



Trapped Nerves

by Drew Hunt

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Drew Hunt

Chapter 1

Pill Hill - Portland, OR, July 2005

Whenever he entered an elevator, Dr. Mason Grant always felt a slight pang of fear. Guiding his chair through the opening, Mason was glad to see that the car was empty. However, when he turned around to face the doors, someone else had stepped inside, too. Mason gazed up at the broad, heavy-set frame of the newcomer. His body froze when he reached the man's face.

Feeling a desperate need to escape, Mason reached for the rims of his wheels, but his arms refused to co-operate. To his horror the steel doors began to close, locking him inside the car with the one person he hoped he'd never see again.

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Central High School - Crawford, a small town outside Vancouver, WA, September 1991

The coach had worked the soccer team hard: harder than usual in Mason's opinion. Dragging his tired body out of the showers Mason reached for a towel. Stepping into the main part of the locker room, he beheld the sight of the football team in a state of semi-undress. Usually the soccer team used the smaller locker-room in the sports complex, but it was closed due to some problem with the water supply.

Snapping out of his momentary shock, Mason made his way to the benches and began to dry himself. The sight of so much new eye candy proved too hard to resist however. One particularly fine example of maleness was displaying itself to Mason's right. The penis was good sized; Mason was willing to bet its owner was getting aroused judging by its slight plumpness as the smooth pink tube rested against an almost hairless ball sac.

With a jolt, Mason realized he'd been staring too long. A brief glance could be passed off as innocent curiosity, but a prolonged stare was something else entirely. Lifting his gaze, Mason's eyes swept up a smooth and beautifully muscled torso to a handsome, square-jawed face, a pair of intense grey eyes staring back at him. Mason gasped. He'd been checking out Parker Collins, 'The' Parker Collins. The six feet two inch, hundred ninety pound star wide receiver and safety.

Feeling a wave of nausea rising from his churning stomach, Mason put his clothes on over his still damp body and got the hell out of Dodge. In his haste he almost tripped over the laces of his sneakers, which he'd left untied.

'How the fuck could I have been so God damned stupid? Parker Collins. Of all the mother-fucking dumb-ass idiotic things to do!' Mason said under his breath.

Mason didn't sleep much that night. Visions of Parker and his teammates bearing down on him, kicking the crap out of him, didn't exactly aid his rest.

An insistent buzzing woke Mason from the light doze he'd managed to slip into. Opening his eyes, he wondered if he ought to pretend to his mom that he was too sick to go to school. "Hell, I won't have to do much pretending," he thought catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror on the door of his closet.

Getting out of bed, Mason knew he had to face the music some time; putting it off would only make things worse.

To his surprise the sky didn't fall in when school began. No one stared at him, called him names or threatened to break his bones. 'Maybe Parker's gonna bide his time before kicking my ass,' he thought as he pushed open the door to the main building.

Mason kept a low profile during the day. He thought he saw Parker at the other end of the hall when they were both changing classes after second period, but he managed to dive into a bathroom before Parker could see him.

Two days passed without incident. Mason was sitting in his usual spot under a maple tree, enjoying the warmth of the fall weather. After grabbing a sandwich, some fruit and a can of soda from the snack bar, he would often escape to his tree to eat his lunch. Few people used that part of the campus, tucked away as it was behind the sports complex.

A shadow fell across his gaze. When he looked up, Mason's jaw fell and his stomach clenched.

"Hi," the calm voice said.

"Um." Mason stared up at his visitor.

"This spot taken?" Parker said nodding at the space next to Mason.

"N-no."

Parker, never losing an ounce of his fluid grace, positioned himself next to Mason, their bare arms touching slightly.

"What ya got in the sandwich?" Parker eventually said after the two had remained quiet for a couple of minutes.

Mason stared at the object in his hand; his appetite having deserted him the moment Parker had shown up. "Um, Bologna and Swiss cheese."

"Cool," Parker said, before asking, "You gonna finish it?"

"I . . ." Mason wondered why they were talking about food. Why hadn't Parker already beaten the crap out of him?"

"Dude?"

"Err, um, n-no, sorry."

"Hand it over then. Man, I'm fucking starved. Lunch was a pile of shit."

Silently Mason gave Parker the remainder of his meal, stealing glances at the jock-god through the corner of his eye.

When Parker had finished eating, belched loudly and scratched his nuts - an action that caused Mason to whimper - he got to his feet. "Same time tomorrow, then." Parker said over his shoulder before loping away.

It wasn't until Parker had gone out of sight before Mason felt he had been released from the spell he'd been under. Why did being in Parker's presence make him act like a blushing tongue-tied fuck up? He was a senior just like Mason, they both played sports. Mason shook his head, unable to come up with a rational explanation.

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Parker kept his promise, appearing at the maple tree next day. Mason being somewhat prepared, had bought extra.

"Thanks, bud," Parker said, picking up the oversized sandwich.

Mason was captivated by how the big guy ate. He'd never thought watching someone chewing their food could be sexy, but the way Parker did so sure was. He felt a stiffening in his pants which soon became uncomfortable. Fearing he'd draw attention to his predicament if he adjusted himself, Mason sat quietly, an arm lying strategically across his lap. 'Why does this guy have this effect on me?' Mason asked himself as he stole another quick glance at the handsome athlete.

"Thanks, man," Parker said once he'd finished.

"Uh," Was all Mason could think of to say.

"You want that orange?" Parker pointed at the piece of fruit.

"Uh, no." Mason had bought extra fruit, but had forgotten to get more soda. Fortunately Parker didn't ask for anything to drink.

"Cool." Parker leaned close to Mason before taking hold of the orange.

The slight pressure of bare flesh on his arm did nothing to ease the tightness in Mason's underwear. Swallowing a groan of pleasure, Mason continued to stare straight ahead. "Warm for September, isn't it?" Mason could have kicked himself for the banality of his statement.

Swallowing the segment of orange he'd been sucking, Parker turned his grey eyes upon Mason, the glint of playful mischief in them, causing Mason's stomach to flutter.

"Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr. Worthing. Whenever people do that, I always feel quite certain they mean something else."

It took Mason a couple of seconds to process what Parker had said. He stared stupidly at the gorgeous athlete.

"It's a line from 'The Importance Of Being Earnest'." At Mason's continuing look of incomprehension, Parker said, "It's a play by an English dude called Oscar Wilde. We're doing it in English."

"Oh, right." Mason was forced to do a rapid re-evaluation of Parker. He'd labeled him a dumb jock, passing each grade purely on his athletic ability.

"It's a cool play. Those stuck up English dudes always trying to put one over on each other."

"Um, yeah, right." Mason thought he'd been dropped into an episode of The Twilight Zone.

"Yeah, well." Parker looked down at the ground, Mason noticing the handsome face had become tinged with red. "Gotta get movin'. See ya around," Parker said, squeezing Mason's shoulder before standing up.

The contact, even though it was through a layer of cotton, made Mason's skin tingle. Waiting until Parker had walked away, Mason reached up and ran his fingertips over the place where Parker had touched him.

"This is too fucking weird," Mason said out loud.

Dusting the stray crumbs from his pants, Mason realized Parker hadn't said that they'd be sharing lunch the next day. The possibility that they wouldn't was surprisingly unsettling.

Mason needn't have worried, however. No sooner had he settled himself under his tree Friday lunchtime and opened his packet of sandwiches, when Parker showed up.

"What's on the menu today, bud?"

Mason tilted his head upward. "Uh," A vision of his six feet two inch jerk-off idol looking as though he'd been poured into his Umbro T-shirt, flexing his bulging biceps, stood looking down at him. Mason speculated the seams of the already tight T-shirt were in serious danger of giving up the unequal struggle.

Mason was forced to swallow before he could resume speaking. "I've, uh, just got PBJ today. They didn't have much at the snack bar and I kinda. . ."

"Cool," Parker said sitting down, cutting short Mason's ramblings.

Parker lifted the thickly cut sandwich and began to chew.

"Are you, uh, playing tonight?" Mason asked, stealing a quick glance at his dining companion before averting his eyes.

"Course. The Falcons couldn't win if I weren't there."

Mason smiled at the jock's cocky attitude. He shifted, as his penis began to plump. "Yeah, but there was that game last season against St Patrick's when you were injured in the first quarter, but we still managed to scrape through."

Parker stopped chewing and stared curiously at Mason. "I'd forgotten about that. So, ya coming to watch me? Should be a close game, but I reckon we can beat North Side if we stick to coach's game plan."

"You want me to go?" Mason couldn't believe what Parker had just said.

"Course. Why not?"

"Um, okay. I'd, um love to," Mason said, trying not to gush.

Once he'd finished chewing his sandwich, Mason dared to sneak a quick glimpse at Parker. Noticing the chiseled chin had a smear of grape jelly adhering to it, Mason warred with himself over what to do. He so wanted to lean forward to lick Parker's jaw clean, but he quickly pushed away that fantasy. Instead he pointed to his own chin and said, "You missed a spot."

Parker smiled as he wiped away the errant food.

"Better get off to class, got to finish my homework before Mrs. Harris puts us to sleep," Parker said interrupting Mason's musings.

Mason watched as Parker gracefully unfolded his long limbs and stood up, towering over him, the early afternoon sun creating a halo around his medium-length blond hair. Mason found it difficult to breathe.

"Get a seat at the front on the 40 yard line. You'll get a good view from there." Not waiting for a response, Parker turned and ambled away, Mason's eyes fixed on the globes of ass flesh in Parker's tight pants.

Once Parker was out of sight, Mason let out the breath he'd been inadvertently holding before adjusting his aching boner.

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Mason found himself swept up in all the excitement and razzmatazz of the pre-game entertainment. He watched as the cheerleaders took the field enthusiastically waving their pompoms to the accompaniment of the school band. Much to his surprise, Mason was enjoying himself, and the game hadn't even begun.

Even though Mason had seen a number of professional and college games on TV, he was still surprised at the many stoppages in play.

Number 82 seemed to be on the field for most of the game, Mason had to restrain himself from leaping up every time Parker was tackled. He could have sworn several of them were late hits. Mason's cup of joy overflowed when Parker scored a touchdown in the third quarter. Even the ebullient announcer seemed to increase his level of excitement when he announced Parker's achievement. Mason found himself on his feet cheering loudly, but then so were many of the other home fans. Parker and his teammates congratulated each other in the end zone with high fives and helmet pats. As he ran back to the bench on the sidelines, he took off his helmet and waved in Mason's direction, Mason couldn't help but think the gesture was meant just for him. It felt odd however to be sitting amid his fellow students, many of them female. He soon realized they were girlfriends and family members of the players. Mason couldn't decide if this excited him or made him feel uneasy.

Though Mason found the game interesting, he didn't think he would ever become a dedicated fan. He was kind of relieved when the game was over; he'd grown cold sitting on the bleachers. He had to admit that other than Parker's being on the field he had enjoyed the half time performance by the marching band and the view of the buns of the players in their tight pants more than the game itself. The game, which had been tightly fought, the lead changing hands a number of times, ended in a 24-21 victory for the Falcons, the game being won by a last minute field goal set up by Parker catching a pass and running it to the 20 yard line. Then they ran three more plays to run down the clock and keep the opposition from gaining possession. Despite football not being his sport of choice, he had to admit the Falcons were one hell of a team.

The band struck up an enthusiastic rendition of the school's fight song as the team began to leave the field. Parker stayed behind to accept more of the crowd's appreciation of his efforts. Jumping the players' bench at the 40 yard line, he came to the stands and yelled to Mason. "Wanna go and get something to eat later?"

"Uh," Mason didn't know what to say.

"If you haven't got anything else to do , or. . ." Parker seemed somehow nervous.

"Yeah, sure." Mason tried to play down how joyful he felt.

Parker's face lit up in a wide smile. "Can you hang for half an hour then come round to the locker-room exit?"

"Sure." Mason couldn't help returning the smile.

"Cool," Parker said turning to follow the last few of his team members off the field.

* * *

The next half hour seemed to pass slowly for Mason. He was barely aware of the crowd dispersing around him. As he continued to sit there, his mind tried to figure out what the hell was happening. Why had Parker gone out of his way the past few days to befriend him? He'd long since abandoned the idea that Parker was going to pulverize him. He tried not to view the invitation to get something to eat as more than it was. Parker just wanted to eat with him, maybe pay him back for the past few

lunchtimes. The warm, tingly feeling that ran through his veins at the thought of spending time with Central High's best looking athlete went a long way in banishing the chill that had seemed to settle over the now empty bleachers.

There was a fair amount of activity around the exit to the locker room, players emerging, slapping one another on the back and generally horsing around in typical macho fashion.

Eventually the double doors opened and Parker emerged to loud noises of appreciation from his fellow jocks. He slapped a few backs but all the while seemed distracted as he scanned the small but enthusiastic crowd. Mason felt his heart speed up when their eyes locked and Parker began to make his way toward him.

"Glad you waited, bud," Parker said slinging an arm 'round Mason's shoulders. "Hey, listen up, dudes. This is my new bud, Mason Grant. He's on the soccer team, but we won't hold that against him."

"Hey!" Mason was surprised that Parker knew which sport he was involved with, they'd never discussed soccer during their lunchtime meetings.

Mason received cautious greetings and gentle jibes from the other members of the football team as Parker introduced him around. His arm never moving from its comfortable resting place across Mason's shoulders.

"Park, you gonna come with us to Fran Baker's? Her folks are out of town and she's throwing a party."

"I'm wacked out, dude. Just gonna crash tonight."

"Park, you gotta go man. Shit, there'll be loads of pussy just for the taking."

"Sorry, bud. Next time maybe. And I wouldn't wanna muscle in on your chances of scorin', cause if I was there, none of you ladies would have a chance of gettin' any."

"Yeah, right," a chorus of voices announced.

"Later," Parker said before steering Mason in the direction of the parking lot.

"You okay?" Mason asked, seeing that Parker was limping.

"Yeah, just a little banged up."

"I noticed how the other team seemed to single you out a lot."

"Yeah, they know I'm the game maker for us, and if they can take me down, then they're more likely to win."

"I was surprised the officials didn't do anything about it."

Parker shrugged. "That's football. Not like the pansy-assed game you play."

Mason stopped walking. He'd hoped Parker wouldn't be like all the other football jocks, always putting down soccer as a lesser sport.

"I'm sorry, bud, it's hanging around those meatheads too much I guess," Parker said, pointing his thumb over his shoulder at the locker-room exit. "I didn't mean to upset you. Forgive me?" Parker followed up with a shy smile which instantly melted Mason's heart.

They resumed their walk.

"Soccer's more about skill and tactics, not physical dominance, and. . ."

"It's cool," Parker said squeezing Mason's shoulders.

Stopping next to a somewhat beat up and rusting pick-up truck, Parker tried to flip his duffle bag into the truck bed, but winced at the effort.

"You sure you're all right? Didn't you get the coach or someone to look at your injuries?"

"Nah," Parker said finally achieving his goal.

"Okay, sorry."

"Hey, dude, it's great that you care." The look Parker gave Mason caused the latter's heart to swell. Could Parker mean it in that way, could he be interested in him, could he. . . 'Stop it!' Mason said to himself.

"Wanna grab a burger or something, maybe go through the drive through line so I can get back to my place and have a soak?"

"Uh, sure, whatever you say."

"What are you in the mood for? Mickey D's, Wendy's?"

"Don't mind." Mason didn't care, so long as he could spend more time with Parker.

"Wendy's it is then. Their chili rocks."

"Yeah," Mason said knowing he hated chili.

"Come on, get in. I'm starved."

Reaching the head of the line at the drive-through, Parker asked what Mason wanted. Getting the impression that Parker would be the one paying, Mason said he'd just have a regular cheeseburger.

"The hell you will. Speaking into the microphone, Parker said, "A double Wendy's burger with the works. And a bacon and cheese baked potato and large chili."

Mason was strangely comforted at Parker taking charge. Though he grew concerned when his friend also ordered dessert as well as two large cokes.

"I don't live far, so we'll wait till we get there before we eat," Parker said not asking Mason if it was okay. Anything Parker wanted was okay as far as Mason was concerned.

Parker struggled to get out of his seat when they pulled up outside a run-down apartment block in one of the poorer neighborhoods of town. Averting his gaze from the graffiti adorned walls, Mason waited while Parker fished in his pocket for a key, trying to balance the food in his other hand.

"Shit."

"Please, Parker, give me the food."

Parker did so and soon found his key. Once inside the dimly-lit and musty-smelling vestibule, Mason became distracted from the drab interior by the far more interesting sight of Parker's delicious buns as their owner ascended a flight of stairs.

"Here we are," Parker said stopping outside a heavy solid looking door. "This is home."

The inside of the apartment was clean, but cheaply furnished with mismatched second hand items. Mason made a determined effort not to stare too obviously at his surroundings.

"Mom has to work two jobs, and she won't get back till later," Parker said, hobbling to the kitchen. Climbing the stairs seemed to have made his pain worse.

"I'll dish up, you go and sit down," Mason said, seeing how uncomfortable it was for Parker to remain standing.

"Thanks, dude."

"You sure you shouldn't have seen the coach or the trainer about your leg?"

"It's my ass. Nah, I'll go to bumps and bruises on Sunday morning. Once I've soaked in the tub, I'll be okay."

Mason sighed knowing this wouldn't have been the first time Parker had sustained such injuries.

"Come on, bud, get that food over here."

"Sorry." Mason looked in a couple of cupboards for plates.

"What ya after?"

"Something to put the food on."

"Just bring it over, man, we can eat out of the bag. Save on the cleaning up, too."

Mason realized the Collins' didn't have a dishwasher. He thought everyone had one.

"Sorry."

"Would you quit apologizing?"

"Sorr. . ." Mason giggled as he brought the food containers to the table where Parker was sitting.

"Thanks dude. I'm starved."

The pair ate quickly, Mason was hungrier than he thought.

"This is good," Parker said, wiping a drop of chili from his chin.

"Yeah." Mason leaned back in his chair and eyed Parker.

"Oh man, that was some game."

"Yeah, you were awesome," Mason felt himself redden at how gushing his words sounded.

But Parker didn't seem to notice. "Yeah, did you see that pass in the first quarter, the post route? I put a move on that middle line backer. He was on his ass before he knew it," Parker chuckled.

"Yeah." Mason said, even adding a laugh of his own.

"Then," Parker continued, "that short shuffle pass, shit, that was a broken play. But I turned it into a 25-yard gain. I had great blocking from the other guys so I guess they deserve some of the credit. What do you think, bud?"

