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The One that Broke Free

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TC Blue

Part One

It wasn't that great of a club, Travis thought as he sipped his Jack and Coke. He stood by the wall, watching the men, young and older, posing for each other. And sometimes for themselves, apparently, judging by how many of them had an eye on their own reflections in the big mirror behind the bar.

In fact, if he was really going to rate clubs, he'd have to say that the Backstage Door was maybe number nine. The place in Paris had been bigger, and at least the bartenders knew how to pour a real drink. None of that measured-shot shit there. The place in London had better music. Not so much techno crap that a guy would actually need to be doing meth to enjoy himself.

Hell, Travis couldn't even remember the names of all the clubs that were better than this one, but he wasn't in Boston by choice in the first place. Not technically. But when a guy's kid brother was getting married to a very successful psychologist, and the rest of the so-called family couldn't be bothered to RSVP, much less show up, well... Travis figured it was his responsibility to be there. His duty, even. As well as a chance to get the hell out of Fred-neck, Alabama without looking like he was running away.

Besides, truth was... Travis loved his brother. Elliot was the only one who'd never really shunned him for being 'perverted.' Granted, the kid hadn't been sure of his own bent at the time, and Elliot had definitely been a little embarrassed that Travis had turned out to be 'one of them,' but Elliot had gotten over it.

El hadn't been all 'yay, you're gay, let's celebrate' when Roddy Kendall had caught Travis and Jim under the bleachers, but at least Elliot had written to him after Travis had joined up and been deployed. Elliot had actually been the only one in the whole town who'd come by to say welcome home when Travis had been discharged on disability because of the shot he'd taken to his thigh. The wound had eventually healed, but it left him with a limp that would never go away.

Christ, Travis still couldn't believe that Elliot was married. Couldn't believe that his kid brother had grown up so much in the last six years or so that Elliot had made that sort of a commitment. Travis couldn't quite manage to wrap his head around it, much less the fact that Elliot had married the guy who had at one point been pining after Travis' ex's current lover.

"Good lord, this is almost incestuous, in a weird Alabama sort of way," he chuckled to himself as he finished the last inch or so of watery amber fluid in his glass. "I should call Momma and Daddy, except they wouldn't appreciate the funny." They'd never understood all those jokes about the South, anyway.

It was kind of funny, though in a different way, that Travis had barely recognized his ex, Jim, when they'd finally met again just a few days earlier. He'd assumed -- believed -- that, even though they'd been apart for more than a decade, he would always know his first great love. He hadn't, though. In fact, Travis admitted to himself for possibly the fiftieth time, he hadn't even made any effort to find Jim when the military had decided Travis was no longer of any use to them.

Oh, he'd taken the time to learn that Jim was in Wentworth, Illinois, but once he'd known Jim was happy and doing well, he hadn't given a single thought to the idea of a reunion. Which sort of killed Travis' whole 'had it and lost it and nothing will ever match up' thing.

Then again, he'd always known, on some level, that all of that had been a crock of shit. He'd loved Jim, in a way. They'd been enemies, then friends, and then more, once they'd realized they were both wired the same way. But a few... hundred... moments of grabby, sweaty hands and awkward advances didn't make true love. Neither did a few fumbling, kind of painful attempts at actual sex.

The blow jobs had been good, Travis remembered with a grin. Hell, after a week or so, Jim had been better at sucking cock than even the captain of the cheerleading squad, as Travis had reason to know. He liked to believe that his own skills had improved just as much during the months he and Jim had been doing their thing. He liked to believe that he and Jim might have been something real and strong and pure, if they'd just been left alone instead of run out of town.

He liked to believe that he would wake up one morning and his leg would be miraculously better, too, but that was never going to happen, and Travis knew it.

So, no. The truth was... Jim wasn't the love of his life. And if they'd stayed in Frederick, hadn't been discovered, then chances were they wouldn't have lasted past a year, anyway. They'd had a good bit in common, sure, and they'd loved each other, but they'd never been in love. Not the way Elliot and Jamie were, and definitely not the way Jim and his lover Mike were in love.

It was a little bit surprising, Travis decided after another drink, but not really upsetting. He and Jim had been too much alike, had known each other for too long for anything like being in love. But Jim had for damned sure been the perfect excuse.

Travis had used Jim -- or rather, Jim's memory -- as a wall. Something to keep himself from letting anyone too close. He'd been using Jim for... God, fifteen years. And why?

That was the question, Travis realized. Why was he so damned reluctant to really connect with anyone?

Okay, at first... military. Not really the place for a guy to form any sort of strong, emotional attachments, aside from the usual kind within a unit. Fine. It was just a bad idea to get all... stupid about someone when they might be sent continents away on five minutes' notice, or you might get caught and win yourself a dishonorable. And if holding up his ideal of what Jim had been to him had kept that from happening, then Travis could justify it, in his own head, anyway.

And, fortunately, the lovers he'd had within his unit had been of a like mind. Hadn't pushed for more than what they could have in stolen, secretive moments on base, and later, in sand up to their chins.

But he'd been out of the service for years. Just sitting around in Fred-neck, doing odd jobs here and there, going to church every once in a while because Madeline Kendall always had some single and gay man she'd found somewhere or other who she wanted him to meet. Some bullshit about the local hero needing to be settled down in order to set a good example for the youth. As if her husband wouldn't come up with some lame, horrible sermon about demon spawn multiplying if Travis actually did manage a relationship.

Because apparently, that's what gay men did. They fucked and fucked until the air was filled with some sort of infectious gay cooties which then slipped out through an open window or something and infected the straight men around. Next thing they knew, they were yearning for a big, hot cock, right up the poop-chute. According to Pastor Kendall, anyway, because the man had actually lost his temper with Travis one day in town and called it just that. Poop-chute. As in "I'm not wantin' anything to do with you *or* your poop-chute, Travis McRayne! And the Lord would really like it if you'd stop comin' to church. You make the *God-fearin'* folk uncomfortable, and I won't heave you spreadin' your filth around, you hear?"

None of which answered the question of why he'd been using the memory of his quasi-adolescent and far-less-than-perfect relationship with Jim to keep himself from letting anyone close.

He'd had one serious lover since then, and that had been an officer he'd met about a day and a half after Travis' unit had gotten settled in Iraq. Even that had been more about sex than anything else. He and Harry hadn't really lain about talking about their feelings, after all. It had been more "oh, God," "yes... yes, right there, Travis," "for fuck's sake, fuck me, already," and, on one memorable occasion, "please, Headmaster, please spank my naughty little bum until it burns! I've been a very bad boy!"

They'd lasted almost six months, and then Harry had been rotated out. Going by the frowns and short tempers in his own unit for the next week or so, Travis kind of thought that maybe he wasn't the only one who'd enjoyed some private time with the British-raised American officer. He hadn't heard from Harry after the man had been sent back stateside, which had only made it more clear. Don't get too attached.

And maybe that was it, Travis realized, the thumping, pounding music a cacophony in his brain. Everything had gone so quickly when he and Jim had gotten caught together, they'd never had a chance to say their goodbyes. Then the military with its 'don't ask, don't tell' rule. And Harry, who had disappeared just as quickly as the man had shown up.

Maybe Travis just didn't expect anything that would last. Or hadn't, right up until he'd come to Boston to see his brother married. Just witnessing that much had showed him... it could happen. It was possible for two men to find each other. To fall in love. To plan a life together that

included just them. And, in the case of Elliot and his husband -- God, Elliot had a *husband* -- kids, one day, because Elliot had said something about adopting at some point.

"I want that," Travis announced to no one in particular, which was a good thing because the damned club was just too fucking loud for anybody to hear him unless he was shouting right into their ear.

"I want that," he said again, hazel-gray eyes moving around the overly full, frenetically charged room as he set his empty glass on the bar and shook his head at the bartender, declining another. "One thing's for sure, though. I ain't gonna find it here."

He also wasn't going to find it at Elliot and Jamie's house, but he was house-sitting for them while they were off on some gay honeymoon cruise, and Travis really didn't know where else to go. Sure, he would have liked to get laid, but that just wasn't enough, all of a sudden, and while he might have a bum leg, there wasn't a damned thing wrong with his hands. Better to satisfy himself that way than engage in yet another meaningless encounter.

He'd call David and Russ in the morning, Travis decided. As Elliot's fathers-in-law, maybe they'd be able to help. Hell, they'd been together forever, from what Elliot had said. They *had* to know where a thirty-three-year-old former soldier could go if he wanted a lover, not just a fuck.

Travis figured he'd feel like an idiot when he asked, and the two older men would likely laugh at him, but it would be worth it. He was just so tired of being alone. So damned tired. It was time to settle down, make a home for himself instead of the renovated garage he'd slapped together on the three acres he'd bought in Frederick. Tom Avery, down at the service station, was getting divorced. Travis knew the man would probably be interested in making an offer, after as much as he'd admired the place, and...

"Shit!" he stated baldly, blinking right there on the street, letting his cane hold him up for a change. When had he decided that he wasn't going back home for good?

Probably around the same time he'd decided that he wanted what Elliot had. What Jim had. What David and Russ had.

Someone to love who would love him. Someone to share his entire fucking life with, assuming anyone would want him with his bum leg and the shrapnel scars on his back and sides. The seams on his left cheek that Travis had never cared enough about to bother with the plastic surgery that could eliminate them.

Even taking all of that into consideration, if there really was a guy somewhere in the world who wouldn't be put off by his many flaws, there was one thing Travis knew for damned sure.

He wasn't going to find him while sitting in a renovated garage in Frederick, Alabama.

Okay. He was in hell. Unexpectedly, but still hell. And the worst part was, he'd put himself there. On purpose.

He should have known. As soon as he'd called Jamie's dads and they hadn't laughed at him, he should have known.

Hell, it should have been clear as fucking vodka when David had put Russ on the phone to issue the invitation in his halting voice.

"We have a... party every... weekend, Travis. It might be... a good place to meet... people." Russ had said, and Travis had said yes. Hadn't even asked what kind of party, which had clearly been a huge mistake.

He'd expected wine. Maybe some sort of stinky cheese that he'd be able to compare to the soft, runny crap he'd tried in Paris that one time, when his unit had been on liberty for two days and nights. He'd thought maybe some old guys talking about art and younger guys talking... cars or some such shit.

He hadn't expected eighties music, which was barely a step up from disco as far as Travis was concerned, and while he might be gay, he wasn't *gay*, for fuck's sake. He liked cock, not Flock of Seagulls. Though the Cure wasn't bad. Or the Violent Femmes. And, okay. Adam Ant was kind of hot. Before he went nuts, anyway.

Even so, a middle-aged dance party wasn't what Travis had been expecting. At all. And he had no idea of exactly which people Russ and David thought he'd want to meet, but everyone for damned sure kept introducing themselves. And their lovers. Husbands. Wives, in a case or two.

The wives were the worst, though they seemed to be perfectly nice ladies. It was just the way they looked at him. Like the women of a certain age back home did. That 'you're good-looking and built, and why aren't you married and making babies' kind of look that Travis had never thought he'd be getting at the Sargent-Hartwell household.

"Christ, this was a bad idea," Travis grumbled, even as he limped his way across the cleared living room, through the mostly male couples who were dancing, and into the kitchen -- unseen, he hoped.

He got a bottle of water from the fridge, then leaned against the counter as he opened it and swallowed half of it down in one long draught.

"So," a woman's voice came from beside him, and Travis nearly choked, "you're good-looking, built like that, and a war hero, from what David says. Why is it that you don't have a man?"

If the voice or tone had been anything like accusatory, Travis knew he would have snarled, but as it was, the words were so... confused and just plain curious, he couldn't quite manage to take offense. It helped, too, he admitted silently, that the little fifty-something blonde woman had said "why don't you have a man," rather than "wife."

Instead of reacting on sheer emotion, Travis took a moment to take a small, slow sip of water as he examined the woman. His initial impression had been right on the money.

She was tiny. Truly tiny. Like, maybe five foot three to his own six-four. And blonde, surely, but with small bits of grayish white here and there that just screamed it was all natural. Travis respected that.

Her face had a gentle golden tinge that spoke of some sort of Mediterranean blood in her ancestry, rather than sun lamps or cosmetics, but her eyes were blue. A soft, faded blue, like Travis' favorite old pair of jeans. And she was fit for a woman her age. Hell, he could see her biceps, toned and distinct in the sleeveless top she wore. That top looked expensive, just like the rest of her clothes. Which was hardly surprising, considering the people David and Russ had invited to their party.

She might be twenty-some years older than him, Travis realized, but this woman was no old lady.

She was also looking at him expectantly, clearly waiting for an answer, so Travis nodded and cleared his throat while he tried to remember the question.

Oh, right. Man. Him. Why none.

"I... well, ma'am," Travis finally managed to say, "I guess I haven't met the right one yet." And that was true enough, though he hadn't really been...

"...looking?" the woman asked, and God help him if she wasn't reading his mind. Actually, God help him if she was, because that would mean this sweet older lady was seeing and hearing things that were likely to make her faint. "Well? How hard have you been looking, son?" she added, and Travis blushed.

"I've been... out there, ma'am," he answered, trying to shrink in on himself, he was so uncomfortable. He didn't know this woman, though she did look maybe a tiny bit familiar. Not enough for him to spill his guts about his sex life, though. Hell, he wouldn't have done that if she'd been his own momma. Assuming his momma hadn't decided to pretend Travis didn't exist since that night he'd been caught with Jim, anyway.

The woman snorted, and Travis jumped. Women didn't snort; not where he was from. And yet this elegant, obviously wealthy woman just had. And she'd done it well, too, expressing disdain and amusement and just a tiny bit of that annoyed '*men*' women were all good at, as far as Travis could tell. It was a damned fine snort.

"You've been 'out there,' all right," she said, shaking her head. Sadly, it looked like. Sad or not, though, she still sounded merely curious when she spoke on. "Out there trying to 'score,' as you boys say. And now, all of a sudden, you'd like my men to help you? Why? Why should any of us

put our young friends and associates' hearts on the line simply because you've decided you're ready to look for something more, hmmm?"

It wasn't the arched and professionally sculpted brow that convinced Travis that she really wanted to know. It was the look in her eyes. Not accusing or even suspicious, no matter how the woman's words had sounded. And she was holding herself tensely. Like she was expecting him to attack -- verbally, he assumed -- and was trying to be ready for it.

That realized, Travis pushed aside his initial impulse, which was to demand where the fuck the bitch thought she got off, interrogating him like that. Instead, he gave her questions the consideration she seemed to believe they deserved.

"Because, ma'am," Travis finally said, after nearly a minute of what would have been complete silence if it hadn't been for the strains of 'Karma Chameleon' seeping through the door, "I mean it."

He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know if you've ever had the privilege of visiting Fred-neck... I mean Frederick, Alabama. But it's not like here. There's no... place there for people like me. And do you know how many gay guys there are in Frederick?"

He took her blank stare as a no and went on. "I can tell you, there's about six of them. Because they all came by my place at some point or other, wanting me to... well. Do things. Or let *them* do things. But it's Alabama, ma'am, and they're all married. To women, obviously. And I don't do that." Travis blushed.

"I don't poach, ma'am. I don't mess with married folk. That's God's territory, not mine, and I don't trespass. So you tell me. Who am I supposed to be trying to date, back home?"

He sighed and swallowed hard, closing his eyes against what he knew was going to be a disdainful stare. "Yes. I take what's offered sometimes. If someone's single and just passing through town. And most times there's no offer, anyway. Not once they see my face and the cane and... but that doesn't matter. You wanted to know why you should help me, and I guess... you shouldn't."

Travis sighed again, deeper this time. "Because you're right. It *is* sudden. I... didn't even know I wanted that until I sat in the back yard of this house a few days ago and watched my brother marry Russ and David's son. I didn't even know it was possible. But it is, and I saw it, and David and Russ just prove that it can be real and last and... *I want that!* And I'm ready, ma'am. I'm just... ready. Ready to look. With intent." And Jesus fucking Christ, Travis thought, if he said anything more, he was going to get all teary-eyed.

"You're wrong, you know," the woman said a few seconds later, her hand suddenly just light and soft and there on Travis' own, pressing his palm to the counter by some non-pressure method that Travis couldn't even begin to understand.

"We should definitely help you, Travis. Because I think you're a good man. Better, even, than you think." The woman smiled and pulled her hand away before taking a step from the counter, then turning to stare up into Travis' eyes. "And you're wrong about something else."

Oh, good, Travis thought wearily. Another thing he'd fucked up. Fan-fucking-tastic.

"Jamie's not just Russell and David's son. He's mine, too. I gave birth to him, after all. And as you're Elliot's brother, that makes us family, doesn't it?" Then she grinned, and Travis was suddenly frightened. More scared than he'd been in Iraq, even, when there had been nothing but sand and the sun's glare between himself and the bullets flying from enemy guns.

"Uh. Ma'am..." he started, only to be cut off as the woman wrapped a hand around his arm and tugged him toward the kitchen door.

"Like I said, Travis, we're *family* now. Call me Blessing. Or Bless, like your brother does. And trust me. We'll get you settled down with a nice man -- who has a job, by the way, and an investment portfolio -- in no time. Now, come along, dear. I'll let the others know you're a safe risk."

Just like that, Travis found himself being dragged back to the party, and whenever anyone looked at him, he just smiled, though he was sure it looked glazed and baffled and possibly somewhat idiotic.

"Don't... worry..." Travis heard, and when he turned, he saw Russell grinning at him. "She's a force to... be reckoned with, but... she has a good... heart. I... would know. I was... married to... her for years."

God. He really hoped Russ was right.

"Look," Travis said to the lawyer sitting across from him, "I'm not really a wine kind of guy, okay? I'm just a redneck with a bad leg." Because damned if the guy -- Troy, Travis thought his name was -- hadn't looked disappointed when the bottle of Syrah he'd ordered hadn't caused any real reaction on Travis' part. "I know beer pretty damned well, though."

And Troy was laughing, shaking his head as he poured for them both. "I'll have to educate you in the finer things, then," he said, and for some reason, Travis just found that annoying. "I don't mind guiding you, Travis. Not at all. In fact, it'll be my... pleasure."

Yeah, that wasn't a heavy-handed bit of innuendo, Travis thought with a silent snort. Who ever said he even wanted to know about fucking wine, anyway? He was a plain, simple guy. Always had been, and hopefully always would. The last thing he needed was to find himself spouting all sorts of shit about grapes and whatever in a couple years. That would drive him nuts in no time, flat.

He still took a sip of the deep purple liquid, then made a face as the weird aftertaste lingered. "Okay, that's gross, man. It tastes like... dirt and tin." And now Troy looked offended, which Travis figured was a good thing. He was pretty sure that he didn't even like the guy, which made the chances of falling in love with him pretty damned slim.

"Clearly, your palate needs to be educated slowly. I'll order something a little less..."

Yeah, Troy was at a loss for words. Travis could see it. See the sudden awareness in the guy's brown eyes that there was no good way to finish that sentence. No way that wouldn't sound insulting.

Travis sighed and shook his head, then pushed the wine glass away. "Look, Troy," he said carefully, trying not to sound as amused as he suddenly was, "I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say that neither one of us is what the other was expecting, okay? You seem like a nice enough guy, but I don't think this is gonna work out. No matter how much Blessing thinks it should. We're too damned different."

The sheer degree of relief on Troy's face might have been upsetting if Travis hadn't been the one to say what they'd both obviously been thinking. Then Troy smiled, and Travis grinned, and they made it through the rest of the meal without any more awkwardness. In fact, Troy was damned good company, once the idea of dating was thrown away.

They exchanged numbers before Troy left, and Travis was almost entirely sure they'd actually stay in touch. They were too fucking different for a relationship, but friends? That was a whole other story. Especially with their solemn pact to never tell Blessing just how quickly they'd known they didn't fit.

He'd been on seven dates in two weeks, and while he'd had a good time on most of them, he just hadn't clicked with anyone. Travis was starting to wonder if there was something wrong with him.

The guys had all been successful, good-looking, and smart. None of them had stared at his scarred cheek or seemed to notice his limp, which Travis knew meant Blessing -- or David, or Russ -- had warned them ahead of time. He appreciated it, sort of, but damn, it would have been nice to know how they would have reacted if they'd just seen him somewhere. Whether they would have even approached him.

Fortunately, he actually had more on his mind than the failed matchmaking attempts of his... fuck, he didn't even know what to call them. Not in-laws, because he wasn't Elliot, but what was he supposed to call his brother's husband's parents and step-dads? Travis wasn't actually sure whether there was a name for them. He thought there should be, though, because 'my brother's mother-in-law' was just too damned wordy. 'My brother's father-in-law's husband' was even worse. By the time he finished saying either of those things in conversation, Travis figured he would have forgotten what he'd been talking about in the first place.

"Family," he told himself, muttering as he packed his things into his duffel. "I guess they're just family." There was something about that. Something that felt weirdly good. It was fucking bizarre, when he thought about it, that his own parents had disowned him -- and Elliot -- for being what they were, while these people had embraced them for pretty much that same reason. It was definitely strange, but cool. Very cool.

That didn't change the fact that Elliot and Jamie were due back the next afternoon, which was why Travis was packing. The guys would want their privacy, he was sure, and while he'd given them a wedding present, it hadn't been much. They'd said they didn't care about that, of course, but Travis cared. Wished he could have afforded something really nice, like the other guests had. A blender didn't really stack up against original art and sterling silver trays. Especially when it wasn't even as nice as the blender already in the guys' kitchen.

So the least he could do, Travis had decided, was be ready to go once Elliot and Jamie got back. Besides, he needed to head home for a little while, anyway. See whether Tom Avery was interested in buying Travis' place, and if not, he'd need to find a realtor. Probably in the next town. There were only three in Frederick, one of whom had been among the guys he'd mentioned to Blessing in Russ's kitchen.

The other two were very dedicated members of Pastor Kendall's church, so Travis seriously doubted they'd be willing to do anything more than sneer at him until he hauled off and hit one of them, which would only land him in jail. He didn't like jail. Too claustrophobic and exposed, as weird as that sounded, even to him. It was something about being locked in while his every movement was visible through the bars.

He finished his packing, ordered a pizza, then settled in to watch *Sports Center*. He'd make it an early night. It was a hell of a drive back to Alabama, especially when he had to stop every hour or so to work the kinks out of his leg.

"This place is nice," Travis said with a grin, glad that he'd forgotten about the suit and left it hanging in the closet the night before, rather than cramming it into his duffel with his jeans, T-shirts, and flannels. It was the only set of nice clothes he owned, bought specifically for Elliot and Jamie's wedding, and who cared if he'd gotten it at a thrift store in Birmingham? It was nice, and it fit him right, which was a minor miracle all by itself. A not-too-old, barely worn designer suit in his size, for only sixty bucks? Yeah, definitely something miraculous there.

"It's our favorite," Elliot said, grinning back and holding Jamie's hand, right there on top of the table. "Shit, bro, we've been coming here for years. You should try the steak. It's kind of small, but it's real tender."

And Jamie was rolling his eyes, but Travis saw so much love and appreciation in them when Jamie looked at Elliot that he was envious. More envious.

"You always say that, sweetheart," Jamie rumbled, and Travis smirked when Elliot blushed. "But you're always full by the time they roll the dessert cart around." He smiled at Travis, then winked. "I don't think he's actually been hungry enough to order dessert more than a handful of times, Travis. And even then, he begs me to help."

Elliot snorted, then leaned over to kiss Jamie softly, and... oh, fuck. Again with the envy. Jesus. Boston was completely fucking different from Fred-neck. Hell, back home, everyone else in a restaurant would have been calling the police if two men kissed.

"That's because if I don't share, you get all pouty and sad, darlin'," Elliot said, a moment or three later. "Besides, I like sharing things with you." Then he waggled his brows and Jamie was blushing, too, and Travis forced himself to swallow a groan.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. You're married now. Doesn't that mean you're supposed to be all celibate and shit?" Travis offered, giving them a teasing smile. "So, what's good besides the teeny tiny steak?"

Onion soup, some sort of weird tart thing with pumpkin, the little bitty steak, and a slice of cheesecake later, Travis was sitting back, patting his stomach with a groan. "Damn. I can see why you guys like it here. Everything was good, even that vegetable stuff, whatever it was. But you're right, El. The steak could be bigger. I might have to order a pizza in a few hours." He chuckled at Jamie's expression.

"That's why I said it was small before, darlin'," Elliot said to Jamie, darting a laughing glance at Travis, which just had him chuckling. "I've seen Travis eat. He could probably put away a whole side of cow if he tried."

Jamie was shaking his head again, muttering something about freakishly good metabolisms, and Travis couldn't help it. He just let his head fall back and laughed, loud and hard.

"I probably could," he agreed eventually. "I'd at least give it a damned good try. Hell, boys, there ain't nothing better than a big, thick piece of hot meat, especially if it has my name written all over it."

"Mmmmm, now, he sounds like my kind of man."

The voice from behind him wasn't exactly a surprise. Travis had been well aware of the fact that someone was there. He hadn't been worried, though, because Elliot obviously knew whoever it was and considered them harmless. Otherwise, his little brother would have said something. El knew exactly how paranoid Travis could be.

So it wasn't that fact that someone was there that surprised Travis. It was... Jesus. The voice was male, but so incredibly dramatic, so... not feminine, exactly, but... Travis didn't know what.

"And I absolutely concur," was what that indescribable voice said. "Unless he was actually talking about meat, rather than using a charming euphemism. Doc D! Hot-body! Or should that

be Mr. Doc D, seeing as you're married now? How was the honeymoon, dreamboats? I want details! Don't leave anything out!"

Then the man was beside the table, leaning over to blow air-kisses beside Jamie's face, then Elliot's, and Travis was shocked silent.

Tall and slender. Wearing a sort of greenish suit with dark yellow flecks in the fabric. Button-down shirt that matched the flecks, and a green tie that was exactly the mossy color of the man's eyes. Long hair, so blond it was nearly white, pulled back into a very tidy, very complicated sort of braid thing that Travis had only seen on women before. Slightly golden skin, probably from a tanning store or something, and red, red lips, wide and full and curved up at the corners, likely because Travis was staring, and oh, shit!

He was staring. And hard. Jesus fucking Christ, he was hard. In the restaurant Elliot and Jamie liked. Because of some guy they knew, who wasn't anything like Travis' type. Fuck, he was insane. Obviously. Completely bug fuck nuts.

Fortunately, it was only the strange guy who seemed to be paying any attention to him, because Elliot and Jamie were talking about their cruise and the places they'd been, and now that Travis was listening, he realized they didn't have a lot to say about the ship, which meant... "Okay, seriously, guys. Did you ever even make it out of your cabin?"

"A couple of times," Elliot answered with a smug grin. "We had to eat, right? And I have to tell you, if you're ever in Puerto Rico, stick with Vaseline. The lube they sell there isn't the same, no matter what the brand name on the box is."

Then Jamie was blushing and the strange man was laughing melodically, teasingly. Those moss-green eyes were sparkling, for fuck's sake, and Travis seriously thought he might come in his pants, just from seeing the guy so... vibrant. Jesus fucking Christ. What was wrong with him?

"So, Mr. Doc," the man said, obviously trying to spare Jamie a little bit, now that he'd taunted him to near-purple, "who's the stud-muffin? Because I would definitely remember seeing *him* before."

The appraising gaze from those pretty eyes had Travis relaxing a little bit, because maybe it meant Travis wasn't the only one who was looking. It almost sounded like the guy thought Travis was hot, maybe.

"Heh," Elliot said, still smiling widely. "This is usually where Jamie would be pointing out my lack of manners. And he'd be right. Sorry. Vincent, meet my brother, Travis. Travis, this is Vincent Clark. I think you met his sister at the wedding. Jamie's assistant, Angela?"

Travis blinked, then nodded. "Yeah. Yeah. Nice woman." Shorter than Vincent, of course, and not as slim, but with similar eyes, though her hair had been a bright gold color, rather than Vincent's almost moon-pale shade.

"Ooooooh! *You're* Travis!" And Vincent looked him over once again. "I should have known. She mentioned meeting you. I, on the other hand, didn't have the pleasure. I was supposed to be off that day, but my assistant manager couldn't make it. His wife just *had* to birth their spawn two weeks early." He sighed dramatically and waved one hand aimlessly in the air. Travis thought it should have seemed funny, but somehow, it just worked.

"I was lucky to sneak out for an hour so I could catch the ceremony, but then it was right back here. I didn't even get to try the food, which I'm sure wasn't anywhere near as good as ours. Am I right, dreamboats?"

And thank God, Travis thought. Thank God that Elliot and Jamie were talking about the caterer, distracting Vincent. Because without those fine eyes on him, Travis thought he just might be able to will away his unwelcome erection.

Eventually, of course, the guys had talked the whole reception to death. Some waiter was trying to get Vincent's attention, judging by the frantic waving, and Vincent sighed deeply.

"Well. It never ends, does it? I'm glad you had a stellar honeymoon, lovelies. And Travis." God, those eyes were on him again, and Travis could feel his half-deflated prick trying to rise again.

"It was fabulous to finally meet you," Vincent went on, licking his lips quickly, just the tip of that pink tongue flicking out. Travis almost groaned. "Elliot's spoken of you a time or two. My sister has, too. She's apparently quite fond of the McRayne brothers, now that she's met you. It used to be just Elliot." Vincent's eyes rolled; playfully, it looked like. "If you're single, I'm sure she'd love it if you'd give her a call. I can write her number down for you, if you'd like?"

Okay. That was weird. Why would Vincent think... especially after that whole comment about being Vincent's kind of man? Unless that was just the kind of thing Vincent said to people. Or at least people who were friends.

Either way, for some reason, Travis wanted to be entirely clear. Wanted Vincent to know what was what.

"Well. Thanks anyway, Vinnie," and when had he started thinking of him as Vinnie? Christ. "I'd love to talk to your sissy, but I don't think I'll be dating her. Ever." And why the fuck were Elliot and Jamie grinning so damned hugely? It was annoying.

But Vincent was arching one nearly-white brow, his head cocking a bit to the side. "Oh. Well, how likely was it, really, that a guy like you would be single? Still, it was worth a try." He grinned, and Travis groaned silently.

"No, that's not it. Shit, El, help me out here, bro."

Elliot smirked and took a sip from the water glass in front of him before finally doing as Travis had asked, thank fucking Christ. "What Travis is trying to say, in his bumbling, redneck way, is that he's single. Very, *very* single. And he liked Ange when he met her, but there was no

chemistry between them. Mostly because Angela doesn't have a cock. Attached to her body, anyway -- that I know of."

"Jesus, sweetheart!" Jamie sounded mortified, but also used to it, which pretty much told Travis all he needed to know about his brother and brother-in-law's relationship.

But Vincent was laughing, the sound just as melodious and tinkling as it had been the first time Travis had heard it, and he actually thought he might be seeing a bit of interest in those mossy-green eyes when the man turned his gaze back to Travis. "Well, she'll be heartbroken," Vincent murmured, flapping his hand at the increasingly frantic waiter.

"Wait!" Vincent said a second later, looking at Elliot accusingly, it seemed like. "You mean there really *is* a town out there where they make them like you? Hot and sexy and gay, and you never *told me*? Humph. Some friend *you* are!"

The next thing Travis knew, they were all laughing, then Vincent was stalking off to deal with whatever the waiter's crisis was. Elliot explained about Vincent's comment, with Jamie adding his two cents every now and again, and their waiter -- not the freaked-out spaz who'd drawn Vincent away -- brought them coffee, which was a good thing, Travis decided. He almost had his cock under control, and another little while couldn't hurt.

They were ready to leave a few minutes later, and even though Travis tried, Jamie wouldn't let him pick up their check. "It's the least I can do, since you were nice enough to stay and watch the house for us," Jamie said. "Dad-vid would have stopped in every couple days, or Mom, but I just felt better knowing someone was staying there. Besides, Trav, you're family."

Travis was still blushing as he followed the guys to the door, leaning heavily on his cane for a change. They'd been sitting for a good three hours, after all, and his leg was damned stiff.

Jamie obviously noticed, because he frowned and crossed his arms over his broad chest, pinning Travis with a stern stare. "You're going to wait here while Elliot and I bring the car around. No arguments, Travis. I don't like the way you're limping. In fact, if you weren't leaving in the morning, I'd get my doctor to have a look at that leg. Five minutes."

Then Jamie was striding down the street and Elliot grinned, watching that strong body for a minute. "Damn," Elliot said softly, "I am one lucky fucking guy. But he's right, Trav. You should really get your leg looked at. It shouldn't still be that... messed up. Okay. Be right back."

Fuck, why the hell did everyone want to believe his leg would get better? It wouldn't, and Travis knew it. He'd had it checked and rechecked by five different doctors at the military hospital over the last six years, and every single one of them had said the same thing after looking at his chart and the old x-rays. Permanent damage, nothing to do about it, and he was lucky he still had the leg at all. It was true, too. So if those were his options -- stiffness and a bit of pain when he sat still too long, and a limp that got worse when he was tired, or losing the leg entirely? Well, Travis was good with living with what he had. At least he was still whole. Damaged, but whole.

"Sneaking out on me, stud?" Travis heard, and he was already grinning as he turned around.

"Nah, Vinnie," he answered, his smile growing when he realized Vincent was only a couple inches shorter than he was himself. Six foot one, maybe six-two. A good height. Just about perfect, really. "You were busy. The guys didn't want to bother you. They're gonna be back in a couple days, anyway."

"Mmmmmm, but will you, stud-muffin? Because..." Then Vincent bit his lip, and Travis moaned, soft and low and deep in his throat. "Maybe I'm not going as far out on the gangplank as I thought," Vincent muttered before staring into Travis' eyes again, which Travis was unexpectedly fine with.

