The book cover features a dark, textured background. In the foreground, a woman with dark skin and short hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. She is wearing a brown leather jacket. In the background, a man with dark skin is standing, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, with his hands on his hips. The title 'THE UNTOLD WANT' is written in a large, blue, serif font in the upper left, and the author's name 'CATT FORD' is in a smaller, blue, serif font in the lower left.

THE UNTOLD WANT

CATT FORD

Dedicated to Patric Michael, a shining star.

The untold want, by life and land ne'er granted,
Now, Voyager, sail thou forth, to seek and find.

—Walt Whitman

EVEN at that hour in the morning, the scent of roasted chestnuts from the street vendors filled the air, along with the bells being rung by the volunteers tending the Salvation Army buckets.

At least in the financial district he didn't have to listen to the sickly sentimental sound of the "Little Drummer Boy" emanating from department stores, although all the other usual signs of Christmas were everywhere, even though it was still before Halloween.

It was ironic to Myles that, in the wake of the financial crash, he was one of the few who not only still had a job but also plenty of money. The problem was he had nothing and no one he wanted to spend it on. Still, he went to work faithfully every day. Why not? He didn't have much else to do.

Pausing with his hand on the doorknob to admire his own name spelled out in brushed steel letters, Myles walked into the front office where Tanisha sat behind the curved desk, her face lit up by her monitor. She was the only thing he had taken with him when the old firm had fallen away from under his feet.

He stopped short when he spotted something new hanging on the paneled wall in a prominent position. Pointing at it, Myles demanded, "What is that—mall art thing?"

Tanisha craned her head and smiled eagerly. "It's a painting."

“Is that a Thomas Kinkade?”

“Why yes, I do believe it is. Do you like it?”

Myles took in the innocent, hopeful expression on Tanisha’s pretty face and swallowed his impolite response. Even though Tanisha was not as guileless as she looked. “It looks like a print.”

“It is,” Tanisha said. “I can’t afford real art.”

“Oh yes, you can, and anyway, I said I’d get something for the walls,” Myles said.

“Yes, I seem to remember you saying that about ten months ago when we moved in,” Tanisha said with an air of one fondly reviewing a distant event. “And yet it still looks empty in here, like you just crash-landed here by accident.”

“Except for the sign,” Myles said.

Tanisha rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah, the *sign*. Good thing your name is on it so nobody blames me for this cell.”

“You know my taste doesn’t run to—that sort of thing,” Myles said, pointing at the quaint cottage with flowers lining the path and a homey glow in the windows. “Besides, with people losing their homes—”

“Pretty tactless, huh?”

“You did this to coerce me into picking out something else, didn’t you?” Myles asked, light dawning. At their previous employer, Tanisha had decorated her office with African masks.

“Yes, but I adore how careful you’re being not to insult my taste.” Tanisha smirked. “Don’t worry, it’s not mine, I borrowed it from my mother. But it’s going to stay there until you come up with something better.”

“I’ll go to a gallery this afternoon,” Myles promised.

“I’ve heard that before. Look, Myles, I know things have been rough....” Tanisha paused.

Myles shook his head slightly, warning her off sensitive territory. The fact that his marriage had gone down the tubes with the market left him feeling surprisingly relieved, with just a tinge of sadness and regret, although he still didn’t want to discuss it. The writing had been on the wall; it was hardly a black swan event.

“But if you don’t want your clients thinking you picked that horror out, you will find something better. Or I’ll break out the masks,” Tanisha threatened.

“Not the masks,” Myles teased.

“Yes, at great personal sacrifice, I will strip the walls of my condo bare, bring them here, and drive nails into that awful retro wood paneling you’re so in love with. Then I will hang my masks all over and people will think we’re a front for a tour service to West Africa.”

“I have one appointment this morning, and then I’ll be free after lunch. I’ll take a walk to Chelsea and see what I can find,” Myles said, checking his watch.

“Myles,” Tanisha instructed, “don’t get anything bland and corporate. I have to live here too, you know.”

“I know.”

“Not that I have anything against corporations, depending,” she called after him.

“Better not. They have money too,” Myles muttered.

As soon as he sat down, his private line rang. Glancing at the caller ID, Myles drew in a deep breath before he picked up the receiver. “Hi, Mom,” he said.

“Good morning, Myles.” Her formal greeting seemed to be an indirect rebuke for the casual way he’d answered. “It’s good to finally get you on the phone in person. Your answering machine never calls me back.”

“I’ve been busy, Mom.” Myles stared out at the glimpse of gray sky between the surrounding buildings.

“Apparently your voice mail has been too. You work too hard.”

“You always said that idle hands are the devil’s playground.” It amused Myles slightly to use her own homily against her, even though he knew he couldn’t win this one.

“Work is fine, but not to the point where you don’t take the time to see your own parents,” his mother said, firmly putting him in his place. “We haven’t seen you in months. We would like to see you for dinner Sunday.”

“I can’t, Mom—” Myles started mechanically.

“Not this Sunday, next weekend. Surely you haven’t scheduled anything that far in advance. Besides, we’re not that far away. We live in Queens, not another state.”

The unspoken threat was clear, and Myles knew he would have to capitulate. Usually his mother managed to guilt him into coming at least once a month, and he’d staved her off for three. “Will Grandma be there?” His grandmother Mimi was still feisty and full of sass in her eighties, and she made him laugh.

“Well, of course. She does live with us, you know.”

Myles smiled, both at the hint of distaste in his mother’s voice and the one pleasure he got from visiting his parents. “What can I bring? A bottle of wine?”

“Nothing, Myles. Just seeing you will be enough.” His mother paused and then hurriedly said, “Well, I’ve got to run, and I’m sure you’re busy as usual. See you in two weeks then, Myles. Be sure to be on time and wear a tie. We’ll eat at seven.”

She hung up before he could utter a word of protest. He hated her hit-and-run tactics, and the way she screwed him into visiting when it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do. He was sure she would be asking probing questions about his social life and then suggest he meet some friend’s single daughter. This was a set-up. His mother just couldn’t seem to leave it alone.

When Tanisha rang to tell him that his client had arrived, Myles turned his attention to finances in relief. At least there was something he was good at.

AFTER a quick lunch at his desk, Myles cut over to Broadway, planning to walk to Chelsea instead of catching a cab. Belatedly remembering Tanisha’s instructions, he regretted not Googling black art before he left. There was no lack of galleries, but he hadn’t thought about how difficult it might be to identify one that carried something that would appeal to both Tanisha and him. Unless it happened to be called The Black Arts. Myles almost laughed at the imaginary name, but he didn’t have the energy.

After suffering through the generic corporate art that hung on the walls of his old firm, Myles wanted to look at something he would enjoy every day. He might have enjoyed the idea of Tanisha’s masks, boldly staring down his clients waiting in the outer office, but he didn’t want her to empty

her own walls. She had proved her faith in his strategies by investing a percentage of her salary with him at their old firm. Ironically, when the housing market crashed, she had finally been able to realize her dream of actually owning her own place. She had bored him for months, sharing paint chips and decorating strategies, and he didn't want her to wreck that now because he simply couldn't be bothered to decorate the office.

Another irony that gave him a bitter chuckle was the switch in their circumstances. Now Tanisha owned her own condo with a water view, while he was living in a tiny studio rental with a single window looking out onto an airshaft. His wife—ex-wife—had kept the expensive duplex co-op with the view of Central Park, and he was the one sleeping on a foldout couch in a one-room apartment. He seemed to be frozen in one spot, not caring enough to even look for a better place. Stationary. Stagnant. Bored.

None of the paintings that hung in the windows of the galleries he passed inspired any ardent response within him. He kept walking, wondering just how long that Kinkade was going to be on his wall, when his attention was caught by the name of a gallery across the street.

The Black Swan.

Myles crossed the street to peer in the window. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, he walked inside. He wasn't used to going to galleries. It looked like nobody was home, and the gallery seemed to be in disarray, with canvases leaning against the walls as if someone had just taken them down. Or perhaps they were putting them up. Spotlights lit empty spaces on the grey walls, but Myles wasn't fussy. He was fine viewing the paintings where they sat.

The portraits in the first room were painted with bright, cheerful colors, and Myles tried to imagine the effect against his walls. The painter seemed enthralled by women; all his subjects were African-American females wearing dresses and turbans of stylized tribal fabric. Myles thought that perhaps Tanisha might like something less... thematic. Or maybe she'd love these. He should have asked more questions.

And besides, the small painting that had first caught his eye in the window seemed to be by a different artist. Even to his untutored eye, the difference in color and technique made it easy to tell.

His breath caught when he entered the second room, and he stopped short, stunned by the haunting beauty of the paintings, all in warm tones of ivory, amber, caramel, and chocolate. This had to be the same artist whose work was in the window, but Myles hadn't expected to be entirely surrounded by life-size nude men. In a panic, he glanced around quickly but found he was alone with his pounding heart. His first cowardly impulse was to leave immediately and learn to live with the Kinkade, but before he could bolt, he had to look at one particular painting on the wall up close.

It was rendered in a realistic style, capturing the scene almost as precisely as a photograph. It was framed tightly so that he couldn't see the entire face, only the curve of the man's jaw, his neck, the way his shoulder bunched with tension, part of a naked back. The man was standing next to a chain link fence through which a basketball court was visible, with the players blurred in motion as if by a camera's depth of field. Light and shadow delineated the curve and dip of muscle under the man's chocolate skin. Sweat beaded on

his back, and a pinpoint of sunlight dazzled off one droplet sliding down his bicep.

A rush of sense memory hit Myles like a hurricane, so intense it was like he'd been suddenly transported back in time. He could hear the slap of the ball against the asphalt and his palms, feel the heat of the sun on his skin, his nostrils were filled with the scent of masculine perspiration. He shut his eyes, unaware that he was swaying in place, following where memory led him; the cool darkness of deep shade under the bleachers, the bite of strong fingers digging into his flesh, the feel of hard, firm muscle straining against him, the tang of bitter, salty come in his mouth.

"It's wonderful, isn't it?"

The voice snapped Myles back to reality, and he realized he was panting. He needed a moment to compose himself before he turned to see who had spoken to him. A droplet of sweat slid down from his armpit and dampened his shirt.

"Yes—yes, it is."

A well-groomed black man with graying hair stood there smiling at him. The man had to be in his fifties, and from his proprietary attitude, Myles inferred that he was either the owner or the manager of the gallery.

"You might enjoy some of the other pieces by this artist, although the floor isn't the ideal way to view them." The manager waved his arm invitingly at the other paintings leaning against the walls. "We're in the process of hanging for the opening."

"I—I'm sorry, I shouldn't have just walked in," Myles started.

"Of course you should. That's why we leave the doors unlocked." The manager smiled gently. "He's very talented. I

expect that I shall be giving him a solo show very soon. It's very evocative, isn't it?"

"Takes me back to the old days on the playground," Myles managed to say with a dry mouth. He swallowed hard.

"Let me get you some water," the manager said.

"I don't want to put you to the trouble."

"It's no trouble." The manager held out his hand. "Jermaine Kolahi."

"Myles Winston."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Winston. I'll be right back."

Myles unbuttoned his overcoat and fished out his handkerchief to mop his forehead dry. Glancing swiftly around, he caught no sound or sight of the manager, so he leaned in closer to check the painter's signature. D. Robinson, he made out, squinting to focus his eyes. He wished he'd brought his readers with him just to be sure. Could it be....

Kolahi came back and handed him a bottle of cold water, companionably opening one for himself. For the first time, Myles noticed that the man was dressed simply but expensively in a good polo shirt and designer jeans. He felt stuffy and overdressed in his regulation dark suit, white shirt, and navy tie, but maybe it was just that Kolahi was wearing casual clothing for hanging the show, as he'd said. Somehow, Kolahi came across as rather formal in manner, making the jeans seem like weekend wear.

"Thank you." Myles twisted off the cap and drank thirstily. The cold water hit him like an ice bath, helping to put out the slow burn that had ignited his groin when he saw the painting. He realized that he was half hard and

hoped it didn't show. By rights, he should be celebrating; he hadn't had a good hard-on in at least a year. "This—this artist, D. Robinson—" He stopped, knowing that the silence would get the other man to speak.

"Davion Robinson," Kolahi said.

His heart was thundering in his chest so loudly that Myles was sure the other man could hear it, although Kolahi gave no sign of noticing anything unusual. "I—knew a Davion Robinson once, in school. I wonder if it could be the same man."

"You might wish to come to the opening, then. He'll be here." Kolahi barely touched Myles's elbow to guide him to another piece. He bent and picked up the painting, hanging it on the wall for better viewing. "He calls this one *Zebra*. Of course, you know that zebra often refers to the offspring of a black and white couple. This is a little private joke on that slang."

Unseen venetian blinds cast stripes of light and dark over the rich cocoa skin of a naked male. His face was obscured by shadow, leaving the voluptuous mounds of his buttocks as the focal point as he lay sprawled on a bed. The lines of light followed the curve of his cheeks, reaching shadowy fingers into the valley between them.

Myles felt the fire inside him flare up again. It was almost painfully sensual, as if the man were waiting for his lover to come and take him from behind. He shook his head, trying to chase the thought from his brain. Whatever had made him think of *that*? It could just as easily be a man taking a nap or enjoying the warmth of the sun. But Myles knew that his visceral reaction was correct; the sensuous

splay of limbs was too inviting, and the smooth skin reminded him of gleaming satin.

"I like dark chocolate better."

He whipped his head around to stare at Kolahi, but the man hadn't spoken; he was still gazing at the painting. The words must have been an echo from the past, audible only to him. He wondered about the first painting he'd been drawn to, realizing that the color of the man on the outside of the fence looking in matched his skin perfectly.

And the skin of the man sprawled so unselfconsciously, unaware of the voyeur greedily eyeing him, was the exact color of Davion's—at least as far as he could remember.

"I want to buy that painting. The first one I looked at," Myles said abruptly.

Kolahi's thin, perfectly shaped eyebrows rose in practiced gratification, and Myles was surprised to notice that he must pluck them.

"We haven't even opened the show yet."

"I must have it. I can't take a chance of losing it. How much? Whatever you want."

"I suppose I could mark it as sold, if you would agree to leave it here for the opening. I already have the walls planned out. Besides, you haven't even seen the rest of Davion's work; you might like another better."

"I'll leave it here for the duration of the show, if that's the way it works, but I must have it," Myles insisted. He couldn't bear the thought of someone else owning it, looking at it, looking at *him*. Because he knew exactly what Davion must have been feeling when he painted it. It was a part of

their past, a symbol of the secret they had shared between them.

“Very well. It’s marked at five thousand dollars, sir.” Kolahi’s gaze traveled over Myles’s clothing, as if assessing whether he could afford such an expensive impulse purchase.

“Check or credit card?” Myles asked.

“Either will be fine. After all, I will retain possession of the piece until the check clears.” Kolahi smiled as if he permitted himself a faint amusement in his own wit.

Myles took out his checkbook and Caran d’Ache pen and wrote out the check, calculating the sales tax swiftly in his head.

“I’ll just fetch you the receipt, sir, and put a sold sign on the painting.”

Suppressing the urge to shout “Yes!” triumphantly and pump his fist in the air, Myles turned to gloat over the first painting he had ever owned. It wasn’t until the frantic desire had been fulfilled that he allowed himself to feel the piercing pain for what he had lost so many years ago. Not just his youth and his hope, his competitive edge, and his belief that he could conquer the world. He had sacrificed love. Now that the painting was his, he questioned the wisdom of having that reminder in front of his eyes every day, a palpable symbol of his eternal status as a man who had everything he wanted except what he wanted most.

“And here you are, sir.” Kolahi returned, offering Myles a piece of paper.

Myles took the receipt and folded it into his checkbook without even looking at it. He, the man who knew the value of a dollar, didn’t care. He watched as Kolahi inserted a

small card in the lower right-hand corner of the frame. Printed in uppercase letters in red was the word SOLD, the artist's name, and the name of the painting.

Lost Summer, Davion Robinson.

All the things he had lost since then seemed to form a solid lump in his throat, and Myles couldn't swallow around it. Hastily, he distracted himself by focusing on the gentle stream of words pouring from Kolahi's mouth.

"—amongst so many wonderful black artists, Davion's work really stands out, especially in his particular area of interest. The subtle, erotic quality of his work is so refined and elegant in comparison with some who prefer a more direct approach. Davion explores the alluring world of sensuality rather than raw sex."

Kolahi had moved on to lift another piece to the wall, and Myles saw that it was a female nude. It was also beautifully executed, but it left him feeling nothing beyond admiration for the perfection of the technique.

A glimpse of a man's well-muscled back, tapering from broad shoulders to narrow hips and the swell of rounded buttocks drew him to a third piece still sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall. He bent to get a better look. Davion had composed the painting so that one could see the cleft and the curve, but the ultimate swell of muscle was cropped out of the picture.

"You must come to the opening. All the artists will be attending," Kolahi said.

"When is it?"

Kolahi went to a desk and picked up an invitation, inserting it into an envelope. "This Friday night, Mr.

Winston. If you do honor us with your presence, I will be very pleased to introduce you to the artist.”

“Yes—that is, that would be fine.” Myles tucked the square envelope into his coat pocket. “Thank you. This was—interesting.”

“You are most welcome,” Kolahi said and bowed in a courtly way.

“WHAT did you get?”

“What?”

Tanisha rolled her eyes. “Did you just go for a walk to mess with me? That Kinkade print is going to stay right where it is until you get something decent to replace it.”

“I bought a painting.” It wasn’t until the words were out of his mouth that Myles realized he couldn’t hang a painting of a partially naked man in his office; it would be outrageous, besides raising too many questions. In fact, if he had his way, no one would ever see that piece but him.

“Oh yeah? Where is it?” Tanisha looked pointedly at his empty hands.

“Oh, uh, still at the gallery. They were in the middle of preparing for a show, so they wouldn’t let me take it away with me,” Myles explained. “There’s an opening on Friday, Tan. Would you like to go?” Once the words were out, he could have kicked himself. As much as he considered Tanisha a friend as well as an employee, he had no desire to date her, and he didn’t want to mislead her into thinking that. Nor did he particularly want her pondering his taste in art.

“No, thanks. I have a date, but thanks for asking,” Tanisha said sardonically.

“I didn’t mean a date—”

She gave him an odd look. “Don’t sweat it, I knew what you meant. And if I weren’t already busy, I’d love to come and see this gallery. I can see you’re very taken with it.”

