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The Angel of 13th Street

TOP SHELF

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The Angel of Thirteenth Street

Eden Winters

Chapter One

"Please don't let them catch me, please don't let them catch me..."

Jeremy walked as fast as he could without drawing undue attention, desperately hoping to make it to safety before the bullies realized he'd given them the slip. In broad daylight, with witnesses, they didn't dare chase him down openly, but he knew they were there, lurking in the shadows, and what they'd do if they caught him.

With a ratty book bag thrown over one bony shoulder, he hurried down the street, distancing himself so his pursuers wouldn't see where he lived. A tattered denim jacket, pulled over his head as much to hide him as for protection from the steady rain, was failing miserably. Turning east on Harper, deserted at this hour, he broke into a run, tennis shoes slapping noisily on the wet pavement. Halfway down the street he swung over a cold, wrought-iron railing, landing hard on his left ankle in a stinking, trash-filled stairwell. Fire shot up his leg as filthy, ankle deep water splattered already damp jeans. Shit! His near-panicked mind reeled past more immediate problems to focus on the trivial: that he was wearing his last reasonably clean pair of pants and needed to wash clothes before school tomorrow. He nearly laughed at the absurdity.

"Where did he go? He couldn't have just disappeared," an angry voice demanded, one Jeremy couldn't identify.

Flattening against a slimy concrete wall, Jeremy bit his lip to silence a moan as his twisted ankle began to throb. Ignoring his burning lungs, he held his breath, ears trained to the sound of running feet directly overhead. They stopped just a few yards away. He silently prayed that no one else could hear his loudly thudding heart, roaring like thunder in his own ears.

"Well! Spread out and look! He couldn't have gone far!" That voice he did know -- a local hustler named Trent who hung out near his high school. Trent was the leader of the gang searching for him and a seriously bad dude. He'd once been a friend, and more, before showing his true colors.

"What did he do? He couldn't just turn into a rat and slither down into the sewers!" That voice was also unfamiliar and too gruff to belong to one of Trent's normal gang. So the game had escalated and older reinforcements had been brought in. Shit! More of Willie's recruiters!

Though trembling in fear, Jeremy felt a flicker of pride that his enemies couldn't handle one scrawny runt on their own, and that Trent hadn't succeeded in turning him into a whore. The older boys -- men, actually -- had higher stakes, and as much as he'd feared Trent's gang, the newcomers would be even worse. Willie was a local pimp with an eye for new talent, particularly if they appeared young. Unfortunately, Jeremy had caught the man's attention, cursed as he was to look well below his eighteen years, which was why he was hiding in a

stinking stairwell. He stared longingly at the broken door that hung from its hinges a few feet away, concealing his sanctuary. If he'd only been a few seconds faster...

"Hey, I think I see him," someone shouted. Jeremy's heart skipped a beat. Then, to his great relief, he heard the sound of running feet again -- this time heading back in the direction they'd come. Knowing it might be a ruse, he slowly rose on his toes, stifling a grunt of pain as his injured ankle gave way. He grasped the railing and pulled himself up, eyes warily sweeping the empty street. Sighing in relief, he carefully lowered his weight onto his good ankle and hobbled the short distance to the door of his hovel in flooded sneakers. Finally, squeezing through the narrow gap, he whispered to no one, "Honey, I'm home."

Jeremy tossed the book bag onto his makeshift bed -- an old mattress elevated from the damp floor by stacks of wooden pallets -- and hung his jacket on its nail by the door, hoping by some miracle it would dry before he had to go out again.

He carefully removed his soggy shoes and examined his injured ankle as best he could in the low light. It didn't seem broken, only sprained, and hopefully would be better by morning. Climbing onto the bed and pulling books from his bag, he huddled under the small, broken window, grateful for the sparse illumination it provided. Rain steadily beat against its cracked surface.

Even though he worked at a frantic pace, the sun set before his homework was done. He sighed. His ankle hurt like hell, and being out after dark wasn't wise, but he needed to do laundry and finish assignments for school tomorrow. In line for a full-ride scholarship, he'd no intention of blowing a big chance to climb from the gutters and accomplish something in life by failing to turn in a project on time.

A street lamp shining in through the window provided just enough light to load his meager belongings into two plastic shopping bags and count out the change that he hoped would be enough to at least wash them. He hated wearing damp clothes, and if he had to hang them in the dank cellar that was his home, they'd never be dry by morning. But at least they'd be clean.

He'd found a box of discarded laundry soap in the Dumpster behind the laundry where he'd been salvaging cans to sell. It still did the trick if enough pieces could be scraped off with a knife, and he was more than happy to have it. Beggars couldn't be choosers. He chipped off what looked like a half cup, tossed the chips into one of the bags, and stored the remaining brick on a makeshift cabinet fashioned from discarded cardboard boxes, "Tomatoes" stamped in bright red letters on their sides.

He checked his jacket, only to find it was still wet from the earlier downpour. Fortunately, the rain had now slowed to a mere drizzle. As much as he hated wearing wet clothes, that jacket was all that he had, and it beat the hell out of going out in just a T-shirt. Besides, his jeans were hardly better, even if body heat had helped dry them some. Bracing against the feeling of clammy, wet fabric, he struggled into the damp denim, wincing as it touched already-chilled skin. The soggy tennis shoes squelched loudly when he slipped them back onto his bare feet.

There were two places close by to do laundry, both too isolated to offer any protection for a lone teen doing a little after-dark washing. However, there was another place just a few blocks away with a lively bar next door, which provided some measure of safety. The old, outdated machines there were also much cheaper. Slinging the heavy book bag over his shoulder and picking up the plastic ones, he headed out into the night to Thirteenth Street and the Tub of Suds.

Breath misted before his face while he walked as fast as his injured ankle allowed, keeping a constant eye out for sinister figures lurking in the shadows. Thankfully, it appeared that even bullies avoided rainy nights, allowing him a brief reprieve from their attentions.

He hobbled down the deserted streets, shivering and grateful that it was still too early in the year for snow, but it wouldn't be long until it came. Before then, he needed to find a better place to stay or he'd never last 'til spring. It had been a rare bit of good fortune to find the abandoned warehouse basement after being tossed out on the streets. With no way to heat it, however, and temperatures dropping as winter approached, his quarters, which flooded whenever it rained, would soon freeze. With a desperate laugh, he visualized ice skating through what was essentially his bedroom.

Suddenly, like a bright beacon offering safety and shelter from the cool evening, which it was, the Tub of Suds appeared out of the dreary darkness. He stepped through the door, warmth wrapping around him like a soft blanket, fogging his glasses. He grinned. No one was there, which meant that his favorite washing machine wasn't in use. It would work if he only put a dollar in, saving three quarters on each load. Since he wasn't exactly a clothes-horse, one load would do it, even if it meant mixing lights and darks. That left seventy-five cents for drying. While it might not complete the job, at least his clothes wouldn't be too bad come morning.

An unexpected drawback to washing there was the wonderful cooking smells wafting in from next door. Although Jeremy no longer met requirements for foster care, he could still get free lunch at school, providing no one found out that he no longer lived with the Deweys. He didn't know what would happen if his true circumstances were known, and was afraid to find out, unwilling to risk that one guaranteed meal of the day. Unfortunately, today's had already been eaten and he'd have to wait until noon tomorrow for another. His stomach protested noisily, and he did all that he could think to do -- promise that one day it would never be hungry again while tightening his worn leather belt.

The Twelfth Street Bar and Grill was a small, hole-in-the-wall joint located, of all places, on Thirteenth Street. The former owner was a superstitious sort and had hoped to balance the bad karma associated with the number thirteen and possibly fool fate. It hadn't worked, though, for he'd died three years later of an overdose.

When Noah bought the place, he'd been advised to change the name, but felt a strange need to keep it. Symbolically, it proved to him that businesses, like people, could change. What he told the general public was that the name was established and new signs cost money, and if it wasn't broke, he wasn't going to fix it.

What was broken, however, was the illegal drug trade running out the back door and the whores who openly worked the rowdy clientele. After two long years of hard work, he was finally running a clean operation and had even managed to pull in a good lunch crowd from the local businessmen and women who'd studiously avoided the place before. Yes, with a lot of blood, sweat, and tears -- not to mention all of his savings -- he'd overcome the bar's shady past, much as he had his own. Now he was a successful entrepreneur, and his baby was turning a profit. Not much of a profit, but it was paying the bills and allowing him to tuck away a bit for a rainy day -- unlike the small laundry next door that had come with the place. He'd happily sell that money pit if he could get any decent takers.

Oh, there were bigger and better bars further downtown, where the stockbrokers and banking types hung out, but he found the construction workers, secretaries, and hard-working, blue-collar folks one hell of a lot more interesting, even if some of the female clientele harbored not-so-secret fantasies about him. They were wasting their time. The hard-bodied construction workers, in their hard hats and faded jeans, stood a much better chance.

At six feet three inches tall and one hundred ninety pounds, blond-haired, hazel-eyed Noah knew he was most folks' idea of the all-American boy. He didn't actually lie about his past; he just didn't volunteer information. He also didn't correct the patrons who tried to guess his history, since it was usually far more glamorous, and legal, than the truth. As long as they were paying the tab, he'd be whoever they wanted him to be -- something he'd learned early on in a previous profession.

The story had stuck that he was a small-town, mid-western boy, and high school football star to boot, until an unfortunate injury had cost him a scholarship. Well, he did walk with a pronounced limp, sported numerous scars, and there was no denying his nose had been broken at least once, so they'd actually paid some attention to fact while fabricating fantasy.

The reality was, nothing could be further from the truth. Up until the time he'd had enough and run away, he'd been shuffled from one house to another in many states, never staying in one place very long. What little he remembered of his birth parents didn't bear repeating, even to the raucous patrons of the Twelfth Street Bar and Grill.

Though proud of rising above his upbringing to become a successful business owner, Noah never forgot where he came from, and what it felt like to be all alone in the world, unwanted and unloved. Aside from his past, what his customers also didn't know was that Noah was a man with a mission: to drag others who'd made the same mistakes he had off the streets, giving them hope for a better life, too.

"Mary, mind the bar a minute, would you? I'm gonna run this load of towels next door," Noah shouted above the pounding beat of the jukebox and boisterous comments from the pool tables in the back of the bar. He held up a cheap, plastic basket.

"Now, boss, you know you should get me or Kevin to do that kind of thing," she scolded, apparently of the mind that owning the place meant he didn't actually have to perform menial tasks. She'd bartended here long enough to know he didn't work that way.

"Just need to get away a minute," he reassured her, seeing no reason to disclose the real reasons for taking every bar towel he could find -- clean or dirty -- to the Tub of Suds at this hour of the night.

Mary sighed, relenting. "Okay," she said, though she didn't appear very happy about it. Her attention was called away as a young couple swept in from the cold and approached the bar, calling out for beer. Noah stepped through before the door closed behind them. A cool, light mist brushed against his cheeks.

Pausing on the sidewalk, Noah looked in through the steamy windows next door. There he was, the reason for Noah's sudden decision to wash towels. Waif-thin, with stringy, dark hair badly in need of cutting, was the kid who'd caught his attention a few weeks ago. The kid's head was bowed over a book, and he occasionally looked up to make notes, tongue protruding from between his teeth in concentration. A laundry folding table served as a desk. As scrawny and scraggly as he was, with some proper nourishment, a hot bath, and some decent clothes, he'd turn more than a few heads -- he'd certainly turned Noah's, mostly because of a striking resemblance to someone else.

Just for a moment, Noah was swept back in time, and in bittersweet memories that lank, unkempt hair changed into soft, inky waves, tossed artfully over a bared shoulder. It fell back from an olive-skinned face, revealing a bright smile and the darkest eyes he'd ever seen. The lashes surrounding them were so black that their owner looked to be wearing eyeliner. Then, with a suggestive wink, the glorious smile turned into a wicked grin. Noah knew it wasn't real, yet his heart ached to go inside and find Billy waiting, exactly as remembered. The vision lasted just a minute and then it was gone, replaced by the image of this much-younger replica in glasses -- something Billy was too vain to wear -- too intent on scribbling in a notebook to notice his audience.

When Noah went in, dark, haunted eyes darted toward the door before locking onto the basket of towels. Even from a distance he could hear the sigh of relief as, apparently, he was judged a non-threat. The kid turned back to his work and dug another book out of a tattered bag, closing the first and setting it aside. It didn't take a genius to recognize schoolwork.

Only one washer was in use, two rumpled plastic bags lying on top. Bypassing at least ten other machines, Noah chose the one next to the table, hoping to get a better look at the books and assignments, and maybe even a name or school written on a book cover. As he tossed the towels into the washer, he heard the unmistakable sound of a stomach growling, confirmed a moment later when the dark-haired boy reached down to rub it as though a little petting would calm the beast within. Noah had known that beast himself once upon a time, and had learned the hard way that petting didn't help much.

After inserting quarters and detergent and starting the machine, Noah peered over a narrow shoulder for a better look at the books spread out on the table. Calculus. Damn. He'd pegged the kid for fifteen, tops. Judging from this and the biology book sitting off to the side, either he was staring at a prodigy or a poor unfortunate who had fallen through the cracks in the system -- a kid who, at eighteen, was deemed too old for foster care, but hadn't yet graduated. Runaways didn't normally make it a point to attend school, and if Noah wasn't mistaken, calculus was a college prep course.

He ran his eyes down skinny arms, gratified at the absence of telltale tracks at the elbows. The kid was much too thin to be healthy. Noah knew well enough what street kids looked like. He'd stared into a mirror often enough at that age. By the looks of it, this one, studiously doing homework while washing clothes, didn't intend to be society's throwaway. Good, Noah could work with that.

"Hey, kid," he called, backing away to a respectful distance so he wouldn't spook the guy. "How's it going?"

Wary dark eyes, slightly lighter than Billy's, looked up with the same suspicious glare Noah had seen from the feral cats in the neighborhood. Well, living on the streets would do that.

"Fine," the boy answered automatically, closing his book and stacking it on the other. Any more flighty and he'd already be out the door.

"I have a proposition for you," Noah said, leaning back against a dryer, attempting to appear harmless. Not an easy feat with his size and scars.

The books disappeared into the bag and skinny thighs bunched under threadbare jeans, clearly preparing for a mad dash out the door.

"Not that kind of proposition," Noah amended.

"What then?" the boy asked, body still tensed to run.

"Well..." Noah measured his words carefully. He'd only get one chance at this; if he blew it, the young man would be long gone in a heartbeat, never to be seen around here again. "I own the bar next door, and I was thinking that, if you were gonna be here for awhile, maybe you wouldn't mind keeping an eye on my towels? I gotta get back over there, and folks tend to steal 'em if I don't keep an eye out. I'll pay you, of course."

Curiosity warred with suspicion on the boy's face. "Pay me what?" One foot slowly slipped from the stool he was sitting on. He winced as it hit the floor.

Noah knew better than to comment on the vulnerability while the kid was this nervous, and made a mental note of the injury for later. It would need seeing to. "I'll pay you ten bucks," he said. The towels were probably worth eight, if that. A lost boy to save? Priceless.

One dark eyebrow rose. "That's all I have to do? Make sure no one steals 'em?"

Damn, what had happened in life to make someone this young so skeptical? Noah believed he knew. He'd faced pretty tough times at that age, and silently hoped that this young man hadn't met the same demons he had while on the streets. That was the reason for offering whatever help he could -- for the sake of someone who'd been there and had saved him from the horrors. Good deeds were made to be passed forward.

"That's right," Noah answered, knowing he'd have to move slowly. What was waiting outside that door was far more dangerous than anything that would be offered here.

Brow furrowing in thoughtful contemplation, the kid asked, "What if I steal 'em?"

"You won't," Noah replied, trusting his instincts. Something told him that this skinny, unkempt teen just needed a chance -- a chance that he himself had been given ten years ago.

A toothy grin appeared then, making the boy look even younger and assuring Noah that he probably wasn't a meth user. Those teeth were too perfect and lacked the characteristic gum erosion of an addict. Still, it didn't really prove anything. There were a lot of drugs out there readily available if you knew where to look. There were also worse problems the kid could have than drugs. "You're right," the boy replied, "I won't. But you'd hardly have to pay me if I'm going to be here anyways."

"Let's just say it's worth it to me, okay? What do you say?" Noah hoped the answer would be yes. He needed to keep the kid in the building and learn all he could, other than that this was a student of Joseph L. Parker High School who was probably in the twelfth grade. The rainbow-colored pyramid doodled on a notebook told its own story, and added yet another possibility of why someone so young was on their own. It wouldn't be the first time parents had tossed a child out for being gay.

"You've got a deal," the kid said, digging more books out of his bag and drawing the injured leg up onto the stool again.

Noah slowly released the breath he'd been holding. So far, so good. "What's wrong with your leg?" he asked then.

The boy didn't look up while blatantly lying. "Sprained my ankle playing soccer."

Uh-huh, thought Noah. If lying was the only vice he had to deal with, he'd count himself lucky. "You're too young to come in the bar. What time will you be leaving?"

Glancing up at the clock, the boy replied, "I need to be out of here at ten."

"I'll bring your money over before you leave, then."

Noah hurried back to the bar to set his plans in motion, plans started after the first time he'd seen those dark eyes and that unruly mop of hair that reminded him so hauntingly of Billy. There'd been no sign of the kid for weeks, and Noah had just about given up hope when, out of the blue, there the boy was, entering the Tub of Suds.

"Kevin!" Noah called, bypassing Mary and heading toward the kitchen. "I need a roast beef sandwich with fries and a large lemonade. To go."

The balding cook stepped through the kitchen door, scratching his protruding belly through a "Kiss the Cook" apron. "Coming right up! But didn't you already eat?"

"It's not for me," Noah explained, though it was what he usually ordered for himself. "Throw on a little extra roast beef, will ya?"

"What's going on, boss?" Mary's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

With a grin that he didn't display often, Noah told her more about his private life than he had in the past year of their acquaintance. "I'm getting another chance to repay an old debt." As it wasn't his habit to share secrets, Mary took what was offered and didn't pry.

Jeremy was cautiously optimistic. Ten dollars! And just when he needed it! The money from cashing in cans was now gone, and he wasn't sure where his next dollar was coming from. With what he'd earn tonight he could go to the thrift store and buy a winter coat, maybe, or at least a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter to last through the weekend. He wasn't afraid of working for a living, and he'd put in plenty of applications for after-school jobs, but it hadn't helped. No one would hire a teenager with no viable address or phone number. Oh, there'd been numerous offers for his body, he just wasn't that desperate yet and, God willing, never would be.

The door opened and the most wonderful smells assaulted his nose. An attractive blonde woman approached, carrying a takeout tray and a large drink. Damn the luck! Now he'd have to watch while someone else ate. He breathed deeply, torturing himself with what he couldn't have. Visions of roast beef and French fries filled his mind. His stomach protested angrily, and his heart sank as the woman came closer, each step a taunting cruelty. It looked like she intended to sit right next to him to enjoy her meal.

His eyes widened when she handed him the tray and placed the drink on top of a convenient washer.

"Noah said to give you this," she said.

Oh, shit. Jeremy assumed Noah was the guy he'd made the deal with, and as much as he wanted the food, he needed the ten dollars more. "I can't afford that," he mumbled.

Clearly surprised at the refusal, the woman stammered, "Uh, it's a mistake."

His confusion must have shown, for she was quick to explain, "A customer wanted a rare roast beef sandwich; this one is well done. We were gonna throw it out until Noah said there was a teenager next door watching the towels. In my experience, teenagers like to eat, so we thought you might put it to good use." A pair of big blue eyes pleaded with him. "It'd be a shame to waste it."

Mouth already watering, he asked, "What about the fries?"

"He wanted a baked potato," she replied a bit too quickly. He'd never been in the bar, so had no way of knowing whether or not they served baked potatoes.

Although still nervous about accepting kindness from strangers, the sandwich smelled heavenly and he hadn't had warm fries in ages, normally opting for healthy choices at school. Finally, Jeremy relaxed enough to smile. "Well, if you insist," he said, pushing aside a mound of books to make room. With a mumbled, "Thanks," he opened the container and breathed in the wonderful aroma. His! All his! How did he get so lucky?

The blonde stood quietly watching while he asked a blessing. When he finished, she said, "My name's Mary. What's yours?"

"Jeremy," he replied, after swallowing a mouthful of French fries. "Jeremy Kincaid."

"Well, pleased to meet you, Jeremy," Mary said. "Now you eat up. I brought you lemonade, too. I have to get back to work now. *Bon Appétit*." With that, she was gone.

"He ate like he'd never seen food before! And he's so skinny!" Mary wailed. A mother of two, it seemed she still had enough maternal instincts to spare for the poor kid in the laundry.

"Why do you think I'm feeding him?" Noah replied.

"What about his parents, don't they care? How could they let him go hungry? Did you see his clothes! It's forty degrees outside and all he's got is a T-shirt and a thin jacket!" If her righteous indignation was anything to go by, Mary Miller's children would never be neglected. "Can't you do something?" she pleaded.

"He probably doesn't have parents, Mary, or none that claim him. We don't know his circumstances. What if he doesn't want or need our help?" Noah explained rationally, though he was in full agreement with his employee on this one.

"Hey, change it to the ball game!" someone cried out from the depths of the bar. For one brief second as Mary switched the channel on the big screen over the bar, the noisy room was relatively quiet. Quiet enough to hear the screams from next door.

Homework forgotten, Jeremy lost himself in the rare treat of French fries and roast beef, quickly eating it all and looking for any crumbs that may have escaped his attention. He knew he should have saved some for later, but good meals were few and far between and he just couldn't help himself.

"Well, well, well... What have we here?"

He'd just been to heaven, now he plunged into hell. Heart battering against his ribs and palms suddenly sweaty, he looked up to find Trent and two cronies standing in the doorway, blocking the exit.

Determined not to show weakness, Jeremy eased off the stool and placed as much weight as possible on his bad ankle, biting his lip to stifle a yelp. He dragged his eyes away from the trio long enough for a quick glance behind him. Finding no back exit, he turned his full attention to his adversaries.

"It doesn't have to be like this, Jeremy," Trent crooned. "You know what I want, and you've given it to me before often enough. What's one more time?"

The man standing just inside the door was undeniably beautiful and had donned a winning smile in an attempt to lure his prey. Jeremy knew that, as attractive as he was on the outside, inside Trent was rotten to the core. "Go away, Trent. I told you, I'm not like you. I won't be like you."

"Oh, but you will, baby, you will." That cheerful smile turned predatory. "See, Willie likes you, especially after what I told him, and he already has some prospects lined up who'll pay top dollar for a piece of your ass. All you gotta do is tell 'em you're sixteen. Goodness knows you look it." As he spoke, Trent slowly eased closer. Shuffling footsteps from behind warned Jeremy of the danger from that direction.

"I won't do it," Jeremy whimpered. Hopelessness sank in and he gave up all pretense of bravado and began backing away, knowing that the others were sneaking up behind the next row of washers while Trent distracted him. The three joined forces to herd him into a corner.

Jeremy flinched and tried to pull away when Trent reached out and stroked his face, the gesture a cruel parody of a lover's touch. "It'll be just like I taught you, babe. All you gotta do is spread those sweet cheeks of yours and moan a little, like you enjoy it -- which I know you do. A few might want you to scream and struggle, some might want you to call them Daddy. In the end, you get paid good money for a few short minutes of your time."

Fear spurred him to action and Jeremy jerked away, screaming, "Go to hell, Trent!" catching them by surprise. He tuned out the pain that shot through his ankle, dodging past one of the thugs in a desperate bid for freedom.

Trent jumped toward the door, cutting off his escape, and snarled, "Get him! Willie'll have our asses if we come back empty-handed this time!"

One of the thugs tackled Jeremy against the unyielding surface of a dryer door. "No!" Jeremy screamed. "Let me go!" Tears of frustration filled his eyes as he fought a losing battle against the two larger men. He wriggled and squirmed, but they dragged him, still struggling, to the back of the room and wrestled him to the floor.

"Get his pants down," Trent ordered. "Once he's Willie's, I won't get to have any of that again."

"Oh, God! No! Don't do this, Trent!" Jeremy wailed.

A lucky kick caught one of the attackers in the shin. "You little bastard!" the man screamed, landing an open-handed slap that knocked Jeremy's head against the floor. Stars danced before his eyes.

Just when he was about to give up hope, salvation stormed through the door like an avenging angel -- wielding a baseball bat.

"What the fucking hell is going on here?" the angel yelled, fast approaching with the bat poised to swing.

The hands that had been so intently ripping at his clothes suddenly disappeared. Trent and the two henchmen dashed out the door and into the night, leaving Jeremy staring up into the furious face of his savior.

Chapter Two

The blond towering over Jeremy hadn't looked nearly as huge or intimidating during their brief conversation earlier. Anger and a Louisville Slugger tended to do that for a person, he supposed. Being flat on his back on the floor didn't seem to help, either.

As he lay on the filthy, stained tiles, staring up into the hostile face hovering above his, fear gripped Jeremy once again. Not only was he about to be tossed out for causing a disturbance, he was fairly certain the promised ten dollars had just disappeared.

That is, until the anger turned to concern and a huge, callused hand reached down, palm outstretched. "You okay, kid?" the man asked solicitously, pulling him to his feet.

Though the guy was still wielding the bat, the intimidation factor lessened considerably, even if the knight in flannel armor did tower over Jeremy by at least half a foot. Maybe he wasn't about to be tossed out after all. At least, he hoped not. Still, it didn't pay to get those hopes too high.

Hazel eyes, full of compassion, locked onto his, causing strange, squirming sensations in the pit of his stomach. Jeremy couldn't have looked away if he'd tried. "Do you need a doctor?" the man asked kindly, bringing him back to reality.

Doctors cost money and asked questions, things Jeremy was unable to give or answer. "No!" he exclaimed, finally breaking away from that piercing stare, cheeks flaming. "No, I don't need a doctor, thanks." He might be from the streets, but he'd been taught manners once upon a time, a fact he was proud of when dealing with decent folks, like tonight. Well, some of them were decent, anyway.

"We need to at least take a look at that ankle. *Soccer injuries* can be pretty nasty if left untreated." Judging from the tone of that gruff voice, Jeremy knew his lie hadn't been bought.

"By the way, the name's Noah Everett," the man added, shaking the hand he hadn't yet released. "And you are?"

"Jeremy Kincaid."

Jeremy shuddered as appraising eyes ran up and down his body. Though obviously assessing, it wasn't the blatantly sexual look he'd come to expect lately. It was more like what his gym teacher would do if he'd just taken a fall. "Well, Jeremy Kincaid, I can't take you to the bar, but there's a vacant apartment upstairs where we can go and get you patched up. There's even a fold-out couch so you can lie down."

Heart dropping to the pit of his stomach, Jeremy tensed to run. Oh, shit! Had he misinterpreted the man's intentions, trading a devil that he knew for one he didn't?

His panic must have shown, for the man, Noah, was quick to add, "I just want to help you! No strings attached. If it makes you feel any better, Mary can come up there with us. You know, the pretty blonde who brought you dinner?"

Embarrassed at having thought the worst of a well intentioned offer, Jeremy hung his head, mumbling, "No, I don't want to be a bother. I'm sorry, it's just..."

"It's just that you haven't had much reason to trust anybody lately," Noah finished for him.

With a sheepish half-smile, Jeremy peered up from beneath his overly long bangs and replied, "Yeah, you might say that."

The man gazed into his face one long moment as if looking for something. "I just need to know a few things first: those were Willie Carnell's boys, weren't they? I know the big one." Piercing eyes dared Jeremy to look away or to lie. Somehow, he knew that Noah would know it if he tried. He was surprised by the lack of judgment in the voice that asked, "Do you work for Willie?"

As hard as he'd tried *not to* work for the pimp, Jeremy was deeply offended. "No!" he shouted, disgusted that anyone would even think that. "He keeps sending them after me! I won't be a whore for him or anyone else!"

The big man sighed, relief etched upon his face. A half smile tugged up one corner of his mouth. "That's what I thought. Now here's something else I need to know: how old are you? Don't lie, it won't do you any good."

There was no need to lie about that. "I turned eighteen on the second of June."

Noah nodded. It seemed as though he'd expected the answer and accepted it as the truth. "Is there someone I should call for you?" he asked quietly.

Jeremy shook his head. "No, it's just me."

"That's what I figured," Noah mumbled under his breath. More loudly, he said, "Since it seems we're the only two customers tonight, what say I lock up and get you upstairs and off that ankle? If you've no one waiting for you, you're welcome to stay the night."

Though still harboring some reservations about trusting a stranger, Jeremy wasn't in any position to say no. "I can't afford to pay you," he blurted, wanting to get that out of the way as quickly as possible. If he had to make the trip back to his basement tonight, he didn't want to be wandering the streets too late. He hardly dared to hope, but it would be nice to sleep someplace warm and dry for a change, even if it was only for one night.

Now it was Noah's turn to take offense, judging by his scowl. "Did I ask you to?"

Jeremy lowered his eyes and shook his head.

Something heavy and wet hit him in the chest, and he caught his jacket just before it fell to the floor. Then, with narrowed eyes, the big man took it back, spreading it over a hanging rack. "Jeez! You're out on a night like tonight in that wet thing?" Slipping out of the oversized flannel shirt he was using for a jacket, Noah wrapped it around Jeremy's shoulders. "Put that on before you catch your death and let's get you upstairs."

The flannel, still warm from the big man's body, smelled of cologne, with an underlying masculine scent. Jeremy's teenaged hormones reacted instantly, making him grateful the shirt fell to his knees and hid the evidence. Now that the danger had passed, he was starting to notice that his rescuer was quite attractive in a rough, lumberjack kind of way, and most probably straight. He averted his eyes and willed his body to behave.

As he grabbed his books and preceded Noah into the chilly, soggy night, he was grateful not to be wearing his wet jacket. The temperature had dropped considerably. He stood shivering, watching the big blond lock the door, and then followed Noah around the side of the building. Heavy boots thudded against wooden stairs as his savior climbed a single flight that ended on a landing above the laundry. Jeremy watched for a moment and then placed one foot on the first step, gasping when he put weight on his injured ankle.

The world tilted crazily and Jeremy nearly dropped his book bag as he was swept off his feet and tossed over a broad, muscled shoulder in a fireman's carry. "Sorry 'bout that, kid; I forgot you were hurt."

Jeremy didn't know which was more embarrassing, being treated like he was helpless or having his flagging erection pressed against Noah's chest. Thankfully, between the cold, the painful ankle, and the embarrassment, that problem was short-lived.

A key scraped against a series of locks and then they were inside. It wasn't much warmer in the apartment than outside. His rescuer crossed the room in three long strides and set Jeremy down gently on a couch before going back to close the door. The flip of a switch flooded the small room with light, and he saw Noah squinting at a thermostat while turning the dial. A moment later the gentle purr of a heating unit sounded and warm air wafted from the ceiling. "This place isn't used much," his host explained apologetically. "Since it's small, it'll heat up in no time."

Jeremy didn't care. It wasn't his cold, damp basement, or the colder, damper streets, so it was fine for as long as it lasted. He suddenly realized he was alone in the apartment with a very attractive man. Even without the heater, the room grew much warmer.

His host entered the area sectioned off as a kitchen, which, from what Jeremy could see from the couch, held a mini-fridge, a microwave, and a hot plate. Noah returned a moment later with a plastic baggie filled with ice, which he wrapped in a towel and handed over. "There's only one ice tray, but this should be enough. If not, I can always run down to the bar and get more. Put that on your ankle."

Lying back on the couch, Jeremy removed his sneaker and rolled up his jeans' leg, wincing at the filth that had splattered him earlier. All his socks were in the wash, so the swollen ankle was

already bare, and he shivered when the ice touched his skin. Noah rummaged in the chest that served as a coffee table, finally tossing over a worn and faded blanket.

"Here," he said. "Put this on."

Jeremy gratefully wrapped it around himself, sinking into warmth and yawning sleepily. When he looked up, curious eyes were watching him.

"I want to help you, kid, I really do. First, I need some more answers," that low, gravelly voice began. Earlier it had alarmed Jeremy because it sounded angry. Now that he realized it was just how Noah talked, the growly tone was oddly comforting. "How did you hurt your ankle? And no more lies! If it's broken, you're going to need a doctor."

He'd told the man so much already, something as insignificant as the truth, in this case, shouldn't hurt. "Those guys from downstairs chased me home after school today. I jumped a railing into a stairwell before they saw me."

Noah nodded, accepting the explanation. "Which brings me to my next question: where is home?"

Long months of hiding left him reluctant to answer; however, something about Noah inspired his trust. "Harper Street. I live in a basement."

Again, those intense eyes scrutinized him, and Jeremy could almost hear the wheels turning in the big man's mind. "Not anymore, you don't. Is there someone with you? Or are you truly alone? I don't want anyone worrying."

He knew what Noah was asking. He was being given one last chance to come clean. "I'm alone," Jeremy confirmed with a sigh. That hadn't always been the case.

"Are you in any trouble?"

"Only with Willie's boys."

"No drugs, booze, or cigarettes?"

Jeremy snorted. "Not even if I *could* afford them."

A memory surfaced of slipping packaged soup mixes into his pocket at the local grocery store whenever the pain in his belly was too much to bear. Always afterward the guilt gnawed his insides nearly as viciously as the hunger. His conscience was the only thing that separated him from men like Trent, and every item from a store shelf that found its way into his pocket put him one step closer to crossing a line that couldn't be re-crossed. It was a battle he fought daily, to do what was right instead of what was easy. He usually won. How much longer before he lost? Would Noah toss him out for that?

Finally, Jeremy's conscious got the better of him. "I've stolen before," he confessed.

"Why did you steal?" That gruff voice remained unchanged. It was just a question, not a judgment.

He deliberately locked eyes with Noah's so the truth there could be seen. "To eat. I only took food, I swear, and only when I couldn't find enough cans to sell."

Noah never batted an eye. "Then don't expect me to blame you for that. It's survival instinct, not a criminal act, in my book."

Silence stretched between them and the big man chewed thoughtfully on his lip, emotions flickering across his face. Finally he said, "Well, here's the deal, if you want it. You keep going to school and stay here. In the evenings and weekends, you can work at the Tub of Suds. It needs a good cleaning. You can handle that, can't you?"

Jeremy didn't mean to look a gift horse in the mouth, but months of living on the street had made him cautious. "Yes, I can. Only, what happens when that's finished?"

Noah's biceps bulged when he crossed his arms across his chest and leaned back against the bar. Jeremy recognized it as his "See? I'm harmless!" pose from downstairs. Actually, it had the opposite effect, making muscles bunch and showing just how powerful the man's body was.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there. Oh, and no more stealing. You need something, ask. Okay?"

