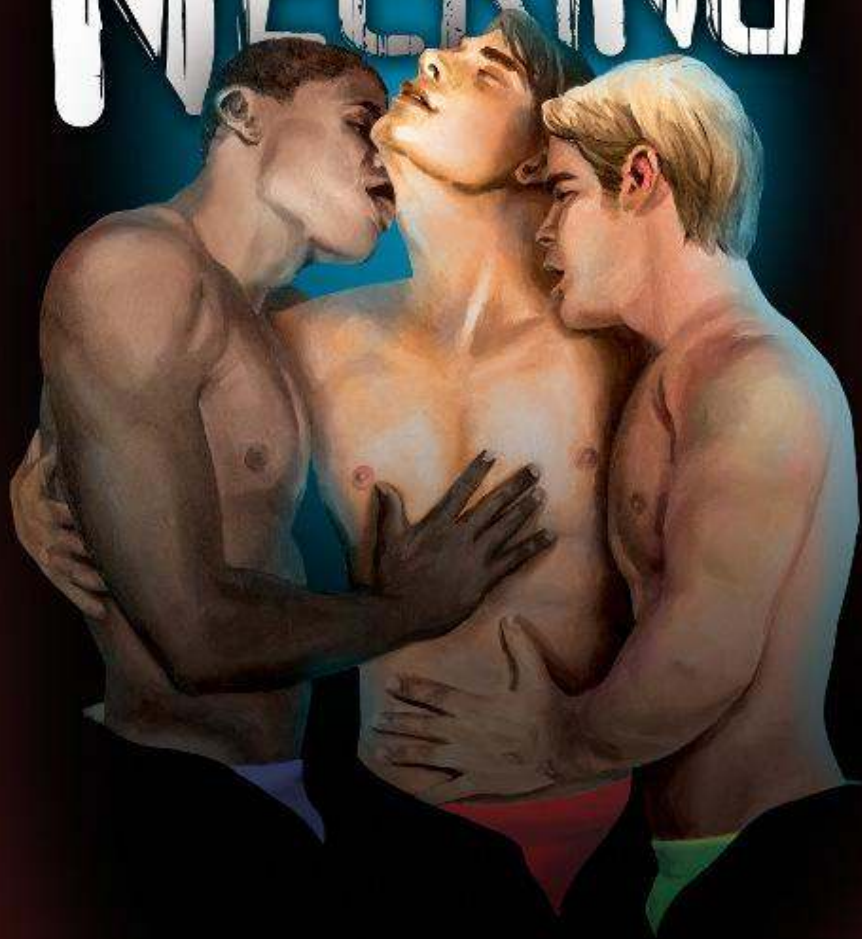


NECKING



A Dreamspinner Press Anthology

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Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Edited by Julianne Bentley
Cover Art by Paul Richmond <http://www.paulrichmondstudio.com>
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<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-370-4

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
May 2010

eBook edition available in Adobe PDF, MobiPocket and MS Reader formats
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-371-1

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THE THANK YOU NOTE

Jamie Freeman

ACT I (ARMY)

THE thank you note was, of course, my idea. Not that Roddy rejected the venture, but it was I who first voiced the idea over breakfast the morning after we met Aidan. We were sitting in the breakfast nook, the broad expanse of Central Park far below us, trading sections of the *Times* and juggling those horrible, greasy croissants Roddy always picks up in Soho, and I said, “I suppose a thank you note is in order.”

Roddy, as he so often does, laughed at me.

“You’re kidding, right?”

I shrugged. “It would be the polite thing to do.”

He shook his head, dark curls flopping beneath the *Aida* ball cap. The embroidered Egyptian eye stared out at me from the black cloth above the bill like a poor man’s chakra. I remember thinking he must have been wearing it to tease me. I had been listening to the 1976 recording of Leontyne Price singing *Aida* at the Met, so naturally he was showing his mock contempt for my operatic taste by wearing his populist *Aida: The Musical* cap, as if Elton John and the Disney company could ever hold a candle to Verdi and the Met.

But perhaps contempt is too harsh a description, for although he would deny it kicking and screaming, I know for a fact that he loves this opera. All of his subtle objections are, in truth, a pose designed to set him in not-so-subtle opposition to me. We two are a proud study in opposites. Perhaps sometimes we become caricatures of ourselves in the

name of a good story. But such is life, and such is certainly the nature of our life together. There is nothing better than a good story, and all other considerations bow to the telling.

Roddy is spontaneous and funny, with a startlingly quick wit. His sardonic, jaded mask hides a passionate, loving being to whom I am enslaved, at least figuratively. On the other hand, I am, as he likes to say, “precision precisely personified.” He sometimes says it as a jab, and sometimes he says it with that beautiful, toothy grin of his, and I know his love is carefully encoded in those ten simple syllables. And he is right about me. I have always had a fastidious, fussy nature, prone to fits over the state of the house, or the texture of the sheets, or the contents of the refrigerator. Even still, I cannot deny that seven years with Roddy have taught me a thing or two about letting go.

In truth, I find myself sometimes exaggerating my own fastidiousness in the presence of Roddy’s utter lack of concern about most things. Again, sometimes it’s about the theatricality of the gestures rather than true concern about, say, the scuff marks on the floorboard or the smudged handprints on the window.

But I am capable of letting go.

When I choose to do so.

Or when Roddy’s hand grasps mine and he pulls me sideways into another life. His life, a life of carefree imprecision. A life where the moments ramble, tumbling one after another like a running brook, rather than marching past like the hands of an eternally ordered clock. And in those moments, I love him the most, as if my heart, set free from the structure of the temporal universe, expands to fill the vastness of the space around me and he *becomes* my universe. And I am embraced and engulfed and liberated, all in the flash of a single, glowing instant. But only for an instant.

Because the world of the clock always calls me home.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

I first met Roddy seven years ago; our anniversary is eight o’clock next Monday evening. We were both waiting to see *Aida* (the musical, not the opera) at the Palace Theatre in Times Square. I was there with my best friend Tasha, who had seen the show three or four times and was determined to introduce me to something glorious and inspiring. As it

turned out, she did introduce me to something glorious and inspiring, but not in the way she had intended.

When I first laid eyes on Roddy he was standing in the lobby of the theater, a plastic cup of red wine in one hand and a black plastic *Aida* shopping bag hanging from the fingers of the other. He was breathtakingly beautiful. The kind of man one might see once in a decade and remember for a lifetime. He had long dark curls that fell loose and glossy to his shoulders. His eyes were dark, almost black in the bright light of the theater lobby; his body was toned and muscular, sheathed in ragged jeans and a tight black sweater. His hands fidgeted and he looked around the room nervously, taking sips from his wine and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He appeared to be alone.

I was literally entranced. I stopped so suddenly that Tasha ran into me, spilling her Pellegrino and cursing loudly enough to attract the annoyed stares of a dozen red-state families and the bemused smile of the object of my enchantment. Our eyes met and something clicked inside me. I remember thinking to myself that this moment was somehow important, that looking into this stranger's eyes meant something significant.

Tasha was too frenzied (and vocal) about the water soaking through her Donna Karan blouse for me to leave her to her own devices, so I walked her back to the bar for a stack of napkins and a bit of cooing concern. When I glanced over my shoulder, the pale, dark-haired beauty had disappeared.

Tasha fussed over her appearance, made a dramatic expedition to the Ladies Room, and then returned looking no different to me, but obviously feeling better about her now mostly dry blouse. She took my arm, cuddled close, and led me to our seats, fourth row center. The lights began to dim as we were squeezing past a dozen annoyed patrons and I heard Tasha gasp. She stopped momentarily, and I tried to see around her, but she was swaying a little and my anxiety level was rising as surely as the curtain on the stage. She plopped into the first of the two empty seats and I hissed at her to move along to the next seat, but once settled, she would not be moved. The curtain was nearly at its zenith when I finally squeezed past her and dropped into my seat. I looked up at the stage, and then felt a leg bump up against my own and stay there. Great, the guy next to me was Bogarting the legroom. I glanced to my

left with what I hoped was a truly withering stare and I found myself looking into Roddy's smiling face. His eyes danced in the reflected light from the stage and I felt my face break involuntarily into a broad, foolish grin.

He always makes me grin like that. Even now, after seven years together, he still inspires the unexpected in me. He is wilder than I am, less inhibited. Not just sexually, but in every way. For instance, on the one-year anniversary of the day we met, we took off from work and spent the day together. I requested the day six weeks in advance; he called in sick. We went ice skating in Central Park, and then wandered down to midtown in a snowstorm, shoulders close against the fierce wind, feet slipping as the sidewalks iced beneath us. When we reached the corner of Broadway and 47th, he pulled me out of the flow of traffic, taking me by the shoulders, turning me around and easing me back against his body. I could feel his erection pushing against my back, his breath hot against my cheek as he said, "That's the Palace Theatre, baby, the place where I met my one true love." Then he spun me around and kissed me. And not just a little lip-lock, but a flat-out, nurse-and-sailor-on-VJ-Day, bend-me-over-and-drop-me-into-a-faint kiss. Public displays of emotion scare me, even in Manhattan, but that was a magical moment. I felt liberated there in his arms, freed from the emotional baggage that usually weighs me down, unconcerned about the clucking disapproval of a pair of women who passed us, or the taunting sneer of "*Faggots*" from a trio of college boys.

We dated for two years before we made the leap and Roddy moved into my apartment. There are many explanations for our relatively long courtship. For instance, we are not lesbians. Okay, that was an unfair jab at Tasha, who has lived with six different girlfriends in the last three years and has never lived alone or with a platonic roommate. I should retract that comment, but I think Tasha would concede there is some truth in it.

Another reason for the long courtship is that apartments are scarce in New York, and Roddy was understandably reluctant to give his up to move in with me, knowing that if something went wrong, he would be living on his brother's sofa in Brooklyn. You might wonder why I did not offer to give up my apartment and move in with him. The best way to explain that might be to give you a few adjectives and descriptive phrases: inherited, crown molding, marble and hardwood floors, gourmet

kitchen, Central Park view, doorman, six bedrooms. I know. It is lavishly irresponsible for anyone in New York to have that many bedrooms and, in truth, two of them are used for storage, but as I said, the apartment was inherited and I could never bear to give it up. So there we sat, breakfasting above the world and talking about the suitability of a thank you note.

“What would Miss Manners do?” Roddy was teasing me.

“As social mores change, one must adapt the civilities of the past to the exigencies of the present, or we shall fall into outer-borough barbarism.”

He cocked an eyebrow and ripped off a huge hunk of croissant between his teeth. “Oh, baby,” he said through a mouthful of pastry. “I love it when you talk dirty.”

I refilled my coffee from the silver carafe.

“I think it is entirely reasonable,” I said, stirring cream into the dark depths.

A week ago, we were sitting in bed watching late night television. Roddy is addicted to *Frasier*, so most nights end with a thirty minute visit to Seattle. On that particular night, we were watching Niles and Daphne exchanging erotically charged banter and I was beginning to doze, when Roddy suddenly said, “What should we do for our seven year anniversary?”

I opened my eyes and looked up at him.

He had flipped over on his side and was lying stretched out on the duvet, his long, thick, hairy body on display in front of me. I reached out and slid my fingers down his muscular chest, across his flat stomach to the thatch of dark pubic hair, and grabbed his still-soft cock in my hand.

“What would you like?”

“A trip?” he suggested.

“Venice?”

“Again?”

“St. Petersburg?” I tried. “I’ve never been to Russia.”

“In the winter?”

“Sydney?”

“Maybe an event rather than a trip?” he asked, eyebrows furrowed in thought.

“A cocktail party?”

“No.”

“A dinner party?”

“Uh-uh.”

I stroked him absently as I watched his eyes dance mischievously.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I said finally.

“What if we invite home a third?” he said, licking his lips and rolling onto his back so that I could more easily reach his cock. I could feel the pre-cum beginning to coat my fingers. I increased the strength of my grip, fingers tightening and sliding.

“You want a third?” I asked, my voice low. My own cock began to grow at the thought of another man here in our bed. It was something I thought of occasionally, most often when I was out somewhere with Roddy and a particularly beautiful man wandered into the frame with him. I would see the two beautiful men and want to capture them both, bringing them together at the epicenter of my desire, pulling their bodies into a fleshly triad with my own. The idea of a threesome was a significant turn-on.

“Yes,” he breathed. “With rules, of course.”

“Of course,” I said, my breathing becoming heavier as I felt his muscles straining and squirming next to me. I increased the pace of my hand job, pulling his muscle in the peculiar rhythm I knew made him wild. I brought him quickly to a breathless climax and watched the cum spurt up onto his chest and stomach. I slid my hand through the sticky mess, and then kissed him hard on the lips. He met me with a vigor that surprised me. I slid on top of him, knees straddling his thighs, using his cum to lubricate my cock and bringing myself quickly to orgasm. I groaned as the cum splattered across his stomach. I leaned down, my left arm supporting me, but shaking in the quaking aftermath. I kissed from the center of his chin across the line of his jaw and stuck my tongue in his ear. He squirmed beneath me.

“A third it is, my love,” I said.

Over the next few days, we articulated rules as feverishly as we had, less than a year before, planned and articulated the itinerary of our three-week tour of Austria, Germany, and Poland. The rules I offered were, in a way, more like travel tips than an itinerary of desires. I proposed a complicated set of safe sex rules, though Roddy and I had given up any semblance of safe sex between the two of us years ago. So interactions between either or both of us and the third would be governed by one set of rules, while interactions directly between Roddy and myself would not. Or was that rude? I considered making a flow chart.

I proposed a complex screening process and some basic security measures.

Roddy looked at me one evening and said, “Army, you’re not taking this very seriously.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“I want to set emotional boundaries for us,” he said.

I nodded, but in truth, I had difficulty imagining the contingencies upon which such rules would be necessary or could, indeed, be developed. In my mind I could not imagine loving anyone else as deeply as I love Roddy, nor could I imagine how a single sexual encounter could possibly escalate into something dangerous. But Roddy wanted agreements on an array of potential emotional complications, and I was more than willing to oblige.

When we had finally hammered out an understanding that left us both feeling a little foolish and exhausted, Roddy placed an ad on Craigslist and the next morning we had about a hundred email responses.

We waded through them, becoming increasingly discouraged. I automatically deleted any email in which “your” was used instead of “you’re.” Roddy deleted any email in which the author used the “words” *cuz*, *tfn*, *boi*, *lol*, or *ciao*. We were left with only a handful of viable responses. We read on as the responses continued to trickle in.

Finally, on the third day of photos of tired dicks and asses spread entirely too wide, and typed messages cobbled together from rude, misspelled, frightening sentence fragments, we found a charming, well-written email.

Aidan described himself as thirty-five (the same age as both Roddy and myself), athletic, economically self-sufficient, discreet, thoughtful, and funny. In his email he referred to himself as a red-headed Han Solo and sent us a photo of himself dressed in the Han Solo outfit from the original *Star Wars* movie: blue pants, black vest, and a white shirt. He held a blaster in one outstretched hand; his head was tilted in a rakish grin, and he seemed to be standing on the steps of a full-sized Millennium Falcon. Roddy and I meticulously studied the photo but were unable to determine whether it had been staged or photoshopped.

Roddy loved the photo from the moment he saw it; I initially found it a little odd and obsessive, but Aidan was clearly adorable and the photo grew on me. After some debate, we decided to meet him in the coffee shop across the street and, if things went well, we could invite him back to our apartment.

ACT II (RODDY)

THE thank you note was my idea. Or at least, the concept of expressing our gratitude for an amazing night of sex and fantasy was my thing, not Army's. I actually suggested we send Aidan flowers. It seemed an extravagant, romantic gesture, something I could really get behind, but Army was afraid he would misconstrue the emotion behind something so over-the-top. I shrugged and dropped the subject, picking up the *Arts* section, but staring beyond it into the morning fog, which was just beginning to fade from the green hills of the park.

"I suppose a thank you note is in order."

I had to laugh at that. Army just wanted this to be his idea; sometimes he's so transparent.

"You're kidding, right?" I said.

Army shrugged. "It would be the polite thing to do."

I made some comment about Miss Manners because he always rises to her defense, and he made some reference to the fact that I lived in Brooklyn for a while after college, and then we agreed to send a thank

you note.

The evening we met Aidan, both Army and I were nervous, bickering and laughing as we rummaged through the closet looking for the perfect attire for the evening. I settled on a pair of black and white patterned boxer briefs that I imagined accentuated my considerable package. I tugged on a pair of fashionably ripped jeans, black Chuck Taylor high tops, and a tight black T-shirt with *Revenge of the Jedi* emblazoned in red across the front.

“That shirt is incorrect. Did you get that on Canal Street?” Army said, pacing back and forth, still naked and undecided.

“Do you ever listen to a word I say?” I asked.

“Why should I? You always seem to repeat yourself.” He grinned at me.

“I told you this was an early promo from Lucasfilm. The original title of *Return*—”

“Right, right. I remember,” he said, cutting me off and pulling on a pair of khakis.

He chose a carefully ironed blue chambray shirt, pale blue socks, and his favorite Gucci loafers.

When he was fully dressed, adjusting the lines of his shirt, shooting his cuffs, and smoothing his pants, I walked up to him and grabbed him in a bear hug.

“Are we even going to the same party?” I asked.

He laughed, “God, I hope so; I have no interest in going without you.”

We kissed, and I felt that easy feeling I sometimes get when we’re together. It’s like that moment when I’m flying home to visit my family and the plane dips down over the Thames on the final descent into Heathrow; or the view of the Dover cliffs from deck of the ferry from Calais. Holding Army in my arms is like coming home from a great distance.

When we arrived at the coffee shop doors, Army opened them with a flourish and we walked inside, buffeted by a sudden gust of icy, wet air. I looked around the room and spotted Aidan immediately. He looked

exactly like his photo, which was a bit of a surprise considering the almost universal photographic prevarications of online dating ads, and when he smiled, he made my stomach lurch, he was that beautiful.

I must have stopped in my tracks, because I felt Army's hand in the middle of my back and I heard him whisper, "Are you okay, baby?"

I nodded and walked over to the booth.

"Aidan?" I said.

"Yes. And you must be Roddy," he said, holding out a heavy, muscular hand. "And Army."

He was wearing a green cashmere sweater that made his emerald eyes glow. His hair was cut short and styled to look as though he had just tumbled out of bed. I could feel the beginning of an erection in my jeans.

We talked for a while, ordering coffee and splitting a large wedge of steaming cherry pie. He was charming and smart and surprisingly genuine.

"You're English?" he asked me at one point.

I nodded. "And you're Southern?"

"Georgia," he said, his tongue dragging the word into three honey-sweet syllables.

I stumbled a little over my own nervousness, but Army was suave and funny, and I felt like he was carrying me conversationally. There came a moment in which we all three looked at each other and we knew this was going to happen. Nobody said anything, but Aidan gave us this stunning smile. I smiled and felt my cheeks flush.

"So y'all live around here?" Aidan said.

Army grinned and called to our server. "Sandy, would you please bring the check?"

When we got back to the apartment it was dark outside. There were a few low lights scattered around the living room, but the glow of the city provided most of the illumination. There was a full moon and the sky was cloudless, the view extending across the park, all the way to the East River and into the distance, a vast sea of lights. It was a view that routinely stopped people cold, and Aidan was no exception. He walked

across the living room and stood staring out into the night.

“Amazing,” he said. “This is the view that tucks y’all in every night?”

“Yes,” Army said, walking over to stand next to him. “And it’s impossible to tire of it.”

I watched the two of them standing several inches apart, Aidan in his loose-fitting jeans, Army in his khakis, and desire leapt up inside me. I walked up between them and put an arm around each of their waists. I pulled them both toward me, forming the base of a momentary triangle. Aidan turned and our lips met. He was tentative, receding a bit under my exploring tongue. I leaned back, and Aidan turned to kiss Army. I watched the man I loved kissing this gorgeous man we had just met and I felt my cock harden in my pants.

Having sex with someone for the first time is always a negotiation of sorts. Even the most accomplished of lovers grapple with the pace, and the repertoire, and the order. When Army and I fell into bed the first time we found a gentle pace in which I took the lead, undressing him, pulling him down on the bed, kissing him, and then going down on him. When his arousal began to peak dangerously he changed the pace, taking control from me and pulling me roughly onto his stomach, pulling out a condom, and easing himself into me. This subtle power shift happened so easily that neither of us could have explained how it happened. It was not a natural shift of temperament, the bottom assuming the submissive role, the top dominating, because we were both unrelentingly versatile in those roles. It was not a subconscious recognition of the overall power dynamic in our relationship, because in that, too, we were a partnership of equals. That easy shift from one pace to another, from one power dynamic to another, could more accurately be attributed to the emotions of the evening, to the momentary whims of our bodies.

And so it was with Aidan that night. We eased into a pace in which the focus shifted from one of us to each of the others in turn.

The kissing led us to undress in front of the huge window with the darkness of the park below us and the glittering wonderland beyond. Aidan’s body was gym-toned and smooth except for a forest of curly red hair that clustered around his thick cock and heavy balls. His legs were long and lean with only a sprinkling of red hair dusting his calves. When the three of us were completely naked, I stepped back to look at Aidan

and Army, standing several inches apart, looking into each other's eyes, their breathing heavy, their erections thumping with their racing pulses. The three of us were close in height, all within an inch or two of six feet, but Army and Aidan were leaner than I am, a pair of long hairless runner's bodies in sharp contrast to my own thick-cut, wide-shouldered bulk.

I watched Aidan drop slowly to his knees in front of Army, sliding his hands along Army's thighs, cupping his balls, then tugging on them, bringing his cock down until it was parallel to the floor, then engulfing it between his thick, red lips. A shudder went through me and I thought for a moment I had groaned aloud, but realized the sound had come from Army. I walked over and stood beside Army, my cock close to Aidan's face. I leaned over and kissed Army, my mouth covering his as I felt Aidan's wet mouth slide onto my cock. I moaned, and Army kissed me harder, pushing his tongue between my teeth and reaching out to pinch my left nipple. Hard. I gasped and then Aidan was standing beside us, pushing his erection between our bodies, his mouth joining our kiss, three tongues competing for entry into three mouths. I felt desire rising in me, a frantic feeling that was unfamiliar to me. I felt faint for an instant, that cold feeling behind your forehead when the adrenaline has spiked and you know you have to burn it off or overload. I reached out and pulled the two men close to me, becoming, for the moment, the apex of our dynamic triad. They kissed me, their hands roaming across my chest, my hips, and my ass. I felt a slick finger sliding between my ass cheeks.

"Let's go to the bedroom," I said, my voice strong and guttural, unfamiliar enough that I saw Army look up to see which one of us had spoken. Desire flashed in his eyes and he kissed me so hard I took a step back, my hand reaching out to grasp Aidan's long fingers between my own. Army drew back and headed down the hallway toward the bedroom. I looked up, kissed Aidan and led him by the hand, my eyes never leaving his as I backed down the hall toward the master bedroom.

The bedroom was dark, but like the living room it had a floor to ceiling window open to the night. Army had crawled onto the white duvet cover and lay watching me as I led Aidan into the room. He was again transfixed by the view.

"I can't believe the beauty of the view y'all live with," he

whispered.

I followed him to the window, standing close behind him, my cock aligning itself between his buttocks. I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my chin on his shoulder. We stood pressed together looking out into the night.

I felt Army stand close behind me, mimicking my own stance, and sandwiching me between their lean bodies.

The exploration of foreplay seemed to last for hours, and when I finally rolled on the condom and entered Aidan, he gasped and then groaned as my thick cock slid into him. I looked down at him lying on his back beneath me, legs raised along the length of my body, ankles resting one on each of my shoulders. His eyes flashed in the half-light. I leaned forward to kiss his lips, folding him nearly in half, and then felt Army ease his long unsheathed cock into my ass. Arousal rippled down my body like a wave of electricity. I felt Aidan reaching up to run his hands across the goose flesh that stippled my arms and legs.

I held his legs and pushed deeply inside him, watching his pupils, dilated with desire and darkness, his face slack with pleasure. He moaned as I found my rhythm. Behind me I could feel Army easing into a rhythm he knew I liked. I was overwhelmed by the physical sensations of Aidan's muscles pulling me into him and Army spearing me from behind. I was lost in a cloud of red; my shout when I came, as Aidan told me later, reverberated off the window, echoing back onto us like a wave. I felt Army come an instant later, and then Aidan, spewing cum up into the air and coating his chest and stomach. I leaned forward, heat rising off my cheeks, a human radiator, and I kissed Aidan, pushing my body heavily onto his and feeling Army collapse onto my broad back.

We disentangled ourselves and staggered to the shower, a custom job that was easily large enough for the three of us, and soaped ourselves off. I could see Aidan's eyelids drooping as I soaped his chest.

I looked at Army. He nodded slowly.

"Do you wanna stay the night?" I asked.

"Mmm-hmm," he said, eyes closing. He reached out unerringly and kissed each of us in turn.

We slept entangled in each other's arms, Aidan tucked in between

us in a surprisingly easy and uncomplicated sleep.

I woke early and made coffee, then sat in the living room and watched as the sun rose, fiery and elegant. Aidan came into the living room naked, rooted through the piles of clothes and found his underwear. We exchanged good mornings, and he stumbled into the kitchen for a mug of coffee.

He came back and sat next to me on the sofa, his body close to mine, his long legs stretched next to mine on the coffee table. We alternated between companionable silence and charming morning-after banter until Army arrived naked with a mug of coffee in his hands. He joined us on the couch and I remember thinking how strange it was, how easy it was, just being there with both of these men.

When Aidan left, Army and I made love again, and then showered again. Army gathered his newspaper, and I dug out the bag of croissants I always bring him from his favorite bakery in Soho as we discussed the suitability of flowers or a thank you card.

ACT III (AIDAN)

I ANSWERED the ad on a whim, not expecting a response. In New York it wasn't like back home where the competition was minimal. There were over eight million people in New York, with over a million gay men, and I never seemed to connect with anyone. I would sometimes meet guys around, you know, at Saks in the menswear section, or in a bar, or even in Starbucks—a completely underrated pick-up spot in my book—and sometimes we'd go to his place and fool around, or maybe just talk until we ran out of interest.

If there are a million stories in the naked city, there are about nine hundred thousand that are too boring to finish reading.

Back home I found it easier to meet guys, even though it was a small Southern town and there was a lot of fear back there. But when I did find someone, we usually got along okay and I was never robbed at gunpoint like that one time in Queens.

My roommate Jake always says I'm just being too picky, too critical of the guys I meet, but to me there's just something about the gentle art of conversation that's important. I'm not so hard up that I'll just go with anyone to get laid. Jake, of course, says that's part of my problem, but to me there's gotta be something more; even if I know it's just going to be a one-night thing, I still want a connection.

Jake makes fun of me because I have this thing about meeting tourists. He laughs and laughs about that, but I think there are probably two reasons I end up meeting these guys from out of town. First, I'm new in town myself, so on the weekends I still like to do tourist shit like taking the Circle Line Cruise or going to the museum at the *Intrepid*. And second, they talk like me. I've got this heavy Southern accent and when I open my mouth, people know I'm just a good ole boy. And when the Georgia boys come to the big city, they like a little taste of home before they hit the hay. I'm happy to oblige them, 'cause they're usually talkative and solicitous and funny, and the kind to offer you room service in the morning.

Jake likes to tell people I'm on a first-name basis with half the hotel doormen in midtown, but there are only five or six who know my name, and two of them know my name because they've shouted it out in the throes of passion. Yeah. That's my story and I'm stickin' to it.

Does that make me sound like a slut?

Maybe.

Momma is always worrying about me getting "the AIDS." She sends me these big boxes of condoms she buys at Sam's Club, and I tell her they give away free condoms everywhere in this city and to send food or DVDs instead, but she still sends me these boxes of Trojans or LifeStyles. I'm embarrassed to say that her confidence in my prowess far outstrips my actual need, so there are currently three cases of condoms stacked in the cabinet above the refrigerator in my apartment. Even Jake and I combined can't keep up with the flow of lubricated latex concern coming from Momma.

Daddy, on the other hand, pretends he doesn't know I'm a gay boy. He sometimes asks if I've found a pretty Yankee debutante to settle down with, and I laugh and humor him because he loves me and because it's the best he can do. And sometimes I'm just too sad about the whole thing to answer him, so I just put on a fake little chuckle and hope he

can't hear the sadness coming to him from across the miles.

But my life here isn't sad; I love this place and everything about it. I'm stumbling around the city, sleeping with my Southern brethren, working at a software start-up company and making pretty good money for New York. I mean, I only have one roommate and we've got a one-bedroom, not a studio. And I'm starting to settle into my life here, finding things I love and drawing them close, making them mine.

Like the Metropolitan Opera, for instance.

When I was a kid, Momma used to tell me about singing in the Atlanta Opera before she finally accepted Daddy's marriage proposal and moved back to Calhoun to get married. She sang in the chorus of a couple dozen big operas, and when I was little, she would sing for me. Mozart and Puccini and Barber and her absolute favorite, Verdi. I remember her telling me the story of *Aida*, of the hidden passion of Radames and Aida, and the moment in the opera when Amneris recognizes the joy on their faces for what it truly is. My mother sang *Vieni, o diletta, appressati* in the clearest, most beautiful mezzo-soprano. Her voice was so high and mournful it made me think of a caged bird. I remember crying quietly at her feet as she stood by the fireplace singing in German or Italian, or in a high, foreign-sounding English that to me was equally alien and beautiful and soaring.

And so, when I arrived in New York, I sought out the Metropolitan Opera, buying cheap tickets and sitting in the darkness, enfolded by the magic of the operas I knew only through the tones of my mother's soaring mezzo-soprano and her sometimes inaccurate, spotty narration. I was transfixed and transported.

Jake hates opera, so when I'm at home, I spend a lot of time plugged into my iPod, surfing the internet or lying in bed dreaming of Radames or Rodolfo or Figaro.

It always comes back to the men. There is no escaping them, no matter how we try, and so, when Jake called me over to look at an ad he'd found on Craigslist advertising for a third, I was intrigued. The ad was funny and smart and brief, but there was something about the wording or the cadences that made me think of an aria. So I answered the ad, and, as I said before, I did not expect a response.

When the response came and I took an uptown bus through the

frozen night, I remember looking up at the full moon and wondering at my lunacy.

And then I saw them coming through the door and everything changed. They were beautiful, like a matched set of china figurines, delicate and pale. Roddy with his English accent and Army with that clipped, Connecticut accent that made him sound like a male Katherine Hepburn. And then I realized that beneath the leather jacket, Roddy was a thick muscle bear, and beneath his tweeds Army had the build of a Harvard rower, long and lean and wiry. They were entrancing, and the sex was spectacular. The power of three, and nobody left out in the cold. Although I knew in my mind I was the outsider, they treated me as an equal. I felt something like a power shift, like the energy of the evening was focused on each of us, one after the other. And I felt so included. When I curled up in bed between them, I felt truly, completely at home for the first time since I left the hills of North Georgia.

Since that night, several times I've dreamed of sleeping between the two of them, safe in their mutual embrace. I've thought about contacting them; Army and I traded contact information, but something has been holding me back.

Until last night.

I was late coming home from work. I'd stopped for Chinese takeout and it was all I could do to drag myself up the four flights of stairs to my apartment. My roommate Jake was out somewhere, but he'd left a pile of mail on my bed.

I dropped my coat on the bed, flicked on the television and changed it to Lifetime, looking for something funny and sweet to soothe my nerves. I'd had a vicious day at work: picture *Deliverance*, but meaner and more humiliating, with crappier music.

I dropped down on the bed, rooting through my carryout bag and pulling out a paper carton of steamed dumplings. Say what you like about the Big Apple, but this place has the best Chinese takeout in the known universe. I dug around in the carton with a chopstick, spearing one of the slippery dumplings and allowing my taste buds to be transported to spiced-pork-based-meat-product heaven.

I glanced down at the pile of mail on the bed and noticed a thick off-white envelope that didn't look like a bill. I never get any real mail,

so the envelope immediately sent a little shiver of excitement up my spine. To be honest, I thought it was a check from my grandmother. She's got piles of money lying around her house like furniture. It's family money that her father managed to hold onto through the Great Depression, and she's determined to hang on to it so she can die the richest woman in Calhoun, Georgia. That being said, she is sometimes spontaneously, lovingly generous to me, especially since I started sending her programs from the operas I've seen at the Met. She's always been my mother's greatest fan, resentful of my daddy's refusal to let her sing professionally, so her support of me may be a jab at Daddy, but I'm not one to look a gift horse in the wallet. So when I saw that envelope, I thought maybe there was a check inside, my full legal name carefully rendered in exact loops and slashes, the amount starting with a precise digit or two followed by two perfect oval zeroes and a decimal.

I set the food aside, pushed off my shoes and drew my legs up onto the bed, sitting Indian style and pulling a blanket across my lap. I'm still not used to these New York winters and I'm pretty sure I could see my breath misting in the frigid apartment air. Maybe I should use the money to buy a space heater instead of a ticket to *Aida*.

Right.

I glanced up at the television. *Frasier*. Niles was running around ironing his suit and getting ready for his big Valentine's Day date. I stopped to watch, riveted, laughing out loud. *Schadenfreude*. I love that show.

At the first commercial break, I looked back down at the mail. I picked up the off-white envelope again, turning it in my hand. Elegant. Expensive. Vellum as fine as linen. Not from my grandmother. The black ink and strong hand were precise and even like hers, but the letters were different, unfamiliar.

I tore the envelope along the seam and pulled out a single sheet of paper folded in half.

The note made me grin and probably blush. I was glad Jake was out somewhere and not looming over me ready to laugh at my sensitivities. When I got to the end of the note and I saw the phone number printed neatly across the bottom of the page, I felt that musical theater lump in the throat that everyone's always singing about.

I picked up my phone and stared at it for a while. My mind was reeling, but I knew if I didn't dial the number now, I'd chicken out.

I punched the numbers and hit send.

It rang three times.

"We were afraid you wouldn't call." The voice was soft but loose, self-consciously sardonic. It was Roddy.

"How could I not, Roddy?" I said.

Roddy chuckled and said, "You knew it was me."

"You have that there English accent 'n' all, ya know."

"Damn, that was my best imitation New England accent."

"Sad."

"What?"

"Kinda sad if that was the best you could do." I laughed. "More 'Merry Olde' than 'New,' I'm afraid."

"Oh, come on, you didn't think it was Army? Not even for a minute?"

"Nope," I said. "It's that damn accent—you're apparently incapable of disguising it—and, of course that sexy, baritone rumble of yours; I have a good memory for beauty."

"Bold recovery," Roddy said.

"I thought so." *What the hell am I doing? Who is saying this stuff?*

"Direct, yet flirtatious."

"Uh-huh." I said. "Us Southern boys can be direct when the need arises."

"And has your need been... arising?"

"Why yes, sir, so kind of you to ask. I'm afraid it has." As a matter of fact, I could feel it at that very moment, pushing against the inside of my trousers, begging to be let out to play. I stretched my legs out on the bed, pulling the blanket up over them.

"Needs must be addressed, of course."

“Sure.”

“And what have you been doing to address your needs?”

“Mooning.”

“Literally or figuratively?”

“A little of both, I reckon.”

“Oh, I like the thought of that, Aidan.” Roddy’s voice dropped to a silky purr. “What else are you doing? Right this minute, for instance?”

“Oh, well you caught me between mooning sessions. At the moment I’m watchin’ *Frasier* and eatin’ steamed dumplings.”

“Dumplin’s?” Roddy was making fun of my accent, but it made me grin like a fool.

“You might know them as dump-ling-g-s.” I enunciated the consonants carefully, stressing the P and the G like an elocution teacher.

Roddy laughed and asked, “Are you naked?”

“Not yet.” I could hear Army in the background saying, “Don’t be crude, Roddy.”

“I didn’t think that was crude,” I told him. “I kinda liked your inquisitiveness—lets me know y’all care.”

Roddy laughed again. “Hang on a sec,” he said, not bothering to cover the phone with his hand. “Go get on the extension. He can hear every word you’re saying anyway.”

Roddy came back on the line. “Army’s nervous,” he said.

“Are *you* nervous?” I asked.

“A little—” he admitted.

“Poor baby,” I said. I was feeling bold suddenly, stronger and more confident than I’d felt in a long time. It was like that feeling I’d felt waking up between the two of them in bed, the feeling that maybe coming to New York had been a good decision, that maybe there was something here for me after all.

I was soaring; pumped full of adrenaline, not quite believing these two incredible men had sent me their phone number. I was flirting with a confidence I’d never felt before, joking with these beautiful guys whose

bodies appeared in my mind every time I closed my eyes, whose smell surrounded me on the subway, in the office supply closet at work, in the elevator at Bloomingdales, whose whispering voices eased me into sleep each night.

I was completely and utterly smitten.

“Hello, Aidan,” Army had picked up the extension. “A little what, darling?”

“A little nervous,” Roddy said.

“He’s been pacing for three days,” Army said.

“Well, except during cocktails,” Roddy said.

“No, of course not during cocktails; he’s not a *barbarian*,” Army said.

We talked for a while, voices overlapping, stumbling a little; trying to find our way through this new thing, this new three-way flirting talk. It was beautiful and awkward. I felt crazy and happy and scared, but I could hear something lurking just beneath their small talk, something that unified the two of them, but somehow excluded me. I felt a tremor of panic building.

Oh shit, maybe I’ve been readin’ them all wrong. How could I be so stupid? Maybe they sent their number as a social formality; maybe they didn’t think I’d call them and now they can’t figure out how to get me off the phone. I dropped my chopsticks and set the dumplings aside. I felt my cheeks burning red hot.

There was a long silence on the phone.

Roddy broke the silence. “So would you maybe be interested in, you know, getting together again?”

“Uh...” I was so startled I didn’t know what to say.

“Well, I mean, this is not a booty call or what have you, well, unless you want it to be, I mean, I don’t want to take that completely off the table of course, but...” He paused.

I was grinning like a Cheshire cat, but I couldn’t quite form a reliable verbal response.

“Are you still there?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, sorry,” was all I could manage. I held the phone with shaking fingers. *Keep it together, Aidan; keep it together.* I held my hand out flat in front of me and watched it quiver and jump in front of my eyes.

“So booty call being set aside for the moment—”

“Roddy—” Army sighed, but he sounded amused.

“As I was saying,” Roddy continued. “We thought it might be fun to get together again to maybe get to know you better? Cocktails and dinner, perhaps? Or we could go to dinner and a show.... Something like that, something social, but with our clothes on, so we can get to know each other better....” His voice trailed off uncertainly.

“What does one do on a triple date?” I asked.

“What indeed?” Roddy said. “I’m not sure how to do this.”

“You’ve run out of steam, Roddy,” I said.

“I’m afraid so, yes.”

“So you want to go on a date?” I said, my tone deliberately thoughtful.

“Exactly,” Roddy said; “Precisely,” Army said, their voices overlapping.

“And what might your intentions be, gentlemen?” I was finally coming around, recovering my wits, letting the idea of dating these two guys wriggle around between my ears.

“I think we should like to take things as they come,” Army said. “See where the circumstances lead us.”

“Yes,” Roddy piped in. “Nothing too serious.”

“But something romantic?” I asked. “Not gin rummy and cigarettes, or the new Coen brothers movie, or Kara Walker lecturing at the Guggenheim?”

“Not until the second date—”

Army cut Roddy off. “An opera.”

“Or a musical,” Roddy countered.

“Something romantic and sweeping,” Army said, his voice soft,

wistful.

“Something we can tell the grandchildren,” Roddy said.

We all laughed and then it came to me. “Gatti’s conducting *Aida* at the Met,” I said.

“I think I am quite in love with this man already,” Army said.

“You just won the daily-double, Aidan baby.” Roddy’s voice was solid again, flirty and funny and sweet. “Maybe we could do drinks at the Oak Room.”

I gave them a little of my patented sex-on-legs laugh. I could feel my erection pushing against my trousers again. I unbuttoned them and slipped my hand inside. *These boys’ll make ya throw rocks at the church.*

“And the booty call we tabled earlier could, hypothetically, come into play if this date were to be a success?” I asked.

“Definitely,” Roddy said.

“Without a doubt,” Army agreed.

“We can start with that, if you—”

This time I cut Roddy off. “Well, I do believe y’all got a date for the opera.”

Roddy jumped back in before Army could say anything, saying in a voice both seductive and amused, “So what’re you wearing *now*?”

“Next to nothin’, baby,” I said, stroking my erection and reaching with the other hand to unbutton my shirt. I could already tell that this was the beginning of something amazing.

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JAMIE FREEMAN is a north Florida native who works a day job to finance his nighttime passions for writing, reading, and watching old movies. He has collected a personal library that already threatens the structural integrity of his spare bedroom but continues to grow unfettered. He's an avid trail runner who spends mile after mile spinning dreams into fiction. He has published a children's book and a string of short stories and is always working on several new projects. An anthology that included one of his short stories won a 2009 Lambda Literary Award.

Visit his blog at <http://nickdreamsong.blogspot.com/>.

NOT JUST A PIECE OF MEAT

Zahra Owens

I DIDN'T want to wake up yet.

My body was sore in all the right places, and as it slowly dawned on me that it was probably light outside already, I also realized I was tucked in rather tightly, feeling warm, living, breathing skin at either side of me. I didn't dare move. Their breathing was even and shallow, telling me they were still asleep. I opened my eyes just enough to confirm my suspicions. The man in front of me—close enough so I could smell his musk—was Peter, my employer's right hand man and longtime lover, which meant that the muscled body behind me was Shawn, the man who signed my pay checks. For a moment I wished I couldn't remember how I got there, but sadly that would be a lie.

I remembered it all too clearly, although in retrospect, it seemed like a dream.

I'd spent the last ten years working for them. Technically, I worked for Shawn, and I'd worked for his dad before that, but I knew he and Peter shared everything so I also considered Peter my boss. Shawn's family business was a very up-market butcher shop, and we catered to our clients' every whim.

Shawn and I are the traditional butchers. Give us a cow carcass and we carve it up neatly, precisely, until we're left with every conceivable type of meat from steaks to ground beef to stew meat. Shawn's the song-and-dance man, though, oozing charm from every pore and blowing the socks off every granny, mother-with-child or businessman-on-his-way-

home-to-the-wife who walks into the shop. He's at home behind the counter, making every customer feel like he's carving a steak only for them.

I, on the other hand, have always felt more at home in the cooled area at the back where the stainless steel slabs are kept surgically clean. Although I've been told I'm deadly handsome, I prefer to leave the sucking-up-to-the-customers to Shawn, who does it with a natural grace I can only envy.

Peter is different from both of us, although we have the same training. He's the cook, the one who makes the catering dishes, from beef stew to spaghetti and lasagna to Thai chicken that is simply to die for. Especially in our area of the city, people work long hours and rarely have time to prepare a full meal. We offer them a wide variety of dishes they just have to pop into the microwave, the oven, or a pan on the stove, and they readily pay the extra price since our meals are far superior to the ones found at the supermarket. More than once we've made whole feasts for people who wanted to impress employers and colleagues with a "home cooked meal," so you see we're more than just "a butcher shop."

All this means we don't have a single day off between Thanksgiving and early January when the shop closes for a week.

Yesterday was the send-off, the thank-you party Shawn always throws after the busy holiday season to reward his employees for work well done. I've been part of every year's celebration, but this is the first year I've actually woken up with them the following day.

I'm not a big drinker, although I can hold my liquor. Even at parties, I prefer to stay in the background to practice my hobby: people-watching. I do that at the shop as well, so I was surprised it took me a number of years to figure out that Peter and Shawn were an item, although, as Peter once confessed, they'd been together forever. They're not what you'd consider very open in public; in fact, I'm sure none of the customers know they have gay butchers and even some of the shop girls are clueless. They rarely touch or even look at each other when they're at work. For the first years I worked for them, I'd never seen them exchange so much as a glance, but then I started noticing small things: Shawn would come to the back, and Peter would offer him a spoonful of some new dish he was experimenting with, and if Shawn liked it he

would flash Peter a smile he didn't give even his best customers. Peter would return a look I could only describe as pride and satisfaction, something he rarely showed since he had no ego where his work was concerned and was always shy about taking credit for anything he did.

Once I'd noticed that first exchange, it became more and more clear to me how they'd seek each other out when they thought nobody was watching. I'd catch them stepping apart as I exited the walk-in freezer or after I'd replenished some of the stock in the front of the shop; and although I'd never ask, Peter once told me about how Shawn had shocked his father by bringing home a boyfriend instead of a "nice girl." All in all, they seemed like a steady couple.

Not the kind of couple who'd bring a third person into their bed.

Yet here I was, and I had the distinct impression I wasn't the first one.

Feeling Peter's gaze woke me from my reverie, and he languidly closed his eyes as he leaned closer to kiss me. I couldn't resist returning it, the memories of our lovemaking springing back into my mind. His lips were soft, the skin around his square jaw and his mouth slightly stubbly, and I couldn't stop my hand from caressing it. His hand drifted to my left buttock and squeezed it, pulling my groin against his where the evidence of his morning erection was hard to miss. Although I felt a little self-conscious about rutting up against Peter with his lover sleeping close behind me, my body was in charge and I couldn't make it pull back. Just like last night, Peter's touches were sensual, slow, even a bit teasing, in sharp contrast with Shawn's, which were direct and unfaltering, like a heat-seeking missile. Before sleep had caught us, it had been Peter's kisses that had made me horny and eager, Peter's touches which had made my skin tingle, my nipples peak and my cock rock hard, but it had been Shawn who had brought me off, convulsing, chanting his name and shooting thick white ribbons all over them and myself.

I shivered when I remembered how I'd come so hard I thought I was going to pass out.

"Cold?" Peter asked in a voice that was smooth like silk.

I pushed myself even closer to him, grabbing without watching and finding a sheet to pull over us. I couldn't look him in the eye. "Just

remembering what we did last night.”

“You mean this morning? No regrets, I hope?”

I shook my head. “I’d do it all again if I knew it wouldn’t change things between us.”

Peter shrugged and scratched his head. “I have no doubt it’ll change things between us.”

I didn’t know how to react to that. I liked my job and I loved our team. It wouldn’t be the same if the dynamic changed, and I certainly didn’t want to lose my job. Oh God, this could cost me my livelihood!

“Don’t panic,” Peter said after a pregnant pause. “You’ve just become even more valuable to us, not less.” He looked at me with those steel-blue eyes of his and made me look back. “We’ve been eyeing you for years, Karl. At first Shawn wasn’t convinced you were gay, but then that guy burst into the shop making a spectacle of himself—”

“Damien,” I interrupted.

“Your boyfriend at the time?”

I nodded. “That was two years ago. What took you so long?”

Peter chuckled. “We weren’t even going to suggest it. Both Shawn and I were worried you’d take it the wrong way and leave because you didn’t want to work for two perverts. Especially not after Damien—”

“Said he was sorry for suggesting a threesome.” I didn’t usually finish other people’s sentences, but it all fell into place right then. I shook my head, but I was smiling. “He asked for a threesome to cover up an affair he was having with some nineteen-year-old twink. This”—I pointed between Shawn and Peter—“is a whole different ball game.”

Peter put his hand on the back of my head and pulled me into a kiss again. “So you want to catch or pitch?”

“You showed me last night I didn’t need to choose.” As soon as the words left my mouth I wanted to take them back, feeling embarrassed about being so blatantly eager.

“Mmmh, demanding. I like that.”

We kissed some more, both of us hard and horny, but unwilling to step up the pace. It felt strangely alluring to try to make it last as long as

possible, and I had to admit I was sailing into unknown territory. Even in my relationships that lasted beyond the first few fucks, sex had always been about getting off, not about the act itself. With these two, I knew I'd have to adjust my sights.

"Hey, leave some for me," a raspy voice behind me said.

Peter broke our kiss. "He's a big guy, remember? There's plenty for both of us."

"Yeah, but you got him ready to shoot already." It almost sounded like Shawn was pouting.

"I got a while to go, guys," I said a little shyly.

"Who would have ever thought," Shawn mused, snaking his arm under mine and inserting his hand between Peter's and my groin, grabbing both of our cocks.

"Yeah, it's always the shy ones, right? Feels good, love."

"Why don't you flip him around so I can get to his scrumptious nipples? Although feeling that delicious ass of his against my cock is nice too."

"Ehm, guys?" I interrupted. I looked over my shoulder at Shawn. "I'm here and at least half sentient. Can I have a say in this too?"

Shawn chuckled, and Peter pulled my head around so I was looking at him again. "Don't mind Shawn. He lacks a little in the social graces when he's horny, but he means no harm. And I certainly don't, either." Peter moved even closer and whispered conspiratorially. "Don't tell anyone, but in bed Shawn loves a take-charge kind of guy, and I certainly don't mind handing over the reins. As long as you don't make him bottom, we're up for anything, right, love?"

As Peter leaned over me and kissed Shawn, I was sandwiched between them and the possibilities started playing in my mind. Like a kid in a toy store, I had no idea what I wanted first. Peter loved to kiss, I knew that. I'd lost myself in his kisses more than a few times in the last twelve hours or so. Shawn was all about the fucking and he had the perfect cock for it too. I'd watched him fuck Peter—without a condom like lovers did—and then remembered how he'd fucked me until I couldn't hold back anymore and just had to come. Even after all that, Shawn was still ready for more, despite the fact he was at least ten years

older than me. I knew I'd have to come up with something to keep both of them entertained. Not an easy feat considering my mind was made of Jell-O right now.

"We freaked you out, didn't we?"

I looked up and Peter came into focus. "No, I just... I've never done this before. I don't mean to boast, but I know what to do with a guy in bed. I just don't know if I can handle both of you at once."

For a moment Peter looked at Shawn but then returned his gaze to my face. "You did more than fine last night. Trust me. You can handle both of us. And together, Shawn and I can handle you."

Peter gently pushed me so I ended up on my back between them. I'm about four inches taller than either of them, but I felt like a fifteen-year-old in that moment; like I was going to lose my virginity all over again. This time I didn't have the benefit of the previous night's drinks and wasn't quite as uninhibited as I'd been a few hours earlier. I just had to remind myself that we'd done this already and they still wanted me, so there was no need to be self-conscious.

Being on my back gave me a better view of Shawn and that stroked my ego. He's the typical alpha male. If he were my height, he'd be the epitome of a northern god: blond, strong and muscled, but what he lacks in height, he certainly makes up in attitude. Although he's always good-humored and kind, nobody at the shop ever questions his authority and it's the same in bed. That's why seeing him rut against me, his cock not only hard, but leaking as well, turned me on so much I could almost forget Peter's recommendation that I not make Shawn bottom. I let him do what he wanted, and he was licking my nipple, rolling the little pebble around with his tongue, and it was shooting right to my cock, which was lying heavy on my belly.

Shawn gently put his hand on Peter's head and pushed it toward my groin. I'm not usually very good at being passive in bed, but with them I was letting it all happen. Peter has the most amazing mouth and a clear appreciation for sucking cock. I watched Shawn watch Peter and saw the pride in his face.

Suddenly Shawn moved higher and kissed my ear. "Fuck, he's so good at that and I love to watch him do it," he whispered, his hand resting on Peter's bobbing head.

“Yeah, he is,” was about all I was capable of answering. Peter took me deep, and I threw my head back as the sudden rush of blood to my nether regions made me feel dizzy. The only rational thought in my mind was that I had to enjoy this for all it was worth because it was unlikely to ever happen again, and then Shawn looked at me like the cat that got the cream and joined his lover. With both of them giving me head, I grew afraid that I would nut too soon, especially because they’d clearly done this before. They licked me up and down, in perfect sync, and occasionally their lips touched or they kissed near the top of my head, licking away the beads of cum that were now steadily forming at the slit. They were watching each other the whole time, and I couldn’t stop watching them, although it brought me so close to coming I had to avert my eyes.

“You *want* to come?”

I opened my eyes and looked at Shawn, still smirking while he had my cock in his hand, and watched him present it to Peter.

“No,” I answered in a surprisingly raspy voice.

“Of course not, Shawn,” Peter answered for me. “I want him to fuck me with it first, and although he’s a fair bit younger than us, I doubt he’ll be ready for action again in five minutes.”

“And what am *I* suppose to do, then?” Shawn asked. I wasn’t sure whether he was being serious or not, but I saw Peter cock his head as if he felt sorry for his lover.

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out, love. You know there’s always plenty of room for you.” Peter exchanged a look with Shawn I couldn’t place, but it soon disappeared and Peter got up to grab a condom from the nightstand. Shawn seemed pleased with Peter’s answer even if I didn’t quite know why.

I was still lying on my back, half sitting up, resting on my elbows and enjoying the view as Shawn got up after Peter and they exchanged a possessive kiss. It gave Shawn the opportunity to grab the lube and pat Peter on his ass.

“You need prep or are you still loose enough?”

Peter demonstratively rolled his eyes. “With a lover like you I’m always ready, love.” He returned his attention to me. “I’m glad you’re a

little more relaxed. I thought all your worries would be over after last night and our little talk earlier?”

I shrugged. Peter didn’t elaborate. Instead, he straddled me, hitting my taut belly with his more than ample cock.

“You up for me riding you?”

“I always seem to be up around the two of you,” I answered.

Shawn came up close behind Peter and looked at me over his shoulder. “Ah, he’s all right. His sense of humor is returning,” he told Peter.

Peter leaned over me and kissed me softly. I could feel his erection between our bellies, but the way his hands were caressing my sides and his tongue was invading my mouth made the rest of the world disappear. I vaguely felt Shawn roll the condom on me, but it wasn’t until I heard a satisfied moan escape from Peter that I realized the tight heat around my erection was Peter slowly impaling himself.

“Fuck, you feel even better than I anticipated.”

I smiled against Peter’s mouth, which was sort of hovering over me as if he didn’t want to lose the contact.

“You feel good too. Nice and tight.”

Peter nodded and started rolling his hips, providing me with some welcome friction. Although his kisses were less deep now, he still didn’t give up this most intimate contact and he didn’t pull away until Shawn made him.

“I’m gonna get jealous here if you don’t watch it.” Shawn’s words were harsh, but the way he was looking at Peter and smiling made them sound more teasing. Peter rolled a little to the side and I got a different taste and much less gentle approach from Shawn when it was his turn to kiss me. For a while we took turns kissing, and I got to watch Peter and Shawn as well. They were so in tune with each other I started feeling like an outsider again, but then Shawn pulled back.

“Close your legs a bit more, Karl?” Shawn asked in his usual undemanding fashion.

I couldn’t see what Shawn was doing since Peter obscured my view, but I trusted him, so it didn’t bother me too much. Peter was still

riding me, not bringing either of us closer to release, despite the fact it felt pretty good. He reached behind to draw Shawn closer and didn't seem to have a problem dividing his attention between us as he turned his head to kiss his lover.

Shawn held Peter closer as they broke the kiss and then looked at me. "Don't jump, okay, Karl?"

Although I had no idea why I could possibly want to pull away, I nodded and smiled.

"You ready, love?" Shawn asked Peter.

"Oh yeah," Peter replied with his eyes closed. There was no doubt he both knew what was going to happen and enjoyed the prospect of it, so I saw no reason to worry too much. Everything they'd dished out for me so far had turned out just wonderful, so when I felt the ring of muscle around my cock grow tighter my only reaction was a muffled "Oh, fuck, yeah."

I couldn't stop looking at Peter. His back was arched, head thrown back, and Shawn's arm was still curled possessively around his chest. My hands were steadying Peter's hips, but I couldn't resist caressing his lean sides to feel the tense muscles while my gaze was locked on his face. We felt amazingly close, the three of us, with both Shawn and I caring for Peter, but it was more than that. Although this was all new to me—not just the reality of having sex with two men at once but also the fact that until yesterday I only knew these two from working with them—I couldn't shake the notion that we fit together in ways beyond the obvious physical aspect.

The first time with someone always felt a little awkward and even with my long-term lovers it had sometimes been far from blissful; but the fact Shawn and Peter were so in tune with each other but still eager to have me there took the pressure off me. I could just enjoy this; let it happen as if I was only remotely a part of it.

Peter's strained, "Easy, Shawn, he's a big boy," brought me back to reality.

"And what does that make me?" Shawn answered, teasingly biting Peter's ear.

"Not complaining," Peter said with his eyes still closed and his

head to the side so Shawn could continue kissing his neck. “Just saying.... Shit... I wish we could stay like this forever. With the two of you filling me up until I think... I think I’m going to burst.”

“Oh, you’ll burst all right,” Shawn said, with his voice showing the strain for the first time.

Peter looked at me through heavy-lidded eyes. “You feel amazing, kid.” His hand moved to his erection, but I knew it would throw him off balance so I swatted his hand away and savored the feeling of his heavy cock in my hand. He showed me his grateful smile although I could tell he was preoccupied with trying to move in a way that let him enjoy all of the sensations Shawn and I were giving him.

It wasn’t until Peter’s shuddering breath and the spurt of hot jizz all over my hand that I realized how much I was enjoying this too. Feeling Peter come around and in between us made the heat rise in me so fast I cursed. Peter muttered an apology as he tried not to collapse on top of me, but it was Shawn who gently helped him fall to the bed. I slipped out of him but felt a hand ripping off my condom. The combination of Peter’s bulk half on top of me and Shawn’s cock against mine made me lose it and we all ended up in a sticky mess. Not that I cared. Peter barely moved when Shawn laid next to me, and so I ended up between them again, cradled by two men.

There wasn’t a single moment when I felt I had to leave: Not that afternoon when the three of us showered in their oversized walk-in bathroom and certainly not that night when Peter cooked for us and Shawn brought up a small case of expensive-looking wine.

“We have something to celebrate,” Shawn said, wiggling his eyebrows at Peter, and Peter nodded knowingly. I didn’t know what they meant, but then I wasn’t going to spoil it by overthinking our impromptu arrangement.

“So do you have plans for this week, Karl?” Shawn asked after we’d had dessert and were in the sitting room, all of us overstuffed on Peter’s delicious cooking.

I shrugged. “Not working is about all I usually manage after the holiday rush.”

They did that conversing without words again, and I must have looked worried because Peter smiled at me. “Would you consider ‘not

working' here at our house for a while?"

I looked at Peter, then at Shawn and then at Peter again. "I don't want to impose on you. I'm sure you two want some privacy?"

"Pete and I have been together for a long time, Karl," Shawn replied. "And we hope to grow old together, but we've always felt most together when we're sharing with someone else."

Peter moved from his single chair to the oversized sofa I was occupying. "My mother always told me that to get to the prince I'd have to kiss a lot of frogs." He looked at Shawn, and Shawn nodded so slightly I almost missed it. "We've tried out a few, but I guess we've always known that you had the potential to turn into that prince."

"We work really well together, Karl," Shawn added, making me scoot over just a little so he, too, could sit down next to me. It was a bit of a tight fit, but I didn't feel the need to run. "It's not just me or Peter that makes the butcher shop run smoothly. You're a part of that well-oiled team. At work I trust you just as much as I trust Peter, so why wouldn't you fit into the rest of our lives as well?"

I had to admit that what they offered scared me. This was not just "let's mess around a bit and have a shitload of sex." This wasn't just for our week of vacation; this was for keeps. This was twenty-four-seven together. Work and play. This was about becoming a part of a relationship I'd envied from afar for years. Although I still felt like a kid in a toy store, a little voice inside me was telling me it was all too good to be true.

Shawn must have sensed my doubts. "We're not asking you to marry us, Karl. We just want a chance to show you we mean what we say, and if you ever feel like it isn't for you, we'd let you walk away without hard feelings."

"And your job will always be there," Peter added. "You're one hell of a butcher. We wouldn't want to lose you, but we've been eyeing you for years. We can go back to looking and not touching if that's what you want."

I sighed, trying to gather my thoughts. Despite all the sex we'd had that day, my body was reacting again to their proximity. Oh, who was I kidding? No matter how loudly my inner demons were telling me this was too good to be true, I couldn't walk away now. I trusted these guys.

And they were right: we did work well together.

Because of my hesitancy in answering, I could see worry in both of their faces. I knew words would be sorely inadequate for what I wanted to convey so I pulled Peter closer and kissed him hard on the mouth. Although that delicious tongue of his was already meeting mine, I didn't linger. I had to include Shawn in this as well. His kiss was rougher, less refined, but not less enjoyable. Like earlier, I was in the perfect position to switch back and forth between them, but their hunger grew as rapidly as mine until we all flowed together into a three-way kiss. I'd never imagined this was possible. I'd always had enough trouble just kissing one guy; I'd never even considered more. That was before I'd had the experience of these two, of course.

It wasn't just their mouths, but their hands as well. I knew it would only be matter of time before we'd end up in bed again.

DESPITE the rigorous exercise, the week was surprisingly relaxing. We only left the house for grocery shopping, and in between we were never apart. Endless hours were spent on the large sofa, legs entwined, listening to music and reading books, of which Peter had a library full. The TV only came on for the occasional sports game, and I found out Shawn and Peter invariable cheered for opposing teams, with Peter's team usually losing, but he didn't seem to mind. He was the champion of the underdogs and loved to play that part any chance he got. I took turns siding with one, then the other, letting my mood dictate whether I could take Shawn's jeers at choosing Peter's team or preferred Peter's mock self-pity when I chose Shawn's team.

On Friday we went to see a movie in the afternoon, and Shawn had threatened to cook afterward. Being a bachelor all my life I knew I could hold my own behind a stove, but I knew from work that Shawn was all brawn and not much else when it came to puttering around in the kitchen. For that, of course, he had Peter and a vast array of leftovers from the shop to keep them well fed. I was therefore sure that Shawn never cooked and that he was just showing off for me. Peter's never-ending amusement at Shawn's antics were further proof.

"Karl, you gotta come see this!" Peter shouted at me by way of

invitation.

I pretended I wanted to change into something more comfortable because I didn't want to crowd Shawn if he was indeed going to poison us all, like Peter predicted.

