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Force of Law By Jez Morrow

Chapter One

The noise of something powerful made Tom look up. It was loud. Not the usual, rusty kind of loud of a heap about to drop its muffler on Tom's head. This engine sounded fine, aggressive and sexual.

Tom shouted up from the pit of the quick oil change garage to the guys topside, "What the hell is that?"

But the guys up there were just killing themselves laughing. Something exotic was coming into bay number two.

The undercarriage rolled into view over Tom's head.

Someone was not here for an oil change.

To say the car was expensive would be a bad joke. Even from this angle, Tom could see it. If Tom saved every last nickel of his gross income for the next ten years he still could not afford to buy one of these.

Collector cars were rare enough on the streets of Cleveland's west side. But no one ever ever ever took a car like that to a quick lube shop.

Somebody up there is just yanking off us poor grease monkeys. And Tom knew who it had to be. This show was all for Tom Russell.

Too many emotions crashed together. Feelings he thought he had put behind him a year ago opened right back up like an infected wound.

Then he was just angry.

That could only be the beautiful, blond godling Wells Sebastian Campbell up there. Tom remembered his lithe,

golden body and long limbs from that sweet, gilded summer when Wells had been his lover.

Wells left him over a year ago—just vanished from Tom's apartment without a word. Tom had called his parents' house in concern, only to have Wells' mother Cynthia inform Tom coldly not to try to contact Wells again or she would have Tom served with a restraining order.

Tom had not deserved that. He didn't know if Cynthia Campbell had grounds to get a restraining order, but then again, rich people could get anything they wanted. It stuck like a bone in the throat that she would make that kind of threat when all he'd done was ask if Wells was okay.

To make it worse, Wells hadn't said anything to counter Cynthia.

Wells hadn't said anything at all.

Tom learned only later and through the grapevine that Wells had left him for a woman.

Now Wells had the balls to come back. It was over. Tom had gone through all the stages of grief. He'd got his head clear. He had said goodbye to that gauzy dream once. There could be no twice.

So, what is this?

Had Wells got tired of being straight?

Too late now, sweetheart. I don't care!

Wells was back, showing off his latest toy. The first time it had been a Rolls. This ride was a lot less sedate and a whole lot more muscular and sexy. Maybe it was even his own ride this time. The Rolls had been Daddy's car.

Down in the pit, Tom couldn't identify this car from its underside. He'd never worked on anything in this tax bracket.

When that growling engine cut, Tom grabbed a broom, reached up and rapped on the undercarriage with the end of the wooden handle—not as hard as he wanted to—just enough to get the driver's attention. He yelled up between the wide wheels. "Get your crotch out of my face, you poser!"

The guys up top thought this was desperately funny, and they laughed all the harder—which was tough to do since they were damn near peeing themselves already.

Then came the answer from above, deep, languid and sensual. "Now Tom, I thought you would enjoy it."

Tom's insides went instantly cold.

Not the voice he expected.

The voice filled him with the kind of cold that burned. His nerves sparked with fight or flight or fuck adrenaline.

That was not Wells up there.

Now Tom was really beyond angry.

He threw down the broom and stalked to the concrete steps that led up from the pit to ground level. As he surfaced, he heard one of the mechanics say, "Devil."

All the guys in the garage were gathered around a lowslung, black wet dream of a car with Virginia plates.

Tom wasn't sure if by devil they meant the car or the driver.

It sure described the car. Tom had only ever seen one of these before in pictures. Lamborghini Diablo.

Devil also fit the driver. Law Castille. Big, powerful, sleek, sexy, dangerous. Evil.

Law lived in Arlington, Virginia, inside the D.C. beltway. My odious cousin Lawrence, Wells always called him.

Tall, gangly Vinny was bending over at the driver's side window. "You gotta know we don't carry oil filters for one of these, mister, so what do you want us to do?"

None of these guys ever called anybody mister.

Law seemed to consider the question for a moment, then tipped his sunglasses down his nose so he could look Vinny in the eyes and suggested, "You could bow."

Vinny stepped back, and he and wiseass Gordy Johnson lifted their arms high over their heads and bent over double into I-am-not-worthy kowtows to the awesome machine.

"Don't encourage him!" Tom called across the garage.

Stocky Demetrius shuffled over next to Tom and mumbled into his own palm. "Mofo's gotta be in the same tax bracket as basketball stars, huh?"

Tom shook his head. "This guy's in the league that pays the basketball stars."

"Nuh uh!" Demetrius protested, his eyes gone round.

Vinny called over, "Hey, Tomcat, is this guy a friend of yours?"

"No!" Tom shouted.

The passenger side door lifted. The door of a Diablo swiveled up and forward, which was so over-the-top that the guys fell to knee-slapping howling again, tears in their eyes.

God, stop pumping his ego before it explodes.

They didn't know who they were dealing with.

Tom did, and he stayed rooted where he was, sullen and unimpressed. Okay, he was impressed, but he wasn't going to

stroke Law's superiority by showing it. Law could go stroke himself.

Law's deep voice carried from within the cockpit, a resonant, seductive command. "Get in the car." His tone wasn't insistent. Just absolute. Law need only speak and knew he would be obeyed.

Tom refused. He imagined his steel-toe work shoes clamping themselves down to the concrete floor, immobile. *No.* He wouldn't even say it. *Just no.*

The other mechanics egged him on. "Go!"

Gordy got down on his knees and begged, "Go, Tomcat! Go for me!"

Tom was about to remind them all that he was working here. Then the shift supervisor, D'Shon Trent, came out of his office.

Thank God, thought Tom. D'shon was going to order Tom back down into the pit and everyone else back to work.

But D'Shon wagged his shaved head over the Diablo and said quietly, in that mumbly laid-back voice of his, "I mean damn, Tom. Get in the car. I'll clock you out."

Cornered and pissed, Tom jammed his work gloves and his safety glasses into his pockets and stripped off his greasy coveralls, which left him in tee shirt and jeans. He passed his bundle of work stuff to Gordy.

Gordy took his things and bowed like a manservant.

"Eat me," Tom snarled.

"Very good, sir," Gordy said in a stuffy voice that burbled into a giggle at the end.

Torn between desire and resentment, Tom approached the Diablo. He hated to think it, but it really was pretty. And that frikkin' door was sticking up like it was excited or something.

Tom dropped into the deep, leather bucket seat. It embraced him lovingly. He reached up to pull the door back down, shutting himself in with the devil.

Tom avoided looking at Law, all too aware of him. Law was no one you could ever ignore. He had a presence that could fill a room, so it pretty much choked the tight, two-seat cockpit, a taurine bulk at the corner of his eye. Power and heat rolled off of him. Tom could smell him. He was wearing a subtle, stealthy scent, woodsy, earthy with an edge. Tom kept his eyes dead ahead. He remembered clearly what Law looked like.

In front of Tom there was an imprint of a powerful bull with lowered horns embossed on the leather of the dashboard. *Fitting*. Yeah, that was Law.

Tom belted himself in as the maintenance bay's exit door rattled up before them.

The engine's sexual awakening filled all the available space. Tom felt it in his nuts. The mechanics saluted as the Diablo rumbled slowly out into bright, summer sunlight.

A wide console separated Tom from the driver's seat, and he was thankful for the barrier. He glanced over at the gear shift on the console. Law's broad hand rested easily on the stick. His hand looked lethal, even relaxed like that. His fingers were thick, blunt-tipped with neat, squared-off nails. Something in the way he held the stick, with more palm than fingers, was disturbingly sexual.

Tom swallowed, dry-mouthed. He tried to sound bored as he said, witheringly, "Only a five-speed?"

"It's an older vehicle," Law said, with a shrug of one massive shoulder.

This was the kind of car that increased in value with age and could only be bought at auction.

Law steered out onto the interstate and headed west. He drove, not speaking, the engine thrumming like an aching hard-on. Sex like an electrical charge sparked around them.

Tom felt very uncomfortable with Law knowing he was gay.

It was a big joke to Law.

None of the guys in the garage knew Tom's preference. It never came up. It was none of their business.

And they might kill him if they found out. When men shared a shower room to wash off the grease at the end of the day, straight guys just trusted that you're one of them. And some guys, if they find out you're gay after you done seen them nekked, they just might get a little homicidal.

Straight guys were funny that way.

But suspicion never occurred to them. For one thing, Tom Russell had more women sniffing around his tree than any man could want.

Tom guessed he was good looking, though he didn't see himself as a hunk. He stood a little shy of the magic six-foot mark required for hunkdom, and he was twenty-two years old, so he didn't guess he would get any taller.

He had a vulnerable bad boy appeal. He hated the vulnerable part, but he couldn't shake it. Even for all his

workouts, his masculine build had an indefinable gentleness. He was told his brown eyes were beautiful. He used a shaver attachment to keep a growth of stubble on his jaw, because he liked the roughness it gave his look.

His disinterest in women made him a must-have. And he could be had, because the women were safer than the guys. He hadn't met a guy who was to die for.

He was a selfish lover. Hey, that's what you get from a bad boy.

Tom often left work at five o'clock with a woman he'd just met seated behind him on his motorcycle, which made him something of a hero at the garage. The guys called him Tomcat.

He wasn't accustomed to leaving work at noon and being the one in the bitch seat of a sexy vehicle.

A buzzing tension gripped his throat.

"What's this?" Tom said with a careless flip of his hand over the four-wheeled rocket, as if he couldn't give a rip. "Don't you got an airplane?"

"One of my division presidents has the jet this week," Law said.

One of his presidents. One of them. Apparently Law really had taken over control of the towering family conglomerate from his father. His age apparently didn't matter. Law was still this side of thirty. He wasn't quite king of the world, but he was lord of an expensive chunk of it.

It wasn't the years that mattered. It was his awesome air of command. Law was a late model, high mileage kind of man, who lived loud and left a deep footprint.

Lawrence Castille had been born to privilege, sure. But Law hadn't rested on privilege. Privilege was only a launch pad for him on an apparent quest for world domination. Law Castille had done well for Castille Diversified.

He could afford to use a collector car as his personal runabout instead of stashing it away in air-conditioned storage.

"How long did it take you to get here?" Tom hadn't meant to ask that, but Tom was an oil-in-his-veins car guy, and he had to know.

"Seven hours," Law said.

Tom's nose wrinkled. D.C. to Cleveland in seven hours? "That's not impressive."

"I got stopped."

Of course he did. "What'd that ticket cost you?"

"Nothing. I drove at night."

Tom scowled, wondering what driving at night had to do with highway patrol handing out speeding tickets, then he said it as he realized it, "You let them drive the car."

"I let them drive the car," Law said. "They stood up on the overpass and took turns clocking each other with the radar gun."

"Oh, beat yourself dead." Tom called him a liar.

Law's big hand lifted from the gear shift as if swearing an oath. "True story."

Tom's next question just came out of him. "What'd they clock?"

"One eighty-five."

And Tom caught himself looking at Law. Law had thrown him off his game, pulled him out of his sulk against his will.

Law Castille was an impressive guy. Always had been. He had always intimidated Tom, damn him anyway.

His bold profile presented toward Tom with a high, solid cheekbone, heavy jaw, and rounded chin. His full lips were seductive, cruel. His dark hair was corporately trim, but it looked soft. Tom couldn't see his eyes for his sunglasses, but knew they were striking, very dark with a hard, gemstone gleam.

He was bigger even than Tom remembered, sleek and massive as a prize bull. He had his shirtsleeves rolled up around his huge biceps. His muscles didn't have that distorted, outsized, veins-popping steroidal look. To make sure, Tom glanced down at his crotch. Steroids shrank the testicles. *Nope*. There was nothing small down there.

The black fabric of Law's trousers was drawn tight across his heavy thigh, showing the interwoven cabling of muscles underneath. Tom's cock lifted.

He tore his glance away and sank back into the bucket seat. Last thing he ever wanted was to get caught getting hard for Law. He wasn't sure where that had come from. Testosterone had reached critical mass in here. He didn't dare look back or he would turn into a pillar of—okay, into a pillar. He stared straight ahead.

The embossed bull on the dash looked back at him, ominous, seemed about to hoist him up on its horns.

Tom determined not to speak again.

He remembered Wells telling him once that in Japan whoever gets down to business first loses the negotiation. As the miles flew past, Tom recognized that he wasn't going to win a battle of silence against the CEO of Castille Diversified. Tom was certain that Law could hold out 'til they hit Indiana without stating his business. Hell, if this was Japan, Law could drive off the other side of the continent without getting to the point.

Tom let go first. "What do you want, Richard? I got nothing for you. Take your shots and have done with it."

He was peripherally aware of Law's head turning toward him. Law ignored the question. "Why did the two of you always insist on calling me Richard?"

Tom twisted in his seat, his weight on one cheek, and faced Law. "Because you're a big dick! You didn't figure that out?"

"I should have," Law ceded the point, eyes back on the road. "Whose idea was that name?"

"Mine. To Wells you were the odious cousin Lawrence."

Law's eyebrows lifted briefly above the lenses of his sunglasses. "Is that what the little prick calls me?"

Actually, the prick in question wasn't little at all. Wells had a long, lovely pillar of manhood, thank you very much, Richard.

"We were being nice," Tom said.

"I'm detecting a note of hostility," Law said. "Why is that?"

"Uh, let's see. You threatened to kill me?" Tom suggested for starters.

"I never."

"You threatened me with a hit man."

"Oh that," Law said dismissively.

"That," Tom said.

Back when Tom and Wells had been lovers, Law had invaded Tom's apartment and ordered both of them to get blood tests. Tom remembered Wells bridling at the command. "You can't order me—!"

"The hell I can't," Law cut him off. "Both of you. Or I hire a hit man. Results on my fax or e-mail before I ship out." He had pointed at them, his hand in the classic bang-you're-dead pose.

Tom remembered telling Wells after the door shut behind Law, "He's bluffing."

But Wells had gone awfully quiet.

And Wells and Tom both got blood tests.

Here, now, in the Diablo, Law didn't deny what he'd said. But he added, "I didn't say which one of you I was going to have taken out."

Like that wasn't obvious. "Oh, get fucked," Tom said. "You tried to break us up."

Dark brows lifted again above the dark lens. "I didn't succeed, now did I?"

No. Tom couldn't say the breakup had been Law's doing. Wells had walked out of Tom's life all by himself.

Tom turned toward the window in a silent sulk and watched the flat scenery go by. A denim seam was binding at his boys, but Tom didn't want to reach to his crotch to make adjustments. Baseball players did it on camera before millions

of TV viewers every summer day, but Tom didn't want Law to know that any of his goods had shifted during transport.

Somewhere west of Vermilion, Law finally dropped his bomb. "Wells is getting married tomorrow."

That shouldn't have affected him. But it did—like a blade in the gut. It hurt. Tom guessed it was meant to.

His midriff fluttered. He was done pretending. He didn't try to disguise his wounded anger. "Fine. You got your way. You won. Thanks a shitload for the news. Turn this twelve-cylinder dildo around. I got work to do."

"Cousin Cynthia sent me to make sure you weren't going to make any trouble," Law said.

Tom was stunned. Wells' mother, Cynthia, was still holding a pitchfork for him after all this time. First the restraining order, now she was sending the really big guns to pound him.

Just give it up, bitch! I did!

Law glanced aside at him. "You know how vengeful those homosexual types can be."

From the tone of his voice, Tom could tell that was a direct quote from Cynthia.

Tom gave a joyless laugh. "I don't give a fuck!" He was afraid he shouted. Hey, it was loud in here. So what if he shouted? He was pissed. Insulted. His face burned. It was probably flaming.

As if he had any intention of inserting himself into Wells' neat little straight life.

Just how hateful could a person be?

Law asked, "Are you planning anything stupid?"

"No, I'm all done with Stupid. I haven't thought of him in over a year," Tom said. "And what are you? Cynthia's errand boy?"

"No. I just told you why Cynthia sent me. I did not say why I am here."

Law should have been a lawyer for the way he could split hairs.

Law was here for some reason other than what Cynthia thought he was here for. There's one shoe. Tom wasn't going to ask Law for the other one.

Okay, that was all bullshit. Tom really needed the other shoe to drop. "Why are you here?"

"I need a date."

Tom blinked. His voice came out flat. "To Wells' wedding." Law nodded.

"Me?" Tom said.

Law nodded again

"Why?"

"I want you."

"Fuck you."

"In time. Are you in or are you out?"

"You're serious. You want me to come to the wedding?"

"Just to the reception. You don't need to go to the church to bless the union."

"This is a joke," Tom said.

"It is," Law agreed. "But not on you."

"On who then? Wells?"

"Screw Wells. He's just a fun little extra. His mother, Cynthia, is the target. She asked for it. She invited me. I'm expected to bring a guest."

And Law wanted to bring Wells' old gay flame to Wells' wedding?

"That's evil," Tom said.

"Are you in?"

Tom hesitated. He couldn't believe he was even considering this. "This is like Carrie invited to the prom, isn't it?"

He could picture it now. West side gay boy gets sent up and humiliated in an East side horror show. Except that the blood wouldn't be visible in this fiasco.

Law said, "I swear I mean you no harm. Oh, all right, I mean you very little harm. I'm going to use you shamelessly. The only vicious thing I have in mind is showing up with you as my guest. Most of those people won't know that you were Wells' sexmate. Cynthia has made sure you're a deep dark secret. Even Winston doesn't know."

Winston Campbell was Wells' father.

"And anyone who does know who you are is too polite to say anything cruel. It is not my intent to embarrass my hostess."

Tom almost believed him. A man of Law's standing in society's stratosphere could take little satisfaction in crushing the pride of a grease monkey. And the hostess would be the bride's mother, no one who deserved embarrassment.

Tom wondered if the bride was the same woman Wells left him for. Probably. It took at least a year to plan a society wedding.

"Speaking of embarrassment," Law said, his glance traveling the length of Tom's body, from tee shirt to jeans to steel-toed work shoes. "I'll pick you up after your shift to take you shopping. You don't have anything to wear. My tab. What do you say?"

All the resentment and hurt Tom thought he'd put long behind him came back up, sour as bad chile. A sudden, mean urge for revenge burned in his throat. Wells had cut him to the heart, and Cynthia had clawed at the wound.

Tom would never have thought of doing anything to disturb Wells' wedding until damned Cynthia sent her thug here to stop him.

Now it was a dare.

Coming to the wedding reception with the odious cousin Lawrence? *That would be—as they say—rich.*

Law. Tom had no love for this big son of a bitch, and Law just wanted to use Tom as a pawn. But Law was Tom's ticket to a parting shot. Tom hadn't thought he needed revenge or closure.

He did. Sudden and deep as a stab in the heart, he realized he did.

"I'm in."

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Chapter Two

By the time five o'clock rolled around, Tom had lost his nerve. He didn't trust Law as far as he could throw a Chevy Suburban. The half ton model. Tom strode out to his motorcycle, intending to skip out on the shopping trip with Law, but the Diablo rumbled into the employee lot and blocked him in.

He got into the car with grave mistrust.

When they arrived at the high end men's store on the east side, Law unfolded from the depths of the car, and Tom was struck all over again by just how big he was. He stood only a few inches taller than Tom, but he seemed to tower, the way a Rottweiler can make a man forget he is bigger than the beast. Okay, not quite like that, because Law really was bigger than Tom, but the sense was magnified, making Law seem larger than life.

In the store, Law didn't try to steer him toward anything embarrassing. Tom didn't have quite the queerest eye in Lakewood, but he knew the difference between tasteful and tacky. Tom's normal uniform was blue jeans worn just snug enough to show what he was packing. If he were straight, he'd be wearing baggy, khaki shorts showing four inches of boxers above the waistband. Neither look would fly at this party.

The wedding reception was to be held outdoors, at the home of the bride's parents in an exclusive eastside village. The village was a tiny sliver of lakefront real estate where

most of the homes sported private marinas. Tom was pretty sure he'd gone to high school with more people than lived in the whole of the village.

The clothes that Law selected for him were absolutely appropriate for such a party, sophisticated with a young, urban twist and tailored to him on the spot.

Unlike Law, the elderly tailor was a nice guy. When Tom said that he wanted a short-sleeved shirt, the tailor winced so hard his whole face wrinkled inward, and Tom knew he'd just stepped in a deep pile of *tres gauche*. The old gent whispered urgently, "Not with a sport coat."

"Then why do I need the coat?" Tom said. "It's gonna be eighty-five degrees."

Law, seated along the wall, texting, spoke without looking up from his BlackBerry. "You may hang the coat over the back of your chair." He lifted his eyes to command the tailor. "Long sleeves. Sport coat."

The tailor put a palm to his middle, almost bowing, appearing supremely relieved with his orders.

The jacket was a lightweight weave, unstructured, what passed for casual in these circles. The crisp shirt had long sleeves. Tom was just going to roll them up, but for this brief moment the cuffs extended the proper fraction of an inch from the coat sleeves. The trousers hung nicely over his taut ass. The trouser legs made the proper break over Tom's new Italian leather shoes. To that ensemble they added a belt, socks—

It's gonna be eighty-five degrees. Why do I need socks?
—socks, no tie—

Thank God.

—a nice wallet, and they were done, because Tom would not sit still for a haircut. Law surveyed Tom's rough, dark hair, which curled over his ears and brushed at his collar. Tom stiffened, ready to dig in his heels on this, but Law backed off without a fight. "No use looking like we're trying too hard."

"I'm not going to shave either," Tom said.

"Please don't," Law said.

Tom wondered if that was a trick to make Tom disobey and get a close shave.