Jeremy considered the proposition carefully, knowing it sounded too good to be true. Basically, he was being offered everything he needed: a warm, safe place to stay and gainful employment so he could finish school. And though it wasn't mentioned, he was pretty sure more "kitchen mistakes" figured into the equation, too. What was the catch? Not only did he not have any skills of value, Willie's boys were still after him. They could make a lot of trouble. "What about the guys from downstairs?" Jeremy reminded Noah in case he'd forgotten.

Broad shoulders shrugged under a tight black T-shirt. Jeremy wanted to see that again without the shirt. "I've handled worse," Noah said. "You let me worry about that. All you need to focus on is finishing school. You seem pretty smart. How is it you're still in high school at your age?"

Jeremy frowned. This was something he didn't want to talk about, but if Noah was taking him in, Noah had a right to know why. "My mom had some... issues, to say the least. She never enrolled me in school, which is what brought Social Services to our doorstep."

Again Jeremy was amazed that Noah was just listening, and that his features hadn't hardened in judgment. "What they found made them take you away." Something in the big man's eyes said he already knew the story and how it ended.

"Yeah." Jeremy's gaze shifted to the floor. It was at this point he expected sympathy or a verbal attack on his poor, schizophrenic mother.

Noah did neither. "If you don't mind my asking, what happened to her?"

He swallowed hard before answering. Regardless of how much time had passed, the pain still seemed fresh and new. "She died," he whispered quietly. "I was told she just didn't wake up one morning. Personally, I think there was more to it than that."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Too many people have told me she's in a better place now. I'd like to believe them."

"I take it you're going to graduate this year?"

Grateful for the change of subject, Jeremy nodded and couldn't help smiling and bragging a little. "I'm up for a scholarship, too."

His smile was returned. Jeremy really liked Noah's smile, chipped front tooth and all. It was genuine and involved the man's whole face, not just his mouth, and caused warm feelings deep inside Jeremy. He didn't know too many people who could do that with a simple upturn of lips.

"Well, then, I stand corrected. All you need to do is finish school and win a scholarship." Eyeing him up and down, Noah added, "That, and maybe put some meat on your bones. Here, let me look at that ankle."

Noah pulled a chair near the couch and sank heavily into it. Jeremy hissed when a surprisingly gentle hand probed his injury, more from anticipation than the actual pain itself. The interrogation continued during the examination. "What time do you have to be at school, and what time do you get out?"

"School starts at eight and I get out at three," he replied, curious as to why Noah asked.

"Well, there's an alarm clock over there on the end table, and this couch folds out into a bed. Be ready at seven and I'll take you out for breakfast before we go."

"We?"

With an intent glare that brooked no argument, the man Jeremy was still expecting to suddenly change his mind and toss him back out on the street said, "Surely you don't expect me to let you walk? Not with all the pond scum out there gunning for you?"

Well, Noah had a point, and until his ankle healed, he was in no position to run. Warming up to his benefactor, especially since a hot breakfast was in the offering, Jeremy grinned and said, "I'd like that." It would be so nice to be able to focus on class work with a full belly for a change instead of anxiously waiting for lunch.

"Okay, that's settled, then," Noah said, with a ghost of a smile. He gently put Jeremy's ankle back on the couch, placing the ice pack on it. "Looks like a bad sprain, but you should be all right. Leave the ice on a bit longer, and then take it off for a while. There's aspirin in the bathroom cabinet if you need it. Is there anything else you need?"

Yes, there was one thing he needed, and wanted, more than anything. "Could I please take a shower?"

Noah smiled again, apparently amused by the request. "It's through that door, and towels and soap are in the cabinet, though I'm afraid the shampoo is a bit girly. That's what I get for asking Mary to pick some up for me. Anyway, I'll pull the couch out and get you some blankets. There's not much in the way of groceries, but there's soup if you get hungry. I live across town and only use this place occasionally, if the weather's bad." He studied Jeremy with a critical eye. "I hate to ask this, but I need you to hobble over to the door and set all the locks once I leave. We can't be sure the riff-raff won't be back."

Just for a moment, fear crept up Jeremy's spine. He felt so secure around this big, burly hero that he'd forgotten what lurked just outside the door. "I certainly hope not," he mumbled.

"The phone works. My cell phone is programmed in as 'one' and the bar is 'two.' Don't hesitate to call either, or nine-one-one if you have to. Hopefully, you won't need to."

Noah stood and pulled him up before pulling the hide-a-bed from the couch and digging into the trunk for more blankets. Then he threw a bracing arm around Jeremy's shoulders and helped him to the door. Too much else had been on Jeremy's mind lately to think about sex with anyone other than his hand, and the close physical contact wreaked havoc with his libido. He wanted to catch that arm and drag it back over his shoulders when it was removed, but fought the impulse. The gesture probably wouldn't be appreciated.

"I have to get back to the bar," Noah said. "Take a shower and get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning. Now, lock all four of those locks behind me, and don't open this door for anyone but me or Mary, got that?"

Jeremy nodded and did as told. The moment he heard boots clomping down the stairs, he hobbled into the bathroom, heading straight for the shower. With the memory of warm hands touching his ankle and being pressed against a firm body foremost in his mind, it wasn't just soap and grime that the water washed down the drain. When at last he curled up in the bed -- clutching a warm, Noah-scented jacket like a security blanket -- he slept like a baby, safe and secure for the first time in months.

Chapter Three

When Noah climbed the stairs and peeked in the window the next morning, he expected to see the foundling still sleeping, just waking up, or vanished altogether, taking whatever wasn't nailed down with him. What he hadn't expected was to find the bed folded back into the couch, the apartment cleaned, and Jeremy sitting in a chair reading a textbook, wearing only a sheet wrapped around his waist.

Damn! Noah had forgotten all about the clothes downstairs, and what the kid had on the night before was too filthy to even consider. About to head back down the stairs, he stopped, watching mesmerized as Jeremy stood and stretched. The makeshift toga fell in a blue cotton puddle at his feet. Noah's mouth went dry. Although way too thin, Jeremy's body was nicely made and far more mature than expected. It also sported an impressive erection. One hand fondled it affectionately while the other reached for the fallen sheet.

Noah eased backward down the stairs, hoping he wouldn't get caught spying, and feeling like a pervert for liking what he'd seen. Jeremy was only eighteen, for crying out loud! He opened the laundry and tried to distract himself by throwing the load of damp clothes into the dryer. Visions of how the low-slung jeans he was holding would look on those slender hips plagued his mind. Then he noticed how threadbare they were. He knew teens liked ripped and holey jeans, but the ones he was holding, as well as everything else he scrutinized, had been carefully mended with neat, tiny stitches. Some of the buttons may have been mismatched, but none were missing from any of the shirts. Even the socks had been darned. Jeremy might not own much, but obviously valued what he did have, something few teenagers seemed to do.

A glance up at the clock told Noah there wouldn't be time to take Jeremy out for breakfast after waiting for the clothes to dry. Maybe he should pick something up, instead.

"You're late," Jeremy scolded playfully when Noah returned later with a basket of warm clothes and a bag of hot biscuits. "I was starting to worry that you'd forgotten me." As if there was a chance in hell of that happening after the little display earlier.

"Just getting you something to wear," he explained, holding up the basket. "I don't know what you like to eat, so I bought one ham and egg biscuit and two sausages."

As malnourished as he obviously was, Noah was truly impressed when Jeremy asked, "What about you?" before diving into the bag like most young men of his acquaintance would have, sparing no thoughts for anyone else.

"I ate mine in the truck," Noah lied. He'd actually planned for one of the sausage biscuits. Seeing Jeremy looking so famished changed his plans, and he decided to make do with the black coffee and stale doughnut he'd had before leaving home. "I brought you milk, too. Errr, you can drink milk, right?"

"As far as I know," Jeremy replied, face lighting up expectantly. "I haven't had any in a while. I usually drink water."

Distracted when the sheet began slipping from Jeremy's shoulder, Noah held out the basket. "Why don't you go get dressed while I fix you a plate?"

"Okay," Jeremy agreed, placing the basket on the couch and picking a few items from it before disappearing into the bathroom. The door latch was faulty and needed to be replaced, allowing the door to swing open. Before Noah had a chance to turn away, Jeremy, back turned, dropped the sheet to the floor. Even in such an underfed condition, his ass was firm and round. Each globe would make a perfect handful for Noah's large hands.

Jeremy moaned with pleasure as he donned the clean, warm clothes. All that smooth, unblemished skin and sensuous moaning had an immediate effect on Noah's cock, which rose to the occasion.

Blushing hotly for the first time in years, he turned his back and focused on pouring the milk into the blender, adding the pack of protein powder he'd brought from home. For good measure, he opened a second pack and added a bit more, all the while fighting his body's reaction.

Once dressed, Jeremy hobbled over to the single barstool, said a blessing and, with a sheepish look toward Noah, attacked a biscuit from the bag with a vengeance, sighing happily. Damn, Noah had forgotten all about finding a plate. Too late for that now.

He hit the button on the blender, let it mix for sixty seconds, and then poured the contents into a glass that he placed on the counter.

Jeremy was already wolfing down a second biscuit. "What's this?"

"That's a protein shake. Forgive my saying so, but I think you're a bit undernourished. That'll help build you up."

Jeremy eyed it skeptically and then took a tentative sip. His face lit up. The drink, which frankly, Noah didn't find so tasty, followed the biscuits into a loudly rumbling stomach. Jeremy barely paused long enough to mumble, "Thanks," before attacking the third biscuit, amidst more contented moaning.

Noah had never seen anyone enjoy food the way this starving kid did, and he was powerless to do anything except watch in amazement. As he studied his guest, he began to notice things in the clear light of dawn that he'd missed the night before.

For one thing, the dark eyes gazing up at him from under dark lashes -- and through the lenses of glasses in desperate need of replacement -- weren't brown after all, but the deepest, darkest blue he'd ever seen. Jeremy's hair, now clean and smelling of flowers, was more brown than black, and the skin that had seemed olive under the fluorescent light of the Tub of Suds was lighter than he'd believed, with a light splash of freckles across the nose. He'd originally noticed the kid because of his resemblance to Billy. Now the similarities were fading. Or maybe, since they'd met, Jeremy's personality, so different from Billy's, was affecting Noah's perception.

Looking up to find he was being watched, Jeremy lowered his head, face flushing -- also something Billy wouldn't have done. No, Billy would smile flirtatiously at anyone caught admiring him. Wait! Admiring? Damn. He *had* been admiring. Noah made a mental note to stop turning down dates. He definitely needed some adult company if a mere kid was affecting him so.

Forcibly redirecting his thoughts, Noah asked, "How did you wind up outdoors, if you don't mind my asking?"

Chewing thoughtfully for a moment, Jeremy swallowed, then said, "When I turned eighteen, the family I was staying with no longer got a check for keeping me and told me I had to leave." There was no bitterness in the calm voice, just a matter-of-fact, roll-with-the-punches acceptance.

That's what Noah had figured. With all the assistance programs out there, far too many unfortunates still slipped through the cracks. While some managed, others fell victim to society's predators. "Why didn't you go to a shelter?"

Jeremy suddenly seemed to find the floor of great interest. "I did. Do you have any idea how crowded they are?" Eyes still trained on the faded linoleum, he paused, then added, "Or that they'll kick you out if someone even accuses you of prostitution?" His voice was a mere whisper now. "It's also too easy for the wrong people to find me there."

"Let me guess: some of Willie's boys?"

A fall of brown hair hid Jeremy's eyes. "I didn't do it," he mumbled. "I'm not a whore."

"Jeremy, look at me." The eyes that slowly rose to meet Noah's appeared far older, and wiser, than any eighteen-year-old's had a right to be. "I never thought you did; I know how those types operate. Just how did you come to Willie's attention to begin with?"

Those dark eyes skittered away again. "Trent, one of the guys you chased away last night -- he was my boyfriend for awhile." Jeremy snorted. "That is, until he tried to become my career counselor. Things were fine until I turned eighteen, then he started pressuring me to go to work with him."

Noah had thought as much. It seemed to be a popular ploy to gain recruits. "Let me guess. He told you that it was a good way to earn big bucks, and it would only be for a little while until the two of you saved up enough to go away together. Am I right?"

Jeremy's shocked expression said it all. "How did you know?"

"Kid, that's the oldest trick in the book."

"It can't be!" Jeremy cried, snapping to Trent's defense. "He meant it at the time! Trent was a good guy when I met him, I don't know why he changed."

Noah sighed. Telling someone what they wanted to hear was a most effective tool for persuasion. He'd fallen for it himself once. While it appeared that Jeremy had believed the sales pitch, the kid hadn't fallen for it. Smart kid. "I hate to tell you this: that line is at least twelve years old. And all people have good and bad in them; it's the choices they make that prove who they really are." He hated being the one to bust the kid's bubble, but he needed to before someone got hurt, namely Jeremy.

Judging from the stubborn lift of his chin and the defiantly blazing eyes, the kid fiercely guarded tender feelings for Trent's nonexistent good side.

"Jeremy, how old is Trent?" Noah asked, leading him toward his own answers. Past experience had taught that truth was more effective when discovered for oneself. Getting it shoved down your throat only led to resistance and denial.

Jeremy mumbled, "Nineteen."

"Uh-huh. Why is it again that Willie's so interested in you?"

"Trent says it's because I look younger than I am."

"Uh-huh." Noah waited patiently for Jeremy to put two and two together. He didn't have long to wait.

"Oh, shit! He's not nineteen, is he?"

"He's been nineteen a while. That's how old he was the first time I tried to convince him to give up the life and go back to Topeka where he belonged."

"How long ago was that?"

Noah visualized a skinny kid with dark blond hair and blue eyes instead of the polished pro Trent had become. Now that hair was whatever color was currently the rage and the eyes were altered by tinted contacts. He'd gone from "boy next door" to "designer whore" for his client's pleasure. "Six years, more or less."

"Twenty-five? He's twenty-five?" Jeremy's sputtered, eyes wide in shocked disbelief.

"Or twenty-six," Noah confirmed with a shrug. "Somewhere in that general area."

Jeremy's shoulders slumped. "How many times do you reckon he's done the same thing to other boys?"

The truth may have been cruel, but lying would serve no purpose and only complicate matters later. "You're the fifth that I know of. Only the others weren't as smart as you and they fell for it."

"I nearly did," Jeremy murmured.

"Happens to the best of us, kid." He kept to himself the knowledge that at least one of the others had been recruited during the time frame when Jeremy had probably thought Trent was his boyfriend. The poor thing was already dealing with enough; he didn't need that added burden. Given time, he'd figure it out on his own.

Focusing his pain on the nearest target, Jeremy exploded. "Will you stop calling me kid? I'm eighteen, damn it, and been living on my own for months! I think I deserve a little respect!"

Noah didn't say a word, just waited out the storm. Sure enough, the problem resolved itself.

Several emotions flitted across Jeremy's expressive face, finally settling into embarrassed horror. "Oh, my God! I am so sorry, Noah. You didn't deserve that. I don't know what came over me!"

"It's all right, k... Jeremy. I don't mean anything by it. It's just sort of something I say, like when Mary calls everyone 'hon.' Don't take it to heart." His eyes turned to the clock on the end table. "What say we get you to school now?"

Thankfully, Jeremy's head was turned and he didn't notice Trent and a few others leaning against the building across the street. Noah did. Jeremy was safe on school property, but couldn't spend the rest of his life hiding there. He had to go home sometime.

"I'll be here at three to pick you up," Noah said.

Already opening the door, Jeremy turned and replied, just as Noah expected, "No, really; it's not far. I can walk."

Yeah, and guess who'd be waiting for him? Noah kept that to himself, however. He'd caused Trent to lose face in front of his minions. Whatever efforts they'd put into harassing Jeremy before were about to be doubled. "It's no trouble, really. In fact, it's on my way. I live over on the east side. Besides, you shouldn't be using that ankle too much until it has a chance to heal."

"Well, if you insist." Jeremy's brilliant smile touched Noah's heart. "Could you make it three thirty? I need to use the computer in the library."

"Three thirty it is," Noah agreed. "See you then."

"Bye." Jeremy hopped out and closed the door while pulling his book bag over his shoulder. Like his clothing, the bag was worn and patched.

The wind caught his jacket, whipping it around his lean frame and reminding Noah of how thin the boy was. "Hey," he called. When Jeremy turned around, Noah asked, "What about lunch? Do you need money?"

"Oh, I'm covered," Jeremy shouted through the closed window. "Thanks, anyway." He waved and then hobbled up the hill, still favoring the ankle, and disappeared into a crowd of young people.

For just a moment, Noah felt a twinge of envy at the students hurrying toward the front of the building. He'd never finished school, and each year that passed was one more excuse not to go back.

Getting an education had never meant that much to him back when it should have. Now it was too late -- for him. It wasn't too late for Jeremy, and Noah vowed then and there to see to it that the kid graduated and, scholarship or not, attended college. Outwardly, the handsome young man still bore some resemblance to Billy; inwardly, Jeremy reminded Noah of himself before he'd allowed others to convince him he'd never amount to much. He'd happily take a bat to anyone who dared suggest it to the kid. Jeremy was going places. If there were any way possible, Noah would help him get there.

He turned a baleful glare on Trent's gang then, knowing they were watching, just waiting for another shot. Well, they'd have it over his dead body, which just might be the case if he was unsuccessful in his plan. To keep Jeremy safe, he'd take drastic measures, up to and including meeting the dragon in its den.

Chapter Four

Noah was strangely subdued when picking Jeremy up that afternoon, visibly tense until they'd left the school grounds and were headed toward the bar. "How was school?" he asked, attention focused on driving. Jeremy sighed. He'd been hard pressed to concentrate on assignments that day due to invasive visions of a certain hunky, hazel-eyed blond. He'd even caught himself scribbling "Noah" in the margin of his notes a time or two.

"Fine," Jeremy answered noncommittally, wishing Noah would look at him like he had that morning when he thought no one was watching. Jeremy was mortified to turn around and find the bathroom door standing wide open, but the look on Noah's face had been worth it. Judging from the tented jeans the man was trying to conceal by keeping the bar between them, Noah was either bi or gay, and interested. Jeremy's world suddenly became a much better place. Now, seeing Noah's sullen mood, he wondered what had happened during the day to cause it.

Then, his thoughts were redirected. Noah may not have looked at him, but he did the next best thing -- offered food. "So, what would you like for dinner?"

Oh, damn! He got to choose! "Pizza!" Jeremy shouted without a moment's pause, causing Noah's shell to crack. A warm chuckle escaped. To Jeremy, it was like a hug.

Amused eyes turned his way. "Been awhile, has it?"

Jeremy decided to let the unintended double-entendre pass, acknowledging, if only to himself, that yes, it *had* been awhile. Hormones jumping into overdrive, he quickly pulled his book bag from the floorboard onto his lap, pretending to look inside. He hoped Noah wouldn't ask what he was looking for, because he wouldn't have been able to come up with a coherent answer other than that the bag was great for hiding unexpected erections.

Instead, Noah asked, "Any place in particular?"

He thought about it for a minute. It had been so long since he'd had real restaurant pizza that he didn't really care, as long as it wasn't the stuff they served in the cafeteria at school. Then he recalled a favorite childhood memory, from the time before his mother had lost her mind. "Know where I can get a good, old-fashioned root beer?" he asked hopefully.

With another libido-inducing smile, Noah replied. "I've got just the place." He picked up his cell phone and hit a pre-set number. "What do you want on your pizza?"

"How about everything?" Jeremy answered, unbelieving of his luck in finding Noah, or rather, of Noah finding him.

"I'll take a large Garbage pizza," Noah said into the phone, "and you know who, so don't even ask."

Thirty minutes later they were in the apartment, Jeremy doing homework, and Noah fussing around the place, not knowing what to do with himself. He was a grown man and had faced down many an angry pimp over the years. Why on earth was he nervous around such a harmless looking kid? A knock sounded on the door. "You keep working," Noah said, opening the door to let Mary in -- loaded with a pizza box on which two large drinks were precariously balanced.

"Evening, hon." She swept into the room with a wide smile and a nod to Jeremy.

"Good evening, Mary," Jeremy replied, without looking up from the depths of college prep calculus.

"Hope you enjoy the pizza. I would stay and chat, but I gotta get back to the bar." She winked and lowered her voice, though Noah was sure Jeremy could still hear her say, "He's a real cutie." Mischief played in her eyes -- not a good sign.

"Stay out of it," Noah mumbled softly, reminded of how much she enjoyed playing matchmaker for some of the bar's regulars. He'd always found it amusing until she attempted to match him up. It looked like poor Jeremy had just been added to her list.

Mary laughed and waved goodbye. "I'd stay and chat, but my boss is a real slave driver." That earned her a cutting, raised-eyebrow glance from her boss. She grinned and blew them both a kiss before closing the door behind her.

"That woman needs to learn to mind her own business," Noah commented, sliding a slice of pizza onto a plate.

So intent on studies that either he'd missed the byplay, or was pretending to, Jeremy sniffed the pizza-scented air and finally closed his book. "Time to eat?"

"Yeah, I guess you can take a break. How much homework do you have left?"

Jeremy flipped open a notebook and recited, "After calculus, I have a report to work on for biology, and I need to start outlining a project for my business class."

Noah handed Jeremy the plate and a drink. "Business, that sounds interesting. What kind of project?" He had planned to express interest to show support, and was surprised to find that he truly *was* interested.

Jeremy closed his eyes and murmured a childish, if efficient, prayer. When he opened them again, he resumed the conversation as if it had never stopped. "I'm not exactly sure what I'm going to do yet. I have to create a business on paper, a failing one, and then turn it around to make a profit. And," he added, gleefully, "it ties in with the scholarship I'm after. I'm gonna make it the best project they've ever seen. They can go ahead and reserve my place at State."

"Hmmm..." Noah mused, thinking of the black hole in his wallet that was the Tub of Suds. "How exactly would you turn a business around?" The Twelfth Street Bar and Grill had survived mostly on sheer, dumb luck and determination, after many initial missteps.

Jeremy's face lit up, keen interest shining from his eyes, and Noah realized it must be a favorite subject. "Well," he began between bites, "you look at its strengths and its weaknesses and build from there."

"Strengths?" If the Tub had any, Noah sure didn't know about them.

"Well," Jeremy explained, "say you've got a really good location, but the wrong type of business. Or maybe you have the right type of business, you're just not attracting the right kind of customer."

Given the bar's history, Noah could well relate to that.

"You also want to look at similar businesses that are making it, and see what they've got that you don't."

That certainly made sense. "When does this project have to be finished?"

"I get to work on it all year, and it makes up half of my final grade in that class. Once I've handed it in, it'll be my entry, and hopefully win me that scholarship."

The youthful exuberance reminded Noah of himself a few years ago, gazing at the filthy, boarded-up windows and broken furniture of what was now his bar. In his mind he saw, not the drug-infested den of prostitution it was famed for being, but a place where a man could have a drink after work and hang out with friends without having to go downtown to do it.

As Jeremy continued thinking out loud about how his dream business would run, Noah occasionally had to remind him to eat -- the kid was that passionate about the project.

It finally came time to leave and, for the first time ever, Noah found he really didn't want to go home to his lonely two-bedroom house on the other side of town. Jeremy looked at him strangely when he said goodnight, then launched himself into Noah's arms. "You don't have to go," the kid murmured breathily, passion of another kind shining in his eyes.

Shocked at the unexpected come on and his body's immediate response, Noah stammered something incomprehensible and nearly ran from the room. The disappointed look in Jeremy's eyes haunted him all the way home, as did the feel of that young, firm body, pressed so close.

Promptly at three the next afternoon, Noah sat in his truck in front of Jeremy's school, remembering the night before. He'd had many attractive young men approach him over the years, and he'd never paid them any attention. It was less complicated to find someone closer to his

own age at one of the clubs downtown. One night was all they wanted, which suited Noah just fine. The less they knew about him, the better.

For some reason, Jeremy was different, or maybe Noah had just entered a phase of life when it was time to settle down. He was about to turn thirty, after all. Jeremy, on the other hand, was so young! Noah prided himself on being a man of strong convictions, but if this newfound temptation pushed him, he'd break eventually.

As he waited, eyes trained on the door through which Jeremy had passed that morning, a soft tapping at his window made him jump. He turned to see one of the men who'd attacked Jeremy standing by the truck, grinning. Slowly sliding a hand down under the seat, he wrapped his fingers around the handle of the Louisville Slugger kept there.

He rolled down the window and growled, "You're not supposed to be on school grounds."

If anything, the arrogant smile widened. "I'm enrolled here," the punk boasted.

If that was true, then there was nothing Noah could do about it. However, he would need to see to it that this asshole didn't use his school access to harass Jeremy. "What do you want?" he finally asked when it became apparent that ignoring the problem wouldn't make it go away.

"I've got a message from Trent. He says you need to leave his property alone. You can't have this one."

Oh, he couldn't, could he? One eyebrow rose in annoyance. "His property, huh? Well, as far as I see it, the kid belongs only to himself, and he's free to do what he pleases. You can tell Trent I said so."

"You can't watch him 24/7, but we can," the young man shot back, not quite as confident as when he'd begun.

"Watch me."

The punk snarled, "Just remember what I said: we'll get the kid." Message delivered, he turned and, eyes shifting right and left, crossed the street to where Trent was waiting.

"Well, Trent, we'll just have to see about that," Noah mumbled, "'cause I know who pulls your strings."

"Do what?" Jeremy asked, opening the door and climbing into the warm truck.

Noah eased his fingers from around the bat, turning to face his passenger.

As Jeremy attempted to rub warmth into his arms, Noah realized they needed to go shopping for warmer clothes before the poor kid froze to death. It was way too late in the year for just a light

denim jacket. Not tonight, though. It would have to wait until later. Tonight there was something else on the to-do list. Mainly, make a deal with the devil to keep Jeremy safe.

Chapter Five

Noah sighed and stepped off the curb onto Ramsey Street -- nicknamed "Ram Me Street" by the male prostitutes who plied their trade there -- a place he'd vowed never to see again except in his worst nightmares. The night was rainy and cold, and a few young men were huddled together in doorways or under the meager shelter of an awning, waiting for someone to brave the chilly autumn night in search of their services.

"Hey, Angel, come to save me?" one taunted. Noah tuned out the mocking accusation of failure. These were the lost souls, the ones beyond his reach. Only the desperate would be out here on a night like tonight. While he'd love to save them all, he could only help the ones who wanted saving -- for these, it was too late. They'd said no.

He wouldn't find the one he sought here. No, his prey sneered at the pitiful humanity found out in the streets, proud of rising above that. This was just the outer rim of despair, the barrier that divided the real world from the dark underbelly of society where Willie reigned. Willie Carnell was a pimp, but he ran a tight ship, demanding that his boys be clean -- unlike these filthy, drug-addicted creatures. If they weren't, if they were even suspected of using, well, they'd soon find themselves out here, scratching and clawing for the crumbs that fell from Willie's table. Noah knew the enemy well enough to know how he conducted business, and that business was good because of how it was operated.

Turning deaf ears to catcalls and suggestive offers, Noah turned up the collar of his jacket and trudged down the dirty street, fighting off the memories the neon lights and their gaudy promises summoned. One of the fallen, with wild eyes and the telltale lesions of meth addiction, clutched frantically at his arm, grinning and offering what none here could deliver: an end to his loneliness. Noah shrugged the pathetic creature off and continued on his way, pushing aside images of the handsome youth the man used to be. He stopped halfway down the street in front of a deceptively innocent-looking brownstone. The gateway to Hell.

Two thugs stood guard outside the door, watching his approach with feigned indifference. They played the role of tough guys like mere wishing could make it so. Noah could take them both and not even break a sweat. He didn't need to physically defend himself often these days, but still worked out regularly, just in case. Being prepared had paid off over the years. A broken nose that hadn't healed right and various other scars were constant reminders of what happened if he grew lax.

The thinly veiled interest in the guards' eyes was proof enough that they'd seen him around and knew who he was. Both were too young to remember who he used to be. They stood aside, and he passed unmolested between them, leaving reality behind to enter a hellish fantasy place where money really could buy anything. No, entering wasn't the problem here -- almost anyone could get in. Getting out in one piece was the problem, and the missing piece was usually your soul.

The moment he opened the door, chaos swirled around him. Loud, raucous music and cigarette smoke drifted in lazy spirals beneath pulsing strobes. The harsh lighting created a jerky, stop-start motion for two scantily clad male dancers, bravely attempting to keep rhythm with the

fractured beat of a techno tune gone wrong. All eyes turned to watch Noah's entrance, for fresh meat was always welcome. They thought him a stranger, never knowing that this had once been his home.

His did a double-take when a thin young man with long blond hair stepped from the shadows to lean against the jukebox, smoking a cigarette and trying to look tough. The young punk reminded Noah of himself at that age. So strong was the sense of *déjà vu* that he couldn't help looking toward the pool tables in the back, half expecting to see Billy holding court, as was his habit, running the tables and taking some gullible fool's money. Noah sighed. Billy wasn't there and would never be again. Billy no longer existed.

He knew there were more boys upstairs, already with clients, and these few would soon be joining them if the appreciative stares they were getting were any indication.

Most of Willie's stable worked in The Brownstone, a relatively safe environment. Only those being punished or who had yet to prove themselves had to scratch out a living on the streets. But not Ramsey Street. It had fallen on too hard times. Willie's boys were as close to the better areas of town as they could get without drawing too much police attention. Bribes didn't help those caught near the mayor or commissioner's neighborhoods.

"Even the air ain't free in here," a burly bartender with too much gut and not enough hair spat, turning only half of his attention away from the porn video showing above the bar. "If you ain't buying, then get the hell out."

If Noah hadn't already known what kind of place this was, the images on the massive television screen would have been a clue. Two young men -- probably part of Willie's stable -- were servicing a man old enough to be their grandfather, while an even older one sat at the bar, licking his lips and watching the raunchy display.

"I said, 'what'll it be?'" the bartender yelled loudly to be heard over the fake moans of the barely-legal porn stars, in what amounted to an infomercial for the wares this house provided. Noah didn't know what was worse, that or the horrible squalling of the jukebox.

"I'm here to see Willie," he said.

"You hear that, boys? He wants to see Willie! Well, he's come to the right place... plenty of willies here." The bartender laughed, unzipped his pants to prove the point, and waved his pitiful excuse for a sex organ for all to see. Judging from the lack of reaction, even 'gramps' at the bar wasn't interested; too much younger and sweeter flesh was to be had at The Brownstone.

"I'm here to see Willie Carnell," Noah clarified, knowing something he bet the bartender didn't: Willie Carnell was no more real than Billy was.

"Nobody sees the boss."

He'd expected this, knowing that the boss was only seen if and when the boss wanted to be seen. Scratching and clawing to the top of the dung heap afforded a man a few perks -- like getting to be choosy about who to deal with. The unimportant were relegated to underlings, as it had always been.

As flunkies went, well, the bartender must have been working for peanuts, for the man didn't seem to possess any other redeeming qualities. Beady black eyes, glazed by booze, followed Noah's hands as he reached behind his neck and unclasped a thin silver chain, removing it for the first time in twelve years. Noah placed it in the bartender's beefy paw, dropping the chain so the charm, half of a Mizpah coin, was clearly visible.

"He'll see the man who wears this," Noah told him. His reception, he wasn't sure of. That Willie would see him -- if for no other reason than shared history -- he'd take that to the bank.

The bartender scurried from the room, and Noah leaned back against the bar to wait, carefully averting his eyes from the action on the TV. The old man sitting on the stool beside him began rocking and grunting, and Noah cautiously slid further down the bar, discreetly distancing himself from the pervert who was now openly jerking off. He already felt the need for a nice, hot shower just from being here; going home and sponging bodily fluids off his jacket wasn't on the agenda -- and he didn't plan on adding it.

In less than five minutes the bartender was back with two of Willie's boys at his side. He didn't return the pendant.

"The boss says you got five minutes," he said gleefully, probably expecting to see Noah again real soon -- beaten to a pulp.

The ugly brute's laughter followed Noah down the darkened hallway. When he'd lived here, it stank of urine and worse things. Now the only scents were the cigarette smoke that seeped in from the bar and the cheap cologne one of his escorts was wearing. He followed the two tough-wannabes, wondering if he'd looked that stupid trying to be a bad-ass at their age, deciding that he probably had -- Billy hadn't. Billy had made young punk look good.

They stopped in front of a door marked "Office," and the larger of the two gestured to Noah and sneered, "After you."

Taking a deep breath to calm shaky nerves, Noah knocked softly and waited. Ten years had passed since he'd darkened this door. It seemed like just yesterday. Memories yawned, stretched, and awakened as the gravelly growl he'd never quite gotten used to called, "Come in."

It had been a long time since he'd seen Willie, and years of hard living should have taken their toll, but they hadn't. No, the king of The Brownstone was the same darkly gorgeous creature who'd skyrocketed from obscurity to become the hottest male for sale in town years ago. However, his looks paled in comparison to his intelligence and conniving. In short order, he'd negotiated a deal to force out the old pimp, Stevie, and take over the business. Willie would have, too, if Stevie hadn't gotten wind of the coup and attempted to knock out the competition with a

little vehicular manslaughter. That Willie now sat behind Stevie's old desk was silent testimony to who'd won that war, even if it had taken a little longer than Willie had originally expected. As much as Noah hated the business, he grudgingly admitted that it thrived under Willie's shrewd direction, just like the man himself had survived and thrived.

Thick, wavy, dark hair shone brightly under the harsh office lights, and the pimp's complexion, deeply tanned by nature, had once inspired the nickname "The Latin Lover." He wore a moustache now where he'd always been clean shaven before, and his cheeks sported a fashionable growth of shadow, lending a more mature appearance. As was often the case in nature, however, the beautiful exterior was designed to lure the unsuspecting into the predator's grasp.

Sitting behind the huge oak desk, dangling the silver chain like a prize between his slender, elegant fingers, Willie Carnell was still the master of his universe, as small and grungy as it was. He wore his tough-guy persona like a badge of honor -- as he did the ragged scar across his throat. A hard-worn scowl momentarily softened when his dark eyes raked over Noah, replaced so quickly that the lapse might have been imagined.

"Well, well, well," Willie began, "if it isn't Noah, the patron saint of the reformed rent boy. Come to return my boys? The ones you stole from me?"

Unease crept up Noah's spine as he assessed his surroundings. Old instincts came on-line, and his fingers itched for the weapon he'd long since stopped carrying. He'd abandoned it years ago in favor of the more direct approach of hard muscles and a bat. On a couch against the far wall, a couple of toughs were sizing him up, and the two young punks who'd escorted him in remained at his back, close enough to pant hot breath against his neck. He'd had his share of fights during his time on the streets, and five to one weren't good odds, but he could hardly expect Willie to join in and dirty those well manicured hands. No, that's what the paid muscle was for. The two on the couch weren't pretty enough to be hustlers, so that's what they had to be.

"I came to ask a favor," he stated simply.

