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All published by
DREAMSPINNER PRESS

ASERVING
OF *Love*

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Dreamspinner Press

Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

A Serving of Love
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<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-909-6

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
May 2011

eBook edition available
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-910-2

To Jennifer E., Skip E., and Dick M.

Without their help, I would not have been able to write this story.

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CHAPTER ONE

SEBASTIAN hated going in to work when it was dark, because that meant it would be dark when he left as well. Not that there was anything unusual about that—it was a fact of life with his job—but it was the one thing he didn't like about it. Restaurant hours were horrendous. Whenever everyone else was off for a holiday or on weekends, that's when the business was best, so that was when you worked. Not that he really minded. Sure, it would be nice to have one of those nine-to-five jobs, but he was good at what he did, and Café Belgie was successful in part because of what he did, or at least he'd like to think so.

Shivering slightly in the early morning air, Sebastian pulled his jacket a little tighter around him as he pressed the button to activate the walk signal at the square in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, a chilly autumn breeze blowing and rustling the leaves at his feet. Cars and trucks zipped by even at this hour, and Sebastian looked around to make sure everything was okay. The light finally changed, all traffic coming to a stop, and Sebastian crossed the intersection diagonally, walking briskly across the street and then down the sidewalk to the front door of the restaurant. Inserting his key, he opened the door and stepped inside, making sure not to track dirt inside with him or else he'd have to clean the rug, and today he didn't need any extra work, much less work he'd made for himself. Closing the door behind him, he threw the lock and carefully weaved his way around the tables, already set for lunch,

toward the back where he flipped a single switch to turn on a few lights.

He was rarely the first person to arrive, but it appeared that this morning he was. Knowing what to do, he walked into the kitchen, turning on the lights before opening the back door and getting to work. Today was Friday and they were going to be swamped, especially with the colder fall weather and the holiday season just around the corner. Walking into the dishroom, Sebastian got tubs of clean flatware and grabbed some napkins that needed folding. There was plenty to do, and he needed to get it done.

Sitting at one of the back tables, Sebastian had begun folding the napkins when he heard the back door open and close. "Morning," Kelly called, her voice carrying through the kitchen.

"Morning, Kelly," Sebastian called back as he continued his work, the door to the kitchen swinging open.

"You're here early," Kelly commented with a smile. "I expected I'd be the one opening this morning."

"I noticed last night that we're almost out of everything out here, and I didn't want to stay last night. I was too tired, so I came in a little early this morning," Sebastian told her as he continued folding the napkins. "Besides, with Billy and Darryl on vacation, I want everything to go well."

Kelly grinned. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that Darryl entrusted you to run things while he was gone?" She winked at him before laughing. "You're going to do a great job," she encouraged.

"What do you think?" He held up one of the napkins for her to see. "I thought I'd try a new fold. I found it on the Internet."

Kelly smiled as she looked at it. "Nice, sort of fluted like the wine glasses." Kelly slipped off the jacket she wore over her white chef's uniform. "I'm going to start some coffee. I'll holler when it's ready."

"Thanks," Sebastian answered, needing coffee to wake himself up at this hour of the morning. Kelly brought him a mug a few minutes later, setting it on the table as he finished folding the napkins, replacing

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the ones on the table with the fresh ones before refolding those and placing them in the bin behind the serving station along with the extra flatware. Picking up his mug, he sipped it before looking behind the bar to make sure everything was full and set there, then checking the rest of his morning items off his list.

Once everything appeared ready, he walked into the kitchen. Maureen had arrived at some point, getting her desserts together before they would open the doors for lunch. This afternoon, she'd be Kelly's sous chef during the lunch service. Darryl's vacation meant that everyone in the kitchen needed to double up and help out. Sebastian was doing the same thing out front, but they could do this. It wasn't often that Darryl and Billy went on vacation, and they both deserved it, so Sebastian intended for everything to run as smoothly as possible while they were gone.

The servers began trickling in an hour before opening, and Sebastian put them to work making sure everything was sparkling clean and ready for opening. "Hey, Peter," Sebastian said as the young man finished sweeping beneath the table, "check in the kitchen to see if they need any help. We're ready out here."

"Sure thing," the dark-haired man said with a smile, putting away the broom before heading through the kitchen doors. He didn't come right back out, so Sebastian figured Kelly was able to use the help.

Making one more check just before opening, he called into the kitchen as a final warning before opening the doors. The first customers came in a few minutes later, Sebastian seated them, and their day began.

Lunch went smoothly, to Sebastian's relief, and he spent part of the afternoon getting the dining room ready for dinner as well as preparing the records that Darryl had shown him. "I'm going to the bank for a few minutes," he told Kelly and Maureen. "I'm taking Peter with me. We won't be gone long."

"Sure thing," Maureen said. "I'll keep an eye out front. Kelly's got things in hand here."

"Thanks," Sebastian said with a smile, getting Peter before walking outside and down the sidewalk.

“I love this time of year,” Peter commented. “The sun is still warm, but it’s not all sticky and hot.” Leaves rained down from the trees as the bright sun warmed the air. It was a great time of year. The only thing Sebastian hated about it was that it portended the coming of winter, with its slush, snow, and cold.

“I take it you don’t have to rake the leaves,” Sebastian said as he looked at the younger man.

Peter shook his head with a smile. “That’s one of the beauties of going away to college—no yard chores. My little brother has to do the raking now,” he said with a grin as they crossed the street, turning the corner before stepping into the bank.

“Thanks, Peter. I’ll see you back at the restaurant,” Sebastian told his companion, and Peter hurried back down the sidewalk while Sebastian got in the teller line. It took awhile, but he made the deposit and got the change they needed before heading back. It was truly a gorgeous day, and he hated going back inside, so he took a few extra minutes on the sidewalk, breathing the fresh air before walking inside and getting back to work.

The afternoon was quiet as they got the dining room ready for the dinner service. Customers trickled in all afternoon, keeping them reasonably busy, but by the time the dinner service was ready to start, the restaurant was clean and ready. They were nearly booked solid, and the customers kept Sebastian and the servers busy for hours. Sebastian was never so happy as when he checked his watch and saw it was already nine o’clock. He felt sweaty and exhausted.

Walking to the front to lock the doors, the last customers lingering, servers already cleaning up, he saw a man in a hooded sweatshirt hurrying in, and Sebastian approached him to see if he wanted a table. Instead, the man pulled a knife, and Sebastian backed away. “Where’s the cash?”

Sebastian felt his legs shake. “In the server’s station,” he answered, taking a deep breath, looking around the nearly empty dining room.

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“Don’t move,” the man growled, grabbing Sebastian’s arm, nails digging into his skin, dragging him toward the register. Sebastian opened the drawer and backed away while the man grabbed the larger bills from the drawer. “Is that all?” the man asked, voice rushed and throaty. Sebastian nodded slowly, and the man let him go, hurrying back toward the restaurant door. Sebastian didn’t move, hoping no one else did, either. Darryl had told everyone if they were ever robbed to let them have the money. Watching the man go, Sebastian tried to memorize any details he could.

As the thief reached the front door, it seemed to open for him, and then he seemed to fly through the air, and Sebastian heard a loud thunk. “Call the police,” Sebastian told the nearest server, not even stopping to see who it was before hurrying to the door. Sebastian saw the sweatshirted man lying on the sidewalk with another man kneeling near him.

“I’m sorry,” the kneeling man was saying. “Are you okay? I didn’t see you coming.”

“That man robbed us,” Sebastian said, pointing, and the other man immediately backed away. “We’ve called the police,” Sebastian explained as sirens could already be heard, getting louder and louder. The thief started to move, and as Sebastian backed away further, the other man scrambled to his feet, and Sebastian’s eyes widened as the man towered over him. The sirens got closer, and Sebastian backed further away as the man on the ground began to move, groaning more loudly. Police officers hurried up the sidewalk, and Sebastian backed up even further.

“No one move!” the first officer commanded.

Sebastian froze and began explaining. “That man robbed the restaurant,” Sebastian exclaimed as the man on the ground actually tried to get on his feet. One of the officers forced him back onto the ground and cuffed him while the second walked to where Sebastian and the other man stood watching.

“He pulled a knife and made me give him the money from the register,” Sebastian said in a rush of words as he started to shake.

“It’s okay, sir, just take your time. He’s not going anywhere,” the police officer said before turning to the other officer. “Did you find a knife?”

“Yeah, already secured it, and I found the money as well. Backup’s on the way too,” he added before tugging the guy to his feet, helping him into the back of the police car, none too gently. Another car arrived, as did a third.

“If you gentlemen could step inside, I’ll be with you in a few minutes,” the police officer told them, and Sebastian nodded, now feeling the cold. Opening the door, he held it for the other man, who walked inside. Sebastian noticed that he had to duck slightly so he wouldn’t hit his head on the overhead door closer.

The dining room still had a few customers lingering at their tables, watching the happenings outside. “Would you like anything?” Sebastian asked when the man had settled at a table.

“I was coming in to get some dinner, but it looks like you’re closing,” he said, looking around.

Sebastian handed him a menu. “Order what you like. Dinner’s on the house.”

The tall man smiled, his face changing instantly from ordinary to incredible. “That’s not necessary,” he answered, looking over the menu. “Can I have the steak frites, medium, and a cup of coffee?”

“No problem. I’ll be right back.” Sebastian hurried to Jane, who was clearing a table. “Bring a cup of coffee to the gentleman near the door.” She nodded, and Sebastian hurried to the kitchen. “Kelly, I need a steak frites, medium.”

She paused in her cleaning. “What the hell happened?”

“We were robbed,” he answered, heaving a deep breath to try to calm himself. “The police have the guy, thanks to a customer.” Sebastian forced himself to slow down. “That’s his order, by the way, and could I get one of the special salads too? Oh, and set aside one of Maureen’s mousses for him.” Excitement coursed through him, and he tamped it down, regulating his breathing.

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“One thing at a time.” Kelly started going to work with practiced ease. “We were robbed?”

“Yeah.” He gave Kelly the abbreviated version as she finished the salad. “He tripped the guy or something, and the robber hit his head on a parked car. There was a dent this big in it,” Sebastian said, demonstrating with his hands before picking up the salad. “I’ll probably need to meet with the police because I saw the guy.”

“Then take the salad out and meet with the police. I’ll bring out the order when it’s ready.”

“Thanks, Kelly, you’re the best.” Leaving the kitchen, he carried the salad to the table, where a police officer was seated along with the tall man. Sebastian set the salad in front of the man before asking the police officer if he’d like anything.

He declined and motioned Sebastian to a seat. “I’m Officer Cloud. I’d like you to tell me what happened.”

Sebastian told the officer what happened, doing his best to keep his voice level and remain calm, but his heart still pounded in his chest. “It happened so fast,” he added at the end, “I barely had time to think.”

“You did the right thing, sir,” the officer said. “Just give them the money and call the police. Your life isn’t worth a few dollars.” The officer consulted his notes. “We’ve had a few of these snatch-and-grab-type robberies in the last few weeks, and I’m hoping we’ve got our culprit,” the officer said before asking for Sebastian’s name, phone number, and address, as well as the address and phone number of the restaurant. Kelly joined them at the table with the steak frites, placing the plate on the table, along with the mousse, and thanking the man for his help before returning to the kitchen. “Thank you both,” the officer said, pushing his chair back. “I’ll be in touch in the next few days. We’ve got the money he stole and should be able to get it back to you in the next few days. I’ll drop by a receipt for it tomorrow.”

Sebastian stood up as well, shaking the officer’s hand. “Thank you for all your help,” Sebastian said, walking the officer to the door, then closing and locking it behind him before returning to the table. “Is everything okay?”

The tall man swallowed before answering. "It's perfect, thank you. You really didn't need to do all this," he said again, setting his utensils on the plate before taking a sip of his coffee.

"It's the least we could do after all your help."

"I really didn't do anything except trip over my own feet and manage to unbalance him as well. The car he hit his head against did the rest." The man smiled again, chuckling lightly. "There are some things in this world that were definitely not designed for someone as tall as me. Like doorways," he added, his smile brightening.

"Please let me know if you need anything," Sebastian said, his eyes raking over the room to make sure everything was being cleaned up.

"I could use some company, if you don't mind. I know it's late, but it's definitely no fun to eat alone."

Everything seemed to be in good hands, so Sebastian got a mug of coffee and returned to the table. "By the way, I'm Sebastian Franklin," he said as he pulled out a chair.

"Robert Fortier," the tall man said as he extended his hand, and Sebastian shook it. "It's nice to meet you, Sebastian, and thank you for the terrific meal. It really wasn't necessary, but most appreciated."

"You're welcome," Sebastian added, scanning the room once again, wondering what to talk about. "Is this your first time dining with us?"

"Yes, it is, actually. I've heard wonderful things about the restaurant, but never had a chance to stop in before tonight." Robert finished his dinner and pushed the plate back before reaching for the cup of mousse. "I usually don't eat dessert," he added before taking a bite, sighing softly.

"I know. Maureen, our pastry chef, makes the most incredible desserts. This is one of her specialties," Sebastian said proudly. He wasn't the chef or the owner, but he was proud of Café Belgie and not ashamed to show it. Finishing his coffee as Robert finished his mousse, Sebastian pushed his chair back, standing up before picking up the

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dishes. "I'll be right back. Would you like any more coffee?" Sebastian asked.

"If it's decaf. It's getting a little late for the high-octane stuff."

"Of course. I'll be right back." Sebastian left the table, carrying the dishes to the dishroom, where the cleanup for the night was nearly complete. Returning through the kitchen, Sebastian smiled at Kelly as he passed by, seeing that she, too, was almost done for the night.

"I'm going to head out soon," she told him.

"Of course. I'll lock up. See you tomorrow afternoon," Sebastian said as he waved before leaving the kitchen, grabbing the decaf coffee carafe on his way to the table.

"I'm not keeping you, am I?" Robert asked as Sebastian refilled his cup. "It looks like everyone's leaving."

"I have a few minutes," Sebastian answered, refilling his own cup before letting people out the front door, locking it behind them again. Sitting back at the table, he sipped his coffee while Robert did the same. Now that he got a good look, the man was really quite attractive. Medium-length, wavy auburn hair brushed his shirt collar, and he had bright blue eyes, nice lips, and a pleasant face. For a second Sebastian couldn't figure out why he hadn't found Robert attractive right away. Then his eyes shifted to his clothes. They hung on the man like they were two sizes too big. As tall as he was, it must be very difficult finding clothes that truly fit. "So what do you do?" Sebastian asked, lifting his cup to his lips.

"Right now, I work for the county," Robert said. "How long have you worked here?"

Sebastian let his eyes scan the room once more. "Since we opened a few years ago. I was one of Darryl's first hires. He's the chef and the owner. Anyway, I was one of his first employees, and he made me front-of-the-house manager about a year ago. I run everything outside the kitchen, and he runs the kitchen and the business. His partner, Billy, is one of the waiters, as well. In fact, he's probably our best waiter." Sebastian saw Robert go a little pale. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Robert set his cup on the saucer. “You didn’t. It’s just that I didn’t expect to find people so open like that in Central Pennsylvania. Maybe in Philly or Pittsburgh, but not here.”

While Sebastian had noticed the man, he really hadn’t given any thought to the fact he might be gay, but the reaction, the startled look, the hard swallow, all helped confirm the notion. “Do you live here in town?”

“Yes, I have a small house on Louther Street, just a few blocks from here.” Robert looked at him quizzically like he was trying to size Sebastian up or something, but then the look dissipated, and Robert picked up his cup again, drinking the last of his coffee. “I should let you go home. It’s getting late, and I’m keeping you from leaving.” Robert stood up and put his napkin on the table.

“It was nice to meet you, Robert, and thank you so much for your help tonight. We really appreciate it.” Sebastian extended his hand, and Robert shook it firmly.

“It was no problem, I assure you,” Robert said with a self-deprecating smile as he walked toward the front door. Sebastian unlocked it and held the door for Robert as he left. Closing it behind him, Sebastian smiled as Robert shrugged on his coat, walking down the sidewalk. Without appearing to, Sebastian watched out of the corner of his eye, and sure enough he saw Robert turn to look at him just before he disappeared from view. Smiling to himself at the confirmation of his hunch, Sebastian walked through the restaurant, making sure the register was closed and everything put in the safe before turning out the lights. Leaving by the front door, he turned the key in the lock and began his short walk.

HOME was a row house on Pomfret Street, one of the oldest streets in town. It had been his parents’ house, and when they passed away, he couldn’t bear to sell it, so he’d stayed. On his days off, he worked on the old place trying to get it fixed up. There was one certainty when you owned a house approaching two hundred years old—you always

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had plenty to do. But he loved living there, and his mom, who had been a lover of antiques, had insisted the house be furnished with antiques from the period the house was built. She and Sebastian's dad had collected pieces the entire time they were married, and the house was beautifully decorated. Unlocking the front door, Sebastian walked into his entrance hall with the case clock his mother had purchased and his father had lovingly restored as a present for their thirtieth wedding anniversary, picking up the mail from the floor.

After setting his keys in the bowl on the small stand, he walked through to the dining room with its large Empire sideboard. Hanging his coat over the back of one of the chairs, Sebastian thumbed through the mail, setting aside what he didn't want before picking up the small local newspaper he'd taken inside that morning. Taking it with him, he walked through the rooms to the very back of the house, where a small sitting room had been added on years ago. His mom had lovingly restored much of the house over the years, but this room and the kitchen and baths were modern, thanks to his dad.

Turning on the light, Sebastian sat in his big, comfortable chair, put his feet on the ottoman, and opened the paper. He loved this time of day. Sebastian knew most people thought he was a little flamboyant and a party boy, but in actuality he led quite a quiet life. Thumbing through the paper, he didn't see anything of interest and was about to throw it away when a picture caught his eye. Looking at it again, his eyes widened, and he began to read the article.

"Well, I'll be damned," Sebastian said with a smile, shaking his head slowly. The title read, "Cumberland County's Newest Judge," and beneath the headline was a picture of Robert Fortier. Sebastian read the entire article with a smile on his face before putting the paper aside and turning on the television. He tried to watch the program, but found himself picking up the newspaper again and again to look at the picture of Robert. The man had been nice, really nice, and it had been a long time since Sebastian had met someone like that. When he first started working at the restaurant, he'd developed sort of a crush on Darryl, but those feelings weren't returned, no matter how much Sebastian had tried to catch Darryl's interest.

Turning off the television, Sebastian clicked off the lights before heading through the house and upstairs to his bedroom. Who knew? Sebastian didn't want to get his hopes up, but Carlisle was a small town; he'd probably run into Robert again. Heck, he hoped he did. After getting cleaned up, Sebastian climbed beneath the covers before turning out his light. He tried his best not to think about Robert... too much.

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CHAPTER TWO

ROBERT woke remembering his dinner the night before... and the waiter. He wasn't too comfortable with the feelings Sebastian had evoked in him, but the man had been very nice, and he was undeniably cute. Getting out of bed, Robert padded down the hall of his small house to the bathroom. After cleaning up, Robert dressed and walked into his tiny kitchen for a much-needed cup of coffee. Picking up his mail from the day before where he'd left it on the table, he thumbed through the bills and junk before picking up the newspaper. It was yesterday's, but that didn't really matter. Thumbing through, he saw his picture and the headline, "Cumberland County's Newest Judge."

Robert read the article, scoffing to himself. The last thing he'd expected was to be elected to the bench. He'd only run on a whim because one of the local legal groups had asked him to run to fill out the ticket. After all, he was running against an incumbent who'd been on the bench for years. The last thing he'd expected was a scandal erupting around his opponent regarding his legal opinions and whether he'd actually written some of them or if he'd had a friend write them for him. That had come to light a few weeks before the election and was enough to get Robert elected. Or the incumbent not elected, depending on how you looked at it. Stranger things had happened, and now Robert found himself an elected judge. Setting down the paper that related much of the story in gory detail, Robert sipped his coffee, wondering, not for the first time, what he was going to do.

Robert had wanted to be a lawyer for almost as long as he could remember. His mother used to tell him stories about his grandfather,

who, in her words, was some sort of heroic, superhero lawyer, and that was what Robert had wanted to be. In law school, he found out exactly what being a lawyer meant, and it was very different from the picture his mother had portrayed in her stories. “Maybe I can do some good as a judge,” he’d told himself when he’d agreed to run, not really daring to hope. And now he’d won and he was terrified. Not about his ability to do the job—Robert knew he’d be a good and fair judge—but as last night had proven, he had a weak spot. The only person in the world who knew he was gay was his mother. He’d told her years before, and they’d never discussed it since. The one thing Robert did know was that he couldn’t deny who he was anymore. That was for certain.

Finishing his coffee, Robert put the cup in the sink, then checked himself in the mirror to make sure his clothes matched and didn’t look stupid before leaving the house. Walking through the streets of the town he’d grown up in, Robert made his way toward the square, crossing in front of the courthouse, which would be his new workplace, before continuing on to the historic façade that housed the small law firm he’d been part of for the last few years.

“Morning, Robert,” Millicent, his legal assistant, said warmly as he walked by her desk on his way to his office. “I hear you had some excitement last night.”

“That got around amazingly fast,” he responded, accepting the mug of coffee she poured for him, “even for this town.”

“It didn’t. You know my dad’s on the police force. He called and told me you’d foiled a robbery.” She sounded so pleased.

“I didn’t, really,” he responded as he began looking over his desk before turning back to her. “Millie, you know me. Can you really see me foiling a robbery? I was going into the restaurant and tripped over my own feet as usual, and took the guy out in the process. If it hadn’t been during the commission of a crime, he’d probably be suing me.”

Robert saw her leave her desk, walk into his office, and close the door. “Now listen to me, Robby, I used to babysit you, and we were friends before I agreed to work for you, so knock that talk off. You’re better than that, and you know it.”

“Millie, I’m a complete and total klutz!”

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She shook her head. “Like I said, that’s enough of that. You’re the sweetest man and a dear friend, and the people of this town just elected you a judge,” she continued and waved her hand past his protestations, metaphorically sweeping them away. “You’re a judge because you’re the best person for the job—period. And it’s time you realized it.” She stepped closer. “You hear me? You don’t want me to do what I used to when we were kids....” Robert reflexively put his hands over his ears, and Millie smiled. “Good, I doubt I could reach them, anyway, but you get the idea.” She turned back toward his door.

“When’s my first appointment?”

She looked at the clock on the wall before rolling her eyes. “At nine, so you have half an hour,” she answered, opening the door with a grin. “You were as close to a little brother as I ever had, and I know you can do anything.”

“Thanks, Millie,” he responded, settling in his chair. “And you were the closest thing to an annoying big sister that I ever had,” he added with a grin.

“I know,” she said just before leaving his office, “and don’t you forget it.”

Watching her leave, Robert looked through his calendar and then at the organized files on his desk, picking up the file for his first appointment, a couple coming in to review their wills. He checked things over before spending a few minutes organizing the rest of his day.

After a number of appointments and phone calls, Robert found himself with a spare few minutes. Standing outside his office, he could hear Jon Grant talking on the phone, so he walked down the hall toward Jon’s assistant’s desk. He was about to ask Sylvia if Jon was free when Jon motioned him in.

“What is it, Robert?” Jon asked in his usual quiet tone. In the years Robert had known him, both as a lawyer and when Robert was a student and worked for him as a paralegal, he’d never heard Jon raise his voice to anyone. In the courtroom, it could be amazingly unnerving. “You’ve been preoccupied for a few days now,” he continued, motioning him to one of the large, comfortable, wingback chairs across

from his desk. “I know this election was a bit of a surprise for you. It was for all of us, politically. But there’s no doubt you can do the job and do it well.”

Robert sat down, but felt himself squirming. “But I’ve had very little time in the courtroom as an actual litigator.”

“And we have a justice on the Supreme Court who has never been a judge before.” Jon stood up, walking around his desk, closing the door before sitting in the chair next to him. “Being a good judge isn’t necessarily about being a good lawyer. I’ve seen incredible trial lawyers fail miserably once they were on the bench. The two things aren’t necessarily compatible. Being a good judge requires knowledge of the law, which you have with amazing recall. But more than that, it requires logic and the ability to weigh arguments, and you do that very well. Many lawyers do. It’s what we’re trained for.”

“Then why can’t any lawyer be a good judge?”

“Because there’s something else,” Jon continued patiently. “You need a touch of compassion and, dare I say, humility and wisdom. Arrogant judges may make a splash, but they don’t render good decisions. You, on the other hand, are one of the most humble, self-deprecating people I’ve ever met, and you also have the most potential of anyone I’ve come across in a long time.” Robert looked into Jon’s eyes for any sign of insincerity, but saw nothing. Not that he was surprised—Jon never said anything he didn’t mean. “We’re all going to be sorry to lose you around here, I can tell you that. But we’ll still be here to listen, and we’ll all be your friends, above all.”

“I know that, Jon, thank you.” Robert squirmed in the chair once again before placing his hands on the arm of the chair to help himself to his feet.

“What else did you want to ask?” Jon said seriously, and Robert felt himself settle back into the chair.

“You always do that,” Robert said with a smile. “How...?”

“Do you remember the day you first stopped by my office?” Robert nodded before Jon continued, “You were a first-year law student, and you’d come in looking for a job as a clerk. Now, I’d had

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dozens of students parading through my door, like I do every year, and I'd turned them all away. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Every single one of them came in here with bounds of energy, trying to turn the world on its ear, and all they ended up doing was turning my office into complete chaos. But the day you came in, you asked for an appointment and waited. When I talked to you, you told me you'd work hard and try your best to do a good job. We're a lot alike in that way. And when something's bothering us, we both think about it and chew on it until we drive ourselves nuts. You've been doing that about something for the last few days. I figured it was the election, but there's something else, isn't there?"

Robert nodded slowly. "I'm not sure what I should do."

"About what? If you don't tell me, I can't help you."

Robert squirmed again before making his decision. "Jon, I'm gay," he blurted out, keeping his voice low.

"So." Jon actually shrugged. "Is that all?"

"Well, yeah, I guess," Robert stammered for a second before regaining his composure.

"Your private life is no one's business. The people of Cumberland County elected you judge, and it really doesn't matter who you fall in love with, and quite frankly it's none of their business."

"How can you take this so well? This is conservative Central Pennsylvania. How can my being gay not be an issue?"

"Yes, this is a conservative area of the state, but the people here are also loving and caring, you know that. You aren't going to be marching in parades holding rainbow flags?" Robert shook his head, smiling now. "Then don't worry about it. You deserve a life just the same as everyone else. Be a good, fair judge, and no one will care about the rest. Most people here have a 'live and let live' attitude, and it's my experience that they'll judge the person fairly."

Robert got up, walking toward the door. "How can you take this so easily?" Not that he'd been sure how Jon would take it, but he hadn't expected this conversation to be so smooth.

“My youngest son, Peter, told me he was gay about....” Jon thought a second, then said, “Six months ago. Then he brought home his boyfriend. The kid had so many holes in his head, I thought he might be a voodoo doll.” Jon burst into a grin. “So you can see where you telling me you’re gay just doesn’t have the impact.” Jon looked behind him toward the door. “I take it you don’t have someone?” Robert shook his head again, wondering what was coming next. “Good, because Peter’s a nice boy....”

At first Robert opened his mouth to protest, but then he saw Jon’s wry smile and knew he was teasing. “Thanks, Jon, I’ll keep that in mind,” Robert quipped as he opened the door. “Thank you.” As he walked back to his office, Millie passed him a few messages as he went by. Robert took them with a thank you before settling back at his desk, immersing his attention in his work.

“Robert.” He heard Millie’s voice at his door as he finished working through the details of a rather complicated trust.

“Going to lunch?” Robert asked, looking up from his paperwork.

“No, I’m back from lunch, and you haven’t moved from that spot in hours. You better get something to eat before your two thirty appointment,” she reminded him gently.

Looking at the clock, he set aside the paperwork. “Thanks. I shouldn’t be long.” Grabbing his jacket, he headed out. Standing on the sidewalk, he tried to decide where to go for lunch before walking down the sidewalk and crossing the street. He was about to go into one of the local coffee shops for a quick sandwich when someone familiar caught his eye, and he found himself walking a few doors down to where Sebastian stood, explaining something to what looked like one of the street people.

“You want me to warsh the windows?” the man asked in a heavy country Pennsylvania accent.

“Just like you do every week,” he heard Sebastian say as he got closer. “Billy asked me to take care of things.”

The man nodded and walked away down the sidewalk, and Robert saw Sebastian look at him, then smile. “Afternoon, Robert,” Sebastian called happily, and Robert found himself hoping some of that

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happiness was for him, but Sebastian probably greeted everyone like that, at least that's what he figured.

"I thought I'd stop by for lunch if I'm not too late."

Sebastian smiled again and held the door for him. "Actually, your timing's pretty good. The rush is over." Sebastian let the door close behind them before leading him to a table. "Can I bring you coffee?"

"That would be perfect," Robert answered as he sat down at the table, his eyes following Sebastian as he walked away. Robert forced his eyes away from the man, only to find them returning once again. As he watched, he saw Sebastian smile at him, and he turned away, embarrassed that he'd been caught looking. Looking anywhere but where he thought Sebastian might be, he waited, thumbing through the menu until Sebastian returned with his coffee. Looking up, he saw the man's sparkly eyes looking back at him, and Robert's throat suddenly felt dry as a desert.

"Do you know what you'd like? For lunch, I mean?" Sebastian asked him, and Robert saw him go red. Obviously he wasn't the only one suddenly feeling a little nervous.

"I'll have the lamb burger, medium, please," Robert ordered, handing Sebastian the menu, their fingers touching for just a second. Sebastian moved away to put in his order. Robert kept watching him under the guise of looking around the restaurant, but his eyes kept coming back to Sebastian. Dang, the man was really cute. Closing his eyes, he silently wished he'd brought something along with him to read. Sebastian was indeed cute and seemed really nice. Robert, tall and gangly as he was, wasn't going to capture the attention of someone like Sebastian. Turning away, he gazed out the front window, watching the man he'd seen Sebastian talking to wash the panes of glass.

A plate being set in front of him pulled his attention away from the window. "Can I ask why you have what looks like a homeless man washing your windows?" Robert inquired, looking at Sebastian, who gazed around the room before pulling out one of the chairs.

"That's quite a story," Sebastian began before starting to sit, then stopping again. "Sorry, I shouldn't disturb your lunch."

“You aren’t,” Robert told him with a smile, hoping Sebastian would stay awhile. “I could use a little company, that is, if you have the time,” Robert added before glancing around the nearly empty dining room. “I’ll understand if you have things to do.”

“Give me a minute,” Sebastian said before walking toward the kitchen. Robert began eating his burger, the lamb melting in his mouth. Keeping one eye on the door, he saw Sebastian return a few minutes later wearing a sweater over his shirt as he returned to the table. “I needed to officially go on my break,” he said before pulling out the chair.

“You were telling me about your window washer.”

“Oh, yeah,” Sebastian began. “Billy met him on the square a while ago and began talking to him. I think he had a room at one of the missions or something. Anyway, he started talking to the man, and it wasn’t long before Billy had him doing odd jobs like washing the windows or sweeping the alley out in back. It was just simple jobs, and Billy would give him a good meal in exchange. Billy asked me to make sure he got taken care of while he was away.” Sebastian smiled at him while Robert continued eating. “Billy’s one of those people it’s really hard to say no to for any reason.” Sebastian tilted his head toward the window. “So he comes around twice a week, once to wash the outside windows and once to clean the area behind the restaurant, and we make sure he gets a good meal.”

Robert took another bite of his burger. “Why would Billy do that in the first place?”

“Because he understands what it’s like to be homeless, or nearly homeless, and he’s got the biggest heart of anyone I know.”

“Do you know the man’s name?”

“He goes by ‘Sweeper’ as far as I know. I don’t think even Billy knows his real name, but he seems quite nice and always so calm, almost peaceful.”

Robert watched Sweeper soap up one of the windows before scrubbing it and then wiping it clean with a squeegee. “Why does he have a Thermos on his belt?”

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“Billy gave him that. If he brings it to the restaurant, Billy always fills it with coffee for him.” Sebastian turned toward him, a kind of softness in his eyes. “I know Billy is worried about him as winter approaches, and frankly I am too. He’s survived a lot of winters, but the cold weather has to be hard on him.”

Robert finished his lunch, thinking of the man outside. “I guess it makes you feel lucky,” Robert said, realizing how his own insecurities didn’t matter so much. He had a home, work, friends, and he certainly didn’t have to wonder where his next meal was coming from.

“That it does,” Sebastian agreed softly. “I have to get back to work.”

“I know, me too,” Robert commented, wondering about the man sitting across from him. “Would you like to get some coffee or something some time?” Where the question came from, he wasn’t too sure, and he nearly cringed when he heard how completely lame he sounded.

“That would be nice. I get off work a little early tonight. José is closing, so I just have to see them through the worst of the dinner rush. None of the coffee houses are open that late, though. Why don’t you come to my place,” Sebastian offered, “if that’s okay?”

“All right,” Robert agreed, wondering what he was getting himself into.

“Great,” Sebastian said happily as he wrote his address on the back of a card before getting up from the table. “I’ll see you at seven thirty.” Sebastian hurried back through the kitchen door, returning right away with Robert’s check, looking a little excitedly flustered, exactly mirroring Robert’s emotions.

“Seven thirty,” Robert echoed as he paid his bill. With a final glance toward Sebastian, he left the restaurant, walking back toward his office.

“What’s got you so happy?” Millie asked as he walked past her desk outside his office. Immediately, she got up and followed him inside, shutting the door. “Okay, spill it,” she said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “You haven’t looked this happy since your mother got you that Nintendo set when you were fifteen, so what gives?”

Robert swallowed—telling her was going to be harder than telling his mother, but there was no way he could lie to her. Hell, Millie should be a judge herself, because no one could ever lie to her. It just wasn't possible. "I have a date," he answered evasively.

"Well, it's about time? Who is it? What's her name?" Her arms relaxed to her sides, but he knew she wasn't letting him get away without a full answer.

"Well, that's the hard part." Robert rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "I mean, I..." *Jesus, was he going to be a mouse his entire life?* "It's not a woman, it's a guy, and he's a waiter at Café Belgie."

For the first time in his life, Robert saw Millie completely speechless, mouth hanging open. Robert watched as her eyes traveled over him as her mouth slowly closed. "You're kidding me, right?" she asked defensively, but when Robert didn't answer, her face darkened, and Robert felt himself begin to worry.

"No, Millie, I'm not kidding."

"Does your mother know?" she asked, still glaring at him.

"Yes," Robert said, nodding, "I told her a while ago. She's the only person I told before today."

"Jesus, I wish I could say I wasn't a bit shocked, but I am," Millie said, still staring at him.

"What is it, Millie? Are you looking for the horns or something?" he teased her. "Because they don't appear right away, that takes a few days, along with the swishy walk."

That got a slight smile. "Okay."

"I'm the same person I always was, Millie," Robert tried to explain as she continued looking at him like a stranger.

"When did you decide this?" she asked softly, still looking at him like he was someone she didn't know.

"I didn't," Robert said, huffing lightly. "I didn't just decide anything, except to trust you enough to tell you." Robert swallowed, hoping she could understand.

"I can see that, I suppose," she said softly. "So why now? Does Jon know?"

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"I told Jon this morning, and I've told no one else." Her expression seemed to soften a little. "Why now? I don't know, other than I'm tired of hiding." Robert sank into one of the chairs. "This is something I've known for a long time, but sort of hid from."

Millie sighed rather loudly for such a small person. "Okay. I can't say I understand." He felt her hand on his. "But I still love you, and I'll be here for you if you want to talk." Robert looked into her eyes. "What, you thought I'd push you away?" She scoffed loudly. "It'll take more than that to get rid of me," she told him, mustering a smile as she checked her watch. "You'd better get ready, because your next appointment should be here any time."

Robert stood up and felt Millie give him a quick hug before opening the door and returning to her desk. He wasn't sure how well she'd actually taken it, but he knew he'd find out soon enough. If she started picking on him about it, he was fine, but if she got all serious and professional, he was in deep trouble. He'd just have to wait and see. His appointment arrived on time, and Robert switched gears, putting things out of his mind as he plunged into his work.

By the end of the day, Robert had finished almost everything he wanted, and he heard Millie gathering her things outside. He waited, and she walked in to say good night. "So this date tonight, where are you going?"

"He invited me for coffee at his place. I was sort of wondering if I should bring something with me," he said, and Millie rolled her eyes.

"Duh, stop at the florist's. They're a block over on High Street. Just pick up a nice bouquet, nothing fancy, but colorful and fragrant," she said before leaving the office. He returned to his work to finish up. Looking up again, he saw her head peering into his office. "Oh, and don't forget to stop at the drugstore for condoms," she stage-whispered before chuckling as Robert watched her walk away. Everything was going to be just fine.

Putting on his coat and scarf, Robert left the office, walking through the square toward the flower shop. As he looked around, he saw Sweeper sitting on one of the benches, huddled against the evening cold. Walking near on his way to the corner, Robert crossed the street.

As he got closer, he saw Sweeper open the Thermos he carried, pouring the steaming liquid into the cover cup. Robert had no idea why this man caught his attention. Maybe it was simply because Sebastian had been kind to both of them. Taking off his scarf, Robert handed it to the other man with a nod. Sweeper seemed to recognize him from earlier. Taking the scarf, he gave Robert a small smile before wrapping it around his neck. Meeting Robert's eyes, Sweeper seemed to hesitate a moment and looked like he was about to say something before turning, nodding again. Not knowing what to say, Robert turned and walked toward the flower shop on the corner.

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CHAPTER THREE

“I’LL see you tomorrow, Kelly,” Sebastian told the chef as he grabbed his coat and sweater from the office, checking his watch for the eightieth time in the past hour.