"They sure did the job for you,"

"Man, that pass from the shotgun that set up the field goal. I thought ole Henry would never see that I was open. Fuck, I did everything but stand on my head before the jerk figured it out. But, when he did, it was a perfect spiral. I snagged that baby. If I had gotten one more block I would've taken it to the house."

"Yeah, you sure make it look easy." He immediately regretted what he'd just said, remembering Parker's injuries. Of course it wasn't easy. But, once again Parker took his praise in stride. Mason couldn't remember enjoying a meal so much, listening to Parker talking about himself, but somehow not appearing boastful. Mason just hoped he didn't come across as too big a suck up.

"I'm glad you enjoyed the game, man. It meant a lot to me for you to be there."

Mason opened his eyes wide in amazement. He was about to ask what Parker meant, maybe even get some idea of what the hell had been going on with the two of them for the past few days, but as usual he chickened out.

Their meal finished, Parker got to his feet, gathered up the trash and limped towards the trashcan.

"Better think about gettin' you home, dude, then I can have myself a good long soak."

"Yeah." Mason was disappointed that their time together was drawing to a close. He scrambled around for an idea of how he could spend more time with Parker. Then he thought of something.

"Um, we've got a hot tub out back at my place, you're welcome to use it. My folks are out at some charity dinner, so. . ." Why had he said his parents wouldn't be at home? "Um, and the jets might help with your bruises."

"Hey, you sure, man?"

"Course. Wouldn't have offered otherwise."

Parker gave Mason a one armed hug. "You really do care."

Mason opened his mouth to say something, anything, but the words stuck in his throat.

"A session in a hot tub would be great. Thanks, dude."

Mason helped Parker limp back down the stairs and into his truck.

"So, where to, dude?" Parker asked, once he'd coaxed his truck's engine into life.

Mason directed him across town to a leaf-lined street, the houses set back from the road, partially hidden by stone walls and neatly cut hedges.

"This is my house, just pull in by that light pole."

"Wow, guy, you sure live in a classy neighborhood," Parker said admiring his surroundings as he stood on the sidewalk.

"Uh, it's just home. I know I'm lucky to be able to live in a nice place, but, it's just home." Mason dipped his head, he hoped Parker didn't feel too intimidated by the obvious differences in their living arrangements.

"Don't know if I ought to leave my truck here, it might lower the tone, or the property values. . ."

"No, Parker, please don't say that. You're just as good, if not better than any of the people who live here."

"Why thank you, kind sir." Parker bowed low, which caused him to grimace in pain.

"Oh shit, you okay?"

"Yeah. Just got to remember not to take any more bows for a while," Parker said through clenched teeth.

"Come on, lean on me, we'll walk round the side to the deck. Save you having to go through the house."

Parker accepted Mason's offer of help. The close contact with Parker's clean, but slightly sweaty body, was causing Mason to have a reaction in his pants. Mason willed his errant member to behave; he wasn't sure now that inviting the gorgeous football player into his hot tub had been such a good idea. Hopefully he'd be able to keep things under control until he was in the water.

"Just sit on this chair while I get the cover off the tub and start the jets. Shit, you haven't brought a suit. I meant to remind you. I'm not sure if any of mine will fit you."

"Uh, well. . . You sure your parents are out?"

"Yeah, positive. These dinners go on for hours."

"Okay. Then um, well, what say we skinny dip?"

"Huh?" Mason couldn't believe what Parker had said.

"It's not like you haven't seen it before."

Mason turned away and busied himself preparing the hot tub, his mind racing. Why had Parker brought up the subject of what happened in the locker-room now? He didn't seem mad. If anything he looked embarrassed. Mason didn't think Parker would taunt him, after all he'd agreed to come here, he'd not brought a suit, and. . .

"Okay, it's ready. You want to strip off and get in while I go get some towels? Mason said, not able to look Parker in the face.

"Sure, bud, whatever you say."

Mason escaped through the French doors and ran for the linen closet. "Please, God, please don't let me make a fool out of myself," he whispered grabbing a couple of towels. Mason wondered if he'd have time to sneak in a quick jerk off before going back out, but knew he didn't.

Stepping onto the deck, Mason said, "Okay, I've. . ." The rest of his words died on his lips.

Parker was sitting on the ledge, facing the house, his legs wide open. Mason got an uninterrupted view of Parker's penis, it was erect and standing about 45 degrees from the vertical.

Swishing his right leg around in the water, Parker said, "Great hot tub, man."

"Uh." Mason was frozen in place.

"You gonna strip off and get in?"

"Uh," Mason repeated, but still didn't move.

Parker levered himself out of the tub and hobbled toward Mason, his dick bouncing with every step. "It's okay, bud." Parker put a hand on Mason's trembling shoulder. "Trust me, man, it's cool. Come on, get out of those pants, they're looking kinda uncomfortable."

Mason was shocked into movement when Parker reached for the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it up, Mason instinctively lifting his arms to allow the garment to be removed.

Silently Mason toed off his shoes, removed his pants and briefs and stood shaking in front of Parker.

"Much better," Parker said putting an arm around Mason's shoulders and giving him a squeeze. "Help me back to the tub, dude. Sure looks inviting."

However, once Parker had settled himself into the bubbling water, Mason seemed to have reverted back to immobility. He stared at Parker's broad, muscular, but somewhat bruised torso.

"You can look at me just as easily from in here, bud."

Mason felt himself blushing. He'd been caught, but Parker didn't seem to mind. In fact he appeared to relish the adoration.

Once Mason had lowered himself into the water opposite Parker, his fellow bather moved to sit next to him.

Taking hold of Mason's right hand under the water, Parker said, "I bet you've been wondering what the hell's been going on this past week, huh?"

"Um, yeah," Mason said, his mouth strangely dry.

With his free hand, Parker tilted Mason's chin so they made eye contact. "Bet you thought I'd pound the shit out of you at any minute, didn't you?"

Mason swallowed. Was that what Parker was gonna do now? He watched as Parker's face, which wore an expression he was unable to read, closed in. Then Mason was shocked to the core when Parker touched his lips to Mason's slightly parted ones. It was only a brief kiss, but it still resulted in Mason letting out a deep low moan.

"When you checked me out in the locker-room, it was kinda like the answer to my prayers."

Mason didn't respond, he just continued to stare stupidly into Parker's face.

"But I still had to make sure. So I gave you a series of little tests. I'm sorry about deceiving you, but a guy in my position has to be real careful, you know?"

Mason wasn't sure that he did. Then a light bulb went on in his head. "You're gay?" Mason said, loudly.

Parker looked round to see if anyone could possibly have heard. "Yeah, but it's not easy, you know, with me being a jock and all."

"Oh, uh, no." Mason's mind spun. Parker Collins, THE Parker Collins was gay, and was sitting in his hot tub holding his hand. "You, uh." Mason cleared his throat. "These tests you gave me."

"Yeah, bud, I had to be certain that you were actually gay, though that was kinda easy to figure out. I mean all the looks you kept shooting me when you thought I wasn't looking."

Mason blushed.

"Then I had to make sure you wouldn't go telling anyone about me. That's real important."

"Uh, yeah. I can see that it would be."

Parker leaned in for a longer kiss. Pulling back he said, "But you won't tell anyone, will you?"

Mason knew he had to be in a dream, the sort of dream where you knew you were dreaming. He thought he ought to pinch himself, but if it was that kind of dream then doing that probably wouldn't work. He didn't want to take the chance of waking up just in case.

"Mason?" Parker waved a hand in front of Mason's face.

"Huh?"

"You spaced out on me, dude."

"Yeah, sorry. It's just a lot to take in, ya know?"

Parker smiled one of his perfect, heart stopping, swelling orchestral music smiles. "I know. Took me a long time to come to terms with it myself."

"Yeah." Mason shook his head. "Um, but why are you telling me all of this? I mean, you're gorgeous, you could have anyone, hell I bet there'd be a long line of straight guys who'd be willing to turn over and open their legs for you."

Parker laughed. To Mason, it was a beautiful sound, full, rich, heavenly. "You don't get it, do you?"

Mason shook his head. "Get what?"

"I want you, dude. You're fucking awesome."

"Huh?" Mason had never thought he was anything special. He was kinda skinny, his face wasn't bad enough to stop traffic, but he certainly wasn't male model material, and his brown hair was always a mess, no matter what he tried to do with it.

Parker leaned forward, wrapped his arms around Mason and began a serious session of face sucking.

Mason, after a few moments of shock, began to reciprocate, his tongue jousting with Parker's for dominance. Soon Mason gave up the unequal struggle and allowed Parker's tongue entry into his mouth, giving him silent permission to explore.

"Hi, honey, we're home," Mason's mother called from the open French doors.

Parker leaped from Mason, a look of total panic on his face.

Chapter 2

Pill Hill, Portland OR, July 2005

"Which floor, bud?"

Mason couldn't move or speak.

"Buddy? You okay?" Parker moved toward Mason's wheelchair.

"NO!" Mason put up a hand to fend Parker away.

"Uh, sorry, guy. Um, look, I'll, uh just press the button for the eighth floor, which is mine. Then you press your own, okay?" The expression on Parker's face was a mixture of surprise and slight amusement.

Mason could feel his heart pumping rapidly in his chest. He'd also broken out in a cold sweat. In a disconnected, far away sense, Mason knew his actions must be coming across as very strange. Obviously Parker didn't recognize him.

The elevator began to move upward. 'Just hold it together, not long now,' Mason told himself, though he remembered Parker was getting out at his floor, too. Mason decided he'd stay in the car and go up and down a couple of times to allow Parker to get out of his way. 'Yeah, that'd be best,' Mason thought, calming his strung-out nerves.

"Bout time we got some sunshine, huh?" Parker observed. "Never knew winters could be so wet."

Mason didn't reply; he was finding it hard to breathe. A quick look at the indicator lights showed they had just passed the fourth floor. 'Halfway there, not long now.'

Crawford WA, October 1991

Mason sat on his bed after dressing for school. It was early Monday morning and still dark outside. However, his usual enthusiasm for the upcoming week was absent.

Mason recalled the image of a trembling Parker, panic writ large in his usually beautiful grey eyes. Parker had attempted to bolt from the hot tub and run, but Mason had somehow managed to physically restrain him.

Maintaining an outwardly calm exterior that was at odds with what was happening inside, Mason did his best to talk Parker down. He explained that he was out to his folks.

"It's cool, Parker. Mom isn't mad, she's not gonna tell anyone what she saw. Your secret, our secret," Mason added as an afterthought, "is safe."

Parker eventually relaxed and let go the death grip he'd had on Mason's arms. His eyes still looked troubled, but maybe not as panicked.

"You sure?" Parker asked, beginning to shiver despite the warm water.

"Trust me. If you like we can go get dressed. Then we can talk to Mom and you'll see for yourself."

Parker shook his head. "No, I . . ."

Mason didn't pursue it. Coming out could be a scary business, especially for someone in Parker's position.

When Parker bid goodbye to Mason, promising he'd be in touch once he'd had time to work it all through, Mason couldn't help thinking that he wouldn't ever get another chance to be close to the handsome athlete.

Although Mason waited by the phone for much of the weekend, Parker never called.

"Honey, you'll be late if you don't get a move on," Mason's mother called from down the hallway.

Mason ate his usual breakfast of a bowl of cold cereal and sliced banana.

A car horn honked, prompting his mother to get up and look out of the window. Cars sounding their horns weren't the norm in their part of town, especially at 7:00 am.

"Derek, do we know anyone who drives a Ford pick-up?" Samantha asked her husband, who had just stumbled, blurry eyed, into the kitchen.

Mason suddenly snapped to attention. He got out of his seat so quickly it toppled over. Rushing to the window, Mason saw that the truck belonged to Parker, who was casually leaning his left elbow on the wound down window.

"Is this the boy you brought back on Friday?" his dad asked.

"Uh, yeah," Mason said, rooted to the spot.

"Well it looks like he's come to drive you to school. How sweet."

"Derek, don't tease him," Samantha warned.

"Sorry, kiddo." Derek ruffled his son's hair.

But Mason remained frozen in place, marveling that Parker came. Actually drove out of his way to come see him. All wasn't lost. Or was it? Was this Parker come to tell him that he'd made a mistake the previous Friday, he wasn't actually gay, he didn't want to. . .

"Son?" Derek laid a hand on Mason's shoulder. "You can't just stand there looking at him through the window. Either go get your school things and meet him out there or invite him in."

"Oh, uh, yeah." Mason ran to his room, picked up his already packed bookbag and headed outside.

The cautious smile which broke out on Parker's face was all the reassurance Mason needed to know that everything would be okay.

"Um, thought I'd come and pick you up," Parker said out of his open window.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks." Not sure where he got the courage to say what he did next, Mason opened Parker's door and said, "Come on in and meet the folks."

Parker's small smile vanished instantly. "Uh, I."

"Do you trust me?" Mason had no idea why he'd asked that.

Parker didn't reply.

"If you don't get it over with now, it'll eat away at you. All the while you'll be wondering what they're like, if they'll say anything that would let the cat out of the bag. But if you come in now, see what they're like, you'll feel a lot better."

Mason watched attentively as Parker sat unmoving for at least a minute, several expressions passing over his beautiful face. Then he seemed to reach some kind of decision. "You're right."

Getting out of the cab, Parker slammed the door and together they walked up Mason's driveway. Just before going inside, Mason sneaked a peek at Parker's face, which was showing an increased level of concern.

"Relax, dude."

* * *

"Oh, man! Parker said pulling up in the student parking lot. "Thanks for almost dragging me inside your place."

Mason smiled. As he'd known would happen, his parents had made a real fuss of Parker. As Parker talked and even made jokes with Mason's dad during the short visit, the worry lines on Parker's face disappeared.

"Go on, I give you permission to say it."

"What?" Mason said looking at Parker.

"That you were right and you told me so."

Mason laughed. "I just knew they'd fall for your charms." Under his breath Mason added, "Just like I did."

"Your parents are great. You're lucky, real lucky." A shadow fell across Parker's face, but Mason didn't think he ought to intrude.

The two remained quiet for a few moments, until Parker said, "Come on, otherwise we'll be late."

Mason had forgotten all about school. As they jogged across the parking lot, Mason wondered again why Parker had picked him up, it was so. . . romantic.

* * *

Mason stared out of the window. His mind had long since stopped paying attention to the teacher who was droning on about a calculus problem that Mason had solved minutes earlier. The weather had decided that it was about time it reminded people that it was the fall and this was the Pacific North West. In short it was raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock. Mason knew he would have to abandon his usual practice of eating his lunch outdoors. He'd have to brave the offerings that the school lunch room provided.

Mason had just loaded his tray and was making his way over to the table traditionally occupied by the soccer team, when a voice at the next table called out to him. Looking up he saw it was Parker.

"Over here, bud."

Mason shrugged, inwardly flattered at the public recognition of his and Parker's friendship.

"Thought you normally had sandwiches," Parker said once Mason had sat down.

Mason explained his reasons for changing his routine while nodding at the other members of the football team whom Parker re-introduced to him.

"God, you should have seen Mason here wiping the fucking floor with Eastside during Saturday's soccer game," Parker said, slapping Mason on the back.

Mason hadn't even known Parker had been there. Parker saw Mason's look of confusion and mouthed, "Later."

Mason shrugged and came out with something about how weak the opposition had been.

"Yeah, we always kick their asses at football," a heavy-set black-haired guy said. Mason couldn't remember his name.

"They're a bunch of fags," someone else said, causing Mason to wince inwardly.

Once he'd finished eating, Mason hung around for a while as Parker seemed in no hurry to leave. Eventually Parker picked up that Mason had finished, and concluded the conversations he'd been having. He stood up, told the guys he'd catch them later, and walked out of the lunch room with Mason.

"Sorry 'bout that, bud."

"It's okay." Mason shrugged.

"We always have a big discussion on Monday lunchtime about the game."

"The guys still seemed pumped over the win. A win which you made possible."

Parker smiled broadly, causing Mason's chest to tighten.

"Look, uh, about your soccer game. I went to see you, but, uh, I was still sorting out stuff in my head about you, about us. So I didn't let you see that I was there, I . . ."

"It's okay, I understand. I guess you've figured it out then, I mean you coming to pick me up this morning and everything."

"Yeah." Parker looked about him, at the students milling passed. "Look, uh, we can't talk here. Can you meet after practice?"

"Okay. But 'cause you brought me this morning, I'll have to stick around anyway 'cause I don't have any other way of getting home."

"Oh yeah." That smile was back again, but was slightly more cautious. Mason found it just as irresistible.

Parker squeezed Mason's shoulder before loping away, Mason's eyes as usual fixed on Parker's deliciously firm ass mounds. Readjusting himself, mentally as well as physically, Mason set out to face the rest of the school day.

* * *

Thinking the coach would never blow his whistle to end practice, Mason stood, hands on knees in goal. The regular goalie was out injured, so Mason had been drafted in his place. 'And wouldn't you know it, they decided to practice kicking penalties,' Mason muttered.

As had happened during the rest of the afternoon, Mason received a couple of rebukes for inattention. Things had gotten so bad in biology during last hour that Mason thought he was going to be given detention. Normally mammalian respiration would have held his interest, but there were more important things to occupy his thoughts.

Finally, mercifully, the coach blew his whistle, and Mason's agony was over. He ran off the soccer field, across the running track and into the locker-room.

After having a quick shower and dressing in his street clothes, Mason made for the parking lot, only to discover Parker was nowhere to be seen. 'Of course he's not here, dumbass, he's probably still at practice.' Mason didn't know if football practices usually took longer than those for soccer. He couldn't help being bummed out that Parker wasn't waiting for him.

After ten minutes had passed, Mason was starting to get worried. Had Parker forgotten, had he left him standing there deliberately? Was all that had happened - earlier that day, the ride to school, the lunch room, and the events of Friday - just been a dream?

"Hi bud, sorry to have kept ya," a voice said from behind him.

Mason spun round and was immediately captured by a pair of soft grey eyes. "Oh, that's okay, I just arrived myself." Mason was relieved, aroused, happy.

Parker raised an eyebrow. "Liar."

Mason felt his face heat up.

"Coach wanted a word with me after practice, and. . ." The shy side of Parker seemed to be coming to the fore. Up until Friday night when his mom had poked her head around the French doors, Mason hadn't known there was a vulnerable side to the star jock. He couldn't help but fall even more in love with Parker because of it.

"No problem. Uh, you said you wanted to talk."