“It’s called the Black Swan, and it’s all black artists.”

“Oh, I see. Serendipity. The Black Swan Theory strikes again.” Tanisha laughed. “Mr. Reuben called while you were out. He wants your opinion before he invests in offshore oil.”

Myles shook his head disapprovingly, but it was a relief to retreat to his own area of expertise. “I’ll call him back.” He took the number that Tanisha held out to him. It was going to be a long week until the opening.

MYLES straightened his tie and surveyed his reflection in the mirror of the restroom. No one ever came in here but him; he was the only tenant on this floor and the only male. Tanisha had the women’s room all to herself as well.

For an unusual change from business white, he was wearing a lavender shirt and a silk tie of a slightly darker hue. The wispy young salesman at Barney’s had assured him that it was perfect against his skin, making him look very handsome. The young man had broken off the compliment with a knowing wink.

Merely the word “skin” was enough to make Myles shiver. From the death of desire that he’d thought was permanent, the thought of his new painting had ignited his nerves to the point that any random word could get him

going. He didn't even care what the young salesman at Barney's had thought of him—or his sexuality.

He didn't know what he hoped for tonight. He wanted to see if Davion had changed or if he was just the same, but maybe it would be better not to take the chance. Myles told himself he still had to purchase some kind of art for the office or he would have that awful Kinkade print leering at him from the wall. Because he'd been careless enough to mention the name of the gallery to Tanisha, he had to buy something from there to forestall suspicion; what if she went there to see for herself and found the homoerotic artwork of one Davion Robinson?

Myles now knew it was called homoerotic art because he had Googled Davion's name. His bio on Wikipedia said that he had worked in advertising for a number of years while getting his masters in painting at NYU. He painted both men and women, although rarely together; the critic had defined the female nudes as sensual and the males as homoerotic. That sounded vaguely insulting to Myles, but he had no experience of the art review section of the Sunday Times, so he couldn't tell whether that was the writer's intention. The article didn't tell Myles anything important, like if Davion was openly gay, if he had a lover or wife, or where he lived.

He was appalled to discover the impulse of a stalker within himself. If Davion had been listed in the phone book, he suspected that he might have staked the place out, just to watch Davion coming and going, and who with. Myles was well aware that he could obtain the information quite easily, but he didn't dare poke around further.

After all, he wasn't a homo, he told himself firmly. It had been a fluke, a one-time thing that many boys do at that age.

And probably Davion had outgrown it too. After all, he'd gotten married; why shouldn't Davion? He just wanted to see him again. Talk over old times. He'd lost touch with too many old friends in his obsessive drive for success.

The gallery was crowded when he arrived, just as he'd hoped. Easier to blend in. Once inside, he handed his coat to a painfully skinny art student with dark eyeliner and black fingernails, and in return was given a ticket with a number and a glass of champagne, which he ditched on the nearest table. Kolahi certainly knew how to throw a party, Myles observed. Other young students dressed all in black served as waiters, carrying trays of canapés and circulating amongst the guests, pouring champagne or relieving guests of empty glasses. Soft music played under the subdued hum of earnest art lovers discussing the show.

The crowd was well dressed, as if, like Myles, they too could still afford to purchase a luxury item during the current economic downturn. Myles was in a good position to know that the rich tended not to lose much in a bear market; they could afford to sit back and wait for the turn of events. He wondered if they were all art lovers; some of them seemed more interested in the refreshments and company than the paintings. Then he had to laugh at his own reaction; art was art just like money was money. It was a business like any other. Some schmoozing was required.

But he was still ferociously triumphant that nobody else could purchase *his* painting, and the thought made him need to see it again and gloat. The second room where Davion's work hung was not as crowded, as if the overt sensuality of the paintings was too embarrassing for some. Or perhaps Myles was just projecting his own turbulent

reaction onto the pieces. For the first time in his life, he understood how volatile art could be, evoking an emotional response from him beyond mere admiration.

He stopped short when he realized that Davion was already there.

Davion was standing with his back to the doorway with his face turned away, but Myles recognized the angular set of his shoulders under a cream sweater, the familiar way he cocked his head to listen to something a shorter man was saying to him, the elegant line of his spine.

Turning away hastily, Myles sucked in a deep breath and edged into the room to examine a nude on the wall before him. The canvas was quite large, and the man's figure was life size, facing him straight on. The gleam of light on the dark skin, the way the line of the pelvis led to suggestive shadow, leaving it to one's imagination to fill in what lay hidden there.... Myles became aware that he was staring with his mouth hanging open and snapped it shut, wishing now that he hadn't ditched that glass of champagne.

As if his wish were powerful enough to create the reality, Myles felt the chill touch of glass on his fingers. Gratefully, he took it and turned to thank the server.

"Hello, Myles."

Davion's smile was just the same; warm, teasing, with a hint of watchfulness that made Myles want to know what was on his mind. He was still slender in the right places, but he filled out the sweater in a good way, as if he worked out regularly. His hair was shorter, revealing his handsome face and a diamond stud that flashed in one earlobe.

With an effort, Myles forced himself to look into soft, deep eyes. Davion seemed to shine so brightly from the

inside out it hurt to look at him. Myles gulped awkwardly. “Davion. Been a long time. You look good.”

“For my advanced age? You know what they say, black don’t crack.”

Myles shook his head. “No, man, you look great.”

“I came over to thank you for buying that piece.” Davion nodded toward the wall where Myles’s one and only piece of art still hung. “Jerry told me you snagged it before the show even opened. Discriminating taste. And a great incentive for the other patrons of the arts.”

The underlying note of sardonic amusement was still there in Davion’s voice too. Myles peered at him to see whether he was teasing, but as always, Davion’s eyes were veiled, even wary. It made Myles wonder what the years had done to him.

“I—needed it.” The raw hunger in his voice made Myles clear his throat in embarrassment. Way to give away the game, he reproached himself.

Davion nodded thoughtfully. “Well, thanks again for buying it. It was good to see you again.” He turned to move away.

“Wait!”

Davion turned back, his brows raised. Myles realized he had come because he needed to talk to Davion, not just to look at him. He had to find out whether Davion was—well, who he was now. “Can I—can we—can I buy you dinner?”

“Now?” Davion flashed his crooked smile, the one that made tiny dimples appear on his chin. They had always fascinated Myles, and he stared at them now, happy to see them again.

“Yeah, why not? You can’t fill up on those little hors d’oeuvres things.”

“Part of the deal is juicing the customers at gallery openings. I can’t just walk out right now.”

“Later then, how about after the party is over?” Myles pleaded.

Davion shrugged. “If you feel like hanging.”

“I’ll be here,” Myles assured him.

“Enjoy the show. You should check out the other rooms. Lamar Stiles is really good, I think you might enjoy his work too.”

And then Davion was gone. Myles realized he was watching the roll of firm buttocks under brown slacks as his old friend moved away from him like walking sin personified. Davion still had that little strut in his step that Myles had always envied. He realized he was staring and wrenched his gaze away hastily.

Jermaine Kolahi came to greet him, holding his hand out with a friendly smile. Tonight he was wearing a conservative but well-cut jacket and trousers two shades darker, and his shirt was opened two buttons to display a carefully arranged silk ascot. “Good evening, Mr. Winston. You made a wise decision when you purchased *Lost Summer*. I was afraid a bidding war might break out over that piece tonight. Several clients were very disappointed to find it had already been claimed.”

“Mr. Robinson told me the sold sign might have motivated some other sales,” Myles said, just to be saying something. He’d forgotten how supremely awkward he felt in social situations.

“Indeed. In fact, if you wish to secure another piece, you might want to take the leap tonight.” Kolahi nodded toward the east wall, where most of the male nudes were displayed. “Although for some reason the male subjects don’t move quite as fast as the females.”

Gently guiding Myles back to the painting he’d been looking at earlier; Kolahi delivered a brief lecture on the history of the greater acceptance of the female nude as decorative art throughout history. “But now we men are coming into our own. Women, in particular, seem to be enamored of bringing home a trophy for their walls. Perhaps for some, it’s the only way they can hang onto a man.” Kolahi chuckled over his own sally.

Myles wasn’t listening, being too mesmerized by the play of light over the contour of muscle under skin. The model was standing by a brick wall, and the contrasting textures of smooth flesh and rough stone made him want to reach out and stroke the man’s chest, trailing his fingers....

With a gasp Myles wrenched himself away and moved to the next painting, with Kolahi trailing him, perhaps sensing he had a live one on the hook.

“What’s this one called?” Myles muttered.

“*Hide No. Fifteen*,” Kolahi answered.

“Hide as in skin or hide as in hidden?”

“Whichever you like. Titles, like beauty, are in the eye of the beholder. Or owner. It’s an ongoing theme in Davion’s work.”

“I want it.”

“You’re in luck, this particular piece hasn’t been purchased yet. There was one admirer who’s been considering it. May I tell her it’s been reserved?”

“I’ll write you a check right now,” Myles declared.

“Certainly, Mr. Winston.” Kolahi inclined his head in a slight bow.

Briefly Myles was surprised that Kolahi remembered his name, but then cynically recalled that one always remembered the name of an easy mark, and certainly he’d given Kolahi no evidence to suspect that he could be a shrewd bargainer. Trying to appear nonchalant, he glanced at the painting, wanting Kolahi to go away before he took a closer look.

Like the first painting, this one hit him in the solar plexus, stealing his breath and leaving him feeling like all the air had been sucked out of the room. He stood there transfixed by the sight of a man crouching and turned to the side. His arms were wrapped around his knees, which were pressed against his chest, his face bowed and hidden. All Myles could see were the folds of supple skin over hard muscle in the compressed pose. The pattern of light and shadow made it almost abstract. He liked the fact that Davion had chosen to depict the creases in the skin realistically. He realized he was rationalizing, trying to find intellectual reasons for wanting to own it, when the truth was what he was looking at was how he felt, and had felt ever since he was a teenager.

Kolahi reappeared with another sold sign and positioned it within the frame before turning to Myles. “May I ask you a question, Mr. Winston?”

“Of course.” Even as he said it, Myles tensed up, fearing whatever might come next.

“Where are you planning to hang these?”

Myles had to chuckle, even though it raised a terrifying specter. “In my home. I suspect they might be a bit risqué for the office, although my assistant might enjoy them.”

“So you came in here originally looking for something—neutral—for your office?”

“And then I found these.”

“The art one enjoys in the privacy of one’s home can be a bit—revealing, shall we say, for the professional environment.” Kolahi’s eyes flicked over Myles’s suit and tie.

It dawned on Myles for the first time that he was the only man in the gallery wearing a tie. “What would you suggest for an office?”

“What sort of work do you do?” Kolahi probed delicately.

“Financial. And don’t worry, not all of us put our eggs in one basket.”

Kolahi favored him with a discreet smile, and Myles realized that the gallery manager must have had him checked out after he bought the first painting. “Might I suggest a series of black and white photographs for the office? They always add a touch of sophisticated elegance, like a pair of diamond earrings with a chic little black dress. We have some suitable pieces through here that you might like to evaluate.”

It was an effort to tear himself away from Davion’s work. Myles was surprised to find himself feeling a fierce possessiveness, glaring at an older woman who stopped in front of one of the other paintings. Maybe he should buy

them all, he thought, and then laughed. His apartment was so small it would be like living in the Louvre with paintings stacked from floor to ceiling, except far less glamorous. For the first time, he found himself missing the apartment he had let the ex keep, not for the view and not because he missed living there, but simply for the wall space. Maybe he should move.

Suiting the action to the thought, Myles forced himself to proceed through the gallery.

“What sort of art does your assistant enjoy?”

Dragging his thoughts back to the present, Myles answered, “At our old offices, Tanisha hung African masks on the walls.”

“Ah!” Mr. Kolahi’s face brightened. “I have something she might enjoy. Vintage photographs of the Cotton Club in Harlem.”

Amused, Myles asked, “Isn’t that quite a jump?”

“Not at all. It all depends on how one looks at it. Back in the day, the clientele was primarily white and yet they ventured into Harlem for the cachet of attending the hottest nightclub in New York. The performers were black, and one could say they were wearing an ironic form of mask.” Mr. Kolahi paused in front of a swing rack and started to shift through a series of photographs. “The very name, Cotton Club, could be considered an ironic shout-out to the old plantations where our ancestors were enslaved. I’ve always liked to imagine the musicians laughing all the way to the bank; a subversive form of rebellion in a time when more forthright actions would not have been tolerated.”

“You have a unique point of view, Mr. Kolahi,” Myles said. He felt like he was waking up after being asleep for a

hundred years. The thought of him as Rip Van Winkle made him chuckle as he looked at the photographs.

MYLES watched a cloud of Davion's breath dissipate in the crisp air as they walked. The wind chased the falling snow so it caught the light from the streetlamps, amplifying it so it was almost as bright as day, although all color was drained from their surroundings.

"Where are we going?"

"Pietro's. They're open late. You like Italian?"

"Sure." Myles didn't really care what he ate. He just wanted to look at Davion, find out what lay beneath that easy smile and secretive eyes. To run into him after all these years....

"Jerry told me you bought another painting tonight, one of the Hide opus."

"Yes—I—I liked it."

"Here we are." Davion opened a glass door covered with condensation and stood aside to let Myles walk inside before him.

Delicious, savory smells filled his nose, and Myles realized that he was hungry. It was a typical Chelsea restaurant, part dive, part self-conscious chic, filled with students, wealthy society ladies slumming, and the artsy set. Judging by Davion's obvious familiarity, he guessed that real artists did actually eat here. Then Myles honed in closer, realizing there were a fair number of same sex couples scattered throughout the restaurant.

“Is this a gay restaurant?” Myles realized how ridiculous that sounded the minute he asked.

“What if it were?” Davion asked, a hint of challenge in his voice.

“Uh, nothing. No big deal.”

A waiter smiled at Davion in recognition and led them to a table.

Myles dove into his menu to cover his embarrassment once they were seated. “They have gnocchi,” he said.

“It’s great, you should have it.”

“What are you having?”

“Ravioli. I had the gnocchi last night.”

When they ordered, Davion asked for a bottle of wine as well. The waiter returned and they went through the performance of sniffing the cork, tasting the wine, nodding approval. It made Myles want to laugh; this was something he had learned to do as part of his job in finance, but it still felt like a masquerade, a frivolous way to prove one’s class to a client with money to spend. He wanted the waiter to leave so he could talk to Davion in private. Finally, the waiter finished fussing and left Myles stumped, not knowing how to begin.

But Davion started first. “Jerry told me you’re something big in the financial world. I take it you didn’t go down with the market when it tanked.”

“I didn’t. The firm I worked for did.” Myles felt a wolfish grin transform his face.

“So triumphant,” Davion mocked gently. “What incredibly smart thing did you do that they didn’t?”

“Have you ever heard of the glass ceiling in the corporate world?”

“Sure. Who hasn’t?”

“It’s a way of keeping women, blacks, and other minorities out of the meetings where things actually happen,” Myles began.

“Must be a bummer to be a black woman,” Davion commented. “Or black and queer.”

That brought Myles up short. Was Davion asking? He wasn’t sure he was ready to tackle that one. “I was a fairly decent producer in my firm, so my boss was pretty much forced to promote me whether he wanted to or not. As soon as I attained the position to attend one of the meetings that counted, suddenly it didn’t count so much anymore. He would create a steering committee above that took ‘recommendations’ from my meetings, so I was just as cut off from any real authority as I was before.” He realized he was clenching his fists so hard, his nails were cutting into his palms. He looked up to see Davion eyeing his hands and made an effort to relax them.

“Still carrying a little baggage on that?”

Myles forced a laugh. “Yeah, a steamer trunk maybe. At any rate, I didn’t have his ear, but I asked for a meeting anyway. I pointed out that the market was heading for a crash. He wouldn’t or couldn’t believe what I was saying.” Myles shrugged as if trying once again to dismiss the lack of respect. “One thing I did have the power to do was create my own funds, so I started a little hedge, buying credit-default swaps.”

“And what would that be in English?”

“Betting against the subprime securitization business made me and my clients a lot of money. My boss and the firm went down in flames, and I have my own financial advisory firm now.”

“Sounds like Las Vegas.”

“Minus the neon lights,” Myles agreed.

“And the booze and hookers.”

“Not really, plenty of that around. Wall Street just keeps it under wraps better. Money is the drug of choice, and you can get just as high on it.”

“Cartier watch, custom suit. So, you’re doing well in life then?” Davion looked down at his plate as the waiter set it in front of him.

Embarrassed, Myles pulled down his cuff to hide the watch, grateful that the waiter had returned with their order. His watch and the other obvious signs of wealth suddenly seemed like a false front. They worked as tools of his trade, but he wished he’d thought twice about wearing them to the opening.

They waited while the waiter ecstatically described both dishes as he placed them on the table, poured more wine in their glasses, and asked if they needed anything else.

When he was gone, Myles said, “You could say I’m doing all right.”

“I heard you got married,” Davion said.

Myles couldn’t read anything in the light tone. “Yeah. Divorced now.”

“Sorry.”

“It was a long time coming. Had time to get used to the idea.” Myles didn’t want to talk about that. “What about

you? Any special—um—person in your life?” He cringed at the clichéd sound of his question, but he wanted to know. His father didn’t pay attention to things like that, and his mother had never liked Davion, so she wouldn’t have told him even if she knew.

Davion gave him an odd look. “No one special right now.”

The silence that fell between them felt so awkward that Myles rushed to say something. “How long have you been painting? Or are you still working for the agency?”

“I do illustration for them on a freelance basis. The artist’s version of waiting tables,” Davion replied. “But I never stopped painting. Even when I worked there full-time and came home late dead-beat after a killer deadline, I’d still fool around a little. Advertising was just a source of income so I could go to school.”

“I bet you won some awards anyway.”

“I’ve got a few.” Davion smirked. “Stacked against the wall. I guess it was a good feeling at the time, but I paint because I have to, not for the recognition.”

“But it’s nice when it comes. I found a few articles about you.”

“Is that what brought you into the gallery?”

Myles laughed. “No, that was serendipity, as my assistant Tanisha would say. Nassim Nicholas Taleb is a financial analyst who postulated a theory called the Black Swan. It concerns rare events that have huge consequences and are difficult to predict. Some might say that the event is impossible, like the market crashing the way it did. His point is that one doesn’t attempt to predict Black Swan events; one

has to prepare for disaster in such a way that one can exploit the negatives in a positive way.”

