

A photograph of a very muscular man, shirtless, with his arms raised and bent behind his head. He has a large, dark, multi-colored tattoo on his chest that includes the word 'SWITCH' in a stylized font. The tattoo also features green and blue elements, possibly representing a landscape or abstract design. The background is black.

SWITCH

claire thompson

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Chapter One

"Gin and tonic. Extra lime."

The bartender, a tall, narrow-shouldered man with blond, receding hair and a rather spectacular curling mustache, nodded with pursed lips, as if he disapproved of Dane's choice of drink or maybe just of Dane himself.

Dane was dressed for the evening, wearing his standard black leather pants and boots and a black silk shirt, *de rigueur* for Doms at the BDSM club to which he was heading.

While waiting for his drink, Dane glanced around the dimly lit room of The Iguana, a small bar located in Austin's downtown warehouse district. He'd never been in this particular bar before, and indeed had only recently become aware of its existence, courtesy of a friend who made it a point to scope out every gay haunt in town. The bar wasn't strictly gay, but it was gay-friendly and it was close to Boot Camp, his ultimate destination.

His gaze landed on an older man with silver hair and the bulbous red-veined nose of a heavy drinker. The man smiled broadly, revealing large, white teeth that probably cost him a fortune. Dane nodded in acknowledgment, though he didn't return the smile. *I see you, but I'm not interested.*

The bartender placed his drink before him. Dane lifted the thick wedge of lime from the edge of the glass and squeezed the juice into it, watching it fizz. He dropped the lime into the glass and took a long, satisfying drink.

The wall behind the bar was mirrored, which made the room look larger than it was and gave patrons seated at the bar the advantage of seeing who was behind them. For some reason, something compelled Dane to look up at precisely the moment the man came in the door.

He experienced a sudden sense of recognition, though he would have sworn he'd never seen this particular man before. He was of medium height and build, his hair dark and hanging in a loose shiny wave to his shoulders. His

eyes were dark too, gleaming against pale skin. Several days' worth of stubble etched the pale skin from his cheekbones to his throat.

The guy looked like a college student from a distance. He was wearing a faded T-shirt with a small tear at the neckline. When Dane swiveled slowly on his stool, he saw the guy was wearing old blue jeans covered in grayish dust, a hole in one knee.

Their eyes met and Dane felt an actual tug in his gut, as if someone had reached inside and yanked. The man had a hawk-like nose, prominent in a long, narrow face. His lips were red against his pale skin and dark shadow of a beard. He was compelling to look at—not precisely handsome, yet there was a power in his face that drew Dane to him, capturing him with its quiet strength. He held Dane's gaze, his expression calm, even knowing.

Dane was the first to look away.

He swiveled his stool back toward the bar and drained his glass. His cock was bent uncomfortably in his pants, having risen of its own volition at the sight of the stranger. He raised his glass toward the bartender, who glided toward him to refill it.

In the mirror he could see the man moving toward him. He waited, not breathing as he watched to see if the man would sit near him. He had no idea if he was gay or straight, or anything else about him. All he knew was he wanted him to sit beside him.

As a rule, Dane gravitated toward clean-cut young men like himself who could pass as straight and vanilla, with no piercings, tattoos or slave collars to give them away. This guy was probably a bum—a high school dropout who worked in construction and couldn't even be bothered to change his pants before heading out. Whatever strange attraction he felt for the guy would no doubt be dispelled the moment he opened his mouth and drawled, "Howdy, ya'll."

The man sat two stools down from Dane. He signaled to the bartender, who approached him with a broad smile. "Nathan, you're back. When did you get in?"

"Good to see you, Martin. I just got back last night."

"You're probably still jetlagged. You want a beer?"

"That'd be great. A Guinness. Oh, and maybe a burger? I kind of forgot to eat today." The man, whom Dane could now identify as Nathan, gave a sheepish grin. His voice was deep and rich, fuller than Dane would have expected. The accent rolled with a charming Southern cadence.

The bartender laughed indulgently. Dane could hardly believe this was the same tight-lipped, disapproving man who had served him a moment before. "When you get to working, you just shut out the entire world, don't you? Sarah says we're going to find you one day passed out on the floor from starvation in front of one of those paintings or sculptures of yours."

An artist. Well, that was intriguing. Though the term was probably loosely applied to someone trying to make it as an artist someday. Dane turned back to his drink. He glanced at his watch. He should probably pay his tab and leave. There were plenty of eager sub boys waiting for his attentions at Boot Camp.

He found he didn't want to go—not yet. He tried to think of various casual, friendly ways to start a conversation, but found his tongue curiously tied. *Say something.* He tried sending a telepathic message—*Look this way so I can smile at you.*

As if he received the message, Nathan chose that precise moment to turn toward Dane. For a second Dane worried he'd spoken aloud.

"Excuse me, but have we met?" Was this merely the overt southern friendliness Dane had yet to accustom himself to, or was Nathan hitting on him?

"No." *I would have remembered.* He smiled in what he hoped was a nonchalant way. "But it's nice to meet you now. I'm Dane. Dane Bishop."

Leaning toward him, Nathan reached out to shake his hand. He wore a gold ring on the third finger of his left hand with some kind of insignia on it. It

looked heavy and expensive, not in keeping with the rest of his bedraggled appearance.

"Nathan Levi, at your service." Nathan inclined his head, smiling to show small, even white teeth. Nathan slipped off his stool and moved to the empty one beside Dane. He tilted his head, as if measuring the dimensions of Dane's face. "There's something familiar about you. I don't quite know what it is."

The bartender distracted them by setting a large mug of dark beer in front of Nathan. Nathan lifted the mug and drank deeply. The bartender told him his food would be ready shortly. Dane waited impatiently to resume their fledgling conversation.

He liked the sound of Nathan's voice. It was a warm voice, the tone rich like dark rum, smooth and strong. Again, he wondered if it were merely a pickup line, or did Nathan share the peculiar sense of recognition Dane had experienced when their eyes had locked?

Dane knew he'd never seen the man before, but the recognition he felt was for something deeper than a passing acquaintance. Though he knew it didn't make sense, it was almost as if a connection had been forged between them the moment Nathan had entered the bar, something that skipped over details like time and place, vaulting directly to the soul.

What the hell was going on inside his head? Dane wasn't given to these ridiculous poetic turns of mind. Maybe that drink was stronger than he'd realized.

The bartender finally stepped away to help someone else. Nathan turned toward Dane and picked up the thread of their dropped conversation. "Maybe you just look like someone I used to know. Or maybe I've seen you in passing. For a big city, Austin can be a pretty small town."

"Yes, that must be it," Dane agreed, though he knew it wasn't true. He would have remembered that face, those burning dark eyes, those lush red lips. Jesus, he needed to cut it out. For all he knew, the guy was straight.

Why not find out now and save a lot of heartache later? He cut to the chase. "I was just on my way to Boot Camp. You know the club?"

Into the scene or not, he'd yet to meet a gay guy in Austin who didn't know of the club, or at least its reputation as the hottest, and most exclusive, gay BDSM club in Texas. If he was met with a blank stare, he'd pay his tab and hit the road.

"I've heard of it." Nathan smiled and glanced down at Dane's leather pants. "I guess you're dressed for it." Dane looked down at his very expensive leather pants, which probably cost more than Nathan earned in a week. He was decidedly overdressed compared to Nathan's faded, ripped jeans and T-shirt.

Still, Nathan's response proved he knew what Boot Camp was. Which didn't necessarily make him gay, but at least it didn't rule it out.

"I suppose I've given myself away with my uniform." Dane admitted. "You ever been there? It can be quite a spectacle, especially to the uninitiated."

"No. It's not really my scene."

Dane's head swarmed with questions. Excitement hurtled up through his gut. What did Nathan mean, it wasn't his scene? Did that mean he wasn't into BDSM per se, or just that he didn't go for the public scene, or that he wasn't gay?

"I'd love to take you sometime. You could come as my guest. The scenes can be very intense, but it's all consensual. Like I said, I'm going tonight. I just stopped here for a drink. I've been meaning to check this place out for a while now."

The ball was in Nathan's court. He could toss it back with a "Yes, I'd love to go with a complete stranger to a BDSM club," or the far more likely, "Thanks, but no thanks." What he actually said was, "So, if it's not too personal, how long have you been submissive, Dane?"

* * * *

Nathan watched with amusement as Dane sputtered into his drink. He'd pegged the guy from the moment he noticed him sitting at the bar—the short, glossy burnished hair, trimmed close along his neck and ears, longish on top so he could brush it back for his corporate day job, or let it flop charmingly forward into his face when in the throes of passion. The S&M getup for his evening persona—the fine quality black leather pants that looked so soft they might melt if you touched them, the sexy black boots, the tailored black silk shirt that molded to broad shoulders made broader by a rigorous workout program at the local gym.

He probably went daily, maybe before he checked in at his office, dropping one of those movie-star perfect smiles on his lovesick secretary, allowing—even encouraging—her to believe he was straight and that maybe, just maybe, she had a shot in hell with him.

Or perhaps he went after work, shucking the designer suits and ties Nathan imagined he wore in the corporate world. He could imagine him in a tight sleeveless T-shirt and biker shorts that molded over his sculpted ass and thighs, creating a picture so perfect it would make a grown man cry.

Nathan was distracted from his thoughts as Martin arrived with his food. “I didn't ask for all that.” Nathan laughed as his brother-in-law set a plate before him that held not only the requested burger, but a huge pile of French fries, a large pickle and a bowl of coleslaw.

“Sarah's latest standing orders.” Martin grinned apologetically and shrugged his shoulders. “Whenever you come in, I'm required to feed you a full meal.”

Nathan nodded, accepting defeat as he reached for the bottle of ketchup. His older sister, like his mother, had taken on the role of feeding him as if he were still a kid. They shared the view that everything could be cured or solved by a good substantial meal. Each always urged food on him, claiming he needed more meat on his bones. He didn't really mind. It was their way of showing they cared.

Nathan took a bite of the burger, aware Dane was watching him. “Want some fries? How about some of this coleslaw? I'm never going to finish all

this."

Dane waved away the offer of food, a scowl on his face. "What gives you the idea I'm submissive?"

Nathan wiped his mouth with his napkin and turned to face Dane. His nose was slightly crooked, which saved him from being labeled a pretty boy. His eyes were blue, the color a startling contrast to his chestnut and copper hair and ruddy, tan skin. Nathan couldn't help the litany of adjectives that ran through his mind as he tried to decide the precise shade of blue—azure, beryl, cerulean, cobalt, indigo, navy...

He settled on cerulean, the dark blue of a clear winter's day, more arresting than the paler azure of spring. Dane was waiting for a response. Nathan realized he'd literally lost himself in those beautiful, clear blue eyes.

"I take it you don't consider yourself such?"

Dane laughed, but his expression was annoyed. "The opposite. I take what I want. You'll find I have quite a reputation at Boot Camp. I have no interest in submitting to another man. None whatsoever."

Nathan eyed him, sweeping his gaze over the tall, sexy man. His bearing was confident, his attitude at the moment almost belligerent. Shakespeare's words about protesting too much slipped into his mind, but Nathan only smiled.

"My mistake. It was something in your eyes. Perhaps it was only my overactive imagination."

"What do you mean? Are you saying *you're* Dom?" Dane's look of incredulity was so brazen it made Nathan laugh out loud. He looked down at himself, aware how he must appear in his clay-smeared clothing and sneakers, hardly the uniform of a serious player. Dane was probably used to looking for more obvious cues—black leather, boots, maybe a pair of handcuffs dangling from his belt hook.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't call myself Dom. Or sub for that matter. I don't especially care for labels. I think they tend to limit you. In my experience, it's the rare person who is all one thing or all the other. It's not about dominance or submission per se—it's about connection. It's about who moves you, and in what way."

Dane crossed his arms protectively over his chest, shaking his head. His smile was grim. "Maybe for the select few, but from my own personal experience, I would have to disagree. It's about hardwiring. My hardwiring dictates that I dominate others—sensually speaking. That I control their reactions, demand their obedience. A submissive, I mean a true submissive, not just a pain slut, is hardwired to accept, even to crave, my mastery over them, sexual and otherwise."

Clearly warming to his topic, Dane continued, "It's like being gay, or left-handed. You're born that way. True, society may force you to deny your nature, or to stunt it by trying desperately to mold yourself to dictates that hold no meaning for you beyond blind conformity, but in the end, you are what you are. You can't change it just because you want to."

Nathan nodded, impressed with the reasoning Dane brought to bear in his defense. Still, he couldn't help but muse, *methinks the boy doth protest too much...*

He offered, "I don't disagree with you. I just think it's more complicated than that. I'm sure at Boot Camp you're quite the Dom, as you say. I'm guessing you derive enormous satisfaction from putting the so-called submissives there through their paces. No disrespect intended for that particular scene."

Nathan lowered his voice and put his hand on Dane's arm. Their eyes met and he tumbled into the dark, clear blue of Dane's soul. He forced himself to look away so he could concentrate. "But it's not *real*."

As Dane started to protest, Nathan pushed on. "What I mean to say is, in the end, that stuff at your club is a game. It's not about who you are, about what moves you, what matters. Granted, it might be a sexy game, but the rules are written out in advance, the sides are chosen and may the best man win."

"Maybe it is just a game. But it can be more than that. I think it depends on the scene, on the people involved." Dane's face lit up. "I'm going there now. Why don't you come with me? I'll show you just what us 'players' are up to. See what you think, then. If you're lucky, I might even choose *you* as my toy of the night."

Nathan laughed and shook his head. It wasn't that he was immune to the erotic aspect of watching someone naked, perhaps suspended, whipped for the amusement of onlookers. It just wasn't something he himself would choose to engage in. It wasn't, to quote his mother, "his cup of tea."

He thought of his studio, of the commissioned work he wasn't nearly done with, having been set back by his impulsive month-long trip to Italy to study with Maria Giovanni.

It had been a huge honor to be invited to work with one of the premier sculptors of the day, but he'd taken too much time away from his obligations. Even if he was into the sort of group masturbation Dane was offering, he had work to do.

Not only that, though he didn't deny the man was breathtakingly good-looking, he had to grudgingly admit to himself they couldn't be more mismatched. Dane Bishop had probably never been inside a museum. He probably couldn't tell a Van Gogh from a Chagall, a Rodin from a Michelangelo. He probably had a subscription to the *Wall Street Journal* and *Golf Digest*, and networked with the big boys in his accounting firm or law office or wherever in the corporate world he'd carved out a shallow, lucrative niche.

Worse, he was a player who spent his spare time pretending to dominate men who pretended to submit. He walked the walk, wore the uniform, but lacked the soul. He lacked nuance, he missed the poetry of D/s, its potential romance.

Nathan was used to being alone. He could work with his paints and charcoal, his clay and bronze, for hours, even days on end. Sometimes he was lonely, but it was better than selling himself short just for company and sex.

Better to give this guy a miss, to say “nice to meet you, must be going, have a good life.” He turned toward Dane, opening his mouth to refuse outright. Then he fell again into those cerulean eyes and found himself saying, “I can't tonight. But maybe another time?”

* * * *

Three nearly naked men knelt before him, heads bowed, cocks erect, waiting for his decree. One of them drew his tongue in an exaggerated, suggestive way over the top of Dane's black, square-toed boot. Dane pursed his lips in disapproval. The boy was too forward. He would not be the one chosen.