"Oh, did you now?" Willie sneered. "You don't show your face around here for all these damned years even to say hello, and now you want a favor?"

The two men on the couch laughed, a sound remarkably like a cat with its tail caught in the door -- more evocative of pain than humor. Noah wondered how much time they spent watching bad gangster movies on TV, especially when one cracked his knuckles in a parody of a fifties B-movie mobster.

He'd watched a few bad-guy marathons himself, enough to know that you never, ever let them see you sweat. "You know why I don't come here, Willie," he said with a forced calm he didn't truly feel, "the same reason you've never come to see me. We're bad for each other's business." He wouldn't give Willie the satisfaction of knowing that just being here gave him the screaming shivers.

Willie chuckled, a hollow, empty sound. "That is true," he agreed. "You're here now, tarnishing your halo and wings to rub elbows with us mere mortals. Ask away." Eyes the color of a moonless night bored into Noah's, and his heart beat just a little faster. "The answer is probably no, but you're free to ask anyway. What have you got to lose?"

The laughter from the lounging sycophants sent a warning, as if knowing Willie for nearly half of his life wasn't enough. What did he have to lose, indeed? Well, actually, nothing he hadn't lost a long time ago. If negotiations failed, he could always buy Jeremy a one-way bus ticket to Boise in the morning, to hell with the scholarship. If this crowd got their paws on the kid, he could pretty much kiss his life goodbye. "There's someone you've been trying to recruit. I want you to leave him alone."

Willie's greasy smile was pure evil. "Don't tell me you're going soft on me, Noah. Has one of your little good deeds finally gotten under that puritanical skin of yours? My boys will be crushed that one of them didn't win the bet." That handsome face twisted into a leer as Willie flung the mocking accusations. The fact that he even thought such things proved how much life on the dark side had tainted him. He hadn't always been this way. "Tell me, oh holier-than-thou: are you fucking him? Is that why you've come down here to beg me to call off the dogs? Do you want him for yourself?"

There was no need to answer; Willie wouldn't believe the truth, anyway. In this world, sex was everything. There could be no other reasons, especially altruistic ones. Standing silently before the desk, Noah pretended he didn't have a personal stake in the outcome. It was better for the pimp to think he was just after Jeremy's ass than know how much Noah actually cared for the plucky kid. That was one young man who seemed bound and determined to make the most of the cards dealt him without whining about whose fault it was that he hadn't started off with a better hand. They'd only just met, but there was something there that triggered Noah's protective instincts. Willie would exploit that to the fullest if given half a chance.

Willie leaned back in his chair, smiling and charming once again. Noah was on guard immediately, tensing for fight or flight. "Tell you what," Willie purred. "I'll make you a deal. You want the kid? Then we'll sit down and talk about it -- another time. Not here and not now."

The assembled thugs hooted and catcalled like the whores out in the street, reading in their own intentions. Noah had hoped that the issue could be resolved tonight. He should have known better. Willie played by his own rules and no one else's, and wasn't about to give in easily without first exacting a pound of flesh. At least Noah had gotten what equated to a maybe and not an outright no. Knowing better than to reply too quickly, he waited a few moments before agreeing. "Okay, but just between us." He fought a smirk at the disappointed faces of the sharks who'd probably hoped to see him on his knees, begging.

The surprise Willie wasn't quick enough to hide was very telling. He must have anticipated a no, or more likely, oh, *hell* no! Noah knew from personal experience that it wasn't often the man underestimated someone. You didn't live long in his line of work by making that a habit.

There was still one little detail that needed working out. "What happens until then?"

Willie recovered quickly, once more in control as he named the terms. "I get to pick the night, you show up. Until then, he's off limits to both of us. I won't touch him if you don't. And Noah? If you do, I'll know. Believe me."

Noah had no intentions of touching Jeremy, period, so it was an easy call. "Done," he said. "What night?"

Willie dangled the chain from his fist, winding it around his fingers and holding the charm up for Noah to see. He winked suggestively. "A week from Saturday."

Oh, shit. Noah's birthday.

Suddenly the room, the thugs, and the manically grinning Willie disappeared as Noah was swept away by a memory.

"Happy Birthday, Noe!" Billy said, pushing a badly wrapped box across the table. "Go on, open it!" Noah couldn't imagine where Billy had gotten wrapping paper covered with penises in various states of excitement, but if it was even remotely sexual, Billy could find or create it. Sex seemed to ooze from his pores.

The other patrons of the upscale restaurant glared as Billy's excited chatter drowned out the classical music a string quartet played while they dined -- wealthy patrons who didn't have to save up for weeks just to be here, or hit the thrift store at the last minute in search of ties and jackets to meet the dress code.

Noah took the small box in his hand, grinning as he shook it. It gave a satisfying rattle. He eagerly ripped the paper from the small white box within. Never one to enjoy suspense, he lifted the lid to reveal two silver chains and nearly identical charms lying on a bed of soft cotton. He looked at Billy in confusion. "Two? I only have one neck!"

With a laugh, his lover explained, "No, silly. There's one for each of us. See, they fit together." Billy lifted the two charms, joining them so that they formed a whole medallion.

Noah read the words inscribed on their shiny surfaces: "The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another."

"You wear one and I'll wear one. That way, we'll never forget each other."

"Like that's ever going to happen," Noah said, fully believing that they'd always be young, happy, and together. Like they'd been for the last year.

Billy had a gift for making whoever he was with think they were the most important person on the planet, and he turned that charm on full throttle. Dark eyes locked on Noah's, and he whispered in the husky, southern drawl he usually tried to hide, "Well, no matter who you're with

or what you're doing, as long as you have this on, I'll be right there with you." Their smiles disappeared as silent meaning passed between them.

For the past year Billy had kept Noah fed and clothed, though sometimes food was scarce and the clothing hardly adequate. "I know," Noah said. "It's time for me to do my part. If only someone would hire me!"

His lover's dark eyes were sympathetic. "Real jobs are scarce right now, especially if you don't have experience or a diploma."

The direct hit made Noah wince. Billy didn't seem to notice. "The life's not that bad, you'll see. If we go to work for Stevie we'll make more than I ever did freelancing, plus, we'll have a place to stay. Won't it be nice not having to worry about freezing this winter?"

"Yes, but I don't want to sleep with other men. Just you!"

"It'll be all right, Noe," Billy murmured, "you'll see. It's just business, it's not like with you and me. That's real."

Then the moment shattered when Billy grinned once more. "Here, I'll put it on you."

With disapproving eyes glaring at them, Billy fastened the chain around Noah's neck. It was when he delivered a searing birthday kiss that they were finally asked to leave.

The next day, Noah sold his body for the very first time, to an elderly gentleman handpicked for the honor. Keeping Billy firmly in mind, he'd gotten through it, and the moment he was alone in the cheap hotel room, he'd promptly thrown up.

An impatient cough shook him out of his reverie, and Noah found himself once again in the dingy office. A fist clenched around his heart at the memory of that dinner so long ago. It was the last birthday he'd ever spent with another person. From that time on, he'd made it a point to be alone, hoping each year to forget about it completely. Someone still remembered, however, for every year on that day an unsigned card was delivered to wherever he was working. He counted his blessings that they didn't come to his home address -- that would be too personal.

There was no getting out of it now. It looked like, no matter how much he dreaded it, he had a date for his birthday. "Where do you want me to meet you?" he asked.

Willie appeared to give it careful consideration before finally answering. Noah knew it was all for show. The pimp always did have a flair for the dramatic. "As you said, we're bad for each other's business. You can't be seen with the likes of me, and if I'm seen with you, my boys might get the idea that I condone your little... enterprise.

"Tell you what. Leave your bar at seven and head down Thirteenth. I'll send a car."

When Noah turned to leave, Willie added, "Oh, Noah? Bring your toothbrush."

Chapter Six

Jeremy was too engrossed in homework to even look up when Noah set dishes down on the laundry table. Noah frowned. Deciding the half-starved waif needed more than just the fast food the bar served and protein shakes, he'd made a special trip downtown for home-style vegetables and stew, something Mary insisted was just what a growing boy needed. It sat ignored.

Noah cleared his throat and Jeremy jumped, eyes wide. "Damn, Noah! Don't sneak up on me like that!" he yelled, clutching his heart.

The frown turned into a scowl. If Jeremy was going to get so caught up that he didn't even notice his surroundings, then he should be upstairs in the apartment with the door locked. If it had been Trent standing there...

Finally noticing the offering, Jeremy smiled, sniffing appreciatively. "Smells good, Noah. I didn't know Kevin could cook like this."

"He can't," Noah replied before thinking, "not that I know of, anyway." Jeremy would only read too much into it if he knew what lengths Noah had gone to. Damn, Kevin should have gotten credit, after all. Attempting a fast recovery, Noah opted for another white lie. "Mary brought it from home." It was bad enough being seen as some kind of hero already. The flames didn't need fanning. Noah wondered if the hero-worship would continue if the kid ever found out about his jaded past.

It appeared that Jeremy didn't take everything Noah said as gospel, for his skeptical scowl and arched eyebrow silently voiced disbelief. The low rumble of a famished belly added its voice, and the subject was dropped in favor of a quick blessing and an all-out attack, a fork the weapon of choice. "Hmm..." Jeremy mumbled, "sweet potatoes! Tell *Mary* thanks for me, okay?"

Gone was the timid youth from that first night, replaced by a cocky teenager who could smirk with the best of them. It did Noah's heart good to see Jeremy acting more his age, and less like the weight of the world was on those slim shoulders. Seeing him so enjoy the meal was thanks enough for the grueling drive through the city to get it. As Jeremy ate, Noah chanced a glance at an opened notebook, surprised to see a diagram of the Tub of Suds. "What's this?" he asked.

Jeremy's face flushed crimson. "Oh, nothing," he stammered.

Noah picked up the drawing for a better look. It looked like his laundry; then again, something was wrong. His eyes perused the room, then fell back on the notebook. Finally, he realized the differences. "You're redesigning the Tub of Suds," he said, matter-of-factly.

If possible, Jeremy blushed brighter. "Uh, for my business project."

"Uh-huh." Well, it made sense -- it *was* a failing business, after all. Noah didn't see for the life of him how that could be changed, unless it burned to the ground while the insurance policy was in force. "I hate to say this, but maybe you should choose somewhere else. There's no way to keep

this place from sucking money. I only keep it open so it doesn't get vandalized and to make it more attractive to potential buyers. At most, we get ten customers a week. This is a business district, and folks don't come here to do laundry. The people who work around here have their own washers and dryers."

"That's where you're wrong," Jeremy said, finally looking up.

Until that moment, he hadn't believed Jeremy capable of disagreeing with him, and it caught Noah off guard. "What did you say?"

Face as animated as when they'd first discussed this days ago, Jeremy took the notebook, flipping it to another page to show a rough map of the neighborhood. "See this?" he asked. "There are two other laundries within a few blocks, in bad neighborhoods, and they seem to do a lively business. Most weekends both stay pretty busy. Know why?"

"Why?"

"They have a daytime attendant," Jeremy said dramatically, as if it were self-explanatory. "They'd do even better if they had a nighttime one. People are too afraid to be there after dark."

"I still don't get it."

"Look, you've got folks coming into this area all the time, to work, shop, eat... whatever. They aren't going to stay in this filthy place," Jeremy wrinkled his nose in distaste, "for two hours with nothing to do. They will, however, drop their things off and pick them up later, paying good money for the convenience."

Although he still didn't see how that could make a difference, recalling his own barely passing grades, Noah decided to show support for an obviously well planned effort. "Okay, I'll make you a deal. What say we put your theories to the test? The suggestions you make on paper we'll try for real, within reason. If the place starts running in the black, and that's a mighty big *if* mind you, then I'll give you a share of the profits."

"Really?" Jeremy asked, eyes wide. "Can I use your ledgers for my project?"

"If this place turns a profit, you can use anything you want," Noah replied, swept up in Jeremy's plans.

The happy expression turned wicked. "Anything?" Jeremy purred.

Horried at the door he'd inadvertently opened, Noah backed away -- slowly. Unfortunately, he wound up pressed against a wall of dryers with nowhere to go. Jeremy stared back at him, predatory gleam in his eyes.

Noah had faced many an amorous hustler before, always managing to politely decline without hurting feelings, and the ones he saved were usually on a bus for home long before they mistook

gratitude for something deeper. This was different, however, because when it came right down to it, Noah couldn't honestly look at Jeremy and say he didn't want the kid.

He tried to nip things in the bud, but Jeremy was too fast for him. Rising up on his toes and pressing their lips together, Jeremy delivered the single most energetic kiss Noah had ever received, all the more arousing for its enthusiasm. That kiss meant business.

"Look, kid," Noah began, forcing himself to push away when he really wanted to pull closer.

The grin disappeared and Jeremy's face reddened once more, this time in anger. "I am not a kid!" he hissed, "and I'll prove it to you!"

Noah's disappointment surprised him when Jeremy stepped away and didn't try to kiss him again. Instead, the angry brunet stood, hands on hips, and proclaimed, "I'm going to make this place the most successful business on the street. Maybe then you'll stop treating me like I'm ten years old!" Eyes blazing with righteous anger, Jeremy stalked back to his makeshift desk, slamming the notebook down and returning his attention to his homework.

Noah stood, flattened against the dryer while reliving the last few moments. Only when a customer entered, casting a quizzical look his way, did he finally remember where he was and why. Muttering a half-hearted reply to their polite greeting, he dashed out the door and back to the relative safety of the bar.

"Noah hates me," Jeremy grumped into the potato salad that actually did come from Mary's kitchen -- this time. His books shared table space with a pile of freshly dried laundry.

"He doesn't hate you, hon," Mary said, words garbled due to her chin holding the edge of the sheet she was folding.

"He is gay, right?"

The suspicion in the blonde's eyes, coupled with a defensive, arms-folded-across-the-chest pose, clearly said that she knew the answer and would die before verbally outing her boss. Jeremy hoped she never tried to play poker. She'd lose. Everything from her expressive eyes to her rigidly squared shoulders screamed, "Yes, he is. How'd you know?" He'd never tell her how comical she looked, trying to look intimidating while holding a sheet covered with smiling sea creatures.

"It's okay, Mary. I've already guessed as much."

Her lips squeezed together in a tight, thin line. Jeremy liked that about the woman. She'd never tell your secrets. If she knew Noah was gay and refused to admit it, then maybe Jeremy could trust her, too. "You know that game we play in the car when the little ones have been dropped off? Name the hot movie star?"

"Yes," she replied, expression guarded.

"Have you noticed that I never name any women?"

"Oh." Mary's arms unfolded a moment before her eyes widened and she repeated an, "Oh!" of understanding.

"Yes, 'oh.' Is that a problem for you?"

She looked like he'd slapped her. "Why would I have a problem with that? Especially when you trusted me enough to tell me." The defensive posture suddenly reappeared, but no longer aimed *at* him. "Has anyone said anything to you?"

"No. My former foster parents weren't too thrilled, but I didn't hide it. You're pretty open-minded, so I didn't think my being gay would be an issue. Besides, I need your help with Noah. I thought maybe I'd read him wrong. I used to catch him looking at me before I tried to kiss him. Now he won't talk to me or take me to school anymore."

Neither confirming nor denying Noah's orientation verbally, Mary wrapped a warm, comforting arm around his shoulders. "Aww, hon, I'm sorry."

She didn't say, "I'm sorry, he's straight," just "I'm sorry." That, in his book, confirmed what she'd given away with body language earlier. "Not that I'm not grateful to you and your mother..." he murmured, relaxing into the hug.

Mary smiled. "Well, it's just a few miles from my kids' school, so it just makes sense for us to drive you. Noah didn't explain why he no longer takes you, just said the boys bothering you weren't a threat anymore, so he doesn't have to act as bodyguard."

"He just doesn't understand is all," she said, patting Jeremy's shoulder. "He's afraid you're trying to pay him back for helping you." Eyes narrowing, she pinned him with the steely, blue-eyed gaze he'd seen her use when her children were misbehaving. "You're not, are you?"

"No!" Jeremy cried, giving her back the same offended look she'd just given him. "Even I know that would make me no better than Trent."

"Trent? Who's Trent?"

Choosing to disclose only half the truth, he muttered, "My old boyfriend," hoping she wouldn't pry.

Before she could question him about his ex, he changed the subject. Some things she was better off not knowing. "Think your mom would like some part-time work?"

"What?" Mary looked bewildered by the sudden topic change.

"While I can sew on the occasional button, I'm getting requests for alterations. Since I don't have a sewing machine, do you think your mother might be up for it? I know she makes clothes for your kids."

She seemed to think about it for a moment, then replied, "That's a great idea; I think you should ask her."

"I believe I will. You know, if I turn this place around, Noah will finally have to admit I'm an adult." A conniving smile crept across his face.

Mary threw back her head and laughed. "I should have known! I thought you were changing the subject when really you were just changing tactics!" With a sly, sidelong glance, she asked, "You really care for the big lug, don't you?"

Jeremy's smile disappeared. "Yeah, but I can't get him to notice me. He thinks I'm just a grateful kid. It's more than that. He's sincere and he cares about other people..." With a teasing grin, he added, "He's also got a job and a car!"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Mary, I'm in high school. A car and a job are everything when it comes to boyfriend material." He winked and added, "It doesn't hurt that he's hotter than anyone at my school, too."

"Well, I remember what it was like when I wanted a job at the bar. Noah tried to discourage me, saying it was no place for a single mother to be, the hours sucked, the tips were bad, et cetera, et cetera."

"What did you do?"

Her grin was downright wicked. "I showed up every day when the bar opened. Then, one day his bartender quit without notice, and he was at a loss. I've worked for him ever since."

Jeremy thought it over, finding merit in the plan. "You wore him down?"

"No, silly," she replied. "I did better than that. I proved to him that he couldn't live without me. So that's what you've gotta do." All lingering doubts were erased by her subtle endorsement.

Mary pulled him closer against her softly padded body, and for just a moment Jeremy recalled his mother. He didn't remember much about her other than that she liked to laugh and gave good hugs before she'd gotten too badly off. He tried not to think of how things were at the end. In that moment he pretended Mary was his mother, alive, happy, and healthy once more. He snuggled tighter into the embrace, contemplating the advice.

Yeah, make it so Noah couldn't live without him. There was an idea.

"Mary?"

"Hmmm?"

"Think you can convince Noah to stay out of the Tub of Suds 'til Monday?"

Noah was stocking the cooler when his cell phone began vibrating. "Private number" showed on the display. Eyes shifting right and left to assure privacy, he flipped it open. "Noah Everett, tell me what I want to hear," he said as quietly as he could and still be heard over the chaos that was the bar on a good night.

Silence. About to hang up, he heard a quavering, "I...I want to go home." The voice sounded young, sincere, and utterly miserable.

"Yep, that's what I wanted to hear, all right," he replied, "and I do believe I can get you there."

He found Mary filling glasses and chatting with customers. "I have to go out for awhile," he said. "I'll be back before closing."

The young man sitting across from Noah hadn't looked up since arriving at the little cafe. With his head bowed and face partially obscured by a fall of dark hair, he almost looked like Jeremy. Almost. "My father's a heartless asshole," he murmured. "I want to go home but can't; he threw me out." A heavy sigh, then, "God, I miss the farm."

Noah took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. How he'd love to give this boy's father a lesson in what's important in life, but he supposed only those who were truly alone understood the value of others. And he personally knew someone who'd give all earthly possessions for the opportunity another had so callously thrown away.

"What's your name?"

"Mark."

"Well, Mark. The way I see it we have two choices." The boy looked up then, green eyes shimmering with unshed tears. He may have been older than Jeremy by a year or two at most. If not for that night at the Tub of Suds, would the two young men have shared the same fate? "You know you can't stay here, right? Your employer," he carefully avoided using the word "pimp," lest anyone overhear, "will never let you just walk away." Bangs obscured those eyes when the boy nodded. "My preference is for you to return home, but if that's not possible, I have connections in Idaho. You'll be provided a place to live, and help to find a job, counseling, if you want it."

Mark remained silent so Noah continued, "I know it seems hopeless right now, believe me when I say it's not." The boy didn't look convinced, but at least he was listening.

"If you can't talk to your parents, is there someone else we can work with? A grandparent, sibling, family friend?"

The boy's full lower lip trembled, and Noah braced for tears. Mark sniffed and said, "I do have an uncle..."

Noah gave what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Give me a number, and I'll give him a call. And Mark?" Was that a tiny bit of hope shining through the tears? "Don't worry, it will be all right."

Mark scribbled two numbers on a napkin, sliding it across the table, then took a sip of coffee -- the only thing he'd let Noah buy him. "The first is Uncle Greg's number, the second is where you can leave a message for me. You will call me, right?"

"Just as soon as I get things set up. Oh, one more thing. Who do you work for?"

Noah's heart skipped a beat when Mark answered, "Willie Carnell."

Damn, he'd been afraid of that. He'd have to work fast and get Mark out of town before Willie found out what he was up to and take it out on Jeremy. It looked like he was going to be busy this weekend.

"Boss, it's only natural that the kid looks up to you. You're a positive male figure in his life. Possibly the only one he's ever had. Don't you think you're overreacting? Besides, he's probably forgotten the whole thing by now," Mary chided as she and Noah set up the bar for the meager clientele expected on Monday nights.

"So you don't think it's one of those guy crushes or anything?" Noah asked hopefully.

Mary smiled. "Of course it's a crush, but again, he's eighteen. He'll probably throw you over for someone else by week's end."

Noah scowled. "You aren't helping."

She rolled her eyes dramatically. "I fail to see the problem. You're both male, single, gay, and, if you don't mind me saying so -- hot. Don't give me that look," she scolded, even before he'd gotten the chance to give 'that look.' "He told me himself. I didn't pry. Honest."

"Even if he is gay, he's too young and you know it!" Noah reminded her.

"Too young for what?" she asked, hands on her hips like they so often were when she argued. "It's not like you're gonna slap a collar on him and drag him down to the bondage clubs." Hard eyes glared at him. "You're not planning that, are you?"

"Mary!"

She held her hands up in defense. "Just asking. Anyway, what would it hurt to take him out to dinner and a movie? When was the last time you went out on a date, Noah?"

"I don't remember," he replied quickly. That beer delivery driver who cornered him in the office last June didn't count. If Noah didn't know the guy's name, it wasn't a proper date, in his opinion. And goodness knows he hadn't found time to visit the clubs lately.

"Okay, then, who was President at the time?" she persisted.

With a look that intimidated everyone except for Mary, it seemed, he replied, "Look, the kid needs someone his own age, someone he has something in common with. I helped him out when he needed it, and what he's feeling is gratitude, nothing more." Still, the thought of seeing Jeremy with someone else was depressing.

"Keep telling yourself that, big guy," she muttered under her breath.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. You can't avoid him forever, boss man. You're starting to hurt his feelings. I know he asked you not to come into the Tub of Suds, but you could have at least taken him to lunch or something."

"Oh, shit. I never thought of that," Noah acknowledged with a sigh. He'd been too busy trying to get through to Mark's folks to even consider that his absence might be noticed. "You're probably right. Okay, you have all the answers, what should I do?"

She smiled and picked up a take-out tray and a drink from the bar, handing them to him. "You can start by taking him his dinner."

Well, what could it hurt? Only, being alone in the small apartment together might not be such a good idea, under the circumstances. While he pretended that the advances were unwelcome, the truth was, not only were they welcome, they were hard to resist. "I really don't think I should be up there alone with him, do you?" Willie had promised not to touch Jeremy if Noah didn't, and, with Willie's spies everywhere, even appearing to dishonor his end of the deal was dangerous. If Willie found out about Mark...

He hated that his avoidance caused hurt feelings, but right now, keeping Jeremy safe was what mattered most.

Mary looked confused before finally working out his meaning. "Oh, he's not up there. It's Monday night, so he'll be next door, working,"

Now it was Noah's turn to be confused. "You know he asked me not to come in there."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. The 'no Noah' ban has been officially lifted."

Then Mary turned away to wait on customers, leaving Noah no choice but to do as she said and play waiter. He sighed again. At what point had he started taking orders from her? Well, she did give good advice, usually, and he was rather eager to see what Jeremy had been up to all weekend. He stepped out into the cold night and rushed over to the Tub of Suds, warm heat enveloping him as he walked in.

"Would you be a dear and help me get these to my car?" an elderly lady was asking Jeremy.

At the sound of the bell above the door -- when had that gotten there? -- Jeremy looked up, face splitting into a huge, smitten grin. *Well, so much for the fickle teenager theory.*

Never taking his eyes off Noah, Jeremy replied, "Sure, ma'am," easily hefting her over-sized laundry basket. Well, it seemed the good, hot meals were paying off. That scrawny body was starting to fill out already.

As the two approached, Noah stepped out of their way. "Evening, ma'am," he said as he opened the door, holding it until they'd both passed by. He took a look around while waiting for Jeremy's return, mouth dropping open. The floors were spotless and waxed, and he could actually see through the formerly grimy front windows. Even the graffiti-spattered walls had been repainted. Damn! He'd never realized how bad the place looked before until seeing it now. He had to hand it to Jeremy; the kid seemed to take his responsibilities seriously.

Then Noah noticed a hand-lettered sign in the window that read: Attendant on duty, Monday - Friday 4 pm - 10 pm, Saturday 9 am - 2 pm. The theory put into action appeared to be working, for Noah had never before seen the elderly matron who'd just left.

What was that noise? He turned, puzzled, before identifying the sound. For the first time since he'd bought the place, nearly every machine was in operation. He wandered over to where the noise was coming from. The insistent whine emanated from a bank of washers, blinking amber lights indicating the spin cycle. In the last two years, he'd heard one, possibly two at a time, never eight in unison.

He was still wondering where all those clothes came from when Jeremy returned, a big grin on his face. "Five dollars! She gave me five dollars just for helping her, and I didn't really do anything! Look what else she gave me." He turned so Noah could see the soft leather jacket he now wore. Jeremy didn't seem to care that it was old and worn. All that seemed to matter was that it was his. "She said it was too small for her grandson and she was just going to give it to a thrift shop. Isn't it great?"

As much as Noah had tried to deny his feelings, convinced that he was too old and jaded for someone so young, seeing such genuine gratitude about receiving someone else's cast-offs was more than he could take, and a lone brick wriggled loose from the wall he'd built around his heart.

"It is a nice jacket, kid," Noah said, wincing when that bright smile faded. Bracing for the inevitable blow-up, he mentally kicked himself for his callousness. Damn. It wasn't so long ago that he was that age. How he'd hated being referred to as a kid. Now he kept making the same mistake. Adding insult to injury, he'd just in essence said, *"I think you're just a kid, so I could never be interested in you,"* the thing that had caused the rift between them to begin with.

"Sorry, kiii... I mean, Jeremy." A flash of sudden inspiration headed off the inevitable arguments. "I really love what you've done with the place. It's incredible."

The tactic worked. "You mean that?"

Had Noah ever looked that bright and eager? Or that happy for a little bit of praise? He didn't think so. "Yes, I do. How about I make you a deal? Any extra money you pull in over here you can keep -- legally pull in," he hastily added. "How's that?"

"Awesome!" Jeremy was distracted from the 'kid' reference, as Noah had hoped, in favor of profit margins. "Thanks!"

Suddenly, that deep blue gaze locked with his, and Noah couldn't look away. Tension danced between them like a living thing. As blood rushed to his cock, he was once more reminded of why he should stay away. He was a man, and, though he tried to ignore the fact, so was Jeremy. Far from being a kid, the determined youth was more mature than many of Noah's much older acquaintances. While Noah could deny the attraction with his mouth, his body had other ideas, wanting nothing more than to take what was offered with every idolizing look, every wanton smile. Noah couldn't give in to temptation. Even if mature, Jeremy was young in years and, unlike so many teens, had ambition. Without a doubt, he was going to make something of himself.

Noah would only be in the way. Jeremy deserved so much more than a former prostitute who hadn't even graduated high school, and Noah already cared too much to ever consider him a casual fuck. Those gloomy thoughts must have shown on his face, for the shining light in those dark eyes dimmed and Jeremy turned away.

"Is that my dinner?" he mumbled, looking at the containers Noah had forgotten he was holding.

Snapped out of his depressing thoughts, Noah stammered, "Umm, yeah," before handing over the trays and running like that coward that he was, to lock his office door and take matters in hand. He still saw those eyes, alight with passion, when he came.

Chapter Seven

Noah stepped out of the bar promptly at seven o'clock the next Saturday night, turning his collar up against the cold. He hoped he wouldn't run into Jeremy, whose big, trusting eyes made him wish he really could do no wrong. Far from the steadfast hero he was in those eyes, Noah had weaknesses; weaknesses that might prove to be his undoing tonight.

Heading down the street as he'd been instructed, he held out a thin bit of hope that Willie had changed his mind. The need to protect the kid was the only reason he was keeping this meeting; at least, that's what he'd been telling himself all afternoon. If the truth about what Noah intended were known, Jeremy would never approve.

Noah was no sooner out of sight of the Twelfth Street Bar and Grill when a horn sounded in the street beside him. He jumped, surprised that he hadn't noticed the limousine slowly following alongside. Well, damn. Obviously Willie hadn't suffered a change of heart. On the contrary, it seemed the pimp was going all out, if the classy transportation was any indication. Expecting one of Willie's more intelligent boys to be driving, Noah was pleasantly surprised when an older gentleman with graying hair and moustache stepped from the vehicle, professional down to his pressed uniform and shined shoes -- and not the sort of professional one normally associated with Willie Carnell. "Are you Noah Everett?" the man asked.

Noah nodded. "I am."

The driver opened the rear door and stepped aside. Noah sighed. There was no turning back now. He climbed inside the luxurious vehicle, settling himself on the comfortable leather seat. If he was going to hell, at least it would be in style.

He'd expected to be taken to Ramsey Street; instead, the car headed into the pricey downtown area, coming to a stop in front of a very fashionable high-rise that towered far above the street. The driver opened his door, but when offered a tip, politely declined. "It's been taken care of, sir," he said.

Noah approached the pink granite, arched entrance, smiling and stepping aside to allow a well-dressed couple to exit. He mumbled a greeting as they brushed past, but they turned away. His eyes traveled up, and up, and up, to the enormous chandelier that hung above the marble-tiled lobby. Damn, no wonder the couple had turned their noses up; they must have mistaken him for a plumber or something equally menial, dressed as he was in blue jeans, boots, and a scuffed leather jacket. A menial workman who had the audacity to use the main entrance instead of the service door he was sure existed around back.

A uniformed security guard rushed forward. "Good evening, Mr. Everett." Noah's eyebrow rose in suspicion. Mister Everett? It seemed his host was conspiring to make him feel important.

His casual attire didn't seem to bother the guard, who waited patiently for him to close his mouth, still hanging open at the sheer elegance of the building. Finally, the man instructed, "Sixth floor, sir," while pointing toward the elevator.

It seemed old Willie must be doing pretty well for himself to give up his apartment at The Brownstone and take up residence here, where rent probably cost more than three times the mortgage payment on the small frame house Noah had bought on the outskirts of town. With that thought in mind, he stepped into the elevator and studied the controls. Before he could select a floor, the doors closed and the elevator ascended. Well, damn. Wasn't that high tech? It must be controlled from the computer terminal on the reception desk.

The moments ticked by with the floors, giving Noah's anxiety time to reach full swing. He had no way of knowing what Willie had in store, and could only hope he'd survive it. At least the hired minions wouldn't be there. That is, if their boss kept his word.

Finally, a muted chime sounded and the elevator stopped and opened. He felt a brief moment of panic, realizing that he didn't know which apartment was Willie's. A door swung open down the hall, answering the question. Heart pounding, he entered the dimly lit apartment, barely able to contain more open-mouthed awe. He was still a bit embarrassed by his 'country come to town' reaction to the lobby. There was a time when he'd frequented places like this, but that had been a long time ago, and he'd never stayed for long.

His eye was caught by the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living area that offered an excellent view of the city. Twinkling lights glittered like a million stars, and if he drew closer, he'd be able to look down at the traffic crawling through the streets below. He chanced a glance around. The semi-darkness couldn't hide that the furnishings were upscale. Noah had scored a few pretty pricey assignments back in the old days, which gave him some familiarity with the finer things in life, even if they weren't a normal part of his existence in present times. The light jazz playing quietly in the background added its voice to the scream of high class, and he wondered who'd picked it. Willie had always been a die-hard metal fan, as far as he knew. Perhaps the man's tastes were improving along with his venue.

The scent of expensive cologne washed over Noah's senses a scant second before a shadowy figure stepped away from the wall to stand much too close for comfort. "Was wondering if you'd chicken out," the husky murmur that was Willie's ruined voice purred into his ear. "I'm glad you didn't." Warm breath caressed Noah's cheek, causing an anticipatory shiver. It had been far too long since he'd last had sex to walk into the spider's web and expect to leave unbitten. This particular spider had an exquisite bite.

Steeling his resolve to resist temptation, at least until he'd gotten what he came for, Noah turned to face his host and immediately fell into the depths the same dark eyes that too often haunted his dreams. His nemesis stood a mere foot away, wearing a seductive smile that had been practiced in the mirror back when Willie had sold himself. Noah had watched him do it. It was merely the performance of an accomplished actor, nothing more. Even knowing that didn't stop the memories from another life and recent self-denial from combining to leave Noah hard and aching. It wasn't fair that, after all these years, the bastard could still have that affect.

Dressed simply in a loose, dark sweater and slacks, Willie stood barefoot, a wet dream come to life. Darkness and clothing hid the worst of the scars that Noah knew lurked under the rather

demure, for Willie, garments. Many men had paid hundreds of dollars to stand right where Noah was standing now. "Take your boots off, the carpet is a bitch to clean, and hang your jacket in the closet," Willie said, the words more reminiscent of meticulous friend Billy than of shrewd pimp Willie, who shouldn't care about such things. A businessman of his caliber had highly paid underlings to worry about trivial matters. Noah was grateful, however, that the tough-guy persona had been left at the office. The arrogant asshole role Willie played to rule Ramsey Street was much harder to deal with and not nearly as attractive.

Noah hung his jacket as instructed, and bent down to untie his boots. Willie leaned to the side, obviously ogling his ass. "Some things, thankfully, never change," Willie said with an exaggerated leer.

Noah refused to comment.

With a beguiling smile, the dark-haired devil incarnate stepped away, his husky whisper inviting, "Come eat; I ordered dinner."

Knowing he was doomed, Noah stepped out of his boots and willingly followed the cobra into its hole. While his host led the way around the furniture into the dining area, he watched Willie's still-firm ass, also unchanged, wondering if it was commando beneath the slacks. His cock grew even harder, fantasizing about how little separated his suddenly sweating hands from the firm cheeks they wanted to grab. What else could he expect from a man who'd built an empire on the art of seduction?

Between the living and dining areas was a large aquarium, and Noah stopped, tearing his eyes from his host's sinfully tempting body to admire brightly hued tropical fish.