“So you made a fortune using the Black Swan theory, and when you saw the gallery....” Davion trailed off and waited.

“It seemed too weird to be a coincidence,” Myles finished.

“Fate strikes again.” Davion smiled.

“How about you? Are you—all right with the way things are right now?”

“So tactfully put. I’m not planning to hit you up for a loan, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I didn’t—I wasn’t thinking that!” Myles sputtered.

“Nice to know I can still get you going after all these years,” Davion said with a grin. “What about the ex? Did she get half?”

“She remarried right away. No alimony. We divorced when the subprime market was still on the rise.”

“I bet she’s kicking herself now,” Davion said. “Is that how you remember major events in your life? By what the market was doing at the time?”

“I guess so.” Myles sighed. “She’s got a baby now, born when the market took a dive.”

After a pause, Davion asked, “Do you regret that?”

“Not really. I never thought about kids except in the abstract. She was the one who wanted them.”

“Quick work.”

“She had an affair—” Myles stopped short, wondering why he was admitting to his failure as a husband, especially to Davion, of all people.

“I’m sorry. That must have been painful.”

Myles wanted to explain everything, to tell Davion that he’d never really felt that connected to Marlene, that the whole marriage had been a farce, but he couldn’t. Or rather, he shouldn’t. “Has anyone ever cheated on you?” he blurted.

Davion raised his eyebrows, looking a bit taken aback. “Well, yeah. It’s a natural part of life, isn’t it? Especially when you’re young and don’t know any better. It happens to everyone at least once.”

The waiter reappeared to remove their plates and ask if they wanted dessert.

“None for me,” Davion said.

“Just the check, please. I’m getting this, I invited you,” Myles said when Davion reached for his wallet.

“Thanks. It was nice to catch up.”

Relieved that Davion wasn’t going to compete for the check, Myles got his card out and handed it to the waiter without checking over the bill as he usually did. It made him feel like he was doing something for Davion.

When the waiter returned, Myles added a generous tip and signed the receipt while Davion stood up, pulling his coat on. Myles put his own coat on and followed Davion outside. The chilly air felt fresh on his face after the restaurant.

“Want to go somewhere for coffee?” Myles felt awkward, but he didn’t want to let Davion go so soon.

“I’m beat and I have an early morning. I’ve got to get going.”

“We could share a cab,” Myles suggested.

“I don’t put out on the first date.” Davion’s teeth flashed white in the darkness as he laughed at Myles’s confusion. “Gotcha. I was just kidding. Just two old friends catching up, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. It was good to see you again.” Myles stuck his hand out.

Davion looked down at it and then grabbed Myles by the arm, hurrying him past the restaurant and around the corner into the shadow of a doorway.

Suddenly, Myles felt the wooden door hard against his back. Davion’s lips were on his, kissing him hard enough to bruise, his hands holding Myles motionless, not that Myles wanted to go anywhere. Or could move even if he’d wanted to. He opened his lips to let Davion’s tongue spear into his mouth, exploring tentatively at first and then more boldly when there was no negative reaction.

Myles melted into the kiss, raising his arms to circle them around Davion’s slim waist, holding him tightly as if he would never let go.

Davion pulled away and gave an odd chuckle, his eyes glittering in the dim light. And then he was gone.

Too shaken to chase after him immediately, Myles stood there wondering if it had really just happened or whether he had dreamt it. The throbbing of his cock and the way his pulse was racing told him that it was real. He pulled his coat shut to hide the bulge making his pants feel uncomfortably tight and leaned out of the doorway to glance around, but Davion had disappeared and the street was deserted.

HE UNLOCKED his door and almost slammed it behind him in his urgency to get inside, shut away where no one could see him. He hadn't been able to find a cab, but he wasn't all that far from his apartment, so he'd walked, his hard-on wedged uncomfortably in his pants. He'd thought it would go down on the way home, but every time he thought about Davion's body pressed against his and Davion's tongue in his mouth, his cock would harden again and he thought he might burst with frustration.

Once safely inside his own place, he leaned against the door and clawed at his zipper with trembling hands. Getting his belt and button undone, Myles pulled out his aching cock, feeling it slap up against his stomach. Even that small amount of stimulation almost made him blow, and he squeezed on the base to stop the pressure.

It didn't work.

He started to stroke. His hand was dry and he spit on it, slicking his saliva onto the skin of his cock, tugging frantically as his other hand went to play with his nuts.

It had been a long time since his cock had been so hard and felt so good. Myles closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the door, fantasizing that Davion was kneeling in front of him, like long ago, the lush lips that had left their imprint on his mouth earlier wrapping around his cock, soft tongue licking up his shaft and circling the ridge of the head.

Myles tried to hold back his orgasm, but the feeling snuck up on him as his hips bucked frantically. It was too intense to resist when it washed over him and he started to shoot. He stroked himself furiously, heedless of the drops flying everywhere.

When his breathing subsided, he opened his eyes to the darkness in his one-room apartment. He was sweating, and he realized he was still wearing his coat, and he'd come all over his shoes and suit. It was the first time he had jacked off since he'd moved here, and he grinned ruefully over the inauspicious baptism.

After being alone and celibate for so long, it was almost alien to have such strong feelings again. Maybe it was only a one-shot deal. He realized he was still gripping himself and let go, bringing his hand to his nose to smell it. Then he licked the come off his palm. The tang of it made him think of those times he'd tasted himself in Davion's kisses. Not that he'd stopped thinking about Davion since he'd walked into that gallery.

"It wasn't enough," Myles said out loud.

"MYLES, get out here right now!"

The note of panic in Tanisha's voice wrenched Myles out of a rather arousing daydream, and he had to take a minute to regroup before he hit the intercom. "On my way."

When he opened his door, Tanisha was crouched down trying to hide the Kinkade print under her desk. She stood up and pulled her suit jacket down, looking embarrassed and flustered.

Mr. Kolahi stood watching her with an amused but benign expression. Two men in work clothes stood behind him. One was holding a ladder, while the other carefully balanced several flat cardboard boxes sealed with wrapping tape against the wall.

“Miss Cordell, this is Mr. Kolahi, from the Black Swan Gallery,” Myles said.

Mr. Kolahi stepped forward to take Tanisha’s hand and bowed over it. “I am most pleased to meet you, Miss Cordell.” He released her hand and held his out to Myles. As they shook, he explained, “You must forgive me for coming without calling ahead. I thought you might need some assistance installing the photos you purchased last week.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Myles said. He wondered how he would have hung them without help, but he’d completely forgotten all about the photos. He eyed the boxes a little skittishly. “I want only the photos hung in here—”

Mr. Kolahi held up a hand to stop him. “I understand perfectly. The two paintings have been wrapped with extra care for transport to your private residence. Am I correct in remembering that the water image is intended for your office while the rest of the photographs are destined for Miss Cordell’s office?”

“Yes—Miss Cordell will tell you where she would like them.”

“I suggest we unwrap them and let Miss Cordell have a look.” Mr. Kolahi turned to his men and pointed out which boxes to unwrap. He picked up the two largest and said, “Shall I place these in your office for now?”

“If you would. Thank you.” Sagging with relief at the hiding of his paintings, Myles forced himself to remain where he was, hoping that Tanisha wouldn’t pick up on his manic energy. He felt like rubbing his hands together and cackling, “Excellent!”

“What did you get me?” Tanisha sounded like a little girl at Christmas, her face alight with curiosity and anticipation.

“Black and white photographs of the Cotton Club in Harlem, back in the day,” Myles answered. To his relief, she let out an excited squeal, out of which he deciphered several “Oh my Gods” and “I can’t wait, let me see!”

Gratified that he must have guessed right, Myles felt that maybe he was catching onto this art thing.

As the photographs were unwrapped one by one, Tanisha fell silent as she examined them. “Myles, you couldn’t have picked anything more perfect,” she said at last. “Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway. Lena Horne! How can you bear to let them hang out here with me?”

“I had to rescue you from Thomas Kinkade,” Myles said, grinning wickedly.

“It’s not mine! I told you it’s not mine!” Tanisha turned to Mr. Kolahi and assured him, “The Kinkade is *not* mine! I just borrowed it—not on purpose! I don’t even like it!”

“Of course you don’t, Miss Cordell,” Mr. Kolahi said soothingly.

Tanisha glared at Myles and he chuckled, even though he knew somehow, some time, he would be paying for that crack, but it had been so worth it.

BUOYED by excitement over his new acquisitions, Myles had transported them to his apartment by cab. He took them up in the freight elevator, impatient to see them in his room. He’d even remembered to buy a hammer and a packet of nails when he went out for lunch. He couldn’t rely on Mr.

Kolahi to hang them here, and besides, it would have been too intimate to share this space with the gallery owner and Davion's paintings. Too revealing.

When he had them unwrapped, he propped them both on his sleeper sofa and stood back to look at them. The rich, warm colors of the paintings glowed in the drab setting despite the poor light from the lone ceiling fixture.

He realized that if he hung them over the couch, he would never see them, whether he was sitting or lying on the bed when he folded it out. He turned to look at the blank wall behind him.

Then he got busy with his hammer and nails. Twenty minutes later, he sat down on the couch, realizing that the two paintings weren't level with each other, but it didn't matter. The images brought life into his dead space. It made him happy to look at them, as if he had forced Davion and himself together again though they were still apart; the darker man peering through the fence at the basketball court, as if he was shut out, the slimmer man curled into himself.

He could feel himself getting excited simply to be freely admiring the naked skin of another man. He started to rub himself through his pants, but it wasn't enough. He popped the button of his pants and unzipped, reaching into his underwear and freeing his cock.

It felt good. Myles started to stroke himself, staring at the naked man curled up and hiding his face. He spit into his hand, getting his cock wet and slick. Leaning back, he spread his legs so he could play with his balls through his pants.

He imagined the naked man crouched before him to be Davion, embracing himself, waiting for someone. In his mind's eye, Davion started to uncurl himself and turned his head to watch. A thrill shot through Myles, secure in the dark cave of his apartment, at the thought of another man watching him get himself off.

He imagined Davion's voice, a little breathless, saying, "You like that, Myles? You like stroking yourself off for me?"

Myles nodded, panting too hard to speak.

"Push your pants down. I want to see your nuts," Davion continued. "Oh yeah," he whispered as Myles complied. "You got great nuts. Does it feel good?"

"Fuck yeah," Myles groaned. His gaze traced the curves of Davion's haunch as he crouched there.

He clenched his ass cheeks together to stave off the inevitable. His legs stretched out in front and his toes curled as he tried to hold back and prolong it until he couldn't stand it any longer. He let go and shot into the air, come flying all over as his hips jerked and his breath became ragged. The extra lubrication from his come made his hand move faster as he milked the last drops. His breathing subsided, and he looked at his watch. He realized he had only lasted five minutes, and he sniggered at himself. "Practice makes perfect," he muttered.

Finally, he let go of his limp cock and felt the damp patches on his suit. "Gonna have some cleaning bill this month," he said, feeling oddly proud.

Then he wondered why he had chosen this particular form of torture for himself. Davion was no longer looking at him from the picture. His face was hidden and his body

curled up within the embrace of his own arms. He looked at the other painting where the younger Myles at the basketball court searched in vain through the fence for a glimpse of his friend. It started the lonely ache all over again.

Myles realized that the paintings were not going to be enough. He needed to feel skin.

DAVION'S voice was guarded. "What's up?"

"I need to see you."

"I don't think it's such a good idea."

"I bought two of your paintings, we're linked now."

"Look, bro, plenty of people have bought my work. That doesn't mean I have to kick it with any of them."

"And you dragged them into an alley and stuck your tongue down their throat to thank them all?"

The silence went on so long Myles was about to speak when Davion finally said, "All right. I suppose I owe you an apology. Five o'clock, you know the Rat Zone bar?"

"I'll be there—" The click told Myles that Davion had hung up, probably as soon as the words were out. He was a little hurt, but that feeling was hard to hold onto in the face of his excitement over seeing Davion again.

THE bar was hot, crowded, and unbelievably noisy. The band on the small stage was terrible; he couldn't understand a word the lead singer was screeching, and the patrons were all shouting over the music. A small group of people with

safety pins stuck through parts of their faces were dancing like maniacs up front.

Myles couldn't imagine what Davion was thinking, asking to meet here, unless this was supposed to be a brush-off. Maybe Davion wouldn't even show up. Maybe he'd realized his mistake in taking Myles to the restaurant where he was known. Or this could be some twisted form of revenge. He supposed he deserved it. He was checking his watch for the nineteenth time when he caught sight of Davion towering over the crowd.

Davion was beckoning to him from the door, and Myles fought his way through the frenzied dancers, pushing people out of his way in his haste to reach his friend. "What—"

A hand gripped his arm, and Myles found himself being pulled out onto the snowy sidewalk. "Thank God," he muttered as the sound was muffled by the door closing behind them.

"You're welcome." Davion grinned at him. "Sorry about that. I forgot it was punk night."

"I guess I should have worn safety pins," Myles said.

Davion raised his brows in surprise. "You find a bunch of safety pins comfortable under a three-piece suit?"

"I wear this for work," Myles said defensively.

"Jerry told me you've got your own firm. You gave yourself a dress code?"

"People expect it from someone who handles their money."

"People also expected not to be robbed by you finance-hawks."

Stung, Myles retorted, “I didn’t rob anyone! My clients made money, to the tune of almost a billion dollars!”

“For real?” Davion seemed impressed, but a disquieting smile lingered on his lips.

“I wish we’d run into each other a couple years ago,” Myles said. “I could have put you onto a good thing.”

“You did.” Davion gave him an odd glance. “Art*Killz.”

“You’re Art*Killz?”

“I wanted the user name BlackisthenewBlack, but it was too long.” Davion sniggered.

“You were on my blog.”

“Even left comments a few times.” Davion shoved his hands into his pockets and started to walk. “I liked what you had to say, even though I didn’t get it all. You made sense in a time when Wall Street was going crazy. I invested enough, using your advice, so I’m comfortable.”

“When did you get interested in finance?”

“When you did. You were always talking about it in school.”

“I was?”

“Yeah, don’t you remember?”

“I guess I forgot.” High school seemed so long ago. Myles was touched that Davion had been paying attention. “How did you know it was my blog?”

“Googled you. It wasn’t that hard.”

Someday, Myles thought, he might actually laugh at the thought of them Googling each other, but right now he felt more like crying. “I hope you didn’t lose any money.”

“Nah, I did good.”

“Davion.” Myles stopped and grabbed Davion’s arm. “I—I’ve missed you—more than I can say.”

“And you want to know if we can be friends.” The mocking tone in Davion’s voice and the way he pulled his arm free gave Myles a sense of just how much he had hurt him.

“Maybe more than friends.”

Davion searched his eyes. “Why should I believe you?”

Helplessly Myles held out his hands. “I don’t know. Maybe you shouldn’t.”

Davion started walking again, and Myles hurried after him. Maybe he didn’t know where they were going or if Davion was going to reject him after a silent trek, but at least for now he was beside him and they were together. He felt like a teenager again, all on edge to see what would happen next but too fucking scared to ask, just in case he hurried the rejection along.

Davion turned down a narrow alley, and Myles braced himself. But there was no sudden attack kiss; Davion kept going to a rusty iron door studded with rivets. He stopped to unlock it and turned to Myles. “Coming in?”

The hallway was absolutely black, and Myles had no idea where they were going. Fleeting visions of some kind of S&M dungeon flashed through his mind, but the thought occurred to him that if he was going to get his ass beat, he would want it to be Davion doing it.

“Yeah.”

Davion led the way inside and flicked on a light, revealing nothing more threatening than an iron staircase. “There’s a freight elevator, but it takes forever.”

“I don’t mind walking.”

At the top floor, Davion used his key again to unlock a door painted teal blue. He turned off the light in the staircase and stepped inside. Even in the dark, the lights of the city shone in through the huge loft windows. The skylights were covered with snow, but there was also a glimmer of light coming through them.

Myles stood still, unable to see or move in the unfamiliar room, tingling with anticipation, waiting for what might happen next. It could be that Davion was going to turn on a light, or it could be—

Strong hands grabbed him, pushing him back against the door. He was breathing hard but unable to resist, as if his muscles no longer worked. Still waiting, unable to speak as he felt a hand groping for his cock, finding it, pulling on it through his pants. Then Davion’s hands—undoing his coat, pushing aside the suit jacket, finding belt and zipper. Waiting for the ultimate touch of skin on skin... groaning audibly at the first touch of Davion’s hand, stroking his cock lightly with his finger and thumb. The sensation sent a jolt of electricity zapping up his spine, getting him hotter than he’d ever felt before. Except for those hasty meetings under the bleachers....

Lips met his, and Myles opened his mouth, eager to taste Davion again yet feeling oddly passive, almost paralyzed despite the lust burning throughout his body. He couldn’t lift his hands. He gripped the flat surface of the door as if that could keep him on his feet and rooted in this new reality.

Davion pulled away from the kiss and laughed almost mockingly. Myles’s eyes had adjusted to the dim light, and

he could barely make out the quizzical expression as Davion sank to his knees, looking up at him. “Just like old times,” Davion whispered.

When he felt the first hot stripe of wetness licked along his cock, Myles’s head fell back against the door with a muffled thud. Nothing had ever felt so spectacularly good, and he wanted more.

Davion teased him, kissing along the length of his dick, lips and tongue, soft with no pressure. Myles felt his hips surge forward, seeking more pressure, but Davion restrained him with one hand, keeping him still.

And then the moment when his cock was engulfed, soft, warm lips closing around him—it felt so familiar and yet so exotically strange and erotic. He had to make an effort to squint down at the beautiful face at his groin, lush lips surrounding his cock. The sensation of the tongue licking at the underside of his cock as if it were the best thing Davion had ever tasted, along with the fingers that tugged his cock and tickled his balls, was too much for him.

He held his breath, his heart thundering in his ears, while the sensation moved from his cock to vibrate through his entire body for one earth-shattering moment until his orgasm rushed over him. His hips seemed to move on their own because all the strength had drained out of his limbs and he just seemed to keep coming.

Davion kept sucking until the onslaught was ended, his mouth and hands gentle until Myles quivered one last time.

His chest heaving, Myles had no thoughts at all. He was weightless, floating in space, lost in the rapturous bliss that filled him. He felt lips against his once more and responded

eagerly to the tongue thrust into his mouth, tasting himself on it, just like so long ago.