At the club, Dane was known for his intense, almost brutal scenes. He never ceased to be amazed that, no matter what he chose to mete out, there was always a willing, eager masochist desperate for his cruel attentions.

Nathan Levi's pale face, those dark eyes that could burn holes through his soul, swam into his mind. Who the hell was that guy? What nerve to suggest Dane was submissive. He was probably just pulling Dane's chain, seeing if he could get a rise out of him.

At the same time, he'd been disconcerted by Nathan's confident assumption. Though Dane had never admitted it to anyone, he occasionally fantasized that he was the one tied to the rack, his body taut and bound, the biting kiss of another's lash searing his skin.

Not that he'd ever permit such a thing. No, Dane was born to control others, to dominate not only a scene, but every arena in which he moved. He was, quite simply, a natural leader. So he'd been told all his life, and he had no reason to dispute it.

He'd advanced steadily in his banking career, moving from lending officer to assistant vice president to vice president. Now, at only twenty-nine, he was running his bank's Austin real estate lending department. The Austin real estate market was still thriving, despite the personal mortgage market woes, and he enjoyed the energy and enthusiasm of the place.

His days were spent managing money, his nights managing submissive, masochistic men who hung on his every word and bowed before him as if he were a king. He had his pick of play partners at the clubs, and if he chose, sex partners for the night.

It had been amazingly easy to talk to Nathan, though he was way off the mark about Dane's D/s orientation. If only he'd agreed to come with Dane to the club. He could have shown him firsthand just how dominant he really was.

Maybe another time.

Dane well knew that could be code for “never.”

He should have stayed at the bar and continued to talk to the enigmatic, interesting Nathan Levi. If only he hadn't let his ego get in the way. He'd been hurt at Nathan's refusal, and angry at himself for letting it matter, and so he'd left, alone.

He looked down at the three men. A small crowd had gathered near him, waiting respectfully for him to make his selection and lead his charge to a whipping chamber for a public scene.

He touched the shoulder of the man on the far left. The man looked up, his face blooming with surprised happiness. The blond one who had licked his boot looked up too, his face startled as well, but not smiling.

Dane knew he had been expecting to be picked, as he was exponentially better looking than either of the other two guys, and no doubt used to capitalizing on those looks. But Dane didn't look for beauty for these scenes, or not exclusively at any rate. When he watched the submissive, masochistic men being shown by the auctioneer on the dais, he looked for other qualities, such as compliance when being examined, prodded and displayed for the audience, and grace when forced to hold uncomfortable, sometimes embarrassing positions under close scrutiny.

The man he had chosen was about five foot, six inches tall, with dark skin, broad features in a wide face and a wiry, slender build. He was wearing a Y-

harness of thin black leather across his chest, the tail of the Y attached to a ring at the base of his cock, which, unlike the rest of him, was quite large. On his back was a small canvas backpack that no doubt held his personal sex toys.

He stood, his head bowed and whispered, "Thank you, Sir."

"We'll see if you still thank me when it's over."

He led the man through the crowd toward his favored whipping chamber, which had been reserved for him as usual. Men standing in groups of two and three parted like water as he passed through. As they headed toward the chamber, they picked up an increasingly large group of followers eager to watch the session.

"Master Dane has picked someone." "Dane's going to scene—let's go watch." The men murmured and called softly to each other as he passed. Dane's boredom was sloughing itself off as he walked, pushed aside by the sexual energy of the men around him, men eager for the show he was going to give them.

"What are you called?" Dane asked the young man.

"Pony boy, Sir."

The chamber was already crowded with men, Doms and subs alike, though they stood at a respectful distance. The room was outfitted with a whipping post, a padded sawhorse with chains and cuffs attached to the legs, a set of stocks and the usual selection of rope, whips, crops and floggers.

Pony boy had admitted during his public interview on the dais, while blushing in a rather captivating way, that he was into pony play. The club had a large bin of various types of gags, which were sterilized after each use. Dane now turned toward one of the men, a sub he'd scened with before who went by the name slut69. "I think I saw a bit gag in the bin. Go see if you can find it for me."

To the man before him he said, "Where's your tail, pony boy?"

"In my pack, Sir."

"Get it."

Pony boy shucked off his backpack and opened it. He withdrew a butt plug, to which had been glued a long, glossy black horsetail. Kneeling, he held the tail on upturned palms, his head bowed.

"Get on your hands and knees."

Pony boy obediently dropped to the floor as ordered. The floors were concrete, covered with linoleum in a pattern resembling gray flagstones.

Reaching into the backpack, Dane found what he was looking for. Squeezing lubricant onto the tip of the plug, he tossed the tube back into the pack and kicked it aside. Bending down, he pushed the plug against pony boy's sphincter. Pony boy remained still, except for the grunt of pain when the flared base of the plug was pressed home. Dane noted pony boy's cock was fully erect.

Slut69 returned holding a rubber bar about eight inches long and one inch in circumference, with large O-rings on each side. Dane grabbed pony boy's hair and pulled back his head.

He pressed the gag into pony boy's mouth. Pony boy's eyes widened, his breath quickening around the rubber bar. Using two leads of rope, Dane tied one on either O-ring, creating makeshift reins. Moving behind pony boy, he pulled at the reins, jerking his head to the right and then the left.

Dane dropped the reins. "Get up and trot for us, boy," he commanded. The man scrambled to his feet and began to move around the small room, lifting his legs high in a kind of goosetstep, his hands held up like paws, his large cock suspended by the cock ring attached to his harness.

Panting, he returned to stand in front of Dane, looking expectant.

"Give me a riding crop," Dane said to no one in particular. In a moment a large black crop was placed in his hand. "Turn around and show me that

ass," he barked. Pony boy eagerly obeyed, bending forward, his hands resting on his knees. Holding the reins in one hand, Dane smacked the man's ass with a resounding crack of leather. Pony boy's black horsetail swished, his yelps of pain muffled by the rubber bit in his mouth.

Suddenly the men in the crowd burst into laughter, punctuated with hooting jeers and scattered applause. Dane pulled at the reins sharply, jerking pony boy's head back. Stepping in front of him, he saw the trail of white ejaculate wending its way down the man's leg. The tip of his cock was gooey with it.

"What a bad little horsey you are. No discipline whatsoever." Pony boy looked mortified, his face nearly as red as his ass. Dane unbuckled the gag and let it fall to the floor.

"I'd say a session in the stocks is in order."

He led the boy to the open stocks and pressed his head down against the wood. Carefully, he closed the top half over his neck and wrists and slipped the padlock into place.

Dane selected a large whip with long, knotted cords from the wall, guaranteed to leave marks. Pony boy's ass was thrust out, his back perpendicular to the floor, his cock pulled upward by the harness. The horsetail swayed, protruding lewdly from between his cheeks.

With a flick of his wrist, Dane brought the whip down hard on pony boy's back. Pony boy cried out. He couldn't move, the stocks locking his head and wrists securely in position. There were murmurs and whispers from the onlookers, who shuffled and craned for a better look.

Dane struck the boy's back and ass with unrelenting force, until there was no sound in the room but his breathy cries and the slap of leather against skin. The air was ripe with lust, sweat and primal desire.

Dane could feel the sexual tension like a live thing emanating from the men crowded round them. Each of the subs wanted to be the one under his lash, bound in the stocks, exposed for all to see. The Doms in the group wanted

to be Dane, to be the object of admiration and envy, to be the one with all the power.

Spurred on by the avid, almost devotional attention of the group, he whipped pony boy to a frenzy, not stopping even when the sub's legs buckled beneath him, causing him to sag in a crouching position at the stocks, which were too high to permit him to kneel comfortably.

"Please, Sir, may I have another."

Dane knew the boy meant it, but also knew he'd taken him to the edge of what he could physically tolerate. He used a gentler stroke of the lash to bring him down from the pain high. Finally he dropped the whip altogether, using his hands to soothe the boy's heated skin. He unlocked the padlock and pulled the stocks open.

Slut69, his self-appointed helper of the evening, helped to lower the well-whipped sub to the ground. Several men knelt around him, murmuring praise and congratulations at how well he took the beating. Pony boy lifted his head and smiled weakly, acknowledging the praise with a regal wave of his hand, as if he'd just returned from battle injured, but victorious.

Watching the men huddled around the prostrate sub, Dane felt almost superfluous. With a shrug, he slipped past the group and out the door of the chamber. Heads swiveled in his direction as he passed, but he paid them little notice.

What would Nathan have thought of the scene? He had a feeling Nathan wouldn't have been impressed. Dane looked around the club. There were mini-scenes happening in every corner—guys bent over, bares asses being smacked, balls locked in cages, whips cracking, bound subs kneeling at the feet of Doms, who pretended to ignore them as they talked to each other.

Suddenly, Dane didn't want to be there anymore. He headed toward the door, waving away invitations to join acquaintances at their tables. He was headed back to The Iguana, on the off chance Nathan would still be there.

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Chapter Two

Dane looked at his watch. He drank the last of his gin and tonic and set it on the bar a little harder than he'd meant to. It was five after eleven. The bar was crowded, but Dane had eyes for no one there. How stupid to have come back with the absurd hope Nathan might still be nursing his beer, waiting for Dane.

Nathan Levi, mystery man. He was an artist, or at least he painted, probably in his spare time. From the looks of him, he wasn't particularly successful, though Dane told himself not to be a snob. Money didn't matter. He'd known a lot of rich jerks, that was for sure.

"May I buy you a drink? Looks like you could use a refill."

Dane turned toward the man who had slipped onto the stool beside him. He was probably in his forties, with brown hair fading to gray slicked back from his forehead. A heavy gold chain lay against a thick mat of curling chest hair. He wasn't bad looking, but Dane wasn't in the mood to be picked up. Besides, what if Nathan came in?

Who was he fooling? Nathan wasn't going to come into the bar. Dane was wasting his time. His head ached and he was tired. He realized the man was waiting expectantly for his response.

With an apologetic smile Dane said, "No thanks." He pulled money from his pocket and set it on the bar with a nod toward Martin. "I was just going, actually."

The man put his hand over Dane's. "I could be just going, too. My car is parked outside. I'd be glad to give you a lift to wherever you'd like."

Dane pulled his hand from beneath the man's, giving a small shake of his head. "Not tonight. Thanks just the same."

He drove to his quiet neighborhood and parked in the garage. As he unlocked the door and entered the house, for a moment he toyed with the idea of calling one of his play partners. It was barely midnight, yet he'd left the club after only one scene, and then after only one drink and one proposition at The Iguana, had hightailed it out of the bar.

"I must be getting old," he said aloud to the empty living room.

But he knew that wasn't it. Somehow a near-stranger had hijacked his evening and kidnapped his thoughts. Nathan Levi, his shiny long hair, his dark, fuck-me eyes, and his sudden, bright smile had utterly captivated Dane, and Dane realized he had no idea whatsoever what to do about it.

* * * *

The next night found Dane back at The Iguana. He told himself it was just a stop on the way to Boot Camp, but he knew he was lying.

For one thing, he wasn't dressed for the club. Instead of black leather and silk, he wore his favorite pair of straight-leg Levi 501s and a thick, white cotton T-shirt, the sleeves of which hugged his biceps in a way that was drawing attention from both the men and the women in the bar. Instead of the black leather boots, he wore his favorite pair of old brown work boots, the leather worn and cracked but more comfortable than any shoes he owned.

He glanced around the room, first along the stools at the bar and then at the clusters of small tables and the booths set along one wall, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man he'd come to see. He saw no one he recognized, except Martin the bartender.

Martin obviously knew Nathan well. Maybe he knew where he was, or if he was coming in that night. Or worse, if he'd already been in and left. Martin ignored him for several minutes as he served other customers.

Dane finally got his attention by clearing his throat and dropping his keys with a jangle to the bar. "What can I do you for?" Martin drawled, his

accent more pronounced than Dane recalled from the night before. If he recognized Dane, he gave no sign of it.

"Gin and tonic, heavy on the lime."

When Martin returned with his drink Dane almost blurted, "Have you seen Nathan?" Instead he held his tongue. For all he knew, the guy was Nathan's lover, though when he forced himself to be rational he knew that was a long shot. Martin gave off a particularly straight vibe, and from the conversation he'd overheard, they sounded more like old friends or family than lovers.

Dane sipped his drink, trying to make it last as he kept his eye glued to the mirror's image of the door behind him. Each time it opened he held his breath, waiting to see if it was Nathan.

But it never was.

Finally at ten thirty, on his third drink, Dane admitted to himself Nathan wasn't going to show. Obviously he'd had zero interest in Dane or he would have come back tonight to reconnect. Whatever sense of primal recognition Dane had experienced when they'd looked into each other's eyes, it had obviously been entirely one way.

Dane was pissed off. He had to admit he'd expected Nathan to be there, waiting for him. He felt betrayed by Nathan's failure to show.

Cut it out, Dane warned himself. Why should Nathan be interested in him? It was probably for the best Nathan hadn't reappeared. In a way it was a relief. If they had met again, Dane would have wanted to start something. He'd have taken Nathan home with him. They would have had sex. Then they'd have that awkward time where he decided if he wanted Nathan to go or stay, and where Nathan decided the same thing in reverse.

Say he stayed. In the morning Dane would wake up with a stranger beside him, wondering for a second who the hell was in his bed. They might go out for breakfast, and realize, now that the sexual tension had been dealt with via a one-night stand, that they really had nothing in common. He'd be

bored by noon, desperate to get rid of the guy, wondering why he bothered in the first place, and what he'd thought he'd seen in him.

Wasn't that always how it went?

Dane pulled several bills from his pocket, barely paying attention to the denominations. He slapped them on the bar and walked resolutely toward the door. This was for the best. It was a rare Saturday night he wasn't at the club or using some slut boy for his own private amusement. He'd get an early night. It would be a refreshing change.

In the morning he might even go into the office and get a head start on the week's work. He had a complex loan package to review on a parcel of land up for development on the outskirts of the city.

It was good Nathan hadn't returned. Who needed the hassle of getting involved?

As he walked toward the door, it opened and a man of medium height with long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail entered the bar. Dane froze in his tracks, his heart suddenly flopping like a fish thrown up on the deck.

Almost as quickly, he saw the man wasn't Nathan. He was shorter and his hair was brown, not black. A woman had entered just behind him, her hand proprietarily on his shoulder. They passed Dane with a murmured, "Pardon."

His heart still pounding, Dane walked quickly to the exit, suddenly in need of fresh air. Whatever he'd just tried to sell himself about not caring, his heart wasn't buying it.

"Plenty other fish in the sea," he said aloud, testing out the idea. But he knew there was only one fish he wanted, and he had no idea how to catch him.

* * * *

Nathan loved the feel of the cool, wet clay beneath his fingers. He thrilled to the process as a lump of clay slowly took on the dimensions of something real, something he'd created. Sculpting was for him the purest kind of meditation, even more satisfying in that regard than drawing or painting.

Scattered before him on the large drafting table in one corner of his studio were a dozen drawings he'd sketched in charcoal from the photograph of the man whose likeness he'd been commissioned to create. He liked to draw his subjects first, to get familiar with their features—the particular curve of their cheekbone, the flare of their nostril, the shape of the eye socket.

