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*Meant
For
Each Other*

D H STARR



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Meant For Each Other
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Meant For Each Other

D. H. Starr

Dedication

To Ally Blue. Thanks for taking the time to respond to my emails and for encouraging me to keep writing and never give up. You are an inspiration. To my readers, if you want a great read, you should buy her books. I've recommended several on my website.

Acknowledgements

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Author Note

To learn more about D. H. Starr and his books, visiting his website at www.dhstarr.com or follow his blog at www.dhstarr.blogspot.com.

Prologue

June, 1995

Craig Harper dashed out of his final class. It was the last day of his freshman year in high school. He rushed to his locker, emptied all of his things into his book bag, and ran to the front entrance of the school. Not stopping to say goodbye to any of his friends, Craig had one thing in mind – get outside and to Jeremy.

Jeremy Finn was waiting for him by the bike rack. Craig skipped out of the school, tripping over his feet and nearly cracking his head on the cement steps. A few students around him chuckled as they stepped aside to avoid being taken down along with him. He grabbed the railing just in time, avoiding a nasty fall. Righting himself, Craig glanced over at Jeremy who shook his head in amusement.

“Shut up.” Craig scowled.

“What? I didn’t say anything.” Jeremy walked over to Craig and they headed to their homes which were about ten minutes away. Best friends since two, they had been in every class together, all the way back to being enrolled in the same daycare.

The last day of school had always been a high point for the two of them, but Jeremy was moving across country to Arizona the next day. The summer, which had always been the best times of their lives, now threatened to be long and lonely. Neither of them spoke about Jeremy’s move as they headed up the hill to their affluent neighborhood homes in Newton, just west of Boston.

Reaching Craig’s home, they dumped their bags on his front porch and ran to the small oval park which separated their houses. They could see each other’s front doors from across the park and had once devised a makeshift phone with cans and yarn. It was one thing to link neighboring homes, but to steal about two hundred yards of string and wind it through trees and across streets had stretched their parents’ patience beyond the normal limits. Each of them had been grounded for a week when a neighbor complained the string got caught in their car wheels.

Running into the park, they grabbed at each other’s arms, trying to win their race to the biggest tree in the park, the tree they had climbed ever since they could reach the lowest branch – The Love Tree, hearts with initials inside and arrows piercing them adorned just about every inch of visible bark.

Jeremy grabbed Craig’s arm and yanked with all of his might, causing Craig to lose his footing and to fall to the ground with a crash and a grunt. Lethely grabbing the low hanging branch with one hand, Jeremy swung his legs into the air and pulled himself into a standing position.

Craig stood up and brushed himself off. “You’re such an asshole.”

Jeremy laughed at him, his wide smile lighting up his face. "C'mon princess. This tree isn't getting any younger."

Craig grimaced and hooked his hands around the branch, hoisting himself up so he stood next to Jeremy. Although Craig had a penchant for being a klutz, The Love Tree had lots of thick, sturdy branches and made falling rather difficult. A plush blanket of leaves covered each branch, quickly making them invisible to anyone who walked below them in the park or on the sidewalk.

After they had climbed about fifty feet, Jeremy stopped and waited for Craig to catch up. "You want to stop here or keep climbing?"

Craig could tell Jeremy wanted to keep climbing so he simply passed him, working his way further up the tree. After they climbed about seventy feet, Craig suggested they were high enough. He sat back, straddling a thick branch and leaning against the trunk. Jeremy followed closely, straddling the same branch and grabbing a smaller branch above his head for balance. A wave of sadness passed through Craig as he gazed at Jeremy. *I don't want him to move.* He couldn't recall one memory without Jeremy by his side. He was like a brother, but without any of the rivalry or aggravation so many of his friends complained about. Their friendship was one adventure after another, kind of like Jess and Leslie from his favorite book, *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. Except instead of the woods, The Love Tree was their secret place where magic and dreams became real. That and neither of them had died.

Jeremy kicked him lightly on the shin, as if he could sense his sour mood. "What's on your mind?"

"It just sucks that you're moving away. Really, really far away. It's not like you're moving a few towns over or even one state over. You are moving thousands of miles away.

Jeremy remained silent, a thoughtful expression on his face. "It sucks big time. We'll always be best friends though, right?"

Craig tried to smile. *Of course we'll always be friends.* He shrugged, his resentment at the situation still raw and painful.

Regarding Craig, Jeremy's finally smiled. He always managed to brighten a dark moment. "So instead of pouting, let's make the best of this day." Before speaking again, he stood and glanced around, peeking through the spaces in the leaves, seeing but not being seen. "Hey Craig, you ever give any thought to what you want to be when you grow up?"

Craig stared at Jeremy as if he had lost his mind. "Why in the hell would I think about that? That's like seven hundred years from now."

Jeremy laughed. "Yeah. But you've never given any thought at all to what you would like to be when you grow up?"

Realizing Jeremy wasn't playing some game and he was actually curious, Craig contemplated the question. "No. I haven't picked out a job or anything, but I want to do something with computers and something creative; where I'll be able to use my mind.

I'd be bored to death if I did something brainless or repetitive." He lifted his gaze to Jeremy who simply nodded.

"That makes sense. You've always been creative and experimental. You wouldn't last long at a desk job or doing other people's taxes." Jeremy remained silent after his comment.

Craig decided to break the silence. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Jeremy sat down on the branch once again. "That's easy. I want to be a teacher. I want to teach elementary school kids."

The answer surprised Craig. "Really? Why would you want to continue with school once you finish? I can't wait until I don't have to go to school anymore."

Jeremy laughed. "I like school, Craig. I've always gotten good grades, made lots of friends..." Craig nodded. He already knew all of this. "But," Jeremy went on, "when I think of school, mostly I think of you. We met the first day my mom dropped me off at daycare. That's not really school, but it's kind of the same thing. We have gone through everything together. I guess I associate school with my best friend and being happy."

Craig took in a deep breath as a lump formed in his throat. His heart thrashed inside his chest and the hum of blood rushing behind his ears momentarily drowned out all other senses. Jeremy had always been better at expressing feelings and emotions, but never something like this; so heartfelt and revealing. The fact he opened himself up, shared such an intimate thought, forced his sadness to the surface once again. *Why does he have to move?*

Of course he knew the answer to the question. Jeremy's grandmother was ill and needed her only daughter nearby to help care for her. Still, he had always pictured the two of them going through high school, graduating, and going to college together. With Jeremy moving and his plan obliterated, he had no idea what would happen in the future.

As much as he didn't want to talk about the move, they couldn't avoid the topic forever. After a moment Jeremy continued in a quiet voice. "Craig. You are my best friend in the world. I don't know what I'm going to do without you by my side."

A sense of relief filled Craig, knowing Jeremy struggled with the move too. His relief quickly shifted to concern. He didn't want Jeremy to be upset, especially on their last day together. "You didn't create the situation and we can't do anything to change it. We'll still call each other, and email, and we can talk using Skype. It won't be so bad." The lie didn't even convince *him*.

Jeremy frowned. "It's not the same. I want to tell you something, Craig. You've been the one I've trusted with everything. You're the first person I think of when I have a secret to share or if I'm upset about something. You've been the best friend anyone could ever hope to have." Craig understood Jeremy wanted to ease his pain, but the words cut at him. "What I'm trying to say is that I love you, Craig."

Craig's head snapped up. He loved Jeremy too, but had never dared to say the words fearing Jeremy might freak out and never speak to him again. His mind reeled,

wondering whether Jeremy meant he loved him as a friend or something more. He had realized his own feelings for Jeremy ran deeper than friendship, something that scared the shit out of him. Still, Jeremy had the courage to say the words. Craig needed to say the words or he would regret never having taken the chance to say how he really felt.

"I love you too. You are the one who always sticks up for me when Dickhead Donald tries to beat me up. You're the one who picks my sorry ass off the ground when I fall. That's why I'm so bummed. I'm never going to find someone like you. It's too late to start over." Craig's sadness intensified as the lump in his throat became larger and his eyes began to blur. He almost started crying, something he desperately wanted to avoid in front of Jeremy, and had to fight back the tears.

Tenderness crossed Jeremy's face and he reached his hand out, touching Craig's cheek. Surprised, Craig almost lost his balance. He tightened his grip on an overhead branch and peered at Jeremy, whose eyes were fixed on him. No nervousness or hesitancy showed in Jeremy's face as his hand remained on his cheek, slowly caressing. Without realizing what he was doing, Craig leaned into Jeremy's hand as a tear escaped his eye and trickled down his cheek.

Jeremy's used his thumb to stop the tear in its track, cupped the back of Craig's neck, and leaned towards him. He closed the distance between them and kissed Craig on the lips. Craig began to pull back, fearing Jeremy would get angry with him. How many times had he dreamed of kissing Jeremy? How many fantasies played out in his mind?

Heat travelled to the spot where Jeremy's hand touched him. The slickness of Jeremy's tongue, sliding against his own, triggered tingling fingers of electricity throughout his body, sending currents along his skin and forcing blood to his groin as his penis hardened inside his jeans. A moment of panic took hold, but then Craig remembered Jeremy had initiated this.

He allowed Jeremy to take the lead, relaxing as Jeremy put his other hand on Craig's shoulder. What started as a chaste kiss quickly turned passionate. Jeremy ran his tongue over Craig's lips and instinctively, Craig opened to Jeremy, their tongues exploring each other's mouths.

Jeremy's mouth contained a hint of orange flavor, probably from lunch, but his scent was purely Jeremy. The fresh, crisp smell of spring air and new leaves wafted between them, causing his head to spin as Jeremy pulled them closer, deepening the kiss, pressing their lips tightly together. He had to grip the branch above his head to prevent them from falling.

Jeremy's hands roamed down Craig's body, gently touching pectorals, brushing over nipples, and resting on his waist, leaving a tingling trail of excitement in their wake. Craig's vision funneled until the only the two of them existed, nestled together high up in the branches of The Love Tree.

After a few minutes which seemed like years, they pulled apart and stared at each other. "Whoa." Blood rushed to Craig's head and he had to grab onto the branch with both hands to stabilize himself. "I can't believe you just did that."

Jeremy laughed. "You want me to take it back? I've wanted to do that for a while and I couldn't leave without at least kissing you once. I really do love you, Craig."

Craig didn't know what to say. Even though he had begun to question his feelings for Jeremy, he had never imagined actually kissing him for real. Now that they had kissed, he was amazed at how incredibly right it had felt. It was almost cruel. On the day he had to say goodbye, he discovered they could have been so much more than best friends. The discovery was bittersweet and the irony caused another wave of grief to pass over him.

The moments ticked by. They remained silent as they shifted on the branch until Jeremy finally spoke. "Come on, we should probably get out of the tree. I'm sure our parents will be pissed if we're late for the dinner they planned for us. Craig nodded in agreement and they worked their way back down the tree.

The rest of the evening went by in a blur. Craig couldn't stop thinking about his kiss with Jeremy. On the spare moments when he did push the thought from his mind, he remembered Jeremy had to leave the next morning which replaced the thrill from their kiss with depression. When they finished dinner, everyone hugged and said their goodbyes.

That night in bed, Craig replayed the kiss over and over. Even as a first kiss, he knew no one else could have made him feel the way Jeremy had. In one instant, he realized how much he loved his best friend and had also discovered something much more important about himself. Tears began to stream down his cheeks and Craig flipped over, burying his head in his pillow, sobbing.

The next morning, Craig woke up earlier than usual. His head was heavy from not having gotten a good night's sleep, but he jumped out of bed anyway, threw on his jeans and a sweatshirt, and ran outside. Jeremy was just getting into his car.

"Jeremy!"

Jeremy stopped, turning to face Craig. Time stood still, before Jeremy ran over to him, grabbing him in a tight hug. Craig wrapped his arms around Jeremy, hot tears spilling out of his eyes. When they pulled apart, Craig looked at Jeremy and saw his eyes filled with tears as well. Jeremy wiped his face and sniffled. "I'll call you once we get there."

Craig nodded, but said nothing, his grief making it too difficult to speak. As Jeremy returned to the car and climbed in, a piece of Craig closed off with the same finality as the car door. He ran about half a block once the car started to drive away, waving frantically to Jeremy's retreating face, which gazed out the back window at him. And then the car turned the corner. Jeremy was gone.

Chapter One

Fifteen Years Later...

Craig stared at his computer screen, lost in thought, something that had been happening more often lately. The business he and his college friends had started, Spectacular Designs, had a steady flow of clients which kept the five of them busy. But busy didn't fix the other problems Craig had to deal with outside of work. Namely, his boyfriend, Robert. What had once been a source of happiness in his life now hung as a dark cloud. In fact, he had taken to spending more and more time at work, avoiding the criticism he had to deal with at home. Just this morning they had argued once again about his work. Robert was constantly pushing him to leave the business he had created in order to take a job which would pay more. How many times did they have to have the same discussion before Robert would realize that a major reason Craig loved his job was because he had helped to start the business.

Janet came out of her office, her head tilted to the side holding her cell phone to her ear while she scribbled madly on her notepad. Craig smiled and watched her on her phone call, remembering the first time he had met her.

Second semester his sophomore year of college, he took his first graphics arts course and met Janet. She had been incredibly intense, wanting to double major in business and graphic arts, but Craig loved her upbeat and fun nature. She made him laugh and cry. They spent all their time together and quickly became best friends. Meeting her had saved him from coasting through college in the fog that had followed him for four long and lonely years following Jeremy's move.

Janet's energy and friendship had brought him back to the person he had been when Jeremy had been around; a vibrant, upbeat person who loved life and lived fully. Still, he had never been able to let go of the memory of loss. No one, not even Robert, measured up to the feelings he had for Jeremy.

Craig was distracted by Janet's voice next to him. "You're working late tonight." He glanced up from his computer screen and turned to face her. He hadn't heard her end her phone call.

She grinned at him. "I swear, if you keep working as hard as you do, you're going to have to take over my position. I'm not earning my paycheck with you around."

Craig smiled a devilish grin, allowing exaggerated innocence to play across his face. "I work this hard for the sheer love of the job." He did love his work, but he had other reasons for staying late so often.

Janet punched his shoulder. "You don't have to be a wise ass."

Craig laughed, rubbing his arm in mock-pain. "I'm working late because I can't get a solid idea on how to proceed with this project." Again, not the real reason, but one Janet would believe.

Janet leaned over to glance at his screen. "A bed and breakfast job, huh? What do they want you to design?"

Craig pushed the file across his desk. Fran and Berma, two lesbians who lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts, had contacted him to reinvent their logo for their annual mailing to advertise their small but cozy business. "The place is called Earth and Sea. They want me to create a design which represents land and water, but they want the two images to blend somehow so you can't tell where one ends and the other begins. I'm seriously stuck."

"Well, I'm sure you'll manage. Why did they choose you though? You do the modern stuff. Kevin would have been a much better choice for this project. He does the natural designs."

Craig knew Janet was right, but he had been the only person in the building when Fran and Berma stopped in. After talking to him, they refused to allow anyone else to work on the job. They said karma had brought them to Spectacular and to him. Craig agreed to do the job, but thought the two ladies had been nut jobs.

He leaned back in his chair, turning to face Janet and folding his arms behind his head. "I'm only staying a little longer. I want to develop some kind of a concept for this project. It's been sitting on my desk taunting me for the past week." Leaning forward and staring at his computer, Craig tried to will the screen to give him inspiration.

"Ok, hon, but don't stay too late. You do have a life after all." Janet stood but didn't walk away. When he looked up, he saw a perplexed expression on her face as she assessed him.

"What?"

She reached over and tousled his blond hair. "Nothing. I'm just wondering..." She clamped her mouth shut.

"What!"

"I was just thinking how handsome you are. That casual sloppy hairdo is so *in* right now, combine that with your dazzlingly blue eyes, high cheekbones with sun-kissed red highlighting them, your perfectly smooth creamy skin and those muscles." She sighed. "And you barely go to the gym. You're just blessed with naturally rounded shoulders and no body fat. Finish it off with you clothes which hug your body in all the right places..." her voice trailed off as she stood back to check out his ass. "If you weren't gay, I would jump your bones."

"Shut up Janet." He hated when she complimented his physical appearance, although deep down, he reveled in the adoration. He wasn't getting any satisfying attention at home; hadn't for a couple of years now.

Janet shook her head. "Sorry, babe." She gave Craig a peck on the cheek, and headed towards the door.

Craig remained at his desk, staring at his screen, decidedly uninspired. Exasperated, he got up and grabbed his Marlboro Lights from the desk drawer. He

walked outside, leaned against the wall next to the door, and lit up. He took a drag and exhaled forcefully, hoping some of his frustration would exit his body with the smoke.

Chelsea was exactly the kind of neighborhood Craig enjoyed in Manhattan. Unlike midtown, the streets were never overcrowded and the businesses were warm and fun. The tall buildings, mostly red-brick, filled with apartments, towered on either side of the streets, while the avenues were lined with stores. The stores catered to the largely gay population; natural food, clothing, alternative medicine, coffee shops. Craig never minded the constant flow of eye candy either. Something about Chelsea screamed New York City to him; upscale-cozy with a great deal of pretention and a fast pace. *Perfect for a working environment.*

Just as he blew out a second puff of smoke, two men walked by. One, overly muscled like he spent his life in the gym, the other a waifish, petite thing. They held hands. As they passed Craig, they waved at the air and the shorter of the two made an exaggerated show of coughing then glared at him. Craig simply smiled at the mousy little man, but made a mental note he needed to give quitting a shot once again.

Just as he started to head back inside, his cell phone vibrated at his hip. He glanced at the caller ID and an immediate wave of panic passed through his chest. Robert.. And it was six o'clock. *Shit.* Wincing, he flipped open the phone. "Hey, babe."

"Where in the hell are you? You're supposed to be here. You know how annoyed I get when you don't keep our plans." Craig sighed inaudibly. Robert, his boyfriend for the past eight years, worked in Battery Park for Goldman Sachs as an investment banker and was nothing if not punctual, precise, and a pain in the ass.

"I'm so sorry. The project for those two batty ladies with the B&B is giving me problems and I lost track of time...again." Craig hoped his excuse would ease the irritation radiating at him through the phone. Robert responded well to business and work issues.

"Well, I guess I can understand that, but you should have called to tell me you'd be late."

Craig shook his head. "I'm leaving now. I'll be home in about twenty minutes." He hung up and went back inside to shut down his work station and gather his things. He lived with Robert in the West Village so the walk home was short and pleasant. Before leaving, he flipped through the file for Earth and Sea one more time, then closed it a bit more roughly than intended and left the building, locking up behind himself.

He pulled out another cigarette and cupped his hand to prevent the wind from blowing out the flame. His foot caught on an uneven patch of the sidewalk and he stumbled. The cigarette dropped to the ground as Craig grabbed for the phone booth next to him before making a complete ass of himself and tumbling all the way to the ground. His cigarette rolled down the sidewalk, blown by the wind, so he abandoned the idea of smoking, and continued walking south towards the West Village.

He passed one of the many travel agencies littered about Chelsea and his thoughts returned to Robert. A mixture of sadness and aggravation filled him as he recalled

Robert's terse tone over the phone. For the past couple of years, ever since Robert had been promoted at work and ran his own domestic trading floor, he had become fixated on deadlines and money, unable to draw a line between work and his personal life. He seemed to measure his worth by material success, what he owned, where he traveled, how others perceived him.

As always when he longed for the way their relationship used to be, Craig's mind drifted back to the night eight years ago, each detail as vivid as if it had just happened.

* * * * *

Twenty-two and fresh out of college, Craig had just moved to New York into his small loft in the West Village, something he had sublet from an artist who would be traveling through Europe for a year.

Despite his friendship with Janet, a friendship which had saved him from his loneliness and depression, Craig had never given men a real chance. No one could measure up to Jeremy. If Craig were to be honest with himself, he didn't want anyone to be able to replace the one person who he truly loved. A part of him had hoped that someday they might reconnect, but Jeremy had called him less and less frequently the more time passed and Craig was too afraid that if he raised the issue, he might push Jeremy away completely. As it turned out, that was precisely what happened without him doing anything.

After he and his friends unloaded his stuff, he had decided to explore the city. He found himself in a local gay bar, The Monster, located in the heart of the gayest part of the neighborhood, Christopher Street.

He had been out since he had gone to college, but UNH didn't have a vibrant and extensive gay community and his sexual experiences had been limited at best. The choice to move to the city was bold, but also exciting and he couldn't wait for his world to open up before him.

When he entered The Monster, he pushed his nerves aside and walked to the bar, preparing himself to be carded. He looked at least three years younger than his actual age and had miraculously retained a fresh-faced look that belied the depression he'd suffered for years. As he sidled up to the bar, he noted the doubtful expression crossing the bartender's face.

"Hey, sweet thing. You're a doll, but I'm gonna have to ask for your ID before I can—"

Craig slapped his driver's license on the counter. "Here you go."

Examining Craig's proof of age, he eyeballed Craig once again. "Damn, baby. You may be legal, but you look like jail bait."

Craig winced. People commented on his youthful appearance all the time, but he didn't like it. "Dewar's and Coke please."

He winked and poured his drink, sliding the glass across the table. "Name's Charlie. Someone as cute as you gets to call me by my first name. On the house, doll face."

Craig smiled and thanked Charlie. He'd never been called so many nicknames in rapid succession since, well, ever.

He sipped his drink, looking around the room to take in the patronage and get a sense of the place. The bar was open and well-lit. Not one of those dark places that used dim lighting to obliterate any real possibility of seeing what people actually looked like. This place was a social bar, not a pick-up joint. Craig made a mental note that he liked this place.

As he surveyed the room, Craig caught movement to his left. He glanced over, struck by the sight of a tall, well built, and devastatingly handsome man.

Cropped dark brown hair framed strong facial features; sharp jaw line, high cheekbones, narrow nose. His skin bronzed, appearing smooth and silky. He wore a blue button down polo-shirt and navy suit pants. The index finger of his left hand was hooked through the loop in the collar of the matching jacket, casually slung over his shoulder. "Robert Howell," he said, a wide grin spreading across his face revealing perfectly straight, white teeth.

Craig smiled back extending his trembling hand as his heart beat recklessly behind his ribs. "Craig Harper. Nice to meet you."

Robert took his hand. He had a firm grip which exuded confidence. "I haven't seen you around here. Are you new to the neighborhood or to the city?"

"Both," Craig answered honestly.

"Welcome. Glad you chose to come *here* tonight. Where are you from?" Robert's voice was deep and masculine.

"Just outside Boston. I grew up in a town called Newton." Craig felt ridiculous revealing such trivial information about himself, but he was inexperienced in the art of small talk. "How about you?"

"I've lived here for three years. Moved here from Michigan. Absolutely adore this city." Robert smiled and Craig found himself staring at his perfect teeth once again. He gave Robert a once-over, inspecting his elegant but masculine neck which gave way to broad shoulders. His body tapered sharply from his shoulders to his trim waist. His slacks hugged him in just the right places, hinting at a generous bulge behind the zipper. Craig's cock twitched and he quickly returned his gaze to Robert's face.

They spent the rest of the evening talking. Robert had begun as an investment banker at Goldman Sachs, excited to be on the front lines of the stock market. He had been fascinated by Craig's entrepreneurship, starting a business with his college friends.

What had begun as sheer physical attraction had shifted to appreciation for the passion Robert displayed towards his work. To meet someone who tapped at a part of him which had lain dormant for so long sparked excitement in him. Hope that maybe

he *could* find someone else he could respect and love. Maybe Jeremy hadn't been his only chance at happiness.

The weeks that passed were exciting for Craig as he got to know Robert better. He found Robert's self-assured manner appealing and his feelings quickly moved from friendship to a desire for something more. After a month of dating, they became a committed couple. Craig had held onto his loft for the whole year of his lease, but when the artist offered him a second year, he opted to accept Robert's invitation to move in with him.

They had been experimental and devoted in bed during the earlier years of their relationship. Robert's libido could rival a teenager's. They spent hours wrapped in each other's arms, finding new ways to bring pleasure to one another, generating the kind of sweaty heat that would make porn stars blush. He hadn't been terribly experienced when they first got together, but Robert had been patient with him. Craig figured out quickly what to do to turn Robert into a spluttering mess...the good kind.

Craig had felt like the luckiest man in the world. He'd found an intelligent man who cared about his career and was hot as all fucking hell. He'd allowed Robert past his guard. All other relationships had failed because they never measured up to his first kiss and the feelings he had shared with his best friend growing up.

* * * * *

Craig sighed, snapping back to the present. He missed the early years of their relationship when things had been vibrant and new. He missed the excitement of listening to Robert talk about the trends in the stock market and celebrating with him when his predictions on which companies would do well and which would fail turned out to be accurate. The idealism that Robert exuded matched Craig's passion for his own work. Robert believed his job provided secure futures for his clients and prided himself on making individual portfolios blossom into sizable nest eggs. He worked because he believed in what he did and Craig found the trait irresistible. Those days were gone. They had been for two years now, ever since Robert had been promoted to floor manager.

No longer responsible for the portfolios he had been so successful at managing, he became a bit meaner, complaining about the idiocy of the *kids* he managed who couldn't tell their asses from their heads. He focused increasingly on the size of his own bank account and the material demonstration of his financial success. As the passion leaked out of his love for his job, a fissure in the passion they shared as a couple seemed to grow as well. He cared more about being seen than being together.

The distance between them had grown to such a degree that Craig took to spending more time at work; being at home wasn't relaxing and didn't make him happy. He would never tell his co-workers the real reason he spent so much time at work. Craig still believed in loyalty, despite his strained relationship. He needed to protect Robert's image in the eyes of his friends and portray him in a positive light.

Deep in thought he hadn't been paying attention and was surprised to find he had turned onto his street. He walked up the four flights to their penthouse apartment, dropped his bag and jacket in a heap by the door, and crossed the room to Robert, giving him a peck on the cheek. Robert nodded and continued leafing through the papers in front of him. Craig poured himself a glass of wine and lay on the couch, picking up his book.

Strong hands covered his shoulders and began to knead them. Craig looked up. When had Robert come over? Not that it mattered. He enjoyed the impromptu massage. Slowly, Robert worked at his shoulders, kneading the muscles like dough. Craig couldn't remember the last time Robert had given him a massage. He'd done this sort of thing often when they first started dating. This was exactly what Craig missed in their relationship; a simple act like a backrub, no expectation for sex, just nurturing closeness.

Nostalgia and hope filled Craig's mind. He leaned his head back to peer into Robert's eyes, but did not meet the expression he expected. Instead of affection, Robert's lust-filled eyes stared down at him. Before Craig could sit up, Robert's hands slid down his chest and stomach, stopping over his groin. "Robert, what are you doing?" He covered Robert's hands with his, but Robert's fingers yanked open his belt.

"What do you think I'm doing?" He reached into Craig's pants and closed his hand over Craig's cock. "Hey, didn't my massage turn you on?"

"Well, it was relaxing." Craig's tension returned, his hope for a romantic moment shit on yet again. He wanted to push Robert's hands away but wanted another fight even less, so he lifted his hands away and sighed.

"Don't worry, baby, I'll relax you." Robert snaked his way around the couch and knelt by Craig's midsection, pushed underneath the elastic of his briefs and wrapped a warm hand around his cock, twisting his hand as he slid it up and down, creating exhilarating friction. Craig hardened under Robert's touch, despite his disappointment.

"Mmm, you like that don't you?" Robert's voice purred in his ear.

Craig tried to sit up, but Robert pushed him back down, working his cock with greater vigor, using the precum to slick his shaft. "Robert, couldn't we...uhhh." Robert ran his finger tip along the delicate skin under his cock head sending shivers up Craig's spine. "Maybe we could talk?"

"What for?" Robert yanked Craig's pants down to his knees then dove onto Craig's cock, swallowing the whole thing in one motion before Craig could protest. Craig gasped as the hot wetness of Robert's mouth engulfed him. He tilted his head backwards while arching his hips upwards into Robert's mouth. *He's too good at this.*

Against his own desires, Craig succumbed. Robert could work his body into a puddle of desire without thinking. "God, your mouth...so good."

Robert continued working on his cock, rolling his tongue over the head and tip which was freely leaking by this point, stimulating each nerve along his shaft as he pulled Craig's pants the rest of the way off.

Robert wet his finger and slipped it into the crease of Craig's ass, snaking it towards his hole. Craig bucked his hips again, electrified by the intensity of Robert's knowing hands. He glanced down, catching Robert's lips pulling up into a wicked grin around his cock as he continued to invade Craig's hole, hitting his prostate with each probe of his finger.

Craig's cock became even harder, straining against his skin. Just as his orgasm began to build inside him, Robert released his cock. "Oh, no you don't. Not yet." Robert's eyes glittered with the lustful knowledge of his lover's body, always able to stop at the precise moment before Craig came. "I'm going to fuck the cum out of you."

The statement momentarily cut through his pleasure. The only time Robert paid this kind of attention to him lately was when they had sex. *Stop. You told yourself to stop thinking like that.* He allowed Robert to flip him over so he knelt on the couch. Robert's hands cupped each of his ass cheeks and he lowered his head between Craig's legs. Hot breath blew against his hole and then Robert's tongue flicked over the surface, making him tremble.

Just when he thought it couldn't get hotter, Robert sealed his lips around Craig's tight opening and ran his tongue in circles, gently yet feverishly urging the ring of muscle to loosen and open for him. Craig moaned, a breath's *ahhh* escaping his mouth. With each circle, Robert's tongue probed deeper into him until he fucked Craig's ass with his tongue. *He's a sexual black belt. No doubt about that.*

"You ready for me?" Robert's husky voice was filled with need. Craig answered him by lifting his hips a bit higher and arching his back to give Robert full exposure to his wet and twitching anus. He grabbed Craig's hips and positioned the head of his cock against Craig's opening. In one smooth thrust, he shoved himself all the way in, eliciting a gasp from Craig as the shock of sudden penetration filled all of his senses. He controlled his breathing while adjusting to the stretch and burn, but after years and years of sex with Robert, his muscles relaxed to Robert's body as naturally as his lungs drew in air.

Craig pushed back, matching Robert's thrusts, his ass meeting Robert's hips in a regular rhythm. Each time Robert thrust into Craig's tight channel, his cock nudged his gland and sent ripples of pleasure searing through Craig's body. Craig's arms and legs began to tingle, his muscles turning to rubber, as his orgasm built inside him until he feared he wouldn't be able to support his own weight.

Robert increased his pace and began switching his angle with each thrust. "You're close, baby. Your hole quivers around my cock when you're ready to come. Go ahead, let loose."

Craig obeyed Robert's instructions, arching his body as the orgasm built in intensity within him. Unable to hold out any longer, Craig's nerves exploded deep inside of him, radiating out so his entire body quivered with pleasure. He grabbed his cock and began pumping as jet after hot jet of cum erupted from him and onto the armrest of the leather couch.

Once his orgasm subsided, Robert quickened his pace and his grip on Craig's hips tightened. A few more thrusts and Robert cried out, slamming his cock deep into Craig's ass. Craig's insides filled with hot semen as Robert's cock pulsed repeatedly. Once the aftershock of Robert's orgasm passed, he pulled out abruptly, heading to the bathroom to clean up, Craig assumed.

Left on his hands and knees, spent from his orgasm, and abandoned without a word, Craig used what strength he had left to push himself off the couch and into a standing position. He went into the kitchen and dampened a washcloth, returning to the couch and cleaning the white liquid streaks of his spunk before they had a chance to set in and leave a stain. *Robert will have a fit if this leaves a mark.*

A single wry laugh escaped him. When they began dating, they had sex on everything, and then lay together in their own semen, kissing and talking, not caring whether it dried, stained, or leaked. Sex had been about being together and holding one another. Craig had enjoyed their after sex tenderness even more than the sex itself. The physical act was about the pleasure of the moment until release, the holding and loving after sex was far more intimate. Being held, talking in sleepy mumbles about their love and their futures and how good they felt together gave Craig far greater happiness and satisfaction than an orgasm ever could.

Once again, he pushed his thoughts aside. The days of snuggling and attentiveness had long passed and pining wouldn't change anything. *Besides, eight years is a long time. I can't expect the romance to last forever.* A part of him always refuted that particular thought. *Yes, I should expect that.* But he never paid attention.

Robert came back into the living room, distracting him from his thoughts. "Why are you still naked? We're going out." Craig held up the wash cloth. "Oh, good thinking. That couch cost twenty-five hundred dollars. I would be seriously pissed if it got ruined." He checked the couch to make sure Craig had cleaned all traces of semen. "Good. Get changed now. I'm starved."

Craig walked into their bedroom, depositing the washcloth into the hamper, and selected a pair of comfortable jeans and a t-shirt. Once he dressed and had checked himself in the bathroom mirror, he walked back into the living room. Robert got up and the two headed out to grab dinner.

As they walked through the streets, Craig watched couples strolling idly hand in hand, stopping in front of store windows and cuddling. Other couples leaned against walls, sat on benches, or huddled together on stoops, enjoying each other's company and stealing sweet kisses. With loving affection all around and Robert next to him, distinctly not giving him that kind of attention, Craig felt more alone than if he had actually been by himself.

Not wanting to ruin what promised to be a good dinner, Craig pushed his thoughts from his mind once again, a skill he had become disturbingly good at over the past couple years. By the time they reached the restaurant, he had successfully shed his sour mood, ready to listen to Robert discuss his day.

Chapter Two

Jeremy walked back to his classroom after the last of his second grade students had been picked up by their parents. The classroom was clean, due to his desire to instill a sense of responsibility in his students to pick up after themselves. Far too many kids believed some magic clean-up fairy materialized when they weren't around and picked up after them. Jeremy was not playing into that fantasy.

He sat down at his desk and began leafing through the pile of stories his students had written about a memorable experience with their families. Story structure was an important aspect of second grade writing and Jeremy was pleased many of the students were beginning to get the hang of it.

He was looking for a clear beginning, middle, and ending and also wanted to ensure the children remained on-topic. The first few papers focused on topics typical of seven-year-old children. Neil had written about the Yankees game his father took him to see. Clarissa's was about the time she went to the beauty salon with her mother and got her nails done. Joey wrote about the ski trip his family had taken during winter break.

The topic of Seth's paper caught Jeremy's attention and he read the story all the way through, taking his time, ignoring the spelling errors.

Two years ago, my mommy and daddy told me they were getting a divorce.

Jeremy was immediately intrigued. He knew what divorce was like. His parents had divorced shortly after they moved from Massachusetts to Arizona. His father had only gone with them out of obligation. Never adjusting to a new life and new location, his parents had decided to split a year later.

My mommy and daddy told me to sit down because they had something important to tell me. They both looked serious.

Jeremy thought about Seth. He was a quiet kid who rarely raised his hand in class. He had plenty of friends in class, but he seemed a bit older than the other kids. *An old soul* was the phrase his mom would have used.

Jeremy could relate. He had become much more serious once they moved to Arizona. Losing his best friend, the one person he truly loved with all his heart, had taken a piece of his innocence from him. He had to acknowledge the world *wasn't* perfect and fair. Sometimes bad things *did* happen. Then, when his parents had announced they were getting a divorce, he had become even more jaded. *What ever happened to the dreams Craig and I had shared?* They had evaporated the second his parents decided to move.

That wasn't entirely true. He had allowed their friendship to slip. Calling once a week had been hard, but when he started calling twice a month and then once a month, the distance between them grew. Calling less frequently, had backfired. He had hoped

Craig would call him more frequently. Instead, their conversations became more distant and strained.

Jeremy shook his head as he always did when he allowed his thoughts to return to Craig. He continued reading Seth's paper.

Mommy told me that when mommys and daddys fall in luv, they get mareed. But somtims they don love eech othr anymore.

The depth of Seth's story pleased Jeremy.

Daddy said even tho he and mommy didnt luv eech other, they stil love me. I seed both of them was crying.

Jeremy couldn't imagine what it must have been like for such a young child to have to cope with his parents' getting a divorce. He'd had a hard enough time coping when he was sixteen.

I got up and gav my mommy and my daddy a hug. They were sad. That is when I lernd somtims kids have to tak care of ther parents.

Jeremy put the paper down, impressed with this story. He would have to make sure to talk to Seth and tell him how proud he was Seth had been brave enough to tell such a hard story. He wiped a tear from his cheek, decided he'd had enough of work, and packed up his things to head out.

The air carried a hint of spring warmth, made more appealing by the cloudless sky and gentle breeze. His school, New Horizons for Young Leaders, located on Second Avenue and Twenty-Fourth Street, was a small private school with only one class per grade. Ever since he graduated college and moved to New York, he had taught at the school, loving the work more than he had expected. Although he'd completed his master's degree five years later at City College New York, he had never used his qualifications to move to the public sector of education. Working in a private school provided a certain level of autonomy and freedom which didn't exist in the public schools.

Heading down Second Avenue, Jeremy passed many of his favorite stores on the way to the East Village apartment he shared with his boyfriend, Andrew Jamieson. Jeremy loved the East Village because, in his opinion, it was the most eclectic neighborhood in New York. Every walk of life coexisted without difficulty. He and Andrew walked down the street hand in hand past yuppie couples with kids tugging at their arms or punk skateboarders with pink spiked hair practicing their moves. No one seemed to care how anyone else lived their lives, so long as they didn't create any problems.

He also loved the East Village because he could afford it. Jeremy had known that choosing to become a teacher, especially a teacher in a private school where the pay was meager, would limit what he could afford, but his current apartment was rent stabilized and he was able to pay and still have money left over for himself and Andrew.

Andrew had become increasingly pushy about moving over the past two years; ever since he got his promotion at work. Along with the promotion and increased

earnings had come increased tension and arguments at home. Each time Andrew brought up moving, Jeremy had to swallow his anger to avoid blowing up at him. It wasn't that he minded a difference of opinion, he had never backed down from arguments with Andrew, but this particular issue cut too close to Jeremy's core. The fact Andrew couldn't see how important it was to him to be self-reliant hurt. It sent the message that he wasn't listening to what Jeremy was telling him. That had never been the case between them, at least it hadn't until two years ago.

The smell of potatoes frying in oil carried on the breeze, reminding him he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He decided to stop at *Pomme Frites* to buy some fries to curb his appetite until Andrew got home. He got his favorite, potato wedges with a creamy garlic dipping sauce, and continued walking east down Sixth Street towards his apartment located between First Avenue and Avenue A.

Continuing east, he passed several more stores, each bringing back memories of different experiences. He stopped at the The Record Mixer, a store which sold various albums with beats, vocals, instrumentals, and other random sounds which DJs used for mixing. Andrew had loved this store and Jeremy had indulged him on numerous occasions, by perusing the bins for a specific sound he needed. Back in the days when they had begun dating, when everything had been fresh and new, Andrew had mixed music all the time, his apartment cluttered with equipment and records. Jeremy loved every minute of it as they drank wine and Andrew shared stories of the college parties he had been invited to since he was the best mixer around.

But that had been at the beginning of their relationship, back when they both made the same salary and still thought the most important thing was the love they shared. Andrew would go to work at Fidelity Investments, managing portfolios, but rushed home after work so the two of them could be together.

When gentrification set in and rents began to climb, Andrew's priorities shifted. He was still a wonderful man, loving, attentive, gentle. But some of the free-spirit that had initially attracted Jeremy had seeped from him. In the beginning of their relationship, Andrew's idealism lifted Jeremy up, reminded him that good things *do* happen. He had forgotten that for the longest time.

With each promotion, Andrew became more and more corporate and the spirited DJ, the carefree lover, drifted further and further away. And the further Andrew slipped from him, the more Jeremy thought back on his youth; about Craig. Craig had been the one person who had remained consistent for him.

Jeremy pushed his thoughts from his head. He popped another fry into his mouth then headed into his building, walking up the three floors to their apartment. When he entered the living room, his breath caught and he dropped the fries. What was Andrew doing home so early? The initial rush of disappointment caused him to feel slightly guilty.

Andrew rushed to Jeremy's side and bent over to pick up the fries he had dropped. "You okay, baby?"

Jeremy ignored his comment and took in the rest of the scene before him. Andrew was dressed in nice but casual clothing. The table was covered with a crisp white cloth topped with flowers and lit candles. Hope sparked in his chest, causing his heart-rate to speed and his skin to warm. *Did he come home just to do something special for me? Just to surprise me?* "My God. You're home. What is all of this?" Jeremy waved his arm at the room in general.

Andrew was still scooping up the spilled fries. He glanced up at Jeremy, wrinkling his nose. "You love this creamy garlic sauce don't you?" After picking up the last spilled fry and depositing the mess on the kitchen countertop, he returned to Jeremy, cupping his face in both hands. "I'll kiss you even if you *do* have garlic breath." He leaned in and brought his lips to Jeremy's, gently brushing them against his mouth and flicking his tongue across the surface begging entrance.

Jeremy leaned into Andrew, accepting the comfort after reading about Seth's story. He opened to him, enjoying the familiar warmth of Andrew's mouth. Andrew kissed him with an intensity Jeremy had not felt for quite some time. He allowed Andrew to take charge, pulling them closer together, letting out a short gasp when Andrew caught his bottom lip between his teeth and nibbled, laughing at his uncharacteristic playfulness.

After he had spent his walk home thinking about his problems with Andrew, finding him home was a welcome surprise. *Maybe he does get it?* The hope from a moment earlier flared and he tightened his grip around Andrew's neck, kissing him back.

Winded and lips sore, they pulled apart. "What was *that* for?" Jeremy staggered back a couple of steps, grabbing hold of the countertop to balance himself.

Andrew grinned widely. "I have a surprise for us. Today I got promoted. You are looking at the man in charge of three of the firm's largest clients and my salary was increased by fifteen percent. I'm well on my way to becoming a director of portfolio management."

Jeremy froze. So this was the real reason for the romantic dinner. He should have known. Andrew had been working for years to get this promotion, putting in long hours and doing everything in his power to stay a step ahead of the other investment bankers in his firm. Yet, the tension between them was growing because of this very thing. *Shit*. Yet if he mentioned this, Andrew would be crushed. It was important to be the supportive partner, wasn't it? "I—I'm so proud of you, although I'm not surprised. You're incredible at what you do." He braced himself, expecting what was coming next, but hoping against it. More money meant Andrew was going to push moving once again.

Andrew was beaming. "I decided to cook for us. To celebrate."

Some celebration. I'd rather eat the fries. Feeling powerless over Andrew's ambition, Jeremy eyed the fries he had dropped on the floor and grabbed one, dragging it through the garlic sauce and popping it into his mouth.

Andrew stared at him, shaking his head. "Let's forget you spilled those on the floor and just ate one; I have no idea how you keep them from showing up anywhere on your perfect body."

Jeremy shrugged and tried to place a demure and innocent expression on his face. "I guess I've got good genes."

Andrew crossed the kitchen in two steps. "I'll tell you what's getting into your *jeans* after dinner." He leaned in and traced the tip of his tongue along the line of Jeremy's neck, which normally made him go weak in the knees.

Jeremy tensed under Andrew's touch. He was still waiting to see where all of this was going. "That's not what I meant," He murmured. He understood Andrew was playing on his words, and couldn't remember the last time Andrew had taken the time to do something as spontaneous and romantic as cooking for him, flowers and candles and all. Still, now that he knew about the promotion, he couldn't get past the fact that there was more to this candlelit dinner than simple romanticism. "Let me get out of your way so you can cook. I need to take a shower."

Andrew stood in the middle of the kitchen, staring at Jeremy for a moment, his brow furrowed as if he were contemplating something, but then his face smoothed and he kissed Jeremy on the cheek. "Okay, dinner will be ready soon. I bought some cheese and crackers and we can crack open a bottle of red if you want." He turned back to the pile of groceries on the counter and began his preparations.

Jeremy scooted out of the kitchen and into the bedroom to take off his clothes. Under the cascade of hot water, he sighed contentedly at Andrew's romantic mood. *Why do I seem to expect the worst from him lately? He's excited and wants to share this with you. This doesn't mean he's going to push a move, or worse, bring up my job again.* He finished his shower, got dressed, and joined Andrew in the kitchen. Andrew was busy frying up shrimp, a heavy smell of garlic in the air. Next to the fry pan was a pot with a thick creamy sauce simmering and pasta was boiling away. "Looks like you're preparing a fancy dinner."

Andrew turned and flashed his bright smile at Jeremy. "We have a lot to celebrate." He picked up the glass of wine he had poured for Jeremy and handed it to him. "Here's to us and to great things in our future."

Jeremy clinked his glass with Andrew's, taking a sip as he appraised his boyfriend. The man had a head of sandy blond, clean cut hair. He was bulky, but not in a body builder sort of way. Still, his large shoulders, bulging pecs, and thick arms always made him feel safe and protected whenever they wrapped around his own narrow frame. Defined cords of lateral muscle tapered sharply into a trim waist, and sloped back out invitingly into his pants which revealed an ass with just the right amount of bubble.

Jeremy's dark hair, amber eyes, flawless bronze skin, and narrow frame, thin and defined, was completely opposite from Andrew's bulk. He brought the glass to his lips, taking a sip, and continued his inspection. Andrew's hair was a bit tousled. Something jarred in Jeremy's mind, a memory, and then it hit him. Andrew looked a lot like Craig.

The shock of the realization hit him hard. It wasn't like him to miss details like that, especially when they involved Craig. If Andrew had been just a little slimmer, a tad less beefy, he could easily be Craig's older brother. The thought sent a shiver through him. *I didn't pick him because —*

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, even though he didn't allow himself to finish it, he knew it was true. He had chosen Andrew because something about him reminded him of Craig. Oddly, the realization did not cause him any guilt. Instead, it poked at a loss he had long since buried; one he didn't want to face.

He wouldn't allow himself to complete the thought. When dinner was ready and the two were seated with food on their plates and the flickering yellow orange glow of the candle light setting a romantic atmosphere, Andrew peered into Jeremy's eyes. "I have another surprise for you."

Jeremy couldn't believe how the night was turning out. First he came home to Andrew, which usually never happened. Andrew had prepared a romantic dinner for the two of them. Now he was getting another surprise. "What is it?"

Andrew took a bite of pasta and shrimp. "I started searching for a new condo for us. I got a realtor and we can start viewing places until we find something we can buy. We can finally own property in this city."

Jeremy's mouth dropped open. *Damn*. The hope Jeremy had been clinging to slipped away. He had been right all along. This evening wasn't about celebrating a promotion. It was about changing their lives. How many times did they need to have this fight? "Andrew, I thought we agreed not to move anywhere for now. Shouldn't we have discussed this before you made the decision to get us a realtor?"

"Aw c'mon, baby. I wanted to surprise you. With my new salary we can afford an awesome place right in the heart of midtown. I found a couple of places with an amazing view over Central Park. You love the park and..." Andrew tilted his head to the side, a sly smirk crossing his face, "we can even get that dog you've been pestering me about for years now."

Jeremy had to admit the idea sounded appealing, especially living by Central Park. The running paths and dog parks would be ideal since he loved nature and animals. "All of this sounds amazing, but how am I supposed to contribute to this condo? You know I can barely afford the rent here and we have a pretty damn low rent." Andrew knew how he felt about this issue. Why was he doing this?

Andrew put his utensils down and stared across the table at Jeremy. "How many times do I have to tell you not to worry about the money thing? Maybe you can't afford it, but I *can*. We've been together for eight years. Do you think I consider my money just mine?"

Jeremy didn't doubt Andrew's sincerity, but the fact was, Andrew's money *was* his own. "I know you don't *mind* spending the money, but I *do*. I don't want us to be on unequal footing. You're already carrying the lion's share of our financial commitments."

Andrew took Jeremy's hand and let out a sigh. "Why does this have to be such a big deal? Can't you let me spoil you and take care of you?"

Jeremy had picked this fight, drawing from a perpetual argument they had over the years. "What, now you want me to be a kept man? I suppose the next thing you're going to ask me to do is quit my job."

"You know I wouldn't do that. I respect how much you love teaching, but now that you've brought it up, I don't understand why you won't consider moving to the public sector. Don't they make something like three times the salary you make working in a private school?"

Jeremy exhaled. "I *knew* it. This is about you wanting me to change so I can contribute more money to our lives. I've explained why I don't want to move to the public sector." He ticked off the reasons on his fingers as he spoke. "The mandates restricting teacher flexibility and creativity, the lack of funding for the classroom, the overcrowding. I love my school, the students, and the families I've grown connected to over the years."

Andrew conceded the point. "I get all that, but why won't you consider going for a headmaster position and run your own private school? You could affect the lives of so many more students and families. You'd be able to foster a culture where all of the teachers can be as free to be creative as you've been."

Jeremy had considered applying for headmaster positions a few years back, but as he got called on interviews and received a few offers, the reality of leaving the classroom hit him. He would miss the day-to-day practice of designing learning experiences for children and watching them grow and learn as a result of his teaching. "I already explored that option and maybe I will again in the future, but for now, I'm happy where I am. I don't see what the problem is remaining here in the East Village where we've been happy for the past eight years...unless you haven't been happy."

Andrew threw his hands up. "Jeremy. Why are you picking a fight with me over this? Of course I've been happy and still *am* happy. I love you. Let's enjoy our dinner and forget I said anything about moving?"

Jeremy stared at his plate, guilt flooding through him.. "I'm sorry. You're right. This should be an evening for us to celebrate." He raised his eyes and gazed into loving eyes which only compounded his guilt. "I'll tell you what. How about I agree to check some places out with you and see if something jumps out at us."

Andrew's eyes lit up. "Thank you. I appreciate you're willing to be open minded." He returned to eating and Jeremy watched his lover enjoy his meal.

Andrew was a good man, he meant well, but he consistently disappointed Jeremy. Their needs had changed ever since Andrew started making more money. But rather than working through the changes, growing together, it seemed as if they were growing apart. What made matters worse, was Andrew didn't seem to recognize that encouraging Jeremy to leave his job was insulting. It cemented Jeremy's suspicion that Andrew didn't approve of the work he did. That he thought Jeremy could make more

of himself, which translated into Andrew thought Jeremy wasn't living up to his expectations.

What bothered him more than Andrew's lack of understanding, was his own passivity. He had always fought for what he wanted, believing that voicing his views was part of what kept his relationship with Andrew strong. In recent years, he had lost the energy to argue. There was no satisfaction in it since the same problems cropped up over and over.

A picture of his life growing up flashed in his mind. On the rare occasions when he had argued with Craig, their fights had been fierce, bitter. Part of it had been that they were teenagers, but Jeremy knew there was much more to it than simple teenage irrationality. He and Craig loved each other and cared; cared enough to make sure that their feelings weren't just heard, but accounted for. The fact he had given that part of himself up just to avoid conflict and disappointment weighed on him. It was a trait he had valued in himself and caving in felt like chipping away at a defining aspect of who he was as a person.

There was nothing wrong with wanting to live in a better part of Manhattan or having more to show for his increased earnings. The problem was Jeremy's needs *hadn't* changed. He loved where they lived and didn't want to move. Add to that the fact he could barely afford their place now, even under rent stabilization, and Jeremy's discomfort was multiplied. He didn't want to be taken care of. Even though Andrew had said over and over that he didn't mind spending the money on the two of them, that he didn't view the money as just his, Jeremy didn't share his views.