When I arrived in the kitchen, I found Peter had uncorked a bottle of wine, brought three glasses, and parked himself on top of the kitchen table with his bare feet tucked under him to see the spectacle.

Shawn had most of the kitchen cabinets open and the counter was stacked with so many ingredients he looked like he was cooking for an army platoon. As soon as I entered, Peter offered me a glass of red wine and a place next to him on the table.

"Shouldn't we help him or something?"

"Sit," Peter commanded with clear amusement written all over his face. "'Or something' is right. He said he was cooking, so let's cheer him on. You know how much he loves an audience."

I wasn't quite sure, but sat down at the edge of the table anyway. Shawn, in the meantime, was trying to get organized and it was clear that not only did Peter have no intention whatsoever to help him, Peter wasn't about to let anyone else—namely me—chip in, either.

"Come on, K. You should consider yourself lucky. Shawn has never cooked for me. Not even when we first got together eons ago."

Shawn threw Peter a mock glare over his shoulder and then continued frying the meat, which made Peter end up in a fit of giggles.

Once Peter recovered, he threw his arm over my shoulder. "You'd think that since he knew how much effort went into slicing and spicing those scrumptious slivers of beef, he'd treat them with a little more respect." He then turned to Shawn. "Shawn, love, your pan is way too hot."

"I'm searing the meat, Pete, it's supposed to be hot," Shawn snapped.

I was starting to feel uncomfortable. Shawn seemed annoyed and Peter was teasing him mercilessly. I couldn't make out whether they were serious or just having a go at each other, crossing boundaries only longtime lovers are allowed to cross. At one point I was wondering

whether this was turning into an argument between the two of them over me. I saw no way to rescue the situation, though. As usual, I was between a rock and a hard place. If I helped out Shawn, I risked turning against Peter, and if I did nothing, Shawn might take it the wrong way, so I shut up and drank my wine and occasionally handed Shawn the spices he was looking for amid frustrated grunts. All in all, whatever Shawn was brewing didn't smell half bad and my apprehension died down a bit when I noticed Peter secretly checking on the contents of the rice cooker.

"So who's setting the table?" Shawn asked without turning around.

"I'll do it," I volunteered. I got up and took the plates and cutlery out of the kitchen cupboard and arranged them around Peter, who clearly had no intention of getting up from his perch. As I was doing this, I saw a gesture Peter usually bestowed on Shawn, but now it went the other way around. Shawn had a strip of beef hanging from his fork, with his hand underneath, and he offered it to Peter, who bit at it with a look that went straight to my groin—and the look wasn't even meant for me.

"Fucking hell, that's hot," Peter mumbled while trying to prevent the strip from burning the inside of his mouth. Shawn's smirk was priceless and he included me with a wink.

"You want to taste as well?" Shawn asked me.

I put down the last knife and shrugged. "Depends on what Peter thought of it and if you didn't poison him."

Shawn punched me playfully and offered me another strip with the same fork.

"It's not too bad, actually," Peter admitted.

I blew on the morsel before biting it off the fork, and instantly felt it burning off the roof of my mouth. Peter was right. It tasted great, but was a bit too spicy for my taste, and I felt my face turn beetroot red instantly.

"Aw, poor baby," Peter mocked. "Shawn, how could you not warn him?"

"You were fine with it," Shawn said with a shrug.

Peter looked at my bloodshot and tearing eyes and put his arm

around my shoulders. “I lied to you. Shawn does cook occasionally. He’s got a limited range, and loves his spices a bit too much.”

“Can someone get me some... I don’t know, beer or something?” I tried to utter.

“I know something better. Shawn, get the yogurt out. This is why we bought it, remember?”

When I wiped my eyes, Peter was standing in front of me with a cup of yogurt. He dipped his finger into it. “Open up.”

A little unsure what Peter’s intention was, I parted my lips and he inserted his finger. The smoothness of the yogurt instantly cooled down the burn, and I sucked on Peter’s finger gratefully.

I saw Shawn licking his lips behind him. “Shucks, Pete. I should feed him some more, because he looks hot doing that.”

Peter took another finger full, only this time he put it into his own mouth before kissing me passionately. When we parted, Shawn had his hand down Peter’s pants and things were getting out of hand.

Luckily, the spicy beef reheated easily, because by the time they were finished “cooling me off,” everything was stone cold.

THE week passed too quickly, like every vacation does. The following Saturday we were back at work. Although it was business as usual, which meant I had to keep my hands and eyes off Shawn and Peter, it felt different. I was a part of the home team now and all my doubts had faded like snow on a sunny day. While I was carving meat in the back of the store, I started making plans to cancel the lease on my apartment. The house I’d stayed in all week was more than big enough for the three of us. They’d shown me a room to use as my own, but I knew it would just house my stuff and I’d never use the bed in it. Sleeping between them every night seemed like a much better idea.

A hand pinching my butt almost made me cut my finger.

“You’re dreaming,” Peter said.

“What if the girls catch us? You said no touching.”

Peter laughed. “Come on, Karl. Where’s your sense of adventure? We’re in the back here. I usually pinch Shawn’s ass when he’s out front talking to some rich customer. You should see how hard it is for him to keep a straight face.”

I looked at Peter and made a mental note never to turn my back on him behind the front counter of the shop. He didn’t kiss me, but gave me a look that by now I understood as a “come hither” with a promise of what was going to happen later.

After a busy first day back, I heard the jingle of the front door as the last customer exited, followed by the lock turning and the blinds of the shop front being turned down. I was checking the temperature on the coolers when Shawn wrapped his arms around me. “Mmmh, been wanting to do this all day.”

I was way beyond startling and just smiled as I savored the feel of the tight hug. When Shawn swung me around I came face to face with Peter and kissed him without hesitancy. They were my lovers now and since they had started this I had no qualms about enjoying it.

Peter moaned into my kiss and rutted up against me. Shawn snaked his arm between us and palmed my groin while he kissed my neck. As usual, the heat rose quickly between us, and Shawn’s nimble hands unbuttoned my burgundy apron until he could insert his hand underneath it. I turned slightly so I could kiss him and leaned on the shiny stainless steel wall between the back room and the freezer for support. Both their hands were all over me, and I groaned because the two of them were driving me crazy.

“Let’s go home first. Need more of you,” I growled.

Neither answered. I knew their touches by now, knew they were very purposely trying to get me off. I felt sorely inadequate trying to reciprocate. I’d managed to snake one hand into the back of Peter’s pants, but Shawn kept avoiding me, moving to my back. I could feel his arousal through our layers of clothing and could hear his heavy breathing in my ear. Peter had pushed closer as well, opening his legs so my thigh fit between them and he could push his groin against my hip. His stance gave me enough access to be able to finger his hole and his kiss was becoming sloppy.

“Do it, K,” Shawn whispered. “Make him come apart. You know I

love to see him come under your hands.”

Although I was pretty close myself with Shawn humping my ass and his strong, manly hand kneading my package, I agreed with him that we were both looking at our favorite picture. Peter kissed me and bit my lip as he came, and I followed close behind. We panted through our mutual release as Shawn grabbed my free hand and our entwined fingers over his groin made him come as well.

“Damn, I hate slippery shorts,” Shawn complained as we finally pulled apart. I was hesitant to let go of Peter until I was sure he was steady on his feet, but my concern was ungrounded.

“Guess we have to think about installing a shower at the back of the shop, then,” Peter said with a big smile.

“Naah,” Shawn replied. “We’ll just have to rush home where we know all three of us will fit.”

And fit we did. Not just in the shower, but everywhere else as well.

ZAHRA OWENS was born in Europe just before Woodstock and the moon landing and was given a much less pronounceable name by her non-English-speaking parents. Being an Aquarian meant she would never quite conform, and people learned to expect the unexpected. She started writing fairy tales in first grade; the same year she came into contact with her first group of English-speaking friends, a group which would eventually grow to include people from all over the world. On the outside she was a typical only child, accustomed to being with adults most of the time. On the inside, she sought ways to channel her wild imagination.

During the daytime she earns a living as a computer specialist, but it's her former career as an intensive care nurse that tends to seep into her fiction. Maybe this has to do with her weak spot for flawed characters and imperfect bodies, or maybe it's just her sadistic streak coming through. You be the judge.

Visit her web site at <http://www.zahraowens.com/> and blog at <http://zahra-owens.livejournal.com/>.

GETTING A FILLING

JL Merrow

“YOU,” Colin said decisively, prodding Ivo painfully in the ribs, “are the world’s biggest wuss.”

Ivo glared at his lover. “Excuse me? I think you’ll find, actually, I’m being extremely brave here. I’m not trembling in fright at home, pretending it’s all going to go away. Oh, no. I’m here. Standing tall—”

“—sitting on a comfy chair, actually—”

“—and facing up to my fears. I think you’ll find that’s the very *definition* of bravery.”

Colin made an annoying sort of *tsk* sound with his tongue. “And I think you’ll find that most grown men in your situation would not call this—especially seeing as you dragged me along to hold your hand—anything even remotely like bravery. You’re not marching into battle, Ivo. You’re not about to have experimental brain surgery. You’re not even going bloody bungee jumping. You’re at the dentist’s! For a check-up. How terrifying can it be?”

Ivo was wounded. “I had a bad experience at the dentist’s when I was little, I’ll have you know. It scarred me for life.” He shuddered at the memory. “You never saw the dentist I used to have to go to. His surgery was in a big old house like the one in the Amityville horror films—”

“A perfectly ordinary terraced house in the High Street, no doubt.”

“Well, it looked scary enough when I was a kid. All Masonic patterned tiles and Gothic windows. And the dentist was an absolute ringer for Vincent Price. It was bloody terrifying, seeing him looming over you with a drill.”

“Well, it should have taught you not to eat so many sweets, then, shouldn’t it?” Colin asked with the smug air of one blessed with a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to sugar and naturally strong teeth. “If it wasn’t for your chocolate addiction, we wouldn’t even be here. *I’ve* never had to have a filling in my life.”

“Which is why there’s nothing intrinsically manly about you being so bloody blasé about trips to the dentist. You’ve never had reason to be scared.” A shiver ran through Ivo’s frame. “All the times I had gas at the dentist’s, feeling that horrible taste in my mouth and wondering if I’d ever wake up....”

“You can’t *feel* a taste, Ivo,” Colin put in dismissively, picking up a battered copy of Reader’s Digest apparently for the sole purpose of dropping it again with a shudder.

“Maybe I’m synaesthetic,” Ivo muttered sulkily. “Just because you haven’t experienced something doesn’t mean it isn’t a perfectly valid—”

“Would you like to come in now, Mr. Eccles?” The nurse smiled around the waiting room door. Ivo felt a sudden flash of loathing for her, with her starched white uniform and her perfect nails and her friendly manner.... He took a deep breath. No. The nurse was not the enemy.

Merely a collaborator. Ivo wondered what she’d look like with that artfully highlighted hair shorn off and a badge of shame hung around her neck reading, “Dentist Lover.”

“Mr. Eccles?”

Scrambling to his feet, Ivo squared his shoulders. He might be heading toward unimaginable terror and suffering, but by God he’d show a bit of good old-fashioned British backbone. Unfortunately, his voice didn’t seem to be playing along. It came out in a bit of a squeak. “You’re coming with me, right, Colin?”

Colin sighed. “If I have to.”

As Ivo walked into the surgery, the smell hit him. A mix of antiseptic and that horrid pink stuff they made you rinse your mouth out with after they’d finished their sadistic little round of torture. And a faint whiff of mint. Uniquely *dentist*, it transported Ivo back to his childhood and his mother’s harassed voice, promising him a whole box of Smarties if he’d only, please, just *try* to be good at the dentist’s this time.

“Ivo, you’re hurting my hand,” Colin hissed in his ear. Ivo let go hurriedly.

And then he looked at the dentist, and all his anxiety seemed to drain away. Right along with most of the blood in the upper portions of his body. That seemed to be heading south so fast Ivo was vaguely surprised he didn’t keel straight over on the floor, leaving just his dick standing up and waving enthusiastically. The dentist was absolutely bloody gorgeous. Well, what could be seen of him was, at any rate. Green eyes twinkled above his surgical mask, and dark, almost black curls poked out from under his cap. The whole effect was Pan, gone middle-class professional. Ivo found himself wondering if there might be two tiny horns nestling in those curls under the cap. And as for the rest of him.... His tight white tunic (and how come Ivo had never realized just how sexy a tunic could be?) seemed to strain to contain his muscular chest, and his trousers clung lovingly to rock-hard thighs.

Ivo heard Colin’s sharp intake of breath and knew his lover was just as affected by the sight as he was. It was one of the many reasons he felt so lucky having Colin; they had very similar tastes in men.

“Ah, Mr. Eccles? If you’d like to take a seat.” The dentist waved politely at the chair, which looked more like a couch in its present semi-reclined state. Really, you could get up to all sorts of things in a chair like that....

“Ivo,” Ivo told him as he moved forward, drawn by the lure of that mellow voice. “Please, call me Ivo.”

The green eyes crinkled up at the corners. “Ivo, then. And you’d better call me Ted.” As Ivo sat down, Ted set the chair in motion, reclining it even further. Ivo swallowed, feeling a sudden urge to cover his groin with his hands just in case he might be, ah, showing his appreciation a little inappropriately. “Now, have we had any particular problems, Ivo?”

Firmly pushing aside all thoughts of one particular problem in his trousers, Ivo nodded, the motion a little awkward from his recumbent position. “Yes. Back right, at the top—there’s a tooth that’s been bothering me lately.” He felt himself blushing, and reflected that at least that meant not *all* of his blood was collected where it shouldn’t be. “I’m afraid I haven’t been to the dentist for about a decade.”

Black eyebrows drew together in reproach. “Well, you should realize that might mean there’ll be a fair bit of work to do. But let’s take a look, shall we?”

He leaned over Ivo, the heat of his body a tangible thing. “Open wide, please.”

Oh, I’d love to open wide for you, Ted, Ivo thought. Green eyes widened, and in the corner Colin made a sort of spluttering sound. Ivo felt a sudden chill. “Did I say that aloud?”

“Oh, yes.”

Ivo glared at Colin, who was now laughing openly.

“Don’t worry,” Ted assured Ivo, his eyes glittering. “I’m rather flattered. It’s not much fun, having half the people who come in here loathe me on principle. It makes a change to be, ah, appreciated.”

“Oh, thank God.” Ivo was still mortally embarrassed, but at least he wasn’t mortally embarrassed *and* at the mercy of an outraged homophobe with any amount of electrically powered torture implements. “I tend to talk too much when I’m nervous.”

“Don’t worry, Ivo.” Colin seemed to be finding this endlessly amusing. “He’ll be putting something in your mouth soon that’ll shut you up.”

The nurse coughed. “Excuse me,” she said brightly.

“Yes, I’m afraid you’ve only got a twenty-minute appointment, so we’ll need to, ah, get things moving,” Ted pointed out. “If you could just open your mouth for me, Ivo?”

Suddenly the whole *dentist* part of this seemed once again horribly real. Clenching his hands on the armrests, and with his eyes screwed shut, Ivo opened his mouth.

“Now, you’re going to feel my fingers in your mouth,” Ted began in a soothing voice.

“Yes, I always think it’s best to start with fingers,” Colin put in unhelpfully. “Especially when the guy’s nervous.”

Ivo’s jaw twitched with tension as latex-clad fingers invaded his mouth. “Try not to bite me, Ivo, if you can,” Ted murmured.

“He’s usually so good about that,” Colin mused.

The nurse’s cough seemed to be getting worse and worse, Ivo thought sourly. She really should take something for that. Cyanide ought to do it. Perhaps Colin might like some too.

“Now, you’re going to feel me prodding about inside you a bit—”

“He likes that.”

“—with a metal probe,” Ted continued serenely.

“Well, we haven’t tried *that* before.”

Ivo tensed as the probe began digging and scratching at his teeth, really quite roughly.

“Ready?” Ted asked in a more businesslike voice. *Ready for what?* Ivo wondered, then realized Ted must have been talking to the nurse as he began calling out some kind of code.

“Bottom left; one, two, three, four, five: all sound. Six, sound. Seven”—there was a bit more digging—“sound. Eight, partially erupted. Bottom right; one, two, three, four, five: all sound. Six”—more digging—“sound. Seven... badly stained, put a watch on it. Eight, partially erupted.” Ted paused, and allowed Ivo a moment to unlock his jaw and swallow. Then he dived straight back in. “Top left; one, two, three, four, five. Six, sound. Seven... sound. Eight, fully erupted: sound. Top right; one, two, three, four, five. Six, sound. Seven—”

As the probe hit Ivo’s sensitive tooth, his whole body jerked like he’d been hit with ten thousand volts and he let out a strangled cry.

“Yes, I’m afraid that’s going to need a filling,” Ted commented serenely, as if he hadn’t just been the cause of acute shock and agony. “Eight, fully erupted: sound.”

Ivo felt the warmth on his right side recede as Ted sat back. “Melanie, if you wouldn’t mind?” *Mind? Mind what?* Ivo wasn’t sure he wanted to know. He unclenched his fingers from the armrests, leaving little dents behind, and glared at Ted. That had hurt! “So, that’s it for now, is it?” he asked hopefully, attempting to get up from the still-reclined chair.

A strong hand pushed down on his chest, preventing him from rising. At any other time, Ivo might have rather appreciated that, but

right now it wasn't doing anything for him at all. "Oh, I think we've got time to do the filling now. After all, you don't want to have to make another appointment, do you?"

Yes, thought Ivo. I want to make another appointment. I'm fairly sure I've got a window in my diary about fifty years from now. "N-no, that's fine," he croaked.

"Excellent. Thank you, Melanie." Ted leaned over Ivo once more, this time brandishing a fiendish-looking needle. Ivo's eyes widened. "I'm just going to give you a local anesthetic, so you won't feel a thing when I drill."

Ivo squeezed his eyes shut again hurriedly, the word "drill" having done unpleasant things to his stomach.

"You're just going to feel a little prick...."

"Doesn't look that little to me, Ted!" Ivo wished pain and dismemberment on his lover for managing to sound so flippant at a time like this. "Better brace yourself, Ivo," Colin continued obliviously, "he's going to stick it in now. And my, it's a big one!"

The needle went in. And in. And in. Ivo wouldn't have been surprised if he'd opened his eyes and seen it sticking right out of his face. Of course, there would have to be a mirror involved. Probably. Depending on just how far it was sticking out.... Ivo managed not to whimper at the thought.

"There, now. We'll just leave you for five minutes or so, to let that take effect. Would you like to go out to the waiting room, or will you be all right sitting there?"

"He'd better stay there, Ted," Colin said before Ivo could answer. "If you let him out of that chair, he's liable to forget to come back."

"I would *not*," Ivo countered indignantly. "I told you; I'm facing up to my fears." He nodded at Colin, satisfied that he'd made his point. And cringed internally as he realized he'd just publicly confessed to cowardice in front of the dentist.

"Oh? You should have told me you were feeling a bit nervous about this, Ivo." Ted's voice was smooth and mellow as ever. "Don't worry. A lot of people can be a bit squeamish about a trip to the dentist. Tell me, is there anything you can think of that might help you relax?"

“Oh, I can think of several things you could do for him,” Colin said archly.

The nurse made a strange snorting sound. “Sorry! Don’t mind me.”

Ted cleared his throat. “How’s that numbness coming along, Ivo?”

Ivo probed his mouth with the tip of his tongue. “Getting there, I think.”

“Well, we’ll leave it another couple of minutes, just to be sure. Speaking of which—I take it you two are a couple?”

“Well, I could ask, a couple of what?” Colin teased. “But yes, we’re together. Are you, ah, in a relationship, Ted? Married?”

“Only to my job, I’m afraid. What can I say? All the good-looking men always seem to be taken.”

Colin gave him a commiserating look. “On the other hand, Ted, you’ve got Ivo completely at your mercy here.”

Ivo, who had an excellent imagination, felt some of the warmth from earlier returning. There were, after all, worse things in life than being at the mercy of an attractive, professional man.

“Ah,” Ted answered with a tone of regret, “but I could hardly get up to anything with him with you watching, could I?”

Ivo smiled to himself. One side of his mouth felt oddly rubbery.

“Believe me,” Colin purred in what Ivo liked to think of as his “bedroom” voice (although to be honest, it could more accurately be described as his “anywhere handy with a modicum of privacy or indeed an appreciative audience” voice.) “I’d be far more put out if I *didn’t* get to watch.”

Ivo felt it was time to assert himself. “Exthcuthe me? Do you mind not dithcuting me like a pieth of meat?”

As Ivo frowned at the way that had come out, Ted’s eyes crinkled up. “I think you’re ready now, Ivo. Just lie back and try to relax.”

“That’s what I always tell him,” Colin quipped.

“Now, Ivo, you’re going to feel a bit of vibration,” Ted began.

“Nothing he’s not used to,” Colin said cheekily. Ivo glared at

him—then squeezed his eyes shut as he realized what was approaching his face.

“Open nice and wide,” Ted instructed. Ivo did as he was told, and felt the hated implement slip between his jaws. Then, with a hideous, screaming whine, it started.

A *bit* of vibration? Ivo’s very brain seemed to rattle as the diabolical tool attacked his benumbed tooth like a pneumatic drill. He couldn’t keep his head still; Ted pushed him this way and that as he worked away, digging out a hole that felt big enough to swallow up Ivo’s entire body. Had Ted been a road worker in a previous life? Or perhaps an open-pit miner? Ivo imagined him saying calmly to the nurse, “Melanie, would you prepare the dynamite? We’re going to need to blast this one out.” How could there be any of his tooth left? If he could have spoken, Ivo would have begged Ted to just yank the bloody thing out and be done with it. Shouldn’t there be some kind of safe-word system? This, Ivo decided, was *not* well thought out.

Just as he was certain he couldn’t stand it a moment longer, the torment stopped.

“That’s the drilling all done now, Ivo. Why don’t you have a quick rinse?”

With hands that weren’t quite steady, Ivo reached over for the little plastic cup of Barbie-pink liquid.

“That’s it, Ivo,” the nurse encouraged him. “Have a quick rinse out and spit in the bowl.”

“You know, he usually prefers to swallow,” Colin put in.

Glaring at someone, Ivo discovered, was not easy with a mouthful of sickly antiseptic mouthwash. But he felt the manner in which he spat into the tiny sink made his feelings quite clear.

After that, everything that followed seemed a bit of an anticlimax. Even the bill seemed remarkably unremarkable, Ivo thought, as he handed over his credit card, one side of his mouth still feeling unpleasantly as if it was stuffed with cotton wool.

“You know, I think that was the best trip to the dentist’s I’ve ever had,” Colin mused as they walked out into the bright sunlight.

“Thepeak for yourthelth,” Ivo muttered sulkily.

IT WAS several weeks later that Ivo found himself in the faux-Georgian bar of The Wonky Bridge. For some reason, Colin had been desperate to try out the new pub on Crown Street. “Everyone goes there these days,” he’d said, as if that was some kind of plus point. Still, Ivo had to admit to a certain curiosity about the latest “In” place, so he allowed himself to be persuaded. Not, however, before exacting the promise of a reward of his choosing. And Ivo knew exactly what he’d choose. Hopefully they’d be able to pick up someone suitable while they were out.

The place was certainly popular. In other words, unpleasantly crowded. Ivo elbowed his way to the bar, finding a space next to a dark-haired guy in nicely tight jeans who moved over obligingly, then gave Ivo a second look.

“Hi, Ivo! How are you?” Green eyes twinkled at Ivo from beneath a mop of curly black hair. The whole picaresque look was nicely set off by a fuzz of dark stubble upon a well-chiseled jaw.

Ivo stared at him. The eyes seemed familiar, but from where? He was sure he wouldn’t have forgotten that roguish smile with its promise of all kinds of kinky delights....

The smile grew broader, displaying white, even, perfect teeth. “Will this help?” Ivo blinked as the man grabbed a beer towel from the bar and used it to mask off the lower portion of his face like a veil.

Or a surgical mask, as might be. “Ted!”

“Glad to find I’m not totally forgettable,” Ted said with a laugh. “How’s that tooth holding up?”

“Oh, fine. Wonderful. Not a single twinge.” Did he really want to talk about teeth? Ivo could think of so many other things that were *much* more interesting. “Listen, Colin’s here too. Why don’t you come and have a drink with us?”

“I’d love to.” Ted smiled, and picked up his pint.

IT WAS amazing, Ivo thought as he sipped his Pinot Grigio. Ted, attractive enough in his dentist's kit, became positively irresistible when seen (as it were) in the wild. Perhaps it was the effect of being able to see all of that handsome face.

Or maybe it was just because he was no longer wielding instruments of torture. And his conversation was definitely more to Ivo's liking now that it wasn't restricted to matters dental. Ted seemed to have a wide variety of interests: cars, climbing, and canoeing, to name but the ones beginning with 'C'. And he could talk entertainingly on any subject under the sun: the latest government scandal or the need for variety in any long-term relationship; England's chances in the Six Nations Rugby or the evils of heteronormative social conditioning; petroleum taxes or polyamory. It hardly seemed like they'd been chatting for—Ivo looked at his watch—over two hours now.

"Past your bedtime, is it?" Ted said, one eyebrow raised. "Or am I boring you?"

"Oh, the former, definitely," Colin assured him. "In fact," he added seductively, "I'm starting to think it's way past time all of us were in bed."

Ivo opened his mouth to protest that he could answer for himself, but shut it again on reflecting that Colin was doing quite well without him, so why bother?

"Well, then," Ted said with a glint in those forest-green eyes, "why don't you both come back to my place?"

AS Ted unlocked the front door, the brass nameplate beside it shone softly in the golden light of the streetlamps. Ivo felt a sudden chill and had to remind himself he wasn't here for treatment this time. "Don't you ever want to get away from all this?" he asked without thinking, as Ted waved them in and they walked past the doors that led to the waiting room and surgery.

"Maybe he loves his work," Colin answered for Ted. "Or maybe

he's only brought us back here so he can get you back in that chair and do terrible, horrible things to you...."

"Actually, Colin," Ted said in a thoughtful tone Ivo didn't like one bit, "there might be something in that." White teeth flashed in the low hall lighting as Ted grinned at them both. "If you'd like to step this way, Mr. Eccles? The dentist is ready to see you now."

Ivo blanched. "I don't—"

"Relax, Ivo! I just thought maybe we should do something about this phobia of yours." Ted's voice dropped. "Replace bad memories with some more pleasant ones?"

"I like the way you think, Ted." Colin grabbed Ivo by the arm and pulled him toward the door. "Come on, Ivo, no need to be a wuss!"

Ivo shook him off angrily. "I am *not* a wuss!" He stormed into the surgery ahead of them both, only realizing as he saw their smug faces that he might just possibly have allowed himself to be manipulated. Colin, he reflected, knew him far too well.

Walking over to the chair, Ted started flicking switches. He turned on the overhead light on its maneuverable arm, and it lit up the chair like a spotlight. "Colin? There's a dimmer switch on the main light, could you get it?" Ted turned to Ivo and winked. "A lot of people find soft lighting more relaxing."

Ivo wouldn't have said it was relaxing, precisely, but as the ceiling light dimmed to a gentle glow, he certainly felt his feelings of apprehension dissolve into an altogether more pleasurable anticipation.

"Now, Mr. Eccles, if you'd like to sit down?" Ted was using The Voice again. Ivo moved as if drugged, and clambered awkwardly into the chair. There was a soft hum, and a sinking sensation as the chair reclined itself fully.

"Open wide, Ivo," Colin murmured, a wicked grin on his face.

"Oh, no need to rush things, Colin," Ted reproved him. "We want Ivo to be completely relaxed, don't we?" He sat down on the dentist's stool next to the chair and leaned over, taking Ivo's face in both hands. "Now, Mr. Eccles, you're going to feel a gentle pressure on your lips." He bent further and kissed Ivo softly. Ivo's mouth tingled at the contact. A warm tongue ran around his lips but didn't dip between them no

matter how Ivo tried to encourage it, opening his mouth wide and pressing up into the kiss.

After several blissful minutes, Ted broke contact. Panting, Ivo noticed Colin watching them avidly from the side of the room, one hand on the bulge in his trousers.

“Mr. Eccles?” Ted’s voice recalled Ivo to the other man. “I’m going to probe your mouth with my tongue now.” As Ivo arched up into Ted’s kiss, he felt that sensuous tongue seeking out every corner of his mouth, while a strong, capable hand moved over his chest and down his belly to his groin. Ivo moaned as it made contact with his erection.

“Not fair,” Colin said, and although Ivo couldn’t see him he could just picture the pout on Colin’s lips. “You’re not leaving anything for me to do.”

Ted slowly withdrew his tongue from Ivo’s mouth. “Oh, even the best dentists need an assistant. Perhaps you could take over here for me?” He stood up, and Ivo heard the stool being wheeled across the floor. “Now, Mr. Eccles,” Ted continued as Ivo’s flies were unzipped and he felt Colin’s familiar hand close around his straining cock, “open wide.”

There was the sound of another zip being undone, and then Ted gently turned Ivo’s head to one side, bringing him face-to-face with Ted’s hard cock. Ivo could smell the heady, masculine aroma, making his mouth water and his balls tighten in anticipation. Ted used a hand to guide his erection to Ivo’s mouth, rubbing the head of his cock softly over Ivo’s lips. Ivo parted them eagerly and let his tongue flick out. He was rewarded with a soft moan from Ted and a salty flavor that spread deliciously over his tongue.

“This chair,” Colin said thoughtfully, his hand still gently stroking Ivo’s cock, “it’s got to be fairly strong, hasn’t it? I mean, it’d be no good if it collapsed under one of your patients, even if they were terminally obese.”

“Oh, they’re built to withstand some pretty—ah—hefty loads,” Ted answered him, his breathing seeming a little affected by what Ivo was doing with his tongue.

“So the weight of two reasonably slender men wouldn’t be a problem, would it?”

“Not... in the... least.” Ted took hold of Ivo’s head with both hands and held it steady as he pressed the head of his erection between Ivo’s eager lips.

Ivo made a sound of disappointment as Colin’s hand withdrew from his cock, but decided not to complain any further when he felt his shoes roughly pulled off and his trousers and underwear being dragged over his hips and down his legs. The vinyl covering of the chair felt cold on his bare skin, but Ivo had a delightful suspicion things would be happening to warm him up in short order.

He was proved right as Colin, similarly naked from the waist down, climbed on top of him and straddled his hips. The pressure on Ivo’s groin made him moan around the head of Ted’s cock, and he strained upwards, trying to get more friction. He ran his hands up and down his lover’s thighs, loving as always the feeling of strong muscles tensing under his fingertips.

“I think,” Colin mused, “that it is high time that I got a filling. Wouldn’t you agree, Ted?”

From the way Ted’s cock jerked convulsively on his tongue, the saltiness of it intensifying, Ivo rather thought Ted *did* agree. “Oh, yes,” Ted confirmed unnecessarily. Ivo started to suck. “God, yes!”

“Now, Ivo, don’t be in too much of a hurry with Ted,” Colin cautioned. “I don’t want him coming in your mouth until you’re ready to shoot in me.”

That, Ivo thought as he felt Colin lube his cock up with long, steady strokes, was not going to take very long at all. Every stroke brought him closer to his peak. The only downside to this arrangement was that he couldn’t watch Colin getting himself ready, but it was a small price to pay for the feeling of Ted’s cock twitching in his mouth, testimony to the eroticism of Colin’s little display.

Or possibly just to his own skill at sucking cock, he thought smugly.

And then all rational thought disappeared, as he felt his erection enveloped in Colin’s tight, slick heat. He moaned around Ted’s cock once more at the intense sensation. Colin eased down slowly, and Ivo could feel that well-known body stretching to accommodate Ivo’s girth.

“God, Ivo....” Colin breathed, his voice strained. He sounded almost as if he were in pain, but Ivo knew better.

“That’s right. Fuck yourself on him,” Ted urged, his voice hoarse. “I want to see you come all over him while I fill his mouth up.”

Ivo felt a sudden draft as Colin ripped his shirt open. Wicked fingers started to play with his nipples, tugging and squeezing as Colin pumped himself up and down with his powerful thigh muscles. Knowing he wouldn’t last long, Ivo redoubled his efforts at sucking Ted to completion, using his tongue to tease the man mercilessly.

Ivo wasn’t sure which came first—the bitter-salt taste of Ted’s spunk in his mouth, or the red-hot come splattering over his bare chest as Colin convulsed with a loud cry. The pressure on Ivo’s cock became unbearable, and he grabbed at Colin’s hips, holding him forcibly in place as he thrust uncontrollably into that exquisite tightness. When Ivo came, it felt like he was being torn in two, and he barely noticed as Ted’s softening cock slipped from between his come-smeared lips. He clamped his lips shut around the groan that sought release as he surrendered to the ecstasy.

“God, what a sight,” Ted murmured.

Ivo felt Colin’s weight shift, and then he was being lifted up gently to a sitting position. He blinked at his lover’s face, only now realizing that he’d had his eyes clenched shut, and they kissed. Colin’s arms around him tightened as Ivo let Ted’s come transfer between their mouths, and he felt it as Colin swallowed.

“Fuck, you two are hot.” Ivo and Colin broke their kiss at the sound of Ted’s voice.

“You’re pretty tasty yourself, Ted,” Colin said, smiling contentedly and licking his lips. He climbed down from the dentist’s chair, straightening cramped legs with a grimace, and held out a hand to help Ivo to rise.

“But you didn’t—*oh*.” Ivo couldn’t help a wicked grin as understanding dawned over Ted’s face. “You kinky sod, Ivo,” Ted added admiringly.

Ivo raised an eyebrow as he gave their surroundings a significant look. “Takes one to know one.” He stretched languidly, with a feeling of

profound relaxation he'd never have imagined himself capable of experiencing at a dental surgery. "But I seem to remember something about it being my bedtime."

Ted gave him a considering look. "It's a bit late to be thinking of going home to bed. Why don't you stay over?"

"Yes, that sounds like a good plan," Colin said. "I take it you've got room enough for three?"

"Always," Ted assured him with a grin.

"Good." Ivo slung an arm around Ted's shoulders, and wrapped the other around Colin's waist, pulling all three of them together. "Because I am fully intending to get my own back on you, Ted."

"Oh?" Ted queried, amusement in his tone.

"Oh, yes," Ivo promised as they made their way upstairs. "After we've had a little time to recover, I'm planning on giving the dentist a *very* thorough filling."

JL MERROW is that rare beast, an English person who refuses to drink tea. She read natural sciences at Cambridge, where she learned many things, chief amongst which was that she never wanted to see the inside of a lab again. Her one regret is that she never mastered the ability of punting one-handed whilst holding a glass of champagne.

When not writing she enjoys reading, martial arts, and surprising people who judge a book by its cover. Stories by JL Merrow have been published by Dreamspinner Press, Torquere Press, MLR Press, Reflection's Edge, and Ravenous Romance.

Visit JL's web site at <http://www.jlmerrow.com/> and blog at <http://jl-merrow.livejournal.com>.

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Evan Gilbert

“It’s a beautiful day out there.”

Tavian looked out the window across from his bed and had to agree. “Yup. Sure is.”

“The Taste is in full swing.”

“So I heard. It’s pulling bigger crowds than last year.” He settled into his book again.

“Oh, and that new superhero movie is out. The one with the Marvel characters fighting the DC characters.”

“Really?” He’d had no idea Margaret was a fan of the genre. His mind duly noted the fact so that he could pick up the DVD when it was released. It would make a nice Christmas present for her.

There came a loud sigh from Margaret, the peevish nature of which escaped the nose-stuck-in-a-book Tavian.

After a few moments of silence, she cleared her throat. “Hey, there’s a pole dancing contest in the sanctuary at Old Saint Mary’s Church this afternoon, and that’s going to be followed by a live version of *Debbie Does Dallas*, with Pat Robertson playing Debbie.”

“Sounds cool.” He turned the page without so much as raising an eyebrow.

Margaret crossed the room in three quick strides and snatched the book from his hands. “Hey!” he protested.

“Tavian,” she snapped, “get out!”

Tavian bolted up from the bed, stricken. “What’d I do?”

“Oh, for God’s sake. I’m not kicking you out. I just mean for you to get out of this house for a while. Live a bit.”

“But I have to finish that book for class Monday.”

“And Monday’s two days off. You can spare a couple of hours.”

He didn’t agree, although he would not say so aloud. He reached for the book.

Her eyes narrowed.

He froze, and then withdrew his hand.

“Okay,” Margaret said, now that the boy had recovered his senses. “You don’t get this book back until you spend at least two hours away from this house. Get out.”

Tavian pulled on his sneakers and walked past Margaret. She escorted him up the hall and across the living room. Once he stepped onto the porch, she held out her hand. “Hold it,” she said. “I know you. You’re sneakier than I am, and I wrote the damn book on sneaky. Give me your key.”

He had to smile. She’d read his mind perfectly. He pulled the little ring with its single key and JESUS LOVES FAGS button from his pocket and handed it over.

“See you when you get back.” She closed the door in his face and locked it.

Tavian stood there, staring at the peephole. He had no idea what to do with himself. His options were limited by his lack of funds. He pulled in a hundred and fifty bucks a week working part-time at a snack shop in one of the Metra stations. A hundred of that had been set aside toward the monthly payment he made to Margaret for his room and board. The remainder had to cover all his other needs for the week, including bus fare, school supplies and personal hygiene items.

He stepped off the porch and headed up the street. He decided to hike over to Boystown, the East Lakeview neighborhood known for attracting gay men. Addison bordered it to the north, Diversey Parkway to the south, Sheffield Avenue to the west and Lake Michigan to the east, with North Halsted as the district’s main thoroughfare. There were bars,

cafes, bookstores and boutiques geared toward all things homosexual. It was a great place to window shop, and not just for chaps and rainbow flags.

Unfortunately, Tavian had never had much luck in cruising. Guys simply didn't seem to notice him. He thought it was because his looks were bland. His skin tone was that of a white man with a very good tan, but his nose was a wide, upturned button, his lips were thin, his hazel eyes were big, and his hair was a short, black frizzy Afro. He was six feet tall and very lean at one hundred and sixty pounds. Margaret said he was "coltish." Apparently, guys weren't into the equine look this season. Still, it would be nice to wander around and watch lovers amble along, holding hands as casually as straight couples.

Tavian was strolling down Halsted, the spring sun unusually warm on his face, when an idea sidetracked him. The Unabridged Bookstore was only a couple of blocks away. There he could pick up a copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the book from his American Literature class that Margaret was holding hostage. He could find a nice corner in the bookstore and finish his reading. Not exactly what Margaret had in mind for him, perhaps, but he would have spent two hours away from home as agreed.

He arrived at the bookstore fifteen minutes later, pushing his way through the door. The place was unusually crowded, even for a Saturday afternoon. Probably overflow from the Taste of Chicago festival, he decided. Tavian went straight to the fiction section, got the book he wanted, and started making his way to the back of the store, where he hoped—but doubted—he would find his favorite chair waiting unoccupied.

He turned his shoulders sideways as a guy slid past him, walking in the opposite direction. The nearness of the other male made Tavian's breath catch in his lungs. Tavian looked back. The guy was just about six feet tall, his body a bit thicker with muscle than Tavian's. He wore loose blue jeans, a red T-shirt, black sneakers with big, red laces, and a watch on his left wrist with a wide, studded black band. The guy came to a halt and turned to look back at Tavian. His thick, straight white blond hair lay in long bangs over his forehead. His face, dominated by dark green eyes, was attractive.

Tavian stopped, too, fully turning to face the guy, whom he had

seen a few times before on the University of Chicago campus. On campus, the guy never made eye contact, never seemed to register Tavian's existence in any way, and Tavian had dubbed him Ice Blond. Tavian was therefore stunned that Ice Blond was now standing barely ten feet away from him and gazing into his eyes. Even more stunning was the unmistakable rush of desire that abruptly passed between them.

Frozen in place, they stared at each other for what seemed like minutes, but the situation never made either young man feel awkward or self-conscious. Tavian knew, however, that if one of them did not make a move, they would lose this moment, this chance. Pick-up lines were not his specialty. He had, in fact, never picked up another guy before. His one and only semi-relationship had grown unexpectedly out of a yearlong friendship. What could he say to Ice Blond that would pull the guy in?

The rest of the world had ceased to exist the moment their eyes made contact. Part of it came suddenly back into focus as movement just beyond a table of discounted books caught their attention. Both Tavian and Ice Blond turned to see a young black guy step closer to them, his attention riveted by their charged aura. Like them, he was roughly six feet tall. His skin was the color of chocolate. He had a slender, handsome face with dark brown eyes, and he wore two tiny gold studs in his right ear lobe. His close-trimmed hair looked as if it had been painted on his shapely head. He wore stonewashed jeans and a long-sleeved, light blue T-shirt with denim swirls sweeping diagonally across the front. The shirt hugged broad shoulders and nicely rounded pectorals.

From the corner of his eye, Tavian caught the subtle shift in Ice Blond's attention. Ice Blond was just as intrigued as Tavian by the entry of Dark Stranger (as Tavian's whirling mind immediately tagged him) into what had been a two-way glamour.

Tavian could feel his heart quickening in his chest. He looked again at Ice Blond. Ice Blond looked at him. They both turned their eyes back to Dark Stranger.

Dark Stranger's gaze shifted from Tavian to Ice Blond. He nodded his head toward the door, then turned and walked outside. Ice Blond followed.

Tavian tossed *For Whom the Bell Tolls* onto the table and went after them.

THE three of them came together on the corner. In the sunlight, the sexual tension seemed to abandon them. For a moment, they simply huddled there shyly.

Dark Stranger shoved his hands in his back pockets and broke the ice, if unspectacularly. “Hey,” he said, not looking either of the other guys in the eye.

“Hey,” Tavian and Ice Blond parroted in unison.

Dark Stranger smiled. “I’m Deangelo.”

Ice Blond said, “Ike.”

Tavian gave his name.

“So.” Deangelo smiled again. “What’re you fellas up to?”

“Oh. Uh...” Tavian glanced at Ike, and then looked down at the sidewalk. “I was just picking up a book for one of my classes. American Lit.”

“I don’t think that’s all you were picking up,” said Deangelo.

Both Ike and Tavian blushed.

Ike cleared his throat. “Is there someplace we can all... talk?”

Tavian’s blush deepened. “We can go to my place.”

TAVIAN rang the bell. Seconds later, the lock clicked, the door opened, and Margaret peered out at him. “What are you doing back here so soon—?” She broke off when she saw that he was not alone.

“Uh, Margaret, these are my... friends. Deangelo and Ike.”

“Well. Hello, Deangelo and Ike.” She stepped past Tavian and reached out to shake hands with the attractive pair behind him. “I’m Margaret, so nice to meet you.”

“We were just gonna hang out. In my room.” Tavian coughed uneasily into his fist.

Margaret looked at him. Her right eyebrow arched fractionally. “Fine,” she said, waving them inside.

Tavian led the way down the hall. The young men said nothing. Deangelo had driven them over in his car, an electric blue Mustang convertible he’d been given as a high school graduation present, and their conversation during the short ride had been cursory but informative. Tavian now knew that, like himself and Ike, Deangelo attended the University of Chicago. (And he wondered how it could be that he had not seen the good-looking black guy before.) Deangelo was a sophomore chemical engineering major who lived in the suburbs with his parents and kid brother. Twenty years old, he loved singing and once auditioned for *American Idol*, but chickened out before he could go before the cameras. Ike, twenty-one, was a junior accounting major from Springfield who lived in an off-campus dorm and was pledging a couple of fraternities. Tavian volunteered only that he was an eighteen-year-old freshman education major.

Tavian let the guys into his room, and then closed the door. “Sit down,” he said, embarrassed and trying very hard to hide the condition. “You want anything? A soda or something?”

“I’m cool,” Deangelo said, turning around the swivel chair at Tavian’s desk and seating himself.

“Me too,” said Ike. He sat on the bed. “Your mom seems nice, Tavian.”

“Margaret’s not my mom.” Tavian sat on the bed, carefully leaving a significant space between himself and Ike. He said nothing more. When he glanced at Ike, he noticed a polite but expectant expression on Ike’s face. “She’s my landlady,” he added reluctantly.

“How long you lived here?” asked Deangelo.

“Almost a year, ever since....” Okay. He was talking way too much.

“Ever since what?” Ike pressed.

Tavian took a deep breath and sighed. “My mom and dad kicked me out. Back in my senior year of high school, I got caught having sex, and they freaked.”

“‘Cause you were getting it on with another dude?” said Deangelo. He saw Tavian’s mouth tighten. “It’s okay, man. You can say it. We’re

all gay here, aren't we? I mean, we wouldn't be here together otherwise."

Tavian nodded, shrugging against the tension in his neck and shoulders. "Yeah. It was another dude."

"You like living here?" Ike asked, smiling, hoping a slight change in subject would put Tavian more at ease.

"It's really okay," Tavian answered. "Margaret has a twelve-year-old daughter, and she's like a little sister to me. And in a lot of ways, Margaret is like a mom to me. She cooks breakfast and dinner, makes sure I get up in time to make my morning classes. It's great."

Deangelo slowly raised his arms over his head in a long, languid stretch. He folded his hands behind his head, leaning back in the chair. "You know something? You guys really look good."

"Yeah?" said Ike. "Well, so do you."

Tavian found himself suddenly trembling. The sexual charge was starting to flow among them again, as shocking to his system as a plunge into an icy stream. He flinched when Ike reached over and clamped a hand on his knee; he fully expected the contact to crackle with electricity. Instead, the warm, firm grip on his leg felt simply good.

Keeping his eyes on Deangelo, Ike began massaging his way up Tavian's thigh. He could see, in the way that the black man's eyes widened, that it was turning Deangelo on.

Deangelo's eyes shifted to Tavian. "Why don't you slide closer to him, man?"

Planting his hands against the mattress, Tavian pushed his body up, and then sat down again, pressing himself against Ike. He realized he was holding his breath, and he forced himself to exhale in a deep sigh. He couldn't believe this was happening. After his dad had picked him up and literally thrown him out of the only home he'd known; after his boyfriend had been banished to an out-of-state boot camp; after the long months of being so lonely, convinced that he would never find another boyfriend, he couldn't believe there were two beautiful gay men who wanted him as much as he wanted them.

"Kiss him," Deangelo said quietly to Ike.

Ike turned his face to Tavian without a hint of timidity. He leaned forward. Tavian closed his eyes as Ike's soft, cool lips brushed against his own.

Deangelo watched as Ike pulled back slightly. He liked the way Tavian held himself there, eyes shut, waiting to give his body up. He liked the way Ike brushed his lips against Tavian's cheek, the way he gently kissed each of Tavian's eyes.

"*Kiss him,*" Deangelo hissed.

With his eyes shut, Tavian felt Ike's hand slip firmly around the back of his neck. Ike's mouth pressed to his, gently at first, but the kisses grew hungrier moment by moment. He felt his lips nudged apart, felt Ike's tongue flicking against his teeth. His hand came up as if it had a mind of its own, and he found himself stroking his fingers through Ike's soft hair. Ike's arm went around Tavian's shoulders, sweetly imprisoning him.

"Yeah." Deangelo's voice came in an urgent whisper. "Yeah."

Tavian could feel himself melting under Ike's kisses, sinking in his firm embrace. He could also feel Deangelo's presence, and the urge to touch Deangelo was becoming irresistible. He reached out with his left hand, groping, waving the third man in.

Deangelo was there suddenly, right in front of them. Ike broke the kiss and, along with Tavian, looked up. Deangelo stood with his arms at his sides. Ike reached out, his right hand caressing the back of Deangelo's left thigh. Taking that as his cue, Tavian reached out, grabbing Deangelo's right thigh.

"Ah, man." Eyes closing, Deangelo let his head fall back.

Ike brought his hand up, gliding it over the firm, round swell of Deangelo's butt. Tavian slid over, and together he and Ike pulled Deangelo down between them. They leaned in, kissing at his neck on either side. Deangelo's hands caressed their bellies in slow circles, going lower with each rotation.

The press of their bodies together was dynamic. Tavian heard the rapid breathing of Deangelo, the soft moaning of Ike. Tavian gasped as Deangelo's warm, smooth lips found his left ear, the hot, wet tongue questing inside. He held his breath again as Deangelo's hand began to

slide under his belt, down the front of his pants.

There was a knock at the door. “Tavian?”

All three guys froze for an instant. Then Tavian jumped up, tearing himself away from the tangle of bodies on his bed. Deangelo planted himself back in the swivel chair as Ike smoothed his hair back into place with his hands, settling himself nonchalantly on the bed.

Tavian opened the door. Margaret stood there. “I almost forgot,” she said. “Here.” She held out his key.

“Oh. Thanks.” He took the key and slipped it into his pocket. He waited for her to go.

Margaret looked in at the others. “You guys look like you’re hungry.”

Deangelo crossed his legs carefully.

“No ma’am, we’re fine,” said Ike. He gave what he hoped was an innocent smile.

“You can’t fool me, fellas. Boys your age are always hungry.” Margaret waved for them to join her. “Come on down to the kitchen with me. I’ll make you some sandwiches.”

“Okay, thanks,” Tavian said reluctantly. He waited until Margaret walked out of the room, then turned to Ike and Deangelo and mouthed, “Sorry.”

Deangelo smiled. “After we eat, dudes, let’s take a ride. I got something I want to show you.” He stood up, revealing the bulge in his jeans.

Ike and Tavian looked at Deangelo. Then they looked at each other.

“I’ll tell Margaret that we’ll skip the sandwiches and eat out,” said Tavian.

“Thank you!” Ike replied breathlessly.

“OKAY. Where can we go?” Deangelo asked. He was driving south along Lake Shore Drive.

Tavian sat across from him in the front passenger seat. He was so buzzed with erotic energy that his eyes went glassy as he stared ahead at the rushing traffic. “How about your room, Ike?”

“Are you kidding me?” Ike replied from the back seat. “My roommate spends every Saturday vegged out in front of the television with his girlfriend, playing video games. You couldn’t blast them out of there with a nuke. I got tired of looking at ’em. That’s why I left.”

Anxiety began inching its way up Tavian’s spine. If they didn’t come up with a place soon, this whole, unbelievably wonderful situation would fall apart. “Could we go to your house?” he said, shooting a nervous glance at Deangelo.

“No, that’s out. My brother’s having a birthday party. There’s probably twenty thirteen-year-olds crawling over the place,” Deangelo said. “What is it with your landlady, anyway? You pay rent and you can’t have friends in your room?”

“It’s only because her daughter’s there,” said Tavian. “Margaret knew you guys didn’t come by to help me study. If her daughter was out with a friend or something, she wouldn’t care what I did in my room.”

Ike sat forward on the seat and started massaging Deangelo’s and Tavian’s shoulders with his hands. “Well, we could always get a motel room,” he ventured.

Deangelo leaned his head to the side, gently brushing his cheek against Ike’s dancing fingers. “Hey, that’ll work. There are a couple of places on the South Side where we can get a room cheap, just fifty bucks. I’ve got thirty on it.”

Tavian shook his head sadly. The mini-massage he was getting, however, made him want to smile. “I’m broke. Sorry.”

“So am I,” said Ike.

“Well, crap,” spat Deangelo.

Tavian reached out, intending to grab Deangelo’s knee. His naughty hand found Deangelo’s crotch instead. The bulge there had gone soft, but it immediately began to waken at his touch.

“Hel-lo...!” Deangelo glanced down at Tavian’s hand with a smile. “You know what, man? I’d like to meet your friend too.” With that,

Deangelo's right hand snaked over the gearshift, unzipped Tavian's pants and slipped inside.

Tavian hissed with pleasure, and that sent a tingle racing down into Ike's groin. He leaned forward, sliding his hands beneath the collars of the two guys in front of him. The fingers of his left hand teasingly stroked over Deangelo's hairy chest, while his right hand pinched wickedly at Tavian's nipples. "Am I invited to this party?" Ike whispered.

"Hell, yeah," Deangelo groaned.

With Tavian's hand squeezing at his cock, Deangelo felt himself come to full, glorious attention again, and the play of Ike's fingers over his chest doubled his pleasure. In a sudden surge of passion, he freed Tavian's dick from the confines of the freshman's jockey shorts.

"Whoa!" Tavian hunched forward to cover himself, stunned at Deangelo's recklessness. "We're driving down Lake Shore Drive in broad daylight!"

"And that makes this even hotter." Deangelo unbuttoned his jeans, hauling out his own hard cock. "Sit back and relax, Tavian," he said, squeezing himself with his fist. "Grab on like this, close your eyes and pretend it's my hand on your friend."

Tavian put his head back. He wrapped his fist around his dick.

"Come on, Ike, you too," said Deangelo. "Get that bad boy of yours out here and picture what Tavian could be doing to it."

Tavian took a nervous glance around at the passing cars. He was so excited now, however, he didn't give a damn who saw what. He looked into the back seat just as Ike undid his pants, releasing a rigid, ruddy pole. Ike embraced himself hungrily, closing his eyes.

"Fellas," Deangelo said, carefully keeping his eyes on the road, "let's start these engines. Last one to bring his friend across the finish line has to clean everybody up."

It was a wild, messy, satisfying ride.

BY THE time it was over, they had reached the South Side. They wound up in Washington Park. Satisfyingly spent, they zipped up their pants, abandoned the car and strolled over to the park's pond. They lay down on the grassy bank, forming an indolent triangle with Tavian's head on Ike's lap, Ike's head on Deangelo's lap, and Deangelo's head on Tavian's lap. Tavian thought they might draw some dirty looks (not that he cared, he was so happy) but the passersby fully ignored them.

"Damn. That was good," Deangelo sighed deeply.

"Yeah," Ike agreed. "Best Saturday afternoon I've had in a long time."

They lay for some time watching big, white frothy clouds drift lazily across the pale blue sky. Their contented silence was peaceful.

Finally, Deangelo sighed again, this time wistfully. "Well. I hate to break this up, guys, but I have to go."

Tavian actually whined. "Do you *have* to?"

"Fraid so. My dad got some philanthropic award from the city. They're having a banquet in his honor, and he wants the whole family there."

All three young men got to their feet.

"But before we go," said Deangelo, "I want to set up a date."

Here it comes, Tavian thought, the part where I get squeezed out. "With who?"

Deangelo grinned. "Both of you, dummy! I want the three of us to do the town. Next Saturday night. The whole dinner-movie-dancing thing. It'll be my treat. And next time, I'll make sure we have a nice room somewhere so we can *really* get busy. Either of you have a problem with that?"

"Not me," said Ike.

Tavian felt a skip in his heart. "I'm in. But I don't really dance all that good."

"I think Deangelo and I can show you a few moves." The look in Ike's eyes promised some very dirty moves.

Deangelo draped his arms around the shoulders of his new friends.

As he strolled with them back to his car, he quipped, “Fellas, I think this is the start of something be-yoo-ti-ful.”

EVAN GILBERT lives in Memphis, Tennessee, a Southern boy through and through. He thinks writing is a pretty neat way to make a living. When he's not writing, he enjoys, in no particular order, swimming, going to the movies, reading, long walks in the country, working out, and spending time with family and friends.

BEAUTIFUL FRIEND

Dan Mavison

“HE LIKES to be held.”

“What?”

“*Held.*”

Held? Held where? His cock? Did he mean, like, a cock ring? Tex wasn’t much for accoutrements. Sex toys were sort of overkill when you had the drive, level of fitness, and naturally occurring cock the likes of Tex Bellamy’s. “Likes to be held where? You mean his cock?”

“No, his body. In your arms,” Emerson said.

“My arms—why mine?”

“Because you’re going to hold him while I suck him off.”

“You got the whole thing planned, don’t you, Em?”

“Not the whole thing, just the starters. I told you, he’s skittish enough without you scaring the shit out of him. Don’t deviate from the plan. You hold him; I’ll suck him off. Trust me, you’re gonna love it.”

Tex did not agree. He liked cock. He’d always liked cock. At first, he’d liked his own cock. Once he was old enough, he liked other guys’ cocks too. He liked looking at them, touching them, licking them, sucking them, jerking them off, taking them up his ass. How could holding be better than blowing, when the holding did not involve a cock?

You have to trust your teammates, though, and Mad Emerson had been his teammate for almost as long as Tex could remember—in boot camp, in the regular Army, and all through Special Forces. Now they were civilians, business partners in M-Techs Security. They were also

equal partners in a relationship that more than tolerated intruders; hell, it welcomed them for the variety. They might not have shared men all that often, but they often shared details, to the point of over-sharing by most standards. Of course, Tex lived no part of his life by “most standards,” and neither did Emerson, which was why they worked so well together—that and the trust.

Tex had learned to trust his partner, no matter what the circumstances. But *holding* while Emerson got to suck the guy off, that seemed far-fetched.

“You’ll like him. He’s... he’s soft,” Emerson said.

Tex did not like soft.

“Not like he’s flabby. I mean his skin and his hair. But really he’s... when you hold him in your arms... you’ll just have to find out for yourself.”

It was unlike Emerson to be so nonspecific. He was a stickler for most details, and he wasn’t shy about describing sex. Emerson only got inarticulate when he was nervous, so that meant Emerson liked the kid. *A lot*. It would be impolite for Tex to mess things up just because the kid was a little soft. Soft wasn’t necessarily a *bad* thing.

“Okay,” Tex said. “I’ll just hold him while you blow him. Then we get to fuck, right?”

“No! No anal.”

Tex shook his head. His hearing must not have been working properly, because he could have sworn Emerson had just said that the two of them were going to have sex with Emerson’s medic—the beautiful French Canadian medic who always made Emerson look a little goofy in the face for days after they got together—and there was *not* going to be any anal activity.

“No anal at all?” Tex said. “What are you crazy?”

“He doesn’t like anal.”

Damn. Anal was another thing Tex really liked. He loved fucking. And he loved being fucked. He loved Emerson’s cock in his ass. And, God, he really loved to fuck Emerson’s ass, Emerson’s tight, firm, perfect ass. That wasn’t up for debate. He knew some people weren’t

into assfucking, and he could even understand on a theoretical level why they might not like it, but he could not understand why Emerson would go ga-ga for a guy who didn't like anal, when he himself was so very good at it.

Tex reached over and cupped a tight, firm, perfect bun.

"Tex!"

Tex squeezed.

"Jesus! He'll be here any minute. Don't get me all horny."

"I thought that was the whole point of this exercise."

"No! Well, yes. Aw, shit. Look, he's shy. He's never been with two guys at the same time, and he's going to be skittish enough without you grabbing asses."

Tex thought that over while he pulled on his jeans. It was okay with him if the man didn't like assfucking. There were lots of other ways to have fun. Come to think of it, he hadn't been into fucking when he first started out, either. It had taken him a while to work up to it. "Can I touch his ass at all?" Tex asked. He was willing to tolerate the Canadian's ass being unfuckable, as long as he got to touch it at some point. You haven't truly had sex with someone until you've held his ass.

"Maybe I'll let you, once things get going. Just stay away from his asshole. That's all I ask. And he's shy, so hang back a bit at first, okay? I don't want you to scare him. Maybe you should wait upstairs for a while." Emerson said all this while looking at the floor.

Emerson hardly ever looked at the floor.

"Oh no," Tex said. "He doesn't know about me, does he?"

Emerson grimaced.

"Em, you can't just spring shit like this on people!"

"I know that—that's why I've got a plan."

"Telling him I'm just going to hold him at first is going to make a surprise threesome suddenly okay?"

"It's not a surprise. Not totally. He told me about a fantasy he's got about being with a stranger. He wants to feel a stranger's hands on him. This will be like that—someone he doesn't know but it'll still be safe."

It's a once-in-a-lifetime fantasy fulfillment kind of thing. I promise it'll be worth all the restrictions."

Tex shrugged. It sounded fucked-up to him. "If he wants a stranger, why doesn't he just do a stranger?"

"Because a stranger wouldn't know about what he likes."

Tex *knew* that. "Hell, that's the whole point of fucking a stranger."

"I told you—no fucking!"

"Jesus!" Tex threw his hands up. There was no pleasing the guy. "Then why do you want me in on this?"

Emerson reached out and curled his hand around Tex's neck, drawing him in close. The kiss was hard, with Emerson's tongue firm in Tex's mouth. "Because you're a slut and you love it when I bring men home to you."

Tex couldn't argue with that. He was a slut, and Emerson didn't bring men home to him nearly often enough. He'd been hearing about this particular man for almost two years. Or not hearing about, because Emerson didn't talk about this one much. Although Tex might have guessed about the no-anal rule, if he'd bothered to think about it a bit more. A little while after spending time with the medic, around the time that goofy look wore off, Emerson had a tendency to get demanding. Tex had never formally connected the two phenomena before, mostly because he was not one to question a good thing. He rather liked it when Emerson got demanding, especially when that entailed Emerson fucking Tex good and hard. Emerson wasn't particular about whether he topped or bottomed, so Emerson's demanding moods were a real treat. Not that Tex was a bottom or anything. He didn't have much of a preference in that department, either, as long as there was hard contact, and lots of it.

Emerson *knew* that, so why was he pushing this "soft" thing on him?

"I promise I'll fuck you after," Emerson said, reading Tex's mind as he so often did. "If you really need to get fucked. Or you can fuck me. I really want to do this for him. It's his birthday next month, and I may not see him again for a long time. He's turning thirty. Didn't you want a nice present on your thirtieth birthday?"

"I was in a battle zone on my thirtieth birthday," Tex said.

“Sorry. I forgot.”

“At least I was getting fucked up the ass, even if it was metaphorical.”

“Okay. I said I was sorry. But what about your fortieth birthday?”

“You know damn well what I was doing on my fortieth birthday. It wasn’t that long ago—and I had my cock shoved up your ass.”

“It’s exactly like that. Except without the assfucking.”

Damn.