He had the basic shape of the head and neck already formed on the small, temporary modeling stand he'd constructed from a thick piece of plywood, into which he'd glued a dowel to hold the clay while he worked. The nose and eye sockets were molded, though not yet refined. He closed his eyes as he worked a thick coil of clay onto the skull to shape its cheekbones.

Instead of the man's rather broad, flat features, he saw Dane's high, sculpted cheekbones, the hollow just beneath them creating shadow that highlighted his vivid blue eyes. He opened his eyes and looked down at his work, realizing he was sculpting the image of Dane with his fingers, instead of the one he'd been paid to create.

He glanced at the clock Sarah had hung on the wall of his studio in an effort to try to get him to keep track of time. It was twenty after ten. He'd slept most of the day, his body still jetlagged. He was hungry.

He took the water bottle and sprayed a mist over the clay before covering it with a plastic bag. Hoisting the bust from the turntable, he placed it carefully on a shelf in the large walk-in closet he'd had built especially to keep his clay works-in-progress cool and protected.

The loft took the entire top floor of a warehouse not far from his brother-in-law's bar. He loved the space, which, with the landlord's blessing, he'd converted from a large, empty room to his studio on one side and living quarters on the other. He'd designed it himself with the help of an architect friend and was quite pleased with the results. Every bit of it was functional,

yet the room, with its many windows and the high, vaulted ceiling, maintained a sense of airiness and open space.

He moved from the studio area to the living quarters, passing through the bedroom to the bathroom, where he shucked off his clothes and stepped into the shower.

As he washed his body and hair, he thought about Dane Bishop. Was he at Boot Camp right now, whipping some horny masochist's ass while onlookers cheered their approval? Or was he waiting at The Iguana in those painted-on black leather pants, frozen in time while Nathan went about his business, only to click back to life when Nathan opened the barroom door?

As he pulled on fresh jeans and a red T-shirt with no rips or stains, he realized he was dressing up. He knew without asking himself who he was dressing for, though he also knew the odds of finding Dane at The Iguana were slim.

He glanced toward his large bed, a four poster covered in a black silk coverlet, a gift from his last lover, Andre, who had returned to Paris the summer before, taking a small piece of Nathan's heart with him.

He hadn't been in love with Andre, though he'd wished he could have been. At twenty-six, the concept of "true love," if there was such a thing, had so far eluded him. Yet there was no denying they had shared an intense D/s experience.

Andre, highly masochistic, had challenged Nathan's abilities as a Dom. Nothing was too extreme for Andre, who craved the cut of the single tail, the pierce of a needle, the tight bondage of ropes and gags.

Though Nathan enjoyed what they shared, he knew in his bones there had to be more. A part of him was still holding out for a D/s relationship based on more than just the giving and receiving of erotic pain.

Nathan sat on the edge of the bed, fingering the satiny coverlet, imagining Dane naked, his wrists and ankles pulled taut by the red rope Andre had

avored. He closed his eyes a moment, allowing Dane's chiseled, handsome face to fill his mind.

Just what had passed between them? He knew Dane had felt it too. When they'd stared at one another, Dane's pupils had dilated, his cheeks had flushed and he'd looked away, as if trying to recover himself.

On the surface, Dane presented himself as a tough guy. Nathan had seen his kind before. They strutted about in their black leather and chains, a crop or whip attached to their belt like an S&M handyman, always prepared. He could tell by the arrogant curve of Dane's mouth and the firm set of his jaw he was a man used to taking what he wanted.

It had been amusing to watch his affronted indignation when Nathan asked him how long he'd been a sub. He'd done it partially for effect, fairly certain Dane regarded himself as staunchly Dom. Yet the question hadn't been entirely a joke.

Nathan had found, for whatever reason, that he had a gift when it came to discerning the secrets of men's hearts. Especially men with a penchant for D/s. It was something in their eyes, something in their bearing. Somehow, no matter what they *said*, he could see beyond the words to the truth beneath them.

Dane wasn't the first so-called Dom he'd met who in fact had the sensibilities and longings of a sub. Vice versa, he'd known men who had entered the scene as subs and come to appreciate their dominant nature as they grew more confident and more honest with themselves.

Nathan himself had been submissive on occasion, with the right person, but such a connection was rare. He didn't call himself a Dom—he had meant it when he told Dane he didn't like defining or limiting himself with jargon—but his sensibility was decidedly dominant.

Nathan let himself out of his loft and walked down the three flights of stairs of the silent building. The rest of the tenants were commercial—a delivery service, a tire storage facility, and a metal works and carpentry shop that opened at the crack of dawn, or so it seemed to him, and made a huge

racket when he was trying to sleep. Sometimes when he was jerked out of his dreams by band saws and drill presses, he fantasized about having the whole building to himself.

He stepped into the warm Austin night and walked down the street, heading in the direction of The Iguana. He noticed a tall man with dark, short hair walking toward him. His shirt gleamed white as he passed beneath a streetlight.

Oh my god, there he is. Dane Bishop, head down, hands in his pockets, about to pass me.

And pass him he did, no doubt heading for the municipal parking lot just down the street. Nathan stopped walking and turned to watch him. Silently he willed Dane to stop. To turn around. To see him standing there.

Oddly, that's precisely what Dane did. He stood beneath a streetlight in a halo of illumination, staring toward the relative darkness where Nathan stood. Nathan advanced toward him.

"Hello, Dane."

As he approached, a look of incredulity spread over Dane's face.

"It's *you*."

Nathan felt himself smiling back. Those two words told him a lot.

"It's me."

Nathan noted the color rising in Dane's face. To help him feel more comfortable he added, "I was just heading over to The Iguana to get something to eat."

"Did you forget again?"

"What?"

"To eat. Did you forget to eat?"

"Oh, right. You overheard that, huh?" Nathan laughed. "Sometimes I just get so wrapped up in what I'm doing I lose track of things like eating and sleeping."

Oddly, Nathan found he'd lost his appetite again. Maybe it was just that the blood had drained from his stomach in its mad rush for his cock. His erection bulged in his jeans as he drank in the sight of Dane in his tight T-shirt and blue jeans that fit like a second skin against those strong, sexy thighs. He noted with amused approval that Dane was also sporting an erection.

"Were you on your way home, or could I talk you into staying out a little later? We could go somewhere and grab a bite. It doesn't have to be The Iguana. I just go there because it's close by and my brother-in-law owns it."

"You live around here?"

"Yeah. I live in a loft on the top of a warehouse about two blocks over. It's a combo art studio-apartment."

"It's zoned for residential real estate over here?"

"Well, not strictly speaking, no. But my landlord knows somebody who knows somebody. You know how it is. It's just me and I'm pretty discreet, so I haven't had any problems so far."

Dane nodded. "I just spent a while at The Iguana, so...."

"Understood. You don't really feel like waltzing back in there. Do you like Mexican? I know a place that serves authentic food like you'd find in Mexico City. No Tex-Mex there. The *rollas cabos* is incredible."

Dane looked puzzled and shrugged his shoulders. "*Rollas cabos*," he repeated, his accent painfully American. "I've heard of tacos and enchiladas, but that's about it."

"It's made with blue corn tortillas stuffed with scallops, crabmeat, tilapia and shrimp, sautéed with a cream chipotle sauce and manchego cheese.

Trust me, you'll love it."

"Do they have margaritas?

"Sure."

"Then I'm sold. Let's go."

* * * *

"Let's take my car." Dane pressed the button on his keychain to unlock the doors. He watched Nathan as he climbed into the passenger seat, wondering if he appreciated what he was seeing. The poor guy probably couldn't even afford a car.

Dane decided not to rub it in by drawing attention to his Mercedes-Benz SL 65 AMG. Of course, he wouldn't mention he'd gotten it used for an incredible price at the bank's repo auction. Being an employee definitely had its perks, as he had advance word on the good deals. Even so, it had cost a bundle, but every time he climbed into the driver's seat, he knew it had been worth it.

"What do you drive?" He finally asked, unable to resist.

"What?" Nathan seemed puzzled by the question. "Oh, you mean a car. I don't like to drive. I mostly get around by foot or my bicycle."

Dane nodded, certain now Nathan's financial straits prevented him from owning a car. The idea was kind of romantic—living in a loft, dressed in old jeans, his hair long, immersed in his art. He might have been happier in Woodstock or Soho than in Austin, though Austin still managed to maintain its college-town atmosphere and hip quality, despite the recent burgeoning development.

He followed Nathan's directions to the restaurant, casting sidelong glances at him as they drove. When he'd passed Nathan on the street, he'd literally ignored him, so wrapped up in his own thoughts about the very man he was

passing by. Yet something must have registered in his brain because he'd felt a strong compulsion to turn around to better examine the stranger.

His heart had sprung to life at the sight of Nathan, adrenaline wiping out the effects of gin. Instead of acting suave and cool, dropping a casual, "Haven't we met somewhere?" He blurted out the telling statement, "It's *you*." Nathan had smiled then, but his smile had been kind. He hadn't pressed his advantage where another might have, where, Dane realized, he might have.

They arrived at the restaurant a little before eleven. Dane was glad to see it wasn't closed, as so many places around there seemed to close by ten, which continued to surprise a man used to the city that never sleeps. Though Dane didn't usually eat this late, the wonderful smells in the place made him realize he was quite hungry.

He let Nathan do the ordering, including the seafood thing he'd mentioned, plus various other items with complicated Spanish names. Dane noticed the prices, while reasonable for a fine restaurant, were a little on the high side. He made a mental note to snatch the bill before Nathan tried to shell out half his week's wages just to impress Dane.

A waiter brought two frozen margaritas to the table, Nathan's with salt on the rim, Dane's with two extra wedges of lime. "They use Grand Marnier in these, but don't let the mild flavor fool you. The Tequila in these is strong enough to take your head off."

They shared a companionable silence as they sipped their drinks and munched on blue corn tortilla chips they dipped into a fresh, spicy salsa. After a while Nathan said, "Were you at Boot Camp this evening?"

"No. I wasn't in the mood."

"Well, it was a happy coincidence we ran into each other. I'm glad we did." He took another sip of his drink and then leaned forward over the small table. "Listen. I'm sorry if I was kind of abrupt the other night. I mean it about going to the club. I probably shouldn't be so rigid about it. Maybe it's not the way I imagine it to be. It's not really fair of me to judge without experiencing it firsthand."

"It's funny you should say that. I didn't have all that much fun this time. I guess a lot of what you'd said kind of resonated with me. I mean, it's not like I ever took it all that seriously, but for some reason that night I didn't get the thrill I usually do from domming some guy while a crowd gathers around, their tongues hanging out.

"I didn't go tonight because—" Dane stopped himself. He wasn't in the habit of appearing vulnerable, not in the workplace and definitely not in his personal life. Nathan was watching him, his expression bemused. Again Dane was taken with the large, dark eyes in the pale face. He reminded Dane of paintings of saints in the middle ages, their pale skin luminescent, as if lit from within by their religious fervor, their eyes burning with a secret passion.

Something in Nathan's expression compelled him to be honest. To forget his carefully constructed façade of always being in complete control of every situation. He finished his sentence. "—because I went to the bar to look for you. I went last night too, after the club. I wanted—I wanted to see you again."

Nathan reached across the table, squeezing Dane's arm. "I'm sorry, Dane. I was so jetlagged Friday night I wasn't thinking straight. Obviously I wasn't, to let you get away without even getting your number or anything." Dane felt happiness like a warming sap rise up in his veins as Nathan continued. "I went home after you left and slept for like fourteen hours straight. I'm still cockeyed with my schedule."

"Where were you again?"

"Italy. I spent a month there studying with a really cool artist. The experience was fantastic, but now I'm really behind in my work." He shook his head and said, "But let's not talk about that. Let's talk about us."

"Us?" Dane's typical retort would have been to dryly assert he hadn't been aware there was an "us" at this point. For some reason, his usual flip attitude didn't seem appropriate with Nathan.

The waiter arrived, with a second waiter in tow. Together they set down various dishes, admonishing the men to watch out, as the plates were very hot. Nathan said something to them in rapid Spanish. They both flashed white smiles at him, nodded and faded away.

"What did you say?" Dane asked, impressed.

"Just that the food looked wonderful and smelled even better."

"It does look delicious. There's enough for a small army here."

Nathan laughed. "That's okay. We can take what's left home and eat it for breakfast." Dane glanced sharply at him, wondering just how much to read into the seemingly casual remark, but he said nothing.

They passed the dishes to each other, piling their plates high with food. Dane, who normally didn't pay that much attention to what he was eating, was struck by the delicately spiced, delicious flavors. The only Mexican food he'd had in New York was what he guessed Nathan would call Tex-Mex, barely a notch up from Taco Bell.

"I could get used to this," he said between mouthfuls.

Nathan nodded. "It's addictive."

Dane wanted to return to Nathan's remark—*Let's talk about us*. He wondered how he could do it without seeming overeager. A novel thought slipped into his brain—so what if he seemed eager? He *was* eager. He'd spent hours thinking about Nathan, dissecting in his head every word each of them had spoken, second guessing the meaning of every sentence, every inflection and nuance of Nathan's utterances. He'd hung out alone at a bar for two nights running, just on the off chance Nathan might reappear. He'd felt as if his heart had been pumped full of lead when he'd left the bar, walking with his head down, his mind stuck in the painful, useless rut of what might have been.

And then Nathan had appeared, like an angel in the mist, smiling and inviting him for dinner. It seemed as if fate had intervened, not willing to let

the sparks that had flared between them die away.

I can trust him. These words, not words Dane was used to thinking or feeling, whispered quietly in his brain. And so he took the chance—he allowed himself to be vulnerable. “You were saying—let's talk about us?”

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Chapter Three

Nathan smiled. It had been a while since he'd even entertained the concept of "us" with anyone. Since Andre had left, he'd dated here and there, very casually, rarely consummating the date with sex.

It wasn't that Nathan didn't like sex. *Au contraire*, he was just choosy, he supposed. He didn't want to just fuck for fucking's sake, nor did he want to Dom someone simply because he could.

It had to be special. The person had to merit his attentions. Dane might be such a man, his protests of his dominant orientation notwithstanding. Dane was watching him, his expression endearingly open. Nathan sensed a vulnerability in him that could be explored and exploited—not in a negative way, but in a way he sensed might free something in Dane, something he kept hidden even from himself.

"Would you like some dessert? The flan is very good. Maybe a little espresso?"

"Sure," Dane said. "Though I'm not sure I could eat another bite. This was really delicious."

"We'll get one flan and share it, how about that?"

The waiter returned to clear the plates and pack their leftovers to take home. Nathan ordered their dessert and coffee and sat back, appraising the handsome man across from him.

"I'd like to sculpt your face. You have perfect cheekbones. In fact, only tonight while I was supposed to be sculpting a bust for someone, my fingers decided to do what they wanted, which was smooth and shape the clay into your likeness."

Dane looked pleased. "So you thought about me, huh?"

"I did. Quite a bit. There's something about you, Dane. Something I want to explore."

"Something about me?"

"Yeah. I know you've stated categorically that you're Dom to your core. That you're hardwired that way, end of story. I'd be curious to see if that's really true. It's not even so much about submission, but more about human nature. If you were game, I'd like to try a little experiment. It wouldn't involve whips and chains or any of that. More a mind thing. If you were interested?"

"I'd need a little more to go on." Dane laughed, and Nathan thought he sounded a little nervous.