One thing was becoming increasingly clear. Andrew was itching to move. This issue was going to come to a head sooner than he had thought. He was going to have to make some big decisions, and deep down, neither option he made would make him happier. How could he win if he had to choose between caving in and allowing Andrew to take care of him or leaving a good man who loved him?

Jeremy pushed his frustration aside, asking questions about Andrew's new job and enjoying his meal. Andrew had put in a lot of effort to make the evening romantic. He wasn't going to ruin things by allowing his pride and his inkling the two of them were drifting apart to get in the way. Those were issues for another day.

Chapter Three

Craig stared at several logos on his computer screen. Each logo he attempted for the bed and breakfast seemed further from the mark of what he had been asked to do. One by one, he clicked on the images and deleted them. This was the wrong job for him. He didn't specialize in abstract design and natural subject matter. He was a modern artist, creating sharp lines and angles to give the sense of an image. He should pass this job off to Kevin who was particularly talented with the representation of natural objects. If his clients insisted Craig be the artist, he could place his name on the art but give Kevin the money. He and his colleagues passed jobs around often enough when they got stuck.

Craig's determination kicked in and he refused to give up on this assignment. He still had a week to get the design completed for the client's review. Craig got to work, hoping this time inspiration might hit.

His attention was diverted by the sudden sound of cars rushing by as the door to Spectacular Designs opened. The man who entered looked to be in his mid-forties, had a sizable gut hanging over his belt, and curly black hair which receded to the middle of his scalp. He inspected the samples of the firm's work through gold-rimmed glasses, stopping by the series of designs Craig had done with increased interest.

Janet walked over to the visitor. "Hello, Mr. Stanton?"

He nodded. "Yes, Boris Stanton."

Janet smiled and offered a handshake. "I have you down for a one o'clock appointment. You're prompt."

Boris wrapped his stubby fingers around Janet's delicate hand. The contrast in their size and grace was amusing. "Yes. I was admiring these designs here." He pointed to Craig's work. Craig's heart quickened with Boris Stanton's next words. "They seem to capture the exact tone I want for the campaign I'm about to launch." He indicated the picture he had designed of Jeremy's summer home on Cape Cod. Each June when school ended, Jeremy's parents had taken them to the Cape. Their home was located on a lake and the view from the water always stuck in his mind.

"The exterior of this house," Boris went on, "creates clear angular shapes that grab your attention, yet the home is nestled, almost as if it had grown from the spot, right in the middle of natural surroundings. This is precisely what I'm seeking—modern pleasures couched in the comfort and warmth of nature."

Despite the man's awkward appearance, Craig was impressed with the clarity of Boris's description of what he wanted. Janet nodded. "Yes, Craig does excellent work in this particular area. Can I get you a cup of coffee or water? We can head into my office to discuss your plans further and see if our company may be in a position to help you."

Boris turned away from the designs and faced Janet. "Water would be lovely. Would it be possible for the artist to join us? I'd like to meet him and discuss my ideas with him directly."

"Of course." Janet showed Boris into her office. "I'll be back in a moment, Mr. Stanton." Janet closed the door and walked over to Craig's desk. "So, did you hear everything or do I need to repeat what he said?"

Craig chuckled, his excitement building within him. This was *exactly* the kind of project he loved. "I can't believe you just left him in there. To answer your question, yes, I heard him. Sounds like a good job for me."

"I agree." Janet peered at his blank screen and cocked her head. "I thought you had made progress on this project. You're supposed to be working on the Earth and Sea logo right?"

Craig huffed and minimized the screen. "I deleted everything. None of it is any good. I should have pushed the issue with the client to hand the job off. I'm not suited for this kind of artwork."

Janet shook her head. "Give the job to Kevin like I told you to the other day. He's intrigued by this project. Why are you hammering yourself with a job you clearly hate? The five of us got together because we each bring our own particular artistic vision to the mix."

She was right, but he still couldn't let go of the idea that handing the job over would feel like quitting. "I want to try.. If I can visualize the concept I'm sure the actual work of designing the logo will come easily."

"I'll never understand boys and your egos. You don't ask for directions, compare your dick sizes, swig beer, and watch football. You always have to be right even though you are wrong ninety percent of the time." Janet stood up, placing her hands on her hips.

Craig pouted with theatrical hurt. "I *never* swig beers. I always *chug* them."

"Oh for fuck's sake." Janet smacked Craig on the back of his head and ruffled his hair. "Go into my office and introduce yourself to Boris. You'll be the artist assigned to this client. I'll give you two a few minutes to talk before I come back in. You are much better at buttering up clients. Once you've landed him, I can handle the logistics."

Craig smiled, but still wasn't happy about giving up the bed and breakfast job. But Janet was right, this job was perfect for him. He needed to cheer himself up. Meeting with a new client while in a bad mood would not serve him or the company well. Giving Janet shit always cheered him up. "Hey, if you're already going to be in the kitchen, grab me a coffee."

"Certainly, sir. Would you like anything else?" Janet shot him an exaggerated expression of servitude.

"Yeah. Make it snappy."

She smiled and turned on her heels. "I'll be right in with your coffee, smartass."

Craig winked at her and headed to Janet's office. Boris stood and turned when Craig entered. "Hello Mr. Stanton. I was speaking with Janet and she told me we may

be working together on your project. My name is Craig Harper. It's nice to meet you." Craig extended his hand.

Boris smiled, returning Craig's handshake firmly and with confidence. "The name's Boris. Mr. Stanton was my overbearing father. I always look around whenever I hear someone use my last name wondering whether he's standing somewhere in the room."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you Boris. I noticed you looking at some of my drawings when you came in. I assume you want an artist with a modern slant to his work?" Craig had heard the entire conversation, but good business was to let the client talk.

"Yes. I'm a contractor and also do some of my own construction. However, I want to shift my focus towards remodeling home and condo interiors. Although I will still build homes, I would like the homes I build to be in selective, natural areas and for the house designs to be sharp and crisp, but to blend in with the natural surroundings." Boris became animated as he spoke and Craig decided he was going to enjoy working with him. Not only did the man have a vision of what he wanted, but he was impassioned as well.

"I have to say I'm impressed, Boris. Our job is much easier when the client can be as specific as possible about what they want. Do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

Boris seemed eager to engage in a discussion of his work. "Of course. Ask away."

"You say the homes you build should have a modern tone, but you want them to blend in with natural surroundings. How do you envision making modern homes blend into natural settings? The two aren't usually considered compatible."

Boris nodded. "Yes. I had the same initial concern. Very few architects have been able to successfully achieve the look I am going for." He began walking around the office. As he did, Craig envisioned the work of his inspiration, Frank Lloyd Wright. This job seemed like an opportunity to attempt to achieve what this great visionary had managed. The challenge alone caused his heart rate to increase.

Boris continued talking. "I like to work with natural materials, building with resources like unfinished wood, bricks, and various types of stone to give a natural quality to a home. The materials cut the sharpness from the angular patterns and give homes warmth, enhancing their immersion within a natural setting." He turned to face Craig. "Have you ever heard of Frank Lloyd Wright?"

Craig practically jumped out of his chair. "I was just thinking that what you are describing is exactly like his work. To have the chance to try to create the kinds of images he so brilliantly created; I can't tell you how much that excites me."

"You seem like a young man who embraces challenges." Boris assessed him with an approving stare. "I see a lot of myself in you. Way back when I was your age, I was eager to prove myself. I wanted to take on projects which would force me to stretch. I like you."

The unexpected compliment and the reference to the common architect they both admired caused Craig to sit up a bit straighter in his chair. This wasn't just a good account, Boris was an interesting man. Someone Craig would enjoy working with. He

could see the things they could accomplish together and the thought of his work coming to life in the image of one of 'the greats' was beyond exciting.

"This sounds like a perfect project for me." Craig had to fight to remain seated. As much as he wanted to pace the room alongside Boris, the initial stages of wooing clients who had a lot of money to spend was to maintain a certain level of professionalism. "I can conceptualize how to use the angles and sharp lines of modern design, but dull the effect by staggering the placement of stones or choosing natural wood with varying grain patterns."

"Excellent thinking. I can tell you and I will be able to work together beautifully.

Craig was sure he'd landed the job, but wanted to make sure he understood the scope of the project. May I ask another question?"

"Certainly."

"You said you're shifting your focus to internal remodeling. What exactly do you have in mind?"

"Ah, the new direction of my work. Yes. I'm excited. I want to target the Manhattan professional, particularly those who live in midtown. The city can become cold and harsh. Don't get me wrong, I've lived here all my life and New York is the best city in the world, but I've witnessed people swallowed whole by the impersonal atmosphere. I think people need a nook in this big place to call home." Boris was practically bouncing as he spoke. "Most of the condos in the city are designed exactly the same. Granite countertops, white tile bathrooms, clean square rooms, large bay windows. Boring! What I want is to introduce warmth, kitchens with oak cabinets, tables carved from redwood, bathrooms adorned with colorful tiles and niche for holding candles. I want to place lights so they reflect off ceilings and walls. By drawing the eye off center in a room, it helps to add a sense of increased space."

Craig followed the rapid series of images easily. Boris was right. Most condos were cold and utilized common materials to create a sterile atmosphere. "I like where you're going with this. You have a unique and edgy perspective—unconventional. I think there's a real market for your work."

Boris beamed. "I am so glad you mentioned the market. What I want to discuss with you, if you'll take the job, is the campaign I want to launch."

"Oh, I definitely want the job."

Boris beamed. "Wonderful. I want to run a multi-tiered campaign, starting with several posters which show both the exterior of homes as well as the interior designs I can offer for city condominiums. I also want to purchase space in several of the bigger magazines for home decoration and redesign, targeting the male professional as well as the female homemaker to double the business I can generate."

Craig sat quietly and considered Boris's plan. "What you're describing is a huge job. The work of creating the posters and the magazine spread will cost a lot of money. You'll have to shovel out a ton of money to purchase advertising. Are you sure you want to start so big?"

Boris reached out and patted Craig on the knee. "Money is the least of my concerns. Although, I do appreciate your honesty. Most business people begin to salivate when they're offered a job of this size. I've visited three other design firms and chose *not* to utilize their services because they were trying to push more and more on me. I'm impressed by your conservatism and candor."

Craig cringed. Janet would probably want to chop his balls off when she found out he had tried to talk the client down from spending too much money. She always said, *if they think big, don't box them in*. Which is why they had all decided she should manage the company. She had a talent for generating business and increasing revenue. "We're a small business, but we take our work seriously. When we commit to a client, we commit completely. We won't stop until you're totally satisfied with our work."

Boris shifted in his seat so he faced Craig. "I like this firm and I like you. I'd be honored to do business with you."

Just then Janet walked in. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. Believe me, Mr. Stanton, we are not in the practice of making our clients wait. Potential clients are as important to us as existing clients. Here is your water."

Boris smiled, taking the water. "Thank you, but no apologies are necessary. Craig and I have been having a wonderful conversation and I am impressed with the business you run here." He glanced at Craig then back to Janet. "In fact, one of the biggest selling points for your firm is how Craig voiced concerns about the fiscal challenges I might face when I told him how big I want to go with this campaign."

Janet shot Craig a dangerous glare, immediately replacing her displeasure with a beaming smile. "Thank you so much, Mr. Stanton."

Craig knew he was in trouble, but didn't care. Janet always forgave him. His work generated significant amounts of word-of-mouth business for them. She wouldn't rip into him with the client in the room, so he decided to push his luck. "Hon, he prefers to be called Boris."

Janet shot him another glare, subdued, but clearly agitated. She turned to Boris and cupped his hand with both of hers. "I'm so sorry Mr., er, Boris. I meant no offense."

Boris let out a boisterous laugh. "You people certainly keep each other on your toes don't you? What a fun working atmosphere. I would be thrilled to do business with you, a *lot* of business. This is going to be a huge campaign and I want to start right away."

Janet shifted into her sweet-as-pie demeanor and sat down. "I am so glad, Boris. Let's discuss the scope and timeframe of what you're expecting." Turning to Craig she said, "I think you should clear your schedule of other projects for the time being. Why don't you talk to Kevin and pass off your current project to him. I believe this project will take up most of your time." Although her voice dripped with sweetness, her sugar was going to be extremely salty when Boris left.

"Absolutely. Boris, it was such a pleasure to meet you. I look forward to the work we will be doing together." He left Janet to negotiate the terms of the contract, stopped

by his office to grab his cigarettes and his coat, and headed out into the warmth of early spring. He lit up and headed down the street to Express Café, his favorite coffee joint and a terrific place to watch the pretty boys walking by. As he turned the corner on the street where the coffee shop was located, he bumped into the corner of the building, crushing the cigarette and scattering embers over the front of his shirt. Frantically wiping the burning ashes from his front before they burned holes, Craig shook his head. *I need to quit smoking.*

Once inside Express Café, he thought about Robert, hoping this new campaign, and the potential for drumming up recognition for their company, might prove to him that he wasn't complacent in his job. Robert constantly told Craig to leave his position and join one of the bigger design firms, but Craig had started Spectacular Designs. Maybe now Robert would take his commitment to his company more seriously.

* * * * *

The Bulls and Bears was crowded when Robert walked in around six-thirty. Although the name of the bar suggested it catered to a particular segment of the gay population, it actually served the white collar professionals who worked on Wall Street and in the financial district. Robert went up to the bar and nodded to the bartender who placed his Grey Goose on the rocks with a lemon rind in front of him. Robert visited this bar at least three times a week, especially on days when he had done particularly well. He had successfully increased the portfolio of one of his major clients by three percent on this particular day, an unheard of feat, and felt like a god. Tonight was a time to give himself a reward.

The vodka slipped down his throat with a cool burn as he scanned the room to find the lucky young man who would be his prize for the evening. A cute little blond sitting on a barstool by the wall would do. He walked over to Blondie who was drinking something orange and fruity, leaned against the wall, and waited for the twink to face him.

"How's it going? I haven't seen you around here before."

Blondie glanced up at Robert, immediately interested. "I started working on Wall Street a few months ago. This place is fabulous."

Robert appraised the young piece in front of him; smooth, silky skin, no freckles or blemishes to be seen. He had a faint tan, but not enough to distract from the youth's fair complexion. Narrow shoulders led down to narrow hips. Robert imagined his hipbones would make perfect handles as he plowed into him. The kid's sweet, plump, red lips would probably drive him mad with pleasure wrapped around his cock. The thought caused the phallus in question to shift and grow in his suit pants. "What's your name?"

"Billy, er, I mean William." William blushed and lowered his eyes as he took a sip from his fruity drink.

"Well, Billy, er, I mean William, you here with anyone?" Robert was pretty sure he wasn't, but even if he was, the challenge would make this conquest more fun.

"No, I'm here by myself."

Damn. "You said you started working here. Where do you work?"

"At Fidelity. I'm working my way towards becoming a portfolio manager, but right now I'm just an assistant to one of the junior partners on my floor." Blondie took another sip from his drink. "What do you do?"

"I run my own floor at Goldman Sachs." The sudden intake of air and the raised eyebrows let Robert know he had captured the kid's interest.

"Wow. Awesome. I applied to Goldman, but didn't even get called for an interview." Billy flashed his eyes at Robert, peering at him through long eyelashes.

Robert's cock twitched in his pants again. "It's all about who you know." Robert saw the angle to make this conquest fun. He was going to play the I-have-something-you-want card. "I'm always scouting for new talent. Can I buy you another drink?" Billy smiled, asking for an Orange-Stoli Madras. *Fucking fruit drinks.*

Three drinks and a lot of boring conversation later, Robert led Billy out of the bar. They hopped in a cab and stood inside Billy's apartment fifteen minutes later.

Robert closed the door and pushed Billy against the wall, kissing him roughly. Billy opened to him, allowing Robert to drive his tongue deep into his mouth.

He placed his hand on Billy's head, pushing him down to his knees. "Suck my cock." The order was guttural and harsh.

Billy obediently fumbled with Robert's belt, unfastening and unzipping his pants. When he had worked Robert's cock out, he hungrily took the whole length into his mouth all at once. Robert sighed, letting out a moan of pleasure. *Good little cocksucker.*

Billy ran his tongue in circles around Robert's cock head each time he withdrew, the nerves along Robert's shaft became increasingly stimulated.

Before he got too worked up, Robert grabbed Billy under his shoulders and hoisted him back to his feet. Get undressed and lube yourself up. I'm gonna fuck you good and hard."

Billy silently walked toward the bedroom, Robert following, and undressed, not saying a word. "Get the lube."

Billy obeyed, leaning across his bed into his nightstand. "Do you want —"

"I didn't tell you to speak." Billy clamped his mouth shut as Robert grabbed the bottle of lube from him and squirted some into his palm. He ran his hand along the crease of Billy's ass, slowly pushing one finger into his hole, working him open with steady in and out motions. After a minute, he added a second, then a third.

Robert slid off the bed and walked over to the night table where Billy had gotten the lube. "Are the condoms in the nightstand as well?"

Billy lifted his head, a glazed expression in his eyes from the sound finger-fuck Robert had given him. He simply nodded without speaking.

Robert fumbled with the drawer and took out a condom, tearing the corner of the packet off with his teeth and rolling the latex down the length of his cock. "Are you ready for me yet, cause I'm ready to spear your hole."

Billy nodded once again, bringing a grin to Robert's lips. "Good boy. You're obedient aren't you?" Billy raised his ass to better expose his hole to Robert in response.

Robert positioned himself behind Billy and grabbed his slim hips. He had been right about the hips, they were the perfect size for him to grab hold and guide Billy any way he wished. In one forceful surge, he plunged all the way into Billy, only stopping when his hips slammed against his ass. The loud *oh* followed by whimpering, sent a thrill through Robert.

"Slow down kid." Robert continued the steady rhythm of pounding in and out of Billy's sweet, young hole. His senses began to cloud.

Billy moaned. "Oh God. Fuck me harder. Feels so good."

Robert slapped Billy's ass, leaving a red mark where his hand connected with skin. "You like me fucking you?" Billy nodded. "You like my cock slamming into that tight little hole of yours?" Robert increased the intensity of his pounding and Billy's insides began to quiver around his cock as the kid started yipping like a dog in heat. The sense of power and control surging through Robert pushed him closer to his own climax. "You're a good little bottom, Billy. I'm gonna come soon."

Billy arched his head back and shouted, "I'm gonna come. You're making me come." Billy's body began to spasm and his tight little ass clenched around Robert's cock. Feeling the release he had forced out of Billy pushed Robert over the edge. Robert grabbed his slim hips, slamming hard into Billy's ass, burying himself all the way to the hilt and unloading deep inside. The waves of his orgasm caused his body to jerk as he fell forward on top of Billy.

Once the aftershock of his orgasm passed, Robert pulled out, removed the condom, and tossed it in the waste can next to the bed. Without a word, he walked into the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth to wipe himself down. When he returned to the bedroom, he tossed the damp cloth towards Billy and began to put his pants back on.

Billy sat on his bed looking at Robert. "You were amazing. I haven't ever been fucked so good."

"Glad to be of service."

Billy gazed at Robert, appearing shy.

Robert smirked, his voice distant and cold. "Did you want to say something?"

The other man flushed. "I was wondering if we could meet up again. Maybe dinner or something?"

Robert laughed out loud. "What for?"

Shock crossed Billy's face. "I thought...You said...I assumed—"

"You thought because we had a good fuck I want seconds. Kid, this is New York and you got fucked by a powerhouse from Wall Street. Count yourself lucky."

Under Billy's silent stare, Robert finished buttoning his shirt. When he was dressed and got to the bedroom door, he turned to Billy, still sitting silently on the edge of his bed. "Thanks, kid. I had fun."

He left, the door clicking behind him, and checked his watch. Eight o'clock. Craig would definitely be home by now. The whole way home he replayed the encounter in his mind. The kid had been fun. He was a nobody, certainly no one Robert would leave Craig for, but he had been fun. What the fuck was he doing wasting his time with Craig when he could be screwing a different guy each night? Unable to answer the question, he grabbed his Blackberry and checked his email.

Chapter Four

Jeremy had become irritated after viewing the first condo and was ready to go home after he and Andrew walked out of the third. Andrew and Lance, their realtor, had flitted about from room to room, gabbing like girlfriends and leaving Jeremy to trail behind them. As far as he was concerned, the two of them could move in together and Jeremy would stay in the East Village.

Lance had plans to take them to three more places. An average man, brown hair, moderate build, a light five o'clock shadow, about five foot eight, it was his bubbling personality that made him and his endless tour tolerable. Each condo was the same as the others in Jeremy's opinion, but Lance treated each one as if it were a castle in its own right.

They were beautiful. Jeremy couldn't deny that. And he would probably enjoy living in each place, but whenever they left one place to go to another, he felt like cattle being prodded towards a pen. Midtown was too crowded, too fast, and too busy. Nothing like the comfortable pace of the East Village. Signs for upscale stores lined the street. Nothing resembling a thrift shop could be found, but three Starbucks were in his immediate line of vision.

The next place they viewed was on Fifty-Ninth Street, right across from Central Park. The unit itself was high up with a perfect view of the park and the northern part of Manhattan, clear across the island to the George Washington Bridge. Despite his reservation about moving, Jeremy had to admit it was a beautiful view.

Lance began the tour of the unit. "The living room and kitchen are connected. Track lighting has already been installed with a dimmer feature. The counter tops are imported granite from Egypt, a beautiful sandy color. We have wasted no expense in fitting the kitchen with state-of-the art utilities. The sink has a filtering unit built into the nozzle. The refrigerator can do just about everything but pour your drinks for you. We have outfitted the stovetop with a ventilation system that self-cleans. Plus, we've installed a double oven. The living room is open with ample room for entertaining."

He ushered them down the hallway. The first room they came to was large and square, also overlooking Central Park. "This is the spare room. If you used it for guests, I guarantee they won't want to leave." *Is that an advertisement or a warning?* Jeremy followed Andrew to the window to admire the view. Lance opened the closet and beamed. "By city standards, this closet should be a bedroom." Jeremy and Andrew's entire wardrobe would easily fit in that one closet and have enough room left over for a small side table and a chair. Hell, he could have tea and biscuits in it. *I don't even have enough clothes to fit half this space. Who needs a closet this big?*

"Here is the bathroom for your guests." It was located next to the spare room. Lance bounced as he led them down the hallway and opened the door. "Everything I've shown you is fantastic, but I've saved the best for last. This is the master suite." As they entered the room, Jeremy was blown away by the sheer size. Both bedrooms in their

current apartment would fit into this one room. Upon closer inspection, Jeremy thought perhaps their entire apartment would fit in this one room.

"Come into the master bath," Lance urged. "It's not to be missed."

Jeremy followed him into the bathroom. When Lance turned on the light, he winced at the brightness. Andrew's eyes bugged out in amazement. An expansive double sink unit with mirrors running to the ceiling lined one wall. A deep, whirlpool bathtub nestled in the corner and a shower stall which could fit four people stood next to it and contained three shower heads all angled towards the center. The ceiling had numerous lights. Playing with the switches, Jeremy adjusted the brightness, relieving his eyes.

As he played with a few of the other switches, warmth hit the back of his neck and head.

Lance smiled. "You've found the heating lamps. Come, look at the toilet which even has a self-heating seat."

Andrew's eyes lit up even more than they had a moment before. Jeremy was sure they were going to pop out of his head at any moment. He and Lance were chattering with one another like they were discussing their favorite soaps. Once again, a twinge of aggravation tugged at the corners of Jeremy's mind. This day was supposed to be about Andrew and him, but he wasn't involved at all. Instead, he was watching Andrew make decisions for their life as if he were a spectator whose opinion didn't count and wasn't desired.

Jeremy left the two of them in the bathroom. *Why did I agree to this?* The closer he inspected the place, the more he didn't want to move. Lance and Andrew were getting excited over fucking toilet seats. Andrew had promised this search would be something the two of them would do *together*.

Jeremy headed back to the living room and stood by the window, leaving the two of them to worship the plumbing. The view was peaceful. The changing seasons were one of the things Jeremy remembered most about growing up in the northeast and the thing he missed most when he moved to Arizona. With the image of his childhood best friend in his mind, the green of the trees in the park seemed a bit greener; the haze blurring the bridge in the distance a bit thinner. *How many years have passed since we've touched base? At least eight years; since I moved to New York and met Andrew.*

No, it wasn't what I missed most. "You would *never* make me move if I really didn't want to," he whispered out loud. "You'd understand how important it is to me to be able to take care of myself. You'd love the East Village as much as I do." Jeremy snapped his head around to make sure he was still alone.

The image of Craig formed in his mind as if his best and oldest friend was standing in the room. Craig's dirty blond hair, ruffled from all of his clumsy tripping and falling. The thought brought a smile to Jeremy's lips. *Lips.* Craig's lips were full, plump, and kissable. He had a dreamy figure as well; broad shoulders canting into a narrow waist, a hint of bubble in his butt. *How often did I stare at his lips only to be faced with his delectable ass when he'd turn around to get something?*

Jeremy shook his head, distracted by the tugging in his pants. His cock had begun to lengthen, pressing against the fabric of his jeans. For the second time in as many minutes, Jeremy glanced around to make sure he was alone, and then dug his hand into his pants to adjust himself.

Andrew and Lance's voices carried from the other room, bringing Jeremy back to the reason he was in the condo in the first place. Regret filled him as Craig's image faded from his mind. This was not what Andrew had promised. Jeremy had agreed to view places with him, but said he wanted the experience to be for the two of them. If they were going to move, he wanted both of them to fall in love with the place. The more they viewed new places, the more certain he became that he didn't want to move. If he could afford to, he'd put his foot down and simply remain on his own if he had to.

Thinking about money set his stomach churning. This condo would probably cost over five thousand dollars a month. The apartment they lived in was only twelve-hundred dollars a month and he had to stretch his earnings to afford half of the rent, pay for utilities, and have a little left over for himself and Andrew. He'd have to depend on Andrew financially if they moved into a place like this. Andrew didn't seem to understand how much he wanted to contribute equally. They had argued over this so many times even the dumbest monkey would have figured out Jeremy wanted to feel self-reliant.

As soon as the thought entered his mind, Jeremy realized it was only half of the problem. He would never make as much money as Andrew and, if he were honest with himself, he wouldn't care about the difference if it weren't for the fact Andrew seemed unable to hear him. Andrew wasn't listening when he spoke. Sure, he heard the words, but the message was lost on him. What he wanted was for Andrew to understand that he needed respect, not security. That was the real issue. Andrew seemed to think that taking care of him equaled love.

Considering that thought, Jeremy backed off a bit. He wasn't giving Andrew enough credit. Andrew wasn't one-dimensional, but he did seem to think too simplistically. He either couldn't or didn't want to hear what Jeremy was really saying. If it felt like Andrew wanted a change for the both of them and not just for himself, Jeremy would probably be open to the idea

But I wouldn't. That's the problem. The thought sent a shiver up his spine. The truth of it caused him to grip the window sill for stability. He didn't want to move and nothing Andrew said would change that. If he truly loved Andrew, deep down, rest of his life, loved him, he wouldn't question this move. He'd be content to do anything that would keep the two of them together and happy.

Once again, Craig's image filled his mind and with it, a sensation of warmth and love. If he were with Craig he would quit his job and live in a shack. He had always known what Jeremy wanted. The difference was Jeremy never had to put his own desires aside to give Craig what *he* wanted. They loved each other enough to compromise and to keep each other's needs in the forefront. *Funny I never knew that as a*

kid, but now it's obvious. Treating me like a partner, his equal, came easily to Craig, as if he didn't have to give it a second thought.

Andrew and Lance returned to the living room, interrupting Jeremy's reflections. Andrew walked over to Jeremy and stood next to him by the window. "I wondered where you got off to. I didn't notice you leave the bathroom." He hugged Jeremy from behind and Jeremy leaned back against Andrew's chest, hoping to hide the discomfort growing inside him. Andrew whispered in his ear, pulling him in tighter. "The view is beautiful, huh? This is the best feature of the whole place. Can't you picture a small table right here by the window so we can wake up every day, drink our coffee, and just stare at Central Park?"

Jeremy allowed the image to fill his mind. It *would* be nice to have this view and to share it with Andrew, but it wouldn't change the fact Andrew didn't understand him. He snuggled closer into Andrew's embrace, hoping to push his thoughts out of his mind and to keep Andrew from sensing his disappointment. "Yes, that would be amazing."

Jeremy pushed the thought out of his mind. After all, he'd never see Craig again and Andrew was his partner in life. He turned and clasped his arms around Andrew's neck. He let go of the lingering frustration he had been harboring and ignored the flash of guilt he experienced under Andrew's adoring gaze. "This place is awesome. And yes, the view is beautiful. I was just thinking that when you came over. You must have been reading my mind." He brushed his lips against Andrew's in a chaste but sweet kiss. Inside, a part of him shut down. A piece of him broke and he needed to shield himself from the crushing weight of having given in. Where there had been fight, now resided nothing. The emptiness threatened to suffocate him.

Lance cleared his throat. "I'll be outside. Why don't the two of you spend a few minutes alone and decide whether the place talks to you?"

Andrew waved Lance off without taking his eyes off of Jeremy. "Thanks."

Jeremy heard the door click shut and then Andrew's lips closed over his. The erotic dance of their tongues and the moist heat of his mouth caused Jeremy's knees to wobble and he poured fierce passion into their kiss. Despite his actions, Craig remained in his mind. The image of a different life, one where he grew closer to his partner, not further apart, filled his thoughts. The guilt overwhelmed him, yet Andrew couldn't seem to sense his conflict, which only fed his distance from Andrew.

Andrew reached down, grabbing Jeremy's ass and pulled the two of them together. His hard cock pressed against the upper part of Jeremy's hip and Jeremy's cock leapt to attention in response, blood flowing south and filling out his shaft. The physical acts helped him to push his thoughts aside. Losing himself in the sensations of Andrew's attentions, Jeremy focused on Andrew, yanking his mind away from thoughts of Craig and a different life.

The cool wetness of precum wiped against Jeremy's inner thigh and he smiled up at Andrew. "Baby, if you want to check out other units today, you better ease up on what you're doing because I'm about to come any minute now."

Andrew pulled his head back, a sensual gleam in his eyes. "Really? You little vixen! I'm not even touching you there."

Jeremy laughed, letting himself get caught up in the moment. "You don't need to touch me *there* when you kiss me like that." He leaned in and took Andrew's mouth once again, kissing him fervently, allowing his affection and love to be expressed through wet, silky caresses. Yet, with each lick of his tongue against Andrew's, the memory of another kiss, one far sweeter, lingered in the back of his mind, refusing to leave.

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In spite of the kiss they'd shared, Andrew couldn't shake the nagging feeling something was very wrong. Jeremy had been quiet after they left the condo with the view of Central Park and remained so during Lance's showings of the two remaining units. *Maybe he's tired.* He'd so wanted Jeremy to be as excited about house-hunting for their dream apartment yet a world of thoughts and feelings seemed to be going on in Jeremy, things that Andrew couldn't do anything about. Why did it have to be so hard?

After the second unit, Andrew told Lance he would be in touch to let him know whether they were interested in putting down a bid on any of the units. Lance gave the required warning the two of them shouldn't take too much time since the units would be gone before they knew it. Andrew shook his hand, thanked him, and then he and Jeremy were alone.

They strolled down Fifth Avenue and Andrew glanced sidelong at his lover who remained taciturn. He took Jeremy's hand. "You want to go to dinner? We're never up here and I'm sure we'll find something we both like." Maybe a nice dinner together with a glass or two of wine would help lighten Jeremy's mood.

Jeremy nodded and Andrew tightened his grip on his hand. The condos had exhilarated him. They were big, in a terrific location, outfitted with modern features. He and Jeremy would be able to enjoy the city in the kind of style he had worked so hard to be able to afford. Jeremy had been against moving from the beginning, but he seemed to be trying to remain open to the idea.

They headed south on Fifth Avenue, and decided on Lemon Grass for dinner, since they both enjoyed Vietnamese cuisine. The hostess seated them and they ordered. Sitting at their table, over glasses of chilled Pinot, Andrew prodded Jeremy about the places they had seen. "So, what do you think? That place overlooking Central Park was amazing. Can you picture us in a place like that?"

Jeremy sipped his wine, meeting Andrew's gaze over his glass. He seemed tired, like he was ready for bed. "I liked that place the best out of the ones we viewed today," he said finally.

His lack of enthusiasm was obvious. Better if they talked about it. Andrew frowned. "Spill. I know something's on your mind."

Jeremy sighed. "I love the place, but..." Jeremy squinched his nose, something he did when he tried to think of how to say something he knew Andrew wouldn't like. Andrew prepared himself. "The place is so much more than I can afford."

I should have seen that coming. "Jeremy. Please. Not this again. I've already told you, what we have is ours. I don't view the money I make as just mine. The money is ours. Hell, without you I wouldn't even care about the money. *You* are what makes everything worthwhile for me." As soon as the words escaped his mouth, he questioned whether they were true. They used to be. He would have done anything for Jeremy to make him happy, including living in a small, crowded apartment in the East Village, simply because it made Jeremy happy. He would have done anything, content to be with the man sitting across the table from him, but somewhere along the line that had changed. He wasn't so sure he would give up moving to a nicer apartment and the realization surprised him.

Jeremy's face had relaxed, but Andrew sensed tension in him. Everything he did or said upset Jeremy lately. He couldn't figure out what Jeremy wanted. He was sincere, expressed his love—everything a boyfriend was supposed to do. Yet Jeremy remained resistant, hanging onto a desire to maintain complete equality in the relationship. So many of their friends had entered into relationships based on mutual physical attraction, but after months, or in a few cases a year, the physical attraction wasn't enough for them and their relationships had fizzled out. Of all their friends, he and Jeremy were the only lasting relationship he knew.

Andrew was about to confront him, but something in Jeremy's expression stopped him. His shoulders had slumped and his eyes, despite the ambient lighting and the flickering of candlelight, seemed hollow. "Baby, if you don't like the places just say so. I don't want you to agree to something that will make you unhappy."

Several moments of silence passed between them, Jeremy's face revealing a whirlwind of emotions. Exhaustion melting away, giving way to sadness, then frustration. Eventually, his face settled with an expression Andrew couldn't read, one he had never seen on Jeremy...almost apologetic. He was about to reach out and take his hand when Jeremy broke the silence. "I think you are a generous man. I don't give you enough credit for putting us first. I think I fight you too much on stuff when all you want is to make our lives better."

"You're right. About me wanting to make our lives better I mean. I'm not sure about the other stuff you just said. Where is this coming from?"

Jeremy reached across the table and took *his* hand. "I guess I'm realizing how difficult I've been; selfish. I've been so focused on what I want, I haven't considered how much *you* want this move."

Andrew's heart sped up. Maybe things would work out after all. "So, you're saying..."

Jeremy sighed. His expression wasn't sad, but wasn't one of happiness either. "I'm saying I'm considering the move. The place is fantastic and I know you would be happy."

Andrew spoke immediately without allowing a moment of silence to linger. He wasn't going to let Jeremy play the compliant boyfriend card. *Enough is enough. If he doesn't want to move then fucking say so.* "Yes, the move would make *me* happy. The question is would *you* be happy too?"

Jeremy sighed again. "I don't like that you'll basically be paying for this by yourself. You know that. At least I can afford half the rent where we live right now. The place is as much mine as it is yours because we split everything down the middle."

Andrew took a sip of his wine to give himself a chance to think. This argument kept coming up and he didn't buy that the only concern was about money. Something else had to be underlying Jeremy's concerns. "I don't know why you keep going back to money. How many couples do we know where one person earns more while the other does other things for the home and family? Honestly, I think there's something you aren't telling me."

Jeremy shot up in his seat so his back was stiff and straight. "And what if there is? If I sat here and told you what's really going on in my mind, would it make a God damned difference?"

Andrew leaned back in his chair. Although he was surprised by the reaction, at least it contained emotion and wasn't compliant. "Maybe. I haven't seen you giving me any chances to make things right between us. It seems like all we do is fight lately."

"And I suppose that's *my* fault?"

"I didn't say that." Andrew sunk back even further into his seat. The more agitated Jeremy became, the more he saw of the old flame that used to exist between them and it oddly comforted him. "Why don't you give me a chance and we'll see."

Jeremy opened his mouth as if he were about to speak, his lips moving slightly, but then his entire posture sank, as if the fight had washed out of him. "I'm not saying anything. I'm just being stupid and testy and picking a fight. I'm sorry."

As Jeremy slunk into his seat, Andrew shot up, his muscles quivering with tension, as if the two of them were teetering on a see-saw; if one was relaxed, the other was tense. "No. You need to tell me what's going on."

Jeremy shook his head, but began speaking. "What if, God forbid, anything happened to you? I would have no way of taking care of myself. If we move, I'd be completely reliant on you for almost everything. At least in the East Village we are equal. We split the bills. I could take care of myself if I ever needed to."

Andrew's chest constricted at Jeremy's words. "I don't know why you say things like that. Do I treat you like you aren't equal to me? Do I ever lord anything over you? Please, tell me if I do because I've never wanted to do anything but love you. You are my partner in every sense of the word. If you don't want the place, just say so."

"No, of course you don't treat me like I'm less than you. I'm just being stupid. Let's make a bid on the place. I'll miss the East Village, but we can make new memories. Plus Central Park is screaming for me to enjoy it. Maybe I'll get a puppy and play with him in the dog park every day."

Jeremy caved in way too quickly for Andrew's comfort. "If you don't want to move, say so."

The expression on Jeremy's face shifted from one of contrition to affection. "Andrew. I *am* being serious. I want you to be happy. This move will make you happy."

Andrew felt he could smile again. "Are you sure?"

A shadow passed over Jeremy's face, quickly replaced by a smile. "Yes. Let's call Lance tomorrow and make a bid."

They spent the rest of dinner chatting about the view, what kind of dog they might get, the master bath; anything which might make the move seem more appealing to Jeremy. Andrew's mood was so light he thought he might float away. Despite his joy, Andrew couldn't help thinking Jeremy had caved in too easily. He had been doing that a lot; putting up a fight, defending his point, then giving in. Back when they had first met, when they were younger, their lives had been far more similar. They made about the same amount of money, worked hard to develop their reputations, and enjoyed all of Manhattan.

As the years passed, they had settled into routines, comfortable behaviors that became automatic. Andrew listened to Jeremy talk about one of his students. Something about a kid named Seth and a paper he wrote. He couldn't remember when he stopped listening to Jeremy's stories...when his *own* needs had become more important to him than *their* needs. He couldn't pinpoint when Jeremy had shifted from fighting to force Andrew to understand him, to resigning, allowing concession to take the place of compromise.

When they had first started dating, Andrew had loved Jeremy's stories. Somewhere along the line, that love had shifted to tolerance, and then annoyance. He had assumed Jeremy would get over talking about his work and focus on bigger things, things that would move them forward as a couple. When the change never came, Jeremy's stories became an aggravation.

When they finished their meal and the waiter brought their bill, Jeremy grabbed it, placing his credit card in the slot on the bill holder. Andrew flinched, but forced himself to keep his hands on his lap. *I'm even reacting to things like him paying for meals. When did this relationship become a series of criticisms instead of affectionate appreciation of each other?*

Back home, Andrew draped his coat over the back of the couch and dropped down onto the soft cushions with a sigh. He removed his shoes, stretched out, and lay back against a throw pillow, pulling Jeremy down with him. "I had a wonderful day and I know what would make this a wonderful evening."

Wrapping his hand behind Jeremy's neck, he pulled their mouths together. He only sensed resistance for a moment, but then Jeremy opened to him. *Must be the position we're in.* He slid onto his side, making room for Jeremy to lie next to him on the couch.

Jeremy traced his finger over the well-defined pec muscles hidden beneath the fabric of Andrew's shirt, and then leaned over, pressing his lips against the skin of Andrew's neck, opening his mouth and licking gentle circles against the sensitive skin. Andrew moaned and tilted his neck, hungry for more of Jeremy's kisses.

Andrew sighed, placing a hand on the back of Jeremy's head, holding him in place. Their physical interaction seemed to be the time when they were the most in sync, yet they hardly ever talked to each other during sex anymore. They used to roll about, laughing, telling each other how they felt, both physically and emotionally, as they made love. Now, their actions felt good, but the connection had bled out and it had become more a series of pleasurable acts, void of the emotional punch that had once been there.

Jeremy continued to massage at his neck bringing Andrew's attention back to the moment. He started unbuttoning Andrew's shirt, revealing the smooth skin and taut muscles. Once he had finished with the buttons, he pulled the fabric aside and lowered his head to take one of Andrew's nipples in his mouth. Andrew placed his hand on the back of Jeremy's head once again, stroking his hair as Jeremy continued working on the taught circle of flesh. He moved to Andrew's other nipple, raking a groan of pleasure out of him.

Andrew pushed himself up into a sitting position, pulling Jeremy across his lap, causing him to laugh as he ran his fingers through Andrew's hair. Lowering his head, capturing Jeremy's mouth in a hungry kiss, Andrew sealed their lips together. He ran his tongue over Jeremy's lips and Jeremy opened to him. Their tongues twined together, wrestling in circles, laving against teeth, a hint of the wine from dinner still lingering in their mouths.

Keeping their mouths locked, Andrew lay Jeremy on his back, leaned forward, and rested his weight on top of him. Their hard cocks pressed together through their pants and Jeremy began to rotate his hips, generating more friction. "You're friskier than usual tonight." Andrew lowered his head to Jeremy's neck, brushing his lips over the sensitive skin and forcing Jeremy's breath to come out in short gasps.

He licked his way down Jeremy's body while rubbing at his groin outlining the hard shaft. Jeremy unbuttoned his pants and pushed them down over his hips and ass as Andrew worked his way south, running his tongue over each nipple and along the ridges of his abs. The closer he came to Jeremy's groin the more his own cock strained for freedom. Jeremy's musky scent mixed with the subtle hint of the body-wash he had used earlier causing Andrew's head to reel with pleasure.

Andrew unbuttoned his own pants and worked them down until they were bunched at his ankles. Jeremy kicked his own pants onto the floor next to the couch, He spread his legs, creating a sensual nook for Andrew to place his body.

He eagerly snuggled into Jeremy, the pungent scent of precum filled his nose. He lowered the last few inches, closing his lips around the mushroom cap and flicking his tongue over the tip. A salty tang filled his senses and his own erection leapt to greater attention.

Jeremy's cock slid further down his throat. He had learned through years of practice how to relax and take Jeremy in without gagging.. Andrew feathered his tongue along the underside of Jeremy's mast while cupping his balls, rolling and tugging at them, rewarded by new streams of precum, which mixed with his saliva, making the work of taking him all the way down his throat that much easier.

The grunts emanating from deep inside Jeremy, along with the trembling of his muscles, told Andrew he was succeeding in his effort to send his lover into a senseless bliss. When two hands hooked beneath his shoulders and pulled him up, Andrew wanted to protest, but one glimpse of Jeremy's eyes halted any complaints. The pure lust and hunger sent shockwaves through him.

He allowed Jeremy to guide him up his body until he was laying on top of him, face to face, gazing into each other's eyes. Fire surged in his belly at Jeremy's impassioned plea. "I want you inside me."

Andrew locked his mouth over Jeremy's once again, this time with a fevered need, gripping the back of his neck and pulling their mouths together; Jeremy's excitement fueling his own. As legs wrapped around Andrew's waist he angled his hips to give his glistening cock better access to Jeremy's hole. "You want it right now?"

"Yes. God, Yes." Jeremy's eyes darted back and forth, peering at him, begging for release and ecstasy.

"You want it slow or all at once?" Each request sent fire through his belly and right to his groin.

"Fuck me hard. Shove your cock into me now." The pleading edge in his voice caused a tingling to begin in Andrew's core. His breath became labored and his body began to shake. Unable to withhold any longer, the game of teasing no longer an option, Andrew reached down and positioned the head of his penis against Jeremy's hole.

Jeremy's anus throbbed against Andrew's cock with each rapid heartbeat. He pressed forward, pushing past the ring which gave way allowing him to sink all the way into Jeremy's heated insides, the sensuous burn ripping the last bit of control from him.

Jeremy responded by squeezing his legs around Andrew's waist even tighter. "My God. You're filling me up."

Andrew's words were barely audible as he increased his pace, releasing Jeremy's mouth from his to take in desperately needed oxygen. The two of them pumped and writhed in sync, like pistons working in tandem, the heat and friction increasing with each thrust until the tingling inside Andrew exploded outward, filling his senses with a blinding light, each nerve firing simultaneously.

Andrew's cock pulsed, shooting jets of hot cum deep inside Jeremy. Jeremy's muscles clenched around his cock, deepening the sensation. He gripped onto Andrew, raking his fingers along the skin of his back, as his own orgasm racked his body. Red-hot semen coated their stomachs, causing them to slide against each other.

Several minutes of panting and kissing later, both of them regained their ability to move. "Jesus, Jeremy. What got into you?" Jeremy's eyes glinted with amusement. "Ok, poor choice of words. Maybe I should have asked what brought that on."

Jeremy closed his eyes, a contented hum emitting from him. "Do I need a reason to want you to fuck me like that?"

"No. I guess you don't." Andrew lowered his head and captured Jeremy in a languid kiss once again. The whole day had been a roller-coaster of emotions. At least they ended the day on a high. He peered into Jeremy's eyes, stunned by the intensity of the gaze that met his.

Jeremy's voice came out soft, but sure. "I love you, Andrew."

Andrew smiled down at him. "I love you, too," he whispered, sleepiness beginning to set in.

Looking satiated, Jeremy rolled lazily onto his side, an unspoken invitation to spoon. Andrew slid behind him on the couch, folding his arm around Jeremy and pulling him in tight.

Within minutes, Jeremy's breathing became slow and even. Andrew's eyes grew heavy and his mind began to drift. He held Jeremy in his arms, keeping him safe. He glanced down and watched Jeremy sleep and was struck by how peaceful he appeared. *I haven't seen him so relaxed in a long time.*

The realization robbed him of some of the satisfaction he had just experienced. The stark contrast between Jeremy awake and asleep forced Andrew to make a connection that unsettled him. *Why would he only seem relaxed when he's asleep?* He knew the answer, since he too felt the strain that had crept into their relationship, but he had managed to ignore it. Yet watching Jeremy sleep, seeing the peaceful man he had originally fallen in love with, cut deep.

Rather than pull Jeremy closer, Andrew rolled over, hugging a pillow to himself, and lay awake, all enjoyment from their lovemaking evaporated into the gap that continued to grow between the two of them.

Chapter Five

Craig opened the several screens of his *Boris* file, and assessed his work one last time before he printed them for his meeting in an hour. This project hadn't actually seemed like work at all. He had two sets of designs: one of homes in natural setting and one of home interiors. His favorite was the one of the home by a lake, Jeremy's summer home. *Funny how things like that stick in my mind after all this time.*

Tall pines were scattered about, providing a canopy of rich green all around the house. He had included a small piece of the lake to show the house was located by water. The view was from the lake looking ashore.

The slant of the roof peeked through the trees, lower on the left and angling up to the right. The wall facing the water consisted of sliding glass doors and an expansive deck which wrapped around to the left. The lake mirrored off the glass doors and provided a range of blues, grays, and greens as if the doors were a movie screen displaying a beautiful nature scene.

He had done a few designs of the interior of the house as well; a fireplace built of gray stone created a rustic aura in the living room and long beams of maple wood from one end of a room to the other, again unfinished, warmed the room. The picture was a perfect example of blending modern and natural elements.

He glanced at the other interior design pictures to make sure they were of the same quality. Once satisfied his work met the criteria set out by Boris, he printed the collection, put them into a portfolio case, and headed out to Boris's office located a few blocks away. Although he was confident in his work, an excited nervousness caused his heart to beat a bit faster than normal. *I hope he loves them as much as I do.*

At Boris's office, he took a deep breath before walking up to the receptionist, a petite blonde. "Hi. I'm Craig Harper from Spectacular Designs. I'm here to meet with Boris."

"Yes, yes. Boris is expecting you. Please, take a seat." Her voice was chipper and sweet. "He's on the phone, but will be off shortly." Craig thanked her and took a seat.

A few minutes later, Boris came out to greet him. "Craig. Sorry to keep you waiting." He shook Craig's hand energetically. "Come into my office." Craig followed Boris who pointed to a large table to the side of the room. "Come, let's lay the pictures out here. I'd like to be able to view all of them at once."

Craig opened his portfolio and began laying the pictures out. Boris took his time inspecting them, picking some up to view them more closely. After about ten minutes, he turned to face Craig, a wide grin spread across his face. "Absolutely marvelous work. Exactly what I want. So, m'boy, let's talk business. How are we going to launch this campaign?"

Craig's spirit soared, but he managed to control his reaction. The last thing he needed to do was trip and fall in the middle of Boris's office, making an ass out of

himself. "Janet is actually the one who does the coordination with the print companies and the advertisers. Maybe we should schedule a meeting so you can discuss the financial aspect of your campaign with her."

Boris stared at Craig, silently assessing him, then sat down, motioning to the seat next to him. "Take a seat. I'm going to explain something to you and I'd like your full attention." Craig sat, nervous he had upset Boris.

Boris crossed his legs and sat back comfortably in his chair. "You realize I am spending a lot of money on this project, yes?" Craig nodded. "This is my investment in myself and the direction I want my business to go. You are the one who knows more about my vision and what I'm trying to accomplish than anyone else. If I am going to be successful, I want you, who can speak to my vision, present at all meetings and helping me to make all decisions. You are my sounding board. In business, especially with the amount of business I'm bringing to your company, the client always gets what he wants."

Craig's stomach tied into a loose knot. Janet was not going to be happy about this. She was already pissed he had warned Boris to start small with his campaign and had told him so in no uncertain terms after Boris had left the office the day they landed the account. Now Craig would be dealing with printers and ad execs—Janet's domain. He kept his thoughts to himself, giving Boris the answer he knew he wanted. "I understand Boris. You can count on me."

Boris smiled. "Good. Now, let's talk about the campaign. I want a billboard and a magazine spread. Does your firm contact companies which rent billboard space?"

"Absolutely." Visions of Janet scowling at him haunted Craig's mind, but he forged ahead. Later he'd figure out a way to appease his friend.

"Perfect! The two demographics I am targeting are white collar professional males and homemaker females. I realize my target audiences are clichéd, but those two groups are where I'll generate the bulk of my business. I'm thinking of Wall Street and midtown billboard displays as well as highway displays along Interstate eighty-seven where a number of shopping malls and various other stores are located. In terms of magazines, I definitely want *Better Homes and Gardens*. We can work out a few other magazines as we go along."

Craig had been furiously writing all of this down to review with Janet when he got back to the office. He leaned back in his chair, the tension leaving his body so rapidly he slumped a little and had to pull himself back up to sit straight. "Okay! Then I'll tell Janet to call your receptionist and set a meeting time for the three of us to go over numbers and timeframes. What is the timeframe you are looking for?"

