



The
Solitary Knights
of Pelham Bay
Book 3

Switching Gears



Claire Thompson

ROMANCE UNBOUND PUBLISHING

Romance Unbound Publishing
Presents

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Book 3: Switching Gears

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The Series

It started as a joke. Several guys burned by love decided to create a club they dubbed the Solitary Knights. A safe haven for the romantically disinclined, the guys meet once a month to drink a beer and renew their vow to avoid love at all costs. Yet beneath the laughter and bravado, each man hides a broken heart.

One night, Drew Kensington, owner and bartender of the Pelham Bay Pub, issues a challenge, “Why don’t you *find* that one guy—the one that got away, the one you’ve never quite let fade from your dreams? Track him down. Reconnect. Then come back here and tell us what you found out.”

Book 3: Switching Gears

Take it! Take another little piece of my heart, now baby. Janis Joplin’s powerful, bluesy voice echoed through the small Brooklyn auto shop. Jack Harris, head beneath the hood of a car, let her raw power pound through him. Her music, as it always did, wound him tight—edgy and spoiling for a fight.

He heard the chime that indicated the door to the shop’s reception area was being opened. “Break another little bit of my heart now darling, yeah.” Jack sang along under his breath as he pulled his head from beneath the hood and wiped some of the grease from his fingers.

The service bell on the counter began to ding, the insistent sound interfering with Janis’ lament. “Yeah, yeah, I’m coming,” Jack called. He hit the button on the CD player and moved toward the glass door that separated the garage from the reception area, still humming.

Marcos Savakis stood just inside, his face registering haughty impatience.

Shit. The tires. Jack had forgotten to let Marcos know, and now here he was, looking better than a man had a right to look, with that dark hair curling in waves down his neck and those soulful eyes that seemed to stare right into Jack’s secrets.

I need you to come on and take it...take another piece of my heart, babe.

Jack shook away the words, aware his cock was rising as he stared at the handsome man in front of him. What Marcos needed was for someone to bend him over and take

him down a rung or three. Him and his fancy car and his fancy clothes and his soft hands that probably never did a day's honest work since he'd been born.

"I assume you are ready for me?" Marcos asked.

Jack slapped his forehead. "Damn. I meant to call you. I had to give your tires away. I'm really sorry you made the trip for nothing."

"You what?" Thick, straight brows furrowed over clear brown eyes. Marcos frowned. "I don't understand."

"I meant to call first thing this morning, but I got distracted. Look, there was an emergency on Saturday. Don't worry, I'll have you a new set by tomorrow. Wednesday at the latest."

Marcos pursed his lips, his eyebrows lifting with incredulity. "Let me see if I understand." Marcos spoke slowly, as if speaking to a stupid child. Jack felt the skin on his neck heat. "I ordered and paid for a set of four tires last week. You assured me they would be here on Monday. I took time from my work to come here, and now, after the fact, it occurs to you that you forgot to extend even the barest courtesy of letting me know you'd sold my tires, the ones I'd already purchased, out from under me. Am I getting this so far, Mr. Harris?"

Jack forced his hands, which were aching to curl into fists, to stay loose at his sides. Did Savakis go out of his way to irritate the shit out of him? Jack swallowed his rising anger. The customer is always right, he reminded himself.

He held out his hands in a supplicating gesture. "Don't worry. You'll have your tires, I promise. I wouldn't have done it, but it was for Ryan. Ryan Kennedy, a Solitary Knight and your fellow Porsche owner. He had an emergency on Saturday. Someone slashed his tires."

Marcos spoke in a calm, measured tone, the hint of his Greek accent shaping the words. "That's regrettable, I'm sure." He looked down his nose at Jack. Something about the sneer that twisted his lips caused a jolt of electricity to zing its way directly to Jack's cock. Yet Marcos' tone was cold, the tone a master would use with his errant servant back when there were such things. Where did the prick get off acting like that?

"I appreciate Ryan's situation. Nevertheless," Marcos continued, "what you did is unacceptable. Perhaps if you'd had the courtesy to check with me first...?" He let the question hang in the air.

Marcos sat down on one of the plastic molded chairs in the waiting area. "I require the tires today. Neither Tuesday nor Wednesday. Today. I suggest you get on the phone and call whomever you have to call to make that happen."

Marcos lifted his arm, pushing at the sleeve of what looked to Jack to be a very expensive suit, the white cuff held closed by a cufflink of black onyx set in gold. Marcos looked at his watch and back at Jack. "I have an hour. I will wait."

This is business, Jack reminded himself. *The customer is always right. Stay cool.* "Look, I'd love to get your tires today, but the tire dealer that I get the P Zeros from is closed on Mondays and—"

"Then I suggest you call another dealer," Marcos cut in. He looked Jack slowly up and down, his lips lifting in an arrogant trace of a smile. Jack was wearing his usual uniform of a black T-shirt and denim work shirt over jeans worn smooth with age, scuffed black work boots on his feet. Good, solid clothing for a man who worked with his hands and his back. Marcos' eyes moved slowly back to his face, his expression daring Jack to defy him.

Jack's fingers curled, the nails pressing into his palms. One smash to that smooth jaw would wipe the smug, superior look off Savakis' face. It would feel so fucking good...

The door swung open and Carlos came in, a box of donuts in his hands. "Hey, Jack. Sorry I'm late. My kid's got the flu."

"No problem," Jack replied, forcing a calm he didn't feel. "Look, this customer here," Jack jerked his head toward Marcos, "needs some Pirelli P Zeros for his 911 Carrera S. See what you can do about getting a set *muy rapido*, okay? Do whatever it takes."

Without waiting for a reply, Jack shouldered through the door into the garage. He pushed the button on the player and cranked the volume. ...*have another little piece of my heart, now baby...*

All the words Jack had bitten back while talking to Marcos gushed through his brain like hot blood. Who the hell did that Savakis think he was? Fuck him and his good looks and his money, the condescending bastard. It was bad enough Jack had to deal with the little prick's sarcasm at the Solitary Knights meetings. He did not need his righteous indignation bullshit at his garage.

I appreciate Ryan's situation. What the fuck? Didn't the bastard get the concept of helping out a friend in need? Didn't he understand that sometimes people got busy and forgot to make a phone call? And where did he come off, standing there in his three-thousand-dollar suit, giving Jack the once-over like he was something the cat dragged in?

Rage ricocheted through Jack's body, filling him with a dark, dangerous energy. The anger felt good. It was hot and filling and gave him something to cling to. It hurt when he smashed his fist against the concrete wall, but at the same time it felt good. So good.

He hit it again, and again, and again...

"Jack. Jack! What the hell are you doing, *amigo!*" Through the roar of blood pulsing in his head, Jack became aware of Carlos pulling at his shoulders, wresting him away from the wall, from the pain, from the darkness in his soul.

"*Santa Maria, madre de dios,*" Carlos whispered. "What the hell are you doing, Jack?" They both stared down at Jack's hand. The knuckles were streaming with blood. The gray concrete wall was smeared with it.

"I—I don't know."

The blinding, biting rage ebbed away, replaced with a sort of numbness.

"I better call 9-1-1 —"

"No. No, that's okay, Carlos." Jack grabbed a greasy rag from his back pocket and wrapped it awkwardly around his hand. "It's fine. I'm okay." He knew it should hurt, but Jack couldn't feel a thing. The blood began to seep through the rag.

Carlos shook his head. "You gotta go to the emergency room, man. You could've broken something. You probably need stitches. What the hell were you doing?"

"I, uh. I hit the wall a few times, I guess. Just blowing off some steam.

Carlos shook his head. "That's just blowing off steam? *Mierda*, I'd hate to see you when you're really pissed off."

"Look, do me a favor? Call Gordon Flanders. You can find the number in the rolodex. He's a medic and a friend of mine and doesn't live that far from here. I think he's off today. Maybe he'll agree to have a look at it. Will that make you happy?"

"I guess it'll do for a start." Carlos tried to smile but Jack could see the worry in his eyes. Jack looked down at his hand again, which was finally starting to hurt. Jesus, what the fuck was wrong with him? His hands were his living. He was building up a good reputation for his specialty work with Porsches. He couldn't afford to blow it by not meeting customer needs in a timely fashion.

Which reminded him: "Did you find tires for the Porsche?"

"Yeah. Dealer out in Queens. Cost nearly double what we usually pay. He's gonna deliver, but not till this afternoon. That customer left in a huff. I have a feeling we've lost his business after this."

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," Jack snapped.

Carlos eyed him curiously, but said nothing.

~*~

"I don't know, Jack." Gordon shook his head, a concerned look on his face. "The butterfly bandages should keep the wounds closed, but you should probably get this checked out by a doctor.

Jack stared down at his bandaged hand. "Looks like you've got it wrapped up pretty good. I'll wait a couple of days and see how it's healing. I bet I'll be good as new in a week."

Gordon grinned. "Knowing you, you probably will be. You're made of steel. Just don't use it for a few days, if you can avoid it. And no slamming any more walls." He eyed Jack. "I mean, what the hell was that all about, anyway? Did the wall offend you in some way?"

Jack shrugged, embarrassed. "I don't know. I just get...edgy. You know? Savakis was in the shop and —"

"Ah, Marcos," Gordon interrupted with a smirk. "That explains it. Every time the two of you get going at the pub, we just sit back and watch the fireworks."

"Well, he's annoying as hell. And who does he think he is —"

Gordon laughed, shaking his head. "Harris. You might as well just admit it. It's obvious to anyone looking during those meetings. You are so into that guy it isn't even funny."

Jack frowned. He could feel his blood pressure rise, causing a sharp ache in his chest. He glared at Gordon. "Is that your idea of a joke, Flanders? You couldn't pay me to get involved with that prick. Shit, I wouldn't fuck him with *your* dick."

"Uh huh." Gordon continued to grin, which irritated the crap out of Jack. "Whatever you say."

Seeking to deflect attention from himself, Jack shot back, "Yeah, what about you? Dennis sure seems to want to get into your pants. When're you going to give it up for the guy?"

"Dennis?" Gordon looked genuinely puzzled. "Dennis Wilson?"

"Yeah. To quote you, he's so into you, it isn't even funny. Why not take advantage of the situation?"

"You got that one all wrong." Gordon shook his head. "Dennis and I are just friends. We work together. We're both way too smart to get involved with a work partner. Kiss of death. "

Jack couldn't deny that was true. After a moment, Gordon added, "Back to you, Jack. I regard you as a friend, and I don't like to see my friend hurting himself. No more of this wall bashing shit, okay? You're really lucky you didn't break something."

Jack knew Gordon was right. "Hey, I really owe you one, man. Thanks for patching this up. Bring in your car next time you need work, or a tune up or whatever."

"Yeah, sure." Gordon laughed. "When I win the lottery and buy my Porsche, I'll let you know."

"Nah, don't let the specialty sign fool you. I'll always have time for my pals."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Gordon stood, hoisting his medical bag over his shoulder. "And Jack? Not that it's my business, but you might want to get some help — you know, find a better way to deal with your anger. That kind of rage could end up killing someone."