"Okay, here's the thing, stud," Vinnie said after a moment, his gaze bold but somehow nervous, too, to Travis' mind. "I think I like you. A lot. And I never do this. I don't hit on customers. Not seriously, anyway. It's just sort of what people expect now. I was the maitre d' here for years before I became the general manager and a partner with the owners. So it's become a tradition, of sorts. The big, swishy queen who acts suggestive but doesn't mean it, you know?"

Travis didn't know. Didn't even really get what Vinnie's words meant. He only knew that the man sounded bitter underneath all that charm and good humor. Even so, he nodded. "Okay."

"But I like you. By which I mean I really like you. So far." Vincent blushed just a little bit, and it was so damned cool. "So I was thinking. Maybe we could go out some time. Have dinner. Catch a movie. Tip some cows, shoot a deer... whatever it is you like to do. I just. I like you."

And damn. Just damn. That sounded pretty good, Travis realized. Aside from the deer-shooting, because he hadn't fired a gun since he'd been discharged, and if he never did again, it would be too fucking soon. He still kept a rifle at his place, but he hadn't had any call to use it. Other than that, though, he could definitely get into spending some time with Vincent. He could imagine sitting across a table from the guy, seeing him in something less formal than the suit Vincent was wearing. He could picture how that so-blond hair would look out of its braid, flowing free around the man's face.

Hell, he could nearly feel those long, silky strands wrapped around his fingers while he slid his cock slowly between those full red lips, Vincent's eyes wide and wanton and staring up at him and Travis really needed to think about something else, but Jesus fuck, it was already too late. He was hard again. And Vincent hadn't said anything about sex, which just made Travis feel like the biggest pervert ever.

"I like you, too, Vinnie," Travis heard himself saying, "and that'd be fucking great, man." Then Travis managed to take control of his mouth, right before it made promises he knew he couldn't keep. "But I'm headed back to Alabama in the morning, so..."

Oh. Oh, damn. Damn. Vincent was frowning, and those pretty green eyes were suddenly narrow and cold.

"You could have just said 'no,' Travis," Vinnie -- Vincent -- said harshly. "It's not the first time I've been turned down, you know. I don't know what I was thinking, anyway. A guy like you probably goes for the waifish little twinks." Vincent sighed. "Christ, I really shouldn't have done this at work. I... I'm sorry, Travis. Truly. I have no right to be mad at you for not being interested. I know that. And I'll just... Okay. I'll let you go now. I should act like I work here, after all."

It actually took Travis a good second to work through everything Vincent had said, but when he finally did, he growled and reached out with his free hand, grabbing tightly at one suit-clad shoulder.

"I'd chase after you, but I'm not that steady on my feet right now," he announced, not caring whether anyone else heard him or not. "And I resent the fuck out of you thinking I'm lying, Vinnie. I really *would* like to take you out, okay? You're not like anyone I've ever met before. And you sort of... turn me on. A lot. But I really *am* headed home tomorrow. Now, I'm planning on coming back, eventually. Gotta sell my place in Fred-neck and find something here, and I don't know how long that's gonna take. But my family's here, so I'm moving."

And yeah, Travis realized, he'd already known that, but saying it out loud made it somehow more real. Elliot was here, and Jamie. And Travis' parents didn't even acknowledge him, but Blessing and Russ and David did. They cared about him, even, and after only two weeks of knowing him, while his own folks didn't give a rat's ass whether Travis lived or died.

"So here's the deal," Travis went on, his heart pounding jack-rabbit fast as he forced himself to say what he was thinking; to take a chance that maybe he wouldn't scare Vincent off by being completely honest. "When I get back, I'm gonna call you, okay? We'll talk, get to know each other. And *not* in the Biblical sense. Not right at first, anyway. And if you're still interested, we're gonna go out. Because I meant what I said, Vinnie. I like you. At least, I like what I've seen so far. So that's it. You gonna be cool with that?"

Vincent was blinking, those pretty eyes just opening and closing so fast, it was like flashes of green. But then that nearly white head nodded a little and Travis relaxed. "Good," he murmured, still holding Vinnie's shoulder, though less tightly now. "The guys are gonna be here any second, so I'm saying goodbye. For now. I'll see you just as soon as I make it back, Vinnie. You can count on it. Even if you don't care by then. I'm not exactly a prize, what with the scars and gimpy leg."

"Shut the fuck up, Travis McRayne," Vincent growled, sounding for all the world like a tough little tiger cub. "And there's no law saying you can't call me while you're in Alabama, you know. Maybe we could get a head start on that whole getting to know each other thing."

Next thing Travis knew, Vinnie was holding his hand and scribbling on his palm with a pen from inside that suit.

"That's my number," Vinnie announced, then he gave Travis a hard glare that was surprisingly arousing. "Use it, Travis. Good night."

Travis was still blinking and chuckling when Jamie's BMW stopped at the curb in front of McGinty's. But no matter how much Elliot and Jamie pried, he refused to say why.

All he did say, in fact, was, "I need to get a cell phone. Who do you guys use?"

"We can add another line to our plan before you leave in the morning," Jamie said, like it was the simplest thing in the world. "It'll take five minutes at the store downtown."

"Yeah," Elliot added, and Travis really wanted to argue; wanted to say that he could for damned sure afford a phone of his own, except he really kind of couldn't. "It'll only cost us, like, another fifteen bucks a month with taxes and shit. You can pay us later." And when Elliot put it like that, Travis couldn't do anything but nod.

"Okay. Cool." And it was.

Travis spent the first day of the drive alternating between replaying every moment he'd spent with Vincent and staring at the brand-new cell phone on the passenger seat beside him. When he wasn't pulled in at a rest stop, taking halting steps that grew stronger as his leg loosened up, he was opening and closing the flip-style contraption, pushing buttons just to see what happened.

He wasn't sure whether it was sad or funny that he only -- or already -- had seven numbers in his electronic phone book. He'd had the phone for mere minutes before the first six were entered; Elliot had seen to that. Elliot's number, of course, and Jamie's. Russ's, David's, Blessing's... and even Troy's, since Elliot knew he and Troy had become friends in the days since their disastrous 'date.' And Travis had been maybe sixty whole seconds away from the guys' house before he'd pulled over and entered Vincent's number himself. That was one he didn't plan on losing.

Of course, he grumbled silently as he made his way back and forth across the far end of the parking lot from the vending machines in... wherever the fuck he was, he hadn't had the nerve to actually call Vincent yet. He wanted to, but he couldn't. Not yet. Not until he figured out why his libido, and every other part of him, had taken so strongly to the man. Vincent was a radical departure from Travis' usual type.

Sure, Vincent was tall, but he wasn't built like a brick shithouse. Wasn't solid and bulky and stronger than fuck, which was what Travis had always gone for.

Even Vincent had been surprised by his interest, Travis remembered. Had said something along the lines of Travis liking the fluttery little twink-types that swarmed every gay bar in the world, it seemed. But that wasn't it, and Travis knew it. Travis had never really seen anything appealing about guys who looked like they might break if he let himself go. No matter how available the waifish young men were, Travis had always preferred strong men with muscles. Hell, he'd fucking adored them.

So what the fuck was going on with him? That was what Travis needed to figure out, because he'd come to one simple conclusion in the last eleven hours of driving.

If he was only interested because he'd never met anyone like Vincent before -- tall, slender but not skinny, fucking gorgeous, and very openly, obviously gay -- then it wouldn't be fair to either of them if Travis pursued the man, only to discover later that it had been fascination with someone unique, rather than an actual attraction. Yeah.

And Vincent -- not Vinnie, because that was maybe too familiar, somehow -- hadn't said anything about Travis' cane. Hadn't even stared noticeably at the obvious scars on his face, and Travis was starting to think that maybe it was because Vincent didn't really care. Like maybe it didn't matter to Vincent because the man wasn't planning on being around long enough for the reasons and situations that had caused both things to make an impact.

He'd possibly read too much into the unexpected chemistry, Travis decided as he climbed back into the cab of his old Chevy four by four, shifting a little to get his bad leg comfortable. Just because he was looking for something real, suddenly or not, that didn't mean Vincent was interested in anything more than a few nights, did it?

Except Vincent had given him his number, Travis reminded himself with a frown. Had said Travis should call, even with knowing that Travis would be hundreds of miles away. Without knowing how long Travis would be gone, too.

And Travis kind of thought Elliot, at least, knew how intrigued he was by Vincent. Hell, the sly, too-amused glances had told Travis that much. And what Elliot knew, Travis was sure Jamie knew, too. So wouldn't one of them have said something if Vincent was the kind of guy who'd break Travis' heart?

Yeah, he told himself, crossing two lanes of highway in an instant because there wasn't another car anywhere that he could see. His brother... brothers, he guessed he should say, since the whole 'in-law' part was just irrelevant to him now, because Jamie was family. Yeah. His brothers would have warned him. Assuming they knew Travis was looking for something serious.

Which they might not, he realized with a bit of surprise. Elliot and Jamie had been on a cruise ship when Travis had finally understood what he wanted. They'd been back for less than twenty-four hours by the time Travis had driven off into the sunset... well, into the whatever the hell it was called when the sun was up in the sky and it was ten a.m., anyway. He didn't know whether Blessing or Jamie's dads had mentioned anything at all, and Jesus! It was more than possible that Elliot and Jamie thought Travis was just looking for a fuck. Which would explain the laughter in his kid brother's eyes.

After as many times as Travis had warned Elliot that most guys were only after one thing, Elliot thought Travis was just looking to get laid and thought it was funny.

"I am so fucking screwed!" Travis growled, flinching a little as yet another bug splatted against the windshield. "And I'm fucking tired, too. Christ, I hate driving like this."

That much was true, though he always seemed to forget it until he was in his truck and more than a few hours along. He'd need to find a motel soon, even though he wasn't the kind of tired that required sleep. He was more physically wrecked than anything else, and Travis knew from experience that he'd be awake for hours, which made a motel with cable a necessity rather than an option.

And he could call Vincent, he thought with a grin, before common sense reared its head and slapped down that entirely too optimistic idea.

He could call Elliot, Travis told himself sternly. And if their conversation turned to Travis' strong yearning for an actual lover, well... maybe he'd mention Vincent and see what Elliot had to say. Or Jamie, because Travis wasn't sure whether Elliot would be honest. Not if Elliot thought the truth might hurt Travis' feelings.

Yeah, Travis decided after another flinch at another bug. He would call Jamie. And depending on what the man had to say, maybe, just maybe, Travis would use the number Vincent had scribbled on his hand.

He could still feel those long, warm fingers on his skin, damn it.

"Honestly," Jamie was saying, and Travis thought he heard the sound of a door closing on the other end of the line, "I've known Vincent for ages. Almost ten years, I suppose, though it seems longer. And... look, Travis. He's like a brother to me, okay? His sister and I go way back. They're family, really."

Travis nodded from his spot on the motel room's bed, even though Jamie couldn't see him. "I know, man. That's why I'm asking *you*." Then Jamie chuckled, and when Jamie spoke again, Travis had to admit he had a point.

"If your next word is 'duh,' Trav, I'm going to be even more sure that you and my husband sprang from the same womb. But my point is, Vincent doesn't date, as far as I know. Hell, Angela's never even mentioned him having a boyfriend in all the time I've known her. And she would have, believe me." Travis could actually picture the annoyed but fond expression that was reflected in Jamie's voice.

"I've never seen him react to anyone the way he did to you, though. Not when he meant it. And believe me, after all this time, I can tell the difference between the show and... what the other night was." Then Jamie sighed, and whatever small bit of relief Travis had been feeling went right out the proverbial window.

"I think he likes you, Travis. And I know this sounds strange because Vincent's a good-looking guy, even if he is kind of, um, more in touch with his feminine side than most men -- even gay men -- ever want to be, but I don't know if he's *ever* dated. I think, and this is me speaking as a

psychologist, okay? I think there's some sort of trauma in his past that keeps him from being open to the idea, so if you're really serious about this, about him?"

Jamie sighed again, but this time it had Travis sitting up straighter. "Yeah? What?" he demanded, frowning at the idea that Vincent was damaged in some way. "Just say it, bro. I hate it when people fucking dance around shit."

"Christ, you're definitely El's brother," Travis heard Jamie mutter, and it made him smile. "Okay," in a more normal voice this time, "I could be wrong, Travis, but I don't think it's going to be easy. It helps that Vincent is so attracted to you. It really does. But it might also be a problem, depending on what his issues are. So if you're sure that you want to pursue him, that you want to try? Just... don't push too hard. But don't go too easy on him, either."

Jesus fucking Christ, Travis thought a good twenty minutes later -- after talking to Elliot, too, and discovering that yes, Blessing had told him and Jamie all about Travis' epiphany of sorts -- Jamie's advice had been about as fucking useful as a box of rocks.

Not that Elliot's was any better, because "Get your ass back here and fuck him unconscious, repeatedly, until he can't even imagine anyone else's cock in his ass, and you guys will be fine" was an interesting suggestion, but wasn't really the way Travis thought a good relationship would start. Even if that was pretty much how his brother and Jamie had begun, according to Elliot, anyway.

He would think about it some more in the morning, Travis promised himself. Maybe some sleep would let him see things more clearly. Because even as discouraging as Jamie's words had been, in the end, Travis couldn't help replaying the important parts in his mind.

Vincent liked him. Vincent was attracted to him. Vincent had reacted to him -- to Travis, scars, cane and all -- in a way Jamie had never seen before.

And Vincent had given him his number, Travis reminded himself. That had to mean something.

Travis still wasn't sure of what, though, and that was the thought that chased him as he drifted to sleep, the TV still on, droning voices rambling about poker hands and rivers.

Travis woke with a clear picture of why he'd been so sure Vincent wasn't his type, and it was all bound up in what he'd already known, as well as something Jamie had said the night before.

He thought on it while he got out of the too-soft motel bed and showered. Considered it some more while he devoured a plate of eggs and ham and sausage with a side order of pancakes at the diner attached to the motel.

Finally, after he'd finished his third refill of Coke, because he hadn't been able to drink coffee since Iraq, he admitted that it made sense.

He admitted it yet again once he was an hour down the road and stopped for a break.

Jim had been his first 'boyfriend,' and Travis already knew that had been as much about convenience as friendship. They'd been the only ones, the only option for each other. Then Travis had been in the Army, which... yeah. More big, muscled guys, for the most part. Nobody like Vincent.

And later, after his honorable, Travis hadn't really had much chance. Still, he knew now, without any question, that his preferences had been dictated by habit. By what he'd known and was comfortable with.

Vincent had shot all of that to hell, though, and without even trying.

The man was stunning. Just straight-up, unbelievably stunning, no matter that it was the sort of girly word that Travis never would have used to describe another man as little as three days earlier.

Vincent was... Travis ran through all the things he'd thought about the guy, and yeah. He couldn't find any other way to put it. Vincent was slender but obviously toned. Travis had been able to tell that much just by looking at the man, even through that tailored suit.

Vincent was fucking pretty, too, with those moss-green eyes and nearly white hair. That soft gold skin, no matter where it came from.

Vincent was smart as well, which was possibly the only downside, because Travis couldn't quite grasp why a man who'd gone from being a host to a general manager and partner at a place like McGinty's would ever want *him*, for more than a night, anyway.

So, really, Travis told himself sternly, he'd been sure Vincent wasn't his type because he hadn't *met* Vincent yet. But now he had, and he had the guy's number, and... "And he's way too good for me," Travis muttered out loud, his words nearly lost under the sound of Tim McGraw singing about taking chances, doing things rather than putting them off.

And fuck it, Travis thought. Tim made a damned good point. It was time to stop fucking around. "Gonna live like I was dying," Travis told the song playing. "If I don't take a chance, ain't nobody but myself to blame when I don't get what I want."

He reminded himself of that six hours later, when he pulled into yet another roadside motel just a mile or so off the highway. "Okay. Time to put my money where my mouth is."

The first time he called, Travis got Vincent's voice mail, and he really didn't know what to say. So he hung up and tried again an hour later.

Voice mail again, and still no idea of what an appropriate message would be, so he closed his phone and bit his lip before turning the TV on.

Another hour, still voice mail, and still no clue. Vincent was probably at work, Travis realized, and he felt himself blushing yet again. "Fuck if I don't feel like a kid with his first crush."

He was almost afraid to call again, almost too worried that Vincent would think he was an idiot who didn't know how to leave a message, but Travis forced himself to do it. And he would leave voice mail this time, because he'd spent the last forty-five minutes figuring out what to say -- 'you're busy, but this is my new number, so call me back when you can, if you want to.' It wasn't poetic or even romantic, but it would get the point across. It was fucking sad that it had taken him so long to come up with such a simple offering, but it was the best he could do.

He pushed the call button, his mind wandering as he waited for the six rings to shunt him to the automated system, which was why he jumped when he heard Vincent's distinct voice after the third ring.

"Well?" Vincent demanded, "I know you're not my sister, and if you're trying to sell me aluminum siding, I live in an apartment, so I'm not interested." And God, Vincent just sounded so irked, Travis couldn't help chuckling.

"I'm definitely not your sister, Vinnie, and I'm not trying to sell you anything. Well, maybe I am, but it for damned sure ain't aluminum," Travis said as he relaxed back against the two pillows he'd jammed against the headboard, listening to Vincent sputter.

"Stud-muffin?" he heard Vinnie stammer a moment later. "Is that really you?"

God, it was either really flattering or really depressing that Vincent sounded so damned shocked to be hearing from him, and Travis didn't know which. It depended on why Vinnie sounded that way.

"Were you expecting some other gimpy guy to call?" Travis finally said, grinning a little bitterly. He wouldn't blame Vincent for that, after all.

Just that quickly, Vincent rallied. Travis could tell, just from the sound of the man's voice.

"Shut the fuck up, stud. You're not a gimp. You're just..." Vincent paused and Travis frowned, wondering how the man was going to squirm out of asking. Then Vincent truly surprised him. "What happened, anyway? With your leg. And your cheek. Because I think I should know if this is going to be something. But is it? I mean, maybe you just called because you're bored, and -- you're not in Alabama yet, are you? Because that would mean you've driven way too far in two days and your leg is probably screaming at you and..." Vincent swallowed audibly. "And I'm shutting up now, okay?"

God. Just, God. It was like he'd known Vinnie forever, Travis realized. Well, maybe not, because if he had, Vinnie would have already known about his leg and his face. But the way he didn't feel defensive when Vinnie asked? Oh, yeah. That was... surprising, but cool. Very cool.

So he told Vinnie about the explosive device that had blown, his first week in the desert. Told him how he'd felt it ripping at his face like shattered glass, only hot, and how he'd been lucky that there had been a medic just a few hundred yards away, hunkered down and dealing with some truly hurt soldiers. It had taken hours for the man to reach him, but even so, a flesh wound hadn't been that important. Yeah, Travis had been one of the lucky ones, that day. He'd lived.

"Oh, God, honey. I. Sorry, Travis. That's just terrible. But what about." Vinnie sounded breathless and sad. "I mean, your..."

Travis chuckled just a bit. Not because it was funny but because he didn't know what else to do. The memory wasn't a favorite, but it didn't carry quite the weight that it once had. "My leg, Vinnie? That's easy. Right place, wrong time. Zigged when I should've zagged. Whatever cliché works for you." He tried to sound matter-of-fact but was pretty sure he'd failed. "My unit came under fire and I caught a bullet. It was. I don't know. It's the only time I got shot. Hell, I didn't even know I was hit, right at first."

Honestly, it had felt like nothing because his nerves just didn't register anything beyond the initial cold burst. He hadn't even known that the bullet had nicked his femoral artery until Darryl, who'd died a week or so later, had noticed the swiftly spreading deep red of the blood seeping through Travis' camos and used a torn strip of T-shirt as a tourniquet.

"Didn't really know what kind of damage the shot did, either, but it turned out to be pretty bad. I guess I never thought about how easy it would be to get hurt or even dead until then. My buddy Darryl saved my life."

Finally, he stopped talking, and Travis swallowed hard when he realized how long it had been since Vincent had said anything. Anything at all. In fact, Vincent hadn't uttered a sound in ages, which had Travis wondering if he'd maybe said too much.

"So, after I got out," he added, in an effort to lighten the mood, "I went home and really got... out. I mean, yeah, everyone knew I was gay before I left, but what could they say when I came back with medals and shit and was still into cock?"

"Uh, Vinnie? You still... still there?" Because if he'd scared the man off, Travis just knew he'd hate himself forever. And wait. Forever?

Well, yeah. Because, while he didn't really believe that whole love at first sight line of bullshit? Maybe it wasn't always bullshit. But if he was being honest, he wasn't in love with Vincent yet. Travis thought he could get there, though, and pretty damned easily, which was fucking bizarre since they'd only met the once.

"I..." he heard, Vinnie's voice sounding thick, somehow, but still bright and beautiful and just too right for Travis to describe, even to himself. "Oh, honey... Travis. I... God, that must have been horrible! I... God, I can't even begin to understand."

Vinnie was crying. Travis didn't know how he knew it, because the man wasn't sobbing or sniffing or even making any sort of unusual sounds, but Travis knew. Knew there were slow, steady tears dripping from those mossy eyes, making tracks down gold-tinged cheeks, and he couldn't stand it.

Jesus, it was the first time he'd talked to Vinnie since the night they'd met, and he was making the guy cry!

"Hey... hey, Vinnie. I'm tired of talking about me. Tell me something about you, okay? Something different from what El and Jamie would say." Because Travis just knew he'd lose it if he had to listen to Vinnie trying to make conversation while those tears on Travis' behalf kept flowing.

Five minutes later, Travis knew that Vinnie had been a fuck-up until ten years or so earlier. Knew Vinnie had been a pothead, much to the disgust of his parents.

Fifteen more minutes, and Travis understood that Vinnie's folks hadn't cared that he was gay. They'd just wanted their son to be doing something worthwhile, rather than getting stoned all the time.

He knew that Vinnie had been unsafe more often than not, back then, but he also knew that the man got tested every few months. Knew that Vinnie had started that when one of his semi-regular bareback fucks had tested positive eight years earlier.

And he knew -- because Vinnie said so -- that Vinnie hadn't been with anyone at all for well over two years. Even then, that last time, had been an old friend, and more for comfort than anything else.

"So, wait," Travis murmured, one hand on the front of his jeans while the other held the phone to his ear, "what do you do for... relief?"

"Um." There was a small, uncertain tone to Vinnie's voice that made him think the man was blushing, but Travis was cool with that. Wished he could see Vinnie, even, just so he could be sure. See it for himself. Hell, Travis was sure a blush would just make that golden skin glow.

"I do have hands, you know," Vinnie groused, "and in case you guys missed the memo down there in Fred-neck Alabama, you can buy anything on the Internet. Especially dildos. All shapes and sizes. So I'm... not good, but I'm not deprived, either, if you get what I'm saying."

Travis wanted to growl. Wanted to demand that Vincent throw away whatever toys he had. Hell, he wanted to order Vinnie onto a plane so the guy could be with him in a day or something, rather than however long it was going to take Travis to relocate.

But it wasn't about sex, he reminded himself forcefully. It *wasn't*. No matter how much just hearing Vinnie's voice saying 'dildos' made him want to show the man how much those things weren't needed. Or wouldn't be, one day.

So "Yeah, yeah, I get it," Travis lied. "And we should probably stop talking about sex now. Even with inanimate objects, okay?"

Travis was almost frowning by the time Vinnie spoke again, because even ten seconds seemed like an eternity at that point.

"Why? Vincent said softly. "I mean... does that count as cheating? Oh, God. I mean..."

And that was the first real sign Travis had received that maybe it wasn't just him, so he was going to embrace it, though the idea of a molded piece of silicone inside Vincent's body made him nearly livid.

He didn't have any right to feel that way. Not yet, he reminded himself. So...

"No," he answered. "No, Vinnie. But I meant what I said before. I'm not gonna have sex with you until we get to know each other. Really, really well. And hearing about you and... dildos... isn't gonna make it any easier to hold back." Then Travis frowned, a sort of dirty thought floating through his mind. "Unless you want to use one while we're talking, Vinnie. Because that might be... no. No. Talking only. Getting to know each other."

And Vinnie laughed that melodious laugh that was almost a giggle, and Travis knew he was shit out of luck.

"We're gonna be having lots of phone sex, aren't we?" he asked, feeling defeated but also excited. "This whole conversation thing. It ain't gonna stop us, is it?"

God, he felt fucking pathetic for putting it like that, but then Vinnie was laughing even more and Travis loved the sound of it.

"Won't even slow us down," Vinnie agreed, sounding more serious than anything else. "Hey, do you like getting fucked, too? Or do you only top? Because if you like getting it, maybe I'll send you one of my toys and we could, uh, do it together."

God, that was a fucking question, Travis realized. He wasn't entirely opposed to the idea of having someone fuck him, but he hadn't even tried it since his time with Jim, and he remembered very clearly how much those first fumbling attempts had hurt.

By the same token, Travis remembered how much it *hadn't* hurt the guys he'd fucked later, and maybe that was because by then he'd known what he was doing, which Jim hadn't, and... Yeah.

Yeah, Travis could imagine what it would be like to feel Vincent pushing into him. He could already feel Vincent's cock -- long, short, thick, thin, whatever -- pressing at him.

"I... I'd love to feel you inside me," Travis found himself saying. "But don't send me anything, Vinnie. We'll... God, this waiting is gonna make me insane if you keep talking about sex!"

Another few seconds of silence that seemed to go on forever, then Vinnie laughed again. "I have your number now, stud," Vinnie said with a tone Travis wasn't sure he liked. It was... not smug, but something. Certain, Travis thought. "So maybe I'll call you, next time."

Then they said goodbye, and Travis was left with a boner that just wouldn't quit until he took it in hand and stroked, thinking about how Vinnie's hand would feel in place of his own.

Travis came quickly, then slipped into sleep, easier than he'd done in years.

Travis didn't know what he was expecting when he pulled into town. Hell, he wasn't really expecting anything. People tended to ignore him unless he was right there in front of them, after all. He was pretty sure no one had ever paid him much attention when he was just driving along what passed for the main drag in Frederick. Except maybe he'd been wrong about that, because people were for damned sure stopping on the street to stare at his old truck.

It was weird and kind of creepy, and Travis wanted to stop, to find out what was going on, but as he knew from experience, there wasn't really any point. Fred-neck-ians never went out of their way to share information with him. Oh, they'd offer up a 'hey' or even a 'nice morning' in passing, but an actual conversation that wasn't about painting a railing or fixing a floor board on someone's front porch? Well, apparently that was a sign to the rest of the town that Travis' perversion was spreading.

No one had even bothered to tell him when his daddy had that heart attack three years ago. Sure, he and Daddy weren't speaking or anything, but Travis would never have found out without overhearing it at the convenience store out on Route Sixteen. Even then, no one but Madeline Kendall had been willing to keep him updated on his father's condition. Travis had tried to go by the hospital, but the woman at the front desk had said his daddy didn't have any children listed, and only family could visit.

"So tell me again why I'm still here?" he grumbled, trying to ignore the stares that were starting to annoy him. "Oh, yeah. Because leaving would mean they won, and I didn't want to let them run me out of town again." And because he'd seen a lot in the military, but mostly other countries. He'd never really been anywhere in the USA other than Frederick and a few Army bases. And while he'd known things were different in places that weren't Alabama, he hadn't really understood how different he could feel, away from home. Away from the stares and whispers that always seemed to start up just as soon as people saw him coming.

He'd learned that lesson in the three weeks he'd spent in Boston, though. He'd learned it well. And maybe he'd been punishing himself, Travis realized, the thought hitting him like a bolt from the blue. Not intentionally, of course, but maybe by refusing to leave a place he didn't like much, he'd been doing himself more damage than anything else.

Hell, he knew it. His stubborn desire to not let 'them' win had kept him from even using the government money he was entitled to for school. There hadn't seemed to be any point, when he'd made that choice, because it wouldn't have mattered how well he did. Nobody in Frederick would ever hire him for real. Throwing a few odd jobs to the decorated war vet was one thing, but working side by side -- day in and day out -- with an admitted homosexual? Well, that would just lead to talk and to Pastor Kendall turning against whatever place Travis worked.

It was a small town with a shaky economy. The pastor could easily make or break a business, just by questioning the godliness of its operators.

Of course, the other reason he'd passed on school, Travis reminded himself with a sigh, just to be fair, was that the nearest community college was almost seventy miles away. He hadn't been able to face the idea of that commute on a daily basis. Not with as bad as his leg had been for the first few years.

Either way, though, Travis knew -- suddenly and without a doubt -- that by staying in Frederick, by trying to use his own presence to irritate and annoy people like Pastor Kendall and the pastor's son, Roddy... Travis hadn't really hurt anyone but himself.

If he hadn't already decided to leave, that bit of knowledge would have done it. As it was, though, it only made Travis more certain that he was doing the right thing. Get the hell out of Fred-neck, haul his ass and his assorted crap up to Boston, and find a place to stay. Get on with his life, which had somehow been on pause ever since he'd come back to the tiny little burg that hadn't been home, not really, since Travis was eighteen.

He felt almost giddy, as gay as that sounded even in his own head, while he made the left at the end of Buck Head Drive and slowed down, trying to avoid the biggest bumps and potholes that were so common outside of the heart of town. He slowed even more when he got a couple miles out. Every once in a while, someone left a board full of nails somewhere along the first twenty feet or so of the old service road that led to Travis' renovated garage. If he was going too fast, he'd never see it, and tires weren't fucking cheap.

There was nothing this time, which had him smiling, though that curve of lips disappeared as he rounded the big tree in front of his place and saw it.

He had a feeling that he was gaping like a fish, but he couldn't help it. All he could do, it seemed, was stare, and blink, and try to breathe. Open the driver's side window and force himself to draw in huge, shuddering gasps of air past the sudden knot of emotions in his throat. So many fucking emotions, Travis couldn't even begin to name them.

His hand scrabbled at the passenger side of the seat, but he couldn't seem to stop looking at what he knew he couldn't be seeing. He had to be imagining it. Had to.

Finally, his fingers brushed his phone and he pulled it to him, held it in his hand like it was a lifeline, like just holding it would pull him back to sanity. Because he had to be suddenly whacko. There was no other... no other possibility.

If he wasn't crazy -- if he hadn't gone completely bug fuck nuts -- then someone had actually smeared '*DIE COCKSUCKER*' and '*BURN IN HELL FAGGOT*' across the front of his home in rust-colored paint.

But it wasn't paint, he saw a minute later. It wasn't paint at all. Because it had obviously rained at some point since the... words had been left for him, and there were streaks, smears, drips that went all the way down to the pavement, and they were paler, weaker, but still sort of that same evil shade, and that meant...

"Blood," Travis whispered to himself, and his own voice, quiet and shaking as it was, pulled him from however many minutes of stunned disbelief. "Somebody painted my house with blood."

It didn't build slowly; didn't take any time at all, it seemed. He went from shocked, stunned, completely frozen, to ready to fight in a mere instant.

His home. His land, his ground. *His*. Bought and paid for and repaired, made better by the work of his own hands, his own sweat, and some *fucker* went and did this? Some *coward* waited until Travis was out of town, then trespassed, defaced his home, and with *blood*? Jesus.

And everybody knew, Travis realized, the thought making him even more furious. Jesus fucking Christ, the whole town knew. That was why they'd been staring earlier. They'd known. Were probably just waiting for him to storm back into town and start some shit, which was exactly what he was going to do, but first...

First, he had to make a few calls. One in particular.

"Troy," he growled a few minutes later, when the man actually answered, "I have a problem."

Troy wasn't licensed to practice in Alabama. Travis knew that. He didn't actually expect his friend to do anything, but Troy was the only lawyer he knew, and he needed advice, damn it.

"Have you been inside?" Troy was asking, and Travis growled again. The thought that whatever fucking coward had done this might have actually been inside his home wasn't something he'd even considered. "If not, then don't. You hear me, Travis? In fact, don't touch anything. Don't touch *anything*. Hey, does that phone of yours have a camera?"

Travis frowned, but then he pulled the phone away from his ear and looked at it, just to be sure. "Yeah," he said a second later. "Why?"

It took maybe ten minutes for Travis to walk around the outside of the building, snapping pictures of the blood, the scuffs on the cement, a tire track that wasn't his own, everything that might conceivably have been left behind by whoever was responsible. Then he called Troy back and let the man talk him through sending the pictures to Troy's phone.

"Okay. I got them. Jesus, Travis, who the hell did you piss off?"

"Everyone who hated it that the quarterback on the varsity team turned out to be a fag," he snarled, "but no one recently that I know of." And that was true, too. He pretty much kept to himself. Hell, he only went into town once a week or so to buy groceries, unless he was fixing something.

Troy sighed, and Travis could actually picture him sitting at a desk and running one hand through his hair. "Well, that sucks. No immediate suspects. Okay. First thing you do is get a grip on yourself. I'm not telling you to calm down, because that'd be pointless, but try to hold it together, Trav. You need to go to the police. Show them the pictures. They'll have to admit that what was done to your place constitutes a hate crime, which means they'll have to investigate. Then--"

"No." Travis said it as calmly as he could. "Sorry, Troy, but--"

"So what, then?" Troy cut him off, sounding just a little bit angry. "You hose off the hatred and pretend it never happened? I don't think you have it in you."

"Jesus. No. That's not it." Travis was still growling, but less now. Mostly because Troy obviously just didn't get it. "The cops... they can blow this whole thing off, if they want to. They don't have to investigate, or even do more than fill out a few forms. This is Alabama, Troy. And Fred-neck is only about half a century away from being backwoods, inbred Alabama. We have hate crime laws, sure, but they don't cover being gay."

He growled again, deeper, though he was starting to lose the hot, harsh edge of fury he'd been holding on to. He was still angry, still wanted to beat someone with fists and cane and whatever else came to hand, but he wouldn't.