Boris rubbed his chin. "Hmm, maybe a month, can we draw up the contracts and book the space in a short time period?"

"I'll call our contacts and get back to you." Craig mentally patted himself on the back. *Smooth. You had no idea and didn't commit yourself to a definitive answer.*

"Good, good. Now, one more thing needs to be done right away." Boris got up and started pacing around his office. "I am throwing a party this weekend for a number of potential clients. I want all of these designs blown up and matted on poster-board, large displays to be hung on walls so several people can view them at once. I'm talking museum-size displays here." He continued walking as he talked. "I've already wooed some clients for my new direction and I want them to conceptualize what I am talking about." Boris turned to Craig. "And I'll need you present at the party. You can arrange your schedule to accommodate me, yes?"

Boris's comment was more of a command than a request. "Of course, Boris, I would be pleased to come to the party. Just out of curiosity, why would you want *me* there?"

Boris let out a heartfelt laugh. "Because, I'm going to introduce you as the genius behind the work. If my clients are going to hire me, they need to meet you so they can tell you their hopes and dreams for their homes or condos. You are going to be my design guy and your company is going to profit from the business I bring in."

Craig nodded, a bit uncomfortable, as if he had been commandeered as Boris's personal consultant. "When is the party?"

"This Saturday night. I rented a hall in Tribeca. My potential clients will be showing up around six o'clock. I would need you to arrive a few hours earlier with the posters to help direct my crew in setting up the place."

Craig made note of the date and time. "Would you mind if I brought my boyfriend? Saturday night is usually date night for us."

"Please, bring him. I hope your boyfriend likes to drink because I'm springing for a full open bar." Boris sat down behind his desk and picked up his phone. "Actually, I just reminded myself I need to call the caterer to make sure everything's in order. The evening must be perfect."

Craig stood up and let himself out of the office as Boris began talking to the caterer. Boris waved, giving Craig the thumbs up signal.

His discomfort grew as he left Boris's office and headed back toward his own. This was a job he enjoyed, but he was getting the sense Boris was going to keep him busy on this project for the rest of his life. This new venture was going to be successful for Boris, and taking advantage of Boris's energy and business savvy would certainly be a good business move, but Craig liked diversity. He didn't want to specialize in home design. He would become bored and begin to view work as something he did to survive rather than something which challenged him and gave him pleasure. Craig made a deal with himself to complete this job to the best of his ability, and then politely pull back from Boris once this initial phase was complete.

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Watching Boris Stanton walk into the The Bulls and Bears at six-thirty, their appointed meeting time, Andrew suppressed an annoyed laugh. The other man looked ridiculous in his red beret. What did he think, that all gay guys dressed flamboyantly? Forcing his

negative thoughts aside, Andrew plastered a smile on his face and approached the short man. "Mr. Stanton?" He extended his hand.

"Yes, please, call me Boris. I take it my beret helped to make me recognizable." Boris beamed at him. "So nice to meet you."

Andrew directed Boris toward the table he had reserved. "Why don't we get a drink so we can get started?"

"What are you drinking?" Boris was greasing the wheels. A tactic Andrew knew and used with his own clients.

"Gin and tonic. Thanks. I'll be at the table."

Boris ordered their drinks and returned to the table. "Here you go." Andrew smiled and took a sip. "I am so pleased you called. I brought samples of the work I can do for you. The designer working for me is quite talented. He will be a part of the deal if you should choose to hire me for your needs." Boris handed over a portfolio.

Andrew leafed through the pictures. They were quite good. Something about them seemed familiar to him. For some reason, he felt Jeremy would really like them. "This is terrific stuff. I especially like the use of natural material."

Boris nodded. "I specialize in this type of design. A touch of warmth in an upscale environment."

"I'm impressed. Jeremy will love these designs. He's the one who will be making the big decisions about how we decorate."

Boris sat up straighter. "Well, perfect. I'm throwing a party this Saturday, for potential clients. Please, bring your partner so he can meet my artist and view the designs for himself."

Andrew nodded. "Sounds like a wonderful idea. Where will the party be?"

Boris reached into his briefcase and pulled out an invitation. "Here you go. I hope you come by this weekend." They finished their drinks, Boris asking questions about Jeremy. *He's good, I'll give him that. Buying me a drink and then talking about my boyfriend.*

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When Andrew got home, Jeremy was in the kitchen preparing dinner. He stepped behind Jeremy and hugged him, nipping at his neck. "Hey, sexy. Your ass is so hot when you cook."

Jeremy smiled. "You think my ass looks hot whatever I'm doing."

"True. Is that a bad thing?"

"No, definitely not a bad thing." Jeremy turned in Andrew's arms and gave him a kiss. "I'm making chicken parmesan for dinner. The chicken is frying right now."

"Yum. Listen, I'm gonna shower, but then I can't wait to tell you about the meeting I just had. I met with a contractor with the best designs for remodeling the condo. We're invited to a party on Saturday to check out the work."

Jeremy stiffened. "You met with a contractor today? Why didn't you tell me?"

Andrew stepped back, shocked by the bite in Jeremy's voice. He expected some resistance, but anger was more than he had anticipated. "Because I wanted to surprise you."

"Haven't we talked about this? I don't want any more surprises. I've already agreed to the move and swallowed my pride by letting you pay for everything. Now you're planning on remodeling the whole place."

"Hey, calm down. I wanted to make sure his stuff was good. The surprise is I want you to make all the decisions about remodeling. You're good at that sort of thing." Andrew peered at Jeremy hesitantly, trying to determine whether the anger was flaring hotter or simmering.

Jeremy's shoulders slumped. "Fine. That's generous of you and you definitely surprised me."

"You're mad, aren't you? I can't do anything right, can I?"

Jeremy flinched at the question, but said nothing. Ever since his bid had been accepted, Jeremy had become distant. Something had changed between them, as if all the fight had drained out of him. Andrew tentatively walked closer to him. "Are you sure? If you're not sure, I can always call and cancel."

"I'm sure." Jeremy took the final step to close the distance between them and kissed Andrew again, gently, on the lips. "Go take your shower. Dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes."

Andrew gave Jeremy one last kiss on the forehead, then headed into their bedroom to undress. Under the hot stream of water, he allowed the tension to wash off him. He had been so excited to get home and tell Jeremy what he had done, thinking Jeremy would appreciate the effort to include him. Instead, like everything else lately, his efforts seemed to create problems instead of solving them.

A sudden urge to punch something filled him and he fisted his hands in his hair, pulling until the roots began to protest with pain. He tilted his head back, his mouth filling with water, then spat it out, enjoying the gratifying splash against the tiled wall. Putting more soap on the loofah he scrubbed at his skin. *Why are things so difficult with him?* Andrew sighed, placing the loofah back on its hook and allowing the suds to wash off his skin. Jeremy had always been too sensitive about things. So high strung. Strange how such a high strung guy could also be so lacking in ambition. At first it hadn't mattered. However, with each passing year, Jeremy's inability to move forward were putting a terrible strain on their relationship. *That's not fair. The strain is as much my fault as his.*

All Andrew wanted was to enjoy his life. He'd worked hard for his promotion and the fact he made lots of money and Jeremy didn't, never bothered him. Their problems weren't about money for him; just for Jeremy. Even the arguments they had about Jeremy's work weren't because of the money; they were because he believed Jeremy could do so much more.

The thought caused something to click into place in Andrew's mind. *Who the hell am I to decide whether Jeremy's job is good enough for him?* As if someone had switched on a light, Andrew understood *he* was the one who didn't think teaching was good enough. *He* was the one who thought teaching was a thankless, underpaid profession. Maybe his job *was* thankless and underpaid, but Jeremy loved what he did.

Yet, Andrew also knew what he wanted. He wanted to live in an expensive, large condo with modern conveniences. He wanted to travel around the globe with the man he loved. Jeremy did not want those things. The realization caused him to wonder whether Jeremy was still that man. He loved Jeremy, but was loving someone was enough of a reason to stay together if you didn't want the same things any longer?

They had both wanted the same things eight years ago. They had been on even footing, but now, they were in two different places and they seemed to be drifting further apart rather than growing closer together.

The sadness in Andrew's chest faded, nothing replacing the emotion, leaving him with a hollow emptiness inside. He couldn't deny his thoughts resonated as true in his heart. If they didn't want the same things and couldn't work to reconcile their differences, all they would do is end up hurting each other and making each other miserable. He didn't want to make Jeremy miserable. He loved him way too much.

Turning off the shower and grabbing a towel, Andrew's thoughts came faster. The reason for the distance growing between them had become clear, but how to handle the problem was far too scary to contemplate.

The scent of chicken wafted through the bedroom causing his stomach to growl. He quickly got dressed, checked himself in the mirror, and smiled, forcing his negative thoughts aside, then strode into the kitchen. "Dinner smells delicious."

Chapter Six

On Saturday, Craig got up early to make sure the artwork and displays were ready before he headed out to set up the party. He had worked overtime for the past couple of nights, perfecting his designs and working with the printer to make sure the posters were ready for display by Friday night. He was going to pick them up on his way to the hall in Tribeca which Boris had rented.

Heading out into the bright morning, he walked down the street to Starbucks. The day would be long and he was going to need a lot of caffeine. From a point of pride, he was excited his work was going to be the sole focus of the evening. He walked with a lighter gait knowing whatever business Boris drummed up would be partially because of the visual images he had created.

At the same time, he couldn't shake the nagging thought tugging at his mind since he met with Boris a few days earlier. The more he thought about their conversation, the more uncomfortable he became. Boris wanted him as his sole designer. Craig was confident Boris would hire him if he was willing to accept an offer, but he didn't want to limit his work to just one type of design. He loved his specialty, but each job was different. Each client was different which was what made the work exciting and kept his imagination and talent fresh. He was always trying to envision a new idea or concept based solely on a client's description of what they wanted. To limit himself to designing homes and home interiors would drain his work of creativity and imagination. No amount of money was worth sacrificing his freedom.

A conversation from long ago crept into his mind. One he had high up in a tree. Jeremy had asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. He had said he wanted to do something with computers and something creative. The thought reminded him of his first kiss. No matter how much time passed, thoughts of Jeremy always had the same effect; creating a heaviness in his chest. The sense of loss had grown even stronger in the past couple of years as his and Robert's relationship had dwindled. Since his mind was in the past, he decided to allow himself to wallow.

Jeremy had understood exactly what he meant. He agreed Craig needed to be doing something involving his mind; something from within him, not some job where he churned out garbage at a fast clip. *What had Jeremy wanted to do?* Craig racked his brain, trying to remember. *Teaching. How could I forget?*

He answered his own question without having to think. *Because I remember a far more powerful moment in the tree.* With Jeremy's image in his mind, Craig replayed the kiss, picturing soft lips closing over his own, Jeremy's scent, musky, with a hint of orange. He laughed at the level of detail his mind was able to recreate from that moment.

More than the kiss, Craig recalled Jeremy's affirming acceptance by getting excited over the things which excited him. He couldn't think of one time Jeremy criticized or

pushed him into doing something he didn't want to do. Jeremy never judged him for following his dreams, not like Robert did, all the time.

Reaching the coffee shop, Craig pushed his thoughts from his mind. He ordered two coffees, one for him and one for Robert, and headed back to their apartment. With a *Wall Street Journal* for Robert tucked under his arm, he jogged up the steps, amazed he didn't trip and fall.

Robert was up when he got home, standing in the middle of the living room naked with a towel draped over his shoulders. His brown hair was wet and his bangs clung to his forehead. He turned around when Craig walked in, his cock swinging with his motion and clapping the inside of his thigh.

Craig walked over to Robert and handed him his coffee and the newspaper, then turned to go to the bedroom. He was stopped in his tracks by a sharp clap on his ass. "Looks good." *Please don't make a pass. Not today. I'm way too busy.*

"Uh, I..." Craig's heart began to beat a bit faster; his skin became clammy with a sudden sweat. "Babe, I have a lot to do today. Can't we just sit and have breakfast before I head out?"

Robert pouted, walking over to Craig, a swagger in his step, and cupped Craig's groin. "You saying you're too busy for a little fun?"

Craig smiled weakly. "Robert, today's a busy day for me."

Ignoring him, Robert unbuttoned his pants and worked his hands under the waistband, beginning to push it over his ass.

"Robert." Craig's voice came out far louder than he had intended, but it had the desired effect of freezing Robert's actions. "I said I have a lot to do today."

His face became crimson in a flash, lips tightening into thin slits as he pressed them together. "Sue me for finding my boyfriend sexy."

"Really. Is that what this is about? Are you coming onto me because you think I'm sexy, or is this because you want a warm body to help you take care of your morning wood?"

Robert opened his mouth then closed it once again. When he spoke, his voice was controlled, something Craig had learned meant he was seething with rage. "What crawled up your ass and died?"

"Lovely image. Today's a big day for me and I want to remain focused. I'd think you would understand that. How many times did you push me off of you because you had a big event?"

Robert laughed, a single burst of sound emitting from him. "Those instances were different. They were—"

"About you!" The anger swelled up inside Craig to the point where his arms began to shake. When he continued, he was shouting, pressure building up in his head. He was sure if he looked at himself in a mirror his veins would be bulging with the strain

of his outburst. "It's always fuckin' about you. Well today is about me. So fuck off." Craig stormed from the room and headed to the bathroom, turning on the shower.

He allowed the hot water to run over his body, cleansing him of the sweat and soothing his trembling muscles. Instead of serving as a release, this fight had left him empty and sad. When they had first met and for years afterwards, Robert had gone out of his way to treat Craig like a kid, but those days had passed a long time ago.

Fresh tears streamed out of his eyes. He leaned his forehead against his arms, his body convulsing with his silent sobs, as the water poured over him.

"What's wrong with me?" Craig hadn't meant to speak out loud, but his voice had only been a whisper and he was sure Robert hadn't heard him. Craig tried to pinpoint when they had gone from being lovers to being roommates who fucked. The thought brought on a new wave of tears. He tried to push the ache in his chest and throat away, but it clung harder, causing him to kneel down in the shower as the water caressed his back. When the image of Jeremy entered his mind, he realized he was hugging himself in a fetal position on the shower floor. The image helped to ease the ache and he pulled himself together, dried off, got dressed, and joined Robert in the kitchen.

Robert placed a plate of scrambled eggs and buttered toast in front of him. "I pushed you too hard. I'm sorry."

Craig's head snapped up. *Did he just apologize to me?* Hope managed to filter its way through his spent emotions and exhausted brain. "I shouldn't have exploded like that. It wasn't fair of me."

His words were dismissed with a wave of Robert's hand. "I'll admit you've been frustrating me for quite some time. Your job seems like a dead end, but now, with Boris wanting you as his exclusive graphic artist, you found your big break. Make good tonight and you're set. Boris will hire you and you'll be rolling in it big time."

Craig's momentary hope, that Robert was simply proud of him, faded. "Yeah, I think Boris wants me to join his firm, but I don't. I'm not leaving Spectacular Designs."

Robert was silent for a moment, leaning against the countertop, looking down at him. "I don't get you, Craig. This is a wet dream come true. You can make twice, hell, three times what you're making now. Why would you continue working for a small, going-nowhere company? This is your chance to make a real name for yourself."

Craig's anger bubbled up his throat like bile, but he forced himself to swallow it back down as he took another sip of his coffee. He couldn't handle another blowout. "I like the work I do in my small, going-nowhere company. I don't want my work to be limited to the same thing day after day. I like meeting clients and discussing their ideas. I like my business partners. They're my friends." Despite his efforts, his voice had risen to a yell, but this time, a buoyant sensation flooded through him as Robert's eyes narrowed.

Robert's expression and tone dripped with disgust when he spoke. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Who gives a fuck about the client? The client is the one with the money, but you direct the client. I know the bullshit line of *the client is always*

right, but it's a load of crap. Anyone worth their shit knows *they* direct the client towards what's best for them. If the client won't listen, cut 'em loose. Boris is a smart businessman from what I can tell and he recognized your talent. You'd be plain stupid not to work for him."

"Well, I guess I'm plain stupid then. Tonight's show is just that...a party showing my work. Boris is the client. I don't view him as potential future business. We do fine at Spectacular Designs. I'm happy...there."

"We'll see what you say after I talk to Boris tonight. You may not know your own worth, but I sure as hell do. You can do so much better than you are right now and I deserve it as much as you do." Robert's eyes narrowed to slits.

"What in the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" Craig glared back, able to dish out just as much attitude as he got.

"It means you need to fucking grow up and start contributing something to this relationship. Our lives would be so much better if you made more money. You're a hot guy, but you don't reach your potential in any other way." Robert inspected Craig as if appraising a new car. "We would be a powerful couple; good looks, hot sex, lots of money, lots to show for it."

"What about lots of love, Robert? I didn't hear you mention love in the assets you just listed." Craig stood, accidentally knocking his coffee to the floor. "Shit, hand me a paper towel."

Robert shook his head. "You are such a klutz." He handed Craig a paper towel and watched him wipe up the mess he had just made. "I'm telling you right now, you are going to accept a job offer if Boris offers one to you or else we're going to have a serious conversation about this relationship."

Craig laughed at Robert's comment. "Are you threatening me? Do you actually think threatening me is going to make me change my mind?"

"What the fuck, Craig? Why is everything a fight with you lately? We used to want the same things. What happened to you?"

Craig stood up and deposited the soaked paper towel on the countertop. "I don't know, Robert. But you're right. Everything is a fight lately. After tonight, maybe we *should* talk about our relationship."

Robert opened his mouth, but quickly closed it. He lowered his voice, his expression softening. "You're nervous. A lot hinges on tonight. I shouldn't be pushing you right now."

Craig picked up the paper towel from the counter and walked into the kitchen, throwing it into the trash can. "Whatever, Robert. I need to go to the printers and then to the studio. The party is at six o'clock this evening." He grabbed his bag and left the apartment. When the door closed behind him, he leaned against it, closing his eyes, and took deep breaths until his heart rate slowed.

* * * * *

Jeremy stepped out of the shower at around four-thirty. He and Andrew had to leave in about an hour to get to the party in Tribeca. After their argument, Jeremy knew he was pushing Andrew too hard. Andrew only wanted to make him happy. He wasn't purposefully excluding him from making decisions.

Andrew stood by the window overlooking Central Park. Jeremy walked behind him and slid his arms around his body. Andrew sighed and spoke without turning to face him. "The view is beautiful, don't you think?"

Jeremy peered over his shoulder, appraising the scene before him. "Yes."

Andrew turned to face Jeremy, a hint of a smile on his face, but a sadness behind his eyes. "You know, this is the first time the two of us have actually appreciated this view together since we moved here."

Jeremy stared out the window. Andrew was trying so hard to make this work for the both of them. The sadness he witnessed in Andrew passed through the air to him. It was true, they hadn't enjoyed this view together; something that signaled a problem he had been trying not to face. "I've been a bit of an ass lately, haven't I?"

Andrew's face became solemn as he drew Jeremy to him. "I love you, Jeremy. You know that, right?"

Jeremy gently squeezed Andrew's waist. "I love you, too. We've just made a lot of changes and I guess I need to adjust to them."

Andrew's shoulders stiffened. "I never forced anything on you. I told you to say no if you didn't want this."

Jeremy glanced out over the park for one lingering moment, then turned to face Andrew. "I know. That's why I'm apologizing for my behavior. I'm sensitive lately and this move really unearthed our differences front and center." Andrew tried to interject, but Jeremy cut him off. He wasn't sure he entirely believed everything he was saying, but until he was sure, he needed to try to do better than simply keep the peace. He needed to be pleasant and stop picking fights. "You didn't do anything to bring this on. It's *my* pride and *my* problem. I like being able to contribute equally, but my desires limit you. I shouldn't expect you to sacrifice the things you want simply because of my ego." It wasn't the real issue, but Jeremy wasn't ready to discuss that yet. He still needed time to determine whether they had grown too far apart to find their way back to each other.

Andrew pulled Jeremy in close. "I was thinking the exact same thing." He kissed Jeremy's head and hugged him tighter.

Jeremy tensed momentarily. Andrew turned him so they faced one another. "What, that I've been a pain in the ass?"

Andrew's face broke into a wide grin. "No. How I'm pushing my issues on you—specifically the teaching thing. I shouldn't pressure you to leave a job you love."

"Oh. I misunderstood. Sorry." *Why am I assuming the worst from Andrew?* Every time he was ready to fight, he stopped himself, not wanting to have the same argument over and over.

He had never backed down from arguments before; he never had to. As a child, he only knew compatibility. He had been accepted unconditionally for who he was and had been supported in any choice he made, no judgment or pressure. Craig had been his perfect match and all his relationships had been measured against him.

Why is Craig popping into my mind so much lately? He pushed the thought aside, got dressed, and the two of them headed out. In the cab, heading toward Boris's party, a party where Andrew was expecting him to excitedly spend more money he didn't have, Jeremy felt another small piece of himself falling away.

Chapter Seven

Craig was pleased with the work done by the printing company. The pictures were large and clear. Setup didn't take long, so he decided to wander through Little Italy, the neighborhood next to Tribeca.

At around five-thirty Robert showed up at the hall. Craig painted a hospitable smile on his face and walked over to him. As he led Robert to meet Boris, he hissed a warning through his smile. "Don't even think about bringing up job offers."

Robert ignored his comment, extending his hand to Boris when they reached him. "You must be Boris. Craig's told me a lot about you." He waved in a sweeping motion, gesturing around the room. "This is a decadent place. I'm excited for your guests enjoy Craig's work."

Craig dug his nails into Robert's arm, maintaining his smile. "Boris, this is Robert, my boyfriend. He hasn't learned the art of subtlety. He's sweet, but the focus should be on your vision. I agree with him. This will be an extravagant event."

Boris glanced between the two with an odd expression on his face. "Well, I'm happy to meet you, Robert. You have quite a talented partner here. I am impressed with the designs he's created for this event."

Robert beamed. "Yes, Craig is outstanding at what he does. His talents are a perfect match for what you are trying to accomplish. Wouldn't you say?"

"Absolutely. I was talking to Craig about that the other day. In fact, if all goes well tonight, I was planning on making an offer I hope he can't refuse." Boris turned to Craig. "I'm happy with your work and your commitment to this project and would like to bring you on board to work for me. Of course we'd need to discuss benefits and salary, but I think you would bring in a great deal of business and I'm a generous man with money and profit sharing."

Craig widened his smile, wanting to kick Robert into next week. "Why don't we focus on tonight? I think I'll do one more check on the pictures to make sure everything is set up correctly."

Craig tugged on Robert's arm, but Robert didn't budge. "I'll stay here and chat with Boris. You go do what you need to do. Perhaps I'll discuss some ideas for upgrading our apartment with Boris."

Boris's eyes lit up. "Absolutely, Robert. Come, let me get you a glass of champagne and we can discuss your ideas." The two walked towards the trays loaded with champagne glasses leaving him alone, seething.

Craig walked to the other side of the room and took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself down. Robert was purposefully doing everything he'd asked him not to do. *Does he think I'll change my mind and leave Spectacular Designs? Does he believe I'm that fickle?*

He was about to walk back across the room and give Robert one hell of a huge piece of his mind when the first guests started to arrive. Not wanting to make a scene, he swallowed his rising anger, grabbing a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and taking a huge gulp.

About an hour into the party, things had already gotten quite busy. Boris was moving about from person to person, socializing and trying to generate as much business as possible. Craig had been summoned to meet dozens of people. He received multiple compliments as Boris introduced him as the brilliant artist behind the work. He enjoyed receiving so much praise, but also felt greasy in a drumming-up-business sort of way.

Robert, who remained by his side the whole time, capitalized on each and every chance to plug Craig. Each person he talked to politely complimented Craig once again, giving Robert a strange side glance, before turning to mingle with others at the party. Craig, becoming more annoyed by the second, decided to go outside and smoke a cigarette. Robert remained inside, grabbing another glass of champagne. His speech was horribly slurred and he should have been arrested for assault with an annoying personality.

* * * * *

Jeremy and Andrew arrived at the party around seven o'clock. The room was crowded, filled with well-dressed men and women, all appearing to be between the ages of thirty and fifty. If this weren't a business gathering, Jeremy might have considered it a dance club.

Andrew grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter and handed one to him. "Let's go look at the pictures." He lifted his elbow and Jeremy hooked his hand in the space provided.

As they walked along one wall of pictures, Jeremy was struck by the look and tone of the images. Something about them felt familiar to him. A wooden beam here, a fireplace there. Several images touched at something deep inside him, giving him a sense of *déjà vu*. Unable to place his finger on what seemed familiar to him, he simply took in the designs, surprised by how much he enjoyed the images. *If this is what Andrew wants, I could actually get into the idea of remodeling.* Although he acknowledged the thought, his pride wouldn't allow him to say so. He had made a big enough deal of arguing the remodeling in the first place that to back down now would seem like he was caving in.

After a few minutes, they were accosted by a short man with receding curly hair. The man seemed to know Andrew, approaching the two of them with a wide smile on his face. "Andrew, I'm so glad that you made it." He then turned to Jeremy, extending his thick hand with stubby fingers. "You must be Jeremy. Andrew mentioned he would be bringing you." Jeremy took it, staring at Andrew who wore a bemused expression. "I'm so excited at the prospect of working with you. The Central Park location is one

that excites me. Perfect for the type of design we do. And my artist...he's brilliant at bringing a natural feel to a modern environment."

Andrew turned towards Boris and smiled. "Thanks. This is quite a turnout." He placed his arm around Jeremy's shoulder. "As you've guessed, this is my boyfriend, Jeremy. He will be the one making all of the big decisions," Jeremy felt his shoulders tense, but raised his glass to his lips and allowed the sweet nectar and light bubbles to ease his fraying nerves.

Jeremy, whose hand was still held in Boris's stubby grasp, extricated himself as politely as possible. "Nice to meet you Boris. Andrew came home excited after meeting you. I had a chance to view some of the designs and can understand why. The combination of modern design with the use of natural resources and colors is quite surprising and pleasant."

Boris smiled. "Do they match your vision for your condo?"

Jeremy glanced at Andrew who nodded. "I like where I live to feel homey, not sterile. The pictures show lots of work using unfinished wood which I find refreshing. Central Park was what drew the two of us to the condo in the first place.

Boris listened, but seemed fidgety, darting glances to his left and right periodically. "Well, your tastes match the specific skills of the graphic designer I selected for this work. I am going to be recommending him to all potential clients." Boris leaned in, whispering conspiratorially. "To tell the truth, I'm hoping to steal this guy from his current job. He's *that* good."

Jeremy smiled politely. "Well, he certainly wins my vote. If he's able to bring this kind of warmth to a home, I believe I would enjoy working with him on ideas for our condo."

Andrew wrapped his arm around Jeremy's waist. "Really?"

Jeremy looked at Andrew. "Yes, I like the work. It might make a real difference to the cold feel of the place."

When Jeremy called the place cold, Andrew's shoulder hunched. "Let me introduce you to the designer. I'm sure he would love to discuss your ideas with you. He's here tonight."

He glanced around the room. "Let me go find him."

* * * * *

Craig pulled on his cigarette one last time before dropping it to the ground and crushing it with his foot. The evening was fun, or it would have been if Robert hadn't come. *I can't believe he's purposely doing everything I asked him not to do. Why can't I have a boyfriend who treats me with respect and supports me?* As if on cue, an image of Jeremy filled his mind. Jeremy would have simply enjoyed this evening and let Craig have his moment of glory. In fact, he probably wouldn't have left Craig's side.

He could picture exactly how the evening would have gone. As clients droned on about their ideas, Jeremy would patiently listen, probably admiring his expertise and his ability to make clients comfortable, but he would know when Craig needed a break and would serve as the perfect partner in creating subtle reasons for breaking away for a moment here and there.

He had been busy meeting with clients and the evening was going well. Boris was a schmoosing machine, and was probably wondering where he was right now. *Better go back in.* Releasing his lungful of smoke, he watched the white cloud hang in the air before it began to dissipate.

He turned to enter the building as Boris came barreling toward him. "Craig. I've been looking for you. I have some clients I want to introduce you to."

Craig plastered a smile on his face, inwardly wanting to kick Boris in the shins for interrupting his small break. Allowing himself to be led back into the party, he prepared for another round of listening and headed in his direction.

As he got closer, the two men he was supposed to meet came into better focus. The taller man had broad shoulders, blond hair, and was quite handsome, but something about the dark haired man seemed familiar to him; something that reminded him of. His thoughts froze at the same time his muscles stopped working. His heart began to pound inside his chest and his skin tingled as each nerve-ending seemed to reach forward, protesting against Craig's delay. It wasn't until his lungs began to ache that he realized he wasn't breathing. The only thing filing his vision, his thoughts, was Jeremy. Older, a man now, but definitely Jeremy.

Craig managed to begin moving, although he had to focus on one part of his body at a time. First he moved his feet, then remembered to breath, finally he wiped his sweaty palms along his pants, before taking the final steps to close the gap. The whole time, he never moved his eyes from Jeremy, who, if looks were any indication, was experiencing a similar sense of recognition and shock. His amber eyes widened and his mouth formed an *oh* and then began to pull up at the corners into a smile.

"Craig?"

His smile broadened, lighting up his face, filling Craig with a rush of happiness he hadn't felt in fifteen years. Boris and the blond man both turned to face Jeremy, then turned to face him, but he could only focus on one person.

"What are you doing here? Oh...you're the artist! Oh my God!" Jeremy laughed, that tremulous sound he'd always made when nervous, then stepped forward and grabbed Craig in a tight hug.

Craig's heart thrashed wildly, as he returned the hug. He had been thinking about Jeremy and here he was, as if summoned by magic. Craig squeezed tighter, fearing he might disappear if he let go. Finally, Craig pulled back so he could survey his friend once again; dark hair, smooth-as-silk tanned skin, lanky muscles, not overly developed, but, if memory served, taut nonetheless. *Handsome.* "My God, Jeremy, you haven't changed at all in fifteen years."

Jeremy laughed again. "You mean like a pimply fifteen year old kid? Thanks."

Heat rushed to Craig's cheeks. "No, I didn't mean...Hell, I can't believe you're here." An image of their last day together, their kiss in The Love Tree, flashed through Craig's mind again. He grabbed Jeremy into another hug. Just hearing his voice, listening to his laugh, smelling that mixture of sweetness and muskiness, brought him back to a time when he had been the happiest in his life. Heat radiated between them.

After another minute, Jeremy stepped back, a wide grin on his face. "I was telling Boris how much I loved the artwork and he told me about this brilliant artist he had found. I'm not surprised the pictures gave me a sense of home." A look passed over Jeremy's face. The same expression he'd worn up in the Love Tree that day...

The man with Jeremy cleared his throat.

Jeremy turned to him. "Andrew, I'm sorry. This is Craig. He and I spent every minute together until I moved to Arizona."

Andrew's face lit up. "So, this is the famous Craig? Your first kiss?"

Jeremy's cheeks pinked and he gave Andrew's shoulder a shove. "Sorry about him, Craig. He's not trained yet. Says whatever comes to his mind."

Craig smiled, ignoring the dark feeling passing over him. *He has a boyfriend.* His heart sank, but he managed to keep his voice cheerful. "Hey, if my reputation is going to precede me, I guess being known as a good kisser is better than a lot of other things."

"I never told him you were a *good* kisser." Jeremy's teasing smile said he was lying.

Andrew snickered. "Are you kidding? You said you dumped the next four guys you dated simply because their kisses didn't measure up to his." Craig's cheeks flamed hot. If they hadn't turned red before, they certainly must be now. *Jeremy compared other guys to me. Just like I did.*

"Andrew! I'm sure we can find better things to talk about than first kisses." Jeremy shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Craig regarded him with wonder and, as Jeremy shifted, he swore he glimpsed a bulge at his crotch which hadn't been there a moment earlier. "So, Craig, how long have you been in New York City?"

Too many thoughts crowded his mind for him to answer right away. Jeremy had compared other men to him. He was becoming aroused just thinking about it. Shaking his head, he managed to clear his mind enough to respond. "Eight years. I moved here after college. You?"

"Same. I can't believe we've lived in the same city for the past eight years and never ran into each other!" Jeremy shook his head.

Craig's gut tightened into a small knot. *Eight years in the same city. What would eight years have been like if—* he cut off his own thoughts. "Well, we didn't do the best job of keeping in touch after we graduated from high school. You remember. When you first moved, we talked every week, but three years of high school went by and we talked less and less. When we both went to college we sort of fell out of touch." That hadn't been the reason at all. Once Jeremy had started to call less frequently, the pain of loss

had sent him into a downward spiral. When the calls ended altogether, it had been easier to let the past be the past. It still hurt, but to reopen that wound—Craig didn't want to allow the unpleasant thoughts back into his mind.

Jeremy sighed. "I can't believe we let that happen. But here we are, both living in the same city. They say it's never too late, right?"

Craig smiled. *Is he right? Is this a second chance?* The same feeling of hope from that morning filled him. The hope Robert had dashed. Reflexively, Craig corrected his thinking. Jeremy had a boyfriend. The most he could hope for was friendship from Jeremy. Just because his own relationship was failing didn't mean Jeremy's was. Hope led to disappointment. "Right. So why don't we catch up?" He turned to Andrew. "I got your name since Jeremy scolded you for embarrassing him—which wins you points by the way."

A warm smile crossed Andrew's face. "And *I've* figured out you're Craig, the kiss I had to measure up against." Jeremy punched his arm, but Andrew ignored him. He cupped Craig's hand in his. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Andrew's grip was strong, but Craig noted gentleness as well. *So, Jeremy had found a really nice guy. Unlike Robert...* "My boyfriend is around here somewhere," he said, once again forcing a cheerfulness into his voice that he didn't feel. "I've been neglecting him."

Jeremy's head snapped up. "Your *boyfriend* is here? Let me meet him. Fifteen years of friendship means I still get the right to judge a boyfriend, don't I?"

Craig laughed, "I guess." He felt his mouth pull up into a smile. Seeing Jeremy brought back feelings he had forgotten; a sense of confidence, like nothing could go wrong as long as they were together. He had buried that loss so deep that feeling it again created a sense of sadness and excitement at once.

Jeremy raised one eyebrow, an expression Craig had loved. Not many people possessed the muscle skill to lift one brow while leaving the other motionless. "You're thinking something. I would recognize that pensive expression from across a room."

Just a mere mention of familiarity sent waves of physical and emotional stimulation through him, making his cock shift, lengthening and pressing against the inside of his pants. "I was just thinking that seeing you now, it seems like no time has passed."

"We may not have seen each other in years, but I think we could pick back up where we left off." Jeremy flashed a sheepish glance at Craig, one Craig had seen so many times growing up. Of course when they were younger, the look had been precipitated by Jeremy trying to convince Craig to engage in some kind of trouble or other and inevitably was followed by both of them getting caught and grounded for various lengths of time.

"Well, you do make a good point." Craig scanned the room and found Robert talking to a few people by the banquet table. Robert was waving one hand, another glass of champagne in the other. His hand gesture made him wobble a bit before an audience of three men who looked at once amused and embarrassed. Craig sighed.

Robert drunk, meeting his lover's first boyfriend. Not good. But how could he not introduce them? "He's over by the food."

They headed over to the banquet table and approached Robert. Craig's interruption seemed to be a welcome distraction for Robert's listeners who scattered in different directions. Craig followed their retreat, dread filling him. *Shit*. All he could do was hope that Robert would behave enough to not embarrass the both of them. He was doing a bang-up job of embarrassing himself. He placed a hand on Robert's arm. "Hey, I want you to meet someone. This is Jeremy. My best friend from growing up."

Robert peered at Jeremy and scrunched his brows before his eyes shot wide, "Oh, the one you had your first kiss with. I remember now." The heat from moments earlier crawled back up Craig's neck and into his cheeks. He glanced at Jeremy, whose eyes widened as well. "Ok, so I told him about the kiss too."

Both Jeremy and Andrew burst out laughing. Andrew extended his hand. "Hi, I'm Andrew Jamieson, Jeremy's other half."

Robert flashed his winning grin and extended his hand. "Robert Howell. A pleasure." Robert held Andrew's hand for a moment, surveying him with a scrutinizing expression. "You seem familiar. Have we met before?"

Andrew withdrew his hand, but maintained friendly eye contact. "I was thinking the same thing. Where do you work?"

"Goldman Sachs. I run the domestic trading floor." Robert's chest puffed out slightly.

Recognition flashed across Andrew's face. "Ah yes, that's where I've seen you. At The Bulls and Bears. I work at Fidelity. I guess we have more in common than boyfriends who kissed each other as kids."

Robert's smile widened. "You're an investment banker? Interesting."

"Well, I'm a portfolio manager actually. I prefer that line of the work." Andrew's smile remained pleasant and easy.

"Portfolio management is important work." Robert began talking about his views on the connections between portfolio management, investment banking, and trading.

Both Jeremy and Craig turned to face each other, one glance telling both of them their boyfriends would be occupied for a while. Craig hooked Jeremy's arm, the thrill of contact causing his blood to rush a bit faster through his veins. The simple act fed his fantasy of what he and Jeremy could have been. Just as quickly, he pushed the thought aside. *He's got a boyfriend. Don't get your hopes up.* "C'mon, we need to catch up. Let's go find somewhere a little less crowded to talk."

They walked over to a corner of the room, away from the hustle and bustle of the guests. Craig was the first to speak. "It's strange that we've lived in the city for eight years and never run into one another." He was digging, searching for any sign that Jeremy might reciprocate his feelings. Hope kept coming back. *Maybe he isn't happy with Andrew either.*

"It's kind of unusual given that only one point-five million people live on the island. Odds were definitely in our favor to cross paths."

"So you're still a wise ass." His spirit sank with Jeremy's response. It was simple banter, something they had always done, but without any of the underlying pangs of desire. Craig placed an arm on Jeremy's shoulder. Warmth radiated through the shirt as Craig's hand brushed over muscle. "So what do you do when you aren't coming to these parties?"

"I'm teaching second grade at a private school on the east side."

"No shit. You always said you wanted to be a teacher." Craig nodded in approval. "Good for you. I never doubted you'd achieve whatever you set your mind to."

"You remember I wanted to teach?" The surprise in Jeremy's voice was unmistakable.

"Of course. You said you wanted to and I knew you would follow your dream. I bet you're an amazing teacher. All your students must have crushes on you." Craig witnessed several emotions pass over Jeremy's face. He appeared thrilled, but the excitement seemed to fade into something more like sadness. "Did I say something wrong?"

Jeremy turned his amber gaze on Craig, causing his breath to catch. "No. I had forgotten anyone knew my childhood and could appreciate that I achieved my goals."

Craig's heart thumped at the deeper meaning in Jeremy's comment. "You were my best friend. I paid attention to everything you said. Plus, you told me on a day I'll never forget. That kiss cemented every detail into my mind."

The flush pinkening Jeremy's cheeks caused Craig to laugh, but he never dropped his gaze. "How about you? You said you were going to do something creative. I guess you achieved your goals as well." Jeremy glanced around the room at Craig's artwork. "Show me your work. I want a tour from the artist himself."

Resisting the sudden impulse to take Jeremy's hand, Craig followed Jeremy as he walked by the various pictures on display.

"These pictures remind me of home," Jeremy said, a wistful note in his voice. "Like this one. The wooden beams are exactly like the ones in your kitchen. And this fireplace, the use of stone and the various shades of gray match the one from your front parlor, right?"

A mixture of happiness and regret filled Craig, and he had to work to keep himself held together. "I guess you have a good memory too. I enjoyed this job. My specialty is modern design, but Boris wanted me to make the designs softer and warmer."

Craig surveyed the designs again, scrutinizing his work from Jeremy's perspective. He had used his home as motivation, but had not realized until now how similar his designs were to several of the features from growing up. He walked over to the picture of the house by the lake. "Jeremy, check this one out. Recognize anything?"

Jeremy studied the picture. "It's the Cape house." He peered closer and his mouth fell open. "Is that...That's The Love Tree!"

"Yup." Craig walked up to the picture. "As best as I can remember it anyways. I know it wasn't there, but I had to draw it anyway."

Craig had been particularly nostalgic when he designed this scene. Each detail came to life in his mind as he had replayed moments from growing up with Jeremy...none more vivid than the kiss in the Love Tree. Somehow bringing together the two places he shared with Jeremy which held the most powerful meaning for him seemed a natural thing to do. He reached up to touch the tree. "I did the same thing you did."

Jeremy looked at Craig. "What's that?"

"I judged my first few boyfriends against you."

Jeremy dropped his gaze. When he lifted his head, he wore a serious expression. "It's so good to see you again."

Craig stared at the picture for a moment longer, before turning to Jeremy. He took a step forward, maintaining eye contact as he moved, and his foot caught on the floor causing him to trip. He would have smacked himself smartly on the ground if Jeremy hadn't caught him. Jeremy's arms wrapped around Craig, holding him until he steadied his feet on the ground. When he righted himself, Jeremy kept his hold around his waist. Their eyes met and locked, Jeremy's amber pools peering into his blues. For a brief moment, no more than a few seconds, they were back in the tree, nothing else existed. Craig felt himself draw closer to Jeremy, his desire to seal their lips together filling his every thought. It seemed that Jeremy's mouth drew closer to him as well, each of them breathing a bit more heavily.

Jeremy shook his head, breaking the moment, replacing the intensity on his face with a sheepish grin and a weak laugh. "Your balance has improved dramatically, I'm impressed. The flat floor would be tricky for anyone to navigate." His laughter became stronger, helping to bring Craig out of his haze.

Craig smirked. "Fuck you." Then he started laughing too, appreciating the release in the intensity of their reunion. "We better not let another fifteen years go by before we get together again." Craig reached into his pocket, pulled out a business card, and wrote his cell number on the back. "Here, take this. Let's grab dinner sometime soon and catch up."

"I'd like that. Can you give me one of those cards?" Craig obliged, pulling another card from his pocket. Jeremy wrote his number on the back as well, and returned it to Craig. "Now we have each other's numbers. I'm free any day next week."

"Me too."

Their conversation was interrupted by Boris who called for everyone's attention. He stood at the podium. "I would like to thank each of you for coming tonight. I'm pleased to be able to show the work my company can do for you. Could we all take a moment to appreciate the bright, young designer who created the samples of work you have seen this evening? Craig Harper, please step forward."

Craig turned to Jeremy. "Well, guess I need to be shown off." He gave Jeremy a quick hug, before heading for the podium. As he walked away, each step was harder to make than the last, taking him further away from Jeremy and their reunion.

* * * * *

Jeremy didn't spend much time with Craig after Boris announced him. A constant band of clients surrounded Craig, all undoubtedly wanting to discuss their plans for redecorating their places. Finally, at the end of the evening, Craig stopped by, pulling him into another tight hug. Craig's arms squeezed him tightly, the pressure heating him where they touched, a hint of cologne, something light and fresh, on his collar. Jeremy wanted to stay in Craig's embrace all evening just to breathe him in.

"What's that cologne? I love it."

Craig pulled back, smiling. "Acqua Di Gio. It's my favorite. They hugged once more, then Craig left with Robert.

Longing filled Jeremy as Craig walked away. All of his memories of their childhood flooded his mind. He had always been so happy with Craig, the boy. Now he was stunned by Craig, the man. He had grown into himself nicely. Light brown hair, slightly longer than his own and a bit disheveled, perfect for an artistic type. Pale skin, unblemished, the line of his features perfectly symmetrical. Those bright blue eyes he had admired as a child hadn't aged, youthful excitement still evident in his confident gaze. And those plump lips, the ones he had nibbled seventy feet in the air. He had dreamed about kissing those lips, the soft press of them against his own, countless times over the years.

Jeremy was distracted from his thoughts by an uncomfortable tightening in his pants. He shifted his hips, attempting to readjust himself without using his hands. *Just thinking about him is giving me a hard-on.*

Craig understood him. He should. They grew up together. You didn't spend fifteen years with someone without knowing who he really was, deep down inside. *What if things had been different...if I had never moved?*

He tried to remember when he and Craig had lost touch. What the exact circumstances had been causing him to let such an important friendship slip through his fingers. Their kiss, the day before he left, had left him with a void when he and his family moved to Arizona. He had always loved Craig and for a year before he actually kissed him, had been aware of being *in* love with him. After he moved, he cried himself to sleep night after night; upset he had waited until the last possible moment to show his true feelings.

They called each other every week for the first year, but once a week became once every two weeks and then once a month. Each time they spoke, the void would return and he would fall into a depression, missing his best friend and wishing for what they never had a chance to have. He found when he didn't call, he could focus on his new friends and his new life without the sadness and depression of yearning for his past. By

the time he left for college, he only kept in touch around holidays, yet every contact still filled him with regret.

He had considered going to college back east, but with his parents divorced, money was tight. Going to Arizona State made more sense. Even if money hadn't been tight, he would have avoided going home. Too much time had passed. He had allowed things to slip between them, dreading the feeling of emptiness which always filled him afterwards. And Craig had become more distant during the phone calls, as if he were pulling away. That hurt more than anything.

In college he focused on building new memories, making new friends. He didn't have the courage to come out in high school. Surrounded by tons of gay people at Arizona State, he explored his sexuality and focused on his lifetime dream of becoming a teacher, distractions which kept him from thinking about Craig.

He had dated a few people, but he always thought of Craig whenever he kissed them. No one measured up and the sense of emptiness would return.

When he met Greg during his junior year, he finally fell in love with a person, rather than the idea someone could be to him what Craig had been. Greg helped him to let go of the hold the past had on him. They dated each other for the remainder of college, but when Jeremy moved to New York City, Greg remained in Arizona.

Jeremy didn't want to begin a long term relationship, not after all the suffering he had already experienced once, so they broke up amicably, choosing to remain friends. As he thought of Greg, he realized they never talked either. *That's not a good pattern.* Craig showing up in his life once again seemed like a second chance to reconnect to his past.

Yes, that's what's going on. I'm reclaiming something I lost. Craig reminded him of who he had been, a strong, confident person. There was no reason he couldn't bring the past into his present, right? Andrew would understand. Jeremy's heart gave a thump. Craig's card sat in his wallet, and he could almost feel its presence as if it were alive. He shook his head and reached for his wallet. There was no reason to feel so guilty when Craig was a friend, an old friend he loved and who was helping him and his current partner remodel their home, right?

Right.

Jeremy pushed the thought aside, guilt filling him. Andrew was trying so hard to make things good between them and here he was reliving a kiss from fifteen years ago and wanting to experience it again. *Chill out, Jeremy. All he said was he wanted to get together for dinner.* The reprimand sounded right, but didn't fool him. Craig was back in his life and for the first time in as long as he could remember, the future excited him.

The entire ride home, Jeremy's mind raced and he barely managed to maintain conversation with Andrew without interrupting his own thoughts. Andrew bubbled on and on about the evening and his excitement about redecorating their condo. Jeremy made the appropriate sounds of affirmation, but his head remained focused on Craig. The fresh scent hovered around him like a mist, each intake of breath making the

picture of his best friend clearer in his mind. As he sat, his cock pushed at the fabric of his jeans, constricted within the tight space.

Andrew called his name with a bit of alarm; causing Jeremy to snap his head to face him. "Huh?"

"Where are you? You looked like you were a million miles away."

Panic gripped Jeremy. *What's the appropriate response here?* "Considering some ideas for the condo."

Andrew squeezed his hand, a broad smile crossing his face. "I'm so glad you're excited about this. And what a bonus your friend is the designer. Small world."

Guilt managed to squeeze inside his chest along with the panic. Jeremy had been thinking the same thing. Not about spending money. He normally became irritated at Andrew for spending money when Jeremy couldn't contribute. Instead he focused on the fact he would be able to spend more time with Craig. Suddenly a third emotion joined the guilt and panic. Pride welled inside him as well as he thought about Craig and how talented he had become.

Back in their condo, they got undressed and slid into bed; Jeremy nestled in Andrew's arms. Within minutes, Andrew's breath came slow and easy, but Jeremy remained wide awake, memories of his childhood playing through his mind like a slideshow and fantasies of what his life might have been if he had never moved.

Chapter Eight

The next morning, Jeremy pulled the card out of his wallet. He had wracked his brain for a plausible reason to call Craig and finally decided on inviting Robert to dinner. His heart sped up and he started breathing faster. *Geez Jeremy, it's just Craig.* Before he had a chance to dial, his phone started ringing. Glancing at the caller ID, he didn't recognize the number, but then checked it against the card. It was Craig.

Jeremy picked up the phone on the second ring. "Why'd you wait so long to call me?"

All of the tension Jeremy had allowed to build up inside seeped out as soon as Craig responded. "What? You expect me to drop everything and call? I had to pee first."

"You could have called me and peed at the same time."

They both burst out in heartfelt laughter. God, it felt good to laugh with Craig again. How had he lived all these years without hearing the sweet tenor of the man's voice? When the laughter had passed, Jeremy's insides jumped and he prepared himself to broach the true purpose for his call. "Listen, I wanted to invite you and Robert for dinner."

Waiting for Craig's answer, Jeremy ignored a sliver of jealousy at having to extend an invitation for two. He pictured the tall man with dark hair, who had been drunk and ridiculously talkative. *My God Jeremy, you're jealous.* The realization startled him, but he couldn't deny the truth of it.

Craig cleared his throat, a nervous sound Jeremy recognized from their childhood. His own throat dried suddenly. *Was Craig feeling the same way?*

"I'd love...I mean, we'd love to come, Jeremy."

Jeremy's heart beat even faster. Wow, he was actually inviting Craig to his home for dinner. Just twenty-four hours ago it was something he'd never imagined possible. "How does Wednesday night at seven o'clock sound?"

"Sounds like a plan. Can we bring anything?"

"No, I'll take care of everything." *And I'm spending my money for this. Not Andrew's.* With a pang of guilt, he knew why he'd not use Andrew's money for this dinner.

"Okay. Wednesday night then."

Jeremy waited for the other end of the line to go dead before replacing the phone on the handset.

A few minutes later Andrew came into the kitchen. "You're up early." He snuggled behind Jeremy and planted a kiss on the back of his neck, his scruff tickling the sensitive skin. The normally enjoyable sensation blended horribly with the guilt snaking around inside him. *Come on, Jeremy, you're just friends. That's all.* He closed his eyes and concentrated all his attention on the brush of Andrew's lips.

"I woke up alert today," he murmured. "Hey, I called Craig. He and Robert are going to come for dinner on Wednesday night. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course I don't mind." Andrew released Jeremy with a pat on the butt and walked over to the coffee pot. "Didn't make the coffee yet, huh?"

Jeremy ignored his comment. "I think I'll make the roasted chicken Craig's mom used to make. We ate it all the time growing up."

Andrew walked over to the freezer and took out the ground coffee. "Sounds delicious. How come you never made the meal for *me*?"

Jeremy froze, panic setting in once again. "Uh, I—"

"I know, I'm never around for dinner." He turned to Jeremy and offered him a sly smile and a wink. Jeremy released the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. "I'm glad you've reconnected with Craig. You've been pretty down. Maybe spending time with an old friend is what you need. Whenever you talk about growing up in Newton, you're always so excited."

