



**Andrew
Grey**

**Pump
Me Up**

I

HE TURNED the key in the lock. “No—not again,” Maddoc groaned to himself as he looked at the stems sitting next to his front door. Bending down, he picked them up. Being careful of the thorns, he gingerly dumped the headless flowers in the trash, the note that came along with them slipping between the porch floorboards. “Why does this keep happening?” Maddoc looked around but saw no one in the early morning darkness. He never did, but the damn stems kept showing up anyway. Turning around, he walked down the steps, stumbling on the last one as his knee nearly gave out under him. “What did I ever do?”

Still shaking, he made it to his car without falling on his face. After looking at each of the tires, he opened the car door and got inside. Starting the engine, he put the vehicle in gear and inched forward before hitting the brakes. Everything seemed to work. Turning on his headlights, he sped in the direction of his office, but he couldn’t help looking back to check his house before turning the corner.

The office was bright with plenty of people around, and Maddoc allowed himself to relax as he got to work, a day like any other day, at least for him lately. People said good morning, and Maddoc felt the tension begin to slip away. This was his routine, and while it was often hectic, it was known and comforting.

His work day went normally enough, and by late afternoon Maddoc was shutting down his computer. He looked down at the bag near his desk. "I really should do this." Picking up the bag, he carried it with him to his car and drove the half mile or so to a large, bright fitness center. Entering nervously, he approached the desk.

"Um, I got a two-week pass from work." He couldn't meet the receptionist's gaze and found himself talking more to the counter than to her. "I thought I'd give it a try." He fished out the pass and set it on the counter.

"We're glad you did," she responded in a high, perky voice, and Maddoc raised his gaze to see her huge, genuine smile. "Take a seat at the first desk, and Mark will be right with you." Maddoc did as he was asked, and a big man in a tight shirt sat down across from him and went through his sales pitch.

Maddoc listened, fidgeting nervously. "I'd really just like to see how I like it first."

"No problem." Mark smiled. "I'll give you a quick tour. I see you brought work out gear. Excellent! Bring it with you, and I'll show you around."

Relief flooded through Maddoc as he got up from the chair. He hated disappointing people, but he needed to know he was going to like this. "I've never worked out before," he confessed as they started the tour.

"You're not alone. A lot of people who come in are just trying to get in shape. That's why we have all kinds of equipment. Machines are great for starting out." He pointed to the rows of what looked like new equipment. "Free weights

are also available.” Mark pointed to the back of the gym where huge guys were lifting and grunting loudly.

Bang! A sharp sound echoed through the building. Maddoc jumped and looked around for cover.

“Sorry. When they’re working with the heavy weights, they drop them to prevent getting hurt,” Mark explained as he continued the tour, thankfully ignoring Maddoc’s jitters. “You get used to it. A lot of gyms don’t allow it, but we have a number of high-powered lifters....”

Maddoc looked at the men getting up from the bench. “I wouldn’t want to tell them no, either.”

Mark laughed, “Actually, they’re great guys.” He led the way toward the back of the building. “Here’s the men’s locker room. There’s a sauna near the showers and the entrance to the pool and whirlpool area.” Maddoc slowly nodded and thanked him for the tour before finding a locker and pulling off his shirt.

“Maddoc?” a vaguely familiar voice said from behind him. Turning around, he saw one of the guys from his office. “I thought that was you.” The man smiled brightly and stepped around the bench, extending his hand.

“Hey, Dan.” Maddoc returned the smile and shook the offered hand.

“I haven’t seen you here before, are you a member?” Dan inquired as he started looking for an empty locker.

“Not yet. I got a pass at the office and thought I’d give it a try.” Maddoc hung up his polo shirt and pulled a T-shirt out of his bag, slipping it over his head. “I’m a real newbie.”

He lowered his pants and hung them in the locker before pulling on a pair of shorts.

“You’re welcome to join us.” Dan opened his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders. Maddoc found himself staring and had to turn his eyes away. He knew Dan was about his age, but he’d never have guessed, and he found himself stealing looks at the man’s flat stomach, wide shoulders, and pierced nipple. Maddoc turned away suddenly, afraid he’d pop wood right there in the locker room... in front of a coworker no less.

“H-have you been working out long?” He needed to get himself together, but he couldn’t help asking. Maybe there was hope that he could get strong like that.

“Years. But you’ll be surprised how much you can change once you work out regularly.” Dan dropped his pants, and Maddoc forcibly turned his attention to putting his things in his locker. “Join us,” he repeated, as he pulled on a pair of tight shorts and a tank top.

“If it’s okay.” Maddoc didn’t want to impose, but he needed some help and wasn’t really sure who he should ask.

“Of course.” Dan closed the door and locked his locker. “Do you have a water bottle?” Maddoc shook his head, closing his own locker. Turning around, Maddoc saw Dan open his locker again, handing him a plastic water bottle before relocking it. “You’ll need it.” Maddoc thanked Dan and took the bottle before following him like a puppy out of the locker room.

“Big Pimpin’, you ready?” a guy called as he slapped Dan on the butt. “I haven’t seen your other half yet, is he joining us?”

“Probably not. He’s on a competition regime, so it’s just us.” Dan turned to him and said, “This is Maddoc. We work together, and he’s thinking about joining.”

The man immediately extended his hand. “I’m Lonnie. You gonna join us?” The man seemed genuine, and Maddoc found himself nodding. “Don’t worry, we’ll take it easy on you.” Lonnie turned and began striding toward the equipment before turning around. “You homos coming?” Maddoc looked to Dan, shocked, not sure how to react. “No offense,” the loud man added automatically.

“That’s just Lonnie,” Dan explained. “He’s got the biggest mouth of anyone I’ve ever met.” Dan began trailing behind Lonnie. “You really are an ass sometimes—you know that, Rosen?” Not sure what to do, Maddoc found himself following slowly. “Don’t let him bother you. The man’s a complete pig,” Dan continued to explain. “He’s living proof that there is such a thing as Jewish pork.” Maddoc couldn’t help laughing. “Just give it back to him. Comments about his big ass are surefire winners, particularly if they’re original.”

Maddoc found himself relaxing as Dan led the way to a flat bench. Lonnie was already doing his set, and Maddoc watched. When Lonnie was done, Dan took his turn and then stripped off the weights and indicated for Maddoc to go. Dan explained the exercise and helped him perform it right, even standing behind him to help in case he needed it. When

Maddoc was done, Dan put the bar in the rack. “That was really good.”

“I could probably do more,” Maddoc said, pleased with himself, even though Dan had said it was only ninety pounds.

“Don’t push it right away or you’ll be really sore tomorrow. Let your body get used to it.”

Maddoc nodded and watched as they each took their turns, doing the exercise three more times before switching to an incline bench. “Who’s that?” Maddoc saw a huge man approach, his chest and shoulders bulging out of a string tank.

“That’s Gene, Dan’s partner.” Maddoc looked at Lonnie in disbelief. “He’s training for Mr. Olympia.” Lonnie gave him a surprised look. “Don’t you guys work together?”

“We work in the same office, and we’ve worked on projects together and stuff,” Maddoc stammered, unsure why Dan had invited him to work out with them in the first place. Hell, he hadn’t even known the man was gay.

“Come on, you two. Play hide the sausage later.” Maddoc saw Gene glare at Lonnie for a second before the man actually gave Dan a kiss right there in the gym. “Geez, you two.” Lonnie started making gagging sounds, and Maddoc didn’t know how to react, but Dan and Gene began to laugh, and he figured this was normal for them. The two hunky men separated, and Dan rejoined them, watching Gene walk across the gym. “Can we get back to work?” Lonnie groused good-naturedly.

“Look who’s talking,” Dan retorted. “The man who turned gabbing into an Olympic sport.”

Maddoc laughed and added tentatively, “You mean he’d be as big as Gene if talking counted as exercise?”

“Exactly,” Dan responded with a grin.

“If you’re done Lonnie-bashing, can we get jacked already?” Lonnie walked over to a large, gray machine and began putting weights on it as Dan explained it was a decline press machine. They took their turns, the talk diminishing as they got to work again.

“Hey, Lonnie.” A man approached as Maddoc was finishing what he hoped was the last set. He let the arms fall back against the stops, then got up and watched as the guys all talked.

“You joining us for dinner?” The man didn’t answer right away. “Don’t be a pussy all your life and come eat with us.”

“Okay,” the man answered. “Since you asked so nicely. What time?”

Maddoc listened to the exchange as details were finalized, watching the man really closely. He had to be about Maddoc’s age, with close-cropped graying hair and broad shoulders. Maddoc couldn’t tell anything else from the baggy clothes he was wearing, but his imagination quickly took over.

“You gonna join us, too, Docky?” Lonnie’s question pulled him out of his daydream, and he nodded. *Docky?* “Good.” Lonnie finished up his last set, clanking the arms against the stops. They finished the routine, and Maddoc

thought he'd need someone to carry him into the locker room, but somehow he made it under his own power.

Pulling off his sweaty clothes, Maddoc found himself naked just as the man who'd been talking to Lonnie entered the locker room. Maddoc felt himself color as he reached for his bathing suit, pulling it on quickly and grabbing a towel, figuring he'd try to find the whirlpool. He'd never gotten used to being naked in public, and he felt especially shy around all these super-hot men. The whirlpool was easy to find, and Maddoc lowered himself into the hot, swirling water, thankful he was alone. Relaxing his head back, Maddoc felt his muscles turn to JELL-O, and didn't look up when he heard someone else enter the tub.

"Hi."

Maddoc looked up toward the voice coming from next to him. "Hi." He saw the man from earlier settling into the water next to him. Maddoc wished he'd been paying attention, because what he could see above the water looked... really nice. He even liked the graying hair... sexy.

"I'm Ivan." The man lifted a hand out of the water.

"Maddoc." He shook the offered hand and found that Ivan held it a little longer than necessary. He didn't know what to say and resettled in the water, watching the man through half-closed eyes. God, he was handsome. He had to keep his imagination in check or he'd completely embarrass himself. Maddoc kept watching until he began to feel slightly cooked, and then got out of the water, doing his best not to turn for one last look before he left. But it happened anyway—he just couldn't help it.

In the shower area, Maddoc saw Dan and Gene coming out of the sauna as he headed to the showers to clean up. Turning on the water, he washed quickly, feeling self-conscious the entire time. Turning off the water, he sneaked his hand outside the curtain, snatching his towel inside with him. Drying off, he wrapped the towel around his waist and pushed the curtain aside. In his hurry to step out, he bumped into a naked and very hot Ivan, hand brushing against his.... “S-s-sorry,” Maddoc gulped and stammered before grabbing his bathing suit and rushing into the locker area. Maddoc figured he’d get changed as fast as he could and leave, when he saw Dan come in wearing only a towel.

“See you at dinner?”

Maddoc felt like a trapped rat. How could he go to dinner with Ivan when he’d just had his hand against the man’s balls? But Dan and his friends had been so nice, Maddoc couldn’t let him down or embarrass him. “Yes,” he answered against his better judgment, and turned toward his locker and began dressing. Maddoc had never been so mortified in his life. Not only had he felt the man up, but he’d liked it. God, he’d practically molested the man right there in the showers. After pulling on his underwear and pants, he slipped on his shirt before sitting down to put on his shoes.

Looking up, he saw Ivan walk in with only a towel around his waist, sitting low on the hips. The man looked like some sort of god: tall, fit, with wide shoulders tapering to a small waist. How in hell could a man his age have a waist that small? And those abs! There was no mere six-pack—the

man had at least a ten-pack glistening above that low-slung towel. “See you at dinner?”

Maddoc blushed as his eyes took in the sight before him, hoping he wasn’t too obvious. “Sure, I’ll see you there.” Maddoc lowered his eyes again and finished dressing. Packing his bag, he fled the locker room with a small sigh of relief. He needed to get himself under control. Heading to his car, he nearly tripped over an uneven spot in the pavement but kept his balance. Unlocking the car, he climbed in and shut the door.

Sitting in the driver’s seat, he felt himself heaving for breath. It didn’t matter what Ivan looked like or how stunning he was. Maddoc would never be able to talk to him anyway. Getting himself under control, he started the car and backed up, immediately stepping on the brake. Putting the car in park, he got out and walked around to the back. There was a rose stem affixed to the base of the back window. Maddoc looked around and found himself shaking again. Was no place safe? Throwing it away, he did his best to try to convince himself that it was there from that morning and that he wasn’t being followed, but he wasn’t so sure. Getting back into the car, he locked the door, his hands shaking.

It took him a few minutes of deep breathing, but he got himself together and began pulling out. A horn stopped him, and he let the other car pass before finishing backing out of the parking space and driving the short distance to the restaurant.

Maddoc parked near the entrance and got out, looking around to see if he was being watched, but saw no one. Finding himself still shaking a little, he walked into the restaurant and looked around. He didn't see anyone he knew, so he grabbed a handful of peanuts from the barrel and took a seat in the log-lined waiting area, tossing the peanut shells on the floor with the rest, and waited.

The guys began to arrive a few minutes later, and Maddoc followed them to the table. Taking a seat, he was relieved when Dan and Gene sat next to him. The others arrived, and to Maddoc's nervous excitement, Ivan sat right across from him. Lonnie arrived a few minutes later, and the stories began. Between drink and dinner orders, Lonnie regaled the table with story upon story of lurid conquests, which Maddoc thought strange since Lonnie's fiancée Cory was seated at the table, but no one else seemed to think anything of it.

"I've never seen you at the gym before." Ivan seemed to be talking to him.

"Today was my first day."

"Did you like it?"

"Dan and Lonnie let me join their workout." He found himself rubbing his shoulder a little without thinking about it. "It was more fun than I thought it would be."

"So you're going to join?" Ivan asked with a smile.

"I think so."

"That's good. You'll be surprised at the changes you'll see in yourself." That got Maddoc's attention, and he waited

for Ivan to continue. “You’ll look younger, feel better, and have more energy.” Ivan seemed to wink at him, and Maddoc felt his cheeks heat a little.

“I just don’t want to feel weak anymore.” Maddoc looked down at the table.

“Working out will make you stronger and feel better about yourself, but strength has to come from inside.” There was that wink again, and thankfully their drinks arrived to give Maddoc something to do with his hands.

Maddoc wasn’t sure, but Ivan seemed sincere and really smart. “I just want to be able to defend myself.”

“From what?” Ivan’s tone became serious.

Maddoc made light of his fears, not really wanting to discuss them. “Just in general.” The arrival of their dinners interrupted the conversation, and Maddoc began eating. The conversation continued, most of it driven by Lonnie.

After they’d eaten, the server took the dishes, and after the group talked awhile, the check arrived. Maddoc pulled out his wallet, but Lonnie grabbed the check and paid the bill, insisting that it was his treat and he wouldn’t hear any argument. Then they all got up and headed toward the exit. Maddoc walked to his car and looked it over. No flowers or anything attached. Unlocking the door, Maddoc got in and turned the key. The starter ground for a second, and then the car was silent.

A tap on his window had Maddoc jumping out of his skin. Clutching his chest dramatically, he looked and saw Ivan looking back at him. Catching his breath, he pushed

the button to lower the window, but nothing happened, so he opened the door. “Do you know anything about cars?”

Ivan shrugged. “A little. Pop the hood.” Maddoc pulled the lever and Ivan lifted the hood, peering inside. “I think the battery’s shot.” Maddoc looked to where he was pointing and saw all kinds of corrosion and stuff around it. Stepping back, he let Ivan close the hood. “We could try giving it a jump. You might make it home.”

He didn’t like the sound of that. The last thing he needed was to be stuck on the side of the highway. “I’ll call a cab or something.” He began reaching into his pocket for his phone.

“You don’t need to do that. I’ll drive you home.” Maddoc looked up and saw Ivan’s deep brown eyes looking at him so intently that he forgot what he was going to say and merely nodded before remembering his manners.

“Thank you.” For a second his fear kicked in again, but Ivan’s eyes told him he wouldn’t hurt him. After locking his car, Maddoc followed Ivan to a little sports car and climbed into the passenger seat, buckling himself in. “I appreciate this.” He told Ivan where he lived.

“It’s not a problem.” Ivan started the car and pulled out of the lot, zipping down the road.

“Have you known Lonnie long?” Maddoc needed something to talk about, and after that dinner, he figured Lonnie was a safe topic.

“Don’t let him get to you. Lonnie’s just one of those loud guys, but I’ve known him for years, and he’ll help anybody.”

Ivan drove up the freeway on-ramp. “There was a guy like him in my unit when I was in the Corps. Bigger mouth than Lon. He was also the guy I most wanted watching my back. Lonnie’s sort of like that. Big, filthy mouth, needs to be the center of attention, but loyal and a great friend when you need one.”

“Seems like a weird combination.”

“That’s Lonnie.”

“Are you a Marine?” Maddoc asked quietly.

“Yeah.” Ivan turned to him, squinting slightly.

“My dad was in the Corps, and he always said, ‘Once a Marine, always a Marine,’” Maddoc explained. “His biggest disappointment was that I didn’t enlist too. But by the time I was seventeen, I’d had enough of his version of military discipline.” He turned away and looked out the window. “Dad was a good guy and a good father, but being a Marine was the most important thing in his life.” He turned back to Ivan. “Besides, I knew I was gay and just didn’t want to lead the kind of double life I’d have to. Not that I ever told him that.” Why he was telling Ivan all of this, he had no idea. Maybe it was because, although he’d never gotten along with or understood his dad, he always knew he could trust him. He’d like to think he was talking because he just wanted to fill the empty space in the car, but the Marine thing had thrown him just a bit, and he found that he kind of trusted Ivan. “Dad used to tell me stories about the guys who got drummed out for being ‘queer’, and I decided I didn’t want that to happen to me. So I went to college instead. To his eternal disappointment.” Maddoc turned back to the window

and stopped talking. Ivan didn't need to hear all about his troubles. "Did you like the Marines?"

"Loved it. I never had much of a family growing up, so the guys in my unit became a sort of substitute family. The only member of my real family who's still around is my mom." Ivan's voice remained strong, but Maddoc could hear a slight longing anyway.

"What happened?"

"Don't ask, don't tell.... I told." Maddoc found himself nodding. "I couldn't live a lie any more. I stayed away from anyone I was attracted to for years. I didn't date and didn't socialize. I just wanted to be the best soldier and Marine I could."