"We could go to my place, or yours. It's just an exercise, really. An exercise in personal control. Doms tend to pride themselves on their level of control—you're probably no different. If you felt uncomfortable at any time we'd simply stop. It's that easy."

"I'm not really sure what you're talking about, but if you're trying to get me to admit some secret submissive tendencies, forget it. Not going to happen." Dane folded his arms over his chest. The feeling Nathan had experienced when they'd first met, of Dane's protesting overly much assailed him, but he merely nodded and smiled.

"I understand. It's just for fun, really. I have no great plans to turn you into my docile, robotic sex slave." Dane laughed and Nathan laughed with him, observing the high color that was blooming in Dane's cheeks and the sudden dilation of his pupils. The man, whether or not he was aware of it, was definitely sending mixed signals.

After coffee and dessert, the waiter brought the bill, placing it beside Nathan's plate with a *gracias*. Before he could reach for it, Dane swooped down on the paper and pulled it away.

"Please, let me," he said emphatically.

"That's hardly fair," Nathan began. "I invited you, after all."

"No, my treat. I *insist*." Something in his tone made Nathan certain he wouldn't take no for an answer. It was one of those traits peculiar to men, the grab for the bill and the underlying implications of power and control that seemed so very important to some guys. Nathan shrugged. Obviously, with the car he drove and the clothes he wore, Dane could afford it.

They walked toward the car. Dane said, "How about we go to my place. It's not far from here."

"Sounds good." He had been expecting that. Dane would want to maintain the level of control being at his own place would afford him. As they drove, Nathan asked, "So what do you do when you're not domming slut boys at Boot Camp?"

Dane chuckled. "I'm a banker. Real estate banking. I was sent down by corporate to clean things up in their Texas real estate department. Seems the guy there before me was a little too much of a good ol' boy, fudging appraisals and padding loans for his buddies. He didn't get caught until things started to head south, as they usually do when a loan isn't structured properly."

"How do you find Austin compared to New York?"

"At first, I think I was suffering from culture shock. Everything closes so early, and I didn't know anybody. I missed the snow. I wasn't connected in the scene at all. But I've really been pleasantly surprised. I like the way gays seem to be so integrated here. I mean, like The Iguana. I was expecting Texas to be different, you know, big guys with beer bellies named Bubba coming at me with a shotgun, but I really haven't experienced much of that at all."

Nathan laughed. "Oh, we've got those too. But you're right, Austin is something unique. There's a kind of energy here, like in San Francisco or Paris."

"Here we are," Dane said. They were in a newish development not far from downtown. The house was a nondescript single story ranch with an attached garage. Dane pulled into the driveway and pressed the button on the remote on his sun visor, waiting as the garage door eased open.

The door to the house led into the kitchen. The kitchen was what Nathan thought of as 'standard boring,' with newish appliances, wood veneer cabinets, stone tile flooring and no personality. Dane, as if reading his less than complimentary thoughts, said, "I just rent this place. The jury's still out on if I'm going to make Austin my permanent home. Though lately," he looked into Nathan's eyes with those cerulean beauties, "I've been giving it more serious thought."

He led Nathan into the living room, which was furnished in classic dullness, with a large brown and blue plaid sofa, the kind that hides stains and wear, brown leather chairs, a few framed posters on the walls and a large flat-screen TV in an entertainment center. He was pleased to note a large bookshelf nearly filled with books, both hardcover and paperback, clearly there because they'd been read, not just for display.

"I'd been thinking about having my own stuff sent down from storage. I'm not crazy about this rental stuff, but then I don't spend all that much time here. I work long hours, and during my free time I hang out at the clubs."

Nathan noted the use of the past tense and smiled. Dane gestured toward the sofa and Nathan sat. Dane sat beside him. This was the moment they would lean in to one another and kiss, if it were a typical first date. But Nathan didn't plan on making it typical.

"Have you ever been whipped, Dane? Felt the pull of rope against your wrists and ankles? The feeling of a hard palm on your bare ass?"

Dane stiffened beside him. "No way. I mete it out, I don't take it."

Nathan raised his eyebrows. "Then you aren't of the school of thought that says a Dom should experience firsthand anything he 'metes out'?" He drew quotations in the air around the last two words.

"No. I rely on communication instead. I listen to my subs. I listen to their words and also their bodies. It's worked fine so far. I've had no complaints." His tone was defensive.

"So you've never experienced the high you can get from a well-delivered flogging? You know, that razor's edge where pleasure and pain lose their meaning as separate sensations?"

"I take it from your remark that you have?"

"I have, yes. From both sides. I find when you're really in tune with someone, you can actually feel what they're feeling. It's as if they pull you along in the wake of their experience. A sort of melding of sensation. It's very hard to describe to the uninitiated."

"I've watched it. I've induced it—that trance you can put a sub in with a really good, hard whipping—but I can't say I've experienced it, not in the way you describe."

"Who knows?" Nathan offered with a small smile. "Maybe one day you will."

They stared at one another for a long moment. Nathan felt Dane's desire shimmering between them like a heat mirage. He held his own responding desire in check, for the moment.

"Are you ready," he asked softly, "to try my experiment?"

"I don't know. It sounds kind of silly—"

"If you're uncomfortable. Scared...."

"No, of course I'm not scared." Nathan felt him bristling at the implied challenge, as he'd intended. He suppressed a grin.

"It can be disconcerting to give up control. Especially for someone so invested in maintaining it."

"What do you mean? I'm not *invested*. I told you, it's just about who I am."

"Understood. Tell me, do you think it's harder to submit or to dominate?"

"No question about it. It's much easier to submit. All you do is stand there and take it. The Dom has to do all the work. He has to learn the proper techniques with whips and canes, careful not to cut the skin or cause permanent damage. He has to gauge when the sub's had enough, even if they think they can take more. He has to be the one always in control, always conscious of what's best and right for his sub. It's a big responsibility, not one I take lightly."

"I see. So you would assert then that it's easy to submit. A piece of cake."

"As long as you get off on the pain, yeah."

"Pain isn't a necessary ingredient of submission. Some people are service subs. They long to please, to serve their Master, to submit to his will. They might crave the B&D aspect of the scene, but no more than that."

"Fair enough. Though my subs better like the lash, because they're going to get it. Still, either way, it's much easier to submit than to dom someone."

"So you shouldn't have any problem with my experiment, then. It's just a small experiment in submission. No whips, no pain. Just obedience. It should be very easy for you."

Dane barked a laugh. "Let me guess. You want me to strip and get on my knees, put my hands behind my head and open my mouth."

Nathan laughed. "Though that's a very nice image, no. That's not what I want you to do. I just want you to stand up, hands at your side, and not move, no matter what I do or say. I presume you can follow directions?"

"If I choose to," Dane retorted.

"Fair enough." Nathan stroked Dane's cheek. He watched Dane swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing, his jaw clenching. "Relax," he said gently, drawing his finger along the line of Dane's square, handsome jaw, feeling his slight responding shiver. Despite his attempted bravado, there was a

sensitivity and depth of feeling to this man Nathan was aching to explore. He continued to hold himself in tight control, not permitting his longing to show. There was time, he hoped. Plenty of time.

"Do you choose to?"

There was a pause, and then finally Dane answered.

"Yes."

Nathan nodded. That word comprised Dane's first submissive act. Nathan fervently hoped it would not be his last.

* * * *

Jesus, what was happening to him? Had Nathan felt him trembling when he'd touched his face? It had taken every ounce of self-control not to turn his head into Nathan's hand and kiss the palm, suck the fingers, lick down his wrist to the pulse.

This did not happen to Dane Bishop. Dane was never the one at a loss, never the one literally trembling with desire. His cock was so hard he thought it might burst through his zipper, and all the man had done was touch his face.

What he wanted to do, what he should do, was throw Nathan—who was smaller and slighter than he—down on the couch, pull off his clothing, flip him over and fuck him until he screamed for mercy.

Yet he didn't. He didn't even reach over and pull him into his arms for a kiss. Nathan had set up some kind of invisible barrier between them. He had some agenda that didn't seem to include sex, at least not yet.

Instead he seemed determined to play this game, to conduct this "experiment," to prove something to Dane, or himself. The odd thing was Dane was deeply intrigued. Something about Nathan completely disarmed him.

Dane knew Nathan was waiting for him to obey. Slowly he stood, letting his arms drop to his sides. For no reason he could discern, his heart was crashing about in his chest. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

Nathan stood as well. "Remember, no matter what I do, don't move. Don't respond. Keep your eyes open and stare straight ahead. That's your entire task right now."

Piece of cake. How hard could this be? What would it prove, one way or the other? As if reading his mind, Nathan said, "Empty your mind. Don't think, just be."

He touched Dane's face again, drawing the back of two fingers along his cheek. He traced the line of one cheekbone and along the crooked bridge of his nose. His lips were parted, his dark eyes glittering.

"Eyes straight ahead. That's one."

Chagrined, Dane lifted his gaze, focusing on the wall. Nathan's fingers pushed through his hair. He held himself still, though he wanted to take Nathan's face in his hands and kiss him.

Nathan dropped his hand and stood back. He walked behind Dane, who resisted the desire to turn and see what he was doing. In a moment Nathan's warm hands slipped beneath his T-shirt, moving up his back. It felt good. Dane pressed back against the hands.

"Stay still. That's two." Dane stiffened. He'd barely moved, for God's sake.

Nathan pressed his body against Dane's from behind. His cock was hard as steel against the back of Dane's thigh. Nathan's hands, still beneath his shirt, slid around to his front, rubbing over his chest.

Could Nathan feel his heartbeat, which was thumping against his ribs? The situation was completely novel for Dane. Never before in his life had he held back when he wanted something or someone. The exercise was

proving more difficult than he'd anticipated. He wanted nothing more than to turn around and take Nathan into his arms.

Nathan's hands slid down his stomach, the tips of his fingers slipping into the waist of his jeans. His fingers were centimeters from Dane's cock, which was pointing straight upwards, its head poking above his underwear, twitching at the closeness of Nathan's touch. He moaned softly and then bit his lip, angry at himself for betraying his desire.

Nathan chuckled softly and his warm, hard body was abruptly withdrawn. He moved around to stand in front of Dane, sinking to his knees.

Hardly a dominant pose, Dane thought with a sense of triumph. *The guy just wants to suck my cock!* Without thinking about what he was doing, Dane thrust his pelvis provocatively in Nathan's face.

All at once Nathan was face-to-face with him. Strong fingers curled around Dane's throat, making him gasp. "I said don't move. That's three." He dropped his hand and it took every ounce of Dane's willpower to maintain his position and his silence, yet he was determined to do so. He'd be damned if he'd let Nathan win whatever the hell this game they were playing was.

"You thought this would be easy. Yet so far in the space of a couple of minutes you're broken the one rule I set for you three times. If you were my sub," Nathan lowered his voice, the sound of it seductive, melting over him, "I would have to correct you. If you belonged to me, I'd have to teach you the basics of obedience. It's clear you don't know the first thing about it."

"Now, wait—" Dane blurted, forgetting his promise to himself to win the game.

"That's four," Nathan said sharply. He sat on the sofa and crossed his legs, looking up at Dane. "Is it really that hard for you, to follow one simple direction?" His tone was at once sad and challenging.

Dane felt like a little kid caught stealing cookies or cheating on a test. A peculiar sense of shame flooded through him. He had wanted to please

Nathan, and he had let him down.

"I'm sorry," he began, and then bit his lip, aware he wasn't supposed to speak. *Jesus, this was hard.*

Nathan stood again, his tone tender. "I know. It's harder to submit than you might think. But also far more rewarding than you can possibly imagine." Again he stroked Dane's face. Dane wasn't sure if the game was over, if he was permitted to respond.

Permitted! He was only standing there because he wanted to. If he was submitting, if that's what it was, it was entirely his choice. Of course it was! He wasn't some mindless sub, desperate for his Master's approval. He could do whatever he wanted. He could stop this game in an instant.

"We're not done." Nathan's soft, sensual voice stilled the protest in Dane's head. He held his breath, his cock throbbing as he waited to see what Nathan did next.

"The rules remain the same. You are to stay perfectly still, no matter what I do. Eyes open and straight ahead, arms at your sides. Do you think you can do that?"

Slowly Dane nodded, determined this time to prove how easy it was. Nathan again knelt in front of him. "I'm going to open your jeans, Dane. Is that okay with you? You have permission to answer." Against Dane nodded, feeling a heat of desire lick up his neck and cheeks. "I'm going to touch you with my hands and my mouth, Dane. Remember your one job—don't move."

Dane grinned despite himself. So Nathan had worked out an elaborate way of getting his hands on Dane's cock, what a surprise. Not that he minded, no sir. He wanted nothing more than to feel Nathan's sexy mouth swallow him whole. If this was submission, bring it on, baby!

"You may answer, Dane. In fact, I want you to. You understand I'm going to touch your cock. I want you tell me this is okay with you."

Dane laughed, forgetting his standing “orders” as he looked down at the so-called Dom on his knees. “Of course it's okay with me, are you kidding?”

Nathan didn't smile back. “Oh, and one more thing. You aren't to come until I give you permission.” Dane doubted that would happen, he wasn't one to ask permission for anything, but he didn't respond. He was too eager to feel that hot mouth slide over his shaft to worry about that particular rule.

“And,” Nathan continued, “If you move, speak or interfere with what I'm doing, I'll stop. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir,” Dane said, the emphasis clearly sarcastic.

Nathan reached up and jerked at Dane's fly, causing the metal buttons to open. He pulled on the jeans, drawing them down Dane's thighs. Dane started to shift to help him, but remembered he was supposed to stay still. Fine, let Nathan struggle with it on his own. Nathan managed, getting the pants to Dane's ankles, where he left them.

Next he dragged Dane's underwear down, leaving his very erect cock swaying between them. Dane closed his eyes, eager for what was to come.

“Eyes open,” Nathan snapped.

Dutifully, Dane obeyed, trying not to smile. He had to admit the whole scene was kind of hot, in a weird way. Cool fingers snaked over his balls, catching them in a gentle but sure grip. Dane started to close his eyes again, but remembered in time. He sighed with pleasure as wet, soft lips closed over the head of his cock, a warm, wet tongue gliding down his shaft.

It felt good, so incredibly good, and the knowledge it was Nathan Levi, the man about whom he'd been endlessly fantasizing for the past twenty-four plus hours, made it all the better.

He could go on all he liked about Doms and subs, but Nathan was the one on his knees, Dane's cock stuffed down his throat. Nathan took him deep, massaging his shaft with his throat muscles until he nearly came. All at once he pulled back completely, letting Dane's cock fall from his lips. Then

he cupped and stroked Dane's balls, sliding back to caress the cleft of his ass.

For several minutes Nathan engaged in this erotically delicious torture, while Dane made a valiant effort to hold himself still. He found the hardest part was keeping his eyes open. They repeatedly fluttered shut of their own accord.

Dane hadn't come in a few days and that, coupled with the long, hot tease, brought him quickly to the brink. He crested on the edge of an orgasm just as Nathan pulled away yet again. Reason left him, control left him, all he wanted to feel was that hot, perfect mouth again.

He grabbed Nathan's head, his fingers tangling in the silky, dark hair as he pushed him forcibly down onto his cock. Nathan froze. Dane knew he shouldn't have done that, but he wanted it so bad. Surely Nathan wouldn't keep up this pretense of dominating him. Surely he'd do what Dane needed, what he must have, and finish what he'd started.