"If they'd written 'die, Christ-loving bastards,' that would be a hate crime, according to the State of Alabama, Troy. Or if I was Indian -- dots, not feathers -- and they wrote something about 'choking me with my turban'? Hate crime. But 'die, cocksucker; burn in hell, faggot'? Even with it being in blood, that's just vandalism. Unless the blood is human, which I doubt." Travis frowned, then heaved an enormous sigh as he forced himself to relax just a little bit. It wouldn't help him any if he got thrown in jail when he went to the cops, after all.

"Jesus Christ." Troy sounded as disgusted as Travis actually felt. "Well, bright side is, if they did anything to the inside of your place, that's breaking and entering. But I still don't want you to go in. Talk to the cops first, okay? Because if you go inside, they'll have an excuse to say shit about you tainting evidence or whatever. In fact, I want you to make sure someone comes out there

with you. And if they ever do find the guy who did it, at least we have pictures. They won't be able to pretend you made it up."

Travis nodded slowly, because even though Troy sounded like he was kidding about that last part, the man was right. "Now you're starting to get it," Travis said after a moment. "And if they fucked up the inside of my place, I'm gonna be pissed, man. It's bad enough that I'm gonna have to sand and repaint the front. Fixing it up inside -- again -- could take way longer than I want to spend." Travis sighed angrily. "I was hoping to have this place sold within the month, but if it's all fucked up, I'll either have to spend the time or take way less than it's worth. And I'll be sleeping in the fucking truck until it's livable again, too. Shit."

Troy was silent for so long, Travis thought his friend had hung up. Then there was a small laugh, and it sounded... relieved.

"You're moving. Thank God. I have no idea of why you're even there, Trav. I mean, I knew you lived in Alabama, but Christ. Just get done there and... where are you going, anyway?"

Travis snorted. "Oh, y'know. The *other* city where I have a brother, brother-in-law, extended family, friends. I'm moving to Boston, jackass. I might even sit in on that poker game you told me about a few times. You lawyer guys make way too much money. It'd be my pleasure to take some of it off your hands."

"Like you could." Troy snorted back. "I'll have you know, we all played in college. We have years of experience. But we'll go easy on you, Travis, what with you being a poor, broke redneck and all."

Travis was still angry. Still fuming on the inside that someone -- anyone -- could do what had been done to his home and think it was all right, just because of Travis' bent. But it was also good to be talking about normal shit with Troy. Good to have that reminder that the world hadn't ended. Hell, it hadn't even changed much, really, because it was exactly the same as it had always been. The difference was in Travis.

Even after every horrifying atrocity he'd seen in the war, with the knowledge that human beings were capable of enormous evil when pushed beyond what anybody with a soul should ever have to do, somehow it had surprised him. To see that sort of pure, malicious hate spread across his own wall, right there in the heartland, had truly *surprised* him. Shaken him to his core. Taken him years and thousands of miles away, in his heart, to a blinding desert and things done because they were expedient rather than right or wrong.

And Troy had sort of brought him back. A little bit, anyway. So Travis chuckled just a touch. A poor effort, but he tried. "Cool, man. You and the suits go easy on me. Because it's not like we're pretty much weaned on poker down here. Nope. I wasn't playing with my friends at the kids' table while our dads sucked down Buds and yelled for more sandwiches at the grown-up table three feet away." He chuckled again, and it was more sincere this time. "And I promise I wasn't the junior champ of the whole damned county by the time I was fifteen. Because gambling's illegal, especially for minors."

Travis was still smiling slightly when Troy hung up. The guy's mutters about claiming his losses as charitable donations weren't really funny, but still, Travis thought they were better than thinking about what he had to do next.

He really wanted to call Vinnie, but he had a feeling that it would be a bad idea. At least until he knew what the cops had to say. Vincent would only get upset on Travis' behalf, after all, and then Travis would get more pissed off because Vinnie was unhappy, and that was never a good idea. Especially when Travis might have to actually give his report to the new deputy with the truly perverted tastes in sex. Travis still shuddered when he remembered the many, many things the man had suggested, each one more disgusting than the last.

Sure, Travis liked cock. Liked ass, too. But that didn't mean he was ever going to let anyone... and he couldn't even think it. Not in words. Besides, Travis reminded himself with relief, he didn't need to. He never needed to think about being used as a toilet. Never would have if Deputy Masterson hadn't said all those things that still made Travis queasy.

He forced the thoughts away as he climbed back into his truck, setting his cane carefully in the passenger side footwell. It didn't matter who he talked to at the sheriff's office. They weren't going to do anything about it, anyway. Still, it wasn't a bad idea to have something on record about the... incident.

Then he'd go back to his place, hopefully with one of the *normal* deputies, and with any luck, find out that his vandal hadn't bothered with going inside. Travis didn't think anyone had, actually. None of the windows had been broken, and the doors had still appeared to be locked. He hadn't seen any signs of forced entry. He hadn't really been looking that closely, granted, because he'd still been sort of stunned, but there hadn't been anything obvious.

"Okay," Travis grunted as he pulled up in front of the sheriff's office and stared at the glass doors. "Here goes nothing."

"God, honey!" Vinnie nearly screamed on the other end of the line, a good four hours later. "What happened? What did they say?" And yeah, Travis figured that really was a sort of cruel place to stop his narrative for a drink. Even so, he didn't hurry as he finished his beer and grabbed another from the little refrigerator beside his couch.

"Pretty much what I knew they would say, Vin. Vandalism, blah-blah-blah. Unfortunate. I should have told someone I was going out of town so they could keep an eye on my place." He shook his head, glad Vinnie couldn't see him. The look on his face would have given the lie to his carefully stoic tone. "Then Bobby Thornton -- he's one of the deputies, I went to high school with him -- 'accidentally' deleted the pictures in my phone. He even said 'oops,' like his puppy pooped on my rug."

"He did *what*? Why did he have your phone? Did you check it for bugs and stuff, because I saw that on some TV show and--"

And Travis was laughing, somehow feeling better. Not like everything was fine, but like Vincent made things better just by listening.

"I don't think the Fred-neck sheriff's office has that kind of budget, Vinnie. But if it makes you feel any better, the sheriff wasn't happy with Bobby. Especially after I told them I'd already sent the pictures to my lawyer."

Actually, Sheriff Randall had been fucking livid once he'd heard that. And then rounded on Bobby for 'destroying evidence, and lucky for you there's copies or you'd be out of a job, Thornton, you useless...' which more or less cleared up any wondering Travis might have been doing about who, exactly, had ordered Bobby to delete those pictures. Accidentally, of course.

"Wait." Vinnie sounded baffled suddenly. "You have a lawyer? Well, so much for that whole 'simple guy from Alabama' façade. Unless it's, like, Bubba's Law and Bait Shop or something? Because I could see that."

"I called Troy," Travis said, once he caught his breath. "Did I tell you about Troy? I must have done. The first guy Blessing fixed me up with. The one who was all hoity-toity 'til I told him I wasn't interested?"

God, Travis thought Vinnie sounded jealous. Just a little bit. Maybe. "Wait. You called some random ex-date before *me*? And... Troy. Not Troy Bernay, the hottest gay defense attorney the city's ever seen! Not *that* Troy! And you turned him *down*? God, honey! What's wrong with you? He makes seven figures at that law firm of his! He could keep you in style!"

Okay. Maybe not jealous, Travis decided with a frown. Maybe... envious, which had *Travis* feeling jealous. "Want me to give him your number?" he asked, sounding sulky even to his own ears. "I'm sure you two would get along. He's rich, you're gorgeous; isn't that how it's supposed to work?"

"No. No, Travis," and God, he could almost see Vincent shaking his head. He could picture that long, white-blond hair flying, floating on the air like it was light as a feather. "How it's supposed to work is, unless they like the waifish types, studs like you go for studs like you. Especially when they're fucking rich. And guys like me... we watch and wonder and wish, but we generally end up alone. Or we settle and convince ourselves that we're happy."

Vinnie sighed, and Travis frowned. "Is that what you're doing?" he asked carefully, frown getting even deeper at the silence from Vinnie's end. "Tell me, Vincent. Are you just settling for me because I like you, or what? Because if that's the deal, then we shouldn't even start this thing, got it? I... Shit. I like you, Vinnie. I told you that. I know I did. But if you don't really..."

Fuck, this was *not* phone sex, Travis grumbled silently. There was supposed to be phone sex, and he and Vinnie were supposed to be getting to know each other, but there he was. No sex, phone or otherwise, and all he really knew so far was that Vinnie thought Troy was hot, damn it.

"God, we're pathetic," Vincent muttered, and Travis found himself sitting up, listening closely to the man's next words. "Look, honey. One of us has to go out on the fucking limb, here, and after the day you've had, I guess it's going to have to be me. So, here it is."

Vinnie cleared his throat and Travis sat up even straighter.

"I'm not tall enough, or I'm too tall. I don't have enough muscles, or I'm too defined. I'm too pale, too tan, too blond, not blond enough, though God knows how. I'm too fucking feminine. I've heard that one a lot. I say too much or not enough, I'm too needy, too independent. I'm too fucking sarcastic, or too sensitive; I think everything's a joke, or else I don't have a sense of humor. Everything about me is a fucking flaw, depending on who you ask. But you, Travis. You looked at me the other night, and I felt like someone was actually seeing me, for maybe the first time in my life, and... you have no idea of how good that feels."

Travis wanted to argue, wanted to say he did know, because Vinnie had looked at him that way, too, and it had set something inside him free. Something Travis hadn't even known was there, much less bound. Some indefinable, hidden part of him that had never wanted anything as much as that feeling. That understanding, deep and visceral, that he was seen, known, *recognized*. Not just as a man with scars and a cane. Not just as a so-called war hero. But as a man, with faults and flaws and a multitude of imperfections that just didn't matter.

And that was why he'd fallen so hard and fast for Vinnie, Travis realized right then, right there on his couch, with the man's voice in his ear. Vinnie's looks, yes. But also the way Vinnie looked. At him.

"Shut up," Travis ordered, but he kept his voice soft, wasn't abrupt about it. If Vinnie had been there, right beside him, he would have placed his hand gently over that red-lipped mouth. "You're exactly as tall as you're supposed to be, Vinnie. Perfect. And I love your body, even if I'll love it more once I have the chance to touch it. I bet you have the softest skin ever."

Travis swallowed hard, echoing Vincent's small gulp.

"And you're not too feminine, far as I'm concerned. Just honest about yourself and how you feel. So what? It makes you a rare man. I. Shit, Vinnie, I think you're just right."

"I like it that you say what you're thinking," Travis went on, giving himself free rein and damn the consequences. If Vinnie backed off, well, he knew where the man worked, and Travis was nothing if not persistent. He'd stayed in fucking Fred-neck for fucking ever, hadn't he, just because he refused to give in?

"You're funny, Vinnie. And smart. And so fucking hot, it makes my teeth ache, along with the rest of me. You're strong and sensible, but sensitive, too, and I don't have a single fucking clue

about what you see in me. I'm not... well, I ain't Troy Bernay. I haven't even made enough money in the last five years to pay taxes. I'm just a messed-up country boy, y'know? Bad leg, ugly scars and all. But if you'll have me... Jesus fucking Christ, baby, if you'll have me? Pretty much means I'm richer than any fucking lawyer could ever be. Or king or whatever, too."

"Um." Okay, Vinnie sounded freaked. "Um," the man said again, and Travis suddenly knew -- just flat-out knew -- he'd said too much.

Then he replayed the words that had poured from his mouth, and no fucking wonder Vinnie sounded strange. Christ, Travis had just more or less said 'you're way too good for me and I'm a fucking pauper without a real job, and I'm all fucked up, but take me on anyway', and that was just stupid and wrong and bad, even if he'd meant every word.

"Vinnie, I..." he started, only to have that distracted-sounding voice hush him.

"No, no, Travis. It's fine. I just, I have to go now, okay? I have a lot to do if I'm going to get... well, I just have a busy night ahead of me. Um, I'll call you tomorrow, okay? I... sleep sweet, when you do. Talk to you soon."

And then Travis heard the distinctive sound of Vinnie's phone snapping closed, and he just... collapsed.

He collapsed back against the couch, his latest beer forgotten in his hand as he stared at the ceiling and wished he could take the entire last half hour of his life back. Wished he'd never called Vinnie, never told him about the 'vandalism,' never mentioned Troy.

Yeah, Travis decided a few more beers on, his life would be much better if he'd never called Vincent, damn it. At least then, he'd still be sort of, kind of, dating the man. Even if they were hundreds of miles apart.

And he still hadn't gotten any phone sex. Probably never would, damn it. Except, if Vinnie said he'd call, well, Travis was almost certain that Vinnie actually would.

Part Two

"Okay, get a grip, Clark," Vincent muttered to himself. "You can do this. You can. And yes, Travis is going to be pissed. Of course he is. But he'll forgive you. Maybe. With any luck."

God. He hoped so, anyway, because no matter what Travis' words on the phone had seemed to imply at the time, Vincent couldn't help wondering if he'd possibly interpreted them as meaning something more than Travis might have intended. They'd known each other for less than a week, after all, and only spoken three times, including their first meeting.

He'd told himself exactly that, repeatedly, for the last twenty-seven hours, and still got that same little shock of surprise every time. It felt like longer, like he'd known Travis for years. God, Vincent felt like he *knew* the man, deep down.

Oh, he might not know Travis' favorite food or beer or color, but somehow, Vincent just knew Travis. Or knew enough to believe in the man's nature, in his heart, in the interest Vincent had doubted for all of two minutes that first night. But that had been more about doubting himself than anything else, and now? He just didn't. Not after the things Travis had said.

He believed Travis, and more to the point, Vincent believed *in* Travis. Believed Travis meant it when he said just having Vincent in his life would make him feel rich. And Vincent also believed -- more with each passing hour since they'd first met at McGinty's -- that he reciprocated Travis' feelings.

Travis had scars. Probably more than the ones on his cheek for all the world to see. Travis had a bad leg. Travis probably had more issues than he even knew himself, and Vincent didn't care about any of that.

Travis had *seen* him, somehow. Seen through Vincent's carefully constructed mask. And he hadn't run. He'd called Vincent, instead. Then he'd said those things -- those wonderful, frightening, perfectly amazing *things* -- and Vincent hadn't had a choice. Not really.

And that, in the end, was why Vincent was currently maneuvering a rented SUV down some heinous, barely paved, entirely unlit back road in the wilds of Alabama with no real idea about where he was. He was fairly sure that he'd missed a turn somewhere, though, because there didn't seem to be anything like a town nearby. He couldn't see any lights glowing against the sky, in any case.

He'd left the Birmingham airport going south and west. And now he was here. Wherever 'here' was. "God," he sighed, shaking his head but still driving because going somewhere, even the wrong somewhere, was better than sitting on the side of some dark road, waiting for the strains of 'Dueling Banjos' to fill the night.

"Jesus, can someone please tell me how Frederick isn't even in the GPS? Please?" Because it wasn't, which hadn't even occurred to Vincent before he'd packed his bag and gotten on a plane to... to what? Rescue Travis? That idea made him laugh all by itself.

Travis was the last man on earth who would ever need rescuing, but even if he did, Vincent was pretty sure it would take the National Guard to pull Travis out of anything the man couldn't escape on his own. One somewhat out-there queen like Vincent surely couldn't do anything but get in the way. And yet, here he was.

Crap.

Vincent turned right when the so-called 'road' he was on ended at a T, then left when another alleged byway appeared, and while he might have had no clue about where he was, at least this road was more paved than not, which was a vast improvement. He even saw a pickup truck coming from the opposite direction, a group of what looked like high school kids crowded into the back. They howled as they passed him, and Vincent turned on the windshield wipers to clear away the sudden streams of beer. At least, he hoped it was beer. He hadn't been looking closely enough to notice whether anyone had cock in hand.

He kept going, of course, suddenly just a little bit hopeful. If a bunch of rowdy teenagers were coming from up ahead, there was a chance that there was something in that direction. A gas station, maybe. Or a diner. Somewhere he could get directions, Vincent prayed silently.

And for once, Vincent thought with a grin, someone was listening, because when he rounded the next curve in the road, there it was. Shining dimly, one single lit-up sign at the front. It was like Mecca, though. An oasis in the darkness. Sanctuary.

"Jiffy Mart," Vincent sniffed as he pulled into the nearly empty parking lot. "Well, at least it's not something tacky, like the 'Come and Go.'" Which was actually an incredibly horrendous gay bar Vincent had had the distinct displeasure of being dragged to by an overly optimistic date a few years earlier. He still shuddered at the memory when it managed to creep up on him.

Vincent climbed slowly from the SUV, then pocketed the keys, looking down at his costume critically. Jeans, and not the designer variety he favored. No, they were plain old Levi's, but surprisingly comfortable since he'd bought them a bit on the large side for this trip. Boots -- once again plain, just construction-style and brown. A no-name T-shirt and, God help him, Vincent sighed, but he was wearing flannel. Green and navy flannel that tied the whole outfit together and brought out his eyes, but still. Flannel.

"The things I do for love," Vincent muttered sarcastically before he stepped into the store.

Well, the Jiffy Mart had been an experience, Vincent admitted as he watched the side of the road carefully, looking for the 'three-fork tree' where he was supposed to turn onto a dirt road that would cut him from Route Sixteen through to Route One-sixty-two, where he was supposed to

make a left and drive five miles before taking the right that would put him onto something called Buck Head Drive.

"Have these people never heard of street signs?" he complained to the night whistling past his partially opened window. "Or is this some kind of rite of passage? God. It's amazing Travis ever found his way out of here. Elliot, too." And the hopefully accurate directions would only get him to Frederick. Vincent had no idea of how he was going to find Travis' house from there. He knew it wasn't in the town itself, but that left a lot of empty space and confusing back roads to wander, with no guarantee that Vincent would ever find it. Still, he had a feeling that asking for directions in Frederick would be a Bad Idea.

Maybe he'd just find a room for the night. There had to be a motel around somewhere. Then he could tackle the visitor-unfriendly roadways in the morning. But that would mean not seeing Travis until sometime the next day, and Vincent couldn't stand even the thought of that. Besides, he only had the one set of hillbilly clothes, which he strongly suspected weren't fooling anyone, judging by the look the guy at the Jiffy Mart had given him.

Even so, the kid -- because he couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty -- hadn't said anything rude or even acted like Vincent had expected after the things Travis had said, not to mention some of the stories Elliot had told him over the last few years. In fact, the young man had been grinning when Vincent left, but not in any sort of nasty way. He wondered for a moment whether it might just be the town preacher and his ilk who were so against everything different, but Vincent shrugged it off. It didn't matter, anyway.

Travis was already planning to move, and Vincent wasn't going to do or say anything to make the man change his mind. Not even suggest that maybe the next generation of Frederick-ites might be more open-minded.

He made the right onto the dirt road, and now Vincent knew what a three-fork tree was, if anyone ever asked, then he made the left onto One-sixty-two, still feeling off-balance from the jostling he'd taken from driving the dirt. God, he really was going to have to stop. Somewhere.

He would get a motel after all, he decided. He'd take a shower -- because there was no chance that he would ever take a bath in some roadside motel whose cleaning staff likely consisted of a kid with a bottle of Windex -- and then he'd call Travis. Maybe even tease directions from the man so Vincent could surprise him in the morning.

Now, if he'd just asked the kid at the store where a motel might be, Vincent realized, he would have been golden. "Crap."

Or maybe not crap, Vincent told himself a few minutes later, because there was a service station of some kind coming up on the right. It didn't look like it was open. The sign out front wasn't lit, but there were lights on inside, so maybe there was someone there. Someone who could give him still more directions.

It was worth a shot, Vincent decided. So he turned onto what had to be a service road and followed it down, then he rounded a truly enormous tree and pulled up in front of the station. He heard the sound of a television when he got out of the SUV, but then it was turned off or at least turned down.

Less than five seconds later, he heard the sound of a creaky door opening, like in so many horror movies he'd seen, and Vincent almost panicked.

"You're on private property," Vincent heard, and oh, that voice had him panting, his heart pounding away, just like it had the first time he'd heard it. "And my rifle's loaded, so you might want to get on out of here, whoever you are. I ain't in the mood for this shit." Then that door-sound repeated, followed by a slam, and Vincent blinked before reaching into his pocket for his phone.

He pulled it out and flipped it open, then pressed a few buttons, and God. He could actually hear Travis' phone ringing inside what Vincent now understood was Travis' home. He wasn't clear on why Travis would have 'Love on the Rocks' as his ring tone, though. He seemed more the Eagles type to Vincent.

"I... Vinnie?" Travis was nearly whispering when he answered, but Vincent figured the man was waiting to hear his trespasser drive away. "Vinnie. Hey. I, uh... it's kind of late. I didn't think you'd be calling. Tonight." Or ever, Vincent interpreted, which just irked him no end.

"Why? Because you said some of the nicest... no. Not *some of*. Because you said the absolutely nicest, sweetest, best things anyone's ever said to me?" And yes. That was it, Vincent suddenly knew. Travis thought Vincent had been scared off by those words or at least by what they'd implied. Travis thought Vincent had changed his mind.

"Well, I..."

"Oh, just shut up, Travis McRayne. I swear. And I'm sorry it's so late. I would have called sooner, but I got lost for a while, and then some lunatic in an old garage threatened to shoot me if I didn't get off his property, and really, Travis. 'Love on the Rocks'? I told you I'd call, didn't I? You could have just believed me."

He heard a sharply indrawn breath as Travis worked his way through all that, then the sound of that creaking door again, and Vincent kept talking, nervous all of a sudden.

"So what are you wearing, honey?" he said, voice shaking just as much as his hands suddenly were. God, he was barely managing to keep his phone to his ear. "I'll bet it's not that suit I saw you in last, which is good because I actually like a man who changes his clothes every now and then, and..."

"Shut up, Vinnie," he heard Travis growl, the sound coming from his phone matched by the same from right in front of him, and it was only then that Vincent realized he'd closed his eyes. "Shut the hell up and hang up the damned phone."

Oh, God.

"Look at me," Travis ordered once Vincent had done just that, and it was harder than Vincent ever would have thought to open his eyes and meet Travis'. When he did, though... oh, when he did, Travis' reaction wasn't anything Vincent had expected.

The surprise was there, yes. And the happiness Vincent had hoped for. But there was also a sort of amusement that Vincent just didn't like. As though Travis was laughing at him. And there was just a little bit of that anger Vincent had expected, but *so* little, it barely even registered.

"What?" Vincent demanded. "What's so damned funny? Answer me!" Because Vincent was suddenly thinking that a motel might not be such a bad idea, even with being less than a hundred feet from Travis' bedroom, he was sure.

Travis looked a little bit sheepish, but then he was closing the foot or so between them and Vincent forgot all about being mad. He could feel the heat of that big, strong body, even though they weren't quite touching. It rolled off Travis in waves, it seemed.

"You look like a gay lumberjack," Travis murmured after a moment. "It's kinda hot, Vinnie. But what the fuck are you doing here?" And there was worry in those eyes, Vincent realized. Worry for him. For his presence in Frederick.

Even so, Vincent forced himself to sound unconcerned when he answered. He didn't have to force the soft smile on his lips, though. Not at all. "Oh, please. Like you really thought you could say those things over the phone, with no idea of when you'd be coming ho-- back to Boston, and I *wouldn't* catch the first flight out?" Vincent snorted quietly, delicately. "You may be able to lie to yourself, honey, but I'm not buying it. So. Do I get the grand tour, or should I try to find a room in town?"

There were big hands on his hips, suddenly, and Vincent heard Travis' cane drop onto the cement, but he didn't care about that. Not when Travis was dragging him up against all that muscled flesh, clothed or not. Not when those hazel-gray eyes were staring at him so intently, so heatedly. And definitely not when Travis' hot, full lips were brushing his own, sliding back and forth and making Vincent crazy.

"God," he gasped, somehow pulling back just enough to speak, though Vincent wasn't sure of whether he was making any sense when he did. "God, honey. Inside. Tour. Fuck, show me everything. Now!" And okay. Demanding. He was demanding, and it felt good, and Travis didn't seem to mind because the man was nodding.

Nodding and letting go, which wasn't what Vincent wanted at all. But then Travis bent down and stood again, holding the cane, and that made sense. "Let me just..." Vincent swallowed. Hard. "I'll get my things. Two shakes."

It wasn't even that long, because he had his suitcase in one hand a second later, while his free arm was around Travis' waist, just holding on as the man led him to that creaky old door. Then they were inside and Vincent dropped his bag, not even bothering to check out Travis' place.

"You need to be naked," he announced, eyes raking over Travis' body repeatedly. "I need you to be naked, honey. And horizontal. I've got mountains to scale."

"You..." and Travis was speaking, but sounding so uncertain, Vincent could have cried. He didn't, but he could have. "You know it's not just... my face, Vinnie. I... some of it's kinda... bad."

And what could he do other than turn and kiss Travis until the man was moaning roughly, Vincent asked himself, tongue pushing at and then into that hot, wet mouth.

Nothing, he answered dazedly a moment later. Nothing but wrap his arms tighter around Travis, press hard against him and let him feel just how much Vincent didn't care about anything as superficial as a few scars.

"You'll tell me about every single one," Vincent gasped a few minutes later as Travis led him around furniture, hopefully toward the bedroom. "And I'll tell you about mine, even though they don't show, honey. Everybody has scars. Yours are just on the outside."

Vincent wasn't sure if that might be a bit over the top, but he meant every word, so he couldn't manage to regret it. Then Travis was stopping, turning, driving those soft, full lips against his own, and Vincent moaned. Oh. Oh, yeah. Not over the top at all. Thank God.

He'd ended up coming in his new Levi's, even before they'd made it to the bed, which was a little bit embarrassing. Only a little bit, because Travis' discarded sweatpants were in a similarly damp and sticky state on the floor.

Even so, it had been... amazing. To feel that big, strong body shuddering against him, Travis' hands hard on his ass? Yeah, that had been perfect. Not as perfect as lying there in Travis' bed, stark naked and warm with the heat of Travis' skin all along his side, but still.

"This isn't what I meant when I said we should wait until we got to know each other," Travis murmured, though Vincent noticed the warm hand sliding up and down his spine didn't even pause. It dipped down lower, in fact, Travis' hot palm cupping his ass for a moment that made Vincent shiver. "I ain't saying it's not nice, but..."

His own hand moved slowly, carefully, fingertips mapping what had to be close to a hundred small, rough patches on Travis' chest and side. "We know enough, honey," Vincent insisted gently. "We fit, somehow, hmmm? But if..." He bit his lip, wishing he could be selfish enough not to say it, but he just couldn't. Not with Travis. "If you want to keep it at this, just kissing and rubbing and maybe some stroking -- not forever, but for a while -- I guess we could do that, Travis. I'll try not to push, okay? No matter how much I want to. Push. Or, you know, have you

push. Hard." But damn, he really hoped Travis wouldn't take him up on it. He'd seen Travis' cock now, after all.

Travis sighed, but Vincent could tell the man was trying not to laugh. "Fuck, Vinnie. You had me going from wanting conversations to wanting phone sex in one call. Do you really think I'm gonna be able to resist the temptation of having you here and naked?" Travis chuckled and Vincent swore he could feel it shivering over his skin. "We're definitely gonna be kissing and rubbing and shit, baby. We'll be using hands and mouths and... everything. But not tonight, unless you packed a big bunch of rubbers in that bag of yours."

Vincent could feel it under his cheek, but he had to sit up, had to look. And yeah, he was right. That extra heat really was Travis blushing. Jesus. It was... God. Hot. "You don't have..."

Travis snorted and turned even more red. "Nothing that didn't expire a long time ago. I, uh, wasn't expecting company. Haven't had any in... fuck, Vinnie. *Years.*"

"Oh." God, how was that even possible? With as gorgeous as Travis was, and that body; that sweet, gentle side and those kind eyes?

So Vincent asked, and Travis told him, haltingly at first, but then faster and faster, like a dam had broken somewhere inside the man. Vincent found himself angry for Travis, because Travis clearly wasn't angry for himself. And Vincent swore silently that if he ever ran into any of the guys Travis described, he would kick their butts. Or maybe scream at them real loud. In public. Whichever.

"I'll go back to the Jiffy Mart tomorrow night," Vincent finally said. "The clerk there earlier wasn't entirely heinous, and at least I know the way now."

Travis groaned, pulling him back down to that broad chest, and Vincent didn't complain at being dragged right back to where he wanted to be. "Christ," the man grunted, "I used to be a patient man, Vinnie. But right now, all I can think of is how badly I want it to be tomorrow night. Right now."

"I know, honey," Vincent moaned back, his hand pressing lightly, then not so lightly, on Travis' burgeoning erection as he slid his own wakening shaft against one hard thigh. "Believe me, I know."

He woke up hard, which wasn't anything unusual for Vincent. He was only thirty, after all, so morning wood was pretty much a given.

What wasn't a given, or hadn't been, anyway, was the hot, wet mouth around his cock. In fact, Vincent almost thought he was dreaming, but he'd never had a dream that felt so real. He'd never looked down his body to realize that he was in Travis' bed, and that the huge lump under the covers had to be Travis, and God, yes!

"Oh, fuck... fuck, honey, yes..." He was already close. Too close, considering he'd just woken up, and Travis was sucking him off like a pro, and it was just too much. Too fucking much and not even close to enough and Vincent needed to see. Had to.

It wasn't easy to focus, to find the edge of the blankets and sheets that had apparently covered them in the night, but he did it. He did it and was as proud as if he'd run a marathon, as well as being glad that the distraction had pushed back some of the urgency building in his balls. Then he threw the covers back as hard as he could, and Vincent nearly howled at seeing those grayish eyes staring up at him while those pretty lips slid lower.

He whimpered something like "ah..." next, his hands finding Travis' head, fingers sliding into short, dark hair, and when Travis moaned around him, the vibration traveled directly to Vincent's sac and pulled an echoing moan from his lips.

"T-Travis... honey, that's too g-good, I..." God, he was amazed he'd managed that much, but so was Travis, judging from the way the man's eyes narrowed and that hot mouth moved faster, tongue doing something that felt insanely good. Unfairly wonderful.

Vincent arched, back leaving the mattress as he tried not to come, but God, Travis was good at sucking, blowing, whatever. And Travis was groaning, that big body hunched over as the man took Vincent's cock in to the hilt yet again. There was a big, dry finger pressing ever so lightly at Vincent's hole, giving just a tiny burn, and it was enough. More than enough.

Vincent was whimpering and he knew it, but he couldn't even try to stop. Not when his hands were on Travis' head, trying desperately to pull that mouth away, but Travis wasn't letting him, was being fucking stubborn, and "C-coming," Vincent forced himself to stammer.

Then Travis' eyes were even hotter, locked harder on his own, and Vincent could see the 'do it, baby, come for me' there, and that was it. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. Or broke the Vincent's willpower. Whichever.

The next thing he knew, he was babbling, nonsense flying from his lips to fill the near-silence of the room as he shuddered and shook, fingers flexing roughly in Travis' hair. His hips jabbed up, pushing his cock into the back of Travis' tight, hot throat as he came in long, hard pulses that had Vincent gasping even after he'd finished.

Hell, Vincent realized, he was still breathing in great, shuddering gasps when Travis moved slowly up his body to press one slow, deep kiss to his lips.

"Oh... oh, fuck," Vincent whispered, still not up to regular speech, "I. That. You. God!"

Travis chuckled, which was possibly the best sound in the world, then pulled him over to rest atop that big, muscled form, Travis' leaking shaft right there against Vincent's skin. It felt huge and hot and right. Would feel even better later, Vincent was sure, but right then, oh, it was just about perfect.

Vincent shifted, trying to give Travis some friction, and if he hadn't been paying particular attention, trying to commit every single moment to memory, Vincent was sure he would have missed Travis' small hiss when Vincent's knee pressed the scarred thigh lightly.

Just like that, Vincent's post-orgasmic lassitude was gone, replaced by sudden worry and adrenaline. "God! God, honey! I hurt you!" He was up and around the bed in moments, ignoring Travis' objections. "Shut up, Trav. Let me see." Because he knew it wasn't good. Travis' cock was deflating like Vincent wouldn't have believed possible.

Oh. Oh, God, Vincent thought, slightly horrified. He'd seen the scar the night before, but he hadn't really *seen* it. Not up close. Not so plainly.

It wasn't pretty, wasn't even close to pretty, but that wasn't the awful part. Vincent really didn't care about scars. It was just... this one looked like it was terribly painful. In fact, it looked like it was barely healed at all, which was strange. Travis had said the wound was years old, but the scar was still that angry red of new scars and that couldn't be right. Then Vincent touched it, carefully, and it was hot, nearly burning to his fingers. Much more so than the skin even six inches away.

"Jesus, Travis. Have you had this looked at?" Because while Vincent wasn't anything remotely like a doctor, even he could tell there was something *not right* there. He kind of thought Travis knew it, too, on some level, because the man's voice was bitter when he finally responded.

"I go to the military hospital up near Birmingham every year, baby. They check it out, tell me I'm lucky to still have my leg, then give me a new prescription for antibiotics." Travis frowned and reached over, pulling Vincent against him, and Vincent let him, doing his best not to touch that poor leg and possibly make things worse. "It only acts up when I'm too active, anyway. Or not active enough. It'll be fine in a few hours. Swear, Vinnie. Don't... don't let it change anything, okay? Please, baby. I... I know I'm messed up, but..."

Telling Travis to shut up again would probably have made the man that much more miserable, so Vincent did the only thing he could think of to accomplish the same goal. He shifted a bit, then straddled Travis' waist -- well away from that angry-looking scarred thigh -- and leaned down, kissing Travis hard.