"But something changed," Maddoc supplied softly. He knew this was difficult for the strong Marine, and he was surprised Ivan was even telling him any of this. Maybe the Marine family thing ran both ways.

"I met Gerald. He was bright and smiled at the slightest provocation. I didn't want to admit it, but I fell for him and fell hard." Ivan's voice remained level. "After Gerald was killed in action, I decided it was time to go."

"I'm sorry," Maddoc said sincerely.

"That was some time ago." Ivan took the freeway exit and turned onto the main street. Maddoc provided directions to his house.

"It's the one on the left," Maddoc supplied, and Ivan pulled up in front, stopping the car. Maddoc got out and walked toward the front door, seeing a bunch of what looked

like flowers leaning against the front door. “Not again.” He stopped and felt his legs start to shake again. For a few hours he’d been able to forget this crap, but here it was again.

“What is it?” He jumped slightly when the car door closed behind him but relaxed a bit when he remembered it was Ivan’s voice.

“Someone keeps sending me flowers.” He took a few steps toward the house. “At first they were nice bouquets with sweet, secret admirer type notes. But lately the notes have gotten disturbing. For the last few mornings the flowers have been wilted and then dead.” Maddoc looked at the flowers, or what was left of them. There were only stems. “Damn it.” This was really starting to scare him. “I’m sorry.” He began to fumble for his keys and unlocked the door, then picked up the mess gingerly and threw it under the thick shrubbery, the card falling to the porch floor. He scooped it into his hand and crumpled it, getting ready to throw it with the stems.

“Can I look at it?” Ivan asked, and Maddoc handed it to him, pushing the door open and stepping inside, letting Ivan follow him.

“This is twisted.” Ivan read the note. “There’s nothing here directly threatening, but the tone seems menacing.”

“I know.” Maddoc shuddered as he stood in his living room, shaking like he usually did when these appeared. “I’ve been frightened to go out of the house.”

“Have you called the police?”

“Yeah, but they didn’t do much and just thought it was my imagination. Maybe it is.” He slumped into a chair, pulling his feet under him, doing his best to curl into a ball.

“Is there anything I can do?” Ivan stepped closer, and Maddoc found himself curling further into the chair.

“No. I’ll be all right.” He forced his feet out from under him. He had to get a grip on himself. “Thank you,” he added with more conviction than he felt.

“Oh.” Ivan looked skeptical, but to Maddoc’s relief didn’t push it. “Here’s my card with all my numbers on it. Please use it if anything happens.”

Maddoc took the card, wondering if this was for real or not. “Marine to the rescue?”

“A friend, if you need help.” Ivan turned, and Maddoc heard the front door close.

“Wow.” His eyes followed Ivan’s exit. He knew the guy was only being nice, but there was something inside that told him Ivan could be trusted to help him. Getting up from the chair, he locked the door and went through the house turning on lights, spending the evening before going to bed jumping at every noise in the house. Whoever this was might or might not be out to hurt him, but they already had him scared of his own shadow. “This has to stop somehow,” Maddoc told himself.

II

IVAN looked back at the house and watched lights appear in the windows. He hated leaving but hadn't been given much choice. Maddoc was one scared man, and he wished he could help him, but he knew from that look on Maddoc's face that he wasn't about to trust him or anyone. Opening his car door, Ivan slid into the driver's seat and slowly pulled away, looking back at the house.

He kept seeing the look in the redhead's eyes when he'd seen those flowers on his steps—the fear and worry. He'd seen that look before on the face of civilians in Baghdad after neighborhood shootouts, and now, as then, he wanted to help. Besides, he couldn't get that smile he'd seen a few times at dinner out of his mind. The man was adorable. Tight, red curls with just a touch of gray, those big blue eyes, and he'd definitely noticed that small, tight butt when Maddoc had bent over on the porch.

He couldn't believe he'd actually told him about Gerald. He hadn't told anyone about Gerald ever, including his mother, but somehow he'd felt like he could tell Maddoc. That was really strange, although he got the feeling Maddoc didn't open up about himself to many people, either. So maybe they were even. His phone rang, and he peered at the screen, not recognizing the number. "Hello."

“Ivan? It’s Maddoc, I just wanted to call and say thanks for the ride... and everything else.” The man’s voice sounded so small.

“I was wondering if you’d like to meet me at the gym tomorrow? We can work out together, and I’ll show you some of the Marine workout we used to get into shape fast.” If getting Maddoc in shape would help give him some confidence, he’d try to help him.

“You would?” He heard the first hint of hope in Maddoc’s voice.

“Sure.” Ivan smiled into the phone.

“I’ll try. I don’t have a car. Can I call you tomorrow?” Damn, the defeat crept in fast.

“Please do, and if you need it, I’ll pick you up at your office.”

“You’re sure?” There was that slight bit of hope again.

“Of course. Just give me a call.”

“Okay. Thanks.” He could almost hear Maddoc’s smile as he hung up, and Ivan closed his phone, finding himself smiling as well at the slight flutter he felt in his stomach. Turning on the radio, he got on the highway toward home.

It took about half an hour for Ivan to reach his condo. Parking in his spot, he walked toward his unit, unlocking the door and going inside. Throwing his keys on the table, he sat in the chair and turned on the television as his phone buzzed.

“Hi, Mom.” He picked up the phone, knowing her ring.

“Ivanovich, you’re alive.” It was her usual taunt when he hadn’t called her recently.

“Sorry, I’ve been a little busy lately.” He hated excuses, but she deserved an explanation.

“Too busy to call your mother? What, it takes forever?” The familiar nag was perversely comforting.

“I’m sorry. I was out with some friends for dinner.”

“On a date?” She sounded excited and hopeful.

“No, Mom. Just some friends.”

“I could fix you up.” Just what he needed—his mother fixing him up with all the gay sons of the women in her neighborhood, good Lord! He felt lucky his mother had been so supportive, and he knew she wanted him to be happy, but letting her find men for him was just too much.

“No thanks, Mom. I can find my own dates.” He kept his voice light. He knew she was only trying to help. “I should be able to come by this weekend to see you. Is that okay?”

“I’ll be here.” They said their good nights and hung up. Ivan spent the rest of the evening watching television before shutting off the lights and walking to his bedroom.

IVAN’S phone rang a little after three the next afternoon. “Maddoc, is everything okay?”

“Yep. Is that offer of a ride still good?” Just the sound of his voice made Ivan smile.

“Of course. I know where your office is. I’ll pick you up out front at about four.”

“That’d be great, thank you.”

“It’s no problem.” In fact, Ivan was more than a little pleased that Maddoc had actually asked him for help, even for something as small as this. Ivan knew that the kind of unwanted attention Maddoc had been receiving made it hard to trust or even ask for help of any kind. “Were there any more presents?” He hated to ask, but he’d been wondering all day if Maddoc was okay. He wasn’t sure if it was his protective nature asserting itself or something else, but he’d been concerned and preoccupied for most of the day.

“No, thank goodness.” Ivan’s mind flashed on Maddoc’s expression from the night before, and he silently berated himself for even bringing it up.

“Did they tow your car?”

“Yeah.” An exasperated sigh came through the line. “But the mechanics won’t be able to get to it for a few days. I should be able to get a loaner tomorrow.”

“Good.” Ivan’s desk phone began to ring. “I’ve got to go, but I’ll see you at four.”

“Okay... and thanks.”

Ivan hung up and answered the other phone before getting busy and completing his tasks for the day. But he couldn’t get the redhead’s scared expression from the night before out of his mind. Completing his last item of the day, he grabbed his bag, said good night to his coworkers, and hurriedly left the office.

A few minutes later, Ivan pulled up in front of the large office building and saw Maddoc step out the door, walk toward his car, and open the door. “I shouldn’t have bothered you. I probably could have gotten a ride with Dan.”

“It’s not a problem, honest. I work just up the road in the industrial park.” He didn’t want to say that he’d have driven across town to pick him up. The last thing he wanted was to spook the man even more than he already was. “Besides, I promised you a Marine workout.” Ivan smiled over at his passenger and saw a slight smile in return. “Are you sore from yesterday?” He put the car in gear and moved through the parking lot to the exit.

“Yeah.” He watched Maddoc rub his chest. “It feels kind of good but a little tight. I didn’t do anything very heavy, not like Dan and Lonnie.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t work you too hard, but I can show you some basics that’ll stick with you.”

Maddoc rested in the plush seat as Ivan guided the car through traffic and into the gym parking lot. Getting out, they retrieved their bags and walked together into the club.

The locker room was crowded, and Ivan grabbed a locker, beginning to change. He could almost feel Maddoc’s gaze on him, and he smiled to himself, pleased he was drawing the man’s attention. He knew he turned heads, even at his age and with his gray hair, but until now, very few had turned *his* head, not in the way Maddoc had. But with everything going on in Maddoc’s life, he couldn’t act on it like he might have otherwise. The last thing he wanted Maddoc to think was that he was taking advantage of his

vulnerability. That didn't stop him from sneaking a few furtive looks at the smaller man, with his light skin and that little butt that stretched those black briefs invitingly. God, he was cute.

Ivan pulled on his tank top and sat down to tie his shoes. "I'll meet you out there."

"Okay." Maddoc smiled up at him as he pulled on his shorts.

Ivan walked out into the workout area and saw Dan and Lonnie walking in together. He said hello as they passed and glanced up at the televisions as he waited. "Anything interesting?" Maddoc asked, joining him.

"No." He pulled his attention from the silent, flashing images. "Just waiting for you." Ivan led them to the padded floor mats. "We'll start with some stretching and then a brief warm-up to get our heart rates up."

"Okay. What do I do?"

"Stand near the pole and hold it with your hand." He watched as Maddoc did as he asked. "Now twist your upper body. Feel that in your chest?"

"Uh-huh. That feels really good."

"It should, after the workout you had yesterday. Now do the same thing with the other arm." He stretched as Maddoc finished up. "Now let's do your back." Ivan helped him through all the stretches, steadying him as he moved, and asked him to return the favor. "Would you hold my wrists?" He stretched his chest back, having Maddoc hold his wrists steady. He could feel the heat from Maddoc's smooth hands

when they touched him, and he wanted to keep stretching just so he could keep Maddoc touching him. “Let’s walk on a treadmill for five minutes to warm up.”

They took two matching treadmills side by side, and Ivan made sure Maddoc’s was set correctly. When they were done, he led them to a low bar. “What we’re going to do are exercises that use your body weight. Normally I’d start with push-ups, but you did chest yesterday, so we’ll start with rows for your back.” He showed Maddoc how to do the exercise and then stood back, watching him perform the movements. “It’s okay if you don’t do many, as long as next time you do one more.” When Maddoc was done, he took his turn, easily doing a set of twenty. “We’ll do three of these and then move on.”

“Hey, Dances with Dick.” Lonnie strode over, grinning at his own witticism, and Ivan saw Maddoc smile, which was good.

“Lonnie, your mother just called,” he heard Maddoc respond as he picked up Lonnie’s cell phone from next to the machine Lonnie had been using. “She wants her butt back.”

Dan joined them, laughing. “Man, that was a good one,” Dan crooned as he patted Maddoc on the shoulder. “Damn, Lon, he got you bad.” Ivan joined Dan and Maddoc as Lon tried to look at his own butt in the mirror, sending them all into renewed fits of laughter.

Damn, he never would have guessed that Maddoc had such a wickedly quick sense of humor. It was surprisingly nice. “You ready?” he asked. Maddoc nodded, and they

started their next exercise. “Pull-ups are great for your overall upper body.” Ivan demonstrated the movement.

Maddoc stood under the bar, looking up, eyes wide. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Try it. If you only get a few, that’s okay.”

Maddoc nodded and reached up to the bar, giving it a try. “Well, that was pathetic.” He groaned as he let go of the bar after four, and Ivan took his turn, pumping out twenty easily.

“Next time, bend your knees and I’ll hold your feet. You should be able to get a few more.” Maddoc looked at him skeptically, but did as he asked. Ivan held his ankles, the warmth of Maddoc’s skin making his hands tingle. When he was done, Ivan felt his hand glance lightly along Maddoc’s calf before pulling away. “You got six that time.” He took his turn and then helped Maddoc again, finishing up the exercise before showing him a few more.

By the time they were done with their workout plus ten minutes of cardio, Ivan was tired. But Maddoc was flushed, eyes wide, breathing hard, and Ivan couldn’t help wondering what he’d look like if he was doing those same things for a very different reason. “Are you doing—”

“Hey, homos—you going to dinner tonight?” Lonnie’s voice carried across the gym, riding over Ivan’s question.

Ivan looked at Lonnie, cursing the man’s timing under his breath. “I think I’m busy tonight, but maybe later in the week.” At least he hoped he was busy tonight, and he hoped that he’d be busy with Maddoc, but he wasn’t sure how to

ask him and he certainly didn't want to do it with Lonnie watching.

"You aren't going to dinner?" Maddoc asked, looking a little disappointed.

"Not with Lonnie." Ivan watched as Lonnie went into the locker room, leaving them alone temporarily. "But I was wondering if I could take you to dinner?"

"You mean just the two of us?" Maddoc looked around like he was making sure Ivan was talking to him. "Like a date?"

Ivan had never felt so nervous and unsure of himself in his life. He'd gone into battle with guns blasting, shells exploding, bombs falling, and sometimes his friends dying, but he'd never been as shaky as he was now. "Yes." Even with Gerald, they'd never really dated. Things were different. They'd just clicked and sort of fell into bed and then into each other's lives. "I'd like to take you on a date."

"Why don't you two just go somewhere and...." Lonnie stepped between them and began making obscene gestures that involved a lot of hip thrusts.

"Maybe later, but he needs to feed me first," Maddoc deadpanned, and Ivan watched Lonnie's energy deflate a little. Damn, the man was really quick. It took a few seconds for Maddoc's words to sink in. He must have been kidding.

Before Lonnie could retort, Maddoc smiled and stepped into the locker room. "Looks like you've met your match, bud," Ivan said with a smile and headed into the locker room as well, stopping when he saw Maddoc's naked butt as he

stepped into a blue bathing suit. Trying not to leer, he went to his own locker and began stripping off his sweaty clothes before pulling on his own suit, grabbing his towel, and walking through to the whirlpool.

He'd hoped to see Maddoc, and he wasn't disappointed. "Is it hot?"

Maddoc sat in the bubbles, lounging like he had the day before. "Uh-huh." But this time, he saw Maddoc checking him out, and it made him smile as he lowered himself into the swirling water. "Would you go back in the Marines if you could?"

The question took him by surprise. He'd spent years wishing he'd stayed, wishing he could have stayed. "Not now. If things had been different, I'd like to have stayed in the Corps, but you can't go back. I wouldn't change it, but I wouldn't go back, either, if they changed the rules. How about you—if you had it to do over again, would you change anything?"

Maddoc's answer was fast. "No. I like my life." Ivan watched as Maddoc's expression changed. "I used to like my life, anyway, before...." Ivan watched Maddoc swallow around what must have been a huge lump in his throat, and he could almost visibly see the fun and confidence he'd shown earlier backing away. Maddoc became quiet, and Ivan wasn't sure what to do. His first instinct was to get angry, but that wouldn't help; the person responsible wasn't there.

"Instead of going out to dinner, would you like me to cook?"

That seemed to draw Maddoc out of himself, at least for a while. “You cook? Because I sure as hell can’t.”

“You better believe it.”

He saw Maddoc smile and knew he’d made the right decision. “Then we’d better get moving if we want to eat before midnight.”

“Would it be okay if we went to my house?” Maddoc asked.

“Sure. We’ll stop at the store on the way,” Ivan answered. Whatever allowed Maddoc to feel more comfortable was fine with him.

Maddoc stood up and climbed out of the tub. “I’ll meet you out front in a few minutes?” Ivan nodded and watched Maddoc pad toward the locker room.

“You like him, don’t you?” Ivan looked up and saw Dan and Gene slipping into the water.

“Yeah, I do. Is it too early to feel all weird about him?” Ivan asked as the newcomers settled in the water.

“How so?” Dan queried.

“I wish I knew.”

Dan chuckled softly. “Don’t question it; just go with it.”

Ivan looked over at Gene and saw both of them go all gooey-eyed. He knew it was time to leave. Not that they’d do anything, but he suddenly felt like an intruder.

Ivan walked through the club, still a little warm, and saw Maddoc sitting in one of the chairs near the door, leg

bouncing with what Ivan hoped was excitement that matched his own. His face was bright, eyes wide and cheeks slightly flushed, for a second he looked... like one of the newbies fresh out of college. “Are you ready?”

Maddoc stood up and grabbed his bag, following him to the car. “What’s that?” He pointed toward the back window, and Ivan walked closer and saw it was a flower caught in the edge of the trunk lid. He snatched at it and threw it on the pavement as they both looked around the parking lot.

“I’m getting so tired of this,” Maddoc said, sighing softly. “They’re following me.”

Ivan saw Maddoc start to shake and dropped his bag, pulling the smaller man into a hug. All the doubts he’d felt earlier had been overwhelmed by the helpless look on Maddoc’s face.

“It’s okay.” The man felt good in his arms, too good. This wasn’t how he was supposed to react right now, but he could feel Maddoc’s heat against his skin and he felt his body start to respond. Pushing those thoughts away as best he could, he concentrated his attention on comfort and support. “Look.” He backed away and pointed to another car a few parking spaces down, “There’s one on that car too.” Maddoc lifted his head and looked to where Ivan was pointing. Multiple cars in the lot had flowers on either their back windows or their windshields.

He felt Maddoc relax and pull away. “I’m sorry,” he said softly as he wiped his eyes, “I don’t....”

“It’s all right. I thought the same thing you did.” Unlocking the door, he put his bag in the tiny back seat

before sliding down the soft leather of his driver's seat. Maddoc closed his door and stared quietly out the window. "You don't have anything to be ashamed of, you know," Ivan said. "Someone's doing this to you. It's not your fault."

"My head knows that, but I keep wondering what I did." He didn't turn away, and Ivan was thankful for that. "Maybe I led someone on without knowing it.... I...."

Ivan turned in his seat, facing his passenger. "You didn't do anything. Someone's harassing you, and it's not your fault."