“Go on,” Kelly told him. “We’re fine. José and I can handle anything,” she said with an added grin before returning to her work. “Have fun,” she sang out as he grabbed the box Maureen had made up for him from the fridge and hurried out the back door and into the night. The restaurant had been busy for the past hour, and it looked as though it would continue for the rest of the evening. He’d trained his staff. They knew what to do, and Kelly could more than handle any problems, he told himself as he hurried around the buildings toward the sidewalk.

Unlocking his front door, Sebastian stepped inside, closing it behind him as the tall clock in the hall began to chime. “Damn,” he cursed softly, hurrying to the kitchen, placing the box in the refrigerator before running up the stairs. He only had fifteen minutes, and that was only if Robert wasn’t early. Stripping off his shirt as he moved, Sebastian turned on the shower before stripping off the rest of his clothes and stepping under the water. He shivered. Cold or not, he didn’t have time to let the water warm up. Washing himself in record time, he turned off the water, grabbing a towel as he rushed into his bedroom. After drying his skin, Sebastian dropped the towel and quickly chose his clothes before yanking them on and grabbing the

clothing littering the floor, stuffing it all into the hamper just as the doorbell sounded.

Throwing his towel in the bathroom, Sebastian descended the stairs, heart pounding from all the activity. Taking a deep breath, he smiled and opened the door... to his neighbor's children. "Would you like to buy some chocolate, Sebastian?" the seven-year-old girl chirped as she handed him a sign-up sheet, her younger brother standing next to her, grinning up at him.

"Sure," Sebastian answered, stepping back so they could come inside and get warm. Looking things over quickly, he signed up for God-knows-what before handing the sheet back to them. "Just a minute," he told them, walking to the living room, where a bowl of candy bars from Halloween still sat. Grabbing some, he gave them to the kids, watching their faces break into bright smiles. After the children thanked him, Sebastian opened the front door, and the kids hurried out, nearly running into Robert as they rushed down the steps, already opening candy wrappers.

Sebastian smiled and saw Robert return it as he held the door for the tall man. Robert stepped inside, handing Sebastian a large bunch of colorful mixed flowers. "I hope these are okay," he said softly.

Sebastian took Robert's coat and hung it on the hall tree. "They're beautiful," Sebastian heard himself say before inwardly cringing at his clichéd response. "I can't remember the last time I got flowers." *Good God, he was turning into Donna Reed.* "Come on in, I just got home." Sebastian led Robert into the living room, turning on lights. "Please make yourself comfortable, and I'll be right back."

In the kitchen, Sebastian found a vase in one of the cupboards and placed the flowers in water before starting the coffee pot. Carrying the vase with him, he placed it in the center of the dining room table before joining Robert in the living room.

"Your home is beautiful," Robert told him.

"It was my parents'. I grew up here, and they left it to me when they passed away a few years ago." Sebastian looked through the familiar rooms. "Mom collected the antiques over decades, looking for

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bargains and just the right pieces. It's not really my style, but I don't have the heart to redecorate."

"I think it's perfect," Robert said, looking at him.

"Would you like the tour?" Sebastian asked, standing up. "Mom redid the living room. She spent hours removing the old paint so she could get down to the original colors. Then she redid the rooms around them. The furniture she collected over the years." Sebastian ran his hand over the top of the black octagonal table. "She found this piece in an old barn outside town, and cleaned it up herself," Sebastian said to Robert, and they moved into the dining room. "This room is interesting in that the chandelier was never electrified," Sebastian explained, pulling down the fixture so he could show Robert. "You lower it so you can light the candles."

"I've never seen anything like that before," Robert commented, peering closer.

"The amazing thing is that it survived intact all these years. Mom was particularly fond of it. She used to light the candles on holidays," Sebastian explained. It surprised him how attentive Robert was, and as they moved into the kitchen and family room, he could smell Robert's cologne tickling his nose. "This part of the house isn't really anything special," Sebastian explained as he got two mugs from the cupboard, pouring the coffee before handing Robert his mug.

"How long did your parents own the house?"

"Almost thirty years, I guess. My father's parents bought it and left it to him. This is a real family home. My dad was born in the bedroom upstairs, and I was born while my folks lived in the house." Sebastian opened one of the cupboards. "Would you like anything for your coffee?"

"Black is perfect," Robert answered, sipping from the cup. "What happened to your folks?"

Sebastian led them back through the house toward the living room. "My mom developed cancer about five years ago," Sebastian said, surprised by the lump forming in his throat. "She fought it tooth and nail for almost three years, but it was too aggressive, and she died

here in the house, with my dad and me taking care of her. They'd been together almost forty years at that point, and after her death, my dad just gave up," Sebastian explained. "I buried them both within six months. That was the hardest time of my life." Sebastian looked up when he felt Robert's hand rest on his.

"For me, it's always been just my mom."

"You never knew your dad?"

Robert shook his head. "No. Mom says I met him once when I was about two, but not since. She got pregnant and refused to marry him. She always told me she was better off alone than with my dad. Mom lives on the edge of town in one of those new condos they built a few years ago. She likes it and doesn't have to do yard work." Robert set his coffee mug on a coaster, settling back on the sofa. Sebastian let himself relax as well, his fingers still holding Robert's hand.

"How does she feel about your election? I saw the article in the paper yesterday," Sebastian explained.

"She's really proud, I guess. I only got elected because of my opponent's scandal."

Sebastian moved closer. "My mom used to tell me that everything happens for a reason. Personally, I think it was so you could meet me," Sebastian added with a wicked smirk. Robert laughed deeply, his face brightening with his mirth, and Sebastian reminded himself to make Robert laugh whenever he could. "So when does your term start?"

"In January."

"Are you nervous about it?" Sebastian asked.

Robert's smile slipped away. "Very. Right now I draft wills and help people set up trusts, buy and sell property, stuff like that. I've been to court a number of times, but I've only argued a few real cases. Mostly I do administrative law, but as a judge I'll be called upon to make decisions that could put someone in prison."

Sebastian could hear the trepidation in Robert's voice. "I guess," Sebastian agreed, "but if you put a guilty man in prison, then you're making things safer for the rest of us. Maybe if you think of it as helping people, you'll feel better about it." Sebastian tried to help, but

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he wasn't sure if he was successful until some of the darkness dissipated from Robert's expression. "If it's any help, I think you'll be a good judge."

Robert grinned at him. "Why would you think that? You've known me for a day or so."

"Because you're worried about the consequences of your decisions—that means you'll make good ones." Sebastian decided to try to change the subject a little. "Will you get your own courtroom?"

"I'm not sure. As the newest judge, I may get an office and have to float from courtroom to courtroom. I meet with the President Judge next week, and I'm hoping that he'll have some answers. But I understand he's swamped because the guy I defeated was the current President Judge, so things are a bit up in the air right now." Robert seemed more at ease, which was nice, as was the fact that Robert had been holding his hand for a while. It felt nice. He hadn't just held hands with someone in a long time. He sort of felt like a kid, which wasn't a bad thing.

"Can I ask something a little personal?" Sebastian inquired. "I don't want to pry, and please say something if you get uncomfortable."

"Go ahead, I guess," Robert answered, but Sebastian could feel a hint of wariness in Robert's expression.

"Do people know you're gay? I mean, being a judge and all, is it something you've had to deal with?"

"A few people know and they seem to be okay. The senior partner at the office was supportive, but my secretary, who I've known most of my life, was really thrown when I told her. I think she'll be fine. My mom knows, but we never talk about it. Other than that, I haven't told people. I'm sort of afraid of what will happen if it becomes known. As a judge, I'll be sort of a public figure."

That's what Sebastian had been afraid of. Robert was just beginning to figure things out. "I wondered." Sebastian couldn't help feeling a stab of disappointment. He'd had boyfriends before who were just coming out, and he'd learned firsthand that most guys, after they came out, were ready to sample as much as they could from the man

buffet. Granted, Robert didn't seem like the type, but Sebastian had been surprised before.

"Is something wrong?" Robert asked, his hand tightening slightly in Sebastian's.

"No," he answered, trying to push away some of his concerns. Robert wasn't Gregory, and it wasn't fair to compare them. "I'm glad you have people who are supportive. That's very important."

"Did your parents know about you?" Robert asked, and Sebastian got up from the sofa, his hand slipping from Robert's. Moving to the fireplace, he opened the flue and lit the fire he kept laid. The paper caught easily.

"I told my parents while I was still in high school. For my mom, it was no big deal. She took it completely in stride, but for my dad it was harder." Sebastian added a small log on top of the kindling as it caught. "He didn't disown me or even yell, but things just didn't quite seem the same afterwards. He and I used to do things together, but after that we didn't any more. I could never be sure if it was my imagination or not, but he seemed distant. We talked, but never about anything important. Eventually, I went to work full-time, and we saw each other less and less. When I got my own apartment, Mom would stop by quite regularly, but Dad always seemed to be busy with one thing or another."

"Did you ever talk about it?"

"I wish we had," Sebastian answered, adding another log before returning to the sofa. "By the time Mom died, he wasn't functioning much anymore, and after that he pulled into himself and never came out again. I thought there just being the two of us, we could become close again." Sebastian stared at the flames. "He chose to give up living rather than live with me." He'd never told this to anyone else, and Sebastian didn't know why he was saying it now, except that he felt like he could and wouldn't be judged for it. Turning away from the fire, he saw Robert staring at him. "The hard part is that it could have all been my imagination, but I'll never know because he's not here to ask." Sebastian sighed softly, trying to dispel the gloom from his own attitude. "I'm sorry for being so depressing."

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“Don’t apologize,” Robert told him. “You’re the first person I’ve been able to talk with about anything like this. I never knew who to ask and always felt so confused. At least I know I’m not the only one.”

“No, you’re not the only one. You’re probably a little older than most guys when they contemplate coming out, but everyone goes through the soul-searching you are doing right now. I did it at sixteen. You should have seen the kids in high school when I dressed as Tinker Bell for Halloween that year.”

“You didn’t.” Robert covered his mouth as he laughed.

“I sure did,” Sebastian said with a smile. “One of the jocks in my English class started calling me a fairy, so I made him eat his words, especially when I walked up to him in full costume and touched him with my wand to turn him into a donkey. ‘Look, it worked,’ I said at the top of my lungs, ‘you are a jackass.’ Everyone laughed and I took off down the hall.”

“Did he pick on you after that?”

“He tried, but I told everyone that he was just a big closet case, and the more he picked on me, the more he actually wanted me,” Sebastian said through his laughter. “It sort of stuck and he stayed away from me big-time.” Sebastian started laughing harder. “I hear he and his boyfriend live in San Francisco now.” Sebastian burst into another round of laughter and saw Robert crack up as well. It felt good to laugh. He hadn’t realized how long it had been since he’d actually laughed hard and long with someone.

“You must have been quite a teenager,” Robert said as his laughter died down.

“Oh, I was. I got it from my dad. He was a great practical joker and could tell a story to lead you down the golden path like nobody’s business.” Sebastian felt his gloominess threaten to return and pushed it aside with some effort. “I think that was one of the things I missed: his jokes and laughter. They sort of disappeared after Mom got sick.” Sebastian decided it was time to change the subject. “So what were you like as a child?”

“Boring,” Robert said, before grinning. “I studied hard in high school. Mom couldn’t afford anything extra, and I had my heart set on going to college, so I worked hard for years, got stellar grades, and earned a scholarship that paid for most of the tuition. Once I got into college, I continued working hard to keep up my grades so I wouldn’t lose my scholarships and could get into law school.”

“Did you go out? Have friends?”

“I had a few friends, but they were mostly study buddies, stuff like that. I really didn’t have a lot of time, and I rarely went out like the other kids did. Looking back, I sort of wish I would have, but my mom always says you can’t change the past.”

“No, besides, how many of your law school classmates will be sworn in as a judge in January?” Sebastian asked. He wondered if Robert would think he was kidding and tried to make it clear by the look on his face that he was deadly serious. “I partied through school and then went to work. I didn’t go to college, and now I’m a thirty-year-old waiter. Granted, I’m good at my job and I do well enough, but it’s hardly anyone’s dream job. So I’d say in the long run, you made the right choices.” Sebastian stood up, reaching for their coffee cups. “Would you like some more? Maureen sent home some goodies if you’d like one.”

“Yes, please.”

“All right then, I’ll be right back.” Sebastian walked through the dining room to the kitchen, pulling out the box before refilling their mugs.

“Can I help?” Robert asked from the doorway.

“If you’d take the coffee back in, I’ll bring the dessert,” Sebastian said as he opened the box, pulling out one Maureen’s luscious chocolate cakes. She’d always said it was this cake that had landed her husband. Sebastian figured he’d give it a try—it certainly couldn’t hurt. Cutting the cake, he placed two slices on plates before carrying them to the living room.

“Should we eat in here?” Robert asked, a little wide-eyed.

“Sure, why not?” Sebastian said, setting the plates on the table.

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“Because I tend to be a little klutzy, and I’d hate to get crumbs and chocolate on the furniture.” Robert seemed genuinely concerned, so Sebastian brought their plates to the table, and Robert brought the coffee, setting it on the table, stumbling as he found his chair. “I told you. I wasn’t kidding yesterday when I said I tripped over my own feet coming into the restaurant. I really am sort of clumsy.”

“Well, don’t worry here. Everything in this house has been through teething kids, teenagers, and me growing up. It may be old, but it’s sturdy,” Sebastian soothed as he sat at the table. Looking around, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually eaten at the table unless it had been for Sunday dinner when his mother was still alive. He kept the rooms clean, but he rarely used them, and if it weren’t for the fireplace in the living room, he probably wouldn’t use that room much either.

Eating slowly, Sebastian watched Robert, smiling as he groaned slightly whenever he took a bite. Afterward, they moved back into the living room, sitting near the fire. They talked of everything and nothing for hours, sitting close together. Checking his watch as Robert watched the flames in the fireplace, Sebastian was surprised to find it was already nearly midnight. They’d talked for hours, and the time had seemed to pass in a blink. “It’s getting late,” Robert said, stretching his long legs in front of him.

“I suppose,” Sebastian murmured, but likewise made no effort to move. Sebastian saw Robert turn to face him, a look of slight confusion on his face. He wanted to see Robert again and wasn’t quite sure how to bring up the subject. As he’d expected, Robert was a nice man, but he also had a sharp wit and wasn’t all stuck on himself. And when Robert smiled, he radiated an innocence that Sebastian found very attractive, like the lanky man had no idea how attractive he actually was. Reaching across the sofa, he touched Robert’s forehead as he moved a stray lock of hair back into place.

From their conversation, Sebastian knew he’d have to make the first move. Slowly, he moved closer, watching Robert’s eyes, waiting to see if he pulled away. He didn’t, but he didn’t move closer, either, and for a second Sebastian wasn’t sure if he should continue, but it was almost too late now. Shifting on the sofa to bring them a little closer

together, Sebastian touched Robert's lips with his. As kisses went, it was hardly earth-shattering, but after a second or two, Robert began kissing back, moving his lips slightly. Not wanting to scare the other man, Sebastian backed away. Looking into Robert's eyes, he saw a hint of surprise combined with, to Sebastian's relief, desire.

"You kissed me," Robert said softly, fingers touching his lips. Whatever Sebastian had expected Robert to say, that hadn't been it. "You kissed me," he repeated.

"Shouldn't I have?" Sebastian asked and saw Robert smile.

"No one's kissed me like that before," Robert told him before moving closer, and Sebastian kissed him again, this time a little harder, hugging Robert close. Sebastian was trying very hard not to move too fast. It was obvious that Robert didn't have a lot of experience, and Sebastian needed to take things slow. But—Sebastian's eyes widened in surprise—the man knew how to kiss. In Sebastian's experience, a bad kisser could be taught to improve, but good kissers were born, and damn if Robert wasn't a good kisser. Holding Robert close, Sebastian returned his kisses, their lips beginning their explorations. Making himself think, Sebastian gentled the kiss before ending it, touching the skin of Robert's cheek, surprised at how smooth it was.

"I should probably go," Robert said, standing up, and Sebastian berated himself, figuring he'd scared Robert off. "I'd like to see you again," he added, and Sebastian felt himself breathe again.

"The restaurant's closed on Sunday," Sebastian supplied.

"Then I'll see you Sunday at about one?" Robert asked, and Sebastian nodded as he, too, stood up to see his guest to the door. Getting Robert's coat, he handed it to him, looking up as the much taller man towered over him. "Thank you for a wonderful evening," Robert told him and leaned down. Sebastian took that as an opportunity and an invitation. Slipping his arms around Robert's neck, he gave Robert a good-night kiss hot enough to curl their toes.

"I'll see you Sunday, unless you stop in for lunch before then." Waiting for Robert to put on his coat, Sebastian opened the front door and watched as Robert descended the stairs. Even in the cold air,

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Sebastian watched him until feeling deeply chilled, and then he finally closed and locked the door.

Returning to the living room, Sebastian stirred the fire, which was nearly out, before picking up the dishes and the plate with the last of the cookies, carrying them into the kitchen and placing them in the sink. Turning out the lights, Sebastian checked the fireplace one more time, making sure it was out before turning off the last lights and heading up the stairs. Cleaning done, he was just slipping between the covers when the phone rang. "At this hour?" Sebastian grumbled before answering it.

"Sebastian?" the caller asked, speech slightly slurred.

He recognized that voice even though he hadn't heard it in a while, almost two years. "Gregory? What are you calling for at this time of night?"

"I miss you, Bastian," he heard the other man snuffle. Gregory was always a maudlin drunk, and what was worse, Sebastian knew he'd remember nothing when he sobered up. "I was such a shit to you." He heard Gregory snuffle on the other end of the phone.

"Yes, you were, Gregory. You broke my heart and acted like a huge asshole," Sebastian told him as his own emotions started coming to the surface. "You treated me like I was dirt, and if you think some drunken confession or apology is going to do any good, you must be completely smashed off your ass. So hang up the phone and go to bed."

"Bastian," he slurred. "I really do miss you." It was probably meant to sound sexy, but came off as completely pathetic.

"I don't miss you," Sebastian told him. "You left two years ago and now you miss me? Forget it." Sebastian turned to hang up the phone.

"Don't hang up, Bastian, I need to talk to you," he slurred. "It's important." He heard Gregory's continued snuffles on the other end of the phone. He nearly inquired what could be so important to call him after midnight, but didn't want to encourage him.

"Then call me when you're not drunk off your ass, Gregory, and we'll talk." Hanging up the phone, Sebastian put it back on the charger

before turning off the lights. He did take a few seconds to wonder what Gregory wanted before his mind drifted to the remembered feel of Robert's lips on his, and he drifted into sleep, but found himself tossing and turning for most of the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ringing phone pulled Robert out of his thoughts. Picking it up to stop the ringing, he held it for a second as his thoughts cleared. “Robert Fortier?” His whole name—this wasn’t good. “Why haven’t you called in over a week?”

“I’m sorry, Mom, I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy to call your mother?” she asked.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” he retorted. “I’ve been swamped trying to get things wrapped up at work, and new clients keep calling, trying to get me to do things for them before I take the bench. It seems I’m popular. Besides, you could have called me, you know.”

“All right, there’s no need to get sassy,” she said with a bit of mirth in her voice. “I know you’ve been busy,” she added, in what Robert had quickly come to recognize as her proud “my son the judge” tone. “I’m calling to ask you to come over for dinner tomorrow night. With as much as you’ve been working, you could probably use a home-cooked meal.”

“Thanks, Mom, but I have a date,” he said proudly, waiting to see what her reaction would be.

“That’s wonderful,” she started to say, “when can I meet her....” Robert heard her voice fade out at the end of the word. “It’s not a her, is it?”

“No, Mom, it’s not. We’ve talked about this before.” His comment was met with an initial silence.

"I thought you might have outgrown that. Since you never brought it up again, I guess I thought...." Robert could hear his mother's confusion and hurt.

"I know what you thought. But just because we haven't talked about something doesn't mean it's changed. And I'm not likely to outgrow part of who I am, just like my eye color isn't likely to change. I'm sorry this is painful for you, but being gay is part of who I am." There was more silence and maybe a soft snuffle. "I'm not doing this to hurt you, but I can't separate my life into compartments and only show you what you want to see."

"I know that," she snapped. "And I don't want you to," she added, her voice softening. "It's just hard for a mother to accept." The sound of her blowing her nose traveled through the receiver, and Robert pulled the phone away from his ear until she was done. "So do I get to meet him?"

Robert shook his head. "You want to meet Sebastian?"

"Of course I do. What kind of mother do you think I am?"

Robert chuckled as his head spun. "Maybe one who's slightly nuts," Robert said affectionately, and he heard her laugh on the other end of the phone.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'm feeling a little at loose ends with all this, but you're my son, I love you, and I'll learn to adjust. After all—"

"Mom," Robert interrupted, "please spare me the speech about how long you were in labor, okay?" He chuckled as she laughed on the other end of the phone.

"So bring this young man on Sunday," she told him.

Robert felt his laughter drift away as he swallowed hard. "I don't think I'm quite ready to do that yet. This is all so very new, and...." He paused, trying to figure out what he wanted to say. "I think I want him for myself right now."

"Okay, but bring him by soon, and call me during the week."

"I will, Mom," Robert said, disconnecting the call before placing his phone in his pocket.

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He'd been at loose ends, too, for much of the week, keeping himself busy while looking forward to his date with Sebastian. He'd sort of needed to clear his head, so he'd decided to take advantage of the November sunshine and go for a walk. Passing the post office and Victorian-era firehouse, he continued toward the main street of town, passing the restaurant where Sebastian worked. He thought of going inside, but Sebastian was working and he didn't need Robert disturbing him. Continuing on, he passed an antique shop and went inside. He'd been in the store a few times, usually to find something nice for his mother, but found himself wandering around pieces of furniture, simply looking and thinking. After saying goodbye to the pleasant lady behind the counter, he continued down the sidewalk, crossing the street at the square.

A flash of his old scarf caught his eye, and Robert saw Sweeper sitting on a bench alone, watching people as they went by, the Thermos in his hands. Robert had seen these people all his life, spending their days sitting on the same benches, watching people walk by, and he'd usually ignored them as if they didn't exist. Heck, Robert realized he'd done just that to all the people he'd simply walked past. The only reason he noticed Sweeper was because he'd seen Sebastian talking to him.

"Is Billy back?" Sweeper asked softly, looking up at him from the bench as he got closer.

"I don't really know," Robert answered, looking down at the older man, wondering what else he should say. "I think Sebastian said he'd be back on Monday." Did the man know what day it was? Robert almost said something before realizing how he was behaving. Sweeper was homeless, but not stupid. "Do you have coffee?"

The gray head of hair sticking out from around the scarf nodded, but said nothing more, and Robert moved on. Continuing down the street, he saw some of the Borough workers wrapping the light poles in garlands and bows. A father lifted his son onto his shoulders, the child crying out happily as small fingers touched his father's cheek. Robert had never known his father, and his mother had never told him much. Whenever he'd asked, she'd told him he was gone and that she'd refused to marry the bum. He didn't even know the man's name. When

he'd looked at his birth certificate, it listed "unknown" as his father. Fortier was his mother's last name. She obviously knew who he was, but had refused to tell anyone, then or now.

Letting the cool air clear his head, Robert continued walking, cutting across the Dickinson College campus, strewn with its red Adirondack chairs, before heading for home once again.

Inside, he spent the day cleaning and puttering. He knew he should relax, but his mind wouldn't really allow him to. Finally, after a quiet supper, he settled in front of the television.

DURING the night clouds had rolled in, and by morning a light drizzle coated the walk when Robert stepped outside for his newspaper after sleeping late. By the time he was ready to leave, it was raining steadily, so he decided to drive to Sebastian's.

Pulling up in front of the house, Robert found a parking space before getting out of the car, hurrying up the sidewalk, and knocking on the front door. Huddling out of the rain near the door, he waited and finally heard someone on the other side. The door opened and Robert smiled as he saw Sebastian, but the smile didn't last when Robert saw his face. There was no joy, and no smile returned when Sebastian saw him, and Robert wondered what he'd done, but there couldn't have been anything. Sebastian made an effort and half smiled before stepping back. "Come in, Robert," he said stiffly, and Robert stepped inside, hoping for a clue about what was going on.

Robert took off his coat. Sebastian took it from him, hanging it on the hall tree, and Robert followed him into the living room. Another man sat on the sofa, eyes dark and drawn, face gaunt and sickly looking. "Robert, this is Gregory. He was just leaving," Sebastian said firmly, and the other man slowly got up from the sofa.

"I'm sorry, Sebastian, but I had to tell you," he said, before picking up a jacket laid over the back of one of the chairs. Robert watched the other man leave, staring daggers at Gregory that only stopped once the front door closed.

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“If you’d rather I didn’t stay, I’ll understand,” Robert said softly, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice. He’d been looking forward to seeing Sebastian again for most of the week, but it really didn’t appear as though Sebastian was in any mood to do anything, or have company for that matter.

“No, please don’t go,” Sebastian told him as he sat down next to him.

“Who was that?” Robert let his eyes follow the path the other man had taken out of the room.

“Gregory Southland—he was an old boyfriend of mine a few years ago.” Sebastian shook his head. “He stopped by to tell me that he’s sick, complications from HIV.”

Robert felt his breath catch, but he stopped himself from saying anything even as he wondered if Sebastian was okay.

“I’m not, Robert. I had a test a year ago, and it was negative. And while I’ve seen him a few times to talk over the last few years, I’d never let that dog anywhere near me again.” The venom in his voice had Robert leaning away. “Sorry. I know disease isn’t some sort of punishment, but in this case, it makes me wonder.”

“So what was he doing here?”

“Notifying his partners that they should get tested. It seems there were quite a few of them,” Sebastian told him. “He’s finally getting some help, and that’s one of the conditions of the clinic.” Sebastian sighed loudly. “At least I already had that test, or I’d be in for a very worrisome couple of days. It’s just that Gregory was young when I met him, and I grew to love him. He was just coming out and wanted to explore.”

“That seems sort of normal, I guess,” Robert said.

“It is, but he didn’t tell me about those feelings until I found out he’d been going out to clubs, playing in the back rooms, things like that. I ended it with him and tried to warn him he was playing with fire, but he wouldn’t listen. Now he tells me he’s sick, and he told me he doesn’t have any place to go and asked if he could stay here with me. It seems he hasn’t told his family he’s sick and would rather hide from it than face them. So I told him no. He can’t continue to run and hide.

They deserve to know, and he needs to tell them. It was just hard saying no to someone I care about. Besides, if he is sick, he's going to need more care than I can provide."

"When was he diagnosed?" Robert asked, taking one of Sebastian's hands in his.

"He didn't say, but I assume it was relatively recent, since he contacted me last weekend. Although, knowing Gregory, it could have been months ago, and he's just now pulling his head out of the sand." Sebastian sighed again. "Sort of makes you feel a touch of your own mortality. I know I'll help him if he truly needs it, but he's still hiding from it, and that has to stop or no one can help him."

Sebastian got up from the sofa. "I don't know about you, but I could use a drink."

"Nothing for me, thank you," Robert said as he watched Sebastian go to the kitchen, returning with a bottle of beer. "One's my limit, or I'll get myself plastered, and I don't want that to happen," Robert explained.

Sebastian took a long pull on his beer. "Did you have anything you'd like to do?"

"I was going to ask if you wanted to go to the Sports Dome. I was there as part of a team-building thing as part of a conference, and it was a lot of fun. But it sort of seems inappropriate now."

"No, I think a little fun is exactly what I need about now," Sebastian told him. "I'll get a jacket and be right back." Robert watched Sebastian's delightful backside as he left the room to get his coat. When he came back, Robert got up off the sofa, and after Sebastian locked the door, they hurried to the car, dodging raindrops. "This is your car?" Sebastian asked, slightly awed. "I always wanted a BMW like this."

"Would you like to drive?" Robert asked, reaching over the seat to offer Sebastian the keys.

"No, thank you," Sebastian answered, shaking his head. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to it." Closing the doors, Robert started the engine, and they pulled onto the street. "I can't believe

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you'd let me drive your car," Sebastian told him when they stopped at the light on the square.

"Why not? You're not going to hurt it or anything. It's just a car," Robert said softly, smiling at Sebastian, who smiled back.

"Could I drive it home?" Sebastian asked him, looking like a little kid about to get the present of a lifetime on Christmas morning.

"Sure." Robert saw Sebastian's smile, and his heart fluttered a little. The light turned green, and Robert continued on through the intersection. The ride to the Sports Dome wasn't long, and by the time they pulled into the parking lot, the rain had let up a little. Hurrying inside, Robert looked around. "What would you like to do?" he asked.

Sebastian's eyes looked ready to boggle as he turned to look at all the games and the climbing wall. "I'm not sure."

"You up for go-carts?" Robert asked, and Sebastian nodded. After buying tickets, Robert motioned them toward the line, and they watched the cars spin around the indoor track. He felt Sebastian move close enough that he could feel the heat from his body. Sneaking a look, he saw Sebastian looking up at him, and they shared a brief smile. The line began to move, and the moment slipped away as they handed the attendant their tickets. The last car available was for two people, so Robert sat in the back, legs stretched out as Sebastian sat in front of him. Strapping themselves in, the cars ahead of them began to move, and Sebastian began driving the small car. Robert held on around Sebastian's waist, and he felt Sebastian lean back against him. As they turned the first corner, Robert tightened his hold as the car pushed them toward the outside.

"This is fun," Sebastian yelled over the sound of the engine, and Robert tightened his grip as the race continued. Sebastian drove like a madman, overtaking other cars, both of them yelling, having the time of their lives. When their ride was over, Robert hurried to the ticket booth and bought more rides. He and Sebastian shared that car for three more runs until they both thought they were going to be sick, staggering out of the car like two drunks until they got used to solid ground under their feet.

“Let’s motocross,” Sebastian teased as he slipped onto a motorcycle game, leaning over the crotch-rocket-shaped controls, that small butt in the air. Robert climbed onto the other motorcycle, slipping a few bills in the machine, and they were off, racing over the track, their controllers leaning and turning along with the screen ahead of them. “I beat you,” Sebastian sang out as he crossed the finish line first.

“Only because you cut me off,” Robert groused through a smile. “I bet I can make it up the wall before you.”

“Bet you can’t,” Sebastian called as he hurried over to the wall, and Robert paid for both of them. The attendant strapped them into harnesses and held the ropes. “I’ll see you at the top, big guy,” Sebastian taunted as he leapt onto the wall and began climbing. Robert had barely begun climbing when he heard the bell ring and saw Sebastian grinning down at him like the cat who’d eaten the canary. Robert stopped himself from looking down, concentrating on placing his hands and feet on the green-colored holds as he lifted himself higher.

“Are you part monkey?” Robert huffed as he got closer, wondering if he was ever going to make it to the top.

“No, I’ve done this before,” Sebastian called to him. “You can do it,” Robert heard Sebastian tell him as he started getting close. Arms aching, legs throbbing, he finally reached out to ring the damn bell.

“I made it and I’m not dead,” Robert huffed as he rested at the top of the wall, and he saw Sebastian move closer.

“Yes, you did,” Sebastian said, grinning, “and that deserves a reward.” Before Robert could do anything, Sebastian kissed him, right there in front of everyone. It was sweet and very quick. Robert found himself looking around to see who’d noticed, but no one had. Turning back to Sebastian, he only saw empty space as Sebastian was lowered to the ground. Robert pushed off the wall, the handler smoothly lowering him to the ground as well.

Robert didn’t know what to say. Sebastian definitely looked hurt, and he could feel his heart still pounding in his chest. It wasn’t that he hadn’t liked the kiss—he had, and he really liked that Sebastian had

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wanted to kiss him. Robert just wasn't sure how he felt about being kissed in public like that.

Reaching the ground, he waited until the attendant unhooked him from the safety rope before taking off the harness and handing it back to the attendant and joining Sebastian where he waited for him. Sebastian was definitely hurt—his body language said he wanted to go somewhere and hide—and Robert had no idea what to say. The next group of people were strapped in and began to climb, Robert watching them. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Sebastian. You just took me by surprise,” he said softly.

“I know. I shouldn’t have done that. I just....”

Robert glanced around, making sure no one was paying attention to them. “It’s not that I didn’t like the kiss. I did. And it’s not that I don’t like you, because I do,” Robert huffed softly, trying to put what made his stomach clench into words. “I’m just not sure how appropriate public displays of affection are.”

Sebastian turned toward him, and the look he gave Robert told him that that was the exact wrong thing to say, but Robert soldiered on anyway, figuring if he was going to dig a hole, it may as well be a big one. “It’s not you and it’s not us.”

“Can you say that if I’d been a woman and kissed you, you’d feel the same way?” Sebastian asked him, eyes hard and accusatory.

“Actually, I would. Not that I want women kissing me.” Robert managed a slight smile and saw some of the tension leave Sebastian’s face. Leaning closer he decided to go for broke. “There’s only one person I want to be kissing, and he’s right here. It just isn’t up there,” Robert said, letting his eyes wander to the top of the climbing wall, “but somewhere quieter.”

Sebastian returned his gaze. “You’re serious, about women I mean? You’d really feel the same way?”

“Yes,” Robert answered, his stomach unclenching. “That sort of behavior should be private and special.”

Sebastian swallowed, and Robert had to make himself turn away or he’d make a complete liar out of himself. A group of kids walked through the doors, their excited shouts filling the large room. “I think

I'm ready to go if you are," Sebastian said, and Robert chuckled his agreement, following Sebastian toward the door. As they approached the car, Robert handed Sebastian the keys. "You were serious?"

"Of course I was," Robert answered as he opened the passenger door, sliding into the seat, watching as Sebastian opened the driver's door and slipped into the seat. Sebastian smiled over at him before turning the key to start the engine. They didn't talk much on the way back to Sebastian's house, but Sebastian's smile didn't fade the entire time he drove. Pulling up in front of the house, Sebastian parked the car, but didn't make a move to get out once he'd turned off the engine.

"Thank you. I always wondered what it was like to drive one of these." Sebastian leaned closer and then stopped. He seemed to be waiting. Robert finally got it and leaned across the seat, receiving the gentle and tender thank-you kiss from Sebastian. "Would you like to come in?" Robert nodded slowly before getting out of the car, following Sebastian up to his door.

Inside, Sebastian took his coat and led him through the front rooms and the kitchen to the back of the house, where there was a small, comfortable sitting room. "So this must be where you spend most of your time," Robert commented, looking out the back windows into what looked like an impressive garden. "This must be spectacular in the spring."

"It is," Sebastian said softly from just behind him. "My mom loved the backyard and spent much of her spare time back there. It's been hard, but I've worked to keep it up because she loved it so. She got my dad to build her an outdoor kitchen," Sebastian explained, pointing toward what looked like a chimney. "There's a fireplace, and in back of it there's a barbeque, and on the side there's a small bar and refrigerator near the edge of a large patio. I've got most of it covered for the winter, but in the spring, there's a cable strung between the trees, and I have a parachute that gets hoisted over the patio as sort of a roof, complete with candle chandelier."

"Wow," Robert breathed softly, turning toward Sebastian. "That sounds beautiful."

"Would you like something to drink?"

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Robert stepped a little closer. “No, thank you.” Looking into Sebastian’s eyes, he waited, just looking. Sebastian looked away first, sitting down on the large sofa, motioning for Robert to join him, neither saying much for a while. “Penny for your thoughts,” Robert said, to break the companionable quiet, but Sebastian simply shook his head. It had been a long time since he’d been with someone where one of them didn’t feel the need to fill every quiet moment. “You’re thinking about your friend, aren’t you?” Robert had no idea why he jumped to that conclusion, other than the fact that he would be thinking about Gregory if their roles were reversed.

“Yeah. This is the first time I’ve been touched by HIV. I’ve never known anyone before who was infected. It’s sort of scary. Have you?” Sebastian asked, big eyes shifting up to meet Robert’s.

Robert nodded. “A friend in college was diagnosed with it while we were seniors. I don’t know how he got it, and I never asked. It didn’t matter to me. He told a small group of us, and we got him help. He still lives outside of State College and is doing fine. He’s been on medication for years, and the last time I talked with him, he was in great health. It’s not the death sentence it was, but it’s not going to be cured, either. Gregory can get help, and he can live a long, productive life if he’s willing to manage the disease and his treatments.” Robert stopped as Sebastian moved closer to him, arms snaking around his waist, Sebastian’s head resting against his arm. “Would you really let him live here?” Robert asked amazed that Sebastian would even consider it.

Sebastian nodded against his skin. “He’d have to realize there was nothing between us, but yeah, I guess I would. He may have been a crappy boyfriend, but he was a good person, and he doesn’t deserve the grief his family is going to give him. No one does.” Robert put his arms around Sebastian, holding him as they sat together quietly, occasionally letting his fingers stroke through Sebastian’s soft hair. “His family’s really religious, and I’m scared they’ll believe that Gregory’s illness is some sort of punishment from God or something,” Sebastian said softly, angling his head up, lips so kissably close Robert couldn’t resist. “Did you have any plans for dinner?”

Robert shook his head. “Only ones with you,” he answered. He wasn’t so sure how he felt about the possibility of this Gregory staying with Sebastian, but he knew he had no right to say anything. The thought that someone might take advantage of Sebastian’s kindness had Robert’s heart pounding. Jesus, he was jealous. The realization made Robert tense up, and he saw Sebastian’s eyes peering at him curiously. Forcing himself to relax again, Robert breathed deeply. He knew he had no reason to be jealous. They’d been out on a few dates, that was all, but damn, did it feel nice holding Sebastian and being held at the same time. He could definitely get used to that.

CHAPTER FIVE

SEBASTIAN left for the restaurant early Monday morning. Billy and Darryl were coming back today, and he wanted to make extra sure everything was perfect. The police had returned the money from the robbery late in the week, and he'd been able to make the deposit, so everything was okay there. Unlocking the door, he walked into the quiet dining room. Turning on the lights, Sebastian walked around every table, checking that each was properly set, before entering the kitchen. Everything gleamed and sparkled just like it had the night Darryl left.