"Yeah." Parker unlocked the door to his truck and was about to climb in when a girl who was on the cheerleading squad, approached and began to hang all over him.

Mason looked on as the girl whose big boobs were threatening to spill out of her uniform top pawed at Parker, making Mason want to barf.

"I missed you at the party Friday night," she said, trying to sound sexy. The voice had the opposite effect on Mason.

"Uh, hi, Hannah. I hurt my ass, so I decided to just go home and crash."

Her hand moved to Parker's right ass cheek and began to rub it. "You should have told me, Parky, I'd have made it all better for you"

"Uh," Parker groaned. "Look, um, later, okay? I gotta be somewhere."

"Sure thing, hot stuff." Hannah removed her hand, gave Parker a quick kiss on the lips and sashayed away.

Once inside the cab Mason did his best to put a neutral expression on his face, but judging by the look Parker gave him, he failed miserably.

"Come on, let's get out of here."

'Couldn't agree more,' Mason thought. His previous good mood was all but shattered. Would he and Parker ever have anything approaching a normal relationship? Or would Mason always have to watch scenes like that with Parker playing the role of a straight red-blooded male?

* * *

"You're quiet," Parker said pulling into traffic, heading, Mason assumed, back to his house.

"Yeah."

The two drove in silence for a while before Parker said, "It didn't mean anything you know. That girl, Hannah."

Mason didn't respond; he didn't know what to say. In the back of his mind he'd always known Parker was a player. He shouldn't have built a fantasy of the pair of them living some kind of gay version of "The Little House on the Prairie."

"Looks like your folks are home."

"Huh?" It was way too early for his parents to be home. Looking in the same direction Parker was, Mason understood. "No, that's my car. The garage must have brought it back."

The pair got out of Parker's truck and approached the highly polished bright red Chevrolet Beretta GT in the driveway.

"Cool," Parker said.

Mason didn't know if Parker was teasing him. The Beretta wasn't exactly the type of muscle car the average American teen dreamed of owning. His mom had put her foot down and squelched any thoughts Mason had had of driving a sports car. The Beretta had been something of a compromise.

"Um, it's not exactly a . . . But, you know." Mason shrugged, still not knowing what Parker thought.

"It's cool," Parker said, staring at the vehicle. "Why haven't I seen it before?"

"It's new, but there was a problem with the transmission, so dad took it back to the dealership. They must have brought it back sometime today."

Parker continued to look at the vehicle.

"Uh, wanna go for a test drive?" Mason asked, not knowing what else to say. "I've got a spare set of keys in my room."

"Uh, um, sure."

"Right." Mason turned away and headed toward his front door, his growing sense of unease crowding his thoughts.

As Mason made his way along the hall, he wondered yet again what he was doing hanging around Parker Collins. It had to be Parker's magnetic personality. Mason just felt drawn to him, and couldn't escape. Did he want to escape?

After scooping up his car keys, Mason caught his reflection in the mirror on his closet door. His brown hair looked tangled, out of control. Mason picked up a comb and tried in vain to deal with his errant locks. He mused at how perfect Parker's hair always was. "God, all he's got to do is run his fingers through that sexy center part and it just falls in place."

Suddenly the vision of that center part appeared in the mirror. Mason spun round. Parker's face wore a satisfied smirk. "So you think my hair's sexy?" he said raising an eyebrow.

Mason open and closed his mouth, but no words came out. He just wanted the floor to swallow him up.

Parker's smirk slowly faded and was replaced by concern. "It's okay, bud." He gripped Mason's biceps. "Dude, look at me."

Mason slowly raised his head. "I'm sorry."

Parker leaned in and kissed Mason on the lips. It wasn't passionate or deep, just reassuring. "For what it's worth I think your hair's kinda sexy too, how it always seems to misbehave and. . ." Parker moved his right hand up and ran his fingers through Mason's hair. Mason had to stifle a groan, it felt amazing to be, well, petted like that.

"Go on, you can touch my hair too if you like," Parker all but whispered.

With trembling fingers, Mason reached up and touched the part, widening it slightly. He drew his fingertips downward, feeling the soft blond strands. "It's so soft," Mason whispered.

"Yeah, I get that from my mom."

The two then fell silent. Mason didn't know what to say. He just stared into Parker's grey eyes.

Parker shifted, no doubt growing uncomfortable at being stared at so intensely. "Uh, man you're lucky. This room's massive," Parker said, flicking his gaze across Mason's space.

"Yeah."

"Shit man, you got a computer."

"Uh huh. Mason spent a lot of time on the machine. He wanted to tell Parker all about it, how he had a modem and could call up various bulletin boards and newsgroups, but sensed that would be way too geeky.

"And you've got a queen sized bed, oh, man. All this and a brand new car, too." Parker seemed sad.

Something clicked in Mason's head. Parker hadn't been dismissive of his choice of vehicle, he'd been envious. Not necessarily at the model but at it being new.

"They're just things you know, just possessions,"

"Suppose." Parker walked over to Mason's bed and lay down. If Mason had been thinking more clearly, he'd have marveled at having Parker Collins, the subject of many a nightly masturbation fantasy, lying there on his bed. But Mason's in-built need to make everything okay was foremost in his mind.

"But you have so much, too. At school you're the big jock, the one everyone looks up to. People admire you, want to be near you, even touch you. Hannah, for example.

"I know. But it's not easy keeping up the straight jock-boy image all the time."

Mason felt compelled to go over and offer Parker comfort. This was something he thought he'd never see. He'd always imagined Parker had it all, fame, good-looks, a brain. Never did he think that the great Parker Collins would have a vulnerable side.

"I guess that wasn't an easy admission to make," Mason said, sitting on the side of his bed and looking down at the star athlete.

Parker let out a deep sigh. "Nope. But, I dunno, I. . . I get the feeling I can trust you."

Mason acted without thinking. He lay down next to Parker, rolled onto his side and put his arm across Parker's broad chest. "Thank you, that means a lot. I promise that whatever you tell me won't go any further."

Parker shifted so he was lying on his side, facing Mason. "I know, bud. I don't mind admitting I'm scared, I'm usually the one in control, I have to be, but all this, it's. . ." Parker's voice faded into silence.

"I know." Mason pulled the big jock into a tight hug. "I'm here for you, buddy."

Parker snuffled, and buried his head into Mason's chest. Mason reached up and stroked Parker's hair, but unlike the previous time, he didn't get a sexual thrill out of it, he was just offering comfort

to a lonely and confused fellow student, a person he was beginning to realize he was getting serious feelings of attachment for.

"You're all right with this?"

Mason smiled. "I gotta say it wasn't quite what I expected would happen between us, but I really like it,"

"Me, too."

In an attempt to change the subject, Mason asked, "Do you think I need to bulk up? I mean I'm so skinny."

"Nah. You've got a good body. Okay, so you're not bulging with muscles, so what? But everything's in proportion."

"Thanks, Though I still think I'm a bit thin."

"You need to be that way to play soccer. Nope, you're good as you are,"

Even though the complement was carefully phrased, Mason still blushed.

Parker laughed. "It's so cute when you get embarrassed."

"Cute! Yuck, I hate that word. It's the sort of thing a grandmother or an old aunt would say."

"Oh looky here," Parker affected an old lady voice, "just look at those baby cheeks." Parker pinched them. "And such a cherubic smile. And those hazel eyes. Now who do you remind me of?"

Mason burst out laughing.

"Oh, but your hair. You've certainly inherited that from your Uncle Henry. Come here, let me fix it."

Mason lost it completely. He couldn't lie still, he was laughing so hard.

The two eventually quieted, Parker settled back down against Mason's chest, Mason content to cuddle the bigger boy. The silence was broken when Mason's stomach rumbled.

Parker laughed softly. "I guess we ought to get up so you can feed your belly."

"Yeah. Wanna go out to eat? That way I can show off my car. Sorry, Parker, I didn't mean it like that."

"I know, bud. You're just used to having nice things. It just was natural for you to say it."

"I'm sorry." Mason gave Parker a squeeze.

"It's cool."

"Thanks."

Neither teen made an effort to move from their comfortable embrace. However, Mason's stomach had other ideas, letting out another and louder groan.

Parker propped himself up on one elbow and regarded Mason with a serious expression.

"What?" Mason said, looking back at the grey-eyed god.

Parker leaned down and began to nibble at Mason's lips, which soon opened, allowing Parker's tongue entrance.

The two spent a few minutes kissing before the telephone interrupted them. Parker withdrew.

"Hello?" Mason said into the bedroom extension.

"Mason, honey."

"Oh hi, Aunt Caroline, how are you and Uncle Peter?"

"Oh we're fine dear. I just wanted to have a word with your mom."

As Mason explained to his mother's oldest sister that his mom was at work, Parker made a series of comic faces, pinching his cheeks and generally making it difficult for Mason to not burst out laughing.

"Uh, I gotta go, someone's at the front door. I'll tell mom you called, okay?" Mason said in an effort to end the call. Sometimes Aunt Caroline could be on the phone for hours.

"Okay, dear. I love you."

Going red in the face, Mason was forced to repeat the declaration before hanging up.

Parker was doubled over with laughter. "Did she say you had a cute face?"

Mason shot Parker the bird.

Parker tackled Mason to the floor. They wrestled until Parker's stomach rumbled. "Come on, bud," Parker stood up and held out a hand to help Mason rise. "Where you thinking about taking me on our date?" Parker said playfully.

'Date?' Mason thought. "Uh, well, there's that new steak house just off the exit ramp. It's supposed to be really good."

A shadow fell across Parker's beautiful features. "I was only joking."

"I know, but. I'd still like to go."

"Yeah but." Parker's hand went to his back pocket.

"My treat. You paid last time, remember?"

"Yeah but that place is real expensive, Wendy's the other night only cost. . ."

Mason put a finger over Parker's lips. "Hey, if I'm taking my man out on a date, then he's gonna have the best." Mason tried to emulate Parker's light tone, but he knew he wasn't fooling anyone.

Parker pulled Mason into a tight hug. "Let me use the can, then we'll get going, okay?"

Mason nodded, and watched Parker leave the room. He was both nervous and amazed at how open he'd allowed himself to be about his true feelings toward Parker.

* * *

"This thing can go faster. Come on bud, don't be a pussy."

Mason was torn. On the one hand he didn't want to come across as a wimp in front of Parker. This warred with the type of person he'd always been. Mason was a law-abiding citizen. The fact that his uncle, whom he admired, was a cop played a large part in this.

"Sorry, Parker, but I don't want anything to happen to this baby, and dad would kill me if I got caught speeding." 'Not to mention my uncle,' Mason thought.

Parker shrugged. Mason hoped he didn't see him as a wuss. Maybe he should loosen up some, especially if he were to keep Parker interested 'and away from the likes of Hannah Berwick,' he thought following the signs for the freeway.

After riding a few miles, Mason took the exit ramp and soon he was pulling up outside the steak house. "Sorry, Parker, but I'm not a speed freak, it's just not who I am."

Parker smiled and clapped a hand on Mason's shoulder. "Don't worry, dude, you're still a cool guy."

Mason felt as though he was walking on air as he and Parker crossed the parking lot. His good mood lasted throughout their meal. When the conversation moved to soccer, Mason asked why Parker had attended his last game but kept himself hidden away.

Parker's face reddened, Mason thought it made him look even more adorable. "Well I'd, uh, sorta already realized that I liked you, and. . . But I still had to convince myself, you know?"

"Thanks, it meant a lot that you went, even if I didn't know it at the time."

"That's okay. When's the next game?"

"Next Thursday evening, at our school."

"I'll be there, bud."

The conversation moved to football. Parker became more expansive as well as boastful. Mason lapped it up.

The food had been great, the portions large, Mason's dining companion funny, happy and just incredible. He felt relaxed and content as they left the restaurant.

"Wanna have a turn at the wheel?" Mason asked tossing his car keys at Parker, who caught them effortlessly.

"Now you're talking." He grinned, something Mason tried to emulate, a feat made more difficult the longer Mason thought about what he was potentially in for.

After fastening their seatbelts, Parker said, "Let's see what this V/6 baby can do, wanna feel all 140 horses?"

Mason winced, wishing he'd not let Parker behind the wheel. As they drove along the freeway, Mason kept stealing anxious glances at the speedometer. Parker soon reached the posted limit, but thankfully never exceeded it. Mason slowly relaxed as it dawned on him that Parker wasn't going to get them in trouble.

Steering the car into the drive, Parker shut off the engine. Mason noticed his mom's car was already there.

"Guess I ought to be getting home," Parker said, sounding unenthusiastic.

"You don't have to go just cause Mom's home."

"Thanks," Parker said, giving Mason's left bicep a squeeze, "I'll just come in for a minute, but I've got homework, plus my chores."

The two got out of the Beretta and headed for the Grants' kitchen.

"Honey, I wondered where you were," Mason's mother asked, presenting her cheek for Mason to kiss. "Hello, Parker, thank you for driving my son to and from school today."

"Oh, that's okay, Mrs. Grant."

"Please, call me Samantha."

"When Parker brought me home we saw that the garage had returned my car, so we decided to take it out for a test drive."

"And how was the transmission?"

"It's good. I'm just taking Parker up to my room for a while, that okay?"

"Sure, honey. Will you stay for supper, Parker?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Um, Samantha, but Mason and I had something while we were out."

"Oh," Samantha said, bringing a hand to her cheek. "I almost forgot. I'm afraid your father has got something on at the University this weekend so we won't be able to get to the cabin."

"Oh, Mom!" Mason looked forward to the times spent at their place in the Cascade Mountains.

"Sorry, honey. But it can't be helped. You know how much pressure the Dean puts on your father."

"And how dad can never say no to him," Mason said sarcastically.

"Mason. That wasn't called for. Look, um, you could always go and take Parker, that is, if . . ."

Mason looked over at his new friend. He wouldn't have had the guts to ask himself, but as his mother had raised the subject, he couldn't help kindling the small ray of hope that had ignited in his heart.

"Um, I'd have to clear it with my mom, but I can't see why not."

"Fantastic!" Mason said loudly. He had to hold himself back from giving Parker a hug. He knew his parents were cool with their son being gay, but he'd never had an opportunity to test their tolerance of public displays of affection.

"You'll love it up there. It's so quiet and remote." Mason began to hope the solitude of the place wasn't a turn off to the outgoing, sociable Parker.

"Sounds cool."

Chapter 3

Pill Hill, Portland OR, July 2005

The elevator car gave a sudden lurch. Mason heard a sickening grinding noise. The lights flickered but stayed on as the car came to a stop.

"Shit!" Parker said, pressing buttons on the control panel, but nothing happened.

Mason's panic increased. He couldn't be trapped in a small metal box with this man, the man he'd once loved.

The Cascade Mountains, WA, Columbus Day Weekend 1991.

"If you didn't want to come, you should have said." Mason finally spoke up. Parker had been restless ever since they'd arrived at the cabin.

"Oh, babe, no, it's not that," Parker said kissing Mason before snuggling back into his chest.

Mason resumed stroking Parker's hair, relieved that everything between them was okay.

As soon as they'd arrived at the log cabin, the first thing Mason had done was light a fire in the stone fireplace in the main room, as well as a smaller one in the master bedroom. After they'd carried in the bags and supplies, the pair had crashed on the couch in front of the blazing fire.

"It's my back. I took some hard hits today."

Mason had watched from the bleachers as Parker had done his stuff, wowing the crowd of visiting Falcon fans as he tore apart the Jackson Raiders defense pretty much single-handed. Mason knew he was exaggerating, but he didn't care. Parker had been awesome; he had scored a touchdown, gained 162 yards, and caught 7 passes. At the end they gave him the game ball. As soon as he had climbed stiffly into Mason's Beretta he gave the ball to Mason.

"A couple of the hits were late." Parker wriggled against Mason's chest. "Those fucking refs were blind, or playing for the other team."

It wasn't like Parker to swear, especially when they were alone. "Want me to give you a back rub? I've got some massage oil around here somewhere." Mason didn't add that its usual purpose was as an aid to jerking off.

"Would you? I was gonna get one from the trainer after the game, but I knew you'd be waiting, and I didn't want to delay us." Parker had been given permission to leave the Jackson campus with Mason rather than return on the team bus.

Mason sighed before gently pushing Parker from him and rising from the sofa. "You should have stayed. I feel terrible that you've been in pain all this time."

"I'm tough."

Mason leaned down and kissed the recumbent Parker on the lips. "But what few people realize is inside that macho stud super-jock exterior, you're a real pussycat."

Parker meowed.

As Mason rooted around in his bag for the massage oil, he marveled at how close he and Parker had become over the past week. He was no longer afraid of the big jock, but he still couldn't get his head around the fact that they were boyfriends. When Parker had called him by that term the previous day, Mason had had to fight hard not to burst out crying.

"Okay, we best take this to the bedroom."

Parker got stiffly to his feet and followed Mason down a short hallway.

"A double bed, nice."

"This is mom and dad's room."

"Uh, should we be in here then?"

"I asked them if we could sleep here." Mason blushed; he'd not asked Parker if he wanted to sleep with him. He'd just assumed he'd be cool with the idea.

"Wha?"

"Um, we can have separate rooms if you'd rather, I just. . ." Mason's spirits began to plummet.

"No, babe, you misunderstood. I was blown away that you'd asked your folks about sleeping in their bed with your boyfriend. I mean, it's kinda, well, I dunno." Parker shook his head.

Mason was relieved, Parker wasn't refusing to share a bed with him, and he'd called him his boyfriend again. "I think part of it has to do with how little time they spend with me. Giving me nice things like the car and letting us sleep together is probably their way of salving their consciences."

"Sorry, bud. But really they're not bad people."

"Yeah, you're right. Guess I'm still bummed at dad having to work this weekend."

"But at least it means we can have the place to ourselves." Parker waggled his eyebrows.

Mason grinned, "Come on, stud, let's get on with your massage." Mason unscrewed the cap on the bottle of oil and poured some into his hands and began to warm it. "Should be some large towels in the armoire." Mason nodded in the direction of the heavy oak cupboard. "I don't want to stain the sheets."

"I'm sure you're an expert at staining the sheets with that stuff."

Mason blushed; Parker had guessed what he usually used the oil for. As he watched Parker spread the towels, his mind was conflicted. He never tired of looking at Parker, but because his movements were restricted and painful, it caused him concern.

"Okay, strip," Mason said, taking charge of both the situation and his emotions.

"Huh. You've been wanting to get me naked and your hands on me all day."