"But how do I make it stop?" The helplessness in Maddoc's plea tore at Ivan's heart like nothing before. He'd seen things that he never wanted to remember, but this man's pain shot right to his gut. He'd only known him two days, but he could keenly feel Maddoc's confusion and sorrow as though it was his own. He'd spent years insulating himself from these feelings, and this adorable redhead shot right through all the defenses he'd built up after Gerald died.

"We'll figure something out." The offer of help was out before he could even think about it. Someone had to help, and if Maddoc would accept it, Ivan would try to help him. "Let's get to the store. You'll feel better on a full stomach." Starting the car, he drove to the market, and they got what he needed for dinner before putting the top down and speeding toward Maddoc's house with the air rushing around them. The exuberant fun lasted until they pulled up in front of Maddoc's house, and he heard his passenger gasp.

Multiple bouquets of pink roses rested all over the porch floor and around the door. The display would have been stunningly beautiful if the whole situation hadn't been so creepy. "What the hell?"

Maddoc opened the door and slowly walked toward the porch. "They... they...." Ivan followed him as he walked around to the side of the house. "They cut down my roses." Maddoc pointed to naked branches that had been what looked like tall, flowing rose bushes. "Goddamn them!" Maddoc raced back to the porch, ripping down the blooms, throwing them on the sidewalk before stomping on them. "If you can hear me, I've had enough, you sick bastard!" he yelled into the quiet night.

Ivan didn't know what to do but thought it best to let Maddoc get it out of his system. The man had been through a lot and had most likely kept it all bottled up. He'd seen it before on the battlefield and knew the best thing to do was to let him get it all out. Maddoc disappeared around the corner of the house, returning with a large trash barrel, and ripped down more of the flowers, throwing each one in the trash.

"Feeling better?" Ivan asked as he watched Maddoc throw the last bloom in the now-full can.

"Yes... no... fuck. I don't know what I feel. I raised those plants from cuttings I took from the house after my dad died."

"They'll come back." Ivan bent down and examined the stalks. "There are still some leaves. They may look funny for a while, but they're not dead."

“You know plants?” Maddoc knelt down to look where he’d indicated.

“After I was discharged, I decided to spend my time making things grow.” He left out the part where he’d seen enough destruction to last a lifetime. He didn’t think Maddoc needed to hear that right now. Standing up, he touched Maddoc on the shoulder. “Let’s get you inside.” He could tell Maddoc’s adrenaline was wearing off and figured the fear would start to rear its head again. “I promised you a nice dinner, and I intend to deliver.”

Silently, Maddoc nodded and walked back around to the front, opening the door and leading them inside. “I guess I should be grateful they haven’t tried to get inside.” He set his keys on the hall table. “The kitchen’s in back.” He pointed to the door at the rear of the hall.

“I’ll bring in the things.” Ivan left the house and retrieved the bag of groceries. Moving through the house to the kitchen, Ivan was glad he’d planned comfort food. Maddoc wandered in behind him, showing him where things were located. “I got pasta and thought I’d make pesto with chicken.”

Ivan knew he’d chosen correctly when he heard the small happy humming sound Maddoc made. “Can I help?”

“Sure. Put a large pan of water on the stove and get it heating.” It took him a few minutes, but he figured out where things were and got the chicken cooking. “I should have gotten some wine.”

“I have a few bottles.” Maddoc opened a door that appeared to go to the basement, returning with a bottle in

each hand. “I wasn’t sure which would work.” Maddoc set them on the counter and got the corkscrew. “Which one do you think?”

“This one should go nicely.”

Maddoc opened the indicated bottle with a pop and got a pair of glasses, pouring them each one before pulling up a stool, watching as Ivan cooked, sipping his wine. “I hate this.” Ivan stopped moving until Maddoc explained. “Feeling scared all the time, and it’s getting worse. I just don’t know what to do.” Maddoc rested his forehead on the counter. “God,” he moaned as he lifted his head again. “Here I am with a nice guy, and all I can talk about”—he bobbed his head toward the front door—“is that crap.”

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Ivan said lightly, letting a hand slide along Maddoc’s arm.

“I’ll set the table.” Maddoc slid off the stool, and Ivan watched that tight backside as it moved around the room.

A popping sound pulled his attention back to his cooking, and he turned off the heat. Cutting up the chicken, he added it to the pesto pasta and began filling the plates and bringing them to the table. “I guess the thing we need to do is try to figure out who could be doing this.” He placed a plate at each of their places. “Have you gotten flowers anywhere else?”

“I thought I found one on my car at the gym yesterday, but I’m not sure.” Ivan watched as Maddoc took his first bite and smiled at his blissful expression. “This is heavenly.”

“Thanks.” Ivan took his own bite and had to agree, for store-bought pesto, it wasn’t bad. “My fresh pesto’s better.” Even if he did say so himself.

“Then it must be amazing, because this is fantastic.” Ivan smiled as Maddoc shoveled in the food like he hadn’t eaten in days. They’d worked up an appetite at the gym, but good God, could this guy eat.

Returning to the earlier topic, Ivan said, “Let’s not rule out anything, and assume whoever’s stalking you is either following you or knows your schedule.” Ivan saw Maddoc’s reluctant nod. “Are there people you see both at home and at the gym?”

He tried to think but nothing came to mind. “Not really.”

“Is there anyone new in the neighborhood?” Maddoc shook his head as he chewed. “Did something change about the time you started receiving the flowers?”

“I got a promotion at work. But I doubt that has anything to do with it.” Maddoc kept eating, and Ivan grinned as the smaller man cleaned his plate and got up to get some more. “This is really good,” Maddoc commented as he heaped more on his plate and returned to the table.

“Is there someone else who wanted the promotion you got?” Ivan asked between bites, watching as Maddoc continued eating.

“I don’t think so. It really seems to me like it’s someone from town. Things often show up early in the morning, like they either bring them late at night, or just before I leave for

work.” Maddoc swallowed and yawned. “Sorry. I haven’t been sleeping really well. I hear noises and worry that it’s them.”

“I understand.” Ivan got up and put the dirty dishes in the sink. “Where are your plastic containers?” Maddoc pointed to a cupboard, and Ivan put the leftovers away in the refrigerator. “I should let you get some sleep.” He stepped to where Maddoc was leaning against the counter.

Moving slowly, giving Maddoc time to react, he leaned forward and lightly touched their lips together. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Maddoc followed him to the door, and Ivan saw the same fearful look he’d seen the night before.

“Do you trust me?” Ivan asked, to his own surprise, and smiled when Maddoc nodded slowly. “Then you go up to bed, and I’ll stay here.” He indicated the large chair in the living room. “Is there a place out of sight I can move my car?”

“Yeah, but you can’t sleep in the chair.” The look on Maddoc’s face was priceless.

“I’ve slept in holes in the ground and even sitting up in a moving tank. I can sleep in a living room chair. Besides, if you have a visitor, I’m hoping to catch him.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Maddoc’s face was a study in slightly masked confusion.

“I know I don’t. But somebody has to get this guy, maybe even scare some sense into him.”

Ivan watched Maddoc’s eyes as his emotions warred behind them. “If you’re sure.” He still seemed so tentative.

“I’ll move the car and be right back.” Ivan opened the door and tugged Maddoc close. “If you’re being watched, let’s give them a show.” Leaning forward, he took Maddoc’s mouth, his lips tasting the soft sweetness of Maddoc’s for a few seconds before letting the man go. “I’ll be right back.”

Ivan stepped outside and sneaked a final glimpse at Maddoc’s flushed face before the door closed softly behind him. Striding down the walk, he got into the car and drove away, parking in the next block and walking through dark yards before knocking on the back door.

He saw a shock of red hair in the window, and then the door opened. “You scared me.”

“Sorry, but if you were being watched, I didn’t want to be seen coming back.” Maddoc shut and locked the door behind him. “Go on up to bed. You look like you’re about to fall over.”

Maddoc nodded and said good night, walking up the stairs. “Thank you.” The man was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open. Ivan went to the living room and saw a couple blankets and a pillow on the chair. Smiling to himself, he settled into the plush chair after turning off the lights.

In the darkness, his senses came alive just like they had years earlier. Footsteps upstairs sounded as clear as if Maddoc were in the room with him. Water running, a squirrel chattering outside, the sound of a car passing, even the squeak as Maddoc got into bed. He couldn’t help picturing what Maddoc looked like. Did he sleep naked? The thought was distracting, and he brought his thoughts back

to the present. He had a job to do, and maybe if he took care of this guy, he'd have a chance to find out if his imagination was right. Resting back in the chair, he willed his mind to settle as he half-dozed in the chair.

III

MADDOC tossed and turned for a while, thinking about Ivan and listening to the house, but everything sounded normal. His eyes eventually got heavy, and he drifted off to sleep.

He woke to the sound of the front door slamming shut, and he was out of bed and on his way down the stairs before he could think of anything. Downstairs, he rushed to the door and peeked out into the night, but saw nothing. Checking the living room, he saw a pillow by the chair and a blanket pooled on the floor. Flipping on the front lights, he watched out the windows until he saw movement along the front walk. As the figure stepped into the light, he raced to the door and opened it. “Are you okay?”

Ivan stepped into the house, and he shut the door. “I’m fine. Bastard got away.” He was barely breathing hard, and Maddoc followed him into the living room. “I heard footsteps on the porch and snuck to the door. But it was dark, and as soon as I opened the door, he took off. I chased him through the yard and down the street, but he disappeared in the empty lot, probably hiding, and I didn’t want to leave you alone.”

“Did you see whoever it was?”

“A little bit. It was definitely a man, medium height and weight, probably younger than us and rather fit. The guy took off like a shot, and I couldn’t match his speed.” He looked embarrassed. “I must be getting older.”

“We all are.” Maddoc sighed softly. “And right now, every muscle in my body is telling me just how old I am.” He saw Ivan’s eyes sweep over him, and he peered down, remembering he was wearing nothing but his underwear.

“Looks pretty good from where I’m standing.”

“What do you say we put the old guys to bed?” Maddoc locked the door and held out his hand. Ivan took it, and Maddoc led his protector up the stairs. Without saying anything, Maddoc walked toward his bedroom and slid beneath the covers, watching Ivan as shoes thunked on the floor, a shirt was pulled overhead, and pants slid down powerful legs. Maddoc couldn’t take his eyes off the figure moving in the dark room. He couldn’t see details, but what he saw was pretty amazing.

Ivan walked to the other side of the bed, and Maddoc felt the covers lift, and then the bed dipped and warm skin slid against him. Rolling over, Maddoc nestled against Ivan’s shoulder, and strong arms pulled him close. Lips touched his forehead, and a hand stroked along his back. He wanted to stay awake and get to know the body next to him, but for the first time in weeks, he fell into a deep sleep, the sound of Ivan’s breathing like a lullaby.

He woke to a bright room, an arm around him, a hand against his stomach, and hips pressed to his butt. Maddoc’s alarm sounded, and he jumped slightly before reaching to the nightstand and silencing the electronic intruder.

Maddoc knew he had to get up, but he didn’t want to move. Ivan felt so good next to him. “Just relax a few minutes.” Ivan’s voice was deep and raspy with sleep. “This

feels too nice to rush.” Maddoc could echo that as Ivan pulled him closer, and he felt a sizable length press against him, and a warm hand rubbed small circles over his chest and belly.

It had been quite some time since he’d woken with anyone in his bed, and Maddoc suddenly realized how much he missed it. The quiet moments together, the closeness—that was what he missed most of all. Ivan moved behind him, his hand slipping away, and then the warmth dissipated as Ivan got out of bed and began moving through the room. Rolling over, Maddoc watched as Ivan pulled on his pants. Slipping from under the covers, he walked to him, doing nothing to hide his excitement. He wanted Ivan to know the effect he had on him just like he’d known the effect he was having on the handsome man. “Thank you.” He slipped his arms around Ivan’s waist and rested his head against the strong man’s shoulder.

“You’re welcome.” He felt a warm hand slide over his back as Ivan’s musky scent filled his nose, making him almost painfully hard. “I hate to bring this up, but if we don’t get moving, you’re not going to make it to work.” The hand on his back slipped lower, ghosting lightly over his butt. Then Ivan pulled back, pushing him lightly toward the bathroom. “You need to get cleaned up.”

Maddoc glanced at Ivan’s face, making sure this wasn’t a rejection, but saw what looked like a struggle for control. Doing as requested, he disappeared into the bathroom, going through his morning ritual before emerging to dress. Alone in the room, Maddoc pulled on his clothes and walked downstairs to the kitchen, hoping to see Ivan, but it was

dark and empty. Moving through the house, he saw the blankets folded on the chair with the pillow stacked on top. His heart fell to the floor when he realized that Ivan was no longer in the house. “Couldn’t wait to get away I guess.” Turning around, he wandered back to the kitchen to get ready for work.

The front door opening made him jump slightly before stilling.

“It’s just me. I moved my car around front.”

“I’m such a girl,” Maddoc muttered to himself as he poured two cups of coffee.

“What?” Ivan asked as he walked into the room.

“Nothing,” Maddoc responded as he handed him a mug, noticing the “how’d you know” look and hoping the coffee, which he knew was the Marines’ nectar of the gods, would distract him. “Dad always said the Marine Corps ran on black coffee, guts, and sweat.” He sipped his coffee and set the mug on the counter. “Would you like something to eat?”

Ivan shook his head as he drank, eyes closed, much to Maddoc’s amusement. “I need to go home to change after I drop you off.”

“I’ll be ready in a minute, then.” He set his mug on the counter and made sure he had everything all set before finishing his coffee. “Ready when you are.”

“Not quite.” To his surprise, Ivan backed him against the counter and kissed him. Where last night’s had been soft, this one was harder, more forceful, and definitely hotter. “Now I think we’re ready.”

“Uh-huh.” Maddoc waited until the weakness in his knees subsided before getting his things and following Ivan out the front door, locking it behind him. “No gifts,” he said with a smile as he bounced down the steps.

“I think I put a pretty good scare into him.” Ivan unlocked the car, and Maddoc put his things in back before sliding into the seat.

“Do you think he’s gone?” Maddoc asked hopefully.

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t count on it.” Ivan shut his door and started the car. “I may have scared him away or just made him mad. I’m sorry, but I may have made things worse.”

Maddoc smiled. “Are you kidding? I actually slept last night for the first time in weeks.” The car began moving into traffic. “And I don’t feel so scared now.” He was still nervous about what else they’d do, but Ivan’s actions last night had given him a real shot in the arm. This guy, whoever he was, wasn’t infallible, and Ivan had almost caught him. That alone made him feel better.

They sped down the freeway, the sun peeking above the mountains. “Are you coming to the gym?”

“Yeah.” He smiled at his companion.

“Will you need a ride?” There was a hopeful look in Ivan’s eyes, and Maddoc wondered for a second if he was hoping his car wouldn’t be ready.

“I don’t think so. They should be able to get to it today, and they said they could provide a loaner if they were still backed up.”

Ivan pulled into the parking lot of Maddoc's office. "If you need a ride, call me. Otherwise I'll see you at the gym." The leather creaked as Ivan leaned over and gave him a soft kiss. "Have a good day." After that kiss, how could he have anything but?

Maddoc unbuckled his seat belt and grabbed his bags from the back. Walking into the building, he watched Ivan speed away and touched his lip as the door closed behind him.

"MADDOC." A hand waved in front of his face. "You okay?" Maddoc snapped out of his daydream, swiveling his chair as Kyle smiled back at him. "You seem a million miles away."

"Sorry." He half smiled as he again thought of what had him so distracted.

"I was wondering if you needed a ride home?" Kyle lived near him and had been nice enough to drive him in to work before.

"No, thanks. I'm good. The dealership agreed to deliver my car since they took so long to get to it."

"Did they say what was wrong?"

"Just the battery, but they're so backed up, it took them a few days." Maddoc was just happy he'd have his car and his mobility back.

“Okay. I’ll let you get back to work and whatever it was you were thinking about.” The smirk on his friend’s face spoke volumes.

The rest of the workday was quiet for a Friday, and he left on time, climbing into his car. It felt good to have it back, but his sedate sedan was nowhere near as much fun as Ivan’s convertible. Starting the engine, he pulled out and drove to the gym with an excitement he never thought he’d have felt going to a health club. Pulling out his bag, he shut the door and whistled as he walked to the club and reached for the door.

“I see you made it.”

He knew that voice. Turning around, he looked into Ivan’s eyes. “I was looking forward to it all day,” he said truthfully, although if it was the gym or the chance to see Ivan, he really couldn’t say, and he didn’t really care. “What are we doing today?”

“We’re taking it easy today. You’ve had a heavy workout for the last few days, and I don’t want you overdoing it.” They scanned their cards and went to the locker room to change, and as soon as he stepped out of the locker room, Maddoc found himself engulfed in a hug.

“I thought that was you.” The slip of a girl stepped back.

“Lisa.” He grinned as he recognized the radiant black hair, bright smile, and deep, almost black eyes. “I didn’t know you were a member.” He stood back. “Jesus, you’re amazing. You must live here.” He grinned at her and got one of her radiant smiles in return.

“I don’t look like that at all.” She slapped Maddoc’s arm lightly. He knew her well enough to know that she didn’t see herself as pretty, even though she was stunning. “What brings you here?” At that moment Ivan walked out of the locker room, and Maddoc couldn’t help following with his eyes. “I see.” She winked at him. “You have good taste.” Lisa leaned closer and said, “But I didn’t know he was gay.”

“He is.” Maddoc gave her another hug and waved as he followed Ivan through the gym.

“Have fun,” she called after him before hopping on a treadmill.

Just watching Ivan move sent a warmth through him like he’d never experienced before. Maddoc had had other men in his life, but none had made him feel this way. It scared him and thrilled him at the same time. Ivan did something to him that he couldn’t quite understand. “So what are we doing today?” He had to get his head on straight.

“I thought we’d try something different, if you’re up to it.” Ivan opened the door to the gymnasium portion of the club. “Usually this is full of kids playing basketball, but it seems to be empty, so I thought I’d show you some self-defense moves.”

“Oh.” Maddoc wasn’t sure he could fight anyone, not really.

“You don’t have to fight.” Ivan chuckled as if he could read his mind. “But if something happens, you should know what to do to give yourself time to get away.”

“Okay.” He looked around. “Don’t we need mats or something?”

“I’m not going to throw you around.” Ivan moved closer. “Unless you want me to.” Ivan leered at him playfully, and Maddoc began laughing.