No. Not happening.

Tom didn't know how much coin Law dropped on this gig. The clothes were by designers Tom had never heard of, and he didn't get to see the price tags. He had a feeling the numbers would be a little on the obscene side. Tom's blue-collar ethic told him no man should ever wear something that cost more than anyone else's ride. A man was allowed to plant a rock on his lady's finger, but that was the exception.

Law returned Tom to the employee parking lot behind the oil-change garage where the second shift got to ogle the Diablo. The super yelled out from the garage, "Hey, Tomcat, who's your sugar daddy?"

Tom pointed his middle finger at his own ass to let him know where he could put those lips.

He turned his attention back to Law. "Where exactly is this party?"

"I'll pick you up," Law said. "I remember where you live."

All the windows of Tom's apartment over the furniture store stood open to the night breezes. The night had to be scorching for him to use the window air-conditioning units. It was a big space with high ceilings in an old building, and the tall ancient windows leaked air like slashed tires.

Appliances plugged into outlets on one wall made up the kitchen area. There was a closet of a bathroom. It was all he needed. It was all he could afford.

His bed was nothing more than a made-up mattress on box springs set directly on the wood floor. Tom didn't own a bed frame.

As he lay down, memories of hot nights came back to him in a golden haze. Memories of Wells.

Wells had been beautiful, Tom's young sun-colored god. Wells had an androgynous beauty and innocent sexuality.

Wells was stuck up and stuffed full of himself the first time they met.

Tom had just been laid off from an auto plant and was working as a parking valet at a country club in Rocky River. This was the west side. A Rolls Royce was a standout, even at the country club.

A young guest from an east side club came strutting out the front door of the clubhouse, plucked his keys from the board, dangled them at Tom on the tip of his finger and pronounced with indolent superiority, "The Rolls."

"What color?" Tom said.

Made him blink. Made him look, his expression pure astonishment. And Wells broke into a bright laugh.

Tom was smitten.

Wells was a wild, whimsical youth, a fey spirit, an unrepentant snob. He'd been "sent down from university," which was British for not being allowed to return to college. Instead, he shacked up with his blue-collar stud in the commoner's low end apartment in Lakewood, a town where it was said if you drop your keys you gotta kick 'em into River before you bend over and pick them up.

Lakewood had that rap, but not that Tom ever noticed and he only lived here. Maybe all the gays were on the Gold Coast in those high rise condos on the lake, but Tom wouldn't know anything about that neighborhood.

He spent that summer in an idyllic haze.

Wells fancied himself the reincarnation of Oscar Wilde. He glided about Tom's apartment naked. Wells had a video camera and recorded the two of them making love. The video captured everything—their deep kisses, their naked bodies twining, their cocks rubbing together. Their bodies were splendid, lean and gracefully muscular.

Sometimes Tom wished he had a copy of the video, just to remember what it was like to think he was in love. But he had nothing to play it on, and he was better off without any reminders of what was gone.

Damn, we were pretty.

They were sunshine and shadow. Wells was blond and fair. Tom was more olive toned, with loosely curled dark hair and deep brown eyes. Tom didn't look like either of his WASP parents.

Wells' parents lived on the east side in what Wells called the Valley of Divorced Women. "Maybe it's something in the water," Wells told him. "There's just all those divorced women rattling around in those big houses."

"Are your parents divorced?" Tom asked.

"Not yet," Wells said.

Wells' father was Winston Campbell, whose Rolls it was. Mother was a brittle, blonde drinking straw dressed in Dior—the hated Cynthia Campbell.

"Cynthia has rich relatives," Wells told Tom.

Rich relatives? Tom blinked. "Like you're not rich?"

"Not even close," Wells said, and Tom hadn't believed him.

Tom remembered distinctly the first time he'd laid eyes on the odious cousin Lawrence.

It was very early in their affair. Wells was playing polo that day and begged Tom to come out to the valley to watch the match. "My odious cousin will be there," Wells told him. "I need immoral support."

Tom rode his Harley Low Rider across town and off the east end of the map to the Metropark polo field.

It wasn't like a scene out of *Pretty Woman*. It wasn't fancy. There was no big, elegantly dressed crowd. It was just a game like any other neighborhood ball game played in any other park, except this was a bunch of rich guys with their horse trailers coming out to play. A scattering of family and friends showed up to cheer on their teams.

One player stood out, noticeable as an exploding radiator.

Big guy. Big guy. Dark dark eyes lined with dark dark lashes. Dramatic, dark brows. Haunch like a horse. Neck like

one, too. You couldn't call him fat anymore than you could call a stallion fat. He was brutishly regal with an intimidating mass. Aviator sunglasses made him look like a Hollywood bad ass. He had a smile like the devil and a laugh that carried like rolling thunder.

Tom sat in the grass along the sideline. The other spectators sat in their folding chairs under their sun umbrellas with Ivy League logos on them.

The players wore black equestrian helmets, striped shirts and white breeches, and those black, flat-heeled, knee-high boots that made any man look sexy.

The big guy looked like the villain in a gothic regency. Wells looked beautiful.

The prince of darkness rode onto the field astride a really big brute of an intact stallion, bigger than the other animals, and a bully like its rider. The man played a physical game, like hockey on horseback. He wasn't shy about body-checking an opponent with a half-ton of hoofed beast.

There came a point in the match when a pair of horses galloped in Tom's direction, hard, thundering literally neck and neck, trying to push each other off line as they raced to get at the ball. Tom rose into a crouch, ready to sprint out of the way. The ball was jammed up against the low sideboard right where he was sitting.

Like the squirrel in the middle of the road with the semitrailer bearing down, Tom didn't know which way to dart.

Choose wrong, he was going to get trampled.

Then the big man on his big horse slammed into the racing pair hard enough to drive both of them off line, clear of Tom.

Galloping momentum carried the three sets of pounding hoofs out of bounds in one solid mass of horseflesh. Tom felt the thudding up through the ground. A horse-scented wind buffeted his face as they passed by.

The ball was left behind.

One of the original two rivals for the ball waved his mallet head angrily in the air, demanding a foul.

The big man bellowed back in a very deep voice, "Do *try* not to kill the spectators!"

The offended player didn't get the call from the ref.

The big man rode back in bounds, his horse lifting its heavy hooves high. The rider struck Tom more like dark knight on a war charger than a gentleman at a polo game.

At the end of the game, Tom asked Wells, "Who was that guy?"

"That, my dear, is my odious cousin Lawrence. I would introduce you, but you would have to kiss his ring, and the dauphin is insufferable enough as it is. He likes to flaunt his wealth."

"So do you."

"We are merely the poor cousins. The odious Lawrence will be head of Castille Diversified when he comes marching home again. He's only here on leave now."

"On leave from what?"

"The Army."

"If he's such a big executive, what's he doing in the Army?"

"He thinks he's royalty. He's doing the Prince Harry thing in Afghanistan. The throne is his when he gets home."

"He seems awfully young."

"The big dick knows how to get his way."

"Won't he be a little out of touch with the business by the time his tour is up?"

Wells gave an indolent wave of his hand. "Apparently there's a lot of down time in the Army. The odious Lawrence calls in to the office every day."

Tom made a face. "Cell coverage can't be that great in the Kyber Pass."

"He has a satellite link."

"And the Army lets him use that?" Tom said, out of work and pissed. "Our tax dollars at work so he can play soldier?" Wells smiled. "Lawrence owns the satellite."

Oh.

On Tom's second encounter with the odious cousin Lawrence, Tom didn't recognize him right away. It was six months after the polo match. Wells had been living with Tom since then. Tom didn't know anyone was coming up to his apartment until this imposing hulk filled his doorway.

Tom thought they were about to be murdered.

The intruder seemed immense. Tom faced a vast chest coated in Army green. A pin on the man's jacket formed an upright sword with wings and the number "160".

Tom looked up at dark sunglasses and closed-shaved head.

Law took off his dark, aviator style glasses. His glance raked the room and landed on Wells. "This is so wrong." And he laughed a graveyard laugh.

Law's glance touched over Tom fleetingly at first, then came right back to Tom and stuck there. Something moved in Law's cheek, a small ripple in his arrogant calm. Law said, "Oh no. No. And no."

There were about five more no's before Law finally turned back to Wells and told him to get in the car.

Tom stepped forward and ordered Law to get out of his apartment.

"Or you'll what? Call the police?"

"No," Tom said. "I'll just beat the crap out of you."

Law's eyes widened briefly, flicked up and down, and Law laughed at him. Tom supposed it really had been a stupid threat, and he winced to remember it. Law's smile was big and wicked. The smile crinkled into fans at the corners of his dark eyes. "Now there's a picture. Thank you for that." And Law turned back to his cousin.

Tom threw a punch. Strike first—that was the only way to survive against a stronger opponent.

It didn't turn out like a David versus Goliath match. It was more like ant versus shoe.

Tom's fist landed way short of that smug face. Tom's knuckles smacked hard into the palm of Law's hand with an elbow-jarring stop. Law's hand had come up so fast Tom didn't see it. Tom remembered the exact feel of Law's broad hand closing around his fist, and then the sensation of his arm twisting, his elbow up, fist down. Law twirled Tom aboutface with his arm locked up behind his back. Tom remembered Law's breath on his ear, Law's hard cheekbone, the prickle of Law's jaw, the feel of Law's lips on the side of

his neck with a jolt of softness. Law murmured, "Maybe next time, baby. I just don't have the time."

Law launched Tom away from himself as effortlessly as emptying the trash.

Tom blundered face first in an ungainly sprawl onto his threadbare couch. He scrambled to recover his footing, outraged.

Wells spoke languidly to Tom with a tilt of his head toward the bully, "This is the cousin."

The cousin.

"Oh yeah," Tom said, remembering. *The odious cousin Lawrence*. And to Lawrence he said, "It's Richard, isn't it?" Law corrected him. "Law."

"If you say so."

Law's eyes traveled up and down Tom, hard. Law motioned between Wells and Tom and said to Tom, highly skeptical, "You're the man?" Law's dark brows skied as if that was funny.

Tom crossed his arms, defensive.

Law strode over to Tom's mattress, turned round, and let himself drop back onto it. He lay with his hands clasped behind his head. "Am I going to catch something social or viral on this?"

Tom uncrossed his arms and clenched his fists. He had a fighting hard-on. "Get off my bed."

Law's eyes found Tom's swelling crotch. "You want me, sweetheart?" It was the caustic banter of the straight bully. Straight guys always think you want them.

"Screw you." That sounded feeble. Wished he'd come up with something better.

Law patted the mattress at his side. "Okay, maybe a quick one. Wells, wait in the car."

"I'm staying," Wells declared and took a stand beside Tom. Tom circled an arm around Wells.

Law laughed up toward the high ceiling. "God, this is so wrong!"

Wells demanded, "Why are you here?"

"Cynthia sent me to find out where you were slumming. She said you were with some blue-collar homosexual." Law sat up, planted his feet flat on the floor and rested his elbows on his knees. He looked up at Tom sideways. "Got AIDS?"

"No," Wells said.

"Been tested?" Law asked.

"We are fraught with caution," Wells said.

Law stood up with a look of amazement and the edge of a mocking smile. "Frot? *That*'s what you do? A lot of ridiculous rubbing and humping?"

"You can't get AIDS from frot," Wells said. He pronounced it *cahn't*. Wells affected a Brit accent in those days.

Law laughed, a big sound, cruelty in it.

That's when Law ordered the blood test, and he told Wells, "You are not gay, you idiot."

"How little you know," Wells said in his airy voice.

"You are confused," Law told him.

Wells looked indignant.

"And you." Law's gaze fell on Tom. Tom remembered that hard gaze, like being in the crosshairs of something lethal.

The intensity of the dark eyes burned. Law told him, "You are even more confused."

Saturday afternoon, Tom heard the Diablo's engine coming from halfway up the street. Tom was dressed and ready. He bolted out to the landing, slammed his door, locked both the locks and ran down the steps and out to the street. He was not letting that swaggering jackass up here again.

The odious Lawrence emerged from the low slung Diablo and parallel parked just up from the furniture store.

Law was dressed much more formally than Tom, in black trousers and white shirt with cufflinks. The black jacket and bow tie were laid out in the narrow space behind the bucket seats. *Tux?* Tom realized he didn't know what the difference between a tux and suit was. There was no cummerbund or frou frou on Law's shirt, but Law looked formal. He looked like James Bond.

"We don't match," Tom said.

"I was at the church," Law explained. "Figured I'd bring a fast car in case one of them decided to run for it." He meant the bride and groom. "The twits went through with it. Do you want me to change so we look like a couple?"

"Hell no," Tom said.

Law moved away from the Diablo. He'd sighted Tom's motorcycle parked in the back of the furniture store's side lot.

Law walked across the lot and circled the bike like a predator.

The bike was Tom's only transportation, so it was a good one, a Harley Low Rider. Law's hand trailed the length of the seat, a loving, dangerous touch. The intimacy of the gesture

gave Tom a shiver, as if Law was caressing his ass. Tom wanted to tell him not to touch it. But that would probably just provoke him to do worse.

Law laid his hand flat on the leather. "Let me take a ride." "No."

Law gave an eyebrow shrug and walked back to the car.

Tom followed him, relieved. "Look, Lawrence, I know you never cared for me—"

Law cut him off. "Cared for you? Cared for you? What am I? The gardener?"

"Okay, you always hated me-"

"Better," Law said. "You're *wrong* of course, but you said what you meant this time." He ducked into the driver's seat.

Tom realized that Law probably didn't hate him. Hate took too much effort. It would be beneath Law to squander that much effort on the likes of Tom.

Tom got in the passenger side.

Law paused to free himself from the cufflinks. He tossed them over his shoulder. They sparkled with a brilliance that could only mean real diamonds. "You ready to meet Mrs. Wells Campbell?"

"No prob," Tom said, eyes forward.

Law started the car. That delicious sound filled all the available spaces. "I told you Wells was just going through a phase."

"Fine," Tom said. "Rub my nose in it."

"And you were just confused."

"I was not," Tom said. Tom knew what he was. He had been drawn to men before he knew what sex was.

"You both thought you were the man," Law said. "You're the bitch."

Realization hit Tom in face like pepper spray. He felt suddenly naive. No, he felt outright stupid. *He's flirting with me*.

A mean and dangerous flirtation. Law had been at it for some time. Tom had been dismissing all his innuendos as stupid straight man insults.

"And *you're* going to prove that?" Tom said. "Stop the car."

This was beyond mere snide comments to provoke the gay boy. Law really was trying to bait him into doing something.

Damned Wells had to go and blab the specifics of their love-making to this man. Tom wondered if this straight prison guard type sadist meant to show the faggot how a real man does it.

Law sensed his fear. Tom could see the gleam in Law's dark eyes behind the edge of his dark lenses. Tom could tell Law was laughing.

Tom said, "Just so we are clear on this, I am not submissive."

Law's derisive snort without words clearly told him bullshit.

Bullshit right back at ya, Tom thought. As if Tom would succumb to his magnetism. If this was Law's idea of charm, he was really bad at it. Tom wondered what Law would do when Tom didn't go down for him. Just teach him a lesson?

What had he got himself into?

Tom stifled a groan. Just how many times had he ever said Fuck Law!

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Chapter Three

Tom only stopped shaking when they arrived at the stately house on the lake.

Law parked the Diablo on front lawn amid ranks of staid, expensive cars. In the silence of the engine's shutting down, Tom asked, "You sure about this?" The house looked so civilized.

Law opened his door. "I am second cousin once removed from the groom. My grandfather and Cynthia' father were half-brothers. Wells doesn't like me. You tell me who invited me to this wedding and why."

Tom guessed, "Mother of the groom is showing off the billionaire in the family tree for the mother of the bride?"

Law nodded once. "Bang right."

Inviting Law was kind of like inviting an unexploded bomb. Cynthia really was asking for it.

"She wants me," Law said. "She's got me."

Cynthia was getting the full Lawrence. *No one deserves it more*.

Law and Tom walked on the grass between the rows of cars toward the house.

And there was the Rolls.

Recognition hit Tom with the force of a yawn. Strange how little it affected him. It looked tepid and prosaic parked under the mottled sycamore tree.

Tom heard a band playing from the backyard of the house. Sunlight glinted off all the polished copper roofs over all those

gables of the big house. The sheer volume of copper struck Tom funny. In his neighborhood, all the copper was in the old plumbing and it was what got ripped out of a house the minute it went into foreclosure. It this neighborhood, they floated mass quantities of it right outside in the open.

Beyond the house stretched a wide expanse of blue lake.

A tall, long-legged, bony-armed sprite of a girl with long, dark hair bounded half way up the rise from the house. Upon catching sight of Law, she stopped dead and flashed a huge, toothy smile in bright recognition.

"Laurie!"

She twirled around, making her wide skirts flare like a top, and ran back to the party in the rear of the house, calling, "Laurie's here! Laurie's here!"

Tom gave Law an evil smile, his eyebrows high. "Laurie?"
"Family may call me Laurie," Law said serenely. "To you, I am Law."

"You just hold that thought, Laurie."

"You'll notice it's only the girls who call me that," Law said.
"I guess you may as well call me Laurie." He gave Tom a fiendish wink.

Got him again. Tom could not win against the Prince of Darkness.

The coltish girl came running back up the slope and sprang at Law. "Laurie!"

Law caught the flying bundle of skinny arms and legs.

She was tall for a girl. Hell, she was tall for a grown woman. She was still flat-chested, her body on the verge of doing something, but for now was a bunch of sticks.

"Box of Rocks!" Law greeted her back.

"Laurie!" she scolded him with his name.

Law dropped her back onto her feet, and, with one heavy arm around the girl's angular shoulders, he turned to Tom. "Roxy, this is Tom Russell. Tom, this is my sister Roxanne."

Tom kept from blurting *your sister*? But he was afraid his eyes bulged. She had to be half Law's age.

As if to explain the wide gap of years between them, Law said, "Roxanne was a get-out-of prison celebration."

Roxanne's eyes went huge. "Laurieeee!" she cried, scandalized, and punched him in the ribs. In turn, Law twisted her arm and tucked her head under his arm. Her voice sounded muffled from somewhere within the trap of his massive muscles. "Dad was never in prison!"

So it happened that Lawrence Castille, CEO, was holding the skinny girl in a headlock when the elegant woman arrived up the hill.

The woman was of an age north of fifty. A few streaks of early silver shone in her long, dark hair, which was pulled back from her aristocratic face. She wasn't tall, narrower in the hips than across the bow, and packing a lot more weight than was fashionable. She carried herself lightly, grace in her walk. She wore wide-legged trousers. All the narrow pleats in them made them look like a floor-length skirt.

There was a splash of freckles across her nose. The sprays of laugh lines at the outside corners of her dark eyes were permanent. Her eyes were like Law's, only softer. She wore diamonds, big ones, in her earlobes, a cluster of them like a

blossom in her hair behind one ear, and a boulder on her left hand ring finger.

Her neatly shaped eyebrows lifted critically at the sight of the girl trapped under Law's arm. The woman planted small fists on her hips. Her voice was calm and cultured, only slightly reproachful. "What are you doing?"

"She started it," Law said, sounding absurdly innocent.

Roxanne's muffled protest sounded from the headlock. "He started it!" Her bony arm snaked up, her forefinger jabbing accusingly at her very big brother.

The woman's brows lifted higher as if to say, I'm waiting.

Law let go. Roxanne straightened up, red in the face, puffing long strands of hair off her lips.

Law put his arm around the woman's shoulders, kissed the top of her head and turned to Tom. "Alana, this is Tom Russell. Tom, this is Alana Castille. My mother."

Mother. Law actually had one. Tom wasn't sure what diabolical monster he'd imagined spawned Law. Something more on the order of a Disney queen witch.

Alana Castille clasped Tom's hand warmly. "How do you do." Her smile sparkled all the way to her eyes.

"Ma'am," Tom returned the squeeze of her hand.

"Alana," she corrected him, then craned to look up at her son. "You could stand to call me *ma'am*."

"Yes, ma'am," Law said.

Alana stepped free from Law's arm and smoothed down her tomboy daughter's hair and skirt. Then Alana slipped her hand under Law's bulging biceps. Law's arm automatically crooked into an escort's position. Alana corralled Tom's arm in

her other hand, drew him in to her side, and said, "I'll let the two best-looking men here walk me down this hill."

"Hm," Law said. "If we're the top two, what rank does that make Harrison?"

"Harrison," Alana began, with her teeth on edge, "is growing a mustache. I need you to tell him it looks ridiculous."

"It's really gross," Roxanne said, taking big strides down the hill alongside the trio, her arms swinging wide.

Tom met Law's gaze over Alana's glossy head and guessed who Harrison had to be. "Dad?"

Law nodded.

A robust, distinguished man, who had to be Harrison Castille, waited at the bottom of the slope. Tom could see the point of Alana's complaint. Some lips were never meant to bear fur.

Law and Harrison Castille embraced like grizzly bears with loud thumps on each other's backs. Tom guessed the globetrotting paths of father and son didn't cross often.

When Law introduced Tom, Harrison Castille took Tom's hand in a firm grip. Tom leaned in and spoke in a low, confidential voice, "Sir. You have a little something..." He lifted his forefinger surreptitiously to his own upper lip.

Harrison brought his hand to his mustache to brush something off it, his eyes questioning. "What is it?"

"Carpet remnant?" Tom suggested.

Alana laughed brightly and clapped her hands. Roxanne looked like she'd swallowed a bug.