A low chuckle made him realize how inanimate he must appear to Davion, and it took great effort for Myles to open his eyes.

“My turn,” Davion said. He pulled Myles gently away from the door and leaned expectantly against it himself.

Helpless to resist the pressure of the hands on his shoulders, Myles went to his knees, submitting to Davion’s unspoken demand. There he was, on his knees to another man, his limp, wet cock hanging out of his pants, and yet he didn’t feel ashamed or unnatural. There was no question of being forced into anything he didn’t want.

He nuzzled at the hot bulge that distended the front of Davion’s jeans, enjoying the gasp of pleasure that sounded from above. He had to rub his fingers over the hardness for the sheer pleasure it gave him to know that he had aroused another man in the same way.

Davion stood with his hips jutting forward, demanding and expectant.

Caressingly, Myles opened belt buckle, snap, and zipper, tugging the jeans gently down the long thighs. The head of Davion’s cock poked up above the waistband of his black jockeys, and Myles leaned forward to swipe his tongue over the firm head, savoring the droplets of fluid.

He pulled down the jockeys, noting in surprise that Davion’s pubes were neatly trimmed short, making his cock seem even larger. Putting a hand on the angular hipbone to keep Davion still, Myles nuzzled under his erection, enjoying the sharp masculine scent of his balls.

“Please,” Davion gasped. “Please....”

Myles wrapped his hand around the cock bobbing for his attention, stroking while watching each response he drew from the other man. Finally he circled his lips around the head, letting them drag on the ridge as Davion started a shallow thrusting. He felt Davion's fingers cup the back of his head, drawing him closer.

He allowed the other man to guide him. Forgotten skills resurfaced as he breathed through his nose, allowing Davion to drive deeply into his mouth, closing his lips when the other man pulled out, working his tongue over the long shaft. He was sure his technique was rusty, but judging by Davion's breathing, he seemed to be doing pretty well. He gasped when the hand at the back of his head forced him closer, holding him in place as Davion fucked his mouth.

He looked up when he felt Davion's cock swell and fill his mouth. The thrusting faltered as he watched Davion throw his head back, his neck convulsing as he moaned softly. Then the thrusting stopped, and Myles tightened his lips, sucking strongly.

The first blast of salty fluid hit the roof of his mouth, and he swallowed hastily, unable to keep up as he coughed and gagged a little. Davion emitted a rhythmic sighing sound in company with each spurt until, finally, he sagged over Myles's back. The only sound was their uneven breathing as they gasped for air.

"You sure you gave up walking on the wild side back in the day?" Davion asked as he straightened up.

"Must be like riding a bicycle," Myles said, wiping his hand over his mouth.

"I'd thought it was easier than that to forget," Davion said.

Uneasily Myles remained on his knees, shocked into silence at the underlying note of bitterness.

Davion pushed himself off the door, and Myles flinched internally but stayed where he was, feeling he deserved whatever the other man might choose to do to him.

Without saying anything more, Davion walked away, going further into the room while casually stripping his clothing off, leaving each item where it fell in his trail. Myles realized he had never seen Davion naked before and wished hungrily there was enough light to see more than his silhouette.

Then he flinched and squinted at the sudden flash of light. The sound of clinking told him that Davion had opened the refrigerator door, and suddenly he was desperately thirsty. Then the light went out and he was lost in darkness again.

He jumped when Davion asked, “Gonna sleep on the floor?” Davion was standing next to him, holding out a bottle of beer. “Have a cold one. Refuel.”

Myles took it and drank thirstily. He groaned as he stood up. “Fucking knees.”

“Getting creaky, old man?”

Davion hit a switch, and soft lights came on around the perimeter of the loft, casting pools of light over the exposed brick walls while leaving the center of the room in relative darkness. Myles realized that the loft was both a place to live and a studio for Davion. Two deep couches were set in the center of the space, with tables and a television. At the far end he glimpsed a bed behind filmy curtains suspended from overhead tracks.

He felt weird staring at Davion's naked body, so instead he looked at the paintings that hung everywhere. In addition, canvases were stacked leaning against the walls, and three easels standing near the north-facing windows supported paintings in various stages of progress.

"I thought you'd start a painting and then go all the way to the finish," Myles said, keeping his eyes averted.

"I get stuck. Sometimes it helps to work several canvases at once. Then I go back when inspiration hits." Davion strolled into view and threw a cloth over one of the paintings.

It was becoming harder to focus on the paintings and not look at Davion's body. He was like a beautiful, living, breathing sculpture, a piece of art that belonged amongst his paintings. Myles sucked in a breath when he caught the exotic gleam of a silver bar pierced through one of Davion's nipples. He wanted to explore it with his tongue. That and the star tattooed on Davion's hip, leading his gaze inexorably to the half-hard cock.

"Come on, get them off," Davion teased, waving a hand at Myles's clothing.

"What?"

"Don't play dumb. I want to see you butt-naked."

Myles felt instantly embarrassed and yet pleased that Davion wanted to see him. On the other hand, the passing years had added a few extra pounds around his middle. "I'm not in such good shape as you are."

"Strip! Now! Or I'll come over there and—"

“All right, all right.” Myles put down the empty bottle and carefully folded each article as he took it off, arranging his clothing neatly on a chair.

Davion drank his beer and watched with a quizzical expression. When Myles was undressed, he walked over and ran his fingers over his shoulders, down Myles’s chest, over his abdomen, and tickled his bush. “You shouldn’t worry so much. You look great.”

“You’re as skinny as you were back in high school.” His voice sounded tight and uncomfortable.

“You look like a man,” Davion said. “Beautiful.” He turned Myles around and slapped his butt. “Nice ass.”

Their closeness made Myles profoundly uneasy now that they were naked, but he couldn’t bring himself to move away now that Davion was running his hand lightly over his biceps. Myles was still proud of his muscles and bunched his arm, showing off a bit. “So you live and work here?”

Davion smiled at him and took his hand away, drinking a swig of beer. To cover his confusion or disappointment, whatever he was feeling, Myles moved closer to the easels to examine one of the paintings, not even aware that he hadn’t acknowledged the compliment.

“It’s tradition for artists to live in lofts in the city.”

Firmly fixing his attention on the paintings, Myles was shocked to recognize glimpses of himself everywhere. It was never a literal portrait, but a hint of him showed in the color of a man’s skin, the set of muscular shoulders, a gesture or movement frozen in time. It made him feel guilty that Davion remembered so well, while he had spent the intervening years deliberately forgetting. And then his guilt was replaced with jealousy when he noticed other paintings, celebrating

bodies very different from his, other men whom he imagined were Davion's lovers, who knew his body in a way that he never had.

"One-night stands or long-term lovers?" Myles asked. He flinched at the vulgarity of his question, but he was consumed with a desire to know what Davion had been doing. Or *who* he'd been doing. It was important to find out if he'd been happy.

"A few," Davion said, smiling as if very amused. "Some are just life models."

Myles was annoyed when his eyes dropped in shame under Davion's intense stare. "I should get going," he said, looking at his watch, the only thing he was currently wearing. The realization filled him again with embarrassment over what his old friend might be thinking of his body, but then all thought fled. He gasped when he felt the smooth heat of Davion's body pressed against his and the throaty question whispered in his ear.

"You have another hot date lined up?"

"No, no, but I couldn't do it again—I don't think I could—I have to work tomorrow—" he stammered.

"I have an alarm clock and I know how to use it," Davion said, his voice heavy with irony. He rubbed his thigh on the inside of Myles's leg suggestively. "And I think you can. Leave it to me." He took Myles's hand and led him to the large bed, neatly made up with numerous pillows.

Even if Davion hadn't been so beautiful, with that body and face, Myles would have found his confidence sexy.

The look on Davion's face, almost wickedly innocent as he rubbed himself against Myles's body, turned his bones to

water. When Davion gave him a little push, he toppled helplessly onto the bed.

Myles bounced once, and then Davion was over him, straddling him to crawl onto the mattress. He didn't touch him except for dragging the tip of his cock along Myles's thigh.

"Get all the way on the bed," Davion ordered, and Myles scrambled to obey.

Then he lay there waiting for whatever Davion wanted to do next, his cock throbbing as if he hadn't just come a half hour ago. He watched the flex of muscle in Davion's shoulders as the other man bent lower to kiss his feet, working his way up to his knees, his thighs, and then his cock, taking it into his mouth as if it were something fragile and precious.

Then Davion licked a line up his abs, bringing his mouth to Myles's nipple, licking, sucking, and then biting it. Myles reached for the silver bar protruding from Davion's nipple and pulled it gently, gratified by the muffled groan he elicited. As if he couldn't bear it any longer, Davion lowered his body onto Myles's completely, letting their erections rub together as they kissed.

Myles reached up to rub Davion's ass, grinding their crotches together.

Still kissing, Davion twisted on the bed, rolling them both so he was on his back underneath Myles, and spread his legs so Myles's cock was trapped between them, rubbing up against his balls.

His thighs were so soft and warm, gripping Myles's cock, and instinct took over. Myles began to thrust, and Davion squeezed his thighs tight, giving him the friction he needed.

The touch of skin that Myles had been longing for was now overwhelming his senses. To be naked and pressed against the full length of the most desirable man in the world was almost too much.

Myles pushed himself up, staring down at the beautiful face below, so open with pleasure. His eyes half closed, Davion's hand went to his own cock, and he started to beat off as Myles continued to move. The familiar rhythm of fucking swept Myles away as he rocked, feeling closer to Davion than he'd ever been to anyone.

Davion's eyes focused, and he reached up to pinch one of Myles's nipples and then his own, his hand going back and forth between them. There was something so casual about his intimate assumption that this would turn him on; it excited Myles even more than the sensation.

The humping was getting him close, and he could tell Davion was too. Leaning on one hand, Myles reached down to grab himself, finishing himself off with a couple of strokes and shooting onto Davion's stomach. His body strained as he convulsed in ecstasy and then collapsed onto the mattress beside Davion.

Davion's hand was still working, and Myles reached over to help, closing his fingers around Davion's and squeezing. With a soft cry, Davion's slim body arched up off the bed as he reached his orgasm, and then he fell back panting.

He lifted his head and checked his stomach, where the fluid from both of them combined glistening white against his skin. Then he grinned at Myles. "Told you I'd work it out."

Myles laughed. "You've learned a lot since we were kids."

“I ain’t been wasting my time.”

However innocent, every comment seemed loaded, but Davion didn’t seem to be trying to hurt him. “Do you have—someone?”

“Not currently. I don’t step out on my man when I have one,” Davion said.

“Did you ever—hook up for a long time—with someone?”

“Never did. I try not to take things too seriously.”

“Oh. That’s sad.”

“That’s how it’s been so far,” Davion said, sliding his hand down Myles’s arm and taking his hand. “Had sort of a thing for you back in the day.”

“You did?” Myles was astonished. For him, the memories of their whatever-it-was were more sensory, more about the physical connection. He couldn’t remember any overpowering emotion other than fear that they would be caught, that the kids in school would make their lives hell, that his mother would find out—but most of all the agony of that one day he failed to meet Davion under the bleachers.

That memory hit him hard, and he wondered how he had managed to suppress it for so many years. Tears stung his eyes, and he realized how many other emotions he’d ruthlessly jammed down in trying to deny the feelings he had about the one person who had mattered the most to him.

“I’m sorry,” he stammered, realizing he was interrupting whatever Davion was saying and that he hadn’t heard a word of it.

“Sorry for what?” Davion didn’t seem put out; instead he rolled onto his stomach and rested his chin in his hands, looking at Myles with a compassionate expression.

“I didn’t come—that last day.”

Davion’s face registered an emotion that passed too swiftly for Myles to read it. “Why didn’t you?” he asked carefully.

“I don’t know.” Myles waited for Davion to accuse him of lying, but he’d revealed too much of his internal struggle already.

After a long pause, Davion sighed. “Whatever. I hoped you might.” He lay back down again and groped for Myles’s hand, lacing their fingers together.

Myles squeezed his hand. Emotions rocketed through him too fast for comfort—fear, shock, excitement, and most of all joy. He felt like he was finally where he belonged. When he looked over, he almost laughed at the dichotomy; while he was busy experiencing all the profound emotion he felt he’d missed out on in life, Davion was idly scratching at the spunk drying on his stomach.

“Be right back.” Davion got up and went into the bathroom.

Myles heard the water running behind the closed door. Then Davion came out. He seemed perfectly at ease walking around naked, and, belatedly, Myles wondered if anyone could see into the apartment. Before he could get too panicked over it, Davion switched off the light.

The mattress moved as he lay down and found Myles’s hand again.

In the darkness, Myles barely moved when Davion pulled a sheet up over their legs. He lay there waiting for Davion’s breath to even out and become slower. He didn’t

think he could sleep lying there naked next to his friend. He was too jumpy but also too excited.

When he was sure Davion was deeply asleep, he drew the sheet aside. It was enough just to look at him, the angles and flat planes of his shoulders and chest, the curve of his hip and buttocks, the long line of his legs. He wondered how Davion could trust him enough to simply fall asleep beside him.

Myles spent the night looking at Davion's unconscious face as if memorizing it for the long emptiness ahead, touching and caressing his skin.

WAKING up had been a jolt. Daylight poured in through the windows, and Myles found his mouth resting against Davion's shoulder, his arm circling the other man and holding him close. He ground his erection into the cleft between Davion's buttocks before he came fully awake and forced himself to stop when he realized what he was doing.

Davion didn't stir or give any indication that he was awake. Myles withdrew his arm and peered cautiously at Davion's face. The lashes fanned against his cheeks, and the slightly parted lips caused a rush of some powerful but tender emotion for him.

He glanced at his watch. He'd have to rush if he was going to have time for a shower and a clean shirt. He dressed quietly and tiptoed to the door. He couldn't do anything about the deadbolt, but he twisted the lock on the doorknob before he pulled the door to. He took one last look at Davion

sleeping peacefully amongst his paintings and then let himself out.

GETTING in to the office was a relief. He could retreat into the world of numbers and turn off the recurring sensory flashes of Davion that assaulted him at odd moments.

Tanisha had commented on the spring in his step when he'd walked in, which Myles found ironic. He felt both exhilarated and terrified by what had happened the night before. At least he lived in the city now, where he wasn't constantly under his parents' eyes, so presumably he would be able to see Davion again without anyone finding out about it.

The fantasy of a secret love affair turned him on. No one would have to know. They would meet at Davion's loft, and there, in the safe cocoon away from the world, they could do whatever they wanted. There were things that Myles wanted to explore.

For the first time in years, he was busy making plans for the future. He would join a gym and he would actually go and work out; he would find a bigger place to live, maybe in the West Village, within easy reach of Davion and work; he would go out more, meet people.

When Tanisha went to lunch, he locked the outer door and the door to his office so that he had the privacy to do some research online. He was astonished at how many sites popped up when he typed only the word "gay." He changed the settings to unfiltered, and immediately images of naked men *doing* things to each other popped up, and that wasn't the only thing. His boner pushed insistently at his zipper. He

clicked on a site that showed samples of movies he could watch if he joined.

He reached for his wallet and then stopped himself. “The SEC would love that,” he chuckled ruefully. It was not a good idea to look at this stuff on his work computer, even if it was *his* computer. It would have to wait till he got home. Besides, it wasn’t a good idea to jack off in his office. He didn’t even have a box of tissues.

He strolled to the window and rested his hot forehead against the frigid glass, hoping to cool down. Seeing Davion again had brought up urges he’d thought dead and buried long ago; the confusion and frustration of the locker room in high school, the need that pushed him into risky encounters with his friend, the dread of being found out that drove him away....

He didn’t want to go back there again. It was too painful for him to even contemplate, but another part of him was soaring with triumph. He wanted to fuck Davion, to possess him fully. He’d never had anal sex, but he knew about it, like anyone else who’d gone to high school. All the derogatory terms kids had used were meaningless now. Being on top of Davion last night, rubbing his dick between his legs, their bellies grinding together, had given Myles a taste for conquest, something he’d never felt in his marriage. He wanted to take Davion, feel what it was like to be inside him.

Lost in his daydream, Myles jumped a mile when a sharp rap sounded on his door.

“What are you doing in there, Myles?” Tanisha demanded sharply.

His erection wilted immediately, so he was able to go to the door and unlock it. “Sorry, Tanisha. What is it?”

Tanisha peered into his office, and Myles was glad that he was alone. “Why’d you lock the door?”

“I was concentrating on something and, uh—you know those solicitors that go door to door sometimes?”

“In this building?” She stared at him in disbelief.

“It could happen,” he said defensively.

“Right, sure. Anything could happen. A unicorn might fly by the window too. Didn’t you hear the phone ring? You have a client waiting on hold.”

“Afraid not. Who is it?”

“Some guy who says his name is Davion and you’ll know who he is.” Tanisha shut the door on him.

His heart fluttering wildly, Myles picked up the phone. “Myles Winston.”

“Yo, M. Didn’t Tanisha tell you it was me?”

“How did you know her name?” Myles’s heart was beating like a trip hammer to hear Davion use his old nickname.

“I asked her, fool. Why you so jumpy?”

“I’m at work.”

“If work makes you stupid, maybe you shouldn’t go there so often.” Davion’s voice sounded soft and intimate in a way that made Myles squirm. “Sorry I didn’t wake up in time to say goodbye. I’m not a morning person. I suppose you are.”

“It kind of comes with the job. I’m open for business as soon as the market is.” Myles sat down, his pulse beginning to slow a bit. “What’s up?”

“There’s an opening at another gallery tonight. They’re showing my friend Marcel Rogier’s work, and I’d like you to

come,” Davion said. “We can go, drink their champagne, and then maybe hang out at my place after.”

Forbidden desires surged over him, and Myles was once again clutching his erection under the desk. “What’s the name of the gallery?”

“You know so many, you’re going to be picky about which ones you visit?” Davion asked mockingly. “Does it matter? I thought maybe you’d like the pleasure of my company.”

“You mean, like a date?”

There was a silence. “Just friends hanging out,” Davion said in a cooler voice. “We don’t have to hold hands.”

“You’re a pretty well-known artist—”

“I’m not a star, Myles. The pap ain’t coming around to snap my picture getting out of the limo or anything. Look, if you don’t want to come, say so. I’m not asking you to go steady.”

The hard note in his voice told Myles how much he’d blundered. He didn’t want to hurt Davion. And besides, he needed to see him again, if only one more time. “No—I’d like to come along. Where and when?”