“Maybe later.”

“Okay.” The leer was back. “We can get some mats from the aerobics studio and get started.” Working together, they dragged four padded mats into the gym and laid them out on the floor. “Take off your shoes.”

Maddoc slipped off his sneakers and stood in the center of the pads. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing for the moment.” Ivan joined him on the mat, facing him and smiling. “Don’t look so nervous. I’m not going to hurt you at all. This isn’t *The Karate Kid*—no punches or kicks, and you won’t be throwing me to the mat, either. That’s a bunch of Hollywood crap.”

“How about you throwing me to the mat?” Maddoc teased.

“Nope.” Ivan looked around as if contemplating something. “Well, maybe.” He turned into a whirl of movement, and Maddoc found himself flat on his back, looking up at the ceiling with Ivan looming over him. “You looked too good to resist.”

“I did, huh?” His head was spinning a little as he made sure nothing hurt. It didn’t. Ivan reached out his hand and pulled him to his feet. “I’m not going to teach you that, but

there are things I can show you that'll allow you to protect yourself."

"Okay."

"First thing is that you need to know the tender spots." Maddoc nodded, listening intently. "Did you ever see the movie *Miss Congeniality*?"

Maddoc nodded, smiling. "You mean when she beats the guy up during the pageant? Yeah, I love that part."

"What she said was accurate. S. I. N. G." Ivan reached toward him. "Solar plexus, instep, nose, groin. If you can punch or elbow someone in the solar plexus, right here"—Ivan demonstrated, making Maddoc squirm and try to get away—"you'll knock the wind out of them and they won't be able to breathe for a few seconds. The instep works great as well. Someone hopping around because you mashed their foot isn't going to be able to chase you very well. The nose will break if you hit it hard enough, and the body's reflex is to grab the nose when it's hit, so they'll release you if they've got their arms around you." Maddoc nodded, trying to take everything in. "I want to talk about the groin." Maddoc raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Not yours, although it's very nice, from what I felt last night." Maddoc colored. "Behave. When you're attacked, you use everything at your disposal. There's no such thing as fighting like a gentleman. You go for anything that's available." Ivan moved in front of him. "If he has you from behind, use your fist." He demonstrated with just the lightest touch that made Maddoc's dick stand up despite the material being covered. "If he's got you from the front, like this"—he demonstrated on Maddoc—"move your

hand slightly and squeeze, twist, and yank with everything you've got. I can guarantee they'll let you go and reach immediately for their balls."

Ivan stood back, letting Maddoc go. "It's important that as soon as they do, you take off as fast as you can, yelling at the top of your lungs, 'Call 911'." Maddoc began to laugh. "I know it sounds cliché, but people will react to that even if they don't know what's going on."

"What are you fudge packers doing?" The door banged closed and Lonnie strode over, followed by Dan and Gene, both of them shaking their heads. "No offense."

Ivan showed great restraint and ignored the comment, but Maddoc didn't. "None taken, you limp-dicked breeder." Both Dan and Gene howled with laughter as Lonnie shook his head.

"I'm showing Maddoc some ways to protect himself," Ivan explained.

"Looked more like buttsex foreplay to me." Lonnie grinned and stepped back off the mat.

"In your dreams," Maddoc crooned as he turned his attention back to Ivan.

"Gene, would you help us?" Ivan asked the huge man, and he stepped forward. "Grab him from behind." Gene put his arms around him, holding him firmly. "Don't hurt him, but touch the areas we talked about," Ivan instructed.

Maddoc thought it a little silly, but even in Gene's strong grip, he could move enough to elbow his side, and

since his legs were free, stomp his foot. He didn't go for the nose or groin, but he could do it.

"See, it's not a matter of size or strength, but of surprise." Ivan stepped forward, and Gene let him go. "Thanks, Gene."

"No problem." He stepped off the mat. "I'll see you guys later." He and Dan wandered away with Lonnie following behind.

"You ladies coming to dinner?" Lonnie called from the door. Before they could answer, the door banged closed behind him, and they both shook their heads in wonder.

"The element of surprise can't be underestimated. You may only get a few seconds, so don't look, just run. Knee the guy in the nuts"—he lifted his knee slowly—"and then run like hell." Maddoc nodded, his concentration returning to the lesson.

Ivan spent the better part of an hour showing him basic moves and then helping him practice. A few times, Maddoc found his hand full of Ivan's substantial package, and each time he could feel himself blush. "What are you so shy about? You've already felt me up in the showers."

"That was an accident," Maddoc replied indignantly, the flush returning to his cheeks.

"There are no accidents," Ivan replied as he winked at him. "I think we're done here. Let's put the mats away and go clean up."

"Thank God. I wasn't sure I could make it through another workout like yesterday."

“Not today, but I’m not letting you off so easily tomorrow.” Ivan’s smile faded slightly. “I have an appointment tonight, but I was wondering if you’d like to meet me at the gym tomorrow morning at about ten. We could work out and then go for lunch.” Ivan trailed off. “Shit! I forgot. I promised my mom I’d see her tomorrow. We can still have lunch together, unless you’d like to go with me.”

“To meet your mother? You want me to meet your mother?” Maddoc didn’t know if he should be scared or exceedingly honored. “Does she know about...?”

Ivan burst into rich laughter. “God yes. My mother actually tried to fix me up. Before we immigrated, the women in my family were matchmakers, and my mother’s got the bug bad.” Ivan became serious. “You don’t have to, but I’d sort of like you to meet her.”

“Okay.” He was game for just about anything, as long as it involved spending more time with Ivan. “I’d like to meet your mother.”

“Then how about if I pick you up at your house in the morning. We can go to the gym and then I can take both you and my mom to lunch.” Ivan picked up half the mats and began stacking them where they belonged.

“That’d be great.” Because Ivan would need to drop him off afterward, and his mind flashed on all the possibilities.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow?” Ivan walked closer to him with a sort of feral look on his face. Maddoc found himself backing away until he bumped into the wall with a thud, a pair of strong arms pinning him there.

Maddoc couldn't hold back a small gasp as Ivan leaned closer and kissed him. "Just so you know, I would rather spend the rest of the evening with you." The way Ivan took his lips left little doubt as to his veracity. Maddoc's knees began to buckle as Ivan plundered his mouth with lips and tongue before pulling away. "I just wanted to be clear."

Maddoc blinked a few times in utter amazement. "Oh, you were."

"Good. I'll see you in the morning." Maddoc could only nod feebly as his lips were taken a final time. "And please call me if something happens, okay?"

"I will. I promise." Just knowing that Ivan wanted to help him gave him a strength he hadn't felt a few days earlier. "You'll be the first."

Ivan seemed happy with that response and let Maddoc go. They both walked into the locker room to clean up. Once he'd changed clothes, Maddoc talked awhile with Dan and Gene before leaving the club and heading home.

Pulling up to the house, he released a breath when he saw that his porch seemed untouched: no flowers and no notes. Wandering through his yard, he looked at his naked rose bushes and silently agreed with Ivan that they would probably survive but would look weird until they grew in. Finishing his walk through the yard, he admired his gardens before walking back around to the front.

"Maddoc."

"Hey, Jerry." Turning around, he saw one of his neighbors.

“I heard you had some excitement last night.” Jerry walked up to the base of the steps. “Was someone trying to break in?” He stepped closer, and Maddoc found himself backing away, feeling a little uncomfortable.

“Word gets around fast.” Maddoc backed up further, putting his bag in front of him to provide some distance.

“It’s not often that someone gets chased through the neighborhood in the middle of the night.”

Maddoc crinkled his brow. “How did you know that?” He suddenly got this jittery feeling in his stomach and wanted to get out of there.

“I saw them running when I was getting home last night.” Now that he could believe. Jerry was a notorious drinker, and neighborhood gossip had it that he spent a lot more time in the bars than he should. “A guy ran in front of my truck, and I nearly hit him as I was rounding the corner.” Jerry pointed as he continued his story.

Maddoc wasn’t completely convinced and made a note to himself to find out if there was someone on the road when Ivan had chased the guy away. He really didn’t think it was Jerry, they’d been near-neighbors for years, but it wouldn’t hurt to ask. “I have to take care of a few things.” Maddoc suddenly had an overriding urge to get away. Maybe he was just seeing things, but he wasn’t feeling comfortable right now. “I’ll see you later.” He turned around and caught his foot on the step, stumbling up the stairs and against the door. Jerry rushed up and helped him to his feet, taking his arm. Maddoc nearly wrenched his arm away but restrained

himself, muttering a thank-you as he got himself inside and shut the door, dropping his bag on the floor.

A knock a few minutes later had him jumping. Looking out the window, he saw his neighbor Corky peeking back at him. Calming his racing heart, he opened the door.

“Are you okay?” Maddoc stepped back and she walked inside, using her cane. “I saw Jerry leaving and heard about your excitement last night.”

“I’m fine.” Remembering his manners, he offered her a chair in the living room. “Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?” He could certainly use something.

“Coffee would be nice.” Her eyes twinkled. “Irish would be better.”

Maddoc went to the kitchen to put on a cup of coffee, grinning the entire time. Corky was an absolute gem. Getting the coffee maker going, he pulled out mugs and put a splash of whiskey in Corky’s cup before pouring the coffee and rejoining her in the living room. “Here you go.” He set her mug on the coffee table and settled on the sofa. “So what’s the rumor?” he asked as he sipped from his mug.

She lifted her mug and then set it back down. “I’ve been worried about you,” she confided. “Henry from across the street said that someone was chased across your yard last night, and I saw your rose bushes and knew you’d never do that to them. What’s been happening?” She sipped her coffee and made a face.

“Is something wrong?” Maddoc asked, surprised.

“There’s whiskey in here.” She set the mug down.

He was totally confused and got up to take her mug. “It’s what you asked for.”

“Dear, that was for you.” She picked up the mug and handed it to him. “I figured you could use it.” She settled back in the chair. “So what’s been happening?”

He figured *what the hell*, and told her everything. “At first, I was getting flowers from someone, and secret admirer type notes. I think whoever sent them figures I should know who they are.”

“And you don’t.” It wasn’t a question.

“Heavens, no. Then they started sending dead flowers, and then just the stems, and the notes kept coming.” He tried to keep himself from reliving the fear he’d experienced each time he’d come home to another threat. “Then yesterday, someone cut down my roses and put them all over the porch.” He couldn’t keep the loss out of his voice. “A friend stayed at the house last night and heard him trying to leave another message and chased him through the neighborhood.”

“A friend, huh? Is this a really good friend?” She leaned forward, expecting more.

Maddoc wasn’t ready to tell anyone about Ivan. He wasn’t even sure there was anything to tell. “He’s a friend from the gym. He used to be a Marine.” He tried, but he couldn’t keep the happiness out of his voice. Just thinking of Ivan was enough to put a smile on his face. “He was the one who chased the guy.”

“I’m glad he did,” she replied, and Maddoc used the opportunity to change the subject. He and Corky talked for a while about general neighborhood gossip, thankfully avoiding the subject of Maddoc’s stalker.

After a while, she used her cane to help stand up. “I’ll keep an eye on things while you’re at work.” She walked toward the door, her cane barely touching the floor. Maddoc had thought for years that the cane was a prop, either that or a weapon. “I hope your friend chasing him was enough to scare this guy off for good.” She said goodbye and kissed him on the cheek before leaving the house. As Maddoc waited on the porch, he hoped she was right, but something told him this wasn’t over. As she crossed his yard, he looked over at the Henry’s. The curtains were drawn, light peeking around the edges. Corky had said that Henry had told her about the excitement the night before. *The man was a little quiet....* “Jesus Christ.... This has got to stop. I’m starting to suspect everyone.” Stopping himself from going down that path, he walked to his front door.

IV

IVAN grinned like an idiot as he drove toward Maddoc's house on Saturday morning, checking to make sure he had his phone in his pocket. Ever since he'd left Maddoc the night before, he'd kept his phone next to him. When his mother had called to confirm that he was coming, he'd jumped out of his skin, afraid that something had happened to Maddoc. Pulling up to the house, he parked and walked up the walk: no flowers on the porch, and the yard looked the same.

Ringling the bell, Ivan smiled when the door opened and Maddoc stood looking back at him. Without thinking, Ivan found himself stepping forward, hands on Maddoc's neck, kissing the man for all he was worth. Maddoc's firm lips stood up to the onslaught, and Ivan found himself gasping as Maddoc's tongue slid into his mouth. Kicking the door closed, he began moving both of them toward the stairs, but Maddoc broke the kiss, gasping, "Please, I can't," and stepped back slightly.

Ivan didn't know what he'd done. "Is something wrong?" Confusion and doubt invaded his lust-clouded mind. Maddoc looked embarrassed and turned away. Ivan reached toward him and touched his shoulder. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Can we go in the living room?" The tension and fear in Maddoc's voice made Ivan swallow around the lump in his

throat as he followed behind and sat in the chair he'd slept in a few nights earlier. "It's not that I don't want to be intimate with you, but I can't. Not yet." Maddoc took a deep breath and blew it out. "I've had boyfriends, some of them lasting a while, but...." It looked like Maddoc was shaking. "I like you, I really do, but I always got physical with the guys I liked, and they never stayed around for long. So I promised myself that if I ever met someone I really liked again, I'd wait the next time. I know I sort of led you on the other night, and I'm sorry, but I just need to take it a little slower." Maddoc looked over at him, and Ivan knew he was expecting him to run for the door.

Standing up, he walked to the sofa and sat down next to him. "We'll take things as slow as you like." He saw Maddoc relax a little. "I like you, too, and I'm willing to wait." He moved closer. "We'll limit our activities to the kissing and touching variety if that's what you're comfortable with." He watched Maddoc's eyes as he moved closer until he picked up where they'd left off, with a kiss that short-circuited his brain. The little moans and gasps that Maddoc made went right to his dick, and he slowly pulled back, breathing heavily as he kept himself under control.

Ivan's dick throbbed in his pants at the first touch of Maddoc's lips. He knew he should stop this torture, but he couldn't. His instinct-driven brain drew him closer. Fingers wound through Maddoc's red curls as he deepened the kiss. Small mewling noises from deep in Maddoc's throat told him he was enjoying this just as much as Ivan was. Ignoring practicality and reason, he slipped a knee between Maddoc's and got a sharp gasp when he felt a hard length slide along

his hip. This was what his body called out for, what he really wanted. Ivan's tongue thrust deep and his cock throbbed with each movement, desperately wanting to get in on the action.

Something deep inside, probably his Marine training kicking in, he wasn't sure what, pulled him back from his passion-induced haze, breaking their kiss. Ivan looked at Maddoc's lust-hazed eyes, tousled hair, and kissed-red mouth. His body urged him forward to claim the man. It was funny to Ivan. In the Corps, he'd never understood how his buddies could become so possessive of wives and girlfriends. He hadn't felt that way with Gerald, but that's exactly how he felt with Maddoc. "We need to go to the gym, or I'm not going to be able to keep my promise." His breathing ragged, he forced himself to look away from Maddoc, but he couldn't for long.

Maddoc moved around him, giving him a wide berth, and bent over to pick up his bag. The jeans Maddoc was wearing tightened around that firm, small butt, and it took all Ivan's resolve not to move toward him as his dick did its best to try and split his pants open.

Jesus, when did I turn into such a caveman? Walking was slightly painful, and Ivan adjusted himself before following Maddoc out the front door and down the walk to his car.

Starting the engine, he pulled away and turned onto the main street and then entered the freeway. Ivan's thoughts kept racing to the man sitting next to him and he had to

force his attention onto the road, letting his training from long ago center himself and his attention.

“You don’t have to do this. I’ll understand.” Maddoc’s voice cut through Ivan’s thoughts, and he turned to glance at his passenger. Maddoc nervously chewed on a fingernail, shifting in his seat.

“You’ll understand what?”

“If you don’t want to date any more. I know I’m asking a lot.” The hand pulled away from his mouth, but joined the other one fidgeting in his lap. *Where had this come from?* Putting on his blinker, Ivan pulled off to the side of the freeway, putting on his hazard lights.

Popping off his seatbelt, Ivan twisted in his seat. “There’s nothing to understand. You’re worth waiting for.” His heart was drawn to Maddoc, and a little time was a small price to pay. Reaching out, his fingers carded through red curls, slowly pulling him closer. “Don’t get me wrong, Maddoc. I want you... bad.” Ivan brought their lips within inches of each other. “I want to feel you from head to toe, run my tongue over every inch of you, and I want to mark you so everyone will know you’re mine.” *God, where was this coming from?* He’d only known Maddoc a few days, and yet the words were out before he could stop them. “I want to bury myself so deep inside you we can feel each other’s heartbeats.” He ran a thumb over Maddoc’s quivering lower lip.

“You got so quiet before,” Maddoc explained nervously.

“Only because I was thinking.” Ivan smiled. “And trying to keep the car from running off the road.” Taking Maddoc’s

hand, he placed it on his lap. “That’s what you do to me.” He saw the redhead smile. “No one can fake that, not even a Marine.” He let their mouths get closer, Maddoc’s warm breath tingling his lips. “So you take your time. It’s important that you feel comfortable and ready when we express our feelings physically.” Ivan moved a fraction of an inch closer, letting their lips touch before pulling back. “Now, for the rest of the ride, you need to keep your cuteness to yourself, or otherwise when I change clothes, my dick will still be pointing in your direction, and that could be embarrassing.” He could feel his cheeks heating, and that never happened.

Maddoc snorted. “Well, you’d have one hell of an audience.” He put his hand over his mouth and began to laugh. “They’ll probably give you a standing ovation.” Ivan joined in Maddoc’s mirth and put the car in gear, speeding them down the freeway toward the gym.

Inside the club, they scanned their cards and walked toward the locker room. Ivan chose a locker and began changing his clothes.

“Hey, Maddoc.”

Ivan looked around and saw someone approaching. Turning to look, he saw Maddoc pale slightly.

“Hey, Jerry.” Maddoc’s words sounded guarded. “I didn’t know you were a member.”

“I’m thinking of joining.” The guy seemed genuine, but Maddoc’s continued reticence had him wondering. “My pass is almost up, and I need to make a decision soon.” He saw Maddoc nod and back away slightly.

“I’ll see you around.” Maddoc plastered on a smile that looked totally fake and went back to dressing.