"Yeah. Maybe it is." Jeremy kept his other thought to himself. *Maybe it's what I've always needed.*

On Wednesday, when Jeremy finished school, he left right away rather than staying to prepare for the next day as he normally would. Craig and Robert would be coming over around seven that evening. And he still had to do some food shopping. While in the supermarket, Andrew called. "Hey, baby. Just wanted to check if you need me to pick anything up on my way home. I'm going to cut out right at five o'clock today so I can be home and help out with last minute preparations."

"I have most everything I need. Would you mind picking up some wine?" Jeremy had gone way over his food budget. Knowing he wouldn't be able to afford wine as well, he succumbed.

"Absolutely. I'll pick up a bunch of bottles so we can get tipsy tonight. Do you want me to get out of work early to help out?"

Jeremy's guilt intensified. Not only was Andrew being sweet and accommodating, but he was now offering to help make the evening a success; an evening which felt like he was preparing for a first date. In a way, it *was* a first date. "No, thanks. You need to work." He fiddled with the tie of his apron. "Besides, I love cooking."

If Andrew noticed his tension, it didn't register in his voice. "Ok, I'll be home around five-thirty with the wine. I love you."

"I love you too. See you when you get home." Jeremy snapped his phone shut and stood quietly, staring at the oven door. *What the hell is going on with me? I'm in a relationship!* He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to push the image of Craig's face from his mind, unsuccessfully. With a sigh, he placed his cell back in its holster and continued selecting the food for their dinner.

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Craig stared, distracted at the computer screen in his office. In spite of the huge success of Boris's party on Saturday, all he could think of was Jeremy. What a miracle. An unbelievable surprise. In his mind he replayed their kiss over and over, his body reacting strongly each time. Fifteen years had passed, yet just thinking of kissing Jeremy caused his cock to stir.

Their reunion had brought up old skeletons as well, some he wasn't sure he was ready to face. Their one kiss had been incredible, but for weeks afterward, he had difficulty sleeping, pining over Jeremy, wondering why he hadn't been aware his best friend wanted the same things he had longed for.

All of junior year, he had basically existed through week days, looking forward to weekend calls. When the calls waned to every other week, then once a month, he had gone into a depression and shut off from all of his friends, thinking no one would understand. How could they? He never came out in high school.

The only thing preventing him from calling Jeremy more frequently was his fear that Jeremy was pulling away from him. If he pushed, he might make Jeremy stop calling altogether. That was a pain he knew he would not be able to live with. He took what he could get, but each time Jeremy called, his depression would rage within him and it took him longer and longer to recover each time.

In college, he had made a lot of friends, many of them gay, but even in the middle of fourteen-thousand people, he still felt terribly alone. No matter how many friends he made, none compared to Jeremy. He enjoyed the gay students, but as soon as Craig found himself alone with any of them, they would hit on him, not really interested in friendship at all. He learned the hard way after a few hook-ups that gay men often lost interest after they had sex with someone. Those encounters managed to reinforce for him how different others were from Jeremy and how much he had lost. After meeting Janet he let go of his depression, and moved forward.

Thoughts of Robert snapped Craig back to the present. Robert had been a jackass Saturday evening, doing everything Craig had asked him not to do and getting drunk on top of it. Boris had been too busy to pay attention to him and every time he turned around to find out what new mess Robert created, someone seemed to be searching for a reason to get away from him. Craig learned later, Robert had been plugging him to anyone who would listen. Their ride home had been silent and the argument when they got to their apartment had been ugly. One of their ugliest yet.

Craig had been furious and had accused Robert of deliberately embarrassing him. Robert, in his typical cocky manner, had said he would push Craig's career if he refused to promote himself. The comment had thrown Craig over the edge. Why was Robert so obsessed with his career? Didn't Robert have enough to worry about with his own job? Craig even went so far as to accuse Robert of wanting him as a showpiece. He even suggested that Robert's feelings for him ran parallel with the amount of money he made.

Robert, of course, accused him of being dramatic, but Craig didn't care, finally vocalizing what he had been thinking for years. The last connection between the two of

them was sex and even that was faltering. The one question which Craig couldn't answer was why he stayed with Robert when it made him so unhappy.

He wondered what had caused him to blow after so many years of keeping a lid on his emotions, but the answer was obvious. He had seen Jeremy. Jeremy had always stood up for him growing up. He believed in Craig, even when Craig didn't believe in himself and he had been a better and happier person because of him.

Andrew seemed to be a terrific guy, genuine, kind, good looking, and successful. But more than anything, Craig had seen how Andrew looked at Jeremy with love and affection. Jealousy crept up Craig's spine. He missed loving someone and being loved in return. His heart had risen to his throat with excitement when Jeremy had called to invite the two of them to dinner. The mere *thought* of seeing Jeremy, even if he couldn't be with him, caused his head to spin and butterflies to flit about in his stomach.

Memories of high school and his first year of college flooded his mind. He had closed himself off for three years after Jeremy moved. Maybe Jeremy had allowed their friendship to fade, something he never understood, yet now, only memories of the person who he had grown up with and loved filled his mind. All of the hurt and pain was a distant echo of a time that had passed.

He turned off his computer, stood up, popped in to say goodnight to Janet, and headed out to get ready for dinner.

* * * * *

The buzzer rang at seven o'clock. "My God they're prompt." Swamped in the kitchen, Jeremy rushed between counters with several pots simmering at once. "Andrew, get the door. I have to stay with the food."

Andrew gave Jeremy's shoulder a squeeze before leaving him in the kitchen to buzz Craig and Robert in. Once Andrew left, Jeremy gripped the edge of the counter tight enough for the whites of his knuckles to show through. He took in a deep breath and counted. *One, two, three, four, five.* Exhaling, he allowed the breath to exit slowly through pursed lips, relieving pent up tension.

A few minutes later, he heard the front door being opened. "Hey guys, welcome to our not-so-humble abode."

Jeremy shook his head. *Goofball.* He wiped his hands on a towel, smoothed out the front of his shirt, and made sure no chicken fat had stained his pants before heading out of the kitchen. The kitchen had been hot, but that didn't account for his sweaty palms. Blood coursed through his veins, the thrum of each heartbeat sounding in the back of his ears. "Craig, Robert, you guys are right on time."

Craig stepped forward and handed Jeremy a bottle of red wine. "I wanted to bring something and figured red wine would be safe." He squinted his eyes and inhaled audibly through his nose. "That smell...are you cooking Mom's roasted chicken?"

Jeremy's heart squeezed. "You bet. The scent —"

"Brings me right back to dinner at my house."

"Exactly." Jeremy beamed at Craig whose smile had spread across his face.

Robert turned to Andrew. "I'd love a tour of the place. Let these two gab about growing up and old memories and shit."

Andrew grinned. "Sure, let me show you around."

When they were gone, Craig turned to Jeremy. "Right now I'm thirteen and it's the beginning of fall. Let me guess, red bliss potatoes and carrots simmering with chunks of garlic and chicken grizzle. Rosemary and cayenne pepper rub on the chicken itself, and sautéed green-beans with sliced almonds—"

"And a hint of butter," Jeremy finished for him, his heart pounding. How he wished in that moment they really were thirteen and standing in Craig's kitchen. To have that chance again and do it right this time.

Scents of the meal enveloped him. Roasted chicken, rosemary, baked potatoes, each smell bringing him back to a time before he had experienced loss. "It's great to see you Jer." He walked the couple of steps to his friend, embracing him in a hug. Feeling Jeremy in his arms once again, surrounded by the nostalgic aromas, filled him with contentment. Without pulling away, Craig joked. "The night my mom taught us how to make this was a pivotal day in my life." Finally, slowly, he released Jeremy and cleared his throat, his gaze trapped by Jeremy's piercing eyes. "Let's go into the kitchen," he said softly. Jeremy nodded and led Craig from the living room.

In the kitchen, Craig opened the oven and inhaled. "Yup, that's it, Jer."

Jeremy interrupted his absorption with the food. "The look on your face tells me you are excited to eat."

Craig looked up. "Are you kidding? I remember every single time mom made this for us. How much longer?"

Jeremy laughed. "Maybe thirty minutes." He poured Craig a glass of wine. "Would you like some? We have a bit of a selection. Andrew went a little nuts and bought five different bottles."

Craig walked over to the counter. "Hm, let's see. Ah, this will do." He picked up the bottle of Rosemount Shiraz. "How about you?"

Jeremy nodded, lost in the blue of Craig's eyes. Over the years, every time he looked at the sky on a brilliant autumn day, he thought of those eyes.

Craig poured two glasses. Jeremy watched him, listening to the faint rattling sound of the bottle neck clinking against the glass. *His hand is shaking. Is he nervous?* Craig handed the glass to Jeremy, maintaining eye contact with him the whole time. As Jeremy reached to take the glass from him, their fingers touched and Craig dipped his glance to the point of contact.

Jeremy raised his glass and they clinked. "To renewed friendship."

"To renewed friendship." Craig touched his glass to Jeremy's, holding Jeremy's gaze the whole time.

With his heart still pounding, Jeremy took a sip, savoring the momentary bite of the tannin in the wine, and the subtle but fruity flavor of the grape. He set his glass down on the counter, and looked at Craig. Seeing him in his kitchen, standing before him in the flesh, in the deliciously smooth flesh, with mounded muscles, not too big, but very masculine, gave Jeremy the urge to grab him, to kiss him and erase fifteen wasted years. He took another quick sip of wine, grateful for the relaxing burn of it in his veins.

Craig set down his glass too. A shy look came over his features. "You know, somehow it doesn't feel like any time has passed."

Jeremy's cheeks heated and he suspected they had become flushed. "I know what you mean, but at the same time it seems like too much time has passed."

Craig remained silent for a moment and Jeremy witnessed the red hue creep into place on his face and neck. "Yeah. That too." He cleared his throat and asked a question which threw Jeremy off balance. "How long have you and Andrew been together?"

Jeremy took another sip of wine. Craig's eyes were focused on him and his face contained an expression Jeremy couldn't quite discern; something between tension and curiosity. Jeremy stood still, dropping his gaze to the floor, and then turned back to the oven. "About eight years. We met soon after I moved here and have been together ever since."

When Craig spoke, his voice sounded subdued. "Well, he's lucky to have you."

Jeremy turned to face him, making sure he smiled. He didn't like this line of conversation, but didn't want to say or do anything that might make Craig uncomfortable. "Yes, Andrew is a wonderful man. I'm lucky to be with him too." His voice sounded forced, as if he were trying to convince Craig. Talking about Andrew with Craig was the most uncomfortable topic he could imagine. And he didn't want to ask Craig about Robert. However, avoiding the topic would seem suspicious. "How about you and Robert?"

Craig's face went from flushed to crimson. "We've been together for eight years as well."

The comment had been delivered plainly, no emotion to show pride or pleasure and Jeremy couldn't help but feel relieved. "Sounds like the two of us have been travelling the same path." He laughed awkwardly, the tension between them like a third person in the room.

"You mean moving to the city and getting into relationships at the same time?"

Jeremy smiled. "Yeah. Kinda weird huh?"

"Weird? More like serendipity." Craig's voice trailed off, as if he had just gone miles away in his mind.

Jeremy's breath caught in his chest. *Serendipity? Yes, I can see that.* "But we ran into each other again. When Boris called you over to us, I recognized you right away." Addressing their reunion helped to relieve his stress.

"Me too." Craig's voice became animated. Jeremy was relieved to have brought the conversation around to the two of them. "I've thought about you a lot over the years, but...um...lately, you've been popping into my mind more often than usual."

"Really? You've been on my mind as well." Jeremy recalled the several times Craig had crossed his mind over the past couple of weeks. To be honest, the past couple of years. He took a step closer. "I'm so glad things worked out the way they did."

Craig took a step closer to Jeremy. "It's funny how things work out." Silence filled the room until a sizzling broke through the quiet between them. "I think the chicken's telling us it's dinner time."

Jeremy laughed and turned to the oven, grabbing his oven mitts and placing the hot pan on the stove top, inhaling deeply, the rich scent of chicken, rosemary and garlic filling the air. "Perfect!" When he turned, Craig was standing next to him, shoulder to shoulder, smelling the delectable meal along with him. He froze on the spot as one additional scent registered in his senses. "You're wearing that fragrance again. What's it called?"

"Huh? Oh. Acqua Di Gio. I love it. Such a clean, fresh scent."

"May I get a closer whiff?"

"Sure." Craig lowered his arms and lifted his chin.

Jeremy turned to face him and leaned in until his nose brushed against the silky skin of Craig's neck. The cologne filled his senses, bringing him back to Saturday night and their embrace, the one where Craig held him tightly. His cock began to lengthen inside his pants as he continued to breathe in Craig's scent.

The sound of the timer going off broke the moment and Jeremy straightened. He turned to the skillet on the oven and shifted the beans about. Through his peripheral vision he detected a slight movement. He peeked, trying not to seem to be doing so, and spied Craig reach for the crotch of his pants and tug. *He's adjusting himself.*

The realization that Craig was aroused caused conflicting emotions to war inside his head. He knew he shouldn't feel excitement, but he couldn't deny that he did. The curiosity about Robert was eating away at him, so he allowed Craig's physical reaction to fuel his courage to pry. "Robert seemed proud of you the other night. Andrew tells me he wouldn't stop talking about you Saturday night."

Craig stiffened. "Robert's a good guy. He takes his work seriously and he views opportunities like Boris's party as good business. I think he'd like me work for Boris permanently."

Jeremy nodded. "Well, Boris also seemed impressed with you. Somehow I get the sense you don't want to work for him though."

"You can still read me after all this time. I guess I still wear my feelings on my sleeve, huh?"

"You never managed to hide your feelings, no. But you dodged my question. Do you want to work for Boris?" Jeremy leaned back against the counter, looking at Craig with unwavering eyes.

"No. Boris wants me to work for him and wants to pay me a lot of money too, but I'd only be doing one kind of work. I'd become bored. Right now, I get all sorts of clients and the challenge of meeting their needs pushes me creatively. Plus, my friends and I started the business together. The thought of leaving seems like abandoning a child."

Jeremy's blood flowed faster as he listened to Craig talk his job and how his salary didn't factor into how he lived his life. Craig hadn't changed one bit in all these years. He still followed his heart and did things he believed in. He was more interested in being happy, exercising his creativity, and remaining loyal than following the draw of the almighty dollar.

He admired the characteristic, the one he questioned in Andrew. Craig's passion reminded him of how his friend always used to fight for what he believed in. He took another sip of his wine, wondering if he would have allowed himself to continually cave into Andrew's desires if Craig had been around to remind him of how he used to be. "I totally understand what you're saying. You always stood by what you believed. It's one of the things I loved about you so much."

Craig stared at his feet. When he lifted his head, he wore a soft expression filled with affection. "No one's talked about my beliefs with admiration in a long time. You always boosted me up whenever I doubted myself." Craig snapped his mouth shut. When he spoke, his voice was timid. "I can't believe I just said that."

Jeremy smiled. "Robert doesn't tell you he's proud of you?"

"Not really. No."

A surge of protectiveness swelled inside Jeremy. Just a few admissions from Craig and he already decided he didn't like Robert. *I'd never treat Craig like that. He'd always know how proud I am of him.* "You're running low on your wine. Need a refill?"

Craig lifted his glass, allowing Jeremy to pour him some more, and walked to the oven to take another whiff of the chicken.

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Robert was impressed with the condo. Not only enormous, it contained all of the modern conveniences of upscale apartments. "Do you mind if I ask how much this went for? This is prime property. I bet it cost a mint."

Andrew hesitated before answering. "Two-point-seven million"

Robert let out a long whistle. "Wow, steep. I'm guessing the mortgage is hefty." Robert sized Andrew up as he walked around the guest room. He was tall, about an inch shorter than himself and had smooth, tanned skin. The jeans he wore hugged his body in all the right places, revealing thick thigh muscles and a hard, round ass. His

sweater clung to his body, accentuating broad shoulders which tapered into a flat midsection and a muscled waist. He was sturdy and big, but well formed. Handsome and financially successful. Robert thought Andrew looked tastier than the smell of the meal from the kitchen. *This is a guy who would be a perfect match for me.*

He checked himself in the bedroom mirror to make sure he presented well, before turning to Andrew, giving him his most charming smile. Given his line of work, he needed a ten-million dollar look, and his success with clients proved he had perfected his. "The other night, I admired your reasons for becoming involved in portfolio management. People need a solid financial advisor who can steer them through the ups and downs of the market. They get scared when the market dips and need someone who can help them through the rougher times. You must be proud of the help you give people."

Andrew looked surprised. "Yes, you described the exact reason I love what I do. You have no idea how glad I am to be able to talk about this with someone who understands what I do." Robert's ears perked up. *Jeremy doesn't understand your work.* "Whenever I have a client who calls me about a dip in the DOW or NASDAQ, the most important thing for me is to make sure I understand their concern, look at their investment horizon, and help them to realize what their best decision is. I can't tell you how many calls I've received where people thank me for seeing them through difficult times. Those calls make the more cut-throat aspects of the job tolerable."

Annoyed by Andrew's melodramatic sentiments, Robert shoved his hands into his pockets and clenched his fists to release energy. At least he had passion. Passion could be redirected under the right circumstances, resulting in high yielding portfolios, which translated into lots of *bank*. "How about Jeremy? What does he do?"

"He's a teacher in a private school not far from here. He loves his second grade kids. I have to admit, they're cute."

"A teacher. Noble job." Bile rose up Robert's throat. "It must be hell on him trying to afford a place like this with you."

Andrew drew up his shoulders. "He contributes in his own way."

Robert nodded. "I understand." *Translation, he cooks and cleans.* "Where did you live before?"

"The East Village. We had a small place. The rooms barely fit beds, but he could afford the rent and Jeremy loves the neighborhood."

"But you didn't want to live in a cramped space any longer, especially when you had the means to provide more for the two of you." The angle Robert needed to play became clear. Once Andrew realized the life he could have with Robert, he'd come running, and then Craig would be forced to make a decision—step up, make more money, and be a more worthy boyfriend, or suffer the consequences. Andrew would be a far better match for him anyways.

"Those were the *exact* words I used with him. I'm so glad you understand. Sometimes I wonder if I'm being selfish by pushing this on him."

"Of course I understand. I worked my way through the ranks, same as you, and I like to enjoy the finer things this city has to offer. Hell, I've been pushing Craig to take his talents and market them to make more money. He's got the ability to be the best in his field."

"Boris seemed to like his work. He even mentioned to Jeremy and me he wanted to steal him away from his current company."

"I know. But Craig doesn't seem interested." He attempted to sound as sympathetic as possible; a difficult task when he wanted to choke some sense into someone.

Andrew interrupted his internal thoughts. "Maybe we should head back to the living room with the boys. I'm sure they're wondering where we are right about now."

"I'm sure you're right." Robert held up his empty wine glass. "I need a refill anyway." They walked back to the living room, Robert filled with smug satisfaction. His conversation with Andrew had gone well. *Options. The heart of any good business.* He had definitely planted a seed with Andrew. Now all he had to do was water it and let it grow.

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Craig couldn't remember enjoying a meal so much. He and Jeremy gabbed on and on about their childhood and filled each other in on the rest of high school and college. Jeremy wanted to hear about the friends he had left behind. Most of them had gone through high school with uneventful stories, but some stories had Jeremy's mouth gaping in wonder and surprise.

Robert continued showing interest in Andrew's work at Fidelity and the two conversations ran concurrently with little overlap, which suited Craig fine. He hadn't forgiven Robert yet. When the evening ended and the four of them were buzzed, Craig and Robert retrieved their coats.

With the end of the evening upon them, Craig wanted to make the moment last as long as possible. "Thank you so much. I'm going to have to call mom and tell her she has competition for cooking the best roast chicken I've ever eaten."

Jeremy laughed. "You better not. She'll never forgive me if I take over the role as hostess. Just say hello and tell her we found each other. Maybe I'll give her a call sometime soon."

This is moving too fast. Craig wanted to suggest they have another glass of wine, but they all had work the next day. Besides, he had no idea how to prolong an evening without seeming...interested. All evening he had been focusing on Jeremy while trying to conceal his growing attraction. Craig gave Jeremy one last hug, kissing him on the cheek, then turned to Andrew and shook his hand. "Thank you for inviting us. Your place is terrific."

Andrew smiled. "We loved having you. I'm so glad you and Jeremy reconnected. I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot more of you." Andrew paused for a moment. "Will you be helping us remodeling the condo?"

Jeremy jumped in before Craig could answer. "We've already talked about that. I think we are going to get together this weekend to discuss some ideas I have for the place."

"Perfect." Andrew shook Craig's hand once again.

On the way home, Craig couldn't stop thinking about the evening and how much he enjoyed being around Jeremy the feel of the other man's arms wrapped around him, the scent of dinner wafting through the air as if they were back home, and his knowing smile which made him feel like the center of Jeremy's world. It had been a surprise when Jeremy lied to Andrew about plans for discussing remodeling. He tried not to over-think it, but a question lingered in his mind: *Is Jeremy unhappy with Andrew?*

Chapter Nine

Craig called Jeremy from work the next day just after three o'clock. He picked up after the first ring. "Hey, you answered. Cool!"

Jeremy laughed. "That's typically what one does when a phone rings."

Craig's cheeks heated and he grinned. "Wise ass. You might have been busy with work. School usually gets out about now, right?"

"The kids are dismissed at two-thirty. I've been off the clock for half an hour."

"Oh...uh, well, I called to ask if you wanted to get together for dinner on Friday night. Andrew had said you wanted to redesign the condo and you dropped the bomb we would be working on ideas, so I figured I'd make an honest man out of you." His voice sounded casual, but his heart raced inside his chest.

Jeremy remained silent for a few seconds. "Yeah. I appreciate you running with my story. Andrew's been pushing me and..." The pause as Jeremy stopped speaking caused Craig to hold his breath, sensing Jeremy had something important to say. "...I'd love to get together for dinner."

Craig exhaled. Jeremy's response had simply been to accept the invite. "Great. How's Friday night? I could cook another one of my mom's famous meals this time."

"Shit yeah! What time?"

"How does six o'clock sound?"

"Sounds perfect."

On Friday, Craig left work early and headed out to pick up the food to make his mother's lasagna.

The meal was ready to pop into the oven when the buzzer rang. Craig placed the casserole dish on the stove top, ran to the door, and pressed the button to let him in. His heart beating fast. He opened his apartment door a crack, then rushed back to the kitchen to put the lasagna in the oven. If he timed it right, he'd be back to the front door by the time Jeremy got there and he wanted to be there to greet him.

He placed the casserole dish in the oven turned around to find Jeremy standing in the kitchen watching him. Craig jumped in surprise, then took a step towards him, tripping over his feet as he did so, and falling to the floor. Jeremy, slightly out of breath, laughed and reached out a hand to help him up. Craig took his hand, embarrassed, but pleased to see him. "Hey, you scared me. Did you run up the stairs or something?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, I did. And your blunder reminded me how much I enjoy sneaking up on you. You get flustered so easily."

Craig blushed. "Well, some things never change. Remember how I used to call you an asshole every time you scared me?" Craig took a step forward and opened his arms. "Welcome to my home, asshole." Jeremy closed the distance between them and hugged him tightly.

"I wanted to bring something, so I grabbed a couple bottles of wine. You like Rosemount Shiraz, right?" Jeremy motioned toward the counter where he had placed the two bottles.

A rush of affection flooded through him. *Chill out, Craig. You're being ridiculous.* "You didn't need to bring anything. I wanted to be the one to provide all of the food and drink tonight. You fed us the other night."

Jeremy dismissed Craig's comment with a wave of his arm. "Like you said, the wine's cheap."

Craig's mouth pulled up into a grin. "Are you calling me a cheap date?"

Jeremy blushed this time. "Well, I guess I am. But no one said being a cheap date is a bad thing."

Craig fell silent, enjoying their banter, but feeling a hint of guilt at their flirtatious behavior. This shouldn't happen with people in happy relationships. *But you aren't in a happy relationship.* Worried his attraction to Jeremy would make his friend uncomfortable, Craig shifted conversation to a new topic. "I'm making Mom's lasagna, even though I had to run for days to burn off the calories."

"Don't I know it? Of course, you're naturally fit. Your body is as taut now as I remember it back in Newton, with one exception, your muscles are even bigger now." Jeremy made a show of inspecting Craig.

Craig's cock shifted some more in his pants. "You're not so bad yourself. You've grown much broader over the years." *So much for keeping my mind off my attraction to him.*

"I'm not as big as Andrew."

Craig mentally cringed at the mention of Andrew's name. "No, but Andrew is beefy. Anyway, I need to take in the calories. I'm still thinner than I would like to be. You know us artist types. Bohemian lifestyles make us thin."

Jeremy leaned against the countertop, a confused expression on his face. "I thought most bohemians were also vegetarian. Don't they do sit-ins on farms, communing with cows and shit?"

Craig laughed, coughing and trying to catch his breath. "Oh my God. You didn't actually take me seriously did you? I'm no fucking Bohemian and I'm definitely no vege-fuckin-tarian." Craig shook his head. "Wow, so maybe you *did* change some. You never used to fall for any of my shit." Jeremy became withdrawn and Craig worried he had offended him. "Shit, sorry Jer, I was only kidding around."

Jeremy closed the distance between them, keeping the serious expression on his face. In a flash, he caught Craig in a headlock. "Maybe I fell for your shit, but I'm still stronger than you Mr. Bohemian Cow-man." They struggled playfully for a few minutes until Craig lost his footing and crashed to the floor, bringing Jeremy with him.

They remained on the floor laughing. Craig grabbed his stomach, a stitch starting to form, and peered at Jeremy. Tears ran down his face, his mouth pulled up in a wide, happy smile. Pure, raw, emotion flowed through him, both blissful and heart-

wrenching, as he sat on the floor with Jeremy. *I can't remember the last time I've laughed like this.*

Jeremy interrupted his thoughts by reaching up to grab the countertop and pulling himself back into a standing position. "Man, it's good to see you again. I'm so glad I went to Boris's party with Andrew." Craig followed Jeremy's movements as he stood, his shirt lifting from his waist revealing a trail of dark hair leading from his navel into his pants. Craig needed to readjust himself for the third time, almost fully erect as heat seared through him.

Craig stood up as Jeremy brushed himself off. "What do you mean? Your life seems to be going well, Andrew seems like an awesome guy, you're teaching like you always wanted, you're apartment is amazing—"

"Of course, I wasn't referring to the things I have. I meant I'm glad to have a taste of home again; a piece of what I lost...you, Craig. After I moved to Arizona, everything changed. I made friends and all, but no one compared to you. Seeing you again brings back a part of myself I thought was gone forever."

Warmth spread through Craig. "I had no idea the move was so hard on you. I mean, I hung out with the same group of kids and I lived in the same place, but without you, nothing was as fun."

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes. Finally, Jeremy broke the silence. "The lasagna brings me right back to your house. I can't wait to dig in."

Craig smiled. "It should be ready in about thirty-five minutes. How about some wine?"

At Jeremy's nod, he opened a bottle and poured two glasses, handing one to Jeremy. "Come on. Let's go hang out in the living room while the food cooks." He led Jeremy out of the kitchen and took a seat on the couch.

Jeremy sat next to him and curled a leg under his butt so he was facing Craig. He twirled the wine in the glass a few times before taking a sip. Craig studied him, the expression on his face giving the appearance of deep concentration. "Craig, can I make a confession just to get it off my chest?"

"Sure." Craig settled back on the couch, nervous about what Jeremy might say.

Jeremy fidgeted with the wine glass for a few more moments. Craig watched him his lips moving slightly, as if he were rehearsing what he wanted to say before actually saying it.. "This is kind of embarrassing, but ever since I ran into you on Saturday night, I can't stop thinking about our last day together before I moved."

Craig's heart rate increased. *Could he be thinking what I am...that we could have been an incredible couple?* Craig mentally reprimanded himself. Just because he wasn't happy with Robert didn't mean Jeremy was unhappy with Andrew. "Really?"

"Yeah. I haven't been able to stop thinking about our kiss. Did you *know* I had never kissed anyone before?" Jeremy stared down at his hands in an uncharacteristic show of awkwardness.

"Of course I did. We told each other everything. Remember? The kiss made your leaving so much more difficult for me." Craig stopped talking and waited for Jeremy to return his gaze. When Jeremy lifted his head to face Craig, he continued. "I had always loved you, but I figured I loved you like a brother. I never thought to try to kiss you or to think of us as something more than friends." *Well, I did, but now's not the time to spill all.* "Something clicked into place when you kissed me. I figured a lot of things out about myself in the days and weeks that followed."

Relief washed over Jeremy's face. "So you felt it too? Because up in the tree, sitting on the branch, hidden from the world, you became my world. I needed to kiss you before I left. I knew I would regret it for my whole life if I didn't at least kiss you once. Even if you had pushed me out of the tree, I would have still done it." Jeremy talked fast, his voice animated. "Gosh, listen to me. I'm babbling on like a fool."

Craig shifted in his seat. As far back as he could remember, Jeremy had always been the one to take chances, to express his emotions and thoughts. Craig desperately wanted to be the one to take charge, to open up to Jeremy. "No," he said slowly, staring a moment into his wineglass, his heart pounding, "not a fool. The saying is true. You never forget your first love."

Craig looked up and was faced by Jeremy's smoldering eyes, catching him off guard and forcing all thought from his mind. The expression said more than *I'm glad we've reconnected*. It said something far deeper, dangerous for someone in a relationship. Startled by the intensity of Jeremy's gaze, Craig stood up. "I think I should check on the lasagna." *So much for taking the reins. Jeremy offers me a perfect opportunity to open up, to tell him what's on my mind, and I take the first excuse to escape.*

Jeremy followed Craig into the kitchen. If he had sensed Craig was about to admit his feelings, he didn't show it. "Can I help? Where are the plates and utensils?" Craig pointed them out and Jeremy went about the task of setting the table.

Craig removed the lasagna from the oven, which bubbled like his mom's and smelled perfect. He grabbed a trivet and placed the casserole dish on the living room table. "Here we go. Lasagna a-la-mom. Dig in." They sat down to eat, Craig still berating himself for not having grabbed his chance to open up to Jeremy.

Craig went to the kitchen, returning with the steamed broccoli and a spatula for serving the lasagna. He cut a large square for Jeremy, before cutting a piece for himself. They both spooned broccoli onto their plates and began eating in silence.

He wanted Jeremy. Seeing him, remembering their past, brought back all the hurt and emptiness from the years following Jeremy's departure. The pain as their conversations became more infrequent. As if a scab had been torn off a cut, his emotions bubbled to the surface like blood pouring from a newly opened wound.

Avoiding conversation about their past wouldn't make him more comfortable and he would regret not telling Jeremy how hard things had been for him all those years ago. Even if Jeremy couldn't or wouldn't return his feelings, at least Craig would have finally told him the truth; just like Jeremy had summoned the courage to kiss him.

"Jeremy, I spent a lot of time after you left wondering what it would have been like if you had stayed. I had an active fantasy life about a hot and heavy relationship between the two of us."

Jeremy stopped chewing and stared at him. When he finally swallowed, an excitement seemed to light his eyes. "I did the same thing. Each night I fell asleep imagining all of our firsts. I imagined us sneaking to the back of a theater at the Circle Cinema and kissing. Or when I got my license, I imagined us driving to the old golf course parking lot and...well, learning how to do other things to each other."

Craig's temperature rose a few degrees. He lifted his gaze, his mind filled with every act he had ever imagined with Jeremy. "I *do* know. You're one hell of a good lay if my fantasy life was accurate. I had hundreds of orgasms from the things you did to me." This was Craig's second chance to let Jeremy know how he felt and he wasn't going to back down this time.

Jeremy's cheeks flushed crimson. "I guess we both had active imaginations. I had to do my own sheets so many times I lost count. My mom thought I was a neat freak who liked everything washed all the time, but I didn't want her to find the evidence of my jacking off, like somehow she would know I had been thinking about you. It's dumb, but that's what went through my head."

"Well, what are teenage years for but to be dumb?" Craig smiled, thinking back on all of the stupid and fun things they had done as kids. How many times had he put himself at risk of breaking some part of his body, believing he would never get hurt and not caring what the word *consequences* meant? "I would have liked to live out some of those fantasies I've wondered over the years what it would have been like if you had never moved; if you and I had a real chance at seeing how we would have worked as a couple."

Jeremy remained silent for longer than Craig expected and he began to worry he had pushed too hard. When Jeremy finally spoke, his response was well worth the wait. "You're bolder than you used to be. The Craig I knew would never have admitted that to me."

It hadn't been an answer to his implied question. He wanted to know if Jeremy thought about what their life could have been as well. "You were my role-model for that growing up. I never saw you back down from anything." As much as his heart was sinking in his chest, disappointed that Jeremy hadn't reciprocated the sentiment, Craig managed to keep his gaze locked with Jeremy's.

Jeremy placed another bite of lasagna in his mouth, his brow furrowed. When he finished chewing, he raised his glass of wine to his mouth, taking a sip. "I thought about that too...what it might have been like if I had never moved. To tell you the truth, I imagined it the other night at Boris's party. I wondered what would have happened if we had run into each other eight years ago when we first moved to the city."

Craig's mouth dropped open. Jeremy had given him exactly what he wanted. Confirmation that he had felt the same way all those years. But he gave him even more.

He still imagined what it might have been like. A movie of an entirely different life began to play in his mind, only interrupted when Jeremy broke his train of thought. "So, your designs, they're amazing. When did you decide to become a graphic designer?"

Craig had to shake his head to follow Jeremy's topic shift. "Uh, would you mind giving me fair warning when you're going to switch topics so abruptly. I might get whiplash trying to follow the conversation." Part of him appreciated the new focus, although he had tons of new questions he wanted to ask.

Jeremy laughed. "Sorry, bad habit of mine."

Craig playfully nudged him. "No problem. To answer your question, I took all sorts of random courses in college, but I liked the computer tech courses the best. Learning and using the programs came naturally. The work intrigued me and the creativity allowed me to express my emotions. I kept my earliest designs from those college classes stored away. When I thumb through them I can remember exactly what I was going through at the time."

Jeremy's eyes lit up. "Really? Will you show some of them to me?"

Craig laughed at Jeremy's excitement. He hadn't browsed through those pictures in a long time and Robert had never expressed interest in seeing them. Not even when they had first started dating and their relationship had still been romantic and loving. "Of course. I'll need to dig them out, but sure." Craig got up and headed to his room with Jeremy following him. "I think they're in this closet." He placed a chair by the closet and stood up, digging into the back of the uppermost shelf. Pulling out a worn portfolio case, he spread the pictures on the bed. There were about thirty prints, most of them designed during his junior and senior years. After laying them out, he stood back, giving Jeremy room to peruse them.

Jeremy sat on the bed and flipped through the prints, taking extra time to examine some. Craig took note of the ones Jeremy spent more time examining; the ones where his slant for modern design had begun to reveal itself. When Jeremy turned around, his face revealed open admiration "These are good. I'm not surprised, but still, they're incredible. You're extremely talented." He picked up a picture which played with angles and shapes in unusual ways, similar to the designs Craig had used in the artwork at Boris's party. "Why did you get into modern design?"

Craig sat down next to Jeremy on the bed, daring to let their legs and shoulders touch, and gazed at the work with him. Heat from Jeremy's body penetrated Craig, causing his skin to prickle. Jeremy's genuine interest in his work filled Craig with pride. He wasn't being polite; he wanted to learn why Craig chose this particular path, a stark contrast from Robert's apathy towards his motivation or passion weighed inside him. *Stop. Answer the question.*

"I'm not sure. I guess I liked the clean images when I used angles and shapes like these." He picked up an abstract representation of The Love Tree. "I always loved this one. I was thinking about you and growing up, and this image formed as I worked. I

think this is when I realized I wanted to do something to transform natural subject matter and colors into a modern image."

Jeremy took the picture from Craig. "This is absolutely beautiful. You could put this work in a museum."

Craig shrugged. "I don't think so, but thanks for the compliment. I made some good friends in my classes and five of us decided to move to New York and start our company. Our business has been steady. None of us wants to become millionaires. We're happy to be doing what we love and to be able to make a decent living. I'm pretty much my own boss, can pick my clients, and can enjoy the city. That's why I don't want to work for Boris. I'd be doing the work from the party exclusively and I would become bored. Plus, I can't imagine leaving the business I helped to start. It's a part of who I am. At least it feels like an extension of what I love."

Jeremy sat quietly, peering at Craig for a moment before speaking. "I admire your passion and commitment to sticking by what you care about rather than caving into opportunities which would make you more money. Especially in *this* city. No one understands why I stick with teaching in a private school. The money is shit and teachers aren't terribly respected...at least not as much as we should be."

Jeremy fell silent and traced the edges of the image in his hands. He seemed far away, somewhere deep in his own mind. Then, he looked up abruptly. "Hey, I'm about to shift topics here. I'm giving you fair warning as requested."

Craig laughed though his insides jumped in anticipation. "Okay, shoot."

"Do you want to head out? I'd love to show you some of my favorite spots in my old neighborhood."

Craig placed his pictures back into the portfolio, and returned the case to the top shelf of his closet. "Sure. I love the East Village. Let's go." They headed out into the warm summer night and began walking. Fifteen minutes later, they entered the East Village.

Jeremy led them all the way to Avenue A, before heading north towards Tompkins Square Park. The park matched the diversity of the neighborhood. Dog parks, grass lawns, playgrounds, tennis and handball courts, skate-boarding ramps, and chess board tables drew a wide range of people, yet, like everything else in the East Village, everyone enjoyed themselves without bothering anyone else. "I love this park," Jeremy said, "especially at this time of night when the day isn't quite over. Twilight is kind of a magical time here. C'mon."

Craig followed Jeremy into the park where they sat on a grassy patch. He lay on the ground, crossing his arms under his head and looked up at the sky, content and relaxed. "Tell me about teaching. Does the job fulfill you the way you imagined it would?"

Jeremy sat cross legged, facing Craig. "Better. I always enjoyed explaining things and loved helping people understand what they don't know, but when I'm working

with those kids and I can spot their excitement, you know, the moment the light bulb goes off. Nothing compares to it."

Craig tilted his head to face Jeremy. "That's a good reason to enjoy what you do."

"Thank you. Not many people understand how teachers can love the work. No one does the job for the money." Jeremy stared at Craig, warmth in his eyes. "I'm not surprised *you* appreciate what I do. You always had my back no matter what."

Craig sat up. Once again, the words Jeremy said seemed innocent enough, but a secondary message seemed to be simmering under the surface. *What's he trying to say? I'm missing a message he won't seem to spit out.*

Jeremy smiled, a wide grin spreading across his face. "See those bushes." He pointed across the lawn towards the bushes lining the lawn. "In the summer, this place will be sparkling with fireflies. Hundreds of them dotting the grass. That's why this is my favorite spot. They seem to light up like fireworks. You can't look anywhere without little green flecks of light sparkling."

The two of them sat in silence. Craig became lost in the image of the grass twinkling with fiery green light with the two of them sat in the middle, as if in a wonderland. The beauty and peacefulness of the moment, the appreciation Jeremy expressed for such a simple yet magical phenomenon, caused Craig to forget they were merely friends who reconnected. He became the fifteen-year-old who couldn't get enough of his best friend. He could only manage to say, "It's beautiful."

Jeremy reached over and took Craig's hand. "We'll have to come back here in the summer." Craig took in a sharp breath, but managed to remain quiet, keeping his hand in Jeremy's. The touch sent electricity up his arm from the point of contact. His thoughts innocent, yet intensely intimate; sitting together, holding hands, enjoying a warm summer evening, talking about glimmering green flashes of light.

Rational thought told him they were two friends spending time together. Hell, he'd fallen asleep in the same bed with Janet tons of times in college after a party or when they travelled during breaks, and never once questioned if it meant anything more than needing sleep. Why should this be any different? Jeremy was a friend sharing something he enjoyed. A touch which sent tingling waves through his body didn't mean Jeremy had intended anything more than a friendly gesture by taking his hand.

The reasoning made him laugh out loud, causing Jeremy to turn his head. Quickly recovering, Craig squeezed Jeremy's hand, blurting out the first excuse that came to his mind for his outburst. "I'm picturing myself being attacked by a swarm of twinkling green-assed bugs." *Lame.* The truth was he was completely smitten. He knew what he wanted. He wanted to remain sitting in a park, discussing the most romantic image he had ever heard described, with a man who understood him better than any other in the world. If he could freeze time, he would.

Jeremy chuckled, squeezing his hand back. "You're a goof." After a few minutes, he removed his hand from Craig's. The cold shock of air hitting the spot where they had

been touching sent shivers through him. "Maybe we should head back. Robert will be getting home soon."

"You're probably right." Jeremy stood up. Let's head back towards your place. I can catch a bus uptown and you can continue to the West Village. Craig followed Jeremy and they walked in silence once again for a few minutes. When they finally reached Third Avenue, Jeremy leaned against the bus stop sign and glanced at Craig. "I enjoyed tonight. I'm glad we got together."

"Me too. We didn't talk about your condo though." Craig shifted uncomfortably on his feet. He didn't want this evening to end, but too many mixed signals between the two of them had confused him and he needed time to sort through his thoughts. To fixate on the possibility of anything happening between the two of them wouldn't do him any good. Jeremy had a boyfriend and he shouldn't want to come between two happy people.

"I wondered if you ever allow classes to come to your business for a field trip." The question cut through Craig's thoughts, bringing his attention back to Jeremy.

Craig stared at him. "You mean like a field trip for your kids?"

Jeremy nodded. "Yes. You know. That thing when you take kids someplace so they can learn something?" Jeremy's tone made fun of him and Craig laughed, needing a break from the tension building up inside him. He then stopped joking, his earnest desire to give his students a rich experience clearly evident. "I'm trying to incorporate a visual and artistic aspect to the work I'm doing with my kids. Writing stories is important in second grade and, although a lot of kids are making good progress, some kids need to the use of pictures to help them think through what they want to write. Since your work is a way to tell a story without using words, I think my students who struggle with words and language would become highly motivated."

Craig loved his job, but had never considered the work as educational. The fact Jeremy believed he had something to teach filled him with pride. Whether the pride came from being able to share his work or Jeremy's attention didn't matter, he wouldn't deny Jeremy any request. "Of course you can bring your class for a field trip. We have tons of extra laptops sitting around. The kids could even do some of their own designs if they wanted to."

Jeremy's eyes lit up. Their amber hue caught the orange glow of the setting sun, causing them to appear rich and vibrant. "Really? I mean, you don't need to check with your boss or anything?"

Craig laughed. "No. I told you, I started the business with four other friends from college. Although Janet is our office manager, she isn't our boss. She takes on a smaller project load and focuses more on the finances, drums up new business, and deals with the companies we contract with for the work we can't do in the office. I'll tell her as courtesy a few days in advance. You tell me when and it's a go."

Jeremy beamed, filling Craig with pride. "Fantastic. Thank you so much." He leaned in and hugged Craig tightly, planting a kiss on his cheek. Craig's entire body

reacted as if on instinct. His heart rate increased, heat flooded to his neck and cheeks, his palms broke out in a sweat, and his penis lengthened inside his pants. Everything about Jeremy stimulated physical reactions from him. "This is exciting. I'm so glad we're hanging out again."

Craig hugged Jeremy back, trying to keep a safe distance away so his erection wouldn't brush against him. Thinking about the two of them seemed bad enough, but Craig could keep his thoughts to himself. Allowing his hard-on to press against Jeremy would be more difficult to explain without embarrassment and awkwardness.

Craig's head spun with confusion as they headed to the bus stop. All evening Jeremy seemed to flirt with him which didn't make sense. *Had that just been normal playfulness or was there more to it?* Craig figured he must be reading into things and kicked himself. *You're glad he's back in your life. Don't harp on the feelings you used to have. Give it some time and your obsession will pass.* The words made sense, but Craig didn't believe them.

He waited with Jeremy until the bus showed up. He asked questions about his students and his coworkers to keep him talking and concentrate on controlling his rising libido.

When Jeremy got on the bus, Craig waved. When the bus was a safe distance away, he dug into his pants and readjusted his member which had become tangled in his underwear. If he wasn't careful, spending time with Jeremy could become a problem.

* * * * *

As Jeremy viewed the storefronts passing by the bus window, the images began to blur. He closed his eyes, and then opened them again, shaking his head. Every time he closed his eyes, an image of Craig smiling at him entered his mind. He had sent tons of signals—tousling with Craig in the kitchen, holding his hand in the park, kissing him goodbye. He had sent them intentionally, hoping to get a read on Craig, to see if he would react at all. If he had, Jeremy couldn't tell.

Guilt filled him. Even though he had done nothing wrong, his feelings for Craig ran deeper than they should. Seeing Craig reminded him of who he used to be, someone Andrew wouldn't understand, and someone he wanted to be again. He had to be careful. If he wasn't, he might do something he would really regret.

Chapter Ten

A week later, Craig ran about Spectacular Designs, preparing for Jeremy's class. Everything had to be perfect. Ever since the day at the park, he'd made special efforts to calm himself down and settle into a safe friendship with Jeremy, but he couldn't help wanting to make this presentation extra special. It was the one way he could show Jeremy how much he cared for him and not be so obvious.

Janet came into Craig's office, interrupting his thoughts. "Are you ready for the kids?" Janet fidgeted with her bracelet, a sign of her nervousness.

"I think so." Craig walked into the technology room where they kept the workstations and printers. "I need to wheel out the laptops so the kids can experiment with the design programs when I finish showing them what we do."

She turned her bracelet again with a flash of pink-painted nails. "I still don't understand why you agreed to let a bunch of seven-year-old kids come here. I'm concerned about our equipment. What if one of the kids has an accident?"

Craig burst out laughing, but regained control of himself when Janet's expression became sour. "Uh, Janet, I think kids are potty trained at like two or three."

"Well, how the hell would I know? I don't have any kids." She glanced around at the technology surrounding her.

"The way you're acting right now, I'd think this hardware is your child and you are worrying the big mean second graders are going to bully your wittle baby." Craig smirked at his own cleverness. The smile was wiped off his face by a slap to the back of his head. "Ouch. What the fuck?"

Janet smiled sweetly. "Language, dear. I wouldn't want my wittle baby to learn such bad words at such a tender age. Make sure the kids don't break anything."

"Don't worry about it. Everything will be fine." He barely finished his sentence when Jeremy showed up with his class and the room filled with the excited murmurings of twenty second grade children. With a leap of his heart, Craig turned to Jeremy whose dark head of hair was wind-blown, giving him a disheveled appearance. As the two men locked eyes, Jeremy smiled, but there was a hint of nervousness behind his gaze as well. Jeremy had always been the one in control, the one who had a handle on any situation. To see a flaw, a minor chink in his air of confidence, made him human and even more lovable...if that was possible. "You're here," he said to Jeremy. "Awesome!"

Jeremy gathered his students around him. "Boys and girls, I want you to meet Craig. He is one of my friends and works here at Spectacular Designs. Today we are going to learn how he makes the pictures for the people who hire him and how he prints those pictures."

The kids *oohed* and *aahed* and Craig couldn't help but chuckle.

Janet, who had moments earlier held a scowl on her face, melted at the sight of the kids. "I'll run out and get some cookies," she said. Craig looked at her as if she had lost her mind. She threw up her hands. "What? You didn't tell me they were going to be so cute."

Jeremy gathered the kids around Craig and addressed the class. "Okay, before we start, I want to ask if anyone here knows what I do for work."

Several kids raised their hands. Jeremy helped by calling on students for him. "Sean, do you have an answer for Craig?"

He faced Craig and puffed out his chest. "You make pictures for people."

"Right. Very good Sean." Craig said. "And, kids, why do I make these pictures for people?"

"Bernice, you raised your hand and remained quiet," Jeremy said, "Bernice's eyes widened and a smile crossed her face. "You make the pictures because people pay you to make them." She quickly dropped her glance to her feet, flushing madly.

Another kid raised his hand. Craig pointed towards him. "What's your name?"

"Nick?" His voice sounded more like a question than an answer.

"Hi Nick. What did you want to say?"

Nick sat taller, smiling widely at Craig, his chubby cheeks lifting and his blue eyes twinkling with excitement. Craig had a sudden urge to walk over to the kid and ruffle his dark hair, but managed to suppress himself. "You make pictures so people can put them outside and get other people to buy their things."

Craig nodded his head approvingly. "Good." He glanced at Jeremy, sure he had prepared the children before they arrived. Jeremy smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "Now, the name of my job is a bit complicated. I'm what you call a graphic designer. That's a big fancy name for someone who draws pictures using a computer."

The kids began to giggle. Another girl raised her hand and Craig motioned for her to speak. "How can you draw pictures with a computer?" she asked. "You need to use crayons or magic markers."

Craig laughed. *I don't remember being this innocent.* "Well, you're right. I don't actually pick up a computer and draw with it, but special programs are *in* the computer, which help me draw pictures."

Jeremy piped in. "We use computer programs at school. Like when you read those books on the classroom computer, you're using a program with stories in it." The kids nodded their heads and a new round of *oohes* and *aahes* filled the room.

Craig spent the next few minutes walking the kids around Spectacular Designs, showing them the computers and the printing machines. Finally, he sat them down in the audio-visual room where he had attached a computer to the LCD projector.

"The first thing I do is ask my client, the person who is paying me to draw for them, what they want the picture to be. So, what should I draw?" Several students raised their hands and began to describe Jeremy – dark hair, tall and smiling. Then one girl called

him pretty before burying her face in her hands giggling. Craig decided the little girl was one of Jeremy's brighter students.

A warm twinge of affection for Jeremy filled him. He enjoyed the fact the kids wanted him to draw a picture of their teacher. He followed the students' instructions and when he finished, had drawn a picture of Jeremy sitting in front of the class reading a picture book. The kids started talking all at once to one another.

Craig surveyed his work and realized he had embellished certain features. He'd made Jeremy's shoulders broader, his bottom lip a bit poutier, more kissable, and his legs and arms longer and more graceful. He glanced at Jeremy who also stared at his drawing, a hint of pink on his face. He turned to face Craig and they locked eyes, before Jeremy lowered his head to face the floor.

Craig saved the picture. "Ok, so when I finish, I need to print the picture out so our client can tell us if they're happy with the work. I'm going to print this and you can tell me if I did a good job." The kids sat up straighter in their chairs, an air of importance in their body language, as they prepared to make a decision about whether or not the picture Craig drew satisfied them.

He printed the picture, went to the technology room to pick up the print, and returned to the audio-visual room placing it on an easel. "So, what do you think? Did I do a good job or do I need to make some changes?" For the most part, the kids loved the picture, but some kids suggested he add the classroom flag and others wanted him to change the color of the rug. Craig made all of the changes the kids wanted and printed out the new picture.

"So, who is happy with the picture now?" All of the kids raised their hands.

"Fantastic! Now you get a turn to draw pictures. Mr. Finn told me you wrote stories in class about a time you did something with your family. I set up our laptop computers in the main room and you can draw a picture to go with your story. How does that sound?" The kids erupted in cheers and Jeremy had to quiet them down.