~*~

Gordon's words kept echoing through Jack's head that evening. *That kind of rage could end up killing someone.* His hand was pulsing like a beating heart, a constant, throbbing reminder of his rage.

Yeah, Savakis had pissed him off, as usual, but this wasn't the first time he'd lost it, letting his anger get the better of him. It was almost like a physical thing — something that rose up like hot lava and burst through him, beyond his control, almost beyond his awareness.

Hitting something eased the pressure. Even when it hurt, maybe especially when it hurt, somehow it made him feel better, calmer. Lately he felt wound up all the time, full of nervous energy that had nowhere to go.

Sex was a good release, but he was forty-two—how much longer did he want to go on picking up guys at the bars, taking them home for a quickie and then sending them on their way? The morning after nearly always still found him edgy, restless, like a boxer in the ring, itching for a fight.

When was the last time he'd felt calm? At ease in his own skin? He closed his eyes, pondering. Man, was it really twenty years ago? He'd just gotten out of the service back then, still wet behind the ears when he'd discovered the scene and fallen in with Alexei. Back then, Alexei had been able to calm him, but Jack had washed his hands of the scene a long time ago.

That whole leather culture smacked too much of the military for his taste. Nobody dictated to Jack Harris who he could talk to and when, or what he should wear, and why it was significant. Alexei, one of the old guard leather daddies, used to coach him on the rules when he took him to scene events—a bottom should never initiate conversation, he should stare with respect at a Top's boots during conversation, he should walk half a step behind his Top as a sign of respect. There were way too many damn rules—fuck that.

Jack Harris bowed down to nobody, not even Alexei Spiros. Still, he couldn't deny Alexei had been the one person who could slow him down. When he was with Alexei, the jittery agitation that was such a constant in his life just seemed to slip away. He'd never experienced that level of peace before or since.

"I wonder how he's doing?" Jack said aloud in the habit of people who live alone. "Maybe I should look him up." He recalled Drew's challenge at the last Solitary Knights meeting about looking up an old lover and seeing what had happened with them. Well, he wasn't sure he'd categorize Alexei as a lover, not precisely. But he had been the one person who could get inside Jack's head, and the one person who could calm him down.

Curious now if Alexei was still around, Jack went into the kitchen in search of his old address book. He hadn't looked in the little black book for years. Maybe Alexei didn't even live in Manhattan any more, but what the hell—it was worth a shot.

He punched the number into his cell phone. "Hello?" It was not the deep, gravelly voice of Alexei, but that of someone who sounded much younger. Shit, it was the wrong number. Jack was about to hang up when the person added, "Spiros residence."

An employee? A sub boy? A lover?

"Hi. I was calling for Alexei. Is he around?"

"Who is this?"

Just answer the fucking question. Jack took a breath. Gordon was right. He really needed to get a grip. He let out a breath and said politely, "This is Jack Harris, an old friend of Alexei's."

"Hold on. I'll see if he's available."

Jack waited. A few moments later the man returned to the phone. "He's resting now. Can I take a message?"

Worry suddenly shot its way through Jack's gut. Alexei must be nearing seventy. "Is he okay?"

"You – you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Alexei had a mild heart attack awhile back. I just brought him home from hospital a few days ago."

Jack's mind was whirling. Alexei Spiros was made of iron. Nothing could ever happen to him. Even though Jack had lost touch over the years, Alexei had always remained a quiet, steady constant in the back of his mind. He'd been not only Jack's mentor and partner back when Jack had been active in the scene, he'd been a friend, and maybe the only person who could tell Jack what to do without pissing Jack off.

"I'm so sorry, I had no idea."

"He's doing well. Full recovery expected. He just has to take it easy for a while. Did you want to leave a message for Alexei?"

"Yes. We – we haven't been in touch in a long time." The guy's second sentence now penetrated Jack's head – I just brought him home – whose home? A shared home? Curious, Jack asked, "You're Alexei's...friend?"

The man chuckled. "Yeah, you could say that. We've been together fourteen years. My name's Rusty. Rusty Dougherty. You know Jack from where?"

"I knew him twenty years ago. Man, I can't believe it's been that long. He was my, uh, that is, he and I..." Jack hesitated, not sure how much this Rusty knew of Alexei's background.

"You were his sub? One of his boys?"

So he did know. Jack snorted. "I was never anybody's sub. But yeah, we were in the scene together, I guess you'd say. I think of him more as my mentor. But I walked away from all that years ago. Not really my thing."

There was a brief pause, and then, "Would you like to leave your number? I'll let Alexei know you called."

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"You can do better than that. Come on. Ass out, arch your back." Marcos, dressed in black leather pants, black boots and a Roberto Cavalli black silk shirt, tapped the long bamboo cane impatiently against his leg.

The man standing in front of him at the exercise bar wore nothing but a black jockstrap and a thick black collar. The man was slender and blond, probably in his early twenties.

His partner, Edward, also in his twenties, swarthy and of stocky build, was sitting several feet away. The room resembled a dance studio, complete with two mirrored walls with wooden exercise rails built into them. There were strategically placed eyebolts on the ceiling and walls as well as a few other pieces of multi-functional hardware.

Marcos turned to address the seated man. "Remember, a cane is very flexible. Although it may appear straight and even stiff, in practice it is more whip-like. Proper technique is important so you don't cut the skin. You want to flick it just so, so that the business end of the cane catches at exactly the right angle." As he spoke, Marcos flicked the cane through the air, its whistle echoing in the empty room.

Kenny flinched at the sound. Marcos leaned close, murmuring, "You can do this. Show him your grace."

"I can't," whimpered Kenny "I'm afraid."

"Come on, Kenny, you know you love it," Edward called out. "Don't embarrass me in front of the trainer here. Be a good boy and stick out that sexy little butt of yours. You do want to please me, don't you?"

Kenny nodded. Marcos couldn't help noting in the mirror that the guy's cock was so erect that the head was jutting from the waist of the jockstrap. Each stroke of the cane only made it harder.

Back when Marcos had first started as a trainer for The Quarters, a hardcore underground gay BDSM club, he'd been thrilled to discover so many sexy sub boys – his for the taking if he wanted them. The sessions were a nice break from his day job at the auction house, where he had to keep up the proper façade. He had never mastered the art of office politics or socializing, and while he loved his job, he found that aspect of it tiresome.

At The Quarters he was able to be just exactly who he was. He didn't have to pretend, either by direct lie or omission. He'd started volunteering for the training sessions several years back. He'd found them a great way to get a feel for a guy's potential and limits, without having to actually commit to even a first date.

True, they were often collared, like Kenny here, but Marcos would just use those guys as an opportunity to improve his technique with the various whips, canes, paddles and crops provided by the club. Occasionally he would take someone home with him, but nothing ever came of it, beyond a few days or a few weeks of erotic play.

He had a problem, and he had no clue how to solve it. While he loved the rituals, the obedience, the beautiful leather toys and the taking of submissives to erotic heights of masochistic ecstasy – when it got down to it, he rarely connected with the subs he met in this city.

That is, he didn't like the whole club clone mindset. The guys at the clubs were more into the collared boy status than a true appreciation for the power of erotic submission. From where he stood, most of them seemed to be seeking a sugar leather

daddy. What did he expect? BDSM play clubs were not exactly the place to find true love.

Once, he'd thought he found it, long ago — that one amazing summer on the island of Capri, three glorious weeks when he'd been truly happy. After five years in the United States, Marcos had almost forgotten the crystal blue water of the Mediterranean and the sleepy hillside villages basking in the sun.

When he'd seen Nicholas on the beach and Nicholas had turned his clear green eyes toward Marcos, somehow he'd just known. He'd been nineteen to Nicholas' twenty-eight. It was Nicholas who introduced him to the romance of D/s, teaching Marcos about its power and passion.

He'd taken Marcos along a sub's path, teaching him about grace and the power of blending erotic pain and pleasure into something infinitely more rewarding than mere sex. Beyond BDSM, he'd taught Marcos about love, something he'd never witnessed between his cold, distant parents, nor experienced at their efficient but indifferent hands as a child.

With Nicholas everything had been easy. Beyond the incredible sex, they laughed all the time, happy in each other's company. Never before or since had Marcos felt so at ease in the world.

How foolishly naïve he'd been back then. He'd bravely held back tears when they parted. He would find a way to return after his fall semester, he promised Nicholas. He'd had vague, romantic notions of going to work with Nicholas on the fishing boats. Even when his letters went unanswered, he never wavered in his heart.

Against his parents' wishes, he'd returned the next spring. Nicholas welcomed him with open arms, but those arms now held another lover — a handsome young submissive named Estevo.

Nicholas had been genuinely puzzled at Marcos' devastation. At first he had laughed and chided Marcos, explaining that he kept many boys, and loved them all equally. When Marcos had protested, Nicholas had grown angry, telling Marcos he was selfish and not a true submissive, to want to own his master. He ordered Marcos from his sight, telling him he could return only on his knees, when ready to beg forgiveness.

Humiliated and brokenhearted, Marcos had left Greece for good. It had taken years to move past the feeling of loss and betrayal. He learned to compensate for the pain — to let it nestle down into a dark, secret place where it could no longer reach him. And never again did he submit to another man.

Yet BDSM had been his salvation. As sometimes happened with people introduced to the scene as a sub, as Marcos matured he'd found himself more comfortable in the role of dominant. He studied technique with some of the finest Doms in the city. He thrilled to the reactions he could pull from submissives who hungered for what he offered. It became more than just a sexual kink — it was a part of who he was, woven into his being. And yet at the center of it all, his heart remained cocooned, safe from the pain of Nicholas' betrayal, frozen in time.

He turned his attention to Kenny, keenly aware anger had no place in what they were about to do. He stroked Kenny's ass and thighs with his fingers as he leaned close again, speaking softly.

"I want you to relax. Don't clutch the bar so tightly. Yes, that's better. Stand out a little farther and rest your forehead on the bar." As Kenny obeyed, Marcos continued to stroke his skin.

"Why are you here?" Marcos asked.

"Because Sir wants me to learn to take the cane better. He says a session with you will help us."

"Okay, good. So you're here to please him. Any other reason?"

"What?"

"What do you hope to gain out of this, other than pleasing him?"

"Um. I don't know. I guess that's enough, isn't it?"

Marcos suppressed a sigh. What was he after, anyway? It's not like this guy was a potential partner. He was already taken, and much too young. Still, that didn't mean Marcos couldn't teach him something, something beyond just enduring a caning in order to please his master. He could teach him something about himself, if Kenny were open to it. Marcos decided to find out.

"I'm going to start very slowly — let your skin get used the sting. I want you to breathe. Don't hold your breath, don't tense your muscles. Open yourself to me and what I'm doing. When it gets too intense, breathe deeper. Take the pain into yourself. Use it to step to the next level."