“Is something wrong?” Ivan asked in a whisper. “Who was that?”

“A neighbor.” Maddoc’s eyes darted around the locker room.

“Could he be the one?”

Maddoc shrugged and pulled on his shorts and sat down to tie his shoes. “I’ll tell you later.” Ivan had to be content with that and finished dressing, following Maddoc out of the locker room. “What’s on for today?”

Ivan pulled him into the deserted gym. “Nothing until you tell me what’s up with Mr. No Personal Boundaries?”

“You noticed, huh?” Ivan nodded his head. “He was asking me about you chasing someone away the other night.”

Ivan felt his eyebrows furrow. “How did he know? It was after two in the morning.” For a second, Ivan hoped they’d found their guy. He wasn’t sure Jerry could outrun anybody, but he wasn’t ruling anyone out.

“He said he was coming home from the bar and almost hit the guy you were chasing.”

Ivan nodded, “That’s possible. The guy did dart in front of a car as he was running, so that could have been this Jerry guy. But then it could also have been the guy I was chasing.” Ivan watched as Maddoc’s nervousness returned.

“It doesn’t mean it was Jerry. I just don’t want to rule him out.”

“So what do we do now?” He knew Maddoc was talking about his stalker, but he purposely misunderstood.

“We get to work.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Man, he was cute when he got indignant.

“I know, but there’s nothing we can do about your unwanted visitor, but we can get to work so you can defend yourself. So let’s get the mats, and we’ll start.” Maddoc nodded, and the two of them dragged mats into the gym and spent time going over what they’d covered before, practicing together for the better part of an hour. “I know this is repetitive, but it only works when you don’t have to think about it.” Maddoc’s hand stopped just short of his groin. “Okay, you’re getting too good at that one.”

Maddoc chuckled. “But I like that one.” The chuckling lasted until Ivan wrestled him to the mat. “Hey!”

Now it was Ivan’s turn to chuckle. “One thing you have to do is stay on your feet.” He helped Maddoc to his feet. “Once you’re on the ground, you’re at their mercy.”

“Like this.” Ivan saw Maddoc coming a mile away, but played along and let him take him down. “That’s not fair, you let me do it.” Maddoc playfully slapped him on the arm.

“I know. You were moving slowly, but you did it right. I just saw it coming.” Maddoc tried again, but Ivan stayed on his feet. “That’s probably enough for today. Why don’t we spend some time on a treadmill before cleaning up.”

They put away the mats and spent the next half hour walking at a steep incline before cleaning up and leaving the club. “So what’s your mother like?” Maddoc asked as they walked across the parking lot.

“She and my father migrated from the Ukraine forty-five years ago, just before I was born. They both came over alone and met here at a church function. They married six months later.” Ivan unlocked the car and they got inside. “When I was growing up, we spoke only Ukrainian in the home. My father’s English was never very good, but Mom picked it up really fast. She has a heavy accent that she’s ashamed of, so don’t be surprised if she tries to speak Ukrainian when I’m around.” He started the engine, lowered the top, and sped through the parking lot.

“Do you think she’ll like me?”

Ivan found himself laughing, “She’ll probably try to pin a medal on you. Remember I told you her people were matchmakers? Well, I’m one of her notable failures. For years she tried to fix me up with girls, and when I finally told her I was interested in men, once she went to church to talk to the priest, she came home and tried fixing me up with every gay man she could find.”

To Maddoc’s credit, he didn’t laugh for about three seconds. “Oh my God. I know you told me she’d tried, but I figured maybe once or twice.”

Ivan began to laugh as well, a deep belly laugh that he couldn’t stop. “Try thirty-two times, and that was just the guys.”

“Jesus.” Maddoc calmed himself down.

“I turned her down enough that she eventually stopped. She’ll be happy I’m bringing someone home to meet her, but don’t be offended if she grumbles a little. She figures the only way to make a good match is through a matchmaker.”

“But she met your father,” Maddoc replied, and Ivan looked at him and waited. “You mean they....”

“Yup, they had a matchmaker.” The two of them continued talking as the car sped through quiet residential streets, pulling up in front of a small ranch house.

“Is this where you grew up?” Maddoc asked excitedly as he got out of the car, looking around. “This must have been a great place to be a kid.”

“It was. There were lots of other kids to play with.” Ivan looked up the road—he could almost hear the laughter from his friends playing baseball or tag. “Come on.” Leading Maddoc toward the door, he placed a hand on the small of his back.

The front door opened. “This must be the young man you were telling me about.”

Ivan couldn’t keep the smile of his face. “Mom, this is Maddoc.”

She extended her hand, and Maddoc took it. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Bradoff.” A shiver went up Ivan’s spine. He loved the lyrical way his last name fell off Maddoc’s tongue. He’d always thought it sounded rough when most people said it, but Maddoc made it sound sensual somehow.

“Please, call me Maria.” She opened the door further and motioned them inside. Ivan nearly tripped on the step.

Maria? His mother never let anyone call her by the American version of her name. It was always Marinova.

The living room was spotless as usual. “Please make yourself comfortable. Lunch should be ready soon.” Something wasn’t quite right. His mother was smiling from ear to ear, and Maddoc looked nervous as hell. She’d insisted on cooking, and Ivan couldn’t talk her out of it.

When his mother left the room, he touched Maddoc’s hand lightly and saw him relax a little in the chair. “It’s fine. She likes you.”

“Oh.” He heard Maddoc’s stomach growl along with his own. “What is it she’s cooking? It smells wonderful.”

“Probably cabbage rolls. They’re her specialty and one of my favorites.”

“So, Maddoc,” his mother said as she returned to the room, “how did you meet my son?” Ivan opened his mouth to answer, and she gave him a don’t-you-dare look.

“At the gym. Ivan’s been teaching me self-defense.” Maddoc looked over at him warmly, and Ivan had to adjust his legs a little to keep his pants from getting too tight. “I’ve been having trouble with someone bothering me.”

“What are they doing?” Her words were a little halted, but Ivan noticed how much better her English had gotten lately.

“Someone keeps sending me flowers.”

“And it’s not Ivan?” There was a protectiveness in her voice, like she didn’t want her son to have competition. That was his mom: defensive as a mother cougar.

“No. Lately, they’ve sent dead flowers, and then just the stems.”

“Someone’s been stalking him,” Ivan supplied for his mother. “A few nights ago, they cut down the roses in his yard.”

She nodded and seemed lost in thought, just looking at Maddoc. Turning his head, he saw Maddoc start to squirm under his mother’s intense gaze. “Flowers are love. Sending flowers is a good thing. Using flowers to hurt is bad, only a very bad person do this.” Her pronouncement over, she settled back in her chair. A ding sounded in the kitchen. “Lunch is ready.” She got up from her chair.

“Where can I wash up?” Maddoc asked as he stood.

“Down the hall, first door on the left.” Maddoc walked from the room, and Ivan went into the kitchen to help his mom, but everything was already on the table.

“He’s very nice, but scared.” She put the casserole dish in the center of the table. “It’s good you’re helping him.”

“I really like him, Mom.” Ivan met her eyes.

“I know, and he likes you. He’s very smart, and you’re very strong—you need each other. He’ll show you wonderful things, and you’ll help protect him. I could not have done better.” Before she could say more, Maddoc entered the room and they sat down to eat. But Ivan knew that from his mom that was very high praise indeed, and he felt his heart warm

as he watched Maddoc settle into the chair next to him. They might need to wait, but he knew Maddoc would be his lover. Sooner or later, the stunning redhead next to him would be his to love; he could feel it with every beat of his heart.

Lunch was served with his mother constantly trying to get both of them to eat more. “You’re both so skinny,” she kept saying as she’d put another stuffed cabbage roll on each of their plates. At one point, Maddoc had whispered to him that they’d both need to go back to the gym after this meal. They spent much of the afternoon with his mom, and Ivan was pleased to see Maddoc becoming more comfortable as the day progressed.

“Mom, we’ve got to go,” Ivan finally said as his mother tried yet again to get him to eat. This time it was a plate of cookies. He stood up, and she gave him a hug.

“Thank you for the wonderful lunch, Maria.” Maddoc offered his hand, but to Ivan’s complete shock, she pulled him into a hug before disappearing into the kitchen, returning and handing each of them a container of food.

“I’ll see you soon, Mom.” Ivan made for the door, knowing she’d keep him talking for an hour if he didn’t. She did her best to keep them talking anyway, and finally Ivan was able to get them outside.

“Your mom’s great,” Maddoc babbled as they walked toward the car. “I don’t think I’ll need to eat for a week.”

“I know what you mean.” He placed the food in the back seat.

“Oh fuck!” Ivan looked at Maddoc and followed his gaze to the passenger seat. Three mangled roses sat on the seat. Reaching over, he picked up the flowers and threw them into the street. Taking Maddoc’s container, he set it next to his and waited for him to get in. “I hate this!”

“I know.” He didn’t know what else to say. He could almost feel Maddoc’s pain and fear as though they were his own.

“I want this to end. I need to make this stop!” Maddoc pounded his thighs with his fists.

“We need to make this end,” Ivan corrected and saw Maddoc’s anger begin to slip away. “Let’s get you home, and we can try to figure out how to catch this fucker.”

“We?” Maddoc looked over at him, hope in his eyes.

“Yes, we.” Ivan leaned over the seat.

“Your mother. She’ll see us.” Maddoc cautioned, backing away.

“So. She knows we kiss, and if she doesn’t want to see, she can get away from the window.” Ivan captured Maddoc’s lips and quickly deepened the kiss before pulling back and looking deep into those sea-blue eyes. “Okay?”

“Uh-huh.” That was all he said as his head nodded slowly, and Ivan started the car before pulling away from the curb. He drove fast, imagining the things that might be going through Maddoc’s mind.

As they pulled up in front of the house, everything looked the same. No flowers on the porch, but Ivan couldn’t

help looking around anyway. Someone had been following them to the gym, to his mother's, and God knew where else. Putting up the top, he shut off the engine and walked Maddoc to his front door.

Maddoc unlocked the door. "I'll be fine."

Ivan wasn't buying it. The fear, the jitters, it was all back, and Maddoc looked just as small and scared as he had that first night. He wasn't sure he'd be welcome, but he knew he couldn't just leave. "Let's get you some tea, and we can talk."

Maddoc went inside, and Ivan took his silence for assent and followed him, closing and locking the door behind him. Maddoc walked blankly through the house toward the kitchen. This was hurting Ivan as much as it was Maddoc. As he reached the door, Ivan took his arm, pulling them together. "Look at me." Maddoc raised his head, and Ivan looked deep into those rich blue eyes. "We'll figure this out."

"How?" Maddoc's confusion was swirling in his eyes.

"I don't know yet, but we will."

Maddoc began to squirm in his arms. "I need to make tea." Ivan knew that was just an excuse.

"Not yet." Running his fingers through those curls he loved so much, Ivan captured Maddoc's lips and kissed him, hard. At first Maddoc didn't respond, but soon those lips parted, and Ivan deepened the kiss, exploring the mouth of the man he was determined to make his lover. He wasn't sure what Maddoc was thinking until he heard that first small, throaty moan. Wrapping his other hand around the

smaller man's back, he rubbed along Maddoc's spine as he pressed them closer together, their body heat melding. Maddoc began returning Ivan's kisses, and his moans got louder and more insistent.

Maddoc pulled away. "We shouldn't." Then his lips crashed against Ivan's, pulling and tugging on his lips while alternately sucking on his tongue. Ivan's dick wanted in on the action so bad, he thought he'd come just from the kissing.

Not giving any quarter, Ivan swung Maddoc off his feet, Maddoc's legs wrapping around his hips, Ivan's hands gripping that tight, firm butt. Fuck, Maddoc felt good in his hands—if only he could figure a way to get those pants off without breaking their kiss or letting Maddoc go. The slim man's hips began grinding against him as Maddoc tried to wrap himself around him like a vine. "I'll take care of you, Tiger."

"Make me forget everything."

"You won't remember your name by the time I'm through with you." Maddoc's lips were on his again, and Ivan began climbing the stairs to Maddoc's bedroom.

Approaching the bed, he set Maddoc on the edge, pressing him back onto the mattress.

"Is this what you really want?" Maddoc nodded in response. "No, you have to say it." If Maddoc said to slow down, he would, but his dick would probably explode.

"Yes, I want you to fuck me."

Ivan pulled back, looking into Maddoc's clouded, half-closed eyes. "I'll make love to you," he corrected.

Maddoc stilled. "You'll... yes." Maddoc pulled him back down, and Ivan resumed their kisses, using his hands to open Maddoc's shirt before moving to suck lightly on his neck.

"I know I'm not handsome like you." His voice trailed off as Ivan found a spot at the base of Maddoc's neck that had him vibrating beneath Ivan.

Ivan lifted his head. "I think you're beautiful." With a smile, he parted the fabric of Maddoc's shirt and ran his tongue over a pink nipple before sucking on the firm bud. Maddoc's hot skin tasted better than he'd imagined. The man must spend a lot of time outdoors, because his skin smelled like sunshine with a hint of pine, clean and earthy. Maddoc let his legs fall away as he moaned with pleasure.

Letting his lips roam, Ivan kissed his way across Maddoc's chest before latching onto the other bud, his hands sliding down to Maddoc's hips and across his belly. The redhead began to laugh and squirm, but Ivan stilled his hand and brought their lips back together, kissing the laughter away and replacing it with whimpers. Breaking the kiss and stepping back, he unbuckled Maddoc's belt and popped the button on his pants before grabbing the waist of his pants and tugging them down and off. Moving between Maddoc's legs, he murmured, "I told you—beautiful," as he ran his palms down Maddoc's chest and stomach, stopping just before touching his length.

"Please, Ivan," his radiant redhead begged softly.

“What do you want, Tiger?” He knew his eyes were as filled with desire as Maddoc’s; he only hoped the other man saw it.

“I want to see you.”

Ivan shivered slightly. Those few words were the hottest thing anyone had ever said to him. Stepping back, he slipped off his shirt, draping it over the foot of the bed before toeing off his shoes and stepping out of his pants, standing naked in front of his lover. Maddoc sat up, his arms slipping around Ivan’s waist, mouth and tongue sliding over his skin.

When Maddoc sucked on one of his nipples, Ivan threw his head back and hissed as Maddoc bit lightly and scraped the skin with his teeth. “Fuck, you’re hot.” Maddoc’s hands slid down his stomach, fingers tracing his stomach. “I’ve never seen a ten-pack before,” Maddoc purred, sliding his tongue over Ivan’s skin, lightly tickling.

Ivan chuckled and nudged Maddoc back, pressing him against the mattress. This time, he let his hands glide all over his lover’s smooth, pink skin. Legs wrapped around his waist, and Ivan let his fingers graze over that soft, firm butt. Ivan ran his fingers along the smooth crease. The man’s body was nearly hairless, and Ivan smiled when he realized that extended to other, more intimate places.

“Ivan,” Maddoc whimpered breathily as Ivan’s fingers teased the flesh around his opening.

“You like that, Tiger?” Ivan did it again, and Maddoc cried out this time, pressing back against his fingers, trying for more. Looking around, Ivan saw a bottle on the nightstand—the little minx.

Slicking his fingers, he pressed one to Maddoc's opening. The hot body beneath him gripped his finger tightly. "How long has it been?" Ivan pressed his finger deeper.

"T-too long." Maddoc arched beneath him, throwing his head back. "Ivan!"

Smiling, knowing that he'd found that special spot, Ivan used the pleasure point to direct his lover back on the bed. Maddoc's head landed on the pillow, and he lifted his legs, exposing himself to Ivan's gaze. "You're stunning, you know that?" Ivan added another finger, daring his lover to contradict him.

"Whatever you say." Ivan rubbed the spot again as he leaned forward, sucking Maddoc's length into his mouth. Jesus, the man tasted good, and from the sounds he was making, it wouldn't be long and he'd get the full Maddoc banquet. "I'm—" was the only warning he got as the man bucked up into him, and Maddoc's intense flavor filled his mouth and kept coming until his lover collapsed back onto the bed with a deep sigh. "What'd you do to me?"

"Made you feel better." Ivan grinned down at his resplendent lover before opening the drawer in the nightstand and fishing around for... there had to be some... ah, his fingers latched onto a square packet. It was hard to look for condoms when he didn't want to look away.

Preparing himself, he pressed his cock to Maddoc's opening and leaned forward, close enough that he could feel Maddoc's breath against his lips. "Okay?"

"Yes." Maddoc arched. "Fuck."

Ivan stopped just inside his lover, unsure if his cry was pain or pleasure. Looking deep into Maddoc's eyes, he waited until Maddoc's body began taking him deeper on its own. As he pressed further, a low, rumbling moan vibrated through his lover's body as his hips melded to Maddoc's butt. He could feel his cock throb and jump deep in his lover.

"Make love to me, Ivan," Maddoc rasped as he pulled Ivan forward into a forceful kiss that curled his toes.

Lips and tongues battled, ramping up the intensity, and Ivan moved deep inside. He only hoped Maddoc liked it fast and a little rough, because that was all he had left. Snapping his hips back and forth, he plunged deep and withdrew again. "Feel so good!" His cognitive processes began shutting down, reducing him to instinct and animal passion.

"Ivan."

Plunging deep, he lifted Maddoc off the mattress and slid him lower on the bed before resuming his relentless, pounding passion. Maddoc was his and only his. Leaning forward again, he sucked at the base of Maddoc's neck, raising a mark as his lover bucked against him. Maddoc cried out loud and fierce as he came between them, and still Ivan couldn't get enough. Driving deep, he felt his balls threaten to disappear inside him as he came with a brain-stopping climax, howling his release. "Mine!"

All his energy gone, Ivan collapsed onto Maddoc, huffing for breath. His lover's arms cradled him as his head stopped spinning, and he regained awareness of his surroundings and the fact that he was probably crushing Maddoc.

Slipping from Maddoc's body, Ivan tried to shift off him, but was held in place as lips kissed the base of his neck. "That was quite a declaration."

"Maybe it's the Marine in me, Tiger, but something took over." He wasn't going to apologize for how he felt. The declaration had been honest, if maybe a little premature. But he felt what he felt, and he knew he'd fight for Maddoc.