"Morning," Sebastian heard Darryl call as the back door opened. "Sebastian, is that you?" Darryl asked, walking closer. "What are you doing here so early?"

"I wanted to make sure everything was perfect when you came back," Sebastian explained, about two seconds before the larger man engulfed him in a hug that squeezed the air from his lungs.

"Billy will be here later," Darryl explained as he released him. "What happened while I was gone?" he asked as he threw his coat over the back of a chair in the office, already looking over his work station.

Sebastian explained about the week, reiterating the details of the robbery and catching the thief. He didn't go into details about Robert, other than to tell Darryl that the money had been returned and the thief caught. "No one was hurt."

"This customer who helped catch the guy, did you treat him right?" Darryl asked, and Sebastian felt himself color a little.

“Sebastian.” Darryl stopped what he was doing, staring over the counter at him. “What’s going on?”

“Well.” Sebastian grinned. He couldn’t help it. “I treated him right, and I’ve been out with him two times this week.”

“You mean like a date?” Darryl smiled. “That’s wonderful,” he added before chuckling. “How many people get to say they met at a robbery?”

“I’ll let you get back to work,” Sebastian said, walking toward the dining room, wondering exactly what he was going to do, since everything seemed to be caught up and ready.

“Is it serious, do you think? Let me rephrase that—could it be serious?” Darryl asked him, and Sebastian nodded.

“I’d like to think so, but...”

Darryl nodded his head slowly. “You want to talk to Billy,” he said, finishing his sentence for him with another chuckle as Sebastian nodded. The back door opened, and Maureen charged into the kitchen, practically throwing herself at Darryl for a hug, and Sebastian used that as an excuse to get out of the kitchen. He decided now was a good time to complete his inventory, and spent the next hour counting the dining room supplies, until he heard the front door open.

“Uncle Sebastian,” Davey called as he raced between the tables and into Sebastian’s arms for a hug, with Donnie right on his heels.

“Did you have fun?” Sebastian asked the excited seven-year-olds, Billy’s younger brothers, and he heard all about the Harry Potter theme park.

“We had pumpkin juice,” Donnie told him. “Darryl says he’ll try to make us some.”

Sebastian looked over their shoulders and saw Billy walking toward him.

“Come on, boys. Let Sebastian get his work done. He’ll be back to see you before you leave for school, and your mom and dad will be here in a few minutes. They missed you too.” Both boys nodded before leaving the dining room on the way to their area in the office.

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“Did you have a good time?” Sebastian asked, but he received a hug instead of an answer. “I guess you did.”

“It was great, but we’re worn out. We did and saw so much, we need a vacation to get over our vacation. The cruise was amazing. There was so much for the boys to do. They were going all day long.”

“Did you and Darryl have fun?” Sebastian asked.

“Yeah. A few nights we arranged for a babysitter, and we had an evening to ourselves.” Billy smiled and blushed like he always did. “What happened here?”

Sebastian told him about the robbery and how he met Robert. “We’ve been out a few times, and he’s really nice.” Sebastian got them each coffee before sliding into one of the back booths. “I really like him.”

“Then what’s the problem? You wouldn’t be telling me all this if you weren’t leading up to something.” Billy added sugar to his coffee, stirring it with a spoon.

“He’s not really out, and he’s just been elected as a judge here in town.”

“Is he a real closet case or just figuring out who he is?”

“I think Robert’s starting to come out. He’s told his mom and some of the people he works with,” Sebastian explained before sipping from his mug. “I really like him, Billy. He’s a nice guy, and, I don’t know, there’s something about him that tells me he’s a real stand-up, honest guy.”

“But that crap with Gregory has you messed up,” Billy supplied. “I never met the man, but he was a real ass to do that to you. But Robert isn’t Gregory, and you shouldn’t paint him with the same brush.”

“I know, and Gregory’s another matter completely,” Sebastian told Billy, before filling him in on the visit he’d had from his ex the day before.

“My God, you’ve had quite a week haven’t you?” Billy said, and Sebastian nodded.

“Robert and I spent most of the day together yesterday,” Sebastian told Billy. “He knew I was upset about Gregory, and we sat together on the sofa in my family room. He just held me, and we talked for hours about everything. It was really nice.”

Billy shook his head, finishing the last of his coffee. “I really don’t understand what your problem is. Yes, Robert may not be out of the closet, but he’s an elected official in this county. It sounds like he’s trying. If you want my advice, and I’m no expert, but I say don’t worry about it. Just enjoy it.” Billy looked around and lowered his voice. “Quiet, sweet guys can be really hot.” Billy smirked, and both of them laughed. “So what does he look like?”

Sebastian chuckled as the kitchen door opened and the two boys joined them in the booth. “He’s almost six-foot-six and skinny. He’s a self-professed klutz and caught the thief because he tripped and took him out on his way down.”

Billy laughed, and Sebastian started to as well. “He was so sweet and really smart,” Sebastian added, his laughter fading away. “I keep wondering how long he’ll be interested in a waiter like me.”

“Who, Uncle Sebastian?” Donnie asked from the other side of the table.

“Never mind,” Billy told him. “You need to eat. Your mom and dad will be here any minute to take you to school, and they haven’t seen you in a while, and you know what that means....”

The boys looked at each other before making faces like they’d just eaten something awful before saying together, “Kisses.” A knock on the door had Billy hurrying to the front of the restaurant to let in Marie and Charlie, Davey and Donnie’s parents. Billy was immediately hugged before the couple hugged the boys in a happy reunion that did indeed result in kisses for both boys, kisses that they didn’t immediately wipe off their faces.

“Did you have a good time?”

“Yes,” they both answered before returning to their seats as Darryl brought out breakfast for everyone. Plates were filled, and family conversation spread around the table. Sebastian had found out a while ago that he was considered family, and he’d given up his

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reticence about joining in. After plenty of eating and talking, the boys got their backpacks, following Marie and Charlie out of the restaurant with waves as they headed off for school.

"I'm sorry, sir," Sebastian heard Billy say from the door. "We don't open for lunch until eleven."

Turning around, Sebastian saw Robert standing outside. "It's okay, Billy. That's Robert." Billy stepped back, and Robert walked to the table, Darryl and Billy peering up at him. That is, until Sebastian gave them both looks, and they decided they had other things to do. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I was on my way to the office and saw the lights on," Robert told him, looking uncomfortable. "I was thinking about you and wanted to make sure everything was okay. Have you heard anything from your friend Gregory? I know you were worried."

Sebastian moved closer to Robert. "Was that the only reason you stopped by?"

Robert shook his head, and Sebastian saw him glance toward the windows before leaning close, kissing him lightly on the lips. "I just wanted to see you. Did your boss get back okay?"

Sebastian smiled, returning Robert's kiss before looking around the dining room. "The man over by the bar trying to look like he's not paying attention to us, that's Billy," Sebastian said, raising his voice slightly. "And the guy peeking at us from the crack in the kitchen door is Darryl." Sebastian waited for Billy and Darryl to join them. "Guys, this is Robert." Hands were shaken. "They were just getting back to work, and I have to as well," Sebastian said with a smile, "but I appreciate your stopping by. It was really nice to see you." He took Robert's hand for just a few seconds. "Can I give you a call tonight?"

"You can call me anytime," Robert told him. "I have one more thing I need to ask. I talked to my mom last night, and she invited you for Thanksgiving dinner. She really wants to meet you. If you don't want to come, it's okay, I'll understand," Robert told him in an obvious burst of nervousness.

"Robert," Sebastian said, "I'd love to come and meet your mother."

Robert kissed him again, and Sebastian smiled as Robert walked to the door, letting himself out. Billy locked it behind him as he went around the dining room. "You know," Billy said, glaring at him, hands on his hips, "you didn't leave anything to do out here." Billy burst into a smile. "For the first time I can remember, there's nothing to do."

Sebastian had to agree. After clearing up the breakfast dishes and resetting the table, the dining room was ready for opening. Billy went into the kitchen to help Darryl while Sebastian puttered, doing some extra cleaning, trying to keep busy. At eleven, he opened the doors, the first customers entering for lunch, which began like any normal Monday.

"Sebastian," Billy said from behind him as he hurried past to the serving station, "there's someone asking for you. I put him in the booth near the kitchen and gave him some coffee. Poor guy looks miserable."

Sebastian looked to where Billy had indicated, swearing lightly under his breath. "That's Gregory," Sebastian told Billy, and he had to agree, the man looked exhausted, and from the green complexion, he obviously wasn't feeling well. Thankfully, by now the lunch rush was dying down, and Sebastian walked to Gregory's table. "I'll be a few minutes," he told Gregory, who looked up at him, nodding slowly but saying nothing.

Getting some flatware for one of his tables, he delivered it, making a pass through the dining room before meeting Billy at the serving station.

"Do you want me to get rid of him?" Billy offered.

Sebastian shook his head. "I think he's here because he needs help." Sebastian felt his stomach churn. He knew what Gregory wanted, but he wasn't sure he could really be the help he needed. The man was going to need a great deal of care, and Sebastian wasn't sure he was capable of providing it.

"I know how he feels," Billy said quietly from behind him, and Sebastian turned. "Darryl helped me and the boys when we needed it most. I didn't know where to turn, and he was there for me." Billy looked at Gregory. "He looks the way I felt when I was taking food from the plates that went back to the kitchen to feed the boys."

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"I know. I told Robert yesterday that he may have been a crappy boyfriend, but Gregory's still my friend, and if he asked for help, I'd try. But I'm not sure how I can help."

"What did Robert say?" Billy asked.

"Nothing, he just held me for most of the evening."

"I knew I liked him," Billy said with a small smile before making a trip through the dining room to check on his tables. Sebastian followed suit, and thankfully it wasn't long before most of the traffic cleared away, leaving just a few tables that Billy said he'd handle. Taking a deep breath, Sebastian walked to where Gregory was still nursing the same cup of what had to be cold coffee, looking as though he'd lost his last friend in the world.

"I'm sorry, Sebastian," Gregory told him as Sebastian slipped into the booth across from him. "I've messed up everything," Gregory mumbled into his cup. "I had a great guy and blew it because I couldn't keep it in my pants, and I got this disease the same way."

"Are you getting treatment?" Sebastian inquired.

"Yeah, and the meds seem to be working. I was doing pretty badly six weeks or so ago, though I'm improving, but the meds cost a fortune, and I lost my job because I'd been so sick and couldn't keep up." Some of the green in Gregory's complexion seemed to fade. "By some miracle, I've been able to take my meds, but I couldn't keep the apartment any longer."

"What did your folks say?"

"That my HIV was God's punishment for my behavior. My mom seemed sympathetic, but my dad said I should save them any embarrassment and die quickly." A tear ran down Gregory's face. "He actually said I should die, my own father. I know I was stupid to everyone, but my own father wishing me dead...." Gregory buried his face in his hands, sobbing. "My own parents won't help me."

"Sebastian," Robert said from just behind him. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," he answered. "You remember Gregory."

Robert nodded, his expression darkening. “I stopped by for lunch, but you’re busy. I’ll just get something to go.”

“I don’t want to keep you,” Gregory said, already sliding out of the booth. “I’ll see you later.” He made it about half a step before losing his balance. Robert steadied him, nearly losing his own balance in the process.

“Just sit down, Gregory. You came here for a reason, so you may as well tell me what it is.” He knew he was being a little harsh, but the drama that seemed to surround his ex was starting to wear just a little thin.

Gregory sat, and Sebastian peered briefly over his shoulder, watching Robert, whose face was set in a hard expression he’d never seen before. Sebastian could tell he wanted to say something, but seemed to be restraining himself even as his lips went white.

“I don’t have a place to stay, and I know you don’t owe me anything, and I have no right to expect anything,” Gregory said, looking miserable. “I slept in my car last night because I didn’t have a place to go,” Gregory told him, sniffing a little.

Sebastian felt Robert’s hand on his shoulder, and he nearly jumped—not from the touch being unwanted, but from surprise. “Give me a minute,” Sebastian told Gregory before sliding out of the booth. Robert followed him across the room. “What do you think?” Sebastian asked, seeing the hard look on Robert’s face.

“Why are you asking me? It’s not as though I have the right to an opinion.”

“But you have one,” Sebastian pressed.

“Not really.” Robert’s expression softened. “I heard most of what he said, and I can understand how he feels, but I just don’t want him taking advantage of you.” Robert’s voice lowered. “You’re a kind person to even consider what he’s asking, and the thought that he could be using that....” Robert’s face hardened again as he looked across the room at Gregory.

“Okay, killer,” Sebastian told Robert with what he hoped was a disarming smile, “I can take care of myself.”

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“I know you can,” Robert told him, still glaring at Gregory. “I just don’t want to see you hurt.”

Sebastian stopped himself from touching Robert’s cheek. “Thank you, but Gregory lost that ability a while ago. If I do this, it’s because it’s the right thing to do. There’s only one person in this room who I care enough about to hurt me, and it’s not Gregory,” he told Robert, watching as the other man’s eyes widened and his lips curled into a smile. He’d known Robert only a week, but it seemed like so much longer. He didn’t know why—maybe it was because Robert actually seemed to care and didn’t always put himself first. Sebastian knew Gregory had, and probably would again. But that didn’t seem to be Robert’s way. He’d seen Robert’s face, but knowing that was concern for him rather than jealousy only made him care for Robert a little more.

“Do you still want me to come over this evening?” Robert asked him warily.

“Yes, very much,” Sebastian answered.

“Should I bring anything?”

Sebastian thought for a second before standing on his tiptoes to reach Robert’s ear. “Your toothbrush,” Sebastian whispered before stepping back, waiting to see Robert’s reaction. What he got wasn’t what he’d expected.

“Are you sure? If you’re going to let Gregory stay with you for a while, are you going to want me around like that?” The cute look on Robert’s face was priceless.

“Yes, Robert. If he stays, it’ll be in the guest room with his door and my door closed. I’m not interested in him. I’m interested in you, and I want to continue seeing you, regardless,” Sebastian told him.

“But what if we’re”—he saw Robert swallow, looking over at Gregory—“a little loud?”

“It’s still my house, and he can get himself some ear plugs,” Sebastian answered with a grin before realizing what the issue was. “It’s okay if you’re shy and quiet. We don’t have to do anything you aren’t comfortable with. It would be nice to have a repeat of last evening, if that’s what you’d like.” Sebastian heard some commotion

coming from the kitchen and glanced at the clock. "Let me get your order in before you're late getting back," he told Robert, "and you can think about tonight, but above all, yes, I'd really like to see you." Robert told him what he wanted for lunch, and Sebastian got the ticket into the kitchen. "Do you want it to go?"

"Please?" Robert asked, checking his own watch. When the food was ready, Sebastian brought Robert the bag. "Darryl said it's on him for helping us with the robbery."

"Tell him thank you, and I'll see you this evening," Robert said. "With my toothbrush," he added in a blushing whisper. Robert gave him another smile before hurrying out the door.

Making a check of the dining room, he walked to where Gregory still sat in the booth, watching them. "Is he your boyfriend?" Gregory asked quietly.

"It's new, but yes," Sebastian answered, quickly changing the subject. "I'll let you stay at the house," Sebastian told Gregory, and he saw relief in his eyes. "But I need to stress that this is only temporary, and that I will still have my life. Which will include Robert." *I hope.* Sebastian couldn't help a small smile at the thought.

"What if I—" Gregory started to say, but Sebastian cut him off.

"That's what got you into this, remember," Sebastian said firmly. "You will be my guest for a short while, nothing more. I'm opening my home to you, and I expect you to treat it accordingly."

"Is that what he said?" Gregory asked, motioning to where Robert had stood.

Sebastian shook his head. "You know, you were a selfish boyfriend and a selfish lover. I suggest you get over that before you and your selfish ass find yourselves on the street. I'll be home a little after four. If you can live with my rules, you can use the guest room."

Gregory's eyes lost any fire they might have had, and he looked worn out and beaten down. "Thank you, Bastian. I'll pay you back somehow."

The kitchen door opened, and Darryl, Kelly, and Maureen all came into the dining room carrying bowls of food. Billy had taken care

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of the last of the lunch customers and locked the front door. “Is your friend staying?” Darryl asked with a smile. Not knowing when Gregory had eaten last, Sebastian accepted Darryl’s offer with a thank you and helped get plates, silverware, and glasses.

Sebastian made quick introductions. He thought Darryl had met Gregory, but it had been a while. Darryl had given Gregory a wary look for a second before returning to the task at hand.

“This is a celebratory lunch to thank all of you for the fine job you did while Billy and I were away,” Darryl announced before starting to fill plates. He handed one to Gregory. Throughout lunch, Sebastian noticed that Gregory ate slowly, but finished the entire plate. Conversation swirled around the table, but Gregory stayed quiet, and Sebastian listened to tales of Billy and Darryl’s cruise with the boys.

As they finished up, Sebastian filled a to-go container with some of the pasta, setting it aside before the dishes were cleared away. Sebastian said goodbye to Gregory and unlocked the front door. “I’ll see you at the house a little after four,” he told him, and Gregory nodded, giving Sebastian a relieved smile as he left. Sebastian was about to close the door when he saw Sweeper hurrying down the street toward him, and Sebastian waved, waiting for the man to approach.

The homeless man slowed as he got closer, and Sebastian motioned for Billy to come up, leaving the two of them to talk. Billy handed Sweeper the container of food and filled his Thermos for him while he waited. Sebastian knew he had to be cold, but Sweeper never stayed inside for very long, and as soon as Billy returned with his Thermos, Sweeper left with a few muffled words.

“Do you know his real name?” Sebastian asked, standing next to Billy as Sweeper moved down the sidewalk.

“He said once his name was Malcolm, but that’s all I was ever able to get him to say. He has a room at a shelter somewhere at night, but can’t stay there during the day, so most of the time he’s out on the street somewhere.” Billy turned toward him. “I know he’s been on the street for quite a while, but I worry about him with winter coming.”

“I took care of him while you were away,” Sebastian told Billy as he turned to go back to work.

“I know. He told me. He said you and the other man were real nice to him. Who else would have helped him?”

Sebastian thought a minute, then said, “No one from here. I was the only one who dealt with him from the restaurant.”

“He said the other man saw him on the square and gave him a scarf because he thought he was cold. Sweeper said he was real tall and to tell both of you thank you.”

“Could it have been Robert?” Sebastian asked, almost to himself, curious while at the same time pleased that Robert had a kind heart.

“If it was, tell him Sweeper said thank you,” Billy told him before returning to work. They cleared all the remaining dishes and reset all the tables for dinner. As he worked, Sebastian had time to think and worry a little. Gregory was going to be staying with him. He had to help if he could, but he sincerely hoped he wasn’t going to regret it. “Do you have plans for your night off?” Billy asked him as he spread a tablecloth.

“Gregory’s moving into my guest room, and Robert’s coming over for the evening,” Sebastian told him.

“Is he staying for breakfast?” Billy asked teasingly. “He is,” Billy added when Sebastian didn’t answer. “Is it serious?”

“I’d like to think so, but I’ve been disappointed before,” Sebastian answered truthfully. “He invited me to his mother’s for Thanksgiving, so that’s definitely a good sign, because no one braves their parents unless they’re serious or trying to scare someone off,” Sebastian quipped, not letting himself contemplate the scaring-off option. “Did I tell you that Robert’s a judge? At least, he will be in January.” Sebastian knew he was bragging a little, but he couldn’t help it.

“No, you kept that part to yourself. So you gonna find out what he wears under those robes?” Billy asked, laughing, and Sebastian joined in without commenting further. He was more curious about what Robert looked like without his robes, or anything else for that matter, and hopefully he was going to get to find out.

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CHAPTER SIX

ROBERT paced nervously in front of Sebastian's house, stumbling twice, not quite ready to knock. Excitement warred with nerves. Making his decision, he lifted the knocker on the door and waited as a few flakes of snow drifted out of the sky on the slight breeze. "Hi, Robert," Sebastian said as he opened the door, a smile on his face, but his eyes filled with tension.

"Is everything okay?" Robert asked, stepping inside and looking around as he listened for any sound that might be out of place.

"Gregory's upstairs in the guest room getting himself settled," Sebastian told him, taking Robert's coat when he'd slipped it off. "I think things are worse than he let on, if that's possible."

"Healthwise?" Robert inquired, and Sebastian nodded slowly.

"He's coughing, and isn't looking too good. He has an appointment with his doctor tomorrow morning first thing. I made him call as soon as he got here, and had to carry his things upstairs for him because he couldn't." Sebastian motioned them into the living room. "I know you don't think this is a good idea, but I have to help him if I can."

Robert wasn't sure how to react or how he felt, but one thing was for certain, Sebastian's kindness wasn't something he should be receiving grief for, especially from him. "I know, and I think what you're doing to help him is good. As I told you before, I don't want to see you hurt or taken advantage of, that's all." Robert sat on the sofa with Sebastian sitting next to him. "Do you need any help?"

“No, I think he’s settled, and after dinner Gregory will probably go right to bed. He’s exhausted, and the confrontation with his parents hasn’t helped.” Sebastian moved a little closer. “Do you really want to talk about Gregory?”

“No,” Robert answered, hugging Sebastian close. “I’d rather talk about you. How were things at the restaurant?”

“Busy, how was your day?” Sebastian stirred next to him. “Didn’t you have a meeting at the courthouse with the President Judge?”

“Yes, it went really well. He told me that I may be starting before January. It seems they’re behind, and with my predecessor’s scandal, their caseload is backing up. He’s had to resign, and his position is sitting vacant, so the governor is being petitioned to appoint me to his seat a few months early. We’ll see what happens.”

“You sound excited.”

“I really am. I think it’s going to be a challenge, and as things have started to sink in, I’m becoming more comfortable with the idea. After the election, I was scared silly, but I think it’s going to be all right.”

“Why were you scared?” Sebastian asked. “Was it the gay thing?”

Robert nodded a little. “I’d kept that part of me a secret for so long, and the hiding was taking a toll on me. I never realized how much energy it took to keep hiding until I started to tell people.”

Robert heard footsteps on the stairs and stopped what he was saying, not comfortable talking about this in front of anyone but Sebastian right now. “Are you hungry?” Sebastian asked both him and Gregory when he popped his head in. “Give me a few minutes, and I’ll get dinner ready.”

“Can I help?” Robert asked, and he followed Sebastian into the kitchen as Gregory lowered himself into a chair.

“I think I’ve got things here,” Sebastian told him, and Robert stood near the table to keep Sebastian company. For some reason he didn’t feel comfortable being alone with Gregory. “You could set the table,” Sebastian told him, and Robert pulled open the drawer Sebastian indicated, getting the silverware. “What’s upsetting you?”

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Robert stopped, setting the utensils on the table with a collective jingle. "I'm not sure," Robert huffed softly. "I want to be with you, and having him here makes me uncomfortable, like we're being spied on or something. I know that's not what's happening, but it's what it feels like." Sebastian looked at him, but said nothing. "I know I'm just being weird, and I'll get over it."

"Why don't you go talk to him? I'm okay in here. Maybe you'll feel better if you get to know him a little." Robert saw Sebastian turn to look at him before chuckling. "He's not such a bad guy. He just did some dumb things. I've got things here," Sebastian told him, so Robert wandered back into the living room, sitting on the sofa. Gregory didn't say anything, and Robert wasn't particularly in a mood for conversation. Maybe coming here tonight had been a mistake. He wanted to see Sebastian, but he'd had no idea how uncomfortable Gregory would make him, and what was worse, he wasn't really sure why he was so unsettled. He just knew the man made him nervous.

"So you're Sebastian's new boyfriend," Gregory said softly, dark-rimmed eyes looking up from studying his shoes.

"I guess so, yes. We met a week ago," Robert said, mostly to fill the empty space.

"He's a really good guy," Gregory added. "Not many people would take someone in like this."

"No, they wouldn't." A slight edge crept into Robert's voice. "I hope you realize what he's doing for you."

Gregory coughed and seemed to deflate a little more. "I do. After the way I treated him, I couldn't blame him if he'd have chucked me out onto the street, but not Sebastian, he's helping me."

"I know. He has a kind heart," Robert commented, his eyes flashing a warning.

Gregory's eyes became hard in response. "So make sure you don't hurt him."

"I was about to tell you the same thing."

"Look," Gregory said softly, "I'll admit I was hoping to get him back, but he's made it more than plain that's not going to happen. I screwed up big-time when I was with Sebastian, and I know that. Those

mistakes have cost me everything.” Robert saw Gregory’s eyes glisten in the lamp light. “My family won’t have anything to do with me, my job’s gone, and so is my home. Even my other friends turned their backs on me. Only Sebastian was willing to help, and for that I’m grateful.”

Robert found himself relaxing a little. “So, are you healthy?”

“I think so. The medications are working. I have a cold or something right now, but it’s getting better, and,” he said, smiling, “Sebastian insisted I see the doctor tomorrow. Hopefully there’s something they can do to help me.” Gregory coughed into a tissue for a few seconds before settling back in the chair. “What do you do?” he asked.

“I’m a lawyer, and in a few months I’ll be a judge,” Robert answered, and he heard Gregory whistle. “It’s not that big a deal. What did you do?”

“I managed a shoe store at the mall, but after I got sick, I couldn’t work anymore.” Gregory coughed again, a little less violently this time, and Robert thought it was probably a good thing Gregory had a doctor’s appointment in the morning.

“Dinner’s ready,” Sebastian called from the other room, and Robert watched Gregory lift himself out of the chair, following the much-smaller man through the house to the table in the kitchen.

“Smells wonderful,” Robert said with a smile as he pulled out a chair, kicking the table leg as he sat down, jarring the table. Sebastian joined them, and Robert squeezed his hand under the table as the food was passed. They didn’t talk much, but Sebastian and Robert exchanged worried looks when Gregory picked at his food, eating little. Robert felt his heart going out to Gregory. He wasn’t sure he trusted him, but he did feel for him and hoped he got better. He didn’t seem like a bad guy, but he’d hurt Sebastian in the past, and that was enough for Robert to be wary.

After they’d finished eating, Robert helped Sebastian clear the dishes. “I’m going to lie down,” Gregory said softly after getting up from the table. “Thank you, Sebastian... for everything.”

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“You’re welcome,” Sebastian answered with a half smile. “Get some rest. I already called the restaurant to tell them I’d be late so I can take you to the doctor in the morning.”

“Thanks,” Gregory said before coughing again as he left the room.

“Where are the dish towels? I’ll help you with the dishes,” Robert offered. Sebastian pointed to the drawer near the sink. Sebastian washed and Robert dried, carefully. He couldn’t remember doing domestic things with anyone, and it was sort of nice doing simple things together like the dishes. His mother would have asked if he was nuts and then wondered what had happened to her son.

“Did you have a nice talk?”

“I guess,” Robert answered, drying a plate before putting it in the cupboard where Sebastian indicated. “I understand how he feels, and he probably isn’t such a bad guy.”

“But...,” Sebastian prodded.

“He hurt you,” Robert supplied, and he felt Sebastian lean against him.

“You’re a sweet man, you know that?” Sebastian told him, his hands in the dishwater as he washed the last pan. Rinsing the last of the dishes, Sebastian set them in the drainer. “They’re fine,” he told Robert. Wiping his hands on the towel, Robert handed it to Sebastian, and after a final cleanup, Robert felt Sebastian’s hand slide into his, leading him back toward the family room. Settling on the sofa, Sebastian looked up at him, eyes soft. “Do you want to tell me what’s got you so nervous? You handled every dish as though it were made of eggshell.”

“I’m fine,” Robert answered, sitting next to him.

“Robert,” Sebastian said, holding his hand, “you’ve been wound as tight as a drum ever since you arrived, and I saw you pacing out in front of the house. What’s wrong? Is it Gregory and what’s happening with him? Are you upset that he’s here?” The questions came at him rapidly, and Robert started to wonder if Sebastian was some sort of lawyer in disguise.

“Sebastian, please,” Robert said softly, unsure of how to bring up the subject. “It’s not any of that.” Robert stood up, his nervousness not allowing him to sit still. “We never talked about certain things when I was growing up. One of them was my dad—Mom refused to ever say anything about him. And the other was sex, and I find it hard to talk about.”

Sebastian walked to him, his gentle face peering up at him. “What’s got you so nervous?”

“Sebastian, I’ve never—” He stopped, sighing. “Been with anyone like that.” There, he’d said it.

“No one?” Sebastian asked, and Robert shook his head. “That’s nothing to be ashamed of or worried about.” Sebastian took his hand again, leading him back to the sofa. “It’s okay to talk about things like this. There’s nothing wrong or dirty about it.”

Robert wasn’t so sure about that. Deny and ignore, that was how his family dealt with things.

“You’ve never been with a woman?” Sebastian asked him, and Robert shook his head.

“No one. Women didn’t interest me, and I guess I was too scared and too far in the closet to do anything with a man. So I studied and worked.” *And used my hand*, but he wasn’t about to say that part. “I was always so tall and skinny, no one looked twice at me.”

“Robert, I did,” Sebastian said, moving closer. “You don’t need to be nervous or afraid of anything. We would never do anything you weren’t ready for. I always thought I had it hard as a teenager, but maybe I didn’t. I was out and sex was no big deal because I was fearless, and very lucky.” Sebastian tilted his head, catching Robert’s gaze. “Close your eyes for me,” Sebastian told him, and Robert narrowed his eyebrows, wondering what Sebastian was doing. “Go ahead, I’d never hurt you, you know that.” Robert did as Sebastian asked. “Do you remember those nights as a teenager when you were all alone in your bed?”

Robert felt himself nod. “Yeah.”

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“What was it you thought about, fantasized about when you were alone?” Sebastian whispered into his ear, and Robert felt himself color slightly. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but I want you to remember what it was that excited you,” Sebastian murmured to him as a hand slid over his shirt. Robert jumped, his eyes flying open when he felt Sebastian touch his ear. “Relax, it’s okay.”

Robert closed his eyes, letting himself relax again. Sebastian touched his cheek, stroking his skin. Being touched felt so good, and he leaned into it. “That’s nice,” Robert whispered.

“Good. Now remember what you used to think about when you were alone.”

Robert smiled. He could see him standing in the locker room: Todd Miller, tall, athletic, strong. They had the same gym class, and Robert would peek at him as he showered, but in his fantasies, he was in Robert’s room, and they were alone. That was how it had always started. Opening his eyes, the fantasy faded away, and Robert looked at Sebastian, realizing for once that real life was so much better. Taking Sebastian’s hand, he held it, bringing it to his lips, kissing the warm skin before leaning closer. Sebastian’s lips met his in a slow, simmering kiss that nearly took Robert’s breath away. Robert returned it, hugging Sebastian close, and he felt Sebastian shift on the sofa, their chests coming together as Sebastian intensified the kiss to a near mind-blowing level. He wanted to stop to breathe, but didn’t want to break the kiss, either. Finally, breathing won out, and their lips parted, but only for a second.

Years of denial fell away as Robert began to realize just what he’d been missing. His kiss gentled, and Sebastian’s lips slowly moved away. “Sebastian,” Robert mumbled. “What did you do? My head’s spinning,” he said, returning Sebastian’s grin.

Sebastian slipped off the sofa, extending his hand. Robert took it and followed Sebastian through the house as lights were turned off, and then up the stairs. His nerves threatened to kick up again, but he quelled them with the memory of that kiss. He wasn’t sure how comfortable he was with more right now, but Sebastian had said they could go slow, and he believed him. At the top of the stairs, Sebastian led him down the hall and into a large bedroom with a massive bed and a headboard

that had to be nine feet tall. “Just relax and don’t worry about anything,” Sebastian told him.

“But what if I’m no good?” Robert asked. “What if I hurt you or something?”

Sebastian’s chuckle reached his ears in the nearly dark room. “As long as you care for the person you’re with, you can’t do anything wrong.” Sebastian tugged him around the neck, and he leaned forward, kissing Sebastian again. Being tall was definitely a disadvantage in the kissing department, especially when they were both standing. “Sit back on the edge of the bed,” Sebastian told him, and Robert carefully found the edge of the mattress, sitting down, and Sebastian immediately moved to stand between his legs, the kissing continuing much more easily now.

Robert wasn’t sure what he should do, what Sebastian would like, so he kept his hands at his side, returning the kisses but wondering what was okay. Sebastian seemed to read his mind. A hand slipped into his, lifting it, placing it on Sebastian’s back. Then the other one was held in Sebastian’s hand as Robert began to tilt backward under Sebastian’s onslaught. “I meant what I said, Robert. You can’t do anything wrong,” Sebastian whispered against his lips before pushing him backward onto the bed. Fingers began working open his shirt, and Robert tensed.

Sebastian stopped, and Robert stayed where he was, suddenly embarrassed. “Sebastian, what if I’m ugly?”

The weight on top of him slipped away, and Robert blinked when Sebastian turned on a small light. “What do you mean ugly? How could you be ugly?”

Robert sat back up, looking down at his shoes. “I’m a skinny beanpole,” he started, unsure how he could explain. “I love winter because I can wear more layers of clothes. That way it looks as though I’m bigger than I am.” Sebastian made a dismissive sound, but Robert continued. “I’m six foot six and weight a hundred and eighty pounds. There’s nothing to me. I’m not buff, I’m....”

A finger slipped under his chin. “You’re you, Robert, and that’s enough,” Sebastian told him, stepping closer.

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“Turn out the light,” Robert begged.

“No,” Sebastian countered, “I want to see you, all of you.” Sebastian moved close again. “And this way you can see me.” Sebastian opened the buttons of his own shirt, and Robert’s eyes bulged out. “See, we all have something we’re not happy about.

“What happened?” Robert asked, his finger tracing the scar on Sebastian’s side. “Did someone do that to you?”

“I had surgery a few years ago, and they had to remove part of one of my kidneys. I’m fine now and have been ever since.” Sebastian took Robert’s hand. “See, no one is perfect—even those guys in the magazines with the spray-on abs.” Sebastian smiled wickedly, moving his fingers back to Robert’s shirt, opening the buttons and slipping it off Robert’s shoulders, and pushing him back onto the bed.

The room became quiet as Sebastian’s hands glided over Robert’s skin, a finger outlining a nipple, making him wriggle on the bed. A soft coughing sound drifted in from outside the room, and Robert felt Sebastian stop and listen. The sound died away, and Sebastian started kissing him again, this time with urgency. Robert hugged Sebastian to him, their chests pressing together as his hands stroked Sebastian’s back, smooth, warm skin sliding beneath his fingers. He was actually feeling another man against his skin, being kissed and touched. He’d imagined what it would be like to have sex with another man, but he didn’t think it would feel like this, so tender and loving. “Sebastian,” Robert moaned softly, writhing on the bed as soft fingers plucked at one of his nipples. Swallowing hard, he looked deep into Sebastian’s eyes, kissing him deeply. Everything fell away, his heart pounding in his ears as he gave himself over to the kiss.

Then Sebastian stopped, pulling away, and Robert stilled, blinking, wondering what was wrong. It took his dazed mind a second to realize he was hearing more coughing, and this time it seemed to keep building. Gasping followed, and Sebastian slipped off him as they both listened. Finally, the sound subsided, and Sebastian moved closer again, then the coughing sound drifted into the room again. “I think I’d better check on him.”

Robert nodded, the cool air sliding over his skin. Shivering slightly, Robert reached for his shirt, and Sebastian grabbed his own from the floor, shrugging it on as he left the room.

Sitting quietly, he listened, but all Robert heard were the sounds of Gregory coughing. Then finally he heard footsteps rushing down the hall. “Robert, he’s having trouble breathing. I think we need to take him to the hospital,” Sebastian told him, eyes wide with worry and a touch of panic.

“Okay. Is he dressed?” Sebastian shook his head. “See if you can get some clothes on him and grab a blanket.” Robert was already off the bed, pulling on his shirt. “I’m parked down the block. I’ll get my coat and pull the car right up in front of the house. You get him out there as soon as you can.” Robert finished buttoning his shirt and was already at the doorway by the time he’d finished talking. “It’s going to be all right,” he told Sebastian before walking down the hall. He could hear the hacking coughs get louder as he passed Gregory’s room. The door was open, and he saw the half-dressed man trying to breathe and cough at the same time.

In the entrance hall, Robert found his coat, pulling it on as he opened the front door, heading out into the cold night. Hurrying to his car, he got in and started the engine, pulling out into the street. Pushing buttons, he turned on the seat heaters as he drove around the block, pulling back up in front of Sebastian’s house. As he tooted the horn softly, he felt under the dash, the first warm air just starting to blow into the car. Cranking the fan, he felt the heat as he saw the front door open. Robert got out, opened the passenger door, and helped a still-coughing Gregory across the sidewalk and into the front seat of the car. Closing the door, Robert rushed around to the driver’s seat, getting in while Sebastian locked the house before getting in the backseat. As soon as he heard the door close, Robert gunned the powerful engine, taking off down the street. Barely stopping at the first corner, he continued rushing down the streets, paying no attention to the speed limit.

Red and blue flashing lights appeared behind him, but Robert was nearing the hospital now and wasn’t about to stop. He’d explain things after Gregory was inside. Making the final turn, he pulled into the

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hospital drive and up under the portico. “Go inside,” Robert told Sebastian. “I’ll explain things to the police.” The back door opened and Sebastian got out, opening the front door to help Gregory out of the car. An orderly came outside with a wheelchair, and they hurried Gregory inside, the sound of his coughing splitting the cold night air.

For the entire drive, Gregory had only stopped coughing for a few seconds, and all he’d done then was try to catch his breath for the next coughing fit. With each rasping, grating cough, Robert felt his tension and worry build, and he could only imagine what Sebastian was feeling for his friend. Robert waited in the driver’s seat until the police officer approached his door. He handed the man his license and registration. “You ran every stop sign for five blocks,” the officer told him.

“I know. My friend could barely breathe, and I had to get him here,” Robert explained calmly, looking through the windows to where Sebastian stood next to Gregory’s wheelchair. He could see Gregory shaking as he continued coughing, and he saw the police officer looking as well.