“We can meet at the gallery if you prefer. We can shake hands, like we just ran into each other.”

The rush of relief made Myles feel like a heel, but he was much more comfortable with that idea. “What gallery?”

Davion told him and hung up abruptly. The only thing Myles could seem to regret is that by offending him, he might not be able to maneuver Davion into the sack later. He was going to have to make it up to him. Somehow.

He pressed his hand over his cock again, trying to force the sexual feelings to recede. He turned his chair to look at the photo on the wall behind him. Mr. Kolahi had told him that most people regarded water as restful, not that Myles had needed much persuasion. He was very taken with the photograph, a close-up of rings in water, overlapping, concentric, repeating into infinity in soothing colors of blue and green. It calmed him.

“It’s like life,” he murmured aloud. “Hope I don’t drown.” Then he deliberately turned his back on it and got back to work.

THE non-date had been tense for Myles. They knocked knuckles casually when they met outside in the gusty wind, and he stood far enough away from Davion that they wouldn’t brush up against each other accidentally. He wasn’t sure he could trust his own reactions if they touched.

Davion was looking fine that night, lithe and slim in a cream-colored pullover and slacks, a silver hoop in his earlobe. He had a brilliant blue patterned scarf wrapped around his neck, and when he took his peacoat off, he pushed his sleeves up, revealing a bracelet of flat silver links on one wrist. Myles couldn’t decide whether the scarf and jewelry made him look gay or confidently masculine.

However, when Davion went to his friend Marcel and kissed him on the mouth where everyone could see before giving him a man-hug with requisite back slap, he seemed so obvious it made Myles draw away as if he didn’t know him.

Although Davion had disclaimed any notoriety, Myles noticed that quite a number of people seemed to recognize him, and one man, who identified himself as the critic from an art magazine, actually asked his opinion of the exhibit. Davion praised his friend's work enthusiastically while Myles hovered at a distance, feeling like a rogue male lion lurking at the edge of the pride.

At least Mr. Kolahi wasn't there. Myles was uncertain of whether he could have kept his composure under the man's all-seeing gaze. The exhibit didn't interest him, and he was nervous, looking around to see if people noticed he and Davion were together. The crowd was busy talking, drinking, and looking at paintings, and no one took any notice of him at all.

When Davion decided it was time to leave, Myles was thrilled, even though he might have to apologize for his boorish response to the invitation.

"I guess that wasn't your thing. Sorry," Davion said, when they were standing on the sidewalk outside.

"I liked your work better," Myles said. "Sorry about earlier."

"Okay, but don't let it happen again." Davion snickered at the look on Myles's face. "Hang loose, bro. It ain't no big thing. Just two friends catching up. I take you to a gallery, you take me to—watch something boring and financial happen."

It was Myles's turn to laugh, however uneasily. "Financial isn't really something you watch in groups."

"Gotcha. No socializing during working hours. That goes for me too. I hate being interrupted when I'm painting."

Davion tucked his scarf in more securely and turned up the collar of his jacket. "Want to grab a bite?"

Myles shot a look around. No one was close enough to hear. "Of you."

Davion looked amused. "My place or yours?"

"Ah, good to see you, Mr. Winston. You're becoming an art lover."

Myles jumped away from Davion and turned with a sinking feeling. Mr. Kolahi stood behind him wearing a knowing smile. Myles held out his hand, and they shook. "Mr. Kolahi. Yes—yes, I am. You inspired me at your gallery, and I wanted to see more. I ran into Mr. Robinson once I got here."

His mouth twitching as if he wanted to laugh but was far too polite, Mr. Kolahi said, "What a fortuitous circumstance! I'm sure it made the exhibit all the more enjoyable to have someone to discuss it with."

"Yes! That's it—it did." Myles wouldn't look Davion's way, afraid the other man would have steam pouring out of his ears. His excuses sounded lame even to his own ears, and he realized he probably wasn't fooling anyone.

"Davion, how is the show?"

Davion answered, "It's good, Jerry. Marcel's done some nice work lately."

"There's one artist I should never have let slip through my fingers," Mr. Kolahi said mournfully. "Ah well, we all make mistakes."

An uncomfortable silence was broken by Davion saying lightly, "At least you don't make many."

“Yes, I pride myself on getting in on the ground floor with you.” Mr. Kolahi executed a formal bow. “Nice to run into you, Mr. Winston. Mind you come to my gallery when you feel the itch.” He smirked and added, “To acquire a new piece, of course.”

“I will,” Myles promised warily. They shook hands again, and Mr. Kolahi went inside. He took a breath and finally turned to face Davion.

“Pried that foot out your mouth yet?”

“I’m sorry—he just—took me by surprise.”

“What am I going to do with you?” Davion shook his head, as if torn between anger and amusement.

“Invite me to your place. We wouldn’t both fit in my place.”

“I thought you were Mr. Moneybags,” Davion said. He turned the corner and leaned into the wind.

“I’m just renting for a while.” Myles didn’t want to dwell on the divorce or the future right now, especially with the possibility of getting with Davion again.

They walked in tense silence for several blocks and then turned to go cross-town. At least it was uncomfortable for Myles; he was too scared to sneak a look at his friend.

“Good thing I live close by. It’s chilly out.” Davion led the way into the alley and unlocked the iron door.

Once inside the building, the sound of the wind subsided, and Myles felt that sense of cloistered security again. “Does anyone else live here?”

“Yeah, a couple of other artists,” Davion said. “I don’t see them much. We all keep our own hours.”

He led the way up the stairs, and Myles followed, his gaze glued to the way the tight cream-colored trousers cupped the swell of muscle in Davion's buttocks.

This time he took the initiative and crowded Davion against the door the minute they were inside, pressing their lips together in a frantic quest to find his tongue. Davion opened his mouth and stabbed his tongue inside Myles's mouth every bit as aggressively, his slim arms like bands of iron keeping Myles pressed up against him.

Myles could hear his own smothered groans as he probed into Davion's mouth, exploring every nook and cranny of it. He felt Davion's teeth scrape his lips, but their tongues were soft together, dancing between their open mouths. He was panting for air, humping against the slim figure he held trapped against the door until Davion pushed him away.

Hurt, Myles took a step back.

Davion gave a shaky laugh. "Lose the threads." He strolled away into the darkness of the loft to switch on a lamp by the bed, casting a pool of light onto the middle of the mattress. He stripped back the blanket and sheets and then stood there, his face in shadow as he stripped, slowly and deliberately, until he stood there proudly, clad only in a skimpy white jockstrap, his erection jutting proudly over the top elastic, the head gleaming with pre-cum.

Myles sucked in a deep breath of relief. Whatever the tension between them, sex was still on the menu and in the air. He hurried toward the bed while ripping his clothes off, but still he folded them before dropping them onto a chair.

“Let me guess. When you unwrapped your presents on Christmas morning, you carefully cut the tape and saved the paper, am I right?”

Davion’s face was in shadow, but the light slanting across the taut body highlighted large dark nipples on his chest, leading down to the light treasure trail that led under his jock.

Myles desperately wanted to lick those nipples, suck them, play with the bar that pierced through one of them. “Get them off,” Myles growled.

“I like a forceful man,” Davion teased. He strolled slowly toward the bed, putting out a hand to forestall Myles’s impatience. “Enjoy the show, man. Get on the bed.”

Myles sat on the bed and scooted up toward the headboard, aware of his cock bobbing with every movement, aware that Davion couldn’t seem to tear his eyes away either.

“Lube and rubbers in the drawer in the nightstand,” Davion said, pointing.

“I don’t think I—”

“Don’t worry, M. I want you to fuck me. I prefer to bottom.”

Myles’s cock jumped at the welcome news, and Davion laughed, his gaze fixed on it.

“I never—um....” Myles pulled on his cock, aroused at the thought of what Davion was suggesting.

“You mean never hit it in the ass? We’ll have to bust that cherry, boy.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Davion said. He cupped the straining pouch, rubbing himself provocatively.

Myles licked his lips nervously. “Come here. I want to taste you.”

Davion turned around so Myles could see how the straps cut across the back of his thighs under his buttocks. He bent over seductively so that Myles could see his hole.

It made Myles uncomfortable in so many ways, but the sight made him even more excited. Davion’s hole was clean and enticing, tight, wrinkled, and completely hairless. He lunged forward and grabbed Davion’s hips, pulling him closer to the bed.

“Down, tiger. We got time.” Davion’s voice was a little breathless.

Myles sank his teeth into the waistband and pulled the jockstrap down, growling possessively as he heard the light slap of Davion’s cock as it sprang up and smacked him in the belly.

He pulled Davion onto the bed with the jockstrap still clinging around his thighs, rolled him onto his back, and started to nuzzle at his nipple. He bit into it, relishing the yelp Davion gave, and then started sucking, flicking his tongue over the bar, rolling it in his mouth. Somehow the tiny erection of the hard flesh on the flat muscled plane of chest turned him on more than any rounded womanly breast had ever done.

Davion was gasping by the time he let that nipple go and applied himself to the other, rubbing the wet one he’d just abandoned between his thumb and finger. The slim body was bucking under him now, and Myles became aware that he was vigorously rubbing his engorged cock against

Davion's thigh. He was hard and swollen and in danger of coming if something didn't slow down.

He lifted his head and panted, staring at Davion's unguarded expression of lust and pleasure. "Sorry, I got carried away."

Davion rolled out from under him, and Myles fell back on the bed, pressing the base of his cock, trying to control the feelings.

Shakily Davion pushed the jockstrap all the way off and got to his knees. His face was concealed by shadow, but he still seemed to be looking at Myles's cock. He crawled up on the bed till his knees were on either side of Myles and gripped the headboard, pushing his cock against Myles's lips.

Opening his mouth, Myles reached around to cup and squeeze each hard muscled cheek in his hands, letting Davion set the pace. He circled his lips, feeling the bump of balls on his chin, and almost gagged when Davion thrust a little too deep.

Myles pulled off and forced Davion closer, lifting his head to suck in his balls, one at a time, tumbling them in his mouth. Davion's hard cock thumped his nose a couple times, but it was all good.

"Hold up," Davion muttered and rolled away to reach into the nightstand and get out a bottle of lube and a condom. "Suit up that prong."

Myles took the packet wordlessly. He was about to rip it open but stopped to watch the other man. "What are you doing?"

“Getting myself ready to take you,” Davion said. He squirted lube liberally over his fingers and reached behind himself, grunting a little.

“Let me see you,” Myles demanded.

Davion turned away from him, getting on all fours and supporting himself on one hand as he reached around and stroked over his hole.

Myles watched avidly as Davion sank a finger inside himself, pumping it gently in and out. After a minute he added another finger, wiggling them around to stretch himself. It was unbearably hot to Myles to watch him so unselfconsciously put on such a display. Davion looked over his shoulder, watching him while he worked his fingers. Finally he pulled them out. His glistening hole seemed to wink at Myles.

“Rubber up,” Davion ordered. “How do you want me?”

“What do you mean—”

“On my side, my back, on all fours?” Davion was kneeling, holding the base of his cock and jiggling it up and down while he waited for Myles to smooth the rubber over his dick.

Still, Myles hesitated on one side of the bridge, wondering what this would mean for the rest of his life once he crossed it. He’d never particularly considered assholes attractive, but he realized he could barely wait to possess Davion. He was lost and he knew it.

“Ride me.” Myles had spent some time on the Internet, so he wasn’t surprised when Davion pushed him flat on his back and straddled him.

The secretive smile on Mona Lisa's lips was nothing compared to Davion's as he positioned himself over Myles, the rest of his face hidden in shadow. It was thrilling and strange to watch him plant his knee on one side and balance on one foot as he continued stroking himself with one hand. With the other he reached behind himself and grabbed Myles's cock, aiming at his hole. Myles gripped the sheets with both hands. He could feel his toes curling in anticipation and watched as Davion maneuvered his cock.

When he felt the tight, warm walls closing around the head of his cock, Myles tried to rear up, but Davion took control, pausing a moment to adjust. He felt a slight resistance, and then his cock was sucked inside, engulfed in a channel that was tighter than anything he'd ever felt, and yet it was so soft and warm.

The slightest edge of pain showed in Davion's smile, melting into pleasure as he slid slowly down Myles's pole until he was fully impaled. Still Myles felt he couldn't really read the other man, how he felt in this moment. But what was happening was so hot he wasn't going to ask questions and risk getting tossed out.

Thrilling to the sight of his cock entering Davion, Myles drew back slightly and drove his dick further inside.

Davion grabbed both of Myles's wrists, pinning him to the bed as he leaned forward, his hips starting a slow rotation and grinding himself between their stomachs.

The muscles in his thighs clenched and released as Davion started to ride Myles, rising and falling in ever-faster rhythm. Instinctively Myles slid his hands under Davion's thighs, helping him lift up.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Myles murmured, staring at the cock bouncing with each movement.

Davion reached for his cock and stroked himself quickly, holding himself steady with one hand on Myles’s chest.

Feeling the ring of muscle clench and release around him, Myles managed to gasp, “Am I hurting you?”

Davion shook his head, his eyes closed and his lips open as he sucked for air.

Encouraged, Myles pushed in a little further, watching his dick disappear, the inner muscles drawing him in deeper. Gripping Davion’s waist, he pulled back and plunged in forcefully until he was buried to the hilt.

Davion squirmed and writhed, but his face wore its familiar expression of mocking amusement, not that Myles was spending a lot of time looking at his face.

Proudly, Myles asked, “Who said it’s a myth about a brother’s equipment?”

“They can come and ascertain the facts with me,” Davion said, sounding torn between ecstasy and laughter. “Aren’t you proud of yourself?”

Myles looked down on Davion’s own not-inconsiderable endowment and was secretly glad he wasn’t the one on the receiving end. “God, you’re so tight.”

“Come on, more fucking, less talking.”

Myles grabbed for Davion’s buttocks, holding him up in one spot as he snapped his hips upward, driving deep and fast.

Then he slowed down, gliding slowly into the other man. Davion’s torso stretched languorously to meet each

deliberate thrust. Then he planted his hand in the middle of Myles's chest and said, "Wait. I want to ride you reverse cowboy."

The words spiked a shiver of lust inside Myles. Davion pulled off, stroking his own cock as he got to his knees and turned around to face the other way before lowering himself slowly onto Myles's erection again, swiveling his hips to grind their bodies together. Myles couldn't believe how deep he could go in this position, thrusting up fast into Davion.

With each thrust Myles could watch the quiver of Davion's buttocks as he slammed down on his stomach. He couldn't take the slow pace any longer. Gripping Davion's hips, Myles pushed Davion forward till he was kneeling on all fours, ass up and head down on the mattress, and held him there, still buried deep inside.

Davion gave a shaky laugh. "Never had much luck with that move before."

Feeling absurdly triumphant, Myles got upright on his knees, reveling over the submissive lines of Davion's body crouched before him, waiting for him to take control of the fuck. He snapped his hips forward and yanked Davion back to meet his thrust at the same time, making their flesh smack together with force.

Davion grunted in pleasure and reached back with one hand to slap one of Myles's cheeks before he grabbed his own cock, stroking in time to Myles's thrusts.

Myles withdrew and entered Davion again, ramming himself home. He'd never felt anything so tight, so warm, and added to that was the visual excitement of watching the hole close around him and his cock disappear up another man's ass. He started to fuck faster.

Each stroke was becoming shorter, and his abs fluttered when he felt Davion tighten his ass when he was buried as deep as he could get. Myles felt his brain turn off, his muscles tensed, and silence roared in his ears before his orgasm thundered through him like a symphony of sensation so exquisite, he would have been happy to die like that.

But he didn't. He knelt there with his chest heaving, looking down at the spot where his dick was still buried in Davion's hole, admiring the graceful curve of his spine as he remained drooped over on his knees and elbows.

He moaned in disappointment when Davion moved, pulling off and turning to push Myles to the mattress with an oddly triumphant look on his face. Where Davion knelt, his face was obscured in shadow, a spill of light from the window framing his body from abdomen to thighs. His hand became a blur as he jacked himself, his body shaking and his head dropping back. His hand kept moving when he came silently, his chest heaving.

Myles surveyed the pearly white drops shining on his skin. He felt marked in some way. On the one hand, it felt so right to be with Davion, but on the other, he resented it. He didn't want to be owned by anyone. He was distracted when Davion rubbed his stomach, working the spunk into his skin.

He pushed the hand away and took care of his condom. Davion handed him a tissue. Myles dabbed at his cock, leaving shreds of tissue behind, and wished he had the energy to take a shower. Tiny aftershocks of pleasure and confusion thrilled through him, despite his fatigue. Pride that he had managed to fuck Davion and bring him pleasure.

Anxiety about where this was going when Davion lowered himself to the mattress and switched off the light.

“How’d you like that?” Davion asked eventually.

“I’ve never felt anything like it,” Myles admitted. He felt a sheepish grin coming over his face. “It was wonderful.”

Davion chuckled. “Felt pretty good from my end too.”

“Don’t you feel, I don’t know, less masculine being the one who takes it up the ass?” Myles asked awkwardly.

“I know what I like and I own it. I like getting fucked, and if you like fucking me, I don’t see a problem.”

“I don’t think I could ever do it.”

“Some people never do. I know who I am.”

Myles couldn’t help it even though he knew it was trite, but he really needed to know. “Was it good for you?”

Davion laughed. “Yes, dear. Was it good for you too?”

“I’m serious. I’ve never been with another man—like that—and you’ve probably had thousands of lovers—”

“I’m not that easy. Call it hundreds.” There was an edge to Davion’s voice. “What’s the problem?”

“Mr. Kolahi... when we ran into him... I thought you were going to blow me up with him.”

Davion leaned over to switch the light on again and stared at him in disbelief. “He knows about me, Myles. He’s going to believe whatever he wants about you. You can’t control that.”

“Damn!”

“What’s got you so jacked up?”

“It’s—taboo in our community.”

“Not in mine.”

“Oh, suddenly you’re not black anymore.”

“Myles, there are plenty of gay guys who are black.”

“But no one talks about them. No one respects them.”

“You trying to live up to the whole African-American community? You know what they *all* think about it?” Davion swung his hand, waving it to include the city. “Or is this about your mother?”

“Does your mother know?”

“Yeah, of course.” Davion acted as if it was just an ordinary, everyday conversation to come out to one’s own mother.

“You mean—your mother—*accepts* it?”