Kenny looked blank. Marcos glanced back at Edward, who looked equally mystified. No matter, he would do this for them — give them a glimpse into what was possible beyond the mere physical aspect of rough play.

He turned back to Kenny, tapping lightly with the cane over his ass cheeks and thighs. "Breathe," he reminded his charge. He began to use the cane with more force, not enough to mark, but harder than before. Kenny remained still, though Marcos felt him tense.

"Relax, breathe. You're doing great. You need this. You were born for this." Marcos had no idea if Kenny was indeed born to experience the incredible high of transcending erotic pain, but he decided to proceed as if this were the case. If nothing else, it would be an interesting experiment.

The first real blow landed squarely across both cheeks, just where Kenny's ass cheeks met his thighs. Kenny jerked his head up and yelped. "Back into position." Marcos' tone was firm but not harsh. Kenny obeyed, dropping his forehead back to the bar immediately — a good sign.

Marcos resumed the lighter tapping for a while, willing the tension to ease from Kenny's body. When he deemed him sufficiently relaxed, Marcos struck again, just above the first spot. This time Kenny flinched, but stayed in position.

Marcos stroked the pink welt rising on Kenny's flesh. Kenny shuddered and pressed his ass back against Marcos' hand. His erection, Marcos noted in the mirror, hadn't flagged. Again he resumed the tapping, warming and readying the flesh for the next real blow. This time the cane whistled the second before contact.

"Ah," Kenny cried, rising onto his toes.

"Relax your hands." Marcos touched Kenny's clenched knuckles and Kenny obeyed. His breath was shallow, his shoulders tense. "Stand flat. Relax. Give yourself over to the pain. Do it for him. Do it for yourself. Embrace the pain and let it take you where you need to go."

His voice nearly a whisper, he added, "Do it for me."

He watched as Kenny's shoulders eased and his breathing deepened and slowed. Yes. He was close. Marcos could take him there. For a moment he almost wished they were alone. Alone in a bedroom, rather than in this cold, empty space, another man watching with clinical interest behind them.

Forcing the thought from his mind, Marcos focused again on what he was doing. He continued the pattern, tapping lightly with the cane, interspersing it with strikes hard enough to mark the skin.

Kenny began to pant, but he remained remarkably still, his hands gripping but not clenching the bar, his feet flat on the ground. Gauging the time was right, Marcos delivered the first blow hard enough to leave a mark that wouldn't fade for at least several hours. Kenny hissed in pain.

"Breathe," Marcos whispered in his ear. He stroked the blond hair that had fallen in Kenny's face, tucking the tendrils back behind his ear. Assuming his position again to the side and just behind Kenny, Marcos resumed the caning, leaving a series of raised pink lines in the wake of the bamboo. Kenny's panting shifted to moans that were definitely sexual in nature. He leaned more heavily against the railing.

Marcos watched him closely. He could almost feel the change himself as it came over the sub—the slowing heartbeat, the easing of the breath, the whooshing rush of heat and peace that filled his body and spirit.

He struck him hard, hard enough that just a moment before it would have thrown him out of position. But Kenny didn't move. "Shall I continue?" Marcos said, leaning close to Kenny's ear. He waited until he saw the slight nod of Kenny's head.

Marcos reached around the boy, cupping the erection beneath the jock strap. They'd negotiated beforehand as to the couples' limits, and Edward had made it clear he had no problem with Marcos' touching his boy in whatever way he wished.

Usually Marcos could handle the intimate contact without letting it affect him. It was just part of the training—a way to fuse sexual pleasure with erotic pain and thus reinforce the experience. For some reason that evening, Marcos felt an urge to do more. There was something that drew him to this boy. He sensed Kenny's capacity to blossom into a true sub, under the right guidance. He wanted to take Kenny's face into his hands, and kiss the boy, as if he were his lover.

Of course he didn't give in to such an impulse, nor would he have, even if Kenny had been there on his own. He was the boy's trainer, not his lover. Marcos glanced back at Edward, who was sitting just behind them, leaning forward, an intent expression on his face.

Marcos resumed the caning, not wanting to lose the momentum he had built and pull the sub from his trance. He covered every inch of the offered ass with the fiery kiss of the cane and still Kenny held his position.

Slowly Marcos decreased the intensity until he was again just tapping the skin. Then he stopped even that, replacing the cane with his fingers, which traced the lines of the welts, hot to the touch. He looked back, gesturing for Edward to come over.

"He's in that amazing place where pain doesn't just rise above pleasure, it is one and the same thing. Each stroke of the cane is like a stroke to his cock. Look at him, look at his face. He's floating on air."

Edward bent down close to his lover, a look of awe on his face. He traced one of the welts with his finger. "Is that something I can learn to do? I can take him to that place?"

"Absolutely," Marcos confirmed. "Next time it's your turn with the cane."

Edward nodded and pulled gently at Kenny's shoulder. "Hey, hey you. What galaxy are you floating in, huh?" Kenny opened his eyes and offered Edward a dreamy smile. Edward pulled him into his arms and they kissed briefly before pulling apart.

"Thanks, Marcos," Edward said, nodding toward him. "You really are something. Thanks for the lesson."

Marcos nodded, smiling. He watched as they left the room together, Edward's arm protectively around Kenny's shoulders. He moved toward the chair Edward had been sitting in and slumped down into it. He stared at himself in the mirror a long moment before dropping his head into his hands.

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Jack sat at the bar, nursing a beer. Marcos' tires had come in early from the dealer, but Jack had let Carlos handle the sale. He'd had about all of Marcos he could take for a while.

Jack watched Drew dry the glasses. Drew always looked so calm, so self-contained. What really went on in that head of his? Jack thought back to their last Solitary Knights meeting, when Drew had so uncharacteristically offered his unsolicited advice.

Jack had scoffed at the time – who the hell wanted to go back and find the one that got away? They got away for a reason, so it seemed to Jack. Let sleeping dogs lie – why stir up old grief? The whole point of the Solitary Knights was to avoid those emotional pits of sucking quicksand.

"Get you another?" Drew looked at Jack's bandaged knuckles, but didn't ask, for which Jack was silently grateful.

Was that sexy English accent for real? Jack eyed Drew. He was a hot looking guy, with those warm eyes and ready smile. Jack had tried in an offhand sort of way to get

something going with the guy, but it never worked. Drew turned that same smile on the others, but Jack sensed a wall beneath the warmth. What was his story, Jack wondered.

"Sure, I'll have another."

Someone slid onto the stool beside him. "Eric. Hey, good to see you, buddy." Eric Moore, the other founding partner of the Solitary Knights, was one of the few men at the pub Jack hadn't tried to engage in casual sex. Maybe it was because they were too much alike – each always on the make, scoping out the next potential conquest.

Looked like Eric had a new one, someone Jack had never seen before. He leaned over to get a better look. The guy wasn't bad looking, though he looked older and less buff than the usual hot twink Eric liked to hook up with for his one night or one week affairs.

Eric, unlike Drew, didn't hesitate to ask, "What the hell happened to you? Get in a fight?"

"Yeah," Jack quipped, "but you should see the other guy."

Eric lifted his eyebrows but didn't comment further. Instead he said, "I'd like you to meet Chandler. A very dear, *very* good friend of mine. We've only recently reconnected." Eric put his hand over Chandler's and they beamed at one another.

Chandler nodded toward Jack. "Nice to meet you."

Jack noted the way the two guys were leaning into each other, the look of pride and – what else was it on Eric's face when he looked at Chandler? No, no way. Next week Eric would show up with a new guy. He didn't *do* love, same as Jack.

"Chandler and I used to play darts back in college. I've challenged him to a dart game. Want to play?"

Jack held up his bandaged hand with a rueful shake of the head. He felt his phone buzz in his pocket. "Jack Harris," he said automatically, not recognizing the number on the screen.

"Jack." Jack's stomach gripped at the sound of that distinctive, gravelly voice, a voice he hadn't heard in nearly twenty years. "Rusty tells me you called. How's my boy after all these years?"

~*~

The door to the old brownstone was opened by a man of medium height with auburn hair who looked to be in his mid-fifties. "Come in, you must be Jack."

Jack nodded, stamping his boots against the doormat. The walk from the subway had been longer than he'd expected, and the snow had been falling for long enough to stick. He pulled his snow-encrusted cap from his head and shook it before entering.

The smells in the small front hall took Jack back twenty years to his time with Alexei in a way no amount of reminiscing could. It smelled of fresh bread and olive oil, with a hint of cinnamon and patchouli.

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Rusty Dougherty. We spoke on the phone." It was then Jack noticed the black leather cuffs secured by silver clips on Rusty's wrists, and the thick collar around his neck, a D ring at its center.

He forced his eyes to Rusty's face and raised his own hand with an apologetic grin. "I, uh, had a little accident."

"Sorry to hear that. Hope you're okay."

"Sure, sure. I'll be good as new in a day or two."

"I'll see if Alexei's up to coming out or if he wants you to go back to his room. Would you care for some coffee?"

A beer would have been welcome, but it wasn't offered. "No, that's okay. I'm good."

Rusty led Jack into a living room crowded with faded silk-upholstered furniture surrounded by small tables cluttered with knickknacks and framed photographs. Jack perched on a sofa, fiddling with his damp cap and feeling like he was twenty-one again, all jitters and anticipation.

It was going on nine o'clock at night. He was surprised when Alexei had invited him to come over right away, but hadn't argued. You didn't argue with Alexei Spiros.

Jack glanced at the photographs on the cluttered end table beside him. One was of Alexei and Rusty, sitting side by side on a very white beach with impossibly blue water behind them. Alexei had aged well, his smile white against his tan skin, dark eyes crinkled with laughter beneath thick brows. His long hair was pulled back, tendrils of it caught by the camera blowing in the sea breeze. Once jet-black, Jack could see traces of silver and gray woven through it. Alexei wore a striped T-shirt. Rusty, beside him, was bare-chested, gold hoops glinting at his nipples, wearing the same collar he now wore around his neck. They looked ridiculously happy.

A second picture caught Jack's eye. He picked it up and brought it close for more careful inspection. It was a black and white photo of Rusty. He was naked, save for thick chains criss-crossed artfully around his body. He was standing, his arms stretched and secured overhead, facing the camera with an expression of such intense devotion and adoration that Jack caught his breath.

Had he ever felt that way about anyone?

Would he ever?

"Alexei's ready to see you, if you'd like to come on back to his bedroom." Rusty startled Jack, who nearly dropped the picture. He set it back down beside the other, feeling clumsy as two of the frames toppled over. He hurried to right them. Rusty watched him, an enigmatic smile on his face, saying nothing.

Jack followed Rusty down a long hall past several closed doors. The last door was open. Inside on a large bed sat Alexei in silk pajamas, leaning against a pile of pillows, a black-on-black striped satin duvet covering him to the waist. His hair had more silver in

it than in the beach photo, but his brows were still dark over eyes that sparkled with light and intelligence.