Nathan remained still, as if he'd turned to stone. Nonplussed, Dane dropped his hands. Nathan moved back, letting Dane's cock fall away. Though Dane was breathing hard, his cock began to wilt under Nathan's dark-eyed stare. Again that odd sense of shame flooded him. He'd disappointed Nathan.

He waited for Nathan's inevitable lecture about breaking the one simple rule. He waited, but Nathan said nothing. Instead he lifted himself to the couch and sat back. As Nathan's eyes raked his body Dane felt ridiculous standing there with his pants around his ankles.

Finally Nathan raised one eyebrow, a hint of a smile hovering at his lips.

"That's five."

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Chapter Four

Dane pulled his underwear and jeans up, though he didn't close the buttons of his fly. Looking down at the sardonic half smile on Nathan's face, he had an impulse to slap him. He could wipe that smug expression off his face in a hurry.

Without speaking, he fell back heavily onto the sofa beside Nathan. Without looking at him, he kicked off his boots and socks, pulled his T-shirt over his head and turned toward Nathan. He barely contained his own smile as he watched Nathan's eyes roaming hungrily over his chest. Soft dark curls grew in a V down his sternum, moving to a straight, narrow line below his navel. Nathan's gaze traveled the length, his tongue sliding over his lower lip as he focused on the bulge showing in the underwear beneath Dane's unbuttoned jeans.

After a moment, Nathan slid his eyes back up to Dane's face. "Did you learn anything just now?" He remained slouched against the back of the sofa.

"I learned I'm not submissive. Or rather, I confirmed it." Even as he said this, a prickle of unease slipped through his gut. Whatever had happened during the "experiment" had affected him in a strange way, a way he wasn't ready to acknowledge or examine.

He certainly wasn't about to admit this to Nathan. Nathan had purposely set out to humiliate him, pulling his pants down the way he had, admonishing him for failing to obey as if he were some pathetic little sub boy desperate to please his Master.

He would prove, not only to himself, but to Nathan, just how dominant he in fact was. Maybe *he'd* teach *Nathan* something in the process.

Before Nathan realized what he was doing, Dane grabbed him around the waist, pulling him onto his lap. Gripping Nathan's long hair tight and

jerking it, he pulled Nathan's head back and kissed him roughly, forcing his tongue between Nathan's lips.

Nathan didn't resist, letting his lips part, his tongue sliding up to meet Dane's, his hands moving over Dane's chest, reaching lower. Dane's cock felt like it was going to burst. Letting go of Nathan's hair, he pushed him down onto the sofa and stood, kicking off his jeans and underwear.

Nathan lay back, watching him with those dark, liquid eyes. With a slow, insolent sweep, he took in Dane's naked body, his eyes moving from the hard, erect shaft slowly upward to rest finally on Dane's face.

Without taking his eyes off Dane, Nathan removed his shirt and lifted his hips to slide his jeans from his body. He wasn't wearing underwear and his cock sprang free, thick and hard. Dane couldn't help but stare at the impressive member, larger even than his own substantial offering.

Nathan's body was pale, like smooth marble, except for the dark, springy tuft of pubic hair surrounding his cock. His chest was smooth, the muscles well-defined against the delicate curving bone of his ribs. His body was long and lean, elegant in its masculine beauty.

Dane, who a moment before had been determined to make Nathan pay on some level for his own humiliation, found himself consumed with a sudden, inexplicable tenderness that overlaid his aching desire.

Instead of throwing him down and crushing him beneath his weight as he took what he considered his due, he wanted to take Nathan in his arms and kiss him tenderly. Dane shook his head, wondering what had gotten into him.

He sat and wrapped his arms around Nathan. Their lips met in a kiss, tongues moving in an eager, entwining dance. As they kissed, Dane leaned forward, covering Nathan's body with his own. He could feel the hard press of Nathan's shaft against his stomach, his own cock nestled against Nathan's thigh.

Lust surged through him, burning away the tenderness, fueling his natural dominance. He captured Nathan's wrists with one hand, pinning them high over his head on the sofa as he leaned over him to kiss him again.

Nathan didn't resist. If anything his cock grew even harder. He opened his eyes, focusing on Dane with a lazy, provocative smile. *He's challenging me. He wants me to dom him.* Rising to the challenge, Dane, with Nathan's wrists still firmly caught in his grip, lowered his head to bite Nathan's neck.

He found the pulse at his jugular, nudging it with his teeth, just hard enough to make Nathan draw in a quick breath. He slid down the side of Nathan's neck, moving over his firm chest to one dark red nipple.

He teased it to erection with his tongue and then bit, again just hard enough to elicit the gasp, though if it was pleasure or pain, he wasn't quite sure. He did the same to the other nipple.

He wanted to move lower, to find and taste Nathan's thick, long cock. He let Nathan's wrists go, and noticed with satisfaction Nathan didn't move. Scooting down, Dane knelt between his legs, greedily snuffling at Nathan's cock like a hungry piglet. Eagerly, he cupped the fat crown with his lips, sliding down over the shaft until he nearly gagged himself.

He pulled up, wrapping his hand around the base of the shaft, pulling upward as he lowered his mouth as far as he could. He kissed, nibbled, sucked and teased Nathan's cock until he finally heard the long, low moan of pleasure he was seeking.

Nathan stroked his cheek. "Let me," Nathan's voice was low and husky. He pushed gently against Dane's face and Dane understood him to mean he wanted to use his own hand. Dane pulled away and leaned back on his haunches for a moment, watching Nathan stroke himself. It was incredibly erotic to watch him, the long, slender fingers wrapped around the fat, long shaft, blushed red with blood and shiny with Dane's saliva.

Impulsively he knelt between Nathan's legs, sucking at the sac beneath his cock until one delicate egg slipped into his mouth. After a moment he let it fall out and did the same thing with the other.

While Nathan continued to pump his own shaft, Dane began to lick his balls, which were hairless and soft as satin. He licked in a pattern, drawing an infinity sign with his tongue over and around Nathan's balls, cocooned in the warm skin of his sac.

Nathan began to breathe hard, his hips lifting. He brought his hand down, pushing so Dane's face was thrust down against him.

"Yes!" Nathan cried, shuddering and arching upward, Dane's hair still tangled in his fingers. Dane could barely breathe, his face mashed against Nathan's thigh, his head held firmly by Nathan's surprisingly strong grip in his hair.

Nathan let him go only after his shudders subsided. "What the hell...?" Dane demanded, confused. Nathan had come. He'd jerked himself off while Dane knelt before him, sucking and licking his balls like ... like a submissive little slut.

Nathan sat up, small gobs of ejaculate sliding down his smooth, hard stomach toward his groin. He smiled, his eyes dancing. "Don't look so miserable. That was terrific. I'd say you have great potential." Dane glowered back at him.

Slipping from the couch to the floor, he knelt in front of Dane and said, "You're upset. Please don't be. That was incredibly hot." He reached out, stroking Dane's shaft with sure fingers. "Let me return the favor."

* * * *

Whatever Dane had done with his tongue had driven him nearly wild. When he had glanced down at him while Dane was licking his balls, he'd seen the closed eyes and the expression of nearly slavish devotion. That alone was enough to send him over the edge.

Dane could protest all he liked. So far everything that had happened only served to convince Nathan he was right in his initial assessment of Dane's orientation.

He recognized, however, that he needed to go slowly. Dane's sense of self was still wrapped up in his dominant persona. It would take finesse and patience to tease his real nature to the fore.

When he'd suckled Dane's cock to its full length, he pulled back, letting it drop from his lips. As he expected, Dane's eyes opened. "Don't stop." Dane's command came out more as a plea, or so it seemed to Nathan.

He wrapped one hand around Dane's shaft. "Shall we try it again? Just for fun, see if you can stay still while I suck your cock. See if you can control yourself enough to wait for my signal. Don't let yourself come until I tell you." He tightened his hold on Dane's shaft and slid his hand up and down its silky hardness.

"You might be surprised how intense it can be—the giving over of control to someone else. Try it—for me."

Silently Nathan willed Dane to obey. Whether or not he agreed, Nathan knew he would still suck the beautiful, rock-hard cock. He could hardly resist plunging down upon it now, taking it deep in his throat, forcing another hot, sexy moan from Dane's lips.

But how much sweeter, how much more erotically powerful the experience would be for them both if Dane would agree to his terms of gentle obedience.

He was pleased when Dane nodded. His eyes were the color of the sky just before it darkened into dusk on a clear day. His lips were parted, his cheeks flushed a rosy pink. Nathan knew if he placed his palm on Dane's chest, he would feel the steady, rapid beat of his heart.

He lowered his head, his eyes still on Dane's face as he licked the head of Dane's cock, pressing against the slit and then drawing a circle around it with the tip of his tongue. Dane's hand fluttered up, reaching to push Nathan down farther on his cock.

Nathan caught him by the wrist. "Remember, don't move. Your entire job is to stay still while I do this. Hands resting at your sides." Dane nodded, his

eyes bright.

Nathan let go of his arm and focused again on his cock. Dane's hands dropped to his sides. Nathan took his cock, this time not stopping until he took it all. He closed his eyes, relaxing his throat to handle Dane's considerable girth.

He'd noticed Dane had not been able to do the same for him. Admittedly, his cock was thicker and longer, though not by much. If he were to become Nathan's sub, he would have to work on his skills.

If he were to become my sub...

Nathan thought about this as he licked and caressed Dane's hot, pulsing cock. He was pleased, very pleased, to note Dane sat still as ordered, his only movement the heaving of his chest. Though he'd just come himself he could feel his own cock rising in response to Dane's reactions and the spicy, musky scent of his hard, naked body.

Dane began to pant, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. Nathan could tell from the spasmodic jerks of his body and his rapid, staccato breathing he was nearly ready to come. He impaled himself on Dane's shaft, blocking his own windpipe as he massaged the length of it with his throat and tongue.

Just as he felt Dane topple over the edge he pulled back quickly and said, "Come for me. Now."

He took Dane's cock back into his mouth, catching the spurts of warm semen with his tongue. Yes, he knew Dane would have come anyway, with or without his permission, but a little positive reinforcement was never a bad thing.

He held Dane's cock in his mouth until it softened, reluctant to let it go. He stood and then sat down beside Dane, letting his hand drop to Dane's thigh. They were both quiet for a while. Nathan guessed it was probably a little after two in the morning.

Though he often stayed up this late and later, he suddenly felt very tired. It was a good kind of tired, the tired one feels after swimming laps or finishing a piece of sculpture.

As if on cue, Dane glanced at his watch. "It's after two," he announced. "Two-fourteen, to be exact." He grinned, and Nathan noticed the dimple in his right cheek. He looked very boyish when he grinned, and Nathan found himself grinning back.

"I guess you banker types like to be exact with the time."

"Oh, absolutely. Time is money, don't you know. And we bankers love money." He laughed, and Nathan sensed he didn't especially care about wasting time or amassing money, banker or not. This pleased Nathan, who didn't care a whit about either.

Dane stood and reached for his underwear. He also retrieved his jeans. Nathan, following his lead, stood and put his own pants back on as well.

They faced one another, both still shirtless. Dane said, "Would you like a ride home?" A pause and then: "Or would you like to stay?" His voice was carefully neutral. Nathan couldn't quite discern if Dane wanted him to go or stay.

He knew he wanted to stay. He wanted to lead Dane to the bedroom, strip him naked and fuck him blind. He also knew he would be content just falling asleep beside him. It had been a long time since he'd slept in someone's arms, unless he counted the two-night stand he'd had with a beautiful Italian named Angelo, who worked in the pastry shop where he bought his coffee and roll each morning while in Rome.

Angelo, at nineteen, had been eager to follow his lead sexually, happily complying with whatever Nathan had told him to do. He hadn't gotten a sense Angelo was at all submissive, however, and had kept their interactions strictly vanilla.

With Dane, on the other hand, he was more convinced than ever of his submissive tendencies, and eager to begin exploring them in earnest. For

now, though, he'd follow Dane's lead.

"I could go or stay," he answered. "It's up to you."

"Stay. I want you to."

* * * *

They sat in bed sipping a very fine Port wine. They were both naked, the sheet covering the lower halves of their bodies. Dane was still feeling the effects of the powerful orgasm Nathan had given him, but his mind was less on that release and more on what had occurred before it.

He'd experienced the oddest sensation when he'd been kneeling between Nathan's thighs, licking his balls while Nathan stroked himself. He'd never done that before—never licked another man's balls. The act itself seemed so starkly submissive he would never have permitted himself, as a Dom, to engage in it.

Yet with Nathan it had been okay. No, better than okay. It had been right. He hadn't wanted to stop, even when Nathan had already come.

Then reason had returned, his mind clicking back on, reminding him he was supposed to be the one in control. What was it about Nathan that made him do things he would never otherwise do?

When Nathan had urged him to try the experiment again of not moving or responding directly as he drove Dane nearly wild, Dane had agreed, just to see if he could. But again something had happened during the process, something he didn't understand. He found he wanted to do it for Nathan. To please Nathan, to ... no. He couldn't yet articulate the words, even in his mind. He was not submissive. Whatever had happened, that wasn't it.

He gave a sidelong glance at Nathan, who was leaning back against the pile of pillows at the headboard, holding his glass up to the light and swirling the contents.

"This is very good. It's vintage, isn't it? I hope you didn't open it just for me."

Dane was startled by Nathan's words. He wouldn't have expected him to know what Port was, much less if it was vintage or not. But then, why shouldn't he know? Just because one didn't have a lot of money didn't mean one didn't have good taste.

Dane, who prided himself on his wine collection, smiled expansively. "Yes, it is vintage and yes, I opened it for you. For us. I'm glad you like it, since now that it's decanted, we'll need to drink it up."

While Nathan had been in the bathroom Dane had mused over his wines, deciding which one Nathan might like. He was glad he'd passed over a Cabernet he'd been considering in favor of this fine, old Port he'd received as a gift from a wealthy friend.

Nathan tipped his glass and finished the contents, holding it out with a grin. "No problem there, my friend. Bring it on." Dane drank the rest of his and reached over to take Nathan's empty glass. He set them on the nightstand, but instead of getting up to bring more Port, he reached for Nathan, pulling him close.

They kissed, the taste of the sweet, strong wine still on their tongues. Dane realized he hadn't had a man in his bed for some time. He hadn't wanted one. It was better to use them at the club, and then, if he hadn't lost interest, to follow them home, fuck them and forget about them.

His cock hardened, his balls tightening with need as their bodies pressed together. "I want you," he murmured against Nathan's mouth. Nathan's hand curled around his cock, the other cupping his balls. The gesture was possessive, almost aggressive.

Not this time. This time I'll be the one in charge. I'll make him beg for mercy. He pushed against Nathan and Nathan's hands fell from him. He lay back, his large cock resting against his stomach, his dark eyes on Dane's face.

Dane could feel the unspoken challenge. *He wants me to dom him, I know he does.* Lust rose in his blood like a fever. "I'm going to fuck you," he announced.

Without waiting for Nathan's reaction, he reached into his nightstand and pulled out a condom, quickly tearing off the wrapper and rolling it over his erection. He squeezed some lubricant on the tip and turned toward Nathan.

"Get on your hands and knees. Give me that ass."

