

KIMBERLY GARDNER

# PHOENIX RISING



## MLR PRESS AUTHORS

---

Featuring a roll call of some of the best writers of gay erotica and mysteries today!

Maura Anderson	Storm Grant
Victor J. Banis	Wayne Gunn
Laura Baumbach	J. L. Langley
Sarah Black	Josh Lanyon
Ally Blue	William Maltese
J. P. Bowie	Gary Martine
James Buchanan	Jet Mykles
Dick D	Luisa Prieto
Jason Edding	Jardonn Smith
Angela Fiddler	Richard Stevenson
Kimberly Gardner	Claire Thompson

*Check out titles, both available and forthcoming, at  
[www.mlrpress.com](http://www.mlrpress.com)*

# PHOENIX RISING

KIMBERLY GARDNER

mlrpress

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

Copyright 2008 by Kimberly Gardner

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Published by  
MLR Press, LLC  
3052 Gaines Waterport Rd.  
Albion, NY 14411

Visit ManLoveRomance Press, LLC on the Internet:  
[www.mlrpress.com](http://www.mlrpress.com)

Cover Art by Anne Cain  
Editing by Kris Jacen  
Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN# 978-1-934531-17-4

First Edition  
2008

*To Bobby,  
My friend and my love*



## CHAPTER ONE

---

No way was he making a career out of delivering strip-o-grams. This gig was only temporary.

“Show me the money,” he said as he grabbed the directions off the passenger seat. The screwed up directions. The directions that had already gotten him lost. Twice. Now he was a half hour late.

Adam glanced down at the paper in his hand and checked the address once more as he approached the foot of yet another driveway. He tapped the brake and leaned as far as he could toward the passenger-side window. He had just about perfected his technique for checking the house numbers without coming to a full stop.

Squinting through the darkness, he could barely make out the numbers on the mailbox. Hot damn, it looked like he’d finally found the place.

And what were the odds that the address was actually right?

Shoving that thought away, he turned the car into the driveway. The twists and turns continued for a good quarter mile, finally spilling him into a circular turnaround. Lights came on automatically, illuminating the manicured shrubs, a fountain and a massive stone structure that looked more like a museum than a house.

Adam let out a low whistle as he eased the car around the circle and slowed to a stop at the foot of the wide stone steps.

A sweeping expanse of porch ran the width of the house, disappearing into darkness at either end. Ornately carved columns flanked the massive front door and the place was positively lousy with arches and stained glass windows. It was impressive even at night and must be damn spectacular in the daylight. Not that he would ever see it again.

Adam checked his reflection in the rearview. The costume, a stripper’s version of a florist delivery-boy outfit, looked cheap and the color, a hideous green, didn’t suit him at all. Picking up

the stupid little hat from the seat beside him, he put it on and consulted the mirror again.

“Oh, I don’t think so.” He pulled the hat off and tossed it into the backseat. The costume would work just fine without the hat. Besides, it wasn’t like he’d have it on for very long. And who ever heard of a florist who delivered at ten-thirty at night anyway? But florist was what they had asked for and the customer always got what they wanted. Maybe they weren’t going to get it quite on time, but they’d get over it.

Adam ran his fingers through his hair, giving it that tousled bedhead look. Grabbing the boom box from the floor, he checked to be sure the music was cued to the right song before he gathered the flowers into his other arm. He’d just managed to snag the strings of the half-dozen mylar balloons when his cell rang.

Shit.

Releasing the balloons, he grabbed the phone and flipped it open.

“Hello?”

“Hey, babe, what are you doing?”

“What do you care?” Adam shut his eyes and leaned his head back against the headrest. Why the hell hadn’t he checked the number before he answered?

“C’mon, angel. Don’t be like that. I just want to talk.”

“I’m working, Daren.”

There was a beat of silence. “Why don’t I hear any music?”

“I quit the club.”

“When?”

“A while ago.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I forgot.” *Just like you forgot to tell me you were fucking somebody else.*

“You haven’t returned any of my calls.”

“Hmm, what do you think that means?”

“Why do you have to act like that?”

Adam sighed. “I have to go, Dee.”



"What time are you done? Maybe I could meet you somewhere."

"No."

"Adam—"

"I said no. And quit calling me."

Without waiting for an answer, he flipped the phone closed. No sooner had he put it down but it rang again. Opening the glove compartment, he shoved it inside and slammed the door. There. Now he could barely hear the ringing. They were so not doing another round of why-won't-you-take-me-back.

A balloon floated in front of his face. Adam swatted it away. Goddamn balloons. He gathered up the strings before opening the car door. The damn things had been all over the place the whole way there. Why did they need balloons anyway? You'd think the flowers would be enough -- two dozen roses of all colors, even purple. Balancing the whole deal in his arms, he climbed out of the car, nudged the door closed with one hip and mounted the front steps.

His finger had barely left the bell before the door opened. An attractive woman with dark hair gave him the once-over. It was a quick and thorough assessment.

"Oh, thank goodness. I thought you weren't coming."

"I got lost." Adam dug down deep and produced a smile. "Lousy directions, you know?"

"Of course," she said, clearly having no idea what he was talking about.

They both fell silent, looking at each other. She was going to rip him a new one for being late, Adam could just feel it. Then the tightness around her eyes and mouth eased and she smiled.

"Well, you're here now." She reached out a hand. "I'm Rene. Can I take something?" Without waiting for an answer she took the balloons.

"Thanks." Adam edged past her and entered the foyer.

The hallway alone was bigger than his last apartment. Gray and white marble tiled the floor. A stairway of dark, polished wood rose in a majestic sweep, curving off to the left until it

disappeared into shadow. Soft lighting showcased several paintings that hung on the dove-colored walls.

The silence was absolute.

Adam turned back to the woman. "Where's the party?"

"It's a fairly intimate party. Probably not what you're used to." Her smile tilted a little as her gaze slid away from his and settled somewhere over his left shoulder.

Adam glanced behind him but saw nothing. He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Strip for two hundred, strip for ten, it's all the same to me."

"Well, how about strip for one?"

"One? You mean like a private dance?"

She nodded. "Jimmy is a dear friend. It's his birthday and I wanted to give him something fun and special, you know what I mean?"

He didn't, not exactly. But it didn't matter since before he could respond a male voice drifted out from somewhere deeper in the house.

"Ren, who's at the door?"

She jumped like someone had goosed her and shoved the balloons at him. "I have to go." She pointed. "Go right through that archway and..."

Adam grabbed the balloons before they could drift up to the high ceiling and out of reach. "I don't think—"

She shook her head and put a finger to her lips. "Go on," she said and made a little shooing motion. "Oh, wait one second." She picked up her handbag from a small side-table, rummaged inside and produced a wad of bills which she held out.

Adam looked at the cash but made no move to take it. Uneasiness coiled tight in his belly. This was too weird. "What's that for?"

"It's a tip. They said I could tip you if I wanted."

"I haven't done anything yet." And whoever heard of a fifty-dollar tip anyway, because there was at least fifty bucks there.

"That's all right."

"Rene?" That deep, masculine voice called again.

"I know you'll be perfect," she said and tucked the bills in among the roses. Throwing one final glance toward the archway she hurried out, leaving him alone in the foyer.

Adam stared at the closed front door. He should leave now, just get the hell out. Something weird was going on here. Except ...

His gaze settled on the cash sticking out from among the roses. Two twenties peaked out from behind a large blush-colored bloom and more bills were crumpled in with the greenery. Fifty bucks, at least fifty, and that wasn't counting the money Party Boys would pay him for what amounted to fifteen or twenty minutes work.

Whatever was going on here it didn't matter. He wouldn't let it matter, because money was money and right now money was what he needed. He could do this.

Setting down the boom box, Adam took a breath, plucked the money out of the bouquet and plastered on the smile that served him better than any costume ever had. Tucking the bills in his boot, he grabbed the boom box and turned toward the archway.

If he'd thought the foyer was big, the living room was gigantic. Adam's gaze swept the room, taking in the large fireplace, dark wood and muted colors of walls and furniture. A glittering chandelier far overhead poured golden light over everything. The room's only occupant crouched before an entertainment center with his back to Adam. From where he stood, Adam saw pale blue material stretched across broad shoulders, sandy hair clipped short and not much more.

"Who was at the—" The man turned and looked up, his gaze finding Adam. Eyes of pale blue, the same color as his shirt, widened. His lips, full and sensuous, formed a small "o," but no sound came out.

Adam walked to him, held out the flowers and the balloons. "Happy birthday," he said, giving his most winning smile. "I'm here to dance for you."

For a minute, the guy did nothing, didn't speak, didn't lift a hand to take either the flowers or the balloons, nothing, just stared.

Adam suppressed a sigh. What the hell? He could put the flowers on that chair, but what the fuck was he supposed to do with the balloons?

Adam was about to just let go of the goddamn things when the paralysis broke, birthday boy stood up and took the flowers and balloons from him.

With some relief, he set down the boom box and jabbed the play button. The music, a vintage Chili Peppers track, fired up and he began to dance. The hardest part, the talking, was done. Now all he had to do was get naked and dance. Simple.

He knew his routine like breathing. A few basic moves with some improvisations, things he changed depending on the size of the room and the responsiveness of the crowd. His eyes drifted half-closed as his body went through the motions in perfect time with the music and, piece by piece, he shed the costume.

Peering through his lashes, he checked out his audience. It was rare that he stripped for one person, weird really, yet now that he was dancing, doing the thing he most loved, his earlier uneasiness evaporated and in its place there was just the music and the dance.

The man was a rapt audience, focusing all his attention on Adam. He stood perfectly still, tenderly cradling the flowers in his muscular arms, and making. Adam wondered what it would feel like to be held like that. The balloons he clasped loosely in one big, long-fingered hand. His face was good, too. Not traditionally handsome but interesting with a strong jaw, a sculpted mouth, a nose that listed a little to the left, and those pretty blue eyes. It was the eyes, Adam decided, that took the face to a whole new level of attractiveness.

Birthday boy was hot, maybe a little older than his usual type, but hot. And Adam could see that he was most definitely birthday boy's type. Though he held the flowers in front of him, his stance and the excellent cut of his dress pants didn't entirely conceal his reaction from Adam's practiced eye.

Could he tell Adam was checking him out? Maybe. Did he mind? Apparently not.

Adam smiled to himself. This gig might not be so bad after all.

By the time the third song started he was down to boots and a leather g-string. His body swayed to the sultry Latin rhythm and Adam made the most of the tempo change, sexing up the dancing, moving his hips, air fucking. Feeling the guy's eyes on him was getting him hot. His cock had begun to fill, more than obvious when he wore so little. But what the hell. Either birthday boy was into it, or he wasn't.

The music ended and the room went quiet. Adam paused, waiting for birthday boy to do or say something. But again he didn't.

Hell, Adam thought, the smile never leaving his face. He was just high enough on the dancing and adrenalin to kick caution to the curb. He walked to where the other man stood and leaned in close. The sweet scent of roses filled his head, his heart thumped against his ribs, but whether from the dancing or what he was about to do, who could say?

Adam touched his lips to the other man's, just the lightest brush. "Happy birthday," he said. "I'm Adam."

Those pretty blue eyes widened then filled with awareness, but birthday boy didn't pull away. That was good.

"Was that all right?" Adam asked.

"It was ..."

The birthday boy swallowed then licked his lips. "It was more than all right." He smiled as his gaze dropped to Adam's mouth and lingered there.

Adam licked his lips, deliberately mirroring the gesture. "Shall I do it again?"

Birthday boy shook his head. "Let me."

Adam couldn't suppress a laugh when birthday boy simply let go of the balloons, which immediately floated up to the ceiling.

"I don't know why people send balloons," the man said as he turned and laid the flowers on a nearby chair.

"Me neither," Adam said.

Mmm, very nice ass. Adam stepped forward. God, how he wanted to press against that fine ass, let the birthday boy know exactly what was on his mind.

The man took longer than necessary settling the flowers, giving Adam ample time to appreciate the view. When he straightened and turned they were nearly chest to chest. He reached out, but just before he touched Adam he paused, “Where’s Rene?”

“Who?” Adam, eyes already half-closed, lips already parted in anticipation, blinked.

“The woman who answered the door. Where’d she go?”

“I ... She left when I got here. What does it matter?”

“I guess it doesn’t matter.” But birthday boy stared over Adam’s shoulder like he wasn’t totally convinced. Then he shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

One hand slid around Adam’s waist while the other slid into his hair then cupped the back of his neck. The touch was tentative at first; as if he wasn’t entirely sure it would be welcome.

Adam angled his head back, presenting his lips. The thrill of knowing he was about to be kissed zinged through him.

“I’m a little sweaty,” he said, the words sounding kind of breathless even to his ears.

“So?” Birthday boy pulled him closer, pressing their bodies together. “Sweaty looks good on you.”

Adam’s eyes drifted closed as the other man’s mouth claimed his. Soft, warm lips moved slowly over Adam’s and lingered, tasting him and apparently liking his flavor. Birthday boy was just tall enough -- maybe two inches taller than him -- to make the angle perfect for kissing.

Adam’s arms tightened around the other man. He rested his head on that broad shoulder and leaned in. The caress of silk against his nipple piercings sent a jolt of electricity straight to his cock. Adam moaned against the stranger’s mouth.

Something changed in the kiss then, the pressure increased as Adam’s lips were forced apart and their tongues met. Adam tasted some kind of wine and maybe chocolate with an underlying flavor of man. He moved even closer, molding himself against birthday boy’s muscular form. Their cocks bumped and the kiss broke.

“God,” the sexy stranger said, “God, Adam, you are so fucking beautiful.”

Adam laughed with real pleasure. He knew what he looked like, sure. But hearing it from this man, seeing it reflected in those gorgeous eyes, was like an extra shot to his libido. Adam rubbed against him, drunk on pure sensation, begging for his touch like a cat hungry for affection. His cock strained at the g-string. Their pricks slid together, so hot even through multiple layers of material.

The man groaned. “Christ!” He looked past Adam’s shoulder. “Are you sure Rene left?”

Adam nodded. “Yeah, she’s gone. It’s just you and me, big guy.”

“My name’s Jimmy,” birthday boy said. “Do you have anywhere else you have to be?”

Adam hesitated. Stay or go -- it was time to decide. They could kiss a little more, maybe jerk each other off then he could be out of there and back in his car -- his car where he’d be sleeping tonight, where he’d been sleeping most nights over the last three weeks, ever since he broke up with Daren.

Jimmy held him close. Adam felt the steady thud of the other man’s heart, smelled the faded scent of some expensive cologne on his skin. Jimmy’s fingers remained tangled in Adam’s hair. He wanted just to lean into this man, to go on kissing him and being held by him. They were virtual strangers, but something about this just felt right. And if going with that feeling meant he didn’t have to sleep in the car...well, where was the harm in that?

“Adam?”

“I can stay a while,” Adam said.

“Good. That’s good.” A pause. “Do you want some champagne?” Jimmy’s fingers sifted through Adam’s hair.

“Champagne would be good.” Adam brushed Jimmy’s lips again. He kept his eyes open this time. Oh yeah, he liked the heat that flared in those pretty blue eyes, heat that was all for him.

Despite the offer of wine, Jimmy didn’t let him go right away. His hand was warm on Adam’s back, skin on skin, big hands.

Jimmy was a big guy, not heavy, just big with lots of muscle. And these felt like real muscles, the kind you got from real, physical work. He liked the look and feel of this man. And if more than kissing was being offered, and apparently it was, he already knew what his answer would be.

"I need to get the wine," Jimmy said. Slowly he released Adam as if reluctant to let him go. "You can sit down, if you want."

"Shall I get dressed?"

Jimmy's gaze swept over him. His smile was shy but his eyes burned with desire. "Don't feel like you have to on my account."

As Jimmy left the room, Adam dropped onto the sofa. The buttery soft cushions embraced him and he leaned his head back, a sigh of contentment slipping out. What a place. He closed his eyes and inhaled. Even the air smelled like money.

Idly, Adam stroked himself, fingers tracing his cock as he imagined what it would be like when they were naked together for the first time. What kind of top would Jimmy be? Would he take him fast and hard? He thought not. Just from the way Jimmy kissed Adam thought he would be slow and sweet, maybe a bit tentative. Adam shivered and wrapped his fingers around his shaft. He could hardly wait. He thrust into his hand, reveling in his own touch as he wove a little fantasy featuring pale blue eyes and broad shoulders.

A soft sound, little more than a shifting of the air, had his eyes snapping open. Jimmy stood only feet away watching him. Two crystal flutes dangled as if forgotten from his fingers.

"Don't stop," he said, voice low and rough. "I like watching you."

Adam smiled, his cheeks going hot. He stood, took one of the flutes from Jimmy and raised it. "To the birthday boy."

Jimmy laughed as their glasses touched. His eyes stayed on Adam's as he sipped his wine.

Adam took a tentative sip. Slightly tart, the frothy wine felt like a party on his tongue. He swallowed then set his glass aside. Leaning in, he kissed Jimmy, sliding his tongue into the other man's mouth. The taste of the wine and the man flooded



through him and he suddenly wanted nothing more than to be closer, much closer to Jimmy, to feel skin on skin, to have more of those intoxicating kisses and feel those big hands on him, touching him everywhere, making him moan.

Their lips clung, tongues exploring, taking turns advancing and retreating like a dance.

"I never kissed anyone with a tongue ring before," Jimmy said, drawing back slightly. "Does it hurt?"

"No, it feels good."

"I meant—"

"I know what you meant." Adam stuck his tongue out and wiggled it suggestively. "Want me to show you how good it feels?"

Adam took the glass from Jimmy's fingers and set it on the table next to his. Reaching for Jimmy's belt, he started to slide to his knees. His bad knee protested but he ignored it. He wanted to touch Jimmy, to take him in his hand then in his mouth and taste him.

"Wait," Jimmy said. "I want..." He hesitated. "That is I'd rather ..."

Adam paused, not yet on his knees, hand on Jimmy's belt buckle and waited. But the man seemed unable to say what he wanted. Eyes, dark with need, pleaded with Adam to just know. Strong fingers closed around Adam's wrist, gripping hard enough to leave bruises, and pulled him closer.

With his free hand, Adam flicked open the top button of Jimmy's shirt. Then the next. And the next. And the next. Sliding his hand between fabric and flesh, he ran his fingers through chest hair at once soft and crisp. He circled Jimmy's nipple with a fingertip, bringing it to a hard little peak.

Jimmy swayed, a long sigh sliding between his parted lips.

"Tell me what you want, big guy," Adam murmured. He leaned in close, stopping with their lips no more than a breath apart. "Whatever you want ... I'll do it."



## CHAPTER TWO

---

Unbelievable. Un-fucking-believable.

Jimmy took Adam's hand and led him to the foot of the stairs. As they ascended, he couldn't resist glancing back over his shoulder. He half-expected, at any moment, to see the man who was really supposed to be here, the recipient of all this phenomenal good fortune, because he was pretty sure it wasn't him. Things like this didn't happen in his life, not even on his birthday.

Silently he blessed Rene. Certainly this was her doing, something he would have known even if she hadn't run off like the proverbial thief in the night.

"Nice bed," Adam commented, when they reached the bedroom. He walked to the king-size bed and flipped back the comforter like he'd been there a thousand times. He ran a hand over the sheets, just changed that day, thank God, and threw Jimmy a heart-stopping grin. "This bed's big enough for like a half dozen people."

Adam turned and, sliding his thumbs under the g-string, gave it a tug. The leather came away with the soft tearing sound of Velcro. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed it aside. Lying back on the bed, booted feet still on the floor, he held out a hand. "C'mere, big guy. You have way too many clothes on."

Jimmy just stood there, unable to move or to think. The kid was gorgeous, a walking wet dream. Long silky hair spilled around his shoulders, the rich sable color contrasting dramatically with the pale sheets. Heavy-lidded dark eyes regarded him with an unnerving intensity. And that lush mouth was just made for doing wicked things in the dark.

Jimmy's gaze drifted down Adam's body. Broad shoulders tapered to a slim waist, narrow hips and ... oh yeah. What a pretty cock! Long and thin, it curved toward the flat belly and gleamed wetly at the tip.

Would Adam keep the boots on while they fucked? Did he dare ask?

"You okay?" Adam asked.

"Fine," Jimmy said, giving himself a mental shake. "I was just...looking."

Adam grinned. "Oh yeah? See something you like?"

"Oh yeah."

So what the hell was he waiting for, an engraved invitation? He walked to the bed, toed off his shoes and slid onto the mattress next to Adam. Adam who looked so completely comfortable, so completely at home, lying naked on his bed. Adam who reached for him, lashes lowered and lips slightly parted.

"Don't you feel over-dressed?" He asked. Deft fingers made short work of the rest of the buttons on Jimmy's shirt. Adam slid the silk off his shoulders and down his arms. His hands and mouth followed the progress of the material, lips far softer than the silk.

He trailed open-mouthed kisses over Jimmy's chest, murmuring as he went, though what the words meant, or even what they were, Jimmy couldn't have said. When that glorious mouth reached his stomach, Jimmy's muscles rippled and tensed as his cock swelled to near painful fullness.

Metal clinked as Adam worked open Jimmy's belt, his zipper drawn down with a soft metallic zzzt.

God, how he wanted Adam's hands on him.

Jimmy lifted his hips as his pants and boxers were pulled down, then off. His cock sprang free, unbearably sensitive, unbearably full. If Adam so much as touched or even breathed on him, Jimmy was afraid he might go off like a damn teenager.

"So big and hard," Adam sighed. He leaned over Jimmy, his mouth only inches from Jimmy's prick. His breath wafted warm over Jimmy's cock, a drop of pre-come welling from the slit.

Dark eyes lifted to meet Jimmy's. "You going to let me taste that before you stick it in me?"

Jimmy swallowed, his mouth gone dry. When exactly had he forgotten how to form words? Not that it mattered. He nodded. Adam leaned forward, his tongue flicked out ...

And the phone rang.

Jimmy's breath whooshed out and he swore. A glance at the clock showed it was nearly eleven. Who the hell was calling at this hour? Jimmy shut his eyes but made no move toward the phone.

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

No. Nobody was that important.

The phone rang again, then again.

"It might be important," Adam said. Clearly he was one of those people who couldn't conceive of not being plugged in at all times.

Jimmy opened his eyes and grabbed the phone just before the machine would have picked up. He suppressed the urge to snarl, *'This better be good.'* "Hello?"

"Happy birthday to you," sang a rich baritone, that French-Canadian accent unmistakable.

Despite his annoyance at the interruption, the smile tugged at Jimmy's lips. He let the singer finish.

"Happy birthday, cher," Paul said in his ear. "Did I wake you?"

"No," Jimmy said. "And thanks for remembering." His gaze settled on Adam who leaned back on one elbow, chin propped on one hand, legs stretched out behind him, booted feet hanging over the side of the bed.

"Of course I remember. What kind of friend would I be to forget your birthday? But I didn't wake you? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I was just..." about to have the best blowjob of my life "... lying here."

"You're in bed then? Ah, perfect." Paul chuckled.

Adam laid a hand on Jimmy's leg, fingers resting lightly on his inner thigh.

"I didn't catch you in the middle of anything? Or did you just get back from celebrating with some hot young thing?"

Jimmy forced a laugh. "Hell, you know me. I've been home all night. Dinner with the family, that sort of thing."

"I do," Paul agreed. "And I know how the pretty young things look at you, too." He sighed. "But you shouldn't be alone on your birthday. I wish I could be there with you."

"Yeah, me too." Why the hell was he lying? This man had been his closest friend for nearly two decades. He genuinely cared for Paul. They had a great time when they were together. But they had no promises between them, never had. They were just friends — with privileges. So why had he said that?

"So tell me what you're wearing." Paul's voice, already deep, dropped into a sexy growl.

Adam's hand slid higher, fingertips just brushing Jimmy's balls. His cock twitched.

God, he was going to explode if he didn't get off the goddamn phone.

"So?" Paul prompted.

"I— what was the question?"

"I want to know what you're wearing. And don't lie because I'll know. I can see you through the phone, you know."

God help him if that were true.

Jimmy laughed because Paul expected it and because, under other circumstances, it might even have been funny.

"Nothing," he said. At least that much was true.

"So you finally listened to me and started sleeping in the nude. This gets better and better."

Jimmy said nothing. How could he, with Adam stroking his balls like that?

"Tell me what you're doing, cher. Are you thinking of me and touching yourself?"

"I could be."

"Do it then, mon ami. Take that beautiful cock in your hand and make it hard for me."

As if he could hear what was being said, Adam's fingers closed around Jimmy's cock. His other hand cupped Jimmy's balls as he caressed him with long, sure strokes.

Jimmy groaned.

“That’s it,” Paul murmured. “Are you hard yet, cher?”

“Yes. So hard.”

Adam’s thumb skimmed over the sensitive head then pressed, ever so lightly, into the slit. Jimmy sucked in a breath.

“That’s good.” It was clear from Paul’s voice that he, too, was getting into it. “Imagine they’re my hands on you, cher. My mouth only inches from your prick. I so wish I could taste you right now.”

Adam leaned over him, lips pursed and blew on Jimmy’s cock.

“Yes,” Jimmy whispered, “suck me.”

Paul moaned in his ear as Adam’s lips closed around the head of his aching prick. Jimmy’s free hand tangled in Adam’s hair. Not to pull him closer. Not to urge him to take more, to take him deeper. But that was exactly what he did.

Obediently, Adam swallowed Jimmy, tongue lapping and swirling on the up-stroke, his tongue-ring scraping fire along the underside of Jimmy’s cock.

“Oh, God,” Jimmy groaned. His hips lifted as Adam drew back, fingers clasped loosely around the base of Jimmy’s prick. He wanted more, needed more of that hot, silky mouth.

“Mon Dieu,” Paul panted in his ear. “You sound so hot, Jimmy. Are you hot? Are you going to come for me, cher?”

“Not yet,” Jimmy moaned. “Don’t make me come yet.”

Adam released Jimmy’s cock with a soft pop then licked him from base to tip. Long slow strokes of his tongue that made Jimmy want to scream, and beg for more of that sweet mouth.

“I want to taste you,” Paul murmured. “I want you to come in my mouth then fuck me through the mattress.”

“Yes. God, yes. Want to come in your mouth, baby. Want you to take me deep.”

Adam’s gaze lifted to meet Jimmy’s. His tongue slipped out and moistened his lips. His tongue-ring flashed. As his head bent forward his hair brushed Jimmy’s thigh. With a flick of his tongue he licked away the drops of fluid leaking from Jimmy’s

cock just before he swallowed Jimmy down, pulling hard, calling the orgasm up from Jimmy's balls.

Paul had lapsed into that weird mix of French and English that meant he was very, very close. With that sexy voice in his ear and Adam's talented mouth on his prick, Jimmy was tempted to close his eyes, just live in the swirl of sensation. But Adam with those enormous dark eyes and that angelic mouth going down on him, perfect cheekbones standing out with each glorious, mind-blowing suck, was the hottest thing Jimmy had ever seen and he didn't want to miss a moment.

"I'm going to come," Jimmy panted as his hand fisted in Adam's hair.

"Oh yes, come for me, cher." Paul's voice broke on a cry that was pure pleasure as Adam scraped his teeth down the length of Jimmy's cock.

Jimmy's balls drew tight, cock throbbing just as Adam drew back. He shot, come spraying Adam's face, coating his lips and cheeks and chin yet somehow missing his hair.

Adam's fingers released Jimmy's cock. He sat up, lips swollen and glistening, Jimmy's come running down that perfect face. His smile was positively angelic as he trailed a fingertip through the come then held it up to Jimmy's lips.

"Good night, cher," Paul whispered. "Happy birthday."

The line clicked followed by the hum of disconnect as Jimmy's tongue slipped out and he licked his own come off Adam's fingers.

Jimmy turned the phone off then replaced it on the nightstand, his gaze never leaving Adam's face.

"Wow, that was fucking hot." Adam grinned and ran his hand up Jimmy's calf.

Jimmy swallowed and heard the click in his throat. His tongue felt like sandpaper and his mouth was dry as the Sahara. He had no idea what to say or even if he could speak.

Shouldn't he feel guilty for what he'd just done? Slutty even? But lying there, looking at Adam with spunk dribbling down his chin, he couldn't seem to manage it, it was as if all his ethics and honor had been sucked out through his dick. Adam seemed utterly unphased. Hell, he thought it was hot.



Jimmy nodded. "Yeah, it was pretty hot."

He sat up and, grabbing a corner of the sheet, wiped the come from Adam's cheeks and chin before leaning forward and bringing their mouths together.

The kiss broke and Jimmy lay back with a sigh. He held out a hand indicating for Adam to come and lie next to him. But Adam remained where he was, sitting up, warm fingers curled around Jimmy's ankle. "Who was on the phone?"

"Oh, just a friend calling to wish me happy birthday." It wasn't a lie. Jimmy lay very still as those fingers stroked just behind his anklebone. He prayed that Adam would let it go at that.

"Just a friend? Do you think he knew what we were doing?" Adam stroked a finger along the arch of Jimmy's foot. "Or did he think you were jacking yourself off for him?"

Jimmy's toes curled. "Hard to say."

*Please, let's change the subject.*

Adam stretched, muscles rippling, gaze sliding away from Jimmy's. Was he looking at the clock?

"Don't go yet," Jimmy said, not caring how it sounded.

"Not going anywhere, big guy." Adam shifted then got to his knees and started to crawl up the bed. "Oh, wait a minute." He paused, and reached for his boot. "Let me just get—"

"No, wait," Jimmy said, "leave them on. I mean, will you? Leave them on?"

One dark brow lifted. "Yeah? You want me to wear them while you fuck me?"

Jimmy nodded, feeling his cheeks grow hot. "Yeah."

"Anything you say, big guy." Adam moved into Jimmy's arms, lithe body pressing close. "After all, you are the birthday boy."

"Yeah, I am," Jimmy said and grinned. "Got a present for me?"

"I am your present." Long fingers tangled in the hair on Jimmy's chest.

Jimmy smiled and covered Adam's hand with his. He opened his mouth to make some quip about a pretty red ribbon for his present...and his heart froze in mid beat.

What if this beautiful man really was his birthday present? What if Rene had paid for more than a strip tease and some flowers? He wouldn't put it past her. But ...

"Hey, Jim?" Adam's lips brushed Jimmy's ear. "You're frowning. What are you thinking so hard about?"

"Nothing. Why?" God, this was bad.

"I asked if you ever did that before."

"Did what before?" Jimmy's gaze slid down Adam's body. Was there any way to know for sure? Short of asking, of course, and he certainly wasn't doing that.

Adam pinched his nipple, effectively stopping Jimmy's thoughts in their tracks. He leaned in close, his lips only a whisper away. "Talk to your lover on the phone while you were with somebody else."

"He's not—" Adam's tongue slipped between Jimmy's lips, cutting off the words. The memory of his come coating Adam's lips shot fresh desire straight to his spent cock. Could he slip out of bed, call Rene and ask? He could just imagine that conversation:

*Hi, Ren. Did you, by any chance, get me a whore for my birthday? Because if you did, I just wanted to say thanks.*

Oh yeah, that would be good. And what was more, did he really want to know if it was dollars rather than desire that had brought Adam to his bed? He did not.

Jimmy turned onto his side, arms going around the slim body and pulled the younger man close, taking his mouth in a long, deep kiss. Still hard, Adam's cock pressed against Jimmy's abdomen. God, Adam hadn't even come yet. Jimmy was appalled at himself. He was normally more considerate of his...what? Lovers? Bedmates? Not that there were so many of them, and what category did Adam fit in anyway?

"You haven't come yet." Jimmy reached down and took Adam's prick in his hand. "Let me—"

“No.” Adam’s fingers wrapped around Jimmy’s. “I can wait. I want you to fuck me, Jimmy. I want to come with your dick in my ass. Want you to feel it when I do.”

Jimmy’s breath caught as Adam squeezed his hand. His thumb skimmed the head of Adam’s cock, slicking it with the pre-come gathered there.

Adam sighed. “Please, Jim, don’t make me come yet.”

Jimmy’s cock twitched. How long would it take him to get it up again? After all he wasn’t twenty anymore.

He kissed Adam again, tongue sweeping in, lapping up the taste of the man, drowning his doubts in that intoxicating flavor. Jimmy moaned and drew back. “Anything you want, baby.” He took another kiss. “But it might take me a few minutes.”

Something about this young, almost androgynous man was getting to him in a big way, pushing some primal button Jimmy hadn’t even known he possessed. Yeah, he wanted to fuck him, but it was so much more than that. He wanted to possess him, to hold, and kiss, and sleep with Adam, to wrap the man in his arms and keep him there.

*And what if he really is a whore?*

*Shut up.*

In his head, Jimmy imagined slamming a door on that sly little voice, the one that kept insisting that someone who looked like Adam would not be with someone like him unless there were extenuating circumstances.

“Jim?”

“Hmm?” Christ, he’d never get it up if he kept analyzing everything to death.

“I said, maybe I can help you out with that.” Adam brought their mouths together again, tongue slipping in to trace the inside of Jimmy’s lips before delving deeper. Adam pressed close, molding his body against Jimmy’s. Heat radiated from him, branding the memory of that lean body into Jimmy’s brain.

“Touch me,” Adam murmured. “Want your hands on me. Want to see the marks from your fingers when I wake up tomorrow.”

Jimmy let his hands roam freely over Adam, stroking the silky skin, tracing the lines of all those long, lean muscles.

"You have a gorgeous body," Jimmy said, his fingertip running the length of Adam's thigh. "So slim and strong, like an athlete."

"Or a dancer," Adam said, lips curving.

"You get these kinds of muscles from stripping? Who'd have guessed?" Jimmy chuckled.

"Not hardly." An unreadable expression flickered across Adam's face and was gone.

"What then? You must work out a lot to—"

"Never mind. Just touch me, Jim."

Adam reached for him, long fingers wrapped around his still soft prick, stroked its length before sliding lower. Those clever fingers rolled his balls as Adam's tongue licked just behind Jimmy's ear.

"Want you so bad, Jim," Adam murmured. "Want you to fuck me hard and deep." He nipped at Jimmy's earlobe. "Make me scream."

Jimmy groaned. The thought of thrusting into that sweet ass, of fucking this beautiful man until he writhed and screamed—it was too much, or maybe just enough. Jimmy's cock stirred and amazingly began to fill.

He gripped both their cocks in one hand, the silky heat and the smell of desire getting him fully hard faster than he would have thought possible.

Jimmy's eyes drifted closed as he rubbed their cocks together. So hot. So good. God.

"Stop." Adam's hand covered his, stilling it. "Stop, or I'll come."

Jimmy opened his eyes. Adam kissed him, just the lightest brush of lips. "Have you got condoms and lube?"

"In the bathroom," Jimmy said. "I have to go get them." Reluctantly he let Adam go.

"You should keep them in here."

Jimmy nodded.

"It would be more convenient."

"It would," Jimmy agreed and swung his legs over the side of the mattress. He stood then turned back for one more long look at the vision in his bed. There was no need to tell Adam that convenience wasn't an issue since he never brought anyone home.

"Hurry up, big guy." Adam made a shooing motion. "Don't make me wait too long."

Trying to find anything in his medicine cabinet was a bitch. Jimmy shoved bottles and tubes around on the shelves. Nothing. Shit. What if he didn't have any condoms? It wasn't like he was getting laid every night so it was a distinct possibility.

He yanked open the top drawer under the sink. A hair brush, a comb, an old electric razor and a half dozen sample bottles of shampoo, but no condoms. He shut the drawer. The second drawer was equally filled with crap and equally unhelpful. With hopelessness a growing weight in his stomach, Jimmy opened the bottom drawer and found what he needed.

Thank you, he thought, though who exactly he was thanking he had no clue. He reached for the box but hesitated. How many should he take? Two would probably do it but, what the hell, why not be optimistic. He grabbed four and the lube and shut the drawer.

Returning to the bedroom Jimmy found Adam in the middle of the bed, pillows scrunched under his head, sooty lashes fanned out against those perfect cheekbones. Asleep.

Goddamnit!

Jimmy slid cautiously onto the bed. The mattress shifted under his weight and Adam's eyes opened.

He blinked. "What took you so long?"

"You fell asleep," Jimmy said.

"Mmm — no way. I was just resting my eyes." He reached out and plucked the bottle of lube from Jimmy's fingers. Adam patted the sheet beside him. "C'mere, Jim. And bring one of those condoms so I can get you ready."

Jimmy did as he was told. He lay back against the pillows and watched as Adam flipped open the lube and turned to him.

Adam held the condom between his lips as he dripped lube over the head of Jimmy's cock. He tore the package open with his teeth, then deftly rolled the condom over Jimmy's shaft and smoothed it down.

"Next time maybe I'll do it with my mouth. Would you like that?"

"Oh, yeah." Jimmy sighed.

Adam handed him the lube, lay back and spread his legs. "Get me ready."

Jimmy squirted lube into his hand, warming it a moment before reaching between Adam's legs. He ran a finger lightly along Adam's crease then circled the small puckered opening before slipping just one finger inside. Slowly he fucked Adam with that single digit, rewarded when the younger man moaned and shifted restlessly. He added a second finger, twisting his wrist to find the sweet spot that would make Adam see stars. He found and stroked it, watching Adam's face for reaction.

Not wanting to tease, yet unable to resist touching, Jimmy stroked down the length of Adam's cock then over his balls, as smooth and soft as velvet. "You shave all your body hair?"

"Hmm? No, wax. It lasts longer." Jimmy winced and Adam laughed. "It's a stripper thing. And I'm not that hairy anyway." He shifted, spreading his legs more as Jimmy's hand slid lower. "Oh, yeah, just like that."

God, he looked so wanton—legs spread wide, prick hard and leaking, nipple rings glinting in the soft light from the bedside lamp.

Adam's lashes fluttered, his eyes lost focus for a second as his hips lifted and he shifted closer to Jimmy's hand. "Oh, yeah," Adam moaned. "Feels so good. Gonna make me come."

Jimmy slid another finger in. Adam was so hot and so tight, his ass gripping Jimmy's fingers, hips moving in time with Jimmy's stroking.

"Please," Adam sighed. "Do it now. Need you in me now."

Jimmy's fingers slipped free as he shifted closer between Adam's legs. Adam drew his knees up, those sexy boots planted on either side of Jimmy's thighs. Jimmy ran his palms over the leather, almost as soft as Adam's skin.

Jimmy took his prick in hand, positioned himself at Adam's opening and pressed forward. God, so tight. Grabbing the lube, he drizzled more over his sheathed cock.

"Please," Adam begged. "I need this. Need you, Jim."

With fingers that weren't quite steady, Jimmy slicked down his shaft. This time when he pushed the head slipped in.

Adam gasped. "Oh yeah, God, so big."

Jimmy paused, shaking with the effort of holding back. Adam was so hot, so tight and the need to thrust, to take him in one long stroke clawed at his control. He took a breath. "Okay, baby?"

"Yeah. Okay. Good. Don't stop. Please." Adam's breath came short and shallow. He closed his fingers around Jimmy's wrist in a surprisingly strong grip.

Giving in to his own need and Adam's request, Jimmy thrust forward, burying himself balls deep in Adam's ass. Someone moaned, maybe they both did, and Jimmy began to move.

"Oh, God! Yeah, just like that. Fuck me, Jim. Feels so good."

Adam was a talker. He liked that. For his part, Jimmy couldn't speak, couldn't make his brain work. All his concentration was centered on his dick, on the unbelievable heat and tightness that surrounded him, on the need to come and the equally strong need, to hold off and make this last as long as possible.

Adam's fingers found his where they gripped his hip, twining them together and held on. "Harder," he panted. "Faster. Want you to take me deep. I need it. Want to remember you for days."

Jimmy thrust deep, hitting Adam's gland again and again.

"God, right there. Just like that."

They rocked together, the rhythm perfect, every stroke bringing Jimmy closer and closer. He fought the orgasm building at the base of his spine. *Not yet, please? Just a little longer.*

Adam cried out wordlessly. His head thrashed from side to side on the pillow, eyes squeezed shut.

"Look at me," Jimmy panted. "Adam, open your eyes and look at me. I want to see you when—"

“Gonna come, Jim. Can’t wait anymore.” Adam’s fingers flexed in his. Those beautiful eyes focused on his face as muscles clamped down on his cock and Adam came, shooting come over his belly.

It was all Jimmy needed to send him over. With a hoarse cry he thrust deep, cock throbbing, and came, filling the condom. He thrust again, making it last, pulling every ounce of pleasure from the orgasm before he collapsed, breathless and trembling on Adam’s chest.

Arms encircled him and held him tight. The thunder of Adam’s heart under his ear matched Jimmy’s own. He knew he should move, that he must be crushing Adam, but, God, he wanted this to never end.

Fingers stroked through his hair. “You okay, big guy?”

Jimmy shifted, cock sliding free and raised himself on arms that trembled. “I’m good,” he said. “Are you?”

“That was pretty fucking amazing,” Adam’s grin flashed and something in Jimmy’s chest clutched tight. He had put that sated look in Adam’s eyes. And that look was true, honest and real and just for him.

Jimmy slipped out of bed, disposed of the condom and grabbed a warm, wet cloth. With hands that shook just a little he cleaned Adam up then dropped the cloth on the floor. With some surprise, he noticed that Adam still had his boots on.

. The voice in Jimmy’s head whispered. *Any second he’ll get up and you’ll never see him again.*

Ignoring the knowledge that what he was about to do was probably stupid—maybe even dangerous—he gathered this virtual stranger into his arms. “Stay with me?”

“Hmm—” Adam sounded like he was already half asleep. “If you want.”

Jimmy touched his lips to Adam’s. “I want.”

It must be the understatement of the year, Jimmy thought, eyes drifting closed as he slid into sleep.

§ § § § §

Adam opened his eyes to darkness. He blinked. Where the hell was he?



A warm, male body spooned against his back, a muscular arm wrapped around his waist and a hard cock pressed against his ass.

Jimmy. He was in Jimmy's bed.

Adam sighed, wriggling a little, recalling the feel of that long, thick cock inside him and the way Jimmy had looked at him, like he was everything the man wanted, and not just when they were fucking either. The look had been there from the beginning -- when he was dancing, then later when they kissed. Being wanted like that, with such intensity, had made him giddy and maybe a little less cautious than normal. Probably why he'd given in to the attraction so quickly. He wasn't usually so slutty.

Jimmy's deep even breathing paused. The man mumbled something in his sleep then nuzzled the back of Adam's neck through his hair.

Adam shivered. The arm around him tightened, the hand sliding down to brush his prick.

Adam closed his eyes. In the predawn darkness he lay perfectly still, listening to Jimmy breath. He should go, get his shit together and get out before Jimmy woke up.

Except he wanted to stay right where he was. Savor the feel of soft sheets and warm skin and the sensation of being held. Mmm, so good. It had been a long time since anyone had held him while he slept. Daren had only ever touched him when they fucked. And the man had never looked at him like that, not ever.

The lying, cheating asshole.

And how long had it taken him to figure that out? With Jimmy, at least he knew, right from the beginning, that he wasn't number one.

Adam shoved that thought away. He was so not getting involved with a guy he already knew screwed around. Adam recalled the phone call between Jimmy and his mysterious "friend." Not the dirty talk and swearing in that quiet sexy voice, though that had been fucking hot—he could come just from listening to that voice. But it was the intimate tone, the laughter shared, that let him know that he was merely a substitute, even while Jimmy ate him up with his eyes.

Adam eased out of Jimmy's arms, slid to the edge of the mattress and sat up. As he slipped from under the covers goosebumps rippled his skin. The room was freezing.

Jimmy grunted and flung out his arm. Fingers flexed as if to draw him back into Jimmy's embrace.

Adam stared at the hand that reached for him. It would be so easy just to crawl back into bed, let Jimmy hold him a little while longer. Maybe Jimmy had told the truth and the guy on the phone really was just a friend. Maybe—

Adam shook his head. No. He was going, had to go. Right fucking now.

Okay. So where were his clothes?

Shit. He'd have to wear that stupid costume since all his real clothes were in the car.

He found his boots right away on the floor next to the bed. His g-string, however, was nowhere to be found, not that he could see much in the dark, and turning on the light was out of the question. He walked slowly around the bed, crouched down and peered underneath. Nothing.

Jimmy stirred. Adam froze as Jimmy's head lifted from the pillow.

"Hmm? Adam? Where you going?"

Adam touched Jimmy's cheek, the beard stubble rough under his fingertips. "Bathroom," he said. "Go back to sleep."

"Mmm, 'kay. Hurry back. Want you." Jimmy turned his lips into Adam's palm.

"Shhh. Okay. Go back to sleep." Adam stood up, closing his fingers as if he could hold onto the feel of Jimmy's lips against his skin.

He walked into the bathroom, used the toilet then just stood there, heart pounding and waited.

When Jimmy's breathing deepened, he returned to the bedroom. The g-string was a loss. He couldn't waste any more time looking for it. Grabbing his boots, Adam slipped into the hall, closing the door as quietly as he could.

In the living room, he switched on a light, found the rest of his costume and dressed quickly. The flowers he'd brought lay

on the chair where Jimmy had left them and the balloons floated near the ceiling, strings trailing.

As Adam bent to pick up the boom box, his gaze fell on the coffee table where Jimmy's wallet, cell phone and keys lay. There was a card-case too. Leaving the boom box, Adam went to the table, picked up the case and took one of Jimmy's cards.

James T. Trent IV, it read, with a company name, telephone number and email address.

Maybe he could call Jimmy...and say what?

*Hi, this is Adam of the birthday blonjob. Remember me?*

Yeah, right. That would happen.

Adam stared at the card in his hand. Maybe he should write Jimmy a note...leave his number. Maybe Jimmy would call him.

And if he did? Then what?

Adam sighed. If Jimmy did call and ask to see him, he would say yes. Even knowing that Jimmy had someone else, that the encounter was nothing more than a meaningless fuck, he would still say yes. And nothing good could come from that.

Adam replaced Jimmy's card in the case, grabbed the boom box from the floor and left.

In the car, he took his cell from the glove compartment. Daren had left two messages. He didn't care what Daren had to say. Delete.

Shoving the key into the ignition, Adam started the engine as he punched Jason's number into his cell. The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Jase, it's Adam."

"Hey, man, where are you?"

Adam heard music through the phone.

"Are you still in the club?"

"Yeah. We had a seminar for new submissives tonight and it ran late."

Jason's club, The Pleasure Chest, was one of the most exclusive, private BDSM clubs in the tri-state area and his friend took his role as club owner and Dom very seriously.

Adam glanced at the imposing house visible in the rearview. "I'm just leaving a friend's place. I was wondering—" he waited a beat "—would it be all right if I crash at your place for a few hours?"

"Sure," Jason said. "I told you, you can crash here anytime. In fact, I was going to call you. I might have a line on a job for you."

"Oh yeah, doing what?" Adam eased the car around the circle and turned it into the long driveway.

## CHAPTER THREE

---

Adam was gone.

Jimmy knew it before even opening his eyes. Sliding his hand over the wide expanse of bed, he found nothing but cold, empty sheets.

Gone.

Cracking an eyelid, he squinted at the clock. Nearly seven.

Shit, but he was exhausted. That's what he got for staying up half the night with some kid fifteen years his junior.

And now he was gone.

Well, what had he expected, really? He was probably about as far from Adam's usual type as they got. What did such a gorgeous young hottie like Adam want with a middle-aged computer nerd? Besides a quick fuck that was. Christ, at thirty-six, he must have seemed as old as Methuselah.

Jimmy shook his head. If the memory of Adam's mouth on his prick, of that lean, hard body in his arms were not still so vivid he might have thought he'd dreamed the whole thing. Turning over, he buried his face in the pillow next to his. God, he could still smell him.

Idiot.

Jimmy sat up, rubbed at the stubble on his cheeks and shoved a hand through his hair. At least now he'd have some fresh fantasy material to keep his hand company in the nights ahead.

His feet had barely hit the floor when the phone rang. Not the one on the nightstand because he'd turned that one off last night, but that distant electronic trill was definitely the phone, and for one insane second he thought, Adam. Which was completely ridiculous because Adam didn't have his number and even if he did...

Ring.

He grabbed the cordless from the nightstand and punched the on button. "Hello?"

"Oh good, you're up."

"Barely. What's up, Laton?" What the hell was his brother doing calling at this hour of the morning? "Is something wrong? Is it mother?"

"Mother? No. Why do you always think it's some catastrophe?"

"Oh, I don't know, Late. Maybe it has something to do with it being seven in the freakin' morning."

Jimmy lay back on the bed, his feet still on the floor and the phone pressed to his ear. An image of Adam in a similar pose formed in his head and he closed his eyes, bringing it more into focus.

Mmm.

"...So I'll see you around noon, right?"

Noon? Jimmy dragged his thoughts back to the conversation and sat up. "What—Oh, shit. I completely forgot about the club thing. Do we have to do that today?"

Silence.

"Laton?"

"What? Sorry, I'm in the car."

"Why don't you call me back—"

"No, it's fine. I didn't hit her. And what do you mean do we have to do it today? I have that contractor coming in today, the contractor you hired."

"I hired? You said he was the one you wanted for the renovations."

"After you said his estimate looked good. You're the one who worked for the developer, not me."

"Laton, that was when I was in college. And I did grunt work not estimates."

It was way too early in the morning for this kind of crap.

