



COPS *and* RUBBERS

A. J. Llewellyn

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...Jun dropped to his haunches, sucking Jason's cock. Jason was petrified of being arrested. Jun never wanted this kind of hot sex at home. Only in public.

Research, he told himself as Jun's fingers slid up toward his asshole.

Jun suddenly straightened. He turned Jason around. Shit. He knows I love to get fucked like this. Jun's cock poked at Jason's ass. Jason braced himself since he hadn't been prepared. He felt Jun's fingers moving away.

"I took butter from that club," Jun said. "I'm buttering you up, baby."

Butter? He remembered now. They'd ordered a bowl of soup and it came with a rock-hard piece of bread. The soup had been awful and after one sip, they'd sent it back.

Jun slathered the butter on Jason's ass.

"Fucking hurry, I want you."

"You're getting me, bitch." Jun bit the back of his neck. It was a gesture that always sent shivers down Jason's spine. Jun entered him so quickly it took Jason's breath away. He wanted to jerk himself off but Jun was fucking him too hard. He had to brace himself for each thrust.

Jun's fingers came around him.

Oh, God, a cop car down on Cahuenga!

"Come now, my beautiful whore. Come." Jun's voice purred in his ear. Unbelievably, Jason exploded as Jun took off inside him. One stroke of that cock against his prostate and Jason was always a goner.

They had little time to do much else than pull up their pants. They pretended to ogle the window display of Anna Nicole Smith as the cop car slowed to a crawl...

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Fawnskin
The House Of Driscoll

COPS AND RUBBERS

BY

A. J. LLEWELLYN

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COPS AND RUBBERS
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*To my wonderful readers who pay
for their books and support the global effort to combat
piracy of books, movies and music.*

CHAPTER 1

Rocky spoke into the phone, his honeyed, Caribbean accent hypnotic. If only the unsuspecting woman on the other end of the line could realize how insincere he was being.

“I know baby, we do have something between us. Oh yeah. It’s special. Uh-huh. You’re right...it only comes along once in a lifetime.” He grunted. “Yeah, baby, me too.”

Jason rolled his eyes. Oh man, this guy was a piece of work. He took advantage of his supervisor’s distraction to zip onto the Internet and check on his books.

Fuck! That asshole site ostrichwalk.com had pirated six of his ebooks since he’d last checked at seven A.M. His lover, Jun, accused him of being obsessed. Obsessed was an understatement. The familiar tug of fury washed over his already mounting despair.

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I am a thirty-seven-year-old gay man who has finally found his niche in the world. Finally gotten my books published, and each month I see my royalties diminishing because of rampant ebook theft.

Jason sighed. He wanted to punch someone or something, but his cubicle in the bowels of the Downtown Theater Company was as flimsy as paper. It barely withstood his call-script being tacked to it and a photo of the three actors whose best-selling show helped pay his bills.

He was working through lunch since he had until the end of Friday, two days from now, to make quota. Then he'd hit his commission. If he didn't hit his quota he'd be taking home the standard two-hundred-and fifty bucks.

His stomach rumbled. He wondered if he could sneak his banana out of his backpack and eat it. They weren't allowed to have food in their cubicles because of crumbs and because they were supposed to focus on drumming up sales, not stuffing their pie-holes.

Bracing himself, Jason stared at the fresh uploads of his book to what was commonly called a file-sharing site. You could call it anything you wanted, but it was still theft. Pure and utter theft. It was a disease that had affected the music and movie industry.

People dismissed the new victims of Internet piracy: authors.

It was easy to dismiss the theft of books as if it wasn't important.

They're closing down bookstores every day. Why would they care about what happens to us authors?

Each time people uploaded his ebooks to this pirate site, he had to file takedown notices that were usually observed, but sometimes took days to achieve. In the meantime, he would torture himself by

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checking the record numbers of illegal downloads. It gave him sleepless nights and was affecting his relationship with Jun.

“Don’t go there and look,” Jun would say. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

Easy for him to say. When his times were tough, his parents could be relied upon to send him a few bucks. Jun didn’t wage the lonely battle of trying to carve a living out of writing.

“I know, baby.” Rocky chuckled loudly.

The other telemarketers in the room, Kellis, Mahdi, and Jason, were silent. Mahdi was working through lunch because she’d taken off briefly for a commercial audition. She caught Jason’s gaze around the shared partition of their cubicles.

She passed him a half a peanut butter on rye sandwich. He wanted to kiss her. He passed her his banana.

She winked. Jason winked back.

Oh, boy. Now would come the phone sex.

Rocky Renford was a handsome actor, a sweet shade of cocoa, who had found some success in Hollywood. However, not being white and not being local, he usually got the parts of pimps, killers, and exotic weirdoes. He had a fantastic accent that people loved and he did well as a cold-caller. He’d done so well he’d just become a supervisor, and Rocky loved being in charge.

“Are you lying on that bed for me, sweetheart?”

Geez. He should be a phone sex worker, not selling theater tickets. If his wife ever found out, she’d have him back home in northern California. He’d be lucky to watch unsupervised television.

Mahdi cleared her throat and Jason peered around the partition. She handed him a neatly-cut half of his banana in a napkin. He chewed as fast as he could. He listened for a pause in Rocky’s

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spiel. This was the third lady he'd worked over this morning. It was unreal how many lonely ladies out there were willing to pay through the nose for a bit of phone sex.

Jason could tell that Rocky was getting restless.

The trouble with women was that they took forever to achieve the required...er, happy ending, but Rocky would get a huge sale out of the deal and Jason would still be lagging behind in his weekly quota.

He was ninety-six dollars shy of his one-thousand dollar cap before commission kicked in. He had to be careful, even though Rocky had a live one wriggling on the line.

Jason adjusted his headset and pretended to talk to a prospective client as he picked a piece of rye from between his teeth. It fell between the G and H keys of his keyboard. When he tried to lever it out, it disappeared completely. Oops. He knew Rocky wouldn't risk losing his big fish in the throes of Rocky-made pleasure to switch over to listen to Jason's phone call. Just as he was about to start typing, Rocky stopped talking. Jason knew he was eavesdropping on the room long enough to make sure the others were working.

Mahdi Danush, an Iranian-born actress, had a sort of name in the movie industry. She went by "Angie" on the phones but the staff still called her Mahdi. She was on the phone with her agent.

Unbelievable.

She was the only one among them who could get away with such flagrant behavior, conducting her real business on company time. She had an agent at CAA, one of the biggest theatrical agencies in town, and kept dangling that carrot to Rocky, who was now between agents.

"Let me check what matinee seats we have left for that series,"

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Jason said to dead air. "I'd love to book you in for our best available seats."

He had a few minutes since he needed to check the theater's box office schedule, which changed by the minute.

"I can absolutely get you a pair of tickets in preview to see if you like our theater," Jason said.

This was Downtown Theater Company's new policy. They gave away matinee seats in prime spots on Sundays, when Los Angeles's most prestigious and wealthy theater-going patrons chose to attend plays. Sunday matinees hid a multitude of sins that new subscribers would know nothing about until they bought nighttime series tickets.

Oh yes, nighttime was not the time you wanted to be in the heart of LA's downtown district. Certainly nowhere near the corner of Third and Spring, a drug dealer and sex hustler's paradise. Yes, they had undercover parking and security. But there were also vagrants, drug users openly popping on the spot, often passing out on the sidewalk. Jason had been forced to step over jerking bodies many times.

They also had the nastiest, stinkiest laneway between the parking lot and DTC.

"We have two seats in the third row right in the middle," Jason said, deftly flicking between two screens. On the second, ostrichwalk.com was having a field day with Jason's books.

Shit, shit, fuckity fuck! I knew it. I just knew it. Another book just went up. Right in front of my eyes! These assholes are having a Jason Jagger free-for-all!

"Oh yeah, baby, oh yeah," Rocky said. Jason stole a look at him and saw Rocky reading the Hollywood Park racing form.

That bastard's gonna hit his target and then he's gonna bet

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money on a horse!

Jason stared at the name of the uploader of his brand new gay erotic romance ebook, *Unnatural Desires*.

Private Eye.

That ass! He always uploads my books with multiple mirrors to European theft sites. No matter. They all know me now and they'll observe my takedown notices.

He swallowed down his anger as he focused on breathing. Jason had templates stored both on his home computer and a secret, hidden file on his computer here at work that he accessed for swift emails to every single file-sharing site. He copied and pasted his copyright takedown notice to seven different file-sharing sites now holding stolen copies of his brand new book.

Shit. It just came out. These guys aren't giving me a chance to even make a buck or two anymore. I can't believe it takes me longer to remove my books than it takes these idiots to upload them in the first place.

Jason almost laughed out of frustration and panic at Private Eye's message on the three book uploads.

"Give some thanks to the original uploader."

I'm the original uploader, you ass. I wrote the damned books! What pisses me off is that I gotta jump through so many legal hoops to protect my work...my goddamn right to an income, and these assholes can upload in ten seconds!

He dreaded Private Eye's book uploads because he wasn't content to upload to one site. He was fond of multiple mirrors, meaning, duplicated uploads to obscure file sharing sites scattered around the globe. His reasoning was obvious. If one link was removed, the ebook thieves still had plenty of other options until those links, too, were removed.

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Filing takedown notices was the loneliest, suckiest job in the world and he knew thousands of writers suffered this indignity on a daily basis. He sent off his messages, hoping for a break in the endless chain of finding and removing unauthorized copies of his books.

Lately, he'd suffered extra indignities, with users on Ostrichwalk uploading his books to CDs and selling them on eBay. He failed to understand why these thieves thought it was okay to make a profit off his work while his own royalties increasingly plummeted.

Private Eye was a different story. He seemed to take great and malicious pleasure in reloading Jason's books all over again. *Cat and mouse. Two uploads removed, one to go.*

"Beautiful, baby," Rocky said. "Beautiful. Now baby, you got your credit card handy? Just read me off those numbers, sweetheart."

What an ass! Jason stared at his heavily marked-up call sheet. Even Rocky's referrals lately were rubbish. He abandoned Rocky's call list and went back to his own.

"Beautiful baby. Expiration date?"

Shit! I've got five more fucking mirrors to deal with!

Jason's fingers trembled with the effects of his rage and anguish. He had to calm down. One wrong button pressed, one wrong letter or number in a link and the illegal downloads would remain in place until he manually checked them all over again.

"Now, baby, what's the three-digit security code on the back of your credit card?"

Two links to go. Fuck! Seventy-five downloads already this morning. The bills I could be paying with that money!

His fingers hovered over the keyboard. Seventy-five downloads

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was a boatload of money, even after his publisher took sixty percent of his income. He had to pay the cable bill, the gas bill, phone, electricity, his car needed an oil change, and the cat needed his yearly check up. Jason needed food. Yeah, that was in pretty short supply, too.

The thieves seemed to think authors were rich. If only he could tell them a hundred sales in the first month of release was considered excellent. One hundred! It always went downhill from there. This was how romance authors kept their income flowing. They'd keep churning out the books once, sometimes twice a month.

Rocky ended his call and out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw his fingers flick a switch. Jason didn't waste a second. He immediately began pressing numbers for a new call. Man, Rocky was the worst kind of two-faced Gestapo.

Jason got a voice mail, but didn't leave a message. They never left messages. He ended the call and moved down the line to the next phone number on his list.

I'd love to know who Private Eye is. That bastard. I'd like him to know exactly what he's doing to me. He's killing me. That's what he's doing!

Jason was shocked when the phone call went through and a woman's voice came on the line.

He introduced himself quickly and the woman didn't hang up.

"I don't know about going to the theater in downtown LA," she said.

"Mrs. Costa, I know you live in Sherman Oaks, but it's twenty minutes by train," Jason said. "On Sunday, it's around the same if you drive."

All the Audience Development workers had a script, but most

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veered off it. Most had their own selling point. Mahdi, for example, was passionate about the New Playwrights' Workshop Lab series, which was financed by ticket sales.

Jason had done well using the theater's comedy troupe, Latin Love's revue show *Fiesta Forever*.

Now he was allowed to give away matinee tickets, he'd done better. Everybody wanted something for free.

Yeah, just ask those nameless, faceless ebook thieves.

Mrs. Costa loved the idea of doing something *for the community* and said she and her husband would love to come and see the show.

Jason peered out of the corner of his eye. He could see Rocky leaning back in his seat as he fingered his chin. Yeah, he was still listening to Jason's call.

Suddenly, a man's voice came on the line.

"Hello?"

"Arnold, I'm talking," Mrs. Costa said.

"I heard. And I don't want to go to some deadbeat theater in downtown LA. Are you crazy, Helen?"

"It's a Sunday matinee, sir, tickets are free and this is our hottest show," Jason said.

Rocky was smiling. This was a familiar conversation. At least Jason was *having* a conversation. Sometimes people told you to get fucked. Sometimes they screamed passages of the Bible to you. Sometimes, if they were very lonely they kept you on the phone just to talk. And then when it came time to extract money from them, they hung up on you.

"Your friends, the McBains, gave me your number," Jason said.

"Oh...really?"

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“Yes. They bought a ten-ticket season DTC package as gifts for their clients. They—”

“Is that your most expensive package?” Arnold Costa asked.

“No, sir. We have a complete season package of twenty-four tickets with interchangeable dates, box seats, and opening night champagne suppers.”

“Hmm. Well, I like champagne...but what’s this free play you’re talking about?”

Jason launched into his familiar routine. He kept the photo of the three stars of the show on his cubicle wall. It reminded him always of why he did what he did. It was an inspiration because each of them had struggled to overcome huge obstacles.

If the frickin’ ebook thieves stopped stealing from me I wouldn’t be sitting here trying to sell theater tickets, barely hitting my quota week after week.

He went on with his spiel. “...and the lead actor, Raul Marquez survived a drive-by shooting to become a comedian author and—”

“He’s the guy from the TV show,” Arnold said. “Right?”

“Right.”

“Where did he get shot? At your theater?”

“No.” Jason bit down on mad laughter. “He lived in San Francisco and it happened Christmas day five years ago. He survived and he is a wonderful man. We work with the LA County Sheriff’s office and we bring At Risk Youth here to see this show, which he wrote during his recovery.”

Arnold was silent. So was Helen. They were listening.

“Many of these kids have never been to the theater before and to be honest, it’s my favorite thing in the world to see the tears on their faces when they come to see their first play. But we need people like you and Mrs. Costa to help us make a difference.”

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Arnold sighed. "You're very persuasive, young man. If we come Sunday to see this little show of yours, do we get champagne?"

"Absolutely." *Even if I have to come down to the theatre and pour it down your throat myself.*

Arnold hung up, leaving his wife to handle the details. Jason organized the tickets, giving them front row center for the following Sunday. Although his quota deadline officially ended Friday night, since he'd hooked the Costas today, his room supervisors would let him include the sale for this week—if it went through.

"I'm so excited," Mrs. Costa said. "I'm going to wear my furs." Her voice dropped. "Call me first thing Monday and I'm sure we'll be buying that big, fancy package."

"Thank you," Jason said.

Five-hundred-and eighty-dollars! He rarely sold the big deluxe deal. His specialty had become the ten-ticket pass. At three-hundred bucks it was nothing to sneeze at, but still...he would be well over his one-thousand dollar quota and earning a decent commission.

He had to pretend he wasn't aware of Rocky listening in as he called the box office to talk to LaWanda who ran the place with an iron fist and the crappiest music—her own—for those put on hold.

"These are hot ticket patrons," Jason said. "I'll personally come in to greet them on Sunday, but could you please make sure nobody gives away those seats?"

"Of course, Jason," she said. LaWanda was a six-foot four, three-hundred pound African American woman who had trained in opera but whose passion was punk rock. She performed in seedy clubs on weekends with three guys who also worked in Audience

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Development. She was an incredible opera singer, but preferred to scream unintelligible lyrics over loud, distorted music.

She was, in spite of her atrocious music, a wonderful woman, and he actually adored her but it was painful to attend her shows. He did it for political reasons and because it was the thing you did in LA. Actors, writers, and musicians supported one another.

“See you Saturday,” she said.

God help me. “Yeah.” Wait until he told Jun that they were going to another Ghetto Fabulous show.

He still had two takedown notices left and as he dialed yet another number, he stared at the screen. Who the hell is Private Eye? Why am I allowing this anonymous ass to control my life this way?

If Raul Marquez can recover from bullet wounds to multiple, vital organs...I can find this guy. I can find him. And kick his ass.

CHAPTER 2

Darius Maguire sat back in his wooden chair by the window, tearing his gaze from the activity out on Fifth Avenue. He stared at his laptop screen. He wondered how long these fresh links would last. He twirled a ballpoint pen in his fingers as Xanthe, his best friend in the world, chattered from across the universe, crystal clear in his ear thanks to his new, state-of-the-art sat phone.

He missed her. Their daily calls were not enough. He felt adrift. God, it was supposed to be fun, but being Private Eye on his own massive file-sharing site was a frickin' drag.

Smoke swirled around him. Really, it was the only thing he hated about the Café du Marquis, his favorite coffee bar. They still allowed smoking and the place was packed. Now it was after three o'clock, trending teens who thought they were the bomb had taken

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over the place, ordering one sandwich between six of them, thinking they were groovy as they tried reading coffee grounds.

And smoking cigarettes. In the afternoons and evenings, hookahs were popular. He didn't mind the smell of those. It was the damned cigarettes.

He sipped at the gritty residue of his own Turkish coffee as Cesaria Evoria's husky voice wafted from the sound system. He stared at the image in the residue in the bottom of his cup. The letter J. Or maybe it was a hook. A fish hook. It almost looked like a devil's tale.

Cesaria Evoria's throaty vocals settled over the room like a ray of light. He'd read an article about her early life and how she described her early years as drinking venom. "Now I am drinking honey," she said. "It's better to drink the venom first."

He felt like his life was the exact opposite. He felt like his honey was turning more and more deadly by the day. Nothing was going right. He tried to relax, enjoying his favorite diva.

That was the beauty of this place. One minute you'd hear sultry world music, the next, cutting edge rock from Little Boots. Minutes later, you'd get the haunting classical strains of Beethoven's *Pathétique*.

Darius wanted another coffee but was afraid to get up and lose his seat. Those kids'd swipe it even if he left his laptop on the table. Hell, this was Royal Oak, Michigan. They'd steal the laptop and the table, too.

"I'm so jazzed that we had six hundred uploads yesterday and most of the links are still intact," Xanthe said.

Xanthe, who lived in New York, was one third of the company that ran ostrichwalk.com. She took a harsh view of authors or their representatives, who filed DMCA or copyright takedown notices

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of their books.

She was a staunch believer in things being shared and that if it was on the Internet, it should be free. Darius took a far softer line and considered having to re-upload books as part and parcel of file sharing. He didn't begrudge authors wanting to make a living but he wondered really, how much could shared books affect their income?

"Have you read the new Jason Jagger mystery that went up last night?" she said when Darius tuned back into her.

Jason Jagger, now there was a phony, made-up name if ever he heard one, but readers seemed to love this guy's books.

Guy! Jason Jagger was probably a woman, a straight woman, passing as a guy as so many of these M/M authors were. It infuriated him that straight women wrote gay erotic romance novels. It was the most popular genre in romance fiction. It still floored him that women wanted to read about two guys together. Well, maybe he could understand that part. But why did they want to *write* about them?

What the hell did chicks know about guys fucking each other, anyway? He'd read a few of the titles and they embarrassed him. One book even had the word fart in the title. What the fuck? These women didn't seem to understand men at all. The guys were usually goofy. The plots, if you could call them that were flimsy. The guys always had huge cocks, were usually rich. One was an Alpha male, one was the beta male.

Some of the better authors did a good job of building romantic tension. Some had weird stuff going on from page one. Like BDSM. And wearing dog collars. Or halos as romance writers liked to call them. The reality was that you couldn't go to most jobs wearing a dog collar, but in these romantic fantasies, the

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Alpha male pushed and punished the beta male to unbelievable extremes.

Xanthe grooved on gay erotica. When Darius once asked her why, her answer had been, “One guy is hot, two guys are even better.”

I bet most of these authors don't know any gay men. They probably haven't even watched gay porn! You read some of this crap and the guys giggle. Giggle! They hold hands and have pouty lips like chicks. Not men. They've all read Harlequin romances and substituted a beta male in the woman's role. Some of the excerpts I read boggle the mind.

He knew all about Harlequin romances since he'd edited a few. He sighed and stared back out the window. Three months he'd been back in Michigan after his spectacular flop of a relationship in London. He, Xanthe and his ex-lover, Finch, had conceived the idea for ostritchwalk.com when the three of them had traveled through Eastern Europe with a fourth friend, Joe. They found it impossible to buy games, movies, or music online.

Now he and Finch were done. Finch remained in London, where he and Darius had lived, and taken over a pub. Finch was now in love with one of his barmen and Darius was in Michigan, trying to make sense of it all.

The whole book request thing took patience. Some days he loved it. He enjoyed the private messages flying back and forth between the various users on the site. There were a lot of requests for the usual, hot-selling M/M or Male/Male tales. A lot of requests for Jason Jagger's books.

That's why straight women wrote these books. Money.

“Have you read it?” Xanthe prompted him.

“No, I've never read Jagger's stuff.”

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“You’re gay. You’d love his books. Have you been to his website? He’s awfully cute. You’d like him. He seems hot, funny, and sweet.”

Funny and sweet. Yeah, right. The last guy Xanthe thought was funny and sweet turned out to be his cheating bastard of a lover who now ran the pub Darius had decorated and fitted out with a state of the art Wi-Fi and gaming system.

I gave up a juicy publishing job to move to London and now I’m back, sitting in a coffee shop with a bunch of kids talking about American frickin’ Idol. How the hell did this happen to me?

He looked out the window and scrolled through the rest of the new requests. Let somebody else do them. Most of the books were junk. Werepenguins? Really? And what about all those romance novels with multiple men and one woman? That wasn’t hot. It was gang rape. And some of the titles! *The Sheik’s Illegitimate Baby. The King’s Whore*...sheesh.

To be fair, he’d never read a Jason Jagger book. He just hated the guy for constantly dogging him on the web and taking down Darius’s links to his books. He checked his email as some snotty kid walked by his table again, eyeing it as if ready to pounce.

Shit! Jagger already had one link down. How did he do it? The guy or girl must be a rich-bitch author with plenty of time on his hands to spend his whole day on the Internet filing takedown notices.

Authors, like musicians, had a legal loophole otherwise known as copyright infringement. They could request a book link to be removed on the basis of copyright infringement. In the beginning, when Darius had started ostrichwalk.com with Finch, Joe, and Xanthe, it had been their aim to provide music and movies to people in Europe and other countries that couldn’t get access to

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DVDs, iTunes, or Amazon.

Within weeks, Joe took off, copying their idea and was now their literal and virtual rival. Finch had shored up the financial end of things and the partnership was set. It had shocked Darius how competitive the world of stolen—for he had to admit, what they were doing was illegal, not that it gave him too many sleepless nights—software, programs etcetera were.

It was a huge business. With each person clicking on the site, their hosting site paid them a buck. They were raking in bucks, but had to shift servers multiple times when the ebook takedowns became too much work for the hosting sites.

Computer games were the initial hot ticket, then audio books, and suddenly ebooks became the big currency. The most popular books came under the general realm of romantic fiction, but this encompassed a wide range of books in varying degrees of “sexual heat” level, content and popularity.

As far as he could tell, gay books, or M/M as they were called, particularly ones with paranormal overtones, were big. Then there were the gay cowboy themes, thanks, or no thanks to *Brokeback Mountain*, the bloom had not come off that particular rose. Authors came and went but there were some that just kept producing.

And he, Darius Maguire, kept uploading when others wanted their books. True, he pirated Jagger’s books more than some other authors, but to Darius it was a game. He caught a glimpse of the activity numbers on his screen. He was pretty certain Jason Jagger was a lurking member of ostrichwalk.com. He was able to get his books removed from file-sharing sites too fast for it to be a coincidence. Nobody was supposed to be a member who didn’t upload their own share of books to be distributed across the Internet, but with their membership numbers growing on an hourly

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basis it was difficult to patrol the lurkers.

Some lurkers just liked to secretly download and that was the point. Ostrichwalk.com was a place for everybody, rich or poor, to access books. After all, didn't authors *want* their books to be read?

He yawned and stretched. He'd spent a long time online cleaning up the site as well as uploading new books. He, Xanthe, and Finch were making money from ads and kickbacks from other private sites scattered throughout Eastern Europe, all whilst providing a genuine service.

Was it his problem that authors wanted to make a living? Hell, no. They should all get off their whiny, moaning asses and get proper jobs!

"Do you realize these authors are becoming a lot more savvy?" Xanthe suddenly asked.

"Yeah." He signaled his favorite waiter behind the counter. "Tell me about it."

He caught Cade's eye and held up his cup. Cade grinned. He was a hot little number. *Stop it. Maguire, he looks like frickin' jail bait.*

"They're finding out who our site hosts are all over Europe and getting their links down. Have you noticed that they're now real quiet publicly about piracy?"

"Some are, some aren't," Darius said. Definitely, the more experienced authors had resorted to stealth tactics. Jagger was one. He had ferreted out secret site hosts and contacted them directly. While a part of him applauded the author's ingenuity, it was starting to play havoc with Darius's income with sites dropping Ostrichwalk's services and not paying up their monthly premiums.

Jagger wasn't quiet about it at all. In fact, he'd started some online support group as more and more authors fought to get their

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links down. Xanthe had spotted a blog where Jagger talked about filing a class-action suit against Ostrichwalk, which had worried the three partners for about an hour.

"They can't do anything," he reminded Xanthe as Cade brought him a fresh cup of coffee.

"It'll cost you," Cade said.

Darius blinked. He and Cade had exchanged flirtatious greetings for weeks and he'd nursed some fantasies about the guy.

"Hold on," he said to Xanthe. He fished five bucks out of his back pocket and gave it to Cade.

"Will this do it?"

"No."

Oh, he was brazen. His desire was unmistakable. He wanted Darius.

God, he is gorgeous. Suddenly, Darius's mood improved. Cade was a long, tall drink of a guy with immaculate, well-cut, chestnut-colored hair. He loved many things about men, but well-kept dark hair was his secret fetish.

"What time is your shift over?" he asked Cade.

"Seven o'clock."

"I'll be here. Waiting."

The two men smiled.

"You go, guy." Xanthe laughed on the other end of the phone.

"I will. He's a hot little thing."

"So, back to work for a second. I spoke to Finch."

"You just rained on my parade."

"Do you want to know what he said?"

"Not particularly. Unless it's to do with work."

"He wants out."

"Fuck him."

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“The pub is struggling. He’s...anyway, he says if he can find a buyer, will you be okay with this? Somebody to step in for him?”

This day was getting better and better. “No problem.”

He felt like dancing on his table. Not having to struggle though his weekly conference calls with Finch and Xanthe...wow, that would be cool.

“Okay. I must say, you’re taking it well,” Xanthe said. “I thought you liked having an excuse to call him.”

“I haven’t yet.”

He took pride in that.

“Really?” she sounded surprised. “That’s not what he says.”

“In his dreams. The only time I’ve talked to him is on our conference calls.” Darius was pissed now. It had practically killed him to stay away from Finch, but he’d done it. In the words of his favorite TV character Patsy Stone, he’d heeded her advice.

Just finish the Beaujolais and walk away, darling.

“Okay, hon. Sorry.” Xanthe changed the subject. “Finch is so good at protecting our asses, switching servers, confounding the authors and publishers who file takedown notices.”

“And? Look, sweetie, it’s no big deal.”

“We are a class action lawsuit waiting to happen,” she said.

“I’m surprised it hasn’t happened yet. But really, because we’re not a US site, they can’t do anything. All they can do is keep taking down their links,” Darius said. They’d had these conversations before.

“We’re covered legally since there are no actual downloads on our site, besides, we’re structured in the Cayman Islands. We are out of the FBI’s jurisdiction.”

At the mention of the FBI a few heads turned in his direction. He didn’t give a fuck. Fuck the authors and their whiny problems.

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Fuck the site users who felt they were owed free books like it was crack and they were grumbling, insatiable addicts. Hell, most of them admitted they never read the damned books, they just loved acquiring them.

Darius had a date. He sipped his coffee and burned his tongue. He still didn't care. Tonight, he was gonna get laid.

* * *

Jason stared at the chalk board behind Rocky's head. He was number four in the sales rankings. Some days the chalk board was Jason's incentive. Other days it was his complete ruination. He was behind Rocky, Mahdi, and even the psychotic Dan Rubin whom everybody called Voodoo Doll. He was a complete loon. Voodoo Doll lived in a room up on Cherokee Avenue in the heart of Hollywood. A flophouse where people went to drink, drug-up, delude themselves about their greatness, and die.

Voodoo came to Hollywood from Kansas to be an actor but found an alarming shortage of work for short, fat, angry, gay white guys. He fancied himself as a kind of Jason Alexander but lacked that man's charm and talent. In fact, everybody else in the room decided Voodoo Doll must have had a charisma bypass as a toddler.

He'd chosen the dismal room on Cherokee because he found out that Elizabeth Short, aka the Black Dahlia had once lived there. Jason had seen the room and didn't think it had received so much as a lick of paint or a rudimentary cleaning since her murder in 1947.

Voodoo Doll had befriended Jason on his first day. What Jason hadn't known was that Voodoo befriended you then scoped out

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your leads and stole them from under you. A trip to the can, lunch breaks, bawl-out sessions with the room supervisor or, on Saturdays, a trip to the bagel spread at the top of the room gave Voodoo Doll enough time to sneak over to your desk and copy down phone numbers. He'd call your ready-to-bite big fish and steal them. Hook, line, and commission quota.

He's three-hundred-dollars above quota thanks to the ten-seat package he stole from me last night. Why did I go home and sleep? I should just bring a roll-away with me.

Jason had filed a complaint with Ara, the grand pooh-bah of the room supervisors. He was waiting to hear if Ara would give Jason the sale. In the meantime he feared Voodoo Doll's wrath.