"What makes you think I'd be interested in your skinny ass?" Mason asked, as he watched with rapt attention as Parker undressed.

"You find me totally irresistible."

"Yeah, right." Mason knew he couldn't tell Parker how he really felt. It would inflate the football player's already oversized ego.

The sight of Parker's naked broad back displaying itself was very arousing, and Mason had been given permission to touch it. He intended to make full use of his opportunity. Kneeling on the side of the bed, Mason brought his oiled hands down onto the warm, firm and slightly sweaty flesh.

"God, you've got a great touch," Parker moaned low in his throat.

Mason leaned down and kissed a spot between Parker's shoulder blades. "I'm glad I have my uses. Come on, tell me about the game, and how you won it for us." Mason remembered the talk they'd had the previous Friday when Parker had given an almost play-by-play account of his part in the victory.

"I didn't think you'd be interested, ooh yeah, that's it." Parker wiggled as Mason dug his thumbs into the left side of Parker's trapezius.

"Of course I'm interested. I think you're so fucking sexy when you get hold of the ball and run down the field, leaving a trail of players in your wake. You're like a brave warrior, laying waste everything in your path." Mason knew he'd gone too far, but his mind was spinning with the awesome sensations being received from his hands.

Parker chuckled. "Is that how you see me? A warrior?"

"Yeah." In a much lower voice Mason added, "My warrior."

He only half listened as Parker enthused about the game, his teammates and the weakness of the opposition. He was too caught up in the thrill of touching Parker, caressing his beautiful body, to pay much attention to what he was actually saying. The shallow valley along Parker's spine seemed to beckon to his fingers, demanding to be worshiped. Mason lightly ran his fingers along the slight bony ridges. Then Mason opened his hands and swept his palms outward and upward, gliding across the glorious topography of Parker's back. Then his hands swept further to caress the wide, oh so wide shoulders. Moving down, Mason traced the classic V of Parker's torso as his hands rubbed Parker's trim waist. The firm mounds of butt flesh came next. Parker's buttocks were high, tight, with a light dusting of blond fur in the cavern which divided them. Mason wondered if he dare part the tight buns to examine what was inside.

"You enjoying yourself back there?" Parker asked, snapping Mason out of his daydream.

"Sorry," Mason said, realizing Parker had stopped discussing the game some time earlier.

"So, do I have a skinny ass?"

Mason slapped Parker's left buttock.

"Bastard."

"Hey, lie down, I've not finished."

Parker grumbled something about giving someone a toy to play with and them not wanting to give it back. However, he did as he was asked and Mason resumed his massage.

The heat from Parker's body had released the lavender in the oil. That, along with the warmth coming from the fire, the flames dully reflecting from Parker's glistening skin, soon had Mason back in his trance.

Though he'd studied human anatomy in his biology classes, the pictures in the textbooks and the plastic models he'd seen, though instructive, didn't tell the whole story. Here, touching Parker, made it all much more real. Mason traced Parker's trapezius muscle from where it began in the mid back, up to the shoulder blades. He then followed the muscle over Parker's wide shoulders to his collarbone. Tracing the traps into Parker's scalp, he felt tension.

"Have you been having some pain here?"

"Uh, yeah. How did you know?"

Mason dug into the tightness with his thumbs, he felt the muscle resist before finally submitting. Mason could feel Parker's body relaxing. He smiled.

"Wow, you've got a fantastic touch. You ought to take this up full time."

"Thanks. I'm gonna take pre-med in college and follow in Mom's footsteps."

"Dr. Mason Grant. Yeah, that has a real ring to it."

Closing his eyes, Mason conjured up a diagram of the human back and figured out where to find Parker's latissimus dorsi. There it was, attached to the hipbones. He followed the muscle up Parker's back and up until it disappeared into his armpits. Again Mason felt the occasional knot, which he smoothed away.

As Parker seemed content to act as a kind of human biology specimen, Mason probed deeper to locate Parker's rhomboids. Sure enough, he found them exhibiting their classic Christmas tree shape. As he felt around in Parker's shoulder for the levator scapula attachment, he mused about having Parker stripped to the waist and sitting at the front of Mr. Becker's biology class. The grey haired teacher could use Parker's amazing physique as an anatomy model. But the thought of having others looking at and drooling over Parker's beautiful body didn't hold any appeal. No, he wanted Parker all to himself.

Mason was so concentrated on the task of locating and tracing Parker's erector spinae muscles, he hadn't realized his patient had stopped talking. Pausing the massage, Mason softly asked, "You okay?"

Parker's only reply was a soft snore.

"Must be my scintillating company." Mason wasn't downhearted. Parker had played hard during the game; he seemed to be on the field a lot of the time. He'd have to remember to ask sometime why Parker played both offense and defense.

Deciding he'd done all he could, Mason used a towel to wipe the excess oil from Parker's skin.

"And to think I'd been hoping for a night of sex and passion," Mason said just above a whisper as he tucked a comforter around the softly snoring athlete.

Mason visited the bathroom to relieve both his bladder and his aching balls, before going back into the bedroom.

"You still asleep?" Mason asked softly.

There was no reply.

Climbing into the bed, Mason propped himself up on an elbow and leaned down to kiss his boyfriend on the cheek. "I know you don't feel the same, but I've fallen in love with you, Parker." Mason sniffed back a tear.

* * *

The first thing Mason became aware of when his mind began to drift into wakefulness was the smell of bacon. Opening his eyes, Mason quickly closed them again. The drapes had been drawn back, letting in the morning sunlight, which at that elevation and time of year, meant the sun was shining directly into his eyes. He didn't have long, however, to gather his wits before the bedroom door opened.

"Rise and shine," Parker announced in an irritatingly cheerful voice.

"Urr! What time is it?"

"After nine, and the day is half over."

Mason still had his eyes shut, wondering who had stolen his boyfriend and replaced him with this pseudo-parent.

"I made breakfast," Parker said, when Mason didn't move.

Mason opened his eyes to see Parker placing a tray of bacon, hash browns and waffles on top of the bedside locker.

"What the. . ." Mason said when Parker straightened up. Parker was wearing a full-length white apron with frilled edges. "Oh my God!" Mason clapped a hand over his mouth to stifle his laughter. It was such an unexpected, incongruous and downright hilarious site. Parker the big macho jock wrapped in a white cotton apron!

"Shut up. That fucking bacon kept spitting at me. So I found this in a drawer and put it on to protect myself," Parker said untying the apron and pulling the loop over his head to reveal nothing but bare flesh and a pair of red boxer shorts. Seeing this, Mason instantly stopped laughing.

"I was hungry, and you didn't look like you were gonna wake up anytime soon," Parker said, filling the silence.

"Sorry, you should have woken me. Fine host I am."

"That's okay." Parker got under the blankets, reached over for the tray and placed it between them.

"Fresh coffee as well as orange juice. Wow,"

"Yeah. That kitchen is really well stocked."

"That's Mom's domain."

"Come on, get eatin', or are you waiting for me to feed you?"

Mason smiled. He rather liked the idea but thought it might be pushing things too far; after all, he and Parker had only really known each other for a couple of weeks.

"Hey, this is great." Mason said biting into a waffle. It was a crisp golden brown on the outside, but soft and light on the inside.

"Yeah. I love waffles, and cause Mom's out working so much, I have to either do without or make my own."

"You'd make someone a real nice housewife," Mason said through a mouthful of food. He noticed Parker had stopped eating. Swallowing, Mason continued. "Sorry, Parker, I didn't mean it like that."

Parker smiled. "It's cool. I know I don't come across as the cozy domestic type, but. . ." Parker looked at the ceiling, was that a wistful expression on his face?

Mason got an image of the pair of them living in a small house together, white picket fence, roses growing round the door. He mentally slapped himself for being such a sap. "Come on, it's getting cold," Mason said in an effort to lighten the atmosphere.

Once they'd finished, Mason saw a smear of maple syrup on Parker's chin. He leaned forward and licked away the errant food. "You messy pup."

Parker wrapped his arms around Mason and began to kiss him, Mason responding eagerly. As their passions rose, Parker rolled Mason onto his back and pressed him into the mattress. Pulling their lips apart, Parker stared down into Mason's eyes. "I remember that day under the maple tree when I had something on my chin. I thought you were gonna lick it clean."

"You remember that?"

Parker nodded. "Of course I do. I remember everything we said and did those first few days. I wanted you to lick my chin, kiss me and. . ."

"I was too scared. I mean I didn't know that you. . . that you were gay and interested in me."

"Yeah. Seems like a real dumb game we played, both sorta circling each other, neither of us willing to make the first move."

"I couldn't, Parker. Though I'm not a weakling or anything, if you'd have wanted to, you could have beat the crap out of me. I was shitting my pants that day in the locker-room when you caught me staring."

"I could never hurt you, babe," Parker said running a finger down Mason's cheek. "You mean the fucking world to me, Mase."

Mason swallowed. This was the most serious the two had been with each other, the closest either of them had come to saying the 'L' word. No one had ever called him Mase before; he thought he'd hate it, but when Parker said it, his body tingled.

"Oh, Parker." Mason pulled the big teenager on top of him and initiated a further round of kissing. He could feel a large hard object pressing into his hip. Mason didn't need three guesses to know what it was. He wanted that cock. The more he thought about it, the more he wanted it. But before he could match thought to deed, Parker had slid down Mason's body, pulled off his boxers and engulfed Mason's stiff erection.

"Oh Christ!" Mason said. Though he'd both given and received a few blowjobs in his time, this, this was something else, in a class of its own. No one had ever deep throated him before, but it only took Parker a few bobs up and down before the head of his cock was down Parker's throat.

"Fuck! Oh God, Parker, don't stop." Mason's fingers clawed at the towel under him. "This is fucking awesome." Mason looked down and saw Parker's beautiful blond head bobbing on his achingly hard tool. Their eyes met. Mason could see the satisfaction, the sense of achievement in Parker's grey orbs. The eye contact caused Mason to lose control. He thrust upward once, twice; the third time he blew. His cock fired several volleys of cream directly into Parker's eagerly sucking mouth.

Mason collapsed back on the bed, exhausted. He couldn't ever remember having such an intense orgasm.

Parker hovered over him, a shit-eating grin on his face, bringing out his sexy dimples. "Enjoyed that?"

"Uh," Mason gasped. "Fucking A, Parker. You were," Mason shook his head. "You were. . . well, the best!"

Parker's grin widened.

"Now it's my turn, you fucking gorgeous stud. Though I don't know if I can do as good as you just did, I'm sure gonna try."

"Have at it, babe. You won't get any complaints from me."

Mason wanted to take his time. Run his fingers in Parker's treasure trail, rub his smooth belly, explore the cobblestones of his ripped abs, but he was in too much of a hurry to get to the main prize to fully appreciate the honed perfection that was Parker's torso.

A quarter sized wet spot marked the place where Parker's manhood was leaking pre-cum. Mason rubbed his cheek against the cotton-covered bulge, eliciting a moan from further up the bed. He then tongued and gently bit into the mound. Knowing he couldn't wait any longer, he reached out and pulled at the waistband of Parker's sexy red boxers. The elastic snagged on Parker's knob but soon freed itself and slapped Mason's cheek, causing him to giggle.

Denying his desire to immediately go down on Parker, Mason instead began to lick under his partner's balls, making the big guy groan. Mason spent countless minutes lapping Parker's scrotum, perineum, once even straying into a musky smelling ass crack. Parker, judging by the pleasurable sounds he was making, loved the attention, though he eventually became impatient.

"Please, Mase, please, I gotta get off. Suck me, dude."

In a bid to show his independence, Mason continued licking, but moved on to Parker's inner thighs.

"You bastard," Parker whimpered.

Out of the corner of his eye Mason saw Parker reach for his dick and begin to stroke.

"Hey. Stop that."

"But, Mase."

Mason decided it was time. He grasped Parker's cock. It was stiffer than he could ever remember and was pointing to Parker's face. Maneuvering it to his mouth, Mason licked at the shiny cock head, dripping with pre-seminal fluid. Parker tasted sweet, sweeter than any of his limited number of previous sex partners.

He wasn't allowed to enjoy the taste for very long though, because Parker put his hands either side of Mason's head and began to push him further onto his log.

Mason objected to being handled so roughly. Parker apologized, but Mason could see his actions were due mainly to frustration and lust.

"Put your hands behind your head or grip the sheets or something. Otherwise I'll tie you up."

Parker, the big muscled jock whimpered like a baby being told it couldn't have its favorite toy.

"Want to be tied down, Parker? You into bondage?"

In a small voice, which Mason only just heard, Parker said, "Yes."

Mason stared down at the handsome athlete with his face bathed in sweat, his hair a mess of tangles. "You sure?" Mason's heart began to beat rapidly, he'd never done anything like this before, but the prospect was highly arousing.

"Yes, I love it when someone else takes control."

Mason was amazed; he thought Parker would always want to be top dog. Then he remembered all the times when Parker would ask him to just cuddle him. "Okay, if you're sure."

Parker nodded while biting his bottom lip.

Mason thought quickly about what he could use to restrain Parker. Rising from the bed he searched in his parents' dresser and soon found a handful of his father's ties. Occasionally his mom and dad would attend a function out of town and either go from, or return to, the cabin.

Working as quickly but as thoroughly as he could, Mason secured Parker's wrists to the vertical spindles on the headboard. Parker tested his bonds, found they would hold, but weren't tight enough to interfere with circulation.

"Now I've got you just where I want you," Mason said, putting an edge of menace into his voice. He surprised himself at how turned on he was being the one in charge.

Parker grinned at him, though it looked somewhat wary. "And just what are you going to do with me now you've got me?"

'Show you just how much I love you,' Mason thought. But out loud he said, "Oh, tease you until you go crazy and beg me to get you off." Putting on a sinister smile he added, "Then I'll tease you some more."

Parker groaned. "Oh fuck."

Mason lost track of time as he rubbed, licked, bit and kissed every square inch of Parker's available flesh. Whenever the big jock's passion seemed to be waning, Mason would stop whatever he was doing and stimulate him back to full hardness. Parker whimpered, begged, cursed and shouted for release, but Mason was deaf to his entreaties. Mason had a great time pointing out to Parker all his muscle groups, not just the obvious ones of pectorals, biceps and triceps.

"These, Parker, are your intercostals," Mason said poking at the big guy's ribs.

"Stop it. This has gone on long enough. Please," Parker said through his laughter at being tickled.

Mason mounted the wide chest and after subduing Parker with a long, slow tongue-filled kiss, he began suckling and biting Parker's neck. "I'm going to mark you as my property. Do you want that, baby?"

Though Mason sensed that Parker's mind was otherwise occupied because, while he was biting Parker's shoulders, his fingers were pinching and rubbing the big guy's nipples.

"No, Mason, please, no hickeys."

By now Mason had developed a good sense of Parker and what he really wanted. He therefore sucked harder at Parker's collarbone and bit down. Pulling off he noted with satisfaction that he'd left a visible red mark.

"Now everyone in the locker room on Tuesday will know that 'the' Parker Collins got some over the weekend." Mason chose not to think how everyone would assume the bite had come from a chick. No, he absolutely refused to think about Parker telling everyone that his new girlfriend had done it.

As often as he could throughout Mason's exploration of Parker's body, he'd rubbed his own hard member against whatever part of Parker was accessible. He thought he'd taunted the big guy enough, and in truth he too was ready to blow again.

"Okay, Parker, I'm gonna let you come. Aren't I a considerate master?"

"That's not how I'd. . ."

Mason closed his lips over Parker's silencing the angry comments. "Now, now, Parky darling, that's no way to talk to your betters. For that comment I ought to make you wait another five minutes."

"No, please!"

The imploring, desperate expression on Parker's face made Mason relent.

Levering himself up and shuffling backward until he was sitting on Parker's thighs, Mason took hold of Parker's now slippery member and began to pump. Parker was close to the edge, hell, he'd

kept him on the edge for the past half hour. Therefore it didn't take long before Parker was ready to explode. "Shoot, Parker, shoot for me."

The big man's scream at the moment of release rattled the window panes with its volume. Three, four and then five ropes of cum shot out of the head of his penis, the first spraying Mason in the face. His vision was momentarily obscured before he could reach up and wipe his eyes clean just in time to witness the fourth volley. The subsequent eruptions, though far less spectacular, seemed to affect Parker just as much. He shuddered involuntarily as his orgasm racked his large frame. Mason looked down in satisfaction, which as time went on, turned to mild concern. Had Parker blown some kind of biological fuse? Had he overdone things? Mason was only vaguely aware that he himself was hard and unsatisfied. It wasn't until Mason saw Parker's wet face, that it dawned on him that Parker's shudders were due to him crying. Mason felt like shit. He'd pushed Parker' beyond his limits, why hadn't he listened to his pleas to stop? Frantically Mason tore at Parker's bonds, eventually freeing them. Parker launched himself at Mason and held him in a death grip as he continued to cry, his sobs now audible.

"I'm sorry, so sorry, Parker," Mason tried to say, though he too was crying. How could he have hurt this beautiful but obviously vulnerable boy man?

"No, Mason. You don't understand." Parker tried to say. "These are happy tears. I am. . ." Parker sniffed, "I'm happier than I think I've ever been in my life."

"Huh?"

"Just hold me, Mason. Please don't let go."

Mason complied, rocking the big guy in his arms, wondering what the hell had just happened.

"Feeling better now?" Mason asked after Parker had been quiet for about five minutes, though he hadn't let go his tight hold on Mason.

"Yeah, thanks."

Mason kissed the top of Parker's head. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Parker shuddered, but made no other visible or audible reply.

Mason just continued to cuddle his friend, marveling at how amazing it felt to give comfort to such a big and outwardly tough person.

"Can we get cleaned up first? I stink."

"Sure, babe, whatever you want." Mason let go of Parker who got up, kissed Mason on the cheek before making for the door. "Leave the shower running. I'll go in after you." Mason didn't suggest they shower together; he suspected Parker needed a little time to himself, plus the shower cubicle was rather small.

As he waited for Parker to finish in the bathroom, Mason scanned the room. They'd made a real mess of the bed, though fortunately the towels Parker had laid down the night before had borne the

brunt of the damage. Gathering them up and straightening the underlying sheets and blankets, Mason headed for the kitchen to do laundry.

Not long after starting the wash, Parker called out that he'd finished, so Mason went to have his shower.

Once he'd washed and dried himself, Mason went back into the master bedroom and found Parker already dressed.

"I thought we might go for a hike. Are there any decent trails round here?"