“I’ll be right back,” the officer told Robert. “Please stay in the car.” The officer walked back to his car, and Robert rolled up the window as he waited for his ticket. A few minutes later the officer returned, and Robert lowered the window again. “I’m not going to ticket you, your honor, but next time, please call us. We’ll be glad to escort you to the hospital if you need it.” Robert narrowed his gaze, wondering for a second how the officer knew who he was.

“I don’t want any special treatment, Officer....” Robert checked his name tag. “Amery.”

“You aren’t getting any. This happens, and if it’s an emergency, we don’t ticket people. I’d want folks to do the same for me if I needed it. Drive home safe and don’t run any stop signs,” he said with a smirk before walking back to his car. The lights switched off, and Robert rolled up his window, pulling out from under the portico and into a parking spot.

Hurrying into the hospital, he found Sebastian in the waiting area. “Where is he?” Robert asked, sinking into a chair.

“They already took him back and asked me to wait out here.” Sebastian looked drawn and tired. “Is it stupid to be worried about him?”

“No. He’s your friend, and when I talked with him, he seemed like a nice guy who needs help,” Robert told Sebastian, wondering why he was so worried about the man himself. “Besides, I was pretty worried too.” Robert looked toward the desk. “Did they tell you anything?”

“No. Because of his coughing, they asked me to stay out here and said someone would be with us once he’d been seen,” Sebastian said, his leg bouncing nervously. “I hate hospitals.”

“Because of your surgery?” Robert asked, remembering the scar on Sebastian’s side.

“I keep flashing back to the pain,” Sebastian commented softly. “This is so not how I expected this evening to go.”

“Me too,” Robert added, but he wouldn’t have changed anything, and he was glad he’d been there to help. They grew quiet, each of them looking around whenever a door opened, hoping someone would come tell them what was going on. A few times, Sebastian walked over to the counter, but the lady couldn’t tell him anything. “It’s okay, Bastian,” he said, trying the nickname on for size, but finding it didn’t suit. “Sorry,” Robert added, “I thought it would be sweet, but it doesn’t sound right.”

“It’s what Gregory used to call me,” Sebastian said as he turned to look at the door once more.

“Give it time. I know the waiting is painful, but he’s going to be okay. I know it.”

Sebastian squirmed in the chair. “It shouldn’t be us here at all. His parents should be the ones taking care of him,” Sebastian told Robert bitterly. “They’re very fundamentalist, but I can’t figure out how turning your back on your own child could ever be the Christian thing to do. My dad never really understood the whole gay thing, and we weren’t as close after I told him, but he never turned his back on me. I knew he loved me even if he didn’t or couldn’t understand. But to cut him off and refuse to help him....” Sebastian shook his head slowly, his face a mask of confusion and anger.

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"I know," Robert said, comforting him.

"Is it terrible of me to wonder how Gregory's going to pay for all this?" Sebastian asked.

"No. There are organizations that can help, and we'll figure something out once he's better," Robert soothed.

Thankfully, a few minutes later a man in a white coat walked out into the waiting room. "Is one of you Sebastian?"

"Yes," Sebastian said as he jumped to his feet. "How is Gregory?"

"We've got the coughing under control, but he's got an infection in his lungs. Thankfully, it hasn't turned to pneumonia, at least not yet. His condition complicates things, but I'm glad you got him here so fast. We've moved him to an isolation ward to minimize any further infection. We'll need to keep him here for a few days, at least."

"Can I see him?" Sebastian asked, but the doctor shook his head.

"I'd rather you didn't right now. The fewer people he's around right now, the better, and I've given him something to help him sleep, so he probably won't even know you're there. I suggest you go home and get some rest. He should be up to visitors tomorrow, with any luck."

Sebastian looked as though he were about to argue, but thanked the doctor instead. Picking up his coat, Sebastian shrugged it on before following Robert out to the car. Neither of them talked much as Robert drove back to Sebastian's. Pulling up in front of the house, Sebastian got out. "Are you coming inside?" he asked softly.

"I wasn't sure whether you wanted me to," Robert answered, and Sebastian nodded slowly, so Robert found a parking space and walked back to the house. The door opened as soon as he climbed the stairs. Taking off his coat, Sebastian led him upstairs to the bedroom. They passed the guest room, now dark and quiet. Inside Sebastian's bedroom, Robert looked around, not feeling particularly sexy, figuring Sebastian didn't either.

"The bathroom's just down the hall," Sebastian told him softly. "I set out things for you to use."

Robert left the bedroom, walking into the small room where towels and other things had been laid out for him. Robert cleaned up, looking at himself in the mirror, wondering what he was doing. He probably should have gone home. Sighing, he finished and used the toilet before returning to the bedroom.

Sebastian sat on the edge of the bed, shirtless and barefoot, waiting for him. Sebastian stood up, slipping off his pants, but leaving his boxers on, before pulling back the covers and slipping underneath. Robert toed off his shoes before stripping to his own underwear. Sebastian lowered the covers, and Robert joined him between the sheets. It had been a long time since he'd slept with anyone, none of them romantic in nature, and once Sebastian turned out the light, Robert felt the other man curl next to him, holding him. He'd never felt that before, and Robert held Sebastian in return, finally figuring out some of what he'd been missing. "Good night, Robert," Sebastian whispered in the dark.

"Night," Robert said, kissing Sebastian's forehead as he lightly rubbed the other man's arm. Robert stayed awake for quite a while, listening to the sound of Sebastian's quiet breathing as he stared at the ceiling above. So much had changed for him in such a short period of time—winning the election to the bench, starting to come out, meeting Sebastian. He should have been trembling at all the change, but he wouldn't undo anything. Feeling Sebastian's warmth, his soft skin next to his, he knew he definitely wouldn't change having Sebastian in his life, not if he could help it. He felt good, right, and in all of his fantasies, he'd never imagined just how wonderful it could feel to simply have another person holding him in the night, especially one he cared for.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SEBASTIAN forced his eyes open, listening for sounds in the quiet house, and he immediately thought of Robert and what it had felt like to wake up next to him. That had been a couple days earlier, and some of his scent still lingered on the pillow. Gregory was still in the hospital, and it looked as though he would be there a few days more. At least Sebastian didn't have to be at the restaurant too early. Checking the clock, he smiled when he saw the time and realized he had another hour to sleep.

His phone had other ideas as it began buzzing on the nightstand. Slipping his arm from under the covers, he snaked it out to snatch the phone, checking the display. "Robert, is something wrong?"

"No," Robert answered with a chuckle, "I was wondering if you wanted to go visit Gregory before you go in to work. I don't have any appointments this morning, and I could take you up if you wanted."

"That'd be great," Sebastian said through a yawn. "I can be ready in twenty minutes."

"I'll bring coffee and breakfast."

Sebastian yawned again, setting down the phone. That man was just way too chipper in the morning. Granted, Sebastian's morning usually started way too early for anyone to be chipper. Getting out of bed, he shivered in the cool room before putting on his robe and heading to the bathroom. After cleaning up and dressing, Sebastian walked down the stairs in time to hear Robert's knock on the door. Opening it, he saw the tall man grinning, holding up coffee cups and a

food bag. “Oh, thank God,” Sebastian purred, reaching for the large cup of coffee, sipping it through the plastic lid. Yawning for what he hoped was the final time, Sebastian led the way through to the kitchen.

They ate quickly and in relative quiet, Sebastian not awake enough to carry on a conversation. After throwing away the packaging when they were done, Sebastian grabbed his coat, following Robert out to his car. “I know we can’t stay long, but I figured Gregory could use some company,” Robert told him. “When I was up yesterday, he seemed better and wasn’t coughing anymore.”

Since they’d taken Gregory to the hospital, Sebastian had been surprised that Robert went up to visit him every day. A few times when he’d arrived, he found Robert sitting in the chair next to Gregory’s bed, the two of them talking in low voices. “I never would have guessed the two of you would become friends,” Sebastian said with a smile.

“That’s okay, isn’t it?” Robert asked him, his expression one Sebastian couldn’t read.

“Of course. I just hadn’t expected it.” Sebastian wasn’t quite sure what to make of Robert’s reaction, but he let it go. It was too early in the morning to try to figure out the subtleties of anyone’s emotions. “I’m happy about it, actually,” Sebastian added, settling back in the seat as they lapsed into silence.

At the hospital, after putting hospital gowns over their clothes and masks over their noses and mouths, they spent about an hour visiting with Gregory, who seemed much more alert and seemed to have more energy. “They changed my meds, and it seems to be working,” he told them shortly after they arrived in the room. “The doctors said that what I was on before wasn’t really helping, and that’s why I got so sick. They said I could leave the hospital in a few days.”

Sebastian looked at Gregory’s now-thin hand. “Don’t worry, your room at the house is waiting for you.” He knew that had to be weighing on Gregory’s mind. “Just worry about getting better,” Sebastian said, wishing he could touch Gregory, feeling like he was just out of reach even though they were next to each other.

Robert stood up near the bed. “I need to get Sebastian to work, but we wanted to stop by and see you.” Robert leaned over the bed,

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meeting Gregory's eyes. "I'll stop in this evening after work." Robert waited while Sebastian said his goodbyes. Gregory seemed even thinner than he had a few days earlier. Saying their last goodbyes, they left the room and walked down the hall toward the elevators.

"I wonder if he's actually eating," Robert commented almost to himself as he pressed the call button. "He looks even thinner than he did yesterday."

"I know," Sebastian said as the elevator door opened, "but at least he looks better and seems to have a bit of energy." They got in the elevator and rode down to the main floor, saying nothing since there were other people in the car with them. Exiting the elevator, they walked out to Robert's car.

"I was wondering if you'd like to come over to my place this evening," Robert asked, looking a bit shy. "I'd really like to see you, and we've both been busy."

"I have to close tonight, but don't have to be in until dinner tomorrow. If that's okay, I'd love to," Sebastian answered slipping into the seat, closing his door as Robert leaned across to kiss him lightly.

"I can't wait," Robert told him as he started the engine. Pulling out of the parking lot, Robert drove him to the restaurant, letting him out and waving at him as Sebastian stood on the sidewalk, returning the wave before going inside.

"I take it someone's been having a good time," Billy teased as Sebastian walked into the restaurant.

"You're a laugh riot, Billy, you know that?" Sebastian countered, trying to sound gruff, but his smile wouldn't allow it. He really was happy, and Robert was wonderful.

"I know that look," Billy told him as he reset one of the tables after finding some dirty silverware. "You're chewing on something, so you may as well tell me about it."

Sebastian moved to where Billy was working, helping him lay out the place settings. "I'm starting to think Robert only sees me as a friend," Sebastian told Billy, keeping his voice low. "A few days ago, I invited him over—"

“Was that the night you took Gregory to the hospital?” Billy asked interrupting.

“Yeah, and he stayed the night. We didn’t do anything because we were so tired and kind of shook up. After that we’ve both visited Gregory in the hospital, and he’s been over once, but he never makes any sort of move, and I’ve done everything short of jumping him on the sofa and humping his leg.”

“Did you ask him about it?” Billy questioned, and Sebastian closed his mouth. “I’ll take that as a no.” Billy finished folding the napkins, placing them at each setting. “I don’t think Robert looks at you as a friend, if the way his eyes shine whenever he sees you is any indication. Maybe he wants to take things slow, or”—Billy lowered his voice—“maybe you need to take the lead. After all, you said he’s not very experienced, and lord knows you are.” Billy grinned and jumped back as Sebastian grabbed one of the folded napkins off the table to take a swat at him. He missed, but gave his friend a mock glare. “You know I’m right,” Billy told him, like he could read his mind. “Shit,” Billy swore lightly, “I have to go pick up the boys at school. They have a half day today. Will you cover for me? I’ll be back as quick as I can, I promise.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sebastian told Billy, and they finished getting the restaurant ready to open.

“Shit,” Billy gasped after checking his watch. “I’m going to be late picking up the boys. Thanks for covering. I shouldn’t be long.” Billy grabbed his coat and hurried out of the restaurant.

Darryl came out of the kitchen a few minutes later. “You going to be okay without Billy?” he asked. “I can call someone in.”

“He said he wouldn’t be long, and it doesn’t get busy until after eleven thirty.”

“He should be back by then,” Darryl explained as he looked around the room, checking out everything.

“Then we’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it.”

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“Thanks, Sebastian,” Darryl added with a small smile, his eyes still looking at every detail. “Looks good. Everything ready for opening?”

“You bet. I just need to make an extra pot of coffee. It’s a cold one outside, and we always go through more on days like this,” Sebastian told him, already moving toward the coffee station. Putting on another pot of coffee, he saw someone outside the door and heard a soft knock. Seeing Sweeper outside, he hurried to the front door to let him inside. “You have to be freezing,” Sebastian said as he closed the door behind the older man.

“It’s a little cold,” Sweeper said, but he didn’t move further into the restaurant. “Billy said I could bring this by for coffee.” Sweeper held up his Thermos.

“I just put on a couple pots. They’ll take a few minutes,” Sebastian explained to the skittish man. “Why don’t you have a seat? Are you hungry?”

Sweeper shook his head. “I don’t want to mess up any of yer fancy tables.”

“You’re not going to hurt anything,” Sebastian insisted, pulling out a chair. “Take a few minutes to warm up, and I’ll see what the kitchen has ready.” Sebastian hurried away through the swinging kitchen door. “Hey, Darryl, what do we have ready?” Darryl looked up from his station with a quizzical gaze. “Sweeper’s out front, and I think he’s hungry.”

Darryl tut-tutted softly. “You and Billy, you’re such bleeding hearts,” he teased. “I’ll have a plate for him in a few minutes.”

“Thanks,” Sebastian replied with a smile, watching as Maureen nudged the chef with her arm as he left the kitchen. He didn’t know what she said to him, but he figured she was giving him grief about his bleeding heart comment. Especially since everyone knew Darryl’s heart was just as soft as Billy’s, and that the chef was a soft touch for anyone in need.

“Darryl will have a plate for you in a few minutes,” Sebastian said as he approached where Sweeper sat, fidgeting nervously. “I brought you some coffee,” he added, setting down the cup, “and before

you leave, I'll fill your Thermos for you." Sebastian poured coffee from the pot, filling Sweeper's cup."

"Thank you," Sweeper said softly before sipping the hot liquid. "You didn't have to do that."

Sebastian scoffed lightly. "You know Billy would kill me if I didn't take care of you." Sebastian put the pot away before returning to the table. Pulling out the chair across from Sweeper, he checked his watch before sitting down. He had a few minutes before the opening.

"Billy's a good kid," Sweeper said, setting down his cup. Sebastian's pager vibrated, and he walked back to the kitchen to get Sweeper's plate. Returning, he set it in front of him, smiling as the old man's face lit with mouthwatering relish. "This is too good for the likes of me," he said, before immediately starting to eat.

"My mother would have loved you," Sebastian commented lightly, and Sweeper looked up at him, barely pausing. "She always hated people who picked at her food. She said the highest compliment any cook could get were people who were too busy eating to talk."

"Mine always said, 'Eat what I cook or starve. We Norrises can't afford to be picky.'" Sweeper gave him a quick smile and went back to eating. "Dang, this is good," Sweeper said, humming.

"I have to open up, but take your time, and I'll fill your Thermos before you leave," Sebastian told him before getting up. Making one last check of the dining room, Sebastian unlocked the door, and a few people rushed inside, shivering from the cold. Helping them to tables, Sebastian got to work, keeping an eye on Sweeper in case he needed anything. Easily slipping into work mode, he took care of the early tables, refilling Sweeper's coffee cup a few times, letting the man stay warm. When he saw him getting restless, he took his Thermos to the back, washing it before filling it with coffee. "Stay warm, Sweeper," he said as he handed him the container and watched him walk out the door, his coat already bundled around him, scarf pulled high.

"Uncle Sebastian!" His name rang through the restaurant as Billy's brothers came through the door. "Where's Uncle Robert?" Davey asked, looking around.

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Sebastian looked to Billy, who simply shrugged. “He’s at work,” Sebastian answered, figuring it was the easiest way.

“He is still your boyfriend, isn’t he?” Davey pressed, big innocent eyes looking up at him, and when Sebastian nodded, Davey seemed satisfied, following Donnie into the kitchen.

“They don’t miss much, do they?” Sebastian asked as Billy hung up his coat.

“No,” Billy told him as a large group came in the door. “I’ll get them,” Billy said as he hurried to the door. Sebastian worked the room, clearing tables when he wasn’t otherwise occupied. At Sweeper’s place, he cleared the dishes, finding a crumpled dollar next to the coffee cup. Picking it up, he nearly put it into his pocket, but stopped himself. Swallowing hard, Sebastian felt himself smiling as he refolded the bill, placing it in his shirt pocket so he could set it aside.

“What’s that?” Billy whispered over his shoulder as he passed.

“The best tip I ever got,” Sebastian replied, getting back to work.

Lunch was busy, but steady, and Sebastian found himself looking toward the door whenever it opened. He’d always done that, but what surprised him was the realization that he was looking for Robert. Whenever his phone rang, he found himself reaching for it, hoping it was Robert. It got to the point where he gave Robert’s number a different ring tone so he’d know. He almost didn’t want to admit, even to himself, that he was falling for Robert. He held on to the notion that it was too soon for him to be feeling like this, especially with someone still coming out.

“You okay?” Sebastian jumped slightly as he turned to find Billy standing right behind him. “Because I thought the coffee pots had suddenly gotten really interesting the way you were staring at them,” Billy teased as he filled two cups, taking them away to his table.

After lunch, he and Billy, along with the bussers, cleaned and reset the dining room for dinner. They’d just finished when Darryl, Kelly, and Julio carried dishes from the kitchen to the back table they used. “I’m trying this out for next week, so you need to tell me what you think,” Darryl told everyone as the boys hurried out from the kitchen, taking their places at the table.

“Do you want some?” Billy asked Davey and Donnie, who both took one look and shook their heads violently.

“I already fed them,” Darryl explained, but Sebastian knew there was no way the boys would eat the eel dish Darryl had prepared, not in a million years. “This is authentically Belgian, but I’m not sure how our customers will embrace it.”

Billy took a bite and Sebastian did as well, both of them shaking their heads. “I have to say I’m with the boys on this one,” Sebastian commented, reaching for the chicken pasta dish.

“Kelly, what do you think?” Darryl asked his sous chef.

“I like it, but I’m afraid it’s not going to go over, not here.”

“That’s what I was afraid of, but I thought I’d try.” Darryl sounded resigned. “It’s getting harder to develop new things,” he groused lightly, and Sebastian saw Billy reach under the table.

“But, Darryl,” Davey said from across the table as he rolled his eyes dramatically, “eels, yuk!” The adults tried to keep a straight face, but everyone lost it at the same time, doubling over with laughter. Even Darryl gave it up and began to laugh.

“Uncle Robert!” Donnie called from his chair. Sebastian turned and saw him outside the door. Before he could get up, Donnie had slipped off his chair, running to the front door to let him in.

“Hi, Donnie,” Robert said as he walked inside.

“How’d you know it was me?” Donnie asked. The twins had gotten used to people not being able to tell them apart.

“I just did,” Robert answered.

“Did you want to join us for lunch? I can get another plate,” Billy asked, already getting up.

“No, thank you.” Robert’s expression changed, becoming more serious. “The hospital called. Gregory’s taken a turn for the worse. He was having trouble breathing again, and they found another infection. It wouldn’t be a big deal for anyone else, but with his immune system compromised, he’s having a hard time fighting it off. They tried to call you, but you weren’t answering. I tried, too, but figured I’d be sure to find you here.”

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“Should we go to the hospital?”

Robert shook his head. “There’s nothing we can do. They said the fewer people he comes in contact with the better. Give him a call this afternoon, though. I just wanted to make sure you knew what was happening. The bad thing is that he picked up the infection in the hospital.” Robert’s eyes said he was more than pissed. “I’m expecting a call from the administrator. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to eat?” Sebastian asked, suddenly wanting very badly for Robert to stay.

Robert leaned close to him, face right near his. “I wish I could, but I have to get back.” He felt Robert’s lips touch his cheek. “I’ll see you when you’re done here, though.”

Sebastian shivered slightly at the light touch, watching Robert as he walked toward the door. Donnie raced over, and Robert lifted the youngster into his arms, hugging him before setting him back on his feet. Donnie said goodbye, holding the door for Robert, still grinning as Robert said something to him just before he walked out the door, stumbling on the sidewalk.

Donnie closed the door, reaching up to lock it before rushing excitedly back to the table. “Uncle Robert said I can see his courtroom,” Donnie told the group, “and I get to bang his hammer thing.”

“You mean his gavel,” Billy corrected.

“Yeah, I get to pound the gavel,” Donnie said proudly, sitting in his chair.

Davey turned to Billy. “Can I pound it too?”

“I’m sure Robert will let both of you bang his gavel once he’s sworn in,” Billy soothed, getting the boys situated back in their places before leaning over the table. “I bet you’re anxious to bang Robert’s gavel,” Billy leered, and Sebastian rolled his eyes as Darryl swatted Billy playfully on the butt. “Hey,” he cried, rubbing his rear end as he turned to Darryl.

“You be nice and stop picking on Sebastian. That’s my job,” Darryl said with a wink before returning to his lunch. The conversation returned to normal subjects—food, food, and more food—until lunch

was done. Everyone helped clean up before returning to work. Sebastian got the table ready for dinner while Billy restocked the serving stations.

Before dinner service was to start, the other servers arrived for work, and Sebastian checked that the bar was ready, putting the unique beer glasses in their places by brand and type. He made sure everything was exactly ready for service by the time the doors were opened, and dinner customers began to arrive, along with Marie, who took the boys home, but only after everyone received hugs.

Sebastian found himself once again looking for Robert and had to keep his mind off thoughts of the tall man who loped around and stumbled over nothing. The restaurant got busy, and all the servers were kept hopping until well into the evening. Once the dining room began to clear, he kept himself busy resetting tables for the next day, and as soon as the doors closed, they cleared and reset the final tables. “Go on, Sebastian,” Billy told him. “If you stare at that door for much longer hoping Robert is going to walk in, I’m going to smack you,” he said with a grin.

“Thanks,” Sebastian said, hurrying into the back to grab his coat. Saying good night, he hurried out into the cold, walking toward Robert’s place. Snow drifted on the breeze, coming down lightly, the town already decorated for Christmas. Huddling inside his coat, Sebastian picked up his pace, hurrying the few blocks to Robert’s house, knocking on the door as he breathed into his hands.

“Get in here,” Robert told him as he opened the door. “You have to be freezing.” Robert closed the door behind him, taking his coat before rubbing his shoulders and arms to get the blood flowing again. “You should have called—I would have picked you up.”

“It’s only a few blocks,” Sebastian countered as he felt himself being pulled into a hug, and Sebastian reminded himself that he’d walk those few blocks every night if he got greeted with warm hugs and the soft scent of Robert’s cologne every evening. The man smelled good, warm and spicy with a hint of something that was uniquely Robert. He’d smelled it on his pillow for days after Robert had stayed over, and that scent filled his nose now.

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“Would you like to come in?” Robert asked, and Sebastian shook his head against his chest, not wanting to move from that spot. “I made you a special dinner... sort of,” Robert told him, and Sebastian raised his head away from Robert’s chest. “Well, I asked my mother to make it, since I’m nearly completely useless in the kitchen. So I take credit for the idea, if not the actual cooking,” Robert explained as he led Sebastian through the house. He liked the simple, modern furniture and neutral colors, so very different from his own house. Maybe that was why he liked it, because this house was actually Robert’s, whereas his own still largely spoke of his mother and father.

“So where is your mother?” Sebastian asked, looking around as though he expected to see her join them at any minute.

“She left a while ago.”

Sebastian slipped out of Robert’s arms. “Your mother cooked dinner for us, and she left before I could meet her?”

“Well,” Robert said, “she desperately wanted to stay, but I bribed her. I told her she would get to meet you on Thanksgiving when you come over with me. I wanted you all to myself tonight. I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course it’s all right.” Sebastian allowed himself to be pulled back into those arms. “I just can’t believe you got your mother to cook dinner for you and then made her leave,” Sebastian said, settling against Robert, glad there was no one else there right now. “She must really love you.”

Sebastian felt, rather than heard Robert’s chuckle reverberate in his chest. “My mom’s a controlling woman who wants everything her own way, but yeah, she loves me and wants me to be happy.” Robert’s arms slipped away, but his hand slid into Sebastian’s. “Let’s go on in to dinner,” Robert said with a grin that had Sebastian wondering just what was going on.

Holding his hand, Robert led him through the living room with its leather furniture and wood floors, to the small dining room where the table had been set for two with candles and flowers. There was even soft music playing. “I wanted to make this special,” Robert told him. “I’ll be right back. I need to bring in the food.” Robert hurried away,

leaving Sebastian alone in the room. As he sat down, he heard Robert in the other room—the oven opening, dishes clanging a little, a soft swear, and then the running water. Finally, Robert walked back in the room carrying a tray in his large hands, a bit of paper towel wrapped around a finger.

“Did you burn yourself?” Sebastian asked.

“Yeah,” Robert admitted, setting the tray on the table. Sebastian helped transfer the dishes to the table before taking the tray from Robert’s hand.

“Let me see it,” Sebastian said, setting the tray aside before taking Robert’s hand. Unwrapping the paper towel, he stepped into the light. “It’s just a little red and isn’t blistering,” Sebastian told him before gently kissing the finger.

“Feels better already,” Robert said before bending lower, kissing him on the lips. The kiss started soft and slow, Robert touching his cheek. Sebastian kept expecting it to deepen, but it didn’t, and he wondered what he was waiting for, but Robert didn’t stop, so Sebastian slipped his arms around Robert, deepening the kiss, feeling Robert respond. Billy had been right. Robert needed him to take the lead. Holding Robert tighter, Sebastian let his tongue trace the edge of Robert’s lips, hearing a soft whimper as he felt Robert shake against him, the arms around his waist tightening as Robert held on, making those whimpers that echoed through the otherwise silent room.

Gentling the kiss, Sebastian stroked Robert’s cheek. “We should eat, because the last thing I want to do on Thanksgiving is tell your mother when she asks that her food got cold, and why.”

Robert chuckled, showing him to a chair. Sebastian sat down and waited for Robert to take his seat, letting his host serve. “Everything smells wonderful, Robert,” Sebastian murmured as the aroma of beef, mashed potatoes, and carrots all mingled together to make his mouth water. Robert passed him his plate, and he inhaled again before setting it down and waiting for Robert before starting to eat. “How long have you lived here?”

“Four years,” Robert answered. “When I bought the house, it was a wreck, but one of the men I went to school with is a carpenter, and he

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helped me make the repairs and redo the kitchen and bathroom. I really love it. It's not large, but it's perfect for me. Mom helped me pick out the furniture and stuff since I have almost no taste when it comes to things like that."

Sebastian began eating the simple food, which was well-seasoned and tasty. As soon as he started eating, he realized how hungry he was. "It's very comfortable and it feels like you."

Robert smiled as he swallowed. "It does?"

"Yeah, not stuffy, but comfortable and livable with a touch of strength." Sebastian looked toward the living room. "Makes you want to curl up on the sofa with a good book or...." Sebastian swallowed as he returned to his dinner, not wanting to presume anything.

"Or what?" Robert prompted, setting his fork on the plate.

"With you," Sebastian answered as he continued eating. Robert said nothing, going back to eating, and Sebastian wasn't sure if he'd said something wrong or not, but the conversation died away, and Sebastian wasn't sure if he should do something to restart it or let his comment pass.

When they'd finished eating, Robert took away the dishes, refilling their wine glasses before taking them into the living room. Sebastian followed, and Robert sat on the sofa, motioning for Sebastian to join him. Sitting down, Sebastian found himself enfolded in a pair of arms that tugged him close. Robert didn't say anything as a big hand slid gently over his cheek, and Sebastian leaned into the touch, moving closer.

"Robert." Sebastian put his hand on Robert's, holding it to his cheek, resisting the urge to stroke his skin over it like a cat. "I didn't get five minutes all evening—did you talk to Gregory?" He knew now probably wasn't the best time to ask about Gregory, with them getting all cozy.

"I called him earlier this evening. They'll probably have him in isolation for a while, but he said he was feeling better and whatever stuff they were giving him seemed to be working, but he won't be able to have visitors for a few days yet." Robert hugged him a little closer. "When you get a chance tomorrow, give him a call."

Sebastian nodded, resting his head against Robert's chest. "I should have called when the restaurant slowed down this evening." Damn if he wasn't feeling guilty. "Gregory has to be bored stiff."

"No feeling guilty," Robert said. "I told him your schedule, and besides, you were up to visit him this morning. He knows you'll call." Robert shifted them on the sofa slightly. "It's probably too late now, but you can call before you go in to work. I'll even remind you," Robert added, and Sebastian felt a zing of sweet surprise shoot through him as Robert touched their lips together. "I don't really know what to do," Robert whispered, but from the kiss he'd just received, Sebastian figured Robert would be a fast learner.

Sliding back, Sebastian took Robert with him, reclining on the sofa. He tugged Robert on top of him, part of Robert's weight pressing him into the cushions. "Robert," Sebastian said softly, peering to where Robert's legs hung off the sofa, "maybe we should move someplace with a little more room." Robert kissed him again before lifting himself off the sofa. Ignoring the full wine glasses still sitting on the table, Robert led him by the hand toward the back of the house.

Thankfully, the only room in the house that appeared large was Robert's bedroom with its king-size bed. Once inside with the door closed, Robert sat on the edge of the bed, and Sebastian immediately stood between his legs, their faces at an equal level, perfect for kissing, which Sebastian did with gusto. Robert's lips still tasted slightly of wine, spice, and something uniquely Robert. Pulling off his shirt, Sebastian felt warm hands slide around to his back, and he arched into the touch, his skin crying out for more.

Working off Robert's shirt, Sebastian got his shoes off before pushing Robert back on the bed, climbing on the mattress and on top of Robert, kissing his way up his long body, Robert crying out softly as Sebastian sucked on a small, hard nipple. "Sebastian," Robert hissed softly, and Sebastian smiled against Robert's skin, licking small circles with his tongue.

"You like that, do you?" Sebastian asked as he looked into Robert's eyes, tongue darting over his skin. "You have to promise to tell me what you like, and if there's something you don't, okay?"

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Robert nodded his answer, and Sebastian licked his skin again, savoring the taste and those sounds. Every time Sebastian touched Robert's skin, Robert made these amazing sounds, small sighs and moans all at once, like he was thrilled at finally being touched. Standing up again, Sebastian patted Robert's hip lightly, and Robert looked at him, confused. "Let's get these pants off. I want you to get comfortable on the bed, okay?" Sebastian knew Robert was self-conscious about his body, but Sebastian wanted to see him and feel him. Stepping back, Sebastian watched as Robert bent over, sliding his pants down his legs. The man was so cute, turning around while he undressed. Reaching out, Sebastian ran a hand over Robert's butt, and the man nearly fell forward onto the bed, stumbling out of his pants. "You have nothing to be ashamed of or nervous about."

"But I'm—" Robert started to say, leaving his pants on the floor, but Sebastian stepped close, cutting him off with a kiss.

"You're handsome, Robert," Sebastian told him, touching his chest and slowly sliding his hand down his skin. "Warm and smoothly soft," Sebastian cooed, letting his fingers slide over a nipple, flicking it lightly before sliding over his smooth belly and down to the waistband of his tented boxers. Sebastian heard Robert's breath catch and felt his stomach muscles tighten as though they were willing Sebastian to go further, but it was definitely too soon, so he let first his palm and then his fingers slip away. "Get comfortable, okay?" Sebastian told Robert, watching as the tall man lay on the bed, head on his pillow. Eyes followed him as Sebastian slipped off his pants and socks, joining Robert on the mattress. "Remember, you can't do anything wrong," Sebastian whispered against Robert's lips, and he saw Robert nod slightly just before Sebastian captured his lips, lowering himself onto Robert's body, a zing of energy zipping through him. Everywhere Robert touched him, his skin seemed to come alive, and as Robert kissed him, he felt warm hands slide down his shoulders and back. When they reached the small of his back, Sebastian felt his head throb, but when they slipped beneath his boxers, cupping his butt, he tensed.

"Is this okay?" Robert asked, stopping his movement. "You said I couldn't do anything wrong," he added, his hands sliding away.

"It's fine. I was just surprised at how good it felt."

“Oh,” Robert responded, his hands slipping back beneath the fabric, squeezing lightly, sending Sebastian over the moon. Robert’s touch felt so perfect, as natural and right as breathing, and when the fabric of his boxers slid down, Sebastian gasped as his straining cock touched the skin of Robert’s belly for the first time. Slipping his own fingers beneath the elastic on Robert’s boxers, he slid them down Robert’s hips. It took some doing, but Robert finally kicked off his boxers, and Sebastian sighed as, skin to skin, he slid his erection along Robert’s.

Sebastian gasped as he was suddenly rolled on the bed, finding Robert looking down at him with a sort of “what do I do now?” look. Sebastian kissed him and let his hands roam over the smooth skin on Robert’s back. The man was too tall for him to be able to grab his butt from his position, but Sebastian knew a spot, right at the base of the neck. Licking lightly, he heard Robert gasp and then sigh as Sebastian licked and sucked on his skin, being careful not to leave a mark, although he wanted to. Sliding down under Robert, his chest above him, Sebastian sucked on a nipple. God he loved Robert’s nipples. They were small, but pert and oh so lickable.

“Bunny!” Robert cried out from above him, his hips grinding, his ample erection sliding along his stomach. Sebastian kept licking, a hand sliding up Robert’s side until he began to giggle, flopping back onto the mattress. “What are you doing?” Robert asked with a smile just before Sebastian jumped on top of him, straddling his body. He kissed Robert hard, reaching behind to stroke Robert, watching his eyes widen, earning another gasp as he ran his hand over Robert’s smooth hardness. “No one has ever touched me like that before,” Robert said, eyes wide, as Sebastian felt him bucking lightly into his hand.

Kneeling next to Robert after shifting on the bed, Sebastian continued stroking Robert’s length, watching his face as it transformed into a mask of total bliss. Leaning forward to kiss him, Sebastian yelped slightly as he was hugged on top of his lover, their bodies finding a comfortable place as they moved together. There were so many things he wanted to do with Robert, but... at that moment Robert kissed him hard, and all thoughts except the feel of Robert’s skin on his

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fell away. There would be plenty of time, he hoped, and this felt really good. “Robert,” Sebastian whispered, and he became still.

“Am I doing something wrong?”

Sebastian shook his head with a smile. “No, but there’s something I want to show you.” Damn it, if this was Robert’s first time, then Sebastian was going to make it good. Hell, he was going to make it mind-blowing, if possible. “Last time, I asked you to think about your fantasies,” Sebastian said with a mischievous smile, “and I bet this was pretty high on your list.” Sebastian held Robert tight, stroking a few times before releasing him and running his lips along the length of Robert’s cock. The loud moan told him he’d been correct, and he did it again before running his tongue around the head as Robert’s flavor burst onto his tongue.

“Sebastian. Bunny,” Robert started to say, his words turning to a groan as Sebastian closed his mouth around the head, tongue swirling as he slid his lips down the shaft. “I, oh God, Bunny,” Robert babbled as Sebastian sucked him deep. He wondered about this bunny thing for a split second, but then Robert’s cries increased, filling the room as Sebastian took him to the root.

Robert’s hands settled on his head, fingers threading through his hair, and Sebastian felt Robert begin to buck lightly. Sebastian loved sucking cock. He was damned good at it and quite talented. Taking Robert deep, he relaxed his throat so he could take all of Robert’s thick length. “Oh God,” Robert cried in surprise, pumping his hips with excitement. Encouraging him, Sebastian bobbed his head in time to Robert’s thrusts as Robert chanted softly, his head rocking on the pillow. “Bunny, I’m—” Robert gasped between breaths, and Sebastian felt Robert’s body stiffen as he came hard, flooding Sebastian’s mouth with his release. Swallowing hard, Sebastian relished Robert’s rich, salty flavor.

The room quieted, and Sebastian heard Robert’s steady breathing. Letting him slip from between his lips, Sebastian felt Robert tug him up toward him. Robert looked as though he could barely move, but he managed to guide Sebastian on top of him until they were kissing again, slow and languid, Robert’s hands smoothing down his back and over his butt. Sebastian’s mind whirled with unreserved passion, and

his hips began moving on their own, grinding against Robert's skin. A finger slipped along his crease, ghosting over his opening as Robert kissed him hard. Everything he'd worried about—Gregory, Robert coming out, work, the house—all of it slipped away as he fell deep and hard for the man holding him tight. He'd been trying to hold himself back for so long, but Robert's cries and whimpers, along with something as simple as the way Robert held and kissed him, like he was the most dear and precious person on earth, all of it combined to wash away the last of Sebastian's hold on his heart. He couldn't have stopped it from reaching out to Robert's any more than he could stop the tide or the sun. "Robby," Sebastian murmured as his climax built from deep inside. Clamping his eyes closed, he cried out, only to have Robert seal their mouths together, swallowing Sebastian's cries as he came between them.

The kiss faded as Sebastian gasped for breath, Robert's eyes shining up at him. "You're beautiful," Robert told him as he wiped his cheek.

"And you're sexy," Sebastian countered, wriggling on Robert's belly and chest before kissing him again. "There's only one thing I want to know," Sebastian said with a grin. "What is this thing you have with bunnies?"

"Not bunnies," Robert corrected, "Bunny. It's your nickname. I didn't like Bastian, so I guess somewhere deep down I started thinking of you as my Bunny, and it sort of slipped out. And if you want to call me Robby, then you're Bunny."

Sebastian wasn't too sure what he thought of that, and he mock-glared at Robert for a few moments, trying to figure it out. "Okay, but if you call me Bunny at the restaurant, I'll never hear the end of it."