Nathan smiled slowly and lifted his eyebrows. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes." He waited, half-expecting Nathan to refuse, or to suggest another "experiment." Instead Nathan rolled over and positioned himself, turning back with an enigmatic smile toward Dane.

Dane could hear his heart pounding in his ears. It felt as if it were slamming against the bones of his chest. He couldn't remember wanting anyone so much before. He wanted Nathan. He would have him.

Roughly he grabbed Nathan's hips and aimed his cock at the tiny entrance between his ass cheeks. He guided the head with one hand, groaning with pleasure as his cock pressed past the entrance, which yielded easily to him. Nathan obviously wanted this too.

He eased himself farther into the tunnel, which gripped his cock like a glove of tight muscle. Placing a hand on Nathan's hip, he began to move, sliding back and forth to create the perfect friction. Nathan moaned and arched his ass back toward Dane.

It felt powerful, claiming this strong, sexy man with his cock in a way that brooked no debate. Nathan couldn't call *this* a submissive act.

"That's it," Nathan's voice was soft, yet the command in it was undeniable. "Press all the way in and then stay perfectly still. Yes, that's it. Don't move."

Dane was so stunned by the command he actually obeyed, waiting to see what Nathan did next. "I'm going to move. Your job is stay still. Drop your hands from my hips. Let me guide you."

For some reason Dane didn't understand, he dropped his hands. Nathan began to move, leaning forward so Dane's cock began to ease from his body, then pushing back to take it to the hilt. Dane tried to stay still, just to see if he could. It felt so fucking good, he wanted to grab Nathan's hips and slam himself in and out. The effort of not doing so made his body tremble.

"Very good, yes," Nathan said softly, his approval for some reason sending a warm feeling through Dane. Nathan began to move faster, thrusting back against Dane's cock and then pulling away. Dane could feel himself teetering on the edge. He could barely catch his breath. Though he didn't understand it, the experience was a huge turn-on for him. No one had ever dared tell him what to do during sex. Not ever. He had always been the one calling every shot.

He stopped thinking completely when Nathan reached back, grabbing his balls and squeezing. "Fuck me. Do it hard. Make yourself come for me."

Nathan let go of his balls. Dane grabbed his narrow hips and thrust himself hard into the hot, tight passage, making Nathan grunt. *I'm fucking him because I want to, not because he told me to. I'll come because I want to, not because he said to.*

He pulled Nathan up and back, riding him hard, his pelvis thrusting like a piston. His climax roiled over him, dragging him along in its wake. He heard a cry and realized it was his own. Through the blood roaring in his ears he heard Nathan's low, insistent command.

"That's it. Yes. Come for me. Now."

For the second time that night, for the second time in his life, he came on command.

The blinding pleasure knocked him hard into Nathan, who fell forward against the bed beneath his weight. For several seconds he continued to

shudder and jerk, completely unable to control his body or his breathing.

Nathan lay still beneath him. After a minute or so, Nathan lifted himself and Dane rolled away from him, pulling his sheathed, sticky cock from him. He lay on his back, so completely spent he could barely open his eyes.

He felt rather than saw Nathan lie close beside him. He could feel his warm breath on his cheek.

"That one," Nathan said, "was free. From now on you have to earn it."

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Chapter Five

When Nathan woke, it took a moment to recall where he was. Dane was still sleeping beside him, his lips curved in a small smile. There was movement beneath his eyelids.

What are you dreaming of? Nathan wondered. He lay back against the pillows and put his hands behind his head. He could tell from the angle of the sun it was nearly noon. The unfinished bust waiting in his studio whispered to him. It was going to be displayed in some company's lobby, the head and shoulders of a dead founder, brought to life in clay. Hardly the subject he'd choose, but Nathan enjoyed the process more than the final product. He liked to work with clay, and it didn't hurt to have his name out there on the plaque beneath the heads of dead dignitaries in office buildings he would never set foot in if he could help it.

He touched Dane's shoulder. "I have to go. I have some work I have to finish. A deadline."

Dane sat up and yawned, stretching his arms high overhead. As he took in the sexy sight of Dane's broad, masculine chest and well-muscled arms, Nathan considered forgetting the deadline and spending the rest of the afternoon in Dane's bed.

"What time is it?" Dane looked at the clock beside his bed. "Shit. I told a guy at the office I'd be in today. He wants to discuss his loan proposal before it goes to the board tomorrow. I didn't mean to sleep this late."

"It's Sunday. You're allowed."

But Dane was up already, heading toward the bathroom. "I'm just going to shower real quick and then I'll drop you at your place before I head on to the office. Care to join me in the shower?"

"No thanks. If I did, it wouldn't be 'real quick.'" He grinned, trying to ignore his rising erection at the sight of Dane's naked body.

They parted company in front of Nathan's building, after exchanging cell phone numbers. Dane called several hours later to suggest they meet for a drink that evening but Nathan missed the call, as his cell battery had died.

His cell battery was always dying because he invariably forgot to charge it. He didn't really like cell phones or technology in general, though he recognized their uses. He sometimes thought he'd been born in the wrong century.

He told himself it was just as well he'd missed the call, as he was immersed in his work and it would have been difficult to stop and put it all away. He hadn't even realized he'd missed it until after nine that evening when his phone made a peculiar chirping sound he'd come to recognize as the cell phone's death rattle.

When he belatedly called Dane back, Dane had seemed a little cool, no doubt annoyed his invitation had been ignored. "Maybe tomorrow night?" Nathan had offered, but Dane had declined. He had a meeting, he said, that he knew would run late. Tuesday and Wednesday evenings were also booked—a reception for the opening of a new building his bank had financed and a dinner with some bankers' association. Thursday Dane had to fly to Houston for more bank business. He would return Friday afternoon.

"So the expression about bankers' hours obviously doesn't apply to you," Nathan teased.

They agreed to meet on Friday for dinner and then maybe go out somewhere. Nathan had an idea where he'd like to go, but he didn't suggest it yet. He'd wait until then.

* * * *

"Thanks, Theresa." Absently Dane accepted the folder his secretary was holding out to him. He was in the middle of reviewing several loan proposals that would go to the board that afternoon and he needed to concentrate.

He realized Theresa was still standing there. "Was there something else?"

Theresa blushed beet-red. With her freckled, pale skin, her blushes were especially hard to miss. He wished she felt more comfortable with him, but in the two years he'd been working there, she blushed nearly every time they spoke.

At first he'd worried something was wrong, but he'd come to realize she was just painfully shy and apparently attracted to him. Though he didn't pretend to be something he wasn't, he hadn't come out at the office. He kept his private life strictly private.

Theresa was perhaps thirty pounds overweight and her eyes were too small for her face, but she was otherwise attractive. He knew from her personnel file she was twenty-eight and single. She'd once asked him if he'd be her escort at some function or other she was attending for some charity, but he managed to decline without being rude, pretending he had another engagement. Sometimes he caught her staring at him when she thought he wasn't looking, which was usually cause for more blushing.

In all other respects she was an excellent secretary—keeping him focused and on time for meetings and appointments, handling his correspondence, meticulously proofing his work and generally assuring things flowed smoothly in the office.

"That folder I just gave you," Theresa said timidly. "Betty Ann says it's top priority. The borrower's father is a friend of Mr. Bennett's."

Inwardly Dane sighed, though his expression remained pleasantly neutral. "Thanks, Theresa. I'll look at it right away."

Betty Ann was Joseph Bennett's executive secretary. She had been with the bank twenty-seven years and everyone in the office, including Dane, knew better than to cross her. Even Bennett, who was in charge of all Austin operations, deferred to her formidable presence.

Theresa remained standing in front of him, her ample breasts heaving in her too-tight dress, her pudgy fingers twisting together, her cheeks still blotched

with red. She was waiting for him to put aside his work and pick up the folder so she could report back to Betty Ann that it was being handled promptly.

Dane obliged by opening the folder and lifting the first page. It was a loan application for the purchase of a building in the warehouse district downtown. He glanced briefly at the specs and terms of the deal.

The name of the borrower caught his eye—Horace N. Levi. Idly he wondered if the person was any relation to Nathan. When he looked at the person's net worth, which was listed at over ten million dollars, he doubted it.

Theresa retreated, closing his office door softly behind her. Dane continued to look at the application but realized he wasn't processing the information, his thoughts now turned toward Nathan.

Dane had managed not to think about him for the past several hours, distracted with his work and phone calls from clients and appraisers. Now his mind wandered back to the weekend.

He'd tried to laugh off Nathan's provocative words about his having to earn the chance to fuck him again, but they kept spinning through his mind as they lay together, drifting toward sleep.

There was no question he was wildly attracted to Nathan, but was it in spite of his attempts to dom him ... or because of it? What would it be like to be whipped with a flogger, to feel the thick, flat ribbons of leather slap against his ass and back? Would it make him a better Dom to experience it, as Nathan had suggested?

He thought about his cache of BDSM toys, the ones he sometimes brought with him to the clubs when he wanted to use his own whip or crop. Did Nathan have a similar stash at his place?

He conjured a scene—Nathan naked, his wrists cuffed and suspended by chains from the ceiling, his legs forced far apart with a spreader bar. Dane

stood just behind him, ready to smack his sexy ass with a broad leather strap until Nathan screamed for mercy...

But as he'd lain in that twilight world between consciousness and sleep, the images had reversed. It was he, not Nathan, who was bound and spread, while Nathan stood beside him, those dark eyes shining as he raised his whip....

Dane's intercom buzzed, jerking him from his thoughts. "You have a call on line two, from Mr. Quentin about the Riverwalk proposal. Do you want it or should I take a message?"

Dane glanced at his watch. He only had twenty minutes until meeting with the board and he wasn't done with his analysis and review of his loan officers' packets. "Take a message, thanks. Tell him I'll call him back before I leave today."

Forcing Nathan from his mind, Dane bent over his work.

* * * *

Friday came at last. This realization surprised Nathan—not that Friday had arrived, but that he'd been anticipating it so eagerly. Normally Nathan drifted through his days, barely aware of the transition from one to the next. He ate when he thought of it, slept when he wearied, and basically ignored the conventions of workaday life.

Since he didn't hold a nine-to-five job and had no significant other to remind him of the passage of time, the days simply glided smoothly into one another, marked more by whatever project he was working on than the hour or the date.

This week had been different. Anticipation made him restless. He was consumed with thoughts of Dane, recalling each moment, each conversation, each kiss. He could hardly wait to see him.

They hadn't spoken on the phone again. Nathan almost never initiated phone calls, and for whatever reason Dane hadn't called either. Nathan

hoped it was only because he was busy.

He had to laugh at himself. He was as fidgety and anxious as a kid in high school. His cell phone, which he'd made sure was fully charged, rang at five o'clock, right on schedule.

"Nathan?"

"Hey, Dane. How was your week?"

"Insane, as usual. You still want to get together tonight?"

"Absolutely. I've been looking forward to it all week."

"Great. I'm cutting out early. I'll just head home and shower and we can grab a bite. My mouth has been watering for that Mexican food we had the other night, if you don't mind going there again."

"I could eat there every night. Listen, I was thinking, afterwards maybe you could take me to Boot Camp."

There was a silence on the other end of the line. "I thought that wasn't your thing. Why the change of heart?"

"I've been thinking about it. It's not really fair of me to categorically reject something I've never observed firsthand. Also I think it would be interesting to see you in your element, as it were. You know, watch you in action."

"I don't know. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the idea..."

"Well, think about it. I even have black pants, though they aren't leather. Is there like a dress code or whatever?"

Dane laughed. "Nothing official, but yeah, there is a lot of black and a lot of leather. And a lot of skin for that matter. Black jeans are fine. I guess we could go there, if you're sure..."

"We can decide at dinner, how about that? Just in case, I'll wear black so I can blend in with the natives."

Over dinner they caught up on their week. Dane had worn black as well, though not leather this time. He wore tailored linen pants and a black silk long-sleeved T-shirt. He looked like a model for a men's fashion magazine. Nathan hoped his denim and cotton wouldn't be too out of place, but then, he'd never worried much about what he wore.

They sometimes lost the thread of their conversation as they looked into each other's eyes. Nathan was tempted to skip dinner, skip the club and take Dane straight home to his bed. His cock had leapt to attention the second Dane's car had rounded the corner to pick him up in front of his building, and it hadn't flagged since.

At the same time he was very curious to see Dane's persona at Boot Camp. Though he remained convinced Dane was submissive, or at least had the potential to submit, he believed Dane's continued assertions that he was Dom, at least in the right setting.

After dinner, which Dane again insisted on paying for, they drove back to the warehouse district, passing The Iguana as they wended through small streets, parking on a street not far from the bar.

They walked half a block, turning down a narrow alleyway that was flanked by boarded-up buildings, some of the windows of which had been broken. Midway they came to a large, black metal door. There were no signs to indicate it was the entrance to a club or even that the place was occupied.

There was a doorbell, however, which Dane pushed. After a moment the door opened a crack and a man said, "Yeah?"

"Boot Camp. Two."

The door swung open. Dane couldn't help but smile, thinking of little boys with secret clubs and decoder rings. Some things never changed.

They entered the dimly lit hallway. "Thirty each," the man said. He was large, dressed in the requisite black with a completely shaved head. He settled himself on a stool beside a high table on which sat a strongbox. He

accepted money from Dane before Nathan could pull out his wallet, and nodded toward the door behind them.

They passed through into an open area that contained a large square bar in the middle of the room, with stools set around it. Tables were set up here and there and it could almost have passed as any other bar, except for the whipping posts scattered throughout the room, the chains with cuffs dangling here and there from the ceiling, and the fact that, instead of drinking glasses hanging above the bar, there were whips, floggers, straps, paddles and crops of a dizzying variety.

The walls were painted in camouflage, probably in homage to the club's name. Small groups of men were clustered here and there, watching mini-scenes—a guy wearing only leather chaps lying across another man's lap, his bare ass being smacked with a paddle, another with his arms cuffed around a whipping post, being flogged by two men taking turns. Several of the men were naked or nearly so, their only adornment a cock and ball cage or a leather harness and wrist cuffs.

Nathan was at once repelled and fascinated by what was going on around him. He'd almost forgotten Dane was beside him until he said, "The real scenes go on in private rooms." He pointed toward the back, where Nathan could make out a hallway. "That's where I usually play."

"How do you pick your playmates?"

"I know a lot of the guys here. It can be informal, or sometimes they have slave auctions. Guys will sign up to be auctioned off for a scene. They go up on that dais over there and an auctioneer—actually the owner—will show them off. You know, have them strip, put them through a few exercises to demonstrate their obedience and tolerance for pain. It's negotiated—what a sub wants and expects, what his limits are, what his safe word is, that kind of stuff. They give you poker chips to bid with. You can give yours away if you want someone else to do a scene and you want to watch."

"I'm guessing lots of guys hand their chips to you?"

Dane looked embarrassed but pleased. “Yeah. I usually end up buying a couple of the subs. They either wait their turns to scene with me, or I might give one away. It's a game, like you said, but the action is real enough. The whips and floggers are real. The men who submit to me are real, and so is the experience I put them through.”

"Show me."

"What?"

"Show me. Pick a sub boy and show me your stuff."

Dane looked uncomfortable. “I don't know. I'm not sure—”

He was interrupted by two men who approached them, one in full leather, from his captain's cap to his boots, the other in nothing but a Y harness and leather chaps, his feet bare, a chain and lead around his neck. The leather-clad one yanked at the lead and the other man sank to his knees beside him.