Jack stood uncertainly at the end of the bed. Alexei beamed at him. "Jack. I would have known you in an instant. You look fantastic. How has life been treating you?"

"Pretty good. I own my own auto shop. I've developed a nice niche business working on high end cars. Porsches are my specialty." While Jack spoke, Rusty moved to stand beside Alexei. He plumped a pillow and poured water from a blue crystal decanter into a matching glass beside it.

Alexei smiled at Rusty fondly, reaching out to touch his arm. The easy intimacy of the gesture made Jack's heart ache. A hot, nervous energy was grinding its way through his gut. He bounced a little on the balls of his feet.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Why had he even come here, anyway? He didn't even know Alexei anymore. What the hell had he been thinking?

Alexei was watching him. He turned to Rusty. "Give us a few minutes alone, okay?"

Rusty nodded, gave Alexei's pillow one last pat, and disappeared from the room.

"Come, sit beside me here on the bed. I apologize for receiving you like this. Rusty is so over-protective. I could definitely have gotten out of bed and come out to greet you properly, but he's like a jailer." Alexei laughed fondly. "You'd think he was the master and I the boy."

"He's your boy then?" Jack asked, though of course he knew the answer.

"Yes, my boy. My perfect, obedient, delightful sub. And my partner and my best friend."

Jack said nothing. His bandaged hand itched and throbbed. He put his good hand over it. Alexei followed his movement. "What happened to your hand, Jack? And what brings you to me after all these years? I don't know why, but I have a feeling the two are connected."

Jack didn't respond right away. Thoughts were tumbling through his mind, moving just out of reach each time he tried to formulate them. "I'm not really sure why I'm here. It's just...I don't know. I'm...confused. I've been thinking about you lately. Wondering how you're doing. But, more than that—you were always the one, way back when, who had a knack for getting into my head. For figuring out what the hell was going on in there when I had no clue." He shrugged apologetically.

"I'm glad you thought of me, Jack. I always regretted your rather abrupt departure, though I understood your reasons at the time."

"Yeah. That whole scene just wasn't for me. I'm my own man. I like to play the field, you know, keep my options open."

"You never connected with a Dom?"

Jack gave a startled laugh. "A *Dom*? You kidding me? Jack Harris submits to no man. I'm not some sniveling sub boy, groveling at his master's feet. I mean..." Jack

trailed off, embarrassed as he recalled Rusty, cuffs and collar in place, clearly owned by Alexei.

Alexei shook his head, a sad smile on his face. "Jack, it's me. You don't have to do that around me."

"Do what?" Jack crossed his arms defensively over his chest.

Alexei reached out and put his hand on Jack's forearm, gently pulling until Jack let his arms fall to his sides. "You know better than that, I know you do. You weren't into the whole leather scene, I understand that. But you of all people know D/s is as individual and personal as any expression of love. You were threatened by the trappings and role play some of the guys were into —"

"Not threatened," Jack interrupted. "I just didn't like it. Not my thing."

"Fine, okay. My point is, that doesn't take away from who you are inside. What you need." He reached forward to stroke Jack's cheek. If anyone else had done that, Jack would have jerked away. But not Alexei. For some reason, with him it was okay.

"Let me ask you something, Jack. Are you happy? Do you feel comfortable with who you are now? Is playing the field, as you call it, meeting your basic needs? Do you have serenity in your life?"

Serenity.

Jack felt a muscle in his jaw jumping. He clenched his fists, and felt the skin on his healing knuckles tear. He winced in pain as the warm blood seeped against the gauze. Embarrassed, he tucked the hand between his knees.

Alexei nodded as if Jack had spoken aloud. "I thought not." He put his hand on Jack's shoulder. His touch was warm and comforting. Jack felt something ease inside, as if a part of him had been waiting all these years for just such a calming touch.

"Get on your knees, Jack."

Jack jerked his head up. "What?"

Alexei pointed to the floor. "Kneel up. You remember? When you were agitated, I would have you assume that position, palms up on your thighs, eyes straight ahead. Clear your mind, let the negative energy flow from your body."

"Are you serious? I haven't done that since we were together. That's not my thing. I haven't done any of that in years and years."

"That's precisely why you need to do it now. Go on. If it doesn't feel right, you can get up immediately."

Jack stared at Alexei, his body warring with his mind. His limbs were tingling, eager to obey Alexei's command. But his mind was screaming. No fucking way would he get on his knees, not for anyone. Not even Alexei Spiros.

"Jack," Alexei said softly. "I know you. No matter how many years it's been, some things don't change. Your true nature remains the same, even if that's not a convenient truth for you. You didn't call me just to say hi and talk about old times. You came

because you needed to reconnect with a basic part of yourself, before it's lost to you forever."

Jack said nothing. His eyelids felt heavy and hot, as if tears lurked just behind them. Which was ridiculous — Jack hadn't cried since he was a child.

"Close your eyes a moment and take a deep breath." Alexei's voice was warm and soothing. "Let it out slowly."

Jack obeyed, compelled by the tone in Alexei's voice, and by the memories of what they'd once shared. "Trust me." Alexei's voice soothed him. "Trust yourself. Get on your knees and kneel up."

Jack slipped from the bed and knelt, feeling awkward as he settled into a position he hadn't assumed in twenty years. He straightened his back and placed his hands on his thighs, palms up. Of their own accord, his shoulders went back and he tilted his chin forward.

"That's better." Jack's eyes were closed. Alexei's voice took him back through the decades. He felt displaced to a time and place when life was yet to happen to him, when anything was still possible.

He felt Alexei's fingers on his cheek. They were dry and cool against his skin. Alexei's hand moved, pushing the hair back from Jack's forehead. Jack leaned into the hand, his eyes still closed.

"Who is he, Jack? Who's got you in this state?"

Jack's eyes flew open. "What?"

Alexei sat back, his smile knowing. "You used to get like this, remember? So coiled up, watching you was like watching a cobra, ready to strike. Invariably there was someone behind it — some guy who had pissed you off, or who you wanted but couldn't have. You're still going at life the same way, aren't you? Gripping it in your teeth like a bulldog and shaking it till nothing's left. You still haven't learned to let go, even after all these years. You haven't found the serenity you need, because you've never accepted what and who you are."

Jack stiffened. What the hell was he doing, kneeling on the floor like a fucking sub boy? He stood abruptly, a rush of white hot anger pumping in his brain. Alexei was making a fool of him.

"Look, Alexei," he said, "I told you — I walked away from that scene a long time ago. I don't do the whole yes sir, no sir, please sir may I have another routine. I'm my own man. Jack Harris bows to no one. That kneeling bit — that's just some kind of meditative bullshit. It doesn't mean a thing."

"Okay." Alexei patted the bed beside him. "Sit down." When Jack obeyed, he leaned forward and touched the bandage. Blood was seeping through and Jack tried to cover it with his other hand.

"Talk to me, Jack. How did that happen?"

"Hey." Jack forced a laugh. "You should see the other —"

"Stop." Alexei's voice carried command and, despite himself, Jack closed his mouth. "It's not necessary, Jack. I know you. Yes, twenty years have got behind us, but you and I – what we shared transcends time. We connected and the link was never broken, even if you left the life and never looked back. That's why you called me. You needed to reestablish that link. Something's going on in your life, Jack. Call it a midlife crisis, call it what you want. But you came here for a reason. Now tell me the truth. How did you do that to your hand?"

"I – I hit the wall." Jack's voice came out hoarse. He cleared his throat.

"Who is he?"

"Who is who? There's nobody. I have nobody." What was Alexei's problem? Why was he hassling Jack like this? If it had been anyone else... Jack took a breath and forced a smile. "Look. I don't *do* relationships. The few times I've made the mistake of trying, I just fuck it up. I'm not cut out for that crap."

Alexei stared with such tenderness Jack suddenly got that choked up feeling again. "Just before you lost control and hit that wall," Alexei persisted. "What was going on?"

The image of Marcos, standing in Jack's shop with that haughty expression on his face, marched itself into Jack's mind. "It's not a big deal about my hand. It's just a little scrape. I was pissed off at an unreasonable customer. I was, I don't know, just letting off steam. I didn't even realize I was doing it until my assistant stopped me."

"So you hit your hand bloody, but you didn't know you were doing it until someone else came in to stop you?"

"Yeah." Jack stared at Alexei, unnerved.

"And this doesn't strike you as a problem, Jack? Everything's fine?" He looked at Jack's bandage, now bright red with blood. "Rusty, come in here will you?" Alexei called out.

A moment later Rusty rushed in. "Yes, Alexei. You okay?" he said breathlessly.

Alexei smiled. "Relax, Rusty. I'm not dying, I promise. It's not me. Jack here needs some attention. Could you take Jack to the bathroom and see about fixing that up for him?" Turning to Jack, he added, "Don't worry, he's a pro."

Jack stood, embarrassed and confused. He followed Rusty into the bathroom. As Rusty removed the bloody gauze, he grinned at Jack. "Piece of cake compared to what I'm used to. No fur to deal with, and I trust you don't bite?"

"Huh?"

Rusty laughed. "I'm a vet. My clientele isn't always so accommodating, especially when they're hurt."

"I see." Jack looked Rusty over as he worked. He had a kind face, but more than that, he looked happy – at peace with himself.

"We'll leave those butterflies in place," Rusty said. "I don't want to tear the wounds open by removing them. I'll just augment a little." Jack was glad Rusty didn't ask how he'd hurt himself.

When they returned the bedroom, Alexei was leaning back against the pillows, his eyes closed. He looked pale, the skin around his eyes sagging and papery. He opened his eyes as they entered and smiled, joy lighting his face.

"Come to me, boy," Alexei said softly to Rusty, and Jack recognized between them the shift from lovers to master and sub.

Without speaking, Rusty unbuttoned his flannel shirt and took it off, folding it neatly over a chair. As if he wasn't even aware Jack was in the room, he turned his back to Alexei, bringing his wrists together at the small of his back. Alexei leaned toward him and connected the dangling clips between the cuffs. Jack could see the gold at Rusty's nipples, glinting in the lamplight.

Rusty turned and knelt on the floor beside the bed, his wrists linked behind him. Alexei tugged on one of the gold hoops at Rusty's chest, pulling until Rusty drew in a sharp breath. Alexei subjected the second nipple to the same treatment. When he let go, Rusty's expression eased into an adoring smile.

"Thank you, sir," he whispered.

Rusty lowered his head, resting it on the bed beside Alexei, who ruffled his hair, a look of deep affection on his face. "You're welcome. Lots more later tonight, I promise."

I want that.

The words slipped into Jack's mind before he had a chance to censor them. His body actually ached with a longing he didn't quite understand, or more accurately, wasn't ready to face. He stood at the end of the bed, feeling uncomfortable, not sure if he was supposed to go or stay.

Alexei looked up at Jack with a smile. "I'm glad you came by, Jack. It's been too long. Far too long." He stroked Rusty's hair as his eyes searched Jack's face. "Listen, I want you to do me a favor."