"Lovely, aren't they?" Willie asked, stepping up beside him. The soft illumination from the aquarium washed his face in a pale blue glow, making his features appear younger, softer.

"Yes, they are," Noah agreed, trying to ignore their proximity and the effect it was having. Willie stood so close, he could reach out and...

Voice heavy with innuendo, his host murmured, "I like surrounding myself with pretty things, but you already knew that, didn't you?"

Willie wrapped a hand around Noah's arm and led him to the table. A gleaming silver candelabrum stood in the center of a white tablecloth, six glowing tapers augmenting the soft illumination from the aquarium. The silverware reflected the light from their deceptively cheery glow.

"Does this remind you of anything?" A hint of challenge lurked within the words.

Shaking off images of two young lovers and a swanky restaurant downtown with a string quartet and a dress code, Noah replied, "Not a damned thing."

"That's a pity." His host's disappointment sounded surprisingly sincere.

Noah looked past Willie, distracted by twinkling lights.

Following the direction of Noah's eyes, Willie said, "It's beautiful, isn't it? I've been told this apartment has one of finest views in the city. It better -- I paid enough for it. After six months, I still love it. Wanna know the best part?"

Afraid of the answer, Noah still had to ask, "What's that?"

A muscular arm dropped around his shoulders, pulling him closer than necessary. Willie guided him over to the windows and gazed down on the streets below. Noah had been right; he could see the cars from up here, streams of light chasing each other on the road beneath them. In the distance, an endless red streak led from the city down the interstate.

"The best part is that I can't see Ramsey Street from here."

"Looks like you've done pretty well for yourself, Willie," Noah grudgingly admitted.

"I've done better than well. But come, we'd better eat before dinner gets cold." Willie turned them back toward the table and pulled out a chair. "You do still eat your steaks medium rare, don't you?"

"I do," Noah replied, allowing Willie to push his chair under him. He ignored the warm lips that briefly nuzzled his neck, another sadistic reminder of that night so long ago. Hoping a distraction might hide his discomfort, he ventured, "I never expected to see you move this far downtown."

"That's one of the things I want to talk to you about." Willie disappeared through a door, presumably to the kitchen, reappearing a moment later with a bottle of wine. He poured two glasses, handing one to Noah. "The Brownstone is up for sale. I'm leaving Ramsey Street -- permanently."

That was unexpected. "You're leaving the business, then?" Noah asked, shock and hope flooding his heart.

Willie laughed quietly, a rich, infectious sound despite his ruined vocal chords. Chances were he'd practiced that, too. "Hardly. I'm just moving up." Once more he left the room, returning a moment later with two loaded plates. He set one in front of Noah before taking a seat directly opposite. "If I remember correctly, you say grace. Feel free."

Noah bowed his head and gave thanks, as he had since childhood. His faith may have fluctuated wildly over the years; it never quite completely disappeared. He glanced up to see Willie cross himself, a gesture that he hadn't expected the man to still perform.

He picked up his fork and looked down at his meal, once again given a bitter pill to swallow. It was an exact replica of the one he'd been served on his eighteenth birthday. Despite earlier

denials, he remembered every detail of the night before he'd given up his soul to the darkness. Thankfully, he'd gotten it back. Or part of it, anyway; the rest he'd learned to live without.

"Angelo's is still there, and they deliver." Willie answered the unasked question and twisted the knife in Noah's heart a little deeper. This was more than just a re-creation; this meal came from the same place that Billy had saved for weeks to take him to twelve years ago to the day.

"Why did you bring me here?" Noah asked, ignoring the deliberate cruelty his host was inflicting. Willie knew full well how much Billy and that night had meant to him. "You could have told me 'yes' or 'go fuck yourself' in your office. There's no need to bring me here and wine and dine me. Although this steak isn't bad."

Those dark, bewitching eyes twinkled with amusement. "Well, I thought you'd like to see me shake off the gutter and move on to better things."

Busily chewing what was easily the best meal that he'd had in a long time, and that, surprisingly, didn't turn to ash in his mouth for the circumstances, Noah's response was more moan than words. "Hmmm?"

"With a few better-quality boys, I can make in a week what I used to make in a month, without the hassles of so many silly little preeners who don't have the sense God gave a goose. That part of the business is handled over the Internet, too, from the comfort of my own home. Gives a whole new meaning to 'you've got male.' It's so much more convenient than picking up customers off the streets, like we did back in our day, eh, Noah? That's the part of my enterprise that I'm selling off."

Noah refused to comment. He simply waited, knowing there was more to come.

Willie smiled. "I've got better customers now -- customers who want more than just twenty minutes in an available hole. There are men out there," his hand swept out to indicate the city, "who want someone they can be seen with. They still want something pretty hanging on their arm, but they also want someone who can put two words together in public without embarrassing them, and who can pass for a business associate. They no longer want them for just minutes or hours, either. One of my boys was hired for a three-week stint in Toronto. The john even wrote it off as a business expense!"

Recalling the gangster wannabes from the Tub of Suds, and the scared, homesick Mark, Noah was skeptical. "I've seen your boys, and if you don't mind my saying so, they don't really fit that description. In fact, those in your office the other night were about ready for retirement, weren't they?"

"Ah, that isn't going to be a problem much longer," Willie replied. "I already have a few that'll never be seen on Ramsey Street, working their way through college or earning money to invest in businesses. That's where your boy comes in," he added with a wink.

Noah didn't bother correcting the "your boy" comment. "Continue."

"Well, Trent's an ambitious little shit, like I was at that age, and he was the one who originally gave me the idea to move up." Willie paused to take a leisurely bite of steak before continuing, "Seems he likes to fuck boys smarter than he is, which is pretty much everybody. The first one he brought is gonna graduate college and start his own business soon. Two years with me has given him more than just a fatter wallet. He's made some pretty impressive contacts. He even brought in more boys just like himself."

Those too-familiar dark eyes gleamed excitedly as Willie unveiled plans for the future, face more animated than Noah had ever seen it. "The new boys can also stay in the game longer, because some of the customers actually want someone with maturity. They're also one hell of a lot easier to deal with. Instead of bail money, they ask for gym memberships -- which I pay for because those are good places to meet clients."

"Then how does Jeremy figure in?" Noah asked impatiently, wincing when he realized he'd said the name aloud. He'd forgotten his earlier promise to keep the negotiations impersonal. This was one time when he should have said "kid."

Willie either didn't notice or ignored the slip. "Well, even some of my premium customers like a good fantasy now and then. Trent has brought me several boys, but this one of yours is bound to outdo them all." He leaned across the table and confided, "Trent brought him to restaurants so I could watch, and he'd do to be seen out with. He has manners that could be impeccable with just a little coaching. He's also highly intelligent and very well spoken, yet still looks so young. What really convinced me that I needed him were the videos Trent filmed of the two of them in bed together -- seriously hot stuff, I'm telling you." Willie frowned. "That is, if you overlook that Trent was his co-star. With someone more suitable? Why, I might even be tempted to try him in my adult video line. He'd be quite appealing to a certain type of customer." Dark thoughts lurked behind Willie's sinister grin. "Oh, I forgot to tell you about that, huh?"

Noah's blood ran cold at the thought of that sweet kid spreading his ass for the likes of Trent or anybody else. Even more horrifying was the photographic evidence. That information could never be shared with Jeremy. The poor kid had enough problems without worrying about being an inadvertent porn star. Jeremy in adult films? Never!

"By 'certain type of customer' I assume you mean pedophiles."

Willie glared at Noah, appearing genuinely offended. "You know me better than that, Noah! I'm not Stevie. I've never stooped to exploiting minors. No one underage."

"Just because the boys aren't actually minors doesn't absolve the *customers* of guilt if they *think* that's what they're getting. Intent's as bad as doing, in my book."

"Not in mine." It was an old argument. Neither had ever succeeded in swaying the other.

If Willie noticed how riled Noah was on Jeremy's behalf, he prudently kept it to himself, for later use, no doubt. "Anyway, that kid of yours, -- who's eighteen, I checked -- is a knockout and a

wildcat in bed. He'd do great in the business. I can see why he got under your skin; I wouldn't mind a piece of that action, myself. Still, for old time's sake, I'll make you a deal. As long as he's yours and living under your roof, he's off limits."

Jeremy was his, all right, even if not in the way Willie meant. This was too easy, and Noah waited for the other shoe to fall, which it did. "In return, I want something from you. Well, two things, actually." The lascivious grin gleaming in the candlelight was anything but friendly.

Noah swallowed hard. "What's the first?"

"Something you'd do anyway," Willie responded with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I've got this kid who, frankly, shouldn't be in the business. I want you to put him on a bus like you've done for all the other strays, and make him go away."

"What if he doesn't want to go?" Noah asked carefully keeping his tone neutral. Did Willie know something? Was this a setup?

"Oh, he wants to, all right. My other boys have been making life hard enough that he's just waiting for 'The Angel' to come rescue him."

The implications of those words hit hard. "You've given me boys before, haven't you?"

Willie smiled. "It's my way of culling the herd. If their hearts aren't in it, they're bad for business. This one is careless, and I'd rather you foot the bill to send him off than to keep paying bribes to have charges dropped.

"Naïve kids like that let johns push them out of windows." Willie's dark eyes were full of meaning.

"Or get run over and left for dead," was Noah's unflinching reply.

"Touché."

Pausing to sip the wine that probably cost more per bottle than an entire case of the stuff he served at the bar, Noah took a deep, fortifying breath. He had the feeling he was going to need it. "What's the other thing?"

Willie downed the remainder of his own wine in one gulp and rose gracefully to his feet. He stretched out a hand to Noah. "One more time, for old time's sake."

Well, there it was, the invitation Noah had hoped for as much as he'd feared. He knew it was wrong to want the beautiful bastard, but God help him, he did, unable to resist the charms that had brought many men to their knees -- literally. His willingness should have been a clue that he wasn't involved with anyone else. He may have sold his body at one time, but unless it was business, he'd never cheated. Then again, this could be considered business of a sort.

For some reason he couldn't quite fathom, it still felt vaguely like infidelity when he placed his hand in Willie's and said, "I thought you'd never ask."

Leaving the remains of dinner on the table, Willie led him through the darkened apartment and into a candlelit bedroom. The bed covers were already turned down, and a bottle of wine sat in an ice bucket on the dresser. Two glasses sat beside it. It looked as though Willie had never doubted the outcome of this meeting. Manipulative bastard.

Willie poured them each a glass and then sat on the edge of the bed, crossing his legs. "Strip for me," he said, sipping his wine.

In front of bare windows, before an audience of a million twinkling lights, Noah did something he hadn't done in years -- performed a strip tease. In his mind, it was Billy on the bed, body young and unblemished by scars and tattoos that peeked from the neck and sleeves of an expensive sweater. Those were also Billy's dark eyes gazing at him in appreciation as he slowly drew his shirt up and off, to drop it to the floor. Keeping time with the sultry blues number now playing softly in the background, Noah recalled the last time he'd performed this dance.

He tuned out the hoots and whistles of the men who were even now approaching Stevie, his pimp, to purchase his time. Amidst loud, obscene comments, Noah proudly displayed the moves that Billy had tried so hard to teach. Swaying seductively onstage, he slowly unveiled the body he worked to maintain, striving to be the best so he could afford to finally leave the business behind and get on with his life. But it wasn't the paying customers he danced for. Billy, his lover, was watching intently, grinding against the shoulder of a seated customer. The bawdy pantomime created a mirror image of Noah's dance.

"It's only for a little while, Noe," Noah heard Billy's rich tenor whisper, "then we can go anywhere you want and be together. You can go back to school and be anything you want to be. We just have to do this a little longer..."

Brought back to reality by a soft moan, Noah looked down into dark, lust-glazed eyes gazing up at him. He found it amazing that a man who surrounded himself with attractive, barely legal boys could appreciate someone who'd just turned thirty. Then again, Willie was nothing if not a consummate actor. You never knew what was real and what was illusion with him.

Quickly shedding jeans, briefs, and socks without missing a beat, Noah continued the dance, hard cock bouncing against his stomach, begging for contact and release. There was no way to hide the effect the dangerous predator had on him, and guilt rankled. He was no better than all who had come before and paid good money to experience what was in store. The only difference was that he'd pay with what remained of his soul instead of cash. Either way, payment would be rendered.

"C'mere, baby," Willie whispered, voice as smoky as the bar on a busy night. Noah took his time crossing the floor, purposefully placing his cock so close to Willie's face that an exhaled breath caressed it, sending shivers down his spine. Just that tiny bit of stimulation elicited a moan.

Glittering eyes looked up from underneath long, dark lashes, then those full lips parted. Willie swallowed him to the root, effortlessly taking the entire hard length into his throat.

"Oh, God!" Noah cried out. Willie had been one of the most highly paid escorts in town ten years ago, and Noah remembered why when his cock was worked expertly with lips, tongue, throat, and teeth.

Firm hands rose to grip his hips, supporting and guiding him. Willie bobbed energetically, tongue massaging all it touched. He pulled off and opened wide, dropping lower to take both of Noah's balls into his mouth at once. All the while, those dark eyes never broke their mesmerizing contact. That talented mouth released Noah's balls to slide up the thick vein of his cock, licking and nibbling before wrapping warm lips around the head. Noah moaned helplessly when Willie swallowed him again.

Willie's throat may have been scarred and deformed, but, apparently, it functioned just fine. With every inch of Noah's long shaft down it, he still managed to stick out his tongue and brush the tip against Noah's balls, humming softly. It was one hell of a trick.

It was also too much to take. "Willie," Noah moaned, "you've gotta stop or I'm gonna blow!"

Willie pulled off, hands still gripping Noah's hips hard enough that there'd be bruises come morning. "What's the matter, Noah?" he taunted. "Your boy can't be as good as Trent says if I can make you come so easily."

Invoking Jeremy in this setting nearly brought things to a screeching halt. Noah slammed the door on the image of freckles and adoring blue eyes. Now was not the time!

Noah grabbed Willie by the shoulders and flung him onto the bed. "Your turn to strip," he ordered, remembering how much the jaded man liked force. He wished he'd thought to bring a pair of cuffs. There were probably plenty around here, but he didn't want the reminder of the man's profession that a box full of well-used toys would present. The last thing he needed right now was performance anxiety.

Willie rolled his sweater slowly up his torso, grinning at Noah's wide-eyed reaction to his tattoos, something Noah had never seen except for hints at neck and wrist. The black ink patterns swirled over the pimp's shaved body, traveling down both arms to end at his wrists. Ink circled his exposed ankles, too. Noah had little doubt the art extended up both legs. From what he could tell, it was an intricate Celtic design that was all part of one large piece. It was beautiful, and made the thick, ropey scars that criss-crossed Willie's body less noticeable. While Noah knew there may be hell to pay later, he was going to enjoy this.

Frustrated by the painfully slow undressing, Noah unfastened Willie's pants, grabbed the waist and pulled them down around his ankles, then off to land on the floor. He'd been right on both counts: Willie had been going commando, and the inked markings snaked their way up both heavily scarred legs. Willie's cock, the only part of him that appeared undamaged, was hard. Climbing onto the massive bed, Noah crashed his lips down on Willie's grinning mouth, losing

himself in the frantically returned kiss while fantasizing once more that this was Billy, the man he'd once vowed to spend his life with.

He nudged firm thighs apart with one leg and settled between them, kissing a path down that ink-darkened torso. His tongue laved the raised scars, living reminders of how tough Willie really was and of what he'd survived.

Willie hissed and arched his back, pushing a nipple into Noah's mouth. He moaned as the licks and kisses gave way to gentle nibbles, and, finally, bites. So, The Latin Lover still liked sex rough? Images sprang to mind of just how rough Willie used to like it; images that Noah had to push aside if he intended to last.

Noah distracted himself by following a particularly vicious scar down Willie's chest and across a taut abdomen, until a hard, uncut cock waved impatiently in front of his nose.

As he opened his mouth and took that demanding flesh inside, reacquainting himself with the feel of foreskin against his tongue and lips, a warm hand cupped his cheek, tracing the hollows formed by his sucking. When he began to slide up and down, that hand moved to the back of his head, encouraging a faster rhythm before returning once more to stroke his face -- a gesture too tender to come from a street-hardened whore.

That hand turned insistent, forcing Noah to withdraw. "Condoms are in the drawer," Willie mumbled breathlessly.

Shit! He'd been so caught up in fantasies that he'd forgotten the main rule of Willie's profession: no glove, no love, and it was puzzling that someone of the pimp's expertise had taken the same chance.

Noah looked toward the nightstand where those dark, lust-glazed eyes were focused. Reluctantly easing from the bed, he quickly rifled through the drawer, finding a condom and making short work of smoothing it down Willie's cock.

Then he grabbed Willie's ass, using it for leverage to force that strawberry-flavored cock deep into his mouth, utilizing skills rarely employed anymore. He was rewarded by guttural groans of pleasure.

Insistent fingers laced through his hair as Willie's hips eagerly bucked, fucking Noah's mouth in earnest. Relaxing his jaw, Noah held still and let Willie fuck his face before grasping the man's narrow hips forcefully, stilling him. Willie's whine of frustration was music to Noah's ears. Apparently, being a paid professional hadn't dulled the ability to find pleasure in the act, which was reassuring, even if Noah didn't know what to make of the fact that it was himself inspiring that response.

He slowly pulled off, licking up and down the sides of the hard shaft before lowering his head and taking one smooth, heavy ball into his mouth, sucking gently and rolling it with his tongue before repeating the process with the other. He curled his body around Willie's leg, hips pumping

against a muscular calf. It had been way too long since Noah had someone in his bed, and he was afraid he wasn't going to last long -- especially not with a highly trained professional like Willie Carnell.

Releasing Willie's leg and sliding down farther still, he lifted the ass he'd so admired earlier into the air and buried his face between firm cheeks, tongue seeking out the man's entrance. Another heady moan told him Willie liked that -- a lot. Yeah, some things never changed. He pushed his tongue in as far as possible, reveling in the musky scent that he'd been deprived of for so long. He'd shied away when Billy had first told him about rimming. Once he'd tried it, he was hooked.

"Stop playing and fuck me, Noah!" Willie groaned. Noah didn't need to be told twice. He revisited the nightstand and quickly found another condom. He tore open the package with his teeth and rolled the latex down his aching flesh. Another exploration produced a bottle of lube, which he took with him when he climbed back between Willie's legs.

Pouring a generous amount onto two fingers, he slipped them into Willie's waiting opening, twisting and turning them to the sounds of harsh, panted breaths. "Now, Noah," Willie pleaded.

He removed his fingers and grabbed a pillow, settling it beneath Willie's hips. Noah lowered his head to once more claim possession of that sensuous mouth that had nearly ended things too soon. He slowly worked his cock into tight heat, pushing aside thoughts of the sheer number of men who'd been there before, caught up in the fantasy that this was Billy, who gave only his body to others. All else belonged to Noah. He'd intended to be gentle, to be better than the men who had paid their money and then used this ass with no regards to Willie's comfort, but it had been too long. With the image of Billy clearly in mind, he lost control and ruthlessly took what was offered.

If the guttural encouragements were any indication, Willie didn't mind. "Fuck me!" he screamed again, locking his legs behind Noah's thighs and impaling himself, groans and cries filling the air. The pimp's fingers dug almost painfully into Noah's shoulders.

Wrapping his arms under Willie's back, grasping gym-sculpted shoulders for leverage, Noah pounded into Willie, too lost to stop even if he wanted to -- which he didn't.

His tongue invaded Willie's mouth, questing, stroking, and his challenge was met and matched. Warm hands grabbed his ass and hurried the rhythm as the man beneath him moaned and thrashed. "That's it, baby, that's it!" Willie yelled. "Fuck me like you mean it. Baby, it's been so long!"

Then one hand released Noah's ass and squeezed between their bodies, peeling off the condom and then pumping in time to the frantic thrusts. "Oh, God!" Willie screamed. Wet heat splashed between them.

Noah couldn't hold back against those muscles rhythmically squeezing him, and he loosed a yell of his own, filling his own latex sheath. "Billy!" he wailed, burying himself in the man's willing

body. His body spasmed in endless waves, pleasure sweeping through him with more force than he'd ever imagined possible.

He collapsed, boneless and sated, onto Willie's body. Aftershocks rolled through him, more than he could count, while Willie's fingers traced gentle patterns on his back. "Nobody's called me Billy in years," the pimp murmured quietly. "Not since you left me."

Sighing, Noah rolled off his former lover, staring deeply into the dark eyes he once swore he'd never get enough of. "I never left you, Billy; I left the life."

"Same thing," Billy replied, expression strangely close to pouting.

"No, it's not! We were both nearly killed by madmen because of the life we led! I didn't understand how you could stay, why you wouldn't come with me." He hated that his voice held the same edge of pleading it had all those years ago. No matter what happened or how much time passed, Noah still held out hope that one day Billy would change his mind and they could be together again.

The man lying next to Noah might look like his former flame, but he wasn't. Willie Carnell was a stranger. "You know why, Noah. Because I belong here," that stranger explained calmly, as though it were the most logical thing in the world. "You never did. It was a mistake bringing you into the business to begin with."

Noah felt he must be a glutton for punishment. He already knew the answer, and yet still asked anyway, "Why, Billy? We said we'd always be together. Surely you didn't love the money more than you loved me?"

The heavy sigh warned Noah that he was about to hear again the words that had haunted him for the past ten years. "That's the thing; I never loved *you*, Noah. I liked being with you, and I loved *fucking* you, sure, but I don't believe in love."

"I'll let myself out," Noah said, rising from the bed. He didn't know what he'd expected; that maybe, somehow, after all these years, Billy had changed his mind. But the man Noah had stubbornly held on to for all these years truly was gone for good. All that was left were bittersweet memories, for more than just Billy's name had changed ten years ago. However, no matter what was said, Noah still remembered them lying in bed together, whispering plans in the dark. Willie could deny it all he wanted to, but at one time, Billy Cordell had loved Noah Everett. It was only Willie Carnell who didn't believe in love. Billy had; of that, Noah had no doubt.

Willie was strangely silent while Noah dressed, watching intently with none of the expected gloating. Only when Noah turned to leave did he finally speak. "Your chain's on the coffee table. Why you still wear that cheap-assed piece of shit I'll never know. The car is waiting downstairs. Keep your boy close and he'll be safe. Oh, and by the way, Happy Birthday, Noe. You can touch him now. Just remember that each time you do, he's getting my leftovers."

Without a word Noah stalked into the living room to retrieve his pendant, and he stood staring at it a long, hard moment, debating whether to put it on or fling it as hard as he could, uncaring of where it fell. Finally, he sighed and put it around his neck, rationalizing that it was simply because he'd worn it so long that he felt naked without it.

Feeling its warm, comforting weight back where it belonged filled him with anger. He didn't have to justify to anyone why he chose to wear it! To hell with what Willie or anyone else said! It might be a cheap-assed piece of shit, but it was his cheap-assed piece of shit, and he'd wear it to his grave if he damned well felt like it!

Retrieving his jacket from the closet, he slipped it on, chilled by more than just the thought of the cool fall evening waiting outside. Looking out once more on the breathtaking view of the city while pulling on his boots, Noah recalled all Willie had traded in order to be here now, sincerely hoping the man was happy with those choices. "Goodbye, Billy," Noah whispered softly, closing the door of the apartment and of his heart.

Chapter Eight

"C'mon, shake a leg; I ain't got all day!" Noah bellowed up the stairs, feigning impatience. Far from being annoyed, he was actually eagerly anticipating the next few hours. For, though he'd never act on erotic feelings for his young protégée, he valued any excuse to spend the day with Jeremy without arousing anyone's suspicions, and got to burn off more karmic debt by doing a good deed. It would also help put aside the growing depression that the visit with Willie had spawned. The ones that couldn't be saved always tugged heavily at his heart.

"Where are we going?" Jeremy asked, bounding down the stairs two at a time.

Noah was glad Mary wasn't around, because if she saw his smile, he'd never hear the end of it. He'd donned a more neutral expression by the time Jeremy reached the truck. "I've got some errands to run, and if you're going to be a business owner, even on paper, you'll need to know where to get supplies."

Jeremy looked stunned before a wide grin lit up his face. "Really? You're gonna let me go with you?"

Trying to appear stern and demanding, like he'd expect someone in upper management to be, Noah told Jeremy, "Sure. I expect my managers to be able to run my businesses on their own, with little help from me. Just remember that I still wield the checkbook, and all major expenses have to be cleared by me first."

Chattering like a magpie and making a list with pen and paper found in the glove compartment, Jeremy brainstormed all the way across town, throwing out ideas -- some viable, some so farfetched that he winced and said "never mind" the moment the words left his mouth. It kept Noah entertained. The youthful enthusiasm was contagious, and seeing the young man so happy was balm for the soul.

The smile faded and the laughter died when they reached their destination. "This is a clothing store," Jeremy said sullenly. "I don't think they sell laundry equipment here."

Given his fierce independence, Noah thought Jeremy might feel that way. He'd discussed this possibility with Mary and conveniently employed the excuse she'd provided: "I can't expect my managers to come to work looking unprofessional, can I? Besides, I still owe you for watching the towels the night we met."

Creases appeared in Jeremy's forehead as he mulled over the words. Noah couldn't miss the longing look or the sad smile that crossed the kid's face while he stared wistfully at the latest styles displayed in the shop window. The rich kids at his school probably had clothes like that. Finally, he turned to Noah and said, "I'll let you buy me clothes, just not here. Drive over to Jefferson." In a small voice, he added, "Please."

Noah had never met anyone before who would turn down an opportunity to spend someone else's money, and it was humbling, especially since the kid needed a new wardrobe desperately.

Heart heavier than it had been when they started out, Noah drove over to Jefferson Avenue. That part of town wasn't familiar, and he had no idea where they were going. The closer they got to their destination, the more excited Jeremy became, until he'd nearly recaptured his earlier good mood. When they pulled into the parking lot of the biggest thrift store Noah had ever seen, Jeremy was wearing an ear-splitting grin once more.

"Just wait 'til you see this place, Noah. They have everything," he crowed.

Reserving judgment, Noah entered the shop behind Jeremy, immediately impressed by the bright lights and neat, orderly racks. When he'd been on the street, the secondhand stores he'd frequented were drab and dreary, hours were spent picking through jumbled bins to find something usable. This place looked like a department store in comparison.

"Look at this!" Jeremy held up a rather plain button-down shirt. "It still has the tags on it!"

It broke Noah's heart that this young man had received so little in life as to be excited over the prospect of a thrift store shirt. "Are you gonna try it on?" Noah asked.

Jeremy's face fell. "Well..." he stammered, "I'm sure it'll fit. If it doesn't, I'll just take up a stitch here and there."

If Noah's heart had broken before, now it shattered into tiny pieces. He fought the urge to grab the shirt and throw it to the floor, then drag Jeremy to the most expensive store in town and buy him one of everything. Sadly, they were on a budget, and Noah had a feeling that, rather than be impressed by the gesture, it would make Jeremy miserable. "Yeah, well, humor me. I want to see it on you."

Something passed through Jeremy's dark eyes that Noah couldn't quite identify. If he had to guess, he'd have called it hope.

"Let me get a few more things first," Jeremy replied. "There's usually a line for the dressing room." He suddenly stopped, the hope changing to longing as he stared at a royal blue sweater hanging on a rack behind the check out counter.

Noah thought the thin knit, obviously of good quality, would look positively sinful on the kid. He was surprised when Jeremy turned away. "What's wrong with that one?" Noah asked, puzzled why anyone would walk away from something they so obviously wanted.

Jeremy sighed, eyes straying back behind the counter once more. "That's where they keep the best stuff. They cost more."

Ten minutes later, Noah was openly admiring Jeremy's trim form, dressed in clothes that weren't ready for the Dumpster. The shirt with the tags was missing a button, but Jeremy insisted he could fix it, especially seeing how cheap it was. In fact, most of the chosen items were marked down because they needed repairs, although some were new and labeled "factory seconds."

While Jeremy was in the changing room Noah approached the clerk at the counter. "How much for the blue sweater?"

With all the enthusiasm of a commissioned salesgirl, the elderly lady took the sweater from the rack, holding it up for inspection. "Well, it's name brand from one of those fancy boutiques downtown, and it's hardly even been worn!"

Eyes trained to the closed dressing room door, expecting Jeremy to emerge at any second, Noah tried to speed things up. "How much?" he asked again. Was it too much to ask that she just name her price?

"It's fifteen dollars, sir, and may I add that it'll look stunning with your..."

Noah cut her off. "I'll give you twenty if you'll tear the seam."

She stepped back from the counter, hugging the sweater protectively. The look on her face suggested that he'd just asked her to kick a puppy.

"Nothing that can't be fixed," he amended. "My friend won't accept it if he thinks it cost me too much. Add some minor flaw and mark it to five, okay?"

Suddenly the woman beamed. "Aww... that's so sweet!"

"Now, please. Before he comes back!" Noah considered himself a patient man; that patience was at an end.

Still smiling, the woman rang up the purchase at fifteen dollars, then deftly reached inside the sweater and unraveled two inches of the seam beneath the arm. "It won't show there," she explained.

Trying to appear nonchalant, Noah leaned casually against the counter, watching Jeremy approach. "Got everything you need?"

"Umm..."

Jeremy blushed and rose up on his toes to whisper into Noah's ear, "I draw the line at used skivvies."

At first Noah wasn't sure he'd heard right. "Did you say skivvies?" The serious look in Jeremy's eyes had him fighting a laugh. "I don't blame you there. We'll stop by somewhere on the way home." Attempting to spare any guilt, he added, "Someplace cheap."

The bright smile returned. "Deal." Jeremy worried his lower lip with his teeth before asking, "You are going to let me pay you back for these clothes when I get the money, right?"

"How about you wash the bar towels for a month and we call it even?"

Whatever Jeremy might have said was interrupted by the clerk. "Oh my!" she exclaimed. "Would you look at this? This poor sweater!" She held up the soft blue garment, two fingers sticking through a hole in the underarm. "I guess I'll have to mark this down to five dollars and stick it in with the rest of damaged clothes. It's a pity," she said, looking straight at Jeremy. "It's lovely, don't you think?"

Hopeful eyes met Noah's, and he couldn't have said no if his life depended on it, even if he hadn't been working toward this very goal.

The blue sweater left with them.

"Can we stop here?" Jeremy asked, tearing his eyes away from the soft sweater he'd been petting for the last fifteen minutes. They were the first words he'd said since leaving the thrift shop, other than happy noises made while looking through the bags at his purchases.

Noah had no idea what the kid was up to, and it didn't really matter -- he'd gladly go anywhere Jeremy wanted just to see him smile.

A sign in the window said the shop did small motor repair work, and a price list was included. A bell chimed above the door when they entered, reminding him of the new addition to the Tub of Suds, and, judging from the beeline made to the back of the store, Jeremy had been there before. He stopped in front of a display of sewing machines, the wistful sigh Noah had heard all day sounding once more.

"If I had a sewing machine, I could do more repairs at the laundry," he said.

"You can sew?" Noah eyed him skeptically. "Teenaged boys can't sew! Hell, *I* can't even sew." Then he remembered all the neat, tiny stitches and mismatched buttons on Jeremy's clothes.

With a haughty lift of his chin, Jeremy replied, "This one can. One of my foster mothers was a seamstress and she taught me." His tone clearly indicated admiration for the woman, and Noah wondered if she could have been so cold as to callously kick a kid out on the streets for turning eighteen. Nah, it couldn't be.

"Do you mind my asking what happened to her?" Noah was ready to hate the anonymous woman if she had, indeed, turned her back.

Jeremy sighed. "Remember what you said about there being good and bad in everyone? That it's the choices they make?"

"Yes."

"Well, Katherine was wonderful to me until she got busted for pot. Then the state took me away." Under his breath he added, "And gave me to the frickin' Deweys. I was better off with Katherine. She at least gave a rat's ass about me. It's not like she made me smoke it or anything."

None of Noah's foster parents had earned any respect, so what could he possibly say to that? Feeling strangely inadequate and wishing he had Mary's gift of knowing what to say in any situation, he stared at the line of machines, totally out of his element. "Well, I don't know anything about sewing machines..." he began, only to be cut off by a fifteen minute crash course in features. Noah listened without comprehension to Jeremy's rapt explanation of stitch lengths, embroidery, and buttonhole attachments. The sales pitch ended with a rough estimate of how long it would take the machine to pay for itself.

Noah was speechless. Never in his life had he heard anyone speak so passionately about anything, and, under his heavy jacket, he was as hard as a brick. When a nervous hand reached out and stroked a plastic casing, to a reverently whispered, "Industrial model," he thought he was going to need a cigarette, and Noah hadn't smoked in ten years.

A mumbled litany about depreciation values followed him to the cash register, where he wrote a check for far less than anticipated. On top of his other talents, the kid was a natural-born haggler.

They made two more stops, one for the promised underwear and the other to get Jeremy toiletries, and then they were on their way back to the laundry.

It was while hauling the machine into the old office in the back of the laundry that Jeremy's jovial mood changed. Several times that day, Noah had caught Jeremy watching him, and at first he believed it was just gratitude, for he'd seen that often enough in the eyes of the young men he'd helped. Now the smoldering gaze had definitely turned sexual. With the way his own thoughts had been going lately, any encouragement could be dangerous.

"Listen, Jeremy," he began, striving to be the voice of reason now before his body overruled his head.

He found himself pressed against the door, demanding hands climbing his shoulders to lock behind his neck. Jeremy leaned in and kissed him. Noah's resolve held for a moment before breaking, and he opened his mouth to admit a questing tongue. He moaned, losing himself in an enthusiastic play of lips, teeth, and tongues. The passion Jeremy had shown earlier when talking about sewing machines couldn't match this.

A car door slammed in the parking lot, breaking the spell. It took all of Noah's will power to push Jeremy back. "I'm sorry, Jeremy. We can't do this."

Jeremy immediately went on the defensive, arms crossing over his chest and chin thrust out in defiance. "Why not? I'm over eighteen. I may not be able to drink legally, but I can f--"

Noah cut him off. "Jeremy, you're grateful because I helped you, nothing more. I got you off the streets, gave you a job and a home. It's not me that you truly want."

"You think I don't know what I want? You honestly believe that I only want you because you buy me things? That I'm not aware of what it would make me if I had sex with you because you bought me clothes or a sewing machine?" The defiance turned to anger. "If I didn't whore myself for money, what makes you think I'd whore myself for other people's castoffs?"

Sighing, Noah tried to explain, "I'm not saying that's what you're doing or that you'd do that. What I'm saying is that I'm thirty years old and you're a teenager. I'm too old for you."

Jeremy didn't look convinced.

"One day you'll look back on this and be glad nothing ever happened between us," he said, even if Noah himself wasn't as sure of that now as he'd been a week ago.