"Master Dane,” the Dom said heartily. “We missed you last Saturday. You should have been here. Harold brought these three guys from Sweden and sweet Jesus, what a show they put on. Everyone was asking where you were.”

He was with me. Nathan was surprised by the tendril of jealousy that curled around his heart. He'd never been jealous in his life—the sensation was an odd one. He put his arm proprietarily around Dane's waist.

"This is James.” Dane turned to introduce the guy to Nathan. James was tall with narrow gray eyes and a trim, graying mustache. “James, meet Nathan.”

"Nice to meet you, Nathan. Are you the lucky property of Master Dane? Has someone finally lassoed his heart?"

Dane blushed and said hurriedly, “He's not a sub, James. He's just here as my guest.”

"My mistake, forgive me.” James jerked on the chain attached to the collar of the man at his feet. “This is Joey. My personal property and fulltime slut.

I just bought him a birthday present and we're going to try it out on his ass tonight, aren't we, Joey?" James waved a wicked-looking, coiled single-tail whip Nathan assumed was the referenced birthday present.

"Yes, Sir." Joey was a slight man with a large nose and full head of dark hair. He was staring with abject adoration at James, who pulled him to his feet and put his arm proprietarily around him.

The men drifted away. Other men smiled and waved, greeting Dane by name as they walked toward a small, unoccupied table near the rear of the room. "You want some Coke or something? They don't serve alcohol, sorry."

"No, I wouldn't expect them to." Nathan was glad to hear that if nothing else, the establishment didn't encourage the mixing of liquor and whips. "I'll take a Dr. Pepper if they have it."

"Wait here. I'll be right back."

Nathan watched Dane as he moved toward the bar and ordered the drinks. Several men approached him and several others just stared at him, looks of naked longing on their faces. Again jealousy reared its head but Nathan shook it away. He could see why Dane liked coming here—he was treated like some kind of royalty. While Nathan himself wouldn't have liked that kind of attention, it was clear Dane enjoyed it.

Dane returned with the sodas. "See that blond guy in the vest at the bar?" Dane pointed toward a very good-looking man in his twenties with bleached blond hair, a black leather vest open on his broad, very tan chest. He was wearing, surprise, black leather pants and boots.

"Yeah."

"His name is Tommy. He gets off on being caned. I've scened with him before. If you really think you want to watch, he'd probably be game. I like to scene with him because he's honest. His responses are genuine and he can fly from a good caning."

"He's here by himself? Not owned by someone?"

"No. He loves the scene, but he loves money even more. He lives with this old guy who's like ninety or something. Tommy said it scandalized the shit out of the old man's kids when they found out, but what could they do about it? They calmed down once they were assured they were still in his will. He gives the old guy companionship and what sex he can tolerate, and in exchange Tommy gets a weekly allowance that probably exceeds my annual income."

"And the guy is cool with him coming here?"

"Apparently. Tommy says as long as he gets what he wants, Tommy is free to do as he pleases. A pretty sweet gig, I'd say."

Nathan laughed. "I guess Tommy's as good a candidate as anyone. Why don't you see if he's interested?"

Dane walked back over to the bar and talked to Tommy, who looked toward Nathan and smiled, nodding. They walked together back to the table. "We've got a private room if we want it. I prefer that to scening out here. It's too chaotic."

Nathan followed Dane and Tommy toward the back, noting with amusement the attention they were getting. Dane certainly had a following. By the time they entered a small room on one side of the hallway, about twenty men squeezed in along with them, though they stayed by the door, respectfully silent. Nathan joined the throng, leaving Dane and Tommy to their scene.

The room had a whipping post, a bondage chair and medical exam table. Tommy, Nathan now noticed, had leather cuffs on his wrists with clips dangling from them. He had brought his own cane, a thin, whippy rod, its handle covered in purple suede.

Tommy knelt in front of Dane and held out the cane like an offering. Dane took it. "Strip," he ordered, his voice brusque. Dane didn't look toward

Nathan or the other men gathered at the door. His focus was entirely on Tommy.

Tommy kicked off his boots and shucked his leather pants and vest. He was wearing a leather codpiece that hid his cock and balls. He didn't remove this and apparently wasn't expected to. His ass was high and firm, a white tan line showing the outlines of a thong bikini.

Dane clipped his wrists to hooks high on the whipping post. He snapped the cane through the air several times, the whooshing sound making several of the men near Nathan flinch. Tommy shifted, sticking out his ass as far as he could, the invitation clear.

The whole thing seemed so clinical, so devoid of passion, but Nathan tried to keep an open mind. He could feel the arousal in the room. The men were collectively holding their breath, waiting for that first cut of the cane.

Dane flicked his wrist and the cane landed in a perfect arc across the fleshiest part of Tommy's ass. It left a white line that rapidly changed to pink and then red. Tommy didn't move. Dane delivered several more well-aimed flicks, each one causing a welt to raise, one just below the other in a succession of horizontal lines. Dane obviously knew what he was doing.

The room was silent, save for the whoosh and whistle of the cane. Tommy was breathing hard, his shoulders rising and falling. After one particularly cutting stroke he jerked forward, pressing against the post as if it would offer him some protection.

Dane covered every inch of his ass and upper thighs in a criss-cross of angry welts. Tommy's rapid breathing shifted to moans and then to a single word repeated over and over between gasps. "Please, please, please, please..."

Nathan was familiar with that particular plea—he understood Tommy wasn't asking for Dane to please stop. He wasn't necessarily asking for him to continue. Or to put it another way, he was asking for both. The pain was almost too much to bear and in those instances when he thought he couldn't take another stroke, he meant please stop. But when the pain was processed

in his masochistic nerve center, his perception of the pain was altered and shifted into indescribable pleasure, and then he meant please don't stop. He existed in two planes simultaneously—pure pleasure, pure pain. It was in the moment when they melded that he began to fly.

Nathan watched it happen. He saw the easing of Tommy's tortured panting, the lowering of his hunched shoulders as his head fell back and his muscles relaxed.

"Yes," he heard Dane whisper. "Yes." He continued to flick the cane against tender, abraded skin. Tommy remained immobile, the picture of submissive grace.

Gradually Dane eased the whipping, finally stopping altogether. He dropped the cane and released Tommy's wrists from the clips. Tommy leaned back heavily against him. Nathan knew at that moment Dane could have Tommy for the asking. Dane could have any man in the room, himself included.

Dane nodded toward the group of men and, as if it had been planned, two of them stepped forward, one standing on either side of Tommy to support him. They helped him to the exam table and he lay on his stomach, folding his arms into a pillow beneath his head, his expression one of pure bliss.

"Me next," called a man beside Nathan.

Dane smiled but shook his head. "Not now, Pony boy. Another time." The man called pony boy looked crestfallen but didn't ask again.

Dane moved toward the exam table and leaned over Tommy. "You okay?" he asked. His voice was solicitous. Tommy opened his eyes and smiled beatifically at him.

"Better than okay, Master Dane. I'm in heaven."

Dane smiled. "Good. I'll leave you in good hands." He nodded toward the two guys still hovering near Tommy.

He turned toward Nathan. "Let's go get another soda. I'm thirsty." The group of men at the door disbursed now that the show was over. Nathan followed Dane back into the main room, again waiting at the table while Dane fetched their drinks.

When Dane returned, Nathan offered, "That was quite impressive. I honestly didn't expect it to feel so real."

"What do you mean? It was real."

"That's the wrong word. I guess I mean I expected it to be more, you know, clinical. Lacking in emotion. Like watching a porn video. But it wasn't like that. I could really feel the connection you had with Tommy. I can definitely see why you're so popular here. You know what you're doing with a cane, that's for damn sure."

Dane gave a small grunt of acknowledgment. "Proof you don't have to experience something directly to know how to do it."

"Perhaps. But if you had, you'd be that much more skillful, because you'd really understand what he was experiencing. You'd be that much more connected."

"So you're saying I'd be a better Dom if I let someone cane me."

"Yes. Among other things, yes."

"You honestly expect me to walk into one of those rooms, strip and let you cane my ass so I can become a better Dom? Don't make me laugh." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back, the challenge in his bearing clear.

"No. I don't expect that. I don't want that."

Dane looked startled. "You don't? What do you want?"

"I want what you want, Dane. What we both want. All you have to do is still your mind, look into your heart, and you'll know."

Their eyes met. Nathan saw the challenge in them. He also saw the longing, and the fear. The room fell away as they stared into each other's eyes.

I will have you.

Dane drew in his breath, as if he had heard the silent promise.

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Chapter Six

They were silent as they drove toward Dane's place. Dane reviewed the evening in his head, wondering what Nathan really thought.

At first he'd been self-conscious with Nathan watching him, but as he'd settled into the scene, he forgotten to be nervous, slipping as he did into the special, intimate place shared by Dom and sub when a scene was right.

When he entered that zone, then he wasn't just caning a near-stranger for the entertainment of a bunch of horny guys—he was connected in an almost spiritual way to the man he was subjecting to such intense erotic torture. The cane was the conduit between them. It was the means by which they shared their mutual need for dominance and submission, for the giving and receiving of erotic pain, a pain that melded into pleasure for them both.

Dane glanced at Nathan, who was leaning back in the passenger seat, his eyes closed, his long, dark lashes sweeping his pale cheeks. “What did you mean back there, when you said I want what you want?”

Nathan opened his eyes and turned toward Dane. “Connection. The kind of connection that goes beyond sex, beyond a mere exchange of power. I think you want that. I'm not saying you want it with me. Maybe we're still too new. But I sense in you a deep desire, a longing—to connect.”

Dane didn't answer. He did want that. He even thought he wanted it with Nathan. The question was, on whose terms?

* * * *

The mirrors were fogged with steam. Dane and Nathan were naked, having decided to shower before retiring to Dane's bed to pick up where they'd left off the weekend before.

Dane bent over and opened the cabinet beneath the sink, where he kept extra soap and toilet paper. He felt a sharp snap across his left butt cheek

and jerked up, swiveling to see the source of the pain.

"Hey!"

Nathan held a towel twisted in his hands. "Sorry." He laughed. "I just couldn't resist that perfect target." He snapped the towel in the air with a cracking sound as he jumped nimbly back.

Dane lunged toward him, ducking his head, intent on grabbing Nathan around the waist and swinging him upward. To his surprise, Nathan somehow slipped out of his grasp and caught him instead, forcing him to bend forward, his head caught between Nathan's bent arm and side.

After a moment, Dane managed to execute a reversal, gaining control by twisting free and catching Nathan by his shoulders.

Nathan did a kind of flipping motion, jerking free and turning quickly to face him. They grappled for several moments and then stepped back, elbows close to their sides, bodies bent forward as they circled, bouncing lightly on the balls of their feet.

"You've wrestled, huh?" Nathan grinned.

"Yeah, in high school. You too, huh?"

"College." They continued to circle, each waiting for an opportune moment. Dane put his hand on the back of Nathan's neck. Nathan responded in kind. They were jockeying for leverage when, all at once, Nathan cupped Dane's elbow and ducked under his arm so fast Dane didn't realize what was happening.

Somehow he got his arms around Dane and actually lifted him off his feet, causing them both to fall in a kind of graceless heap. Taking advantage of Dane's surprise, Nathan moved forward, pressing Dane's shoulders to the floor.

"You're pinned," Nathan announced. "I win." He was panting, his erect cock only inches from Dane's face. Dane grabbed his balls.

"Hey! That's an illegal move. No genital contact."

"I'm not playing by your rules," Dane laughed, but he released Nathan's balls and Nathan rolled off him. They lay side-by-side on the large bath mat, breathing hard.

"Let's shower before the hot water's all gone." Dane stood and held out his hand to Nathan, who grasped it and pulled himself up. Dane's cock was hard as steel. It wasn't only because they'd been physical. He couldn't deny he was turned on by Nathan's agility and speed. Dane was the taller of the two by several inches, and more heavily muscled, yet Nathan had easily overpowered him.

Why was he aroused by this? What was it about this one man that created these new feelings in him—feelings that weren't entirely welcome?

They kissed in the shower, letting the hot water spray over them. Nathan gently pushed Dane out of the spray and began to wash Dane's body with a wet, soapy washcloth.

"Lift your arms," he said. "Put your hands behind your head."

Dane understood the statement to be a command. His first instinct was to refuse, yet his body obeyed. He locked his fingers behind his neck, closing his eyes as Nathan lathered his chest and underarms. Nathan squirted more liquid soap on the cloth and knelt in front of him, rubbing his pubic hair to a frothy foam.

Dropping the cloth, he stroked and caressed Dane's cock and balls, pulling a moan of pleasure from Dane's lips. Forgetting Nathan's "command," Dane dropped his arms and touched the top of Nathan's head.

Nathan looked up. "Stand under the spray and rinse off. I want to taste you."

Dane didn't need to be told twice. He rinsed himself while Nathan waited, still on his knees, his long, thick hair slicked back from his face, beads of water gliding down his body.

He knelt forward, taking the head of Dane's shaft between his lips. His mouth felt like warm velvet. Dane let his head fall back, the hot water splashing into his face. Nathan gripped his hips and took his entire length down. Whatever he was doing felt incredible. It was as if he were milking his shaft with his throat muscles. Dane was going to come any minute if he kept that up.

Before he could, Nathan abruptly pulled back. He stood and quickly washed his own body and hair while Dane admired his wet, sexy body. "Let's get out of the shower," Nathan said, once rinsed. "I want to try an experiment."

Dane snorted. "Another experiment, huh? I don't know about that." He tried to laugh, but it came out more as a croak. Whatever was happening between them, he was more turned-on than he could remember being with any other man.

It was strange, because Dane had been the one to fuck Nathan, yet he'd been left feeling Nathan had been the one in control. While this half-frightened him, it also compelled him in a way he was beginning to realize he could no longer ignore. He found himself wondering if he was attracted to Nathan in spite of his being Dom, or because of it. The thought was decidedly disconcerting.

They dried themselves quickly, each wrapping his towel around his waist. Dane followed Nathan into the bedroom, curiosity driving him to say, "What's your idea this time?"

Nathan sat on the edge of the bed. Dane sat beside him. "When I was watching you cane Tommy, I could feel the connection between you. It was intense. It was, as you said, real." He paused, seeming to collect his thoughts. "But there was something missing, even so—the element of trust that develops between a Dom and sub who are also lovers. I'd like to begin to explore something like that with you. To teach you." He stroked Dane's thigh.

Dane raised his eyebrows, trying to ignore his erection, refusing to admit what caused it. "So you want to teach me, huh? To teach me what it is to suffer?"

"Not to suffer. Not at this point."

Dane gave a small, nervous laugh. "Oh? So you've got plans for the future, huh?"

Nathan smiled. "I hope we have a future, yes."

Dane warmed to the words, but wasn't ready to capitulate. "How about this? We'll take turns. I'll dom you first, then you can dom me. Maybe I'll teach *you* something. It could be you'll discover where you really want to be is on your knees."

Nathan turned toward him, his dark, velvet gaze capturing Dane's complete attention. "Is that really what you want, Dane? Look in your heart and answer me honestly."

Dane swallowed hard, his heart lurching into his throat. What the hell was happening to him? Who was this man?

"How old are you?" He said abruptly, hoping to regain the control he felt slipping from his grasp.

"Me? That's a funny question."

"So what's your funny answer?"