"Fine," Laton said in a tone that said it was anything but fine. "No sweat, Jim. I can deal with the contractor if you're too

busy. But I still need you to go to the bank. Or are you too busy for that, too?"

Jimmy sighed. "I'll be there. But I can't promise noon, not until I get into the office and see my schedule."

As expected, Laton bitched, but eventually parted with a grudging thanks and hung up.

Why the hell he'd ever agreed to become a partner in Laton's latest business venture he'd never know. Except that by doing so he'd kept Laton from going to their mother to borrow the money.

A titty bar, God help him! It had never been his ambition to own a titty bar, not even half a titty bar, not even one tit.

With a sigh, Jimmy replaced the phone on the bedside table and got to his feet.

The room was a wreck. The sheets, still redolent of sex, lay in a rumpled wad in the center of the bed. All but one corner of the comforter trailed on the floor. Hastily discarded clothes and underwear were strewn everywhere.

And today was the housekeeper's day off. Not that he would have left it like this anyway.

On his way to the bathroom, Jimmy made a half-hearted attempt at picking up. Once the clothes and underwear had been dealt with, he picked up the comforter and shook it out over the unmade bed.

There. At least that looked a little better.

Something just under the edge of the bed snagged on Jimmy's bare foot. Screw it. He'd get it later. Except in his head he heard his mother's voice saying how she'd brought him up better than that. Probably just a forgotten sock or something. And who was there to care? But he leaned down and fished it out anyway.

A g-string.

Adam's g-string.

Jimmy stood perfectly still, holding the scrap of leather and Velcro in his hand as the memory washed over him – Adam tearing away this final piece of his costume then lying back naked on this very bed and beckoning to him.

Slowly, Jimmy raised the g-string to his face and inhaled. It didn't smell like leather because it wasn't, just some faux leather-like stuff. It smelled like sweat and male arousal. Like Adam.

God.

Crumpling the g-string in his fist, Jimmy walked to the bedside table, jerked open the bottom drawer and stuffed the thing inside.

§ § § § §

Jimmy parked his car in the nearly deserted lot at Flesh Tones and shut off the engine. The clock on the dashboard read two-ten. Laton was going to be pissed. Ah well, fuck it. That couldn't be helped.

He'd arrived at the offices of Trent Continuity Systems by eight-fifteen that morning only to find the phone ringing off the hook, a deluge of email and voice-mail messages waiting and four of his five senior technical people running around like they were in the middle of a Chinese fire drill. He was still signing onto the system when Rene, the fifth senior tech and the giver of the single best birthday gift he'd ever received, appeared in his doorway with the news that the system at Reynaud Electronics had gone down again and stayed down for six hours. She had pointedly not asked why the calls to Jimmy's home and cell phones had gone unanswered all night. And for that, Jimmy had been grateful even if her knowing smile and the mischievous gleam in her eye told him she had a pretty good idea why. He hadn't even gotten a chance to ask her about hiring Adam. There just hadn't been any time or privacy.

And now he had to deal with Laton and his newest project, a failing strip club that was hemorrhaging money faster than—

Jimmy cut the thought off. He would just go in there, deal with the contractor -- assuming he hadn't missed him -- go to the bank with Laton to sign the papers for the loan, then get the hell out so he could get back to his real job running the company their father had left them, the company in which his brother took little to no interest. Simple. The whole thing should take no more than an hour.

Yeah, right.



Inside, the club was dim and cool but not silent as Jimmy had expected at this early hour. A throbbing bass-line reverberated in his chest as he stood just inside the front entrance. The sound emanated from a set of closed double doors set in the wall in front of him. His temples throbbed in time with the beat. Shit. This was not going to help the headache he'd had brewing ever since opening his eyes. Another, smaller door marked 'Employees Only' sat off to the side. Jimmy headed for that one. But just as he took hold of the knob, the double doors flew open and Laton barreled through as if propelled on a wave of sound.

"Jesus Christ, there you are. About fucking time you got here," Laton yelled, the words almost lost in the din.

The doors swung shut and suddenly Jimmy could hear again.

"I couldn't make it any earlier. I had a ton of shit to deal with at the office. Paul Reynaud's company was—"

"Yeah, whatever." Laton waved away his explanation. "You're here now, so let's just get this done." He turned back toward the double doors and the racket beyond.

Jimmy stopped him with a gesture. "Where's the contractor?"

"You missed him. But I handled it. He says we have water damage. You know that spot in the kitchen where the ceiling droops?"

He didn't, but let Laton go on anyway. Since they'd bought the club six months earlier, he'd done his best to remain on the periphery of the operation, only providing opinions when specifically asked and only going to the club when it was unavoidable. Like today.

"What's going on in there?" Jimmy asked, pointing to the closed double doors.

"Auditions," Laton said. "We should have been done a half hour ago but the last guy was late."

"Guy?"

"Yeah, for ladies' night." Laton made a face. "It was Shannon's idea. Stupid if you ask me. This is a titty bar, not a fucking equal rights convention. But we've been doing it for a while now and it's actually making money. Who'd have thought?" He chuckled. "So I really couldn't bitch when she

wanted to hire more male dancers.” Laton lifted his hand and placed it on the door. “C’mon in. I want to show you that spot in the kitchen ceiling. Then we can go to the bank. Then you can get back to your precious office.”

Laton pushed open the doors and whatever Jimmy might have said was swallowed up by the music. Bracing himself and hoping his head wouldn’t simply explode, he followed Laton into the club.

Walking into an empty club just felt fucking weird, like he was in the middle of some sort of strange dream or something. He paused just inside the door and looked around.

Two women, one blonde and the other dark, sat at a table near the front, their heads bent together like they were talking. The blonde he recognized as Shannon, the club’s manager, but the brunette’s name as well as her job title escaped him though he was sure he’d seen her before.

Jimmy turned his attention to the stage where a lone, nearly naked, male figure writhed in time with the driving beat. Wearing nothing but the smallest spangled thong, the man was on his knees, head bent forward so a dark fall of hair curtained his features. In the glow of the spotlight his lean body swayed and undulated with an almost serpentine grace. He was beautiful and sensual and...familiar.

Adam.

Jimmy gasped, the sound, thankfully, lost under the music. Recognition mixed with desire and dread sizzled through him like an electric current. All thought drained away, heading south with the blood that rushed to his dick. Jimmy stood there gawking like a teenager until Laton bumped his shoulder.

His brother leaned in, his mouth right next to Jimmy’s ear so he could be heard. “You okay, Jim?”

Hell, no.

What if Adam recognized him? And, frankly, how could he not? They’d been lovers less than twenty-four hours ago. No, not lovers. Adam had been hired to strip for him and maybe to fuck him, too, that was all.

A sick disappointment filled him. Ruthlessly, he squashed it down. This was a good thing. If Adam was whoring to

supplement his income, chances were he wouldn't want his potential employers to know it and would keep quiet about their previous encounter.

Tearing his gaze away from Adam, Jimmy nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine." He grabbed Laton's arm and turned him around. "Let's go take a look at that ceiling, shall we?"

§ § § §

Madonna's sultry voice faded away as the song ended. Adam blinked sweat from his eyes and shoved his hair back from his face scattering drops on the stage. Wearing only the tiniest thong, he walked to the edge of the stage where Shannon, the club's manager, stood.

She tapped her pen against the clipboard she held and studied him with narrowed eyes. "That wasn't bad, Adam. Jason told me you've stripped before."

What did she mean 'wasn't bad?' He'd totally nailed it.

He nodded. "Yeah, I've stripped before."

"Where?"

He listed the last three clubs he'd worked in, watching her face for a reaction.

"Those are all gay clubs," she said. "Do you have any problem stripping for women?"

Adam shrugged. "Women or men, stripping is stripping. It's all the same to me."

Shannon's dark-haired companion joined them. "That was terrific. Very hot," she said, extending her hand. "My name's Crystal. I'm the bar manager."

They shook hands and he thanked her. She had a nice smile and he instinctively liked her right away.

"Your application says you have experience tending bar. Is that right?" Crystal peered over Shannon's shoulder at the clipboard. "How long did you do that?"

Only a month, but he couldn't say that, could he? Better to say six months or a year. He rolled the lie around on his tongue, but couldn't spit it out.

"Not that long," he said. "I really like dancing more."

"But it doesn't pay the bills," Crystal said.

He nodded.

“Your application says you can start right away,” Shannon said. “How come you left your old job?”

Adam hesitated. It was never a good idea to criticize a former employer in an interview, but if the situation here was anything like the last place it would be best to know now. Besides, what the hell did he have to lose?

Shannon lifted a brow. “An honest answer would be appreciated.”

Adam blew out a breath. “The club got bought by a new owner. They started letting the dancers...service the customers in ways other than just stripping—if you know what I mean. And I don’t do that.”

Though it had gone far beyond “letting” and was actually more like “encouraging” the dancers to suck and fuck the customers, he didn’t say that.

Shannon nodded, her eyes serious and sympathetic. “I left a job like that many years ago. You won’t find anything like that here.”

Privately, he thought she didn’t look old enough for it to have been that many years ago, but it was nice to know she understood. A flicker of hope sparked inside him. Maybe this was the job for him after all.

The door behind the bar opened and two men emerged. Automatically, Adam checked them out. Both blond, one slightly taller than the other and...familiar.

Holy shit!

Jimmy.

Adam dropped his gaze then turned and began gathering up the pieces of his discarded costume.

What the fuck was Jimmy doing here? And what was he supposed to say if Shannon introduced them? Except that probably wouldn’t happen. Please, don’t let that happen.

“You finished here, Delacourte?” The man who wasn’t Jimmy asked.

“Just about,” Shannon said.

Adam heard the men's footsteps. He picked up the last of his costume and turned just as Shannon gestured him forward.

"Adam, this is Laton Trent and his brother, Jimmy. They own Flesh Tones."

Clutching his costume, Adam took the hand Laton Trent offered and shook it, murmuring something like hello or nice to meet you.

Then Jimmy stepped forward and their gazes met. Adam's hand was taken and his heart began to pound. For just a moment he could feel those hands on him again, the way Jimmy had touched him last night. He recalled the feel of Jimmy's cock pounding into him over and over, the way he'd felt when Jimmy came inside him, the way Jimmy had held him afterward.

God.

"Nice to meet you, Adam," Jimmy said. "I hope you'll like working here."

What the fuck?

"Actually," Shannon said, "we haven't really gotten that far yet."

"Oh." Jimmy's cheeks colored and he dropped Adam's hand.

Shannon laughed. "It's okay, Jim. I was just about to offer Adam the job." She turned to Adam. "Dancing on Thursday for ladies' night and tending bar the rest of the week with Monday and Tuesday off, what do you say?"

"I ..."

What did he say? Five minutes ago that sentence would have made his day. Flesh Tones looked like a nice place and everyone seemed friendly enough. But Jimmy owned the place and clearly he did not want anyone to know that they knew each other. He would probably die of embarrassment if his brother and the rest of the people who worked here found out he'd fucked some trashy stripper.

On the other hand, that would mean Adam wouldn't have to worry about his boss coming on to him, a complication he didn't need. It also meant he would never spend another night in Jimmy's bed, never again taste that mouth or feel those strong arms around him.

Adam shoved that thought away and with it the twinge of disappointment. He was thinking like some stupid lovesick high school girl. So what if he had a one-off with Jimmy Trent? He needed this job.

"If you need to think about it," Shannon said.

"No," Adam said, "I don't need to think about it." Unable to stop himself, he glanced at Jimmy, and for a moment he imagined he saw it, that look from last night, the one that had made him feel so special, so wanted. Then it was gone.

He turned his gaze back to Shannon. "When do you want me to start?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

---

Jimmy checked his pockets once more before leaving the house. Wallet, keys, cell phone—he was good to go. Opening the alarm panel he punched in the code just as his cell rang. Pulling it from his jacket pocket, he checked the number then flipped it open.

“Hey, Rene. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Actually,” she said, “I was calling to find out if I could just meet you at the club.”

Jimmy opened the door and stepped outside. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing major. I just got held up by some things and I’m nowhere near ready.”

“Listen, if you’re tied up—”

“No, I’ll be there. This is a big night for you and Laton with the TV people coming and all that. This kind of publicity could really turn things around for you guys.” She laughed. “Besides, it is ladies’ night and I’ve got my dollar bills all ready to go. And I was looking forward to comparing notes with you later on which dancers were the best looking.”

“We never agree on that, Ren. You always go for the blonds.” Jimmy pressed the button on the remote and the garage door whirred softly on its track. He walked over to the Porsche and opened the door.

“And you always go for the brunets. Well, we can still argue the hotness factor.”

Not once she saw Adam, Jimmy thought. He didn’t have to see the rest of the dancers to know that Adam would be the hottest, hands down.

Jimmy’s stomach fluttered as he got behind the wheel and clicked his seatbelt. He was going to see Adam tonight. Even if it was just on stage and from a distance, the thought was enough to have his dick sitting up and taking notice.

"So I'll see you at the club in an hour or so," Rene said.

"Ren, wait." He had to know. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

Jimmy took a breath. "Remember the stripper you got for my birthday?"

"Of course, I do," she said. "He was adorable. Just your type with all that long dark hair and sexy dark eyes. I picked him out special, you know. What about him?"

"I—" He almost let it go, almost didn't ask the question that had nagged at him for over a week, ever since he'd seen Adam at the club. But he had to know.

"What is it, honey?" Concern replaced the teasing in her voice.

"Did you hire him to sleep with me?" There, he'd said it.

Silence.

Oh, God.

He felt like throwing up.

"Did he tell you that?"

"No, but—"

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what? I thought—"

"Jimmy, if that doll baby stayed with you, he did it all on his own and not because anybody paid him."

Now it was his turn to be silent.

"Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Why do you always assume that men are only attracted to you for what you can give them, or buy them? Not everyone is like—"

"Ren, okay. Please."

She sighed. "Okay."

They said good-bye and Jimmy returned the cell to his pocket before leaning his head on the steering wheel.

So Adam had stayed with him because he wanted to and not because he was paid to. The news should have made him happy. Adam was attracted to him, or had been before Jimmy



had acted like they were total strangers. What must he think now?

Probably nothing at all, Jimmy told himself. More than likely, Adam hadn't given their encounter another thought after that night. It was just two strangers fucking, that was all. Men fucked like that all the time. It didn't mean anything. He wouldn't let it mean anything because if it did, if what he thought he'd seen in Adam's eyes had actually been there, then he had fucked up royally.

For just a moment, Jimmy let himself imagine what it might be like to throw caution to the wind, to not think about discretion in everything he did and to give in to his own normal responses. What would that be like?

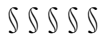
He had no clue because he had never done it.

What if instead of acting like they were strangers, he had clasped Adam's hand and greeted him with all the pleasure he had actually felt at seeing him, the pleasure that had so quickly been crushed under the need for discretion that he'd hardly allowed himself to feel it?

But he hadn't done that and wasn't at all sure he ever could.

Jimmy sat up, jammed the key in the ignition and started the engine.

If he'd thought for just a moment that he'd seen something else in Adam's eyes, something more than lust, it must have been his imagination.



Jimmy sipped his drink and watched idly as the blond muscle-boy on stage rid himself of the last remnants of his costume. Clad in nothing but a purple spangled g-string and a smile, Blondie gyrated to the driving techno beat blaring from man-sized speakers at either end of the stage. The kid was good-looking in a flashy, over-developed way and judging from the whistles and shrieks coming from the writhing mass of females gathered around the stage, his performance was quite a hit. For Jimmy, however, this blond with his oiled muscles and his goods on display just didn't do it.

Now, if that was Adam up there in that tiny purple thong ...

Jimmy cut that thought off at the knees. Instead he concentrated on the blond, willing away the vision of Adam that had popped into his head.

Fingers lightly brushed his arm. Wendy Ryan, a familiar face on the local TV news, leaned forward. "This is quite a place, Mr. Trent." She glanced around. "You and your brother have really brought this club back from the dead, haven't you?"

"This is mostly Laton's doing," Jimmy said. "I'm sort of a silent partner."

"You're here tonight," she pointed out. "Though I imagine it can't be much fun for you. I mean with this being ladies' night and all." She smiled, all red lips and white, white teeth. "Of course, there are a lot of women here tonight. And with the Trent brothers being two of the most eligible bachelors in town..."

God help him.

"I'm not really looking for anything like that, Ms. Ryan," Jimmy said.

"Oh, of course," she said and had the grace to at least look sheepish as she glanced over at Rene seated on Jimmy's other side. "I just meant, since the piece we're doing is about the cross-gender appeal of gentlemen's clubs...though I suppose I should say gentlepersons' clubs?"

She laughed at her own quip. Laton laughed too, a bit too hard, Jimmy thought. Rene smiled but said nothing. Of course the music was so loud maybe she hadn't even heard what Wendy had said.

Across the table, Shannon rolled her eyes and glanced at her watch.

Wendy turned to Laton and Jimmy leaned back in his chair. Maybe she was done with him. Please, let her be done with him?

He half-listened as she fired off question after question at Laton and Shannon. How had ladies' night come about? Were they having a lot of success with it? What were the differences between the crowds on ladies' nights and regular nights? Were there a lot of hook-ups on nights like this?

Surreptitiously, Jimmy glanced at his watch. How much longer before he and Rene could decently excuse themselves and escape?

The music changed and the blond dancer left the stage.

"How about another round?" Laton asked. He waved at a passing waitress already burdened with an overflowing tray. The girl paused, clearly unsure whether to keep going or to stop.

Shannon got to her feet and gestured for the waitress to go on. "I'll get the drinks, Laton. Tina's already up to her butt in orders."

"That's her job," Laton said.

Shannon shot him a look but said nothing.

"Just club soda for me, since I'm working," Wendy said. "With a slice of lime. Make sure it's lime and not lemon, please?"

"You bet," Shannon said. "I'll run out to the lime tree and pick one myself if necessary."

Jimmy laughed, covering his mouth and faking a cough. "Nothing for me," he said, recovering his composure, "since I'm driving."

Rene declined as well.

"C'mon, Jim," Laton said. "Have one more. You'll have plenty of time to sober up. The night is young."

And getting older every minute, Jimmy thought.

"Mr. Trent," Wendy Ryan said, laying a hand on his arm, "Laton tells me you're in securities? That must be very interesting."

Securities? What the hell had Laton been telling her?

"Actually, our company is involved with data security and business continuity planning. And it is very interesting, at least to me."

"Oh, business continuity. How...necessary." Her hand left his arm.

Jesus God, this night was never going to end.

Jimmy looked to Rene for help. But she wasn't paying the least attention to him or Wendy Ryan. Rene was all eyes, watching the blond kid work the room for tips.

Jimmy turned back to Wendy just as Shannon appeared with the drinks. She placed Wendy's glass in front of her and was just handing Laton his drink when something seemed to catch her attention.

"Damnit!" Shannon said, gaze directed toward the stage.

"What?" Laton demanded.

They all turned to look. Jimmy saw nothing but the empty stage.

Shannon waved over one of the club security guys and pointed at the stage. "Gerry, have them hold the next dancer and tell Danny to get out there and pick up that crap before somebody gets hurt."

"What is it?" Wendy Ryan asked. She craned her neck then half-rose from her chair.

"Underwear," Shannon said.

"Underwear?"

"Yeah, these...ladies throw their underwear up on stage, like anybody would want it, then we have to go out there and pick it up between dancers."

"Underwear? You mean right off their bodies?" Wendy laughed. "That's hysterical."

Shannon sighed. "Yeah, it should be a real riot when somebody slips and falls into the crowd and we get sued because some twit couldn't keep her panties where they belong."

"Sued?" Laton asked.

"Do the men throw anything at the dancers?" Wendy asked.

"Nothing besides the occasional lewd comment," Shannon said.

"Why would we get sued?" Laton persisted.

Shannon didn't even look his way. "I better go see what the hold up is."

Jimmy swore he heard the whooshing sound as she escaped the conversation.

Moments later the next dancer was introduced and the crowd erupted. Screams and squeals and general chaos surrounded

them. Jimmy glanced at his watch. Had they stayed long enough? Maybe if—

“Oh my,” Wendy Ryan said. Her chair scraped back as she got to her feet and gestured to her cameraman. “Get a shot of him, Larry. If he doesn’t make people watch, nothing will.”

Jimmy looked up and his heart stopped as if frozen solid in his chest. The man on stage, in black tie and tails, complete with top hat and cane was none other than Adam. His Adam.

Jimmy stared, dumbstruck, as the golden glow of the spotlight caressed the lean lines of all that male hotness. Of course he’d known he was going to see Adam tonight, had even prepared himself in case they actually had to speak. But now, with walking-wet-dream, sex-on-a-stick Adam standing not twenty feet away, he realized he wasn’t prepared at all.

The music swelled and the women screamed. But Jimmy barely heard any of it, fixated as he was on the lone figure in that circle of light.

Slowly Adam strolled to the edge of the stage, not dancing, only swaying a little, the spotlight following his every move. He never acknowledged the women who shrieked and whistled and yelled for him to show them some skin. His movements were casual and sensuous at once, the pantomime flawless -- just a man arriving home from an evening out -- as he removed his hat and laid his cane aside. Next went his tie, pulled off and tossed carelessly away. With an elegant shrug of his shoulders, Adam rid himself of the jacket. But just before it fell from his fingertips, it too was tossed aside.

Adam turned slowly, showing the crowd that the tuxedo shirt was nothing more than sleeves and a front. He was bare to the waist, nothing but smooth, pale skin and a sleek tail of dark hair that fell to the middle of his back.

As he turned, Adam raised his arms. Loosened French cuffs slid back as one slim, pale hand loosed his hair. With a toss of his head, dark, glossy waves cascaded past his shoulders and down his back as the music paused.

Jimmy’s world stilled, the club and the crowd and the people at his table sliding away until all that was left was that face and those hands, until he felt that touch as they stroked and

caressed and played his body like an instrument, until Jimmy could barely breathe.

In a single movement, Adam tore the shirt off and flung it away. The stillness shattered. Sound and motion rushed in, threatening to overwhelm Jimmy as the music crashed down on him and Adam began to dance.

Under the table, Jimmy's cock swelled, straining at his zipper. He shifted, trying to make room for the hard-on that would not be denied, but to no avail.

A hand gripped his, nails digging in. Jimmy tore his gaze from Adam.

Rene leaned close, her lips almost brushing his ear. "I know he's pretty, but close your mouth before you start drooling."

Thank God for Rene.

Though it nearly killed him, he didn't look back at the stage. Turning his hand, he linked fingers with Rene. As long as he wasn't looking at Adam he could breathe easier and maybe, just maybe, his heart wouldn't leap out of his chest and land on the table.

He needed to get out of there, get some air, get away, something. Except...he risked a glance at the stage.

The pants were gone now, leaving Adam in only low boots and a g-string that shone like black satin but probably wasn't. The top hat and cane were back and the way Adam moved, using his body and his props, would have made Fred Astaire proud. Might have made him blush too, Jimmy thought, as the overall effect was far more sensuous than anything old Fred could have gotten away with in his day.

Jimmy shut his eyes and inhaled deeply. He swore he could smell the sweat gleaming on Adam's skin.

Rene squeezed his hand. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. Didn't she recognize Adam? After all, she'd been the one who let him in when he came to the house. And how could she not after the conversation they'd just had about him?

"Want to leave?" she asked.

Yes. No. Hell if he knew. He should leave, no doubt about it. But then there was the not so small problem of his cock, which

refused to behave itself. He couldn't go strolling through the club with a boner the size of—

"Mr. Trent?" Wendy Ryan was looking at him, finely arched brows drawn together. "Are you all right? You look a little peaked."

"Fine," Jimmy said, "just hot. It's too hot in here."

She nodded. "It is a little."

The dancing went on and on, Adam staying on stage far longer than the previous dancers. Or maybe that was just a perception. At last it was over and Adam began collecting tips from the women gathered around the stage.

Wendy turned her attention back to Adam. As he started down the set of steps closest to their table, Wendy stood up and waved. "Yoo-hoo, gorgeous." She waved a bill. "Can I have a word?"

Adam looked up and, to Jimmy's horror, started in their direction.

Shoving back his chair, Jimmy grabbed his jacket from the back and held it in front of him as he got to his feet.

"Are we leaving?" Rene asked.

Oh, it was tempting. But they couldn't just get up and walk out, not without the obligatory round of good-byes and nice-to-have-met-yous, so he chose the next best thing.

"Bathroom," he said, "I'll be right back." Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked quickly away.

He hurried through the club and down the short hallway that led to the bathrooms. Shoving open the men's room door, he ducked inside. The interior was empty and comparatively quiet. Slipping into the end stall, he locked the door and leaned back against it, pausing long enough to hang up his jacket. Only then did he allow himself a sigh of relief.

Adam had not seen him or his cowardly flight, at least he didn't think so, preoccupied as he must have been with Wendy and her cameraman and all those women clamoring to tip him and touch him and...

Damn, but the man had looked good.

Jimmy closed his eyes and summoned the image of Adam as he'd looked on stage. Though clearly a costume, the black tie and tails had suited him down to the bone, turning his already phenomenal good looks into an intoxicating mix of sensuality and class that pushed Jimmy's buttons big-time. Of course, he'd always gotten a hard-on for a hot guy in evening clothes. Something about that look just flat out did it for him.

Unzipping his pants, Jimmy drew out his prick, already wet at the tip. As he stroked himself he rearranged the image in his head, exchanging the cheap costume Adam wore for the real deal, complete with cuff-links and shirt studs, everything custom tailored to fit that lean yet muscular body.

Jimmy imagined untying the tie, sliding it off and taking a kiss as he did it. The jacket went next, slipped from broad shoulders and down Adam's arms, trapping his wrists and momentarily rendering him helpless. Those dark eyes went hot and the lovely fair skin flushed with arousal. Jimmy imagined casting away the jacket then slowly unfastening each cuff until the material draped loose over those slim hands.

*Please, Jim,* his fantasy Adam begged, *let me suck your cock.* Without waiting for an answer, his lover dropped to his knees. His shirt cuffs slid back as those clever hands came up to wrap around Jimmy's prick.

Jimmy gasped, his grip punishingly hard on his cock as he pictured that luscious mouth sliding down his shaft, imagined the silky heat engulfing him. Heavy-lidded eyes focused on his, perfect cheekbones standing out as Adam sucked him.

Need built in Jimmy's balls as he swiped his thumb over the head of his prick. He pictured his hand fisted in Adam's hair, holding him still while Jimmy fucked his mouth.

God, he was close.

Any second now he was going to come. Only this time, he would come in that angelic mouth. His fantasy Adam did not pull back. Instead he swallowed Jimmy down, sucking relentlessly until pulse after pulse of hot salty come filled his mouth.



Jimmy shot, come splashing over his hand and just making it into the toilet as his entire body shook with the force of the orgasm.

Leaning against the wall, knees shaking, he tore off toilet paper and cleaned himself up. Heart still racing, he grabbed his jacket and slipped it on before he left the stall.

Jimmy washed his hands and splashed cold water on his face. He peered at his reflection in the mirror. He looked normal enough even if his insides still churned like a vortex. No one would guess from his appearance that he'd just come so hard he'd nearly passed out.

He'd almost made it back to the table when he caught sight of Rene. She stood near the bar, no sign of Laton or Wendy Ryan anywhere. Most important, Adam was nowhere in sight.

"I was wondering what happened to you," Rene said when he reached her. "Laton's been looking all over for you."

No sooner had the words left her mouth, but his brother rushed up to them. "Where have you been?" Laton demanded. "I need you to do me a favor."

Jimmy smiled without humor. That was his brother, all right. No would-you-mind or could-you-please, just I need you to do something for me.

"What kind of favor, Late?"

But Laton wasn't paying attention. He scanned the club, looking for what Jimmy didn't know.

"Laton," Jimmy said, "what favor?"

"What? Oh, yeah, that." Laton's attention returned to Jimmy. "One of the dancers got hurt, and Shannon's insisting that he needs to go to the ER only he can't drive himself." Laton clapped Jimmy on the shoulder. "You don't mind, do you?"

Jimmy turned to Rene. "Are you ready to go?"

She nodded. "I can be."

"There's Wendy," Laton said. "I have to go." He'd taken only a few steps when he suddenly turned back. "Jim, go around to the back, will you? I don't want a big scene out front." Without another word, he left them.

As they walked to the parking lot, Rene slid her arm through Jimmy's. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I drove the Porsche. There's no back seat."

"Oh. Well, we can take my car."

"Then you'd have to bring me back to get mine. Don't worry about it, Ren." Jimmy patted her hand where it rested on his arm. "I'll take the guy to the ER. It's no big deal."

After seeing Rene to her car, Jimmy got into his own car and fastened his seatbelt.

There were lots of dancers working tonight. What were the odds that his passenger would turn out to be Adam? Please, let it be the blond kid. He could handle the blond, anybody but Adam.

Jimmy drove around to the back door of the club, leaving the engine running while he waited. He really didn't mind driving someone to the emergency room, was glad to do it in fact, since it gave him the perfect excuse to escape the club. In a way, Laton had done him a favor by recruiting him. He'd only been there a minute or two when the door opened and Shannon came out. Jimmy leaned across and opened the passenger door.

Shannon walked over and leaned into the car. "Thanks for doing this, Jim," she said. "You're a life saver."

"It's serious then?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, I think it's just a sprain. I meant Laton's life. I was about to hurt him if he didn't let somebody drive Adam to the ER."

Shit. Jimmy's stomach plummeted into his shoes.

The door to the club opened again. One of the security guards came out with one beefy arm around Adam's waist.

Shit. Shitshitshit.

"Here he is," Shannon said.

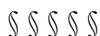
Dressed in faded sweatpants and a Temple University sweatshirt with the sleeves torn off, Adam limped toward the car. He looked both pissed off and in pain. "I don't need to go to the friggin' hospital," he bitched. "It's just a sprain, Shannon. I can deal with it myself."

“Be quiet and stop being such a baby,” Shannon said. Stepping back, she opened the door wider so Adam could get in.

Adam glanced at Jimmy as security guy and Shannon helped him get settled. His eyes widened and Jimmy’s heart leaped into his throat. That dark gaze lingered on him for only a second, then Adam leaned his head back and shut his eyes. In the car’s interior light he looked pale, his mouth set in a grim line.

“Okay,” Shannon said, “You’re all set. Take care of that knee, Adam. I want you good as new for next ladies’ night.” To Jimmy she said, “Don’t let him talk you out of taking him to the hospital.”

With that she closed the door and they were left alone in the car.



Adam inhaled the mingled scents of new car and Jimmy’s cologne.

For fuck’s sake, of all the people Shannon could have stuck him with, she had to pick the single person he wanted least -- or was it most -- to see.

Shit, but his knee hurt like fucking hell. While still in the club he’d tried to pretend that it didn’t, sloughing off Shannon’s concern and arguing that he didn’t need to go to the ER. In truth he simply didn’t want to go. He didn’t want the x-rays and the MRIs and the poking and prodding and endless questions. And, oh yeah, let’s not forget the bad news when they came in and told him he needed more surgery. He wasn’t even done paying the bills from the last time. He had no insurance, no money and no place to live since he’d left Daren. And now, if he couldn’t walk, or dance, he wouldn’t have a job either.

Adam swallowed hard and tried to tamp down the rising panic. Just because his knee hadn’t hurt this much since he’d torn his ACL four years ago didn’t mean it was the same thing. It’s just a sprain, he told himself, repeating the words again and again like a mantra, as if by sheer repetition he could make it true.

He could still remember the accident in such clarity, like it had happened just yesterday, or just an hour ago. In his head he

could see himself, so strong and so confident in his body's ability, doing the jump, then the landing, then the pop. Just a little pop, and he was sure he'd actually heard it, that pop that had ended his career before it ever began. That pop had stolen everything he'd worked so hard for and left him with nothing but a torn ACL and a mountain of bills he couldn't pay. Adam wasn't at all sure he could face that again.

"Does it hurt a lot?" Jimmy asked.

Adam's eyes snapped open. They were stopped at a red light. Even in the dark, he could tell by the angle of Jimmy's profile that he was being watched, could practically feel the weight of Jimmy's gaze like a touch on his skin. Adam wet his lips. He'd thought of Jimmy so often over the last week, of the things they'd done together and the feel of Jimmy's hands on him, but it was those amazing eyes, a faded denim blue with darker flecks around the irises, that had haunted his dreams.

"It hurts some," Adam said.

Jimmy said nothing. The light changed and his attention returned to the road.

Adam turned toward the window, staring blindly out at the passing streets.

Had it really been just over a week since he'd shared Jimmy's bed? Just over a week since Jimmy had looked at him like he was every Christmas and birthday present in the world all rolled up in one? It was that look, he knew, that had fueled his fantasies, those pretty eyes he pictured when he was alone with only his right hand for company. Except that look was a lie. He wasn't what Jimmy wanted, not really, not for more than that single night anyway.

"I think about you," Jimmy said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"What?" Adam could hardly force the single word past the pulse pounding in his throat.

"I think about you," Jimmy said, louder this time. "About being with you, touching you, the things we did together, everything."

I think about you too, Adam wanted to say. About your eyes. And the way you taste. And the calluses on your fingers. About

the way you make me feel when you look at me. But he couldn't say any of that. Not here. Not now.

"I work for you," Adam said, falling back on the obvious.

"You work for Laton, not me. My name might be on the club but I'm not the one signing your checks."

It was a technicality, like Jimmy couldn't get him fired in a heartbeat if he wanted to. But his gut told him that wasn't what this was about.

"So what do you want?" Adam asked.

"To see you again."

"To see me again?"

"Yes. I want to see you, spend time with you ..."

"You want to fuck me."

"Yes," Jimmy whispered. "But not just—"

"Tell me what you want to do to me," Adam interrupted. So it was about fucking. Fucking he could handle.

A pause.

"I want you on your back," Jimmy said, "so I can see your eyes, the expression on your face. You're so beautiful when you come."

God.

Adam's cock twitched and began to fill. He laid a hand on Jimmy's thigh, trailed his fingertips along the man's inseam, stopping just short of his crotch.

"You want to come in me, don't you?" Adam murmured. "Fuck me bare, and shoot your load in my ass."

"That wouldn't be safe," Jimmy said, voice cracking on the word safe.

"No, it wouldn't," Adam agreed, "but it's what you want." He let the backs of his fingers graze Jimmy's erection. "It's what you think about, isn't it, when you think about me?"

"God, Adam, not just that." Jimmy's fingers closed over Adam's, pressing his hand against Jimmy's cock.

Adam stroked him. Jimmy thought about him, fantasized about coming inside him. Of course he wouldn't do anything so stupid and reckless, but it was hot as fuck to think about it.

"If you want me so bad, why'd you pretend we were strangers?" Adam asked.

Jimmy's hips shifted, pushing his prick against Adam's hand. "What?"

"At the club last week, when I was auditioning for Shannon and you walked in with Laton, why'd you act like you didn't know me?"

"I don't know," Jimmy said, releasing Adam's hand. "You took me by surprise and I...I guess I behaved badly."

"You were ashamed," Adam said, testing. "Afraid people would know you fucked a stripper."

"No."

"What then?"

"It has nothing to do with you being a stripper."

"I don't think I believe you."

"I just don't make an issue of my sexuality. That's all."

"So if we saw each other again, like you say you want, it would have to be a secret."

Jimmy hesitated, and in the hesitation was all the answer Adam needed. "Not a secret," Jimmy finally said, "just discreet."

Adam's hand stilled. He could feel the heat of Jimmy's cock through his pants. He longed to take it out and stroke it, maybe suck it and feel that velvety skin against his lips, taste the salty pre-come on his tongue. But if he did that, if he accepted the offer of a secret seduction here in the intimate darkness of Jimmy's car, it was all he would ever have of Jimmy Trent. And it wasn't enough.

"No." Adam let his hand slide away from Jimmy's prick. "I don't want that."

"Adam, please, just listen—"

"No. I don't want to be your closet fuckboy."

In the silence that followed, Jimmy turned the car onto Tenth Street, and Jefferson Hospital came into view. He said nothing as he pulled up to the emergency entrance and stopped.

Adam pulled on the door handle. Nothing happened.

“Wait a minute,” Jimmy said. “Let me come around and help you.”

“I don’t need your help. Just unlock the door.”

“Adam, you can’t—”

There was a tap at the passenger window. A dark-skinned security guard with glasses motioned for him to lower the glass.

“You can’t park here,” the guard said.

“He’s just dropping me off,” Adam said before Jimmy could speak. “Do you think you could give me a hand? I hurt my knee and I’m not walking so great.”

“You need a wheelchair?” The guard asked.

Adam shook his head. “No, just a hand to get inside.” He turned to Jimmy. “Thanks for the ride.”

“I’ll go park the car and—”

“No.”

After several seconds, the locks clicked and Adam released a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. Opening the door, he eased his injured leg out and slowly got to his feet. His knee collapsed. Adam clutched at the door to keep from falling on his ass.

“Easy there,” the guard said, catching his arm and taking some of his weight. “You sure about that wheelchair, man?”

“I’m good.” Icy sweat drenched his skin and his knee was a blaze of agony, but he’d be damned if he’d spend one more second in that car.

“Adam, wait. I—”

Leaning on the guard’s arm for support, Adam shut the door. He did not need to hear any more of what Jimmy had to say.





## CHAPTER FIVE

---

“Shannon’s going to take one look at you and send your ass home,” Jason said.

“I’m not walking that bad.” Adam shifted his weight off the crutches and cautiously tested his bad knee. It held and the pain wasn’t unbearable, not compared to what it had been two nights ago.

They were standing in Jason’s living room on the top floor of the building that housed Jason’s club. Outside the large windows, day had just surrendered to dark and the lights of the Philly skyline twinkled like multicolored stars.

Jason eyed him skeptically. “Yeah, well, how’re you going to tend bar on crutches?”

“I’m not. I’m going to leave them in the car. I don’t really need them anyway.”

Which was almost the truth.

The ER doc, after much poking and prodding, had pronounced his knee sprained but with no real, long-term damage. She’d also recommended, quite strongly, that he stay off of it for a few days -- thus the crutches. But, as Jason had pointed out, you couldn’t tend bar on crutches, and since there was no way he was not going to work, both the doc’s advice and the crutches were being set aside.

“Up to you, I guess,” Jason said. “I have a full schedule tonight, but you’re welcome to come back and hang out here after Shannon takes a chunk out of you for not listening to the doc.”

“I have a brace on it. It’ll be fine.” Had to be, since Saturday was their busiest night and he didn’t want to lose the tips. Besides, he wasn’t giving them any reason to get rid of him. He needed this job.

“Did you hear anything about those apartments you went to see?”

Adam's shoulders slumped. "I didn't get either of them. The first place said they couldn't rent to me because I'm a bad credit risk because of that thing with the hospital bill."

"You're still paying that?"

Adam nodded. "The other one turned me down because I haven't worked at my current job long enough."

"I told you I could lend you—"

"No."

"Adam—"

"No. Thanks, but no."

Jason sighed. "Well, there are plenty of other places. And like I said before, you can stay here as long as you want. *Mi casa es su casa*, you know?"

"I know." He was grateful for the offer, but even between friends there came a time when accepting a favor crossed the line and became taking advantage, and he didn't want to do that. And besides, Jason's live-in girlfriend, Marissa, had been giving him the evil eye for the last couple of weeks whenever he showed up. As much as he didn't like Marissa, he didn't want to cause problems between Jason and her.

Adam adjusted the crutches under his arms. "I have to get going or I'll be late."

He turned toward the elevator. It was the old-fashioned kind, with the heavy steel door you had to pull open and a metal gate behind that. Because the building was a converted factory and parts of it still had a weirdly industrial layout, the elevator opened directly into Jason's living room.

"Let me get that." Jason opened the door. The metal squealed in protest as he pulled back the gate.

"Thanks." Adam stepped into the car. The gate rattled back into place.

"Hey, Adam?" Jason propped one arm against the door, holding it open.

"Yeah?"

"I mean it, about staying here. If you don't have some place else to go tonight—"

"I know. Thanks, Jase."

For a moment they stared at each other through the metal gate, then Jason nodded and let the door swing shut.

§ § § §

Adam managed to avoid Shannon until almost ten-thirty by always looking busy whenever she tried to catch his eye. It wasn't that difficult. It was dollar draft night and business at the bar was brisk.

Adam had just finished filling a drinks order for one of the waitresses when he noticed they were out of limes. Grabbing the empty basket, he pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen and stopped dead. He was busted.

Shannon leaned against the counter, an unlit cigarette in one hand and a lighter in the other. She looked at him then down at the cigarette and sighed.

"I hate this new law. Whose business is it anyway if I want to smoke?" With visible regret she tucked the cigarette and lighter in her pocket.

"Go ahead," Adam said. "I won't tell on you."

Sure she was watching, he refused to limp as he crossed to the refrigerator. Opening it, he took out half a dozen limes and put them on the counter. Despite the drugs and the brace his knee was killing him, except he couldn't let her see that.

Shannon pulled a knife from the block and picked up one of the limes. "Adam, you want to tell me what you're doing here?"

Not really.

He picked up a knife and a lime. "I'm slicing limes."

"You know what I mean." She whacked the ends off her lime then split it into six slices, which she dumped into the basket. The tang of citrus assailed him and mixed with her perfume as she reached across him for another lime.

He said nothing, just continued slicing.

"I can see you're in pain. It's all over your face."

"It's not bad," he lied. "It's just a sprain. No big deal."

"Still, you should be home resting it, not in here on your feet all night." Shannon dropped her knife into the sink. "I want you to leave at eleven. And take tomorrow off."

"I can finish my shift."

“You are finished.” She took the knife from him and dropped it in the sink. “Go home, Adam. And I don’t want to see you in here tomorrow night.”

He thought about arguing, but the look on her face told him it was useless. He even considered telling her the truth, or part of it anyway. But it was just too humiliating to admit that he had no place to go but his car. So instead he nodded.

“Okay. But I’ll be in day after tomorrow.”

Shannon blew out a breath. “Whatever. I guess I can’t stop you.”

“You could maybe tie me up or something.” For a moment she said nothing and he thought he might have made a mistake in teasing her.

“Forget it. You’d like that too much.” Shannon smiled.

And amazingly, they shared a laugh.

It was eleven-ten when he left the club. The walk across the parking lot seemed endless. If only he had those damn crutches ...

Adam scanned the rows of cars. His Cavalier sat between an SUV and a pickup. Not much farther, thank God.

His relief vanished when he saw the figure of a man crouched down next to his car. The figure straightened then leaned against the driver’s door. Even from several rows away and with the man’s back to him, he recognized Daren.

Shit. What the hell was he doing here? He hadn’t told Daren about this job, so how had he known?

Adam paused. He was not up for this. Shifting most of his weight off his bad knee, he glanced back toward the club. He could go back inside, avoid the whole encounter. But he was sick of Daren’s endless stream of messages and screening every single call before he answered it. Besides, the doors seemed miles away.

Fuck it. He was getting in his car and leaving. To hell with Daren. Whatever he wanted, he wasn’t getting it.

Just as he made his decision and got moving again, Daren turned. Even from that distance, the shift in the man’s stance told Adam he’d been seen. He deliberately slowed his pace.

“Hey,” Daren said when he was still a good fifteen feet away. “Long time no see.”

Even under the sickly parking-lot lighting, Daren looked good -- blond hair artistically tousled, sharp green eyes above chiseled cheekbones, the tan that never faded thanks to regular nukings at the salon, and the body, all those ripped muscles cased in faded denim. It was a very appealing picture, maybe just a little too appealing considering how low he felt at the moment.

“What are you doing here?” Adam pulled his keys out of his pocket and assumed an air of nonchalance he didn’t feel as he approached his car and his ex-boyfriend.

“I was leaving you a note.” Daren held up a piece of paper. “But now that you’re here—”

“How’d you know where to find me?”

“I’ve kept tabs on you, babe.” He stuffed the paper in his pocket.

“I think that’s called stalking.”

Daren leaned against the car and gave his hair a calculated toss. He was posing. “I wouldn’t have to stalk you if you’d just answer my calls.”

Adam jingled the keys in his hand. “What do you want, Dee?”

“I just want to talk,” Daren said. “I miss you.” He smiled that come-on smile, the one that had once made Adam’s pulse race and his cock hard.

“You were leaving me a note because you just wanted to talk?”

Daren looked blank for a second then shook his head. “No. I was leaving the note to tell you I’m leaving.” He paused but when Adam said nothing he continued. “I’m going to L.A. Jasmine -- you remember Jasmine, my agent -- she hooked me up with a commercial and maybe a part on a new series. I wanted to share my good news but you won’t even take my calls.”

“Share your good news with Patrick.” Adam pressed the button on the remote and the locks clicked.

Daren's expression turned sullen. "Patrick's gone."

"Gone where, back to high school?" Adam leaned against the side of the car. Through the back window he could see the crutches sticking up between the seats where he'd left them. God, but his knee was killing him.

"He said he was twenty-one."

Adam laughed. He couldn't help it. "Twenty-one, my ass. He was seventeen if he was a day."

And he'd told Daren as much, at least he thought he had, though what he had or hadn't said that night wasn't all that clear. Once he'd walked in and found Daren balls-deep in the twink's ass, the two of them so intent on each other that they hadn't even noticed him, after that his recollections got fuzzy. He did recall, though not in much detail, the fit he'd pitched before slamming out the door without taking so much as a toothbrush.

"Whatever," Daren said. "Anyway, he's gone now." He let his gaze slide down Adam's body. "You look good, babe."

"I look like shit." He knew it, too. The pain in his knee and the night spent sitting in the ER had taken a toll. He'd seen it for himself in the bathroom mirror. No wonder Shannon had sent him home early.

Daren laughed. "You couldn't look like shit if you rolled in it." He caught a stray lock of Adam's hair around his finger and tugged. "Why don't you come to L.A with me? You'd love southern California. It's the hot young thing capital of the world."

Adam jerked his hair from Daren's fingers. "I wouldn't go across the street with you, let alone southern California."

"Why do you have to be like that? I fucked up. I admit it. I made a mistake. Didn't you ever make a mistake?"

"Forgetting to put the gas cap back on after you fill the tank is a mistake. Going behind my back and fucking some twink in our bed, that's no mistake. Unless of course, you tripped over him and your dick ended up in his ass purely by accident."

Daren huffed out a breath. "You're so sarcastic. I fucking hate that about you."

"So leave." Adam reached around Daren and grabbed the door handle. But before he could open it Daren's fingers closed on his wrist.

"I didn't come here to fight."

"I know, you came here to leave me a love note."

"I came here to ask you to come home." His grip tightened. "C'mon, Adam. Come home with me so we can talk."

So they could fuck more like it.

"You don't want to talk."

"So what if I don't? You were never much of a talker either."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"You've got somebody else, don't you? That's why you won't give me another chance."

An image of Jimmy's face flashed into Adam's head and he quickly banished it. He didn't have Jimmy, wouldn't ever have him, and shouldn't even want him, not after their conversation the other night. Which only proved how fucked up he was.

"There's nobody else," Adam said. "Now, let go and get off my car." He punctuated with a tug on his wrist.

Daren let go and stepped away from the car. "I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want."

Adam reached for the door handle, keeping his eyes on his ex-boyfriend. Daren never gave up this easily.

Adam saw the move coming. He jerked the door open and tried to put it between himself and Daren, but was too slow.

Daren shoved him back against the car. Adam's knee buckled and he gasped. He was pinned to the side of the car, trapped between the cold, unyielding metal and Daren's body. It was the only thing that kept him from crumpling to the blacktop. The scent of Calvin Klein filled his head and suddenly he was awash in memories, some good, most not so good.

Daren leaned in, his face only inches away, kissing distance. When he spoke his breath wafted warm against Adam's face.

"You still think about it, angel? Remember how good it was?" Daren's hips moved in a slow, seductive grind, the bulge of his cock unmistakable. God, he was getting off on this.

Adam shook his head, partially in denial but mostly to clear it of the image of Daren naked and leaning over him.

“Come on, baby. You made your point. You don’t need to sleep in your car anymore. Why don’t you just admit that you want to come back and we’ll go home and take care of business?”

And for a moment he actually considered it. He was so fucking tired. What would it hurt to just give in and let Daren have his way? He could just get in the car, go back to their old apartment, back to his old life with Daren and—

No. Just no. If he did that nothing would change. He needed to get in the car, alone, and get the fuck out of there.

Somehow he got his arm up between their bodies and shoved. “Get off me. I’d rather sleep in my car for the rest of my fucking life than get back with you.”

Daren was forced back a full step. His elbow connected against the side of the SUV with a hallow thump. Anger flashed in his eyes as all the good humor and seduction drained from his face. His arm came up, hand open and ready.

With nowhere to go, Adam braced for the slap—

“Adam.”

Everything went still with that single word. Daren’s hand dropped to his side as they both turned in the direction of the new voice.

Jimmy stepped out from behind the pickup on the other side of Adam’s car. He walked around the back of the car and stopped within an arm’s reach of where they stood.

“Is there a problem here?” Jimmy’s tone was almost casual, like he was asking nothing more than if they’d heard the weather report for the next day, but his eyes were hot.

“No problem,” Daren said.

Jimmy looked at Daren like the man was dog shit on his shoe before his gaze returned to Adam. “Is there a problem here, Adam?”

Adam’s lips moved but no sound came out. He couldn’t speak past the pulse pounding in his throat. Nor could he take his eyes off Jimmy. The man looked taller than he remembered,



broadly across the shoulders and just a little dangerous despite his relaxed stance.