“She wasn’t happy about it, but she came around. She realizes I’m not going to change.”

“Does she know about me?”

“I don’t give her a blow by blow of my conquests, current or past.”

Myles could tell Davion was losing patience. “Don’t you feel guilty about, like, God?”

“God hasn’t shared his views with me personally, but I don’t think he cares that much,” Davion said.

“The Bible is against it.”

“When was the last time *you* went to church?” Davion asked in disbelief.

“When I was married,” Myles admitted.

“Aw, you insisted on a church wedding. Did you wear white too?”

“It was my wife who wanted—” Myles stopped short, realizing it was a mistake to bring Marlene into the discussion.

“Nearly forty and you still don’t think for yourself.” Davion compressed his lips, as if he was controlling himself. “I want a man who walks beside me through life. I’m not going to walk five paces behind, like I’m less than.”

“It’s not like that!”

“What’s it like then? You show up when you want to take a jab but otherwise we don’t know each other on the street?”

“Yeah—I mean, no! You know what I mean. You’ve been living like you want to, doing whatever you feel like—”

“You could do that too.”

“No, I couldn’t. My mother—my parents—they would die if they knew—if they thought—”

“Why didn’t you come that last time?” Davion interrupted.

“I couldn’t.”

“Had a more important appointment?” Davion sounded sarcastic and angry.

Myles struggled to find an answer. He could make an excuse, a good one, he knew. But his life had become a series of excuses, and he felt he owed Davion the truth, even if he never spoke to him again. His heart felt like it was breaking at the thought of never seeing Davion again, especially like this, never holding him, never loving him again. But finally the truth demanded to be spoken between them, and the words burst from him.

“I didn’t want to be....”

“Keeping it real, like always. You can’t even say it.”

“I... I....”

“You didn’t want anyone to know you were gay, but you liked what we were doing just fine,” Davion said in a hard voice.

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Yeah it is. If you can’t admit to yourself what you are, how you going to claim it?”

“I know who I am,” Myles insisted. “This thing only happened with you.”

“You don’t know shit. Anything you do in the dark is damn sure going to come to the light sometime.”

“It’s not safe—maybe for you, you’re an artist and everyone expects—”

“Artists are expected to be a little wild and outrageous?” Davion waited for an answer that was not forthcoming. He rolled off the bed and stood up. “You think I didn’t have to face all that shit? That offhand disdain from black men *and* women, accusations of going white, doubts about God, telling my family. Yeah, it’s hard. Been there, done that.”

“You don’t know how difficult it would be—you don’t know my life!” Myles burst out angrily.

“Yeah, no one’s ever had it as hard as you.” Davion crossed his arms, staring down at Myles angrily. “Get dressed and get out of here.”

“But why?” Myles sat up, his gut clenching with fear. Davion towered over him like a powerful judge sentencing him to life in a prison he’d always been trapped in. The marks of his own fingers gleamed where he’d left lube on Davion’s skin. He didn’t want to go, not now, not when he’d found Davion again and was on the verge of grasping what he had always wanted. “I don’t want to go.”

“You’re not listening. I live my life in the light. You planning to slip over here just to fuck my ass and keep it on the down-low? We’d just make each other miserable. *Again.*”

“I don’t know what to do.”

Almost tenderly, Davion said, “The thing about making a choice is that it always comes with regret for what might have been. You have to decide what you want more.”

“I don’t know.... I want....” Myles shook his head miserably.

“Someday you’ll realize you can’t be who people want you to be. You have to be you, or no one can make you happy.”

“But—I can’t lose you again—”

“I’m done wasting my time on you. Get out of here.” Davion walked away from Myles into the kitchen. He got out a beer, opened the bottle, and took a gulp, leaning against the counter and pointedly looking away from Myles.

Myles got out of bed and went to where he’d left his clothing, dressing slowly while wondering what he could say to change Davion’s mind, even though he seemed implacable.

When he was dressed, Myles came to stand in front of Davion. Even though he was dressed and Davion was naked, he felt like a kid called on the carpet by his mother. “Is there anything I can say or do to convince you....”

Davion’s face was as hard as stone, but his eyes had a bruised look behind the mask. Myles stopped talking, watching his happiness slip away for the second time in his life, feeling powerless even though he knew that wasn’t true. All he had to do was claim Davion—and himself.

Davion waited a beat and then shook his head. “Not me you have to convince. Get your own head sorted out. Figure out what you really want.”

He couldn’t say what needed to be said. The fear of his mother finding out, disappointing her yet again.... Myles turned and walked away from Davion again.

“MYLES, what’s wrong?” Tanisha shut the door to his office and stood with her back pressed against it, looking at him with sympathetic concern in her eyes.

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong,” Myles said dully, keeping his eyes on the papers on his desk. By rights he should have had them memorized by now; he’d been staring at them all morning.

“Do I look like the kind of idiot that would buy that load of bullshit?” Tanisha asked. “No, I do not. After not lifting anything heavier than a coffee mug for a year, you’ve suddenly been working out every day until you’re exhausted. You come in looking like you haven’t slept in a year. You’re not returning phone calls. Do you even know where the NASDAQ closed yesterday?”

“Yes, it was five thousand something, wasn’t it?”

Tanisha looked at him as if she was now sure he’d suddenly gone insane. “The last time that happened was ten years ago, Myles. What the hell’s eating you?”

“Nothing.”

She sat down in the chair opposite his. “That’s supposed to be what the woman says in an argument, and

when she says it in exactly that tone, you know something really is wrong. Are your parents okay?”

“Fine,” Myles mumbled.

“Your grandma Mimi?” Tanisha knew how much his grandma meant to Myles.

“She’s good.”

“It can’t be Marlene. You weren’t that broken up when she dumped you.”

That roused Myles a bit. “She didn’t dump me, it was a mutual decision.”

Tanisha rolled her eyes in exasperation. “That’s what all the boys say when they finally figure out their lady is trifling. No! Don’t even bother lying about it. I don’t care! If it’s not her, what is it? Did the market take a dive without me noticing?”

“It’s personal, Tan,” Myles said heavily.

She stiffened and rose from her chair. “There’s nothing you can’t tell me, Myles. I’m always in your court, although sometimes you make it very difficult. But when you say it’s personal....” Tanisha shook her head. “There’s never been anything personal about you. You don’t see people as persons; they’re numbers to you. Marlene dumped you because she was never a real person to you.”

Myles attempted to rouse himself from his lethargy. “I loved Marlene.”

“Love! You don’t know the first thing about it,” Tanisha scoffed. “You are not a good person, Myles. I thought you were but....” She shook her head again and went to the door. “You’d better do something about this. You can’t spend the rest of your life sitting there feeling sorry for yourself.”

Myles stared at her in shock. “I can’t—”

“Yes, I know you can’t.” Tanisha’s gaze was sympathetic even though her voice reverberated with anger. “Even though you’re more useless than most men usually are, I still like you, Lord knows why. If I can’t help you fix it, at least talk to your grandma. She’ll set you straight.”

“Tanisha—” he started, but his voice was barely audible.

“NASDAQ at five thousand. Someday we’ll get a good laugh out of that one. I hope.”

The sharp click when she shut the door just served to reinforce the stab of pain in his heart. Without knowing anything personal about him, Tanisha had put her finger right on the source of his pain. He wanted so much from people, but he wasn’t willing to give an inch to give them anything.

“Wonder where I learned that at,” Myles muttered bitterly.

The killer was, Tanisha was right. He wasn’t a good person; he had nothing to offer anyone; his parents, his grandmother, or Tanisha. Even Davion.

THE subway ride out to Queens seemed like mere minutes to him. Mechanically he switched from the express to the local, staring blankly at the ads in the car. Simply getting off at his stop reduced him to the emotional level of a kid again, going home to face his parents and hoping they hadn’t caught him at something forbidden.

He walked the four blocks from the subway stop to their high-rise, steeling himself to face them. His father would

shake his hand and clap him on the shoulder, and facing him would be easy compared to his mother's suspicious eyes and probing questions.

The elevator smelled of cigar smoke. Myles remembered how frustrated he'd felt when he was thirteen and his mother had accused him of smoking simply because the elevator always smelled like cigar smoke. He hadn't been quick enough to realize it, and she'd grounded him, not that he'd had anywhere to go at that age. He hadn't met Davion yet. The flood of bad memories didn't help during the ride to their floor, past the nonexistent thirteenth floor to the top.

He still had a key to his parents' condo, but he always rang the bell anyway. Maybe it was only a tiny rebellion, but it was enough to remind himself and his mother that he no longer lived there. But this time it wasn't enough to soothe him. His emotions roiled inside him when she opened the door.

"Myles, my dear." Ruth Winston smiled when she saw him, and her voice was softer than he remembered it from the phone. His mother was stately with her white hair swept into a French twist and her rather formal dress of blue chiffon. She drew him down for a kiss, and the sight of her smile reminded him that she really did love him, even though she had difficulty showing it.

"Hello, Mama," he said.

"It's so good to see you, Myles. Come in." She drew him inside and closed the door before leading the way into the living room.

The view of the Manhattan skyline was hazier than he remembered from when he was growing up, hidden in the

smog, but it still beckoned to him alluringly with promises of a spurious freedom.

“You’re early. I’ve got some things yet to do in the kitchen. Your father will get you a drink.” Having organized her menfolk, Ruth returned to the kitchen and left him standing in the living room.

Earl Winston put down his newspaper and got up to greet him. Myles shook hands with his father, becoming aware that Earl was looking at him searchingly.

“You all right, son?”

Myles roused himself to respond. “Yeah, Dad, I’m fine. Where’s Grandma?”

“In her room. You know how she is. She’ll come out and join us if she feels like it. Or not. What’s your poison?” Earl went to the sideboard covered with glasses and bottles.

“Just a coke.”

Earl shot him a quick look. “Let go and live a little, son. Even cops get off duty some of the time.”

“A coke is all I need,” Myles said hesitantly.

“You’re a grown man and it’s none of our business now, but you don’t seem happy to me.”

Myles was so shocked he let it show on his face. He couldn’t think of a thing to say. His father handed him a coke and a coaster, and went to sit down again.

Earl glanced cautiously toward the kitchen, but Ruth wasn’t in view. “I used to think I knew what made a real man, Myles. I thought I was doing my best by you. But now I’m beginning to think it all doesn’t matter if you’re not happy with the life you chose.”

“There’s nothing to choose,” Myles responded dully. “It is what it is.”

“It is what you make it,” Earl corrected him. “You’ve never been happy since you were in high school.” He waited, but Myles didn’t speak. “Your mother is a fine woman, son. All she wants is for you to be happy too.”

Myles knew it was the truth. Ruth did want him to be happy—*her* way. He shook his head wordlessly.

Earl got to his feet. “I’ll go see what your mother wants to drink.” He shuffled his feet and looked down. “Don’t let her steamroll you into anything you don’t want.”

Myles got up and gave his father a hug, feeling somewhat as if he’d stepped into an alternate universe. After a moment Earl wrapped his arms around his son and hugged him tight.

“Love you, son,” he whispered, and then slapped Myles on the back twice before he let him go and hurried into the kitchen.

The exchange rocked Myles off balance. It was the most intimate and yet the most oblique conversation he’d ever had with his father. It struck him that maybe his parents knew or suspected what he’d tried so hard to hide from them all these years, and that his father was trying to give him permission to be himself. The thought terrified him.

Or maybe it was just wishful thinking. Somehow Myles couldn’t imagine his father being proud to have a gay son. Earl Winston was a corporate lawyer and a successful one, but in all the years that Myles had gone to school, nothing had made his father prouder than when he scored in basketball or the time he’d had a fight at school and won.

Myles remembered hearing his father brag about his athletic prowess and his SAT scores but never talk about anything personal about him. He sighed and shook his head, as if trying to free himself from the bonds of his own expectations.

He escaped down the hall to his grandmother's room and tapped on the door.

"Come in."

He went inside, closed the door, and leaned on it in relief at reaching that familiar sanctuary.

Mimi laughed. "Hounds of hell after you, darling?"

Her dark eyes were sharp and bright, eyes that would have looked fine on a hawk. After examining his face, Mimi beamed at him, and she stated, "You found Davion again."

Shocked, Myles stammered, "Damn, woman, how'd you know? I never told you—"

"Grandma ain't no fool. You only ever wore that look on your face when you were around him. Don't screw it up this time."

Myles flinched as she prodded him in the chest with a hard finger. Even though she was in her eighties, Mimi still stabbed as hard as she always had. "But—how did you know?"

"Do I strike you as stupid?"

"Never, and even if you did, I wouldn't dare tell you."

"Damn right, boy." Mimi turned away to look out her window at the clouds. "*Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.*"

“I’m a Judas?” Myles felt devastated by her statement, even more because he had betrayed Davion again, and this time he should have known better.

She turned to face him, and her hawk-eyes softened. “I wasn’t talking about what you did to Davion. You betrayed yourself. You’ll never be happy if you continue down the wrong path.”

Myles writhed in his chair. “The Bible says it’s bad to be—gay. How can you—”

“The Bible! Jesus never said a word against homosexuality, and I think we can trust him! God made gay people, same as straight, and God doesn’t make junk. Don’t tell me you’ve been believing it’s a choice between your faith and yourself. You can be gay and still believe.”

Myles opened his mouth, and Mimi held up her hand to stop him. “Now don’t quote your mama to me. She has her good points, but she’s a mite too worried about what the neighbors think. And Jesus never said your neighbor will judge you when the trumpet sounds. No, I think that responsibility is reserved for God himself.”

“But how can you be sure—” Myles stopped, recognizing the serene look that came over his grandmother’s face.

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.’ One Corinthians 13:12.”

“What does that mean?” Scrambled thoughts flashed through his head, how Davion hadn’t let him see his face the last time they’d made love, how he himself had hidden behind a façade all these years, even from himself, how he didn’t deserve a man like Davion.

“Without starting a Bible study here, it means you’re never going to be happy unless you do what *you* want. You have to know yourself and claim your heart’s desire.”

“Mom’s going to hate this,” he muttered.

“She’ll get over it or ignore it, whatever suits her best,” Mimi replied. “Don’t take that onto yourself.”

“You never liked Mom, have you?”

Mimi smiled. “You’d be surprised. I like Ruth quite well at times, and I even love her. Don’t much respect the gods she worships, but that’s her business. And what you do with your life is *your* choice!”

“I always felt like I didn’t want to disappoint them—”

“Myles, you’re a grown man, almost forty. You finally got right and dumped that chocolate Barbie you married. You’re on the right track for once.”

“Mom wants grandkids, and I thought you wanted great-grandchildren—”

“No need to produce unhappy great-grandchildren on my account. I never planned to hold your life hostage to gratify my desires.”

“But you would have liked it if I had kids, right?” Myles asked wistfully, still wishing he knew what to do to please her.

“I would have liked you to be healthy, Myles, and happy about whoever you’re taking to bed. Your parents are in their sixties, I’m in my eighties. When *do* you think it might be all right to live your own life for yourself?”

“Now,” Myles said. He stood up. “I won’t be Judas again. Davion deserves someone better, who isn’t slinking around hiding behind innuendo and lies by omission.”

“You deserve to be someone better. Be yourself. Somewhere deep inside there is a pretty fine man.” Mimi patted his hand. “And when you get things ironed out, bring Davion by to see me. Is he still as good-looking as he was when he was a boy?”

“How the *hell*—how did you know what he looks like?” Myles exploded. The unexpected conversation was taking a toll on his self-control.

Myles could swear that Mimi was mentally licking her lips and rubbing her hands gleefully when she thought about Davion. “I saw him somewhere once. A beautiful boy with soulful eyes. Is he still as handsome?”

“Better. He’s better-looking now, but he’s also—I don’t know, completely *himself*.”

“I’d like to see him.”

Myles bent to kiss his grandmother and suddenly realized how fragile she looked, although her spirit still shone like a beacon. “Thank you, Grandma.”

She put her arms around him and clung tightly to him for a moment. “Always glad to set a stupid child straight, Myles. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’ll bring Davion to see you,” Myles promised.

“Make it soon, child. I do like looking at a beautiful man.”

“So do I, Grandma. In fact—”

“I feel you,” Mimi said and flapped her hands, her eyes luminous. “It makes my heart sing just to see you happy again.”

“I guess we’d better get out there.” Myles gave his grandmother his arm, and she got to her feet.

“Thank you kindly,” Mimi said. She gave a girlish giggle. “I hope I get to see Ruth’s face when you blow her up.”

“You’re a wicked woman,” Myles teased. He felt curiously at ease now that she knew. If only he’d known that she’d known all along—but she was the most honest person he’d ever met. She often said that the truth was the only right way. Now that he had her approval, he could stand up to the disapproval from his mother and father, although thinking back to what Earl had said, Myles wondered if his father would be that shocked about the revelation.

Mimi kept her hand on his arm as they walked to the living room, and he was relieved to see that she still moved easily and kept her balance. He couldn’t bear to think of losing her just yet. There were things he needed to do, and he wanted her to be there to see that he could do it. He helped her sit in an easy chair with special care and asked, “What can I get you to drink?”

“A glass of my sherry, boy,” Mimi answered. “I haven’t changed that much.”

Myles fetched her the glass and then exchanged a look of amusement with her when his mother came out of the kitchen, bearing a tray of something in her hands. “Dinner is ready, Myles.”

Mimi grinned wickedly at him and winked. “And so it begins.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

MYLES ran a finger around the inside of his collar. It felt tight, like it was choking him, even though this was just a

regular shirt that he wore to work once a week. He hadn't tasted a spoonful of the soup, and now his plate could have been filled with dog food for all he knew or cared.

He found his mother staring at him disapprovingly and giving him a little shake of her head. He was an adult now, but she still had the power to make him feel that he might be sent off to bed without his dinner for misbehaving. The conversation had already covered how busy he was at work and the state of the weather, so any moment now his mother would start in on his social life.

"Myles, I would like you to meet the daughter of a friend of mine," his mother said. "Her name is Evelyn Banks, *Miss* Evelyn Banks. She's a professional woman working the fashion industry. Very attractive, quite smart, and *single*. A lovely girl. I'll give you her number and you can give her a call."

Myles did not miss the stress his mother put on the word "Miss" and realized that he'd been right, she was at it again. He couldn't decide which was worse; the fact that she refused to stop trying to play matchmaker or the fact that she automatically assumed that he wasn't seeing anyone since the divorce.