Jack waited. What could Alexei possibly want from him? He had everything a man could want, or so it seemed to Jack as he watched Rusty kneeling so serenely on the floor beside him.

"I want you to meet someone. Someone who I think could help you."

"Help me?"

"Yes. Jack, I think it's time. It's time for you to explore things maybe you were too young before to appreciate. You were a kid back then. You weren't ready for the power of a D/s connection. I think you're ready now, but you don't know how to start, where to look. I agree with you – the club scene's not for you. The leather community – even though it's a lot more flexible now, I still don't see you there. What you need is some one-on-one experience. A chance to explore the feelings and sensations you've been denying yourself for so long."

Embarrassed, Jack glanced at Rusty. "I told you, Alexei, I don't do that stuff anymore."

"That might be the reason you're so miserable. You never really gave it a chance, Jack. There's so much more to D/s than just whips and chains. I think you might be ready now to find that out for yourself. I think that's why you're here."

Jack opened his mouth to deny it, but nothing came out. Alexi continued, "It's not something you stop needing. But you've been denying it so long, and your anger is a symptom of your denial. I know you don't believe that yet. That's where the favor comes in." He paused and Jack waited, tensing.

"I want you to meet someone. He's a professional dominant and a very close friend of mine. He's very good at breaking through the kind of emotional defenses you've built up over the years. He understands the intrinsic need someone like you has to give up control, to experience the cathartic release of erotic pain. If you're able to trust this man, and you can take it from me, he is supremely trustworthy, he can free you through bondage, he can take you through the physical pain of erotic suffering to reach that higher plane of peace and serenity I know you long for."

What the fuck?

Jack stared at his old mentor, barely processing the mumbo jumbo he was tossing around. He had only the vaguest notion what the hell the old man was talking about. His mouth was dry and his palms were sweating. He tried to draw a breath but found the room was suddenly hot, the air too close. Still, he couldn't deny the fact his jeans had suddenly become too tight in the crotch.

The physical pain of erotic suffering was something he could understand, and even relate to. Though he'd rejected the whole BDSM leather scene, he couldn't deny the thrill he'd gotten all those years ago from a good, hard flogging. Not only did it get his rocks off, but he'd prided himself on being able to take it like a man. But was there, as Alexei promised, more to it than that?

"I have a small house in Westchester County where we go sometimes to get away, or host weekend play parties," Alexei continued. "I would like you to commit to one night there with my friend. Rusty would take you there. To make it easier for you to submit, certain decisions would be made for you. But you would always have the right of final refusal. I only ask that you listen to this man with an open mind and be willing to try. I want your promise that you'll submit, just for that brief time, to whatever he deems best for you. What do you say? Will you do that for me – for yourself?"

Jack's mouth opened, as he prepared in kneejerk fashion to refuse. Was the guy out of his mind? Let himself be tied up and whipped and god knew what else by some stranger, just because Alexei thought it would be a good idea?

"Stop the noise in your head," Alexei said, as if privy to it. "Take a moment and then answer with your heart. Will you agree to what I have asked? And if you do, you need to go all the way. Don't run away before you've given him a chance. More importantly, don't run away from what you know in your heart is right for you."

Jack stared into Alexei's calm, dark eyes. Then he looked at Rusty, at his collar and cuffs, at his serene expression as he rested his head so peacefully beside his lover, and felt a longing so sharp it nearly made him gasp.

"Yes."

~*~

Normally on a Saturday night at eight o'clock, depending on his mood, Jack would be getting ready for a night either spent cruising the bars for a likely prospect, or relaxing at the Pelham Bay Pub for a few beers and a friendly game of darts.

But that night found him in the passenger seat beside Rusty Dougherty, heading down a narrow, winding road in a semi-rural part of Westchester County. Jack had spent the week going back and forth, cancelling and then rescheduled the meeting in his mind at least a dozen times.

Yet when Rusty had showed up at his apartment, smiling in that calm, easy way he had, Jack picked up his overnight bag and followed Rusty out to his car, still half-wondering what the hell he was doing.

As they drove, they talked at first of superficial things – Rusty's veterinarian practice, Jack's auto shop. But soon the conversation veered toward BDSM, first in a general sort of way, and then it got personal.

"I don't really know what the hell I'm doing," Jack admitted. "I'm gonna show up tonight, but beyond that, I haven't a clue. I'm here mainly for Alexei, because he wants it."

Rusty nodded, his face on the road. "Alexei can be very compelling, that's for sure." He smiled, glancing briefly at Jack. "But I hope you're not doing it just for him. I hope you're doing it for yourself."

When Jack didn't reply, he added, "Alexei thinks a lot of you, Jack. Of your potential. He wouldn't go to this trouble and set up this meeting if he didn't. He cares about you. And not for nothing, he's rarely wrong. If he thinks this is something you need, you can bet your bottom dollar that it is."

Jack shrugged, still unconvinced, though he had to admit he liked hearing that Alexei cared about him, even after all these years.

"You know," Rusty continued, "back when I was first learning, first getting comfortable with the whole concept of sexual submission, I found it a lot easier to handle when I was bound. It took away that added responsibility of maintaining a position, of keeping still, of fighting what I really wanted but wasn't ready to admit just yet. But on an even more basic level, it took away my choice. At least in the immediate sense. I mean, the sub always has the ultimate control, the final say in a consensual exchange of power."

"Right," Jack said, digging back in his memory to say, "Safe, sane, consensual, the bywords of the community."

Rusty nodded. "That's right. Good words to live by. So with your *consent*," he flashed a grin in Jack's direction, "we've decided to make it easier for you tonight. Ever been on a St. Andrew's cross?"

Jack drew in his breath, remembering the large X-shaped crosses they had at some of the clubs, cuffs attached and at the ready to secure wrists and ankles. "Yes," he said. "A long time ago."

"It'll make it easier, I promise. There's something very freeing about bondage, as ironic as that sounds."

"I don't know..." Jack hesitated, aware his cock was stirring at the thought of being bound and at the mercy of some – what had Alexei called him – professional dominant. But was he really up for this?

"Alexei wants it that way," Rusty said, a certain finality in his tone. Jack nodded. If Alexei wanted it...

"Here it is," Rusty announced as he turned into a gravel driveway. He drove back toward a hedge of evergreens, behind which a small gray stone house appeared. Rusty parked the car and they climbed out. He walked toward the front door, Jack following with his overnight bag in his hand, and butterflies in his stomach.

Rusty unlocked the door and stepped inside, switching on the light. The door opened directly onto a large, comfortable looking room, not nearly as cluttered as Alexei's Manhattan home. Jack took in the sofa and two chairs grouped around a fireplace, and set off to the side, the promised St. Andrew's cross, as well as what looked like a spanking bench, along with a large wardrobe set against the wall.

The place was warm, and logs were piled in the fireplace, ready to be lit. "I came up earlier," Rusty said, "to get the place ready for you. You want to use the bathroom or anything while I get the fire going? You can strip in there, or out here, whatever suits you."

He said it so matter-of-factly, as if Jack would naturally expect to strip naked in a stranger's house and present himself to be bound. Jack stood motionless a moment, until Rusty said, "Come on, Jack. You're here for a reason. Safe, sane, consensual. Right?"

Jack nodded and shrugged. What the hell? He had a good body and he knew it. Though he was over forty, he worked out regularly and had never let himself go, so why not show off the goods? Maybe he'd get some decent sex out of the evening, if nothing else.

How different was this, really, from picking up some guy at a bar? And this one, at least, came with Alexei's seal of approval. That counted for something. Actually, that counted for a lot.

Jack went into the small bathroom typical of these old houses. He took off his clothes, tossing them into a pile on the counter. His hand had healed sufficiently to where he no longer needed the protective gauze padding, though the knuckles remained bandaged.

He thought about that past Monday, when he'd smashed his fist against the wall, instead of into Marcos Savakis' face, like he'd wanted to. What would Marcos think if he could see him now? Jack grinned to himself and left the bathroom.

The fire was going in the living room and Rusty was busy at the wardrobe, the doors of which were open. Jack saw that inside were shelves filled with BDSM paraphernalia – whips, rope, floggers, crops, cuffs and chain.

He swallowed, tendrils of unease starting to curl through his nervous system. Rusty turned around and smiled, lifting his eyebrows as he gazed at Jack's naked body, nodding his silent approval.

"So where's this guy?" Jack said, resisting a sudden urge to cover his groin.

"He'll be here any minute," Rusty replied. "He just called to say he's only a few minutes away. He meant to be here when we arrived but was running just a little late, he said. That's okay, though. It's better if I get you on the cross before he gets here. That'll make it easier for you."

"Okay." Now that he'd made the decision to go along with this whole thing, Jack told himself to go with the flow. He'd give this professional dominant a chance, for Alexei's sake if nothing else, and see what happened.

He allowed Rusty to secure the cuffs of the cross onto his wrists and ankles, standing obediently with arms outstretched and legs spread. Just as Rusty finished locking him in place, they heard the sound of a car engine.

"That'll be him," Rusty said. "I'll just go greet him and then I'll be on my way. I'll pick you up in the morning, okay?"

"Uh..." Jack experienced a moment's trepidation. It was one thing to do a scene with someone at a club, but with Rusty's remark about getting him in the morning, it really brought it home that this was for real.

"You'll be fine. I promise," Rusty said, giving Jack's shoulder a squeeze. He moved toward the front door and opened it. Jack could hear the muted voices of the two men talking. Though Rusty had left the door cracked open, from his position on the cross, Jack couldn't see the men standing just outside.

Then he heard the sound of the front door closing, and Jack turned his head to see the man standing there. He felt his mouth falling open as he tried to process the image that he could not possibly actually be seeing.

The guy was staring at Jack as if he'd seen a ghost. "What the hell..." he said softly, making it clear he was as surprised as Jack.

It couldn't be, and yet it was – Marcos Savakis stood just inside the door, dressed all in black, looking better than any man had a right to.

~*~

Marcos dropped his duffel bag and advanced slowly into the room. When Alexei had referred to his friend Jack, it had never occurred to Marcos it would be Jack Harris!

Jack, the guy for whom perpetual sexual adolescence was not a flaw but a goal. The guy who seemed to make it his life's work to give Marcos a hard time.

Jack Harris, standing naked and cuffed spread eagle before him, his face twisted into a scowl, his body...well...Marcos realized he was staring. Staring at the bulging curve of Jack's biceps, his arms raised in cruciform on either side of his head. Staring at well-defined pecs covered in tattoo ink, and the six-pack of flat, muscular abs. He nearly licked his lips as he took in the cock, large even at half-mast above heavy balls, nicely displayed between thick thighs forced apart by the cuffs at his ankles.

"Let me down," Jack said gruffly, as Marcos moved to stand directly in front of him.

"Hello, Jack. This is a surprise," Marcos said, pleased his voice sounded calm, though inside he was anything but. How could Alexei do this to him? But then, Alexei couldn't have known. Couldn't have known their connection at the pub, or that Jack was the one man who got under Marcos' skin in a way no one else could.