EMERSON took the Canadian medic’s jacket and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Gabriel liked those sorts of gestures, and Emerson liked them, too, because they made Gabriel smile and blush a little, and when he smiled and blushed a little he looked almost angelic.

Jesus, he was beautiful. It hit Emerson like a ton of bricks every time he saw him. Gabriel did one of the hardest jobs in the Army, one of the most gruesome, but he somehow managed to seem pure and innocent. Deep brown eyes with long lashes and the prettiest damn smile, all set in a gentle face with no harsh lines, no sudden angles. Definitely angelic. Even the dark stubble on his upper lip and chin was soft; Gabriel always had a bit of stubble. Maybe he thought it made him look older. It didn’t. It only made Emerson want to kiss those smooth cheeks and rub his lips over the soft hairs and kiss him. But everything about Gabriel made Emerson want to kiss him.

“*Bon soir*, Madison. So what is this big surprise? You were so mysterious over the phone,” Gabriel said in the accent that made Emerson’s gut do a little flip-flop. His “over” sounded more like “ovair” and the “phone” was almost “fun.” Vowels got dragged out endlessly, and the ends of words faded into nothing, with the ‘th’s more like ‘d’s. The overall effect was long and short at the same time, and the whole thing sounded like music. Especially when Gabriel said his name. *Madison*. No one had ever called him that. *Ever*.

Emerson rubbed his palm over Gabriel’s slender shoulder. “Let’s have a drink and we can talk.”

Vodka. Gabriel liked vodka, for some reason. Emerson didn't mind vodka. It was okay. He liked whiskey better. He liked the bite of it. Emerson wasn't big on small comforts, so small discomforts didn't faze him in the least. He was inured to harsh conditions, sleep deprivation, cold, hunger, and fear. Actually, fear was a rarity, but constant caution was the norm. Gabriel made him want to throw his usual caution overboard. At the same time, Gabriel's skittishness held him back. He had to approach this carefully, the way one would approach any mission. Step-by-step. No sudden moves. Tactically.

"So when do you head out?" he asked, in a just-making-conversation way.

Gabriel shrugged. "Do such things matter?"

Right. Gabriel did not like to talk shop. Besides, he probably didn't know exactly when he'd head out, or where he was headed. He only knew when he was supposed to report to base.

Emerson had checked into it with a few intelligence contacts he still had. That's one thing about being in the Army for a couple of decades—you get contacts for life. Emerson probably knew more about Gabriel's future than Gabriel. Where he was headed was not dangerous. *Yet.* It would be soon. Emerson couldn't let on that he knew this, or that he'd even been checking up on Gabriel. It had been stupid to check up on him in the first place—there was nothing Emerson could do to keep Gabriel safe, short of re-enlisting, and Emerson was too old for that sort of romantic gesture. His last tour had convinced him of that.

"Madison?"

Emerson must have been staring into space. What a waste of time when Gabriel was sitting right beside him.

"Madison, are you worried?"

Emerson lied by shaking his head.

"About me?"

Emerson could not keep lying. "Always. You're going into combat."

"I'm a medic. That's what I do."

Emerson stared into Gabriel's dark eyes and watched them falter.

“Is there something I should know?” Gabriel pressed closer to him.

Emerson wished he could convince Gabriel that he should leave the Army. “Just that I wish you didn’t have to go.”

Gabriel’s fingers slid up Emerson’s forearm, following the bulge of muscle up and back down to the pulse at his wrist. “You could help me forget I’m leaving tomorrow.”

He could. Emerson could take him upstairs and tie him to the bed and kiss him all over until he forgot he’d ever enlisted. Instead, Emerson ran his fingers through Gabriel’s thick black hair. He hated to think of it shaved off. Good thing it grew back so fast. “I’ll have to wish you happy birthday tonight,” he whispered.

Gabriel touched Emerson’s thigh. “Is that the surprise?”

Surprise. Right. The surprise. Gabriel always did that to Emerson, took his breath away and made him forget what he was supposed to be doing. Giddy was the word. He made Emerson giddy. Maybe, with time, that would wear off. But they only saw each other every few months, if that. So Emerson was on the natural high of being alone with Gabriel and, as you so often feel with a natural high, he was invincible. Nothing could get in the way of his plan.

“You remember that time we were on the dock, and you told me about your dream?”

“To open a clinic for children in Africa?” Gabriel nodded and smiled, and Emerson almost forgot about Tex sitting upstairs in the bedroom.

“No, not that dream. Last fall, remember? When we met at that club and it was too loud, so we went for a walk and sat by the lake.”

Gabriel took a gulp of his vodka and orange. He got a worried look that made his thin eyebrows go wavy. He bit his upper lip. Never the lower one, always the upper one. That was the thing about Gabriel. The little details added up to so much more than the whole.

“Your *fantasy*,” Emerson said, hoping he sounded seductive when he really felt anxious.

Already dark eyes turned darker. “Yes. I remember. All those men in the club, looking for strangers. It made me want to know what it

would be like to have a stranger take me in his arms. He is quiet, and I am naked. And his hands, they are all over me.” Gabriel shivered. “You want to pretend we don’t know each other?”

God, yes! Why hadn’t Emerson thought of that? Roleplay! He could be the stranger, and take this lovely man in his arms and kiss him until he was breathless and then... but Tex was upstairs. Waiting.

“That sounds very good, but it’s not quite what I meant.”

Gabriel sat up straighter and leaned away from Emerson. The eyebrows were squiggles. If Emerson were Tex, he would have wanted to lick them straight. Tex liked to lick everything. Instead, Emerson sat and looked at them and got harder, almost forgetting what he was trying to say. Oh, yeah. Tex. The stranger.

“Gabriel, do you trust me?”

Gabriel blushed. “Of course, I trust you, Madison. I couldn’t do the things we do if I did not.”

They didn’t do anything that required huge amounts of trust on Emerson’s part, but everyone has different definitions. They kissed. They held each other. They got naked and rubbed their bodies together. One time in a bathtub. The motel owner had been furious when they flooded the room. They touched each other, jerked each other off, and sometimes did blow jobs. For someone with Emerson’s experience, that didn’t sound like enough, but it was. After two years, though, it was time to step things up a notch. After all, Gabriel would only turn thirty once in his life, and Emerson wasn’t getting any younger.

Emerson paused. This was it. He would either grant Gabriel his wish or scare him off so badly they’d never see each other again. “I have... a friend. Upstairs.”

Gabriel bit his lip again. “What kind of friend?”

“A close friend. Very close. I’ve told him about you, about us. Nothing too detailed, but I told him you might like to try something with a stranger. But safe. And I’ll be there the whole time.”

Gabriel pursed his lips. A kiss in the air. “I’ll need to know more about him, but if he is a friend of yours, then he must be good and honorable like you.”

Emerson might not go *that* far. Good, sure. Tex was good. Hell, Tex was great. Honorable? In a willing-to-risk-his-life-for-his-country way, absolutely. But all-round honorable? Gentlemanly type honorable? Emerson guessed so, as long as there was such a thing as an honorable slut.

“He’s....” There were so many words he could use to describe Tex, and Gabriel always seemed to steal his words. Words were so inadequate. But he had to choose some, and he had to make them count. “He’s the kind of man I know you like. You know, very manly. He loves making love. He’s very good at it, and he promises to be careful. He’s fit, and he’s adventurous, and he loves beautiful men.”

Gabriel gave Emerson a gentle push. “Get out! You set me up with your slutty friend Tex?”

Oh, God. The way he said ‘Tex’ rhymed with the way he said ‘sex’, and Emerson had never, ever heard Gabriel use a nickname before. Gabriel was the sort who called you by your rank and surname for the first month he knew you. The first time he called Emerson by his first name, it had been hard to shake off his silly grin for days.

Wait a second.... “You know Tex?” Emerson asked faintly.

“I know of him. Everybody knows Tex. The man is a legend.”

Emerson had not been aware of that. He’d known about Tex’s reputation as an operative, as a soldier, as a warrior, but a *legend*? Unless the legend was his sluttiness. He hoped Tex never got wind of that. He’d be impossible to live with.

“This Tex, he’s beautiful. I have seen him once, at Fort Bragg, but I only saw him in uniform. You know I’m not into uniforms. But he has beautiful eyes, I think.”

Emerson wanted to say they weren’t as beautiful as Gabriel’s, but that wasn’t true. You can’t compare a guy like Tex with a guy like Gabriel. It was true, though. Tex’s eyes were among his many good features.

“Yeah, he’s beautiful.” Tex would kill Emerson if he heard him say that. Tex only liked to be thought of as scary or sexy—preferably both at the same time.

“He has nice skin,” Gabriel said.

Sure. Tex had beautiful skin, the result of a heritage so mixed that Tex sometimes referred to himself as a mutt. It was usually a light caramel color, but when Tex wanted to, he could darken it to a rich copper, which had been useful on more than one undercover mission. The scattered scars and flaws, a natural consequence of their profession, did nothing to take away from it. Really nice skin. Emerson could use that to entice Gabriel. “Sure, beautiful skin, always warm. And he’s got an amazing mouth. Very active. He’s very good at using it.”

Gabriel squirmed a little in his chair. Yeah, Gabriel liked the tongue action.

“He likes to lick,” Emerson said. “I know he’d like to lick you here.” Emerson brushed his lips over Gabriel’s jaw. “And here.” He traced his fingertip down Gabriel’s throat, around the most perfectly protruding prominentia laryngea ever. Emerson knew the proper name for it, because he’d looked it up the second he got to a computer after the first time he licked Gabriel’s Adam’s apple. Emerson leaned in close and gave a soft, gentle lick to the hard bump. “Just like with a stranger,” he whispered, “only safe.”

Gabriel’s throat quivered under Emerson’s tongue. “But Madison, you know, I have these limits. These borders. It’s very personal. I don’t like to even talk about them.”

Emerson forced himself to retreat. It was not fair to try to convince someone of something while licking one of his erogenous zones. That might be perceived as coercion. “He knows about them. He’s fine with them. He won’t go over the line.”

“But what... what if *I* want to go over the line?”

“With him?”

“I was thinking I would with you. Maybe. Tonight.”

Emerson clenched his teeth. *Damn!* He’d arranged for one fantasy, only to be confronted with an even better one. Only it wasn’t better, because to share Gabriel with Tex, and to share Tex with Gabriel... it was an impossible choice. They had only this one night. Gabriel was shipping out.

“We could do that,” he said, thinking only of himself. But Tex... waiting upstairs. And not in uniform. He was in blue jeans, for fuck’s

sake, and a T-shirt. A tight T-shirt, the slut. Tex had chosen the shirt on purpose, knowing exactly what a tight T-shirt and blue jeans did to Emerson. He was probably hoping it would do the same for Gabriel. It probably would. "We could do that, but we don't have to leave out your stranger, do we? I promise we'll take it slow."

Emerson would figure out how to take it slow. Somehow.

TEX was beautiful. That was true. He was even bigger than Gabriel remembered, almost bursting out of his T-shirt. He was everything Gabriel liked in a man. Big. Strong. Very manly.

But not as beautiful as Madison. Gabriel did not know anyone as beautiful as Madison, who was so considerate. Such a masculine man, with all that power tightly contained. His muscles strained but he held them all in check and was gentlemanly and courteous, even when Gabriel could tell he was burning to go all out.

Madison's restraint was the most beautiful thing Gabriel had ever known.

That and Madison's body. Oh, Madison's body was a wonder. It was lean and hard, and his sweat had the most delightful scent. Madison's body was firm everywhere, startlingly so for a man of his age, which Gabriel guessed to be closer to fifty than forty. The perfect body to rub against. He had soft blond hair, not thick and unruly like Gabriel's. It lay in neat lines, with a slight wave, and Gabriel wanted to hold onto it while they kissed and pressed their bodies together. He was the only man who had ever let Gabriel rub against him like that without demanding more.

Gabriel loved everything about Madison, even his ass, only he didn't call it his ass, he called it his behind. Or *derriere*. He preferred language that wasn't so crude. It wasn't as if he never heard swearing; after all, he was in the Army. But he did not like to associate sex with battle. He knew that made him seem like a prude, but he preferred it gentle. Nothing vulgar.

Gabriel knew that Madison could be vulgar when he wanted. He often used words that made Gabriel's face burn, the ones that made him

uncomfortable. When Madison said them carefully, while he was touching Gabriel, while rubbing against him, while moving his mouth on Gabriel's bare skin, they made Gabriel explode.

Still, Madison was a gentleman. He never embarrassed Gabriel. He never pushed for more than Gabriel was willing to give. Gabriel was not so sure about Tex. Tex looked like he would like to push, and to be pushed. He was sure that Tex and Emerson liked to push each other. He wanted to see that. He wanted to see Tex give Madison what he probably wanted but was too much of a gentleman to demand of Gabriel.

Gabriel knew that if he were the only man in Madison's life, no matter how much Madison liked him, he would not be satisfied. That, his *grand-mère* had told him when he was young, barely a teenager, was what made men different from women. Men want more than one lover. One person, she would say, could not satisfy a man. Then she would shake her head, and Gabriel would hate his *grand-père* for a moment.

His grandmother had never mentioned women, not in particular. She'd always said person, or even lover, but she never said, "When you grow up and fall in love with a woman." It had always been "When you are older and fall in love." Was there something she had known, even when he was young, something he had not discovered until much later? Somehow she'd known that Gabriel would grow up wanting men, men like Emerson. Men like Emerson and Tex.

Tex sat next to Gabriel, exuding manliness. He wasn't touching Gabriel, but he might as well have been; Gabriel could feel him. Tex was being polite, acting the part of a perfect stranger, and showing complete restraint, which made Gabriel want more. It was very sexy.

Madison was being the responsible one, laying out ground rules, saying things Gabriel couldn't imagine saying out loud. The safe word was "halt." Safe word—who would have thought that Gabriel would ever do anything requiring use of a safe word? Gabriel turned to Madison.

"What is your safe word?" he asked. "When you two are together."

Madison looked a little sheepish. "We don't really have one. We should. Everyone should. But..."

"Don't need one," Tex said, a little arrogant, or perhaps merely sure of himself.

“But since you have your... we want to respect your limits. We want you to be....” Madison sighed. Out of words. That happened a lot. He would try to talk but he would give up and just stroke Gabriel’s skin or hold his hand and kiss him instead of words. They didn’t need words, most of the time. Gabriel was glad they talked at least part of the time, because that was how Emerson had found out about his fantasy, and now he was trying to make his fantasy come true.

Emerson nudged Gabriel’s cheek with his nose. “Will you let us do this for you?”

OKAY. *Fine*. Emerson had not been exaggerating. It was damn near heaven to hold this young man in his arms.

Tex couldn’t believe it was Gabriel’s thirtieth birthday. He seemed so much younger. He kissed younger than thirty, all shy lips and tentative tongue at first, and then eager, like a puppy. It made Tex feel like a dirty old man. Tex had always liked that feeling. Combine that with the way Gabriel’s slender body twisted against his torso, and he was in fucking heaven.

God, that accent. Emerson had warned him about that. Gabriel’s soft voice had such a strangely foreign sounding accent, near perfect English only so much nicer to listen to. And Gabriel was so polite. He said, “Please, do,” when Tex asked if it was okay to take off his shirt. He’d thanked Tex when he ran his hand over Gabriel’s almost hairless chest with its gentle curves and little pink nipples and dusting of soft, black hair. Tex took off his own shirt, and the kid—he wasn’t a kid but Tex couldn’t help thinking of him as one—put both his hands over Tex’s pecs and gasped. Tex chest’s heated up under the touch.

Gabriel’s hands were magic. They sent out something electric. It wasn’t quite sex. It might have been healing. He was a medic, after all. *Sexual healing*, Tex thought, but restrained himself from smirking because a smirk might be taken the wrong way, and he didn’t want to spoil anything. It was all going so well.

Emerson had mentioned his Canadian medic enough times. They’d met when Gabriel stitched up Emerson after a road mine incident. He’d

done a great job of it. The scar was as delicate and beautiful as Gabriel. Tex liked to lick it because it made Emerson squirm as he remembered Gabriel's hands on his thigh for the first time.

Tex had actually seen Gabriel once, and asked about him. "Who was that kid I saw you talking to? Looked like an angel." Emerson had smiled and said, "Ah, he's Canadian. He's a medic." And there was something in Emerson's smile, something sweet and private, always there when he thought about Gabriel.

Gabriel liked men, that much was clear. Beyond that, he liked big men, the more manly the better. Tex had seen that plenty of times, mostly in younger men, usually ones who were not in the Army. They were the boys who rubbed up against him in bars. Tex sometimes gave them a little squeeze, and was usually disappointed. They gave under his hands, wilted as if his heat was too much for them. Gave it up without so much as a negotiation. Tex may have liked being a dirty old man, but he did not want to be used as someone's ideal masculine object, and he didn't want to take what those boys offered so freely just because they liked to be taken from. Tex wanted to be an equal.

Gabriel was different from those boys. He was an innocent. He was working on pure instinct; he didn't know, or he couldn't admit to himself, what he wanted. But Tex knew, and Emerson had taken the time to make Gabriel feel safe. Tex opened up his arms and offered more of the same safety. Gabriel took it, without giving it up.

Once he got going, the kid was voracious. He really loved to be touched. Tex touched him, every part he was allowed to touch. Gabriel loved to be licked. Tex licked him. He licked his cheek and his neck and his chest and under his arms and inside his elbows and across his down-covered belly. He moved back up and kissed him on the mouth, and the kid's tongue was soft and as electric as his hands, which kept squeezing Tex's muscles.

Finally, Tex settled back on the bed and the kid lay back against his chest, with Tex's arms around him, and Emerson crouched between their outstretched legs. Emerson was sucking a cock that was as beautiful as the rest of Gabriel, uncut with a dark head and veiny skin, and from what Tex could tell it tasted great, because Emerson was savoring that cock, damn it.

Two slender arms reached up, and fingers twined in Tex's hair. It

was incredible how happy it made Tex that he hadn't cut it since he left the Army. It gave those magic fingers something to hold on to, and he wanted them holding him, pulling his hair, a little bit of hurt to remind him that he wasn't dreaming. His cock was still stuffed in his jeans, but if it wasn't, it would have been jammed against Gabriel's forbidden ass, which was a great ass, even if Tex hadn't actually touched it. Yet. The time would come. Tex buried his face in the thick black hair and rubbed back and forth, breathing in the scent of it.

Tex wished he knew more French. He was pretty sure it was French Gabriel was moaning. He didn't know half the words the kid was saying, but they sounded terrific. Gabriel tried to open his legs, even though his pants were still on. Emerson pushed Gabriel's hips down and took his cock right down his throat. Tex watched over Gabriel's shoulder, watched Emerson's lips brush against dark, soft pubic hair. There wasn't anything about this kid that wasn't soft, was there? Except for the hard cock, and the way his fingers tugged Tex's hair. Hard enough to make Tex even harder.

EMERSON felt greedy. He'd tasted Gabriel before, and Tex hadn't, and that was unfair to Tex, while it was more than fair to Emerson, wasn't it? He held his lips around the still-stiff flesh and spread his hands over Gabriel's smooth belly. He loved the way it always quivered right after an orgasm. Everything about Gabriel was delicious.

Tex groaned. Poor guy. He had an almost naked, absolutely beautiful young man on top of him, but he was still half-dressed. Tex had trouble with that sort of thing. He needed more contact than most people. He liked to twist and grapple, and cover as much skin as possible. Skin on skin. That was Tex's *modus operandi*.

Tex had taken his shirt off, so at least he had a bare back against his bare chest. He had his hands on Gabriel's chest. Gabriel had wanted to feel a stranger's hands cover him, and he had his wish. Gabriel's back was arched so his ribs showed through his pale skin. Tex could probably feel Gabriel's heart beating through that delicate-looking ribcage, which looked even more delicate with Tex's huge hands spread over it. That would likely make Tex want things Gabriel wouldn't want to give. It was

a good thing Emerson was there to gently move Gabriel to one side and unbutton Tex's jeans.

"Ah, fuck," Tex mumbled.

Gabriel twisted on the bed so he was still half on top of Tex, with Tex's arms around him again, and he started kissing Tex's stubbled jaw, licking his cheek. Emerson got Tex's fly unzipped and looked up again. Gabriel was kissing Tex, and he could see their tongues going back and forth. Tex liked to kiss with an open mouth, all the better for licking. He licked all the way around Gabriel's lips. Gabriel caught the tongue between his teeth. Tex's cock popped out and Emerson licked it from root to tip, still watching them kiss. He would have watched all night if Tex's cock hadn't been so close it was bumping against his nose.

"No!" Gabriel said, and he came down the bed so fast his forehead smacked into Emerson's. "You cannot do that alone!" He looked angelic again as he kissed the tip of Tex's cock.

They could definitely do this together. The perfect way to enjoy Tex—two on one. Emerson experimented, and discovered that if he licked to the left while Gabriel licked to the right, Tex begged for more. When he licked all around the head while Gabriel licked around the shaft and balls, Tex's begging became incoherent. And when he and Gabriel kissed each other around the head of Tex's cock, Tex's thighs began to shake.

Emerson leaned back and let Gabriel do the cocksucking for a while. He'd never seen Gabriel with a cock in his mouth before, not from this angle. God, he was good at it. Gabriel licked around the head and smiled at him again.

"He is very fit, as you promised," Gabriel whispered.

If Gabriel could forget Tex was supposed to be a stranger, so could Emerson. "He knows how to use it, too, if you're interested," Emerson said. Tex was big, but he wasn't as big as Emerson, so if Gabriel really was interested in breaking barriers....

Gabriel looked away. "I don't know about that. If it's even possible...." He wriggled as if in discomfort, scared of taking a cock, or anything else inside.

God, yes, Emerson thought. *Brilliant!* "Me," Emerson said. "You

inside me! That would be okay.” *Okay, nothing—that would be great!*

Gabriel looked surprised. “Really?”

“Why not?”

“You are... you’re bigger than me. And more experienced.”

“I know. That’s what makes it so perfect. It’ll be easier for you.”

Tex’s cock bobbed between them impatiently.

“But I thought the bigger man... the more powerful man... that *I* would have to be on the bottom.”

Oh, Jesus. Who the fuck had put that idea into his head? Emerson would kill him, except that he knew it wasn’t one *him*; it was this whole fucking society. First they made you feel shitty if you didn’t fit in, then they told you not to like other men, that you were bad if you fucked other men. And then, even though they called you a pervert for liking other men, they still expected you to follow the same shitty rules they’d set up for the heterosexuals. There had to be a “man” and a “woman,” because they couldn’t stand the idea of two men together. The bigger more “manly” guy had to be “the man,” on top. And the smaller, more delicate, fucking angelic more beautiful man had to be on the bottom, no matter what. How fucked up was that? It was enough to make Emerson scream.

All this time, Gabriel had been denying himself one of life’s greatest pleasures because he was attracted to big, macho guys like Emerson and Tex, and he was afraid they would tear him to pieces.

Some of them would. Gabriel had been right to protect himself.

But he didn’t have to. Not in this room. Not in the company of these two particular big, macho guys. *They* would protect *him*. But not in the way he thought he needed to be protected.

“Gabriel, you are going to fuck me.”

“I am?” Gabriel looked stunned.

“You’re going to fuck me, and I can’t wait, because I am going to love the feel of your cock in my ass.”

“You are?” Gabriel looked mortified.

“Ah, fuck, yes. And I’m gonna watch,” Tex said in a voice close to

a wail.

“You are going to *what*?” Gabriel got nervous.

“Unless... unless you let me....” Of course, Tex wanted more than just to watch. He would want to help. He was generous that way. But first, he would have to come. Tex would need his wits about him. He needed to show restraint, and he was too far gone for restraint now. Once he’d had his first orgasm, Tex would have more or less total control, whether that required him to hold back or get hard again. It was just one more of the many things that made Tex the perfect partner.

Tex shoved his hips up. “For the love of God, Em, finish me off so we can get this thing going!”

Emerson grabbed Tex’s cock. “Get up there and kiss him while he comes,” he said. Tex loved sucking tongue while he came. Emerson had damn near broken his back on a few occasions, twisting so they could kiss and fuck at the same time. Tex had an uncanny ability to be all tongue yet not sloppy, and while that tongue felt good just about anywhere anytime, it was spectacular when he was coming.

Emerson wanted to watch the two of them kiss, but it was never easy to suck Tex the way he really liked to be sucked. Emerson had to close his eyes to concentrate on just breathing. If he suffocated on Tex’s cock he’d never get fucked by Gabriel. Gabriel had stopped partway up and attached his mouth to one of Tex’s nipples, and Tex took advantage of not kissing and started swearing at Emerson to suck him hard. “Who’s the slut now?” Tex growled. Had Emerson been able to speak, he would have admitted that it was him tonight. As it was, he kept sucking while they went at it above him, finally kissing, until for the second time he got a mouthful of come. Soon he would have a cock in his ass, and Emerson decided everything was working according to plan. This was the best idea he’d had in years.

Gabriel was only half-hard by the time Emerson swallowed. Emerson lay still and let Gabriel lick all the come out of his mouth, just to give him a little more time to recover. It also gave Tex time to get lube and a condom and two of his lubed fingers inside Emerson.

Gabriel licked across Emerson’s slack lips. “I don’t know what to do,” he said by way of confession.

“Just let Tex teach you. You won’t find a better teacher anywhere.”

GABRIEL had never imagined this. Not in all his years of furtive fooling around with men. Not in all his fantasies, which usually consisted of what Gabriel actually *did* with other men, which was a lot of kissing and rubbing and maybe some sucking. Tonight was different.

His cock was hard, and he had a condom on it, and he was pushing it against a hot, wet, thoroughly prepared asshole, and the asshole belonged to the biggest, most macho guy he'd ever dared to fool around with, and he was being urged on, guided by a guy who was even bigger, someone he would never had had the guts to approach on his own.

Gabriel rarely approached men. It didn't hamper his sex life, since men approached him all the time. If he was lucky, the man would abide by his limits without him having to get explicit about it. If he was unlucky, there was a scene. Sometimes Gabriel figured it was worth the risk; more often he did not.

Madison had approached Gabriel, and there had been no risk at all. No actual sex had happened for the first six months they knew each other. They'd found a mutual interest in winter sports and had listened to hockey games together in the desert. Madison was originally from Detroit, so they'd argued the relative merits of the Red Wings and *les Canadiens*. Gabriel had met few soldiers who loved the game. He once wrote to his brother that he regretted joining the US Army instead of enlisting at home, but he didn't really mean it. Right after his uncle died in The Towers, he'd wanted to help. Since then he'd saved and lost a lot of soldiers, and gained a few friends, but none quite like Madison.

Madison was the only person, of either gender, who had ever taken the time to get to know Gabriel before making a move on him. Most likely, he'd wanted to make that move from the beginning, but that sexy restraint had given Gabriel time to get comfortable. Madison's first move had been so achingly tentative that Gabriel had acquiesced immediately. Madison probably thought Gabriel was some kind of slut, but Gabriel didn't care anymore.

Gabriel was going to fuck Madison.

Tex's fingers slid along his latex and lube-coated shaft. "Nice and

wet. That's it. You've got one hell of a cock, kid. I wouldn't mind being fucked by it myself."

The thought of fucking Tex made Gabriel want to laugh. Tex was so far from what Gabriel imagined as the sort of man who would want to be fucked. But then, Tex wasn't exactly the sort of man Gabriel had imagined would hold him so carefully, almost tenderly, skimming his fingers over Gabriel's skin and whispering for him not to worry. "You're safe," he'd said.

But that was no surprise at all compared to the shock of watching Tex's fingers slip inside Madison. "See, he's ready for you."

Gabriel stared, fascinated. Tex crossed his fingers and twisted them. Madison moaned and pushed against them. Tex's hand was on Gabriel's lower back, pressing him forward. Gabriel allowed himself to be pushed. Tex's fingers slipped out of Madison and onto Gabriel's cock to keep it steady as it forced its way inside.

Gabriel gritted his teeth.

Tex whispered instructions. "No need to act like your cock is doing this without the rest of you. Put your body into it."

The head of Gabriel's cock was being crushed.

"You have to give him a bit more. Get in past the ring and it'll be easy."

Madison was on his hands and knees. That made it easier for Tex to watch, and for Tex to touch Gabriel all over. His hand trailed down to Gabriel's behind.

"You know you've got a beautiful ass," Tex cooed in his ear.

"You slut," Madison groaned. "Keep your hands off that ass. That's *my* ass."

"Nonsense," Tex said. He winked at Gabriel, and whispered, "Finders keepers." His fingers squeezed lightly on Gabriel's behind. "You've got his cock. I can touch this beautiful ass. Nice shape," he said, and licked Gabriel's ear lobe. "Small. Neat. I like it."

Gabriel lost control of his hips. They snapped forward, and he sank deep inside Madison. He tried not to be so detached, to use his whole body, but it was easier to think of it as someone else doing it, because it

was so, so very intense. He couldn't keep track of everything. He didn't have the vocabulary.

"That's it. Get your cock deep inside his asshole. He likes a good, hard fuck."

Those words worked. But they were almost too much. Cock and asshole and fuck—words Gabriel heard all the time, but as insults. Maybe not cock. "Cocksucker" for sure. "Motherfucking" and just plain "fuck!" he heard all the time from wounded soldiers, except they weren't talking about fucking—they were talking their wounds, their broken bodies, and their pain. This wasn't pain. This was a pleasure so pure he ached.

"Now, ease out."

Gabriel did as he was told. He hissed.

Tex's fingers trailed to the middle of his behind, and he snapped back inside.

"I don't know," Gabriel gasped.

"What are you talking about? You're a fucking natural at this." Tex leaned in very close. He massaged Gabriel's behind, thumb teasing him in the crease with short, firm strokes. It felt good. "I won't hurt you. I only want to make you happy."

Gabriel had heard words like that before.

"You just say, 'Halt!' and I'll stop. I'm only going to touch you on the outside, just so you can feel how good it is."

"Tex, you fuck!" Madison yelled.

Gabriel snapped his hips once more, and Madison grabbed the headboard for leverage so he could grind back against him.

"It feels good. Right, Em?"

"It feels great," Madison said hoarsely. "Fucking great. But not for him."

Tex moved his hand back up to Gabriel's lower back. "I understand."

Gabriel knew he could not understand. Tex feared nothing. Tex would want more. He was that kind of man. Especially when there was

nothing to fear. What harm could be done on the outside?

“Just the outside?” Gabriel double-checked.

“I’ll keep my cock away, and I’ll even keep my fingers out of you. Just let me touch the outside.”

Gabriel wanted to trust Tex. He really did. But he could not help think that Tex would change his mind.

“I already came, so I’m good.” Tex slid his hand back down, slow and easy, reading his fears. “There’s no pressure. We can take our time.”

Gabriel nodded, and Tex let go long enough to arrange Gabriel’s hands on Madison’s behind, near the top, at the sides, almost holding his hips. “He likes it when you hold him there. Hold on tight. Use your hands to move him. Pull him back onto your cock, that’s it.”

Gabriel followed instructions in a daze. Madison tightened around his cock when he pulled him back. Gabriel began to move his hips at the same time.

“Now you got it,” Tex encouraged him as he slid his fingers down along the crease of Gabriel’s behind, but Gabriel wasn’t scared. *Good and honorable*, he reminded himself. A fingertip brushed over his opening. He clenched his cheeks, and Tex’s breath wafted over his shoulder.

“Bend over him,” Tex said, and gave him enough of a push to make it happen. Madison yelped almost as loud as Gabriel.

“Keep fucking him. He likes a good steady fuck.”

Gabriel tried to deliver a good, steady fuck. He pushed his cock in and out of Madison as a finger circled him. Circled his asshole. Tex was right. It was good. Very good. It made his body shake all over.

“Oh, fuck,” Tex said. “I’m sorry, kid. Fingers are not going to be enough. But don’t worry, I’ll stay outside. You may want to reach around, grab his cock. You’re going to need something to hold onto....”

Gabriel did as he was told and was happy for it, because Tex’s tongue trailed down his spine. *Dieu*, he’d heard of this but he never thought he’d ever have it done to him. Were those his thighs shaking like that?

“Jesus, Tex, are you rimming him? Are you fucking *rimming* him?” Madison snarled.

“He’s licking down my back,” Gabriel said, surprising himself with the calm in his voice. He sounded... sexy. “And now he’s licking my *derriere*.”

“Best is yet to come,” Tex murmured against Gabriel’s left buttock. He put his hands between Gabriel’s legs and spread them apart.

VIRGIN ass, Tex thought. Hope he’s clean.

Of course he would be clean. He was a medic, he knew about anatomy and diseases, and he had this crazy idea that if he was going to do anal sex, he would have to be the one to get fucked because he was slender and pretty and young. He’d probably taken a shower, given himself an enema, and then taken another shower just to make sure.

Tex nuzzled the lightly furred crack. God, this kid’s hair was soft everywhere. His skin was like silk. Tex breathed out, warm air to tease. The kid jumped like when Tex first touched him. Tight little hole. Virgin little hole. Tex was having way too much fun. He snaked out his tongue and touched the tip of it to the tense little wrinkles. The kid jumped forward, and Emerson groaned loud. Tex recognized that moan—it was the same noise Emerson always made when Tex had a finger in his asshole and curled it on purpose to stroke over his prostate—so Gabriel must have nudged him deep inside. Emerson groaned again, even louder. Tex took a moment to calculate the trajectory—good aim for a first-timer!

Technically, Tex was violating the rules with what he was going to do next. He’d promised to stay strictly on the outside. But Gabriel yelled something he’d probably never even *thought* before, so Tex stuck out his tongue.

EMERSON tightened his grip on the headboard. Jesus, fuck, he hadn’t remembered Gabriel’s cock as that big. Of course, it had never been

inside him. Maybe it was the angle. Or maybe it was because Tex was *fucking rimming Gabriel*, and he couldn't tell whether he was jealous about the tongue in Gabriel's ass or smug about Gabriel's cock in his own ass. Gabriel's mouth was on his shoulder, and he was panting hard. Tex had to be doing that thing where he thrust his tongue hard and fast. Gabriel let out a torrent of French. Filthy French, if Emerson remembered correctly from the brief stint he'd done with the French Special Ops. Tex must have found his target.

Gabriel started pumping into Emerson, thrusting hard. Emerson could feel Tex's hand on Gabriel's hip, between Gabriel's hip and Emerson's ass, holding, guiding, but also giving Tex the information he needed to match his head movements with Gabriel's hip thrusts. No one could keep his mouth on target like Tex. No matter how much you bucked and jerked around, he rode your ass with his face, determined not to lose contact. It was a gift, and one that Emerson was careful not to demand the enjoyment of too often, because that was the kind of thing that could spoil a guy.

Emerson got one hand to disengage from the headboard and reached back to Gabriel's thigh. He tugged. Tex took the hint and pushed both of Gabriel's legs forward, up, off the bed so Emerson was taking all of Gabriel's weight. The fucking wouldn't be as intense, but that was okay because it opened up Gabriel's asshole to Tex, and that was what Emerson wanted. He wanted Gabriel to understand that this was a good thing, Gabriel riding his back like a monkey and Tex lapping away the way Tex liked to lap away.

"Madison!" Gabriel's teeth grazed Emerson's shoulder.

"It's okay, Gabriel, you just ride it out," Emerson encouraged.

Gabriel writhed on Emerson's back, thighs tightening against Emerson's sides. Poor Gabriel. All this and a rim job from Tex. It was a miracle he was still conscious. Gabriel figured out how to thrust even though he had no leverage, so he was fucking, and Tex was making slurping sounds, louder than if he was eating pussy. Gabriel's hands had long ago left Emerson's cock. They were grasping his shoulders and his hair and his back and his neck, clutching, flailing. Oh, fuck. It was too much.

THERE was a tongue on his... asshole.

No. It was in. It was *in* his asshole. And the only thing that could possibly feel better was the way he was fucking Madison, with all that power surging under him and all that heat clenching around his cock and Madison making noises Gabriel had never heard before. Tex made his tongue flat again and lapped like a dog, stubble scraping at tender skin that had barely ever been touched, let alone licked and scraped with stubble. Tex could go on all night.

Gabriel could not.

Tex growled against his asshole, Madison shook beneath him, and finally Gabriel thrust one more time and let go. He was coming and coming and coming and nothing could stop it, until his whole body went limp. He was vaguely aware of Tex's massive hands between his legs, pulling him out of Madison, then on his hips, pulling him off Madison, placing him down on the bed tenderly. In a haze, Gabriel felt a kiss to his hip, the gentle stroke of his leg.

"Shhh."

Was Gabriel making a noise? Something like a whimper, perhaps.

"You're shaking. You need to breathe deeper."

Gabriel obeyed.

"God, you're good, kid," Tex said. "Real fast learner." He leaned over, close to Gabriel's face, but seemed to think better of it. He pulled a blanket up around Gabriel and told him to sit tight, and then he climbed on top of Madison. "Better let me take care of this." Tex snatched a condom from beside the bed and rolled it on.

Gabriel watched. He watched Tex fuck Madison so hard he was afraid Madison would break. The bed rocked, and Tex grunted and came, but it wasn't enough for Madison to come. Sometimes Madison took a long time to come, and the longer things went on, the longer it took. Gabriel knew that from experience. Sometimes Madison went too far and couldn't come back again, couldn't come, not unless something special happened. The last time it happened, Gabriel had crawled up and kissed him hard, and then whispered into his ear that he could not imagine anything better than the feel of Madison's hard, lean body

against his, nothing more exciting than the feel of Madison going hard all over and moaning. “I want to feel you come on me,” Gabriel had whispered, and Madison had.

But this wasn’t like that. This was what happened not between Madison and Gabriel; this was what happened with Tex. Madison heaved Tex off and pushed him down on the bed. He spread himself over Tex’s broad back.

“A little overstimulated, *Madison*?” Tex said, and it was clear he was taunting Madison. He was teasing in the middle of sex, after he had just come. Was there anything these men did not do?

Madison was fumbling beneath himself, between himself and Tex. From his cocoon at the side of the bed, with his head still spinning, Gabriel couldn’t tell what Madison was doing. He could not have been fucking Tex. There was no preparation. There were none of the fingers Tex had used on Madison, none of the slow stretching.

But there was a condom. Gabriel heard the distinctive tear of the package. And there was something that made Tex make a sound that sounded like “Oof.” And then Madison was moving on top of Tex in a way that looked very much like fucking.

“I need...” Madison growled. He shifted over until he was looming over Gabriel. “Mmmm,” he said. And his mouth opened over Gabriel’s mouth. Once he had Gabriel’s tongue in his mouth, he didn’t seem to need fast or hard anymore. Gabriel put his arms around Madison and rocked with the slower, gentler motion of Madison’s body.

THE next thing Gabriel knew, the blanket was pulled back down and he was being cleaned with a warm, wet cloth. He looked up to see Tex concentrating, like he was memorizing everything he saw and felt while he cleaned around Gabriel’s exhausted cock. He noticed that Gabriel was awake.

“You okay?”

Gabriel nodded. “What time is it?”

“Only midnight. What time you shipping out?”

“I don’t have to be on base until noon.”

“So you’re spending the night.”

There was no reason not to, Gabriel supposed. “Isn’t that what is done?”

“Not always. Not with a stranger,” Tex said.

“You are not a stranger. Not anymore.” Not after that.

Tex grinned and tossed the washcloth through the bathroom door. He touched Gabriel’s chest. “Gabriel. That’s the name of an angel, isn’t it?”

Gabriel nodded. “Yes, but I am named for my uncle.”

“No kidding? Me too. He’s Big Tex, and I’m Little Tex.”

Gabriel looked at the cock lying on Tex’s thigh, soft but still substantial. “I don’t think you are little anywhere.”

Tex grinned. “Not anymore. I’m just Tex now.” He ran his hand up Gabriel’s chest. It was warm. “Anyone ever call you Gabe?”

“Never,” Gabriel said earnestly. “But you could. If you wanted.”

Tex trailed a finger up his throat. “You always call Em by his full name?”

Gabriel nodded. “Mad” had always sounded... incomplete, although he knew that’s what some of the men in his old unit used to call him. Either that or “Emerson,” because everyone in the Army called people by their last names. No rank. Just the name. Except for Gabriel. They called him “Doc.” It was a nickname he tolerated only because you could not expect a wounded man to remember your name, especially if your name was Charbonneau. Nicknames, last names—they were fine for the Army, but that wasn’t personal enough for Gabriel. Not for intimacy.

“Em never told me that.”

Gabriel couldn’t tell if Tex was calling Madison by his first initial or shortening his last name. He was probably doing both. Tex was, among other things, an excellent multitasker.

“I was brought up to think a man’s name is important,” Gabriel said.

“Yeah, well, I was brought up by a family that called me Little Tex, so nicknames are pretty much normal.”

Nothing was *normal* about Tex.

“Your name Bellamy means *beautiful friend*, you know.”

“No kidding,” Tex said. “I never heard of that. I’d be honored if you thought of me that way.”

Gabriel did.

Tex leaned down very close. Gabriel could smell mouthwash. That was considerate of him. Gabriel could hear the shower going, and Tex’s skin was damp. He must have washed himself, and Madison was in the shower now. Gabriel must have fallen asleep or passed out. He could vaguely remember a hand pulling the condom off, and him feeling dizzy. He must have passed out, simply overwhelmed.

Tex brushed his lips over Gabriel’s ear. “It’s Abel,” Tex whispered. “My name.”

Gabriel nodded.

“No one ever uses it. But I’d let you, if you wanted.”

Gabriel turned his head, and the bright flash of the mint mouthwash couldn’t quite erase the memory of where that tongue had been, which was fine. The memory was good. He felt his limbs spreading across the bed, his body opening up to draw Abel closer to him.

EMERSON stepped out of the shower and was stopped dead in his tracks by the sight from the bedroom. Tex had Gabriel in his arms. Again. Only this time, Tex was on top. Gabriel’s foot crept up the back of Tex’s leg, and he had both hands on Tex’s ass, all shyness gone. They were going at it pretty heavily, but it didn’t look as if they were in any rush. Emerson had been on the receiving end of this before. Tex would go all night, if you let him. Once the fucking was over, he’d neck with you until either the sun or your cock came up.

“Couldn’t wait for me to start round two, could you? I swear, Tex, you are the biggest slut.”

Gabriel waved his hand but couldn't respond in any other way because of the way Tex was devouring his mouth. Tex was very good with his mouth. And he did like to use it. A lot.

Emerson wasn't jealous. He'd be happy to just watch for a while, maybe join in later, maybe not. That had been one hell of a workout, and he wasn't as young as the other two. But he did worry about Gabriel being crushed. "Hey, let him breathe."

Tex raised his head. "Aw, Madison, give us a break. Gabe and I were just getting to know each other a little better."

Gabriel offered a dazed smile.

Emerson sat on a chair by the bed. "Well, get on with it then." His friends were truly beautiful, and there was plenty of time.

DAR MAVISON lives and writes in Toronto in a household full of punks, animals, books, musical instruments, and subversive attitudes. Sex has always been a common, not to mention favorite, writing theme. As a proud Canadian, Dar probes issues of identity in just about every tale. Dar has worked in construction, copywriting, health care, the psychic industry, mainstream pornography, and web retailing but always returns to writing. First love, last love.

Visit Dar's blog at <http://darmavison.wordpress.com> or send e-mail to darmavison@gmail.com.

NEIGHBORS BY DAY, NAUGHTY BY NIGHT

Devon Rhodes

I

JASON surfaced from sleep gradually as usual, barely slitting his eyes open to ascertain that it was still just after dawn in the lengthening days of spring. The warmth at his side was pulling at him, seducing him back toward sleep. His sleepy, sated mind gave name to the radiating heat and its siren call.

Kevin.

Jason's lips stretched into a smile, eyes again closed, remembering the previous night. He had just moved in to Kevin's condo the week before. And still in their honeymoon stage of living together, it was laughably easy for the two of them to get distracted from sleep, now sharing the same bed every night. Like a couple of kids with a new toy. Last night had been a record of sorts—he remembered seeing a time beginning with four when he'd come back from the bathroom with a washcloth and glass of water. But then again, they had gotten a later start on the night's festivities than usual.

Kevin, who could always invent an excuse to entertain, had thrown a housewarming dinner party for Jason last evening. This was in addition to the moving-in-day bash the week before and the welcome-to-the-neighborhood cookout next weekend. "This is just our closest friends, sweetheart, you know, *intimate*," Kevin had explained with a look of fond exasperation when Jason had dared to ask how tonight's meal

differed from the upcoming barbeque.

And while a sweet gesture, the “intimate” dinner had dragged on well past what Jason considered to be acceptable limits for lingering at a man’s home late at night. Especially when he wanted nothing more than to be alone with his sexy partner, bury himself in Kevin and stay there all night. Maybe all weekend.... Mmm....

But, he conceded guiltily, it was really only one guest who had pushed the boundaries of decency—Kevin’s best friend, Marty. And poor Marty had good reason to need his friends’ support after this week’s unexpected and damned cold-hearted breakup—seriously, who broke up by text message? That was just wrong. You already have the phone in your hand; use it.

For Georg—yeah, just like *The Sound Of Music* guy, but Jason would bet his next paycheck the joker’s parents named him plain old George—for *Gaywad* to puss out and text the kiss-off to Marty confirmed everything Jason had ever thought about their neighbor’s boyfriend. Asshole. Marty was better off without him, and Jason hoped he would realize that soon. Marty’d been way more depressed about the whole thing than that prick deserved, drinking more heavily than Jason had ever seen him in all the time they’d known each other.

It had been after two when Jason and Kevin had finally escorted a morose and more than slightly drunk Marty across the landing to his own condo door. Jason had cringed when Kevin offered to go in and stay with Marty, then instantly felt bad for being so selfish. But Marty had smiled wanly and reassured Kevin he’d be fine alone before saying goodnight.

Kevin had looked so damned adorable with that concerned and empathetic look on his face that Jason had barely restrained himself from attacking him right there on the landing. Instead, he wrestled Kevin through his—*their*—apartment door, only just managing to make it as far as the living room before showing Kevin without words how ridiculously in love and lust he was with him.

Not an unusual occurrence, really. He was crazy about his guy, and thanked whatever karma in a past life set him up for the kind of luck it took not only to meet Kev, but for some reason to have Kevin want *him*, a quiet, boring number-cruncher. Kevin’s dynamite wit, huge heart, and heart-stopping lithe body had combined to knock Jason off his pins from the day he’d brought his tax return stuff into Jason’s office. He’d been

referred there by Marty, who Jason knew casually since he owned the sandwich shop next door to the office.

Never before had Jason had more than casual hookups, and yet with Kevin, he had skipped right past casual to the frightening concept of perfection, reaching out with both hands for commitment, unable to help himself.

Dawn gave way to morning, gradually and imperceptibly lightening the room. Jason rolled blindly toward still-sleeping Kevin to spoon up behind him, pressing his morning wood up against that perfect, unbelievably rounded ass as he ran a hand slowly down Kevin's smooth flank. Kevin shifted in his sleep, mumbling something incoherent, arching back against Jason with a sexy subconscious rub. Jason stifled a groan as the counter-pressure had him bucking forward, his lassitude instantly evaporating. Feeling a slight prick of guilt for waking his night owl partner so early, he justified the green light to himself: since it was the weekend, they could go back to sleep... afterwards.

He slid his hand around to search for Kevin's cock. But instead of that gorgeous, stiff prick he was expecting to find, his hand hit....

Jason's eyes flew open as adrenaline jolted through him.

Another ass?

What the fuck?

“KEVIN!”

His name being hissed urgently and way too loudly in his ear brought Kevin swimming up into a semblance of awareness. He attempted to respond but only managed to make a slightly inquiring noise buried in the back of his throat.

He must've drifted right back to sleep again, because an increasingly pissed sounding, “Kevin, wake the fuck up right now,” speared through an amazingly vivid dream he couldn't quite remember, something about a truck....

“Kev, the phone. If we go skiing....”

“Mmm hmm. Go to sleep, Marty.”

“Kay.”

Marty wiggled and settled back into sleep in front of him, but behind him, Jase wasn't being nearly as cooperative, puffing and panting like the bull on that Bugs Bunny matador episode, and sending off palpable waves of upset. He really needed to relax. *Chill out, babe. Sleeping here.*

Jason's voice was taut as a bow string. “Chill out?” *Oops, must've said that out loud.* Jason's next whisper was just this side of a shout. “What is Marty doing in *our* bed?”

“Sleeping.” *Duh.* Kevin had a dreamy smile curving his lips, thoroughly enjoying finally being the melty stuff in the middle of a Marty/Jason sandwich. Seriously hot thought, that. Marty should put it on the menu, it'd be an instant best-seller. If only Jase would just settle down and let him savor it....

“Okay, that's it.”

Tidal waves of jerky movement behind him finally brought Kevin up to speed. *Oh shit, I forgot to warn him.* “Jase, babe. Shoot.” He scrambled to get the necessary information across. “I forgot to tell you....”

“Tell me what?” Jase was already yanking on discarded jeans from last night, forgoing the whispers as he continued at normal volume. “I can't wait to hear this one.”

“Shhh!” Kevin stage-whispered. “You'll wake him up.”

Jason froze with his pants just below his crotch, and his jaw literally dropped. It would've been a comical look on him if Kevin didn't know how upset Jase was right now. *Mental snapshot for later.* He could see how damning it looked to have Marty in their bed, but it was a truly blameless situation.

“You did *not* just tell me to ‘shhh’ so I don't wake up your....” Jase waved his hand angrily before giving up and yanking his jeans the rest of the way up.

“Our friend,” Kevin finished for him. He gently eased away from Marty and pulled the covers up over their visitor's cool, exposed

shoulder, glad to see he was still sleeping deeply. Scooting to the edge of the bed, he gazed toward Jase innocently. "I forgot to tell you he might join us tonight."

"He might join...." Jase trailed off incredulously. Kevin watched warily as Jason's face and neck grew steadily more flushed with each passing second. With vicious movements, Jason added a T-shirt to the visual barrier between his freaking ripped bod and Kevin's admiring gaze.

Darn.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yeah, no big deal. Invite your old boyfriend into *our bed*, I can see how that might've slipped your mind." His voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"He's not my old boyfriend." Technically. "Will you settle down and let me explain?"

"I'd love to hear the explanation for this. But I'm not in the mood for fairy tales before coffee. So I think I'll just skip straight to the caffeine, thanks." Jase headed for the door and Kevin, needing to stop this before it went any further, called out, "He sleepwalks."

Jason stopped dead just at the bedroom door's threshold and spun around, an arched brow and skeptical, annoyed expression his only response.

"Well, when he's stressed, which he was last night, so I figured he'd probably be over. I was going to tell you, but we... got busy, then, well," Kevin concluded uncertainly, "I fell asleep."

"The rain." This mumbled non-sequitor from Marty punctuated the conversation nicely, and Kevin couldn't stifle a nervous giggle. Marty continued urgently, "'S'not funny. Got a ride?"

"Shhh, it's all taken care of. Go to sleep," Kevin reassured Marty before looking triumphantly at Jase, flipping his hand as if to say, "See what I mean?"

Jason's confusion made him look less pissed off, thank God, but he continued to hover in the doorway as if still poised for flight. Kevin walked to him, his slightly flagging morning erection drawing Jason's notice. *Good, babe. Look your fill. C'mon, think happy thoughts.*

“He’s done this before. I used to find him on the landing some mornings, freezing his ass off, buck naked. So I started leaving a key under the mat and now he just lets himself in. It’s actually pretty amazing.”

“In his sleep?” Jase still sounded dubious, but a bit thoughtful.

“Yeah, weird I know.” Kevin took a chance and smoothed his hand down Jason’s arm. “It’s kinda sweet. He just crawls into bed and is dead to the world. I don’t know why, but,” he paused, searching for the right words, wishing he knew what was going through Jason’s mind. “It seems to help him rest easy to be with me.”

“You guys don’t....” Jase abruptly cut off as if reconsidering his question, but Kevin knew what he meant and flushed. He decided on the stark truth.

“Not anymore.”

A baleful glare replaced a brief flash of heat in Jason’s eyes as the tacit admission lingered between them. Scowl aside, at least he wasn’t walking out the door. Instead, Jase settled his shoulder against the doorjamb and cocked his head inquiringly, his restrained body language subtly inviting more information. Kevin decided to put all his cards on the table.

“And not while he’s still like this.” Kevin waved one hand toward their surprise guest. “That would just be weird. But before you and I were together, after he’d wake up in the morning... a little bit... you know.” Irritation with his own wishy-washiness welled as he shrugged and tried to quit stammering his explanation. After all, he hadn’t done anything wrong. “But not since you and I’ve been dating, no way.” Kevin shook his head for emphasis and tried his best sincere look, pleading for Jase to recognize his honesty. “It’s only happened twice since you and I got together, and both times I got out of bed before he woke up.”

Jase still didn’t respond, but his stance continued to ease down. Kevin chanced another seductive step closer to Jason, and was gratified when his quarry didn’t shy away from the contact. “He gets really embarrassed when this happens. But he really doesn’t know what he’s doing. I’m just glad that, for whatever reason, he comes here, where he’s safe.”

Jase heaved a huge long sigh, the remaining tension draining out of him, and reached out to run his hands down Kevin's arms. *Got him to touch me. Bingo.* "You're getting chilled," Jase observed gruffly. Kevin stepped confidently into that encompassing embrace, moving even closer so they were fully touching down their lengths. He leaned in, holding Jase back against the doorframe, Jason's clothed state a sexy counterpoint to his own nudity. He shivered a little, not from the cold, but from the erotic contrast. His cock was by now uncomfortably hard and pressed up against Jason's rough, jeans-clad thigh.

"Warm up in the shower with me?" Kevin suggested invitingly, already picturing all the fun they could get up to in a steamy communal shower.

Jase looked at him steadily, regretfully. Kevin could almost see the wheels turning. "I'm already dressed and way past due for some coffee. And I'm going for a run this morning; doesn't make sense to clean up." Jason cupped Kevin's jaw gently in his large hand. "It's too early for you to be up," he whispered, leaning in for a soft kiss. "You should go back to bed."

Heart thumping, Kevin glanced over at Marty, who had flipped onto his stomach. Did Jase mean Kevin should go join Marty, or simply go back to sleep? The brief hint of excitement and interest he'd sensed from Jason earlier when he mentioned being together with Marty popped into his head. Was this a subtle permission in that direction? Or maybe Jason was testing him, and going back to bed, even innocently, would be the wrong move?

Head spinning, he searched Jason's inscrutable expression for some hint of his meaning. In the absence of obvious clues, Kevin decided to take the logical route. As much as the hedonistic image of the three of them twined together had woven itself into Kevin's fantasies of late, he wasn't about to climb into bed with Marty without Jase... much less right in front of him. Now if Jason'd offered to join him....

Stop it. Jason's way too conservative for that. Ain't never gonna happen.

"That's okay, hon. I'm pretty much awake now." Kevin could tell the conversation on this was far from over, but he sensed the best thing to do right now was to give Jase some space to process everything. "I'm going to hit the shower. Join me if you change your mind."

II

THE rain in his dream slowly resolved itself into the sound of a shower running as Marty woke up. Momentarily disoriented, he frowned at the blue pillowcase he was burrowed into.

Blue? Oh fuck.....

A look around the room confirmed Marty's worst fears: he had done it again. And it so wasn't kosher to break and enter anymore, not with Jason living here now. Studly, dark, and dreamy Jason; a perfect foil for beautiful, blond Kevin....

Shit, shit, double shit.

Marty gave a soundless groan as his trapped cock, already half-hard with morning wood, did what it always did at the thought of Jase and Kevin, especially in combination. Last night's party had been an exercise in extreme frustration, and it was only because he apparently enjoyed torturing himself that he'd stayed ridiculously late, lingering well beyond decency. He'd shamelessly used the breakup with Georg—which had actually come as a relief, other than the fact he was now alone—*again*—as a plausible excuse to have Kevin and Jason's caring attention focused on him. It *had* been a sudden and humiliating way to become single again, but truth be told, Marty wasn't going to waste any tears on Georg's departure.

No, the real reason he'd been so despondent last night was the overwhelming and crystal clear confirmation that, yes, in fact, Jason and Kevin *did* make a perfect couple.

And he was in love with both of them.

How fucked up was that?

Pretty damned fucked up there, Marty.

Bad enough to perv on your best friend in your secret heart of hearts. Then he had to go and provide Kevin's intro to the uber hunky customer he'd crushed on from afar for the past year. Now Jason was

Kev's serious boyfriend-slash-roommate, and they both tripped every trigger Marty had. On so many levels. Simultaneously. So wrong.

Kevin had the friendliest, most easygoing and sexy style, it would be impossible *not* to be in love with him. And they had connected right away, as Kevin effortlessly drew quiet Marty into his orbit. Within minutes of their first meeting, Kevin had pressed Marty into helping him move in next door, rewarding him with non-stop comforting chatter throughout the process, perfectly designed to help Marty relax. At the end of the day, Kevin had refused to take no for an answer, inviting Marty to stay for take-out then extracting a promise to show him around the neighborhood the next day, before sending him home with a friendly kiss on the lips and a pat on his ass.

Marty was charmed.

And nervous.

It was clear to him that Kevin was way out of his league. Cute and funny, personable, and he probably had never had an uncomfortable experience in his life. The polar opposite of Marty, and Marty well knew it. So he resigned himself to worshipping from afar.

Until the morning he'd awakened huddled on Kevin's doorstep, naked and half-frozen, a puzzled and concerned Kevin staring down at him.

Kevin had unhesitatingly pulled him to his feet and into his apartment. Marty had been clucked and fussed over and tucked right into Kevin's blessedly warm bed, spooned from behind and soothed into the most peaceful sleep imaginable.

That was the first time, but not the last, that Kevin had rescued him from his doorstep. He was endlessly fascinated by Marty's sleepwalking, the seeming randomness of the occurrences—which Kevin began tracking, gleeful when he discovered that daytime stress for Marty usually translated into nighttime wandering. Sometimes Marty would awaken right away when Kevin spoke to him, and other times would apparently carry on nonsensical conversations he didn't remember. Kevin didn't have a pattern for that one figured out yet, but Marty was sure he would eventually. He was relentless once he put his mind to something.

Kevin had finally come up with the idea to leave a key under the

mat, almost giddy about testing whether Marty would remember it was there the next time. And sure enough, a few mornings later, he had awakened in Kevin's bed, sprawled all over the smaller man, opening his confused eyes to Kevin's brilliant grin. A celebratory kiss had escalated into a hot, mutual rubbing off session that only deepened Marty's affection for his neighbor, and made the embarrassment of waking up after one of his rambles well worth it.

Of course, all that kind of sexy play had come to a halt after Kevin met Jason. Marty had pointed out the accounting office right by his shop when Kevin moaned about needing tax help. The huge, intense looking man came in for lunch at least a couple times a week, and Marty had been trying to talk himself into asking the guy out, or at least for his name, for almost a year. Kevin trotted right in one day with his shoebox full of papers, and came out with a big smile and Jason's phone number. And the rest was history.

Kevin wasted no time in finally introducing the two. To this day, Marty was still kicking himself for not having the nerve to discover, before his own best friend took him off the market, that not only was Jason his perfect physical type, he was also a super nice guy.

Marty had been terrified that he'd do the sleepwalking thing sometime when Jason was there and had tried to make Kevin take back the key, to no avail. Fortunately, the few times he had found his way in to Kevin's condo after Jason was in the picture, Kevin either wasn't there—i.e., at Jason's—or would be up and about when he woke up. Now that Jason had moved in, Marty guessed glumly, it had only been a matter of time before he migrated to Kevin's bed while Jase was occupying it. He really needed to make Kevin take back the key this time, though.

The shower shut off and the ensuing silence was almost deafening. Marty bolted upright as he realized with a sense of panic he'd been lying there, spacing off—naked in a committed couple's bed—when he should have been making his escape. Obviously they were up, so they knew he'd been there. But he still didn't want to actually *face* them.

Especially Jason.

Still-waters-run-deep, strong and sexy, take-on-the-world Jason. He had a presence and strength which made him seem larger than life, and more than capable of handling anything thrown at him. Not just his

impressive physical stature, but his character as well. With Jase on your side, you'd be safe from anything. Marty wanted a man just like him.

Face it, Marty. You want him. But he has Kevin, the other catch of the century.

He threw back the covers and jumped up, intending to snag a pair of sweats that Kevin let him keep here for just these occasions. But as if his dread of seeing Jase had conjured him up, suddenly there he was, filling the bedroom doorway with his tall, muscular frame. Marty's heart leapt into his throat as he abruptly dropped his hands to cover his morning erection. He could feel himself going beyond pink to well into the fuchsia range.

Opening his mouth to speak, he couldn't force a single word past the mortified constriction in his chest. In a whirl of motion born of desperation, he gave up on modesty and grabbed his sweats from the bottom drawer of the nightstand. Yanking them on, he pushed past a strained-looking Jase, practically running from the apartment.

Once safe in his own place, he tried to catch his breath, mentally kicking himself for his pathetic exit. If he only had the cool to casually say good morning and laugh it off, rather than running like a fool. Ugh.

With nothing better to do this early, Marty crawled back into his own unmade bed, sweats and all. Shaking his head against his pillow, he recalled the not-happy look on Jason's face as he fled the room, and hoped fervently Kevin didn't catch any grief over this. He'd have to talk to Kev later, when Jase wasn't around, to make sure everything was copacetic.

Marty wasn't too worried about Kevin's reaction. It had taken a long time, but Kevin had finally convinced Marty of his sincerity in more than tolerating the situation—actually embracing it as a weird kind of connection between the two of them. Kevin had laughingly proclaimed—to Marty's secret joy—that their souls were entwined, which is why Marty would subconsciously seek Kevin out when troubled.

Souls entwined. Marty loved that.

He could only wish.

Jason, though, was an unknown quantity. Marty just hoped that

Jase would get over his mad, that this wouldn't affect the threesome's friendship. It was hard enough to keep his impossible two-pronged love a secret. It would just kill him to give up both their company altogether.