He realized his grandmother was watching him with a mischievous smile on her lips, and he grinned back. Having her in his corner made him feel like he could take on Mike Tyson. The only problem was that he'd always felt his mother could probably take on Tyson and win. She was one tough lady.

"No thank you, Mama," Myles said. "I'm not interested."

"How can you possibly know that without meeting her?" His mother frowned slightly and then smoothed her brows.

“My friend Estelle said that Evelyn is quite eager to meet you. I told her about your successes on Wall Street.”

It pissed him off that she'd felt compelled to assure the woman of his worth, as if there wasn't much to recommend him other than the money he'd earned. He jumped as he felt the pointed toe of Mimi's shoe dig into his shin under the table.

“I'm seeing someone,” Myles blurted hastily.

“Why haven't you told us about her?” Ruth demanded. “When can we meet her?”

Myles felt another painful kick from Mimi and turned to glare at her.

“Don't you look at me like that, boy. I thought you brought a set of balls along with you tonight. Now find them or lose them.” Mimi chuckled at Ruth's wince over her choice of words.

“My balls are just fine!” Myles started to laugh. Even his father looked a bit startled, and his mother's mouth was rigid with disapproval.

“Myles, please. We're at the dinner table.” Ruth refused to look at Mimi, but Myles had the impression she would have liked to rebuke her mother-in-law as well.

“Grandma started it.” Try as he might, Myles was unable to stop laughing. Some untapped well of courage seemed to bubble up within him, fed by the proud way Mimi was looking at him even though she'd forced his hand, but maybe she intuited that he needed a push if he were ever going to come clean. Maybe she thought they all needed to face it. Her words about being a Judas echoed in his head, and he realized he couldn't deny Davion again.

He looked at Earl. “Dad, what you said before—did you mean it?”

Earl seemed to steel himself. “I meant it,” he said resolutely.

“Mom, Dad, I’m—I’m—gay.” Myles expected to see his father flinch.

“Oh, Myles, not that.” The disappointment in Ruth’s voice made Myles flinch, but he was surprised to see her welling up with tears.

Irritated, he said, “It’s not like I turned out to be a serial killer, Mom.”

“I can’t say that I approve of your choice, Myles,” his mother said stiffly.

“It’s not a choice, Mom. It’s just how I am, how I’ve always been. Now that Davion—”

“That boy again! I always thought he was a bad influence.”

For a moment Myles was angry, and then he laughed again. “No one can influence you to be gay. And now that he’s back in my life, my feelings for him are as strong as before. Stronger. I’m not going to give him up, for you or anyone.”

“You’re not expecting us to accept him—as your partner!” Ruth exclaimed. “You would bring him here—as a couple—”

Myles glanced at Mimi, looking for her help. She bit her lip but nodded at him. “This is yours to do, boy.”

“I won’t force you to accept him, but if you don’t, you’re rejecting me,” Myles said. “He’s the one I want to be with.”

“Ruth, what is it? Your friends? The church?” Earl put in. “This is our son, our only child. He’s old enough to know whether he’s gay or not.”

“It’s not the church. I won’t discuss this with my friends,” Ruth said. She covered her face with both hands. “I wanted a better life for you, Myles. Who would choose to be homosexual in this world? Discrimination and violence!”

Even Mimi looked startled. She reached out and gently stroked Ruth’s arm. “Ruth, my dear, is this what’s bothered you? You’re afraid for Myles?”

“I am afraid. I wanted something else for you. Your life—” Ruth started.

“My life,” Myles repeated. “My life. My choice.”

“I’m—just not—I’m—uncomfortable with the idea of—” Ruth lowered her hands but looked at Mimi rather than at Myles. “The thought of him—with—a man....”

“Then I suggest you stop thinking about it,” Mimi said. “I’ve always thought it was rather rude to imagine one’s friends and acquaintances doing it. There’s more to being gay than getting it on between the sheets. Myles is telling you who he is.”

“I’m not going to march in the Gay Pride parade in sequined hot pants and feathers, if that’s what you’re dreading,” Myles said. “But I probably will march in it. I’ve been afraid to admit to who I am, even to myself, and I can’t do it anymore. Can’t you at least meet me halfway?”

Ruth turned to stare at Myles, and he wondered if he really knew her. When she spoke about homosexuality, he heard the loathing and humiliation in her voice, but the tortured look in her eyes seemed to have nothing to do with him. “I love you, Myles.”

“Hallelujah,” Mimi said softly. “It’s about time you two met. Ruth, you have a very fine son, and Myles, you have a mother who loves you very much. After the dust settles, I think you might find you actually like each other.”

“I’ll try, Myles,” Ruth promised and stretched out a shaking hand.

Myles took it and kissed it. “Thanks, Mom.”

Now that the moment was past and his secret lay bare for everyone to see, Myles couldn’t wait to get out of there. He felt free, and he needed to find Davion and tell him. He went to his grandmother’s side and bent to kiss her. “Thank you, Grandma. I have to go now, but I’ll bring Davion to see you soon.”

“You did good, boy. Love you.” Mimi pulled his head down and kissed his cheek. “Give him my love.”

That surprised Myles a bit, but he said, “I will. Dad, I’m sorry I have to get out of here. Take care of Mom.”

Earl took his arm and walked him to the foyer. His smile fading a bit, Earl sighed, but he put his hand on Myles’s shoulder. “Your mother will be fine, Myles. Maybe she didn’t want to face it, but she’ll get used to it. It makes no difference to how I feel about you. You’re my son and a man in my eyes. A man to be proud of.”

“I haven’t made you proud yet, but I will.” Myles patted his father’s hand. “Thanks, Dad.”

ALL the way back to the city, Myles dialed Davion’s number repeatedly. Each time he got the message that the number was no longer in service. He thought maybe it was the

connection in the subway, but when he was aboveground, he got the same result.

Davion must be even angrier, or worse, more hurt than he'd suspected. He'd seemed fully in control when he asked Myles to leave so it shook him to realize just how much he'd fucked up. Not only that, but he'd never thought to ask Davion for his cell number, like Davion was always going to be there waiting for him when he wanted him, just like the old days.

He didn't like the idea of just showing up outside Davion's place. It smacked of stalkerish behavior, and he didn't want to do that to Davion. Or himself. Someone had to have his number—Mr. Kolahi.

Myles hailed a cab with renewed determination.

MYLES opened the gallery door and made a beeline for Mr. Kolahi's office. "Kolahi! Are you in there?"

Jerry Kolahi was standing up behind his desk, looking surprised when Myles opened the door. "Mr. Winston! What can I do for you?" He held out his hand.

Ignoring it, Myles said, "I want Davion's cell number. You have to give it to me, I need to talk to him, to explain—"

"Please sit down, Mr. Winston." Kolahi remained on his feet. "Can I get you something? Coffee, water perhaps?"

"I didn't come for a social call—"

"Mr. Winston, I'm sure you can appreciate that I can't simply hand out one of my artists' number to anyone who buys a painting." Kolahi's voice held a hard note that Myles hadn't heard before.

“But I’m not just someone who bought a painting!” Myles almost groaned as he slumped into the chair but controlled himself in time. “I can’t reach him. He changed his number at home.”

“If he didn’t give it to you, he must not wish to keep in contact,” Kolahi said, his voice gentler now. He sat down. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I, and I need to tell him, I need to apologize—” Myles stopped. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have burst in here like that. I keep fucking up.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it.”

Myles searched Kolahi’s face. “You know.”

“I’m not just Davion’s agent, I’m his friend,” Kolahi said. “The first day you walked in here, I knew who you were.”

“You’re very tactful.” Myles was embarrassed when he remembered how cold he had been, trying to hide his reactions. “How could you know about—us?”

“Let’s say I suspected. Davion has told me about some of what inspired some of his most evocative pieces. I’ve also seen some of his private work, paintings he’s refused to place with me. Artists generally tend to explore themes—but your face, your physique, the way you hold yourself... it’s very distinctive.” Kolahi made a gesture. “I recognized you in many of his pieces.”

“Why did you invite me to the opening, then?”

“Sometimes an event from the past holds us back. I thought perhaps he needed to see you and face... certain things so he could move on.”

“What about me?”

“Have you been happy running away from ghosts all these years?”

“What are you, some kind of psychic?” Myles demanded roughly. He hated feeling so exposed, especially to this older man who seemed to have it all together.

Kolahi chuckled. “When one’s life is all about art, perhaps one is given the eyes to see things that are hidden from other people, maybe even themselves.”

“Whatever. I understand you can’t give me his number, but can you tell him to call me?”

“If he walked away from you, he must have had some good reason.”

Myles sighed. “He did. He does. I fucked up again.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Why? What’s the use?”

“I can’t decide for Davion whether he should listen to your apology or not. You look like you’ve needed to get this off your chest for a long time, and perhaps I can be of assistance.”

“I don’t know what he’s told you,” Myles said.

Kolahi’s expression was sympathetic and interested but didn’t give anything away. It was almost as useful as jousting with his own reflection.

“Go on.”

“We came up together. Same neighborhood, same school, same court where we played ball,” Myles said, his voice constricted with pain. He fell silent, as if hoping to be let off the hook.

Kolahi got up and brought two bottles of water, setting one down in front of Myles. It made Myles think back to the

day he first entered the gallery and found Davion again. The last two weeks had brought him back to life, ablaze with an intensity he'd thought was gone with his youth.

"We had a thing going. I walked away from him. I didn't want anyone to know I was a fucking faggot."

"Anyone in particular?"

"My parents—my mother. She had such high expectations—she wanted a churchgoing son, a daughter-in-law she could go shopping with, grandkids...." Myles shrugged, looking a little lost.

"That's sad," Kolahi said.

"I know. I disappointed her." Myles hung his head.

"Not for her. For you. For Davion."

Myles looked up, startled. "He was fine. He never said anything—"

Kolahi gave a sharp snort of laughter. "He's a proud man. You think he would show you his pain? Did you wear yours on your sleeve?"

"No, I didn't, but I never thought—he seemed so—he was fine—"

Shaking his head, Kolahi said, "That kind of agony cuts deep, drawing the heart's blood and draining the joy out of life. Davion isn't the sort of man to beg."

"Neither am I!" Myles flared.

"Pride is a cold thing to take to bed with you for the rest of your life," Kolahi rebuked him. "If there is such a thing as a soul mate, I would say that you two are it for each other, but you'd rather throw that away for the sake of your black manhood. You're both fools!"

“So you’ll ask him to contact me?” Myles asked hopefully.

“Do you play poker, Mr. Winston?”

Taken aback, Myles said, “No, of course not. I don’t gamble.”

Kolahi chuckled. “Amusing that you’d say that when you work on Wall Street.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Pity. You have an excellent poker face.” Kolahi leaned forward and said softly, “Perhaps I am psychic after all. I feel like I’m looking at a man who is writhing in agony on the inside, but outside you’re as blank as a stone.”

Myles hung his head, uneasy with Kolahi’s piercing gaze. “I—I—”

“I’ll call Davion,” Kolahi said. “Don’t thank me. I can’t guarantee that he’ll agree to speak with you and I’ll bring no pressure to bear on your behalf. No matter how sorry I feel for you.”

“Thank you,” Myles said humbly, even though he didn’t quite like the idea of Kolahi feeling sorry for him.

Kolahi dialed the phone while Myles held himself tensely on the edge of his chair. He drew in a huge breath when Kolahi began to speak, but his blood pressure was elevated to the point where he couldn’t hear. Or maybe he just didn’t want to. He just sat there with his eyes fixed hopefully on Kolahi’s face.

Perhaps Kolahi recognized that because he smiled reassuringly when he hung up the receiver. “He’s agreed to see you, but you’ll have to go over there. He’s been drinking.”

“Thank you.” Myles leaned forward and grabbed Kolahi’s hand, shaking vigorously. “Thank you. You’ll never know what this means to me.”

“You’re most welcome, Mr. Winston.”

WHEN Myles arrived at the building where Davion lived, he realized he’d never come there without Davion so he had no idea how to get in. Luckily it was still light enough that he noticed the intercom. He hit the button labeled D. Robinson, expecting to hear Davion’s voice, but instead he jumped when the buzzer sounded.

It was still going as he started up the stairs, and he wondered if Davion was so drunk he was just leaning on it by accident.

The door was open at the top of the staircase, and Davion was standing there holding it open, a beer in one hand. He looked incredibly hot in tight jeans and an unbuttoned white shirt that hung open, exposing his smooth chest.

“Come in,” Davion slurred, waving his beer before taking a swig. “Did you forget something last time? Your Rolex? Your wallet? Or can I offer you a drink with a giant helping of asshole?”

Stung, Myles was stricken into silence as he watched Davion walk unsteadily to the center of the room. Even worse was the tortured look in Davion’s eyes that belied the satirical smile. He stood there clenching his hands, wondering if it had been a mistake to think he could turn back the clock and make this right.

Almost to himself, Davion started to speak. “Never thought I’d see you again and then there you were at the gallery. Hit me like a ton of bricks. Thought I’d put it all in the past, moved on and there you were, asking me to go to dinner. Never should have done that, but why not? Just for a laugh, I thought.

“And you sat there looking at me so sad with those puppy-dog eyes and I got the notion to kiss you. Just a joke, just to poke fun at what we had back in school; maybe prove it was really dead and done with. So I did it and it wasn’t enough. Still, I was willing to let it go.

“But you couldn’t let it be. You called and I could tell you wanted a little something-something. So I thought, let’s get down under those bleachers again. Quick little blowjob, where’s the harm in that, right? We already did that, right?”

Mutely, Myles nodded, shame burning like a white-hot poker in his gut when he realized how he’d used this man again and again in his own quest for—something.

“You acted like a fucking asshole when we ran into Jerry. Like I was something you couldn’t scrape off your shoe fast enough.”

Myles hung his head, afraid to look at Davion. However drunk he was, every word cut like a knife.

“But it was just your way to hide in the darkness, I told myself. You’re a private man. Always was. Never shared nothing of yourself back then, why should it be different now? But I kept hoping.” Davion shook his head and staggered as he started for the window.

Myles stretched out a hand to steady him, and Davion slapped it away.

“I thought if we fucked, it might help you see what you been missing, might make you man up. You hit it and left without a word. I fooled my own fucking self into thinking I was giving you what you needed when it was what I wanted.

“You took it anyway. Not enough for you, and what I got isn’t enough for me and way too much either of us to handle.” Davion drained his beer. “Get out of here. I never want to see you again. That’s all I wanted to say.”

“Give me another chance.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I love you!” It had taken so long to say the words Myles practically shouted it out.

Davion took so long to respond that Myles started to despair.

“Why didn’t you come that last day?”

“I was afraid.”

“And you’re trying to sell it that you’re not afraid now.” Davion laughed bitterly.

“I’m terrified,” Myles admitted, “but I can’t lose you again. You’re the missing part of me. All these years, I’ve been alone—so lonely—and only half alive. Since we’ve been—since I saw you—I realized—” He swallowed hard. “I can’t lose you again. I told my family; my father, Mimi, and my mother. It came to light, just like you said it would.”

“I’m not going to change for you.”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m not going to be perfect, I’ll probably fuck up, but when I saw you in the gallery, I knew what a treasure I threw away. I can’t go through my life without you.”

Davion shook his head in disbelief. “So far you’ve given a great impression of a selfish fucking asswipe.”

“No impression. It’s the truth.” Myles hung his head. “I had nothing without you. I’d give up everything I’ve earned if I had to in order to be with you.”

“That’s okay, I’d rather have a rich lover than a poor one,” Davion said.

Myles stared in dismay at the impassive face, but finally Davion broke and laughed. “You mean—I have a chance?”

Davion was grinning, and his voice was filled with astonishment and joy. “I should throw you out the window.”

“You should, but I hope you won’t.”

“I promised Mimi I wouldn’t if you ever came back,” Davion said, unaware of what a shock he’d caused.

“You—you know my grandmother?” Myles squeaked.

“I met her once,” Davion admitted. “A long time ago. She said she wouldn’t tell you unless you asked, and I guess she kept her word.”

“That’s something she’s real good at. But—why?”

“You didn’t come. I knew where you lived. I wanted to know why; I guess that was stupid. Never matters why.” Davion crushed his empty beer can in his hand and lurched toward the kitchen. Finally he grabbed the back of the couch for balance and simply tossed the can in the general direction before sinking down to slouch on it. “Don’t worry, I made sure your parents weren’t home. Mimi answered the door and she called me by name, so I thought you’d told her about us.”

“I never did,” Myles said regretfully. “I must have talked about you—a lot.”

“She was nice. I could tell she wasn’t pissed about us,” Davion slurred, sinking deeper into the couch and staring dreamily at Myles. “I told her how I felt about you.”

“And how—how did you feel?” Myles could hear the quaver in his voice.

“Maybe it was teenage hormones,” Davion mused. “But I felt like I met the one person I was meant to be with. I felt so lucky to meet you so young. I thought we’d grow up and move to the city together, live together, sleep together....” His voice trailed off. “I loved you. You were my soul mate—and then I lost you.”

Myles swallowed the lump in his throat. After seeing Davion as the confident, ultra-cool man who never quite revealed anything, it was all the more powerful to see his emotions stripped bare. “I’m sorry. I failed you.”

“Didn’t fail me.” Davion shook his head slowly. “Mimi explained it to me. Sometimes you meet your soul mate—but they don’t love you back. You busted me up inside. I’ve never been right with another man. When I saw you at the gallery, I figured—this is my one shot. I was lucky to have it once. Not going to happen again.”

“Damn.” Myles sat down and hung his head, letting his hands dangle between his legs as the weight of the confession sank in. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Tell me, Myles. If I take you back, can you ever love me?”

Myles went to Davion and sank to his knees on the ground before him, taking his hands in his. “I love you now, I loved you then. I’ve loved you all these years. My soul ached for you, ached for the hole I gouged in my heart when I

turned away from you. You're the only one I could ever love. I'll *make* you believe it if you give me a chance."

Davion's face looked radiant, if a bit unfocused. "I'm too drunk to know if you're telling the truth—"

"Don't worry, if I hurt you again and Mimi finds out, she'll tear my heart out and have it for breakfast. How can I prove it to you?"

"Tell me you're gay."

Myles reared back but didn't let go of Davion's hands. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"I want to hear you say you're gay. I *need* to hear the words," Davion demanded.

Myles cleared his throat. "I'm gay," he managed to croak.

Davion gave a laugh of sheer joy. "We'll have to practice that."

"And I love you," Myles continued.