Adam swallowed. "There's no problem, Jim. Daren was just leaving." He finally managed to tear his eyes away from Jimmy and turned to Daren. "Weren't you just leaving, Dee?"

Daren nodded but the look on his face was anything but agreeable. Adam knew that look. It never meant anything good.

"Yeah, right," Daren said. He pulled keys from his pocket. "If you change your mind, Adam, you know where I am."

Adam watched Daren walk away because it was easier than looking into Jimmy's eyes. How much of their fucked up little scene had Jimmy witnessed?

Jimmy cleared his throat. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

Adam turned back to Jimmy. The man looked normal again, the air of potential violence was gone. Or maybe it had never been there. Maybe he had imagined it. "Nothing that shouldn't have been interrupted a long time ago."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

They fell silent, just looking at each other. It was Jimmy who finally spoke.

"Looks like you've got a flat."

"What?" Adam followed Jimmy's pointing finger. His left front tire sagged. Daren had done this. He couldn't say how he knew but he did. He swore.

"Got a spare?" Jimmy asked. "I'll help you change it."

Adam's gaze flicked over Jimmy—the blazer, the white shirt, the tailored dress pants—and he shook his head. "You're not dressed to change a tire. But thanks anyway."

"The clothes can go to the cleaners. It's no problem." He paused. "How's your knee?"

"It's not bad. Just a sprain."

"That's good. Still, you shouldn't be down on it changing a tire. Let me help." He started to slip out of his jacket.

"Really, Jim, it's okay. I can handle it." The truth was he had no idea if he had a spare. And even if he did, he'd be damned if

he was going to open the trunk in front of Jimmy Trent and let him see all the shit that was jammed in there.

Jimmy just stood there for a minute holding his jacket. He looked at Adam then at the tire going flatter by the minute then back at Adam. At last he said, "It's really none of my business, Adam. But I couldn't help overhearing what your...friend said."

So Jimmy had heard at least part of it. Now the man would know for sure what a loser he was. Adam's face grew hot. When he spoke his voice was almost inaudible. "Which part?"

"The part about how you're living in your car."

"So is it true?" Jimmy waited for the answer, already knowing what it would be since he'd been eavesdropping and heard the admission from Adam himself. But would Adam trust him with such a humbling truth? Only one way to know.

To Adam's credit he met Jimmy's eyes directly. When he answered, his voice, though soft, was steady. "I'm sort of between places right now. So, yeah, I've got most of my stuff in the car."

For a moment, Jimmy couldn't sort out what he felt. Adam had confided in him, admitting to what had to be a humiliating truth when he could have dissembled. That certainly meant something, didn't it? On the other hand, someone he knew, someone he'd slept with, was homeless and living in his car and that just sickened him.

He opened his mouth to ask how long then closed it. What difference did it make how long? One night was too goddamn long. He wondered if Laton knew. Surely not. Even his self-absorbed brother wouldn't knowingly leave one of his employees sleeping in his car.

Jimmy fought down the urge to take Adam in his arms and tell him that it would be all right, that he didn't have to sleep in his car, not that night or ever again. He desperately wanted to do it, but something in his gut told him it would be a mistake. He'd already nearly blown it once with Adam. Christ, every time he thought of that conversation they'd had on the way to the ER... About how Adam had turned him down flat...

Why the hell hadn't he been able to explain himself better?

Maybe, a little voice in his head whispered, you couldn't explain yourself because a secret fuckboy is exactly what you want.

Jimmy shoved that thought away. What was said was said and couldn't be taken back. But this, this he could fix.

As seconds stretched into minutes and Adam remained silent, Jimmy reviewed his options and the likely consequences of each. He already knew what was the absolute wrong thing to do, and that he would do it anyway.

"Adam?"

"What?"

Slowly Jimmy slipped his jacket back on. "I know of a place that might work for you, if you're interested."

Suspicion clouded those beautiful, expressive eyes, but there was something else as well. Was it hope? If it was, it had been well tempered with wariness, so much so that had he not been looking for it, he might have missed it altogether.

"What place?"

"It's just a one-bedroom apartment over top of a garage. It's not much, really."

"How much?"

Jimmy shrugged. Because he wanted to touch Adam he slipped his hands into his pockets. "I don't know. It's empty right now so..."

"Because I can't afford much." Adam's shoulders slumped. "If it's decent it's probably more than I can afford."

"No, it's not."

Adam's eyes narrowed. "I thought you said you didn't know. Don't dick me around, Jim."

"I wouldn't do that." Jimmy sighed. His next words might be the deal breaker so he chose them carefully, keeping his gaze fixed on Adam's face. "The apartment belongs to me. It's over my garage and it hasn't been used in a long time." Adam opened his mouth and Jimmy held up a hand. "Just hear me out. No bullshit, I swear."

He already saw the no in Adam's eyes, could practically hear it though nothing had been said. And, damn it all to hell, that wasn't the answer he wanted.

"Like I said, it's not much but you're welcome to come and see it. We could work something out—"

"No."

"Why not? At least come and see it."

"I can't do that. "

"Why? If it's the money, I told you, we could work something out. Hell, you could stay there for nothing. I don't—"

"For nothing?" Adam laughed. "Nothing's for nothing."

"I don't know what you mean." But he did, of course he did. He hadn't meant it that way, but now it was out there, misunderstood and shocking, but out there, nonetheless. And part of him, a part he wasn't especially proud of, wanted to see what Adam would do.

"C'mon, Jim. No bullshit, remember?"

"Right," Jimmy said. "No bullshit. Okay."

"Okay what?" Adam's lashes lowered, making it hard to read his eyes. His tongue slipped out, wetting his lips. His tongue-ring flashed.

Jimmy's gaze was drawn to that beautiful mouth. Suddenly he was flooded with sense memories of silky heat and suction and the scrape of that tongue-ring against his flesh. Jimmy's cock stiffened. God, but he wanted this man. And the truth was he didn't care how it happened, only that it did.

Tearing his gaze away from Adam's mouth, Jimmy took a calming breath and let it out. It did nothing to slow his racing heart or quell his growing erection. "Just come see the apartment, Adam. Then you can make up your mind."

"Why should I?" The words might have been contrary, but the breathy tone negated any doubt.

"Because I want you to."

As they drove out of the parking lot, fat raindrops splashed against the windows and ran like tears down the glass. In the

passenger seat, Adam leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Off in the distance thunder rumbled.

They drove in silence. The purr of the engine and the soft whoosh, whoosh of the wipers should have lulled him, he was certainly tired enough, except Adam was way too keyed up to sleep.

He should have told Jimmy he was staying with friends. In fact, the lie had been on the tip of his tongue – *No, Jim, I'm not living in my car*. He had practically heard himself telling it. But then he had looked into Jimmy's eyes and he'd told the humiliating truth.

Waiting for Jimmy's reaction had been sheer agony. Why it mattered so much what Jimmy thought of him, he didn't know, only that it did.

Then the man had offered him an apartment. Just like that.

You need a place to live? Well, here, come and live over my garage for free.

For free, for fuck's sake!

So much for what Jimmy thought of him.

Everything about it was wrong; he felt it down to the bone. Not only that, but it made no sense that if Jimmy didn't want people to know they knew each other, why would he give Adam an apartment? But when Jimmy had made the offer, oh, how he'd wanted to say yes. Say yes, hell, he'd wanted to throw his arms around Jimmy and kiss him senseless, which was why he had been so determined to say no. And it wasn't even the free part that had really flipped his switch. It was the idea of living practically in Jimmy Trent's lap that had done it. So he had said no, except Jimmy wasn't taking no for an answer. Now here he was, sitting in Jimmy's car for the second time in as many days, on his way to becoming what he'd sworn he would never be, a rich man's kept boy.

The man didn't want a relationship; he'd made that clear enough the other night. What he wanted was a convenient, no-strings fuck though he hadn't said so, not in so many words. Jimmy had too much class for that, but the message was unmistakable. And what was wrong with that? For his part,

Adam knew he could do a lot worse than to be Jimmy Trent's casual fuck.

"Adam?"

"Yeah." Adam opened his eyes and sat up straighter.

"I thought maybe you were asleep."

"No, not asleep."

"We're almost home."

Almost home. The words seemed to echo in his head. Soon he'd have to make his choice and he still didn't know what he should do. Oh, he knew what he wanted, had known for days, almost since the first time he'd laid eyes on Jimmy. Except he would never be Jimmy's boyfriend. That just wasn't going to happen. But could he settle for what Jimmy was offering?

Jimmy turned the car into the driveway. Lights came on then flickered out as they wound their way up to the house and around to the back. The garage door rose slowly and more lights came on as Jimmy drove the car inside. He shut the engine off, quiet rushing in to fill the car's interior.

"Ready?" Jimmy asked.

"Sure." Adam opened the door and braced for the pain he knew would come when he stood up. At least it gave him something else to focus on. Gritting his teeth, he levered himself out of the car.

Jimmy got out and came around the hood. "You're hurting."

"I'm okay." Adam shut the car door, maybe a bit harder than was necessary and just stood there for a moment. The cooling engine ticked in the silence.

Jimmy seemed on the verge of saying something more, then didn't. He walked to a door in the far wall, opened it and flicked on a light.

The stairway rose, narrow and steep, and disappeared in shadow. From where Adam stood it looked very, very long.

"Can I help you?" Jimmy reached out like he meant to slide an arm around Adam's waist.

Adam shook his head and stepped back. "I'll manage. You go up first."

One step at a time, careful not to bend his knee, the going was slow and agonizing. A single flight of steps had never seemed so long. Jimmy stood on the landing at the top, watching him in silence. By the time he reached the landing, Adam was trembling with the effort and a sheen of sweat coated his skin.

Jimmy already had the door open and the light on. Adam followed him inside.

“Want to rest a minute?” Jimmy gestured to a chair standing near the door.

Adam shook his head. “I’m okay.”

The apartment had that closed-up smell, a little dusty, a little damp, but nothing an open window wouldn’t fix. Jimmy must have smelled it too because he went directly to one of the windows. The glass rattled in the frame. The muscles in Jimmy’s shoulders and back rippled and flexed as he pushed up the sash.

Mmm, nice view.

The breeze brought the scent of rain and damp earth with it. The sweat dried on Adam’s face and he pulled in a deep lungful of cool night air, hoping it would help clear his head.

Tearing his gaze away from Jimmy’s ass, Adam glanced around the room. There was furniture, though he couldn’t tell what it was like since everything was covered. At least he wouldn’t be sitting on the floor.

A faded rug added a splash of blues and greens in the center of the wood floor. There was a kitchen alcove to the right and another doorway to the left.

Jimmy swiped at a dusty spider web hanging from the light fixture. “Sorry it’s so dirty. I’ll get someone in to clean if you decide...”

Adam had to smile at that. Funny how it didn’t seem to occur to Jimmy that Adam should clean the place himself. But that was just Jimmy. The man had probably never had to clean for himself in his life.

Adam walked to the door on the left, opened it and felt for the light switch.

The bedroom was tiny, but there was a double bed with a white wrought-iron head and footboard, a dresser and a nightstand. Adam imagined himself stretched out naked on that bed, wrists and ankles bound to the iron while Jimmy fucked his ass.

“What do you think?”

Adam started a little. He hadn’t heard Jimmy come up behind him. He turned. Jimmy stood in the doorway.

“Nice bed.” Adam stroked a hand along the footboard, the metal cool under his fingers.

Jimmy’s gaze flicked to the bed then back to Adam’s face. “Yeah, it is.” There was a pause. Jimmy licked his lips. “The bathroom is through there.” He pointed to a door in the opposite wall. “It’s kind of small but...”

Because he couldn’t shake his little bondage fantasy and having it in his head made it hard to think, Adam walked to the bathroom and stepped inside. He went directly to the tiny window, lifted aside the yellowing lace curtain and looked out.

The rain had stopped and a thumbnail sliver of moon cast silvery light over the yard. From the rear of the garage the ground sloped down. About ten yards down the slope, the manicured grass gave way to a line of trees and wild growth where the shadows grew thick and heavy.

“That’s Fairmount Park,” Jimmy said from the bathroom doorway. “It backs up to this property so there aren’t any neighbors, not unless you count the deer.”

“How far does it go?”

“The park? Miles and miles. Fairmount is the largest municipal park in the country. When we were kids we weren’t allowed back there. My mother was sure we’d wander off and she’d never see us again.”

“But you went anyway.”

“Of course we did.” Jimmy laughed. “Tell a kid not to go somewhere and that’s the first place he wants to go. I remember when Laton was in high school, he used to take his girlfriends back there and make out.”

“How do you know?”



"I followed him a couple times. You know, the kind of stuff little brothers do."

He didn't, because he didn't have any brothers, but he liked listening to Jimmy talk. Knowing these little details made him feel closer to Jimmy, like they could actually be friends. "Did he ever find out that you followed him?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Are you kidding? He would have kicked my ass if he knew."

They both laughed.

Adam let the curtain drop and stepped away from the window. "How about you? Who did you take back there when you were in high school?"

Jimmy's cheeks flushed. "I went to boarding school in New Hampshire."

"So you never snuck into the woods with anyone to make out?"

Jimmy's hesitation was just enough to tell Adam there was something here. A little thrill raced through him.

"Who was he, Jim?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I don't remember. That was a long time ago."

Adam stepped up close. Jimmy could easily have moved away but he didn't.

Adam slipped his hand inside Jimmy's open collar and stroked the warm skin. Jimmy's pulse jumped under his fingertips as Adam leaned in. "Tell me."

There was a pause. Jimmy's lips parted. He swallowed. "His name was Christopher," Jimmy whispered. "Chris Daley. He was the first boy I ever kissed."

Adam leaned closer, stopping with their lips no more than a breath apart. "You took him into the woods and kissed him?"

"He kissed me." Jimmy's lashes fluttered down.

"Show me how." He didn't know where this little game had come from or where it was going, but he liked it.

Jimmy's hands slid around Adam's waist. The man drew him close. He pressed against the hard length of Jimmy's body.

Jimmy's mouth claimed his, the kiss starting slow, the contact soft and just a little tentative, the way a teenage boy might kiss.

Adam's fingers caressed the back of Jimmy's neck before sliding into the close-cropped hair. He sighed as his eyes drifted closed. But when his lips parted, Jimmy broke the kiss.

Adam opened his eyes. "What—"

"He asked me if I liked it," Jimmy said, his words slow, his tone dreamy and far away. "And I said I did. Then he put his hand on my cock."

Adam's breath caught. He could imagine it, Jimmy so young and unsure, never even kissed let alone had another boy's hand on his cock. God.

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen. We were both fifteen."

Adam slipped his hand between their bodies. With a fingertip he traced the hard length of Jimmy's cock through his pants.

"So hard," Adam murmured. "Were you hard for him, Jim?"

"Yes," Jimmy breathed, "so hard...from the kiss, you know? And it was nothing really, just a kiss. But, God ..." Jimmy's hips pressed forward, silently asking for more contact.

Adam squeezed Jimmy's prick before sweeping his thumb over the head where a damp spot on the fabric of his pants let Adam know just how much Jimmy liked this game.

"Did he fuck you and make you come?"

"I came," Jimmy said, hips rocking against the press of Adam's hand. "He kissed me and I came in his hand."

God, it was too much. Adam laid his head on Jimmy's shoulder. They were supposed to be talking. He should be telling Jimmy why he couldn't live here, why he couldn't be Jimmy's fuckboy.

Jimmy squeezed Adam's ass, angling their bodies so their cocks bumped. "God, Adam, I want to fuck you so bad."

Adam moaned. He wanted it, too. "Let's do it. I want your cock in my ass."

"Can't," Jimmy said, "no condoms or lube out here."

Adam didn't have anything on him either. Shit. Suddenly, inspiration struck.

“We’ll just kiss and use our hands. Like you did with that boy all those years ago.” He rubbed against Jimmy, begging with his body, cock against cock.

“Adam, I don’t—”

“You going to make me beg?” Adam flicked his tongue inside Jimmy’s ear. “Please, Jim, I want to hold your cock in my hand, make you come.” He nipped at the pulse in Jimmy’s neck. “Please, let me kiss you and come for you.”

Without waiting for an answer, he pulled out of Jimmy’s embrace. Taking Jimmy’s hand, he led him from the bathroom and tugged him toward the bed. Yanking away the dust cover revealed a blue and white quilt. Gently, Adam pushed Jimmy down to sit on the bed.

“Lay back,” he said. He knew just how he wanted this to go. “I’m going to strip for you.”

Eyes locked on Adam, Jimmy did as he was told. But when he reached for the buttons on his shirt, Adam shook his head. “Leave your clothes on. Just watch me.”

Slowly Adam shed his clothes. His knee was killing him but he ignored the pain, focusing instead on the look in Jimmy’s eyes. That look made him forget everything but the man on the bed and how much he wanted him.

Once he was naked, Adam slid onto the mattress next to Jimmy and molded their bodies together. “Kiss me.”

Jimmy’s lips were anything but gentle as he claimed Adam’s mouth. His tongue thrust inside and tangled with Adam’s as his hands roamed over Adam’s skin, petting and stroking - shoulders, back, hips and ass.

“I dream about fucking your mouth,” Jimmy said, lips moving against Adam’s neck.

A jolt of need raced down Adam’s spine and straight to his balls. His cock jerked. It was like Jimmy had plucked the thought right out of his fantasies, like somehow he knew.

“I’m dying to come in your mouth.” Jimmy’s teeth scraped over the sensitive place where neck met shoulder. “Want to taste my come when I kiss you.”

Adam squirmed. If Jimmy kept this up he would come way too soon.

Jimmy moved lower, kissing and licking Adam's skin. He caught Adam's left nipple-ring between his teeth and tugged. "These are so sexy." He moved to the other nipple and did the same. "Makes me so horny."

"You?" Adam laughed. "Jim, I swear, I could come just from you doing that."

Jimmy's gaze lifted to meet his. "Isn't that the idea? You're going to come for me?" Leaning up, Jimmy touched his lips to Adam's. "God, Adam, you should see yourself. You're so fucking gorgeous."

Adam smiled. "Jim, look." He pointed. A large mirror hung over the dresser opposite the bed. "Look at us, Jim."

Jimmy turned. "Wow," he breathed. "We look so..."

"Decadent," Adam said.

"Yeah. Here." Jimmy sat up. "So we can both see." He shoved a pillow against the headboard then leaned back against it and spread his legs. He gestured. "Sit between my legs."

Adam did, leaning against Jimmy, his back against Jimmy's chest, his head on Jimmy's shoulder. The hard length of Jimmy's cock pushed against his lower back.

Jimmy's legs slid over Adam's and he pulled them farther apart. Spread for me," Jimmy said. Adam did. "Now reach up and grab the headboard and don't let go."

Adam obeyed. This was just what he wanted.

"Look at you," Jimmy whispered. "So beautiful." He kissed Adam's neck. "So hot."

He was hot all over, like he was on fire. But it was the two of them together that he found so erotic. Him, spread out naked and hard, wanton and slutty. And Jimmy fully dressed and holding him, beautiful blue eyes drinking him in, eating him up in the mirror. If he didn't look like Jimmy's boy now, he never would. And he knew right then that he would do anything to stay with Jimmy, surrender whatever pride he had left just to see that look in Jimmy's eyes.

"You look so serious. Tell me what you're thinking."

No fucking way.

Adam turned his head bringing their mouths together. His tongue slid between Jimmy's lips and he drank in the flavor of the man, memorizing it, trying to say with his kiss the things he didn't dare put into words.

Jimmy's hands caressed Adam's thighs. Nails scraped lightly over his stomach making the muscles jump. Jimmy tugged gently on Adam's nipple rings.

"Harder," Adam moaned. "Do it harder."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. I like it."

Jimmy tugged harder.

"More," Adam begged. "Twist them."

Jimmy hesitated. "Adam..."

"Let me show you." Releasing the headboard, he covered Jimmy's hand with his and gave his right nipple a firm twist. The jolt went straight to his cock and he nearly came.

"Jesus." Jimmy buried his face in Adam's hair. "I can't do that."

"Please?"

Jimmy stroked Adam's chest, circling his nipples with feather-light touches that were almost as arousing as the pain. "You really like that?"

"I really do. C'mon, Jim, I want to come for you." Adam turned on his side, shifting enough to reach Jimmy's zipper. He drew out Jimmy's cock and held it, feeling the pulse against his fingers. "Want to come with me?"

"Yes." But Jimmy wasn't looking at him, instead he was watching in the mirror.

Adam turned, bringing his cock up against Jimmy's and wrapping a hand around both. The press of hard, hot flesh made him shiver and he began stroking.

"Tell me when," Adam said. "I won't come without you."

"Jesus," Jimmy groaned. His hips began to move as he fucked Adam's hand.

Adam's balls tingled. He rocked his hips, sliding their erections together, not daring to move too much. He was too close.

"You feel so good," Jimmy panted, "so fucking good. I dream about you, baby. About fucking you...so hot and tight around my cock. So beautiful under me, so...God, Adam, gonna come." Jimmy thrust hard into Adam's hand. His cock swelled and pulsed. "Now, Adam, come for me now."

Adam thrust, squeezing hard on the down stroke. Jimmy gasped. Hot silky come spilled over Adam's hand and that was all it took. He shot, mixing his seed with Jimmy's, splashing it over his own belly and chest.

In the silence that followed, their breathing seemed very loud. Adam's heart beat so hard he was sure Jimmy must be able to hear it.

"Adam." Jimmy shifted trying to pull him even closer.

"Careful," Adam said, "you'll get come on you."

Jimmy laughed. "I don't care. I want to hold you."

Adam sighed. Skin slick with sweat and come, he cuddled closer. God, but this was perfect.

Almost. If only...

No. This was as perfect as it was going to get and he needed to just deal with that.

Jimmy's lips brushed Adam's temple. "I didn't hurt you, did I? Your knee, I mean."

Adam's lips curved. "You didn't hurt me."

Jimmy sighed and stroked a hand down Adam's back. "Good. I could never hurt you."

Oh, but he could, so easily, only not in the way Jimmy meant. Adam knew he needed to guard against that future hurt, needed to set boundaries and stay within them. This was just fucking, nothing more. Oh, and a nice place to live though they'd have to deal with that. He wouldn't stay here for free. He just couldn't. But they would talk about that later. For now he just wanted to be.

"Jim?" Adam kissed the corner of Jimmy's jaw, beard stubble prickly against his lips.

“Hmm?”

“Still want me to live here?” He wanted to hear Jimmy say it.

Jimmy’s arms tightened around him. “Of course I do.” He paused. “Does that mean you’re going to stay?”

In the stillness, Adam heard the rain rattling against the windows and the beating of Jimmy’s heart.

“I’ll stay.”





## CHAPTER SIX

---

Watery sunlight filtered through a film of clouds as Jimmy pulled his car up in front of the Four Seasons Hotel. He got out and handed his keys to the parking attendant. The Fountain Room was already busy with lunchtime diners when Jimmy got there. While he waited to be seated, he scanned the crowd looking for his brother. Just as the maitre d' approached, he spotted Laton, already seated at a table near the fountain. He had the cell phone pressed to his ear and his PDA on the table. He barely glanced up as Jimmy took the chair across from him.

"I have to go," Laton said into the phone. He flipped it closed and stuck it on his belt. "Hey, Jim. I thought you were going to stand me up."

Jimmy didn't have to look at his watch to know he was late. "Traffic was bad," he said, unfolding his napkin. "Why did you want to come here anyway?"

"I like it here." Laton finished entering something into his PDA then slipped it into his pocket. He opened his menu and scanned it. "What's the matter? You worried I'll stick you with the bill?"

"It's not that and you know it."

Nor was it that he didn't like the restaurant Laton had chosen. The Fountain Room was one of the nicest restaurants in the city. The place was beautiful, the service impeccable and the food out of this world. No one in his right mind could dislike it. But it was also far from both their offices and, in his opinion, unnecessarily fancy for a casual lunch with his brother.

"Don't worry, brother mine," Laton said. "I'll get the check."

Jimmy didn't bother to reiterate that the check wasn't the issue. Laton was in a mood, or he wanted something. The last time his brother had invited him to lunch at a place this nice, he'd gotten talked into buying half a strip club.

Jimmy opened his own menu and scanned it. Ah well, they were here now, he might as well enjoy it.

A waiter approached to take their orders.

"I'm in the mood for a white today," Laton glanced up from the wine list. "How about a chardonnay?"

"No wine for me," Jimmy said.

"You can't eat here and not sample the wine cellar. C'mon, Jim, it's just wine."

Jimmy shook his head. "It's only lunchtime, Late. If I sit here and drink a bottle of wine with you, my head will be hitting the desk by three o'clock."

Jimmy didn't add that he was already fighting to keep his eyes open. Since Adam had moved in nearly a week earlier, they had spent every night together. Waking up between two and three in the morning when Adam got in from work, and often being up for the rest of the day, was beginning to take its toll – not that he was complaining.

"Fine." Laton sulked. "Just a glass then," he said to the waiter.

Just as the waiter was leaving, Laton's cell rang. He pulled it off his belt and glanced at the number.

"Don't answer it."

"I wasn't, just wanted to see who it was." He silenced the phone and returned it to his belt.

"Just turn it off."

"Who pissed in your Cheerios this morning?"

"I didn't come here to watch you talk on the phone."

Laton huffed, but turned off the phone.

The wine arrived and shortly afterward the salad. They ate in companionable silence for several minutes before Laton suddenly set his fork down and reached for his wine. He sipped then blotted his mouth with his napkin.

Here it comes, Jimmy thought and braced himself.

"Stephanie called me the other day," Laton said.

"Stephanie? Really?" As hard as he tried, Jimmy couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. "How is she?"

Laton chuckled then took another sip of wine. "Don't look so shocked, Jim. She is still my kid, you know."

“Of course she is. But I didn’t realize you had much contact with her, that’s all.”

Or any contact for that matter.

Stephanie was Laton’s daughter with his ex-wife. And, as far as Jimmy knew, father and daughter hadn’t spoken in years.

“I haven’t,” Laton said, “not for a while.” He picked up his fork. “She just graduated from Arizona State.”

“That’s great. What did she get her degree in?” Jimmy took a bite of salad.

“Hell if I know. I just pay the bills.” Laton stabbed a piece of romaine lettuce. “And she’s engaged to some guy from Princeton.”

“How’d she meet a guy from Princeton at Arizona State?”

Laton rolled his eyes. “The town, Jim, not the school.”

Jimmy thought of the freckled, pigtailed girl he’d last seen – when? He couldn’t remember, but it had to be at least a decade ago. “Jesus, how old is she now?”

“Twenty-one. Almost twenty-two.”

“Ouch, that makes me feel old.”

“You?” Laton snorted. “Don’t even talk to me about feeling old.” Catching the eye of their waiter, Laton held up his empty wineglass.

The salads were cleared and the entrees arrived. Laton’s wineglass was refilled along with their water glasses.

“So will you go to Arizona for the wedding? Is that why she called, to invite you?” Jimmy cut into his beef tenderloin.

“Invite me?” Laton took a bite of shrimp and chewed. “Hell, she wants me to pay for it. Says it’s the least I can do since I’m such a shitty father.”

“She didn’t say that.”

“No, she didn’t. I believe that was her mother who said that.”

“How is Melanie?”

“Fine. Great. How the fuck should I know? It wasn’t like we had a long heart to heart. She just got on the phone after Stephanie to tell me what a loser I am and that she and the good doctor would not be bailing me out this time.”

Laton put his fork down and picked up his wine. "Melanie's husband is a plastic surgeon. His name is Ted." He gulped down his wine then set the glass down with a soft thud. "Stephanie calls him dad."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, Melanie made sure I knew it."

Damn. What was he supposed to say to that? There was emotion behind those words, Jimmy knew, simmering just under the surface though Laton was good at hiding it. He knew, too, that a lot of people thought his brother was an asshole, but the man felt things deeply. He wished he had some words of comfort to offer.

"Sorry, Late."

Laton shrugged. "Yeah, well what are you going to do? It is what it is." He caught the eye of their waiter and pointed to his wineglass.

"If you're going to keep drinking like that, you better give me your keys."

"I don't have my car. It's in for detailing."

Jimmy sighed with relief. At least there wouldn't be a big argument about Laton driving anywhere. "Will you need a ride somewhere after lunch?"

Laton nodded. "Yeah, you can drop me back at the club." He gripped the stem of his wineglass like it was a lifeline. "She's moving back here, you know."

"Who, Melanie?" Jimmy watched his brother's knuckles go white and hoped the glass wouldn't snap in his hand.

"No, Stephanie. That was the other thing she wanted to tell me. She's moving back to the area to be near her fiancé while he finishes his graduate work." Lifting his glass, he found it empty and put it down. "And she wants to stay with me for a while."

"That's great. It'll give you a chance to reconnect with her."

"Great? It's a fucking disaster." Laton's voice rose.

Heads turned at adjacent tables.

"Late, keep your voice down."

Laton glanced around then leaned in closer. "You're not listening, I said she wants to stay with me."

"So?"

"So, I can't have Stephanie at my place. It just wouldn't be right."

"What do you mean not right? She's your daughter, of course it's right that she should stay with you."

"You know how big my place is. How am I supposed to work out the logistics?"

"What logistics? You have three bedrooms and two bathrooms. There's plenty of room for—"

"Yeah, well, sometimes I have guests. Hello? How is that going to look?"

Jimmy laughed. "For God's sake, just stop bringing your bimbos home while Stephanie is here. How long is she staying anyway?"

Laton shrugged. "Who knows? At least through the summer, I guess. Maybe till the wedding."

"The wedding that hasn't been planned yet."

"The wedding I'm supposed to pay for. Right." Laton leaned even closer. "The thing is, I was thinking maybe she could stay with you."

Jimmy's fork clattered against his plate. "Me? No. Forget it, Laton."

"Shhh." Laton looked around. "You're making a scene." Then he grinned. "Besides, I didn't mean with you, with you like in the house. I was thinking about that apartment over your garage. It's been empty forever and—"

"I rented it out." Feeling his cheeks grow hot, Jimmy ducked his head, suddenly very interested in his lunch.

"You rented it? No shit. When did you do that?"

"Recently." Jimmy speared a piece of potato and stuck it in his mouth. He chewed, hardly tasting it.

"Why'd you do that?"

So he could have the hottest guy he'd ever met in his bed every night. Why else?

Jimmy sipped his water. "You're the one who was always telling me I should rent that place out, that it was stupid to leave it empty."

"I know. But you never listened to me before."

"Yeah, well," Jimmy shrugged, "I listened this time."

Laton shoved a hand through his hair. "Well, fuck, Jim, what am I supposed to do now? I already told Stephanie to come. I'm picking her up at the airport tomorrow night."

"I guess you'll have to tailor your social life around being a parent."

"You're being a prick, little brother."

"Sorry. But what do you want me to say?"

"I want you to help me come up with a solution. I'm dying here and all you can do is make snide remarks. Can't you just throw the guy out? Is it a guy or a girl?"

"It's a guy. And no, I can't just throw him out. He has a lease." It was only a small lie after all.

"Shit." Laton looked thoughtful. "Did you check him out? His credit history, references, all that stuff?"

"Of course." Another lie. And that one had just popped out, no muss, no fuss.

"What does he do?"

"Bartender."

Why the hell didn't he just tell Laton it was Adam? It would certainly simplify matters. And it wasn't like his family didn't know he was gay, even if they never talked about it. They had to know, or at least suspect.

Then there was Rene and the fact that she'd been a fixture at family functions for years, as Jimmy's so-called date. Even so, his mother had long since stopped dropping hints about the seriousness of their relationship.

But how could they not know? Laton at least, must know.

In his head, Jimmy heard himself telling Laton about Adam.

Yeah, so Laton, the guy renting the apartment? It's Adam Hyland from *Flesh Tones*. And I'm dating him too, sort of. Jimmy's imaginary self chuckled. Isn't that funny? And you

thought you were the only one culling his dates from the hotties at the club.

Jimmy drank the rest of his water. His lunch sat like a lead weight in his stomach. Okay, so just say it.

“Laton, I—”

“Renters are a pain in the ass,” Laton said, and that fast the opportunity was gone.

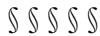
“You’re a renter.”

His brother waved this off. “I’m not talking about somebody like me. I’m talking about the kind of person who lives over somebody else’s garage. Let’s see what happens when the first of the month rolls around and he’s supposed to pay the rent.”

“It’ll be fine.” Jimmy’s heart was pounding and the heat was back in his cheeks. “Laton, it’s Adam Hyland.”

Laton looked blank for a second then he glanced around. “Where? I don’t see—”

“Not here.” Jimmy heard the impatience in his own voice. Laton could be so dense sometimes. “My tenant, it’s Adam Hyland.”



“You sure he’s not here?” Benny hung back, darting nervous little glances over his shoulder as Adam found the right key on his ring, and fitted it into the lock.

So Daren’s threats about changing the locks had been just that, threats. Shoving the door open, Adam reached in and hit the light switch. “He’s at work.”

“What’s the matter, Ben?” Jason asked, clapping a large hand on Benny’s slender shoulder and drawing him forward. “Too cloak and dagger for you? We’re just getting the rest of Adam’s stuff, then we’re out of here. It’s no big deal.”

Benny shrugged the hand off. “I just feel weird sneaking into somebody else’s apartment when they’re not here, is all.”

“It’s not sneaking if you’ve got a key.” Jason looked around the living room then turned to Adam. “Is that the TV we’re taking?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Benny was right, it did feel weird being here. Though the apartment looked much the same as it had the night he'd left, he felt no sense that this place had once been his home and no regret at the thought of never seeing it or Daren again. Maybe because this apartment had never really been his home any more than Daren had been the love of his life.

"What about the DVD player," Jason asked, already unhooking wires from the back of the TV.

"That's mine too. But the stereo stays. That's his."

Jason looked around. "Ben, where'd you go, man?"

"Out here." A loud clunk sounded from the landing then the apartment door banged back against the wall. Benny walked in clutching a pile of empty boxes, spiky purple hair the only thing visible above the stack. "I just went to get the boxes. Where do you want these, Ad?"

"Anywhere." Adam grabbed the top two boxes just as Benny's foot caught on the edge of the rug and the entire stack tilted.

"Whoa!" Benny stumbled, his hip grazing the edge of a nearby table as the pile of boxes crashed to the floor. "Shit. Sorry, dude."

"No sweat," Adam said, "They're empty."

"Good thing," Jason added.

They all laughed, even Benny, whose penchant for creating accidents wherever he went was nothing short of legendary among his friends.

"Hey, this is a pretty nice place," Benny said. Wide blue eyes fringed with long dark lashes took in everything at a glance.

"It's not bad." Adam grabbed one of the empty boxes. Walking over to the bookshelves, he began loading books. Since all the books were his, there was no need to check the titles. Daren never read anything more challenging than the back of the cereal box.

Benny picked up a framed photograph from the end table. "Is this your ex? I think I've seen him somewhere before."

Adam paused, a copy of *Treasure Island* in his hand. "He's on TV." He set the book in the box. "He does the traffic on



one of the local news shows. That's probably where you saw him."

"Yeah," Benny said, "I've seen him do the weather too."

"Only when the real meteorologists have the day off."

"He's hot." Benny replaced the photograph.

"He's an asshole," Jason said. "One of you guys get the door for me?"

"Let me help," Adam said as Jason lifted the TV from its stand.

"I got it." Jason hefted the twenty-seven inch TV like it weighed nothing at all. "Just open the door."

Benny opened the door and Jason edged through with the TV in his arms.

Adam nudged the now full carton of books off to the side and reached for another empty box. "Hey, Ben, you going to help me with these books or stand there all day staring at Jason's ass?"

"I was not." Benny shut the door with a bang then joined Adam by the bookshelves. He ducked his head but not before Adam saw the flush that stained his pale cheeks.

"Were too. I saw you." Adam bumped Benny's shoulder. "What's up with that, man? You got the hots for the boss?"

"No!" Benny pulled a stack of hardbacks off the bottom shelf and dropped them into an empty box.

"Hey, I don't blame you. Jason has a nice ass." Grinning, Adam dropped half a dozen paperbacks into the same box Benny was filling. "Don't you think?"

"I never noticed." Benny's face was turned away, but the tips of his ears glowed bright red.

"Does he know you want to get in his pants?"

"I do not! And don't say anything in front of him either. I have to work with him every day."

"How do you like working at the club?" Leaving the rest of the books to Benny, Adam turned to the rack of CDs.

Though they'd only known each other a couple months, Adam knew he could tease Benny about Jason without the kid getting upset. He'd seen the way Benny watched the big blond

when Jason wasn't looking. And lately, he thought Jason might just be watching right back.

"I like working there," Benny said. "The money's good and the people are mostly nice."

"So when are you going to let Jason know you're into him?"

"I'm not."

"You should. I bet if you did he'd dump that bitch Marissa."

"They broke up."

"No shit?" Adam stopped sorting CDs. "When?"

Benny glanced at the closed apartment door then dropped his voice to a near whisper. "A couple days ago they had this giant fight. She took off his collar and everything. Told him he could shove it up his ass then stormed out."

"No shit," Adam repeated. "There you go, Ben. Now's your big chance. Maybe you two could hook up."

Benny scuffed the toe of one sneaker along the floor. "You're the one who should hook up with him. You guys are like best friends, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. But that's not happening." Adam slid several CDs back onto the rack. "I already have somebody."

"Who?"

"You don't know him."

He wanted badly to tell someone about him and Jimmy. How Jimmy had spent every night with him since Adam had moved in and how right that felt.

He'd nearly died that first night when, upon coming home from work, he'd opened the apartment door and walked into the bedroom only to find Jimmy already there, in his bed, waiting for him. God, just the thought of it could still get him hard.

"Tell me anyway," Benny persisted. "Is he hot?"

"Yeah, he is."

"How come you never bring him around the club?"

"He's not into the scene. You can't just take somebody who's pure vanilla and dump them into the middle of that."

"I guess not." Benny ran his finger along a row of DVDs. "Why don't you bring him to the party tonight? There'll be plenty of people there who aren't playing. At least then we could meet him."

And how great would that be?

For a moment Adam let himself imagine it, walking into the party on Jimmy's arm, introducing his lover to his closest friends and letting them all see how great it was between them. Jimmy was so smart and classy, Adam was sure he wouldn't even have any trouble fitting in with his rather kinky friends. He wondered if Jimmy liked to dance.

Adam shook his head.

That wasn't going to happen, none of it. Jimmy wasn't his boyfriend and there weren't going to be any parties or dates because what they had together had to stay secret.

"Ad?"

"What?" Finishing with the CDs, Adam closed the box and put it with the rest.

"Why don't you bring him?"

"I don't know. I'll think about it. Maybe I'll ask him."

"No, you won't." Benny flipped the lid of one of the empty boxes back and forth. "What's the matter? Don't you think he'll like us?"

"It's not that."

"What is it then?"

The door opened and Jason came in. "Adam, is any of this furniture going?"

"The couch is mine, but I don't have room for it. The bed is too, but I don't want it."

"Is that it then? Just the TV and these boxes?"

"I told you there wasn't that much."

Jason sat down on the couch. "Too bad you aren't taking this, it's a nice couch."

Benny picked up two of the full boxes. "I'm going to take some of this stuff down to the truck."

Jason and Adam watched in silence, neither speaking until they could no longer hear Benny's footsteps.

"That kid is stronger than he looks," Jason said.

"He's not a kid. He's twenty-three. That's a year older than me."

Jason shrugged. "Maybe, but he seems more like a kid than you do." He glanced at his watch. "You ready to get out of here?"

"Sure." Adam turned to the stack of boxes then remembered the key. Removing it from his ring, he walked over and dropped it on the empty TV-stand.

Jason laughed. "Oh man, that's perfect. Even Daren the dumb ass can't miss the irony in that gesture."

Jason picked up two of the remaining boxes. "Meet you down at the truck?"

"I'm coming right now." There was nothing left for him here. With one final look around, Adam grabbed the last two boxes and followed Jason out, closing the door behind him.



Jimmy sat at his desk in the study, the laptop open in front of him and the phone wedged between his ear and shoulder. Coltrane played softly in the background. A breeze, far too warm for so early in the year, fluttered the curtains and brought with it the scent of spring and new beginnings.

"I'll run some diagnostics and get back to you with whatever I find," Jimmy said into the phone.

"My people have already done that," Paul Reynaud said. "Unless you've got something new up your sleeve, I doubt you'll find anything."

"Okay," Jimmy said, "but I'll run the programs anyway. It's part of the procedure."

He could tell from Paul's voice how upset he was. Stress thickened his friend's French accent and just then his English was barely understandable.

"I'm having the security cameras upgraded on Monday," Paul said. "You were right. I should have done it weeks ago after the first incident."

"You've already called?"

"Oui. Yes. I called the president of the company at home this morning."

Jimmy chuckled. "And here I thought I was special."

Paul said something unflattering in French. "You are my oldest friend, cher, besides being my disaster recovery expert. I think that gives me license to bother you at home."

"The friend part or the expert part?"

"Both." Paul laughed, then sobered. "Jim, these incidents are costing me. I can't afford for this to continue."

"We'll figure it out," Jimmy said. "I'll come up there and work with your people in person if need be."

Having calmed Paul down, Jimmy hung up and turned back to the computer, ending the session and logging off. These security breaches at Reynaud Electronics were frustrating at best and costly at worst. A trip to Montreal might be in order, though he wasn't looking forward to the travel.

Leaning back in his chair, he rolled his shoulders and stretched, trying to work the kinks out of his back and neck. Jesus, but he felt about ninety-years-old. That bed in the garage was going to be the death of him. Or maybe it was the man he was sharing it with who would be the death of him. Jimmy grinned. Death by twenty-two-year-old hottie, what a way to go.

"You're not twenty anymore, pal," he said to the empty room. His spine popped loudly as if in agreement.

Last night he'd gotten two, possibly three, hours of sleep before Adam came home from the club around two-thirty. They had talked a little, kissed a lot and fucked till nearly dawn when Adam had fallen asleep in his arms. Jimmy had finally dozed off around six only to be awakened by the alarm at seven-fifteen.

As he swatted at the alarm, Adam, already wrapped around him like a vine, had cuddled even closer, all warm naked skin and long lean muscles. Getting out of that bed was a task of Herculean proportions, but somehow he had managed it. He'd even made it to the office by eight, only to have Sylvie, his secretary and right hand, ask if he was coming down with something. So after seeing to a few matters that couldn't be put

off and fending off Sylvie's motherly concern, he'd given in and left early promising himself that he'd finish the day's to-do list from his home office. It was days like today when being his own boss really did have its advantages.

Jimmy yawned hugely and shifted, wincing when his back protested. That bed really had to go. It was too goddamn short for one thing, and too narrow for the two of them. He should buy a new bed for the apartment. Except that Adam had commented several times on how much he liked that bed with its wrought iron head and footboards. Maybe just a new mattress then.

Or...

Sliding open the top drawer of his desk, Jimmy removed the key and held it in his hand, the metal cool against his palm. He'd never before given anyone a key to his house, had never wanted to. So why did he want to now?

It was the lousy bed that had started him thinking about it. Sleeping in that bed was just stupid when he had a perfectly good, king-size bed right across the driveway. And yes, common sense dictated that giving Adam a key so he could let himself in would certainly make Jimmy's life simpler. Not only could he sleep in his own house, in his own bed and still have Adam beside him every night, but he wouldn't have to get up to let him in when he came home from the club. It was by far the most sensible solution.

And if he was just the tiniest bit addicted to the taste, and scent, and feel of Adam in bed beside him, what of it? It wasn't like he was asking the man to move in with him, though once keys were exchanged what, essentially, was the difference? And if Adam accepted his key, how long would it be before he was making room in his closet for Adam's stuff?

And if that happened, how long could he put off telling his family that he had a live-in lover?

Just the thought made his stomach flutter with nerves though he was sure, mostly, that his family would not turn their backs on him no matter who he chose to love.

And besides, who was to say that Adam would even take his key? The man could be so stubborn sometimes.

Jimmy curled his fingers around the key and squeezed until the teeth bit into his skin. No matter what, he had to try.

The sound of an engine intruded on his reverie -- probably a good thing since his cock had picked up the train of his thoughts. But who was coming up his driveway in the middle of the day? Pushing back his chair, Jimmy got up and walked to the window just as the truck appeared from around the side of the house and stopped in front of the garage. The door on the passenger side opened and Adam slid out.

Jimmy's breath caught and something clutched in his chest like a fist squeezing his heart at the sight of his lover, all long legs encased in faded jeans, a dark sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up and his hair loose and tumbling over his shoulders. God, he was so beautiful.

His lover.

Adam.

His Lover.

He'd never had a lover before, not like this. Of course he'd had sex, plenty of that, over the years, mostly one-nighters or weekend flings. Discreet, often anonymous indulgences while he was out of town on business, the encounters were as quickly forgotten as the trips themselves. But this thing he had with Adam was different. He wasn't sure exactly how, but it was.

As Jimmy watched, a tall blond rounded the front of the truck and joined Adam by the tailgate. Was it? No, not the blond ex-lover Jimmy had nearly decked in the parking lot at Flesh Tones. That guy had been tall but slender, almost willowy, pampered-looking, and very much the prettyboy type. But despite the blond ponytail that hung nearly to his waist, there was nothing even remotely feminine or pretty about this guy. He was big, Jimmy guessed about six-five and looked strong as an oak. He wore a denim shirt with the sleeves ripped off, the muscles in his arms clearly delineated with each movement. So this was a totally different person. But who was he and why the hell was he standing so close to Adam?

Jimmy grinned at his own ridiculous insecurity.

Slipping the key into his pocket, he went to the back door and opened it. Another man -- or kid really, judging by the spiky

purple hair and baggy jeans -- had joined Adam and the big blond by the truck. As Jimmy watched, Adam pulled keys from his pocket and gestured at the door on the side of the garage. The kid with the purple hair said something and they all laughed.

These must be the friends Adam said were going to help him move the rest of his stuff. He should go out and see if they wanted a hand.

Jimmy hesitated. How would Adam introduce him? This is my landlord, Jimmy? Or, this is my friend, Jimmy? And what would Adam's friends think? Would they just assume that he and Adam were together?

Oh hell, he was analyzing everything into the ground again. Screw that. He was just going to go out there and offer his help.

Just as Jimmy stepped out of the shadow of the house Adam looked up. The smile that lit his face brought a now-familiar fluttering low in Jimmy's belly.

"Hey, Jim," Adam called. Straightening from where he'd been leaning against the truck, Adam came toward him, eyes bright, hand held out. "C'mere and meet the guys."

Jimmy paused at the edge of the grass bordering the driveway, a bubble of panic rising in his chest, the knowledge of what Adam meant to do as clear as if it were proclaimed in neon for all the world to see.

He needed to move -- retreat -- something to stop what was about to happen, but his feet stayed rooted to the spot. Helpless, he watched as Adam came toward him. Then Adam was there, warm and real and reaching for him.

"Hey," Adam said. Fingers brushed Jimmy's cheek as Adam leaned in for a kiss.

Jimmy's paralysis broke and he got a hand up between them as he took first one then two stumbling steps back. "Adam, don't."

Adam's eyes widened and he froze, the hand that had just a moment ago brushed Jimmy's cheek, hung in the air between them. For what felt like an eternity they stood there staring at each other in silence.



"Sorry," Adam whispered, "I forgot." Slowly, he lowered his hand to his side, then just as slowly turned away.

"Adam, wait."

But if Adam heard him he gave no sign of it as he walked toward the garage and his friends.

Jimmy locked eyes with the big blond guy. Clearly, the man had seen everything, knew everything including what Jimmy had just done. His expression, the thinning of his lips, said he didn't like what he'd seen, not even a little.

The blond came forward, laid a hand on Adam's shoulder and said something too low for Jimmy to hear before the two of them disappeared around the truck and the garage door whirled up on its track.

The kid with the purple hair eyed Jimmy for a long moment. Jimmy opened his mouth to say something though what he had no idea. But before he could speak the kid turned and followed the others into the garage.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

Adam pulled back his hair and secured it with a strip of leather. The style showed off the array of silver hoops in graduated sizes decorating his ear from lobe to cartilage. The fine silver chain threaded through his nipple-rings glittered in the light as he stepped back and eyed his reflection in the mirror, the same mirror where he and Jimmy had watched themselves making love.

No. Adam shook his head to clear it of the image. It was fucking, not making love. Jimmy was not in love with him. Hell, after today Adam wasn't even sure they were still, or had ever been, friends.

Jimmy had looked so horrified when Adam had tried to kiss him that afternoon in front of Jason and Benny. It was almost funny the way his eyes had gotten so big and round and his mouth had formed that silent "o" of shock as he stared past Adam at the other men.

For his part, Adam hadn't given their presence a second thought. He'd only been doing what felt natural and right when he saw his lover and it had backfired badly. Hell, the man had practically broken his neck in his hurry to back away.

Jimmy was ashamed of him. If there had been any doubt it was gone now, and that stung more than he wanted to admit.

"It's your own stupid fault," he said, reaching for the sheer black shirt with the long poet sleeves and slipping it on.

He'd known from the get-go that he would never be anything more than Jimmy's fuckboy. That guys like Jimmy Trent, rich, successful, classy guys, weren't looking for relationships with pretty boy strippers. A willing hand or mouth or ass was all they wanted, and he had fooled himself into thinking it would be enough. Except somewhere along the line, and he wasn't even sure when it had happened, he'd begun, foolishly it seemed, to hope it could be more.