JASON stood stock-still as Marty brushed past him, the hastily donned sweats hanging low, barely riding on his trim hips. He ruthlessly quashed the impulse to reach out and comfort Marty as he rushed by, uncertain where the physical contact might lead to. His heart hammered as the order of his world crashed around him. Lust at the sight of an aroused male in person? Completely understandable. The feelings of fierce protectiveness and yearning—for someone other than the man he was certain was his destined partner? Alien.

You were right. He is auburn down there too, his mind gleefully whispered. And that hot birthmark right where....

Stop it.

Shock roiled through Jason at the whole bizarre situation and his very uncharacteristic response to his friend.

It was the other hidden emotion, though, that really twisted him into knots. Guilt. Guilt for wanting Marty. And guilt for being jealous of the new knowledge that Kevin had been with—had touched—Marty. Dark, confusing feelings were engendered by Kevin's forthright confession.

But just who are you jealous about? Hmm?

Where had this come from? Admittedly, he had always admired Marty's lean, sexy form. Who wouldn't? It wasn't over-the-top buff or anything, but more the type of build that a designer suit would hang perfectly on. Marty would make a perfect runway model based on what Jason had seen in magazines. Jason'd always had a thing for guys dressed to the nines, and subtle attracted him more than flamboyant. He absently dropped his jeans, wincing preemptively as he eased the zipper down over his impatient hard flesh.

Kevin strolled into the room, toweling his hair with one towel, another wrapped around his waist. His gaze immediately zeroed in on Jason's exposed erection, and Jase could feel himself hardening even

further in response to his appreciative audience. After a quick glance at the empty bed, Kevin smirked and deliberately shimmied the towel loose from his hips, strutting toward Jason while slowly stroking his own cock to readiness.

You don't always go for subtle, Jase.

Kevin reached him, with Jason finally snapping out of his reverie and taking a couple steps to cut the distance. They immediately brought their pelvises together, rubbing while cupping each other's ass, the height difference bringing Kevin's velvety cock nudging in between Jason's thighs, while Jason's hardened shaft slid up along Kevin's firm abdomen. Jason widened his stance just enough to let Kevin's erection into the space between his balls and thighs, before trapping it in place with a squeeze of muscles. A moan rose from Kevin's throat, that lovely, surprisingly deep sound Jason always thrilled to know he caused. Jason smiled against Kevin's temple and clenched his inner thighs once more. Kevin helplessly thrust while digging his fingers painfully into Jason's ass cheeks, prompting an answering groan from Jason.

"Claws, kitten," he cautioned, rocking his hips back and forth, pulling on the captured prick as he swayed. He could feel moisture not his own, and, deciding enough was enough, abruptly released Kevin. His wordless protest was cut off by Jason quick-walking Kevin backward until they reached the bed, Kevin falling backward on the mattress and Jason landing on top of him, satisfyingly trapping Kev beneath him.

Jason could still feel the warmth from Marty's place in the covers. Running his hand over the bottom sheet, he imagined he could still smell Marty's unique scent, different from his own and Kevin's.

With an inward blink at the direction of his thoughts, he turned his attention back to the man cradling him. Kevin's face wore a curious look, he noted uneasily. "Mmm, still warm," Kevin purred, his eyebrow raised as he pinned Jason with his gaze.

Fuck.

Trying evasive maneuvers, Jason took Kevin's mouth in a hard, plundering kiss, which Kevin instantly opened to welcome. Lips sleeking and tasting, tongues inviting and retreating, they savored each other's taste. Jason put all thoughts of this morning's strangeness behind him as he felt Kevin responding and writhing seductively beneath him.

“Didn’t you get enough last night?” he mocked playfully, and Kevin grinned in response.

“What? Did we do something last night?”

Little shit. “Let me refresh your memory.” Jason rolled off Kevin, evading with difficulty his grabby attempts to pull him back down. “Do you want me to get the lube or not?”

“Oh, by all means.” Kevin relented and laid back, hands behind his head, the very picture of innocent repose—unless one was looking at his bottom half, which was sprawled obscenely open.

Groaning at the sight of Kevin’s little pink hole, awaiting his touch below that taut, freshly waxed sac, Jason wasted no time in suiting up and crawling into the inviting space between Kevin’s lean legs. His traitorous mind wandered back to his glimpse earlier of Marty’s naturally haired torso. For a moment, he couldn’t help comparing Marty’s dark red trail of hair arrowing down into the nest surrounding his uncut, erect prick, with Kevin’s bare smoothness.

Forcibly wrenching his mind away from that path, he refocused on Kevin, his own cock trailing against the sheet, hard and wanting, as he slowly worked a good dollop of lube into Kevin. Rubbing his not-yet-shaven cheek against the silky inside of Kevin’s thigh, he enjoyed the close-up view of his tight hole, and couldn’t resist a light blow of air against the glistening entrance.

That brought an urgent, “Jase!” from Kevin as he clenched around Jason’s fingers, pulling them in and releasing. Jason ignored his own increasingly insistent erection, intent upon the act of penetrating his partner and the pleasure he knew it brought to the other man. Using his other hand to pet the smooth skin all around the begging cock, trailing over that soft ball sac, now drawn up tight as he had ever seen it, he teased and tormented Kevin with his fingers inside, crooking over his prostate. Kevin babbled an incessant stream of obscenities, culminating in, “Goddamn it, suck it, you sadistic son of a—”

He finally took Kevin’s shaft between his lips, sliding halfway down and using his tongue to rub and extract the clear drops he’d been watching well from the swollen prick. The briny, smoky taste was heady and he wanted—needed—more. Applying more suction, relentless in his finger-fucking of Kevin’s gripping anus, he was finally rewarded with a

strong jerk and stiffening of Kevin's expressive body, followed by a flood of semen hitting the back of his throat. Jason had to really focus on swallowing to keep up with the deluge—he was always amazed by the amount of ejaculate Kevin produced.

After a final broad swipe of his tongue, Jason crawled up over Kevin and kissed him thoroughly, sharing the remnants of his flavor with Kevin's eager mouth as his cock unerringly sought Kevin's well-prepared hole. With barely a nudge the head was inside, alternately almost strangled then sucked inward by Kevin's still-flexing muscles.

"Yeah, babe, fuck that's good." Kevin's voice was low and seductive. He arched bonelessly upwards, taking Jason farther into his silken passage. "Mmm, more."

"You got it." Jason seated himself to the limit, and held there with a circular grind. Kevin ran his tongue over his bottom lip. Jason watched its slow passage, caught by those intense blue eyes, and he began to pound rhythmically into Kevin's welcoming depths, not stopping or varying his motion until he could feel the impending explosion gathering in his balls, his cock.

"Kev, oh, babe," was pulled from his throat, and he flew shockingly swiftly into his release, holding high and taut against Kevin as he spilled his heat over and over into that snug warmth. Jason barely kept from collapsing full weight onto his bedmate, instead bracing himself but allowing his head to drop sideways against Kevin's forehead. He felt those soft lips kiss his neck once, twice, and smiled before turning his head slightly to nuzzle Kev's ear.

Never before had attention to his ears failed to produce a shiver, and this time was no different. "Quit tickling," Kevin complained without heat, sounding drowsy. "I'm comfy."

Jason gave one last contrary nip before gently easing from Kevin and sitting up to take care of the condom. A few minutes in the bathroom later, he was back with a warm washcloth, enjoying the ritual they'd developed of Jason taking care of cleansing Kevin, whose orgasms seemed to always leave him in an enervated, sleepy state. The only time he *ever* lacked energy, Jason thought ruefully.

He gave Kevin a nudge onto his side, then spooned behind him as they always did for a well-deserved, post-coital nap. But instead of

drifting off as Jason expected, Kevin instead rocked Jason's contentment.

"So, about Marty. Did you get a good look? Or was all this just for me?"

III

JASON went rigid behind him, and Kevin winced. Maybe that was a little too direct. Damn mouth. Very short path between his brain and tongue.

"It's okay, babe. I know he's hot, and just your type."

"Wait a minute, what do you mean, 'my type'? *You're* my type, dumbass. Period. End of story." Jason sounded really affronted, and Kevin stifled an inappropriate giggle.

"I know you love and want me, sweetie. No worries there. I'm just saying that Marty has something I don't, something you really get off on."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Now he sounded nervous and pissed, and sure enough, the next moment he pulled away from their cuddle altogether. "Jesus. What the fuck are we doing talking about another guy like this anyway?" He ran his hand roughly through his hair, looking frazzled.

"Lie down," Kevin ordered, and after a brief hesitation, Jason warily complied. Kevin pulled him into a one-armed embrace and tried to get all he'd been thinking about in the shower out in the open.

"You and I, we click. Like puzzle pieces, we really fit." He waited a moment, and was rewarded with a nod. "I have no doubts that we were made to be together." Jason's expression softened, and he leaned in for a brief but intense kiss.

"Now. I caught a vibe earlier when Marty was still here, and I know you pretty well. The thought of Marty and me together made you hot." Kevin watched as Jason's lips pressed together, but he forged on.

“And I’m guessing you saw him before he left, before I got out of the shower, and he turned you on then.” Shifting defensively, Jason opened his mouth to speak, but Kevin cut him off.

“Just let me finish, okay? I did a lot of thinking in the shower and have everything making perfect sense right now. Now, I’ll bet one of the first things you feel with Marty is how you want to hug the crap out of him and protect him from the world. Right?”

Looking startled by the turn of the conversation, Jason appeared to think for a moment, then gave a cautious nod. Kevin grinned.

“See? Do I know you or what?” He wiggled around so that he was on his side facing Jason. “He brings out the knight in shining armor in you.”

“Well, so do you,” Jason retorted, and Kevin choked on laughter.

“Oh, please! I might act like a princess, but I’m not sitting around waiting to be rescued. Hell no. You know me better than that. What did you call me during our first big fight? ‘Militantly independent’?” Kevin raised a brow while pinning Jason with a ‘c’mon, get real’ look.

To his credit, Jason grimaced. “Crap. Okay, yeah, you don’t really *need* me.”

“Exactly. And there’s a protective part of you, a *big* part, that needs an outlet. An outlet you don’t get with me.”

Frowning, Jason stared intently at him. “What are you trying to say? Bottom line.”

Bottom line? Not sure he’s ready for it, but here goes.

“I think you need Marty in a way you don’t need me. And”—he paused for courage—“I don’t mind if you want to be with him.”

“Be with him?” His partner’s eyes widened before narrowing as Jason simmered. “You mean, be with him? Like”—he gestured to the bed and the two of them lying there—“like, *with*? That’s not how it works. A relationship is between two people, not three. Or, wait a minute.” He sat up abruptly. “Are you breaking up with me?”

“Idiot.” Kevin sat up as well and gave into the urge to smack Jason, sticking to his muscular arm instead of the tempting target of his head. “No, I just said we belong together. What I’m saying is, it’s fine with

me—more than fine,” he emphasized with a squeeze of Jason’s abused arm, “if you want to bring him into ‘us’ with—uh—us.” He smiled brightly and waited.

Jason looked poleaxed, and stared at Kevin as if he’d never seen him before. A tendril of worry crept into Kevin’s heart, but he savagely stomped on it. Confidence would win the day, not doubt. Words to live by.

Some knowledge crept over Jason’s face and he opened his mouth then closed it again. “You want Marty too,” Jason finally managed, then cleared his throat. “Wow.” He went silent for a moment. “So, by your argument, what it is that *you* need from him? That you don’t get from me?”

“Can’t you guess, my alpha stud?” Kevin teased lightly, although he was deadly serious inside. “In my case, it’s not what I *need*—more like enjoy.”

Realization bloomed, and Jason flushed. “If you really want to, we can—” he trailed off, and Kevin took pity on him.

“It’s not about what I want, but more what we both want and need together. I’m perfectly happy with you exclusively topping. That’s just you. Okay? All I’m saying is you wouldn’t be the only one to gain in this scenario.”

“Geez, no pressure or anything.” Jason laid back and stared at the ceiling moodily. “What about Marty? Shouldn’t he have a say in this? I mean, he’s all broken up over that jack-off ex of his. And, well”—he sighed gustily—“you two have been together, so you know he wants you, but I haven’t seen any sign he wants me.”

“That’s because you’re blind,” Kevin muttered under his breath. Jason cast an uncomprehending look at him. He continued in a normal tone of voice, “How about we just wait and see what happens next time he sleepwalks? We stay in bed until he wakes up, and you should be able to tell if he wants you.”

The plan he’d thought of in the shower was brilliant. Now he just hoped that they would both cooperate. He’d been waiting for a while to catch Marty single and available, as well as giving himself and Jason time to cement their bond.

Jason needed a sign that Marty wanted him too?

Time for a conversation with Marty.

“WHAT?” Marty looked at him, aghast. “Why the hell would I do that?” The blush that had been slowly working its way up Marty’s neck to his face bloomed in force. “That’s deceitful and tricky and...” He struggled for more descriptives. “Devious. Mean. Dishonest. Sneaky.”

“Geez, tell me how you really feel.” Kevin was amused. “C’mon, lighten up. I know you’re crazy about him. I finally figured it out last night.”

Marty went a truly alarming shade of red, poor guy. Kevin reached up to pat his cheek tenderly. “Hon, relax before you stroke out. It’s okay. I love you dearly, and I know Jason thinks you’re hot, so who’s it going to hurt? Really? It’ll just”—Kevin flapped his hands expressively—“move things along faster.”

“I don’t think I can do it,” Marty confessed with finality. “I can’t. In fact, I want you to take your key back anyway, so I don’t intrude anymore.”

Oh, brother. Between the two of them.... “You weren’t intruding, babe. We both *want* you there. And this will just help Jason get over the whole Mr. Conservative thing more quickly. Trust me.” He moved in closer and took Marty in his arms, watching him closely. “Hmm? Trust me?”

At the undemanding, supportive touch, all the tension seemed to drain out of his friend’s tense frame, but the resolute expression didn’t change. Wisely, Kevin decided to back off.

All he could do was plant the seed.

Wouldn’t be able to reap the harvest until tomorrow.

Maybe.

Kevin crossed his fingers.

MARTY shifted nervously.

Was he really going to do this?

He could hardly believe he was standing naked in the front foyer of his condo, looking through the peephole at the landing outside. Two in the morning, and he hadn't been able to sleep, tossing restlessly as he turned over the events of the day in his head.

Bad enough to start off the day in the wrong bed again. It had been long enough that he'd actually thought maybe he was 'outgrowing' the sleepwalking. *Yeah, right.* Then to have the guy he'd been secretly nuts over for two years now actually see him naked....

His chilled cock perked up at that thought, beginning to widen and lengthen in the usual series of twitches.

"Oh, quit it," he directed downwards at himself. He looked once more through the peephole.

The topper, though, was having Kevin confront him so accurately, in such a bizarre fashion, about his feelings for Jason. Add to that Kevin's offhanded confession that he 'loved' his best friend—loved *him*. Dearly. What exactly did that mean? And did Jason know?

Crap.

And according to Kevin, Jason thought Marty was hot.

Everything he'd wanted for so long was right there for the asking.

Did he dare?

Before Marty could give himself any longer to think about it, his body moved apparently of its own volition—knowing what it wanted—his erect cock leading the way as he opened and passed through his door. The chill he'd felt a moment ago was amplified as he stood outside in the night air.

What am I doing?

He almost chickened out at that point, but the budding hope Kevin had evoked, coupled with his arousal, won out over his logic, and he bent to lift the mat.

There was the key, symbolic as it fit perfectly into Kevin and Jason's door, which opened to him easily, welcoming him in....

He slipped inside and closed the door, his heart nearly beating through his chest as he listened carefully. No sounds from the bedroom.

Was this what it was like when he was sleepwalking? This must be exactly what he did, a small part of him observed with interest as he placed the key on the kitchen eat-at counter as he passed, the motion feeling familiar. Muscle memory?

Keep going. He walked into the bedroom, fearless and fearful at once, making himself cross to the bed, stopping with a jolt as he only saw one body in the bed. Motion from the corner startled him as Kevin rose from under a blanket in the overstuffed chair there, crossing with a huge smile to take Marty in his arms for a fierce, hard hug.

"I'm so glad you came. I hoped you would," he whispered, then pulled back, staring inquisitively up into Marty's eyes. "You're awake, right?"

For a brief moment, Marty thought about pretending with Kevin, too, not having to take any responsibility for coming here tonight. Just as quickly, he discarded the notion, thinking that Kevin's confidence must be rubbing off on him. With a braveness he tried really hard to believe in, he nodded down at Kevin and gave him a tentative smile in return, beginning to comprehend what was happening.

Marty was welcome here. He was wanted, even when he came to their bed on purpose. A warmth that had nothing to do with sex, but brought his semi-erection to stiff life anyway, spread through him as he gently pressed a kiss to Kevin's full, soft lips. It was short—Marty was well aware of the sleeping presence of Jason just yards away. Until he knew for certain where he stood with Jason, it wouldn't do to get caught making out—naked—with the guy's partner.

Kevin ushered him to the bed with one warm hand on his lower back. "You first."

Marty stared at the mouthwatering sight of Jason, peacefully sleeping and unaware of his audience. "Why me in the middle? You should be in the middle," he hissed.

"Because you need to be next to him when he wakes up," Kevin

whispered back determinedly. “Hard to act on loving each other with me as a buffer. *I’m* not the one who needs convincing—you’re not fake-sleepwalking for *my* benefit. So move it! I’m freezing my ass off,” he added with a pout, and Marty had to giggle.

He was still fighting laughter when he climbed in the bed. This should probably be a serious moment, but somehow it seemed right to be happy. Oh, and Jason was warm. Like a furnace. Marty didn’t need much encouragement to scoot closer, and with Kevin hurriedly piling into the king-sized bed after him, he wouldn’t have had much of a choice anyway.

Settling on his side, facing Jason, he examined that strong, masculine face in the dim light from the bright, nearly full moon through the cracks of the blinds. Kevin curled into him from behind, and although taller than his friend, Marty felt comforted being held in his loving embrace. The warmth from both front and back was like a living thing, creeping over him and wrapping him up. Faster than he would have thought possible, Marty was being sucked down toward sleep.

I just hope Jason’s not too mad when he wakes up, was his last thought as he finally succumbed.

BLUE pillowcase.

Crap, I—uh. Oh. Oh yeah.

Marty was sandwiched in the middle of the most loving and perfect couple he knew, and he’d done it on purpose. And now, there was no way he was going to be able to escape without waking Jason up.

Even trying to gently lift the arm Marty had wrapped around Kevin’s waist, cupping his pec, he still jostled the heavy arm that anchored him to the mattress. A few movements and a grumble behind him, and then Marty was pulled even more firmly back against Jason unbelievably huge, and hard, body. He was well and truly stuck.

And speaking of being stuck....

Jason’s erection was a brand against his ass, and his own cock was reacting in kind. Oh, it wasn’t willing to go all out, not until it knew he

wasn't going to get pummeled—and not in the good way. But still, it was definitely there, kind of pressing upward against Kevin's beautiful, rounded butt. Marty couldn't help a wriggle as pleasure coursed through him, his prick thickening hopefully, reacting to all the stimuli surrounding him.

His wriggling had set off a chain reaction of stretching and pressing and arching amongst all three men as one bedmate stimulated the next, and vice versa, until Marty was literally panting, his desire sharp in his vitals.

The breathing behind him changed, shifted into something more erratic before he both felt and heard a gasp. Marty knew with no little dread that Jason was finally awake, and he waited for something, anything, to happen.

"Am I going to have to do everything?" Kevin grumbled. "You two are hopeless." He turned over and looked at Marty, the exasperation in his eyes fading toward a more gentle, almost playful expression. "Turn over."

Marty felt his eyes widen, and he shook his head.

"C'mon, ostrich. Turn over." Kevin looked implacable, and Marty grudgingly complied, at least partially, flipping onto his back. He was so disgruntled by Kevin's bullying tactics that he actually forgot for a moment he'd be looking at Jason—until their eyes met.

Kevin piped up from behind him, pulling their eyes to him. "Marty, this is Jason. Jason—Marty. Both of you, here's your freaking sign. Now, I'll be over here if anyone's interested in fucking, ever." And the bed shook as Kevin dramatically flopped onto his own back and began to stroke his lovely, long prick.

As he'd probably planned, his antics had both Marty and Jason laughing, then—Marty, anyway—unbelievably horny. And from the feel of the erection jousting against his hipbone, Jason truly was interested. In him? Or in Kev?

Marty turned his head once more. *Your sign*, Kevin had called it. Yes, not just a sign, but a wake-up call. The desire was plain on Jason face, and his gaze was firmly locked on *him*. Marty. Wow.

Two years' worth of want slammed through Marty full force,

unwilling to be held back a moment longer, and he slung his leg over Jason's hip, pressing as close as he could as Jason murmured, "Finally," and touched his lips to Marty in a gentle, questing kiss that deepened into a mutual stroking of their mouths, learning each other's feel and taste.

A wiggle behind Marty, and suddenly Kevin pressed up behind him, nuzzling his neck and ear, reaching over and touching first Marty then Jason, as if comparing the two. Shoulder here, there. A nipple, his then Jason's. The hand brushed over Jason's short, dark hair, then combed Marty's auburn waves back off his forehead.

Jason pulled slowly away from the kiss, and looked at Marty conspiratorially. "I think someone wants some attention. And maybe deserves a reward."

"Who me? No way, just enjoying my guys. Carry on." Kevin waved a hand haughtily, then said, "Oof," as Jason crawled over Marty and landed on top of him. After a quick, hard kiss, Jason knelt up and reached for the bedside drawer, pulling out a condom and tube of lube. Only an extremely strong desire to enjoy this whole scenario for as long as possible kept Marty from coming right then and there.

His brain hadn't apparently gotten the memo. *Oh God, they're going to fuck right in front of me, holy shit that's hot.*

"Oh, we're going to do more than fuck in front of you. You're going to be participating in this too."

Apparently, Marty had said that out loud.

While the one-sided conversation was going on, Jason was wasting no time in moving things along. He had two long, blunt fingers tucked up inside—*inside*—Kevin, and was alternately scissoring them apart and thrusting in and out. Kevin was arching and moaning, and with Jason's beautiful cock on display, waiting impatiently for its turn, well, it was just the hottest fucking thing Marty had ever seen.

In a rush, all the feelings he'd had over the years for both Jason and Kevin hit him, the seemingly hopeless love he felt practically blindsiding him. But rather than taking him out of the moment, it made every sight, sound, scent that much more intense and meaningful.

Taking the initiative, he gave Kevin a grateful, loving look before bending to mouth the head of Kevin's hardened, weeping shaft. Jason

had been conspicuously avoiding touching his cock, and with Jason's hum of approval at his action, he finally understood why; he'd been waiting for Marty to join them. He sucked his friend's erection fully into his mouth, tasting the sweet pre-cum on his tongue, that familiar, beloved taste he'd thought lost to him forever. It felt like a homecoming as Jason rolled on the condom and finally pushed into Kevin, and the two of them proceeded to bring Kevin close to madness, working in tandem as if they'd done this dozens of times.

His own cock was painfully erect but Marty had been so entranced by the current interaction that rubbing against the mattress felt sufficient. Until Kevin, veins prominent with the strain of being on the edge, tugged on his leg. Finally getting the message, glancing up at Jason for tacit permission—confidence to act on his own would eventually come, he supposed—he swung his leg over Kevin's shoulder, straddling his head. Marty gasped at the first feel of Kevin's expert combination of mouth, tongue and hands on his cock and balls. He knew time was short, so he bent to reapply himself to Kevin's begging cock, but before he could get there, Jason directed his face upwards to claim another torrid kiss.

“You look so fucking good here like that. So right. So glad you came.”

Just then, a wet finger slid over his hole before lightly pressing just a tip inside and stopping. Combined with the mind-blowing suction on his cock and the visual of Jason's thick shaft plundering Kevin's hole, Kevin's saliva-slicked erection bouncing with the thrusts.... Oh God, that was his spit slicking Kevin's cock.

And just like that he came, the hardest he'd ever come in his life. For a moment everything went black then white as he supernovaed, falling against Jason's broad chest as all his strength blew out the end of his dick.

Dimly, he remembered that he had been doing something. Kevin—blow job—right. Before he could act, Jason reached down and gave a series of hard, quick tugs on Kevin's curved shaft, and he came with a cry, splattering his chest and abs, and flinging a strand onto Marty's stomach, right at the top of his pubic hair.

Jason was pistoning hard now, and then stilled abruptly, coming silently but for a gasp, still lightly cupping Kevin's erection, with Kevin's hand touching his lightly. Marty swallowed against a sudden

tightness in his throat at the look of their hands in tandem.

Feeling a bit like an intruder, Marty finally remembered his position and fell to the side, blushing as he realized he'd been lingering over Kevin's face.

"Don't move on my account. I was enjoying the view."

"Kevin," Jason scolded lightly as he stood to take care of the condom.

"Well, I was." Kevin's voice had that tell-tale sleepy, sated sound Marty remembered from long ago. How well did he know this man. Well enough to know he loved him, and he was ridiculously happy to have been admitted into the inner sanctum.

He looked at Jason next, returning from the bathroom. Felt the tender care in his touch as he cleaned Marty's abdomen, then watched as he turned his attentions to Kevin, who lay without opening his eyes. It had a feeling of habit—and he had been included. For all he'd observed of his quiet, steady nature over the years, Marty knew there was more he would learn about Jason, more that would unquestioningly affirm and strengthen his love for him as well.

So much to learn, and to do together.

And now, the *three* of them had all the time in the world.

DEVON RHODES started reading and writing at a young age and never looked back. After a creatively sapping career in the business world, she gratefully took some time off to be at home. At thirty-nine and holding, Devon finally figured out the best way to channel her midlife crisis was to morph from mild-mannered stay-at-home mom to erotic romance writer. She lives in Oregon with her husband and two girls, who are (mostly) understanding of all the time she spends on her laptop, aka the black hole.

Visit her web site at <http://www.devonrhodes.com> and her blog at <http://devonrhodes.blogspot.com/>. You can contact her at devonrhodes@hotmail.com.

SKUNK, BRYAN, SPOON (AND A BADGER) *Aundrea Singer*

HIS actual name was “Rex” or “Rick” or something. Bryan was pretty sure it was Rick—all the Ricks Bryan had ever known were batshit insane—but everyone called him “Skunk” for no reason Bryan could fathom except that he answered to it.

So here Bryan was, trapped in the copilot’s seat of a Badger X02, and right now they were accelerating so fast that if the inertial dampener things failed, he and Skunk would be mashed hamburger at the back of the spaceship.

Bryan hadn’t joined up to fly spaceships. Bryan had joined up to fly *shuttles*. Nice, slow shuttles that stayed within a planet’s gravitational field and conformed to regulation safety standards. He *liked* shuttles. Shuttles were turtle-shaped and white and clean and were never piloted by homicidal maniacs with nicknames normally reserved for forest mammals.

Skunk, however, seemed to be enjoying himself. They were supposed to be engaging in a mock dogfight with the other Badger, but regrettably the other Badger was piloted by James Spoon—who’d naturally lost his first name the instant he got off the recruit shuttle—and Spoon was a pretty decent guy, really, except that he happened to loathe Skunk with the heat of a thousand fiery suns.

This was a mutual loathing, of course, which meant that currently Skunk was screaming in rage while their Badger twisted into an inverted dive that had Bryan’s stomach in his throat despite the inertial whatever.

It did mean that Spoon's next shot missed, however, which was unfortunate, since if they'd been hit their Badger would have automatically switched to autopilot and landed.

"YOU ARE DEAD, SPOON! YOU ARE DEAD, YOU GOT ME?" Skunk bellowed into the commlink. "NO ONE POKES MY BADGER, GOT IT? YOU ARE FUCKING *DEAD*, YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

"Oh God, oh God, please slow down, Skunk. Please, please slow down," Bryan chanted. He could hear Spoon laughing over the commlink and Spoon's copilot Veronica screaming in terror beside him.

"You go ahead and try, asshole," Spoon sneered, which only made Skunk howl and haul back on the throttle a little more.

"OH YEAH?" Skunk had an impressive vocal range when he was pissed. "YOU WANNA POKE ME? POKE THIS, FUCKER."

"Uh, we're going to ram them, Skunk," Bryan pointed out helpfully as Skunk steered their Badger directly toward Spoon's, their directional thrusters flaring wildly. The little ship vibrated under the strain. "I really think we're going to ram them if you don't pull up, Skunk. Maybe you should—*Oh my God! Pull up! PULL UP!*"

In desperation, Bryan heaved backward on his yoke. He had to fight both the unfelt inertia and Skunk's wrath-fueled adrenaline, but imminent death made a fantastic motivator. Bryan's Badger skimmed the top of Spoon's, missing a collision by centimeters.

"Gee," Skunk said, blinking as their Badger continued upwards on its curving trajectory. "We nearly died." Apparently the slap of reality had cooled his ire.

"Yes we did," Bryan said. He leaned back in his seat and looked up out of the canopy at the distant, whirling stars. "Maybe I can transfer to the bomb squad."

BRYAN'S legs still felt wobbly as he stumbled out of the showers in the new recruit barracks. They were aboard the Military Training Orbiter *Great Bustard*, and in retrospect the "orbiter" part might have suggested that flying anything restricted to atmosphere wasn't in Bryan's

immediate future. “Buster,” as everyone called it, was roughly the size of Belgium and not white, turtle-shaped or particularly friendly or clean. It was, however, gray and rusty and prone to random and bizarre malfunctions, which was why Bryan was currently shivering and pulling globs of generic edible protein out of his hair.

The water in the sinks still worked at least, though it was freezing, so Bryan had his head wedged under the tap with his ratty, standard-issue green towel around his waist when Veronica said, “We need to talk” and startled him into smacking his head on the faucet.

“Ow!” Bryan yanked his head out of the sink and jerked upright, sending a glacial river of water down his back. He looked at Veronica, rubbing his head. “What was that for?”

“We need to talk,” Veronica said again. She put her little hands on her little hips and glared up at him like a vicious elf.

“We do?” Bryan asked, trying to stealthily make sure his now-waterlogged towel wasn’t going to fall off. The barracks were unisex, so Bryan constantly felt like he’d just walked in on his little sister in the bathroom. It didn’t help that Veronica’s own towel was only around her waist.

“We do,” Veronica said. She crossed her elfin arms over her teeny breasts and upped her glare a notch. Bryan shuffled back. “About Skunk.”

Bryan stared at her, making very sure to keep his eyes from drifting lower than her neck. “Why?”

“Because he’s insane,” Veronica said flatly. “He’s insane and almost got me and Spoon killed today, and if you don’t do something about it I’m going to smother you in your sleep.”

Bryan kept staring. “Me? Why me?”

“Because you’re billeted with the guy,” Veronica said. She stepped forward and poked him in the chest. Bryan shuffled backward a little further. “And the way I see it, that makes him your responsibility.” She moved in for another poke. “You have until our next combat practice to calm him the hell down, or else.” She turned on her heels and stalked away.

Skunk sauntered in naked and dripping from the showers while

Bryan was gaping at Veronica's doll-sized back. Skunk smirked at Veronica's black glower then snapped her in the ass with his towel as she passed him. Veronica squealed and jumped, then spun and tried to kick Skunk in the balls. Skunk backpedaled, laughing.

"Or else, Bryan!" Veronica yelled over her shoulder at him as she stormed off.

Skunk smirked and moseyed over to Bryan. "What's up with her?"

"Nothing," Bryan said quickly. "We weren't talking, or anything. So I have no idea what might be up with her. Because she didn't tell me since we weren't talking. Before."

"Whatever," Skunk said. He started casually rubbing his hair with his towel, seemingly content to let the rest of him air-dry.

"Right," Bryan said. He swallowed, Veronica's "or else!" looming doom-like in his mind. He forced himself to turn sideways so he was facing Skunk, and then had to move back so he wasn't staring at Skunk's chin. He crossed his arms but decided that looked too belligerent, so he put his hands behind his back. Then he decided that was too military, so he ended up with them hanging with one of his arms sort of flopped on the counter. "Right," he repeated. "Um, we need to talk."

"Yeah?" Skunk asked. He finished drying his hair, leaving it sticking up like a bright orange porcupine. He arched his eyebrows at Bryan.

"Yeah," Bryan said, going for a firm nod. "You need to calm down."

Skunk's eyebrows inverted. "I'm plenty calm."

"I know! I know you are," Bryan said immediately, nodding. He put his palms up and backed away a little more, just in case Skunk showed how calm he was by attacking him. "You're absolutely, totally calm. Completely. It's just that...." He couldn't help the wince. "You were kind of... not calm today." He shrugged apologetically. "You know, when you almost killed everyone."

Skunk's eyebrows shot up again. "So you're saying I need to relax."

Bryan nodded gratefully. "Yes! Yes, exactly. You need to relax."

Especially, um, especially in spaceships. With other people in them.”

Skunk crossed his arms, staring levelly at Bryan. “Fine. How you gonna do it?”

Bryan blinked. “What?”

Skunk smiled, and there was possibly something predatory there in the curve of his lips. “Relax me.” He made a long, obvious sweep of Bryan’s body with his eyes. “What’re you offering?”

“Offering?” Bryan squeaked. He retreated another step, feeling heat flood his face as he blushed. His eyes involuntarily did the same inventory of Skunk’s body that Skunk had just done for his. Skunk was pretty much a gorgeous, red-haired Viking: tall and solidly muscled with rugged, masculine features, all of which were difficult to miss when he walked around naked so often.

Bryan’s personal topography wasn’t quite as... spectacular as Skunk’s. He was fit and thought his shoulders and arms were all right, but mostly he was kind of skinny and tended to look like a dunked cat a lot of the time. If he were being honest, he wouldn’t have figured he’d catch Skunk’s interest in a million years. “I-I’m not. Offering, I mean, why—why would you think that?”

Skunk shrugged. “You’re here, I’m here, you’re hot, I’m hot, we got nothing to do until oh-six hundred....” He dropped his towel on the floor then pushed away from the sink and stepped forward. “Seems like a good idea to me.”

It definitely seemed like a good idea to Skunk’s cock, and Bryan couldn’t help watching as it went long and thick, rising like a dangerous promise. He licked his lips. “It’s not,” he said with nothing like true conviction. He wrenched his eyes back to Skunk’s face with an effort. “It’s not. I don’t... I didn’t....” He realized his gaze was drifting steadily lower and jerked his attention back up. Skunk smirked at him. “I meant, um, reading, maybe?” He backed up again and hit the cool, rough metal of the bulkhead. “Games?”

Skunk just grinned. He took one final step forward and they were almost chest-to-chest. The head of Skunk’s cock butted Bryan’s abdomen just above the edge of the towel, trailing warm streaks of pre-come. Skunk put one large hand on the wall, then bent his neck a little so Bryan could see his eyes. “We can play games,” Skunk said, low and silky. His

breath was a whisper of warm air against Bryan's cheek, and Bryan shivered.

Skunk leaned his head down a little more, until his mouth was level with Bryan's blood-reddened ear. "You wanna play, Bryan?"

Bryan gulped. He wanted to say, "No," to exert some control over what was happening, but all he could concentrate on was the humid tickle of air against his neck as Skunk breathed; the heat of Skunk's body and the pressure of his cock. Somewhere between the last step backward and Skunk breathing in his ear, Bryan had gotten so hard the rub of the towel over his dick was almost painful.

"We shouldn't. Not—not here," he said, though his hips were already jerking in a helpless search for contact. "This is crazy. Someone...." He gasped as Skunk palmed the head of his cock through the towel. "Someone might see."

"Yeah," Skunk said, like the thought of it was turning him on. He made a slow circle around the head of Bryan's cock with his hand. "Do you want to stop?" he asked, in a rumble that rolled all the way to Bryan's already straining erection.

"No," Bryan breathed, admitting it. He lifted his arms and wrapped them around Skunk's back. "No. God. Just kiss me."

Skunk laughed and kissed him.

Skunk kissed like he piloted: wild and reckless and hauling Bryan along with him. He held Bryan's head in both his hands like Bryan might escape, and his tongue plunged into Bryan's mouth like it was taking over, laving it with heat.

Bryan felt his head clunk against the bulkhead behind him as Skunk's lips slid over his own. He could feel the light rasp of Skunk's stubble, and smell the antiseptic scent of the cleanser they all used. Skunk's chest hair was tickling him a little, but all Bryan could really think about was Skunk's demanding mouth and the heat of their cocks trapped between their bodies. And how he couldn't get nearly the friction he wanted because of the fucking towel.

Bryan tried to get rid of the damn thing, but Skunk grunted and grabbed his forearms. He lifted Bryan's arms above his head then held them tight to the bulkhead by the wrists. Skunk started grinding against

Bryan, using the same kind of frustratingly slow circles that he'd made with his hand. Bryan tried to push back, thrust harder, faster, anything, but he was pinned by Skunk's mouth and hands and body; unable to do anything but ride out the conflicting surges of pleasure and need lancing through him.

Bryan couldn't help the whimper that escaped his mouth. He turned his head, breaking their kiss. "Stop," he panted. "Stop."

Skunk pulled back and let go of Bryan's wrists, blinking dazedly. His pupils had blown wide with lust and his lips glistened. "What?" He sounded like it was an effort to think enough to form the one word.

"Please," Bryan said, not caring that he was begging. He finally managed to fumble the towel off and then his breath hitched as the cooler air hit his over-sensitized skin. He wrapped his hand around his cock, hissing at how good it felt, but he only got in one stroke before Skunk grabbed his wrist again.

"Don't," Skunk said when Bryan's eyes flew open to glare at him. He grinned again, but this time it was eager instead of mocking. "I'm gonna suck you off, then we're going back to our billet so I can fuck you through the mattress of my bunk."

Bryan swallowed thickly. "Yeah, okay," he said.

Skunk chuckled and lowered himself to his knees, never breaking eye contact. He leaned forward just enough to take a single, deliberate lick of the head of Bryan's cock.

"Jesus," Bryan breathed, and leaned his head against the bulkhead as Skunk took the entire shaft into his mouth.

And then Bryan saw Spoon, standing with his back against the bulkhead on the far side of the room, beside the door going to the showers. He was still in his uniform, but his pants were open and pushed down around his hips. Sweat gilded his dark skin and his night-colored eyes burned as he fucked the circle of his fist.

Spoon laughed when Bryan's wide eyes fastened on him, the same careless laugh Bryan had heard over the commlink during the mock dogfight, shortly before Skunk attempted murder-suicide.

"Uh," Bryan said, but it was too late. The beautiful wet heat around his dick disappeared as Skunk whirled and stood in one motion.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Skunk snarled at Spoon.

“Watching,” Spoon said, grinning. He gave himself one last pull before casually yanking up his pants, leaving the fly open with his cock proudly jutting out. “It’s a public shower.”

“Um,” Bryan said, stepping away from the wall. He was already so flushed from what he and Skunk had been doing that he couldn’t blush from embarrassment, though in truth he was still so turned on it was hard to care.

Skunk straightened and crossed his arms, his eyes throwing daggers. “Like it? ’Cause watching’s all you’re gonna get.”

Spoon’s grin turned sneering. “Yeah, that’s always been your problem, hasn’t it, Ricky? You want everything for yourself.”

Bryan looked between the two of them. “What?”

“We went to the same cadet school,” Spoon said as he and Skunk advanced on each other. He took a long, slow eyeful of Skunk’s naked body, lingering on his groin. “I have to say, you still got it, Ricky.”

“Ricky?” Bryan asked.

They both ignored him. Skunk put his smirk on again. “Yeah, but you can’t have it anymore. Bet you hate that, dontcha?”

“I just hated how you started fucking *our* girlfriend without me, asshole,” Spoon said. They were almost face-to-face now, with Bryan standing a few steps away like a triangle point.

Bryan looked at Spoon. “Fucking your—?”

“Hey, she came on to *me*, Jimmy,” Skunk shot back. He smiled nastily. “Guess she just liked me better.”

Skunk had scored a hit with that, Bryan realized. Spoon was actually upset, like he was remembering a past hurt. But Skunk hadn’t seemed to notice.

“I never cared about that!” Spoon said angrily. “But the three of us were *together*! And you went and fucked her without even *telling* me!”

“Together?” Bryan parroted numbly. He looked back and forth at each of them, pointing vaguely. “So you two were....”

“Why, so you could stop us?” Skunk moved that much closer to

Spoon, all but growling. “It’s not my problem if you couldn’t satisfy—”

“Whoa! Whoa! Hey!” Bryan shouted, sliding between the two men. He put a hand on each of their chests to try and push them back, but it was like trying to move two buildings. He could feel the heavy thumping of their hearts under his palms. “We can work this out, okay?” He looked at each of their faces as he talked. “Whatever happened with this woman, it’s over. Gone. History. Rear thruster flash. It’s time to move on. Like, moving on to not killing each other. Or me,” he added when both men turned their narrow-eyed gazes on him. “Not killing me would be really, really good.”

“He started it!” Spoon exclaimed.

“What the fuck is that, ‘I started it’?” Skunk demanded. “Just because I didn’t ask your fucking *permission* when she threw herself on my dick?”

Spoon bared his teeth. “It’s a simple issue of *respect*, Richard!”

“No, it’s an issue of you being such a fucking *tightass* that—”

“WHOA!” Bryan hollered. “Okay, okay, okay,” he said quickly when Skunk and Spoon both stared menacingly at him again. Bryan licked his lips, thinking desperately. “What if you, uh, shared me now?”

Spoon blinked, but Skunk’s expression blackened. “There’s no way I’m gonna let him get his hands on you.”

Bryan took a deep breath and stepped away from both men. He crossed his arms, trying to look like he knew what the hell he was doing. “You guys share me and work this out. Or neither of you gets me at all.”

“Hey!” Skunk exclaimed.

Spoon smirked. “It’s his call,” he said, gesturing at Bryan. His eyes swept Skunk’s body again. “You’re still looking good, I really do have to say, but if you’re not up for it...”

Skunk glowered at him. “Oh, I’m up for it. Not sure if you are, though.”

Spoon just laughed. “Always.” He took a long, speculative look at Bryan. “You sure about this?”

Bryan nodded dazedly. His mouth was suddenly too dry to speak.

His cock had lost interest in the proceedings when it looked like he might be running for his life, but now he could feel it lengthening again, hard and wanting.

Spoon tucked himself in and zipped up, then jerked his head at the exit out to the main corridor. "Come on." He started walking. A corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile as he looked over his shoulder at Bryan, who was following with some enthusiasm. "You might want to get your towel first."

THE door to Skunk and Bryan's shared billet glided shut and clicked as it locked. Almost instantly Spoon had his long-fingered hand on the back of Bryan's neck, dragging him into a kiss. Spoon was as thorough and controlled as Skunk had been wild, slow and sensual where Skunk had been demanding. Bryan sighed and sank into it, letting Spoon nip his bottom lip then trace his tongue over Bryan's lips as if tasting them.

Bryan had almost forgotten about Skunk and why he was there in the first place, and then he felt Skunk's broad palms sliding around his waist from behind, loosening the towel and letting it drop to the floor. Skunk started sucking and nibbling on Bryan's earlobe. He skimmed his hands up Bryan's body then began teasing his nipples, which made Bryan arch and gasp.

As if he and Skunk were in competition, Spoon turned his attention from Bryan's lips to his neck, mouthing the heated skin just under his ear before following the sharp line of the tendon with the tip of his tongue.

Bryan groaned. He'd been running his hands up and down Spoon's back, pushing under his T-shirt, but now he grabbed Spoon's ass and yanked them together. Bryan could feel Skunk behind him, his cock sliding against Bryan's own ass every time Skunk shifted, the straight, hard planes of his body flush against Bryan's spine. Spoon's hands were... somewhere. Maybe on Skunk; Bryan had no idea and couldn't care. Spoon hadn't showered yet, and he smelled like ozone and metal and the heady musk of his own sweat. He was slimmer than Skunk, but just as well muscled, and Bryan felt a little like he was being held between two walls.

The onslaught of sensation was close to overwhelming. Bryan realized he was thrusting unconsciously against the rough cloth over Spoon's crotch and making embarrassing little keening noises.

He didn't hear anyone speaking, but Spoon and Skunk must have communicated something to each other because all of a sudden they both let him go. Bryan's eyes flew open at the loss of contact. He whined and grabbed one of Skunk's wrists and one of Spoon's hands, trying to keep them both from moving away from him.

Spoon laughed, flowing rich and warm over Bryan's skin. "I think he likes it, Ricky."

Skunk chuckled. "Don't worry, we're not done yet," he said to Bryan. He tugged Bryan to the nearest bed, which was Bryan's own, then nodded at it with his chin. "Lie down on your stomach."

Bryan nodded mutely and crawled onto his bed, hissing as his sensitive cock was pressed between his body and the mattress. He pushed his pillow onto the floor and cradled his head in his arms. His entire body thrummed with need.

A warm hand caressed his back, and Bryan cracked his eyes open to see Spoon crouched next to the narrow bed, smiling at him and petting his sweat-damp skin. Spoon had finally shucked his clothes, and Bryan wished Spoon would stand up so he could see all of him. Spoon was even better looking than Skunk, with sharp cheekbones and lush, sensual lips. His body was sleek and lean, so dark his skin was almost true black. Bryan levered himself up on his arms and leaned toward him, fumbling his way into another kiss. He could hear Spoon's murmur of approval when Bryan sucked his tongue into his mouth.

He'd almost forgotten about Skunk again when Skunk slapped Bryan's ass, making Bryan startle and yelp, more in surprise than actual pain. "Hey!"

"Hands and knees," Skunk ordered, smiling unrepentantly.

"Why do you get first shot at his ass?" Spoon asked, scowling.

"I called it," Skunk said.

"I'm calling it now," Spoon snarled. He stood up, finally giving Bryan the view he wanted. "You owe me."

“I don’t owe you shit!” Skunk retorted.

“If you fight, I’m leaving,” Bryan said, hoping they couldn’t hear the depth of reluctance in his voice. He looked up at Spoon. “What if I suck you instead?”

Spoon’s eyes dropped instantly to Bryan’s mouth, and he actually swallowed. “Yeah, that works,” he said.

“Great,” Bryan said, sighing in relief. The sigh turned into a small gasp when he felt Skunk’s fingers sink into the cleft of his ass, cool and slippery with lubrication, then push inside him. “Oh. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Like that. Do it,” he said as he felt Skunk’s fingers slide and twist.

Skunk suddenly hit his prostate, making Bryan cry out at the wave of pleasure that rocked through him. He dropped his head, eyes closing as he rode it out. “God, yeah,” he panted. “Like that. More.”

“You ready?” Skunk asked.

Bryan nodded almost frantically. “Fuck yeah.”

He felt Skunk’s fingers slowly pull out, leaving him empty and wanting. “Just a sec....” he heard Skunk say, then the unmistakable squelching noise of the combined lubricant/antibacterial/antiviral liquid they’d all been given after their first medical exam.

The bed dipped and creaked at Bryan’s head as Spoon climbed onto it, then Bryan felt Spoon cupping his face in his hands.

“You ready for me?” Spoon asked softly. He stroked each side of Bryan’s face with his thumbs.

Bryan opened his mouth.

He could hear Spoon inhale as he slid his cock between Bryan’s lips. At almost the same moment Skunk used his thumbs to part Bryan’s ass cheeks, and then Bryan felt the thick head of Skunk’s cock nudging against his hole. He made a noise he hoped was encouraging and pushed back, dragging his lips along Spoon’s cock at the same time. Skunk breached him entirely, and his moan sounded almost the same as Spoon’s.

Deliciously impaled from both ends, Bryan’s breath juddered through his nose as he let the two men push and pull him into a steady back-and-forth rhythm. Skunk gripped his hips tightly in his hands,

bucking as he pulled Bryan against him, while Spoon stroked his cheeks almost tenderly, staying perfectly still while Bryan's mouth moved up and down his shaft.

Skunk grunted and changed his angle, and his next thrust rubbed right over Bryan's prostate, then again and again while Bryan shuddered and made muffled sounds around the cock in his mouth. He was trembling head to foot with the need to come, but he couldn't touch himself because he knew he'd fall over if he tried to change position. He was so hard his cock was bouncing against his stomach every time he moved.

"Fuck. Fuck. I'm almost, I'm gonna come," Spoon stammered, and Bryan started sucking in earnest, swirling his tongue. Spoon came with a shout, thrusting involuntarily as he emptied himself into Bryan's mouth. Bryan managed to swallow some of it, but at least half leaked between his lips and dribbled down his chin.

As soon as Spoon let go of Bryan, Skunk sat back on his heels, pulling Bryan with him so that Bryan ended up in Skunk's lap with Skunk's big hands working his hips up and down. Skunk bit Bryan's shoulder, making him shiver, then Skunk's pace sped up until it was nearly frenzied as he came. Bryan let his head loll forward as Skunk started mouthing and lapping sloppily at his neck and shoulders, still hard and pumping Bryan's ass through the hot wetness of Skunk's own semen. His hands free, Bryan gratefully reached for his cock, but Spoon got there first. Spoon circled it in both hands and started stroking, making Bryan buck and cry out. One of Spoon's thumbs rubbed over the slit, and Bryan came so hard he saw stars.

"SO, this means you're not going to try to kill each other with the Badgers anymore, right?" Bryan said. He squirmed a bit, then made a disgruntled noise and squirmed some more, trying to get comfortable. "I'm right on the wet spot."

"Suck it up," Skunk said sleepily. He threw his arm over Bryan as if to keep him there, even though Bryan had no intention of getting up anytime soon. Bryan noticed that Skunk's hand landed on Spoon's hip, but Bryan purposely didn't say anything.

“Hey, *I* wasn’t trying to ram anybody,” Spoon said. He rolled further onto his side, probably to keep from falling off the edge of the bed. And if his hand just happened to end up on Skunk’s arm with Bryan between them, Bryan prudently wasn’t going to mention that, either. “Skunk’s the one with no impulse control.”

“You fucking goaded me, Jimmy!” Skunk said, and now there was heat in his voice.

“You two are going to get along or I’m never sleeping with either of you again,” Bryan said firmly. He sighed in relief when Spoon and Skunk went quiet.

“We, ah, we doing this again?” Skunk asked. He sounded strangely tentative.

“As long as you’re not going to be an asshole and start fucking him without telling me,” Spoon said.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do!” Skunk growled. He moved as if he wanted to sit up, but Bryan grabbed Skunk’s meaty thigh to stop him.

“Never sleeping with either of you. Again,” Bryan said.

He could practically hear them grinding their teeth in the silence.

“He came on to *me* first,” Skunk said, sounding just a bit petulant.

“Yeah, well, he didn’t exactly say ‘no’ to *me*, did he?” Spoon snapped.

“I’ll say ‘no’ to both of you,” Bryan said pointedly. “Shut up so I can go to sleep.”

Another uneasy quiet descended.

Bryan had just drifted into a doze when Skunk started talking again. “She, uh, wasn’t that great a lay anyway,” he said quietly, obviously only to Spoon. Bryan hadn’t known Skunk could sound so hesitant. “It was better with you there.”

“Of course it was,” Spoon snorted. “And if you hadn’t—”

“He just apologized, Spoon,” Bryan cut in. “Accept it and shut the fuck up.”

Spoon cleared his throat. “Sure. Sorry.” He lifted up a little so he

could look at Skunk. “Thanks.”

“S’okay,” Skunk said. He reached over and ran a fingertip along Spoon’s bottom lip, then grinned. ““Bet those still taste good.”

Spoon chuckled. “Find out.”

Spoon and Skunk leaned over Bryan and started kissing.

Bryan huffed in annoyance, wondering if he should just sleep on Skunk’s bed. But as soon as he moved, Skunk and Spoon both grabbed him, like they’d planned it.

“Where’re you going?” Spoon smiled wickedly then swooped down and sealed their lips together before Bryan could answer, shoving his tongue into Bryan’s mouth. Skunk was further down Bryan’s body, doing something with his hands that made Bryan jerk and moan.

Bryan laughed against Spoon’s lips, then closed his eyes and just rolled with the sensations. He definitely wouldn’t have to worry about Veronica killing him tonight, though he wasn’t entirely sure he’d survive Skunk and Spoon.

He decided he’d be fine with that.

AUNDREA SINGER was born in Canada and has been an avid fan of sci-fi and fantasy since her mother read Lloyd Alexander and Madeleine L'Engle to her at a terribly impressionable age. Despite this, she was well into adulthood before giving up her aspirations to normalcy and embracing her geekitude--whereupon she naturally fell in love with an engineer and moved to Texas. She started telling stories before she could write and will always be enthralled with how words can be used to create entire universes. She is grateful to her husband that she is now able to write full time.

Aundrea still lives in Texas with her much-beloved husband, three cats of varying levels of insanity, and the most wonderful little boy in the entire world. Her penname is a small homage to her parents, her heritage, and her husband, as well as a salute to the gaming buddies she left behind.

You can contact her at aundrea.singer@gmail.com.

HOMECOMING

Emily Moreton

BEN knows the moment he walks in the front door of their house that he's not home first. He swallows the urge to groan, because Raul home at five-thirty means the programming's not going well, and Raul on a day when the coding isn't flowing is not Ben's favorite thing to deal with.

Even worse, he can't hear Raul anywhere, can just feel someone else in the house. Sulking Raul on a day when the coding isn't flowing is even further from his favorite thing, particularly when he knows Raul's up against a deadline from the university and pressure from his boss.

Ben sighs, kicks off his shoes and drops his bag, though he knows Raul will lecture him later for not putting it properly away. He wanders into the kitchen, shrugging out of his suit coat, and finds their kitten, Jess, up to her brown ears in dry cat food. Maybe not a totally bad sign, if Raul remembered to feed her.

It's still the only evidence that Raul's home, the place so undisturbed that Ben's almost willing to start doubting himself. Almost, but not quite.

He hangs his suit coat over the back of a stool and heads upstairs.

He's most of the way down the corridor to their bedroom before he hears anything, the thick, dark wood doors enough to keep most noise behind them. Not this one, though, and Ben hesitates, because that sounds like Raul, like Raul when he's balls-deep in Ben's ass, fucking him so hard that he's moaning with the effort, and there's no way on this Earth or any other that Raul would bring a guy home when he knew Ben was due.

He tells himself that he's mishearing, or that Raul's just dealing with his frustrations in a more hands-on way than he usually does. It's still not a surprise to open the door and find himself face to back with Raul, naked, curled over another body, hips moving to the same rhythm as his groans.

"Honey, I'm home," Ben says, saccharine sweet and dry as toast. He's not even early.

Raul doesn't stop, but the guy he's fucking says, "Oh fuck, Ben," so familiar that Ben comes to a complete stop, two feet from the foot of the bed, not quite believing—again—that he's hearing what he thinks he is.

"Come here," the guy—Matt, that's Matt, Matt's legs spread over Raul's thighs, Matt's hands clutching at Raul's back, Matt naked and sweaty and *here*—says.

Ben goes on auto-pilot until he can see Matt's face, his dark red hair sticking to his forehead, his head tipped back to accommodate Raul's mouth as he lowers it to press at Matt's throat. Matt, really here after four months not, and Ben can't fight his grin, even in the face of Matt's desperate expression.

"Sorry," Matt gasps out, voice raw, like he's been using it too much. He peels one hand off Raul's back and holds it, shaking, out to Ben. Ben takes it, lets Matt pull him closer, even though the two of them are sprawled across the middle of the bed, and there's a moment when Ben's sure his knee's going to land in an awkward place, then Matt tugs and Raul thrusts into Matt hard enough that he cries out, and Ben goes down next to them without anything colliding with anything it shouldn't.

Matt doesn't let go of Ben's hand, just pulls it down to cover Matt's cock, hard and leaking. Ben curls his hand round it automatically, lets Matt guide him in short, rough strokes. "Sorry," Matt says again, turning his face away from Ben. "Sorry, I'm sorry."

Ben wants to ask what the hell he's got to apologize for, but Raul's thrusts are getting shorter and sharper, both of them breathing hard—all three of them breathing hard, Ben's cock stiffening in his suit pants—and he's well aware that the time for questions is not now.

"Oh God," Matt says, his voice cracking. "Oh God, please, please."

Ben tightens his fist on Matt's cock, presses his thumb over the head, and Raul says, "Fuck, come on, I can't—" and Matt comes with a string of wordless cries that sound more like anguish than pleasure.

Raul says, "Ben, Ben," into Matt's neck, then drags his mouth away and kisses Ben, sloppy and unsteady with lots of tongue. Ben holds Raul against him with the hand that isn't easing Matt through the last of his orgasm, feels Matt shudder against him, Matt's thigh hard where Ben's shifted to press his cock against it, and when Raul comes, Ben groans with him like he's just come too.

Raul shakes over Matt for a long moment, then pulls out with a low groan and flops down on his back on the far side of the bed. Matt rolls into Ben's body immediately, pressing close enough against him that Ben can feel Matt's sweat soaking through his dress shirt. He holds Matt close, ignoring his confusion, and figures he's doing the right thing when Raul presses in on Matt's other side, one hand coming to rest on Ben's arm, one leg wrapped over Matt's and against Ben's.

"Missed you," Matt mutters into Ben's throat. "God, I missed you both so much."

Ben lifts his head a little to look at Raul, who makes a sympathetic, anxious face back to him, which is approximately no help whatsoever. Matt's been gone, working as a psychological consultant on a serial killer case on the east coast for four months, and when he called two days ago, he wasn't expecting to be home any time soon. Between the sudden arrival and the clinginess, Ben's pretty worried, and that's before he adds in Matt's litany of apologies.

"Should've waited for you," Matt says, like he's reading Ben's thoughts. "I needed..."

"To reconnect," Raul offers softly.

Ben moves until he can hold Raul's hand, their own connection that isn't frayed by four months living in a hotel room, living in a killer's head. He's a political researcher, he'll never know how Matt feels, but he thinks he might get it, why Matt needed what he did. What he still needs, unless Ben's reading him very wrong, and God knows a year of living together after months of dancing around each other is more than enough to make him good at reading both of them.

He kisses Matt's hairline, the easiest place to reach, the kiss more

fond than anything else, despite his own unfading arousal. Matt makes a small, undecipherable noise and lifts his head a little. His eyes are closed, but he angles his head, bringing Ben's kiss to his mouth easily enough. Ben kisses him slow and easy, the way he did before Matt left, when they turned all the clocks away from the bed and tried to pretend they had forever. It didn't work then, but now they don't need to pretend.

Even so, it doesn't take long for Matt's mouth to open under Ben's, for the kisses to go from slow and easy to slick and hard, Ben's tongue in Matt's mouth. Matt's getting hard again against Ben's thigh, and from the little gasping sounds Matt's making into the kiss, he's not the only one. Raul's hand is still in Ben's, clenching and releasing in time with Matt's gasps.

"What do you need?" Ben asks Matt, saying the words against his lips.

Matt blinks his eyes open slowly, and gives Ben a long up and down look. "You're over-dressed," he says, like he's giving it the deepest thought. Then, as Ben's about to ease himself away to undress, "Tell me we didn't use the last condom."

Ben hesitates, even as his cock expresses how much it likes the sound of that, and catches Raul's eye. They've done this before—before Matt got sent across the country, they did pretty much everything three guys could do together—but not often, and not usually with Matt in the middle. Not that Ben blames him for wanting it; he's usually the one in the middle, and he loves it, the feeling of being surrounded by people he loves. He can see why Matt, stumbling back into their connection, would want it as well.

"You sure?" Raul asks.

Matt rolls onto his back, which Ben takes as his cue to get up and strip, and pulls Raul down half over him so they can kiss. Ben can't quite take his eyes off them, even as his fingers stutter on the buttons of his shirt; he hasn't watched Raul kiss anyone in four months, and he'd kind of forgotten how much he likes it. Raul's always been the one who likes to sit back and let them put on a show for him, but watching him and Matt, naked and post-coital, gearing up for round two, is a pretty nice reminder that Ben doesn't exactly find it a turn-off.

"I'm sure," Matt says. "Just... go slow. It's been a while."

“All night if you want,” Raul says, smiling a little, like he’s finally managing to relax.

“All weekend,” Ben adds, climbing back into bed, weirdly happy when Matt rolls back into him. “Nothing else to do.”

“You said on the phone that your sister’s coming to visit Saturday afternoon,” Matt says, almost absently, gasping a little as Raul kisses the back of his neck and Ben rubs at his nipple. “Pretty sure we don’t want an audience.”

“I’ll tell her to come next weekend,” Ben says. Mandy might not ever actually say it, but he knows she knows what the three of them are to each other, that they’re not just the roommates they let most people assume they are. She won’t mind.

Raul laughs, sudden and slightly hysterical, eyes bright. “Yeah, tell her this is our weekend for coming.”

Matt laughs like he didn’t mean to, and Ben rolls his eyes. “Please tell me you didn’t miss his sense of humor.”

“Not quite,” Matt says. “I missed other things more.”

He sounds too serious, but Raul’s never been anything but good at knowing when to break the tension, socially inept geek stereotype notwithstanding, which he does now by shoving a condom packet into Ben’s hand and saying, “Yeah, like my cock.”

“Only because the only time you don’t make bad jokes is when you’ve got it in someone,” Ben says, fumbling with the foil wrapper.

“There’s nothing wrong with my jokes,” Raul says, mock-affronted.

“There’s so many things wrong with your jokes, I could spend the weekend making a list,” Ben assures him. It’s strange how odd the familiar banter sounds with only two voices, even after months to get used to it. He still remembers that best from when the three of them first met up, starting to slide past being three people who knew each other casually in pairs and into something more complicated. Something better.

Matt takes the condom packet from him and opens it smoothly. “We’ve got better things to do with the weekend,” he says, and none of

them mention that his voice is shaking a little. Though Ben, in his own defense, is somewhat distracted by Matt's fingers on his cock as Matt rolls the condom onto him. "You first."