"You listen to me, stud," Vincent said fiercely a minute or three later, when Travis was panting under him. "It changes everything, but only because now I know how much you need a keeper. Lucky for you, I've already accepted the job. I know this is all sudden and strange and completely fucking bizarre. I do. It just doesn't happen like this. Except it did, and I'm here, and there isn't a single fucking chance that I'm going anywhere without you."

Vincent smiled as much as he could while worrying about Travis' leg. "That means we spend the next however long it takes to get you packed up and put this place on the market. Once it's listed, you don't even need to be here, which is a good thing because you're coming home with me. I'll

rent a storage space for whatever won't fit in my apartment, and once you have a buyer, we'll find a bigger place that'll fit everything we own."

Travis was blinking, and it was just the most endearing thing Vincent had ever seen. Endearing and encouraging because those pretty hazel-gray eyes were starting to look incredibly happy. Even so, "I won't sponge off you, baby," Travis said flatly. "I'm not gonna be your pet fucking project. If that's what this is about, then--"

"Oh, Jesus fucking Christ!" If there had been a wall nearby, Vincent knew he'd have been banging his head against it right about then. "It's about me being selfish, you big, blind jackass! Do you really think I want to spend the next however many weeks or months it might take to sell this place *here*? In Fred-neck, Alabama? When we could be back in Boston with friends and relatives, where things actually make *sense*?" Vincent growled, even if it sounded sort of kitten-like. His voice just wasn't deep enough for a good growl. "And for the record, honey? The only 'project' I've got going on in relation to you is getting some fucking condoms and riding that thick beast between your legs until I pass out from sheer pleasure."

Luckily, Travis seemed to hear the truth in his voice, because the man was nodding; smiling a little, in a dazed sort of way. "I'll pay you back, once I get work," Travis murmured, and Vincent nodded, too, though he didn't care about payback. Money wasn't that important anymore.

"You're not a project, honey," Vincent murmured against Travis' full lips, "pet or otherwise. But I'm pretty sure I wouldn't get all upset if you wore a collar every once in a while. Hard, definitely, but not upset."

Then they were laughing together and kissing, and there were hands touching and stroking gently over skin, and it was possibly the best thing Vincent had ever known. The lack of urgency alone was a revelation. Like they knew they had all the time in the world and had come to a silent agreement to make use of it. It was... perfect.

"Well, you're new."

Okay, Vincent couldn't decide whether to say 'duh' or just smile, so in the end he merely nodded.

"I'm visiting with a friend," he added as he dug his wallet out of his pants pocket and offered his Visa to the girl behind the counter. "I don't suppose you guys have any of that spray air freshener in sandalwood?"

The girl wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Just pine and lavender. Not together. One or the other."

Vincent sighed then shrugged. "Okay. Whatever. Thanks. Um, could you maybe run my card now? Or is cash better for you?" Because he wanted to get the hell out of the grocery store. The

constant stares were already getting on his nerves, and he'd only been in the actual town for half an hour. He couldn't even imagine what Travis felt like after years of it.

"That's it, Daddy!" Vincent heard, the voice sounding shrill and not terribly masculine to even *his* ears as he stepped out onto what passed for the main drag in Frederick. "That's the car I saw outside the pervert's place this mornin'!" Then a woman's voice, soft enough that Vincent could only make out a few words.

"Leave... boys to your... fear of God into..." followed by some sort of farewell that was swift and sure.

Vincent had one very brief moment of frozen stillness, during which he tried to decide between ducking back into the grocer's or moving closer to see who was talking. Then a third voice, answering the first one, made the decision for him.

"Well, Roddy. It has plates from the city. Whoever it belongs to ain't gonna be stickin' around for long. You just wait 'til they're gone, and you can leave another little *warnin'* for that God-hatin' faggot. A stronger one. Maybe then he'll stop with all that poop-chute devilry and come back to the Lord."

A million thoughts were racing through Vincent's head, but he wasn't really hearing them, aside from the one that screamed 'these are the people who defiled Travis' house,' and the one that said 'find out who they are so you can report them.' And the third one, the one that told him to back slowly away and not get involved. He probably would have listened to the last, except that Vincent questioned whether the younger voice -- the one he'd heard first -- belonged to anyone who was straight. And the idea that it was another gay man, no matter how closeted or in denial, who had written those awful things on Travis' home was just infuriating.

That being the case, Vincent did something he'd never expected to do. Something he'd never even considered, in point of fact. But he was smiling on the inside *and* outside as he sashayed the ten or so feet to his rental, putting far more swish into both movements and tone than he'd ever come by naturally.

"Oh, goodness," he declared, pitching his voice a good octave higher than usual and fanning himself with his free hand, "I do declare, this heat has me positively *wilting*!" He pretended to notice the two men by his car only when he stopped. Then Vincent offered a suggestive smile to the younger one, smirking at the blush he got.

Definitely closeted. And already hating him, Vincent realized; most likely because whoever the guy was didn't like sporting sudden wood in public.

Vincent dug into his pocket, deliberately fumbling around just to see if the younger man's eyes would follow, which they did. Then he pulled his keys out and thumbed the button to unlock the doors. "Oh, thank God," Vincent sighed dramatically as he set his bags of groceries in the back seat of the SUV. "I am *not* designed for manual labor. Or this *climate*!" He flashed a nearly-flirtatious grin at the two men. "If my stud weren't so determined to stay here, I'd make him come

home with me, but he's so stubborn." Vincent sighed again, forcing himself to look as sorrowful and near tears as he could manage.

"Of course," he added a moment later, visibly perking up, "This is a nice town and people have been friendly so far. I suppose I won't mind living here *too* much. We'll have to wait and see how my traditional Pride Day Jubilee goes." Then he offered another suggestive smile as he purred.

"Are there many motels nearby?" Vincent demanded suddenly, "because I don't think that one out on... whatever route it is, I'm just not that good with numbers... will be able to accommodate four hundred of my *very* close friends. And I'm so sorry! Oh, I'm being terribly rude, but I know you'll forgive me because that's what people in lovely little towns like this do. I'm Vincent, but you can call me Vanity. I don't actually answer to Vincent when I'm in drag, which is most of the time. But I suppose you'll all get used to that. After everyone sees this place during the Jubilee, I'm sure droves and droves of my people will decide to move here. It's so... warm and welcoming. Soothing. "

And that was enough, Vincent figured, because the older man looked like he was about to burst a vein, while the younger... well, the younger man was obviously having to make an effort to replace the fascination and anticipation on his face with disgust.

"And who might you gentlemen be?" Vincent offered with an extra flounce as he stepped closer.

Five minutes later, Vincent knew that they were Pastor Kendall and the pastor's son, Roddy, which wasn't actually a surprise. In fact, the only shocking thing about the entire meeting was that the pastor didn't seem to have a single clue that his own boy was gay.

Roddy knew, though. Vincent could tell that much just from the way Roddy's eyes kept dropping to check out Vincent's crotch. The young man might not be willing to admit it out loud, but Roddy definitely knew.

Another minute or so and Vincent forced himself to look around, deliberately letting his true feelings for Frederick show, even while his mouth lied.

"It really is a pretty little town," he said, sounding as resigned as he could manage. "It's a little bit secluded, now that I think about it, but it's not like I have much choice, is it?" Vincent pouted. "Travis doesn't think he can find a buyer for his place, and I'm not willing to be separated from him, so it looks like we're going to be neighbors, gentlemen. I'm sure I'll get used to the slower pace eventually." He smiled. "And like I said, once my friends see it and start relocating, I'll feel *much* more comfortable."

Vincent looked at his watch, then offered the Kendall men a sly smile. "And it's past time for me to be getting home. My honey's going to be, um. Anxious, by now. It was truly lovely to meet you both." He shook Pastor Kendall's hand quickly, then Roddy's, more slowly. Let the pastor turn a little red at the length of the contact.

"Well, goodbye," he said a moment later, pretending reluctance at letting Roddy's sweaty, clammy hand go. "We'll be sure to invite you the party we'll be throwing once I'm settled in. Oh, and the Jubilee, of course."

With that, Vincent hopped into his SUV and headed off down the street. He hadn't been lying about absolutely *everything*, after all. Travis really was waiting for him. Vincent just needed to hit the Jiffy Mart before he went back to Travis' place.

After that, nobody had better disturb them. He had plans for Travis. And Travis had plans for him, Vincent reminded himself with a smug grin.

It was going to be one hell of a night.

Travis was laughing at the assortment of boxes and tubes on the bed, which was more irritating than anything else, although in retrospect, Vincent supposed eight different sizes and types of condoms might have been a bit much. Still, he hadn't known whether Travis had a favorite brand, and while he'd suspected that the extra large variety would be necessary, he hadn't been a hundred percent sure. So, okay. Maybe he'd been a little bit obsessively thorough, but that didn't mean Travis had to laugh like that. Even if Vincent wanted to join in.

"Oh, please," he grumped after another few chuckles from Travis, "like you'd be even remotely happy if I had to go back to the store. Besides, we're likely to be stuck here for at least a week, Trav. Do you really think we won't use them?"

Vincent smirked and arched one brow, then nodded when Travis stopped laughing. "Mmm-hmmm. I really just said that, stud. You planning on telling me I'm wrong?"

Travis wasn't planning on saying anything, Vincent realized. Or, if he had been, the man's words had disappeared somewhere between looking at the bed and finally seeing that Vincent was slowly, ever so slowly, unbuttoning his own shirt.

"Uh..." The sound barely made an impression, it was so soft, but Vincent heard it, anyway.

"Did you know, honey," Vincent went on playfully, letting the unbuttoned cotton slide from his shoulders to pool on the floor, "that the Jiffy Mart actually rivals the sex shop back home for quantity and variety of lube?" He gave Travis a long, slow stare. "It's sort of funny, when you think about it. I mean, you're the only gay man around here. The only one who admits it, anyway. So why in the world would they need to sell so much of the slip and slide?"

Vincent toed off his shoes, then stood there, maybe three feet away from Travis, in just a pair of linen slacks. He preened a bit at the way Travis was staring, those eyes hungry and raking over Vincent's skin wildly while that pink tongue licked repeatedly at lips that must be remarkably dry.

"You okay, honey?" Vincent asked, worrying all of a sudden. "We really can wait, if that's what's bothering--" Oh, and good choice, Vincent told himself a second later, his eyes closed, hands full of bunching muscles, heat surrounding him as Travis pulled him up against that amazing body.

Then those lips -- not dry at all, just soft and full and hot and demanding -- were pushed against his own, and Vincent couldn't do anything but open up, meet Travis' tongue with a whimper and a swallowed cry.

He wasn't sure when Travis had gotten them both fully naked. Didn't care, either, though Vincent had a vague recollection of something tearing; possibly his slacks. Whatever it was couldn't be important, though. Nothing was, right then, except the way Travis felt over him, two hundred and some pounds of tight, hard muscle pressing his more slender body into the mattress.

There was something under his back, digging in. Probably one of the tubes of flavored lubricant, Vincent realized, but he didn't care. It was a tiny pain, not even an annoyance, really, and there was no way he was going to mention it. Or, rather, he wouldn't have, even if he could have spoken. Even if he could have forced anything but "God, honey. God," from his lips. Which he couldn't.

Travis was grunting, rocking against him, pushing him harder into the bed, that hot mouth tight against the skin just below Vincent's ear, while that even hotter cock pushed at Vincent's groin, his hip, leaving streaks of slick heat on his skin, and Vincent had never felt anything like it. Not ever.

"Vinnie," Travis growled, and Vincent whimpered loudly enough to embarrass himself, just from the sensation of Travis' breath spilling over what Vincent knew was going to be a dark mark on his skin. "Vinnie. Jesus, Vinnie. Can I... God, baby. Let me..."

"Anything," Vincent groaned back, his body shaking, trying to rock up against all that hard muscle and heat with little success. "Anything, honey. Whatever you want, just don't stop touching me." And that was an actual sentence, Vincent realized with a good bit of pride.

Travis kissed him again, rolling to one side, and there was a hand on Vincent's knee, bending it until his foot was flat on the sheets. Vincent was kissing back, too, just lying there, one arm spread out across the bed while the other wrapped around the back of Travis' neck, holding the man's stunningly talented mouth right where it was.

He arched roughly, feeding a loud cry into Travis' mouth when strong fingers closed around his cock, giving Vincent a few fast strokes before releasing that flesh to slide down, back, to cup balls and roll them. Seconds later, Vincent felt one blunt fingertip circling his hole and he arched again, gasping, sure he'd lost the ability to breathe, except...

Except he *was* breathing. Vincent could nearly taste Travis' sweat every time he sucked air into his nose, a slightly salty tease of a tinge. Then Travis moaned, there was a small snick, and slick gel, cool and viscous, was letting Travis' finger press in, and Vincent couldn't do anything but

hold on harder, kiss deeper, drive his tongue desperately into Travis' mouth in an effort to keep himself from screaming aloud at the rightness of it all.

Somehow, Travis seemed to know, to understand, though Vincent hadn't really expected that. Still, the man was slowing, that large body barely moving at all, suddenly. That thick finger was still inside Vincent's body, and when Travis slowly pulled away from his lips, Vincent took one deep, shaky breath; then another. "G-God."

Travis was staring at him, Vincent saw when he forced his eyelids open. Staring and intent, focused, those hazel-gray eyes almost all pupil. "You... Jesus, baby. You okay?" Oh, sweet man.

Vincent nodded before he'd even processed the question, but that was fine. Hell, there wasn't a single thing he'd be able to say no to. Not right then, when Travis was looking at him like that, and not with that single, sturdy digit buried deep in his ass. "F-fine, honey. Be better when you... oh, God." His eyes closed again and Vincent pressed his mouth to Travis' shoulder, breathing as deeply as possible while he rocked down, up, back into the sharp, amazing burn of a second slick finger. "God," he moaned, right against that tanned skin, his lips finding a small scar he hadn't noticed before. "God, Travis. You... y-yeah. Like th-that."

He could feel Travis' cheek on his head, feel the small, rough bits of stubble pulling slightly at his hair. He could feel that just as much as the smooth and rough textures of Travis' scarred skin against his side. Could feel the drag of those fingers pushing in, pulling out, stretching, twisting, opening him enough for... God, a third. Vincent moaned, and it was so much, so big, so sharp. So fucking right to feel that rough need building from Travis' careful movements.

"Feel so good," Vincent heard, the murmurs pushing through his hair and straight into his brain, it seemed like. "So good, baby. God, Vinnie. You feel like nothing else. God, gonna come just from this. Just from having my fingers in you, feeling you so tight and hot. I... Oh, fuck, Vinnie. Gonna come."

No. Just no. Please God, no. "S-stop, Travis. Please... please, honey. Stop now." And Vincent didn't know where he got the strength to speak, because he was maybe one more slow twist of digits away from coming himself, but he said it. And even more amazingly, Travis listened.

That hand stilled, big, thick fingers motionless and holding him wide, and Vincent moaned, low and deep in his chest. His hand finally left the sheets it had been gripping, and he almost let it join the one tangled in Travis' hair, but at the last moment, Vincent managed to press it to Travis' chest. He whimpered again when he felt Travis' heart going like a jackhammer under his palm. "Need... God, Trav. Need you in me. When you come, honey. Need to feel it, okay? Please, Travis; please, honey. Let me feel."

Travis shifted and Vincent felt that bad leg against his own. Felt the too-fiery heat that wasn't caused by the flames between them, and he groaned. "Can't last that long," Travis was saying. "Can't last 'til I'm in you, baby. Fuck, Vinnie. Sorry. So sorry, but I can't... can't last."

Vincent frowned against Travis' skin, then shook his head. "You can, honey. But you need to let me ride you, okay? Just... hold on long enough for me to get you in, Trav. I... Let me have that. Come on, honey. Just lie back, and..."

God, Travis actually whimpered as he pulled those thick fingers from Vincent's body. Then Travis moaned again, this time with obvious relief as he rolled onto his back, the sheets ruffled and twisted beneath him when Vincent looked, and Vincent was definitely looking.

His eyes moved down Travis' body, then back up quickly, pausing in each direction to look at that bright red, seamed thigh. He would think about that later, though, rather than right then. Because right then, he had a beautiful, seeping rod of masculine perfection to sheathe in latex, then in his body.

"Mmmm," Vincent hummed, ignoring his own urge to just climb on and ride Travis like a pogo stick. "God, you're going to break me in two, honey. Just split me right up the middle." He looked up and caught those mostly-black eyes staring, looking helplessly at him. "Hold on, Trav. Just hold on."

It was a matter of moments to find the right box of condoms, and even less to rip it open, tear one from the strip, then get the foil-like plastic gone.

One more moment to work the latex over Travis' rampant, nearly bobbing shaft, and another bare instant to spread a thin layer of lubricant over the rubber, which had Travis clutching the sheets and trembling, but that was fine.

"Okay. Okay, honey," Vincent said as he shifted, moved, slung one leg up and over Travis' solid waist. "Just... let me..." and he reached down between his own legs, wrapping slicked fingers around the base of Travis' covered cock. He took one deep breath as he positioned himself just at the tip, then let that air slip from his lungs as a long, drawn-out hiss while he pushed back, Travis' bulbous head wide and hot and maybe just a little bit too big, but Vincent couldn't let that stop him.

"Oh, God. So good, honey," Vincent groaned, and it wasn't exactly a lie because it hurt -- Jesus fucking Christ, did it hurt -- but it felt so damned good, too, and just the way Travis was moaning, keening, nearly weeping, would have had Vincent going on, even without the pleasure. "Now, honey... now. Just... God, push up a little, okay?" And Travis did, with a soft cry that nearly undid Vincent, and then... God. "God. Fucking God, Travis! Y-you're in!"

Vincent's hands moved, nearly flying to Travis' chest, palms covering the man's tight, hard nipples, and he could feel Travis' heart again, pounding out a fast, rough rhythm. And Travis' hands were on Vincent's hips, pulling him down before he was really ready, but it was so hot, so fucking good. "Yes! Yes, honey, yes! Just like..."

"Fuck, Vinnie," and Vincent knew he'd be more than sore in the morning, but it was worth it to feel this, to hear that amazed, disbelieving tone in Travis' voice. "Fuck, I... so tight, I... Jesus."

Vincent rocked a little. Back and forth, side to side, letting that thick column of flesh stretch him a little more with each movement. Then he pushed back and down again, taking another inch or two, and when Travis groaned, Vincent echoed him. "God, honey... h-huge. So... God. Perfect. Just..." And those hands were pulling him down again. Vincent could feel his hole complaining as what seemed like a never-ending intrusion pushed deeper, but while his ass might be objecting, Vincent knew he'd never felt anything so pure and necessary in his life.

That being so, he held in the pained moan that wanted to fly from his lips and sat back harder, holding on to the sound until he felt his skin tight against Travis' body, the man's already hard sac right there, brushing the edge of Vincent's straining hole.

"Oh... fuck," he heard, and when he opened his eyes, Vincent saw Travis' closing, the man's face looking pinched and tight. And that thick, hard cock inside him was throbbing, pulsing in time to the way Travis' fingers were clenching and loosening on Vincent's hips. Vincent thought he might be able to get off on that. Might be able to come, just from feeling Travis come without even a single real stroke. But he didn't want to.

No, he wanted Travis to know what it felt like to be moving inside his body, so Vincent bit his lip and leaned forward, pulling himself off of what seemed like at least a foot of fat cock but was likely only six inches. Then he pushed back, using Travis' chest for leverage, and Travis' wild shout didn't even come close to matching Vincent's ecstatic cry.

He did it again, Travis' cock sliding roughly against his prostate, just like it had the first time. And then again, harder, as Travis' hands squeezed his hips tight and dragged him down with enough strength that Vincent thought he might just feel Travis come in his chest, the man was so deep.

Then Vincent wasn't thinking at all, beyond "yes," and "fuck," and "God," and "Travis, Travis, God honey," because he was coming. He was stiff and arched, wordless cries falling from his lips to fill the room and harmonize with Travis' own grunts and groans. And he felt that awesome cock swelling even more inside him, nearly splitting his hole wide, it seemed like. Felt Travis' sac pulsing where it touched his ass, and Vincent was pretty sure he was dying as he shot wildly, roughly, violently enough that his first few spurts actually reached Travis' cheek, his neck... his own hands on Travis' chest.

The world went black for a moment, but that was fine because Vincent could feel Travis beneath him. He could feel those hands releasing his hips, then sliding up his spine. He could feel Travis pulling him down onto that broad chest, feel ragged, shaky breaths against his hair, and it was good. More than good.

"Jesus, Vinnie," he heard as Travis' cock continued to throb in his ass, though slower now, "Jesus fucking Christ, baby. I... Just. God."

"That about sums it up," Vincent murmured a few minutes later, when he'd finally caught his breath. "Just... God."

He wanted to nap right where he was and damn the condom, but he couldn't. Damn it. He and Travis had only touched on the 'I'm negative, how about you' talk on Vincent's end, and Vincent worried that maybe even suggesting anything of that nature so soon might be too much for Travis. Aside from which, he was about a hundred and ten percent sure that Travis was disease-free, considering the man had been in the Army and still went to the military hospital yearly. Vincent was sure they did all sorts of blood work and whatnot, and would have told Travis if there was anything wrong.

Of course, Vincent had also seen the bungled mess they'd made of his lover's leg, and if they could screw that up, who was to say that they'd even test for HIV, considering the whole 'don't ask, don't tell' thing.

He made a mental addition to his 'to do once I get Travis back home' list, and if Trav had a problem with Vincent paying for a full blood work-up as well as some sort of something-or-other to see what was actually going on inside Travis' bad leg, well, they'd fight it out in Boston. And Travis would do what Vincent wanted him to, in the end. Vincent would see to that.

In the meantime, though... "I guess we'd better get cleaned up, lover," Vincent purred with a smile, and when he made himself sit up, Travis' latex-sheathed prick still inside him, though nearly soft now, he could see the pleased blush that one word brought to Travis' skin.

His own disappointed sigh when he lifted himself from Travis' body, one hand holding the condom around the base of Travis' cock, was matched in both emotion and regret, and that was a good thing, Vincent told himself. It meant Travis had felt each moment just as much as Vincent had. That it had been more than just a fuck, though Vincent hadn't doubted that for an instant.

"We should shower," Travis muttered, looking halfway asleep. "Been thinking about you all wet and sleek, Vinnie. Like a golden seal, but without the fur. Other than in a couple places." Vincent blushed, which Travis obviously took as an invitation to say more, the man waking up damned quickly. "Y'know, I kinda figured you bleached your hair, but it all matches," Travis went on, leering at Vincent's groin, and that was sort of weird, but also kind of hot.

"Hush, you," Vincent said with no heat at all as he blushed even deeper. "Do you have any idea of what dye feels like on your cock? I may be a slave to my own personal sense of fashion, but nothing's worth that. Not after the first time, anyway." He shuddered at the memory. "Now, I'm going to bathe. You can either come with or stay here. But if you stay, I won't be snuggling up to your come-stained body with my nice, clean skin."

Then Travis was laughing, reminding him of whose come it was, and Vincent shook his head, refusing to dignify the comment with any response other than, "It's your own fault for being such an amazing lover." And, just like that, Travis' prick was visibly twitching.

"I do owe you a blow job," Vincent offered, one brow arched in question. "We never quite got around to that this morning." Because Travis' leg had been all fucked up, damn it. Worse than it was right then.

Travis stopped, right there in the middle of the bedroom, naked as the day he was born, cane in hand. "If you suck me off now," he said, sounding so-logical to Vincent's ears, "then I won't be able to do you again in the shower." Which just had Vincent busting out laughing.

"Oh, honey," he announced, still chuckling softly as he wrapped an arm around Travis' waist, "You weren't going to be doing me in the shower, anyway. Or not tonight. I told you it's been over two years since the last time I... well, with a person. And not even one of my toys comes close to the size of your pretty cock. Meaning I'm sore right now. Too sore to let that beautiful beast in me again just yet. And before you go getting all apologetic and freaked, it was perfect, okay?"

Vincent smiled, leaning in to brush his lips against the small frown line beside Travis' mouth. "I've never come that hard before, honey," he whispered. "Never felt anything like it. You fill me up just right, Travis, but it's going to take a little while for my body to get used to it. To open up for you easy enough that we can do it more than once a day. So until it does, we'll just have to pace ourselves, hmmm?" He winked, letting Travis see how much he meant every word. "So... how about that blow job, honey? Let me taste you?"

He could actually see Travis waffling between accepting his claims and believing he'd somehow hurt him, and Vincent wasn't sure of what he'd do if Travis decided Vincent was lying. How on earth would he ever be able to convince his gentle-hearted lover that he wasn't hurt, that Vincent had enjoyed the burn as much as the joy?

Fortunately, as it turned out, Vincent wouldn't have to, because Travis turned a little and leaned closer, brushing those soft, full lips against his own.

"I'll probably never turn down a blow job again, baby," Travis murmured, "and I'm not saying no this time, either, but..." Oh, there was that blush again, and Vincent really hoped Travis would never stop doing that. It was just... wild, knowing *he* could pull that sort of reaction from the big, scarred man who'd stolen his heart.

"But?" Vincent arched his brow.

"But if you wanted to do me in the shower, I wouldn't say no to that, either," Travis announced, the words bleeding together, they came out so fast. "I... unless you don't... I mean..."

And that was the bad kind of blush, Vincent realized. The kind that said Travis was regretting even opening his mouth. The kind that said Travis thought he'd said something stupid that was going to upset Vincent. The strange part of it, for Vincent, was that he had no idea of how he knew that. He just did.

He also knew that there was no chance in hell that he was going to let Travis go on thinking he'd done anything wrong. In fact, Vincent knew, without a single shadow of a doubt, that even if he hadn't already liked switch-hitting, so to speak, he would have made the effort for Travis.

So he took a step, then one more. He turned and looked Travis in the eyes, hoping his own desire was showing there as his cock swelled, going from sleepy to wide awake in seconds. Then he plastered himself to Travis' bulkier form, glad there was only a inch or two height difference between them.

"I may be a big queen," Vincent said simply, "and maybe I haven't had as much opportunity to top as some other guys out there. But hear me, Travis McRayne. There is nothing in this entire world that I would rather do than bury myself deep in your beautiful ass. I'll make it good, too. I swear. Maybe not the best ever, but it'll be good. And I still want to suck you dry, because if you taste anything like you smell, you're going to be delicious. Now march, soldier. I'll grab the supplies and meet you in there."

Then he kissed Travis hard and stepped away, grinning as he heard the man groan a few times before shuffling off to the bathroom.

He just hoped Travis had those handicapped bar things in there, because those could be fun. As well as useful, really, considering Travis' bad leg.

It wasn't until Vincent had two slender fingers sliding freely in and out of Travis' unbelievably tight body that he found out the truth, though possibly that very tightness should have warned him. It hadn't, though.

In fact, it wasn't until Travis looked back over his shoulder at Vincent, those pretty eyes a little bit nervous, and whispered "I... will it hurt, Vinnie?" with curiosity and a tiny trace of fear that Vincent actually *knew*.

He felt his breath catch, his lungs feeling as stunned motionless as the rest of him for just an instant, but then Vincent could move again. Could lean forward and press a soft, steady kiss between Travis' shoulder blades, his fingers moving more slowly, even more gently inside Travis' body. "Oh, honey," he answered, sounding wonderfully stunned even to his own ears. Thrilled and almost unable to believe that Travis had chosen him -- Vincent, the fully-in-touch-with-his-inner-girl man -- as the one he wanted for his first.

His body screamed for him to take what Travis was offering, to just plunge right in before the man changed his mind, but Vincent wasn't willing to lie. Not to Travis, and especially not about this. Damn it, what was so special about having a virgin, anyway?

Nothing, Vincent answered himself. Except when that virgin was his lover, his honey, his Travis. And even then, it wasn't a question of going where no man had gone before that made it special. It was that Travis wanted him. Wanted to feel him. And it would be just as special, Vincent told himself honestly, if Travis had been fucked by the entire Army before they'd met. Probably less worrisome for Travis, but just as amazing to Vincent.

"It might, honey," Vincent finally answered, feeling Travis tense around his slowly questing fingers. "Just a little bit, right at first. I'm nowhere near as big as you, but I'm not exactly small, either. That's why I'm taking my time, hmmm? By the time you're ready, honey, it shouldn't hurt more than a slow, hot burn, and even that should fade in a few minutes. If it doesn't, you tell me and we'll stop. Then we'll stretch you even more, until you're ready to let me try again, okay?"

Travis nodded slowly, meeting Vincent's eyes with so much trust and belief that Vincent could have cried. That would have freaked Travis out even more, though, so he didn't.

"I... I do want this, Vinnie. Want it with you. I ain't gonna wuss out. I just only tried to once, and neither one of us knew what we were doing, so it really hurt and it didn't, uh... happen." And God, that would definitely explain the nervousness, Vincent admitted to himself.

"My poor, poor honey," Vincent murmured, kissing that spot on Travis' back again. "I promise, Trav. I'll make it good for you. And if it's not-- but I already said that. You tell me and I'll fix it, lover. Now, let me just..." He let his free hand stroke slowly up and down Travis' side, watching those back muscles flex and shiver for him. "Put your foot up on the edge of the tub, honey. It'll help you open up, okay?"

It would also take some of the pressure off of that poor, wrecked thigh, though Vincent wasn't going to say so. Travis was sensitive enough about his scars without adding that to the case of nerves Vincent knew the man was experiencing.

"Good, honey. God, so pretty... you look like pure sin, Travis. Just looking at you... God!" Vincent swallowed hard, then stroked Travis' side one more time before reaching for the open tube of lubricant perched beside the condoms on the soap dish. "A little more slick, Trav. The water's washing it away too fast." That was fine, though, because without the hot deluge raining down over them both, Travis would likely be shivering. God knew Vincent had been, the first time he'd let another man into his body. Even with being stoned beyond the telling of it, he'd been shivering with fear and desire and a whole multitude of emotions that had his brain feeling muddled and slow. Or maybe that had been the pot; he couldn't be sure.

Either way, Vincent knew Travis wasn't entirely comfortable with what was happening, or more likely, with what was going to happen. His big, handsome lover hadn't really tensed up until after Vincent's second finger pushed in, so... Vincent squeezed a good dollop of slick gel onto his fingers as they pulled back, then he slid them in again, deep and easy with the added unguent.

There was a small, nearly stroke-inducing second when Travis pushed his hips back -- pressing that tight little hole farther onto Vincent's fingers, Travis' solid, muscled ass rising just a tiny bit - that told Vincent his lover was enjoying it. Liking the sensation of being stretched and opened, even if Travis wasn't sure yet of whether he would like the reason for it.

But Travis would, Vincent promised himself. Hell, having Travis enjoy Vincent's cock in that stellar ass was more important than anything else. Even if Travis never wanted Vincent inside him again, this first time just had to be good. Not everyone liked getting fucked, Vincent knew, and if Travis decided it wasn't his cup of tea, that was fine. Vincent could quite happily spend

forever letting Travis fuck him blind. Even so, Vincent figured Travis deserved to have his maiden voyage, so to speak, be something the man looked back on with fondness and appreciation.

"Okay, honey... okay, I'm going to try another now. Just try to relax, hmmm?" Which was apparently the wrong thing to say, because Travis was tensing up again. More. "Shhh..." and the lube went back in the soap dish so Vincent could touch skin again, though this time he pushed his hand around Travis' side, then slid it over to the man's big, heavy cock. "It'll be fine, Travis. We don't even have to, honey. I can get you off just like this, you know. My hand on your pretty cock, fingers moving in your heat..." Then Vincent twisted his hand, fingers still sliding slowly, turning and stroking Travis from the inside out, and when Travis gasped out a rough, shaky moan, Vincent found that spot again.

He familiarized himself with the position of the small, raised nub. He committed its location to memory, because if Travis was groaning like that, there was almost zero chance that he wouldn't love what Vincent's cock would feel like when it pressed... right... there.

His other hand was stroking, sliding up and down Travis' hot cock, forefinger swiping over the tip, and just like that -- without any more effort than a thought, Vincent found himself pressing into Travis' body with a third finger as well, the resistance small and seemingly unnoticed by Travis.

"G-gonna come, baby. Oh, God, gonna come, Vinnie. Y-you... th-that..."

Vincent could feel Travis shaking again, though this time it was the trying-to-hold-back kind, so he slid his fingers deeper, forcing them apart just a bit as he loosened his grip on Travis' cock. "Do you want me to try, honey?" he whispered, trying not to sound too desperate. "Or do you want to just come like this? It's up to you, Travis. Just... God. Tell me, okay?" Because he for damned sure wanted in, but not enough to go for it without Travis' say-so. They would have years to get there if that was what it took, and Vincent could wait if he had to. But he'd rather not.

Travis stilled for such a short space of time, Vincent almost thought he'd imagined it, but then those big, strong hands were spreading wider on the tile wall under the shower head, and Travis broadened his stance, even with the one foot on the tub edge. And Travis was nodding, sounding just a touch worried when he spoke. "I... yeah. Yeah, baby. I think... I w-want you to try. I... just... go slow, okay?"

As if he would rush, Vincent thought with a silent snort. As if he would have some sort of psychotic break as soon as he got the go-ahead. Except he was for damned sure letting go of Travis' cock in a hurry, and grabbing a condom from beside the open lube. The wrapper barely had time to make a sound before it was discarded, and Vincent hissed softly as he rolled the all-important and barely-there latex over his long, thin cock.

His fingers moved one more time inside Travis' tight, hot body while Vincent smeared more lube over his own covered shaft. He wasn't going to hurt Travis, he promised himself. No more than he had to, which was just about not at all.

Then he was holding his cock and pulling his fingers slowly from that heated, slightly trembling form, and Jesus Christ, his tip was touching Travis' hole, just pressing lightly against that wrinkled skin that shone with water and lube.