Mahdi was on the phone and she was bullshitting some poor little old lady about the prospects of meeting hot, decrepit old men at the Sunday matinees. She was more likely to get peed on by a vagrant in the alleyway than landing a date.

Maybe I should start lying more. Maybe I should throw my conscience out with this bruised banana.

Jason knew he had been snapped up because in spite of ten years in tinsel town he still had his Australian accent. Accents went over big with Americans who still thought Paul Hogan was a captivating clown.

Kellis, the drop-dead handsome blond guy who yearned for soap opera stardom and claimed to be a working psychic, scuttled past Voodoo Doll's desk. He'd dropped something there. Jason made sure his call sheets were tucked under his arm and swung by Voodoo's hectic work station. On top of his keyboard was a note:

There's hot sex, fast sex, oral sex, safe sex, leather sex, phone sex, group sex and for people with a face like yours, there's masturbation.

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Jason resisted the urge to laugh out loud and kept moving just as Voodoo Doll entered the room.

You could always tell when Voodoo was in the house. His body odor was eye-watering. He was fond of telling you that he showered and washed his clothes by stomping them with his feet in the tub. Clearly he hadn't done either lately.

Jason took a break. He climbed the cement stairs from the dim, dark basement, pushing open the door to the theater level. He blinked in the light. The Downtown Theater Company was a fantasy of marble flooring, stairs and walls, gold balustrades that screamed Old Hollywood and beneath the sumptuous veneer was a not so thin line of sheer and utter panic.

The theater, which strove to present both traditional plays and cutting-edge material to its community, was going broke.

There were rumors that the company had three months before it went belly-up. Some said it was closer to six. Others said sixty days. Or twenty-eight. Either way, it was disheartening when Jason and the rest of his co-workers, dubbed The Dinosaur Club by the rest of the theater staff, worked so hard to get warm bottoms on theater seats. Though some shows did well, others did not, and of the five plays currently on offer, only the Latin Love revue had capacity audiences each night.

The three actors told the board of directors for the theater that they credited Jason alone for their escalating big ticket sales. They knew he actively promoted *Fiesta Forever* and loved him for it.

They were in the process of moving from Theater Three to Theater Two, to accommodate their increasingly larger crowds. The heart of the show was Raul Marquez, who'd survived a drive-by shooting a couple of years ago. In the midst of funny material, he gave a monologue about how it felt to almost die. It never failed

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to move Jason who had easily seen the show a hundred times.

Raul was on stage rehearsing his big emotional scene and he glimpsed Jason hovering at the back of the theater.

“Hola, come on down, amigo,” Raul shouted.

Jason grinned, walking down the plush, red-carpeted aisle. Technical crew workers were on stage black-taping spots for the actors’ cues. Marquez sat under a spotlight on his suitcase and stared ahead of him.

“I stood on the stoop, waving goodbye to my girlfriend. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the car coming. I saw the gun.”

As he stuck out his hand. A spotlight hit it.

“My first thought was for her. The woman I loved.”

Everyone stopped working on stage. The moment was so powerful, the stagehands forgot they were supposed to be taping off the floor. They stood, mesmerized as Raul got off the suitcase and stood.

“I threw her down and covered her with my body. I heard the gunshots and realized I’d been hit. Over and over again.”

Pause.

“Blam! Blam! Blam!”

Jason’s nails dug into his palm. He’d seen the scene so many times and it never failed to bring tears to his eyes.

“They shot me, man. Over and over again. In my back, in my head. I have no idea why God spared me except...I know this. My mother always said, life is so powerful, so spiritual, it should be finished in beauty.”

He let out a sigh. Jason’s eyes swam with unshed tears.

Of the three actors, Raul was the least handsome, flashy or popular, yet he was the most humble man. He and Jason were not exactly friends, but they talked. The other two actors, like the rest

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of those employed by the DTC, kept a wall up between them and The Dinosaur Club.

Jason and the crew applauded and Raul took a bow.

“You’re biased, gringo,” he shouted to Jason who stood, gave him a wave and went back to work. Moments like Raul’s big scene made it all worthwhile.

What we are doing here counts. It’s more than about money. It’s art and life and about a guy who refused to die.

* * *

Jason, Kellis, and Mahdi left the theater at a quarter to three to walk to their afternoon gig. The top members of The Dinosaur Club—except for Voodoo Doll—had been hand-picked by their supervisor Ara to handle an unusual account.

Ara’s latest squeeze, Felizia, had opened her own nail polish line. Out of the back room of a grimy salon that to Jason’s eye looked like a sweat shop for illegal Asian manicurists, they wielded grubby old telephones, cold-calling nail salons across the country. Their mission: offering them a free sample of Felizia polish.

It seemed easy work the first day, but it soon transpired the nail polish industry was as rumor-rife as the movie industry. Felizia was not a hit. In fact, Jason found that since he’d taken on the gig from three to five P.M. each afternoon, he was getting a variety of manicurists who had numerous questions and, very often, mind-boggling complaints.

All he and his co-workers had to do was get a *yes* from the nail salons they called and pre-packaged base coats and polishes were shipped to them. He got five dollars for every lead that agreed to receive the polish. It seemed like a gift from God, until he started

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calling.

So far he'd scored three yeses. Mahdi was ahead with five. Kellis had one. The other members of their team had all quit. Jason couldn't afford to quit. He and Jun were scraping by on their combined incomes. And for the last few months, Jun had been struggling more than Jason. He took a deep breath as they walked, passing unsuspecting foreigners lolling in the pristine park opposite the court house on Hill Street.

Jason, Kellis, and Mahdi discussed the rampant, often violent homeless population that took over the park at sunset. They always walked together back to the theater parking lot, but Mahdi was afraid of the park even in daylight, having stepped on numerous spent condoms and a needle one time.

They also discussed Voodoo Doll.

"Ara is definitely going to side with you," Kellis said. He sounded so confident, Jason felt buoyed by his words. "You are going to get that sale he stole from you. Absolutely."

The trouble with Kellis's psychic predictions, however, was that they were usually wrong.

At Felizia's salon, the smell of chemical fumes made their eyes water.

"Let's get pizza," Mahdi said. "We have a few minutes."

It was her turn to buy, so Kellis and Jason waited out front as she stepped inside Johnnie's tiny storefront and bought a slice of mushroom pizza. It wasn't that they were mushroom fanatics so much as Johnnie's mushroom pizza for some reason had the biggest slices. She carefully cut one into three and brought them to the outside window on paper napkins. Oil dripped onto Jason's shoe, but he didn't care.

They ate fast and with great appreciation, sloping back to the

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salon.

The manicurists who all wore white face masks, looked up as they entered. It was his third day here and Jason tried to identify the expression. Panic? Hatred? Both?

We come and go after a couple of hours. They're stuck here from morning until night.

The three co-workers squeezed past work stations crowded with men and women getting their nails done. In the back room, they found the kitchen table ready with stacked sheets of mailing labels and lists of phone numbers. As soon as you got a hit, you wrote out the salon name and stuck it onto a box of polish and dropped that into a plastic US mail box carrier.

Jason began his spiel, wondering what Jun was doing.

Mahdi began doodling in black ink on her call sheet. Jason glanced at her. She seemed suddenly depressed. The doodling became aggressive, dark. Tiny black squares, mounting in the page, as if it represented her thoughts. Stuff...problems tumbling on her.

She feels boxed in.

Mahdi happened to glance up and caught his gaze. She was the most resilient woman he knew. She always had a smile and a laugh on her lips, but now she seemed really down.

He smiled. She smiled back and pressed numbers on her phone.

Jason's first call was to a woman in South Carolina who wasn't happy to hear from him.

"I know about Felizia," she said, cutting him off. "That stuff is full of toxins. It has formaldehyde in it."

It did? Jason was taken aback. He had no idea about the formaldehyde.

"Why do you think they're all wearing masks up front?" Mahdi

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asked, a nasty snarl to her tone. “It’s highly toxic. America is the only major country that hasn’t outlawed its use in cosmetics.”

“I didn’t know that.” Jason tapped his phone. He had big problems endorsing a product that was hazardous to anyone’s health.

The second call produced a manicurist who told Jason that Felizia’s products caused toe fungus on one of her clients.

“Her nails fell off,” she insisted.

When Jason asked Mahdi about this, she nodded.

“Oh, yeah. I’ve heard that from other people.”

In the doorway, the cute Asian guy he’d seen the day before, hovered. He was one of the manicurists. He smiled behind his mask. At least, Jason thought he was smiling.

He smiled back. *God, he is cute.*

Jason would never cheat on Jun. His stomach suddenly clenched. He and Jun were only recently back together after Jun’s affair with a musician living in their apartment building. The musician, Diego, had moved out after his meth addiction ate up all his funds. And his teeth. It still rankled that Jun had spent Jason’s hard-earned money getting the guy the chemical products to cook the stuff in his kitchen.

He knew Jun had dabbled in the drug and had given it up. Jason, who hated drugs, had no idea what the chemical smell in their apartment was. It smelled like cleaning fluids. He hadn’t exactly caught Jun in bed with Diego. He’d caught them kissing goodbye at the front door.

Jun of course had lied. The odd thing was, Jun, who was a beautiful mix of Scottish and Japanese, had a Japanese name—Jun meant truthful. Jason had found out the hard way that his partner didn’t live up to the name.

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It's over. That was three months ago. You have to trust him.

Sighing, he picked up the phone and tried again. After two hours, he had no bites. He was surprised *nobody* had bitten yet he seemed to be the only one among them who was calling constantly. Mahdi seemed to call the same number over and over again. It looked like a toll-free number. He watched out of the corner of his eye. Yep, she was calling somebody every few seconds.

And yet, she had one hit. Kellis had one, too, but had now fallen asleep with his head on his arms.

Mahdi took out her cell phone and ran through the display, checking for her calls. Jason took the opportunity to call Jun. No answer. Odd. Their home phone had voice mail. He dialed again and the voice mail message came on. He hung up.

He had to quit worrying that Jun was out there, screwing around. Jun loved him. He said so often enough.

Yes, but I no longer trust him.

On top of it, he'd worked a long day with nothing to show for it. There was nobody supervising, so Jason did the unthinkable, out of sheer desperation. He pasted a label on a box to his friend Christina's address, making up a salon name. He would let her know, in case somebody called to check on his shipment.

He dropped it in the mail box.

Mahdi laughed. "I was wondering when you'd wake up and smell the dollar signs."

"You mean you've been doing it, too?"

She nodded. "Since day one."

"So who are you speaking to on the phone all those times you dial?"

"Nobody. I'm calling Dial-a-Prayer. I'm always guaranteed a good laugh."

CHAPTER 3

Darius waited for Cade, excited at first, then very nervous. He'd watched the guy all night, hardly able to keep his eyes off him as he worked.

"You want to go for coffee?" he asked as Cade finally joined him. He winced at his own clumsiness. Why would the guy want to go for coffee when he'd been slinging the stuff all day?

Cade was a sweetheart, though. He suggested a drink instead.

They tried a few places but everything was standing room only. Darius knew Cade had been on his feet for long hours and suggested a quiet drink someplace away from the area.

"Do you like Soho?" he asked.

Cade's smile widened. "I love their cocktails. They make a pretty decent martini."

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“They do. Want me to drive?”

Cade shook his head. “I have my motorbike. You walked here, right?”

“Yeah. I live right across the road.”

“I see you every morning. Let me take you. I’ve got a spare helmet lurking in the storeroom.”

Cade was a smooth, confident rider. As they sped through the darkened streets toward the predominantly gay neighborhood off Woodward in Ferndale, Darius tried not to think about the road trip he’d taken through England with Finn.

“You’re a great passenger!” Cade shouted when they stopped at a red light.

“Thanks.” Darius adjusted his messenger bag across his shoulders. It contained his laptop, making it damned heavy.

Memories of wending through snow-covered lanes in pursuit of Medieval England on Finn’s Motto Guzzi hurt his heart. They’d followed an ancient path created by monks in a so-called meridian grid that the cities and towns had been built upon. They had kept to the gold meridians. These were supposed to be the highest energy grids. Their trip had ended in the ancient French town of Chartres. It had been the end of their journey—and their relationship.

Soho was hopping as they parked out front. Tall wooden stools surrounded the bar as they entered, little red French shutters lining the back wall. There were still some empty seats at the bar and Darius quickly threw himself in one, holding the other out for Cade.

A video monitor above them showed the painful action of brilliant astronaut Buzz Aldrin embarrassing himself by limping around the competition floor on *Dancing with the Stars*. Then there was a clip of reality mom Kate Gosselin weeping when she was

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hoofed off the show.

The next cut was *The Soup* host Joel McHale making fun of Gosselin with a blonde wig and fake boobies.

“Hey, five-dollar martinis,” Cade said, dropping the helmets at the foot of his stool. He slid into his seat. Darius kept his hand at the small of Cade’s back.

“What would you like?”

“A blow job.”

Darius was taken aback.

The few guys at the bar laughed.

“It’s vodka, Irish cream and whipped cream,” the bartender said.

“I really want the other kind,” Cade announced, “but the drink will do for starters.”

Everybody laughed except Darius who tried desperately to keep the smile on his face. He was mortified.

“Pear martini for me, thanks.”

Cade leaned in closer to him. “I’ve had my eye on you for two weeks. You’re obsessed with work. I think this might be the longest amount of time you’ve spent with your fingers off the keyboard. Are you suffering withdrawal yet?”

“No, no,” Darius said. “I’m not work-obsessed.”

“Yeah, you are. I think it’s cool that you can take your work with you.”

“That’s true.” *God, this is awkward. I thought I was through with the dating rigmarole.*

Their drinks arrived. They clinked glasses.

I haven’t been laid since I left London. I gotta get some action soon.

“So what is it that you do, exactly?” Cade asked him.

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"I design and manage websites."

"Huh. That's certainly the gig du jour."

The drinks were very good, the gin starting to hit Darius in all the right ways.

"You want another one?"

Cade held up his glass. "I'm still working on this one. You go right ahead though."

It took Darius a few moments to catch the bartender's attention.

"My real job, as opposed to my day job is writing. I just got my first book accepted for publication," Cade said.

Darius glanced at him. "Really?"

"Yep. I'm kinda worried though."

"Why?"

"Piracy. Internet theft is big business. I'm really worried my book will get stolen before it even sees print. It's coming out as an ebook first. I've discussed it with my publisher and they want to release it as a secured ebook format."

"That will kill your sales since most ereaders can't read them. Besides, if thieves want to break the security code, they will."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

Darius shrugged. "I deal with authors every day."

"Then you can maybe help me when the time comes."

Dude, if you only knew who you were talking to...

The bartender finally stepped in front of Darius. "Sorry about that. You want another drink?"

Cade's hand was on Darius's thigh.

"We're good, thanks."

Cade massaged Darius's cock through his pants, Darius blinked in surprise.

"Let's go," Cade breathed in his ear.

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Darius threw some money on the bar top and they left.

Outside, Cade handed him his helmet.

"I wanted to be alone with you. I hope that's okay."

Before Darius could respond, Cade stepped into his personal space and kissed him. He felt the other man's hands snaking around his hips, pulling him to closer. It was surprisingly easy being kissed by another man after assuring himself for the last three months that he would never get over wanting Finn.

"I had you for a moment there and then your attention wandered," Cade said, leaning back against the motorbike.

His cock thrust up, meeting Darius's. They were both rock hard. The evening still held the warmth of the day. He could smell something cooking. Bacon. There was something else, too. The scent of promise on the air.

"I'm here," he said, surprised that Cade read him so well.

"Nah. You were thinking about something...or someone else."

Darius shook his head. "No. It's over."

"You, too, huh?"

The words hung between them.

"I wouldn't have taken you for a writer," Darius said as Cade leaned in and kissed him again. It was a sweet kiss that could have gone on.

"No?"

"No."

"What did you think I was?"

Darius grinned. "Maybe a model. An artist's model. You're beautiful, you know."

"Thanks, babe. I *was* a model, actually."

"You were?" He shrugged. "You're very sexy."

"Thanks again." A wistful expression came over Cade's face

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under the streetlights. Downtown Ferndale at night was romantic and certainly atmospheric with its old-town lights and quaint buildings. The smell of bacon was making him hungry.

“You feel like a burger?” Cade asked.

He slipped on his helmet and hopped on the bike. Darius slammed his onto his head as they powered away. Through darkened streets, he held onto Cade’s waist, wondering where they were going. He liked the feeling of being on a bike. They headed back into town and soon, they were in the big city again.

Detroit was considered one of the most violent cities in the country. Darius had fought hard to get away from it, but now he was back. He took in the many shuttered businesses, trying not to worry about what the future would bring. The tough economy had hit every city, not just Detroit. His arms tightened around Cade as they took a corner sharply. He felt the breath catch in his throat as his face whisked a few inches from the road.

Cade handled himself well though, straightening without a problem. Darius fought the urge to kiss the man’s shoulder as Cade slowed along Chicago Street, outside Elmer’s. It was a dumpy-looking twenty-four hour greasy-spoon. Business was booming inside.

“I’ve never been here,” Darius said.

“You’re crazy. I love this place.”

Cade took their helmets and led the way. It was as old-style inside as it was outside. Black and white checked floor, silver stools, a long counter. Only surprise here was what looked like bullet-proof glass separating the cooks from the patrons. There were no tables, only the counter. Darius let Cade order for them and out popped six small burgers, big fat fries, a couple of Cokes and a double-chocolate donut.

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The burgers were outrageously good. They ate three each, ordered more, and Darius found himself drooling for the grilled pickles and onions.

“Why do they have bulletproof glass?” he asked Cade, leaning into him. People around them were happy. And loud.

“They kept getting held up.”

Darius stared at Cade’s sweet lips.

“You wanna kiss me.”

It was a statement. Not a question.

Darius shook his head and bit into a fry. “How do you read me like that?”

“You were staring at my lips. We’ll have to kiss someplace else. Here might not be a good idea.”

They split the donut and hauled ass back to the bike.

“Where to?” Cade asked. “Your place or mine?”

Darius sucked in a breath.

“What are you doing here in Detroit, handsome Cade? You’re too beautiful for a place like this.”

“You’re not exactly chopped liver yourself.”

Cade’s finger ran down Darius’s cheek.

“I want to be naked in bed with you. Every time I see you frown, I want to lick the lines away.”

Darius laughed. “You *are* a writer. You have such a way with words.”

Cade grinned. “It’s closer to my place than yours, but mine is kinda...dumpy.”

“Close is good.”

Cade nodded and off they went again, pulling up at a tall building on Ohio. They took the stinky elevator up.

In the small apartment, Cade flicked on lights. They had a

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stunning view of a wall next door. It made Darius think of C.C. Baxter and the movie *The Apartment*. He loved the movie. And this apartment, like C.C.'s, was no oasis.

"You're going to think this is weird," Cade said, tossing his keys and the helmets onto a wing chair.

"What's weird?"

"First time I saw this place, I thought of the movie, *The Apartment*. I don't even know if you know that movie."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

The two men stared at each other.

"I've had dreams of bringing you here." Cade touched Darius's lips with his fingertips and moved away.

"Jack Lemmon said the best line ever."

"I bet I know which one."

Cade arched a brow.

Darius noticed the tennis racket leaning against the wall and picked it up. "You have to imagine I'm C.C. Baxter, you know, Jack's character."

"I know who C.C. Baxter is."

"I'm straining spaghetti through this like C.C. did in the movie. He's so thrilled to have Shirley MacLaine there for dinner...and he tells her... 'Ya know, I used to live like Robinson Crusoe; I mean, shipwrecked among eight million people. And then one day I saw a footprint in the sand, and there you were. It's a wonderful thing, dinner for two.'"

Cade's eyes glowed. "You really do know that movie."

"It's one of my favorites."

Darius was aware of their rapid breathing.

Cade broke off the stare first. "Christ."

"What is it?" Darius felt his hopeful spirits start to falter.

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“I did some modeling work in Miami, fell in love with a cute Puerto Rican pop singer there. He persuaded me to give up my career and travel with him. Actually, I wish now I’d pursued it, instead of moving in with him.”

“Things ended badly, huh?”

“Yeah. I’ll say. There’s something you should know. He gave me HIV.”

* * *

Jason drove through the streets of downtown Los Angeles, which he had come to love in spite of its flaws. Parts of it were so New York, which was where his family first moved after migrating from Australia. He loved how some streets could have been from the middle of Manhattan and he thought about his dad. His father was a great guy who had shocked his family when Jason was sixteen by coming out. Within weeks of that, he’d left the family home to move in with his male lover. They were still together fourteen years later. Jason’s dad had told him to give Jun another chance. Jason wavered constantly on his decision. Like any relationship, they had their good days and bad days.

As he headed toward the Hollywood Hills and to his apartment on North Vermont, he hoped Jun would be home. He was feeling horny for a change. Lately, he hadn’t, but he always made sure to take care of Jun. Without constant sexual attention, Jun was likely to stray.

North Vermont was a hip gay neighborhood containing Skylight, one of the few remaining independent bookstores in Los Angeles. It also had a lot of coffee shops, The House of Pies and above them, the Hollywood sign.

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The apartment he shared with Jun was in a pretty three-story building right opposite Palermo's Italian restaurant. It always smelled of garlic and simmering tomato sauce just inside the entrance. Toward the back of the apartment building was the unmistakable metallic tang of the strange mix of chemicals the drug-addicted residents used to cook crystal meth.

He took the elevator to the third floor. The apartments up here were bigger and therefore more expensive, so they didn't attract the druggies. He lived in fear of the apartment being jacked, but somehow he and Jun had escaped any break-ins. He suspected it was because Jun was home a lot and because the neighbors actually feared their cat, Hendrix. He was a big, black, twenty-two pound cat.

Jun had joked to one of the neighbors that Hendrix was part bobcat and suddenly people walked around their front door, never close to it.

Jason unlocked the door and went inside. Hendrix greeted him at the door, which was his custom. Jun did not, which was *his* custom. Jason picked up his heavy, luxurious-feeling cat. Hendrix purred and rubbed his head under Jason's chin. Two seconds later, he extended his claws. He wanted to be released.

Kissing the top of the cat's head, he put him down on the ground. He glanced at his stunning view. The Hollywood sign stared at him. It never failed to seduce him each time he looked at it. He could spend hours at the unadorned windows looking at it.

Hendrix followed him into the kitchen. His dishes were empty. Not even a sip of water in the bowl. What the hell? What did Jun do all day? He filled the bowls, checked on the stove and in the oven for food for dinner. Jun always threatened to cook, then didn't.

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“You home?” he called out.

Nope, he wasn’t.

He heard a key in the door.

“Hey,” Jun said, coming into the living room to meet him. “I thought we’d go to Palermo’s tonight.”

They exchanged kisses. Jason adored Jun. He was so stunning physically it was easy to overlook his character flaws. His thick black hair was glossy and cut just above the shoulders. His skin was the color of toasted coconut. He wore low-slung jeans that showed off his sweet little six pack. Around his neck, he wore a Hawaiian fish-hook necklace. His eyes were magnificent black moons in a face that came from an artist’s dreams. Yeah, Jason was totally into this guy. So it was hard to say no.

“We can’t afford dinner out, sweetie,” he said.

“Yes, we can. I just got a Visa gift card from my mom for my birthday and she stuck in a note saying that we should have dinner at Palermo’s. On her.”

Jason felt dismayed. He’d hoped for a home-cooked meal so he’d have leftovers for lunch the following day. He tried to disguise his sadness. If he ate slowly and kept some food on his plate, he could bring home leftovers from Palermo’s.

He nodded, trying to act happy. He tried luring Jun back for more kisses, but Jun kept out of reach. He was a contrary guy. As Jason tried again, Jun’s cock hardened in his jeans.

Jun glanced down at his crotch as if surprised by his body’s response. “You always have to go there.”

“Yeah, I guess I do,” Jason said, feeling stung. He wanted Jun and knew the only way to have him when he was in this mood was to ignore him.

Man, why do we need to play these games?

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He went online and saw that he had galley edits on his new book.

“Don’t look for anymore pirated books,” Jun warned.

Man, he has a hot ass.

Jason ignored him. It was tough. He wanted his face buried in Jun’s tasty ass.

“You’re looking for books. I know you are.”

“Nope, I’m not.”

“You need a distraction,” Jun said.

That was fast. He really is horny.

Jun leaned down to him for a kiss. “You want to get a little action?”

Jason shrugged. “Sure.” *Man, I could rape you I want you so bad.*

Jun grinned. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Take off those pants. I want that ass.”

“You can have it for dessert.”

“Nope. I have my heart set on cannoli.”

Jun laughed. “No multiple choice options here. You can have both.”

“Can’t I have you now and later?”

Jason kept up the banter as he swiftly checked Ostrichwalk again. He was playing two games. Ninja book assassin and nonchalant lover. The thing with Jun was to make sex seem like it was his idea. Once they were in bed, Jun wanted constant orgasms. Getting him there was the battle.

He glanced at the new uploads on the theft site. It was an ugly, evil, vicious site because a simple Google search of his name led potential book buyers, instead of to his website, directly to the theft site.

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Damn! There were three new uploads of books. Private Eye was getting to be a major pain in the ass.

“I’m waiting,” Jun yelled from the bedroom.

Jason swallowed hard. Sex now, pirates later.

“Hold on,” he yelled back. “Just returning an email.”

He fired off three quick takedown notices. Maybe he was obsessed, but it had really begun to take its toll on him. The stress of how much he hated these pirate sites kept him awake at night.

No, not pirates. Calling them pirates romanticized them. They were thieves.

He turned off his laptop and went into the bedroom. Jun lay on top of the bed, his hard, hot body naked on top of the quilt he’d had since college.

Jason knew this because they’d been lovers in college. Over the years, they’d gotten together, broken up, gotten back together and finally last summer, they moved in together. Jun still wavered between loving and wanting commitment and needing space.

He, too, was a writer, but he wrote poems and had developed a one-man show which he staged with the funding from obscure Asian artists’ grants. It was an angry piece about growing up in Hawaii and Osaka as the grandson of Japanese immigrants interred in concentration camps in World War II.

Jun’s dad had not been able to forgive his parents’ plight. The anger had rubbed off onto the next generation. Jun often remarked it was a good thing he liked men because he would not infect a future generation with his anger. He had made a decent living out of his one-man show, *Sensei*, until drugs derailed him. It had been a searing, yet poetic piece.

He was now trying to rebuild his acting career and was earning some money publishing his poems in Japan, but once again Jun

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had found a way to self-sabotage. He had grown resentful of other people, such a publisher, making a profit from his work. He was now actively engaged in trying to retrieve the rights to his books in Japan, yet he had received some lucrative royalty payments. Jason couldn't understand Jun's motives. He was a hard guy to figure out. He yearned for success, yet feared what he considered to be *selling out*.

Jun smiled when he saw Jason coming into the bedroom. "So, how did it go at work today?"

"Okay. I thought you were going to get naked for me."

"I like when you undress me."

Jason melted as Jun kissed him. Man, his lips were so soft. Jun smelled good. It was that new bamboo body shampoo. It made Jason think of rolling in fresh-mown grass. It made him feel horny as hell. Jun must have been horny, too. Since he'd stopped using drugs, he'd reverted to his difficult-to-satisfy-sexually persona. He leaned into Jason, kissing him, giving him lots of tongue.

Jason's hand strayed down the front of Jun's jeans. He was still nice and hard. Over the years, Jun had pretended to be straight, bi, asexual and finally, when he and Jason hooked up in New York after a long separation, seemed to be more comfortable admitting his sexuality.

They fell on the futon, which took up most of their bedroom. Jason molded his body to Jun's, allowing his fingers to roam his lover's rock hard abs. Thanks to daily workout sessions, Jun was magnificent. There were moments like these when Jason was grateful that his lover paid such close attention to his physical well being. Jun's skin was smooth and soft, the muscles well defined under his skin, but not bulging. His cock was huge, which was unusual for Asian men. Jun always said he had a big Scottish cock.

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Jason stripped his lover completely, lust overtaking him as his dropped between Jun's slim, taut thighs and licked his balls.

"Oh, oh God."

Jun's legs opened a little more.

Jason knew exactly how to pleasure him. Jun had very specific tastes and it had taken Jason years to figure him out. Jun liked having his ass sucked and played with. His ass and balls only. He didn't like his cock being stimulated because he came too quickly. After letting his tongue migrate across Jun's balls and ass, he ordered his lover to his knees, pressing kisses on his hot ass. Jun reacted to the feel of Jason's mouth on his cheeks.

"Oh, Christ...put it where I need it."

"This where you need it?"

Jason began suckling on his lover's hole. When Jun was really worked up, he loved to get fucked but it was not a daily thing. Jason felt that by keeping Jun happy, he'd keep him faithful, so he pressed his tongue against his ass. He loved to give head and longed to suck Jun's cock but contented himself with putting his tongue and fingers into Jun's tight hole.

Jun bucked against him, grinding against his mouth. He felt Jun's hard movements against him and heard him jerking himself off. Jun grunted low in his throat. It didn't take long. He came hard with Jason lapping at his ass.

As his head fell against the headboard, Jason rolled off Jun's back. They both turned over, staring up at the ceiling, smiling. Jason wondered if Jun would reciprocate, but his lover's deep breathing told him Jun was asleep.

At least he's not doing meth. He would be so weird and wired when he was smoking that shit. What the fuck is he doing all day?

He tried to quell the single thought that kept ranging around his

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brain. He had been so oblivious to the signs before. The rapid speech, the inability to sit or stand still long enough to complete a sentence. Not being able to look at him, his gaze shifting in a million directions. The weird taste of his tongue and skin. *He's not using again, I know it.*

Jason lay beside his man, drinking in his exotic beauty. He'd never had such a gorgeous lover but over and over again, Jun had hurt him. He sighed and went to the living room. His gaze picked out the workout bag he took to the gym. He opened it. He saw a notebook and tugged it out of the confines of smelly socks and jockstraps. My God. It was a workout diary. Jun was obsessively weighing himself several times a day.