It's awkward for a few seconds as the two of them try to arrange their legs so Ben can get the right angle, not clicking back into place as easily as they did when they kissed, then Matt bends one leg a little higher and Ben shifts a little further forward, and it's better. "You good?" Ben asks.

"Better if you stopped fucking around," Matt says. He doesn't give Ben chance to respond, just gets one hand on Ben's cock and pretty much pulls Ben in by it, until the head of Ben's cock is pressed against his ass, then pushing into him.

It's pretty intense, just him, because Raul pretty much hates being fucked while Ben can go either way, and so Ben hasn't fucked anyone since Matt left, and he hasn't fucked *Matt* in months. Matt's only half-hard against Ben's stomach, but that doesn't matter; Matt gets reliably hard from being fucked no matter what.

Ben pushes the rest of the way into him and stills, tipping his face up to kiss Matt again, then shifting awkwardly to kiss Raul.

"Hmm," Matt says drowsily. "You want to...?"

Raul does.

Matt's still kind of tight, even after Raul fucking him into the mattress earlier, and Raul's big, and for a moment, Ben thinks there's no way this is going to work, that they're going to need a Plan B, or a lot more prep. The blunt head of Raul's cock nudges at Ben's where he's buried in Matt's ass, over his balls, and Matt says, "No, come on."

"I'm not sure—" Raul starts.

Matt opens his eyes, and they're far brighter than they should be, his brief burst of humor washed away by the same desperation Ben saw earlier. "Please," he says, sounding ragged. "Please, I just...."

"Okay," Ben says, petting Matt's shoulder in what he hopes is a calming fashion. "Here, like this." He rolls onto his back a little, bringing Matt with him, Matt's legs falling open a little further. Ben's still not sure it's enough, but Raul goes with it, kneels carefully between the tangle of their legs, and lines himself up again.

Matt's breath catches as Raul pushes in alongside Ben, and Ben fights not to echo him. It's tight and hot and burning, and he's not the one trying to take two cocks inside him, but the press of Raul's cock against his own, against Matt surrounding him, is so close it's almost claustrophobic. He finds himself holding his breath anyway, feels Raul doing the same in the tense line of his muscles as he inches into Matt, careful and slow.

When he's all the way in, he stills, and the three of them breathe. They're pressed close enough together that Ben thinks he can feel Raul breathing as well as Matt, can maybe even feel Raul's heart beating, though that might just be sense memory from a hundred nights listening to it and straining to hear what wasn't there.

Ben moves experimentally, a brief thrust that makes Matt and Raul both catch their breath all over again, and it's good, it's really good. He does it again, a little harder, loving it, and Raul echoes it a moment later. Matt sighs, some of the tension easing out of his body as he closes his eyes again.

Ben, unusually, seems to be taking the lead, Raul following the pattern of his thrusts so that one of them is pushing in as the other is pulling out, and Ben knows exactly how good that feels, exactly why Matt, tight between them, is moaning already, his cock getting fully hard against Ben's stomach. Ben closes his eyes, reaches out to cup Raul's shoulder and pull him even closer than he was, not quite able to contort himself enough to kiss Raul. He kisses Matt instead, even though Matt's too caught up in being fucked to really respond. It doesn't matter, because their fucking is speeding up now, enough that Ben knows he's going to ache in the morning and suspects that Matt will actually hurt.

That doesn't matter, either, not now when they're racing toward the best kind of sticky end. Raul's rhythm is already starting to fall apart—he always comes fast after the first time—and now Ben's the one trying to match it, his own hips jack-hammering back and forth, his heart beat hard in his ears, almost drowning out the sound of Matt moaning between them.

"Not yet," Matt says. "Please, not yet."

"Sorry," Raul says, sounding like he's holding on by the absolute thinnest of threads. "I can't, I have to—" He thrusts raggedly into Matt, against Ben, and comes with a long, low groan that makes Matt moan in

such clear disappointment that Ben's almost insulted.

"Sorry," Raul says again. Ben rocks his hips, some of his own urgency lost now that Raul's come, and Raul hisses. "Too sensitive, wait."

He pulls out carefully, doesn't go far after disposing of the condom, still pressed against Matt and breathing hard. It feels good, and Ben starts fucking Matt again, trying to get up the same urgent, deep pace he had before, even though he feels like Raul's post-orgasmic lassitude is seeping into him as well.

It doesn't seem to be seeping into Matt—he pushes back onto Ben's cock, which is easier said than done at that angle, and growls in obvious frustration. "Come on, fuck me."

Frustrated, horny Matt is better, Ben decides, than broken-up Matt, and at least he can do something about the former. He braces his hands on Matt's hips and pulls out, even though Matt growls again and tightens around him. "Calm down," he says. "This'll be good, I promise."

"Better be the best fucking sex of my life," Matt complains, and then goes quiet as Ben rolls him onto his stomach, settles all his weight over him. It's another thing that Ben usually gets more than either of the other two, and even then it's nothing special, but when Ben pushes roughly back into Matt, he knows immediately that it's the perfect angle, Matt crying out in the closest he's gotten to pure pleasure all evening.

"See?" Ben says smugly, then grips his hips and fucks him as hard, as fast and deep as he can, listening to Matt cry out every time Ben hits his prostate and trying not to feel too smug.

Which doesn't get any easier when Matt says, "Oh fuck, oh fuck, I'm gonna," pushing back onto Ben's cock.

Ben says, "Jesus," intelligently, then, when Raul's hand closes loosely over his balls, fondling them roughly in his palm, "Oh, Jesus fuck," and then it all slides rapidly downhill into a mess of gasping, moaning orgasms.

When Ben finally manages to catch his breath enough to pull out of Matt and deal with the condom, his thigh muscles burn like he just ran a marathon. He pats Matt's shoulder gently, says, "Matt?" but Matt, sprawled out on the bed, doesn't move, just groans.

“Maybe we should clean him up?” Ben suggests, though it’s pretty much the last thing he wants to do.

Raul, lying against Matt’s side, looks at his face, then shakes his head. “He’s out for the count.”

Ben means to argue, he really does, but it’s been a long week—a long four months. He tells himself he’s just going to nap for a bit then get up, but he already knows it’s a lie as his eyes slide shut.

BEN wakes up to a deeper dark than he went to sleep in and a half-empty bed, only Raul left, snoring, his arm flung over the space that should contain Matt. Ben thinks about giving Matt his space, letting him come back in his own time, then decides that that’s a stupid idea, and gets up. It takes him a couple of minutes of fumbling around in the darkness to find his sweat pants and T-shirt from the night before, which have somehow wound up under the bed, and then he nearly puts the T-shirt on backward.

He knows the house well enough to pick his way through it in the dark, squinting at the clock hung part way down the stairs as he passes it—nine-thirty, so it’s even odds whether hunger or Matt woke him. Matt’s often the one up in the middle of the night, poring over case notes or research papers, and Ben’s never been sure if it’s because he just doesn’t sleep much, or because he doesn’t want to. He’s closer to Matt and Raul than he’s ever been to anyone else, but he’s still never quite managed to ask, not when Matt still walks out of the room if he comes home to Raul and Ben watching a horror movie, even if they turn it straight off.

There’s no sign of Matt until he gets to the kitchen, where he finds the back door slightly ajar. He hesitates, then goes back for Raul’s sweatshirt, hanging on the hall closet door handle against Raul’s neat freak nature, and a pair of his own running shoes, the February night air decidedly not warm enough to be sitting around without the extra layers.

Outside, Matt’s not hard to find: he’s sitting on their porch swing, wrapped in a green blanket over what look like Raul’s pajamas, legs curled up, Jess huddled into the curve of his body, his face barely lit by

the glowing end of the cigarette in his right hand. He doesn't look away from contemplating the darkness of their garden until Ben sits next to him, nudging the swing into swaying gently.

"Thought you quit," Ben says softly. It still sounds loud in the near total silence that speaks to a much later hour than it actually is.

"I did," Matt says, bringing the cigarette to his lips, the end flaring bright. "This is just habit."

"That's different from not quitting?"

"Yeah. I'm not doing it for the nicotine, I'm doing it for the ritual. I won't want it in a couple of days."

It's an unusual opening, made more so by Matt turning back to look at the garden, his and Raul's space, in the summer at least, the two of them looking like something out of a domestic porn movie while Ben pretends to work and enjoys the show. Matt's free hand absently pets Jess, who seems to have fallen asleep, Raul's kitten all the way after he rescued her from the side of the road and brought her home, dancing around the idea that they could use something other than each other to take care of. "You just needed it for this case?" Ben asks.

Matt makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "Something like that. Good excuse to get out."

"You never said much about it, while you were away," Ben prompts, reaching over to pet Jess mostly as an excuse to lean into Matt and offer some comfort.

"I didn't want to think about it when I was talking to you guys," Matt says. "I still don't. It was pretty rough."

Ben thinks that he should respect Matt's right not to have them know, but also that he'll Google the case anyway, because there's a difference between what Matt doesn't want them to know and what Matt doesn't want to tell them, and he's pretty sure this is the latter. Even if it's not, he can understand that Matt needs them to be careful of his edges right now, and the only way they can do that is if they know where these are.

"Is it over?" he asks.

Matt sighs, drops the cigarette and uncurls enough to grind it out

with his heel, wincing slightly at the movement. “My part is, until the trial.”

They fall into silence broken only by the slight creak of the swing as it gradually loses momentum, until Matt says, “I’m seeing the departmental psychologist Monday. It’ll be better after that.”

“Okay.” Ben shifts until he can kiss Matt’s cheek, but stops Matt before he can turn it into a kiss on the mouth. “Not till you brush your teeth.”

“Charming,” Matt says, laughing a little.

“House rules,” Ben says firmly. “You hungry? I was thinking about an omelet.”

Matt tilts his head to one side then the other, considering. “I could eat,” he says finally, and he sounds relaxed, for once, soothed by domestic normality.

“Me too,” Ben says. “All that exercise on an empty stomach.”

Matt laughs. “You can talk, you only came in at the end.”

“And what an end,” Ben agrees.

“You want to see if Raul’s hungry?” Matt asks.

Ben shakes his head, then lets it rest against Matt’s shoulder. “He’ll sleep through anything I do to wake him up.”

“True,” Matt says. He puts his arm around Ben and smooths some of the blanket over his knees. “Wish I could do that.”

“Me too,” Ben says again. He’s tempted to just stay there, trying to seep comfort into Matt, but even with the blanket and Raul’s sweatshirt, it’s not really warm enough. “Come on. Food, bed.”

Matt stumbles a little when Ben pulls him up, and Ben wonders how long he’s been sitting alone out here. Matt’s not great on his own, for all that he sometimes still tries, but he lets go of Ben’s hand easily enough when they’re standing, reaching back down to scoop up Jess, who makes a sleepy noise, hanging in his hand with her eyes closed. “Not a night owl, this one,” Matt says, cupping her closer.

The kitchen light makes Ben blink after the dark outside, and he shrugs Raul’s sweatshirt off again, too warm. “You want some coffee?”

he asks Matt, who's hovering at the edge of the kitchen, a little too much like a guest. In the harsh light, he looks vaguely lost. "Go brush your teeth," Ben suggests.

He flips the hob on as Matt goes, digging out a frying pan and wooden spoon, not bothering to keep quiet. Raul really can sleep through pretty much anything, and if he doesn't sleep through Ben cooking, he'll be easily enough appeased with food.

Ben's standing at the counter, chopping peppers, when he hears the creak of Matt coming back down the stairs. He keeps going, resisting the urge to look around, because Matt's not going to fit back in any faster for Ben keeping a constant eye on him.

It's a good plan, but it means that he jumps when Matt steps up close behind him, presses against him. His body's still cool from sitting in the dark for too long, making Ben shiver when Matt's hand brushes his as he reaches over to steal a slice of pepper, crunching loudly in Ben's ear.

"Minty fresh?" Ben asks, going back to chopping instead of leaning into Matt like he wants to.

"Mm-hmm," Matt murmurs. There's a beat of nothing, then he slides one hand around Ben's waist and under his T-shirt. Ben tenses, stomach muscles jumping at the cool against his warm skin.

"That's kind of distracting," he offers.

"Good," Matt says, hand slipping down to tease under the waistband of Ben's pants. His fingers are warming up quickly, and Ben's glad he didn't bother with underwear.

"Won't be saying that when I take off a finger because you startled me when I was chopping."

"You could stop," Matt says, teasing the skin at the base of Ben's cock. Ben shivers again, definitely not from cold this time.

"So could you," he says, suspecting it's a pointless comment. "I thought you were hungry."

"I changed my mind." Matt shifts, pressing a little closer to Ben, and leans over to snag the oil next to the hob. "I want something else."

Ben's starting to get hard again. Matt's not. "Like you can even get

it up again,” he says. “I’m surprised all your muscles aren’t mush after that.”

“Let me worry about that,” Matt says. He slides his hand away from Ben’s cock as he says it, opening the bottle of oil. Ben decides discretion’s the better part of not losing a finger in an embarrassing sex-and-peppers-related accident, and puts the knife down, pushing the chopping board away. He guesses they can just eat later.

Breakfast time, maybe, because Matt’s pushing Ben’s sweatpants down to his knees, pouring a liberal dose of Raul’s decent cooking oil over his fingers.

“Raul’ll be pissed,” Ben says. He spreads his legs as far as he can with his pants still on, and shifts to lean more of his weight on the counter. “More for you letting him sleep through this.”

Matt rubs a slick finger over Ben’s hole, making his cock jump. “Had his turn,” Matt says, distant, like he’s not really concentrating on the conversation. Not that Ben blames him. He’s not. “Should’ve called you as well, but Raul said you had meetings all afternoon. I just needed...”

Matt’s desperate clinginess makes Ben wonder again what the case was about, beyond the little on the news. Matt’s said enough about other cases he’s worked on as an attachment to the FBI, both before and after they got together, to make it clear there was probably a lot more to it—enough to keep him away over Christmas.

“You gonna fuck me, or you gonna keep telling me why you want to?” he asks, before Matt can sink again.

“Not quite,” Matt says, and shoves two fingers into Ben’s ass.

Ben’s not tight, not by any definition of the word, and they slide in easily. It’s enough to make him groan—he loves having his guys in him—but not *enough* enough. “More,” he says, letting his head drop as his hands tighten on the edge of the counter.

Matt obliges, adding a third finger, pressing against Ben’s prostate.

“Yeah,” Ben says. “Yeah, good.”

Matt fucks him like that for a while, ’til Ben’s rocking on his fingers, trying to keep them where he wants them just a little longer, his

cock fully hard and bumping against the cupboard door if he rocks too far forward. “Come on, already,” he says, even though he can feel that Matt’s still soft where his cock’s pressed against Ben’s thigh.

He expects Matt to pick up the pace, maybe touch his cock. Instead, he pulls out completely, leaving Ben empty and moaning in disappointment. “What the—” Ben starts, then yelps in surprise as something hard presses at his opening.

Too hard to be Matt, and then he pushes it the rest of the way in, and Ben realizes it’s a dildo, unyielding in him. He clenches down on it and sighs, satisfied.

“It’s mine,” Matt says against his neck. “I bought it a week after I left, and I used to lie in bed after I talked to you and Raul and imagine it was his cock, your hand on me. I’d come so hard.”

Ben closes his eyes, lets Matt paint the picture for him, and whimpers. He wonders if they could talk Matt into doing it again, while Raul fucks Ben. And Ben sucks Matt’s cock. He whimpers again, almost tasting it.

“I put it in before I called one evening,” Matt goes on. He twists the dildo in Ben’s ass, makes him gasp. “You were telling me about spending all day in the library, something you’d been researching for the senator, and I was fucking myself with a dildo. I thought I’d come just from listening to you.”

“Did you?” Ben asks, his voice gone shaky. It’s crazy—they have a drawerful of sex toys, and he never feels like this when he uses one that one of the others has, like he’s doing something dirty and illicit. Maybe it’s because it’s Matt’s. He doesn’t really care, not when it feels this good.

“No,” Matt says. “I couldn’t get there. I needed....”

The dildo nudges a little deeper into Ben’s ass, then starts buzzing in him, the tip set perfectly against his prostate. Ben cries out, hips jerking forward, and Matt’s hands, warm now, steady him.

“Turn around,” Matt says, helping Ben do so. He can’t concentrate past the vibrating in his ass, nothing like being ridden hard, but still good. “Lean against the counter,” Matt adds. “Hold on.”

And then he’s going to his knees, holding Ben’s hips still, leaning

in to lick pre-come from the tip of Ben's cock, before he takes it completely into his mouth.

"Oh, Jesus," Ben says faintly. He wants to touch, but he's a little afraid his knees might give out if he lets go of the counter, even more so when Matt starts to suck him, rough, quick pulls of his mouth, tonguing the slit of Ben's cock. "Matt."

Matt looks up at him from under his eyelashes, then tugs Ben's hips forward as he slides his mouth up. He does it a couple more times before Ben gets a clue, and then it's all Ben can do not to come right there, Matt on his knees with his mouth full of Ben's cock, inviting Ben to fuck his mouth.

He's not going to turn down that invitation. He's still afraid to let go of the counter, which makes it awkward, even with Matt's hands curving round his ass to guide him. They manage, though, Ben rocking deeper and deeper into Matt's warm, waiting mouth, bumping the back of his throat, the dildo in his ass kicking up a notch through no mechanism Ben can feel.

It's good, it's great, he's gasping for breath and moaning wordlessly, and he wants it to go on forever, right on the edge of too much, he wants that last little bit that will push him over. He's got his eyes closed, too caught up in his cock and his ass and Matt's mouth to see, to hear. He can't even remember if he left the hob on, if he's about to burn down his own kitchen; it's sure hot enough.

And then Matt slides one hand down his ass, over the end of the dildo, and squeezes Ben's balls, tight, sharp pain. Ben doesn't just cry out, he shouts, and that's it, he's gone, fucking Matt's mouth desperately as he comes, long and hard, feels his knees give out and doesn't care.

When it's over, Matt's not the only one on his knees—Ben's clutching Matt's shoulders, his sweatpants still around his knees, stained now with his own come, his cock spent and limp, the dildo still buzzing in him. He moans weakly, feeling wrung out, then groans as Matt slides the dildo free, leaving him empty and over-sensitized.

It even makes his nerves zing when Matt kisses him, lush, post-orgasmic kisses despite Matt not having come. "I'm still hungry," Matt says eventually, pulling away.

Ben's not sure he can stand up, let alone chop and slice and cook

without causing himself permanent harm. He'd kind of like to just curl up on the kitchen floor and go to sleep. "Take-out menus in the drawer," he mutters.

He feels someone else near him right before Raul says, "Maybe pizza. We're gonna need the carbs."

Ben turns his head to look at Raul through bleary eyes. He keeps his hair too short to get bed head, but he's got a pillow crease on his cheek. His cheeks are flushed, and when Ben looks down, he's hard in his boxers.

"Audience," Ben murmurs.

"You two woke me up," Raul says, steadying himself with a hand on Ben's hip and kissing Matt, who leans into it. "I wanted a reward."

"Happy to help," Ben says.

Raul strokes up Ben's thigh, making his skin buzz with the contact, and once over his soft, spent cock. "I know that," Raul says, hands on Ben's shoulders, easing him down onto his back. Matt pushes away, leaning against the cupboard door and watching with hungry eyes when Ben looks over at him. "You're always very helpful," Raul adds, slipping out of his own boxers and reaching for the oil.

"Oh God," Ben moans, as Raul slicks his own cock quickly and pushes into Ben's aching, open ass.

"Something like that," Raul says, amused, looking over to where Matt is as he starts to thrust gently in Ben's ass.

"Funny boy," Ben says, and closes his eyes, takes it on his back on his kitchen floor.

BEN wakes up curled on his side in bed, with only the haziest memory of half-walking, half-being-carried up the stairs and someone helping him into bed. His thighs ache, and he's pretty sure he's got rug burn across the backs of his shoulders, but he's felt worse for less.

Someone makes a little snuffling sound, so he opens his eyes. Even through the curtains, it's obviously regular February weather, gray and

damp and cold. Good weather for staying in bed.

“Where’s Matt?” he asks, his voice rough.

Curled behind him, Raul presses a little closer, his hand flat against Ben’s stomach. “Went to make coffee. Figured we’d need it.”

“Hmm.” Ben drifts a little, wrapped up warm under the blankets, not quite ready to wake up properly. “Mandy’s coming.”

“It’s fine,” Raul says. “I borrowed your cell, texted her last night.”

“Thanks.”

“Welcome,” Raul says, laughing a little. “I don’t want her scarred for life by walking in on us.”

“She’s not easily scarred,” Ben says.

He wakes up most of the way again when he smells coffee, getting his eyes open to see Matt sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in jeans and a University of Chicago T-shirt that might belong to any of them, even though Raul’s the only one who actually works there. He smiles when he catches Ben’s eye, and Ben smiles back easily. Matt looks better now—less gray, less frantic, more like Matt.

“Coffee?” Matt offers, holding out a green mug.

Ben seriously contemplates trying to drink it lying down, but he figures that way lies third-degree burns and having to change the sheets, so he lets Raul pull him up until he can lean back against the wall, accept the mug. “You okay?” he asks Matt.

Matt draws his legs up to sit cross-legged at the foot of the bed, one hand resting on Raul’s ankle. It’s hard to tell in the low light, but Ben thinks he might be blushing, which is cute as hell, if weird. “Yeah,” is all he says.

Raul snorts in obvious disbelief. “Sitting up probably hurts.”

Matt rolls his eyes. “Pretty cocky there.”

“If the shoe fits,” Raul says lightly, sipping his coffee.

“Remind me again who once reduced who to actual *begging* in less than five minutes, then made him come in another two,” Matt says, equally lightly, but his eyes have gone bright with amusement and challenge, and this is the guy Ben knows, the guy he’s in love with, who

never met a challenge he didn't like, even if the challenge comes with dead bodies and bad memories. Which Ben really appreciates, because sometimes the challenge is three guys and a kitten in one house, and it never hurts to have someone who'll keep going through the problems because it's easier than his day job.

"I guess we're talking about you and me," Raul says, looking thoughtful. "Though I think you might be remembering that wrong."

"Pretty sure he's not," Ben puts in.

"He's not," Matt agrees. He leans over the side of the bed to put his coffee on the floor, then crawls over Raul's legs, settles in his lap and kisses him.

Ben groans when Raul twists away to kiss him. "No more sex. Too tired."

Raul and Matt look at each other. "I thought that didn't happen until at least a couple of years into the relationship," Matt says.

"Seriously," Ben says. "Unless you want my dick to fall off."

Raul makes a face. "Way to kill the mood."

"I do what I can," Ben says brightly, drinking the last of his coffee. There's too much sugar, but that doesn't hurt, since they never got as far as food last night. "It's too early for this. I'm going back to sleep."

He suits actions to words, crawling back under the covers and curling up with his back to Raul and Matt. Neither of them moves, but he can hear their voices, low and far away, and it's enough to send him down into more sleep.

NEXT time he opens his eyes, he feels more awake, the stale taste of coffee in his mouth speaking to how long he's been asleep. For a moment, he thinks he's alone, then the bed shifts, and someone moans softly.

"What happened to no more sex?" he asks, muffled into his pillow.

Matt laughs, relaxed and happy. "You're the one who said he was too tired."

Ben gives in to his own curiosity, rolling over. Raul's still leaning back against the headboard, his T-shirt gone now, showing a line of faint bruises down the center of his chest, sized to Matt's mouth. He's got his head tipped back, his pupils blown, and when he meets Ben's eyes, he drops one hand onto Ben's side. The other's resting on the back of Matt's neck, following him as he drops his head to take in Raul's cock again, making Raul moan.

It's sweet—slow and easy, mellow, the kind of sex no one initiated for the first couple of months, too unsure—but it's still not enough to convince Ben he wants to get hard again yet, or that it would be worth it. He arranges his sleep-warm limbs into sitting up instead, Raul's hand sliding across his bare stomach as he moves, then tilts Raul's head a little so they can kiss.

It makes Raul moan again, his mouth open a little against Ben's, letting Ben control the kiss. The angle's a little awkward, since Raul can't quite twist far enough, but Ben makes the best of it, soft, mostly close-mouthed kisses, more affection than passion, and Ben thinks he could do this all day.

He doesn't get the chance—Raul goes from an occasional moan to a steady stream of, “Oh, oh, oh,” his hips rolling slowly with Matt's rhythm, until he gives a long, full-body shudder and collapses back against the headboard, pushing Matt weakly away from his cock.

Matt sits back on his heels, a trickle of come running from the corner of his mouth. Ben leans in to lick it away, and then it's easy to move into kissing, tasting Raul's come in Matt's mouth. “That was nice,” Matt says when they slowly separate.

“Yeah,” Ben agrees. “You need anything?”

Matt shakes his head, and Ben finally notices the hazy post-orgasmic cast to his eyes. “My turn to go first.”

“Just knew I'd be useless after,” Raul corrects. He sounds half-asleep, and he's starting to list a little to one side.

“More sleep?” Ben suggests, already wriggling back into the mess of covers.

“Better than sex,” Raul agrees absently.

“That's what I've been saying,” Ben says.

Matt laughs. "I don't know what happened to you two. I'm sure I remember staying up all night having sex."

Ben pulls him down between him and Raul, tucking the covers around his shoulder. "You can train us up again."

"Hmm," Raul says, snuggling closer and patting Ben's thigh, probably just because that's where his hand ended up. "Training schedules and diets and...."

"Go to sleep," Ben says quietly. Matt's close enough, so Ben kisses him. "You too."

"More sex later?"

"Sure," Ben says in his best patient voice. "More sex later. Swinging from the light fittings sex."

"Not all three of us," Matt says. Behind him, Raul's breathing has already started to even out, and Ben's having a hard time keeping his eyes open. "Wouldn't hold us."

"Probably not," he agrees. "Figure it out when we wake up. Not going anywhere."

It's obviously the right thing to say, Matt's face softening even further. "Yeah, okay," he says, resting his head on Ben's shoulder. Ben feels the brush of his eyelashes as he blinks once, then again. The third time, he doesn't open his eyes again, and Ben gives himself one last waking moment to feel satisfied at a job well done, before sinking down himself into sleep.

EMILY MORETON has been writing since she was a child, when her stories mostly involved her and her sister saving the world (or at least the back garden). Since then, her writing has developed somewhat, and she's published several short stories, only some of which have included saving the world, and has been nominated for the Push Cart awards. She now lives in Bristol, where she works four jobs, and spends most of the rest of her free-time volunteering at the local concert hall.

Visit Emily's web site at <http://purple-pen.dreamwidth.org>.

UNWRAPPED: THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

Josephine Myles

BY TEN-THIRTY I'd resigned myself to the fact that I wouldn't be getting my birthday wish after all, and sent Mark to the bar for another couple of pints. I gazed around the half empty pub, thinking how ridiculous it had been to hope that there would be someone new on the scene, when I saw something that made my breath hitch.

Oh my God, there he was. A stranger; and what's more, he was tall, dark, and if not classically handsome, then certainly strong featured enough to be striking. He stood at the bar, leaning on one elbow, looking like a man completely at ease in his own skin. Our eyes met, and my mouth must have been hanging open or something because he grinned at me, flashing a set of dazzling white teeth, deep grooves in his cheeks framing his mouth. I did my best to smile back, but was worried that I probably looked like a frightened animal caught in the headlights. Could I do this? Could I pluck up the courage to go over there and ask him?

Fortunately, I never had to take that chance, because stepping in front of the grinning stranger was Mark, who shot me a mischievous glance before striking up a conversation with the new guy. I wish I'd been able to hear what he said. Instead I had to make do with their body language. The stranger leaned forward, a small smile playing on his lips, and then leaned back again, eyebrows raised. I saw Mark turn to me, point me out, and wink with a lascivious leer. I summoned up enough courage to give a small wave, and was rewarded with another heart-stopping smile from the mystery man. There was some more chat, which looked rather flirtatious given the amount of smiling and arm touching

that was going on, and I distinctly saw the stranger give Mark the once-over, pausing appreciatively in the right places (Mark does have a fantastic arse, it has to be said).

By this point I was starting to feel a little jealous, but that soon changed to nerves as they picked up their drinks and headed toward me. I stood up, knocking the edge of the table in my haste, relieved that there were no drinks to spill. It wouldn't have been the first time I'd have spilled something when anxious, though, so I made a conscious effort to relax.

"Dave, this is Pedro. He's just in Bath on a business trip. Heading back to the States tomorrow," thus setting one of my biggest fears to rest. I'd made it very clear to Mark that I didn't want it to be anyone we'd be likely to run into on a regular basis. "Pedro, this is the Birthday Boy, my darling Dave." And Mark stepped back as Pedro moved forward, ignoring my proffered hand to give me a huge bear hug and a lingering kiss on the cheek.

"Happy Birthday, Dave. Mark's just told me all about your birthday wish." He spoke with a deep drawl which made me weak at the knees. When he finally let go and pulled away to look me up and down, I could feel myself blushing furiously, but he just flashed that dazzling grin again and motioned for me to sit down. He then seated himself on the bench next to me, sliding over until our thighs touched. I gulped, tongue-tied, while Mark sat down opposite us with a cheeky smile on his face.

"So, Pedro, what do you think of England so far? Seen anything that takes your fancy yet?" It was one of those occasions when I was profoundly grateful for Mark's easy, flirtatious manner. It's one of the things that's made him so successful at running a café, but also a quality that made me uneasy. Usually I'd start to get a little jealous when he was chatting like this to other men, but it gave me a chance to study our new companion. He was older than us by at least a decade, I guessed, putting him somewhere in his forties judging by the lines around his eyes and the sprinkling of silver in his hair. He was wearing what looked like a very expensive dark suit, possibly custom-made as it seemed to fit him like a glove, revealing broad shoulders, slim hips and impossibly long legs. I felt underdressed in my jeans and T-shirt, but at least Mark was wearing the same. His dark hair curled slightly and was worn slightly

longer than I was used to seeing on a professional, giving the appearance of a wild mane. Compared to Mark's fair hair, pale skin, and round, open face, Pedro had a mysterious, dark allure which drew my gaze.

I was admiring his beak of a nose and his smooth, coffee-colored skin when he turned and fixed me with those deeply hooded, twinkling brown eyes, and I cursed myself for blushing so easily.

"Well, Dave? What do you say?"

Oh God, what had they been talking about while I was otherwise occupied? I did my best to provide an all-purpose reply, "Yes, no, I uh... maybe. What was the question again?" Mark spluttered on his beer, and Pedro chuckled.

"I said this bar ain't up to much. What say we have a private party back at your place? Mark tells me you got a bottle of champagne in the fridge."

It was true. We'd spent so long in bed that morning that we hadn't had time for the Bucks Fizz before work, and I ended up running for the train having breakfasted only on Mark. A morning at the office on an empty stomach is not to be recommended, but there are far worse ways to start your birthday! I felt a sudden rush of confidence as I took in the desire in Pedro's deep brown eyes.

"That sounds great. Let's go."

There were a few catcalls as we left the pub, along with shouts of "Happy twenty-fifth, Davey-boy!", and it was a relief to get out onto the cool streets, washed clean by rain. I walked between my two companions, my stomach fluttering, half listening to Mark pointing out buildings of historical interest, and half lost in anticipation of what was to come.

IT WASN'T until I was seated on the couch between the two of them that I started to have real misgivings. The sensation of hands stroking me from both sides was just too much like the last time, and I leaped up with a lame excuse and fled to the bathroom. A soft knock at the door sounded a few moments later, and I let Mark in before slumping down against the side of the bath with my head in my hands.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on, Dave?” His voice was quiet, understanding, and I felt like an utter coward as I gave him the real reason.

“I don’t want it happening like last time. I don’t want to lose you, Mark.”

“Oh, sweetie, you know that isn’t going to happen, don’t you?”

But the thing was, I didn’t. Because the first and last time I’d ever had a threesome was just over a year ago, with Mark and my ex-girlfriend. That was the same night I’d realized that not only did I find men much more attractive than women, but that I just had to have more of this particular man. Later, once the messy break-up was out of the way and Mark and I had established our new relationship with a steamy weekend in bed, he confessed that the only reason he’d agreed to the threesome was because of me. That women just didn’t interest him, and that he’d only been able to get it up because I was in the room. At the time I’d been immensely flattered, but now I was just worried, because sitting in our living room was Pedro, and I knew that Mark went for tall, dark men too. I knew it because I’m tall and dark haired, albeit lanky and pale with floppy hair that refuses to cooperate into any sensible style.

I looked up into those pretty green eyes, wondering again why someone like Mark was even with me. I mean, with his confidence and fresh, freckle-faced charm, he could have anyone he wanted. I could never understand quite what it is he sees in me.

He touched my cheek, planting a lingering kiss on my forehead.

“We don’t have to do anything if you’re not happy with it. I’ll go and ask him to leave if you like. But I can guarantee you that if you do want to go ahead with this, then you have nothing to fear and an awful lot to look forward to.”

I gulped, looking up into those clear eyes to see the truth behind the words. Mark had never given me any reason to distrust him, happy to go along with my demands for exclusivity even though I knew he had no objections to more open relationships. I could trust him, couldn’t I? Maybe this would even be good for me, and help set some of my fears to rest; if I could cope with the sight of the two of them together then I might worry less in the future. And besides, I really did want this. I’d been unable to fantasize about anything much else for the past few

months.

“Okay.”

“You’re sure? You can put a stop to it at any point if you change your mind.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” And I was. Mark’s honest eyes had reassured me, and I reminded myself of all the ways he showed me he loved me every day. That wasn’t about to be canceled out by sex with a stranger. Especially not when I was there to keep an eye on things.

We made our way back to the living room, hand in hand, to be greeted by the sight of Pedro sprawled on the couch, minus jacket and tie: an instant aphrodisiac.

“Everything cool now?” Pedro asked.

“Yeah, we’re cool. We just need to show Dave a good time and try and keep our hands off each other, I reckon.”

Pedro grinned. “I’ll do my best for the Birthday Boy.”

And then I sank down onto the couch, already breathless, and felt the overwhelming presence of two men intent on my pleasure. It began with my ears, hot breath replaced by sweeping tongues and nibbling teeth. I’ve always had really sensitive earlobes, so the dual assault was almost unbearable. I moaned, feeling myself grow hard. I wanted to kiss, and turned to Pedro, claiming his lips as Mark concentrated on my neck, two pairs of hands stroking over my torso.

Pedro tasted smoky, his lips thinner than Mark’s but superbly skilled. His tongue found places in my mouth that I hadn’t known were erogenous zones, and I kissed him back with ferocious passion, sucking on his tongue and running my hands down the hard planes of his body, all the time aware of Mark licking and biting my neck. I moaned again, pleased to hear a responding sound from Pedro as I tweaked one of his nipples through the thin silk of his shirt. I wanted nothing more than to unwrap my present, and started work on the buttons with my trembling fingers, making a frustrated sound as I realized how difficult that would be without ending the kiss.

“Here, I’ll give you a hand,” Mark’s voice purred in my ear, and together we managed to open and untuck Pedro’s shirt, revealing the broad expanse of tan skin, adorned with a light pelt of hair across the

chest, running down to the start of his trousers. I pulled away from his kiss, and fell onto that gorgeous chest, taking a dark nipple into my mouth and sucking. He gasped—such an arousing sound—so I teased him with my teeth and tongue before moving over to treat the other side. His skin tasted of salt and smoke, more earthy than the slightly sweet flavor of Mark. I wanted the contrast, so I broke away and kissed my boyfriend, reveling in his familiar taste and practiced tricks.

And this time it was Pedro who concentrated on my neck, sucking the skin in a way that I knew would leave marks, but which sent shivers through me with the delicious pain. I felt my shirt lifting, then that mouth on my lower back. The contact sent thrills through me, straight to my cock. Could I be any harder? I had a sudden urge to free myself from my hot and restrictive clothing, and helped to pull up my T-shirt, breaking the kiss for just a moment while pulling it over my head.

Hands were rubbing me through the denim, stroking my erection and making me burn with the desire for more: more friction, more contact, more skin. I know I whimpered, and probably would have been embarrassed by the noise if I hadn't been so fucking horny. I pressed up against the hand, demanding more with my body, still unsure of whose hand it was and even more turned on by not knowing. Then two hands tweaked my nipples while the others set to work on my fly, and I almost lost it then and there, having to make a real effort to calm down.

I pulled back from Mark, opening my eyes to see his twinkling with amusement.

“Having fun then, are you?”

“Oh yeah!” I panted, trying to slow my breathing as I felt those hands (Pedro's!) pull down my zipper and start to work on easing my jeans over my hips. I lifted my arse off the sofa to help, and Mark joined in with pulling them down, his face a picture of glee. He's one of those guys who approaches everything with childlike enthusiasm and good humor. You can't help but love him.

God, I was glad we'd all taken our shoes off earlier. My jeans were whisked away, followed rapidly by my boxers, leaving me lying there, ever so slightly self-conscious, while two men looked me over.

“You're wearing too many clothes,” I rasped, and they both leapt up and started stripping. It dawned on me just how much power I had at

this moment. They were there to do my bidding. The only trouble was, what would I ask them to do for me? I looked down at my cock, pre-cum beading at the tip, picturing both of them teasing me with their tongues. Oh God, I was going to come quicker than a randy teenager if I wasn't careful. I closed my eyes for a moment, concentrating on slowing my breathing, trying to think unsexy thoughts....

"So, Birthday Boy, what do you want us to do next?" Mark's voice was sultry in my ear, and I was suddenly aware of naked flesh on either side of me, brushing hot against my own. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, whimpering as I felt burning breath against my neck, then moving down, before settling on my nipple and sending waves of exquisite pleasure coursing straight to my cock.

"Perhaps you'd like us both to suck on your nipples," Mark continued, "Or maybe you'd like to kiss me while Pedro gets to work on your beautiful prick." I gasped at the idea, or was it at the sensation of Pedro sucking my nipple so hard it stung? "Or perhaps what you'd really like, what you're gagging for, is for us both to go down on you."

"Yes! Yes please, both of you. Please!" My hips wouldn't keep still, straining upwards in search of some kind of pressure against my erection.

There was a rumbling laugh. "Oh, you English! So damn polite, even when begging to have your cock sucked."

Mark started to snigger, an incredibly infectious sound, and before I knew it I was laughing, too, the build up of nervous energy making me slightly hysterical. But then I opened my eyes and saw such love in Mark's gaze that I relaxed again, slumping back against the cushions and watching them both as they rode out the laughter and set to work on me.

I couldn't tell you whether it was the sight or the sensations that were the most erotic. Let's just say that the combination of two men licking and mouthing my cock was one of the most intensely sensual moments of my life so far. It was a tease, in a way, because I craved a good, hard suck, but the drawn out kissing made my toes curl and I moaned my pleasure, gratified to see the affectionate look that Mark shot me.

"You want more?" he broke away to say, his fingers stroking my balls and moving down toward my entrance as Pedro tongued my slit. I

think I only managed to gasp, but Mark seemed to understand and knelt down between my legs, lifting my arse up with his hands as he took my balls into his mouth. I thrust upwards, unable to keep still despite Pedro's hands bracing my hips against Mark's hold. And then my cock was enveloped in warm wetness as Pedro deep-throated me, and it took all my powers of self restraint not to just shoot my load that second. We hadn't even done the talk yet, my mind niggled at me, and I had to ask before I lost the ability to speak. I wasn't used to this sort of thing, but I knew what was expected.

I grabbed hold of his hair as he reached the top of his up stroke, preventing him from going down again. "D-do you swallow?" I managed to stutter out, ashamed at the baldness of my words, but unable to phrase things any more elegantly while Mark was licking down the sensitive skin of my perineum.

"Sure," he said, looking surprised. "It's not so dangerous. I don't care. So long as we use a condom when we fuck, I'm easy."

I heaved a huge sigh of relief, loosening my hold on his hair just as Mark started to rim me in earnest. It was too much sensation for me to hold out for long; the sucking heat around my cock and the warm, wet pressure against my anus stoking up that fire in the base of my spine. I let go of Pedro's hair, grabbing instead for Mark, scrabbling around for his hands so that I could feel that contact when I came. It wasn't comfortable, but I managed to lace some of my fingers though his before giving in to the incendiary rush of pleasure that engulfed my body, setting my every nerve ending ablaze. Cursing wildly, incoherently, my vision whited out as I came down Pedro's throat.

I drifted back into my body, still trembling with the aftershocks of my orgasm, to the sensation of hands gently stroking me, and Mark's lips on mine. I kissed him slowly, opening my eyes to see Pedro's face looming closer. Mark chuckled as Pedro tried to join our kiss, pulling back and letting him kiss me properly, sharing the taste of me in his mouth. I grabbed hold of Mark's head and pulled him back into the kiss. It was a sloppy, open-mouthed effort, but the combination of three tongues twisting together was enough to start my balls tingling again. I moaned softly, so glad that this was an experience Mark and I could share together. He was right; I didn't have anything to fear.

Generosity swept through me, and I decided that it was my turn to

give some pleasure to my companions. I reached out, fumbling around until I'd found a cock with each hand. I still hadn't looked at Pedro's properly, but I could feel its silken length and was rather pleased to note that he wasn't quite as big as me, or as thick as Mark. It would have been too much if he'd been huge as well as having such a perfect body. An unworthy thought, perhaps, but a reassuring one as I felt I more than measured up against the competition. Mind you, as Mark always said, it wasn't the size that counted, but rather what you did with it, and I couldn't wait to find out what Pedro could do with his.

My hands were too dry to give a decent hand job, so I contented myself with stroking them both until our kiss fell apart as I started to giggle.

"Sorry! I just—just couldn't believe this is really happening." Mark gave me an affectionate smile and reached out to stroke my cheek. Letting go of his cock, I ran a fingertip over his curved lips and into the dimple on his round cheek, smiling in return.

Pedro cleared his throat, and we both looked up to find him standing over us.

"I hate to break up this beautiful moment," his eyes sparkled with amusement, "But how about we take this to the bedroom? I've got an idea that the Birthday Boy might enjoy, but my knees won't suffer a hard floor these days." He quirked an eyebrow at me, and I gulped as my mind called up all sorts of tantalizing possibilities. I nodded, my mouth too dry to speak, and rose on shaky legs.

Mark gestured from the doorway. "This way."

Pedro followed him, and I trailed behind, entranced by the sight of two sets of naked buttocks in the hall of our flat.

The bedroom was warm, lit cozily by one small lamp. I was glad that I'd thought to change the sheets before we went out tonight, as the bed looked really inviting. A broad expanse of red cotton, just perfect to roll around on, or....

Pedro climbed up onto the bed, settling himself down on his knees at the head end, his cock jutting out, beckoning me. I looked at Mark, who just raised his eyebrows and smiled, sitting down on the end of the bed. Crawling over toward Pedro, I realized what was about to happen as I heard Mark open the drawer where we kept our lube. God, how I

wanted this. Mark knew as much, and I wondered if he'd communicated it to Pedro earlier, or if it was just that obvious a desire.

I licked my lips as I took a closer look at Pedro's cock, the head a livid red and the shaft quite a pale brown in comparison. Intriguing. It hit me then, that other than Mark's, I'd never sucked another man's cock; my same-sex explorations having been confined to a few awkward fumbblings after drunken parties when at university. The thought brought on a sudden wave of misgivings. What if I wasn't good enough? What if Pedro laughed at my efforts to bring him off? But then I felt Mark's hands on my hips, stroking me as he planted a kiss on my tail bone. The contact warmed me, suffusing me with confidence. I could do this. What's more, I could do it well.

Taking an experimental lick from the base to the head, tasting that unique, smoky flavor again, I felt Pedro shudder and groan, and then his hands were in my hair, gentle, reassuring. At that point I felt Mark circling his slickened fingers against my anus, and the combined sensations of a hard cock against my lips and being teased by those fingers was dizzying. I could feel my own cock swelling with interest as I took Pedro into my mouth, swirling my tongue around him and noting the differences in the way he filled me. But all coherent thought was driven out by Mark's exploring fingers, breaching and opening me up, closely followed by his hard, blunt cock pressing into me.

How I love that sensation! Being filled by the man I adore. That hot, sweet pressure that seems almost too much at first, but that makes me crave more, deeper, further! I'm afraid poor Pedro must have suffered an accidental graze from my teeth as Mark finally settled balls deep, as I felt his hands tighten in my hair and he gasped. I released him for a moment, muttering "Sorry," at which he just grinned, then I turned my head to get a glimpse of Mark.

"You all right there, hon?" he asked, winking and smirking. His hands had found my erection, so he knew full well just how all right I was.

"Yeah, I think so." The words came in gasps, followed by a breathless laugh that surprised me. My whole body was on fire, my skin tingling with excitement, my head buzzing, thoughts skittering here and there without finding any purchase.

"You ready for this?"

“Uh-huh!” And I turned back to Pedro, determined to do my best for him despite the distraction of being fucked by Mark.

I soon discovered that I wasn’t going to be allowed to move. What with Mark holding my hips still, thrusting leisurely, and Pedro gripping my head to do the same, all I needed to do was to be there, present in the moment. I sucked as best I could, but my more experienced partners had the control, and I was grateful for that. Grateful, because I felt so molten and trembly that I’m not sure I could have moved in a rhythmic manner, and probably would have just brought myself off with a few hard, sharp thrusts. As it was, I could just be there, filled with cock, pleasuring them just as they were pleasuring me.

I felt the heat of my impending orgasm coiling at the base of my spine; heard Mark moaning his pleasure; felt his tempo speed up, becoming more erratic as he reached his own climax. He let go of my hips and moved his hands underneath me, fisting my cock with that furious desire I know he always has to get us both off at the same time. It certainly worked, his last thrusts hitting that sweet spot inside me and making me cry out as I surrendered to the powerful sensations wracking my body. It was bliss. It always is with Mark, and I have to admit that I completely forgot about our guest in the selfish pleasure of the moment.

I came to, with a sweaty Mark collapsed over my back, to find myself clutching Pedro’s buttocks for support, with his still very hard cock filling my mouth. I released him, looking up into his dark, smiling eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“What for?”

Surely it was obvious. “You didn’t come.”

He started to laugh, his body shaking. I stared at him, puzzled as to why my failure was so amusing, and slightly insulted if truth be told. Eventually he calmed down, ruffling my hair like I was a small child. I guess my hurt feelings must have shown on my face.

“Sorry ’bout that, Birthday Boy. It’s just, I didn’t really want to come just yet, anyway.”

“You didn’t?” Wasn’t that the point of the whole exercise?

“Hell, no. At my age, it takes me a fair while to get it up again

afterwards, so I want to wait until we've shown you a really good time. Besides which, I'm longing to fuck that sweet ass of yours."

"Oh." I blushed, nonplussed. "How old are you, then?"

"You really want to know? I'm fifty-six." I felt Mark startle at that one, and looked back at him, his mouth a perfect 'O'. "I know, I know. I'm old enough to be your father. Well, boys, you can always call me Daddy if you want to."

I think my horror at the idea must have communicated itself, because he burst out laughing again.

"Just kidding! I don't really wanna be reminded of my antiquity, thank you very much."

I wanted to make amends. "I'm sorry, it's just a bit of a shock. You don't look that old." And it was true. Okay, there were some lines, and a little thickening around the waist, but he was in amazing shape. Although now I looked closely, I noticed the gray hairs sprinkled throughout the black ones on his chest.

"Yeah, well, I look after myself pretty well. Clean living, regular exercise, all of that. Plus I'm still in love, which helps."

Mark withdrew completely, sitting back on the bed. I sprawled next to him, avoiding the puddle of cum, resting my head in his lap and enjoying his hand combing through my hair. Pedro lay down, too, facing me and propping his head up on his hand while he proceeded to tell us the story of how he met Angelo, back before Mark and I were even born. It was an education, learning first hand about the attitudes that prevailed in the southern United States back in the seventies and eighties. I found myself gasping as he detailed all the homophobia they'd had to endure, and I could tell by his sensitive questioning that Mark was deeply affected too.

When he finished his tale, there was one question that was niggling me, but I hardly knew how to phrase it. Still, I had to know.

"But what about.... What about Angelo? Will you tell him about this?"

He laughed again, the rumbling shaking the bed as he reached out to pat my arm.

“Oh, you’re too cute! Of course I will. He loves hearing tales about my travels. Believe me, he’s gonna get pretty turned on by this one! We’ll have a great time together after I get through describing all the things we’ve been up to.”

I looked for any signs of deceit in his face, but it was totally open. Looking up at Mark, his gentle smile told me so much. I began to feel ashamed of my petty jealousy, but also excited at the possibility of finding a new way to look at things.

“You know, when you really love someone and you know that they love you, you can rest. You don’t need to go looking for excitement elsewhere, but you don’t need to fear it, either. It’s all good. It’s all people making each other happy.” Pedro reached out for my soft cock, stroking me in such a skillful manner that I felt myself twitch and stiffen. “Now boys, if you don’t mind, this old gent is gonna have to get to bed soon, what with the ridiculously early flight I’ve been booked, so I was thinking we might just get on with things.”

I felt such a rush of excitement, mingled with real affection, that I gave him a huge sloppy kiss before pulling back and looking up at Mark.

“You should kiss Pedro too,” I said.

“I’d love to,” he replied, a glimmer in his eyes and the slow smile on his lips letting me know just how much he appreciated the offer.

And so I watched them kiss, watched Pedro touching Mark, and against all my prior expectations, I really enjoyed it, generous feelings warming me inside, along with a pride in Mark. A joy that he was attractive to other men, and that he was still mine. A joy that I could share out the sweet goodness of this man, but that it wouldn’t diminish our relationship.

And what’s more, watching them was hot. So hot I reached out for Mark’s arse, massaging his pert buttocks and slipping a finger down his crack. I felt him twitch, pushing back against me and moaning as I reached his entrance. I had to scrabble around for the lube, but was soon able to get a couple of slickened fingers inside him, turned on by the sound of him whimpering into Pedro’s kisses. I knew exactly what I wanted now; I already knew that Mark was up for it, and from Pedro’s earlier comment, I had a feeling that it was exactly what he was after too.

But first things first. I had to locate the rubbers. Mark and I didn’t

bother with them any more, having both tested clear, and safe in our exclusivity. I knew we had some, though. We'd made sure of it, before heading out to the pub. I reluctantly pulled my fingers out of Marks' tight, hot behind, and went in search. There they were, still in the drawer. I took hold of Pedro's hand, pressing the foil packet into it, and then rolled Mark onto his back.

He looked so fucking gorgeous: his lips reddened from Pedro's kisses, skin glistening with sweat, a flush spreading across his chest. I stared into his glittering, sea-green eyes while leaning down to taste his beautiful cock. There was so much love and tenderness in that gaze that I was almost sorry when he closed his eyes and flung his head back with a wanton groan. Still, that was my doing, too, and it filled me with joy to know that I could make him feel such passion.

Leaning over him, gasping as he licked at my nipple, I managed to reach one of the pillows and then placed it under his arse. Then it was simply a matter of giving in to that overwhelming urge to fuck him senseless. I sunk into him, relishing that sensation of the hot tightness gripping me, then giving way as his muscles started to pull me into him. We rested then, buried to the hilt with our fingers laced together, Mark's arms pinned down to the bed, his legs spread wide. I pressed breathless, open-mouthed kisses against his neck, only aware of the taste of him, the feel of him spread underneath me, around me. His body trembled, his breath coming in short gasps. God, how I loved this man!

It was only when I felt hands on my hips that I remembered Pedro, I'd become so lost in Mark. But there he was, pressing into me, breaching me just as I had breached Mark. I had to force myself to breathe, squeezing my eyes shut and biting my lip while trying to come to terms with the sensations of both fucking and being fucked. When he'd pushed all the way in we paused, time seeming to stretch around us, cocooning us in a bubble separate from the real world. I could feel my body quivering, hear my shuddering exhalations, feel the sweat running down my back.

"You ready?" Pedro's voice was gravelly, and I could sense the pent-up energy in him.

"Yeah, I'm ready." And I was. So ready.

"You start, then."

And so I pulled back slowly, still holding Mark's hands as I supported myself above him before plunging into him again, but this time leaving Pedro behind me. His hands steadied my hips, and I quickly realized that there would be no escaping the sensations. I was either pushing into Mark's moist heat, or pushing back onto Pedro's cock. I groaned with the sheer, unbearable ecstasy of it, so glad that I'd already come twice and would be able to make it last a little bit longer than otherwise.

Hearing Mark groan, I opened my eyes to look deep into his. He mouthed something that looked like "beautiful," but I was too far gone to tell for sure. Pedro's mouth was on my back, the man I loved was straining up to capture my lips in a kiss, and that heat was rising within me, electricity crackling up my spine, my balls tightening.

"Mark! Come for me. Please!" I wanted to feel his muscles clenching around me, sending me into the throes of my own climax. I sped up my strokes, supporting myself on one arm to reach between us and grab hold of Mark's cock, dimly aware of Pedro's increasingly erratic thrusting and his hands bruising my hips. And then the whole world was blotted out. Everything gone but the sound of Mark's voice as he shouted my name, the rippling of his orgasm and the jerks of Pedro's a counterpoint to my own shuddering spasms. The white heat filled me, bursting out from my center to reach every last cell, every last atom.

The next thing I remember was feeling Pedro lift off my back, the damp skin suddenly chilled with the loss of his heat. I nuzzled into Mark's neck, muttering how much I loved him, dimly aware of Pedro leaving the room.

"Mmmm.... Happy Birthday, gorgeous.... Love you too. So special...."

I could feel Mark's semen cooling and sticky between us, and knew we would have to move eventually, but couldn't bring myself to pull away from him. My whole body felt boneless, and we fit together so perfectly.

We were still lying like that when Pedro came back into the room. I heard him chuckle, and managed to lift my head to take a look at him, now fully clothed and looking immaculate. He sat down on the edge of the bed, planting a kiss on both our foreheads.

“I’ll be off, then. Just wanted to say thanks before I go.”

I started to mumble something about seeing him out, but he stopped me from rising with a hand to my back.

“No, I’ll be just fine. You stay right there. You two are beautiful together.” His eyes were wistful, but he smiled again. “You two work at it, now, you hear me? I wanna know that you’ll hold onto each other, no matter what.”

I nodded, trying to put all the sincerity I felt into my face, and it seemed to reassure Pedro. He got up and walked to the door.

“Bye, now. Maybe I’ll look you two up next time I’m in town.”

And that was the last we saw of my Birthday Gift.

THAT all happened five months ago, and things have settled back to the usual routine of work, seeing friends, and lazy mornings in bed. But I find now that I don’t mind Mark’s flirting with other guys, and although we’ve both agreed to stay monogamous, it feels as though there’s a new freedom between us. Strangely, though, it’s a freedom that seems to bond us even closer.

Then this evening, something happened. Mark had a text.

“Dave! You’re not going to believe this! Guess who’s back in the country and wants to meet up for a drink? Says we owe him a birthday treat this time!”

Our eyes met, his sparkling with mischief, eyebrows cocked. A slow smile spread over my face. I had a feeling we were in for another spectacular night.

JOSEPHINE MYLES lives in the West Country of England with her husband and four-year-old daughter. Currently self-employed, she gave up a career teaching English literature to look after her daughter. She enjoys various textile crafts and gardening when she isn't busy writing or spending time with her family.

Over the years Jo has shunned the predictable path, having sampled a wide range of jobs, from the factory production line to mosaic artist. She has also lived in many unconventional situations, from shared houses and tied accommodation, to living with extended family; even spending a couple of happy years on a narrowboat!

Visit Jo's blog at <http://josephine-myles.livejournal.com/>.

BACON BITS

G.S. Wiley

“Friends are the bacon bits in the salad bowl of life.”-Anonymous

AS CRAZY as it sounds, there was a time when I was scared shitless Patrick and Alex wouldn't like each other.

Sure, hindsight is twenty-twenty and all that, but for a while, it was a real concern. They were as different as two members of the same species could be, given that they both had dicks and lived in the continental US of A. Patrick was the WASP poster boy, right down to his Brooks Brothers suits and his inability to dance in public without causing widespread panic typically seen in a Godzilla movie. Alex liked to call himself a “proud Gay-sian.” I'll leave it up to you to figure out his ethnic background. That's right. Native San Franciscan.

Hobbies-wise, Patrick liked nothing more on his downtime than to rent a bunch of sappy Hollywood romantic comedies and sit in front of the TV with a big bowl of popcorn and a box of Kleenex. His puppy eyes welled up with tears whenever Meg Ryan or Rachel McAdams or Reese Witherspoon realized her one true love was, conveniently, whoever she'd been paired up with in this particular script. Alex, on the other hand, thought that any movie not filmed with a hand-held camera on a hundred dollar budget was an example of “the mass-produced excrement of American society polluting the cultural rivers of the world.” Really. You can imagine his reaction when a guy asks him out for dinner and a movie.

Patrick and Alex also had very different work lives. Patrick was a high-flyer in the HR department at a big Wall Street firm. As a freelance bicycle courier, I brought packages to his building all the time, but we

didn't meet until I accidentally delivered a dozen Valentine's roses to the wrong office. Not my fault, by the way. I don't know where this client learned to write, but his 9s looked like 7s and his 2s looked like 9s. He's lucky he didn't end up declaring his floral love for a mobster on the lower East Side. It was a situation straight out of one of Patrick's shitty romantic comedies, and it resolved itself just as happily.

Alex didn't work in an office. In my opinion, he'd never worked a day in his life, but he preferred to call himself a "free spirit." One day, he'd be organizing marches for Greenpeace, the next he'd be hollowing out tree trunks on a California beach and claiming they were works of art. Even I didn't know how he survived, but it's best not to ask a question if you don't really want to know the answer. Long story short, Patrick and Alex had about as much in common as President Obama and a poison-dart frog. A poison dart frog who happened to be a Log Cabin Republican.

Still, when Alex showed up in New York, I wanted him and Patrick to meet each other. I'd known Alex since we were in high school. We'd dated off and on through college, but that was more out of desperation than anything else. We weren't good boyfriends, but we were the best of best friends. Even now that we were separated by a continent, we still e-mailed and text-messed and called each other all the time. Alex was my best friend, Patrick was my main man.

Before Patrick, I was always a "fuck-em-and-leave-em" kind of guy. I figured I was young, I liked sex, why would I tie myself in knots by bringing "emotions" into it like some sappy old queen? Then Patrick Keenan waltzed into my life—or, rather, I bicycled into his—and suddenly I was thinking about shared apartments and joint bank accounts and a nice, tasteful upstate wedding with rainbow flag centerpieces and matching cufflinks. It was a hell of a shock. There were times when it almost sent me running in the opposite direction, but every time I got close to it, Patrick looked at me with those puppy eyes and I was rooted to the spot.

As soon as he heard Alex was going to be in town, he told me to invite him over.

"Everything's going to be fine," Patrick said, coming up behind me as I looked out the window. He smelled like Old Spice, something I'd always associated with grandfathers until I met Patrick. "I'm sure we'll get along great." I wished I had his optimism. Before I could worry

myself any sicker over it, the buzzer buzzed. Patrick kissed me on the cheek and released me, and I got up to answer the door.

“Hey, baby!” Alex threw his arms around me. He was wearing a pair of painted-on jeans and a shiny red shirt, more suitable for an eighteen-year-old at a rave than a thirty-year-old having dinner with friends. He kissed me wetly on the lips and turned to look at Patrick. “And you must be Prince Charming.”

“Most people call me Patrick,” Patrick said. He put out a hand.

Alex shook it. “I’m not most people, honey.”

That was definitely true. Alex was barely in the apartment ten minutes before he was thumbing through Patrick’s iPod. I expected him to make some sarcastic remark about the preponderance of ABBA and Enya and other wussy vowel-heavy singers. Instead, he said, “No way! You’re a Bethany Morrison fan?”

I had no idea who that was, but Patrick lit up like last year’s Chrismukkah tree. “She’s great. Have you heard her latest download?”

“*Beautiful Daydream*? Yeah, it rocks, but I prefer her older stuff. *Ravens in the Forecourt* and *Smoldering*, that kind of thing.”

“She played a coffee house on the Lower East Side about a month ago,” Patrick replied. “She was amazing.”

“I don’t remember that,” I said, just to remind them I was here. From the way they were staring at each other, I thought they might have forgotten.

Patrick barely glanced at me. “I invited you. You said you didn’t like that ‘hippie jazz crap.’”

“He never had any taste.” Alex rolled his eyes at me, and then looked back at Patrick. “I heard she paints too.”

“Yeah. I bought one of her prints online. It’s in the guest room.” If it had come from anyone else, it would have sounded like a pickup line. Even from Patrick, I wasn’t a hundred percent certain it wasn’t. The smallest, tiniest, most insignificant iota of jealousy set up camp in the back of my mind when he took Alex into the guest room to look at the picture. By the way, it was a really hideous abstract that looks like someone barfed a bunch of half-chewed Skittles onto a black canvas. I put

my feet up on Patrick's coffee table, stopped worrying that they weren't going to get along, and started to worry that they might be getting along a little too well.

When they came out, they were giggling like girls and chattering about Bethany Morrison and art and jazz and shit. Patrick played the good host and went into the kitchen to get us some drinks. Alex sat down beside me, his pants drawing even more tightly across the bulge in his groin.

"Do you think you could tone it down a bit?" I hissed, quietly enough that Patrick wouldn't hear. His apartment isn't "open plan," but like every Manhattan apartment, it was about the size of a shoebox. You could stand by the front door and hear a mouse fart in the back closet. In this building, you sometimes did.

"What?" Alex looked at me like I was the crazy one.

"You don't have to flirt with Patrick." Not so obviously, anyway.

"Please, honey. If you call that flirting, it's no wonder you were single for so long." A smile came to Alex's face. "But you must really be into him if this is freaking you out."