Finding himself sent up, Harrison narrowed his eyes at Tom. "What did you say your name was, son?"

Tom answered quickly. "Wells Campbell."

Tom and the Castilles walked around the big house to the lake shore where the guests mingled and the band played. Two huge canopies shaded the dining tables and the dance floor.

Law's arrival commanded attention.

Tom was on the lookout for the enemy.

He spotted most of the major players straightaway. The bride, arrayed in a whole lot of white lace, bustled among the guests. The ushers, all six of them, were dressed in light gray tuxedoes. Their waistcoats and the bridesmaids' dresses were a shade of peach you only ever see at weddings.

The mother of the bride was in rose-stem green. Tom was searching for the mother of the groom.

He spotted a likely candidate—the thin, brittle blonde in pale yellow chiffon fussing with something on the cake table.

The woman looked up once, briefly, at Law's arrival. Looked twice and stared. Tom recognized his enemy. Wells' mother. The mother of all sons of bitches. Cynthia Campbell.

Cynthia locked gazes with Tom for only as long as it took to recognize him. Her face was a snapshot of pure horror, loathing, and betrayal. She broke eye contact instantly, her face turning twelve shades of pissed off. She retreated, vibrating like a wasp in yellow chiffon.

Law's eyes were elsewhere, pretending not to notice, but he murmured an aside to Tom, "Now *that* was worth the price of admission."

Cynthia did not come out to greet Law. Everyone else did. Tom escaped from Law's side to let Law do the family thing. Tom's work here was done.

He secured a Burning River Ale from the open bar and wandered down to the lake. He strolled out to the end of the private pier. A whole lot of sails dotted the water, gulls hanging suspended in the air above them. Powerboats cut white trails in the green-blue. An ore barge sat on the hazy horizon in the distance. Downtown Cleveland stood off to the left.

A voice sounded at his back. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Tom turned around. He hadn't recognized the voice. It was completely altered, deeper, with none of the airy whimsy he remembered.

Wells.

Of course, Tom knew Wells was here. Still, the actual seeing was a shock. A dull shock.

Wells wasn't the lovely creature of memory. Tom and Wells had both been androgynous Adonises. But young men changed fast.

Not that Tom was exactly *pretty* anymore, either, but Tom was still extremely good looking. Tom had filled out strong, more masculine than he'd been back then.

It was a good thing Wells turned out to be straight, because his looks were in fast fade. The lovely youth Tom remembered was on the accelerated track to bland. The beautiful, flamboyant sylph was gone. The otherworldly creature had turned utterly banal, all his color gone beige.

Wells was dressed in a dove gray tux over a pearl waistcoat. His tie was white. His rosebud boutonniere was the color of the bridesmaid dresses. But it was easy to picture him in an argyle cardigan and driving a golf cart.

Tom remembered how he'd scoffed when Law told him that Wells wasn't gay. Tom had to admit now that Law had a shooter's eye and he'd nailed that one. Tom just hadn't wanted to see it.

Something caged and moping inside Tom's chest lifted away and vanished—some lingering unhappiness he hadn't known was there until it left.

Tom shifted his beer to his left hand and offered his right. "Hi, Wells. I'm a guest. Congratulations."

Wells made no move to take Tom's hand.

"I didn't invite you," Wells said, his face stony, his voice deep without any hint of lilting, effeminate lisp. "You can leave, or I can have you removed."

"You invited your odious cousin Lawrence," Tom said. "And guest."

Wells' face fell clean off the front of his head. He looked utterly blank.

When expression returned, it was outrage. "Oh, that—" Wells couldn't think of anything bad enough to call Law.

"Rat bastard is the word you're looking for," Tom filled in for him.

Wells turned and stalked back up the dock.

A gull alighted on the boards at Tom's feet. It cocked a beady eye up at him. Tom gestured with his beer bottle as he

commented to the bird, "You're right. Rat bastard is two words, isn't it."

Law and his guest were seated at a table with Law's mother and father and Roxanne. This suited Tom fine. Even Satan couldn't cause too much trouble with Mom at the table.

Another older couple was seated there, too. *She* was named Irene. Tom missed how Irene fit into which side of whose family tree, but she was very nice. And *he* was named Ira. Ira introduced himself as the no good in-law. Ira was already half in the bag and very funny.

Ira told Tom, "Just remember, when they start the dancing, keep at least one elbow lower than your ears." And Ira winked as if he had just given Tom an insider tip.

Tom smiled, bewildered. "Why?"

Irene explained, "When a man dances with both elbows higher than his shoulders, it supposedly means he's gay." She gave a shrug. "Ira always tries to get the photographer to dance with his arms over his head."

When the head table was seated and the best man proposed his toast, Tom lifted his glass and drank to it.

Law leaned aside and murmured, "That's not choking you?"

Tom shrugged. He really didn't feel too much when he looked at the bride and groom. No loss, no anger, no desire. This must be what they called closure. He actually felt grateful to the arrogant bastard Law for bringing him here. Tom raised his glass again.

To the one that got away. Thank God he got away. He clinked his glass with Law's and took another swallow of his champagne.

"What's that for?" Law asked.

"I owe you," Tom said.

"I will collect," Law said.

Oh shit.

The wait staff brought out the first course. Tom surveyed his place setting. There was a bewildering collection of cutlery laid out. Mom had taught him to navigate from the outside in, but Mom had never been confronted with this much silver, and he sensed this was a pop quiz laid out by the bride's side of the family.

The appetizer looked like fork food, but there were forks all over the place. There were two forks on the left, another fork on top, and still another one over on the right.

I'm surrounded.

Law took one look at the setting and said, "We get to use the whole arsenal."

The drunken in-law Ira proposed taking to the boats and invading Canada.

Alana, the alpha female at the table, selected the little fork on the far right side of the plate for the first tiny oyster appetizer.

The next table over was frozen in solemn panic, no one knowing how to proceed. Roxanne saw their distress. She popped up from her chair, bade all the gentlemen at her table to stay seated, and she dashed over to the rescue.

Once she had identified the right tool for the job and the guests were laughing in broken tension, Rox patted one of them on the shoulder and said, "Honey, you get stuck again, you just holler."

She dashed back to her own table. Law rose from his seat to pull back his sister's chair for her return.

It was done so *unstuffily* that Tom was blown away. The Castilles didn't put on airs. Even when Harrison and Alana learned that Tom was an auto mechanic, they couldn't have reacted any differently than if he'd told them he was President of Eaton Corporation.

When the dancing began, most of the single women and even some of the married ones were all over Law. Money was a strong aphrodisiac, and power was even stronger. Law also had looks. And size. And he also had an air of wickedness. Lawrence Castille had every high card in the mating deck. He declined most of the ladies' invitations to dance. Instead, he danced with a tiny flower girl, whom he balanced on the tops of his highly polished shoes.

The young men were dancing with the bridesmaids or the other young women with the lowest cut dresses.

Left alone at the table with Tom, Roxanne leaned way over, her cheek resting on her forearm, wistful. "Why aren't they asking me to dance?"

That was easy. She wasn't the age of consent, and the guys were looking for someone to take home tonight.

"'Cause they're stupid," Tom said, toying with his beer bottle.

Roxanne leaned all the way over so that her arm was flat on the table, her cheek resting on it, and she was looking at Tom sideways. "Why aren't *you* asking me to dance?"

"Because I'm queer as a three-eyed jack," Tom said.

Roxanne didn't turn so much as an eyelash. "Then you know how to dance."

She was looking at him frankly, waiting. No shock. No judgment.

Tom stood up and offered his hand. "Wanna dance?"

As Tom took to the dance floor with Roxanne, the drunken in-law Ira, dancing with Irene, cautioned him in a stage whisper, "Elbows." He winked, very serious, holding his own arms pasted down to his ribcage. "Elbows."

Roxanne and Tom returned to the table the same time as Law. As Law pulled back his chair, he spoke offhandedly, "Cat fight. Nine o'clock."

Tom looked to his left, where Law was purposefully *not* looking.

Cynthia had Alana cornered. Cynthia's blond head was lowered like a hissing goose, her earrings shaking. She was red in the face, her chin jutting, her forehead smooth as porcelain. Tom guessed that Cynthia hadn't the nerve to confront Law for herself, so she'd made an end run to Law's mother.

"Ooo, Mom's in the ring with the wicked bitch of Midwest," Rox said. "Who do you like?"

"How much you want to bet that's about my choice of quests?" Law murmured, sitting down.

"Nothing. Squat. Nada," Tom said, dead certain that Cynthia was reaming Alana for letting *her* son bring *that* boy to *her* son's wedding.

Alana wasn't talking. She just listened, letting nothing of her thoughts and feelings show on her face.

"I'm going to hear about this," Law said.

Tom felt ill. He did not want to face Alana again.

And Alana didn't come back to the table. Whether that was because there were too many relatives to catch up with or because she refused to sit with Tom, Tom didn't want to know. He just wanted to walk into the lake and let it swallow him up.

Roxanne got up, leaving Tom alone at the table with the devil.

Law lounged far back in his chair. He nudged Tom's heel with his foot under the table. "Dance with me."

"Not if you were the last mammal on planet Earth, Law."

There was still some champagne left in Tom's glass from the toast. Law picked up the glass, touched it to his lips, not drinking, just touching provocatively, his dark eyelashes lowered with a lascivious look. Something moved in Tom's middle.

"Bastard," Tom said.

Law licked the rim where Tom's lips had touched. It made Tom feel like he was being licked without permission.

Tom got up and walked away, even as he mashed down an awareness that Law was physically very attractive. Okay, Law was physically outstanding. He was still an overbearing thug having a laugh.

"He's not gay, you know."

Tom turned. Wells again.

The comment threw him. Tom looked around at the crowd. "Who?"

"Lawrence."

That came out of left field. Tom was at a loss. "I never thought he was."

"In case you think you're going to shag some money out of my cousin, that won't be happening."

That barb bit deep because Tom was so not expecting it. Tom had never asked Wells for a dime. Suddenly, Wells was accusing Tom of digging for gold—from Law of all people. Why didn't Wells just warn Tom that the pigs won't be flying., Duh.

"He's not gay," Wells said again. "He's just fucking with your head."

And duh again.

Tom said, "You're the only one who ever fucked my head, Wells."

Tom took refuge at the bar, where he found a cluster of men to shoot the shit with.

The pack of them parted to let a busty bridesmaid through. She was a brazen young woman who thrived surrounded by studs. She zeroed in on Tom. "Hey. You're Lawrence's wingman. Is that Lawrence's Lamborghini out front?" she asked, her heavily crusted eyelashes dropped come-hither low.

All the young men answered for Tom. They told her yes, yes the wicked car was Law's ride.

The woman toyed suggestively with the neck of one of the bottles on the bar. "You know I'd fuck him for a ride in a Lamborghini."

Tom said, "I got a Harley. Would that get me a blow job?" Her eyes went as big as bottle bottoms, and all the guys laughed loud. The bridesmaid stalked away fuming. A couple of ushers offered fists to Tom to bump, but Tom hid behind his beer bottle. He felt his face going red as hell. He groaned, "Oh, don't spread that around. I so did not say that."

"Aw it was classic, man," one insisted.

Another usher hastily excused himself from the pack. "I gotta go see what I can get for a Lexus." He ran in pursuit of the bridesmaid.

Another man asked Tom if he'd brought his Harley here to the reception.

"No, I rode in the Lambo—oh crap." He stared after the bridesmaid, horrorstruck. "You don't think that's the real price do you?"

The guys all laughed, as if that was actually funny.

Tom went up to the third floor bathroom to tap a kidney. He was still standing before the porcelain throne when he happened to spy Alana and Law out the window. The two had walked around to the front yard, apart from everyone else. They stood facing each other under the sycamore tree.

Tom instantly assumed that this conversation was about him. Good thing he was done peeing because everything froze up inside him.

Cynthia had ripped Alana for bringing Tom here.

I'm going to hear about this Law had said, watching that go down.

Here it was. Alana was going to tell Law to take Tom and quietly leave.

Tom's ears burned hot. Squirming embarrassment gripped him all the way down to his oysters, while down below, the two made an odd, compelling tableau, the bull and his mother under the spreading tree. The majestic figure of great power who was Law became a tame beast facing the woman who bore him.

After some serious words between mother and son, Alana reached up and kissed Law's face several times. She gave the brute a big motherly I-love-you-so-much hug. When Alana drew back to look at Law again, her face was angelically beaming.

That conversation could not have anything whatever to do with Tom. The two were walking hand in hand around the house, back toward the party. Apparently, the gracious Alana had no intention of bringing up Cynthia's complaints to anyone.

But she knew Tom had been Wells' lover. She knew. And Alana's knowing left Tom feeling as if he'd swallowed a live muskrat.

On Tom's way out of the house, a young woman snagged his arm. She was tanned all the way down her cleavage, slightly glittering. She had long, amber hair, frosted pink lips, and she smelled like vanilla spice. She asked him coyly, "Who is Laurie seeing these days? Is it Jennifer Anniston?"

Who is Jennifer Anniston?

Law could have anyone he wanted.

"Hell if I know," Tom said. Why would he care who Law was seeing? "Ask *him*."

Tom detached himself from her grasp and looked around for Law, wondering if he could get Law to leave now.

But Winston Campbell had already carved Law out from the herd, and was leading him to a secluded side of the house. Tom didn't like that. True, Winston didn't carry himself like he knew Law's wedding guest used to rub salamis with Winston's son. This private walk appeared to be a business schmooze. Still, it made Tom uneasy. He watched from a distance.

The discussion turned heated. Winston got hot. Law just stood with his weight back on one leg, his head bowed on his heavily hewed neck like a brooding stallion, his body language clearly saying he wasn't buying whatever Winston was pitching.

Tom became uncomfortable and paranoid. He didn't *think* Wells' father ever knew about Wells' youthful experiment on the other side of the bed. But Winston sure seemed angry with Law now. *Oh shit, Law, you didn't just tell him! You bastard.*

Tom burned with curiosity.

A window above Winston and Law gaped open to the summer breeze.

Tom sauntered back into the house at what he hoped was a casual pace. Once inside, he turned right instead of heading toward any of the five bathrooms.

He found the room with the open window.

Unfortunately, the room was some kind of library office, tricked out with lots of heavy wood molding, hardbound books, a big desk and a leather office chair. There was a painting of a thoroughbred on one wall, a painting of a sailing yacht on another. It looked like the kind of room where a safe might be hidden—someplace Tom really had no excuse to be.

But Winston's voice carried through that open window.

Tom stepped in quietly, crossed the hardwood floor with cat steps, hunkered down behind the desk chair, and slouched low to keep his head under the windowsill.

He could hear Winston clearly now. And thank God, Tom wasn't the topic. Winston talked business. Tom could get out of here.

Someone passed the library door.

Tom froze, held his breath. Tried to wish himself invisible.

The passer-by backed up, looked inside the library. Tom died a bit. He'd been caught skulking under a rich man's desk. He cursed the sheer stupidity of this stunt. What did this look like? How could he be doing anything other than hunting for something to steal?

The person who caught him was Law's skinny kid sister, Roxanne. She sighted him behind the desk, and her brow knotted up and her mouth twisted, perplexed.

Tom lifted a forefinger to his lips.

Roxanne tip-toed into the office, whispering, "Are you spying?"

Tom whispered back, more mouthing the words than making any sound at all, "Hell yeah!"

Roxanne approached at a crouching duck-walk. She turned around and slid in beside him under the windowsill, her back curled against the low wall, her knees up. She was wearing bicycle shorts under her full skirt. She rubbed her shins. Tom knew that feeling. The girl had grown a lot very recently. Everything hurt.

Tom felt a lot safer trespassing in here with a Castille beside him.

From outside, Winston's voice was rising.

It sounded like Winston had some fabulous investment opportunity. Winston was making money hand-over-fist for all his clients, and he was willing to let Law in on it,—Law being his wife's cousin and all.

Law said, "I'll pass."

Winston went into shame mode. "I knew your father was fossilized in his ways, but I thought you weren't that timid, Lawrence."

Rox's eyes beetled huge. *Timid* was not a word ever used to describe Law Castille.

Winston told Law that he was pulling down a million a month and the returns were only getting bigger.

Law's voice stayed very calm. "Ohio is a community property state, isn't it?"

The statement—it hadn't been a question—seemed to throw Winston. There was a pause. Winston choked out a simple, bewildered confirmation. "Yes."

Law told him, "Good. Make sure my cousin has something of her own socked away off shore in a numbered account so you don't drag her down with you."

Winston tried hard to sound amused. He made a jagged, strident sound that was probably meant to be a laugh. His voice went high, nearly shrill. "What is with you? Are you afraid of my success? You can't bear to accept my help?"

"Ever heard a story about a tortoise and a hare?" Law said.

"Yes! It's a popular story among people who can't keep up with the leaders of the race!"

Roxanne's back straightened right up. Her mouth dropped open, her eyes started out of her head. She cast a filthy look right through the low wall and hoisted a thumb and forefinger L to her forehead. She mouthed in Winston's direction the word *Loser*

Tom pulled Roxanne's hand down and pushed her other hand up. She had her L on backwards.

Realizing what she'd done, Roxanne covered her mouth with both hands, stifling a snigger. She slid all the way down the wall onto her back on the floor, laughing, trying not to make a sound.

Here was Tom with an underage heiress flat on her back with him in the private study of the father of the bride.

Anyone comes in here now, I am so screwed.

Outside, Winston was shouting, telling Law what *his* problem was. *His* problem was that he had come to the helm too young.

Law countered tiredly, "I heard that one a lot before the stock market crash. I haven't heard it since then."

"You think you know everything! You're content to bask in your past glory. You think because you can't get these kinds of returns, no one can."

"That's exactly what I think," Law said.

"Oh the *ego!* I offered you your chance. I did. You'll see. And you'll forgive me if I gloat when your own board of directors throws you out on your orange-and-black ass!"

Winston stormed off so forcefully Tom could hear his retreating stomps.

Roxanne scrambled to stand up. Before Tom could stop her, she had shown herself in the window. She slid the screen aside and lifted a long, skinny leg over the sill to climb out the window.

Tom hovered, poised to grab one bony arm to keep her from breaking her neck. But this girl had climbed many a tree in her day. She had the climbing part under control. Tom could only un-snag her dress from the sill and push her skirts down over her booty as she went.

Standing below the window, Law looked up. Without excitement, he reached up to help his sister down from the window. He furled his brow at Tom.

In a very slight scold—Tom could not tell at which of them—Law asked, "What are you doing?"

"Spying," Roxanne said, landing on her feet.

Tom propped his arms on the window sill. He asked Law, "Do you really have an orange-and-black ass?"

"You want to see it?" Law said.

"Princeton colors," Roxanne explained to Tom. "Castilles go to Princeton."

"Yeah?" Tom leaned out the window to see if he could still see Winston. "Where do Campbells go?"

"Jail, if they're not careful," Law said.

The sun was setting as Law bid goodnight to his mother. Some quiet words passed between them, then she was up on her toes, hugging him tight, kissing his face. Someone loved the brute. Law's face looked tender, an odd look for him. Tom supposed even wild beasts could love their mothers.

To Tom's surprise, Alana sought Tom out and hugged him, too. She spoke softly into his ear, "I am so happy to meet you." She sounded as if she meant it, and she kissed him on the cheek before sinking back down from tip-toe, affection shining in her dark eyes. Tom wondered if she wasn't high, because she didn't smell drunk.

"Hey."

A large hand landed on the back of Tom's neck like a strong, warm collar. A frisson of dread passed through his body, and he tried not to cringe. He tried to will down his rising erection. The hard-on had to be from fear. The man intimidated him.

Law strolled alongside him with Tom's neck firmly in hand, the warmth of Law's palm sinking into Tom's skin, his muscles, his spine. "I understand you made a little business proposition of your own at this party."

Confused, cautious, Tom said, "I don't think so."

"Something about a bridesmaid and a ride on a Harley?"

Tom could feel the heat from his cheeks rolling up to his eyeballs. He said feebly, "She started it."

As they walked out to the front yard, cooler air exhaled from the grass. There were still a lot of cars. Tom grew more and more apprehensive. He was afraid to get back in the Diablo.

You dance with the devil, paying the piper could be hell.

If Law had heard the Harley story, then he must've heard the set up for that line. Law knew what the going rate for a ride in a Lamborghini was. It was no comfort that Wells had told Tom—twice—that Law was straight. And Tom never doubted it. But he knew for damn sure that sex wasn't always about desire. Sex could be a weapon. It was about dominance. And did Tom happen to know anyone who needed to be the master of everything?

Law let go of Tom's neck, and they parted to go to their separate sides of the car.

Law said, "Do you know a way around the construction?"

They had driven through a gantlet of orange barrels on the way here. There was always construction downtown. Those orange barrels were the Ohio state flower. "Yeah," Tom answered. "Shoreway."

Tom was about to explain the alternate route to Law when something came arcing over the car. Tom reached up, caught them out of the air on reflex. The keys to the Diablo.

"Drive," Law said.

The edges of the keys bit Tom's palm. This was the forbidden fruit, and Tom could not let go. He imagined himself a fish swimming around a baited hook, all his schoolmates screaming at him *No, no, no you fool!*

Law stepped back from the driver's side door to make way for Tom to take the wheel. The door opened and slanted up. He's playing me.

And Tom was walking around the car without thinking about doing it or meaning to do it, as if possessed. He

dropped into the driver's seat, felt an instant tingling thrill of expectation.