Craig turned to face Jeremy who gazed at him with awe and adoration mixed together. "Mr. Finn, if you would like to bring your kids and follow me, we can get them started on the laptops." Craig turned and left the room, a bit flustered by Jeremy's attention, and took a few deep breaths to control the arousal shooting straight to his groin. After a minute, the wave passed and he helped to set the kids in pairs, two to a computer.

Craig had expected this part of the field trip would be hectic, but couldn't believe how easily the children took to using computers. He marveled at these young technicians, and was startled when a hand touched his shoulder.

Jeremy stood beside him. "You're sweet when you talk to kids. I'll admit, you kind of turned me on."

The blood Craig had just gotten under control, flooded south once again, causing his pants to become restrictive. "The kids love you. When you left the room they asked if you could be their teacher too."

"Really?" Craig looked at the kids, but couldn't process his thoughts. Jeremy's arm touched his shoulder. The admiration he communicated was on behalf of his kids, but clearly came from him as well. It was all too much and Craig had to focus all of his energy on controlling his libido. Each time he saw Jeremy, the urge to sweep him into his arms and kiss him grew stronger. Finally, he found his voice. "I'm amazed at how well they're using this program. It's not a simple one."

Jeremy laughed, maintaining his hold on Craig's shoulder. "You would be amazed at how much these kids understand about computers. When we grew up, computers were new. Our generation was the first to use them regularly. This generation of kids has never lived in a world without PCs. They're far more technologically sophisticated than we'll ever be. Well, most of us anyways, other than people like you who make a living using technology." Jeremy's eyes held fast with Craig's. "Seriously though, you're sweet with the kids, talking to them at the right level. You didn't baby them, but you didn't talk over their heads either. I'm impressed."

Heat rushed to Craig's face. "Thanks."

Jeremy let go of his shoulder. "Let's check out what they're drawing." Craig allowed Jeremy to lead the way. Under any other circumstance, the suggestion of paying attention to anything but Jeremy would seem like a joke, but this was Craig's passion. He loved graphic design and was able to share his love with Jeremy, making the work even more special. Add in that he was giving Jeremy what he wanted and the moment was charged with excitement.

Craig enjoyed the bright, colorful pictures the students drew. Most of the pictures involved children playing games or going on trips with their families.

One picture caught Craig's attention. Not only the subject of the picture, but the complexity of the child's use of shade, line, and depth to give the image dimension. The work was more sophisticated than anything he would expect from a seven-year-old. Not many adults could work the program as well as this child.

The picture portrayed a mother and a father, both with serious expressions, with a little boy between them. What struck Craig as odd, was the boy had a wide grin on his face. The story being told eluded him, but the conflict drew his interest. Jeremy walked up behind him. "Ah, you noticed Seth's picture. His is a sad story, but the way Seth processed his situation, I can't be too sad."

"What do you mean? The conflict in the picture is gripping. I can't make sense of it." Something in the picture seems sage, as if a life lesson lingered in the image. When making designs, artists aimed for this exact effect and often failed. Seth had created an image to capture attention and draw people in to learn more. *Maybe Seth could design book covers when he gets older.*

Jeremy explained. "Seth's parents got divorced. His story is about the time they told him. The funny thing is, although his parents had been serious and sad while telling him, Seth had remained happy during the conversation. The last line of his story said something about how he learned kids sometimes need to take care of their parents."

"Really? That sounds kind of disturbing."

"Oh, I know, it does seem creepy, but I had a meeting with his parents after reading his story and they are really handling this well. They told him he had made them feel much better and apparently Seth ate it up."

"No shit." Craig walked closer to the picture. With the context explained, Seth's work emerged with greater clarity. Both parents had sagging shoulders whereas Seth sat upright. Dull colors adorned the edges of the picture and the features of the room were fuzzy, but the closer you got to Seth, the clearer and more vibrant the picture became. The entire image placed Seth as the center of the happiness and clarity of the moment. "His parents must have handled the situation well. I'm happy for Seth."

"What do you mean? I can't even fathom having to deal with finding out your parents are getting divorced at such a young age. You remember how I reacted when my parents split. You and I still called each other once a week back then."

Craig turned to Jeremy. "No, I'm not saying the fact his parents divorced makes me happy." He took Jeremy by the arm and led him to survey the picture more closely. "Look at his picture. Specifically, at him and then at his surroundings."

Jeremy peered at the picture, and turned to face Craig, confusion evident on his face. "I don't know what I'm supposed to be seeing."

"May I talk to Seth? You can listen in and then you'll see what I do."

Jeremy nodded and Craig approached Seth. "Hey, Seth. I really like your picture."

Seth turned to face Craig. "Thank you. I think this is fun. You're a good teacher."

"Thanks." Craig ruffled his hair. "You're pretty good at this," he said. "Using the computer to draw pictures, I mean. You're better than a lot of grown-ups." Seth beamed with pride. "I like how you used color in your picture. The brightest and happiest colors are in the middle where you are." Jeremy leaned over Craig's shoulder, examining the picture closer. The heat of Jeremy's body penetrated his shirt, sending a wave of excitement through him as it warmed his skin. Momentarily distracted by the contact, he turned to smile at Jeremy. He then returned his attention to Seth and continued. "I also like how you made everything so clear in the middle and how things get fuzzier on the outside parts of the picture. Did you want to show how you had the answers to your parents' problems? These two people seem kind of sad. Were you the one to make them happy again?"

Seth looked up at Craig. "Yes, that's what I drew in my picture. My picture told you the whole story?" Seth stared at his picture, running his fingers over the screen. Craig kept his focus on Seth, but didn't miss the intake of breath behind him.

"Like I said, I think you are *that* good." Craig knelt down next to him. "Mr. Finn tells me this is the time your parents told you about their divorce. You must have been kind of sad, huh?"

"Well, my *parents* were sad. I was scared at first, but they told me they loved me no matter what, which made me happy. I only wanted them to stop being sad, so I told

them I loved them right back and I had enough love to give to both of them ten times around the world."

Craig took in a breath, a lump forming in his throat. "What a nice thing for you to tell them. I bet you made them happier."

"Yes. My parents are even friends now. Not like my other friend Abby. Her parents fight all the time." A sad look passed over Seth's face, quickly replaced by a happy smile once again.

Craig stayed with Seth for a few more minutes admiring his work. "Well, I should probably walk around and talk to some of the other students about their pictures, but I wanted to tell you I think this picture is extra special. You're a talented little graphic designer. I'm impressed with your work."

"Thanks, Craig. Mr. Finn said we should call you Craig. Is that okay?" Seth had an innocent and questioning expression and large blue puppy-dog eyes.

"Of course. Keep working on your picture." Craig walked over to Jeremy. To his surprise, Jeremy's eyes were brimming with moisture and his bottom lip quivered. "Hey, you okay?" Jeremy nodded, a smile slowly breaking through his taut lips. As he relaxed his face, Craig noticed one glimmering tear roll down his cheek and resisted the urge to brush it away. "Seriously, Jer, are you all right? Did I do something wrong?"

Jeremy let out a gentle laugh, almost an exhale. "No. You definitely did *not* do anything wrong. You did something incredibly *right*." He put his hand on Craig's shoulder. Craig sensed intensity in the touch, as if Jeremy wanted to communicate more than his words could say. "The tender way you talked to Seth. I never get a chance to watch others interact with my kids since I'm the one orchestrating their activities. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by your natural talent at working with kids. Watching you with Seth made me a little emotional. In a good way."

Craig smiled. "Thanks."

"What for?"

"For bringing the kids here." Craig rubbed his hand up and down Jeremy's back to comfort him. Seth turned to face them, a bright smile on his face. Craig had a feeling that Seth knew exactly what was going through his mind. *Well, if you know what I'm thinking, cross your fingers for me. Maybe make a wish for me too while you're at it.*

Jeremy's snuffle brought his attention back to the two of them. "These kids adore you." Craig lowered his head and Seth turned back to face the laptop. *I swear, that kid has got to be the coolest kid I ever met.* He glanced at Jeremy who still looked a bit emotional, then walked over to another student to help them with their picture.

As Jeremy watched Craig approach Sarah to praise her drawing, a second wave of emotion passed through him. Craig's pleasure and excitement of working with the children showed on his face, making his face shine almost as it had in their youth. Jeremy couldn't remember witnessing anything sweeter or sexier, ever. No one, not his parents, not even Andrew, had taken an interest in his work beyond asking him how things were going or pressing him to aim higher in the educational field than a

classroom teacher. Craig actively engaged in helping his students and appreciating their potential. If they had been alone, Jeremy would have grabbed Craig and kissed him again, like when they were fifteen. Only this time, he wouldn't stop at the kiss.

The thought caught him off guard. *I'm in a relationship*. Even though thoughts didn't equal cheating, a sense of being disloyal to Andrew filled his mind. Still, he didn't know how long he could resist his thunderous attraction to Craig.

As much as he loved Andrew, distance kept growing up between them, exacerbated by his reunion with Craig. He watched Craig, leaning over his students' shoulders, talking to them, laughing with them, caring. The contrast hit him hard. In one hour, Craig, who'd been absent from his life for fifteen years, had become more involved in what he loved, more accepting of his passion, than Andrew ever had. The thought didn't surprise him, but being forced to acknowledge it scared him; as if he now had to face a truth he had been hiding from. A decision needed to be made, and soon, and there was nowhere to hide anymore.

Chapter Eleven

The sun had been out for about an hour, evaporating the clouds, nothing blocking the warmth radiating over the city. A perfect morning for a jog with Jeremy. Craig stepped outside his building and was greeted by Jeremy who waited for him on the stoop. "You're early! How long have you been here?" He jogged down the steps, hiding his disappointment that Jeremy had worn a t-shirt instead of a skimpier tank, as he himself had done to celebrate the first truly warm day of spring. He'd hoped to see more of Jeremy's body.

"Only five minutes or so." The wide grin on Jeremy's face made up for the lack of eye-candy. With his focus on Jeremy's face, Craig didn't miss Jeremy's slight intake of breath or the interest that flared in his eyes as Craig moved toward him.

Jeremy's leg was extended, the heel of his foot resting on the steps. Craig sat down, pretending he had to retie his shoes, using his vantage point to admire the lean muscles of Jeremy's leg, following the sloping line of a muscled thigh until it disappeared in his shorts. When his own cock began to come to life, he jumped up and started stretching as well. A hard-on would show in his running shorts.

Jeremy's voice brought Craig's attention back to him. "Oh, before I forget, my kids have been asking about you. I think they have developed a little bit of a crush on you."

Craig pictured Jeremy's students, and smiled. "Really? That's so sweet."

Jeremy blushed. "I can hardly blame them." He averted his eyes, leaning down to stretch his leg. "I was wondering if you might be able to come in and visit the class."

Did he admit he has a crush on me? He shook his head, realizing Jeremy had simply asked him a question. "Uh, yeah. Sure. When would you like me to come by? And what would you want me to do?"

Jeremy's chuckle was light-hearted. "You don't have to *do* anything except show up, maybe read them a story. Circulate around the room and help the kids with their work." Jeremy lifted his gaze back up to meet Craig's, his coloring back to normal. "How's Tuesday?"

Any chance just to be with Jeremy. "Tuesday's fine. C'mon, let's run."

They began their run, the sun baking down on them. After ten minutes, their shirts were plastered to their skin. Jeremy stripped off his shirt, clutching it in his hand as they ran. Craig stole sidelong glances at him, taking in the broad shoulders which tapered into his thin waist, firm round ass, and muscular legs. His abdomen was lean and cut. *Well, I guess that question is answered.* Craig actually faltered in his step a couple of times, forcing his eyes back onto the running path. Although he wasn't entirely sure, he thought he saw a smirk cross Jeremy's face.

Tired of being the one to stare, Craig decided it was time to give Jeremy a view of his own. When he took off his tank top, Craig checked to make sure he had the audience he wanted. Jeremy did not disappoint, stealing frequent looks. Craig was far more

muscular than Jeremy, but he had excellent muscle tone which gave him a sleek appearance. His shoulders were broad, his pecs bulging slightly, forming a distinct line where the muscles joined in the middle of his sternum and curving smoothly along his upper ribs up towards his armpits. His collar bones were prominent, but not bony, leading the eye outward towards the slopes of his shoulders and contributing to the square frame of his square body. His stomach, lean, with well defined ripples of his six-pack, showed off his strength and tone. He was hairless with only a wisp of light brown fuzz running from his navel into the rim of his running shorts, which ran low on his hips, highlighting his oblique muscles which rounded nicely, framing his lower abdomen and curving inwards in an inviting angle towards his cock. *Even if I'm arrogant as hell checking myself out, at least I know what Jeremy is seeing right now.*

They continued to run in silence, sweat making the sun reflect off their skin. Craig concentrated on the pounding of his feet against the pavement, attempting to divert his attention from the longing filling him each time he viewed Jeremy's lean torso. The narrow, flat plane of Jeremy's abdominal muscles, leading down to slim hips would be perfect to wrap his arms around and pull Jeremy in close. The rivulets of sweat dripping down his chest begged for Craig to lick them. He imagined the salty-tang hitting his taste buds as he ran his tongue along the ropes of tendon and muscle in his neck.

By the time they finished their run, standing in front of his building, Craig was exhausted, drained emotionally by the effort of suppressing his vivid fantasies. After all, what was the point? Nothing was going to happen between them. Hands on his knees, he lifted his head to face Jeremy. "Terrific run."

Jeremy was panting, clutching his side. "You're in way better shape than I am." Craig noticed Jeremy's gaze drifted up and down his body, but pretended he hadn't. "I've had a stitch in my side for the last twenty minutes."

Craig stood up and slung a sweaty arm over Jeremy's shoulder. Slipping off the slick surface, his hand brushed over Jeremy's ass. Although it had been a legitimate slip, the extra few second he allowed his hand to remain cupping Jeremy's glute was not. "Oops, sorry. I guess we're a bit more slippery than I thought."

Jeremy gave a short, nervous laugh, then he squatted, fidgeting with the laces of his running shoes. "No problem, Craig."

As Craig stretched, raising his hands over his head, he caught a glimpse of Jeremy grabbing at his shorts and tugging in a not-so-subtle effort to untangle himself. *Son of a bitch! He's turned on right now.*

The realization caused his own cock to begin to stir and lengthen. "We should make this a weekly thing. Robert never runs with me." The thought of Robert managed to quell his rising libido.

"Definitely. I need to get back into shape. You put me to shame. I look like a stick figure next to you."

Something in Jeremy's self-deprecating behavior inspired courage to flare up inside Craig. "I don't know. Your legs are well-toned and your physique tapers perfectly for your frame. Your shoulders are rounded and your lats angle in towards your waist. I've been admiring your body the whole run."

Jeremy's eyes widened, before a smile crossed his face. "I'm glad you said that. I thought I was a horrible person because I admired your body as well. I thought I was practically cheating on Andrew the way I was staring at you."

Craig froze. Jeremy just said the very thought he had been thinking over and over for the past couple of weeks. *I finally made the first move. I didn't wait for him to say something; I did it this time.* Pride swelled inside his chest. It was time to push forward in his exploration of where things might lead with Jeremy. "Would you like to come up for a glass of water or do you need to head home?"

"I'd love a glass of water." His answer was immediate. "But is Robert home?"

Craig snapped his head towards Jeremy. "I don't know. Maybe. Who cares?" He knew he sounded dense, but Jeremy couldn't possibly have meant what Craig thought and to allow himself to believe he did was setting himself up for disappointment.

"I guess no one." Jeremy's shoulders slumped, but he maintained a smile on his face. Craig turned and led the way into his building. As they walked up the stairs, Craig prayed silently to himself. *Please be out. Please be out.*

When they entered his apartment, Craig saw the note right away on the kitchen counter. *Went into work to take care of some stuff. Be back tonight around eight.* Excitement filled him, knowing they were alone in his apartment. "I guess Robert's not in."

Jeremy stood a little straighter, his shoulders squaring from their previously slumped position. "Oh, well, Andrew goes in on the weekends a lot too. I know where the glasses are. You must want to get changed."

Craig nodded. "Yeah, I'll just be a minute." He headed into his room, kicked off his shoes, stripped off his shorts, jock-strap, and socks, and stepped into the shower. The initial shock of cold water helped to break the heat from his run and from his flirting with Jeremy. As the water slowly warmed, so did his muscles. He leaned his head back, allowing the water to soak through his hair and run down over his head.

When he removed his head from the water and wiped his eyes, he shouted out loud in shock.

Jeremy had pulled the curtain aside and was standing in the bathroom, naked. "Mind if I join you? I caught a whiff of myself and I stink." Craig didn't have a chance to respond before Jeremy stepped into the shower next to him. "Shit, Craig, this is hot."

He wasn't sure whether Jeremy was referring to the water temperature or the fact that the two of them were standing naked together. Deciding to busy himself rather than contemplate his situation, Craig grabbed a loofah and pomegranate body wash and began to scrub himself. The scent of citrus filled the room, carried through the air by the steam. It both refreshed and stimulated his senses. Raising his arm to scrub at his lateral muscles and down to his waist, causing his body to turn in the process and his

ass brushed against Jeremy's cock, the hard shaft sliding across his skin with wet soapiness. The sensation shot straight through him, causing his penis to quickly lengthen and thicken. *If we were boyfriends, I'd...But we're not. Stop fantasizing Craig.*

"Hey, mind if I grab that other loofah?" Jeremy didn't wait for an answer, instead, he just leaned across Craig's body, chest sliding against chest, and grabbed it. Craig inhaled sharply at the contact. Jeremy's body had seemed lanky, but under the spray, with the light gleaming off his skin, each ripple of muscle became highlighted. Craig admired the line splitting his abdomen into two halves and the ridges revealing his washboard stomach. His pec muscles weren't large, but they were smooth and tan, dotted by nickel sized nipples which seemed to have a gravitational pull. It was hard work, but Craig managed to keep his mouth from clamping down on one.

Glancing down was his undoing. Jeremy's cock swayed heavily in front of him, jutting out at a slight angle, not hard, but filling out. Long, with a perfect head, the pink skin under the ridge stretched, looking pure and clean. If Craig were to take that into his mouth, he imagined it would taste sweet, with a hint of salty, and it would smell of Jeremy. His own penis continued to grow until it nudged Jeremy's leg. Shocked by the contact, he shot his head up and was caught in one of the most heated gazes he could remember.

Jeremy's amber eyes seemed alight with a fire beneath the surface. Unable to draw his eyes away, Craig stood, his erection now at full-mast, saluting the statue of perfection standing before him. Jeremy glanced down, licked his lips, then returned his eyes to gaze at Craig once again. "I can't reach my back. Would you mind soaping me?"

Jeremy turned around, revealing the lean cant of his body, shoulders rounding over a sturdy frame and a slow slant of muscle into narrow hips, only to round into two firm mounds of ass. Craig's own cock was merely inches away from Jeremy's crease, throbbing with excitement. Shaking his head, he poured body wash onto his loofah and worked up a lather, then ran the mesh up and down Jeremy's back, starting at his shoulders and moving in circular motions to massage as he worked his way down Jeremy's body.

When he got half way down Jeremy's back, Jeremy leaned forward, placing his forearms on the wall in front of him and resting his head on them. At this angle, his ass was positioned at an inviting angle. A dusting of dark hair ran from the base of his spine and disappeared into the crack of his ass, giving his slender frame a highly masculine appearance. Craig made quick work of washing the remainder of Jeremy's back, making sure to keep his hands and the loofah away from the treasure displayed before him.

Once he finished, Jeremy stood up. "Here, switch, I'll do you." He glanced down once again as Craig stepped aside and allowed Jeremy to stand under the spray of the water. His eyebrows raised slightly as he bit his lower lip. "Lean forward like I did, it will make it easier for me to get your whole back.

Craig obeyed, leaning forward as Jeremy had. Even with the patter of water against the walls, the floor, and the plastic lining of the shower, Craig heard Jeremy's gasp. *I*

know what he's just noticed. The thought of Jeremy admiring his mounded ass, and the network of muscles perfectly aligned to give him a symmetrically pleasing physique, caused his own cock to lurch. At the same time, he felt the guilt of allowing this to go on, and in the bathroom he shared with Robert. This was too much. He had fantasized about something like this, but never imagined it would really happen. And now that it was happening, he couldn't do anything to satisfy the lust coursing through him. The irony of the situation was torture.

Just when he thought he couldn't become any more aroused, Jeremy began scrubbing at his back, taking care to vigorously work the suds into his skin, applying just the right amount of pressure for the loofah to scrape away old skin, leaving his body shining and fresh. As Jeremy continued washing him, Craig felt something press against him from behind. It was subtle at first, but then the pressure increased. Jeremy had closed the distance between them and his cock was pressed against his ass. He was fully erect and his movements rubbed his hard shaft back and forth against his wet skin. Luckily he didn't try to work his cock into his crease because Craig wouldn't be able to stop himself if Jeremy were that close to fulfilling his greatest desire.

As if sensing his inner struggle, Jeremy stepped back. "C'mon, wash the suds off."

The sense of loss overwhelmed Craig and he groaned, his voice carrying through the bathroom.

Craig turned, not caring that his cock was arched all the way up so it ran parallel to his abdomen. That fact that he didn't care caught him off guard and Robert entered his mind once again. He quickly pushed the image out of his mind as Jeremy stood aside and allowed Craig to stand under the spray of the water. The silkiness of the suds as they ran down his back, over his ass, and along the length of his legs only heightened his pleasure.

Once clean, Craig lifted his eyes and stared at Jeremy. Jeremy's lips curled up in a hint of a smirk, giving him a devilish appearance, but there was a seriousness to his expression as well. An intensity which indicated there was nothing amusing about this moment for him.

The combination of his arousal, the intimacy of the moment, the expression on Jeremy's face, all of it, caused Craig to act. He reached out and cupped his hand around Jeremy's neck, pulling him in and sealing their lips together. He wrapped his free hand around Jeremy's waist and pulled their bodies tightly together.

Jeremy allowed his body to mold against Craig's, pressing his hips forward so their erections dueled with one another as their tongues gained entrance to each other's mouths. Water and saliva mixed, making the kiss wet and impassioned. Jeremy had always had plump lips, but Craig hadn't remembered how gentle the soft cushion of his mouth felt pressed against his own. Their tongues danced, twirling against each other, brushing over teeth, massaging palate and gums, as their hands roved up and down each other's backs, holding them together.

After what felt like several minutes, they broke apart, both panting for breath. Craig stared at Jeremy, trying to focus. "I'm gonna blow my load."

Jeremy leaned back against the wall, his head tilted upward. "Me too." He grabbed his cock and started jerking at it, water pounding down on his head and cascading down his smooth chest. The visual sent Craig into overdrive. Grabbing his own cock, he only had to stroke it twice before he felt the tingling of his orgasm deep inside, starting in his center and quickly travelling out to his throbbing erection and tightened balls. The first wave of his orgasm was drowned out by Jeremy's cry as his own cock began to jerk, creamy white fluid spewing from the head.

Craig shuddered, his body spasming with pleasure, riveted by Jeremy's release. When Jeremy's body stopped rocking from the after-shock of his orgasm, he lowered his head, amber eyes smoldering with satisfaction. "Holy shit, Craig."

Heat seared through Craig. He couldn't believe they had kissed and now they had both come in his shower; his and Robert's shower. Not knowing what else to say, Craig said the first thing that came to his mind. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

Jeremy chuckled. "Play on words aside, you have nothing to apologize for. I started it by coming in here and getting into the shower with you."

He was glad Jeremy didn't seem to be freaking out, but the confusion intensified with each passing moment. "Um, I've been thinking about you so much, I guess I just needed to get this out of my system." He knew it was a lie, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

Jeremy smiled. "Don't worry. All we did was kiss and beat off."

All we did was kiss and beat off? The words sounded plain enough, but Jeremy's eyes told a different story. Behind his relaxed exterior was a simmering heat, a flame which had been ignited and which had not gone out. Craig knew exactly how he felt, because he too felt a raging flame that could not be extinguished. "I guess so."

Jeremy nodded, then stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel from the rack and wrapping it around his waist. "Exactly. Except..." He stepped out of the shower.

"Except?"

"That was better than I remembered it. The kiss I mean." Jeremy was looking in the mirror as he made the comment, but Craig could see the strain on his face as he glanced at his reflection.

"It was." Had they just made a huge mistake? Was it going to make things weird between them?

Again, as if he could read Craig's mind, Jeremy turned to face him. "Look, I know we are both in relationships and shouldn't have done that, but I don't want this to make things weird between us. We can manage that, right?" The last question came out more as a plea than an actual question.

A surge of relief passed through Craig as he stood naked and still fully erect in the shower. He stepped out and grabbed the towel he had placed on the hook, covering himself. "Of course we can. I was just thinking the same thing."

Jeremy's smile broadened. "Whew. Do you mind if I borrow some clothes. Now that I'm clean, the idea of getting into my stinking running clothes is very unappealing."

Craig laughed, "Sure, let's see what I can give you."

They both got dressed and spent another ten minutes before Jeremy had to leave. "I need to get going. I told Andrew I'd be home an hour ago. He's going to be worrying about me by now."

"Of course." Hearing Jeremy talk about Andrew stung more than it should have. Of course Andrew would be worrying about him. He was his boyfriend. But now that he had tasted Jeremy once again, he didn't want to let him go. "I'll talk to you later and we'll make plans to get together." Craig was relieved his voice didn't betray his sinking spirit.

Jeremy walked up to Craig and placed one hand on either side of his face. "Don't worry Craig. We're cool." He leaned in and kissed him once on the lips. The kiss was quick, friendly, but sent Craig's head reeling.

Once Jeremy left, Craig walked into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of orange juice. He then stood by the window and looked out over the West Village. *Did that really happen?* He couldn't decide whether he was elated or mortified. Probably a bit of both. They had kissed which was technically cheating. Beating off together was a grey area. Craig didn't want to think of himself as a cheater. It wasn't like they'd slept together or anything. He laughed at his attempt to justify his behavior.

It wasn't the kiss or the beating off that confused him. It was the fact Jeremy had set the stage for them to do so. If Jeremy were really happy with Andrew, would he have come into the shower, would he have asked Craig to soap him? Craig may have been the one to grab Jeremy for the kiss, but there was no resistance. Not one single bit.

Bringing the juice to his lips, he took a big gulp, allowing the fresh orange flavor to fill him. The tang of the citrus cleansed his mouth and for a moment, he felt a pang of regret. He had washed the taste of Jeremy away. Shaking his head, he brought the glass to his lips again, taking another gulp. Hope. It only led to heartache.

* * * * *

Andrew paced around the condo, glancing at his watch every other minute. *Where the fuck is he?* Jeremy was supposed to be home an hour ago. It seemed ever since he started hanging out with Craig, he had lost a sense of time. It was one thing to want to go for a run. The spring weather carried hints of summer and Jeremy loved to run outdoors. He even understood wanting to run with a friend. And he hadn't minded the chance to sleep in. But the weekends were the only time he and Jeremy had together,

aside from the few hours each weeknight before they went to bed, and to chew away at the time by spending half the day out, raked on his quickly dwindling patience.

He better come home with some fuckin' awesome plans for the condo. Surprising himself with the ire of his own thoughts, Andrew hopped into the shower, got dressed, and headed out on his own. He contemplated not leaving a note, but at the last minute, scribbled one on the pad of paper magnetically attached to the fridge. *Went to Sidewalk Café. Meet me in East Village if you want.* The note was curt and would piss Jeremy off. The fact that Andrew would choose to go to the East Village without him would be like rubbing salt in an open sore.

When he stepped outside, Andrew was shocked at just how warm the weather was. This wasn't just a spring day, it was a cloudless warm day promising the coming of summer heat. His anger still thrumming inside, he decided to walk rather than take a cab to the East Village. It would take him a half hour, but it would give him plenty of time to think. Plus, he hadn't done nearly enough exploring of his new neighborhood.

Madison Avenue proved to be too crowded. He shouldn't have been surprised seeing as it was one o'clock on a Saturday, but having to weave in and out of people served as a stimulant to his already frayed nerves. He headed east and, once he arrived at Second Avenue, continued his trek south. Sidewalk Café was on the corner of Second Avenue and Sixth Street. Without the people traffic to distract him, Andrew had time to think.

Despite the beautiful weather which should have cheered him up, Andrew couldn't keep his thoughts off Jeremy. He normally wouldn't have been so angry with him, but their relationship had turned into one fight after another lately. In fact, the past two years had been a struggle, not just the past few weeks. *Huh. That dates back to my last promotion.* When he had first been promoted from portfolio manager assistant to portfolio manager, Jeremy had been excited for him, but that was when they started fighting more often. And then with this promotion to senior portfolio manager, their fighting had escalated even further.

The arguments always centered around money, but somehow Andrew knew it was more than that. He knew he pushed Jeremy to change jobs, but, he didn't think that was it either. Their problems ran deeper than money and jobs. Something more fundamental was creeping between them, forcing a wedge that was becoming more and more entrenched.

Rather than wondering what was bothering Jeremy, Andrew turned his thoughts inward. He had been proud to achieve his promotions, not simply because of the increased salary, but because of the increased responsibility. He now oversaw bigger accounts and could help to shape future portfolio managers. Far too many people were in the job for the money, not the work of securing people's futures.

Jeremy had always respected that aspect of his work. Had supported Andrew in his climb. And was proud of his morals and his sincere desire to help others. He hadn't even complained about the increased hours required with increased responsibility. It wasn't until Andrew started buying things for him and for their place that Jeremy

started complaining. At first he was appreciative, but it didn't take long for appreciation to turn to arguments about spending too much money and making Jeremy feel like he couldn't contribute as much to their lives financially.

The words were about money, but the sentiment wasn't. *How could I have missed that?* It was about being equals in a relationship. Instead of regret, anger resurfaced inside him. Why should he have to withhold from the things he could afford? He shouldn't have to, and the fact Jeremy wanted him to was *his* problem. The thought caught him off guard. When had he become so callous, so resentful?

He quickened his pace, hoping the extra effort would help to burn off the tension rising within him. Instead, his agitation increased and his mind began to spin faster. He worked hard to earn his promotions and he wanted to be able to enjoy Manhattan. There was nothing wrong with that. When they had started dating, he and Jeremy had been on even footing in all respects, but didn't relationships grow and change? People weren't clones. There were things Jeremy did which Andrew couldn't hold a candle to.

His patience with kids for starters. Andrew would rather slit his wrists than spend six hours a day in front of twenty seven-year-old kids. But Jeremy loved it. And he brought that nurturing to their home. If Jeremy hadn't been such a great cook, they would spend a fortune on takeout because Andrew couldn't cook worth a damn. Jeremy was the nurturer, the one who made their apartment feel like a home, what made coming home worthwhile.

At least he used to make coming home worthwhile. Until the fighting had begun. Now, Andrew stayed later at work, dreading what new argument might occur if he dared to order some new piece of furniture or plan a trip somewhere for the two of them. He didn't want to live his life worrying about how he would piss off his boyfriend. He longed for someone who was moving in the same direction, not necessarily financially, but at least with an ability to enjoy what increased financial stability could bring.

Andrew slowed down, his breathing becoming slightly labored, not from the effort, but from the sudden weight pressing at his chest. *That's it. That's what the real problem is. He isn't growing with me.* The realization hit him hard. All this time he had been wondering what he had done wrong to upset Jeremy, to push him away. And the answer had been right there. He hadn't done *anything* wrong. Their lives weren't coming together, they were growing apart.

The thought filled his mind until he couldn't think of anything else. He glanced around and found he had walked all the way to Fourteenth Street. He was only a block away from Phoenix. *Hell, it's after noon, why don't a get a drink. I could use one.* He turned east on Thirteenth Street and headed to the bar he and Jeremy had frequented when they lived there. It had been a while since he'd been in the neighborhood. Maybe a slice of something familiar would comfort him.

Entering the bar, he was immediately accosted by the dim lighting, a stark contrast from the bright sunshine from outside. He walked over to the bar and ordered a pint of whatever was on tap. Allowing the cool froth to hit his tongue, the bitter sweetness

touching his taste buds and filling his senses, was a welcome distraction from the thoughts which had taken residence in his head. He took a gulp, allowing the fermentation to tickle his throat and fill his stomach. Placing the glass down on the bar with a solid thunk, he emitted an *ahh* releasing the tension building up within him.

"Rough day?"

Andrew snapped his head up, unaware he had an audience. He met the gaze of the shirtless bartender, heavily muscled with broad shoulders, thick arms, and a sculpted chest and abs. His skin was far too tan for this time of year. *Must go to a tanning salon.* He had forgotten the bartenders went shirtless down in the East Village. Well, in most gay bars, but more so in the East Village where the clientele was a bit more laid back. In the West Village and in Chelsea where the clientele was more of a business crowd, the bartenders didn't remove their shirts until later in the evening when the patrons were well on their way to drunk and horny. It increased tips tremendously for them.

Taking another moment to appreciate the man in front of him, he observed the close-cropped haircut, dark hair, contrasted by blue eyes. Quite handsome. "Yeah. I guess so."

The bartender extended his hand and Andrew took it in his. "Name's Peter. Peter Somers. Want to talk about it?"

He lifted the glass to his mouth, taking another gulp, more tension slipping from him. As he drank, he allowed his eyes to take another glance at Peter, surveying him more closely. He wore tight-fitting jeans. His thick arms were complemented by trunks for legs and a powerful ass which caused the seams of his pants to scream in protestation. Andrew loved working out with weights and had a body to show for it as well, but this guy put him to shame. *Well, maybe not to shame, but he'd certainly make a great gym partner.* "No." He finished his beer and slid the glass across the counter.

Peter smiled, took his glass, and refilled it, never taking his eyes off Andrew for a moment. Sliding a fresh glass across the bar, he winked. "Suit yourself." Instead of walking away, he rested his elbow on the bar and leaned his head in his palm. "I haven't seen you in here before. Of course, I just started a couple of weeks ago, so I'm meeting everyone and trying to remember names. What's yours?"

Andrew chuckled. This guy would do well. He was hot and friendly, the perfect combination. "Name's Andrew."

"Nice to meet you, Andrew. You live around here?"

"No." Andrew reached across the bar and took Peter's hand. He had a firm grip and the muscles of his forearms rippled as they shook in greeting. "I used to, but just moved to midtown near Central Park."

"That's a shame." Peter smiled, revealing perfectly white teeth and stunning dimples which gave him boyish good looks. "It would be nice if all the guys who come in here looked like you. How often do you go to the gym?"

"I dunno. Usually three times a week. I'm a member of New York Sports Club and usually go after work."

"Well it shows." Peter made a show of admiration. Andrew took in the expression and it filled him with pride. This was a handsome, well-built man, one who could grab him, take him, make him do things that – *What the fuck. I'm a top*. Yet he couldn't deny the physical response of his body at the thought of Peter entering him, controlling him. The image caused Andrew's cock to strain in his pants. "So what brings you down here on a Saturday?"

The question, the beer, the handsome man who seemed to care, Andrew wasn't sure which sparked it, but words started pouring out of him. "Normally I wouldn't be down here, but my boyfriend is out running, or doing something, with a friend of his, and he was supposed to be home by noon. By one o'clock, and after several unreturned phone calls, I decided to head out on my own and ended up here."

Peter's eyes maintained contact with Andrew's. "You have a boyfriend? Bummer."

The comment caused his pants to become just a hint tighter as his bits and pieces continued to shift. "Yeah, but lately I'm beginning to wonder."

Peter grabbed a rag from behind the counter and began to wipe down the bar. Andrew noticed he was cleaning the same spot without making a move to clean anywhere else. "You're beginning to wonder what?"

"I'm beginning to wonder whether we really are boyfriends anymore, or if we're growing apart." As soon as the words came out, he snapped his mouth shut, surprised he had shared such personal information. Despite his surprise, he continued. "We seem to want different things."

"What is it you want?" Peter continued wiping the same spot on the bar top.

"I want to be able to enjoy myself. Isn't that what everyone wants? I want to be able to spend the money I earn without worrying about how it's going to piss someone else off, especially my boyfriend."

"Your boyfriend gets pissed off at you for spending money?"

"He teaches. I work in the financial industry. There is a financial gap between us which has never bothered me, but it's become the source of our problems. Well, not so much the money itself, but..." Andrew raised his glass to his mouth, taking another gulp. This had been what he had wanted to avoid thinking about.

"But you make more money than him and want to do things that he can't afford."

"Exactly. I don't ask for anything. I don't push for him to contribute financially. All I ask is that he jump on board and move forward with me." Listening to himself, he cringed, realizing how selfish he sounded. "God I sound like a jerk."

Peter laughed. "No you don't. Money is a powerful thing and splits lots of people. At least you don't care that he doesn't make as much as you do. My last boyfriend did and that was what broke us up. He never appreciated me for me."

"I'm sorry." Andrew reached out and placed a hand over Peter's which hadn't stopped cleaning the same spot. "I think you managed to clean that spot, unless you want to rub the finish off the countertop."

Peter laughed. "You caught that, huh?" His cheeks flushed. He must have been seriously embarrassed for Andrew to notice the red in his cheeks in the dim room. "Busted. I wanted to seem like I was working, but you're cute and I wanted to keep talking to you."

The words sent a surge of electricity through Andrew. His cock filled out and became fully erect inside his pants, forcing him to shift his hips to relieve the uncomfortable pressure. "Thanks."

"So this boyfriend who doesn't want the same things as you. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." He took another sip of his beer, the effect beginning to calm him. Peter was attractive and no one had listened to him, understood him, like this for quite some time. An image of Robert popped into his mind. Robert had understood him perfectly. He recalled how good it felt to talk about his work and his hopes with Robert. *Maybe I need someone like him.*

Before Peter could speak again, his phone vibrated. Glancing at the caller ID, he saw it was Jeremy. "Jeremy. Nice of you to call." Peter walked away, cleaning the rest of the bar top.

"Hello to you too. I'm at Sidewalk and you aren't here. Where are you?"

"I decided to go to Phoenix instead."

"Oh. Okay, want me to meet you there?"

"No, stay where you are. I'm hungry. I'll come join you. See you in a few." He snapped his phone shut and turned to Peter. "Thanks for listening."

Peter smiled. "Good luck."

Stepping back outside, Andrew squinted until his eyes had a chance to readjust to the brightness. Rather than dulling his thoughts, going to Phoenix had shoved more things to think about into his overcrowded head. Peter had been openly flirting with him and it felt good. He seemed like a great guy, someone Andrew could have fun with. *But that would be jumping from one person who couldn't move forward with me to the next.*

He thought of Robert again. Robert was handsome and shared his professional interests. They were far more compatible. If he and Jeremy were growing apart, someone like Robert was a far better choice for him. And Robert had seemed interested. There had been a hint of flirtation that evening as well. At the time he had written it off as just being friendly, but re-examining the evening through a new lens, he could see how Robert had sent out signs of invitation.

He turned left and headed South on Second Avenue. Only a few blocks to go and he would be at Sidewalk Café, with Jeremy. The thought filled him with a sense of frustration. He had just snapped at Jeremy on the phone. Would Jeremy start an argument about that? Would he complain that Andrew had gone out without him? His frustration sparked a hint of the anger, the same anger he'd been trying to escape.

He shook his head, a faint humming behind his ears. *I need food. Drinking on an empty stomach was a bad idea.* Whatever reaction he faced when he arrived, he would deal with it, like he always did.

Chapter Twelve

Craig was sitting at his computer Sunday night, working on a project for one of Boris's clients. It was a condo job near Jeremy's place by Central Park. Ever since his run with Jeremy, and their shower, he hadn't been able to think of anything else. Since he had blown up at Robert the day of Boris's party, they had barely spoken to each other. *No wonder I let him in the shower with me. I haven't had sex in over two weeks.*

Staring at his screen, his attention was diverted by the continual images of Jeremy and his naked body, his erect cock, his climax, their kiss. He got up and walked into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of wine. Several times the night before and during the day, he had wanted to call Jeremy, but was afraid to. What if Jeremy had second thoughts about what they had done? What if he realized they had made a terrible mistake and didn't want to have anything to do with him anymore? Craig knew he wouldn't be able to stand it if he lost Jeremy again.

Just as he finished pouring the wine, his phone rang. He picked it up without checking the caller ID. "Hello."

"Hi, Craig." Jeremy's voice sounded cheerful. "Seriously, why do you keep taking so long to answer the phone?"

A warmth filled him. It was nice to have someone who was playful to talk to. "I told you. I have to keep you on your toes." Relief flooded through him. *Jeremy called me.* He shook his head, both amused and annoyed for having worked himself up so much.

"Very funny. Listen. I was wondering if you still wanted to visit the kids. I wasn't kidding about them asking for you."

"Of course I do." He wanted to kick himself for having allowed himself to get so worked up, but his sense of relief outweighed any criticism he could give himself. Jeremy not only felt comfortable with him, he wanted him to visit his class. *I should have called him last night instead of worrying myself into next week.* "When would you like me to come?" Jeremy was silent for a moment. "You there?"

Jeremy laughed on the other end of the phone. "Sorry. I was just deciding whether to go with that opening you just gave me or to simply answer your question about when to come."

Heat rushed to Craig's cheeks. "Geez Jeremy. I've been spending the last twenty-four hours worrying that you wouldn't want to see me again after our little...experience...and here you are joking about it."

"I told you. No weirdness. We're fine, Craig." He remained quiet for another moment. "But it's kinda cute that you worried about it."

"Quit it!" Craig laughed to release some of the nervous energy building up inside of him. "So when do you want me to come...I mean *visit* your classroom?"

"We agreed on Tuesday, right?"

"Right, we did." Craig flushed and was glad Jeremy couldn't see his embarrassment.

"Perfect. And Craig, don't worry so much. That was always your problem growing up. You worried about everything."

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind. See you Tuesday." Craig flipped his phone shut and held it against his chest. A simple phone call and all of his concerns were gone. Jeremy wasn't uncomfortable at all. And yet, maybe things would be easier if he were uncomfortable. He raised the glass to his lips and took a sip of his wine.

* * * * *

On Tuesday, Craig left work early to visit Jeremy's class.

"Craig. Wait." At the door, Janet handed him a container filled with cookies. "I made these for the kids. Can you tell them I said hello?"

"You *baked*?" Craig summoned as much surprise into voice as he could muster.

Janet smiled sweetly, stepping forward and handing the container to him. Once his hands were occupied, she reached up and flicked him hard between the eyes. "Yes, I baked! Now get your fuckin' wise ass out of here before I do something that will *really* hurt."

"Should I share *that* message with the kids too?"

Janet took a menacing step forward, forcing Craig to jump back. "Peace. I'm kidding. That was sweet of you."

A dazzling smile replaced her warning glare. "Okay, call to tell me how they liked the cookies." Craig headed out, chuckling to himself. *I never would have thought of Janet as motherly.*

The short walk to Jeremy's school was filled with a nervous tension as Craig replayed Saturday in his mind. He hadn't seen Jeremy since the shower and had only spoken to him once the next day. He wondered if seeing him again would cause Jeremy to realize what they had done had been a terrible mistake, and to shy away from him, despite his reassurances that everything was fine.

When he arrived at the school, he had wound himself into a bundle of nerves. The fact the front office was expecting him only marginally eased his anxiety. Upon entering the classroom, his concerns evaporated into thin air. Jeremy's beaming grin greeted him, warm as ever. Unfortunately, the comforting welcome was short lived as all the kids jumped up from the rug where Jeremy had been reading them a story and huddled around Craig, to give him hugs.

As the kids crowded him to get their turn, his legs began to give way and he started to fall over backwards, catching himself on a desk before he fell all the way to the ground, probably taking a few kids out with him.

Jeremy rose from his seat, laughing. "All right kids, come on, let Craig come in and sit with us. We'll have plenty of time for you to talk to him for the rest of the day."

Craig righted himself, shooting an appreciative glance at Jeremy, and headed to a chair on the outskirt of the rug, his earlier nervousness entirely forgotten.

Jeremy shook his head, still chuckling. "So boys and girls, like I told you before, Craig and I were friends growing up. Do you want me to tell you a secret?" A small knot formed in Craig's chest. *Is this an ambush?* "Craig was clumsy as a kid too. He used to fall over all the time." Several kids giggled and the knot unclenched inside him. "In fact, sometimes he tripped by walking along the sidewalk." Some of the kids glanced at him, wide smiles crossing their faces. Craig blushed, but found the kids' delight to be too cute to become annoyed by Jeremy's jab.

A girl raised her hand and Jeremy called on her. "Can we give Craig his present now? Pleeeease!"

Jeremy flushed. "Okay, since Abby has let our little secret out, I guess now is a good time for us to give Craig his surprise." The kids let out squeals of delight and reached into their desks, pulling out colorful pieces of folded construction paper. "Abby, would you like to go first?"

Abby walked to the front of the room, shoulders held back and head held high, clearly excited and proud to be the first one to share. She opened the colorful paper and began reading. "Dear Craig, Thank you so much for showing us how you make pictures on computers and for letting us play with the computers. I love my picture. It was pretty. Love, Abby."

Craig smiled. He hadn't expected the kids to write him thank you notes. "You're welcome, Abby. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." The students took turns reading their cards to Craig who fidgeted in his seat, embarrassed by all the attention and adoration.

When they finished, Jeremy got them started on their math lesson. With the kids busily working, he was free to pay attention to Craig. "They couldn't wait to read those to you. They haven't stopped talking about you since we visited Spectacular Designs."

Craig was touched. "The kids have so much love to give. You must feel like a king every day."

Jeremy turned his gaze away from Craig, and faced his class. "They *are* filled with love; they're so open and unguarded. It's one of the things I like about teaching elementary school." As Jeremy spoke, Craig observed him, noting a slight pinkening in his neck. "I can't believe you figured that out in only a few minutes. I'm constantly amazed at how attuned you are to the things I care about."

The acknowledgement cut straight to Craig's heart. Not just because he was pleased that he had made Jeremy feel appreciated, but because Jeremy's comment meant Andrew *didn't* connect with him the same way. Maybe the two of them weren't as close as they seemed.

Craig spent the rest of the day walking around the room, helping kids with their work. Finally, at dismissal, when the last kid had been picked up, Jeremy took Craig back inside. "You have a natural way with the kids. They adore you."

Happiness flooded Craig at the compliment. "Well, they're kind of hard not to love. They're so cute and damn if they aren't smart as hell too." *I can't believe how a simple compliment from him causes my heart to race.* "So, we have a couple of hours to kill before we're supposed to meet the boys downtown at The Bulls and Bears."

Jeremy walked over to the far corner of the room and stood in front of a bulletin board covered with student work. Craig followed him. "Are these the stories your kids wrote?"

"Yeah. I've left spaces next to each one for their pictures." Jeremy kept his eyes focused on the board as he spoke. "I've never had anyone take an interest in my class before. No one. I mean my parents ask about school and Andrew listens to my stories, but you really care about the kids."

Craig watched Jeremy as he continued to inspect the wall, surprised to find the flush had moved from his neck to his cheeks. When Jeremy turned to face him, two smoldering eyes caught him in a lust-filled gaze. Before he had a chance to speak, Jeremy grabbed him and gave him a fierce kiss. Unable to resist, not wanting to, Craig wrapped his arms around Jeremy and kissed him back, opening his mouth to Jeremy's invading tongue.

They remained together for several minutes, gripping each other as the intensity of their kiss increased and their straining erections pressed against each other through the fabric of their pants.

The wall connected with Craig's back and Jeremy leaned his body even tighter, to create more pressure and friction. Craig allowed him to take charge, his own hands carelessly running along lateral muscles and resting on Jeremy's waist.

Jeremy's hands were far from gentle. He wrapped one hand behind Craig's neck and pulled him close, sealing their lips together in a fervent kiss. His other hand worked its way inside Craig's shirt, lightly pinching the sensitive nipple, rolling the nub of flesh between his thumb and forefinger and leaving Craig helpless to do anything but enjoy.

When Jeremy ended the kiss, they both stood panting for a moment, simply staring at each other.

Craig was the first to speak. "Jesus, Jeremy. What if someone saw us?"

Jeremy laughed. "They couldn't. See, the door is on this wall and we're standing in the corner here. They would have to come into the room to catch us and no one ever comes in once school lets out."

"But —"

"I know. I'm sorry. I just can't help myself when I'm around you. And watching you interact with my kids and the way you understand me and what I do...it's a huge turn on. You have *no* idea how good it makes me feel to know you appreciate what I do." Jeremy's lips were red and swollen from their kisses, making them appear even more pouty and kissable. Since it was obvious that his cock was tenting his pants, Craig

didn't bother hiding as he reached into the front and readjusted himself. Jeremy laughed and did the same.

"Don't get me wrong. I enjoy kissing you, but you're with Andrew and I'm with Robert."

Jeremy finished tucking his shirt back into his pants, his skin returning to a normal pallor. "I know. We're going to have to work harder at controlling ourselves. Let's say we're even. You pulled me into a kiss the other day. I initiated this one."

Craig had to work to suppress a laugh, the thought of them competing to see who could trap the other in the most compromising kiss caused all his work at readjusting himself to be undone. "This isn't a competition, Jeremy."

Jeremy shuffled from foot to foot. "I like kissing you."

Four words, four very dangerous words which could make the difference between a lasting friendship, or losing one forever. Craig held Jeremy's gaze. "Maybe we should grab a bite to eat before meeting the guys."

Jeremy nodded, grabbed his things, and led Craig outside. The fresh air helped to dissipate the heat between them and made regular conversation easier. "Do you like Thai food?" Jeremy's voice had returned to its normal cheerful tone.

"Yeah, I love it."

"Cool. Let's go eat at Thai on Two. They have the best curry puffs I've ever eaten and I haven't been there in ages." They walked the few blocks to the restaurant and sat down in the nearly empty dining room.

Craig looked around. "The place is kind of empty. How does it stay in business?"

Jeremy sighed. "No idea. So many of my favorite spots have closed as the gentrification of the East Village has progressed. Whenever I get used to a place, it's forced to close down and something new opens up."

Craig hadn't spent much time in the East Village, so he wasn't familiar with the dramatic changes. The West Village was well established and hadn't changed much at all since he lived there. He knew the East Village had once been a slightly dangerous place, but as wealthy businesses bought property and developers upgraded the area, the diversity of the neighborhood had been significantly impacted. "I never paid much attention to the changes. What a bummer people and restaurants are getting pushed out."

Jeremy sighed. "I know. This place used to be teaming with diversity. It's what I loved so much about living here. It's still one of the most diverse places in the city, but people are getting pushed north or out to the boroughs. Have you noticed how One-Hundred Sixteenth Street has become completely upscale? Ten years ago it was dangerous. Now, people are getting pushed even further north. Before long, no one except the wealthy will be able to afford to live anywhere in Manhattan. So much for this being the original melting pot."

Jeremy's passion for the subject surprised Craig. As he imagined people being forced out of their homes due to inflation, increasing rent, and the abolishment of rent control, he realized what Jeremy said was true. "You're a tree hugger, aren't you?"