Feeling a tap on his hip, Ivan slid to the mattress, and before he could blink, found himself on his back with a naked Tiger straddling him. "You may be a big, hunky Marine"—Maddoc's eyes shone down at him—"and for the record, you're *my* big, hunky Marine, but that doesn't mean that I'm the little woman." Ivan cocked his head, waiting to see where Maddoc was going with this.

Leaning forward, Maddoc sucked on one of Ivan's ears, pulling slightly with his lips. "Just so you know, I can't wait to fuck you until you can't see straight." Maddoc yawned and rested his head against his shoulder. "Maybe later."

"I look forward to it, Tiger," Ivan replied in a whisper as Maddoc burrowed next to him, using his bicep as a pillow.

As the light faded, Ivan tried to rest with his now-napping lover but couldn't. So many things ran through his mind, and then there were the soft noises Maddoc made and the sweet way he'd hug him tighter every few minutes, like he was afraid he'd somehow get away. His Marine instincts were screaming at him, telling him that this guy stalking Maddoc wasn't going to give up and that his behavior would escalate. He had to figure out a way to catch this guy that wouldn't put Maddoc in danger.

“You can’t solve the world’s problems by yourself.” Maddoc’s eyes didn’t even open, and he stroked his hand along his lover’s skin. “I know what you’re thinking about,” the sleepy redhead clarified.

“You do, huh?” He hugged Maddoc closer, and those blue eyes slid open.

“The same thing I lie in bed most nights thinking about.” Maddoc lifted his head slightly, “The only time I sleep well is when I’m with you.” Maddoc rolled over, spooning himself against Ivan.

Jesus, what an admission! Thinking to himself, he realized how little he really knew about Maddoc’s life. He didn’t know many of his friends or any of his neighbors and had no idea who could be doing this to him. They hadn’t known each other long enough. A few days earlier, he’d never have believed he was capable of falling for someone so fast—wouldn’t have believed it was possible—but he knew better now. Without thinking, he found his fingers stroking through Maddoc’s hair. “Don’t look too close. I’m getting gray.”

Ivan snickered. “It’s a sign of virility.”

“On you, maybe....” Ivan’s laugh turned to a soft groan, and Maddoc ground his butt against him. “Let’s test out that theory.”

V

MADDOC closed his front door, looking around like he always did, but saw no one and breathed a silent sigh of relief. No flowers, no notes, and while he'd checked, he hadn't seen or felt like anyone was following him. Locking the door, he picked up his bag.

Jumping back at what he thought were footsteps, Maddoc had his keys in hand already turning to unlock the door when he saw pair of squirrels dash through the bushes, skittering across the mulch before chasing each other up a tree, chattering between them. "Calm down," Maddoc mumbled to himself as he checked the door and walked to his car. He knew he was still jumpy, and just because nothing had happened for a few days didn't mean it was over, but it gave him hope. Releasing a sigh, he unlocked his car, checking the back seat before getting in and starting the engine. Pulling away from the curb, he thought he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Stopping the car, he watched, but saw nothing as the breeze rustled the leaves of the flowering quince. Pulling away, he forced himself to relax.

His phone rang and he jerked again. "Morning, Ivan."

"Is something wrong? You sound nervous."

"I'm just jittery this morning." Maddoc tried to concentrate on his driving as he entered the freeway. "Give

me a minute.” Setting down the phone, he merged into traffic. “Sorry.”

“Did something happen?”

“Other than my overactive imagination, no. I got startled by a pair of squirrels this morning,” he grouched into the phone. “This is ridiculous. I’m jumpy all the time, and I hate it.” There were times he just wanted to scream.

“I know you do.” He could hear the concern in his lover’s voice.

“Will I see you at the gym? I’ve missed seeing you.” With Ivan out of town, he’d felt even more alone, and he realized how he’d come to rely on the big man after just a few days. There was something about Ivan that made him feel safe.

“Me, too, but I had to go on this trip. I should be back in town, and I’ll meet you there at four.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” Lonnie and Dan were great workout partners, but he missed working out with Ivan. “By the way, I officially joined the club yesterday, and I’ve lost four pounds.” He heard a soft chuckle come through the phone. He loved the sound of that deep laugh and squirmed on the seat.

“That’s really good—not that you had much to lose.”

“But I want to look all ripped like you.” He squirmed again as images of a naked Ivan flashed through his mind. The man was stunning, and he wanted to look good for him.

“I think you’re sexy right now.” Ivan used his bedroom voice, and Maddoc’s dick throbbed. “I thought I’d stay over tonight, if that’s okay.”

“It’s more than okay.” *It’s bloody fucking fantastic.* The last few days when he’d gotten home, he’d spent most of the time holed up in the house. A few times he’d heard neighbors outside, and he’d ventured out, but only if other people were around. It felt pathetic—he kept seeing threats everywhere and found himself running scared all the fucking time.

Saying goodbye and closing the phone, he finished his drive to the office, some of his trepidation slipping away just knowing that Ivan would be back and that they were going to get together that evening. He parked in the lot and walked into the office, going right to his desk and checking his calendar. Thank God, he had a very busy day ahead. Turning on his computer, Maddoc sat at his desk.

A knock on the door drew his attention. “Morning.” His supervisor smiled as he walked in and sat down. “I know it’s early, but I got a call from the San Francisco office, and they have an opening for a program manager.” Maddoc was about to interrupt, but Dennis stopped him, “I know it’s not a promotion, but it’s a larger location, and the position comes with a huge raise. I have to tell you that you were specifically requested.”

Wow, what an ego boost. He’d only been in his current position for six months.

“Think about it and let me know at the end of the week.” Dennis got up from the chair. “Just for the record, I want

you to stay. You're the best program manager we've ever had, but I won't stand in your way, and the San Francisco office is much higher profile."

Maddoc smiled. "Thanks. That means a lot." Dennis left the office, and Maddoc sat dazed in his chair. His first instinct was to turn down the job. He knew it was a great opportunity but it meant moving clear across the country to a state he didn't know and to a city where the cost of living was astronomical. But it would be a chance to start over without his friendly neighborhood stalker. But Ivan.... His thoughts stopped momentarily. Going to San Francisco would mean leaving Ivan. Maddoc sighed loudly. He really didn't want to leave; he liked it here. He had his own house and a garden he'd spent years cultivating. He had friends and a life, one that was quickly expanding to include someone who could mean a great deal to him. Forcing his mind back on the task at hand, he signed on to his computer and tried to get to work.

He spent much of the day in meetings and completing paperwork. Most people complained about it, but he seemed to thrive on it. Part of the reason he was so successful was because he knew what the rules were and was able to navigate them efficiently in order to get his job done.

"Are you leaving soon?"

He looked up and saw Kyle standing in his doorway before checking his watch. "In a few minutes."

"I was wondering if I could ask you something?" Kyle moved into the office, standing right next to his desk. Maddoc immediately began to feel trapped and started

looking outside, but no one was nearby. Trying to keep his cool, he looked around his desk for something he could use as a weapon if he needed to. “Are you dating the guy from the gym?”

“You mean Ivan?”

“Big, tall man with short gray hair.”

Maddoc nodded slowly, wondering where Kyle was going.

“Yes, we’re dating. Why?” Maddoc watched Kyle’s eyes and saw them fill with sadness.

“Nothing.” He slowly turned away.

Maddoc wondered what was going on. Did Kyle have feelings for him? “Did you send me flowers?” he asked, slightly less confused.

Kyle shook his head. “Is that what he did to get your attention?” The words sounded snide, but there was no heat in them, only what sounded to Maddoc like regret. Kyle left the office, and Maddoc leapt from his seat to talk to him, but by the time he reached the hall, all he saw was Kyle’s retreating back hurrying away. Turning around, he went back to work, shaking his head, wondering why everything happened at once and feeling a little stupid. It looked like the man might have been interested in him. Why hadn’t he said something? Not that he was interested in Kyle that way, but he didn’t want to hurt him.

“This crap has to end,” he muttered to himself as he turned back to his PC. Whoever was doing this had not only stripped away his peace of mind and made him jumpy as

hell, he'd made Maddoc become suspicious of everyone and everything. "I can't live this way."

"Did you say something?" One of the ladies poked her head in his office, obviously hearing his mutterings. He smiled at her and shook his head, embarrassed. She returned his smile and moved away. But he'd had enough. Opening the file he needed to finish before leaving, he got back to work.

Thankfully Maddoc's day had truly been extraordinarily busy. Back-to-back meetings and a pressing deadline kept his day short and his mind occupied. But that ended as he walked to his car and headed to the gym.

Ivan was walking in as he pulled in the parking lot. Maddoc smiled to himself when he saw Ivan waiting for him on the sidewalk. Grabbing his bag, he hurried to catch up. "How was your day?" Ivan asked as they walked toward the doors.

"Very busy but productive. I was able to eliminate Kyle from my office as my stalker." He told him about their conversation. "I think he liked me."

"You sound sad." Ivan stopped. "Are you regretting your decisions?"

Maddoc stopped as well, "No. But I feel for him, you know. He liked me and knows we're dating." They continued walking, and as they reached the door, Maddoc put a hand on Ivan's arm. "I don't regret anything."

Ivan smiled. “For a second there, I was afraid you’d started to regret what we did before I left.” Ivan’s smile brightened, and he moved closer. “You’re blushing.”

Maddoc felt the heat in his cheeks as he returned the smile. “Just thinking about what we did before you left.”

“Come on, Hot Stuff, we’ve got a workout to finish. Then maybe, if you’re good, we can arrange an encore.” Ivan opened and held the door.

“What if I’m bad?” Maddoc winked at him and saw Ivan’s cheeks start to pinken. He scanned his card and continued through the gym to the locker room. After changing clothes, Maddoc followed Ivan to the workout floor.

“I thought we’d go through the body weight exercises again,” Ivan explained as he walked toward the mats. “We can start with push-ups.” Maddoc followed Ivan down onto the mat and waited to find out what he had in mind. “Start and do as many as you can. Be sure to go all the way down and come all the way up.”

Maddoc mimicked Ivan’s position and began the push-ups. At ten, he started having trouble, and by twenty, he was flat on the mat, breathing like he’d run a marathon. Looking over at Ivan, he watched him continue as though it was nothing. “Show-off.”

“Fifty-one, fifty-two....”

Maddoc grinned as he watched Ivan’s tight butt rise and lower.

Maddoc moved close to Ivan’s ear. “Do you think you could do that and fuck me at the same time?”

Thump. Ivan's hands slipped on the mat. "That was mean and just plain wicked."

"But effective," Maddoc countered.

"Just for that, we need to do another set." Ivan got in position. "Come on," he prodded, and Maddoc huffed and started doing more push-ups. When he collapsed again, he watched Ivan's tight body raise and lower, butt tightening with every rep, chest bulging, arms pumping, legs rigid. "One hundred."

"That was hot," Maddoc whispered, and Ivan chuckled as he gulped water from his bottle. "And so is that." He watched the man's throat work and had to stop himself from running his tongue along the taut, undulating skin. Ivan must have seen the look on his face because he said nothing as he lowered the bottle and led the way to the next exercise. Maddoc followed behind like Ivan was the Pied Piper.

"CAN you do one more?" Ivan asked as Maddoc pulled himself up to the bar for what he was sure was the last time. Reaching the top, he lowered himself and let go.

"Are you kidding? I can barely lift my arms." Maddoc rubbed his shoulder as he groused lightheartedly.

"Then let's clean up."

After spending time in the whirlpool, letting his taut muscles loosen, Maddoc led Ivan to the showers, where he slipped off his bathing suit and stepped into the stall,

glancing over at Ivan and all that tight musculature. Starting the shower, he pulled the curtain closed and let his imagination wander as he soaped his skin. His body definitely had ideas of its own, and he had to stop himself. When he got home he could have the real thing as opposed to just the visions in his mind. Finishing his shower, Maddoc dried himself and wrapped the towel around his waist before heading back to his locker to dress.

Slipping into his clothes, he spent much of his time watching Ivan pull on his pants, the powerful legs disappearing into denim cut to accentuate a narrow waist and broad chest. The last time they were together, Ivan had been the one in control. He hoped that this time he'd have a chance to take his time exploring his lover's athletic, sexy body.

A breath against his ear pulled him out of his daydream. "Are you thinking of something good?" Maddoc colored slightly as he looked up at Ivan and nodded with a small smile. "Then we should get back to your house so you can do more than think." Maddoc finished tying his shoes and packed his bag, grabbing it before following a jeans-clad butt out of the locker room and through the gym, watching as each step made those tight globes flex and bob.

Outside, Maddoc hurried to his car. Unlocking the door, he put his bag in the back and pulled open the driver's door, stopping in his tracks. A pink rose, or more accurately, what was left of a pink rose, sat on the driver's seat. Maddoc stared in near horror, his legs nearly giving out beneath him. They'd been in his car, and if they could do that, they'd be able to get into his house. Brushing the remains of the flower

onto the concrete, he climbed in and started the car. Pulling out of the lot, he rushed toward home, hoping that Ivan was close behind him.

Pulling up to the house, he shoved the car into park and rushed up the walk, bounding up the steps to the front door. Unlocking it, he rushed inside. Everything looked the same. Walking through the living room, he noticed nothing out of place. The kitchen looked the same, as did the dining room. Climbing the stairs, he walked through the rooms. Walking normally, getting control of his breath, he walked in his bedroom to use the bathroom and saw a single, pink rose on his pillow.

“Maddoc?” Ivan’s voice carried through the house. “Are you okay?”

“Up....” His mouth suddenly dry, the words died on his lips. He swallowed and tried again. “Up here,” he said as levelly as he could, even though he could feel panic rising from his very toes.

Heavy footsteps pounded on the stairs, and seconds later Ivan burst into the room and stopped when he, too, saw the flower. “He’s been in here.”

“And in my car.” Maddoc started to shake. Was there no place he was safe?

“We should call the police.” Ivan’s footsteps sounded around him. Maddoc nodded, unable to move. Then strong arms encircled him and a gentle hand cradled his head as he was pulled into a warm, reassuringly tight hug. “It’s okay.”

Ivan’s scent filled his nose, Ivan’s warmth reaching through his clothes to calm his ragged breathing. Tears

threatened, but Maddoc pushed them back. He wasn't going to do that, wasn't going to give the bastard doing this the satisfaction. Even in private, he wasn't going to let it happen. "Thank you," Maddoc whispered as he sniffled lightly.

"It's okay." A big hand softly stroked the back of his head and neck. Ivan just held him, making no move to back away, and Maddoc found himself clinging to the man, feeling that without him he'd crumple to the floor. "It's going to be all right."

Maddoc stepped away and reached for the flower, wanting it off his bed, but Ivan stopped him with a touch. "We should leave it for the police." Nodding, Maddoc lowered his hand and let Ivan guide him out of the room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen.

Seated in a chair, Maddoc finally reached for the phone and placed a call to the police. The operator asked all sorts of questions, and he answered each of them mechanically before hanging up the phone. "They said they'd send someone."

Ivan set a mug in front of him, and the scent of mint tea filled his senses. Lifting the mug, he sipped, the familiar taste soothing his rattled nerves. "Can you tell me what happened with the car?"

"There was a mangled version of the rose upstairs on the driver's seat when I got out of the gym." Maddoc took another sip of the tea. "I brushed it out and hurried home."

"Was the car locked?" Ivan asked gently, and Maddoc nodded in response, not trusting his voice right now.

“So how did they get in?” Ivan mused, and Maddoc had a terrifying thought.

Jumping up from his chair, he raced to the cupboard next to the refrigerator, pulling it open. “The extra set of keys is gone.” Maddoc pointed to the hook. “I always keep them right here.”

“We have to tell that to the police, and we need to get someone to change the locks on the house because we have to assume they have a key to it as well.”

Maddoc felt a crushing weight descend on him. They could get into anything they wanted. Turning away, he leaned against the counter, feeling the frustration and fear really start to take hold, and suddenly San Francisco didn’t seem like such a bad idea. Maddoc knew he had to get himself under control, but that was precisely what was eluding him right now. “I’ll be okay. We’ll figure this out.” Arms wound around his waist, and he felt a comforting weight against his back, and he leaned against it, taking the strength Ivan offered.

Maddoc jumped at a sharp knock on the front door. Feeling Ivan’s arms slip away, he walked through the house, looking out one of the windows before opened the door.

“I’m Officer Aaron Cloud,” he said as he showed his badge. “We got a call of a break-in.”

Maddoc stood back and held the door so he could enter. “I made the call.”

The officer looked around him. “Was there any damage? What was taken?”

Maddoc started to feel embarrassed and a little stupid. Looking around he saw Ivan, who thankfully joined him. “Well... um.” The policeman looked confused. “Let me show you.” Maddoc turned and led the way upstairs. “I came home from the gym and found this.” He led them to the bedroom and pointed toward the bed. “I also found one, or what was left of one on the driver’s seat of my car. It appears that whoever broke in also took the extra set of keys to my car, and they probably have keys to the house now too.” Maddoc began to shake again.

“Okay, sir.” The police officer looked around. “Would you like me to call a locksmith, and we can get the house secured?”

“Could you?” Everything felt out of control. “I don’t want them in my house again!” Ivan put his hand on his shoulder, letting him know he was there.

“Certainly.” Officer Cloud began talking into his radio, and they waited. “One will be here within the hour.”

“Thank you,” Maddoc replied, feeling relieved and a little less helpless now that something was being done.

“Would you be more comfortable downstairs? I’ve got a number of questions I need to ask.” Maddoc nodded his response and led them to the living room. Maddoc sat down and told him everything he could think of. “I have a few of the notes.” He gave them to the officer. “It didn’t seem like anything at first, but it’s been getting scarier over the last week or so. I reported the problem before, but I think the previous officer thought it was my imagination and didn’t do much.”

The police officer wrote down everything Maddoc said and then asked some more questions for clarification. “I’d like to take the flower from upstairs and look at the car as well as the rose bushes.”

“Of course.”

The officer got up, and Maddoc stayed where he was. He wanted to block the doors from the inside and curl into a ball, away from everyone and everything. Ivan, who’d been sitting next to him, pulled him into a hug, rubbing his back. “It’s going to be fine. The locksmith will be here soon, and we’ll call the dealership in the morning to see if we can’t get the locks changed on the car as well.”

