

A movie poster for 'The Boxer' featuring a close-up of a man's face and torso. He has a bloody nose and a bloody shoulder, looking intensely at the viewer. The background is dark and textured.

JAN IRVING

THE
BOXER

LoSeId

The Contenders 2: The Boxer

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eISBN 978-1-60737-820-4

Editor: Judith David

Cover Artist: April Martinez

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

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It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.

~ Kahlil Gibran

Chapter One

“You okay down there? I guess not, seeing as I don’t think you probably want to be rollin’ around our Dumpster.”

The deep voice made Ally stiffen, feeling like a cat with its hair fanning out in defense. He spit out blood and groped for his fallen glasses.

Metal and glass helpfully touched his palm, and he lifted his eyewear into place, the blurry brown-red-black morphing into something that resembled the bottom of the ocean, murky fungus stains on the dusty brick walls, and two muscular tree trunks that were actually legs.

The massive fighter’s body towered above him like Superman, but the brown eyes belonged to Bambi.

“I’m Dane Connelly,” the man said, his voice seeming to come from deep inside his body like a warning foghorn. “And this here is Charlie’s alley. Well, it was his alley, but he died, see, so now I guess it’s mine, and I got to look after it for him.”

Ally gaped. “W-what?”

“You don’t look so hot, you don’t mind me sayin’,” the big man continued. He held out a fist that looked like it could smash granite, and hefted Ally to his feet.

“I’m all right,” Ally muttered.

The fist lifted his head into the light from the streetlamp, and Ally hissed as his split cheek bled warm against gentle fingers.

“Sure you are,” Dane said, just as easy as when he’d lifted Ally from the crumpled garbage. “But Noel, you know, he worries about me when I do my road

work—that's running to keep in shape, in case you're not a serious fighter. He's afraid I'll be attacked or somethin'."

"You?" Ally demanded, spitting out more blood and hoping he wouldn't lose a tooth that was wobbling in his mouth. "Yeah, right."

"And that's exactly what I tell him, but see, he thinks now we live together, my body is kind of like some of the real estate he owns, and he likes to look after it."

Ally frowned. "What are you getting at?" He rubbed his arm where a goose egg lived, but it didn't hurt as bad as his chest; his chest hurt because he kept picturing Sean's face when he'd suddenly turned on Ally like the rest.

"I'm sayin' that if you don't see your way to coming into Charlie's Gym with me, I'm gonna have to stay out here with you. And then Noel will worry I've been attacked, and he won't sleep so good."

"I'm all right. I don't need to go in there." Ally had never gone into Charlie's. The gym bristled with ripped men, and usually Ally slunk his thin shadow quickly past it.

"Then I guess we stay out here. That's all right," Dane said, folding massive arms against his sweaty T-shirt and leaning against the brick wall. "You want to tell me your name? I'm Dane."

"I heard your name the first time, dummy," Ally said.

Dane rubbed his eyes. "Oh, yeah, sorry, so you did. But I don't seem to remember you tellin' me your name..."

"It's Ally," Ally said. "Ally..." He looked over at the billboard with a toothpaste ad. "Johnson."

"Nice to meet you, Ally Johnson." Dane's dark eyes glinted. He couldn't know Ally was lying, though.

"Yeah," Ally said.

"So I take it you're a serious fighter," Dane said, studying Ally. "You mind if I have a smoke? I hide them out back here since the husband worries."

“Husband?” Ally grimaced. “What?”

“It’s what I call my old man sometimes, you know.” Dane lit a match against the rough face of the brick wall and took a deep drag of a cigarette he’d shaken from a wrinkled pack. “My better half.”

“Guys can’t be married to guys,” Ally said. “That’s really dumb.”

“Well, we aren’t really married like in a church, but only on account that we’d have to do that somewhere else. But if we was allowed, I’d do it where they buried Charlie,” Dane said. He half closed his eyes, clearly enjoying his cigarette. “I figured you might know about stuff like that since the boys who hit you called you a faggot.”

Ally swallowed thickly, dropping his gaze.

“I’m a fag too, and so is Noel. He wasn’t when I met him, but I tempted him with my body,” Dane said proudly.

“Don’t you—” Ally cut himself off. He swallowed again, squeezing his eyes shut.

“What were you saying? I didn’t catch that. Maybe on account my ears are ringin’ a little. I pushed the road work, but see, I haven’t been feelin’ too good lately.”

“I said...” Ally huffed. Then he narrowed his eyes at Dane. “Don’t you hate yourself?”

Dane’s hand paused on the way to his lips with his cigarette. “No,” he said.

Ally blinked.

“So you want to come into Charlie’s with me? We got lots of sinks if you want to get cleaned up. And we can call someone to come pick you up, seein’ it’s late. Or early. Do you think one a.m. is early or late? I can never decide.”

“I, uh... There’s no one.” Ally found himself following Dane because Dane had put out his cigarette and was walking toward the door to the gym, and it felt natural to follow him.

Dane nodded instead of asking Ally why there was no one he could call. “Charlie found me where I found you the first night I met him. Do you think that’s—what do they call it—kismet?”

“A predetermined course of events,” Ally mulled. “Probably not. It’s just a good place to”—his throat tightened as he saw Sean’s eyes again—“beat the shit out of someone.”

Dane didn’t push him to add more but instead pointed toward a door inside the gym, which was deserted at this hour. Hanging bags swayed with no one to hit them. “Through there are some showers. Noel even had towels put in there that come all the way from Egypt. Anyways, they cost a lot.”

Ally smiled. “Egyptian cotton, you mean.”

“Yeah,” Dane said. “I’m going in my office, which is through there.” He pointed to another door as Ally watched, wary now they were in the shadowed gym. “You can come out and talk to me if you want, once you get cleaned up. My locker is eighty-nine. Lucky eighty-nine! I wasn’t so lucky for a long time, but then I met Noel, you know, and now... Anyways, it just so happens there are clean shorts and T-shirts in there, so you help yourself. That is, if you don’t mind they might be a little on the extra-large size, but not on account I’m fat or anything, you understand.”

Ally hesitated, studying the big man.

“No, I don’t mind,” he said softly before heading for the door that led to the showers.

* * *

Noel Atherton turned over in the big bed he’d shared with Dane up until six months ago. He frowned, the silken sheets feeling like they were binding his body to the mattress. He shoved them aside and sat up, rubbing his unshaven jaw and pushing his blond hair out of his eyes.

No Dane. He could tell when his boyfriend was in their loft, because the space seemed to vibrate in some mysterious way—like a tuning fork. Right now the loft said no Dane.

He sighed, massaging the back of his neck.

They weren't separated, not really. Dane sometimes spent the night on the couch in the loft so that Noel could get out of bed and walk into the great room and sit on the chair opposite his big sleeping shape and stare at him in the semidarkness.

Of course, their neighbors, Mr. Trent and Gilbert, had to know something wasn't right, but the two friends who lived in the apartment next to theirs kept their peace, watching Noel and Dane on opposite sides of a high-wire act and willing them not to fall.

"Dane," Noel whispered, reaching out to touch the pillow that was still covered with the same pillowcase it had worn for months. Dane's pillow, vaguely smelling of him—not cologne, just man. Some nights Noel held it to his chest, and that trace of Dane was the only thing with him as he listened to his heart beating, counting off another night alone.

As Dane would say, being in love sure sucked sometimes.

* * *

"Dane?" Noel cleared his throat at Dane's office door. He was hovering with the same hesitation he'd experienced when he'd first met Dane, who had worked then as a janitor at the university where Noel was now a professor.

"Hey, it's Noel." Dane's hands quickly fell away from his skull, which he'd been rubbing as he sat alone at his shadowed desk.

He was still as beautiful to Noel as he had been the first time he'd seen him, two years before, mopping floors, wearing a black wifebeater, an illicit cigarette resting on his pouty lip.

His brown hair was cut almost military short, his large dark eyes full of feeling as he looked at Noel. He was sporting even heavier muscle now than he had then, the result of working out at all hours of the night.

“One of your headaches?” Noel asked politely, hating that they had become so distant from each other.

“All gone now I see you!” Dane said, standing up. “You are my personal brand of sunshine.”

Noel flushed. “Dane...”

Dane joined him at the door, brushing his fingers against Noel’s as if he felt the same shyness. He loomed over him, a big man, intimidating to those who didn’t know him. But Noel had never felt the slightest fear of Dane’s size and strength. He had always been very gentle with Noel. “Hey, would these lips lie to you? If I say you’re my sunshine, what do you say, huh?”

Noel swallowed. “I say...I miss you.”

Dane’s dark eyes fell. “Oh yeah.”

Aching, Noel watched his Dane turn away, pacing back into his office. “It’s very late,” Noel said when he could trust his voice to be even.

“So it is. Well, I thought I’d put an extra mile in my road work, you know? Just because I’m gettin’ closer to the big three-oh now, I figure that doesn’t mean I have to get soft or nothing.”

Noel huffed out a laugh. “You’re...built!” he said, using a word he’d heard the other fighters use. “I hardly think you need to add another mile to stay in shape! Unless you’re planning another fight?” His heart pounded as he lived his worst fear. Dane had nearly been killed in the ring once by Gerrard Narone, a shady top contender who had succeeded in killing Dane’s mentor, Charlie. In the aftermath, he’d promised Noel he’d never again fight, but that was before he’d stopped sleeping in their bed, eating at their table.

God alone knew what Dane would do now.

“Well, you never know,” Dane said. He looked over his big, rounded shoulder at Noel, the shoulder Noel had kissed, had bitten, when they’d lain together.

Dane swallowed; Noel had the feeling he was remembering those moments too. “Narone—”

“What about him?” Noel prodded wearily, wondering if he’d have to push Dane to share with him.

“He’s out on parole,” Dane said.

Noel stared at Dane. “No,” he whispered.

“Scuse me, Mr... Uh, Dane?”

Noel managed to drag his gaze out of the gridlock with Dane’s, to see a young man with brown hair and a slight body hesitating just beyond Dane’s office. He looked barely into his twenties, his face a patchwork of colorful bruising ranging from plum to scarlet. His lips were oozing fresh blood, as was his cheek. Behind cracked glasses, his dark green eyes fell away from Noel’s startled gaze.

“It’s my man Ally!” Dane called, leaving his office to greet the stranger. He looked at Noel. “This is Ally Cat. I made his acquaintance in Charlie’s alley. He’s telling me his last name is Johnson, but I’m thinking he’s not being entirely upfront about that.”

Ally flushed, but his gaze remained steady.

“Ah...” Noel struggled to make the jump from missing Dane, to Narone, to the bruised young stranger.

“Ally here is a serious fighter,” Dane continued. “He don’t know this yet.”

Ally made a face. “You’re shining me on, Dane.”

“No way! You think a fighter is all muscle?” Dane held his arm up, flexing it, and Noel stared at it, again remembering touching, kissing, licking...how he’d even liked to put his face into Dane’s armpit sometimes and brush the soft hair with his lips.

Oblivious to Noel's thoughts, which lately were bordering on obsessive, Dane continued, "A fighter is heart, Ally. And I can see you're a very serious man the way you're hurting now and you ain't complaining about it none."

Ally shrugged.

"But you know, a smart fighter knows when to share how he's feeling with his trainer," Dane said. "Just in case there's something that isn't working so good and might need more than a Band-Aid, you know what I'm saying?"

Ally now looked as dazed as Noel. "I guess."

Dane lifted Ally's hands up and turned them over, examining them. Ally watched, silent as Dane gently squeezed his forearms. He inhaled sharply when Dane reached his upper arms.

"Oh, that's a bad bruise," Dane said. "You want I should take a look at it?"

"How come?"

"I can maybe give you some ointment to make it feel a little better is all," Dane said, his dark eyes patient as he waited on Ally.

"Okay," Ally said after a pause. He rolled up an oversize white T-shirt sleeve, revealing a huge bruise on his bicep.

"Ouch," Noel said, caught up despite himself. The young man reminded him a bit of himself at that age, except back then Noel had used a cane after suffering injuries from a car accident. Nowadays he only needed it occasionally since he worked out with grim determination in Charlie's Gym to strengthen his bad leg. Dane had designed the regimen for him.

"What happened?" Noel asked Ally.

Ally's green eyes flashed. "Sean," he said.

"Oh," Noel said. He looked to Dane, but he only widened his eyes at Noel. Obviously he didn't know who Sean was either.

"I have some liniment that will help, if you want to apply it, Ally," Dane said. "You ain't hurting worse anywhere else?"

Ally swallowed, avoiding their gazes fixed on him. “No,” he said.

“That’s good!” Dane said. “I’m very relieved to hear that, you being of the stoic persuasion. Stoic is this week’s new word, which I looked up in my thesaurus, but I think it fits you to a T, Ally.”

“Stoicism was a school of Hellenistic philosophy founded in Athens and popular into Roman times,” Ally said. Then color rose in his cheeks, where the bruising didn’t cancel it out. “Uh.”

Dane said, looking enthused, “You knew a lot about kismet too.”

Ally took the liniment from Dane and patted some onto his arm, looking self-conscious. “I read.”

“That’s excellent. You’re a bit like me and Noel if we was to have a kid. You’re tough and you’re smart,” Dane said. “And that bein’ the case, I wanted to offer you my couch in the office, seeing as you might need a place to crash.”

Ally bit his lip.

Dane rubbed his hands against his legs. “Well, I hope to see you in the morning, Ally. Me and Noel have to go upstairs now. There’s a fridge in my office beside the couch, if you get hungry or anything...”

Noel’s heart picked up. Dane was going to sleep in the loft? He grimaced at how pathetic he’d become, but after years of touching Dane, he wasn’t handling the deprivation very well. He looked over his shoulder at Ally. “Good night,” he said.

As Dane drew open the wooden barricade to the elevator that went from the first-floor gym to the lofts above, Noel glanced back to see Ally watching them, his green eyes shining in the semidarkness.

Noel wondered if the young man would take the offer of Dane’s couch. He hoped so. He hoped he stayed a few nights, forcing Dane to sleep in the loft with Noel.

Maybe if Dane was close at hand, Noel could get over his timidity and seduce the man he loved.

Chapter Two

Dane hesitated once he was in the loft with Noel. Noel hadn't turned on the lights, so their apartment was lit by the streetlamp across the alley from Charlie's Gym. It made Noel's features look heavy to Dane's eyes, so if he was sketching him, he'd use darker lines. There were crow's feet by Noel's eyes, but they weren't smiling now.

Dane remembered when he'd made Noel smile, blue and sleepy, looking up at him when he covered Noel. More and more in their lovemaking, Noel had liked Dane to be inside him, but he was bossy about it so he was still in charge.

Now...what would it be like now?

Dane swallowed, trying to will away the flash of need that moved through him. But, man, he bet if he could see himself there would be wavy heat lines rippling around his body. It was always this way whenever he was close to Noel, like a magnet that needed to be snug against metal.

"Are you going to sleep in our bed?" Noel asked, his gaze fixed on Dane's face.

"No." Seeing familiar yearning and confusion, Dane turned away. He was a fighter, a boxer. He could go the distance. He could endure. "I'm gonna take a shower," he said. "On account that probably I'm leaving a scent trail and it ain't so nice for you. I did seven miles." The last he said proudly.

"Oh. I'm... That's nice," Noel said. His voice was like a balloon, slowly deflating until it bumped the ground.

Dane wanted to say more. He wanted to sit with Noel between his legs and talk to the man, looking into his eyes. No, he wanted to do that naked, after they'd—

Instead, he made himself go into their bathroom and shut the door. He stared at the sink that still made him feel stupid because even after a couple of years he wanted to twist some knobs, and he reached for them. But water spurted only when he put his hands under the spigot.

After he'd patted cool water on his cheeks, he pulled off his T-shirt and shorts and briefs and walked into the circle of glass that was their shower. Usually now he used the ones in the gym because they didn't come with extra features, like X-rated memories of him and Noel getting it on against the tile. Lifting Noel up and laughing because his blond head had fallen back and he groaned, clawing Dane, as Dane buried himself deep in the smaller man, his hips moving in and out so it was like they did a slow, hot dance under the water.

Dane leaned against the tile and let the water fall, feeling like crying he missed Noel so much. The memories of Noel running his tongue down Dane's long back and biting the muscles he found stretched out and quivering along the way made Dane harden. He hunched closer to the glass and took himself in hand, groaning softly, imagining it was Noel's hand on him, Noel whispering that Dane could come, but only when Noel said he could come. Oh yeah...

"Need a hand?"

Dane spun around as the glass door opened, and there was Noel, naked. Not just his body, but his hot blue eyes, raking Dane's bigger body like he owned it. Which he did.

Dane backed away against the tile.

Noel's mouth tightened, and he slammed the glass behind him. The spray hit him so the fine soft brown-blond pubic hair around his erection fanned wet against his thighs, and his pale and subtly shaped body was slick like he was wearing baby oil. They liked to use it on each other sometimes. Their bodies would slide together, and next thing, he'd be inside Noel and Noel would be gasping. Yes. Yes!

Noel's bad leg had white pale lines forking around the knee like a lightning tattoo, and it was still thinner than the other, but Noel held himself with more

assurance now than he had when Dane first met him. He hurt, like a fighter hurt, but he toughed it out.

Dane's mouth watered with the need to get down on his knees for his Noel and kiss and lick that knee. He loved it the way he loved Noel, because it went the distance, because he knew it hurt Noel, so sometimes there had to be creative making love, the way Dane was still learning to be creative with his art.

Making love. Oh, man. He had to stop thinking with his dick. But his dick and his heart wanted Noel.

Noel couldn't seem to see that, though. He stood on the other side of their big shower, water slicking his hair back from his face so he looked like a very serious merman.

"Dane, this has to stop," he said. Then he chewed his lip, and Dane wanted to groan and offer to do it for him. "I have been thinking of moving out."

Dane blinked, water hitting his face, which was suddenly numb. But he couldn't feel it, like that moment when he'd taken too many punches and sound, scent, and sight narrowed down to his heart beating. "You gonna leave me?" he croaked.

"I had Gilbert open my father's house." Noel's father had gone to prison for going too far in trying to keep Noel and Dane apart. When he had gotten out, he'd gone to Tibet. Noel thought it was to find himself, but Dane figured it was to lose himself. Anyway, they hadn't heard from Noel's dad.

Dane felt like a bottle he'd found at the river one time. There were words inside it, rolled up, but it was all stoppered up with wax, and when he'd tried to open it, the cork went into the bottle and that was all she wrote.

The words he wanted to say were: *If you leave me, I will die.*

"I want to keep the goldfish," Dane said. "On account that moving might not work out so well for him. But we could share custody of our dog. I heard Hollywood people do that."

Noel wanted to shake his boyfriend. Didn't he see that the threat to move out was an empty one? What he wanted was for Dane to tell him he'd die if Noel left him.

Maybe the time for words was over. Dane was hard. He was crammed into a too-small corner of glass and tile, but his penis was pointing in Noel's direction, silently asking for his touch.

Noel could do this. He did not have to retreat into his shell because Dane had hurt him. He could fight for his man.

He reached out and gripped Dane's cock gently.

"Oh, man! Noel..."

Noel chewed his lip. Dane looked like he was in pain. Not quite the reaction he was looking for.

But then Dane surprised him. His big fighter's hands were suddenly on Noel's slender hips, and he swung him around so he faced the glass wall. Dane pressed his larger body against Noel's, all of it, so that Noel could feel his partner's erection prodding against his ass.

He knew what Dane needed.

"Dane, take what you need." He gave his permission, feeling Dane trembling against him.

Slick with soap, Dane thrust his penis against the curve of Noel's ass. His hand slid forward to the little valley between Noel's legs, finding him, and Noel gasped, his head falling back against Dane's shoulder.

"Daddy, please," Dane moaned, using Noel's body to get himself off.

"Dane, you bad boy," Noel whispered, one palm against the glass as Dane worked him off, rutting against him.

"I'm so bad, Daddy." Dane kissed the side of Noel's neck, buried his face there. "I want Daddy to spank me, to make me suck his cock..."

Noel whirled around, only he stumbled since one leg was shorter than the other. So much for being graceful. But he held the reins, oh yes.

Slick chest against slick chest, their cocks rubbing together like wonderful friends who'd missed each other. Noel nearly smiled at the thought since it sounded like something his Dane would say.

He lifted his hand and gave Dane's ass cheek a hard smack, envisioning the red imprint. Dane shuddered, head falling back, muscled chest heaving. "Daddy, can I suck your cock?" Dane whispered.

For an answer, Noel squeezed Dane's shoulders, and his well-trained pet fell to his knees, rubbing his face delicately against Noel's plum-tipped sex. "Looks a bit like a shiitake mushroom, Daddy," Dane said, inspecting it. "Like when me and Mr. Trent was shopping for groceries."

Noel laughed but nevertheless nudged Dane pointedly with his cock. *It's been too damn long, Dane.* "Make Daddy come," he ordered. He thrilled at the sight of his Dane, his mighty boxer, kneeling for him, submissive.

Dane opened his lips and Noel lodged himself home, fucking Dane's mouth. "Oh, my boy," he murmured. "My good boy Dane..."

Dane's hands were on his hips, drawing him closer. Had he missed the taste and feel of Noel's cock in his mouth as much as Noel had? Noel had never been desired like this before he'd met his boxer, and he'd begun to feel like a drab wallflower again without Dane's attentions.