Vincent's free hand moved to Travis' hip, palm and fingertips making small, soothing circles on wet flesh as Vincent pressed forward, just barely rocking his hips. "Okay, honey?" he moaned, his own guiding hand acting as a restraint. "You... God, you okay, Travis?"

Travis grunted, but it didn't sound like a complaint, so Vincent pushed just a little bit harder, a little bit faster, and he groaned when he felt that slick little opening start to yield to him. "Oh, God. You're going to feel so good, Travis. So fucking good," and Vincent didn't know whether he meant Travis was going to feel good around him, or that he was going to make Travis feel good. Probably both, because yeah. In a perfect world? Definitely both.

Travis was rocking a little, too, those strong hips pushing back and forth like Travis didn't even know it. Vincent met that small motion with another touch of pressure, and he gasped when he felt Travis spread around him, so slowly it felt like an eternity but also, somehow, like no time at all. "Trav," he moaned. "God, Travis, tell me I can..." because he was right there, so close.

"I... wait. Wait, Vinnie, I... this is... it's so much, so big, I..." And he got that. Vincent got it. It felt enormous to him, too. Like if they did this -- all the way *did this* -- there would be no going back.

But that was fine with him, really. Vincent hadn't planned on going back to anywhere but Boston, and that with Travis by his side. So if being inside Travis and being Travis' first also meant he would be Travis' last and only? Well, Vincent was fine with that. More than fine. In fact, it sounded just about perfect to him.

He pressed just a tiny bit harder, head dropping forward to rest against Travis' back. "It's everything, Trav. Everything, honey. I know. Just... tell me you're letting me in."

"Oh... oh, my fucking God," Travis whispered, the sound nearly lost under the music of the water and Vincent's heavy, rapid breaths. "C-come in, Vinnie. I... please." And those strong, solid hips were pushing back just as Vincent was pushing forward, and there was one split second -- right when his tip pressed through and Travis' tight little ring snapped almost audibly around the ridge -- when Vincent felt the world just stop spinning, as though in acknowledgement of the gravity of the situation. The rightness of that one instant.

Then the world spun again, but with a vengeance, because he could hear Travis hissing, see that long spine growing tense as the corded muscles beside it tightened, and Vincent stopped. Stopped moving, stopped pressing, stopped everything other than stroking Travis' sides with his hands. Both hands, because he was inside now and there was no way his cock needed guidance.

"Honey... honey," he murmured, holding himself there, just that first inch or so in paradise. "God, honey, tell me I'm not hurting you. Please, Trav. If I am..."

"If I say you are, you'll stop, Vinnie," Travis answered immediately, without even a thought, it seemed like. Vincent could feel the vibrations of the words in his cock, they were both so still otherwise. "I... I don't want you to stop. It's... God, it's..." And as strange as it seemed, even to him, Vincent understood.

It hurt, yes. But it also felt good in a way Travis wasn't quite ready to express. Hell, it was probably freaking the guy out that pain and pleasure could be so closely tangled, to the point that they even intensified each other. And that was about as thoughtful as Vincent was going to get. "Okay. Okay, honey. I'm not stopping."

A small push again, his latex-covered prick pressing a good two inches into Travis' ass, pulling a surprised, wanton moan from the man, and Vincent felt the exact moment when the burn melded fully with the bliss because Travis relaxed, his body loosening all over, muscles losing that tight, expectant tension. Then Vincent was the one gasping and groaning because, just like that, Travis' body let him in. Hell, it nearly *pulled* him in, and Vincent was balls-deep, his cock fully encased in the most amazing place it had ever known.

He paused there, just reveling in the sensations, feeling Travis' stretched hole pulsing around his shaft, that big, unbelievably sexy body spread open for him, skin gleaming, shining from the streams of slowly cooling water that still poured over them. Then Vincent leaned forward again, plastering his chest to Travis' back as his arms wrapped around the man's waist, holding on.

His hips moved in slow, shallow thrusts as he shifted slightly, trying to find the right angle, and when Travis jumped, a small mewling sound leaping from his lips, Vincent did it again. Just to hear that noise, he did it a third time, and wasn't disappointed.

Oh, yeah. Travis liked getting fucked, all right. Except that wasn't exactly what they were doing, Vincent knew. And when Travis pushed back, trying to move his hips faster on Vincent's cock, Vincent gripped more tightly around Travis' waist and shook his head against that strong, wet back.

"No," he murmured, voice thick and strained even to his own ears. "No, honey. If we go any faster, any harder, you'll be hurting tomorrow. Let me just..." and Travis was moaning and stilling a little, and Vincent figured that meant he didn't need to talk any more, which was a good thing, because he didn't think he could.

Instead of speaking, Vincent rested more heavily on Travis' back, trusting the man to hold him up while he wrapped the fingers of one hand around Travis' thick, meaty prick and picked up where he'd left off earlier.

Vincent stroked slowly, his hand moving just a bit faster as Travis' breath sped even more. He thought he could feel that enormous heart beating around his cock, squeezing him as

rhythmically as Travis' hole was doing. It wasn't a sensation he'd ever experienced before, but that didn't surprise him. He'd never known anyone like Travis before, either.

God, he wanted to break, to shake off every bit of consideration and gentleness he was feeling. Wanted to lose himself in fire and heat and need. He wanted to let go and slam himself in and out of Travis' tight ass, force his cock deeper and deeper until Travis was begging him -- *begging him* -- to stop. It felt that good. But he couldn't. Wouldn't. Not this time, and maybe not ever.

Instead, Vincent took a firm hold of his psyche and pressed deep again, balls slapping lightly against Travis'. Then he circled his hips, slowly at first, but faster when Travis moaned. Then faster still when Travis met the motion with one that was similar, but reversed, and his hand moved more quickly on Travis' heavy, throbbing shaft while the man grunted and groaned, body flexing and heaving as much as it could with Vincent holding on so tightly, and...

"Come for me, honey," Vincent pleaded, his orgasm suddenly coiled in the pit of his stomach. "Come on, Travis. Need to... oh, God. Need to know you don't... fuck! Don't hate this..."

No words answered him, just a loud, keening wail as Travis' cock throbbed and swelled, then spilled almost gently over Vincent's hand, but that was enough reply. Enough that Vincent kept jacking that thick cock, slowly but determinedly, as he felt his own sac tighten even more, then force rough, needed spurts of hot seed out through his shaft and into the waiting reservoir of latex.

The water was bordering on cold by the time they'd both caught their breath, but that was a good thing, Vincent figured. Otherwise, he would have been tempted to stay in the shower and do it again, this time giving Travis the faster-harder-more his lover's body had tried to demand.

And that would have been bad, Vincent realized when he pulled himself slowly -- carefully -- from Travis' still-tight but well-used hole, and Travis hissed softly. His honey wasn't used to being fucked yet, just like Vincent wasn't used to anything the size of Travis' cock. It seemed they'd both need some time to get used to things.

Then again, Vincent thought with a smug smile, they had time. As much time as Travis would give him, anyway.

Now if they could just get the hell out of Fred-neck, Alabama, things would be perfect.

Vincent was still grinning when Travis turned off the definitely cool water. His hands were itching to touch all that soft and rough skin again, stroke it, rub it, make it his own. Then Travis turned around and looked at him, and Vincent forgot all about the somewhat lusty thoughts that were racing through his brain, even with just having come.

He didn't even think about it. Didn't have to, which would probably have scared him even a week earlier, but he hadn't known Travis then, hadn't felt... whole. So he moved closer in the small confines of the curtained-off tub and wrapped his arms hard around Travis' body, his mouth less than an inch from Travis' wide, full lips. "Honey. What is it? What's wrong?"

And Travis just shook his head and peeled Vincent's arms from around him. Stepped away, limping more than usual, to Vincent's eyes, as he maneuvered over the rim of the tub and grabbed a towel. So Vincent followed, taking a towel himself, though he wrapped his around his hair rather than his waist as Travis had done.

He trailed his lover back to the bedroom, and even back to the bed, and when Travis finally sat down on the edge, Vincent steeled himself and sat down beside him, less than an inch separating their legs.

Travis was bent over, his elbows on his knees, head hanging low, but Vincent could hear the man breathing. Travis was taking slow, deep breaths. So slow that they had to be deliberate and not just the deep-in-thought type. But he looked so... God, Vincent didn't know what.

"Honey?" he said again, trying not to sound as worried as he was as he rested his closer hand on Travis' unscarred thigh. "Talk to me, honey. Tell me what's got you all wigged."

It took a good five minutes of asking while Travis just shook his head, but finally the man answered, apparently having decided what to say.

"That was," Travis started, and Vincent couldn't help the hopeful leap of his heart. "That was... fuck, Vinnie. That never shoulda happened." And just like that, Vincent's heart plummeted down to his toes, it felt like.

"It wasn't fucking," Travis went on, sounding frantic, all of a sudden. "I... you were supposed to *fuck* me, and that wasn't fucking and it was... God, Vinnie, it was too fucking good, and what am I supposed to do now that you... fuck, you ruined me, Vinnie! Ain't nobody ever gonna make me feel like that again even if I wanted to let them try! Fuck, Vinnie! Why couldn't you just fucking *fuck* me!"

Oh, Vincent thought, blinking wildly. Oh. Okay. Travis really had liked it. Maybe even loved it. And that was good, even though Travis seemed to think otherwise, which was... kind of insulting, Vincent decided a second later.

Here he was, in the middle of the most gay-hating place he'd ever heard of, and not for work or vacation, but because it was where Travis was. And the man actually thought... God, thought what? That Vincent was playing around? Jesus!

"Stop it, McRayne," Vincent found himself snarling, and he really wished he could rent a deeper voice for his snarling, growly moments, because he knew he didn't sound remotely fierce. Even so. "Just shut the fuck up, jackass. You're right. It wasn't fucking. And may God forgive me for making love to your hot ass, Travis. Because I'm obviously just screwing around here, right? I take emergency family leave from work -- make my partners cover for me -- every time I just want a fuck. And that's why I came here; why I *told* you we're going back to Boston together, right?" He snorted. "And just so we're clear, honey, I couldn't just *fuck* you because you're more than just a fuck!"

His fingers were tight enough on Travis' thigh that Vincent knew it had to hurt, but he didn't care. His heart felt like it was bleeding just from what Travis had said, and God damn it, he'd promised himself that he'd never hurt Travis on purpose, but Vincent figured this was different. Travis had hurt *him*, after all.

"Don't be a complete fucktard, Travis," Vincent heard himself saying, though he'd had no intention of saying anything else. "Besides, can you really say it was 'just fucking' when you were jerking up into me, right here on this bed?" Vincent demanded. "Go ahead and try. But I don't think you're that good of a liar."

Travis was looking at him finally. Looking at him like he was crazy, granted, but looking.

"It wasn't just fucking," Vincent went on, stating it plainly and clearly so Travis would hopefully be unable to misunderstand. "It was more than that. Much more. You loved it, and even if you don't love *me* yet, you will. But I think you do, honey. I think you have since the moment we met. And maybe saying it out loud makes me even more of a screaming queen than people already think I am, but there it is."

"Ain't no such thing as love at first sight, Vinnie," Travis said sadly. "And if it was gonna happen, you'd be falling for someone pretty like you. Not some old redneck with a..."

Vincent slapped him.

He was shaking less than a second later as his palm stung, and he almost couldn't believe it, but there was a hand print pushing up pink on Travis' cheek and there wasn't anyone else there, so... Yeah, Vincent admitted with a blink or three. He'd just slapped Travis. Even more surprising was the fact that he didn't regret it.

"Okay, honey," Vincent said after a silent three minutes -- and he knew because he'd been counting the seconds in his head -- "what the hell happened to you between Boston and this horrifying island of ancient, retarded mores? Because I seem to recall you being all 'going to call you when I get back and we'll date but we're not going to have sex until we know each other.' And now -- when I've told you, and shown you, just how much we're meant to be together -- you're trying to tell me you're not good enough for me."

He smiled softly, reaching out to cup the cheek he'd just hit, caressing it in apology. "I don't know how, Travis, and God knows I don't know why. And maybe it isn't love yet, but maybe it is. The one thing I *do* know, for real and certain true, is that this, us, is good. Better than good. And if that means I need to turn into some kind of stalker just to get you to admit it? Then consider yourself stalked, honey. I'm not letting go of you without one hell of a fight. Understand?"

He watched Travis work through that, watched the man go through whatever mental gymnastics were required to come to the right decision. Because Vincent had no doubt that Travis would

make the right choice. They belonged together, after all. There was no other explanation for the fact that they were sitting on Travis' bed, naked and post-orgasmic in Alabama, of all places.

"You could do better," Travis finally whispered, so softly that Vincent thought he wasn't supposed to hear. "You could do better," Travis said again, louder this time, and Vincent had to press his hand against that warm cheek to keep himself from slapping the man again. "I guess those three weeks in Boston made me forget, but I'm here now, and I remember what I am, and... you're beautiful, baby. I don't deserve you. I don't have a damned thing to offer, or even a job, Vinnie. How the hell could I support us?"

Just like that, Vincent found himself pushing Travis back onto the mattress, both their legs hanging over the edge until Vincent shifted enough to straddle Travis' abdomen. There was nothing sexual in the position, but that was good because Vincent was pissed.

"I make my own money, asshole. I don't need a sugar daddy. And even if I did, you're not old enough for that. This hideous fucking *town* is making you crazy, though. So once again, I'm telling you. Not asking, but *telling*." Vincent gave Travis a stern stare that had the man's eyes opening just a bit wider, and that was good. Let Travis finally understand that while Vincent was usually more than happy to be somewhat submissive, there were times when he just couldn't be.

"We're going to crawl under the covers, honey," Vincent stated bluntly, "and we're going to curl up. Hopefully sleep. And in the morning, we'll find a realtor, and start packing your things. I think most of it will fit in your truck, and what doesn't will go in the SUV once I put the seats down. I can keep the rental 'til Boston." He nodded sharply at Travis' slightly dazed expression.

"As soon as we've got that sorted out, we're going home, by which I mean *home*, not this bastion of homophobic delights. And once we're there, we're going to live together and be happy, and we'll be getting tested so I can feel that pretty beast of yours spilling deep inside me. Oh! And you're going to let a *real* doctor look at your leg. If it's healed, you shouldn't be on antibiotics all the time." Vincent narrowed his gaze into a glare. "No arguments on that one, honey. I'll drug you and hold you down myself if I have to. That leg is just... *wrong*. Do you understand me, Travis?"

The baffled-looking nod Travis gave him was actually kind of funny, but Vincent wasn't feeling at all amused just then. "And do you agree to my terms?"

That was the kicker, honestly, because if Travis said no, Vincent knew he was going to back down. And if he did that, there was about zero chance of Travis ever taking Vincent's intense-alpha-male side seriously again, no matter how rarely it appeared.

But Travis nodded again, and that was good, so Vincent leaned down and kissed the man, hard and deep.

"Thank you," he murmured after pulling away slowly. "Now, get yourself comfortable on the bed. On your back, if you don't mind. I'm going to get some of the cushions from the couch to put under your thigh. It should help the swelling, I hope. And if it does, you'll be getting a

morning blow job, honey." Vincent grinned as Travis shifted, writhed to get where Vincent had said without getting up. "Maybe even if it doesn't help your poor leg, Trav. You'll just have to promise not to move."

There was nothing Vincent liked quite as much as a plan, except maybe a *good* plan. And right at the moment, he had one. It was not only good, but perhaps the best plan ever.

Take his lover home, get them settled, then spend the rest of his life making sure they stayed that way.

Yeah, Vincent thought with a grin as he gathered the throw pillows from the couch and headed back to his honey, he had a plan.

Part Three

Travis had no idea of how Vincent had managed it, but once his lover -- Jesus fucking Christ, his lover; not just a fuck, but a lover -- had set his mind to it, things had just started falling into place. And with almost no effort on Travis' part, too, which was how he knew it was all Vinnie.

He wasn't entirely sure why Vinnie had come back from town the day before with five small paint cans, each color horribly bright. Pink, purple, some sort of lime green that was nearly fluorescent, a sickening lemon yellow, and what Vinnie had called the *pièce de résistance* -- a blue so incredibly girly that even Vincent called it gay.

"All part of my plan, honey," Vinnie had announced with a wink, then he'd kissed Travis until Travis was panting and hard and had zero interest in anything as irrelevant as unexplained, high-gloss, exterior paint. Vinnie had a plan, and that was good enough for Travis. He didn't even need to know what the plan was, which was a good thing, since Vinnie didn't seem to be in any hurry to share it.

"Okay," Vincent said, hustling back into the living room with his arms so full of assorted pieces of clothing, Travis could hardly see the man's face. "Do you really need six thousand pairs of sweatpants, most of them full of holes in non-sexy places, or can we ditch at least some of them and buy new ones? Um, same for the T-shirts, honey." Vinnie dropped the entire assortment on the low table in front of the couch.

"I need them, baby," Travis said, trying to sound stern. "They still have years of wear in them." And if he let Vinnie throw them out, then the man would want to buy Travis new ones, just like Vinnie had said, and damn it, Travis already felt like a mooch, what with the going to live with Vincent and not having a job lined up.

Hell, he didn't even know that he'd be able to find work if his damned leg kept acting up, the way it had been doing more and more frequently over the last six months or so.

Vinnie was insisting on taking care of that, too, which Travis knew wouldn't be cheap. Even so, Travis would let Vinnie do it because his lover was right. Elliot and Jamie were right, too, though Travis hadn't been ready to admit it when they'd commented.

He figured it was the way Vinnie had just told him that there was going to be a doctor's visit that had opened his eyes, because Vinnie hadn't sounded annoyed, or even like he pitied Travis. Instead, the man had sounded worried, sort of, underneath the determination. Like he thought Travis might get sick or something if he didn't at least have it examined by someone unconnected with the military hospital. Like Vinnie was afraid of losing Travis, which Travis had to admit was still a little bit weird.

Guys like him didn't get lucky that way, or at least Travis had never thought so. And yet, here he was.

"Seriously," Vinnie said, drawing Travis' mind back to the world. Vinnie's voice sounded flat, stoic, while one of those borderline-white brows arched. "You're really trying to tell me that these," and he pulled a pair of sweats from the pile, clearly at random, then held them up, forcing Travis to notice that they were torn in places, worn through in others, and close to being threadbare all over. Vinnie shook them out, and Travis heard a tiny snort of amusement when the waist band split from the energetic motion. "These threads have 'years of wear' left in them? Come on, honey. I know you like making me laugh, but... no. Not even as a rag."

Just like that, Travis found himself watching Vinnie, the man all bent over and stuffing Travis' overly-used old things into trash bags. He was grinning, though, because he could hear Vinnie muttering, probably to himself.

"Won't let me keep the SUV to drive to Boston. Won't let me hire a moving company. Won't even let me spring for boxes when he can 'get them for free' out of the dumpster behind the grocery, for God's sake. And now he wants to keep these shreds of fabric that even a homeless person would laugh at?" Another soft snort had Travis grinning even more. "Not on *my* watch. And definitely not on my honey. Harrumph. 'Years of wear left in them,' my ass."

Looking at the swiftly disappearing sweats and such, Travis had to agree -- silently, but still -- that Vincent had a point. He'd had most of them since he'd first gotten home from the service, back when sweats and T-shirts had been the easiest things to get on and off, what with him having nobody to help him. He hadn't told them that part at the military hospital, though, because they would have made him stay longer, and Travis hadn't wanted that.

"Okay." Travis sighed the word reluctantly as he gave in, but he was still smiling. He couldn't help it. Vinnie in a snit was just fucking adorable. "Okay, baby. I guess some new things wouldn't hurt. Not a whole bunch of stuff, but some." The last had needed to be said because he'd seen Vinnie's eyes light up, and while Vinnie might be willing to bankrupt himself for Travis' sake, Travis for damned sure wasn't gonna let that happen.

Then again, Travis reminded himself, he was going to be selling his place, and while it wouldn't make him rich, he would probably have enough to pay his own way for at least a few months, after he'd paid Vinnie back for whatever the man spent. So maybe, just maybe, he shouldn't be so uptight about the whole financial thing.

What was that they said? Oh, yeah. Something about most relationships going bad when money worries crept in, and hadn't he been letting himself worry about money ever since Vinnie had announced that they were going home and Vinnie would take care of everything?

Now that he was thinking about it, and knew he'd eventually be able to pay his lover back, Travis couldn't deny that he'd been freaking a little bit. Which was stupid, he decided a second later, because if Travis had been straight and gotten involved with a woman who had money troubles, wouldn't he have done just what Vinnie was trying to do? Wouldn't he have offered to help and maybe even forced her to let him?

And that didn't make him the girl, Travis told himself sharply. It just made him... involved. In a relationship. With someone who cared enough about him to push that hard.

Travis laughed out loud, then leaned forward and grabbed Vinnie's hand, tugging the man down onto the couch. He pulled Vinnie up against his side, then dragged the man's long, cotton-covered legs over his lap. "You spend what you need to, baby," he murmured against Vinnie's lips, feeling the stunned moment of immobility before he felt those pretty lips curve against his own. "But you're gonna save the receipts and when this place sells, I'm gonna pay you back, got it? I need us to be equals in this, okay?"

And Vinnie was nodding and kissing him hard, meeting Travis' tongue with that joyous acceptance Travis knew he'd never get tired of, and it was good. Really good.

Travis made a mental note to always make Vinnie wait a while before agreeing with him. It seemed to flip one of Vinnie's switches, and that could never, ever be a bad thing.

Every time Vincent ran into Madeline Kendall in town, he noticed something different about her. Of course, he'd only been staying at Travis' for six days, but damned if he hadn't already seen the woman four times.

That was possibly his own fault, Vincent knew, because while he wasn't actually a scatterbrain back home, there was just something about being with Travis -- in borderline-scary Alabama -- that had him forgetting things, more often than not.

He blamed Travis' pretty cock. And stellar ass. He also thanked them, on a near hourly basis.

So he'd forgotten buy rope the day before, as in rope to tie the bags and boxes of Travis' stuff down so they wouldn't go flying if there was a pothole on the drive back north. And there he was, in what passed for downtown Fred-neck. Again. God help him. And there was Madeline Kendall, walking down the street with that closeted stepson of hers.

That was actually the first thing Vincent had learned about the woman who'd been trying to set Travis up at every opportunity. Roddy Kendall was her stepson, rather than the fruit, so to speak, of her... girly parts that Vincent refused to even think about. She hadn't seemed happy about the connection, though it had only shown around her eyes, which Vincent figured most people never looked at. Or most men, anyway, because the straight ones were probably always staring at her chest. Which was, he had to admit, damned impressive for an actual woman-by-birth.

The second time Vincent had seen her, he'd noticed the way her mouth tightened every time he said Travis' name. It was subtle, yes, but Vincent hadn't gone from a part-time host to full-time maitre d' by being oblivious to the tiny clues people gave off. And he for damned sure hadn't gone from maitre d' to becoming a partner and part-owner in McGinty's by being unable to interpret what those clues meant. He just didn't like what he was thinking when it came to the woman Travis thought of as his one and only ally in hell.

No, Vincent definitely didn't like suspecting that Travis' so-called friend could be the owner of the female voice he'd heard talking to Pastor Kendall and Roddy, mentioning putting the "fear of God" into someone -- anyone -- so easily, whether that person was Travis or not. It likely was, though, considering who Maddy was married to, as well as the mention of perverts and so on. Unfortunately, that would mean that Madeline Kendall was anything but Travis' friend. Or Vincent's, for that matter.

The third time Vincent had run into the woman, he'd decided to test his theory. To see whether he was simply expecting treachery because he was so on edge -- in the bad way -- just from being in such a closed-minded little town. Because Travis was right. Frederick really *did* feel and act like a place that had gotten stuck in beliefs that a good portion of the country seemed to have passed by years earlier. Or rather, Frederick admitted to those beliefs, which was maybe both good and bad. Comfortable lies versus feeling openly unwelcome. It was a tough call to say which was more preferable.

Still, he'd chatted with Maddy, his movements deliberately languid and more fey than he would have felt comfortable with, even in Boston. And when he'd made a point of ducking his head, supposedly examining a quilt on the table in front of him, he'd really been watching Madeline Kendall from the corner of his eye.

"Oh, Maddy!" Vincent had exclaimed, one hand brushing lightly over the hand-sewn work of art, and it really was lovely; that much wasn't a lie, though the rest of his words were. "It's perfect! And it's just the right size to cover our bed perfectly. You know, assuming we're in there under it, because with as big as my honey is? Well, if I got one for a *queen*-sized bed, it'd leave both our backs cold when we were using it, but this king-sized one would do just fine!" He'd grinned then, the smile going tight when he saw the woman's jaw clench hard.

"I'm so glad I met you," he'd gone on, "but even more glad that I met my Travvy. Just think! If I hadn't, he might really have settled down with one of those men you tried setting him up with. And God only knows where they'd have wanted him to move. This way, you won't lose him, sweetie! Just think, now you get to keep Travis, and you get me, too! We're already well on our way to being the best of friends, don't you think?"

Yeah, that third meeting had proved to Vincent that he wasn't wrong, though he hadn't had the heart to tell Travis yet. He wasn't sure he ever would, really. It might be better to let his big, tender-hearted warrior go on thinking that there was at least one person in Fred-neck who'd be sorry to see Travis go.

The fourth time he'd seen Maddy Kendall, he'd bought the cans of paint, deliberately leading her to believe that he and Travis were going to redo the outside of Travis' former-garage, making it a big, screaming billboard of gayness. As if any self-respecting gay man would have a rainbow-painted house. Outside of New Orleans, anyway, where green, gold, and purple were barely even noticed, much less used as a calling card.

She'd hustled off just as soon as she'd managed to pretend to like the idea, though, so that had been a bonus. And Vincent had finally understood, for absolute certain, why the woman was the evil pastor's wife.

This time, though...

This time, he knew what she was. Knew it for sure, without a single doubt. And he knew she knew about Roddy's bent, too, because she sent the young man off as soon as she saw Vincent.

"Well, hey there, Vincent, honey," she called, sounding for all the world like she was pleased to see him, even while her eyes went hard, glittering with what Vincent recognized as hatred and disgust. "I thought you were just in town yesterday!"

Vincent let loose his very best overly-dramatic sigh. The same one he'd been told not use the one time he'd performed in gay dinner theater because it was too over the top. He even pressed one hand to his chest. "Oh, I was, Maddy! But I was in such a hurry to get back to my stud-muffin, I forgot all about the rope we needed! And let me tell you," he added, doing his best to sound pouty while he pushed his nip-swollen bottom lip out just a bit, "Travis was *not* pleased. He really wanted that rope so he could tie... um. So he could tie down some... stuff."

And oh, there was that carefully hidden nausea that he wouldn't have seen if he hadn't been looking for it. That small twist of lips that said he was sick and Travis was sick. That swift swallow that announced Madeline Kendall would probably have vomited if Vincent hadn't been right there.

And if anyone was sick, twisted, and perverted, Vincent realized, it was Maddy Kendall, and that had nothing to do with her thoughts on rope and its many uses. He was sure that Maddy not only shared Pastor Kendall's views and opinions of everyone 'not like them,' but encouraged those same perspectives in others. In Vincent's eyes, *that* defined sickness and perversion better than anything else.

"So you're going to the hardware store," Maddy said brightly. "I'm headed that way, myself. Roger has a birthday coming up and I've decided to order him that new electric drill he's been wanting. He takes care of all the maintenance at the church himself, you know."

God, he wanted to sneer, or just tell Madeline Kendall that he knew how she really felt, but that would have interfered with his plan. Would have completely derailed it, in fact. So Vincent just smiled and offered his arm, like one of the gentlemen in the old movies his mother still liked to watch. "I would be thrilled if you'd allow me to escort you, then, Maddy," he said, dramatic once again. "I'm afraid I won't be much use when it comes to power tools, but a lovely lady like you should never be without an escort by her side."

The woman was good. Vincent barely even saw her cringe when he said 'power tools.' Mrs. Pastor Roger Kendall had obviously been looking at things on the Internet that the good preacher's wife of Fred-neck, Alabama shouldn't even know about. But that wasn't any of his business, and Vincent knew it.

No, his job -- since Maddy Kendall was there and being just as two-faced as she'd been for God knew how long -- was to plant another seed and hope it would germinate, then grow to twine with the seeds he'd already planted the one time he'd met the pastor.

"You know, Maddy," he sighed as he carefully ran his fingers over each of the twelve skeins of rope at the hardware store, "I really do love your little town. It's like... a slice of the past." The crazy, brother-and-sister marrying past, when white sheets weren't used to make beds, but whatever. "And please don't take this the wrong way, okay? But I really wish..." Vincent sighed again, heavily, as he went back to the first rope option and started all over again. "Never mind."

"No. No, Vincent, honey. You can tell me anything," the woman said, and Vincent could hear the predatory glee she was trying to hide. Like she was waiting for Vincent to say something that she'd be able to use against him. Or against Travis, which was pretty much the same thing, as far as Vincent was concerned.

So he shrugged, then fingered the trailing end of braided fibers that dangled from the fifth skein. It was actually not too rough. Maybe he'd buy a few yards, even though it wasn't thick enough to use for the truck. A boy never knew, after all, and it might be good to have, just in case.

"I really wish..." Vincent said, letting the words emerge slowly, like they were pushing out against his will. "I wish Travis would just come home with me, Maddy. I do. I mean, we could come back here to visit, so don't think I'm saying we'd ever want to leave for good. And my friends..." He shook his head slowly. "Well, they'll come for my Jubilee, of course."

"But I miss the city, Maddy," Vincent went on, doing his best to sound resigned. "I do. And I love Travis more than anything, so I know I'll be happy here eventually. But..." He shook his head again, knowing he'd used the right tone with the woman when she stepped closer and deliberately put her hand on his arm. Yet, only one finger was actually touching his skin, Vincent noticed, and he figured she'd be using Brillo pads on that now-infected digit just as soon as she got home.

"Well, maybe you should try to get him to go back with you, Vincent," Madeline Kendall said softly, sounding for all the world like she truly cared about Vincent's happiness. Hell, Vincent might even have bought it if he hadn't already known better. "If he loves you," the woman added, "he'll do whatever it takes to make you happy. And if he's not willing, then maybe it's good that you find out now."

Oh. Oh, that was beyond too much. That fucking bitch, trying to make him doubt Travis' heart. Travis' love, even though the big man hadn't said it yet.

"He's willing," Vincent said carefully, holding the fury deep inside. "He loves it here; don't misunderstand that. Why else would he still be here when there's a whole, wide world out there, right? But he..." Vincent pretended to be sharing a secret as he leaned closer, whispering more than speaking the rest. It wasn't even a lie. Not really, considering how long it had taken him to make Travis accept their future.

"He wants to be able to pay his own way, Maddy, and he doesn't have anything but that wretched old shack. We've talked about selling it, but..." Vincent shook his head yet again, bowing his neck in mock defeat. "The only one who might even be interested is that guy at the gas station. The one who's getting divorced. And there's no way he'd be able to pay what my Trav needs to clear in order to move."

Then Vincent forced himself to seem to perk up. "Of course, the bright side is, I can sell my place. That'll give us enough of a cushion to last, oh, *years* down here. Which means Travis won't have to worry about trying to get three hundred grand for his little place so he'll have something left after paying the bills for the specialist he saw back home, and... oh! We'll probably be able to get a house here in town, and won't that be fantastic? We can go shopping every day, Maddy; it'll be fabulous!"

He wasn't remotely surprised when Madeline Kendall offered her hasty regrets at running off less than five minutes later. He didn't even bother to comment upon her forgetfulness with regards to ordering an electric drill. Mostly because Vincent had a feeling that her forgotten appointment was really an urge to go tell her husband everything Vincent had said. And possibly collect Roddy from wherever the boy was lurking.

Fortunately, Vincent was fine with that. He was pretty sure the seeds he'd planted were already growing at a reasonable rate.

He ended up buying eighteen yards of heavy, coarse rope and two yards of the thinner, softer-fibered variety. Not because he actually thought he and Travis would use the less harsh braid, but because he wanted to see the look on his honey's face when Travis asked what it was for and Vincent answered him.

It was sure to be funny, Vincent thought with a smug grin. And maybe even fun, if Travis surprised him, which the man actually managed to do every now and again.

It was... awesome. And Vincent was going to do everything in his power to keep it going. First, all the way back to Boston, and then on and on. At the moment, though, he was more committed to getting back to Travis and kissing the man nearly unconscious.

There was nothing better to sweeten the memory of intolerant preacher's wife than Travis' tongue. And cock, Vincent thought with a grin. Assuming his honey hadn't been overdoing it, because if that seamed, damaged thigh was pulsing and red and hot again, Travis was *so* not getting another blow job. For hours.

As much as Vincent wanted to rush, he kept the SUV to two miles under the speed limit. There'd been a sheriff's department car trailing him every time he'd looked for the last few days, and he didn't want to give the law any reason to pull him over.

He'd still be back in Travis' arms soon, and that was good enough for him.

Travis was still blinking as he hung up his house phone, mostly because Maddy Kendall never called him unless she had yet another guy she thought might be perfect for him. Of course, he'd long since given up on expecting anything from her choices, since she apparently thought that all two men needed to build a healthy, happy relationship was the fact that they both shared a liking for cock.

He'd actually thought she'd found another 'prospect' for him when he'd answered the phone, which was probably why he was still so stunned after hearing her words.

"Roger and I would like you to come by for supper, Travis," she'd said simply, and damned if she hadn't sounded hopeful to him, for whatever reason. "You can bring your... friend, if you like, but we'd really prefer it if you came alone. Of course, that's entirely up to you. I know that you and Roger have never gotten along, so if you're at all worried, feel free to bring Vincent."