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Craig clarified, realizing his comment might be taken as a criticism. "I didn't mean that as a bad thing. I use the term for anyone who cares about those less fortunate than themselves. You teach. You care about people being pushed out of their homes; refreshing in a city where everyone is so cutthroat."

Jeremy smiled. "Oh. Yes. I'm definitely a tree hugger."

Craig let out a breath, relieved Jeremy was not offended. When their meal arrived, they continued talking. Craig was surprised when he checked his watch and realized two hours had passed. "Shit, we're going to be late." He waved for the waiter. They split the cost and headed out to the bus stop across the street. Twenty minutes later, they got off near Wall Street and headed to the bar where they were meeting Robert and Andrew.

Robert and Andrew were already at a table and had their drinks. Craig turned to Jeremy. "What are you drinking?"

"I'll have an Orange-Stoli Madras."

Craig's eyes widened. "Oh, that sounds good, especially on a hot day like today. I think I'll get one of those too." Craig walked over to the bar and ordered their drinks and returned to the table where Robert, Andrew, and Jeremy sat. Placing Jeremy's drink in front of him, he took the seat next to him. "Hey guys. Sorry we were late. We ate at this Thai place and lost track of time."

Robert waved his hand. "No worries. Andrew and I were talking shop. You would have been bored." He raised his glass. "To...uh...to..."

Craig shook his head. "To old friendships and new ones." Everyone raised their glasses and clinked over the middle of the table, before taking sips. Craig watched Jeremy and Andrew as they clinked their glasses. They hadn't made eye contact and a tension seemed to hover between them. Given their kiss back at Jeremy's school, a flash of hope surged within him. They seemed like the model of happiness and Jeremy hadn't mentioned anything about problems, but by reading between the lines—*stop. This is how problems begin.*

"We actually have news for the two of you." Andrew leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, and leaning his head on his hands. "There's a conference in DC this weekend and our companies are sending the two of us. We leave on Friday and come back on Sunday. We thought sharing a room would make sense, but wanted to check with the two of you first." Craig noticed that Andrew's tone was curt and that he had leveled a steady glare at Jeremy.

Jeremy looked up, obvious tension in his voice when he responded. "Of course. Why would we mind?"

"No reason. I thought I should check with you before making any big *decisions* that impact the two of us." He sat back without breaking eye contact, as if he were challenging Jeremy with his stare.

Jeremy's shoulders stiffened. The movement would have been imperceptible if Craig hadn't been watching. "I think that sounds like a *great* idea."

Robert finished his drink in one large gulp, seemingly oblivious to the entire exchange. "I'm getting a second round. You need a refill, Andrew?" Andrew swished what remained of the contents of his glass and downed it.

Robert got up and the three of them sat in awkward silence until he returned with two new drinks a few minutes later. Craig watched as Andrew and Jeremy shot glances back and forth, as if they were engaged in some sort of a silent argument.

They spent another couple hours drinking and making small talk. Conversation was pleasant enough, but rather two sided; Robert and Andrew engrossed in discussions of the market and their trip, Jeremy and Craig talking about things they would do over the weekend. It was a challenge, but he managed to keep the thoughts of what their weekend might entail to himself. They had already proven twice that they couldn't keep their hands off each other when they were alone.

Eventually, they finished their drinks and headed out.

* * * * *

On Friday morning, Andrew got up especially early to make sure he had everything ready. Jeremy followed him around the apartment like a dog waiting to be fed, following his every move. The week had been tense between them after their minor altercation on Tuesday night in front of Craig and Robert. Whatever problems they had, they always managed to keep them private. The fact that their problems were escalating was becoming harder to ignore.

This weekend apart seemed to come at just the right time. They needed time to cool off and Jeremy needed time to think. *Actually, I need time not to think.* Spending the evening with Craig would be just the kind of evening he needed. The same comfort he had felt as a kid had returned now that Craig was back in his life and he couldn't wait for Andrew to leave so he could begin his weekend.

"Don't forget to pack your casual dress pants. You'll need them for the evening events."

"I *did* pack them." Andrew rifled through his suitcase to prove that he had only to find jeans, underwear, socks and t-shirts. When he turned to face Jeremy, he was holding them. "Thanks." He grabbed the pants and shoved them into his suitcase.

Jeremy huffed, a short grunt of a laugh, and turned to leave the room. "I'll make some coffee for you."

Andrew sat down on the edge of the bed and dropped his head into his hands. Things had gone from bad to worse in a matter of days. What had once been the best

relationship in his life had turned into the blackest hole. His home had become the one place where he felt the most judged, the least comfortable. Walking into the bathroom, he checked to make sure he had all of his toiletries, then returned to his bag, zipped it up, and carried it into the living room.

The scent of coffee wafted through the room, a pleasant smell to go along with a beautiful view. The only thing missing was the loving man to round out his *perfect* life. Jeremy walked over to him, travel mug steaming. "I made it just how you like it. Black with one sugar." Jeremy's voice and tone had softened. As he handed the mug over to Andrew, he leaned in and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Have a nice trip."

Andrew gave him a quick peck and headed out. Ten minutes later, he sat next to Robert in his convertible and they worked their way west to the Henry Hudson Highway.

The day was clear and warm so Robert had the top down. When Robert spoke, Andrew could tell he was brimming with excitement. "This is going to be an exciting trip, Andrew. The national convention is perfect for networking." When Andrew remained quiet and sullen, Robert glanced at him. "Something wrong?"

Andrew shook his head. "Yeah. No. I don't know."

A concerned expression crossed Robert's face. "Want to talk?"

Andrew started blurting everything on his mind. "Things haven't been great between me and Jeremy. I know you and I talked about this before, but the distance between us is growing. The list of things he doesn't like seems to increase daily; our new place, the fact I'm financially providing for us, redecorating the condo. I'm trying everything I can think of to make him understand I don't care about our financial differences, but he's so damn stubborn. He hates the idea of me supporting him."

"I'm sorry. You said you've been experiencing problems for a while now." Robert's voice was filled with sympathy, something Andrew desperately needed. "I didn't say anything at the bar on Tuesday, but I could sense the tension between the two of you."

"Who could miss it? This has been going on for a couple of years. I've been on his case to do better for himself. I've tried to convince him to switch over to the public schools where he would make more money or to get his administrative license to become a principal or an assistant principal. He won't listen to me. He says he's happy where he is." Andrew fisted his hands in his lap. "I don't get him. I mean, if money is what's bothering him so much, this is the perfect way for him to make more so he can contribute more...not that I'd give a shit if he paid nothing." *Although you know that isn't the truth anymore.* Their problems ran far deeper than money and Andrew wasn't sure anything would be enough to fix the problems between the two of them.

"Why do you think he won't make the move? He seems pretty clear about what's bothering him."

Andrew leaned his head back and allowed it to loll to the side so he was looking at Robert. The way his head was tilted, his Adam's apple stood out, appearing masculine

and delicious. "He says he loves where he works and doesn't want to leave. Do you mind if we don't talk about this?"

Robert smiled. "Sure. No problem. But if you want to talk, I'm all ears. Why don't you tell me more about the two of you? The good stuff I mean."

Andrew's lifted his head. *The good stuff*. Why was the good stuff hard to think of now? It would have been easy a few years ago. He would have jumped at the chance to talk endlessly about Jeremy. Now, the topic drained him. "We met eight years ago, when he moved to New York City. I was a nobody at Fidelity and he had started his job at his school. Neither one of us made much money, but we didn't care. We spent all of our time together, exploring the city, making love, sharing our hopes and dreams."

"Sounds romantic."

"He was everything I had ever hoped for." Andrew smiled thinking back on the earlier days of their relationship, but then his chest seized causing him discomfort. Thinking of happier times only increased his current sense of loss and unhappiness. "We moved in together six months later. I had never been so happy, but then I started to move up at Fidelity. The portfolios I managed flourished, and my supervisors gave me more and more responsibility. My salary increased and I wanted to take in more of what the city had to offer. I was promoted rapidly over the next two years until my salary had tripled and I had my own department to manage."

Robert glanced at him, his smile warm. Andrew smiled back, enjoying the chance to talk to someone who could understand him. The wind caught Robert's hair and caused it to blow carelessly across his forehead, the mirror of his glasses giving him a slightly mysterious appearance. A mystery Andrew wanted to figure out. His high cheekbones carried a hint of pink, sun-kissed, adding just a twinge of color to his otherwise bronzed complexion. "Sound like everything was going perfectly."

Andrew sighed. "I thought so too, up until my last promotion two years ago. I was promoted to portfolio manager and oversaw all the investment bankers underneath me as well as their assistants and interns. I had to work longer hours and I started making lots more money. I didn't have as much time for Jeremy and the number of functions I had to attend increased significantly. At first Jeremy came with me to the functions, but eventually he said he didn't like the impersonal atmosphere and how little attention I was able to give him. I didn't blame him. I mean these *were* business events after all. I had to network; to be seen and to plug my company and department. You understand what I'm saying."

Robert nodded. "I do. Networking is an important part of the job."

Andrew's mood began to rise. The understanding coming from Robert was like a lifejacket. He couldn't remember the last time he was able to talk about work and his responsibilities without being accused of something. Robert knew the pressures he faced and didn't judge him for his upward mobility. If anything, Robert admired him for it. Talking about his problems became easier. "That's when we began to fight. They were small fights at first. I would have to cancel dinner plans and when I got home we

would discuss how he was hurt or disappointed. Eventually, the fights started to get bigger." Andrew started to use his hands to emphasize his points. "I started buying things for the apartment. Big TVs, lots of expensive gadgets, stuff for convenience and luxury. Jeremy complained, saying our home was becoming more and more *my* place instead of *our* place."

Robert shook his head. "I don't think you're wrong for wanting nice things if you can afford them."

Andrew beamed. "That's what I *told* him, but he didn't care. He said I was beginning to care about my money more than spending time with him. He said we were becoming more about what we had than what we had *been*. Does that even make sense?"

"Well, I think so. I mean, Jeremy *is* a teacher. He works in an occupation unconcerned with material wealth. His professional rewards come from the social, emotional, and academic growth of his students; he measures success differently than we do."

He hadn't considered Jeremy's position the way Robert had stated it and felt like an ass. How could he not have taken into account that Jeremy wanted and needed different things in order to feel successful? Despite his guilt, it was Robert's words that resonated. It was the fact he had said that Jeremy measured success differently than *we do*. Those two words hit home more than anything else.

Robert understood him. Andrew imagined coming home from a long day at Fidelity and kicking back to a stiff drink while looking out over Central Park, Robert by his side. They would talk about the market, the trends, how their investments were prospering. They would have a compatibility Jeremy and he could never have.

Andrew had already figured out that he and Jeremy were growing apart. He didn't want them to end up hating each other, but if something didn't change, they would. His thoughts were interrupted by Robert.

"I'm sure the two of you will work things out. You seem to love each other."

Andrew threw his head back against the seat once again. "That's the thing tying me up in knots lately. I *love* him, but things have changed between us over the past couple of years. I don't feel that head-over-heals, heart-goes-pitter-patter sort of love. I mean I get that the novelty of new relationships wears off, but lately I've been wondering if you can grow apart as your lives move in different directions, even if you love someone."

"That's an interesting point. Sometimes people grow apart. That can happen, even if there's no blame to place. But truthfully, if two people are meant for each other, they find ways to work past these kinds of problems."

Andrew dropped his head into his hands. "I think you're right. We've been growing further and further apart, especially since my last promotion a few weeks ago. The salary boost pushed me to buy the condo, but also escalated our problems. The

kicker, the part causing my head to spin, is I would choose to buy the condo again, even though I'm aware of how much the move bothers Jeremy."

Robert smiled sympathetically, understanding pouring out of him. "Tell me. What do *you* want?"

"I want to be able to enjoy the things I can afford. Growing up in western Massachusetts, I didn't have the same things Jeremy had growing up. We didn't live in a big house or go on annual family vacations. We didn't have a summer home and I didn't inherit my father's BMW hand-me-down once I got my license." Andrew stopped himself, realizing how bitter he sounded. The fact that Jeremy had grown up privileged was not the issue. He had known that from the beginning. The fact Jeremy had chosen a life that would never match what he had growing up, that material goods weren't important to him despite his upbringing, had been one of the strongest draws when they first met.

"What I'm trying to say is that I work my ass off all day and I want to be able to benefit from the fruits of all that work. I love the new condo. I love traveling. I love going out to expensive restaurants and ordering ridiculously decadent bottles of wine or champagne. But I want someone to enjoy those things *with* me. I can't enjoy them if I want those things but my partner doesn't." Andrew felt his spirits rise as he listed the things he enjoyed. He also felt better listing things which didn't put Jeremy down. The fact that they wanted different things didn't have anything to do with their history. It had everything to do with their future and how they wanted different things.

"Well, like I said, sometimes people grow apart." Robert put a hand on Andrew's leg. Heat radiated from the spot where his hand lay and travelled to his genitals, causing them to shift in his jeans. "For what it's worth, I totally get where you're coming from. I like being able to enjoy the things I can afford as well. I don't think you should beat yourself up for wanting that."

"But Craig is doing well for himself. I bet he doesn't complain when you want to splurge on him." Andrew's felt his mood go sour once again.

"You may think so, but you're wrong." Andrew's head snapped to face Robert, his mood lifting once again. "Craig is a wonderful man, but he doesn't share my ambition. I think he's a lot like Jeremy, which is no surprise. They *did* grow up together; brought up in the same culture and with the same values. His business does all right, don't get me wrong. They're moderately successful and he's excellent at what he does, but he could do so much better."

Robert shook his head. "Boris offered him a position working for his company. His salary would have significantly increased. He turned him down. I completely understand why. Craig started Spectacular Designs with his friends and is loyal to them, but his loyalty is holding him back. If I'm offered an opportunity to make something more of myself, I grab it. Craig, on the other hand, is content. We have a fundamental difference in how we view our professional lives. Maybe Craig and I seem to be the model of a happy couple, but I don't think we're so different from you and Jeremy."

Andrew glanced at him, shocked by Robert's revelation. Relief filled him knowing that Robert understood what he was experiencing on a level he dared not hope. Robert wasn't happy with Craig either. As he stared at Robert, he saw a man who understood him, not someone else's boyfriend, and the thought confused him. Despite the problems he had with Jeremy, he had never looked at another man beyond surface appreciation of good looks. What he saw in Robert was someone who shared fundamental goals in common with, goals he feared Jeremy would never share with him. "I'm glad I can talk to someone who understands what I'm going through. You love Craig, but if you and Craig want different things for your lives, maybe love isn't enough." It was delivered as a statement, but Andrew held his breath as he waited for Robert's response.

"Maybe you're right, but that doesn't make the problem any easier."

"You're right." Andrew's heart was pounding. His cock had become fully erect and his blood coursed through his veins. He had to work to contain his excitement before speaking once again. "Thanks, Robert. I'm glad we talked about this. Now I can enjoy the weekend."

Robert kept the conversation light for the remainder of the trip. They changed CDs, talking about what music they liked, work, and the workshops they would be attending at the convention. The four hour trip to DC flew by and the next thing Andrew knew, they pulled into the hotel parking lot and were checking into their room.

Once unpacked, Robert led him down to the hotel restaurant. Andrew splurged on dinner, making the evening as enjoyable as possible. He ordered them an expensive bottle of champagne, as Robert continued talking about the market and his work at Goldman. The two of them ordered every appetizer catching their eyes and meals of the best cuts of beef. Once finished, Andrew suggested they continue talking at the bar, opening a tab for them.

By the time they headed back to the room, Andrew was stumbling on his feet, but happier than he could remember feeling in a long time. The evening had encapsulated everything he wanted out of his life. A five-star hotel, sumptuous food, expensive drinks, all without a thought for the money he was spending.

Back in the room, Andrew started undressing, heading into the bathroom to take a shower. Robert said he would call room service and order them another bottle of champagne.

As the hot water pattered against his skin, Andrew closed his eyes, a mixture of guilt and pleasure passing through him. He had betrayed Jeremy on the ride to DC. Not only had he complained about him, sharing intimate details of their problems with Robert, but he had betrayed him mentally as well. His attraction to Robert grew with each passing moment and the feelings excited him more than they alarmed him. At the same time, the thrill of enjoying the evening, the food, drink, and company, with no thought to consequences held a particularly strong allure. Rather than continue to contemplate the situation, he simply concentrated on the alcohol still coursing through his veins and enjoyed the heat of the water penetrating his skin to sooth his tense muscles.

When Andrew came out of the shower, Robert had slipped into a polo shirt and loose fitting jeans. He handed Andrew a glass of champagne. "Here, let's toast. To a fantastic weekend between friends who understand one another."

Andrew clinked his glass against Robert's. Robert's choice of words sent a thrill straight to his groin and he suddenly felt extremely exposed as his cock began to shift once again, the only thing separating his erection from Robert's vision was a thin layer of fabric. "Thanks." He stretched his arms and started to rub his shoulder. "Huh, I must be stiff from sitting all day in the car."

Robert got up. "I give a mean back rub. Do you mind?"

Andrew sat on the couch so his back was turned to Robert. "Not at all."

He sat behind Andrew, wiggling one leg onto the couch along Andrew's body and placing the other on the floor. Andrew became acutely aware the only thing separating Robert's package from his ass were jeans and a towel. Robert rubbed his hands to warm them, before working on Andrew's bare shoulders. He kneaded the tight muscles until the knots began to loosen. Andrew sighed, leaning into the pressure. Robert moved his hands down Andrew's lats, squeezing at the cords of muscle which ran down his sides.

Andrew lifted his glass to his mouth only to find it empty. "Let me refill that for you." Robert leaned to the side to grab the bottle and in doing so, his body pressed against Andrew's back. The contact sent shivers through him and caused his cock to lurch underneath the towel. His glass full, Andrew took a large sip, the bubbles tickling his throat.

Robert slid his hands to Andrew's chest, massaging the large, well-defined pectoral muscles, pulling Andrew back to lean against his chest in the process. Andrew tensed at the touch. "Shh. Relax. I told you I'm good at giving massages." Andrew obeyed.

Continuing his rubbing, Robert pinched Andrew's nipples which sent a shock through him. He drew in a deep breath and leaned back against Robert's chest. He couldn't recall nipple stimulation as a recognized massage technique, but he didn't care. Robert's touch felt too good.

"How's that, Andrew?" Robert's voice was a silky whisper close to his ear.

Andrew pushed up, into Robert's hands. "Good."

A low throaty chuckle answered him. "Enjoy." Slowly, Robert's hands ventured down Andrew's abs, his fingers pressing and rubbing at the planes of his six-pack, then working lower down his body. Again, Andrew tensed, but relaxed without being coaxed this time.

Robert made the final move and lowered his hand to Andrew's cock, reaching beneath the towel and circling his hand around Andrew's shaft. Andrew let out a deep moan as his cock jumped in Robert's grip.

Robert gave a light tug, rotating his hand in a soft motion to create additional friction. Andrew moaned, a breathy oooh escaping his mouth as he tilted his head back and to the side so it rested on Robert's shoulders, their mouths inches apart. Tentatively, he leaned toward Robert until their lips met. Robert's mouth opened to him

without hesitation, his lips soft and smooth, his tongue tasting of champagne. Their mouths locked, tongues dancing against one another.

Andrew felt Robert's pace quicken on his shaft, his fingers slipping across the head of his cock which had become lubricated with generous amounts of precum.

Andrew pulled from the kiss. His initial thought to put a stop to things before they got out of hand. What he said, matched his desires, not his better judgment. "Maybe we should move this to the bed." As soon as the words escaped his mouth, shock and excitement filled his mind. He shouldn't want this, but he did.

Without a word, Robert stood and walked over to the bed, first removing his shirt, then his pants, until he stood before Andrew, naked and erect, an Adonis with bronze skin. "Your turn. I want you to remove that towel and come over here, make a show of it to get me excited."

The commanding words sent a thrill straight to Andrew's groin and he lifted his towel, freeing his cock from the confines of the fabric and stood. He wasn't accustomed to allowing someone else to take control sexually and the change in roles overwhelmed him with lust and arousal. His erection was full and heavy, standing directly in front of him, a thin string of clear liquid dripping from the tip. He reached down, scooped the string with his finger, and placed it in his mouth. The salty tang combined with the sweet taste of champagne.

Robert gasped, then closed the distance between them, grabbing Andrew and pulling him into a kiss. When he pulled his mouth away, it was only long enough to whisper in his ear. "That was so fucking hot." He then locked his mouth on Andrew's neck, licking and nibbling at the skin as he backed Andrew to the bed and lay them down.

They continued kissing and rolling on the bed until Robert pulled back gasping. "I want you to taste my excitement."

Andrew sat up, placing his hands on Robert's broad chest and pushing him down so he lay flat. Crawling down his body, he grasped the base of Robert's cock and lowered his head until the glistening tip of Robert's erection entered his mouth.

The salty flavor of precum filled him and traveled along the length of his palate, triggering his sense of smell. The taste and aroma sent bolts of excitement through him, straight to his groin and his cock began to pulse in time with his rapidly beating heart. As he lifted and lowered his head, swallowing Robert's hard shaft, more and more of his essence filled Andrew's mouth.

Robert's groans increased in volume as he bucked his hips, fucking Andrew's face. Just as Andrew prepared for his reward, he felt Robert's hands cup his armpits and pull him up along his body until they were face to face. He dropped his head to capture Robert's mouth in a hungry kiss, their tongues dueling, exploring and probing until Robert broke the kiss once again and pushed Andrew onto his back. Straddling him, the expression in his eyes was one of pure lust.

Robert slowly kissed his way down Andrew's body, until his hot breath brushed along the length of his shaft. When Robert closed his lips over Andrew's cock, the sudden shock of hot wetness sent fire from his groin to all of his extremities, as if someone had touched an electrical wire to his body. Currents of bliss rushed through him. Robert took Andrew all the way in, slowly lifted his head so only the tip remained in his mouth, then lowered back down again. Steady, slow motions maintained a slick friction over his skin, eliciting more and more precum from him. The tickle of the fluid travelling up his length before escaping through the opening at the tip, caused his muscles to quiver, the ring of his anus, spasming.

As his pleasure increased, Andrew placed a hand on Robert's head, forcing his mouth to separate from the expert sucking. "I'm getting too close. I want you to fuck me."

A wicked grin crossed over Robert's face. "Your wish...I have condoms in my bag." Robert got up and walked over to Andrew's bag, his cock bouncing with each step. After retrieving a condom and a bottle of lube, he returned to the bed. Andrew pulled his knees to his chest, exposing himself to Robert. And was rewarded by the cold sensation of fingers slicked with lube probing at his opening, gently pressing into him, working his tight ring open.

Before long, Robert was finger-fucking him, two digits pushing in and out of him easily. "Enough. Fuck me."

Robert smiled once again, placing the corner of the wrapper in his mouth and tearing it, spitting the bit of the wrapping across the room. He then sheathed his cock and guided it to Andrew's entrance.

As the head of Robert's erection pressed against Andrew's opening, he pulled in a deep breath, the burn cutting through the champagne induced haze. "Do you want me to go slow?"

Andrew hissed his response. "No. Fuck me."

Robert pressed forward, spearing Andrew. The stretch created a burning sensation as he accommodated Robert's shaft. Lights danced in the corners of his eyes. It had been years since anyone had fucked him. He always topped Jeremy. Giving himself over to someone else, forcing himself to submit, to open and expose himself, touched at a side of him he had buried. For a moment, he wondered why he didn't feel comfortable allowing this level of intimacy and vulnerability with Jeremy, but quickly pushed the thought aside, not wanting anything to spoil this moment for him. Control had become part of his routine; control at work and control at home. He needed to break it if he wanted to move forward with his life. And maybe Robert was the person to move forward with.

Reaching down, he gripped Robert's ass and pulled him in, urging his pace to quicken. Robert responded automatically, pounding harder and faster. Each thrust rubbing against Andrew's prostate, the center of his erogenous core. A tingling

sensation took hold deep inside, replacing the burn with utterly blissful pleasure. He closed his eyes and succumbed completely to the onslaught.

Each thrust increased the quivering of dormant muscles. Sweat dripped off Robert's face and from his hair, splashing against Andrew's chest, mixing with the sheen of perspiration coating his entire body. In an explosion, they both erupted, screaming in release, Robert buried to the hilt deep inside Andrew and Andrew's seed shooting out of him onto his chest and stomach.

They remained connected in that position until the waves of pleasure subsided and their breathing returned to normal, then Robert pulled out of Andrew, carefully removed the condom, and dropped it into the waste can next to the bed.

Flipping off the light, Robert snuggled close to Andrew, wrapping his arms around him so Andrew's back pressed against Robert's chest. For a brief moment, Andrew thought of Jeremy and the betrayal he had just committed, but pushed the thought out of his mind, refusing to allow anything to spoil the first evening in years he felt truly happy. Snuggling back into Robert's embrace, Andrew closed his eyes, unaware of the moment he fell asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Craig didn't go into work on Friday, telling Janet he wanted to see Robert off. The truth was he and Jeremy had plans to spend the evening together and he wanted time to prepare. Once Robert left, he hustled out to purchase wine, the ingredients for the pot roast, baked potatoes, and sautéed asparagus. He then picked up flowers to decorate the apartment. He wanted to make sure that every aspect of the evening would be perfect. Passing by a Newbury Comics store, he dashed in and picked up Squeeze's Greatest Hits, it had been his and Jeremy's favorite group. He didn't care that the last two times they had been alone together, they had taken things to a place where no two people in relationships should go. They were adults and could handle themselves. Still, as the hours ticked by, his nervousness increased exponentially.

Jeremy showed up at seven o'clock, a couple of bottles of wine in hand. He smiled as Craig stepped aside, his masculine scent flowing into Craig as he passed. The smell of cooking beef filled the apartment with a hint of the asparagus, which he had simmering on the stovetop. "Wow! This reminds me of your house on a winter night."

Craig took the bottles of wine and set them on the kitchen counter. He took Jeremy's coat for him, allowing his fingers to graze along the skin of Jeremy's neck. A short gasp escaped his lips as he took in Jeremy's outfit. He wore a black form-fitting, cotton and spandex mix, long-sleeve shirt which hugged his narrow frame. His loose-fitting jeans accentuated his lean torso as well as his slim hips, the round of his ass pushing at the fabric in the back.

He had made sure his appearance would capture Jeremy's attention as well. Choosing to wear a collared polo short-sleeve shirt a size too small, revealing his muscular frame; the planes of his pecs dotted with a hint of nipple pressing at the fabric, narrow Levi jeans highlighted his ass and package as well as his strong thighs. He had even sprayed himself with Acqua Di Gio since Jeremy's reaction had been so enthusiastic.

After hanging the coat on a hook in the hallway, he turned to Jeremy who caught him caught in a tight embrace. The sudden contact sent a thrill through Craig and his arousal kicked into gear, sending blood to all the right places. *Thank God my pants are tight or else Mr. Happy would be poking into Jeremy right now.* They stood in the middle of the hallway, holding each other for a minute or two, before Jeremy pulled back, sniffing audibly. "You're wearing that cologne again, aren't you?"

Yes! "I threw on some Acqua Di Gio. You mentioned you liked the scent."

Jeremy released him, a furtive smile crossing his face. "So you put the cologne on for me?"

Heat raced to Craig's neck and cheeks. He hadn't anticipated Jeremy turning his own move against him. "Um, I guess, er, no?"

Jeremy burst out laughing. "Convincing!"

With the meal ready and a bottle of wine opened, they sat down to eat. "I can't get over how much your cooking brings me back home. It's like we're sitting in your kitchen like old times, eating until we burst." Jeremy had a dreamy look on his face as he cut a small piece off his roast and popped the meat into his mouth. "My God. This is better than I remember."

Craig grabbed his fork and dug in as well. "Mom sure has an awesome arsenal of meals. I'm glad I spent so much time learning how to cook before I moved out." Food muffled his speech causing Jeremy to laugh.

"I see your balance isn't the only trait you kept. Your manners are as atrocious as ever. How are your parents anyways? We haven't talked much about them over the past few weeks."

Craig's parents kept tabs, but didn't become overly involved, striking the perfect balance between checking in and giving him space. They had been accepting when he came out to them, making an effort to remain involved in his life, inviting boyfriends to dinner, and asking about them when they called. Craig could tell his mother never warmed up to Robert even though she never showed her displeasure. His mother had a way of cutting through the bullshit no matter what fronts others put on to impress her. "They're great. Dad says he's got about five years of work left in him before he and mom are going to take more time off in the winter to go south."

Jeremy smiled. "I bet your mom can't wait."

Craig cut off another bite of meat and placed it into his mouth. "Well, she keeps herself busy. She reads to kids at the library and volunteers in the schools while Dad is wrapped up in his dentistry business."

"Sounds like they're good as ever." Jeremy speared a stalk of asparagus and placed it idly in his mouth.

Craig followed the motion, admiring the plump lips as they closed over the fork, fueling his desire to jump across the table and nibble on them. He shook the image from his mind. "The only thing about Mom being retired and dad still working is she has way too much time on her hands and checks in on me much more frequently."

"Speaking of checking in, does she give you any shit about smoking? I mean, your dad made sure you had the straightest, most perfect teeth in all of Newton and now you're ruining your smile by staining your teeth yellow. It's quite a disgusting habit." Jeremy made a face, exaggerating his distaste.

"Thanks, Mom." Craig rolled his eyes. "Actually, I haven't had a cigarette in a week. I'm about to turn thirty and get winded walking home. Something doesn't sit right with me to be this young and to lose my breath by walking."

Jeremy nodded his approval. "Well, good luck. I hear after three days the nicotine leaves your system. After that, you're battling a mental addiction, not a physical one. The whole hand-to-mouth thing." A smirk crawled across Jeremy's face and he chuckled to himself.

"What? You can't laugh and not tell me what's so funny."

Jeremy shook his head. "What I said, the hand-to-mouth comment. I wonder why gay men smoke in the first place. We seem to do fine in the whole oral fixation department."

Craig choked on the food in his mouth. Jeremy jumped up and started pounding him on the back. A large chunk of beef came back up and landed with a *thunk* on the table in front of him. "Jesus, Jeremy, let me finish chewing before you make me laugh. But you're right. If smoking is partially an oral addiction, we should be a demographic that smokes less." Craig grabbed a napkin, scooped up the chewed up piece of food, and walked into the kitchen to throw it away.

He returned to find Jeremy laughing harder than before. "Smooth. A real turn on."

Craig flushed. "Shut up. It's your fault."

"Sure, blame the flying food on me." Jeremy smiled, and continued eating.

"Dad says if I'm still not smoking by summer, he'll give me a free teeth whitening." Craig smiled, purposely ensuring he covered his teeth with chewed up asparagus.

"Lovely. You're a real charmer when you want to be." Jeremy smiled at him, a simmering heat beginning to burn within his eyes. "I'm glad you still have your goofy, immature way of doing stupid things for laughs."

Becoming slightly more serious, Craig turned to Jeremy. "How about your parents? How are they doing?"

Jeremy glanced down at the table, the smile vanishing, before lifted his gaze to meet Craig's. "Mom's doing well. She hasn't dated much since she and dad split up. I get worried about her sometimes. Grandma passed away five years ago and I tried to get her to move here, but she seems settled where she is and doesn't want to pick up her life and move again."

Craig saw a twinge of sadness in Jeremy's eyes. "And your dad?"

"Dad's good too. He moved back to Boston and remarried a few years after they split. He waited until I went to college before moving so things would remain stable for me. Neither of my parents wanted me to shuttle across the country while I still lived at home. His wife, Marsha, is a nice lady. I'm happy for him." Craig could tell he meant what he had said.

They continued eating for a few minutes in silence, drinking their wine and enjoying the meal. Finally, Jeremy broke the silence. "So, Robert seems like a stand-up guy."

Craig's insides jumped at the sudden turn in conversation. *What does he want to talk about Robert for?* "Yeah. He tends to make a good impression on people."

"Tell me about him." Jeremy's request was delivered pleasantly enough, but the way he stared at Craig made him wonder how casual his interest really was.

"We met when I first moved to the West Village, I went to The Monster. We met and connected, like when you see someone across a room and think *he's cute* and later, you manage to talk to him and find out he thinks you're cute too. We talked the whole

night and I liked him a lot. I didn't even let him sleep with me at the end of the evening."

Jeremy cocked his head. "I don't follow. You liked him so much so you *didn't* let him take you home?"

"Well, if I did, Robert would have been like every other one night stand. How many times has a hook-up with a guy on the first night turned into a relationship for *you*?"

Jeremy nodded. "Point taken."

"Anyway, we went on several dates. He was starting out at Goldman Sachs and believed in his work...had a real passion for investment banking. I became excited listening to him talk about his work. I didn't understand one damn thing he said, but his passion was a turn-on. Know what I mean?"

Jeremy's eyes glazed over. "Yeah. I know exactly what you mean."

"After about four dates, I finally invited him over to cook for him." Craig smiled remembering the evening. "I made him *this* meal actually. We had a wonderful evening. I dimmed the lights, set candles all around, played romantic music." *Music, Shit!* Craig jumped up, ran to the stereo and pressed play, then returned to the table. The sounds of Squeeze filled the room. "Sorry 'bout that."

Jeremy's mouth pulled at the sides, pressed tightly together, as if he had to fight to hold something in, then he burst out laughing. "You, my friend, are a total goof!" Jeremy continued laughing and Craig couldn't help but join him. Before long, the two of them were clutching at their sides.

Jeremy's laughter died down, a smile still plastered across his face, but something in his expression seemed a little sad. "You sound like you're happy with Robert."

Craig stared down at his plate. "I used to be." He couldn't believe the admission came out of his mouth.

Jeremy's head snapped up. "What?"

Craig blushed. He never talked badly about Robert, no matter what he thought. "Uh, well, you know how things are. After a while, you run into road bumps and need to work through them." *I hope I sound convincing to him, 'cause I'm not fooling myself for a minute.*

Jeremy studied Craig as if he were under a microscope. Crossing his arms, he leveled his gaze to settle on him. "You're not fooling me for one second. Spill."

Defeated, Craig slumped his shoulders and finished his glass of wine. "Well, if I'm going to tell this story, I think I need a refill." Jeremy grabbed the bottle and refilled both of their glasses and Craig recounted the past few years of his relationship with Robert; the promotions, his shift from valuing people to valuing money, the fact the sex had begun to seem mechanical – absent of love.

Jeremy took his hand. "I'm so sorry, Craig."

Craig sighed. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't want anyone's pity. I'm the one who is in this and I'm the one who is *staying* in this." He shook his head. "Until I do something about it, I can only be upset with *myself*."

Jeremy glanced down at their joined hands, then back at Craig. "I don't pity you. I'm sorry you're experiencing this." His voice remained soft and understanding.

"The worst part of the whole thing...I know he's not good for me. I've never been someone to sit by and let bad things happen. Up until recently, we still had amazing sex, but now he doesn't seem to care about anything but his own needs. He gets himself off and doesn't worry about my needs."

The shocked expression on Jeremy's face caused Craig to laugh. He couldn't decide if Jeremy was horrified or embarrassed by the last bit of information.

Jeremy squinted and shook his head, as if he were trying to clear his brain of the image Craig had planted there. "Why do you stay with him?"

Craig removed his hand from Jeremy's. "Honestly, I have no idea. I think because I'm comfortable and to upheave my life right now seems like a headache I don't want to deal with."

Jeremy slid his chair closer to Craig and put his arm around his shoulders. "Listen to me. We haven't been in touch until recently, but we were best friends for a long time and we have reconnected like no time has passed." He stopped talking. Craig turned to face him and he continued. "You are way too good, worth way too much, to tolerate this. You deserve someone who will love you with a fierce passion." He tightened his grip around Craig's shoulder. "I barely met Robert, but I hate him from what you've told me."

Craig smiled, but lowered his gaze. "I haven't been fair to him. He's not here to defend himself and you are only hearing my side of the story. I'm sure he has his side as well."

Jeremy's voice shifted to a shout. "I don't give a *fuck* about his side of the story." Craig stared up, frightened by Jeremy's outburst. Jeremy blushed. "I'm sorry. All I'm saying is no reason is good enough to treat someone like they don't exist. You don't deserve to be treated like an object. He's made you forget who you are. The way you're talking right now is unrecognizable from the Craig I grew up with."

As much as Craig didn't want to hear what Jeremy was saying, he couldn't deny the effect Jeremy's validation had on him. Despite the years between their childhood and now, Jeremy understood Craig better than anyone else. He placed a hand on Jeremy's arm and stared at him, his heart filled with affection and longing. It took all of his self-control not to hug Jeremy close and never let him go. "Thanks Jeremy. I appreciate hearing someone remind me I deserve more." *What I really mean is it makes me hard when you get protective like this.*

Jeremy filled their glasses again and took their dishes to the kitchen. Craig got up and followed him. "So, tell me about how things are with you and Andrew."

Jeremy stiffened slightly. "We met eight years ago. I had begun teaching and lived in the East Village. One night I went to Phoenix on Thirteenth Street and he was playing pool. I decided to put my name on the board and we ended up playing together. We made fun of each other and conversation came easily. As the evening progressed we had drink after drink and our attraction grew."

The two of them returned to the living room after the dishes had been cleaned, and sat on the couch. They had finished their first bottle of wine so Craig opened a new one. "We dated for the next few weeks and, like you and Robert, we found we were very compatible."

Jeremy took another sip of his wine. "He believes his work is helping people. I admire that he hasn't lost his love for his job." Craig watched as Jeremy's brow furrowed and his lips pulled together in a tight line. He remained silent and thoughtful for a few moments. When he spoke, his comment did not match his troubled appearance. "He's a good man."

Craig leaned back on the couch, his head sinking just a bit lower in his chest. "I'm happy for you. You deserve someone who loves you and appreciates all you give."

Jeremy leaned back on the couch as well, still looking troubled. "Don't be too happy for me. Things aren't going well for us lately. We've got a lot of problems and I'm not sure they'll go away. The problems are different than they are with you and Robert. We don't want the same things anymore and for the past couple of years, I feel like I've been the one doing all of the bending. He doesn't seem to understand that each time he pushes for what he wants, I have to chip away at myself, losing a piece of who I am, to give in to his needs at the expense of my own. He's the reason we moved to midtown. I didn't want to."

Jeremy clenched his hands on his jeans and Craig reached over, taking Jeremy's hands in his own. Jeremy relaxed and continued. "He's wanted me to talk to you for the past couple of weeks about remodeling the condo, but I keep making excuses because he'll be spending more money I can't afford. It's not the money specifically that is creating our problems, but it has been at the center of them. He wants things I don't and I can't see him compromising. In the end, he gets what he wants and I give in."

Craig nodded. "I wondered why you hadn't brought up the remodeling. I figured I would wait until you broached the topic."

"The biggest problem is I don't think he respects what I do." Craig's head snapped up to face Jeremy. His shock must have been evident because Jeremy simply nodded.

Craig allowed the information to sink in. As he did, a sense of protectiveness filled him. "You aren't the kind of person who gives in without a fight. You never were."

"I know. I've been remembering that ever since we reconnected at Boris's party. Things always happen for a reason. Maybe we're both struggling to remember who we are since our partners are trying to convince us to be something different."

Craig stood up and walked over to the stereo, ejecting the Squeeze CD and replacing it with Third Eye Blind. "Come here. Dance with me."

Jeremy glanced up and laughed. "What? Who's the topic shifter now?"

"Shut up and dance with me."

The smile never left Jeremy's face as he got up and walked over to Craig, a little wobbly on his feet. "Whoa. I think I'm past tipsy."

Craig smirked. "I'd hope so after we polished off a bottle and a half between the two of us." Jeremy walked over to him and Craig took his hand, wrapping his other around Jeremy's waist and beginning to dance to *Bittersweet Symphony*.

Jeremy circled his arms around Craig's neck, leaning in and resting his head against his broad shoulder. Their bodies swayed together as the hypnotic sound of the music filled the room. "Your cologne smells so good."

Their contact sent a tingle up Craig's spine. He linked his arms around Jeremy's waist, and hugged him close. They swayed, grinding their hips together. The combination of contact with Jeremy, the wine, and his own desires caused Craig's cock to fill out and lengthen, straining in his pants. He grabbed Jeremy's waist tighter, pulling closer, allowing their shafts to create friction as they rubbed together.

Jeremy's warm breath against his neck caused the hairs to prickle and stand on end. Craig ran his fingers up and down Jeremy's back in a gentle motion, brushing the muscles as they undulated under his shirt. He loved how Jeremy's frame molded within his embrace, wanting to hold him forever if Jeremy would let him.

Jeremy lifted his head from Craig's shoulder, his eyes glimmering in the dim lighting of the room, the amber seeming to flare as if a fire lit them from within. He parted his lips and Craig thought he might say something, but Jeremy closed his mouth over Craig's brushing his tongue against Craig's lips.

Craig opened to him and their mouths sealed together in a languid kiss. Jeremy ran his tongue along Craig's teeth, slicking across the surface, a hint of red wine in his mouth. Time and motion seemed to slow as the two moved; hands exploring bodies, lips locked together, erections pressing against each other. Jeremy reached between their bodies and cupped his hand over Craig's groin, rubbing gently along his hard length. Craig's mouth pulled away at the contact, gasping for breath, shock and pleasure filling him. "Jeremy, we—"

His words cut off once again as Jeremy pressed their mouths together, this time gripping Craig's hair and pulling them into an intense kiss.

Jeremy reached down and pulled Craig's shirt free from the waist of his jeans and started removing it. The shirt caught around Craig's pecs forcing Jeremy to pull out of the kiss. His eyes hazed with lust as he whispered one command. "Take off your shirt." He then lowered his head and took Craig's nipple in his mouth, laving at the sensitive skin. Craig obeyed, pulling his shirt up and over his head and tossing it to the side.

They slowly moved together, sidling towards the couch, and fell onto the cushions in a heap. Jeremy grabbed at his cock, maintaining the connection of their mouths, the heat and intensity flaring. Craig's blood rushed in his ears, causing a drumming sound with each heartbeat. He reached down and grabbed Jeremy's ass, pulling him in,

rotating his hips so their cocks pressed together through their pants, and ripping a gasp from Jeremy.

When Jeremy lifted his head, Craig thought he might bring their mistake to a screeching halt. Instead, Jeremy worked his way down Craig's bare torso, nibbling at the taught nubs on each pectoral plane, tracing the contours of his abdomen, allowing his nose to trail down the center. Hot breath blew against the fuzz at his navel as Jeremy's fingers gripped his belt, loosening the buckle and unbuttoning his jeans. Before he could utter a word, Jeremy had slid his pants and boxer briefs over his butt, allowing Craig's cock to spring up like a tower.

Craig lost his ability to breathe as Jeremy licked his lips, his gaze fixed on his prize. With a gentle flick of tongue, Jeremy tickled the underside of Craig's mast, just under the crown of his cock. The already glistening tip shone with the added moisture of saliva and left Craig helpless to do anything but throw his head back and enjoy.

The heat as Jeremy's mouth closed over his head and worked its way down the shaft, caused his cock to pulse inside Jeremy's mouth as a sheen of sweat broke out over his body. Craig lifted his head when he heard a zipper being opened, and watched Jeremy reach into his own pants to remove his penis, thick and straining, shimmering with wetness at the tip. *Holy shit! He's not wearing underwear. How hot is that?*

The combination of Jeremy's slick mouth, the glistening strings of precum hanging from the tip of Jeremy's cock as he beat himself, and the fact Jeremy was the one giving him such pleasure, filled Craig with an emotion he had forgotten; one he hadn't experienced in longer than he cared to remember—love. Somehow he could sense Jeremy's only desire was to please him, and that *he* gained pleasure in the process.

Hot tears formed in Craig's eyes and spilled down his temples as he let go of any lingering resistance. Whether the tears came from guilt about cheating or bliss from sharing a moment with the man he loved, the tears cleansed him. Once they began to flow, they wouldn't stop...he didn't want them to.

In a matter of minutes, his body tingled with agonizing ecstasy, each nerve sending electrical shockwaves through his body. Guttural moans reached his ears, but he had no idea whether they came from himself or from Jeremy. He didn't care. When his testicles pulled up close to his body, his release moments away, he gripped Jeremy's shoulder and forced a strained phrase out of his mouth. "I'm gonna come."

The tension continued to build, blinding lights flashing behind his tightly closed lids, as his entire body began to shudder and tremble. His cock lurched inside Jeremy's mouth, shooting jet after jet of hot cum down his throat. The waves of pleasure kept washing over him for what seemed like minutes; certainly far longer than he had experienced ...ever!

When the frenzy dulled to a minor roar, Craig managed to lift his head and glance down at Jeremy, whose mouth remained clamped on his cock, milking the remaining sperm from his shaft, his hand coated with his own cum.

After another minute, Jeremy released Craig's cock from his mouth and worked his way back up his body, sealing their mouths together once again, the taste of his semen filling his mouth as their tongues tumbled against one another.

For quite some time, they lay together, panting, kissing, caressing, until Craig's muscles stopped trembling from the exertion and excitement of their encounter. Slowly, he moved, nudging Jeremy and working himself into a sitting position.

Jeremy sat up as well, fumbling with his pants. "I'm sorry. We shouldn't have done that."

Craig stared at him. "We shouldn't have, but we did."

They stared at each other, an uncomfortable silence falling between them, as Craig pulled up his pants. Jeremy's voice was timid when he spoke. "We shouldn't have —"

"I know. I know." Craig shook his head, still trying to clear the lingering fuzziness.

Jeremy stood up. "Maybe we should call it a night."

Craig began to protest, but stopped himself. "Okay. Can I at least call you a cab?"

Jeremy nodded and excused himself to go to the bathroom. When he returned, he seemed more composed. "Listen, neither of us planned for this to happen, but it did. We can't seem to control ourselves when we're together."

Craig nodded. "I know. But I want you Jeremy. I'm not going to hide it anymore. Not after tonight. I'm not happy with Robert. You're not happy with Andrew. Neither of us wants to cheat while in relationships. So what should we do?"

"I know what you're suggesting, Craig. I've thought about it countless times over the past few weeks. For years after I moved I was devastated at having lost you. And now, here you are. I want you so bad it hurts when I'm not with you, but what we're doing is wrong."

Jeremy grabbed his jacket from the hook in the hallway. "I'm going to head out. We need to think about this. This affects more than just you and me. We both need to decide what the *right* thing to do is." He walked toward the door. "I'll call you tomorrow after I sleep this off."

Craig nodded again. "Sure." He opened the door for Jeremy and watched as he walked down the hall and disappeared down the stairs.

Closing the door, Craig pressed his back against it and let out a huge breath of air. He wanted to run after Jeremy and tell him to come back. He wanted to kiss him again, and again, and again, but Jeremy had been right, cheating never solved problems. If something was going to happen between the two of them, they had to break things off with their boyfriends first.

He was with Robert and even though things were bad between the two of them, he wouldn't become someone who started breaking his own moral code simply because it was easier. "It's time. I need to tell Robert about this and break things off. Whether Jeremy and I have a future, Robert is definitely no longer going to be a part of mine." He realized he was speaking aloud and didn't care. He had made up his mind and

knew what he needed to do...a piece of the Craig he had been while growing up returned to him.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, Andrew woke up, his head pounding. A faint breeze brushed against the back of his neck. He rolled over to face Robert lying next to him, his arm draped over Andrew's side.

All at once, the evening flooded back to him. The champagne, the massage...and the sex. *Fuck. I can't believe I cheated on Jeremy. I'm such an asshole.*

He slipped out of bed and went into the bathroom closing the door quietly. Facing himself in the mirror, a sudden wave of nausea filled him. He rushed to the toilet and vomited acidic bile with a lingering taste of champagne. Brushing his teeth and splashing cold water over his face helped to revive him.

Gripping the counter, he stared at himself. *I need to face him. It may be what I wanted, but it was still wrong.*

He walked back into the bedroom to find Robert sitting up in bed. "You okay?"

Andrew ignored the question. "Why did you fuck me last night?"

A confused expression settled on Robert's face. "Because you wanted me to."

"I *know* I wanted you to, but I'm with Jeremy. You're with Craig."

"Come on. You're not happy and neither am I. When you begged for me to fuck you, it wasn't just about the sex. You want *me*. You know I'm better for you than that teacher-boyfriend of yours."

Andrew shook his head, not bothering to deny the truth of Robert's words. He *had* wanted Robert. "Maybe I *am* questioning things with Jeremy, but we're both in relationships. What we did was wrong."

Robert raised an eyebrow. "Why? Because we cheated? Why shouldn't we give in to our desires? We're a perfect match."

"What? No." He swayed again and Robert stepped forward, wrapping an arm around Andrew's waist.

Andrew pushed Robert away, stumbling backwards and falling onto the bed. Quickly getting back to his feet, he pointed at Robert. "Cut it out. I don't want this or *you*."

Robert's next comment sounded angry, his words spitting out of him. "Maybe you don't *think* you want this...or *me*, but you really *do*. We're perfect for each other. Look at us. We're handsome, successful, wealthy, and motivated. We both have partners who are going nowhere. Why shouldn't we have everything we want? Can you imagine what a couple we would be? We would be powerful. We would have enough money to buy anything. Think about what we could achieve together."

"You think we would be a great couple because of how much *money* we make? You think we would be powerful because we're both motivated and successful? You're a fucking dick."

Robert took a menacing step forward, but Andrew squared his shoulders and Robert backed away, fear in his eyes, the recognition that he would lose in a physical match. "It's not only the money, Andrew. We'd be able to do all of the things we can't do right now because our partners don't want the same things. All the things you said you want to be able to do without feeling guilty."

Andrew stepped backwards, groping for his pants. "You're unbelievable. Tell me something. Are you interested in me because of who I am or because of how much I make and what I do?"

Robert shrugged. "What's the difference between the two? You *are* what you do and how much you make."

"Oh my God. I have to get out of here." He buttoned his pants, slipped his feet into his shoes, and threw on a shirt. "I'm going to book another room."

Andrew left and headed towards the elevators, his head reeling from how stupid he had been. He had allowed himself to become entranced by Robert's charm. He had listened to Robert in the car and during dinner and believed Robert actually cared about him; understood him. Realizing Robert only saw him as another conquest or trophy caused his stomach to churn.

Despite all their differences and fights, Jeremy loved him for who he was. Even if they were drifting apart, Jeremy never treated him like he was an object. He wasn't a cheater. The weight of his actions crushed down on him.

Maybe he and Jeremy weren't meant to be together, but Jeremy didn't deserve what he had done. Last night had been about escape and, in his desire to taste a life free from restriction, he had betrayed a person who deserved better. Guilt racked him, wrenching at his heart and causing his head to ache even more than his hangover. When he got home, he would admit what he did and make an effort to be what Jeremy deserved. This had been a line that should not have been crossed. Sacrificing his own desires seemed small compared to his betrayal of Jeremy's love. Somehow, he would make things right between them.