Thank God for Ivan’s strength, because right now, Maddoc didn’t feel like he had any left. The front door opened and closed, and Maddoc saw the police officer glance in before heading upstairs. He returned a few minutes later with the rose in a plastic bag. “I didn’t see any signs of forced entry on the car and I found a few pieces from the flower on the floor.” Maddoc pulled slightly away from Ivan, but not enough to completely lose contact as he was offered a card. “Here’s the case number for the insurance company. Please call if you have any issues. I’ve already put in a request for extra patrols on the street, and if this guy is watching like you think, he’ll have seen that you’ve called the police.”

Maddoc nodded slowly and took the card as the doorbell rang. “Thank you.” Maddoc got up and opened the door to the locksmith. Thankfully, Officer Cloud explained what needed to be done and then said good night and left.

“This is good hardware. I can rekey it for you if you’d like.”

“Thank you,” Maddoc replied, and the man got to work.

“I’m going to get some food—we both need to eat. Will you be okay?” Ivan fished his keys out of his pocket.

Maddoc nodded and smiled the best smile he could muster. “I’ll be fine.” He needed a few minutes to think, and the locksmith was going to be here for a while anyway. Sinking into one of the living room chairs, he couldn’t stop himself from thinking about the job offer he’d received. San Francisco—the city of hills and water that was an entire country away from the man who was making his life a living hell.

He loved his house. Seven years ago, he’d bought this place and fixed it up. Lifting his head, Maddoc looked around the room. He saw the crown molding that he’d spent days cutting just right. The walls he’d stripped layers of wallpaper off of only to find the original impressions of picture frame moldings that he’d restored. He’d put part of himself in every room and every flower bed in his garden.

Shaking himself back to reality, he began wandering through the house, thinking, ruminating. He wasn’t a coward, and he’d never run from things in his life. When he’d realized he was gay, he told his parents. There were plenty of tears and lots of yelling, but he’d done it anyway. “God damn it, I’m not going to let someone scare me out of my own house.” He’d faced heartache and loss when his parents died and when his relationships had ended.

The front door closed, and the locksmith came through to the back door and started working, interrupting his thoughts. “I’ll be out of your hair soon.” He settled on the floor and started talking the lock apart. “This is a great house.”

“Thanks.”

“Did you do the work yourself? I don’t mean to be nosy, but we looked at this house about”—he paused, thinking—“six or seven years ago, and it didn’t look anything like this.”

“Yeah.” Maddoc smiled. “I did most of the work myself.” It had been a labor of love. Every room had been cleaned up and redone, from the kitchen and baths to the bedrooms.

“It really shows.” He put the lock back in the door and tested it. “If I’d have known it would look like this, I’d have bought it.” He closed the door and stood back up, handing Maddoc two keys. “I can make more if you want.” He wrote up a bill and handed it to Maddoc. Maddoc wrote him a check and handed it to him before walking him to the door.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Maddoc closed the door behind him and locked it before making sure the back door was locked tight as well. Then he settled in the living room to wait for Ivan.

He didn’t have to wait long before he heard a soft knock on the front door. Getting up, he looked out and unlocked the door. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Ivan leaned close, a kiss ghosting lightly over his lips. Maddoc closed the door. Ivan walked to the kitchen,

and Maddoc heard cupboard doors opening and closing as he joined him. “I got burgers and salad. No fries.” Ivan placed the food on plates while Maddoc got out forks and sat at the table.

“I’m sorry for all this.” The adrenaline that had been carrying him for the last hour had drained from his system, and Maddoc felt wrung out, empty, and definitely a little maudlin.

“There’s nothing to feel sorry about.” Ivan put a plate in front of him. “Eat a little and you’ll feel better.” Maddoc wasn’t sure anything would make him any better, but he took a bite of the burger. “Tell me about work today.”

Maddoc looked at Ivan like he was crazy. “What?”

“I just thought talking about something normal would help.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.” Maddoc took another small bite of burger.

“Stop apologizing and tell me about your day.”

“Okay.” Maddoc swallowed and took a sip of the wine that Ivan had poured for him. “I told you about what happened with Kyle, but I didn’t tell you the best news. My boss stopped in and told me that there’s an opening in the San Francisco office for a program manager, and they want me for the job.” Maddoc couldn’t help smiling a little. That they wanted him for the job was enough to make him smile. It said a great deal about the job he was doing.

Maddoc saw Ivan stop chewing, his eyes going wide for a second. “You’re leaving?” Ivan put his food down on the plate.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t thinking about it. After all this crap”—he waved his arms toward the door—“it would be hard not to.”

“Oh.” Ivan swallowed and gulped his wine. “I understand.”

Maddoc reached across the table. “I don’t think you do.”

“Oh, I understand perfectly.” Ivan glared at him from across the table. “Things get a little tough, and you’re going to run away.” Ivan dropped his fork, and it clattered on the plate. “I thought I might have finally found someone I wanted to be with, but you’re going to up and leave.”

“I didn’t say that.” Maddoc could feel his own temper starting to rise. “I said they asked me. I didn’t say I’d told them yes.”

“You told them no?” Ivan crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“I haven’t given them an answer yet.” That was obviously the wrong thing to say, because Ivan’s eyes blazed. It was really quite hot, actually. “Sometimes it’s just nice to be asked.”

“You’re going to tell them no?” Ivan’s expression softened just a little, but Maddoc could tell he was still wary.

“I love my house and my job. I like it here. It’s quiet with nice people.” He stopped himself. “Well, they’re nice except for the guy who’s stalking me.” Ivan even cracked a slight

smile. “And I really don’t want to pick up and move across the country. My life is here.” Now it was Maddoc’s turn to fume just a little. “But could you blame me if I decided to take the job after everything that’s happened?”

Ivan’s arms slid to the table. “I guess not.”

Maddoc smiled slightly, “Okay, then. Like I said, sometimes it’s just nice to be asked. I mean, I’ve only been in this position for six months, and they’re already offering me the same position in the largest office in the country. That means they think a lot of me, and they’ll offer me another promotion if I continue.” Maddoc found himself smiling.

“So you’re staying?”

“Yes, I’m staying.” Maddoc grinned mischievously.

Ivan started eating again, and Maddoc’s appetite finally kicked in as well. “Are you staying for me?” he asked sheepishly.

“I’m staying for me.” Maddoc returned Ivan’s sheepish grin. “You’re an added prize.”

Ivan smiled, and Maddoc felt himself relax for the first time since he’d seen the flower in his car. “So I’m a prize, huh?”

“I’m still trying to figure out if you’re the first prize or the booby prize, but you’re definitely a prize,” Maddoc replied with a smile and squirmed away when Ivan began tickling his ribs. “That’s not fair.”

“I’ll give you booby prize,” Ivan said through his chuckles as he continued tickling Maddoc’s ribs. Maddoc nearly fell off the chair, he was squirming so much.

Maddoc finally squirmed out of reach. “I give.”

“That’s better.” Ivan took a bite of his burger with a satisfied grin.

“I’ll let you audition for the kind of prize you are later.” Maddoc wagged his eyebrows as he returned to his chair and began eating again.

“Then you’d better eat everything on your plate, because you’re going to need your energy.” Ivan leered across the table, and Maddoc broke into giggles as he made sure to finish every bite.

“I don’t have to lick the plate, do I?”

“No.” Ivan’s eyes crinkled a little as he smiled broadly. “I have other things in mind for that tongue.” Ivan knelt close and kissed him, sucking lightly and drawing Maddoc’s tongue between his lips, and Maddoc found himself whimpering softly. Ivan’s lips were firm and moist, and his tongue did things Maddoc had never felt before. “Let’s go upstairs, Tiger.” Maddoc nodded a little, and Ivan took his hand, leading him out of the kitchen. At the base of the stairs, Ivan turned quickly and pulled him tight, kissing him hard.

Maddoc’s mind shut down, and everything that had happened over the last few hours slipped away as everything but the feel of Ivan’s lips against his and Ivan’s hands as they slipped beneath his shirt were driven away. His knees shook as hot fingers plucked first one nipple and then the other. “Ivan,” he murmured against his lips, and a hand stroked the skin just above his belt, a finger sliding under his belt, teasing his oversensitive skin.

A soft tune sounded in his ears, and it took him a while before he realized a phone was ringing somewhere in the house. Ivan's hand slid away, and his lips pulled back. Maddoc groaned audibly as Ivan stroked his cheek. "I have to answer that." Maddoc leaned against the wall and nodded absently as his chest heaved for breath. Ivan's flushed face and unsteady walk told Maddoc that he wasn't unaffected by the kiss, and he smiled.

Maddoc heard the tune stop and Ivan talking softly before returning. "I'm sorry, but I have to go in to the office. There's a problem that I have to fix." Maddoc couldn't keep the disappointment off his face, but he understood. There were times when he'd had to say the same thing. It came with the territory. "Don't worry, Tiger. I'll be back, and we'll pick up where we left off."

"You promise?"

"Oh, yes." Ivan kissed him against the wall. "I'll be back as soon as I can." Ivan gave him another kiss and then walked toward the door, turning around just before he left and giving Maddoc a final smile.

The front door closed, and Maddoc let the tingles of their last kiss fade before pushing away from the wall and locking the front door.

The quiet of the house and the sudden loneliness brought back the earlier fear, and Maddoc went through the house turning on lights. His phone ringing started him, and he clutched his heart dramatically before picking up the receiver.

“Maddoc, it’s Corky. Do you have a minute? I can’t get my VCR to work, and I want to tape my shows. I’m supposed to go to George’s tonight, and I don’t want to miss them, but I can’t figure out how to program the thing.” She always called for help with anything electronic.

“Of course.” There was no way he could tell his neighbor no. She’d done so much for him over the years, and she was such a great friend. “I’ll be over in a few minutes.” Hanging up, he picked up his keys. At the front door, he looked out before unlocking the door and opening it slowly. He turned on the porch light but could see no one in the twilight. Closing the door, he relocked it and hurried down the steps and across the lawn to the neighbor’s, knocking on Corky’s back door.

Maddoc heard the locks turn, and then the inside and screen doors opened. “Thank you.” She stepped back and walked inside.

“It’s not a problem.” He walked to where she had her television and VCR. “What time would you like it to start?”

“Have it record from nine to eleven on channel four.” Maddoc took the remote she handed him and programmed the device for her, making sure there was a tape in it. The thing was as old as the hills. He’d tried to get her to upgrade it, but she liked it and generally understood it, so the huge relic stayed where it was on top of the old console television. “Would you like something to drink?” She poured a cup of coffee and handed it to him without waiting for an answer, and Maddoc sat at one of the stools. He and Corky had spent a number of afternoons talking at her kitchen counter. “So is this man I’ve seen coming and going a new boyfriend?”

Maddoc nodded, hiding his smile behind the mug. “Yes, I think so.” Maddoc sipped more coffee, letting the smooth roasted warmth slide down his throat.

“Well, it’s about time. You’ve been alone for a while.”

Maddoc shrugged. “Sometimes it’s what happens.” He continued sipping his coffee. “I don’t really want to talk about it too much; I might jinx it.” Maddoc chuckled at the notion and changed the subject. They talked until it was time for her to leave for her son’s. After saying good night, she let him out the back door.

The lock on Corky’s door clicked, and Maddoc realized the twilight had turned to near darkness. The shadows of his familiar side garden had lengthened, looking ominous. The porch light at the front of the house cast a weak beam across the front yard but didn’t extend around the house. Screwing up his courage, he walked across his own yard toward the anemic light, which flashed and went out.

“Great, I’m in a cheesy horror movie.” His own words girded him in a bizarre way, and he stepped toward the front door, moving faster. Walking up the front stairs to the porch, he fumbled in his pocket for his keys, looking around and jumping slightly at the creaks of the porch boards under his own footfalls.

Fishing in his pocket for his keys, Maddoc cursed softly that he hadn’t gotten them out earlier. His fingers had just found the metal when a pair of arms grabbed him by the waist and he smelled what he was sure was alcohol.

“Hi, lovely, did you like my flowers?” Maddoc jumped, and the arms tightened, a hardness pressing against his

behind as the alcohol-fortified voice behind him continued. “I thought we could have some fun.”

Maddoc could feel the stronger man pulling him away from the door. *Stay on your feet.* Ivan’s words at the gym rang in his mind.

“You never gave me the time of day, but you will now that your boyfriend’s gone.” A car pulled along the street, casting just enough light so he could see where he was being led for a few seconds. “You don’t even know who I am. Do you?” His attacker yanked Maddoc’s hair, and Maddoc let loose a yell from the depths of his frightened soul.

Stomping hard, he caught the top of the man’s foot, earning a yell of pain and a loosening of the grip around him, but not enough for him to get away. Using his weight and his arms, just like Ivan taught him, he slammed his attacker in the groin. The wail was gratifying as the attacker grabbed his balls and fell to the decking.

Maddoc ran, leaping down the steps at a bound and running across the yard. Footsteps behind him sent his adrenaline soaring, and he took off like the hounds of hell were after him.

VI

“MADDOC,” Ivan called and watched as his lover slowed and finally stopped. Ivan walked up to him and silently folded him into his arms. “You okay?”

Maddoc shook his head against his chest, and Ivan felt his shoulders begin to shake. “I’m sorry,” Maddoc said into his chest, and Ivan felt himself smile.

“Come on, Tiger, we need to see if he’s still writhing on the ground.” Maddoc nodded in response and held onto him as they walked back toward the house.

Ivan saw a bent-over figure trying to descend the stairs. “If you don’t sit down right now, a lot more than your balls are gonna hurt! I’ll break your fucking neck!” Maddoc let go, and Ivan continued walked closer, standing a short distance away, waiting. “I mean it!” He used the same voice he had with rookies in the Corps. Ivan could see the moment Maddoc’s attacker decided to listen—his shoulders slumped further, and slowly he lowered himself to the step, hands still clutching his groin.

Ivan felt Maddoc come up behind him. “Go inside and turn on the light. Let’s see who this asshole is, then call the police.” He touched Maddoc’s arm. “He won’t try anything.” Ivan looked at the seated figure. “Or he won’t have any balls left to hurt!” All Ivan heard was a soft moan and shallow breathing as Maddoc slowly walked up the far edge of the stairs before unlocking the door and disappearing inside.

“I think my balls are swelling.”

“Who gives a fuck? If I’d have been here, you wouldn’t have any left, so consider yourself lucky.” The yard light snapped on, and the door cracked open. “The porch light won’t come on, and the police are on their way.” The door opened a little further. “Do you want me to come out with you?”

“No, stay inside, I’ll watch over blue balls here.” Ivan folded his arms over his chest. The man stared at the pavement, occasionally raising his eyes before lowering them again. A few minutes later, Ivan saw flashing lights and a police cruiser pulled up in front of the house. The man started to stand up, but Ivan growled at him and he sat back down.

“Someone called in an attack.” The officer approached, followed by another.

The front door opened, and Maddoc stepped outside. “I did. He attacked me.” Maddoc pointed at the seated man, his voice becoming agitated.

“It’s all right, sir.” The first officer turned to the other. “Why don’t you take his statement. I’ll talk to this one.” The second officer followed Maddoc inside, and Ivan watched as his lover closed the door and locked it behind him.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” The officer addressed the still-moaning attacker.

“He hit me in the balls.” He moaned softly, obviously trying to get sympathy.

“Do you need an ambulance?” The man nodded, and the officer made the call and spoke to Ivan, taking his statement as he waited for the ambulance. “We’ll get his at the hospital.” Ivan nodded and waited as more flashing lights appeared.

The ambulance arrived a few minutes before Maddoc and the officer emerged from the house. The attacker just sat on the step moaning, and Ivan was certain he was going for sympathy, but by the looks the police officers kept shooting his way, it wasn’t working. Maddoc stood next to him, and Ivan slipped an arm around his waist. “Do you know this guy?”

Maddoc nodded slowly, his eyes wide as saucers. “He’s my neighbor. Henry Hudgins.” Maddoc began shifting uncomfortably next to him. “I never saw him much.” At hearing his name, Henry moaned again, but Maddoc glared at him. “Shut up, Henry. You’re lucky you have any balls left after what you did to me.” Maddoc shook with rage next to him, and Ivan rubbed his arm gently before tightening his grip. After everything he’d been through, it was good to still see the fight in him. That more than anything told Ivan that Maddoc was going to be okay.

The EMTs finished with their preparations and bundled Henry onto a gurney, tying him down before placing him inside the ambulance. One of the police officers rode along while the other asked a few additional questions before asking them to come to the station in the morning to sign their statements.

Once everyone had left, Ivan led Maddoc inside. As soon as the door was closed and locked, Maddoc squeezed him tight and began to shake. "It's okay."

"I can't stop thinking about what he wanted, what he was going to do to me," Maddoc replied, voice muffled against Ivan's neck.

"Don't." Ivan lifted Maddoc's chin before stroking his cheek. "He didn't get a chance to do anything because you defended yourself." Ivan looked into those water-blue eyes. "That was all you. You're stronger than you realize, and it's time you give yourself credit for that."

Maddoc's expression didn't change. "I almost wet myself when he grabbed me. I was so scared." Maddoc shifted his eyes to the floor.

"Do you think I wasn't scared when I was in combat?" Maddoc's eyes lifted to meet his. "I was terrified, but I had a job to do, people depending on me. But my training kicked in, and that gave me strength. The same goes for you." Ivan ran a hand through Maddoc's hair. "You may have been scared, but you did what you had to, to defend yourself." He lifted Maddoc's head slightly. "And you did that perfectly. I have no doubt you could do it again." Ivan brought his lips to Maddoc's, tasting the unique sweetness that was his lover. "I don't call you Tiger for nothing."

"I always thought you were teasing."

"Nope. I learned pretty early to be able to read people, and I could tell there was a tiger in you. You're strong; you just needed to realize it for yourself." Maddoc's now-

smoldering eyes met his. “Come on, let’s go upstairs. I want to wash him off you.”

Maddoc’s nose crinkled. “Good. I can smell him on me.” Maddoc put out the lights, and then Ivan led him upstairs and right to the master bathroom. Slipping off his clothes, Ivan stood naked before a still-dressed Maddoc. Pulling him close, Ivan kissed his lover hard, possessively. “Ivan.” Maddoc moaned softly into the kiss, and he felt warm hands slide down his back before cupping his butt.