"Uh, yeah. You remembered to bring a pair of hiking boots?" Mason asked, wondering if Parker was trying to avoid the issue of what happened earlier.

Chapter 4

Pill Hill, Portland OR, July 2005

All Mason could hear in the silent elevator was his fast beating heart, and Parker's heavy breathing. Mason remained still, but Parker soon began to pace the small metal box as if he were a trapped wild animal.

The Cascade Mountains, WA, Columbus Day Weekend, 1991

On their hike, Parker set a brisk pace. Although Mason had no difficulty in keeping up, he wondered why they were in such a hurry. Parker obviously was using the walk to burn off his frustrations at whatever was bugging him.

They had decided to explore one of the trails that wound its way up a nearby hillside. It would, Mason told Parker, give them a good view of the lake and its surrounding cabins. Parker, who took the lead during the times they had to proceed in single file, provided Mason with all the beautiful scenery he desired, but because of Parker's quiet mood, he kept his no doubt inappropriate observations to himself.

Parker put on a burst of speed and went ahead, further increasing Mason's concern. When he turned a corner, he found Parker sitting on a fallen tree trunk.

"Figured you needed a rest, 'cause you won't be used to hard exercise just playing that dumb sport of yours," Parker said smirking at Mason who flipped him the bird. "You were right, there's a great view from up here," Parker said picking up a stone and hurling it into the air. Mason watched as it sailed upward, before gravity took hold and it plummeted down the incline. He lost sight of the stone as it grew smaller and merged into the tree-lined backdrop.

Mason took a seat next to Parker, who put an arm over his shoulder. The only sounds came from the rustling leaves in the trees as well as a group of crows squawking as they nested or did whatever

birds did. A blue jay suddenly flew up, its jayer-jayer alarm call quickening in speed but fading as the bird flew away.

"About earlier," Parker began, "at school I'm the in-control tough guy. But. . ." Parker rubbed at his face. "But that's just one side of me. You, Mason," Parker turned to face Mason and put his hands on Mason's shoulders and stared into his eyes. "Get to see another part of me. Aside from all the macho shit, I'm also a guy who wants, needs to be led, taken care of." In a quieter voice he added, "Held and protected."

Mason watched a raccoon amble toward them, sniff the air, then, not perceiving them as a threat, go on his way.

"I don't understand. When you burst into tears last night, I didn't know what to do. I know you said you weren't hurt or upset. But I. . ."

"I cried because of how happy and safe you made me feel. It was great how I could show this other part of me, knowing you'd understand."

Mason nodded, even though he didn't understand. How could someone of Parker's size, abilities and usual level of self-assurance also be needy and vulnerable? He'd never have guessed.

"Why all the macho tough guy stuff? I mean why do you hide your more tender feelings from people?"

"To go to college I gotta get a football scholarship. And to get that I need to play. They wouldn't let a limp-wristed fag on the field."

"But, you're not a limp wristed fag. . ." Mason shook his head. So much was wrong with what Parker said.

"The tough guy shit is designed to keep people away, or at least keep them from guessing that I'm more than just a football jock. Don't get me wrong, I love football, the team spirit, the buzz when we win a game. Even the macho B/S is fun."

"But there's a lot more to you than all that." Mason interjected. "The gentle, caring needing to be held Parker Collins is a much nicer, more approachable guy than the super straight, my shit don't stink Parker Collins everybody sees at school."

Parker laughed. "Exactly, but I choose not to show people those other aspects of me. The Parker people see at school isn't approachable. Okay, some of the meatheads on the team think they know me, but they don't, and that's just the way I like it."

"Why? I wish more people could see the, well the sweet, kind, genuine Parker."

Parker leaned forward and kissed Mason's cheek. "Thanks, babe."

"Won't you at least try and ease off a little? Can't some people get to know just some of the other Parker?"

"But if they knew, they could hurt me. I don't mean physically or hurt my chances of getting to college, but they could hurt the me inside."

"I don't understand." Mason finally admitted.

"You've probably heard of the alpha male. I'm not saying I'm one of those necessarily, but from what I've read, an alpha likes being in control in certain situations, at work say. But at home, or whatever, he likes for someone else to be in charge. I think that's the best way I can explain it"

"I see." Mason wasn't sure he did. What Parker said sort of made sense, but he'd have to give it more thought.

"Wanna climb further, or is my wimpy soccer bud not up to it?" Parker's smile let Mason know their serious discussion was at an end.

"Huh. You think you football players are such hot shit."

"That's cause we are," Parker said, rising to his feet and offering a hand to Mason, who thought of a number of suitable comebacks, but decided to bide his time.

They walked for another hour, this time much more companionably, even holding hands when the trail permitted.

"I think this is as good a place as any," Mason said when they came upon a large flat rock overlooking a fast-flowing stream.

"Yep, looks great," Parker replied, taking off his backpack and setting it down on the rock. "Great idea to bring lunch. The climb has given me a real appetite."

"Yeah, me too."

They unwrapped their sandwiches, popped the tops on a couple of cans of soda and opened a large bag of potato chips.

"Bet that water's cold," Parker said nodding at the stream.

"Trust me, it is. Mountain fed water is always cold."

"Looks clean though."

"I guess. Never tried drinking it."

After Parker had drained his soda he walked over to the stream and filled the can. "Shit, it is cold," he said blowing on his hands. "Tastes good, though." He handed the can to Mason, who took a drink.

Their hike had taken them round the hillside, into the sun's path and out of the breeze. Mason estimated the temperature to be in the upper sixties. He yawned.

"What's up, you didn't get enough sleep last night?"

"Huh. I wasn't the one who zonked out after getting a massage."

"I'd had a hard game. And you give one hell of a back rub."

Mason felt it was warm enough to take off his jacket. He stood, folded it and put it on the grass and lay down, using it as a pillow. Parker chose to do the same, but used Mason's chest as his pillow. Mason didn't object; he soon began to run his fingers through Parker's hair, an action which they had discovered helped relax the both of them.

"It's great up here," Parker finally said.

"Yeah. I often come here when the folks are at the cabin.

"Ever brought anyone with you? To the cabin I mean."

"Nope, never found anyone I wanted to bring."

Parker lifted up and gave Mason a kiss. Once he'd settled himself again, he began to rub circles with the palm of his hand on Mason's wool-covered belly.

"Fuck, I'd forgotten how big Mount Rainier actually is."

"Yeah." Mason continued to stroke Parker's hair. "And if you look over there you can see Mount Hood, and the one with the top cut off it is Mount St. Helens."

The two boys fell into silence, just enjoying the warmth of the sun, each other's company and the spectacular mountain view.

* * *

The sun was sinking toward the horizon by the time Parker and Mason made it back to the cabin.

"What's for supper?" Parker asked.

"Dunno, what would you like?" The gleam in Parker's eye told Mason that food wasn't foremost on his boyfriend's mind. "Horn-dog!"

"What can I say, you're so irresistible."

"And you're so full of shit. Mom packed some burgers and hot dogs, if you want those."

"What about really getting back to the wild and catching our own supper?"

"Huh?"

"Fish, Mase, fish. You know, those slippery wet things that live in the water just outside." Parker pointed his thumb in the general direction of the lake.

"Uh. Well, I'm not sure if it's still trout season "

"Come on, man, live dangerously. Who's around to see us and call the cops, anyway?"

Mason knew he was always too uptight about sticking to the rules. Parker was right, who would see. The nearest cabin was at least a quarter mile away and probably unoccupied. "Okay, do you know how to fish?"

"Nope, haven't got a clue," Parker said, sideling over to Mason and beginning to rub his friend's back. "But I bet my big, strong protector knows." Parker licked Mason's left ear.

Mason would have melted into a puddle if Parker weren't holding him up. "Okay, anything you say."

"Anything? Hmm." Parker licked Mason's ear a second time.

Mason groaned.

Parker slowly let go of Mason, but all the while maintained eye contact, staring longingly at him. "Get out your pole, Mase." The slow and lecherous way Parker spoke had Mason's heart beating faster.

Finding the fishing rods and baiting the hooks took some time, especially as Parker insisted on being demonstrative in his affections. "But why aren't we using a fly?" Parker asked.

"You're a beginner. There's an art to fly fishing, and as we want to eat sometime today, I think it's best we use power bait."

"Uh-huh." Parker nuzzled Mason's neck.

"Stop it you horn dog. I nearly cut my finger on this hook."

"I want to hook you, Mase. Reel you in and eat you all up," Parker moaned into Mason's ear.

For the next few minutes the fishing rods, bobbers and bait were forgotten as Mason and Parker got down to some serious heavy petting. It was only the rumbling of Parker's stomach that reminded them that they were hungry.

Standing at the lake, Mason began to demonstrate the finer points of casting.

"No, Park, like this," Mason said taking hold of Parker's hand. "Draw it back then cast forward in one fluid movement. It's all in the wrist action."

Parker stared at Mason with a raised eyebrow. "I bet you say that to all the guys."

"No, just the ones I want to catch me."

Parker snickered. "You smooth-tongued devil, you."

"Hey, look, you've got a bite!" Mason said, pointing at the float bobbing in the water.

"Shit, what do I do? Quick, Mason, do something, I don't want it to get away."

Mason helped Parker land the fish, a fourteen-inch trout. "Huh, beginners luck," Mason said after he'd unhooked the fish.

"Crap. You're just sore that I caught a fish and you didn't. I'm da-man, " Parker said, bouncing on the balls of his feet, the biggest shit-eating grin on his face.

Looking at his boyfriend, Mason wondered where the vulnerable, needing-to-be-held Parker had gone. His lover sure was one complex mix of contradictions.

They fished for another half hour, Parker catching two more fish only slightly smaller than his first. Mason snagged just one, a fact Parker wouldn't stop taunting Mason about.

As it was now completely dark, Mason said they ought to call it a day. He was starving and in his opinion they had enough fish for their supper.

"Sure you don't want more time to try and beat me?"

"No, Parker, I'm quite happy to have you be the winner."

"Yes! I am the champion fisherman. Is there a prize?"

"Yeah, you get to eat the fish," Mason said reeling in his line.

"No I mean a real prize," Parker pouted.

Mason shook his head, but couldn't help smiling at his boyfriend's behavior. "We'll see."

* * *

"Do you know what to do with the fish so we can eat them?" Parker asked once they'd stowed away the fishing rods in the lean-to shed at the side of the cabin.

"Uh, not really, though I've seen dad do it loads of times."

The two fixed supper. Mason cleaned the fish, then Parker coated them in flour and fried them along with some potatoes in a large skillet. The fish, potatoes, a can of peas and several bottles of Mr. Grant's beer formed supper.

Parker wanted to eat outside on the porch, but by the time supper was over, the temperatures had dropped significantly, and Mason was beginning to shiver. However, Parker seemed not to want to go inside.

"It's amazing out here, Mason. You're so lucky to have this place. It's so quiet, there's no one around to bother you, or to stick their nose into your business."

"Yeah, I know. Because we're so far from city lights, the stars always seem to shine brighter." Mason pointed to the far horizon. "Look over there."

"Venus? Wow, it's so clear."

"I know." To himself Mason said, "The Roman goddess of love." Then out loud, "Come on, let's go inside, it's freezing out here."

* * *

By silent mutual consent the pair decided there was little point in lighting a fire in the main room, as both seemed anxious to move straight to the bedroom. The sexual tension, Mason knew, had been building all afternoon. Parker had used every opportunity he could to touch Mason, and Mason hadn't been slow in reciprocating. It therefore took Mason twice as long as usual to lay the fire in the bedroom.

"At last I have your undivided attention," Parker said lifting Mason to his feet after he'd struck the match and the fire had taken hold.

Parker began to undress Mason, kissing, licking and sucking at his flesh as it became exposed. Mason tried to undress Parker, but the stronger teen fended him off. "No, this is all for you, Mase." After the last item of clothing had been stepped out of, Parker lifted Mason off his feet and carried him over to the bed, laying him down on top of the blankets. "Tonight, babe, we're going to make love."

Mason shivered; he doubted it was because the room hadn't fully warmed up. He was forced to watch as Parker slowly--agonizingly slowly--disrobed.

"You get off on my muscles, don't you, Mase?" Parker did a double biceps pose then kissed each raised muscle in turn. Mason wasn't sure of the proper name for many of the poses Parker struck; all he knew was he loved every one of them.

Parker then bent over the bed and took hold of Mason's left foot. To the smaller guy's amazement Parker began to suck on his toes.

"Oh shit," Mason moaned. It felt erotic, arousing, amazing.

"I'm gonna make love to every part of your body, Mase. I'm gonna show you just how special you are to me." And Parker did exactly that. For the next goodness knew how long, Mason was transported into a world of pleasure, of sensual caresses, of unimagined sensations. However, Mason was only vaguely aware that Parker never touched his straining member. When realization finally sank into his lust-fogged consciousness, Mason reached for his sex and began to stroke it.

"No, baby. I'm gonna take care of that." Parker wasn't firm or demanding, he didn't slap Mason's hand away, but Mason was left with the distinct impression that Parker would be hurt if Mason brought himself off through his own hand.

"Please, Park, I need it, I need to. . ."

"You sure you're ready, Mase?"

"Yeah, man. Please, Park."

Mason watched as Parker leaned to the side and held up a condom. His heart began to beat faster; at last he'd have his gorgeous football player inside him. Mason followed every movement as Parker's strong white teeth closed over the rim of the foil packet and tore it open. This was gonna happen, his man was going to make love to him. Mason felt tears sting his eyes. Then Parker did something totally unexpected. He rolled the rubber down Mason's dick.

"Huh?"

"Just putting the raincoat on, baby. We have to, you know, STDs and all that."

"Yes, but."

"How do you want us to do this?"

"Uh?" Mason knew he sounded dumb, but couldn't shake himself out of his confusion.

"Mason, babe, what's wrong?"

"Uh." 'Why the fuck do I keep saying that?' Mason mentally slapped himself. "I sorta thought I'd, or you'd or. . ."

"You want me to be the pitcher?"

"Well, uh, I thought you would be, but, well if you'd rather. . ."

"I'd really like it if you'd fuck me, Mase. It's sorta what I like."

'Is this really happening?' he thought. "Uh, okay. Are you um, lubed up?" Mason winced at sounding so clinical.

"Not yet." Parker got the bottle of lube, poured some out and quickly inserted two fingers up his ass. "Ready."

"Uh?" Mason groaned to himself, 'Stop sounding like a total dumbass.'

From the couple other encounters he'd had, the lubing up seemed to take a while, what with the stretching and everything.

Parker, obviously thinking he needed to take charge, moved himself over Mason and began to squat. Before Mason was able to comment, he was balls deep inside Parker. Again this was nothing like his previous experiences.

Parker experimentally moved up and down a couple of times, sending Mason's thoughts flying. Nature seemed to take over, and he found himself thrusting upward.

"Yeah, man! Fuck me harder, come on Mase!"

Parker's continual dirty talk had its desired effect. Mason shot his load into the rubber, but when his orgasm subsided, he felt somehow cheated, unfulfilled, unhappy.

"Parker?" Mason asked once the big jock had dealt with the used condom.

"Yeah?"

"Um, I. . . Well I don't know how to say this, and. . . But. . . Well. . . It all seemed to happen quickly, I mean I slid in easy, you were, oh shit." Mason felt his cheeks burning bright red.

Parker was quiet; Mason hoped desperately that he hadn't hurt his feelings.

"I'm sorry, that came out all wrong." Mason crawled over to Parker who was lying on his back, and put an arm over him.

"No, it's all right. I didn't want. . . I didn't think. . . ~What I mean is. . . I was hoping you wouldn't have noticed."

"Noticed?"

"That I'd had lots of experience of being fucked."

"Well, uh. . .I. . ."

"Please, Mase, please just hold me. I don't feel good."

"Of course, babe, anything you say." Mason didn't have a clue what was going on. All he knew was that his friend was hurting and he wanted to fix it.

Parker took several deep breaths.

"You feeling any better?" Mason asked quietly.

"Some."

"You don't have to tell me anything, I mean what happened before we, um, before I became your boyfriend. Well that isn't any of my business."

"It is, Mase. I want to tell you, I should have told you before, but I thought you'd think less of me."

"Hey, I could never do that!"

Parker sniffed. "Thanks."

The two fell quiet again, Mason continuing to stroke Parker's hair.

"As I said, I've had a lot of sex," Parker eventually said.

Uh huh." Mason didn't want to pry, but he couldn't help being interested.

"Well I. . . That is. . . Oh shit this isn't easy. During the summer a friend of the family stayed at our place. His mom and my mom grew up together, and. . ."

"So?"

"Well, uh, the guy, Kurt, had to stay in my room, and, uh, we had sex."

"Parker, there's no problem here. I wasn't expecting you to be a virgin. I've done it with a couple of guys, but--" Mason sensed Parker didn't want to hear about what he'd been up to.

"I know, but Kurt is twenty and he's straight. He managed to persuade me to mess around some, and. . . one thing led to another, and he started fucking me."

"Oh, right. You say he's twenty? He didn't force you or anything? Legally what he did was rape."

"Shit no. Mason look at the size of me. No one's gonna do stuff to me that I don't agree to."

"Well, uh, yeah, suppose." Mason found it hard to balance all the new information he'd received about Parker. Yeah, he was big and strong, but he was also quite vulnerable, too.

"What's not so good is that I really got to like it when he fucked me. But I knew that's all it ever was. Kurt has a girlfriend back at college. He said he was just horny, and a moist hole is a moist hole."

Mason winced. The more he heard about Kurt, the less he liked.

"I enjoyed the sex but I realized I wanted more. When he'd come, Kurt would just get off me and go to his own bed. There was never any cuddling or kissing. When I tried kissing him once, he called me a fag."

"Fuck. I hope you kicked the shit out of him."

"No. I'd started to get some real strong feelings for him," Parker sniffed again. "In fact I thought I loved him. But he didn't feel the same about me. I'm sorry." Parker began to blink rapidly and sniffed a couple more times. "I'm not gonna cry, shit, it's so fucking girly to cry."

Mason was torn between wanting to comfort Parker, and being angry at Kurt. If he could only get his hands on that Kurt guy, he'd rip him a new asshole for hurting his lover. Kurt was older; he should have known better, he should. . . Mason didn't know.

Mason gave Parker a tissue, and he blew his nose. "Thanks. You don't hate me?"

"What? No, of course not. Though I can't say the same about Kurt. Fuck, I hope I never run into him, cause." Mason tightened his hold around Parker.