Jason flipped through the bizarre, tiny, delicate symbols, realizing Jun had the ability to rip his heart out and put it right back again. His partner had a new addiction. The pursuit of physical perfection. He detailed guys watching him, which exercises made him feel horny and constantly measured his heart rate.

Jason batted away at the anger he felt and retreated to the living room. All day long, Jun was working out. He was getting vitamin shots and catalogued a huge consumption of supplements that weren't in their kitchen. This troubled him. He wondered now if any drugs *were* actually involved.

Where the hell is he getting money for all these supplements? And where is he keeping them?

He put the book back in the bag.

Disappointment. He'd felt it before, but decided to use it as fuel. In the kitchen, he poured himself a glass of iced green tea and sliced up an apple. As Jun slept, he went back to the living room and embellished what had just happened. He was convinced romance writers wrote the hottest scenes because they weren't

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living them. *He* wasn't, that's for sure. Jason brushed aside thoughts of the cute Asian manicurist and went back to his scene.

Firing up his laptop again, he logged into his current work-in-progress, his latest in the male/male paranormal romance series *Cat Power 6*. It was, as the title implied, his sixth book in this gay erotic "shifter" series. He had never read or even wanted to write a shifter book but these were hot titles and his publisher had persuaded him to do one. He had researched the legends of shifters and found himself enthralled.

The first Adriano and Harris story sold through the roof. Now he was working on their new adventures set in Hawaii and there was no end in sight—except for the damned pirates.

It always came back to them. They uploaded his books in bundles. Series were great and popular with readers. And with thieves. It broke his heart when they uploaded all his books as if they had no value. Adriano and Harris were his lifelines. He loved them and felt like he let them down when their stories were stolen.

Jason knew it was ridiculous, that it wasn't his fault. They were fictional characters but to Jason they were real. Adriano came to him in dreams, like a muse, tall, silent, sexy, showing him the way to deeper, darker, sexier stories.

He forced the emotion away and focused on his book. He pictured the way Jun had come into the kitchen earlier. He rewrote the scene.

* * *

Adriano strode toward him, his cock bulging in his tight white Calvins. He was huge...perfect. A muscle-bound god with an endearing smile. Adriano always wanted him, was always ready to

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fuck. They began to kiss.

"I have champagne and lobster waiting in the bedroom. I couldn't wait for you to get home. I always miss you so much."

They hurried to the bed they shared, Adriano anxious to remove Harris's clothes. They fell to the bed, the salt-scent of the ocean outside their big bay window mingling with hot man-on-man smell in the now-warm room.

Adriano took Harris's cock in his hand. "I want to pleasure you. This is all I can think about." He was an ardent, attentive lover who took his time kissing Harris's throat, knowing this was the place that aroused him. Harris felt his body's natural response. Adriano's lips and tongue moved along Harris's jawline.

"I gotta have that cock," Harris muttered, pushing his lover back on the bed.

* * *

Jason's cell phone rang.

Annoyed, he checked the readout. It was Ara, his Audience Development supervisor.

"Dude," Ara said. "Just wanted to let you know I'm not going to deduct the ten-seat pass from Voodoo Doll...er, I mean David's tally."

"Why not? It was my sale, he swooped—"

"He says you left a nasty note on his desk."

Jason groaned. He meant the note Kellis had left.

"He showed it to me and it's horrible. I'm surprised at you. It seems so...out of character"

"Ara, it wasn't me."

Jason squeezed his eyes shut. He needed the money from those

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tickets.

“Who was it then?”

Man, I feel like I'm in school again.

“I can't say.” Jason felt wretched.

“Too bad,” Ara said. “I'm just letting you know, I won't tolerate that kind of behavior in Audience Development.”

“I know. I'm sorry, Ara.”

Ara paused, then said, “See you tomorrow.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Jason's misery swamped him. He took Ara's disappointment very hard. But what could he do? He couldn't snitch.

He went to the bedroom. Jun snored softly right where he'd left him. Should he wake him? He was starving. Hendrix curled up on the space between their pillows. It was eight o'clock and Jun was sleeping like an old man.

There was a time when he had no idea where Jun was. He wasn't sure which was worse.

* * *

Darius didn't know how to respond. It was on the tip of his tongue to say *That's the way it crumbles, cookie-wise*, as C.C. Baxter said when he discovered the girl he craved was his boss's illicit mistress.

“Say something.” Cade's voice was soft.

“I'm sorry. You've taken me by surprise. I don't know what to say.”

It wasn't just a gay disease. It was the scourge of their times, but he wasn't prepared to make any immediate decisions on whether he wanted to start a relationship with a man who was

infected with HIV.

“Look...I was with a wonderful man. I moved to London with him...we started a new life and he dumped me. It hasn't been long for me...I really like you,” Darius said.

“But...?”

He shrugged. “I'm grateful you told me. Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah. My viral load is negligible. I've never showed symptoms. I had no idea. I took a test.”

“Maybe it's wrong.”

“It's not wrong. I'm just a healthy guy.”

“Your lover never told you he had it?”

Cade shook his head. “Nope. Now...well, he's very sick. Look, I made a decision I would give you the information willingly and early in our...acquaintance. I really, really like you.”

“I like you, too.”

“Darius, I really want to have sex with you.”

“Not yet. This is a shock.”

“You want to go home?”

“No. I want to stay. I want...to process this. I'm not a complete bastard. I just want us to be safe.”

Cade seemed to consider all this. “I think that's fair. You want to cuddle in bed and watch a movie?”

“Hell, yeah.”

Cade grinned. “Wanna watch *The Apartment*?”

“Sounds good to me.”

They stepped in and kissed each other again. Darius fought the urge to flee. Why oh why did he have to be HIV positive?

“When the time comes, I promise, we'll be safe, okay?” Cade asked.

“Okay.”

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Cade took his hand. Darius's belly rumbled.

"I think it was the onions."

"Those burgers were loaded with grease. Bathroom's through there."

Darius followed Cade's pointed finger and found his way. He took his time, wondering if he could allow himself to start something new.

As he went to find Cade, he saw him naked in the bedroom. God, he was magnificent.

"I'm putting on boxer shorts," Cade said. "I'm likely to get a boner being with you. Other pants are confining."

Darius drank in the man's beauty. They kissed quickly as Darius shucked off his own clothes.

"Nice boxer briefs," Cade said, hooking his finger into the elasticized band at Darius's hip. "I knew you'd be wearing those."

They landed on the bed in a sexy heap.

"I thought my boyfriend was a bastard. Yours takes the goddam cake," Darius said.

"Yeah, but you know what C.C. Baxter would say, don't you?"

Darius felt his cock hardening as he kissed the magnificent man underneath him.

Cade muttered, "'That's the way it crumbles, cookie-wise.'"

Darius pulled down the boxer shorts, making Cade gasp. "I've never made love to someone with HIV. How safe is safe?"

"There are a lot of things we can do. I want this to be fun for you without any serious risk to you."

Darius nodded. "Okay."

"You may decide that some things are extreme, but..." Cade shrugged.

Darius was fixated by the man's incredible cock. It was thick

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and long. He stroked it, liking how hard it got.

“Try me.”

Cade’s breath came in short gusts. “This is very safe...what you’re doing now.”

Darius kept stroking Cade, increasing his speed and the pressure on the beautiful shaft in his hand. Cade came fast, shooting all over his chest and belly.

Cade’s body shook. When he calmed down a little, he opened the drawer beside him.

“I’m going to take a quick shower. When I come back, I want to see these gloves on you.”

He got up from the bed, tossing a pair of disposable latex gloves at Darius. He hesitated for only a moment before slipping them on. When Cade came back, he got on the bed.

“Use this lube, get me ready for your cock,” he said.

Darius was surprised how turned on he became.

“You can give me head using plastic wrap.” He tore a square from a box beside him. When Darius didn’t move, Cade showed him.

“Here.” He tore off another strip, pushed Darius back to the bed and proceeded to blow him, using the plastic wrap to guard his mouth from Darius’ secretions. Cade was an expert at this, clearly. Darius was shocked how good it felt, getting blown this way. He could still feel Cade’s hot mouth on him and found himself getting ready to come. Cade took Darius’s cock deep into his mouth, coming off only as Darius began to come. As soon as he finished, Cade kissed the top of his plastic-covered cock.

“What was amazing.” Darius fell back on the bed. He felt the stress wash down his neck and back.

“I still want you to fuck me,” Cade said. “You can suck my ass

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and cock using plastic.”

Darius followed Cade’s lead. He placed a square of plastic over his new lover’s ass as Cade lay back on the bed, his legs pulled high. It was quite erotic and certainly, Cade was getting some serious pleasure out of it. The man rocked against Darius’s face.

“I want to suck your balls,” Darius said.

“Bitch, suck anything you like. Just use the plastic.”

Darius did. For some reason the whole thing became super-charged. Cade came a second time with Darius’s gloved fingers probing his ass and his mouth on Cade’s covered cock.

“Please fuck me,” Cade begged. He pulled condoms out of his magic drawer and slipped it onto Darius’s cock with his mouth.

Darius took pleasure in every second he spent trying to get inside the hot ass writhing underneath him. He fucked Cade, kissing him.

“We’re going to get you tested,” Cade whispered. “If you’re negative, we can take more risks. I want you to spit in my mouth.”

Darius nodded as Cade grabbed at his ass cheeks, pulling him in deeper.

“Stick it right there. Faster. Harder. Oh, fuck! That’s it!”

Darius couldn’t tell what he was doing that was making Cade go so wild. He only knew he was surprised that even with a condom on it felt so good to fuck. He came hard, deep in Cade’s tight ass and after a sweet kiss, they rose from the bed, showered together and Cade, ever the thoughtful host, changed the sheets. They lay close together, their underpants separating them.

“We never did watch the movie,” Darius said against Cade’s ear.

“Next time,” Cade said, pulling Darius’s arm closer around him.

CHAPTER 4

Jason's phone rang again. It was Rocky, his shift supervisor.

"I'm over at Palermo's with Kellis. Wanna grab some dinner?"

He glanced over at Jun. Dead to the world. He said yes, leaving a note for Jun in case he woke up and wanted to join them. He was surprised that Rocky was calling him. They never socialized. However, knowing Kellis was with him meant he really should go. He cursed the necessity of brown-nosing. Especially when in their own ways, both men tortured him on a daily basis.

Out on the street, business was hopping for most of the stores. The sky was a beautiful, deep lilac color. The recession had hit Los Angeles badly and the first places to feel the pinch were bookstores, music outlets, and art frame shops. Palermo's was still doing huge business though. He found Rocky's wife Dee Dee and

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small daughter, Aaliyah, squeezed into a booth with him and suddenly understood the reason for the call.

Rocky's wife believed her husband was in Los Angeles working hard for his family, not hopping from bed to bed and wielding phone calls with an endless array of women. She thought Jason was the most normal member of The Dinosaur Club. She'd mentioned it several times.

"Dinner's on me," Rocky said. "I know you took the fall for me on the note Kellis left on Voodoo Doll's desk. Sorry about that."

Jason was stunned that Rocky had written it. It seemed a very unprofessional thing for a supervisor to do.

"Hi," Jason said, kissing Dee Dee's cheek. He liked Dee Dee. A lot more than he liked Rocky. Kellis sat opposite them and moved over to give Jason more room. He had the gigantic, laminated menu in his hand and they shared it. Jason picked mushroom pasta because it was the cheapest thing on the menu. Goddam mushrooms. He couldn't get away from them.

Jun showed up as the crusty Italian bread and marinated mushroom appetizer arrived. He hugged everyone at the table, draping his arm around Jason. In front of their friends and Jason's co-workers, he was affectionate. In front of his Asian friends, Jun was an ass.

"You're coloring SpongeBob?" he asked Aaliyah, who nodded solemnly.

"I love SpongeBob. Can I color, too?"

"No." She scowled.

Her parents laughed but Jun looked mortified. Jason felt for him. His upbringing had been one of respecting his elders. He took Jun's fingers under the table.

"What are you going to eat?" he asked.

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Jun took his fingers away from Jason and studied the menu.

“Steak, I think.”

Jun always picked the most outrageous, most expensive thing to order.

“So why do you all call that poor Dan guy Voodoo Doll?” Dee Dee suddenly asked. “I mean, he seems okay to me.”

They launched into a full-scale character assassination of their co-worker. Across the room, Jason noticed the store manager from the Skylight bookstore. They raised a glass to one another.

“Flirting?” Jun asked.

“No, babe. That guy hand-sells my paperbacks, remember?”

Jun looked across the room. “Oh, yeah. Right.” Jun had embarrassed Jason by first asking to have his own haiku poetry books stocked in the store, then balking at the customary terms. Small-print authors such as Jason found that the only way to have their books in brick-and-mortar establishments was to hand-sell books to them.

He’d been astonished to learn the hard way what was involved with having a book published. He earned more from ebooks than paper, but being a writer, holding his first paperback had been a dream come true.

Then the dream became a nightmare.

He’d had no idea that his books were marked “non-returnable” by his publisher. This meant the big store chains would not take his titles because they wanted to be able to return any unsold copies to the publisher.

Jason had been taught all the tricks and had ingratiated himself with Skylight. He had given them five copies of his first book, *Cat Power* with an invoice saying *Forty- five percent, fully returnable*. This meant the store got forty-five percent of the sale and could

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return any books left over.

After having two book signings there and constantly visiting the store, taking the staff pizza and cookies, he had now sold sixty books through them. He liked them and they liked him. Jun wanted to sell his poems, but balked at the percentage he would have to give the store.

Now his books sat in boxes shipped by Amazon, unopened and unread in their hall closet. Jason had distanced himself from the squabble out of self-preservation. He needed Skylight. He needed to keep his books in the store.

Dinner was fun and he was ridiculously pleased when Jun paid for the two of them.

"Jason worked so hard today," Jun said. "I'm so proud of you, babe. Did you know you're number three at Fictionwise today?"

"I had no idea." Jason was excited that Jun even cared to check on stuff like that. Fictionwise was the biggest Internet warehouse for romantic fiction. Though many readers bought directly from his publisher, some preferred to go through a third party such as Fictionwise, which offered discounts and other incentives.

They crossed the street with Jason's container of leftover pasta and a cannoli to share in bed. The lovers kissed at the door.

"I always love coming home with you," Jun said, rubbing his nose against Jason's. They cuddled in the elevator, kissing all the way to their front door.

"*Survivor* is on," Jun said, hurling himself in front of the TV.

Jason put himself to work finishing the sex scene he'd started before dinner. His mind raced as his fingers flew across the keys.

* * *

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Adriano took Harris's cock into his hot, hungry mouth. Harris arched up to him. The way Adriano's hand encircled his cock and balls felt like exquisite torture. Harris couldn't move. He didn't want to move. He couldn't even reach Adriano which was another torment. His hands needed to touch the man who gave him such forceful bliss. He finally got his hands on the bare, muscular thigh.

"Wait your turn," Adriano rasped, coming off his cock for a moment. He soon put it back and Harris's head lolled in abandonment as Adriano coaxed a powerful orgasm from him.

When Harris could speak, he crawled to his lover snarling, "My turn now," and guzzled at the juicy drops of fluid on Adriano's massive cock.

* * *

Jun inched up the volume and the crabby old man next door thumped on the wall with his broom. Jun ignored him. The old man thumped again.

"Fuck you!" Jun screeched.

"Turn it down, baby, please." Jason's head throbbed in his hands. The stress would kill him, he was certain of it.

Jun turned it down a fraction and returned to his show.

Jason returned to his book.

* * *

Harris slaved over Adriano's cock. There was a knock at the door. Their neighbor.

"How does he always know when I am sucking you?" Harris asked.

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He opened the door, greeting the handsome, muscular man who'd moved next door. Butch had come to crave the moments when Harris would allow him to help service Adriano's huge cock.

"I need him," Butch said. Harris understood. They walked to the bedroom where Adriano, tousle-haired, hard and anxious, knelt on the bed.

"We have company, I see." Adriano's dark eyes gleamed.

"I need help, baby," Harris said. "And Butch needs you."

Butch begged to lick the cock jutting in his face.

"Oh, all right." Harris nodded, Butch not losing a moment. He bent and licked Adriano's lovely cock head. Harris sat on the bed and watched. It didn't make him jealous watching Adriano being serviced. It turned him on immensely. He knew there was a connection between Adriano and Butch, but loved that nothing ever happened unless Harris was there.

"May I suck his ass, baby?" Adriano asked before even laying a finger on the blond hopelessly attached to his cock.

"Of course," Harris said.

Adriano upended the man gripping his shaft.

"Suck him for me," Harris instructed Butch.

Adriano let out a hiss as Butch swallowed him deeper. He pulled down the tight shorts encasing Butch's cute ass and began to kiss and suck him.

"You want to come in his mouth or in his ass?" Harris asked Adriano.

Adriano took his tongue out of Butch's ass.

"Both," he said.

* * *

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Jason stopped typing. He had another two thousand words to write before he could even think of sleeping.

He had a long night ahead and another long day tomorrow. He gazed at Jun, sleeping on the sofa, his legs tucked under him.

Jason went to the kitchen to make coffee. Hendrix followed, jumping on the counter and rubbing his face against his chin. Jun hated the cat being on the counter, but Jason didn't care. He needed the affection. Hendrix purred contentedly. He tried to be simply in the moment and not stress about the future, but it was hard. His constant fear was losing everything. He needed Arnold and Helen Costa to come through for him on Sunday. He needed that sale. It was his only chance of getting commission. Whatever happened, he had to be there at the DTC to meet and greet the couple in person.

Jason felt his heart hardening. He had to guard his leads better. Somehow, some way, he had to guard his books, his leads...he glanced back into the living room at Jun.

And his relationship.

* * *

Darius and Cade awoke early in the morning. Cade was a hottie and sex had been fun, romantic and pretty darn hot, but Darius felt the need to get on with his day. Cade had the day off and eyed his desktop computer like he was desperate to get to work. He made them each a cup of instant coffee in cracked and chipped mugs that made weird noises as they sipped. Cade made jokes about it, but Darius was petrified his cup would disintegrate in his hands.

The sound of morning bells pealing from the church high on the hill they could see from the kitchen window charmed Darius.

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The instant coffee, one of Darius's pet peeves, did not. He thanked Cade and said he would call a cab, but Cade manfully insisted on taking him home.

"Here's my card, use it," Cade said, handing Darius a small blue square of card stock with his name, Stewart Cade Thompson, and his phone number.

"Your name is really Stewart?"

Cade shrugged. "I prefer Cade. I only use Cade, but my mom likes it. She still calls me Stewart."

So, Darius hitched a ride home on Cade's motorbike. The rush hour traffic was in full bloom and Darius held onto his new lover's waist as they slid in amongst the traffic, switching lanes with an ease bordering on suicidal.

With a pang, Darius thought about Cade's HIV status. He had to think about this, if he really wanted to continue. As his fingers gripped the man's hips, he marveled that there wasn't an ounce of body fat on the guy.

When they arrived outside Darius's apartment, Cade stopped, but kept revving the bike. They hugged. Darius handed over his helmet.

"I'll call you," Darius said.

Cade's sweet grin made him feel really good as he took the stairs to his apartment. His neighbor, Jeff, was coming out shirtless and in his raggedy old jeans to collect his morning paper. There was nothing attractive about Jeff, but he was a nice enough guy. Darius tried averting his gaze but Jeff gave him a wave.

"Want to come in for coffee?"

Darius could smell the coffee brewing and he longed to get a decent cup.

"Sure," he said. He had a few minutes. He'd just drink fast. Jeff

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shared the apartment with his lover, whose last name was Mott. He always referred to himself that way, too, which was unfortunate since the couple was always referred to as Mutt and Jeff. Mutt was a weirdo, Darius had decided on their first meeting.

The two men rarely socialized and did big shopping bouts on Saturdays, crating in endless twelve packs of beer. They seemed to be on the same time schedule as Darius, who frequently ran into them hauling empties to the garbage chute.

Jeff, however, was quite friendly and, Darius realized, the guy was lonely. Mutt seemed to work from very early until around three o'clock in the afternoon. On the occasions Darius ran into Jeff when Mutt was out, he seemed happy. When he ran into them as a couple, Jeff always looked depressed.

He followed Jeff inside the musty apartment. For a couple of gay guys who'd been together thirty years, they had no taste whatsoever and no discernable cleaning skills.

Mutt hogged the gigantic, puffy, faux-leather sofa, which was littered with ugly cushions easily twenty years old and a massive collection of *TV Guides* he refused to toss.

The TV was turned off for a change but the place could have used some cleaning, an open window, and drapes that didn't block out every last ray of sun.

His cell phone rang. Finn.

Finn?

The shock stopped him in his tracks.

"I'm sorry," he said to Jeff, "but I have to take this. It's business."

Jeff's disappointment was palpable, but he said, "I understand." Something in his eyes conveyed the man's desperation.

"Tell you what. Give me five minutes and I'll be back for that

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coffee.”

He took the call.

“Really?” Jeff looked so grateful it was pathetic.

“Sure,” he said.

“I’ll leave the door open,” Jeff said as Darius said as calmly as he could, “This is Darius.”

He unlocked the door to his apartment, which looked like an ode to kabuki modern in comparison with Mutt and Jeff’s cluttered abode.

“Hey,” Finn said.

Light poured through the unadorned windows, hurting Darius’s eyes. He responded with his own greeting, dropping his laptop on his worktable, which was pushed up against the window. He looked out onto the street. He was surprised to see Cade over at the coffee shop, since he had said he wanted to spend the day writing.

He turned his back on the view, focusing on the long silence coming from Finn.

“Look, I know this is awkward...”

Shit. He doesn’t want me back, I can tell. The bastard wants to talk shop!

He wasn’t going to help Finn out. He didn’t smooth things over the way he normally would have. *We’re a kind of Mutt and Jeff, too.*

Darius let Finn fumble over his words as he checked the contents of his fridge. Nothing but some leftover Chinese food. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had Chinese food. Weeks ago.

He’d have to go over to Jeff’s for coffee.

Any hope he’d had of this call being a reconciliation continued to recede into his sad fantasies as Finn griped about the bad

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economy and how his bartender lover was so hot in the sack but a lousy businessman.

"I have no idea why you feel the necessity to call me and tell me this," Darius said, keeping his tone icy. "It really has nothing to do with me."

"Shit, Darius. I didn't mean to say all that. Look, I want this bar venture to work. I need to sell off my shares of Ostrichwalk."

"I know about that already." Darius couldn't keep the irritation out of his voice.

"The thing is, I have no idea how to find someone. I'm really out of the loop."

"Again, it's not my problem." Darius hoped Finn and his horny bartender lost their shirts.

"Will you accept Xanthe finding someone for me?" Finn asked.

"Of course I will." *What the hell is going on? Why is he calling me?*

"Cool," said Finn. "Thanks for being okay about it. I just...you know..."

"No, I don't know."

"Things have been so contentious between us, I thought you'd give me a hard time."

"A hard time? Ha! I think that's your new lover's problem. Again, not mine."

He ended the call. He was so damned mad, he wanted to punch a hole in the wall. Instead, he went next door for coffee. He knocked at the door, which still stood open. There was no answer. That was odd.

He called Jeff's name. Their old neighbor, Mrs. Kline, who lived opposite came into the hallway.

"Is there something wrong, Darius?"

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He glanced over his shoulder at her. "I don't think so. Jeff left the door open so I could come back for coffee.

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know."

She stood with him, in her gray velour tracksuit, and they went into the apartment. They found Jeff lying on the kitchen floor, flat on his back.

He was staring at the ceiling. No. A closer look revealed Jeff was dead.

CHAPTER 5

LaWanda's punk rock band, Ghetto Fabulous, played worse than usual. LaWanda must have twisted the arms of every last employee of the theater, including the actors and more than a few people looked embarrassed.

"Is that vomit on that wall?" Jun shouted over the alleged music, leaning into Jason.

The club venue in the heart of Hollywood on the corner of Hollywood and Orange, was hideous. The music was so bad, Jun wanted to go home after the third, er, song. LaWanda hadn't gone on until midnight. They'd walked to the club from their apartment.

A reprieve came when LaWanda broke the stage with an ill-timed jump, hitting the guitarist with a live mike stand. He crashed into her and she fell, hard, right the dance floor. Jason and Jun

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rushed the stage, helping to fish her out of the hole.

They walked back home again, hand in hand. "I'm not going to one more shitty show of hers," Jun shouted as they left the venue.

"Okay," Jason shouted back. His ears were ringing and his body still shook from the weird trance music pulsing the room thanks to an inept DJ as they walked out.

At the first set of lights on Highland, Jun leaned against a telegraph pole.

"I don't know what's worse. Her singing or her dancing."

Jason laughed. "Oh man. I'd have to say her dancing. I can't believe she wore a skirt and had no undies on. She was flashing me."

Jun shook his head. "She wasn't flashing you, baby. She was flashing *me*. That can-can really took the cake though."

"And what about the stage? She's probably gonna have to pay for the damage."

"God," Jun said. They started laughing.

Jun's mood seemed to improve. He slung his arm around Jason's neck as they crossed the street. It was one-thirty in the morning, but Mann's Chinese Theater was still a typical zoo with tourists, theatergoers and movie star lookalikes swarming the area designated for movie star footprints.

It was eerie seeing a lookalike Jack Sparrow talking to a lookalike Edward Scissorhands. There was an Alice Cooper lookalike with a gigantic boa constrictor slithering around his neck and body.

"Come on." Jason grabbed Jun's hand and they shouldered past the throng. The next few blocks were covered with the stars on the Boulevard.

"I've never heard of half these people," Jun said, peering down

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at them.

Jason knew them all. He loved everything to do with Hollywood, movie stars...talent.

"I love you," Jun suddenly said and pressed him up against the Hollywood Wax Works window. It was closed now, but Jason was surprised to find his lover hard and so horny.

"Let's give the tourists a show."

"We can't fuck here."

"Sure we can." Jun's eyes bored into his. "I want to fuck your ass."

Jason heard Jun's belt buckle jangle and felt his lover's fingers fumble at his belt, too. Jun was surprisingly forthright tonight.

"The cops are patrolling the streets, remember?"

"Fuck them. This won't take long."

Jason was aware of a few people crossing the street. A bus passed them. The falafel stand on the corner was still open, but only the counter guy was there.

Jun dropped to his haunches, sucking Jason's cock. Jason was petrified of being arrested. Jun never wanted this kind of hot sex at home. Only in public.

Research, he told himself as Jun's fingers slid up toward his asshole.

Jun suddenly straightened. He turned Jason around. *Shit. He knows I love to get fucked like this.* Jun's cock poked at Jason's ass. Jason braced himself since he hadn't been prepared. He felt Jun's fingers moving away.

"I took butter from that club," Jun said. "I'm buttering you up, baby."

Butter? He remembered now. They'd ordered a bowl of soup and it came with a rock-hard piece of bread. The soup had been

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awful and after one sip, they'd sent it back.

Jun slathered the butter on Jason's ass.

"Fucking hurry, I want you."

"You're getting me, bitch." Jun bit the back of his neck. It was a gesture that always sent shivers down Jason's spine. Jun entered him so quickly it took Jason's breath away. He wanted to jerk himself off but Jun was fucking him too hard. He had to brace himself for each thrust.

Jun's fingers came around him.

Oh, God, a cop car down on Cahuenga!

"Come now, my beautiful whore. Come." Jun's voice purred in his ear. Unbelievably, Jason exploded as Jun took off inside him. One stroke of that cock against his prostate and Jason was always a goner.

They had little time to do much else than pull up their pants. They pretended to ogle the window display of Anna Nicole Smith as the cop car slowed to a crawl. It kept going.

"Close call," Jason said and finished buttoning his fly. He could feel Jun's juices in his ass and it felt good.

"Nothing is what it seems. Not in Hollywood. Look at this. It proves my point," Jun said.

"What, baby?"

"This waxwork looks nothing like Anna Nicole Smith. Nothing like her at all."

The whole thing struck him as so ridiculous, Jason laughed out loud.

* * *

Darius felt disoriented. Six-thirty in the morning and he had to

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explain to the cops why he was in the apartment of a neighbor he barely liked. Jeff of all people...dying. The man had been lonely and wanted companionship, but really, this was too much. Darius struggled to remember what else he and Jeff had talked about.

It's weird. I always thought Mutt would die first. Jeff seemed to take care of him. Maybe I read them wrong...I should never have befriended him when I moved into the building.

"Were you close?" the cop asked.

"No. We're neighbors. You know...we say hi, we talk about local politics."

The front door opened and Mutt walked in. The cops had found his office number and called him. He glanced at Darius and moved past him as the second cop came out of the bedroom and escorted him to the kitchen.

Mrs. Kline came out from the room where she'd been talking to the second cop. Her hands shook as she perched beside Darius on the sofa.

"Are you okay?" Darius asked her.

She nodded, looking anything but okay.

"And he seemed fine?" the first cop asked. They'd been over the same questions many times. Why was this guy grilling him?

"Absolutely. I got a phone call from my business partner, so I took it. I said I'd be back in a few minutes and—"

"That was early for a business call wasn't it?" the cop asked.

Darius frowned. "No. He was calling from England. Anyway, I came back and you know the rest."

Mutt came out of the kitchen. He looked strange. He glanced up from the floor, where he'd been staring.

"Thanks for finding him," he said to Darius. His hand rose and fell again.

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He drew out a chair from the dining table and dumped a stack of books on the floor and sat on it.

His head went into his hands.

The cops thanked Darius and Mrs. Kline. They left the apartment.

Mrs. Kline plucked at Darius's sleeve as they walked into the hallway. A man in a gray morning suit and white gloves pressed the buzzer out front. His van out front indicated he was from a funeral home.

They heard the buzzer and the man walked in, taking his time.

"Good morning," Mrs. Kline trilled.

"Good morning," he said, his tone grave and soft. He walked past them and knocked on Mutt and Jeff's door.

"If you ask me," Mrs. Kline said to Darius, "this is the best thing that could have happened. Some love kills. This man will start to live again."

She touched her nose and drifted across the hallway to her own apartment.

Darius stared as she closed the door behind her.

What does she know? Mad old bat...