"I said, let me down. This is a mistake. I don't know what the fuck Alexei was thinking but—"

"How do *you* know Alexei?" Marcos interrupted. "I had no idea you were in the scene."

Jack jerked at his restraints, but the cross was firmly anchored and it did no good. "You gonna let me down?"

"Look, this is as much a surprise to me as it is to you. My first impulse is to call Rusty to get back here and we'll end this right now. But first impulses are not always the best course of action. Just stop a minute and calm down. Take a deep breath and let's think this through. I'm not going to let you down yet, not until we come to some agreement. Admittedly, I have the upper hand here." Marcos smiled, realizing he did indeed have the upper hand — what a rare occasion, to have Jack Harris at such a remarkable disadvantage, bound and naked while he could come and go as he pleased. Imagine if the other guys at the pub knew about this!

But of course they never would. Marcos took his role as a professional dominant very seriously and would never, ever compromise someone in his charge. Not even Jack Harris, no matter how annoying and highhanded he was at the Solitary Knight meetings.

Marcos pulled a chair over to sit down in front of Jack. Alexei had wanted this session, and Marcos tried to tell himself that was a good enough reason to stay. Alexei had been Marcos' savior, in a very real way. After the bitter betrayal he'd felt at Nicholas' hands, Marcos had returned to New York and gotten involved in a callous, casual way in the leather scene, but his heart was too cracked to appreciate the poetry of D/s any longer.

Until he met Alexei.

Alexei helped Marcos recover his humanity. Though Alexei had been born in this country, their shared Greek heritage helped Marcos to trust him immediately, but the

connection went far deeper. Alexei was the one who sensed Marcos' natural inclination was in fact dominant. He helped Marcos appreciate the erotic power and also the deep responsibility of a Dom, an almost sacred charge, to lead his sub safely through the intense experience BDSM could offer.

Alexei didn't ask favors often. For whatever reason, he saw something in Jack. Something worth exploring. If nothing else, Marcos owed it to Alexei to give this strange evening a chance.

"Jack, when Alexei called me, he asked me to come over and meet with a man he holds in high regard. He explained this is a man ready to reconnect with the part of himself that can give up sexual control in order to find that intensity of experience he has been missing all these years. It's not just a matter of letting yourself be tied up and whipped. You and I both know it's so much more. Alexei told me, Jack. I know you – I know what you need, if you can let go enough to find it. If it makes you feel better, I'm not doing this for you – it's for him, for Alexei."

"Savakis, I'm warning you..."

Marcos stood and approached Jack. He couldn't deny the man was incredibly good looking. In fact, Marcos had always found Jack attractive, but it had been hard to look past the arrogance and cockiness when he was fully clothed and boasting about his latest sexual conquest.

But now Marcos could see Jack was anxious and conflicted, tethered as he was, and in a situation he wasn't expecting or at least wasn't used to. A sudden rush of compassion assailed Marcos. He put his hand on Jack's shoulder and traced his finger along one of the intricately tattoo designs along Jack's arm. He was unprepared for his own reaction to the feel of Jack's skin – it was as if someone had touched a lightning rod directly to his cock.

He dropped his hand and stepped back, swallowing hard. He needed to keep his own sexual attraction at bay. This wasn't about him, or it wasn't supposed to be. He was here at Alexei's request, not as Jack's lover.

"Jack," he said gently. "Let's give this a chance, okay? For Alexei. Let's put aside what we know of each other out there. Let's focus on who we really are. You didn't know I was a dominant, I had no clue you were submissive."

"I'm not –" Jack began, but Marcos silenced him with two fingers over Jack's lips. He resisted an absurd impulse to follow his fingers with his lips.

"Shh, please. Right now you are not Jack Harris. I am not Marcos Savakis. We are just two people exploring something very powerful. Alexei sees something in you I never saw, but then I realize, I never had a chance to see it."

He stroked Jack's right arm, moving his hand along the muscle toward his bound wrist. "What happened?" he asked, touching the bandage covering his knuckles.

"I, uh. I hit it. Accidentally." Jack slid his gaze away.

Marcos knew he was lying, but he didn't press. He brought his other hand up and stroked Jack's left arm, moving his hands in tandem along both arms, and then down

Jack's sides, smoothing the skin, pressing hard enough so he wouldn't tickle him. He was pleased Jack had stopped demanding to be let down. That was a first step, at any rate.

He continued to move his hands soothingly over Jack's flesh, aware of his own erection, hoping that Jack wasn't. When Marcos' hands moved lower, he noted Jack's cock twitching to attention. He suppressed a smile, telling himself this was just a reaction to skin-on-skin, not any particular attraction Jack had for him. Indeed, he knew Jack found him as irritating as he found Jack.

Still, he had meant what he said – they weren't there as Jack and Marcos, but as two people exploring the potential for erotic submission. He would treat Jack just as he would treat any other man in such a situation. When he curled his fingers around Jack's cock, it wasn't because he ached to do so, but because it would help get Jack in the proper frame of mind for their session.

Jack gasped softly at Marcos' touch. His cock elongated and thickened in Marcos' grip. Marcos brought his other hand to Jack's balls, cupping them and squeezing. "Are we agreed then, Jack? You will submit to me for tonight? I can blindfold you, if that will make it easier." As he spoke, he stroked Jack's now rigid shaft, squeezing his balls just hard enough to keep Jack's complete attention.

When Jack didn't answer, he squeezed a little harder. "Answer a direct question, boy."

Jack whipped his head toward Marcos at the use of the term "boy", which Marcos had employed on purpose to begin to establish their relationship for the evening. Jack glared at him, but his cock remained hard as bone beneath Marcos' fingers.

"Yes," he finally said. "For Alexei."

Marcos couldn't stop the hint of a smile that slid onto his lips. He nodded. "For Alexei."

~*~

It would almost have been funny, if it weren't so fucking crazy! If anyone had told him he'd be naked and tied to a cross, getting ready to submit to Marcos Savakis, he'd have laughed in their face.

Yet here he was, with Marcos' hand wrapped around his cock, and he couldn't deny it felt just fine. Yeah, he was a little nervous – make that a lot nervous. At the same time, something was humming and stirring inside him. Beneath the usual edgy energy, there was something deeper and more powerful at work.

Marcos let go of Jack's cock and moved his hands again over Jack's torso. He palmed the nipples, pressing hard, pushing Jack against the center of the wooden X he was bound to. Jack liked the way it felt. He closed his eyes, his nipples tingling in expectation.

But Marcos' touch was withdrawn. Feeling the lack of it, Jack opened his eyes. Marcos had stepped back and stood in front of Jack, his hands on his hips. He exuded a sort of calm power, but it was different from the obnoxious arrogance Jack had come to

associate with him. When he spoke, the authority in his voice was compelling. It reminded Jack of Alexei.

"A few ground rules. For this time we are together, you will address me as Sir. You will obey me without hesitation. If you have a question or are unsure of a direction, you must ask me. If you are uncomfortable or frightened, tell me. Communication is paramount, especially since we don't know each other – that is, we don't know each other in this context.

"This first session is mainly an exploration – of your limits, your desires, your expectations, your needs. Usually this wouldn't require a safeword, since I don't plan to put you in a situation where that might become necessary. But just in case, since we are new together, your safeword will be downshift. Any questions so far?"

Jack smirked to hide his nervousness. Before he realized he was going to speak, the words were out of his mouth – old words that suddenly had no meaning there, and yet still they tumbled like garbage from his lips. "You gonna get naked too? You gonna let me down so I can show you how the big boys play?"

Marcos moved so quickly Jack didn't even have time to gasp. Marcos slapped his right cheek, hard enough for it to sting. Jack's hands clenched into fists, but bound as he was, it made no difference.

Marco's voice was quiet, but edged with steel. "Do that again, and I walk out, Alexei or no. Either you take this seriously and make it matter, or we stop now. Understand? This isn't a game, not for me. You said you were willing to try. That kind of flippant response tells me otherwise. I will ask you once more. Are you serious about this, or is it just a game?" Quick as lightning, he slapped Jack's other cheek, even harder than the first. "Answer me, boy."

Jack was breathing hard, his face warm not only from the slaps, but the hot, familiar anger that was so much a part of him. At the same time, his cock was bobbing, fully erect, between them. If it had been anyone else, anyone but Marcos, he could have handled the situation better, he was sure of it.

Marcos stood watching him, his brows furrowed, a frown on his face. When Jack still said nothing, the anger seemed all at once to wash from Marcos' features. Instead he looked merely sad. Jack felt a sudden pang in his heart, though he had no words for what he was feeling.

Marcos reached for Jack's right wrist and released the clasp. "We're done. You can get the rest of those cuffs off yourself. I'll let Alexei know there was a misunderstanding." He turned away.

"Wait!" Jack called impulsively. "I'm sorry. I'm so used to being an asshole, it's just second nature." Marcos stopped, though he didn't turn around.

I should just let him go, Jack thought, but for some reason, he couldn't. Maybe it was because of Alexei. Jack had promised to give it his best shot, yet he hadn't even given Marcos a chance.

"Marcos, please." As Marcos started to walk away, Jack blurted, "I had just got out of the Navy when I had my first real relationship with a Dom." Marcos stopped walking. In a rush, Jack continued, "He was heavy into rough play but light on communication. I thought we were in love, but I was wrong."

Marcos turned to face him. "I'm listening," he said.

"I thought he was the one. I couldn't see straight I was so into him. I worshipped him. One night out of the blue when I came home from work the locks were changed and all my stuff was piled up in the hall. I banged on the door and he called through it to get lost. He said he was bored with me, that he'd found a new boy toy and I was no longer wanted. That's when I figured out love was for losers."

"I am sorry that happened to you, Jack. I know what it feels like, if that's any solace." He moved closer, touching Jack's bandaged knuckle. "How did this happen, for real? You did it that day, didn't you? The day I came in for my tires? I was in the waiting area—I heard the banging, I heard Carlos talking to you. You were hitting the wall with your bare fist, weren't you? You did that to yourself in your frustration and your anger."

Jack started at him, stunned. "You knew?"

"Yes. At the time I didn't understand any of your story. I thought it was just the irrational rage of an angry man. But I think there's more to it now." He touched the bandaged knuckles. "A lot more."

He searched Jack's face and Jack held his gaze, resisting the urge to look away. Marcos continued. "To tell you the truth, I owe you an apology for how I behaved that morning. You were helping out a friend, and I was unable to make allowances for that. I think if it had been anyone else... I don't know, there's something about you—about us. We've always gone at it like cats and dogs, haven't we, Jack?"

He paused, stroking Jack's chest with his fingers. Jack couldn't help the shudder that went through his body. His skin missed Marcos' touch when it was withdrawn. "Does it occur to you maybe the intensity of our exchanges is based on something deeper? A connection neither of us has been willing to admit before?"