"It's not freaking me out," I lied. "I'm glad you're getting along, but you don't have to act like you're going to jump him the second his back is turned."

Alex laughed loudly. He's the kind of guy who does everything loudly. *Everything*. "You know I strictly jump guys from the front."

"Oh, right. Of course. Sorry." Because that was the most important element to take out of this conversation.

Alex gave me one of his famous looks. They look innocent, but I'd known him long enough to know they meant trouble, usually for me. "You know, I think I forgot your birthday this year."

"You've never remembered my birthday."

"Maybe it's time I did something to fix that," Alex suggested.

"Maybe it's not," I suggested right back. It was too late. Patrick came out, drinks tray in hand. Alex looked at him with the blatant lust of a Dom DeLuise looking at a bag of Doritos.

“Alex....” I warned. Patrick looked between us and set down the tray.

“Everything okay?”

“Perfectly okay, Patrick.” Alex beamed at him. “My old buddy here was just telling me he doesn’t want me to flirt with you.”

“Oh.” Patrick blinked. I wished I could crawl beneath the carpet and die. Funnily enough, I often felt like that around Alex.

“Of course, we all have different definitions of ‘flirting’, don’t we? Apparently, he”—Alex jerked his thumb in my direction—“thinks a friendly conversation about music and art constitutes flirting.”

Patrick swallowed and glanced at me, clearly trying to gauge my reaction. I tried not to have one. Alex was like a grizzly bear. If you played dead, the mauling was over quicker. Patrick sat on the chair across from us, pressing his knees together.

“I, on the other hand, think flirting looks more like this.” Alex stood and crossed the small space between the chairs. He planted his arms on either side of Patrick’s chair and leaned toward him. He smirked in the instant before he pressed his lips against Patrick’s.

As kisses went, it was relatively chaste. Alex didn’t open his mouth, and Patrick was as immobile as a blow-up doll in the window of a Soho sex shop. A knot of jealousy twisted in my gut, but almost immediately, it was untied by another sensation. I felt myself blush, partly from annoyance but mostly because this was really fucking hot.

“What do you think, honey?” Alex asked.

All eyes were on me. Whatever happened next, I’d have no one to thank but myself. Or no one to blame, depending how things went.

“I don’t know, Alex.” My voice was more strangled than I’d intended it to be. I cleared my throat. “I think I need another example.” I locked eyes with Patrick and waited to see what he thought of that. I got my answer pretty quickly. He kept his eyes on me, but reached up for another kiss.

It was even hotter this time, a real kiss with tangling tongues and grasping hands. I forced myself to sit still for as long as I could take it, which was all of twenty seconds. Then I got up and joined them.

Patrick let go of Alex the second I was within reach, which hatched a flurry of butterflies in my stomach at the same time it calmed any stray particles of jealousy still lingering in my bloodstream. Patrick pulled me down until I was bent awkwardly over the chair, kissing me while his hands clasped the front of my T-shirt. I heard a moan, but I didn't know who it came from. A second later, I felt a strange sensation on my tongue. I opened my eyes to see that Alex had joined in on the kiss, lapping at both Patrick and me, his arms around both of us like some kind of pornographic football huddle. The sight of it sent a bolt of lightning directly to my groin. I was hard in seconds, and when I shifted downward, I found out that Patrick was in a similar state.

"You got a bedroom, Patrick?" Alex asked. He was close enough for me to feel his breath on my face, and to see it ruffle Patrick's eyelashes. Patrick opened his eyes and nodded, a dazed expression on his face. Alex stood up. "Happy birthday, honey." He winked at me and then he was gone. I could hear him opening various doors until he gave a squeal of excitement, and I assumed he'd found the bedroom. That, or he was really, really into Patrick's collection of little shell-shaped bathroom soaps.

"Are you okay with this?" Patrick slid his hand up my arm. He was wearing his fake Rolex, the one I got him for Valentine's Day off a guy in an alley near Times Square.

"What about you?"

"I asked you first."

"Yeah, but you're the romantic." As evidenced by his Blu-Ray collection. "Anyway, I've already done it with Alex. It's no thrill for me." The idea of Patrick *and* Alex, though, that was an interesting prospect.

Patrick looked at me for a long time, like he suspected there was something I wasn't telling him and he thought he could figure out through some kind of telepathy. Finally, he squeezed my shoulder and led me into the bedroom.

Alex was already naked by the time we got there, stretched out on the navy blue comforter atop Patrick's king-sized bed. The bedroom was too small for it, and we had to inch our way in. Alex's cock was half-hard, lifting up against the hopelessly cheesy yin-and-yang tattoo on his belly that was going to look pretty stupid when he was fat and fifty. He stroked

himself while Patrick pulled me close and slipped his hands under my clothes, trailing them up my chest until he pushed my T-shirt off over my head. I got to work on his belt, and within seconds we were all naked.

Personally, I had no clue what to do next. I didn't think Patrick had much of an idea, either, but Alex was there to stage manage us. "Get over here," he ordered, although we were already mere inches away. Patrick moved first, sitting on the bed beside Alex. Alex rolled over until his face was in Patrick's lap. I couldn't see what he did then, but the way Patrick's eyes rolled back into his head made me think he wasn't reciting the lyrics to *America the Beautiful* down there.

"Fuck," Patrick groaned. He only ever swore when he was seriously turned on and that, in turn, got me going like one hell of a horny motherfucking son of a bitch. So to speak. I climbed onto the bed on the other side of Patrick. Alex had to shift over a little before I could get all the way on. I leaned into Patrick, kissing my way down his neck and across his shoulders. Alex raised a hand and fumbled around in my lap for a moment before taking hold of my cock and squeezing hard enough to make me gasp.

Always a multi-tasker, Alex started to jack me off while he sucked Patrick. I could have happily ridden that wave all the way back to shore, but Patrick had other plans. "Wait." He shifted, and Alex raised his head. His mouth was strawberry red and a thin layer of spittle coated his chin, shining in the fading light from the open blinds. Patrick ran a hand through his hair and looked at me. "I want you to fuck him." I blinked, a little surprised he was so blunt about it. The heat in his eyes would have swept away any doubts, though, even if I'd had them. I didn't. "And I want to fuck you," he added.

"Jesus." Even Alex's usually jaded expression disappeared, replaced by a wide-eyed, lip-licking, throat-clearing excitement that mirrored my feelings perfectly. "Tell me again where you found this guy, honey?"

I didn't answer him. I was too busy reaching for Patrick's little beneath-the-bed stash of supplies.

Alex was a good fuck. He always had been. He was a good friend, too, for all of his irritating qualities, and he cinched his legs around my waist, threw back his head, and moaned like he was getting it from some horse-hung porn star when I pushed inside him. That would have been encouragement enough, but Patrick wasn't about to sit idly by. He

watched for a moment, his breathing shallow and ragged, then slicked himself up while I pounded into Alex. I felt Patrick's hands on my back, and then on my ass. When the first finger dipped inside, I jerked forward so hard, Alex's head collided with Patrick's headboard.

"Shit!" Alex took a hand off my shoulder and rubbed at his head.

"Sorry." I winced in sympathy.

"What?" Patrick leaned in to look over my shoulder. The hairs on his chest rubbed against my sweat-slicked back and, all at once, I didn't care about Alex's head in the slightest. Not that I'd really cared all that much in the first place.

"Fuck, Patrick...." I said, which was both comment and command. He grunted, a strange sound coming from a usually articulate man.

"Come on," Alex snapped, although I don't know whether it was directed at Patrick or at me. Patrick seemed to take heed. I felt him position himself, then a second later he pushed inside.

I'll be honest. It wasn't the first time I'd been in the middle of a threesome. Alex and I got up to some crazy shit in college, and since coming to New York I'd dated a few guys with somewhat unusual tastes. It had never felt like this before. Feeling Patrick behind me and Alex beneath me, hearing Patrick panting in my ear and seeing Alex reaching up to grab the headboard with both hands, it all conspired to raise me higher and higher until I came so hard, I felt like I'd been shot into another galaxy.

When I regained some semblance of consciousness, I opened my eyes to see Patrick slumped on the bed beside me, his body sprawled on top of mine and his head resting on my back. I raised my face from the pillow, but I couldn't see Alex.

I reached back and gently shoved Patrick to one side so I could roll onto my back. He shifted, snuggling into my side and sighing into my shoulder. I felt a wet smack as he kissed me. I raised an arm to draw him closer.

"That was...." Patrick sounded like I felt: dazed.

"Pretty good, huh?" I agreed. His hair was damp with sweat. His skin felt sticky against mine.

“Hm.” Patrick tilted his head up, peering at me with his big eyes. I heard someone flush the toilet and used my powers of deduction to assume it was Alex. “I like your friend.”

“Everyone does.” He was irritating as hell, but he was universally likeable. One of the paradoxes of Alex.

“But I love you.” Patrick pushed himself up. He leaned over to kiss me on the mouth in a way that was quintessentially Patrick and me: soft and hard, Brooks Brothers and Converse sneakers, Wall Street tycoon and bicycle messenger. Sappy romantic comedies and hot-as-hell best friend threeways, all rolled into one fucking amazing package.

“Good,” I said. I lay back down and waited to see whether Alex would come back to bed.

He did, about five minutes later, smelling like the body wash Patrick kept in the bathroom. Patrick was already snoring, his head resting on my shoulder. Alex stood in the doorway.

“Should I get going?”

I looked at him. We hadn’t seen each other in a very long time, and he was my best friend. “What do you mean? We haven’t even had dinner yet.” I held up an arm. He crawled onto the bed beside me and closed his eyes.

G.S. WILEY is a writer, reader, sometime painter, and semi-avid scrapbooker who lives in Canada.

Visit G.S.'s web site at <http://www.gswiley.com/>.

SNOWBOUND

Jana Denardo

HIS arm ached. Caleb fought to drag his old-fashioned sword around in time to fend off the demon's razor claws. He and his teammates hadn't imagined there would be quite this many of the beasts when they had been asked to help. They were already a man down and trying to get back to their base. Li had died three weeks ago, leaving Temple without a partner.

A gun roared, turning the demon's head into a fine, bluish mist that sprayed wetly over Caleb. As the beast fell, Caleb saw Temple smirk at him. He was doing just fine without a partner, a real product of their time when it came to using his Tommy gun.

Hearing a subtle whoosh of air, Caleb turned in time to see his own partner's chakram whip by, taking off the arm of the last of the demons. It would help if the demons looked as monstrous as everyone thought they did. Some, in fact, did, but this last one looked like a young lady shrieking in pain. Caleb ended it for her.

"I hate it when they look human," Caleb muttered, his eyes scanning the dilapidated one-time miners' bar for any lingering demons. The tables, mostly broken to kindling now, had remained in the place. The alcohol was long gone, thanks to prohibition. He wondered what the demons were doing in the bar in the first place. Deserted buildings did make for good places to hide, he supposed.

"Won't have to worry about it long," Agni, his partner, muttered, retrieving one of his chakrams. Caleb never could figure out how the young Indian managed to whirl those edged discs without removing his own head by accident.

At Agni's fatalistic pronouncement, Caleb glanced down at his feet. The female demon he had killed had begun her quick putrescence. With a sickly, organic smell, she dissolved into a slick, reddish-brown ooze that promptly dried up into a powder. Caleb knew he should be grateful for it. At least they didn't have to hide the bodies. Turning from the sight, Caleb pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and swabbed off his sword. Demon blood was the devil's own to get off once it dried.

"I'd like to know why so many demons have been cropping up lately." Temple leaned on the bar that now bore signs of his Tommy gun blasts. He pretended to be unaffected, but the way his chest jerked and heaved gave him away. "What next?" Temple slung back his auburn hair. Unlike most men their age, he rarely wore it oiled. He swore it made him look too much like a popular marionette in Barnum's Circus.

Caleb had to admit Temple was right. On the other hand, unoiled, the color and appearance of Temple's hair would fit right in on an Irish setter. Temple's overly friendly, enthusiastic personality completed the image. "We should be done here," Caleb said. "We cleaned the nest."

"We hope," Agni huffed. "Regulars never know how many demons are around. They just know people are acting strangely or 'bad things' are happening."

Sheathing his sword, Caleb nodded. If everyone could see the demons, there would be no need for their Order. The trouble was, the very people who called them fearing ghosts or demons or fae folk couldn't provide much in the way of useful data. They could tell the Soldiers of the Sun the phenomenon they witnessed and whom they might suspect, but more often than not, the demons weren't the strange old woman in the falling down house at the end of the block. No, they were the upstanding men whose place was in perfect order, hiding in plain view. "I guess we should get to a phone and call headquarters. They might have something else for us to do in this area before we head back."

"At least we're not far from headquarters now." Temple reloaded his Tommy gun, just in case.

"So, where do we find a telephone up here?" Agni headed for the door, which hung now by one bent hinge. He stopped to scoop up his fedora, lost in the fight. "And just where is the safe house from here?"

“How should I know?” Caleb shrugged. “Though you would think we would, since headquarters is over by the college.”

“That’s Oakland, this is Mount Washington,” Temple reminded him. They were both suburbs of Pittsburgh but hills and rivers divided the land like a pie cut by a shaky hand. “They barely speak English up here.”

“True. Guess we’d better go find the safe house. Who speaks German?” Caleb knew the question’s answer already. None of them.

“We don’t need to talk to too many people,” Agni said, not that he ever actually did. “Just enough to get to a phone. General Taglioferro can tell us where the safe house is up here on the hill.”

Temple paused on the street, canting his face skyward. Fat wet flakes slapped his cheeks. “Hey, snow. I love snow.”

Agni huffed, rolling his eyes at the young soldier. “I’ve never understood how anyone could possibly like the cold.”

“That’s because you have a stunted sense of fun,” Temple replied.

“You’re a child.”

Caleb ignored them as they fell back into their usual pattern of bickering. After two years, he was well practiced in disregarding them. He thought that there should be a phone in the general store. The proprietor would probably let them place a call. Most people knew the Soldiers and what they did. Many were eager to help. They knew that without the Soldiers they would be at the mercy of the demons. Now, if he could only remember where he’d seen the general store.

The thick snow began to cling to Caleb’s eyelashes as he walked. His partners moved in his wake, still arguing. Given how loud they were getting, they had better hope that the demons were all dead. Temple loved shoving sticks into beehives and stirring wildly. When Li had been alive, he had functioned as a buffer between Agni and the much more extroverted Temple.

Spotting the store down the street, Caleb broke into a run. When the trio stumbled inside, shivering, the clerk eyed them, wary as a rabbit before the fox. The sight of their deep blue uniforms did little to relax the man. Of course, that probably had a lot to do with the sword on Caleb’s back and the chopper on Temple’s. The man’s knuckles were white

against the sheets of the newspaper he had been reading.

“Can we use your horn to call our General?” Caleb asked and the man was more than willing to let them use his blower.

“It is really coming down,” Agni muttered, peering out the window as Caleb waited on the operator to connect his call.

“Supposed to be a blizzard,” the clerk offered, and Agni groaned.

“What are our chances of getting over to the University of Pittsburgh?” Temple asked the man, who shook his head.

“I wouldn’t bank on it.” He sounded as disappointed as they were. Caleb wondered if the man feared they’d camp out on his floor. While he waited for the operators to do their thing, Caleb glanced at the newspaper to see what was happening in the final weeks of 1931: another article on the tax revenue losses thanks to prohibition, something about what Gandhi was doing in India that might interest Agni and a big article on a murder in the Hooverville tucked in between Penn and Liberty avenues in the middle of Pittsburgh.

A melodious voice came over the line, dragging Caleb’s attention away from the paper, “Preston & Wyncott Funeral Home, how may we help you?”

Caleb grinned at the sound of Viola’s voice giving the code words. Many a prospective Soldier had turned up at the Pittsburgh branch, imagining how pretty a muffin Viola was, only to learn that her voice didn’t match the rest of her. Now a new grandmother, Viola had been one of those opera canaries until her daughter proved able to see demons. When she retired from the stage, Viola of the beautiful phone voice became secretary to General Taglioferro. “It’s Caleb, doll. We were sidetracked here in Mount Washington but the snow is coming down. It’s probably not going to be possible for us to make tracks back to the school tonight. Do we have a place here?”

“Let me check, baby-face.”

After a few minutes, Caleb had their orders. He slipped the clerk a fiver for the call then headed back out into the snow. He noticed Agni had bought some fresh food. “The house isn’t far from here. Viola says it should be well stocked. We’re to bivouac there until the snow passes.”

“Can we hurry? I don’t like this weather,” Agni huffed.

“Why don’t you ask for a transfer back to India or something?” Temple twirled in the snow. The Tommy gun on his back looked completely out of place for such a childlike action.

Caleb let them bump their gums while he counted house numbers. Like many homes in Mount Washington, the safe house was tall, deep and skinny. Yellow smoke smelling like the devil’s farts wafted along the street from all the coal that had been mined out from under the town, which had once been known as Coal Hill. Snow darkened, mixing with the ash.

Inside, the house wore an eerie veil, like the gloom of a tomb: cold as one too. Agni flipped on the lights. At least this place had electricity. Sometimes the safe houses didn’t. There wouldn’t be anything in the ice chest, but they had fresh supplies and there would be canned goods. They set aside their weapons and Agni immediately headed for the fireplace. There was wood stacked next to it, and somewhere there would be a coal-burning stove.

“Caleb, why don’t you put away the food? I’ll go run the pipes and knock the rust out of them, provided this place has indoor plumbing. I don’t want to be running to an outhouse in this,” Temple said.

“May I remind you about the time you kicked over the thunder pot the last time we had no plumbing?” Agni flashed a grin back over his shoulder.

Temple curled his lip. “No, you may not. I’ll look to see if they have anything we can change into. My uniform has icky stuff on it.”

Caleb didn’t want to think about it. Muscles sore, he dragged into the kitchen to see what they had here. He could hear Temple bitching about the fact he couldn’t see a radio anywhere. Heaven help them if the redhead missed an episode of *Sherlock Holmes*. The ghostly echo of the pipes confirmed there was plumbing.

A once-over of the kitchen proved that they wouldn’t starve, so he headed back into the living room to get out of his stained jacket and boots, whether or not Temple found anything in the closets. The fire would feel nice too. At this point, he wasn’t sure if he’d still be awake by dinner.

Agni was already resting on the floral-patterned couch, boots and jacket off, stockinged feet up on the arm of the furniture. “We’ve been

on the move for weeks. All I wanted to do was get home.”

“I know.” Caleb flopped on the matching chair. “Close enough, I guess. We just have to wait out the storm.”

“Yes!” Temple’s cry cut through the house. He jogged down, completely changed into dungarees and a sweater too big for his lean form. He clutched a Zenith radio in his arms. He promptly set it on the table, plugging it in. “Plenty of clothing upstairs. You should find something passable,” he said, his attention entirely on tuning the device. “Now, hopefully there’s some bathtub gin in this place and we’ll be set.”

“You are aware gin is illegal, right?” Agni cocked up an eyebrow at Temple.

“You’re a wet sock. What harm is a little giggle juice going to do?”

Caleb got to his feet wearily, giving his partner’s leg a slap to get him moving before he could really start arguing with Temple. With any luck, there would be good heating, not that he was opposed to them all sleeping in a heap in front of the downstairs’ fire. Still, he longed for a real bed and some decent sleep. With the storm outside, he might actually not have anything to do for once. Caleb would be glad of the rest.

CALEB stumbled into the bathroom without even a glance outside to see how much snow had come down. A variety of toiletries had been stocked, and as he used the toothbrush he had unwrapped last night, Caleb studied his reflection. His sandy hair stuck up all over, but he decided pomading it into submission could wait until after breakfast. It wasn’t as if the guys would care if he was a mess.

By the time Caleb got downstairs, Agni already had the fire going again. He was sitting with his legs curled into a painful-looking lotus position as he meditated on the dancing flames. Caleb didn’t know how his friend managed not to sweat to death sitting so close like that. Apparently, he took his Fire god name to heart.

The young Hindu paid no attention to Caleb, and for his part, Caleb thought it was way too early to be doing any sort of training. He stumbled into the kitchen, where Temple stood at the counter holding a

coffee grinder in one hand and a tin of coffee in the other, seemingly unable to figure out how the two items worked together. Temple hadn't even pulled on a shirt, his white skin threatening to blind Caleb. Goose pimples stood out over his shoulders.

"Are you going to make coffee or just stand there?"

Temple mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like "Go to hell," but he set the grinder down so he could open the coffee tin. While Temple turned the hand crank, filling the air with the perfume of coffee, Caleb located the coffee pot and filled it with water. The pipes moaned ominously and the flow didn't come on full strength.

"We might want to turn the taps on to make sure the pipes don't freeze."

"It just might. Have you looked outside?"

Caleb shook his head. "I was saving that for when I'm actually awake."

"Smart move."

Caleb tapped the coffee into the percolator and put it on the stove before he headed for the door.

Temple stopped him. "You're not helping with breakfast?"

"It's Agni's turn to cook."

"Oh no. You leave that crazy man where he is." Temple caught Caleb's arm, hauling him around. Caleb noticed the cold made Temple's nipples jut forth and he knew he shouldn't be looking at those shell pink, pale pearls of flesh. "The last time Agni cooked something, it burned going down and burned coming out the other end."

"But his palak paneer is superb." Caleb grinned as Temple's lips thinned. "Besides, he doesn't have access to his full spice rack here."

"I don't trust that man not to have curry secreted on his person. He probably uses it to gas demons." Temple crossed his arms. "I'll make scrambled eggs and bacon, but not until after I've had coffee."

"Fair enough."

While the coffee perked, Caleb got down the cups, and Temple fetched the sugar cubes.

“Does Agni like milk in his?” The redhead glanced out the window. “I’m thinking we ought to conserve the milk a little.”

“Not a bad idea.” Caleb leaned against the sink, staring out the window. “It really snowed.”

“Check this out.” Temple tugged open the back door and stepped into a mud room. The door beyond revealed a tiny yard heaped with snow. Icicles hung off the metal railing that hemmed in broken-edged cement steps. The last several were invisible under the snow. The glitter of the sun filled the yard with the queen’s jewels. “If you’ll help, we can knock Agni around with a bunch of snowballs.” Temple headed back inside, shivering. “He always says I need to practice my throwing weapons.”

“You know how that would end.” Caleb followed him in. “Agni would knock you down, stuff snow in your pants, and leave you buried head first.”

“You have a violent partner.”

“This is a violent world,” Caleb muttered, and Temple’s expression fell.

The redhead turned away. “I need coffee. I’m cold.”

“A shirt might help.”

Temple snorted. “So it would.”

While he went upstairs, Caleb poured three cups of coffee. He fixed his and Agni’s cups. He couldn’t remember how much sugar Temple liked; too much, that he knew.

He set the cup for Agni on the coffee table and settled on the couch. The fire felt good. Though he didn’t want to admit it, Caleb was glad to have such a thick snow cover. He doubted there would be any way of getting off the hill. The Duquesne Incline would be frozen over, the funicular train too tricky to run in the inclement weather, and the roads all but impossible to traverse. Agni probably wouldn’t agree, but Caleb looked forward to a forced vacation. It would be good to relax. His muscles wouldn’t know what happened to them.

Temple thumped back down stairs and got his coffee, flopping down next to Caleb. He sipped the dark brew, moaning as he did so. “I

so needed that.”

“We’ll have to call in.” Caleb’s gaze flicked to the bay window, which was kissed with snow flowers. “If the lines aren’t down.”

“Good point.”

Agni stretched suddenly, his legs unfurling. He picked himself up off the ground. Snagging his coffee, he settled on a chair. “Are we going to contact the locals here about any other problems they might be having, if we can’t get back to base?”

“You even try and I’ll break your legs,” Temple grumbled. “Nature sent us time off. Don’t you dare argue with it.”

Agni snorted. “At least attempt to put in a little martial practice. The basement has mats. You can throw each other around, or perhaps I could have the honors.”

Temple’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t like that smile of yours. Why don’t you get on the horn and call in, Caleb, since your partner will probably just tell me I have to go out in the snow no matter what they actually say.”

Agni’s white smile grew. “Would I lie to you?”

“If you thought I’d freeze, probably.”

Agni chuckled. “Then I’ll go start breakfast.”

Temple waved a hand. “I’ll do it. You just keep meditating or something. Find something for us to do here.”

“There is a nice library down the hall,” Agni gestured while Caleb went to dial the phone. “You have your radio, provided there’s anything but static. And, of course, we could be practicing.”

Caleb cupped his hand over the phone’s mouthpiece. “Temple was talking about playing in the snow.”

“He would. I don’t like being cold.”

Temple got up, cradling his coffee. “Stay inside and read. Any type of relaxation would be good for you.” He rocked his head back and forth, trying to crack his neck. “For all of us. We’ve been moving and fighting since before Li died. I haven’t even had the chance to just sit and think about my partner being gone.”

Agni's amused expression turned around one-eighty. "I know. Li was a good soldier, a good man."

"He was a great partner." Temple trembled. "I'll get the eggs started."

Caleb felt a chill whisper its way across the room as he waited on the operator to connect him. None of them had really ever talked about losing Li, not since those first few days. Caleb was distracted away from the stab of pain inside him when Viola answered the phone.

He relayed the official order to stay put and relax while they downed the well-prepared breakfast. Afterwards, the young men returned to their places in front of the fire with another round of coffee.

"I guess we should poke our noses outside, just to be sure no one needs help. And I don't mean with the demons," Agni said.

"You looking for little old ladies to help dig out of their homes?" Temple blew across his coffee cup. "I thought you didn't like the cold."

"I don't, but helping others is good for your karma," Agni said. "Afterwards, I am going to take time out and just find something good to read and relax."

"Pinch me, Caleb, your partner wants to relax. It must be a dream."

"Of course, I could take some time to kick your ass around the house first." Agni's lips parted into something too feral to be called a smile.

Temple stuck his tongue out, then nudged Caleb with an elbow. "Once breakfast settles, you and I can go work out a little. I wouldn't want to take your partner away from his reading."

"If you keep pulling on the tiger's tail, Temple, don't come crying to me when the tiger bites," Caleb replied, earning his own stuck-out tongue. Temple's tongue was long and curled. Caleb almost wished he hadn't seen that.

They settled into comfortable silence while drinking their coffee. Agni did herd them outside at one point, but was content to come back inside quickly when no neighbors appeared to require any help. Most people were probably satisfied to stay indoors or maybe shovel a walkway to the woodpile. Caleb handled that one for them.

To his surprise, his partner actually went to the library to find something to read, leaving him and Temple to go downstairs. Caleb didn't mind. His toes were numb, and he could use a little exercise to get the blood pumping.

It wasn't long before Caleb knew Agni was right about at least one thing: Temple really needed to work on close combat. He had gotten too reliant on his gun. Caleb lost track of how many times he took the redhead to the mat, but in doing so, he allowed himself to become complacent. Before he knew it, Temple had him down instead. The redhead swung over top of him, resting his buttocks on Caleb's belly.

He pinned Caleb's wrists to the floor. "About damn time," Temple panted, sweat sticking strands of his auburn hair to his cheeks.

"You needed the practice," Caleb replied, wiggling to get free, but Temple wouldn't let him.

The redhead slid down further on Caleb's torso. "Huh? I'm not talking fighting. I meant this." Temple leaned down, kissing Caleb, taking him by surprise. Temple caught Caleb's bottom lip, sucking on it before letting go.

"Temple! What do you think you're doing?" Caleb tried to dislodge him, but the way Temple rocked on him was far too distracting for him to get any steam behind his movements.

"I would have thought that was clear." Temple brushed his lips to Caleb's again. "I know you and Agni...." He shrugged. "I didn't think it was exclusive."

Caleb felt fire building in his face and somewhere much lower and more dangerous. "It's... we've never really talked about that. It doesn't matter. We're in a frigid basement. Get off me, Temple."

"But I think you like me sitting on you." Temple pouted, grinding down against Caleb, who moaned. He could see Temple's arousal pushing against the young man's fly, could feel his own building in the confines of his trousers. "In fact, I know you do. We're snowed in. It's going to be a long day. Can you think of a better way to liven it up? Agni can join us."

"That's just like you, Temple." Agni's voice sounded from the top of the basement stairs. "All impulse and acting on instinct."

Grimacing, Caleb tried to catch a look at his partner, wondering how this was going to be taken.

“Am I in trouble?” Temple grinned up at Agni with childlike guile playing over his face. Caleb could almost believe the man was innocent of everything.

Caleb toppled Temple off of him, struggling into a sitting position. His cock deflated almost instantly and he couldn’t quite meet Agni’s eyes.

“Not yet,” Agni replied. “Very interesting fighting style you have, Temple.”

“It is of limited use, sadly, but when I get to employ it....” Temple’s smile went sunnier.

Agni shook his head, uttering a snort. “Since you asked, Caleb is free to make his own choices.” Agni disappeared from the doorway.

Caleb sighed, getting to his feet. He didn’t say anything to Temple as he followed his partner into the den. Agni was already sitting back down on a comfortable-looking chair, book in hand. Caleb simply stared at his partner.

Agni’s nose wrinkled. “What?”

“I didn’t think Temple was going to do that.”

Sighing, Agni set the book aside, getting back to his feet. “I don’t mind.” He rested his strong callused hand on Caleb’s shoulder. “Our lives, they don’t lend themselves to exclusive relationships, no matter what our tastes in lovers might be, conventional or not so. We’re partners until the order says we’re not.”

Caleb wanted to interrupt him there, to protest that he wouldn’t let the order change partners on him, but that was beyond his control.

“We are what we are.” Agni shrugged. “Our lives... too short. I wouldn’t hold anyone back from experiencing everything they wanted to.”

“You’re saying you wouldn’t mind if I had said yes to Temple?”

“I wouldn’t, nor would I blame you. Temple does have a reputation. It would surely be fun to find out if it’s deserved or if he’s

just highly overrated.” Agni smirked. “Skinny thing like him, probably the latter.”

Caleb choked back a laugh, especially when he heard a disgruntled noise coming from just beyond the doorway. That would teach Temple to eavesdrop. “I just don’t want you to be hurt or angry.”

“I’m neither.” Agni patted Caleb’s shoulder. For the emotionally reserved young man, that was the equivalent of a hug.

“Temple did offer to invite you into the fun.” Caleb grinned, not sure he could imagine Agni doing something like that. Then again, Agni had shown Caleb the Kamasutra and was pretty sure two guys and a girl were in some of those pictures. Could three guys be that much different?

“I heard him. He’d like that.” Agni huffed, sitting back down. “He shouldn’t get his hopes up too much.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for that sort of thing,” Caleb said, rubbing his chin. Ready or not, the images tumbled about in his mind, enticing him in spite of himself.

“I’d be more worried if Temple is ready. He can be such a boy, and that sort of thing takes a certain level of maturity.”

Caleb cocked his head toward the door but heard nothing. Temple must have moved off because Caleb didn’t see him letting that go unchallenged. “I can’t help considering it.”

“I understand. Threesomes can be fun.” Agni hid his face behind his book so Caleb couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. It was always so hard to tell with him. “I’ll think on it myself.”

“Oh... okay.”

When Agni didn’t elaborate or even lower the book, Caleb figured the conversation to be over. He wasn’t even sure if Temple would still be in the mood, or if he would be miffed at Agni’s slight. He found the redhead sitting in front of the fire. Temple looked up at him with a little pout riding his lower lip.

“He doesn’t like me, does he?”

Caleb sat next to him on the couch. “Who? Agni? He likes you. He would utterly ignore you if you didn’t like you, trust me. You just have very different personalities.” He jumped as the whistle of a tea kettle he

hadn't known was on the stove sounded. He heard Agni get up to turn it off.

"Agni is just far more reserved than you are."

"That's putting it kindly. Reminds me of the men in my family." Temple looked away, but not quickly enough to hide a strange flicker of melancholy.

"You never talk about them. All I know is your family has been fighting the demons for centuries, probably as long as the Templar Knights have been around."

"They're who I'm named for," Temple replied, digging his finger into the cushion he leaned against.

"I always wondered why you didn't join the Templars," Agni said from the doorway.

Temple twisted on the couch, an angry look Caleb had never seen before flashing over his face. "To piss my dad off. You know I can fight. I've been trained since I was a kid, and I think sometimes that's why I'm *not* as good at some of the hand-to-hand stuff as you and Caleb. Inner rebellion." He slumped down on the couch. "I know it only hurts me, but... you have no idea. He'd beat us, my brothers and I, if we weren't performing to our best abilities. Or if he felt I wasn't doing what I should have been. Basically, if I was being myself, I got hit, but I *like* me. I like being light hearted and fun. I'm not naturally reserved and stoic like you, Agni. I never have been."

Caleb rested his hand on Temple's knee. "That is no reason to hit anyone."

"Yeah." Temple let his head drop back against the couch pillow. "Dad left a lot to be desired. He let Granddad...." His face twisted up. "I wonder if Granddad used to do stuff like that to him too."

Caleb parsed that cryptic statement, his eyes widening. "Temple...."

The redhead held up a hand. "It's okay. I left. I found someplace better to be. I like being a Solider of the Sun. My family is so mad, I'm pretty sure I've been disowned. Mom has to sneak letters to me via one of her friends. Hell, Dad's been mad his whole life that non-Christians can see demons. I've made sure to send letters home saying I had a

Buddhist partner and I'm working with a Hindu."

Agni sniffed. "I'm sure he's proud."

"Oh, yes. When I said you remind me of him, I didn't mean in a bad way, Agni. Sometimes Dad's seriousness is necessary for what we do. That's why I didn't argue when you suggested a workout. It was a good idea, but I also know that if I had said no, you wouldn't have forced the point. Dad would have."

"I have no real interest in telling you what to do. It was merely a suggestion to kill time," Agni said, then stiffened as something moaned outside.

"Please let that be the wind," Caleb muttered as they all went to the door, none of them dressed for the cold. He and Temple stood on the front porch while Agni went to the back, casting about. The moaning sounded again, slapping Caleb with snow. Satisfied it was just the wind and not a demon, they went back inside. Caleb heard Agni in the kitchen, then he reappeared with tea cup in hand before heading into the den.

"So, he's really going to just go read?" Temple asked.

"He said he wasn't sure if you weren't too much of a boy-child for such a grown up thing as taking on both of us." Caleb chuckled, flopping back down on the couch.

"As if he would know."

"You've obviously never seen some of his books... I'm pretty sure he knows," Caleb replied.

"So I'm too skinny and clueless?" Temple pouted, then leaned down, pushing his lips to Caleb's.

Caleb pushed him back a little. "Temple, the curtains are open. You know the Order only looks the other way if we don't create a scene."

Temple caught Caleb's wrist, hauling him up, a knowing look on his face. The Order didn't really care who the soldiers chose as lovers, but all too many places would never approve of two men together. The Templar Knights surely wouldn't have, and Caleb didn't doubt that was another reason for Temple to sign on with a different, more accepting, group. "Let's go upstairs, then," Temple suggested, tugging on Caleb's

arm gently.

Caleb took a quick glance back at the den, then decided Agni had been very serious in how he felt. He wasn't going to mind. He followed Temple up to the young man's room. Temple pulled the curtains: second stories were not impervious to bored neighbors staring out. As the room darkened, Caleb felt himself beginning to get aroused just from the anticipation of something new. Until he had met Agni, he had tried to repress this side of himself. Caleb didn't have the experience Temple did, even though he was a year older.

Temple said nothing, simply pulled Caleb closer and sealed his mouth over the blond's. Caleb slipped his arms around Temple in turn, exploring Temple's mouth with his tongue. Temple's body pressed tight against Caleb's. Somehow, Temple managed to slide a hand between them, smoothing it down Caleb's body to cup his growing erection.

"If I knew how much you wanted me, Caleb, I'd have tried something sooner." Temple grinned, guiding Caleb backwards.

"Don't be a brat, Temple."

Temple pushed Caleb back onto the bed, jumping on beside him. "You like me when I'm a brat."

Caleb ran his fingers through Temple's soft red hair. "Do I really?"

"If I weren't a brat, would we be here?" Temple tugged off his own shirt.

"I suppose you have a point." Caleb reached up, thumbing one of Temple's nipples, feeling it harden between them. He gave the pearl of flesh a gentle tug, making Temple squirm. Maneuvering a bit, Caleb trailed his tongue over Temple's collarbone. His skin was so unlike Agni's, which was dark like cinnamon. Agni looked as warm as Temple did glacial. Caleb could see the pale blue netting of blood vessels through the young man's skin.

Temple caught the hem of Caleb's shirt, stripping it off, and then trailed a finger down Caleb's belly before caressing his crotch. The redhead's mouth conquered Caleb's again as he undid the front of Caleb's trousers. Caleb arched into his touch. Temple wormed his hand into Caleb's boxers, stroking him.

Caleb yanked Temple's trousers and underwear down over the

subtle curve of the man's hip. Temple's cock was a shocking shade of purple, so unlike the deeper tones Caleb was used to. It looked almost painful. Caleb caressed it gently at first, then more forcefully as Temple pressed into his hand. A pretty rose color blossomed over Temple's pale chest as his whole body began reacting to Caleb's touch.

Squirming away, Temple stretched out on the bed and then pulled Caleb closer. His tongue pressed against the head of Caleb's shaft where it peeked out of his boxers. Temple sucked at the tip like a greedy kid with candy as he tried to catch hold of Caleb's trouser band. His mouth only let go when necessary to get Caleb's pants down.

Temple pressed Caleb back against the bedding, his fingers toying with Caleb's goose-pimpled skin. The bedroom air was cool, but their flesh was warm. While Temple sucked him down, Caleb feathered caresses over Temple's shoulders and played with his hair, making the young man groan.

Letting Caleb go long enough to get the man's pants off entirely, Temple renewed his oral conquering. He was a virtual Caesar at it. It took a moment for Caleb to realize the ragged sounds he was hearing were actually his own breathing. Caleb's back arched as Temple sucked on one of his testicles, his hand milking along Caleb's shaft.

Suddenly, Temple moved, his body skimming up over Caleb's. His tongue flicked over Caleb's lips, then pressed between them. His hips rocked against Caleb's. Working his hand between them, Temple stroked their cocks together. It didn't take more than a few hard caresses to make Caleb spill.

It took a moment for his senses to come back to him. Caleb shifted his languid body around so he could take Temple deep into this mouth. Caleb could tell Temple was already close. Lips and tongue easily brought him off. Temple curled up with Caleb, grinning. "So... did I live up to my reputation?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure." Caleb tapped a finger to Temple's lip. "I might need more empirical evidence."

Temple chuckled. "We have all afternoon."

“IT’S snowing again,” Agni muttered, staring out the bay window. He had another cup of tea in his hand and if he wanted to know anything about Caleb’s encounter with Temple, he obviously wasn’t about to ask. Caleb wasn’t sure if he should even bother to bring it up. “Temple, I thought you wanted to go outside and play.”

Temple didn’t bother looking up from where he was fiddling with the radio dial. “It’s getting dark. You go play. I’m tired and it’s nice and warm in here.”

Agni snorted at him. “You? Tired? Should I be surprised?”

“Just read your book,” Temple huffed. “You passed on the glories that are found here.” Swinging up off the chair, the redhead smoothed a hand down his chest.

“Was there room in his bed for you and his ego, Caleb?”

“Barely.” Caleb couldn’t suppress a grin.

Temple stuck his tongue out, making Caleb consider going over and putting the plump, pink appendage to better use. Suddenly swing music blared out of the static Temple had been dialing through, making him grin. “That’s better. I want to dance.”

“Must you do that here?” Agni asked. “I was listening to the orchestra before you barged in.”

“You go be boring somewhere else.” Temple waved him off. “I’m going to dance and this is the only radio, so...”

Agni cast a look at Caleb. “I’m regretting not taking him up on his earlier offer.” When Temple perked up, Agni added, “On going out in the snow. I could have buried him up to his eyes. Maybe that would have kept him out of trouble.”

“I honestly doubt it,” Caleb replied as Temple started gyrating to the music.

Agni lost interest in his book and his tea as he watched the redhead. Caleb knew the look in his partner’s dark eyes: honest amusement. “You look very silly dancing by yourself, Temple.”

Nonchalantly, Temple danced his way over to the bay window. He pulled the curtain shut then spun over to Caleb, yanking him up from the couch. “Dance with me.”

"I don't know how to swing," Caleb protested, stumbling after Temple.

"I'll teach you."

"I'm a horrible dancer."

"He really is," Agni put in.

"Nonsense, you're trainable," Temple assured him. "I've seen you fight. You know how to move. You just have to figure out how to do it to music."

"Don't blame me when you lose a toe," Caleb said, trying to find the beat in the wild music. He gave up and just let Temple spin him around.

Agni laughed, watching them. Temple managed to make the complicated dance steps look easy, but Caleb felt like he was wrestling a many-armed demon. The occasional seductive touches Temple lavished on him only served to help that image. Finally, Caleb managed to trip them both, and Temple ended up half over the back of the couch.

Temple buried his fingers in Agni's curls while he dangled over the couch, trying to drag the young man in for a kiss. Agni put his hand over Temple's face.

"Don't even think it."

"Come on, dance with me, Agni. You're right, your partner's awful. He's going to maim me." Temple pouted.

"I warned you," Caleb snorted.

"I'm busy, Temple." Agni hefted the book he hadn't been reading for a while.

Temple pushed it down, leaning in for that kiss, then froze. He cocked his head, listening intently. Caleb shut the radio off. The sounds of screams echoed loudly in the night. Cursing, the trio ran for the door where boots, winter gear and weapons waited for them.

Snowflakes combined with the gloaming to make seeing anything almost impossible. Caleb took the lead, heading up the hill toward the sound of the screams. He pounded past two blocks before reaching the crest. Down the street, the paralyzed Incline seemed to be the center of

unusual activity, or was it the small diner nearby? Caleb didn't think there were too many places open on a day like this. The screams became shriller, more frequent. Temple sped past Caleb, his Tommy gun tucked tight against his chest. With his long distance weapon, Temple was usually the first one into the fray. Of course, if anyone saw them, out of uniform as they were, they would probably take a fright just from seeing the weaponry.

"What the hell is that?" Temple asked as the first of the demons came into view.

"I have no idea," Agni said.

Caleb didn't, either. It wasn't a demon he had ever seen before. Most demons prefer to keep their human forms unless forced out, but this thing was anything but human. Seven feet tall, it seemed to be made out of snow. Icicles protruded from its head and along what Caleb assumed was its spine. To his horror, the thing wasn't alone. There were at least two others, which seemed to have several of the neighborhood kids trapped outside the Incline station.

Temple peppered the ground behind the demon, trying to lure it away from the kids. The demons lunged away from the kids, obviously in the mood for tougher prey. Caleb hated the kind that liked a good fight, but he was just as glad it provided a way to get the kids a path out of danger. With a clear shot now, Temple sprayed the closest demon with bullets. What looked like chunks of snow flew free but the thing's body heaved and pulsated, reaching out to collect its missing parts.

"Oh, shit," Temple spat.

"Who wants to bet edged weapons aren't going to fare any better?" Caleb asked, trying to decide on a better course of action.

Agni winged one of his chakrams at one of the demons, shearing off the back of its head. The icicle-like appendages clattered to the snowy ground. The monster shrieked but its head filled in rapidly, sans new icicles.

"This is really bad," Temple said. "Thoughts?"

"One," Caleb said, finding a street-side garbage can. While he didn't smoke, most of the soldiers carried matches just in case. Kicking the top off, he threw a couple lit matches down into the newspaper- and

trash-filled can. “Of course, it’s wet and not catching very well.”

“Temple, move it!” Agni cried.

Temple whipped around, seeing one of the things trying to come up behind him. The monsters moved as silent as snowfall. His gun sputtered, taking off the thing’s head. That only stopped it momentarily. It whipped out a white tentacle that took Temple off his feet, hurtling him over the edge of the cliff.

Caleb heard him scream, then heard the clatter of Temple’s gun banging its way down the hill. “Temple!” Caleb plunged his sword into the fire as the monster started using its tendrils to shake the Incline car.

“I don’t think he’s fallen,” Agni said, whipping a chakram at the approaching demons. “That thing wouldn’t care about the car.”

“Then we have to do something,” Caleb said, wishing his sword would heat up faster.

Nodding, Agni sent a chakram spinning into a nearby wooden fence slicing through one of the cross pieces. He shoved the wet wood into the fire. It sizzled and popped, but caught. Still, he let Caleb take the lead. Caleb was the best with close combat weapons. The demons had already dismissed the hunters as not worth their worry until Caleb sliced through the closest one. His hot blade spat and hissed its way through the creature’s bulk. The demon collapsed and dissolved into the snow, not rising again.

Caleb didn’t have time to relish his victory. Another of the things lurched after him. He took two the tentacles off with one hack, then plunged his blade forward before it cooled. Caleb didn’t wait for the thing to completely dissolve. He pelted toward the cliff edge where Agni pummeled the last of the demons. The thing had a tendril lapped over the cliff as if very intent on doing something even as the flaming bit of fence melted through it.

Caleb’s sword bit through the tentacle before he even looked to see what it was doing. Only then did he realize the demon had Temple hanging off the cliff by the neck, strangling him. Once the severed tentacle turned to powder, the young man was in free fall. Temple managed to grab hold of the Incline car. Terrified green eyes canted up at Caleb and Agni, who had finally finished off the demon and had dropped the burning fence piece.

“My hands are numb!” Temple croaked. “Help me!”

“We’ll get you,” Caleb promised, though he had no idea how.

“Here, boy,” someone called.

Caleb turned to see several townspeople coming their way. Obviously people had been lured out by the sounds of the fight. One of them had a length of rope. The man shrugged. “I thought maybe you could tie them up.”

“I’m glad you did,” Caleb said.

Agni insisted on being the one to go over the cliff. Caleb didn’t argue. Agni had the best upper arm strength of their group. Caleb helped the others anchor the rope, and when he heard Agni calling for him, he went to the edge to help Agni and Temple up over the cliff edge. Shaken and bruised, Temple said nothing but a few “thank-yous” to the crowd, which parted to let the soldiers through. Caleb lingered to talk to one of the city elders who had shown up.

By the time he reached the safe house, he found Temple sitting on the couch.

“Here.” Agni pressed a hand towel wrapped around a few regular icicles from the awning outside against Temple’s shoulder.

“Icicles? Really?” Temple grumbled, his neck ringed with fresh bruises.

“You’ll survive,” Agni said.

“I almost died,” Temple replied hotly. His face fell, losing what little color it had. His next words whispered out, “I almost died.”

“But you didn’t.” Caleb sat next to Temple. He put a hand on Temple’s knee. “You survived.”

Temple shook, unable to reply. As the redhead’s trembling grew stronger, Agni sat on the other side of him as well, hemming Temple between him and Caleb. Caleb wrapped an arm around Temple.

“I almost died, just like Li,” Temple whispered again.

“We all might,” Agni said.

Temple bobbed his head frantically. “You want to know why I act the fool so often, Agni? I know my life will be short. All of ours will be.

I'm just trying to get in as much fun as possible."

"It's not a bad idea," Agni agreed.

"And we don't all have to die young. Your father has made it pretty long," Caleb said.

Temple let out a bitter laugh. "We need a break. I think I'll feel better if we just had a little time off."

"Even getting snowed in didn't help us much," Caleb replied.

"That's our luck," Agni said. "Together, we are strong, Temple. When we get back to headquarters, we'll put in for a rest. They need to find you a partner anyhow."

"Yeah." Temple rested his head back on the couch pillows. "Can we sit quietly for a while?"

"We can stay with you as long as you need," Caleb assured him.

"I'm going to need you for a long time," Temple muttered, leaning his head on Caleb's shoulder.

Agni got up. It surprised Caleb; he knew emotional scenes made his partner uncomfortable, but Temple really had almost died. Agni turned on the radio and fiddled with the dial, then returned to the couch with them. He draped an arm over Temple's shoulder. "It's almost time for *The Detective Story Hour*, and I know *The Shadow* will be on. You love him."

Temple offered up a smile. "Thanks, Agni."

Curled around each other, the three young men tried to forget there were worse things than just the evil that lurked in the hearts of men.

"YOU sure?" Caleb whispered, standing outside Temple's bedroom. The redhead hadn't come down for coffee.

Agni nodded. "If Temple's up for it, it would make him happy. He would definitely know we're with him."

"Not quite what I imagined we'd be doing when headquarters said travel was still frozen over."

Agni touched Caleb's cheek. "Do you want to do this, Caleb?"

Caleb kissed his partner. "I think I've wanted to try this even before Temple brought it up."

Agni laughed. "I'll let you get him started. Granted, that boy comes pre-started most of the time."

"That he does." Caleb opened the door to find Temple still curled up in his bed, sleeping. His bruised shoulder peeked out of the covers. Caleb wondered if the redhead would be too sore to be interested. "Temple," he called out from across the room. No soldier should be approached without warning. It was a good way to get hurt.

Temple moaned, burrowing deeper into his bed.

"I know you hear me, Temple."

"I'm sleeping. I don't care what's happening," Temple murmured.

"All right, then. I was going to ravish you a little, and then hand you over to Agni, but if you'd rather sleep...."

Temple whipped around in the bed, his big green eyes staring up at Caleb.

"You do seem tired," Caleb teased. "And a little bruised," he added more seriously.

"Barely hurts and I'm awake," Temple promised.

Caleb sat on the bed. "Are you really?"

Temple caught Caleb's hand, drawing it under the covers to touch his awakening cock.

"You really are pre-starting, aren't you?" Caleb laughed.

"It's morning." Temple frowned. "I have to piss first. You stay. I'll be right back."

"It snowed another six inches. Where could I possibly go?"

"Somewhere with Agni, I don't know," Temple said, tumbling out of bed. He scurried off for the bathroom.

Caleb laughed as Temple bounded off; he really was like an Irish setter. He pulled off his own shirt and stretched out on the bed. Caleb could feel the outline of Temple's body in the residual warmth of the

sheets. Settling into the warm spot, Caleb opened his trousers. He debated just taking them off, too, then decided Temple might just be disappointed if he didn't get to do so.

He wet the tips of his fingers with his tongue then circled them around the head of his cock. Between thoughts of what was about to occur and those light touches, Caleb's shaft perked up quickly. He had ideas as to what he wanted to happen. In his mind's eye, this would be glorious. In reality, Caleb hoped they all weren't horribly clumsy at it—he saw himself at the bottom of the pile.

"Starting without me?" Temple popped back into the room.

"Just stoking the fires." Caleb scrutinized the collar of bruises Temple wore around his slender neck. Purples and blues stood out in sharp relief to his pale skin and bled down over his shoulder. "Are you sure you're not hurting too much?"

Temple shrugged, shimmying out of his boxers. That's when Caleb noticed he had brought the Vaseline with him out of the bathroom. "When are we not bruised? It's nothing I can't handle."

"That's good to know," Agni said, coming into the room. Temple turned as the young man touched the redhead's bruised shoulder. "I do have herbs that will take the bruising down. Remind me later."

"You have herbs for everything," Temple laughed.

"One day you'll see the use of ayurvedic healing." Agni plucked the Vaseline jar from Temple's hand and put it on the nightstand.

"So you keep saying."

"You sure you want us both?" Agni asked Temple.

"Of course I do. Look at you two, so handsome. How could I not?"

"So eager," Agni purred.

"I am. My eyes see hell every day. Moments like this, when they can look upon beauty, I want as many of these moments as I can get," Temple replied, leaning down to catch Caleb's chin, tipping it up so he could kiss him.

Caleb slipped his arms around Temple's waist, pulling him closer to the bed. Temple pushed Caleb down against the mattress, straddling

him. Pressing against Caleb, Temple sucked on his earlobe then whispered very softly, “I want to fuck you senseless.”

Pushing Temple’s hair out of his eyes, Caleb grinned. “That’s the idea.”

Smirking, Temple maneuvered so he could mouth Caleb’s cock. As he tugged Caleb’s pants down, Temple took Caleb’s half-awake cock more deeply into his mouth. Caleb felt himself stiffening quickly as Temple’s tongue teased him. Agni managed to unsnarl Caleb’s feet from his clothing, tossing them aside. Agni’s dark-skinned fingers slid around Temple’s pale chest to play with the man’s nipples. Caleb worked his fingers against Temple’s scalp languidly as the man continued to suck on him. Caleb watched his partner’s face. He’d never seen Agni toy with another man before, but the lust in those chocolate eyes was something he was well familiar with.

Agni let one hand drift down Temple’s body, reaching around to massage the redhead’s testicles. Temple groaned around Caleb’s shaft. Temple’s cock filled and thickened rapidly, and Caleb hiked himself up so he could stroke its velvety head. He trailed a finger along the vein standing up on Temple’s shaft, feeling the redhead’s hair brushing against his belly as he did so.

Temple let Caleb go, groaning more loudly. He straightened up, his green eyes clouded over with desire. “Have a little mercy. You’ll make me go too fast.”

Agni chuckled, withdrawing his hand. He leaned down and gave Caleb a kiss.

Temple reached over, tugging on Agni’s shirt. “You have on way too much clothing. Take it off,” he ordered. Agni obeyed, and Temple’s eyes widened. “No wonder you were watching me so intently last time, Caleb. We’re so different. He’s delightful, like a big cinnamon stick.” Temple caught hold of Agni’s waist, pulling him in. The flat of Temple’s tongue laved its way down to Agni’s waistband.

Before Temple could get bossy again, Agni undid his own pants, letting them slip down. Caleb gave Agni’s foreskin a little rub while his other hand slid up and down Temple’s cock. Then the redhead’s mouth closed over both Caleb’s fingers and Agni’s shaft at the same time, rather confirming Caleb’s thoughts about just how big the young man’s

mouth was. When Temple let them pop free, Caleb took his turn at his partner's penis, running his tongue along the length of it and tickling the sweet spot just under the head. Temple, greedy as ever, met Caleb's mouth. Their lips warred against each other, drawing the head of Agni's cock into the fray until Agni finally pulled back, panting.

"Temple has the right idea," Agni said. "Don't want it to be too fast."

"I love how you make it sound like I'm not always right." Temple laughed, pulling Caleb back down on the bed with him. "I know what I'm talking about."

"You keep saying that." Caleb nipped Temple's chin. "How about showing it?"

"Oh, you want a show? I can do that." Temple squirmed over Caleb, reaching for the jar of lubricant, nearly sending it spinning to the floor in his haste.

Agni caught it and opened it, then sat on the edge of the bed. Temple caught the man's eye, nodding at Caleb. Agni simply smiled, dipping a few fingers into it. Caleb's breath hitched when Temple stuck in a few fingers of his own. Temple nudged Caleb's knees wider apart and Caleb lifted his hips a little to give the redhead better access.

Temple's finger circled around Caleb's opening then pressed inside, making Caleb gasp. Agni took both Temple and Caleb's cocks in either hand, stroking them together hard and fast before he let go of Caleb so he could more liberally apply the lubricant to Temple's shaft. The redhead added a second finger inside, causing Caleb to arch his back and gasp.

"You're a tease, Temple," he accused.

Temple withdrew his hand and moved over Caleb, the head of his cock tapping against its target. "You have no idea."

Temple then slipped inside Caleb, sinking in slow and deliberate. Caleb rocked his hips up, trying to take more of Temple at once, only to have him withdraw almost completely before starting the leisurely slide in again. Caleb's fingers worked their way down Temple's back to his strong buttocks until Agni got back up, standing at the head of the bed. While his hips moved in rhythm with Temple, Caleb turned his head so

he could shower attention on Agni's cock.

Sensations from both ends swept through Caleb. He didn't know how he kept from spilling right then and there. Agni took a step back, his dark gaze turning to Temple, who shook his hair back off his face like a wild thing. He grinned up at Agni, who then picked up the Vaseline jar, extending it to Caleb. Quickly, Caleb slathered some onto Agni's cock. Once done, Caleb rested back against the bed, spreading his legs to give Temple easier access. Temple pushed into Caleb deeply, turning his head to track Agni.

Caleb, very aware of how full he felt with Temple poised as he was, watched Agni as well. The young Hindu was more casual with how he prepared Temple than Caleb was used to seeing him. Agni sheathed himself in Temple in one fast, rough move, surprising Caleb until he realized Agni had read Temple better than Caleb. The redhead hissed, his body shuddering against Caleb's. A low moan rumbled in Temple's throat.

"Damn, fuck me," Temple ordered. "Fuck me hard."

Taking hold of Temple's hips, Agni complied, pounding into Temple, raw and unbridled. Caleb felt the transmitted force. It took Temple a few moments to get the fast rhythm but he matched it, diving into Caleb deep. Temple's breath rasped in Caleb's ear. Caught in the middle, the redhead's moans dissolved into a symphony of inarticulate cries until one final sharp one as he emptied into Caleb. Dazed, Temple's thrusts wound down, driven more by the translated motion from Agni's hips than his own quivering muscles.

Agni reared back, catching Temple around the waist, lifting him up. Caleb slid free of them both. He scrambled around, pulling himself up onto shaking knees. Agni settled Temple down on all fours. Caleb caught the redhead's sweating chin, pressing his swollen cock against Temple's lips. Temple opened his mouth, letting Caleb thrust inside. Agni leaned over Temple's back, his mouth questing for Caleb's. The kiss was brief before they turned their attention back to the soldier they had captured between them.

Agni's skin was darker than usual and so very pretty to look at, especially juxtaposed with Temple's pale flesh. A deep cry caught in Agni's throat as he pulled out and came, striping Temple's buttocks and the small of his back. Gathering his senses, Agni caught Caleb's eye, and

Caleb pulled out of Temple's eager mouth.

Agni pulled Temple tight against his body, his mouth at Temple's ear. "You want more?" he asked. Temple bobbed his head. "Want Caleb to fuck you now?"

"Yeah," Temple's voice sounded tired, but the lust hadn't diminished any in his eyes.

Agni swung off the bed, pulling the unsuspecting Temple half off with him. Caleb was more used to Agni's acrobatic nature and suspected what his partner had in mind. Quickly lubricating his shaft, half surprised he didn't go off in the process, Caleb captured Temple's legs, hefting them up. Agni's arms snaked around Temple's chest. Figuring out what they were about, Temple looped one arm over Agni's shoulders and locked his ankles behind Caleb's ass. Certain Temple was secure in the hammock of his and Agni's arms, Caleb thrust up into the redhead. Temple took him in easily, the muscles of his legs clenching around Caleb.

"God, fuck me, Caleb," Temple rasped. "More."

As Agni laughed and nipped Temple's lips, Caleb buried himself in Temple's ass. "What a potty mouth you have, Temple," Agni said.

"Don't care." Temple arched against Agni. "Yeah, there, damn. More, God, faster."

"Insatiable," Caleb panted, thrusting in as quick as he could without losing his balance. Temple's head dropped back against Agni's chest, a primeval cry echoing out of his throat, his body tensing. He was positively feral in his desire, and Caleb couldn't hold on. He filled Temple up, letting Agni steady them both before finally grasping onto a few shreds of his conscious self; it was just barely enough to help get Temple back down on the bed. The redhead sagged there, a languid god caught just before slumber.

Caleb sat next to him. "You all right, Temple?"

Temple raised a hand then let it fall. "Promise me something."

"What?"

"We'll do this again."

Agni chuckled. "Yes, but not just yet. We all need a rest...." He

glanced down at himself. “And a shower.”

“Why don’t you get that started?” Caleb suggested.

“Don’t hog all the hot water,” Temple murmured.

“By the time you wake up again, the tank will have reheated.” Agni snorted, then headed out of the room.

Temple smiled up at Caleb. “See? I’m always right about stuff like this.”

Caleb grabbed a pillow and tried to smother him.

By the time the three of them were showered, Caleb had no real desire to pry himself off the couch when someone surprisingly rang the bell. Temple appeared at the top of the stairs, still only half dressed. “Don’t answer it,” the redhead suggested.

Agni just flashed him a sour look and opened the door. What choice was there, really? Caleb couldn’t hear his partner’s conversation with whomever was on the stoop, but quickly enough Agni turned back to them.

“Get your uniforms on. The town elders need to see us. Apparently, there is a whole lot of weirdness going on up here on Mount Washington,” Agni said.

“See! I told you not to open the door,” Temple whined. “I’m exhausted and you just had to ruin a perfectly good snowbound day. Do I have to remind you my gun is at the bottom of the damn cliff?”

“You have more than one,” Agni countered. “If you fought as well as you complained, you’d be invincible.”

Caleb let the two of them fall back into their usual bait and snipe routine. They wouldn’t be themselves without it. As he got dressed for work, he had to admit, he half wished Agni hadn’t answered the door. Still, Agni was right. Together, they were strong. They would face whatever waited and they would win.

JANA DENARDO'S career choices and wanderlust take her all over the United States and beyond. Much of her travels make their way into her stories. Fantasy, science fiction, and mystery have been her favorite genres since she started reading, and they often flavor her works. In her secret identity, she works with the science of life and gives college students nightmares. When she's not chained to her computer writing, she functions as stray cat magnet. She's also learning that the road to enlightenment is filled with boulders she keeps falling over and that the words gardening and Zen don't go together no matter what anyone says.

Visit Jana's blog at <http://jana-denardo.livejournal.com/>.

BREAKING THE HABIT

Heidi Champa

IT HAD been five days. Five horrible, horrible days. Well, at least my hands had stopped shaking. How did I ever let Cam and Joel talk me into something like this?

Five days ago, my roommates had the crazy idea to quit smoking together. We had all struggled with quitting over the years, each of us attempting the impossible many times. The longest any of us had ever gone without the sweet taste of nicotine was a little over a week. Joel had made it for eight miserable days before cracking and nearly bowling over an old man running to the store to buy a fresh pack of fags. Since that day, we had decided that the only way we would ever quit smoking again was if we did it together. As I knew that would never happen, I felt safe in my addiction.

I was content with my smoking. I had grown accustomed to the hacking cough and the constant aroma of stale smoke on my clothes. I didn't care about any of that, smoking made me look fucking cool. Well, at the very least it made me feel cool.