Of course he'd gotten all stubborn and manly, saying he didn't need backup to have dinner with a preacher and a woman, though he'd been a bit too polite to use those exact words. And while a small part of him was hoping Pastor Kendall had finally realized that what Travis did, and with whom, wasn't anybody's business but Travis' -- and now Vincent's -- well... Yeah, the chances of that were somewhere between slim and none.

And holy fuck! He'd basically just agreed to have dinner with the pastor, hadn't he? With Pastor Kendall and wife, and Roger Kendall hated Travis with a passion that burned like the very fires of hell. Travis knew it; mostly because the man had said so, in public and more than once. Hell, he'd even written a whole sermon about how it was fine to have hate in your heart for someone who was going against God's law.

The pastor actually repeated that sermon, word for word, every few months. Just to make sure nobody relaxed their guard, Travis figured. And he was going to eat with the man?

But Maddy would be there too, Travis reminded himself, and they were... well, not friends, exactly, but Maddy had always been decent to him, even if she had terrible taste in men. Her own and the ones she'd found for Travis.

So maybe it wouldn't be too bad, Travis told himself. Maybe Maddy was trying to get her husband to see that Travis wasn't the sort of danger Roger had obviously thought, especially now that Travis had a serious relationship going on. It was always possible, Travis figured. And Maddy had always been so damned nice to him, too. So maybe she was trying to smooth things over and show her husband that Travis really wasn't any sort of threat, perceived or otherwise, now that he was involved with Vincent.

"And moving," Travis murmured to himself, still staring at the phone. "I should probably tell Maddy and Pastor Kendall about that part, too." He'd have to work that into whatever passed for conversation over dinner. That he was moving to Boston with Vincent. Just thinking the words made him smile. Excited him, too, but yeah. Definitely smiling.

It still shocked him a little bit that Vinnie really cared about him, but Travis couldn't doubt it anymore. Hell, Vinnie was still there, wasn't he? Going on a week and a half, and the man was still in Alabama, still in Travis' bed every night and every morning. Still lit up like Travis didn't know what, whenever they were together again even after being only a room apart.

Travis had a feeling that he wore a very similar expression each time he saw Vinnie, too, though his lover had never pointed it out. And that was because... God. Jesus fucking Christ, Vinnie was right. No matter how or why, Travis had finally come around to accepting that they really were meant to be together. That Vinnie wasn't perfect, but was perfect for him. And Travis was about a hundred and ten percent sure that it went both ways.

He was also sure that Vinnie would insist on going with him to Maddy's special dinner, and that would pretty much destroy any credibility Travis had, after saying he'd show up on his own. Which left him in one of those rock-and-a-hard-place situations, Travis thought with a groan.

He could try to sneak out, which would have Vinnie pissed off and possibly not talking to Travis whether he succeeded in the sneaking or not. Or he could lie to Vinnie about where he was going and why, which would have Travis feeling like a huge sack of shit even before Vinnie found out and got all silent and pissed off anyway. Which Travis was sure would happen. He sucked at keeping secrets -- at least he did now that he was out of the Army -- and... yeah. If Vinnie lied to him, Travis knew he'd be beyond angry once he discovered the truth, too.

Besides, Travis admitted to himself, he'd feel too damned guilty if he lied to Vinnie. Or tried to, because there wasn't even a good chance that Vinnie would believe him. He always seemed to know when Travis was hiding something, after all.

"Well, shit. This kinda sucks," Travis grumbled as he grabbed his cane and levered himself from his chair.

"What's that, honey?" Vinnie said, grinning the way Travis liked so much as he strolled in from the bedroom. "Oh, I changed the sheets, but we're down to the last clean set." He moved quickly, and Travis was glad of it when that long, slender form pressed tightly against him. Vinnie kissed him slow and deep. "Mmmm... never get tired of that, Travis. Now, where was I before you attacked my lips like a wild animal? Oh, right. Sheets."

Travis laughed, but he'd noticed that he was doing a lot of that lately. For the last couple weeks, in fact. Vinnie just... made him happy, deep down, and that was fucking amazing. Travis really hadn't known how miserable he'd been until Vinnie had appeared in his life and gone ahead to change it.

Still, "Seems to me you're the one who just about ran over here to jam his tongue down my throat," Travis teased, fairly sure that Vinnie would like it. He usually seemed to, anyway. "Ain't complaining, of course. Just saying." Then Vinnie was blushing a little bit and Travis felt his own skin heating in response.

"Oh, whatever, stud," Vinnie said with a little laugh. "There was kissing. Kissing is good. Kissing leads to other, more strenuous activities, sometimes. Activities that have us making a pretty mess of your sheets. And speaking of sheets, which I was, if you'll recall -- since we're on the last set, I'm thinking it might be a good idea if I took them to that laundry in town?" Then Vinnie bit his lip and Travis held back a moan. He loved it when Vinnie did that. Hell, just seeing it made Travis hard, every single time.

"Uh-huh," Travis answered, fairly certain that there'd been a question of some kind in there. "Yeah, sure, whatever." Because he was too busy looking from that full bottom lip to Vinnie's groin to remember what it had been. Too busy watching the front of Vinnie's pants push outward, a little at a time, until there was an even more noticeable bulge than usual.

"Uh. The laundry," Travis added, licking his lips even as Vinnie stepped closer again, closing the few feet that had grown between them when the man had moved away after that kiss. And God, Vinnie should know better than to just walk up and kiss Travis hard like that. Or soft, like he sometimes did. Whatever. It always had Travis wanting, in any case, and maybe that was the point, Travis realized. Or else he was just a horny guy in his early thirties who had the hottest lover ever, and he should stop thinking about it and just be glad.

"How do you want to do this, baby?" Travis murmured, one hand wrapping around the back of Vinnie's neck while the other dropped the cane to fasten on one slim hip. His cock was pushing, pressing hard against his zipper, but he wasn't alone in that, because Vinnie was right up against him again, and Travis could feel that long, thin shaft. Could almost feel it pulsing, even through layers of denim and rayon and probably silk, if Vinnie was wearing those boxers Travis liked so much.

Vinnie pulled back a few inches, then grinned at him, and Travis felt it clear to his balls. That sudden, always welcome burst of happy and whole and 'I made that smile' that never failed to stun him.

"With you," Vinnie murmured before pressing even closer, which had Travis moaning like a stranded calf missing its momma, he figured. But that was fine. Not even embarrassing, because it was Vinnie pressed up against him. "Want to do this *with you*, Travis," Vinnie went on, the words sounding more like a happy sigh than anything else, and "Oh! We could come in our pants, honey! We haven't done that in a while, and I'm going to be doing laundry anyway, right?"

Travis would have laughed at his lover's logic, but he couldn't. Not while Vinnie was kissing him again, that slick, mobile tongue just racing through Travis' mouth. There were hands sliding up and down Travis' back under his T-shirt once Vinnie managed to pull it up enough. There was that slender, toned body, holding onto Travis', pushing against him, Vinnie's cock hard and thrusting alongside his own through their pants. Travis could nearly taste the way Vinnie's moans sounded, which was even better. Too much, maybe.

His hands shifted, slid, moved over soft, sensual fabrics, then Travis was gripping Vinnie's ass tightly, the twin globes of that round-muscled rear filling his palms. His fingers dug in, directing his lover's movements, and it was almost enough. His tongue stabbed deeper, battling Vinnie's

for a moment before Vinnie pulled away. Those hot, full lips latched on to Travis' neck before he could make a sound of complaint, though, so Travis just tilted his head back and groaned, hoping Vinnie could hear every bit of desire and need and pleasure he was feeling.

Then Vinnie bit him, strong teeth digging deep enough to nearly draw blood, and that was it. That was so far beyond enough that Travis lost himself, hips rocking, stuttering back and forth against Vinnie's hot, clothed body. And when he felt Vinnie shuddering against him and heard the sharp cry that was stifled by Travis' skin, Travis came.

He came in long, hard pulses, viscous seed exploding roughly in the confines of his jeans, and it wasn't until he started to fall backward and discovered the edge of the kitchen table there that Travis realized Vinnie had moved him those few feet. Even during their encounter, Vinnie had been thinking about what was best for him. Had managed, by whatever method, to maneuver them until Travis wouldn't end up hurt or on the floor by accident.

It was an important realization, and Travis knew it, but he would think about it later. Right then, he was too busy gasping, moaning, using his grip on Vinnie's ass to drag the man's lean body and perfect cock up against him. Too busy flexing his fingers around that muscled rear, shifting all of Vinnie back and forth, back and forth. Too busy tilting his head to latch on to one earlobe, sucking and biting and whispering the sweetest, filthiest things he could think of until that long body arched, Vinnie's mouth leaving Travis' skin to shout meaningless syllables to the ceiling.

"God..." Vinnie whispered a good five minutes later, and Travis was actually flattered that it had taken so long for his lover to catch his breath and be capable of speech. "That was... Christ, honey. We really need to do that more often, hmmm?"

Travis grinned against that long, pale hair, but he also nodded. "Oh, hell yeah, baby. Every single time it's laundry day." Because he fucking meant it. Travis was entirely sure that he wouldn't mind doing that again and again and again.

Then Vinnie was chuckling, his melodious little laugh vibrating against Travis' shoulder. "Have I mentioned that we have a washer and dryer at my place? It's in a little closet off the kitchen. *Every* day can be laundry day, honey."

Oh, Lord, Travis thought. He was so going to change his clothes at least three times a day once they got home.

It was only then, in that simple moment of post-orgasmic bliss, that Travis realized.

He meant Boston when he thought of home. Not the garage he'd renovated with his own hands. Not the town where he'd been born and brought up. Home was Boston and Vinnie and family and friends. Elliot. Jamie. David and Russell and Blessing. Even Russ and Blessing's other kids, Alicia and Joss, whom Travis had met at Elliot and Jamie's wedding. Home was Troy, who Travis figured he would always be friends with, and a couple of the other so-called dates Blessing had sent him on that hadn't gone quite as she'd hoped.

It felt strange, but also... right, in a way Travis couldn't explain even to himself. Frederick wasn't home. Probably hadn't been since his senior year of high school, now that he was thinking on it.

Frederick had been what he'd known, and it had been only the lure of the familiar that had kept him there. That and fear of the *unknown*, because he'd been scared shitless when he'd gotten out of the hospital with his leg all messed up.

But that had been then, Travis told himself, and he wasn't afraid any more. In fact, he was looking forward to the future, but in order to make it a good future -- the kind of future he was hoping for -- he needed to take one simple, definitive step. So he did. Travis took a deep breath, and he did.

He held Vinnie closer, tighter, his chin resting on one strong, cloth-covered shoulder. "We need to go a town or so away tomorrow, baby," he muttered. "It's time, Vinnie. Time to put this place up for sale. With a realtor who won't be more interested in fucking me over than getting me a fair deal. Then we can go home. To *our* home."

God, the way Vinnie grabbed him, holding him like the man would never let go, told Travis as much as he needed to know about Vinnie's feelings on the subject. It was... fucking awesome, really, and Travis made himself a silent promise to never fuck it up.

That decided, he really had no choice in what he said next.

"Uh... Madeline Kendall called me," Travis said carefully, then he swallowed hard and tried to smile when Vinnie pulled back and met his eyes, that moss-green gaze looking both curious and concerned. "She wants me to come to supper with her and that bastard husband of hers. Uh, I told her I would, baby. Alone." He cringed a little, hoping Vinnie wouldn't be mad. Of course, even if Vinnie was, it wouldn't hold a candle to the kind of furious the man would have been if he'd lied, Travis consoled himself.

But Vinnie didn't look mad at all. Just a little bit worried. Then "Wear your suit," Vinnie said, "and my blue tie. It brings out your eyes." And Travis blushed when he remembered the things Vinnie had suggested they do with that blue tie... and some rope from the hardware store, God help him. He was pretty sure Vinnie had been teasing, though. Like when Travis had gotten a little bit upset that Vinnie had thrown out his collection of old local band T-shirts, and Vinnie said something about deserving a spanking.

"I wasn't planning on showing up in sweats, baby," Travis finally said, one hand rising to push Vinnie's hair back behind a perfectly shaped ear. "Pastor Kendall hates me. I'm not stupid enough to give him even more ammunition against me. Against *us*." Because that was the truth, and Travis figured it was time he started admitting it. Not just to himself, but to Vinnie and everyone else. "Anything that bastard says about me, he means all of us. Every single gay man and woman in the world. So I'm not gonna give him any excuse to talk shit, y'know? But I need to handle this on my own, Vinnie. No matter how much I wish I could have you there with me, okay?"

God, he'd thought there would be a fight over that, but Travis was thrilled to find out he was wrong, because Vinnie just nodded and kissed him gently, then stood fully and started unbuttoning Travis' jeans.

"What?" Vinnie asked, clearly trying to look innocent and failing. "I said I'm doing laundry, and your pants are... wonderfully filthy. Of course, so are mine, but I promise you, honey. If you were to help me take them off, I wouldn't object." Then those so-expressive brows waggled a bit and Travis was laughing.

His hands shifted, moving to Vinnie's shoulders, and Travis shook his head. "If I help you with that," he explained simply, "we won't ever leave the house, baby. Now, step back so I can peel my way out of the swamp in my jeans, and we'll both do what we have to do, okay?"

Vinnie sighed, nodding and moving away, just a little at first. Just enough to grab Travis' cane and prop it against the table beside him. "You're sure you're going to be all right, honey?" Vinnie said, and Travis couldn't find a single bit of him that resented Vinnie's asking.

"Gonna be fine, baby," he answered with a smile. "I just wish I had a fucking clue about why Maddy's asshole of a husband wants me to have dinner with them. That part of it is kinda freaking me out."

"Well, no matter what," Vinnie said, the words coming over his shoulder as the man walked toward the bedroom door and clean pants, presumably. "Turn down their first offer. Trust me, honey. They'll make a better one."

"Uh... okay," Travis called out as Vinnie disappeared through the doorway. "If you say so, baby." He had no idea of what Vinnie was talking about, but Travis figured it didn't really matter.

He'd go to the Kendall home. He'd even pretend to eat, though he was feeling nervous enough -- even with the amazing orgasm he'd just experienced -- that he probably wouldn't manage more than a bite or two.

He would listen to whatever it was Maddy had to say, while trying to figure out what it had to do with Pastor Kendall, and then he'd come back to his old service station and Vinnie. Then he would let Vinnie remind him of all the reasons that existed for the both of them to leave Travis' God-awful hometown.

He wouldn't miss Frederick at all, either. Hell, the only thing Travis would miss was Maddy Kendall. She'd been nicer than anyone else, even his own parents. But they could talk on the phone or something. As long as she wasn't trying to set him up with some eighty-year-old, anyway.

Because he didn't need setting up anymore, Travis told himself with a grin. He was set. And up. He was going home, for fuck's sake, and he was going home with the best-looking man he'd ever

seen. The best man he'd ever known, too. That Vinnie cared for him was something Travis didn't think he'd ever get used to, but there it was.

He'd gotten all kinds of lucky. Now he just needed to keep himself from fucking it up.

"All right, honey, I'm off," Vinnie announced, a big sack of what must be dirty linens over one shoulder. "You planning on actually giving me those jeans, or are you trying out some new alternative to waxing? Dried come and denim. It'll probably hurt more than having Sven rip off strips of hair with hot wax. But it's up to you."

Vinnie was grinning while Travis dragged the sodden cotton from his body, but Travis didn't care. He was more interested in the 'Sven' Vinnie had mentioned. Still, he wasn't going to ask right then because he was on a schedule, damn it. Though the mention of waxing did explain how smooth Vinnie's chest was, as well as other parts. And suddenly, the idea of some random -- or not so random, seeing as Vinnie knew the bastard's name -- guy touching Travis' lover was something that needed to be addressed. But again, not right then. Just soon.

"See you later, baby," Travis murmured, pushing come-damp jeans into Vinnie's hand, even as he pressed his lips lightly to his lover's. "And yes. I'll wear the suit. And I won't forget what you said, okay? I should be back by... well, I might even beat you here. I doubt I'll want to stick around Pastor Kendall's for coffee and dessert."

Another few moments and Vinnie was gone, driving off in that SUV Travis would never admit to being jealous of.

"Okay," he told himself out loud, just to break the silence that he'd enjoyed before. Before Vinnie. "Shower, so I don't smell like sex. Suit. Dinner. And shit! Some sort of hostess gift! What the fuck do I do for that?" Because it was just ill-mannered to show up for dinner without some sort of token. Travis' mother had drilled that into his skull by the time he'd been ten, mostly with her bitching about how so-and-so hadn't brought her anything.

Oh, well. He'd figure something out. He would. Even if it meant he had to stop on the way.

"You wash a lot of sheets, faggot." The smug, sneering voice came from right behind him, but Vincent knew who it was without even looking. There was no mistaking that distinctive voice. "Daddy says anyone who needs clean sheets more than once a week is sinning more than God likes, and you've been in here three times since you got to town. With way more than one set."

Well, of course the pastor would say that; probably because the man couldn't get it up without an engraved invitation from the God Pastor Kendall seemed to love so much.

"Well, faggot? Ain't you got nothin' to say? Don't you care that you and that McRayne pervert are gonna go straight to hell for bein' fornicatin' sodomites? Wait. You don't. You don't even care that God hates you."

Vincent sighed and dropped three quarters into the machine, then closed the lid on the washer. "Look, Roddy, that's enough," he said bluntly as he turned around and leaned back against the filling machine. "I understand that you're fascinated. I really do. I don't even blame you. I can't begin to imagine what it must have been like for you, growing up in this town, knowing all the while that if you ever admitted the truth, they'd treat you just like they did Travis. And Elliot. So it has to be fascinating for you to see me and know I'm happy in a way you'll probably never be."

He almost felt badly for putting such a look of naked fear and reluctant longing on the young man's face, because that was what it looked like... and it was right in that moment that Vincent realized. Roddy Kendall couldn't be more than twenty-six or so, which would have made him... Jesus. Twelve years old, at most, when he'd outed Travis and Jim; maybe even younger. And even with the man's father being who and what he was, Vincent couldn't quite picture a little kid running off to spread the news maliciously.

"God, what happened to you?" Vincent whispered, somehow sure Roddy would hear him over the sounds of water and spin cycles and dryers clanging away. "What did he do? Your father, I mean. Did you go running home that day, Roddy, feeling all excited because you'd seen them, seen Travis and Jim kissing, and you suddenly knew what it all meant?"

Roddy was just standing there, his mouth hanging open. With shock, Vincent thought. But the guy's eyes... oh, they looked terrified. Like Roddy thought Vincent was reading his mind or something, and was afraid of what Vincent might see.

"I bet that's it," Vincent went on, keeping his voice to a low murmur. "You were happy. Thinking that you knew, all of a sudden, why you weren't chasing skirts the way your friends did. So you told your father because he's your dad, and dads love their kids no matter what. Want them to be happy, even."

Vincent frowned slightly at the tiny nod he got in response, though he doubted Roddy was aware of moving even that much. "Except he didn't, did he? He wasn't happy and didn't want you to be, either. And you've been following in his footsteps ever since, trying to lock the barn after the horse ran away, or whatever that saying is. You've gotten so used to acting like a homophobic asshole that you don't have a single clue about how to be yourself anymore."

"I... y-you don't understand," Roddy whispered. "It's so easy for you. You and Travis and Elliot. Hell, he ran off just as soon as he could and left us all behind! He never even told me what he was, and now he went and married some doctor? Daddy wouldn't even let me go to college!"

Well, of course not, Vincent thought with a sad sigh. If Daddy-dearest had let Roddy out of his sight, who knew what the boy might have gotten up to. Drinking, carousing, meeting other guys who were from places where being gay wasn't the kiss of social death. And one or two of them might even have thought Roddy was cute or something.

No, Pastor Kendall wouldn't want his gay son to be in any environment that was open-minded, and that pretty much took college off the list of possibilities. At least, that's what Vincent assumed was behind the pastor's refusal. It seemed like a good bet.

"You could still go, you know," Vincent said carefully. "To college, I mean. I don't know what your grades were like..." But Roddy was shaking his head so fast that hanks of uneven hair were actually flying.

"I'm too old, and I don't got any money. Daddy says I got a life here, anyway. Wouldn't be right to leave everythin' I got just so's I can hang some piece of paper on my wall."

Yeah, Roddy had a life, all right. A life that kept the young man shuttered and miserable and unlikely to ever know any sort of happiness or even contentment. Vincent was fairly sure that Roddy knew as much, too, on some level. Why else would Pastor Kendall's only child be taking a chance by standing there, having an actual conversation with exactly the kind of person the whole damned town hated?

Vincent couldn't say that, of course, because it wasn't his place. He also didn't want Roddy to start thinking Vincent was attracted to him, which was a possibility, what with as sheltered as Roddy was, and the fact that they were both gay. Even a gentle rejection might have the guy crawling so far to the back of his own personal closet, he'd never even crack the door open again.

So Vincent approached what he would say with logic, concentrating on being sensible, rather than trying to play on Roddy's apparently screwed-up and twisted emotions. Fortunately, Vincent realized, he had the perfect example to use.

"Look, I know you probably want to get out of here, but let me say this, okay?" Vincent said, crossing his arms and trying to look like he was giving Roddy an earful, just in case anybody happened to glance in through the front window of the laundry. The younger man was darting glances toward the door, which spelled out his worry pretty clearly to Vincent. Roddy nodded, though, which was good enough.

"You mentioned Elliot. Said he got married. Well, he did. He and Jamie are actually friends of mine from work." And that was close enough to the truth, Vincent decided. Didn't require a whole lot of back story that wasn't any of Roddy's business.

"I'm bringing them up because you said you're too old for college. Jamie's step-dad, David, around your age when he went back to school, and he didn't have any money, either. He got loans and things. The government actually has programs for that." Vincent chuckled a little at the way Roddy was blinking. Like Roddy had never even heard of such a thing.

"I asked him once," Vincent admitted, "whether he'd been scared about having to pay all that money back, and he just smiled a little and told me it motivated him to do well. In school and after." Then Vincent shrugged, raising just one shoulder. "Never let anyone else tell you what you're supposed to want, Roddy. Because chances are, they're really only trying to make you do

what *they* want. And if there's one thing a pastor should understand, it's the exercising of free will. That's all."

Roddy looked confused to Vincent, like maybe he wasn't sure of what to say or do. But he was still glancing back and forth between Vincent and the door, so Vincent shook his head and took pity on the man.

"Go," he said. "You wouldn't want anyone to wonder what we've been talking about, hmmm? And don't worry. I know you're still going to be calling me names. Be warned, though. I'll likely start saying you're a hillbilly throwback who's just bitter because he doesn't have a twelve-year-old bride in the kitchen making dinner and working on his third defective baby."

Vincent waited out the surprised-sounding laugh that earned him, then narrowed his eyes in actual warning. "Oh, and if you ever -- and I do mean ever -- paint racist, homophobic slogans on anyone's home again and I hear about it? I'll find you, Roddy, and I'll kick your ass. Understand?"

Then Roddy was nodding and hauling ass toward the front door of the laundry, and Vincent sighed almost despairingly. How was it that he'd ended up almost liking the creep who'd defaced Travis' place and had looked at Vincent like he was an evilly sexy bug every time they'd passed on the street? It was... weird, as Travis would say. Entirely bizarre, in fact. But there it was.

"Um, hey," Roddy said, his voice startling Vincent for a second because it came from much closer than the door, "about Madeline. She, um... she doesn't really like you. She just wants you to take Travis and get the fuck out of her town. I thought you oughta know." And with that, Roddy was gone, sparing Vincent the decision of whether or not to tell Roddy that he'd already known that.

"Nothing would make me happier," Vincent muttered to himself as the washer behind him entered its first spin cycle. "God, I'm going to be *thrilled* to get my honey out of this horrendous place. It might be pretty on the outside, but underneath, it's a festering, oozing, maggot-filled sore." And that pretty much summed it up. He didn't have a single other thing to say about Fred-neck, Alabama. Or Madeline Kendall, for that matter.

Travis' mind was still spinning. Reeling. Dancing a fucking jig, if he were being honest.

He actually had no idea of what had just happened, but he was sitting in his truck outside the Kendall house. He had a belly half-full of shockingly tender and tasty meat, as well as the lingering taste of some sort of white cake with raspberries and white chocolate shavings that he just knew had to be from that crazy-expensive bakery halfway to Birmingham.

He also had a contract in his pocket, and a check, both signed by Pastor Kendall on behalf of the church. The contract had been notarized by Bubba Stilton, who worked at the bank part-time and was the only notary public in town. Bubba was also one of the two realtors who attended the

pastor's church, but he'd waived his commission in Travis' case, which was fucking weird. Travis hadn't even known he *had* a case.

The Kendalls -- even Maddy, which had surprised Travis for a minute -- had waited until he'd signed everything. Waited until Bubba notarized and witnessed and did whatever other arcane things were involved, with a seal and some sort of log book, before announcing that Travis had just agreed to being moved out and gone within three days. Bubba would expedite the closing with the bank, since all the papers were in order, just like that.

He'd been sort of baffled by the apparent glee in Maddy's voice, though her semi-apologetic, "I know it's short notice, but the sooner we're living in a faggot-free, Godly town, the happier we'll all be, don't you think?" had cleared up a few things.

Travis wanted to be upset, or even disappointed that the woman he'd considered to be at least friendly had turned out to be the exact opposite, but he couldn't. Not when Madeline and Roger Kendall's hatred was allowing him to do what he and Vinnie had already decided on.

They could leave just as soon as they got the truck loaded up, Travis realized, grinning. They could hit the road, head north and east, and never look back. And when they got to Boston, Travis would be able to pay his share.

He had a sneaking suspicion that Vinnie already knew what had happened. In fact, he was just about entirely sure that his lover had orchestrated the whole thing, though Travis didn't know how or when. He didn't care, either.

It was enough that Vinnie's words -- "don't accept their first offer; they'll make a better one" -- had proven true. Besides, Travis decided, still smiling as he started his truck and headed through town, he'd get the full story out of Vinnie later, even if it meant using the tie Travis was wearing, and that rope Vinnie had teased him about the other day.

He was nearing the end of Buck Head Drive when he saw Roddy Kendall sneaking around, but Travis was in too good of a mood to even growl. Instead, he grinned and honked his horn, waving through the open driver's side window of his truck. He could have died, just about, when Roddy glanced around, then offered a tiny wave of his own.

Jesus fucking Christ, what was going on in Frederick, all of a sudden?

Pastor Kendall and Maddy buying his place. Roddy Kendall actually acknowledging Travis with something other than a sneer and shouted 'faggot'? It was... fuck. It was bizarre, to borrow a word from Vinnie. Damned bizarre. Then he saw Vinnie's rental SUV parked at the curb, and Travis stopped thinking about weirdness. Or the reasons for the weirdness, anyway.

He pulled up a few feet behind Vinnie's ride, then slid from the cab of his truck, cane at the ready, though his leg was feeling pretty damned... not too bad. Not good, and worse than it had even a few months earlier after about the same amount of activity, but not so bad that he had to hobble, and that was a relief. He wanted to sweep into the Laundromat and carry Vinnie off, but

limping a normal amount was okay, too. Wouldn't have Vinnie hustling Travis home to care for Travis' leg rather than his cock, in any case, and that was the important part.

"You still here, baby?" Travis called out as he opened the door, and yeah, he didn't give a shit if there was anyone else inside. He was so fucking out of Fred-neck, it wasn't even funny. Hell, Travis realized, he might even kiss Vinnie on the street later. Except he'd heard about what had happened to Elliot's father-in-law, Russell, a couple years earlier, and that was up in Boston where things were better and where not *everyone* had a gun, so maybe not.

Then Vinnie was right there in front of him, that pretty grin Travis loved so much just lighting up Vinnie's face, and Travis reached out, dragged the slender body up against his own, and damn the consequences. Sometimes a man just had to do what seemed right, and holding Vinnie tightly against him? Oh, that would never feel anything but perfectly necessary and desired.

"Well, hey there, honey," Vinnie murmured, pulling back just a little, but not enough to leave his arms. And that pretty much answered the question of whether there was anyone else in the laundry, Travis figured. "That was quick," Vinnie went on as one hand pushed inside the front of Travis' suit jacket. "How was dinner?"

Travis chuckled and shook his head. "Fast. Fancy. Profitable. I'll tell you more back at the house. So come on, Vinnie. We're burning prime sex-time."

Yeah, he'd been expecting that skeptical eyebrow-raise. That didn't mean Travis wasn't loving it, though. In fact, Travis pulled Vinnie closer, right up against his body again to let the man feel just how much he was enjoying that gimlet stare. "Come on, baby. You. Me. A long, hot bath..." Followed by a long, hard fuck, but Travis didn't need to say that part.

He watched the heat fill Vinnie's eyes. Moaned quietly when he felt that long, thin cock growing against his own. Then Travis found himself standing there, arms empty, cock trying to follow the waking friend it had missed for the last couple hours. "Vinnie?"

"The sheets still have another twenty minutes or so in the dryer, honey," Vinnie said, and Travis growled.

"Leave them," he ordered. "We don't need them for your... our bed back home. They're all raggedy. You said there's already sheets on my bed, and we're leaving tomorrow. So just leave the fucking things, baby."

Travis saw the small 'O' of surprise that Vinnie's lips made, and it only had him growling more. Then Vinnie was opening one of the dryers and pawing through what looked like an endless sea of worn cotton and Travis had had just about enough. "Vinnie, I swear..."

"Two seconds, honey," Vinnie gasped after looking over his shoulder, probably noticing just how serious he was, Travis figured. Then a damp pair of jeans was flying at him, followed by black slacks, and Vinnie was slamming the dryer closed. "There. Let's go, Trav. We'll be fine

without the sheets, but I love those jeans on you. They fit your ass just right. There's no way in hell -- or Frederick, Alabama -- that I could ever leave them behind."

"I don't give a good God-damn about a pair of fucking jeans, baby," Travis muttered, just as soon as he'd pulled Vinnie close again. "As long as you ain't gonna leave *me* behind, I'm good. Got it?" And yeah, that was about as true as anything could ever be, which Vinnie clearly understood, because Travis got one soft, almost chaste kiss before Vinnie pulled away, taking both pairs of pants with him.

"Got it, stud," Vinnie announced with another one of those grins. "So let's go pack the truck. After that whole bath thing."

And that was a plan Travis could live with, so he just smiled back. "House. Tub. Bed. Packing. Then driving in the morning. Let's go."

He turned, leading the way back to their vehicles, feeling Vinnie's eyes on him like a hot, heavy weight the entire time, and yeah, Travis told himself again. He could definitely live with this.

No problem.

"We should really be moving those boxes, honey," Vincent murmured against Travis' chest, but he wasn't making any real effort to move just yet himself. In fact, Vincent wasn't in any hurry to even shift, to let Travis' softening cock slip from his body. Not until he had to, which would be soon enough, damn it. There was still the condom to deal with, after all.

Vincent grinned against Travis' skin; felt the rumble vibrating in his lover's chest. "Yeah. Yeah, I know, baby," Travis agreed on a sigh. "And it's not that I want to stay here. I just don't feel like letting you go yet, Vinnie."

Oh, he did have himself a sweet, sweet man. And a tender one, because Travis was running those big, rough hands up and down Vincent's spine, just touching him, stroking him like Vincent was made of silk or something.

"Might be hard driving all the way home like this, Trav," Vincent said, chuckling as he turned just a little to kiss Travis' collarbone. "But what the hell. I'm willing to give it a try if you are."

"We'll move soon, Vinnie," Travis answered, though Vincent thought he could hear the tiniest traces of a yawn in that wonderful voice. "Soon. Promise."

And it was a good thing that 'soon' was such a relative term, Vincent decided a little while later, because once Vincent finally shifted and let that beautiful latex-covered cock slip from his body, as soon as they'd gotten rid of the condom and curled up together for just a second, Travis was out like a light.

Of course, that meant Vincent would be able to get started with loading the truck on his own, and if he just happened to get most of the heavier boxes moved before Travis even woke up? Well, that meant there was less chance of Travis injuring that poor, damaged leg.

They really did have a hell of a drive ahead of them. It would just suck if Travis was in any more pain than he had to be, especially when Vincent could prevent it.

It was more fun driving with Vinnie than it had been on his own. Since the Birmingham airport, anyway, because Vincent had followed Travis' truck with the SUV until then, and that had been a special brand of hell for Travis. He'd almost sprained his neck from looking in the rearview, then turning around to make sure it was Vinnie's SUV behind him and not one that just looked like it.

And a small part of him -- very, very small, thanks to Vinnie's unwavering attention and affection over the last couple weeks -- had to keep looking, just in case Vinnie suddenly wised up and decided to drive off in search of a real man with two good legs and no scars.

But that had been hours earlier, and now Vinnie was right there beside him in the cab of the truck, those long fingers fiddling with the radio knobs as the station they'd been listening to started to fuzz out. "So where are all the weird roadside attractions?" Vinnie demanded, and that grin was just teasing enough that Travis couldn't help laughing.

"Like what? This may be the South, baby, but it ain't like we've got gator farms and shit along the Interstate." Travis laughed again. "That kind of stuff is mostly in the *deepest* South. Louisiana and Florida, I guess. Or were you looking for something like Hillbilly Hideaway? Because that's just a myth."

But Vincent was shaking his head and sliding closer on the old vinyl seat, and Travis was fine with that. He even put his arm up along the back to let Vinnie in closer.

"I don't know what I'm looking for, honey," Vinnie announced happily, "but this is my first real road trip that doesn't involve my sister. I guess I thought there'd be, you know. Bizarre things around. The world's biggest ball of yarn. Longest paperclip chain. Biggest wad of chewed gum. Something like that." Vinnie shrugged; Travis could feel it against his side, just like he could feel that elegant hand sliding onto his thigh.