"I just wanted someone to hold me, love me, let me feel safe. But Kurt couldn't, wouldn't."

"Oh, Parker," to himself, Mason added, 'My beautiful, hurting Parker.'

"Sorry."

"Hey, stop that. I'm here now. I'm your boyfriend. Any time you want a cuddle you come to me." Mason's voice rose in volume. "Any time you want someone to love you, you find me. Because, Parker, you fucking beautiful person, if anything bad was to happen to you I'd. . . Well I'd kick their asses good and proper, and then kick yours for you letting them hurt you."

Parker laughed. "You say the cutest things."

"Bleck!" Mason said, but at least he'd put a smile on his boyfriend's face.

Mason watched over Parker as his eye-lids slowly closed and his breathing evened out, all the while wondering how the hell such a powerful, outwardly confident muscle stud could be so vulnerable. Mason offered up a prayer that he would be strong enough to meet Parker's needs. He knew he had no choice. For better or worse he was totally in love with the big lug. And so for the second night in

a row, Mason quietly professed his love to a sleeping boyfriend, before cuddling up to him and drifting off into a troubled sleep.

* * *

Sunday brought rain, lots of heavy, cold, persistent, unrelenting rain. But it didn't really matter because Mason and Parker used the time indoors to further cement their friendship.

This time Mason was the first to awaken. He found Parker's arms and legs tangled around his own, as if the big guy wanted to get as much body contact as possible. Mason wasn't about to object.

It was fascinating to watch Parker sleep. His face, which when awake, could show a variety of emotions from deep sadness to total joy, now was peaceful and untroubled. Mason sent Parker another silent promise to always be there for him, support him, hold him and love him.

Slowly Parker began to wake up. His eyes at first seemed unfocused, but when they spotted Mason they brightened, as did the rest of his face.

"Good morning, beautiful, did you sleep well?" Mason asked.

"Yes, uh, I think so." Then Parker's face clouded. "Uh, Last night, did what I think happen really happen?"

"Yes, bud. But as I told you then it's all right."

"You sure?"

Mason ran a finger down Parker's cheek. Parker turned his head and gently held the finger in his mouth, sucking on it like a pacifier.

"You want breakfast? My turn to cook."

"Can you cook?" Parker asked letting go of Mason's finger.

"Uh, well I can do cold cereal without too many problems."

Parker nodded. "I'll cook."

"So does this mean I get to see you in that frilly apron again?"

Parker punched Mason on the arm.

"Ouch, you big bully."

"Want me to kiss it better?" Parker leaned down and kissed more than Mason's arm better.

"Now look what you've done," Mason said pointing to his erection.

"Want me to kiss that better, too?"

"Well I don't know about better, but, oh shit!" Mason exclaimed as his cock was enveloped in the warm wetness of Parker's sucking mouth.

When he'd finished, and Mason had returned (if slightly less expertly) the favor, Parker said he better go and make some coffee to go with the cream they just ate.

Mason got up with him, they dressed in the minimum of clothing, and while Parker cooked, Mason re-laid and lit the fire in the main room.

* * *

"I don't think we'll be able to get out today, bud." Mason said peering out of the window at the torrential rain.

"No, but it's nice just being inside all toasty with you," Parker said coming up behind Mason and giving him a hug. "Thank you for not. . . Well for understanding, you know, last night."

Mason turned in Parker's arms and put his own round Parker's wide chest. "What happened wasn't your fault. Kurt used you for his own pleasure, not caring about you."

"I know. Don't get me wrong I liked the sex. I liked it a lot, but I wanted, needed more, I needed Kurt to like me, to want me, but, well. . ."

"This guy really likes you and really wants you,

"Thanks, babe. That was why when I caught you looking at me that day, well I got to hoping, praying that maybe, just maybe you might be 'the one.' And you are." Parker kissed Mason's lips hungrily. "I hit the jackpot with you."

Mason wanted to say that he was the one who had gotten the prize, but Parker's tongue was too far down his throat for him to be able to achieve intelligent speech.

Pulling back and taking in several deep breaths, Parker cupped Mason's face in his large hands. "Make love to me, please?"

Mason didn't need asking twice. Silently he led Parker back to the bedroom. He sensed Parker wanted him to be the aggressor, a role he was beginning to get accustomed to. So after much kissing, stroking and rubbing, Mason stuck a folded pillow under the small of Parker's back. After suiting up and making sure everything was well lubed, he slowly entered Parker's ass.

This time would not be a quick hump and come; Mason was determined to take it slow and steady. He would show Parker what someone who genuinely loved him for the beautiful person he was both inside and out could do. If Parker's whimpers, his glazed eyes, his drooling, slack-jawed expression was any indication, then Mason could be certain he'd gotten his point across.

Mason felt his orgasm approaching, but he eased back, determined to have Parker come first. Knowing he was no expert on making a partner come purely by stimulating his prostate, Mason reached down and pumped a load out of Parker's iron hard, leaking manhood.

Again Parker let out a primitive, window-rattling roar. If Mason had possessed sufficient powers of reason at that moment, he would have concluded that there would be no way he and Parker could have sex without anyone under the same roof knowing what the two of them were up to. But such

matters were far from Mason's mind as he too hurtled over the precipice, testing to the limit the capacity of his condom's reservoir.

The exhausted but satiated lovers collapsed onto the bed, both catching their breaths.

"Fuck," Parker said.

"You certainly have been." Mason replied finding and kissing Parker's mouth.

"And how. Cuddle me, Mase, please?"

Mason was to learn that after making love, Parker always liked to be held. They would both come to enjoy the post-coital cuddle, making it their favorite part of the lovemaking experience.

* * *

Parker's ass was dragging Monday afternoon as he helped Mason close up the cabin prior to their departure. Mason was acutely aware of Parker's somber mood. He shared it but hoped there'd be other opportunities to return.

"Come on, Parker, cheer up. I know that yesterday was a total wash out, but we still managed to find plenty to do inside the cabin." Mason flashed him a knowing smile.

"I know, I'm still a little sore," Parker smirked.

"And we had a good walk this morning,"

"Yeah, that porcupine took a real liking to you."

"Don't remind me."

Parker's face, which had momentarily brightened, fell once again. "I don't wanna go back home,"

"We can't stay up here forever, babe." Though Mason wished they could. The weekend had been amazing. He and Parker had grown so close, he'd almost told the big guy that he was in love with him several times, but he always bit back the words at the last moment. "This place is great as a getaway, but we have lives to live, school to attend, and you've got football games to play. What is it you told me, 'the Falcons couldn't win if I weren't there?'"

The ghost of a smile appeared on Parker's face. "I know I'm being dumb. It's just. . ." Parker drifted into silence.

"Thanksgiving is only a few weeks away. Mom and Dad might not want to come up because Mom usually has to work on both the Wednesday and Friday, so we'll probably have the place to ourselves again."

Parker's smile brightened. "Really, can we Mase?"

Mason grasped Parker's arm and pulled him around so they were both looking over the lake, its rippling green blue water stretching the half mile to the opposite shore. "I know this place has

become very special to you. It's where you feel safe, feel able to be yourself. If only for that reason, and trust me there's lots more, that's why it's special to me also. I promise you that we'll come up here as often as we can."

Parker pulled Mason into a tight hug. "I don't deserve someone as special as you, Mase, I can't think why you put up with me, I'm screwed up, I'm. . ."

"You're a fucking awesome stud, Parker Collins and I love you with all of my heart," Mason said loudly. He amazed himself at finally speaking the words aloud, but he didn't regret doing so.

Parker tightened his arms around Mason.

"I'm here, I'll not hurt you like Kurt did. I'll do everything within my power to give you the happiness that the both of us deserve. Now come on, get movin', I told mom we'd be home in time for supper."

Parker gave him a final squeeze before pulling back and gripping Mason's upper arms. "Mase, you, I. . ."

"It's okay." Mason put a couple of fingers to Parker's lips, silencing his struggle. "I maybe shouldn't have said what I did. But I've said it now and I can't take it back." Mason's heart was beating rapidly. He tried not to be hurt at Parker not being able to say those all-important words. Under his breath he cursed Kurt. Parker's inability to reciprocate was all his fault.

"You're so fucking awesome, Mase, you really are."

Chapter 5

Pill Hill, Portland OR July 2005

"Fucking useless piece of shit!" Parker exclaimed as he slammed the phone back onto its cradle.

As Mason had suspected, the elevator's phone was out of order. "Vandals," he said softly.

"What the fuck business is it of yours!" Parker whirled on Mason.

"No, uh, I said vandals, plural." He swallowed "Kids, they frequently vandalize the equipment in the elevators."

"Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry, bud. You must think I'm a real asshole."

Mason didn't say anything.

"I'm nervous. Hospitals, I don't like them. I don't normally fly into a rage with people I don't know."

"It's okay." Inwardly Mason winced. He knew Parker hadn't recognized him, but somehow having it spoken out loud made it hurt worse. People only ever saw the chair, never the guy sitting in it.

Despite the passage of time, Parker had lost little of his physical, manly presence. Mason's gaze fell to his lap, to the pants covering his withered, stick-like legs. He closed his eyes not wanting to think how differently fate had treated him and Parker.

"Uh, will someone be coming, do you think?" Parker's voice had softened.

Without opening his eyes, Mason said, "Try pressing the alarm button." He prayed it would work.

A bell rang somewhere in the distance.

Despite a resolute determination not to, Mason couldn't help but open his eyes and admire his elevator companion. From his seated position he thought Parker appeared taller than he remembered. His hair was still perfect. Mason wondered if it felt as fine and silky as it used to. Parker was a little thicker around the middle, but he wore it well. Through his suit jacket and button down dress shirt, Mason could tell Parker still had a great chest. Looking at the man's arms, Mason concluded Parker must still work out regularly. He remembered how those arms once used to enfold him, holding him against that firm body.

"Don't go there."

"Huh?"

"Oh, uh, nothing." Mason hadn't realized he'd spoken out loud.

* * *

Central High School, Crawford WA, May 1992

"I don't mean anything to you. I've never meant anything," Mason hissed quietly.

"What?"

"I'm just. . . just your dirty little secret, someone you can ignore when it doesn't suit you."

Mason was at the end of his tether, he'd had enough. It was the eve of Parker's 18th birthday. Mason had planned to take his boyfriend out for a lavish dinner in a private dining room so they wouldn't be observed. Parker had been thrilled with the gesture, but had cancelled at the last minute when his girlfriend had asked him to stay with her for the night as her parents weren't home.

The pair were standing in the hall by their lockers. The melee of students had turned their attention to the two jocks when they heard raised voices.

"No, Mase, that's so not true." Parker looked about him. "Uh, can we talk about this later?" he asked shifting uncomfortably.

"You mean when Tina or whatever the name of the latest bimbo is, isn't pulling on your leash?" Mason spat.

Someone in the crowd snickered.

Then in an instant everything changed. Parker's face turned an angry red. He slammed his fist into his locker and rounded on Mason. "Oh for fuck's sake! Stop being such a fucking fag. I've had enough of your queer-ass shit! So just. . . Just fuck off!"

Mason stood, his mouth opening and closing. Parker stormed off, pushing his way through the crowd. Once he'd gone, all eyes turned to Mason. Then the warning bell rang and people slowly began to disperse.

* * *

Wherever he went during the day, Mason saw people staring at - and whispering about - him.

Because of the minimal demands placed on his conscious thoughts due to finals already being taken, Mason found himself reflecting back upon his seven-month love affair with Parker. He'd always known that they would have to hide from public gaze the more intimate aspects of their friendship. He was prepared for that, but what frequently irked him was the lengths Parker felt he needed to go to in order to appear straight.

Parker had been elected homecoming king the previous fall. Mason sat on the edge of his seat during the special assembly, as the results were announced and the king, queen and her court were assembled. To anyone else Parker seemed bashful as he kissed the cheek of his queen. Mason was okay with this; he knew Parker was just acting. Though as the week of homecoming events continued, Mason was beginning to wonder if secretly Parker was enjoying himself a little too much.

The school had planned several homecoming events, pep rallies, a bonfire and a parade complete with decorated floats.

The whole thing culminated in the football game on Friday and the homecoming dance the day after. Mason attended the game, eagerly anticipating a comfortable victory. The Jackson High Volcanoes were consistently bottom of the league.

All was going to plan. The Falcon's were fourteen points ahead when in the middle of the second quarter Henry, the first string quarterback, got sacked. He lay on the ground and didn't look as though he was getting up any time soon. Mason knew Henry was a close bud of Parker's, and sure enough, Parker was one of the first to kneel down next to the prostrate football player.

An ambulance was called. The paramedics examined Henry before placing him on a stretcher and carrying him off the field. The second-string quarterback did his best, but it was obvious that there wasn't the same chemistry between the new guy and the rest of the players. The lead that the Falcons had built up was slowly whittled away, until the Jackson Volcanoes nudged ahead. The lead changed hands several times.

Mason watched concerned as Parker and his teammates fumbled passes, dropped balls and conceded needless penalties. Mason wished he could take his boyfriend somewhere quiet and talk him down. He'd learned that hugging, stroking his back and running fingers through his hair usually

had a calming effect on the big guy. But Mason was powerless to help so he just had to sit in the bleachers and watch.

In the last five minutes of the game, the Volcanoes went three points ahead with a touchdown pass. Much to the distress and frustration of Parker and his teammates, the Volcanoes kept possession with an on-side kick and worked the clock down.

With a minute remaining, a Falcon defensive lineman intercepted a pass and ran almost the full length of the field but was tackled at the fifteen yard line. The Falcons tried to advance the ball for a couple of plays but only managed to gain a yard or two. On the final play, Parker caught a pass and slithered over the goal line.

The home crowd went crazy. Mason jumped to his feet and cheered. Not only was Mason proud of his team, but it was his boyfriend that had made the win possible.

It didn't matter that the extra point attempt was unsuccessful. They had won, and Parker, his Parker, despite an earlier lackluster performance, had come through.

The Falcon players hoisted Parker on their shoulders and carried him off the field in triumph. Mason couldn't ever remember being more proud of his man. He looked forward in eager anticipation to that night's round of celebrating.

As had become his usual practice, Mason made his way to the locker-room entrance and waited for his boyfriend. When Parker emerged a half hour later, he was immediately set upon by Mandy the Homecoming queen. She hugged and kissed him, something Mason knew he wasn't able to do. Feeling out of place and dejected, Mason backed into the shadows.

Parker waved him closer. "Hey, bud. Did you see that touch-down?"

"Yeah, bud, real smooth."

"Yeah. I'd gone through the moves loads of times in practice and it all fell into place."

"Sweet."

"Listen, uh, I've been invited to a party, and. . . " Parker was finding it difficult to talk with an excited Mandy clinging to him.

Mason wondered where Brad, Mandy's boyfriend, a fellow soccer player, was.

"Uh, The party's just for members of the team and, uh."

"Their dates," Mandy put in, kissing Parker again.

"Oh, uh. I thought you were with Brad," Mason said, feeling as though he was gonna hurl.

"Nah, I dumped him when I got crowned queen and Parky here became my king."

Mason had to jam his hands in his pockets, otherwise he was sure he'd have reached out and hauled Mandy from Parker and delivered a sharp upper cut to her chin. Parker was his!

"Tomorrow, then." Parker said, shooting an apologetic look at Mason.

"Yeah, tomorrow."

"But, Parky, there's the charity rally, then of course the homecoming dance," Mandy chimed in.

"Oh, uh, yeah." Parker smiled at Mandy, Mason hoped it looked forced but wasn't so sure. "So I guess I'll see you at the dance, then."

"Yeah." Mason didn't think he was gonna bother going.

A phone call from Parker pleading with Mason to attend the dance had its intended effect. Mason along with a couple of his soccer buds went stag. Parker had offered to line Mason up with a date, but Mason had been firm in his refusal, and Parker hadn't pressed the point.

Though he had no shortage of pretty girls asking to dance with him, Mason only accepted offers from the most persistent. His gaze would inevitably drift over to what Parker was up to. He seemed to be dancing much too intimately with his partners for Mason's liking.

The evening dragged on, Mason hating every minute of it. He managed to lock eyes a couple of times with Parker, who while obviously enjoying himself, shot Mason a series of apologetic looks. Mason sent back an understanding smile, all the while wishing he were the one dancing with Parker.

At just after 10:00 pm, Mason finally had had enough and slipped away quietly.

Sunday saw Parker on Mason's doorstep, a bag of doughnuts in his hand and an apologetic look on his face. As would happen many times in the future, Mason forgave Parker and told him he loved him. Parker would thank him and apologize but not reciprocate the declaration of love.

* * *

The bell signaling the end of first period rang, breaking Mason out of his reverie. He gathered his books and trudged off to his next class, ignoring the strange looks and whispered comments of his fellow students.

As had happened during his algebra class, the lack of mental stimulation in AP chemistry afforded Mason another opportunity to ruminate.

Parker had thankfully ditched the ever-clingy Mandy, but had taken up with Lorraine Little. Lorraine seemed to have a brain beneath her straight-cropped black hair. Despite his best efforts, Mason couldn't bring himself to hate the girl. She was in several of Mason's AP classes and he'd always gotten on quite well with her.

Parker hadn't dated Lorraine for long before he ditched her. This resulted in another row.

"Fuck, Mase, I don't get it. You're telling me you're pissed at me for dumping my girlfriend? I thought you'd be pumped."

"That's not it," Mason struggled to explain. Truth was he couldn't understand his reaction. "Lorraine is a nice girl. She's safe, she's. . . Oh fuck, I don't know. She came over to me yesterday in tears that you'd ended things with her."

"Yeah, so? She's just a girl."

Mason shook his head. "You use people, Parker. That's. . . not cool."

Turning the page in his chem textbook, Mason mused that at least things had returned to what had passed for normal when Parker started sniffing round Jennifer Stone.

He could, and did, hate Jennifer with just as much vehemence as he had Mandy. She was clingy, clueless and her perfume was cloying.

It had been a mistake. Mason knew it would end in disagreement, but he allowed Parker to talk him into double dating. Mason had asked Lorraine to go with him to the movies, though he was at pains to point out to Lorraine that the evening was merely one friend socializing with another. She accepted the invitation, even kissing Mason on the cheek for being so sweet.

As Parker's truck didn't have a rear seat, they decided to use Mason's Beretta. Mason drove, forcing Parker and the bitch Jennifer to occupy the cramped back seat. The restricted conditions didn't seem to hinder Parker, however; he and Jennifer went at it complete with accompanying moans and slurps. Mason tried to tamp down his anger and distress, attempting to focus on Lorraine, giving her as good a time as he could. She too was upset at how Parker had seemingly moved on without effort.