He thrust in and out, and Dane hummed, one hand rubbing against Noel's bad leg fondly. Noel's balls tightened, and his hands clenched on Dane's skull because—

"Uh!" He pulled free of the gentle suction so he could see his cum hit Dane's face, watch it on his lips, his chin, stare into his dark, velvety upturned gaze as Noel's spend rinsed away in the rain-shower setting. Huffing, he whispered, "Oh, Dane."

"Daddy." Dane leaned his head against Noel's bad leg.

Knowing what he needed, Noel shifted his leg forward between Dane's spread legs. Gaze on Noel's face, Dane wrapped himself around Noel's leg, rutting against it.

Noel stroked Dane's hair, feeling Dane's desperation against him, Dane's need to belong to him. "That's my good boy. Hump Daddy's leg," he encouraged Dane.

"Ohhhh, Daddy!" Dane's eyes squeezed closed, and he huffed out ecstasy in hot tattooed breath against Noel's thigh.

After Dane's climax, Noel still continued to caress his soaking head, his heart slowing from the hard thudding excitement as his body sent out messages of contentment...and pain.

His damn leg. His mouth tightened, and he shifted his foot, but Dane knew him well, and suddenly Noel was high in his arms, and per their old routine, Noel shut off the shower while Dane opened the door. Then they were dripping on the shag bathroom mat.

Dane avoided Noel's eyes as he carried him into their bedroom, adjacent to the palatial bathroom Noel had had put in when they'd renovated Charlie's old apartment and made a home together over the gym.

"I'm dripping," Noel said softly.

Dane put him down by the linen cabinet, opened it, and engulfed Noel in a fluffy jumbo towel, patting him dry thoroughly. Noel saw him swallow when he brushed Noel's sex, which stiffened slightly in fresh interest. Dane didn't bother to dry himself.

"You're all wet, Dane," Noel scolded, forking his hand through wet clumps of Dane's seal-wet hair.

"I'm tough. No worries," Dane said, gaze still lowered. He swung Noel back into his arms, handling him like Tarzan with Jane, and toted him closer to the bed, where a giant saltwater aquarium formed one wall, a lionfish resplendent as it swam serenely through the living coral.

But it was the small fishbowl by their bed that Dane looked at as he settled Noel onto it. A black goldfish with beautiful rippling fins was circling a Chinese temple. Dane knocked on the glass. “Blackie, dude, are you hungry, my man? Has Noel been treating you good?”

Noel sat up against the headboard, self-consciously covering his cock, which had missed Dane’s lips, his touch. “I talk to him the way you asked,” he confessed. His gaze ran over Dane, still nude, slick with water—so beautiful. “But I think he misses you too.”

Dane sat on the very edge of the bed, raising a knee and cupping big hands around it. Noel’s heart thudded. He’d managed to lure his boxer into their bedroom. It had been weeks since Dane had been in here with him.

“He is a stalwart companion while I await the return of Odysseus.”

Dane’s face lit up at the reference. “See now, I remember that story you told me about Penelope and Odysseus, though I gotta be honest and say he wasn’t much of a sailor since he kept gettin’ lost or distracted.”

Noel cleared his throat. “What’s important is that he finally returned.”

Dane’s dark eyelashes fanned down, concealing his gaze. There were water droplets on his olive-toned skin that Noel wanted to suck off Dane’s skin.

“What do you intend to do with Ally?” Noel asked, searching for safer waters away from Scylla and Charybdis.

Dane got up from the bed, went to their chest of drawers, and pulled out sweatpants. He bent over to put them on, his ass turned toward Noel like the hard shape of a rounded heart. “I dunno. I just didn’t like him hurting, you know?”

“Maybe you can help him.”

Dane shook his head. “Charlie did that for me, but he was smart about stuff like helpin’ me find work. All I know is how to block a punch and how to take one.”

“I think you know a lot more than that.” Noel’s heart was sinking as Dane hesitated at the threshold of their bedroom. He swallowed. So Dane still wouldn’t

sleep with him. “*You gotta go the distance.*” Dane’s words came back to Noel. All right, he’d do that, and tonight he’d made some progress. “I believe in you, Dane.”

Dane nodded, so Noel knew he’d heard him before he left him alone in their bed.

Chapter Three

Dane couldn't sleep, so he was down in his office. Ally was wrapped up in his coat on the couch, snoring softly, the bruising on his skin almost at the glow-in-the-dark stage.

Dane got a blanket from a cupboard in his office and put it over the kid.

He returned to his desk and dug the key out of his sweatpants' pocket; he'd only lately started to lock it up. He opened the drawer and shoved aside the Kel-Tec nine-millimeter handgun resting on top of his assorted art supplies before pulling out his charcoal and drawing paper—the basics, like road work and head guards.

I believe in you, Dane.

He inhaled deeply and looked over at Ally—the rumpled hair, the creased blanket, the hurt blooming on his face. Dane had been there a time or hundred. He remembered how the day after a fight was always worse than the night he was in the ring, mostly. He'd always been proud if he could stand up, but Noel's upset at seeing him after sparring had changed stuff. Noel's lips touching his bruises. Noel looking like he wanted to cry or something. Dane had knocked off the sparring time, though he sure missed it.

Dane sketched a charcoal outline of Ally's body, moving faster as he caught fire. Sometimes he still needed to work on old newspaper when he drew, the feel of it as familiar as wrapping his hands before a match.

Brownout.

The charcoal rolled from his fingers as he kneaded the closed lid of his bad eye, the one Narone had struck repeatedly during their last fight. He'd lost the colors then, but they'd come back. He'd thought they were back for good.

Red lightning forked through his skull, and sweat broke out on his forehead and upper lip and armpits, and he thought he might vomit into the wastebasket.

Dane put his head on his desk, his fist crumpling the budding sketch of Ally.

* * *

“Mister, uh, Dane?”

Dane blinked, his back and neck sending out pain messages. He sat up abruptly, to discover Ally standing beside his desk, staring at the still-open drawer where the gun was. Dane shoved it closed.

“Hey, it’s my man Ally Cat,” he rasped. His head was still a little tender like he’d tied one on. It was too bad he hadn’t so he’d at least have gotten something out of feeling so lousy.

Ally shook his head at him, looking unimpressed. “That’s a stupid name. I’m not a kid, you know. I’m twenty.”

Dane widened his eyes. “No, really, that old?”

Ally flushed the same color of his bruises and gave a reluctant smile. “Fuck you, Dane.”

“Sorry, I only let Noel do that,” Dane said. “Though I should warn you that he’s...moving out. On account I’m not puttin’ out my marital duties.”

Ally cocked his head. “I wondered why you were down here. Sleeping at your desk?”

“Yeah, it sucks,” Dane said, feeling fresh depression.

“That me you were drawing?” Ally sat on the corner of Dane’s desk, moving the paper around so he could look at the outline of himself curled on the couch. “Not bad.”

“Well, thank you very much,” Dane said. “I’m trying to do enough so I can meet the grade this semester. So far I’m kind of behind the eight ball, you know what I’m saying?”

“You’re in art school?” Ally raised his brows. “I thought you were a boxer.”

"I was a man," Dane said. "Uh. I mean, I was a boxer. Now I'm just a guy."

Ally cleared his throat; his eyes were on the wall where pictures of old-time boxers Jack Johnson and Henry Armstrong lived in black-and-white. "Your boyfriend's really moving out? He seemed pretty crazy about you."

"Yeah, kind of how Sean is crazy about you, huh?"

Ally's gaze fixed on the floor, his jaw rigid.

Dane waited a few beats, hearing the count when someone was down and out.

"So he is your boyfriend, huh? And when those other guys started in on you, he—"

Ally shrugged. "He was scared. His family..." He looked up at Dane, green eyes blazing. "I know what you're thinking, but it didn't mean anything!"

"It means he hurt you, Ally," Dane said softly.

Ally got up from the desk and snatched for his jacket, which was still lying on the couch.

"Hey, you ever been to Pete's Pancake House on Fourth?" Dane asked. "I always wanted to go there with Noel, but he likes to sleep in."

Ally swallowed, hands going into the pockets of his leather coat.

"Maybe you could keep time for me. It's just a mile," Dane said. "I don't feel so hot, so I thought I'd do a little road work, maybe. And then me and you could get pancakes. That is"—Dane didn't bother putting on a coat since he planned to sweat—"if you have time to go with me this fine morning."

"It's raining," Ally noted in disgust, looking out the grimy window. Nevertheless, he followed Dane as he left the office behind and opened the main door of Charlie's Gym.

Dane shook his feet in his running shoes, rotating his ankles, feeling the homey cracked asphalt and seeing a bit of fresh graffiti on the brick wall opposite. "Like they teach me at art school, it's all a matter of perspective," he told Ally.

* * *

"I feel stupid," Ally said.

Dane finished wrapping Ally's left hand, and his dark eyes followed Ally's to the guy who was skipping rope, his hair plastered to his skull, his gaze unfocused.

"That's Ruben. He had some problems and Charlie helped him out, and now he comes here and works out, you know? But he never fought in the ring," Dane said.

"You talk about Charlie a lot," Ally noted. "He helped you out too, huh?"

"Yeah, Charlie owned Charlie's Gym before he died. Um, but I guess that's kind of what they call obvious, huh? Anyways, he took me to Pete's for breakfast first time I ever met him, and then he gave me a job here, mopping the floors. I got beat up at school on account I'm dumb."

"You're not—"

"I'm not smart like you and Noel. You know stuff, like about kismet." Dane shook his head. "But I can do things with my body. I can go the distance and I can make up pictures and I can make love pretty good. I didn't used to. It used to be just trips to the men's, you know? But Noel likes a bed and candles and shit."

Ally blinked.

"Oh, that's like TMI, right?"

Ally smiled slightly and held out his other hand for Dane to wrap. "Yeah, Dane."

"Well, I wouldn't share that with just anyone, you know, but you seem like a special type of person to me. Maybe it's good for you to know or something." Dane looked up briefly as he stretched out a boxing glove before helping Ally dig his hand into it.

Ally flexed. Dane knew it was weird at first, the rigid feel of it. Ally hadn't wanted to put them on, but Dane had talked him around. It just seemed like something Charlie would do, like when he helped Ruben.

"Sean and me..." Ally's gaze dropped.

“Well, the day after a fight is always the worst, you know. Give the bruises time.” The other glove went on, and then Dane stepped back, looking Ally over. “You look like a very serious man.”

“Kind of...feel different.” But then Ally’s gaze went to his distant reflection in the mirrored wall that ran along one side of the gym.

Dane looked too and crinkled his brow, trying to see from Ally’s perspective. Oh. Okay. Thin legs, bony shoulders. Ally only saw that, maybe? He shook his head at Ally. “No, don’t you do that.” He pressed a flat palm firmly to Ally’s chest. “It’s the stuff inside that matters. That’s what you got. That’s all you got.”

Ally’s lips parted. Dane could see he wanted to give him a hard time. He could also see Ally wanted to believe.

* * *

Dane looked down to see Noel closing his black leather satchel as he hesitated beside the elevator, his glasses on, his face serious, the way it was when he was going to the university. Most people were really serious there, like all that knowledge made it kind of hard to laugh. Noel had been like that when Dane first met him, but he’d soon started smiling back at Dane. Yeah, they’d done a lot of things to put a smile on Noel’s face!

Remembering, Dane smiled now as he patted Ally’s shoulder and then moved through the ropes, jumping down to the gym floor and standing in Noel’s path. His heart was pounding.

What was he doing? He had thought it was better to stay away, but then Noel had shown up in his shower and he’d touched Dane, and Dane couldn’t seem to find his balance again, like he’d taken a one-two in the ring.

Noel blinked at him through his glasses, blue eyes looking soft.

“You look very edible this morning,” Dane said softly. Noel didn’t like it sometimes when he said boyfriend stuff in the gym too loud.

Noel gave a shy smile. “Edible, hmmm.” He blushed. “I meant to tell you that I was in the Japanese garden on campus yesterday. The one you introduced me to?”

“Oh yeah,” Dane said, remembering. “I also was introduced to you givin’ me a blowjob there.”

Noel went even pinker. “Um, yes. Anyway, I saw a heron eat a koi fish there yesterday. It upset the tourists, and I kept thinking...I wonder what Dane would say if he were here?”

Dane blinked. “I’d say the bird was hungry.”

Noel grinned like he’d said something really smart. “I love you, Dane,” he said, something he used to say a lot, but then Dane had hidden himself away and Noel had stopped saying it so much.

“So...” Dane said. He wanted to keep Noel talking. It was nice. “You going over to live at your dad’s place?”

Noel cleared his throat. “Not quite yet.”

“Oh. I guess you’d have a lot of packing to do. Yeah, you got a lot of stuff.”

Noel looked at him, blue eyes giving him sunburn through the glasses. “I couldn’t take what I’d most want.”

“Oh, ha-ha, I get it. You mean—”

“You, Dane.” Noel looked like he wanted to say more, but then he gave a little shrug, looking up at Ally, who was standing at the side of the ring, watching them like they were a movie.

Neal brushed past them on the way from the swaying heavy bag, his black face shiny as he glanced slyly in their direction and smiled.

“He’s not very muscular, Dane,” Noel scolded, still looking in Ally’s direction.

“I’ll be careful, honest,” Dane said. Then he lowered his voice. “I figure...Ally’ll be too busy to hurt so much over his boyfriend. And learning some moves, he might get to meet himself in the ring.” On impulse, he knelt, his big hands touching Noel’s

bad leg and feeling its top dressing of scarring through his pant leg. "Hello, knee," he whispered. "You doing okay?"

"Dane..." But Noel didn't look too upset. His attention was focused on Dane's hands, as if he liked them on his body. Dane swallowed thickly since he was abruptly flashing back to the shower. Oh, man. He hadn't slept so well. He'd wanted to climb into Noel's bed with him and make it theirs again.

He forced himself to let his hands fall away. "You have a sensational day," he said, looking up at Noel.

Noel shifted his satchel around in his hands. "I'm meeting with my graduate student."

"Oh, that's good. I bet she is real happy you took her under your wing." Dane climbed back to his feet, aware that everyone in the gym was looking their way.

Noel raised a brow and nodded toward Ally. "I think I'm not the only one to do that. What are you going to do?"

"Teach him some stuff Charlie taught me," Dane said, putting his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants. He wanted to get down on his knees for Noel again, only he wanted to do it when they were alone. And he wanted Noel to tell him what to do.

Noel's eyes mellowed. "Ally is a very fortunate young man to have you and Charlie."

"Charlie's dead, Noel," Dane reminded him.

"I don't think so," Noel said, looking at Dane.

Chapter Four

Ally stepped over Dane's sleeping body.

They'd made an arrangement. Dane didn't ask him why he didn't have a home to return to and Ally didn't ask Dane why he had slept the past week on the floor of his office—not that everyone in the gym wasn't aware. Neal had told him Mrs. and Mrs. had a fight on. Hearing that crack, Ally had wondered if everyone knew about him at the gym also—not that his old neighborhood wasn't spreading it around, probably, but he'd decided it wouldn't hurt if he didn't go back there to hear it.

The second part of their arrangement was that Dane insisted Ally take the couch.

Now, as his bare ankle brushed by the half-moon shape of Dane's muscled shoulder, Dane gripped Ally's foot.

"Noel, you all right?" he asked in a drowsy voice.

Ally said, "I'm fine. Go back to sleep, Dane."

"Cause you know I worry. I gotta keep you safe. I'm nothin' without you. I know people aren't supposed to say that, are supposed to stay strong, but how can I be strong if I lose my heart?" Dane's voice drifted to another plane of sleep, but he caressed Ally's calf, and Ally shivered in response. *Shit! But Dane was a pretty hot dude, even if he'd decided to play Ally's sensei.*

"Go to sleep, Dane," Ally ordered again, more firmly. Then: "You won't lose me. Promise."

Ally's answer was the grip on his ankle falling away and the sound of a muffled snore.

Ally unlocked the new bolts on the main door of Charlie's Gym. Dane had had a guy around just that afternoon to install them. He seemed to be very security conscious. Ally left it open and drifted outdoors, heading for the alley where he'd first met Dane and where he knew the boxer kept his illicit pack of cigarettes.

* * *

One of Dane's smokes in hand, Ally stiffened when he heard a soft footfall behind the Dumpster. He'd been waiting. Every night he'd been waiting, and he knew that sooner or later...

He caught the passionate flash of dark eyes, and then a mouth crashed against his own. Someone moaned—him, Sean, he wasn't sure.

Sean dragged him behind the Dumpster, tugging at his leather belt, opening his jeans. Sean's eyes were wet velvet brown. He opened his mouth to speak, but then they kissed, like planets crashing, like the cosmos shooting out in fireworks, so that Ally thought there should be an orchestra belting out theme music and a bright flash of lightning.

"Sean..." Ally lifted him high against the grimy, graffiti-tattooed wall, nipping Sean's skin, tasting Sean's tears. "You're just...younger than me," Ally whispered. Only eighteen and scared like a wobbly fawn would be if it were suddenly transported to a freeway. He covered Sean's hard-on with his palm, loving the feel of it through his jeans—perfect, belonging to Ally.

The bruises, the shock, what had happened here...burned. Burned between them, burned by need, by flesh.

Sean kissed him, devouring him, cupping his head, bringing him closer. He was shorter than Ally, his cocoa skin shiny with the steam they created.

Ally licked Sean's lips in response. "Baby, I'll give you what you need," Ally promised.

Sean freed him and then himself, and it was just like those hot, humid nights on the fire escape when they had rubbed together and come and kissed and then had to go home.

He stared into Sean's streaming eyes as Sean worked them both. "If I'm gay, I can't stay at home," Sean said. "Then Evie and Jarrod have no one. I keep them fed. I walk them to school."

Ally whimpered, pushing himself deeper into his lover's grip. He wanted to say, *Your hair smells like cinnamon*. Like the gum he'd bought at the five-and-dime near Charlie's Gym. He always wanted to say shit like that, but he couldn't.

"Ally, I'm going to—" Sean leaned against him, his body tight, trembling.

Ally stared into Sean's eyes as Sean came, stared...and then Sean's thumb rubbed over his cockhead, and he heard his own raw sound, his fingers clawing brick behind him as he spattered in Sean's hand.

They wilted together, curling against the wall.

Sean shoved him.

Ally's legs were shaky. Cool air chilled him where he was sticky. He stared blankly at Sean.

"Listen!" Sean ordered. A hot tear hit the back of Ally's hand as he reached out, cupped that face.

Baby, please.

"I'm listening," Ally said.

"I can't!" Sean choked. "I just..." He squeezed his eyes shut, his body fighting not to cry. "I needed to know you were okay."

"I am," Ally said. "Dane Connelly, you know, gym guy—he gave me a couch."

Stiff shoulders up like someone was leveling a gun in his direction, Sean righted his clothing and then swerved around Ally, his back to him.

"Don't," Ally said, feeling like the dirty, broken glass at his feet. "You can't do without me."

"I'm sorry I hit you," Sean whispered.

* * *

"Are you all right?"

Ally flushed, using his sleeve to dash away moisture. He blinked, surprised to see Noel, Dane's husband, partner, sunshine, whateverthefuck. On the rare times he was interrupted stealing Dane's smokes and waiting in hope of Sean, it was usually Dane himself who found him, made him go running, and treated him to pancakes for breakfast.

"M fine," Ally mumbled.

"Of course," Noel said, giving one of his polite smiles. He reached into the crack in the brick and pulled out Dane's cigarettes and his lighter. To Ally's surprise, flame speared, warming the cool patrician bones of Noel's face.

"You're smoking?"

Noel's face spasmed. He coughed, and Ally hit his back. "Of-of course I am."

"Uh-huh." *Wow*. Dane and his old lady were something. Maybe like Neal, he should sit back and just enjoy the show.

"I just wanted to find whatever it is Dane experiences when he comes out here alone," Noel continued morosely. He took another drag and coughed again, eyes watering. "You haven't noticed him spending any time out here with, ah, someone?"

Ally laughed.

Noel leaned against the wall and rubbed his eyes. He had his cane, which was a first. His hand clenched over it. "Shit," he whispered. "I thought I'd overcome my territoriality."

"It's hard since he's not, um, staying upstairs with you," Ally sympathized. "But you're all he thinks about. I know."

Noel's eyes lit like the blue flame of the lighter he'd used. "He does?"

Remembering Dane sleeping on the floor, his rounded, big arms, the inquiring hand on Ally's ankle, squeezing gently, Ally nodded. He swallowed. "You're lucky."

Noel took another drag. “I hope so. Did you meet your friend out here?”

Ally kicked some damp paper plastered to the asphalt. “That obvious?”

“To a man in love, yes.”

Ally grimaced.

Noel asked softly, “Haven’t you ever told him?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry.”

Ally shrugged. “Nothing to be sorry about. Sean—he’d laugh in my face if I ever...” Ally took the cigarette from Noel, and inhaled a deep drag. “I wouldn’t see him again, probably. I’ll finish this.” Another drag. “So what’s the plan?”

Noel blinked. “Plan?”

“Breaking down Dane’s resistance. Have you thought about possible venues?”

“One.” Noel blushed. “But I can’t get Dane in there.”

“Oh. Yeah. Um, maybe you need to ambush him.”

Noel’s eyes narrowed. “I certainly would like to try. What do you suggest?”

Feeling the tight band around his chest ease, Ally told him.