But, when Joel came into the flat one day so winded he could barely breathe, we knew we were in trouble.

"What the hell happened to you?"

He had collapsed on the couch, his hand at his chest. Glancing up at me with half-closed eyes, he looked as if he would pass out if he had to exert any more energy.

"The lift is out of order. I had to walk all the way up."

"Joel, mate, we only live on the second floor."

“I know, but that is a hell of a lot of steps. Don’t look at me like that; you don’t take the steps, either.”

He had me there. I lit two cigarettes, handing him one after a long drag. We sat and waited until Joel could move again so he could get to the kitchen to put the kettle on. Just as Joel slunk to the sink, Cam came through the door, exhibiting all the same symptoms as Joel. Truth be told, I had done something similar when I got home from work, there just hadn’t been anyone there to witness my shame. As Cam fell onto the sofa, his hand still managed to reach into his pocket and fetch himself a cancer stick of his own.

“Goddamned lift. How long is it going to be out?”

“I don’t know, Cam. Hopefully not long. We called the handy man already. Do you want some tea?”

“Yes, Tom. That is just what I need. I would love some tea.”

Our sitting room was soon filled with a familiar cloud of smoke. I picked a stray particle of tobacco off my tongue and met eyes with Cam. He winked at me, right before he doubled over, coughing into his free hand. Joel emerged from the kitchen with our cups, his cigarette hanging precariously from his lips. I watched in horror as his ashes fell straight into my purple fish mug. Cam noticed it, too, and was the first to speak up.

“God, would you look at us? We are a bloody mess.”

“What are you talking about?” Joel asked, looking confused as he set the cups on the coffee table, dropping his cigarette butt into my mug, since the tea was undrinkable already. Cam continued his rant, undeterred by our cynical looks.

“Joel, you just ruined a perfectly good cup of tea with your ashes, and I don’t know about you, but I’m going to die if I have to keep coming up those stairs. Yesterday, Tom burned another hole in the couch. We can’t go on like this. I think it’s time we considered quitting.”

“Bite, your tongue, Cameron.”

I couldn’t keep quiet any longer, as I knew where Cam was going with his speech.

“Come on, Tom, you know I’m right. We’ve been all through this

before. We have to do it. Besides, now is the perfect time. The pub is going non-smoking next month.”

Joel and I gasped in horror at the thought of drinking pints without a fag in our hands. As I crushed my cigarette into one of the many overflowing ashtrays in the flat, I had to admit he had a point. Joel seemed more convinced than me, having been the most successful of the three of us thus far.

“Come on Tom, let’s do it. If we all stick together, we can make it work. Cam and I won’t let you cheat. What do you say?”

I pulled the pack out of my pocket and stared at the single remaining cigarette staring back at me. It was like a sign, an omen that they were both right. I sighed deeply, and then coughed. Hard.

“Oh, what the hell. One last go, and then we’ll quit.”

We sat, side by side, on the couch smoking like prisoners condemned to die. As we watched the last bits of flame being snubbed out, I knew we were making a mistake. But I smiled at them both, trying to hide my feelings.

I SAT on the couch, feeling like I was coming out of my skin. Cam and Joel were next to me, both of their heads resting on my shoulders. Five days into our torture, and we were all struggling. The television talked to itself, all of us too bitchy to bother changing the channel or even pay attention. I looked down and noticed Cam’s hand twitching slightly. I put mine on top of it to calm him down. His fingers laced through mine, but I still felt the slight jittery charge running through his skin. Joel was tracing the pattern of the couch mindlessly with his pinkie, his knee rising and falling in a rapid tempo. I tried to be the strong one, but my mind was racing so fast I could barely control where it was going. Before my logical mind could catch up, I opened my mouth with a suggestion.

“We need something to take our minds off this.”

Joel was first to react. His voice still sounded gravely, despite all the fresh air we were getting.

“What do you suggest, Tom? There isn’t anything we can do.

Except the one thing we can't do. We agreed, no exceptions, no matter what."

Joel jumped up, startling us both with his energy. He paced a small track back and forth in front of us, his hands air drumming out a crazy rhythm. He wasn't done telling me off, either.

"Come off it, Tom, there isn't anything that can make us feel better. We've been to the cinema, we've gone for walks, we've chewed so much bloody gum our teeth are going to fall out. What the fuck do you want us to do? I mean, seriously. What the fuck do you suggest?"

My thoughts continued to spin wildly, like a slot machine with a fresh coin inside. The wheels of my mind kept going until all the pieces clicked into place; three cherries in a row. I stood up, releasing Cam's hand in the process. I stepped in front of Joel, stopping his manic motion. I grabbed his head in my hands, and before he could say another crazy word, I kissed him hard on the lips. At first he stiffened, his body resisting my solution. But, after a few seconds, he relaxed into me, his hands going around my back on pure instinct. His tongue dove into my mouth, my hands gripping his ratty T-shirt for dear life. Pulling apart, Joel was panting and I was feeling calmer than I had in days.

"Shit, Tom. That was unexpected."

"Do you feel better?"

"Yeah."

We stood looking at each other in silence until Cam cleared his throat and brought us back to reality. He smiled at me, his hand patting the cushion next to him.

"You know, Tom. I'm freaking out over here too."

By this time, it was beyond me to think about how stupid or wrong it might be to continue. All I knew is that we needed it. We needed each other. I slumped back onto the couch, and fell into Cam, our mouths connecting. As we kissed, I felt the couch move. Joel had sat down again; his hand was on my knee, and moving upward to my thigh. Breaking contact with Cam, I turned back to Joel, his mouth finding mine before I could even get my eyes all the way open.

I heard zippers opening, felt tugging and pulling at my clothes, hands and tongues sliding over sensitive skin. My mind was too

overloaded to know who was who, which thumb was strafing over my nipple, which hand was reaching into my pants to find my hard cock. Joel pulled away, my mouth finally free to gasp for air, my eyes free to see what was happening all around me. Cam had his cock in his hand, stroking it slowly while teasing my nipple to a hard peak. Joel was working his fist around my dick, his erection peaking out of the hole in his boxers. I looked back and forth between the two of them until Cam pulled my face to his, kissing me deeply before urging my mouth toward his waiting cock.

I wrapped my lips around Cam, and took him into my mouth. Closing my eyes, I took the length of him into my throat. It was finally something to satisfy my oral fixation that wasn't going to send me to an early grave. I could feel both sets of their eyes on me, fueling the heat between my legs, making my cock painfully hard. I moved slowly, licking and sucking until Cam had grown bigger in my mouth.

Joel had apparently grown tired of just sitting by, as I felt him pull my pants down my legs and off my feet. His urging hands moved me to my knees, my ass high in the air. The next moment, he began slowly trailing his tongue up the back of my leg. His hot, restless hands moved up my inner thighs, pausing just below my prick. For a moment, he did nothing, and I waited, tense and anxious for his next move.

Cam's cock slid in and out of my mouth as Joel's tongue swept from my balls to my puckered ass. His mouth was hot on my skin, and his fingers parted my cheeks, exposing me to his deep tongue strokes. After a few torturous minutes, he stopped teasing me and dipped his tongue into my asshole. Joel dug his fingers into my hips, holding me still while he rimmed me between plunging thrusts of his tongue. I slowed my pace with Cam, unable to concentrate. I felt Joel run his fingers down my crack and push two inside of me. Sucking one of my balls into his mouth, he began fucking my ass with his thick digits. I rocked back and forth between them, trying not to give one too much attention. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about this moment before, I just never dreamed it would actually happen. It was a shame it took something like nicotine withdrawal to push us together.

Joel's face and hands suddenly moved away from me. I swiveled my hips in the air, trying in vain to find him again. I felt the couch shift once more, and heard Joel's footsteps moving quickly around the

apartment. I knew exactly what he was looking for, but my mind was too focused on Cam's cock to offer him help in finding it. Joel returned to the couch quickly, his hands cupping my hips, and for a moment I stopped everything I was doing, releasing Cam from between my lips. Joel's fingers were back inside me, lubing my ass with the cool, sticky liquid. Without any warning, Joel entered me, slower than I could bear. I rubbed my face against Cam's thigh, moaning quietly between clenched teeth. His hands ran through my hair, soothing me while Joel moved his cock deeper, inch by inch, inside me. I couldn't help but bite gently into Cam's skin, riding high between the pleasure and pain of Joel's cock stretching me out. Once I relaxed, I felt him slide all the way inside me, his hips resting against me for long seconds before pulling back again. Joel's voice broke me from my private world, and brought me back to the here and now.

"Keep sucking him, Tom, I want to watch."

Cam tightened his grip on me, and pulled me back down onto his waiting dick. I opened my throat and sucked him, as Joel slammed his cock into me, pushing me forward. My eyes closed as the pleasure of the two of them inside me coursed through my blood. Joel increased his pace, and I felt his fingers reach under me, finding my cock hard and waiting for attention. He wrapped his fist around me and started to jerk me, gently at first, but with each thrust of his cock into my ass, his hand worked me harder. My muffled cries around Cam's cock grew more fervent as I heard him moaning my name into the air. I pushed back into Joel, trying to bring us all closer to the edge. Joel twisted his wrist and ran his thumb over my weeping slit, and just as the pain and pleasure crested inside me, Cam started to come into my mouth, his hands holding my head in place as his hips came up to meet my mouth. I didn't think twice, just swallowed him down, tasting his salty sweet come as it ran down my throat. He released my head, his hands barely resting on my back as his moaning stopped. Cam was spent, and I released his cock as I threw my head back in ecstasy.

Joel and I came nearly together, my ass contracting around him as he sped up and pounded into me with the same fervor I had seen in him a few minutes before. His fingers, now wet with my come, moved over my cock until I had to push him away when I got too sensitive. With two last halting thrusts, Joel fell onto me, collapsing for a few minutes until his composure returned. He pulled away, leaving me feeling sated and calm

for the first time in nearly a week. It was a shame we hadn't thought of it before. It could have saved us days' worth of grief, and given us all something to do.

We sat, exhausted and sweaty, still intertwined. Cam moved first, reaching into the end table and producing a fresh pack of cigarettes. Joel and I accepted the offering without a word, neither of us refusing the forbidden fruit, even though we should have. In the quiet, we watched the smoke rise around us, the familiar smell a comfort to all our noses. I smiled at them both and said what we were all thinking.

"Okay, so maybe this can be our one exception."

Cam and Joel looked at me, smiling between drags. Joel spoke first, his voice steady and easy for the first time all week.

"Agreed. From now on, we'll only smoke after we do that."

HEIDI CHAMPA is a typical last-born child. Snarky, attention-seeking, and rebellious, she started to create dirty stories to keep herself out of real trouble. Having tried her hand at a million terrible jobs, she bought herself a laptop and finally started typing up those handwritten tales. After much deliberation, she started to let other people read her work. The rest, as they say, is history.

In addition to her flair with the written word, she knows every sentence of the movie *Clue* by heart and bakes a mean Funny Cake. When she is not writing, she can be found reading, hiking, or filling her iPod with more music. Her life has taken her all over the world, but a piece of her heart will always be in Australia. She currently lives in Pennsylvania with her husband. Her greatest wish is that her sarcasm would translate better in the written form.

Visit Heidi's web site at <http://heidichampa.blogspot.com>.

PERFORM FOR ME

Lori Ireland

THE first time I ever saw them in the room, I felt frozen. My jaw was so tightly clenched, I could hear my teeth grinding together. In front of me were two men, the one who was fair-skinned with dark hair was kneeling in front of a man so angelically gorgeous it was hard to believe he walked this Earth.

I was riveted by the sight of green eyes cast down submissively, staring at the floor until the beautiful blond angel standing in front of him spoke softly and those dark eyelashes fluttered closed. I couldn't tell if it was out of embarrassment or if the action was tinged with lust but either way, I found I was holding my breath as I watched his long fingers unlace the Dom's leather pants, freeing his thick, uncut cock.

I should have felt awkward watching what was obviously a private act, but that was why I had come to this place: to watch people have sex. It was my first time at this sex club and while I felt my cheeks burning, the sight before me was the hottest thing I had ever seen.

My cock swelled inside my loose khakis. I wasn't naked, but the slave on his knees certainly was. His prick was leaking as much as mine, from the look of it, the head shiny and slick. I wet my lips in time with the sub as he prepped his lips and opened his mouth to take that thick, hard prick inside his gorgeous mouth.

I groaned, heedless of the others that had gathered to watch. Slowly, a crowd had trickled in as the sub had started to suck his Dom's cock. I saw the sub smile at the reaction he was eliciting from the Dom and heard the Dom's hiss as I saw teeth drag along the sensitive flesh.

The Dom pulled his cock out of the sub's mouth and, quicker than

lightning, a crop slashed through the air and landed across the sub's back. "I said no teeth, boy," the angel said.

"Yes, Sir," the sub said before covering the gleaming cockhead with his lips again. Long fingers curled into dark curls as the Dom proceeded to fuck his mouth. The sub's gleaming lips stretched around the hot, turgid flesh in his mouth, sucking him as the angel groaned and stiffened. I realized I had to get out of there because I was going to come in my pants right there in front of the crowd, now standing three deep.

I left discreetly, not wanting to distract attention from the show. I would have to stop somewhere on the way home, anywhere, to get my body under control because if I didn't, I was going to wind up fucking my partner the second I saw him without even a hello.

The drive home was a blur; so was the fast food joint I stopped at to get coffee, thankful for the darkness of my car that made it hard to see the tent in my shorts. Still, the burn of the hot coffee on my tongue as I pulled back onto the road home was enough to bring me down slightly.

By the time I pulled my sports car into the garage next to my partner's sensible four-door, I was hard again. The thought of those green eyes cast toward the floor submissively was enough to set me off again. It had been obvious both men enjoyed not only the green-eyed vixen submitting but knowing they were being watched as well.

Walking inside the house, I called out for my partner. "Justin?" No answer, but then there wouldn't be since I could now hear the running water of the shower. Ripping off my T-shirt, I walked into our bedroom just as Justin was turning the shower off.

I heard rustling as Justin grabbed a towel from the rack, his movements quiet as he dried himself off. Leaning against the doorframe of the bathroom, I watched him. His back was to me; that gorgeous pale skin pink from the hot shower, his back muscles rippling as he wrapped the towel around his slender waist.

I groaned, looking at the way the towel caressed his gorgeous ass, thinking it should be my hand touching the beautiful perfect skin, leaning in to bite those firm globes gently.

Justin whirled to face me, his eyes lighting up. "Hey, baby. How was the club? Did you enjoy the show?"

I growled as I reached down to adjust my cock through my shorts. “You know I did,” I said.

Justin’s eyes shifted to my bulge, his smile turning seductive. “Yes, you did. Saving that for me?” he asked coyly.

I closed the space between us quickly, my cock throbbing and overriding my usual gentle personality. The surprise on his face was welcome as I grabbed his hips and ground our cocks together. His groan right before our lips met told me just how much he loved this, if it hadn’t been completely obvious from his thick, hard prick jutting into my hip.

I stripped him of the towel he had so artfully twisted to stay in place, and he didn’t complain. His lips were moist, soft from the shower, and he tasted of the minty toothpaste we both used. Claiming his mouth, I slid my tongue along his as those skilled hands reached between us to shove my shorts down my hips along with my boxers. Skin met damp skin as my cock slid along his, trapped between our bodies. I reached between us, encircling both of our cocks with my hand, stroking us off.

He broke the kiss, breathless as he started to walk me backward toward the sinks, his hands tangling in my short, dark hair. I made a noise in my throat as I switched us around and pushed him into the counter.

He jerked slightly when the edge of the counter bit into his thigh, and I looked into his eyes questioningly. He sat on the counter, pulling me close as his legs spread to accommodate me moving my hips between them. He kissed me and all worries were banished with the ferocity of his embrace, as if he were trying to get closer to me still.

I opened a drawer next to me, digging blindly for the tube of lube, my fingers closing around it. I almost laughed as I realized it could have been toothpaste or anti-itch medication for my pollen allergies, so I held it up, opening one eye just to make sure. I spread some on my fingers, tossing the lube away as Justin leaned back, resting his head against the mirror as I probed his tight hole. He hissed, tensing slightly as he moved toward the edge, those sexy ass cheeks resting half off the counter. I worked him loose, adding a finger to loosen him further. His whispered pleas sent me into a frenzy, overriding my good sense, and as another bead of fluid formed on my dick, I grabbed the lube and slicked my bare cock, desperate to be inside him. I hooked his legs over my elbows and positioned my cock against his eager hole.

The sound he made as I pushed inside him made my heart skip a beat, holding my breath as I watched his eyes close. “Corey,” he whispered, saying my name as if it were ripped from him. The torture was pleasurable, driving us both wild as I was fully seated inside him.

He let his head drop back against the mirror again, his mouth hanging slightly open as I started to fuck him. He was hot, and his tightness was driving me wild. I needed to slow down because I wanted to savor this, but when I would still my hips, Justin’s muscles would flutter around my cock, stealing my breath. “Fuck, Justin, come for me,” I whispered, my orgasm rising within me.

The pressure built, and he knew me, knew I was close. He started to stroke his own cock, right as my cock brushed over the spongy organ, causing his eyes to shoot open.

I looked into his hypnotic eyes, those gorgeous full lips, and I thought about watching how gorgeous the Dom’s cock had looked filling the sub’s hot, wet mouth as they performed for the crowd. Suddenly, I was spilling inside Justin, my hips jerking as I felt his hot come splash between us.

Justin’s eyes were hooded as he panted. My heart was pounding so hard, I could feel it in my ears. And all my lover could say was, “Wow.”

I HAD to go back to the club, and I did. Again, the same couple was there, putting on a show that fired up my blood, made me so hot I thought I might burn alive. This was the one thing that shut my brain down completely and now I craved it like a drug.

The next time I saw the two men, they had a bigger room to accommodate all of the people, and it wasn’t just the two men who put on a show. The crowd watching did as well with one of the couples dry humping in one of the chairs set up around the perimeter of the room.

Their show got more intense each time, and week after week I kept coming back. I was addicted to their show, craving more and more of them. It was in my blood.

One weekend, I was getting dressed to go to the club, happy to be in something besides the scrubs I wore at the hospital, as Justin cleaned

up the kitchen after our dinner. His dark curls were still damp from his shower, and he turned to look at me when I walked out of our bedroom. “Still going out even though it’s raining?” he teased me.

I smiled, my cheeks burning. “Is that okay?” I called over my shoulder as I went to the dryer and pulled out a pair of socks.

“Of course,” he said with a chuckle. “Have fun there.”

“I do,” I called back, smiling at the thought of what was to come later in the night. I dug around in the bottom of my closet, looking for my Rockports, when I heard Justin clear his throat.

I turned to find him standing in the doorway, his eyes reminding me of the color of the sky just before a tornado was about to strike. His eyes were a dark yet vivid green, so different from my own average brown.

His next words floored me. “Have you ever thought about joining in?”

I was in such shock, I blurted out, “With who?”

He looked at the floor, scuffing his feet, and our age difference became very apparent to me right then. Even at twenty-eight, he still looked and acted like a teenager. “I don’t know,” he said, his cheeks flushing as I shoved my feet into my shoes and tied the laces. “Maybe there is someone there you’d like to experiment with.”

I didn’t know if Justin wanted reassurance or not, but I really wanted to just pull him into my arms and kiss him senseless. His full pink lips were beckoning, wet from the way he nervously licked them. He sighed, looking into my eyes as he said, “If you want to try it tonight, go ahead.”

It occurred to me maybe I should invite Justin this time, but instead I stared at him for a second and like the coward I knew I was, I fled out to my car and left for the club.

OVER an hour later, I found myself getting a bottle of water before heading to one of the largest rooms in the club. I had been shaking as I got out of the car and I almost thought of ordering a scotch at the bar but

nixed it. I didn't want anything to dull my memories of watching these two.

As I grabbed a seat, I thought over Justin's words, trying to figure out what he meant by them. Was he really giving me permission to step out on our relationship? Did he really want that or did he have something else in mind? People trickled in slowly, until the couple that had held my fascination for so long stepped into the room.

Instantly, the low talking ceased as the sub kneeled and put his hands behind his head. This was different, I thought, as I watched the Dom walk around his sub as if inspecting him, his leather pants whispering with every stride, his chest deliciously bare. Normally there was some sex play, maybe a little bit of whipping, but tonight a different tone hung in the air.

"Tonight, my slave has disrespected his Master, and as such, I will be teaching him a lesson," he said. It was odd to hear his voice because other than for the occasional command or groan, he rarely spoke. Neither of them did, but clearly tonight was different.

I winced as the sound of the riding crop hitting skin rang through the air. A murmur rose among those seated and a couple of people left, but there was a steady stream coming in and their seats were snatched up quickly. I might have left if it wasn't this couple, since discipline was not what got my dick hard, but they had me bolted to my seat, my attention riveted.

"Tonight, my slave," the Dom whispered, "tonight, I will select someone for you to play with for my amusement."

Green eyes swung up to meet the Dom's, and the look on the Dom's face hardened. A moment passed between them until he looked over at me and crooked his finger at me. "Would you like to join us?"

I looked behind me, looking to see if there was anyone behind me but no one had made it over to my corner. "Me?" I questioned, just to be sure.

He smiled, and my breathing hitched when I looked at him. He really did have an amazing beauty, hypnotic almost, but I watched as he nodded. "Join us?" he repeated. It wasn't an option to say no.

I stood amid murmurs from the crowd, leaving my empty bottle of

water behind. Walking forward stiltedly, my nerves alive as never before, I suddenly had tunnel vision, my eyes only on the two men in front of me.

The Dom circled me, and now that I was up close, I saw his eyes were an amazing midnight blue. I thought at first they had been black or a dark brown because they were so dark. I realized I was staring into his eyes, an aggressive move. I didn't know if I should look away or cast my eyes toward the floor like his sub would, but as I heard his chuckle, I knew my fate was sealed.

"You're our guest tonight, pet. So just enjoy yourself. Tell me, do you think my slave is beautiful?" he said as he reached down and put his finger under his sub's chin to tilt it up.

I looked down into the sub's eyes, dark with lust, and I whispered, "Yes, he's sinfully gorgeous."

The Dom smiled cockily and said, "He may be, but he knows it and that's made him into a willful slave in need of discipline. Have I told you my plans for tonight?"

I shook my head mutely, my heart pounding.

"For his discipline," he said, looking down at his sub, his blond hair glistening in the light, "he will pleasure you in any way you wish and I will choose when he comes, if I let him have release at all."

I heard the sub's moan and I looked down at his flushed cheeks, thinking I would find disappointment or frustration, but he looked eager to get started. He crawled up to me, caressing the skin above my knee, just under the edge of my shorts.

My breathing hitched as my mind blanked. His eyes were pleading, as if begging me to say yes. I barely noticed the Dom circling around in back of me, his hand trailing along my arm.

I shivered, my eyes moving to the man in front of me, on his knees with his fingers playing with the hem of my shorts, fingering the fabric with a question in his eyes.

"Doesn't he look amazing there, ready and begging to suck your cock, waiting for my command?" the voice in my ear whispered as he stroked the bare skin of my arms.

I felt embarrassed when all that came out of my mouth was a pathetic gurgling noise. The fingers at the hem of my shorts traveled higher. My cock leaked against my boxers, straining to get out. It was all I could think of, the voice in my ear and the hands of the gorgeous twink slave at my feet.

“Pull his dick out and suck it, slave,” the Dom commanded from behind me. My cock twitched as the fingers moved eagerly up to my button and zipper, pulling my cock free as fast as he could.

“Oh fuck,” I whispered as arms wrapped around my waist from behind and I felt a hot, sinfully delicious body pressed against mine. I felt the Dom’s hard cock nestle between my cheeks as his hands moved under my shirt, stroking my heated skin as my shorts were moved lower still. But then the sub’s moist lips covered the head of my dick, and I almost shot right away.

I wanted to make this last because holy fuck, this was amazing being sandwiched between the two of them, the Dom stroking my nipples as my cock was nearly swallowed whole by the sub’s amazing fucking mouth and throat.

Fingers grasped my chin and turned my head toward my shoulder as the Dom leaned over to capture my lips in a heady but gentle kiss. I realized why his touch was so soft—he was trying to calm the nervous butterflies in my stomach so I didn’t bolt. He moved his lips from mine and dropped kisses all over my face before moving to trail across my neck.

He kept moving toward my ear, murmuring softly, but what exactly the words were, I couldn’t tell over the pounding of my heart in my ears. I tingled all the way to my feet, sighing as the mouth moved from my shaft to my balls.

The Dom stepped away from me, walking a few steps away to look at us. He unlaced his leather pants, pulling out his own cock. “That looks gorgeous,” he said as he stroked himself, his eyes glittering.

Right then, I wished I was in the crowd, watching the three of us. This was not my kink, participating in public sex. It was watching that got me off. We must have looked amazing to the crowd, my head thrown back in ecstasy as his submissive sucked my dick like a Hoover.

The carnal look on the Dom’s face was unforgettable. I stared at

him, so caught up in my own pleasure I got lost in the moment while watching him stroking his dick. He was staring at his sub, as if assessing his performance.

He suddenly made a motion with his hand. “Kneel,” he told me as he walked around behind his sub, reaching into a tiny pocket in his pants to pull out a condom and lube. I bit my lip as the sub quit sucking me off and looked back at his Master.

The slap of his hand hitting that gorgeous round ass was loud and I saw the red imprint form on the pale skin like a brand. Instinctively, I dropped to my knees as I realized the Dom didn’t play around. When he realized the effect the strike had on me, he chuckled. “Don’t worry. You’re our guest tonight. Is my slave doing a good job?”

I nodded, my hand on my cock as I looked back into eyes that were full of a passionate willfulness. The sub moved to his hands and knees, taking my cock in his mouth again, stroking the underbelly with his tongue, much to my pleasure.

“That’s good. He may be forgiven his impertinence, then.” He set aside the lube at those words after he’d dropped to his knees. Leaning in, he placed his hands on each side of his sub’s ass, grasping them firmly. I saw him dip his head, his tongue coming out as if in slow motion.

The groan I felt around my cock made me thankful I was on my knees. I looked toward the mirror on the ceiling, my eyes focused on that pink tongue laving that hole. I let out a cry as the buzz started in my balls, and I was sure I was going to shoot like never before. As the Dom pulled away, he grinned evilly at me as he said, “You should see how much his hole wants my cock.”

I let out a wordless cry, thrusting my hands into the sub’s dark curls. I watched, all the while fucking that hot mouth, as the Dom prepped his sub for his claiming with a lubed finger, torturing him the whole time.

The Dom rubbered up, slicking the leftover lube onto his shaft before positioning the head at the well-lubed entrance. The sub moved his mouth away momentarily, his eyes screwing shut as I watched inch by inch disappear inside him.

Slowly, we started to move together, his mouth covering my cock again. This time, it didn’t take long. The two of them moving together

was too beautiful, and I thrust inside his mouth one more time, my vision graying as the pleasure exploded inside me.

I collapsed back onto my heels, unable to tear my eyes from the beautiful sight before me. He had swallowed down everything, not even a drop spilled. I looked into those eyes filled with lust, the moans resonating within me as that hard, gorgeous cock slammed inside him.

The Dom threaded his hand into the dark curls, pulling the sub's head up as he said, "Did he satisfy you well?" he said, punctuating the question with a groan.

"Yes," I said softly.

The grin he shot me was wholly evil as he shifted his hips, angling for a deeper thrust. The cry ripped from his sub was explosive and torturous, and I could only imagine how the Dom's cock had probably just stroked his prostate.

"Kiss him," I heard the Dom order and I saw dark green eyes soften. I was boneless as his sub reached for me, desperation evident on his face as we grasped each other, our lips crashing together. I tasted myself on his lips and I knew if I let myself, I could lose myself forever within him.

I swallowed the groans as I felt every thrust the Dom made inside him as his lips jerked against mine. When I heard the Dom say, as if from far away, that he could come, I broke the kiss as I felt a cry rumble inside him and the sub fell apart in my arms.

For my whole life, I will never forget the sound that came out of him. He didn't even have to stroke himself, he just hit his peak as if he'd been waiting for the command.

He fell against me as I instinctively stroked his hair, and with a few pumps of the Dom's hips, I heard the groan that signaled that he had come as well. I watched out of my peripheral vision as he pulled out, taking care of his protection and cleaning them both up before coming back to lie with us where we had fallen on the mats as we basked in the afterglow of our releases.

I'm not sure how much time passed, but suddenly and inexplicably, I felt the uncomfortable need to bolt. I got up without ceremony, stuffed myself back into my shorts and darted out of the room, leaving my sex

partners lying there. The crowd had started to dissipate after we had finished up. I just couldn't stay around for another second. I made my way through the building to the parking lot, throwing open the door. I wasn't surprised to see it was still raining.

I slid into my car, my wet clothes squeaking across the leather seats. My hands were shaking as I dropped my keys, and in the back of my mind, I was aware it was probably not a good idea to drive. But I had no idea what to do. When I came here tonight, this wasn't what I had been expecting.

In the back of my mind, my doctor training kicked in and screamed that I was in shock, and between the cold rain that had soaked me and was now pounding on the roof of my car and the scene I had just been a part of, it was no wonder.

I watched people come and go from the club, and it seemed like hours that I sat there but in reality it was only a few minutes. I couldn't even start the car because my hands were trembling so badly, but that was probably a good thing. I needed time to let the dust settle and get a hold of my racing mind.

The passenger door flew open, and suddenly I was looking into Justin's eyes, green as grass and full of worry. His dark curls were soaked from the rain, and he ran his hand through his hair to shake the leftover drops away.

"Are you okay?" Justin asked. Boy, was *that* a loaded question, full of so much meaning, and it had so many answers. Sure, I was okay. I was more than okay. The shock I was experiencing was just a stupid and unfortunate occurrence. It was too bad, really, because everything that we worked toward for the past year had now come to fruition and here I was freaking out and not quite able to enjoy it.

"I think so," I said, picking up my key fob and playing with it absently. "I'm just a little shaken. I wasn't expecting the scene to be so intense."

Justin smiled knowingly. "It was intense my first time with Michael too."

Michael. I had always loved the irony that the man had the name of an angel to go along with his heavenly good looks, but they hid a devil in disguise. The man I'd just had a threesome with was the Dom we sought

out after I had tried to dominate Justin and it fell flat. It wasn't that I didn't know how to be bossy, but I found out dominating was so much more than just ordering Justin around.

We had started out with research, and slowly we immersed ourselves into the world of fetishes. I found the original club and I would be damned if I was going to let Justin go there alone. So one night, we went out, taking in the sights. I think I should have known right then that I was a watcher, not a participant. When I saw the look on Justin's face as we watched the show, I knew he wanted to be up there, submitting fully to his Dom.

We made fast friends with the people at the club and after a few visits, we met Michael through an acquaintance. I vaguely remembered how reverently some of the people had spoken of him, but nothing could prepare me for being in his presence. I admit I was incredibly attracted to him, and, really, who wouldn't be? However, the sparks that flew between Justin and Michael overshadowed my own attraction. It was a given that Justin would begin his training to be a submissive to Michael.

The next week when I picked Justin up from his first session, his cheeks were flushed and those green eyes were glazed over, and I had felt a pang of jealousy. I wasn't angry, I just wanted to feel the way Justin did too. He was euphoric, on a high for days afterward. Stupidly, I had crushed down the feeling, ignoring the uncomfortable feelings of wanting until weeks later, after Justin had returned from yet another amazing session, and I just snapped.

It was a miracle we made it to the bottom of my true feelings. I look back and I realize just how much Justin must love me to have persisted through that ugly argument. Maybe it was just that he knew what it was like to hold back your deepest, darkest desires out of fear or shame.

It wasn't that I needed to submit. I just had my own desires and needs to be fulfilled. After searching for months and trying new things, I came across my kink by accident, after finding a nurse and a tech at the hospital fucking in a dark room. I stayed quiet as I watched them, and it felt like my brain completely shut down. When I told Justin about it, he'd taken it to Michael, and God, brilliant Michael had hooked us up with the sex club.

"I've never come that hard in my whole life," I said softly.

“Neither have I,” he admitted, his voice telling me volumes about just how good it had been between us. He was staring in the direction of the gear box but as I reached for his hand, he swung his gaze up to meet mine.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked. “Because all of this, none of it is worth losing you over. I love you. I would have safe worded out if it wasn’t you he’d chosen.”

My heart skipped a beat when he said that, and I came to terms with the fact I was scared we were about to take all of this too far. “I’m sure. And I love you too. You can’t get rid of me that easily,” I quipped.

Justin smiled a brilliant, toothy grin. It was one of the many endearing qualities I had fallen in love with, along with his gentle personality and intelligent sense of humor. He leaned in, his eyes drifting shut.

I reached out, threading my hand through his dark hair, pulling us closer together until our lips met, tentative at first but then our inhibitions melted and we were grasping, pulling at each other’s clothes in a desperate move to get closer to each other. I moaned into his mouth as I mentally cursed the console separating us.

The kiss subsided to tiny little brushes of the lips, which were no less loving. I realized how lucky I was to have this man loving me, how perfectly matched we were. But as I looked into his eyes, I saw hesitation cloud those brilliant green eyes. “Did you really like the scene tonight?” he asked.

“Do you really have to even ask?” I scoffed. “It was perfect. I wasn’t expecting it at all.”

Justin’s expression lightened and he reached out and cupped my cheek. “I’m glad. So much went into tonight, and I wanted everything to be a surprise.”

“It certainly was that,” I said with a chuckle.

Justin beamed. “Michael even let me use my hands. I told him not to bind me or it might freak you out. Oh, that reminds me, I better call Michael real quick and let him know I’m going home with you.”

“Do you want to go pick up your car?” I asked as I put my seatbelt on.

“I can pick it up tomorrow,” he said, grabbing my cell phone from the glove box.

“Does he work on Sunday?”

Justin frowned. “He has a consulting business, and being that corporate America is mostly closed on Sunday, so is he.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I said, smiling. “Is he available to do this tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure, I’ll ask.... Oh,” Justin said, turning his attention away from the keypad to look at me. “Liked it that much, did you?” he asked with a smirk.

At those words, I was fairly certain I was blushing straight to my roots because my face felt like it was almost on fire. “Yeah, but maybe we could do something else too,” I said softly, feeling sort of lame when I said it, not sure exactly what we could do. I would leave that up to them, though.

I heard his chuckle as he pressed send on my BlackBerry. I’d left the phone in the car when I got there since I wasn’t on call tonight. I’d finished my shift at the hospital that afternoon, come home, and showered after a quick dinner with Justin, but I was off until Tuesday, almost like having a mini-vacation.

“Michael? Hey,” Justin said. “I’m going home with Corey but I was wondering if you were free tomorrow?” There was a long silence as I heard the low tones of Michael speaking into the phone. “No, not just to pick up my car... maybe something more.”

I put the car into reverse as Justin put on his seatbelt while he conversed with Michael, setting up a meeting for lunch and maybe more for the next day. I drove out of the parking lot, only then realizing Justin was still dressed in his slave boy leather shorts, his torso covered by a white T-shirt.

“Happy?” Justin asked as he ended the call.

Right then, I couldn’t keep the smile off my face if I had tried. Our foray into exploring our deepest desires had progressed well and was continuing on into something that would satisfy the both of us. As I pulled up to a stop sign, I glanced over at Justin, a look of satisfaction evident on his relaxed face.

I realized I was finally there, feeling what Justin had felt when he came back from Michael's all those months ago. Euphoric, riding high, and that's how I felt now. "Amazingly happy, yes," I said as I turned out onto the road home.

THE next day, I stood in front of Michael's house, holding Justin's hand like it was a life line. Michael had an average three-bedroom house, nothing that stood out and screamed that a Dom lived there. I had been here before, of course, driving Justin to his sessions with Michael. Often I would need to drive Justin home because he would buzz for hours, even days, afterward on a high from the endorphins. Michael would call me to come pick Justin up and as we left, I wondered how Michael felt all alone there.

Michael was a big boy, Justin would say when I voiced my concerns, and I had to agree. But still, as Justin would wash up, my mind would wander back to Michael as I imagined what he was doing after we left. As far as I knew, he only had one sub at a time, preferring to focus all his attention on one person at a time, almost like a relationship.

Was he turned on like I was? I had Justin to take care of my desire, and we often fucked hard after he came home, before he could even shower. Michael had no one. Justin never used to have sexual contact with Michael during the sessions, until I approached them with my fantasy of watching them. I also hadn't sat in on a session with Justin and Michael, even though they asked me to. One day, I had said to them. That day was today.

Justin rang the doorbell, swinging our hands joyfully. I smiled nervously at Justin, who just looked back at me serenely.

The door flew open, and at just the sight of Michael, my cock stood at attention. *Fuck*, I thought to myself, he looked amazing. His blond hair was perfectly styled, and his clothes looked like they were tailored for him. His white linen shirt, paired with jeans that molded to his muscled frame, was enough to make my mouth water. Not to mention he was barefoot, his skin pale against the dark clay tiles.

I felt awkward in my upscale casual outfit, a polo shirt and khakis.

Justin had told me to dress casual, but this was as relaxed as I got. Unless I got naked and... I just couldn't take my mind down that path right now. Regardless of how intimate we had been last night, today in the daylight, I was laid bare for all to see.

"C'mon in," he said lazily. Even though he looked relaxed, I saw his eyes assessing me, looking me up and down, and then Justin next. Justin had dressed in jeans and a tight cotton shirt that had me unable to take my eyes off his gorgeous body.

We walked inside, and Michael shut the door behind us, gesturing for us to follow him. His home was open and airy with high ceilings and a ton of plants. Either he bought amazing-looking fake plants or he spent a lot of time watering because the plants all looked real.

"They're real," Justin whispered in my ear. I looked over at him, shocked that he could read me so well.

Michael led us into his kitchen, where little snacks were laid out on the island for the lunch we had planned. Michael offered us drinks, and once we had them, we sat down on stools and dug into the food. I wasn't sure where to start the conversation because, after all, last night this guy had fucked Justin.

Justin leaned into me, nuzzling my cheek as he said, "Relax. Michael won't do anything you don't want him to."

That was just the problem. I couldn't relax. I was totally out of my element here, sitting in the kitchen of the man who dominated my partner on the weekends, like some kinky hobby of his. Instead of gardening, he made my boyfriend submit for their mutual pleasure.

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy last night. I sure as fuck did. The eagerness that Justin had displayed as he sucked me off was nothing short of amazing. So I had asked him last night—had it been the whole performing for the crowd that had gotten him off, or Michael dominating him? His response floored me. It was *me* who had driven him so close to his peak so fast: showing me off, showing off his skills at bringing me off. Michael fucking him had been the cherry but I was the whole dessert.

Not that I would have minded him saying that it was Michael that had brought him off that quickly. It would have given me a chance to divulge my part of our mutual attraction for the Dominant. Even now, as

I sat across from him, watching him shaking a bottle of homemade dressing, my attraction was growing within me. I could imagine touching him like he touched me last night, his bare skin pale like alabaster, flushing with desire from my touch.

I wished there was some way to make my cock deflate but nothing was making it go down now. I adjusted myself but dammit, nothing got past Justin, who smiled knowingly at me.

For damn sure nothing was lost on Michael, who dished out the salad and set the dressing down in front of us, his keen eyes seeing everything. "I hope you don't mind, I kept it simple with a Cobb salad."

Justin grinned as he grabbed the dressing. "Looks great. Thank you for inviting us over."

I watched Michael lick his lips as he looked over at me. "It's not a problem," he said, taking a bite of the salad. The man was riveting. Watching him was like watching a porno. He sat down to my left on the other side of the counter and Justin sat to my right, digging in.

The talk was light, mostly between Justin and Michael as we ate our lunch. I couldn't even begin to comprehend what they were talking about; all I knew was I heard it over the blood rushing in my ears. Each time I lifted the fork to my mouth, I noticed my hand was shaking. I felt like that all over, as well as feverish and hot.

I dropped my fork and tried to catch it, not wanting to look like an idiot in front of Michael. Justin knew my clumsiness, but Michael I needed to impress. "Shit," I said, looking at my fork on the floor stupidly.

Justin hopped down to pick up the fork as Michael reached into the drawer and got me another one. He held it out, but just far enough way that I would have to lean a little across the island to get it.

"Don't worry about it," Michael said softly, and in those words, I heard his commanding tone.

I bristled and I couldn't figure out why that had rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe because I was embarrassed about being clumsy, and I should have just laughed it off. Instead, I grabbed for the fork, intent on eating and leaving while we made our excuses. I wasn't in this gorgeous man's league and I was simply fooling myself if I thought I was.

Michael grabbed my wrist. He was quick as a snake, and strong. I was so shocked by his move that I gasped and froze. I knew my eyes had to be wide, my lips parted as I licked them in anticipation of his kiss.

“Why are you so nervous, Corey?” Michael asked. His hand was steady, his grip tight but not overly so.

“I... I...,” I started to say but then trailed off, not sure what I was even trying to say. I really didn’t know why I was so nervous. Obviously the man wasn’t going to take out his whip and abuse me, nor was he going to do anything against my will. He laid everything out ahead of time, like Justin had told me, although the final decision of what happened exactly was up to Michael.

I was worried that he was going to tell me that last night was just his way of satisfying his sub and that he had no real interest in me. When I realized from the look on Michael’s face that I had just blurted out what I was thinking, I yanked my arm away and covered my face with my hands. Oh God, I prayed for the ground to swallow me whole.

“Oh no,” Michael said, and was that a touch of breathlessness I heard or just my wishful thinking? “Ever since I met you and Justin, I’ve wanted you.”

I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. I might have said something along the lines of “Really?” or maybe it came out just a gurgle of air and spit. I really had to stop that or Michael would start to wonder about me.

Michael’s eyes glittered. “I saw you two that night and all I could think about was corrupting the both of you. Justin, by making him my slave, and then you. You’re so prim and proper in your little prep school outfit,” he said as he rounded the corner of the island. “And all I want to do is mess up that hair of yours as I fuck your hot little ass.”

I tried swallowing until I realized it was a lost cause as I drowned in his blue eyes. “I don’t bottom,” I choked out as I looked over at Justin. He was looking back at us with a look of rapt interest on his face.

Michael’s throaty laugh was cocky and self-assured and it yanked my attention back to him. “You will for me.”

A thrill shot straight to my dick when he said that. Michael took that last step until he stood in front of me, our lips nearly touching. “I’ve

wanted to do this since I saw you two in the sex club the first time. You dress all preppy and stuffy, but Justin and I know differently. Beneath the surface, your passion nearly consumes you, and all I want to do is release the bond holding it back and see you let loose.”

I knew my cheeks had to be apple red, because they felt like they were on fire. I could feel Michael’s breath on my face, cool because anything short of boiling water would be cold compared to my cheeks. I was speechless, partly from shock and partly because I knew if I said anything, I would ask him to fuck me.

“Last night,” Michael continued, “you lost control. You looked me in the eye for a second right before Justin sucked you dry, and the barriers keeping everyone out dropped.”

“Oh God,” I groaned, and it came out more of sigh than anything else. Our lips were a hairsbreadth apart, and all I could think about was how it would feel to kiss him. I wanted to be wrapped up between Justin and Michael until none of us knew where the others ended, our bodies moving together in rhythm until we were spent, lying naked and replete.

It was like an odd game of chicken, waiting for the other to make the move. I saw Michael’s eyes look to my side, and a second later they were back to mine before he leaned in and covered my lips with his. I groaned, leaning into him, and his tongue slid across the seam of my lips, asking for acceptance. I let him, unable to say no.

I felt a hand on my back, stroking gently as we ground our hips together. Hands gripped my hips as Justin stepped up, and I felt his cock digging into my ass, grinding against the fleshy curve of my cheek as a hand reached between us, separating our bodies just a bit as he unbuttoned my pants. He pulled my dick out, stroking the head gently at first before taking his hand away momentarily to lick his palm in place of lube.

Michael groaned, his hand at my hip moving to my ass and grabbing it hard. I whimpered, unable to keep the sound in. He pulled away, looking at me as Justin stroked my dick. “Want to move this to my bedroom?”

Justin, so conveniently quiet up until then, piped up and said, “Sure!” I glared over my shoulder at him, as if to ask where was he when Michael was hypnotizing me... oh yeah, he had his hand on my dick,

encouraging me to fall deeper into Michael's midnight blue eyes.

Justin just grinned and pushed me forward to follow Michael. I couldn't feel my feet and I was vaguely aware that my cock was standing at attention since my pants were open. Once through the doorway, Michael turned to me and grabbed my arm. He yanked me to him as his hand went to my cock, working the head with the pre-come that had appeared as we had walked down the hall. "I think you like the idea of me fucking you."

He was right. It wasn't that I hadn't bottomed. It was just that Justin didn't top, ever. It was a shame, really, because Justin had the most gorgeous uncut cock I had ever seen. Since he never wanted to fuck me, I had to resign myself to sucking him off any chance I could get, and that was not a hardship, trust me.

All I could do was moan at Michael, sighing as his mouth came crashing down on mine. His hand was like heaven, his mouth possessing my lips and demanding that I give myself over to him.

I didn't even know he was moving me toward the bed until the backs of my calves hit the side of the bed, and he pushed me down on the cool bed covers, the bed soft beneath me as he stretched me out on the bed.

Michael pulled away and looked over his shoulder, crooking a finger at Justin. "Join us."

Justin unbuttoned his jeans, dropping them to ground and stepping out of them as he pulled his shirt over his head. He discarded it, his eyes on us, lust burning in his eyes. He kneeled next to Michael, a questioning look on his face.

Michael pulled away from me and faced Justin. "Today, this isn't a scene or about your submission. This is just about our pleasure. Don't call me 'sir' but I may tell you what to do to help me pleasure Corey," he said, trailing a thumb along Justin's cheek.

I shivered at his words and I wondered to myself what had stopped me from sticking around to watch them together all those times I had dropped Justin off. What had ever possessed me to walk away from this?

I couldn't come up with a reason. When we had started out four years ago, our relationship was an open one. It was only when we

decided to get tested and stop using condoms that we decided to go exclusive. But if one of us stepped out on the other, it wouldn't have been the end of the world. We would have moved on since neither of us had a jealous personality. We were secure enough in ourselves that we knew sex wasn't the only thing keeping us together.

Michael hooked his fingers in my shorts and boxers and pulled them off me as Justin pulled off my sandals. Michael looked down at me as he came back, bringing one hand up to stroke my cheek. "Stop thinking," he said softly. "Just feel."

Justin was lying next to me, and I looked at his green eyes, so honest and open that it was like reading a book. The desire there made my jaw ache but as Michael's hand stroked my cock, I let go and gave myself over to the wave of desire.

Michael dipped his head to kiss me, pulling away only when Justin leaned in and kissed his cheek. Michael turned his head to kiss Justin, his lips running along that smooth cheek. I groaned as Michael's hand tightened, working my cut cock as my hips thrust forward.

My gasps became throatier and my pulse pounded in my toes as my peak started. Michael pulled away, kneeling between my legs with a smile. His maddening smile was enough to send lust shooting through me as a growl escaped my lips. I sat up and reached for his hand, guiding it to my cock. "Keep going," I demanded greedily.

Before Michael touched it, he pulled away and cupped the back of my head as he threaded his fingers through my dark hair. "You're going to come when I fuck you."

Oh yeah? The words sprang to my mind. I wasn't his slave and he couldn't tell me what to do, but breaking free meant leaving his touch, and I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do less. "So what are you waiting for?" I asked.

Michael grinned as I reached for his button down, my fingers joined by Justin's to make short work of his shirt. Justin unbuttoned Michael's jeans and he pulled away briefly to work them off while he grabbed a bottle of lube and protection out of the nightstand.

His cock was long and thick, and my hole clenched with want, just like it had last night when I watched him fucking Justin. I reached out and stroked his dick, lust crashing through me when he leaned his head

back and let out a sigh.

He sank his hand into Justin's curls, guiding his head in for a kiss. Even though I wasn't part of the kiss, I felt like I was. We were entwined, all of us touching in some way or another, completely connected.

He handed me the condom, and I tore it open, rolling it down his thick member. It twitched when I reached the base, and Michael pulled away from Justin to look into my eyes. He handed Justin the lube after he squirted a little in his palm.

Justin leaned in, suddenly ferocious in his desire as he pushed me down and rolled me onto my stomach. His hands were steady as he spread my cheeks, applied the lube to his fingers and pressed in gently and slowly. I hissed in pain and pleasure. "Careful," I warned him, "It's been a while."

Justin laid down next to me, working his fingers in and out. The look of love in his eyes stirred something deep inside me. I reached out, my fingers gripping his arm. I closed my eyes as he leaned in and kissed me. His lips were gentle on mine, caressing and sweet.

The contrast of the two men was delicious—Justin was sweet and kind, and Michael was dominating and intense. Both were everything I ever wanted.

Michael's hands suddenly gripped my hips as he dragged me up to my hands and knees. Justin moved beneath me, his hand gripping my cock as the head slid along his.

Michael was gentle, pushing inside me inch by inch. The sinful pleasure of being stretched flowed through me to every inch of my body. I could feel every throb of my cock all the way to my toes. I was aware of everything, from the tight grip Michael had on my hip to Justin's gasp as his hand tightened around our cocks sliding together.

Michael was now flush against me, leaning in as he covered me. "You all right?" he whispered huskily.

I closed my eyes as I felt my muscles ripple, grasping his cock. His low groan gave me a sense of satisfaction that I was giving as good as I was getting. I opened my eyes and looked down at Justin, his hooded eyes and parted lips beckoning me.

I leaned in and when my lips were a mere inch from Justin's, Michael wove his hand into my hair, tugging me away. Justin groaned, his cock jumping against mine. His pre-come leaked against my dick, the smell of our musk strong and luscious.

Michael pulled out and slammed back in, tugging on my hair again almost painfully, not letting go. I let out a cry, pressure building inside my dick. Holy fuck, I'd missed that. The second my gland was touched, it felt like I was going to come apart at the seams.

Michael's hand never moved from my hair, and with every thrust, my cock slid along Justin's. He pounded away, his cock hitting my prostate on some of the strokes. I was getting close, and between Justin stroking my cock and Michael nailing my prostate, the pleasure built within me until I was soaring.

My come splattered on Justin's stomach, and his peak followed quickly behind mine. I collapsed against him, my breathing fast and shallow. Michael's hips jerked a few times before he groaned, biting my shoulder as his pulsing cock stilled inside me.

Just that quickly, my life had changed. We all lay there entwined, with our bodies drenched in sweat and come that was quickly turning sticky. I couldn't bring myself to move, to separate myself from the two men, one I loved and one I was falling for.

Michael rolled off me, staying away only long enough to clean up before coming back to us. Justin had started stroking my face, looking at me with wondering green eyes. I felt the bed dip behind me, letting me know Michael was back, his arm coming around to my front to stroke my stomach, chest, whatever pleased him.

Satisfied, I drifted off to sleep and my only thought was that this was wonderful, falling asleep in the arms of two amazing men, and I vowed to find my way back here again someday.

CEO by day, manlove writer by night, LORI TOLAND somehow finds time to play video games and watch movies while taking care of her cats and husband.

Visit Lori's web site at <http://www.loritoland.com> or e-mail her at lori@loritoland.com.

AN AMERICAN IN SEVILLE

Lenore Black

“WELL, it’s no Akron.” Sheila shades her eyes with her hand, taking in stone arches and the glossy leaves of orange trees with the narrow-eyed scrutiny of a cowboy warily checking the horizon for danger.

Tony suspects the people of Seville would be relieved to hear their city looks nothing like northern Ohio, but he keeps this opinion to himself. Sheila is the boss. He has the drying spot of drool on his shoulder to prove it from where she used him as a headrest for most of the eight-hour flight.

“Yeah, not Akron at all,” Fred chirps, so eager to agree with Sheila he usually ends up repeating half of what she says. “But it’s only four days, and then we’ll be back home, thank God.”

If there were any justice in the world, a free trip to Europe would not be wasted on these two people. This is yet another opinion Tony doesn’t express.

“I guess we should get to it then.” Sheila breathes out a resigned sigh, eying their four-star hotel dubiously, clinging white-knuckled to her purse.

They heft their luggage, because Sheila waved off the uniformed bellhop who met their taxi. “You never know about those people,” she’d said in a sonic boom of a whisper that could probably be heard in Antarctica. Tony predicts that by the end of the convention he’ll have perfected a facial expression that says: *I’m not really with these people. We just work together.*

He puts a straggler’s distance between them on the way inside, and

once in the lobby, he stops altogether, waylaid by the past. A woman with long black hair falling down her back like a curtain sits perched on a settee, fiddling with a newspaper she's not reading, her momentum tilted forward, like she's ready to leap up at the sight of a familiar face. Tony's heart lunges against his ribs in a pathetic imitation of hope. *Clare*, he thinks, even though he knows it can't be, helpless to stop the rush of: *Maybe she wants to come back. Maybe she flew all this way to tell me.* A second glance dispels the illusion. It's not Clare, of course, just some other beautiful, dark-haired woman who has no use for him.

Tony continues on, but unfortunately Fred has noticed the detour. He waits at the desk with a buddy-buddy grin, the kind of look guys give each other when they're scoping out chicks, oblivious of the fact that he and Tony aren't buddies, that Tony has never treated him like anything but the nuisance he is. "Oh, yeah, she's a looker. You going to go say hello? Huh?" He nudges Tony with his elbow. "Huh?"

I can still smell Clare when I close my eyes. Tony doesn't say it. No one understands. People fix him with the same puckered stare these days anytime he mentions his ex-wife's name. *Hasn't it been over a year already?* As if that's the finish line, and now that Tony has made it across, he should be magically unshattered. He should forget all about coming home from work one night to find his bride of five years packing her suitcases, with no more explanation than, "There's just nothing here for me anymore."

Tony sleepwalks through the check in, nodding mechanically whenever the lady behind the desk seems to be expecting a response. The elevator feels too close, Tony hemmed in by suitcases and Sheila's incessant nattering. "Let's meet down in the lobby at six. That'll give us a chance to get settled and freshen up. Some people don't mind living out of a suitcase, but I always unpack. Even if I'm only going to be someplace one night. It's just more civilized that way."

She and Fred get off on six. Tony continues on up to eight, saying a little prayer to whatever hotel gods are looking out for him. Now that he's alone, there's more air. He can almost breathe. In his room, he drops his bags and flops back onto the bed, arm crooked over his eyes. It keeps out the light, but not the questions.

How did I get here? He must ask himself that at least a million times a day. Clare was supposed to be forever. Trueway Turbines was

just a stopgap after college, a paycheck until he got his real writing going. *You don't know how lucky you are to work somewhere you can make a decent living, and, hey, even if it is technical stuff, at least you still get to do some writing, right?* That's what people kept telling him. Maybe he believed them too much. Somehow he's ended up clinging to what he hates and losing everything that matters.

THE irony is not lost on Tony that one of the things Clare threw back at him during their ill-fated couples counseling was that he'd given up on his ambition to travel, big plans he'd dreamed up back in college when he had too much time on his hands and not enough money to make it as far as Columbus. Now here he is, his first time in Europe, and he spends fourteen hours a day talking about turbines. He hasn't seen the outside world in two days.

The meeting room overflows with students, some bent dutifully over notebooks, most slumped in their seats with permanently glazed expressions. To stay certified, they have to attend this three-day training session, but clearly they'd rather be anywhere else. Tony certainly sympathizes.

"Proper maintenance of the air bearings is crucial if you're going to get the optimal energy savings out of your investment." Tony's mouth goes on and on about micro turbines in great detail, but he feels disembodied, as if the most important part of him has floated away and might never return.

Remember when you wanted to be a travel writer? You don't dream anymore. You act like you're stuck and there's nothing you can do about it. Clare's voice flits through his head, more therapy flashbacks. *You have no idea how hard it is seeing you miserable all the time, seeing you lose that spark that made you the man I wanted to marry, and not knowing what to do about it.*

If only she could see me now, Tony thinks bitterly.

He gets mobbed when the session finally limps to a close, his erstwhile students all eager to have their forms signed. No one lingers with questions, much to Tony's relief. His freedom turns out to be short-

lived, however. When he pushes through the door, Sheila waits in the hall, pointedly checking her watch.

“I was just about to come in and get you. There’s no need to dawdle all day with these guys. Just train ’em and get ’em on their way. We’ve got dinner with the Allard clients. You didn’t forget, did you?”

She corrals him like a wayward child, nudging him forward with her shoulder. *Why don’t you just stand up to her?* Clare always used to ask. Why doesn’t he? Tony’s never been able to answer that question.

The clients are already waiting at a table, and dinner quickly takes a mortifying turn. Sheila drinks way too much wine, insisting with every glass, “I’m really more of a strawberry daiquiri kind of gal, but, okay, maybe just a little more.”

She’s slurring her words before the entrees arrive, although Tony suspects that even if she were sober as a stone she’d still feel perfectly comfortable declaring, “I don’t know what to think of this country. They don’t seem to do anything the way we do back in the States. I mean, what is with these bidet thingamajigs? What kind of weirdo wants to soak their butt? And I swear if I see one more piece of fish I’m going to have to sneak off and make a McDonald’s run, although from what I hear they do weird stuff with the fast food too. I have a friend, Irma, who came here last Christmas, and she warned me.”

Fred nods along. “Yeah, they do really weird stuff with the fast food.”

The clients exchange surreptitious, slightly horrified glances. Tony stares down at his dinner as if chewing takes all his concentration.

After what feels like an eternity, the waiter carries away the last dessert plate. Sheila signs for the charges, and the clients take their leave as quickly as politeness will allow. The word *freedom* flashes through Tony’s head the way *crack* probably goes through an addict’s. He hasn’t had a moment to himself all day.

But Sheila quickly clangs the iron bars closed on that possibility, clapping her hands together briskly. “All right. Let’s recap what happened today, see if there’s anything we need to follow up on, and plot our strategy for tomorrow.” Her eyes are still glassy from all the wine, and she lists slightly to one side, but drunkenness only seems to make her more determined to have her way.

Tony follows her and Fred tiredly into the lounge. His mind wanders as Sheila rattles on about client interface and strategic sales opportunities.

THE days come and go, a blur of turbine talk and forced smiles, all punctuated by way too much Sheila. On their last night, Tony is startled to realize he hasn't set foot out of the hotel even once. But he's fine with that, really he is. As long as the convention finally ends, and he can go home, where he'll have more than three waking seconds in a day away from co-workers.

He hopes to hide out in his room until it's time to leave for the airport. Sheila, naturally, has other plans. "I'm as ready to get home as the next person, but some of our clients got us tickets to this flamenco show thingy as a thank you, so I guess we're going out tonight."

The club is small and plain, white plaster walls and straight-backed chairs at rough-hewn tables, already packed with people. Cigarette smoke hangs in the air, making Tony's eyes water. The hostess shows them to seats near the stage.

Sheila settles into her chair with a queenly glance around the room. "We've got the best view in the place."

"Damn, I could use a drink," Fred booms out, craning his neck, looking for someone to flag down.

"Now I'm not saying there's no reason to come to Europe," Sheila says, as if continuing a conversation she's been having in her head. "It's good to see how they do things in other places. I'm just saying I won't be in any hurry to get back here again. Give me the good old U.S. of A. any day. That's all I'm saying."

The server turns up with a notepad and an attentive expression.

Tony orders vodka. "A really big one," he tells the woman in broken Spanish.

When it comes, he takes a long, bracing sip. The lights dim, and the room falls quiet in anticipation. The musicians start to play, a guitar riff trilling through the air, as percussive as a heartbeat, the rhythm traveling

up Tony's spine.

It's so encompassing Tony almost forgets about Sheila and Fred, until Sheila leans close and says into his ear, "Remind me to get back to those Thorastan clients. We don't want to let them stew about that repair issue."

Tony nods curtly, trying to will her to be quiet. The music swells dramatically, and the curtain draws back. A line of female dancers as beautiful as peacocks, in dresses festooned with ruffles and feathers and glittery trim, sweeps out onto the stage, arms gracefully lifted, castanets on their fingers.

"That's the key to good customer service, you know," Sheila continues more loudly. "Getting right back to them when they have a problem. So they know you were listening and took their concern seriously."

Tony stares pointedly at the stage, because shushing her will just make her more determined to talk. The music pulses up a notch, the guitar lines intertwining, a racing give and take, and everyone in the place leans forward expectantly. A male dancer bursts onto stage, raising his arms with a flourish, his chin tilted up. His wavy hair resists the effort that's been taken to slick it back, tendrils escaping here and there like renegades. He's dressed just as flamboyantly as the women, in tight-fitting black pants and a scarlet jacket threaded through with gold, accentuating his slim, strong form. No one in the place can take their eyes off him—no one except Sheila, who chooses this moment to start fumbling in her purse.

"I can't find my phone. Oh my God, where's my phone? Have you seen it?"

She starts taking out the contents of her purse and dumping them onto the table. Tony shifts in his seat away from her, but it's not really necessary. Nothing else exists but the epicenter of sensuality erupting on the stage, possibility burning in the air like the electric potential before a storm. The dancer rolls his hips, smooth as water, and the music thrums through Tony, his heart hammering away in time like an overexcited drum.

The dancer makes a detour over to the musicians, nodding amiably at each one, until he gets to the last guitarist, freckled and sweet-faced

and a little plain. With him, he touches hands, fingers lingering only a moment, but it feels expansive, as if an entire universe of meaning, of affection has been packed into that one simple gesture.

Tony falls through the chinks of his own memory, things he's forgotten, things he's *chosen* to forget, surging back to him. A firm mouth on his neck, broad hands on his body, the feeling of strength meeting strength. He hasn't had a man touch him since college, since Clare, and he's always written off those encounters, every one of them, as flukes, as booze and curiosity. He's never looked at a man and thought: *He's beautiful. I want him.* But God help him, he can't think anything else now.