* * *

Jason took the bus and train to the theater on Sunday morning. Jun was still burrowed under the covers with Hendrix and begged to keep the car. Jason agreed only because he didn't want to start the day on a fight.

Man, my ears are still ringing.

As he walked into the theater, a pianist in the center of the room played Mozart and the generally older, genteel crowd sipped

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champagne. Jason waved to a couple of the theater ushers and ran to the box office.

LaWanda glared at him. "You took off early last night."

"Sorry, honey, Jun was sick."

Her expression softened. "He's not using again is he?"

Only earplugs. Jason shook his head.

"What did you think of the new songs?"

"Excellent," he lied.

He waited for her to preen under his false admiration for a moment and he asked her if the Costas had picked up their tickets yet.

"Nope," she said. "They still have thirty minutes until show time."

"Okay." He grabbed a bottle of champagne and two glasses and ran toward the back entrance.

A couple of old girls held out empty glasses, thinking he was a waiter, but he sped past them, reaching the back entrance just as a couple came hobbling in. The woman, an elegant blonde with frosted tips, limped as she adjusted her furs. She looked like she'd taken a fall. The man held her arm.

Shit! She's only got one shoe! Please God, don't let these be the Costas.

"Mr. Costa?" His voice came out in a frightened squeak.

"Jason?" Mr. Costa's eyes narrowed.

"Is that our champagne?" Mrs. Costa asked, looking eager.

Jason nodded. "I'm Jason, yes. My goodness. Mrs. Costa, did you take a fall? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, sweetie."

"She's not fine. She's been assaulted!"

"Assaulted?" Jason couldn't believe what he was hearing.

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“No, no,” Mrs. Costa said.

He husband raged on. “And that’s not champagne. That’s vinegar!”

Before Jason could respond, Mr. Costa went on, “We came out of the parking lot into the laneway. There wasn’t a security guard in sight and—”

“We walked into the middle of a gang war!” Helen Costa’s eyes were wide.

Jason heard those words and felt a strange lurch in his chest.

Mr. Costa’s face was grim. “We got caught in the crossfire.”

“Oh, my God!” Jason almost his grip on the bottle and the glasses. He thought he might be having a heart attack.

“I threw my wife on the ground and threw myself on top of her. Bullets whizzed over our heads.”

“One went right past his ear.” Helen looked spooked.

“Oh, my God,” Jason said again, his voice coming out in a shriek.

There was a dramatic pause.

“I’ve never been so excited in my whole life,” Helen said. “I lost my shoe. Wait until I tell all my friends!”

Jason stared from one to the other of the Costas. “I...er...”

“We’re leaving,” Mr. Costa said. “I’m not staying and watching that show when they’re going to be waiting with all their guns blazing when we leave.”

“Oh, please, Mr. Costa, I assure you nothing like this has ever happened before.”

“Honey, now we’re here, don’t let me lose a Jimmy Choo in vain. Let’s see the show.”

Jason poured them each a glass of champagne and ran to the box office. By now the story of the gunfight had worked its way

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around the theater and LaWanda looked shocked.

“Get them to their seats, baby boy, and I’ll make sure somebody finds her shoe.”

Jason nodded, grabbed the tickets and ushered the Costas to their seats.

Helen enjoyed the attention the other theatergoers gave them and accepted her scuffed-up Jimmy Choo somebody had found outside for her.

“Battle scars,” she said, sotto voce.

Jason topped up their glasses and left them sitting in their seats as the theater lights flashed, indicating two minutes to curtain time.

“Leave that bottle.” Mr. Costa yanked it from his hands.

Jason left the theater and headed to the lobby.

God! What a catastrophe.

He paced the closed theater doors, tempted to upend the bottle he found on a marble ledge and swill what was left of its contents straight down his throat.

They have to love this play. They have to they have to.

His cell phone rang. It was Jun.

“Babe, I know you’re busy but I just thought you should know. I just found all of your books uploaded again on a music site. They’re uploading them by the hundreds. Babe...they were put there in locked codes. I can’t access them. You have to be a paid member to get to them.”

“Fuck!” Jason said. *Why is Jun looking on a music site? What’s he doing?* His brain cleared. “Wait...what’s it called?”

Jun read off the name of the site.

Jason breathed again. “Oh, that’s a fake.”

“It is?”

“Yes, they trick you. Any title you type in gets a positive read

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but it's a phony. It's a ploy to get your money."

"Hot damn. I was about to pony up."

"Oh, baby. You'd do that for me?"

"No, sweetie. They have some cool music."

Jason's head hurt. "I thought you weren't going to pirate music anymore."

"I'm not. Will you relax? I'm bored. I was just surfing. Hey, there's another site that has your books in a torrent. Whatever that is."

"Yeah. I know what those are."

"They came from some guy who goes by Private Eye. There's a link to that Ostrichwalk site."

"Fuck!" Jason felt his blood pressure rising.

"I'll make a list of everything and you can take it down when you get home."

"No, babe, can you just send me a text with the link now? I'll pop downstairs and file away."

"How's it going over there?"

"My dear old couple got shot at."

"Really?"

"I'll tell you about it later." Jason checked the time. He had forty-five minutes to go before intermission. Plenty of time to race downstairs, get online and come back again.

His will battled his sense of injustice. He picked up the champagne bottle he'd been ogling, rounded the corner, hid in a dark space and put his lips to the bottle. His chance to get hammered and the bottle was empty. What the fuck? Somebody had emptied it as he'd been talking to Jun.

He slid to the floor.

I can't take much more of this. I can't.

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* * *

"I don't know about meeting your parents, Cade. I'm sure they're great people but this is kinda rushing things for me."

Darius had gone to the coffee shop for toast and coffee and felt ambushed instead. He stood at the counter hoping to order, hoping for a smile. Instead he got aggravation and had no idea why.

"It's just dinner, Darius, not a wedding rehearsal."

"Look, I had a weird morning, okay?"

"Not as weird as mine," Cade retorted. "I have to pull a double shift. I'm sick of this job."

This was a whole different Cade than the one Darius knew. Openly criticizing his place of employment right in front of his coworkers was a bad idea.

"We'll talk about this later," Darius said, feeling a monster headache coming on.

He rubbed and squeezed his forehead. He could feel the guy behind him getting restless.

"No. We'll talk about this now."

"I don't want to discuss this now. I found my neighbor dead this morning." Darius still couldn't believe it. He'd spent most of the day inside his apartment showering, cleaning, going through the website, dealing with irate authors and rabid book fans.

"Oh...listen, this is about me being you know..." Cade's voice dropped. "Positive, isn't it?"

"No, it's not. Did you hear me at all?"

Darius felt his headache bloom behind his eyes. The music was playing pretty loud and maybe people weren't listening, but there seemed to be a lack of conversation all of a sudden. The guy who'd been waiting behind him walked out.

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“Look, we’ll talk later,” Darius said, swinging his laptop over his shoulder.

“Yeah, goodbye and all that,” Cade shouted, sounding bitter.

Outside, Darius took a deep breath. What the fuck was going on with Cade?

He stared across the road at his apartment building and all he could see was Jeff lying dead on the floor, the expression on his face he realized now had been one of surprise. He wondered how Mutt would handle it.

He debated where to go next. He did not want to go home. He heard the café door open and Cade was beside him.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’m having a really bad day, okay? We didn’t sleep much and I wasn’t expecting to work.”

“It’s fine,” Darius said. He saw Mutt walk out of the apartment building and trot down the stairs.

Darius frowned. *Man, the guy looks like he’s got a spring in his step!*

He shook his head. He was imagining things.

“Come back in, okay?”

Darius hesitated.

“Come on...I won’t bite.” Cade smiled. “Unless you ask me to.”

Darius fell for the smile. “Okay.” Back inside, his favorite table was gone, but he picked another one without a window view. He fired up his laptop and Cade soon brought him coffee and a grilled cheese sandwich.

“There you are, big boy.” Cade bustled around cleaning up glasses, ashtrays...he seemed to be back to his usual good humor.

Drugs? Could that be it? Darius resolved to learn more about Cade’s medical condition. What was he taking? Was his viral load

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really negligible? Was whatever he was taking likely to cause such violent mood swings? He sighed as he studied the latest uploads on his website. In spite of his lack of attention, Ostrichwalk was doing fine. All of his Jason Jagger books still had live, active links.

He had no idea why, but this guy intrigued him. His choice of material wasn't to Darius's taste, but he was intrigued nonetheless. He wondered how much money Jagger was making and why he so diligently patrolled the site, removing his links. *Why does he need to worry? He's probably got a big, fancy house in Malibu. He probably has hot guys tumbling over his feet. The guy has to be rolling in dough.*

Darius checked all the uploads and was surprised to see a few of the links were suddenly down. He's obsessed. He must be on here night and day removing links. Jagger's first book *Cat Power* still had an active link. A PDF file. He downloaded it. He'd read it, just to see what all the fuss was about.

* * *

Mr. Costa refused to sign up for a season pass. Mrs. Costa, however, slipped Jason a check. "This goes to my private mail box. They can send me my passes there."

Jason blinked. He'd just made commission. He had to thank the show's stars who'd made a point of coming out to the lobby and greeting the couple. He was sure this made all the difference. Mrs. Costa made a point of telling Raul Marquez that they, like him, were survivors of random violence.

Raul nodded. In that moment, Jason realized how close the Costas came to being urban statistics. Fate really did have some fickle fingers. *The world is like one great big turnstyle and each*

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day they let me pass...one day, you never know when, they just don't...

After hugging her, Jason found a security guard to personally escort the Costas back to their car. The guard seemed a little tipsy. He must have been drinking the free champagne.

Mahdi, who'd been working as an usher, ran over to Jason.

"You got a check? Good boy!" She hugged him. Checks were okay since they could be verified immediately. LaWanda, who'd had bad luck selling copies of her CD at Will Call grudgingly took his check, verified it by electronic activation and took it from him to put with the current day's earnings. She would let Ara know she had it since nobody was in Audience Development right now. Jason hated to hang on until the following morning to have his statistics bumped up, but at least he had the money.

"Well done, sweetie. Did you drive or take the train?" Mahdi asked.

"Train."

"Well, I'll buy you a slice of pizza and we'll head home together."

She threaded her arm through his and they left the theater.

It was sunny and warm and Jason felt good about life. His new book was coming along just fine. He was caught in what he called "in between land" where he was mentally with his characters, but physically in his own life.

I want my own Adriano. The thought hit him like a brick to the head. Jun wasn't an Adriano. Maybe an Adriano didn't really exist. He brushed the thought aside. He was about to eat pizza. The second-best thing in his mind to sex.

They rolled up to Johnnie's and were shocked to see it was closed. A small sign in the window said, *Due to the bad economy,*

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we are forced to close. Thank you to all our loyal customers.

"I knew he was over-generous with those mushrooms," Mahdi said.

The thought was so hilarious in that ridiculous moment that Mahdi and Jason laughed. It felt good to laugh. Man, it had been too long...

* * *

Darius went to an AIDS clinic after his strange encounter with Cade. He felt he needed to know more about HIV and AIDS and was relieved to find a very short wait before a counselor invited him to take a seat.

The place was a little intimidating with its health posters and the slight air of panic to some of the young men in the waiting room, but then AIDS was a scary disease.

After introductions were made and Jim Jarvis poured Darius a cup of coffee, the counselor, an attractive guy in his late thirties sat back and let Darius talk.

He described his evening with Cade, their ultra-safe sex and he confessed that Cade was his first experience with somebody living with HIV.

"There's no need to feel guilty about that," Jim said. "I am glad you've met a responsible man and I am glad you can see past the disease to give him a chance. However, I think you should get tested yourself. If your relationship is going to continue, you should know exactly what his health status is."

"But he says his viral load is negligible," Darius reminded him.

Jim looked him right in the eye. "And maybe it is, but he wouldn't be the first guy who lied. Look, I'm not saying he's

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lying, he may be telling you the truth, but there are many strains of this virus and even if his viral load is what he says it is, he can still infect you.”

“Can the medications he’s taking...or possibly be taking, affect his personality, you know cause mood swings?”

Jim studied him for a moment. “If his viral level is undetectable as he says it is, it means he’s taking his medications. HIV is not an illness that gets that way by accident. There are side effects to all drugs, but I can’t honestly answer that question without knowing what he’s taking.”

“Fair enough,” Darius said, feeling dispirited.

“I think it’s fair for you to ask him what he is taking, should your relationship progress, because there are long-term side effects associated with any course of treatment. But let’s start with you, shall we? Let’s get you tested and then, if you like, I’d be happy to set up a counseling session with you and your boyfriend.”

“My lover left me,” Darius said, feeling the pain all over again of Finn’s defection. “I didn’t think I’d be wading in the dating pool again.”

“It doesn’t have to be a bad thing,” Jim said. “Come on, let’s get you started.”

Darius submitted to blood testing, feeling the same panic everyone felt when they were tested for HIV. Over the shoulder of the male nurse taking his blood, he stared at the poster and the alarming statistical graph that male-to-male sexual contact made up fifty-three percent of AIDS-related illnesses in the US.

I don’t want to be a statistic. I want to be with one man who loves me. Why did Finn stop loving me?

Jim Jameson was talking to a twinky-looking young couple as he left the clinic, but gave him a friendly wave as he closed the

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door on his new session.

Another clinic worker gave Darius a card and said he should call in four days for his results. In the meantime, he pulled out a plastic bag, filled it with a ton of information on HIV and AIDS.

“Would you like some condoms?” the guy asked.

Darius stared at the tray on the tabletop with an array of packages in all kinds of enticing colors.

“These new Japanese ones are smoking,” the guy said. “All the guys love them.”

Darius took a few.

“Don’t be shy,” the guy said. “Better safe than sorry.”

* * *

Mahdi lived in the Hollywood Hills in a lovely, spacious apartment on Odin, an incongruously tiny, twisting canyon road overlooking the Hollywood Bowl. You could never find parking and it was impossible to get public transportation there, but it was beautiful, a secret jewel in the sprawling city mass.

In the summer, it was the go-to place for all her friends when the Bowl’s concert series was in full swing. She had a clear view of the amphitheatre and it was as if the musicians played right outside her window. Most of the time she liked it, but as she frequently told the members of The Dinosaur Club, on weird jazz nights, she didn’t enjoy it so much, especially when the loud, experimental music went on late into the night.

She had persuaded Jason to come for the Bowl’s big event, *Sing-Along Sound of Music*, where everybody, including the men, dressed up as characters from the musical. She and Jason chopped salad makings in the kitchen as her new boyfriend, Raul Marquez

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from the DTC's hit show *Fiesta Forever*, fired up the Weber on the balcony. Four chairs were positioned on one end for good views of the Bowl but smoke kept blowing across it.

"I don't mind," Jason assured her when Mahdi complained to Raul. "We've got the best seats in the house."

He loved Mahdi's home. Comfortably furnished with huge sofas, large, wooden coffee and side tables, the walls were given over to her life in the theater. She had worked at the magnificent Shubert Theater before it had been demolished and had been given two priceless gifts before it all came tumbling down. Pride of place was a gigantic, stunning black and white photograph of actress Marion Davies in all her 1940s glory. The photo was luminous. Davies embodied everything about old Hollywood glamour that Jason and Mahdi loved.

She'd also nabbed a framed poster of Leonard Nimoy as Sherlock Holmes from a production staged there.

Mahdi had posters from *Jelly's Last Jam* and a few of the DTC's earlier efforts. She was a theater geek through and through.

Jason checked the time on his cell phone. He'd called Jun, who had been excited about coming. He said he'd stop and pick up some champagne.

"Hey, babe, the salmon's already done," Raul said, coming into the kitchen. He handed Mahdi a platter of barbecued fish and corn cobs. They grinned at each other. Their relationship was a super-secret and clearly in its early hot phase. Mahdi was taller and bigger than Raul, but they seemed to adore one another.

The front door intercom buzzed and Mahdi disengaged from meaningful eye combat to answer it. It was the first time Jason had ever been alone with Raul and the two men stared at each other.

"How are the books selling?" Raul asked him.

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"They're doing fine," Jason responded.

Raul popped a cashew into his mouth. "Why do I sense a but?"

Jason laughed. "Piracy is killing me."

"Piracy?"

"Your honey's here," Mahdi said, full of smiles. Jason was pleased to see that Jun had brought her flowers.

"Poppies," Jason said. "How lovely."

Jun nodded, kissing Jason full on the lips. Jason noted the pained expression on Raul's face.

"Poppies always make me think of Mahdi. They're happy, peppy flowers."

Mahdi laughed. "Is that how you see me, Jun?"

"Sure. You have a beautiful fragility but you're also very strong."

"I am woman, hear me roar," Mahdi joked.

Jason was still in shock that she was involved with Raul. It was a controversial relationship to be sure. Raul had so far proved to be the only member of his comedy troupe not to be sleeping his way through the theater staff. Mahdi, for all her appearances of being tough, was a marshmallow. He hoped Raul wouldn't break her heart.

"This is the schedule for upcoming Bowl events," Mahdi said, spreading a brochure on top of the kitchen counter.

"Jack Johnson!" Jun enthused.

"Sergio Mendez," Raul said, nodding his approval. "Can't wait."

"Oh, look. A vampire weekend in September," Jason said.

"We can dress up. Say...should I have dressed up as Fraulein Maria?" Jun asked as the overture for *The Sound of Music* began.

"No," Raul said. He popped the champagne cork and filled

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Mahdi's elegant champagne flutes. They toasted one another, filled their plates and rushed outside.

It was a lovely moment, as they all watched the movie began, Julie Andrews thrusting her arms open wide to life and love, the sunlight slowly beginning to fade behind her.

"I never saw this show as a kid," Raul said.

"Were you in a gang?" Jun asked as the movie opened and the Hollywood Hills came alive with the sound of sing-along-songs.

Raul didn't take offense. "No. Mexican kids didn't watch things like *The Sound of Music*."

"I didn't watch it as a kid either," Jun said. "The first time I watched it was with Jason in college. We watched it in bed eating beef with black bean sauce."

Raul laughed. "You remember what you were eating?"

"Sure I do," Jun said. "I was naked in bed and in love with the hottest guy I ever met. You don't forget a thing like that."

Jason should have been happy, except he'd just glimpsed the label on the champagne bottle. Veuve Clicquot. Where the hell had Jun found the money to buy such expensive booze?

* * *

Darius didn't really want to go home but he had work to do and he was expecting a call from Xanthe. He didn't feel like battling for a coffee shop table and waiting to see what kind of mood Cade was in. He walked up the stairs to his apartment. He knocked on Mutt's door. When Mutt opened it, he looked quite cheerful.

"Hey," Darius said. "I just wanted to check on you. I bought you some flowers."

Mutt stared at them as if they were live, crawling snakes.

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“What do I want those for? If you want to be helpful, buy me some beer.”

Darius was taken aback. “Beer?”

“Yeah. Cascade. They sell it down at the corner store.”

Geez, Louise.

Darius didn't really want to contribute to the man's alcoholism, but he dropped his things in the apartment, put the poppies he'd found at a street stall in water and rushed to the store. He bought rye bread, cheese and pastrami, a bag of freshly-ground Italian roast and milk. He reluctantly picked up a six pack of beer and lugged it all back home. He knocked again at Mutt's door.

“Gee, thanks,” Mutt sneered. “Last of the big spenders.” He took the beer and shut the door on Darius.

What an ass.

Back in his apartment, he fired up his laptop. He waited for Xanthe's call and to his amazement, for the first time since he'd lived next door to Mutt and Jeff, he heard music and...he was certain, dancing next door. *He felt a chill go through him. It's as though he's dancing on Jeff's grave...*

Xanthe called right on time and he focused on the business at hand.

“We have a bunch of newbies on the site,” she said. “There's one lady in Atlanta, Georgia who's doing a bang-up job uploading brand new releases from all the major sites. Thirty just last night.”

“That's great.” Suddenly, Darius felt an odd pinprick of guilt. He thought of Cade and the long hours he worked in the café. He knew the guy struggled. He brushed the thought aside.

“Hey, I found someone to buy out Finn,” she said. “I guess that kind of means you have some closure, huh?”

Closure. Did it exist? Not for Darius. He felt more alone than

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ever, wishing he had an anchor, wishing he wasn't in his small boat alone, looking for safe harbor. He liked Cade, but even he wasn't in the boat with him. When he looked around, he had the weirdest feeling Cade wouldn't ever get into the boat with him at all.

CHAPTER 6

Jun was in a really good mood, thanks to a lot of laughs and champagne at Mahdi's. Jason took the wheel, driving them home in his car. He tried not show annoyance that Jun always left a ton of rubbish in it and had driven all the way high into the hills with no gas. Jason gassed up on Franklin and they zoomed home. Jun was frisky as hell as they parked. Jason reminded himself to move the car by eight AM for mandatory street cleaning.

"Let's get some pie," Jun said.

Pie? Boy, he *was* drunk. The line inside House of Pies was too long and Jason was grateful to get his lover home. They jumped into bed the second they shut the front door. Jun attacked Jason's pants, his mouth moving straight to Jason's cock. He always licked Jason tentatively, as if surprised to find a cock between his legs.

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“They’re kind of an odd couple, aren’t they?” he asked, coming off Jason for a moment. “They were mooning over each other. It was kind of...weird.”

Something about it felt off to Jason, too. Lying on his back, he stroked Jun’s naked thighs as his lover knelt by his side on the bed. Jason’s fingers moved to Jun’s ass and Jun reacted to the sensation, immediately scooting his legs toward Jason so that they could sixty-nine.

“You think she’s after some street cred?” Jun asked.

“Shut up and suck me, bitch,” Jason said. He knew the window was short for Jun and cock-sucking. As soon as he sobered up even slightly, he’d want just his ass licked. Jason sucked his man’s cockhead and the pre-come tasted sweet against his tongue. That was a good sign that Jun wasn’t using. His fluids always tasted damned weird when he’d been using, even though Jason at the time had no idea.

Jun got worked up very fast and kept up a brisk pace sucking Jason’s balls and shaft. Jason loved receiving head and glanced down to watch Jun in action for a moment.

As if aware of scrutiny, Jun lifted his head. “Please fuck me, baby.”

He rolled over on his back and parted his thighs. Jason couldn’t wait and his face went right between Jun’s hot legs, his lips working on Jun’s hole. Jun shuddered and shook. He was close to coming. He exploded the second Jason entered him and he kept up a litany of Japanese that only ever came out when he had a cock in his ass.

“*Fukaku hamekonde chodai!*” he shouted. Jason knew this meant fuck me hard and he had no problem doing that. He loved when Jun wanted him this way. He gave his man all he had.

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Feeling the hot little bottom gripping him in his own moment of extreme need, he came, Jun panting and grunting beneath him.

"Iku," he said in Jun's ear. It meant *I'm coming* in Japanese. It always drove his lover crazy. His mouth moved to Jun's throat. Jason kissed and licked him until his orgasm subsided. For a moment, he almost let himself drift off to sleep buried in Jun's ass, but he had work to do. Jun was already half-asleep.

"Stay in bed with me," Jun said as Jason's mouth closed over his. Within seconds, Jun was asleep, his face looking happy in repose. Jason shook the cobwebs of desire from his brain and went to his laptop. He wished, not for the first time in his life that his books could kinda take the thoughts from his brain and write themselves.

He quickly wrote down his hot session with Jun as Hendrix curled up top of the sweater he'd left on his desk. He stared a moment. Wait. That wasn't his sweater. It must have been Jun's. He stroked his cat's luxurious fur and started to rewrite the sex scene to that his shifter hero Adriano morphed into his big cat persona in the middle of fucking his lover, Harris.

* * *

Darius heard music and laughter all night long from his neighbor's apartment. He heard loud banging a couple of times and when he poked his head out the door, saw Mutt dragging boxes and bags of stuff down to the dumpster. When his doorbell ring in the middle of the night, he half-expected to see Mutt. He was surprised instead to see it was Cade. The guy seemed drunk. He stumbled inside and Darius caught him in his arms.

"You haven't called me. You hate me."

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Darius led him to the sofa. "I don't hate you. Are you drunk?"

"Just a little." Cade giggled.

More than a little drunk. "Should you be drinking when you're taking meds?"

"Meds?" Cade slipped off the sofa. "Oops...I think I need the bathroom." He stumbled off...turned, swaying on his feet. "Which way?"

Before Darius could respond, Cade fell, hitting his head on the corner of the coffee table. It was a nightmare. Blood gushed from his forehead and Darius, in a panic, ran to the bathroom, grabbed a towel and pressed it to Cade's head. Cade's eyes opened and closed. He seemed to be in shock. Darius flipped open his cell phone and called 911.

It didn't take the paramedics long to arrive.

"Aren't you Calamity Jack these days," Mutt said, his face peering out from his door.

Fighting the urge to scream, *Fuck you*, Jason ignored him.

"It looks worse than it is," the first paramedic said as they stabilized Cade's head and loaded him onto a gurney. "Head wounds bleed profusely."

"He's HIV positive," Darius said, but the paramedics were already wearing gloves.

Some of Darius's other neighbors came out of their apartments to check on all the noise. He had the distinct feeling a few of the looky-loos thought he'd been beating up his late-night visitor.

"Want to ride with him?" the second paramedic asked.

Darius nodded. He grabbed a sweater and locked his door, ignoring some of the neighbors who were whispering in the corridor. Mutt was not among them.

He got into the back of the ambulance, relieved that the siren-

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filled journey didn't take too long.

"Is he HIV positive or does he have full-blown AIDS?" the paramedic tending Cade asked him.

"No, he says his viral load is negligible."

The paramedic nodded, adjusting the bag of fluids on a stand beside him.

"You're covered in his blood. You might want to get tested while you're here."

I just got tested this morning. This can't be happening. This can't be real. This can't be my life!

They arrived at the emergency entrance of Beaumont Hospital and two orderlies came rushing out to help ferry Cade inside.

Darius found himself shunted to the admissions desk where he was asked a battery of questions he couldn't answer about Cade's health insurance, next of kin or what drugs he was taking for his HIV condition.

"I'm sorry, I feel really stupid," he said. "I hardly know the guy. He came to my apartment drunk."

The admissions nurse was nice, but stern. "I need his insurance information."

An orderly handed over Cade's wallet that had been removed from his clothing.

"Stewart Cade Thompson. That's him, right?" She held up a Michigan driver's license.

"That's him," Darius said.

"I don't see an insurance card," she said.

"Does that mean you won't treat him?"

"No, we'll treat him," she said. "It'll be expensive though."

"Maybe he has insurance."

"Hmmp," she said. "There's an emergency number here. He's

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an organ donor.”

“Organ donor? The paramedic said it wasn’t that bad!”

“Would you relax? I’m just saying because he’s a registered organ donor, I have an emergency contact phone number.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Do you have insurance?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Since your friend is HIV positive, you should take a test.”

“I had one this morning.”

“You’ll need to take another one. You should see the doctor.”

She pointed to a door. He walked toward it and went in just as somebody else walked out. The intern who saw him freaked out.

“You shouldn’t be walking with all that blood loss!”

“Not my blood,” Darius said. “I brought in a friend.”

After he explained, the doctor examined him.

“You don’t appear to have any open wounds and no blood spatter near your eyes, nose or mouth, but we can take a blood test for you.”

Darius felt his heart sinking further.

“You should take one in a month then again in a few months, just to be sure.”

Once again, he was poked and prodded. He didn’t know what to do with himself. The admissions desk was slammed, so he sat in the waiting room, leafing through ancient magazines that had been donated by people who’d carefully snipped off the mailing labels revealing their home addresses in the lower right corners.

He waited until he caught the admissions’ nurse’s eye and when there was a break in the crowd he rushed over to her.

“Any news?” he asked her.

“Somebody will let you know when there is.” She resumed her

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all-important task of putting a pencil check next to somebody's name on a clipboard.

He waited and waited and finally the intern came over to him, looking wan and tired.

"Hey," he said, sitting beside Darius in one of the lovely orange plastic chairs.

"How is he doing?"

"Your friend is fine, lost quite a bit of blood. Five stitches, got some concussion." The intern paused. "I just thought you'd want to know we tested his blood. No sign of HIV."

"Well, he said his viral load was negligible."

"No," the intern said. "You don't understand. He's HIV negative. We spoke to his father who was shocked at the suggestion. We've tested him. We—"

"He's *negative*?"

Darius was stunned.

"Yes, that's good news, right?"

"Um...yeah, great news." *What the fuck? Did he lie to me?*

The intern rose. "Well, I thought I'd let you know. You can visit him in a while. His dad is with him right now and we only let one visitor in at a time."

"Wait." Darius put his hand on the young doctor's arm. "Look, you've been great, but this has come as a shock. He told me last night he was HIV positive. Tonight you're telling me he isn't. Did he know?"

The intern hesitated. "What the hell...he's not my patient. I just work here. Look, I'm gay, too. It's a tough old world out there, buddy, but believe it or not, he said it's his best pickup line."

He didn't stay. He *couldn't* stay. He was beyond furious. He walked out of the hospital. It was three AM. He called Xanthe as

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he paced West 13 Mile Road. She picked up on the first ring.

"How did you know I was awake?" she asked by way of a greeting.

"Something bad's happened."

"Tell me." She inhaled.

"You took up smoking again?" he asked.

"Yes. Who are you, the cigarette police? Now tell me, lover. What's up?"

He fought his way out of the manicured hospital grounds and spilled his guts to Xanthe on the phone. His battery was running low and he wanted to scream in frustration.

But Xanthe thought it was funny. "Geez, that's a new one," she said, when her laughter subsided. "He survives on pity fucks? Dude, I thought you hit the skunk parade with Finn. You've officially sunk to even lower depths."

Fuck you! He held his tongue. He couldn't afford to lose the one friend he still had, who had been his staunchest supporter through so many catastrophes.

"Listen," she said, when he didn't respond. "I have to go to LA to take some meetings. Come with me. You should meet the new investors anyway. We can take in the sights, have fun for a few days."

"I can't," he said, feeling a new headache mushrooming behind his eyes.

"Why not?"

He opened his mouth. She was right. Why not? What was keeping him here?