Chuckling, Robert held his hand. "I promise I won't call you Bunny at the restaurant. You have my word." Kissing his knuckles, Robert smiled at him before bringing their lips together again.

Sebastian settled back on the mattress, then the bed shifted as Robert got up, and he returned with a warm cloth and towel. After a cleanup, Robert climbed back in the bed, turning off the small light. Sebastian curled close, holding Robert tight, half expecting an excuse

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or a hint that it was time to leave. But what he got instead was an arm that lightly tugged him closer. This was almost too good to be true, and regardless of everything else, Sebastian wondered just how long it would last before Robert decided he wanted more than just Sebastian. It had taken Gregory awhile. Sebastian tried to remember what Billy had told him—that Robert wasn't Gregory. "Night, Bunny," Robert whispered, his voice already deep with sleep.

"Night, Robby," Sebastian said, doing his best to let go of his worries and enjoy things while they lasted.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ROBERT cracked his eyes open, looking over at the empty space next to him, patting the pillow before looking over at the clock and closing his eyes. Snapping them open again, Robert looked one more time before throwing back the covers and jumping out of bed. Nine thirty, it was already nine thirty, and he was supposed to pick up Sebastian at ten. His mother always did the Thanksgiving meal at noon, and heaven help anyone who was late. Hurrying, Robert shaved while the shower warmed before jumping under the water to get cleaned up and wash his hair. No leisurely day-off shower this morning. Turning off the water, he dried himself quickly before rushing into the bedroom, shivering as the places he'd missed with the towel became abundantly clear. Pulling on his clothes, he did a quick check in the mirror, bending down to see himself properly, before pulling on his socks and shoes. Robert checked the clock once again: ten minutes till ten. Thankfully, Sebastian's wasn't far away. Walking down the stairs, he grabbed his coat and did a quick walk through the house.

Stepping outside, he shivered as he pulled his coat around him before bending down to pick up the paper in the plastic wrapper on his walk. Throwing it just inside the door, Robert locked the house before hurrying to his car. Starting it, he pressed the buttons to turn on the heated seats, and pulled onto the road.

He pulled up at Sebastian's almost exactly on time. As Robert got out of the car, the front door opened to a very nervous-looking Sebastian. "Morning," Robert said as he stepped inside, giving his

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lover a quick kiss that to his surprise didn't turn into more. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just nervous about meeting your mother," Sebastian told him. Movement on the stairs caught his attention, and Robert looked away from Sebastian to see Gregory slowly making his way down.

"When did you get out of the hospital?" Robert asked with a smile, alternately looking at Gregory and then Sebastian.

"I brought him home last night."

"Do you want to go with us? I know my mom will have enough food for an army, and you'd be welcome." Robert began fishing out his phone so he could call her.

"No, thank you, Robert. I'm still pretty tired, and Sebastian's made a small lunch for me. I just came down to see you and thank you for the phone calls and visits while I was in the hospital." Gregory's sigh ended in a slight cough. "Don't worry, I was just clearing my throat," he said to Sebastian in reaction to his mother-hen look. "It meant a lot," Gregory told Robert. "You both mean a lot," he added before beginning to shiver.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" Sebastian asked.

"I'm fine. I'll probably sleep much of the day, anyway. You two have a good time, and I'll see you when you get back." Gregory reached into the pocket of his robe. "I have my phone, so if I need anything, I'll call you, I promise."

"You promise to eat?" Sebastian admonished lightly.

"Even my vegetables, Mom," Gregory answered with a smile as Sebastian hugged him lightly. Robert did as well, the man feeling so fragile he had to remind himself to be extra gentle.

Robert repeated his earlier offer. "You know you're welcome to come with us."

Gregory shook his head. "I'm going back up to bed," he told them both before turning and slowly climbing the stairs like a man fifty years older.

Sebastian put on his coat, and Robert figured he was debating whether to check on Gregory one more time, but instead he opened the

door. After Sebastian picked up a vase of cut flowers, they quietly left the house.

“What if your mother doesn’t like me?” Sebastian asked him as they traveled toward his mother’s condo. “I mean, she’s never—” Sebastian started to say, and Robert looked over at him as he drove. “She’s only had a few weeks to get used to the idea, and I wouldn’t blame her if she hates me on sight. After all, I corrupted her son.”

“I was corrupted, as you put it, long before I met you, and she knows that,” Robert told him lightly. “She’s been anxious to meet you for a while, so you have nothing to worry about. She’s going to love you.” Robert reached across the seat, squeezing Sebastian’s leg. “So don’t worry, but I do have to warn you. My mom can be a little intense sometimes.”

“Intense?” Sebastian echoed.

“She raised me alone, so she has this ‘damn the torpedoes full steam ahead’ mentality.” Robert felt himself smiling. “I think the two of you are going to get along just fine.”

“Is it just the two of us for dinner?” Sebastian asked him, chewing on a fingernail, obviously nervous.

“I don’t think so. Mom tends to pick up strays. People with no place to go always have Thanksgiving dinner at Mom’s. So it’s possible there will be people there who I don’t know either.” Robert turned off the main road onto a small residential street before pulling into the drive that ran in front of the tan condominium buildings. Robert pulled into one of the free spots. “Relax, Bunny, it’s going to be fine.” Robert heard Sebastian growl slightly while trying to suppress a smile.

Getting out of the car, Robert led Sebastian up the front steps, where he pressed the call button, and they were buzzed inside. “You made it,” Robert heard his mother’s voice cut through the entrance area the way it always did.

“Of course I did.” Robert walked to the door where his mother waited. “Mom, this is Sebastian,” Robert said.

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“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Fortier,” Sebastian said, handing her the flowers.

“Please, call me Clare. And the flowers are lovely, thank you,” she said, smelling the lilies as she backed into the apartment, hitting the wall behind her. Robert looked at Sebastian and saw an amused look. Yes, he definitely took after his mother. “Please come in,” she continued as though the wall weren’t there. “Robert will take care of your coat. Go and sit in the living room. I’ll be right in as soon as I check the turkey.”

Robert took Sebastian’s coat, setting them on his mother’s militarily made bed, resisting the urge to see if he could bounce a quarter on it before joining Sebastian on the sofa. “So, since you never call me,” his mother started to say from the other room, and Robert rolled his eyes, “are you excited about being a judge?” she asked proudly.

“Yes. I still can’t believe I actually won, but I’m excited about it,” he answered her, looking over at Sebastian, who sat a little nervously next to him. The oven door opened and closed a few times, and then his mother joined them in the living room, sitting in the chair across from them. “What is it you do, Sebastian?”

“I’m the house manager for Café Belgie. I manage the dining room and waitstaff,” Sebastian answered quickly. “That’s how I met Robert. We were robbed a few weeks ago, and he caught the guy as he was leaving.” Sebastian gave him a smile that Robert felt deep down.

A buzz sounded in the hallway, and Clare got up. Soon she was escorting a lady into the room, and both Robert and Sebastian stood as she introduced Mildred to her son and his friend. Robert wasn’t sure how Sebastian felt about that introduction, but he seemed to take it in stride, immediately beginning a conversation. It soon became apparent that they knew each other.

“Mildred’s been a regular customer for months,” Sebastian explained with a smile. “You must come in every couple of weeks for dinner.” Sebastian’s smile had Mildred beaming, and Robert took her coat before returning to the living room to find that Mildred had taken his place on the sofa, she and Sebastian talking excitedly about food.

While they talked, Robert wandered into the kitchen, finding his mother fussing over dinner. “Can I help?”

“Everything’s already taken care of. I just have to mash the potatoes when they’re done,” she answered, peering through the oven window at the roasting turkey. “We should be ready to eat in a little over an hour,” she told him, slapping at Robert’s hand when he stole an olive from the relish dish. “Those are for dinner,” she admonished, giving him the evil eye. The buzzer sounded again, and his mom let in more of her guests, the condo filling as a couple about his mother’s age joined the group. His mother introduced them as Harriet and Claude Hughes. Robert took their coats while his mother served drinks.

Conversation swirled around the living room, with everyone making small talk until his mother called them in for dinner. His mother sat them all at her dining table. It was a little cramped, but comfortable, nonetheless. Sebastian sat next to him, and Robert found he kept looking over to make sure his “Bunny” was okay. Luckily, he seemed to have found a kindred spirit in Mildred—the two of them barely stopped talking.

As his mother sat down, the conversation fell away. She said a short prayer and then began serving. “You must be excited about your election,” Claude said from across the table, his expression more severe than Robert would have expected. “There can’t be many judges in the state who are as young as you.”

Robert smiled and thanked him. “I want to do a fair and impartial job. I have a lot to learn, but I’m very excited about the opportunity and the challenge.” He knew he sounded like a politician, but it seemed to work.

“I know we can count on you not to be one of those liberal court judges who legislate from the bench,” Claude told him, and Robert could almost feel Sebastian and everyone else at the table looking at him. Robert stole a glance at his mother, who seemed to have gone a little pale, and he wondered just how well she knew these people.

“Courts do not make laws, they only interpret them, and sometimes that interpretation differs over time,” Robert said levelly. “The court’s job is to hear and decide cases based upon the evidence

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and nothing more. Often people who don't agree with a decision will complain about courts legislating, but that is something courts are prohibited from doing by the Constitution." Robert wondered where all this was coming from and hoped the conversation would move on to something else.

"I love this wine, Clare," Sebastian said from beside him, and Robert smiled gratefully at Sebastian for changing the subject.

But Claude was not easily sidetracked. "These liberal courts keep undermining the country's values with their so-called decisions. Like this one in California. That Proposition 8 was voted on and passed democratically, and now the courts have said the voters were wrong, forcing unnatural marriage down everyone's throat."

"Claude," Robert said slowly, "one of the basic protections guaranteed by the Constitution is equal protection under the law, and under that principle, courts have long upheld that the rights of the few cannot be voted away by the many. And that is what I believe the courts have found happened. You wouldn't want that any more than you'd want a law voted on that said people"—Robert checked Claude's eyes—"people with green eyes are not allowed to drive."

"That's not the same thing," he sputtered a little loudly.

"Actually, I believe the courts have determined that it is, and I believe if you look at things dispassionately, you'll agree that you wouldn't like your rights voted away, so why would you allow someone else's to be voted away?" Robert swallowed and took a sip of his wine. "Sebastian, you're right, this is good. I'd like to propose a toast to our hostess, my mother. You created this wonderful feast for all of us to enjoy. We have much to be thankful for." Robert lifted his glass, glancing at Sebastian for just a second before clinking glasses with the other guests, even Claude, and thankfully, this time, the conversation moved on.

The tension faded away, and the conversation remained light through the rest of dinner. Once the food had been devoured, everyone moved back to the living room to let things digest until it was time for dessert. Claude remained quiet, not saying much, and Robert noticed that Harriet barely uttered a word at all. "Harriet, what do you do?"

"I'm a homemaker," she answered, offering nothing more.

"Harriet takes care of our home and raised our two children," Claude elaborated. "Are you a football fan, Robert?"

"Not really, although I usually watch a few games each year at parties and things like that. I usually have work to do and spend most evenings either at my office or working at home," Robert said.

"How about you, Sebastian?" Claude pressed.

Sebastian grinned. "I'm a huge football fan," he answered with an amazing amount of enthusiasm. "There's a game on now, but it would be rude to watch television at a party," Sebastian added, and Robert saw Claude's face fall before Sebastian got up, moving into the kitchen.

"Do you need any help, Clare?" he heard Sebastian inquire, and when he didn't come right back, Robert figured his mother had put him to work. Robert got up to help as well and found Sebastian and his mother talking quietly in the kitchen.

"Okay, what's up with you two?" Robert asked quietly.

"Nothing. I was just asking where Clare dug up the fossil." He put his hand over his mouth, and Robert saw Clare do the same.

"They go to my church and commented that they were going to be alone," Robert's mother said. "They're new, so I invited them." Clare leaned closer. "Now I know why they were going to be alone," she whispered, and all three of them put their hands over their mouths to stifle laughter.

"I'm going back to rescue Mildred," Sebastian said, putting down the dish before returning to the living room, and Robert heard Sebastian asking about her favorite restaurant and then their conversation was off and running.

"I'll help you with the dessert, Mom," Robert offered.

"Thank you, dear," she said, before adding in a low voice, "Your young man is very nice."

"You don't know the half of it, Mom. He took in a sick friend because he had no place else to go." Robert checked his watch. "In fact, we need to leave a little early to check on him. He's getting better, but he's still a little weak."

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Robert helped his mother get dessert ready, and they served the pumpkin pie in the living room. Shortly after finishing, Claude and Harriet left. Robert figured it was so Claude could get home to watch football. As soon as the door closed behind them, Robert heard Sebastian cackle, with Mildred joining in as well. “I thought he was going to bust a gut when I told him it would be rude to watch television,” Sebastian said between bouts of laughter.

“I never knew you liked football,” Robert told Sebastian.

“Why not? It is the gayest sport ever, after all!” Sebastian told him, and Robert looked to Mildred and his mother, but Sebastian continued. “Mildred’s cool. She knows Darryl and Billy.”

“So,” Clare said from the doorway, “why is football the gayest sport ever?” Robert could not believe they were actually having this conversation in his mother’s living room.

“In what other sport do grown men bend over looking at each other’s butts before passing a ball between their legs?”

Robert looked at his mother, expecting her to be appalled. Instead, he saw her smile and then chuckle. “You know, I always wondered why they patted each other on the behind.” That ended it for the other three, who all laughed as Robert stood in the middle of his mother’s living room, watching the three of them.

“You’re all nuts,” he said with a straight face before he, too, joined in the laughter. It felt good to laugh, and amazingly comfortable. One of the things he’d been afraid of was that he’d never be able to talk about things like this with his mother, and in a few hours, Sebastian had her joking and laughing. The man was amazing.

“Robert,” his mother said, “lighten up.” The laughter intensified for a few seconds before slowly abating. Clare brought coffee, and the four of them sat and talked. Afterward, Robert helped his mother gather up the dishes while Sebastian and Mildred continued their restaurant conversation.

“It’s good to see you laugh, Mom. It’s been a while.”

“I could say the same about you,” she countered as he loaded the dishwasher.

"I know," Robert agreed, listening to more laughter from the living room. "Sebastian's pretty special."

"Do you love him?" his mother asked, and Robert stopped, holding the plate in his hand, not knowing how to answer. He hadn't allowed himself to give his feelings for Sebastian a name, and he almost felt it was too soon for them to be in love. "It's not that hard a question," she pressed in her usual way.

"I'm not sure, Mom. I've never been in love as far as I know, and I'm not sure. I guess you could say I'm exploring the possibility."

"Damned lawyers," she mumbled under her breath teasingly. "Never give anyone a straight answer."

"I don't have one to give you, Mom, and besides, I think I should probably discuss my feelings about Sebastian with him first," Robert told her and got a smile and a pat on the arm in return.

Laughter once again filtered into the kitchen, and Robert saw his mother smiling as well, relaxed and happy. "I want to ask you something," Robert started to say, and he saw his mother immediately begin to shake her head. "I'm old enough to know about my father. All these years, you've never spoken about him or told me anything, no matter how many times I've asked. It's important to me." Robert saw her jaw set and knew he probably wasn't going to get anything this time either. "At least tell me why you won't say anything."

"Does anyone want to talk about their mistakes?" she answered, eyes blazing.

Robert swallowed hard. "Was I a mistake?"

Robert watched as his mother's eyes softened and her lips parted slightly. "No. That's not what I meant. You were never a mistake," she said, reaching up to stroke his cheek. "You were the best thing in my life."

She seemed to deflate a little, pulling out one of the chairs and lowering herself into it. "I was just out of high school when I met him," she started, and Robert stood stark still, afraid any movement would break the spell and she'd stop. "He was nice and treated me like a queen. I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. We dated for months, and he

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said all the right things, and I fell for him more and more each day.” She swallowed. “Eventually, I want to say we made love, but I’m not sure that was what it was, at least for him. After a few weeks, I realized I was pregnant. When I told him, he said he’d pay for the abortion. I wanted to smack him into next week. That’s all he could think about—getting rid of our child. I couldn’t do it, not in a million years.” Her eyes blazed again. “I told him so, and he disappeared for almost a week, no phone calls, nothing. Then he turned up on my doorstep asking me to marry him, saying he’d make an honest woman of me.” She pffted under her breath. “Like he was doing me a big favor.”

“Why didn’t you marry him?” Robert asked softly.

“I realized I didn’t want to compound one mistake with another. So I told him no and goodbye. He hung around town for a while and even saw you once. I think you were about two. I never told your grandparents who the father was, and I certainly wasn’t about to tell the hospital. You were my son, and I wasn’t sharing you. After I brought you home, we lived with my parents, and they helped me raise you until I got a job.”

“What’s his name, Mom?” She shook her head, clamming up. “You know you’re my mother and I love you. I always will. You raised me alone and worked two jobs to help put me through school. I became a lawyer because of you, and a judge because of you and your nagging pushiness.” Robert winked and saw the ghost of a smile on his mother’s lips. “You have nothing to fear from him or anyone else, but I’d like to know my father’s name.”

She sat there, staring up at him, and Robert figured she was going to keep her secret. She really hadn’t told him much he hadn’t already pieced together over the years. Sighing, he touched her hand before walking back into the kitchen to help finish the cleanup. “Manny,” she said. “Your father’s name was Manny Norris.”

Robert knew better than to ask anything more. “Thank you,” he told her before wiping down the counters. Putting the cloth in the sink, he saw her look around the kitchen before sighing once more. Standing up, she walked into the living room, and after turning out the lights, Robert did the same.

The four of them talked for another hour, his mother losing some of the tension from their conversation. Checking his watch, Robert realized it was getting late. “We should be going,” he told the group, standing up. Robert said goodbye to Mildred and noticed that Sebastian gave both Mildred and his mother a hug. His mother walked them to the door, and he gave her a hug goodbye. “Thank you, Mom,” he whispered into her ear and felt her tighten the hug for just a second before letting him go.

“I packed a care package for you,” she said, stepping away, returning with two foil packages, handing one to both him and Sebastian. After yet another round of goodbyes, Robert and Sebastian closed the condo door behind them, walking out of the building toward the car.

“Your mom is so cool,” Sebastian said as soon as he’d settled in the seat. “I figured she’d be uptight or nervous, but she was warm and nice. The woman was a laugh riot in the kitchen.”

“My mother?” Robert asked. He’d never seen her laugh a lot. His memories of her were always serious and driven, especially where he was concerned.

“Yes. Before you came in, she was telling me stories about you—had both of us in stitches.”

“Wonderful,” Robert grouched, wondering just what kind of stories his mother had told his boyfriend. “I can just imagine.”

Sebastian chuckled from the passenger seat. “She told me about you staring down a bowl of pea soup until the spoon stuck straight up in it, but you never took a single bite.” Sebastian’s chuckles died out. “She promised to show me pictures the next time we visit.”

“Next time, she said that?” Robert asked, shaking his head in surprise.

“Yes, she did,” Sebastian said softly. “That is, if you want there to be a next time.”

It took a few seconds for the meaning of what Sebastian said to kick in. “Of course I want there to be a next time,” Robert told Sebastian, one hand slipping from the wheel to squeeze Sebastian’s leg.

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"I guess I'm just a little surprised. Pleasantly, but surprised, nonetheless. She's always so serious." His mother had taken so easily to Sebastian. He hadn't dared to hope things would go that well, but they had.

"Do you want to stay tonight?" Sebastian asked softly. "I know I'll probably be up a few times with Gregory. He doesn't seem to sleep through the night, and I'll understand if you aren't up for it."

Robert heard the insecurity in Sebastian's voice and didn't like it. "I always want to stay with you. Sometimes it isn't practical, but I always want to. And yes, I'd like to very much. My office is closed tomorrow. I know you have to work, but maybe we can sleep in a little."

Robert miraculously found a spot right in front of Sebastian's house. Parking, he turned off the engine, sitting in the warm car for a second before getting out. Sebastian unlocked the door, and Robert followed him inside the warm house. To his surprise, the lights were on in the living room. Robert had expected Gregory to be upstairs, but instead he was curled up on the sofa under some blankets.

"I thought you'd be upstairs. Are you feeling better?" Sebastian asked, picking up an empty glass from the coaster on the coffee table.

"Yes." Gregory sat up, but kept himself covered. "I wanted to stay up because there's something you need to see."

"What is it?" Sebastian asked looking around the house, but he didn't seem to see anything wrong.

"I take it neither of you saw the paper today," Gregory commented before handing Robert the local paper. "They had the decency not to print the story on the front page, at least. I bet your phone at home has been ringing nonstop."

Robert felt his stomach tighten as he took the paper from Gregory. It had been folded to highlight a particular story: "Is Cumberland County's Newest Judge Gay?" Robert's eyes read the print as if it were about someone else. It was written as a quasi-editorial instead of an actual story, but there it was. Robert could hardly believe it. Scanning it, he handed the paper to Sebastian before sinking into a chair.

“Talk about being outed,” Gregory commented from the sofa. “Don’t these people have any dignity? That’s none of anyone’s business.”

“They didn’t give any details, but just alluded to possible things. Sounds like they’re fishing,” Sebastian said softly.

“They probably are,” Robert said with more heat than he intended. “But they’re right. I am gay, and they’ll write sleazy stuff about me and you.”

“What do you want to do?” Sebastian asked softly. “I’ll help if I can.”

Robert didn’t know what to do, but he knew everything was going to be different now and that his private life wasn’t going to be very private any longer.

CHAPTER NINE

SEBASTIAN seethed with anger combined with shame. This was all his fault. He was the one who'd kissed Robert in public. Granted, the article didn't contain any specifics, and since it was printed on the editorial page, no actual facts were presented. But because of him, Robert was going to have to answer a lot of questions. *What if Robert didn't get to be a judge now?* The thought that he could have cost Robert his position on the bench made him feel sick to his stomach. He wanted to help, but wasn't sure what he could do, except maybe leave him alone. If he wasn't around, maybe Robert would be able to go on. So far, this was just a rumor fostered by whoever wrote the article, and it would die down.

"I don't know what to do," Robert commented softly. "I don't think there's anything I can do." Sebastian saw Robert look at him, lines around his mouth, eyes dull where not long ago they'd been dancing with mirth and happiness, and he knew he was responsible for that.

Sebastian set the newspaper he was still holding on the table, not wanting to look at the thing any longer. He had no idea what to say and kept waiting for Robert, who'd lapsed into silence.

"Is that it?" Gregory asked from the sofa. "You're not going to get angry?" Gregory got to his feet, walking toward Robert. "You just got outed in the most cruel, cowardly way possible, and you're just going to take it?"

"What can I do?" Robert asked with a shrug.

“This is all my fault,” Sebastian said softly, his thoughts and fears rising to the surface before he could stop them. “If I hadn’t kissed you at the climbing wall, no one would have seen anything and—”

“Wait a minute,” Robert said, his voice rising as he stepped closer. “This isn’t your fault. This isn’t anyone’s fault except maybe my own for keeping that part of myself a secret for so long, and the asshole with a complete lack of decency who wrote the article. In this day and age to have someone think that things like that will sell papers is ridiculous. Darryl and Billy have been out for a long time, haven’t they?”

Sebastian nodded. “I doubt they ever hid their relationship from anyone.”

“And their business thrives and they have plenty of customers?” Robert prodded.

“Yes. Business keeps getting better. I don’t think anyone really cares.” Sebastian couldn’t help smiling. “Billy and I are waiters, so I think half our customers expect us to be gay, anyway. It’s almost a cliché.”

“Then what’s the big deal?” Robert asked, pointing to the paper. “There are gay people throughout town. I don’t understand why this is a big deal.”

“Because you didn’t say anything before the election,” Gregory supplied. “Granted, it’s nobody’s business, but that’s what I think people will say, and that’s probably what the sanctimonious twerp who wrote the article used to justify it. Not that too many people are going to care,” Gregory continued his voice sounding a little hoarse. “This is the twenty-first century, and it’s not like you’re married and got caught having an affair or something.”

“I know,” Robert answered quietly.

“So what do we do?” Sebastian repeated from earlier.

“Nothing,” Robert answered. “Some people won’t like it and most won’t care. I don’t think I can change the minds of the people who it bothers, but there’s nothing they can do. I got elected and I haven’t broken any laws or rules.”

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“Are there ethical considerations?”

Robert shook his head. “My private life is just that, and this will have no effect on any case or my ability to preside. Heck, this actually may relieve possible ethical issues. Since it’s out in the open, it can’t be used against me. No, the only issue is public reaction, and I can’t think that people will care enough to make a big deal about it. I guess the thing to do is to keep a low profile, and this will blow over like everything else.”

Sebastian wasn’t so sure that would happen, especially as he thought about that Claude guy from dinner at Robert’s mom’s home, but right now he didn’t want to make a big deal about it. Robert wasn’t blaming him, even if he was blaming himself, and for now, he could accept that. He wasn’t sure how long it would continue. It felt more like a temporary reprieve than anything else. “I’m going to get something to drink. Would anyone like anything?” Sebastian asked, needing something to do.

“I’d love a whiskey,” Gregory said from the sofa, and Sebastian glared at him. “But juice or a soda would be nice.”

“I have some wine open,” Sebastian told Robert, “would you like a glass?”

“Yes, thank you.” Robert sat in the chair near the sofa, and Sebastian walked into the kitchen, still feeling guilty. Yes, he’d wanted Robert to come out, because he was more comfortable that way, but he hadn’t wanted it to happen this way. Opening the refrigerator door, he pulled out a container of grape juice and the bottle of Chardonnay. If he found out that someone had done this maliciously to Robert.... Sebastian gripped the neck of the bottle tightly, turning his knuckles white.

“It’s okay, Bunny. That bottle didn’t do anything to you,” Robert told him as he walked up behind him. “I know you’re upset, and I’m sorry.”

“Robert,” Sebastian started, setting the bottle on the counter. “Do you remember how you felt when Gregory first moved in a few weeks ago? You didn’t like him because he’d hurt me. Well, I feel the same way about this reporter, or whoever it was that wrote the story. I’d like

to see what gets dug up on them if someone started looking in their bedroom windows.”

“I know. I really should have seen something like this coming. I was always concerned about people knowing, but I’m not as much anymore. The important people know and understand. It’s not the end of the world.”

Sebastian heard what Robert was saying, but wondered if Robert was just trying to make him feel better, or make himself feel better. Opening the cupboard, he pulled out two glasses, pouring the wine before getting out a third glass and filling it with juice for Gregory. “This wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for me.”

“We don’t know how anyone found out, and it’s not good to try to speculate, because it doesn’t matter,” Robert told him as his phone started to ring. Robert answered it, and Sebastian heard Robert talk to his mother. “Yes, we saw it. No, he didn’t know what happened. It doesn’t matter,” Robert told her in fits and starts. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow. There’s nothing I can do right now. Night.” Robert disconnected the call, sighing as he shoved it back in his pocket.

“How is she taking it?” Sebastian asked as he handed Robert one of the glasses before picking up the other two.

“Not bad, actually. Her righteous indignation is up, and if we find out the source, you’re going to have to get in line behind her because I think she’s ready to string them up by their ears.” Robert walked toward the living room. “Let’s see if we can forget about this for a while.”

Sebastian agreed, wondering how that was going to happen, but Robert was right, there was nothing any of them could do about it now. Sitting down, Sebastian handed Gregory the glass of juice. “How did Thanksgiving dinner go?” Gregory asked, settling back on the sofa.

“Good. Mom loved Sebastian, and it was a nice time except for this couple Mom invited from her church.” Robert gave Gregory a blow-by-blow of dinner while Sebastian settled back into his chair and his own thoughts. No matter what Robert said, he felt bad about what had happened, and he couldn’t let it go. Sipping his wine, he heard the other two talking, but didn’t really feel up to joining in. Reaching to the

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table, he picked up the paper, reading the column again. The piece alluded to people seeing Robert around town with another man and his having been seen kissing another man. The whole thing was so childish and petty that Sebastian threw the whole thing into the fireplace. "It's not worth getting upset over," Robert told him levelly.

"What I can't understand is why you aren't more upset by this. It's an invasion of our privacy." The words were out before he could stop them.

"Is that what's got you upset?" Robert inquired, putting his glass down on the table.

Sebastian shrugged not sure of anything. "Doesn't it feel like someone's been skulking around, looking at us, watching us?" Sebastian stood up and moved through the room, making sure all the curtains were pulled tightly closed. "Is someone outside watching how long you stay or how long your car stays parked in front of the house?" He suddenly felt exposed and spied on, and he didn't like it.

"If they are, they are. I'm not going to change to fit someone else, and I'm not going to give up my time with you because of it, either. That would be letting them win, and I won't do that. In my job, I've hired detectives to have people followed or watched. Insurance companies do it all the time to follow up claims. I can't let it bother me. I could deny it, but I won't lie. Then I'd be denying you, and I won't do that, either."

Gregory yawned. Finishing his juice, he got up, the blanket still wrapped around him, and padded toward the stairs. "I'm going to bed," he said softly before adding, "and for what it's worth, I'm proud of you, Robert. You can't let this get to you. Gay people deal with bigots all the time, and you're right, you can't let the bigots win." Gregory coughed lightly before leaving the room, the stairs creaking as he climbed them.

Sebastian didn't know what to say as he watched Robert. He knew Gregory was right, but hearing the words was one thing, actually feeling them was a different matter.

“Sebastian,” Robert said softly, “I know this isn’t the best way for people to find out, but now that it’s out in the open, I feel free, like a weight has been lifted.”

Sebastian sighed. That’s just what Gregory had said before deciding he wanted to see other men and to start going out to clubs. Sebastian stilled, listening to Gregory move around above them. “What’s got you upset?” Robert asked. When Sebastian continued looking away, he felt Robert’s finger under his chin, and he couldn’t help following that touch. “What’s bothering you?”

“I’m just wondering how long it will be before you want to go out and find someone else. Everyone does, you know. Once they come out and they feel free, they want to experience the man buffet. I did, Gregory did, so why wouldn’t you too?” The thought of Robert with someone else sent jitters down his legs. Fuck, he was falling in love, and he knew he really shouldn’t, not this soon, and not with someone just figuring out who he was, sexually.

“I don’t have any intention of sampling any man buffet,” Robert told him, and Sebastian felt Robert’s lips brush lightly against the skin at the base of his neck. “That is, unless I can convince you to lie on a table with goodies on all the best parts.”

Stretching, Sebastian gave Robert better access to his skin, and he seemed to be taking full advantage. Soon they were making out on the sofa like teenagers. “Come upstairs,” Sebastian whispered when Robert’s lips slid down his neck.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Like you and Gregory said, we can’t let the bigots win, so let’s go upstairs and win one for our side.”

THE next morning, Sebastian walked to the restaurant in the chill morning air. In the end, he and Robert had spent a wonderful evening scoring a few touchdowns for their side. He found that one of the best parts was the way Robert held him afterward, tight and warm against

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his chest, and then in the morning.... Sebastian felt himself blush as he remembered the inventive things Robert had done with just his fingers.

"Somebody's a million miles away," Darryl called from the kitchen door. "You've been folding that napkin for the last twenty minutes. What gives?"

"Nothing," Sebastian answered with a blushing smile. "How was your Thanksgiving? Did you spend it with the boys?" Sebastian asked, changing the subject. He'd found he was quite protective of his time with Robert and didn't want to share.

"Marie is a great cook, and we had a ball with the boys," Darryl told him before looking around the dining room. "Where's Billy? I haven't seen him since he left the house this morning." Darryl sounded concerned.

"He hasn't been here yet as far as I know, and it's not like him not to call. Give him ten minutes, and we'll send out the posse. He can't be very far away," Sebastian told Darryl, but he could see the concern in the chef's eyes.

"Is Robert coming in for lunch?" Darryl asked, leaning to look through the restaurant and out the front windows.

"Yes. He doesn't have to work today, so he said he was going to do some Christmas shopping and then stop in. I know," Sebastian said as Darryl rolled his eyes. "He's a nut, but he and his mom have this thing where they go shopping in the Black Friday madhouse. Couldn't pay me enough to do that, but he swears they have fun and get some great deals."

Darryl nodded absently, still looking out the windows as Sebastian went back to work, but he found that he, too, kept looking out the windows for Billy.

Darryl saw him first, hurrying to the front door to let him in. "What happened? Where were you?" Darryl fired questions as he hugged Billy, practically dragging him inside.

Billy squirmed away. "Sebastian, I need your help," Billy said, hurrying toward him, practically dragging him outside and around to the side of the building.

“What’s going on? It’s freezing out here,” Sebastian protested as he began to shiver in the cold air. “I don’t understand what could be so—” Sebastian stopped midsentence as they turned the corner and Sebastian saw a man lying on the ground, face covered in blood. “Why didn’t you call an ambulance?” Sebastian asked as he hurried toward the still form.

“I forgot my phone,” Billy answered from behind. “It’s Sweeper,” he added softly.

“Go back inside and have Darryl call an ambulance, and for God’s sake, bring my coat. And if there’s a blanket on the futon in the office, bring that as well,” Sebastian ordered hurriedly, lightly pressing his fingers to the fallen man’s neck.

“Is he alive?”

“Yes.” Sebastian turned to Billy. “Go!” Billy seemed to brush off his daze, and he ran back toward the restaurant. Sebastian could hear Sweeper’s labored breathing now, and he wondered how long he’d been lying here before Billy had seen him.

“They’re on their way,” Billy said as Sebastian heard footsteps. Taking the blanket, Sebastian covered Sweeper before pulling on his coat. “Shouldn’t we move him off the ground and get him someplace warm?”

“No. If we move him and he’s injured his neck or back, we can make it worse. Is there anything else we can use to keep him warm?” Sebastian asked as sirens began to sound. “Go stand out by the road and direct them in here.” Billy nodded, biting his lower lip worriedly, and finally moved toward the street. “Don’t try to move,” Sebastian said as Sweeper’s arm pushed against the pavement. “Help is coming. Just relax. They’ll be here in just a few minutes,” Sebastian told him soothingly, and he thought Sweeper might have tried to say something, but Sebastian didn’t understand it if he did. “Billy found you and called for help,” he went on to explain, unsure if Sweeper could actually hear him or not, but he hoped if he did, it would help him remain calm.

“Sebastian,” he heard from behind him. Turning, he saw Robert hurrying toward him. “What are you doing here?”

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Sebastian explained as the ambulance pulled up, the sirens echoing in the small space, drowning him out until the sound died away. “He’s alive, Robert, but that’s all I know right now.” Sebastian checked Sweeper’s pulse again, still finding one. Paramedics rushed up and took over, asking a lot of questions they didn’t know the answers to. “It looks like he was attacked, but that’s about all we know,” Sebastian supplied, looking at Billy, who shrugged, but could supply nothing more. He just stood next to one of the buildings looking worried and upset.

“Billy,” Robert said, stepping over to where he stood, “we need to get out of the way and let them do their jobs.” Sebastian saw Robert lead Billy away. “We’ll find out where they’re taking him, and I’ll make sure they call you.” Sebastian saw Robert in full lawyer mode, and it was impressive. Joining the others out of the way, they let the men work. Robert talked to the police while Sebastian watched the men check Sweeper over before placing him on a back board and putting him in the ambulance. Sebastian joined Robert and Billy, watching as the ambulance pulled away.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions,” a police officer told them.

“Can we go inside?” Sebastian asked, checking his watch. “We’re supposed to open in five minutes.” He motioned toward Café Belgie, and the officer nodded, following them down the sidewalk and inside. Things seemed strangely familiar for Sebastian as he sat Billy and the officer at one of the tables before getting to work. There was plenty to do, and luckily there weren’t people waiting as he opened the doors for customers.

Billy and the officer talked for a while, and the dining room began to get busy. “Hey, Robert,” Sebastian said as he walked to the table where his boyfriend nursed a cup of coffee. “I could use a little help, would you mind? Billy’s still with the officer, and I don’t want to disturb them.”

“Sure,” Robert said as he stood up. “What would you like me to do?”

“When people sit down, make sure their water glasses are full and bring them the bread baskets. I’ll take their orders and get them into the

kitchen,” Sebastian explained. “I appreciate this.” Sebastian explained where the bread was, and Robert began filling glasses while Sebastian took orders. After half an hour, Billy got up from the table and went to work, not talking much. The officer asked Sebastian a few quick questions, but he didn’t know anything that would help, and the officer left.

Every table in the restaurant was full, and people waited by the door throughout much of the early afternoon. Sebastian had told Robert he could go, but he’d insisted on helping. All three of them worked their legs off until the crowd finally started to thin and eventually tapered off. Unlike most days, the customers kept coming, and the lunch service stretched right into the dinner service.

“Thank you, Robert,” Sebastian told him when they were both in the kitchen once two fresh servers arrived.

“No problem,” Robert told him. “You can pay me back later,” he added, giving Sebastian a quick kiss. “I’m going to make a few calls to see if I can find out anything about Sweeper’s condition. It would be easier if we knew his real name, but I’ll find out and let you know.”

“Thanks,” Sebastian told him.

“And if judging ever gets dull,” Darryl added from behind the counter, “you can always come to work here.”

“Thanks, Darryl, I’ll remember that,” Robert said with a quick smile before saying goodbye.

Sebastian watched him go, sighing once before pulling his eyes away and going back to work. “Don’t like it when he leaves, do you?” Darryl inquired as he worked.

Sebastian felt himself turn red, but didn’t answer, expecting Darryl to say something more, but he only smiled knowingly and nodded once before going back to work, and Sebastian did the same, stopping to tell Billy that Robert was trying to get some news about Sweeper.

The restaurant got busy again, and Sebastian went back to work. Robert called a few hours later to tell him that Sweeper was in the hospital and expected to be okay. “He was roughed up pretty good, but

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it looks like they didn't do a lot of internal damage," Robert told him, and Sebastian had to listen intently while standing behind the server's station. Normally he would have left the dining room, but they were too busy. "That's good," Sebastian said over the noise from the room. "Why was he unconscious, then?"