* * *

Dane rubbed his unshaven jaw. It was morning rough like the sandpaper they’d used on the wooden floors when they’d renovated the gym, so he’d have to shave before he could snuggle up to Noel. Some mornings he actually set an alarm so he could do that and then he could do Noel before he went out and did his road work.

His hand groped and touched cool floor and not warm, sleepy Noel, and his eyes snapped open.

“Ow.” He sat up, and his back creaked and popped. He arched it, trying to relieve the soreness. Maybe he should take up yoga like one of the other fighters had suggested. Only yoga made him hard because it reminded him of a book he and

Noel had bought: *The Gay Man's Kama Sutra*. "This here floor isn't so comfortable," he mumbled.

Faint light was coming through his office window so that Dane's eyes automatically went to Ally's bed, which was actually Charlie's old brown couch—or maybe what Noel called it: the life preserver.

Staring at it, Dane remembered sleeping on it a time or twelve when Charlie was around, especially when he got his heart broken, which happened a lot. Dane didn't have a glass jaw, but Charlie used to say he had a glass heart.

"Charlie, if you was alive, what would you say to me, I wonder?" Dane asked Charlie's brown couch. "I know I ask you that all the time, mostly when stuff isn't going so well, you know, but it's not true that someone lives inside you when they passed on. That's just not true. It's like playing checkers with myself, you know? 'Cause I really don't know what you'd say, but I wish...I really wish I could hear it, you know?"

Dane pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. He could almost see Charlie now like he'd brought him back a little by wishing so hard—white, close-cropped hair, leathery chocolate skin, shaking his head since Dane was being a dope.

"I have this sort of...embarrassing problem," Dane confided in Charlie-ghost. "You bein' dead, you might already know about it, but probably not, seeing as you used to tell me to keep some stuff to myself. I just can't see you floating over our bed—Noel's and mine the night I..." Dane rested his forehead against his knees. "Noel was kissin' and touchin' me, and it felt real good. But then my head hurt, and I wasn't a man anymore. That never happened to me previously, just so you understand." Dane's eyes stung. "Now I'm so afraid it's gonna happen again, so when we snuggle and it's all good, I know I'll let him down. You think I should maybe get some Viagra? I never needed something like that before, but it's not for me, it's for Noel, so he don't leave me—"

"I'm not going to leave you." Noel's soft voice interrupted.

Dane twisted around, heart pounding. Had Noel heard the stuff about his not being up to the job? He licked his lips, waiting, taking in Noel's slight body, his curly soft blond hair, the cane gripped in one fist.

Seeing that, Dane leaped to his feet and went over to Noel, fell to a kneel, hands going to the knee and massaging the inside of it where he knew Noel hurt sometimes.

"Oh, Dane, how could you think I'd ever really leave you?" Noel accused. His eyes were moist behind his glasses.

Dane put his face against the bad knee, gentle, careful not to add weight. He wanted to kiss it. Even though he knew that kissing didn't really make you feel better when you were all bruised up...it kind of did.

"You said, Noel." Dane looked up at his boyfriend. "You said you were moving back to your father's house."

Noel's gaze dropped. "I wanted to push you into coming back to our bed. It was manipulative and untruthful."

Dane swallowed. "You wanted me back so bad?"

Noel's eyes lifted, blue flame.

Dane's gut tightened. *Oh, mama.*

"Oh yes, I want you back," Noel said. He reached down and brushed Dane's hair as if he were a little boy, and Dane felt that way. He closed his eyes, enjoying the caress like sun on his face. "It can't be comfortable sleeping on the floor."

"No," Dane admitted. He stood and put his hands in his shorts' pockets. "I was wondering if I could have Blackie down here in the office. Even with Ally here, I get a little lonely."

"You don't have to be lonely."

Dane wished that wasn't true. His head thumped a little now, signaling that while he'd slept, he'd probably had a brownout, something that felt like a lightbulb

going off behind his eye. He felt hungover like old gym clothes shoved in a corner of the floor.

He looked at Noel, seeing how unhappy he looked, not liking he was using the cane. He couldn't think of a reason to give for why he wasn't sleeping with him.

Except the truth.

And he couldn't tell Noel that.

"Dane, Noel...?" A knock on the door and a gravelly voice.

Dane looked over with relief to see their elderly neighbor, Mr. Trent, along with Noel and Dane's young dog, Sparrow.

"Hey, Mr. Trent! Taking Sparrow out for your walk?" Dane asked. He went to the older man, wanting to hug him since he still worried he'd have another stroke. One side of his face reminded Dane now of melted wax, the skin almost dripping off the edge of his jaw, the left eyelid lax. He had to listen hard to make sure he understood Mr. Trent just as good as he had before the older man got sick.

"Yes, I... He is so good. Doesn't jump all over me. The leash-free area has a nice b-bench in the sun." Mr. Trent paused like his words had been a workout. "Dane, it's good to see you and Noel together."

Noel looked away, and Dane felt bad because Mr. Trent wanted them to be the way they used to be.

"Dane, Gilbert will pick you up and drive you somewhere at three," Noel said. "I checked, and I didn't find you had any business appointments for the gym this afternoon."

Dane blinked. He remembered when he and Noel were first going out, Noel had had his chauffeur pick Dane up and take him places. They'd always had some pretty hot sex on those drives. He got hard, remembering. "Uh, Noel—"

Noel gave him a smile. "I'm off to the university. I look forward very much to seeing you later."

"But..."

Cane in hand, Noel hobbled out of Dane's office.

Mr. Trent gave a laugh that sounded a bit like a cough.

Dane reached out and squeezed the older man's shoulder, worried. He hadn't slept when Mr. Trent was in hospital. He and Noel and Gilbert and some of the guys from the gym had camped out in the waiting room.

"I'm all right, son! Just think it's funny the way your man is leading the dance again. Gilbert and I have a bet that you'll be back together in no time."

"Things ain't working out the way I thought, Mr. Trent," Dane said. "I thought once we lived together, we'd just...go on doing that."

"Marriage is not the end of the journey, but the beginning, Dane. You and Noel have to learn that," Mr. Trent said. "May I sit down?"

Dane helped him over to Charlie's couch so Mr. Trent sat where Dane had pictured Charlie earlier. He pulled over his chair on its rolling legs, rubbing Sparrow's head when the little dog jumped up to visit with him.

"We're not really married," Dane said. "Only it feels like it inside, you know?"

"Do you know you are not the first gay man I have been friends with?" Mr. Trent asked, settling in the couch. "When I served, I knew someone, George Anderson, an enlisted man who had an affair with an officer."

Dane sat forward. He like the old man's stories. He and Gilbert had some good ones, and they always meant something.

"I b-believe they truly loved each other. The officer eventually went home to his wife...and family."

"Oh, that's sad," Dane said.

"Love can be sad," Mr. Trent said, reaching out to squeeze Dane's hand with his pale one. The wiggly veins on that hand stood out more to Dane than they had before the stroke, but Mr. Trent had lost a lot of weight. "But that is a part of it. When I lost my wife"—Mr. Trent closed his eyes—"I didn't feel alive again until you

returned my stolen photograph of her when those punks took it for the frame. It was like a sign from Matilda that I needed to know this fellow Dane.”

“I’m sure glad I know you, Mr. Trent, and not just because you do the books real good, you understand. When Charlie died...you helped me. It was like you were a little bit like him.”

Mr. Trent’s eyes were moist. “That is a compliment, Dane!” He gave a sigh. “I must get up now for my walk, get the blood moving.”

“Doin’ your road work. That’s good. You mind if I jog beside you?” Sometimes Dane joined Mr. Trent on his walks. He felt sad even though the older man was walking and making cappuccinos and some of the stuff he’d done before he got sick. Dane wasn’t sure how much longer Mr. Trent would be around to be Dane’s friend. He’d made that mistake with Charlie, thinking it would be forever.

“I wonder where Noel intends to take you?” Mr. Trent mused as Dane held the door open for him and they walked outside. “Oh!”

Across the alley, Gerrard Narone slouched, wearing a black leather jacket. He glared at Dane like a guard dog.

Dane’s heartbeat picked up, and sweat broke out in his armpits and on his upper lip.

Scared. He was scared.

Narone made a kissing sound.

Dane remembered those big, tattooed fists slamming into his jaw, his ribs, his eye...

“Dane.” Dane jumped when Mr. Trent gently took his arm. “Come on. We have to do our road work.”

Dane looked back over his shoulder as he walked away with Mr. Trent, feeling those hard black eyes on him, killing him.

Chapter Five

Noel shut down his Kindle, where he'd been reading Z.A. Maxfield's *Family Unit*. He tucked it into his leather briefcase, clearing his throat and pretending he had been doing something appropriately academic.

His father's private investigator sat opposite him in his office at the university. There was a fine tension surrounding the man, despite his relaxed posture.

Noel's pulse picked up. "Well?" he prodded.

Jerry Ray ran a hand over his mustache, pale gaze fixed on Noel. "You won't like it."

Noel leaned forward, brushing the outside of the file folder with his fingertips before he forced himself to open it.

Gerrard Narone glared at him from a photograph.

"I already don't like it. It was bad enough he got such a reduced sentence for killing Charlie Burns—"

"Unfortunately, there was no concrete evidence, no witness," Jerry noted. "He had money, and he played it like a street fighter—smart. If it weren't for your father coming forward, he wouldn't have done time at all."

Noel rubbed his upper lip with a shaking hand. Dane. This man wanted to hurt his Dane.

Trying to tell himself this was no different from gathering dry academic research, Noel flipped through Narone's stats as a fighter. But he was seeing Dane in the ring, soaked with water and sweat, blood running pink down his face and body, a fist slamming into his eye so that his body lifted, spun...fell.

Noel's eyes stung as he remembered. He rubbed his forehead with trembling fingers.

"He left a man a vegetable after a match once," Noel said. "Dane didn't tell me before he faced him. No doubt, trying to protect me." He looked at Jerry. "I hate what Dane does. I hate boxing!"

Jerry's lips tightened. "Narone does have a rep as a man killer. Dane got off easy."

"Easy..." Remembering the days after that fight, when his partner had pissed blood, the black eyes, swollen and lurid, obscuring the puppy brown of the man he loved, Noel wasn't so sure about *easy*. "I guess we were lucky," Noel said. "I only wish he'd accept a bodyguard. I did discuss it with him, but...he took it all wrong."

"I didn't think he'd go for it," Jerry said.

Noel paused while examining the next photograph, holding dark eyes that were vaguely familiar. They belonged to a smiling young man, with windblown brown hair.

"Do I know him?" Noel wondered aloud. "Maybe from Charlie's Gym?"

"I don't think so, sir. He's Ross Moore, a.k.a. Mrs. Narone. He was Narone's cell mate in the joint. He worked as a gas-station attendant in high school but got in with the wrong people."

Noel swallowed drily. "He's so young."

"He was in for some petty stuff. Nineteen years old when he went to jail."

"Oh my God! He looks like Dane, a young Dane!" Noel whispered. He looked up at Jerry. "Narone raped him, didn't he?"

Jerry's face was impassive.

"Excuse me!" Noel grabbed his cane and lurched to the en suite of his small office. He shoved the door, so it banged against the wall and his cane fell, and then he was on his knees, the cool rim of the toilet seat under his palm and...

After, he flushed and reached for some toilet paper to wipe his mouth. It felt like a band was wrapped around his skull, squeezing, but as he breathed, shakily, he began to come back to himself.

He cleared his throat. His leg hurt from the sudden awkward position, but it was a pain he lived with. He reached for his cane, scraping the floor as he struggled back to his feet.

Avoiding his eyes in the mirror, he washed his hands and brushed his teeth before pressing a cold washcloth against his face. As refreshed as he could feel in the circumstance, he returned to his desk.

“Excuse me,” Noel said.

“No problem. You all right?” Jerry’s eyes had seen a thousand things, but now they held only understanding and kindness. “Dane’s...” Jerry huffed, spreading his hands. “You just want to keep him safe.”

Noel gave a tight nod. He settled back at his desk. “Shall we continue?”

Jerry sighed. He clearly wasn’t enjoying the recital any more than Noel. “Moore spent some time in the infirmary right after he was assigned to Narone’s cell.”

Noel removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Narone once threatened me. Dane went crazy.”

“You going to tell him about this?” Jerry lifted his brows.

Noel’s hand fell away. His fingers were still trembling finely, he noted. That young man... No way was it a coincidence that he looked like Dane and Narone had hurt him.

What if one day he arrived home from the university to find Dane lying in a pool of blood in the gym’s ring as Dane had found Charlie?

It was Noel’s worst nightmare, almost as bad as Dane taking up fighting again. He knew he was a coward, but he hated seeing Dane even sparring. He didn’t see why Dane loved it.

But he knew he did.

Jerry handed Noel some water from the dispenser.

Noel nodded his thanks, unable to speak for a moment.

He'd been anticipating the date he'd set up earlier with Dane in a bid to fight for him, but now he wanted it even more because somehow it felt like time was running out. "No, I won't ever tell Dane about this. He would... He'd never understand that this wasn't his fault somehow. Why didn't the prison administration put a stop to it?" Noel took a small sip of the water, grateful for the reprieve. He snapped the file closed, unable to look at Narone's history for the moment.

"Moore wouldn't make an official complaint—probably too afraid. Narone busted him up pretty bad."

"I have to keep Dane safe, Jerry," Noel said. "This time it has to be me. Dane can't face that killer again."

* * *

Dane hesitated beside the limo outside the gym's graffiti-etched alley, shifting his big shoulders to ease the sudden tension. Sometimes it was like a right cross to the jaw how he was dating someone so uptown. How had that happened? He couldn't believe he'd ever had the stones to ask Noel out for hot dogs.

Dressed up in one of the casual outfits Noel had bought him for Christmas—black slacks and a deep blue silk-and-cotton sweater—Dane felt a bit like he was wearing a costume. Yet Noel had said the color set him off like a jewel, which still made Dane blush. Nah, with his mug? Who was Noel fooling?

But he wore it because he remembered the look in Noel's eyes when he had tried on the sweater.

"You have to get in sometime, Dane," Gilbert said, studying Dane. He drove Noel's car, but he was still an okay guy who talked to Dane like he was a real person.

Dane rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the tension. "You don't think it's like that time Noel and me went out for fancy sushi, do you, Gilbert? That didn't work out so good."

Gilbert laughed. "And you had McDonald's afterward because you were still hungry? Noel didn't mind waiting in the car while you went in."

"It wasn't just that. It was kind of strange eating off a person like he was a table," Dane said, wiping his hands on his pants and getting into the passenger side next to Gilbert. If he sat in the back, his heart would pick up and he'd get so hard thinking how he was Noel's dessert, being delivered to him. Think about his daddy's hands on him, making Dane bow down, take his cock in his mouth, feel the spurt of warm semen on his face before begging for his own release.

Daddy.

"*Nantaimori* might be more your thing if you were the plate, I think," Gilbert teased, his kind brown eyes twinkling. He was an average-looking man, quiet, with silver hair that he kept close-cropped. He'd met another man, an architect who worked downtown, after years of living alone. Dane sure hoped it worked out. "You did cause a stir at the fund-raiser by continually asking the sushi platter if he was all right, if he needed to go to the bathroom, or if you could get him something to drink."

"Hey, turns out he was an art student just like me, Gilbert! He liked I did a drawing of him. It was easy to sketch him fast, on account he was pretending to be furniture, but oh, man, I don't think I could keep still long enough to be a plate," Dane grouched as they pulled into traffic. "And I'd get hard if Noel was eating me. Uh, I mean off me. So much for the flowers they stick over your parts. Mine would start to steam."

Gilbert laughed. "Dane, you are one of a kind!"

Dane blinked. "But that's good, right?"

* * *

They pulled up outside a graceful building, white, capped with turrets at the end of a long, curving, tree-lined drive. Dane got out of the limo with Gilbert and stared in awe.

"Looks like a fancy Indian restaurant, only bigger," he noted, staring up at the tall pillars that loomed like the legs of curved, upturned furniture high above.

"Definitely mimics the Taj Mahal," Gilbert said. "Very lovely, not too over the top."

"So Noel wants us to eat curry? We won't have to eat off someone again, though, right?"

Gilbert shook his head, smiling. "No, your friend Tim won't be here."

"Fancy."

"Dane, remember how nervous you were the first time I drove you to see Mr. Noel at his home?" Gilbert asked gently. "Coincidentally, this is the same neighborhood."

"Sure do. You told me it was just a house like everyone else's, but that wasn't quite true, you know. It was a lot bigger with more stuff, and I didn't have that much stuff."

Gilbert shrugged. "This is just more stuff."

"Should I knock on the front door, do you think?"

But Gilbert only smiled and raised a brow, nodding toward Noel, who now stood waiting at the entrance. Seeing him, Dane suddenly didn't care if this was like one of the university parties he had to attend sometimes because he was Noel's, where people read stuff by Voltaire and he read comic books, although the university president called them graphic novels as if that made them smarter.

Dane went to Noel, who looked fine, really fine, in a pale linen suit. His light eyes were focused on Dane like a pure blue flame.

Dane wanted to kneel at his feet.

Noel reached for Dane's hand. "I want you to like this."

"Okay," Dane said. He looked so adorably uncertain that Noel stifled a laugh with a cough.

"Come on, trust me." Noel pushed the door open, and they walked through the grand entrance. He watched as his lover's wide dark eyes took in the little bridge that led to reception, which spanned a pool made of blue mosaic tiles where half shells with orchids floated. An attendant was lighting tea candles by hand since the day was darkening early, and they shone like dots of light on the rippling water.

Noel tugged Dane over the mock-oriental bridge, pausing so Noel could look down at the koi.

"I know those guys!" Dane exclaimed, relaxing for the first time. He squatted closer to the pool. "Hey, fellas." A white-and-red-spotted fish swam closer, right up to the surface to mouth Dane's fingers. "Think it's feedin' time, huh? Sorry I don't taste so good."

"On the contrary. I think you do," Noel said.

"Hey, you're going to make me blush!" Dane stood, brushing his fingers against Noel's cane. "You want maybe to work out with me later? When I first saw you, you seemed pretty serious, like you had a tough day or something."

Noel swallowed thickly. "Yes, it was hard," he admitted softly. "And yes, I've missed working out with my favorite personal trainer."

At the reception desk, a man acknowledged Noel's reservation and gestured toward the changing room. "You will find guest robes through there, sir, after you shower. I hope you enjoy your experience here at the Lal Salon."

Dane was now gripping his hand tightly, so Noel paused a moment. "Dane, really, you'll like this."

Doe brown eyes studied Noel's face.

"This is not so different from Charlie's Gym."

“Noel, Charlie’s Gym is on another planet, unless you can picture Charlie floatin’ flowers in half shells in the men’s sauna.”

Noel laughed at that picture. “No, I guess you’re right.”

But Dane followed him into the changing room and stripped, though he turned his back on Noel to do it, which made Noel’s lips tighten. Patience, Noel told himself. Once upon a time, Dane had been the one who put himself in Noel’s path, offering himself. Now it was Noel’s turn.

Noel wanted his boy back. He wanted to see his handprint on Dane’s ass and his cum on his lips. He pictured handcuffing Dane to their headboard and feeding his cock into Dane’s mouth. When he came, he’d come on Dane’s hard penis, cementing to his boy just who his daddy was.

After quick showers, which they took separately because Dane was still behaving bashfully, they both donned dark linen robes. Tugging his where it pulled on his Atlas-like shoulders, Dane followed Noel to the massage room.

“Dane, this is a day spa among other things, the most sensual in the city,” Noel explained, threading his fingers through Dane’s again. He also wanted to thread his fingers through Dane’s hair. He wanted him on his knees, arms wrapped around Noel’s hips, safe in their loft.

His throat closed as he stared up at his Dane’s face, at the strong bone structure and warm olive skin unmarred by bruises, by black eyes, or a split lip. He was so beautiful, and he’d made Noel live.

Catching Dane frowning at him like he was sensing something of what Noel was feeling, Noel cleared his throat. “I, uh, had heard about it but never come here, so it’s new for me too.” Resting his cane against the nearby wall, Noel lifted himself carefully up onto a towel-draped table, and after a pause, Dane tentatively did the same on the one opposite Noel’s.

“Why did you never come here before, Noel? Your father was pretty loaded.”

Noel chewed his lip. “My leg...” He massaged it. “I felt ugly. I didn’t want anyone to see it.”

Dane shook his head. "There's nothing ugly about you. I thought you knew that now. When I first met you, I thought maybe you was so bashful because you were deformed downstairs or somethin', but it turned out it was just your leg that made you shy."

"I know I'm not ugly when you touch me," Noel confessed softly. "But you haven't touched me of your own volition for such a long time that now I feel ugly again."

Dane's brown eyes stared into his own. Noel could feel his boxer thinking about what he'd said.

* * *

"Ally, are you also heading outdoors?" Mr. Trent shouted above the sound of thunder rolling overhead. The elderly man had just exited the elevator that went up to the two apartments above Charlie's Gym.

"Yeah!" he called back, storing the mop and bucket away in the little closet as lightning illuminated the gym like an X-ray. He was done his cleaning for the day, and the place was deserted because of the sudden storm that had come up.