Once the girls had been dropped off, Mason exploded with rage. Parker tried to defend his actions, but Mason wasn't having any of it. Parker became sullen. Mason was forced to pull over when Parker started getting clingy and needful. Interrupted by a series of sniffs and nose blowing, Parker admitted he too had hated every minute of the evening.

"Why do you do all this crap, Parker?"

"Cause I need a scholarship to get out of this hick town and make something of my life. Mom has to work two jobs to keep a roof over our heads, dad ran out on us. I'm not gonna be like them, I'm gonna study law and make something of my life. To do that I need to play football. My grades aren't good enough to get an academic scholarship."

"And if people find out that. . ."

"That I'm a fag, I won't be able to play, and bang goes my chances of college."

"Oh, Parker."

"I know none of this is right, but please, Mase, please don't ask me to stop." Parker gestured with his hand, presumably indicating the double-dating episode, and the other activities designed to make him appear straight. "I gotta escape my life and this town."

"There must be an easier way. This is just tearing you apart." Mason didn't add that it was tearing their relationship apart, too.

"I wish there was. Please, Mase, would you hold me?"

Mason kissed the top of Parker's head and pulled the big guy closer. 'Fuck, what a mess,' he thought.

The next week saw Parker extricate himself from Jennifer's clutches, and he remained faithful to Mason until early in the new year.

At the sound of the lunch bell, Mason gathered his books. News of the events of earlier that morning had spread. Mason heard more than one person call out "Fag" to him as he walked down the halls. Queuing at the snack bar, Mason was jostled and pushed. He spun round to face whoever was doing it, but no one met his eye. He just bought his sandwiches, snacks and a couple of sodas and left. Walking around the perimeter of the sports fields en-route to his tree, Mason tried to recapture some of the happiness that he and Parker had enjoyed during Christmas break. He forced to the front of his mind images of him and Parker kissing in front of the tree, as they exchanged gifts, Mason's parents watching them contentedly. However, the events at the snack bar weighed too heavily on his mind to allow him to reminisce.

Sliding his back down the trunk of the tree, Mason waited for Parker to show up for their regular lunchtime rendezvous. Mason kept looking at his watch, but Parker never showed. Realization began to dawn that things between him and Parker were worse than he'd thought.

As he half-heartedly ate his sandwich, Mason debated with himself about going to the office and reporting sick with a view to going home. He decided to stick things out, a decision he would later come to bitterly regret.

* * *

Afternoon school followed a similar pattern to the events of the morning. He and Parker shared a study hall during fourth hour, but when Mason pushed open the door to the library, Parker was nowhere in sight. This caused a heavy lump to form in Mason's chest. Parker was avoiding him.

Lazily scanning the pages of a Sports Illustrated, Mason couldn't help but think back to another occasion where his and Parker's relationship experienced yet more bumps in the road.

News of a couple of members of the basketball team being caught in a compromising position in the showers spread like wildfire. The two guys, whom Mason knew only slightly, were immediately ostracized by the basketball team, the remainder of the school's jock body soon following. The news had spooked an already nervous Parker who, much to Mason's distress, ratcheted up his red-blooded, pussy-hunting macho persona. Parker even told Mason he couldn't be seen talking with him at school for fear that his buds would catch on to them.

Mason had argued that it was perfectly acceptable for best friends, both of whom were jocks, to be seen hanging round one another. But Parker was adamant. Mason had given serious consideration to

breaking things off. He'd even raised the issue with Parker. But Parker had pleaded with Mason not to end things.

"You're everything to me, Mase. I couldn't go on without you. You're the only one who understands me, who can love me. Please, babe. We can still meet here at your place, or sometimes at mine when mom isn't home."

That raised another bone of contention between them, that of Parker coming out to his mother, a woman Mason held a great deal of respect for. But Parker, fearing rejection, always refused to even consider the idea.

"Fuck, Parker, is it worth it? I know we can't kiss and stuff at school, I'm not asking for that, but to not even speak or spend time together, that's just. . ." He groped for the right words. "Just stupid."

Parker agreed that they could still eat lunch together at the tree, but they couldn't both be seen walking there at the same time.

Figuring he'd rung as many concessions from Parker as he was likely to get, Mason had agreed. So for a couple of weeks people around school never saw Parker and Mason together.

'Operation Ignore' as Mason termed it, ended when Henry, the quarterback, had asked Parker why he and Mason had fallen out. Parker had gone to Mason's house that night and told him about the conversation, and how he'd not been able to come up with a suitable explanation.

Mason merely nodded in understanding and watched as Parker went through his now customary groveling routine. As usual Mason forgave Parker. He took him up to his bedroom where they had sex. Once he'd come down from his climax, Mason kissed Parker on the lips and told the big guy that he loved him. Parker smiled, thanked him, but didn't return the compliment.

Mason still hated how Parker felt the need to date girls. He knew that he either had to accept the situation or end the relationship. This last he knew he couldn't do. Despite their problems, Mason was totally in love with the big guy. He did extract a promise from Parker that when the two of them went to college and shared an apartment, Parker would only take the occasional girl to an official function, he wouldn't date in the regular sense.

The uneasy peace that they'd brokered was shattered when word got around school that Parker had "done it" with one of the cheerleaders. The girl in question had announced with glee to anyone who would listen that she'd got a notch on her bedpost with Parker's name on it. Mason, knowing the girl's sluttish reputation, didn't fully believe the rumors, but thought he better go see Parker and ask him about it, just to set his mind at rest. Parker was evasive, and wouldn't meet Mason's eyes.

"Shit, man, it's a simple question. Did you have sex with that. . . that! Whore!"

"She's not a whore."

"I don't care what she is. Did you fuck her?" Mason was shouting by this point.

"God damn it, Mase. If you want to know, then yes I fucked her. I bent her over the kitchen table and pounded the hell out of her pussy. She screamed that I was the best she'd ever had."

Blinded by rage, Mason delivered a punch to Parker's mouth. He went reeling backward and landed on his ass, blood spurting from his top lip. Parker sprang to his feet, drew back his fist, but his arm fell to his side.

"Go on, hit me, you fucking bastard! God knows you can't hurt me worse than you have already."

"I'm sorry," came a small voice.

"It's too late, Parker. I've put up with a lot because of my love for you. I've watched as you've publicly ignored me, I've stood back while you've danced and made out with girls. I've listened to you bull-shitting with your friends about fucking pussy. If anything I hated that the most. But to find out that you've actually done it. That's more than enough. It's over, Parker. And this time I mean it."

Mason stormed out of Parker's apartment. His vision blurred with unshed tears, he ran down the stairs, tripping over a trash bag that someone had left in the lobby.

He refused to have anything to do with Parker. He told his folks to send him away whenever he visited the house. Thanks to caller ID he was able to not pick up when Parker called. It was a little more difficult to not speak to him at school, though whenever Parker approached him, Mason would walk toward other students, knowing Parker couldn't argue or plead with him when others were within earshot.

One Friday night Mason's parent's returned home late from a function and found an incoherent and very drunk Parker on the porch. Initially Mason was furious, but seeing the once strong and confident boy-man he loved so much, now beaten down and pathetic, Mason yet again forgave him, telling him he was sorry for pushing him away.

The next morning Mason enjoyed watching a hung over Parker run for the bathroom when Mason's mom offered the big jock a plate full of sausage, bacon and pancakes.

Looking at his watch, Mason saw that study hall was almost through. When the bell rang Mason walked the halls until he sought out one of Parker's team mates. Before he could enquire if they had any information as to Parker's whereabouts, the guy, Todd, one of the defensive linemen, pushed Mason into a bank of lockers and punched him in the gut. Mason doubled over and thought he was gonna puke. Even though plenty of students witnessed the assault, no one came to Mason's aid.

"We don't like fags trying to queer our friends." Todd said before hocking up a mouthful of spit and firing it into Mason's face.

Mason was too stunned, too winded to react. He only had the presence of mind to wipe away Todd's spittle.

"What the fuck you staring at?" Mason said to the crowd, who judging that the show was over, began to move on, but not before a few of them called him a fag, queer and other similar comments. Only one person, Lorraine, stayed to offer comfort.

"You should report this to the office," she said.

"What's the point? Thanks for stopping, though. Means a lot."

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"Yeah. It'll all blow over soon." Mason didn't believe what he'd said, and judging by her expression, Lorraine didn't either.

* * *

Mason managed to get through the rest of the school day unmolested, though the level of taunting showed no signs of diminishing. He was glad to hear the final bell ring and was soon at his locker putting away his books. He had decided to drive over to Parker's place to demand an explanation for the shit he'd pulled earlier that day.

However, Mason was forced to delay his plans when Jacob - a fellow member of the student government - reminded him about their after-school meeting.

"Shit, I ain't in the mood. It's just gonna be a yawn."

"Come on, dude. We never get enough people to show up to make a quorum. It shouldn't take long to get through the planned business."

"Fuck, this is all I need," Mason grouched as he followed Jacob down the hall. Amazingly, the few people they passed didn't make any comments about Mason's perceived sexuality. Mason figured they were afraid of Jacob who was a big shot on the wrestling team. As he walked, he idly wondered why Jacob hadn't made reference to that day's hot item of gossip.

The meeting dragged on, Mason growing more and more anxious to get away and go see Parker.

"Jeez, some people just like listening to the sound of their own voices," Mason said none too quietly to Jacob, when the student body president had been speaking for over ten minutes with little sign of winding down.

Jacob snickered, the exchange causing others to either smile or shoot disapproving glances at the errant committee members.

Finally the meeting was adjourned, Mason unable to recall a single thing that had been discussed. He bid Jacob goodbye in the hallway before going in opposite directions.

He hadn't even reached the exit doors before Todd, who had obviously lain in wait, accosted him. "Hey, fag."

"Not that fucking shit again." Mason formed a fist, but his hand was stayed by the more powerfully built lineman.

"Much as I'd love to deck you here and now, Grant, we've got more important business. Parker wants to see you."

Mason, sensing a trap, resisted. "If I want to speak to Parker, then I'll go see him when I'm good and ready."

"You're really starting to piss me off, fag. Just come with me."

Todd hadn't let go of Mason's forearm, and his unwillingness to play along resulted in the football player tightening his grip.

"Get the fuck off of me." Mason struggled ineffectually.

Another member of the team emerged from round the corner. "Fuck, man, get a move on, otherwise we'll be caught."

"Stop bein' such a fucking pussy, Jared. Come on, give me a hand with the fag."

"What the fu. . ." The rest of Mason's comments were cut off by a blow to his stomach. This time he did puke.

As he tried to regain his breath, Mason was bundled out of the building with Jared on one side of him, and Todd on the other.

Mason was dragged to the now empty student parking lot and dumped into the back of a covered delivery van, the doors being slammed behind him. In the darkened interior it took Mason a few moments to realize he wasn't alone. Two other members of the football team were present.

Seeing he had spotted them, one said, "Welcome to your worst nightmare, fag."

Mason, knowing he was in deep shit, threw himself to the side of the van and began pounding on the metal panel.

He was soon dragged away however. "Uh, that wasn't a very smart move," the guy said, with menace in his voice.

"Fuck you!"

He was rewarded by both players using him as an impromptu punching bag. Mason fought back as best he could but soon realized he was out numbered and out muscled.

Mason was only vaguely aware of subsequent events.

He could later recall being dragged out of the van into a grassed clearing, trees surrounding them on all sides. He didn't know why, but Mason looked round to see if Parker was present, though couldn't decide if he was happy or sad that he wasn't there.

The increased space afforded the four athletes greater freedom of movement. They were able to use their feet as well as their fists to whale on him. Mason, now in a fog of constant pain, detachedly felt a couple of his ribs breaking, the sharp pain making breathing very difficult.

All the while he was being worked over, he could hear, though it sounded as though it were from a great distance, a series of comments about how they were 'giving him what he deserved,' and 'fags needed to be taught a lesson.'

Mason had no idea how long his torture lasted. He slowly became aware that the blows and kicks had ceased. Then he got the feeling of being carried. He didn't care much where, he was hoping the fuzzy blanket of unconsciousness that kept threatening would just go ahead and cover him.

He heard the van's engine starting up before they slowly began to move off. The unevenness of the terrain resulted in him bouncing about on the floor, hitting his already injured head.

Passing in and out of consciousness, Mason heard the two guys in back arguing.

"You went too fucking far, man. . . He's not moving. . . What we gonna do with him, did you think of that, asshole . . ? Oh fuck, we're in deep shit."

Later, Mason had no sense of time. He felt himself being lifted, but wasn't the van still moving? Cold air, increased road noise. Brief sensation of flying. Dull pain of impact. Numbness.

Chapter 6

Pill Hill, Portland OR July 2005

"You guys okay down there?" the maintenance man shouted from the top of the elevator shaft.

"How long are we gonna be stuck in here?" Parker bent his head back and asked loudly.

He and Mason had been trapped in the elevator car for over twenty minutes while the guy from maintenance tried to diagnose the problem.

"Uh, I can't find out what's wrong. So I called the elevator engineers."

"And?"

"They're not sure, either."

"Jesus Christ," Parker muttered.

"They said they'd send someone out."

"How long's that gonna take?"

"Uh, well, could be a couple hours."

"Oh for fuck's sake!" Parker slammed his fist into the metal wall of the elevator car.

"NO,PARKER, NO!" Mason screamed. He was instantly transported back thirteen years. Unwelcome images of Parker slamming his fist into his locker and shouting those self same words echoed round Mason's head. He began to tremble violently, as mental flashbacks of his beating at the hands of the football team crowded his mind.

Parker spun to face Mason. "What? How come you know my . . ."

Even through his terror, Mason was able to see the dawning light of recognition appear on Parker's face. "Mason? Is, are you?" He moved toward the wheelchair.

"NO!" Mason brought up his arms defensively.

"Mase, I . . ." Parker shook his head and moved closer.

"HELP!" Mason screamed.

Parker halted. The car fell silent, save for Mason's heavy breathing.

"What's going on down there?" the maintenance man asked.

Mason couldn't answer, his mind was locked.

"You guys okay?"

"We're okay," Parker shouted up. "Don't worry, nobody's hurt."

Parker stared at Mason, his eyes raking along his body. "I, uh. It's really you. Oh man." Parker slid down the wall of the elevator car and sat down. Mason felt a little easier.

"Why did you disappear on me?" Parker eventually asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

"I . . ." Mason didn't know what to say.

"I know I really screwed up when I said what I did that morning."

Mason laughed, but it wasn't through amusement.

"I guess you still hate me. Can't say I blame you." Parker's face fell.

The two sat, just looking at one another. Mason believed he'd dealt with the whole Parker episode. He thought he'd forgiven him, but seeing him now, he wasn't so sure. Part of him still loved the man, while another part hated him for all he'd done to hurt him and ruin his life.

Parker reached into his suit coat pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. Unfolding it he looked at the contents. "Hey, I never made the connection before. I've got an appointment to see a Dr. M. Grant. Fuck, that's you isn't it?"

Mason nodded. Why would Parker be coming to see him professionally? Mason was an infectious disease specialist. Although his field was quite varied, the majority of his patients in the Portland area were gay men who had contracted HIV. Mason's eyes widened. Not his Parker, his beautiful Parker, it couldn't be. Mason shook his head, Parker had long ceased to be his.

"Guess you've figured it out." Parker said scrutinizing his shoes. "I got the bad news a couple months back."

"I'm sorry," Mason said before his cell phone started ringing. "Excuse me," he said to Parker before flipping the phone open. "Maggie?"

"Dr. Grant, your first appointment was 15 minutes ago, but. . ."

"Yes, sorry. I meant to call you earlier. The elevator has broken down with me trapped in it."

"Oh dear."

"Would you reschedule my appointments? Mr. Parker Collins is in the car with me."

After explaining he could be trapped for some time, Mason ended the call.

The car fell silent. Mason, feeling he had to say something, anything, asked, "What's been happening to you these past thirteen years?" He was alarmed to realize he could have added 'Andd two months eleven days.'

Parker sighed, "Jeez, where do I start?"

Mason was now in full doctor mode. He just waited for Parker to tell his story in his own words and at his own pace.

"It probably won't surprise you that much of my adult life I've been too fucking chicken to admit what or who I am."

'Still with the pity party. Some things never change,' Mason thought, but maintained a well-practiced neutral expression.

"I got a football scholarship and went to college, but then you might know that cause your dad was one of my professors. Hey, why didn't he ever tell me anything, apart from that you'd gone to college out of state?"

"What happened after college? Did you practice law like you wanted to?" Mason wasn't ready to answer any of Parker's questions.

"I met this girl, her dad was a senior partner in a law firm, and, well, uh. . . We got married."

Mason stayed passive. He wasn't altogether surprised. Saddened, but not surprised. "Go on," he said calmly.

"Well, uh, I got a job in her daddy's firm, passed the bar exam and was starting to climb the ladder. But. . ."

Mason could imagine what the 'but' was, though he was determined not to interrupt.

"We had a couple of kids, boy and a girl, but. . ."

Again Mason stayed quiet.

"Being married wasn't easy."

'There's a surprise,' Mason thought.

"Well, uh, I started using the Internet. I visited different chat rooms where I could chat with other men who were like me."

Mason nodded.

"That helped a lot, but just talking to people who understood only went so far, you know? Shit, I'm not proud of this," Parker mumbled. "But well I'd visit adult bookstores, even public restrooms and. . . Well you know."

The venom in Mason's voice surprised even him. "You could never stick to just one partner when I knew you, so it's no surprise that nothing has changed." Mason didn't care that his mode of questioning wouldn't be approved of by the state medical board.

"You're right. I've had a crappy life. I'm a fucking worthless piece of shit. When Sue found out, I lost everything. The job, the house, my marriage, access to my kids. Then when I found out I'd gotten the plague, I. . ."

"It's always been about you! 'Please feel sorry for me, I've had such a crappy life,' Well fuck you, here's a newsflash. Your life has been a hell of a lot easier than mine." Mason banged his fist on the arm of his wheelchair. "Whatever went wrong in your life was your own doing. I can't fucking say the same about mine."

"Sorry," Parker said in a small voice.

"Ha, that's rich!" Mason spat. "Tell me, Parker, which parts are you most sorry for? Outing me to the whole fucking school or setting your football buds on me, beating me to within an inch of my life, then tossing me out of a delivery van breaking my spine?"