"They say he probably has a concussion, and they're going to keep him for a few days. They won't give me too many details, but will you tell Billy? I know he's worried."

"I will," Sebastian answered and heard Robert say goodbye before closing the phone and walking to a table when one of his customers caught his eye. He spent hours as busy as he could ever remember and had no time to think about anything other than his customers, except the few minutes he spent delivering Robert's message to Billy.

At closing time, Sebastian locked the door, falling against it with a dramatic sigh that came all the way from his tired feet. He and Billy, along with the other servers, worked to get the dining room ready for the following day while everyone caught their breath and made preparations for what looked like a repeat tomorrow. Finally, having closed at nine, they left the restaurant after ten. "Would you like to join us for a drink?" Jackie, one of the other servers, asked. Sebastian politely declined, and with a final wave started walking toward home.

INSIDE his house, the rooms were dark, and as he took off his coat, Sebastian heard Gregory's footsteps upstairs. "I thought you'd be in bed," Sebastian said, looking up as Gregory stepped slowly down the stairs.

"And I wasn't expecting you back tonight."

"Why?"

Gregory stopped on the stairs. "I expected you to be at Robert's tonight."

Sebastian hung up his coat, slipping his scarf into the sleeve. "He didn't mention anything when he was at the restaurant this afternoon,

so I guess he wants an evening alone. He's entitled." Sebastian thought of calling, but it was awfully late.

"He called this afternoon to see how I was doing," Gregory said as he continued down the stairs, walking into the dark living room. "He said he was working at the restaurant." Gregory's voice drifted in from the dark room, and Sebastian wandered in, sitting next to Gregory on the sofa. "You want to tell me what's going on in that mixed-up head of yours?"

Sebastian glared at the still figure sitting next to him in the reflected glare from the streetlight through the windows. "My head's just fine."

"Then why are you here instead of with Robert? The man worked at the restaurant on his day off for you, and in case you haven't noticed, whenever he looks at you, the man's eyes light up, and yours do the same. But I can tell you're holding back."

"No, I'm not," Sebastian countered weakly.

"Come on, Bastian. I know I hurt you, and I'm sorry, but you can't keep a lid on your heart. Robert loves you, I can see it."

"Then why hasn't he said anything?" Sebastian asked, half whining.

"Why haven't you?" Gregory countered quickly. "I think he's probably shown it, though," he added in a softer voice. "Robert's going to be a judge, but he spent part of his day today helping you at the restaurant because you needed him. I doubt he likes filling water glasses or clearing tables, but he did it and probably enjoyed himself because he was doing it to help you. And I think he's a little scared himself. He's gay, an elected judge, just coming out, and I dare say, you could probably be his first love, and he isn't sure what he should say." Sebastian felt Gregory's hand in his. "When I came to see you a few weeks ago, I'd be lying if I told you I didn't want you back, because I did. You were the best man I ever met, and I let you go because I thought the grass was greener someplace else. I can tell you—it wasn't."

"So what should I do, oh wise one?" Sebastian quipped with a smile.

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“Go tell him how you feel and stop hanging around this house with me.” Sebastian felt Gregory shift before getting to his feet. “I’m going back up to bed, and Monday I’m going to start looking for a job. I’m feeling better, and it’s time I stopped mooching off you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” Sebastian found himself pulled into a hug. Gregory still felt frail, but he seemed stronger.

“How about you concentrate on finding a job, and then maybe we can talk about you renting a room here.”

“Maybe,” Gregory answered, “but I think you have more urgent things to take care of.” Gregory moved away and out into the hallway, where he began climbing the stairs. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Sebastian followed, debating if he should follow Gregory’s advice, but while his brain vacillated, Sebastian had already put on his coat and wound his scarf around his neck. He wasn’t sure this was such a good idea, but he wanted to see Robert, and Gregory was right, damn him. Sebastian looked up the now-empty stairs before turning and leaving the house, locking the door.

As Sebastian walked in the cold air, his skin tingled, so he moved as fast as he could, his steps becoming more rapid the closer he got to Robert’s house. Hell, he didn’t even know if Robert was at home. He hadn’t called, and he probably should have. As he walked up the block to Robert’s house, he felt his heart stop when he saw all the windows dark. Slowing his pace, he climbed the steps, knocked on the front door, and waited.

No lights came on, and Sebastian began looking around, shivering inside his coat. *Why hadn’t he called?* Knocking again, he waited a few seconds before turning and walking back down the sidewalk. This was a stupid idea, and he should have stayed home, or better yet, he screamed inside his head, *he should have just called.*

“Sebastian?” he heard from behind him. Turning around, he saw Robert peering outside his doorway. “What are you doing here?”

Sebastian walked back, standing near where a half-dressed Robert shivered in the doorway. “I...,” he started, but he didn’t know what to say all of a sudden.

“Come on in,” Robert told him, stepping back. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I know and I should have called first, but....” Sebastian walked inside, feeling weird and very nervous. *Why had he let Gregory talk him into this?* He was going to see Robert tomorrow, and they could have talked then. Instead he felt like he was imposing. “I’m sorry, Robert. I shouldn’t have come. You weren’t expecting me, and I just barged in. I should go.” Sebastian turned back toward the door.

“Bunny,” Robert said from behind him very softly, a hand settling on his shoulder. “I get the feeling that you came here for something in the middle of the coldest night of the year so far.” He felt Robert right behind him. “Just tell me. It can’t be that bad.” Robert’s voice fell silent, and the hand slipped away from his shoulder. “I see,” he said softly.

“No,” Sebastian said, turning quickly, “I don’t think you do.” Sebastian stepped closer, suddenly realizing what Robert was thinking. “I came because I have something to tell you, but, geez, Robert, I’m messing this all up.” Sebastian blinked when Robert turned on the lamp on the table, and he saw Robert was in his robe and barefoot. “You must be freezing.”

“What is it you wanted to say?” Sebastian could hear a touch of fear in Robert’s voice.

“I know I’m not doing this right, but I came to thank you for helping today and to tell you that....” Sebastian felt his chest tighten—the last person he’d said these words to had hurt him. “Robert, I love you.” He’d said it, and he waited to see how Robert would react, that is, until he was hugged close and felt Robert press his cheek to the top of his head.

“I love you too, Bunny,” Robert murmured against his hair. “But I was afraid to say something.”

Sebastian tilted his head, and Robert’s lips found his, the kiss soft, but building quickly, their bodies pressing together. Sebastian wrapped his arms around Robert’s waist, holding on until the kiss softened again. “Are you staying?”

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Sebastian realized he still had his coat on. Pulling off his scarf, he set it on the nearest chair before shrugging out of his coat. Then Robert kissed him again, hard and filled with passion, and Sebastian felt his knees weaken as he leaned against Robert's body. "I love you, Robert," he repeated softly as his emotions took flight.

"Let's go upstairs," Robert told him, turning off the light before taking his hand, leading him up the stairs and into the bedroom. Then Robert was kissing him again, and Sebastian was filled with a lightness his spirit hadn't felt in a long time. He loved Robert, and Robert had said he loved him. Working his hands beneath Robert's robe, he felt soft skin slide under his hands, and after undoing the knot at his waist, the robe fell open, and Sebastian felt the warmth radiate off Robert's skin.

Soft hands touched his waist, and Sebastian felt his shirt lift. Robert's lips gentled, the kiss ending as Robert's hands glided over his stomach. Lifting his arms, Sebastian let Robert tug off his shirt. Robert kissed him again, and he felt the robe slide off Robert's shoulders, the tall man standing naked next to him.

It wasn't long before Sebastian felt his pants slide down his legs and the two of them tumbled onto the bed, hands and mouths engaged in their own explorations. They'd been together before, but tonight everything felt new and special, Robert's skin smoother, his kisses more urgent. The slightest touch on Sebastian's stomach made it flutter with excitement. "Make love to me, Robert," Sebastian said softly between kisses.

"You know I've never...."

Sebastian stroked Robert's cheek. "You'll be magnificent." He knew it was true because it would be Robert and him making love. It didn't matter if it was Robert's first or hundred and first time, this was what he wanted very much. "I love you, and whenever you do something in love, it can't help being perfect."

Robert captured his lips again, his weight pressing onto Sebastian, their cocks sliding against warm skin, and Sebastian shivered as Robert moved above him, warm skin pressing to him, heat passing between them. Lifting his legs, Sebastian wrapped them around Robert's waist.

Robert's hands slid down his thighs and over his cheeks. "You feel so good," Robert said softly against his lips. "I love the way your legs quiver when I touch you here." Robert's hand slid to the back of his knee, and Sebastian's leg shook and he tightened his hold on Robert, hands sliding down his lover's back.

"Robert, please make love to me." Sebastian heard his voice break.

"Oh, I will, Bunny. I'll make love to you for as long as you'll let me." Robert kissed him again, and Sebastian felt fingers slide over his skin, and he started when they lightly slid over his opening, his breath catching. Holding Robert around the neck, he gasped as Robert's touch continued.

Robert shifting on the bed brought Sebastian out of the passion-induced fog. His eyes closed, he waited for Robert, and soon his lover was back, kissing him again, fingers slick as they explored his most intimate of places, teasing his skin. "It's okay, Robby," Sebastian whimpered breathily, and slowly, a long finger slipped inside his body. Sebastian gasped, his back arching as Robert's finger touched that special place for the briefest of moments. "I love you, Robby," Sebastian croaked as Robert touched that spot again. A second finger slowly joined the first, the stretch nearly blissful, each touch soft and caring, and a deep moan escaped from his chest.

"Is this okay?" Robert whispered. "I'm not hurting you, am I?" All movement stopped, and Sebastian groaned again, this time in frustration.

"No, you could never hurt me," Sebastian answered between gritted teeth as Robert moved again, fingers scissoring inside his body. Pulling Robert closer, Sebastian attacked his lips, echoing the pleasure Robert was giving to him. "Ready for you, Robby."

Robert shook his head, and Sebastian wasn't sure what he was saying no to, until a third finger added exquisitely to the stretch. Sebastian inhaled deeply, gasping and sighing in rapid succession. His entire body felt as though it were on fire. Everywhere Robert touched, his skin came alive.

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A deep groan filled the room as Robert's fingers slipped away, and Sebastian felt himself shake with excitement. The bed shook for a few seconds, and Sebastian watched in the dim light as Robert rolled a condom down his length. Leaning closer, Sebastian nudged Robert's hand away before slowly sliding the latex into place, watching as Robert's eyes closed at the touch. Stroking lightly, he heard Robert's soft cry like music to his ears.

"I'm not going to last if you keep doing that," Robert murmured, and Sebastian let his fingers slip away as Robert kissed him again. Settling between his legs, Robert got into position, fingers touching once again, and slowly Robert pressed into his body. Everything about Robert was proportional, and when he breached Sebastian's opening, Sebastian felt it with every muscle, each fiber in his body. All his nerves seemed to fire at once as Robert sank deep inside.

"Please stop for a minute," Sebastian whispered as the sensation threatened to overwhelm him, his body needing a moment to adjust.

"Should I stop?" Robert began to pull away, and Sebastian touched his hip to still him.

"No, love, just give me a minute," Sebastian replied softly, his hand sliding along Robert's side, smooth skin sliding beneath his palm. "That's better."

Robert began to move, slowly, as if his body were questioning Sebastian's, and after a few strokes, Sebastian's body answered. His back arching, Sebastian met each thrust. Their lips came together in a forceful kiss that mirrored the building passion inside both of them. Sebastian held on to Robert with both hands, letting him guide their passion.

It had been a long time since someone had made love to him, and Sebastian could feel Robert's love and care in each and every one of his movements. There was no doubt how Robert felt anymore. It almost seemed as though their hearts engaged at the same time their bodies did. Sebastian had never felt anything like it before, but it seemed he'd finally come fully alive for the first time in his life, and it was with Robert.

Breathing hard, he felt Robert's movements become ragged, his breathing deep and forced. Locking his gaze onto Robert's eyes, he watched as Robert's mouth opened, eyes staring back. Robert thrust deep inside, stilling, and Sebastian felt Robert throbbing deep inside him as he made the most incredibly surprised groan, his body vibrating slightly as the climax overtook his lover. "Oh God, Bunny. I love you!" Robert cried out before falling into Sebastian's arms.

"I love you too, Robert," Sebastian echoed softly, holding Robert as he came down from his intense climax, rubbing his back, feeling Robert slip from his body.

"Did I hurt you?" Robert asked against Sebastian's ear.

"No," Sebastian whispered, kissing Robert's lips when he lifted his head.

"You gasped and I thought...."

Sebastian smiled. "It's because you slipped out of me, and I'm really sensitive right now."

"Is that bad?" Robert's concerned look returned.

"No," Sebastian said, practically giggling, "it's wonderful, completely and absolutely wonderful." To help make his point, Sebastian kissed Robert hard, carding his fingers through his lover's hair. When the kiss subsided, Sebastian felt Robert shift from on top of him. Getting off the bed, he walked into the bathroom, returning a few seconds later, stopping by the edge of the bed. "What's wrong, Robert?" Sebastian asked, sitting up, not sure what the look on his face meant.

"Nothing," Robert said but didn't move. "You're so beautiful," he murmured, and Sebastian felt himself color slightly even through his excitement. "Lying in my bed, naked and excited. I don't think I've ever seen anything as beautiful in my life." Robert took a step forward, his hands ghosting over Sebastian's skin, fingertips barely touching, but Sebastian's skin gasping for each touch. "I never thought I could have someone as wonderful and kind and special in my life." Robert moved closer still, standing naked against the bed. Sebastian looked up into his eyes, feeling Robert's hands lightly rove over his skin, each and every touch making him throb and ache.

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“I know how you feel. I never thought I could ever find anyone like you.” Sebastian couldn’t bear to list all the things he loved about Robert. He was too afraid that one day Robert would wake up and realize that he could have so much more than Sebastian. Robert’s fingers sliding around his length drove all other thoughts, doubts, and worries from his mind. “Robert,” Sebastian cried, bucking into the tight heat of his fist. “My Robby,” he gasped.

“Yes, I’m your Robby, and you’re my Bunny,” Robert told him as he leaned forward, taking him into his mouth. Sebastian could barely control himself, his body on overdrive, his need for release powerful and nearly all-consuming. Robert’s hand on his hip stilled his movements, and he let Robert’s lips slide up and down his length, taking him inside that person he loved. In a matter of seconds, Robert had driven him up the mountain of desire, and with a cry he came in eye-flashing power.

Opening his eyes, he found Robert sitting on the bed next to him, hands rubbing his stomach. “Are you okay? You had me worried.”

“I’m fine,” Sebastian told Robert and felt him get into bed, pulling back the covers so he could get under them. “You just blew my mind.”

“You blew mine too,” Robert told him, snuggling close, holding him against his warm body. Robert, his Robert, held him close. Turning out the light, he heard Robert whisper little things in the dark, sweet loving things that he let into his heart and held there. Nothing was perfect, he knew that, but right here and now with Robert, it felt as perfect as Sebastian thought it could possibly get.

“I love you,” Sebastian said again, loving how it felt to say it and loving when Robert said it back to him. “Sometimes I wonder just what you could see in me,” he told Robert, who simply kissed away the words, holding him a little bit tighter as his body relaxed into sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

THE rest of the holiday weekend was the best weekend Robert had ever had in his life. He and Sebastian spent all the time that Sebastian wasn't working together. And most of that time they spent in bed. Gregory felt better each day and seemed to be getting stronger, which was a relief to both of them, and yesterday afternoon the hospital had called to tell him that Sweeper, which seemed to be the only name he'd give anyone at the hospital, at least within Robert's hearing, was going to be okay. And while he had a concussion, it didn't seem to have affected his cognitive abilities.

"I'll see you later," Robert said as he bent over a still-sleeping Sebastian, the man's eyes closed, hair ruffled and beautiful. As he kissed him on the cheek, Sebastian moved, lips searching for his even as his eyes remained closed. Kissing him again, Robert quietly left the room, heading down the stairs and out the front door of Sebastian's row house. Walking to his car, Robert felt the wind blow through his coat, and he gratefully pulled the car door closed, starting the engine and turning on the seat warmers. Driving home, he changed quickly before heading to his office.

"Millie, you're here early," he said with a smile as he passed her desk. "What happened?"

"Come on, Robert, I saw the paper this weekend. I figured you'd need me this morning. At the very least, I thought you'd need me to handle any phone calls."

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“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, but if there are any calls, I have no comment to the press and will not talk about my personal life. In fact, you can tell them that my personal life is just that, personal.”

Millie smiled. “I’ll be sure to do that, nosy reporters, anyway. Don’t they know what happens in someone else’s bedroom is private? How’d they like it if people started looking into their lives, I wonder?”

Robert stepped closer to her, giving the woman a warm hug. “Thank you, I’m so glad you understand, and I wanted to offer you a job as my personal assistant when I move to the courthouse. I want you there with me when I do this.”

“Won’t they already have people for you?”

“I have no intentions of using my predecessor’s assistant, so I wanted to offer you the job.” Robert felt himself smiling now, especially when he saw the delighted look on her face. “Good. I’ll give you the details when I have them, hopefully later this week.”

“Thanks, Robert,” she said with a grin, “but what about Jon? Won’t he be upset about you stealing his people?”

“No, Millie,” Jon said as he appeared behind her. “Robert is going to need people around him he can trust, and I can’t think of anyone better for that than you.” Jon walked to Robert’s door. “Can I speak with you?”

Robert nodded and followed him into the office, shutting the door. “I want you to know that I’m behind you,” Jon said, turning around to face him. “As I told you before, most people are understanding and feel that this is none of their business. But others may be more vocal.” Jon sank into one of the client chairs. “I’m hoping this will blow over and be a non-issue, but you need to be prepared for a negative reaction. Granted, there’s nothing they can really do except make some noise, but they could do that and cause quite a distraction.”

“What do you suggest? I told Millie to say I will not comment on my personal life.”

“Perfect. I’ll call some friends at the paper. They have to know what’s going on, and I’ll make it known that this is your personal life that they’re reporting on and that it has no effect on your ability to be impartial or fair on the bench, and that’s all that really matters.” Jon got

up, walking toward the door. “Someone’s just sensationalizing. This won’t last long, and everyone will be on to something else.”

“Thanks, Jon.”

“No problem. I know coming out is hard, it was hard for Peter, but to have it splashed in the newspaper for the world to see has to be extra shocking. Just know that you have people in your corner, and let us help speak for you. It’ll carry more weight and help keep you out of the line of fire. They can use your words against you, but they can’t do that with ours nearly as easily.” Jon left the office, and Robert watched the crafty litigator walk away. That man should have been a salesman instead of a lawyer, because he could sell sand to a man lost in the Sahara.

Robert left his door open and got to work until his first client arrived. The young couple greeted him with a smile. “We saw the article and we’re behind you,” the husband said before he and his wife settled down to draft their will.

The morning flew by, and Millie told him as she was going to lunch that the phones had been normal. For that, Robert was eternally grateful, beginning to hope that his personal life would fade quickly from the public interest. The only people calling had been clients, and Millie told him their calls had been positive with shows of support. He thought of going to Café Belgie for lunch and to see Sebastian, but instead opened the small refrigerator in his office and pulled out a microwave lunch. Heating it, he returned to his desk to get some additional work done before his afternoon appointments. He’d half expected some of his appointments to cancel, but that hadn’t happened, either, not that he had all that many right now. He’d been winding down his appointments in preparation for taking his seat on the bench. Eating the bland microwave chicken, Robert finished making his notes so Millie could type the document. Then he gathered his things, getting ready for his afternoon appointment at the courthouse.

On the street, the sidewalk bustled with people. Carlisle had done a lot to try to bring businesses back downtown, and it seemed to be working, with people dodging snowflakes as they wandered from store to store. He headed toward the square, where the lampposts were

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decked with garland and bows, and the entire town seemed festive and bright. Approaching the square with the large angels on the light poles spreading their message of cheer, the sound of chanting cut through the festive atmosphere like a knife through butter. “No gay judge, no gay judge.”

Robert could feel his happy mood fly away on the winter breeze. Crossing the street, he could see five or six people standing near the courthouse steps with homemade signs reading “No Gay Judge” and “No Sodom in Our Courthouse.”

Shaking his head, Robert didn’t linger, but got in line to go through the metal detectors and to have his bag X-rayed. Once inside, he headed to the Prothonotary’s Office to have some documents filed before walking up the stairs for his appointment with the President Judge. His assistant was expecting Robert. “Judge Wilson is just finishing up. He should be right with you,” she said, offering him a chair. “Can I get you some coffee while you wait?”

“That’s very nice, thank you,” Robert answered with a smile, trying to put the words he’d heard outside out of his mind so he could concentrate on the details for his swearing-in and where he’d be working. He’d been anxious to get all the details finalized.

“Robert, good afternoon,” Judge Wilson said as he opened his door. “Jean, I’ll be in conference for the next little while,” he told his assistant before ushering Robert into his spacious office. “Please have a seat,” he offered. Jean came in, handing them each a cup of coffee before quietly leaving the room, closing the door behind herself.

“I have to apologize for the hooplah outside,” Robert began, but Judge Wilson waved it away.

“We’re judges and we decide cases on the facts, not based upon who happens to be marching on our steps,” Judge Wilson responded, and Robert felt some of the knot in his stomach unwind. “That being said, I need to know some things. Are you in fact gay?”

“Yes,” Robert answered. “I’m not comfortable discussing something this private, but yes, I am. It’s something I’m starting to come to terms with.”

The older judge walked behind his desk, the chair creaking slightly as he sat down. "I see. This puts me in a bit of a conundrum."

"How so?" Robert asked quickly. "I have done nothing illegal or unethical. Keeping my private life private is a right of all Americans, and my being gay does not diminish or affect my ability to hear cases or render well-reasoned and thoughtful opinions and verdicts."

"Because this is an elected position, I wish this would have come out before the election."

"Aha," Robert said, and he knew his eyes showed his excitement. "There's the rub, however, the topic never came up during the election, and if asked I would not have lied. Since I was not asked and the topic was never broached, I was not obligated to provide an answer. It's very simple, your honor. I have done nothing wrong legally or ethically."

"I know," Judge Wilson's chair creaked again as he leaned forward. "You make a very good case, and yes, the right to privacy is one we all enjoy, and rightfully so. I don't see any ethical issues, especially now that this is in the open, or any signs that this or anything else would impair your judgment." The judge leaned back in his chair. "Now that that's over, let's get down to the real business at hand, shall we?"

"Wonderful," Robert answered, and their conversation shifted to courthouse routine and case assignment procedures, as well as a tour of his new courtroom and chambers.

"We're a little short-handed at the moment, but once you're sworn in, we'll be up to speed and able to clear some of the backlog," Judge Wilson explained as they walked back to his office. "We'll hold your swearing-in ceremony in the old courthouse across the street right after the New Year. It's a much better setting for things like that. I know we were hoping to swear you in earlier, but the appointment doesn't look like it's going to happen," he explained with a shrug. "Politics," he added before going into a few details regarding staffing and budgetary issues. By the time they were done, Robert's head was swimming with information and his heart pounding with excitement. This was really going to happen. In a little over a month, he was really going to be

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Judge Fortier. “We’ll be in touch in the next few weeks with all the details,” Judge Wilson told him as they shook hands.

Robert’s excitement lasted until he stepped outside the doors. The few protesters had been joined by more people carrying signs and chanting. The police were there now, telling people to disperse, explaining that a permit was needed for the demonstration. “We’ll get one,” someone yelled as Robert came down the steps. Turning, he saw Claude, from his mother’s Thanksgiving dinner, holding a sign. Thankfully, Claude was looking at the police officer rather than him, and Robert was able to make his way to the corner to wait for the light.

“Robert.” Hearing his name, he turned around to see a man with a camera and microphone heading his way. Thankfully, the light changed, and Robert turned back, crossing the street diagonally, appreciating this quirk of Pennsylvania logic, and made his way toward his office without looking back. He hadn’t rushed or hurried, for which he was grateful, because the instinct to run had been nearly overpowering. Closing the door behind him, he walked through the entrance hall of the late eighteenth-century building and up to his office. Meeting Jon on the stairs, he told him what was happening as the door opened, and Jon continued downstairs to do battle. He heard questions and voices before Jon’s voice carried over the din, very levelly telling them they needed to leave and that there would be no comment on Mr. Fortier’s personal life.

“Your three thirty is already here and waiting for you,” Millie told him as she handed him his messages.

He didn’t remember a three thirty today. “When did they make the appointment?”

“This morning. I added it to your calendar. It’s a lady, and she wanted help with her will.” Millie handed him the information she’d already put together from the telephone conversation. Robert didn’t recognize the name. “I asked her to wait for you in the library.”

“Go check to see if she looks like a reporter,” Robert said, and Millie’s hand flew to her mouth and she nodded. Robert went into his office, getting a notepad together in case this was legitimate. Millie came in a few seconds later, smiling. “I saw her poking around the

books and looking out the window, raising her hand to someone. When I offered her coffee, she jumped slightly.”

“Not the coolest cucumber, is she?” Robert commented, picking up his phone and calling Jon, telling him what he suspected.

“I’ll handle it,” Jon told him with what sounded like a touch of glee. “I’ll meet you outside the library.” Jon hung up, and Robert joined him on the landing before opening the door. “Good afternoon,” Robert said, walking in as though it were any other appointment and offering her his hand. “Mrs. Williams, I’m Robert Fortier. My assistant said you were interested in drafting a will?”

Robert could almost see the delight in her eyes as he took a seat at the long table across from her. “Please tell me what I can do for you.”

“Well, I’m with the *Carlisle Guardian*, and I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when Jon strode into the room. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“He’s not afraid of a few questions, is he?”

“Miss Williams,” Jon began, standing in the doorway, “Mr. Fortier has no comment on his personal life, but you, on the other hand, are in a bit of trouble gaining access to this office under false pretenses.” Jon’s performance was beautiful, voice level and confident as she stood up, gathering her purse.

“I’ll be leaving.”

“Just a minute. I’m sure Millicent explained to you when you made the appointment that a will requires a minimum of two hours’ work.”

“Yes, but...”

“So, will that be cash, check, or credit card?” Jon asked her, his voice a mask of half threatening seriousness, and Robert could tell that behind that mask, he was ready to laugh his ass off.

“You’re joking?” Miss Williams sputtered, but it quickly tapered off.

“I could always call the police. Either way, if I know your boss, and I do, he’s not going to be happy with you.” Jon waited, and Miss

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Williams opened her purse, handing Jon a credit card. “Millicent,” Jon said lightly, and Millie walked in from her desk. “Could you please charge”—he looked at the card—“Janet Heath for two hours of Mr. Fortier’s time?” He handed her the card, and Millie kept her serious face on as she left the room, but Robert swore he heard her stifle a laugh as she headed to the business office.

Millie returned and Janet signed the slip. Millie made a show of checking the signatures before handing her a copy of the slip while Jon showed her out. As soon as he was alone, Robert collapsed into one of the chairs, looking out the deep-based windows that overlooked the street. “Millie, do I have any more appointments?”

“No.” He heard her voice travel in from her desk. Suddenly the office felt confining, and he needed to breathe. Hurrying to his office, he grabbed his coat. “I’m gone for the rest of the day,” he told her. “And you get out of here as soon as you can too,” Robert said as he grabbed his case and hurried out of the building and across the street. He could almost feel eyes following him, and he was sure there were people waiting for him, but he hurried along, walking to the front door of Café Belgie and peering inside. He saw no one, but knocked lightly anyway.

In the back, he saw the kitchen door open and someone walk toward the door, realizing it was Billy when he got closer. “Robert,” Billy said, pushing the door open, “come on in. It’s frigid out there.”

“Is Sebastian still here?”

“He’s in the back,” Billy told him, shutting and locking the door. “Come on,” Billy added, leading him through the dining room and into the kitchen.

“Robert,” Sebastian said, echoing Billy’s earlier cry, “I wasn’t expecting you. Is something wrong?” Sebastian asked, leading them toward the office. Sebastian shut the door, and Robert tugged him close, hugging Sebastian tight. “I take it you’ve had a rough day, not that I’m complaining in the least.”

“There are protests at the courthouse, and a reporter tried to get me to talk to her by making an appointment at my office,” Robert told Sebastian, holding the other man tightly, squeezing his eyes closed to

block out the tornado of fear and insecurity that threatened him. To think that a few hours ago, he'd allowed himself to be happy and excited about his upcoming appointment, but that happiness seemed far away right now. "It wouldn't surprise me if there are people outside the restaurant looking in the windows."

Sebastian moved away, walking through the kitchen. Robert stayed where he was, and Sebastian returned, shaking his head. "I don't see anyone." Sebastian moved close again, and Robert held him without thought. He needed to feel close to Sebastian.

"Should I simply resign and let the governor appoint a replacement?" Robert vocalized the thought that had been running through his mind ever since he saw the protestors.

"Don't you dare!" Sebastian told him, eyes boring into him. "You were elected fairly, and just because a few people are bigoted asses doesn't mean you should walk away. You're the best person for this job. They'll get tired eventually. This type of thing happens, and all you need to do is be strong and act as though you're above it. Take the high road," Sebastian advised.

"That's basically what Jon said, and it sounds reasonable and sensible. I just wish I didn't feel like I've been ripped to hell."

Sebastian lifted his head, meeting Robert's eyes. "But don't get me wrong—I can say that, but what I really want is to rip their guts out for making you feel this way."

"Sebastian," Billy called before walking into the office, "I need your help out front."

Robert released him from the hug. "I should get going and let you get back to work."

"Will I see you tonight?"

Robert didn't answer at first. "I'll call you later," he said, and Sebastian nodded slowly. Robert followed Sebastian out of the kitchen and into the dining room. There didn't appear to be anyone outside the restaurant, and Robert breathed a sigh of relief as he unlocked the door, leaving the restaurant and heading toward home.

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No one appeared to be following, and he didn't see any reporters or news cameras, not that he'd really expected any. Turning the corner, he walked down the block. As he approached his house, he saw people outside on the sidewalk. His stomach took a flip, and he tamped it down, telling himself it was probably nothing and he was overreacting. But as he got closer, he saw the signs, versions of the same signs he saw at the square. These people were picketing his house—his home! Threading between them, trying to ignore their calls and chants, he walked up his steps and saw Claude standing near his railing. "Your mother would be so ashamed," he said loudly, and the others took up the chant. Hands shaking, Robert inserted his key in the door. Unlocking it, he walked inside, closing the door before leaning his back against it, half gasping for air.

Chants drifted through the door. Not wanting to hear it anymore, Robert walked toward the back of the house, sitting at his kitchen table as his phone rang. "Hi, Mom," he said, answering the call with all the enthusiasm he could muster.

"I saw this protest nonsense on the news and knew you'd be upset," she said. "I even saw that Claude and his mime of a wife on television. And to think they ate at my table."

His mother's indignation made him smile for a few seconds. "He's outside my door right now, protesting in front of the house. I think the current chant is 'Your mother would be ashamed'."

"Well, I'm not," she said forcefully. "I know I had a hard time when you first told me you were gay, and I know I thought you'd get over it and find a nice girl, but that's not going to happen. I know that and I can't say I'm not disappointed I won't have grandchildren."

"Mom...."

"Listen to me. The one thing I am not, nor will I ever be, is ashamed of you! And if I could, I'd wring that scrawny Claude's pencil neck."

"Thanks, Mom." Their conversation lasted a few more minutes, with her telling him all about her day and Robert just listening—a normal conversation with his mother. For some strange reason, it felt soothingly familiar.

“Talk to you later, honey. All this will die down pretty fast when they see it won’t get them anywhere,” she added before disconnecting. Robert hoped she was right, but the people in front of his home seemed very determined. Robert was about to call the police when he heard a short siren blast from in front of the house. Moving into the living room, he peered out the windows and saw the officers talking to the sign carriers, and they seemed rather forceful. Eventually, the protestors dispersed, and Robert heard a knock on his door.

“Thank you, officers,” Robert said as he opened the door, inviting them inside out of the cold. One came inside while the other stayed on the sidewalk.

“It’s no problem, your honor,” the officer answered, obviously the one in charge. “We got calls from your neighbors. Borough ordinance does not allow protests on residential sidewalks because while the public has a right of way on the sidewalk, the actual property is the homeowner’s,” he explained with some delight. “If you have any more troubles, please give us a call.”

“Can I get you anything?” Robert offered, even though he already knew the answer.

“No, thank you,” the officer answered. “My partner is just making sure they don’t come back. But I wanted you to know you have friends on the police force.” The officer didn’t wink at him or anything, but Robert knew exactly what he meant. “I just need some information from you, and we’ll be on our way.”

Robert provided the basic information the police officer needed. Seeing him to the door, he was relieved that the neighborhood appeared to be quiet, and after thanking the officers once again for their assistance, he shut the door as the phone in the house began to ring. Robert let the machine get it, but no one left a message. After four more calls, Robert unhooked the phone before making sure all the doors were locked. Turning on the television, Robert settled into his chair, absently watching the images on the screen.

A buzzing sound pulled him out of his television-induced daze, and he walked to the kitchen to answer his cell phone. “Robert, are you okay?” Sebastian asked him. “You never called.”

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“Sorry, when I got home, there were protestors at the house. The police dispersed them. One of them was Claude. I didn’t see his wife, but who knows.” Robert sat back in his chair, turning down the volume on the television. “Say,” he exclaimed, checking the time. “Aren’t you really busy?”

“Actually, no, so I thought I’d give you a call. Do you want me to come over tonight after work?”

Robert wanted that more than anything. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said, half biting the inside of his lips to keep himself from saying what he really wanted to say. “I’ve got protestors and reporters following me all around, and you shouldn’t have to put up with that.”

“Robert.” Sebastian sounded disappointed. “You could come over to my place. Gregory says it’s been quiet all day.”

“It won’t be. Once they find you, they’ll start picketing your home too.” Robert swallowed hard, knowing what he had to say. “Maybe we should lay low until all this blows over.” This was not what he wanted to be saying, but it was the right thing to do. Sebastian didn’t need to be in the middle of his troubles, and he’d only bring them to Sebastian’s doorstep, or worse, to the restaurant. “I’m hoping this doesn’t last long and things will return to normal.”

“I see,” Sebastian said softly, “I...” Robert heard Sebastian fumble for his words. “Night, Robert.” The line went quiet, and Robert realized that Sebastian had disconnected. Placing the phone on the table, Robert stared at the television. He knew in his heart that he’d done the right thing to protect Sebastian from protests, and who knew what else these people had planned. But what he couldn’t quite figure out was why he felt so miserable about it. After a while of ignoring the television in favor of his own thoughts and worries, Robert switched it off, sitting in the silent, nearly dark room, wondering what he should do about all this. He knew he didn’t want to let the bigoted protestors win, but he almost saw no other option. “Crap!” he shouted through the empty house. They’d already won, because he was sitting alone at home instead of being with Sebastian. “Damn!” What had he done?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CLOSING time couldn't come fast enough. Sebastian felt as though all the wind had been let out of his sails, and by the end of his shift, he barely had the energy left to lift his feet. "You look like you lost your best friend," Billy told him as he flipped a tablecloth, settling it on the table. "But since that's me, I know that didn't happen. What gives?"

Sebastian shrugged, not wanting to talk about it. "Have you heard anything about Sweeper?" He knew it wasn't a graceful segue, but changing the subject was the only way he was going to get through the rest of his workday and go home in one piece.

"He'll be leaving the hospital soon," Billy explained from across the room as Sebastian retrieved the clean glasses they'd need. "They kept him a few extra days to make sure he was out of the woods, but he should be out tomorrow. I'm going to pick him up and bring him back here for the day so he can rest someplace warm. He was able to give the police a description of the kids who hurt him, but he hasn't heard if they caught anyone, or at least he didn't tell me that the last time I went up to visit him." Billy stopped what he was doing. "He doesn't tell me much, really," Billy said with a sigh. "I wish he'd open up a little more. I only want to help."

Sebastian stopped what he was doing, walking to where his friend continued smoothing the tablecloth. "He's been on his own for a long time, and this probably isn't the first time he's been hurt. Trust comes slowly."

"Is that what's going on with you and Robert?"

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Sebastian shook his head. “I wish I knew. These protests seem to have hit him hard, and he’s pulling away. He said we should, how did he put it, ‘lay low’ until this blows over.”

“Probably to protect you, or at least he may think he’s protecting you,” Billy commented as he finished laying out the silverware, and Sebastian placed the glasses at each setting.

“I don’t need his protection from anything. It’s not as though he’s the knight in shining armor and I’m some sort of damsel in distress.”

Billy grinned. “I didn’t know you were into costumes, kinky!” He jumped back, laughing, as Sebastian took a swat at him. “Seriously, he’s used to helping people solve their problems—he’s a lawyer. Maybe he spends so much time helping everyone else that he doesn’t know how to handle his own problems, and he thinks he has to handle it on his own.” Billy grabbed another tablecloth, flipping in a practiced movement over the cleared table.

“Thank you, Dr. Freud,” Sebastian quipped. “Since you’re so smart, what do I do about it?”

“I wish I had an answer, I really do, and while I did a lot of talking, I could just be full of shit. But there’s one way to find out. Ask him.” Billy smoothed the cloth and started placing the silverware as Sebastian got to work on his own tables, snapping a cloth into place as he did his best to ignore that bit of advice.

“He’s the one who wants us to lay low. I’m not going to go over to his house like some needy child and beg him to spend some time with me. He’s the one who made that little decision,” Sebastian grumbled rather fiercely.

“Then it sounds like you’ve made your choice—you’re going to wait it out.” Sebastian nodded at Billy’s observation. “Let me ask you this, what if there’s nothing to wait out?”

Sebastian sighed. “I’ve done it before,” he answered quickly, but the prospect left him with a hollow feeling inside. Dang it, he wanted to go over to Robert’s and shake some sense into the man. “Let’s get done so we can go home. It’s been a long day, and with the holidays, every day seems like a Saturday. We’re going to need our beauty sleep.”