He folded his arms, which hurt a little from the weights Dane had him doing, but Ally was hoping if he lifted long enough, he'd get some definition and maybe Sean would—

"I need to get out there now before the storm gets any worse." The old man was nice, a little quiet, and tight with Dane; Ally felt as if he didn't miss much. "If you don't mind, I'll accompany you," Mr. Trent asked. "I'm walking Sparrow since Dane and Noel are out."

"Are you sure you want to go out there, Mr. Trent? It looks pretty Shakespearean."

"Shakespearean? You remind me of Noel. The rain and thunder won't matter to Sparrow, and I have to get my evening exercise."

Ally waited, without feeling impatient, as Mr. Trent took a little time making it to the door out to the street. He held it open for the other man, and they walked outdoors, rain striking their faces, Sparrow sniffing the night air.

“You all right?” Ally asked. He felt protective; Dane doted on the old guy. “Jeez, it’s freezing out here!”

“I just thought I’d take the little fellow out back to a grassy patch,” Mr. Trent told him. “There and back quickly.”

Ally nodded. “I was going to sneak one of Dane’s smokes—”

“And wait for your friend?”

Ally flushed. “It’s raining. Probably he won’t...” He looked away. “I hope not, anyway. This is shitty weather.”

The old man patted his arm. “If he’s there, I won’t intrude, but Noel asked me to make sure I wasn’t alone out here with Sparrow.”

“How come?” Ally was always curious about Dane and Noel. They were better than the soaps.

“That man Narone—Dane and I ran into him. I believe he’s stalking the area, looking for trouble.”

Ally knew the story of Dane and Narone and their boxing match. It was a legend in the neighborhood. “That’s why Dane got new locks awhile back, right? He’s afraid...” Ally’s throat closed on a new thought.

* * *

“Don’t you touch him!”

Noel had been almost asleep, despite the noisy sounds of a storm that had picked up and was lashing rain against the floor-to-ceiling windows. In the salon, candles flickered and a muscled attendant wearing a loincloth was massaging his lower back with sea salt and lime blossoms—or he had been until he was suddenly up against the wall with Dane’s big palm flat against his chest and Dane glowering at him.

Noel sprang up and noticed belatedly that his towel must have fallen off. He blushed, but he didn't cover himself. Being with Dane had made him a little more comfortable with his body. "Dane, what are you doing?"

"He was touching your ass!" Dane was pissed...and intimidating. Noel's masseuse was cowering.

"He was just touching the upper portion," Noel said, going over to Dane and touching his arm. "It was meant to be soothing, not to arouse me. I only let you do that."

Dane immediately relaxed, shifting so he faced Noel. "You lost your towel," he said.

"You were upset."

"I guess I lost it too"—Dane's hands fell away, and he took a step back from the nervous attendant—"seein' some other hot guy touching you." Dane looked at their masseuse. "I'm really giving you a compliment saying you are hot enough that I'd worry my Noel would be tempted. But I wouldn't hurt you none if he really wanted you. I'd just get very depressed and drink a lot of Shirley Temples."

Noel also looked at their attendant, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I thought this was a good idea, coming here, but...will you give us a moment?"

The man nodded, relaxing a little and cocking his head at Dane. "If it helps, I went through a period where I didn't like anyone touching my boyfriend. It was right after I'd had some surgery."

Dane's eyes widened. "So you weren't feeling very, uh, masculine, huh?"

"I'll leave you two alone. Good luck." The attendant left the room after giving Dane a small smile.

"How do you do that? The poor man was scared, and now he's going to join your fan club," Noel said.

Dane's gaze was on the cork floor like a puppy that expected a whack from newspaper.

“Dane, when have I ever looked at another man?” Noel took Dane’s hand and walked him back to the table where Noel had been enjoying his massage. Dane had been having one as well, but he hadn’t been able to relax, so his masseuse had gone in search of special aromatherapy oils to ease his tension.

“Never,” Dane admitted. “But I haven’t been a man.”

Noel blinked in surprise. “What do you mean? You’re a man now, aren’t you?” he asked, very gently. Some instinct told him he was treading near the raw ground that might explain why his boyfriend had left their bed.

Dane rubbed the back of his neck, still avoiding Noel’s gaze. “I guess...”

“No guessing needed, love,” Noel said. He stroked Dane’s arm, the hard lines of undulating muscle. “You’re magnificent like one of those marble statues we saw in Italy.”

“I don’t feel like a man!” Dane burst out. “I feel like the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*—full of straw.”

“Dane...” Noel inhaled deeply. “I miss you in our bed. How many ways can I show you?”

But Dane had turned away. “I ruined the fancy spa for you. I didn’t like some guy touching you, even your back.”

Heart pounding, Noel refused to give up. He leaned against Dane, wrapping his arms around him. “We can try again,” he said firmly. “Maybe...this wasn’t what we needed. Maybe next time we’ll go somewhere you would like to visit.”

Dane’s towel was gone now too, and he was... *Oh*. Noel brushed his hand against Dane’s erection.

Dane jerked away, panting. “I can’t.”

Noel licked his lips. “It’s all right.”

“No!” Dane’s voice rose. “It’s not all right!”

“Dane...”

Nude, erect, Dane barreled away from Noel, shoving the door open and striding away.

Unfortunately, it was the wrong door.

Noel scrambled off the massage table, grabbed a towel, and hobbled quickly after his Dane.

* * *

He found him in the front entrance, kneeling on the bridge again, staring down at his friends the koi fish. Several men and women were gaping at the picture Dane made—like a crouching nude by Rodin.

“See? I ruined everything,” Dane mumbled.

Noel settled behind him, winding the towel around Dane’s lean hips, covering him. He was afraid to say anything, so he kissed the side of Dane’s face, holding on.

After a moment, Dane exclaimed in outrage, “Where’s your towel, Noel?”

And Noel smiled against his lover’s neck, feeling hope.

Chapter Six

“So how did it go?” Gilbert asked with a smile as he opened the back of the limo for Noel and Dane. He was holding an umbrella for them, but Dane didn’t mind the weather so much. He often did his road work when it rained, and it felt good against his hot skin.

And sometimes when he got to feeling bad, missing Charlie or Noel, no one could tell tears from rain.

Noel sighed, arm firmly around Dane. “I think I miscalculated.”

“They had nice fish, anyways,” Dane said at the same time.

Gilbert laughed climbing into the driver’s seat. “At least you two are in the same place, if not on the same page.”

* * *

Ally’s heart picked up when he thought he caught movement behind the Dumpster despite the freaking downpour. *Sean...?*

“Mr. Trent! You maybe should go in now,” Ally directed. “You’re getting soaking wet!”

“It wasn’t the brightest idea not to bring an umbrella. I agree! At least I’ve done my circuit with Sparrow.”

Ally smiled, shaking his hair, which was dripping against his skull. Sean might be there, waiting for him, probably keeping out of sight since he didn’t want anyone to know he still met Ally. He’d escort the old guy back inside—

“I waited for you.”

“Uh!” Bounced into the brick wall, skin barked—killer dark eyes glaring into his.

Ally shouted, “Mr. Trent, get the fuck out of here!”

The knife pricked the corner of his eye so his skin bled a tear. Ally’s breath rushed out, leaving him cold.

Soaking black hair. Big, muscled, tattooed. Just like in his televised fights. “Dane likes you,” the creepy, light voice drawled.

“I’m calling the police!” Mr. Trent called. “You leave that boy alone!”

Ally trembled, seeing the sideways glance Narone gave the elderly man. He hadn’t run! Oh shit, goddamn it, Mr. Trent hadn’t run!

“Maybe later, grandpa,” Narone whispered. “You tell Dane this is on him. He’s not a man.”

The pressure was gone, but more warm blood rolled down Ally’s cheek.

Mr. Trent grabbed his arm. He felt spacey. Everything echoed.

Ally rubbed his back. *Sore, Christ!*

“Come on. We better get back inside!” Mr. Trent prodded.

As he straightened, trembling, Ally glimpsed a familiar pale ivory running shoe sticking out of the top of the Dumpster.

* * *

“Shouting!” Gilbert yelled over the storm as he slammed the limo door. “Mr. Noel, did you hear that?”

Dane took two steps into the alley, his big fists clenched.

“Ally,” Dane said flatly. “It’s Ally.”

Noel and Gilbert hustled toward the Dumpster out back, but Dane ran into the gym.

* * *

There was no umbrella protecting Dane now from the wind and water as it ripped through his hair, the fancy clothing he'd worn for Noel.

The nine millimeter gripped in his fist, he stood over Ally, who was rocking, mouth open, no sound, a young black man gripped tight in his arms. The victim was unconscious, his T-shirt torn open, the word *fag* carved into his skin in lines of scarlet.

Mr. Trent was kneeling beside Ally, holding him as he rocked, trying to say something. Noel was waving to the red and blue flashing lights coming their way, summoning them closer.

Dane stared into Ally's eyes.

He could do nothing.

* * *

"If his parents—" Ally choked. He leaned against the hospital wall, puffing, his face paper white. "They can't see that word!"

Gilbert grabbed his arm. "Breathe slow, son. You're hyperventilating. Easy."

Watching Gilbert and Ally, numb, Dane waited in the center of the lobby, Sean limp in his arms, blood on Noel's favorite blue sweater, Noel standing close beside him. The officer who first responded had let them know there'd been a pileup on the freeway. There would have been a wait for an ambulance for Sean. Gilbert, Dane, Ally and Noel had rushed him to the ER in the limo. "I'll make sure he has the best care. I'll make sure," Noel was saying. "He won't... Let me find someone. God!"

A gurney rattled close, and Dane lowered Sean gently onto it. He reached out, wanting to use the T-shirt to cover the boy's chest, but a nurse blocked his reach as Sean was wheeled away.

Ally rasped, "His little brother and sister—they need Sean living at home."

Distantly, Dane saw that Noel's face was cool, focused now. Pale fire. "They won't know why he was there, to meet up with you, I mean," he reassured Ally.

“And I have the best plastic surgeon in the state on his way. I’ll talk to the attending physician.”

Ally curled against the wall, arms around himself. “I can’t be here. Fuck! They only let him stay at home because he wasn’t my friend anymore.”

Dane put a hand on Ally’s arm.

Ally yanked it away. “I know it’s not your f-fault, Dane!” he growled. “But right now I...”

“Come home with me,” Dane said. The words felt like rocks rolling out of his throat. “Noel will take care of him. I swear. But you’re right. Sean hasn’t made the call to come out, and you can’t do that for him...”

Ally’s face was stone. Dane wanted to lift him up, carry him like he had Sean.

He settled for just walking beside him, and they left the ER.

* * *

Dane heard the dead *thud* of the heavy bag.

Bam! Bam! BAM!

Ally was still using it. Probably Dane should go out there and hustle the kid’s ass into the sauna. His hands had to be swollen by now, despite the careful way Dane had insisted on wrapping them before Ally could work out. All the time he’d done it, Ally hadn’t said a word and Dane had avoided his blank stare.

In Charlie’s office, he saw the gun on the desk, where he’d left it after the patrol car arrived, before they’d taken Sean five minutes down the road to the nearest ER. He put the handgun carefully back in the drawer, locked it. Stood there.

Then Charlie’s desk chair was up, swinging in an arc, crashing into the black-and-white photographs Charlie had treasured. Plastic wood frames fell. Glass splintered like spiderwebs.

Dane stood there, panting, fists balled.

He looked at the brown couch, pointed at it. “You don’t get to not be here with me!” he yelled. He could almost see Charlie looking up at him in surprise. “You don’t...” Dane choked. Tears were starting like the first pebbles down a slope. His knees gave out, and his hand curled around Ally’s blanket; but before Ally had ever used it, it had been Charlie’s blanket—Charlie who had always been here for Dane, told him how to stand up. “What do I do, Charlie?” Dane bowed his head.

* * *

Hours later, Noel found Dane and Ally in Charlie’s office.

Ally was sitting on the floor, staring at the wall. His wrapped hands were stained pink.

Dane had a fist curled in the blanket on Ally’s couch. His face was wet. He was asleep, leaning against the furniture like an old friend.

Noel stepped out of the office and called an exhausted Gilbert back from the elevator, where he was waiting with Mr. Trent. It was nearly dawn, subdued light coming in through the high windows. “Gilbert,” Noel asked quietly, “please help Ally. Clean him up.”

“Don’t you walk Sparrow without me again, Mr. Trent!” Gilbert warned the elderly man. He squeezed his shoulder and closed the elevator screen before retracing his steps back to Noel.

“It’ll be all right. We’ll take care of each other the way we always do,” Gilbert said. “How are you, Mr. Noel?”

Noel’s face stretched into a smile he couldn’t feel, like sunshine in December. “You don’t have to call me Mr. Noel, you know, Gilbert, because you’re right; we take care of each other.”

“I’ll handle the young man, Mr. Noel,” Gilbert said and went to Ally, gently helping him to his feet.

After they left the office, Noel went to Dane, his Dane. He knelt and touched his shoulder, and Dane jumped, fists balled, raised, ready—

“Noel!” Dane buried his face against Noel’s neck. Warm tears, fresh tears. “I did this!”

“No!” Noel shook his head. “Shhhh, baby,” he whispered. “Come upstairs now.”

Noel stood, held out his hand, waited.

Dane took it.

* * *

Dane hesitated on the threshold of their bedroom. Seeing that, Noel suggested, “We’ll wear something to bed. Pull out some sweats, Dane.”

Dane stared at him as if he needed to read his lips. He was shivering.

“Whirlpool tub first,” Noel said, deciding they needed that first. His leg was sending out red cracks of lightning up and down his muscles. Tomorrow he’d probably barely be able to get out of bed. But he would anyway.

Dane trailed him into their bathroom. Noel pulled out jumbo Egyptian-cotton towels, hesitated, and then he put on soft music. And then he lit candles. When he ran the water, he added the Kama Sutra sea salts Dane liked.

Dane whispered, “You’re wanting a do-over, Noel? The way you’re fussing, making things the way you want—”

“What I want is to have come home from the spa, where I”—Noel cleared his throat—“failed miserably to reach you, and gone upstairs and done some writing, some research. I don’t want to have found Sean. I don’t want to have watched Ally have to leave the ER.”

Dane scrubbed his eyes. “We’re on the same page now,” he said. “Oh, man.”

Noel hobbled to Dane and cupped his cool cheeks in his palms. “Let’s flip the page. Sean is going to be fine, and that’s what matters most. Strip, Dane. Get into the tub.”

Dane’s pupils were blown, unfocused, but after a moment, his eyes seemed to sharpen on Noel’s face. He pulled off the blood-soaked sweater, his muddy black dress pants.

Noel took Dane's clothing, balled it, and rocketed it into the open wicker hamper. Perspiring, flushed, he sat down on the john to take off his clothes, wincing when the movement pulled the hot wires in his leg. His ankle felt like it was in a vise.

He stiffened when abruptly he was swung off his feet.

Dane looking down at him, dark eyes saying...everything they were both feeling right then.

Noel reached up and kissed Dane's lips. They were still kissing when Dane lowered him into the water and he hissed at the sudden warmth. He gave a choked sound of painful relief, and then Dane was in the water with him, surrounding him, big arms, big body.

* * *

"This means Narone has broken his parole, big-time," Noel said in a hushed voice. He hadn't brought up what they were dealing with, just edging around it, because—the soft wind-chime sound of water droplets, Dane rubbing his shoulders—this moment was needed.

"It won't be that easy," Dane said flatly.

"What do you mean?" Noel stiffened and turned to look at his partner over his shoulder. He could feel Dane's erection against his ass, comforting, giving him the ghost sensation of penetration, of being full of Dane again. No matter how screwed up things were, Dane still wanted him.

"Just feel it," Dane said. His mouth was a hard line. "I have to face him."

"What? No, Dane! There will be no boxing match between the two of you again! As soon as my investigator can locate him, Narone is going back to prison, I promise you!"

Dane said nothing, and Noel swung around, facing the wall, glaring at it.

Dane continued to rub his back.

Noel pressed his lips together. It was better to say nothing right now.

* * *

Dane put on his sweat bottoms in their bedroom and handed Noel some of his silk pj bottoms.

Noel looked up at him from where he was lying on their fine Egyptian-cotton duvet, chewing his lip, waiting.

Dane climbed onto their bed and snuggled up to Noel, spooning him. Noel wedded the fingers of one hand through Dane's.

"I was so scared tonight. It could have been you or Mr. Trent," Noel whispered.

"We're both okay."

"Dane, I saw the gun. That is not you!" Noel looked at Dane, studying him in the soft lovers' light from the streetlamp that came into their bedroom. "When did you lose confidence in yourself enough to"—Noel swallowed—"bring that thing into our home? New locks are one thing, sensible, but you should have consulted me about a gun."

Dane's jaw hardened. "If we talk about this now, we're going to fight, maybe. And then we won't feel so good. I don't want to go twelve rounds with you, Noel."

"We won't fight!" Noel stated. Then he blinked. "Okay, we will fight."

"The spa wasn't so bad," Dane continued as if Noel hadn't spoken. "I liked the fish. You didn't do so bad."

After a pause, Noel probed. "So you'd enjoy visiting somewhere natural with me?"

"No nudist colonies," Dane said with a slight smile. "On account I don't want anyone else seeing what's mine."

"Am I yours?"

"If you want to be."

"I want." Noel turned around to face Dane, their feet tangled now. This was the first time in months... He felt his throat tighten. He'd missed his Dane so much.

“Natural...” Noel’s eyes widened. “I think I know a place, if you’ll agree to a second date today.”

“After we visit Sean, sure,” Dane said, yawning.

“Of course. I promised Ally. And...Sean’s parents are not bad people, despite the fact I have to agree they are intolerant.” Noel sighed. “At least they allowed us to help their son.”

Dane’s eyelids were closing. “I’d go anywhere with you, Noel.”

* * *

Noel got up to get a drink of water in the bathroom a couple of hours later. He turned on the sconce in the hallway but left the bathroom light off. In the sepia tones reflected by the mirror, he saw Dane enter, and followed him inevitably.

Dane kissed his neck, passed a big, affectionate hand over the upper side of his thinner, bad leg.

Noel caught his breath.

Dane pulled down the silk pj’s and reached into the vanity drawer, then pulled out lube. As Noel watched, panting softly, Dane put a generous amount on his fingers and ran an oily circle around Noel’s offered dimple.

Holding Dane’s heavy eyes, Noel whispered, “No, it’s all right. I’ve been using a toy sometimes. I’m not...out of practice.”

“You want it straight up?” Dane’s voice was dark, gravelly, sexy.

In contrast, Noel’s voice was a thread as he admitted, “I want to be fucked. Fuck me. Take me like a stranger.”

Dane pushed Noel forward and lifted his good leg higher against the vanity. He penetrated Noel in one smooth movement, claiming him.

Noel whimpered, impaled, full of this huge, muscular man. He liked the contrast of Dane’s tanned hands on his pale blue-veined skin.

“You want your bad boy, Noel?” Dane rasped, sparks of excitement in his eyes.

“I want my bad boy.”

Dane's hand covered Noel's mouth like a gag. His thumb entered him like his cock, and Noel sucked on it, eager.

"I'm gonna pound you," Dane promised.

Noel whimpered, "Dane..." His hands clawed the vanity as he watched himself being fucked.

Red flags of heat in his cheeks, Dane paused at the sound of his name, looking into Noel's eyes. He groaned as he pulled out of his tight passage, leaning against Noel, trembling finely.

"It's been so long," Noel said, stroking Dane's arm, trying to comfort him. "Please, Dane."

"I'd do anything for you, Noel. You know that. But I gotta say, this is kind of hard on a fella," Dane said. "Good thing I'm of the heroic persuasion like you said once, am I right?"

Noel could feel the massive prod of Dane's penis, wet tipped against one ass cheek. "I can feel that it's hard." Even through the pain of denial, his lips lifted. "And heroic."

"Very funny," Dane rumbled. "We gotta wake up Gilbert to drive us there? I mean..." Dane's gaze dropped bashfully. "He'll know we're gonna have sex and everything."

"I think he'll be happy we, ah, have resumed our relations," Noel pointed out.

Dane was still gripping him, shaking. "We gotta resume our relations *soon*, Noel."

* * *

Feeling the heat from Dane's big, warm body behind him, Noel pulled a key out, closing his eyes for a moment.

This. This is what he'd wanted the first time he'd seen Dane mopping up the floors in the library with his sweaty olive skin and his white wifebeater and the nipples that used to seem to poke through it, catching Noel's timid gaze. But he'd

been afraid, and somehow Dane had known, and so he'd found a way to give over control to Noel.

"Crafty," Noel muttered. And some people thought Dane wasn't smart?

After these years of being with Dane, was he finally ready to admit what he'd wanted then?

Noel pushed open the door and inhaled the scent of dust and books. He switched on the lights, stepping into the tiny campus library tower where he'd first encountered his Dane.

He'd dressed for the role in some of his drabbest clothing, things he never wore anymore, because Dane liked strong colors and he encouraged Noel to wear them. He was even sporting the glasses he'd worn back then, the chunkier frames serviceable but hardly flattering. In contrast, Dane was dressed all in black, tank, jeans, with a silver necklace half concealed by his shirt.

They were dressed the way they had been when they first met.

"It was nice Jeff let me into his supply locker," Dane said, hefting the mop and bucket into the room.

Noel's lips quirked. "You offered to clean this space in exchange. No doubt he finds the stairs tiresome."