"Okay," he said. His battery ran out of juice cutting Xanthe off mid-sentence but he didn't care. He was off on a new adventure. His mom always said Darius was happiest with a boarding pass in

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his hand. She was right. She was living in Ojai now, just a little over an hour north of LA. He could rent a car and swing up there and visit. He took a deep breath and walked all the way home, staring up at the dark and muddled sky. He was remembering a line from *The Apartment*.

Why do people have to love people anyway?

He waited at a corner for the light to change. Night or day traffic kept moving. Life kept going on. He wondered how long it would be before Cade found another guy to take pity on him and fuck him. He felt stupid now. It had seemed so nice. He was like C.C. Baxter...how did the line go?

Some people take, some people get took. And they know they're getting took and there's nothing they can do about it.

He almost laughed out loud. The whole reason he'd started Ostrichwalk was to feel some measure of control. He'd never felt less in control. Yeah, well, he'd never trust love or lust again. The next cute guy who put an itch in his underpants was in for a rude awakening. He squared his shoulders and crossed the road.

From now on he was all business. Work and money. Fuck love. Love *sucked*.

* * *

Jason slept for four hours, rose early, fed the cat, showered, dressed and hunkered down to add some spice to his last sex scene with Adriano and Harris.

Harris, on the verge of being turned into a shape-shifting big cat, was afraid. Adriano could love him still, but unless Harris accepted Adriano's blood, unless he was willing to consummate the final bonding, they'd have to part and keep seeing each other

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when Adriano was ready to return to his human state.

* * *

“But I want to be with you. I must be with you,” Adriano said. His eyes flashed, The human state was getting shorter and shorter with each visit.

“There’s so much about being human that I’ll miss,” Harris said.

“You will still be able to return to your two-legged state,” Adriano assured him.

“But it will be different.”

“Yes. It will be different.”

Harris sighed.

“You won’t be alone anymore.”

* * *

“Babe, you still here? It’s a quarter to nine. You’ll be late.”

Jason looked up from the computer screen at his freshly-showered lover.

“Shit.”

“Don’t panic. I’ll drive you. We’ll take Olympic all the way down.”

“You sure?”

“Sure I’m sure.”

“Double shit.”

“What?”

“I forgot to move the car. We’ll get a huge ticket.”

“Oh ye of little faith. Today’s a public holiday. No street

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cleaning. Come on.”

Jun was in an unusually good mood. He rarely offered to drive Jason to work. As Jason saved everything on his flash drive and picked up his work bag, the two men kissed. Out on the street, the weather was warm. Jun broke into a spirited version of “I am Sixteen Going on Seventeen” as they ran to the car.

“You’re right. No ticket.”

Jun beamed and unlocked the door. “I expect a hot time in the sack as soon as you get home.”

Home. Man...he had that sucky, fucky second job to get through before he could come home.

“Screw the job, come home. How’s the book coming along?” Jun asked.

“Almost finished.”

“Excellent.”

“I can’t decide whether Adriano should put the bite on Harris in this book or drag it out for one more.”

“Well, the next book is the last one you’re planning in the series, right?”

“Yep.”

“Well, put the bite on him now and the last book should be their adventures as big, ballin’ cats.”

Jason laughed. Sometimes Jun was fun to talk story with. Sometimes he wasn’t. The traffic going down Vermont was steady, but moving. They turned on Olympic, which was wide open. Jason closed his eyes as Jun sailed through two red lights. They arrived at the theater a few minutes after nine.

A drug dealer out front approached the car, recognized Jason and moved away. He was so jittery, Jason was certain the guy was juiced up on his own merchandise.

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He kissed Jun goodbye and as his lover swerved away, a second car pulled up beside him. It was Raul Marquez. He lowered his shades and the passenger window.

“Glad you’re here. Get in.”

“I can’t, man. Got a staff meeting.”

“We need to talk. Call me on my cell as soon as you can.”

Raul took off, turning the corner, driving toward the parking lot. What was all that about? Jason shrugged, ran inside the theatre and was only six minutes late for Monday morning’s bagel and schmooze fest.

He couldn’t believe how great things were going. He was number three on the sales board. He’d even beaten Voodoo Doll. He’d arrived just in time for Ara to lay out the bagel nosh and his novel was almost finished!

Mahdi crashed into the room, pushing her Jackie O sunglasses on top of her head. Voodoo Doll burst forth with the insulting noise he always made when she walked in, the *bl-bl-bl-bl-bl-bl* sound he associated with Muslim prayer. Everybody rolled their eyes and ignored him except for Ara.

“Cut that out,” he said to Voodoo Doll, who looked surprised.

Rocky called the room to order. There was a moment where everyone worried that they’d be told the theater was closing. Instead, he pointed to the points board.

“Great week, everyone, but don’t rest on your laurels. Today it starts all over again. And although Mahdi is number one and she gets to pick a prize, Jason gets to pick one, too, for his late surge yesterday.”

There was a round of applause. Mahdi got to pick a real prize. She chose a Yankees baseball cap. Jason had hoped to get the voice-activated digital recorder that Ara had been dangling at him

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for weeks now, but he went through the box of toys—literally—and chose the other thing he'd been coveting. A plastic hand curled into a fist at the end of a toy gun. It gave him a sense of power to fire the thing and see the little fist shoot forward. The only other thing that would have been more gratifying was using it on Voodoo Doll's pursed lips.

He was on his way to his second bagel lavishly smeared with cream cheese and chives when he looked up and found Raul Marquez staring at him over the top of his cork-walled work station.

"You got time for me now?"

Jason bit on the half bagel locked in his jaw. He nodded, picking up his call sheets. He'd gotten one sale that morning and was feeling pretty good when they walked up the stairs out of the bowels of the theater. Jason was so surprised Raul had sought him out he'd left the second half of his bagel and his coffee cup behind. He followed Raul to another set of stairs. Backstage. Jason had never been here before, though a female movie star had been heard having sex with her male lead here some months before.

Raul sat on a step a couple flights up. Jason sat beside him and swallowed the last bite in his hand.

"Mahdi told me of your problems."

Jason hesitated. Which problems? His Voodoo Doll problems? Financial?

"The piracy issue," Raul said, as though reading his thoughts. "You mentioned it last night but she and I talked about it after you left. Amigo, I had no idea. I knew the music business suffered...but man, I had no idea it's happening to novelists!"

Jason nodded. The bagel was lodged in his throat, preventing a response...or was it an emotional lump stuck there?

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“I see how hard you work. I see what you do for the community here. For me, my people...the children. I see how supportive you are. It’s wrong... totally wrong that some... anonymous gangster rips you off this way. It really grills my cheese.”

Jason was so surprised he found words still failed him.

Raul clapped his shoulder. “Listen, amigo, I’m not a computer guy but you’ve been very good to me and I want to help you. Take this card. This is our webmaster. The guy’s like eighteen and a serious techno-geek. I know he can help you. He’s expecting your call.”

Jason stared at the card. It read *Rodney Jones* and there was a phone number with a 213 area code. This had been the original Los Angeles area code twenty years ago. Now it was relegated to East LA, some parts of the South Bay and, more likely in this case, cell phones.

“Thanks,” he said, looking up, except he was alone. Raul had always been a man of few words, but this was pretty eerie. Jason hadn’t heard the guy leave. He got up from his cold seat on the cement step and returned to his desk.

He was pissed to find his remaining half bagel was gone, there were no more left at the front desk and when he discreetly checked Ostrichwalk, there were fifteen fresh uploads of his books.

* * *

Darius arrived at his apartment building and was shocked to find Mutt jogging down the street. He wore old-fashioned gigantic headphones and held a Walkman in his hands. He didn’t seem to notice Darius, concentrating instead on his feet. He gave up

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running after half a block and took to walking.

Probably the most exercise he's had in years.

He went inside, shocked to see boxes lined against the hallway filled with empty beer bottles. Mutt's door stood open, two kids he recognized from a unit upstairs painting Mutt's blank apartment walls a creamy, off-white.

"What's going on?" he asked.

One of the kids shrugged. "He's payin' us a hundred bucks, man. Each."

Inside his own apartment, his landline rang. Xanthe had booked him a ticket. Time to throw some things into a bag and get out of Dodge. He stepped around the dried blood on the floor and called a taxi, which arrived fifteen minutes later. As he headed to the airport, he was surprised to see Mutt was still speed-walking, a determined look on his face.

He thought about Mutt and Jeff the entire way to LA. Had his relationship with Finn been good? Or had it been toxic? Somewhere high over the country, the thought hit him. It had been a toxic union. There had been love, but it had been tough. For some reason, he felt Finn had liberated them both, had done a kindness to them both, though Darius's feelings had nothing to do with Finn's decision.

One day I'll thank him. I think I'm kinda getting close to that. He was surprised when the announcement came that they were preparing to land. Xanthe was waiting for Darius outside his Delta terminal in a jazzy red convertible Ferrari. He was as stunned by the vehicle as he was by the blustery, chilly wind. He'd always associated great weather with California.

Xanthe blew kisses at him. "Don't worry, I'm not paying for it. It was a free upgrade for giving the car rental agency a month of

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link-backs and company coupons on one of our sites.”

Darius grinned. She was such a money-mover. He tossed his suitcase in the trunk, keeping his laptop up front with him. Experience had taught him the wisdom of this. He always kept the tools of his trade at his fingertips. He never left his laptop anyplace it could be stolen or knocked around.

“Where to?” he asked as she took the far left fork out of the terminal and onto Century Boulevard.

Her hair blew in the wind and she slipped her sunglasses on. “We’re having lunch at Clafoutis on Sunset with the new investor. We don’t have time to check into the hotel until afterward but I already called to let them know we’re in town.”

“Where are we staying?” he asked, his throat choking on the wind. Xanthe responded, but he didn’t hear her in the wind. She drove like a maniac and he wasn’t surprised when a motorbike cop pulled them over as they entered the 405 Freeway heading north. She stopped in the carpool lane earning a series of honks behind her. There was nowhere else for her to go.

Fortunately for Xanthe, the cop told them he’d just been called to an emergency situation as he sauntered over to them.

“Lady, you just dodged a bullet. Slow down.”

“Yes, officer.”

She acted charming and sweet, but Darius saw her hands shaking on the wheel.

“Want me to drive?” he asked.

“Hell, no. This here is my penis substitution, darling. You’ve had enough dick for a couple of days.”

They took off again and the wind whipped their faces. It was hard to breathe in the stiff breeze, but Xanthe refused to put the roof up.

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"This is LA," she said, but as far as Darius could see, they were the only people in LA driving a convertible with the top down. No matter which lane he looked in, people seemed to be in big SUVs, scowling and hunched over their steering wheels as if driving into combat zones.

"You heard from HIV boy?" Xanthe asked as they waited at a red light on the Sunset Boulevard exit.

"Yeah, he sent me a couple of text messages."

"And?"

Darius shrugged. "I'm not sure he realizes I know that he was lying." He'd left town within minutes of returning home, packing some clothes, his computer stuff, and calling a taxi to take him to the airport.

"Does he know you've gone?"

"No."

"Don't feel bad, hon."

"It's not your apartment that's covered in blood," he shot back.

She took Sunset, curving around east, and the sun warmed his chilled bones just a little. They passed UCLA, some pretty spectacular houses and he reflected on the text messages he'd received from Cade. Both had come as he'd been in the air and he'd retrieved them upon landing. Both said simply, *call me*.

"You haven't asked him why he did it?"

"No." Darius watched the dashboard navigation system jostle its way into key position. They were heading east to Beverly Hills.

He sighed. "I just want to meet a normal guy, you know?"

"Yeah, you and me both, darlin'."

They crested over a hill and the street flattened out.

"So, who's this investor?"

"Some computer guy with a lot of money on his hands."

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Daris nodded. In the early part of the century, his dad had invested in several companies that flopped. He felt a certain vindication that he'd done well, that he'd mastered the computer beast.

"Don't be down," she said. "Did you get some rest?"

He laughed. "No. I read three Jason Jagger books on the plane."

Xanthe grinned. "You did?"

"Yep. I downloaded them online and I have to admit, in spite of my dislike of fantasy fiction, his stuff is good."

"It's better than good. He's an awesome writer. He has a book signing tomorrow night. We should go."

"Are you kidding? He hates us."

"He doesn't hate us. He doesn't even know us. Besides, maybe we could convince him we're doing him a favor."

"Yeah, right."

She shrugged. "Well, I'm going. I love his stuff."

Xanthe turned on the radio. It was tuned into a talk station discussing a particularly gruesome murder of a young woman whose body had just been dug up right near a running path. That was another thing he didn't associate with his image of sunny LA. Brutal homicide.

He shivered in his seat and checked the dashboard. The navigator estimated they'd be at the restaurant in three minutes.

"You hungry?" she asked when the talk turned to gruesome DNA evidence, devastated families, and online sexual predators. Maybe he got lucky after all. Cade could have turned out to be a vicious killer.

Xanthe swung the car down a steep driveway and they found parking, squeezed between two Hummers up against a tree, beyond

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which, was a panoramic, but smoggy view of the city. They walked back up the slope and back on the Boulevard, they trotted past sidewalk diners at Chin Chin restaurant. At Clafoutis, a cute little French bistro, Xanthe scanned the half-filled tables jostling for space with heat lamps.

“Claude?” she asked as a middle-aged Frenchman stood and shook their hands. He introduced his associate, a young, cute guy called John, and they sat, almost on top of the people at the next table. There wasn’t a lot of room, but there were sure plenty of tables. And, Darius was astonished to see, several celebrities.

The tables filled quickly and European-looking waiters rushed around with little electronic organizers, taking their orders.

Darius ordered sea bass, salad, and coffee. Both he and Xanthe were pastry whores. They tore through two baskets of Clafoutis’ fresh-baked bread as Claude outlined his plans for business expansion. He would invest in their companies if they would, in turn, manage and control his plans to release French entertainment—legitimately—for the US market.

“It’s difficult to do this, since the cable companies, one in particular, have a French-language network available as a pay channel,” he said. “They are making it almost impossible to compete with all kinds of restrictions.”

Darius and Xanthe saw no problem with his plans and, in fact, Darius could already see how they could create his French-Anglo website with movies, TV shows, music, and ebooks all available for a modest monthly sum. They could charge extra premiums for first-run movies that never made it to US cinemas, sporting events, live concerts for big-name talents such as Garou.

He spoke on automatic pilot, his brain really drifting back to the wonderful tale he’d been reading on the plane. Jason Jagger’s

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alternate universe where the star-crossed lovers Adriano and Harris inhabited fueled not only all his sexual fantasies, but dammit, a few of his emotional ones, too. He wanted somebody to go the extra mile for him. He wanted somebody to need that from him, too.

“You have some good ideas there,” Claude said. “I love Garou. He lives in Paris full-time now. I am pleased to see you know the French talents.”

I pirate his music all the time.

“He is a huge talent,” Darius said as their food arrived. He tucked into his fragrant salad and delicate fish. It was out of this world.

“Claude said we need to go and see a play that’s like, the talk of the town,” Xanthe said, sipping hot coffee.

“A play? In Los Angeles?” Darius almost scoffed.

“I thought so, too, but I bought a season package and I have two tickets. You should see it.” He flipped through a billfold and handed the tickets to Darius. Front row seats for something called *Fiesta Forever*. The idea of good theater in LA was like...well, bad weather in LA and there was certainly tons of that right now.

Claude picked up the check.

“I wanted dessert.” Xanthe pouted. “How is the clafoutis here?”

“Ah.” Claude smiled, signaling their waiter. “They don’t make that pastry here because the ingredients are so hard to find.”

“Really?” She popped her elbows on the table. “Clafoutis doesn’t make clafoutis? Wow...what ingredients are hard to find? It’s just cherries in a kind of pancake, right?”

Claude called the waiter over.

“It’s the cherries,” he said, going into an explanation of how

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the exact cherries used in the original French recipe didn't exist in the US.

"That should be our next business," Xanthe said, releasing a throaty laugh. "Importing French produce."

* * *

Rodney Jones lived, somewhat unbelievably, on a street called Rodney at the base of the Hollywood Hills. Mahdi went with Jason to meet him. She said it was for moral support, but Jason suspected she wanted to talk about Raul Marquez, who hadn't returned her two cell phone messages that day.

"Don't bug him," Jason had advised.

"He adores you," Kellis had said when Mahdi confessed their romance at their afternoon gig at Felizia's.

Uh-oh. Kellis is always wrong. Even Mahdi knows that. But she'd grabbed onto Kellis's words like a life-preserver. She talked the whole way as they drove from Jason's place to Rodney's.

Rodney had asked Jason to bring his laptop and he had, after picking it up from the apartment. Jun was downloading music and wasn't thrilled to see the computer go, but he'd handed it over, saying he'd go to the gym for an afternoon workout.

"I won't be long," Jason said. "Will you be home for dinner?"

"Sure I will. You still owe me a hot time in the sack. Don't think I've forgotten."

Jason had blushed because Mahdi was right there beside him, but she thought it was cute. She sighed as they left the apartment.

"I could see Raul living with me," she said.

"You haven't asked him, have you?" Jason felt faintly alarmed.

"Of course not. It's just a small fantasy. He seems so attached

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to his”—she waved her arm in an easterly direction—“barrio.”

“That’s his show fodder, babe.”

She looked wide-eyed. “Yes, I know. And I can’t believe I’m having the best sex of my life with a Catholic...my father would call him an infidel...and one with a pretty puny penis, I might add.”

“Oh, my God.” If he hadn’t been carrying his laptop, Jason would have clapped his hands over his ears. He would never be able to look at Raul the same way again.

“It’s small but he sure knows how to navigate with it,” Mahdi said.

Jason laughed. He retrieved the car, parked blocks away. They headed back west to Rodney’s. They found street parking and located the apartment quickly. It was huge and filled with electronica. Rodney was a skinny black guy with a Blue Tooth affixed to his ear. He talked constantly. It meant that Jason was constantly asking, “Are you talking to me?”

Sometimes Rodney was, sometimes he was not.

He opened up Jason’s laptop and after a confusing conversation in which Rodney conducted a couple of remote chats and fired unintelligible questions at Jason, the guy finally removed his Blue Tooth from his ear. He did in a way that suggested to Jason that this didn’t happen very often.

“All right...I’ve looked at this Ostrichwalk site. I am gonna noodle around in it some. There’s lots of things we can do, but in the meantime, I’m going to keep an eye on your ISP.”

“My internet service provider? Why?”

“Your link-backs suck.”

“Excuse me?”

“I Google your name and the theft site is the first thing that

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comes up.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“I’m gonna fix that.”

Rodney picked up a pen, twirled it in his fingers and stared at a bunch of codes from Ostrichwalk that he’d somehow pulled up on the screen.

“I have to fix the language. Even images linked to your name are the avatars of users on this site.”

“Yeah, I know. I emailed Google, also sent them faxes and snail-mail asking them to remove those links and they won’t.”

“Leave it to me. I’m gonna have fun locating these clowns. In the meantime, I’m gonna have somebody upload a nice little virus to them. You ever tried Black Sun?”

Jason gaped. “Black Sun?”

Rodney’s smile was alarmingly sly. “Any idiot can go there and download a computer virus—”

“Not on my computer you won’t.”

“I’m not suggesting that. Here. I’ll show you.”

Rodney shut down Jason’s laptop and returned it to him. “I have all your info on flash drive. We’ll talk about that later. Here’s Black Sun.”

Rodney turned to one of several monitors on a long worktop and up came an evil-looking site.

“I’m going to have a coworker upload one of your books to this site, except it won’t be the actual book. It will be a virus. The users won’t know what hit them. They open up the file and bam! Down goes all their shit.”

“Holy crap...I want them stopped...but that’s too extreme for me.”

Rodney looked disappointed.

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“Do you want to keep stressing the way you are?”

Jason hesitated. “No...but...”

“Well, think about it. In the meantime, I will see what I can do about tracing these people. If you change your mind, call me.”

“Okay.”

Rodney fixed his Blue Tooth back to his ear and kept working.

“Are we done?” Jason asked, feeling confused.

“For now.” Rodney glanced at him. “I’m keen to see if I can invade their hosting site and mess with their minds a bit. Have a nice evening.”

Jason and Mahdi left the apartment. Out on the street, she shivered and blinked.

“Boy...he’s heavy duty, isn’t he?”

“He really is.”

“I didn’t understand half of what he was saying.”

Jason grinned. “Neither did I.”

“It says a lot about you that you weren’t willing to upload a virus to that website.”

“I’d feel so guilty,” Jason said.

Mahdi hugged him. “Can I invite myself to dinner with you and Jun?”

“Sure you can.”

* * *

Jun was in a strange mood. Jason had no idea if it was Mahdi’s presence or just Jun being Jun. They walked down Vermont and decided to eat at The Dresden, an old-time Hollywood restaurant. It had been the locale of many Hollywood movies and as such, attracted an eclectic crowd of locals and tourists. These were easily

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identified by the cameras they always carried.

The food was American, the ambience a bit too sceney for Jason's tastes, but Mahdi was amusing company.

She filled the silences left by Jun, who picked at his Caesar salad. He seemed even more distracted by the time his Bombay salmon arrived.

"Hey." Jason looked up from his chicken marsala. A man and a woman were standing beside them.

"Aren't you Jason Jagger?" she asked him.

Jason was so shocked he just stared at her.

"You are him. I knew it!" She pointed at him. "I have all your books." She turned to her companion. "Darius, isn't he just adorable?"

"Excuse me."

Jun patted his mouth with his napkin and took off past the wall of framed celebrity photos in the direction of the men's room.

"Oh. My. God." The woman's hands flew to her face. "You're Mahdi Danush. I love your movies! I've seen all the Iranian ones. Are you living here now?"

Mahdi laughed, sipping at her now-watery Cosmopolitan.

The two women got into a spirited conversation.

The man called Darius just stood, staring at Jason.

Jason stared back. Darius was a hot motherfucker, that's for sure. Dark-haired and eyed, his skin was creamy-colored. He had a wide, generous mouth made for pleasure.

Stop it. Jason shook the thought from his mind. He had sex on the brain. He had to finish the book. But still, he couldn't stop staring at this hot hunk of man standing in front of him. He had a nice, muscular build. Not Jason's usual type, but it was strange to find himself attracted to a living, breathing man again. He'd been

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in his head for so long with Adriano. He realized in that moment that his feelings for Jun were changing.

He remonstrated himself. *Jun is real. Adriano is fictional. Adriano is strong, virile, yet loving and tender. Sure, a man like that can exist. In a book.*

"I'm Xanthe James and this is my BFF Darius Maguire," the woman said, breaking into his thoughts. She shook Jason's hand and Darius went next. There was a hesitancy there, but his hold strong, once their fingers met. Jason smiled. He thought he understood the problem. Jason wrote male-male stories. Some men were uncomfortable with their women reading gay erotic romances.

"Your girlfriend likes my books...does that seem weird to you?"

Darius looked taken aback. "She's not my girlfriend. No... it's not weird. I've only read a couple of your books, but I'm... um... I'm a fan, too."

Jason laughed. "Oh really? Thanks."

He wasn't sure whether to believe the guy. It must have showed on his face.

"No...he really is." Xanthe plopped into the creamy leather booth uninvited, scooting next to Mahdi. "He read your first two *Cat Power* books on the plane."

"Have a seat," Jason said to Darius. "You folks just get into town?"

"I came from New York. Darius came from Detroit. Just here for a few days of fun."

"Oh, I love New York," Mahdi said and the two women were off, verbal shopping along Fifth Avenue.

A couple of twinks came by the table. Jason only looked up

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because he recognized them as go-go dancers from a club down on Santa Monica Boulevard.

One of them was lifting a T-shirt over his flat belly.

"Look at me," he whined. "My navel ring got ripped out in the mosh pit."

The twink passed them. Jason and Darius exchanged looks and burst into simultaneous laughter.

"That's not a line you hear every day." Jason shook his head.

"Will you use it in one of your books?" Darius smiled at him.

"I use everything. I'm a thief of dialogue...life experiences."

"Oh, yes." Mahdi draped her arm around Jason's neck. "My entire life is in his books. All my dating disasters...say, oh, no. You're not going to write about Raul, are you?"

No. In romantic fiction the heroes all have to have huge dicks.

He was saved from an actual response by Xanthe pouncing on the topic of Raul. He couldn't bear to listen to it all again and Darius was just too damned attractive. Time to go find Jun.

"I'm just going to check on my boyfriend. Be right back."

Jason headed to the restroom. He found Jun pacing the single-room stall.

"What took you so long?" he hissed.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be plenty okay when I have my cock in your ass."

Jun lunged for the door and locked it. He pushed Jason against the garishly paint-sponged wall. Jason couldn't decide if the shade was poop brown or vomit. Either way it gave him a headache. Jun's tongue flicked over Jason's lips.

"Did you find him attractive?"

"Huh? Who?"

"Darius, bitch. Be honest."

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Shit! Jun's the most possessive guy alive. "No, babe."

"Liar. I saw the way you looked at each other. You haven't looked at me like that in a long time."

Shit...that's true. "I was writing in my head," he said. "You know how I get."

"That fucking Adriano. Sometimes I think you love him more than you love me."

I do.

"We both know who this cock belongs to right?" He brushed his mouth across Jason's lips without actually kissing him. He fingered Jason's cock through his jeans.

Somebody tried the door.

Jun kept rubbing, getting the response he wanted. He gave his mouth back to Jason and finally, Jun surrendered to their open-mouthed kiss.

Just as things started to turn sweet and sensual, Jun pulled away, snarling at him.

"Fuck you, man. You're gonna get fucked."

"Jun."

Ignoring Jason's attempts at pushing him away, Jun went for the kill. He grabbed Jason's crotch, kneading him through his jeans.

Jesus. He always gets fire ants in his pants in public places.

"Take it out, Jason. I want to play with it."

Whoever was on the other side of the door rattled the handle.

"Yeah, it's fucking locked," Jun shouted. "Get over it."

"Come on, man. I gotta slash," said the guy on the other side.

"Just wait."

He kept rubbing Jason's bulge.

"My *chinfo*. This cock belongs to me, Jason."

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Whoever was on the other side of the door, swore.

“Take it out, bitch or I swear, I’ll take you into the hallway and fuck your ass in front of everyone. I’ll show them just how much you like getting fucked.”

Jason gasped. *Shit. Why am I so turned on?*

Jun unbuttoned Jason’s fly and roughly took out his cock.

“Bad boy. You’re in trouble now.”

He knelt between Jason’s splayed legs and captured his bouncing cock head with greedy lips. He swallowed Jason’s cock in a slow, deliberate way that had him clawing the wall behind him. Jun was so sexually aggressive lately. So out of character. Maybe all those vitamins were making a new man of him?

Jun sucked the swollen cock head at his lips. He took his mouth off it, licked it with hot little swipes and dug his free hand between Jason’s thighs, reaching for his ball sac. His almond-eyes looked up into Jason’s as one finger stroked his ass cleft insistently. Jason felt his eruption close.

“Give it to me,” Jun rasped, putting his mouth back on him again. Jason’s cock shot hot juice into Jun’s noisy, sucking lips.

Jason was still coming as Jun came off his cock and wiped his mouth with two fingers, feeding them to Jason.

“Bitch is gonna pay with his ass tonight.” He kissed Jason hard. “Don’t talk to that guy anymore. Don’t even look at him.”

He opened Jason’s shirt, tweaking his nipples.

“Jesus, Jun.”

“Yeah, you’re gonna pay.”

There was a line outside the door. A couple of guys grinned. The first guy fumed.

“Had to show him what’s what,” Jun crooned, patting Jason’s ass. Jason was mortified. *Christ. He always has to go there.*

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* * *

Back at the table, Mahdi played with her pasta as she and Xanthe ranted about men.

"It's all the same. Los Angeles, New York. They all think they're something because they have a penis," Xanthe said. "You don't hear women raving about their snatches like they're more important than weapons of mass destruction."

"Some do," Mahdi said. They were off and running again, dishing on celeb chicks.

"Save me." Darius looked up, then away, as if embarrassed by his friend's loquaciousness.

"We gotta go. My baby needs to work," Jun said, a protective arm around Jason's waist.

Darius picked up his coffee cup. He wouldn't look at Jason, but Jason studied him. There was an arrogance...no. He was a sad man. Hurt. Lost. A man of many secrets inside that beautiful exterior.

Mahdi and Xanthe looked up at the two men.

"Dinner's on us, Mahdi," Jun said to her.

"Oh, but you can't. Jason hasn't been paid yet. Say, Jason, did you have trouble cashing your last paycheck?"

"No. Why?"

"Kellis said his last check bounced."

"Really?" This was surprising news.

"Yeah. He just sent me a text."

"Did you deposit or cash it?" Mahdi persisted. It embarrassed Jason that she kept going on in public in front of strangers about the checks. He didn't want it getting out that DTC bounced checks.

"I cashed it," he said.

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Mahdi laughed. "I'm going to from now on."

"Oh, you work?" Xanthe asked him as Jun handed a credit card to the waiter.

"Of course I work," Jason said.

"Well...I just thought being a best-selling author..."

Jason rolled his eyes. "I'm not Stephen King."

She looked momentarily confused.

"Yes, and meanwhile, piracy is killing him." Mahdi patted his hand.

"Piracy." Xanthe had a weird look on her face.

"His sales have plummeted." Mahdi glanced at Jason. "I've seen his royalty payments. Big fat zeroes. Last month, Jun and I had to talk him off a ledge. He was talking about not writing anymore."

Jason felt tears pricking the back of his eyes.

"Really?" Darius looked doubtful.

"Yes, really." What was with this guy?

"Your sales go down?" Darius looked astonished.

"Of course they go down. There's a couple of very aggressive sites... oh..." He lifted a hand. "I can't even talk about it anymore."

"He spends his whole day taking down those pirated links. It's unbelievable. And the poor guy barely scrapes by." Mahdi put her hand out and grabbed Jason's fingers.

"We have a standing twenty bucks that floats back and forth between us."

"Mahdi!" He was mortified now.

"Oh, what?" She flapped her hand. "So you're poor. Big deal. So am I. And I've been in award-winning movies."