“Speak for yourself,” Billy retorted with a swish that had them both laughing.

The talk diminished, leaving Sebastian alone with his thoughts. The thought of not seeing Robert again made his whole body ache with loneliness. Then he’d remember that it was Robert who’d asked for the distance and anger coursed through Sebastian to the point where he nearly broke a glass as he slammed it on the table. Looking at his hand, he felt his anger slip away as fast as it had risen. *What if Robert stayed away? The big doofus.* “You made me love you, and then you go and decide something this dumb,” he muttered under his breath as he finished his last table. “I ought to smack you the next time I see you.”

“Go home, Sebastian,” Billy told him. “Darryl has another half hour, and I can finish what’s left here.”

“Thanks,” Sebastian said rather numbly as he grabbed his coat and left out the back way, saying his good-nights rather absently. Bundling up against the cold, he hurried the four blocks home.

Inside, he heard the television on in the back of the house. “I got an interview for next week,” Gregory told him with a huge grin on his face.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m tired of being sick, and I’m tired of being tired,” Gregory told him. “It’s time I got on with my life. The meds seem to be working. I’m feeling better every day, and early next week I go to the doctor. Hopefully he’ll clear me to go back to work.”

“That’s good,” Sebastian said as he flipped off his shoes, reclining on the sofa. He saw Gregory looking over at him, and he could almost see the questions cross his friend’s face, but thankfully he kept his mouth shut, because Sebastian was in no mood to talk about this anymore. His anger had resurfaced, anger at Robert for reacting like such a bonehead, and anger at himself for letting himself fall for the man in the first place. When would he ever learn? While Robert hadn’t cheated or wanted to go out, he’d simply pulled away in a different manner, but the effect on him was the same. The phone in the kitchen rang, and Sebastian got up to answer it, wondering who could be calling this late, and half hoping it was Robert.

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“Good evening, this is Janet with the *Guardian*, and I was wondering if I could get a comment. I’m working on an upcoming story, and I understand that you are Robert Fortier’s boyfriend. Would you care to comment, and could I ask you a few questions?”

Sebastian stilled, pulling the phone from his ear, staring at it like it was a foreign object. “No, thank you,” Sebastian answered, placing the phone back in its cradle. With an unsettled feeling, Sebastian wandered through the house, making sure all the curtains were pulled closed before rejoining Gregory in the family room, pulling the curtains in there as well even though the windows overlooked his backyard which was surrounded by a high fence.

“You okay?” Gregory asked, quite concerned.

“I don’t know. That was a reporter who wanted to ask me questions about Robert.” Sebastian shivered at the thought of his personal life being printed in the newspaper.

“You should tell him,” Gregory said. “Robert will need to know.”

Sebastian shook his head. “He’s got enough to deal with right now....” Sebastian’s words trailed off as he realized he was doing the same thing Robert had. “Damn it!” Sebastian swore.

“What?”

“I’ll... oh hell.” Sebastian got up and went into the kitchen, pressing Robert’s number into the old push-button phone. He listened to it ring and figured it would go to voice mail.

“Sebastian?” Robert’s voice sounded so far away.

“Yes, it’s me. I got a call from a reporter who wanted to ask me questions. I didn’t speak to them, but I thought you should know.”

“Dang, I was hoping they’d stay away from you.”

“Is that why you said all that stuff earlier—because you were trying to protect me? Because if it was, I’ll tell you it was the sweetest, kindest thing, and if you ever do that again, I’ll smack you upside the head until your ears ring ‘Jingle Bells’.”

Robert’s rich laugh rang through the phone. “I guess I was kind of an idiot, wasn’t I?”

“Well, you were being protective,” he started, the lump in his stomach dissolving, “but I can take care of myself, and we’re stronger together helping each other than we are alone.”

“I know,” Robert told him, sounding contrite. “I missed you as soon as I hung up the phone.” Robert fell quiet, and Sebastian began to wonder if something was still wrong and if he’d pushed too hard. “This is hard to talk about over the phone.”

“Then come over here and tell me what you want to say in person,” Sebastian chided teasingly to a dead telephone line. Lifting his eyebrows, he stared at the phone—he seemed to be doing that a lot lately—before hanging it up.

“What did he say?” Gregory asked with a grin when he flopped back on the sofa.

“I don’t know. He was talking about it being hard to talk about this on the phone, and the next thing I know, there’s no one there. I told him to come tell me in person.” Sebastian couldn’t stop his grin.

“Sounds like someone’s expecting company.” Gregory got up and turned off the television. “I’m going upstairs to leave the two of you alone. Try not to make too much noise,” Gregory mock groused as he wrapped his blanket around himself and headed toward the stairs.

A few minutes later, Robert walked into the room, nearly shocking him half to death. “Gregory let me in,” Robert explained as Sebastian got to his feet and was immediately engulfed in a hug from the taller man. “I was such a fool,” Robert said softly as Sebastian’s senses were filled with him. The sound of his voice, the smell of his cologne, the taste of his lips—everything seemed so heady. Robert kissed him hard, as though he were trying to banish the feelings from the last few hours. “I should have known you could help.”

“Yes, you should,” Sebastian chastised lightly, working his hands around Robert’s neck as he rubbed his body against him like a cat starved for affection. “I thought—” Sebastian stopped himself. There was really no need to go into what he’d thought. “Forget it, just don’t do it again.”

“I won’t. I promise,” Robert told him, tugging him down onto the sofa. “Do you want to tell me about the phone call?”

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Sebastian pushed Robert back against the cushions, climbing on top of him as he kissed Robert to within an inch of both their lives. The last thing he wanted to do right now was talk, about anything, and as they continued kissing, Robert stopped asking such stupid questions, concentrating on kissing him back.

The sofa creaked beneath them as they moved, with Robert holding him tight and Sebastian trying his best to open Robert's shirt. Once he'd succeeded, he bent his head forward, capturing a nipple between his lips, sucking lightly before swirling his tongue around the hard bud. Robert hissed softly, and Sebastian did it again, enjoying the flavor of Robert's hot skin on his tongue. "You know, if this is how you make up, we're going to have to fight more often," Robert told him with a wink, and Sebastian ran his fingers down the taller man's side. Robert nearly fell off the sofa as he squirmed to get away. "Or not."

"Good choice," Sebastian told him with a smirk before pulling his fingers away and going back to the kissing.

"We really should talk before you keep this up and I forget all the things I wanted to say." Robert sat up, and Sebastian huffed lightly.

"Robert." Sebastian leaned forward, his lips right near Robert's. "You can either use your lips for talking or you can put them to better use and let your body speak for you." Sebastian let his hand slide lightly down the skin of Robert's chest and stomach, teasing the top of his belt before sliding back up to circle one of his nipples. Robert said nothing at all, his eyes as wide as saucers. "See, that's the right kind of talking."

Sebastian felt Robert's hand take his, holding it firmly. "I know what you want, but this is important."

"I know it is." Sebastian stopped his seduction, or, more accurately, *attempted* seduction, leaning against Robert, letting his lover hold him. "I was hoping to forget it for a little while."

"I'd love to, but that doesn't get us any nearer to any kind of solution."

"Robert," Sebastian said firmly, "it's almost eleven. There isn't much we can do tonight. So I propose this. Tonight you show me just how sorry you really are for the way you treated me, and in the

morning, you meet me at the restaurant early, and we'll have a war council. Darryl and Billy know a lot of people, and maybe they can help too. You're not alone in this, and we have friends who can help us."

"Maybe I'll see if Jon can join us."

"So it's agreed?" Sebastian asked, and Robert nodded. "Then I suggest you take me upstairs and start that apologizing." Sebastian did his best to look petulant, though he wasn't sure he succeeded until Robert laughed, the deep, rich sound filling the room. Getting up off the sofa, Robert tugged Sebastian to his feet, and after turning out the lights, Sebastian let Robert lead him upstairs and into his bedroom.

"I love you, Bunny," Robert told him as he tugged Sebastian close in the dark room. "I missed you so much." Robert kissed him hard, fingers sliding through his hair as Robert guided them toward the bed. Clothing melted away. Sebastian shivered, and not from the chill in the room, as Robert's hands traced elaborate patterns on his skin. Soon his lips joined in as well, leaving Sebastian writhing and panting on the mattress. "You know, Bunny, we should get tested. I only want to be with you," Robert murmured, his voice wrapping around Sebastian like a security blanket.

Sebastian cupped Robert's cheeks in his hand, bringing their lips together in what he hoped was an answer that Robert couldn't possibly misunderstand.

He wanted Robert to know how he felt, and when Sebastian felt Robert's palms and fingers sliding down his back, stopping at the indentation just above his butt, Sebastian groaned into their kiss. When those fingers slid lower, big hands cupping his cheeks, Sebastian poured himself into the kiss, holding on to Robert for dear life. Small gasps and cries filled the dark room as they explored with hands and lips, the outside world with all its troubles falling away as it became just Robert, him, and their love.

Reaching to the bedside table, Sebastian found his stash of supplies. "What are you doing?" Robert groaned, as Sebastian slid his fingers around his length, holding him still with a grin he knew Robert couldn't see.

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“You’ll see,” Sebastian said, chuckling softly, “or feel.” Finding what he was looking for, Sebastian opened the package, rolling the latex down Robert’s shaft, listening to his soft hisses as he stroked him. Slicking his fingers, Sebastian prepared himself, stretching and stroking as he listened to Robert’s excited breathing in the dark while he, too, writhed with anticipation.

Straddling Robert’s hips, he got into position and slowly sank onto Robert. Exquisite burn and stretch greeted him as Robert entered his body. Sebastian had to give his lover credit, because he somehow managed to let Sebastian control things without trying to thrust deeper. Sinking lower, Sebastian took more and more of Robert into his body, letting the taller man fill him in a way he’d never experienced before: body and soul. His butt pressing to Robert’s hips, he let things adjust before starting to move.

Sebastian loved the small gasps and whimpers he got from Robert whenever he moved, but what thrilled him even more was the way Robert felt inside him, big and full, like he could feel him touching his heart. Robert’s hands stroked his legs and thighs as they moved together, Robert thrusting up into him. Sweat pouring down him as they moved, Sebastian felt Robert’s climax build along with his cries, and Sebastian let his own passion build right along with his lover’s. Coming together, Sebastian’s spirit flew as he felt his mind float during that moment of complete and absolute bliss before he became aware of the world once again.

Leaning forward, he captured Robert’s lips with his as he felt their bodies separate. This time, Robert gasped, and Sebastian kissed it away before retrieving the things for a quick cleanup. Lying together, Robert held him close and tight, whispering soft, loving words, made more wonderful by the fact that they were meant for him and only him, until his eyes began to get heavy.

“Robert, go to sleep,” Sebastian whispered as he felt Robert shifting once again. “I know you’re worried, but it’ll be okay,” Rolling onto his side, Sebastian stroked his cheek. “There’s nothing you can do tonight, and you’ll need to be fresh and ready in the morning.”

“I know, but you didn’t see all those signs and....” Robert’s voice trailed off.

“Sticks and stones, Robert. We’ll figure it out.” Sebastian curled close, placing his arm over Robert’s tummy as he heard his lover’s breath finally begin to even out, and Sebastian let himself fall away into sleep.

Sebastian woke to Robert tossing and turning. He tried holding him, but nothing seemed to work. Eventually, Robert seemed to fall back to sleep.

THE sound of Sebastian’s alarm jolted him out of a sound sleep, and he slapped the infernal machine off. Hearing Robert groan, Sebastian wished they could stay in the warm bed a little longer, but they had things to do and plans to make. Sebastian felt hopeful that maybe then, Robert would be able to relax a little. Sliding out of the bed, he let Robert sleep as he got cleaned up, walking back into the bedroom to find Robert still buried under the covers, his head nearly disappearing into the pillow. The man looked adorable, and Sebastian hated to disturb him, but did it anyway, leaning down to kiss him first on the forehead and then on the lips, smiling slightly as Robert responded even in his sleep. “It’s time to get up,” Sebastian told him softly, getting a deep groan in response as Robert tried to pull him back into the bed. He was tempted to join him, very tempted. “You need to call Jon if you want him to join us.” After another groan, this time Robert began to move. He didn’t get out from under the covers, but at least he rolled over.

Sebastian began getting dressed, and he heard Robert get out of bed, padding naked toward the bathroom, ducking just in time to keep from hitting his head on the low doorframe. Hearing him groan again, Sebastian finished dressing before heading downstairs to put the coffee on. Robert joined him as it finished brewing, and Sebastian poured them each a mug. “I called Jon,” Robert said with a yawn. “He’ll meet us at the restaurant at eight thirty.”

“Good.” Sebastian sipped his wake-up juice. “I’ll call Darryl in a few minutes to let him know what’s going on. He may have some ideas too.” Sebastian felt his coffee start to work its magic, and ideas to help

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Robert began to flow through his mind. He wasn't sure if any of them were worth anything, but he could ask later.

Setting his empty mug on the counter, Sebastian called the restaurant, telling Darryl what was happening, and his boss told them to come on over. "Are you ready to go?" As Sebastian asked, he saw Gregory walk into the kitchen.

"Where are you going so early?" he asked sleepily.

"We're meeting at the restaurant to figure out a plan of attack for Robert. If you want to go, too, finish getting dressed. We're leaving in five minutes." Gregory nodded, taking his coffee cup with him as he went back upstairs, returning dressed and ready, but still looking really tired. "You don't have to do this if you're not up to it."

"I'm up for it," Gregory told him with a smile before placing his empty cup in the sink and walking toward the door. "Are you two lovebirds coming?" Gregory called through the house with a laugh.

Getting their coats, the three of them got into Robert's car, driving the short distance and finding a parking space right in front of the restaurant. Sebastian unlocked the front door, and everyone hustled inside out of the near bitter cold.

"Morning, Jon," Robert called as he approached an older man seated alone at a table. "This is Sebastian and Gregory," Robert said, making introductions.

Darryl walked through the kitchen door, with Billy right behind him. "Breakfast is served," Darryl announced. "We can't take on a fight on an empty stomach." Darryl placed the bowls on the table, steam wafting up from the eggs and sausages. Kelly and Maureen joined them, too, and Darryl introduced everyone. "I figured we may as well call in the troops," Darryl added before passing plates as everyone took a seat. "So what's the plan?" Darryl asked as he began passing the food around.

Sebastian looked to Robert and then at Jon, who thankfully seemed to take the lead. "There isn't much they can do to Robert right now. The election has been certified, and they can't legally circulate petitions to recall him. Judges are handled differently from other elected positions because they're to be impartial and nonpolitical."

“Could they remove him?” Sebastian asked, fascinated with what Jon was explaining.

Jon took another bite and swallowed. “Not really. He could be removed, but that would require judicial misconduct or him breaking the law, which he hasn’t done.” Jon set down his fork. “What I think they’re doing is trying to make things difficult enough for him that he just gives up.” Jon’s gaze traveled to Robert, who sighed, and Sebastian patted his leg reassuringly under the table.

“I haven’t been commenting to anyone,” Robert said, “but maybe that’s not the right approach.” All eyes at the table shifted to Robert. “This case, for lack of a better term, is going to be tried in the court of public opinion, and I was hoping it would go away, but it appears that it’s not going to. So I’m starting to wonder if we could find a fair reporter, someone who’ll give me a fair shake, and maybe I can sit down with them. It might make me seem more human and less scary. It’s hard to demonize someone whose face you’ve seen.” Robert’s phone began to ring. Pushing back the chair, he stepped away to answer it.

“Should we start a counter-demonstration?” Sebastian asked, directing his attention to Jon.

“I don’t know how productive it will be. I think we want Robert to look sympathetic. If it looks like he’s going in with guns blazing, it might do more harm than good.” Jon finished his eggs. “Most of these kinds of demonstrations don’t last long because they simply run out of steam, and people have very short attention spans.” Jon picked up his coffee mug, looking as though he were mulling things over. “Robert may be right, and I think I know who he needs to talk with.”

Robert walked back toward the table, still on the phone. “Mom, I think we need to talk to you. Can you join us?” Everyone became quiet. “Good, we’ll see you soon.” Robert hung up and sat back down. “My mother is on her way over,” Robert explained to the curious group before going on to tell everyone about Thanksgiving dinner. “So this Claude is one of the protestors, and according to my mother, he was bragging at church that he’s the one standing up for what’s right and decent—his words, not my mom’s.”

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“I don’t understand how that helps us,” Sebastian stated, totally confused.

“All Mom would say was that she had some possible dirt on Claude that may get him out of the picture somehow.”

Jon set down his cup with a soft clink. “I was just saying while you were on the phone that your idea might be a good one, and I may know of a reporter you can speak with,” Jon said thoughtfully, and some of the tension in Robert’s face seemed to ease, which in turn unwound some of the nervous knots in Sebastian’s stomach. “There isn’t a quick and easy solution to this, other than time and hopefully a little good PR,” Jon added before getting up. “I need to get to the office.” Jon pulled on his black wool coat. “I’ll see you in a few minutes, Robert.” After making eye contact with each person around the table and wishing them a good day, Jon left, the door closing quietly behind him. It almost immediately opened again as Robert’s mother walked in.

Billy got up, taking away Jon’s plate and bringing a fresh one for Robert’s mother. “Clare, welcome,” Sebastian said, getting up to greet her before making introductions.

“Please join us,” Darryl stood pulling out a chair for her.

“Robert,” she said, looking at her son, “you have such nice friends.” Clare smiled at everyone and immediately began talking to Kelly and Maureen as though they were old friends, asking them all kinds of questions. It wasn’t long before Sebastian’s head began to spin as they chatted. Maureen told her about a new dessert she was working on before running back to the kitchen, returning with a sample that the women all tasted. “This would be perfect with just a hint of mint—not much, but just a little.”

“Mom,” Robert broke in, “I hate to interrupt, but you said you had something you wanted to tell me.”

“Oh, yeah, that,” she said dismissively, and Robert rolled his eyes.

“Mother, I have to get to work,” he reminded her levelly, and Sebastian felt himself smile.

“Okay.” She sipped from her cup before clinking it back into the saucer. “I was at my church group last night, and Claude was there with his wife,” she said to the group before turning to Robert and Sebastian. “You remember him, that awful man from Thanksgiving. Well, he was bragging about how he was spearheading the effort to protest your election. It seems he didn’t realize I was there. Anyway, after he ranted on for a while, we got back to the class. Afterward, I went out for dinner with the usual women from the group, and Evelyn—” Clare stopped midsentence. “Now I don’t want to be unkind, but that woman has the biggest nose of anyone I know, and it’s always in everyone else’s business. But she said Claude was asked to leave his previous church in Mechanicsburg because of some sort of money issue. Seems he got caught with his hand in the collection plate or something. Evelyn wasn’t sure of the details.” Clare looked at everyone in turn before picking up her cup again.

“Thanks, Mom,” Robert said, getting up from his chair to kiss her on the cheek.

“Does it help?”

“I’m not sure, but it just might. I have to get to the office.” Robert walked over to Sebastian, giving him a kiss. “I’ll see you later. How late do you work today?”

“Till after the dinner rush is over. Why?”

“I thought maybe we could go Christmas tree shopping,” Robert said, lips right next to his, and Sebastian nodded slowly before watching Robert walk toward the door. Turning his attention back to the table, Sebastian saw Clare looking at him curiously, as if she were trying to figure something out. Her expression changed fairly rapidly, shifting into a smile.

“I should be leaving as well,” Clare said as she finished her coffee. “You have work to do, and I don’t want to get in the way.” She stood up, shaking hands with everyone around the table. “It’s nice that Robert has such kind friends,” she added softly before taking a step away from the table, then stopping. Sebastian didn’t know if he should do something, but Billy got up and walked over to her, touching Clare’s

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shoulder, speaking softly to her, and Sebastian watched as Billy walked her to the door, the two of them still talking.

Sebastian began clearing the dishes as everyone got back to work, keeping an eye on Billy and Clare, who stood at the front door of the restaurant talking quietly back and forth. By the time he had the dishes cleared, the table reset, and the dining room ready for opening, Sebastian saw Clare lean to Billy, kissing him on the cheek, which made his young friend blush, before he held the door for her.

“Sorry, Sebastian,” Billy told him once she’d gone. “She had so many questions and needed to talk to someone who, I guess you could say, wasn’t her son.”

Sebastian nodded slowly, understanding that very well. “I’m glad she had you to talk to,” Sebastian said before looking to Gregory, still sitting in one of the booths. “I can take you home if you like,” he said, checking his watch.

Gregory shook his head. “I have some shopping to do, so I’m going to do that and then walk the rest of the way home.”

“Are you sure?” It was still pretty cold out, and the last thing he wanted was for Gregory to get sick again.

“Yeah, I’m fine, and I could use some fresh air,” Gregory added before sliding out of the booth. “You don’t need to worry about me, Mom, I’m doing better every day thanks to you and Robert.” Gregory hugged him tight. “I don’t know where I’d be if it wasn’t for you.”

“Sweeper!” Billy squealed and ran for the door, throwing it open as he ushered the old man inside. “It’s good to see you,” Billy said loudly. Gregory released Sebastian from the hug, pulling his coat around him before tugging on his hat and gloves. Billy held the door for him, and Sebastian finished up while Billy gave Sweeper the third degree as he brought him coffee and began plying him with food.

Sebastian opened the restaurant with a smile on his face. Sweeper was back, Gregory was healthy, Billy was happy, and it even looked as though Robert’s mom was coming to grips with having a gay son. “You seem happy,” Billy said from behind him as he stopped on his way to the kitchen.

"I am," Sebastian said, looking over the dining room. "I just wish all this mess with Robert would go away. It's really bothering him, and it's just not fair."

"I do too. But we're all behind him, and we'll help any way we can," Billy told him as the first customers walked through the door. Sebastian seated them, filled water glasses, and took their drink orders before seating the next couple as he and Billy got busy. As always, they worked together, knowing what the other needed without either of them having to ask. "You know," Billy said from behind him as he filled drink orders, "maybe there is something we can do for Robert."

Sebastian started, spilling water over his hand, and he moved the glass over the sink. "You have an idea?"

"Yeah, I do." More customers came in, and Billy lingered for a few seconds. "We'll talk after the rush." Billy moved away and seated the customers as Marie, Charlie, and the boys came inside.

Billy was hugged by all four of them, and then the boys rushed over to Sebastian. "Uncle Bunny," Donnie giggled as he hugged him. Sebastian returned the hug, looking over his shoulder at Davey, who threw himself at him as well.

"We had half a day of school, so Mom and Dad brought us in for lunch, Uncle Bunny." Both boys giggled to beat the band.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Uncle Robert," both boys said in tandem as Billy held his belly, trying to keep from laughing right there.

"You go sit down for lunch," Sebastian told the boys, before mumbling under his breath that he was going to kill Robert when he saw him, or at the very least get even.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ROBERT got ready to leave his office with his head swimming, but for the first time since he'd been outed in the paper and seen the demonstrations in front of the courthouse, he felt as though there might be a glimmer of hope. Jon had gotten in touch with Faith Babcock, the reporter from the *Guardian*, a real reporter, and after speaking with her, she had assured him that she would do a balanced story, and Robert figured that was as fair as he could expect. All he wanted was a chance to tell his story, and then hopefully people's emotions would settle down, and he could go back to leading his quiet life. Pulling on his coat, Robert stopped, one arm in, one arm out, staring out his office window. What was he thinking? He had a very distinct feeling that his life would never be quiet again, not with Sebastian. He wondered about that for a second before he felt the smile on his face.

"Robert, you're going to be late for your appointment, and that won't impress that reporter," Millie said from behind him, holding his coat while he finished shrugging it on.

"Thank you, Millie, for everything."

"No problem, boss, I mean, your honor," she corrected, and Robert spun around in time to see the smirk on her face. "Just be yourself and you'll be fine." She patted his shoulder. "At least the interview will happen on familiar territory."

That was the one thing Robert could hardly believe. The reporter had suggested they meet at Café Belgie. He wasn't sure if that was by

design because she knew about Sebastian, or not, but Robert found it comforting that his lover was going to be nearby. He had called over, and Darryl had assured him that Billy would wait on them and that Sebastian would be there, but working in the back in case the interview didn't go well. That alone made Robert feel better. He didn't want Sebastian in the line of fire. "I'm not sure if that's good or bad," he said softly, but knowing he'd be surrounded by friends had to be good. "In case I'm not back before you go, will I see you tomorrow, Millie?"

She scoffed lightly. "I don't think so. Tomorrow's Saturday, remember? I'll see you Monday, and you have a nice weekend."

"You too, Millie," Robert replied absently, his mind and nerves already focused on this interview. Picking up his case, he walked down the stairs, saying good night to his office associates as he told himself to act like a judge—*be patient, calm, and listen*.

Outside, he crossed the street and couldn't help looking up the block toward the square, where he could just see people carrying signs in front of the courthouse. He knew what they said, but was heartened by the fact that there didn't seem to be as many people now. Maybe the novelty was starting to wear off after all. Continuing on, he walked to the restaurant and pulled open the door. Peter, one of Sebastian's servers, looked up from where he was folding napkins. "Hi, Robert, are you looking for Sebastian? He's in the back. I can get him."

"That's not necessary, Peter. I'm meeting someone."

The young man walked over to him. "Billy said I was to get you what you and your guest needed and then leave you alone."

"Thank you. I expect her to arrive any minute."

Peter looked toward the front door. "Is that her?" he asked, and Robert turned as the door opened and a pretty woman, a little older than Robert, walked in.

"I think so," Robert told him, as the woman walked to the table.

"I'm Faith Babcock," she said, extending her hand.

"Robert Fortier," he said as he shook her hand, and they found a table and sat across from each other. Peter took their orders for coffee

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and then left them for a minute, returning with two cups before retreating to the far side of the room.

“I take it they’ve been instructed to leave us alone,” Faith commented with a slight smile as Robert nodded. “I’d like to tape this interview, if that’s okay. It will not be used for anything other than this story.”

The attorney in Robert balked slightly, but he knew accuracy on her part would be key for his purposes, so he agreed, and she placed a small recorder on the table, started it, then gave the date, place, and time, as well as his and her name. “I’d like to start off with some background information. You’ve been an attorney practicing here in Carlisle?”

Robert kept his nerves at bay. He knew that she was trying to put him at ease. “For the last seven years, yes. I graduated from Dickinson Law School here in town, as well.”

She continued with a few additional, relatively unimportant questions before getting to the heart of the interview. “Aren’t you a little young to be a judge?”

“There are no legal age limits, and when I was approached by colleagues to fill out the ticket, I never expected I’d get elected. At most, I figured I’d get some name recognition that would help our firm.”

“I know some of these questions will seem intrusive, but I need to ask how long you’ve known you were gay.”

Robert looked straight into her eyes as he answered, “Probably for most of my life. Over the last few weeks, I’ve come to understand the difference between knowing I was gay and accepting I was gay. There’s quite a difference.” She didn’t say anything, so Robert continued. “I’ve known I was gay for quite some time, and I’d even told my mother years ago, but I’d never truly accepted it. I didn’t date anyone and hadn’t really been interested. I concentrated on studying while I was in college, and after graduation I worked hard to build my reputation and eventually become a partner in the law firm.”

“What changed?” Faith asked, and as Robert framed his answer, he saw the kitchen door crack open for a second and then close again. Someone was keeping an eye on things.

Robert felt himself smile, and he saw a ghost of a smile cross her lips. “I met someone. At first, I insisted that we be very careful, and was even reluctant to be seen with him. But that wasn’t fair to him or myself. I quickly found that I’d grown to love him. For the first time in my life, I’m in love with another human being and that love is returned. It’s an amazing feeling.”

“Will being gay affect your ability as a judge or affect the way you decide a case?” Faith asked, absently taking a drink from her cup.

“No. A judge must decide cases based upon the law and the processes that surround the law.” Robert knew that answer sounded rehearsed, but it was true.

“You can’t tell me that a person’s own experiences don’t affect the way they decide a case.”

“The law is reason free from passion,” Robert quoted Aristotle, “and I believe that. With the law, we use reason and logic to draw our conclusions. I know that sometimes court decisions can evoke strong emotions, but the point is that we should be making our decisions and interpreting the law based upon logic and reason, not our emotions. Those must be left at the door.”

“So you’re saying you would be able to impartially hear a case where it was alleged that a person had been evicted for being gay? I find that hard to believe.” She made the near accusation so levelly that Robert found himself taken aback momentarily.

“You do?” Robert countered. “Using that same logic, then, a male judge could never oversee a case where charges of discrimination were brought by a woman. As jurists, we put aside our feelings and hear our cases based upon the law. I will tell you that if I felt I could not hear a case fairly, I’d recuse myself, and I’d expect the same from my colleagues. It’s not right for me to give hypothetical decisions, but as judges, it’s not our place to legislate, nor is it our place to let our personal feelings interfere with our decisions. If that’s what we want,

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then we should go into politics, instead of the judiciary.” Robert knew his convictions showed in his voice, and he hoped Faith had heard them.

“Is there anything you’d like to say to the protestors outside the courthouse?”

Robert saw the kitchen door crack open again, and he had to stop himself from smiling when he thought he recognized a very familiar pair of eyes before turning his attention to his answer. “I’d tell them that people are people and discrimination is wrong no matter what form it takes. Judge me on my actions and ability rather than on a single attribute that you know nothing about. Everyone deserves a chance and a voice, that’s part of living in a free society. And while that free society gives them the right to protest, it also gives every other individual the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Freedom isn’t about our ability to state our opinion openly, but allowing others to state their opposing opinion with equal fervor.”

“Do you have any plans to relinquish your seat on the bench?”

“No. The good people of Cumberland County elected me to the Court of Common Pleas, and I intend to fulfill that duty to the best of my ability. If they are not happy with the job I do, they will have the ability to remove me from the bench when my term expires.” Robert didn’t tell her that the term of office was ten years. She’d probably find that out for herself. He also didn’t tell her that he’d thought about it fairly seriously, especially when it had started to affect Sebastian. That was none of her business.

“But wasn’t it unethical not to tell the voters that you are gay?”

Robert huffed softly. This was the question he’d been struggling with for a while, and there was no easy answer. “I’ve mulled that same question since my election, and I firmly believe that the gender of the person I fall in love with is irrelevant and private. The person I choose to live my life with is my own choice and as private as the person I’d choose to marry if I were straight. There are things that make each person unique, and part of that for me is the fact that I am gay. But that is no more important or relevant than the fact that I have brown hair or that I’m just shy of seven feet tall and a total klutz.” Robert grinned

before adding, “No, I don’t play basketball, and yes, the air is fine up here.”

Faith laughed, and Robert felt some of the tension and nervousness that had settled in his stomach like a lead ball begin to evaporate. “I know your”—she stumbled for a word—“boyfriend works here.” She reached over and turned off the tape. “Could I meet him?”

“I’ll see if he’s in back.” Robert got up, walking toward the kitchen door, half surprised when he didn’t see Sebastian on the other side, trying to listen.

“He’s in the office,” Darryl told him. “He kept checking, though.” Darryl went right back to work, and Robert found Sebastian in the office surrounded by supplies. “Taking inventory?”

“Needed to keep busy,” Sebastian said as he looked up at him. “Are you done?”

“I think so. She asked to meet you,” Robert said, and Sebastian looked at the box in front of him. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Sebastian shrugged and stood up, looking at himself to make sure he was presentable before following Robert out into the dining room. “Faith, this is Sebastian.” Robert introduced them, and they shook hands. Faith slid back into the booth, and Robert did the same, with Sebastian sitting next to him.

“How do you feel about all this?” Faith asked Sebastian.

He shrugged again. “Other than being worried about Robert, it’s what I expected, I guess. People seem to need someone to hate, and gay people seem to be the latest target. It used to be the Irish, the Chinese, Blacks, women at one point, but now it’s us. We’re the last group of people it’s acceptable to hate.” Robert looked at Sebastian and then over at Faith, who for the first time seemed shaken and surprised, but it seemed Sebastian wasn’t done. “Being gay isn’t a choice. It’s part of who we are, but people have been saying being gay is a choice so they can justify their own hate and bigotry.”

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"I didn't mean to upset you," Faith told him, still a bit stunned.

"Sorry, I get a little worked up sometimes, especially when people are protesting someone I care about because of who he is," Sebastian told her, and Robert actually wondered if Sebastian was trying to start a fight, that is, until Faith smiled at them.

"I think I can understand that," Faith told them as she slid out of the booth. "I need to get going because I'm on a deadline for tomorrow's edition." She shook hands with both of them and then walked to the door without looking back.

"Well, I guess that went as well as I could expect," Robert commented as he released the breath he felt like he'd been holding for the entire interview. "She seemed nice and she listened, or seemed to. I guess I can't ask for any more than that." Robert still felt nervous, but at least he'd said his piece, and hopefully Faith would write a story that wasn't too negative.

"Do you have to go back to the office?" Sebastian asked, leaning slightly against his shoulder.

"Yes. As much as I'd like to stay here with you, I need to get back, but I'll see you this evening." Kissing Sebastian lightly, he slid out of the booth, followed by Sebastian. Robert grabbed his coat and put it on as he walked toward the door. Turning back, he saw Sebastian watching him. He was about to say something, but saw Peter still working at one of the other tables. Smiling at Sebastian, he opened the door and stepped into a cold, but very bright day.

Sweeper stood by one of the far windows with a bucket of warm water, cleaning the stone on the front of the building. "How are you feeling?" Robert asked as he stepped closer. Seeing the other man tense, Robert slowed his steps, and Sweeper dropped his brush in the bucket.

"I'm okay now." He didn't say any more, but Robert noticed he was still wearing the scarf he'd given him, and he saw a pair of gloves sitting in the crook of the building near the doorway.

"I'm glad. When Billy found you, we were all very worried."

“You were there, weren’t you? You helped me.” Sweeper seemed unsure, and Robert wondered just how much he remembered.

“Yes, I was there,” Robert said, and Sweeper nodded slowly before picking up his brush and going back to work. Robert took that as a dismissal, or at least a sign that the man didn’t want to talk anymore. After saying goodbye, he walked down the block and across the street to his office.

“How’d it go?” Millie asked as soon as Robert walked into view.

“As well as can be expected,” he told her, trying not to let himself get too hopeful. Robert knew that people would form their own opinions, but a little good press certainly couldn’t hurt.

“I’ve had a few additional calls with requests for interviews. I put them on your desk, and Jon asked to see you as soon as you got back. Your calendar is free this afternoon,” she went on to remind him.

“Thanks,” Robert told her with the best smile he could muster. Taking off his coat, he walked down to Jon’s office, knocking lightly on the door. Jon had wanted a recap of the interview, and after telling him all about it, he almost felt as though he were on the witness stand. Robert spent the rest of the afternoon getting caught up on work that he needed to wrap up before leaving the firm. A few times, he caught himself walking toward the window, staring across the street and down the block to the front door of a certain restaurant.

The afternoon wore on, and Robert kept himself busy. Millie came in to say good night, and the office quieted as the windows grew dark. Robert continued working until his stomach reminded him how late it was getting. Putting away the files he was working on, Robert turned off his work lights and got ready to leave, locking the office behind him. Checking his watch, he walked over to Café Belgie to find the restaurant reasonably busy, but not packed. Peter sat him at an empty booth, and he ordered a light dinner while he waited for Sebastian to finish his shift.

After he finished his food, Robert watched Sebastian move from table to table, his eyes following his lover wherever he went. Lingered over a cup of coffee, Robert saw Sebastian talking to the other servers

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before hurrying into the kitchen, returning to the dining room in his coat and gloves. “We better leave while we can,” Sebastian told Robert, and after Robert paid his bill, they left, walking down the sidewalk toward Robert’s house. “Do you really want to go Christmas tree shopping?”

“Sure,” Robert answered, taking Sebastian’s gloved hand in his as they walked the last few blocks to his house.

“How are we going to get them home?”

“I have a truck in the garage,” Robert answered as they walked up the steps and inside the house. “I just need to change, and we can go.” Robert gave Sebastian a quick kiss before hurrying to his bedroom. He changed quickly and met Sebastian in the living room. “Shall we?”

In his garage, Robert started the old pickup truck and turned on the radio as they bounced and rolled down the road. “This is nearly an antique,” Sebastian said as he grinned from the other side of the bench seat.

“I bought it used years ago. I’m always thankful when the thing actually starts,” Robert said with a grin as they drove toward the edge of town, pulling into the Christmas tree lot. Getting out, Robert inhaled deeply. “I always love that smell.”

“Me too,” Sebastian echoed as they walked toward the rows of trees. As they entered, the scent intensified.

“My mom and I used to get our trees together,” Robert told Sebastian as they wandered through the rows. “We always got small ones.” He didn’t say it was because that was all Mom could afford. That wasn’t important.

“So what kind do you want?” Sebastian asked him, and as Robert stopped, Sebastian turned back toward him. “What?”

“I was wondering what you were doing for Christmas?” Robert asked, a little unsure of himself. He wanted to spend Christmas with Sebastian, but he didn’t know what his lover’s plans were and didn’t want to impose.

"I don't know. I was sort of wondering myself what we were doing." The "we" made Robert smile. "I usually have a Christmas dinner for friends, sort of like your mom did on Thanksgiving."

Robert stepped closer. "Then why don't we have Christmas at your house?" Robert slipped his arm around Sebastian's waist.

"You mean it? You want to spend Christmas together?" Sebastian's eyes twinkled in the reflected lights that hung overhead. "Then do you just want to get one tree?"

"Yes, a tall one," Robert answered as he walked to the front of the lot, looking at a nine-foot fir. "What about this one?" The soft-needled tree was tall rather than wide, and Robert held it so Sebastian could get a good look. "It'll fit nicely in your living room," Robert added with a grin, and saw Sebastian's eyes light up too.