"Hey now, those stairs, they're a good workout." Dane's forehead crinkled. "I'd forgotten that, you know? I mean, sex is supposed to be bad for fighters since we need to focus, and I'm not sure I believe that, but stairs—I think I'll add them back to my routine."

"Just don't take the sex out of your routine."

Dane shrugged, managing to look both secretive and guilty. "I guess I kinda did for a while."

"Hmmm." And Noel was going to know why, but not now, not as he unpacked books, which could be written in indecipherable runes for all he cared, from the bag he'd brought with him.

The stage was set.

He sat down and, after a moment, opened one, flipping through the pages. It was easier than he'd thought—slipping into his past skin.

Dane seemed to have the same experience. He swiped back and forth with the mop, his necklace shifting under his tank in a way that brought Noel's attention to those hard nipples.

Finally, Dane paused and cleared his throat. "You know I been thinking... You and me and hot dogs. What do you think?"

Noel wiped his palms on his neat slacks, feeling the old nervousness rise. This felt so real, like it truly was the first time Dane had hit on him. "I, uh, can't walk on the sand, remember?"

Dane blinked. "I didn't tell you which hot-dog stand on campus yet, Noel."

"Oh." Noel flushed.

"So I like going to the hot-dog stand at the beach and, uh, walking the dunes. It's real good for my legs, on account I'm a serious fighter."

"A fighter?" Noel asked, trying to stay in character. He didn't know Dane, not yet, but oh, how he had yearned to back then.

"A boxer," Dane said proudly.

Much as he had every time they had encountered each other in this little library, Noel pushed his books aside, giving Dane all his rapt attention.

"You have a very..." Noel cleared his throat. "Your body is quite developed."

"Yeah, I'm built too," Dane said. He rested the mop against one of the bookshelves and pulled out a cigarette and lighter. "You mind if I smoke?"

"I, ah..."

"I don't mind if you say no. Most folks on campus are into recycling and stuff. Maybe that's your angle too."

Noel chewed his lip, trying not to smile. "I hadn't thought of smoking and recycling as being connected."

“Oh yeah, they have a lot in common. Some people worry about secondhand smoke, which is, you know, a form of recycling.”

Now he had to laugh. “I guess it is.” Dane looked a little hurt that he’d laughed, and he wanted to reach out and take his hand, squeeze it, but Noel back then wouldn’t have had the courage to make that gesture.

But was he content to go on being that man, even in playacting?

“I’d rather you didn’t smoke, because...because I want to know what you taste like when I kiss you.” Noel’s face felt on fire, and his heart was pounding. His hands clenched around the stack of books on the plain wooden table.

Dane’s eyes widened. “Is that right?”

“Yes,” Noel said. He forced himself to hold Dane’s gaze as Dane came to him, his walk somehow making Noel’s gaze go to his crotch, which was gloved by soft denim, and the large bulge pressing behind it. Oh my, he thought.

Dane leaned down and kissed him, and Noel forgot about role-playing as he reached up and sank his fingers into Dane’s soft hair. “Oh,” he whispered. “Oh.”

“O is the idea,” Dane said, a naughty grin twisting his lips.

Noel devoured him with his kisses, all the hunger, the desperation he’d felt then—and now—coming up so he felt like some kind of sea creature bent on pulling Dane into the depths with him and never, *never* letting him go.

“My God, you are so beautiful. So untamed and so...” Noel gasped as Dane began nibbling on his neck, but it wasn’t enough. It was too *gentle*, and he didn’t need that right now.

Dane inhaled sharply as Noel reached out and stroked him boldly, and then his hands—Noel’s hands—were on his belt, pulling it free, and they were bumping heads. *Ouch!* But it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but... Dane sprang free, and Noel dropped to his knees and swallowed him, taking him as deep as he could. His hand wrapped around Dane’s prick like it was a gift, feeling the wiry crinkle of luxuriant pubic hair, the tall length in his grip.

“No, no...” Dane lifted him, so strong, so unbelievably strong, so that Noel hung with his feet off the floor, and then he was on the table and Dane was stripping him and his bland biscuit-colored sweater was torn in half, literally torn in half and his shirt was ripped open so shreds lay on either side of his pale body like a slightly obscene frame.

His trousers were only hanging on to one shoe, and then his legs were open, welcoming, and this, *this* was what he’d wanted, both then and now.

Dane mounted him, holding his cock in one fist, and Noel’s head fell back, and he groaned as Dane broached him. It hurt. It felt good. It was perfect, and he gripped the edge of the table as Dane thrust home, his belt jingling, his necklace free and tracing crazed patterns against Noel’s skin.

“My bad boy...” Noel whispered. His legs wrapped around Dane’s body as his boxer hammered him, staring down at him with flat animal dark eyes, his lips parted, luscious, so that Noel had to crane up to kiss him as Dane fucked the life out of him... Dane’s head leaning now against Noel’s neck, his hand coming over Noel’s hand and drawing it up, high, so he covered it with his own, possessive, dominant, as Noel whimpered and tightened his legs and Dane continued to pound into him and he loved it and his body arched and he was coming... He felt the first hot spurt of Dane inside him even as Dane groaned and ground himself deeper, harder, as if he wanted to use just his flesh to mark Noel *his*.

Chapter Seven

Noel woke, his rear end and leg aching. The first, at least, was his choice. He rolled over, holding his breath.

And Dane was there, sleeping in their bed, curled into the fetal position, brown hair sticking out from his moist forehead. He almost never slept this late—always jumping rope, using the heavy bag, running—but after their late-night adventure, he was obviously worn-out.

Noel couldn't resist the need to touch, grazing a hand over his partner's sandpaper lower jaw.

Dane's dark chocolate eyes snapped open, fixed right on him.

"Our bed's more comfortable than the floor in Charlie's office," Dane said. "I just had what you call an epiphany."

Noel smiled. Dane probably wouldn't have known what *epiphany* meant two years ago.

"Our bed offers more attractions than a very good mattress." Noel ran his foot over Dane's calf, and then he winced.

Dane sat up. "Daddy," he scolded. He pushed back the duvet and, cross-legged, placed Noel's bad leg over his lap. "Your leg is beautiful like driftwood on the beach, you know?" Dane bent down and kissed the twisted white lines.

"I haven't felt...good about it lately. Ahhhhhh." Noel's head fell back as Dane gently massaged the muscles. Dane had taken some lessons from a massage therapist soon after they'd moved in together, wanting to learn how to give Noel relief. It was especially important since Noel had worked hard to be less dependent on his cane, which meant there were days he just plain hurt.

The intercom buzzed, and Noel pressed the button next to their bed. “Yes?”

“Mr. Noel, we’ve made pancakes next door, and Ally’s here with us...”

“We’ll be right over, Gilbert. Thank you,” Noel said. He looked at Dane. “It’s good having you back here with me.”

* * *

Mr. Trent was using the cappuccino machine since he was better at working it than Gilbert. There were heart-shaped pancakes with smiley faces on the table. And a few goldfish pancakes especially for Dane, he noticed with delight. Gilbert used brown sugar in the batter along with sourdough, so they tasted soooo good.

Dane picked up an excited Sparrow and let the tiny dog rest against his shoulder as he watched Noel join Mr. Trent in the space-age round Italian kitchen they’d put in when they remodeled the two lofts. Noel took some mugs from Mr. Trent, ready to help dole them out.

“Hey, this little doggy spends more time over in your apartment, Mr. Trent. Why is that?” Dane called.

“He’s fond of me,” Mr. Trent noted. “I enjoy his company. I thought I was too old to have a dog again.” He looked at Dane under his brows. “And I think you let me borrow him to help with my road work after the stroke. Don’t think I don’t know you and Noel are fussing over an old man.”

“You won’t be walkin’ him alone for a while,” Dane growled as he placed Sparrow back on the hardwood floor.

Gilbert cleared his throat. “The fellas in the gym have offered to go with Mr. Trent when you or I can’t. He won’t be alone, Dane.”

“That’s good,” Dane said. He looked over at Ally, who was huddled on the sofa. “You want some goldfish pancakes? They always make me feel A-OK, like Goldie’s back with me. Goldie was my friend before I met Noel, and she helped me with, you know, relationship issues.”

“No, Dane.” Ally’s tone said *Dane, you idiot*, but that was all right. Dane knew Ally was just swinging punches right now. Hurting.

Dane sat down next to Ally on the couch and threw an arm around him. Ally stiffened, but then after a moment he relaxed and allowed Dane to rub his back much as he had Sparrow’s. “Noel talked to Sean’s parents this morning. Sean is doin’ okay. He’s still pretty out of it.”

Ally dropped his head forward, and Dane just kept up patting his shoulder. The younger man turned to him, and Dane hugged him, feeling the tension shudder through Ally’s body like angry electricity. “It’ll be okay. I know it don’t seem like it right now, but you got all of us, you and Sean. Me and Noel are goin’ out for a little while this afternoon, but when I get back, I want to show you a few moves.”

“You just want to keep me safe from Narone,” Ally growled, adjusting his glasses and cocking a brow at Dane.

Dane’s lips tightened, and he was aware of Noel’s worried gaze on him from the kitchen. “No, I’m not worried about that,” Dane said. “I won’t let him ever come near you. That’s a promise.”

* * *

Dane followed Noel up a cracked cement path. He scratched his morning beard, which he hadn’t had time to shave before he and Noel had gone on their date.

They passed overgrown flower beds with tufts of branches sticking out like bed hair. The tiny bit of dirt exposed to the sun in the jungle still sported crocuses and early daffodils coming up through leaves and paper debris. They had passed a tree colored with fuchsia graffiti. Dane liked the color, even if he didn’t think the tree was the right place for it.

“You’re very quiet,” Noel said. “I’m so glad you agreed to give us another shot at a date.”

They were holding hands since there was no one around to look at them and make a face.

Dane liked Noel's smaller hand in his. He didn't mind taking a bit more time walking since Noel still had to use his cane. Maybe if they worked out together and Dane massaged it real good, Noel could lose the cane again for a while, though it was never a sure thing. Sometimes Dane had to tell Noel to knock it off if he pushed himself too hard, if he was hurting too much.

Dane absolutely did not like his Noel hurting.

"Where we headed, Noel?" he asked. "This place looks like it's goin' back to the wild."

"Wild is the operative word, yes," Noel said with a small smile. "It used to belong to the city, but they didn't have the funding for it, so a small group of volunteers have kept it running, barely."

They came out from the woolly trees to a circular span of concrete on which a giant glass bubble rose. Dane stared. "It looks like some kind of future city," he said, awed.

"You've really never been here?"

"Nope." Dane itched for some charcoal to record what he was seeing. The dome was all interlocking triangles of glass set in metal like jewelry with a lip of cement as the base. There was more graffiti, on the glass itself, but it had a strange transparency like stained glass.

They walked through the budding trees, past giant slabs of rock covered with avidly growing ivy. "I've never seen a place like this," Dane said in awe.

"It's a triodetic dome," Noel explained enthusiastically. "Seventy feet high with fourteen hundred and ninety acrylic glass bubbles." He pushed his glasses higher on his nose and blinked long eyelashes at Dane. "It was once illuminated at night—well, when they could afford the lights."

They had come to a horizontal opening in the structure. Noel took out a heavy key. "Now it's only open to the public three days a week," he said.

Dane frowned, watching as his partner unlocked the heavy metal door. “How come you have a key, Noel?”

“Oh.” Noel cleared his throat. “Well, I, um, bought it.” He looked at Dane. “For you.”

“Noel!” Dane walked through the darkened gift shop and ticket office into the world Noel had wanted to introduce him to. Sunlight streamed in, warm, humid, filtered by palm trees, by spears of banana trees.

Noel folded his arms and watched, absorbed in Dane’s first impressions.

“You bought this...place?”

“Yes,” Noel confirmed quietly. “I had the idea of taking you here, and then when I found out the state the place had fallen into...” Noel shrugged, watching as Dane walked hesitantly down the circular flagstone path. An exotic yellow pheasant bellowed at the big man, and Noel smiled at Dane’s wide-eyed look at the haughty bird. “You love animals—fish. I wanted to give you back the wonder you used to experience when you had your goldfish bowl.”

Dane sat down, cross-legged, on a little grassy patch by the path and looked up at the ceiling. “Oh, man, I need to lie down to just look at that.”

“Then I’ll lie down next to you...if you don’t mind,” Noel asked.

“Mind?” Dane’s brow furrowed.

Noel put down his cane and carefully maneuvered himself so he shared the tiny space with Dane. He looked up at the view Dane was enjoying. “That big tree—that’s a Tasmanian fern.”

“It looks like a bush on top of a trunk,” Dane noted. He turned his head and looked at Noel. “What did you mean about me minding you lyin’ down next to me?”

“Well, you haven’t exactly wanted to for months,” Noel said, unable to help the bitterness that seasoned his words. “I’ve felt...opaque, like I’m slowly losing substance.”

Dane sat up. "That ain't true! All I think about is you, Noel!"

"If you thought of me, you wouldn't have taken away my sunshine," Noel said flatly.

Dane scrubbed his eyes. He looked around the space, as if checking they were alone. "I, uh, have a little problem. Or maybe a big one," he confessed in a hushed voice.

Heart pounding in his throat, Noel grazed his fingers against Dane's, encouraging him to confide in him. "You can tell me anything. We live together, don't we?"

"I...can't be a man." Dane pulled his knees up. He rested his head against them and peeked at Noel with sad brown eyes. "Not with any, you know, reliability."

Confused, Noel also sat up, a hand going under his bad knee absently to massage it where the veins were permanently constricted from his injury. "I don't understand you. Is this somehow about boxing?" He couldn't help that his voice lowered to a growl on the word *boxing*. Somehow it had become his dark rival for Dane's affections. He knew it still had a hold on him. They lived above a gym.

"No." Dane lowered his voice further. "This is about me being able to delight you."

Noel felt a smile form spontaneously. He tried to stifle it, covering it with one hand. "Delight me? Um, yes, that is a good way to, ah, phrase it. But you *delighted* me recently, remember? And I delighted you."

"That happened 'cause I forgot I have a problem, and my prick kind of took over as soon as I was inside you."

"It did." Noel remembered. *Mmmmmm*. Then, "What problem?" Noel blinked. "There wasn't any problem with the, uh, delight. I liked it."

Dane scrubbed a hand over his chin, the rasp of his fingers against his growing beard signaling anxiety. "Okay, how about I give you an example of my, uh, embarrassing problem?"

Noel bit the inside of his cheek. Why, after all the pain and worry, was he fighting laughter now? It was crazy. It was Dane. “Sure, that would be helpful.”

“I’m like the fancy faucet we have in our bathroom. It works real good all the time—only sometimes I forget to hold my hands under it so it’ll go. But there was that time when it didn’t work, right?” Dane widened his big puppy eyes expectantly.

Noel frowned, a little lost. “We had it fixed.”

“I think maybe I’ve been fixed too, only not in a good way,” Dane continued mournfully. “Like Sparrow was.”

“Oh!” Noel’s gaze dropped to Dane’s lap. “But it was working fine last night.” *Was it ever!* He could still feel Dane inside him, almost too big for comfort so he had this pain-pleasure afterglow that had left him semihard for most of the morning. He loved feeling that way, Dane opening him up.

“It’s not...pointing right at twelve o’clock anymore, you know, straight up? Not when I expect it to.” Dane’s head fell. “Remember that time we were messing around and I...I couldn’t?”

Noel was drawing a blank. “No, when was this?”

“Few weeks, I guess.”

Noel’s mouth tightened. “Let me guess. Right before you moved out of our loft?”

Dane shifted his legs, giving Noel a guilty look.

“Dane, that was months ago. Are you saying that you moved out of our bed over one incident?”

“Only it wouldn’t have been one,” Dane said very softly.

“Dane!” Noel didn’t know if he should shake his boxer, shout at him...or hug him. After a moment, he moved closer and put his arms around him. “It happens to every man sometimes. Hasn’t it happened to me?”

Dane cleared his throat. “It never happened to me, Noel, never, ever.”

“I bet if Charlie were alive, he’d tell you it happens to every fighter sometimes,” Noel counseled. “And remember when I was malfunctioning because of my discomfort over my leg? You found a way to make me feel good again.” His first time ever inside another man, inside his Dane. His leg had given out, hurting, but Dane had stroked him back to pleasure. “I think maybe if this is such a difficult issue for you, we should see someone.”

Dane looked appalled.

Noel choked back a laugh. This was serious—this was months of being without his Dane! Yet somehow last night had wiped it away—like writing in sand on the beach.

He decided it was time to cement their bond with action, not words. Dane was, after all, a man of action.

Noel put his hand under the waistband of Dane’s shorts and ran a nail gently over his erection, which was gloved by his briefs.

“Ohhhhh!” Dane’s eyes rolled back, and he spread his legs, instantly Noel’s eager, slutty Dane. “Daddy...”

“Dane, I’m displeased with you.” He tried to keep his voice stern, but he saw the answering smile in Dane’s eyes. Time to play.

Dane moved up to his knees and pulled his shorts down, revealing the cool moons of his ass. Noel reached out with possessive hands, massaging Dane, hearing the whimpers ignited by his touch.

“I want my boy,” Noel said.

Dane held very still, Noel’s good boy, as Noel reached under him and handled his long, heavy penis, his hanging balls. Sweat broke out on his back, and he quivered, but he understood his body now belonged to Noel.

Noel gave him a tap on the rear, and knowing the signal, Dane put his head against the soft green grass, his ass raised, his legs spread.

His fingers penetrated him, slick with lube, and Dane moaned, his head shifting, restlessly. When Noel smacked him lightly, his penis flexed, eager.

“Higher, Daddy wants it nice and high,” Noel prodded him.

Heart galloping with excitement, Dane lifted himself up. He’d watched Noel take him this way, reflected in a mirror in their bedroom. His muscles would stand out, evidence of all the hours he put into sit-ups and working out with the heavy bag.

“Daddy,” Dane groaned as he felt Noel’s prick breach his entrance.

“I’m going to use my boy,” Noel said, pushing home, rough, the way Dane liked it sometimes.

Dane shuddered from the impact of Noel’s thrusts, holding his body obediently still so Noel could use him. “Use you like Kleenex, Dane,” Noel went on, whispering in Dane’s ear. “You slut, you deserve to get fucked. You asked for it.”

“I want it all the time,” Dane agreed. Noel had a hand around his thick neck like a collar. It felt good, natural. “I tease my daddy.”

Dane was open, taking all of Noel as Noel’s rhythm stuttered, choppy. He could feel heavy, hot breath against his back, and he tightened on his daddy’s cock, knowing Noel liked it when he milked him.

“Come for me, Dane!” Noel ordered. He hadn’t touched Dane’s cock, but Dane knew that was because he was such a bad boy, such a slut, he didn’t need it.

“Noel!”

“Came all over Daddy’s grass. Uh! Daddy should make you lick it up, lick it all up before I make you swallow me, suck me...” Noel’s voice lowered to a whisper. “Dane, I love you.”

Dane squeezed Noel’s cock as Noel pulled free, and then he turned onto his back, spreading himself.

Noel jerked off above Dane, his face tight, shiny with sweat, tangled blond hair, his glasses askew, just the way Dane had wanted to see him when he'd been so quiet and serious in the library where they'd first met.

Noel came right on Dane's cock and balls as he lay, hands above his head, his eyes half-closed, smiling up at his daddy.

Chapter Eight

“Koi!” Dane pointed at the big, lazy swishing fish pooled together under the bamboo woven bridge. It swayed gently from their combined weight. Noel had left his cane and now leaned against him. It felt good. Dane was always proud to have him on his arm, liked seeing Noel’s normally primly arranged hair all wild from his hands, Noel’s expression relaxed...and it didn’t hurt that Dane felt good too. In fact, he was a little dizzy from coming so hard. Noel’s educated teacher’s voice, whispering that stuff... He had gotten him hotter than a rocket in no time.

“It’s a wishing well, though I’m not sure the coins are good for the fish,” Noel said, frowning. “It’s something I’ll have to have our aquarium guy answer.”

“I like the waterfall. All that froth looks like the light beer you drink.”

“You could drink it too,” Noel teased. “But you never touch any alcohol.”

“Charlie started me on Shirley Temples on account I’m a slutty drunk. He was afraid I’d get seriously hurt,” Dane said.

“Thank God for Charlie,” Noel said softly.

Dane had to go into the water. He was sitting on the bank with some of the fish food Noel had found to mete out, patiently letting the koi nip curiously at his hairy calves, which were immersed.

Noel’s head was in his lap. “Can we stay here like this? I don’t ever want to go back. I’m so afraid of Narone, Dane,” Noel said drowsily.

Dane swallowed. “So am I,” he confessed. “I can still feel his fist hittin’ my eye, you know? Ouch!”

Noel stiffened. "It still bothers you?" A musical sound interrupted, and Noel pulled out his BlackBerry. Dane liked it, but the keyboard felt too small for his big hands. "Yes? Oh good. We'll return to the gym right away."

Dane stroked Noel's hair, bending close to press his lips against Noel's. It felt good, right—like they were mating all over again.

"My investigator is waiting in your office with some leads on where Narone may have gone to ground. Dane...you'll sleep with me from now on," Noel said sternly. "I don't care if your equipment is...occasionally faulty. That will happen more often as we get older anyway."

Dane blinked. "I was thinking Viagra."

"I have something better than Viagra." Noel stroked Dane's crotch.