Parker's face went white. He open and closed his mouth, but no sound came out.

"Well, I'll tell you what I'm sorry for. I'm sorry I stuck with you for the seven months we were together. No, scrub that. I'm sorry I kept taking you back after you kept shitting on me."

"I'm sorry, Mase." Parker buried his head in his hands.

"I fucking bet you are! I'm also sorry that I went to all the trouble of building a dream life for us. You remember that birthday dinner I'd planned for you, the one you couldn't attend because you had to be with your latest beard?"

"I'm sorry."

"Is that all you can fucking say? Well, you're not fucking half as sorry as I am." Mason paused in his vitriolic outpouring to draw breath. "Because if you hadn't outed me and got your buddies to try and kill me you'd have gone to that dinner. My eighteenth birthday present to you was to be a full ride scholarship I'd talked dad into arranging for you."

"But, how. . ."

Mason put up a hand to stop Parker interrupting. "It didn't even end there. Because I was fucking stupid enough to love you and wanted to make our life as good as I could, I'd gone out and contacted several realtors. They'd given me a list of off-campus apartments that we could go look at. I'd persuaded mom and dad to pay for a four year lease for whichever place we liked the most."

"NOOOO! Stop it! I can't hear any more!" Parker clenched his fists and beat them on his skull.

"Yeah. I'm so fucking sorry that I was dumb enough to love you enough to do all that for you. For us."

For several minutes the only noise in the elevator was Parker's heavy breathing.

"You said something about being beaten up by some guys on the team?" Parker asked once he'd gotten a hold of himself.

"Yeah," Mason too had had a chance to calm down.

"I swear, Mason I don't know a thing about that. I promise on my kids' lives that I don't."

Looking at the sincere and pleading expression on Parker's face, Mason was beginning to believe him.

"What happened?" Parker asked softly.

Mason closed his eyes. "After school I was ambushed by four members of the football team. They hustled me into a small delivery van, took me to some woods somewhere and kicked the crap out of me."

"Oh God."

"My memories of what happened are sketchy. The EMTs told me they found me on a road in the middle of nowhere. The injuries I sustained were consistent with landing on my back after being thrown from a moving vehicle."

"Oh Christ, Mase, no!"

Mason had told the story so many times, he was able to continue in a dispassionate flat monotone. "It seems my injuries were too severe for the local hospital in Crawford to deal with. So I was air lifted to Seattle.

"My spine suffered trauma at L4 and L5." He pointed to his side to indicate the height of the injury. "Though I've got some feeling below this, it's, uh. Well I won't bore you with all the medical crap." People tended not to want the gritty details about his condition.

"My right leg was broken in three places, my left femur suffered a single fracture. Then there were the broken ribs, the trauma to my left cheekbone as well as innumerable contusions which covered most of my body."

"Oh my god. Mase. I had no idea about any of this. I swear to you I didn't."

Parker made to rise to offer comfort, but Mason fended him away. Parker began to pace the confines of the metal box.

"For months I had no memory of what happened. The cops kept visiting me, but I couldn't tell them anything. When I started to get flashbacks, I remembered there had been four of them and only one of me. I figured they'd have had plenty of time to create alibis for each other. I knew it'd be my word against theirs. So I never told the cops anything.

"Who did it, Mase?" Parker asked. He sounded calm, but Mason knew better.

"It's not important now. It happened a long time ago."

"Fuck!" Parker punched the side of the elevator car. This time Mason didn't react. "I bet it was Henry Livingstone, he was always such a fucking asshole."

"I thought Henry was your best friend on the team, and no, Henry wasn't involved."

"Who did it, Mase. I wanna rip their fucking heads off."

If anything, Parker's desire for vengeance helped Mason to think more kindly about his former lover. Mason reached out and took hold of Parker's hand and gave it a squeeze. Parker squeezed back before disengaging and head butting the metal wall.

"Those fucking bastards are gonna pay for what they've done to you. When I. . ." Parker began pacing again, thumping his fist into his palm.

"What's the point? You'd only end up going to prison and. . ." Shaking his head, Mason continued, "A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then."

"Honestly, Mase, I swear I didn't know anything about any of this."

"I believe you. For a long time I'd cast you as the devil, the sole cause for all that was wrong in my life. Why didn't you come see me? Why'd you stay away?

"What? But I tried to. I all but camped out on your driveway, but your folks wouldn't ever tell me anything apart from that you'd left town and weren't coming back."

"Shit! God. That was my fault. I told mom and dad not to tell you where I was or what had happened to me."

"Why not? Mase I was fucking going out of my mind. All I knew was that I'd outed you and you disappeared," Parker snapped his fingers, "Just vanished into thin air."

It was Mason's turn to say, "I'm sorry." He began to think about the consequences of his actions. If he hadn't frozen Parker out, he would have learned years earlier that Parker hadn't been responsible for his attack.

"I guess we both made bad calls. You for, well outing me, and me for pulling away and not wanting to see you."

"Not a day has gone by that I haven't beaten myself up over what I did. As soon as I'd calmed down I realized the full implications. I didn't think you'd want to see me so I skipped classes."

"I wondered where you'd gone. I thought it was you not wanting to see me."

"Oh, fuck. No, Mase, never. Fuck it's all my fault." Parker slumped to the floor, pulled in his knees and lowered his head.

Mason moved his chair in front of Parker and put a hand on his shoulder.

"We both screwed up. We were young, inexperienced, and. . ."

"You always had it together, though," Parker sniffed. He took hold of Mason's hands. Looking directly into Mason's eyes, Parker said, "Mase, there's one thing I regret more than anything else about those days. I never told you that I loved you."

Mason closed his eyes.

"I was too scared, too stupid to. . ."

"I won't pretend that it didn't hurt when you couldn't love me the same way I loved you."

"I did love you, Mason, please you have to believe me." Tilting his head upward, Parker raised his voice and said, "Hey, bud, you still there?"

A couple of seconds passed before the maintenance man confirmed his presence.

"Fourteen years ago I had the great honor of being the boyfriend of Mason Grant. Up until today I never told him that I loved him. I need you to hear me say it." Looking down at Mason, but still speaking loudly, Parker said, "I know this is way overdue, babe, but I promise with hand on heart," Parker moved his right palm over his heart, "that I loved you from the first day I kissed you in your parents' hot tub."

Mason stared up at Parker. He was astonished he'd said what he had.

"Did you hear what I said, bud?"

"Uh, yeah. Congratulations I guess."

"Wow," Mason eventually said. Never did he imagine that Parker, paranoid, scared to be labeled as gay, Parker would ever make such a declaration and in such a public way, too.

"I know it doesn't. . . can't mean anything now, but. . . I'd promised myself that if ever I met you again I'd do what I just did."

"Thank you." Mason didn't know what else to say.

The two went quiet, Mason in his chair, Parker looking down at him.

"So, uh," Mason said to break the silence. "You said you lost your job. I assume you found another, what with the nice suit."

"This," Parker said, brushing at his pants, "was one of the things I managed to salvage from the house before Sue sent everything to Goodwill." He sighed. "Her kicking me out of the house and losing my job was just the start. I soon realized that the word had gone out and no law firm in the Pacific north-west would hire me. It's true what they say about hell having no fury like a woman scorned. Sue and her bitch of a mother have taken that to a whole new level."

"I'm sorry." Mason really was, he wasn't just saying it.

"Thanks. So I had to settle for a post at the Public Defender's office here in Portland. They're so desperate for trained lawyers, they'll take anyone."

"Please, Parker, don't put yourself down. I'm sure you were. . . are good at what you do."

"Thanks. You always did believe in me even when I didn't myself. Shit! I wish I could turn back the clock and. . . "

"I know. If only I hadn't gone on at you that day. If I hadn't frozen you out, you'd have come to see me and you'd have told me you weren't responsible for the attack."

"We really managed to screw it up between us, didn't we?"

The two stopped talking and just looked at one another. Mason was trying to get his head round all the new information he'd been given.

"How did you manage to get me a scholarship?" Parker asked bringing Mason back to the present. "I mean I thought I'd explored all the options, except for playing football all through college."

"Dad seemed to be on every fucking committee at the university, we hardly ever saw him in the evenings. I found out that one of these committees decided on discretionary full-ride scholarships."

"Wow. I'd never even heard of such things."

"I only knew about them 'cause I happened to see something dad left on his desk at home once. I bugged dad until he agreed to put your name in. The news that you'd been successful arrived just a couple of days before your birthday."

"Oh, Mase. You'd done all that for me? Why didn't you tell me that you'd applied? Sorry, guess it doesn't matter now."

"I didn't tell you just in case it didn't come through, I knew you'd be bummed about it."

"Shit. I never deserved you."

"I loved you, Parker, plain and simple."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Parker covered his face with his hands. "I'm so. . . sorry just isn't enough. If only, oh fuck, if only I hadn't lashed out. We could have lived together, studied together."

"Parker," Mason said softly.

Parker didn't reply.

"Parker, please." Mason said louder.

Parker raised his head.

"Come here," Mason opened his arms. Parker all but fell into the embrace. Mason closed his arms around the long remembered frame of his former lover. It felt incredibly comfortable hugging Parker again.

"I'm sorry, Mase. I'm just so sorry. I fucked everything up. Oh God I want to die for all the pain, the hurt I've caused you, caused us."

"Hush." Mason rubbed Parker's spine, he could feel the bigger man shaking. "You can't blame yourself for it all. Remember I'm partially to blame, too."

"Not for the attack."

"No, but you're not to blame for that either."

"But if I hadn't. . ."

"But nothing. Did you tell those guys on the team to beat me up?"

"NO, never! You must believe me."

"I do. I'm just trying to point out that it's not all your fault. You didn't tell Todd, Jared and the others to go after me,"

Parker's head shot up. "Todd and Jared? I'll. . ."

"Shit! You won't do anything, Parker, do you hear me?"

"But. . ."

"No, Parker. Getting back to what I was saying, very little of it was your fault. You weren't involved in me being hurt." Cupping Parker's face in his hands, Mason said, "I forgive you, Parker Collins"

"I don't deserve to be forgiven."

Pulling Parker back into his chest, Mason gave him a tight squeeze. He'd been lucky enough to have a supportive family around him. They'd helped him to come to terms with things. He guessed Parker hadn't had the benefit of a support network. He'd had to go it alone, all the while adding more and more troubles to the fire. Mason shuddered at Parker trying to walk the straight and narrow path without anyone to lean on.

Eventually disengaging, Parker said, "I'd forgotten what a great cuddler you were."

Mason wasn't ready to tell Parker that he'd missed holding his big frame for the past thirteen years, too.

* * *

The guys received an update from the maintenance man when he told them an engineer from the elevator company was expected to arrive within the hour.

Mason was thankful that the atmosphere inside the elevator had calmed significantly. Although there were long silences, they didn't seem uncomfortable. One or the other would speak up, recalling some of the highpoints of the time they'd spent together as teenagers. Neither felt the need to dredge up any of the less pleasant aspects of their friendship.

"Do you remember Lorraine Little?" Mason asked at one point.

"Uh, no, don't think so."

"Yes you do. You dated her for a while. Tall. Straight black hair."

"Oh yeah. She was your date when we, uh. . ."

Mason smiled, "It's okay." Mason didn't want to bring up the disastrous double-date episode, either. "She had figured us out you know."

"Huh?"

"She'd worked out that we were boyfriends."

"Really?"

"Maybe you really have changed. If the seventeen year old Parker had been told that piece of news, he'd have been climbing the walls right about now."

Parker sighed. "You're right. Is that why you didn't tell me about it back then?"

"Uh huh."

The elevator car fell quiet again.

"Does your family still own that cabin by the lake?"

"Yeah."

"Man, that place." Parker sounded wistful.

"You always seemed a lot more relaxed when we went up there."

Parker nodded. "First place we ever made love,"

"I know." It was still one of Mason's most precious memories.

"I've heard they're making a movie about two cowboys who meet on a mountain and fall in love."

"Yeah, I read the book last year."

"Me two. I couldn't help thinking of us when I read it. Ennis, not realizing he had the chance of something real special." Parker hung his head. "Remind you of anyone?"

Mason didn't comment. He'd had the same thoughts when he'd read the book, too. Ennis's inability to reconcile what he felt with what society demanded, had more than a few parallels with how Parker couldn't express his love for Mason.

After a few moments, Mason asked, "When it comes out in the movie theaters, would you like to go see it with me? I don't think I could watch something like that on my own."

"Really? Wow. Yes. Thank you. I wasn't looking forward to seeing it by myself either."

All the talk of the movie and his parents' cabin in the Cascade Mountains set Mason's mind wandering. The more he thought about it, the more he wished for it to happen. "Uh, I was planning on going up to the cabin this weekend. Mom and dad rarely go up there these days. After the attack, they had ramps and things put in to make the place accessible for me."

"That's good."

"Look, um," Mason was hesitant, "If you want, and if you've not got anything else scheduled, uh, would you think about maybe going up there with me?"

Parker's face was a study in changing emotions. Shock, disbelief, joy, but ultimately his expression turned to sadness. "I can't. It'd, well it'd not be right."

"It's okay. Probably it was a bad idea." He sighed. "I shouldn't have mentioned it. You'll have something planned with your kids or a boyfriend I expect."

Parker laughed, though it was without mirth. "I'm only allowed supervised visits with the kids twice a month." Staring into Mason's eyes, Parker said, "And you were the only man I could ever attach the term 'boyfriend' to."

"Huh?"

"Mase, you were it for me. No one ever compared or came close."

"Oh, uh." Mason couldn't help but feel a small thrill of pleasure at knowing that Parker had never loved another man.

"What about you?"

"How'd you mean?"

"Boyfriends. I mean surely there are lots of cute male nurses and. . ."

Mason shook his head. "Parker, although things kinda still work down there," Mason waved in the general direction of his crotch. "I don't. . . haven't. Let's just say the last person I truly made love to was you."

"I don't know how you could want to invite me back to the cabin after what I've done to you, I mean I. . ."

Mason shook his head. "Didn't I tell you earlier that I don't blame you for any of that?"

"But that doesn't stop me from blaming myself."

Mason let out a long breath. "As you know I'm an infectious disease specialist and you are supposed to be my patient. But, and don't take this the wrong way, I can't be your doctor. We're too close, there's too much history between us to maintain a proper doctor-patient relationship."

"I guess."

"What I'm getting at is I can't be your doctor, but. . . Oh I don't know. I could be someone, a friend, who could help you deal with all these unresolved issues."

"I don't know."

"Parker, you need someone to talk it out with. Trust me, I'm a doctor," Mason grinned.

Parker smiled. "But, uh, wouldn't you be too close to it all?"

"Probably. But I know you. You wouldn't be able to really open up to anyone you didn't know, didn't trust."

Parker nodded.

"Does that mean a yes?"

Parker treated Mason to the ghost of a smile. "Persistent aren't you?"

"Yup. And maybe the best place to start your, our, healing would be the cabin."

Parker's smile increased. "Okay. Thank you. Though, uh, I think we oughta take things, uh, slow, I.

Mason looked down at his withered legs and felt a wave of sadness wash over him.

"No, Mase, no. I don't mean cause you're disabled." Parker took Mason's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Thanks. I understand. The cabin has more than one bedroom, if we need them."

Parker nodded.

* * *

"Hey, guys?" the voice of the maintenance man echoed down the elevator shaft.

"Yeah?" Mason said.

"I've got Terry with me, from the elevator company."

"Hi there fellas," a new voice drawled. "Y'all okay down there?"

"Yes, we're okay, but could you get us out?"

"Shore 'nuff. I'll have ya outta there 'fore ya know it."

"Christ that's all we need, a fucking straw-chewing red-neck cowboy." Parker said softly.

Mason snickered. "I don't know, cowboys can be kinda hot. Remember the cowboy costume you rented for the Homecoming carnival?"

"I seem to remember you took a real liking to me in that. It was embarrassing having to take the stained costume back to the rental shop, though."

Mason laughed out loud.

It wasn't long before the car began to moan and shake slightly.

"Just lowerin' y'all down, fellas. No need to git spooked."

"Is he for real?"

"Sure is, pardner." Mason couldn't help himself. He was euphoric at knowing he'd soon be free. Despite part of him wishing for more, Mason believed he and Parker had the chance of re-establishing some kind of friendship.

They heard a loud clang from above, before Terry said, "Sumbitch!"

Mason and Parker exchanged glances. Mason hoped there wouldn't be too much more of a delay.

"Uh, fellas, I've lowered the car a good six feet, but it's jammed. It don't seem to wanna go up nor down now."

"Jesus," Parker muttered.

"Y'all just hang in there,"

Parker looked at Mason who looked back at him. They both snickered.

"I'll come down to the other side of the doors on yer floor. We might be able to get you out anyway."

The two waited until Terry knocked on the metal doors. "Okay, fellas, let's see what happens."

The doors slid open. Mason saw that the ceiling from the upper floor was in view.

"Ah, not too bad, but there's a mighty big step down," Terry drawled. He was a thin man standing just over six feet tall. Mason was rather disappointed that he wasn't wearing a cowboy hat, nor indeed chewing on a piece of straw. However, all wasn't lost, for under his grey overalls he wore a gingham western shirt open at the neck revealing an ample carpet of chest hair. Terry also had on a pair of dun colored cowboy boots.

"Oh, sorry, friend, I didn't know that ya was an invalid," Terry said seeing Mason. "Uh, guess I could carry you out if'n someone'll git ya chair."

"No, it's all right," Parker said taking charge. Turning to Mason, he asked "May I carry you?".

"Uh, yeah, guess so." Mason wasn't sure, but thinking about it, if he had to suffer the indignity of being carried, he'd sooner Parker do it.

"Uh, how's the best way to go about this? The last thing I want to do is to hurt you."

Parker's deep concern touched Mason. "If you lean down over me, I'll wrap my right arm around your neck. Then if you work your right arm under my knees and support my back with your left arm, you can lift me out."

"Okay."

Parker did as directed, taking infinite care.

"You're so light," Parker said once Mason was lifted up.

"The lower half of my body has lost almost all its muscle mass."

As Parker carried him to the edge of the elevator he lost the battle with his emotions. "Mase. I. . ."

Mason saw tears rolling down Parker's cheeks.

"What happened to you, bud. It's not right. It's so fucking not right."

Their faces moved closer. Parker halted before their lips could touch. Mason closed the distance. For the first time in 13 years, two months and eleven days, Mason shared a kiss with the man he loved.

The End