Stupid fucking hope.

One final glance in the mirror told him the pains he'd taken with his appearance had paid off. Just because he felt like shit didn't mean he had to look like it, too. Grabbing his keys and cell from the dresser he headed for the door. In the living room he grabbed the bag that held his leathers. Jason had said dress to impress, but no way he was wearing full fetish attire on the street. He could change when he got to the club.

The moment Adam stepped out of the garage the driveway lights flickered on. His Cavalier sat next to Jimmy's Porsche like the quintessential poor relation. And wasn't that just too fucking symbolic for words?

The cool night air slid chilly fingers under the thin material of his shirt, making him shiver. His keys jingled softly in the quiet as he unlocked the car.

"Adam." Jimmy stepped out of the shadows near the back door of the house. "Have you got a minute?"

No.

"I guess. Sure." Adam dropped his bag behind the driver's seat then let the door fall shut with a click.

Jimmy crossed the grass, then the driveway. Rounding the hood he stopped within an arm's reach of where Adam stood.

Please don't let him touch me.

"You're not working tonight?"

"No, I have the night off."

"Oh." Jimmy's gaze slid over him, making Adam's skin tingle in its wake. "You look nice."

The heat in Jimmy's eyes should have pleased him, instead a lump of icy dread formed in Adam's gut. Clearly, Jimmy had something to say. So why the hell didn't he just get on with it?

"I'm sorry about what happened earlier," Jimmy said, the words tumbling out in a rush. "I know you were upset with me and—"

"No." Adam lifted a hand as if somehow he might push the words back into Jimmy's mouth so they could both pretend nothing had been said.

Jimmy paused. "No, what?"

"It's no big deal." The lie tasted bitter as it slid off his tongue.

"But I thought..." Jimmy shook his head. "When you just walked away like that, I thought..."

"You were wrong." The words came out flat and toneless. Adam tried again. "It takes more than a little thing like that to shake me up, big guy." Amazingly, he found a smile and plastered it on. "Hell, I'm the one who should be apologizing, not you. I forgot we're supposed to be a big secret." He laughed though it nearly killed him. "All this cloak and dagger stuff. . . I guess I'm just not use to it."

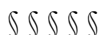
God, he sounded like a total twink. That was okay though. He could play the empty-headed pretty boy. Better that than let Jimmy see what he really felt.

Jimmy said nothing for a long moment. He looked like he didn't have a clue what to say next. Some dark part of Adam's heart felt a tinge of satisfaction at that.

Wishing he wore a watch just so he could glance at it for effect, Adam opened the car door. "I'd love to hang out and shoot the breeze, Jim, but I really have to get my ass moving or I'm going to be late."

An unreadable expression flitted across Jimmy's face and was gone. "Sure. I didn't mean to keep you." He stepped back and half-turned away. "Have a nice evening."

"You too." Adam got in the car, shoved the key in the ignition, gunned the engine and got the hell out of there.



Drink in hand, Adam pushed open the door and listened. Silence. Cool. With some relief he slipped into Jason's private office and shut the door. The quiet enveloped him like the comforting arms of a good friend. The party noise, the murmur of conversation and music might just as well be a thousand miles away. If only they really were a thousand miles away.

If only he were.

The room lay mostly in shadows, the dimness broken only by a spill of jewel-toned light from a single Tiffany lamp burning on a side table. Adam walked to the window. Pushing aside a panel of the heavy drapes, he gazed down on the street below, deserted but for a single couple. They walked side by side, close but not touching. The thick wavy glass prevented him from

hearing either their conversation or their footsteps though it was clear from the tilt of their heads that they were talking. The taller of the two stopped in the yellow glow of a streetlight and, catching the hand of his smaller, slimmer companion, drew him into an embrace. They kissed, a long and lingering meeting of lips.

Even from twenty feet away and one story up, Adam felt the heat of that kiss. It made his blood tingle and his heart ache more than a little. Awash in envy, he turned away, leaving them to their private moment.

What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he find someone like that, a lover who would walk openly with him, a man who wouldn't shrink from touching or kissing in public, who might spontaneously take his hand and draw him into an embrace no matter who was watching?

Except that not just any man would do. And this afternoon had demonstrated, in a way that nothing else could, that Jimmy Trent would never be that man. At least now he knew.

When they were together, Daren had teased him relentlessly for having romantic fancies just like this, and for possessing what he called a hearts and flowers view of relationships, because although Daren was open about his sexuality and always enjoyed having Adam on his arm, the idea of kissing or touching that didn't lead inevitably to sex was so far off his radar that the very suggestion seemed ridiculous.

"Not much to see out there?"

The question might be ordinary, however the voice was anything but. The accent slid over Adam's skin like a caress. The English was perfect, the words like music with just a hint of the exotic.

That voice made him think of hot sun, spiced rum and soft tropical breezes. Its owner stepped out of the shadows and Adam's breath caught.

In the glow of the streetlight that shone through the window, the man was slender, more wiry than delicate, with incredible muscle definition under flawless skin the color of café au lait. Fawn-colored pants clung to slim hips, the leather sufficiently supple that nothing was left to the imagination. Nothing at all.

The stranger's chest was smooth with a gold hoop piercing the right nipple. Adam followed a thin gold chain from the ring down and down over ripped abs until it disappeared into the waistband of the low-slung pants.

"See something you like?" Very white teeth flashed in a smile at once friendly and suggestive.

"I might," Adam said, returning the smile without hesitation as he let his gaze drift up the stranger's toned body.

The face was good, too. Sharp-featured with high cheekbones and a soft, sexy mouth. Dark eyes, slightly tilted at the corners, sparkled with wicked flirtatiousness. The stranger's black hair was woven into dozens of skinny braids that hung nearly to his waist and glittered with tiny colorful beads.

"I'm Theo," the man said, extending a slender hand. "I've been looking for you." Adam's hand was taken and held.

"What for?"

"Your pictures are amazing," Theo said. "All evening I've been after Jason to introduce me to the owner of those incredible eyes. Then I slip in here for a moment of quiet and. . ." he made a voila gesture with his free hand. ". . . here you are."

Adam laughed. Ever since he'd arrived at the party people had been complimenting him on the series of fetish pics Jason had taken of him and displayed around the club. But this was a compliment he had yet to hear.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Adam said, extracting his hand from Theo's. "It's just that most people who see those pics don't comment on my eyes."

A line appeared between dark brows. "Cynical much?"

Adam gave a who-me shrug and sipped his drink. He wasn't especially cynical as a rule, he just didn't feel like being "on" tonight. But if Theo was offended by the ungracious way Adam had received his flirtation he gave no sign of it.

"I'm not most people," Theo said, "as you may discover." The glass was taken from Adam's hand. Theo raised it to his lips and sipped. "I'm a photographer."

“So?” The move was bold, even ballsy, yet Theo made it work.

“So I see things other people don’t.”

“What do you photograph?”

“You, if you’ll allow it.” There was that smile again.

Adam took his drink back. Their fingers brushed and a jolt of awareness sizzled up his spine. This man wanted him and no mistaking it.

“Why should I?” Lifting the glass, he turned it slowly so that when he sipped his lips touched the rim exactly where Theo’s had only moments before.

Heat flared in his companion’s eyes. “Because I like your looks. And, unlike Jason, I can pay for the privilege of looking.”

“How do you know Jason didn’t pay me?” Adam swirled the contents of the glass. Ice clinked musically against the crystal.

“Whether he did or not doesn’t interest me.”

“What does?”

“I told you. It’s your eyes, pretty.” With one finger Theo lifted Adam’s chin, turning his face first one way then the other, studying him. “And the shape of your face.” Warm fingers caressed Adam’s jaw. “It’s the way you make love to the camera, you know? All the rest is secondary. Lovely, to be sure, but secondary.”

“I’m not a model,” Adam said.

“Oh, but you could be. You have just the look I want.” Theo’s hand slid to the back of Adam’s neck. But rather than draw him in for a kiss, his fingers loosened the leather strip holding Adam’s hair back from his face.

“Soulful and sexy,” Theo murmured, sifting his fingers through the strands, “and just a little sad.” He leaned in close, pausing no more than a breath away. “Tell me what makes you so sad, pretty.”

Adam didn’t move, or breathe, or speak, only gazed into those dark, dark eyes and waited for the kiss he knew was coming.

As their lips met, Adam thought of other eyes, and other hands, and features more rough-hewn and not so sharp. But



that man wasn't here. That man didn't want him, not the way he wanted. Theo was here, and Theo was hot and Theo did want him.

Adam's tongue slipped between Theo's lips, the taste of rum and man passing between them and quickly the kiss grew heated. The glass was taken from his hand and set aside.

Theo's arms slid around Adam's waist and drew him closer. Adam's arms circled the other man's neck. Warm fingers caressed the bare strip of skin just above his low-slung leather jeans, a fingertip dipped inside the waistband. Lips brushed his ear.

"I want to watch you come, baby." Theo's hands slid lower, cupping his ass, crushing their bodies together. "First for my camera. Then for my cock." Teeth nipped his earlobe. "What do you say? Want to come for me?"

"I don't know." And he really didn't. Sure, his body wanted it. His cock was hard, straining against the leather, reaching for what Theo was offering. It was his heart that wasn't into it. And fucking one guy while you thought of another was just wrong.

One of Theo's hands fisted in Adam's hair and drew his head back. Teeth scraped his throat, making him shiver. "We could go to my hotel," Theo said. "It isn't far. Or I could bend you over that couch and take you right here where anyone might come in and see. You like fucking in public, baby?"

The hand on his ass squeezed. The hand in his hair tugged harder. Teeth sank into his shoulder as the thrill of the suggestion shot straight to his prick.

God.

The need to touch and be touched warred with other, deeper needs. Needs he now knew might never be satisfied. Still ...

"Or," Theo continued, "I could suck your cock. Let you come down my throat." Hot and wet, Theo's tongue traced the vein in the side of Adam's neck. "I want to taste your spunk, baby. I bet you taste good."

Adam closed his eyes and rested his cheek against the side of Theo's neck. A spicy scent clung to the man's skin. Just a blowjob, that's all, and why the fuck not?

“Okay,” Adam breathed, flicking his tongue in Theo’s ear. “Suck me.”

Theo made a sound caught somewhere between a growl and a purr as he maneuvered them over to a large leather armchair. Planting a hand against Adam’s chest he shoved him gently down. “Sit, baby.”

Adam dropped into the chair with a sigh.

In a move that was all fluid grace, Theo sank to his knees at Adam’s feet. “I can’t wait to taste you, pretty.”

He leaned forward, his eyes alight with arousal. One hand stroked Adam’s cock through the leather as the other made short work of the laces at his fly.

Adam wriggled and squirmed, shoving the tight leather down far enough to spread his legs. Strong fingers gripped his prick and squeezed. Adam gasped and pushed into the touch.

“Mmm, like that, baby?” Theo’s head dipped, eyes rolling up to meet Adam’s as he licked him from base to tip.

Adam shifted just that little bit closer, urging Theo on. The sight of Theo’s darker hand on his dick was hot as fuck. Adam shut his eyes and briefly let himself imagine how they might look together, this sensual stranger bent over his back, Theo’s cock buried balls-deep in his ass. But with his eyes closed, the dark-skinned man doing him morphed into another, more familiar man. Adam banished the image. He would not think about Jimmy Trent, or how he would never have Jimmy inside him again. And if that thought made his heart ache, well, he wouldn’t think about that either.

“Open your eyes, baby,” Theo said. “I want you to watch me.”

Adam opened his eyes just in time to see Theo swallow him to the root, engulfing his prick in wetness and heat.

“Oh, fuck,” Adam moaned as Theo’s throat worked around the head of his dick.

Theo hummed with pleasure, vibrations sliding down the shaft to Adam’s balls before he pulled off with a soft pop. “Sure you wouldn’t rather have my cock in your ass, pretty?” He slid his fingers down over Adam’s balls and farther back to tease at his hole. “Or you could fuck me if you want to.”

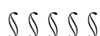
“No,” Adam said, “I want your mouth.” He gripped a handful of Theo’s braids and tugged him forward. “Don’t stop. I need it.”

Obediently, Theo slid his lips over Adam’s cock and slowly took him deep. The silky suction that was Theo’s mouth, the stroke and swirl of his tongue and the light scrape of teeth layered one sensation over another and soon Adam was moaning and thrusting, unable to stay either silent or still.

“God,” Adam panted as a familiar heat sparked at the base of his spine, flared then spread through his belly and balls drawing them tight and making his cock jerk. “Gonna come soon,” he said by way of warning, his hand fisting in Theo’s hair, hips flexing spasmodically.

Theo doubled his efforts, cheeks hollowing as he sucked. Wetting one finger, he pressed it into Adam’s ass, finding the sweet spot and stroking.

“Now,” Adam said, yanking hard on Theo’s hair. His cock swelled and pulsed as he shot, biting back the name of the man he loved, the man who didn’t want him.



Seated on a low sofa in a shadowy corner of the lounge, Adam sipped his Diet Coke and watched the few couples who remained on the dance floor as they swayed together slowly, more making out than dancing. He spotted Benny wrapped around a tall, shirtless biker-type whose name Adam didn’t know. The guy’s blond dreadlocks swayed as he bent Benny backward and proceeded to give the kid a tonsillectomy with his tongue. Adam turned away. Normally he enjoyed watching the kissing and groping that went on at club parties, but tonight the whole couples thing was just too damn depressing. He turned his attention to the bar where a handful of hangers-on still lingered despite the fact that the party was definitely winding down. A few faces looked familiar. He should get up, go over there and be sociable. But somehow he couldn’t muster the interest or the energy to move.

Sighing, Adam twisted around to see the clock on the wall behind him. It was nearly five in the morning and past time for him to get his shit together, change out of his leathers and go

home. If he'd had a lousy time tonight it was nobody's fault but his own. Even Theo's invitation for a quick, no-strings fuck, repeated once Theo finished blowing him in Jason's office, had left Adam flat. Not that it was Theo's fault that after the blowjob he'd felt even more depressed and maudlin than before. Though if the man had sensed it, he'd at least had the grace, or the disinterest, to ignore it. Once it was over, they had shared a brief kiss then returned to the party and Adam hadn't seen Theo since, which was just fine with him.

Draining his glass, he set the empty on a low table and got to his feet. As much as he didn't want to be there, the prospect of going home didn't thrill him either.

He'd gone only a few steps when a hand fell on his shoulder stopping him.

"Hey, man," Jason said. "I thought you left hours ago."

Adam shook his head. "Had to sober up first."

"You know you can always crash here if you're not okay to drive."

"I'm fine now. Besides, I thought Benny said all the rooms were taken."

"You can stay in my place. With Marissa gone I've got all this extra space. Women have a lot of shit, you know?"

"She's not coming back?" Adam dug deep and tried for a sympathetic tone. "Sorry, man."

Jason laughed. "Yeah, I bet you are. There was never much love lost between you two."

Adam smiled. Jason knew him so well. "Still, breaking up sucks."

His friend shrugged. "It does, but I'm okay with it. Tell you what though, after this shit with Marissa, I swear I'm done with women. Too much trouble."

"I've been telling you that for years. Guess we'll just have to find you a nice boy to fuck."

"I'd rather have a slut." Jason grinned. "You know any?"

And they both laughed.

"How about some coffee before you head out," Jason suggested.

"I told you, I'm fine to drive. I stopped drinking around midnight."

"One cup won't kill you. Or are you in a hurry or something?"

Despite Jason's assertion that he was fine, Adam noted the signs of strain that added years to his friend's face. Jason was right. One cup of coffee wouldn't kill him. Besides, it would delay, for maybe another hour, the inevitable return home.

"Sure, I could drink coffee." And he followed Jason out of the lounge.

The scent of freshly made coffee wafted from Jason's office as soon as he opened the door. Adam inhaled deeply and headed straight for the pot on a small table in the corner. He poured for both of them, dosing his own mug heavily with cream and sugar before carrying both mugs over to the desk.

"So who's the guy Benny was with?" Adam blew steam from his cup and took a tentative sip.

"What guy?"

Adam noted the way Jason's gaze sharpened and how the question was barked out and smiled to himself. So maybe there was a little interest there after all. That was good.

"Big guy," Adam said. "Blond dreads, full beard and moustache, tribal tats on his back and arms." He shrugged. "I never saw him before, but I figured you must know him if he's here."

Jason's eyes narrowed. "Oh, yeah, his name is Zach or Zee or something like that. He's a friend of one of the bartenders." He sipped his coffee. "Guy bought a guest membership last week. Wants to see if we suit. Benny gave him the tour and did his paperwork. I guess that's how they met." He paused. "You said they were dancing?"

He hadn't said they were dancing, just that he'd seen them together. Evidently so had Jason. Interesting.

"More or less. Looked more like making out to me, but you know how that goes." Adam set his cup on the edge of Jason's desk. "Benny's not with anybody right now so..."

Jason nodded and set his own cup down. "And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"I saw you with Theo earlier. Then you just sort of disappeared and I figured you left with him." Jason picked up his coffee. "He just about came in his pants when he saw your pics. Bugged the shit out of me to introduce you. Then I saw the two of you coming out of the office and I figured he took care of the introductions himself."

"How do you know him?" Adam asked, more for something to say than because he really cared.

"I went to one of his shows in New York. His work really blew me away and I told him that. We started talking and that was that." Jason grinned. "He's a wild man, but I guess you know that."

Adam nodded.

"He's very well connected, too. His work's in galleries all over the country. You could do a lot worse than to hook up with him."

"I don't know what you mean," Adam said, though he suspected he did.

Jason finished his coffee and stood up. He poured himself another cup but when he held the pot out, Adam shook his head.

"Didn't he talk to you about modeling for him? He said he was going to."

"Yeah, he did."

"And?" Rather than returning to the chair behind his desk, Jason sat in the other guest chair opposite the one Adam sat in.

"I said no. Jase, man, I'm not a model. Besides, I already have a job."

Jason was silent for a long moment. "Adam, you know you can't strip forever. It's really not a viable career choice."

Adam laughed. "Oh, you mean like fetish model is?"

"No, smartass. I just mean with your knee and all—"

"My knee is fine."

"But what would it hurt to give Theo a call? I could give you his number—"

"I've got his number."

"So call him. The dude's into you, man. I guarantee that if you spend some time with Theo, you'll get closet boy right out of your head."

So here it was, the real reason Jason had wanted to talk to him.

Adam stared at his best friend in stony silence. He did not want to discuss Jimmy, not with Jason, not with anyone. But Jason had seen Jimmy diss him that afternoon and he should have known better than to think his friend was going to let that go without comment.

"You do know your boyfriend's in the closet, right?" Jason said when Adam said nothing.

Adam shook his head.

"What do you mean no? That dude is so far in he's got roots." Jason's eyes narrowed. "Don't even tell me you never talked about that."

"He's just discreet," Adam said.

"Discreet? He's using you, man. You have to see that."

He didn't have to see anything.

"Maybe I'm the one who's using him. Did you ever think of that?" When Jason said nothing, Adam continued. "It's a pretty sweet deal for me living there. . . a nice apartment in a nice neighborhood, no credit check or security deposit, regular no strings fucking. I'd say I've got it dicked, wouldn't you?"

Even as he spoke, his heart ached with the truth of his own words. Regular no strings fucking was all they had, not a relationship, not even a real friendship. And what was even more shameful, so much so that he wouldn't admit it, not even to his best friend, was that he couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't return to Jimmy's bed if it was what the man wanted.

"Yeah right," Jason said, "whatever you say. I'm just saying that for as old as he is—how old is he anyway? He's got to be about my age at least."

"Yeah, like you're so old. He's thirty-six."

"That's old enough to know what you want and not screw people around over it."

"He's not—"

"Don't defend him." Jason leaned forward in his chair. "I saw the look on your face when he pushed you away this afternoon. You're falling hard for him and that's a really bad idea."

"He didn't push me away."

"He might as well have. Get over him, Adam. This...relationship isn't going anywhere good for you. So just get closet boy out of your head and go find somebody else."

"Like Theo?"

"Like anybody. Jesus Christ, Adam, there are any number of people—men and women, Doms and subs—around here who would—" Jason stopped mid-sentence and held his hands out in an I-give-up gesture. "Okay. Fine. I'll shut up about it."

"Thanks," Adam said, because they were friends and because he knew, that in his own domineering and bossy way, Jason was only trying to help.

He just didn't want anybody else. But he'd be damned if he'd say so. That just sounded too pathetic. Again, he remembered Theo's eyes gazing up at him over a mouthful of his cock and how it was Jimmy he'd thought of as he came down the other man's throat. How many men, how many blowjobs would it take before he stopped seeing Jimmy's face every time he closed his eyes? And was that really what he wanted?

What he knew he wanted was to get Jason off his case about Jimmy. Because no matter what the man said, Adam knew he hadn't heard the last on that topic. He produced Theo's card and showed it to Jason. "Just so you know, I kept his card."

"That's good," Jason said. "I'm glad to hear it. You should give him a call."

"Maybe I will." He shoved down the guilt over lying to his best friend. Jason was just trying to help, he reminded himself once again, but he could handle his own life.



*Yeah, you're handling it, all right,* a little voice in his head mocked. *Lying to your friends, getting blowjobs from strangers and pining over a guy who would never be more than a fuck-buddy -- way to go, man!*

Adam got to his feet. "I have to get going. I'm working tonight and I need to sleep."

Jason stood and walked with him to the door. With his hand on the knob, he turned to Adam. "I don't mean to get into your business, Adam. I just hate to see you fall for some asshole who—"

"I know," Adam said, cutting him off. "I told you, I'm handling it."

But was he, was he really?



## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

Jimmy signed the note with his initial, then read it over for what felt like the hundredth time and nearly tore it up just as he had the other attempts. But no. He had decided that the note was the best way to go. If Adam really didn't ever want to look at him again, and who could blame him, the note was a way for them both to save themselves from another awful scene like the one in the driveway. On the other hand, if, by some miracle, Adam might be willing to forgive him, then the note would show how truly sorry he was for what he'd done.

Jimmy's gaze strayed to the window. The sky was growing pale, the sun just breaking above the trees, the driveway still empty and silent. It was morning, early to be sure, but morning and no Adam.

Unable to sleep, Jimmy had spent the night in the study, pretending to work, pretending that he wasn't waiting for Adam to come home. The pretense hadn't lasted very long. By midnight he had formulated every possible scenario for reconciliation, none of which was worth shit when there was no one to reconcile with. Drawn to the window again and again by what he'd thought was the sound of an engine, Jimmy had rehearsed what he would say when Adam finally did return, finally settling on the note as the best way to go.

Except here it was nearly six-thirty in the morning and Adam hadn't come home.

And maybe he won't, the voice in Jimmy's head whispered for the hundredth time. Maybe you drove him off for good with your precious need for discretion.

No. Maybe. Ah, hell, he didn't know. What he did know was that if Adam did come home, he would do whatever it took to undo the damage he'd done.

Really? Whatever it takes, that voice prodded. Including writing some stupid, fucking note? Yeah, that'll get him back.

Jimmy looked down at the note. Stupid, fucking note indeed. He tore the paper in half then in half again and dropped the pieces in the trashcan. Lifting his coffee cup to his lips, he found only cold dregs in the bottom. He set it aside and flicked on the TV. Maybe hearing about all the misery in the world would take his mind off his own troubles.

A perky brunette appeared on the screen. "... And since Rob is off today," she chirped, "we have Daren Taylor joining us with today's forecast and it looks like a beauty. Hey, Daren."

The camera switched to a shot of a blond pretty boy standing outside with sparse traffic passing behind him. He smiled a perfect, television smile. "Hey, Michelle. Today's forecast is a beauty all right—"

With his finger hovering over the mute button -- who cared about the weather anyway -- Jimmy paused. There was something familiar about blondie. He'd seen the man somewhere before. Of course he'd seen him, Jimmy chided himself, the guy was on the news. Except that felt wrong somehow.

The blond's face was replaced by a weather map then the shot returned to the brunette at the anchor desk. "Thanks, Daren, we'll see you inside in a few."

Daren.

Daren! Shit!

Jimmy dropped the remote. He certainly had seen blondie before. It was in the parking lot at Flesh Tones. Daren Taylor was Adam's ex-lover, the same man Jimmy had wanted to beat to a bloody pulp when he'd seen him about to slap Adam. And now here he was smiling that thousand watt smile and forecasting the weather on the morning news.

"C'mon," Jimmy muttered at the TV. Now that he'd placed blondie he wanted to see his face again. Not just to make certain his memory was right, he knew it was, but to get a closer look at the man who had once shared Adam's bed.

God, but he really was a masochist.

He was so absorbed in waiting for Daren Taylor to reappear on the screen that he nearly missed the sound of the car in the

driveway. Getting quickly to his feet, he went to the window and peered out.

The fist clenched around his heart loosened at the sight of Adam emerging from the driver's door. He looked incredible, just as good as he had last night, maybe even better for the tousled hair and rumpled clothes.

He wanted to run out and fall on his knees at Adam's feet and beg forgiveness for being such an idiot. Except something held him rooted to the spot. Why the hell had he torn up the note anyway? Maybe. . .

No. Jimmy shook his head. Fuck the note. If he couldn't say what he needed to say to Adam face-to-face, then he really was no better than a fucking coward who didn't deserve another chance.

Without giving himself time to reconsider, Jimmy headed for the back door. As he passed the mirror in the hall he caught sight of his reflection and winced. Hair mussed from repeatedly running his hands through it, face scruffy with a day's growth of beard, shirt untucked, sockless feet jammed into untied sneakers -- he looked like hell. No way could he go out looking like that, not even to cross his own driveway. Pausing by the back door, Jimmy tucked in his shirt, tied his shoes and made a half-hearted attempt to smooth down his hair before he opened the door and stepped out into the cool spring morning.

Then he saw the girl.

She stood next to Adam's car on the passenger side, a backpack slung over one shoulder, a mass of burgundy curls obscuring most of her face. Adam said something and she laughed, a lovely musical sound that rang through the clear morning air and sent a jolt of pain and jealousy straight through Jimmy's heart.

Adam was with a girl. And why was that so shocking? Of course Jimmy had known that Adam might see other people. Of course there had been no promises between them even before yesterday when Jimmy had been such an asshole and things had gone so horribly wrong. But to have the evidence of just how wrong things had gone standing in front of him in his own driveway...

Jimmy half-turned, ready to retreat into the house.

"Hey!" The burgundy-haired stranger bounded toward him, skidding to a stop no more than a foot away. "Uncle Jimmy, it's me, Stephanie."

She threw her arms around him and he was instantly enveloped in the smell of cigarettes and some very flowery perfume.

He hugged this stranger who had once been a little blonde with pigtails and a space between her front teeth, then held her at arm's length for a better look.

He tried to reconcile the woman before him with the child he remembered and couldn't do it. She was tall and slim, the riot of burgundy curls falling nearly to her waist. Her face was lovely with delicate features and a multitude of piercings including eyebrow, nose, lip and several in each ear.

"God, Stephie, you look so different."

She laughed. "You don't. You look just the same as I remember."

The clunk of a car door closing drew Jimmy's attention away from his niece. Adam was walking away toward the garage.

"Adam," Jimmy called, "wait a minute."

Stephanie turned. "Hey, Adam, you can't just take off. You promised me coffee."

Adam paused. When he turned around his expression was carefully blank, his eyes cool and a little wary. "That was before—"

"C'mon," Jimmy said, "come in and have some coffee."

The hesitation was palpable. Jimmy held his breath. Then Adam nodded and followed them into the house.

As he made fresh coffee, Jimmy learned that his niece had gotten into town yesterday and had already argued with her father; who, she said, didn't like her hair or her clothes or her piercings and had wasted no time saying so.

"He didn't even recognize me," Stephanie said. "He almost picked up the wrong girl at the airport."

Jimmy set three mugs on the counter and cream and sugar on a tray. "Does he know where you are now?"

Stephanie shook her head. "When we got to the condo, we ordered takeout Chinese, and I left when he went to get it."

"So where'd you spend the night?"

"Just walking around."

"All by yourself?"

"No, not by myself. I met up with some people. We hung out. They took me to South Street. We hit some bars. It was fun."

Jimmy swallowed the warning about the dangers of a young girl walking around a strange city at night with people she hardly knew. "Why didn't you come here last night?"

"It was late. I didn't want to bother you."

"Don't be silly. You could never bother me." He poured coffee and handed a mug to Stephanie. When he handed one to Adam their fingers brushed. But where there would have once been a smile or at least eye contact, Jimmy got nothing more than a murmured thanks.

He was dying to ask how his niece had ended up in Adam's car. But Adam wouldn't even look at him.

"Do you want cream or sugar, Stephanie?"

She shook her head. "This is fine."

Without asking, Jimmy passed the cream pitcher to Adam who took it and wordlessly dosed his coffee. They did the same with the sugar, the silence between them growing heavier with each passing moment.

Why wouldn't Adam look at him?

A little desperate for some kind of acknowledgment, Jimmy asked, "So, Adam, how did you two meet up anyway?"

Adam's gaze flicked up, met Jimmy's briefly then slid away. "I almost ran her over at the bottom of the driveway."

"Don't be so dramatic," Stephanie said. "It wasn't that close."

This comment got at least the flicker of a smile.

Jimmy turned to Stephanie. "What were you doing at the foot of the driveway?"

"Trying to figure out if I was at the right house. It's been a long time and I couldn't remember." She sipped her coffee. "I had just about decided I wasn't when Adam pulled up and asked if I was lost."

"And that's when you figured out you were at the right place?"

"No. That's when I was sure I was at the wrong place." She grinned. "But I looked in the car and I was like, ooo hottie. So I let him rescue me. Of course that was before I realized he was your boyfriend."

She patted Jimmy's hand. "Wouldn't want you to think I was poaching on your territory or anything."

Jimmy stared at his niece. He knew his mouth was hanging open and he shut it with a snap. When he looked over at Adam he saw an almost identical degree of surprise reflected in the man's expression, but Adam said nothing.

Stephanie looked from one to the other, eyebrows lifted. "You are, aren't you? Together, I mean?"

He was so not touching that question. Adam sipped his coffee in silence and waited for Jimmy's answer.

"Yes." Jimmy swallowed, his Adam's Apple bobbed. "Yes, we are." He lifted his mug and drained it, his eyes meeting Adam's over the rim.

What the hell?

Adam lifted his cup to his lips, took a careful sip and set it down. Jimmy's expression gave him no indication of what the man was doing, none at all.

Adam just nodded. There was no way he could force words past the lump in his throat.

Stephanie looked from one to the other, color creeping into her cheeks. "It's all right, you know? I'm not like homophobic or anything. In fact, I think guys together are hot." The flush deepened. "Not that I mean you two, because that would just be...wrong. You know, since we're related and all."

Jimmy laughed and the tension coiled even tighter in Adam's gut.



"It's okay." Jimmy wrapped an arm around the girl's shoulders and, leaning in, kissed her cheek.

She quit worrying the ring in her lower lip and smiled at Jimmy. "Good. Mom says sometimes I talk too much, you know?" She glanced at Adam. "Can I still crash on your couch?"

"I guess. Sure." God, Stephanie's eyes were the same clear, lake-water blue as Jimmy's.

"You don't have to sleep on the couch, Stephanie. You can stay in one of the guest rooms."

"The couch is fine, Uncle Jimmy. I don't want to be a pain in the ass."

"You're not being a pain in the ass. C'mon, I'll show you where."

"I'm going, Jim." Adam took his cup to the sink, rinsed it out and put it in the dishwasher.

"Can you wait? I have something I want to talk to you about. I'll just be a minute."

Stephanie followed Jimmy out of the kitchen, their voices fading as they ascended the stairs to the second floor.

Adam leaned against the counter and listened to their receding footsteps. When he could no longer hear them, he walked as quietly as he could to the back door, opened it and slipped out. He couldn't deal with this, not right now.

With one final glance over his shoulder, he pulled the door shut then walked quickly across the grass, into the garage and up the steps to his apartment. Closing the door, he collapsed on the couch and pressed a hand to his pounding heart. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Last night he'd been so sure it was over, that, despite his having given his heart to Jimmy, there could be no future for them. If he'd thought any different he never would have made out with Theo.

Briefly he let himself remember Theo's hot wet mouth on his prick, the glorious, mind-blowing suction and soul-deep sorrow as he came and thought of the man he loved, the man who refused to acknowledge him. Now that man had taken that first

tentative step toward coming out and what the fuck was that supposed to mean to him?

Adam scrubbed his hands over his face. It would have been so much easier, or at least clearer, if Jimmy had denied him again. If the man had said no to his niece's question about whether they were a couple, if he had just done what Adam expected instead of being so goddamn unpredictable.

The knock on the door broke into his thoughts. It was no surprise, really. He'd known Jimmy would follow him. Enough time had passed that he should be just beginning to realize the magnitude of the admission he'd made. Now, he'd be looking for someone to help him deal, hold his hand and tell him it would be all right.

Adam sat very still, barely daring to breathe. If he just pretended he wasn't here...

The knock came again, harder this time.

"Adam, I know you're there. Can I please come in?"

God.

"It's not locked."

The door opened and Jimmy stepped inside. Gone were the messy hair, wrinkled shirt and bare feet. Jimmy looked like his normal, pulled-together self. Until he turned his head and Adam saw his eyes.

Adam's heart went out to him. He looked so pathetic -- broken and confused and no doubt scared shitless over what he'd just done. Adam wanted to go to him. But like in a dream, the harder he willed his arms and legs to move the heavier the invisible weight that held him right where he was.

"Adam." Jimmy took one step and another and another until he stood in front of where Adam sat on the couch. He went to his knees and took Adam's hands in his. But rather than speak, he lowered his head and laid his cheek against their joined hands.

He should pull away, break the contact and say something, anything, to get the man up off his knees and start the discussion that would inevitably put paid to whatever this was they were doing. He should. Except that the warm strong grip, the breath that ghosted over his skin and prickle of beard

stubble where Jimmy's cheek lay against the back of his hand were all too much and he couldn't bring himself to do it. So he did the only thing he could, sat still and waited.

"I don't know how to do this, Adam."

Shit. This was it.

Dread wound itself tight in Adam's stomach and choked out the tiny threads of hope. "Don't know how to do what?"

"Be with you." Jimmy's lips brushed Adam's knuckles. "Have a relationship." He raised his head. He looked into Adam's eyes, his own filled with unspeakable sorrow. "All I've had was sex, plenty of it actually. But they were just weekend flings or one-night-stands or, Christ, guys whose names I didn't even know. But it was so empty. I was so empty. And now when it matters I don't know what I'm doing, only that I'm doing everything wrong. And I don't know how to fix it."

Adam let the torrent of words run out, not speaking until he was sure Jimmy was finished. When Jimmy finally wound down, Adam took a long breath.

"Your family doesn't know you're gay, do they?"

"Well, we never actually talked about it, but I'm sure they must know something." Jimmy laughed but there was no humor in it. "And now, once Stephanie tells them, I guess they'll know for sure."

Freeing one of his hands, Adam laid it against Jimmy's cheek. "I think if you ask Stephanie not to say anything, she would be cool with that."

"I can't do that." Jimmy leaned into the touch, turning until his lips grazed Adam's palm. "I told her because she asked. And because I know it's what you want."

"It doesn't matter what I want." Panic rose like a poisonous bubble in Adam's chest. "This isn't about me."

"Of course it's about you. It's about us being together publicly and people knowing, isn't it?"

"No." Unable to sit still, Adam pushed to his feet, forcing Jimmy back. There wasn't much room to pace but he did anyway. "You can't lay this on me, Jim. You can't come out for me. I'm not taking that responsibility."

“What responsibility? I thought you’d be happy.” Jimmy sat back on his heels and regarded him from his place on the floor.

Happy? Hell. Nothing would make him happier than if he and Jimmy could be a couple. Publicly. Openly. But he couldn’t take the responsibility for wrecking Jimmy’s perfect life. Because he knew that if Jimmy came out for him, and not because he was ready to, that one day—not that he knew when that day would come, but it would come—Jimmy would despise him for it. And that would be infinitely worse than losing him right now, today, when there was still time to shove the closet door closed again.

Adam stopped pacing and rested one hip against the counter that separated kitchen from living room. “Look, Jim, I know you think you’re being noble, doing what I want and all, but you can’t come out for me. You can’t come out for anybody but yourself. You have to have your own reasons for doing it that don’t involve me. I mean, what if we break up—”

“You’re breaking up with me?”

“I didn’t say that. I said if—”

“Because I do have my own reasons. You’re my reason.”

“No!” Adam slammed his fist down on the countertop. “You aren’t listening.”

Jimmy came to his feet in a single motion, fists clenched at his sides, eyes blazing. “What the fuck do you want from me, Adam?”

“How about taking some responsibility for your own fucking life,” Adam shot back.

“You don’t know anything about my life. I have a fucking fantastic life. I have friends and family who love me and—”

“And are you really willing to risk that, Jim? Because you’ll lose them, I guarantee it. Maybe not all of them, but some. They’ll turn their backs and pretend like they don’t even know you.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I do know it. Because it happened to me. I haven’t talked to my family in nearly four years and do you know why? Because they can’t deal with me being gay, because I won’t hide it.”

All the energy suddenly ran out of Adam's body. Returning to the couch, he sank down and lowered his head into his hands. All was still for several long seconds, the hum of the refrigerator very loud in the silence. The couch shifted. Though Jimmy didn't touch him, Adam could feel the man's heat beside him. But he didn't move or look up. He just couldn't.

Never before had he told anyone about his family. Hell, he hardly ever thought of them himself, of how they—and it was his father mostly, but they'd all gone along—turned their backs on him because he refused to hide who he was. And now it was out there, the shameful truth that even the people who were supposed to love him hadn't wanted him. Ah well, if it kept Jimmy from wrecking his life on a whim then maybe it was all right.

When Jimmy finally spoke his words were so soft that Adam had to strain to hear.

"I'm afraid if I don't come out, you'll leave me."

And there it was, the real, honest, down to the ground reason Jimmy was finally going to crack open the closet door. Jimmy cared about him. Jimmy wanted him for more than just sex, and wasn't that just what he'd hoped for?

Adam didn't bother voicing his thoughts, that if he did leave it would be the best thing all around for Jimmy. Instead he slowly raised his head and looked at the man sitting beside him. He felt incredibly tired, but it was a fatigue no amount of sleep could cure. "Why the hell would you think that?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Why would you stay? I mean, Adam, look at you. You could have anybody. Why would you stay with me?"

Adam took Jimmy's hand in his and laced their fingers together. "Because I love you."



## CHAPTER NINE

---

I love you.

Jimmy went very still, afraid that the moment would shatter and he would wake up and it would all be gone like a dream.

Years ago he had given up the hope of ever hearing those words. His need for discretion, the space he'd put between himself and the men he was with, had just about guaranteed that he would never hear them. But now here they were, handed to him like a gift. And he savored it, wrapped himself in the words and let the warmth fill him.

And he wanted to hear it again.

"Adam." Jimmy lifted their joined hands to his cheek, letting his lips graze Adam's fingers.

"It doesn't change anything, Jim."

Oh, but he was so wrong. It changed everything.

"I just—"

"Shhh." Adam leaned in close. "I told you, it doesn't matter."

How could it not matter? Of course it mattered. Adam loved him. It was the only thing that did matter.

But before Jimmy could say any of this, Adam released his hand and slid onto his lap, straddling him.

Now face to face and groin to groin with his lover, anything Jimmy had meant to say slid away as Adam leaned in and covered Jimmy's mouth with his. Jimmy tilted his head back letting Adam control the kiss. A sigh passed between their mouths as the kiss broke and Jimmy laid his head on Adam's shoulder.

"I thought you might not come back." The weight of that fear slipped from Jimmy's shoulders as he made the confession.

"You think too much." Fingers slid through Jimmy's hair, caressed the back of his neck. "Try just feeling for a while." He accompanied the advice with a roll of his hips.

Jimmy groaned, stretching his neck as Adam's fingers kneaded the tense muscles. "That feels good." He sighed. "Adam, we need to talk. There are things I need to tell you—"

"Later." Adam laid his cheek against Jimmy's. Lips brushed his ear. "Right now, I want to fuck."

Jimmy's cock swelled, pressing against his zipper. They really did need to talk. Adam's teeth scraped over the pulse in Jimmy's neck and all thoughts of talk evaporated, leaving only wanting in their wake. There would be time to talk later.

Adam slid off his lap, caught both his hands and tugged. "Let's go to bed. I need you."

On his feet, Jimmy pulled the man close once more. Their mouths came together, Adam opening for him on a sigh as tongues tangled and the taste of his lover flooded Jimmy's senses. Jimmy's arms tightened around Adam as he pushed up the hem of Adam's shirt letting his hands find smooth skin over lean muscles. The lithe dancer's body molded against him as the kiss deepened and heated.

Adam moaned into Jimmy's mouth as their hips rocked together. His prick, already hard, pressed against Jimmy. The kiss broke, both of them gasping for air.

"I need you." One hand tangled in Adam's silky hair as the other slid under his waistband. Jimmy's fingers dug into one firm, round ass-cheek and he buried his face against Adam's throat. He nipped at the pulse that jumped under his lips then sucked up a mark.

Adam whimpered. "You marked me. God, Jim, you never do that. I want you. Now. Please."

Adam was right. He never did that, never left marks. Jimmy stared at the small purpling welt and something primal, some elemental possessiveness fountained through him.

With his hand still buried in Adam's hair, Jimmy walked his lover backward into the bedroom. Drawing Adam's head back, Jimmy once again claimed those kiss-swollen lips.

Adam deftly freed Jimmy's cock as they kissed, wrapping strong fingers around the shaft and pulled a groan from deep inside him. He thrust into Adam's hand, his need all at once so



close to the surface that he wasn't sure he would even make it to the bed.

When Adam started to slide to his knees, Jimmy stopped him. "No, not like that. I want to fuck you. I need to be inside you when I come."

Something flickered in Adam's eyes and Jimmy felt an answering uneasiness lick up inside him. Then Adam smiled, took Jimmy's hand and kissed it. Jimmy shoved the uneasiness away. Adam loved him.

Slowly Jimmy undressed his lover. He started with the filmy black shirt, the slippery fabric and tiny buttons slowing him down, making him wait for the feel of Adam's skin under his hands. His own clothes he shucked without regard for subtlety or style, wanting only flesh against flesh.

When at last they were both naked, Jimmy shoved Adam back on the bed and stretched out over him. Adam's legs parted, one coming up to wrap around Jimmy's waist and pull him even closer. Their cocks slid together, so hard and hot and oh so good, pre-come slicking the way.

Propping himself on one elbow, Jimmy reached for the bedside drawer.

"What are you doing, Jim?"

"Condoms and lube," Jimmy said, "I don't think I can wait."

"I'll get it." Adam stretched underneath him, one hand reaching for the nightstand and not quite making it, all those long, lean muscles rippling with the motion. "I can't quite reach. Roll over, Jim."

Jimmy did, enjoying the view as his lover rolled onto his side and reached into the bedside drawer, rummaged around and pulled out the bottle of lube and a condom, tossing the latter on the mattress beside him. When Jimmy reached for the bottle, Adam shook his head.

"Watch me." He flipped open the cap and squeezed a generous amount into his hand as he got to his knees on the bed.

Adam slicked his fingers up then reached between his legs sliding first one then two fingers in his ass. With his other hand he stroked himself, long languid pulls that made him look like

he could last for hours. His eyes drifted closed, dark lashes fanned out against pale skin, and he began to rock. Back and forth. Fucking and jacking himself in a slow, sensuous rhythm that had Jimmy's balls pulling tight.

Jimmy's cock jerked, a drop of pre-come welling from the slit and dripping down the length. Jimmy took his prick in hand. A single stroke and he knew that no way could he last, not with Adam looking like some wicked, wet-dream angel straight from his fantasies.

"Adam, come here and let me suck you."

Adam hesitated for only a heartbeat then he smiled and dropped a wink. "You got it, babe."

Jimmy licked his lips as Adam straddled his chest.

"Hold on to the headboard," Adam directed. "I'm going to fuck your mouth."

Jimmy reached up, wrapping his fingers around the lacy ironwork and holding on. Adam's hands covered his, holding them there as the head of Adam's cock brushed Jimmy's lips.

The scent of arousal filled Jimmy's nostrils, his mouth opened and he lapped at the salty-sweet pre-come that coated the head. Adam's hips shifted, his prick sliding into Jimmy's mouth. His fingers gripped the headboard and he tilted his head trying for a better angle, one that would let him take more of his lover's dick. He swirled his tongue around the shaft as Adam drew back.

"That make you hot, sucking my cock?" Adam's cock slid forward, still slow but deeper and brushed against Jimmy's soft palate. "I want you to do this to me, Jim," Adam rocked forward. "Hold me down and fuck my mouth. Gonna show you how I want it. You want to do this to me, babe?"

Yes. God, please...

Jimmy sucked hard, the only answer he could give with his mouth full of cock. He felt helpless, held down and taken, completely at his lover's mercy, and he loved it.

"God, you're so good," Adam sighed. "Your mouth feels so good. So hot and wet...Can you take it all, Jim? Can I shove my cock down your throat, feel you swallow me down? You gonna make me come with your mouth?"

Yes! Oh fuck, yes!

Jimmy scraped his teeth along Adam's prick, saliva running from the corners of his mouth, his gaze locked with Adam's. His own cock strained against his belly, the orgasm boiling up from his balls.

Not yet. He did not want to come so soon.

Jimmy fought for control even as Adam's dick shoved deep all the way to the back of his throat. He swallowed around the head, amazed that he could do it without gagging.

"Oh fuck, Jim," Adam gasped, "gonna come now."

Adam's cock swelled against Jimmy's tongue then suddenly his mouth was empty as his lover pulled back. Warm silky come coated Jimmy's chin and chest.

God, how he wanted to taste Adam.

Adam released Jimmy's hands and leaned down. Sliding his tongue along Jimmy's jaw, he licked his own spunk from Jimmy's face.

Jimmy let go of the headboard and gripped Adam's hips. "God, Adam, I need..."

"Yeah, babe, me too," Adam murmured, moving down to Jimmy's chest.

The sight of his lover licking come from his chest was almost too much. "Now, Adam," Jimmy said, "I want to fuck you now."

Adam just laughed and went right on licking. He drew one of Jimmy's nipples into his mouth and sucked till it stood at attention. He trailed little licks and bites across to the other nipple and did the same to it before lapping his way down Jimmy's stomach to just above his cock.

When Adam sat up, he held a small foil packet in one hand. He ripped it open with his teeth and drew out the condom.

Taking it between his lips and, using only his mouth, he slid it over Jimmy's prick swallowing him down to the root and smoothing the latex as he went.

"Christ!" Jimmy's fingers gripped the sheet, flexing and releasing as Adam's throat contracted around the head of his cock.

Adam drew back sucking lightly as he went. He crawled up Jimmy's body, straddled his hips and impaled himself on Jimmy's prick in one fluid motion.

"I need it too, babe." Adam's ass settled against Jimmy's groin. "God, you feel so good, so big and hard, filling me up."

Jimmy's brain shorted out as tight heat engulfed him. He released the sheet and gripped Adam's hips.

Adam remained perfectly still, head thrown back, eyes closed, hands flattened against Jimmy's chest.

"God," Adam sighed, and slowly began to move.

At first Jimmy stayed still, reveling in his lover's body, the slow rocking to and fro, pull and thrust, each time Adam took him deeper. Jimmy's fingers flexed on his hips as need coiled low in his belly and slithered, snakelike down and around his balls, tighter and tighter with each undulation, the rhythm as ancient as the tide, the need as elemental as breathing.

Orgasm sparked along his spine, a familiar fire and Jimmy squeezed his eyes shut. "Adam, can't wait. Gonna come. Oh!"

"Yes!" Adam sped up the pace, slamming down again and again, driving him higher and higher. "Come for me, babe. God, I want to see you come."

Wet heat spilled over Jimmy's abdomen as Adam came again, his muscles clamping down on Jimmy's cock.

Jimmy came with a cry, his body shuddering, his prick throbbing, filling the condom with pulse after pulse of come until he felt empty, wrung out.

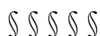
Adam collapsed on his chest, warm, sticky come unnoticed between them, and pressed his lips to the hollow of Jimmy's throat.

Adam would say it now, and when he did Jimmy would say it back.

Jimmy waited, heart hammering. But Adam said nothing, only lay sprawled across Jimmy's chest, breath warm against Jimmy's throat. His breathing slowed and gradually deepened.

Adam was asleep.

Jimmy pressed his lips into Adam's hair. It didn't matter that he hadn't said it. He wouldn't let it matter, because Adam loved him.



Jimmy woke in a tangle of arms and legs, Adam lying half on top of him, the sun shining full in his face. He blinked then yanked the sheet up to cover his eyes. Adam stirred, mumbled something and burrowed deeper into his pillow. Gathering his lover closer, Jimmy cautiously opened his eyes and squinted over at the nightstand. The iridescent numbers on the clock showed nearly noon.

Damn. There were about a million things he should be doing instead of lazing around in bed. He should get up, go back to the house and check on Stephanie. He should call Laton and let him know his daughter was here.