"Ohhhh." Dane's eyes half shut as he basked like the fish in the sunshine. "Daddy, I want you up me again."

* * *

Ally watched as Dane examined his hands. "If I hadn't been, uh, a little distracted, I woulda been mad about you doin' this. Look at these hands? Swollen, cut up. Did you punch glass or something?"

"No," Ally said. "I don't..." He saw his thin nerd's shoulders sag in the reflection of the gym's mirror. Why did Dane insist on training him? And an even better question would be, why was he going for it? "I don't remember much after I had to leave the hospital, leave Sean." He sighed. "I haven't been myself."

Dane looked up from Ally's hands, studying his face. "Yeah," he said. "I've been there. It was bad, what happened to Sean."

"It should have been you!" Ally's voice was too loud, so heads turned. He reddened and chilled out. "Or me."

"I know," Dane said.

"I don't want to say the stuff to him like you and Noel do... I don't believe in that shit, like sweethearts or marriage." Ally rubbed his eyes. "But I'm dying, not seeing him."

"I'll talk to Noel about it; see if there's something we can do." Dane's brown eyes were understanding. It always struck Ally as weird; Dane's puppy-dog eyes in the body of a freakin' Terminator.

"I know you don't think what we have is... But he can't come out. Not now. Not with those kids."

"So he won't," Dane agreed, surprising Ally.

"I was sure you'd say... Because he can't—"

"It's like you said: those kids. So we just have to find a way you can see each other, spend some time without his parents finding out. You know, when Charlie took me in, my mother told him not only was I stupid, but I was queer too, so who'd want me?" Dane swallowed. "But Charlie didn't seem to care what I wasn't. He watched out for me. I wasn't allowed to fool around with anyone without a condom, and he liked to meet my dates when I was your age."

Dane put an arm around him, and Ally let him. He felt less stringy, less insignificant, with Dane's big arm around him. Like things would work out. Like one day if Sean wanted, he'd have more choices and maybe...

Maybe Ally would be one of them.

"I'm going to watch out for you, Ally, same as Charlie did for me." Dane looked proud. "Noel put me wise that was what I was supposed to do, but I was thinking about what I lack, you know, and not where I'm bountiful."

Ally smiled at Dane's quaint word choice, shaking his head. Dane. "Bountiful: marked by abundance, plentiful." Then he blinked. "Please don't tell me you're referring to your... Because, ewwww."

Dane laughed. "I don't need to brag."

“Oh, maaaaan.” Ally rolled his eyes. Then he sobered. “Okay, I guess. Maybe shit will actually work out.” He cocked a brow at Dane. “So you and your old lady make up?”

“Don’t call him that.” Dane bumped him. “Noel’s into books, but he’s all man.”

“Please don’t tell me more,” Ally groaned.

Dane laughed. “TMI, huh? Well, I won’t be sleeping on the floor of your room anymore.”

“It’s not my room,” Ally said.

“It is as long as you want it.” Dane rubbed some salve carefully into Ally’s fingers, loosening the joints, his expression patient, focused. “I can still teach you some stuff so you can get out of a fight quick, if you need to.”

“Dane—”

“Knock it off, Ally. You think I like seeing you bruised up?” Dane looked pissed, which was intimidating in such a big man. “You think I want to find you in the fucking Dumpster next?”

Ally put his free hand up. “All right. Bossy.”

“That’s what a manager does.”

“I’m not a fighter! I just clean this place and I get a couch, and you keep the fridge stocked so there’s always something for me to eat.”

“You *are* a fighter,” Dane said. “Even if you never step in the ring, it don’t matter.”

“Okay, already,” Ally muttered. “You and Noel are a pair with the bossy.”

Dane raised a brow. “I saw he left some of those fliers about courses at his university on my desk. Somehow I’m not thinkin’ they were for me.”

Ally flushed, giving a one-sided shrug. “We might have talked about some stuff. I really dig archeology.”

“Like *Indiana Jones*, right?” Dane finished with Ally’s hands.

“Not quite as colorful, but...” Ally chewed his lip. “I always thought it would be an adventure, doing something like that.”

* * *

“All I can tell you is I think Dane’s holding back.” Noel’s investigator sighed, sitting back at Charlie’s desk. “I mean, he’s shared what he told the cops about places Narone might frequent, but there’s something—I can’t put my finger on it—some vibe like he doesn’t believe they’ll find him.”

Noel adjusted his glasses. “I’m sure you’re wrong. Dane wants Narone caught. I know he doesn’t want anyone else hurt the way Sean was!”

“I didn’t say that. I just think...” Jerry made a frustrated sound. “Noel, I think your man has other plans for Narone.”

Noel’s hand tightened on his cane. He looked out at the gym, the place he remembered entering for the first time like a nobleman visiting a pit of common gladiators. After two years of being the lover of one of them, he still did not belong. He could not reconcile the belief that meeting someone in the ring was a mark of manhood.

It was barbaric.

But Dane... Didn’t Dane still believe?

Noel climbed painfully to his feet, a little stiff from their vigorous lovemaking. He hobbled to the doorway, looking out at Dane, whose hands were writing descriptive arcs as he taught Ally. Noel remembered when he’d first lived with Dane how his lover had wanted to teach him some moves. Noel wouldn’t hear of it.

He’d had Dane’s promise that he wouldn’t fight anymore, even spar in the ring for “fun.” There was no way Noel could encourage him in his backward thinking by appearing to offer approval.

Instead he’d taken Dane to fund-raisers at fancy sushi restaurants and to university Christmas parties. Perhaps Dane hadn’t enjoyed those events, but he

had also been deeply immersed in his art, which Noel knew he loved. And they'd done as well as other couples, hadn't they?

Yet when Dane hadn't stayed hard one night, he'd pulled away from their bed. And when Narone had returned, Dane had bought a handgun for protection.

Swallowing thickly, Noel had to wonder, if he'd let Dane continue to have his sparring, would his partner have found other solutions, other ways of mastering his fears? Ways Charlie had taught him, long before Noel had ever met him.

"It's not just Dane who clams up when I try to talk to him," Jerry continued. "Sir, the men in the gym are entirely too unhelpful. I think they are standing behind Dane."

Noel's mouth tightened. He glared over his shoulder at his investigator. "Find him. Find Narone! I am not helpless. I am not some damsel in distress whom Dane has to"—Noel inhaled sharply—"bleed for. Hurt for. God!"

* * *

"That's right. Fall back, but keep your feet," Dane said, smiling at Ally. The kid wasn't looking too bad. Probably he was good at dancing, which came in handy with boxing moves. "You've got good balance, and that way you don't get slugged, and who needs that, right?"

"But you take it," Ally said, lowering his upraised arms. He cocked a brow at Dane. "From what I hear, you were pretty good in the ring, so you like, invited guys to hit you."

Dane paused, looking around the gym at the other men working out, their eyes distant with concentration... "You can't duck from life, Ally. It's gonna slug you hard sometimes. But a seasoned fighter knows how to take the pain and keep going. That's what boxing is. It's like..." Dane ran a hand through his hair, struggling for the fancy words that Noel and Ally used. He gave up. "It's like life."

Dane cocked his head. "Come on. We got time for maybe one more move. Noel's finished up with his investigator, so he'll want to head upstairs with me."

Ally raised his arms again. “Okay, go, show me.”

* * *

Stewing like a copper cooking pot left neglected on their stove to burn—something that happened sometimes when Dane was drawing and forgot all about dinner—Noel hobbled out of the office.

He and Dane were going to talk, goddamn it! They were going to settle this once and for all, because they couldn’t keep going in different directions. Dane had to...

Dane was bent over, huffing, big hands on his knees while Ally talked to him softly, rubbing his shoulder. Some of the guys in the gym had also noticed something was wrong, and moved closer, calling to Dane.

Dane looked up as if sensing Noel watching him, but when he looked for him, his eyes passed right over him.

And Noel knew Dane couldn’t see him.

* * *

“I hate bein’ bare assed, you know? It’s drafty, and I feel dumb except when I’m around you at home,” Dane complained. “How long I have to wear this gown? We’re done, right? We’ve been here for hours.”

“Dane, it’s more serious than that!” Noel was cold inside.

Dane had started out with a basic ophthalmoscopy, the doctor looking at his eye, but that had led to a quick trip to radiology for an MRI scan. And from there... Oh God.

“There is pressure building in your skull,” Noel reiterated. “You need surgery.”

He’d known it was too good to be true—these years with Dane. He’d known there would be a price for letting him go in the ring with Narone.

Dane reached for his jeans. “Yeah, lights out, I know. It’s been goin’ on awhile, but it’s okay.”

"It's not okay!" Noel grabbed Dane's arm, panting. "What do you think you're doing? You have to stay here, have the surgery!"

Dane blinked at him. "I'm getting dressed so I can go visit Sean. I don't think he wants to see my bare ass, even if you like it."

"Dane, you can't just ignore this!" Noel growled. "Like you did the conversation we never had about the handgun or why you're shutting out my investigator on Narone."

"You want the gun in tomorrow's trash?" Dane demanded. Then he paused. "Or I guess probably you'd go more for recycling."

Noel blinked. "So that's it? You'll toss it out?"

"I don't need it anymore."

"And why is that?" Noel asked.

Dane shook his head, his color high, his lips parted. He was panting a little, and not just from their fight.

Noel's gut twisted.

Now that he knew what to look for, he could see the toll Dane's injury was taking on him. And that time Dane hadn't gotten hard - it had been months ago, but had that also been a symptom Noel had missed? At first he'd thought he was losing his attractiveness to his partner, and so he'd been too timid to bring it up and force the issue until recently.

"You don't need it because you think you'll actually have some kind of physical altercation with Narone again?" Noel couldn't keep the disbelief from his voice. How could Dane even think...? The idea was insane!

Dane turned and slapped the wall. Hard. "No, you don't tell me what to do!" he yelled, the veins sticking out in his neck, heat lighting his olive skin a ruddy color, his eyes leveled on Noel like big fists.

Dane. Yelled.

Noel cupped his mouth, feeling his stomach drop like he had taken a too-fast elevator ride—all the way down. “In all the time we’ve been together, you’ve never...yelled at me.”

Dane’s eyes widened and then filled with tears. He rubbed the side of his head, the movement habitual now, unconscious, and then he knelt like a champion for his king right there in the small gray-and-blue-washed hopelessness of the hospital room.

“I promised you these hands would never hurt you,” Dane whispered, lifting his large hands. “Do you still believe me, Noel? The thought of hurtin’ you... I might be sick. Right here, which maybe is fortunate, seeing as they’re set up for that.”

Noel instinctively reached out and grasped one of Dane’s hands. “The short temper—it’s probably also a symptom, Dane,” he reassured him. “You didn’t break your promise.”

But Dane could not be comforted. He bowed his head. “I let you run me, Noel.”

“Dane...”

“No!” Dane took a deep breath and looked up at Noel again. “No. In the bedroom it’s okay, I like it. And you know, outside of it, I just want to make you happy because I still can’t believe someone like you is with a guy like me.” Dane shook his head. “But something tells me, something deep inside like Charlie whispering to me, that Narone’s coming for me, and there’s nothing I can do...” Dane looked Noel over as if memorizing him, as if his gaze were a loving farewell. “And what if he hurts someone else I love? I can’t stay here, have this stuff done now. I need to be strong, to stand up. Didn’t you hear the doctor? I may not be the brightest bulb, but he didn’t seem to know what would happen, what they’d find. Hey, for a moment I thought maybe I should conduct my own brain surgery, you know? Seeing as he didn’t know so much. But Noel...I may come out on the flip side even...less a man for you than I am now.”

Noel didn’t know he was crying until he had to remove his glasses. He covered his eyes. “Dane, please, please, have the surgery now! I’m begging you... My life... I

can't go back to who I was without you." He fought to keep his voice level, calm, so he could reach Dane. "You don't know what it was like. I felt invisible. No one saw me, wanted me until you. I felt as dead as the print on the pages I studied until you wanted me to touch you, kiss you..."

Now Dane looked sad, his shoulders weighed down. "We dodged the bullet for two years, I figure. Good times! I wanted so much to have a boyfriend, you know? And I knew you'd be perfect for me, and it's some kind of miracle that you thought the same thing, since you're so much smarter than I am. But I guess you were dumb enough to love me!" Dane smiled smugly over the last. "But I don't see things the way you do, and that's not going to change. You're asking me to step aside, and I can't do that. I figure...I figure my shadow has always got to be between you and bad stuff, you know? It's what I was made to do."

"That's not t-true," Noel rasped. He reached out and cupped the back of Dane's neck, shaking him gently. "You're a wonderful artist."

But Dane's dark eyes were relentless, killing Noel. "That's only, like, half the coin, Noel. We both know I'm more than that. I'm a boxer and I'm going to spar again, and I'm going to fight sometimes. And if you can't live with me, if you need to go back to your father's big house, then I understand."

Noel watched Dane climb to his feet and pull on his T-shirt. He felt numb, like Dane—his gentle Dane—had shoved him away.

Dane hesitated at the doorway like the last thing he wanted was to walk away.

Watching him, Noel scrubbed his eyes, but fresh tears stung, the pain singing in his throat. Oh God. He was losing Dane. How could he lose him? He was losing Dane.

"Whatever happens to me, it don't matter so much. All that matters is I love you, Noel."

Noel shook his head. Why couldn't he get through to Dane? Why were they getting further away from each other with every heartbeat? "You heard what the

doctor said. The longer you leave it... Dane, you have to deal with your eye, with the cranial pressure."

"Yeah, one thing at a time," Dane said. "I'm not unconscious or dead or blind...yet." He gave a little laugh as he walked out of the room. "So it's all good."

Chapter Nine

“That word—it’s gone off my chest,” Sean told Dane. He fiddled with his hospital bracelet. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and continued hoarsely. “Well, they say it is. I can’t...”

“You want me maybe to look for you?” Dane asked gently. “I won’t faint or anything if it looks bad.”

Sean smiled, white teeth gleaming. He had a nice smile. Dane could see why Ally liked him so much.

“I think it’s all covered up with shit, but thanks, Dane.” Sean swallowed. “I’m, uh, glad I got to meet you. Ally says...”

“Ally’s a good kid, you know?” Dane cocked his head. “He’s my fighter.”

“So he wasn’t shitting me about you training him when he texted me? That’s for real?”

“Yeah, and just to make things crystal, which is how I like it, that’s all it is between us. I’m a married man almost.”

Sean played with his hospital blanket. “I have no claim on him.”

“Funny, that’s not how I think he feels. You two really remind me of Romeo and Juliet, which is a play about a couple of unhappy kids just in case you haven’t seen it. Noel took me to see it at the university. Except I guess you’re both Romeo, but you know, it’s kind of exhausting to watch it play out. Maybe you feel that way too, so don’t walk away when you find some sunshine, you know what I’m saying? Ally, he cares about you.

“And as for the...scar, I can ask Noel here if he’d talk to the doctor again for you,” Dane said, looking over his shoulder at Noel, who was leaning against the open doorway to the private room. “Just to make sure.”

“It’s just... It feels like it’s still there,” Sean confessed.

Dane sobered. “Yeah. Sean, it might feel that way for...I don’t know exactly. It might always feel like it’s there.”

Sean’s eyes widened. “No one admits that! They all say with time, blah-fucking-blah.”

Dane shook his head. “Yeah, I know, and they want it to be true, you know? But I know what it’s like, Narone cornering you...” He breathed through the smash of impact he relived, the fist hitting his eye. He’d gotten pretty good at changing the channel when he had a flashback, but his body would always carry Narone.

Noel hadn’t known what to do, where to go, so of course, he’d followed his Dane like a moon caught in orbit. He listened to the conversation between Dane and Sean, the words comforting and normal, a surface he could cling to.

“I’ll be going home soon,” Sean told Dane.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Dane said. “You and me was maybe gonna be roommates.”

“Huh?”

“They got to patch me up sometime soon on account of my eye, it don’t see so good sometimes.”

Sean chewed his lip. “I’m sorry. From when you were a fighter?”

“Yeah. Turns out the human body is kind of fragile,” Dane said, flexing his bicep and cocking a rueful eyebrow. “Even mine.”

“But you promised you’d keep Ally safe,” Sean began.

“And I will, I swear,” Dane said, reaching out and squeezing Sean’s shoulder. “Just remember when you get better, you can visit the gym for some training. Anytime.”

“Training...” Sean grimaced. Then his brown eyes narrowed. “Ohhhh. Ally...”

“Yeah, he’s what you might call a *special attraction* at Charlie’s Gym,” Dane teased. “You can always find him there.”

* * *

Gilbert looked over his shoulder at Dane as he settled next to Noel in the back of the limo.

“I’m okay, Gilbert,” Dane said. “Don’t you worry.”

“You are not okay!” Noel looked out the window. He and Dane were sitting in opposite corners, not knit loosely together the way they usually were. “Please, don’t lie to him. He...cares about you, and it’s not fair.”

“I wasn’t... I just don’t see things the way you do,” Dane said. “I told you it’s sunny-side up because I’m walking and talking.”

“It’s never been more clear that we see things differently.” Noel gripped his cane.

“Yeah, you used to like that.” Dane rubbed the side of his head. “So you gonna pack when we get to Charlie’s?”

Noel swung his head around so he could stare at Dane, who swallowed. He looked like he was working himself up to take a fist to the jaw.

“No, I’m not,” Noel muttered.

“Oh. Oh, that’s...” Dane played with the microfiber. “That’s nice.”

“I’m not running this time, Dane. This is not just your fight, even if you don’t see that.” Noel looked away. He wanted to curse Dane. He wanted to hurt him, smash him to his knees with words. He closed his eyes, trembling, the hand on the cane all that kept him anchored.

How dare Dane not have the surgery! Didn’t he see that...? God, what would Noel do if he...? *No, don’t think of that. Please. It won’t, it can’t happen.* Noel exhaled, trying to calm himself. But the cane in his hand, his twisted leg said that a body could be broken despite all the wishing in the world. Noel’s injuries had

become his axis, the thing that on the most basic level, like the weather, defined his days. Some days he just hurt. No reason, just pain, so that all he wanted was to soak in their tub. And other days he felt like he could run with Dane.

He'd never wanted this for his Dane.

He knew that in the first starburst of attraction to Dane, he'd loved having that big, healthy body under his command. He'd loved that Dane had wanted him—a cripple. It made him feel like a conqueror; possessing someone like Dane proved him a desirable lover, not just a man hiding timidly in the library.

But this wasn't about him, about how he felt with Dane on his arm. This was fear that the man he loved would feel even a tenth of the pain Noel lived with.

Not him. Not his beautiful Dane.

Let him go out for his road work. Let him eat eight pancakes when I can barely manage one. Let me trace the outrageously cut muscles of his back, his firm, hard ass, with my fingers, my tongue.

From the driver's seat, Gilbert let out a sigh. "Mr. Trent and I will have towels on hand if either of you two wants to take a time-out." The glass slid up, leaving Noel and Dane alone.

Noel didn't speak again, and Dane looked out his window as if afraid to look in Noel's direction.

* * *

At Charlie's Gym, Noel paused at the elevator, waiting with Gilbert to ride up to the apartment level. Dane watched him, his jaw tightening even as Alphonse tied a glove around his left fist. It felt good. It felt like he couldn't have spent hours in the hospital to wait for a big fat zero on his brownouts. He knew they were getting worse. Didn't need a doctor to tell him that much.

He also didn't want to be the man who came out of surgery maybe unable to do shit like swallow or speak or run his hands through Noel's hair, hear him grunt as he pressed inside...

His heart was pounding as Alphonse helped him put on a second glove. He'd go in the ring after he warmed up, and he'd spar. He was rusty, so he was going to be clumsy, but it would be beautiful, every moment beautiful because it might be the last one.

This was like before he'd met Noel. He'd lived for the times he'd pushed himself, never knowing if he'd come out on top. He'd stuffed those feelings down inside himself, but they had rested, uneasy.

It was like he'd woken up to the man he was again.

Only question was...could Noel live with that man?

Noel stared back at Dane across the length of the gym, at the gloves on his big hands, and then he walked into the elevator, turning his back on Dane.

Dane squeezed his eyes shut. *It hurt*. But this was better than what he might be feeling in a few short weeks, which could be nothing. Who knew?

* * *

Dane faced Ramon, the twenty-year-old current champ of Charlie's Gym. He'd won five out of six matches lately. He was hot stuff, the man everyone wanted to meet.

Holding Ramon's dark eyes and seeing the sweat roll down from his forehead, the gloves up, his gaze hammering Dane's through his helmet, Dane felt that moment of connection light him up.

Aware of his protégé, Ally, watching, Dane narrated, "It all starts with what you might call your mental attitude. You have been here before on this ground, and you have to remember how you made it yours."

Ramon playfully batted at him, and Dane ducked away, laughing. Sweat broke out on his own forehead, his bare chest. Oh, man, Ramon was going easy on him! He decided he didn't have a problem with that, since part of him was saying it had been too long, and he'd lost the stuff, so he had to fight that part of himself as well as Ramon.

Ramon brought the fight to him suddenly. One-two-three—footwork perfect, balance perfect. Dane hit the ropes, but then he bounced back, forcing himself to counter. *Now, now*. Moving, blocking, doing a circuit, and checking Ramon out face-to-face, which was a very different thing from watching as a spectator.