Travis groaned quietly and eased up on the gas pedal a little bit. "You keep moving your hand up my leg like that, baby, and there's gonna be a roadside attraction, all right. For everyone who drives by after I pull over." And God, he shouldn't have even thought that, because just imagining Vinnie touching him -- hand, mouth, whatever -- in the car like that, with Travis' cock hanging out? Had him about ready to pull over anyway.

Jesus, Travis wanted to look at his lover. Wanted to see whether Vincent thought that was funny, or maybe found the whole idea as hot as Travis suddenly did. Because Travis did think it was

hot, in that sort of nervous, stomach-flipping way that generally struck him when he was thinking on doing something new. In this case, something new that could easily get them both thrown in jail, if they weren't careful.

Then Vinnie spoke, and sure there was laughter in that tone, but it was also heated. Travis had heard it enough times to recognize it. Fuck, sometimes he thought he'd recognized Vinnie's horny voice before he'd learned to know Vinnie's teasing voice, or even the man's 'I thought it was obvious' tone.

"We should probably find one of those quaint little rest stops soon, honey," Vinnie suggested, and yeah. There was desire right there for Travis to hear. It didn't hurt that Vinnie's hand was still moving, either, grazing denim on its quest to... fuck, to cup Travis' cock through straining jeans.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Travis groaned, his body trying to press up against Vinnie's palm, even while his brain tried to pay attention to driving. "Fuck the rest stop," he growled, taking the exit they'd almost passed already. He was sure the guy in the semi right behind them was flipping them off, but Travis didn't care. Whoever it was shouldn't have been following so close, anyway.

Vincent was laughing again, or laughing more, because Travis didn't think the musical sound had ever stopped. "You're kidding, right? Travis! Tell me you're kidding!"

"Not even a little, baby," Travis ground out, taking the first right he came to, then a left, then a right again, until he pulled the truck up behind what looked like some sort of dilapidated old shed. Probably part of the railroad that had once gone through wherever the hell they were, since there were overgrown tracks thirty or so feet away. "We're on our way home, and you're touching me, making me crazy. So you say stop, and I'm for damned sure gonna stop. Especially for this, Vinnie. Unless... unless *you* were kidding."

But Vinnie's hands were right there, opening Travis' button and zip carefully, which derailed any doubts Travis might have started to feel. And now that he could actually look at his lover, Travis couldn't see anything on that pretty face other than surprise and want and maybe even a little bit of need. It was fucking amazing to know that he made Vinnie yearn. Every single time, it amazed him.

"Mmmm..." Vinnie purred, those moss-green eyes just shining at him, "We're going to make such a pretty mess, honey." Then those long fingers were pushing inside Travis' open jeans, helping his cock pop out into the still air of the truck, and when Vinnie ran one fingernail down, barely grazing Travis' thick, swollen flesh, Travis moaned.

"Oh, God. Shit, Vinnie." Because it already felt too damned good, and Vincent was barely even touching him. "Gonna be quick, baby," Travis added, not sure if it was a warning or a promise. Then Vinnie gave him what Travis thought was the wickedest, most adoring smile he'd ever seen.

Travis wasn't sure whether he'd imagined Vinnie's murmured "oh, good," mostly because he was too busy staring as Vinnie twisted that long, slender body until those long legs were somehow

folded in the passenger side well while Vinnie's body stretched across the seat. It was damned close to the position Travis figured someone would have to be in to...

"Oh, God. Vinnie. Baby. You're gonna hurt yourself like that..."

"I'm not the one with the bad leg, honey, so I guess you're going to have to trust me. This is going to do a lot of things, but hurting me isn't one of them." And Travis didn't have words to answer that. Not when Vinnie's fingers wrapped around his base, and definitely not when he felt that hot tongue slide across his tip.

"Vinnie!" Travis tried to groan, but it came out as a whimper, and that was fine, he decided, unable to be any more rational than, "God. Fuck, baby. So good..."

Another soft purr answered him, and Vinnie was opening up, taking Travis' cock into that wet, slick haven. Travis had already known his lover sucked like a damned Hoover, but this was different. It was so much... more, out here in the truck with nothing but glass between them and the sky. Nothing but hope and a decrepit shack between them and the possibility of prying eyes. It was a little bit scary, but so profound and intense and big. So... real. Because Vinnie didn't have unsafe sex -- of the kind that could get him thrown in jail -- anymore, but he was for damned sure blowing Travis in what could be called public, and that, more than anything else, told Travis just how serious Vinnie was about him. About them. Together.

That hot, wet mouth moved on him, pushing lower, taking more with each sucking pull, and Vinnie's hand was holding his prick steady for those tight lips, and Travis had to look. Couldn't not look, even with having no memory of when he'd closed his eyes. So Travis did it. He opened his eyes and looked down into his lap.

God, he was going to come in about a second, because Vinnie looked perfect there, that pretty mouth sliding up and down, up and down, green eyes staring up at him, shining even in the shade of the shack, and Vinnie was beautiful. Just fucking perfect. In fact, the only thing that wasn't right about the image was the tidy braid that was taunting Travis with its restrained glory.

Less than a minute had Vinnie's hair free, flowing over Travis' lap, and that was better. Better still was when his fingers tangled in the silken mass, holding it tightly, keeping it away from Vinnie's face.

"God, baby," Travis groaned again, hips rising just a bit, meeting Vinnie's downward move. And then Vinnie was pulling away, pulling off for just a bare moment. "I want..." Jesus, Travis didn't even know.

"Do it, Travis," Vinnie murmured, his voice sounding husky and raw and sure. "Do it, honey. I want it all." And that mouth was on him again, Vinnie moving faster this time, harder. Those gold-tinged cheeks were hollowed, Vinnie's tongue running strong circles around his tip and then against Travis' shaft, and Travis couldn't do anything but what his lover had demanded.

His fingers tightened in those near-white strands of hair, and when Vinnie started another slide down, Travis stopped him at halfway, his own hips punching up roughly, pressing deeper and harder into his lover's mouth, then his throat.

He listened as carefully as he could to the sounds Vinnie was making. Just as soon as it sounded -- felt -- like Vinnie wasn't enjoying it, he would back off, but Vinnie wasn't doing anything like that. In fact, Travis noticed with a deep, low moan, Vinnie was pulling that one hand away, letting Travis push harder, deeper, and Vinnie's fingers, all of them, were holding on to the open front of Travis' pants, like the man was trying to rip them away.

Then Vinnie did something, Travis didn't know what, but that tight, hot throat opened and Vinnie took Travis in fully -- to the hilt -- and that was almost enough. Almost too much. Vinnie did it again, using Travis' moment of stunned disbelief to slide down until Travis could feel that sharp nose in his coarse, curly hairs, and Vinnie swallowed, the vibrations when Vinnie moaned driving Travis that needed hairsbreadth further.

He was coming, just like that, balls throbbing, pulsing, emptying wildly and pushing what felt like an endless stream of come from his cock. Then Vinnie pulled back quickly and Travis thought maybe he should have warned his lover, because while Vinnie always sucked him to completion, the position they were in might make it difficult, and...

Vinnie clearly didn't have an issue, because that mouth didn't leave him. It just... latched on tight, right there below the glans, and Vinnie's amazing, wonderful, perfect tongue started flicking back and forth over Travis' tiny slit. Vinnie's hands were on his skin, though Travis didn't know when they'd left his pants. One was inside Travis' jeans, fingers rolling his balls, while the other pumped almost roughly at the rest of Travis' shaft, and Travis heard it, felt it, when Vinnie rumbled softly, happily, at pulling still more spurts of come from him, taking it all in with obvious enjoyment.

Travis figured he was still looking kind of stunned when Vinnie pulled away. He for damned sure was, though. Stunned. Shaken. Staggered. And feeling completely, unquestionably boneless and blessed. "Wh-what about you, baby?" he managed, swallowing hard when Vinnie grinned and licked his lips with clear enjoyment. "I mean, let me..." Please, God, let him.

"So now you know why I always wear dark pants when I'm with you, honey," Vinnie answered, still sounding a bit hoarse, but so fucking relaxed and pleased with himself. "And underwear. Underwear means a whole other layer to... soak through, which comes in handy sometimes. But I wouldn't say no to stopping somewhere soon. It'd be good to clean up a bit."

Vinnie somehow untwisted himself from what Travis just knew had to be an uncomfortable position. Then Vinnie kissed him slow and deep, letting Travis taste himself in that amazing mouth, and it was beyond good. It was... Jesus, Travis thought, if this was what life was going to be like with Vinnie, then God must love gay men more than anyone else, and Travis in particular.

"Okay, baby," Travis answered, grinning as he retraced the route he'd taken from the highway. "We've been driving for a while, anyway. Maybe we should find a motel and settle in for the night." Because he was for damned sure going to see to it that Vinnie got cleaned up. With Travis' tongue, in point of fact. And then, well, then they'd just have to get good and messy again.

Part Four

Oh, God, it had been fun to make that long drive with Travis a few weeks earlier. Even getting stuck in rush hour traffic around York, Pennsylvania and NYC hadn't been anything like as horrible and frustrating as it would have been on his own, and Vincent knew it.

Hell, they'd talked and flirted and shared stories about their lives, and Vincent was entirely sure that he'd never known anyone as well as he knew Travis after all that. Of course, Vincent was equally certain that Travis knew more about him now than anybody else, even his sister Angela.

Vincent thought there might be a rest stop somewhere in the last eight hundred miles that they hadn't christened in their own way, but not for lack of trying.

Even with all that, though, it was damned good to be home from the restaurant. Fucking amazing to walk in to his apartment and see not just his own things, but *their* things, all mixed together in a way that shouldn't have worked, but did.

"Hey, honey, you home?" Vincent called out as he set his keys, phone, and wallet on the table by the door. "I have good news!" Although Travis might not think so, considering. Still, Vincent was prepared to be a hard-ass, if that was what it took.

"He's in here, Vincent," and okay, that was Jamie's voice. Coming from the bedroom, which was bizarre. And a little bit worrisome, really, because while Travis and Jamie were family, by marriage, Vincent hadn't thought they'd gotten that friendly in the week since he and Travis had gotten home.

"Jesus, what's wrong?" Vincent demanded, feeling just as shaky as he was sure he sounded. "Honey? What happened?" Because Travis was lying on their bed with what looked like a huge ice pack on his thigh, and the way that scarred face was tight, hard, made it clear to Vincent that his lover was in some serious pain. "Jesus fucking Christ!"

Vincent didn't remember crossing the room. He only knew he'd moved when he found himself sitting on the edge of the bed, one hand resting on Travis' tense cheek while the other basically fluttered, he was so afraid to touch anything that might hurt.

"It's nothing, baby," Travis muttered, but Vincent could tell how hard his man was trying to be strong. "I'm fine."

Jamie snorted, and thank God there was someone else there who could recognize bullshit when he heard it. "Jamie?" he said, deliberately arching one brow in an effort to make his request more of a demand than anything else.

"Your boyfriend, there, decided to get in one of those strange redneck wrestling matches with my husband," Jamie announced, sounding for all the world exactly like Russell. Faster with the speaking, but just like his dad. "Unfortunately for Travis, after he got a good shot at Elliot's eye,

Elliot ended up going down. In the process, he knocked your boyfriend to the floor and somehow landed a boot on Travis' bad leg."

Vincent could feel his eyes narrowing. Even knew he was starting to glare. "Mmm-hmmm. And?"

"It's no big deal, Vinnie. I swear. I'm fine, okay?" Travis was saying, while Jamie shook his head again. And while it made him feel a little bit like a traitor, Vincent wasn't buying Travis' words.

"You're fine, Travis?" he demanded, well aware of the fact that his voice was rising to an almost hysterical pitch. "You're in bed, which I usually enjoy, but there's an *ice pack* on *your leg*! And you look like you're in fucking agony, so don't even bother with saying you're fine! You're not fucking fine, and we both know it!"

Vincent forced himself to take a few deep, slow breaths, still staring hard into Travis' pained eyes. "All right," he said a few moments later, "the screaming queen portion of this conversation is over." Then Vincent placed two fingers on Travis' lips. "That doesn't mean you get to talk yet, honey. I'm still waiting for Jamie to get to the 'and.'"

"And." Jamie sighed, then shook his head at Travis. "Sorry, buddy, but Vincent's scarier than you." A frown crossed Jamie's face, so quickly Vincent almost missed it. "And... Travis seemed to be fine at first. He got up on his own, was walking around a little. I was more worried about El's black eye, to tell you the truth. Then Travis made this sound and sort of... fell over. On the couch, not the floor again. But he was holding his leg and then it started swelling, and... Well, you know how these McRayne men can be."

Vincent nodded, still holding Travis' lips closed gently, though he was pissed off at him. "Stubborn as fuck," he agreed.

"Yeah. So he wouldn't let us take him to the hospital. He swore he was 'fine.' He just wanted to come home. But he didn't make it up the stairs, Vincent. It's a damned good thing I train with Elliot, or you'd have found us both in a heap downstairs when you got home."

"Hmmm... I see," Vincent murmured, mind going a mile a minute. "So you got him set up with ice and waited for me? I... thanks, Jamie. I really do appreciate it, though Elliot possibly deserves a spanking. It depends on how this turns out." He turned to Travis again and dropped his fingers from those tight lips, trying to look stern rather than freaked and worried and, oh yeah, still pissed. "This would be a good time for you to show me what you've managed to do to yourself, honey. I'm already furious, so chances are, I won't get any madder. More mad. Whichever."

Vincent took one look at the massive, deep purple swelling under the ice pack, then closed his eyes, counting to ten and swallowing hard with each number just to keep himself from vomiting. "Jamie," he said, amazed by how calm his own voice sounded while his insides were twisting and cramping. "I left my phone by the door. Would you be a love and get it for me, please?"

"Vinnie," Travis said, just as soon as Jamie was out of the bedroom, "it was an accident. I'll be..."

Vincent growled, hands clenching into fists on his own thighs. "I swear to God, Travis McRayne, if the next word out of your mouth is 'fine,' I'll rip off your *good* leg and beat you to death with it. Just shut the fuck up and keep that ice pack on it. The bad one. Leg. You... fuck, you know what I mean." Then Jamie was back, and Vincent didn't even need to look at his phone. He just opened it up and speed-dialed two.

"Marcy," he said a few seconds later, "it's Vincent. I want you to look over at table one-oh-three and tell me if there's a very distinguished looking, gray-haired man there. Blue suit, apricot-colored tie. He'll be with a much younger, brunette woman in pink." Vincent sighed with relief when the girl on the phone said there was. "Good. Now, I need you to put me on hold and ask him -- very politely -- if he'll be kind enough to speak with me for just a moment. Thanks."

The minute and a half or so of canned Muzak was incredibly annoying, and Vincent made a mental note to speak with his partners about finding an alternative. Of course, he admitted to himself, he wasn't in the best mood to judge right then, either, so maybe not.

"Bill! Thank God," Vincent yelped as the man he'd been hoping for picked up the call. "Look, I know we spoke about sometime next week, but there's been an accident, and... yes. No, from what I understand, it was an impact kind of thing." Vincent frowned, then glared at both Travis and Jamie again, trying for fierce. "He was fighting with his brother and took a boot to it. His younger, works-in-a-gym brother, if you can believe that. Mmmm-hmmm. It's really swollen, Bill. I mean, I could barely look at it, but, God, it looks like there's a small animal in there that's trying to burrow its way out and I don't think that can be good. Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank God. Thank you. Tell your daughter I'm sorry. And thanks again. Oh, right." He rattled off his address, relieved when Bill said he knew the area, then ended the call, giving Travis a stern look.

"Well. I was going to tell you that one of my regulars at the restaurant had agreed to fit you in for an exam next week, honey. That was my good news. But he'll be making a house call instead. Now. And you can feel free to talk."

"Wait." And that was Jamie, who Vincent had almost forgotten about. "Older man, gray hair... Bill? Christ, Vincent, are you talking about Bill Chambers?"

Vincent gave Jamie a long, hard look. "I am. Just because the man is semi-retired..."

"No, no," Jamie answered, shaking his head. "I'm just amazed. Bill Chambers hasn't accepted any new patients in at least three years. But he's still the best. If anyone can tell you what's going on with Travis' leg, he's the one. And since you're home and Dr. Chambers is on the way, I think I'll be going. I need to pick up some steak on my way home."

Vincent made himself smile, though he was sure it lacked his usual warmth. "Oh, a steak dinner sounds good. I'm not sure your brother-beating husband deserves one, though." Because yeah, he was still kind of unhappy with Elliot. The man should have known better than to fight -- physically, anyway -- with Travis. It was hardly fair when Travis' leg was already so screwed up.

Then Travis was chuckling, and even though Vincent could hear the pain underneath it, it was still a damned fine laugh. "Oh, Vinnie. It ain't steak for dinner. It's for Elliot's eye. I kinda clocked him a good one. It was already turning colors when he hit the floor."

God, Vincent thought, he would never understand how two gay men -- brothers -- like Travis and Elliot could actually enjoy beating the crap out of each other. He'd always assumed that to be straight-boy behavior. Then again, he'd never had a brother. Maybe that was the difference.

It didn't matter. Or wouldn't, once Bill got there and told them what to do to make Travis' poor leg go back to normal. Or back to how it had been even that morning. Vincent would definitely be having a talk with Elliot, though, about how rough was too rough when it came to Vincent's lover.

Travis wasn't really surprised when the doctor Vinnie had called over took one look at his leg and insisted on calling an ambulance. He'd kind of known things were worse than he'd wanted to admit.

Hell, Travis had felt it, just as soon as the numbness from Elliot's boot had faded, leaving Travis gasping on the couch at Elliot and Jamie's house. Something inside had snapped or broken or something. It was only years of hiding his own pain back in Frederick that had let him pretend he was okay.

Vinnie hadn't been fooled, of course, which was a little upsetting on one hand, but on the other, Travis was glad. And sort of dizzy, even with Vinnie right there beside him in the emergency room, one slender hand wrapped tightly around Travis'.

"Sorry, baby," Travis whispered, because there was a nurse less than a foot away from Vinnie, and Travis' words were none of the guy's God-damned business. "I should have let the guys bring me here, but--"

"But you're a big, stubborn jackass?" Vinnie suggested, speaking loudly enough that the male nurse smirked a little. "You think you're fucking unbreakable, is that it, Travis? What the hell were you thinking, fighting with your brother like that? What if... God, honey. You're hurt enough that Bill said 'hospital, right now!'"

And Travis figured Vinnie was hurt, too. It was there in those moss-green eyes, not quite hidden under that snarky, angry tone. It was right there in the way Vinnie's fingers were shaking just a tiny bit around his own.

Travis sighed, the dizziness increasing as some machine nearby started beeping loudly enough to echo in his skull. "He pissed me off, Vinnie. Elliot did. Got all 'don't know what Vincent sees in you,' and I know he was just fucking around, and I didn't mean for it to get so..." Travis shook his head. "We got carried away, as Momma used to say. Then I was hurting and I knew it was bad. I did, okay? But I wanted to see you, Vinnie. Needed to see you before I came to

Emergency, so Jamie got me home and set up with the ice and it didn't hurt so bad and I didn't want to scare you..."

"And that tough-guy gene kicked in, hmmm?" Vinnie frowned, then leaned closer. "You listen to me, Travis McRayne, and listen good. I know you're tough. I know you can be a stubborn fucking bastard when you want to. And I know you're sensitive about your damned leg. But if you ever -- and I do mean *ever* -- risk your own health or well-being because you're afraid of freaking me out, I'll..."

Vinnie growled that cute little baby tiger growl and Travis fought to keep himself from smiling. That would just set Vinnie off even more, especially given Vinnie's next words: "I don't know what I'll do, Travis, but you won't like it."

"I... yeah. Sorry, baby." And wow, his head was spinning. Maybe literally, though Travis couldn't be sure. He just felt... light, really. Like he was floating or something. "Still gonna... love me when I... lose m'leg, Vinnie?" he heard himself asking, and if he'd been any less out of it, Travis thought he might have kicked himself. If he'd had more than one good leg, anyway.

Because even with everything else he and Vinnie had said to each other, with everything Travis had thought they meant, they'd never even mentioned that one word. And now he'd gone and blurted it out like it was something simple.

But Vinnie was sighing and shaking his head, and those long fingers were even tighter around his. "You won't lose your leg, Travis. Bill Chambers is the absolute best surgeon in the city. Just rest, honey. There are probably going to be all sorts of tests and things over the next little while. You need to conserve your energy."

And that answered that, Travis thought blearily, but he could handle it. Vinnie was still holding his hand and looking worried, and that was enough for him. It would have to be, Travis told himself as his vision started to swim, little colored specks floating in front of his eyes.

"...Kay," he thought he whispered, just as he faded out, and not even the frantic-sounding cries of his name pulled him back.

"Jesus, I hate this," Elliot snarled, banging around the waiting room again, looking for all the world like he wanted to beat someone. Probably himself, for bashing Travis' leg that way, even though it hadn't been on purpose. Vincent knew that much.

Hell, he'd known it even before Elliot and Jamie had appeared in response to Vincent's hysterical phone call. He hadn't been able to help the hysteria, though. Not with the way Travis had passed out in the ER, and even less so when the nurse came in response to Vincent's frantic cries and was suddenly far too busy with whatever arcane rituals medical people enacted to spare Vincent a single word.

Then the small, curtain-partitioned area had flooded with what had seemed like a hundred people, but had probably been more like five or six, all of them talking at once in some insane cacophony that Vincent hadn't been able to make heads or tails of. And they'd sent him to the waiting room, told him to be patient, and how the fuck could he do that when his lover -- his Travis -- was somewhere in the building, pale and unconscious and injured? How could he patient or even rational when he didn't know what the fuck was going on?

So Vincent had done the only thing he could think of. The only thing that made sense to him. He'd called Jamie. Told him Travis was in the ER. Asked him -- begged him -- to come. To tell Elliot, and to come. Because Vincent didn't do so well on his own, even if he hadn't known that until a certain ex-soldier had come into McGinty's and turned his entire world upside down without even trying.

"I fucking hate this," Elliot snarled again, and Jamie stopped the next round of pacing by getting up and standing in Elliot's way, shifting when Elliot shifted, not letting the younger man get by. It almost made Vincent laugh, because Jamie looked like he was used to it.

"We all hate it, sweetheart," Jamie said, just simple and easy. Then Jamie's hands were on Elliot's shoulders and Elliot seemed to... not relax, exactly, but lose some of that frenetic energy. "But pacing around out here and talking to yourself isn't going to do anything but scare the other people waiting. And possibly get you a big, mean orderly forcibly administering a sedative. Come on, El. Sit. Wait. Hold Vincent's hand. He looks like he needs it."

"Hey!" Vincent started before frowning a little and releasing a small sigh. "Never mind. I think I maybe do. God, what's taking so long?"

Elliot actually sat down, for the first time since he and Jamie had walked through the door. Vincent tried to give him a smile when Elliot reached a hesitant hand toward him, then he laced his fingers with Elliot's and it was... better. A little bit. Even more so when Jamie returned to his seat at Vincent's other side and just leaned one big shoulder against Vincent's.

"I'm really sorry, Vincent," Elliot said a few minutes later, sounding so guilty and depressed that Vincent wanted to smack him. "I know you hate me now, but I didn't mean to fuck him up so bad. I swear."

Vincent rolled his eyes and darted a glance at Jamie. "Does it ever bother you," he asked slowly, meeting Jamie's eyes, "that our men are so very quick to jump to conclusions? Because Travis does it, too, and I can't quite decide whether it's infuriating or just insulting."

Jamie laughed softly, giving him a little wink that Vincent was sure Elliot hadn't seen. "Honestly, I think it's both, Vincent. But no. It doesn't bother me. Scares me, sometimes, because I never know what Elliot's going to decide something means. But we love them, so I think that makes all the drama worthwhile."

Then Jamie smirked a little. "Well, that and the make-up sex. Because that's pretty damned good, too." Elliot snorted, but also sounded relieved, which was a good thing. Vincent would never

have forgiven himself otherwise. There was enough going on already, and having Elliot's guilt over hurting Travis create a rift between them all would have been just too much.

"Yeah, well. It's a good thing you love us, then," Elliot grumbled. "And thank fuck that Travis moved up here. If this had happened back there..." He frowned. "Well, Travis wouldn't have had anyone to worry over him. Especially not a boyfriend. Slim pickings and all."

"I..." Vincent wasn't going to say it. He wasn't. Not when he knew it would have Elliot all freaked out again and maybe lying to him, but... "Are you sorry it's me? I mean, I know how I am, all right? I'm fussy and particular and pretty much the gayest man ever. Among those who don't wear dresses, I mean. But seriously, guys. And maybe Travis doesn't want me forever because I'm not like you, but for now, I... is this okay? Me and your brother."

He should have asked before he'd even run off to Alabama, Vincent realized. Should have called them both, but mostly Elliot, before he and Travis had ever come back. He hadn't even thought of it, though, and now, with Travis hurt and whatever they were doing to him behind however many doors, Vincent had to know. Had to steel himself against losing his lover, if Travis' family didn't approve. Because he'd never come between family. Never had and never would, especially not Travis and Elliot, who had been all each other had for years, even with being hundreds of miles apart.

The silence following his question seemed to go on for ages, and Vincent couldn't do anything but look at his own leg, memorizing the weave of his slacks and thinking the worst. Then he felt Jamie's arm reach around his shoulders to poke Elliot, judging by the grunt he heard.

Then, "Sorry, man. I was just trying to figure out how you could even think that," Elliot answered, sounding a little bit mad. "You're one of our best friends, Vincent. And Travis is my brother. You make him happier than I've ever seen him, so why does it matter that you're maybe the last guy I'd ever sleep with? It doesn't have anything to do with me."

"Elliot!" And there was Jamie, sounding mortified. "That's not what Vincent's asking! He's asking for your blessing. He's asking both of us if we're going to be okay with him being part of the family."

That had Vincent sitting up straight and looking wildly from man to man, his eyes probably even wider than they felt. "No, that's not..." he started, but Elliot spoke right over him.

"What the fuck, Jamie? 'Be part of the family.' Vincent's been family for years! Why the hell would that change? If he's with Travis, that just makes it better. Vincent's happy, my brother's happy, and it's all good. You know that!" And God, Elliot looked confused. As opposed to Jamie, who just looked smug when Vincent's eyes darted back to him.

"To quote you, sweetheart," Jamie said easily, "well, 'duh.' Now Vincent knows it, too. And officially has our blessing to love Travis."

Jesus. Jesus, it was too much. He'd known Jamie and Elliot liked him. Vincent had never been stupid, and neither of the men were the sort to pretend to friendship. But this... they'd already considered him family? They were actually *happy* that Travis was with him, that Travis might possibly love him?

Vincent felt the tears coming, and there wasn't a thing he could do to stop them. Hell, he was surprised he hadn't been bawling like an infant the entire time. "H-he asked me... if I would still love him... when they cut off his... l-leg! God, he asked and I just..."

And Jamie and Elliot were suddenly holding on to him, and Vincent knew he would have loved that sense of belonging if the circumstances had been different.

"I d-didn't want to say it for the f-first time in... in a f-fucking *cubicle* with a nurse standing there, a-and..." Vincent was sobbing freely all of a sudden, his tears soaking into someone's shirt, though he wasn't sure whose, he was so freaked. And scared. And furious with himself. "I should have just said yes, that I'd l-love him no matter what, but I... I just told him to s-sleep, and what if he doesn't... I... God, what if..."

The guys let him cry, and even though Vincent could hear them murmuring softly, he couldn't make out the words. Didn't even really try. It wasn't anything like enough that they were there, and that they were holding on to him, and offering what comfort they could.

Nothing would be enough. Not until someone came from wherever Travis was and told Vincent that his lover was going to be fine. One leg or two wasn't... well, it was important, but it was more important to Travis than it would ever be to Vincent.

He just wanted Travis, damn it.

Christ, he was sore. He felt like he'd gone a few rounds with his entire unit, and not in the good way. Hell, Travis realized, he was more than just sore. He was actually hurt. Hurting. That part was almost comforting, really, because at least if he was hurting, he wasn't dead.

He could feel too-stiff cotton under his hands, though he couldn't seem to open his eyes, and he heard... what the fuck? Some sort of beeping, some weird whooshing sound, and just like that, Travis was choking, struggling to move, and only getting more determined when he noticed that his hands were moving just fine, but his legs? Oh, fucking God, his legs. Where were his legs? He couldn't feel them, at all.

Voices, unfamiliar and demanding, telling him to hold still. Hands, hard and soft at the same time somehow, holding him down, pressing his shoulders to the cotton beneath him, and that was a sensation he hated, but it was actually familiar. Calmed him enough to realize that he was in a bed.

A hospital bed, Travis decided, the strange sounds suddenly making sense. He was in a hospital bed, which meant he was in a hospital. They'd been helping him breathe, but now he was awake and they knew he could do it on his own, but why was he there? He hadn't been in a hospital bed in years. Not since he'd been sent back from the desert and...

And it all came flooding back, through the heavy haze of fading anesthesia and what felt like morphine in his system. Jesus. Morphine? What the fuck? Then he remembered that he couldn't feel his legs. Not just one of them, but both, and that was...

"No... no. I can't. Not both of them. Please, God, not fucking both of them, I can't." Now he knew why he couldn't open his eyes. He didn't want to. Didn't want to see himself missing one leg, much less two, because that would kill him.

He heard the insistent words through his own pleas to a maker who had obviously decided to punish him, though Travis didn't know for what. He heard them; he just didn't care. How the fuck did they expect him to calm down when he couldn't feel his legs? When they weren't even fucking there?

Then another voice, this one making Travis feel better and worse, all at the same time.

"Jesus fucking Christ! You people may be medical professionals, but you're morons! Can't you see he's freaking out?" The bed dipped by Travis' side and he felt fingers in his. Long and smooth-skinned, not a callus or ragged nail to be felt as they slid between his own and held on tight.

"It's okay, honey," Travis heard. "I'm here. I'm here and you're fine. The surgery went great. Dr. Chambers says you're lucky I called him when I did, though."

It took Travis nearly a full minute of stretched out, taffy-like time to make sense of the words and to understand why that pretty voice sounded so thick, but when he did, he squeezed those fingers in return and tried to speak, because Vinnie was crying. Over *him*. Or maybe over seeing him with no legs, which Travis could understand. He wanted to cry, too, but he didn't have to. As long as Travis never opened his eyes, he'd never have to see. Never have to know for sure. He could just pretend he'd broken his back or something, and... yeah. That was better. Crippled, but still whole.

"Can't... legs..." he managed, with no idea of whether he'd spoken out loud. He must have, though, because those fingers were tighter on his, suddenly. Almost painfully tight.

"God, you really *are* morons! Didn't any of you think to tell him about the block?" Whatever the fuck that meant, because Travis didn't know. Didn't have a single fucking clue. Then there were lips, soft and gentle on the back of his hand for a moment, first, then right by his ear.

"Your legs are fine, Travis," he heard whispered, and he squeezed his eyes closed even more tightly, wanting to believe, but he couldn't feel, couldn't move them. "They did some kind of epidural block thing, honey. So you wouldn't try to move while you were out. You can't feel

them, but I promise you, Trav. They're there. Both of them. And you're going to be fine. Unless you don't open your eyes, because then I'll start thinking you don't want to see me, which means I'll have to smack you a good one."

"I... Vinnie...? 'M scared," Travis whispered back, blaming the drugs for letting him admit it. "More'n I was before, baby. I... I ain't nothin' if I can't be whole for you..."

"I'd still love you even if you were just a head in a box, Travis McRayne," Vinnie murmured against his ear, but Travis thought the man sounded kind of... mad. "You're not, though. You're a fully functional man in his prime. Or you will be, once you heal from this little adventure, along with the damage whatever butcher you saw in the Army managed to do. However, I might have to kill you myself if you don't open your God-damned eyes and look at me!"

And that was definitely Vinnie, Travis thought with a grin, his mood swinging like a well-oiled gate. His Vinnie was patient up to a point, and then... not.

So he opened his eyes, still fucking scared out of his mind, but Vinnie wouldn't lie to him. Travis knew that. Vinnie wouldn't. He still didn't look down, though. He just... raised his lids, slowly, and met red-rimmed, bloodshot green eyes that were still damp from the tears that had marked Vinnie's cheeks, and Travis wasn't at all surprised to discover that *he* was crying.

He blamed the drugs again, but it didn't matter. He was seeing Vinnie right there beside him. Seeing all sorts of emotions he thought -- hoped -- he recognized in those pretty eyes. And Vinnie was there. Fingers tangled with his, no more than inches between them, even though one of the nurses was trying to get Vinnie to use a chair, but Vinnie was ignoring the woman just as much as Travis was.

"Vinnie?" Travis muttered, sounding hoarse and raspy even to his own ears, though he didn't know if it was from emotion or just plain dryness. "Vinnie. Baby. I... I can't feel m' legs." And it was scary, but Travis somehow thought there was a reason, even though he couldn't remember it right then. Vinnie was there. Holding his hand.

And Vinnie was smiling, even though it looked like he'd been crying. "I know, honey. You're not supposed to yet, okay? But they're both there and you're going to be fine. And you're not allowed to fight with Elliot any more. Not for at least a year or two. But you're going to be fine. You just need to be still, honey. The surgery went great. Your bad leg is going to be pretty damned good, soon enough. And I... God, Travis. I love you. So much. So, so much."

Travis could feel the tension leaving his body in what seemed like waves, but maybe that was the morphine? Why the fuck did he feel like he was on morphine? He hadn't had morphine in years. Oh, Vinnie was there. Right there beside him. And... Vinnie loved him?

Travis wasn't sure of where he'd gotten that idea, but he didn't care. Maybe he'd dreamed it. But Vinnie was there, and holding his hand, and... and the world was swimming. Maybe because of whatever the second-prettiest man Travis had ever seen had put in his IV, because the man was pulling a syringe from the port and turning away and... Vinnie was there. Holding his hand.