Then the anger melted to sadness. "Oh," Jeremy said, backing away, "you probably already have a boyfriend, don't you? You're not in the closet are you?"

Noah refused to hide behind either of those conveniently offered outs. "No, on both counts. I like you, that's not the problem. And I've never hidden who I was. But you've got your whole life ahead of you. What seems right to you now won't be next month." Sadness crept in when he realized the truth of those words. He was as far as he was going to go in life, but the sky was the limit for Jeremy. In a few short years, homelessness, despair, and a man named Noah would all be distant memories. There was also that fact that Noah simply couldn't bring anyone else into his life right now. If he couldn't share his whole life, then it was best not to share it at all, and there were certain things that a lover couldn't be trusted to understand.

Sadness filled Jeremy's face before he closed the distance and locked lips with Noah's again. Just like before, Noah's well-intentioned resistance crumbled. When he pulled back, Jeremy said, "You want me, you're just talking yourself out of it. Sometimes, you gotta stop thinking so hard and just go with your heart." He turned and walked away, murmuring, "Thanks for the clothes," over his shoulder.

Noah listened to the retreating footsteps and, once sure Jeremy was gone, closed and locked the door. He stroked a painfully hard erection to the memory of Jeremy's cock pressed to his leg, lightly humping, while they kissed.

Jeremy didn't mention wanting Noah again, and, while subdued, he resembled his formerly happy self enough to keep Noah from worrying too much. Maybe he'd forgotten the whole thing. Even without the hero worship, it was getting harder and harder to be around the young brunet -- literally. Seeing the kid dressed in clothes that displayed his youthful body to full advantage was nearly Noah's undoing. To make matters worse, the stylist Mary had suggested needed to be shot for taking a pair of clippers, a blow-dryer, and a little gel and turning a boy with potential into a drop-dead gorgeous creature who was even harder to resist than before.

Noah wasn't the only one noticing, either. Whenever they were out in public, young people of both sexes cast admiring glances. Jeremy didn't seem to notice. He was too busy casting those same looks at Noah when he thought no one was looking. But keeping the laundry's windows and machines so shiny and clean meant they reflected quite well. Noah was sure he'd seen far more than intended. Still, Jeremy was trying to behave, so credit was given where due.

Then came the morning that Jeremy trotted downstairs wearing the blue sweater and a bright smile. Noah took one look, then spent the rest of the day hiding in his office. The next day, his box of tissues had to be replaced.

Chapter Nine

Things had settled into a routine when, a few days later, a plain white envelope arrived in the mail, addressed to Noah Everett in care of the bar. With no return address, it reminded him of the annual, anonymous birthday cards. He was quite certain they came from the same place. Inside was a picture of a young man leaning against a light post, his entire being screaming "cheap hooker." On the back was written "Mark," and "corner of Fifth and Vine." Yeah, Noah could easily understand how the kid kept getting arrested. Wearing such skimpy clothing in broad daylight, he might as well hang a sign around his neck.

It was laughingly ironic that Willie's request was unnecessary. Then again, maybe he had known all along. Either way, Mark's bus ticket was already bought and paid for. Noah had just that morning worked out the final details. Now to put them into action.

When his truck pulled to the corner, Noah saw roughly a dozen scantily clad bodies of both sexes, hoping to get an early start on the evening trade. Two, a boy and a girl, were already leaning into a car window, negotiating a deal.

Noah waited patiently until a handsome young man broke away from the others and, with a grin that was pure seduction and a suggestive sway in his hips, casually swaggered over, working it for his prospective customer's enjoyment. When he leaned against the passenger door to peer inside, however, his eyes were filled with a desperation totally at odds with the provocative behavior.

"Get in," Noah said quietly.

While the others whistled and shouted vulgar encouragements, the young man opened the door and climbed into the truck. Noah tossed over an old work jacket, and Mark smiled gratefully, pulling it on over a body-revealing, mesh tank top. His working clothes were much too skimpy to provide any warmth. Noah reached over and turned the heating control on its highest setting.

Neither said a word until the old truck pulled away and turned the corner. Then, professional persona cast off like ill-fitting shoes, Noah's passenger appeared in his true form: an eighteen-year-old who had come to believe that home wasn't so bad after all.

"I called your uncle," Noah began, sensing the anticipation and knowing Mark was too nervous about the answer to ask the question he was dying to.

The response was hopeful, but cautious. "And?"

Stopping the truck at a red light, Noah looked over with a wry smile and replied, "And your uncle has a big mouth. For the next four hours my phone rang constantly. I'll bet I talked to every single member of your family -- and you've got a very large family, apparently." He quietly said what he knew the young man wanted to hear. "Mark, they all miss you and want you to come home."

Instead of the expected happiness, Mark huddled quietly in the passenger seat, staring at the floor. So quietly that Noah could barely hear, he whispered, "What about my father?"

Ah, so that was the problem. Despite all the talk of "my dad is a heartless asshole," it seemed the man's opinion still mattered. When Noah had first talked to Mark's father, he'd wanted to track him down and shake some sense into him. Eventually the man calmed enough to listen to reason. In the end, like many fathers Noah had talked to over the years, the simple Kentucky farmer finally confessed that he loved his son and it really didn't matter if the boy was gay -- he just wanted his son home.

The light changed and Noah continued down the street, chuckling as he replied, "Well, first he gave me a piece of his mind, thinking I was your boyfriend and much too old for you. When I finally got past his defenses, he said that he's never forgiven himself for saying those things to you, and that he didn't mean them."

Noah pulled the truck into the parking lot of a cheap hotel and killed the ignition. Turning to his passenger, he added, "Mark, he wants you to come home. He's even agreed to some family counseling." Tears filled Mark's eyes and his expression radiated happiness for the first time since Noah had known him. "Let's get you home, shall we?"

Tears flowed freely down Mark's cheeks, a bright, hopeful smile once again reminding Noah of the importance of his task. If the ones who couldn't be saved broke his heart, the ones he could mended it.

Noah climbed from the truck and reached into the back to retrieve a full backpack, the result of another visit to Jeremy's favorite thrift store. He hoisted it over his shoulder and then led Mark inside a rented room. "The shower's in there." He nodded toward a door at the back. The bag landed on the bed. "Clothes are in here. I didn't think you'd want to go home in that." Noah waved a hand to indicate the hooker gear Mark was wearing.

Looking down, Mark wrinkled his nose. "No, definitely not."

"I'll leave you alone to get cleaned up and dressed, and then I'll drive you down to the bus station. I've already got your ticket."

Suddenly, "Mark the farm boy" disappeared, replaced by "Mark the hustler" who swaggered over and gave Noah a seductive smile. "I want to thank you for doing this," he murmured huskily, pushing his tongue into Noah's mouth.

Noah grabbed him by both shoulders, forcing him back. "Stop it, Mark. The moment you got into my truck you retired from the business. The only thanks I want is for you to get your ass back where you belong and make something of yourself."

Hurt and confusion replaced the sultry smile. "No one does something for nothing!"

"I'm not doing this for nothing," Noah explained. "I'm helping you get out of a situation you don't belong in and repaying the debt I made when someone else did this for me a long time ago."

"You were a hustler?" Mark exclaimed. "No way!"

Noah sighed. He liked to keep this bit of nasty business to himself, but if it would help this wayward one find the way back, then he'd share. "As I hope to never see you again, and I mean that in the nicest possible way, I'll tell you. Yes, I sold my body. Unlike you, it took coming dangerously close to dying at the hands of one of my customers before I wised up and got out."

"Now you help others get out, too?"

"I do what I can. Too bad I don't get many takers. Now, you go get yourself all prettied up to see your family. I'll be back in a few. Oh, and by the way, I also spoke to a nice young man named Eric."

Once again tears filled Mark's eyes. This time, instead of a light shower, there was a downpour. "Oh, my God! Eric! I'm sure he hates me by now." Mark broke down, sobbing in earnest. Though painful to see, Noah knew it needed to happen, this cleansing that would wash away Mark's old life so he could begin a new one with the lover who had been patiently waiting, never giving up hope.

"No, he doesn't," Noah murmured, wrapping the weeping man in an awkward hug. They'd had a long talk, and if Eric was all he seemed to be, Mark was going to be in good hands. "He was upset that you didn't say you were leaving, but he loves you and he's waiting for you."

"What will I tell him?" Mark whispered against Noah's shoulder. "After what I've done, how can I possibly face him?"

"If he's willing to forgive you, don't you think you should forgive yourself?" Pulling back so their eyes met, Noah gave the best advice he knew, "Your past is yours to share or keep to yourself. From this moment forward is what matters. Do not, I repeat, *do not* allow this to rob you of your life. You've got people who love you and don't give a damn what you've been doing these past few months. They just want you back."

"Now, get ready. Your bus leaves in two hours. Here's my cell phone in case you want to call your folks." With a mock stern expression he added, "No international calls."

Mark laughed, despite his tears. "I promise."

"Oh, and if it rings, don't answer it."

Noah eased from the room and pulled the door closed, but not before hearing a triumphant, "Yes! I'm going home!"

Jeremy was happier than he'd been in a long, long time. School was going well, his teacher was impressed with his project notes thus far, and lunch was proudly paid for with proceeds from an honest to goodness paycheck instead of a voucher. The laundry was also flourishing and, thanks to whatever strings Noah had pulled, he could now move around the city without fear of Trent's gang. They watched him occasionally, but they never approached. The only part of life not going exactly as hoped was Noah, who still kept him at arm's length.

Jeremy had no intention of giving up. He'd just take Mary's advice and be patient. Once he'd proven himself, maybe Noah would stop denying that they had a chance. He'd never met someone so solid and dependable, someone willing to help a stranger just because it was the right thing to do. Or someone with so big a heart. Was it hero worship? Maybe some of it. But Jeremy was a realist. He knew Noah had flaws, and eagerly looked forward to making acquaintance with each and every one. Crush didn't even begin to cover the feelings the big blond inspired in him.

His newfound freedom allowed him to visit the local library on that Saturday afternoon in November, and he set out on foot. The day was cool and crisp, perfect for being outdoors. That is, until he crossed the street onto Vine. Noah's truck was pulled to the curb, and a young man who couldn't be much older than himself was leaning against the passenger door. *Maybe he's asking for directions.* His heart sank when the obvious hustler opened the door and climbed in.

Okay, maybe there's a good reason for Noah to pick up a hooker, he rationalized, willing to give the benefit of the doubt. However, when he turned onto a street a few blocks down and saw the truck again, it was parked in front of a hotel. A dagger pierced his heart. Noah had turned him down, saying he was too young, and had picked up a whore instead! In a bed in that room, at this very minute, Noah was fucking some anonymous slut when Jeremy loved him and would have given him everything!

Unbidden images came to mind of Noah, HIS Noah, with the boy he'd seen leaning against the truck. He bit back an agonized wail. Blinded by tears, he dashed back to the tiny apartment and hastily threw a few belongings into a trash bag, deliberately leaving behind anything Noah had given him. Far from just jealousy, Jeremy felt betrayed that the one person he trusted enough to believe in had fallen from his pedestal. A whore, Noah? Why?

The tears were still falling when he crawled back into the dismal, dank basement on Harper Street.

Noah whistled merrily through the bar, ignoring the few early evening customers on his way to the door that had once hidden the notorious "back room" of the Twelfth Street Bar and Grill. He pulled a knife from his pocket and carved a notch in the wooden frame with a light heart. Forty-seven marks had been cut into the wood, representing forty-seven men who'd been given a second chance.

At a quiet "ahem," he turned to face an outraged Mary.

"Just what the hell did you do to him, Noah?" she demanded, arms folded across her ample bosom and foot tapping out a steady rhythm on the worn, wooden floorboards.

Abruptly pulled from his private celebration for Mark's redemption, Noah stepped back from the furious woman. Why was she angry? This time. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Jeremy, Noah; I'm talking about Jeremy."

"What about him?" The last he'd seen, Jeremy was pretty happy himself, and planning a trip to the library to work on a book report.

"He's gone. He left shortly after you did."

Noah smiled and relaxed. Jeremy had probably forgotten to tell her where he was going. "He just went to do some research and use a computer; I'm sure he'll be back soon."

"He did come back," she growled, "muttering about how you lied to him and how he was a fool and you never really liked him. He took off a few hours ago. I would have gone after him, but I couldn't leave the bar unattended." If looks could kill, Noah would be dying, slowly and painfully. An insistent index finger pecked at his chest, punctuating each word. "I called your cell phone. You didn't answer."

Oh, shit! He'd left his phone with Mark and hadn't checked it since he'd gotten it back. Jeremy was gone? Fear twisted to life in his guts. Ignoring Mary, he ran outside and upstairs to the apartment. She must have been mistaken, for Jeremy's belongings were still there. Then he realized that the only things left in the apartment were what he'd bought. Most telling, the blue sweater that Jeremy prized had been carefully placed on the couch in such a way that anyone entering would be sure to see it. Whatever had prompted this was personal, then.

What could possibly have set him off? Sure, Noah had made it clear that he wasn't willing to risk his heart on something doomed to failure. Anyway, hadn't Jeremy gotten over that school-boy crush already?

Then it dawned on him. The library was near the hotel, and it was quite possible that Jeremy had seen the truck. If he'd left just after Noah, chances were that he'd seen Mark, too. Shit! Noah had turned Jeremy down and then been seen with a pro. No wonder the kid had run.

Noah had to find him, and fast. Willie's promise was only good while Jeremy was under Noah's roof. By running away, the kid became fair game. If convinced that Noah liked hustlers... well, it just didn't bear thinking about. He'd have to find Jeremy before anyone else did.

That late in the fall, the sun was already setting when Noah turned onto Harper Street. He shuddered at the thought of Jeremy living in this rundown warehouse district. It wasn't a nice

place to visit during daylight hours. At night, it was positively foolhardy to come here alone. His respect for Jeremy grew. For months, the teen had survived in this harsh environment without accepting Willie's offers of a better life. As fall turned to winter and the weather got colder, would he have eventually given in?

Noah didn't want to think of those laughing eyes losing their shine, merriment replaced by haunted sorrow. That's what the life did to its victims, or rather, what he feared it would do to Jeremy. That gentle spirit would be crushed under the hands of partners who paid for the privilege of using another like a piece of meat. It wasn't just the idea of paying customers that bugged Noah, either. He didn't want to think of anyone in the kid's bed, paying or not.

Well, damn! He'd done the one thing he'd sworn never to do -- let himself get close enough to fall. Shit! Shit! Shit! The little bugger had wormed his way into Noah's heart after all.

The kid was young and ambitious, deserving the best life had to offer. Things Noah *couldn't* offer. There would be no stability, or security, for Noah couldn't give up his mission. A mission that constantly put him and anyone close to him in danger. He'd just have to keep denying the feelings Jeremy inspired and prove that the only one who'd ever manage to breach his emotional defenses deserved someone better, someone younger, someone without so much baggage. But first, Noah had to find him. All he had to go on was that Jeremy used to live in a basement here. Where to begin? There were at least thirty buildings on Harper, and most probably had basements.

He drove slowly down the deserted street, looking for some clue that would show the way. A rat scurried from the shadows into the beam of the truck's headlights, facing the approaching vehicle with open defiance and little fear. It reminded Noah of some of the more jaded hustlers he'd seen while braving Ramsey Street in search of Willie.

It was on the third pass that he saw the railing and recalled the story of Jeremy's injured ankle. He parked the truck close by, shining the headlights into the darkened stairwell that could have been an effective hiding place on that fateful day.

He kept a flashlight behind the seat and, thankfully, the batteries were still good. Retrieving the bat from the floorboard, he slowly crept toward the stairwell, sinking up to his ankles in filthy sludge when he reached the bottom. A wooden door hung precariously from its hinges. Try as he might, he couldn't move it without kicking it in and alerting his quarry. There was an opening in the door that was just wide enough for someone of Jeremy's size to squeeze through. This had to be the right place.

With a flash of inspiration, he used the bat to pry open the door with one loud 'pop.' He immediately stilled, listening for sounds of running feet. All was quiet. Shining the flashlight into the damp basement, he slogged over to an odd structure built against the far wall.

There, on stacked wooden pallets that kept it above the wet floor, was a bare mattress on which Jeremy lay sleeping. A threadbare blanket was wrapped around him, and even asleep, he shivered from the cold.

"Kid... Jeremy, wake up," Noah said, shaking an ice-cold shoulder.

Awake in a flash, Jeremy pulled away, hissing, "Don't touch me!" In the flashlight's dim glow, Noah could tell that those dark eyes were red. Jeremy looked positively miserable.

"Jeremy," he growled, grateful to find the kid, but still angry about what could have happened if Trent had gotten there first. "Do you mind telling me why I'm standing ankle deep in muck in the middle of the night in the freezing cold, when we both should be home where it's warm?"

"Nobody asked you to come," Jeremy snapped, voice just as angry as Noah's.

"Wanna tell me what I did to piss you off?" He tried to hide his anger and fear, for it definitely wasn't helping. Jeremy was the most level-headed kid he'd ever met. Something serious had happened to make him run, and intimidation wasn't the way to find out what.

"You lied to me!" Jeremy yelled. "You said I was too young for you, and that you didn't want me to become a hustler, then you go out and pay for it. I'd have given it for free!"

So Jeremy had seen. With a heavy sigh Noah crawled onto the makeshift bed, ignoring the groaning protests of the pallets. Jeremy wriggled as far away as the wall allowed, and it cut more than Noah wanted to admit. Up until that morning, the kid had trusted him; now, every bit of that trust was gone. Noah only hoped he could get it back.

"I didn't lie to you, and it's not what it looked like," Noah began. He tried hard not to endanger anyone else by involving them in his crusade. Now it seemed full disclosure of his clandestine deeds was necessary to keep someone safe. The wounded look in Jeremy's eyes decided the matter. Noah had no right to ask for trust if unwilling to give it.

Jeremy sat silently glaring, but at least he was still there. Noah took a deep breath and began the tale that would either restore or permanently lose Jeremy's admiration. "I used to be on the streets, just like you. Only, I'd run away from a bad situation. Also like you, I met and fell for a working boy. For a while, he kept me safe. It didn't matter that he never said he loved me, I knew in my heart that he did."

Noah sighed, running his fingers through his hair, hating the confession he felt honor bound to make. "I wasn't smart like you..."

Jeremy snorted. "Yeah, right." The words couldn't possibly have sounded more skeptical.

Even angry, it seemed Jeremy was quick to jump to his defense, and it warmed Noah's heart even though he knew the truth: he'd never once been mistaken for a scholar. Jeremy was the one and only person to whom he could admit his biggest failure. "I dropped out of school and never went back. All I've got is a tenth-grade education." He wondered for the millionth time what he'd have made of himself if he, like Jeremy, had found a way to stay in school. "Eventually, because I couldn't get a job any other way, I entered the business."

"You were a hustler?" Jeremy asked in the same incredulous tone Mark had used earlier.

"Yes, I was," Noah replied. "Then, one night, a customer was flying high on something or other, got pissed off, and shoved me out of a window."

"Oh, shit! No kidding?" Jeremy asked, wide-eyed, curiosity apparently overcoming anger.

"No shit. In the emergency room I met this doctor, an amazing man who saved my life. He was the first person to ever tell me I could be more." Though it wasn't Noah's story to tell, Doc hadn't minding people knowing the reasons behind his campaign to reform young prostitutes. "This doctor had a boy who ran away. He did everything he could and still couldn't find his son.

"One night, while Doc was on duty, they brought in this kid, beaten to a pulp and so crazed by drugs and alcohol that he didn't even recognize his own father.

"Doc had finally found his son, Ben, only to have him die in his arms a few hours later. The next day he went out and talked to as many as he could, offering to help them if they wanted out."

"I'll bet he got lots of responses." Jeremy now sat at rapt attention, arms wrapped around his skinny knees.

"No," Noah replied sadly. "Actually, they laughed at him. Then one came. Then another. Each one Doc saved helped him a little more to work through the pain of losing his son."

"He saved you." It was a statement, not a question.

It had happened so long ago, but the guilt still plagued him. Shoulda, coulda, woulda haunted Noah's dreams at night. "I knew his son, Jeremy. I tricked with him a time or two. He took risks he shouldn't have, took drugs from people he didn't know. All that time I could have done something, said something, and didn't. He's not the only one, either. There's so many out there headed down the same path, and all they need is a chance for a different life."

"Like the doctor gave you," Jeremy said quietly, staring at the hand that had crept inside Noah's.

Noah nodded, lacing their fingers together. He hadn't noticed it at the time, but Jeremy was now sitting huddled into his side instead of on the far end of the mattress. The frigid room suddenly grew much warmer. "Since then, I've joined him in his fight," Noah continued. "Doc still helps with job placement and funding for bus tickets, clothes, meals, and an apartment, if necessary, but he was getting too old to be out in the streets. He retired two years ago, and now runs the operation out of his home. I do all the leg work."

Jeremy sat quietly, and Noah was sure the wheels were turning in that clever mind. Eventually, he asked, "Do Mary and Kevin know?"

"Heavens, no! Mary would worry too much or want to adopt them all, and Kevin, bless his heart, doesn't have an altruistic bone in his body."

A few more moments passed in silence. When Jeremy spoke again, it was the one question Noah dreaded most. "When you got out, what happened to your boyfriend?"

"He stayed."

"Do you still see him?" Noah heard the unasked, *"Do you still love him?"*

"He's gone," Noah replied, feeling it answered both questions adequately.

"So, that boy today?" The pain in Jeremy's voice was gone, replaced by curiosity.

"I took him to a hotel and let him get cleaned up, then put him on a bus home to his family."

"Maybe I shouldn't ask this, but did you fuck him?" Jeremy's eyes turned away and he clung tighter to Noah's side. The trembling in his body was barely perceptible, but it was there, nonetheless.

"No, I didn't fuck him, or any of the others, either. That would be wrong, and it's not why I do this."

Suddenly, Jeremy chuckled, the sound a warm caress to Noah's heart. "They call you The Angel on the street, you know that, right?"

Noah frowned. "Where did you hear that?"

Grinning sheepishly, Jeremy looked up from beneath his long, dark lashes. "The customers at the Tub of Suds aren't all middle-aged housewives, you know."

Well, yeah, he did know. Because that's where he'd first seen Jeremy.

"Until today, I didn't know how you earned that name. I thought, because of the bat, they meant the baseball team." Slender fingers squeezed Noah's. "Now I know. Thanks for trusting me enough to tell me."

They both flinched at the sound of gunshots that, thankfully, weren't very close. "What do you say we get out of here and go home?" Noah asked. "I know an all-night diner that makes a mean omelet."

As if on cue, Jeremy's stomach rumbled and he reached out to pat it. It tended to do that a lot. His smile was brilliant and happy as it had been earlier that morning. "Yeah, let's do that," he said.

Damn, Jeremy was resilient. It didn't matter that Noah had just cut his heart open and shared his deepest, darkest secrets -- it was all taken in stride. For the first time in a long, long time, the burden Noah had been carrying alone lightened.

After that, Noah stopped avoiding Jeremy, instead finding more and more reasons to visit the Tub of Suds, and Jeremy didn't try to corner him again. Most importantly, Jeremy joined the crusade.

Jeremy chewed his lower lip nervously and looked up from the homework laid out on the folding table. "Umm, you never really gave me any rules for the apartment; is it okay if I invite someone over?"

In the month and a half since he'd been there, Noah had never once seen Jeremy with a friend and hadn't wanted to pry. "A friend from school?"

More lip biting followed, along with a good deal of toe scuffling. "Um... not exactly."

Noah's heart fell. A boyfriend, then. He'd been expecting it, telling himself it was for the best. Which made the jealousy that clenched his guts all the more confusing. "Oh," he said, trying to keep the disappointment from his voice. "Well, I suppose you're too old to need 'the talk,' and you're smart enough to know that you need to play safe, right?"

Noah never knew someone could turn so red so quickly. He also didn't know a heart could smirk. He could have sworn his did when Jeremy stammered, "No! It's not like that!"

Relief flooded through him.

When he'd stopped blushing and stammering, Jeremy explained, "Next week is Thanksgiving, and, well, some of the boys don't have any place to go, so I was thinking, maybe, if you didn't mind..."

In all the years of the crusade, neither Noah nor Doc had ever considered inviting the young hookers to Thanksgiving dinner. He loved the idea immediately. "What were you planning?" He'd readily volunteer his house, if needed.

"Oh, nothing big," Jeremy replied. "There are these three guys I met here washing clothes -- two are brothers -- and they mentioned how much they hated this time of year 'cause they missed their families. I figured if they're missing them, now would be a good time to convince them to go back, especially with Christmas coming up. No one should be alone for Christmas." There was no mistaking Jeremy's mournful tone.

Noah had a vision of Jeremy and the sad, lonely Christmas that would have been spent in a flooded basement if fate hadn't intervened. It tugged at his heart. "Jeremy, when was the last time you had a proper Christmas?" Noah personally didn't celebrate much, since he didn't really have

anyone to buy for. He did make it a point to attend a church service somewhere. This year was different, however; this year he had Jeremy.

While waiting for the bus, Noah had asked Mark for gift ideas. The young man's eyes lit with glee as he talked of the latest video games. With information learned that afternoon, Noah had bought a small television and gaming console that was sworn to give "the biggest bang for the buck." They were wrapped and sitting in Noah's guest room, just waiting for the big day. More than once he'd imagined an expression of pure joy on Jeremy's face when they were unwrapped on Christmas morning. Noah had a feeling he was looking at a young man who hadn't received too many toys over the years.

"The Deweys didn't celebrate Christmas," Jeremy said, staring down at the floor. "It was against their religion. I guess it would have been before Katherine was arrested."

Hoping his motives wouldn't be misread, Noah asked, "How about spending Christmas at my house this year? I don't have a tree or anything, but we can watch old movies. Mary's already invited you for Christmas dinner, where I'll be going. It will save her the trouble of coming to get you." Not to mention they could enjoy playing the video games together, and neither of them would be alone on Christmas Eve.

With a happy smile, Jeremy replied, "Sure! Like I said, no one should be alone for the holidays."

Noah couldn't agree more and, in the end, seven people crowded into the small apartment the fourth Thursday in November: Noah, Jeremy, and five hookers -- the brothers brought their boyfriends. Mary's mother cooked the turkey. The following Monday, Noah bought three bus tickets. A week later, he bought two more when the brothers sent for their lovers. With Jeremy's one simple, selfless gesture, he'd saved more lost souls than Noah had in the past year.

Noah stopped calling him kid, at least out loud.

Chapter Ten

Heart light while he carved two new notches into the door frame, Noah was delightfully surprised that Monday night at how crowded the bar was -- especially during the holiday season. There were always a handful of customers even on the slowest night, no matter what time of year, gathered around the big screen TV, drinking beer and exchanging bawdy stories. Tonight there was easily three times the normal number.

The bar, like the laundry next door, had been tastefully decorated for the holidays, something the budget hadn't allowed for last year. Knowing Jeremy, he'd managed to get it all at a discount. That boy could get more mileage out of a single dollar than anyone else Noah had ever seen. Since he was too young to come into the bar, Jeremy had explained the general look he was going for, trusting Mary and Kevin to do the actual decorating. The results were stunning. The Tubs of Suds, which Jeremy had managed himself, was even more so.

"Good evening, fellas," Noah said, passing a table filled with men he didn't recognize, all drinking beer, eating pizza, and talking quietly amongst themselves.

"Evening," one of the men responded, smiling broadly before turning back to his companions. "Yeah, tonight's gonna win me some points with the old lady. Why no one did this sooner is beyond me."

The other men nodded agreement, voicing variations of the same theme.

When Noah approached the bar, a customer vacated one of the stools, turning to the man next to him and saying, "Well, gotta get home and relax. Chores are such hard work, ain't they?" Both men laughed. Noah completely missed the joke, if indeed it was one.

"Night, Joe," Mary called after the departing patron when he stepped into the night. Instead of heading for the parking lot, he turned right toward the Tub of Suds. Hmm... strange.

Even stranger was the possum-eating-briars grin and the saucy wink from Mary, who, though usually good-tempered while working, was nearly giddy tonight.

"Mind telling me what's going on?" he asked.

With feigned innocence she replied, "Oh, just the usual Monday Sports Night at the Twelfth Street Bar and Grill."

She was definitely up to something. Then again, she usually was, so he let it slide. Probably just a little matchmaking, since it seemed to be her hobby. However, the next night, when the entire scene was repeated with women instead of men and Joan instead of Joe, Noah became even more suspicious.

"What's going on, Mary?" he asked. "Ladies' Night and half-priced draft have never brought in this many. Is there a bachelorette party or something going on?"

"Oh, nothing special, boss. I guess it's just coincidence," she replied, her wicked grin beginning to scare him.

On Wednesday, the place was filled with couples, and the kitchen could barely keep up with the dinner orders. Mary even pulled her mother in to help. Again, he approached his bartender for answers.

"We've been offering buy one entrée, get one half-off for months now and barely have any takers. What gives?"

This time, she didn't even bother to answer. Instead, she just brushed past him with a pitcher of beer, smugly commenting, "Scuse me, boss; table four looks thirsty. Oh, look! It's Charlene and Andy! I told you'd they'd make the perfect couple."

Thursday, it was seniors, and the match of the night was Agnes and Leonard.

Friday: bikers, with Big Bubba and Devil Woman, who sported matching tattoos.

Saturday was back to the normal mixed crowd, except that there were far more customers than the bar ever had before.

On Sunday, after figuring the week's deposits, Noah decided to shut up, increase orders to keep up with demand, and enjoy the bar's success.

It was while taking a break from paperwork that he perused the Sunday newspaper, finally finding some answers. There, in the advertising section, was an ad that caught his eye even before he noticed it was for "Twelfth Street Bar and Grill, don't let our name fool ya... we're on the corner of Thirteenth and Main."

Monday -- Sports Night

Half price draft and selected menu specials. Wash night? No problem. The Tub of Suds, conveniently located next door, offers laundry services. Relax, watch TV, and have a beer; we do the work for you. Minor repair work available.

The ad was followed by similar offerings for Ladies' Night, Couples' Night, Seniors' Night, and Bikers' Night -- "half off all black wash loads; patches sewn while you wait."

What the hell? Then he remembered Jeremy's request for money to place an ad, and Mary gently prodding him to read it. Well, damn. Who knew Jeremy was really onto something? If things kept up, this little school project to make the laundry earn a profit was going to greatly increase the bar's take, too.

Chapter Eleven

Intent on whatever he was doing online, Trent's prey didn't notice the watchful eyes studying him, just like he hadn't noticed being followed or that, for the past four weeks, his every move had been carefully noted. Jeremy wasn't the first Trent had tried to bring into the business, but he'd been a star pupil and the only one who'd gotten away. That humiliating defeat had cost Trent a healthy commission, plus money lost on side bets. Not only did that bastard Willie refuse to do anything about it, he'd merely laughed at the suggestion that Noah, who was harboring Jeremy, needed dealing with. Willie'd gone so far as to declare both Noah and Jeremy off-limits, which only made Trent want the elusive brunet all the more.

Lately, Willie had changed, and Trent was no longer included in any business meetings, which were now handled well away from Ramsey Street. Adding insult to injury, after announcing that The Brownstone was on the market, he refused to even consider selling it to Trent, who felt it should have been his by rights. Hell, the man owed half the current stable to Trent's recruiting efforts, as well as two of the premium downtown boys who were reserved for wealthy clients.

That was another thing that irked Trent. He was Willie's second in command, but that coveted list, filled with names of politicians and high-ranking community leaders, was withheld. The boss no longer trusted him, apparently.

Trent knew some might think him a stupid pretty-boy, but he knew more than he was given credit for. Like the fact that Willie was looking down his nose at his humble beginnings, ready to leave Ramsey Street in favor of richer climes. No mention had been made of what would happen to the current crew when Willie finally completed the restructuring of his enterprises, either. Trent saw the handwriting on the wall. It said, "You're fired."

Old Willie didn't know it yet, but the bastard was going to get what he had coming. Most of the inner circle now answered to Trent, and it was only a matter of time before the rest did, too.

Eyes narrowing behind the dark lenses of his glasses, Trent watched his quarry, biding his time. When Willie went down and he took over, that annoying Noah Everett would be next, and with all protection gone, Jeremy would be Trent's once more.

His former student would make such a fine whore, when Trent had had enough and was willing to share. That boy had a lot of making up to do first. Trent had taken that virgin ass, as he had many others whom he'd quickly forgotten. For some reason, perhaps because Jeremy was such a natural in bed, this one stayed on his mind. Besides, no one walked away from Trent Adams until they were told to.

It was just business, nothing more. Still, Trent couldn't help enjoying himself with someone who responded so enthusiastically. His cock hardened at the memory. Jeremy Kincaid had been one fine piece of ass.

His most promising student just had that effect on people, if rumors were to be believed. After years of maintaining a squeaky clean reputation, even the great Noah Everett had finally succumbed to temptation.

Ever since Noah had started approaching rent boys, trying to get them off the street, it had become a challenge to see who could seduce him. Many tried, none succeeded. A few bragged that they had, and all turned out to be liars. It only served to further spread the legend of The Angel. Hell, Trent had even tried, and failed, himself.

Now, apparently, that had changed. Too bad for Noah that he'd chosen the wrong guy to fuck with, both literally and figuratively. Anger filled Trent when he imagined that do-gooder taking what was his. The self-righteous asshole better enjoy it, because very soon, Jeremy was going to be back where he belonged, and when that happened, Trent was going to give him a little present, lest he get any ideas about running again -- Noah's head on a plate.

"Can you hand me that?" Noah asked, pointing to a wrench lying a few feet away. He crouched in front of the double load washer he was installing at Jeremy's suggestion.

"Sure," Jeremy replied, rising from his usual homework table to pass it over. Even during winter break, he kept his nose to the grindstone.

Noah knew it wasn't intentional when Jeremy's groin brushed his back, but it had an immediate effect. He focused on the task at hand, pushing away the thought that if he were to turn slightly, he'd be in the perfect position to open those low-riding jeans and suck Jeremy's cock. Did that make him a pervert or just a man? Then he reminded himself that, young or not, Jeremy was every inch an adult.

"These new machines are really gonna make a difference," Jeremy said, seemingly oblivious to the effect he was having. "According to my research, they do twice the amount of laundry for less energy than it takes to run one of the single load machines, and use a fraction of the water."

Smiling proudly, he looked down at Noah and said, "You know the city will give us a tax break if we become energy efficient, right?"

In all honestly, Noah hadn't known. Then again, he didn't have to. He had Jeremy for that.

Jeremy stood above him, leaning casually against a machine with his jeans sliding low and T-shirt riding up, revealing a scant trace of dark hair. Noah's own jeans grew very, very tight. His eyes rose higher, meeting dark blue ones. While they still held sexual interest, the hero worship had slowly been replaced with admiration and respect. The feeling was mutual.