“You know how you and Gilbert play chess sometimes?” Dane danced around, still sizing Ramon up, really meeting him for the first time. “Boxing’s like that. You have to decide how you want to play it. If it’s a long match, you have to hold on to as much of your strength as you can so you can finish your man.” He thought of his match with Narone and how he’d played it. Only he’d almost not come out on the other end. “If you’re doing something short like a sparring match, then you can be a little flashy, see, and you should try to be on the offensive as much as you can.” He moved his feet forward, swinging, ducking, laughing, because this was fun!

“Boxing is a bit like dancing with your guy,” Dane continued. Ramon was smiling at him now. He wanted to swat Dane, Dane could tell, but he was having a good time. “Except you don’t want to move together, you want your war dance to outmatch his, see. And this is where you need to memorize your footwork, need to have your steps be a part of who you are, so if you get clocked”—Ramon smacked him, and Dane let out a deep breath. *Ow*.—“you can keep on dancing.”

Dane and Ramon sped up, circling faster, and Dane just caught glimpses of Ally’s anxious face, turned up to watch along with the other guys’ in the gym.

Faster and faster, so that he was almost dizzy, almost swept up in the music of his feet and his beating heart, in the eyes of his opponent, wishing him down.

They bumped, collided, swatted, countered, smashed... Blood ran from his bottom lip, and he was smiling.

Ramon came in for the kill, pounding Dane’s shoulder, hitting his ribs, but then Dane was inside, and he bought the pain back, delivered, watched the moment when Ramon faltered.

Pow! He struck, and Ramon fell back, lifting his gloves to signal he was done.

Panting, Dane looked down at Ally...and Noel?

He felt a hundred feet tall suddenly, seeing his boyfriend down here. Noel never watched him spar!

He licked his lips, trying to concentrate on what he was passing on to Ally and not on Noel's eyes on him. Oh, man. As long as he'd known Noel, he'd wanted him to be a part of it, to be proud. "Always take advantage of your guy's weakness. With Ramon, he didn't expect me to be as strong as I was, so I surprised him."

Ramon laughed, shaking his head, which was wet and hair curly, dripping with perspiration. "You're still pretty good for an old man, Dane!"

"Yeah, yeah," Dane said, smiling back as he watched Ramon exit the ring.

When he looked back at Ally, Noel was still there. He didn't look exactly happy and his arms were crossed, but he was there.

"This is not just your fight," Dane remembered Noel telling him on the ride home.

* * *

A week later, Dane woke up on the couch in their loft at a touch on his arm. He sat up, a little groggy. He'd been working out twice as hard as before, which was saying something. But just putting on muscle—that was really only half the game. You had to put in your time playing or paying in the sparring ring. He wasn't a fighter otherwise.

"Hey, it's Noel," he croaked, turning and looking at the little illuminated clock he had on the coffee table along with Blackie. Noel had been real nice about letting him have visitation rights with their goldfish. When Dane's fingers weren't too swollen from doing his time in the ring, he did watercolors of Blackie, of his long fins and the way he glided through his bowl in full sail like a Spanish galleon. He was hoping that it would be enough to beef up his portfolio so he made the grade this semester. Fortunately, most students were left to do their work independently in the third year, so he only had two lectures a week.

“You all right?” he asked, feeling concern for Noel as usual. Was his leg hurting him? They hadn’t talked much since the day Dane had gone for tests at the hospital, though Noel had watched him spar, his face hiding his thoughts so Dane didn’t know if he was still really mad at him or not. He’d also spent a lot of time closeted in Dane’s office with his investigator. He wasn’t giving up looking for Narone.

Dane just felt in his bones that it wouldn’t be that easy, since what in his life had been? But he didn’t share that with Noel. He didn’t want to set him off again. Right now they were aware of each other, like opponents in the ring, watching but not making any moves.

Well, until tonight.

“I need something from you,” Noel said, his eyes glittering behind his glasses.

Dane blinked. At eleven forty-eight? It could only be one thing he could think of. He cleared his throat, but his voice still came out sounding hoarse. “Oh yeah, what would that be?”

“You,” Noel said. “Get dressed. Now. Gilbert’s going to drive us somewhere.”

Dane’s heart started pounding. His daddy wasn’t giving anything away, but when he wanted Dane to go somewhere, it always meant they’d have sex, and Noel hadn’t touched him since that time under the big bubble where the Tasmanian fern and the koi lived.

* * *

Gilbert opened the door for Dane. He was wearing his formal chauffeur’s uniform, which he only wore for special occasions. Dane licked his lips, seeing that and the slight smile on Gilbert’s face.

Wherever Noel was taking him, Gilbert knew.

Tugging the collar of his charcoal silk-and-cotton turtleneck that he wore with jeans, Dane got into the limo. He found Noel sitting there, contemplative but not giving off that irritated buzz like a pissed-off bumblebee stuck in a jar.

But he didn't look at Dane, and Dane understood that he was Noel's tonight. The thought excited him so much that he had to adjust his jeans, which suddenly felt too tight over his hard cock. *Daddy*, he wanted to moan. He wanted to kneel in front of Noel and hump his leg, if Noel commanded it. He loved it when Noel made him do that. He felt bad and slutty and so sexy, like he was Noel's pet, his kitty who lay on his back and spread himself and let himself get fucked over and over, whenever his daddy wanted.

The corner of Noel's lips lifted like he could read Dane all too well, but he still didn't speak as the car pulled into late-night traffic.

* * *

They came to a stop at the same Lal Salon where Noel had offered him the botched massage. It was lit outdoors only by Maui torches, the two-story building a dark, exotic silhouette, blocking the stars.

Noel opened the front door with a key.

"I've reserved it for the evening," Noel said, looking at Dane, who wandered over to the bridge and leaned down to take in the floating half shells with tea lights and orchids floating over the koi.

"Do you remember where the shower and changing room is?"

Dane nodded, practically squirming with his arousal.

Noel looked down at the front of Dane's jeans. "You'll be relieved to know I want you to shower and then remove everything, so you should be more comfortable. And Dane...?"

Dane paused on his trip to the changing room, staring wide-eyed at Noel, waiting for his word, his law. Would Noel make him lie on the floor and suck his bare toes as if he were sucking his cock?

"Kneel at my feet without speaking when you return, please." Noel put his hands in his pockets, looking young and slim with his dark blond hair in his eyes.

* * *

Dane showered in no time and somehow managed not to touch the huge woody he was sporting. He knew that Noel would know if he did, because Dane would come. Just the sound of Noel's cool voice ordering him around... Man, Dane loved belonging to him. He made him so hot, and it felt so good that Noel was taking him over again. They were at a standoff with the boxing, but Dane missed being Noel's in the bedroom.

* * *

When Dane returned, he saw there were other men waiting, sharing wine with his Noel. He felt a hot wash of jealousy rise, so he almost forgot he was bare assed with his prick standing out in front of him like a flagpole. When all eyes swung to him, he remembered at the last moment to kneel in front of Noel.

Noel sipped some white wine and caressed Dane's hair, looking down at him while Dane looked up, feeling like he was staring at the moon or something. Noel glowed, silver blond in the dim light. And he looked like he enjoyed Dane was nude and on his knees.

Dane shifted, becoming even more excited, so his pulse beat hard in his neck. Pleasing Noel was his number one. Oh, man. He loved him. He had been so afraid that Noel would want to take his ass back to the animal shelter or something for not being someone he could live with anymore.

"He's beautiful, your pet," praised a familiar voice.

Dane blinked, seeing Master Nathan was there. The tall brunet was wearing black leather pants and no shirt with an amethyst choker, his dark eyes on Dane. Kneeling at his feet was Michael, his red hair looking tousled as if from Nathan's hands. He was Nathan's longtime lover, and Dane noticed Michael was wearing eyeliner to accentuate his gray eyes. Dane stared, fascinated. He wasn't sure he could put that stuff on. Probably the closest he'd ever get was when he was sporting a couple of shiners.

"Thanks," Dane and Noel said at the same time.

Michael grinned, giving Nathan a saucy look. He was also nude, which Dane guessed was nice since it meant he wasn't alone, only being nude didn't bother Dane so much. He was used to having his body sized up, used to commanding attention in the ring. And he could see that Noel's friends thought he was pretty hot from the way they kept staring at him and whispering.

He noticed Michael was wearing a rose-quartz choker that Dane figured Nathan had made just for him. Dane still had some pieces that were supposed to balance his and Noel's chakras or something. Except maybe they weren't working so good lately. Maybe he should take them out of the kitchen drawer?

Dane and Noel had met Nathan and Michael when they were first dating. Nathan sold all kinds of fun toys as well as his jewelry, and since then they'd gone to a commitment ceremony for the couple. Noel had liked it, but Dane had never imagined stuff like that, maybe because he spent all those years in the gym. Noel often said the atmosphere there was not conducive to romance.

"I brought the garnets you asked for," Nathan told Noel. He was acting a bit like Dane and Michael weren't there, but Dane knew that was part of the game. Noel did it sometimes too, but Dane was never fooled. He knew he was always Noel's number one when he knelt for him.

Dane watched, lips parted, as Nathan handed Noel a spill of dark, blood-colored stones. There was a round rose quartz in the center of each piece.

Noel tapped his bare shoulder, and Dane lifted up, closing his eyes and enjoying the feel of Noel's hands on him, putting the choker around his neck and then stroking it and his skin in approval.

When he opened his eyes, Noel was smiling at him, the burning light softened, like water reflecting sunlight. It was the love shining through the passion, Dane figured.

"Since you were completely clear that you didn't want your boy sucking anyone else off..." Nathan drawled.

Dane's eyes saucered, as he heard that. No way! He couldn't do that! It wouldn't bother him so much—he'd been with lots of guys, and though he'd wanted it to mean somethin', it never had until his Noel had wanted him—but he knew Noel was on the possessive side. It wouldn't be a fun game, but something that would hurt him. If Noel wanted to try that, Dane would have to call it off.

"This is a carving of a lingam, a phallus from India," Nathan said, handing Noel something oval-shaped, smooth gray stone but with a red tip. "I thought it might work as a filler." He looked amused as he said the last word. "You can use it tonight."

Noel nodded, running his fingers over the stone before his gaze went to Dane. "Dane, I have this fantasy about watching you suck off another man while I watch..."

Dane held his breath, but he knew his eyes were shouting.

Noel laughed. "I said a fantasy. I don't think... It's hot when I think of it, but then I wonder if you might like another man's...equipment more than mine." Noel's gaze dropped. "I don't think I can go through with my original idea."

Dane reached up and rubbed Noel's hip, the one that tilted a little on account it held more of his weight.

Noel smiled at him. "I asked Nathan for ideas, and he came up with this." He held the stone out on the palm of his hand so Dane could get a better look. "I want you to suck it while I watch. Can you do that?"

Dane flushed, his penis flexing in response to the idea. That felt better. They needed a net because this thing they had was like his favorite glass in the kitchen cupboard that Noel had bought him in Murano, Italy. It could shatter, and Dane never, ever wanted that to happen.

He couldn't speak, so when Noel put it to his lips, he closed his eyes and moaned, taking the red tip into his mouth.

"Lick it," Noel ordered softly.

Dane obeyed, taking his time, running his tongue over the stone as if he were seeking out the wiggly veins that traveled up Noel's cock.

Noel's chest rose and fell rapidly, his face flushed, and when he pulled the stone from Dane's mouth and offered it to Nathan, Dane understood. This was how he was going to suck off another man. He wouldn't actually suck real dick, so it was safe for him and Noel.

Noel stepped back, panting now as Dane was panting. Aware of all eyes on him, of Noel's eyes on him, Dane rooted for the phallic-shaped stone, taking it in his mouth as Nathan held it sternly. There was a hush in the room. Most importantly, Dane felt his boyfriend's gaze like a warm hand running over his bare skin, possessing him, urging him on. Noel was as excited as he was.

He opened his eyes and began to lick the stone like he was teasing Noel, the way he did sometimes on weekend mornings when they started out lazy, Dane with his head between Noel's legs, sucking him until his daddy commanded him on his back or on four legs so he could get inside Dane.

"You love sucking Noel, Dane?" Nathan asked, raising a brow.

"Yeah," Dane admitted. Then thinking maybe Noel's fantasy needed more, he added, "It's all I'm good for, sucking Daddy's cock or taking it up the ass."

"Dane..." Noel whispered, and Dane knew that his naughty words had lit Noel up. Noel took the stone back from Nathan, and Dane saw perspiration wet on Noel's upper lip and forehead. "I wanted these men, other patrons of the salon, to see how much you love me," Noel said, but what Dane heard was *I need to know you love me the same as before. Because you're changing, and I get scared.*

Now that Noel had the lingam again, Dane took the stone deep inside his mouth the way he would Noel. Held in Noel's grip, it was an extension of his partner, his daddy. He loved that Noel would never share him, that he was too precious.

"Dane!" Noel let the stone fall, wet and gleaming. He left it on the bridge like some kind of statement. Dane stared at it as Noel moved behind him. He heard the

rustle of Noel's clothing and then felt Noel's fingers gently brush his opening. Dane pushed himself up, his body strong, his muscles bulging. There were several stifled gasps from the watching men as if they liked how Dane looked right before he was mounted.

But all that mattered was Noel. Noel's fingers rubbing lubricant inside him, a little too chilly so that Dane jumped, but then there was Noel's hard, hot cock, and Dane shoved back and his daddy took him, took what was his.

Dane floated on want like the floating flowers below the bridge, knowing when he came, it would be like a rocket going off. He held still, taking it, watching his and Noel's urgent shadows thrown against the wall.

They grunted, grinding together, Noel's hand covering the back of Dane's, Noel's forehead sweaty where it rubbed against Dane's thick neck.

"Daddy, I give you what you need," Dane whispered. "If you need to fuck me in front of a lot of other hot guys, it turns me on."

"Do you see how they look at you, Dane? You're magnificent like a beautiful beast. And I'm not so...magnificent, but I'm the one you'll get on your knees for. I'm the one you can't wait to have inside you."

Noel's hand wrapped like a collar around the necklace he'd given Dane. The thrust of his penis, in and out, so that Dane's back was slick now, his muscles trembling and standing out.

"It's like that shape-shifter romance you read to me, remember? Where the guy from another planet turned into a big, sexy cat-dude whenever his boyfriend wanted to have sex with him," Dane rasped.

"You're my big, powerful cat," Noel groaned. The pupils in his eyes seemed huge with hunger. "I need to fuck you. I need to fuck your tight ass. I need everyone here to see how hard you are, how you love having me up you, how you submit."

Noel creamed inside him with a sob, clinging for a moment, and Dane felt everything inside his Noel singing inside his chest like they were one body with two souls. He guessed that was corny, but that's how it felt.

When Noel sagged, falling out of his body, Dane got up and lifted him into his arms, then carried him back toward the changing rooms and showers, leaving their audience of wide eyes and whispers behind.

Noel looped his arms around Dane. “Crazy, I guess you thought that was crazy!” he said.

Dane put Noel down on one of the towel-draped tables, kneeling again at his feet, but this time to comfort him, so he’d know Dane was there. Would always be there, looking up at his sunshine.

“You worried about bein’ politically correct, Noel?” Dane prodded. He was smiling. “Nah, it ain’t so different from putting on a show in the ring. Probably I could make porn movies, only I’d have to star in them only with you, I guess.”

Noel gave a choked laugh. His eyelashes were wet as he cupped Dane’s cheek. “I’m so worried about losing you. I just needed...”

“Oh, man, me too!” Dane groaned.

“Dane, come up here.” Noel patted the table, and Dane climbed on top, wary of the whole thing crashing down. He wasn’t exactly a lightweight. But then Noel acted like it was their bed back at home, moving down so that he faced Dane’s aching cock. When he took it into his mouth, Dane groaned, “Oh, Daddy. I love you so much. I’d give you my kidney, you know, if you ever needed it. But this is so much nicer.”

Noel laughed, which, since he was sucking Dane, felt...soooooo good.

Chapter Ten

“A water tower?” Ally asked, huffing from the long climb up the fire escape that ran from the bottom of Charlie’s Gym.

Dane wasn’t huffing. And though his eyes were bloodshot like he hadn’t gotten a lot of sleep the night before, he kept smiling.

Ally was not really a morning person. And it was pissing rain, so he tried not to find this outing irritating based on those two things. Plus, Dane was totally getting some. It made Ally want to see Sean. Soon. But he knew Sean needed some time to heal before he maybe came to visit Ally in secret.

He adjusted his glasses and folded his arms. “Okay, I’ll bite, boss. Tell me what this is all about?”

Dane gave a little laugh as if he had a gift to unwrap. “The two apartments above Charlie’s Gym are full,” he said. “You know, me and Noel and Mr. Trent and Gilbert live there.”

“I know.” Ally tried not to roll his eyes.

“Well, it seems that Noel and me never planned for having anyone extra, but now we do, so I was thinking maybe the water tower could be...renovated or something.”

“Isn’t it, uh, full of water?” Ally blinked.

“Nope.”

“So you’re going to make some kind of...place out of it?”

“Not a place. Your room. I got the idea when I was having a cappuccino this morning with Mr. Trent. Noel put in this round Italian kitchen for him, and Gilbert

and I thought if they can do a round kitchen, why not a round room with a bed and a kitchen and stuff?”

Ally swallowed. “But I’m just... I never even told you my real last name.”

“So tell me now.” Dane shrugged, walking over to the tower with its peaked black roof and running a hand over the weathered blue boards. “We’ll have to punch a hole through the roof and put in a spiral staircase, I figure, that goes down into the loft level.”

Ally just looked at him.

“What? I renovated with Noel before, you know. I like talking to the tradespeople. It’s a very creative experience.”

“My name is Albert Drummond,” Ally said.

Dane folded his arms. “I bet you hate Albert.”

“I do, yeah.”

“So Ally Cat it is.”

“Dane, I told you I’m not a little kid.” Ally groaned, but he couldn’t help smiling at Dane. What a dork.

“No, you’re a young man with, you know, young-man stuff. Like what do you think you want to major in at the university?”

Ally hurt, wanting something so much. Like the way he wanted Sean. “Noel told you I was looking through that stuff he bought home? I can’t afford—”

“You have a job working for me.”

“And it’ll pay for me to live here and go to uni?” Ally shook his head. “Dane, that’s too much.”

“Hey, I have to have some surgery real soon,” Dane said, looking away to study the not-so-inspiring view of more water towers and grimy buildings stacked like gray and brown Legos unending.

Heart thudding, Ally stared at Dane. “That thing the other day, when you couldn’t see stuff?”

“Yeah, you know, kind of serious.” Dane still wouldn’t look at him.

“The headaches, the heavy glasses you wear sometimes...?”

“Yeah. So I’d really appreciate it if you’d do road work with me and train and stuff, because who knows, maybe that will help? Charlie taught me to keep in top shape if I have what you call *a challenge* to deal with. I figure this surgery qualifies.

“And Noel...I’ll need your promise you’ll look out for him. He gets really happy talking to you about courses at school. Makes me feel bad sometimes that I don’t have what it takes, but even if I did, probably I’d rather work construction. Just made that way, I guess. But you’re smart the way he is, and it takes his mind off stuff.”

“You’re not going to... Um, I mean, when you say this is serious...?”

Dane raised a brow, his big arms crossed, looking like a freaking superhero. Nonetheless, Ally felt something cold poke his gut. “I lost my family, or they told me to get lost.”

“We’ll never do that—tell you to go away,” Dane promised. “Seeing as we’re gay, it would be like...that glass-house deal, right?”

But Ally noticed he didn’t say he himself wouldn’t go missing.

Dane reached out and squeezed Ally’s tense shoulder, and Ally allowed it for a moment before they retraced their steps back off the roof. “So what color you think you’ll want the walls?” Dane asked as they headed back down the fire escape, the metal vibrating with a dull bell *thud* under their feet.

“I always liked green.”

“Oh, green is great! It’s a color that’s not cold or hot, you know. It’s actually pretty neutral, and I like it because green is life.” Dane got to the bottom of the landing and waited for Ally. “So you want to go do some road work with me?”

Ally didn’t like running much. He did like the pancakes, though—and Dane.

“Okay, I could do that.”

“That’s great.” Dane stretched his left leg against the brick wall. He was wearing shorts and nothing else. His muscles looked like topography to Ally: hills, ravines, and mountains. Shit, the guy was built like a truck.

So that meant that he’d be okay. Being healthy like that, it had to help like Dane said. But Ally would go with him, keep him company for the road work, just to make sure.

* * *

“They found him!”

Noel blinked, putting aside his glasses. He’d been going over the books for the gym with Mr. Trent, who worried that after his stroke he wasn’t as sharp with numbers as he used to be.

Truthfully, Noel wasn’t good at numbers either since his focuses were history and literature, but he liked spending time with the older man, and it helped take his mind off things with Dane.

Last night had been wonderful. Searing. But his anxiety over his boxer putting off his surgery seemed to rise like today’s cloudy sun.

Now he stared at Jerry.

“Can you possibly mean Narone is in custody?” He was afraid to hope. He and Jerry had been scouring the city, looking at all Narone’s former acquaintances, desperate to find the ex-fighter before he could come after Dane.

Grinning, Jerry nodded, his eyes showing the weariness of the search. “He’s been staying in his aunt’s apartment. She’s out of town in Florida, but there’s no mistake. We’ve got him, Noel!”

Noel squeezed out a pent-up breath. “You mean, I actually did it? I found Narone, stopped him...?” he whispered.