"It's perfect. I haven't done much as far as a tree since Mom died, so it'll be fun to get out all the ornaments." Sebastian sounded so excited. Robert waved to one of the men standing near the truck that served as an office. "We'll take this one," he said, and the men came over, encasing the tree in plastic mesh. While Robert paid, one of the other men helped secure the tree in the back of the truck, and they pulled onto the road. "I don't think my tree stand is large enough."

"No problem," Robert answered, and after a quick stop at the home improvement store, where they bought more lights, too, they rode back to Sebastian's with Christmas carols playing on the radio. Pulling up in front of the house, Robert parked and wrestled the tree inside and into the stand, with both Gregory and Sebastian spotting to make sure the tree wasn't leaning. "We need to let the tree settle before we decorate it."

"Then cut away the plastic, and we'll let it warm up while we get the decorations." Sebastian sounded like an excited little kid, and Robert had to admit he felt a bit of that as well. Cutting away the netting, Robert watched as the branches gradually dropped into place, the stately tree reaching nearly to the ceiling. Stretching up, Robert could just touch the top. Gathering up the netting, Robert threw it in a trash bag before stepping back to admire the tree.

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"It's beautiful, Robert," Sebastian told him as he set down the armload of plastic tubs he was carrying. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Robert said, his arm holding Sebastian to his side.

"Good God, Bastian, what's in these? Rocks?" Gregory huffed as he set down one of the tubs.

"Those are the lights. Mom always went for the old-fashioned-looking ones," Sebastian answered before slipping out of Robert's arms. "I need to get one more tub. I'll be right back." Sebastian hurried away, and Robert opened the tub of lights. Each carefully wound string was wrapped in newspaper to keep them separate. Opening the first bundle, Robert almost gasped as he saw the strings of small, old-fashioned bulbs. They looked like they came from the fifties. Gently unrolling the chords, Robert saw they were relatively new.

"My mother insisted on those," Sebastian said as he set down the tub. "She always said anything else didn't feel like Christmas."

"Gregory, why don't you unroll and test the strings, and I'll put them on the tree." Robert handed him the first string as Sebastian hurried away. Soon music kicked on, with Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas," while Robert built a fire in the fireplace. The tree quickly warmed, and its branches lowered welcomingly. Picking up the first string, Robert began winding the lights onto the tree.

"We have lots of strings, so don't worry about running out," Sebastian told him as Robert placed the bulbs on each of the branches, making sure the cords were on the inside of the tree, his hands touching Sebastian's as he took the strings from him.

"What's going on outside?" Gregory asked as he peered out the window. Robert finished up the string he was working on, looking out as well, his jaw setting and his teeth grinding. "It looks like people carrying signs," Gregory added before gasping, "the obnoxious bastards!"

Robert got closer, peering around Gregory to see people walking up and down the sidewalk, saying nothing, but carrying signs, making

sure they were visible inside the house. Sebastian yanked the curtains shut. “What should we do?”

“Nothing,” Robert answered, picking up the next string of lights. “Let them stay outside in the cold. They can’t do anything to us in here, and I suspect your neighbors don’t want them out there, either. We’ll give it a few minutes. If someone else calls the police, it looks better.” Robert put another string of lights on the tree before pulling Sebastian into a hug. “They can’t hurt us if we don’t let them.” Sebastian nodded against his chest, and they held on to each other for a while.

“This has got to stop,” Sebastian told him as he lifted his head to meet his eyes.

“It will. They’ll get tired and quit,” Robert told him, but the look in Sebastian’s eyes and the set of his jaw made him wonder just what Sebastian meant. The look didn’t last long, and Sebastian’s grip around his waist loosened, and Robert went back to stringing the lights while Sebastian turned up the music just a little louder. Regardless of what happened outside, the festive atmosphere returned in a few minutes, and no one parted the curtains to possibly break the spell.

The lights strung, Sebastian opened tubs and began unwrapping fragile ornaments made of glass and paper. “My mom collected these for years. Some of them are original Victorian pieces, while others go back further. Most are handmade,” Sebastian said, holding up a hand-blown glass ball with a small pontil on the bottom. “We just need to make sure they’re secured to each branch.” Balls of all kinds came out of the first tub, while the second one contained glass pine cones and glass birds that clipped to the branches, each one with hand-painted details and silky feathers.

They worked quietly, the music still playing, as ornaments began to fill the tree. Sometimes Sebastian told stories about how his mom found them, and sometimes Robert saw him blink a few times when he pulled one out of the tub before hanging it on the tree. When they were done, Robert helped Sebastian spread the tree skirt under the tree before carrying the tubs back upstairs. When they came back down, Gregory had the cord in his hand, and Robert felt Sebastian lean against

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him as the tree was plugged in for the first time. “Merry Christmas, Robby,” Sebastian told him softly.

“Merry Christmas, Bunny,” Robert responded before kissing his sweet lips lightly—their first Christmas together, and it was going to be a good one. Robert couldn’t help looking toward the front windows. They had heard nothing, but lights flashed softly through the front door windows, casting red and blue flickers on the stairs. Sebastian was right, this had to stop, but he’d be damned if he was going to let them or anyone ruin his first Christmas with his Bunny.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SEBASTIAN was totally pissed, and that was the last thing he wanted to be feeling as he lay in bed next to Robert. Lifting his head slightly, he peeked at the clock. Neither of them had to get up for an hour, but his mind wouldn't turn off, and it hadn't all night long. Every time he thought of those people walking in front of his house with those damned signs, his blood pressure soared and he got angry all over again. This harassment had to stop, and Sebastian felt determined to try to make it stop. Robert was probably right—they'd give up eventually—but Sebastian had had enough of this crap, and he was dang well going to do something about it. But what? The newspaper interview has been very positive, but it hadn't stopped the protestors.

"Bunny, go to sleep," Robert told him groggily as he was pulled closer to his lover's warmth. An idea had been running through the back of Sebastian's mind, and he simply wished it would settle into something he could use. Closing his eyes again, he tried to let it all go, and hopefully whatever it was would come forward.

Waking again to a cool bed, Sebastian felt around, but he was alone. He cracked open his eyes and they felt like sandpaper as he opened them—that would teach him to stay awake all night. He felt like he'd been drinking, but without the actual drinking part. Granted, he and Robert had had plenty of fun the night before. Sebastian broke into a smile as he stretched, a slight soreness reminding him of just how much fun they'd had all weekend.

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“Hey, sleepyhead,” Robert called as he stepped into the room wearing only a towel. “I have to get to the office,” Robert told him as he leaned over the bed, kissing him sweetly on the lips. “You go back to sleep until you have to go to work. You were up most of the night. I’ll see you tonight after your shift.” Robert smoothed the hair off his forehead before kissing him again and stepping away. As Robert dropped the towel, Sebastian watched as Robert’s white butt shone for a few seconds as he started to dress. The man might be tall and gangly, but he was attractive, with a butt to die for. Sebastian watched Robert finish dressing, wishing neither of them had to go to work. “I have to be in court this afternoon, but hopefully I’ll be able to stop by and see you sometime during the day.” Robert tied his tie and pulled on his suit coat. “I’ll see you later, Bunny,” he whispered.

“That reminds me,” Sebastian said, leaning up to kiss him. “You are in so much trouble,” Sebastian told him, trying to keep the smile off his face.

“I take it you saw the boys,” Robert told him. “I promised I’d never use your nickname at the restaurant, and I didn’t,” Robert said, jumping back, laughing as Sebastian took a swipe at him.

“You’re such a lawyer,” Sebastian countered, “just wait and see what we come up with for you.” Sebastian slipped out of the bed, walking naked to where Robert stood watching him. “Have a good day in court.” Sebastian reached up, slipping his arms around Robert’s neck, kissing him hard and full on the mouth.

“Love you, Bunny,” Robert told him when their lips parted. “You aren’t really angry, are you?”

“No, but you’re still in trouble.”

“I’ll make it up to you tonight, I promise,” Robert told him, smoothing his warm hands down the skin of Sebastian’s now-cold back before sliding over his butt. “I really have to go.” Robert’s hands slipped away, and Sebastian watched him leave the room, still feeling his warmth for a few moments.

Walking into the bathroom, he got cleaned up and ready for work. As he went to say goodbye to Gregory, he found him on the phone, grinning. Curious, he waited for Gregory to hang up. “I got it,

Sebastian. I got the job. They want me to start right after the holidays, so I can get my own place and get out of your hair.”

“I’m really happy for you, though I was serious about you renting your room if you wanted,” Sebastian told him as he reached for the coffee pot. “Think about it, okay?” Sebastian set his mug on the counter and hugged Gregory tight.

“I was a lousy boyfriend,” Gregory told him softly, “and you’re the best friend I ever had, anyway.”

Sebastian returned the hug. “Some people make better friends than boyfriends.” Sebastian gave him another small squeeze. “Stop by the restaurant this afternoon about two, and we can have lunch to celebrate.” Sebastian stepped away, finishing his coffee before getting ready to leave. “I’ll see you later.”

Gregory nodded, still excited over his good news, and Sebastian left for work. Leaving the house, he walked the few blocks up to Hanover and then north toward the restaurant. Passing the courthouse, he saw people still carrying protest signs, Claude and his wife leading the way. As he passed, he heard them chanting and saw the signs. He’d seen them before, both here and passing in front of his house last night. Hurrying on, he raced to the restaurant, letting himself inside before digging out his phone. “Clare,” he said when Robert’s mother answered. “I’m sorry to call so early, but I need some information. Would it be possible for you to get in touch with your friend at church and find out where Claude and his wife went to church?”

“Of course, dear, but why?”

Sebastian explained what he had in mind, and she promised she’d make some calls. Sebastian thanked her before hanging up, finally realizing why he’d been awake all night.

“You look happy,” Billy said from behind him, making him jump slightly.

“Not happy, but I think I’m onto something. This afternoon we may have an appointment at the courthouse. I think it may be time to stand up to some bigots. Are you up for it?”

“Of course,” Billy told him, “what’s the plan?”

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"I'm not quite sure yet. I'm waiting for Robert's mother to call me back with some information. In the meantime, I think we need to make a few signs of our own." Sebastian smiled enigmatically at his friend and saw his eyebrows rise in curiosity, but he didn't ask anything more as they got to work. During the lunch service, Clare called and gave Sebastian all the information he needed, and after the lunch rush was nearly over, Sebastian ran down the street to the variety store while Billy covered the last few customers.

"If you two get your butts thrown in jail," Darryl told them as he came into the office after the front doors had been closed, "don't call me to bail you out."

Billy scoffed as he wrote on his signboard, peering up at Darryl. "Yeah, like you'd actually let me spend the night in jail." Standing up, he walked to his lover. "Who'd keep you warm on these cold nights?" Billy looked at Darryl with a hurt-puppy look, and Sebastian saw Darryl melt like butter.

"So, what is it you're doing?" Darryl asked as he looked down at the signs they were painting.

"We're going to give those protestors a taste of their own medicine," Sebastian answered. "And don't worry, I called city hall and got a permit, so we're not going to jail." Sebastian finished his sign and held it up. "What do you think?"

"I don't get it."

"I know, but I'm hoping that a certain protestor will. Billy, are you done?" Billy held up his sign, and they grabbed their coats. "We shouldn't be long. I just called Gregory while I was out, and he's going to join us at the courthouse in ten minutes." He checked his watch. "So we should get going."

"Okay, you two," Darryl said, shaking his head. "The only thing I want to know is what Robert thinks of this."

Sebastian picked up his sign, heading through the kitchen. "I don't know. I didn't tell him," Sebastian quipped, but he felt a flutter of anxiety in his stomach. If this didn't work, he could be causing more

trouble for Robert. He certainly didn't want that, but he didn't want these protestors harassing them anymore, either.

"Sebastian." He felt Billy's hand on his shoulder. "Are you sure about this?"

He made up his mind quickly. "Yes. Let's go kick some fundy butt." Sebastian said it with more conviction than he felt. Leaving the restaurant, they marched toward the courthouse, and as he approached, he could see the protestors on the sidewalk. He also saw Gregory walking toward them. At first, the group of protestors waved them over until they lifted their signs.

"Hate is not a family value," Sebastian yelled, vocalizing the signs he and Billy had made. Gregory joined them, the three of them chanting together. Claude seemed to recognize Sebastian, scowling at them before leading his protestors in their own chanting that drowned out Sebastian's small group. Sebastian, Billy, and Gregory continued holding up their signs and chanting. Sebastian almost faltered when he saw Robert walking toward the courthouse, and he knew it was now or never.

Nodding to the others, they changed their chant. "Embezzlement isn't a family value!" they yelled at the top of their lungs. "Stealing from churches isn't a family value!" The protestors grew silent, most of them looking over at them, confusion on their faces. "That's right," Sebastian yelled, "it seems your leader got thrown out of Trinity Baptist because they caught him with his hands in the till. Isn't that right, Claude? I talked to a lovely lady there today, and it seems they've decided to press charges." Sebastian smiled as he watched Claude turn as white as a sheet. "Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, should they, Claude?" Sebastian kept yelling, making sure everyone could hear, and he saw some of the other people looking at each other, then at Claude.

"Better go home and pack for prison!" Gregory yelled as police officers began walking toward the courthouse, and Sebastian saw Robert approaching as well.

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“What’s going on here?” the police officer asked, standing between the two groups, staring at Sebastian as if he had the answers to the mysteries of the universe.

“Why don’t you ask the man over there?” Sebastian pointed at Claude, who looked as though he were trying to disappear into the middle of the other group. “It seems he had sticky fingers, and his former church found some of their money missing.”

“Sebastian,” Robert said from behind him, and he turned around. “What are you doing?” he asked softly.

Sebastian turned back to the police officer. “I spoke with Shirley in the business office of Trinity Baptist Church in Mechanicsburg this morning, and she told me they’ve gone through an extensive audit of their books and have found a significant amount of money missing from their bank accounts. She also told me that they’ve been looking for him and were going to make a report of their findings to the police. They suspect Claude, there, of transferring the money to his accounts.” Sebastian grinned at Claude. “She was very curious to know where he was.”

Sebastian turned to Robert, lifting his eyebrows, before turning his attention back to the other group, and it seemed that Claude had a bit of a mutiny on his hands. Apparently he’d convinced a number of his former church members to join in the protest, and now they seemed none too happy with him. “Is this true?” one of the men with him was asking as he glared at Claude.

“Call Shirley,” Sebastian called to the group. “She’ll tell you.”

Cell phones appeared in the group, and a call was made as Sebastian turned to Billy and Gregory. “Our work is done here. I think we can go back to work. This isn’t going to last much longer now. They’re going to be fighting among themselves.”

Billy looked at Robert and then back at Sebastian. “I’ll see you back at work.” Billy had to be wondering what Robert was thinking. Lord knows Sebastian was, and Robert’s unreadable expression worried him. When Robert simply turned and went into the courthouse, Sebastian felt his stomach lurch. He watched as the door closed behind Robert before turning back to the scene on the far side of the

courthouse steps. Voices were raised, and this time they weren't at Robert or him. Picket signs had fallen and people began filtering away. Sebastian took another look at where Robert had disappeared before lowering his own sign and walking back toward the crosswalk. Pressing the button, he kept hoping Robert would come back out, but he didn't, and Sebastian crossed the street, carrying his sign.

At the restaurant, he placed his sign in the corner of the office. "How'd it go?" Darryl asked from his station in the kitchen.

Sebastian sighed. "I think that's the end of the protest, but Robert saw us, and I don't think he was happy with me."

"Well, what did he say?" Darryl prompted, wiping his hands on a cloth.

"Nothing at all. He just went back inside the courthouse."

"Could you have made trouble for him somehow?"

"I don't see how," Sebastian explained. "We didn't cause a disturbance, and I only shared information I got from one of the women at Claude's former church. I didn't say anything that wasn't true." But he didn't know what Robert was thinking right now, and that worried him. "I'll get back to work."

Sebastian walked out into the dining room, where Billy was carrying trays of glasses from the dishroom to the serving station, and Sebastian went behind the bar to make sure all the glasses and barware were set and ready for dinner service. One of the dishwashers brought out a tray of beer glasses, and Sebastian began putting them away. "Did Robert seem angry to you?" Sebastian asked when Billy stuck his head over the bar.

"I thought he was just confused, and he kept looking at his watch, so maybe he was just in a hurry."

Sebastian nodded at his friend, hoping Billy was right and hoping he hadn't messed up everything with Robert. He finished putting the glasses away before wiping down all the surfaces.

Finishing up behind the bar, Sebastian helped Billy with the final dinner preparations before opening the doors. The first person through the doors was Robert. "Do you know what could have happened to you

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accusing someone of a crime in public? What if you were wrong? They could have you arrested, they could sue you, they could....” Robert stepped to him and kissed him right there in the middle of the restaurant. “Don’t you ever do that again!” Robert kissed him again, and Sebastian felt a hand tap his shoulder.

“If you two want to do that, maybe you should take it into the back room.” Sebastian pulled away from the kiss, looking around at three other couples staring at them from near the door. Sebastian felt himself color as he stepped away from Robert, swallowing hard.

“I’ll meet you at your place when you get out of work, Bunny,” Robert told him before leaving the restaurant in a bit of a hurry. Sebastian began seating the customers, the ladies giggling at him. Sebastian did his best to remain professional even as he felt like a school kid who’d been caught making out by his parents.

The dinner service started slowly and built into a very busy evening. The other servers came in, and everyone stayed hopping all evening long. Once the restaurant closed, everyone did their jobs to help get the dining room ready for the following day. One of the servers helped clean up in the kitchen, and everyone left early. Sebastian hurried home, where he found Robert in the living room waiting for him, candles lit, the tree lights turned on. Sebastian felt a little overwhelmed as Robert guided him toward the sofa, tugging him down before kissing him sweetly. “That was an incredible thing you did. The protestors do indeed seem to be gone.” Robert kissed him again, and Sebastian curled close to Robert’s body, sharing the heat that seeped through his clothes.

“I wasn’t sure how you felt,” Sebastian explained.

“At first I wasn’t sure how I felt either, but then I guess I realized that you cared enough to stand up for me. I couldn’t do what you did, and I can’t say I approve of your methods, but I’m glad you did it. Thank you.”

“You could thank me properly upstairs,” Sebastian told him softly, but Robert held him closer.

“Gregory’s out for the evening,” Robert said, his lips skimming over the skin of Sebastian’s neck, pressing him back against the cushions.

“Robert, I smell like the restaurant.”

Robert’s lips stilled and then the weight slipped off him. Sebastian watched, a little surprised, as Robert walked around the room, blowing out the candles before extending his hand, leading him up the stairs and into the bathroom. Sebastian began stripping off his work clothes and found Robert right there with him, hands gliding over his skin, his light touch making him shiver, and it certainly wasn’t from being cold. Sebastian leaned back against the tile, his eyes closed, as Robert opened his pants, slipping them off his legs. Stepping out of them, he stood naked as the shower was started, and Robert began taking off his own clothes. “Get under the water,” Robert told him, and Sebastian slipped around the curtain, warm water caressing his skin. A slight breeze came in as the curtain opened, then Robert’s hands slid along his back and around to his belly. “Love you, Sebastian. I may call you Bunny, but you’re anything but. What you did for me today was amazing.”

Sebastian turned in Robert’s arms. “I don’t like it when anyone hurts you,” Sebastian told him as he was held close, the water coursing over both of them. There wasn’t a lot of room, which meant they had to stay close together. Reaching over his shoulder, Robert got the soap and Sebastian felt his lover’s hands glide over his back.

“Close your eyes,” Robert whispered, and Sebastian complied, Robert’s fingers massaging his scalp as he washed his hair. Sebastian moved into the touch, tingles sliding down his spine, and he moaned softly. Leaning back, water coursed over Sebastian’s head as Robert’s hands slipped away. Lifting his arms, Sebastian worked the soap out of his hair. Opening his eyes, he saw Robert kneeling on the floor of the tub, and before he could react, Robert’s lips closed around a nipple, and Sebastian gasped softly as Robert’s hands slid over his butt.

Robert’s lips slid down his belly. Sebastian’s breath hitched and his legs shook as Robert nuzzled his length. Crying out in his mind, Sebastian gasped as Robert’s lips slipped over his length, sucking him

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deep. Leaning back against wall, hands pressed to the tile, he steadied himself as Robert's head began to bob back and forth. Moving almost on their own, his hips thrust forward slightly, and Robert took him deeper before pulling away. "Why'd you stop?" Sebastian gasped between shallow breaths.

Robert didn't answer as he reached for the soap again, and Sebastian wondered what would happen next. Hands slid up and down his legs, and Sebastian tried moving away from the tile wall, but Robert held him there, hands stroking his skin, sliding between his thighs. If the wall weren't there, Sebastian knew his knees would collapse. Robert's soapy hands kept moving over his legs as Robert sucked him deep once again. Sebastian thunked his head back against the tile and barely noticed it as Robert played his body like a fiddle.

"Robby, I'm not going to last, and...." He swallowed hard. "Too soon."

Robert's lips slipped away and his hands stopped. Standing up again, Robert moved him under the water before stepping out of the shower. Rinsed, Sebastian shut off the water, stepping out of the bathtub and into the huge towel Robert wrapped around him. Sebastian tried to dry himself, but Robert held him tight, kissing him hard. The bathroom door opened, and Sebastian felt himself propelled by Robert's kisses out of the room and into the bedroom. Tumbling onto the bed, Sebastian felt Robert peel open the towel, kissing his skin as he went.

Sebastian felt Robert's heat against his skin, and then Robert tugged him on top. Sebastian gazed down into Robert's eyes and felt the bigger man's legs lock around his waist. Sebastian hoped to hell Robert was telling him what he thought, because the idea of being inside Robert made Sebastian's head throb with desire. Reaching to the nightstand, Sebastian found the lube through some miracle of God. Slicking a finger, he teased the skin around Robert's opening before seeing his man's eyes go wide as Sebastian breached his body for the first time. "Is this okay?"

Robert nodded, his eyes still big as saucers. Robert's gasp filled the room as Sebastian rubbed his finger over a small bundle of nerves. "That good?"

Robert's mouth hung open as Sebastian rubbed again. Adding a second finger, Sebastian marveled at the heat from Robert's body. "Make love to me, Bunny," Robert said softly.

"I won't hurt you," Sebastian told him, making sure he was ready before slipping on a condom.

Robert's body gripped him like a vise, threatening to steal his breath away. Robert's lips had gotten him hot enough that he thought unsexy thoughts until Robert let him slow down enough that he could control himself. Moving as slowly as he was able, he let Robert's body adjust as best he could. Both of them sighed as Sebastian's hips touched Robert's butt. "Relax," he told Robert as he kissed him softly.

"Please move," Robert countered, and Sebastian began to move as slowly as he could, watching Robert's expression.

"Love you, Bunny," Robert told him as he tugged him close, kissing him hard, "Never thought I could love anyone as wonderful as you."

Returning Robert's kiss, Sebastian swallowed hard. Most of his boyfriends had told him they loved him at some point or other, but none of them had ever looked at him the way Robert was right now, eyes shining, locked on his, lips parted ever so slightly, breathing in perfect time with him. Robert loved him, and Sebastian loved Robert back with everything he had. No doubt in his mind whatsoever. Robert was the man for him, and he intended to hold on to him for as long as he lived.

"Love you too, Robert." Sebastian thrust deep, then held still. "Love you forever." Robert pressed back against him, their bodies now moving almost on their own. Slowly, steadily, Sebastian felt his passion build, and when he felt Robert's body tighten around him, Sebastian could hold back no longer as his passion overwhelmed him, and he followed Robert into his release.

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Opening his eyes again, Sebastian saw Robert smiling up at him, their bodies separating. “Are you okay?” Sebastian asked, and Robert nodded, pulling him close.

“I’ve honestly never felt happier in my life. I love you, Bunny, forever and ever,” Robert told him, lips close enough to feel their heat.

Sebastian turned off the light, holding Robert tight as he fell into a doze, happily held in Robert’s arms, where he truly intended to stay for as long as he possibly could. Finding Robert and falling in love—the best Christmas present ever.

EPILOGUE

ROBERT waited in what used to be the judge's chambers in the old courthouse, wearing his black judicial robe for the first time. "We're ready for you, Judge Fortier," a page told him, leading him out of the office. Carlisle's ceremonial courtroom had never looked better, at least to Robert. Antique light fixtures shone down on everything, from the gold leaf on the ornate ceiling medallions to the original 1840s audience benches and the highly polished judge's bench, jury box, and seats. Everything looked perfect as Robert stepped up onto the dais, standing in front of the President Judge. Robert saw his mother, Sebastian, and Gregory, as well as Darryl and Billy, with the boys sitting between them, both grinning, and Robert had to stop himself from smiling as Davey waved and tried to stand up to get his attention. The President Judge administered the judicial oath, and Robert did his best to keep his nerves in check so he could repeat the words.

As soon as he was done, Judge Wilson stepped back, and Robert stepped forward, a fully invested judge of Cumberland County. Everyone clapped, and Robert stepped toward where everyone was seated. Davey and Donnie hurried down one of the aisles, rushing forward, and Robert found his arms filled, with both boys anxious to give him a hug. "Can we see your courtroom?"

"Of course, once I'm done here, I'll take you over," Robert said before shaking hands with all the guests and dignitaries who had come to see his swearing-in. After speaking to everyone and getting a hug from his mother, as well as a pat on the back and a proud smile from

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Jon, Robert led the group over to the new courthouse, taking them through security and up to the fourth floor. Millie sat at her new desk in the reception area of his office, looking ready to rule the roost. Robert made introductions before leading everyone into his chambers and then out into his courtroom with its white walls with blue trim and barrel-vaulted ceiling. The boys took turns sitting at the bench. “No banging Robert’s gavel,” Billy admonished, much to the boys’ dismay, since they really wanted to pound the fancy hammer.

“Can we sit in the swivelly chairs?” Donnie asked as he pointed toward the witness box.

“Yes,” Robert answered with a smile. “Those are where the jury sits during a trial,” he explained, as Davey and Donnie ran to the entrance to the jury box, each sitting on one of the wooden chairs.

“I should get them out of here before they tear the place down,” Billy told him, as the boys rocked the chairs from one side to the other. “You probably have work to do, but we’ll see you at the restaurant for dinner. Darryl’s closing after lunch, so it’ll be just us and your guests.” Billy gave him a hug before getting the boys.

“I’m so proud of you,” his mother told him after she, too, gave him a hug, wiping her eyes.

“You’re joining us for dinner?” Sebastian asked as Robert’s mother gave him a hug as well.

“Of course, I’ll see you then.” She left the courtroom, walking out through the doors into the hallway.

“I should be going too,” Sebastian told him. “That way you can get settled. When’s your first case?”

“Tomorrow. The files were being sent up, and I need to read the materials.” Robert turned toward the door as Millie walked in.

“Your case files were just delivered, and I put them on your desk,” she said before turning to leave.

“Millie, we’re having a celebratory dinner at Café Belgie tonight. Please come, and bring your husband. I was wondering if you could arrange to invite the other judges as well.”

“Of course,” she responded with a smile before leaving the room. Robert and Sebastian followed behind, and Robert sat at his desk, picking up the file for his first case, and began to skim it.

“I should go,” Sebastian said, heading toward the door. Robert looked up from the file, barely able to breathe. “What is it? You look pale,” Sebastian said, moving closer.

“Could you see if you can catch my mother? I need to speak to her now. Please hurry.” Sebastian left, and Robert fell back into his chair, hardly able to believe his eyes and the conclusions he was drawing. There had to be some kind of mistake.

Sebastian returned with Robert’s mother right behind him, and Robert got up, closing his office door. “Mom, please sit down. I know this is going to be hard for you, but I need you to answer one question. What was my father’s full first name?” She looked at him over her glasses and said nothing. “Mom, I can compel you to tell me,” he said levelly.

“Malcolm,” she finally answered, and Robert felt as though all the air had just flown from his lungs.

“Thank you, Mom,” Robert told her before picking up the phone. “Millie, please get me the clerk of courts, I need to speak to him personally, if possible.” Robert hung up the phone before walking over to his mother. “Thank you.”

“Why did you need to know that?” She looked frightened.

“No reason.” He wiped the concern from his face as best he could. “I had drawn an incorrect conclusion, but I really can’t say anymore.” Robert kissed his mother on the cheek, and she got up to go once again. “I’ll see you tonight.” She looked at him like he’d lost his mind for a second, then walked out through his office.

Sebastian stayed behind. “You can’t fool me. You weren’t wrong about whatever it was, were you?”

Robert was about to explain when the clerk of courts knocked on his door. “Is there a problem, Judge Fortier?”

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“Yes, I believe so, but not one that’s your fault.” Robert handed him the file for the case that was to start tomorrow. “I need to recuse myself from this case.”

“May I ask why?” he inquired, taking back the file.

“I could be called as a witness. I was one of the people who helped the victim until the ambulance arrived.” Robert stole a look at Sebastian. “My partner was there as well.”

“I see. That shouldn’t be a problem. There are three cases starting tomorrow. I’ll do some rescheduling,” the clerk said, walking toward the door. “My office will get you the new files shortly.”

“I appreciate it,” Robert said, and the clerk left.

“There’s more to it than that,” Sebastian told him. “I can tell. You were genuinely upset, and not just about recusing yourself from a case.”

“No. As you probably guessed, the case in question was Sweeper’s attack, and it contained his real name.”

“Malcolm Norris,” Sebastian supplied. “He told me his last name, and Billy told me his first weeks ago. And before you ask, I don’t know why it stuck with me, but it did.” Sebastian’s voice trailed off, then he said, “Wait a minute, you don’t think?”

Robert nodded his head. “At Thanksgiving my mom told me my father’s name was Manny Norris, and she just clarified that his first name was really Malcolm.”

“So you think Sweeper...”

“Is my father,” Robert said, finishing the thought for him.

“God,” Sebastian gasped. “What are you going to do?”

“Do?” What could he do? It wasn’t as though he and his father would suddenly have a relationship because he told him who he was. Making a big deal over this would hurt those people he really cared about, and he wasn’t sure it was worth it. “Nothing. At least for now. It’ll hurt my mom, and Sweeper probably has no idea. I’ve always wanted to know who my father was, and now I do. And I’ve met him. That has to be enough for now.” He didn’t think either his mother or Sweeper were ready for any kind of announcement.

Millie knocked on the door, bringing by the new case file. Robert took it, and she left, closing the door behind her. “Are you going to be okay?” Sebastian asked him.

“Yes, I think so. Nothing has changed, not really. I may know who my father is, but that doesn’t change anything about the people who really love me. Does it?”

Sebastian moved close, hugging him. “It certainly doesn’t.” Sebastian hugged him tight, angling his face up for a kiss, which Robert happily provided. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

“What’s Darryl making?”

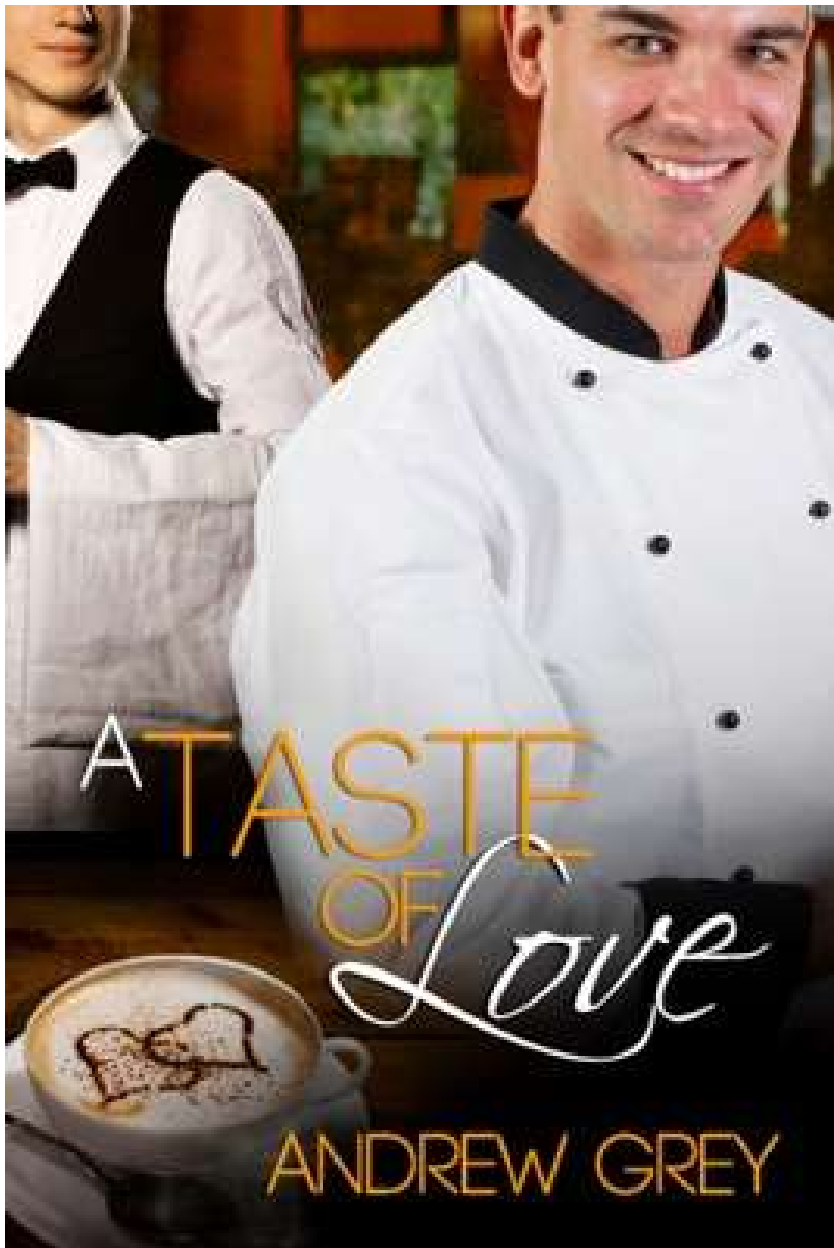
Sebastian shrugged. “Whatever it is, it will be served with love.”

Of that Robert had no doubt.

ANDREW GREY grew up in western Michigan with a father who loved to tell stories and a mother who loved to read them. Since then he has lived throughout the country and traveled throughout the world. He has a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and works in information systems for a large corporation. Andrew's hobbies include collecting antiques, gardening, and leaving his dirty dishes anywhere but in the sink (particularly when writing). He considers himself blessed with an accepting family, fantastic friends, and the world's most supportive and loving partner. Andrew currently lives in beautiful historic Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

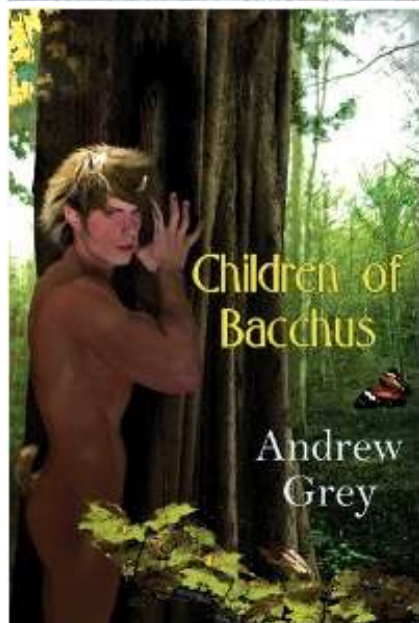
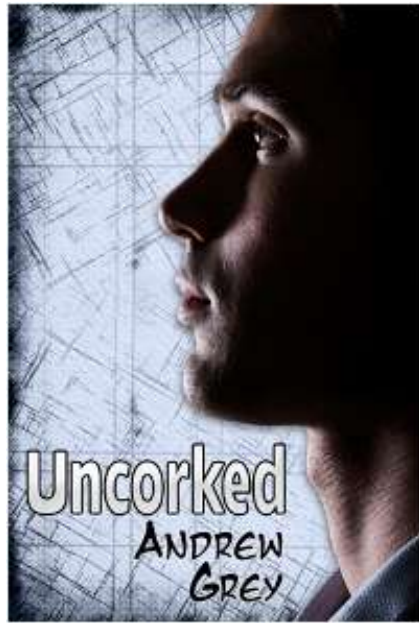
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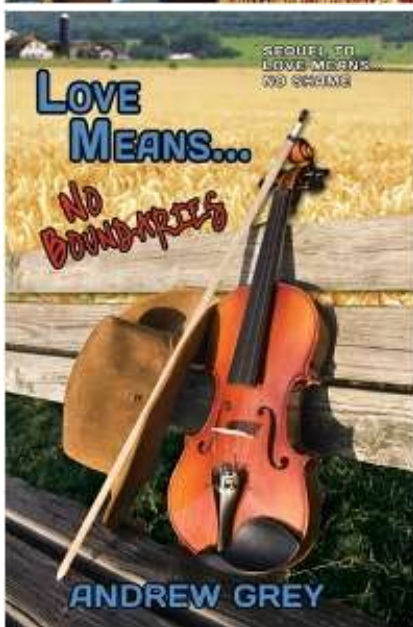
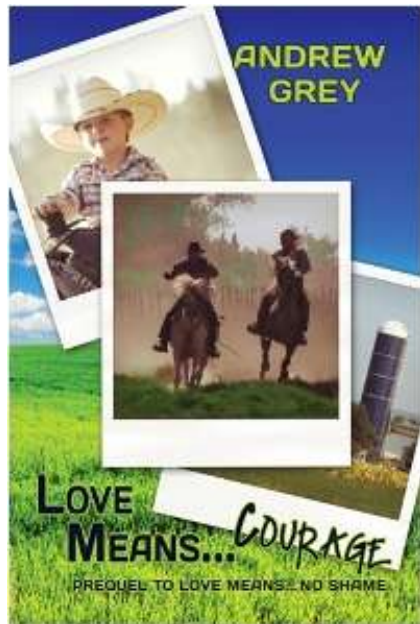
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