"Vin... love you," Travis managed to push out on a sigh, just as an oddly familiar sort of grayness swept over him.

He thought he heard Vinnie, right there by his ear, saying "I love you too, honey. And I'll be here when you wake up," but Travis couldn't be sure. He hadn't even known Vinnie was there, after all, but it made for a damned nice dream, so he would believe those words until they were proven wrong.

"He was awake," Vincent announced as he rushed into the waiting room to share the news with Jamie and Elliot. He sounded far too excited, but he couldn't help it. "He was awake, and he's off most of the machines, and he talked to me! And I told him he'll be fine, but he was sort of doped up, but he said he loves me, and I told him, too! I told him and he seemed to be happy about it, and... oh, God, I'm so fucking relieved, I can't even..."

The next thing Vincent knew, he was crying again, but that was fine. So were Elliot and Jamie. He could feel it in the way their chests heaved as they all held on to each other, the tension and worry that had plagued each of them during the hours Travis had been in surgery, then recovery, finally releasing.

Travis really was going to be fine. Eventually. That was what Bill Chambers had told them, and Vincent was holding on to those words with every bit of tenacity he had.

It had been touch and go right at the beginning, because Travis' blood pressure had dropped so low, and there hadn't been time for X-rays or even tests of any kind other than blood type. Instead, Dr. Chambers had transfused Travis, and kept it going when opening Travis' leg had shown what the problem was.

Vincent really wanted to hunt down whoever it was that had left part of a scalpel in Travis' leg all those years ago. Wanted to find and hurt every doctor Travis had seen since, because not a single one of them had ever tried to fix things. But Bill Chambers was of the opinion that perhaps the piece of sharp fucking metal hadn't posed any real danger, aside from infection, until Elliot's accidental kick had dislodged it, sent it right into the already-patched artery that had nearly killed Travis the first time.

Vincent wasn't sure he believed that, mostly because Elliot had mentioned Travis' leg getting worse all the time, but now? Now that he knew the fucking scalpel piece was out and Travis was going to recover and Travis loved him? Well, Vincent was still angry. Furious. But so fucking relieved. So fucking... God, he was happy.

Travis loved him. And he loved Travis. No matter how quickly it had happened, Vincent knew it was real. Even knew it was forever, or however long Travis would let it be.

Vincent stood there, wrapped in arms and family and a sort of relaxation he'd never experienced, but maybe that was normal. His lover was going to be fine. He had every reason to feel... loose. Like just about everything was right with the world.

"Uh..." And that was Elliot, sounding like he'd just thought of something. Something bad, and Vincent wasn't sure he wanted to hear it right then. "Any idea what kind of meds they have him on?" Elliot added, and Vincent frowned, because who cared? As long as Travis wasn't in any unnecessary pain, what did it matter?

So Vincent shrugged and shook his head. "The kind that made him loopy before he fell asleep," he said bluntly. "What other kinds are there?"

Elliot shrugged, then gave him a grin when he pulled back, and while Vincent felt just a little bit less warm without Elliot's arms around him, he didn't comment on it. "It doesn't matter, I guess," Elliot answered with a sheepish grin. "And this is Boston, not who-the-fuck-knows-where Iraq. Or even Alabama. So, they tell you how long he's gonna be out of it?"

"Hours," Jamie answered before Vincent had the chance. "Surgery, then drugs, and his body's worn out after everything, so hours, sweetheart. It'll be a while before he's feeling up to a real visit, I'm sure, so maybe we should all head home for now. Shower, nap, you know."

Vincent could see the 'you know' flying between Jamie and Elliot, and he smiled to himself. He could do that -- smile -- now that he knew Travis was recovering.

"Can I catch a ride to my place?" he asked easily, ignoring the surprise on their faces. "I need to change and talk to Mitch. See whether he can cover my shifts for the next few days. Oh, and I want to bring Travis his book. For when he's feeling well enough to read, obviously, because you know he'll be going stir-crazy in no time. Besides, I know my honey, and he'll be wanting his toothbrush, at least."

He would be coming back in just a couple of hours, but that was fine. And if Travis wasn't awake by then, well, Vincent would take care of whatever needed doing. There might be some difficulties because of Travis' insurance. Vincent didn't know whether it only applied to military hospitals, but it didn't matter.

Travis was going to have the best. Private room, good food from McGinty's once there was no medical reason for Travis to exist on the crap they served in hospitals... and Travis already had the best doctor in the city.

Vincent was getting ready to bankrupt himself, and he knew it, but sometimes it was worth it. Travis was definitely worth it.

Travis had barely swum up from under the morphine haze when the pretty male nurse came into his room again. Just like the last time Travis had seen the man, the nurse was holding a syringe. This time it was full, though.

He watched from under hooded lids while the black-haired lovely approached his IV stand, then Travis groaned "Wait..." and the nurse actually stopped. Stopped and looked at him with a good bit of curiosity showing in bright blue eyes.

"You should still be out," the man said, cocking his head. And oh, the nurse had a pretty smile. Made the rest of him even prettier. Almost as pretty as Vinnie, but not quite.

"Wh..." Fuck, his throat was dry. Travis cleared it and tried again. "What are you... giving me?"

"It's called M6G," the nurse said easily. "It's a..."

"M-morphine derivative," Travis mumbled. "I know. I can't... don't, okay? Can I have... something else? A, uh... non-opiate. Even Tylenol. Advil. Fuck... aspirin would work."

Okay, that was complete fucking disbelief on the guy's face. It was. Travis couldn't think of anything else it could be.

"None of those will come anywhere close to dealing with the pain you'd be feeling without the M6G, man," the nurse said calmly, moving closer to Travis' IV stand, that needle at the ready. "Trust me when I say you'd regret it. You don't know how much you'd be hurting right now without it."

God, he couldn't really move yet. Not freely, though he was able to feel his legs again, which was a huge fucking relief. Even so...

"Please!" Travis yelped, keeping it from being a whimper by sheer force of will. "Please, uh... guy. I can't... Fuck. I... I don't know if you'll get this, but I'd rather hurt like a motherfucker now than have to go through the fucking withdrawal again later, okay? I ain't that strong, man. Can't... Jesus-fuck. Can't do it again. Not with Vinnie, okay? He don't deserve it."

God, he felt like a fucking child, just laying it out there like that, but at least it had the pretty man stopping, moving to the end of the bed. At least that syringe full of dark bliss and relief was that much further from Travis' IV line.

"There's nothing in your chart about a former addiction," Pretty said slowly, but he was capping the needle and putting it in the pocket of navy blue scrubs, which was more than Travis had hoped for. "In fact, there's nothing here about any medications you received while under military care."

Travis shrugged, feeling more like himself with every passing minute. "No shock, there. Had all the usual. Morphine, the derivatives... and when I finally kicked that habit, more anti-fucking-biotics than I can name. I just... fuck, man. Rather deal with th' pain now than deal with tryin' to

kick again, okay?" And God help him if the guy said no, because Travis was pretty sure he wouldn't be *able* to push his way through withdrawal again. The first time had nearly killed him.

He wasn't surprised that none of that was in his records, though. After he'd been shipped home, he'd found contacts of his own. People who would sell him whatever he needed to keep the pain under control. And one day Travis had woken up and realized that he wasn't calling for a fix because of the pain in his leg. No, Travis had realized that he was calling because of the pain in his gut. His soul. The pain that could only be soothed by another dose, and even then it would only be better until the morphine wore off. So he'd quit, though it really hadn't been that easy.

Getting clean had almost killed him, and while Travis knew he needed some sort of pain management system after the surgery he'd just been through, he also knew that opiates weren't the answer.

"Won't put Vinnie through seeing me like that. I just won't," Travis said again, and even though he knew his voice sounded weak, the nurse seemed to understand, because the man was nodding. Slowly, but nodding, which Travis hoped was good.

"I'll call your doctor, then," Pretty said quietly. "I'm sure he'll find some alternative. It won't be as good, though. Just so you know. And in the meantime, I'll be back soon with some ibuprofen. Just sit tight, okay?"

Travis nodded, grateful down to his bones. "Yeah... yeah. Thanks, uh..."

Then the nurse smiled more broadly than before and was somehow even prettier. Though still not as pretty as Vinnie, Travis saw. "Lex," the guy said, rolling his eyes. "It's a long story, okay? Now, just try to relax, Mister--"

"Travis."

Another smile. "Travis," the nurse -- Lex -- nodded in agreement. "Try to relax and I'll be back with those pills as soon as I can, okay?"

"Thanks," Travis said again, his teeth gritting slightly as the drugs faded more. God, what was he going to tell Vinnie? Because Vinnie would definitely notice that Travis was in pain. He didn't have a single doubt about that.

"The truth," Travis told himself a few minutes later, the sound of his own words startling him in the silence broken only by the beeping of the monitor beside his bed. "I'll tell Vinnie the truth, and he'll understand. He has to."

"Of course I'll understand, honey." And that was more startling than anything, because Travis hadn't even known his lover was standing in the doorway. "Whatever it is, I'll understand. I love you, remember?"

Oh. He hadn't dreamed that part, Travis thought with a grin. Vinnie loved him. God knew why, but Travis wasn't going to question it too closely. Or at all.

Then Lex was back with three pills and a little pitcher of water, and Travis wasn't sure which he was happier to see, the gel-caps or the container of what seemed like pure ambrosia to him just then.

"Thank God," Travis grunted, then he took the tiny cup of pills and tossed them back, following them with the water without even waiting for a cup. "Oh, fuck. You're a damned saint, man." He gave Lex a grin, then noticed Vinnie frowning beside him.

"Sorry. Sorry." His throat felt better, some. Probably from the water. "Lex, this is Vinnie. Baby, this is Lex. He's my nurse, I guess."

"And I was just bringing him some pain pills, so I'll be going," Lex said with a grin that was entirely too bright to Travis' eyes. "I have a call in to Dr. Chambers about your alternative medication, Travis, so I'll be sure to let you know what he recommends. Vinnie, it was nice meeting you."

And Lex was gone, just that quickly. Travis didn't know whether the guy had caught Vinnie's sharp, "It's Vincent to you. Not Vinnie," but he wouldn't be surprised.

Travis groaned softly as a small wave of pain -- the first of what he knew would be many -- rolled through his body, radiating out from his thigh. And then Vinnie was there, those pretty eyes worried, one elegant, long-fingered hand resting on Travis' shoulder.

"You okay, honey?" Vinnie asked seriously, "Or do I need to call a *real* nurse? You just had surgery; you shouldn't be on pills yet!"

And God. He was going to have to tell Vinnie the truth right then. "Okay... it's like this, baby..."

It had been hard to stand back and just watch while Travis was in so much pain, and while Vincent had never been addicted to anything -- not in the real, clinical sense -- he hoped he understood. That didn't make it easier when Travis was lying there, his face screwed up with pain that the various non-opiate medications Bill had ordered just weren't handling. Even so, Travis had insisted it was better than having to go through withdrawal again, and Vincent had to trust him on that.

Fortunately, those few weeks of snapping and groaning even in his sleep were past, and Travis was doing pretty well with slightly stronger than over-the-counter medicines, and that was a damned good thing, because Vincent was taking his man home. His cranky, still growly, and recovering man, but his all the same, Vincent thought with a shaky grin.

Hell, he would have tried to talk the hospital into letting him take Travis home a good week sooner, but there was no way his honey would have been able to handle the stairs; not with his thigh all bandaged and splinted and sore. It wasn't likely that leaving so soon would have been allowed, not with the orders from Bill Chambers to keep from putting any real weight or strain on that leg, but Vincent would have tried. And Travis *still* couldn't handle stairs, which was why Vincent's grin was shaky rather than confident.

But Bill had approved, and Troy -- who Vincent still couldn't quite manage to like, even after as many times as they'd met and talked and plotted over the last little while -- had somehow pulled off a minor miracle that meant neither Travis nor Vincent were responsible for Travis' medical bills. Vincent didn't know the particulars. He didn't want to know. They didn't matter, except in the sense that neither he nor Travis were broke, and that meant Vincent had been able to solve the problem of a place to take Travis home to that wouldn't do any damage to Travis' wounded thigh. He just didn't know how Travis would feel about it. Vincent hadn't even consulted him, after all.

Then again, he hadn't consulted with Travis on a lot of things lately, Vincent admitted to himself yet again. He'd just done what he thought needed doing, and while he'd been making all the arrangements, he'd been able to convince himself that Travis wouldn't mind. Now, though... well, he was there to take Travis home. To a home Travis had never seen. And there was already a fairly strict PT program in place, ready to start just as soon as Travis had rested for a day or so. And Travis didn't know a thing about it, unless Bill or that too damned good-looking nurse had said something.

That Lex was another one Vincent wasn't sure he liked, even though the man had never been anything but nice. Respectful, too, but who knew what the pretty bastard was saying when Vincent wasn't around? Lex wanted Travis, after all. Troy did, too. How could they not, when Travis was so... Travis?

And it was time to chill out a bit, Vincent realized. He'd been getting sort of nuts, spending so much time away from his lover when they'd only been really *together* for such a short time. Which was why he was feeling so jealous and sort of suspicious about Troy. And the nurse, too. Besides which, Vincent needed Travis to know that Vincent wanted him home for *them*; not to keep Travis away from other men.

He couldn't keep Travis in a box, couldn't act as his lover's jailor. Wouldn't, even if he could. He loved Travis. And that meant he trusted him, so... yeah. Travis would never screw him over. Vincent knew it, down deep. And there would always be other guys looking at Travis, checking him out and wanting him. But that didn't mean Travis would ever let it happen. Hell, the man had been solid as a rock on that front, from just about the moment they'd met.

Maybe Vincent would make an appointment for himself with Jamie, though. See if he could get his heart and his head -- and that creepy little voice that kept telling him to question things -- on the same page.

First, though, he needed to get Travis, take the man to their new home, and find the right way to tell Travis that he'd reorganized their lives. That he'd taken over and made decisions that they should have shared. And yes, right at first, Travis hadn't been in any sort of shape to make rational decisions. That didn't change the fact that Vincent had taken over. Didn't change the fact that it was time to pay the proverbial piper.

"God," Vincent muttered to himself, the little overnight bag heavy in his hand, "My honey's going to kill me. Kill me dead." He didn't even care whether the other people on the elevator assumed he was an escapee from the psych ward with the way he was talking to himself. "Deader than dead, maybe."

The kiss was soft and slow when Vincent walked into Travis' room and found his lover sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, clearly ready to be gone. It was soft and slow and just wet enough to have Vincent moaning, wishing for a deeper taste. Travis' hands were on his hips, pulling Vincent closer, and God knew Vincent wanted to give in, but no. Not with that bandaged, splinted leg stretched out straight like that. Not when Vincent knew he'd forget or shift or stumble or any of a hundred things that could end up hurting Travis.

He pulled back, then straightened and gave Travis his best grin, the one Vincent saved just for his man. "You ready to go, honey?" Vincent murmured, and damned if the way Travis' eyes lit up even more didn't make the hazel-gray shine almost silver.

"Fuck, baby," Travis said, that wonderful, mobile mouth stretching into a smile Vincent knew would live in his memory forever, "I don't even care if you brought me pants, okay? I'm so ready to get the hell out of here, I ain't even gonna complain if my ass is hanging out of this fucking gown thing."

Vincent laughed, shaking his head slowly. "And here I was thinking we should liberate a couple, honey. All that easy access." He winked, and Travis laughed, which was what Vincent had been going for. "But while I think you'd look amazing wandering around our place in it, I did bring you some sweats. I don't think the rest of the world is ready to see your stellar ass, honey. Not when I'm not willing to share."

Travis' arms were around his waist suddenly, and Vincent could feel Travis trembling just a little as the man pulled him closer, the scarred cheek pressing tight to Vincent's chest. His hands rose, slid along those muscled arms, then up into Travis' hair, holding on gently while Travis apparently breathed him in. "Oh, honey," Vincent whispered, gazing down at that dark head. "Trav. Honey."

"Promise me, Vinnie," he barely heard, but he did. "Promise me. No sharing, okay? Not ever. I... fuck, Vinnie. Got everything I want, right here."

And if those fucking assholes in Fred-neck could see Travis now. If they could see the 'evil, promiscuous, seducing faggot' asking to never touch anyone but Vincent again, well... Well,

they'd still think Travis was wrong in the eyes of God, most likely. And hate him and Vincent even more because not a single one of them knew what it was like to be so blessed.

"I swear, Travis," Vincent announced, not caring who else heard him, just as long as Travis did. "I swear, honey. If anyone else even tries to touch you, I'll kill them." He smiled down, eyes feeling hot when Travis looked up at him, his man's face so serious, so... hopeful, that Vincent nearly cried.

"I haven't gone through all of this with you, Travis McRayne, to have anyone but you. You're it, honey. Mine, just as much as I'm yours. And once Bill says it's safe, I'm going to show you just how much I mean it. Until then, though..." Vincent smiled shakily, feeling the tremors in every inch of his body. "Well, until then," he finished, "you're going to have to deal with me being more or less glued to your side, except when I'm at work. In fact, even then, I won't be thinking about anyone but you, Trav."

Travis was moving, and Vincent strongly suspected that his lover was going to stand up and possibly tumble him onto the hospital bed. Fortunately for Travis' leg -- damn it -- a quiet laugh came from the doorway, and whatever the look in Travis' eyes had meant, it faded. Didn't die out, but was... banked, maybe.

"Well," Vincent heard, and he smiled when he turned, feeling a tiny bit sheepish but not overwhelmingly so.

"If I'd had any doubt about why you asked me to make a house call in the first place, Vincent," Bill said with a slight smile, "that little scene would have cleared it up. Now, I have some forms for you to sign, and a few prescriptions that will need to be filled. But after that, you gentlemen are free to go. Lex will be bringing a wheelchair by, just to get Travis to the car. And for the record, Vincent, I don't recommend anything too... strenuous... for at least another week, maybe two. It depends on how the PT goes."

And okay, Vincent realized with a silent groan of embarrassment, he was blushing. Of course, so was Travis. And Bill, too, when Vincent looked again. That didn't keep the doctor from continuing, though this time he was clearly speaking to Travis.

"I expect you to act responsibly," Bill said simply. "It's your body, and even though I was in there, poking around..." And Bill blushed more, but went on, even though Vincent was suddenly smiling and possibly looking as wicked Bill's blush made him feel.

"You know your own body better than anyone else, Travis," Bill said doggedly. "And you're likely to know when it's ready for... whatever... far better than I would. So. If you're doing... things... and it starts to feel like it's... God, why do I have to be the one to do this? Look. If it feels like it might be bad, or if it makes your leg hurt, *stop*. That's all. Just stop and let yourself heal more and try again later. Now, sign these and let me go back to my safe little world where I don't have to talk to my patients about sex. It's almost as bad as when I had to have 'the talk' with my daughter."

Bill shuddered and Vincent laughed. Then there was signing and exchanging papers and prescriptions, and the next thing Vincent knew, Travis was in sweats and a T-shirt, being wheeled from the room by that Lex guy.

Soon enough, they were in Vincent's car, driving, and Travis seemed surprised but not angry when Vincent pulled up less than a block away from McGinty's.

"I... I thought this would be easier for you, honey," Vincent said quietly, looking out through the front windshield at the private alley entrance to their new place. "I know it's not home, but..."

Then there was a hand on his leg, a big, strong hand with thick fingers that stroked lightly over the fabric of his slacks, and Vincent swallowed hard before looking at Travis.

"You gonna live here, too, Vinnie?" Travis asked, those grayish eyes searching his own. When Vincent nodded, Travis grinned and nodded, too. "Can't say it's not home, then. Home's pretty much wherever you are, baby."

And oh. Just... oh. That was... "Good."

It was different, but not in a bad way. Not in a good way, either, Travis knew. It was just different. Strange.

Weird to have Vinnie so in charge of things, even if it was only while Travis was recovering from the surgery and far too many years of compensating for the leg he'd been so sure would never get any better. But it was definitely getting better, and Travis knew he had Vinnie to thank for that. Knew he'd spend the rest of his life trying to show Vinnie just how much it meant to him that Vinnie cared. Had cared enough, so quickly, to stick with him, even through the whining, poor-me mood swings Travis knew he'd put his lover through.

Hell, it was amazing that Vinnie hadn't given up on him. And yet Travis was sure that he would have stuck around just as hard if their positions had been reversed. It really wasn't about sex, though that was definitely a part of it. Still, the whole was so much more. So much fucking more that Travis could barely believe it, some days.

But those days were few and far between, and becoming still more scarce as the physical therapy grew less painful. As those workouts became more of a source of pride. He'd come further in the month since Vinnie had brought him to their new home than Travis had hoped for. His PT guy was just as surprised, but Travis was fucking motivated. Even Elliot, working with the PT to help strengthen Travis' leg, admitted as much. Travis figured that was a minor miracle right there.

Oh, El was still feeling sort of guilty about hurting him in the first place. Travis knew that because Elliot said so at least once a week. The truth was, though, that Travis would never have gotten around to getting his leg looked at if Elliot hadn't accidentally fucked it up like that.

Travis was sure he would have found some way to put it off until either Vinnie stopped insisting, or the piece of metal in Travis' leg had shifted enough to kill him.

But it didn't matter anymore, Travis reminded himself, grimacing as he forced his body through one more set of leg curls. He'd already forgiven his brother for what had happened. Thanked him, even, because who knew what might have happened otherwise? All that remained was for Elliot to forgive himself, and Travis was pretty sure that would happen just as soon as Bill gave Travis a clean bill of health.

"That's enough, bro," Elliot ordered, and though Travis shook his head, Elliot was clearly ignoring him. Taking the pin from between the weights on the machine made that obvious. "Hey," Elliot added, grinning, "I'm under orders not to wear you out. I think your honey's got some plans for you, Trav."

"Oh." Oh, indeed, Travis thought, trying not to grin like a madman. Vinnie with plans was always a good thing. When those plans involved Travis and required any degree of energy, that was even better. "I'll take a shower, then."

Elliot snorted and shook his head as he left the second, smaller bedroom that had become cluttered with all the machines Vinnie had leased to help with Travis' recovery. "Just try not to slip or anything, man. I'm supposed to be looking out for you, but there's fuck-all chance of me getting in there with you."

"Thank fucking God for that, El," Travis called out, "because the last thing I need is my kid brother getting all hot for me!"

"Mmmm... how about me, honey?" Vinnie's voice surprised him, but only because Travis hadn't known it was so late already. Vinnie worked until six most nights, a schedule that would continue for another few weeks, until Travis was fully recovered. "I could wash your back."

Travis stood up, cane in hand though he hardly ever needed it these days. It was more a precaution than anything else, though Vinnie would likely tear him a new one if Travis ever said so out loud. "You can wash anything you want, baby. Twice. Three times. Hell, a hundred, if you'll let me do you after."

Vinnie snorted delicately and laughed, turning away, so Travis followed. After all, he'd followed that pretty ass all the way back to Boston, hadn't he? That wasn't likely to change when the distance he had to go was only as far as the master bath.

"After, before, whenever, stud," Vinnie said, still smiling that special smile Travis loved so much. "It's really not a sacrifice to have that pretty cock deep inside me. By the way, you're damned hot like that, Trav. All flushed and smelling like sweat and you." Then Vinnie smirked, and Travis laughed at his next words. "Before would work really well for me."

Travis watched Vinnie undress, watched those elegant fingers make slow, deliberate work of the buttons and fastenings of what Travis now knew was a raw silk suit and shirt. The same greenish

suit with dark yellow flecks that Vinnie had been wearing the first time they'd met. It was Travis' favorite, though he preferred his lover in nothing at all, and Vinnie made a point of wearing it every couple of weeks; probably because he knew just how much Travis liked the reminder.

His cock liked it, too, though there was no reminding necessary there. Hell, he'd been hard ever since he'd heard Vinnie's voice. Pretty much always was, now that he was off the antibiotics and all. And since he was only wearing a pair of baggy, cut-off sweats, Travis didn't feel any need to rush. Not when he could stand there and enjoy the full Vinnie being revealed.

"Uh-huh, ain't a single thing wrong with before," Travis heard himself muttering. "Nothing wrong with after, too, if you feel like, uh, getting a bit of turnabout, baby." Because Jesus fucking Christ, Travis wanted that, too. He hadn't felt Vinnie inside him in, God, close to a week, and even then it had been... good, yeah. It was always good with Vinnie. Always better than anything Travis had known until his lover. But Vinnie had been holding back, probably afraid of hurting Travis' leg.

"I could just lie back on the bed," Travis suggested, one hand dipping into the front of his sweats to wrap firmly around his demanding prick. "Right there by the edge, you know, baby? Put my bad leg up over your shoulder?" And yeah, that was even more fire in Vinnie's eyes, which just made Travis shiver with wanting that heat, up close and personal.

"Mmmm... God, honey," Vinnie purred, his body suddenly still, except for his cock, because that long piece of hard flesh was bobbing slightly, small dribbles of clear fluid bubbling from the tip. "You have the best ideas." Then that slender body was pressed right up against him and Vinnie's lips were on his own, and if Travis hadn't been far too busy touching Vinnie, stroking that soft skin, he figured he would have been begging. Begging for more, and now, and please-baby-please. Even more so once Vinnie's warm hands pushed the sweats down Travis' hips to land on the floor.

Vinnie clearly knew that, and was far too kind of a man to make Travis actually beg, because somehow they were moving and Travis felt the edge of their mattress behind him.

It took less than a moment to arrange himself exactly the way he'd suggested, though Vinnie was too far away to be holding Travis' leg just yet, so Travis held it himself. Held it up and to the side -- not high enough to cause him any discomfort, because Vinnie would notice and that would be the end of that, but high enough that, when Vinnie moved closer, tube in one hand and already slick fingers shining on the other, Travis could only moan at the wanton gasp he heard. And it was definitely wanton. Decidedly needy.

Vinnie's fingers were gentle, softly stroking at Travis' skin -- that span between sac and hole, then tracing around Travis' wrinkled pucker before moving to cup his balls, rolling them lightly in one elegant hand, and that was enough.

"Foreplay later, baby," Travis grunted, not caring even a little bit that his words made no fucking sense. "Just... lube me up and dive on in, Vinnie. Ain't gonna break, okay?" Except maybe he would, but only in the best way, considering how good it felt when Vinnie pushed two long

fingers into him and crooked them, pegging his prostate like it was calling Vinnie's name. "Oh... fuck..."

Vinnie nodded, pushing more lube into Travis' hole with those talented, almost unbearably good fingers, and Travis moaned loudly when the quick stretching was done and he felt the tip of Vinnie's cock right there. Poised and ready and slicking him further with wet streaks and droplets of heat. Then that tip was pushing, prodding, pressing slowly against him, and Travis shifted his good leg, wrapping it quickly around Vinnie's hips.

"Now, honey?" Vinnie murmured, and Travis nodded, lifting his own hips as he pulled Vinnie hard into him with that one leg, sharp sparks of burning pleasure flying throughout his whole body, it felt like, though they started right there at his roughly pierced anus.

"N-now," Travis answered unnecessarily, and Vinnie was holding his bad leg, just like that, one arm wrapped around it, nearly clutching it to that pretty, hairless chest.

Those slender hips were up tight against him, and Travis' sac was nearly crushed between their bodies, Vinnie was so deep, so still. Even, white teeth were hard in Vinnie's bottom lip, and just like always, the sight alone had Travis groaning. Groaning more, really, because there wasn't a single fucking chance on earth that he could be silent and calm with Vinnie inside him.

It had always been that way, Travis knew, but their love-making had gotten so much more intense since they'd stopped using latex. It wasn't even that it felt different, though it for damned fucking sure did. No, it was that... they were permanent. A forever kind of thing. And feeling Vinnie -- just Vinnie -- inside him always brought those emotions welling to the surface. He thought Vinnie felt the same, when Travis was bare inside that beautiful golden body.

"Come on, baby," Travis moaned, hand rising to tangle fingers with Vinnie's free hand. "Come on, lover. Been waiting for this, Vinnie. Wanting this. You."

"Mmmm... patience, my sweaty, smelly man," Vinnie answered, that pretty voice shaking just a bit. "Because trust me, honey. I've been wanting, too."

He didn't have a chance to respond to Vinnie's teasing words. Didn't have even a moment to point out that Vinnie was the one who'd decided to pass on the shower. Travis didn't care, either, because that was when Vinnie started moving, and there was nothing slow or careful about it.

It was rough and fierce and primal, hips slapping harshly against Travis' body, Vinnie's cock slamming deep, over and over again. Travis' balls were trapped, getting battered between Vinnie's trimmed, coarse hairs, Vinnie's cock, and Travis' own body, and it shouldn't have felt good, but Jesus fucking Christ, it was amazing.

Travis rocked, writhing between thrusts, his heart thundering in his chest like it might explode, and he didn't care. Just as long as Vinnie didn't stop yet, Travis would risk it.

His eyes closed with each deep, rough thrust, then opened again when Vinnie pulled back, and Travis could see that long, lean body flexing, muscles contracting and releasing in waves. His own body was echoing those motions with moans and cries, just as he mirrored the arching and rocking. Vinnie's fingers were still twined with his, squeezing hard, pulling him into Vinnie's movements, and God help him, but Travis' good leg was doing the same, and all the while...

All the while, those moss-green eyes were locked on his face, Travis realized. Staring, watching, just fixed on him, and Vinnie's hold on his bad leg was still somehow gentle.

"Vinnie..." Travis whispered, his lover's name emerging as a prayer, even as one more long, deep thrust scraped along Travis' already tormented prostate. Then he was coming, flying and falling and hearing rough, wordless cries filling the air, just as wild spurts of thick, viscous white pulsed over his stomach, his chest, and probably even the sheets.

Vinnie's eyes widened. Travis knew because he was watching. They widened, then narrowed, then Vinnie was moving even faster, harder, leaning on Travis' upright leg just enough to shove the last half an inch or so deeper that Travis hadn't even known he was missing until it was there, and God.

His cock throbbed again, balls tightening still more, forcing another hot burst of fluid over Travis' skin just as Vinnie cried out and pushed harder into him. When Travis felt Vinnie pulsing heavily inside him, when he felt that long, thin cock swelling further, then spilling deeply, filling him with thick, hot seed, he... died.

He came back to life a few seconds later to find that nothing important had changed.

Vinnie was still there, still inside him. Still holding Travis' leg, though Travis had a feeling it was holding Vinnie up rather than the other way around. And Vinnie was breathing hard, those pretty eyes closed tightly, though against what, Travis didn't know.

"Hey. Baby," Travis murmured, giving the suddenly lax fingers between his own a gentle squeeze. "You okay?" He hissed a little when Vinnie jerked, seeming to come out of some sort of trance, then hissed again, louder, as Vinnie slowly pulled that amazing prick from his tender ass. "Come on, Vinnie, tell me. What's wrong?"

That white-blond head was shaking slowly. Vinnie hadn't made a sound since that earlier cry, and it was sort of worrisome. Fortunately, Travis hadn't let go of Vinnie's hand yet, and he was pretty sure his lover wasn't going anywhere without it. So as soon as Vinnie let go of his leg and lowered it slowly, Travis used that hold to drag the man down beside him on the bed.

He got them shifted until they were more on than off the mattress, and held Vinnie tightly to his side, his head turned to stare at those still-clenched-shut eyes. "Seriously, baby. You're starting to freak me out. You okay?"

"I should be asking you that," Vinnie finally answered, sounding sort of sick. "I... you're still hurt and I just... Fuck, Travis! What if I hurt you more?"

God, Vinnie was going to kill him. Travis could tell, just from the glare in those suddenly open eyes. He couldn't seem to stop laughing, though, because hurt him? Good lord. The last thing Travis was feeling was *hurt*.

"A-ain't a single thing wrong with staking a claim, baby," Travis finally said when he could actually breathe well enough for speech. "And for the record, Vinnie? If I'm healed enough for Elliot to force me through endless reps of exercises I really fucking hate, I'm definitely healed enough for you to pound me through the bed." Travis frowned, then winked at his lover. "Maybe not every day, but this was... fucking great, baby. Now, why don't you do me a favor and stop making yourself crazy, okay? I loved it. I love you. You didn't hurt me. You wouldn't, baby. I know it, even if you don't. The minute I said 'stop,' you would've. Just like the first time you did me, Vinnie. Remember?"

"But you didn't tell me to stop then, Trav," Vinnie said, sounding confused.

Travis grinned and pulled Vinnie closer. Just about dragged the man onto his chest, then kissed him hard. "That's exactly my point, baby. I'm fine. Just like I was then. And I'm gonna be really pissed off if you never fuck me like that again. Because I love you, baby. And I loved it when you were banging away at me, making me even more... yours."

And oh, Vinnie was grinning. Grinning like he'd just hit the jackpot, won the lottery, been granted three wishes. Travis had no idea of what the three wishes were, but Vinnie definitely looked like he'd gotten every one.

"I guess I'll keep you, then," Vinnie answered, still smiling that special smile. "Until you decide you want to be free, honey."

Travis snorted and rubbed his cheek against Vinnie's. "Only thing I ever really wanted to break free of was Frederick, baby, and I did that. With you. So if you're waiting for me to leave you? You're the one's gonna have to learn to be patient, Vinnie. Forever's a damned long time."

"Not nearly long enough," Vinnie said immediately, and that speed alone had Travis feeling warm, all the way down to his toes. So did the way Vinnie turned and shifted, ending up straddling Travis' stomach. "Not nearly long enough," Vinnie said again, one hand over Travis' heart while the other cupped Travis' stubbled cheek. "But it'll do for a start, honey. It'll definitely do for a start."

Yeah, it would, Travis thought, but he didn't say it. He was far too busy with the full red lips that were pressed so tightly to his own.

End.