The passenger door lifted. The beast slid into the passenger seat, a sexually threatening presence.

I don't care. I need to drive this car.

Tom turned the ignition. The car came to life for him. Lusty noise filled him head to ass.

He shifted the devil into gear. It responded.

He made a slow, lumbering exit over the grass to the driveway, onto the road, and out of the village.

Merging onto the interstate was license to speed. Tom released all the horses, and the Diablo torpedoed up the ramp and broke free onto the highway. Tom might have shouted.

"How is it?" Law asked coolly.

Tom had to grin. "I'm harder than this stick."

I'm going to pay for this, he thought, still grinning like an ass.

Then he had the sense to be scared shitless.

No, I'm not.

Tom never saw Law as anything but a bully. A big bully. But there was something else now. Something more. Intensely threatening. Tom responded with fear tainted with desire.

No. Don't go there.

Tom felt like prey being stalked by a great beast, not for hunger, but for fun. This straight mofo was going to humiliate him.

When they arrived on the slow streets of the old town, Tom's fear built to choking strength.

He nosed the Diablo up behind another car under a street light in front of the dark furniture store. He wanted to just drop the keys in the driver's seat and sprint to his door like a frightened rabbit. That would look asinine.

The doors lifted like wings. They both got out. Something wobbled in Tom's diaphragm in counterpoint to his heartbeat.

Okay, I'm a frightened rabbit.

Tom tossed the keys back to Law and headed quickly to his door. "That was awesome, but I'm not going to kiss you. Have a safe trip back to D.C." He opened the outer door into the tight foyer. He had his key in the lock of the inner door as fast as thinking about it. He didn't dare look back. He took the narrow stairs two at a time. He rattled the other key into first one lock, then the other lock in his apartment door.

He pushed the door open, felt along the wall for the switch plate. He swept all the switches up with side of his hand. The lights came on. He tugged the key out of the stubborn deadbolt and moved around to shut the door.

The door stopped abruptly short against something.

A bolt of fear hit with the force of electrical shock.

The door wouldn't move, adamant, as if he'd hit a wall. The door had stopped against the flat of Law's palm.

It was just like Law had once caught Tom's thrown fist.

Fear rose up in a blank white wall and hot stab of desire. His blood effervesced. Terror gripped his throat and shook hard. Tom met Law's hard gaze and the world stopped.

He knew he must look like wild game caught in the crosshairs, and he really could not have been more scared looking up the muzzle of a gun. But it was more dangerous

than that. Law's eyes. The door moved slowly, moving the wrong way. Pushing inward.

Law was inside.

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Chapter Four

Tom stepped back and away. All the threat he'd felt wasn't his imagination.

But wasn't Law straight? Didn't matter.

He is going to fuck me.

Tom struggled against his own terror. *No big deal*. He told himself that. *If it comes to that, no big deal*.

The sound of the door shutting made him flinch. Law stood on this side of it.

The dead bolt turned. Tom's entire existence quivered.

There was something inevitable here, it was as if he was falling from a great height and hitting the ground was the only possible end. His fear filled the small corner of the room not occupied by the sheer overwhelming presence of Law.

No big deal. No big deal.

It was a big fucking deal, and Tom was scared out of his mind.

Law prowled the room, a refined and bestial figure. His formal white shirt was open at the neck, and his black tuxedo trousers snug enough to show the mesmerizing fluidity of rock hard muscles in his thighs.

They switched places in a kind of slow dance as Law stalked into the kitchen area and Tom moved out of his way.

Law came back out with a bottle dangling between his fingers by its neck. It was a bottle of cooking oil.

Tom felt light-headed, near to passing out. He had to remember to breathe.

Law's walk, between a strut and a stalk, was all menace. Tom's knees felt unstable beneath him.

Law slowly unscrewed the cap from the bottle. He gave the contents a sniff, then gave a sideways nod as if he found it acceptable. He set the open bottle onto the crate that served as an end table next to Tom's garage sale couch.

"What are you doing?" Tom heard the words come out of himself, and he cringed. How lame was that?

The silence and Law's eyes smoldered.

Tom glanced down at the enormously intimidating bulge at Law's crotch. The man was big. A guy never gets away with glancing down. The glance had been split instant, but Tom got caught looking. And Law was smiling.

Law nodded at Tom's own swelling crotch. "That's not a piss hard-on," Law said.

"And it's not for you, either," Tom said.

Law's smug look called him a liar.

"I'm scared stiff," Tom blurted. The arrogant bastard couldn't call *that* a lie. "Get out."

Law went silent again, prowling, as Tom's panic built. Tom heard his own breathing coming too fast, felt his skin glaze with sweat. He swallowed hard. Law's every motion made Tom start in fear. Law stroked him with an intimate gaze. Tom felt it like a physical touch on his body.

Law glanced up at the lights. He moved to the door and played with the light switches—one on, one off—until they gave a softer illumination to the room.

Some preternatural being that feeds on fear was feasting here. Tom couldn't figure out how it had come to this. He

hadn't heard Law follow him up the stairs. Tom knew he'd shut the downstairs door after him. Yet here Law was. "How did you get in?" Tom's voice sounded weak to his own ears.

"There's more than one thing you can do with a credit card." Law pulled his wallet from his hip pocket and tossed it aside onto a badly dented wooden chair. "Don't look at me like that. That wasn't meant to be kinky." His belt came off. Law tossed that aside, too. It landed on the chair, slithered off and coiled on the floor. His heavy watch unlatched, fell from his thick wrist into his opposite hand, and he set it down with a clunk next to the bottle of oil on the crate.

"Don't do that," Tom commanded uselessly.

Law kicked his shoes off. He was unbuttoning his shirt, slowly revealing the smooth, powerful chest underneath, his eyes fixed on Tom all the while. Law pulled his shirttails free of his trousers. The cufflinks had long since been shed and tossed behind the car seat.

He paused there, shirt loose and open. He rested his hands on his hips, a picture of raw sexuality. He looked around the room. Tom trembled, eyes locked on Law's brawn, unable to look away. In spite of Law's great bulk, he had a flat abdomen, with no hint of an overhang at his waistband. He was solid. His hips and waist were only narrow in comparison to his vast chest. There was nothing truly narrow about the man.

Law's dark eyes returned to Tom, standing there frozen in fear. Law asked almost casually, "Do you want a drink?"

"No!"

Tom's mind whirled. His heartbeat was a blur of terror.

No big deal. No big deal. No big deal.

Even as he mentally repeated his mantra over and over, the repetitions just brought home to him that this no big deal was really going to happen. A burning sensation pushed at his eyes. A vibration took hold of his throat. Shit, he was going to cry.

Law moved in close. His hand slid inside Tom's shirt collar to hold one side of Tom's neck, Law's thumb under Tom's jaw. Tom shivered. Law's touch was almost gentle, warm, controlling. Law made Tom face him. Tom's lips quivered. His mouth opened, not sure how that happened. He hadn't meant to.

Law's face moved closer, stopped a breath away, his eyes heavy-lidded, a little critical. His head tilted a little, his lips right there, poised over Tom's in an imminent kiss. Law spoke, so close Tom felt the puffs of breath at his lips with each word. "Exactly what are you thinking?"

"At this moment, I don't have a thought in my head."
"Liar."

Law's hand withdrew. Tom felt the absence of his touch as something missing. It left a cold spot on his neck.

"Are you going to take your clothes off, or do I have to do all the work?"

"I am not—this is not—"

"It's okay, Tom. I'm good at this."

His name on Law's voice unraveled Tom. His thoughts scattered like a flock of pigeons, wings whirring. He listened to the echoes of his name reverberating inside him.

Law's big hands lifted, unbuttoned the top button of Tom's shirt. Tom was shaking. The tremor showed in the fabric of his shirt. His breathing became shallow as he was afraid to move. The second button freed. The third. As the fourth button parted from its hole, the back of Law's hand caressed upward, brushing the bare skin of Tom's chest, and a nameless emotion speared through his gut into his groin.

He lost his nerve. Bolted for the door. Tried to.

Law caught him by his arm, just above the elbow, and pulled him back. "Wells was all wrong for you."

"I found that out—wait!" Tom's spinning thoughts tripped over the impossibility of what Law just said. "You said *Wells* was all wrong for *me*. As if I was the one that mattered."

Law drew him in forcefully, Law's face over his, their lips barely apart. Tom tasted Law's breath.

"As if."

Law covered Tom's mouth with heat and wetness, his tongue pushing in rude and demanding. It wasn't a gentle, romantic kiss. Law filled him. Law's arms surrounded Tom and pulled him flush into a powerful embrace, Law's body pressing full length against Toms', Law's swelling crotch grinding against Tom's unwilling erection. Tom tried to back up a few lurching steps. Law stepped forward, consuming and overwhelming Tom. Another step and Tom's thigh met the back of the couch. Tom was trapped against the couch and could retreat no farther.

Law's tongue pushed, exploring every recess of Tom's mouth. Law's deep breaths jetted harsh and hot through his nostrils onto Tom's cheek with the edge of a growl. Law's

hands were all over him. Tom felt Law's excitement passing any bounds or control. There was only his need.

Law's hand slipped up under Tom's shirt, flattened against Tom's belly and slid down into Tom's trousers. Law's searching fingers met nothing beneath the fabric except Tom's hard erection. Law's pleasured moan blended with Tom's own horrified bleat. Moisture seeped from the tip of Tom's cock. Law drew a circle of slickness around the sensitive rim of its helmet as Tom dissolved into sensation, drowning.

"No."

Law's hand withdrew. He took a small step back.

Immediately, Law turned Tom around and pushed him at the couch hard, bending him forward over the back of it. Tom caught himself, his palms sinking into the cushions. Tom tried to stand up, but Law shoved him back down. Law kicked Tom's legs apart and stood between them. Tom struggled as Law reached around Tom's body, groping for Tom's zipper. Tom cried out.

Something dropped down onto the couch next to Tom's hand and bounced once on the cushion.

Cell phone. An unspoken dare to call 911 if he really meant no.

And there it was. His bluff had been called—and Tom hadn't even known he was bluffing.

Tom thought he didn't want this. The image of the phone moved up and down before his eyes as Law pushed him rhythmically against the couch with a dry humping at Tom's clothed ass. The motion rocked the couch, and the phone

edged over closer with each bounce of Tom's hands on the cushions until it touched the outside of his little finger. The phone now brushed against Tom's hand with Law's every thrust.

If Law meant to humiliate him, he did. He stripped Tom of every dignity. Law handed Tom his escape, and Tom was so whipped he couldn't even pick it up.

Law suddenly stepped back.

Tom scrambled upright, tried to turn around, but Law kept one leg wedged between Tom's knees. Tom put up a futile excuse for a fight. Law seemed to enjoy it, both his hands at Tom's groin, fondling Tom and searching for Tom's zipper in no great hurry. The top button popped free, then Tom's zipper parted. Law wrenched Tom's trousers down hard. The fabric bunched around Tom's thighs. Tom wore nothing underneath. Air stirred on his bared buttocks. He heard Law take in a quick, sharp breath between his teeth. It sounded like pleasure.

Law's still clothed groin pushed Tom back against the couch. Tom's sex bent, and he flinched. "Ow!"

Tom heard a soft mutter, "Sorry," which sounded sincere. Law reached forward to find the root of Tom's cock. Law's broad hand glided up the length of Tom's erection to straighten him. Tom shuddered at the sensation of Law's touch. A drop of wetness from the tip of Tom's cock drew a line of desire on Law's hand as it passed up his shaft.

Law backed away a palms-width. The sensation of air on Tom's bare ass returned. The backs of Law's hands lightly brushed against Tom's buttocks as Law unfastened his own

fly. With a thrill of terror, Tom heard the zipper go down behind him.

Law's left palm landed firmly on the small of Tom's back to hold him in place as Law got his own trousers down. Law kicked his pants away and dragged his socks off.

Both Law's palms cupped Tom's buttocks with an amazing touch. Not just a grope, it was a slow stroke with broad hands that could gentle and control a hulking stallion and make it do his bidding.

I can get out, Tom thought. I think I can get out. Why am I not getting out?

Tom's flesh was bonding to those hands; his limbs and will were melting away.

Fear returned with a jolt at the unmistakable wet touch of the head of Law's cock against the back of his thigh. Law's cock felt thick. Tom twisted from his waist to try to see it.

He glimpsed it—thick, rigid, angry reddish with a bold, blunt helmet. It wasn't outsized, but from Tom's position it looked like a log.

Dread blurred together with excitement. He was embarrassed and ashamed to want this so bad.

Law leaned in to lick Tom's neck with a wide, hot stroke, which made Tom turn away, startled.

Law's stout cock slid into the cleft between Tom's buttocks. Tom's breath caught in, stayed in. Then the slow ride began, smooth, hot, and wet between Tom's cheeks. Tom felt Law's hips and the crisp hair of Law's balls press against his ass on every upstroke, small sounds coming from Tom's throat each time.

Then Law leaned to the side, reaching. Tom heard the plastic bottle rattle on the crate. Law straightened up, the bottle of oil in hand, and he murmured, "I don't guess I could get you to put this on me."

A wordless sound came from Tom's throat.

Law oiled his own hands. Tom blinked very fast. His breaths shook.

"Law. Law. I don't-"

Tom felt oily knuckles graze his buttocks and realized Law was oiling his own cock. Then Law's hand turned with a hot satin caress between Tom's cheeks. Tom gasped when Law's fingertip found his anus. Law set the bottle set aside. He held Tom's hips between his hands and resumed his gliding ride.

A tear trickled down Tom's nose.

Law leaned into him, forcing Tom to bend far over. The hard muscles of Law's abdomen pressed at the small of Tom's back as Law reached down to the couch and nudged the cell phone right under Tom's face. With his cock nestled between Tom's cheeks, Law said, "What's it going to be, sweetheart?"

The phone loomed before Tom's eyes, mocking him. Tom savagely pushed the phone off the cushion with a crushed sob.

Thick, blunt cock rode between Tom's tight cheeks, faster and faster, then slowed purposefully to a stop, the tip pressing at his anus, hesitant.

"Oh God." The words fell out of Tom's mouth.

"Easy, baby," Law said, an illusion of great tenderness in his voice. "You want it. Ask me for it."

Tom couldn't resist. His body wanted this, to hell with whatever Tom was thinking. He opened his mouth to say no. His body was screaming. *Come in. Please put it in*.

"Please-!"

He meant there to be a don't after that.

He didn't hear that word coming out of his mouth. He trembled madly. The air sizzled in his lungs, blood coursing in his veins. The tight gate that was supposed to be a one-way door relaxed and welcomed the enemy in and in and in.

That sexual thickness pushed inside him for an extended moment that stretched to eternity. His body ignited with a spear of sexual heat. The unexpected sensation left him thunderstruck, dazed and soaring. It was a revelation, as if a veil had been stripped away and suddenly he could see color. His body melted into fiery sweetness. Arousal in an electrical surge swept through him to feel a man's sex move inside him, this man, overwhelming and filling him. Law's cock glided in and out, hitting all the notes of ecstasy—in and out—making Tom his own.

Tom was aware of Law's hands holding his hips, complete ownership in Law's touch.

Tom turned his head. Out of the glistening corner of his eye he could see Law above him, head bowed, Law's gaze transfixed on Tom's ass, watching himself go in and out.

Some distant recess of Tom's brain harbored the thought that he was being used. All the rest of him was singing, *Use me. Use me. Don't stop*.

Tom's own sex was pinned against the back of the couch with maddening pressure. Law's every stroke pushed Tom's

excitement higher. The blinding pleasure of being fucked, in and out, the overwhelming presence of Law, Tom couldn't hold back any more than he could stop the thunderous beating of his heart. He climaxed onto the back of the couch.

Feeling Tom's convulsive spurts, Law reached around to capture Tom's passion in his hand. Law's sure strength surrounded Tom, sending another set of shocks coursing through his body and into Law's palm. Tom moaned with jolt after jolt of blissful fire. Tom kept coming, hard, over and over. A white heat blazed in his head, his heart overfull, his body exultant. Still deep inside him, Law held Tom's body close against him with one strong arm, while Law's other hand felt up Tom's cock, savoring his come.

Tom's eyelashes were matted wet. Law let go of Tom's sex to push his shirt up his back. Law's lips caressed Tom's bared back with a grazing of teeth, a lick, a kiss, a breath. Law laid his slightly stubbled cheek against Tom's back. Their sweat made their skin cling together.

All the blood rushed to Tom's face. The worn cushions swam before his eyes.

Law pulled Tom back and up and slipped one hand inside the front of Tom's shirt to stroke his chest. Law pinched a nipple, making Tom flinch, while Law's other hand worked Tom's singing genitals, the sensations almost too intense to bear.

Law nuzzled his ear. "Still think you're the man?"

Tom couldn't talk. He moaned. The sight, the feeling of that broad hand working his sex, captivated him. Law's utter

masculinity undid him. He shuddered with a last pulse of rapture. And felt suddenly weak.

Tom's life was in upheaval. Law rewrote everything Tom thought he was. It hit him a lot harder and deeper than he could have imagined. He sensed a change in Law, too. His caresses were slower, gentler, sweeter. Tom caught in deep breaths on the verge of sobbing. He felt Law's lips on the side of his neck, Law's hair brushing his skin, Law's palm gently around his throat. Law couldn't possibly miss the quivering in Tom's body. But there was nothing abusive coming. Law nuzzled behind Tom's ear. Tom felt the flicker of Law's eyelashes on his neck. He heard a gentle moan. Felt a kiss.

His own eyes were blinking very fast.

I am not going to crumble like a virgin girl. I'm a guy. This is just sex.

In the dimmest, darkest recesses of his being, he knew he had liked it. Maybe not in the dark recesses. It was right smack in front of his swimming eyes. He'd come like he'd just invented sex.

Clarity returned with the receding of passion's waves. The all-consuming possession was releasing its hold, breath by slowing breath, and now he was keenly aware of where he was, thoroughly fucked and impaled on Law's stout member.

His knees failed like a newborn colt. He sank. Law's cock slipped out of his ass. Tom crumbled to the floor bleating, letting out something awful that needed set free.

Law crouched down, gathered Tom up in his arms, hoist him over the back of the couch and lowered him onto the cushions.

Law walked around the couch, shedding his shirt. Tom saw the flex of muscles in Law's broad chest, the great rounded masses of woven sinew in his shoulders. Law's torso was firm, his thighs massive. His thick cock stood stiff and bolt upright from the thatch of dark hair over his heavy balls. He hadn't come. Law was still in control. He'd left Tom in ruin.

Law's fine, gemstone-hard eyes surveyed the wreckage with satisfaction.

Tom looked up, apprehensive.. What do you want to do now, Law? Gloat?

The big man lifted a heavy leg over Tom and edged out a space between the back of the couch and Tom to set down a knee. Law brought his other knee up to straddle Tom's thighs. His hands came down on the cushion on either side of Tom's head. He bent down and gently kissed Tom on the lips with surprising softness.

Tom drank in the kiss, crushed, dominated, owned, enslayed.

Law smiled into Tom's stunned face. "I told you you were confused."

Law kissed away Tom's tears, concern, amusement and tenderness in his gaze. Tom caught a gleam of moisture at the corners of his Law's dark eyes. Law was moved, too. He hadn't got through that fire wholly unscathed.

Law traced Tom's lips with the tip of his tongue. Tom's mouth opened to receive him, but Law teased at the corners of Tom's mouth. He nuzzled Tom, nose alongside nose. Breathed on his cheek. Law's mouth drew close, breath to breath, not touching.

Until Tom had to demand, "Kiss me."

"Beg."

"Please."

Law's mouth lowered to Tom's. Law's lush, sweet, tongue moved inside Tom's mouth. Tom felt Law's fingertips at the edges of his lips, feeling Tom kissing him back.

Their tongues rubbed and writhed, filling the emptiness.

Law knelt back on his muscular haunches. He finished unbuttoning Tom's shirt and fondled his chest with a warm, strong touch, one hand slick, the other sticky.

When Law leaned down again to kiss him, Tom's arms found their way around Law's brute shoulders to hold him for the first time.

Law tried to embrace Tom, but ran into fabric. He sat back, tugging on Tom's shirt. "This is in my way."

Tom curled up in a half sit-up to shrug out of his shirt.

Law got up from the couch to pull off Tom's shoes, then his trousers.

With his last shred of pride—Tom was surprised he had any by now—he pulled off his socks for himself. He was not getting fucked again wearing only socks.

Law planted something on the floor beside the couch. The oil bottle. A twinge of fear pierced Tom's haze of satisfied bliss. This wasn't over. Law was still rigid.

Law climbed back on the couch to straddle Tom again. He slipped his arms underneath Tom's body to hold him close. Law kissed Tom's neck, Tom's throat.

Law's kisses traveled down Tom's body, lower and lower. He nuzzled the hair of Tom's groin, wet with come. Tom's

cock stirred, and Law chuckled into his groin. Tom's breaths were coming deep again. His chest rose and fell under Law's teasing. Law's hot breath caressed Tom's swelling sex. Then Law ran the flat of his tongue up Tom's stiffening shaft. Tom shivered. Law's tongue stroked down. His mouth half enclosed one ball, and he massaged Tom with his tongue. A tide of pleasure swept over Tom. He tried to keep his eyes open, to watch Law's face. Law's eyelashes were downcast, his lips on Tom's balls.

Tom touched Law's hair, a strange realization penetrating his muddled senses and emotions.

He's gay.