Mr. Trent gripped Noel’s hand, looking at him with compassionate eyes. “Noel, does this mean our Dane can get the help he needs?”

"It does," Noel confirmed hoarsely. "Oh God, Jerry!" He held out his hand, and Jerry shook it. "Thank you!"

He got to his feet, looking around for his cane, wishing that he didn't have to bother with it. But he did until he got back on a regular workout routine, which he had decided he would resume again as soon as possible. "I need to find Dane!"

"He just left with Ally for his road work," Mr. Trent told him. "They always take the same route to the pancake house this time of the morning."

"I know," Noel said. "I know just where they'll be."

* * *

"Jeez, Dane, you really poured it on this morning!" Ally griped. He shook out his hands, which were trembling, and then adjusted his glasses, which were actually steamy.

But he felt good, which was weird. He'd hated gym at school.

His pulse was hammering in his throat as he watched Dane bend gracefully and work on the laces of his left running shoe. Dane's hair was tangled and sweaty, but he wasn't staggering around like a drunk, which was how Ally probably looked.

"You go on ahead," Dane called, smiling. "I know you can smell those pancakes. Maybe order me a stack of eight with strawberry sauce and whipped cream. Yeah. I'm just going to stretch and cool down."

It was the same pattern they followed every morning, but Ally hesitated, looking back at Dane. The talk of surgery had freaked him out. "You sure you'll be okay?"

"Hey, Ally Cat, don't be a mother hen!" Dane teased. "You'll live longer."

Ally rolled his eyes, still shaking his head as he walked into the next alley. The pancake house was just ahead beyond some Dumpsters—

Something slammed into his gut, hard. Wheezing, gripping his stomach, Ally looked into dark eyes burning with a crazy kind of amusement. He tried to call out to Dane—

God!

The baseball bat swung, and he smashed into brick.

* * *

Dane frowned, scratching his unshaven jaw as he caught some racket from the alley ahead. Man, he was still feeling all...glowy. If that was okay for a guy to feel. He hoped maybe if he shaved and showered, he could talk Noel into bed...

He followed Ally into the narrow space adjacent to the restaurant.

"Hey, I'm not so dumb! You got me talking about pancakes and I forgot to get you stretchin'. You gotta do that," Dane called. "Hey, Ally."

Ally was on the cracked asphalt, partially blocked from Dane by a shadow looming over him, stocky, muscled, with massive, tattooed arms and wearing a black wifebeater and jeans.

"D-Dane!" Ally rasped.

"Uhhhh!" Dane hit Narone like a linebacker, shoving him to the other side of the alley.

Fists balled, he flicked a glance back at Ally.

"Dane, man, don't let him...!" Ally wheezed. His arms wrapped protectively around his ribs. His glasses were broken, lying in front of him in two halves. He groped for them.

"Don't you worry!" Dane pointed at Narone, who snarled at him, bristling for a fight. "He ain't hurting you."

"Got another little woman now, Dane?" Narone taunted, hefting the bat so he could swing it freely. "Can't say I get why you'd give up tits, but there is something to be said for making a guy take it."

Dane's heart thumped large in fear; his body seemed to lean forward all on its own, humming like an engine tuning up to full power.

Narone licked his lips. "I can't wait to try that little blond sometime."

“You don’t touch Noel!” Dane growled, sweat dripping off him like hot rain. “I’ll kill you if you even look at him!”

He held Narone’s gaze, wanting to hit him, to the body, to the chin, but he waited. Charlie had made sure he knew how to wait, to see the shift in Narone’s eyes signaling action. He didn’t know what Narone’s tell was, but his body recognized it, and Dane charged, sweeping a battered metal round trash lid off the alley floor.

“Take the fight to him. Take the pain to him.”

Narone swung the bat, striking Dane’s shield, almost knocking it from his grip.

Dane danced back, light on his feet like he and Narone were in the ring. Narone pushed with his eyes, with what lived in his gut, a warrior’s confidence grappling with Dane’s confidence so that Dane felt all the holes inside him like a rotten fishnet pulled from the water. He’d only just returned to the ring. Could he stand?

Narone swung.

The baseball bat struck, leaving a deep concussion in the metal of Dane’s frail shield, skittering over it in a scary sound before smashing shards into the brick next to Dane’s head.

He ducked as it tracked him again, snaring his shield so it exploded from his hand, hitting the alley wall like a crazed Frisbee.

“No, Dane!” Ally yelled.

“Now I finish it!” Narone crowed.

Dane shifted back, panting, locked into the groove, taking in his opponent, everything about his opponent. His smell, his bared teeth, how he was stacked with muscle like a skyscraper, but not as lean as Dane. Dane had a sudden intuitive flash that it was probably because Narone had been lifting weights; he hadn’t been skipping rope or running or sparring.

So he wouldn’t be as fast as Dane, maybe...

Dane let himself sag against the wall like he was played out, and the bat followed, missing his skull by inches. It caught a plastic lamp dangling from one of the Dumpsters, so that pink pieces of acrylic sprayed both men. Narone flinched, and Dane grabbed hold of the meaty part of the bat, using Narone's momentum to yank it into his orbit, then throwing the stub of wood over his shoulder.

They huffed, trembling like attack dogs, staring at each other.

Now it was man-to-man.

I'm ready. I'm ready for this.

He smiled at Narone.

Narone took a step back, not the bull who'd mauled him in the ring, unrelenting. "Didn't need that!" Narone spit, yanking a hunting knife from a pocket in his jeans, hefting it.

Narone jabbed. Dane fell into a cartwheel, arching away from the blade. He snagged some plastic bags and barreled them back at Narone, who skidded over the slippery surface of one.

"You fucking cunt! Come here and get it, Dane!"

Narone kneeling was Narone at a disadvantage. "*Take the fight to him.*" Dane grabbed Narone's knife hand by the wrist. Muscled arms shaking, Dane locked eyes with Narone's hate.

Narone fell back suddenly, snatched Dane's trash-can shield, and winged it at Ally.

"You leave him alone!" Dane barked.

"Stupid fuck. You stupid fuck." Narone crooned. "That's your tell, fudge packer. You had to take care of your little girl."

Dane's fingers grazed the blade buried in his side.

Ally screamed, "No, Dane!"

Dane hauled back and punched Narone, forcing himself to ignore the stud sticking out of his skin, hitting the ex-fighter's jaw so Narone lifted with the punch.

Sweet! Take him down!

Dane hit him again. And again to the body. Shaking his head to clear his grainy vision. Had to finish Narone now, right now.

Narone clocked him, his big fist hitting Dane's bad eye.

Dane collapsed, grabbing his skull. *No, oh no*. Brownout: color bleeding into sepia. *Sepia* was a word he hadn't known two years ago. Noel had given him sepia. Noel and Charlie sent him to art school, and he'd met sepia there.

Narone laughing. "That still hurts, huh, Dane?"

"I hope this hurts!"

Noel. Noel's voice.

Ears ringing, Dane looked up.

Noel hit Narone in the head with his cane.

Narone reeled back.

"No!" he croaked. "You fucking little queer—"

Noel's face like stone. No mercy. He hit Narone again. And again.

"N-Noel..." Dane whispered. Static in his ears... Or was it singing? Or maybe it was a siren.

He fell apart like wet paper. Knees couldn't hold his seesawing weight.

A body against his—a body that he knew, holding him upright. The dark colors were getting heavier like they weighed him down. He looked up through the fading color and saw Noel looking down at him. Noel's blue eyes—now gray eyes—full of tears.

"Hey, sunshine, looking good," Dane said.

Chapter Eleven

Noel sat next to Dane on his hospital bed, gripping his hand.

Dane licked his cracked lips. Noel had put some hand cream on them. He squeezed Noel's hand back, but Noel could feel it wasn't the regular Dane squeeze—the touch of a big, powerful man who was deliberately gentle. Instead the squeeze was like a fading heartbeat.

"So you gonna use my pillow while I'm out of the room?" Dane asked. "Seeing I won't need it, I won't mind."

Noel swallowed. "You knew I did that when we were sleeping apart?"

"Yeah, I used to..." Dane cleared his throat. "I came upstairs sometimes and just watched you sleep. You were actually pretty interesting to watch. Better than TV."

"Oh." Noel leaned his head carefully against Dane's shoulder. They'd stopped the bleeding and stitched him up. Narone's blade hadn't hit anything vital, but the fist to Dane's bad eye had been another story.

Noel's voice dropped to a whisper as he held the dark gaze of his battered warrior. "Dane, I feel like I wasted so much time holding your pillow when it could have been you."

"Yeah, it would have been nice, huh? But anyway, this pillow hasn't had enough time to really smell like me. It kind of smells like bathroom spray, if you really want to know."

"I do. I really want to know...everything," Noel said. "Everything Dane."

"Oh." Dane's eyelashes fell. "That wouldn't take more than ten minutes, Noel!"

"I'm thinking a lifetime." Noel's throat closed, and he brought Dane's swollen hand to his lips, kissing it fervently. "If you'll have me."

Dane blinked. "You mean like a real marriage?"

"I think we have a real marriage." Noel made a rueful sound. "Look how we fought over your going into the ring."

"Oh, that." Dane sagged back against his pillow. "Well, I don't think it will be what you call *an issue* for a while."

"Maybe not. But I won't ever threaten to move out if you want to spar. It's just—"

"Hard for you to watch. I get it."

"Maybe not as much now. I understand the need for a physical response to certain stimuli." Noel's voice was gritty.

"Yeah, you clocked Narone good." Dane grinned. "That was some physical response!"

"Dane." Noel stroked Dane's chest, being careful of the bandages around his middle. "I'm just relieved that Narone's back in jail, and this time he won't be getting out."

"He'll probably want to hide in there to stay safe from you," Dane teased. But his voice sounded tired. His eyes kept closing. "So they're coming soon to give me a shot in the ass, you think?" Dane briefly looked anxious.

"You can't tell me that my fighter is afraid of a needle after you took on Narone with a battered trash-can lid for a knight's shield?"

Dane made a face. "They always hurt more when you watch one going in."

"Yeah, they do," Noel agreed. "Dane, will you make an honest man of me?"

"No, I won't," Dane said, his tone groggy now. He was fading out again. "Noel...what comes back after they go digging around in my head might be somethin'...broken."

Tears burned Noel's eyes. Not now, he told himself. Not while Dane was still here to see them and be distressed. "Whoever comes back will still be Dane."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do." Noel looked at Dane. "Because I know you."

Ally appeared, leaning against the doorway. "Mr. Trent won't go home. Gilbert took him down to the cafeteria for some food with the guys from the gym," he informed them.

"Are you all right?" Dane asked, straightening as he took in the stiff way Ally was holding himself. His glasses were held together with masking tape.

"I have some bruised ribs, no big deal," Ally said. "Just like if I'd been in a real fight."

"You were in a real fight."

"Oh yeah." Ally swallowed. "So you're...having surgery?"

"Yeah."

"They're doing something with your head thing, aren't they?" Ally put his hands in his pockets. "Can't they wait? I mean..."

Noel bent his head.

Dane said, "No, it looks like I got to go in that ring a little earlier than I was thinking."

A nurse appeared, and Dane smiled. "Hey, it's Tom! I can't get used to having a guy nurse. Are you gay too, Tom? I know the guys in Charlie's would say a guy nurse has to be gay, but I don't want to leap to conclusions since that might be, you know, a stereotype."

The brunet nurse blinked, scratching his chest above his chalky greens. "Does that mean you want to date me after you get out, Mr. Connelly?"

Dane blinked. The guy actually looked hopeful. He looked at Noel, who wasn't looking too happy. "No, I can't do that. My heart and, uh, other parts are kind of under a padlock and a chain-link fence. But only because I want it that way."

Tom lifted Dane's blanket aside to give him his shot, and Noel covered Dane's eyes so he couldn't see the needle go in. Was it great to have a boyfriend or what?

"I guess in my case the stereotype is true."

"That's great! I can't wait to tell the guys. Uh..." Dane's enthusiasm dimmed.

The nurse patted Dane's arm gently. "I'm sure you will. I'll be back in a moment to get you with"—he looked Dane over and cocked a brow—"maybe two orderlies."

"Oh yeah. Feel a little..." Noel braced Dane, hanging on as if he wouldn't let go.

Drowning, so he felt like he took a boat out in the blue of Noel's eyes, Dane said, "I got to be honest and say that I think I married you the first time I looked in your eyes."

* * *

Very carefully, two orderlies moved Dane onto a stretcher. After he was settled, he studied Noel and Ally, wanting to remember what they looked like. He tried to think of what to say, but couldn't think of anything. "Bye," he said, waving.

Seeing Noel turn away, carefully smoothing the wrinkles from Dane's pillow, Ally shifted, then gave into the impulse burning under his breastbone.

"Dane Connelly!" The name burst out.

Heads turned in the hospital corridor, and Ally flushed.

"Dane, you're my friend," Ally whispered.

Ally stared after him, holding on to Dane with his eyes. He trailed behind him as long as he could until Dane was rolled down too many corridors and disappeared into an elevator.

Epilogue

Even the limo gleamed white like a prince's ride in Charlie's graffiti-marked alley.

Dane ran a hand over it, giving Gilbert a wide-eyed look. "Did you have the old one painted?" he asked.

Gilbert smiled. "No, Dane. I rented this one for the day."

Dane cupped his hand and bent close to the glass, looking inside to see matching white upholstery and orange blossoms dressing up the interior. He straightened, giving the orange blossom in the lapel of his white tuxedo an anxious glance. It looked a little fuzzy, like the flower was growing mold.

"It's fine, Dane," Gilbert gently reassured him.

"Thanks. I can see stuff far away better," Dane said. His vision was slowly improving, though sometimes he had his bad days when everything was streaky and he got a headache, but the brownouts were gone.

So was the cane he'd used for a while. Noel had been real happy about that, though Dane had teased him that it came in real handy for self-defense.

"Is the groom all ready?" Mr. Trent asked, bringing Sparrow on a leash. The dog was wearing a big white bow. Dane was glad to see him. Dane couldn't believe it, but some people didn't bring their dogs to their weddings! He hadn't exactly known this until one of Noel's friends told him at a fancy luncheon, but Dane had asked what kind of wedding was it if they left one of their best friends behind?

"I don't know if I'm exactly what you call ready, Mr. Trent," Dane confessed. "I never thought...marriage, you know? But then they went and made it legal, so I couldn't say no to Noel."

Gilbert held the door open and whispered, "Have a sip of what's in there to drink. You'll like it."

"Promise?" Dane asked.

"Promise," Gilbert echoed.

"Okay, then. Don't like champagne much."

Mr. Trent got in first with Sparrow, and then Dane climbed in after him. "I feel like...I dunno, Cinderfella or somethin' in this white limo. Except I'm still a big pumpkin, Mr. Trent. And I don't think the makeup Ally put on is helpin'." Dane had done a little bit of a workout in the ring to try to calm his wedding nerves, and he had a shiner.

Mr. Trent reached out and squeezed Dane's cold hand. He could feel it trembling slightly as waves of...stuff moved through him. Dane hadn't expected feeling like this. But he'd never been about to be married before.

"You may find that you like being a married man," Mr. Trent said as if he understood Dane's wild feelings. "It probably seems a corny institution to a young person, but it's nice."

"Yeah?" Dane swallowed. "I'm afraid... All those important people are coming." How would it be about him and Noel? Noel had practically staked out the bridal magazines for months. Man, their recycling had sure doubled, giving Dane a workout every Friday. Clippings, appointments for invitations and cakes, white gold, platinum, honeymoon... Where was the guy he'd asked out for a hot dog?

"Noel wanted to show you off. He's proud of you, proud of how hard you worked to come back for all of us." Mr. Trent swallowed.

"Okay." But Dane felt nervousness pound through his blood, slick his upper lip.

"Hey, hold up!" Ally yelled, running out of the gym. His hair was wild and his new glasses were lopsided, and he had a bit of beard burn around his lips. "You need the rings!" Sean was behind him, not dressed up like Ally was, on account he

couldn't come, but he gave Ally a bashful kiss before watching his lover get into the limo with Dane and Mr. Trent.

"Everything A-OK?" Dane asked.

"Yeah." Ally sighed, running a hand down his white tuxedo. It matched the ones Dane and Mr. Trent were wearing. Dane felt a bit like Mr. Clean, wearing his. "Sean wanted to come, but..."

"Ross will stay with him," Mr. Trent reassured him.

When Ross Moore left prison two months ago, Dane had been waiting outside to offer him a job first thing. Noel had reluctantly come to understand this was Dane's burden; that he had to do what he could to make things right for the kid after Narone had hurt him in his place.

After suffering Narone's abuse, the man was still timid, but even though Dane knew some people were intimidated by his size, which made him sad, Ross was okay around him almost from the start.

Noel said it was good for him to be around someone like Dane, though Dane wasn't exactly sure why that was. But Ross was really great, since sometimes Dane's vision blurred and he couldn't tie his own shoelaces, so Ross did it for him. He used a dressing room that was private with a lock, but if Dane touched his arm, he didn't jump out of his skin. In fact, once when Dane was showing him some moves, Ross had started crying silently so Dane had taken him to his office. When Dane hesitated, not sure what to do, Ross had hugged him and Dane had just held on.

"Maybe one day you and Sean will be doin' this," Dane teased. "Seein' as he practically lives at our gym now when he isn't taking care of those kids."

Ally grimaced. "Nah. Besides, I think I might be in school forever." But the last was said with satisfaction. With Noel's help, Ally had taken some science classes. He had done so well that he had been chosen for a scholarship.

But Dane knew that what made Ally happiest was he'd helped Sean to begin healing. He'd talked his boyfriend into working out with him; Charlie'd always told

Dane that the real gift about going in the ring was meeting yourself and thinking you were not such a bad person.

* * *

They made two stops, the first to pick up the university president, a grizzled man named Ben Hollis with sharp gray eyes who was also dressed up in white. He was a close friend of Noel's and from the beginning had been okay with him and Dane.

"Hey, I'm sparkling so much wearing this I figure I could go over to the old library and clean it up just by walking in," Dane told him.

Ben laughed. "No janitorial work for you today, Dane. How is art school going?"

"I'm catching up," Dane said, pleased. "Only thing I wish is that I could have brought my goldfish today, but Noel said the ride would be unsettling for Blackie."

Ben took a sip from one of the flasks Gilbert had stocked. His eyes widened. "Is this...a Shirley Temple?"

* * *

On their second stop, Dane knelt at Charlie's grave, putting some orange blossoms he'd filched from the limo in front of the marker.

"I didn't think of bringing you flowers, but I don't think you'll care about that much. So even though I don't think you're floating around our bed, I gotta tell you, so far, so good, you know? I don't need Viagra to delight Noel." Dane gave a proud smile, but then it faded and he swallowed. "I'm...kind of scared, getting married. Seems like it'll be really fancy, so I don't know if it's for me." He reached out and grazed a finger over his offering. "I'd ask you to be there, but I know you will be."

* * *

The dome still looked futuristic to Dane as he got out of the limo.

The woolly trees and brush and graffiti had been cleaned up, the path exposed and swept. Now the place was open seven days a week, and people from Noel's university gave lectures on stuff like biodiversity.

Dane hesitated, heart thumping, but then Mr. Trent put his arm through Dane's, and with his friends surrounding him, it wasn't so bad.

By the time they walked through the closed gift shop, decorated for the wedding the same as the limo had been, Dane only wanted to find his Noel.

He craned his neck but paused when Mr. Trent hesitated on the circular gravel path.

"You okay, Mr. Trent? I hope it ain't too hot in here for you."

"No, I'm fine, Dane. I just wanted to tell you...I never had a son to see married," Mr. Trent said, his eyes damp as he held Dane's concerned gaze. "Now I... Now there are two of you."

Dane squeezed his eyes shut and took the old man in his arms.

"I love you, Mr. Trent," he whispered. "If that's okay."

Mr. Trent nodded when Dane pulled away, face working. In another moment, he put his arm through Dane's, and they were walking again, the others trailing behind them.

They circled around the Tasmanian fern, which was one big mother of a tree, and there was Noel, his Noel, and he looked—Dane swallowed—even better than that time shortly after Dane'd got out of the hospital and Noel had emptied the gym and locked it and then he'd gone down on Dane in the center of his sparring ring while Dane was wearing a satin robe with his name embroidered on the back that he'd last worn as a boxer...

Now he was like a pale blond flame, spine erect, gaze proudly on Dane as he waited on the rainbow bridge over the pond where the koi lived.

And then Dane saw what his future husband was holding, and his eyes saucered, taking in the flash of red and gold in the fishbowl. “Noel, you brought a brand-new Goldie to our wedding!”

Mr. Trent let go of his arm, and Dane ran the rest of the way. He heard a couple of smothered giggles from the crowd.

But suddenly he really wanted to be married.

Noel handed him the new goldfish bowl.

“For my husband,” he said.

 THE END 

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Jan Irving has worked in all kinds of creative fields, from painting silk to making porcelain ceramics, to interior design, but writing was always her passion.

She feels you can't fully understand characters until you follow their journey through a story world. Many kinds of worlds interest her, fantasy, historical, science fiction and suspense—but all have one thing in common, people finding a way to live together—in the most emotional and erotic fashion possible, of course!

Visit Jan's blog at <http://jan-revealed.livejournal.com> and her Web site at <http://janirvingwrites.com/>.