Remembering the advice Mary had given weeks ago, he took a deep breath to start the conversation he'd been rehearsing in his head all afternoon, "Jeremy?"

"Yes?"

Judging by the hopeful smile, the kid suspected what would be asked. At the worst possible moment, the bell over the door tinkled and Kevin bellowed, "Boss? We got delivery issues. Can you call the route manager again?"

Noah and Jeremy both sighed, realizing the moment had passed.

"Be right there," Noah replied. The bell tinkled again and another male voice, much younger, called, "Jeremy?"

"Duty calls," Jeremy said, holding out a hand to help Noah to his feet.

"Yeah, it does," Noah agreed.

Noah followed Kevin out, noticing an attractive young man waiting by the door whom Jeremy had introduced two weeks ago as a new friend. A full-length coat hid his clothing, but everything about him screamed rent boy. Now, however, Noah no longer felt jealousy when Jeremy talked to young, attractive men, for some of those same men also talked to Noah. They naturally believed that sex was a part of it when they casually mentioned "his" Jeremy. Besides, hidden somewhere inside that coat was a ticket to Philadelphia, for a bus leaving in a few hours.

Yeah, everyone, including the young man who'd probably come to say goodbye, seemed to think Jeremy belonged to him. It was time Noah acknowledged it, too.

"Look, if you can't make the delivery this evening, I'll come in a few hours early tomorrow if you promise you'll be here," Noah pleaded with the beer supplier. He listened to what wasn't being said as much as to what was. Basically, the man had no clue when delivery would be made, due to heavy snows that had shut down part of the interstate.

Leaning back in his chair, Noah sighed and relented, "If that's the best you can do, that's the best you can do. You've always done what you could, and I understand it's the holidays and the weather sucks. I'll be here at nine in the morning to let him in, on the off chance that your driver can get here."

He hung up the phone and considered returning to the laundry, then decided to give Jeremy time to talk to his visitor. No need to hover like a jealous lover.

He laughed then. Word on the street had him and Jeremy as a couple for weeks now. How ironic that others could see it before he could. Yes, there was an age difference; it didn't really seem to be the problem he'd originally thought it would be. Somehow, they just worked well as a team. Why couldn't they work well as a couple? Always before, Noah held the past between himself and prospective lovers. Jeremy knew about that and didn't seem to care. No, it wasn't that he didn't care, it was more like he *admired* Noah for rising above it.

Eyes drifting shut, he visualized that tantalizing treasure trail he'd seen earlier, recalling the moment Jeremy had innocently rubbed against him. His cock grew hard at the memory, and he reached down to unfasten his zipper.

Other images came to mind: Jeremy bent over a table, folding clothes, nicely rounded ass proudly on display when Noah came to bring his evening meal. No longer overly thin, Jeremy had become the knockout Noah'd known he could be from that first sighting through the grimy windows of the Tub of Suds.

One hand reached into his jeans and boxers, drawing out hard flesh and wrapping around the base. That felt good. He began a slow, stroking rhythm to images of their earlier encounter. His mind changed them until Jeremy was bent over the table, nude, just waiting for Noah to take what was offered. The lovely thing with fantasies was that they could be bent to suit any whims, and Noah imagined parting those rounded cheeks to find Jeremy's hole ready and waiting.

Hand on his cock rising and falling, in his mind's eye he pushed in -- bare -- something he'd never do in reality. Oh, but he wanted to, longing for that kind of trust between them. Tight heat engulfed him and he groaned out loud, working himself harder. Setting up a punishing rhythm, he pounded into his dream lover, the cock in his hands becoming longer, thinner -- Jeremy's.

The image changed and Noah was down on bended knee in front of the new washer, Jeremy's jeans sagging to the floor as Noah mouthed his cock. The air was filled with sharp gasps and low, happy moans.

Noah's hand tightened, pumping harder, faster, his imagination returning to the scene on the table. His hands held slender hips tightly while his fantasy Jeremy moaned and begged for more. Harder and faster he pumped until, every muscle in his body seizing, back bowing, he came hard, semen filling his cupped hand. "Ahh..." he moaned, trusting the jukebox outside the door to mask the cries.

He lay in the chair, panting, coming down from an amazing orgasm. Yes, he might as well admit it -- he wanted Jeremy, and for more than just sex. He was also running out of excuses not to have him. Snatching a handful of tissues, he cleaned himself and tossed them into the trash. After tucking his spent flesh back into his pants, he stood and rounded the desk, intent on going back to the laundry to have a talk with the object of his desires. A frantic knock sounded and the door flew open, Jeremy nearly knocking him down.

"Hey, Eddie." Jeremy smiled up at the young man he'd recently befriended. His smile fell when he saw a pale, worried face. "What is it?" he asked, already dreading the answer.

"It's Trent," Eddie replied in a hushed whisper. "He'll kill me if he catches me here, but I had to warn you."

"Warn me of what?"

"He plans to take out Willie and make an example of your boyfriend."

Jeremy didn't bother correcting Eddie. Noah for a boyfriend was just wishful thinking. "Willie's surrounded by his enforcers," he pointed out. "Trent can't touch him."

"Trent *owns* his enforcers," the slim blond replied. Like Jeremy, Eddie had drawn attention for his boyish looks and carried a forged ID card from a local high school. He'd turned twenty a few weeks ago. "Anyway, I wanted to warn you, 'cause he says that with Willie and Noah out of the picture, he's coming for you."

Jeremy's blood froze. Putting down the shirt he was folding, he turned wary eyes to the door, as if the man in question might suddenly appear like the night his life had dramatically changed. He realized now how foolish it had been to think that Noah could offer protection. Instead, by hiding here, he'd put the big man in danger.

"You know you can't stay here, right?" Jeremy asked, knowing what Trent would do if he suspected betrayal.

"Don't worry about me," Eddie assured him, "I decided to take your advice. I've got a brother in Philly and my bus leaves at eight. I just came here to warn you... and say goodbye."

Grabbing Jeremy by the hand, Eddie pulled him to the back of the room behind a bank of dryers. "I wanted to thank you properly," he said.

"Thank me for what?"

"For seeing me as more than a guy who sells his ass for money, for being my friend, for helping me to realize I can be more than this." Eddie leaned in and captured Jeremy's lips, planting a chaste kiss. In his surprise, Jeremy didn't fight back. The kiss ended and they stared at each other a long moment. Finally, Eddie said, "I know you have a boyfriend. If you didn't, I'd be begging you to come to Philly with me." With a sly smile he added, "Umm... you wouldn't consider coming with me anyway, would you?"

Even though it would be taken the wrong way, Jeremy replied honestly, "I couldn't leave Noah."

Eddie's smile fell. "That's what I thought. Anyway, take care of yourself, and when the shit hits the fan, you know where you have a friend if you need one." A slip of paper was pushed into his hand, and without looking, Jeremy knew it had to be Eddie's brother's number.

With a final brushing of lips, Eddie said, "I heard them say that it all goes down Thursday night. Make sure you and The Angel are as far away from here as you can get by then."

Jeremy watched his friend leave, heart pounding from both the kiss and the unwelcome news. Finally, through a haze of shock, Eddie's words sank in. Noah! They were after Noah! He took

off running. It was illegal, but this was an emergency. He ran into the bar, intent on finding and warning the man he loved.

Mary glanced up from wiping the counter. "Jeremy?" She looked ready to start scolding.

"Not now, Mary! I have to find Noah."

She pointed toward a closed door at the back of the bar. "He's in his office."

Pausing just long enough to knock, Jeremy ran inside, nearly slamming into Noah, who looked strangely... guilty. "Jeremy! You know you're not supposed to be here! What are you trying to do, get me closed down?"

Fear turning to anger at Noah's unexpected reaction, Jeremy yelled, "We need to talk, damn it -- NOW! It's about Trent!"

Noah's expression softened, then he nodded and said more calmly, "Go upstairs, I'll be right there."

Ignoring Mary's questions, Jeremy ran back through the nearly empty bar. He never noticed the young men sitting in the corner, wearing sunglasses indoors. The one facing the door nodded to his two companions, who stood and slipped quietly from the room to follow.

Trent sipped his beer, smiling in satisfaction. Soon, the rope and tape he'd left in the trunk would be put to good use. His plans were coming together and, by this time next week, he'd be where he should have been all along -- on top. The office door opened a few minutes later and Noah walked out, striding purposefully outside. Trent barely hid a smirk. If the self-righteous do-gooder was going to meet his lover, he had a long wait ahead of him, because even now Jeremy should be on the way to a carefully prepared new home -- on Ramsey Street.

Noah rounded the corner, trying to think of what to say to Jeremy. How embarrassing! He'd nearly been caught in the act! It was pathetic; here he was, thirty years old, hiding in the office to jack off because he was afraid to admit to wanting a man twelve years younger. However, Jeremy wasn't your normal twelve-years-younger man. No, Jeremy was smart and deserved to make up his own mind. Noah decided to start by voicing interest and see where it went from there.

He looked up as tires squealed from the parking lot. "Kids," he muttered, eyeing the late model, white Chevy speeding down Thirteenth Street. If that's how they normally drove, then it was no wonder the back quarter panel was rumpled, traces of blue paint visible even from a distance. Dismissing it as inconsequential, his thoughts turned back to the interrupted conversation in the Tub of Suds, and where it was leading.

It wasn't surprising that Jeremy had come to the bar with news involving Trent. The asshole had probably recruited some new kid Jeremy wanted to save, which was fine with Noah. After laying himself open about his mission, he'd found an ally that the street kids were willing to talk to who was more their age. It was just one of many things to like about the one he'd decided was worth risking his heart for.

Noah smiled, taking the stairs two at a time. Mary had been right all along; he and Jeremy just needed to talk, and if their conversation went well, maybe tonight he'd have a date to take someplace special.

His heart lurched when he climbed onto the landing, and he knew without looking that Jeremy wasn't there. The four deadbolts had provided little security -- the door was smashed into splinters, and what remained hung precariously by one hinge. The trunk used for a coffee table bore the imprint of a body.

He flattened himself against the wall, peering inside and listening for movement. All was quiet.

A small Christmas tree lay on its side, homemade ornaments smashed against the floor. Broken pieces from a wooden chair were spread around it. Noah could just imagine Jeremy pushing it against the door in an attempt to stop the intruders. Oh, God! They had Jeremy! Suddenly, his attention was called away from the ransacked apartment.

"Looking for someone?"

Noah turned a scathing glare down the stairs toward the mocking voice. Trent sat in a sporty little Mustang, superior sneer telling exactly who was behind Jeremy's disappearance. Noah wanted to beat the smug little shit until he begged for mercy.

"Where is he?" Noah demanded, eyes frantically combing the parking lot for someone, anyone, who could help. He'd never make it down the stairs and to the car faster than Trent could accelerate.

His nemesis' smile was pure evil. "Safe, for now. Unlike some other people I know."

A loud *bang* split that air, then fire burned through Noah's arm. His world collapsed in a splintering of wood as he crashed through the railing, dropping twenty feet. He hit the metal Dumpster lid with a resounding thud that knocked the wind out of him.

Ten years disappeared in a flash and he was lying, broken and bruised, on the hood of a car outside a cheap hotel. The car's alarm wailed piteously as the curious stood by and watched. No one lifted a hand to help. His panicked eyes rose, searching for the leering face of the john laughing on the balcony, then frantically glanced down, expecting to see a partially severed leg caught in the broken glass of the windshield.

"Good riddance, sucker!" Trent shouted, peeling tires as he sped away, bringing Noah out of his daze. The iron bands unwound from his chest, letting him breathe again. Both legs were still attached, and only a ruined landing stood above him. *I'm Noah Everett, I'm thirty years old, and I haven't just been thrown out of a window...* he chanted like a mantra.

"Oh, my God!" Mary screamed. "Someone call nine-one-one!"

Boots pounded on pavement and suddenly Kevin's face came into view. "Where'd he get you?"

"Upper arm near my shoulder," Noah hissed through gritted teeth.

The beefy hands that so brutally wielded a meat mallet were surprisingly gentle as they peeled Noah's jacket and shirt back. Kevin grunted. "Just a flesh wound. Can you stand?"

"What?" Mary cried, outraged. "You can't just move him!" Her face, from the nose up, appeared from across the lid of the Dumpster. "I got his tag number."

"It doesn't matter," Kevin replied, in a commanding tone Noah had never heard before. "I'll bet a dollar to a doughnut that car is stolen. We've got to move -- now! The guy in the car didn't have a gun; our shooter's still out there." With that, he shoved his hands under Noah's arms, pulling him off the Dumpster and helping him to the ground. Turning to look at the curious crowd of spectators, he screamed, "Idiots! What part of 'our shooter's still out there' didn't you understand?"

Scared faces turned toward each other, then bodies scattered.

"Get him inside," Kevin ordered, handing Noah over to Mary, who staggered beneath the weight of Noah's arm. "I'm going after our perp." Pulling out a gun Noah didn't even know he had, Kevin disappeared around the building.

Mary, eyes wide, didn't move. Noah ended up dragging her back into the now-deserted bar to the sound of sirens wailing in the distance. "I didn't know he was cop; did you know he was a cop?" Noah asked.

Snapping out of her trance, Mary replied, "Ex-cop. He was shot in the line of duty and lost his nerve."

"Can't prove it by me," Noah said, impressed at the man's decisive actions. If this was how he was burned out, Kevin had probably been one hell of an officer in his prime. Noah grabbed a handful of paper towels and attempted to staunch the bleeding of his arm. It had already slowed to a trickle.

Suddenly, realization hit him like a ton of bricks. Trent had Jeremy! The white car! Oh, shit!

"Mary, Jeremy's been taken. I can't stay and talk to the police. You give a statement; I've got something I've got to do."

Ignoring the approaching sirens, Noah ran to his truck, hoping to make it to Ramsey Street before it was too late -- if it wasn't already.

Chapter Twelve

"C'mon, c'mon!" Noah implored the gridlocked traffic, beating his hand helplessly against the steering wheel. Adrenaline raced through his veins as he pictured what Jeremy could be suffering right now at Trent's hands. He forced himself to shut out the images. He needed to focus on the present, not get distracted by might-bes.

Either Trent had ignored orders, or Willie had changed them. Why?

The sun was setting and the snow was falling in earnest, blanketing everything in white and playing havoc with rush-hour traffic. Noah willed himself to stay calm, knowing panic wouldn't help Jeremy. Then he saw it -- the white car with the crumpled, blue-streaked fender at the other end of the alley, just as gridlocked as he was. Two and two added up. It would mean a ticket, but Noah didn't care. Barely taking the time to turn the truck off, he jumped out and took off on foot, leaving the doors unlocked. Thieves were welcome to any of it. All he wanted was Jeremy back.

A few minutes ago, he'd been desperately praying for traffic to move; now, he prayed it wouldn't as he tore down the alley after the white Chevy. His scarred leg screamed in protest. He cleared the neck of the alley and hit a patch of ice, arms wind-milling for a split second before he fell hard, knees and hands stinging from the impact. Fire shot through his injured arm. "Shit, shit, shit, shit," he hissed through gritted teeth, willing the pain to end. Once it subsided to a tolerable throbbing, he tried to stand on the slick sidewalk, watching helplessly when the light changed and the car sped away. Clutching his injured bicep, he hobbled after the car as fast as he could. It was hopeless -- there was no way to catch it before it disappeared again.

The white car stopped just a few feet later at another traffic light. Noah had never been so grateful for rush hour in his life. As he ran, eyes locked on target, he saw the trunk lid easing up. The headlights from the car behind reflected off a pair of glasses, and then a familiar, slim figure climbed out, huddling against the side of the vehicle. When the car pulled away a moment later, Jeremy shot to his feet, dodging and ducking across four lanes of traffic.

Noah changed directions, trying to intercept, when a yelling cab driver cut him off, laying on the horn and blocking the way. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" the man screamed. "Get your ass outta the road!"

Wasting no time to answer, Noah slid around the cab, leaving a bloody hand print on the hood. In those few short seconds, he'd lost sight of Jeremy again. Frantically, he searched the storefronts, peering into windows, calling, "Jeremy!" That only caused a blue-haired old woman to stare at him with frightened eyes. She probably thought he was a lunatic.

He was just about to backtrack to the truck for his cell phone when he caught a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye, allowing just enough time to brace for impact.

Once the initial shock wore off, Jeremy had a chance to think and study his surroundings. He was in the trunk of a car and, judging from the traffic noises and repeated stops, they were heading downtown. The trunk was freezing and his teeth chattered uncontrollably; he couldn't stop to think about that. It was cold now, but when the sun set, he would be in danger of hypothermia. He planned to be long gone by then.

His feet were tightly bound, and starting to lose feeling. Thankfully, his hands were tied in front of him. A strip of tape covered his mouth. Rolling his eyes at his incompetent captors, he took a deep breath and held it, grasping the edge of the tape and pulling -- hard. He nearly screamed when it ripped free -- taking skin from his top lip with it.

Once the pain subsided, he tried chewing the rope. Shit, maybe they weren't that dumb after all, because his teeth were having absolutely no effect, other than to leave him spitting a mouthful of disgusting, shredded fibers.

Think, Jeremy, think! As with school projects, he tried reasoning through the situation. First, he needed to find something to use on the bonds. He smiled when his questing hands found the handle the car was equipped with to prevent entrapment. The smile quickly fell. Bound as he was, he'd either be recaptured immediately or run over by someone else if he tried now. No, he had to get loose and be ready to run before escaping.

His makeshift prison was mostly empty, and he took a mental inventory of items normally found in a trunk. Inspiration hit. Rolling as far as he could to one side, he used his joined hands to pull up the carpet. Underneath was a spare tire, a jack, and a tire tool. He pushed the tool between his knees, clamping them tightly around it. Finding the sharp end, he rubbed it against the rope around his wrists. He'd just about given up when the car hit a pothole. The hard iron jabbed painfully into his arm, partially severing the rope. Encouraged, he redoubled his efforts until the frayed strands parted, freeing his hands. His ankles were liberated a few moments later. He nearly screamed when the blood rushed into his feet.

He listened, waiting for the right moment while wriggling feeling back into his toes. When the vehicle stopped the next time, he eased the trunk latch open. A quick look around showed them still in traffic. Cautiously crawling from the trunk, he closed the lid gently, crouching by the car until it sped away. Ignoring the honking of impatient drivers, he ran for the nearest building, taking refuge inside.

"Sir, you can't come in here," a woman's shrill voice cried, echoing in the cavernous marble foyer. "This is a private club!" Her eyes widened, and Jeremy followed the direction of her gaze, only then noticing that blood from his injured wrist was dripping from his fingertips onto the floor. She changed her tone immediately, picking up a phone at her desk and yelling into it, "Fritz, get Doctor Morris out here immediately!" Then she rounded on him, handing over a stack of towels imprinted with "Cross Hills Fitness Club."

He grabbed the towels gratefully, wrapping them around his bleeding wrist. When a gray-haired, older man barged through the door behind her desk a moment later with a first aid kit in hand, Jeremy exclaimed, "I can't! I have to go!" He shot out of the door once more, right into Noah.

"Oh, my God!" Noah yelled, wrapping his arms around Jeremy to keep them both from falling. "I thought I'd lost you!"

"That makes two of us," Jeremy replied, clinging tightly.

A woman stepped out of the building, face bitter and pinched. "Young man, get back in here immediately. You need medical attention."

Noah turned worried eyes to Jeremy, looking for signs of abuse beyond a raw, swollen lip. "It's nothing," Jeremy assured him, "just a scratch." He held up his damaged wrist.

"Thanks for your concern, ma'am, and that's an excellent idea. I'll see to it he gets to a doctor." Turning to Jeremy, he said, "I'm taking you to Doc."

Jeremy stepped back, wide eyes searching Noah's face. "What?"

There was no time to argue. Once the kidnappers figured out Jeremy had escaped, they'd be back -- in force. Noah had no choice; he had to get Jeremy out of there -- somewhere safe, outside the city. "Look, as long as Trent is around, he won't leave you alone!"

"What about you?" Jeremy shouted. "He's been shooting his mouth off that he's gonna take care of you."

Noah's smile was bitter. "He thinks he already has, which means I'm safe for now. It's you I'm worried about." It was then that he noticed Jeremy shivering -- from fear or from cold, he didn't know. "C'mon, let's talk about this later. I need to get you back to the truck."

Ignoring all protests, Noah slipped off his flannel jacket and wrapped Jeremy in it, folding back the bloody sleeve. Jeremy's eyes traveled from the sleeve to Noah's face, and he opened his mouth, but Noah cut him off before he could ask the obvious question. "We need to hurry or they'll tow the truck." At least that got Jeremy to stop fighting. The truck was still where he'd left it, a patrol car fast approaching. Noah hopped in and settled Jeremy beside him. As unobtrusively as possible, he stuffed a handful of napkins up the sleeve of his shirt. Then he started the truck and waited impatiently. He couldn't afford to be stopped and questioned about the shooting, or about Jeremy's abduction. Every moment they remained in town was another opportunity for Trent.

After the traffic cleared, Noah swung the truck down a deserted alley, doubling back the way he'd come. "I'm sorry; we can't go back to the apartment. We need to get you out of here." Damn, he hated doing this. The moment he'd finally accepted that he wanted to try for something more, Jeremy had to be sent away.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You remember the doctor I told you about?"

Jeremy nodded.

"He lives several hours from here. I plan on stopping for the night, but we'll be there by noon tomorrow."

Jeremy leaned against the door, shivering and looking positively miserable. "If you take me to Doc, I won't ever see you again, will I?" Tears welled in his dark eyes.

As much as Noah would have liked to deny it, he couldn't. Things were going to get ugly, but he'd no intention of running and hiding. He'd see Jeremy safely tucked away and then come back and finish what that asshole Trent had started. This war had been building for years. It was now time for The Angel to trade halo for sword.

He felt it prudent not to answer the question. "I'll drive for a while, then stop for the night. I think we both have some injuries that need looking at."

Jeremy finally looked over, eyes fearful. "Damn! I forgot! You're hurt?"

"Just a scratch. Still, scratches can fester if you don't clean them."

They drove in silence. The cheerful Christmas songs grated on his nerves, so Noah switched off the radio. Perky had no place in his life right now. Thankfully, the snow had stopped falling by the time they'd cleared the city limits, and the plows were hard at work on the interstate. He realized sadly that, even if the beer delivery was on time, he wouldn't be there to meet the driver. That didn't matter right now. All that mattered was huddled on the seat across from him.

A buzzing interrupted his reverie, his cell phone frantically dancing across the seat. "Hello," he said, putting it to his ear.

"Noah! Thank God!" Mary exclaimed. "The cops have been crawling around this place all afternoon, looking for you."

"Did Kevin catch the shooter?"

Jeremy's eyes widened at the word "shooter." Noah deliberately turned away, focusing on the road. He didn't have time now to explain.

"No, he got away. The cops haven't found Jeremy, either!" she wailed.

"Calm down, Mary. He's with me." Noah kept to himself that it wouldn't be for much longer.

"Oh, my God! Is he okay? Can I talk to him?"

"Look, we're in a bit of a hurry. He's not safe there, and I don't have time to explain. I want you to close the bar as soon as you can and go home. We don't reopen for business until I say so, got it?"

Mary was quiet for a moment and then asked, "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

He had to tell her. What happened today could put everyone around him in danger. "It seems I've pissed someone off -- someone who doesn't take kindly to that sort of thing. And he's after Jeremy. Look, Mary, these are some dangerous people. Today was just the beginning. They'll be watching the bar. I want you and Kevin to stay far away from Thirteenth Street, okay?"

She sighed and then finally agreed. "Sure, Noah. Keep me posted, all right? Will you please tell Jeremy to call me whenever he can? I'm worried about him," she added softly.

Noah had to smile despite himself. It seemed he wasn't the only one who'd become attached to the young man who, in such a short time, had managed to become such a big part of his life. "Yeah, Mary, I'll tell him to call. Now, do what I said and get the hell out of there, okay? I'll call you when I get back to town."

Severing the connection, he turned to Jeremy. "What do you want for dinner?" he asked, as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

Noah watched Jeremy carry the pizza boxes into their hotel room and waited until the door was safely closed before driving down the street to a store that was open twenty-four hours. After a quick call to Doc, he changed into an old shirt he kept in the truck, not wanting to scare innocent shoppers with bloodied clothing. He picked out a new shirt for himself and a few changes of clothes for Jeremy, grateful for an excuse to buy the kid something new, despite the circumstances. Besides, he rationalized, he'd have to do it soon anyway, due to a sudden growth spurt that had left most of Jeremy's jeans too snug. As an afterthought, he added a heavy coat with a warm, fleece-lined hood. Not only would it keep Jeremy comfortable until his things could be shipped from the apartment, it would also help to hide him if necessary.

The men's department was followed by a trip to the pharmacy. After pricing individual packs of gauze, antiseptic, and tape, Noah pitched a first-aid kit from a sale rack into the cart, thinking how proud Jeremy would be of him for shopping smart. The aisle was blocked by a family with kids perusing cold remedies, so he turned around and took the next one, only to find an endless variety of condoms and lubricants. He sighed. Tonight might well be their last chance, and he was finding it harder and harder to justify his denial. Besides, if they didn't use them, at least he'd make sure Jeremy had the necessary supplies to play safe in his new life at Doc's.

That brought another sigh. He'd never thought of himself as selfish, but he truly didn't want to think about Jeremy with anyone else. He quickly placed the selected items into the cart before he could change his mind.

The freezing road slush slowed the truck's progress, and he ground his teeth in frustration. He was tired, sore, and just wanted out of the damned weather! When he finally unlocked the door to the hotel room, it was dark and empty. Panic gripped him. Where could Jeremy have gone? Surely Trent hadn't followed them! Then the bathroom door opened and Jeremy stepped out, hair wet from a shower and towel wrapped low around slim hips. The edges of the dark treasure trail that Noah had found so fascinating earlier was barely visible above the towel.

Jeremy leaned casually in the doorway, and Noah realized that all traces of "kid" were gone. Good, steady meals and hard work had filled out his thin frame, and a series of little victories at work and school had given him a confident air. No longer a scrawny foundling, Jeremy Kincaid was a man, in every sense of the word. There was no way he could be mistaken for a minor now. He stepped from the lighted bathroom and into the shadowed bedroom, sinking down onto the bed. "How's your arm?" he asked.

That startled Noah, bringing him back to the here and now. "What?"

"Your arm," Jeremy said again. "Do you need me to look at it?"

It was strange how the sight of a near-naked Jeremy made him forget all about being shot. "No, it's okay," Noah replied, wanting a chance to see it first. There was no need upsetting Jeremy any further. It was probably the first gunshot wound he'd ever see. "I'll just take a shower and clean it up a bit. How's your wrist?"

When Jeremy crawled from the bed, his towel gaped open, revealing nicely furred balls and a hard cock. Trying his best to ignore such a tempting view, Noah pulled the room's only chair from under the desk and ordered, "Sit." He turned on the desk lamp and held Jeremy's wrist under its harsh light, removing the makeshift washcloth bandage and examining the deep gash with a gentle touch. It looked like it might need stitches. Unfortunately, all he had was gauze and tape. Anything more would have to wait until tomorrow when they got to Doc's. Anger burned through him as he cleaned the wound. A little more to the left and Jeremy's veins would have been slashed! "How'd this happen?" he asked, forcing his voice to remain calm. If one of those assholes had done this...

"I was cutting through my ropes when the car hit a bump," Jeremy explained, with the same passionless tone used to explain why he was living on the streets.

While grateful that the assholes hadn't physically hurt Jeremy, they were responsible and would still pay for kidnapping and shoving him into a trunk. Noah wasn't worried about the door or the chest; those could be replaced. Jeremy couldn't. Unfortunately, vengeance would have to wait until he returned to the city and didn't have those watchful eyes on him -- eyes in which he could do no wrong. It was hard living up to the image, and Jeremy needed someone to believe in desperately. For just a little bit longer, Noah would try to fill that role.

He cleaned and dressed the wound, wrapping it in gauze. No matter how hard he tried to focus on the task at hand, being this close to the object of his desires had a profound effect. Once the

medical chores were finished, he fled to the bathroom. "I need a shower," he tossed over his shoulder, making his escape, "and I have a few scrapes of my own to tend to."

Noah entered the cramped bathroom, still steamy from Jeremy's shower, and washed quickly. Before leaving, he wiped the steam from the mirror and checked his upper arm. Far from the expected mess, other than being sore, it was as Kevin had said -- just a flesh wound. It would hurt like hell come morning.

Jeremy was sitting on the bed when Noah stepped out of the bathroom, and his eyes locked onto the long, thick scars that marred Noah's lower leg. He'd kept them covered for so long that he'd forgotten how people reacted to the reminder of that long-ago, career-ending swan dive. He'd come pretty damned close to losing his leg from the knee down. The mass of scars, the result of a caring physician who refused to give up, was a small price to pay for walking on his own. They did tend to draw gasps of horror as a first reaction, however. Jeremy's eyes held no morbid fascination or the expected pity -- just curiosity. "Is that from when you got pushed out a window?"

"Yeah," Noah replied. "Seventy-two stitches and a pin. I'm not complaining. It could have been a lot worse, so Doc tells me." Wrapping the towel more firmly around his waist, Noah sat in the chair Jeremy had occupied a few moments ago.

Jeremy eased off the bed, coming up beside the chair. He whistled through his teeth, surveying the damage to Noah's upper arm. "Damn, that looks like it hurts!" Concerned eyes met Noah's. "Sure you don't need a doctor?"

That sweet kid. If only he knew the injuries Noah had survived in the past, barely pausing long enough to slap on a Band-Aid before moving on to the next bit of excitement. One thing he could say for his time with Stevie was that it hadn't been boring. "I'll be all right," he said, wincing when he reached back to clean the injury.

"Here." Jeremy took the antiseptic-soaked cotton pad from Noah's hand. "Let me do that." Gentle fingers cleaned the wound as Noah ground his teeth against the sting. Thankfully, the bullet had just grazed him -- it hadn't entered muscle. They worked silently together until a crisp, white bandage concealed the damage. Whoever Trent had gotten to do his dirty work hadn't been very competent, and Noah was grateful.

Expecting Jeremy to retreat now that the task was done, Noah was shocked when he sank to his knees on the carpet, reaching up for another cleansing pad. "Your knees are scraped," he explained, tenderly cleaning first one, then the other.

Looking up from underneath dark lashes, Jeremy took Noah's palms in his hand. "This one needs a bandage," he said of the right. "I think the other will be okay without it." So gently Noah could barely feel it, Jeremy cleaned both palms, then wrapped the more seriously injured one. He leaned back on his heels and locked eyes with Noah, the question clear in their dark blue depths.

Noah knew what was being asked, he just didn't know how to answer.

Finally, Jeremy broke the silence. "After tonight, I might not get to see you again."

"Jeremy..." Noah didn't what else to say, wishing he could deny it. He couldn't. It was better this way. Jeremy could move on and create a decent life for himself, free of prostitution, pimps, and threats.

Those soulful eyes brimmed with determination, never looking away as Jeremy said, "If tonight is all I have, then I'll take it. Can I have it?"

Noah had never had anyone look at him the way he was being looked at now, not even Billy. Although the words had never been spoken, it was clear Jeremy loved him. Still, he thought long and hard before answering. Say yes and they could share something they might never have again; say no and he risked going through life never knowing what it was like. On the streets they might call him an angel, but in the end he was just a man. "Tonight's all I can promise," he admitted. If Jeremy could accept that...

"I know," Jeremy replied with a sad smile. Eyes trained on Noah, he very deliberately removed his glasses and placed them on the desk.

Noah spread his legs wider and Jeremy rose between them, gently caressing Noah's cheeks with both hands. Then he leaned in, brushing their lips together.

"Your lip's busted!" Noah cautioned.

"It'll be all right," Jeremy murmured without pulling away.

The kiss started slow and lazy, gradually increasing to a frantic, all-consuming thing. Noah's cock, hard and aching, escaped the towel to brush against Jeremy's abs. The kiss ended with a heady sigh from them both, and Jeremy quietly murmured, "Tonight, you're mine. There's no city, no bar, no Trent, and no Doc. It's just you and me, like it ought to be."

Jeremy reached with steady hands to gently tug the towel from Noah's hips, leaving it to dangle over the sides of the chair. "You'd never believe how many times I dreamed of doing this," he confessed.

Yes, Noah would, because he'd had the same dreams.

Jeremy's smile was bittersweet. He lowered his head and took Noah's cock into his mouth, tentatively stroking it with his tongue. When he bobbed his head, taking it into his cheek, Noah moaned.

"Like that?" Jeremy asked, pulling off to sink lower, lapping at Noah's balls. "Then you're gonna love this." With no further warning, he took Noah's cock back into the warm cavern of his mouth. When the head hit his throat, he moaned and opened, taking every inch of Noah's length until his nose was buried into the tight nest of curls at the base.

"Oh, God!" Noah gasped, pushing from his mind where and why Jeremy had learned that trick. Or on whom he'd practiced.

Jeremy hummed and Noah barely resisted the urge to buck. An image of Billy suddenly appeared in his mind and Noah pushed it out. That was an illusion, this was real. It was then that he realized it was no longer Billy he wanted. Now it was Jeremy who he craved with every ounce of his being. Jeremy, with a big heart and trusting soul, who made Noah feel that it just might be safe to love again, if only for a little while.

Noah's stomach clenched, his balls tightened, and he fought not to shoot his load down that amazing throat. If they only had the one night, he didn't want it to end so soon. "Stop!" he nearly screamed, gripping the chair arms and panting. His eyes scrunched tightly closed as he fought his body.

The sweet vibration of a chuckle caressed him intimately. When he opened his eyes, Jeremy slowly pulled off, a smug smile on his lips. "I take it you liked that," he whispered.

Noah looked down into the face of, not an innocent kid, but as decadent a young man as had ever graced Willie's stable. Not a hint of bashfulness was in the eyes that gazed up at him in lustful admiration. "That's just the beginning," Jeremy said, voice a husky, seductive murmur. He stood and dropped his towel, hard cock bobbing against a flat belly. It was only then that indecision crossed his face. "Umm... did you get supplies?"

"In the bag," Noah somehow managed to say. Imagining what they'd do with those supplies sent him back into a chair-gripping fight for control. He hoped Jeremy was up for it, because, after weeks of wanting, he thought he'd die if he couldn't bury himself between the two creamy cheeks that turned his way.

Jeremy laughed softly and rummaged through the shopping bag. "You normally think of everything, I was hoping this wasn't an exception." All humor was gone when he turned back around and answered Noah's unasked question. "I want you in me."

Jeremy dropped to his knees and, with a wicked grin and a dramatic flourish, unwrapped a condom and popped it into his mouth like a piece of candy. His lips then descended on Noah's cock. Using tongue, teeth, and lips, he worked the condom down, stopping only when Noah was fully sheathed.