Silence settled on the table for a moment. Mahdi's bounce and

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pep soon returned. "I hope you sell some books at the signing tomorrow night."

"Oh. That's right. Where is it again?" Xanthe asked. Jason noticed Darius staring into his cup again.

"At the Skylight. Just up the road a couple of blocks. A very nice, independent bookstore. Jun has some of his haiku poetry there, too."

"Come on." Jun's tone was brusque. "You've got a deadline, remember?"

"But we have to take Mahdi home."

"Oh, right. Sorry. I forgot."

Xanthe waved them off. "Don't worry about Mahdi. We'll take her home. Right, Darius?"

"Sure. I'll be fine. I feel as if I've known you forever," Mahdi said.

Jason would have protested, feeling overprotective but he thought Mahdi could handle herself.

"Sorry about the pirates," Xanthe said.

"Yeah, me, too," Jason said. "I'd like to kill each and every last one of them."

CHAPTER 7

What a clusterfuck.

Darius felt dazed and restless.

*I'd like to kill every last one of them...*that's what the guy said.

Does he know?

No. He doesn't know.

Thoughts warred in his mind. He was anxious to talk to Xanthe but here he was, stuffed in a racy sports car with a giant on his lap. Mahdi wasn't overweight, she was just a tall, big-limbed woman who would *not stop fucking talking*.

His head banged against the window of the Ferrari as Mahdi squeezed her large frame around on his lap.

"Sorry," she kept saying.

They dropped her off, and not a moment too soon. Mahdi had

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not stopped talking about her boyfriend, who was in the very same play he and Xanthe had tickets for.

“You have to see it, it’s wonderful,” she said several times.

They watched her disappear into her apartment building high up in the hills.

“Did she tell you what kind of work they do?” Xanthe asked as Mahdi gave them a final wave goodbye and the door shut behind her.

“No.” He squeezed his fingers against the bridge of his nose as he got more comfortable in the seat.

“You okay?”

“Yes,” he said. “No.”

“Shit. What a weird night. I like her though, Dar.”

“You can’t be friends with her.” The thought was like a sucker-punch to Darius’ solar plexus. Why did the thought hurt so much?

“Why not?”

In the moonlight, he was astonished to see tears glistening in her eyes. Xanthe rarely made friends easily with other women. She was also more than a little starstruck. There had been genuine camaraderie between her and Mahdi, but friendship was dangerous.

“Was that fucking weird or what?” he asked.

“Not here,” she said, reversing out of the driveway. They fiddled with the navigation system that seemed to be spinning in confusion, but soon they were heading back down to Sunset. They were staying at a nice boutique hotel, Petit Ermitage on Cynthia Street. Traffic going down Highland was a nightmare and they had plenty of time to talk.

“You go first,” he said to Xanthe as they waited for a red light on the corner of Hollywood and Highland that never seemed to

change.

"First of all," she said, holding up a finger, "what was with the boyfriend?"

"Yeah. Let's start with him. Did you see the look on his face?"

"I thought his name was John. That's what Claude said at the meeting today."

"Well, I've been thinking about that and Claude is French. Maybe it was his pronunciation. His name is Jun, but I distinctly heard John today at the meeting."

"He did say John. He completely wiggled out and took off for the restroom. He didn't want us to say anything about knowing him."

"So, he's bought into a pirate site that uploads his boyfriend's books." Darius ran a hand through his hair. "And remember what Jason said?"

"How could I forget? He wants to kill us all."

"So he doesn't know."

"Of course he doesn't know. Jun...or John...whatever the fuck his name really is couldn't wait to leave. You know what's sad, though? Jason seems really nice."

"Yeah," Darius said. "He does."

The lights changed and they shot forward, barely scraping through the intersection as the lights turned red again.

"I felt so weird when he was talking about the piracy," Xanthe said. "At first I thought, this is some game they're all playing, but I don't think so."

"No," Darius said, as she shot down a side street off Hollywood, plunging south. A hooker stood on a corner, scantily-clad, right outside a Korean church.

"I felt so fucking guilty." Xanthe smacked the wheel.

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“Shit. When they talked about the twenty bucks they share back and forth...” his voice trailed away.

“Yeah, that was us once, remember?”

“So, what do we do?” he asked.

“No fucking idea.”

They were silent as they drove across Sunset. Jason Jagger had a nice smile.

“We can’t go to the book signing tomorrow night,” he said. “It would be too...surreal.”

“Tell me about it. We have tickets to that play. We should go.”

He sighed. “I guess.”

“Well, look at it this way, it’s the hot ticket in town and none of them would be at the theater. Mahdi’s guy might be in the show, but she’ll be at the book signing. We won’t run into them.”

“Right.”

As they came to Cynthia Street and Xanthe approached the driveway, she put a hand on his leg.

“I could tell he liked you.”

“Shit.” Darius felt wretched. “I liked him, too.”

“It’s better this way. We go to the theater and forget we ever met them. But shit, it really sucks. I liked them both.”

“Yeah. And neither of us likes Jun.” Darius unbuckled his seat belt as the valet guy came running.

“Think he’ll ever find out that his boyfriend is stealing from him?”

“I hope not.” She checked her watch. “We’re right on time for Leno.”

* * *

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It was so typical of Jun. He sure talked a good game in public, but the minute they got home it was the same old story. This time though, he didn't even want Jason to pleasure him. He wanted to curl up on the bed and watch TV. Fine. Whatever. Jason had work to do anyway. He fired up the laptop and could hear the strains of the theme song from *The Nanny*. It was one of their guilty pleasures.

*She was working in a bridal shop in Flushing, Queens,
'Til her boyfriend kicked her out in one of those crushing
scenes...*

He found his foot tapping along with the music. Hendrix yawned. Jason often wondered how animals coped not being able to pick and choose their humans' taste in music and entertainment. He opened up his file on the new *Cat Power* book. There was always a sense of accomplishment to finishing a book. But also an emptiness. Whenever he said goodbye to a chapter in the lives of Adriano and Harris, he felt he was losing a friend.

Jason thought of himself as a method writer. Like a method actor, he *lived* the story. Whatever his characters went through. If they laughed, he laughed. If they cried, he cried...

Wait. Maybe he should check Ostrichwalk. God, how ludicrous that he had to deal with this constantly all day long. Three new uploads. Fuck, damn these idiots. He hit the first book, went to the upload link, copied and pasted it. It was automatic to him now. He emailed a takedown notice to the offending site and switched back to Ostrichwalk.

The other two uploads had vanished. That was weird.

He closed the tab, started a fresh one and came back to Ostrichwalk. He panicked for a moment, thinking he'd been frozen out of the site, but no. He still had access. Now all three new links

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were gone.

He hadn't imagined that they'd been there. He'd just copied and pasted a link. He checked the link. Active. Okay. So somebody had just removed his book uploads.

Rodney? He picked up his cell phone. If it was Rodney, he was so ecstatic he wanted to kiss the guy. He pressed redial and waited for Rodney to pick up.

* * *

Alone in his room, Darius found three new uploads of Jason Jagger's books. He didn't hesitate to delete them. They'd each had some pretty heavy hits. Shit. A hundred and twenty users. He calculated in dollars. Over three hundred bucks. And this guy was struggling. It had been hard to talk to Xanthe about it. She got it, she definitely got it. They knew piracy was wrong, per se, but up until this point it seemed a victimless crime. A faceless, anonymous crime. God. His face. He was handsome. A little skinny. He had that preoccupied expression artists always wore, as if they were dancing with their muses.

There was a sweetness to the guy. Darius felt bad knowing that Jason's lover was actively involved in Ostrichwalk. Well, he assumed he was active. Jun hadn't said much at the meeting today but Claude seemed comfortable talking about all this stuff in front of him. Were they lovers?

Darius's thoughts cycled back unhappily to the same thing. File sharing. He'd always told himself that sharing books was like a library. You got books there for free, too, right?

His cell phone rang. He was surprised to see the readout. It was his neighbor, Mrs. Kline back in Detroit.

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“Mrs. Kline? Is everything all right?”

“Sorry to bother you, Darius, but it’s your neighbor, Mr. Mott.”

“What’s happened to him?”

“Nothing’s happened to him...except he seems...I don’t know...strange. He’s thrown out everything. The Dumpster is overflowing. I heard from Jeff’s sister that they think he died of a heart attack. There won’t be an autopsy. No sign of foul play, but Mr. Mott seems to have gone...well, a bit cuckoo.”

Darius sighed. “I can’t do much from here, Mrs. Kline.”

“You could talk to him. He says you were Jeff’s best friend.”

This was news to Darius.

“Well, I could call him in the morning.”

“Would you, please? Oh...thank God.”

“What?” Darius asked.

“That awful dance music he’s been playing all day just stopped.”

“Do you have his number?”

She gave it to him. He promised to call their crazy, grieving, dancing neighbor in the morning.

He sat for a moment, alone with his thoughts. Mutt was acting like a guy let out of prison. Was this how Finn felt? Stuck? Tethered? He hoped not.

His thoughts spiraled, the worries niggled at him. He had no idea Jason Jagger was...so nice. And he wanted people to read his books. Didn’t he? He’d deleted these three uploads. No doubt by the morning they’d be back up. The upload links were pretty useless if the thieves didn’t know to access them in the first place.

Thieves. There. He’d said it.

He got up from the table in his room and looked out the window. He couldn’t see much. Streetlights. Trees moving with a

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faint night breeze. I'm finally making money. But I've never felt shittier about myself in my whole damned life.

* * *

“Hey, dude. I was just gonna call you,” Rodney said. “I’ve been monitoring that site for you and—”

Jason interrupted him. “Did you just remove those three new uploads?”

“No. I didn’t.”

Jason was disappointed. “Oh.”

“No, my news is, um...well. I have no easy way of telling you this but I checked your trackbacks and well...I hate to tell you this but a lot of your book uploads came from your own laptop.”

“What? How did they do that? You mean they’re uploading but making it look like I did it myself? Wow! Technology’s gotten way out of control, man.”

“No. I’m not saying that.” Rodney paused. “I mean they came from your own computer. I contacted two theft sites that get a lot of your books. There’s two file-sharers who are particularly voracious and I contacted them using a bunch of legal jargon and they freely gave me the ISPs on them.

“One of them is a fake ISP. Meaning the user is hiding behind a phony ISP server. It’s a company called hidemyass.com. That’s gonna be a hard nut to crack. It’s some user called Private Eye. That’s a prolific uploader. They can’t really stop that person because Private Eye changes ISPs constantly. Not just your books by the way, but many. Also a big uploader of music and movies.

“The second one, however, is...your ISP.”

“But that’s ridiculous. I work my ass off! Why would I upload

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my own books to a fucking theft site?”

“I didn’t say you did.” Rodney’s tone was calm. “Jason, who else has access to your computer?”

“What? I—” *Shit. Jun!*

“You got any ideas?” Rodney could have no clue what thoughts swirled in Jason’s mind. Jun was stealing from him. *Why the hell would he be uploading my books to this site?*

“I am going to email you a few of the ISP upload links. It tells you the time of the uploads. Maybe you can narrow it down. I have the two theft sites now working with us. Your ISP has been blocked from uploading to them. You will be able to go there to remove links, but you won’t be able to upload or download anything from there.”

Jason felt hot tears pooling in his eyes. This was crazy, just crazy. It had to be a mistake.

“The only problem is there are hundreds of other file-sharing sites, so whoever is doing this to you will just move on. These two sites are attractive though because they offer cash incentives for uploads.”

Jun’s making money off my work. Shit! That’s how he’s affording all those supplements!

Tears fell freely as he received three emails from Rodney and opened them. Each of the uploads occurred during times when he was out of the apartment. Working. One upload was from the night he’d gone to meet Rocky and Kellis for dinner. Jun must have sat down, fired off fresh uploads then come across the road to join them.

“I know who it is, Rodney.”

“Oh. Sorry, man.”

“Yeah. Me, too. And Rodney? Thank you.”

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Rodney paused. "You okay?"

"No. But they do say the truth hurts."

He ended the call and sat with his fingers on the keyboard for several, long minutes. Of all the sneaky, snaky things Jun had done to him, this was the worst. Cheating on him had broken Jason's heart. Stealing his books stole from his wallet *and* from his heart. *Why? What did I ever do but love him?*

A fresh episode of *The Nanny* was starting. He heard that song again. *I'll show this asshole a crushing scene when I throw him out on his ass.*

He walked to the bedroom door, numb.

Jun was half-sitting, half-lying, naked on the bed, playing lightly with his balls as he watched TV. He looked up, a small smile playing on his lips.

"You done? 'Cos I'm feeling hotter than hell, baby, and I want to fuck you."

Too late, Jun must have seen the fury in Jason's face because his expression turned wary.

"What? What is it?"

"*Fuck you!*" Jason roared so loudly it seemed the very walls shook. Jun shot into the air like he'd been tasered.

"What the fuck?" he asked. "What is it?"

"You're fucking stealing from me, Jun? Are you crazy? What the fuck ever, did I do to you?"

"I didn't steal from you, crazy bastard. What are you talking about?"

"My books! You lousy motherfucking user. You've been uploading them to Ostrichwalk and making money off me! Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

Jun's eyes widened. He looked frightened. "I didn't...who told

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you? How did—” He broke off his own words, throwing on clothes. “I can explain.”

“No you fucking *can’t*!”

“I spent that money on us.”

“*That’s* your excuse? You’re so full of shit. I can’t believe it. You’re buying secret supplements. You’re fucking some guy—”

“Holy shit. You talked to Claude?”

Claude? Who the hell was Claude?

Jason stopped speaking because his tongue was stuck in his throat. Jun rambled, unaware that Jason had no idea about this Claude guy.

“Look... it’s nothing. We fool around. It isn’t love. It isn’t... *us*.”

“Get out. Get out right now.”

“I’m not getting out. Are you crazy? It’s the middle of the night.”

“I don’t fucking care. Call fool-around Claude. Maybe he’ll take you in.”

“Claude’s married.”

“So? I don’t give a fuck. You’re cheating on me again and your stealing from me, too.”

“It’s not cheating. He sucks my ass and plays with my cock. He...he’s like a dog. I tell him what to do and he does it.”

“Oh, shit I don’t want to hear this!”

Jun opened his mouth.

“*Get out! Get the fuck out!*” Jason went nuts, screaming, throwing Jun’s thing around the room. One of the neighbors banged on the wall, another on the front door. Somebody called the police.

It was a nightmare. Jun didn’t want to leave, but Jason held the

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lease. Jason paid the bills. Nobody understood the whole piracy thing, but the police understood that Jason didn't want his cheating, stealing boyfriend on the premises and convinced Jun to leave.

"Just let him simmer down, go stay with a friend tonight. Tomorrow you can discuss your problems," Jason overheard one of the cops saying to him.

There would be no tomorrow. It was over. Jason wept as the cops left and his neighbors went back to their apartments. Hendrix cowered under the bed and *The Nanny* ran around on TV in a crazy checkered outfit.

He turned off the TV and sat on the bed. He'd known it was over. He'd taken Jun back. He remembered what he'd said about Claude. *He's like a dog. I tell him what to do and he does it.*

Probably, he said the same thing to Claude about Jason. He ran a hand across his eyes. He wondered where Jun would go, but frankly, for the first time ever, he didn't care.

He checked his bank account by phone. A hundred dollars. Was it enough to get a late-night emergency key change? He wanted Jun out of here. He called a couple of places. He didn't have enough funds. Okay. The worst that could happen was that Jun could take his laptop and/or Hendrix. Well, he'd take Hendrix to the vet in the morning. He'd give them strict instructions not to let Jun collect him. He'd take his laptop to work. Nothing else he owned mattered to him. Jun didn't care about books.

Jason turned over. Tears still leaked from his eyes. Hendrix came out from under the bed and climbed up like a small bear, using his claws on the duvet. Jason held out a hand and felt the thing that always, the thing that only ever, gave him comfort. The sensation of hand on fur. Hendrix curled into him and allowed

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Jason's tears to fall on him. As Jason's hand pulled the small body close, Hendrix began to purr.

That was when he made his decision. Not just about his life, but his book. Harris needed to be with Adriano at any price.

He cuddled Hendrix for a moment longer and sought refuge as he always did in the comfort of the written word.

* * *

Adriano bit into him finally. Harris hadn't known what to expect, but it wasn't this bliss, this ecstasy as they crossed boundaries, their species mingling, time and space shifting. He heard a low groan. His cock had never been harder and he realized the groan was his own. It was like a rebirth, not just of his body but his senses.

He longed only for the pad of his lover's paw, the touch of his fur. Harris turned over on all fours as Adriano sought entry. How he'd wished for this moment on so many lonely nights. Harris marveled at the novelty of crouching down, his furry ass twitching in the air as Adriano lay claim to it in a final act of bliss.

"You are of my blood," Adriano whispered. "My soul is yours to keep."

Harris felt a strength in this new bond he'd never known when he had two legs. Adrian's huge cock filled him. Harris's head went back as he tested out his new roar. The edges of the jungle beckoned as he and Adriano came.

"Come," Adriano said. "Let me show you the way to all knowledge."

* * *

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Jason typed the last line of the story. *Knowledge*. There was power and pain in it. As always, he marveled at the things Adriano dictated to him. He wished he had a power cat he could learn from. Ah, that's right. He did. Hendrix waited for him in the bedroom. Jason absorbed the silence. He felt strangely at peace, turning the pillows over so they wouldn't have the full weight of Jun's lingering scent. He felt okay. Numb, but okay.

Only because I finished my book. Tomorrow I have to face the world again. How the hell will I cope?

CHAPTER 8

Darius tortured himself reading some of Jason's blogs. The guy had a wonderful sense of humor about everything except Internet piracy. He'd been dimly aware that Jason had co-authored an anthology of short stories with several other writers. An anthology in which all the stories covered the topic of theft. All the proceeds were going to be used to fight illegal downloading of their books. He had no idea how well it had sold but he felt more than a pang of guilt that Ostrichwalk had uploaded the book numerous times.

Could these authors fight Internet piracy? Maybe. Maybe not. He read some of Jason's blogs and found himself laughing out loud at the man's sheer wonderment at the smallest details in life. His eyelids grew heavy and he shut his computer down. God, I feel sick. *When he finds out who I am, he'll hate me.*

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He was surprised when his room phone rang. He checked the time. Two A.M. It could only be Xanthe. It was.

"I'm so fucking tired and I can't sleep," she whined.

"Yeah, me, too."

"I'm coming over. Brace yourself, bucko."

He laughed. It would be like the old times, moonlight picnics, late night feasts. What was the room service menu like, anyway?

She knocked at the adjoining door and he let her in.

"What should we eat?" she asked.

"I was just wondering the same thing." He grinned at her as she perused the room service menu.

"Holy heck, this is expensive."

He ruffled her hair as she flopped on the bed beside him.

"Let's go for it. One night only."

"I want ice cream sundaes and french fries," she said. She flipped the telephone off its hook and ordered the food while he surfed the TV channels. She put her feet on top of his and he lay back, putting an arm underneath her head.

"Damn, baby," she said, when she got off the phone. "Why couldn't you be straight?"

"Why couldn't you be a guy?" he countered.

"I could have the operation."

"Then do it."

She laughed, pushing at him. "I would you know, except I'm not sure about having a penis. What if you got sick of me?"

"As if," he said. She rolled closer and he held her tight. He wondered if this was how Jason Jagger slept with his boyfriend. Then he wondered why he cared.

* * *

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"I know I'm going to regret asking, but why is there a large furry creature in my office?" Ara asked Jason the next morning.

Jason was on the phone. He'd just sold a ten-package booking and he was on fire. His fingers kept pressing numbers on his phone. All his referrals from the Costas were so far proving to be gold.

"Sorry, Ara." He stopped the call. "That's my cat. I had to bring him in."

"But he doesn't like me and he's rather...gigantic. Why did you have to bring him in?"

"Broke up with the boyfriend and I was afraid he'd come and take him."

"So you thought I'd like to have him patrolling my office?"

Jason grimaced. "No. I was taking him to the vet but they weren't open yet. I'm going to drop him there on my break."

Ara raised a brow. He wasn't pleased, but Jason rarely broke rules.

"So how's your heart?" Ara asked.

Jason took a moment to register that Ara was being kind. He was asking if he was okay.

"I'm all right. Thanks for asking."

"Cool. So, I'll just tiptoe back into my office and just hope the baby mountain lion doesn't decide I'd make a nice meal."

Jason actually laughed. "He's in his crate."

"No, he's not. I took him out. I felt sorry for him. It seemed like persecution."

Jason opened his mouth but Rocky was screaming across the room at him.

"Phone call, Jason!"

He took it, not completely surprised to find out it was Jun.

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“Where’s Hendrix?”

“With me.”

“Shit, man. I even called the vet. I thought he got out. Why’d you take him to work?” When Jason didn’t respond, Jun blew out a breath. Jason glanced at Rocky and realized the room supervisor was listening to every word.

“We need to talk. This *cannot* be over.”

Jason swallowed over the lump in his throat. “It’s over, Jun. I can’t do this anymore. You know? I’m tapped out. I’m all done giving you chances. Cheating on me sucked... but what you’ve been doing to me with this fucking website... pirating my books...stealing from me... making money off me—”

“It’s not like it was millions,” he said.

“I don’t care if it was a dollar. You’re supposed to be my life partner. I feel like Sandra Bullock. I thought you had my back. Instead, I find it’s full of little steak knives.”

“I can explain.”

“No, you fucking can’t.”

“I have nowhere else to go,” he whined.

“You can’t stay with me.” Jason realized his voice was rising. A few of The Dinosaur Club members were standing up, staring at him.

“I have to go,” he said and ended the call.

“You and Jun broke up?” Kellis asked. “That won’t last. You two are made for each other.”

“God, I hope you’re wrong,” Jason said.

Mahdi came over, between calls. “You need a place to stay?”

He opened, shut, and opened his mouth again. “Really?”

“Hell, yes, really.”

“It would just be a couple of days.”

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“Stay as long as you like.” She blew him a kiss. He sat back in his seat. Maybe it was a good thing if he let Jun cool off, let him stay in the apartment...for now. He was supposed to renew the lease at the end of the month. Instead, he’d give notice. Somehow, everything changing in five minutes felt right. He felt free, but scared. *Shit, I gave that lousy guy way too many chances.*

* * *

At lunchtime, he and Mahdi drove to her apartment and took Hendrix into the guest room, where he and Jason would spend the next couple of days. He sniffed his litter box, his food and water bowls, and went right under the bed.

“He’ll be fine,” Mahdi said. She gave Jason a spare key, he closed the guest bedroom door, and they headed back to downtown LA. They’d had no lunch and as they crossed the driveway back into the theater, she put a hand on his arm.

“We have ten minutes. Let’s cash our checks. I’m worried they’re gonna bounce.”

“You think they will?”

She nodded. “I’ve heard some people couldn’t cash them and I knew three people who got bounced checks.”

They hurried across Spring Street into the bank. Rocky was at the counter already, a look of dismay on his face as he turned and saw them waiting in line.

“No money in the account,” he said. “I can’t cash it.”

The teller told all three of them to try the next day.

“Funds are on hold,” she said. “Maybe they’ll release tomorrow.”

They encountered Voodoo Doll in the theater lobby. A lot of

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staffers swirled. Evidently, they weren't the only ones unable to cash their checks.

"Have you been to the bank?" he asked them. They told him they had.

"Oh, too bad. I went first thing. I cashed *my* check." He turned on his heel and flounced, yes, flounced. Jason had never actually seen a grown man do that before.

Jason adjusted his laptop and notebook bag from one shoulder to the other.

"Doesn't actually make you want to run to the phones and start dialing, does it?" Mahdi asked.

Back in the Audience Development Room, Ara had left for the day. So had most of the others.

"What do you want to do?" Mahdi asked.

Jason didn't have much to do until his book signing in the evening. He sure as hell didn't feel like getting on the phone soliciting credit card information from unsuspecting prospective patrons. It would feel too much...like what Jun had done to him.

"Let's find some place cheap to eat," Mahdi suggested.

Jason was happy to do that. The news about paychecks had cut right through the theater. The actors were now panicking and morale was pretty bad. Half the staff was trying to stay calm, the other half was lamenting the loss of the one job they loved.

"I predict we'll all be able to cash them tomorrow," Kellis said.

"Shut the fuck up," Rocky snapped at him.

A couple of the actors from the smaller stage shows were milling in the lobby. Gossip had reached a fever pitch.

LaWanda came out of the box office and announced that the theater owners would be making an official statement at nine A.M. the following day.

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“You think it’s good news or bad?” Mahdi asked Jason.

“I don’t know.”

“You’re friendly with her. Go poke her and see if she fesses up.”

“Okay.” He made his way over to the box office and found Raul Marquez already there.

Raul seemed happy to see him. “How did things work out with Rodney?”

“You have no idea.”

“Tell me about it...oh God. There’s Mahdi. Dude, come backstage. I don’t want her to see me.”

“Why not?”

“Amigo, that is one tough chick. She doesn’t get a boyfriend. She takes hostages. Oh, fuck. Here she comes.”

He tore off down one of the marble passageways.

“Was that Raul?” Mahdi asked.

“He had an...emergency. Let’s go get some food.”

They turned and walked right into Xanthe and Darius. Shock registered on everyone’s faces. Jason and Darius, however, locked eyes and Jason was the first to recover.

“Hey,” he said, touching Darius’s elbow. “Of all the gin joints...” He laughed, genuinely pleased to see the man.

“What are you doing here?” Darius gazed right into Jason’s eyes. For the first time in a long time, Jason felt his toes curling in his shoes. Something about the guy made him want to strip naked and do the funky chicken.

“We work here,” he said, glancing at Xanthe, who was hugging Mahdi.

“You’re kidding! Wow, it’s a gorgeous place,” Xanthe said.

“What are you doing here?” Jason asked.

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“We have tickets for tonight’s performance of *Fiesta Forever* and we can’t find them,” Darius said. “We were going to ask the box office if there was any chance we could still get in.”

“Oh, we’ll get you in,” Mahdi said.

“What’s going on?” Xanthe asked. “There’s a lot of activity for an afternoon at the theater.”

Jason smiled. He was not about to reveal company troubles. “You have a few moments? There’s something you should see. *Fiesta Forever* is about to give a free performance for At Risk teens. You gotta experience this..”

“Sure,” Darius said. We’re all yours.”

Mahdi and Jason led the way into theater number one.

They took seats toward the front, turning as the doors opened again and twenty teenagers wearing black T-shirts with white lettering saying *Downtown Theater Center is Me* and carrying plastic DTC gift bags and cartons of popcorn trooped in front of them.

The *Fiesta Forever* actors stood on the stage and waved at the kids who took their seats, talking loudly.

“Thank you for coming today,” Raul announced from the footlights. “We hope you enjoy the show.”

The house went dark and the kids stopped talking.

* * *

Darius noticed a couple of cops and two adults sitting behind the teenagers in front rows. He couldn’t believe this was where Jason was working. The man was sitting right beside him, hotter and nicer than he remembered from the night before. He kept imagining the two of them naked, rolling around the large, comfy

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bed of his hotel room. He brushed the thought from his mind.

God, he smelled good. There was a clean, manly smell to Jason, who turned now and smiled at him. God, nice teeth, too. *Is it my imagination or are we leaning into each other?*

The show started and the kids in front of them gazed up at the stage, enthralled. Darius hadn't known what to expect, but it sure hadn't been anything as funny and engaging as this show. Throughout it, he was aware of the nearness of Jason Jagger and the growing sense of attraction. *I don't know him...but he's driving me crazy. I haven't felt this way since I first met Finn.*

His cell phone buzzed and he quickly shut it off. He hadn't been expecting to be in the theater at this moment, but one of the actors shouted, "Thanks, buddy," from the stage and everyone laughed.

There was a short intermission and the kids went wild, laughing, yelling, talking about what they'd seen. As the house lights went up, Jason put his hand on Darius's arm, putting a finger to his lips.

One of the police officers stepped in front of the teens and held up his hands. "Okay, gang. Now you can take a restroom break, grab a drink in the lobby, or you can wait for the second half of the show."

None of the kids moved.

"You enjoying it?" he asked.

"Yes," the kids screamed. They chatted among themselves. They rifled through their bags and Darius glimpsed buttons, note pads, pens, stickers and small bottles of spring water.

"Who are they?" Darius whispered. He wanted to do the Snoopy Dance. Jason's hand was still on his arm.

"Baby gang bangers. The cops get them off the streets into

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youth programs. None of them have been to the theater before. They are brought here to encourage their creativity. To show them there is a better way. All of these kids...their parents and siblings are or were gangbangers."

"Wow," Darius said, genuinely moved. "Does it make a difference?"

Jason smiled. "Absolutely. That's why I am so committed to working here."

His stomach let out a loud rumble.

"Are you hungry?" Darius couldn't keep the laughter out of his voice.

"Starving, as it happens."

"Well, how long is the second half?"

"About forty minutes."

"We're taking you for an early dinner, right, Xanthe?"

"Right."

Not that Darius was in a hurry. He and Jason were sitting close to one another, even though the man had taken his hand off his arm.

God I want to put my arm around him. Do I dare? He's not acting like a guy in a relationship.

Don't be a fool, man. Be cool.

But I like him.

Watch the show.

Thoughts whirled in his mind, but he and Jason kept sitting closer and closer, arms, legs touching. *I am like a teenager in love. God...what is happening to me?*

After the show was over, they went into the lobby.

"Your boyfriend is so talented," Xanthe said to Mahdi.

"Isn't he?" Mahdi beamed. "Where are we going to eat?"

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"It all depends on Darius and Xanthe. Now you've seen the show, you won't need to come back tonight. You can come to my book signing."

"I'd love that," Darius said.

"So we can get back to Hollywood for an early bite," Mahdi said. "How many cars do we have?"

"We've got one," Xanthe responded.

"So do we," Mahdi said. "Jason's staying with me for a few days so we dropped my car back at my place. I was planning on going to his signing, so we're gonna hang out together."