This hadn't been just a power trip for Law. It wasn't a quick bang by a sadist just to show the faggot who was in charge.

Law was sucking Tom's balls. Law was gay. He *liked* doing this.

Confused and fearful as he was, this one thing Tom knew for certain. No man ever took another man's balls in his mouth to mock him.

Tom let his head rest back on the cushion, let his hands roam in Law's soft hair. Something relaxed inside even as his groin grew taut. The universe was shining. Tom's fingertips found Law's lips, felt Law's mouth doing him.

Law's tongue swept up Tom's erection to the tip. Law's mouth surrounded his sex and descended on him with raw wonder.

Oh, my God. Oh, my God.

Law knew exactly what to do and enjoyed doing it. Tom smiled up at the ceiling through a prism of tears.

Law's mouth moved up and down on Tom's sex, his lips tight, shielding Tom from his teeth. Law's broad, velvety tongue stroked him like nothing on this earth.

Tom had always been the strong one in his pairings. He never imagined—never admitted—that he could ever want someone to overwhelm him.

His excitement rising fast to the brink, he gasped, "Law! Put it in." He needed that feeling again. "Come inside me."

Law's face lifted from Tom's crotch with a sleepy look of sated predator. Law's hands found the backs of Tom's knees. He lifted Tom's ass off the cushion and moved himself forward, wedging his own knees under the small of Tom's back.

Law nodded down to the floor. "Give me that."

The bottle of oil. Tom passed it up to Law. Tom supposed he might have volunteered to do that, but he lay stunned and passive, watching Law's hands smooth oil over Law's own thick cock, something intensely erotic in the act. Law noticed Tom's fascination and gave himself a few a strokes just to make Tom whimper.

Then Law's satiny slick hands enfolded Tom's cock. Tom let out a startled *oh!*

Law lifted Tom's legs up so the backs of Tom's thighs rested against his chest, Tom's legs spread wide.

Tom felt the tip of Law's cock under him, prodding at his ass, teasing high and low. Until Tom reached under himself

and took Law's cock in his hand. With a grunt of surprised passion from Law, Tom guided Law's sex to his hunger.

Law knelt up, his cock penetrating Tom with slow, silken fire.

Tom's eyelids drooped. His head rolled with his moaning.

Law pushed forward, deep inside, his hands cradling Tom's ass. His cock moved in and out, while Tom's own cock rubbed against Law's abdomen.

Tom reached underneath to feel the taut cord inside Law's thigh. Tom closed his hand on Law's balls, felt them tighten. Law snarled.

Law bowed until his forehead butted against Tom's chest. Law seethed like a rutting bull. A growl swelled in his chest, low and dangerous.

Law labored under agonizing restraint, stroking in and out carefully, as if goaded by a desperate urge to ram.

Tom held back, held back, until he felt himself ablaze with agonizing ecstasy. He lost it, came gloriously, spurting white come across Law's flat belly. Law growled. A sudden surge of liquid fire released inside Tom. He cried out in a sudden flare of passion. He convulsed again, harder. Flames leapt toward the sky, spreading through his core. Pleasure lanced out to his fingertips, his eyelashes. Law pushed deep inside him, pulsing, groaning under wave after wave of shuddering ecstasy.

Law held Tom there several moments, his sides heaving, glistening with sweat, waiting for the fire to subside. Deep breaths expanded his chest. Tom clutched at Law's broad shoulders.

After a while, Law moved back, lowering Tom's ass to the cushions, and lay over him.

Law held Tom's face in his hands. Law kissed Tom's eyes. Tom mumbled, "You're such a bastard."

A slight motion, like a shrug, from one massive shoulder seemed to say so?

"You were a virgin," Law said. He moved a lock of hair off Tom's brow with his forefinger.

"I was *not*," Tom protested. "You're forgetting I lived with Wells for almost a year."

"You two didn't do snot," Law said. "Frot? I got your cherry."

Fine. Law was the first man inside him. Fine. "And that was your idea of gentle?" Tom asked.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No."

The first time had seemed violent, as if Tom had been fighting with all his strength. But he hadn't fought at all.

Law's eyes moved back and forth over Tom's face. "You took it hard." Law traced his fingertip across one eyebrow.

Tom tried to put up a shield of sarcasm. "Yeah , I'm just a girlie man. You figured that out." And he tried to turn the focus off of himself. "This is *not* your first rodeo."

"My first time bareback," Law offered.

"Really. Was I to die for?"

"You might be. But you were safe."

"I am. But how did you know?"

"When you were having your trousers measured, I found four condoms in the hip pocket of your jeans. That's a

careful—not to mention energetic—young man. I only ever carry one. I keep the box in the car." He half rolled, pushing Tom to the edge of the couch. "I'll give you first shot at the bath."

Tom guessed that was a really good idea about now, but as he got up and headed for the bathroom door, he wondered if Law would still be here when he came out.

As the water started, he thought he heard the turning of locks, the sound of a door opening and shutting.

Oh, shit. Law was leaving. He was really leaving.

Tom stepped under the water stream, trembling. He dried himself off and nudged the bathroom door open. He peered out, braced for a huge let down.

Surprised, relieved, Tom found Law still there, wearing jeans, standing before Tom's stereo and hunting for an acceptable radio station, posed in that brooding-stallion stance of his.

An overnight bag leaned against the couch.

Okay, this wasn't Law's first, second or third rodeo.

Tom stood in the bathroom doorway, naked. "Do you always keep a change of clothes in the car?"

"I checked out of my hotel room yesterday morning."

"Awfully sure of yourself," Tom said.

Law turned from the stereo, which was now playing jazz or blues. Tom didn't know which. It was not anything he ever listened to.

Law's eyes traveled up and down Tom's naked body. He answered, "Yeah."

Law's skin was slightly damp. His hair wet around he edges. He must have washed up at the kitchen sink. He crossed the room, took Tom by the hand, kissed him on the lips and led him to his bed.

Tom lay in Law's arms, listening to the smoky music and the street sounds. The cars came fewer and fewer as the night deepened.

He didn't remember falling asleep.

Tom woke to the pounding baseline from speakers shaking the whole block. It was still night.

Law got up. Tom ghosted him to the front of the building to look out a tall window.

A long, low-riding car bouncing on its double whoa jimmies had stopped in front of the furniture store. Some bloods were climbing out to circle the Diablo under the streetlight.

Law ran his fingers back through his hair. "I guess I gotta go entertain the troops."

He put on trousers—the black ones, not the jeans—and sunglasses.

Tom felt his eyebrows lift. "Sunglasses?"

"For the same reason the Secret Service and quarterbacks wear them," Law said, turning the deadbolt to let himself out. "So no one can see where I'm looking."

That and the shades made him look ferocious.

Tom heard Law jog down the steps. Tom pulled on a pair of jeans and watched from the window.

Law looked like a lion slowly advancing on a pack of hyenas. The street gang in their colors had the car surrounded. They took a diffident step back as Law

approached. The man really was a big ox. He was shirtless. The streetlight limned his muscles. Barefoot and wearing only black slacks, he looked like a black belt. For all Tom knew, Law was one.

Law intimidated them, even though they were six to his one.

One lifted his hands, palms out. "Hey man. No big thing." Law strolled to his car.

And popped the hood.

And started talking about the car. The pack reformed with Law the obvious alpha among them.

Law opened a door. Those doors did it every time. The toughs laughed like girls. Law held court until the bubble lights ricocheted off all the windows on the block with the brief blip of a police siren.

The squad car stopped at a wary distance. One patrolman stepped out, the other hung back in the car.

Law assured the officer there was no problem here at all. He bid the cop and his new buddies good night and stepped back into the foyer. Tom buzzed him back up. Tom didn't exactly hear Law's tread, just the creak of old wooden steps flexing under his weighted steps.

Law came back to the bed, where Tom waited kneeling up on the mattress.

Law stood before him, his cock at Tom's mouth level. Law caressed Tom's jaw with a warm hand. "What are you up to?"

Tom unbuttoned Law's trousers and carefully lowered the zipper. Law's hands gently stroked his hair.

Tom parted Law's fly. Law's cock was up and waiting.

Tom touched his lips to the bulbous tip. He heard a sound deep in Law's chest, heard Law's breaths deepen.

Tom's tongue tip slipped out to tease at the notch under his helmet. Law's breath drew in sharply through his nostrils.

With one hand under Law's balls, his other hand grasping at one iron buttock, Tom took Law into his mouth, sucking, stroking, adoring. He inhaled the powerful, musky, virile scent of Law's groin.

Law's breath came ragged. His hands made a mess of Tom's hair. In a deep, tortured-sounding voice, Law barely managed to say, "If you're going to come up, come up now."

Tom went down deep. Law came in Tom's mouth. Law had a strong, bitter-edged taste that made Tom wince. It was just like tasting Scotch. After his face unscrewed and he stopped coughing, Tom immediately wanted another hit.

Law held Tom's head against his hip. "My sweet fuck."

"I am not sweet," Tom said, getting up from his knees.

"You are," Law said. He kissed Tom's eyelids. "Get over it."

"Isn't fuck a little coarse?"

"Coarse? For a garage mechanic?"

"The mechanic wasn't the one doin' the talking."

"I call things what they are," Law said.

Tom gave a shrug. *There's that*. As if Tom had any delusions that that had been love-making.

Somewhere in the night, Tom had a hot dream. He came to consciousness with Law's erection riding his own. Tom seized Law's hips and pulled Law down hard against him. Tom moved with him, rubbing and writhing, feeling him all over, their cocks pressed between their heated bodies. Heat rose

between them to unbearable peaks. It became a contest. Tom tried to hold out, to make Law come first.

Tom spilled against Law's belly, crying out in ecstatic defeat.

No one ever won a battle of wills with Law.

Mornings came early in June. Tom woke beneath the heavy arm of a big man.

O God, what did I do?

He looked aside. The face on the pillow looked younger in sleep, even with the rough shadow on Law's jaw.

Somewhere between pleasure and horror, Tom realized, *I* did him.

Law's eyelids parted slowly. He gave a sleepy, canary-fed cat smile. No conflict in his eyes.

They faced each other on the pillow.

Tom's voice came out gravelly. "How did you know I'd go down?"

"I let you touch my stick," Law murmured. He meant his gear shift. "That's a green light where I come from."

"I was going to stiff you," Tom said.

"No. You were never going to do that."

"I was," Tom said. I think I was.

Law got up, showered, shaved, dressed. He dropped a few bills on the heap of clothes on the floor next to the couch.

"Cab fare?" Tom said, sitting up in the bed. "I may have to murder you."

"For the cleaner. These look like you've been mugged by a salad." There were oil spots all over Tom's new clothes. "And no, that's not too much. You're going to be surprised at the

bill." Law strode over to the bed, kissed Tom deeply, tongue rolling, memorizing.

Then he stood up. "I have to go. I'll call you." I'll call you.

Tom almost laughed when Law said it, those infamous last words. It was a slow, painful thing waiting for something not to happen.

Monday morning found Tom still gliding sky high. He started his descent around evening. By nightfall, he was concerned.

By mid week, the minutes became endless. Time slowed to an empty ache.

Sometime, finally, at painful length, eventually Tom needed to admit he'd been had.

This was the kicker. Law left him. Like Wells left him. Only truly fucked this time.

Wells had been going through a phase. Tom had been confused. Tom was not confused now. He'd been hit by a Humvee and left along the roadside.

What now?

Tom had always been just a little different. He couldn't even cat around like other gays. He preferred his own hand to ninety percent of men out there. And the other ten percent weren't swinging his way.

When Wells came along, Tom thought he was in love.

Tom thought he was the man with Wells, even though Wells never let Tom inside him. Not inside his ass. Wells didn't even like taking Tom in his mouth. Tom should have

known by that alone that Law was right. Man love was just a phase for Wells.

Law. Tom knew he didn't love Law. But sex with Law ruined him for anything that could possibly follow.

He had a couple of encounters on the open road, oral sex with fellow riders. Those were quick. None of those men were anyone Tom wanted to stay with. But he remembered their touch, their mouths.

He thought his kind was supposed to be indiscriminate and bang nine anonymous strangers a night. Tom was too squeamish for this life. He needed *something* to be there.

How could he go back to women now?

He didn't love them, and they didn't love him. He never took the women up to his apartment. They were less likely to expect him to eat them if he didn't have a place to go. The seat of his Low Rider had seen a lot of action.

He usually took his women into the city. Cleveland cops had more important things to do than hassle couples in an alley. Doing it in the suburbs was just asking to get hit with the floods. Worst of all were the parks. Rangers actually lay in wait just for a chance to light a lover's moon.

Tom was surprised how many of his partners called his number.

"You're gay, aren't you?" one woman said, even as he was in her. He almost lost it. He choked, "How do you figure that?"

"You look too good," she said, moving up and down.

"Then why are you here?" He closed his eyes and just felt what was happening to his cock.

"Same reason you're here." Her fingers laced through his hair. "I don't want to marry you, sugar."

His sex life had been that way since Wells left.

Desolation came over him at the thought of returning to that life. Forever trying to scratch an itch and never satisfied.

He paced his apartment. Caged, agitated, existing. He'd never been aware of what he was missing.

I am aware.

I am alone.

And that was the real fuck up the ass.

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Chapter Five

Tom couldn't sleep that night. He ended up twisted in a bunch of sweaty sheets, thrashing.

He got up, paced his apartment.

Caged.

He dressed quickly, grabbed his helmet and leather jacket, ran down the stairs, and shoved out the door. He kick-started his Low Rider and took off into the night.

He rode for miles, trying to clear his head, speeding to leave his garbage thoughts in the dust behind him.

Somewhere down state, where the light wash from any city didn't disturb the dark and he could see the Milky Way, he stopped to gaze up at the billions of fires splashed across the heaven. He stayed there for the longest time.

When at last he knew what he needed to do, he turned around.

He would get rid of all his stuff, get out of his apartment lease, give notice at the lube shop, and go back to a life on the open road—just keep riding until someplace made him stop.

He turned on the radio in his helmet. Johnny Cash was growling raw words in a driving rhythm, gonna break this rusty cage and run.

Tom found a strange elation in the despair. Everything was clear now.

He arrived home before dawn and fell into a dead sleep.

He woke to his cell phone ringing, the sun on his face. He fumbled for the phone on the floor at his bedside. It couldn't be any of his friends calling. None of them got out of bed before noon on Saturday. He was afraid something had happened to his mother.

He didn't recognize the number of the incoming call.

He flipped the phone open. "Yeah?"

That voice. No introduction. The voice didn't need one. Law just said, "Meet me at the hospital." There was a lot of noise in the background.

The voice woke Tom right up. A second later, he cued into what Law actually said.

Hospital?

Had Tom been really awake, he might have told Law to go to hell. Instead he asked, "Are you all right?" Kings and billionaires world wide came to Cleveland for heart surgery.

"I'm fine." Law said, and told him which hospital "Be there in a half an hour. Don't be late. They're not happy about me using the parking place." And the signal cut out. Or else Law disconnected on him.

Tom was puzzled. He tried to be angry, but he was too relieved to hear Law's voice. Like an addict given a small hit, Tom's need was so strong that he was grateful for the smallest taste.

He took a quick shower, pulled on his clothes and jumped onto his motorcycle.

When he arrived at the hospital, he realized how big the complex was.

He didn't want to go into the parking garage. Law hadn't told Tom where to meet him.

Tom circled the block, looking around for the Diablo.

A chopping sound from above grew louder, made him glance up where a helicopter was descending toward the hospital roof.

He glanced again.

That wasn't a life flight. The logo of Castille Diversified shone blazoned on the helicopter's side.

On Tom's second circuit around the block, a woman flagged him down. She asked if he was Tom Russell. She indicated where he could park his bike, then led him up to the roof.

There was nothing like being escorted up to catch a helicopter to make a guy feel important.

Hair flaying, eyes squinting, Tom ducked under the slowly turning rotors and climbed into the seat next to the pilot.

Tom looked around quickly, found no one else in the chopper but him and the pilot. He double-took at the pilot. The pilot was big. That black-helmeted, dark-visored science fictional being at the controls was Law.

Tom found the seatbelt, strapped in, and the helicopter lifted straight up like an elevator. And Tom had thought the Diablo was loud.

Law tilted the bird. That gave Tom an interesting view of the city, its highest rooftops really close.

Law's head moved, constantly looking around at everything, the instruments, the sky, that other helicopter hovering over the traffic on I-71. Law spoke into a mike

angled right in front of his mouth, either to a tower or to other aircraft.

Law took them higher, and then they were away from the city, flying toward the morning sun.

Both Law's hands and both feet were controlling the chopper at first. Then Tom felt a brief caress up his thigh that sent a thrill up his spine.

The chopper settled into straight, level flight. Less was happening with the pedals. Law popped open a small window on his side and stuck his hand into the wind stream to cup the air. He shouted over the din, "You're supposed to be able to gauge your speed by the cup size." He seemed to consider the air in his hand , then said, "Funny I have no idea how fast I'm going." He checked his instruments. There were over a dozen of them clustered on the panel.

Tom found the window opening on his side of the helo and stuck his hand out.

"She's a D, Law," he shouted back.

"Thank you." He looked at his airspeed indicator again. "So she is."

"Haven't you ever been with a woman?" Tom shouted.

"Been with?" Law's chin pulled back. "Say what you mean."

"Haven't you ever had sex with a woman?" Tom shouted.

"Not ever."

Something glinted off to the left, and Law was speaking into his mike again. The silver flash was a Cessna.

Tom rubber necked at the land below, seeing it laid out like a map.

It didn't seem very long at all before the chopper slowed, descending a bit, its nose up a little. When the helo wasn't going forward anymore, Law leveled it off.

For a moment, they were suspended in the air, motionless.

As hard as Tom refused to be impressed, the trip had been a rush. And this seat on top of the world wasn't hard to take.

Time had literally flown. They couldn't have gone far. This had to be New York state or Pennsylvania. They hovered over a swathe of green lawn that stretched between the shore of a narrow, brilliantly blue lake and a stately mansion.

The helo turned slightly in place, clockwise, then descended straight down. Law set the bird down lightly, the grass flattening under the downwash from its thrashing blades. The surrounding trees bowed and tossed their branches.

Once settled firmly on the ground, the turbine engine wound down. The blades spent their momentum.

Tom climbed out and stepped away from slow-turning rotors. Law was a few more minutes securing the "ceiling fan" and locking things down.

While Law worked, Tom nodded up the vast lawn toward the mansion. "Your house?"

Law shook his head. "Friends' place. They only come here for the season. I don't own a house. I have an apartment."

Tom frowned, dubious. "Really?"

Law shrugged. "I'm never home."

"You learn to fly in the service?"

"No. I already knew how to fly a helo. But I have to say, a Chinook is a little different than this. The Chinook is more like

flying a building. And when you're flying a Chinook sometimes people are shooting at you."

Law reached behind the pilot's seat for a leather traveling bag. He passed it back to Tom. "Put that somewhere."

Tom set the bag down in the grass and returned to shadowing Law around the helicopter.

"Why did you go to Afghanistan?"

Law answered straight back. "Kill Osama Bin Laden."

Oh. Sure. Right. No small ambitions for this man.

"We placed artillery batteries up near the border," Law said. "We took down the side of a mountain. Fucker got away anyway."

"And that's your fault?"

"Drop the subject. I don't handle failure well."

Tom had to laugh at him. The man literally moved mountains, took on a superhuman task, and took the failure personally. "I guess that's gotta be a megalomaniac thing."

"You just now figuring that out about me?" Law said.

With the helo secured to his satisfaction, Law turned around and kissed Tom. "Hello, beautiful."

Law pulled a blanket out of his traveling bag and spread it on the grass in the sun. He sank to his knees before Tom and brought his arms around Tom's thighs in a tight hug. Law's breath exhaled hot through the denim at Tom's crotch. Tom lost his balance. His knees folded, and he rolled back onto the blanket. Law didn't let go. He unsnapped Tom's fly with his teeth and edged the zipper down.

Set free, Tom's cock stood straight up. Unabashedly gay, Law buried his nose in Tom's groin and filled his head with

Tom's most intimate scent. Law took Tom's erection into his mouth.

Law's shave couldn't stay smooth for more than a couple hours. The light bristle scratched at Tom's balls, unbearably masculine.

Tom's excitement skyrocketed, control slipping. He clutched at Law's shoulders. "I can't—"

Law sucked him off.

Tom arched back, his throat clogged with cries of passion. Law drew out more than Tom thought he could give.

Tom was sensitive after he came. Law didn't let up. He made Tom writhe and flinch in excruciating aftershocks before Law letting Tom come down.

Tom wilted back onto the blanket, gasping.

Law's tongue traced the crease between Tom's thigh and balls. He inhaled Tom's masculine smell, kissed Tom's balls, and gave him the lightest nip.

Law's face lifted from Tom's groin, his lips red, his chin shining. "I missed you."

Tom stayed silent. He'd missed Law terribly. He'd died a few times.

As if reading Tom's mind, Law propped his chin on Tom's hip bone and said lightly, "Anything you want to ask me, Tom?"

Tom heard himself shouting in pain. "Why didn't you call me!"

Law groped under Tom's ass, fished into the back pocket of Tom's jeans, and pulled out Tom's cell phone. Law tossed it

onto Tom's chest. "Did you know you're blocking international calls?"

Oh, shit. "Where were you?"

"Singapore."

Oh.

Law kissed Tom's hip bone, licked his thighs.

Tom toyed with Law's hair. "Are you going to be nice to me now?"