He stood and took Noah's hand in his, slapping the bottle of lube against the less injured palm. "I like fingers," he said, "a lot." With that, he turned and leaned over the table, presenting two gloriously rounded globes to Noah.

For a moment Noah was too shocked to move, and he debated taking matters to the bed. A quick glance down at Jeremy, wriggling in impatience, decided matters. Momentarily discarding the lube on the desk, he parted Jeremy's cheeks with his hands, burying his face between them. "Ahh..." Jeremy moaned, pushing back. "Oh, that's good!"

Encouraged, Noah pushed his tongue against Jeremy's hole, the musky scent going straight to his cock. He loved rimming, and to have someone who responded this wildly was a double rush.

Firmly grasping Jeremy's thighs, Noah continued the torture, knowing that, despite his apparent expertise, Jeremy had only had one lover -- Trent. If this reaction was anything to go by, Trent hadn't been a very good teacher, for the student had only learned how to give pleasure, not receive it.

"Noah! Stop!" Jeremy wailed, thrusting against the desk beneath him. "I'm gonna come!"

Jeremy was eighteen; he'd get hard again, if he even went down at all. Ignoring the protests and the hand frantically trying to push him away, Noah delved deeper, determined to give Jeremy a night to remember and wipe any memories of Trent from his mind forever. If Trent only taught Jeremy to fuck; Noah would teach him the give and take of true intimacy.

Abandoning all efforts to escape, Jeremy grabbed his cock, pumping furiously and bucking back against Noah's tongue. Then, and only then, did Noah open the lube, wetting two fingers and pushing in, searching for Jeremy's gland. A muffled curse told him he'd found it. He smiled. It sounded like Jeremy had stuffed a fist into his mouth to stifle screams of pleasure. One more muffled grunt and Jeremy tensed, hole fluttering against Noah's fingers as he came.

Jeremy collapsed onto the desk, gasping for air and shaking. Noah rose and gently turned him, pulling him to the edge of the desk. Noah stood between slender, splayed legs, holding tight while his lover recovered. When Noah looked down into those dark eyes burning with emotion, he felt the last few inches it took to hit the bottom of the abyss from which he'd never return. Once, he'd thought he'd been in love. It was a pale shadow of this. When he walked away and left Jeremy behind, he'd gladly take this with him, this one perfect moment in time when all was right in the world.

Caught up in the moment, he leaned in and caught Jeremy's lips with his own, saying with actions what he dared not say with words. Jeremy's tongue replied in kind. They rocked together until Jeremy fell back on his elbows, legs spread, looking up at Noah as if he hung the moon.

Noah's need was a living, pulsing thing, and no matter how sweet and tender the moment, his body was making demands. Pouring more lube into his hand, Noah stroked his latex-covered flesh a few times and then pushed three fingers into Jeremy's hole, bending for another kiss. When Jeremy was moaning and thrusting, hard once again, Noah removed his fingers and pushed into the tight, welcoming heat he'd wanted for so long. "Uhh!" he moaned, head thrown back and eyes tightly closed. For weeks he'd dreamed of this, and once again he had to struggle for control.

Strong legs wrapped around his hips while his lover pushed back against him, silently begging for more. He looked down to see Jeremy smiling wantonly, and was totally and completely lost. Finesse flew out the window, along with all he'd ever been taught about pleasing a customer, and

he lost himself in pleasing a partner instead. He reached down a lube-coated hand and stroked Jeremy in time with his thrusts.

"You feel so good!" he grunted. He wanted it to last forever, but even now he was losing the battle, his balls tightening and that exquisite feeling low in his belly warning him it wouldn't be long. "How close are you?" he panted.

Jeremy's body answered for him, bowing up as pearly drops of fluid shot across his chest. No longer even trying to be quiet, Jeremy wailed out his pleasure, "Noah!" His fist hit the wall with a loud thump. Noah was too far gone to care who heard.

The muscles clenching around him, and his name shouted from Jeremy's lips, pushed Noah over the edge. His vision blackened around the edges when he stopped fighting and let go, filling the condom. He collapsed on top of his lover, sweat-soaked and breathing hard.

They lay together in the aftermath, Noah panting, Jeremy calmly rubbing his back.

"Jeremy..." Noah began, not quite sure what to say.

"Shh... I know," Jeremy replied, and then kissed him.

These weren't the frantic kisses of the kid at the laundry, nor were they the practiced kisses of a pro like Willie. They were the kisses of a man who knew what he wanted, and told Noah so with mouth and body.

After awhile, they moved to the bed to lie in each other's arms. Neither spoke. Instead they silently stroked and explored each other's bodies until they both fell asleep, every touch saying more than words ever could. There wasn't much they could say, really. A few short hours ago, they were looking forward to their first Christmas together, and now Noah wondered if this was the end.

Toward dawn, Noah woke to find Jeremy wide awake, eyes glittering with passion, lube and a condom in hand. This time they made love slowly, taking their time. When they finally collapsed in a tangle of arms and legs, Noah lay dreading the day, uncertainty a great, evil monster lurking beneath the bed. He was as sated as he'd ever been, and it was more than just sex. For the first time he was with someone whom he was certain would never ask anything of him that he didn't want to do. He'd enjoy it while it lasted.

When the sun rose, they showered and dressed in silence. Several times one would look at the other and attempt a conversation, but the other would cut him off with a kiss. It was better that way.

"You'll like Doc," Noah assured Jeremy on the drive to the man's house. "He has a big country place with horses and dogs."

"I've never had a dog," Jeremy murmured wistfully. "None of my foster parents would let me get one. Katherine was allergic."

Noah attempted a smile despite a heavy heart. "Well, Doc has a rabbit dog that just had a litter. Maybe you can help him with the pups."

"Really?" The light in those eyes might be dim, but at least it was on -- that was something.

"Yeah," Noah agreed. "Look, I'm really sorry about your old school and your scholarship, but he'll get you lined up for the local high school here. There's even a neighbor kid who'll give you a ride and show you around." A neighbor's *gay* kid, Noah thought dejectedly.

Far from comforting Jeremy, the news seemed to inspire panic. "What will I tell them? They're bound to ask where I'm from and why I'm here." Frightened eyes reminded Noah of his own guilty past. Unlike himself, Jeremy hadn't done anything wrong except trust an unworthy person.

Using the same advice he gave everyone when asked that question, Noah replied, "Your past is yours to share or to keep -- what you tell is up to you." For Jeremy, however, he added an additional warning, "Pick your friends wisely."

"Yeah," Jeremy answered sullenly, bitter expression conveying more than the words. "I'll do that."

Noticing a familiar bend in the road, Noah realized they were less than two miles from their destination. He couldn't say a proper goodbye in front of Doc, and Jeremy deserved a proper goodbye. Pulling the truck down a dirt road, out of sight of the main highway, he killed the engine and turned to his passenger with opened arms. "C'mere. We'll be at Doc's in a few minutes, and I can't leave with saying goodbye."

Jeremy slid across the seat and into the embrace, delivering a scorching, soul-searing kiss. Noah was going to miss this. He pulled away a little breathlessly and murmured, "I want you to take good care of yourself and do whatever Doc tells you. You've got my number; don't hesitate to call me if you need to. I mean that."

Blinking back tears, Jeremy cried, "Why can't you stay here? Why do you have to go back there, knowing Trent will kill you if he can?"

Noah sighed, running one hand through his hair. How could he explain so Jeremy would understand? What was his own life worth when compared to all those poor, misguided souls who were even now waiting for a chance for something better? Finally, he said the only thing he could think of to say. "My work isn't finished. Someone's got to be there for those who want out."

Fat tears rolling down his cheeks, Jeremy nodded. His expressive eyes said that he truly did understand, even if he didn't like it. "You know I love you, don't you?"

Pulling him close again, Noah replied, "Yeah, I know." He wanted so badly to return the words, but that would only complicate things and make Jeremy hopeful. Besides, if Jeremy hadn't figured it out by now, he would, given time.

When Jeremy slid back to his side of the seat to stare dejectedly out the window, Noah pulled back onto the highway with a heavy sigh. This was it, the beginning of the end.

They pulled up in front of a white, wooden farmhouse that somehow managed to look both new and old at the same time. Fresh-fallen snow blanketed the roof. The cedar tree in the middle of the front yard had been strung with garlands, and several boxes sat off to one side. Doc was standing on the front porch, looking just like Noah remembered him.

Nearly the same height as Noah, Doc was thin, reedy, and looked like a strong wind could knock him over. Salt and pepper hair and moustache, the thickest Noah had ever seen, brought to mind a walrus. Kindness and determination shone in his light blue eyes, just as they had the first time Noah had met the man, ten years ago in the emergency room.

"Been wondering when you'd get here," Doc said. "Was hoping you'd make it before the next storm moves in."

"It was snowing pretty bad most of the way, so we stopped," he exaggerated. A sharp look said that Jeremy had heard. His expression softened to understanding. Noah hoped Jeremy didn't think last night was planned from the start.

It wasn't preplanned, not really, Noah had simply been too tired to continue, and wanted to check on the gunshot wound that he had no intention of mentioning to Doc, the one person capable of talking him out of returning to the city. He had to go back. The war had become personal, for his lover was at stake. If he were reluctant to leave Jeremy behind, wanting just one night spent together first, was that so wrong?

Doc walked down the front steps and held his hand out to Jeremy. "You must be Jeremy," he said. "Folks call me Doc."

"Nice to meet you," Jeremy replied, shaking the offered hand and eyeing the man from beneath the hood of his new coat.

Jeremy had relaxed so much over the past few weeks that Noah had forgotten about his suspicious nature. Well, Doc would soon put the young man at ease; he just had that way about him. He'd been one hell of a doctor in his day, with a caring nature, and never-give-up attitude that allowed Noah to stand on his own two feet today -- both literally and figuratively. When Noah rounded the truck to join them, the aging doctor ignored his outstretched hand, wrapping him in a hug instead. Noah hid a wince as his bicep was squeezed against Doc's body. "You know you could stay, too, if you wanted," Doc murmured for his ears only.

Just as quietly, Noah answered, "You know I can't do that. The job's not finished yet."

Doc's glasses did nothing to hide the sorrow in his eyes when he nodded understanding. "Will it ever be?" he asked sadly.

Suddenly, Jeremy exclaimed, "Oh, shit, Noah! I forgot to tell you! Right before those bastards showed up, Eddie came by to warn me that Trent is planning on taking over!"

Heart seizing in an iron grasp, Noah gasped, "When did he say this would happen?"

"Thursday night. Holy crap! That's tonight!"

Noah's eyes fell on his watch while he frantically did the math. "If I leave now and drive straight through, I'll be back in the city by seven." He knew Jeremy wouldn't understand his need to intervene. One look at Doc's tight-lipped expression proved at least one of them might.

"I have to go," Noah said, eyes begging Doc to understand.

"I know," Doc replied. "I don't think I need to tell you to be careful, do I?"

"No, sir." Noah hugged Doc again, then turned open arms to Jeremy, who dove into them, hugging Noah like he never intended to let go. "Listen to Doc," Noah said. "I'll call you as soon as I can, and, hopefully, this whole thing will blow over and I'll be able to come and get you."

Jeremy's mouth dropped open and he stared at Noah, wide-eyed. "You'd come get me?"

Apparently, Jeremy believed he was being abandoned. The chances were slim of the situation calming down enough for his safe return. If it did? "In a flat minute," Noah replied. "Only if it's safe." He hadn't intended to give false hope, but seeing Jeremy standing there, desolate, he'd had to offer something.

Climbing back into the truck, he said again, "I'll call when I can." He was on his cell phone trying to get Willie's number before he'd rounded the corner.

Jeremy stood in the drive of Doc's house, watching the truck disappear from sight. Even during months of living in the basement on Harper Street, he'd never felt this alone. Sensing movement beside him, he turned to look into the kind eyes of the stranger who'd taken him in, just because Noah had asked. Yeah, Noah had that effect on him, too.

"You love him, don't you?" Doc asked quietly. Noah had warned Jeremy that Doc might not understand, because to sleep with those they saved wouldn't be ethical. However, there was no judgment in that deep voice.

Seeing no reason to lie, especially about something that had to be obvious, Jeremy replied, "Yes, I do." He'd gladly take the few changes of clothes Noah had bought and leave if the man said so much as one unkind word, which he expected.

What he *wasn't* expecting was a throaty chuckle. "About time the boy forgave himself enough to love again."

Jeremy shook his head. "He doesn't love me."

The skin around the old man's eyes crinkled when he smiled. "That's where you'd be wrong. In all the years I've known him, he's never once asked me to harbor someone, though I gladly would have." A fatherly arm wrapped around Jeremy's shoulders. Leading him into the house, Doc said, "Don't worry so much about him. He might not even know it himself yet, but he's not going to let you get away so easily."

Jeremy's mouth fell open again. Apparently, Noah didn't know Doc as well as he thought. "You mean, you're okay with me and him? He called it unethical."

A bare tree stood in the living room, plastic boxes similar to the ones in the front yard stacked around it. Jeremy stopped in front of it and Doc came to stand behind him. "I haven't decorated for Christmas in a long, long time, what with it being just me and all. I figured maybe, since you were here, you wouldn't mind helping me."

Despite the severity of the situation, Jeremy smiled. He loved decorating for Christmas, and having something better than thrift store decorations and strung popcorn to do it with would be a treat.

"When?" he asked.

"After dinner, maybe. First, let's get you settled. Let's hang our coats in the closet over there."

Jeremy slung a shopping bag full of clothes to the floor and reluctantly parted with Noah's gift, hanging it in the closet next to Doc's coat. Then he retrieved his few belongings and turned back to his host expectantly.

Doc led him down the hall and into a large, cozy bedroom. "Here's your room. I hope you like it. If not, we can always make changes later." The elderly man eased down onto the edge of the double bed and patted the comforter. "Sit," he said. "I don't bite, it's bad for my dentures."

Appreciating that Doc was trying to put him at ease, Jeremy complied. Doc continued, "Yes, it would be unethical for him to take advantage of those he helps out of the life, for they'd see it as payment and no different from what they're currently doing. Where's the positive lesson in that? You, however, were never in the life. Noah may have made a few things easier for you, that's true. But from what I hear, you didn't need saving. See the difference?"

"Noah still thinks it's wrong."

Again the old man chuckled, a deep rumbling in his chest. "Well, you may not know it, but he and I talk several times a week. I was a doctor for forty years, and if I learned one thing, it was

how to listen to what isn't said along with what is. We normally talk about my farm, the bar, and how it's going with this or that prospect. That is, until you showed up." He looked at Jeremy with amusement, a smile lifting one side of his mouth, making his bushy moustache crawl like a giant, furry caterpillar. "Guess what he talks about now?"

Hope blooming in his heart, Jeremy asked, "Me?"

"Yeah, you. I think I know more about you now than you do. He talks about you and the laundry, he talks about you and school, he even talks about what you like to eat, and how much," a wink softened words, "but he never mentions how he feels about you. Since he's bound and determined to deny himself love, in my book that means he loves you. He's just too stubborn to admit it."

Well, that certainly was a shock and totally at odds with the distance Noah had tried to keep between them until last night.

"He's also told me about what you've done for the albatross around his neck."

When Jeremy raised a questioning eyebrow, Doc explained, "The laundry. Before you came along, he was hoping it would burn down. Now it's profitable, thanks to you, and even adding to the bar's business. Then there's that little matter of the stunt you pulled at Thanksgiving."

On the defensive, Jeremy asked, "What stunt?" As far as he knew, he'd been on his best behavior, except for that whole embarrassing "running away to Harper Street" thing. Surely Doc wasn't talking about that?

Kindly eyes twinkled with humor. "It seems that an unprecedented number of bus tickets had to be purchased -- and right here at the holidays."

"I don't understand what you're getting at," Jeremy admitted.

"Think about your role in Noah's life. You're not another lost soul that needed saving, Jeremy, you're a business partner."

The more he thought about it, the little moments they'd shared and the things he and Noah had accomplished together, the more he realized Doc was right. Why couldn't Noah see it?

"Oh, and there's one more very important difference between you and those who sell themselves," Doc said, rising stiffly from the bed.

"What's that?"

"He saves them. You, young man, saved him. Now, Noah says you've hurt your wrist. Let me take a look."

Chapter Thirteen

Pushing Jeremy's sad eyes from his mind, Noah drove back to the city as fast as he could without risking an accident or a ticket, dreading what he'd find. Somehow, it seemed, Trent had slipped his leash, going against Willie's direct orders. If Willie had changed those orders, he'd have sent word as to why, possibly demanding another meeting. That no word had come didn't bode well. Now it seemed a coup was planned. Noah knew from past experience that those could be bloody and spill over onto the innocent.

The longer he drove, the more it ate at him, until a knot of worry formed in his gut. Willie wouldn't tolerate insubordination; he'd get even, so if Trent was defying the man, that must mean the war had already started without him. Frantically he dialed the number he'd gotten from Mark, and once more it went straight to voicemail. He snarled in frustration and hurled the useless phone onto the seat.

He pushed the accelerator to the floor and prayed it wasn't too late, remembering how Willie had come to power all those years ago in much the same way.

After recovering from his injuries, Noah found honest work on a construction site and was finally able to get his own place and move out of Doc's apartment. He loved the old man, but needed to try his wings and make a life for himself. Besides, sleeping in Ben's old room was a constant reminder of how badly he'd failed. He hadn't known the boy all that well; still, he knew him well enough that he should have said something to stop the self-destructive behavior, sparing Doc the grief. He could possibly have saved Ben. Could he have saved Billy if he hadn't given up and simply walked away from the life, leaving his lover behind? Should he have stayed, hoping Billy would one day see the light? Not that he'd be in big demand with his mangled leg and vivid scars, the reasons Stevie had let him go without a fight.

"Come with me," Noah had pleaded when he'd gone to see Billy, catching him in front of The Brownstone. The slumped shoulders, dragging feet, and revealing clothes told Noah exactly where his lover had been. Did those dark eyes light up just a bit when they saw Noah? Just as quickly as it had flared, the spark died.

In the middle of the crowded street, surrounded by hustlers plying their trade, Billy replied, "Why should I leave? I'm where I belong."

"No you're not! You belong with me, Billy! I love you!"

Lips set in a thin line of determination, Billy's eyes grew cold and hard. "But I don't love you. I don't believe in love." The words ripped into Noah's heart. Billy exhaled a shuddering breath and then turned to enter The Brownstone without a backward glance. Falling four stories onto a Buick hadn't been nearly as painful.

When he looked up he saw Stevie watching from a window, arrogant smirk on his face.

It was at his apartment that Noah received the fateful telephone call. "May I speak with Noah Everett, please," a very professional-sounding woman asked.

He wasn't behind on any bills, so couldn't imagine who it might be. A sinking feeling in his gut, he replied, "I'm Noah Everett."

The lady sighed in relief. "Mr. Everett, we've had a patient brought in here at Mercy General, and you're listed in his contact information. I've been calling Everetts from the phone book all afternoon looking for you."

She didn't have to say who it was. Even though it had been three months since Noah had last seen him, he somehow knew that it had to be Billy. In shaky tones, he asked, "Who is it?"

The woman sighed again. "I wish I could tell you. He's got so many fake IDs in his wallet I really can't be sure."

"Is one of them for William Cordell?"

"Yes."

"I'll be right there."

It took Noah an hour and three bus changes to make it to the hospital, and what he saw when he got there made him think it was too late, in a lot of ways. The nurse led him to a room in intensive care, and he stood looking through a glass window at Billy -- or what was left of him. Most of the thick, black hair had been shaved, and a criss-cross pattern of stitches riddled the exposed scalp. Both arms and one leg were in casts, and a breathing tube protruded from a heavily bandaged throat. Bile rose when Noah saw that beautiful face, bruised and bloated nearly beyond recognition. An odd framework suspended the sheet above Billy's body. Noah couldn't tell the extent of the injuries, but they had to be bad. He couldn't imagine someone being so damaged and living to tell about it.

Fighting back tears, he turned to the nurse and asked, "How did this happen?"

She stepped up beside him, and together they gazed at the still form on the bed. "Nearest we can tell, and it's just speculation, mind you, he was thrown from a moving vehicle, and when he tried to run, they plowed him."

After all this time it had finally happened. Billy had apparently met his fate at the hand of an irate john, just like Noah almost had. "Do they know who did it?"

Noah saw her reflection in the glass as she shook her head. "Even in a crowded part of town no one will admit they saw anything. You know how it goes in bad neighborhoods."

Yeah, he did know. "Where did it happen?"

"Ramsey Street." She turned to look at him then, telling him with her eyes that she knew why a beautiful young man would be on Ramsey Street, and the probable cause of his attack. There was no judgment there, just acceptance. If she'd been at this hospital any length of time this was hardly the first she'd seen of a hustler or runaway. "I have to get back to the floor," she murmured. "If you need anything, ask for Angie." She turned and walked back down the hall, leaving him alone with Billy.

The whole time Noah had been in the hospital recovering from his injuries, Billy had never once come to visit. But as he gazed at his former lover's broken form, and at the monitors with their beeps and flashing lights, a forgotten memory surfaced: himself lying in a similar bed. Through a fog of pain he'd looked up and saw dark hair, dark eyes... and a tear-streaked face.

At five-thirty, like clockwork, Noah entered the hospital room for his daily after-work visit.

"Hey, babe," emerged from the tangled sheets on the bed. Whenever someone entered, Billy hid until he knew who they were. He slowly peeled the covers back from his face, keeping his mangled body covered.

Noah bent close to kiss the one, fairly undamaged spot on his forehead, hiding a wince when the husky rasp that was Billy's new voice added, "I missed you." It would take some getting used to. The voice, like the scars, was a constant reminder of how close this man had come to dying.

The first time he'd visited after Billy woke, Noah'd held him when the broken man cried for the loss of his looks and voice. Still, Billy was alive and could talk. Knowing him, he'd find a way to turn the new huskiness into a sultry purr. As time passed and the injuries healed, it seemed the damage had faded to the point of enhancing his beauty rather than detracting from it. His face was now more rugged, more masculine. His body, however, would always bear scars.

"Yeah, I missed you, too," Noah said, turning off dark thoughts. "The nurse tells me you're getting better. You might get out as early as next week. Isn't that great?"

"Yeah." The happiness didn't quite reach Billy's eyes.

Dropping down to the chair beside the bed and taking Billy's hand in his, a feeling of foreboding told Noah that something wasn't right. For Billy's sake, he continued as if nothing was wrong. When Billy wanted to tell him, Billy would. "When you're ready, I got a job all lined up for you. I even talked my landlady into the bigger apartment. You should see it! It's got a great view of the park and a big kitchen. I know how you like a big kitchen."

Looking at the injured man lying on the hospital bed, Noah could see that the plans they'd made over the past weeks had just changed. "What is it? You said you wanted to get out of the life and be with me again, just like we'd always talked about."

Billy sighed. "Noe, you never belonged in the life. I did."

Horror clutched his heart. "You're not thinking of going back, are you? If you do, Stevie will kill you for sure! You barely fucking survived what he did to you last time!" Noah yelled. It turned out that Billy's near miss wasn't caused by a customer after all, but by Stevie. Somehow the pimp had found out that Billy was after his job and had attempted to eliminate the completion. He'd nearly succeeded. How could Billy possibly think about going back?

It was Billy who smiled now, and it wasn't a smile Noah had ever seen on his face before. It was pure evil. "Remember Ralph and his crew down in Central?"

How could Noah forget? Next to them, Stevie looked like a kindergarten teacher.

"Well," Billy continued, "seems he's tired of old Stevie, too, and intends to do something about it."

Frantic to stop the train wreck that he saw coming, Noah shouted, "You can't work for him! Have you forgotten what happens to those who work down in Central?"

Billy relaxed back into his bed, acting for all the world like a man on top of his game. "Well, he wants someone to run Stevie's stable when that asshole's gone, and asked me." His boasting suggested he'd just been given a high honor instead of a baker's dozen of drugged-out whores. Grinning happily, he added, "Can you imagine? Me! With my own boys!"

Noah stood and stepped away from the bed, not sure who this man was anymore. Just last night everything had been fine. They were going to share an apartment, do honest work...

Billy's smile fell. "What's the matter, Noe? Aren't you happy for me? I'm gonna get that son of a bitch back for what he did to me!"

Noah sighed. Apparently, Billy's mind was made up. He still tried once more to reason with his former lover. "How is your running the business any better than when he did?"

"Noah, Noah, Noah. For one thing, I won't use anyone under eighteen, and I'll fix up The Brownstone for 'em so they won't be on the streets like we were. And..." he added with flourish, "my boys will be clean! Absolutely no drugs allowed!" He may have had his faults, but Billy hated drugs. Or rather, he hated that they greatly reduced a hustler's value.

"What about us?" Noah stammered. "What about us working together, living together... being together?"

At least Billy had the decency not to smile when he said, "About that..."

Stunned and feeling caught in a bad dream, Noah walked out the door and didn't look back, too embarrassed to let anyone see his tears or how much he'd wanted that happily ever after.

A week later, he picked up a newspaper on the way to work. On the front page was a picture of Stevie with the caption "Local Businessman Disappears Without a Trace." The following week, word on the street had it that a pimp named Willie Carnell had taken over Stevie's business. The week after that, Noah reduced the new pimp's stable by two.

A blaring horn interrupted Noah's trip down memory lane, and he looked up just in time to avoid missing his exit. Just thirty more minutes... Under his breath he chanted, "Hang on, Billy."

Trent smiled, leaning against the door frame of Willie's home office.

"What are you doing here?" Willie barked in annoyance, studying the man he'd foolishly named second in command. Not for long. Trent's arrogance was growing with each passing day. No matter how beautiful or good in bed he might be, he'd become a liability. Too bad he hadn't taken a bus back where he'd come from when he had the chance. Willie made a mental note to let the guard downstairs know to remove the little bastard's name from the approved visitors list.

"That's no way to talk to your most trusted... friend... is it?"

Willie snorted, nose wrinkled in disgust. "Trent, you've never been anybody's friend, least of all mine."

The well-practiced smile disappeared from the rent boy's face. "Well, it doesn't matter one way or the other. Even if you were my friend, it wouldn't change anything."

Trent strode confidently into the room like he owned it, arrogant smirk firmly in place. If he'd had the brains to go with the looks and talent, Willie would have him ensconced downtown, reserved for discerning customers. Unfortunately, the moment Trent's mouth opened, his ignorance showed -- especially since he'd been shooting it off to the wrong people lately.

"What do you want?" Willie asked impatiently, rising from his desk chair. "I have a meeting in a little while, and I don't care to be late." He scowled, looking down at Trent's mud caked shoes. Asshole.

"Oh, you will be, Willie, you will be -- late, that is. As in 'the late Willie Carnell.'" Turning to the hired muscle parked on the couch, Trent smiled and said, "Boys?"

The two jumped up simultaneously, throwing open their coats. Willie barely had time to reach down and press the button beneath his desk before bullets ripped into him with searing agony. He stood for a moment, staring down at the blood staining his shirt, not quite comprehending, before falling face down. Blood pooled into the light beige carpet beneath him.

Pain ripped through his shredded shoulder when Trent's hand cruelly gripped it, rolling him onto his back. "You're weak, Willie, and no longer fit to follow. You should have killed Noah Everett

when you had the chance, but no, you just let him get away with stealing your boys. Not any more." Grinning madly, Trent boasted, "I did what you wouldn't. He's saved his last whore."

"You fool!" Willie hissed, grimacing. "He didn't steal them; he got rid of my problems for me. Sent the ones who couldn't cut it home to Mama."

Trent threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, that's rich, but it doesn't matter. That's one asshole that I don't have to worry about anymore. He's dead, just like you're going to be in a few minutes." Turning to the hired guns, Trent said, "Come on, boys, we've got work to do."

Willie moaned, searing agony shooting through every inch of his body. Bracing against the pain, he took a deep breath and tried to yell. A mere whisper ghosted past his lips, "Noah!"

Noah made record time getting to the city. However, once there, traffic slowed, congested with holiday shoppers. It was eight p.m. when he pulled into the parking garage of Willie's high-rise.

"Remember me?" he asked, barreling into the opulent lobby. The security guard, thankfully, was the same one he'd met before.

The man nodded, but remained where he stood.

"I need to get up to Willie Carnell's apartment -- now!" Noah barked, halting when the guard stepped from behind the desk to block his path.

"I can't, sir; not without clearance from Mr. Carnell." The guard's hand crept down to the holstered weapon at his hip. Though much older, and smaller, than Noah, the man admirably stood his ground. Noah didn't have time to deal with someone who took their job so seriously.

He blew out a shaky breath and tried to calm himself enough to reason. "Listen," he began, desperation creeping into his voice. "Willie's in trouble, and if you don't let me up there, the consequences will be on your head!"

The elevator chimed as it opened and three laughing young men -- two wielding semi-automatics -- stepped out. The armed men stopped laughing; Trent didn't. "Ah, Mr. Everett, sadly, we meet again. Seems I won't have to pay Ray after all if he missed. I should have known better than to trust an amateur. Not to worry, though. While they may be overly theatrical, these two are professionals. They won't miss." Turning to the two armed men, he said, "Take care of this. Goodbye, Mr. Everett." Trent turned and made his way out the front door without a backward glance.

Noah had a split second to see gun barrels rising before shots rang out. Reflexes kicking in, he tackled the guard to the floor and shielded them both behind the scant protection of the reception desk while the two punks opened fire.

He grabbed the motionless guard's gun before he had time to think. It was in the holster one minute and in his hand the next. The .38 Special would be of little use against such superior firepower, but was better than nothing. It had been ten years since he'd held a gun, and he'd never actually shot anyone then. It was just a prop for when it was his turn to guard Stevie's lair. He sent up a silent thank-you to Billy for ensuring that he at least knew how to shoot one.

When the ringing in his ears quieted, Noah listened with rising anger to the two punks.

"Hey! I got him!" boasted one.

"No, you didn't, you moron. I did. I get the bonus. You just shot the guard. Trent's not gonna pay you for that," argued the other.

The first one laughed. "In your dreams. We both know I'm the better shot."

How could they banter so callously about taking a life? Noah wasn't about to tell them that they were both wrong, that they'd missed him. Had they shot the guard? Still listening for the gunmen, he turned his attention to the man lying so still beneath him, breathing a sigh of relief when he found a strong, steady pulse. No visible blood marred the crisp, gray uniform. A more thorough exam would have to wait for later.

Holding his breath, Noah listened to ever-nearing footsteps, trying to judge the gunmen's positions. Thankfully, the marble floors made it impossible for the two to walk quietly. One, wearing soft soles, squeaked, while the other's harder heels tapped a sharp staccato beat across the floor. Noah had to act and soon, but with only six shots and an unknown gun at his disposal, the odds weren't in his favor. Since they thought him dead, the element of surprise would be his most effective weapon.

Suddenly, a tiny, electronic voice announced the arrival of an email, and Noah raised his head, eyes locking on the computer that had, miraculously, escaped harm. He studied the screen, said a prayer, and used the touch pad to send the elevator to the third floor. It went to the sixth. Okay, maybe there was some damage, after all. However, when he directed it to the lobby, it complied. He held his breath and waited, counting down the seconds. On the count of ten, he eased off the security guard and slid across the marble to the far side of the desk, where hopefully, the thugs weren't expecting him.

His muscles were screaming from the tension when the elevator finally chimed and the doors slid open. Just like he'd hoped, his adversaries were distracted, their eyes turned to the empty elevator.

His initial shot was high; his next caught the first gunman in the chest. Eyes wide and panicked, the man's hand instinctively squeezed the trigger of the semi-automatic, firing a rapid volley into the second man, who screamed and fell to the floor in a pool of blood. The first gunman sank to his knees and then collapsed in a heap onto the body of his fallen comrade.

Noah counted to ten again, wary eyes watching the fallen pair before returning to the still-unconscious guard to check for injuries. Thankfully, the man wasn't shot, just out cold, otherwise

apparently unharmed. For the second time in as many days, Noah heard sirens in the distance. Like before, he couldn't afford to wait -- Billy needed him.

He cautiously raised his head to peer over the desk. The carnage spread across the once elegant foyer assured him that the would-be killers were no longer a threat. Wincing as pain shot through his arm, he braced it and stood, bloody hand confirming that the wound had torn open again. He slipped the gun into the waistband of his jeans, and then grabbed the edge of a tattered curtain and pulled, ripping off a piece of dark velvet.

Pausing just long enough to catch his breath, he prayed the bullets hadn't damaged the computer's circuitry too severely. On second thought, it might be better to use the manual controls if he intended to use the elevator. Climbing the stairs wasn't a good idea; he'd be too tired to fight after the long climb to Willie's apartment. He gingerly picked his way through the mangled bodies of Trent's henchmen, barely making it inside the elevator before the doors closed.

He punched the button for the sixth floor. Floor one... two... three... Slowly, he counted off floors as they lit up on the control panel. Surely the damned thing hadn't been this slow when he'd been here on his birthday! Still, the delay gave him time to fashion a makeshift bandage from the curtain material. When the doors reopened, he paused and listened, expecting another hail of gunfire. All was quiet. Flattening himself against the wall, he held the gun in front of him and eased toward the half-open door to Willie's apartment.

The smell of blood hit him before he'd even made it inside. Oh, fuck! He was too late! Keeping a low profile, he checked the living area and the bedroom, carefully avoiding looking at the bed, then the dining area -- the only places he was familiar with. It was then that he heard it: a gurgling, gasping sound that made his blood run cold. He carefully eased into a doorway he hadn't noticed on his earlier visit. Bloody footprints led away from the central desk, which sat in a pool of blood. Noah eyed it warily, slowly easing around it to find Billy lying underneath.

"Oh, Billy," Noah moaned, lowering the gun. "What did they do to you?"

"Noah?"

His name was so softly spoken that he might have imagined it, and Noah leaned cautiously over the body, only to find those dark eyes that he knew so well looking up at him, full of pain.

Noah dropped to his knees on the bloody carpet. "Fucking hell, Billy! What happened?"

Those full, sensuous lips slid back over bared, bloody teeth. The man Noah'd once loved more than life itself clenched his jaw and hissed, "Little weasel, Trent... underestimated..."

"Shh... Don't try to talk," Noah said, eyes filling with tears as he counted the bullet holes riddling his former lover's body. He reached for his phone and called emergency services, both for Billy and the unconscious man downstairs. The sirens he'd heard probably just meant cops, not paramedics. He spared no thoughts for the two dead gunmen. Buzzards could have them for all he cared.

"No time," Billy moaned, "...already dead."

"Why? Why didn't you come with me?" Noah asked, heart breaking once more over this beautiful man.

Billy coughed, wincing, then looked up at Noah. He panted out the words he'd said so often, "...where... belong, Noe..."

"No, you aren't. We could have gone away together, just like we said we would."