"You're staying with Mahdi?" Xanthe said.

"Yeah...my boyfriend and I broke up," Jason said.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It was long overdue." He glanced at Darius. "You wanna ride with me? The girls can follow us."

"Yes," Darius said simply. He felt like dancing. He felt like screaming. Instead, he walked outside in the bright light, smelling what he was certain was human piss in the alleyway.

"You work here at night?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

"Sometimes."

"Shit. This place doesn't seem safe, Jason."

Jason shrugged. "I'm...careful."

Darius scowled. "How late do you work?"

Jason grinned. "I don't usually work late, unless I'm picking up extra money working as an usher." He paused. "I just remembered, Mahdi and I have another part-time telemarketing job. I guess we both just quit."

"You quit?"

Jason laughed then. "Yeah...I guess I did."

Xanthe rolled past them in the Ferrari.

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“Dude, haven’t I seen you some place?” Mahdi cracked.

“Do you realize we’re supposed to be selling nail polish?” Jason asked her.

“Nail polish...schmail polish. Not us, darling. Let’s go have some fun.”

“Where to?” Xanthe asked. There was a long discussion in which they agreed to take their out-of-town visitors to The Grove.

Jason seemed very happy as he jumped behind the wheel of his car and they headed to the freeway.

“I feel like I’m playing hooky,” he explained. He checked over his shoulder to make sure Xanthe was following. “I’m always working. I’m either writing, editing, researching, or I’m at the theater. Look at this, it’s a glorious, sunny day, and I’m going to The Grove with a handsome man beside me!”

Darius couldn’t help it. He reached out and touched Jason’s cheek. The skin was smooth, his thumb moving down to the shadow of bristles at the man’s lower jaw. He wanted to kiss him so badly.

Jason smiled and Darius, enchanted, moved his hand to Jason’s thigh.

“You want some music?” Jason asked.

“I want you.”

Jason laughed and Darius covered his face with his hands.

“Way to go, slick.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. Music’s great. What have we got?”

“I don’t know. I hope there are some CDs in the glove compartment. Mind checking?”

“No. Mind if I snoop while I’m in there?”

Jason laughed as they veered down the Highland exit off the 101 Freeway. Darius’s hand closed over a box of condoms which

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he unwittingly withdrew.

“Shit!” Jason slapped the steering wheel. “What the fuck?”

“Not yours, I take it?”

“No. Not mine.” A muscle worked in Jason’s cheek. Darius’s hand went back to it.

“Don’t get upset. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to find it.”

“It’s not you.”

They hit a red light by the Hollywood Bowl.

Jason blew out a sigh. “Goddam Jun. I’ve given that guy so many chances. This is my car and he’s been driving it... he’s been stealing from me... man. I knew he was cheating on me! If you leave rubbers in a guy’s car, you want to get caught, don’t you?”

Darius sat back. “He’s an ass.”

Jason grinned then. “Yeah. A big ass.”

“A very big, hairy ass.”

For some reason, they both got an attack of mad laughter and Darius found himself telling Jason all about Cade.

“Wait—your favorite movie is *The Apartment*?”

“Yes, why?”

“Mine, too.”

They grinned at each other.

Jason blinked as he crossed four lanes of traffic and hooked a right on Melrose.

“I could never get Jun to watch that movie. I think it’s one of the most...romantic movies...and the dialogue!”

“You said it. So many gems.”

Jason shook his head. “I met Jack Lemmon, you know?”

Darius was impressed. “You did? What was he like?”

“My dad did his roof.” Jason grinned. “He’s an awesome guy, my dad. He gets some big accounts. I was so excited when he got

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Mr. Lemmon. He told Mr. Lemmon I was a fan and he was very gracious. He lived in Beverly Hills and told my dad I could come by. I hadn't started writing books then, and he came out of his house and he was so nice. So kind. I told him C.C. Baxter was one of my favorite characters ever. He told me C.C. was one of his favorites, too. He told me to write a nice part for him."

"He said that?"

Jason grinned, but he looked emotional. "I went home and started that day. My dad told me that Mr. Lemmon asked him a few times how my writing was going and if I'd written him a great part yet. He said, 'Tell him to make sure it's a nice big one,' and I will never forget how kind he was to me...when he didn't need to be."

"Did he ever get to read anything you wrote?"

Jason waited at the signal for The Grove and Farmer's Market complex. Darius was so absorbed by the conversation he never even noticed the landmarks as they sped by.

"No, he died. I think every time one of the great actors die, Gregory Peck, James Stewart, Mr. Lemmon...we lose a big piece of our sunshine in this town."

As they passed the entrance to the rustic Farmer's Market entrance, Darius wanted to know about the history of the place, but Jason wanted to hear the Cade story. He had plenty of time to tell it since parking was next to impossible in the massive structure.

They eventually found parallel spaces on the last floor.

Jason didn't seem surprised by the story.

"Honey, I'm sorry you got scammed...on the other hand, if he hadn't been a bastard, you wouldn't be here and, speaking selfishly, to quote C.C. Baxter, as far as I'm concerned you're tops. I mean, decency-wise and otherwise-wise."

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Fuck...I adore you. Darius stared at Jason's mouth. He wanted to kiss him. He wanted to confess his sins, beg for forgiveness, pledge undying honesty to his last breaths on this earth.

"Hey, you two. Let's eat!"

Jason broke off their stare first. Darius wanted to open his door for him, but Jason was out of the door fast.

As they walked to the elevator, he touched Jason's back and said in his ear, "You make me want to be the tops...decency-wise and otherwise-wise."

Jason grinned at him. Darius pulled him closer for a second, his lips touching Jason's ear. Jason took in a breath. It reached Darius all the way past his suddenly-hardening cock to his now shaking legs.

At the elevator, he caught Xanthe's wink.

Xanthe was in a state of bliss with her newfound friend. She and Mahdi giggled like girls. As they walked toward Morel's, a sidewalk French bistro in the charming outdoor courtyard of The Grove, Xanthe and Darius marveled at how Cosmopolitan it was. The restaurant itself was lovely. Freshly-baked bread with a variety of flavored butters appeared immediately.

Darius and Jason sat close, but Darius was pleased to see that Mahdi and Xanthe also sat close together. He'd never seen Xanthe so happy.

"Will you split a beer with me?" Darius asked Jason, wanting nothing more than to plant a kiss on the guy's mouth.

"Only one. I have my thing tonight."

"One won't hurt us."

"Do you like French fries?" Jason asked.

"We love French fries!" Xanthe insisted.

"They have the best here. Mahdi and I came here for her

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birthday.” Jason grinned at his friend. “At Christmas, it’s really beautiful here.”

“It’s really beautiful here right now,” Darius said, staring pointedly at Jason.

They ordered four different meals so they could all share and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world when Jason leaned into him and Darius slipped his arm around him. Their meals were wonderful. Darius couldn’t remember a better feast, but maybe it was the company. He loved Mahdi, who was funny and smart. She and Xanthe wanted to go to the American Girls doll shop on the corner. Darius and Jason wanted profiteroles and coffee.

“Lunch is on us, because we adore our new friends,” Xanthe said.

“Absolutely, I got it.” Darius snatched up the check.

“I have to kiss you,” he said, as soon as the girls darted off. He bent his head and claimed Jason’s lips for an all-too-brief kiss. Aware they were in public, he restrained himself.

“Darius, I wanted you to do that all day.”

“Yeah?”

They finished their coffees fast. Darius took Jason by the hand. Up ahead he could see Abercrombie and Fitch store. *Good! They have tons of dark spaces in there!*

Darius saw the hot young models posing by the front door. *God, Jason is better looking than either one of them.* He couldn’t think straight. He had to get his mouth on him. He had to kiss him.

“Here,” Jason said, apparently reading his thoughts. They could hardly see in the blackened, pinpoint-lit recesses. He and Jason slipped into a dressing room after Jason grabbed something off a hanger.

They reached for each other, their hands, mouths, groins,

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joined. Whatever Jason had been holding fell to the floor. His laptop bag landed, too, with a soft thud. The kiss went on and on, their cocks hardening against one another.

“I—” Darius broke off as Jason held his head in his hands.

“This—” Jason began, his words disappearing into Darius’s soul. God, it was wonderful. Sheer, exquisite lust. The passion felt like fever. He felt his hairline beading up, felt the sweat starting inside his shirt. *Man, I am burning up.* They stopped kissing when they both realized their hands were all over each other.

“I—” Darius began again.

Jason moved away. He took out his cell phone.

“Who are you calling?” Darius panted, trying to catch his breath.

“Mahdi. I want to make sure it’s okay if I take you home with me.”

“Come to my hotel.”

Jason shook his head. “I want to check on my cat and I’ll need to get changed. Do you mind?”

“If she says no, your ass is coming to the hotel with me.”

Jason leaned into him for another kiss. “Hey,” he said, breaking away from Darius. “Is it okay if I take Darius back to your place for a little while?”

Darius caught his gleaming smile, even in the dim light.

“Cool, thanks, Mahdi.”

He looked at Darius. “I should thank Jun after all. Those rubbers are gonna come in handy.”

CHAPTER 9

Jason felt the smoothness of Darius's skin and luxuriated in the taste of it. He was a clean man, which he loved. He was lean and muscular, without being overdeveloped. He let his hands soar over his new lover's body. He couldn't believe he was touching another man when it had only been Jun for so long. Sex hadn't enthralled him in his real world, only his mental one. He'd strip-mined his fantasies and emotions for his work. Now he found his cock very hard, straining toward Darius, who stood naked in front of him at the foot of his bed. They both had big cocks and both were hard. Darius fondled Jason gently at first, then more insistently.

As Jason's cock started creaming, Darius moaned. His thumb moved over the glans. Not letting go, he bent down and licked and kissed his cock head. He pushed Jason down onto the bed. They

hadn't even pulled down the bedspread.

Jason held his arms out to Darius, who got between his legs. Jason felt the wet, hot mouth at his, moving down his body. Oh, God...Darius was so oral. His tongue went where it wanted. Jason's legs flew open. He kept up a silent mantra of *please, please, please* as Darius tongued his crotch, the tender skin of his inner thigh and—*mercy, God!*—moved to his asshole. Jason's legs opened. It had been so long since a man had licked his ass. Darius didn't just lick him, he feasted on him. Jason felt the orgasm building. Unable to stop himself, he felt his nerve endings pulsing, shimmering, felt the way Darius sucked and licked at him. His cock exploded without him even touching it.

"Fuck me," he begged. Darius fumbled for a rubber.

"I want to suck it," Jason said, as he reached under his thigh for the huge, hard shaft poking at his muscle.

"Next time, baby. Right now, I need to be in you."

Darius rolled the rubber over his cock, lifted up Jason's feet, kissing the toes. Jason's feet landed on Darius' shoulders. He felt the beautiful cock sliding into him. He hadn't had such a big one in ages. His body took it, accepted it. Craved it. Jesus, God, he was good. Darius fucked him with reverence and didn't stop fucking him until Jason exploded again, between their hard-rutting bodies.

The impact hit Jason like a brick. He felt Darius's cock head expanding in him, he didn't feel the rush of liquid heat because he was wearing a rubber, but he knew. He knew Darius was coming and kissed him.

They could not stop fucking. Jason rolled over on his knees; Darius ate him out again. He fucked him on his knees and on his back.

"I love how excited your cock gets in my hand," Darius said.

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“My cock is like me,” Jason said between kisses. “Starving.”

“Wow.” Darius fell back against the bed. Their legs and arms entwined, they lay in a rich, sated silence.

“That was...” Jason’s voice drifted away.

“It was.” Darius started to laugh. “God, I dreamed of you all night.”

“You did?”

Darius propped himself up on one elbow, his hand moving down Jason’s body.

“I don’t want to share you with all those people tonight.”

“It’s only for a couple of hours.” Jason reached over and patted Hendrix, who sat on Jason’s recently discarded shirt that he’d tossed on the chair beside the bed. The two men kissed, peeped outside the bedroom door and saw the American Girl doll bags on the sofa. The girls were home.

“Don’t shower. I want my scent on you,” Darius said, drawing Jason back into the room. They re-dressed, letting Hendrix camp on the shirt Jason had been wearing earlier. He left his laptop in the bedroom, taking only his messenger bag with his wallet and a few copies of his latest paperback. He left the bedside light on for Hendrix and they stepped back into the living room.

“Nervous?” Mahdi asked, coming out of the kitchen.

“No. Yes.” Jason laughed. “We should get going.”

“I made coffee,” Mahdi said. “Have a quick cup, both of you.”

She poured them both a cup, Jason hating even the small physical distance between him and Darius as he stepped toward the fridge.

He felt Darius at his back as he reached in for milk.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me,” Darius said, pulling Jason to him. The girls were in the living room as Darius nuzzled

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his neck.

“Are you two still at it?” Mahdi asked, making Xanthe laugh.

The girls showed off their new dolls and the little outfits they’d bought them.

“It costs as much to buy one of these outfits as it does for me,” Mahdi exclaimed. Jason was shocked. How could she afford it?

The girls held up their dolls’ clothes.

“How much dieting do you think it would take for me to fit into this swimsuit?” Mahdi asked.

Jason laughed. “Not much. It’s very stylish. Very retro.”

“It makes me think of Esther Williams,” Xanthe said.

“We should get moving,” Mahdi said. “Somebody has some books to sign.”

They all piled into Mahdi’s car. Jason’s was bigger, but she wanted Jason to be driven on his big night. Jason didn’t mind. Not at all. He and Darius, holed up in the backseat, kissed the whole way.

“He never acted like this with Jun,” he heard Mahdi saying.

“I’ve never seen Darius like this either,” Xanthe said. The two men broke off their kiss for a moment, staring into each other’s eyes.

“Sorry,” Jason said to the girls.

“No, you’re not.” Darius tugged Jason’s chin back toward him. At Vermont, Jason felt dazed as he and Darius got out of the car outside the bookstore. The employees had set up a poster of his book cover out front with the sign LIVE TONIGHT posted to one corner.

They entered the shop. Jason wasn’t really worried that Jun would be here. He never came to book signings when things were good between them. Now, however, who knew? He greeted the

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store staff and checked over the book table where all his stock lay waiting. He also greeted a few of the readers he already knew and then the girls arrived.

Mahdi fluttered over to the microphone stand to make sure it was working. She was the best friend in the world when it came to speaking events. The room filled slowly but Jason was pleased to see about sixteen people sitting in the first four rows.

Book buyers came to their seats with copies of his books. Mahdi was talking to Al, one of the store assistants. She was pointing to the speakers imbedded in the walls. She mentioned music. Man, if he hadn't spent the last three hours getting royally fucked, he'd be able to think straight.

Some of his readers started to swarm him. Most he knew by name. A few he recognized from MySpace and Facebook photos. He was overwhelmed that so many had shown up for him. Some coming as far as San Francisco and San Diego to meet him.

He went to the counter. "I know we said I'd bring pizza for you guys. I ordered it yesterday at Palermo's but I really can't leave—"

"You need something, baby?" Darius was beside him now.

"I ordered pizza from Palermo's."

"Is that the place just down the road?" Darius asked.

Jason was already in love with Darius's face.

He couldn't speak, only nod.

"I already paid for everything, but it's waiting to be picked up—"

"We're short-staffed otherwise I'd send Al," the store owner said. "But you're so nice, Jason, only you would order our staff some pizza."

"I'll get it," Darius said. "Go back to your fans."

Jason accepted Darius's quick kiss. He hated the word *fans*

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since he didn't think of himself as any kind of celebrity. They were readers...friends. He turned and saw the place was hopping. He took a deep breath.

Mahdi had done an excellent job of getting people to tell her their names, and she'd jotted them on Post-its peeking out of their books to speed up the signing process. He'd ordered fifty copies of his books and only about ten remained on the tables. This was heartening since he'd paid for the books himself. He looked forward to getting a nice check from the store in a few weeks.

Jason greeted everyone, hugging and kissing those he knew, introducing some to others. He found chairs for people who didn't have them and spotted his parents arriving. His father and his life partner were there. His mom and her second husband, whom Jason thought of as his second father, were also there. He ran over to hug them all. For a weirdo, blended family, they all got along well. So well in fact, the two couples had moved to the same country town and spent many evenings together going to concerts and having dinner. They'd driven all the way from Ojai. He was so pleased to see them.

Al straightened the remaining books on the signing table and gave Jason a thumbs-up. Jason nodded and Al went to the microphone stand. Jason was aware of Darius returning as Al announced Jason to the crowd. There was now standing room only. He moved over to Darius, thanking him for the pizza and introduced him to his parents.

His mom took the pizza from Darius and went back to the staff kitchen with the three boxes.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. We're very proud and pleased to announce that our favorite gay erotic romance novelist Jason Jagger is in the house!"

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Everyone clapped. Jason glimpsed his dad and Darius standing together, clapping loudest.

“I’m going to hand over the mike to the lovely and delectable Mahdi Danush, who will introduce our studly stud.”

There was more applause and laughter and Mahdi rushed to the mike stand.

“Good evening, everyone. I’m so proud of my friend Jason and his amazing tales of love and magic. I’ve read all his stories and I’m a straight woman. I know many of his fans are. I can tell by all the women sitting here tonight. People always ask why women are attracted to gay romance and I say it’s because we love men. And I think one man is great, two even better...especially when one of them has magical, shape-shifting powers.”

The audience laughed.

“We have ten copies of Jason’s books left. Please wait until we finish taking questions, after Jason reads an extract from his book *Cat Power 5* and you can pay for your books at the register. As always, twenty per cent of each purchase will go to Jason’s favorite charity, Pediatric Aids. And now without further ado, my friend, my inspiration, Jason Jagger!”

The small crowd went wild and Jason hugged Mahdi, almost dropping his book. He was so overwhelmed by the response and in spite of his nervousness, he forgot everything. He forgot fears, money, work, piracy... Jun... Darius... he thought about nothing but the world he’d created. The world that brought him and, apparently, so many other people real pleasure.

He read two excerpts, telling the crowd, “I always make my Mom blush,” and at the end he took questions. One woman asked about piracy and if it was indeed such a big deal.

“Yes, it is,” he said, but he didn’t dwell on it. He signed books,

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posed for photos and his gaze sought out Darius. He found him with his parents.

"You were wonderful," Darius said, hugging him. He held a copy of Jason's book in his hand.

"My mom lives in Ojai," he said. "Can you believe it? Your parents know her!"

Jason grinned. "Small world."

"We have to go visit them this weekend," Darius said. "I promised."

"Of course," Jason said. "Will you still be here?"

"I will now."

* * *

Darius and Jason made love all night in his room at Mahdi's house after a celebratory dinner at Palermo's. Each new thing he learned about Jason entranced him even more. He fell asleep, his cock inside Jason, listening to his quickening heartbeat.

I have to tell him about the file-sharing. I have to apologize. I have to kill Ostrichwalk. His biggest fear was Jun finding out about him and Jason and telling Jason the truth before he got a chance.

But no time seemed right and in the morning, Jason dropped him back at the hotel. He kissed him, already feeling bereft.

"I know," Jason said. "Me, too."

"Jason, I can get through the day if you promise me we can see each other tonight."

"Absolutely."

They kissed goodbye. Jason drove off and Darius walked into the hotel. He had never felt so high and simultaneously so low in his life.

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Xanthe wasn't in her room so he couldn't really discuss the website situation with her. He fired up his laptop and to his dismay there were seven new releases for Jason's books. He killed all the links. What was he going to do? He bit at his fingernail and pondered his problem. He was on the cusp of something amazing with Jason. He did not want anything to spoil this beautiful new relationship. Not with Jason. Not with him. Darius felt himself getting mushy just thinking about kissing him. He was seriously in gaga land over this guy.

He had to call a meeting with his partners. He had to extricate himself from Ostrichwalk. He thought for a moment. This no longer involved Finn. Xanthe would understand. That left Claude. And...shit. Jun. What was Jun's involvement exactly?

As if on cue, his cell phone rang. He took the call, not recognizing the number.

It was Jun.

"Hey, Darius." He sounded nervous. "I'm Claude's assistant. I was at the meeting a couple of days ago. And I ah... met you with... um... my um... boyfriend, Jason Jagger at the Dresden that night."

Darius felt himself bristling. *Boyfriend. Jason is no longer your boyfriend, you ass!*

"Yes, of course." He worked hard to keep his tone even. "How is everything?"

"Well...actually...Jason and I kinda broke up. He found out I was uploading his books to your site and to some others—"

Darius was stunned. Jason mentioned cheating and stealing...never mentioned the piracy. *We were too busy falling in love. Shit. I said it. God...that means it's true. I'm falling in love!*

"Oh, wow, that's wild. How'd he find out?"

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"I have no idea. He went nuts. Thing is, I don't think he's going to change his mind this time. Anyway—"

This time... geez Louise, this guy's a booby prize.

"Look, I want to get more actively involved in the company and Claude...well, he's happy for me to do that. I'm wondering what would be involved."

"I'll need to get back to you on that," Darius said.

One way or another he had to get out of Ostrichwalk. He wanted a chance with Jason. He was the tops. Decency-wise and otherwise-wise. First, he had to talk to Xanthe. They needed to be on the same page.

"Where is the head office?" Jun asked.

Darius balked. "There is no head office. We work out of our homes. Xanthe in New York, I'm in Detroit."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "I was just hoping...you know...to have a place to go every day. I have a new apartment in Hollywood. I could work out of there...but Claude seemed to think you had an office out here in LA."

"No, we don't. But let me talk to Xanthe. Maybe we can work something out and you can work out here for—"

"What kind of wages are we talking about?"

Wages? Boy, was this guy pushy. How the hell had Jason put up with him?

"There is no job at this point, Jun. I'm just sayin'. Maybe we can work out something so that you can be more involved. You spend a lot of time online?"

"Yeah. Well, I did. Jason took the laptop with him. Listen, Claude's put me up in a place on Fountain. It's real nice. I'm getting a laptop today over at the Apple Store."

How nice for you.

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“So, I’ll be good to go.”

“Okay, I’ll get back to you.”

“When?” Jun persisted.

“I don’t know, maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow.”

“You’re in meetings?”

“Yeah.”

“Can’t I come, too? I mean, you know...now I’m one of the principals involved? I should know everything that’s going on.”

Oh, God.

“They’re not those kinds of meetings.” Darius flashed on making love to Jason.

“Oh.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

He ended the call before Jun could argue. Where the hell was Xanthe? He left a voice mail message for her and texted her. She was a text girl. She checked those messages more often than the voice ones. He checked Ostrichwalk again. Damn! Three new Jason Jagger uploads. He killed all three. He missed Jason. He missed his laugh, his touch. He missed those kisses.

* * *

The news at the bank wasn’t good. The theater’s assets had been frozen. Not one person employed by the theater had been paid. The bank lobby was filled with alarmed theater employees who all wanted their money. Security guards ushered everyone out. They were just mere rent-a-cops who seemed overwhelmed by the dismayed staffers who shuffled reluctantly out of the building and back onto Spring Street.

“It was a harbinger of doom when our keycards wouldn’t work

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in the parking lot,” Mahdi muttered. Several people agreed with her. All the theater employees paid for parking out of their paychecks and the theater itself actually paid the parking company. Security forces stopped all the staffers from entering the facility. Nobody’s parking fees had been paid. The news got worse inside the building.

Jason had the peculiar feeling he’d just stepped into an *I Love Lucy* sketch. The one where she writes an opera for her Wednesday Afternoon Fine Arts League and mounts a production with materials bought on a bounced check. Halfway through their debut performance, workmen turn up removing the sets as the women run around screaming in fright. It was a bit like that at DTC.

Federal marshals padlocked theater doors, barring everyone from entry. Nobody could go into the basement. The theater was a million dollars in the hole. Some people started to cry. Mostly, everyone felt defeated. A beautiful dream had disintegrated. Badly.

“That’s it,” Jason said and then his cell phone rang. His heart leapt when he saw it was Darius.

“Are you okay?” Darius asked. “I just saw the news online. Your theater’s been shut down?”

“Yeah.” Jason felt dismayed...disoriented. He’d never felt so personally high and so professionally low at the same time.

“Sweetheart, are you okay? I wish I could hold you.” Darius sounded so loving, Jason felt his eyes moistening.

“Yeah. None of us have been paid. We’re being locked out of the building.”

Mahdi was hugging Raul Marquez, who was openly weeping. This was the biggest thing to ever happen to the guy and it was over. So over.

“Shit, baby. I’m really sorry.”

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"Thanks. It...it feels nice that you care."

"Oh, fuck. Just get over here, will you?"

"I'm unemployed now."

"I can think of some good use for your hands."

In spite of himself, Jason laughed. He ended the call.

"Mahdi, I'm gonna go meet Darius."

"I'm coming with you." She was crying. As they left the theater, she told Jason that Raul had confessed he was married. Jason was surprised. The guy seemed so stand-up. It never occurred to him.

"He said they've been separated and they just got back together."

Jason hugged her hard as they walked out to his car, parked in a lot a couple of blocks over. He'd driven them both here and now, with Mahdi so unhappy about Raul, he didn't like to leave her alone. He wanted to call Darius and let him know he was bringing Mahdi, but her cell phone rang. It was Xanthe. She and Darius were waiting for them.

* * *

They swam in the hotel pool in their underwear, running to the chaise lounges on the roof to sip coffee and munch toast. The attendants were sweet and friendly, the music loud and fun. Darius was all over him and with the sun warming their bodies and Darius heating up every part of him, Jason didn't argue when Darius suggested they go to his room.

Xanthe and Mahdi had found two cute guys to talk to.

"We'll meet you for lunch, okay?" Darius asked.

He and Jason wrapped their towels around their bodies, but

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Jason was having a hard time hiding his boner. They got in the elevator and Darius touched him.

“Don’t hide it. I want to see it.”

The door opened and a couple got it. They looked at each other. Darius and Jason huddled close, trying not to laugh.

At his room, Darius unlocked the door and pushed Jason inside. “Show me that hard cock.”

He moaned when Jason dropped the towel to the floor. Darius put the *do not disturb* sign on the door and closed it.

Slipping to his knees, he rubbed his face against Jason’s tight black briefs. Man, he was hot. His cock jutted to the right and it demanded escape. He pulled Jason’s pants down and licked at the cock head waving in his face. He picked Jason up and put him on the table. Jason sat there, feet dangling over the edge as, heavy-lidded, he smiled at Darius.

Darius kissed him. He wanted Jason. Jason could tell. He kissed Jason’s mouth, his tongue ranging over Jason’s body. He pushed Jason’s legs up and zeroed in on his cock and balls.

Jason panted as Darius licked him long and deep. He felt his cock starting to leak. He couldn’t stop it.

“I’m coming.” He gasped, feeling Darius’s whole tongue inside his ass.

He wanted to suck Darius’s cock. The feeling of bringing the man pleasure this way when Jun hated it so much brought Jason his own sense of pleasure. He took Darius to the floor. They wrestled each other for a moment. Jason adored being with a guy who thought more about his partner’s pleasure than his own.

“Let me suck you, please,” he said, his mouth closing around Darius’s cock. He loved the feel of it, the newness to it. He loved the taste of Darius, who always seemed hard and ready to play. He

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licked up and down the shaft, licking, teasing his new lover's balls.

"Jun must have been crazy," Darius said.

"No. I was the crazy one. I should have been out looking for you."

Jason's mouth tightened around the big, hot cockhead in his mouth. He sucked it slowly, moving down and up to the top again.

"Oh, God," Darius roared as he came hard, filling Jason's mouth and throat.

They were still engaged in a hot, sticky kiss when the girls arrived at their door.

Jason jumped in the shower and Darius grabbed his towel, throwing it around his waist.

"How come it's so easy for guys?" Mahdi asked. "You meet each other and you just *know*."

"Not always," Darius assured her. "Your friend is the most amazing man I have ever met."

"Yeah...he's worked his way through a few crackers," Xanthe said.

"If that wasn't so true, I'd be offended." Darius grinned.

"We're ordering room service," Xanthe shouted.

"Cool. Hang on." He opened the bathroom door, caught hot ass waiting in the tub for him, and felt himself drooling. "Baby, what do you feel like for lunch? Burger and fries sound good?"

Jason nodded, looking ecstatic. "Can we order coffee too, sweetheart?"

"Yeah. For you, anything." He repeated their orders to Xanthe and let himself into the bathroom and locked the door.

"Have we got time for you to fuck me very fast?" Jason asked. He turned and braced himself against the white tiled-wall.

"Fuck, you are the hottest man." Darius bent and bit Jason's ass

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cheek. He wanted to leave his mark. Jason gasped.

“Oh, my God...bite me. It feels so good.”

Darius left a nice raspberry mark and straightened. He fumbled for the last remaining rubber in the box that Jun had left in the car and shoved it on his dick. Getting back inside Jason again was both heaven and hell. The hell was how quickly he came and how badly he didn't want to pull out of him again. He kissed Jason's ass, feeling around for his hot cock, still covered in come and hardening again at Darius's touch.

He sucked it into his mouth. Jason reacted but didn't pull away. Darius released him, wanting to bite the guy all over his throat and chest.

“I'm gonna say this one last time,” Darius said into his ear, adjusting the water spray so it cascaded down Jason's belly. “Jun is a fucking moron for cheating on you and I will never stop being grateful to the stupid, dumb fuck.”

Jason laughed as Darius splashed water on his body.

Xanthe thumped on the door. “Food's here!”

“To be continued,” Darius said and reluctantly turned off the taps.

His cell phone rang. Mutt. He took the call, swallowing some coffee.

Mutt sounded unusually happy. “Thanks for the call, buddy. I'm on day four of my sobriety. I've got a new personal trainer,” he said. “He's so damned cute. Thanks for checking on me. Say, you have any idea where I could buy a cheap pedometer?”

Darius found himself blinking. “Sports store?”

“Cool, thanks. Catch you later.”

“Yeah,” Darius said to dead air.