"Oh, thank heavens for little mercies. I found it. The darned thing was hiding way down there at the bottom of my purse." Sheila has given up any pretense of whispering. "That always happens with this bag, but what can you do? It's my favorite. I just have to put up with a little inconvenience, I guess. The important thing is—"

The dancer pivots sharply, swinging around to face their table, raking them with his gaze, dark and bright, practically daring them to keep talking. Even Sheila falls silent. The corner of the dancer's mouth turns up, as if he enjoys his power. His attention zeroes in on Tony, frank and appreciative, and Tony stares back helplessly, caught in the sensual crosshairs of the glance.

Gravity unhands Tony entirely when the performance begins. The dancer's hips move with such slinky grace, so sensually coiled and effortless as the same time, that they defy understanding, defy whole laws of physics. No one should be able to move like that. Tony sits there, weightless and staring, disturbing warmth in his stomach, painfully aware that Sheila is right at his elbow. Every few seconds, the dancer turns a look on Tony, meeting his eyes squarely, as if demanding, "Are you watching me? I want you watching me." The set of his shoulders, angle of his chin says he knows perfectly well that no one can look anywhere else, that every person in the place wants him, but Tony's attention seems to be some special prize.

The dancers perform several numbers, but they only dimly register with Tony. If asked, he couldn't begin to describe what he saw. He only knows how he feels: like a person standing at the edge of something precipitous, with equal parts terror and exhilaration.

The spell doesn't end when the dancers leave the stage, or when the musicians file out after them. It's Sheila's voice that brings Tony back to Earth. "Like I was saying, you can never go wrong making sure your customers are taken care of. We should really sit down and powwow first thing when we get back to the office. Make sure there's nothing we're forgetting—"

"I've got to go to the bathroom." Tony stands up so sharply he bangs his knee against the edge of the table.

The crowd presses against him as he threads his way through, and that just adds to the tight-throated certainty that he's suffocating. He starts down the hallway to the bathroom, sees a door at the end marked "Salida," and makes a break for it. *Freedom*. Or at the very least some air.

Outside, he skids to a halt, wincing as the door bangs shut behind him, pebbles and broken glass crunching beneath his feet, breaking the stillness. He expected to be alone out here, but apparently so did the beautiful dancer and the guitarist. A pool of orange light from a streetlamp further invades their privacy, fastening on their bodies, clearly delineating the guitarist backed up against the rough stone wall, the dancer's knee thrust possessively between his thighs, his thumb stroking along the guitarist's jaw.

The tenderness in the touch makes Tony shiver, makes him hurt.

They don't stir at the sound of an interloper. Maybe they expect him to turn around and head back inside and leave them to their love. That's what Tony should do, certainly, but he can't seem to make his feet work.

Eventually the dancer pulls back, after several more lingering kisses, and turns a glance on Tony. "I hope you enjoyed the show?"

The dancer speaks flawless English, which is handy since Tony's feeble high school Spanish has gone right out of his head. But it also means there's no excuse not to have this conversation, and Tony doesn't know if the dancer was asking if he enjoyed the actual show or....

Heat rises in his cheeks. "It was great. You were very—" His mouth feels too dry to go on.

The dancer smiles. "I am pleased you enjoyed it. I am Alejandro.

This is Javier.” He rubs a hand over Javier’s shoulder.

Tony gives his name in return.

“So, tell me, how do you like Spain, Tony?” Alejandro smiles.

An innocuous question to ask a tourist, but the unsettling heat returns to the pit of Tony’s stomach. “I haven’t seen too much of it. Just the hotel, just here tonight.”

“A shame. We should do something to remedy that.” Alejandro exchanges a speculative look with Javier.

Javier smiles, but says nothing.

Perhaps it’s a secret language, the kind lovers share, because Alejandro’s expression takes a turn for certainty. “We have finished performing for the night. You should come with us.”

The ground doesn’t feel quite real beneath Tony’s feet, and it would be surprisingly easy to say yes, despite the obvious cautions, despite his co-workers waiting for him back in the club. Tony is as much a stranger to himself in this moment as these two men are.

Alejandro smiles coaxingly. “What is so important that you cannot afford to miss it for a little while?”

Tony imagines Sheila, Fred, Monday morning back at the office, the gold watch he’ll receive in thirty years, inscribed with the company’s name on the back, exchanged for his life like a gilded manacle.

He shakes his head. “There’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

SEVILLE shimmers with life, with people who all seem to know something Tony doesn’t. Quite possibly it’s the secret to happiness. They spill out of restaurants, link arms on crowded sidewalks, tilt back their heads to laugh into the orange-scented air, so light hearted, so connected, so essentially themselves. Bit by little bit, Tony’s shoulders unhunch. The ache that’s been coiled in his stomach tight as a fist since Clare left him—or has it always been there?—relaxes a little. Alejandro brushes his arm, directing him to turn. Tony feels the path of fingers long after they’re gone, and he wonders, in the dazed way of someone surfacing

out of a coma, just how long he's been numb without even realizing it.

He hasn't actually bothered to ask where they're going, following blindly. When they stop outside an apartment building, it's not at all what he's expecting.

"Here is where the party is," Alejandro assures him.

Tony doesn't move. Maybe in some part of him he knew where this was leading when he agreed to go with them. Maybe he didn't. Either way, he feels paralyzed now.

Alejandro touches him lightly on the elbow. "You are with friends."

Take a chance. Let your spirit of adventure out. Remember when all you wanted was to experience something new? Clare's voice drifts through his head, and for the first time since the divorce, it sounds like encouragement, not an accusation.

Two flights up, Javier unlocks a door and leads the way inside. It's small, neat, a far cry from clothing piles on the floor and crusted-over plates lost beneath the couch, the life Tony has been leading since Clare left. The scent of cooking lingers faintly in the air, tomatoes and savory herbs, sturdy food that people fix at home. Two wine glasses sit in the dish drainer. On the bookshelf, hefty, serious-looking volumes bound in leather mix with cheap paperbacks sporting lurid covers. A vase stands on the table, the peonies in it a few days old, casually shedding petals. Tony imagines the unspoken message delivered with the bouquet: *I'm sorry* or *I love you* or *It was Wednesday, and I thought you should have these*.

Everywhere there's evidence of a shared life, and Tony thinks about how he and Clare bought things together once upon a time. A battered old dresser from a flea market that they sanded and repainted and Clare pronounced "shabby chic." The cobalt blue dishes with the silver edging that Tony wasn't sure about at first, but grew to love. A hammock for the backyard, because they'd both always wanted one. Frames for their photographs that they'd hung in the living room. Just like the pictures of Alejandro and Javier that smile down from the walls, casual snapshots, their arms slung around each other's shoulders, easy and content.

"I should go." Tony turns irresolutely toward the door, not because

he wants to leave, but because he shouldn't be intruding on this.

"You should stay." This comes from Javier, punctuated by a soft smile, and somehow that makes it convincing, makes it easy for Tony to let them guide him over to the sofa.

Alejandro plunks down next to Tony, his arm sliding along the back of the cushions, connecting them, until the world feels as small as this one piece of furniture. "I see you take Javier more seriously than you do me." He holds up a hand to forestall protest. "No, no; that is how it should be." He smiles at Javier, who has gone to the kitchen to fetch drinks.

Javier shakes his head, his expression a mix of *what am I going to do with you?* and fondness. He brings back a bottle and glasses. Alejandro and Javier tip back their drinks in one, smooth shot. Tony sputters when the liquor hits the back of his throat. His eyes water, and he swears he can feel the burn all the way down to his knees.

"I hope it is not too strong for you?" Alejandro raises an eyebrow inquiringly. "It is what we drink here in Seville, those of us who are traditionalists, anyway."

Javier laughs, the sound light and musical as wind chimes. "Yes, you are such a conventional man, *mi amor*."

Alejandro widens his eyes at Tony in mock consternation. "You see how he makes fun of me? But that is all right. I forgive him. So, you must tell us more about yourself. What do you do when you are back in America? Have you traveled to Europe before? Tell us everything we should know about you."

Tony fumbles for something to say, but fear of disappointing battles it out with a sort of bleak resignation. He shakes his head. "I haven't really done much of anything."

Alejandro smiles. "Ah, well. There is an easy cure for that, no?"

It's more matter-of-fact than suggestive, but that doesn't stop Tony's mind from splashing up pictures, naked and acrobatic. He glances away sharply, heat creeping up his cheeks.

Alejandro gently changes the subject. "Javier has been to America. There was a show in New York, a Broadway show. They wanted the best Flamenco guitarist they could find, so naturally they chose Javier. Tell

him how they clapped for you every night, *mi vida*.”

Javier shakes his head. “The show was not on Broadway, but I cannot convince Alejandro of this.”

Tony swipes his palms on his pants, trying not to be too obvious about it, trying to ignore the fluttering in his belly. He’s suddenly nervous, suddenly too aware that his clothes hang on his body like a lie and make him feel wrong in his skin. “I—” He can hear his own heart pounding, and he’s not sure why. “I’ve never been to New York. Well, except to change planes.”

Alejandro tilts his head, considering, and then he leans in, deliberately enough that Tony could turn away if he wanted, and he brushes their lips together. Quick and soft, but it leaves Tony feeling as if he’s underwater, a roar in his ears, his lungs burning. “There. Now that’s out of the way. No more wondering when it will happen.”

Tony darts an anxious glance at Javier, an apology poised on his lips, but Javier smiles softly, his eyes warm. Inviting.

God. Tony is being invited. His belly clenches with want. His cock starts to take an interest. Or more of an interest, anyway.

Alejandro lays a hand on Tony’s shoulder, guiding him around to face Javier. “Do you think he’s beautiful?” His lips touch Tony’s ear. His chest presses against Tony’s back.

That fondly exasperated expression flits across Javier’s face again. Tony briefly wonders how many times Alejandro has asked this same question of some other stranger they’ve brought home and then decides he really doesn’t want to know the answer to that question. He touches Javier’s cheek, fingers trembling, but only a little, and that’s almost like courage, he decides. “Javier is very beautiful.”

As he says it, he realizes how true it is. He can’t imagine why he ever thought Javier plain when his face has the stern sweetness of a Renaissance angel, his eyes warm as caramel and flecked with gold, an intangible luster to him that Tony thinks might simply be the fact that he is loved so much.

Javier rubs his cheek against Tony’s hand, smiling. Tony feels it like a revelation, startled that there’s still such a thing as kindness in the world.

Alejandro leans close, his breath skittering across the sensitive skin on the back of Tony's neck. "Don't you want to kiss him?"

Tony does, so much, but he doesn't know if Javier.... The moment seems to stretch on forever, by turns expectant and awkward.

"Go on," Alejandro whispers. "Javier is waiting."

Tony lurches forward unsteadily and fumbles a tentative kiss, catching the corner of Javier's mouth. Javier slides his thumb along Tony's jaw and kisses back firmly, sweetly, touching his tongue lightly against Tony's bottom lip.

Alejandro's breath tickles Tony's neck. "He tastes sweet, no?"

Tony nods in a daze.

Alejandro pulls Tony around by the shoulder and takes his turn at Tony's mouth. "I can taste him on your lips." His voice dips low, a rich baritone that Tony feels as much as hears.

There's no fumbling this time when Tony shifts back to Javier, breathing heavily, leaning in eagerly. He twines his fingers in the shaggy hair at Javier's collar and explores his mouth hungrily.

"It is hard to get enough of him." Alejandro follows the inside seam of Tony's trousers with his finger and settles his palm over Tony's erection. Tony makes a wild sound in the back of his throat, embarrassingly needy, but he's too desperate to care. He curls a hand around Javier's shoulder, drawing him closer, and presses back against Alejandro. Clare once said to him, *There are things you want, and you don't know how to get them, and I can't help you.* He hadn't understood at the time, but now he has to wonder. Could she possibly have been talking about this?

"Come." Alejandro pulls Tony and Javier to their feet. "This is better in bed."

Light filters into the bedroom from a nearby streetlamp, along with noise from outside, the lilt of voices, dull rumble of cars, the distant strains of music. The room is sparsely furnished—a painted dresser, a straight-backed chair, a large bed with a white coverlet soft as a cloud.

Alejandro strips the shirt off Tony in one smooth motion, clearly an expert in nakedness. He hums under his breath, swiveling his hips as he

unbuckles Tony's belt, almost but not quite dancing. Tony stares, as helplessly in thrall as he'd been watching Alejandro up on stage, or perhaps more so, because this is up close and personal. This is Alejandro skimming Tony's trousers and underwear down his legs, throwing off his own clothes in the process, touching Tony's bare chest, murmuring, "*Bello.*"

Javier stands a little apart, watching. His smile has disappeared, and in its place is a stark expression, like lines written in stone. Tony tenses, ready to pull away and fumble his clothes back on and babble apologies as he stumbles for the door. But there's a dark-bright spark in Javier's eyes, which Tony notices an instant later, sharp and hot and intent. That's not anger or jealousy on Javier's sweet face. It's lust so fierce it's almost primitive.

Alejandro kisses Tony's ear, sending sensation white-hot and sparkling down Tony's back. "He thinks you're beautiful too. Don't you, *mi amor?*"

He drifts over to Javier and starts on his clothes, less hurried than he'd been with Tony, slipping the shirt off Javier's shoulders, taking a moment to frame Javier's face in his hands and kiss him before helping him out of his pants. Javier watches heavily-lidded as Alejandro touches the bare, pale skin of his chest, his arm, his thigh. An expression of knowledge and tenderness suffuses Alejandro's face, easy to read even for a veritable stranger like Tony: *I can never get enough of this, never get enough of you.*

They are a world of two, complete and suddenly untouchable. Tony shifts his weight, feels his nakedness, and wants to hide. The word *superfluous* flits through his head, and he starts to calculate how quickly he can reach his clothes and get out of there. Once again, though, Alejandro anticipates him, shifting his attention back with a dancer's impeccable timing.

"Come here." He crooks a finger at Tony.

Tony manages the few feet over to them, weak kneed, and Alejandro guides him into Javier's arms. Tony has had sex with guys, and he's kissed Javier, but he's never been naked with a man before, skin to skin, vulnerable. He starts at the touch of Javier's mouth against his, the whisper of his breath. Javier strokes his thumb along Tony's cheek and kisses sweetly, reassuringly.

“Good.” Alejandro presses against Tony from behind, dragging his lips across the back of Tony’s neck. “So good.”

Tony’s heart thunders in his ears, and it is good, and he’s terrified. He’s *been* terrified, long before he ended up in this room with these men. And he’s so tired of it. He runs his palm, a slight tremor in it, down Javier’s chest, over his belly, following the line of hair with his thumb. He breathes in and takes that last step, out past his fear.

Javier whimpers at Tony’s touch and pushes into his grip. His cock is hot and slick, pulsing with life.

Alejandro reaches around Tony to stroke Javier’s hair. “You like that, *mi cielo*? He makes you feel so good, doesn’t he?”

Tony tightens his fingers, sliding Javier’s dick in his fist, drawing a low moan out of him. Power surges through Tony. He did that. He made Javier sound like begging. He moves his hand faster. Alejandro plasters himself to Tony, a hot swelter all along his back. Someone—he’s not sure who—squeezes Tony’s cock, rubs at the slit, making him tremble. Javier bites at his neck, right at that place where Tony can feel the blood pounding in his throat, probably leaving a mark. Just the possibility makes Tony’s cock harder.

Javier moves from Tony’s neck back to his mouth, deep, filthy kisses that leave Tony shuddering and gasping for more. He rubs against Javier, cock to cock, like he might have done as a horny teenager if he’d understood himself better back then.

Alejandro whispers to him, “He’s going to suck you, and then he’s going to fuck you. That is okay?”

Tony has never.... There are so many things he could say that about, and he’s not going to say it now. Javier sinks to his knees, graceful in his own right. He tips his chin up and smiles and presses a kiss to Tony’s belly like a benediction. Javier’s eyes are bright and clear, watching for a reaction as he slides a hand along Tony’s thigh. Tony trembles at the touch. Heat simmers in his belly. Javier’s mouth lifts softly at the corners as if he’s inside Tony’s skin and knows what he needs. Tony doesn’t scream when Javier’s mouth closes around his cock, but only because there’s no air left in his body.

Alejandro hooks his chin over Tony’s shoulder to watch, his cock an insistent presence against Tony’s ass. “He is very good at that, no?”

Such a beautiful mouth. All the better to eat you up with. You want that, don't you, *cariño*? My beautiful Javier to gobble you up."

Tony whimpers, heavy-limbed and trembling, and he can only hope his knees don't actually give out. He hasn't been sucked in so long, and he doesn't remember it ever feeling this good before. Maybe it's the way Alejandro continues to whisper hot filth in his ear: "*Just wait until he fucks you. He will make you shake and scream and beg for more. You will feel him for days afterward.*"

Or maybe it's simply admitting the truth, that wanting men isn't some feverish delusion he falls into occasionally. It's part of him, as real as wanting Clare.

When Tony comes, only Alejandro's strong arms around his waist keep him from falling. "He makes me dizzy too," Alejandro says softly, as if it's a confession.

Tony nods in a daze, too boneless and sex-flushed for anything more complicated. He goes easily when they guide him onto the bed, pliant as a rag doll as they arrange him on his side. Alejandro stretches out along his front, and Javier presses against his back. The sheets feel soft and worn, comfortingly domestic. They smell faintly of laundry detergent, a different brand than anything they have in America, but still that clean, sharp brightness that detergents always have. Tony is in the bed of strangers, and he's going to get fucked, and yet the details are strangely ordinary.

Alejandro rubs his thumb thoughtfully over Tony's lips, where he bit them raw while Javier was sucking him. "So pretty. And even prettier when Javier is inside you." He kisses Tony and absently touches his body, each movement of his hands slow, exploratory, as if they have all the time in the world.

Javier drops a kiss to Tony's neck, murmuring something softly against his skin. Tony can't make out what, but he likes the sound of Javier's voice, deep and rich and musical. Tony relaxes back against him, and Javier's touch wanders lower, fingers tracing the muscles in Tony's back, the line of his spine, flirting with the crease of his ass.

Tony tenses, and Javier murmurs in a soothing tone, "Do not worry. I will take good care of you."

Alejandro kisses Tony's chest, teeth grazing a nipple, returning,

again, again, each bite a little harder than the last, skirting that sweet, dizzying line between pain and pleasure that makes Tony cry out alternately “*Oh fuck*” and “*God, please!*” Tony’s cock rests against his belly, heavy and flushed and wet at the tip, practically begging to be touched, but Alejandro stops just short, circling his fingertips very lightly over Tony’s hip. The slow, maddening tease leaves Tony off balance, distracted, so he jerks with surprise when Javier slides a finger between his cheeks, touch slick against his hole, finger pressing inside.

“Fuck!” He inhales sharply. “Fuck.”

Alejandro cups Tony’s cheek in his hand, kissing the word off his lips, smiling as if it tastes good. Javier slides his finger in deeper, crooking it, searching, finding something that lights up Tony’s body like a filament. *God*, how did he not know that was there? Alejandro curls his tongue around Tony’s, kissing until Tony is shaking and breathless.

It’s clear they’ve done this before; their teamwork is too perfect to imagine otherwise. Maybe someone else would be put off by that, but Tony feels stupidly grateful that they know what they’re doing, since he certainly doesn’t. He feels safe in their experienced hands.

Javier pulls away for a moment, and Tony shivers at the loss of his warmth. Alejandro makes up for it by licking his palm and curling it around Tony’s cock, giving a little squeeze before starting to stroke.

“Please, please,” Tony whimpers, rolling his hips.

Alejandro smiles. “Such pretty begging. And we will hear so much more of it when Javier is fucking you.”

Javier brushes a kiss to Tony’s shoulder when he returns. Tony hears the crinkle of a wrapper, the pop of a cap, wet fleshy noise, and he knows what that means. Knows what’s coming. But still, he jerks away from the blunt pressure of Javier’s cock against his hole.

“Let me, please.” Javier mouths the sensitive skin at the nape of Tony’s neck. “I will make you feel so good.”

Tony’s relationship to gravity has been off kilter all night, and he takes the final step out into nothing with a nod of his head.

Alejandro peppers kisses to Tony’s chest, fingers worrying his nipples, making them stand up and beg for attention. “Javier is so very good at this. He is going to make you forget your own name, and you’re

going to like it very much.”

There’s no time to answer, even if Tony knew what to say to such a promise. Javier slips the head of his dick inside him, and Tony’s lungs empty. His eyes water. It hurts. *Fuck*, it hurts.

“Easy, easy,” Alejandro murmurs comfortingly. He kisses down Tony’s belly, tongue tracing the line of hair to his cock. Alejandro’s mouth and Javier’s dick, and the sensory overload is a whiteout in Tony’s head.

Javier eases further inside him, slowly, carefully. The first shock of pain passes, and Tony’s thoughts come like a gasp of relief, *This is okay, I can do this, it’s fine*. Then Javier shifts positions, changing the angle, finding that white-hot, electric place in him again, and Tony loses all touch with language. He grunts and pushes back onto Javier’s dick, forward into Alejandro’s mouth. He just wants to be fucked and filled and remade until the concept of “emptiness” doesn’t exist anymore.

Alejandro pulls his mouth off Tony’s cock and starts to jerk him off with his hand. He cranes his neck to kiss Javier. “He must feel so good, *mi amor*. So hot. So tight and sweet around your cock.”

Javier groans, “Alejandro,” and returns the kiss, soft and wet-sounding. Tony feels sheltered in the cradle of their bodies, in the web of their affection. He groans and buries his face against Alejandro’s shoulder. *Going to come, going to come, got to come, oh God, please* thrums through his head, an insistent mantra.

Alejandro pushes their bodies together, rubbing off against Tony’s thigh, his hand moving faster and tighter on Tony’s cock. He moans against Javier’s mouth, their kisses increasingly frantic.

Tony’s belly hurts the way it does when he needs to come too much. “Oh God, oh God,” he babbles, spilling over Alejandro’s hand, his body clenching around Javier’s cock.

He’s dimly aware of Javier’s frenzied thrusts, his arm curved around Tony’s body to jerk Alejandro off. Hoarse epithets in Spanish hang thickly in the air. Tony feels it when they come—Javier inside him, Alejandro against his hip—but he’s floating away, too lost in a post-orgasmic haze to move or speak or even think much of anything beyond, *God, that was hot*.

Tony's eyes feel so heavy he has to close them. He hears the two men moving around the room. A warm, wet washcloth swipes over his belly and between his legs. The bed dips, and bodies press against him again. He lets out a soft, contented sigh.

Vaguely in the background of his mind he can hear the careful part of him already starting to spin worries: Sheila won't be happy, and there will be questions he won't know how to answer, and he's got a plane to catch at the crack of dawn. A sensible person would get up and put his clothes back on and go to the hotel to pack. But Tony is sick of being sensible, and he's warm and comfortable where he is, and listening to the careful voice in his head has done nothing but make him miserable.

Alejandro rubs his cheek against Tony's chest like a friendly cat. "We hope you will stay. Tonight was Javier's turn, but tomorrow I would very much like to fuck you. Or you can fuck me. However you prefer."

A sliver of desire pierces Tony's languor, and for a moment, he considers doing something about it. But he really doesn't want to move, and his eyes are too heavy-lidded to open. *Tomorrow*, he tells himself. The word trembles in his head with a sense of promise.

WHEN he wakes in the morning, the room glows with sun, late morning or possibly even early afternoon. Tony's plane is long gone. Javier's cheek rests against his shoulder. Alejandro is tucked close to his chest. Tony yawns and stares up at the ceiling, listening to the soft, breathy sounds of their sleep. Later, he'll have to call Sheila. Tell her to empty out his desk and throw his stuff away. He won't need it. He's not coming back.

Questions flit through his head: *Who am I?* and *Who do I want to be?* and *What am I doing with my life?* He doesn't kid himself that he's found the answers here. The important thing, he's beginning to see, as Clare always tried to tell him, is simply to do the asking.

Alejandro stirs against him, the top of his head brushing Tony's chin. "You are missing something important, *cariño*?" he asks, voice sleep-rough and touched with concern.

Tony shakes his head. Here's one answer that comes easily at least.

Alejandro settles more firmly against him. Javier reaches for Tony, lacing their fingers together, snuffling against his shoulder. Tony smiles and squeezes his hand. He'll have to figure out the details later—what to do, where to go from here. Right now, though, he's going back to sleep, and when he wakes up, he'll have more sex. And perhaps some coffee.

It's a beginning.

“I want to work with words!” That's been LENORE BLACK'S ambition pretty much since she learned how to read. After trying out publishing and public relations, she took up a career as an advertising copy writer. Now, she's happy to add “fiction writer” to the resume. Lenore lives in Brooklyn, New York, and spends the time commuting on the subway daydreaming about men who love each other... and sometimes about the Yankees winning the World Series.

Visit Lenore's web site at <http://www.lenorejblack.com>.

DOWN THE MIDDLE

Heidi Cullinan

THE day we met David was the same day as the two worst fights we'd ever had.

The first fight was the same old fight, just louder than normal. Robbie would say it was my fault, and I would tell him that if he didn't leave his damn shoes in the middle of the foyer rug, I wouldn't "irrationally lash out." But if it hadn't been the shoes, it would have been my not rinsing out my coffee mug or his leaving the remote in some obscure place—again. We'd been snapping at each other for weeks. The excuse was that we were both stressed and busy. He'd just missed a promotion and was worried they were going to lay him off. I'd just been put "on salary," which translated to "working overtime without getting paid for it." But honestly? That wasn't what we were fighting about.

We were fighting because we were bored. We were fighting because we were stale. We were fighting because we weren't even lovers anymore. We were roommates who fucked and took out our stress on each other, in and out of bed. We'd disconnected, and we couldn't seem to find our way back together again. We both knew, without talking about it, that we were three more fights away from dividing the DVD collection and selling the condo. It didn't matter that neither of us wanted to. It was where we were headed, and we didn't know the way out.

And then we left to go to a friend's museum opening, and there he was: David.

I saw him first. Robbie had murmured an excuse and disappeared into the crowd as soon as we'd given our congratulations to Helen, and I,

frankly, was relieved. I took my refuge in the complimentary mimosas, and yes, I probably took a bit too much refuge. However, after the third I didn't care about the fact that Robbie and I were probably finished—not so much that it hurt my chest, anyway—and I had manufactured an alcohol-induced good mood. However, I also had developed an acute need to piss, so I listed my way as gracefully as I could toward the men's room, and as I took the corner too wide at the coat check, I ran into David.

Literally. And I spilled *his* mimosa all over his shirt.

"I'm so sorry," I said, and glanced around frantically for something to clean him with. But there was nothing, of course, just other people's coats. I might have been tempted to use one of them, but the coat check clerk was right there, looking like she had my number, so I gave up and pointed at the bathroom. "Here. Get in there, and I'll help you clean up."

"You don't need to bother," he said, clearly annoyed. He didn't want the drunk idiot who'd made him spill on himself helping clean him up.

Except his annoyance only embarrassed me, and as Robbie will tell you, when I feel awkward, I deal with it by taking charge. Grabbing the man's arm, I steered him toward the men's room. "Come on."

Maybe that was when the first spark happened. It's hard to tell, because I really was drunk and embarrassed, and beneath it all I was still despondent over how badly things were going with Robbie. But what I remember from that moment as I grabbed his arm and steered him toward the bathroom sink was that he didn't fight me. He didn't protest, didn't get angry, didn't even call me a clumsy idiot, and the last in particular I truly deserved. Robbie wouldn't have hesitated. But David didn't say a word.

Not even when, after my attempts to blot his spoiled shirt with damp paper towels accomplished nothing at all, I demanded he take off his shirt and didn't even wait for him to comply. I just started undoing the buttons myself.

I honestly wasn't thinking about him sexually until then, and I might even have managed to only be academically aroused, staying focused instead on my nanny mission—except I saw his nipple ring. The flash of silver made me pause, and for a second I stared at the taut little

pebble pierced by metal, wondering absently if it hurt, and thinking more directly that it was very sexy. And that was when I became aware that I was pressing a damp towel against his bare skin, that my fingers were grazing the mildly corded muscles of his abdomen, and that, actually, if I'd thought I'd been embarrassed in the hall, I'd really outdone myself now. I was undressing a strange man in the men's room and getting hard over his nipple ring. I glanced up, and that was when I saw that the man was staring down at me, eyes wide, his face flushed, his mouth slightly agape. And then I realized that the corded muscles beneath my fingers were taut, flexing at my touch.

My erection, only slight before, now became pronounced.

The bathroom door opened; both of us turned and watched the newcomer pause, gasp, then quickly duck back out into the hall.

I was even more embarrassed now, which meant, of course, that I clung even harder to my control.

Clearing my throat, I stood upright, but I didn't stop dabbing at the man's chest. "What's your name?" I asked, as if he were an intern in my department and I was seriously considering having a word with his supervisor about his poor performance.

"David." The muscles flexed again, but he didn't pull away. "David Blake."

I nodded, gave him one last unnecessary wipe, then withdrew my hand. "Give me your shirt, David." I held out my hand and gave him an expectant look, and after only the barest of hesitations, he complied, unbuttoning the white shirt the rest of the way and peeling out of it before placing it in my hand. He stood now, shirtless, both nipples pert and hard, whether from arousal or cold I couldn't know.

I pretended it was the former, because I liked that better.

He was young. I was thirty-four, but he was early twenties at best. He had the supple skin and glow of someone who hadn't even considered panicking about a wrinkle or had his throat close at the sight of how thin his hair was starting to get, or how far back it had crept from his forehead. He had blond, carefully mussed hair, and he had a cupid's bow mouth that made me want to suck on his lips. And I didn't think it was the mimosas telling me that this sweet, subdued creature wanted me too.

That was what made me turn away and start rinsing his shirt, pressing my hard-on against the cool porcelain as I took care of the stain. “My name is Parker,” I told him. “I’ll give you my card, and you can send me the bill for a new shirt.”

“Well, what am I going to wear right now?” It was a terse retort, and it made me glance over at him in surprise. Whatever spell that had been between us had broken when I looked away, and he was angry. And he was embarrassed at his reaction to me. Or, I realized in afterthought, upset that I’d turned away and ended our exchange, offering him a new shirt in consolation.

Wringing out the shirt, I stood upright, considering him. God, but David had a gorgeous body, and yes, I wanted it. I wanted his compliance as well; Robbie had been this hesitant once, but I was more likely to get an earful now than I was a blush and a gasp of desire. My champagne-soaked brain was happy to provide erotic images of David Blake yielding even further to me, of that silver nipple ring quivering, his stomach so taut he could bounce a quarter on it as I pushed his legs back and open. I imagined looking into those wide blue eyes, dark with passion, as I pushed myself inside him.

Those eyes had softened now, probably because my desire was very plain on my face. David’s posture slackened a little, and he withdrew without actually stepping back.

“I mean—” His tongue stole out, wetting his lips. What was best was that I don’t think he realized what an invitation it was. “I can’t go out like this,” he said meekly. Almost pleading.

My cock, already rock hard, swelled even further. “I’ll just have to take care of you, then,” I said. Draping David’s wet shirt over the side of the sink, I reached up, unbuttoned my jacket, then slowly, very slowly, shrugged out of it.

I liked the way he held still as I draped the gabardine around him. I picked up his hand and nudged it into the sleeve, sliding it up slowly over his naked skin, letting my hand skim over his naked back as I drew the suit coat over his shoulders. When I picked up his other hand and guided it into the other sleeve, his fingers were shaking, but he let me lead him, even seemed to like it as I deliberately made sure my thumb ran all the way up his arm as I slid the garment into place.

When I turned him to me, he was the one who was listing as if drunk, wanting, I knew, to reach out and brace his hands against my shoulders. But he didn't let himself, just stood there, trembling, waiting for my lead. Forget the mimosas—I was drunk on David now, and if it had been a restroom where I could have locked the door, I might have locked the door, pressed him to the wall, and sucked him right there at Helen's museum opening. Then I would have gotten his number, broken up with Robbie, and used David as my youthful rebound. Or perhaps I just would have used him and been done with it. Maybe I wouldn't even have told Robbie.

In hindsight, I'm very glad it didn't work out that way.

But I was aware of the door, which had already opened once, was aware of the fact that it was some sort of miracle that we'd been left alone this long except for that one intruder, and yes, it made me remember Robbie, and it made me feel shame. No, I couldn't have David, not just now. So I prepared to leave him, with regret, but leave him all the same.

Though there was no harm, I argued, with just one more tease, since it would bring the both of us so much pleasure.

I made a great production of checking all the jacket pockets for my belongings, making him hold out his arms as I did so, making sure my knuckles grazed his skin as much as possible, making sure that by the time I was done he was trembling and all but gasping out loud. The trouble was, I was aroused too. I decided I deserved—we deserved—just a bit more. After I tucked a piece of paper into the inside pocket of the jacket, I reached out with my left hand and traced a lazy circle around that wicked little nipple ring. I pressed the open palm of my right against the front of his khakis, looking directly into his arousal-dark eyes as I boldly fondled and teased him.

Which was exactly what I was doing when Robbie came into the men's room, which was, of course, the beginning of the second fight.

THE actual fight proper didn't begin until we were back at home.

Oh, there was a brief skirmish at the museum: first all three of us stood there in the men's room, frozen in tableau, and then Robbie's face turned red and he stormed out. I let go of David and swore under my breath before calling out to Robbie and hurrying after him. I caught up with him in the hallway leading to the stairs, where he called me a bastard and David a whore. He was right, of course, but pride won over shame, and I said, very stupidly, that if he weren't such a frigid bitch I wouldn't have to go whoring, would I? I admit that was awful. I'd never feminized Robbie before, because I knew that wounded him horribly. Which was, I suppose, why I did it then. And it was why he drew back as if I'd thrown scalding water at his face. He blinked in hurt and shock, and then he turned, ran down the stairs, and continued on out the door without another word, and without his coat.

Why I didn't rush after him coatless as well, I can't really say. I suppose it's most likely that the shame had finally caught up with me, pushed over the edge by the bitch comment, and I just couldn't bear to face him. At the time, I remember rationalizing it by thinking that I needed to chase him, yes, but I needed to get our coats first, because one of us had to be sensible.

He was there. David was there at the coat check, wearing my jacket, his own coat over his arm. Except he hadn't used the coat check but instead had taken his chances with the free racks along the wall, and as I stood there, our two coats from the clerk dangling from my hand, I saw him shrouded in the corner, looking flustered and very sexy in my jacket with no shirt beneath. He caught me looking at him.

His tongue stole out and wet his lips again, and he stared back at me, waiting.

I don't know why I didn't turn and go after Robbie then and there. I wish I could say David cast a spell on me, or that it was fate, but I don't believe in those sorts of things. All I know is that I took a step forward, testing the young man, and my advance didn't scare him or make him withdraw. It made him more eager.

My pride was bruised and I was already feeling guilty as hell, both for cheating on Robbie and for hurting him. I suppose I thought I was owed something, or that I deserved it. Or maybe I didn't care anymore and just wanted a boost, whether or not I could justify it. What I can tell you is that I took another step forward, and then another, and then

another, and then David stepped backward, herding himself into the dark space at the back of the closet. I met him there, pressed him up against damp wool coats and polyester parkas and cupped him boldly once again.

He gasped, his mouth falling open, his fat, wet lips flush with his desire. Tipping his face up to mine, he gasped for me as I massaged him.

“That”—he paused to gasp as I fumbled with his fly—“Was that your boyfriend?”

“Not exactly the time to talk about my boyfriend,” I scolded him, and unbuttoned his pants.

Yes, someone might have come in. I did mention I was drunk. And I think my stupidity that day has been more than made clear. But if David thought this a reckless move, he made no comment about it, just tipped his head back so that it rested against the wall. His coat fell from his hands, and his naked stomach quavered as I unbuttoned his—my—jacket, too, before sliding my hand into his underwear.

“I—*ah!*” He swallowed hard, so beautiful as he fought his desire. “He looked—angry and—hurt—*oh God!*”

I had his cock in my hand. It was thick and velvet-hard, weeping already. I was running my hand up and down the shaft, thinking like a madman that I might just kneel down and take him in my mouth, because that’s how little I was caring about what other people thought of me just then—and then David had to go and ruin it. *He looked angry and hurt. Your boyfriend.*

My boyfriend, coatless in the January cold.

Sighing, I withdrew my hand.

But before I left, I bent and kissed him. I meant it to be rough, commanding, to make him ache for what he’d thrown away by reminding me of Robbie, but it ended up being a kiss of desperation instead. I didn’t give him dominance, not in that kiss; I gave him my own ache, my own fear of loss, of my youth, of my lover, of the passion I might have known with a beautiful blond man in a coat rack.

And then, finally, I left. I left without a word, without so much as looking at his face. I headed for the front door, slipping into my coat as I went, draping Robbie’s over my arm. I called Robbie’s cell, but as usual

he'd left it in his coat. I tried the coffee shop, the book shop, and I even tried the grocery. I thought about calling some of our friends, but most of them were at the museum, and even if they'd been home, I wasn't ready to explain myself. And so I went home.

Robbie was there, waiting for me. He met me without a single word, just a sharp, stinging slap against my left cheek.

By then I'd sobered enough and worried enough that my ego had given way, and so I said nothing back and made no move to recoil or shout. I just stood there and took it. I'd meant it to be acquiescent, but it hadn't been what Robbie wanted. He wanted a fight. So he slapped me again, and then he called me an arrogant, overbearing son-of-a-bitch who'd be surprised to find how few men wanted to fuck a balding, wrinkled old bastard with a bad dye job.

He got the fight he was looking for.

I DON'T remember the first part of the fight exactly, though I know it was the most colorful part. There was a great deal of swearing. Robbie threw several things, mostly pillows, but he had a grand moment when he shoved all the mail off the edge of the counter onto the kitchen floor. Mostly we dragged out every infraction either of us had ever committed against the other, and some we made up on the spot. And we called each other names. And then we called each other on the names the other had given us.

"You call me a frigid bitch," Robbie said, his cheeks red with his anger, "but you're the asshole who can't even reject me to my face! In a public restroom, Park? Is this your second adolescence? Or do you have delusions that you're an Idaho senator?"

I longed for a witty rejoinder, but the fact that I was the clear bastard in this scenario was taking all the wind from my sails. I went for a sneer instead. "He was hot. He was eager. He was there." Then, like the idiot I am, I stooped to honesty. "He looked at me, Rob, like you haven't in months."

Robbie tried to sneer back, but I'd struck another blow. He blinked instead. "Are you implying that *you've* been looking at *me*?" he replied at last.

We both knew very well I hadn't. I said nothing.

Robbie's anger was gone, which made the fight all the more dangerous now. Fools, we, both of us suffered now under the delusion that we were being reasonable. "So is this how we end, after all these years?" Robbie asked. "We become another statistic? All over a fucking men's room tart?"

"Tell me," I said, without heat, but with plenty of barb, "would you have pushed him aside, if he'd looked up at you like he was looking at me?"

Robbie tried to say yes. I could see the lie forming on his lips, but I could see the truth in his eyes. Then he gave up and looked away.

"I would have done the same," he confessed.

Even a year ago, that would have diffused us, and we'd have laughed, and gone to make love. But not now. Not today. The bridge between us had become too thin, and there was nothing in the space between us now.

"A pity, then," I said quietly, "that we didn't spill mimosa on him together. Maybe he would have saved us rather than ruined us."

It was a dramatic, ridiculous thing to say, and I knew it, so I made it my exit line. I went upstairs to the spare bedroom and lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling as the weight of the day bore down on me. The mimosas were all worn off now, leaving nothing but a lingering headache, though perhaps that was the pain they'd displaced coming back.

I did love Robbie. I had almost from the moment I saw him, and I hadn't ever stopped. He was handsome, yes—a year older than me, but he was buff and didn't have as much as a gray hair on him. But his looks had only drawn my eye. It had been his laugh and his playfulness that had pulled me all the way in. I'd fallen in love with the man who had lit up when I'd come in the room. I'd fallen in love with the man who lit up any room, regardless of whether or not I was there. I fell in love with his ridiculousness, his obsessions—yes, even his penchant for worrying

everything into a frayed end. And as I lay there, despondency took me, because I was sure in that moment that it truly was over. I was sure, too, that it was either all my fault or at least mostly so, and I honestly couldn't see how to undo what I had done. I felt so tired, so confused, and so low. When I went down the stairs, we would finish the fight, and it would be, I was convinced, our very last. And despite the fact that I was the one who had pushed us here, despite the fact that yes, part of me was still aching for David the bathroom slut, despite all this I was not ready to end us, not yet. I would rather have a few more months of misery than not have Robbie at all.

I do not cry. But I did then, silently, a few desperate, impotent tears sliding down my temples and onto the bed. And because I had managed now to sicken both Robbie and myself and probably David, too, I shut my eyes and hoped I would wake to find it all had gone away.

What I woke to instead was Robbie standing beside the bed. What shocked the hell out of me was when I turned and found David standing on the other side.

I KNEW I wasn't dreaming, because in no dream did I ever have to piss with such desperation as I did in that moment—I'd never gone at the museum after all, and while I'd given in and relieved myself at the bookstore, I had to go again now. And because I couldn't think of what in the world I was supposed to do with my lover and the cute tart I'd fondled in the men's room flanking me on a bed, I used my bladder as my excuse. I murmured something about a toilet, ducked around Robbie, and took my refuge in the bathroom. I pissed. I washed my face. I leaned against the door and stared at the shower curtain, my heart beating too fast no matter how I tried to calm it.

Finally I gave up and went back into the hallway, where they were waiting for me.

"We need to have a chat," Robbie said, nodding toward the stairs. "I think the living room would be a better place to start."

I couldn't read Robbie's mood, which was very worrying. David wasn't much help, either. He, I realized, had been drinking. Heavily.

Cheap beer from the smell of him, and either he'd been smoking or hanging out with people who were. I was annoyed, thinking that I'd have to have the jacket specially cleaned.

Then I reminded myself that I had much, much bigger issues at hand than a soiled jacket and nudged myself out of my stupor and down the stairs, following Robbie and David to the living room.

Robbie arranged us; somehow this had become his show, and David and I yielded to him. David took the couch, and I took the chair beside it. Robbie took the rocker near the fireplace that no one ever sat in. He perched on the edge of it, looking ready to leap back to his feet at any moment.

I still couldn't read his mood. Stilted was the best I could come up with. It was worrying, but it was starting to become arousing, too, in an odd way. This wasn't the Robbie I'd left in the kitchen. This wasn't the temper-tantrum-prone worrier anymore. Presumably he was still in there, but this man was almost a stranger.

What the devil had happened? What had he and David said to one another? How on earth was David even here?

I decided I had to ask.

Robbie's eyebrows lifted at my question, making him look wicked. "How is he here? Apparently you gave him our address as well as our phone number."

Now *my* eyebrows went up, but I had no delusion that I looked wicked. My God, I really had been drunk.

Robbie nodded at David, who was looking almost green with nerves on the couch. "He came to the door trying to return your jacket, and to pick you up, but you were asleep, and I was obviously a bit of an obstacle. Then things became... interesting."

"Interesting?" I echoed, and looked warily at David.

David swallowed hard and looked down at his lap. "Maybe this isn't a good idea," he murmured. But he didn't rise.

Robbie snorted. "Oh, there's no question that we're flirting with trouble. Normally I wouldn't even consider it." He turned back to me.

“But the odd thing is, that was the last thing Parker said to me, and do you know, at this point I figure we can’t lose.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. “What—?” And then it came back to me.

Maybe if we’d found him in the men’s room together.

I looked at David, then Robbie, and my eyes opened so wide my vision distorted.

Robbie was clearly enjoying himself. “David, this might be better coming from you.”

“The boy’s drunk,” I whispered. I felt like I had a fever; my body was running hot and cold. I couldn’t even tell if I was aroused or not. I don’t think so. I was too shocked. This couldn’t be real. I had to have been dreaming after all.

“I’m not drunk.” David leaned forward and braced his elbows against his knees, using his hands to cradle his head as he stared down at the carpet. “Okay, I’m drunk. But it’s Dutch courage. I wanted this sober. I just... couldn’t get up the stairs to your condo.” He pushed off his knees and looked up at me, terrified, but determined too. “I want to have sex with you.” His eyes darted to Robbie. “Both of you.”

I stared at him a moment, gobsmacked. Then I sank back into my chair. And, finally, when my head stopped spinning, I let out the shaky breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

But David’s tongue, once loosened, could not be stopped. “I’m gay,” he said. “I’ve known that for awhile. I’ve hooked up a couple times with guys, but it just never worked out, so I’ve stuck with girls. But something’s been missing, and it’s been driving me crazy. Then you dumped the drink on me and undressed me in the bathroom and felt me up, then attacked me in the closet—” His eyes were taking on that hooded, lust-dulled quality again, the one I’d found so enchanting. The one I still found enchanting. “I couldn’t stop thinking about it. About you. About how much I wanted you. I was going to mail the jacket, but then I kept getting hard thinking about the way you touched me, and the next thing I knew I was heading over here. And then Robbie answered the door—” He glanced at Robbie, who was still unreadable. “I realized how much I’d screwed you guys up. And then”—he faltered, then

pressed on—“then I decided I really couldn’t make it much worse. So I told him the same thing I was going to tell you.”

“What was that?” I asked, still dazed.

David’s cheeks pinked. “That I wanted you to fuck me.”

I glanced at Robbie. “He said he wanted me to fuck him, or you to fuck him?”

“He mentioned you first,” Robbie admitted. “Then invited me along. I think he’s a bit surprised I took him up on the offer.”

He wasn’t the only one. I wished I were sitting closer to the liquor cabinet, because I’d have opened up the scotch and taken a deep hit straight from the bottle. There was no way this could be real. My Robbie wouldn’t do this. And yet he didn’t seem to be joking.

“Is this—” I stopped, forcing myself to slow and be very careful with my phrasing. “Is this your way of punishing me?”

Robbie laughed, only a little bitter. “Park, I bring you the sexy tart you accosted at a public event, tell you I think we should have sex with him, and you think I’m punishing you?”

Yes, I did. “You didn’t say you thought we should have sex with him.”

“Didn’t I?” Robbie sat back in the rocker and threaded his fingers over his stomach. “Well. I’ll say it now. I think we should have sex with this young man. Right now, before any of us come to our senses.” He nodded at David. “He likes the way you command him, he says. Thinks it’s very hot.”

“Do you?” I asked, unable to stop myself. When Robbie just looked at me blankly, I forced myself to add, “Do you think it’s hot when I’m commanding?”

The slow, sad smile was like a knife. “I used to.” And then he shocked me utterly by adding, “But you haven’t been that way, not for a long, long time. Not with me.”

What was he talking about? He called me arrogant at least twice a day! I opened my mouth to say this, and then closed it. Well, no, it wasn’t the same, was it—arrogance was not being commanding. It was simply being arrogant. And I was low, wasn’t I? As low as Robbie was,

hating everything about my life. And I resented him for not lifting me up, for not being charming—the same way, possibly, he resented me for not being the self-assured man he’d fallen in love with. It was a nice and tidy revelation, which made me suspect it was too simple.

All I knew was that, no, I hadn’t felt this way for a long, long time. And yes, I’d liked it. I looked at David, sitting there terrified on my couch, sitting between my lover and me, listing from the beer he’d used to get himself to our door, and yes. I wanted him.

But I envied him too. Even accounting for the alcohol, he was braver than any of us, because he knew what he wanted and had asked for it. And was still waiting for it. Maybe that was what had drawn me to him. Maybe that confidence was what I had seen, what I wanted to leech from him, like a decrepit old vampire.

And all at once I was tired of thinking about it, tired of trying to figure it out. Tired of myself and my own fears. Tired of waiting for everything to fall apart. Tired of wondering when it would.

I looked at Robbie, who was still unreadable, and then I turned to David and said, “Take off your clothes.”

FOR a minute I thought he wouldn’t. I thought maybe I’d lost whatever magic had held him at the museum and drawn him to our door. I thought maybe this was my punishment for my arrogance at last, hoisted on my own petard, as it were. But no. He was only hesitating, perhaps for effect. Because just as soon as I was about to give up on the game, David slid out of my jacket, letting it pool in a rumpled heap behind him.

And then he rose, undid his pants, and pushed them down his hips.

He undressed with the clumsy indifference of youth. It was different, I decided, than the clumsy arrogance of the thirties, which some would say was young still, but I did not feel young and had not for some time. But when I wasn’t simply shedding clothing at the end of the day, I made an art of it. Certainly when I undressed for Robbie—or, back when I’d bothered with such things—I did my best to put on a show. I teased. I moved with grace and stealth.

I did not ever in my life wiggle my hips and shimmy out of my underpants, then hitch my legs up like a flamingo and remove my socks in some sort of awkward afterthought, then stand naked, eager, and uncertain. Robbie and I exchanged a glance, and the tiny smile he gave me made my heart catch. But then it was gone, and we went back to watching David, who was waiting, apparently, to be told what to do next.

I looked at Robbie again, and then I said, “Go to Robbie, David, and let him touch you.”

I’d meant it to be a sort of concession, a nod to the fact that I’d already had my way with David, and now it was Robbie’s turn. But it turned out to be a boon for all of us. David approached Robbie a little awkwardly, but he went, and Robbie regarded him with the same uncertainty.

“Touch his cock, Rob,” I said.

Maybe I did have some magic command in my voice. Maybe I had some quality that stirred men. Maybe Robbie just needed a nudge. Who knows, really, why it happened. What I know is that when I said the words, Rob’s eyes hooded, too, and the same sensual spell I’d seen on David was now cast on my lover as he tightened his fist around David’s rapidly thickening erection. What I know is that David’s mouth parted, and Robbie bent forward, steadied himself on David’s shoulder, and thrust his tongue into David. What I know is that they both began to moan, that Robbie’s arm began to jerk, and David’s hips began to thrust.

What I know is that I rose from the chair, walked over to them, and put my hand on both their asses, urging them closer together.

I had never watched Robbie kiss anyone before, and it was strange to see. It wasn’t bad; it was just odd. I found myself obsessed with the way his mouth opened, the way his jaw worked when he thrust his tongue inside David’s sweet mouth. I watched the way their mouths moved against one another, the way their lips crushed together, then slid, making each other wet. Robbie’s teeth flashed; David moaned as they nipped on his bottom lip, making the fat flesh even more lush and swollen, and my cock, already alert, strained in its confines. Robbie made a growling sound in his throat—honestly, I’d never heard him make anything like that sound before in the seven years I’d known him—and he bit David again, hard enough this time to make David gasp.

Caught up in their erotic display, I stepped forward, pressed my body into theirs, and joined the kiss.

I had never participated in a three-way kiss before. I had kissed Robbie and other boyfriends at parties while other men kissed around us, but I had never tried to kiss two people at once before David. It was both fantastic and aggravating. Yes, there is definitely something to be said for the heightened stimulation. But there is an orchestration to a kiss, and I don't think we're naturally programmed for it to happen in more than one direction at once. We all kept trying to make a seal against the other mouths, and it just isn't possible with three. And so the kiss became a war, a constant struggle to see what mouth would lock with what other mouth, and no sooner would it begin than the outcast mouth would steal whatever ground the others had gained. It was fruitless, and it was ridiculous.

And it was absolutely wonderful.

For a kiss that had been born out of adultery and a youthful yearning for carnal release, and especially for a kiss between three men, two of them dressed and one entirely naked—considering all this, it was an oddly innocent kiss. It didn't feel like the terrifying potential swan song of my relationship with Robbie, and it didn't feel like the heady, pleasurable rush of seduction I'd known with David at the museum. It felt like mouths, hot and soft and sweet. It felt like tongues, two different tongues tasting like two different kinds of spice dancing with mine, Robbie's achingly familiar and David's wickedly exotic. And after awhile, they tasted the same, felt the same. It was chaos, it was an unsolvable riddle, and it was quietly beautiful.

We might have kept it up forever, too, but the pleasure the kiss gave us began to build, and hands that were not content to hold still began to grope for other parts of the body to touch, and soon, in addition to too many tongues, there was also too many hands. The hypnotic kiss turned into desperate groping, and I drew back, because someone was trying to get into my pants, and I had a sudden, intense need to see who it was.

It was Robbie. He was nibbling at David's chin, but his hand was tugging angrily at my button and zipper. It pleased me, adding another spark to the one his smile had given me earlier.

Even so, I put my hand over his and stilled it. I wanted to lift it to my mouth and kiss it, but I wasn't sure he would want that now, so I resisted. Instead I laced my fingers in his, took as best a hold I could against David's naked hip, and I led them both toward the couch.

Situating David in the middle, I arranged Robbie and me on either side of our naked prize; we began with another kiss, but Robbie and I both moved quickly on. My fingers teased and pinched the young man's nipples as I made love to his ear; Robbie stroked David's naked chest, tugged on the nipple ring, then made his way down to the nest of hair at David's waist and the weeping cock that bobbed there, twitching like a listing mast with each of David's body's jerks and bucks. I paused to watch as Robbie bent to take David's erection in his mouth—this I had seen, but Robbie was beautiful with a mouthful of cock, and I took a moment to appreciate it before I began to twist and pinch at David's hard and pebbled nipples again. I whispered in his ear between wet, brutal thrusts of my tongue, telling him we were going to fuck him, that we were both going to fuck him, and that I was going to take a good ten minutes just to look at his gaping hole, that if he was very, very obedient I would stick my tongue inside, the same wet tongue I was thrusting into his ear now. It would feel like this, except it would be at his ass, every one of those tender nerve endings screaming, his cock aching, though possibly that cock would be thrusting into Robbie's wicked mouth. Or Robbie's cock would be thrusting into *his* mouth.

"Oh! *God!*" David cried, and to my complete surprise, he came.

I drew back, not sure what to do with the game now, and so I watched Robbie ride David's bucks and thrusts until the boy quieted, watched my lover's throat work as he swallowed every drop. My own cock felt heavy as I watched Robbie drag his tongue down David's balls then along his thigh in a wicked double Z before he rose, red-faced, lips swollen, eyes dark with passion as he licked the last of David's cum from his mouth and looked at me.

Oh God, indeed.

David was gasping for air, trying to recover, but Robbie was just staring at me, and I stared right back. *I love you*, I thought, and I did, because no, I never stopped, but right then, right there I knew I was a hopeless fool, that we both were, because who else could I share this with but him? Who else could turn such an odd, potentially awkward or

at the very least seedy experience into such beauty? Why had I stopped looking at him like this? Why had I stopped aching for him? Why did there have to be a stranger between us for me to see it again? To feel it?

Would it last when David was gone? Or was this our last rise above the surface before disappearing forever?

No, I thought, and with my heart constricting, I reached out to him.

He smiled and caught my hand.

“Let’s take this upstairs,” he said, his thumb stroking my knuckles.

I turned my hand over and captured his. David was forgotten entirely. I didn’t want to go up with the men’s room tart. I wanted Robbie. I wanted my lover. I could see the bridge again, and I wanted to dash across and take him in my arms and never let him go again.

But much as I hate to admit it, Robbie is the smarter one between the two of us.

“I want to fuck this boy with you,” Robbie said, his eyes still full of heat. “You were right. We should have discovered him together. Because we seem able to do to him what we can’t do to each other anymore. And he loves it simply because it’s an experience he’s craving. Everyone wins here.”

“I want you, Rob,” I said, my voice hoarse with the emotion I was never any good at saying, which I could not and would not say in front of David. “I don’t want this to break us apart.”

“I want you, too, Park,” he replied. “But as for breaking us—hon, we’ve been broken for months. But now—” He turned to David and gave him a bemused smile before he reached out and tweaked that nipple ring again, making David shudder. “Well, we’re doing rather well with this rascal down the middle. Let’s see what else he can do.” He ran his hand down David’s abdomen, swirling his fingers around the cavity of the young man’s belly button. “Because you want to play with us some more, don’t you, baby? You want what Parker was whispering in your ear. You want to come in his mouth too. And you want the both of us to come inside you at once, one of us buried in your throat and the other in your ass. You want that, don’t you, David. Tell me you want that.”

David’s jaw was so slack he was almost drooling. “Yes,” he rasped. “Yes. I want that. All of it. Whatever you’ll give me, I want it.”

Robbie looked back to me, keeping his fingers on David's skin. "Well?"

What else was there to do? We went upstairs.

ONCE we were there, Robbie and I shed our clothes as well. For all my scoffing at how awkward David had been, I found I was now much the same. I might as well have been eighteen years old, undressing in front of a man for the first time, because I was so nervous that I had to sit down to get my pants off of my shaking legs. Unlike youthful David, I knew all the ways the world could disappoint me, and despite Robbie's pretty speech, I was still worried this could go wrong. Badly wrong. It helped nothing that it was all my doing. It only made it worse.

"Come on," Robbie said, when I was naked and hovering awkwardly. He took my hand and led me to David, who was lying on our coverlet, the one we'd picked out at Bed Bath & Beyond together, the one that I had said was too frayed and that we should replace, the one Robbie had insisted would do just fine until we paid the credit card down a little more. Our coverlet now had a naked David on it, pulling his legs back so that his hole was gaping. Desire grabbed me thick around the throat.

I slapped it back and pulled away from the bed, determined that I would not, not for anything, do this.

Robbie steered me immediately back. "I want," he said, his voice soft and silky, his hand pressing against the crack of my ass, "to watch you fuck him. I want to see you kiss him. I want to watch you suck him. I want you to fuck this horny little devil with all the passion I saw in you earlier. I want to see it."

"I don't want—" I began, then gasped as Robbie took a hard grip of my ass. I turned to him, shocked.

He was grinning. God in heaven, he was so beautiful, so perfect. Where had this man been? It must have been me, I must have been the stupid one, because I always was—and then he laughed and pinched my ass again.

"Shut up, Park," he said, his eyes twinkling, "and fuck David."

I looked down at David, hard again already—ah, youth—looking up at me with nothing but eagerness. No politics, no history. Just a beautiful body that wanted to be played like the instrument it was. As if sensing my shift, he pulled his legs open wider.

“Put your tongue there,” he whispered. “Like you said you would. I’ll be good. I swear. I’ll do anything you say. Just give me your tongue.” His tongue darted out briefly. “Please. Sir. Please put your tongue in me.”

I knelt. I pushed the backs of his thighs up higher, out wider, and I licked him.

I traced a path around his opening, his pucker flexing, trying to lure me, but I ignored it, because now that I was doing this, I intended to make him a slave for it. I wanted forever for him to have someone whisper in his ear that they wanted to tongue fuck him, and he would think of this, always remember the man who had tortured him over it, who had sucked on his thighs and nipped at his skin, who had suckled his balls and laved his perineum until he was shouting in some nonsense language only the extremely aroused understood. I had him nearly shedding his skin, he was so hot for it, before I put my thumbs on either side of that tight muscle, pulled him open, and drilled inside him.

God, his sounds. Like an animal, like a kitten, like a bear, like a whole insane zoo of arousal, bucking against the bed as I buried my tongue inside his musk, into his bitterness, into his hot, tight tunnel. I made him insane with his wanting, and then I fucked him with my tongue until he was on the urge of coming again.

At some point his cries had become muffled, and I noticed he was moving less—when I looked up, I saw that Robbie had joined him on the bed, and when my eyes raked the plane of David’s luscious body, I saw my lover feeding our shared partner his own cock. David was taking it in eagerly, looking like a perverse calf at a bottle. I watched, using spit-slick fingers now inside David as I enjoyed the sight of Robbie fucking David’s oh-so-eager mouth. But I couldn’t take it very long. My own cock was rock hard, and it had been untouched. I wanted to bury it in David. I wanted to do as I’d told him and fill his ass with cum at the same time as Robbie filled his mouth. And so I stood, fumbled in the bedside drawer for lube and condom, and then I worked my way inside him.

He was impossibly tight. He twitched and whimpered as I impaled him, but Robbie soothed him even as he kept fucking his mouth, telling him he was pretty, telling him to relax and let Park put his big cock inside him, telling him to push against it like he was on the toilet—God, but I hated that, because it is not the image you need during sex, but it is an analogy that works, and it did for David. Because the next thing I knew, he was swallowing me in his heat, and then I was sliding, and he was moaning again, and grunting, and then it was the kiss all over again, because we all were fighting for the rhythm, all of us chasing each other until we tumbled into our release, first me, then Robbie, and then David again, and then we were tumbling onto each other, Robbie and I falling forward onto David's heaving chest.

My mouth met my lover's, and we kissed, just the two of us. We kissed as we had never kissed before but would, I knew, kiss again, and again. We kissed over the bridge the boy beneath had made for us, a passage reformed over lust and innocence, over honesty: honesty over what we were, of what we needed each other to be, of what we could be, and what we could not. We kissed over the truth of our frailty, of our inadequacies, and our failures. We kissed over the triumph of our love, a partnership that had its own life, that could find our way back for us even when we were hopelessly lost.

We drew back, and we smiled at one another.

And then we bent down and smiled at our other lover, at the boy who might only be here for an evening, or might come back again, or might become as important as the two of us were to one another. There was no knowing in that moment, and it didn't matter. What mattered was that it was clear he still wanted more exploring. What mattered was that we did too.

Robbie reached out and took my hand, and we laced our fingers together, holding tight as we bent toward David, beautiful David, and thanked him with mouths and hands and tongues and heated words for being our way back to one another.

HEIDI CULLINAN has always loved a good love story, provided it has a happy ending. She enjoys writing across many genres but loves above all to write happy, romantic endings for LGBT characters because there just aren't enough of those stories out there. When Heidi isn't writing, she enjoys cooking, reading, knitting, listening to music, and watching television with her family. Heidi also volunteers frequently for her state's LGBT rights group, One Iowa, and is proud to be from the first midwestern state to legalize same-sex marriage.

Visit Heidi's web site at <http://www.heidicullinan.com> and her blog at <http://amazoniowan.livejournal.com/>.



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