"I'm always nice to you."

Sure.

Law ground his chin into Tom's groin, making Tom jump.

"Why would I suddenly start being nice to you?" Law said.

"You put out for an asshole. That guy is still here."

"And you're also full of shit," Tom said.

"I'm not going to change just because you're putting out for me now. I'm not going to turn into your lapdog."

"Good," Tom said. "'Cause that would be icky."

Law hiked up to the house and let himself in by entering a code on the keypad.

Music suddenly surrounded Tom, left lying on the blanket in the sun. That jazzy blues with a side of funk that Law favored sounded from speakers disguised as rocks.

It was complicated music. Not Tom's choice, but it was growing on him because it was Law's soundtrack. Left to himself, Tom listened to rock. He didn't mind rap either, which was good because he usually got outvoted when it came to what got played in the oil pit.

Law returned, kicked his shoes off, and finished undressing Tom, then slathered suntan oil on him. All over him.

Operating on a couple hours sleep, feeling warm, content and drowsy, Tom refused to fall asleep. He wasn't going to miss any of this.

Law stopped only to take all his own clothes off.

Law smoothed suntan oil on Tom's sex. Tom wasn't sure what that was for. He didn't think either of them had any illusions about who was dominant here.

He liked the feeling of Law's satin-slick hand on him, moving up and down his shaft. Tom's eyes closed. Law really had all day to quit that.

But Tom was a little unnerved by where they were going from here. He asked, "What are you doing?"

"Ever burn your dog?"

"No. You?"

"I have."

"Not something you ever do twice," Tom guessed, eyes shut.

"Oh yeah you do if you're stupid," Law said ruefully. He pulled Tom back against him, spoons. Law's cock pushed between Tom's cheeks, thoroughly oiled and in no danger of burning.

And oh God in heaven, he was in.

They started on their sides, rocking. Then Law pushed Tom over, face down on the blanket, and began a long, slow ride.

Tom tried to outlast him, or at least come with him. But he could tell Law had no intention of coming for a while yet.

Law was all about power. The power to completely own him. To give Tom everything he wanted. To destroy his restraint, tear down his walls and make him cry for joy he

never imagined. To hold his soul hostage and ignite his body. To consume him in rapture. Law would not come before Tom did. He seemed to need Tom's surrender to send him over the edge, unleashing his passion.

Tom came and came.

Sunlight glanced off the water.

Law had gone back into the house to clean off. He returned with two bottles of water.

Most men looked better with their clothes on. Law wasn't most men. Oh, he cut a fine figure clothed. But naked, he was magnificent. He lay down beside Tom, face down on the blanket.

Tom sat astride Law's ass and rubbed Law's shoulders, his back, just because he liked the feel of Law's formidable body.

Massaging lower, Tom discovered something on Law's body he'd missed their first night together. He'd thought Law was tattoo-free like any other CEO. But Tom found one. It was a bitch tat, where the girls wear them, very low, very small—a pair of dark wings riding his ass just above the cleft between his iron buttocks.

Tom traced the wings with his fingertip. "That passed muster with your brothers-in-arms?

"No one said anything," Law mumbled into the blanket.

"Tough to believe."

"Not really. You say anything, it means you're looking at my ass."

"Nice ass," Tom said.

Tom moved himself lower, running his hands over Law's buttocks. He felt where one rock hard muscle subtended the

other like cables in his bronzed ass. Tom licked Law's cheek, then bit. Hard.

Law didn't flinch. Only said conversationally, "Ow."

Tom unclenched. He'd left a double crescent of teeth marks, the flesh broken in places. Law twisted around curiously to see it.

"Are you a biter, Tom?"

"No. I just felt like it."

Tom regarded the teeth marks he'd made in Law's ass. "Is that gonna leave a mark?"

"For a little while," Law guessed.

"That's for leaving me alone," Tom said.

"I suppose I could have had Lakshmi call you for me. I don't like to use her for anything personal. I might have made an exception this time."

"Who is Lakshmi?"

"My corporate wife."

Tom had heard that term before, so it didn't throw him. Law's corporate wife would be his secretary, admin, executive assistant, whatever they were calling them these days.

Tom had to wonder what that position was like, obeying Law.

"What'd you get her for Secretary's Day?" Tom asked. He bet it was something better than flowers.

"It's called Administrative Professionals Day now," Law said. "And I got her a Volvo."

"How come the media isn't all over you? Gay billionaire."

"I'm in the media. You don't read the financial pages. They don't publish that kind of speculation."

"You know, a lot of my kind really hate your kind."

"What kind is that, babe?"

"Mega rich."

"A lot of my kind deserve hating. And I'm no saint. But I don't screw my employees or my investors. I'm not completely evil."

"And here I thought you were the Prince of Darkness."

"Do you still?"

Tom shrugged, massaging Law's massive thighs. "Maybe the Duke. Or the Baron. I thought wealth was supposed to trickle down."

"Who told you that? It doesn't trickle down. It sucks up. Never underestimate the force of greed."

"Okay, if it's not greed that drives you, what does?"

"Power," Law said.

"I believe that."

"Absolute junkie," Law confessed. "For the full year preceding the stock market crash, while everyone else was raking in obscene profits, Castille Diversified was making only modest gains. I was excoriated, vilified, reamed, and burned in effigy for not jumping on the gravy train. Came the crash. Castille Diversified stayed rock steady. Now I walk on water."

"I see that helped your tiny ego."

"My ego is as big as is deserves to be," Law said, his head turned, his eyes sliding back toward Tom. "Is it not?"

Tom hesitated. He hated to feed Law's arrogance, but had to admit he had no grounds to complain of the size of Law's anything.

Law challenged him to ancient Greek style wrestling.

"Bring it," Tom said. He had no idiot idea that he could come out on top. He was going to get pinned. And come.

Tom had come three times. Law was still hard. Tom asked, "Aren't you in pain?" Tom's balls would be blue by now.

"It's a really cool pain," Law said, nodding.

"I heard that executive types like to be tied up and dominated."

"Who told you that?"

"A hooker."

"That could be true for executives who use hookers, but I wouldn't know about that kind."

Law went into the house. He came back out, lay back on the blanket, smug, his cock pointing up, hard. "Show me what you can do."

Tom crouched over him. He smelled liquor on Law's sex. Droplets of brandy dappled the dark, coarse hair of Law's groin.

Tom tried, really tried, with hands and lips and tongue, to bring Law to climax. Tom almost had him a couple times, tasted Law's precome, and made him shift with the raw pleasure of a big cat in heat. Law reached aside for the suntan oil. Tom poured some between his hands, ran his hands up and down Law's thick, rigid cock.

[&]quot;What's that?" Tom asked.

[&]quot;No rules and bare ass naked."

[&]quot;Law, I can't possibly win against you."

[&]quot;Define winning."

Law stood up with a growl and lifted Tom up with him, turned Tom around and hooked his arms through the crooks of Tom's elbows.

Trapped with his arms locked behind his back and Law's sex prodding his ass, Tom could do nothing. Law kissed the back of Tom's neck. Tom's hands groped at Law's hips, but could not reach his cock. Tom cried, "I want to touch you."

"You haven't begun to want," Law murmured, slowly, slowly entering him, penetrating and withdrawing with languorous strokes, his tongue drawing lines of fire across Tom's shoulders, his breath in Tom's hair, his broad chest hard against Tom's back.

He was going to make Tom jack into the air.

You're coming with me, Tom thought, defiant.

Tom carefully tightened and released, caressing Law's cock with his body like a woman in orgasm.

And rocked Law's world. Law let go with a snarling roar only so he could throw his arms around Tom's body and hold him tight. Tom felt Law's shuddering, wet release inside him. Law's big hand reached down to grip Tom's erection.

Law's groans sounded behind his ear, a triumphant, helpless sound, abandoning control and pulsing sheer rapture into Tom's body. Tom's hands pressed over Law's as Tom's come spilled joyously over both of them.

Collapsed on the blanket side by side with Tom, Law murmured, "You surprised me with that—" He didn't complete the thought. Apparently, he didn't know how to describe *that*. He took Tom's middle finger, put it in his mouth, and squeezed it a couple times with his lips. "Where'd you learn to

do that?" There was an unmistakable note of jealousy in his voice. Maybe he was wondering just how lonely Tom had been this past week.

Tom shrugged. "I—I just *did* it. Women do it. When they're excited. Feels good."

"Yeah," Law said, a little shell shocked.

Got him, Tom thought, his turn to be smug. Got him.

Tom rolled into him. Law's heavy arm enfolded him.

"Harrison was impressed with you, by the way."

Tom's eyes flew wide open.

Tom remembered meeting Law's father, Harrison, at the wedding.

He was? Tom lifted his head to look at Law's face. "I dissed his mustache."

"He dislikes toadies," Law said. "You looked him in the eye, and you took Alana's side. He shaved it off, by the way, the carpet remnant. Alana is queen of his universe. And you're a snot. He likes that. And you were good to Rox. Rox is princess of his universe."

Tom rested his chin on Law's sternum. Law's fingers trailed lightly up and down Tom's back, giving him a warm shiver.

"D'your folks know?" Tom asked.

"Know what?"

"What you are?"

"Say what you mean."

"Do they know that you're gay?"

"Yeah. They do. Alana's good with it. Harrison, Harrison is not happy. We had one talk. One. He told me he wouldn't

have wished it on me. And told me that I had to be twice as tough as everyone else."

Tom made a small sound like a snort. Law had taken that advice to the extreme.

"He also told me not to marry. A woman, he meant. He said it doesn't help anyone. Rox and I are thinking maybe grandpa Castille might have been in the closet."

Tom's stomach gave a little lurch. Harrison knew his son's preference. That meant Harrison would have been giving Tom a real hard look when they met at the wedding. Tom wasn't sure he would have been able to look the man in the eye if Tom had known Harrison knew what he was.

Classy man, Harrison hadn't given away any of the suspicion and discomfort he had to have been feeling on meeting Tom. Tom was glad that he himself had been clueless at the time. Embarrassment burned hot and cold in his cheeks. He tried to fight it down. He refused to be ashamed.

"You're not going to marry?" Tom asked.

Law seemed surprised. "Not a woman. I don't do fraud." His hand stroked Tom's buttocks.

"There are to be no tycoon babies?"

"There will. Rox will pick up the slack. We're mama's boy and daddy's girl."

Tom and Law were ravenous by the time they got around to eating the picnic meal Law packed. They split a bottle of wine, swam in the lake, took a shower together inside the house.

They lazed in the grass as the sun lowered toward the horizon.

Law rolled his head aside, lifted his watch from the grass, let it drop. "I have to go. I need to stop for gas."

"Back to Singapore?" Tom asked.

Law groaned. "No. D.C.. I have to play fucking golf with a major partner in the morning."

"Since you love it so much, why do you play?"

"It's required in the business world. And it's useful. You discover things about people. It's a lot like getting them drunk."

He sat up, strapped his watch on, its face inside his stout wrist.

As Tom dressed, Law called ahead to clear the helipad with the hospital. If there was an emergency flight coming in, Law would just have to punt.

"Nice of them to let you use their roof," Tom commented.

"It's very very grudging. And it costs. Underwriters hate it. It's a liability thing."

As they flew back toward the setting sun, Tom half expected this loud magic coach to turn back into a pumpkin. And the coachman? He was still a rat, but Tom was afraid he was falling in love with the rat.

Or had that already happened?

As Tom climbed down from the helicopter on the hospital roof, Law called out after him, "Get a passport!"

Tom squinted as if that would help him hear through the engine noise and wind from the rotors. He shouted back, "Why?"

"I have tickets in the pit grandstand at the Formula One Grand Prix of Singapore in September."

And the helicopter ascended.

I have a date, Tom thought, a little giddy. A date some time in September. That assumed the two of them would be together in three months.

That was a hell of a lot better than I'll call you.

Law did call. It was late morning on Sunday. Tom was still in bed.

Tom seized up his phone at the first ring. The number on the screen sent his heart leaping. *Okay, I'm in love. So frikkin' what*. He let his heart soar.

He flipped open the phone. "Hi."

Law didn't waste time with hello. "We're on the ninth hole, fishing Aquaman out of the water hazard."

Golf. What fun. "And what are you learning about your business partner?"

"He can't swim," Law said for starters. "And I really need to rethink my position with his company."

Tom grinned. "What's he learning about you?"

"If he were paying attention to this phone call—and he's not—he would know that I can be led around by my dick."

"I'm not leading you, Law."

"But you could."

* * * *

Back at his D.C. apartment, Lawrence Castille checked his voice mail and e-mail messages.

He would have deleted unread the one from the unknown sender except the subject line caught his attention.

He read the demand and played the video.

The image on the small screen of his BlackBerry was clear. It was an amateur video recorded on an expensive high definition camera.

The two young men were gorgeous.

Their ages were scarcely on this side of legal. They were youthfully lithe, with an androgynous gentleness to their musculature. There was nothing in the least feminine about their long, hard erections rubbing against each other.

The two slender, young men posed themselves in an open embrace so the camera could catch the action. Sweet, caressing hands roamed across each other's hard body. The tips of their cocks touched and circled. The one on his back ground his narrow hips so head circled head, both of them seeping, glistening. The blond's eyes were directed indolently on the camera. The other, propped up on his side, kept his gaze on his beloved.

Their mouths opened wide and joined in starving kisses, tongues twining and stroking.

The older one closed his right hand around both their cocks, pressing them together length to length. The blonde's hips bucked upward, rubbing sex against sex. The blond's eyes were half-mast and fixed in a sultry pout on the camera.

The other was solemn. Eyes shutting in mounting passion, he lowered his mouth to his beloved's smooth shoulder .

They came, one on the other. Spurts of whiteness from their long cocks blended. Their bodies stretched taut.

The one lay across his beloved, showing his pretty ass for the camera. The blond's eyes peered over his lover's shoulder, smug at the camera.

Law shut off his phone. The young men were beautiful. And familiar.

One was his cousin, and one was his lover.

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Chapter Six

"Tom, what am I looking at?" Law passed Tom his phone.

It was Friday evening. The sky was still light, nearing the longest day of the year. Law had driven in from D.C. and lay on Tom's couch, feet up on the arm rest.

Tom took the phone. A video was playing. He felt a sinking chill. He inhaled needles. Engine sludge churned in his gut.

He forced dread into anger. He was not going on the defensive on this. "You have people investigating me?" he said stiffly. Tom gave the phone back to Law.

Law remained cool. "There's a blackmail demand attached." He clicked his phone a couple times and handed it back to Tom. Law's fingers brushed warmly across Tom's palm in the passing.

Tom was shaking. He took a deep breath and read the text on the screen. The message was addressed to Lawrence Castille, CEO of Castille Diversified. The sender demanded three million dollars to be deposited in a numbered account in the Cayman Islands by Monday or else the pictures of Lawrence's boy toy would hit the internet.

"What are you going to do?" Tom asked, hollow.

"I'm not paying it, if that's what you're asking," Law said, without excitement. "You're going to be an internet star. Pity it's going to be with my idiot cousin and not *me*."

"Oh, jeez, turn it off," Tom moaned.

"No. I like watching you come."

"I didn't think that still existed."

He used to think he wanted a copy. Be very very careful what you wish for, Tomcat.

"Who took these pictures?" Law asked.

Tom was feeling a little sick. "It was Wells' camera on a stand. There wasn't anyone else there. That was back when we were—we." He had to sit. The floor was there, so that's where he sat.

This was a worldwide pants down. Jesus Christ, his mother surfed the internet. The guys at work surfed. Not that the guys would ever do a search on Tom Russell, but if they ever saw that video, the police would be dragging Tom's carcass out of Lake Erie—badly beaten with tire irons and wrenches.

"I should be able to track down the extortionist from his IP address once he posts this. But that's only after your ship sails."

"Could the FBI do something?" Tom asked weakly.

"I'm not going to the FBI. I don't want the FBI in my network. Neither do you. They won't be sympathetic. And fact is, I don't really care if this gets out."

Tom did. And Wells had to care, too.

"Did Wells get a demand for money?" Tom asked.

"Don't know. Don't care. It would make more sense to shake down *him* instead of me, even though I have more money. It's *his* ass out there, not mine. His Daddy is made of money. But I don't think even Winston would part with three million dollars for this. I just don't see the return on the investment."

Tom got to his feet. Law was playing the video over again. Tom covered his eyes and groaned.

"You take a good picture," Law said. He sat up, tossed the phone aside and pulled Tom onto his lap. "But you're better in the flesh."

They stripped each other, then held each other, moving and writhing in each other's arms. Law covered him and rubbed against him, body to body, cock to cock.

Frot. The word popped into Tom's head.

Since Tom apparently liked frot, it seemed Law would give him that—and do it better than Wells. As if he was trying to erase Wells.

Tom thought it would be hard for Law to erase what was no longer there, but it felt so good letting him try that Tom just stretched and moved and caressed, touching him, smelling him, tasting him, and coming on Law's sex.

After sex, Law wanted to drive Tom's Low Rider.

"Why don't you have your own bike?" Tom asked.

"I'm not allowed to."

"You're—?" that thought was too weird to finish. *Not allowed to?*

Who on the planet didn't allow Law to do anything?

"The insurance underwriters would have a cow," Law said. "Actually, they would have whole herds of mooing cattle if I got on a bike."

"They let you get in a helicopter in a war zone."

"We had to pull them off the window ledges. I had to officially resign my position. My Dad was at the helm of the company when I was in Afghanistan. Though we talked just

about every day. Or night, depending on whose time zone you mean. Officially, I wasn't C-level at the time."

"Sea level?" Tom echoed, frowning. What had the altitude to do with anything?

"C level. When your job title begins with Chief. CEO, CFO, CIO. Anyway, helicopter crashes are rare. They're front page news when they happen. A motorcycle has a one in twenty-three chance of being in an accident—or so my underwriters tell me."

"So what? You can't afford to pay your own hospital bills if you lay it down? I don't get it."

"They're not worried about the hospital bills, and they're not worried about me as a person. What they can't afford is to lose the CEO of Castille Diversified. I am worth a tanker load of money. Let me ride."

The night was still very warm, but Tom still wore jeans and his leather jacket for riding. He wasn't surprised to see that Law had packed a jacket.

Law mounted Tom's bike, his heavy leg lifting easily over the seat. Tom climbed on behind him and leaned back against the sissy bar. He let his hands rest on either side of Law's hips. It felt good holding Law between his thighs.

Law kick-started the machine and took off hot. He held back through most of the slow streets of the old town. They got on a county road, and he let it roar.

There was only the road, the wind, the engine, and Law. Tom closed his eyes with a pleasantly aching hard-on.

They left the county in the gathering dusk.

At some point on an open highway, Tom became aware of a car closing behind them. Law slowed and moved over to the right to let the guy pass.

The car nosed up behind them, menacing, not passing.

Law called back over his broad shoulder, "We've picked up another asshole."

Law sped up.

The car sped up.

Law moved over to the right again and gestured for the guy to pass.

The blapping sound of the engine opening up barked very close.

The rust-and-black car roared past them, crowding very close to the berm. Exhaust-heavy wind batted at them. The car rocketed up the highway.

Good riddance, Tom thought. But then saw the brake lights up ahead. The squeal of locked tires carried back.

Oh shit.

Law's arm reached back and pulled Tom flush against him. He took Tom's hand, drawing Tom's arm around him tight. "Hang on."

Law U-turned and roared away in the opposite direction.

Tom looked back. "He's coming around."

When the car closed in, Law veered into the oncoming lane and spun the bike around, its wheels spinning forward, the bike still screeching backward 'til momentum shifted and they were off in the other direction again.

Tom looked back. The car had overshot and was executing a sloppy bootleg turn.

Law turned off the bike's lights and turned down a dark county road without streetlights or buildings, just trees and fallow fields.

Tom's heart thrumming fast in his throat reverberated in his fingertips. Tom had run into this type of jackass before. Some drivers just hated motorcycles. Most of them hadn't been quite this nuts.

He rested his cheek on Law's back, trying to slow his hammering heart, when the corner of his vision caught the glimmer of headlights in the rear. The car had made the turn.

Maybe it was the sight of two men in the saddle that set this guy off, but he was roaring full throttle up the dark road with a double hatred—riders and queers. This guy was on a mission.

Law steered around the potholes. The car didn't give a rip and plowed right over them. Tom saw the headlights jerk and bob behind him as the car passed over a crater.

Crossing a small bridge, Law shouted a warning. "This is going to be rough."

He swerved left, off the pavement, at the point where the bridge's guard rail ended. He braked with a spray of gravel, then backed the bike up behind the metal guard rail.

The car's headlights washed over them.

With a sudden bang, a metallic shriek, and a shower of sparks the car sideswiped the guard rail. Tom ducked his head. "Shit!"

He's trying to kill us.

The car's brake lights illuminated up ahead with the squeal of rubber and an abrupt stop.

"Fuck this." Law turned on the bike's headlight and dismounted. He stepped into the light.

Tom saw Law's giant silhouette, his long shadow thrown out before him as stalked up to the car, which had stopped, waiting for him. Law approached with his arms out to his sides, his hands open, holding nothing.

Tom saw the driver's side window rolling down.

He heard a barrage of hateful obscenities in a raw male voice daring Law to come closer. Law drew alongside the window.

Tom saw the gun.

Law's muscular arm swept sideways like the huge paw of an angry bear. Tom saw the muzzle flash immediately before the booming report made Tom gasp.

Miraculously, Law was still standing. His body hadn't recoiled from any impact.