Stephanie. Of all the people he could have come out to, his twenty-one-year-old niece had never even occurred to him. But there it was. And how had she known? Were his feelings for Adam so obvious? And if Stephanie had known, and known so quickly, who else knew?

Jimmy closed his eyes and buried his face against Adam's neck. The smell of sex and sweat still clung to his lover's skin. Jimmy inhaled and let his hands wander over all that smooth naked flesh.

Adam made a sound and rolled over onto his side. Jimmy turned too, not yet ready to let go. Just a few more minutes, then he would get up.

God, Adam loved him.

The knowledge filled him to bursting and he felt the goofy grin spreading across his face. Jimmy's arm tightened around Adam's waist and his morning erection pressed against his lover's ass. Sliding a hand down to stroke Adam's cock, Jimmy's lips sought out that sensitive spot where neck met shoulder, the place where the lightest touch of lips or scrape of teeth made Adam crazy. Brushing aside a tangle of dark hair Jimmy bent his head to press a kiss to that spot, and froze.

A bluish-purple bruise marred the skin at the juncture of neck and shoulder. A hicky.

Jimmy drew back and stared at the mark. Had he done that? Sometime this morning during their lovemaking, had he left that bite mark on Adam's neck? Adam's skin was so fair and he bruised so easily, it was certainly possible. Except that he was always so careful...

Even as he searched for an explanation, the awful truth beat like a drum in his head. Adam had been with someone else.

No. There had to be another explanation for that mark.

What other explanation, a little voice in Jimmy's head asked. You don't know where he was last night. Or what he was doing. Or with whom.

Maybe not. But Adam loved him, he'd said so. And Jimmy wanted so much to believe that, did believe it.

So maybe it's true, the voice conceded. Maybe there is another explanation. So why not wake him up right now and ask him?

Because, what if the answer was one he didn't want to hear?

Jimmy flopped over onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. Unbidden, an image of Daren Taylor came to him. The thousand watt smile, the sun-streaked hair, the model-perfect good looks. The two of them must have made a hell of a beautiful couple.

God, he didn't want to think about it. But even if it wasn't Daren Taylor, someone had left that mark on Adam's neck.

He probably thought you didn't want him, the voice in Jimmy's head piped up, so he went out and found somebody who did. It's your own fault.

Which was probably true whether he wanted to admit it or not. But Adam was his, goddamn it, and he was not giving up so easily, not without a fight.

He could do this. He would do it. He would come out, all the way out and be with Adam openly and damn the consequences. He'd already begun the process, he'd told Stephanie and the sky hadn't fallen. He hadn't been struck by lightning. It would be fine. It had to be.

Suddenly restless, Jimmy turned over and swung his feet over the edge of the bed.

"Jim? Where you going," Adam asked, voice rough with sleep. Dark eyes, still cloudy with dreams, blinked up at him.

"I'm getting up. I have some things I need to do."

"Mmm, I'll get you up, big guy." An arm wrapped around Jimmy's waist, urged him back under the covers. A hand slid down, fingers wrapped around his cock.

"Adam." Jimmy thrust into the touch.

Adam dropped a kiss on Jimmy's shoulder before disappearing under the sheet. A moment later Jimmy's prick was engulfed in wet silky heat. Closing his eyes, he tangled the fingers of one hand in Adam's hair. I love you so much, Jimmy thought, and gave himself up to that sweet mouth.

No, he was not giving this up, not ever, no matter what he had to do.





## CHAPTER TEN

---

Shit.

In the fading evening light, Adam stared down into the Cavalier's engine compartment. Yeah, it looked like an engine. Beyond that he had no clue what he was looking at. Or for. Only that when he stuck the key in the ignition the damn car was supposed to start. Instead, it had made some ungodly sound, the automotive equivalent of a death rattle, before falling silent. And this would have to happen tonight, ladies' night when he was supposed to be dancing. And when, if he didn't make it to work, he would lose all that tip money.

Shit.

Of course he'd known when he bought the piece of junk six months ago from a friend of Daren's that it probably wasn't going to last long. But it was cheap and it ran and at the time a cheap car that worked was just about all he wanted or could afford. Since getting the job at Flesh Tones and the apartment, he'd started looking in the paper for another car. Looked like he was going to have to step up his efforts and lower his standards. Except that wasn't going to do shit for him right now when he had to be at work in half an hour.

Letting loose a string of inventive swear words, he stepped back, prepared to give the hood a good hard slam.

"Got car trouble?"

Adam looked up.

The screen-door was open and Jimmy stood on the back steps watching him. Still dressed for the office in tailored dress pants and a white shirt, his only concession to casualness was the absence of a tie and the rolled up sleeves that showed muscular forearms lightly dusted with blond hair.

Oh yeah, the man was hot! And wasn't that just too weird since he'd never gone for the button-down conservative type before. But there was no mistaking that fluttering low in his belly that had become such a familiar sensation lately.

In a few long strides Jimmy reached his side and paused. He glanced under the hood then back at Adam. "What's the problem?"

"Hell if I know. It just died on me." Adam's gaze was drawn to Jimmy's open collar and the sandy-brown chest-hair peeking out from that vee. That hair was darker than the hair on his head and arms and shades lighter than. . .

"Do the lights work?"

"What?" Shifting slightly to accommodate his cock's sudden interest, Adam lifted his gaze and met Jimmy's.

"The lights," Jimmy said, "do they work?"

"I don't know." Walking back to the driver's side window, Adam leaned in and flipped on the lights. They worked.

"Not the battery then," Jimmy said when Adam rejoined him by the hood.

"It made a weird sound when I turned the key then it died."

"What kind of sound?"

"Kind of like. . ." Adam tried to imitate the sound but stopped when Jimmy started laughing. "What? You asked what it sounded like."

"I know. Sorry. It's just funny when people try to make car noises. That's all. I really wasn't laughing at you."

"Yeah, right," Adam said. But he found himself grinning anyway. Jimmy had a great laugh, totally infectious.

"I could take a look at it for you, if you want."

"You know about cars?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Some. Though these days there's not much you can do yourself since everything's computerized."

Computers or not, about the only thing Adam could do for a broken down car was call a tow truck. "That would be cool, if you don't mind." He pulled the cell phone off his belt. "Right now I better call Shannon and tell her I won't be in."

Jimmy glanced at his watch. "Aren't you dancing tonight?"

Adam flipped open the phone and started to punch in the number for the club. "Supposed to be, yeah."

"Wait a minute before you call."

Adam paused. "Why? She's already going to be pissed."

"You can take my car."

With the phone halfway to his ear, Adam stopped. "The Porsche?" He shook his head. "Forget it. I'm not driving your Porsche." Realizing how that sounded, he added, "Thanks anyway."

"Why not?"

Was the man kidding?

"Well..." Adam drew the single syllable out as he raised the phone to his ear. "Because it's brand new, and a Porsche, and not mine."

"Just wait a minute." Jimmy reached out and, pulling the phone away from Adam's ear, flipped it closed.

"Jim—"

"Adam, just listen a minute."

"No. I am not driving your new car. What if something happens?"

"Nothing will happen. You're just going to work. But if you'd feel better, would you rather take the blue car?"

The blue car was a sleek little Mercedes convertible that, as far as Adam could tell, spent most of its time sitting in the garage. It wasn't as new as the Porsche, but neither was it an option. Adam shook his head and opened the phone.

"Wait." Jimmy plucked the phone from Adam's hand.

"Hey!"

"Look, Adam, I would drive you myself but I have a conference call in ten minutes and I have to be here for it."

"Why do you have a conference call at seven o'clock at night?"

"It's only four on the west coast." Jimmy slid an arm around Adam's waist and with the other hand stuffed the phone in his own pocket. "Babe, it's just a car."

"But—" Adam struggled not to lean into Jimmy. Through his shirt he could feel the heat from Jimmy's hand at his waist and the press of those clever fingers. The man was trying to wear him down. And, damn him, Adam felt his resolve slipping away as he inhaled the faded scent of Jimmy's cologne.

"But nothing." Jimmy nuzzled the sensitive spot under Adam's ear.

The brush of lips and scrape of teeth sent sparks sizzling down Adam's spine and straight to his cock. With a marked lack of conviction, he pushed against Jimmy's chest. "Jim, stop. Give me my phone."

"You know, sometimes I think about you in that car." Jimmy flipped open the top button of Adam's shirt. "Sitting behind the wheel." Adam's throat was nipped then a warm, wet tongue soothed the sting. "The looks you'd get. . . a hot guy in a hot car. Everybody wanting to be in that car with you, sitting beside you."

"Jim." Almost against his will, Adam arched his neck, giving Jimmy better access.

"Except they can't, because you're mine." Jimmy's tongue dipped into the hollow at the base of Adam's throat.

"Yours," Adam sighed as he gave up the struggle and leaned into Jimmy.

"And you'll do whatever I want, won't you?" Jimmy angled their bodies so their cocks pressed together.

"Mmm."

"Know what I want?" Jimmy trailed little kisses and nips along Adam's jaw. "I want to bend you over the hood of my car while the engine's still warm. I want to fuck you hard and fast and make you scream." Sliding a hand between their bodies, he gave Adam's balls a gentle squeeze. "Would you like that, babe?"

"God, yes." Adam thrust his hips forward, pressing into Jimmy's hand. "Let's do it now."

Jimmy laughed. "Not now. You have to go to work. And I have things to do, too." He stroked Adam's cock through his pants. "But tonight when you get home..."

Adam whimpered when Jimmy's hand left his prick. Actually whimpered. How did this man get to him so fast and so completely? But he had no time to wonder before keys were pressed into his hand and Jimmy was turning him toward the car.

“Shhh.” Jimmy drew back. “Later. Right now you’re going to get in my car and go to work and think about what we’re going to do when you get home.”

“Jim, I—”

Jimmy’s lips brushed Adam’s ear. “Just say yes, baby.”

Adam’s fingers closed around the keys. “Okay. Yes.”

“Good. Now, get going or you’ll be late. And if you’re late, Shannon is going to take a chunk of your very fine ass.” Jimmy’s hand slid down and squeezed said ass. “And I am not sharing.”



Where the hell was the rest of his costume?

Adam glanced around the cluttered dressing room. Discarded shoes and clothes covered every available surface including the floor. The two tables held a jumble of makeup, hair gel, hair spray, brushes, combs and other various pieces of crap including a few parts of costumes, none of which were his.

The room was small, half the size of the women’s dressing room and was really nothing more than a converted store room fitted with a few lockers, some tables and a mirror. But it was better than getting dressed in the bathroom or having to share space with the women.

Adam swore as he rummaged through a pile of discarded clothes. This room wasn’t big enough to lose anything as large as a shirt and vest. Especially when they’d just been in his hand five minutes ago. So where were they?

The door opened and Shannon walked in. “Hey, why aren’t you dressed? You’re on right after Rob which gives you like five minutes to get yourself together.”

“Don’t you knock?” Adam asked. “I might have been naked.”

Shannon snorted. “Since when did you become so modest?” She laughed. “You got something I haven’t seen before, whip it out, honey. Maybe I’ll give you a raise. Now why aren’t you dressed?”

“I can’t find the top half of this stupid outfit.”

“What does it look like?”

“There’s a blue vest with silver embroidery and sparkly stuff and a shirt.”

Shannon glanced around. She lifted a pile of clothes off a nearby chair, grabbed something from underneath and held it up. “Is this it?”

“That’s the vest.” Adam took it. “But I’m still missing the shirt.”

Shannon looked at her watch. “You’ll have to go without. Put on the vest and let’s see how it works.”

He slipped it on and turned so she could look.

She nodded. “That’ll do. You can find the rest later. What are you supposed to be? A cowboy? Where’s your gun?”

Adam swallowed the joke that sprang to the tip of his tongue and picked up the holster from the table. He slid it around his hips and did up the buckle. “Want a bullet? They’re candy.”

She took it and popped it in her mouth. “Turn around and I’ll do up your Velcro while you fix your hair. You’ve got three minutes.”

Turning toward the mirror, Adam reached for a brush as Shannon began opening Velcro tabs and adjusting the fit of the vest.

“Nice hicky,” she said. “You dating a vacuum cleaner these days?”

“Damn.” Adam pulled back his hair and inspected his neck. Every time he looked at that mark it reminded him of that awful night at Jason’s, of how he’d thought it was over between him and Jimmy, and of Theo’s mouth on him, sucking up that mark then sucking his cock. Goddamn Theo marking him like that. And goddamn himself for letting it happen at all.

Shannon pressed one finger to the spot.

“Ow!” Adam turned sideways to the mirror and stared at the giant purplish bruise where neck met shoulder. He’d thought it was finally faded enough that he could go without concealer. He’d been wrong. “I didn’t think you could still see it so clearly.” He picked up a tube of concealer and squeezed some on his fingers.

“Not see it? A blind guy on a galloping horse couldn’t miss that.”

Shannon fastened the last of the Velcro tabs and stepped back. She made a circle in the air telling him to turn so she could inspect him. He did and she nodded.

“Look okay, boss?”

“Don’t you have any of the good concealer?”

“Not with me.”

She took the tube from him and applied more, blending it with a none-too-gentle touch. “There, that’ll have to do. Leave your hair down. That’ll make it less noticeable. And tell Mr. Hoover to watch it from now on. I don’t like my dancers all marked up.” She walked to the door and pulled it open. The sounds of music and general chaos rushed in, filling the small room. “Two minutes,” she said and let the door swing shut behind her.

Adam turned back to the mirror. Shannon was right. With his hair down the bruise was hardly visible. But he would have to do a better job with the concealer before he went home. No way he wanted to have to explain that mark to Jimmy.

He’d been so careful all week not to let Jimmy see, making sure they undressed in the dark and using the concealer as soon as he got out of the shower, and so far his care had worked. Jimmy hadn’t mentioned anything about the mark. Except he figured even if he had seen, Jimmy wouldn’t say anything. Adam had a suspicion that the man would sooner swallow his tongue than ask why his lover had a giant hicky on his shoulder.

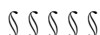
Jimmy. Adam smiled just thinking of his lover. Would the man really fuck him on the hood of the Porsche when he got home? A week ago Adam would have said no way, but recently Jimmy had been different, less reticent about their relationship and far more willing to touch and be touched in those small casual ways that said they were a couple. And possessive, Jimmy had suddenly become far more possessive, albeit in a good way.

Adam sighed. He’d been afraid that by telling Jimmy how he felt he might have made a huge mistake, one that would send the man screaming into the night. Instead, the admission

seemed to have had the opposite effect, letting him relax in a way that hadn't been possible before.

The door opened again, the noise from the club interrupting Adam's thoughts. Shannon poked her head in. "Adam, get the lead out. You're up."

With one final glance in the mirror, Adam grabbed the cowboy hat that went with the costume and left the dressing room. He had a show to do, and then a boyfriend to get home to. Life was good.



Adam eased the Porsche around the final turn in the driveway and stopped in front of the garage. The car was a dream to drive that was for sure. And Jimmy had been right, he got a lot of attention behind the wheel of such a hot car.

No lights showed in either the apartment or the house and Adam felt a twinge of disappointment. Jimmy must have fallen asleep. It looked like there wouldn't be any fucking on the hood of the Porsche tonight after all.

That promise had been in the back of his mind all night. He'd thought of it while he was on stage, imagining Jimmy's hands on him, the feel of Jimmy's cock inside him. The mind game had worked as it always did, and he'd given one hell of a performance, even Shannon had said so, as had the number and amount of tips he'd collected afterward.

Reaching into the console, he pulled out the garage door opener and pressed the button. The door rose in its track but no lights came on. Hmm, that was weird. With only the driveway lights to guide him, he eased the car forward into the garage and shut off the engine.

Adam got out of the car shoving the car keys in his pocket and pulling out his own door key. He'd just started around the car when the driveway lights went out.

What the hell?

Adam stopped. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness otherwise he'd kill himself trying to get up those stairs. Maybe the electricity was out. Except then the driveway lights wouldn't work either, would they? He didn't have a clue. So



what was going on? Maybe he could find the circuit breaker and see if he could see anything...

Suddenly he was grabbed from behind and shoved against the side of the car. Adrenalin dumped through his system, the instinct to fight or flee instantaneous and strong. But before he could do either, a familiar voice spoke close to his ear.

"I can't wait to get my cock in you, baby. Make you scream for me."

Adam moaned as the thrill of those words shot through him. The moan turned into a gasp as his shirt was ripped open. Buttons flew in all directions, pinging off the car's finish. Then Jimmy's hands were on him, skimming over his chest, catching his nipple-rings and tugging before sliding lower to work at his belt.

"You're so beautiful," Jimmy murmured. "I want you so bad, baby." Lips skimmed down the column of Adam's throat biting and licking.

Metal clinked as his belt was pulled off, his zipper yanked down and his pants shoved to his knees.

Capturing Adam's mouth in a demanding kiss, Jimmy leaned in, pressing him back against the car.

Adam's back arched and he wound his arms around Jimmy's neck. The thrill of being held mostly naked in the arms of his fully clothed lover, of having his own clothes torn off and the illusion of having his choice in the matter usurped was enough to weaken his knees and send his thoughts spinning away, lost in the swirl of sensation.

He would have collapsed when Jimmy released him if it weren't for the car at his back. But before he could gain his feet or his breath, he was half-lifted and flipped over on his stomach to lay sprawled across the Porsche's hood, the metal warm against his skin, the steady tick, tick, tick of the cooling engine the only sounds other than the chirp of crickets coming through the open garage door.

"Gonna fuck you now." Jimmy leaned over Adam's back to nip at his shoulder. "Gonna do what I want. Shove my cock in that sweet ass and make you come for me." Another nip, harder

this time, enough to make Adam flinch. "Gonna make you beg."

"Yes," Adam breathed. "Do it. God, fuck me."

There was a pause then a cool slickness slid along his crease.

"Talk to me." A thick finger pushed inside him. "You have such a filthy mouth, baby. I want to hear it."

"Please," Adam whimpered as a second finger joined the first twisting to brush his gland. "Please, Jim, I want your dick inside me. Need your cock up my ass, baby. Want to come for you. Make me shoot all over your car. Please, don't make me wait anymore."

With his cock hard and leaking and trapped between his body and the edge of the car, the position was very nearly painful, but Adam wouldn't have moved if his life depended on it. Very nearly naked and splayed across the hood, ravished by the man he adored, he wanted this moment to go on forever.

Distantly he heard the tearing of a condom packet but Jimmy's fingers never left his ass, working him mercilessly, driving him too fast toward his orgasm.

Adam tried to look back over his shoulder but just as he raised his head the blunt tip of Jimmy's cock pressed against his hole. Jimmy sheathed himself in one long thrust tearing a cry from Adam as he was shoved hard against the car.

"Uh," Jimmy grunted. "Baby, you feel so good. So tight. So hot. Love fucking you. Want to do it all night."

Adam writhed, fingers clutching at the opposite edge of the hood as Jimmy pulled almost all the way out then thrust back in to the hilt.

"Fuck me," Adam groaned. "Shove that big hard cock in me, babe. I want it. I need it. Please. God. Fuck me hard. Hurt me. Please. Want to feel you for a week."

"You talk like a slut," Jimmy panted. He slammed into Adam over and over shoving him hard against the car. "My slut, aren't you mine, baby? All mine."

"Yours," Adam gasped, "I'm your slut, your whore. Do anything you want to me. I love it. Love you."

"Oh, God." Jimmy's rhythm faltered, his thrusts becoming faster, harder, almost brutal. "Close. Gonna come, baby. Come for me. Come with me."

Whether from the punishing pace or the words, Adam's balls pulled tight, his muscles clamping down on Jimmy's cock as the orgasm roared down his spine and out his cock and he shot against the side of the car.

With a cry Jimmy shoved in deep. His shaft swelling against Adam's hole and pulsing as he filled the condom.

Jimmy collapsed over Adam's back, heart pounding, the tick of the engine and the song of the crickets the only counterpoint to their harsh breathing.

Jimmy's cheek rubbed against Adam's shoulder. "Adam," lips grazed the back of Adam's neck. A kiss pressed to the very spot where the bruise was. "I love you so much. Please, don't leave me."

Adam lay still. Fucked nearly senseless and drained from his own orgasm, he tried to gather his thoughts and could not. "Not gonna leave you, Jim. I love you."

Jimmy laced their fingers together and pressed another kiss to the back of Adam's neck. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Adam laughed. "No, I liked it. Not sure I can move just yet though. Maybe I'll just sleep here on the car."

Jimmy's chuckle rumbled against Adam's back. "There are landscapers coming in the morning." Jimmy shifted, cock sliding free of Adam's body as he pushed himself up. "What would they say if they saw you all naked and debauched on the hood of my car?"

"Nice hood ornament?"

"Smartass," Jimmy slapped Adam's ass lightly. "C'mon, I'll help you upstairs. It's the least I can do after having my way with you."

"You going to stay?" Adam let Jimmy help him up.

"Want me to?" Jimmy's arms slid around him and he was held close.

“Always.” He touched his lips to Jimmy’s throat. “I always want you with me.”

The pause was palpable. Adam tensed. He could feel Jimmy wanted to say something more. But Jimmy just touched their lips together very softly.

“I hope you always do.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

Jimmy picked up the living room phone and dialed Adam's cell number. As he pressed the final digit and the phone rang his mouth went dry as dust and his palms grew damp.

And how stupid was that?

This was Adam, his lover, he was calling, not some stranger. And it wasn't like Adam was going to say no when Jimmy asked him. So why did he feel like a high school kid trying to work up the courage to ask the hottest guy in school to the prom? Not that he'd know what that was like. He hadn't gone to his prom. But surely it couldn't be any more nerve wracking than this.

"Stop being such an idiot," Jimmy muttered just as the ringing stopped.

"Hello?"

"Adam, it's me."

"Hey, Jim, that's really weird."

"What is?" Jimmy's fingers flexed on the receiver.

"I was just going to call to tell you I was coming over. Where are you?"

"In the living room. What about you?"

Adam laughed. "Right outside the back door."

Jimmy walked to the door and opened it. There was one brief moment when they stood looking at each other with their respective phones still pressed to their ears.

Jimmy felt like a character in one of those bizarre, anti-plot, David Lynch films. Then Adam grinned and flipped his phone closed and the moment passed.

God, he looked so good. Would he ever stop getting that fluttering low in his belly when he saw Adam? He hoped not.

Laying the phone aside, Jimmy pulled Adam into his arms. The kiss, just a brief touch of lips, ended too soon, Adam drawing away before Jimmy was ready to let him go.

"What were you calling me for?"

"You first." Jimmy was delaying the inevitable and he knew it. He really was acting like a goofy high school kid.

"I was wondering if I could borrow the car." Adam smiled shyly. "I promised Steph I'd go down to Flesh Tones with her."

"What for?"

"She wants to talk to Shannon about a job."

"She wants to work at Flesh Tones? Why doesn't she just ask Laton?"

Adam shrugged. "She says they don't get along. I don't know. She didn't really say."

Jimmy sighed. He'd hoped that Laton and Stephanie would find a way to reconnect during her visit, hoped that by her staying at Laton's condo that father and daughter might find some common ground even if they weren't exactly inseparable. It looked like that wasn't happening.

"So is it all right?"

"Hmm?"

"The car—can I borrow it?"

"Of course, I told you to just take it whenever you want. You don't have to ask me. That's why I gave you my spare keys."

"I know, but I'm still asking."

"And I'm still saying it's fine."

There was a pause. Adam seemed on the verge of saying something more. Jimmy waited, but when Adam remained silent he prompted. "Was there something else?"

"Yeah, actually, there is." Adam's gaze slid away from Jimmy's as he reached in his back pocket. He produced an envelope and held it out. "I wanted to give you this."

Jimmy's gut clenched, which was ridiculous. It was just an envelope. But something in the way Adam held it made Jimmy not want to take it.

He did take it, but made no move to open it. "What is it?"

"It's rent money," Adam tilted his head and a curtain of hair fell forward, concealing his features.

"I don't want it." Jimmy held out the envelope.

Adam made no move to take it. "I told you when I moved in that I wasn't living here for nothing."

And because Adam had said that, Jimmy had deliberately never set a price for the apartment, hoping against hope that the issue would simply disappear. He should have known better.

"Listen, Adam." Jimmy assumed his let's negotiate tone, "I don't even know what I should charge for that place—"

"That's okay. I figured all that out." Adam went on to explain how when Jimmy hadn't mentioned the rent, he'd looked in the paper and, after checking how much similar apartments in the area were renting for, he had set the price for himself. "There's three months there. First, last and a month's security. If you think it should be more—"

"I don't want it at all. I told you—"

"And I told you. Jim, you can't just give me stuff."

"I don't know what you mean. I haven't given you anything." Not that he hadn't wanted to.

"Like the apartment. Like the use of your car. Jim, I'm not your kept boy. I can't just keep on—"

"Okay, okay." Jimmy held up his hands. This was getting them nowhere. "We can talk about the rent, if you want. But in the meantime—" He held out the envelope.

"No." Adam stuck his hands in his pockets.

Why did the man have to be so stubborn?

Jimmy opened his mouth to ask then closed it. He did not want to fight, about anything, but especially not about something as stupid as money. Besides, it wasn't like he had to cash the check.

"Fine." Jimmy stuffed the envelope in his own pocket. "But we are not done talking about this."

"Jim—"

"Not now." Jimmy softened the words with a smile. "There's something I wanted to ask you."

Adam looked wary. "What?"

"Don't look like that. It's nothing bad." He reached out, but when Adam didn't respond he let his hand drop back to his side. "I have these concert tickets, you know? It's a benefit for

the homeless at the Kimmel Center. It's in two weeks and I want to take you, if you want to go, that is."

Adam's eyes widened. "You mean, go out, like together?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yes."

"Like a date?"

"Just like a date."

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

"Why?" He couldn't believe Adam was actually saying no, that he wouldn't go out with him. This was what he wanted, wasn't it? To be able to go out together in public?

"Because you're not ready. You're not even out to your family and you want to go out with me to some fancy place where—"

"It's not like that. It's just cocktails and hors d'oeuvres and a little Beethoven, just a nice evening. It's not like I want to march in the gay pride parade."

As for not being out to his family, his brother had tickets to the same event and would surely see them there. But he would keep that bit of information to himself. If Adam knew Laton would be at the Kimmel he would almost certainly say no, and no was not the answer Jimmy wanted.

Adam sighed and shoved a hand through his hair.

"And besides," Jimmy rolled on before Adam could say no again, "weren't you the one who said I had to do this in my own way, in my own time?"

"Yeah, I said that."

"Well, this is my time." Now he did touch Adam. His arms slid around his lover's waist and he stepped in close. "I want to do this and I want you with me. I need you with me." He kissed the corner of Adam's mouth. "Please, say yes."

Adam inhaled a long breath then exhaled very slowly. His shoulders slumped a little. "When did you say it was?"

Jimmy saw his victory in the man's eyes. He saw too that Adam wasn't happy about it. It didn't matter. It would be great. He would make it great, for both of them.



"I didn't know she was going to ask me to dance like right now," Stephanie whispered.

Adam shrugged. "If she didn't like your look, she would have told you to come back on a regular audition day."

Or not at all.

They were standing in front of the stage in the nearly deserted club, Shannon's voice a faint murmur as she talked on the bar phone while they waited.

"She sort of scares me a little the way she looked at me, like she was sizing me up." Stephanie darted a nervous glance over at Shannon. Her fingers twisted in the hem of her T-shirt, a thing she'd been doing ever since they arrived at the club.

"That is what she's doing. That's her job." Adam took her hand to stop the nervous fidgeting. "She's really not that scary though. Just don't piss her off."

"Oh, great." Stephanie pretended to wipe sweat from her brow. "Now I really am scared."

Adam squeezed her hand. "You'll do fine. Shannon's a ball-buster, but since you don't have any..."

Stephanie laughed, the sound really loud in the quiet club. Her hand flew to her mouth and her eyes went huge as she shot a look over at Shannon who was just hanging up the phone.

"Sorry about that," Shannon said as she joined them in front of the stage. "Let's just get you up on stage, start the music and you can show me what you've got." She walked over to the side of the stage where the DJ's equipment was set up, leaving them alone again.

"I think I'm going to throw up," Stephanie whispered.

"Relax, you'll be great." Impulsively, Adam kissed her cheek then gave her a gentle shove toward the stage.

Adam smiled to himself as the music started and Stephanie walked up the steps and took her place in the golden glow of the spotlight. He really liked Jimmy's niece. She totally got his sense of humor and she said exactly what she thought. He liked that. Hopefully, Shannon would like what she saw and Steph would get the job.

Shannon returned, clipboard in hand.

“What do you write on that thing?” Adam gestured to the clipboard. “I never see you without it when you hold auditions.”

Shannon tapped her pen against said clipboard, her eyes never leaving the girl on stage. “I write my impressions.”

“And what are your impressions?”

“She’s cute. But I won’t know till I see the tits. If those are good then we can work on her dancing or whatever else she might need.”

They watched for a while, saying nothing.

“She’s a decent dancer,” Adam said.

“Yeah, she’s not bad.” Shannon shot him a look, one pale brow lifted. “Didn’t know you swung that way though.”

Adam felt his cheeks go hot. “She’s just a friend. We’re not like together or anything.”

“Uh-huh.”

Stephanie danced through two more songs, slinking along the edge of the stage and taking several turns around the pole. She gave a hell of a performance, Adam thought, considering that she was stripping in street clothes and with no time to prepare.

As the music ended Shannon walked to the edge of the stage. After a moment Adam followed. Stephanie came over wearing only a purple thong and a deep blush.

“That wasn’t bad,” Shannon said, tapping her pen against her clipboard.

Behind Shannon’s back Adam gave Stephanie the thumbs-up sign and mouthed, “You’re in.”

Stephanie smiled hugely. “Thanks.”

The door behind the bar banged open. It slammed against the wall and they all jumped.

“Stephanie Marie, get the hell down from there.” Laton stormed across to the foot of the stage and glared up at the nearly naked girl. “And put some clothes on.”

“What the hell is your problem?” Shannon dropped her clipboard and turned to face Laton. “I’m having an audition here.”

“Not with my daughter you’re not.”

"You can't tell me what to do," Stephanie stamped her foot.

"I'm your father and I do not want you working in a strip bar."

"It's your strip bar."

Shannon looked at Adam. You set me up for this, the look said. And he knew he would be hearing about it later. He gave her his best bland expression and let his gaze slide away. Besides, the show between Stephanie and her father was much more interesting than whatever reaming Shannon had in store for him.

"I can't believe you're such a hypocrite." Still wearing only her thong, Stephanie stood, hands fisted on her hips, eyes blazing with fury, any shyness evidently forgotten.

"I am not a hypocrite. I just don't want you shaking it on stage like some kind of slut. You're my daughter, for Christ's sake."

"Every woman who dances here is somebody's daughter," Shannon bent and picked up her clipboard.

"I wasn't talking to you," Laton snapped. He turned on Adam as if noticing him for the first time. "And what the hell are you looking at? Go find something to do or I'm firing your ass."

"I'm not on the clock," Adam said.

"Then get the hell out."

"Adam brought me here because I told him I needed a job."

"You don't need a job," Laton said. "You need money you come to me. I'll give you money. You don't need to be dancing naked for a bunch of perverts."

"Fine." Grabbing her shirt from the stage, Stephanie pulled it over her head. "You don't want me working here, I'll go somewhere else. There are dozens of strip clubs in this city. I'm freakin' hot and I'll get a job at one of them."

She stuffed one leg into her jeans then the other and yanked them up before grabbing her shoes and storming down the steps. "I don't need your money or your help or anything else from you. So you can just go to hell."

With her shoes still in her hand and her head high, she walked to the door, yanked it open and stomped out.

Without a word to Shannon or Adam, Laton went after his daughter.

Shannon sighed. She walked up on stage, leaned over and picked something up before returning to where Adam still stood. In her hand she held a purple lace bra.

"Well, that was fun." She held the bra out to him. "Why didn't you tell me she was Laton's kid?"

He took it and stuffed it in his pocket. "Why me?"

"I wouldn't have cared who, but one of you should have told me. If you had you could have saved us that little scene."

"I guess you're not going to hire her now."

Shannon jerked a shoulder in a sort of half-shrug. "I want to. Like I said, she's cute and she's not a bad dancer. And she has a nice body."

"And Laton will freak if you do."

"You think?" Her lips curved into a wide smile.

Adam returned the smile. "You want to hire her just because he'll freak."

"Why, Adam, I have no idea what you mean by that." But she couldn't quite manage to hold back the laugh. "No, really, I do like her. I think she'll do fine." She glanced down at her clipboard. "I didn't even get her number."

"I can give you a number. But what are you going to do about Laton?"

"I'll talk to him. I can't promise anything because God knows he can be a stubborn ass, but tell Stephanie I'll call her."

"What are you going to say to him?"

"I'm going to explain to him how it's better for her to work here where we can keep an eye on her rather than at some dive where she'll be all on her own." She shoved a hand through her hair. "There are some really sleazy places in this town. And if she ends up dancing at one of them there's no telling what could happen to her. This is a respectable club. A lot of them aren't."

"Think he'll go for that?"

She nodded. "I think so. Maybe."

"I hope you're right."

"You gotta have faith, Adam." She tucked her clipboard under her arm. "Now, go find your friend and give her my message. I'll go track down daddy dearest and see about beating some sense into him."



## CHAPTER TWELVE

---

Adam finished tying his tie and checked the mirror for the twentieth time. Picking up the black eyeliner he leaned in and opened his eyes wide, lining his lashes with a steady hand. He blinked, picked up the mascara and put it down again. No, that would be too much. The effect should be subtle, not the over-the-top look he wore on stage or when he went to clubs. Somehow he didn't think Jimmy would appreciate that. It was their first real date, the first time they would be going out together in public and he wanted to look perfect. Even if this date was a bad idea, and surely it was, he couldn't quite suppress the flutter of excitement in his belly at the thought of going out as a couple with Jimmy.

Gathering his hair in one hand, he fastened it with a silver clip at the back of his neck then studied the effect with a critical eye. Not bad. Except Jimmy liked his hair down. Removing the clip, he dropped it on the dresser and ran a comb then his fingers through his hair to give it that slightly messy look he liked.

He still felt weird about accepting the tux as Jimmy's gift. But when he'd laid his credit card on the gleaming countertop the grinning salesman has said everything was already taken care of, thank you, and there was no need for Adam's card. Then when he'd tried to talk to Jimmy about it, all he'd gotten in response was a noncommittal grunt. He was just starting to realize that when Jimmy's face took on that stubborn, we're-not-having-this-conversation look any attempt at arguing was only a waste of breath. So despite the distinct feeling that he had a sign on his back that read **Kept Boy**, Adam had caved.

Just as he opened the box that held the cufflinks -- another gift from Jimmy -- there was a knock at the door. He fumbled the cufflink, which fell to the floor with a soft metallic clink.

"Shit." He scooped it up.

Why the hell was he so nervous all of a sudden?

Leaving the cufflinks on the dresser, Adam turned just as Jimmy appeared in the bedroom doorway. He drank in the sight of his lover dressed in his own impeccably tailored tux. With every detail perfect, Jimmy looked every inch the wealthy aristocrat he was.

Adam suddenly felt like a peasant. "Hi," he said. "I'm not quite ready."

Jimmy's gaze slid over Adam and the heat that flared in his eyes went straight to Adam's cock. "You look ready enough for what I want."

Adam walked to him, slipped his arms around Jimmy's neck and leaned in for a kiss. Jimmy's arms wound around him and their mouths came together. The kiss heated quickly, Adam's lips parting when Jimmy's tongue probed for entrance.

The kiss broke and Jimmy sighed. "Hi."

"You look totally hot." Staying close, he breathed in the scents of cologne and soap and skin as he rubbed his cheek against Jimmy's. Mmm, he loved the feel of freshly shaven cheeks. "I'd totally jump you if it wouldn't make us late."

"Who cares? They can start without us." Jimmy's hands slid up Adam's back and lips brushed his ear.

Sparks ignited along Adam's spine and he shivered. He pressed closer, Jimmy's erection hard and hot against his own even through their clothes. "You promised me dinner and a show." He nipped at Jimmy's earlobe. "Then maybe, if I have a good time, you will too."

"So I have to feed you before you'll put out?" Jimmy's hands cupped Adam's ass and squeezed.

"You don't get nothing for nothing, big guy."

"Mickey Dee's it is then." They both laughed and Jimmy released him. "Where are your cufflinks?"

"Over there on the dresser."

Jimmy followed Adam back to the mirror, all the time keeping close so that Adam couldn't help but be aware of his nearness. His cock, already hard from their kiss, took special pleasure in the close proximity.



Adam picked up the first cufflink. But when he started to slide it through his cuff Jimmy stopped him with a hand on his wrist and took the cufflink from him.

"Let me." He took Adam's wrist and fastened the cuff. "Getting you into a real tux has been my fondest wet dream for quite a while now."

"Oh yeah?" Adam's pulse pounded as Jimmy's thumb made small circles over the pale tracing of veins in his wrist.

"Well, not exactly." Releasing Adam's wrist, Jimmy took his opposite hand, fastened the other cuff then twined their fingers together. "It's more like getting you out of a real tux is my fondest wet dream." He lifted their joined hands and brushed his lips over Adam's knuckles. "Though this is damn good, too." Turning to the bed, he picked up Adam's jacket and held it out.

Slipping his arms through the sleeves, Adam turned and found Jimmy studying him, an unreadable expression in his eyes. A thread of doubt wormed its way through him. "What's the matter? It's the eyeliner, isn't it? I can take it off."

Jimmy shook his head. Stepping forward, he turned Adam back to face the mirror. "Look at you," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "You're so beautiful." The hands on Adam's shoulders slid down and Jimmy's arms wrapped around his waist as he pressed close. "So perfect."

Adam studied their reflections in the mirror. Dressed as he was, he looked like someone who actually belonged with a classy guy like Jimmy. They looked like a real couple. His stomach fluttered with excitement and nerves.

Turning his head, he touched their lips together in a brief kiss. "You ready to go?"

"In a second." Jimmy released him. "First, I have something for you. It's in the other room."

"Jim, no. You already bought me—"

"Shhh. It's nothing big. Relax. Hell, you might even think I'm a big weirdo when you see what it is."

As soon as they entered the living room, Adam saw the long white box on the coffee-table. Jimmy picked it up and held it out to him.

"I saw these on my way home today and it made me think of you. So I bought them.

Flowers.

Adam took the box and opened it, a lump already forming in his throat. He'd never gotten flowers from a lover before and the old-fashioned romance of the gesture overwhelmed him.

And here was not just a clutch of posies either. Two dozen long-stemmed red roses nestled in a bed of baby's breath and greenery, their rich redolent fragrance permeating the air as soon as the lid was lifted.

Unable to speak past the emotions welling inside him, Adam simply looked from the roses to the man he loved and back again.

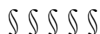
Jimmy was watching him, hands twisted together in front of him. His gaze met Adam's and he smiled, cheeks going pink. "I knew you'd think I was just a big weirdo."

Adam swallowed, shaking his head and found his voice. "No. God, Jim, they're... no one ever gave me flowers before. I love them."

"I like that." Jimmy unclasped his hands. "Being the only one who's ever done that for you."

Adam walked to Jimmy, took the man in his arms and kissed him. But when the kiss threatened to go deep, Jimmy drew back.

"We have to stop." Jimmy's voice held real regret. "Otherwise I'm going to have you out of that tux and bent over the couch in a New York minute and we'll never make it to the concert. And considering how gorgeous you look," Jimmy took Adam's hand, "that would be a damn shame."



The Kimmel Center, Philly's newest and most spectacular performing arts venue, shone like a jewel in the falling twilight. With glossy wood and sparkling glass everywhere, the inside was even more elegant than the exterior. The people, too, were beautiful. Adam tried not to gawk as they made their way through the throng of tuxedoed men and bejeweled women. They were halfway up the stairs of the two-tiered lobby when

Jimmy stopped him with a light touch on his arm. His gaze scanned the crowd below them, like he was looking for someone. But who?

“Jim, who are you looking for?”

Instead of answering, Jimmy inclined his head toward a clutch of people standing just below them. “Look, there’s the governor and his wife. See them?”

Adam nodded politely. What did he care about the governor and his wife? He didn’t know them. But he kept this sentiment to himself because Jimmy, it seemed, was an avid people watcher. And maybe that was all there was to it. His lover was just looking to see if he could spot famous faces. It was sort of cute, actually.

“See that guy over there next to the redhead who’s falling out of her dress?” Jimmy gestured, pointing without looking like he was pointing. “He’s head of one of the largest charitable foundations in the country. He and my mother are great friends. He was quite smitten with her a few years back, before she married Frank and moved to Florida.”

“Who’s Frank?”

“My stepfather, I guess you’d say, though I was in my late twenties when they got together. He designs golf courses for a living. And he adores my mother.”

“What happened to your real father?”

“He died when I was fifteen.”

Adam let his fingers brush the back of Jimmy’s hand. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” Jimmy sighed. “It was a long time ago. But I was lucky because after my dad died I still had Laton.”

Adam winced inwardly at the thought of a young grieving Jimmy having nobody but Laton to depend on.

“He was twenty-three at the time and he really stepped up and did what needed doing. He handled the stuff that my mother couldn’t.”

Like her gay teenage son?

They continued up the steps. At the top, Jimmy took two glasses of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter and

handed one to Adam. His eyes were warm as he touched their glasses together. When he spoke his voice was soft, for Adam's ears only. "You're the most gorgeous thing here tonight."

The compliment warmed Adam down to his toes. He smiled into his wine as he watched the ebb and flow of the crowd around them. Jimmy had brought him flowers. And they were out in public together where everyone could see, just like a real couple. Who needed anything else?

"Jimmy, I didn't realize I'd see you here."

Adam and Jimmy both turned. A tall, gaunt-faced man with a fringe of gray hair held out his hand. Jimmy shook it.

"Mitch, it's nice to see you." Jimmy turned to a plump little brunette in black chiffon who might have been any age from forty-five to sixty. "And Melinda. You look wonderful. How are the boys?"

Melinda smiled and kissed Jimmy's cheek. "Thank you, darling, they're both doing well. It's so sweet of you to ask."

Jimmy turned to Adam. "I'd like you both to meet Adam Hyland. Adam, this is Mitch Daniels and his wife Melinda. Mitch is a client and a good friend of the family."

"Nice to meet you," Adam said as his hand was shaken.

"Hyland," Mitch Daniels mused. "I know an investment banker named Horace Hyland. Any relation?"

Adam shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Adam is a dancer," Jimmy offered.

"Really?" Melinda leaned in, her eyes alight with interest. "What sort of dance?" Adam opened his mouth but she rolled right over him. "Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess." She studied him, brows slightly drawn together. "Ballet. Am I right?"

"Well," Adam hedged. How the hell was he supposed to tell these people he was a stripper? "I was trained in ballet, but I'm not actually..."

"I knew it." She pressed her hands together, a sort of silent clap. "You move like a dancer." She leaned in even closer and laid a perfectly manicured hand on Adam's arm. Diamonds glittered on three of her four fingers. "We saw you coming up the steps with Jimmy. And I said to Mitchell, that boy is a

dancer, mark my words.” She smiled displaying teeth so perfect they just had to be caps. “Where did you get your training?”

“SAB. In New York.”

“What’s...” Mitch started to ask.

“School of American Ballet,” his wife answered. “Honestly, Mitchell, sometimes you are such a cretin.” She turned her attention back to Adam. “I have several friends on the faculty there. When did you graduate?”

“Almost five years ago.”

“Oh, my goodness, you’re just a baby.” She laughed. “But I’m sure we must know some of the same people. What was your...”

Her question was cut off by the chime calling everyone to find their seats.

Mitch Daniels took his wife’s arm. “Good God, Lin, leave the man be.” To Adam he said, “You should never have mentioned ballet to my wife. She’ll talk your ear off about it now. She’s a frustrated dancer herself.”

Melinda shot him a look. “We have a few minutes.”

“Will you let Jimmy and Adam find their dates and their seats?” He gave her arm a slight tug and got her moving. She made a face but went with him.

“We’ll catch up at intermission,” she called over one bare shoulder.

Adam watched them go.

Jimmy touched his arm. “You never told me you were a professionally trained ballet dancer.”

“It never came up.” And why the hell did it have to come up now. He didn’t like to talk about the career that never was. He didn’t even like to think about it. It still hurt too much.

“That’s a pretty big thing never to come up.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“You’re twenty-two. Nothing was a long time ago.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not who I am anymore.”

“Adam...”

The chime sounded again, interrupting. Thank God.

"I guess we better go find our seats," Jimmy let the subject drop but his look said the conversation wasn't over. Reaching inside his jacket, he produced the tickets. "It says we need to go to door C."

"Here, let me have my ticket. I'll meet you at our seats." Adam plucked one of the tickets from Jimmy's fingers. "I'm going to the bathroom."

He didn't want to talk about his dancing. Not with Jimmy. Not with Melinda Daniels. Not with anybody. And having it all brought up so unexpectedly had shaken him more than he liked to admit. He needed a minute to get himself together.

Making his way back downstairs, he stopped an usher who pointed him toward the bathrooms. He followed the man's directions, and, rounding the corner at the end of the hall, he nearly collided with Melinda Daniels.

"Excuse me." Adam caught her elbow and steadied her as she teetered on her spiky heels. "I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh, Adam, it's you." She laid her hand over his on her arm. "I'm fine, honey, don't give it a thought. I was entirely to blame, not looking where I was going." She smiled then glanced around. "Actually, I'm glad I ran into you."

Adam returned her smile. This was obviously not his night. "The concert's about to start. I really should..."

Melinda leaned in close and spoke just above a whisper. "I'm so pleased to see you and Jimmy here together."

Adam blinked. "Why?"

"Why?" she echoed. "Well, I'm just glad Jimmy has finally met someone."

"I'm not sure..." Adam began, but Melinda barreled on.

"Oh, honey, you don't have to be coy with me. We've suspected for years that Jimmy was..." She made a little flippy gesture with her free hand, her rings glittering. "You know. But I never expected to see him with anyone. Cynthia must be beside herself."

"Cynthia?"

"Jimmy's mother, of course. Surely, you've met Cynthia."

“Um...” The wine he’d drunk earlier was burning a hole in his stomach as Adam floundered for something appropriate to say.

“You haven’t met Cynthia?” Melinda’s eyebrows rose. “Well, I’m sure you will when she comes up for Laton’s daughter’s engagement party. You will be there, of course.”

Jimmy’s mother was coming? He wondered when, or if, Jimmy had been planning on telling him. And would she be staying at the house?

“We should get together for dinner sometime, the four of us.” She glanced at her watch. “I really need to get back. Mitchell will think I got lost.” She patted his hand. “See you at intermission, dear.”

What the hell?

Feeling like she’d hit him with a two-by-four, Adam watched Melinda totter away. He would have to tell Jimmy about their little conversation. So much for not being out to his friends. The woman had seemed positively gleeful at seeing Jimmy and him together, even more so at having the chance to talk about it. He wondered how many people she would tell before the evening was over.

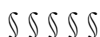
And what would Jimmy’s reaction be? It was one thing to talk about coming out to your friends and family and quite another to actually do it.

The lights went down just as Adam slipped into his seat.

“I wasn’t sure you’d make it back in time,” Jimmy murmured. In the dark he took Adam’s hand and twined their fingers together.

It felt good sitting there in the dark, the music swelling around them, Jimmy’s hand so warm and strong in his. He only hoped it wouldn’t be the last time.

With a sigh that was part resignation and part contentment, Adam settled back to listen.



“Are you sure you had a good time?” Jimmy unlocked the front door. Dropping his keys on the hall table, he punched in the code for the alarm system, disarming it.

"You already asked me that twice. I told you, I had a great time. I like Tchaikovsky."

Jimmy smiled. He had enjoyed the Beethoven more but didn't say so.

"I'm glad. I was thinking of getting a subscription to the orchestra next season." He paused. "Unless you'd prefer the ballet."

He hadn't thought of any such thing, not until that night, but it was a good idea and seemed like a good way to get back to the subject of Adam's dancing, the subject he really wanted to talk about.

Adam followed him into the living room, slipping out of his jacket as they went. "I don't go to the ballet."

"Not ever?" Jimmy took off his own jacket and laid it on a nearby chair.

"No."

They fell silent. The clock chimed eleven-thirty.

"Jim, we need to—"

"Will you tell me—"

They both stopped.

"Go ahead," Adam said.

"No, you first."

"Okay," Adam sighed.

A thread of doubt snaked through Jimmy, spoiling his good mood. Something was wrong. He saw it in the set of his lover's shoulders and the tension around his mouth.

"What is it?" Jimmy reached for Adam's hands. "Did I do something wrong?" Had his bringing up the ballet done that?

"No, it's not you." Adam leaned in for a quick kiss then, releasing one of Jimmy's hands, tugged him toward the sofa. "Can we sit?"

Jimmy settled on the sofa next to Adam, nerves beginning to dance along his skin despite the reassurance that he'd done nothing wrong.

Adam sighed again. "Remember when I went to the bathroom before the concert started?"



Jimmy nodded.

“Well, I saw Melinda Daniels when I went downstairs. Practically knocked her over, actually. And she told me how happy she was to see us and how it was so nice that you’d finally met someone.” Adam paused. “Jim, she knows we were there together as a couple.”