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* * *

Jason hated returning to the apartment on Vermont. Mahdi went with him. He'd left Hendrix at her place. She'd convinced Jason to move in with her. The break in rent would help them both and Hendrix seemed to love his new digs. Outside, Darius was parking the U-Haul. Jason couldn't believe he was moving out, starting a new life. He'd spent the last two days packing. None of his mail ever came here since he kept a post office box. That saved filing change-of-address cards with the post office and the bank, but he couldn't shake the feeling of being rushed, things being left undone.

Xanthe was leaving town that night, returning to New York. Darius was staying to spend the weekend with him. He dreaded the thought of not being with him Monday morning.

"Not much to show for yourself," Mahdi said, her voice cheerful.

"No. Mostly books."

Jun had taken the bed and the TV. Not that he cared. He cared more that the little prick had stolen some of his clothes. As he suspected, he'd left Jason's books. They were now in boxes. Darius came into the apartment, his gaze searing into Jason's.

"You ready, baby?"

Jason nodded. Xanthe was staying with the truck. Nothing was safe in this neighborhood. After four trips back and forth, they were done. As Jason and Darius stacked everything in the truck, the girls vacuumed the apartment and brought out the contents of the fridge in two old milk crates.

"You want to go and take one last look?" Mahdi asked.

Jason made one final visit to take digital photos of everything

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should the management claim he'd left the apartment in disarray. It was tough to leave the place that had been his writing retreat, but he had learned he could write anywhere. He had found he especially liked writing naked in bed, with Darius curled up beside him.

He went to give the apartment manager his keys. The old guy was pretty sweet. He was half-blind and so was his dachshund, Loretta.

"You've been a great tenant. We'll send you the deposit, if there's anything owing once we do an inspection."

Jason shook his hand, not really expecting he'd ever see a dime. He'd left the place immaculate, but it was a notorious rip-off in LA, the whole security deposit thing.

He thanked his three friends for their help. Back at Mahdi's he and Darius unloaded the truck while the girls made dirty martinis. Xanthe hated to leave her new best friend but Mahdi was already planning to visit her in New York for July 4th weekend.

Mahdi wanted to drive Xanthe to the airport alone so they could exchange girl talk. Jason secretly suspected she was going to meet Raul Marquez some place for a quickie, not that he was one to judge. He'd jumped into his potentially dangerous liaison with Darius hot on the heels of breaking up with Jun.

When the girls left for the airport, Darius pulled Jason onto his lap.

"Come to Detroit," he said.

Jason's hands moved to his face. "Oh, God, I want to."

"Then please. Come. I want you to move there. Be with me. Jason, I love you."

"I love you, too."

They stared at each other a moment.

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“We’ve got the truck. Let’s just repack it and go.”

Jason laughed. “We told your mom and my parents we’d go to Ojai for the weekend, remember?”

“I know.” Darius sighed. “Just think about it. All right? There’s nothing keeping you here. You can write anywhere. I want...I want so much to make you happy.”

“You already do.” Jason pulled Darius closer, kissing him.

“I’m afraid if I leave you here, you’ll go back to Jun.”

Jason was shocked. “I...no. Never. That’s never going to happen.”

“We love each other. Please...think about it,” Darius insisted.

“I am thinking about it. Just...please. Give me a little time.”

“You’re right,” Darius said, giving himself up to Jason’s kisses. “We have time.”

The door opened, surprising them. The girls stood there, grinning.

“I’m staying one more night,” Xanthe said. “Mahdi twisted my arm.”

* * *

They spent the day together, Darius surprising Jason in the evening with a rooftop date on his final evening at the hotel. Jason loved what appeared to be a tradition of dinner for two served on one of the big beds that had warm, faux-floor blankets and a heat lamps keeping them warm as the night darkened and grew chilly. Their bed was screened off from other couples enjoying the starry sky and Jason watched their personal waiter lighting more candles as the night progressed. They started out fully-clothed, but with each successive course, Darius removed more and more of Jason’s

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clothing. Jason couldn't remember ever laughing so hard. Darius was fun and so sensual. Their waiter seemed to like them and kept bringing them mini cocktails he'd blended for them to sample.

He even looked the other way when Darius moved under their soft blanket and began to suck Jason's cock.

"Is all this going in one of your books?" Darius asked, coming up for air.

"Oh, yes," Jason said. "My readers get their thrills vicariously, you know."

"Which particular thrill do you think they would like this scene to end with?" Darius asked, kissing his way along Jason's jawline.

"A three-way with the waiter, but I'm too selfish to share you. So, you should just fuck me instead."

"You mean pretend?"

"Sure, why not?"

Jason could smell orange blossoms in the air, feeling very decadent as his lover slipped beneath the blanket once more, tonguing his ass and balls. Sexual heat caught in his throat as the danger of being caught only increased his desire. Bob Marley sang about "One Love" with Jason looking right up into the stars as Darius slid two fingers into his ass and sucked Jason's cock until he came.

His heartbeat raced. *I think I've found my Adriano.*

* * *

One day...the words kept whispering into Darius's brain as Jason came in his mouth. One day, I will tell him. I can't tell him now. He'll leave me. The more time he spends with me...yes...he will see I'm a good guy. He won't dump me. In the meantime, no

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matter how wonderful things were between them, his singular and pressing panic was that he would never be able to make Jason understand about Ostrichwalk.

Up there on the roof, all this seemed possible. Yes! His plan would work. He would make Jason feel so loved and so happy that he would forgive him anything. He'd never been with somebody who made him feel so good, who was his mental and spiritual equal and who stimulated him on a physical way that pushed the supernova index.

He slipped out of their bed back downstairs in the middle of the night and called Xanthe.

"I gotta talk to you."

"Not right now, doll," she whispered. "I got me a hot man here."

"Please."

She met him in the hallway, wrapping a fluffy hotel robe around her body. She looked pissed until she saw his face.

"What's wrong? You look awful."

He led her away from their rooms.

"It's killing me. I have to tell him, but I can't tell him."

"Darius," she said, "you didn't know him then. I think you shouldn't tell him. I'll find someone to replace you. Maybe...you know, I've been thinking."

She glanced back at their closed doors, making sure they were alone.

"You could eventually come clean. You could help code his books so we can trace the thieves. We could turn this thing around. We could help Jason and so many other authors protect their material once and for all. Hey, maybe you could even help him sell a whole new line of stories he self-publishes."

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“The coding thing excites me,” Darius said. “That would be really cool.”

“I love seeing the gleam come back in your eye. I almost gave up on you, my friend.”

She hugged him and pushed him back toward his room.

* * *

Jason awoke to the sweet sensation of being in Darius’s arms. He let himself enjoy it a few moments longer before slipping out of their shared bed. He sat at his laptop for a moment, stories swirling in his head. Damn. He was so happy he couldn’t write. He sat their smiling like a goofball. He checked his emails once he was able to access the hotel’s Wi-Fi and saw three messages from Rodney, the computer guy. Subject matter: *Progress*.

He ignored them. For once he was too happy to even scour the theft sites. Jun had been right. He’d been obsessed. Obsession was unhealthy.

“Hey, how come I’m in this big beautiful bed all alone?” Darius asked, yawning and stretching.

“A situation I am about to rectify,” Jason said, shutting down his laptop.

They lingered in bed until the last possible moment before checkout and drove back to Jason’s new apartment with Xanthe, who spent the entire drive yelling at someone on her cell phone.

Mahdi was asleep in bed, her door open. She had one pillow, Hendrix had the other. Xanthe threw herself on the bed but still, Hendrix wouldn’t budge.

“My cat is miffed,” Jason said, watching his beautiful furball open an eye then close it again.

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"Nah, he's in love," Darius said, nuzzling him. "And so am I."

Jason's laughter woke Mahdi, who came out to greet them, dressed in *Transformers* pajamas.

"Oh, my God, I love them," Jason said. "Where did you find them?"

"Xanthe bought them for me. You guys ready for breakfast?"

She and Jason made pancakes and eggs as Darius coaxed Hendrix into the living room to play with him.

"I'll choose the music," Xanthe called out.

"What a sweetheart he is," Mahdi whispered.

"Isn't he, though?"

She nodded. "You guys heading to Ojai tomorrow?"

"Yes. Want to come with?"

"Naw. I'm gonna load up on DVDs and junk food. Hendrix quite likes the idea. I'm going to miss Xanthe...she's leaving today. She can't extend her trip any longer."

"Can you believe that a week ago, we didn't even know them?"

Mahdi shook her head. "I hate saying goodbye. First the theater...now our friends."

It *was* tough saying goodbye and it felt even tougher knowing it was Friday and he was out of work and should be job-hunting.

"I keep telling you, come to Detroit," Darius said when the girls left for the airport.

"Baby, I will, but it's crazy for me to come now."

"Why?"

"My life is out here."

"What part of your life can't move across state lines?"

"You're serious about this." Jason realized that Darius really wanted him to move to Detroit.

"I'm very serious. Jason...sometimes, you just know. I've

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never known before, but I know now.”

Jason grinned. “Clunky but eloquent.”

“You know, too, don’t you?”

Jason didn’t respond. It was all happening too fast. He needed time.

“So what fun things can we do with Mahdi today to distract her?” Darius asked.

“I need to think about it.” Jason crawled across the living room floor, burying his face in Darius’s crotch.

Darius stroked his head. “Does that help you think?” His voice was soft.

“No. But it makes me feel very good.”

“Works for me,” Darius said.

* * *

They drove to Ojai on Saturday morning, leaving Mahdi and Hendrix to enjoy takeout and marathon episodes of *Torchwood* and *Doctor Who*. Jason drove, worrying about Darius’s mood. He seemed to be in great spirits when they first woke up, but business had kept him online and on his cell phone. Jason wasn’t certain, but he thought he heard him arguing with Xanthe on his cell phone. He’d gone out to the balcony and closed the sliding glass door, pacing as he spoke.

He’d asked Darius if he wanted to cancel the trip. Darius insisted he wanted to go.

“I feel bad,” he said, as they headed up the 101 freeway. “All week, we’ve talked about my work, but what about yours. Everything okay?”

Darius shrugged. “It’s nothing I can’t handle.” He scowled out

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the window at the passing parade of coastal farms lining the freeway. It always struck Jason how strange it was that Californians bitched about illegal immigration, yet, nobody but migrant workers were in the lettuce fields working for minimum wage.

“You want to talk about it?” he asked. He didn’t want to push, but Darius’s mood seemed to be getting worse.

“I will. Sweetheart, I want this weekend to be fun and right now, work isn’t fun.”

“Were you arguing with Xanthe?”

He caught Darius’s sharp glance. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I heard you. You seem so close.”

“We are.” Darius relaxed as Jason’s hand moved across his thigh.

“I’m trying to get out of the online company we created. It’s...no longer working for me. She found an investor to replace my ex. I thought she could find somebody to buy me out.”

“And?”

“She doesn’t want me to quit.”

“Why is it no longer working for you? Too stressful?”

“You could say that.”

Jason waited, hoping Darius would open up more. Instead, he picked up Jason’s hand, massaging his fingers. Darius had figured out in a few short days what Jun never had. Jason’s wrists and hands constantly hurt from writing. He’d given him hand massages that almost made him come they were so great. Darius’s fingers closed around his wrist now. Jason bit his lip as Darius shook Jason’s wrist, sending the tension ricocheting up his palm to his fingertips and shooting into thin air.

“Fuck...where did you learn how to do that?”

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"I did massage therapy for years. In England I even studied aromatherapy. I contemplated doing it for a living again."

"You should."

Darius grinned now, the light coming back into his face. "Is your cock hard?"

"Very."

"Then maybe I should reserve my special technique for you. Pull over, we'll have some fun."

"Wait until we're on the Ojai freeway," Jason said. "I can pretend you're my cowboy."

Darius laughed, leaning over and kissing his cheek. "Thanks for making me smile. You always do."

They took the right fork for the 126 and half a mile along the tiny, two-lane highway, Darius told Jason to pull over.

The smell of horses, manure, earth and good, clean air filled Jason's spirit as Darius grabbed him by the hand and dragged him to the backseat.

"I want to suck you, too," he said. Darius put Jason on his back, kissing him, climbing over him so that his crotch was exactly where Jason wanted it. He unzipped his lover's pants, Darius's smooth, huge cock springing out. He began licking the head, Darius's moans overshadowed by the speeding cars rushing past them so fast the vibration kept rocking the car.

"Suck me, baby," Darius said, coming off Jason's cock for a moment.

Jason's cell phone kept ringing. He ignored it. Gripping his lover's hips was more important than reaching for the phone to turn it off.

"Somebody wants to talk to you badly," Darius said before sliding his hot mouth back over Jason's hardness.

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Jason couldn't respond. He was in orbit. Having his cock sucked at the same moment he was enjoying Darius was unbelievable. Darius bleated when Jason released the cock in his mouth. But Jason wasn't going anywhere. His tongue lapped at Darius's ass hole. Darius went nuts, squirming against his face.

"Oh, God," Darius screamed. "I'm gonna come, baby." He tore his ass away from Jason's face, raising himself up so that his cock plunged into Jason's mouth. Jason glimpsed his own raging erection and it sent him off. They came together, the car rocked by a huge semi-trailer. He held Darius to him, hugging the man's body.

"I love you," Darius said, putting soft kisses on Jason's balls.

Jason let his lover get off him as his cell phone rang again. He checked the readout. Mahdi.

She'd called five times in a row. Petrified something had happened to Hendrix, he took the call.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Hendrix is fine. It's Xanthe. We just had an argument. We—"

"Hon, can I call you when I get to my mom's? I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"All right, she said, sounding grumpy. "Don't say anything to Darius. I'll wait for your call."

Whatever. He was glad Mahdi had found a new friend, but why she needed to call him about their argument was beyond him. As he and Darius tidied themselves up and moved back to the front seat, Darius seemed concerned.

"Is Mahdi okay?"

He nodded. "You ready to deal with family?"

Darius laughed. "I guess...say, I've been meaning to ask you.

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What's the story with your parents?"

Jason shrugged. "They got divorced, they met other people and they are each other's best friends. It's kind of spooky how European they are. My mom and my dad's boyfriend even make holiday dinners together."

Darius laughed.

"What about your family?"

Darius blew out a breath. "They're not European... they're midwesterners... you'll meet them." He grinned. "And I hope you don't hold them against me."

They swapped hot kisses the rest of the way to small country town that they both apparently adored. An old cowboy town with a Chumash name meaning *valley of the moon*, Ojai was a secret, sacred jewel an hour and fifteen minutes north of Los Angeles.

Darius held Jason's hand as they listened to Raul Midon on the CD player. They veered inland on the 126 and Jason pulled off the dinky highway.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "Wild orchids!"

Darius followed Jason to the side of the road where his gorgeous lover pulled tiny flowers out by the roots. They were colorful and, Darius soon discovered, sweetly scented.

"I would never have seen these without you," he marveled. Jason darted up the road and plucked out wild thyme and fennel.

The car smelled so intoxicating, Darius insisted they pull over and have wild sex in the backseat.

"We just did," Jason said. "Don't you remember?"

"But I want you again."

"You'll have to wait until we reach my folks' place. I have a tree house there you know," Jason said.

"I didn't know. You constantly surprise me."

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The rest of the drive almost sent them both over the edge, with the two men rubbing at each others' cocks through their pants.

Darius fretted about the phone call. He was worried that Mahdi knew about Ostrichwalk. He was certain he heard her saying, *Don't tell Darius*. On the other hand, maybe she didn't want whatever argument she'd had with Xanthe being repeated to her.

Quit worrying. He took a deep breath. He really didn't want to wait until they reached the Jagger residence, but once he saw their house, a lovely, sprawling ranch-style property on Eucalyptus Road in the arbulata, or maze section of Ojai, he was glad they'd waited. It was lovely. One lone horse lived on it and came trotting up to Jason like a dog, burying his head under Jason's arm.

"Oh, he's precious," Darius said, stroking the horse's soft muzzle. "What's his name?"

Jason smiled. "Adonis."

"Adonis. It suits him."

The two men walked to the front door. Jason's parents greeted them and Darius was surprised to see his mom there. Sue Maguire owned a café on Ojai Avenue, the main drag. It had been her lifelong dream and she'd worked hard on the place. She sold books and gourmet coffee. Darius was anxious to take Jason there.

He introduced them and Darius was surprised to see his mom being a little reserved with Jason.

"Darling," she said when she got a minute alone with him. "He writes *gay porn*, for God's sake."

Darius felt his temperature rising. "He writes gay erotic romance, Mom. There's a big difference."

"Well, his parents don't think so."

"Really?" Darius was surprised. "His parents came to his book signing. They seem very supportive."

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“That doesn’t mean they don’t think his books are very explicit. Too explicit.”

“So, I suppose that means he won’t be getting a book signing at the café anytime soon?”

She looked alarmed. “You’re joking, right?”

Jason came out of the house right at that moment. He must have heard everything. Darius longed to apologize, but Jason wore a smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes as he passed them champagne mimosas.

They had brunch buffet-style out on the back veranda, the view of the Topa Topa mountains just stunning.

Darius’s cell phone rang. He almost choked when he read Xanthe’s text message.

Mahdi knows about Ostrichwalk.

Darius felt the fragile splendor he’d shared with Jason disintegrating before his eyes.

He watched his lover carrying dishes into the kitchen. Had he returned Mahdi’s call? Did he know?

Darius had to tell him. He had to tell Jason the truth. Now.

Jason’s cell phone rang. Darius felt his heart stammering.

“You okay, sweetie?” his mom asked, touching him.

No...my whole world is about to come crashing down.

CHAPTER 10

“Hey,” Jason said, answering the phone. He hadn’t checked the readout and was surprised to find it was Jun.

“I hear you got yourself a new man,” Jun said, the sneer in his tone sickening.

“So what?” Jason asked, looking out the window to see Darius’s anxious gaze on his.

Oh, fuck...I am such a goner. I can’t stand being away from him. Even for a moment.

“Yeah?” well, there are some things you should know about him.”

“I know all I need to know, Jun. Don’t call me again.

He ended the call. He remembered he hadn’t called Mahdi back. He pressed her numbers, got her voice mail and left a

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message.

Jun called back and he turned off the phone, leaving the dishes on the sink.

Back outside, he smiled brightly at Darius, who stood in his gentlemanly way and held his seat out for him.

“You’re so adorable together,” Jason’s mother said.

Jason saw Sue’s lips thin, but took comfort in Darius’s arm moving around his shoulder.

* * *

Darius was going crazy. Maybe Jason hadn’t found out. He was still acting lovey-dovey, but the whole thing was driving him crazy.

He was pleased when his mom invited everyone over for breakfast the following day. It was a good sign. If she totally hated Jason she wouldn’t have done it. She had a house off Ojai Avenue on a street named Drown. The name always made Darius wince. It was a cute house, but nothing like this. Going back inside for seconds, Darius grabbed the opportunity to kiss Jason, who carried in more plates.

“I hope my mom didn’t offend you.”

Jason sighed. “She hates me.”

“No, she doesn’t. She’s a literary snob. I’m so sorry, honey. If she read your work she would love it.”

Jason looked dismayed. “I have a long way to go in impressing her, I can tell.”

“Well, her son is deeply impressed. Does that count for anything?”

Jason laughed then, the sunshine back in his eyes.

“Actually, to me, it’s all that matters.”

Jason’s mom was a great cook. There was so much food, frittata, smoked salmon, bagels, coffee and papaya drizzled with fresh limes, that Jason and Darius were too full to climb trees or even fuck.

Jason’s dad and his partner left right after lunch for a gay men’s weekend wine-tasting in Santa Ynez.

“We want you to come back and spend more time with us,” Jason’s dad said, and the men waved everyone goodbye.

Will that be us one day, going on gay men’s weekend wine-tastings?

Jason and Darius took a siesta as soon as Sue left to go back to the café. They had all agreed to meet her and her new boyfriend at Bocalli’s for dinner.

Napping with Jason in his arms in the Jaggers’ guestroom was an erotic high Darius wanted to repeat again and again. Even in repose, their bodies strained toward one another.

I love this man. Darius kissed Jason’s smooth forehead and tried not to worry about the future. It was only two days away. No...he’d persuade Jason to move with him. To be with him and share his life with him.

He had told Xanthe what he wanted. She understood. How in the world had things gone so wrong that Mahdi knew about Ostrichwalk? She said she would handle Jun. She would handle Claude. She understood Darius wanting to walk away from the business. She’d urged him to consider a remodification. Maybe they could persuade authors to give them books that they could upload for a fee. Thoughts tumbled over and over in his mind.

Darius had argued it would lead to the same issue. More piracy. But he wanted out. He wanted a life with Jason. He wanted to love

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and care for him.

If he still wants you once he learns the truth.

* * *

Late in the afternoon, Jason and Darius walked down to Ojai Avenue. They stopped at the antique store at the end of the street, the one that constantly changed hands but attracted an interesting cross-cultural crowd that drifted over from the Oh-hi Ice Cream bar. Inside the store were paintings of the entire lineage of Hawaiian kings. Jason knew them all, down to the history of each one.

He had no idea the store owner had painted them all, or that the guy, an eccentric, retired merchant marine was Sue's new boyfriend.

Brecken was impressed by Jason and told Darius he'd finally met a "decent fella."

"I know," Darius said, nuzzling Jason.

"See you at dinner." Brecken adjusted his nautical cap at the back of his head and returning to his painting behind the counter.

It was hard not to maul Jason as they got closer to the center of activity. There was an art exhibit over at Libbey Park. They darted across the road, looking at the range of art, and popped into Nomad gallery, listening to songs of the Tuareg tribe smuggled out Africa.

They seemed to love doing the exact same things. They wandered down Ojai Avenue, finishing at the Ojai Café, where Sue had a poetry reading going on.

Jason and Darius hung out, looking at books. Jason wanted to try the new Guatemalan blend coffee and Sue brought them some in a French press.

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"I heard you met Brecken," she said. "Isn't he amazing?"

Jason nodded. "Sure is. Did he spend a lot of time in Hawaii?"

"Twenty years. I think he still misses it."

"He's very talented. I bet he could sell his paintings of the monarchs over there."

"You really think so?"

"Sure," Jason said. "You should talk to my mom. She knows a lot of people over there who could help."

"I'll do that." Sue ran off to make more coffee and Darius couldn't resist pressing a big kiss on Jason's mouth.

"God, I wish we were going home to make love."

"Me, too," Jason said. "I don't want you to leave Monday. The idea is killing me."

"Then come with me."

"You have an online company, right?"

"Yep."

"You don't have a job to report to, you work out of your home...your laptop is here, why are you rushing back?"

"I...I..." Darius laughed. "I don't know. I live there?"

Jason grinned. "I just got my third-party royalty payment in my PayPal account and it's not bad...a lot more than I was expecting. Maybe I could come visit if you really want me to."

"I want you to. Please come with me."

The three couples drove up to Mediation Mount right at sunset to watch the pink moment, a rare and unique thing to Ojai. Because of its geographical positioning, the entire sky became infused in pink. It was a wonderful moment. People came from all over the world to witness this natural splendor.

"I'm with the people I want to be with more than anyone else in the world," Darius said.

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Jason put his arms around him and they all had a group hug.

"Before we all get too blissed-out, let's grab dinner," Jason's stepdad said.

They drove back down to the bottom of the hill and had a wonderful evening at Bocalli's, the best Italian restaurant in town. They talked until the sky grew inky black and they were the last ones to leave the restaurant.

* * *

In bed that night, Jason and Darius attacked one another in a frenzy.

They tried so hard to keep quiet, knowing his parents were just down the hall, but sucking each other's cocks was a naturally noisy proposition. They couldn't keep their mouths off each other.

Jason wanted Darius inside him and climbed on him, facing away from him. He rode him, reverse-cowboy, kissing Darius's feet as he came deep inside Jason.

"Fuck. How can I *not* love you," Darius said, stroking Jason's sweating back. He sat up, feeling Jason's spent and dripping cock. "You must come home with me."

Darius spent the rest of the weekend persuading Jason to go back with him. The thought of not seeing each other was horrible.

As they prepared to leave Sunday night, Jason checked his laptop for emails and turned on his cell phone.

"Man...a ton of messages from Mahdi."

"Don't," Darius said.

Jason gaped at him. "Don't?"

"I know what she's going to tell you."

Jason gulped.

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“Are you married or something?”

Darius shook his head. He remained mute, his face clouding in misery.

“What’s going on?” Jason asked. He couldn’t imagine what was so terrible.

Darius sat on the bed, his head in his hands.

“Whatever it is, Jun knows. He called me yesterday.” Jason tried not to get hysterical or angry. Darius’s silence was eating at him.

“For God’s sake,” he said. “Tell me.”

“I’m so fucking afraid of losing you.” Darius lifted his face, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Jason moved over to him, trying to hold him.

“No...” Darius jumped off the bed, away from him. “You’re gonna hate me.”

“What’s wrong?” Jason kept asking him.

Darius felt his whole world collapsing around him.

“What’s wrong?” Jason asked again. “It’s not cancer, is it?”

Darius shook his head.

“Then we can handle whatever it is.”

Darius threw himself into a chair. He couldn’t fully breathe. He was about to lose everything. He would die without Jason, just die.

Jason knelt between his legs. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“I don’t know how to tell you.”

“Just do it. Just say it.”

“No. I’ll lose you. This is a horrible fucking nightmare.”

“Darius. What the hell could be that bad? Are you seeing someone else?”

“Oh, my God, no!”

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"Then tell me."

"Ostrichwalk."

"Yes?"

"The...file-sharing site?"

"Yes, I know it. Quite well. Too well."

"I was behind it."

"I knew it."

Darius gaped. "You *knew* it?"

Tears came to Jason's eyes. "I knew you were just too fucking good to be true."

He tore down the hallway, shedding the tears he hadn't had for Jun but for some stupid reason he had for Darius.

Darius followed him, but Jason pounded on his parents' door. His dad opened up. Jason was so upset he knew he wasn't making sense. His parents poured cognacs for all of them.

"I don't get the piracy thing," his father said when Jason explained it all.

"He stole from me!"

"Look, Jason, I know you're upset, but calm down. Some people don't think file-sharing is such a bad thing."

"What? Are you saying you're on his side?"

"I'm not saying that."

"What are you saying, Dad?"

"I never meant to hurt you," Darius blurted.

Jason didn't know who he was more angry with. His father put his hand on his shoulder.

"Jason, life was never meant to be easy. Your other dad's always quoting that goofy Australian Prime Minister who said that, often, I believe. I think it's true. It's been hard watching you struggle with your chosen profession when other things would

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have given you more security.”

“But—”

“Just hear me out. You love what you do. Regardless of the sharing, the theft...the piracy, whatever you call it, you’ve built up a readership and I am so darn proud of you. I stood in that bookstore a few nights ago and saw the faces of the people who came in there to listen to you. You always talked about the effect your theater had on you. You affect people the same way. You don’t even realize it. Nobody...*nobody* can take that from you.”

Jason was so stunned he couldn’t respond. He needed to think.

He took a long walk, on his own. Maybe his dad was right. Anger kept bubbling to the surface,

He walked down to the main road. So much had changed in his life. Darius had made a big impact and the truth was, in spite of everything, he believed the guy cared. He sat on a white stone wall outside Libbey Park. He took a deep breath. He wasn’t surprised to look up and see Darius standing in front of him.

Darius covered the distance between them, pulling Jason into his arms.

I must be a pushover. God...why do I already love this guy so much?

He submitted to Darius’s kisses, his seemingly heartfelt apologies.

“I love you, but I can’t make any decisions about the rest of my life yet,” Jason insisted. “You really hurt me.”

“I know...I’m so sorry. You think you might think about spending the rest of your life with me?” Darius asked, kissing Jason’s throat.

“I’m not sure yet. It might take me a lifetime to decide.”

“A whole lifetime?” Darius grinned.

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“Possibly.”

“You’re a very dangerous guy, Jason. You’re going to keep me honest. I love that. You’re like a cop...a very smart cop.”

“I need to quote C.C. Baxter right now,” Jason said, kissing him.

“Oh, what quote is that?”

“Shut up and fuck me.”

“He never said that.”

“No. But if I’d written the dialogue he would have.”

Darius grinned. “The actual line was shut up and deal.”

Jason nodded. “That works, too.” He leaned forward and kissed Darius. “Game on.”

A. J. LLEWELLYN

A. J. Llewellyn divides his time between California and Hawaii. Bags of Kona coffee in the fridge and a healthy collection of Hawaiian records keep him refueled when he is on the mainland.

A. J.'s passion for the islands led him to writing a play about the last ruling monarch of Hawaii, Queen Lili'uokalani. He has written a non-erotic novel about the overthrow of her kingdom—in diary form from her maid's point of view.

He never lacks inspiration for his male/male erotic romances and has to force his fingers from the computer keyboard to pursue his other passions: collecting books on Hawaiiana, surfing and spending time with his family, friends and his animal companions.

A. J. Llewellyn believes that love is a song best sung out loud. To find out more about A.J., visit his website at www.ajllewellyn.com or you can reach him at aj@ajllewellyn.com.

* * *

**Don't miss *Deeper Blue*
by J. A. Llewellyn,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Tracy Costantino accepts the task of tutoring Marjo, a troubled little girl whose father has rented a house in the remote but

picturesque Greek island town of Molivos. But this is no Mediterranean paradise...something strange is going on...

In the shadow of the town's fabled castle, events start badly with Tracy's new boss, imperious music composer Benoit Seguin, who is furious to learn his daughter's new tutor is a man, not a woman. Nevertheless, as an undeniable attraction builds between the two men, Tracy becomes convinced the Seguins' house is haunted. Some say the ancient legend of the castle's once-kidnapped princess is coming back to life. Is the threat to little Marjo spectral? Or if it's real, who would want to abduct her?

Increasingly confused by his tumultuous relationship with Benoit, Tracy fights the urge to flee to the comfort of his life in New York and await the birth of his twin sister's baby. He's bonded with Marjo, however, and fears leaving her to the increasing danger from unseen, sinister forces swirling around her. And with Benoit shut away working most of the time, Tracy believes he is the only one who can protect the young girl.

Unwilling to leave, yet rejected by Benoit, Tracy needs to decide if this is what he's been looking for...if this is his love, love of a different color...a deeper blue...

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