Even as he made the promise to himself, he felt the weight press just a bit harder down on him and his chest constricted making breathing much more difficult. His decision, his certainty, felt more like a sentence than a relief.

* * * * *

Andrew arrived home earlier than he'd expected to on Sunday. He had changed rooms Saturday and opted to take a train home. He talked to Jeremy several times over the weekend, but had decided not to tell him what had happened until he got home. That was a conversation which needed to happen face-to-face.

Having spent a good deal of time figuring out why he would allow himself to sleep with Robert and, more importantly, reflecting on the way he had been treating Jeremy, he found himself emotionally drained by the time he arrived at Penn Station.

Money may have been a catalyst, but it wasn't the root of their problems. Andrew had lost sight of Jeremy at some point along the way, focusing on his behaviors rather than the reasons behind them. He never would have been so careless or self-centered earlier in their relationship and the fact he had become disengaged shattered him. It ran completely contrary to how he viewed himself as a person and as a boyfriend.

He was also surprised at how much he had enjoyed taking the submissive role. With Jeremy, he had always been dominant, the top. But the thrill of allowing someone to top him, as sick as he was that Robert had been that person, had been a revelation. He couldn't imagine Jeremy topping him and making him feel the same way. Jeremy simply didn't have a commanding enough personality to make Andrew feel submissive. But he couldn't deny that he enjoyed it.

Why did it have to take me fucking someone else to figure that out? Each time he recalled the sex with Robert, his stomach churned. Robert embodied a heartless shell of a human being. Someone so caught up in corporate life and money that he had completely lost touch with what really mattered—people, relationships, integrity. What sickened him was how close he had come to falling into the same trap.

But in escaping one trap, he found himself caught in a new one. He had committed himself to making things work with Jeremy. He owed him that much after spending years pushing him, disrespecting him, making him feel unappreciated. Still, making things work between them wasn't going to bring happiness to Andrew, it would be entirely for Jeremy.

He had failed Jeremy, pushing him to change jobs and to make more money. Judging what he perceived to be a lack of ambition was more damaging to Jeremy's happiness and their relationship than Andrew realized. He wanted to talk, clear the air, and move forward. He owed it to Jeremy to put his own needs aside and to focus all of his energy on making Jeremy happy.

Didn't lots of couples face major challenges, defining moments which would determine the rest of their lives? Why should he and Jeremy be any different? The answer was simple. It shouldn't. Maybe they could work through this and find their way back to being happy together. The more he thought about it, the more he longed for that outcome. Not just for Jeremy, but for himself. The only lingering question in his mind: *do I want this for myself because I love him or because I need to be able to look at myself in the mirror?* He knew the answer, but didn't want to face it.

Suitcase banging against his legs, he entered the condo, dropping all of his things on the floor. Jeremy, who sat on the couch in the living room, swung around in his seat. "Oh my God. You scared the shit out of me." He looked at his watch and raised an eyebrow. "You're home early."

Andrew raced to Jeremy, scooped him up off the couch, and hugged him. Finally with Jeremy in his arms, a surprising sense of calm passed through him. Looking into Jeremy's amber eyes, the eyes which had seen him through all of the challenges he had faced as an adult, old feelings rushed in, crowding out his doubt. Suddenly, he knew what his heart wanted.

He placed his hands on Jeremy's cheeks, staring at him as affection swelled within him. "I missed you so fucking much." He leaned in and pressed their mouths together, brushing his tongue over Jeremy's lips, begging entrance for a hungry kiss.

Jeremy's body went stiff for a moment, but then melted into the kiss; opening to Andrew and allowing the passion to take over. Their tongues danced in each other's mouths, tumbling with an urgent need to be close. Andrew ran his hands all over Jeremy's body, pulling him closer and touching every contour of each muscle. A tingle began at the base of his spine and ran throughout his body. His cock sprang to life, straining against his pants. Jeremy was pure, safe, honest; the complete opposite of Robert. Holding and kissing him felt cleansing.

He took small steps in the direction of the couch, making sure Jeremy moved with him. He maintained constant contact with Jeremy, lips locked, tongues tangled in a dance of passion, hands firmly on his waist, making sure he wouldn't fall. When they reached the couch, he gently lowered Jeremy so he lay down, following him down so his full weight lay on top of him.

He ground their bodies together. Jeremy's cock pressed against his own through his jeans. He lifted his head, never breaking eye contact, and gazed down at his beautiful lover. *How did I waste even one second forgetting how lucky I am?* Jeremy had chosen him and had always shown him love. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* Andrew wanted to beat his head against a wall.

Jeremy gasped for air, a timid smile crossed his lips. "Hey. Slow down for a minute. Is everything okay?"

Andrew grinned from ear to ear and thought his face might split if his smile became any wider. He knew he had wanted to make things right, but had never imagined that seeing Jeremy would open this floodgate of emotion and longing. "Everything is perfect now that I'm here holding you." He leaned back down, taking Jeremy's mouth in a ferocious kiss once again.

Jeremy pulled back, laughing, not in a teasing way, but with lightness. "Hey, c'mon, slow down. What's this all about?"

Andrew released Jeremy, sitting up and facing him. With the initial thrill of seeing him having passed, he remembered he had a horrendous admission to make. His gut clenched and he feared he might get sick. It had been one thing when he felt he was making a sacrifice to stay with Jeremy. If he chose not to forgive him it would feel like he had somehow escaped a relationship he already suspected wouldn't make him happy. But he hadn't expected to feel love upon seeing Jeremy. He hadn't expected eight years of devotion and caring to flood his mind upon walking through the door. "This weekend was strange and I had a lot of time to think." A worried expression crossed Jeremy's face. "I have something I need to tell you."

Jeremy sat up, shifting his body so he faced Andrew. He reached into his pants to readjust himself and settled into a comfortable position. "Okay. Let's talk."

Andrew cleared his throat. "Jeremy. I'm such an ass. This weekend, I realized how horrible I've been as a boyfriend. I want to wind time backwards two years and start over."

A concerned expression settled on Jeremy's face. "What are you talking about?"

Andrew sighed. He had to slow down. He had to communicate this right so Jeremy would hear everything he had learned about himself and about the two of them. Taking a deep breath, he started over. "This weekend I had a lot of time to think about us. Being away from you, missing you, I realized how focused I've become on things that aren't important and not paying enough attention to the things which really matter. I've been pushing you to do something you don't want to do. You've told me over and over you don't want me taking care of you financially and I always assumed it was just your pride, but when I stopped to think about it, I realized it wasn't so much pride, as a desire for equality."

Andrew swallowed, his mouth becoming dry. "What I realized is for the past two years, I haven't valued you and what means the most to you. And for what? So you would make more money? I was so focused on your concerns about finances, I never considered how I was disrespecting you, your work, and this relationship."

Jeremy listened, sitting stone still, his eyes wide. "Andrew, what —"

Andrew placed a finger over Jeremy's lips, silencing him, and caressed the side of his face. Jeremy leaned into the touch. "Jeremy, I love your commitment to your kids. I love your passion for teaching and your dedication to their lives. That school is damn lucky."

Andrew cupped his hand behind Jeremy's neck and pulled him in for a brief kiss. "I lost sight of what is most important. Being together, our relationship, is worth more than any amount of money. I've behaved horribly, causing you to doubt whether I truly understand who you are. I wish I could erase any comment or action I ever made which hurt you or caused you to question my love for you. You're the most important person in my world. Nothing is worth anything if we can't share the experience together. I love you so much."

Tears streamed down Jeremy's cheeks. "I love you too." He wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. "What brought all of this on?"

Andrew leaned back on the couch, tilting his head back so he was facing the ceiling. After a moment, he sat upright and continued. *This is the part I'm dreading. I need to tell him, face the music, and move forward – if Jeremy can forgive me.* "On Friday, while Robert and I drove to DC, we talked about our relationships. I hate to admit it, but I complained about you. I realize now Robert fed me questions to push the conversation in that direction, but sharing any of my doubts about the two of us was disloyal. When we arrived at the hotel, we got situated, had dinner, and ended up getting pretty drunk. Back in the room, Robert offered to give me a backrub and I allowed him to, and one thing led to another, and we..." His voice trailed off.

Jeremy shook his head, a brief glimmer of a smile playing at the corner of his lips. It wasn't a smile revealing happiness, but it didn't reveal sorrow or anger either. Whatever the reason for the look, it caught Andrew completely off guard. "What? You—"

"We did something I'll never forgive myself for, but I'm hoping *you* might be able to forgive me so we can move forward, as a couple."

Jeremy's expression dropped to his hands resting in his laps. "To be clear, are you saying you and Robert—"

"We slept together." Andrew froze, watching Jeremy intently, searching for any sign of anger or hurt. Several emotions played across Jeremy's face, but none of them revealed anger. Instead, he saw a mixture of sadness and acceptance. A tear formed at his eyes and Andrew wanted to brush the tear off Jeremy's cheek, but he decided it would be better to wait until he was sure his touch would be welcome. "You *did* understand what I said, didn't you?"

Jeremy lifted his eyes to face Andrew. Along with tears, a thin smile settled across his lips. Confused, Andrew pushed on. "He's a bad guy. He only cares about money and he thought that the two of us would be a good couple because of how rich we would be. As I listened to him, realizing how cold and emotionless he is, I became sick to my stomach, finally understanding I hadn't been terribly different with you."

Jeremy started to protest, but Andrew continued speaking, not allowing him to interrupt. "Don't tell me I'm wrong. I know I never went so far as to treat you like an object. I'm not a robot. But I did focus on money and material things. I lost sight of the things that make life worth living. You and I, our love, spending time together, is what makes life worth living and brings happiness, not the stuff I can buy."

Once he had gotten it out, he didn't feel the relief he expected. So much hinged on what Jeremy said next.

Jeremy remained quiet, staring at Andrew as if surveying him. Andrew remained silent and waited. Finally, Jeremy spoke. "I understood you and I need to confess something as well."

Andrew's gut clenched. *This doesn't sound good.* "You're not reacting at all how I expected."

Jeremy shook his head. "I find this ironic. You come home and make this huge admission just when I was ready to confront you about my doubts and concerns in this relationship. I had begun to believe we had grown too far apart to come back together, but now you've admitted to everything that's been on my mind."

Andrew started to protest. He didn't want Jeremy taking any blame on himself. He had nothing to be sorry for. "Jeremy—"

"Let me finish. I think once you hear what I'm about to say, you'll understand why my reaction doesn't match what you expected. Don't get me wrong, I'm pissed. You shouldn't have fucked him. Not just because we are together, but because he's a dick. But I did something I'm not proud of either."

Andrew took Jeremy's hands in his. "Tell me. I deserve to hear whatever you have to say. Any frustration, any way I failed to value you, I deserve to face it and make amends."

Jeremy swallowed hard. "I have a confession. This won't be easy for me, but I need to tell you and then we can move forward if you still want to."

Andrew shifted in his seat, but maintained eye contact and kept a gentle hold of Jeremy's hand. "On Friday night, after you and Robert left, I went over to Craig's. We had plans to eat and hang out. I was pretty upset about us. Craig and I reminisced over old times and started talking about you and Robert. When I told him about us, I only shared the good parts...at first. Craig said how lucky I was and I couldn't lie to him. He had poured his soul out and I had withheld my own doubts and fears. So I told him my frustrations. I told him how you didn't seem to appreciate or understand what I cared about anymore. I enjoyed getting it off my chest."

Jeremy paused, biting his lower lip. Andrew sat silently, waiting for him to continue. "We were drinking a lot of wine and our conversation was kind of depressing the two of us, so Craig turned on some music and asked me to dance."

As Jeremy spoke, he shifted on the seat, wringing his hands. "Seeing Craig again and reconnecting has been nice. I'd been watching you change and we'd begun to pull apart rather than grow together. Craig reminded me of my childhood, of the happy and secure kid who stood up for what he believed in. He shares a history with me no one else does. So we started dancing."

Andrew watched him, his heart thrashing inside his chest. Jeremy sat quietly looking tormented, as if the words he was trying to get out were stuck in his throat. "Whatever you need to tell me can't be worse than what I told you. Just say it. Clear the air and let's pick up the pieces." *Whatever it is, say something because I'm going crazy waiting for you to speak.*

Jeremy lifted his gaze so he stared directly into Andrew's eyes. "So Craig and I started dancing. The moment sort of took us over. We danced and hugged, and then we kissed. I mean we really kissed. We ended up fooling around; not sex, but we didn't stop at kissing either. We knew what we were doing was wrong. Neither one of us want to cheat or to be unfaithful. But we did. So you see, we both crossed a line this weekend. Maybe you went a bit further than I did, but does that really matter? Cheating isn't defined by the specifics of what you do."

Andrew tensed, the image of Jeremy being with someone else filling his mind. A wave of nausea passed through him. When he looked at Jeremy's face the expression of guilt, grief and compassion replaced the discomfort. At least the two of them were talking honestly, something they hadn't done for a long time. There was still one question that needed answering before they moved forward. Nothing else mattered until Jeremy answered this one essential question. "Did you stop because you didn't want to be unfaithful to me?" Andrew's voice was soft. "What I mean is, did you want to stop?"

Jeremy sighed. "I don't know. I mean, we stopped because we both, er, finished. This whole weekend I was convinced I wanted to continue to enjoy Craig...that way...but I didn't expect you to come home and tell me everything you did. Now that I know you understand what's been bothering me, I'm confused."

Andrew took Jeremy's hands in his again. "Let me ask you this. Do you want to be with Craig again? Sexually?"

"After this conversation, no."

Andrew relaxed. "So I'm not too late? We can still fix things between us?" It amazed him how completely his feelings had changed in a matter of minutes. This wasn't about sacrificing in order to make things right with Jeremy anymore. It was about fixing a relationship that was too important to lose.

Jeremy's eyes glimmered with moisture as large tears rolled down his cheeks. He leaned into Andrew, and Andrew wrapped his arms around Jeremy, squeezing him. Through his tears, Jeremy continued. "I think we can work on this. You understand what's been bothering me. Now I can let my guard down and open up to you again."

Andrew tightened his grip around Jeremy. "Good. Because I want to work on this. I love you."

He buried his face against Andrew's shoulder, tears spilling freely from Jeremy's eyes. "I love you too. I'm so sorry about what happened with Craig."

"Shh. Don't. I'm not jumping for joy, but I pushed you too hard. Something was bound to snap sooner or later and force us to pay attention to our relationship. And I'm just as guilty. Don't put this on yourself." He took Jeremy's face between his hands, forcing his gaze on him. He wiped the tears from Jeremy's cheeks, and leaned in, kissing him. "You're happier with Craig back in your life. I had hoped if you were happier, you might be more open to the things I want. I was being selfish. I won't put my needs in front of yours anymore. I think you and Craig should remain friends."

Jeremy sat upright, his eyes wide with an expression of shock. "How can you be okay with that?"

Andrew shrugged. "Because you told me you don't want him as a lover. You want to make things work with me, and you love me. I trust you, Jeremy. I don't believe you were trying to hurt me any more than I was trying to hurt you. We lost sight of what's important for a while. Well, *I* lost sight of what's important and pushed you to do what you did." He pulled Jeremy back into a hug. "I don't want you to lose a friend because we both made a mistake."

Jeremy wrapped his arms around Andrew and squeezed. "I can't believe how things turned out. This is so much different than I anticipated. But if we're going to work through our problems I probably shouldn't see Craig for a while."

Andrew continued holding Jeremy. "That's your choice to make. I want you to know I trust you." He squeezed Jeremy tighter as they sat together on the couch in silence for several minutes.

* * * * *

Robert arrived home late Sunday evening. Craig was in the kitchen washing dishes, waiting for him. He had been anxious, knowing he and Robert were about to get into a huge fight. Robert came into the kitchen and grabbed Craig from behind. Craig turned around and his mouth was captured by Robert's, his body pressed against the counter, a desperation in Robert's actions Craig was unaccustomed to.

Robert pressed into him, his tongue invading Craig's mouth, before abruptly breaking out of the kiss, grabbing Craig by the hand, and leading him towards the bedroom.

"Wait. Hang on." Craig had to plant his feet to stop himself from being dragged to the bedroom. "Wait!"

Robert stopped pulling at Craig, his forehead crinkling and his shoulders hunching slightly. He leaned back against the countertop as he scrutinized Craig before he finally spoke. "What? I haven't seen you in two days. I want you, now!"

"Hello to you, too." Craig walked away from Robert to the kitchen table and sat down.

"What the hell?" Robert had a glazed look in his eyes, his pants bulging in the front. "Come on. I'm horny as hell."

Craig didn't look up. "We need to talk."

Robert cocked his head to the side. "Can't we wait 'til later? I want to fuck."

Craig raised his voice. "No, Robert. We can't wait until later. We need to talk now!" Surprise registered on Robert's face. "Okay, fine. Talk."

He had rehearsed how to tell Robert about Friday night a million times, but with the moment upon him, he had no idea what to say. Always finding the direct approach the easiest when he didn't know what to say, he simply blurted out his admission. "Jeremy and I hooked up on Friday night."

Robert took a menacing step towards Craig, his fists clenched. "You what?"

Craig lowered his eyes, but forced his gaze back up, refusing to cower while admitting his own wrong-doing. "It wasn't planned, but it happened."

"You little piece of shit. How dare you." Robert was shaking.

Robert's anger made talking easier. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen and we both knew right away that we made a mistake, but I spent all weekend thinking and I've reached some conclusions."

One loud, harsh, laugh escaped from Robert. "That's rich. You tell me you cheated and now *you've* come to some conclusions. I'll tell you what *my* conclusion is. You're a fucking slut."

Craig let the comment pass. The angrier Robert got, the calmer he became. "I tried to figure out why I would let Friday night happen. Jeremy makes me remember the person I used to be. He understands me and what I care about. He would never

consider me some convenient lay like you do. You've been completely absent from this relationship for years now and I ignored my loneliness for far too long. I deserve more than this...us...and the Craig I used to be would have done something about it long ago. I need to find him again and I can't do that with you around."

The look of rage and disbelief on Robert's face forced Craig to take a step back. "Are you trying to pin this on me?"

Craig shook his head. "No. What I did with Jeremy was a mistake. That's on me. But the underlying reason for it is on both of us. You don't see who I am and, quite frankly, I don't think you give a shit. Hell, the only time we connect at all anymore is during sex and the last few times we did that you didn't even bother to help me finish after you had."

"So this is because you didn't get off a few times?"

"No. This is about how you view me as a possession; one that's not good enough in your eyes. I don't make enough money and don't want to climb any corporate ladders. I'm happy in my job and you disrespect me for my choices."

Craig squared his shoulders. He knew he was right and was just as sure Robert was incapable of hearing him. "We haven't been a couple for years now. I've simply been a roommate you fuck, which isn't enough for me anymore. I'm never going to be someone who is business savvy and rich. If you want a corporate ladder-climber who strives for a higher salary, someone who values titles rather than feelings, I am not that person."

The truth of his words supported him. He faced Robert with confidence. "Does this relationship make you happy? Do I satisfy you?"

Robert seemed stunned, but quickly regained his haughty demeanor. "You're being ridiculous. Why is everything so dramatic with you? We've been together for eight years. Doesn't that show you what I want?"

Craig sighed, shaking his head. "No, it tells me we're comfortable with each other. We're used to this and neither one of us has faced what's lacking between us. I can't live like this anymore."

Robert took another step towards Craig, his knuckles white under the skin of his clenched fists. "I didn't come home for you tell me you cheated on me and that this relationship is over. *I* will make that decision. No one makes a fool of Robert Howell."

The comment caused Craig to laugh. Once it started, the laughter grew until tears streamed down his cheeks.

Robert took one final step forward, wild anger flashing in his eyes. Craig laughed even harder, causing Robert to stop in his tracks. When he spoke, his voice dripped with disdain. "Do you realize I almost hit you? What the fuck are you laughing at?"

Craig had to work at controlling himself. "I'm laughing at what you said. Who do you think you are? Are you so important everyone should revere you? Is your precious self-control so important that you can't let your emotions out for one second. I almost wish you would hit me. At least I'd know that you cared."

Robert's rage returned. "I'm the floor manager of one of the biggest departments at Goldman Sachs. I make more money than five people usually make in a year...combined. I can buy anything I want. Do you know how many people want me...would kill to be in your shoes? You aren't significant enough to treat me this way. And you *certainly* aren't significant enough for me to lose my cool over."

Craig shook his head. Robert was making this way too easy for him. "Well, you're wrong about one thing, Robert, because I *don't* want you. I'm done."

Robert flew at Craig, but stopped just short of grabbing him by the front of his shirt, recomposing himself with what appeared to be a tremendous amount of effort. "I want you to gather enough things to last you a few days and get the fuck out. You can come by to get the rest of your shit while I'm at work. I want all your crap out of here by next Sunday. I'll toss whatever is left after that." Robert turned and stormed into the bedroom. A second later, the shower started running.

Craig stood glued to the spot, his muscles trembling, heart racing. *It's done. It's finally over.* He marveled at the sensation flowing through him. Rather than emptiness or sadness, an overwhelming freedom filled him. His muscles slowly relaxed, his breathing coming easier, and his heart rate lowering to a normal pace.

Grabbing the bag he had packed earlier in the day when he had called Janet to ask if he could stay with her, he headed out the door. The cool night air felt refreshing as he headed east. He couldn't remember a time since moving to New York that he had ever felt more like himself.

Chapter Fifteen

Craig woke up the next day refreshed. Despite the charged emotions of the previous evening, today promised to be the first day of his living freely, being true to himself and to everyone else who had stood by him over the years. At the top of the list was Jeremy. Excitement bubbled up inside him as he thought about Jeremy. He couldn't wait to call him, share the details of his confrontation with Robert, and hopefully take a step in the direction he had always wanted to so many years ago.

He was restless all day, work barely able to maintain his concentration. Finally, at three o'clock, he called Jeremy. "Hey. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

Craig's chest constricted. Jeremy seemed distant. *I wonder if he's freaking out about the other night.* "Good actually. I wondered if you wanted to get together for dinner. I have some news."

"Um, well...sure. I guess that would be all right."

Craig took a deep breath. He knew Jeremy too well not to sense something was really wrong. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine, but we need to talk."

The tightness in his chest increased. *I don't like where this is headed.* "Ok—ay. Um, would you like to meet at the same restaurant we ate at before, Thai on Two?"

"Sure. I'll meet you at five-thirty. Does that work?"

"That's fine." Craig waited to see if Jeremy would say anything else. After a few moments of silence, he continued. "So I guess I'll meet you at five-thirty." He clicked his phone shut and stared at it. Jeremy didn't sound like himself at all. Instead of bubbly and talkative, he seemed subdued and overly quiet.

Craig found Jeremy already sitting at a table when he arrived at the restaurant. He walked over and took a seat. His heart pounded behind his ribs and each pulse throbbed in his ears, muffling his ability to hear. He didn't have a chance to say hello before Jeremy started right in. "I'm sorry about how I sounded on the phone, but I talked to Andrew last night about...you know. I wanted us to talk face-to-face."

Craig watched Jeremy fidget with his hands, fold and unfold his napkin, tap the table with the base of his knife. He didn't meet Craig's gaze. "I figured you had something big to talk about. Are you okay?"

He continued where he left off as if he hadn't heard Craig's question. "The conversation went surprisingly well. Andrew apologized for being such a distant boyfriend. He said he had lost sight of what was important, but during the weekend at the convention he had time to think and reprioritize the things which mattered to him; specifically me." Jeremy took a sip of his water. "On Friday, while you and I talked about Andrew, I began to piece together my thoughts and had prepared to confront

him when he came home. Out of the blue, Andrew expressed everything I've been wanting to hear for years now."

Craig smiled even though his insides churned. On a small level, he was genuinely happy for Jeremy. He deserved someone to treat him with love and adoration. A bigger part of him had to work to hold the wave of sadness filling his gut, crowding his ability to focus. *I want to be the person who makes him feel loved and adored.* He pushed the thought from his mind, taking in a few deep breaths to calm himself. "That's a good thing. I'm happy for you."

Jeremy's lips curved up into a smile, but his face didn't light up. "Yes, it is a good thing, but Craig, this runs deeper than a good conversation." He shifted in his seat and took another sip of his water. "I also told him about what you and I...did."

"I figured you would. You're an honest guy and wouldn't keep something like that hidden." Craig still couldn't figure out why Jeremy seemed so uncomfortable. Nothing he said seemed out of the ordinary.

"He understood; he was hurt, but he understood he had been pushing me away for some time now." Jeremy's seemed to be straining, trying to hold himself together, but a he couldn't hide the sadness in his eyes.

"That's good too." Craig's confusion increased. "I don't understand what the problem is. You said we had to talk."

Jeremy bit his lower lip. "Andrew asked me if I wanted to be with you again."

Craig's held his breath. *What Jeremy says next will define how we move forward.* Heat flooded his body, beginning in his stomach and radiating out to his fingers and toes. He forced himself to remain silent and still. Jeremy had to be the one to say whatever needed to be said. Craig had already made his choice.

"He said he's seen me light up since you and I reconnected." For the first time in the conversation, Jeremy's eyes locked on Craig. "But, that's the problem. When I'm with you, something inside comes to the surface; a part of me I remember from my childhood, a courage I had forgotten. I can't tell you how glad I am you reminded me of who I used to be, but I'm not a fifteen-year-old kid anymore and I can't put myself in a situation where I'm going to be conflicted about something as important as my relationship with Andrew. It wouldn't be fair to either of us. So I told Andrew the truth. I don't want to be with you again. And in theory, I don't. But sitting here with you right now, I do."

A whirlwind of thoughts went through Craig's mind. Friday night had been a heat-of-the-moment thing, a mistake. He had felt guilty as well. But Jeremy's strength had always come from his courage, and Andrew had caused him to forget himself. With Robert out of his life, a big part of him had hoped Jeremy might want to finish his journey of rediscovering himself, but to do it with Craig by his side.

Jeremy's words made sense, but hurt. "Jeremy. The last few weeks have kind of been emotionally charged for us. I totally get what you're saying about remembering yourself. I had forgotten who I used to be too. With you back in my life, I'm

remembering things and reclaiming myself, but you're right, we're *not* fifteen-year-old kids anymore. We have self-restraint and *can* handle this."

Jeremy shook his head. "Don't you understand? When we're together, that fifteen-year-old kid comes back and being around you, I don't think I can control myself. If I'm going to give things an honest shot with Andrew, I have to take some time away from you and focus on the relationship."

Craig felt his whole world shrink in around him as a sense of claustrophobia surrounded him. Breathing became labored, his heart beat painfully in his chest, his tongue ran dry. All of the feelings when he had first learned that Jeremy was moving to Arizona, feelings he had fought to suppress and pack away so they could never hurt him again, unleashed within him and flooded to the surface.

Jeremy had returned into his life and given him the courage to stand up for himself, and now he was losing him all over again. All of the emotions he'd had when Jeremy moved to Arizona rushed to the front of his mind, opening old wounds. His eyes began to burn, his vision blurring with tears.

Jeremy's eyes misted over as well. "I'm so sorry, Craig. I don't want to hurt you and I don't want to lose you as a friend, but I have to do what I think is right. Right now, I need to focus on Andrew and I can't when I want...when I'm around you."

Anger flared up inside Craig. A heated, raging fire, burning at him from the inside out, searing away the pressure pushing in at him. But it was a flame that burned itself out, using all its energy before it could take hold. Jeremy wasn't purposefully hurting him. As much as he wanted to kick, scream, beg, to do anything to make Jeremy choose a different path, that was a burden he had to bear, not Jeremy. Determined to make this as easy as possible for Jeremy, Craig managed to push his anger and sorrow aside. *Hold it together for a few minutes longer. You can fall apart later.* He wiped his eyes and took a few deep breaths through his nose, masking his sorrow by crinkling his brow to simulate deep thought. "I understand. I want you to be happy and if you and I can't spend time together, I can respect your choice. I hope one day, when things settle for you, we can still be friends."

Craig's body sagged in his seat, all of his strength drained. The few words he had communicated to Jeremy had been the most difficult he had ever spoken, but he couldn't remember a time when he had been more selfless. Jeremy had picked Andrew and didn't need the added pressure of dealing with Craig's misery. *It was a long shot to think he would choose me anyway.*

A tear spilled down Jeremy's cheek. Craig had an urge to reach across the table and wipe it away, but held his hands in his lap.

Jeremy took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "Thank you for being so understanding. I hope, in time, we can be friends too."

Their meals came and they ate in silence. The meal consisted of pushing their food around their plates. After what seemed like an enormous and uncomfortable length of

silence, Jeremy spoke again. "So what happened when Robert got home? Did you talk to him?"

Craig found talking about Robert grounded him. Anything to take the focus off the emptiness growing in his chest, in his gut, threatening to fill him completely. At least he had an object to direct his anger at. "I was nervous, but the way Robert had acted made the entire encounter much easier than I expected." Craig smiled as he pictured himself laughing at Robert. "The conversation was ugly, but I'm happy I stood up for myself after all these years."

"What happened?" Jeremy's voice became stronger and more self-assured, as if the deflection from focusing on the two of them helped him to speak with greater ease as well.

"He came home and wanted to have sex right away."

Jeremy tensed, as if he were angry.

"I held him off," Craig went on, "saying we had to talk and he got irritated with me." Jeremy seemed to relax a bit. "Finally I blurted out what happened between *us* Friday night and he exploded. At first I thought he might hit me, but instead he said *no one makes a fool of Robert Howell*."

Jeremy laughed nervously. "Did he actually refer to himself in the third person?"

Craig wasn't sure, but it seemed like he was watching him a bit too carefully, as if he were trying to read him. The words Jeremy spoke seemed normal enough, so he stopped over-analyzing and continued. "He did. And I laughed at him. I actually laughed in his face."

"Shut up. You didn't." Jeremy's smile widened, the first sign of brightness he had shown.

"I did and every time I think about it, I remember his expression. Finally, after about three rounds of him becoming angry and teetering on the verge of hitting me, he became oddly calm and told me to pack my shit and get out. I had already called Janet, so I had a place to go, but I need to get the rest of my stuff by this weekend."

"What? He kicked you out?" Jeremy's smile was replaced with an expression of concern.

"Don't worry. Janet has an extra room and she's wanted me to break things off with Robert forever, so she's happy to help me out. I can stay with her as long as I like."

Relief settled over Jeremy's face. Craig had expected the death of his eight year relationship to overwhelm him with sadness or grief, but in the retelling, all he felt was freedom; pure liberating freedom.

Jeremy pushed a piece of food from one side of his plate to the other. "So you laughed in his face. I wish I had been there."

"I shocked myself." Craig replayed the moment in his mind, a weak chuckle escaping from him. Mimicking Robert, he repeated his words. "No one makes a fool of

Robert Howell. Who says something like that?" Craig chuckled some more, but there was little happiness behind it.

Jeremy laughed with him, but he seemed tired. He put his fork down and faced Craig. "Thank goodness you have a place to stay."

Craig smiled. "Yeah. I have some pretty good friends." He sat quietly for a few minutes thinking about how different his life was today compared to yesterday.

Jeremy moved food around his plate a little longer without eating. "Well, I'm done. I guess we should pay the bill and head out."

Craig's control over his emotions faltered. He had no idea when he would see Jeremy again, if at all. He desperately wanted to postpone the moment of departure as long as possible. "Wait. You said Andrew came home and had changed his whole outlook. Did he tell you what caused him to realize he had taken you for granted?"

Jeremy froze, staring at him with wide eyes. "He did."

"And..." Craig felt a twinge of aggravation. He didn't understand why he had to drag this out of Jeremy.

"I'm going to tell you, but I want you to prepare yourself to hear some unpleasant information. I'm not sure I should bother since you said you and Robert are over, but if the roles were reversed, I'd want someone to tell me."

"Tell me what?" Craig's anxiety flared.

"Andrew told me Robert and he had sex on Friday night. The next morning Robert said they should dump us because they would make a powerful couple, or some shit like that."

The anger he had suppressed roiled to the surface. How could Jeremy sit there telling him that he and Andrew were going to work on things when he just told him Andrew had fucked Robert? It made no sense. Instead of standing up and walking out of the restaurant, instead of reaching across the table and grabbing Jeremy by his shirt to shake some sense into him, instead of bursting into tears, Craig buried all of his feelings, bottling them up and corking the top. The emptiness which had been filling him earlier was still there, but instead of feeling like a threatening void, now it felt like a blissful comfort. His next words, the tone of his voice, reflected his sense of controlled impassion. "That sounds like Robert. He fuckin' cheated? I knew he was a bastard, but I never thought—" *What did I think? He's probably cheated tons of times before.*

"Are you all right? You look like you're a million miles away."

Craig lifted his gaze and faced Jeremy. "I'm fine and even *more* sure I made the right decision."

"I'm so sorry, Craig. You don't think...do you think he might have been stupid and put you at risk for...diseases?"

He and Robert had gotten tested after they had been together and monogamous for six months. Exposure to disease was certainly a concern, but he doubted he needed to worry. One thing he knew for sure about Robert was the most important thing in the

world to him, next to money, was himself. "He would never do anything to endanger himself so I think I should be fine, but you make a good point. I should probably get tested to make sure."

Jeremy's tension melted away. He seemed to be as comforted by Craig's confidence as Craig. "You're not mad I told you, are you?"

"No, of course not. Friends do that for one another, right?" Craig wondered if the two of them would ever be friends again.

Jeremy looked at him. "Yes. They do."

The waiter approached the table with the bill. Craig threw his card down before Jeremy had a chance. "Let me get this." He paid and the two of them walked outside. He gave Jeremy a hug, headed down Second Avenue, and turned the corner.

Once he had turned the corner, he took a few more steps, then grabbed hold of the railing lining on of the building stoops, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Tears began to flow down his cheeks as he tried to regain some semblance of control over himself. He had put Jeremy's needs before his own and didn't regret his choice. Jeremy was too special to have to face added guilt.

But the sense of loss, of losing Jeremy yet again, filled him until he could think of nothing else. He was a fifteen-year-old kid chasing a retreating car all over again, only this time, the second time around, it was even more painful. Now that he knew how Jeremy completed him, brought out all of the qualities which he had always counted on growing up, admired in himself, losing him felt like he was losing a piece of himself.

* * * * *

The air had cooled and raised good-bumps where it touched Jeremy's skin. He watched Craig walk away and stood frozen for another moment after he turned the corner. Craig had been truly understanding, making the conversation easier than he dared hope. The thought of Craig putting his own needs to the side so Jeremy wouldn't have to suffer weighed on him and he decided to walk for a while to reflect on his conversation and to clear his head. Relief should have been the emotion filling him, having done the right thing, but he only registered emptiness, like a part of him had gone missing.

He couldn't be around Craig. The whole weekend, his only thoughts centered on kissing Craig, grinding against him, the sweet-salty taste of Craig in his mouth. He had even masturbated imagining what would have happened if they hadn't stopped at oral sex. He couldn't have those thoughts in his mind if he wanted to make things right with Andrew. Ten minutes into his walk, his mind more cluttered, not less, he decided to hail a cab.

When he got home, Andrew sat by the table overlooking Central Park. Jeremy's breath caught in his chest. Andrew normally came home much later. Before Jeremy could take another step, Andrew crossed the room and grabbed him in a hug, kissing him sweetly on the mouth. "Hey, baby. I missed you."

Jeremy smiled and gave Andrew a kiss back. "I met up with Craig to tell him we couldn't spend time together anymore, at least for a while."

Andrew tensed. "You didn't have to do that. I trust you. And you I are going to work on this."

Jeremy put a hand on the side of Andrew's face. "I appreciate your trust, but I think this is for the best."

Andrew leaned his face against Jeremy's hand, turning his head to kiss the inside of Jeremy's wrist. He ran his hands along the trim torso, pulling Jeremy down onto his lap and capturing his mouth in a soft, languid kiss. Jeremy didn't resist, but his focus wasn't on Andrew. An image of Craig turning the corner outside the restaurant filled his mind and kissing Andrew held no appeal for him.

Andrew pulled out of the kiss, leading Jeremy to the bedroom, and laying him flat. First removing Jeremy's shoes, he proceeded by reaching up and unbuttoned Jeremy's pants, pulling them down along with his boxer briefs. Jeremy lifted his hips to make the work easier. Again, Jeremy went through the motions of their sexual routine, but there was no joy in it for him. Instead of the fluttering of his heart, the tickling sensation on his skin, his senses seemed dulled, as if they were muffled.

Once Jeremy was freed of his pants and briefs, Andrew lay on top of him, taking his mouth in a hungry kiss once again. As his tongue massaged Jeremy's, he moaned and his cock grew rigid, pressing against Jeremy's thigh. He slid back onto his knees and removed Jeremy's shirt so he lay naked on the bed.

Divested of clothing, he watched Andrew as he got up and stripped, putting on a show as he removed each article of clothing. He removed his pants, rotating his hips, giving Jeremy a good view of the ass he so often admired. Andrew's boxer briefs hugged his muscled waist and bulged out for each round mound of flesh of his ass. His erect cock pressed the front of his briefs and leaked until a wet spot of precum soaked through.

Jeremy reached down to stroke his own cock which was still flaccid. Andrew undressing for him had always caused his cock rise to attention.

Andrew removed the rest of his clothes then knelt between Jeremy's legs. "Hmm. I think we need to take care of this." He leaned forward and nipped at the inside of Jeremy's thigh. Working his way up, he nuzzled his nose against Jeremy's balls, inhaling deeply, then took one testicle into his mouth. Andrew rolled the nugget, tugging gently with suction to add a bit of pressure.

Jeremy reached down to grip his own cock, but found he had only become partially hardened. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

He closed his eyes, unwilling to admit why his body was failing him at this crucial moment. As Andrew's mouth slid down his shaft, taking the whole length, he sighed and arched his hips, causing Andrew's plump lips to press against his pubic bone. He enjoyed the warmth and wetness, but his arousal seemed to remain dulled.

An image of Craig grabbing him on Friday night entered his mind. *Their lips were pressed together, hot hands rubbing and touching him. Craig's tongue massaged his, playfully dancing in his mouth.* As he recalled this, his cock began to grow and fill with blood.

"That's it, baby. You like it when I suck your cock, don't you?"

Jeremy groaned, and looked down at Andrew as he thrust himself all the way down his throat. *This is wrong. I should be thinking about Andrew.* Jeremy closed his eyes as Andrew swirled his tongue around his shaft. *Craig grabbed his cock through his jeans, his hot hands rubbing him, causing precum to leak into his briefs.* At the thought, his cock jumped and he felt precum escape from the tip and into Andrew's mouth. Andrew wet a finger and worked it into Jeremy's crease, running the tip in circles around his hole. Jeremy groaned once again, more precum leaking from his cock. His eyes closed, images of things they had done, things he wished they had done, formed, faded, and reformed in his mind, feeding into the frenzy building up inside him. *He lowered his head, fulfilling his need to take Craig into his mouth. The pungent scent of his best friend filled his senses and the sweet tang of Craig's juices stimulated his senses of taste and smell. Craig withdrew from his mouth and pushed him onto his back, teasing his hole with a wet finger, running it in circles around his opening.*

Andrew slipped his finger into Jeremy's hole, twisting and curving the tip so it rubbed against the silky skin inside his ass. Once Jeremy's ring had loosened to one of Andrew's fingers, he slid in a second and then a third. The stretch in his ass sent shivers through Jeremy and his nipples stood up, rigid and electrified, while his legs trembled and his insides quivered with pleasure.

Craig got up on his knees, leaning over him with his fingers still buried deep inside his hole while using the hand of his free arm to support his weight. He gazed down at him. "Open your eyes." Craig's command filled him with excitement, his only desire to obey. He gazed at Craig, his face revealing lust and desire. A warm smile spread across Craig's face and mischief gleamed in his blue eyes. "You love my fingers in your ass. You love the stretch, the burn. You want my cock, don't' you?"

"Yes. Fuck me. Please. I need you." Jeremy hadn't realized he spoke out loud. So focused on his fantasy of Craig, he thought he had been talking in his head to the image of the man bringing him blissful fulfillment.

Andrew removed his fingers and brought his knees up between Jeremy's legs, forcing them apart. "Lift your hips for me, baby."

Jeremy opened his eyes, disappointed to find Andrew kneeling above him. He obeyed, lifting his hips, forcing the shock from his face. "I'm ready for you. You already got me good and loose."

Andrew pressed the head of his cock against Jeremy's opening and applied pressure. Jeremy arched his hips, taking all of Andrew at once. He gasped at the burn and pleasure, closing his eyes once again. *Craig hovered inches above his face. He rested his weight on his elbows and forearms, supporting his muscular frame as he pressed his entire body against Jeremy's bringing them together, skin to skin, sliding with sweat and heat against one*

another. Jeremy's body shook, every nerve coming alive. Craig leaned down and took Jeremy's mouth as he pushed his cock all the way into his ass.

Jeremy wrapped his legs around Craig's waist, maneuvered his body so Craig's cock hit his prostate with each thrust and drove his tongue into Craig's mouth, kissing him with all of the love, passion, and need flowing through him. Craig continued to pump, increasing his pace and striking the sensitive gland over and over, only releasing Jeremy from kisses to gasp phrases, telling him how good he felt. "Your body is on fire. Your heat on my cock is driving me crazy. I love being inside you. I want to make you feel so good." Each statement sent thrills of satisfaction and excitement through Jeremy, heightening his pleasure.

Jeremy's mind went fuzzy. His breathing became shallow and his hips began to gyrate, fucking back onto the cock thrusting inside him. Though the other man's moans were Andrew's, Jeremy didn't want the fantasy to end. He didn't want to open his eyes and lose the image of Craig bringing him so close to orgasm. His thoughts were wrong, but he didn't care. Craig loving him, giving him this pleasure, sent a tingling current of electricity through his body. A frenzied excitement rushed from head to toe and back again, forcing his hairs to stand on end and his mind to reel with images of the man he loved; wanting Craig's release to explode inside him. "Oh God. I'm getting so close."

The pounding came hard and fast. Each thrust like a sledgehammer, banging against his prostate. Blissful pain and pleasure joined together into a blinding fury of passion.

"Yes. Fuck me hard. I'm gonna come." Jeremy's entire body tensed. White lights danced behind his tightly closed lids. Every hair on his body stood on end as wave after wave of ecstasy filled every inch of his body. Finally unable to hold out any longer, his muscles clenched as the first gush of semen flew out of him. "Oh my God. Craig!"

The moment the word escaped his lips, he realized what he had done, but the rapturous sensations flooding him were too intense for him to care. Stream after stream of cum pulsed out of him. The first jet hitting his cheek, several splattered onto his chest, and several more flowed out of his cock and onto his belly. When he could finally focus, he realized he had not even touched himself.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and peered up, confronted by Andrew staring at him with a pained expression. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." He closed his mouth. Nothing would make up for shouting out Craig's name, especially at this particular juncture in their strained relationship.

Andrew slowly withdrew from Jeremy and got up from the bed.

Resting his weight on his elbows, Jeremy faced him. "I'm sorry."

Before going into the bathroom, Andrew turned to him. "I can't believe you just did that." He went into the bathroom and closed the door.

He heard Andrew turn on the shower. Guilt racked him. The entire time, he had been aware of his fantasy; had needed it in order to become aroused. And once he called out Craig's name, instead of losing his ability to reach orgasm, he experienced one of his greatest releases ever.

Jeremy slapped his hands to his face, whispering a single word to the empty room. "Fuck." He lay in bed, aware he had hurt Andrew to the core, and even more aware that nothing would make it right.

Chapter Sixteen

Craig threw himself into work for the rest of the week, the first to arrive and the last to leave. He went directly to Janet's after work, bringing a laptop with him and working until exhaustion made focus impossible. He would then go to bed and start the cycle over the next day. He could live with this routine for a while. It allowed him to escape into his imagination and tap into his creativity while protecting him from facing the hurt and humiliation he had experienced.

At the end of the week, Craig went to his doctor to get the results of his HIV test. As he expected, he was negative, but he left the doctor's office only marginally comforted. Although he suffered no physical scars from his eight years with Robert, he still had to deal with the fallout of remaining in an emotionally abusive relationship.

He had always thought of himself as strong. The fact he had chosen to stay with Robert despite his unhappiness haunted him. How would he be able to let himself trust anyone else if he couldn't trust himself to make good decisions?

He spent the weekend buried in books, reading all day long, only stopping to cook meals. The weather remained beautiful, the heat that came with June only a week away, but Craig kept himself holed up inside the apartment.

On Monday, while in the middle of a project for one of Boris's clients, Janet came into his office and closed the door behind her. "I want to talk to you, Craig. I know I don't usually have serious discussions with you, so I'm kind of nervous. Can you let me finish before you say anything. You may not like everything I have to say."

Craig swiveled in his chair and faced Janet, who sat on the edge of his desk. "Sure. Shoot."

She stared at Craig, remaining silent until he faced her. "I'm worried about you. I understand it hasn't been long, but you are heading in the absolute wrong direction. You are isolating yourself and won't even let your friends help and that's not like you."

As she gazed at him, concern evident on her face. "I hated Robert after you had been dating for only a few months. We all did. We had no idea why you liked him. Opposites attract, but you guys were polar; different species."

Craig rolled his eyes forcing Janet to back-track. "Okay, I'm exaggerating, but you get my point. Robert had a bad effect on you. You even said so yourself when you called me to ask to stay with me. I want to make sure you don't shut yourself off from finding love again. No one expects you to jump back on the bandwagon anytime soon, pardon the cliché. Eight years is a long time and you need time to grieve and process, but if you shut down, you may not find your way back when you're ready. You're way too special to me for me to sit by and allow you to close yourself off to finding love again."

Craig stared at her. The thought of going out for a drink caused his gut to recoil. "I know you mean well, Janet, but —"

"Listen, please. You need to go out. Don't date, but go be around people. Have fun. You've taken a huge step forward. No matter how much you think this rock you've been hiding under for the past week will protect you from getting hurt, the fact is, you got out of a bad relationship on your own. None of us pushed you. Now that you found your strength, go out and enjoy your freedom. You haven't played the field for eight fuckin' years...literally. I can't even begin to imagine sucking the same cock for that long."

Craig chuckled, but remained silent, waiting to see if Janet had anything more to say. When she sat quietly, looking at him, he decided he could safely speak. "Honestly, I don't *want* to go out and make new friends, or date, or fuck around. I need some time to remove myself from the whole scene, to find myself again and figure out why I allowed myself to go so long in such a rotten situation."

Janet nodded. "Okay, understandable, but if you want to wait until you figure yourself out, you'll be waiting for the rest of your life. None of us ever figures ourselves out, and when we think we have a pretty good idea of who we are, we change. I'll tell you some things that haven't changed in the twelve years we've been friends."

Craig leaned back in his chair, settling in for round two of Janet's pep talk. "You're a kind and loving person. You go out of your way to help others and put their needs before your own, sometimes to a fault. Robert is a case-in-point. You're outgoing, funny, and make friends easier than anyone I've ever met. You're the biggest klutz in the world. Most importantly, you are one of my best friends and I want to make sure you don't shut down completely. So here's the deal. Get the fuck out of here by five o'clock and go out to bars or someplace else. Meet guys as friends. Test the waters."

Janet meant well, but she didn't seem to understand how frozen he felt. "I don't *want* to make new friends right now or to date and test the waters. I spent the last eight years in a relationship and allowed myself to remain miserable half of the time. Jeremy shows up in my life once again and I screw *that* up royally. Why in the hell would I want to expose myself to more pain? So I can wake up eight years from now and realize I fucked everything up even more? *There's* a plan I'd like to witness."

Janet pursed her lips. "Why don't you leave the sarcasm to me?" Craig glared at her and her demeanor softened. "All I'm saying is be careful about closing yourself off."

Craig sank back in his chair. "I'm hyper-defensive and sensitive right now."

"I know you are, sweetie, and I don't expect this to happen overnight, but promise me you'll think about what I said and be careful not to shut down." She stood up and headed towards the door, but stopped abruptly, turning around. "Oh, I almost forgot." She walked over to him and gave him a hug "I wanted to tell you how much I love having you as a roomie. I almost got a cat, so you saved my ass from becoming that single, crazy cat-lady."

Craig laughed. "Thanks. I worried I was taking advantage and had started looking for new places."

"Well, take all the time you need. You can stay as long as you like or until I find a boyfriend who I want to move in with. I'll evict your ass when *that* happens. So I'd say you've got a few...decades."

"Do I detect someone who can't take her own advice?"

Janet gave Craig a kiss on the forehead. "Love you, babe."

"Love you too." Craig smacked her ass as she turned around, and was rewarded by a giggle.

* * * * *

Jeremy sat on one of the benches lining the playground, watching his students during recess. The minimal effort required to watch the children and the warm weather leant themselves to idle thought and reflection. It had been a week and he still couldn't believe he had called out Craig's name during sex with Andrew. Although Andrew had forgiven him, the days that followed had been tense. Jeremy had tried to fight the truth; nothing would be the same. Not only because of Monday and his monumental fumble in bed, but because they had grown apart. It was hard to admit that eight years of being together was coming to an end, but knowing the direction things were going relieved him as well.

He leaned back on the bench, tilting his head to face the sun. When he glanced at his students, he was surprised to find Seth staring up at him. "Hi, Mr. Finn."

"Hi, Seth. Why aren't you playing with your friends?" Seth had been playing more with the other kids and had become less reserved in class since the field trip to Spectacular Designs.

"I came over because you looked sad. Are you sad about something?" Jeremy marveled at the sweet directness of children and the utter lack of hidden meaning in their questions.

"No, I'm not sad." Jeremy would miss having this kid in his class next year.

"Really? Because you look sad."

The conversation made him uncomfortable. He *was* sad, but the reason couldn't be discussed with a seven-year-old child. "I'm thinking about things, but I'm okay. Why don't you go and play with your friends?"

Seth sat on the bench next to Jeremy. "I think you're sad about something."

Clearly, Seth wouldn't leave him alone unless he said something. "What makes you think so?"

"You look the same as my mommy and daddy did when they told me they were getting a divorce." He delivered his statement with innocence, cutting straight to Jeremy's heart.

Not knowing what to say, Jeremy thought for a moment. *How do you tell a child you've ruined your eight-year relationship with your boyfriend by fantasizing about your long-*

lost best friend while being fucked through a mattress? “Maybe I’m a little sad, but I’m okay.”

Seth’s expression became serious for a minute. “Did you love someone, but you don’t love them anymore?”

“Something like that, I guess.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be sad. My mommy and daddy are still friends. My mommy even likes my daddy’s new girlfriend. She says anyone who is nice to me is someone who she can be friends with.” Seth smiled up at Jeremy, his expression revealing he was certain he had solved all of his teacher’s problems.

“Thanks, Seth. I feel a lot better. Why don’t you go play with your friends now?”

“Okay.” Seth turned and ran toward the monkey bars where several students hung upside down by their knees.

Jeremy laughed. Seth was one hell of a kid. He seemed to be destined to teach the adults around him lessons about life. But Seth had nailed one thing right. Nothing catastrophic had gone wrong between Andrew and him. They simply grew apart and had different wants and needs. That wasn’t a situation where you place blame, it just *was*.