Jimmy waited for that sick feeling, the one he’d always gotten whenever he’d been in danger of being outed as a gay man. But it didn’t come. He dug a little deeper, looking for it or the fear that had kept him in the closet for the past two plus decades. He didn’t find it.

“Jim, did you hear me? Your friends know about us, about you.”

“I heard you.”

“And?” Adam sat forward. Tugging his hand free, he clasped them together in his lap.

“And what do you want me to say?”

Adam’s eyes widened. “Something. I want you to say something, not just sit there all cool and collected like I just told you it was going to be a sunny day tomorrow. I mean, what the hell, Jim? I just told you you’re out and. . .”

Seeing the way Adam was wringing his hands, Jimmy covered them with one of his. Strangely, the more keyed up Adam got, the calmer Jimmy became.

“Listen to me.” Jimmy pried Adam’s fingers apart. “I asked you to that concert tonight as my date. You accepted as my date. We weren’t pretending otherwise. I’m done with pretending. Do you know how many years I’ve been dragging poor Rene around as my beard?” Adam opened his mouth to say something but Jimmy continued without a pause. “Well, I’m done with that. If people know, then they know. And you said she was happy—”

“Jesus, Jim, she wasn’t happy. She was trying to get gossip. Why do you always think the best of people?”

Laton had asked him the same question many, many times over the years. But now, hearing the question from Adam, Jimmy discarded the flat denial he’d given his brother on all

those occasions that he didn't think the best of everyone. "Why do you think the worst?" Jimmy asked very quietly.

"Because that way, when they act like assholes, I don't get disappointed."

It was one of the saddest things he'd ever heard, especially coming from someone so young.

Reaching for Adam, Jimmy tried to pull the man into his arms. For a moment Adam remained unyielding and Jimmy felt his first frisson of real fear since they'd begun this conversation. Why was his lover, a man who was completely comfortable with his own sexuality, so freaked out about Jimmy's?

"Why is this such a big deal for you?" To his relief Adam turned to him rather than away.

Sliding his arms around Jimmy's neck, he laid his head on Jimmy's shoulder. "People are mean and hurtful, Jim. I just don't want you to get hurt because of me."

Jimmy's heart twisted. He gathered Adam close. "Melinda Daniels can't hurt me."

It wasn't entirely true. The woman was a notorious gossip who could damage his reputation if she wanted to, but he didn't see that as a real possibility. And even if it was, now didn't seem like the time to say so.

"Stop worrying about Melinda, will you?" Jimmy pressed his lips into Adam's hair. "Now, let's not talk about this anymore. Tell me about your dancing. You must have been incredibly good to get into a school like that."

Adam sighed, and it wasn't a happy sound. "I really don't like talking about it, Jim."

"Please?" He knew it wasn't fair to push, but this was an aspect of his lover that was entirely new and he wanted to know. "Will you just tell me, and I promise we don't ever have to talk about it again."

Adam hesitated and for a moment Jimmy was sure he would refuse, then he began to talk.

"There's not that much to tell. I started taking ballet when I was little with my sister."

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah, we're twins. She hated dance and I loved it. When she wanted to quit I begged her to keep going because it was the only way I would be allowed to go." Adam stirred in Jimmy's arms like he wanted to pull away, but Jimmy held on.

"Why?"

Adam shrugged. "That's just how it was. My father has some pretty definite ideas about how things should be, and boys taking ballet didn't fit with that."

"That's ridiculous." Jimmy's anger rose on behalf of the boy Adam had been. "How could he—"

"Can I just finish?" Now Adam did lean back a little.

Jimmy took a breath and tried to quell his indignation. This was hard for Adam and he didn't want to make it worse by continually interrupting.

"Anyway, when I was thirteen I went to New York to SAB. I didn't think he'd let me go, but when I got accepted he was all about it. I couldn't believe it. I kept expecting him to change his mind at the last minute, sort of yank it away from me, but he didn't."

"He was proud of you."

Adam laughed. It was a bitter sound. "He was glad to get rid of me, was what he was. I heard him telling my mother the night before I left that it was the answer to his prayers. He never knew how to deal with me, what to do with a gay son. And now he had his answer."

Jimmy's jaw dropped and he stared at Adam. "He didn't really say that."

"Yeah, he did. Maybe not those exact words, but that was what he meant." Adam touched Jimmy's cheek. His thumb traced Jimmy's lower lip. "So, you see, I know how people can be, how they can let you down."

"I'm sorry." Jimmy leaned into the touch. His heart ached for the boy whose father hadn't wanted him, as well as for the man he had become.

"Don't be. I got what I wanted, and so did he. It was all for the best."

Adam paused. "Now I need to ask you something. Can I?"

"Of course. Anything."

"Why didn't you tell me your mother was coming for a visit?"

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

"I know I told you," Laton said. "You just weren't listening."

You're the one who never listens, not me, Jimmy thought. Turning his chair to face the wide bay window behind his desk, he pressed the phone against his ear and prayed for patience. The view behind his office of a small walled garden with its carefully tended shrubs and little stone benches usually relaxed him. Today, that wasn't working.

"So when did you say mom's coming?"

"She'll be here the week of the party. She's not sure what day but she said don't bother coming to the airport. She's renting a car and—"

"And when is the party again?"

Laton sighed. "Christ, Jim, I think you're going senile. It's two weeks from Friday."

Ignoring the big dish of attitude Jimmy said, "Laton, you can't plan an engagement party in two weeks. People need time to—"

"I've been planning it ever since Stephanie told me she was engaged." Laton spoke slowly and distinctly as if he were talking to either a slow-witted child, or someone for whom English was a second language.

"Did you send out invitations?"

"No, I was planning on calling a hundred and fifty people. Of course I sent invitations."

"I never got one."

"You know what that guy is charging me per invitation? Why should I waste one on you when I told —"

"Mr. Trent, I think you need to—"

With Laton going on in his ear, Jimmy turned his chair around. Sylvia, his secretary, stood in the open doorway to his office. In her hand she held a sheaf of papers.

"Sorry," she mouthed and pointed to the phone as she started to back out the door.

Jimmy shook his head and motioned her forward. After a moment's hesitation she walked to the desk and slid the papers in front of him.

"Sorry," she said again very softly.

"It's okay."

"What's okay?" Laton asked.

"Nothing. I was talking to Sylvia."

The top sheet was a letter. Jimmy glanced at the signature. Mitchell Daniels. Quickly he scanned the letter as Laton returned to his bitching about the cost of the party.

"Fuck me," Jimmy swore under his breath.

He reread the final paragraph with a growing mix of outrage and disbelief.

"What?"

"Nothing," Jimmy snapped, no longer interested in anything but the letter in front of him.

Mitch was taking his investment company's business to another disaster recovery firm. Daniels and Sons was one of their oldest clients not to mention one of the most lucrative accounts. He glanced through the remaining pages, a copy of their service level agreement.

"I have to go, Laton." Without waiting for an answer, he hung up.

Jimmy wanted to be shocked or at least disbelieving. But even as he dug for those emotions, Adam's words came back to him.

People are mean and hurtful, Jim.

He hadn't wanted to believe it, had hoped people were better than that. It seemed he was wrong.

Clicking open his contacts, Jimmy found the number for Mitch Daniels's office. He picked up the phone, dialed the number and asked to speak to the man. He was put on hold for several minutes while music played in his ear before the secretary returned.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Trent. But Mr. Daniels is out of the office at the moment. May I take a message?"

Jimmy hesitated. "Would you tell him that I received his letter and I'd like to speak to him about it."

"Will he know what letter that is?"

"He'll know."

Just as he hung up, someone tapped on his open door.

"Are you busy?" Rene asked.

"No, come in."

She closed the door behind her. Her heels clicked on the hardwood as she crossed to his desk. "I wanted to talk to you about that new storage media—" Halfway between the door and the desk, she stopped, her expression changing to one of concern. "What's wrong?"

Rene always knew just from looking at his face when something was wrong. Even after all the years they'd known each other he still didn't know how she did it.

"I guess you wouldn't believe me if I said nothing."

"I guess not." A small smile curved her lips but the worry never left her eyes.

He picked up the letter and held it out to her. "I just got this letter from Mitch Daniels."

Taking it, she read silently. "He was one of your father's original clients, wasn't he?"

Jimmy nodded.

She handed the letter back. "Have you spoken with him?"

"I called but he's not in." He paused. He could tell her. "Ren, I saw him on Friday at the Kimmel and he didn't say anything about this."

"I was wondering what happened to you Friday night. I saw Laton but not you and—"

"Laton was there?"

"Of course he was there. Don't you remember how we shamed him into buying the tickets? It was the night of your birthday when we were all at the house." She paused. "I don't

know how you could have missed him. Your seats were right next to his."

"The seats next to ours were empty." And why was that if Laton had, indeed, been there Friday night?

"Ours?" Rene's brows lifted.

Though he wanted to look away, he kept eye contact even as his cheeks flushed with heat. "I took Adam to the Kimmel on Friday night."

"Adam? The dancer from Flesh Tones?"

Jimmy nodded. "I've been seeing him for a while." He waited but she said nothing though her smile and the gleam in her eyes spoke volumes. "What?" he teased. "No comment about me taking him instead of you?"

"Just that it's about time you found yourself a real date." She laughed. "Now I am sorry I missed that. The two of you in black tie must have been really something." She paused. "That's odd though about Laton. Maybe he saw someone he knew and sat with them. The ushers weren't being very strict about seats and tickets."

"Maybe."

Or maybe Laton had seen him with Adam and had deliberately avoided them. Except reticence had never been Laton's style. So why hadn't his brother mentioned it?

Jimmy's stomach gave a little nervous flip. But instead of giving in and worrying on it the way he always had, he resolutely turned his attention away from his brother and what he might or might not have seen. He couldn't worry about that now.

"So tell me about Adam." Rene sat down in the chair on the other side of his desk.

"He's a dancer and a bartender at Flesh Tones."

She rolled her eyes and let out a long-suffering sigh. Clearly this was not the info she was looking for. And of course, Jimmy knew it.

A grin tugged at his lips. "What? You asked."

"Don't make me get rough with you."

"He's living in the apartment over my garage."

Rene leaned forward. "And?"



He let the seconds spin out, mostly just to tease her. And maybe, at least a little, because the idea of saying it out loud gave him that funny flutter low in his belly. "And I'm in love with him."

Rene came around the desk and kissed his cheek. "I'm so glad," she said. She hugged him impulsively then drew back grinning. "But I'm still sorry I missed seeing the two of you in your tuxes."

"Yeah, well, Mitch Daniels saw us and apparently he wasn't all that thrilled about it." He glanced down at the letter on his desk. Now the question was, how could he fix it? And, maybe more importantly, did he want to?

§ § § §

"Hello. This is Mitch. I can't answer the phone right now, but if you'll..."

Jimmy flipped the phone closed, dropped it in the console and eased the Mercedes into the rush-hour traffic on Lincoln Drive.

Having decided that he would try to clear things up with Mitch, he'd already left two messages on the man's private line, but still he had not returned Jimmy's call.

And then there was the letter. All day that damn letter had been on his mind. Even as he'd tended to other matters, he'd worried it the way you do with a bad tooth, all the while knowing he should let it be but unable to do it.

Even now, Jimmy could almost hear his father's voice, the way he'd always said there were certain matters that were best dealt with face-to-face. As much as he hated the idea, he was beginning to think this might be one of those matters. But not until he found himself driving down Allens Lane did Jimmy fully realize what he meant to do.

Passing one grand house after another he slowed the Mercedes as he searched for the address he wanted. Finding it he turned into the circular drive and parked behind a silver Lexus he recognized as Mitch's car. At least the man was at home. That was good. Jimmy got out, mounted the steps and rang the bell.

Melinda Daniels opened the door, her eyes widening when she saw him. "Oh." She blinked. "What a lovely surprise. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you." Jimmy stepped into the foyer. "I'm sorry to barge in, Melinda, but I have something important to discuss with Mitch. Is he at home?"

Her hesitation was just long enough for him to know she meant to lie.

"I don't think ..." she began.

"Lin, is that Tony?" Mitch appeared in the doorway that led into the living room and stopped short when he saw Jimmy. In the split second before he got his expression under control Jimmy saw everything. Disgust, dismay, anger and perhaps even embarrassment flickered across Mitch's face in the blink of an eye before he pasted on a welcoming smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Mitch came forward. "Jim, what a surprise. You should have called and let us know you were coming." He glanced at his watch. "We were just on our way to dinner." The man did not offer his hand in greeting.

"This won't take long." Jimmy paused, waiting for an invitation to come in and sit down. It didn't come. The Daniels' simply stood there looking at him.

"I received your letter today, Mitch. And I have to say I was quite surprised."

Mitch gave a little shrug but refused to meet Jimmy's eyes. "Jim, it's just business."

"Just business," Jimmy echoed. His gut told him this was a lost cause, but he went ahead anyway. "Maybe we could discuss it. You've been with tCS a long time and I hate to lose you as a client. Is there anything I can do to—"

"No, there isn't." Evidently realizing how abrupt that sounded, Mitch smiled, showing lots of teeth. By his side, Melinda stood utterly still except for her hands which fluttered like nervous little birds.

"I don't understand, Mitch."

“Well,” Mitch harrumphed. “I thought it was more than adequately explained in the letter we sent...”

“Hmm, I don’t remember any explanation. Maybe you could refresh my memory.” Because he felt his temper rising, Jimmy kept his tone pleasant.

“As I explained in my letter, we’re experiencing quite a bit of growth and we find that our disaster recovery needs are better suited—”

“Oh, I remember that part. That was the load of crap part. It’s the adequate explanation I’m not clear on.”

“Oh dear,” Melinda sighed.

“There’s no need for hostility, Jim.” Mitch took a step forward moving slightly in front of his wife. “Your father would be appalled—”

“Leave my father out of this.”

Melinda took a step forward edging past her husband. “Please,” she said, “there really is no need to get angry. It’s not a personal decision. It’s just that financial management is such a conservative profession—”

“Melinda,” Mitch warned.

She turned on him. “No, Mitchell. We owe Jimmy at least a truthful answer.” She turned back to Jimmy. “Mitchell handles the investments for several large congregations in the area. And you know how conservative some people can be. If they were to find out...” She blushed. “Well, you know. He would be in danger of losing those clients. You can understand that, can’t you?”

“No,” Jimmy said after a long moment, “I don’t think I can. But thank you for the honest answer, Melinda.”

“I have to ask you to leave now.” Mitch walked to the door and opened it. All of his indignation had drained away leaving him looking old and tired.

Jimmy looked from Melinda to Mitch then to the door, standing open. He suddenly felt as tired as Mitch looked. “I’m sorry this had to happen, Mitchell.” Jimmy held out his hand.

Mitch stared at it. “Please, just go.”

Slowly, Jimmy lowered his hand. "You know, Mitch, it's not contagious."

Without waiting for an answer, Jimmy left. He had gone no more than two steps before the door was firmly shut behind him.

An hour later, Jimmy sat at the bar at *Flesh Tones*, a frosty martini glass in front of him. After his encounter with Mitch Daniels, he couldn't face that big empty house and an entire evening alone with his own thoughts. What he'd really wanted was to see Adam. Not that he had any intention of telling the man what had happened. Knowing that Jimmy had lost a client as a result of their being seen together -- even if that client was a homophobic asshole -- would surely upset him, and Jimmy wasn't having that, not over the actions of a small-minded jackass like Mitch Daniels. If that meant he had to keep some things to himself, then that was what it meant.

Jimmy sipped his drink, his gaze naturally seeking out his lover where he was filling a pitcher with beer at the opposite end of the long, mahogany bar. A quiet sigh slipped into his glass as he watched those long, elegant hands and that perfect profile and some of the tension of the day slid away. Not that they could actually talk here at the club, but that was all right. Just sitting here and watching Adam was enough.

Adam finished filling a second pitcher with beer and set it on a tray. He turned, their eyes met and he smiled. That smile, shared across a packed bar, in front of hundreds of witnesses, lifted Jimmy's spirits and went a long way toward soothing his bruised soul. He returned the smile and lifted his hand in greeting.

"Hey, Jim."

A hand landed on his shoulder. He jumped. Vodka sloshed over the rim of his glass and puddled on the bar. He set the glass down and turned to his brother.

"Laton, you scared the shit out of me."

"And made you spill your drink." Laton edged in beside Jimmy even though there was no room. The guy on the next stool shot a dirty look at Laton's back, grabbed his beer and left.

Laton slid on to the vacant stool without so much as a backward glance.

“So to what do we owe the honor of your presence in our humble club?” Laton crooked a finger at the petite bartender with the long black hair. She came over. “Glenfiddich. Make it a double.”

Jimmy eyed his brother. Laton’s cheeks were flushed and he had that look, the one he got when he was doing some serious drinking. What was going on?

Just as the bartender slid the glass in front of Laton, Shannon appeared as if from nowhere. She picked up the glass and sniffed it. “You’re flagged.” She slid the glass down the bar and out of reach. “Get him some coffee, Jennifer.”

“Who are you, my friggin’ mother? Give me that back.” He reached for the glass.

Unfazed by the demand, she nudged the glass farther out of reach. “No, I’m the manager and I am not letting you get trashed in my club.” She glanced past Laton and smiled. “Hi, Jimmy, it’s nice to see you.”

“Nice to see you, too,” Jimmy smiled at Shannon.

“You work for me,” Laton bitched. “You can’t flag me.”

“I think I already did.” When Laton tried again for the glass Shannon picked it up. “Stephanie is dancing tonight,” she explained to Jimmy. “And daddy dearest is having a rough time dealing.”

“Fucking bitch,” Laton grumbled as his coffee arrived.

“Bite me,” Shannon said pleasantly. With another smile for Jimmy, she turned and walked away.

“Ball-busting bitch.” Laton sipped his coffee. “I should fire her ass.”

Jimmy hid his grin in his drink. Interesting how, in spite of his bitching, Laton’s eyes followed Shannon as she walked away. Not that the two of them could ever work as a couple. Just the thought was enough to have Jimmy chuckling into his drink. Shannon’s intelligence and sharp tongue made her the polar opposite of the all-boobs-no-brain type Laton always went for. Still, that look certainly was interesting. And he had a

feeling that if any woman could handle his brother, Shannon could.

“Jesus H. Christ, I can’t take it.” Laton set his cup down hard and covered his face.

“What?” Jimmy glanced up at the stage. Stephanie was on stage, shaking it for all she was worth to the driving beat. As he watched she tore off the scrap of material that passed for a skirt and flung it away, leaving her in nothing but a g-string and tassels.

“Don’t look at her,” Laton said.

Jimmy laughed but dropped his gaze. “I’m surprised you hired her if you feel that way, Late.”

Laton pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, well, I figured it was better to have her working here where I can keep an eye on her than at some dive where anything might happen.” He glanced around. “At least here I’m on a first name basis with most of the perverts.” He stood up. “But I still can’t watch this.”

As Laton stalked away, Jimmy noticed that a seat had opened up at the other end of the bar where Adam was working. Pulling out his wallet, he threw money on the bar and stood up.

“Mr. Trent, you don’t have to pay.” Jennifer, the bartender, scooped up the cash and held it out.

“It’s fine, Jen.” Jimmy kept an eye on the empty stool. “I’ll pay just like everybody else.”

“But Laton said—”

“Really, it’s fine.” He waved her objection away. But just as he started around the bar, the empty place was taken by a lanky blond in tight jeans.

Damn it!

Jimmy resumed his seat and glared at the blond who was now leaning across the bar and signaling to Adam.

“Would you like another one, Mr. Trent?” Jennifer asked.

“Yes, thank...” Jimmy broke off as recognition dawned. The blond who had stolen his seat was none other than Adam’s ex-boyfriend, Daren Taylor.

“Hey, bartender, can I get some service over here?”

Adam tensed and went still, the bottle of Crown Royal forgotten in his hand. He knew that voice and that tone, demanding and flirtatious at once. He’d heard it too many times in too many situations not to recognize it instantly. And with the recognition came a sort of weary dread.

What the hell?

Setting the bottle down, he turned, face carefully blank.

Daren leaned on the bar not ten feet from where Adam stood.

Fuck.

Their gazes met and Daren smiled his perfect television smile, dropping a wink. Adam glanced around. Where was Dana or Crystal? Maybe one of them could wait on Daren. But Crystal was busy at the other end of the bar and Dana was nowhere in sight. With a sigh Adam headed for his ex-boyfriend. He took his time, letting the slow pace say what he couldn’t. Daren might be his ex, but he was also a customer. Way too soon he found himself standing in front of the man.

“What’ll you have?”

Daren’s gaze raked over Adam even as he pouted. “That’s it? No hi, Dee, good to see you — It’s been a while — Hope you choke — nothing? Just what the fuck do you want?”

“I’m working, Daren. I don’t have time to stand around and shoot the breeze with you.” He paused. “Do you want a drink or not?”

“Yeah, all right.”

Adam waited but Daren said nothing. “So what do you want?”

“Jesus Christ, Adam, you know what I drink.”

“Fine. Whatever.” Adam turned, picked up a glass and filled it with ice, glad for something to do with his hands besides wringing Daren’s neck.

He shouldn’t let Daren get to him like this. The man hadn’t even done anything besides just showing up and already he was on Adam’s last nerve. He needed to get a grip and stop reacting to his ex like the guy had the plague or something.

Adam poured Tanqueray, added a splash of tonic and a slice of lime. Setting it on a napkin he slid it across the bar toward Daren. "That'll be eight-fifty."

"I want to start a tab. I might be here for a while."

Great.

Daren picked up his drink and sipped. Nodding he set the glass down and leaned forward. "I think you might have found your calling, babe."

"Fuck off." Adam pitched his voice so only Daren heard.

Daren looked wounded. "That's no way to talk to a customer. I should bitch to the management."

"Hang on, let me get her for you." Adam turned away.

"Hey," Daren said as Adam was walking away. "I thought you said you'd talk to me if I ordered a drink."

"No, what I said was I couldn't talk to you if you didn't order a drink. It's not the same thing."

"Fine." Daren picked up his glass, drained it and set it down. "Guess I'll just take the rest of your shit and burn it."

Adam paused. Daren was baiting him. He shouldn't let himself be drawn in. Yeah, he knew it. He turned slowly.

"The rest of what shit?"

"The box of shit I was nice enough to bring down here to give back to you instead of just throwing it out like I should have. But if you don't want it..."

"Why didn't you just call me?"

"Like you would have answered."

He had a point.

"What's in it?"

Daren shrugged. "How should I know? I didn't look through it. I just found this box of videotapes and stuff in the closet in the spare room. I guess you were too busy taking the TV to bother with it."

That TV was his anyway. Adam opened his mouth to say so but shut it again without saying anything.

"Okay. Could you just bring it in and I can stick it somewhere under the bar?"



With a snort Daren shook his head. "Yeah, right. Come out and get it yourself, man. I'm not your fucking slave boy."

Adam winced, recalling a particular role-play scenario from back when things had been better between them. The smug smile on Daren's gorgeous face said he'd read Adam's thoughts and found it amusing.

"I have a break in fifteen minutes." Heat rose to Adam's cheeks. He hated that Daren could do that to him. "I can go outside with you then. That okay?"

"Sure." Daren pushed his empty glass across the bar. "In the meantime, get me another drink."

Fifteen minutes later, Adam stood by the back bumper of Daren's car. The trunk popped open with a soft click. Pushing it up, Daren leaned in.

Black denim pulled tight across Daren's ass as his shirt rode up, revealing a strip of tanned skin. Once upon a time Adam would have leaned over and licked that skin. The fact that they were in a public place only adding to the thrill of doing it. Now he simply stood there and felt nothing.

After a few seconds of rummaging around Daren straightened, a box in his arms, which he held out. "Here you go."

Adam took the box. It wasn't heavy. Curious about just what he could have forgotten and had yet to miss, he balanced the box against the bumper and flipped open the top.

At first he had no idea what all was in the box. A video lay on top and Adam picked it up, turning it so what light there was shone across the hand-written label. It was an audition tape, the label showing only a date and the name of the ballet. Adam dropped the tape back in the box. He didn't need to see any more. This was the box that held his old life as a ballet dancer, the life that had ended for good the night he landed wrong after a jump and tore his ACL.

"I threw some mail in there too. Looks like the collection agency's after you again, babe."

"Yeah, well, you can't get blood from a stone, right?"

"Yeah, right. So what's in the box?"

“Nothing, just some old junk from school.”

Before he could flip the lid down, Daren took hold of the edge and peered inside. “Hey, this is that crap you saved from when you used to dance with your clothes on, isn’t it?” He laughed. “Man, I don’t know why you drag this stuff around with you. I should have just gotten rid of it for you.”

Adam pulled the box from Daren’s grasp, folded down the lid and tucked the box under one arm. “Yeah, well, thanks for bringing it by.”

Daren flipped a lock of streaky blond hair out of his eyes and studied Adam. “I was just kidding, you know. I wouldn’t have really gotten rid of your stuff.”

“I know.” He didn’t know any such thing. Daren could be a vindictive asshole. But he didn’t have to deal with that anymore so what was the point in saying it?

“So what’s the matter?” Daren closed the trunk and leaned against it.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing, my ass. I fucking slept next to you for over a year. I know when you’re off your game.”

He couldn’t explain the feeling that seeing his old ballet stuff had given him, not to himself and certainly not to Daren.

“It’s nothing, Dee. I’ve got to get back. My break’s over.”

“Okay.” Daren looked around the parking lot. “Where’s your car?”

“My car died.” Adam shifted the box to his other arm.

“So how are you getting around? You need a ride home or anything? I could hang around -- maybe we could go somewhere.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Just no, Dee, okay?”

“Why not?” Daren whined. “I brought your shit down to you. Can’t you at least—”

“I said no.” Adam turned, scanning the parking lot as he fished in his pocket for the keys to Jimmy’s Porsche.

"I can't fucking win with you." Keys jingled as Daren pulled them from his pocket. The car alarm beeped.

Adam turned and walked down the row of parked cars. He heard the door open and the repetitive ding, ding, ding as Daren got behind the wheel. Then the door slammed and the engine revved.

Adam let out a long breath.

Thank goodness that was done.

From the corner of his eye he watched Daren drive toward the exit before he circled back to where the Porsche was parked. Digging the keys out of his pocket, he popped the trunk and leaned in, settling the box in the almost empty space. Straightening up, he was about to close the trunk when a car pulled up behind him and stopped.

Daren. Shit.

The window slid down and Daren leaned out. "Nice ride, angel. What did you have to do to get that car? Or should I ask who?"

"It's not my car," Adam said, already regretting answering at all.

"No shit. I didn't think stripping paid that well." Daren leaned an arm on the open car window. "Guess I know now why you won't give me another chance."

Daren shook his head. The window slid shut and the car pulled away in a plume of exhaust.

Adam stood there and listened until the sound of the engine faded into the darkness. Part of him was pissed at Daren's implication, but another part, a small but very insistent part, felt ashamed that there might be some truth in it. Of course he loved Jimmy, would love him even if the man had nothing. But the fact was he was in love with a rich man, a very generous, very rich man who could give him far more than he could ever give in return.

Shaking his head, Adam ran a hand over the Porsche's sleek hood. Though their relationship might never be equal, there was one thing he could do for Jimmy. That was to make sure his lover never suffered on account of him.

With one last look around, Adam relocked the car, stuffed the keys back in his pocket and headed back toward the club.

It wasn't until he was counting receipts in preparation for closing that Adam realized Daren had never settled his tab.

"Asshole," Adam muttered, digging in his own pocket for some cash. He pulled out a twenty and was making change when the door between the kitchen and the bar burst open and Stephanie charged through. She ran to him and grabbed his arm, nails digging in.

"Adam, somebody trashed Uncle Jimmy's car."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

"I don't know why they couldn't park in the back like I asked. Like we need this kind of publicity, you know? Especially on a busy night." Laton's voice was pitched low as they led the two policemen down the narrow hall to the manager's office.

Jimmy just looked at his brother and said nothing. He was too fucking tired and disgusted to deal with Laton's bullshit. What difference did it make if the cops were parked outside? It was nearly three in the morning and the club was closed anyway.

The two cops sat down on the couch, the younger stockier one who had introduced himself as Hainey balanced a notebook on his knee. Laton sat behind the desk and swiveled to face the policemen. With no place left to sit, Jimmy took up a position near the door, open just enough that he could see the hallway from where he stood.

Hainey clicked his pen and regarded Laton. "So the car that was vandalized belongs to you, Mr. Trent?"

Laton shook his head. "It's my brother's car."

Hainey turned to Jimmy. Click. Clickclickclick. "About what time was it when you went out and saw the damage?"

Jimmy gritted his teeth, barely resisting the urge to grab that pen from the cop's hand. Instead he took a long, slow breath.

"I didn't. That is I wasn't the first to see it. Stephanie was the first one to see the damage."

Hainey wrote something in his notebook. "That's the stripper with the purple hair, right? The one we talked to downstairs?"

"Stephanie is my daughter." The phone rang and Laton picked it up just as someone knocked on the door.

Jimmy opened the door and found Adam standing in the hallway.

"Are you okay?" Jimmy asked very quietly.

Adam nodded. He didn't look okay. In fact, he looked awful. Smudges of fatigue showed under his eyes and several strands of hair had come loose from his ponytail and curled around his pale face.

Jimmy fought down the urge to pull the man into his arms and tell him it would be okay, Laton and the cops be damned.

"Come on in," Jimmy said when Adam didn't move.

Stepping into the office, Adam's gaze lit on the two policemen before darting back over his shoulder as if gauging the likely success of an escape.

Jimmy laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

Adam shot him a look, his eyes much too wide.

"And who are you?" Hainey's partner asked.

Adam licked his lips. "I'm Adam Hyland."

"And that's important because..."

"Adam was driving my car tonight. He was the first person Stephanie told after she saw the damage."

Hainey flipped pages in his notebook. "And what time was that?"

"About an hour ago," Jimmy said.

"Let Mr. Hyland answer, Please."

Adam looked at Jimmy then back at the cop. "It was a little over an hour ago."

"And why were you driving Mr. Trent's car?"

"Mine broke down and I haven't gotten a new one yet. So Jimmy said I could drive the Porsche in the meantime."

Jimmy's stomach flipped over. He felt like he was in the front car of a giant roller coaster that had just tipped over the top of the highest hill. He slid a glance at Laton but his brother's face showed nothing as he continued to speak softly into the phone. It seemed he wasn't even paying attention, yet somehow that lack of reaction wasn't at all comforting.

"You work here, right?" Hainey asked.

Adam nodded. "I'm a bartender."

"And a stripper," Laton added as he hung up the phone.

Hainey looked at Jimmy. "Is it usual for you to let your employees drive your Porsche, Mr. Trent?"

Jimmy swallowed. "Adam is my—"

"Tenant," Laton interrupted. "Hyland is my brother's tenant. But I don't see what this has to do with anything."

"Mr. Trent," Hainey's partner said, "if we're going to find out who did this, we need all the information, no matter how insignificant it may seem to you." He pinned Laton with that cool, cop gaze. "So if you don't mind—"

"Then why don't you ask Mr. Hyland what he and his boyfriend were doing in my brother's car earlier tonight?"

Silence.

Everyone looked at Adam.

Jimmy's pulse pounded in his ears.

Daren Taylor had been in his car?

Of course Jimmy himself had seen Adam and Daren go outside then, fifteen or twenty minutes later, Adam had come back alone. What had they been doing all that time? And how the hell did Laton know Daren had been in his car?

"Daren didn't do anything to Jimmy's car."

"How the fuck do you know?" Laton glared.

"Because I was with him the whole time, then I watched him leave."

Hainey held up a hand. "Hold on. Who is this we're talking about now?"

Silence.

"Anybody can take this one," Hainey said. He started in with the pen again.

Click. Click. Clickclickclickclick.

"He's my ex," Adam said.

"And what's his name?"

Adam hesitated.

Hainey tapped his pen. "We're not accusing anybody of anything, Mr. Hyland. But I'd think you'd want to help us get the guy who did this."

Adam glanced at Jimmy then back to Hainey. "His name is Daren Taylor."

§ § § §

"They'll never get the guy who fucked with your car." Laton shut the door and turned to Jimmy. They were alone in the office, Adam and the cops having left when the interview was over. "With all the crime in this city, a little vandalism won't even show up on the radar."

"Wouldn't the graffiti classify it as a hate crime, which might give it more priority?" Jimmy leaned his head back against the sofa cushions and shut his eyes. He could still see those hateful words as clearly as if they'd been burned on the insides of his eyelids.

Fags must die!

"Even so," Laton said, "what are the odds?"

Fuck if he knew.

One thing he did know was that he was exhausted and he wanted to be home. Opening his eyes, Jimmy got to his feet. "I'm going to find Adam and get out of here."

"Jim, how do you know it wasn't Hyland?"

Jimmy stopped, one hand on the doorknob and stared at his brother. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Laton made an impatient sound as if it should have been obvious. "Hyland was driving your car tonight, right?"

"So?"

"So, it's not like he makes a secret of his...preferences."

"His preferences," Jimmy repeated.

Laton nodded. "Right. What if he's the target, not you? What if you just got caught in the crossfire?"

"Why would somebody target Adam?"

"Jim, that kid is as gay as the day is long, and it's not like he's even discrete about it. This is a titty bar. We have a lot of customers who don't want that kind of thing thrown in their faces." Laton shrugged. "We should have known better than to hire a gay guy. It's like we were asking for trouble."



"What the fuck are you talking about?" Jimmy asked again. "Laton, you are not firing Adam over this. Christ, you sound just like the people who fucked with my car."

"And you sound like some civil rights loving bleeding heart. We're running a business here, not an equal rights rally."

"You can't fire somebody—"

"I'm not talking about firing him. You think I want a lawsuit on my hands? All I'm saying is maybe you should tell him to be a little more low profile."

"Me? You want me to tell him?"

"I don't care who tells him. I'll tell him—"

"You will not say that to him, Laton. He has a right to live his life the way he wants and not to be harassed for it. Jesus Christ, why don't you just burn a cross in the parking lot? It's the same goddamn thing."

"I am not a bigot," Laton shouted.

"Maybe you're just an asshole then," Jimmy shouted back. "But you are not going to say that to Adam."

"Will you stop protecting him? For Christ sake, Jim, I don't care if you're fucking him, but at least stop thinking with your dick for five minutes and see the situation for what it is. You're jeopardizing your reputation for some trashy bimbo who—"

Jimmy's fist connected with Laton's jaw with a satisfying crack, the blow reverberating all the way up his arm to the shoulder.

"Shit!" Laton's hand flew to his mouth, blood already seeping between the fingers. He stared at Jimmy with eyes, wide and stunned, like he'd never seen him before.

Jimmy turned on his heel and left the office. His hand throbbed but he barely noticed it as he strode down the narrow hallway. Rounding the corner at the top of the stairs, he ran straight into Shannon, nearly knocking her off her feet.

"Oops!" She clutched at the railing at the same time Jimmy reached out to steady her. "I didn't even see you—" she broke off in mid-sentence, eyes going wide. "Oh my God, what happened to your hand?"

Jimmy glanced down at his hand on her arm. Blood welled from his split knuckles, which were already swelling. As if the sight had flipped a switch, he could suddenly feel the pain. Bile rose in his throat and he swallowed it down.

"I just punched my brother in the mouth. It's nothing." He removed his hand from her arm. A spot of scarlet stained the sleeve of her white shirt.

Shannon's lips twitched but she did an admirable job of controlling her expression. She took his wrist in her hand and lifted it so she could see. "Looks like you really did a job on your hand." Her eyes met his and he could see that she wanted to ask a thousand questions. "How about if I help you clean it up and get some antiseptic on it."

"That won't be necessary." He tugged on his hand but she didn't let go.

"You can't walk around dripping blood all over the place, Jim." She smiled. "Now, stop being a pain in my ass and let me clean you up."

He let her lead him down to the kitchen. It was sort of funny how she never let go of his wrist, as if she expected him to bolt. Not that he couldn't have gotten free if he'd wanted to. She was five-foot-nothing and maybe a hundred and ten pounds soaking wet. But he followed without any further argument.

She held his hand under the faucet then gently dried it with paper towels, before taking a bottle of alcohol from a cabinet.

"This is going to hurt, but I don't have anything else." Unscrewing the cap, she poured it over his knuckles.

"Shit!" Jimmy jerked his hand away, splashing alcohol on the countertop.

"Sorry." Shannon recapped the bottle and reached for a roll of gauze. She had just finished wrapping his knuckles when the door opened and Adam walked into the kitchen.

"Shannon, have you seen—oh my God, Jim, what happened to your hand?" Rushing to Jimmy's side, Adam seized Jimmy's wrist and cradled his injured hand in both of his. "What happened?"

Jimmy looked from Adam to Shannon who watched them in silence, her gaze alight with interest. When their eyes met she glanced away, a slight flush staining her cheeks.

Shaking his head, Jimmy tugged on his wrist, but Adam didn't let go. Dark eyes searched Jimmy's face. "Jim, what did you do?"



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

“Will you drive?” Jimmy held out the keys to the Mercedes as they walked across the parking lot.

“If you want.” Their fingers brushed as Adam took the keys. He fought down the urge to take Jimmy’s hand and wind their fingers together. It was late and dark and no one was around to see, but something, maybe Jimmy’s silence as they were leaving the club, told him the action would not be welcome.

A damp wind kicked up, ruffling Adam’s hair as he walked around the Mercedes to the driver’s door. Some morbid compulsion, not unlike the need to stare at an accident on the side of the road, had him glancing over to where Jimmy’s Porsche sat all alone in the glow of the yellow parking lot lights. Someone had found a tarp and covered it, concealing the damage from the curious eyes of passersby. Still, Adam could see the shattered windshield and the hate-filled words spray-painted across the hood as if the whole scene had been spotlighted and raised up on a display platform.

Goosebumps rose up on his arms and he shivered.

He didn’t care how it looked to Laton or the cops, he knew the vandalism was not Daren’s doing. The man might be a cheating, lying asshole and a really shitty boyfriend, but this? No way. Daren just didn’t have that kind of meanness in him.

Sliding a glance at Jimmy as they drove out of the parking lot, Adam waited for his lover to speak. He had no clue what he was going to say when Jimmy told him about the argument with Laton, but he was damn sure of one thing, he was going to be there for Jimmy even if all he could do was hold and comfort him.

Seconds lengthened into minutes, and still Jimmy remained silent. What was he waiting for?

Stopping at a red light, Adam watched his passenger in the mirror. Head leaned back and eyes closed, Jimmy cradled his

injured hand in his lap. In the near darkness, the bandage shone very white against his dark pants.

“Does your hand hurt?”

Jimmy sighed and shifted in his seat. “Yeah, it does.”

Okay, now he would tell the story.

Except he didn’t.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

Not really? That was it?

Should he tell Jimmy that he already knew about the argument, that he had heard most of it from outside the office door. No, probably better not to say anything. Somehow he didn’t think knowing he’d been eavesdropping would sit very well with him.

Not that he’d meant to listen. The opportunity had just sort of fallen into his lap.

After the cops left, he’d gone up to the office to look for Jimmy. The man had looked so awful during the interview, like he’d aged a decade in the space of an hour, Adam had wanted to make sure he was all right and maybe see if he could get him to go home.

He’d been standing outside the closed door, hand raised to knock, when he heard his name. Knowing it was wrong but unable to stop himself, he’d listened, heart pounding, as the brothers argued. At least Jimmy had defended him. That had felt good. But knowing Laton thought it had been a mistake to hire him, that part was bad, really bad. And how much worse for Jimmy knowing his brother, who he clearly loved, was a homophobe?

“So what did Daren Taylor want?” Jimmy asked, breaking into Adam’s thoughts.

Letting out a slow breath, Adam hit the turn signal and made a right. Relief slid through him. Not because he especially wanted to talk about Daren, but at least they were talking. It was a start.

“He brought over a box of my stuff that I left at the apartment.”

"Where is it?"

"The box? Actually, it's still in the trunk of the Porsche. With everything that was going on, I forgot to grab it before we left."

"That was all he wanted?"

"What do you mean?" Adam switched lanes, easing into the sparse traffic then accelerating.

"Seemed like you were outside with him for a long time."

"Only like fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty."

"Were the two of you in my car?"

"No. Why would we be in your car? I don't know where Laton got that idea. We were just standing in the parking lot, talking."

Jimmy said nothing. In the dim glow of a streetlight Adam saw him turn away to stare out the window.

Jimmy didn't believe him. The realization hit Adam like a blow straight to the heart, the pain made worse by the fact that Jimmy refused to say so.

Adam's grip tightened on the steering wheel. "Jim, what do you want to know?"

Jimmy didn't answer, the silence in the car growing thicker and heavier between them until Adam could hardly breathe. He was on the verge of repeating the question if only to break the unbearable tension when Jimmy finally spoke.

"Did he ask you to get back with him?"

"Not really. No."

"Not really, or no?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just tell me."

"There's nothing to tell. We got the box out of his car, and he asked where my car was. When I told him it died on me, he offered me a ride home. He said maybe we could stop for a drink and just talk. That's all."

"And what did you say?"

"I said no. What the hell do you think I said?"

"Why didn't you tell the cops all this?"

“Because it didn’t have anything to do with the cops. It was between me and Daren. Jim, Daren didn’t do that shit to your car.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I just know. And besides, Daren is gay. Why would he bash you for being gay? That doesn’t even make any sense. You sound just like Laton.”

“And you sound like you’re protecting Daren Taylor. Why are you doing that, Adam? Did you want to go with him?”

“Of course not. If I had wanted to go with him, I would have—”

“Laton says he’s always at the club.”

“He isn’t always at the club. What the fuck—”

“Are you still seeing him?”

“No!”

“Then who left that bite mark on your shoulder?”

Adam’s head whipped around and he stared at Jimmy. Too late he realized the light at the corner had turned red. The car sailed through the intersection. Luckily, no traffic was coming from the other direction.

“For Christ sake, Adam, watch where you’re driving. I already lost one car tonight.”

Stomping on the brake, Adam jerked the car to the side of the road and turned to Jimmy. “Do you want to fucking drive?”

For several seconds there was silence in the car, then Jimmy blew out a breath. “No, I don’t. Christ, Adam, I’m sorry.” He scrubbed his uninjured hand down his face. “I’m sorry I said that. I’m tired and...oh hell, just please, forgive me?”

Adam’s heart hammered against his ribs. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t dare, not until he could be sure his voice wouldn’t shake.

So, on some level, Jimmy did blame him for what happened to the Porsche. Most likely he blamed him for the argument with Laton, too. Neither realization surprised him much. But how long had Jimmy been holding on to the cheating thing?

“Adam.” Jimmy’s fingers closed around Adam’s wrist. “Look at me.”



Adam shook his head. He couldn't do it. He was afraid of what he might see, or say, if he did.

Releasing his wrist, Jimmy flicked on the light inside the car. "Please, baby, I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I'm just...I had no right to take it out on you."

"I'm not cheating on you, Jim. Not with Daren or anybody else."

"Okay."

"Is it?" Now Adam did look at Jimmy. Did the man believe what he was saying?

"Yes, it is." But Jimmy wouldn't meet his eyes.

Adam sighed. "You want to know how I got that mark on my shoulder?"

"You don't have to tell me."

"Yeah, I do." Because under normal circumstances Jimmy would sooner bite off his own tongue than ask. And because if Adam expected honesty, didn't he owe the same in return?

Jimmy sighed. "All right. If you want."

Reaching up, Adam switched off the light. Whether or not it would be any easier to say in the dark, who could say? Taking a deep breath, he reached for Jimmy's hand, relieved when he didn't pull away.

"I thought we were breaking up, that you were going to dump me. And I was feeling like shit. It was right after that thing that happened when I was moving in. Remember when I—"

"I remember."

"Yeah. Okay. So, I went to a party at my friend Jason's club and there was this guy there."

Jimmy listened as Adam talked, the words washing over him as he stared into the darkness at the barely discernible shapes of trees and buildings. A car passed them, its headlights briefly illuminating the car's interior.

He did not want to know this.

So why the hell had he brought it up?

If there was one thing he'd learned about Adam over the past few weeks, it was that he was honest to a fault. So if he didn't want to know where that hicky came from, he should have kept his damn mouth shut. Now, he had no choice but to listen.

Pulling back out onto the road, Adam talked while he drove, but he never let go of Jimmy's hand. "So we were kissing and he asked if I wanted to fuck."

Jesus. Jimmy flexed the fingers of his injured hand just to feel the pain. It was a fitting contrast to the ache in his chest.

"But I said no." Adam paused, like he was waiting for Jimmy to say something.

What was he supposed to say?

"Go on."

Adam sighed. "So I told him no, like I said. Then he asked if he could suck me off and I said okay. So he did."

This should be no big deal. It was just an anonymous blowjob at a party. Hadn't he himself had dozens of similar encounters over the years? Of course he had.

But not since he'd met Adam.

"Have you seen him since then?"

"No, and I'm not going to either."

Slowing the Mercedes, Adam released Jimmy's hand and turned into the driveway. Lights blinked on and then off as they passed in silence.

The garage door whirred as it slowly rose on its track. Adam pulled into the garage and shut off the engine. Taking the keys from the ignition, he held them out.

"I think I'm going to sleep upstairs tonight."

Well, that message was certainly clear enough. I'm sleeping upstairs and you're not.

Jimmy took the keys. "Okay. I'm kind of tired, too."

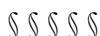
Once out of the car, Jimmy deliberately dropped his keys then made a show of checking his pockets to be sure he had everything, all the while buying time, waiting for Adam to say something more.

Adam walked to the door that led up to the apartment then, with his hand on the knob, turned and looked back at Jimmy.

A sliver of hope sprang to life in Jimmy's heart. Maybe Adam had changed his mind. Maybe he would ask him to stay after all.

"G'night, Jim." Opening the door, Adam flipped on the light and started up the stairs.

"Good night." Jimmy almost added, "I love you" then didn't. After their conversation in the car, he was afraid of the response he'd get. Or, and this would be much worse, that he would get none at all.



When Jimmy walked into his office at a quarter to ten the next morning, his secretary's pale brows nearly disappeared into her hairline.

"Mr. Trent, I was starting to worry." Getting up from her desk, Sylvia trailed him into his office. "I was about to call the other Mr. Trent to see if everything was all right."

Hell, no, everything wasn't all right. In fact everything was about as bad as it could get. His car had been vandalized. He'd punched his brother in the mouth. And he'd accused the man he loved of cheating on him, then spent the night alone in his bed counting the ways in which his life was now so fucked up he hardly recognized it.

"Everything's fine, Sylvie. No need to bother Laton."

She fluttered like a nervous little bird in the doorway. "Of course, I wouldn't normally but—"

Her phone rang.

*Thank God.*

Turning on his computer monitor, Jimmy sank into the chair behind his desk and reached for the keyboard. Just as he began to type in his logon, his phone buzzed.

He picked it up. "Yes?"

"Mr. Reynaud on the line," Sylvia said.

Jimmy thanked her and clicked over to the flashing line. "Paul, how's it going?"

"Thank heaven, cher. I've been trying to reach you for hours. Didn't you get my messages?"

"I just got into the office. What's wrong?" Jimmy grabbed the stack of post-it messages and thumbed through. There were three from Paul.

"God, what's right more like it. My system was hacked last night, data stolen, I think. And now the whole damn thing is down. At first it looked like the same type of thing as before. But my techs have been working on it since last evening and tearing their hair out. I've been calling and calling, Jim. Where have you been?"

"We had some trouble at the club last night. The police were called. I didn't get home until late. Why didn't you call the help desk when you couldn't get me?"

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Paul?"

"I'm still here."

Jimmy didn't press the question. He had a professional, and a personal responsibility here, and the answer to the question didn't really matter anyway.

"I need your help, cher," Paul said. "Can you come?"

Jimmy spun to face the computer behind his desk. His fingers flew over the keys as he brought up the specs of the data security system he'd designed and installed for Reynaud Electronics. He knew the basics from memory but wanted the exact details in front of him as they talked.

"You think data was stolen?" Jimmy asked, scanning the documentation on the screen. "That's never happened before."

"Not that we know of anyway. But this feels different, not like the other incidents. And yes, personal information for both customers and employees though I can't be certain of the extent."

Clicking over to a new window, Jimmy tried accessing Paul's computer remotely. Of course it probably wouldn't work but he had to try.

Nothing.

Jimmy swore silently. "All right," he said into the phone, "I'll have Sylvie make arrangements and Rene will be there as soon as possible, hopefully by later today."

"You're sending Rene?"

"She's the one person besides me who's most familiar with your system."

"Can't you come yourself?"

He did not want to make the trip himself. Not with everything in such a mess. And especially not without making things right with Adam. Still, he'd known Paul for twenty years. And friendship like that brought with it some responsibility beyond the usual professional courtesies.

And suppose he didn't go? Wouldn't his friend then be justified in taking his business elsewhere based on Jimmy's lack of response to his crisis? And how many more clients could he afford to alienate?

"Of course I'll come."

"Thank you, cher. I knew I could count on you." The edge was gone from Paul's voice and in its wake Jimmy heard exhaustion.

With a promise to call as soon as he had his flight information, Jimmy hung up. He rubbed at his gritty eyes, mind already racing, working out details and possible strategies for addressing the problem he'd face when he got to Montreal.

He picked up the phone and punched the intercom. "Sylvie, can you come in here, please? I need you to make travel arrangements right away."