Stepping back slightly, Ivan grabbed the tail of Maddoc’s shirt, lifting it over his head. Their hands in the air, Maddoc clamped his lips onto a nipple, the bud hardening instantly. Ivan arched as he tugged the shirt away. Maddoc’s arms encircled him, and he felt warm, sensuous lips and tongue slide over his chest. A slight nip at the hard bud had his head spinning. The lips pulled away, and Ivan watched with rapt fascination as Maddoc turned around and slid his pants down his legs, that white butt bobbing in front of him. “Fuck, Tiger, are you trying to drive me crazy?”

Maddoc stepped out of his pants and slowly turned around. “That’s the idea.” Ivan watched as Maddoc stretched to turn on the water, and his hands slid along the stretched skin, his own lips and tongue taking the opportunity to taste. As the water warmed, he continued lavishing kisses all over Maddoc’s body.

Stepping under the water, he pulled Maddoc to him, letting the spray sluice over both of them before reaching for the shampoo and running his slippery hands through Maddoc’s hair. Turning around, Maddoc lolled against him

as he washed the red curls before running soapy hands over his lover's chest. Maddoc's moans became a soft cry when Ivan ran his hand along Maddoc's throbbing length. "Ivan." He felt Maddoc shift more weight against him, leaning on him for support. Letting his hand slip away, Ivan washed every inch of Maddoc's skin, making sure anything that remained from earlier washed down the drain with the soap. Ivan knew it wasn't that simple in reality, but it was what he could do. The rest was up to his lover.

Slowly, he let his hands fall away from the smooth skin, and Maddoc turned. Soaping his hands, Ivan stiffened slightly as Maddoc's hands stroked along his neck. "It's like a brush," Maddoc said with a smile as he washed Ivan's hair. "It feels really sexy."

"It does?"

Maddoc nodded, his eyes darkening. "All of you is sexy." Maddoc hands slid down his chest, soaping and stroking. Ivan grabbed the towel bar as Maddoc's hands glided over his stomach, continuing lower until he was stroking him. "Especially this." Maddoc twisted his hand as he stroked, driving Ivan out of his mind. Ivan's hips began thrusting lightly on their own, instinct taking over, his mind narrowing all its attention to Maddoc's hand on his cock. The warm water washed away the soap, and Maddoc's fingers played him like a flute as he again latched onto a nipple, tongue sliding roughly over his skin. Ivan found himself filling the shower with his sounds of need as Maddoc's hand and mouth made every nerve stand up and shout for unabashed joy.

“Tiger!” Ivan gasped in frustration as the hand slipped away. Breathing like he’d just run a marathon, he tried to get control of himself as he looked at Maddoc smiling back at him ferally. “Why’d you stop?”

Maddoc began stroking his skin, washing off the last of the soap before turning off the water. “I want you in bed.” Maddoc stepped out and handed him a towel.

“You’re a sadist,” Ivan grumbled through a smile.

“Maybe, but think how great it’ll feel soon.” Maddoc leaned close to him, nipping at Ivan’s ear.

“It will,” Ivan agreed in a deep whisper. “It’ll feel incredible when you take me.” Maddoc’s eyes went wide with excited disbelief. Reaching out, Ivan took Maddoc’s towel and dropped it on the floor, adding his own to the small pile. Turning off the light, Ivan led his lover to the bed, turning down the covers before tugging him down on top. Maddoc’s weight felt wonderful on top of him, and his lover put his lips and hands to good use. For a while it seemed as though Maddoc didn’t know what he wanted to do first. Ivan arched beneath every touch, his skin on overdrive.

Then Maddoc’s lips took his and everything fell away: the room, the wind, the sound of the cars outside; everything receded until it was just him and his Tiger. Hands gently lifted his legs, and Maddoc writhed down his body, kissing and nuzzling until a tongue slid along his length.

Ivan gasped as Maddoc took him deep. “Tiger, so good!” He felt Maddoc smile around his cock and suck him harder, deeper. All he could do was rock his head on the pillow, fists clutching at the sheets as his lover drove him toward

heaven. But there was more. Ivan felt a finger glide around his opening before working its way inside, then retreating before going deeper. He felt a slight curl and the world went white in a blaze of unimagined pleasure. “Tiger!” His hand pulled, and he heard the sheet rip a little as Maddoc took him deep, and he shot with a force he’d never felt before in his life, like Maddoc had yanked his release from him as he thrashed on the bed.

Collapsing into a ragged heap, he gasped for breath amid the wreckage of Maddoc’s sheets. Opening he eyes, he saw his Tiger beaming back at him. Then he was kissing him, the smaller man devouring him, taking everything he had and returning it twofold.

Wrapping his legs around Maddoc’s hips, he felt a finger slide into him, then another. The stretch burned for a second, replaced quickly by an inner warmth, knowing that it was his Tiger that was filling him. Then the fingers slipped away, and Maddoc locked their gazes. “Are you sure?”

Ivan’s mouth went dry and he rasped, “God, yes, Tiger, make me yours.”

Maddoc shook his head. “I’ll join us together.” Ivan nodded and Maddoc pressed forward, entering him slowly. After what had happened, he’d expected Maddoc to be more forceful, but instead he got a quiet strength as he steadily slid deeper. Muscles stretched, and Ivan threw his head back as he was filled in a way he’d never imagined. “Look at me.” Ivan met Maddoc’s eyes as his lover began to move.

The thrusts started slow and deep, hitting that white lightning spot every few strokes. Ivan felt himself getting

hard again, and he began stroking himself, only to have his hand batted away, replaced with Maddoc's. Every time Maddoc went deep, Ivan thrust into those fingers, torn between the two sensations. Maddoc's thrusts became more erratic, faster, and Ivan felt his own climax approaching again. Maddoc moaned, and he felt Ivan's grip around him tighten, pushing him over the edge. Maddoc cried out, and he throbbed deep, Ivan following right behind him, crying out his release to his lover.

Maddoc collapsed onto him, arms winding around his neck. His Tiger kissed him softly, fingers rubbing his short hair. Ivan returned the kiss and gasped softly as Maddoc slipped from his body. Maddoc pulled away, their eyes locking. Ivan expected to see contentment, but those blue eyes were as turbulent as a rough sea. "What is it?" Maddoc began to shift, and Ivan rubbed his hand languidly up and down the smooth back.

Maddoc bit his lower lip. "Why me?"

Ivan cocked his head against the pillow. "Why you, what?"

Propping himself on his arms, Maddoc studied his eyes before sitting up, straddling Ivan's body, his gaze drilling into him. "Why'd you pick me?"

"I thought we sort of picked each other." Ivan had no idea where this was coming from, and he felt himself squirm under Maddoc's gaze. He'd stared down enemy fighters, even killed men up close and personal, but that look from Maddoc made him flinch.

“Ivan.” Maddoc’s hand slid down his chest before a finger traced the lines on his stomach. “You could have any man you wanted. Just look at you. You’re a gay man’s wet dream.”

So that was the source of that look he’d seen on and off but could never quite place. “I learned a long time ago that you go into battle with the best man to protect your back; it doesn’t matter what he looks like.”

“I’m not a battle.” Some of the turmoil in Maddoc’s face had dissipated, but the insecurity remained.

“No, you’re the guy that has my back, for a long time, I hope.” Ivan pulled Maddoc back down on top of him, whispering into his ear. “And for the record, you’re you, and that makes you beautiful.”

“But—”

Ivan cupped Maddoc’s cheeks, kissing him hard. “No butts. You’re strong, fun, and sexy as hell.”

“I’m not strong,” Maddoc countered with a smirk.

“Tell that to the guy with swollen balls,” Ivan countered, and Maddoc tried to look away, but Ivan stopped him. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. He stalked you for weeks and attacked you on your own front porch. Hell, you defended yourself and nothing more.” Ivan could tell Maddoc didn’t fully believe him. “After he was down, did you hurt him further?”

“No, I ran away just like you said.”

“You used the force you had to and nothing more.”

Ivan saw Maddoc's eyes widen. "I did, didn't I?"

Ivan felt his heart warm, seeing the confidence bloom from within his lover. He rolled them on the bed, pinning his lover to the mattress. "You certainly did."

"When you showed me that at the gym, I honestly never thought I would or could use it."

"No one ever does, Tiger." Ivan gently stroked Maddoc's red curls as he settled on the mattress next to him, tugging his lover close after pulling up the covers as Maddoc mumbled something that nearly stopped his heart. "What did you say?"

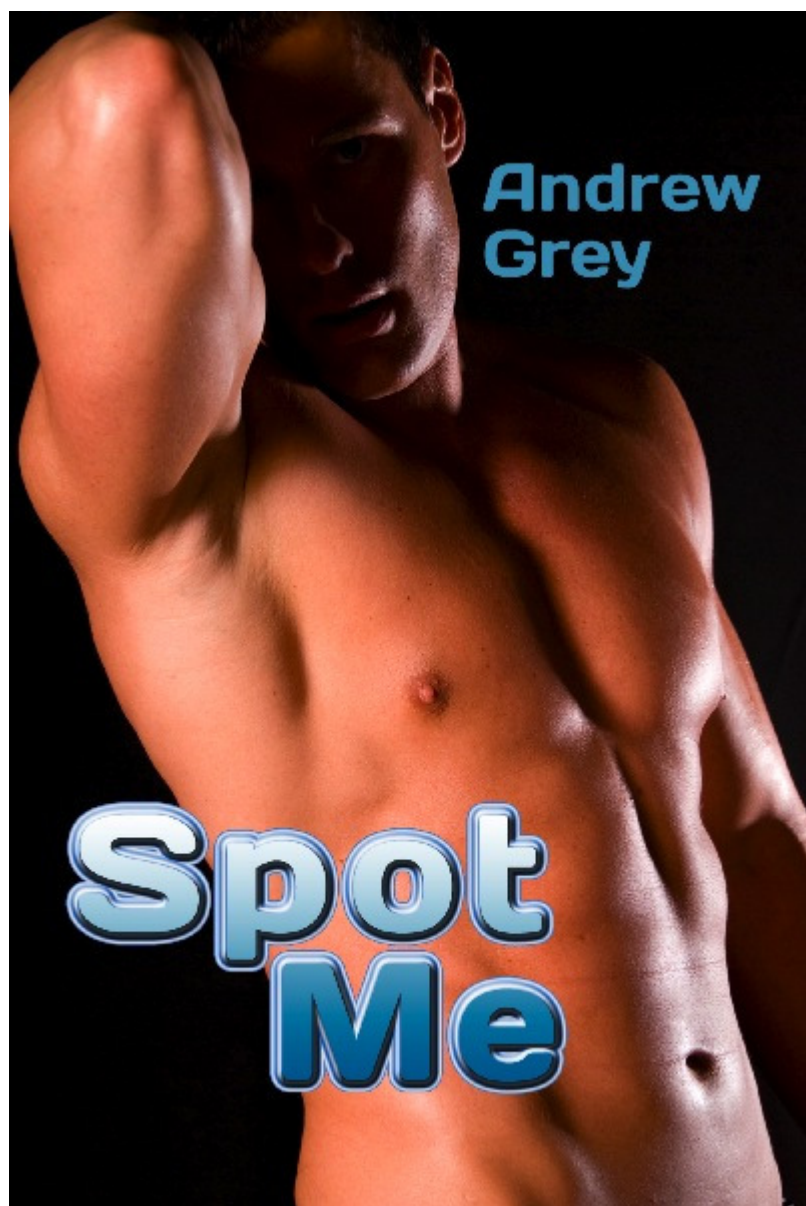
Maddoc rolled over to face him. "I said I love you."

There was no doubt or hesitation. "I love you too." He wanted to shout it to the world, but Maddoc brought their lips together. No words had ever made him feel happier than this incredible man telling him he loved him. His heart pounded and his blood raced—those three little words had him so unbelievably pumped.

ANDREW GREY grew up in western Michigan with a father who loved to tell stories and a mother who loved to read them. Since then he has lived throughout the country and traveled throughout the world. He has a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and works in information systems for a large corporation. Andrew's hobbies include collecting antiques, gardening, and leaving his dirty dishes anywhere but in the sink (particularly when writing). He considers himself blessed with an accepting family, fantastic friends, and the world's most supportive and loving partner. Andrew currently lives in beautiful historic Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

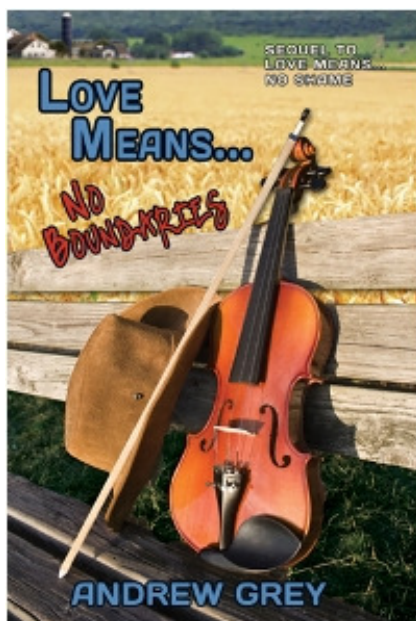
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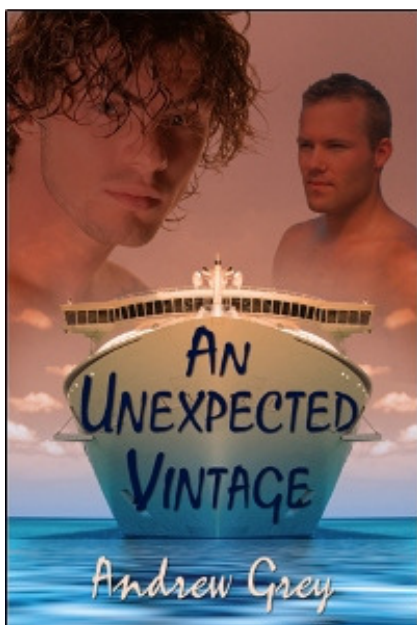
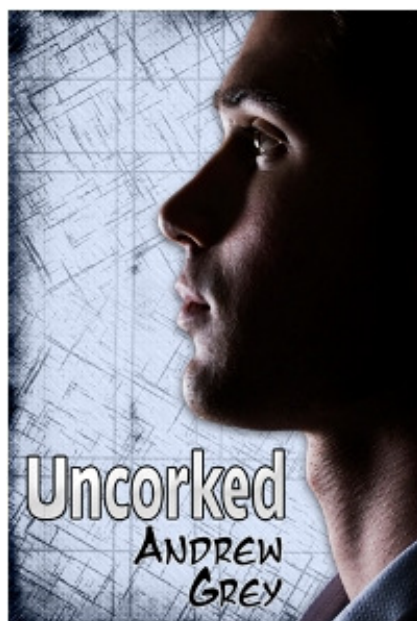
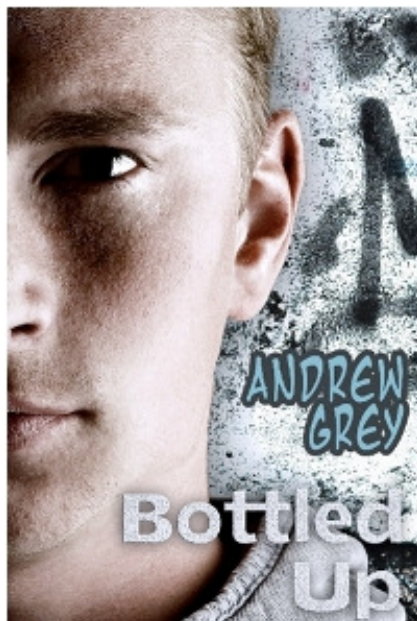
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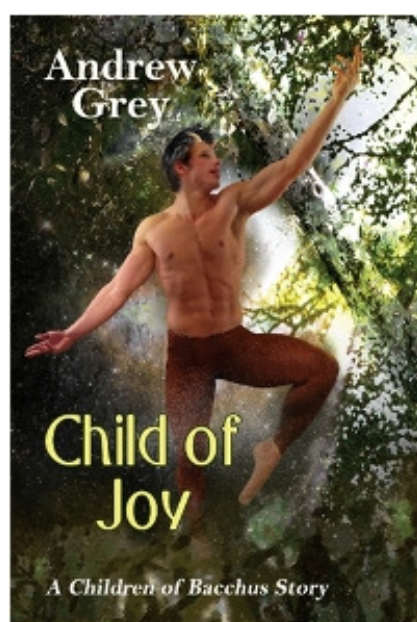
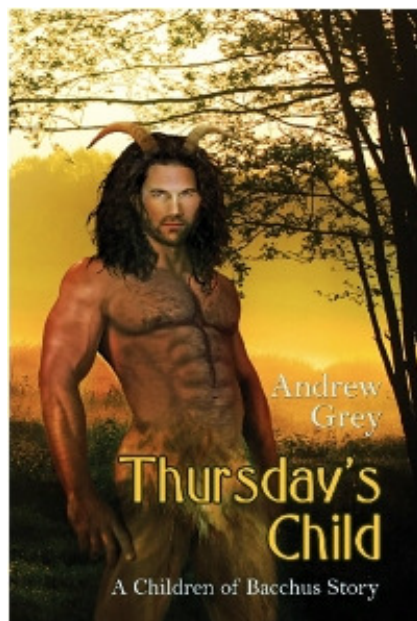
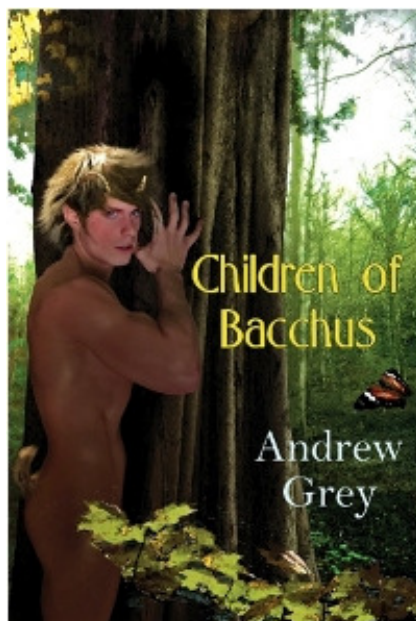
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The background of the entire advertisement is a black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of two men's heads and shoulders. They are facing each other in a close, intimate pose, with their heads tilted slightly upwards. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of their faces and shoulders against a lighter background.

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Released in the United States of America
June 2010

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-510-4