Law had caught the man's wrist in his hands. That strange, caustic voice was shouting. Law controlled the hand that held the gun and hammered it against the window frame. Another flash issued from the barrel with a loud report. Everything inside Tom clenched in on itself.

Law dragged the gun hand out through the car window the full length of the shooter's arm. Another flash flared from the barrel with a bang.

Then came an inhuman shriek as Law slammed the shooter's arm down against the window frame, bending it back the way its elbow didn't go. The animal shrieking streamed non stop. Law kept hold of the broken doll arm as

his other fist pounded in through the open window until the screaming stopped.

Law curled the shooter's arm back inside the cab. Another shot cracked like sudden thunder with the spray of the windshield shattering. Five more shots followed in a barrage.

Law stepped back. The car was quiet except for its bad engine running. Exhaust plumed eerie smoke into the red glare of the tail lights and the stark white headlight of the bike.

Law's big silhouette, like an advancing bull, stalked back to the bike. His face was spattered with fine flecks of blood.

He hiked down the steep incline under the bridge. When he climbed back up over rocks and weeds, his face and hands were clean and wet.

He mounted the motorcycle. Tom's arms encircled him.

Tom felt, heard, Law deep breaths in his back, felt the fury in his heaving sides. Law started them back onto the road in a spray of gravel and sped up the dark road. Tom vibrated to his fingertips.

They had gone maybe three miles when Law pulled off the pavement and proceeded in a low, jarring ride over a wild field.

He cut the engine and dismounted behind a stand of scrubby trees. Tom got unsteadily to his feet. Law laid the bike on its side in the weeds.

Law took Tom's hand and led him farther into the brush.

Tom didn't know if it was because Law had felt Tom's rigid cock at his ass or he just wanted to collect his reward after battle, but Tom could sense he wanted sex. Right now. In the

grip of some caveman impulse for sex after violence, the brute obeyed his impulses.

They stamped into the tall weeds, thistles dragging at the denim of their jeans. Where briars gave way to softer grasses and sedges, Law let go Tom's hand, hauled off his leather jacket, and tramped out a wide circle, like a dog making sure the ground wasn't too lumpy, before he threw his jacket down like a blanket. He returned to Tom, cradled Tom's face in his hands, and kissed him with a need beyond hunger, goaded by fear and a need to own him absolutely. He ran his hands through Tom's hair, then all over his quivering body. He gripped Tom's hips and pressed their groins together, his engorged sex hard against Tom's.

Law dragged Tom's jacket down around Tom's elbows. Tom wriggled free of it, and Law spread it on the ground along with his own jacket. Law sank, dragging Tom down with him to lay on their jackets, holding each other tight, body to body, hands roaming. The grasses exhaled under the crush. Law groped Tom's body as if making sure he was all there. Tom's every nerve sparked like an electrical charge. He felt as if Law's hands were the only thing holding him together.

Law rolled Tom onto his back and crouched over him, kissing his mouth, his throat. Law pulled Tom's T-shirt up over Tom's head. The shirt came free with a static crackle in Tom's hair. Law covered Tom with rough kisses and urgent touch.

Tom yielded to the stronger. Law needed to have him, and Tom needed to be had.

To the victor.

Law groped at Tom's ass, pulled a condom packet out of his jeans pocket and held it between his teeth. He unzipped Tom's jeans and jerked them down. Denim bunched around Tom's ankles. Tom kicked off his shoes and tried to kick free of his jeans as Law tore the condom packet open with his teeth and slathered the lubricant on his own cock. Law tossed the condom away from them and wedged his knees between Tom's legs. He lifted Tom's ass up. Tom's legs embraced Law's powerful sides. Law's cock slid between his buttocks.

Tom was wound tight, his heart not so much beating as it was vibrating. With effort, he relaxed, and Law entered him. Tom groaned, pleasure and relief in the sensation. Law pushed to his hilt. His breathing sounded volcanic.

Law's sex filled Tom with exquisite wonder. Law moved in and out with tortured slowness, seething. Law's desperate desire overwhelmed and comforted Tom. Tom let sensation surround him, the sultry warm air, the vibrantly glowing stars, and Law. Law. He felt Law's leather jacket at his back, as his body rocked with the rhythm of their joining. The breath pushed from his chest with every stroke.

Law's face grew taut in concentration. Sweat beaded on his chest, the iron hard muscles moving under his gleaming skin as he pulled Tom's hips to meet his own agonizingly slow thrusts.

He snorted like an agitated bull, his need under heavy restraint, trying hard not to hurt Tom, shedding rage and fear, channeling fury into lust.

The sound of a car coming up the road pushed into Tom's awareness. Tom glimpsed the flickering edges of its

approaching headlights through the weeds and trees. But Tom was at a point where he couldn't care if the car pulled over. Hell, he couldn't care if it drove into the field and threw a spotlight on them. There was no stopping now.

The car passed on by.

Passion leapt. Flames of it licked him inside, driving him higher. He could not hold on. He came against Law's hard, sweaty abdomen. Law rasped a snarl and thrust harder than he meant to, shuddering. Tom felt Law's heat blossom inside him, and Tom came harder.

Law's mouth descended on Tom's shoulder, kissing, nearly biting, moaning. "Tom. Baby. Lover."

They lay together in the shambles of their clothes.

Tom puffed a bug off his lips.

At length, sirens screamed up the county road. Someone had found the road rager's car.

Tom and Law stayed awhile, like a pair of foxes in the field, watching the stars turn slowly across the sky, listening to distant traffic on the highway. Waiting for all the sirens to go away.

A bright planet set. The moon rose. Either it was giving off a lot of light or Tom's eyes had got accustomed to the dark, because he could see everything.

He became conscious of a stem or a root or something jabbing into his hip. He hadn't noticed it before, overwhelmed with other sensations. He shifted his position and found a comfortable niche under Law's great arm.

The day had been hot. The night was air was still warm on his bare skin. The ground was mostly soft under their jackets.

Tom brushed a crawling thing off his leg. A chorus of crickets and night creatures made a peaceful noise.

Something winged by that had to be a bat, flew like a flapping rag across the sky.

Law's hand moved over Tom's body.

Moonlight bathed Law's skin in an otherworldly luster with soft shadows. Tom wanted to freeze this image in his memory.

When Tom lifted his head to gaze on Law, Law's bold features looked fierce, agitated. Deep breaths still smoldered in his chest.

Law rolled over so he was on top of Tom, his weight on his knees and elbows. His great hands caged Tom's head. He kissed Tom's face, pressed his lips to Tom's temple. Law's teeth grazed across the stubble of Tom's jaw.

Tom kissed Law's neck. He tasted salt. Law's prominent Adam's apple moved up and down. It seemed vulnerable within the powerful column of his neck.

Traffic sounds died down. There was only an occasional truck passing on the distant highway now.

Law stood up.

They gathered up their clothes, shook out the small visitors, and dressed in the moonlight.

They returned to the bike. Law pushed it back out to the road. He paused to pull the weeds out of the wheels. They both mounted the bike and rode back to Tom's apartment.

No sooner than they were in the door, Law was all over Tom. He commandeered Tom to the bed, stumbling across the floor in a groping clinch until their knees met the edge of

the bed and they fell over onto the mattress, moving it off center on its box springs.

Law took him again, thoroughly. It struck Tom that this was Law scared. Law was scared. In some primitive way, Law needed to claim him.

The sex bled off some of the fear. They lay together in a kind of sticky peace. Then Law rolled up, took Tom's hands and drew Tom up to stand with him and led him to the shower.

Tom's shower stall wasn't meant for two. It was barely good for one.

They stood together under the feeble spray, Tom's cheek on Law's shoulder, his eyes shut, feeling the water trickle over him, feeling Law's warm skin, feeling Law stroking his cock. Tom came again in Law's hand.

They dried each other with Tom's rather frayed towels.

Law hooked a towel around Tom's neck, drew him in and kissed him. "Next time, my place," he said.

"Deal," Tom said.

They returned to Tom's bed, Tom tucked comfortably under Law's arm.

"Did you kill him?" Tom asked.

Law moved, felt startled. "No." Then, "I don't think I did. I guess he could die of a concussion. I hit him pretty hard."

"What were all those gunshots!" The memory of terror came back in cold-edged images like lightning flashes.

"Oh. I was beating his gun hand against the steering wheel to make the fucker empty the clip before I turned my back on him."

After a while, Tom asked, "Why didn't you kill him?" "I didn't need to."

"You have?" Killed someone, he meant.

Law's head moved on the pillow, a nod.

Tom knew he sounded like a perfect civilian, but that's what he was, and he had to ask, "Does that keep you up at night?"

"No," Law said. Sounded like he meant it, not just saying something he wanted to believe. Then he answered Tom's next question before Tom could ask *how can it NOT keep you awake?* "I did what I needed to do."

Law's possessive, gentle, lethal hand moved up and down Tom's back.

In the morning, Law didn't even turn on the news. And he wouldn't let Tom do it either. "Don't look back," Law said. "That's the way to get caught."

According to Law, the incident was settled. A case of instant karma. The driver had tried to kill them and got what was coming to him. Done. No need for outside involvement.

Law had to leave. "I have a Reservist thing to tend to. Uncle needs me to teach a class at Fort Campbell."

After Law was gone, Tom still felt a nagging need to know what happened to the driver of the car. Was he dead? Were the police looking for his killer?

Curiosity got the best of the Tomcat. The dealership where he'd bought his Harley was on the highway where the chase had begun. Tom rode down there and hung around the shop, hoping someone might start talking about the incident.

When a cop stopped into the shop, several employees immediately asked about it. Tom needed only to move in and listen.

"Yeah, guy right up the road here," the cop confirmed.
"Got into it with a brother."

Brother here meant a brother rider. Skin color was entirely optional.

Tom paled a little. The police knew a motorcycle was involved. Not good. He kept his mouth shut and listened to the cop's account of it.

"The 'vic' claims some faggot on a chopper pulled a shotgun on him and made him pull over, beat him up with the shotgun and shot out his windshield and placed the pistol in his hand."

Tom tried to keep his eyes from widening while he was inwardly screaming rage and panic. *That is not what happened!*

The cop continued, "The 45 automatic in his bleeding, broken hand was registered to the vic. Vic has a concealed carry permit. The clip was empty. We found five shell casings in the car, three more on the road on the driver's side—which means he had a round in chamber and fired off all of them."

"Any GSR on his hand?" someone asked.

"Oh, listen to Mr. CSI here. Yeah, there was gunshot residue on his hand. The gun was in his hand when the shots were fired. Doc says his hand was broken while holding the gun. We think someone very big got hold of his hand—with the gun in it—and beat the shots out of it."

"How'd someone get close enough to do that?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" the cop said. A group had collected around him. "What do you do if you're in your car, your motor's running, you got your 45 semi automatic in your hand, full clip with a round in the chamber, and a guy making size twelve footprints gets off his motorcycle and walks up to your car carrying a shotgun?"

The group had several suggestions.

"Run him over."

"Shoot him!"

"Drive away."

"Our vic didn't do any of that. Kind of tells us the rider didn't have a shotgun."

Tom's eyes rolled to heaven with a silent *Thank you!*

"Tells us the vic didn't stop in fear for his life. What the road is telling us is there was a chase. And somehow we just don't think the bike was trying to drive the car off the road."

His listeners gave nods and unhappy smirks. Tom could tell that most of these people had been there

Tom breathed easier. The cop was getting the story right.

"The vic lets the rider walk right up to the window and thinks he's going to give the rider a surprise introduction to his good friends Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson. Faggot my ass. It wasn't a limp wrist what done that. The rider left him alive. Left him his gun. Left his wallet. Walked his size twelves back to his bike and didn't lay down anymore rubber leaving, so we don't know where he went."

The listeners smiled angrily. It was a bedtime story for riders. They all knew this story, only *this* time the road rage

driver stepped into his own shit. They loved the happy ending. One of them joked in a childlike voice, "Tell it again."

As casually as he could, Tom asked the cop, "Are you guys looking for the rider?"

Two of the listeners burst out in defense of their new hero. "For what!"

"Leaving the scene?" Tom suggested.

"Yeah, we're right on that one," the cop said dryly. "Got every available man looking for him."

"To shake his hand," the shop owner added to that.

The cop made a waffling motion with his hand that said he wasn't allowed to admit to that in public. Then he turned a wary cop's eye to Tom. "Why do you ask? You know something?"

Tom went blank with fear. Law had warned him. Damn it, did Law always have to be right?

All eyes had turned toward Tom, waiting for an answer. What did he know?

Tom looked back at all the eyes. "Oh, yeah sure," he said. "It was me."

They called him a butt. The group broke up and went back to their business.

* * * *

Tom hadn't buzzed anyone up, yet he heard footsteps ascending the stairs toward his apartment. It was not Law's tread.

Tom got up from the couch and faced the door warily. Maybe the superintendent?

First one lock then the other turned, then the door knob.

The door opened.

"Wells."

Wells looked pale, unhappy.

"How could you do this to me?" Wells said.

Tom didn't understand the question and wouldn't answer it anyway. He said instead, "Give me my key."

"Take it!" Wells snapped, and threw it on the floor at Tom's feet. "I don't have any use for your fucking key. What do you think you're doing?"

"I don't know. What do you think I'm doing?"

Wells held up his phone. The video was playing on it.

Wells got the demand, too. That part was no surprise.

The weird part was that Wells seemed to think *Tom* was making the blackmail demand.

"Yeah," Tom said. "That's me. You can wire the money to my account in the Cayman Islands. You think *I* sent that? I'm doing your odious cousin Lawrence. Why the hell would I blackmail *you*?"

"You hate me for leaving."

"Don't flatter yourself. I don't think much of you at all."

"You—didn't send this?" Wells asked haltingly.

Tom glared at him. Tom didn't need to tell Wells again.

Wells restarted. "Did you get a demand for money, too?"

"I work in a quick lube joint, you dick."

"I mean Lawrence," Wells said, sweat beading on his lip.

"Whoever sent this must be going after Lawrence. Do you know if Lawrence got one of these?"

"Yeah. I do." Tom said. "He did."

Wells' shoulders slumped a little. He asked hopefully, "Is he going to cover us?"

"Hell no," Tom said.

"He—can't do this!" Wells paced a heavy circle on Tom's floor.

Tom snapped a reminder at him. "Hey. Store hours."

Tom's landlord didn't like loud footsteps up here while the furniture store was open for business.

But Wells wasn't listening to Tom. Wells breathed angrily. "Son of a bitch!" He stopped, looked at Tom dead on. "It's nothing for him!"

"Wells, I don't think three million dollars is nothing to anybody."

"He could do it if he wanted to," Wells said bitterly.

"If you want it paid, get the money from your father."

"My father can't know about this. This will kill my father!"

"I don't think Law much gives a shit about your Dad."

"What about you? Does he give a shit about you? Did you ask him that?"

"I never asked anyone for snot."

"Now would be a good time!"

"I don't think so."

Wells blanched. "Ask him!"

"If you want someone to do something, go to the FBI and see if they can find out who hacked into your computer."

"You think it's *my* fault this got out? I don't *think* so! Don't you have a copy?"

"Saved on what? My floppy dick?"

"You're useless," Wells said and let himself out.

* * * *

"Mr. Castille, are you here for a Cynthia Campbell?" Oh hell.

"What line is she on?" Law asked his assistant.

"She's here."

The wicked bitch of the Midwest had flown all the way to D.C. to see him. She didn't have an appointment, but she was kin, so Law could at least turn her down to her face. He signaled Lakshmi to let his cousin in.

He guessed this visit was probably about Wells' little home movie and the blackmail demand.

And so it was.

"It's him!" Cynthia cried. "That horrid homosexual! He's harassing my son! He's a monster!"

Law sat back in his executive chair behind his vast desk. "You do realize I'm fucking him, don't you Cynthia?"

She blinked. She'd barely got up to full revs, and he cut her engine off.

To her blank stare he said, "Don't you realize what it means when a man brings another man to a wedding?"

Cynthia foundered. She ignored what he'd said and forged ahead. "If he posts that filth I'll sue him. I'll sue him for—"

"Everything he's worth? He doesn't have anything. And he didn't do this. Don't worry about him posting anything. Tom doesn't have a computer. Even his phone is just a *phone*." The last he spoke with amazement, having trouble believing it himself.

"It has to be him!" Cynthia said. "Stop him!" She planted both palms on his desk and leaned forward. "Can't you see he's after the family empire!"

That was Cynthia, self-appointed defender of the realm.

Trouble was, as Law told her, "It's not your empire."

She received the words like a martini in the face. No matter how many times he reminded her, she kept forgetting that detail.

Law asked, "What kind of demand did these people make to Winston?"

"Oh!" Cynthia shuddered. She stood straight upright, hugging her thin self, rigid. "Winston mustn't see this."

That bit of information gave Law pause. Law had just assumed Winston received one of these demands. The blackmailer hit the second cousin once removed of one of the video stars. Why not hit the father? Winston was made of money.

Law asked carefully, "Who exactly received the threat?" "It came to my son."

That made sense. Wells was the star of the show.

Cynthia went on, "Wells came to me in confidence. Please, please don't tell Winston." She wrung her tissue to torn bits.

"I'm not telling Winston anything unless it's to go hang himself." Law rose from his chair. He came out from behind his desk to offer her a waste basket for her tissue.

"You can do something! If that filth gets posted, you can block it!"

"No. That's the thing about the internet. Once it's out there, that genie does not ever go back in the bottle."

"Why do you hate me!"

"I don't hate you, Cyndi. You're blood. I have to love you. You just annoy the hell out of me." He put one arm around her thin shoulders.

"What are you going to do about—" She made feeble gesture between Law and someone else not present, a blank for him to fill in.

Law pretended not to understand who she was talking about. He let her twist in the wind, waiting for her to say what she meant.

Cynthia forged ahead, "About your—your—"
"Lover?"

She shuddered, took a breath, shut her eyes. "What are you going to do about him?"

"Do?" Law asked. "Like what? Have a coming out party?"

"This is extortion!"

"And what am I? The FBI?"

"You won't even protect him?"

"Not from that. It's actually very pretty."

Cynthia screeched and stormed out of his office.

* * * *

A dull, sick feeling crept into Tom's gut as the blackmail deadline neared. The subject came up on the phone midweek when Law called to see how he was doing. Law wasn't concerned about the video, and he wasn't all that sympathetic either.

"I wouldn't worry," Law told him over the phone.

Of course not, Tom thought. It wasn't Law's cock about to go public.

The deadline came.

The deadline went.

Tom visited the public library. He reserved time on a library computer and did an internet search on himself. He expected the video might be blocked because of the library screening for X-rated content, but he wasn't even running into a block. He wasn't bringing up anything.

He tried a search on Wells Sebastian Campbell instead. That pulled up only Wells' high school graduation notice and his membership on the polo team.

All the other hits had to do with Wells' father, Winston Sebastian Campbell, which Tom had no interest in.

He was shutting down when his eye caught on one of the Winston hits.

It was breaking news. Another tale of Wall Street greed. A Ponzi scheme had collapsed, costing investors millions of dollars. The financier was on the run. The Feds were looking for him. It wasn't a story Tom would ever read except the picture of the man named in the Federal warrant was Winston Sebastian Campbell.

Winston's investment scheme had been based on bogus profit reports. As long as he kept sliding money around, counting the same money three or four times, his scheme stayed afloat. A cash flow problem caused his house of cards fall.

"Wow," Tom said.

He almost—almost—felt sorry for Wells. The universe was crapping on his head. A newlywed with a blackmailer threatening to air his goods, and now a Federal warrant out for his father.

But Wells had been careless with his dirty pictures, and Winston committed fraud, so Tom didn't have too much pity to spare for anyone except himself.

Problem was there was nothing to stop the blackmailer from airing the video now. Wells couldn't pay. His father sure couldn't. And Law sure wouldn't.

Law was right. We are going to be internet stars.

And there was not a damn thing Tom could do to stop it.

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Chapter Seven

On Friday night, Tom attended a party with Law. Law bought Tom a tux for the occasion.

After dinner and a couple speeches were done with, Tom propped his ass on a wide window sill to hang back, listen to the band, and watch the dancers under the mammoth chandelier.

A tall window at his back gave a breathtaking view of the Manhattan skyline.

A nymph joined him on the windowsill. Her dress was a sheath of hand-painted silk. Its straps were strings of freshwater pearls.

She started up a companionable chatter.

They both twisted around on the sill to admire the view behind them. On a whim, the young woman tugged up on the window handles.

The tall window opened an inch. She jerked her hands back as if snake-bitten. "The windows open!"

That was a little disconcerting at sixty-five floors up. They both mashed the window down shut and stood up from their perch. The young woman smoothed her dress down over her booty, then brushed off Tom's ass. Tom didn't think there was anything on his ass to be brushed, but that probably was beside the point.

And wouldn't you know it, Law chose that moment to come around. He eyed the two of them hard, his expression enigmatic, not altogether pleased.

The nymph turned flirty coy. "I like your friend, Mr. Castille."

"I do, too," Law said.

His hand slipped under Tom's chin, warm. Law's fingers rested on the side of Tom's neck. Law drew Tom's head back and kissed him, deep and long with a lot of tongue.

Tom's body stiffened, awkward, his face aflame. He didn't want to know how many eyes were on them. He concentrated every thought into the kiss, blotting out everything else.

Law let Tom up for air. A look of satisfaction on Law's face, his point proved.

The girl gave a wry smile. "Story of my frikkin' life."