It was nearly eight p.m. when Jimmy flipped open his cell and pressed the preprogrammed button as he parked his car by the employees' entrance at Flesh Tones. Holding the phone against his ear, he listened as it rang. And rang. And rang. Click.

"Hi, this is Adam," the recorded voice said. "I can't answer the phone right now, but—"

Jimmy snapped the phone closed and got out of the car. He wasn't leaving a damn voicemail. Neither was he leaving town without at least talking to his lover.

His suitcase and laptop were packed and ready in the trunk of the car and in his pocket he had his boarding pass, his passport and a few hundred dollars. He was all set to go.

Ever since finalizing the arrangements for the trip to Montreal, he'd been trying to reach Adam, but his calls had gone unanswered. Clearly he'd committed a major fuck-up when he let his suspicion of Daren Taylor and his own insecurity get the better of his good sense, and now Adam was avoiding him.

The burger he'd grabbed from the drive-through sat like a rock in his stomach, or maybe it was just nerves that made him feel like throwing up. Either way it didn't matter. He was going to fix things with Adam, or at least try to, before he got on that plane. Swallowing the bile that rose in his throat, he pulled open the door.

He was greeted by a gush of music from the club's interior. Stepping quickly inside, he let the door swing shut behind him. A pair of shapely female legs appeared through the upstairs railing followed by the hem of a short black skirt as someone descended the stairs from the second floor. As the person rounded the corner on the landing Jimmy realized it was Shannon and he let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

"Hey, Jimmy, I didn't expect to see you tonight." Quickening her steps, Shannon came down the last few stairs and walked to where he stood. "How's your hand?"

"It's better. Thanks."

"Did you hear anything more from the police?"

"Not yet." As casually as he could, Jimmy glanced past her and up the stairs. He did not want to run into Laton if he could possibly avoid it. They would have to talk at some point, but not now.

"Laton's in the office, if you're looking for him."

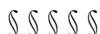
Busted.

"Actually, I'm on my way to the airport and I'm running a little short on time." He felt his cheeks grow hot and hated it. So much for being out and comfortable with it. "But do you know where Adam is?"

"He better be in the guys' dressing room getting his costume on and finishing his makeup." She glanced at her watch. "He's on stage in fifteen minutes."

“Oh.” Jimmy’s heart sank. He didn’t have time to wait around until after the show to talk to Adam.

Gray eyes studied him for a long moment then Shannon lightly touched his arm. “I’m sure he’s got it all under control. You could go on in for a few minutes, if you want.”



In the dancers’ dressing room Adam stood before the mirror, his foot tapping along with the music that vibrated through the floorboards. Gathering his hair in one hand, he scooped up a clip from the cluttered table before him and secured the tail at the base of his skull. A glance at the clock told him he had twelve, maybe fifteen minutes before he had to be on stage, just long enough to finish his makeup, grab a bottle of water and get out there before Shannon came in here looking for him.

Now, where was his black eyeliner?

Someone knocked on the door.

What the hell? Nobody around here ever knocked.

Adam grabbed the bag with his makeup and peered inside. Gray, dark brown, navy blue, even purple, every color eyeliner but black. Shit. Ah well, the brown would have to do. Uncapping it, he leaned into the mirror and widened his eyes.

The knock came again.

“C’min.” Never glancing away from his reflection, Adam lined his upper lashes as the door opened.

In the mirror, Jimmy’s gaze met Adam’s. The eyeliner fell from his suddenly numb fingers, bounced off the table and skidded across the floor, stopping only inches from Jimmy’s Italian loafer.

“Shannon said it was all right to come back here.” Leaning over, Jimmy picked up the eyeliner. He brought it to where Adam stood, still facing the mirror, and held it out.

Adam turned and, careful not to touch Jimmy, took the liner.

“That’s my favorite of your costumes, you know.”

Adam nodded. He did know. In fact, ever since hearing about Jimmy’s little fantasy starring him in a tux, the stripper’s tuxedo had become his favorite, too.

“Don’t let me hold you up.” Jimmy motioned to the eyeliner clutched in Adam’s fingers. “Go on,” Jimmy said when Adam didn’t move.

God, but he wanted Jimmy to touch him, wanted it so much that it must be all over his face. How could Jimmy not see it? But a quick glance over his shoulder at his reflection told him how amazingly normal he looked standing there facing his lover, the monstrous ache inside him invisible to the naked eye.

What was Jimmy doing here?

“Go on,” Jimmy said again. “Shannon will have my head if you’re late.”

Adam turned back to the mirror and lifted the eyeliner. His hand shook so badly that he very nearly poked his eye out as he lined his lower lashes.

“Fuck.” Eye tearing up, he reached for a tissue.

Jimmy pulled one from the box and passed it to him. “I have to go out of town for a few days. But I wanted to see you before I left.”

Oh God, Jimmy was dumping him. Why the hell had he said all those things last night? He never knew when to keep his damn mouth shut.

Blotting at the tears, Adam waited for the inevitable. “Why?”

“I have some DR -- that’s disaster recovery -- stuff I need to see to in Montreal. In fact, I’m on my way to the airport right now.”

Adam dropped the tissue in the trashcan. “No, I mean, why’d you want to see me before you left?”

Jimmy hesitated.

Adam braced. A lump was already forming in his throat. He was not going to lose it, not in front of Jimmy, no matter what he said next.

Glancing back at the door, Jimmy stepped up behind him. Arms slid around Adam’s waist and Jimmy’s lips grazed his shoulder where the false shirtfront stopped and bare skin began. “Because I missed you this morning.” Another kiss, this one longer, was pressed to the side of his neck. “Because I’ll miss



you tomorrow morning.” A slight nip just under his ear. “And every morning that I wake up and you’re not with me.”

“Jim.” Adam’s breath hitched.

“Shhh.” Turning him around, Jimmy drew him close. “And I have a favor to ask.”

Warm hands stroked Adam’s bare back and the ridge of Jimmy’s growing erection pressed into his groin, bringing his own cock to full attention as their mouths came together. Jimmy kissed him long and slow, like there weren’t hundreds of people just on the other side of the door waiting for him to take his clothes off and dance for them, like they had all night.

The kiss broke and Adam sighed.

“What’s the favor?”

“Hmm? Oh, the favor, right.” Jimmy smiled, making Adam’s heart clutch in his chest. “You distracted me.” His fingers sifted absently through Adam’s ponytail. “I’d like you to stay in the house while I’m gone, sort of keep an eye on things, you know?”

“Why?” Adam leaned into Jimmy, careful not to smear makeup on his shirt.

“If you don’t want to—”

“That’s not it. Of course I will. But I’m not that far away in the apartment. I could still—”

“Because I want you to.” Jimmy kissed him again. “So will you?”

“Sure.” Adam’s fingers slid into Jimmy’s hair.

“And sleep in my bed?” Jimmy’s hands slid down to Adam’s ass and squeezed.

“Yes. Whatever you want.” Through the thin material of his costume, he could feel the heat of Jimmy’s hands on his ass. He rocked their hips together. They had to stop. Shannon would be looking for him any minute and she never knocked. If she, or anybody else, came in and found them like this...

And when exactly had he started worrying about that shit? Adam shoved that thought away.

“Jim, we have to stop.” He pushed against his lover’s chest.

"I know. But I don't want to." Jimmy's arms tightened around him, crushing their bodies together. "I love you."

"I know." Adam dropped a kiss at the corner of Jimmy's mouth. "I love you, too. But I have to go dance now."

"Okay." Jimmy sighed and released him.

Picking up the tuxedo jacket, Jimmy held it out, motioning for Adam to put it on.

"Thanks." Adam slid his hands into the sleeves and shrugged into the jacket. Turning, he found himself once more in Jimmy's arms. He touched their lips together one last time. "Jim, you gotta let me go."

"I know." Jimmy sighed and did just that.

A loud knock sounded at the door. Seconds later it swung open but no one appeared.

"Adam, let's get it in gear," Shannon called. "You've got four minutes."

A hand appeared and yanked the door shut.

"That was weird." Adam did up the buttons on his jacket. "Shannon never knocks."

"She knew I was in here with you."

"Jim—"

"It doesn't matter." Jimmy stepped forward.

Adam backed up. "How can you say it doesn't matter. What if she—"

Jimmy laid a finger against Adam's lips, cutting off the words. "Shhh, stop. We are not going to fight about this."

"But Jim—"

"I have to go and so do you." With a hand on his shoulder, Jimmy steered him toward the door.

Adam stopped, bracing his hand against the closed door. "You go first, then I'll go out in a minute."

For a moment he thought Jimmy would argue, then he nodded.

"Okay."

Opening the door, Adam stood back as Jimmy left. Quickly he shut the door. He didn't want to see if Jimmy looked back.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

Adam climbed out of his new -- to him anyway -- Volkswagen and shut the door. He'd just bought the car from a friend of a friend of Jason's and, though it was ancient by car standards and not much to look at, it ran fine and would get him from place to place. It felt good to have his own car again, like he'd regained a piece of his independence.

Leaving the car in the circular drive, he mounted the wide stone steps and stuck his key in the lock. The knob turned easily under his hand, the heavy door swinging silently inward.

After being out in the brilliant afternoon sunlight, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim interior of the foyer. The silence pressed in around him and he shivered. With Jimmy gone the house was so quiet, it sort of gave him the creeps. He would have much preferred to sleep in the apartment, but he'd promised to stay here in the house so stay he would.

Dropping the keys on the hall table, he tossed the mail in the basket and slid open the alarm panel. But just as he started to enter the code that would disarm the system, he realized something was wrong and his finger froze over the keypad. The alarm was already turned off.

Had he somehow screwed up the code and inadvertently not armed the system before going out?

No. He distinctly remembered entering the code and the lights blinking green to indicate that the alarm was on.

So what the fuck?

Maybe Jimmy was back already? Was that even possible given that he'd been gone less than twenty-four hours and—

"I turned off the alarm."

Swallowing a yelp, Adam spun around. Laton leaned against one side of the arched doorway between the foyer and the living room, a glass held nonchalantly in one hand. How long had he been standing there?

“Didn’t mean to scare the piss out of you like that, Hyland.” Laton’s lips curved, the smile betraying the lie for what it was. “But I didn’t want you thinking there was a burglar in the house and calling the cops. I think we’ve seen enough police action for a while, don’t you?”

Momentarily speechless, Adam stared at Laton. The man looked like he’d been on the losing end of a bar-fight. A dark bruise marred the right side of his jaw, fading gradually as it climbed up his cheek. His lip, swollen and split, was no less compelling if not so colorful with a half-formed scab at the corner. Jimmy had done that.

“What the hell are you staring at?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing, my ass.” Laton touched the bruise. “A little present from my brother. Bet you didn’t think he had it in him.”

Forcing himself to look away, Adam tried to get himself together, but he couldn’t seem to sort out what he felt. Knowing Laton he’d probably deserved that punch, but the idea that Jimmy had been the one who dealt it out, and done it on his behalf ...

“Jimmy’s not here,” Adam said, finally managing to find his voice.

Laton nodded. “I know. He mentioned to Shannon last night that he was on his way out of town. Actually, I came to see you. I thought it was time you and I had a little talk.” He straightened and swept a hand toward the living room. “Come in. Sit. Make yourself at home, not that you haven’t already done that.”

Adam stood still, pinned by indecision like a bug on a corkboard. The last thing he wanted to do was have a “talk” with Laton. He slid a sideways glance at the door. Why the hell hadn’t he gone around to the apartment instead of coming in to drop off the mail?

“I don’t have time for a talk. I have to be somewhere in—”

“I think you need to make time for this, Adam. It won’t take long, in any case.” Laton motioned with his free hand then,

without even a backward glance, turned and strode into the living room.

Laton never called him by name, not his first name anyway. Dread coiled tight in Adam's belly. He was prepared for hostility or aggression, but this casual, almost friendly Laton scared the shit out of him in a way that the bully never had. Not knowing what else to do, he trailed into the living room, his feet seeming to grow heavier with every step.

Laton stood by the fireplace, looking for all the world like the lord of the manor house. Adam was suddenly struck by how much the brothers looked alike, so much so that, had he not committed to memory every nuance of Jimmy's appearance, it might have been possible to mistake one man for the other. Laton's hair was a bit longer and a few shades lighter, and he wasn't as broad in the shoulders and chest. But the shape of the jaw was the same as were their eyes, that clear, lake-water blue that Adam had come to love so much. But where Jimmy's eyes were warm and expressive, Laton's were cool and filled with shrewd knowing that chilled Adam to his bones.

Those cold eyes regarded him over the rim of the glass as Laton sipped his drink. With his free hand he motioned to one of the large armchairs by the hearth. "Sit."

Knowing it was childish but unable to stop himself, Adam instead sat on the couch.

Laton sighed as if this kind of behavior was no less than he'd expected. He dropped into a high-back chair across from the couch and set his glass on the coffee table.

"I know you and my brother are fucking," Laton said without preamble. "And I think he thinks he's in love with you."

Adam opened his mouth to say that was none of Laton's goddamn business, but before he could speak, he was waved to silence.

"I don't care about that. What Jimmy does with his dick is his own business. And frankly, I'd rather not know about it."

Adam said nothing. His heart beat so hard he could feel its echo in every pulse-point throughout his body.

“What I do care about, is his reputation, which he seems hell bent on trashing by flaunting his...preferences at every conceivable opportunity.”

Adam swallowed and moistened his suddenly dry lips. “His preferences?”

“Preferences. Orientation. Whatever you like. We are not having that debate, not today anyway.”

“What do you want, Laton?”

“I saw the two of you at the Kimmel the other week.” Laton picked up his drink. Ice clinked softly as he took a sip. “My brother lost clients as a result of that little escapade, you know?” He set the glass down. “Did you know?”

Adam shook his head. He felt sick but, sadly, not surprised.

“Of course you didn’t. Jimmy certainly wouldn’t have told you. That’s just how he is. How we both are, come to that. In our family, you deal with your own shit and don’t go around whining about it. Not to your family, not to your friends, and certainly not to the person you’re fucking. I only know because Mitch Daniels called me. And I just thought you should know, too.” He paused. “You would rather know, wouldn’t you, Adam?”

Slowly, Adam nodded. “Yes.”

But, goddamnit, not like this. Not from you.

“We didn’t do anything wrong.” It was all he could think of to say, and it sounded so defensive. He hated that.

“I didn’t say you did anything. Christ, it’s not like you were skipping down Broad Street holding hands. You don’t even need to do anything. It’s so obvious the way he looks at you what you are to each other, you’d have to be blind not to see it. I’m sure Mitch saw it. I know Shannon sees it. God knows who else. I tried talking to Jimmy about it.” He touched his split lip with a fingertip. “This is what I got for my trouble. I’m guessing from your reaction that he didn’t tell you about that either.”

“No. But his knuckles are all split open so...”

“So you assumed something had happened. Smart boy. I was trying to talk to him about the vandalism and about how maybe

he should be more discrete, how maybe the two of you should be.” Laton shrugged. “He didn’t like it.”

As much as he wanted it to be a lie, Adam’s gut, along with what he’d heard through the office door, told him it wasn’t.

“So what do you want from me?”

Laton made an impatient sound, like it should have been obvious. “I want you to keep my brother from ruining his whole fucking life because he’s too goddamn stubborn to see the world for the shit hole it really is.” Laton leaned forward. “You and I know what people are like, Adam. But Jimmy isn’t like us. He’s a Polly Anna. He’s always looking for the best in everyone. It’s a real handicap. I’ve tried to protect him from his own naivety, but sometimes he just won’t listen.”

It was weird, almost surreal, finding himself and Laton Trent on the same side of any argument, particularly this one. But hadn’t he been trying to do the same thing, protect Jimmy from his own naivety, albeit in a different way? So he knew what Laton was talking about, how frustrated he had been when Jimmy hadn’t listened to him either.

“So what am I supposed to do?”

Laton smiled, the effect weirdly disturbing on his battered face. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.” Glancing at his watch, he got to his feet. “I told you it wouldn’t take long. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have somewhere I need to be.”

Adam followed Laton to the front door. Opening it he looked up and down the driveway. “Where’s your car?”

Keys jingled as Laton gestured. “I’m parked around the side of the house.” He stepped out onto the porch, his gaze falling on the Volkswagen. “New car?”

Adam nodded.

“Quite a comedown from my brother’s Porsche, isn’t it?” Laton laughed like this was the funniest thing ever.

Adam stayed on the porch until Laton’s car disappeared down the driveway and he could no longer hear the engine in the distance. Once he was sure Laton was gone, he went back in the house, closed and locked the door. Not that it would keep Laton out. Clearly he not only had a key, but the code for the alarm system too, so if he wanted to come in, he would.

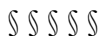
Leaning against the closed door, Adam shut his eyes. Slowly he sank to the floor and leaned his forehead on his knees.

What else was Jimmy not telling him? And did it really matter? If he couldn't trust Jimmy to be truthful, especially about the hard stuff, the stuff that Adam might not like, what did they have? The answer was nothing, not beyond the fucking anyway, and that hurt more than anything.

Jimmy said he loved him and he believed it, but sometimes that just wasn't enough.

Laton's words rang in his head. "Keep my brother from ruining his life." And "you'll think of something."

And he would.



"Please remain in your seat with your seatbelt fastened until the aircraft has come to a complete stop and the captain has turned off the seatbelt sign."

Ignoring the flight attendant's words, Jimmy clicked open his seatbelt and reached for his laptop before the plane had even reached the gate. He practically sprinted to baggage claim then stood, tapping his foot, and watching the same array of suitcases roll around and around and around for what felt like an eternity before his single bag finally appeared.

He'd spent nearly thirty-six hours diagnosing the problem, getting the system at Reynaud Electronics back online and securing the firewall. By the time they were finished, he and Paul and the team of techs working with them had all been on the ragged edge of exhaustion. Though Paul had invited him to stay through the weekend, Jimmy insisted on flying home as soon as the job was done, completing what could have been a much longer trip in a whirlwind two days. At the moment he was operating on nothing more than caffeine and adrenalin.

While he waited for the parking service to bring over his car, he briefly closed his eyes and pictured Adam, the way those dark eyes would widen when he first saw Jimmy and the smile he would get. That smile would be well worth the cost of changing his ticket and the hassle of driving to and from the airport through midday traffic.



Finally in his car, Jimmy pulled his cell off his belt and flipped it open, unable to wait another moment. He imagined the phone ringing and Adam answering

Guess where I am, he imagined himself saying.

He was acting like a lovesick teenager, he knew. But what the hell. He was in love, the real deal, for the first time in his life and why shouldn't he enjoy it? Of course they had some problems. What couple didn't? And then there was the matter of his family. He would have to tell them about Adam and do it soon. But these were things they could work through with enough time and love, and God knew they had plenty of both.

He scrolled through the numbers in his phone until he found Adam's cell. His finger hovered over the "talk" button as he reconsidered. He really wanted his arrival to be a surprise. He could wait.

The drive wasn't long though it felt like forever before he turned into his driveway and let the Mercedes roll to a stop at the foot of the front steps. Leaving his suitcase and laptop in the car, he flung the door open and bounded up the steps. A quick glance at his watch told him they had well over an hour before Adam had to leave for work, plenty of time for a reunion.

Inside the house was quiet, almost too quiet. Jimmy checked the alarm. It was off, which meant Adam was here. Somewhere.

"Hello? Adam? Where are you?"

No answer.

Slowly Jimmy walked through the downstairs rooms, looking for the abandoned shoes, the messy, half-read pile of newspaper, an empty glass left on a table, any of the signs, now so familiar, which meant Adam was somewhere around. Nothing was out of order. The place looked as neat and undisturbed as if the cleaning people had just left five minutes ago.

In the den, Jimmy opened the drapes and looked out the window just as Adam emerged from the garage, a cardboard box held in his arms. A wave of relief swept over Jimmy, not that he'd been worried, not really. He got that sudden fluttering

low in his belly, the same feeling he got each and every time he thought of his lover.

God, Adam was so beautiful. And he, Jimmy, was the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the world.

Hurrying to the back door, he opened it and stepped out, pausing on the landing at the sight of the strange car in the drive. He'd been so relieved to see Adam he hadn't even noticed it before. Whose car was it?

"Hey." Jimmy descended the steps and started across the grass toward his lover.

Adam looked up from where he was settling the box in the backseat of the Volkswagen. His eyes widened, but instead of the smile Jimmy anticipated, Adam's lips thinned into what could only be called a grimace.

What the hell?

Jimmy approached the car from the passenger side. "Whose car?"

"Mine. I just got it the other day." Adam stepped back, closing the driver's door but made no move to come around the car.

"I thought we were going to go look at cars together." Already halfway around the car, Jimmy paused, his gaze drawn to a dent in the front fender. He touched it with a fingertip. A chip of red paint flaked away and drifted slowly to the ground.

"Yeah, well, this came up and it was a good deal, so I grabbed it." Adam hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. "I thought you weren't coming back till Monday or Tuesday."

"We finished early, so I decided to come home."

Why wouldn't Adam look at him?

Jimmy took another couple of steps bringing him around to the driver's side of the hood. Why was his heart suddenly galloping in his chest?

"It was the weirdest thing. The problem at Reynaud, I mean." Jimmy paused but when Adam said nothing he continued. "There's this guy, just a kid really, who works for Paul. Apparently, he thought his girlfriend was cheating on him.

So he was sabotaging the system, and when it was down he would sneak home and check up on her. Isn't that bizarre?"

"Yeah, that's pretty fucked up." Adam shifted from foot to foot, looking anywhere but at Jimmy.

"Adam?"

After a moment's hesitation, dark eyes lifted to meet his. "What?"

"What's wrong?"

Adam shrugged, his gaze sliding away.

"Tell me." Jimmy reached out.

Adam stepped back, lifting a hand in a "don't" gesture. He swallowed and moistened his lips. "I have to leave, Jim."

Jimmy's hand fell back to his side. "Okay, but first will you tell me what's wrong?"

Adam shook his head. "No, I mean, I have to leave. I can't live here anymore...with you."

The breath froze in Jimmy's lungs. He couldn't seem to breathe either in or out, like he'd taken a punch in the solar plexus.

"I'm sorry, Jim."

Jimmy gasped, suddenly regaining the ability to breathe and speak, with it came the stunned realization of exactly what Adam was saying. "What do you mean, you can't live here with me anymore?"

"I'm moving out."

"You can't." It was the first thing that popped into his head.

"I am."

"Why?"

Adam sighed. "Because you don't trust me."

"I told you, I know you aren't seeing anybody else. I should never have said that—"

"Not that." Adam's hand came out of his pocket and he raked fingers through his hair. "You don't tell me stuff."

"Like what?"

"Like about how you lost clients after we went to the Kimmel."

“Who told you that?”

“It doesn’t matter who. It should have been you. Why didn’t you tell me, Jim?”

“It didn’t concern you. It was just business.” As soon as the words were out Jimmy knew they were the exact wrong thing to say.

“It’s not business. It’s homophobia. Jim, Mitch Daniels took his business somewhere else because he saw us together and he doesn’t want to deal with someone who’s gay.”

“So? Big fucking deal. Mitch is just one stupid asshole. I don’t need his business. I don’t want his business if that’s how he is.”

“That’s not the point. You should have told me.”

“There is no point. It’s my problem, not yours. I didn’t want to upset you.”

“Too late for that.”

“Why are you making such a big fucking deal over this? It doesn’t even affect you.”

“You’re wrong. When you’re with someone, in love with someone, everything that affects them affects you.”

“Okay. Fine. What Mitch did was ugly. I was just trying to protect you. So sue me.”

“I don’t need you to protect me. I’m a grown man, Jim, and I know more about the big scary world than you would believe. We’re supposed to be partners, aren’t we? Partners tell each other stuff. God, I should be the first one you want to tell when bad stuff happens, not the last.”

Jimmy took a breath, fighting for control. He needed to stay cool. He needed to be reasonable. He needed to say the right thing rather than letting fly with whatever popped into his head.

“Okay. You’re right. I’m sorry. I promise I’ll tell you stuff from now on.”

Just please, don’t leave, he added silently.

“What else?”

“What do you mean?”

“What else have you lied about?”

"I never lied to you."

"Oh, so you just forgot to tell me that you punched Laton in the mouth when he suggested that we might want to be more discrete?"

"Laton told you." Jimmy's hands balled into fists. He was going to kick Laton's sorry ass for this.

"Some of it. Most of it I overheard. I was outside the door when you were arguing."

"You were eavesdropping?"

"I didn't mean to."

"And you never said anything?"

"I was waiting for you to tell me. I wanted you to tell me. All the way home in the car I kept trying to get you to talk. I kept thinking, okay, now he'll tell me, but you never did. You didn't trust me enough to be honest with me. That's why I have to go. I need to get my shit together and so do you."

Adam opened the driver's door.

"Wait."

"No." Adam started to slide into the car.

"I said wait." Jimmy's hand shot out and gripped Adam's wrist. Dragging him back out of the car, Jimmy shoved him against the side and stepped in close. "I love you, don't you see that? You can't just walk away from me. Not after I—"

Horried at his own aggression, Jimmy released Adam and stepped back.

"After you what? Came out for me?" Adam blew out a shaky breath. Slim hands came up to cover his face, his sleeve sliding back to show red marks on his wrist in the shape of Jimmy's fingers.

"I'm sorry," Jimmy whispered.

Lowering his hands, Adam looked at Jimmy, his eyes filled with regret. "Like I said, Jim, we both need to get our shit together, and we can't do it like this."

"Where will you go?"

"I'll probably stay with Jason for a while. It might take me a day or two to get my stuff out of the apartment. I hope that's okay."

“That’s fine. Take as long as you need.”

“Thanks.”

“Adam?”

“What?”

“Promise me you won’t be sleeping in your car?”

Adam’s smile was sad. “I promise.”

Getting in his car, Adam started the engine.

Jimmy turned and went into the house, closing the door after him. He just couldn’t stand there and watch Adam drive away, he just couldn’t.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

### *Six Months Later*

“Look at me, darling.”

Adam turned his head in response to the photographer’s prompting. Even that slight motion was enough to set him swaying from the suspension bar. The camera clicked. A damp lock of hair fell across his eyes just as a drop of sweat slid down the side of his face like a tear. He could do nothing about either one since he was currently locked in a full suspension, wrists and ankles cuffed, body held in an elaborate shibari harness. He’d learned the hard way that moving around too much, even trying to flip hair out of your eyes, while suspended was not a good idea. Too much motion made him queasy.

Theo tsked. Hurrying to Adam’s side, he brushed the hair from his eyes then swiped that the perspiration with a fingertip. “Stop sweating, baby. You’ll get yourself all shiny.”

“I’m hot, Thee.”

Theo chuckled. “Indeed, you are.” He returned to his camera. “Arch your spine just a little and give me one of those looks. That’s it. That’s the look. Fabulous.” Click. Click. Click. Click. “Just a few more.”

Thank God. Adam felt like he’d been hanging there forever, though, in reality, it couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes or so. Theo was a perfectionist, a real taskmaster when it came to his work. The models complained constantly, though usually not to the man’s face, and no one, including Adam himself, ever refused him anything because Theo had not only exceptional artistic vision but the skill to make that vision a reality. Besides, for every model who got to work with him, there were a dozen more who would be more than happy to take your place if the requirements became too rigorous. So nobody bitched, at least not within earshot of the photographer.

Plus the money was good. And modeling, even fetish modeling, was way easier than stripping any day.

“Gorgeous, darling.” Theo moved back to Adam’s side. “I’m going to turn you now. Hold on.”

Adam shut his eyes. Theo turned him. His stomach rolled.

No puking. Puking was not sexy.

The spinning stopped and he cautiously opened his eyes.

Theo adjusted the lights, changed the camera angle and resumed shooting. “That’s it, darling. God, you’re perfect, the best I’ve ever had.”

“Oh Thee, I bet you say that to all the boys. In fact, I know you do.”

“But with you, I actually mean it.”

Adam laughed. The camera clicked. The rope-harness bit into his skin.

This suspension was the last of the work they’d do today. Adam couldn’t have been more glad of that. The combination of the heat from the lights and the inactivity were getting to him. Though the yoga he’d started practicing was helping, Adam yet had trouble with the stillness that was often required during a shoot where he was restrained or suspended. Like now.

Theo’s “just a few more” turned into another thirty minutes of prompting and fussing and changing lights. By the time they actually did finish, Adam’s arms and legs felt stiff and his joints ached.

Turning the lights down, Theo walked over to where Adam was hanging. But before he started to lower him, he tangled his fingers in Adam’s hair and drew his head back. He smiled. “Lovely as always, my Phoenix.”

Adam returned the smile. He was finally getting used to being called Phoenix, the name he’d chosen for his modeling. The tattoo of the mythical bird that now covered his back had come later. And whereas the name had been Theo’s suggestion, the idea and the design of the tat were entirely his own.

Leaning in, Theo brought their mouths together.



Adam closed his eyes and let his lips be parted by Theo's tongue. Except in his head they were Jimmy's lips on his and Jimmy's tongue exploring his mouth.

Adam inhaled the spicy scent of Theo's skin, the slight rasp of beard stubble against his face a strange contrast with the silky stroke of Theo's tongue in his mouth.

Adam sucked on that tongue, drinking in the sounds the other man fed to him as he lost himself in the memory of Jimmy's eyes and Jimmy's hands and the feel of Jimmy's cock inside him. But this wasn't Jimmy. And as much as he tried to pretend otherwise, he couldn't change that.

Adam's cock throbbed against the ropes that bound him. He needed to get fucked. He knew Theo would do him in a heartbeat. But he didn't want Theo. He didn't want anybody but Jimmy, and that was just fucking pathetic. Why the hell couldn't he just move on, find someone else? Why did he continue to compare every man he met with Jimmy Trent?

For months after their break-up, he had nurtured a tiny flame of hope that Jimmy might seek him out, might come after him and try to win him back. Not that it would have taken much back then. Hell, it wouldn't take much now. Though he liked to pretend his resistance had improved over time, in his heart he knew that was probably a lie.

But Jimmy hadn't come after him. Obviously, the man had moved on.

Just as he himself should.

Adam turned his head, breaking the kiss. "Thee, stop. Just get me down, will you?"

"I'd rather get you up, baby. Though it seems I've already managed to do that." Theo's fingertips brushed Adam's erection. His tongue slipped out and moistened his lips. "How about letting me help you out with that lovely boner you're sporting?"

And just for a moment he considered it. Yeah, he was horny, but it wasn't Theo he wanted. Yet neither did he want to turn the photographer down flat. Nobody liked rejection.

Adam smiled up at the other man. "Now Thee, what do you think Kerry would say if he found out you sucked me off after everybody else left?"

Theo shrugged. "How should I know?"

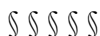
"C'mon man, he'd pitch a fit. You know he would. And he'd end up hating me more than he already does."

Kerry was one of the other models and Theo's latest boytoy, a pretty, little brunet with a sharp tongue and no sense of humor.

Theo sighed. "You're right, of course, though he should know by now what a slut I am. Still, I suppose I can't have dissension in the ranks, especially since I'm planning to have the two of you working together later this week." Theo turned away and busied himself with getting a large exercise-mat from against the far wall. He positioned it underneath Adam and began lowering him to the floor.

"No sharp objects involved, I hope." Adam sighed with relief. That had gone better than he'd expected or dared to hope.

"Nothing sharper than your wits, my dear." Taking a set of keys from his pocket, Theo unlocked Adam's wrist then his ankles. "Let me deal with this film then I'll help you get out of that lovely bit of macramé you're wearing."



Jimmy slid his car into the space just down the street from Jason Bonner's club, the Pleasure Chest. From here the club looked not much different from a half dozen other old factory buildings along this stretch of road. Some had been converted into million-dollar condos, one was even now being turned into a concert venue. Unless you knew what was concealed behind the façade of number 734, you'd never guess that the building housed one of the most exclusive BDSM clubs in the tri-state area.

Picking up the envelope from the passenger seat, Jimmy got out of the car, clicked the locks and walked the half block to the front entrance. He rang the bell then waited.

Benny Sagan opened the door. Christ but the kid was good looking in that punky, purple hair sort of way with his big, blue

eyes and delicate, almost pretty face. Not Jimmy's type, but hell if he didn't know at least a dozen guys who would fall over themselves for a date with a kid who looked like Benny.

"Hey Mr. Trent. How's it going?" Benny's lips curved into a smile that lit his features and made him look even younger than his twenty-four years.

Jimmy winced. "Benny, I told you, it's Jimmy. Mr. Trent was my father. When you call me that it makes me feel as old as Methuselah."

Benny laughed. It was a lovely, musical sound. "Sorry. Who's Methuselah anyway? Should I know that?"

Jimmy chuckled. "Forget it, Benny. It's not important." He held out the envelope. "I brought the papers over. Would you give them to Jason and tell him I made the changes he asked for?"

"He told me to have you come in. He wants to talk to you for a minute." Benny stepped back, clearly waiting for him to do just that.

Jimmy glanced at his watch. If he didn't get on the road soon he would be stuck forever in rush-hour traffic. Plus there was no telling how long it might take him to drive into Manhattan regardless of the hour. He didn't want to miss the opening night of the show at the Renselaer gallery. Theo Wright himself would be attending and so, it was rumored, would several of his models including one Phoenix. No, he had no intention of missing this opportunity to get close to Adam, maybe even to talk to him.

"I'm on my way out of town and I don't really have a lot of time."

"He said it would only take a few minutes." The door opened wider and Benny motioned for him to c'mon. Evidently it never occurred to the kid that anyone would not accommodate the Dom's every wish.

"Is there a problem, do you know?"

"I don't know."

Suppressing a sigh, Jimmy stepped into the foyer. But when he reached for the inside door Benny stopped him with a light touch on his arm.

“Jimmy, I need to see your ID.”

Jimmy lifted a brow. “C’mon, Benny, you know who I am.”

“I know. But it’s the rules. All nonmembers have to show ID before I can let them in.” He bit his lip. “If I make an exception for you, well, Jason won’t like it.”

“Okay.” Tucking the envelope under his arm, he reached for his wallet. Taking it from his pocket, he opened it to his license and held it out.

Benny glanced at the picture and nodded. “Thanks. Follow me, please?”

It was his third visit to the Pleasure Chest in as many months, all on behalf of the charity committee of which he had somehow become the chairman. He still wasn’t sure how that had happened, though he suspected it had something to do with the number of connections he had in the local business community. And many of those connections had served him well, even if a few people had ceased to acknowledge him after he had come out. But most of his associates had been either openly supportive or silently neutral, and he had used them all shamelessly for the benefit of what he now thought of as *his* charity.

Jason was donating the use of his club for their upcoming AIDS benefit, otherwise Jimmy knew he would never have gained entree into this world of whips and leather and bondage. Even dressed as he was in black jeans and a leather biker jacket, Jimmy knew that he could never be mistaken for someone who belonged in a place like this.

Though he already knew the way to Jason’s office, he let Benny lead him. Slim hips and a tight little ass in fashionably ragged jeans swayed just a little as Benny walked. Slender shoulders were held very straight in a posture that looked almost military. Had the kid perhaps been subjected to military school at one time? The thought of a boy who looked like Benny in a military academy made him shudder.

As he followed Benny down a carpeted hallway and past several identical-looking closed doors, Jimmy marveled once again at how much the place, at least this part of it, looked like

any other private club. Of course, with the exception of the Dom's office, he had yet to get beyond the most public areas.

Benny paused before a door that looked exactly like all the others but made no move to knock. "He'll be right with you. He's just finishing an appointment." He opened the door. "Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you anything while you wait?"

Jimmy declined the offer and settled into one of the high-backed leather guest chairs to wait for Jason. Hopefully, the promised few minutes would be no more than that.

While he waited, he let his gaze wander the room. He liked this space with its deep greens and dark woods. The uncarpeted floor showed its age but nevertheless had been polished to a mellow gleam. The large mahogany desk that dominated one corner of the space was also polished to within an inch of its life, the surface empty but for a fist-sized chunk of some type of black rock, probably meant to be a paper-weight except that it held down no paper. The late afternoon sun shone through the stained-glass windows behind the desk, scattering gems of jewel-toned light across the glossy surface. One of the windows showed a naked and very voluptuous Eve in the Garden of Eden, reaching out, her fingers just grazing the apple held out by a grinning, upright serpent that looked remarkably like an erect cock. The other panel depicted the Last Temptation of Christ and boasted an equally penis-like serpent. Jason had told him that he'd picked up the windows at an auction and had them restored and installed not long after acquiring this building. Whatever "acquiring" meant, Jimmy suspected it hadn't been through normal real-estate channels. He also supposed he would probably never know for sure and that was just fine.

The door opened and Jason appeared. He wore casual slacks and a shirt made of some silky-looking material in a shade of green that picked up the color of his eyes. It was quite a different look from the combination of leather and hardware Jimmy had expected.

Jimmy got to his feet. "Jason, how's it going?"

“Good to see you, Jim. Glad you could wait.” Jason took the hand Jimmy offered. They shook. “Sorry to keep you, but my last appointment ran a little longer than I expected.” He dropped into the chair across from the one Jimmy had chosen.

Jimmy resumed his seat. On his previous visits to the club, Jason had occupied the chair behind the desk, the mahogany surface like a barrier between them. So this was different. It made him feel strange and just a little uneasy. But that was ridiculous. In fact, it was probably a good sign, like maybe they were making progress toward some kind of truce, if not friendship. Before they’d begun working on the benefit, their only association had been through Adam and it had not been a good one.

“I brought the paperwork for you to sign.” Jimmy held out the envelope. “It’s the same agreement I emailed to you the other day.”

“With the changes I asked for?”

Jimmy nodded.

“That’s fine then.” Jason took the envelope, opened it and riffled through the pages but seemed to have little interest in reading. “Benny said you’re in a hurry, so I won’t keep you. But I wanted to tell you I have some good news for you.”

“Yeah?” Jimmy leaned forward.

Jason nodded. “I’ve managed to procure some of Theo Wright’s work for the benefit. We’ll set them up around the club and the attendees can bid on them, a sort of secret auction with the pieces going to the highest bidder.”

“Why do it that way? Why not just auction them off?”

“Because if people don’t know what the other bids are, they’ll offer what they’re willing to pay rather than just outbidding the other guy. It’s been my experience that you’ll get more money that way. Besides, we’re already doing the slave auction and it’s better not to confuse the issue. The slaves are going to bring in big money and you don’t want to steal their thunder.”

“That’s terrific.” Jimmy laughed. “And very devious.”

And why the hell did he have to come in to hear that? Couldn’t Jason have called him?

Jason shrugged. "Yeah well, it's all for charity and the more we can get out of them the better, right?"

"I'm really pleased you got Wright to donate. I had just about given up on him. I couldn't even get him to return my phone calls."

"Theo's not much of a phone person." Jason chuckled. "He only returns my calls because I let him use the club for some of his shoots. In fact, I've already got some of the pieces he's donating." Jason gestured. "Like that one. It's really something, don't you think?"

Jimmy looked up and his jaw dropped.

Above the massive, stone fireplace hung a black and white depiction of a witch burning, blown up to poster size. The photograph showed Adam bound to a rough-hewn stake. The ropes that held him had been intricately woven and tied in a fashion for which Jimmy was sure there must be a name, though he didn't know it. The knots were uniformly complex and the overall effect spectacular. But for Jimmy it was the man himself that turned the photograph into an instant obsession. He quite simply had to have that picture.

Adam was naked, his back turned to the camera, hands bound above his head, his phenomenal body stretched taut, every muscle clearly delineated by the play of light and shadow. His pale skin made a striking contrast against the dark wood, his glossy hair pulled aside and draped over one broad shoulder, the better to display the tattoo that graced the skin of his back from shoulders to waist.

It was a phoenix, wings spread, rising from flames, and the sight of it had Jimmy's cock stirring. The tat was new since they'd broken up and though he'd seen it in other photographs -- he now owned several of Theo Wright's works -- it always affected him the same way.

"I'm thinking of buying that one for the club."

"You can't. I'm buying it."

Jason laughed. "How did I know you'd say that? Maybe you'll just have to outbid me for it."

Jimmy tore his gaze from the photograph and eyed Jason who was grinning like the cat who'd just conned the canary.

"You set me up."

*You son of a bitch.*

"I don't know what you mean, Jim." Jason's tone showed the lie for what it was. "And besides, it's all for charity."

Jimmy started to say ... What exactly, he wasn't sure, maybe to call Jason on the way he'd baited him, but Jason cut him off.

"I have some other news for you too. It's about the slave auction."

"Yeah? What about it?"

§ § § § §

"Just fucking go then. I don't give a shit."

The door to the gallery manager's office flew open and Kerry stormed out. Adam stepped out of the way just in time to avoid a collision and received a hate-filled glare for his trouble.

"Fuck you too, then," Adam murmured to Kerry's retreating back. He got no reaction, which meant the other model hadn't heard him. Probably just as well. Entering the office, he found Theo there and very much alone. Even if he hadn't heard Kerry's parting comment, he would have known from Theo's posture that the lovers had been fighting.

The photographer spun to face him. "Don't even try—oh, it's you."

"Yeah, it's me. Sorry to disappoint." Adam sank down onto the arm of the small couch and studied Theo.

Hectic patches of red stained his neck and cheeks, and a vein throbbed in his temple. Rather than his normal relaxed and graceful posture, he stood stiffly, shoulders thrown back and chest thrust out as if ready for battle. As Adam watched, Theo seemed to crumple in on himself, as if someone had pulled a plug and let the air out of his sails.

This was not good.

Adam glanced at the closed office door. "Want to talk about it?"

Theo huffed out a breath. The laugh he attempted sounded totally forced. "No, I don't. It's nothing. Just another of the princeling's temper tantrums."



"Thee, man, what are you doing? You two fight more than you fuck."

"Not quite, darling." Theo sighed. "How are you doing? I saw you out there schmoozing the patrons. J.P. Bradshaw seemed quite taken with you."

He let the sudden shift of topic go without comment. "Yeah, J.P.'s quite a character." Adam grinned. "He invited Phoenix to his yacht for the weekend."

Theo's brows drew together. "You know I find it quite disturbing when you speak of yourself in the third person like that, darling."

Adam waved this away. "Thee, Phoenix isn't me. He's just a part I play."

"So you're always saying. You declined J.P.'s invitation, then?"

Adam nodded.

"What did he say?"

"That if Phoenix changes his mind they'd be sailing at six Friday evening."

Theo laughed. "I guess when you're as old and rich as J.P. you figure nothing ventured nothing gained." He sobered. "You look tired, Adam." Theo walked to where Adam sat and tilted his face up with a finger under his chin. "How are you doing, really?"

"Thanks a lot, Thee. I always like hearing that I look like shit."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. You look stunning as always, but I can see by your eyes that you're tired."

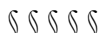
Theo ran his thumb over Adam's lower lip then released him.

"It was kind of a long day." Adam dug for a smile. "I'm okay though."

"Would you like to get out of here? There's a great little pub around the corner. We could go over there and have a celebratory drink."

"What are we celebrating?"

Theo shrugged. "Who knows? We'll think of something."



Jimmy threaded his way through the crowd outside the entrance of the Renselaer Gallery. Just as he passed through a cloud of cigarette and cigar smoke his cell rang. Pulling it off his belt, he checked the number. It was Laton.

Silencing the phone, Jimmy returned it to his belt.

At the moment, he had neither the time nor the patience for Laton's special brand of bullshit. Most likely he wanted to try, once again, to talk Jimmy out of selling his interest in *Flesh Tones*, a thing he'd been determined to do ever since learning that it was none other than his own brother who had arranged for the vandalism of his car six months earlier.

Jimmy had learned the truth quite by accident. It should have been shocking. Sadly, it wasn't.

The brothers had argued, Laton trying, in vain, to explain, and maybe even rationalize, his motives. He wanted, he had said, to convince his brother of the need for discretion in his relationship with Adam Hyland. But things had gotten way out of hand.

Jimmy had listened, saying nothing, then when Laton was finished he had left the office and the club and never returned.

At the time, the hurt and betrayal had seemed so huge that he thought he could never even absorb it let alone forgive his brother. Now though, it just made him sad.

His phone beeped. Laton had left a message. Knowing he should ignore it, yet unable to do it, Jimmy accessed his voicemail.

"Jim, it's me." A pause. "I know you probably don't want to talk to me, but I need to talk to you about Stephanie's wedding." Another, longer pause. "She says I need to make things right with you, that she wants us both at the wedding or she doesn't want a wedding at all." Laton blew out a breath. "Hell, Jimmy, she told me not to bother coming unless I can first make it up with you. Nice, huh? Her own father and she doesn't want me at her wedding." Pause. "Anyway, do you think we could meet someplace...neutral and just talk? Please?"

The message ended and Jimmy flipped the phone closed.

Shit.

He did not want to spoil Stephanie's wedding, had been determined that the strife between Laton and himself should not spill over onto his niece's special day. That was why he had offered to not attend, a thing Stephanie wouldn't hear of.

And so this message from his brother was the fallout.

Of course he would go to Stephie's wedding, and tomorrow he would call and tell her so. His brother, on the other hand, could stew for a while before he got a return call.

For just a moment, Jimmy let himself imagine walking into Stephanie's wedding with Adam on his arm. It was probably just a fantasy, or at least an unlikely daydream, but you never knew.

With a sigh, Jimmy opened the door to the gallery and stepped inside.

Industrial rock throbbed under the murmur of conversation. The place was mobbed, the attendees attired in anything and everything from denim to leather to eveningwear. It was quite the odd mix. And he didn't see Theo Wright, or Adam, anywhere.

A harried-looking woman in a leather mini-skirt and thigh-high boots greeted him. "I'm Joy Rozdale." She extended her hand. "Welcome to Renselaer Gallery."

They shook hands and she passed him a brochure. Jimmy thanked her politely as he tried to peer past her into the gallery proper.

The crowd included all manner of people -- pierced and inked wild men, leather daddies and their tender, young things, a smattering of trannies and even a few tie-wearing, button-down types who looked like they belonged anywhere but here. Like me, Jimmy thought and smiled to himself.

But nowhere did he see the single person he'd driven all this way to find.

Taking a glass of wine from the tray on a nearby table, Jimmy returned his attention to Joy Rozdale who was locked in animated conversation with the couple who had walked in just behind him.

“Excuse me, Joy.”

She turned to him, impeccably shaped brows lifted.

“I had heard that Theo Wright was going to be here tonight, but I don’t see him.”

“He was. For about an hour or so. You just missed him.” She smiled apologetically. “I tried to get him to hang around but...well, you know those artistic types.” She must have seen his disappointment because she gripped his arm and pointed. “But there’s one of his models. I can introduce you, if you’d like.”

Jimmy followed her pointing finger. His breath caught, his pulse accelerated and for a moment his whole world tilted on its axis. Then the dark-haired man turned, Jimmy’s heart plummeted from the heights to which it had risen only a moment before and the world returned to normal. The model was not Adam, though the resemblance was striking if you didn’t look too close.

True the hair was a similar shade, though now that he really looked the length was wrong. Adam’s hair was glossier too, he was sure of that. He had loved Adam’s hair.

This man was smaller in stature as well, not as broad in the shoulders and without the amazing muscle definition Adam had gained from his ballet dancing.

No, this young man was certainly not Adam.

Jimmy started to turn away, looking for an escape. But Joy was already beckoning to the man. “His name is Kerry Wells and he’s a real talent. You’ll find several of his photographs in the show tonight.” She leaned in close. “I’ve heard some pretty wild stories about what goes on during Theo Wright’s photo shoots. Maybe we can get him to share a few juicy details with us.”

Please, no. Jimmy took a large swallow of his wine. Juicy rumors about Theo Wright and his models were the last thing he wanted to hear. But the young man had reached them by then and Joy was still holding on to his arm. Short of genuine rudeness, there was no way that he was getting out of this introduction.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

At last he'd made it into the inner sanctum, the part of Jason's club normally reserved for members. Jimmy sipped his gin and tonic and let his gaze roam the crowded room. After months of imagining what the interior of a BDSM club would look like, he was a little disappointed by the ordinary appearance of the place. Not that it wasn't nice, elegant even, with its plush, leather banquettes, scattering of small tables and the dark wood bar that ran along one wall. But he'd expected something...else. He had no idea what. But aside from the displays of fetish photographs and other artwork, this place might have been any upscale private club. Of course maybe they'd sanitized it for tonight's festivities. As if, under normal circumstances, they'd have the bondage gear, or maybe even the submissives, hanging from the ceiling.

Jimmy grinned into his drink and shifted his attention from the place to the people. A veritable smorgasbord of male hotness, the enormous room was packed with men, all dressed to the teeth and having a good time. From where he stood near the bar, Jimmy had a clear view of a silver-haired business type in an impeccably tailored suit dancing with a pierced and punked-out wild child wearing little more than a g-string and a smile. As he watched, Silver-Hair twirled G-String then caught him in an embrace and planted one right on the kid's lips. Had the two arrived together or had they hooked up after they got here? Either way, he'd lay odds that they would be leaving together.

Slender arms slid around Jimmy's waist from behind, thumbs hooking behind his belt-buckle. A lean body pressed against his back as lips brushed his ear.

"Guess who?"

He recognized the soft male voice instantly. Still, Jimmy pretended to consider the question as he covered the slender hands with one of his.

"Hmm, let's see. Is it Keith?"

"No..." The single word was drawn out as a tongue licked just behind Jimmy's ear.

"Justin?"