"I should be shot for stupid, but I love you too," Davion returned. He dropped his head against the back of the couch and closed his eyes.

Myles released his hands and stood up to take off his coat. He sat down next to Davion and pulled the slimmer man against him, into his arms, holding him against his heart. Davion seemed to have either fallen asleep or passed out. Looking down at his closed eyes and slightly parted lips, Myles felt a sense of peace for the first time since the last time he'd walked out into the sunlight from under the bleachers.

Davion might not remember any of this when he woke up; Myles had no idea what kind of drunk he was, but he

intended to stay right there until Davion woke so he could remind him. He felt like he'd sworn an oath and taken a vow; he felt more married than he ever had after the church ceremony.

He had another chance. As darkness fell and shrouded them in comforting shadow, he remembered what Davion had said about his deeds coming into the light.

One day soon he would go see his parents again. He wouldn't take Davion, not this time. It wouldn't be fair to give his parents a target for their disappointment, someone to blame.

But if his mother ended up rejecting him, it wouldn't matter anymore. He had Davion now, and he would have to be worthy of him. That was all he needed. His soul mate.

IT'S going to be different now, Myles thought, *I'm* going to be different. He opened the door to his office and found Tanisha staring at her monitor as usual.

"Morning, Myles," she murmured. "Market's up a little."

"I'm gay," he announced abruptly.

Tanisha looked up in surprise and then smiled. "Well, *testify*, my brother. It's about time you spread the word."

"You *knew*? How did you—" Myles stammered and stopped when he realized he was sputtering nonsensical gibberish instead of words.

"Not me. My boyfriend." Tanisha laughed at the look on Myles's face. "When you opened this office and he found out it was just going to be the two of us, and you were divorced and all, he wanted to meet you. Make sure I'd be okay." She

shrugged. “I knew you weren’t interested in me, but until he said it, I wasn’t sure why.”

“And you’re okay with it?”

“I’m *much* more accustomed to men falling at my feet after being exposed to my irresistible charms—” Tanisha started.

“Not that, me being gay,” Myles interrupted impatiently.

“What difference does it make?”

Tanisha seemed honestly perplexed by his question, and Myles felt a bubble of laughter welling up inside him. “It might make a difference to our clients.”

“You planning on announcing it?” she asked sardonically. “Maybe get a new sign made: Myles Winston, gay financial advisor. You do love a good sign.”

“I won’t have to. Davion will be around and it’ll be hard to miss.”

“Ah, so that’s who he is. Unless you start losing their money, I doubt most of them will give a shit. It’s dog eat dog in this biz, and only the bottom line counts,” Tanisha said. “Besides, you could afford to close up shop and never make another investment again if that’s what you wanted. If your clients walk away, you’ll get better ones.”

“Yeah, I can start catering to a gay niche market.” Myles laughed. He felt amazingly carefree now that he had come out to Tanisha. If he’d only known how easy it could be—he’d wasted so many years—

“Their money is just as green,” she said. “And maybe gay folks need someone to handle their money who knows what it’s like on the down side. Someone who treats them with a little respect.”

“Maybe.” Myles was a little startled at her perspective, and it gave him ideas.

“I hope you two will be very happy,” Tanisha said.

“I will. I am.”

“Good, just so you know you got a winner. Don’t screw it up.” With that she turned back to her monitor.

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me,” Myles muttered.

“And they’d be right.”

“Always have to have the last word.”

“That’s what women live for. Besides, we usually *are* right.”

Wisely, Myles escaped into his own office and left her to enjoy her triumph.

DAVION was standing by the loft window looking out at the street below, a glass of wine in his hand, when Myles came up soundlessly behind him and slipped his arms around him.

“What’re you looking at?”

“I was watching for you,” Davion said, leaning back against Myles.

Thrilling to the feeling of trust when that fine body relaxed against his, Myles said, “I came in the back way.” Myles hooked his chin over Davion’s shoulder, rubbing his cheek against the stubble of his lover’s face.

“I should be painting instead of mooning at the window,” Davion said huskily. He moved his buttocks, gently rubbing them against Myles’s hardening dick.

“Want me to crack the whip and make you get back to work?”

Instead of answering, Davion turned within the circle of Myles’s arms and gave him a deep kiss. Myles could feel dampness on his back, which told him that Davion had lost control of the wine glass, but the feeling of their hard cocks rubbing against each other through the barrier of their trousers was much more arousing a subject.

He slipped his thigh between Davion’s as they rocked their hips together. He was getting desperate for air when Davion moved his mouth away to ask breathlessly, “Are you staying the night or going home?”

“I thought I was home,” Myles answered.

“For real?”

“For real and forever,” Myles said, “if you’ll have me.”

“Oh, I’ll be glad to take you.” Davion seemed to fully relax for the first time since Myles had seen him at the gallery. “Want to make love?”

The words made Myles happy, that and looking at Davion’s face, laid open for him to read every passing emotion at last. Fear, hope, and love flickered through Davion’s eyes, and Myles thought he must have been blind not to see it before.

He took the glass from Davion’s hand and set it on the windowsill. “Nothing I want more.”

They walked to the bed, hand in hand. Starting to undress Davion, Myles lifted his T-shirt over his head and

kissed each inch of skin as it was revealed. When he finally had Davion naked, he pulled him close for a passionate kiss. The importance of this relationship, so new and fragile, hit Myles hard, and he trembled with the fear and joy of it as he tasted his lover as if for the first time, putting all the emotion he felt into the passionate kiss. He let his hands roam over Davion's silky skin while they kissed.

He jumped a bit when he felt a hand start to stroke his cock. It killed him to end the kiss, but he pushed away gently and said, "Let me get undressed."

Davion pushed his pants down and knelt, taking his cock into his mouth, looking up at Myles with his soulful eyes. Myles could barely make his fingers work to deal with buttons, but he managed to lose his jacket, tie, and shirt, standing there with his hand on the back of Davion's head, rocking into the warm, wet mouth. It felt good, but he wanted something more.

He pulled Davion to his feet and took him into his arms to kiss him again, shivering at the feel of their cocks pressed together.

Davion reached between them and took both their cocks into his hand, stroking them slowly. It was an unbelievable pleasure to have their erections pressed together in the ring of fingers working up and down, and when Davion pushed Myles back, he toppled onto the bed, pulling Davion down on top of him to rest his full weight atop him.

Myles reached for the pierced nipple, moving the bar and pinching the erect nub between his thumb and finger, while Davion moaned into the kiss in response. Myles pushed his tongue deeper into Davion's open mouth, wanting the closeness.

Davion's hips were working as he ground against Myles's groin. Myles cupped his ass and let his fingers drift into the cleft and brush over his hole. Davion moved up to give him a better angle, and Myles pushed in awkwardly. Davion gasped and gave a shaky laugh.

"Let me get the supplies."

Myles let him go, watching the stretch of his sleek torso as Davion reached over to the drawer. He accepted the condom and rolled it on. Davion squirted some lube into his hand, and he slicked his cock.

Then Myles took the bottle from Davion. "Let me do it."

Davion nodded and rolled onto his back, pulling his knees to his chest and spreading his legs.

Myles got more lube on his hand and caressed the head of Davion's cock, sliding a finger under the ridge to watch the lean hips flex in time to his touch. He had to admit what a thrill it gave him to finally give in wholly to his desire to touch another man's cock, but most of all this man, the one he'd loved and lost.

He traced a line down the shaft and stroked the delicate skin behind his sack, finally rubbing lightly over the puckered hole, watching it pulse in response. He sank a finger inside and was surprised when Davion began to rock against his hand, a sublime look of pleasure on his face. He slipped another finger inside, and Davion groaned.

"I want you inside me," he murmured.

Myles got onto the bed and walked on his knees between Davion's thighs, his muscles trembling with anticipation and fear. He was a little surprised when Davion

lifted his legs and put his calves on his shoulders, raising his butt up.

“Get your thighs under me,” he directed.

Myles did so, pulling the other man’s hips up onto his lap. It put his cock level, and he lined up, but still he hesitated. The last time had been a physical rush, but he knew this meant so much more—to both of them.

“Do it,” Davion said. “Go on and take me.”

Finally Myles pressed forward, feeling resistance.

“Keep going. I want to feel you inside me.”

He pushed harder, and the head of his cock was engulfed in molten silk, and he stopped, all his senses under assault, the taste of Davion in his mouth, the sound of his moans, the sight of him, the feeling of his channel pulsating around his cock. The emotion of possessing the other man almost undid him as their bodies were united in this most intimate of acts.

Looking up he saw the most incredible expression on Davion’s face as he sank his teeth into his lower lip, his eyes narrowed as he surrendered to the pain and pleasure of being entered. Davion’s stomach muscles fluttered as he struggled to adjust, but he kept his gaze fixed on Myles’s face. Skimming the soft skin of Davion’s inner thighs with his fingertips, Myles pushed gently forward until he experienced again the unimaginable sensation of being pulled into Davion’s body.

Pride that he was the one who put that look on the beloved face warred with Myles’s feelings of love and his need to move. He pulled almost all the way out and slid further in,

hearing the exhalation of air when he was buried as deep as he could go.

He leaned forward to kiss the other man, his mouth, his neck, his shoulders and chest, feeling the hard cock trapped between their bellies twitch as he drove in impossibly deeper. Moving slowly, he waited for the expression on Davion's face to show more pleasure than pain. At his nod, Myles started to find his rhythm and sat up, his hands on the other man's thighs, keeping him close as he thrust into him. Myles groaned and let his head drop back as he felt Davion writhing beneath him.

Davion arched up, pulling Myles down to him for another kiss. Myles shivered at the hot slide of the tongue seeking his and the erection rubbing between their stomachs as Davion's hips continued their slow undulation. Playfully Davion licked at Myles's open lips. It shook Myles to see the mischievous grin as Davion teased him. Freed from his teenage angst of being discovered and the shackles of his marriage, he realized making love could be fun—with the right person.

"You're the love of my life," Myles murmured.

"I know." Davion fell back on the bed, his face unfocused with bliss but his lips curved in a smile.

Myles started to pick up momentum, driving harder and faster. He licked his lips, trying to hold back to give Davion the utmost pleasure, watching the way his face changed, grimacing when he went too fast, his eyes rolling back when he angled a certain way. He made each move deliberate to heighten the sensation for both of them, trying to find the spot that made Davion groan in pleasure and lift up to meet him. Myles ran his palm over Davion's firm chest and then

slid his hand down his body, grabbing his cock and stroking it.

Davion arched his head back, his mouth open in voiceless pleasure. Stretching his body on the bed and jolted by the force of their lovemaking, Davion let out a series of desperate moans as Myles thrust inside him. He raised his legs to circle Myles's waist, his eyes liquid with pleasure. With each stroke Myles pushed them to the edge until Davion's head hung back over the edge of the mattress, his eyes closed in rapture.

Davion reached for his cock, stroking in time to thrusts, and with his other hand reached up to caress Myles's body, stroking his chest. Myles shuddered with pleasure when he felt Davion clench around him. His face unguarded in ecstasy, Davion convulsed with his orgasm, his chest heaving as he gasped for air.

Myles stopped moving to drink in the beautiful face until Davion opened his eyes and smiled up at him.

Leaning down, Myles put his hands on either side of Davion's head for a sensuous, open-mouthed kiss. He continued to kiss Davion passionately as he began to move again, pressing their chests together. Feeling Davion's arms around him made him feel safe and loved. The combination of tender emotion and raw physical ecstasy swept over him like a hurricane, tearing him loose from his accustomed moorings with an explosive release that he'd never felt before.

After an unusually long orgasm he finally lay still, ravaged by the aftershocks and feeling Davion's hands soothing over his back. Finally he lifted his head and kissed Davion, both of them still breathing hard.

He pulled out and rolled onto his back, finding Davion's hand and twining their fingers together, feeling more spent and yet more satisfied than he ever had in his life. "I love you, Davion Robinson."

"Love you, Myles."

"I'm never going to leave you. You're stuck with me."

Davion laughed. "All I ever wanted. But—I want you to be sure about this. I don't think I could take it if you figured out you couldn't take the heat."

Frustrated, Myles struggled to find the words to convince his lover of the depth of his feelings. "Davion—all my life I wandered alone and blind in the dark. Now I've found your heart—and it's all I need. I've come home. I've found my soul mate."

"Thank you," Davion said softly. He propped himself on one elbow and leaned closer for a kiss.

Looking into the soft, unfathomable depths of Davion's eyes, Myles knew at last he had found his heart and his forever. The untold want that had gnawed at his heart all his life was fulfilled, and he was finally at rest.

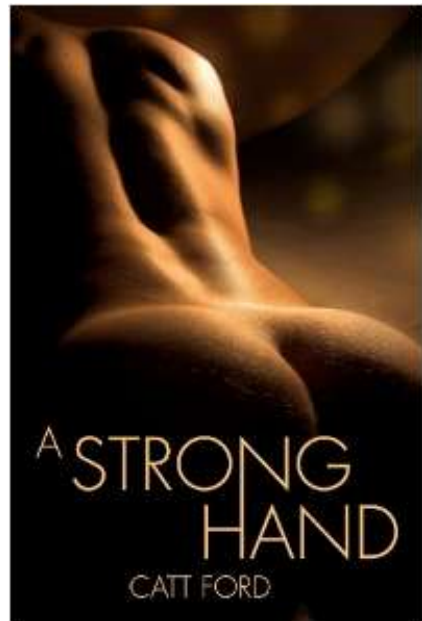
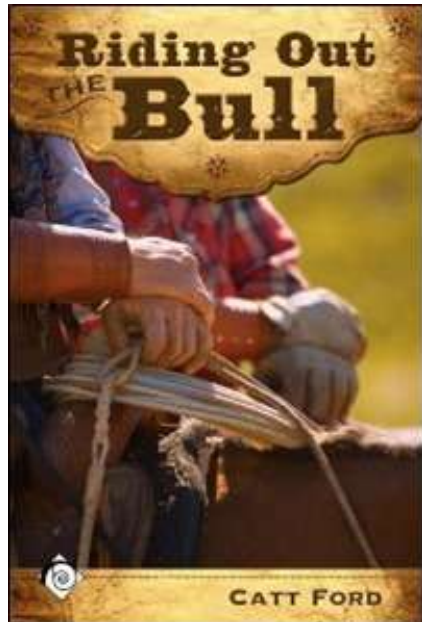
CATT FORD lives in front of the computer monitor, in another world where her imaginary gay friends obey her every command.

She likes cats, chocolate, swing dancing, sleeping, Monty Python, Aussie friends, being silly, spinning other realities with words, and sea glass. She dislikes caterpillars, cigarette smoke, and rude people who think the F-word (as in faggot, or bundle of sticks) is acceptable.

A frustrated perfectionist, she comforts herself with the legend about the weavers of Persian rugs always including one mistake so as not to anger the gods, although she has no need to include a mistake on purpose. One always slips through. Writing fiction has filled a need for clever conversations, only possible when one is in control of both sides, and erotic romances, where everything for the most part turns out happily ever after.

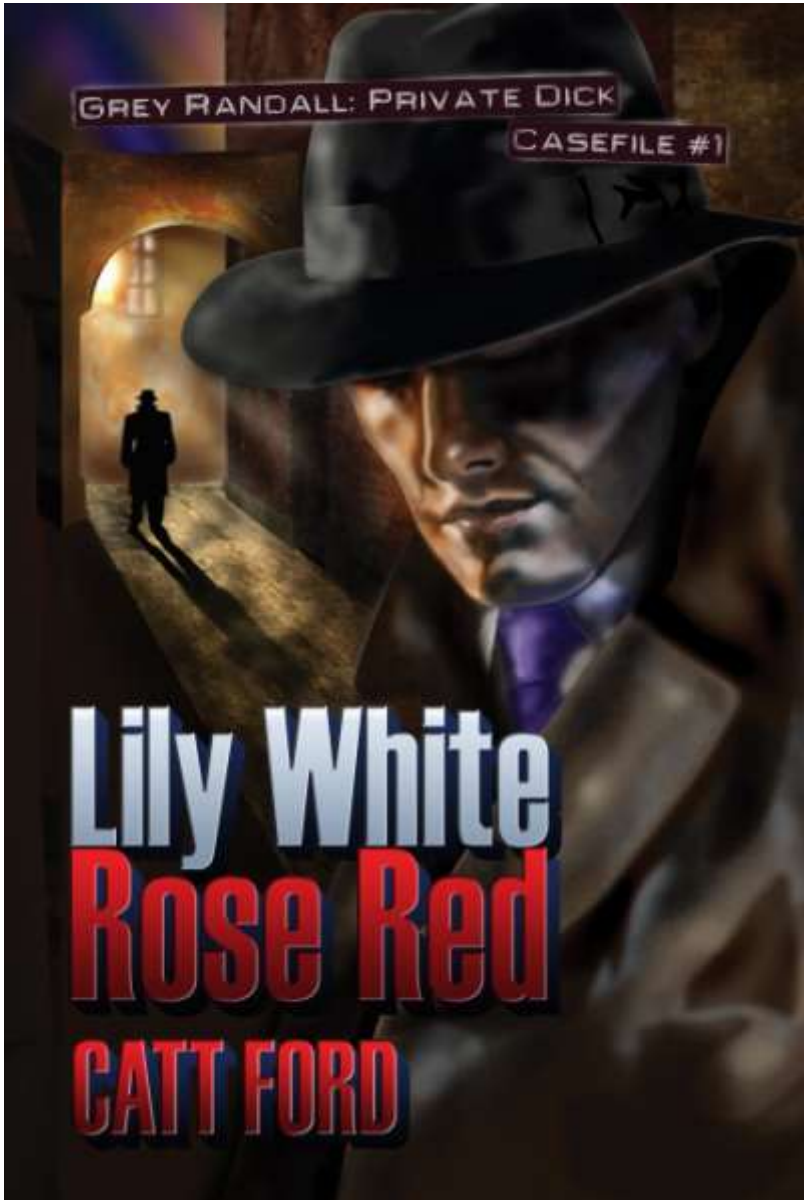
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A black and white advertisement featuring a silhouette of two men in a romantic pose, nearly kissing. The background is dark, and the men's profiles are highlighted against a lighter, hazy background. In the upper left corner, there is a logo consisting of a diamond shape with a spiral inside, resembling a stylized eye or a hypnotic pattern. To the right of this logo, the text "dreamspinner Press" is written in a cursive, script font.

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