Although more complicated than Seth’s simplified summary. He and Andrew should be able to remain friends. They had to talk, listen to each other, and come to an agreement, but they should be able to break amicably. Sure, it might be difficult to see each other for a while, but once the pain of loss subsided, they would be left with years of good memories and the knowledge they had never stopped loving one another as friends.

However, how to fix things with Craig weighed on his mind. He should have turned around as soon as Craig walked away from him at Thai on Two, after the immediate pang of emptiness when he watched Craig turn the corner down Tenth Street. So many *should haves*. It would do him no good to look back. He needed to look forward and hope for the best.

It was one thing to realize that his relationship with Andrew was over. It was something altogether different to realize that he saw a future with Craig, one that would make him happier than he’d ever been. He wanted to call Craig, to run from school and beg him to forgive his stupidity, but he had one thing to do first. He had to talk to Andrew.

A series of images flashed through his mind: he and Craig sitting together in Thompkin Square Park, Craig talking to Seth at Spectacular Designs, their kiss in his classroom, their kiss from fifteen years ago. As the images continued to play in his mind, something inside him unlocked. He had always known Craig was his soul-mate, that Craig was the one who knew him best and loved him more purely than anyone else. Over the years, he had learned to barricade those thoughts, thinking they only held him back from moving forward in his life. But he had been wrong, had it

completely backwards. The gates swung open and his heart embraced the one truth it had always known—he and Craig were meant for each other.

Chapter Seventeen

Jeremy left school right at three o'clock and headed home. He hadn't stopped thinking about Andrew since his therapy session with Seth at recess. Once he knew what needed to be done, a weight had lifted from his shoulders. Even so, the conversation might go either way depending on Andrew's reaction. Then he had to face Craig and hope he hadn't pushed him away. Regardless of the outcome, he was determined to do the right thing.

Andrew wouldn't be home for quite some time, so Jeremy had time to plan out what he would say. Fifteen minutes later, he hopped out of the cab he had taken and headed up to the apartment. When he entered, he was shocked to find Andrew, sitting by the window, shoulders slumped and a sad expression on his face.

Jeremy dropped his bag on the floor and walked over to him. "Hey. What's up? Why are you home?"

Andrew sat quietly, staring at Jeremy. "I didn't go in to work today. I needed to think. We need to talk."

His stomach still lurched at the solemn tone of Andrew's voice. Even though he'd been thinking about breaking up with Andrew all day, it seemed that Andrew had been thinking about the same thing, his "Okay. I actually wanted to talk to you as well."

Andrew's head snapped up, curiosity written plainly on his face. "I wonder if I've been worrying myself crazy for nothing."

"Well, my stomach is dancing the Macarena right now. If that's any indication, I guess we're in the same boat." Jeremy managed a weak smile.

Andrew took a deep breath, never releasing Jeremy from his gaze. "Ok, I need to start. I've been sitting here all day thinking about what to say." He raked a hand through his hair. "Over the past week, I've realized we are trying to force something which can't be forced. We aren't the same as we used to be, individually or as a couple. I understand couples grow and change over time, but this doesn't seem like growth. It feels like we've moved further apart."

Andrew took Jeremy's hand and squeezed it. "I want to be completely clear. My feelings have nothing to do with last Monday night, when you..."

Jeremy winced. "Yeah. I know."

"But this past week, it seemed like we were trying to connect to something which no longer exists. I thought about couple's therapy for us; that someone else with an outside perspective might help us find the road back to each other."

Jeremy hadn't considered therapy and wondered whether he should have. "Is that what you want to do?"

Andrew shook his head. There was more going on here than a misunderstanding or infidelity. Issues could be worked through. No, this ran far deeper. When he had been with Robert, it had unleashed something in him that he hadn't realized he had been

missing. To allow himself to become vulnerable, to open himself up and literally let someone else in, physically, was something he knew he couldn't live without. The problem with Jeremy was: he couldn't picture allowing that with him. It didn't fit, and he didn't want it to. Jeremy was a man, a good man, but he wasn't manly by Andrew's definition and it wouldn't work...and now he knew he needed someone who could take charge. He'd spent far too much time controlling things in his own life that being able to simply let go –

Pushing the thoughts out of his mind, he focused his attention on Jeremy. Jeremy didn't need to know what he was thinking in terms of his sexual appetite. Not at this point when things were over between them. "Honestly, I don't think therapy would change anything. We've never had difficulty communicating with each other. When we have a problem, we talk openly. I don't see how a therapist would bring something out we haven't figured out already."

Andrew was right. Despite the serious topic of conversation, a wry laugh escaped from Jeremy. "I'm sorry. I'm not laughing because this is funny, but I've been thinking about us all day and planned on talking to you tonight about what I had come to understand."

Andrew sat quietly. "I'm not surprised. We're usually on the same page about most things."

"You're right, even if they aren't happy things." Jeremy leaned back in his chair. "What I realized is we've been growing apart for years. I don't think either one of us did anything specific, we just started moving in different directions. I'm happy doing what I'm doing and you've been working so hard and are so good at what you do. You deserve your promotions and the money you make. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be able to enjoy your money. What's been eating away at me is that I've been so inflexible. It's more than not wanting to change, it's that I've been resenting you for pushing without seeming to understand how I truly felt, what I truly valued. I didn't stop to think how I was doing the same thing to you. You want to be able to enjoy yourself without worrying about how your desires are going to be resisted by me. You belong with someone who can move forward with you, not someone who is going to take away from what you want and need in order to enjoy your life. I'm just not that person. There are certain things I can do to accommodate you, but there's nothing I can do to alter the core of who I am and what I value."

Andrew smiled. "It's funny. Most people would be upset, yelling and pointing fingers, but I'm not angry with you. I'm not even angry at myself. You nailed it when you said neither of us is to blame. We simply grew apart."

They both sat in silence for a while, looking out the window over Central Park. The paths were littered with individual and pairs of joggers, enjoying one of the few natural areas the city offered for longer runs. Kids practiced their skateboarding in the area of the park where the cement boarding walls were located. Others lounged in the grass, spread out on blankets or towels.

Jeremy sighed, turning back to Andrew. "So I guess we're saying we're over." Although he had planned on this outcome, the finality of the statement hurt. A lump formed in his throat as his vision blurred and hot tears spilled down his cheeks.

Andrew sat quietly as Jeremy cried. Once Jeremy regained control of his emotions, he lifted his gaze to Andrew. "You know," he said, his voice calm and quiet although tears were running down his face, "you are almost perfect for me, almost everything I want, but that's not enough for either of us, is it?"

Jeremy laughed. "I was thinking the exact same thing; how you're almost perfect for me as well. We both have our faults, but for a relationship to work, you have to be able to bend and adjust to changing needs and wants. If you can't grow with someone, the match is wrong. Bottom line, we weren't meant for each other."

"I'm so relieved we could have this discussion and end up as friends." Andrew smiled, although his expression remained sad. "I truly love you, Jeremy."

Jeremy took Andrew's hands. "I love you too." They sat for a few more minutes, neither of them speaking. Finally, Jeremy broke the silence. "What are we going to do about living arrangements?"

"We have the extra bedroom. I can't think of a reason why we have to rush into figuring that out. I would like to keep the place, but I don't want to set a time limit on you moving out. We're not splitting on bad terms."

"No, we're not. We're going to remain friends."

Andrew tilted his head to face Jeremy. "I'll hunt you down and beat sense into you if we don't."

Jeremy smiled knowing everything would be okay; better than he dared hope. It was no surprise. Andrew was an amazing man.

* * * * *

Craig worked on a design for an apartment in midtown east. Boris had offered him a job to come work for his company and he had turned him down, but took on all of the assignments Boris sent his way. Business had increased exponentially since the party where the first round of clients had been secured, and now Craig interviewed at least three new clients a week, sometimes more, getting an idea of what they wanted for their homes. The steady stream of work served as a good distraction and was good for Spectacular Designs.

Janet entered his office at five o'clock. "Okay. I've sat by long enough. I'm putting my foot down. Get your ass up out of that chair, grab your shit, and get the fuck out of here."

Craig started to protest but Janet raised a hand, halting any argument. Craig scowled at her, but then dropped the façade, pouting instead. "Fine. I'm leaving. You've become such a task-master, maybe I *will* take Boris up on his offer to steal me away from here."

Janet smiled. "Fine. I'll be the first to write you a recommendation."

"Bitch!" Janet was too good. She could call the bluff of a World Poker Championship winner without even breaking a sweat.

Janet smiled. "That's Ms. Bitch to you, sweetie. Out!"

Craig turned off his computer and neatened his desk, lining his projects on his desk in order of deadline so his morning would start smoothly. He walked past Janet, about to give her one last wise crack, but decided against it and continued toward the door. His progress was halted by a sharp slap on his ass. "Ow! Hey. That's sexual harassment."

Janet walked out of the office with him. "Well, you got the *ass* part right anyways."

Craig headed down the street chuckling. Each year, when the weather became warm, he walked everywhere and his skin had already taken on an unfortunate two-tone color, his neck and arms a coppery-brown and his shoulders and torso a ghostly white. He took off his shirt and slipped it into his belt, despite the hideous t-shirt tan. Without a cloud in the sky, the weather was perfect for balancing his two-toned skin.

As he headed across town from Chelsea to the East Village, he noticed guys turning to look at him. He had never noticed others checked him out before, but the attention boosted his ego. *Wait, they're probably wondering why I would ever walk around without a shirt on.* He squared his shoulders, ignoring the self-conscious thought, a tiny strut creeping into his walk.

Janet lived in a small two bedroom on Thirteenth Street and Avenue A. He had never spent much time in the East Village except for his bar hopping days when he first moved to New York. Now with the time to explore the neighborhood, he had grown to enjoy the comfortable friendliness of the area.

He crossed Thirteenth Street, not even glancing at the stores which had become familiar to him. Instead, he studied the people, young mothers carting their babies around, grunge rockers with tattoos walking into the many record stores, homeless people sitting at every corner, cardboard signs next to them requesting money. The diversity caused him to think of Jeremy who loved living in the East Village. He had said all walks of life lived together peacefully. As he glanced around, he realized Jeremy had been right. *Maybe I'll try to find an apartment here when I'm ready.*

Back at Janet's, he took a quick shower before slipping into a pair of comfortable jeans and a form fitting white t-shirt. He had decided not to wear underwear, knowing the jeans would hug his ass and show off his package better without the constriction of boxer briefs. Besides, free-balling was kind of sexy. *Huh, Janet might be right. I should test the waters.* The thought surprised him. He had been adamant about *not* going out and meeting anyone. Now, a physical connection with someone else seemed like the kind of thing he wanted. Just to feel another person's body against his own, to know he's not alone.

Craig crossed the street and went into Phoenix, one of the many gay bars in the neighborhood. All of the East Village bars had a relaxed atmosphere, perfect for a few

beers after work. He figured he may as well stick around for about an hour, before leaving to continue working on his laptop back in the apartment.

When he entered the bar, his eyes had to adjust to the dim light, a stark contrast from the brightness of the June sun outside.

Craig ordered a Bud Light and sat at the bar, scanning the row of liquor bottles. The bartender stood with a few other customers before walking over to Craig. "Hi. I haven't seen you around here before."

Craig smiled. "I moved in with my friend a week ago. She lives across the street. I thought I should come in and check the place out."

The bartender extended his hand across the counter. "Name's Peter Somers. Welcome to Phoenix." Peter wore a tight pair of jeans and no shirt. The light glinting off his smooth, hairless torso made his muscles seem chiseled out of marble. Craig had to admit, Peter was attractive.

Peter peered into his eyes, and smiled, the corner of his mouth slyly creeping up the side of his face. "You caught my attention the moment you walked in. Those jeans fit you real well."

Craig blushed, grateful the bar was dimly lit. No one had flirted with him so openly in as long as he could remember. "Thanks. This place is cozy."

Peter stood up, drying the glass in his hand with a cloth. His muscles undulated under his skin, revealing each contour of his thick arms and bulging pecs. "That's what I like about the place. When I'm not working, I'm a customer. I've met some cool people at this bar." He blatantly ogled Craig, allowing his eyes to glide up and down, without trying to hide his interest. "I get off in about an hour. Would you stick around and have a few drinks with me. We could get to know one another a little bit." He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

A wave of panic passed through Craig. He hadn't been on the market for eight years and this was moving much too fast for him. "Uh, a *drink*, sure." He didn't think he was capable of casually entering into a one night fling. "Look, I should tell you something. I'm not a freak who pours out his soul to strangers, but the reason I moved in with my friend is because I just got out of an eight year relationship."

Peter's eyes widened. "Eight years? That's like sixty years for straight people."

Craig laughed. "I guess so."

"So, what you're trying to say is, I shouldn't be hitting on you so blatantly." Peter's mouth widened into a crooked grin once again.

Relieved Peter was being cool, Craig smiled back. "Not that I don't think you're hot, cause you are, but yes, that's what I'm saying."

"Not a problem. You seem like a decent guy." Just then, two customers who couldn't have been a day over twenty waved to get Peter's attention. He rolled his eyes. "Who do they think they're kidding?" He shook his head and turned back to Craig. "I'm off in an hour and we can hang out. No pressure."

Craig smiled. "Thanks Peter." He took his beer and headed over to the pool table, and leaned against the wall to watch a game already in progress.

* * * * *

Relieved he and Andrew had ended things without hurting one another, Jeremy needed to get out and clear his head. He had overcome one hurdle, but still had one more to tackle. Craig took up every ounce of space in his mind and he didn't want to waste another minute wondering whether Craig would want him back.

He hopped on the bus heading downtown, took out his cell, and he dialed Spectacular Designs. Janet picked up the phone. "Hello, Janet? It's Jeremy. I was wondering if Craig is available."

Janet was quiet for a moment. "Jeremy? No, I kicked him out of here. He's been moping around like the living dead for the past week."

Jeremy's heart sank. *Craig's out?* After a moment, Janet's words registered with him. "Wait, he's been moping? Why?" He was pretty sure he could guess the reason, but didn't want to assume anything.

Janet sighed with exasperation. "Why the hell do you think? He was crushed when you said you needed space from him. He's nuts about you. Geez guys are stupid."

Jeremy's heart began to race. A smile spread across his face so wide it hurt. Trying to conceal some of his excitement, he recomposed himself. "Um, can you tell me where I might be able to find him?"

"You gay boys are going to be the death of me. Look. I've already said more than you deserve to hear." Janet's voice wasn't angry, but wasn't friendly either. "Before I tell you anything else, tell me how you feel about him."

The words spilled out of his mouth and he made no effort to stop them. "I love him. I'm totally, head-over-heels in love with him. Andrew and I broke things off and the only thing I want is to find out if Craig still wants me."

Janet was silent and Jeremy wasn't sure whether she was getting ready to hang up on him or tear him a new one. "Well it's about fuckin' time the two of you came to your senses. That boy hasn't shut up about you ever since you came back into the picture. I love Craig, but in twelve years, I've never seen the side of him that showed up once you came around."

Jeremy's heart beat even faster, although he didn't how that was possible. "Janet, where can I find him?"

"Honestly, honey, I'm not sure. I live on Thirteenth Street and Avenue A. There's a bar across the street called, oh I keep forgetting, the name of some bird."

"Phoenix?" Jeremy was shouting into the phone.

"Yeah, Phoenix." Janet's voice was definitely friendly now. "And don't scream in my ear."

"Sorry. Listen, I appreciate you telling me he's receptive. I'm freaking out hoping I'm not too late to fix the way I fucked things up."

Janet laughed. "I think I'm gonna like you. You've got some balls on you. Go get him. Snap him out of his funk."

"I'll do my best. Wish me luck." Jeremy was so excited and his heart was racing so fast he broke out in a cold sweat.

"Good luck, honey." Janet hung up and Jeremy replaced his cell into its holder. Each stop the bus made caused him to become more and more anxious. He needed to get to the bar and to Craig. At one point he almost considered getting off and running, but thought better of it and waited, cursing each new passenger that slowed his progress to his destination. *God I hope he's at Phoenix.*

* * * * *

Craig had already had four beers by the time Peter finished his shift. He hadn't paid for a drink after the first beer and although he wasn't drunk, he was pretty buzzed and very relaxed. Craig surveyed Peter who had put on a white tank top and decided he looked even sexier with the shirt than without. His skin was rich with his tan and the way the white contrasted against his olive skin gave him a Mediterranean appearance.

Peter put another Bud Light in front of Craig and brought his Captain and Coke to his lips. "I'm glad you decided to wait. I've been staring at you from the bar counting the minutes until my shift ended."

The genuineness of his words touched a part of Craig that needed touching. It was so completely opposite from Robert's behavior and, without Jeremy to provide the sense of belonging, Peter's words nourished a starving piece of him. His body reacted physically as well and Craig's cock shifted in his pants. Without his boxer briefs to serve as a barrier, it had free reign to move around, the rough sensation of his jeans wasn't helping to reduce the stimulation. "Thanks for the beers. If I didn't know any better, I would think you were trying to get me drunk."

Peter smiled. "Maybe I am." Craig shifted uncomfortably and Peter became serious. "Craig, you said you weren't looking for anything. You seem like a good guy and I *did* ask you to meet me after my shift. Consider the beers like me paying for the date."

Craig relaxed. "Thanks."

"So, you were in an eight-year relationship which just ended. Want to tell me about it?" His smile receded just slightly. "Of course, I don't mean to pry. If you don't want to talk about it just tell me to mind my own business."

Normally Craig wouldn't pour his soul out to complete stranger, but Peter seemed genuinely interested and was being so nice to him. "I dated this guy, Robert. He was more interested in money than me. I stuck around for way too long and finally smartened up. I'm glad about ending things, but I'm left questioning why I allowed myself to stay with someone who treated me like such shit."

"We do lots of things that aren't in our own best interest. You certainly wouldn't be the first person to fall victim."

"That's not the worst of it." Again, Craig surprised himself by pouring out all of his thoughts. "I had this friend growing up. Jeremy. He and I were best friends and spent all our time together, but he moved when we were fifteen. We ran into each other here in the city a couple of months ago and everything clicked into place like no time had passed. Things I had forgotten about myself came bubbling back to the surface."

Peter took a sip of his drink, quietly listening. Craig continued. "Jeremy and his boyfriend Andrew were also having difficulties, but they're working on things now. The problem is, while our boyfriends were gone on a trip, Jeremy and I got drunk and hooked up. Now Jeremy doesn't want to be around me while he tries to fix things with his boyfriend."

Craig realized he had been prattling on and embarrassment washed through him. "I am so sorry. I'm sure the last thing you want to hear is my fucked up life after having worked a shift."

Peter laughed. "Hey, I'm a bartender. It's a hazard of the trade."

Craig smiled. "Listen, you're not working. Let me go and buy us another round." Craig walked over to the bar to order two more drinks. When he returned, Peter was sitting on a stool, leaning against the wooden ledge. The position highlighted how his shoulder muscles bulged, tapering into his lateral muscles and angling towards his narrow waist. Craig placed the drinks on the ledge and stepped up to sit on the stool. His foot caught on one of the stool legs and he tripped, falling into Peter's arms.

Craig steadied himself and looked up. Peter's eyes smoldered as he leaned in, bringing his face closer to Craig's. Not knowing how to respond, Craig turned his head. "Jeremy!"

Jeremy was staring at the two of them, emotions passing over his face. Shock gave way to understanding, which seemed to shift into sadness.

Peter kept his hold on Craig, but only to help him sit upright on the stool. "Uh, no. The name's Peter."

Craig never removed his gaze from Jeremy as he responded to Peter. "No. Jeremy just walked into the bar." Jeremy remained where Craig had first spotted him, as if his feet had been cemented to the spot.

Craig turned to face Peter, whose eyes reflected understanding along with what seemed like disappointment and he released Craig. "Oh."

"I'm sorry." His words were sincere, although he was sure they did nothing to sooth Peter's ego. Craig then turned back to Jeremy who still stood in the middle of the bar, looking at the two of them. His shoulders slumped. *Shit.*

Peter stood up. "I'll give you two some space. I'm glad we met, Craig."

Craig turned to Peter. "Y-Yeah. Thanks for the drinks. Sorry."

Peter smiled. "Don't be sorry." He leaned in and gave Craig a kiss on the cheek. Before pulling away he whispered in Craig's ear. "I'll still be here if you want to continue where we left off."

Craig nodded and Peter walked off to the bar. He turned back to Jeremy and had to shake his head before he was able to form words. He was drunker than he had realized. He took several steps towards Jeremy.

As if Craig's movement had unlocked him, Jeremy took the last few steps to close the distance between them and peered at him for a moment. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...I hope I didn't...were you –"

Craig instinctively grabbed Jeremy's hand in his own. "Oh, no. It's nothing like that. We were just...he was...never mind. What are you doing here?"

Relief seemed to flood through Jeremy as his face and shoulders relaxed. He stepped closer to Craig. "I'm here for you."

Craig blinked. *Did I hear him correctly?* "I'm sorry. Did you say you were here for me?"

Jeremy smiled. "Yes. I'm here for you." He swallowed and squared his shoulder, his mouth fixing into a tight line and his brows furrowing. "I'm an idiot. The moment you showed up in my life once again, I knew things weren't going to work out between me and Andrew. We broke up."

The sounds of various men chatting around the bar, the sharp crack of pool balls connecting, the various songs emitting from the jukebox coalesced in Craig's mind. That and the alcohol caused him to question what he had just heard. *He couldn't have said what I think he just said.* "You and Andrew what?"

"We broke up." Jeremy wasn't smiling. He was completely serious. "We broke up because all I can think about is you. You are the person who I woke up thinking about and went to bed dreaming about as a kid. Seeing you now, as an adult, all of those feelings are as real to me as they were then. I don't care how much time has passed; I'm more myself when I'm with you. You get me. You're home to me and I'm home to you. I know who you were and I love how your history has turned you into the incredible man you are."

Jeremy reached out and touched the side of Craig's face. Craig nestled into the warmth of Jeremy's palm. "I came here because I need to find out if I'm too late. I fucked up. I loved you when we were kids and I still love you now." He took a deep breath. "Am I too late? Do you still want to be with me?"

Jeremy's words cleared Craig's head and he was able to think more coherently. "When you showed up at Boris's party, I couldn't believe it was really you. When I walked up to you, something which had been buried at the bottom of a chest became uncovered, like finding treasure I feared I had lost forever. When we started spending time together, a dormant part of me woke up. You reminded me of how confident and

vibrant I used to be and I began to view the world through innocent, fifteen-year-old eyes again. I felt like a kid, but with all of the lessons I had learned through the years. I wanted you back the moment I saw you at Boris's party. It could never be too late. I love you too. I always have and I always will."

Craig kept his eyes fixed on Jeremy, whose expression lit up, as if happiness had filled his entire body. Before Craig managed to say anything, Jeremy closed the distance between them, grabbing Craig and pulling him into a fierce kiss. He wrapped his arms around Craig, pressing their mouths together and grinding his hips into Craig's. Craig felt Jeremy's excitement through his pants and wrapped his hands around Jeremy's waist to pull them together so Jeremy could feel that he was aroused as well.

Jeremy pulled back and stared at Craig. "Your cock is harder than mine."

Craig smiled. "I'm not wearing any underwear. My cock is pressing against the inside of my zipper right now."

Jeremy pulled back. "Shit. I'm sorry." A smile crept across his face. "Why aren't you wearing underwear?"

Craig shrugged, a wave of shyness passing through him. "Dunno. Wanted to try it out."

Jeremy looked around the bar, then reached into Craig's pants and wrapped his fingers around Craig's cock. "We need to do something about this. Now!"

Craig began to pant as Jeremy's hot fingers fondled him. He glanced around, shocked at Jeremy's brazen move, and relaxed once he realized the crowd had no interest in watching two guys standing at the side of the room. "Yeah we do! Hang on." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell. After a moment, the person on the other end answered. "Hey, Janet. When are you planning on coming home?"

"An hour or so."

"Can you make it two?" Craig winked at Jeremy.

"He found you, didn't he?" Janet laughed into the phone. "You little slut."

Craig stuttered, surprised at what Janet had said. "W-What? How did you..."

"Jeremy called me about an hour ago and I told him you were living with me and that you might be at that bar." She sounded smug.

"He did. And thanks." Craig remembered his reason for calling. "So would it be a problem to give us a couple of hours. Go get a manicure and pedicure, on me. In fact, why don't you get your hair cut and colored too?"

"Craig Harper. Are you saying something about my hair? I happen to think that my hair is —"

"Janet, I don't give a shit about your hair. Go to DSW and buy five pairs of shoes on me. All I'm asking for is a couple of hours."

Her voice sounded offended, but Craig could picture the wide grin which had probably spread across her face. If she had been standing in front of him, he would

probably be crushed by an embrace and then smacked on the ass for spending the past week sulking. "Okay, but you owe me home cooked dinners for a week for this."

"Deal." Craig snapped his phone shut and stood up, his erection chafing against the inside of his pants. He made a note never to free-ball again; with Jeremy back in the picture, he was sure he would either suffer an injury or get arrested for indecent exposure. "C'mon, we have some business to attend to."

Jeremy laughed. "Is that what you kids are calling it now-a-days?"

Craig ignored the comment, grabbing Jeremy by the hand and pulling him out of the bar.

Chapter Eighteen

Craig led Jeremy across the street to Janet's apartment, taking the stairs two at a time. As soon as the door was closed, he was pressed against the wall, Jeremy's hands groping him, his mouth captured him in a fervent kiss. Jeremy kneaded Craig's firm pectoral muscles, arching his body so that it molded against his.

Craig wrapped his arms around Jeremy's body, loosely holding onto his waist. Their tongues danced in each other's mouths, the kiss hungry, filled with longing and need. Jeremy explored his body, running his hands down the ribbed plain of abs and gliding up his sides, grabbing hold of firm lat muscles. Craig's cupped Jeremy's ass, pulling them close and grinding their groins together.

The friction from the grinding of their hips and the sensation of Jeremy's hard cock pressing against his own through his jeans, caused an animalistic instinct to kick in. With an audible sigh, Craig broke out of the kiss and slid down the door, fumbling with the buttons on Jeremy's pants. He yanked the jeans down to his ankles, taking his boxer briefs with them causing Jeremy's cock to snap back up, bouncing with a smack against his belly before it settled as a firm tower arching toward the ceiling.

He wrapped his hand around Jeremy's cock, guiding the lengthy shaft so it pointed at his mouth, and flicking his tongue over the tip, precum filling his senses, driving his need to even greater heights. Jeremy's cock tasted sweet, with a hint of salty tang. He ran his tongue in a slow circle around the head, reveling in the silkiness of the skin and the texture of the veins beneath the surface. As he teased the highly sensitive area beneath the rim, Jeremy shuddered above him, gripping his shoulders for balance.

Slowly working more and more of Jeremy into his mouth, his jaws relaxed and his tongue continued to circle the shaft, spreading the slick combination of saliva and Jeremy's own fluids around the hard flesh in his mouth. His enjoyment of Jeremy was magnified by the fact he was free to do so without any of the accompanying guilt of cheating. Jeremy was finally his.

Once Jeremy's cock made contact with the back of his mouth, Craig loosened, allowing more of his length to push past the back of his throat. He had waited long enough for Jeremy and had no patience for taking his time; there would be time to explore and get to know the intricate details of his body later. Right now, all he wanted was to please Jeremy and to make him squirm.

Jeremy's length slid down his throat, as if his ability to relax and accept the invading member was as natural for him as breathing. Jeremy let out a guttural moan, pumping his hips, shoving his cock deeper. He could taste Jeremy's excitement as more precum escaped from the tip, spreading through him like sugar dissolving in water.

He grabbed Jeremy's hips, matching his sucking and licking to the rhythm of the face-fuck he was receiving, wanting to bring Jeremy to orgasm and to taste the thick streams of semen when Jeremy shot down his throat. Craig moaned, wanting to create a

vibration along the shaft and was rewarded by a new round of moans and shudders from above him.

"Oh God. So...good. Your mouth...so warm, so soft." Jeremy's legs began to tremble. "I'm...getting...close."

Encouraged, Craig tightened his hold on Jeremy's hips, not wanting to risk the chance of losing one drop of the precious fluid. He ran his tongue in circles, massaging every inch of Jeremy's cock which slid in and out of his mouth at a furious pace. His jaw muscles began to strain as he tried to make room for the massive erection while working his tongue to increase Jeremy's pleasure at the same time. The sounds he drew out of Jeremy were worth any amount of discomfort.

Craig could feel the ripples of Jeremy's muscles as his body released into a powerful orgasm. His legs quivered, the shaking travelling up his thighs and into his hips where Craig was holding him. Moments later his cock became thicker. "Uh, Craig." The sound sent a new wave of excitement through him, intensified when Jeremy's hands tightened on his head.

When the first spurt of semen splashed against the back of his throat, each of his nerves caught on fire. Jeremy buried his cock all the way to the hilt as stream after stream of thick, salty-sweet spunk flowed into him. The taste, the overdrive of his nerves, and the knowledge he had brought Jeremy to completion was bringing on his orgasm faster than he could register.

Jeremy pulled out of his mouth, two hands hooking under his arm pits and pulling him up along the door. He had no time to mourn the loss of Jeremy's beautiful cock before his own became encased in Jeremy's hot, slick mouth. The heat threw him over the edge and he arched backwards, banging his head against the door. Rather than hurting, the dull pain increased his arousal as he shot deep into the back of Jeremy's throat. He knew his sperm was coming out thick and fast. His first spasm would have shot past his head if he had been beating off.

Jeremy didn't seem to care. He sucked with all his might, managing to take in every drop of what Craig had to offer. Once the initial waves of Craig's orgasm subsided, several smaller aftershocks rippled through him and his whole body shuddered with heightened sensitivity as Jeremy continued to run his tongue over his spent member. After several minutes, Craig peered down at Jeremy, whose eyes burned with lust, gazing into his with love and arousal. He glanced at Jeremy's cock and noticed Jeremy had not fully completed his own orgasm when he had reversed their positions, several strings of white sperm coating his hand and dripping down his fingers onto the floor.

"Holy shit." Craig's breath was labored as he slunk to the ground. "That was awesome." His cock was still hard and throbbing. He leaned forward, placing his mouth over Jeremy's. As they kissed, their cum intermingled as their tongues tumbled against one another. A renewed surge of desire shot through his body and his cock stretched within the already taut skin. Craig reached down and discovered Jeremy's excitement matched his own.

Jeremy managed to push one question out of his mouth between kisses. "You get your results?"

Craig breathed back his response. "Negative."

"Good. Strip." Craig obeyed, ripping the rest of his clothes off as Jeremy stripped himself.

Once undressed, Jeremy extended his hand to Craig and helped him to his feet. "Turn around."

Obedying his lover, the word sending a rush of excitement through him, Craig turned around and faced the door. "Spread your legs." Again, Craig complied. Jeremy knelt down and Craig felt hot breath against the crease of his ass. Jeremy placed one hand on each cheek, spreading Craig, exposing his hole. "Mmm. I'm gonna get you ready, then I'm gonna fuck you. That is if I can last that long. Knowing that you're mine might send me over the edge too quickly."

Jeremy's affirmation that they belonged to each other along with his promise to fuck him sent Craig's mind into an ecstatic frenzy. "I want you inside me."

Jeremy flicked his tongue over Craig's opening, causing the muscle to constrict. He licked in soft circles, massaging the ring with the tip of his tongue, working his way closer and closer to the opening. With each circle, he applied more pressure and his tongue began to penetrate Craig, sending waves of electricity up and down his spine. Finally, Jeremy pushed Craig's cheeks as far apart as they would go and buried his face between them, probing Craig's hole with his tongue. Craig moaned, the sensation sending him reeling towards heaven.

He pulled away and blew gently on Craig's anus. The cool sensation sent a new wave of pleasure through Craig's body. When Jeremy didn't return to rimming, Craig glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of him wetting his finger in his mouth. The view, along with the anticipation of what he suspected Jeremy was about to do, caused his cock to throb with excitement. He reached down and began to stroke himself only to have his hand swatted away by Jeremy. "Uh-uh. We're gonna take our time with this."

Jeremy buried his finger into Craig's ass, twisting inside his body, continuing to probe until an electric shock radiated through him, causing each nerve ending to come alive once again. Craig lurched under his touch, immediately loosening to Jeremy. He pressed back, wanting more of him inside, yet wondering how much more of the intense sensation and pleasure he could take before collapsing.

Jeremy added a second finger, scissoring them to create friction, each motion rubbing against the sensitive gland deep inside. Craig began to thrust backwards to force Jeremy's fingers deeper inside him. Finally, Jeremy added a third finger and Craig tilted his head back, a loud groan emitting from his throat. He was surprised by the sound, feral and lust-filled, his need for Jeremy to be inside him was primal. "Please. I need you inside me."

Jeremy stood and positioned his cock against Craig's hole. He pushed, sliding all the way in with one swift motion, causing Craig to gasp at the sudden invasion. The burn quickly turned to pleasure and he reached back, grabbing Jeremy's ass urging him to pump harder.

Jeremy maintained a slow rhythm of pulling out to the head of his cock before pushing back in, teasing Craig. Beads of sweat formed on Craig's forehead, neck, and back. He wanted more of Jeremy in him. Matching the rhythm of the onslaught filling his channel, he began to fuck back onto Jeremy's cock, evoking a whimper of pleasure.

Craig reversed the role of controlling the action, fucking back onto Jeremy's cock with greater speed and force. He felt a tight grip on his hips as Jeremy's body fell forward, leaning against him, his breathing labored. "Wait, getting too close. Don't want this to end yet." He pressed Craig against the door, preventing him from being able to move. "Bedroom."

Jeremy started moving them in the direction of the bedroom, sidling in an awkward position as he tried to keep his cock buried inside him as they walked. Craig tried to help since he didn't want to lose the sensation of being filled by Jeremy for one moment. The coordination necessary was too much for him and when they walked over the rug, his foot caught and he fell to his knees. A short yelp escaped from him as Jeremy's cock popped out of Craig's ass. "Dammit!"

Jeremy laughed. "You are such a goober. I swear you can find a way to trip on anything. You know, call me crazy, but I love that about you."

Craig sat up, embarrassed, but not caring whether Jeremy was laughing. "Roll over. Get on your back right here on the rug." Jeremy obeyed and Craig crawled up between his legs, placing one hand behind each knee and pushing Jeremy's legs over his head, exposing his hole. He buried his face into the crease of Jeremy's ass and inhaled deeply, taking in the rich and musky scent, sending a surge of pleasure through his body and directly to his cock. He licked a few short circles around Jeremy's hole and began to probe him, the taste invading his senses as he inserted his tongue into the sweet opening.

Jeremy moaned, writhing beneath him. "I'm so turned on I can't even breathe. I want you inside me right now."

Craig lifted his gaze so he peered over Jeremy's balls and looked down on Jeremy's face. "Are you sure? I haven't loosened you up yet."

Jeremy nodded. "I don't want you to loosen me up. I want to feel every inch of you as you enter me for the first time." Craig wasn't sure. He didn't want to hurt Jeremy, but the pleading expression was impossible to resist. He raised himself to his knees and lowered Jeremy so his hole aligned with his cock. Wetting it with saliva, he allowed it to glide along Jeremy's crease until the head nudged against his slick opening. Applying a hint of pressure, his cock began to slide into Jeremy, but didn't fully penetrate. Craig wanted to torture him a bit before giving in to Jeremy's desires. His teasing evoked more begging. "Please, fuck me."

Craig pushed forward, the tip piercing the ring of muscle, and forcing a hiss out of Jeremy. He hesitated, remaining still, but before he could register what Jeremy was doing, Jeremy's hands gripped his ass and pulled his cock into his tight hole. Jeremy cried out and Craig worried he had gone too fast, but no pain registered on Jeremy's face. His mouth gaped and his eyes rolled around with an expression of pure rapture.

Satisfied Jeremy was enjoying this, Craig began pumping in and out of him. "Oh God, Jeremy. So hot. So tight." Jeremy continued to squirm beneath him, shaking his head from side to side, murmuring unintelligibly.

Craig knew he wouldn't last long. Not only had he loved Jeremy his whole life, the physical connection was magnified by their deep connection. Jeremy wasn't a body to please and to be used for pleasure; he was a friend, his best friend, the one he loved more than any other. His entire body felt like it was being tickled with a feather, shaking as sweat dripped down his temples and neck, coating his shoulders, "I'm gonna come."

Jeremy locked his eyes with Craig. "Come inside me."

Jeremy's fevered command was too much and sent him right over the edge. Craig's balls tightened and pulled close and his entire body convulsed as jet after jet of hot sperm filled Jeremy's ass.

Once the shudders of his aftershock subsided, Jeremy sat up, pushing Craig onto his back. "My turn." Jeremy positioned himself over Craig and guided his cock to Craig's hole. When he pushed in, all Craig could feel was pleasure and love, no tightness, no sting, no burn. His whole body craved to be filled by Jeremy. Within moments, Jeremy's breathing became labored and his face tightened signaling his orgasm was building up inside him. "Gonna come. Now!" As Jeremy shouted and arched his head backwards, he slammed his cock all the way into Craig's ass. Jeremy's cock bucked inside of him, hot semen coating his insides.

Jeremy releasing inside him, knowing Jeremy was finally his, filled Craig with a fulfillment and completion greater than any he had ever experienced. His eyes filled with tears. He could feel them stream down his cheeks and hear as they dripped to the floor.

Jeremy collapsed on top of him, panting and they lay together for several minutes. Once Jeremy got his breathing under control, he lifted his weight so he rested on his elbows and forearms, peering down at Craig. "I love you so much. Never knew sex could be so good."

Tears continued to slip out of the corner of Craig's eyes. "We've always been meant for each other. I know that now more than ever. I may have my faults and so do you, but together we're perfect."

Jeremy leaned down, taking Craig's mouth with his and they shared a languid kiss. After lingering moments of tenderness, Jeremy pulled back and got to his knees. "Come on. Let's go take a shower." Craig allowed himself to be led to the bathroom and they

spent the next half hour under soothing hot water, kissing, massaging, talking, and loving each other.

* * * * *

Craig woke up early the next day; Jeremy snuggled close to him in his arms. It warmed him through and he didn't want to get up. Grudgingly sliding out of the bed, he went to the kitchen to make coffee. He still couldn't believe how much his life had changed in such a short time. At the same time, it hadn't changed enough. Jeremy still had to leave, Craig still lived with Janet. It felt as if there were too many loose ends that needed to be taken care of before his life felt like it was back in order.

Those were issues he could address later. Right now Jeremy was in his bed, right where he wanted him to be. Before he left, he went to the bedroom to give Jeremy a kiss.

Jeremy rolled over as Craig kissed him, rubbing his eyes and smiling. "Morning."

"Shit. I didn't want to wake you. I put some clothes on the dresser. We're pretty much the same size so you don't need to go to work wearing the same thing you did yesterday."

Jeremy smiled. "Thanks." He propped himself up on an elbow. "Can I see you again tonight?"

Craig lay next to him, folding him into his arms and giving him a sweet kiss on the lips. "Tonight, tomorrow night, every night."

"I want to rest for ten more minutes before I get up," Jeremy purred before rolling back onto his pillow, "I want to rest for ten more minutes before I get up."

Craig kissed him once more and tucked him in and headed for work. Craig was hit by a wall of heat when he stepped out of the apartment building, the morning already oppressive. *Thank God for air conditioning.* Janet had told him he had an early appointment—eight o'clock. That gave him plenty of time to stop off at Starbucks to get a coffee and a bagel.

Spectacular Designs was empty when he arrived, so he put on a fresh pot of coffee and organized the main room for the day. His co-workers slowly trudged in and by seven-thirty they were all busy working on their designs and shooting the shit.

At eight o'clock, Frank DiMasso arrived for his appointment. Craig led him into his office. "I know you had an appointment with Janet, but I'm covering for her today. Could you tell me a little about your project?"

Frank was short with dark features and a pointed goatee which caused him to look a bit like a goblin and lent a comical air to his businesslike manner. He reached into his briefcase and took out a brochure which seemed more like a catalogue. Emblazoned across the front was DiMasso Properties with a crude picture of a building beneath the name. "I own several apartment buildings all over Manhattan and a few business spaces in the other boroughs. I want to create a campaign to advertise my properties

and increase tenancy in my vacant spaces. So far, I've relied on print for my advertising, but I still have too many vacancies which are costing me a bundle. I'm thinking a visual ad campaign, one that's bold and catchy, might drum up more business."

"Okay. We can certainly accommodate a visual ad campaign. How large is the scope of this project?"

Frank tugged at his goatee. "I'm not sure. I want to take out quarter page spreads in the newspaper and in the phone book. I think I'd like to do a web campaign as well."

Craig nodded. "That can be quite pricy. I would recommend choosing one medium and making that work for you. When a campaign is spread too thin, the client is generally unsatisfied with the results. If you spend your money to get the message out in more places, but don't secure prime spots for those spaces, we find the results are less profitable than putting your money to good use in one medium and making sure your ad will be seen."

"I like the way you think. Clear, direct, easy to follow." Frank nodded. "Which medium would you suggest?"

Craig was pleased. Frank seemed like someone who was open and who would bring in good future business for the company. "I would begin with the electronic medium. You said you tried print with less-than-satisfactory results. May I take a look at your brochure? If I get an idea of the locations of your residences and businesses, I may be able to recommend a web site suitable for your needs."

Frank handed it over and Craig began leafing through it. The residence section was subdivided by neighborhood. He looked in the East Village section and noticed Janet's building was listed. "Huh. My friend lives in this property. Are there any vacancies in that building?"

Frank's eyes perked up. "Craig, I'm going to propose something to you. As I said, I like people who are direct." He leaned back in his chair, scrutinizing Craig as if he were deciding whether he should proceed. "Are you opposed to bartering?"

Craig shook his head. "No, not at all, but what do I have that you want?"

Frank smiled, a wide grin crossing his face. "Your talent. You say you like the building?"

"Yeah. I love the building and the area." Craig didn't know where this was going.

"Well, I have an apartment on the second floor which is vacant; a big two bedroom." Craig could see Frank's mind spinning as he concocting his business proposition. "Since I own the building, I get to set the rent for the units. How about we strike a deal?"

Craig wasn't sure what kind of a deal Frank had in mind. "I guess that depends on the deal."

"Well, you told me this was going to be an expensive job, right?"

"I think so, yes."

"Well, I would be willing to give you the apartment for very low rent if you would be willing to be my on-call graphic designer. I'm going to want to start with the web campaign, like you suggested, but will then move to billboard, the *Yellow Pages*, and newspaper. If you do the designs for free, I'll write up a contract for you to rent the apartment for say, six hundred dollars a month."

Craig swallowed hard. Six hundred dollars was unheard of anywhere in Manhattan. A two bedroom in the East Village usually went for somewhere between twenty-five hundred and three thousand a month. "Frank, I think we could work something out, but I would need to do the work on my own time to keep it off the books. I do plenty of private consulting, but once work is on the books it becomes official."

Frank beamed. "Excellent. So you're agreeing?"

A twinge of guilt tugged at the back of Craig's mind. He was taking business from his own company for his own personal gain. Although he was bringing in twice the business of all the other designers combined because of Boris, he still felt like he was doing something wrong. Janet would ask him why the deal fell through. "Can I add an extra piece to our agreement?"

"That depends." Frank's face became serious. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well, my friend, Janet, lives in that building. She is normally the one who interviews clients and she's going to want to know why we didn't land you as an account. I might be able to soften her up if *her* rent was also reduced."

Frank laughed. "My boy, you are in the wrong field. You should be in sales. What's the unit number?"

Craig told him the unit number and Frank pulled out his palm, looking up the current monthly rent. "Right now she's paying twenty-four hundred a month. If you are willing to do work for me, I can cut her rent in half."

Craig's heart skipped a beat. "Really?" Before he agreed, Craig remembered a similar interaction with Boris. "To be clear, how much work are you expecting me to do for you as a result of this barter?"

Frank laughed even harder. "I was wrong. You shouldn't be in sales. You should be managing sales reps. Setting limits up front so you aren't locked into a deal without boundaries. I like you, boy."

Craig smiled, not liking the fact Frank had called him *boy* twice in as many minutes. "So, what is the scope of your expectations?"

Frank pondered his question. "How about you help me with the web, The Yellow Pages, bulletin, and news campaigns in exchange for your apartment and the reduction of your friend's rent. That would include running as middle man with the agents and sales people to lock in prime spots and to determine how long the run will be published."

That was reasonable. "I can do that. I'll do the design work and Janet, who manages the contacts with the web and print companies, can work out the best deals for you."

Frank sat back in his chair, nodding approvingly. "After we complete the agreed upon work, we can determine if a new arrangement is needed. Either more bartering or I can pay outright. If this campaign goes well, I'll be more liquid and will be able to afford a larger campaign."

Craig thought the deal sounded good...too good. "What happens when I finish the work? Does the rent change once we're done?"

Frank smiled so broadly all of his teeth gleamed in the light from the ceiling. "I like your style kid. I'll increase your rent at a set amount, say four-point-five percent every two years for as long as you like or until I sell the building, whichever comes first. And before you ask, I don't intend to sell any of my properties so we aren't talking about anything likely to happen soon, if at all."

Craig relaxed. "Does the deal extend to Janet as well?" Frank nodded. "Okay, I think we have a deal." Craig took out a blank sheet of paper and wrote down his cell number. "I can begin on this as soon as you like."

Frank reached into his briefcase and pulled out a business card. "Fantastic. Call my office and ask to speak to Gene. She's a doll. She'll draw up the contract for the apartment. All you need to do is go into the office and sign. Your friend Janet should call her too. I'll tell Gene to draw up the new contract for her as well." Frank stood up. "It's a pleasure to do business with you. Get settled in the place and we can begin the campaign later this week."

Craig stood up and shook his hand. "It was a pleasure doing business with you as well." He walked Frank to the front door. Frank hustled past him without a backward glance.

He ran back to his office, shut the door, and started jumping up and down. Craig wasn't sure who to call first, Janet or Jeremy. He decided it would be best to call Janet since this was going to directly impact her and he wanted to make sure she didn't blow a gasket. Picking up his cell, he dialed her number. After a few rings she picked up. "Janet, we have to talk."

"What!" She sounded irritated. "This is my first day off in a month and you fucking call me at eight-thirty in the fucking morning. Fuck you!"

"Okay, then I won't tell you about the meeting I had with Frank DiMasso." Craig counted to five before Janet broke the silence. *She lasted longer than I expected.*

"All right, how did the meeting go?"

Craig's grin nearly split his cheeks. "We didn't get the job."

"You woke me up to tell me we *didn't* get the job. You asshole!" Craig could hear Janet take in a deep breath and knew she was ready to start in with a long list of profanities.

"Wait. What if I told you *not* getting the deal was going to be financially beneficial to you directly?"

Silence. "I'm listening."

"Hear me out. Frank offered me a deal. An apartment is available in your building on the second floor. He offered me the unit for six hundred dollars a month if I did the designing for him for —"

"You what? You fucking gave away business for your own —"

"Hang on." Craig knew this final bit of information was going to tip the scale in his favor. "I made him sweeten the deal before agreeing. I told him I wanted him to reduce your rent as well." He repeated to her what he'd worked out with DiMasso.

"Did you say twelve-hundred a month? Did I actually hear you correctly?" Craig heard Janet hyperventilating on the other end of the line.

"Yes. We both get reduced rents and limited rent hikes as long as I do four jobs for him and you help him with to get the best deals through our contacts with the web companies, papers, and the *Yellow Pages*.

"Craig, I knew you were one of my best friends for a reason." Janet started laughing and Craig knew she was thrilled with his decision. "Let's not let tell the others about this. Let's say the client chose not to hire us."

"Precisely what I was thinking." Craig sighed, relieved this conversation had gone well. "Okay, enjoy the rest of your day." He hung up and leaned back in his chair. With the call to Janet completed, he had the much more important and frightening phone call to make. He had to call Jeremy.

He dialed Jeremy's number, holding his breath to calm his nerves as he waited for Jeremy's voicemail. To his surprise, Jeremy answered. "Hey, I didn't think you would pick up. Aren't you teaching right now?"

"The kids are in art. I'm on a preparation period right now."

Craig took a gulp of his coffee. "Can you talk for a minute?"

Jeremy laughed. "Forty-five of them. What's up?"

Craig hadn't prepared what he would say. He had only expected to leave a message. Sticking to his usual behavior when he didn't know what to say, he dove right in with his question. "How would you like to live in the East Village again?"

"I'd love to, but I can't afford the rent."

"What if you *could*?" Craig's blood raced through his veins.

"Then *hell* yeah, I'd love to move back." Jeremy paused for a moment. "Where's this coming from?"

Craig's chest constricted as he prepared to ask the most important question he had ever asked in his life. "I had a meeting with a client who owns Janet's building. I'm going to do some work under the table for him and he's renting me a unit for six hundred a month." Craig's heart rate sped up even more as he worked up to the big question. "And I wondered....what I was hoping...is...would you move in with me?" Time suspended for a fraction of a second which seemed to stretch for an eternity, all of his fears and excitement frozen inside him, waiting for Jeremy's response.

Finally, Jeremy spoke. "I would *love* to live with you. I was thinking how much I wanted to live with you after you left this morning. Waking up in your arms felt right."

Craig breathed again, time moving in fast forward catching up from the moment when it had stopped. "Really? You want to live with me?"

Jeremy laughed. "You sound as excited as my kids on Halloween. Of course I want to live with you. I loved you and now that we're a couple, I don't want another day to pass where we aren't together."

Craig laughed. "Oh my God. This is so perfect. I can't believe it"

Jeremy laughed again, before he became serious. "Craig, believe it. Being with you is like stepping into my own skin. Let's make a home together. There is nothing I want more."

"I love you so much, Jeremy. Let's go sign the papers tomorrow."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll see you tonight." Jeremy hung up the phone.

Craig jumped up from his seat and started dancing around his office once again. His whole life flashed before his eyes in clips like a movie reel: him and Jeremy climbing The Love Tree, peering at Jeremy's face through the rear window of the car as his family drove away, seeing him at Boris's party, their evening the night Robert and Andrew left, Jeremy finding him at the Phoenix, making love. Craig was so excited he spun in a circle, tripping in the process and tumbling to the floor in a heap.

Laughing, he closed his eyes and the best clip of all flashed through his mind...the two of them together for the rest of their lives.

About the Author

D. H. Starr is a clean-cut guy with a wickedly naughty mind. He grew up in Boston and loves the city for its history and beauty. Also, having lived in NYC, he enjoys the fast pace and the availability of anything and everything. He first became interested in reading from his mother who always had a stack of books piled next to her bed. Family is important to D. H. and his stories center around the intricate and complex dynamics of relationships and how people work through problems while maintaining respect and love. His favorite books tend to fall in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, paranormal, and coming of age.

To learn more about D. H. Starr and his books, please visit his website at www.dhstarr.com or follow his blog at www.dhstarr.blogspot.com.

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