"No." Teeth scraped the side of his neck. "Try again."

"I know, it's David, isn't it?"

"No, it's not David." The voice turned sulky. "I can't believe—"

Dislodging the hands at his belt, Jimmy turned. "Rickie, baby, don't pout. I knew it was you all the time." He slipped an arm around the man's slender waist and gave him a light squeeze before letting go. "How have you been? You look great."

Dark eyes sparkled even as Rickie stuck out his lower lip and gave his glossy curls a toss. "You know I hate when you tease me like that, J.T."

Jimmy chuckled. "I know. That's why I do it." He touched a finger to the corner of Rickie's mouth. "Got a smile for me anyway?"

Turning his head, Rickie sucked Jimmy's finger into his mouth and lathed the digit with his tongue.

A jolt of lust shot straight to Jimmy's prick and he pulled his finger out of that wet heat. At the moment, the memory of that pretty, pouty mouth that could suck the chrome off a Harley was just a little too vivid and he did not want to be distracted. "You're a shameless flirt, Ricardo."

Jimmy slipped his hand into his pocket. It wouldn't do to let Rickie get him all wound up. Not that the kid wasn't adorable with his big dark eyes, curly black hair and flawless olive skin, every inch of which Jimmy had not only seen but tasted. Yes indeed, Rickie Melino was a little hottie. One of a series of dark-eyed, dark-haired, little hotties with whom Jimmy had indulged in the months immediately after his break-up with Adam.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Jimmy." Taking Jimmy's drink, Rickie sipped, eyes intent over the rim of the glass.

"I was about to say the same to you." Jimmy took his glass back and finished his drink before placing it on the tray of a passing waiter.

"I came with someone." Rickie scanned the crowd before he stepped in close, pressing his lithe body against Jimmy's side, lips once more brushing Jimmy's ear. "But I could ditch him, if you want." Dark lashes lowered. It was Rickie's come and fuck me look.

"Not tonight." Jimmy smiled, an attempt to soften the rejection and gently detached himself from the young man. "I already have plans. Now, go find your date. I'm sure he must be missing you."

"Your loss, J.T."

"Absolutely."

Jimmy watched the kid walk away, lean hips swaying, firm little ass encased in tight leather bike-shorts. Quite possibly he should have his head examined for turning down a sizzling hot sure thing like Rickie. But tonight he really did have other plans.

Shaking his head, Jimmy turned back toward the bar, and found himself face to face with Jason Bonner.

The big blond's eyes followed Rickie's retreating figure with more than a little interest. "Friend of yours?"

"Something like that." Jimmy locked gazes with the Dom. Several long seconds ticked by, neither man breaking eye contact.

Jason spoke first. "Nice party, Jim."

"Thanks to you and your staff." Jimmy offered his hand. They shook. "I wanted to thank you again for donating the use of your club for the benefit. It was very generous."

Jason shrugged but his smile was pleased. "I like to do my part for charity."

"Is everything set for later?"

"Just as you asked." Jason's green eyes turned cool. "Not losing your nerve, are you?"

Jimmy had no time to answer before the electronic squeal of a microphone split the air. Jason's gaze flicked to the stage at the far end of the room where several figures scurried about in the shadows. Lights came on, revealing a podium to the left and a large square platform in the center of the stage.

Jason turned his gaze back to Jimmy. "We'll be starting the slave auction in about fifteen minutes, in case you want to say a few words beforehand, because once we get started you won't get their attention again."

Jimmy nodded. "If you say so."

Public speaking was not his favorite thing. But as the committee chair the responsibility was his for getting the attendees to pull out their checkbooks or pry open their wallets at least one more time.

Jason motioned for Jimmy to follow him. "Come with me. I'll introduce you then it's all yours."

§ § § §

In the backstage area behind the curtain, Adam leaned against a flogging post, flipping pages in a magazine and pretending to read while he waited with the other "slaves" for the auction to begin. Besides himself, there were two other fetish models plus a handful of submissives from the club, all standing around chatting or touching up their makeup in the crowded space. On stage the festivities were just getting started.

"On behalf of the organizing committee, I'd like to thank everyone for coming this evening, and for your most generous support. All the charities that will benefit from ticket sales and tonight's auction are..."

The deep timbre of that voice slid over Adam like an intimate caress. He shivered as something tightened low in his belly. How was it that even after all this time just the sound of Jimmy's voice could still get him going?

It was sort of pathetic really. He was handling it, though. Yeah, no sweat. Or so he'd told Jason when his friend had warned him that Jimmy would be here tonight. Just because they happened to be at the same party didn't mean he and Jimmy had to interact or even acknowledge each other. And that was just fine by him.

"Oh my fucking God, he's hot." Ty, one of the other fetish models, popped his blond head around the curtain for a second look. "Nice ass, too."

Adam flinched. His fingers tightened on the magazine. He would not deck his friend for having the balls to look, much



less comment, on Jimmy's hotness. After all, Ty had no way of knowing that Jimmy was his ex.

"Move over and let me see." Jonathan, a petite redhead with the palest skin Adam had ever seen and about a zillion freckles, peered over Ty's shoulder. "He's old, man. That dude is at least thirty-five."

"I like older men." Ty sighed dramatically. "I hope he bids on me."

"Theo says we're not supposed to fuck them." Jonathan adjusted himself in his PVC pants.

"Ask me if I care." Ty gave his mane of curls a calculated toss. "And besides, who would know?" He made a face at Jonathan. "Your eye makeup looks like shit. You should have gotten Phoenix to make you up."

Jonathan turned to Adam. "Does it, Phee?"

"Does it what?" Adam flipped his magazine closed. He liked Ty and Jon, he really did. But tonight their constant ragging on each other was getting on his last nerve.

"Does my eye makeup look bad?"

"No, it looks fine."

"Don't lie to him, man."

Jonathan turned on Ty. "Sometimes I fucking hate you."

"I was just trying to—"

The curtain stirred and Theo appeared. "Now, now, my darlings, what's all the fuss about?" The photographer clapped his hands, taking his role as slave-Master very seriously and reminding Adam of a kindergarten teacher. And wasn't that just the weirdest thought? "Let's have less bickering and more smiling, shall we? It's almost show time."

The audience applauded as Jimmy finished his comments and Jason took over the mic.

Theo ran his hands through Jonathan's spiky hair then straightened his vest. "You're up first, my sweet. Go out there and make me proud."

Theo patted Jonathan's ass and gave him a gentle shove toward the curtain before he turned to Ty. He eyed the blond critically. "Tyler, where's your collar?"

Big blue eyes widened and Ty lifted a hand to his neck. "Oh fuck, I forgot it."

On stage the bidding for Jonathan began.

Theo tsked. "Go find Benny and tell him you need a collar. Hurry up now. You're next on the auction block."

As Ty disappeared through the curtain, Theo turned his attention to Adam. "Why so solemn, pretty?"

Adam shrugged. "I'm not solemn."

Theo sighed. "Bullshit, baby. My beautiful Phoenix never looks so downcast." Lifting Adam's waist-length ponytail, he draped it over one shoulder so it hung down his chest. "Well, you'd better get your gameface on because nobody's going to pay big bucks for a cranky slave boy."

Digging deep, Adam found his Phoenix smile, the same one he wore in photo shoots on the occasions when a smile was called for.

Theo adjusted Adam's collar. "I have something that might cheer you up."

"What is it?"

The auctioneer's gavel banged. Jon had been sold.

"Well," Theo said, drawing the word out, "I've been out there schmoozing and almost all the photographs are sold already. The entire Phoenix Rising series is gone, bought by one guy, they tell me. Can you imagine? Those charity boys are about creaming their jeans over all the money that's pouring in."

Adam smiled for real this time. "How much did they get?"

"Who knows?" Theo waved dismissively. "I'm sure I'll get an accounting at some point for tax purposes."

Adam said nothing as on stage the auction resumed.

For some reason, Theo liked people to think he never troubled himself with financial matters. In reality, the photographer was one of the shrewdest businessmen Adam had ever met. Thanks to Theo's guidance and advice, Adam now had a small but profitable investment portfolio bought with some of the money he'd earned from his modeling. And what was even better, he was out of debt for the first time in his life.

The auctioneer's gavel fell once again, followed by a smattering of applause and a few catcalls.

Ty had been sold. That was quick. Who had bought him?

Adam did not want to look, but he had to. Walking to the curtain, he twitched it aside and peered out in time to see Jason clip the leash to Ty's collar before handing the other end to a tall dark-skinned man with tribal tats on both arms and muscles on top of his muscles. The guy was so not Ty's type.

Ty, ever the ham, fell to his knees, and began licking the dude's boot. The crowd went crazy and Ty's Master for the evening smiled so wide his face nearly split in two.

A wave of relief swept through Adam, the sensation so strong it made his knees weak. So Ty was not going to be sharing Jimmy's bed tonight. Not that he had any business caring. And not that he did care. Besides, the Jimmy Trent he remembered would no more buy a slave for the night than he would fly to the moon under his own power. The whole fetish thing was so not Jimmy's scene. Jimmy was probably out there right now trying to figure out how soon he could decently slip away.

Jason glanced over at him and crooked a finger. He was up. Taking a breath to calm his suddenly racing heart, Adam stepped from behind the curtain. Slipping into his Phoenix mode, Adam sashayed across the stage and stepped into the golden glow of the spotlight.

§ § § §

Jimmy's breath caught. He took two involuntary steps toward the stage before stopping himself.

Adam looked incredible, gorgeous and sexy and hot as fuck in his fetish attire, a crisscross of black leather straps held together with steel clips and o-rings, a pair of thigh-high, platform boots completing the outfit.

"This is Phoenix," Jason said. "I'm sure you've all been enjoying his photographs displayed around the club this evening." He paused. "And wouldn't you all love to have him as your slave for the night?"

"Come to daddy, sweetheart," someone called. There was general laughter.

“Fuck that shit,” Jimmy murmured, edging closer to the front of the crowd.

Jason smiled. “Well, now it’s time to put your money where your mouth is and bid on this lovely slave boy.” He gestured to Adam. “Turn and show the gentlemen what they’ll be getting for their money.”

On the platform Adam turned, a slow pirouette that showed off his amazing body and the tat that covered his back.

Jimmy moistened his lips. He knew that tat so well, had gazed at it so often in the photographs he now owned and had hanging all over his house. How many times had he imagined tracing those graceful lines with his tongue, tasting the smooth skin? And tonight, if all went as planned, he would actually get to do it.

“Isn’t he delicious?” Jason asked the crowd.

The answer was a murmur of assent and scattered applause.

Jimmy slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and touched his checkbook. His pulse picked up in anticipation. He’d waited so long for this moment, these last few minutes were going to just about kill him.

“Okay,” Jason said. “Let’s start the bidding at a thousand.”

A hand went up.

Jason nodded. “One thousand. Do I hear twelve-fifty?”

Another hand.

“Twelve-fifty.” Jason smiled. “How about fifteen hundred?”

The bid was answered.

Jimmy watched and waited as the bidding escalated, the men upping one another by fifty or a hundred dollars, Jason egging them on at every step.

At two thousand the bidding stalled.

“C’mon now,” Jason said, “isn’t this walking wet dream worth a couple grand? And it’s for charity too. Can you say tax deductible?”

Jimmy raised his hand. “Twenty-five hundred.”

Jason nodded, accepting his bid.

Could Adam see him? Had he recognized Jimmy's voice? It was impossible to tell.

The room grew very quiet. Two other men remained in the bidding along with Jimmy, the silver-haired guy he'd seen earlier on the dance floor and a balding fiftyish accountant named Stephen who was one of Jimmy's fellow committee members.

"Twenty-five," Jason said. "Do I hear three thousand?"

"Twenty-seven," Stephen called.

Silver-hair snorted. "Three thousand."

"Three thousand once," Jason said.

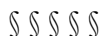
No fucking way.

Jimmy swallowed past the pulse pounding in his throat. "Five thousand."

The pause was palpable. Did he just imagine it or could he actually feel, even from this distance, the Dom's reluctance to accept his bid?

"Five thousand," Jason said "Once...twice..." The gavel banged.

Jimmy exhaled the breath he hadn't known he was holding. He'd won.



The collar felt like hands around his throat, choking off his air. Or maybe it was just the beating of his heart that made it so hard to breathe.

As Jason clipped the leash to Adam's collar, he raised a brow, his eyes filled with concern. You okay with this, the look asked?

Adam gave a slight nod. No sweat, he mouthed, letting a small smile curve his lips as if the whole thing amused him to no end.

He could totally handle this. And even if he couldn't, Phoenix certainly could.

Jason's lips thinned but he said nothing, only turned and handed the end of the leash to Jimmy.

Adam followed as they walked across the stage, keeping pace with his Master for the evening. Just as they reached the foot of the steps, a guy with a digital camera barred their path.

"We need some pictures of you and your slave boy, J.T. That all right with you?"

J.T.?

"C'mon, Larry." Jimmy laughed. "Can't you see I have things to do?"

"Just a couple shots for the web site and the news letter." Larry waggled his eyebrows. "Then you can go do...whatever."

Jimmy turned to Adam. "Is that all right with you?"

Adam shrugged.

Larry backed up a few steps, raising his camera. "Okay, you two, let's see some steaming man on man action, eh?"

Before Jimmy could move or say anything, Adam slid to his knees and pressed his cheek against Jimmy's crotch. Playing for the camera, he rubbed his face along Jimmy's cock. It stirred against his cheek.

Adam closed his eyes and inhaled, God, he could smell Jimmy's arousal. His mouth watered as his own cock stiffened in response.

Larry hooted and the camera whirled softly.

Adam felt Jimmy's fingers at the nape of his neck. He'd gone too far. Jimmy would pull him away now.

Except he didn't.

Suddenly Adam's waist-length hair was tumbling around him like a dark cape. That hand at the back of his neck had untied his ponytail. Jimmy had always liked his hair down.

Longing flared in Adam's chest at the memory. Ruthlessly he crushed it. Tonight he was Phoenix. Phoenix and Jimmy had no history, no memories, only now.

Jimmy's hand fisted in his hair and tugged. "That's enough, Larry."

Adam had just gotten to his feet when Jimmy pulled him close and, for one heart-stopping moment, he was sure Jimmy was going to kiss him.

Oh please, God.

But instead Jimmy's lips brushed his ear. "Let's get out of here."

“Whatever you say, Master.” Adam stepped back out of Jimmy’s embrace and held out his hand.

Jimmy’s chest constricted at the sudden loss of Adam’s warmth, the feel of the man in his arms. Even so, the pain was a mere shadow of what he’d suffered when Adam had left him for real.

God, but he was prone to melodrama tonight. He needed to get a grip and stop acting like a lovesick debutante.

Winding their fingers together, Adam gave Jimmy’s hand a tug. “Let’s go, J.T.”

“Adam—”

“It’s Phoenix.”

The slight rebuke was just enough to knock the stars right out of Jimmy’s eyes. And, oh yes, the message was certainly clear. His slave for the evening was Phoenix, not Adam. Except Phoenix was not the one he wanted.

Adam led him through the crowd and toward a small group of tables near the back. The other two “slaves” were already there. The sexy blond with the Goldilocks curls knelt on the floor, his cheek pressed against the thigh of his Master for the evening, a banker Jimmy knew by sight but not by name. The redhead sat on his Master’s lap, a man Jimmy didn’t know at all and who was, at that moment, checking the kid’s tonsils with his tongue.

“I have a room,” Jimmy said, amazed when his voice didn’t shake.

Adam turned and lifted a brow as if not sure he’d heard correctly.

“I said—”

“I heard you.” He gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. “Sorry, babe, no can do. We’re supposed to stay visible. That’s part of the deal.”

“Fuck the deal. I didn’t make that deal.”

For a moment he was sure Adam was going to balk. Jimmy opened his mouth to add, just give me a few minutes, then closed it. It wasn’t yet time to bargain, or beg.

After what seemed like forever but couldn't have been more than a few seconds, Adam shrugged. "It's your scene, I guess."

Relief so strong it nearly stole his breath swept through Jimmy, except somehow he knew that to show it would be a fatal mistake. So instead he smiled and squeezed Adam's hand. "Yes, it is."

Now it was him who took the lead, keeping Adam's hand firmly in his. Out the back, down a hallway to the elevator and up to the private rooms, Adam followed in silence until they reached a door that required a keycard to open.

"You can't go in there. These rooms are just for members."

"I know." Jimmy took the keycard from his jacket pocket and stuck it in the slot. A green light came on and the lock beeped. "And you know your friend Jason is an extortionist. He made me buy a guest membership before he let me reserve a room."

Adam laughed. "Yeah, he would."

They entered a short hallway lined with doors, all made of dark wood and all identical. Jimmy stopped before the second one on the left and repeated the scanning process.

Adam stepped in front of him, pushed open the door and motioned Jimmy to go ahead. "After you, Master."

Jimmy crossed the threshold and stopped dead. Holy shit. It was perfect. Jason was as good as his word and, regardless of how the evening turned out, Jimmy made a mental note to thank him later.

A dozen or more candles, scattered across all available surfaces, had been lit, Jimmy assumed, by one of Jason's minions. A proliferation of mirrors reflected the light and bathed the room in a soft golden glow. Roses in a tall crystal vase perfumed the air with their subtle fragrance. And the enormous bed that dominated the space had been turned down just as it would be in any fine hotel. An ornately carved chair of some dark glossy wood, the word "throne" popped unbidden into his head, sat opposite the bed not far from a padded bench with a pair of cuffs hanging at either end. Spanking bench, Jimmy's brain supplied, instantly serving up a mental picture of



Adam naked and cuffed and writhing in ecstasy as Jimmy's hand fell again and again on that perfect ass.

Christ.

Behind him the door clicked shut.

Adam walked to the bed, as graceful as ever, as sexy as sin itself, and sank down on the edge. Flipping aside all that glorious hair, he leaned back on one elbow and eyed Jimmy. "Shall I strip for you, Master?"

For a moment Jimmy was back in his own bedroom, on the night of his last birthday, a beautiful young stripper on his bed, reaching out a hand and offering everything he ever wanted. Except back then he hadn't known what he wanted. Now he did.

Jimmy shook his head. "That won't be necessary."

As if this was not at all the answer he'd expected, Adam narrowed his eyes. "You know, technically, we're not supposed to fuck." He sighed. "But since it's you—"

"I don't want to fuck." Pretending a coolness he didn't feel, Jimmy walked to the bed and raked his gaze down Adam's body. God, he was so beautiful.

Adam laughed. "Everyone wants to fuck -- even you, from what I remember. Don't tell me you've become a monk since I last saw you."

"I don't want to fuck you." And it was true as far as it went, because just fucking wasn't enough, not nearly. Jimmy sat on the edge of the bed. He had planned for this moment, rehearsed what he would say, how he would present his argument. Yet all that seemed so inadequate, pretentious even, in the face of Adam's bald statement.

"I just want to talk."

"Okay then." Adam's lashes lowered, the tip of his tongue slipping out to wet his lips. "You know, I could suck your cock, if you'd rather. You could come on my face, or in my mouth. Would you like that, Master?"

Jimmy's cock liked that idea quite a lot. It strained against his zipper, trying like hell to cast its vote. Down boy. "No. I told

you I just want to talk. And stop calling me that. I'm not your Master."

Not your anything, not yet.

"C'mon, Jim." Adam leaned close and ran a hand lightly up Jimmy's thigh. "You know you want to." He laid his head on Jimmy's shoulder, hand sliding higher on Jimmy's leg till his fingers brushed Jimmy's erection. "You know how I love sucking cock, and yours is so—"

"Stop it." Catching Adam's hand, Jimmy removed it from his crotch. "You're not a whore so stop acting like one. I told you—"

"You don't want to fuck. Yeah. Right. But you know what? It's bullshit because fucking's what you paid for, what you all paid for, and we both know it, so let's just cut the crap and get to it."

Jimmy shut his eyes and counted slowly to five in his head. Getting angry would solve nothing, nor would any denial he might make because clearly he wouldn't be believed.

This wasn't working at all. Maybe he'd been stupid to think it would just because he'd wanted it so much. But there was no way he could pour his heart out to this coldly beautiful stranger. He'd lost Adam and this man who'd taken his place, this Phoenix, was no substitute. He didn't want to believe that Adam had changed so much in such a short time. But look at how much he himself had changed. Just because he couldn't accept it didn't mean it wasn't true.

Opening his eyes, Jimmy got slowly to his feet. Though it couldn't have been more than a couple yards, the walk from the bed to the door was the longest of his life. The urge to look back, to see if Adam even gave a shit, was almost irresistible but somehow he managed not to do it.

§ § § §

From his place on the bed, Adam watched Jimmy walk to the door. What was he doing?

For the first time since coming up here, a thread of doubt slid through him. He'd been so sure that Phoenix could handle this scene. Just make it all about the fucking. Simple, right?

Except Jimmy was walking away and that wasn't part of the script.

"Where are you going?"

"Home." Jimmy took hold of the doorknob.

"Why?"

"Because I made a mistake."

"What mistake?"

"Doesn't matter." Turning the knob, Jimmy opened the door.

In Adam's head, Phoenix shrugged indifferently. Let him go, the shrug said, no big loss.

"Wait." Adam ignored the inner voice that warned he was making a fool of himself.

Hand still on the doorknob, Jimmy turned and looked at him. "Why? There's nothing here for me."

Before he knew what he intended to do, Adam found himself beside Jimmy. He shoved the door closed and leaned against it. "Tell me why you came here, Jim."

"I told you, it doesn't matter."

His heart was beating so hard, surely Jimmy could hear it. So much for making it all about the fucking.

"Maybe it matters to me."

Their eyes met. The air between them hummed with tension. Adam felt it like an electric charge. It sizzled along his every nerve and heated his blood. Jimmy could ignore the implied request, open the door and walk away, closing this chapter of their lives for good. But would he? Or would he say what he'd come to say.

"I don't know..."

"Please," Adam said, "just tell me."

In his head Phoenix sighed. Fucking pathetic loser.

Shut up. Adam slammed a mental door on his alter ego. Phoenix was totally fucking this up.

"Please, Jim."

A long pause.

"I came here looking for the man I love." Jimmy sighed. "But I'm afraid he's gone." He reached past Adam and gripped the doorknob.

Adam caught Jimmy's hand and held it in his. "No, he's not." A pause. "Tell me what you want, and I'll do it, if I can."

The silence pressed in around them, growing heavier with each second that ticked by until Adam could hardly breathe.

Jimmy wasn't going to tell him.

Adam's shoulders sagged, the pain of what he'd lost all at once huge and completely overwhelming.

"Okay." Adam released Jimmy's hand and stepped away from the door. "I won't keep you then."

"Wait." Jimmy caught Adam's wrist and held on. "I want you back in my life, Adam. I want another chance." He sighed. "Maybe it was stupid to do it this way. I don't know. I guess I don't really know anything where you're concerned, maybe I never did."

"That's what you came here, did all this, paid all that money for? To say you wanted another chance?"

"Actually, no." Jimmy laughed a little. "I had planned to tell you how I had gotten my shit together, how I'm out to my family and friends and how different my life is now. Then I was going to tell you why you should give me another chance. I had all these perfectly logical reasons ready to go. Then I saw you and none of it seemed to matter."

"Why not?"

"Because nothing about this is logical. How long has it been since you left? Six, eight months? A little more? And you know what? I still think about you."

"What do you mean?"

"It's you I see when I close my eyes at night. It's you I want to see when I open my eyes in the morning. If you say no, that you won't give me another chance, I guess... Well, hell, I've lived without you for this long and I guess I'd be okay. But with you I can be so much better. I love you so much, Adam." Jimmy's voice dropped to just above a whisper but his eyes

remained steady. "Come back to me and help me be a better man."

Jimmy still loved him, had never stopped loving him.

God.

"What if it doesn't work out? You said it yourself, Jim, I'm not the same person I was back then."

And I can't leave you again. I'm just not that strong. Of all the possible reasons for refusing, this was the only one that really counted.

"I'm not the same either," Jimmy said. "But in my case, I think that's a good thing." He hesitated, as if not sure if he should go on. "Look, I can't promise you a happy ever after." His smile was just a little sad. He released Adam's wrist then laced their fingers together. "But I'll do my best to make one with you."

"We'll have to talk. A lot." Adam let his fingers grip Jimmy's. God, it hurt so much to hope.

"I know. And we will. Just say we can try. That's all I want."

"That's all?" Adam laughed, the sound a little shaky like it might just as easily have been a sob.

"Maybe not quite all I want." Jimmy laughed, too. "Truthfully, it's not even close to all I want, but it's a start, as long as you want it too. Do you, Adam?"

"I do," Adam said, "more than anything." Releasing Jimmy's hand, he stepped in close and wound his arms around the other man's neck. Laying his head on Jimmy's shoulder, Adam closed his eyes. "I can't believe you came here, did all this, just to get me back. Or why you even want me back after I left like that. But if you mean it..."

"I mean it." Jimmy's arms slid around Adam's waist, the touch warm and sure. "Adam, God, I promise—"

"Shhh. Promise later. Kiss now."

§ § § §

It was Adam who brought their lips together, softly at first, almost shyly, the kiss at once familiar and brand new. Jimmy sighed softly and opened to Adam, touching their tongues together. The taste of his lover flooded through him, stealing

his breath and getting him hard as stone in the space of a couple heartbeats.

Adam moaned, his fingers slid into Jimmy's hair and cradled the back of his head as if to hold him there, trapped in the kiss, at Adam's mercy, for as long as Adam wanted him.

How could he tell this man he would gladly stay just like this, lips clinging, hands and heart filled with the man he loved, till he took his last breath and never grow tired? Of course, it was impossible, so they went on kissing, devouring each other's mouths, teeth and tongues and lips saying what words could not. At last Adam drew back, breaking the kiss.

Reaching for Jimmy's belt, Adam started to go to his knees. "Let me—"

"No." Jimmy stopped him. "Not like that."

Lips, bruised and swollen from kisses, curved. Adam lowered his lashes. "What's the matter, Jim? Don't you want my mouth?"

"No, it's not enough." Without letting Adam go, Jimmy walked him backwards toward the bed. "I've waited so long for this, and now I want all of you."

With a gentle shove he sent Adam tumbling back onto the mattress.

God, he was so beautiful lying there in a spill of silky hair, booted feet still on the floor, wearing nothing but a crisscross of leather and a smile, his eyes filled with awareness and hope.

And he's mine.

The thought brought such joy with it Jimmy had to smile.

"What?"

"I was just thinking how beautiful you are and how you're going to be mine forever, and it made me happy."

"Forever?" Adam gazed up at him, a pained expression filling his eyes. "Don't say that if you don't mean it."

"I mean it." Jimmy knelt by the bed and lifted one of Adam's booted feet into his lap. Running his hands over the leather, he found the long zipper in the back and slowly drew it down. Unable to resist any longer, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to Adam's inner thigh, inhaling the scents of skin and

leather and man. He pulled off the boot and followed its progress with his lips and tongue. He pressed a kiss to the inside of Adam's knee.

"That tickles." Adam squirmed.

"Lie still." Jimmy tossed the boot aside then treated the other leg to the same attention. When he touched his tongue to the arch of Adam's foot the man nearly came off the bed.

How the hell had he not known about all these secret ticklish places? Why hadn't he taken the time, or the care, to know?

It didn't matter. He would make up for all that now.

Dropping Adam's foot, he leaned over him on the bed and stopped with their lips only a breath apart. "I'm going to touch every inch of you tonight." He ran his tongue along Adam's lower lip. "Taste every inch." Then the upper lip. "And I'm going to take my time doing it." He dropped a kiss at the corner of Adam's mouth. "Do you think you can lie still while I do that?"

"No." Adam's lashes lowered. "I can't possibly control myself for that long." Catching Jimmy's lower lip between his teeth, Adam nipped. "Maybe you should tie me up just to make sure."

Christ.

"That's a hell of an idea, if only I had some rope—"

"Bottom drawer under the bed." Adam's grin flashed, positively wicked. "Or there's cuffs if you'd rather."

Opening the bottom drawer, Jimmy's eyes widened. Coils of rope in various textures and weight lay in neat rows one beside the other. The first one he touched was far too rough and would surely chafe Adam's skin. The second felt smoother but seemed a bit too heavy to tie easily. At last he chose a silky cord in a rich red hue. Lifting it out, he held it up.

"How's this?"

Adam reached out and fingered the rope. "Mmm, silk. Good choice." Adam held out his wrists. "Tie my hands first, then attach them to the headboard. It works better that way."

Jimmy chuckled and looped the cord around Adam's wrists. "You know a lot about this, I see." Wrapping the ends he drew the knot snug. "Maybe you can teach me."

Adam raised his bound hands, a small smile playing over his lips, his skin flushed with arousal. "Maybe I could. Would you like that, Master?"

"I would." Jimmy looped the ends of the rope around the headboard and attached it to a hook conveniently placed in just the right spot, then sat back to admire his work.

"God, you're so sexy." Jimmy ran a finger down one of the straps that crossed Adam's chest. "How does this come off?"

With some coaching, he got the straps undone and off, leaving Adam gloriously naked with his hands bound to the headboard, his cock hard and leaking.

"Take off your clothes," Adam said. "I want to see you."

Obediently, Jimmy stripped. Once naked, he crawled up the bed and lay down beside his lover. Trailing a finger down Adam's chest, he hooked it in the delicate silver chain between his nipple-rings and tugged.

Adam gasped. "God, Jim."

"Don't come yet." Jimmy's hand slid lower, fingers wrapped around Adam's cock. He stroked, loving the silky heat and hardness against his palm. A pearly drop welled from the slit and glistened there. Getting to his knees beside Adam, Jimmy leaned over and lapped it away with a swipe of his tongue.

Adam's hips lifted. "Please, Master."

Sliding his lips over Adam's prick, Jimmy took him deep and swallowed around the head. The sweet salty flavor of pre-come along with the scent of desire filled his awareness and Jimmy's cock jerked in response.

"Master, let me suck you."

Without releasing Adam's cock, Jimmy moved into a sixty-nine position, unable to stifle a moan when Adam's lips closed around his prick.

God, that mouth. And this man. And this night.

As Adam sucked him, Jimmy's hips began to move. He matched his own rhythm with Adam's as best he could, taking



his lover's cock deep when Adam did the same to him. When Adam began to thrust in earnest Jimmy increased the suction even as he fought off his own orgasm.

He did not want to come yet.

Adam's rhythm faltered, the thrusts turning short and sharp. Jimmy sucked harder. He wanted this, needed it, had dreamt of it.

Adam's cock swelled in Jimmy's mouth, but when Adam tried to pull back Jimmy held on, the throbbing against his tongue a sure sign that Adam was close.

With a muffled cry, Adam filled Jimmy's mouth with the salty sweetness of come. Eagerly Jimmy drank it down as he let his own thrust sped up. Only seconds later he came in Adam's mouth.

Adam continued sucking until Jimmy couldn't take anymore, the contact unbearable on his ultra-sensitive flesh.

Releasing Adam's cock he rolled over then crawled up to wrap his arms around his lover.

§ § § § §

Adam's eyelids drooped. The post-orgasm drowsiness was nearly irresistible. If not for the pull of the rope on his still bound hands, he might think he was already asleep because this sure felt like a dream, a familiar dream he'd had at least a hundred times. But it wasn't a dream, and this time when he woke, the man he loved would be beside him and that was better than any dream.

"Sleepy?" Jimmy brushed his lips against Adam's temple.

"Mmm, a little." Forcing his eyes open, he smiled at his lover. "Are you going to untie me now?"

"No." Jimmy nuzzled Adam's collarbone then licked a wet line up the side of his neck. "I told you, I'm going to touch every part of you before we're done. What you've seen so far," Jimmy nipped Adam's earlobe, "was just the beginning." He trailed kisses along Adam's jaw then, capturing his lips in a quick hard kiss, Jimmy rolled on top of him. "Is that okay with you, my beautiful slave boy?" Another kiss. "Or would you rather sleep for a while?"

Adam's libido stirred and stretched, the combination of his bound hands and Jimmy's weight pressing him into the mattress sweeping away his drowsiness.

"Mmm, whatever you want, Master." He punctuated by wrapping his leg around Jimmy's waist and planting his heel in the small of Jimmy's back.

"God, you look so hot with your hands tied like that." Jimmy rubbed his cheek against Adam's. "Can I ask you something?"

Adam tensed. "I guess. Sure."

Jimmy gazed down at him, eyes suddenly serious. "Are you with anybody else right now? Sleeping with anybody, I mean?"

Adam shook his head. "I go out, but there's not anybody like...special."

"You aren't with Theo Wright? Because in some of those photographs you look—"

"Like I just got fucked, I know."

"Or you're just about to."

"It's not like that. We used to..." Adam hesitated. He did not want to screw this up with shit that Jimmy would not want to hear.

"You can tell me. It's important, and I want to know."

Adam sighed. If this was ever going to work he'd have to tell Jimmy the truth, and trust Jimmy to do the same.

"We used to fuck sometimes, but it's been a while since we have." He waited for Jimmy's reaction, dread taking small sharp bites out of his newfound happiness.

"Don't do it anymore. Okay? Please? I want to be the only one." Jimmy's eyes filled with worry. "You won't lose your job or anything...if you stop—"

"No. It's not like that at all. Fucking's not part of the job." Adam tugged on the rope. "Jim, untie me. I want to hold you while we talk about this."

Without breaking eye contact, Jimmy reached up and freed Adam's hands. As the rope fell away, Adam wrapped his arms around his lover.

"This is important." Adam held Jimmy tight willing him to understand. "I know how it looks in some of the pictures, but

it's not like that. Theo's a good photographer and I'm a good model. We can make it look real even though it's just make-believe. Me and Theo had a thing when I first started working with him, but he's just a friend, same as Jason is a friend." He paused but Jimmy didn't answer. "Do you believe me?"

"Of course I believe you." Jimmy sighed. "I just hate the thought of you with somebody else."

"I don't want anybody else." Adam kissed the side of Jimmy's neck. "Just you."

"Promise?"

"Promise. I love you, Jim. There's nobody else for me but you."

"I love you too."

"Kiss me." Adam ran his hands down Jimmy's back and, cupping his ass, he squeezed. "Then fuck me till I can't remember my name."

Jimmy kissed him, a long slow meeting of lips that went on and on with teeth and tongues and sighs that slipped between their mouths like shared breath. By the time the kiss ended, they were both hard again.

Adam spread his legs and arched his back, sliding their pricks together. "Please, fuck me. I need you right now."

Jimmy propped himself up on his elbows. "Lube and condoms?"

"Single shots in the bedside table, condoms too." Adam licked his lips. "But if you don't want to wear one..."

Jimmy looked down at him. "I'm negative, Adam. I get tested regularly. So..."

"Me, too."

"I would never do anything to hurt you."

"I know." His heart was beating so hard, he could feel it all through his body. He could take this step with Jimmy, wanted to take it, to feel his lover inside him with no barrier between them.

Jimmy touched his cheek. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Adam pressed his lips into Jimmy's palm. "Now hurry up. I want you inside me."

Jimmy rolled over and stretched. Adam heard the drawer open and a moment later Jimmy was back holding several of the little lube packets in one hand. When he tried to open one it fell from his fingers and landed on the bed next to Adam's hip.

"Damn, my hands are shaking." Jimmy laughed. "You'd think I was a virgin or something."

Adam scooped up the lube packets and, tossing all but one aside, deftly opened it and squeezed the contents into his hand. Warming it for a moment, he stroked it over Jimmy's bare cock, lingering over the caresses, feeling Jimmy's pulse against his fingertips.

Jimmy hissed a breath through his teeth. "God, Adam."

"I can't wait to have your cock in my ass." Adam kissed the corner of Jimmy's jaw then flicked his tongue in his lover's ear. "Feel you shoot inside me." Sucking the earlobe into his mouth, he bit, pleased when Jimmy gasped and his cock jerked in Adam's hand.

"Don't make me come." Jimmy's fingers wrapped around Adam's on his prick. "I want to come inside you."

"Yeah, I want that, too." Releasing Jimmy, Adam got to his knees and picked up another lube packet. Opening it he slicked up his fingers then reached between his legs.

Sliding one finger then two into his ass, Adam got himself ready. He didn't need much in the way of preparation, and with his balls already drawn up close against his body and desire coiled tight in his belly, he couldn't take much stimulation. Taking his prick in his other hand, he added a third finger, rocking slowly between his hands and watched Jimmy watch him.

"Nobody ever looked at me the way you do."

"No one will ever love you the way I do." Jimmy held out his arms. "C'mere. I need you."

"How do you want me?"

"Under me, on your back, so I can see your face."

Wiping his sticky fingers on the edge of the sheet, Adam lay down and moved into Jimmy's arms. As Jimmy rolled them

over, he drew his legs up and wrapped them around Jimmy's waist.

"Kiss me."

Jimmy did, lingering over Adam's lips like he could never get enough. Finally he sat back between Adam's spread legs.

"Do it. I need it." Adam pulled his knees up closer to his chest, exposing himself for Jimmy.

The blunt head of Jimmy's cock pressed against his entrance. Adam closed his eyes.

Jimmy pushed. After a moment of resistance, the head slipped in.

§ § § § §

They both gasped.

Jimmy stilled, watching Adam's face. "Are you okay? Can I—"

"Yes. Please, more. I need all of you."

"Okay. You've got me." Jimmy thrust in slowly, Adam's muscles fluttering around him, the satiny heat of Adam's body drawing him in and in until his balls rested against Adam's ass.

"Jim, God, I can feel you, inside me, feels so..."

"So good. So amazingly good." Withdrawing until just the head remained inside, Jimmy paused, fingers digging into Adam's hips, heart slamming against his ribs. "Open your eyes and look at me. I want to see you."

Adam's lashes fluttered. He blinked. "God, Jim, I never—you have to move. Please, I can't—"

Jimmy looked down at where their bodies joined. It was the most erotic sight he'd ever seen -- Adam's hole open and stretched wide around his prick, swallowing him up like he'd never let go. He thrust back in, savoring the hot tight grip of Adam's body, the ripple and pulse. He could feel Adam's heartbeat, or maybe it was his own. What did it matter? He belonged to this man, heart and soul and body.

Jimmy began to move in earnest, sliding in and pulling back, all his concentration centered on his lover, on pleasing Adam and making him come. His own pleasure was sharp. It clawed at his control, but it was Adam's orgasm he reached for knowing his own would follow.

Adam writhed, rocking into each thrust, little gasps and mewes of pleasure bleeding from his lips.

Shifting the angle Jimmy nailed Adam's gland, then dragged his cock back over the spot on the out-stroke.

Adam cried out wordlessly, hips rocking, head thrashing side to side on the pillow, fingers gripping the sheet.

"Close," Adam panted. "God, please, harder, faster. I need . . ."

Jimmy moved faster, thrust harder and deeper as pleasure sparked along his spine and raced along nerves. His legs tingled and his balls pulled up tight. Wrapping his hand around Adam's cock, he pumped in time with his thrusts.

Adam's hand joined Jimmy's on his prick, the grip punishingly hard. "Jim, now."

Adam's cock swelled, his internal muscles clamping down on Jimmy's cock as warm silky come spilled over their joined hands.

Jimmy shoved in to the hilt, holding himself at the peak of his thrust. His prick throbbed as, for the first time, he spilled his seed inside his lover.

Hours later, Jimmy woke in near total darkness, a single candle flickering on the nightstand, the scents of sex and sweat heavy in the air and the silence broken only by Adam's quiet breathing.

Adam.

Jimmy's arms tightened around his lover who sprawled half on top of him, his head resting against Jimmy's shoulder and one leg nestled between Jimmy's thighs.

Adam was really here and really his. It was almost too good to be true, but it was true. And this time they would make it work because he was not letting Adam go, not ever again. How long had it been since he'd felt this sated, this whole? Months? Years? Ever?

After making love again they had done some of that talking he'd promised Adam they would do. They had issues, of course. What couple didn't? But this time they would address the issues rather than simply ignoring them and hoping they would go

away. By the time Adam had fallen asleep in his arms, Jimmy felt sure that this time they would make it work.

Adam stirred and sucked in a breath that was almost a snore.

Jimmy smiled and sifted his fingers through Adam's hair. What would that silky hair feel like wrapped around his cock? It seemed he was developing a serious hair fetish.

God, he loved this man, everything about him.

"Mmm, Jim. You're still here."

"Of course I'm still here." Jimmy tugged on the lock of hair between his fingers. "I'm not going anywhere, not without you."

"I'm glad." Adam crawled on top of him and laid his cheek against Jimmy's. "Are you really going to come to New York every weekend to see me?"

"If that's where you're living, then that's what I'm doing. Besides, it's not that far."

"Are you sure it's not just so we won't see anybody you know?"

Jimmy sighed. "I told you, I'm out to my friends and family. I won't hide who I am or who I love, not anymore." He kissed the corner of Adam's mouth. "I want people to see us together. I want my friends to meet you, my family, too."

"What do you think they'll say?"

"I think my mother will love you. And my stepfather will take his cues from her, like he always does."

"What about Laton?"

"Laton and I don't talk much these days."

"Why not?"

As succinctly as he could, Jimmy told how he'd found out that it was Laton who had paid someone to vandalize his car. He told Adam about the argument that followed and the ensuing rift and even how much he missed his brother.

"We've only just started talking again. He apologized and I'm working on getting past the whole ugly mess."

"I'm not sure I could forgive that," Adam said very quietly. "I mean, Jim, that was your brother who did that."

"I'm not sure I can forgive him either, but I'm trying. If I don't at least try, he will have destroyed something inside me and I won't let him do that."

When Adam didn't say anything Jimmy went on.

"Stephanie asked us to try to make it up, too. That's another reason we're trying to make amends." He paused, unsure if this was the right time to ask the next question. But before he could make up his mind, Adam spoke.

"How is Stephanie? Did she ever marry that guy she was engaged to?"

In the dark, Jimmy smiled. It was the perfect opening.

"Not yet. In fact, her wedding is coming up in a few weeks and I was hoping you'd go with me."



## EPILOGUE

---

The band played a fanfare as the bride, wearing yards of white lace and tulle, mounted the few steps to the small stage, her bouquet clutched in one hand. All the bridesmaids and at least half the female guests pressed forward, their eagerness palpable on the soft summer air.

With a quick glance around to see who was watching, Adam slipped away, leaving behind the tent and the music and the guests in search of a quiet moment alone.

Making his way to a spot well away from the celebration, Adam sank down on a small stone bench in a secluded corner of the arboretum. Trees dressed in a profusion of summer greenery screened him from anyone walking down the path and a small fountain splashed quietly nearby. The illusion of solitude was nearly perfect, except for the sounds of the band off in the distance.

Adam closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, trying to quiet his thrumming nerves. He still didn't know if coming to Stephanie's wedding as Jimmy's date had been a good idea. Not that anyone had actually said anything amiss, not that they'd even looked askance when Stephanie had introduced him as my uncle Jimmy's boyfriend, though secretly Adam thought that maybe Jimmy's mother had paled a bit at that. No, everyone, including Cynthia Trent Rossi herself, had been unfailingly polite. Hell, even Laton had spoken to him in a tone that could almost be described as friendly if Adam hadn't known the man and what he was capable of.

As for Jimmy, his lover acted like he was totally over the moon. Ever since Jimmy had picked him up at the train station that afternoon, Adam had felt the intensity of his attention. Leaning in close as he talked, taking Adam's hand in his without regard for who might be watching, and a million small gestures and casual touches that said so clearly that they were a couple, it

was everything Adam had wanted and it felt almost too good to be real.

"There you are."

Adam opened his eyes as a shiver of pleasure slid down his spine. Just hearing Jimmy's voice often did that to him.

His lover stood in front of him, the late afternoon sun glinting on his hair, his tux still impeccable despite the fact the reception had been going strong for many hours now.

Something low in Adam's belly tightened at the sight.

"Are you okay?" Jimmy asked, concern clouding his eyes.

Adam nodded. "I just needed a minute."

Jimmy slid onto the bench beside him close enough that their thighs touched. "Can I share your minute?"

"Sure." When Jimmy's arm slid around him Adam leaned in and rested his head on Jimmy's shoulder.

"Thank you for coming with me." Jimmy's lips brushed Adam's temple.

"I'm glad you asked me." And he really was. Adam let his hand rest on Jimmy's thigh, the wool of his tuxedo pants slightly scratchy under his fingertips.

"Look what I got." With his free hand Jimmy reached into his pocket, pulled something out and held it up.

Adam laughed. "What are you doing with the bride's garter?" Reaching out he rubbed the bit of elasticized lace between his fingers. "Don't tell me you got up there when they threw it."

Jimmy chuckled. "Actually no. I was on my way back to the table and as I walked by the stage Ryan threw the garter and...well, you know how it is. You see something coming at you like that, and you grab it."

Adam laughed. Sitting up straight he turned to his lover. Jimmy's cheeks were bright with color, the bit of lace still dangling from his fingers.

"Aren't you supposed to be putting that on some girl's leg right about now? Isn't that the way it goes?"

Jimmy grew suddenly serious. "I don't want some girl." Jimmy slipped the garter over Adam's hands and fashioned a quick knot trapping his wrists together. "I only want you."

Leaning in Jimmy touched their lips together. "I want to marry you, Adam."

Adam laughed even as his heart did a funny little flip in his chest. He drew back just enough so he could see Jimmy's eyes.

"First of all, that's not even legal in this state."

"We could go to Canada. Paul would let us—"

"Second of all," Adam interrupted, "you're going too fast."

They had agreed to go slow, to take things easy and just date for a while. It seemed Jimmy had forgotten that.

"I'm still scared you'll leave me," Jimmy whispered.

"Not going to leave you." Loosening his hands from the garter, Adam slid his arms around Jimmy's neck and pressed a soft kiss at the corner of Jimmy's mouth. "Besides, marriage never stopped anybody from breaking up."

Jimmy's arms tightened around him and he sighed. "I know that. But still..."

"But still nothing." Adam rubbed his cheek against Jimmy's. "I'm proud of you, you know. For doing all this stuff, for living your life the way you want and not the way other people want." He kissed the corner of Jimmy's jaw. "But I like being on my own, Jim. I like having my own place and my own money and a career that I'm successful at. It's the first time I've had all those things all at the same time. And now I have you, too. I don't think it gets any better than that."

Jimmy was quiet for a long time. At last he sighed. "You taught me how to be a better man. I'm grateful for that." He loosed the clip holding Adam's hair back and ran his fingers through the strands. "I can't help wanting you with me. But I promise I'll try not to pressure you about it."

"I am with you." Adam leaned back out of the embrace and took Jimmy's hands in his. "Just because I need to stand on my own doesn't mean I won't be standing beside you."

A loud flourish from the band reached them in their secluded spot.

"We should get back," Jimmy said. "I think Stephanie and Ryan are getting ready to leave."

"Yeah, we should go say good-bye."

“And besides, you haven’t danced with me all day.”

Adam laughed. “I don’t think your family is quite ready for that, babe. Maybe we should give them a break.”

“You’re probably right.” Disappointment flashed in Jimmy’s eyes, almost too quick for Adam to see it. But he did see.

“And I have a better idea, anyway,” Adam said.

“Oh, yeah? What is it?”

“Well...you said once a long time ago that you had this fantasy about getting me out of a real tux. And I figured since the wedding is almost over and we’re both wearing tuxes...”

Jimmy’s lips curved and his eyes went hot. “Mmm, that sounds like a hell of a good suggestion to me.”

Oh yeah! Adam’s cock stirred and he returned Jimmy’s smile.

Getting to his feet, Jimmy held out his hand. “Let’s go home.”

“Sounds good.” Adam stood and took his lover’s hand. As Jimmy’s fingers twined with his, in his heart, Adam knew that with Jimmy beside him, he was already home.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

KIMBERLY has been making up stories for as long as she can remember. As early as the seventh grade, she recalls slashing her favorite rockstars for her own and her friends' enjoyment. It was also around that time that she began a lifelong love affair with the romance genre, devouring category romances as fast as she could smuggle them into the house. So it's not all that surprising that her two passions, romance and putting pretty boys with other pretty boys, would ultimately come together in her writing.

Moliere said, "Writing is like prostitution. First you do it for love, then for a few close friends, then for money."

Kimberly is delighted at long last to be doing it for money. Her appearance in the *Ties That Bind* anthology was her first publication.

You can visit her website at:  
[www.kimberlygardner.com](http://www.kimberlygardner.com)



Stimulate yourself.  
**READ.**

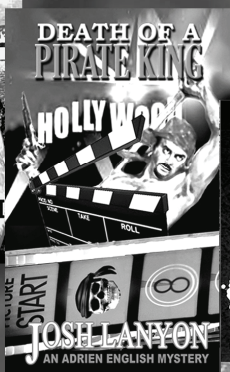
[www.manloveromance.com](http://www.manloveromance.com)

THE HOTTEST M/M EROTIC AUTHORS & WEBSITES ON THE NET

**Mystery. Mayhem.  
Lust. Love.  
We have them all.**



ISBN # 978-1-934531-05-1  
#1 in the Heat Romantic  
Crime Series



ISBN # 978-1-934531-31-0  
#4 in the Adrien English  
Mystery Series



ISBN # 978-1-934531-33-4  
#9 in the Donald Strachey  
Mystery Series

**MLRPress.com**

AVAILABLE AT LOCAL BOOKSTORES, THROUGH INGRAM, BOOKAZINE & ONLINE