Jack stared at him, knowing the words were true. He'd wanted Marcos since the moment he'd first seen him drinking a beer at the bar at the Pelham Bay Pub. At first he'd thought he just wanted to fuck him, and later much of that lust devolved into a desire to bring Marcos down a peg. Now he was beginning to understand there was the potential for so much more between them.

Keeping his eyes on Marcos' face, slowly Jack lifted his arm and settled his wrist back into the cuff at the top of the cross. "I want to try again," he pleaded. "If you're still willing."

Marcos held him in his gaze for several long beats. Slowly he nodded. "I'm glad. I want it too." Reaching for Jack's wrist, he reclipped the cuff around it, securing him again against the cross.

He ran his finger over the tattoo of a strip of barbed wire that was inked in a circle around the upper part of Jack's right arm. "You have a lot of tattoos. Does the pain of the process excite you?"

"It calms me," Jack said, surprising himself with his answer, though once he said it, he knew it was true.

Marcos nodded thoughtfully. "And this?" His fingers found Jack's nipples and he gave each a savage twist.

"Ah," Jack cried, not expecting the sharp, sudden pain.

"Does that calm you, or excite you?"

Jack was breathing hard, his nipples throbbing. The pain zinging from his tortured nerve endings had made its way directly to his groin, transmuting along the way to cock-tingling pleasure.

"Excites me," he managed.

"I thought so," Marcos replied. He stepped back, catching Jack's cock in his grip. He stroked it roughly and then slapped it, catching the sensitive skin just below the head with a sharp smack.

Jack wanted to feel Marcos' hot mouth soothe away the sting, but he managed to keep his mouth shut. Marcos was stroking him again and it felt good, so good. "You love the pleasure and you need the pain. When you put them together, amazing things can happen," Marcos moved in close, murmuring against Jack's ear.

Jack turned his head, his lips brushing Marcos' cheek. Marcos pulled back, letting Jack's cock go. Jack pulled against his restraints, but he couldn't move. Marcos moved behind him, returning a moment later with two sets of chains with strange looking clamps on either end. "Know what these are?"

"Clamps. Nipple clamps." Jack had seen that particular kind of clamp but had never had them used on him before.

"That's right. These are clover clamps. They're especially effective because when you tug on the chain, the tension increases." Marcos flicked Jack's right nipple until it hardened. "Here, I'll show you." Pulling it taut between thumb and forefinger, he compressed the spring that held the clamp closed and positioned the rubber-covered tips over the distended nipple.

When he let it close, it took a second to register the intense pressure created at his chest. Jack closed his eyes and blew out a breath. Marcos took hold of the clamp at the other end of the first chain. Jack expected him to put it on his other nipple, which was already perking to attention, but instead Marcos plucked at the skin on the right side of Jack's scrotum.

"No," Jack said reflexively.

"Shh," Marcos said. "There are less nerve endings there than in your nipples. You can take this. I promise."

Jack compressed his lips, determined to prove he could indeed take it like a man. He winced as the clamps closed on the loose skin, but had to admit the pinch was less painful than the throb he now felt at his nipple.

Marcos did the same thing with the second pair of clamps on Jack's left nipple and the left side of his balls. He stood back to admire his work. "You look very hot like that, Jack. I like you in chains."

Marcos leaned forward, again stroking Jack's shaft, which hadn't flagged during the clamping. Jack looked down, watching as Marcos smeared the clear pre-cum on the tip of his cock, sliding it over the head as he palmed the shaft. Jack's balls were tight with need.

Marcos tugged at the chains between the clamps, pulling them tighter. Jack closed his eyes, absorbing the pain, his cock throbbing. "I want to take you there, Jack. To that place where every nerve ending in your body is screaming with pain, except your cock, which is about to explode with pleasure. It's what you need, isn't it, boy?" Marcos' voice was silky and low, settling over Jack's senses like a promise he was suddenly desperate to keep. "Are you ready, Jack? Are you ready to go where you need to go?"

Jack felt the prick of nervous sweat at his armpits. He licked his lips. Adrenaline was zipping through his bloodstream. "Yes," he breathed. "Yes...sir."

Marcos smiled, his eyes hooding. "Good boy." He glanced toward the ceiling and Jack followed his gaze, noticing for the first time the thick eyebolt embedded in a suspension beam just to the right of the St. Andrew's Cross.

"For the flogging I want to suspend you, feet on the floor, from the ceiling. Do you have any circulation issues or anything I need to know about that would impede your being cuffed with arms overhead for a period of time?"

Marcos stroked Jack's chest, one hand moving down to take his bobbing cock in a warm grip. "No," Jack managed. Though a voice still protested somewhere inside his head, it was drowned out by the torrent of heat caused by Marcos' hand, coupled with the press of the clover clamps that had sent the endorphins flying.

Marcos let him go, moving to release the clips that held his wrists and ankles in the cuffs. Once released, Jack stepped off the small platform at the base of the cross. Taking a breath, he moved to where Marcos pointed, standing just beneath the eyebolt while Marcos rummaged through the wardrobe. He returned with a set of soft leather cuffs and a length of thick chain.

"Hold out your wrists." Jack obeyed, watching as Marcos secured the cuffs and looped the chain between them. He draped the chain over Jack's shoulder, the cold metal making him shudder.

Marcos removed a folding stepstool from the wardrobe and opened it beside Jack. Climbing onto it, he ordered, "Lift your arms up high." Jack obeyed, his stomach clenching with nervous anticipation. Marcos looped the chain through the eyebolt, securing it with a thick clip. "Comfortable?" he asked.

Jack nodded, aware suddenly that his heart was hammering against his ribs. Marcos moved away, returning a moment later with a heavy flogger in his hand, thick strands of soft black leather dangling from a long, leather-covered handle. Marcos ran the tresses over Jack's chest and stomach, the tips grazing his cock. He moved to stand behind Jack, dragging the leather over his back and ass. Jack had always loved the feel of leather against his skin. He sighed with pleasure and leaned into it.

"Stay still," Marcos ordered. "Spread your legs into an at-ease position. Push out your ass. Offer it to me. And then don't move. No dancing away from the lash. You can talk to me, tell me if it's too much, but hold your position, understood?"

"Yes, sir." This time the sir came more easily, almost naturally.

Marcos started slowly, warming the skin. He focused at first on Jack's ass, steadily increasing the intensity of the blows until Jack had to brace himself to keep from being pushed forward.

Jack tensed when the flogger struck his shoulders. "Relax," Marcos said. "Give yourself to the pain." He covered Jack's body, from shoulder to calves, striking harder against the more padded areas of his ass and thighs.

Moving to stand in front of Jack, he tucked the whip beneath his arm and reached for the clamp still compressing Jack's now numb right nipple. "This is going to hurt. Get ready."

As he released the clamp, the blood flowed back into the nipple, bringing a searing pain along with it. "Fuck," Jack gasped. Marcos closed his mouth over the tortured nipple, his tongue warm and sensual as it licked the nubbin. When he removed the clamp from Jack's scrotum, the pain wasn't nearly as intense.

The second nipple, perhaps because he was anticipating it, hurt even more. "Jesus," he hissed, squeezing his eyes shut as he processed the pain. Again Marcos' warm, soft tongue laved the bud, soothing the sting. Marcos removed the second clamp from Jack's scrotum and put both sets aside.

"How you doing?" Marcos asked.

"Good," Jack answered. His untouched cock bobbed between them. He realized with a small shock that he wanted Marcos to kiss him, but doubted that was part of the exploratory package.

Marcos nodded and stepped back. Taking up the flogger again, he held the ends of the leather strands with one hand, releasing them at the last second as he flicked his wrist forward. The tips stung as they made contact with Jack's chest and stomach. As with his back side, Marcos started light and steadily increased the tempo and strength of the blows until Jack was panting and grunting.

Marcos stepped back and to the side, aiming for Jack's cock. "No," Jack said, pulling away.

Marcos lowered his arm. "No? Do you need me to slow down? Do you want to use your safeword?"

Jack stared at Marcos. He'd said no reflexively, but his cock was twitching to feel the sting. Slowly he shook his head.

Marcos smiled. "That's good, Jack. You're being honest with yourself now. That's the key. You can trust me. I'll only take you where you need to go." He let the tresses fall over Jack's erect shaft. Several of the stinging tips caught his balls.

"Ah," Jack cried, as Marcos continued to rain the leather against his cock and balls.

"Give in to it. Stop fighting it. Embrace the pain. Let it become part of you." Marcos began to circle Jack, striking his ass, his back, his thighs, his upper arms, his chest, his cock and balls. He moved quickly, giving Jack no time to recover or anticipate.

One especially hard blow sent Jack stumbling forward, causing him to jerk hard against his wrist restraints. He felt Marcos behind him, strong arms wrapping around his torso, catching him. He leaned back against the other man, the desire to kiss him again rising inside him like a tide.

Still holding him, Marcos murmured in a whisper across Jack's neck, "You look so hot, straining in your cuffs, your body covered in sweat." Jack felt the nudge of teeth biting his neck. He groaned, his cock straining.

Marcos stepped back and Jack felt the absence of his body. It was quickly replaced by the strike of the whip, which caught him hard across the back. He drew in a breath but stood his ground.

Marcos moved to stand in front of him. "You're doing so well. You're taking it for me. I knew you could do it." Marcos' eyes were blazing and Jack could see the clear outline of his cock, erect and hard in his black pants. This went beyond a favor to an old friend. Marcos was into it, into Jack.

Where normally this would have given Jack the sense of having the upper hand, of being the one now in control, this time it was different. He wanted Marcos – he could admit that finally to himself. He'd always wanted him, but he'd never thought the store of distrust and misunderstanding built over the past year could have been bridged so quickly and completely. Was it just because he was naked and strung up in chain, the feel of hot leather stroking his skin? Or was there something more going on between them?

Marcos stepped to the side, drawing the leather strands into a neat bunch, the fingers of one hand moving along them, while he gripped the handle in the other. With a sudden, sharp flick he released the strands, letting them strike across Jack's chest, catching his still-throbbing nipples.

"Ah!" Jack cried. Marcos continued to wield the flogger, covering Jack's skin from shoulder to knee with a torrent of stinging leather. Jack's body jerked uncontrollably with each blow. His eyes were squeezed shut, the blood roaring in his ears.

Just when he was about to cry, "Downshift!", the whip was replaced with soothing hands, which sent arcs of pulsing, electric current through Jack's body. Jack became aware of the sound of their breathing, Marcos' pant nearly as rapid as his own. One touch to his cock, he thought, and he'd lose it.

"You can do it. You're almost there," Marcos crooned, his tone at once urgent and achingly sexy. "I'm going to take you there now. Let go and fly with me, Jack."

This time there was no mercy – the flogger smashed hard against his ass and thighs. Jack didn't even try to stay still – he was dancing on his toes, jerking convulsively with each well-placed blow. He could feel the sweat trickling down his sides. He could barely catch his breath and his heart was beating high in his throat. He began to feel dizzy.