Despite his injuries, Billy smiled, eyes already beginning to dim. "Only... one regret," he said, voice so soft Noah had to bend closer to hear him.

"What's that?"

"Remember... said... didn't love you?"

How could he forget the words that had torn his heart out all those years ago? "Yes," he replied. Fat tears dripped from his cheeks, the spatters washing the blood from Billy's face where they hit.

A bloody, trembling hand reached up, cupping Noah's cheek. "Lied," Billy whispered.

Noah clutched that hand to his face, refusing to let go, even though Billy just had. He stared down into the peacefully smiling face of the small-town boy from Georgia. Blessed with the dark good looks of an Italian grandmother, Billy had left home to seek his fame in the city, only to have his dreams crushed beneath the harsh heel of reality.

A glint of silver caught Noah's eye, and he peeled back the collar of Billy's blood-soaked silk shirt. There, nestled against the man's tattooed, badly scarred chest, lay a pendant -- half of a Mizpah coin.

That's how the police found him, kneeling in a pool of blood in a luxurious apartment high above the festive Christmas lights of the city.

When the paramedics arrived, William Joseph Cordell was pronounced dead.

Chapter Fourteen

Noah was mentally and physically exhausted. To say it had been a long day was a gross understatement. As bad as the day had been, amazingly enough, after leaving Willie's, it got worse. At least the paramedics had taken the time to properly patch his arm, even if his blood-soaked clothes made it appear as if *he'd* been the one who'd been shot today. Now he sat in an interrogation room, answering the same questions over and over. No charges had been filed yet; he was just listed as someone of interest. It was only a matter of time. Willie had died in his arms, leaving a bloody handprint on Noah's face. And Noah had, in fact, shot and probably killed a man. Right now he was too numb to properly process that fact. Later, there'd be hell to pay from his conscious, if not the judicial system. The officers escorting him might as well have said, "Dead man walking" when they brought him in.

After a litany of the same old questions, rephrased to appear different, the sergeant finally asked a new one. "Why did you kill Mr. Cordell, Noah?"

Ah, the gloves were coming off, and he was being accused outright. It wasn't like he hadn't seen it coming. The only thing that did surprise him was that no mention had yet been made of the man he *had* actually killed, other than a reference to the two shooters as "accomplices." If he was being accused of Willie's murder, they'd now be considered *his* accomplices. The fact that they'd tried to murder him, too, seemed irrelevant. Or maybe the cops were stalling for time while forensics did their thing. Noah had been watching the clock, and time was running out. By law, either charges had to be brought, or they had to let him go. Amazing the things that life as a prostitute had taught him about the law.

The sergeant paused the repetitious questioning long enough to look down at the cell phone vibrating loudly against his belt. He muttered, "Excuse me," and then left the room. Noah knew he was being watched and sat quietly, waiting for the officer to return and either formally press charges or let him go home. His vote was for home.

Finally, the sergeant re-entered the room, flanked by two more uniformed officers. "Noah Everett," he said, "You are under arrest for Assault with Intent to Kill. You have the right to remain silent..."

Assault, not murder? It seemed that the men in blue hadn't forgotten about the gunman after all, or that the bullets from the gun Noah had been found holding matched the one in the gunman's body. Did this mean the man was still alive?

Before he had a chance to ask, the sergeant opened a folder and took out a stack of photographs, thirteen in all, and placed them face up on the table. "Each of these men are listed as missing persons. All were last seen with someone who fits your description. This one," the sergeant tapped a fingertip against the image of Mark, "was seen getting into a truck that matches the one registered to you. What do you know about these men?"

Noah looked over the photos, already knowing what he'd see. There before him were the pictures of thirteen young men he'd saved from the streets. Most telling, the photo of Mark was identical

to the one back at his house that would probably be found when the police searched it, which they no doubt would.

It appeared that Willie had set him up. But Willie was dead. Then it hit him -- not Willie, but someone who had access to the same files. Shit! That little bastard! Trent now knew he was still alive and had come up with yet another way to get rid of him. Most likely the "missing persons" were reported by the little weasel or his cohorts.

Noah rolled his fingers in ink and pressed them against the provided cards, finally realizing how clever his adversary was. No doubt Trent had discovered that his men had failed and that Jeremy had escaped. The asshole could even be smart enough to realize his quarry was no longer in the city. A shootout would make the evening news. When Jeremy found out, he'd come running -- right into Trent's waiting arms. The missing person's reports might also bring some of the others against whom local pimps carried a grudge. What a perfect little trap. Trent could get what he wanted and curry favor at the same time.

Noah's one phone call was to Doc. "I only have three things to say. One: don't post bail. If I have to stay in the city, it'll only endanger those around me. Two: Don't risk yourself by coming here. Three: Take care of Jeremy..."

Doc seemed nice enough, if a little quiet, and after two days Jeremy stopped asking the questions he knew wouldn't, or couldn't, be answered. They'd decorated the house and the porch, even the tree in the yard, and for the first time in years he was going to have a real Christmas. Or, rather, he would if Noah came. Though not overly optimistic, he'd still baked cookies, just in case. Noah had once mentioned liking oatmeal raisin bars.

He was getting quite worried that none of his calls to Noah were answered, and Mary was strangely tight-lipped. Doc just said, "He'll be all right," and left it at that whenever Jeremy asked.

He and Doc hunkered down in front of the television after dinner one night just in time to see a news flash appear on the screen. Jeremy didn't pay any attention at first, until Doc's shocked gasp made him look up from his book. Pictures of young men were being shown, some vaguely familiar.

The commentator announced, with all the glee reserved for ratings-boosting disasters, "Today's hot story... A shootout in an upscale apartment complex leaves two men dead and one in critical condition. Local businessman Noah Everett," a picture appeared of a bleary-eyed, unshaven Noah in an orange, county jail jumpsuit, "is now facing charges. He's also under investigation for possible kidnappings. Several young men listed as missing persons were reportedly last seen in the company of the suspect."

The announcer droned on while a video clip showed a scantily clad hustler leaning in through the window of Noah's truck. The next scene showed the same truck parked in front of a local hotel.

Oh, shit! Jeremy had seen that! It was right down the street from the bar! The guy leaning in the window was the one he'd seen Noah with who had made him run away!

"It's a setup! It's got to be that bastard, Trent!" Jeremy exclaimed. His blood ran cold. Noah! His Noah! Accused of murder? No fucking way! "Noah wouldn't kill anybody! Doc, we've got to help him!"

The old man sighed, and it seemed to Jeremy that he wasn't quite as surprised by all this as he should have been. Had he already known? "We both know he's innocent and we have to trust that justice will prevail. As far as the alleged kidnappings, Noah's worked hard to give these boys their lives back. If this goes any more public, so do their pasts, which makes it easier for their former pimps to find them. Not to mention that the lives they've since built for themselves will be ripped apart."

"We can't just do nothing!" Jeremy shouted, ready to storm the city single-handedly to free the closest thing to a truly good man he'd ever met.

Though Doc remained outwardly calm, those blue eyes blazed with passion. "Oh, I don't intend to do nothing." Whatever his plans were, though, he didn't share them.

Chapter Fifteen

On December twenty-third, Noah sat in his cell which, thankfully, he had to himself. His last cellmate had been a drugged-out sociopath and a little hard on the nerves. He'd had a lot of time to think since being incarcerated, and the more he dwelled on it, the more grudging admiration he had for his adversary's ingenuity. All Trent had to do was present the facts, nothing more, depending on the general public to jump to the wrong conclusions -- which they had with a vengeance. The morning paper was full of speculation and conspicuously devoid of fact.

Noah had once been a firm believer in the judicial process, after he no longer had reason to fear it, but that was before meeting the court-appointed attorney. The shifty-eyed little lawyer -- dressed in a cheap suit and reeking of stale booze -- did nothing to dispel Noah's sense of doom. He constantly checked his watch as though the few minutes spent with an assigned client were more than could be spared. More than likely, he'd been interrupted at a holiday party. Why should he care? It wasn't his life on the line, was it?

"Mr. Elliott," the man's high-pitched, nasally voice whined. "How do you expect me to defend you if you won't cooperate?"

Noah didn't bother to correct him. In fact, he hoped the arrogant prick called the wrong name in court, just to rub bureaucratic noses in the ineffectiveness of a system that would provide such a man as defense.

"I can't deny shooting the man. Jeez, it's on security cameras. As far as the so-called kidnappings, what they're saying is true," Noah said for the third time. "Every one of those young men got into my truck and was driven to a local hotel. They were never seen again in town." He didn't explain that it was because they'd been given a bus ticket and sent somewhere else. It seemed most people, his lawyer included, believed Noah had murdered them and hidden the bodies, thanks, in part, to Trent's cronies. They seemed to be the only ones available for interviews who knew the missing men. It was painfully obvious their stories were rehearsed. Only a scant third of the actual number he'd saved were mentioned in the media reports, however, and only thirteen identified by name and with photographs.

"Did you kill those men?" the attorney asked, inching closer to the door. It was fairly obvious he assumed his client guilty. So much for 'innocent until proven.'

"No, I didn't kill them."

"Do you know what happened to them?" the man asked, a tiny bit of hope in his voice.

"Yes. They were safe and very much alive when I last saw them." Noah refused to say more, no matter how many times the question was asked.

"Need I remind you that a picture of one of the men was found at your house, and a bag containing the clothes he was last seen wearing was found in a trashcan near your business?"

Actually, though he prudently didn't voice it, Noah didn't need a reminder. Those facts were aired on the local news at least three times per day.

"Why won't you tell me where they are if you know?" the little man continued, still keeping a safe distance. "If we don't come up with a plausible defense, then there's nothing I can do to help you! Witnesses saw that man get into your truck. Hell, there's even a video of it, though why I have no clue."

Sighing, Noah envisioned the notches carved into the door frame of his bar. Fifty-three young people who'd gotten their lives back and, hopefully, gone on to make better ones. He didn't keep track of them all, but a few had sent letters over the years, telling of their accomplishments and thanking him for what he'd done for them. Faces and names came to mind. A kid named Anthony was married and a father now. He'd sent Noah a Christmas card of his family. Mark had reunited with his lover and planned to start college in the spring. There were Rickys, Bobbys, Lukes, and Johns; some used their real names, some didn't. They'd all left the past behind like Noah had urged them to.

Some, like Anthony, had even gotten married and had kids. Not all working boys were gay. The media would destroy their lives if their true identities and whereabouts became known. The thirteen whose pictures made the news were already in danger. Thankfully, Noah had read and destroyed all the letters, so they wouldn't be found and reopen old wounds for those young men.

What was Noah's life worth next to theirs?

He reached up absentmindedly for the chain that no longer hung from his neck. It was locked away for safekeeping. When Mary cleaned Jeremy's apartment, she'd found a small package beneath the broken Christmas tree, with a label that said, "For Noah." The forensics team had finally deemed it harmless and Noah was allowed his gift -- a gold Saint Christopher medal that Jeremy, uncharacteristically, had bought new from a swanky jewelry store downtown. They allowed Noah to see it, then it joined his other possessions locked away in a safe.

Yes, Jeremy had gotten under his skin, and if Noah named names, the one he'd fought so hard to protect would come running, exactly like Trent wanted. Noah called and told Doc to use ropes and chains if necessary, but under no circumstances was the kid to return to the city, especially not with actual kidnappers still at large. Jeremy must be kept safe at all costs. In time, what the young man thought was love would fade to be a distant memory and he'd learn to love someone else. Noah's heart ached to think about that. Just because it was better that way didn't make it hurt any less.

Over the years, Noah had told many that a man was defined by the choices he made. Now it was time to practice what he'd preached. Head held high, he looked the attorney in the man's beady little eyes and said the words that sealed his fate, "Then I guess you can't help me."

While Noah was giving his life away, Jeremy was frantically trying to save it, seeking help from the most unlikely of places -- the Internet. He'd logged on to read the news story in its entirety, and then tortured himself by scanning the posted comments.

Strangely, it was the disappearances posters seemed focused on, instead of the shooting. They probably found the prospect a prostitute-killing pervert more interesting than a simple shooting. It certainly made for more sensational headlines.

Most condemned Noah, suggesting the most creative forms of torture imaginable. Jeremy wanted to scream. How dare they say such cruel things when they didn't know the truth? Noah was the best man he'd ever met and didn't deserve such things being said about him! Jeremy was about to send his own scathing comments in defense when a new message appeared.

RedtheFed: It's not true! One of the guys they're showing on TV is my brother. That man saved him and sent him home! He gave him back to us. He's not a kidnapper or a killer! Anyone can see that shooting was self-defense.

A moment later, another post appeared.

Geekboy12: No, he's not. One of those pictures is me. He picked me up, took me to a hotel, but only so I could shower and change. Then he took me to the bus station. He wouldn't even kiss me, let alone rape me and kill me like some of you seem to think!

Even if he'd never doubted Noah's words, reading that made Jeremy feel better. He had a sneaky suspicion the poster was the rent boy he'd seen leaning into the truck the day Noah had confessed his past.

RedtheFed: Why won't he talk? He didn't do anything wrong!

Like pieces of a puzzle, it all fell into place. Noah was sacrificing himself so these young men could get on with their lives. So nervous he could barely type, Jeremy posted his suspicions.

anewlife3: Look guys, if he defends himself, the media will come after you. Do you really want to read about your past on the front page of the newspaper? Noah doesn't want that either, and he'll let himself go down rather than expose any of you.

Geekboy12: We can't let him do that! I'd be dead right now if it weren't for him!

All negative reaction was suddenly replaced by message after message of support. Finally, Jeremy typed, "Look, guys, he needs your help. I'll understand if you don't come forward, but I don't think I need to tell you what will happen if you don't..." Nothing could be proven without a body, but even if all formal charges were dropped the cloud of doubt would follow Noah for years, and probably greatly decrease any chances of success saving the lost boys out in the streets. None of them would ever trust him again.

They created a private chat room and, in the end, six of the young men whose pictures were being shown decided to come forward, and five who could have remained safely out of the limelight agreed to make a stand, too. They chatted well into the night, and when the sun rose the next morning, they had a plan.

Early in the morning on December twenty-six, Judge Jenkins stared wide-eyed as his secretary open the door and admitted far more people than expected into his office. Following a group of young men were two older ones. The first he knew, the second he'd seen before but just couldn't place. Then it dawned on him. He'd backed that man in the last election! United States Senator Marshall Dickenson had come to testify? He checked his notes again. As far as the records showed, Noah Everett was just a small bar owner, no one of real import. For a relative unknown, it looked like he had some powerful friends.

"Gentlemen," the judge began. "If I'd known there were so many of you I'd have offered to meet someplace else."

The man he knew to be Dr. Benjamin "Doc" Cook, stepped forward. He'd last seen Dr. Cook over ten years ago, during the trial for the men who'd beaten Ben Jr., resulting in the boy's death. "That's quite all right, Judge. We won't take up much of your time. We've come to relieve your local law enforcement agency of several missing person's cases."

The two older men took seats in front of the desk, the younger ones, several of whom the judge recognized, lined up against one wall. All were quiet, respectful, and better dressed than when he'd last seen them.

"Your honor," the senator began, authority rolling off him in waves, "allow me to introduce myself..."

"That's quite all right, Senator, I know who you are," the judge replied.

"The media would have a field day if they knew I was here." The senator placed a photograph on the desk and slid it over. Underneath the image of a smiling young man were the words "Missing", relevant dates, and a number to call with information. "This is my son, and he's no more missing than I am. The man suspected in his disappearance found Joey after he ran away and convinced him to come home. Noah Everett returned my son to me, and I am deeply in his debt. So in debt that I left my family at Christmas in order to be here this morning. Joey wanted to come, but he's still recovering mentally from his ordeal on the streets -- something the man so unjustly being railroaded saved him from. I offered to come instead."

A handsome, young red-haired man stepped forward, also with confidence to spare, and handed over another missing person's flyer, starring a young man that bore an uncanny resemblance. "That's my brother, and since I saw him yesterday, I'd hardly call him missing. He's away at school, and no one else in the family knew what he'd done, until his picture was flashed all over the six o'clock news, that is. If those damned reporters fuck up his life..."

There was a cold hardness around those angry eyes that made the judge believe the threat wasn't idle. He studied the firm jaw and squared shoulders. Military, maybe?

Another young man, pale-faced and shaking, stepped forward. Judge Jenkins recognized him immediately. This was the suspected prostitute who'd been seen getting into Noah Everett's truck. "That's me," he said simply, laying down another flyer. "I'm the one in the videos, too. Noah Everett helped me to give up the streets and go home."

One by one the young men came forward, all telling how Noah had saved them. Finally, the judge's attention turned back to the one responsible for the meeting. "And you, Doc?" he inquired. "How were you saved by Mr. Everett?"

A sad smile crossed Doc's face, and the judge once again recalled how broken he'd been about his only child's death. "He saved me by joining me in my work. After the death of my son, I started A New Life, a non-profit organization that works to encourage young... how can I say this? Sex workers to give up their professions for more legitimate occupations. When possible, we reunite them with their families. If that's not an option, we arrange a job and place to stay until they can function on their own. Counselors are provided for those who need it."

"I see," the judge said. "What has that got to do with this case?"

"Everything!" the doctor replied. "Noah Everett is a volunteer with A New Life and has been for the past ten years. Every one of those missing men can be accounted for, although I'm sure you can understand why I'd rather my records not be released to the public. These men have new lives now and families. Nothing but bad memories and old enemies wait for them here. Many, as you can imagine, don't want their pasts known. It's critical that their whereabouts be kept in confidence. Rest assured that I can provide the necessary documentation to prove Mr. Everett did them no harm and was acting on behalf of this organization."

"I suppose Mr. Everett is a licensed counselor? There's no record of it in this state."

The doctor shook his head. "Not exactly."

"What is he, then?"

Doc was quiet for a few minutes, and from around the room, all eyes were locked onto him. "It would be a strange bit of luck if you've never met Noah Everett before he began helping me," Doc said. "He talks to these young men because he knows what they're going through and what they'll become if they don't stop before it's too late."

The judge nodded. Yes, he thought a much younger Noah Everett had darkened his door before, even if no charges ever stuck. He looked at the two older men, offering their good name to clear a former prostitute, then at all the earnest faces of the men that, if what they said was true, had been saved by that same man. Then he turned to a young brunet, the only one who hadn't yet spoken. "You, young man; who are you and why are you here?"

Seemingly caught off guard by the sudden attention, the youth sputtered, "Me? My name's Jeremy Kincaid, but I'm nobody, really. I'm here because Noah Everett is innocent, of the charges against him, and I can prove it."

"And just how do you intend to do that?"

The young man looked to Doc, who rose and said, "If you'll excuse us, sir, I think the two of you need to talk privately."

After the room had emptied of all but the brunet, Jeremy, a soft rap sounded on the door.

The judge raised an eyebrow and Jeremy murmured, "Tell him to come in."

"Come in," the judge called, intrigued by this unexpected turn of events.

The door opened and another man entered, slightly older than the first. His eyes shifted nervously around the room, face lighting up momentarily when he saw the brunet.

"Come on in, Eddie," Jeremy said, "it's all right."

The two young men sat down in the now vacant chairs in front of the desk. "Judge?" the newcomer began, biting his lower lip and wringing his hands. His eyes flickered toward the brunet.

"It's okay, Eddie," Jeremy said, patting the frightened blond's arm. "Just tell him what you heard."

The nervous young man pursed his lips and turned worried eyes to the judge. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled before saying, "Sir, my name is Edward Timms, and I believe I might be a witness to premeditated murder."

"Oh?" That certainly was unexpected. A witness? "Go on," the judge prompted.

"Well, you know the man Noah Everett shot? Murphy?"

The judge nodded.

"Well, I heard him and Trent... Trent Adams, talking. I was afraid to say anything then, but I heard them making some plans..."

Noah was allowed to change into the street clothes Mary had brought, and was then escorted to the same interrogation room used during his arrest. The wait seemed to stretch for hours before a uniformed officer admitted the court appointed attorney.

The same sergeant who'd handled Noah's earlier questioning entered the room a moment later. "Your services, Mr. Bishop," he nodded toward the lawyer, "will no longer be needed. All charges against your client have been dropped." His voice was far kinder than it had been the last time he'd been in that room with Noah. "Mr. Everett is no longer a suspect in the disappearance of those young men, either."

Noah watched the sergeant warily, believing the news too good to be true. It couldn't be that easy, there had to be a catch. He was so focused on the uniformed officer that he didn't notice his attorney was gone until he heard the door close.

"Mr. Everett, while you're no longer a suspect, you are a witness, and as such, your full cooperation is needed for this investigation. I'm going to play a tape for you. Listen carefully and tell me if you can identify the voice."

The sergeant placed a recorder on the table and pressed a button. Willie's voice filled the room. A fist squeezed Noah's heart upon hearing the raspy voice he'd never thought to hear again. "You fool!" Willie shouted. "He didn't steal them; he got rid of my problems for me. Sent the ones who can't cut it home to Mama."

The officer pressed the button again. "Can you tell me who that is?"

Hearing that voice again after watching Billy bleed to death was almost more than Noah could bear. "That's Billy," he mumbled quietly. Hot tears stung his eyes.

"By 'Billy,' do you mean William Cordell, also known as Willie Carnell?"

"I do."

"In your opinion, could he be talking about the young men you've encouraged to leave the streets?"

How did the sergeant know about that? Too stunned and choked up to answer, Noah merely nodded.

"He's also talking about you, isn't he?"

Again, Noah nodded.

The sergeant plumped down in a chair across from him and said, "That was taken minutes before he died. Would you like to hear the rest?"

Noah didn't answer, torn between wanting to know what had happened to his former love and not wanting to hear him die all over again.

Obviously taking the lack of response for a yes, the officer restarted the playback from the beginning.

Tears flowed down his cheeks while Noah listened to the shots, the heavy thud of a body falling, and the rasping gasps of Billy fighting for breath. Was that his own name he heard? When the sound of footsteps faded completely, one sentence could clearly be understood, "Trent Adams killed me." Noah listened for several moments to groans of pain and what might have been a prayer, then he heard it again -- his name. There was no mistaking it this time. "Sorry, Noah," was clearly hissed, followed by heartrending sobs. Then Noah heard himself enter the room and that hushed, final conversation with Billy. In the end, all was quiet. That was, except for anguished shrieks that could have only come from himself.

He stared at the table, one plump tear falling from his nose, then another, then another, until a small puddle formed on the polished wood. He nodded his thanks when a box of tissues was pushed into view. When capable of speaking again, he quietly asked, "Where did you get that?"

"It seems Mr. Cordell, Carnell, or whatever the hell his name was, was a suspicious sort. He started the recording shortly after the suspect, Trent Adams, entered his office. It was broadcast via Internet to several people around town -- a clerk in the chief's office being one of them.

"The video tapes from the security cameras show the rest: Adams and two others leaving the building when they encountered witnesses in the lobby -- you and the guard."

Noah's blood ran cold. He'd actually killed a man, or so he assumed. There hadn't been time to check for vitals and, due to the holidays, no one had provided any more news about the case. Asking his lawyer had proven useless. "What happened to the gunmen?"

"The man you shot is gonna live," the sergeant said, "for all the good it'll do him. The rest of his life will be spent behind bars. Your actions that afternoon were clearly self-defense, and you saved not only yourself but the guard who, in his gratitude, has bombarded us constantly with phone calls and personal visits on your behalf. Several officers in our own precinct have come forward to vouch for you, too, as well as a former sergeant who I believe is now in your employ."

"Kevin?"

"I knew him as Sergeant Poole, but yes, him. Raised quite a fuss, too." The last part was added with what might have been considered a smile.

It was quickly replaced by a scowl. "We have a warrant for Trent Adams' arrest. He doesn't appear to be the one who pulled the trigger. Those men are dead or in custody. Adams is still clearly the mastermind behind the shootings. The suspect in the hospital has also been very forthcoming with many other misdeeds. Unfortunately, it looks like Adams has fled."

"You mean he wasn't arrested for kidnapping Jeremy Kincaid?"

"There wasn't enough evidence."

Oh, shit! That meant he was still out there! Then something else dawned on him. "What about the disappearances? The men seen getting into my truck? You said I was no longer a suspect."

The sergeant looked puzzled before replying, "Didn't anyone tell you? They've all been accounted for. A Dr. Cook met with Judge Jenkins this morning, with proof of their whereabouts."

Doc? Doc was here? That meant Jeremy probably was, too!

Noah jumped from his chair. "I think I know where you can find Adams," he said, heart pounding. *Please let Jeremy be safe, please let him be safe.* "Pray to God it's not too late!"

Chapter Sixteen

The Tub of Suds didn't seem nearly as inviting as it once had, Jeremy thought, with his hands mechanically folding towels and senses alert for danger. Noah wouldn't be bringing dinner, and no comforting sounds came from the closed bar next door. Even the festive decorations seemed just dull reminders of how wrong life had gone lately. He sighed. He'd hoped that after the meeting with the judge, Noah would be a free man, but the law didn't seem to work that way. Doc told him not to worry. Too bad Jeremy had gotten so good at it that worrying was second nature.

He sat all alone and wired -- literally -- as a lure for Trent. After leaving the courthouse, he'd gone to several key locations to be seen by Willie's boys, and then returned to the one place Trent knew to look, waiting for the bait to be taken. He didn't have long to wait.

"What have we here?" Trent swept through the door, reminding Jeremy eerily of the night he'd first met Noah.

Glancing down at the opened notebook lying on the table, he tried to hold his voice steady while reciting, "The cops are looking for you."

"That bunch of losers?" Trent snorted dismissively. "We'll be long gone before they get here."

Jeremy shivered at the "we." He'd die before going anywhere with that asshole.

Trent strode across the floor with the same confident grace used for entering classy restaurants. That seemed like a lifetime ago. He stood so close that Jeremy could smell the rich, woodsy cologne that had once caused instant arousal. Now it served as a warning.

"What do you want?" Jeremy asked, clutching the tabletop to keep his trembling legs from collapsing.

If that welcoming smile had been on Noah's face, Jeremy would have been a happy man. On Trent, it fell short of sincere. "I want you, babe. Come away with me; we'll start over someplace else, just like we always talked about." His voice was soft, cajoling. It was hard to imagine this was the same man who'd tried to rape Jeremy, had him abducted, and tried to kill Noah. It was in that moment that Jeremy realized Trent was insane. Yet, when he looked into those familiar eyes, long-buried feelings twisted to life in his gut.

Unbidden images came to mind of Trent climbing through the window of the Deweys' house, slipping into his bed and into his body. They'd lain snuggled together afterward, Jeremy lost in a haze of contentment. It wasn't only sexual satiety; Jeremy felt safe knowing that when he aged out of foster care, Trent would take care of him while he earned a college degree. Then they'd go somewhere, have a life together. Trent loved him. It had all been a lie. Back then, he'd believed himself in love. It was only since meeting Noah that he'd truly come to know what love was. Sending someone away to keep them safe, or facing condemnation alone to protect others -- that was love. What he'd had with Trent wasn't.

Trent drew nearer, and Jeremy flipped the notebook over to hide his script.

"They say you killed a man," Jeremy continued, horrified that someone he'd once trusted implicitly could even think of taking the life of another.

"Willie? That bastard? Hardly a man! In fact, I did the world a favor."

Even after being briefed on Trent's suspected activities, Jeremy was shocked at the proud, boastful tone, and he didn't have to fake the wide-eyed terror the script dictated. "You mean it's true? You actually killed someone?" Jeremy used to find Trent's smirk sexy. Now it scared him senseless.

"I tried to kill two, but your lover seems determined to stay alive. Don't worry; he won't last long in prison."

"B-b-but..." Jeremy stammered. His heart rose in his throat, choking the words, as his mind finally registered just how truly dangerous this man was. "You... you killed someone!"

Trent's beguiling smile disappeared, replaced by an expression so angry and hate-filled that Jeremy would have run had Trent not been standing in the way. "Big fucking deal!" he shouted. "I killed Willie Carnell! It's not like he'll be missed or anything."

There it was, the confession he'd been after. Body coiled tightly to spring, Jeremy waited for the signal. When the red light appeared against the far wall, he panicked, forgetting his instructions, and dove under the folding table. Cops flooded the small room.

"Freeze!"

Trent glared under the table, handsome face twisting into an ugly mask of rage. "You miserable little shit!" he shrieked, hand reaching into his jacket. Jeremy, eyes squeezing tightly shut, huddled under the table, waiting for the inevitable, searing pain. A shot splintered his flimsy refuge, followed by another shot, further away this time, and then a *thump*. Jeremy opened his eyes to see Trent lying opened-eyed and staring. Blood oozed from a tiny hole in his forehead.

"Get an ambulance," an officer yelled, reaching down and pulling Jeremy from under the table. "You were supposed to duck behind the dryers! Are you okay?"

Jeremy nodded in a daze, carefully averting his eyes from the body lying motionless on the floor. Looking would make it even more real; he couldn't handle more real right now. *Don't look, don't look... that used to be my lover...*

Another officer stepped forward and led him away, helping remove his shirt and the Kevlar vest beneath when it became obvious that Jeremy's trembling hands couldn't get the job done. A technician stepped forward and gently peeled the microphone and tape from his chest. "We got it all recorded," she said with a satisfied smile. "You did good, kid." Right now he had no objection

to that word, for that's exactly what he felt like: a small, lost child. Cutting her eyes in the general direction where Trent lay, she scowled. "Too bad he died before we got to use it."

A familiar gruff voice penetrated the chaos, drowning out all other sounds. "This is my building, damn it, and my friend is in there!"

Noah! Jeremy's heart soared. Noah was there! And in street clothes, not the jail jumpsuit! Ignoring, "Hey, get back here!" and the hands that tried to stop him, Jeremy bolted toward the door and threw himself into the warm, comforting arms he thought he'd never feel again.

"Ow!"

Jeremy jumped back. "Sorry, forgot about your arm."

"I'm not sorry. Get back over here," Noah replied, wrapping Jeremy in a bear hug that lifted him off his feet. "Oh, my God! When the sergeant told me what you were up to, I almost died! Don't you ever do that to me again, you hear?"

All eyes were pinned to him and Noah, but if Noah didn't care, neither did Jeremy. With all that had transpired in the last few minutes, he desperately needed a hug. Burying his face in Noah's neck, he breathed in his lover's comforting scent. "I won't if you won't," he finally replied. There were easily a dozen people in the cramped Tub of Suds. At that moment, to Jeremy, only two of them mattered.

"You're safe, you're safe," Noah repeated into his hair, and punctuated it with kisses and something suspiciously like a sob. "That's all I could want, for you to be safe."

"You're free, Noah; that's all I wanted." Jeremy would have said more if Noah hadn't been squeezing his breath out.

"Then Merry Christmas; we each got what we wanted most." Noah loosened his hug but only to cup Jeremy's cheek in one large hand. "We'll celebrate later."

"Later," Jeremy agreed. "When we can plan."

"Yeah, and I promise that next year I won't let anyone fuck up Christmas."

"Me either." Jeremy tightened his arms around his lover, finally letting go and falling completely apart.

Throughout the tears and wails, screams and curses, Noah held him, repeating over and over, "It's all over now, you're safe. I'll keep you safe." And Noah would. Of that he was certain.

Epilogue

Noah studied the map again. Surely this couldn't be right? When about desperate enough to turn around and go back to the nearest gas station to ask for directions, he saw it: Pine Haven Cemetery. He pulled the truck in front of a massive iron gate.

"You can wait here if you want. I'll be right back," he said, climbing out into the warmth of a March afternoon in Georgia. He'd dreaded coming here, but knew he needed to. It was time for closure, and Jeremy's spring break provided the perfect opportunity.

Surprisingly, for such an out of the way place, the gate was kept in good repair, and so were the grounds. Most of the stones had blackened with age, but the graveyard itself was neat and tidy. He picked his way down a pebble-strewn path, noticing how many monuments bore the inscription "Cordell." The further he walked, the newer, and smaller, they were, until finally, at the head of a mound of recently turned earth, he found what he was looking for: the stone of William Joseph Cordell. The inscription read, "Beloved Son." It was oddly comforting to know that someone else would remember Billy as the likable young man with the dark hair and eyes, and not the jaded creature who'd met a violent end.

Noah gazed down at the marker, once again recalling Billy as he'd been when they'd first met. They'd sworn to spend their lives together, the two of them against the world. Oh, the plans they'd made. Billy's eyes had been filled with laughter then, his head with dreams. No matter what Willie said, Noah always knew that the boy from rural Georgia had loved him. That boy had just made a series of bad choices, and by the time he took the name Willie Carnell, Billy had already died to Noah. In the end, for just a few brief moments, he came back to say goodbye.

Reaching into his shirt collar, Noah unclasped the chain that had been around his neck since his eighteenth birthday. He carefully worked it free of the new pendant he'd received from Jeremy. The silver sparkled in the bright sunlight, and for a moment his heart ached at what he was going to do, what he needed to do before he could move on. Noah brought the half Mizpah coin to his lips and kissed it, then sank to his knees beside the grave.

"Sorry it took me so long to get here; things have been hectic. You'll be happy, or sad, to know that, down to the last man, your old stable came to me after you died. They were too afraid someone like Trent would take over. It's been pretty quiet since then, but you know business -- if there's a market, someone will tap it, and when they do, me, Jeremy, Doc, and a whole lot of others will be standing in their way. Thanks to all the publicity from my arrest, A New Life is in five states now and, as you used to say, 'Growing like a bad weed.'

"Speaking of business, I've got a new partner." Noah added, "Yeah, a partner in that sense of the word, too. The laundry and the bar are both doing great. Only, I never saw myself coming home every day to a lover who still has homework. By the way, your boy Trent didn't ruin his chances after all. It looks like that scholarship is his for the taking."

Noah smiled fondly, picturing his dining room table most afternoons, books and papers scattered over every inch. "With him coaching me, I should have no trouble finally getting my GED. I take the test next month."

A cloud passed over the sun then, echoing his changing mood. "I never stopped loving you, Billy," Noah murmured softly. "I've moved on and there's someone else for me now, but there's still a place in my heart that belongs only to you." Having said what needed saying, he placed the pendant over the stone and rose, brushing dirt from his knees.

"You don't have to hide," he said a bit louder. "This isn't a secret."

It was a warm day, but he didn't mind the additional heat that nestled into his side when Jeremy slid under his arm.

Looking down into those dark, questioning eyes, he explained, "I didn't ask you to come to the grave because I thought it might be too hard for you, after what he tried to do. Then to discover what he and I used to be to each other."

With a profound wisdom that was uniquely Jeremy's, his lover replied, "Wherever you are is where I want to be. I never expected that it would only be places I'd want to go on my own." Looking down at the mounded earth, he asked, "Do you think one day I'll be able to visit Trent's grave and make peace like you did?"

"I don't know," Noah replied. "But if you do, I'll be there for you, too."