"Can I get you another glass of Chablis, miss?" Law offered solicitously.

"Oh, I need something a lot harder than this, Mr. Castille." She surrendered the field to the victor.

"Cute girl," Law said.

"Yeah," Tom said, still staggering inwardly for balance, his face blazing. He bet Law swatted flies by dropping buildings on them. He had made everything absolutely clear. Tom was his. Law had claimed him in front of witnesses.

Tom's insides jumped and crashed, caught between the depth of expression, the honesty of it and—and what?

Getting outed? It wasn't like there was a Midwesterner alive who could shock a room full of New Yorkers. It couldn't be shame he was feeling. He'd just always been private as a cat, and he was extremely uncomfortable with an audience bigger than one.

He was filled with embarrassment so hot he imagined he was burning a hole in the floor—all sixty-five floors—down through Rockefeller Plaza and into the sewers. To get eaten by an alligator.

Told himself to get a grip. No one here mattered except one. The One had just declared himself.

"You weren't in the closet now, were you?" Law asked.

"Apparently not," Tom said. He dared glance round. The kiss had created no disturbance.

Tom suddenly loved New Yorkers.

The saxophonist on the bandstand signaled a covert thumbs up his way.

"Yeah, me too," Law said. "Not sure how this is going to play in Singapore, but I never intended to live there anyway."

Tom joined the mile high club on the jet back to Cleveland.

He guessed he should stop agonizing over the blackmail video. Sooner or later his mother was going to find out about him anyway. There was no use trying to stay in the closet while dating a man who lived out loud.

Back at his apartment, Tom asked Law, "Were you pushing me out before the blackmailers air my past?" Tom was pacing.

Law answered from the couch. "Pushing you out?" "With the kiss."

"I kissed you because I felt like it. It has nothing to do with that fucking video, which will never be seen on the internet."

"How can—?" Tom started. How could Law possible know for sure the video would never make it to the net? There was only one way. Tom said, "You know who sent the message."

Law nodded.

When Law said nothing else, Tom asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

"But—" Tom started again, stopped.

All at once he understood.

There was no awful vengeance to be had. The extortionist wasn't some hateful stranger.

This could only be kin.

"It was *Winston?*" Tom asked, unable to picture Winston whoring his own son's home porno movie.

"No," Law said, sounding irritated.

Winston was still on the run, wanted by the Feds and by several big ticket investors.

Tom remembered Law telling Winston to make sure Cynthia had an offshore account in which to stash her own money. The blackmail demand had specified a numbered account in the Cayman Islands.

"Cynthia?" Tom tried again. The thought of Cynthia bartering her precious son's ass was even more unbelievable than Winston doing it.

"Hell no," Law said. "It's much simpler than that." Law made Tom look him in the eyes. "Tom. Who took the pictures?"

Tom's mouth opened, stayed that way.

Wells.

The pieces suddenly fit themselves together. Wells had never received a blackmail demand. Wells had absolutely no intention of ever posting that video on the internet. Wells sent the demand to Law and only pretended to be a fellow victim. Wells tricked his mother into believing it so she would beg Law for help. One way or the other, Wells meant to pry money out of his rich cousin to bail his father out of the financial pit Winston had dug for himself.

Winston had needed a quick three million dollar cash infusion to keep his Ponzi scheme afloat. He didn't get it.

Wells had never been distraught over the possibility of that video hitting the web. He was distraught over his father's impending ruin. And Wells would do anything, anything, to save him.

It was kind of touching, in a pathetic loser sort of way. And that's why Law couldn't prosecute the blackmailer. "You're letting Wells go."

Law sighed. "Wells is a stupid, criminal asshole. But he's my asshole. This opens a whole new chapter in his life— Eleven."

"Who does Wells work for?"

"Wells never finished college," Law said significantly.

Oh crap. "Don't tell me he worked for his Dad."

Law lifted his eyes to Tom. "You don't suppose you could get Wells a job parking cars do you?"

* * * *

Winston was found days later. He hadn't gone far. He'd been lurking in the woods behind his house the whole time,

watching his wife from the bushes. The picture on the news showed a sunken-eyed, emaciated, bushy-haired vagrant.

* * * *

Video or no video, Tom admitted to Law that it was time for him to call his mother and have the talk.

Law noticed that Tom said nothing of a talk with his father. "Your Dad's not your Dad, is he, Mr. Russell," Law said, not a question.

Tom nodded. "I'm kinda guessing that's why he left us."

Law removed himself to the fire escape to give Tom some privacy. This could be a painful conversation.

Law sat on the metal steps overlooking the loading dock, a service alley, dumpsters, and the backs of the brownstone buildings from the next street up.

His own conversation hadn't been bad at all. Not the one about being gay. That talk was long done.

The one about Tom.

At the wedding, Alana had walked him out to the front yard. Law stood facing his mother under a sycamore tree. Alana's voice was calm, but her eyes avoided his. She told him, "Cynthia said some troubling things to me."

Law held both her hands in his. He wasn't going to assume he knew what Cynthia said. He made Alana say exactly what she meant.

"Tom Russell," Alana started, with great difficulty, an unhappy blush in her cheeks. "Cynthia says. Oh, this is really disturbing."

Law didn't help her. She could say what she had to say.

"You know I don't listen to rumors but. Oh, good lord. Cynthia said that Tom is, was, 'Wells' degenerate seducer.' Cynthia told me Tom and Wells had a sexual relationship and that you know this and you brought Tom here to embarrass Wells. Is any of that true?"

Law mulled it over. "Mostly true. Tom and Wells had an affair. I knew that."

Alana looked dismayed. Her eyes showed hurt betrayal. "Why would you ever bring him here? Sweetheart, I just don't understand how you could—"

"I had to make sure he was over him," Law told her.

"I would say it's a *little* obvious that Wells has moved on," Alana said tightly, with a nod back toward the sounds of wedding celebration coming from the other side of the house.

"Not *Wells*," Law said, irritated. "Screw Wells. I needed to make sure *Tom* was over Wells."

Her dark eyes studied his face, her brow knit. "Why?" Law took her shoulders. "Mother, he's the one."

All sort of emotions played across her face. Law could see his own life flashing before her eyes. Her baby. A grown man. A glistening softness filled her eyes. Her palm lifted to his cheek. "Really? Am I happy?"

"You're happy."

"Oh." She had worried. He knew that. Mothers always worry. He knew she had despaired of him every finding love. Her eyes puddled full up.

"Don't cry, Alana. You look too beautiful to cry." She sniffled. "Does *he* know?"

"Not a clue," Law said. "There are concrete bricks less dense than my beloved."

She took his face in her hands, stood up on tip toe, and kissed him several times. Then dropped back onto her heels and just gazed up at him, beaming.

Tom clicked off the phone and came out to the fire escape. Law asked without rising, "How did she take it?"

"She knew," Tom said, mystified, taking a seat next to Law on the metal step.

Law's eyes smiled. "She did?"

Tom spoke, baffled. He stared at his own hands as if something had just escaped his grasp. "She said I was never mean. She said boys are mean."

"That they are," Law said.

Tom thought of the guys at work. He didn't want to stay in the closet. But he didn't want to get beat up. "I think I'm gonna need a new job."

"What do you want to do?" Law said. "Name it."

"What are you? My fairy godfather?"

"Call me a fairy and I will bite you."

"I'll bite you back."

"Hard. And I'm not the Godfather. If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?"

"Believe it or not, I *like* to work on cars. The automakers aren't exactly hiring."

"Do you like race cars?"

"Who doesn't?"

"How do you feel about Formula One cars?"

Tom was afraid his jaw dropped.

Law spoke past his stunned face, "You don't have the reflexes to be a driver. Pit crew is another thing. I assume you're trainable."

Pit crew would be unbelievable. Still, Tom had to ask, slightly insulted, "What makes you think I can't drive?"

"Reflexes. You don't have them. If you'd landed that punch, we could talk."

"What punch?"

"The one you *tried* to throw when I came to collect Wells and you said you were going to beat the crap out of me."

"You remember that."

"I remember a lot. Race driver? No, you're not fast enough. Pit, could be. Or if you want to open a custom bike shop, that's possible. You'd need a business manager, but I can hire one for you. Or do you want to work on aircraft engines? You just tell me what you want to do. I can open any door. I just won't carry you. Okay. I'm only going to carry you once."

Tom wasn't really sure what that last part meant. Law had already moved on to something else. He spoke like an invitation. "Fireworks on the Mall for the Fourth?"

"Which Mall?" Tom asked, before his brain was in gear.

He was met with a dead silence laden with irony. Law waited for Tom to take the foot out of his mouth.

The Mall. Washington D.C..

"Yeah," Tom said. "Sure."

The helicopter put down at Reagan National. A limo took them on a very short ride out of airport to a nearby high rise

office building. "I need to stop in at the office," Law said. "This won't take long."

"You make your galley slaves work on the Fourth of July?"
"A few, for a half day. We're a global company."

Law said hello to the man at the security desk. In the elevator, Law used a key card to take them to a floor that didn't have a call button.

The elevator doors parted to a large door emblazoned with the logo of Castille Diversified. That door opened to an open area of cube bullpens and a rank of dark offices.

A mellow female voice with perfect diction called from the back, "That had better be you, Mr. Castille."

"It's pirates," Law called back.

Law led Tom to the back where a few large desks in a wide row stood before a series of closed doors bearing brass nameplates of C Level officers.

The desk that guarded the corner office was occupied by a reed-slender woman, maybe forty years old, dressed in business perfect. The nameplate on her desk read *Lakshmi Anderson*. She was Law's corporate wife.

Her face was narrow, her nose long, her eyes deep brown. She looked delicate, but Tom sensed she really wasn't.

Law introduced Tom to her.

"Oh." Lakshmi rose, as if connecting a known name at last with a face. She smiled and offered her long fingered hand to Tom. She knew all about him. He blushed a little.

She then presented Law page by flagged page of documents for his signature.

Tom observed that the pattern of Law's few bold strokes looked less like "Lawrence Castille" than it did the mark of Zorro. Law's signature consisted of a clear, dramatic L followed by a few jags to make up all the rest of it.

Tom noticed that the witness lines were already filled in. Lakshmi wasted no time.

Signings done, Lakshmi gathered up her documents and went to the copy room.

Law opened his office. Tom hesitated a moment in the doorway because the carpet was pristine white. Then he decided that was Law's problem.

The office was wide, furnished in steel, black metal, smoky glass and equipped with intricate lighting. All the highly polished surfaces, the windows, the vast glass tabletop sparkled, no streaks, not a mote of dust on any of it. Windows took up two entire walls. Their shades were mechanized and sandwiched between the layers of window glass.

The white carpet was immaculate. Someone had to come in here every night and erase the footprints and all the schmutzes and shine everything back up.

"What does this room say to you?" Law asked.
Tom answered without hesitation. "Total control."
Law gave a satisfied nod. "I knew you could read."
"How did you know that? I'm just a working stiff."

"You're a rider. That takes a poet's soul. You think in symbols. Not everyone does. Flat-souled people come into this office and they're intimidated, but they don't know why."

Law hooked a wireless headset around his ear to check voice mails as he stood at a computer, checking e-mails.

Tom prowled around the acres of smoky glass tabletop, the surface as sparkling spotless as a commercial photo shoot for a glass cleaner. He pressed a thumb to the glass and rolled it to leave a perfect print.

Law's brow contracted. He looked nonplussed. "No one has ever done that," he said. He regained his composure quickly enough and suggested, "We can leave more interesting prints behind than that."

"Yeah?" Tom said.

"Close the door."

Tom closed the oversized door. He could hear a copier or a scanner humming outside. He turned.

Law unhooked his phone from his ear and beckoned Tom to the table.

Law unzipped Tom's jeans and tugged them down. Tom's sex emerged upright and ready. Law's warm palms closed on his waist and lifted him up to sit on the thick, tempered glass tabletop. Law knelt and sucked him lustily. Tom's hands roved in Law's hair. Tom struggled to keep quiet his excited breaths. Excitement mounting, he had to lie back, needing to straighten out and arch back as he came with silent cries.

When Law lifted him off the tabletop onto his unsteady feet, Tom left a clear ass print and a white smear of come that had escaped Law's hunger.

The tip of Law's forefinger landed in the center of the white wetness, and he drew his bold signature in it.

Tom knew from his aunt who worked for a cleaning service that tales of strange finds were a great source of entertainment for those in the trade. The maids here were going to appreciate this one.

Tom emerged sheepishly from the office. Law locked the door behind them. Lakshmi dropped one set of documents into a filing cabinet and another into a pouch to take with her.

Law and Tom accompanied Lakshmi down the elevator to a floor below ground level. The doors opened to what looked like an upscale mall, except that it didn't seem to have an end.

Lakshmi paused to offer parting wishes. "Good to meet you, Tom. Happy Fourth, Mr. Castille." She set out at a brisk walk.

"The Trademark Office is in here," Law told Tom.

"Where exactly is *here*?" Tom looked around. It reminded him of Tower City in downtown Cleveland only on a huger scale with shops, banks, transportation, office buildings and hotels all accessible underground. Most of the places were closed for the holiday.

"This is Crystal City," Law said. "You could live, work, eat, do business, and never go outside."

Law walked him through a set of doors, behind which lay another set of elevators. Another set of doors led out to a parking garage. "What's this?" Tom asked.

"This is where I live."

They took the elevator up and up. They stepped out into a short hallway. Tom was surprised that Law didn't own the whole floor.

As soon as the apartment door opened, Law's stereo and the lights turned on.

The room was wide, rich in a simple, comfortable way. A very large oriental rug spread over the wooden floor. Tom guessed it was from Afghanistan. The furniture was solid wood, massive, with stout, square legs. Tom could see into the open kitchen, where copper cookware hung from an iron rack above a six burner gas cooktop set in a granite counter top. Most everything in here looked strong, adamant.

The couch was leather, a fawn color. That looked buttery smooth and soft.

"Is this where you bring them?" Tom asked.

"Them?"

"Boyfriends?"

"God, no. That's what hotels are for. Nobody comes here. This is the Bat Cave, my man."

Most of the art work on the walls was huge and original. Among the smaller stuff, Tom noticed a group photo of a tough group of guys posed in front of a Chinook helicopter with jagged mountains in the background. There was also a family photo of Harrison, Alana, Law, and Roxanne.

Tom peered into the bedroom. The bed was whatever size was bigger than a king. A lot of stout timber made up its frame. "You could lose someone in here," Tom called out.

"I'll find you," Law promised.

Tom visited the bathroom. The fixtures were sleek and modern. The tiled shower stall had two full body sprays and several more sprays overhead. It was all very cool and high

end, but not the overweening opulence he'd expect of a billionaire.

"If no one else comes here, why is the shower built for two?"

"I've been waiting for you."

When Tom came back out to the living area, the French doors stood open. Law was out on the balcony.

Tom stepped out and joined him at the rail. Outside was steaming hot and sticky, the air so close you kind of wear it. At least the sun was on the other side of the building.

Law passed him an iced drink.

Only then did Tom look out across the Potomac and over the ribbons of highways. There, straight ahead, rose the white phallic column of the Washington Monument.

"Um," Tom said. "Nice view."

He recognized the graceful dome of the Jefferson Memorial to one side. A plane was taking off from Reagan Airport.

"We can watch the fireworks from here, or we can go down to the Mall if you want," Law said. "It's a little crowded."

"Here's just fine," Tom said "When did you know you wanted me?"

"I had a hard on for you first time I saw you."

"What? When you came to my apartment looking for Wells?"

"No. That was the second time. And wasn't that a pie in the face. You and Wells! No. The first time was on the polo field."

"You saw me?"

"Of course I saw you." Law thumped his knuckles against his sternum in a loud, pulsing beat. "There you were, this vulnerable, tough guy sprawled in the grass. You looked raw and natural. And gay."

"How'd you know that?"

"I could tell. It wasn't blatant, but when you need to know, you're given the ability to recognize it. You had your helmet and your leather jacket beside you in the grass, so I knew the motorcycle in the parking lot was yours. You had your eyes shut, the sun on your face. You looked free as the wind."

"We call that unemployed," Tom translated, struggling to sound flippant, overwhelmed by the intensity of emotion in his words.

"Last thing I ever expected to see at a polo match. Everything I ever wanted to see. Sudden as a lightning strike, I wanted you. I wanted you bad.

"And I was trying to play fucking polo. And there were these two idiots so intent on getting to the ball they didn't see they were going to murder the love of my life before my eyes."

"I remember that," Tom whispered. "You didn't say anything."

"You looked so young."

"You're only eight years older than me."

"I couldn't even take you out for a drink in the state of Ohio. And I was shipping out. I said something. I said, 'Walk away, Law. It's not meant to be.'

"Then the second time—the second time was a sign from God. And God was pissed. That's when Cynthia sent me to find out where my idiot cousin Wells was slumming.

"I wanted you. I wanted you more than anything in my life. And there's my idiot cousin shacked up with *my* beloved. And Holy Mother of Mercy I thought I'd swallowed glass."

Tom gaped, his world up-ended. His train of thought left the rails and skidded away on a mental detour. He fixed on the words *Holy Mother* and said rather stupidly, "You're Catholic."

"And you're not. No problem. We're not going to fight about how to raise the kids. Stay on the road here, Tom."

Tom shook himself back to the point. "You were in—you were in love with me? I tried to hit you!"

"Very feisty, Miss Scarlett."

"You laughed at me!"

"That was not at you. That was graveyard laughter at the cruelty of fate. There was my idiot cousin paired up with my man! It was hideous. What else could I do?"

"You were mean."

"Of course I was *mean*! I was bleeding all over your floor!" Law roared. "Not that you noticed! I couldn't wait to get back to Afghanistan where the worst thing they do is try to kill me. You and Wells! God *damn* that hurt!"

Me, that was about me.

"Wells left real soon after that," Tom said. "I thought it was something you'd done."

"No. I didn't need to do anything. I knew Wells was full of crap. I told Cynthia leave him alone and he would come home

wagging his tail before him. I only didn't know where that left you."

Tom shook his head. He couldn't believe it. "You can't fall in love at first sight."

"No, Tom. You can't fall in love at first sight. I did."

Law was blatantly erect. Tom wanted to fall into his arms, have Law take him right then and there. But Law strangely turned the subject.

"I'm giving up this place. I need to establish a new state of residence. Do you like Connecticut or New Hampshire? I'm never home."

Tom blinked, stunned not to be having sex right now. He stammered, "Those are the choices?"

It caught up with him as soon as he said it. Those were states that recognized gay marriage.

I'm only going to carry you once, Law had said.

He meant over a threshold.

The world was turning at a dizzy spin. Tom was just now coming up to speed. "Are you asking me to marry you, Law?"

"I'm telling you what's going to happen. Pick a state.

Either one. I don't care which."

Tom was getting steamrolled here. He crossed his arms in a sudden balk. He lifted an eyebrow, waiting.

"What?" Law asked Tom's silent look.

Tom said, "Say exactly what you mean."

Law looked dumbstruck, almost angry. He breathed, "Son of a bitch." And to Tom's surprise, Law got down on one knee and took his hand. "Tom, you beloved bastard, I love you. I need you in my life forever. I cannot imagine existence

without you. Will you—God please say yes—grant me the honor and the privilege and save my life and marry me?"

Tom was astounded. He had an image of the great, glossy black bull, its enormous power and might down on its forelegs, before the matador, begging not to be killed.

It was so sudden Tom didn't know what to say. Ask for more time to think? This was real fast. They'd been seeing each other maybe a month now?

How much time did he need?

This could be a mistake, he thought.

And then, So what?

If it's a mistake, then just deal with it.

It would be a worse mistake not to seize love so offered.

Tom had nothing clever or eloquent to say. He was just blown away by the sheer force of Law's need, Law's absolute certainty. Tom could do nothing but choke out a bald, simple, "Yes."

Law's head bowed. Tom felt the flat of Law's brow against the back of his hand. Law looked like he was praying. He was.

"Thank God," Law said. He kissed Tom's hand, tugged. Tom knelt down facing him.

They shed their clothes quickly their bodies twining in impassioned need.

Sweat in tiny rivulets threaded against Tom's scalp under his hair. Law's skin was wet against Tom's back. It was all intensely erotic. The city sounds, the close roar of airplanes were mere background music to their joining.

"My sweet love," Law moaned into the back of Tom's neck, his sex deep inside Tom. Tom was Law's, and Law was Tom's. To have and to hold, and to touch and kiss and ride and fuck.

They were still out there on the balcony at nightfall. They lay together on their damp clothes, the air sweltering close.

"Achilles' heel wasn't his heel," Law murmured into Tom's shoulder.

Tom hadn't a clue where that came from. "What?"

"Achilles' heel, the greatest warrior's famous weakness. His weakness wasn't his heel. It was his boyfriend—what he couldn't live without. Without him, everything else was pointless."

The sky grew as dark as the city ever did. The first single soaring shot arced heavenward, burst into a red, white and blue spray. The delayed crackle followed across the river with the cheers from the gigantic crowd.

Fireworks burned the sky, sizzled, blazed and roared.

It struck Tom strange that he had just committed his life to this man and all that fire up in his heaven was celebrating independence.

"Then celebrate the more perfect union," Law said.

"And how the hell do you do something better than perfect?" Tom asked.

"I don't know," Law said. "But we keep doing it."

"Yeah," said Tom. "Yeah, we do."

They were not done with skyrockets.

And from that day forward, everything between them just kept getting more and more perfect.

The End

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