"Slow down," he heard Marcos say, as if from a distance. "Slow your breathing. You're almost there. I can feel it, Jack. You're almost where you need to be."

Then the most curious thing began to happen. Jack's head felt heavy, so heavy he had to let it drop back. His feet lowered themselves of their own accord from tiptoe and he could feel his heart slowing its wild pace.

Marcos continued to flog him, just as hard as before, but Jack no longer felt the pain. Or more accurately, he no longer processed it as pain. "Yes," Marcos whispered from somewhere near him. "Yes. That's it, Jack. That's it. Let it take you."

Jack became aware his mouth was hanging open, but he lacked the ability to close it. He couldn't move. It was as if he were a statue, not of stone, but of living, breathing flesh. A strange lightness began to invade him, like sunlight shining from inside, warming him and easing all the burdens he'd been amassing for a lifetime. A sigh, heavy with years of weariness, escaped him.

After a time, he had no idea how long, the whipping stopped and warm, sure fingers gripped his shaft, pulling upward as his balls were caught in a tight embrace. He could feel Marcos just behind him, his chest against Jack's back as he held him. The friction of Marcos' hand on his cock was perfect. Marcos nuzzled against him, his lips grazing Jack's neck and shoulder.

Marcos continued to stroke Jack's shaft, sending waves of pulsing pleasure radiating through him. Jack could feel his balls tighten, the skin puckering against Marcos' palm.

"Come for me," Marcos whispered in his ear. "I want you. God help me, I want you, Jack."

The orgasm rising through him started at his groin, but spread throughout his body, making him jerk and shake, the chain rattling overhead as his body spasmed with blinding ecstasy. It seemed to go on and on, pulling him in its wake, lifting him off the ground, making him float so high and far he vanished into a patch of pure, perfect freedom.

When he began to float back to the planet, he was aware of Marcos' arms around him. Jack was sagging heavily against the chains at his wrists. "I want to let you down, okay?" Marcos whispered.

Jack nodded. Marcos kept one arm around Jack as he reached up to release the cuffs on his wrists. Jack leaned heavily against Marcos as they sank together to the floor. He could feel Marcos' heart beating against his own. He felt dazed, stunned with emotion

he wasn't used to feeling. His entire body was warm and stinging, but it felt good, as if he'd somehow been scrubbed cleaned, years of tension simply whipped away. Every muscle ached with delicious fatigue.

"Marcos, that was..." He wanted to say so much—to try to describe what he'd experienced—the stinging pain that had been almost too much, the explosive orgasm that seemed to lift him out of his body, then the drifting ease into a lightness of being that left him floating on air. More than that, though—it was about more than just what Marcos had given him. Something had happened between them. Something more than just an exploration into the power of sensual pain.

The words he'd barely heard and hadn't processed in the seconds before orgasm now came sifting into his brain like stardust. *I want you, Jack.*

"I want you, too," Jack whispered, his heart pounding.

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Marcos pulled out of Jack's embrace, searching his face. Marcos had lost control during the session—no question about it. It was the first time he'd been lifted out of his comfort zone as professional dominant. There was nothing professional about what had just happened between them. It was personal—the most personal experience he'd had since Nicholas.

The rational part of his mind tried to lodge a feeble protest. This was Jack Harris, the guy who had driven him nuts over the past year. Jack was a consummate player, wasn't he? As much as Marcos found himself yearning for the naked man beside him, he couldn't help the uncomfortable flash of dismay. What if Jack just pretended to want him as a way to regain control? Marcos couldn't bear the thought of becoming just another notch on Jack's sexual belt.

"Please," Jack whispered. His eyes were pleading, no trace of the old swagger and conceit left in them. "I know you just did this for Alexei, but...I don't know. I feel *alive*. For the first time in...well, forever. I want to kiss you, Marcos. I want to...thank you. Please, don't shut me out."

Marcos could actually feel his frozen heart melting. Tenderness warred with lust inside him. They pulled each other up, moving together through the arched doorway that led to the back of the house. Jack was unsteady on his feet and Marcos brought an arm around his shoulders, guiding him toward the bedroom.

Once there, Jack dropped to his knees in front of Marcos. "Let me. Please. I want to thank you for what you gave me just now. For what you showed me."

Marcos looked down at Jack, silently praying the man was sincere. It had been so long since he dared to trust another soul, Marcos realized he wasn't entirely sure how to start. He nodded. If Jack was going to break his heart, so be it, at least it was beating again.

Jack tugged at Marcos' right boot, pulling it, along with his sock, from Marcos' foot. He did the same with the second boot before turning his attention to Marcos' trousers. He unbuckled Marcos' belt and opened his fly. Marcos gripped Jack's bare shoulders

for support as Jack dragged the pants down Marcos' legs. He tried to pull Jack up and into his arms, but Jack shook him away.

"Please," he whispered. "This is for you, Marcos. For you." Marcos nodded, understanding. Jack traced one finger along Marcos' erect cock through his underwear. He hooked his fingers into the elastic and pulled the briefs from Marcos' body. His cock sprang free and Marcos bit his lip in anticipation of Jack's touch.

"Sit on the bed," Jack whispered, pointing toward it. Marcos sat and Jack crawled toward him, kneeling up to unbutton Marcos' shirt and push it from his shoulders. Jack pushed Marcos back gently against the quilts, which were soft beneath his skin.

Marcos sighed his pleasure as he felt Jack's lips close over the head of his cock. Cool fingers gripped the base of the shaft, rising up to meet the lowering lips. Marcos reached out to stroke the top of Jack's head as he kissed and sucked Marcos' cock.

Jack took him deep, suckling until Marcos groaned. Jack pulled back, running the tip of his tongue along the underside of Marcos' shaft, licking and kissing his balls with a tenderness Marcos wouldn't have dreamed Jack could possess.

"Jack," Marcos said breathlessly. "I always wanted...you were always so..."

"Me too," Jack lifted his head long enough to reply. "I think it's why you drove me so crazy. I wanted you and didn't even know it. Tonight you showed me, Marcos. You taught me how to let go. It's like you broke me out of a jail I didn't even realize I was in."

He lowered his head again, making Marcos forget whatever it was he had been about to say in return. Marcos closed his eyes, surrendering himself completely to Jack's loving, ardent attention. He allowed Jack to spread his legs and push them back so Marcos' nether entrance was exposed.

Leaning down, Jack touched the tip of his tongue between Marcos' ass cheeks, lightly rimming the puckered hole until Marcos groaned with pleasure. Jack moved up slowly along Marcos' perineum, licking and kissing his way back to Marcos' balls, which he took, one at a time, into his mouth. Marcos could feel Jack's finger gently inserted inside his ass and he pressed against it.

When Jack again found Marcos' cock, he lowered his head until his nose was touching Marcos' pubic bone, massaging the entire shaft with his throat muscles, cheeks and tongue.

"Yes, so good," Marcos whispered, surrendering to the incredible sensations washing over him. "Oh god," he cried. "Don't stop." He began to buck, nearly overcome with a pleasure so intense he felt his body was going to burst into flame. Heat radiated from his cock and balls and he came, harder than he ever remembered coming.

"Jack," he whispered. "Jack." He reached blindly, pulling Jack up onto the bed and into his arms. They kissed, long, lingering kisses until their lips were chapped. Finally Marcos lay still, exhausted – as if he'd been shattered and miraculously reassembled within the space of these few amazing hours with the last man he'd ever expected.

Marcos felt himself drifting, the power of his orgasm dragging him toward slumber. He wanted to stay awake and tried to will his eyes to remain open, but the lids were heavy. Jack was heavy and warm in his arms, his heart beating a sweet tattoo against Marcos' chest. Giving in, Marcos let his eyes close...

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Jack awoke with a start in the strange bed. Moonlight was streaming through the windowpanes, casting silvery squares across the floor. For a moment he was uncertain where he was, and with whom. Then it all came back in a rush.

Marcos was beside him lying on his back, an arm flung over his face. Marcos must have wakened at some point before him, because they were now beneath rather than on top of the quilts.

Jack stared down at him. The wild, aching sense of gratitude and adoration he'd felt just after the session had abated, replaced with...what? He felt raw and vulnerable, with no idea what the future held.

But at the same time, he felt found, as if he'd come home after a long time away. The experience Marcos had given him went well beyond anything he'd known was possible, even with Alexei.

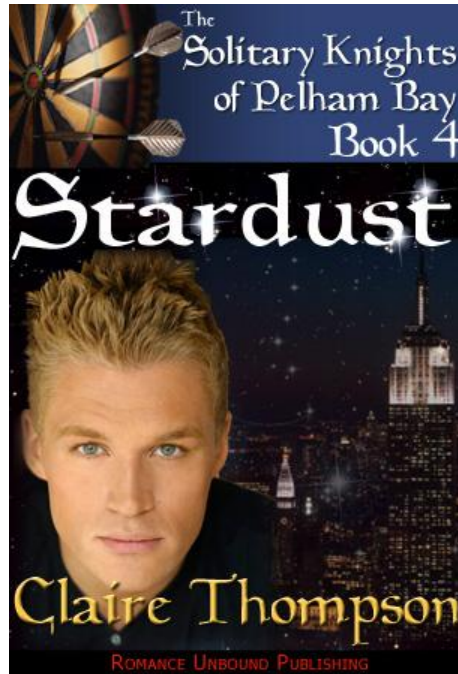
Could what they'd just shared develop into more? Was Marcos willing to continue on this amazing journey with him? Would they find something abiding and lasting, like what Rusty and Alexei shared?

Jack shook his head, hardly believing he was thinking such thoughts — Jack Harris, who was impervious to love. No — *had* been impervious, when he thought it didn't really exist. Now, he knew better.

Would he find that love with Marcos? He knew he didn't have the answer. He realized he didn't have to have the answer. Being here, now, beside Marcos, was enough.

Though he hadn't known he was seeking it, Jack realized he had found what he was looking for at last.

He had found himself.



Coming Soon:

What starts out as a routine emergency call, lands Gordon Flanders and Dennis Rutherford in the thick of a madcap drag queen party gone wild. Gordon finds himself in a position to save Ben Ryder, his old lover, from a fiasco that could ruin the movie star's career. Gordon volunteers to hide the movie star from the paparazzi until he can get a flight back to L.A. Thrilled by what he sees as his second chance with the man he never got over, the star struck Gordon plans a romantic dinner for two that he hopes will set the stage for more – much more.

Dennis and Gordon outwardly agree love affairs and work relationships shouldn't mix. Inside Dennis' heart, however, it's a different story. Too shy to press past Gordon's defenses, he settles for being the best friend he can, even when it means helping Gordon plan the seduction of another man.

When events collide to reveal Ben's true colors, Gordon's heart is trampled in the process, and it's left to Dennis to pick up the pieces. Will Dennis finally find the courage to seize his own second chance at love? And with the stardust falling from Gordon's eyes, will he finally see the real star who has been in front of him the entire time?

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