"Twenty-six."

"I'm twenty-nine." Dane waited, as if this would change things. A Dom couldn't be younger than his sub. It just wasn't right. Twenty-six! Who the hell did this guy think he was?

Nathan shrugged, apparently unimpressed.

Dane stared at him, thinking about their strange proposal—two Doms taking turns pretending to submit. Well, what the hell? If Nathan could take it, so could he. Before he could change his mind, Dane said, "If you think you can handle it, I have the perfect whip. It's beautifully weighted and the

leather is soft as butter, though in the right hands it can pack a serious wallop."

"Okay. You show me your technique and I'll show you mine." Nathan grinned and then sobered. "Seriously, though, we need to talk about limits. As you know from your own experience, negotiation is like building a room. The sub sets the limits, but once the boundaries are determined, the Dom can be creative within the confines of the room."

"Agreed. So what are your limits?" As Dane asked the question he tried to think what his own would be, if he were submissive.

"For tonight, only the obvious—no bodily harm, nothing permanent that is." He flashed a brief smile. "I will do my best to obey you and I would expect the same from you. How about you?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not even sure what the hell we're doing. I understand your theory of needing to experience the lash in order to appreciate its sting, for example, but I've never found the need. But I'm game, I guess, if you are."

"Good. Then for tonight, we each agree to complete obedience during the session. Whatever the Dom demands or requires, within obvious limits of safety and sanity, the other will comply with. Do we have a deal?"

So Nathan wanted to play. It would be fun to put the self-assured Nathan Levi through his paces. He would show him what it was to submit to Master Dane.

It would be worth it, even if afterwards he had to submit to whatever Nathan had in mind. And who knew, maybe Nathan was right. Maybe it really would make him a better Dom to permit himself to experience a scene from the other side. How hard could it be? No harder than his cock, which was solid granite beneath his towel.

Dane nodded. "We have a deal."

He went to his bureau and pulled on a pair of cotton shorts. "You'll stay naked," he announced. He entered the walk-in closet and returned a

moment later with a large duffel bag, which he set on the bed beside Nathan.

"I keep my toys in here." He unzipped the bag, rummaged a bit, and withdrew his favorite long-handled flogger. He held it up for Nathan's inspection. It had cost a pretty penny, but it was worth it.

Let the games begin. Stepping back, he drew himself to his full height, dangling the large whip in front of Nathan. "Drop the towel," he ordered. "Get on the floor on your knees."

Nathan obeyed, his movements slow and graceful. He didn't look at all perturbed at the thought he was about to be flogged. Maybe he really was a sub dressed in Dom's clothing. Maybe all of this was an elaborate manipulation to get Dane to dom him.

Dane knew in his heart this wasn't so, but it gave him momentary comfort to hold onto the illusion. It was easier to focus on what Nathan's motives were, rather than his own. "Should I restrain you? Or can you stay still for your whipping?"

Nathan was kneeling up, his expression calm, his large cock only half-erect, his arms hanging relaxed at his sides.

"That's up to you."

Dane licked his lips, his mouth suddenly dry. Though Nathan's voice held not the slightest hint of defiance, Dane felt as if he were being challenged. Well, he'd show Nathan a thing or two.

"Get up. Stand with your hands locked behind your head. Don't move and don't make a sound, no matter what I do. Your safe word is Texas."

"I don't need a safe word."

"Pardon?"

"I don't need a safe word. I trust you. I trust you to know if it's too much. If I need to, I'll ask you to stop. Safe words are for players, Dane. We aren't

players. I don't want to be that with you. I want more."

Dane absorbed this. "Okay. Fair enough. I should warn you, this will be a real flogging. I'll expect you to take it like a man."

Nathan smiled. "I wouldn't know how else to take it."

Dane flushed. "You know what I mean—"

"I do know what you mean. I'm just teasing you. Forgive me, Sir. I'll be more obedient going forward." He stood, assuming the position.

Sir.

Dane wasn't sure how he felt about the title. It felt strange. This whole thing felt strange. Yet at the same time, he was curious to see how Nathan took a beating. He didn't seem at all nervous.

Dane, on the other hand, was jittery with anxious anticipation. Nathan was the first man he'd been with in a sexual situation where he didn't feel one hundred percent in control. So why was his cock so hard? In spite of this? Or because of it?

He moved close, grasping Nathan's shaft and stroking the satiny soft skin. He was pleased to feel it harden beneath his fingers. Leaning down, he spoke softly into Nathan's ear.

"I'm going to whip you now, slave boy. Don't move. Don't make a sound. Falling out of position is grounds for punishment. This flogging is not a punishment. It's an exercise in discipline and control. Do you understand?"

Dane was relieved to feel the familiar sensation of power rising in his veins like a drug. He loved the moment just before he whipped a new sub. He loved the expression of eager anticipation mixed with apprehension, even fear.

Yet Nathan didn't look afraid. He didn't seem especially eager. He was standing utterly still, his expression composed, his eyes fixed on the middle distance.

I'll fix that.

He snapped the whip in the air near Nathan's thigh. Nathan didn't flinch. He cupped Nathan's ass with one hand, squeezing the hard muscle. Stepping to the side, he drew back his arm, letting the tresses land squarely over both cheeks. Nathan remained still as a statue. He struck him several more times, each time harder than the last. Nathan's pale skin quickly turned to dark pink.

He struck Nathan's back, aware it stung more than on his ass. He struck him hard, intent on getting a reaction, but there was none. Nathan was obedient, remaining still and silent. Well, he could obviously take a flogging. Dane decided not to hold back. He'd see just what Nathan could handle.

He settled into a rhythm, striking Nathan harder than he usually would, especially with a first-time partner. Any movement—a sigh, a flinch, a catching of the breath, and he would ease up, but Nathan might as well have been made of stone.

He shifted, moving so he could see Nathan in profile. His cock, while not flaccid, wasn't fully erect. This annoyed Dane, who was used to his subs sporting full erections during scenes.

He struck Nathan harder. Damn it, he'd get a reaction!

"Get on your hands and knees." His command was brusque. Nathan obeyed. Dane struck him full force across the ass, aware in this position Nathan would feel it more keenly. He whipped his thighs and his calves. He flogged his back, covering every inch with stinging leather.

Still Nathan didn't moan or flinch. His head was hanging down, his face obscured by a thick curtain of dark hair.

Finally, Dane dropped the whip and touched Nathan's back. His skin was criss-crossed with red lines and fiery to the touch. Dane resisted the impulse to drop beside him, wrap his arms around his waist and rest his cheek against the hot skin.

Instead, he moved to stand in front of Nathan. "Kneel up," he commanded.

Nathan obeyed, resting his hands on his thighs. Dane was pleased to note he was flushed, his eyes feverishly bright, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath.

Dane pushed down his shorts, kicking them off. He stood with his hands on his hips, jutting his pelvis into Nathan's face.

"You know what to do. No hands."

Nathan opened his mouth to take Dane's cock. His hair fell forward, its wet tips grazing Dane's thighs. Dane reached down, gathering it and pulling it out of the way. He liked watching Nathan's face as he took his full length into his throat.

At first Nathan teased him, licking in sensual circles around the head, flicking it with the tip of his tongue. Dane pressed the back of his head and Nathan complied with the unspoken command, again leaning in to take him fully.

Dane groaned as Nathan massaged his cock in that amazing way he had with his throat muscles. *I wonder if I could learn that.* Dane had a sudden, disturbing image of himself kneeling at Nathan's feet, his arms bound behind him, Nathan's huge cock choking him as he struggled to pleasure him.

His balls tightened and he was no longer sure if it was in spite of the submissive image or because of it.

He forgot to think altogether as pleasure began to roll through his body in waves. He gripped Nathan for support, panting as he neared his release. His knees nearly buckled as he climaxed, his fingers digging into Nathan's strong shoulders as he gasped with pleasure.

Nathan held his cock until he'd milked it dry. Dane staggered back, finding and falling onto the bed. He lay still until his heart stopped its thundering

beat. Lifting his head, he saw Nathan was still on his knees, waiting like an obedient sub for permission to move.

"Hey, come over here." Dane held out his arms. "Session's over. Have I converted you?"

Nathan stood and joined Dane on the bed, stretching out on his stomach beside him. Dane reached over and touched his back, which was still warm to the touch, though the skin was already fading from red to pink.

Nathan hadn't answered his question and so he asked again, phrasing it differently. "So are you ready to be my obedient submissive?"

"Maybe every once in a while, if you're very, very good." Nathan's eyes were twinkling.

"Yeah, right." Dane snorted. He added, with begrudging admiration, "I have to admit, you definitely can take a rough flogging. I wasn't easy on you."

"Well, you said yourself that submission is easy." Nathan lifted himself on one elbow to face Dane. "How about we'll try it my way now? Still game?"

Despite a sudden finger of fear drawing its way through his innards, Dane forced a grin. "Bring it on, baby."

* * * *

"Just lie back and relax." Dane, already on his back, remained as he was. Nathan left the bed a moment, returning with the flogger. He pulled through the strands, untangling them with his fingers. "This is really fine quality. Is it a Tom Saunders?"

Dane nodded, pleased and impressed Nathan recognized the top of the line handmade whip. His skin tingled with nervous anticipation. Could he handle this? Did he want to?

Nathan snapped the whip, smacking the mattress with it. Startled, Dane drew in his breath. His heart began to patter. He willed himself to be calm as he waited for whatever Nathan had planned.

To his surprise, Nathan didn't order him to turn over and present his ass, which is what he would have done. Instead Nathan set the flogger carefully onto the bed, again smoothing its tresses flat.

"Your skin is waiting, isn't it? The nerve endings are jumping, waiting for the sting of leather. It will be a new experience for you."

Dane nodded, hoping the expression on his face passed for a smile. He knew a flogger was the easiest of whips to take, especially this particular one, its tresses of the softest suede. Shit, Nathan had handled a rough whipping with seeming ease. Surely he could do the same.

But Nathan made no move to pick up the whip. Instead he straddled Dane's chest, his cock inches from Dane's face. "You haven't proven yourself ready for the whip yet. Instead you're going to serve me in a different way. Your task is simple. I want complete obedience. You will do exactly what I ask, and only what I ask. Don't try to take control in any way. I'm going to give you a lesson in pleasing me. Would you like that?"

Dane's impulse was to snap back with something smart, like, "I bet you'd like it a lot more." But something in Nathan's eyes made him hold his tongue. He found himself nodding, a whispered, "Yes," forming on his lips.

"Good." Nathan stroked his cheek a moment, his expression at once fierce and tender. "We begin."

Taking his cock in his hand, he held it near Dane's face. Instinctively Dane lifted his head, parting his lips.

"No." Nathan tapped Dane's cheek with the side of his cock. "I didn't say to do that." Dane dropped his head, chagrined.

Nathan continued to stroke his shaft, which was rapidly rising and thickening before Dane's eyes. Nathan, watching him, continued, "An important part of submission is listening to what your Master wants. It isn't just about you. In my experience, a lot of subs, or perhaps more accurately masochists who like to be controlled, sexually and otherwise, aren't truly obedient. They don't obey for the sake of it. They do what they have to do

in order to get off the way they want to. It becomes only about them. They use the Dom, really, as an instrument of their own pleasure."

His cock was now fully erect. He drew the head along Dane's cheek, stopping at his lips. Again Dane parted them, his tongue curling forward.

"No." Nathan struck his cheek again with the side of his hard cock and Dane recoiled, turning his face away.

"Look at me," Nathan said. Dane did, meeting his eyes as he tried to control his reaction. A part of him wanted to slap Nathan for daring to use his cock in that way. Another part of him, the part that was sending shockwaves of desire toward his groin, thrilled to it.

Again, Nathan touched the crown of his shaft to Dane's lips. He inhaled the musky scent of Nathan's arousal. His mouth watered with desire and he had to swallow to keep from choking.

"Open your mouth."

Dane opened wide, closing his eyes. "I didn't say to close your eyes. Keep them open." He obeyed. Nathan moved forward slowly, pressing his huge cock toward Dane's soft palate. Dane willed his throat muscles to relax, but in the position he was in, flat on his back with his neck craned forward, it was difficult. He gagged.

Nathan pulled out, shaking his head. "You're not open to receive me. I don't like that."

"In this position it's hard to—"

Nathan touched his lips with two fingers. "Hush. You speak only when asked a direct question." D/s 101. Dane closed his mouth, annoyed with both himself and Nathan.

Nathan slipped off his chest and moved toward the side of the bed. He stood, pointing at the edge of the mattress. "We'll try something different. Scoot down here. Stay on your back and hang your head off the bed."

Dane obeyed, aware of what was coming. How many times had he used his subs like this, fucking their faces with his cock, using it as a way to control their very breath? Now he was to be on the receiving end.

He'd always fancied himself skilled at oral sex, but he'd never been with a man as well-endowed as Nathan. Could he handle it? God, he hoped so. Nathan had taken his whipping so beautifully. It would be embarrassing to screw up this simple exercise.

Nathan positioned himself in front of Dane's head. The bed was high, the angle ideal to slide his shaft into Dane's mouth, pushing it in to the hilt by bending his knees.

"Open your mouth."

Dane obeyed. He closed his eyes and then quickly opened them. If Nathan noticed, he didn't comment. He pressed the head of his cock between Dane's lips. Slowly he eased himself into Dane's open mouth, his eyes on Dane's face.

Dane wanted to close his eyes. He could hardly believe he was permitting himself to be put in this extremely submissive pose, passive and obedient as Nathan moved inexorably to block his windpipe, to stop his breath.

Permitting myself. Yes, Dane reminded himself. *I'm permitting this. I'm letting it happen, just for fun. Just to see what it's like. And as quid pro quo, since I got to whip Nathan's hot little ass.*

But isn't all consensual submission done by permission? How am I different from any other sub? Stop it, you're not a sub. This is just an experiment. A game. Nothing more.

Nathan pushed himself deeper, the head of his cock now resting firmly in the back of Dane's throat. He couldn't even gag. He couldn't breathe. His heart began to pound. He clenched his hands into fists. He could do this. He could handle it. *A piece of cake.*

He closed his eyes, willing Nathan to pull back. It was a matter of seconds before he would be forced to jerk away. Blood roared in his ears. His chest was heaving. To his great relief, Nathan unbent his knees, pulling himself out of Dane's mouth, not stopping until only the tip of his cock touched Dane's lips.

Dane turned his head, gasping for breath. When he could speak, he said, "Jesus, Nathan. You practically suffocated me. What the fuck were you doing?"

Nathan smiled down at him, reaching out to grab Dane's cock, which was hard as bone. "A small test of your level of trust. You trusted me enough to let me block your ability to breathe. For those few moments, you put your life in my hands, at least on a symbolic level. I'm very proud of you, Dane, and honored by your trust in me."

Nathan sat beside him. Dane shifted so his head was back on the bed. He turned away from Nathan, confused by his own reaction—a mixture of beaming pleasure at Nathan's praise, coupled with an awareness that his response was a typically submissive one. He needed time to process just what the hell was going on between his ears.

Nathan apparently had other ideas. He stroked Dane's cock, squeezing it hard as he leaned down to kiss his mouth. "For your reward," he said, his eyes gleaming, "I'm going to fuck you."

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Chapter Seven

Dane cocked his eyebrows, his lips curving in a sardonic smile. "My reward? Or yours?"

"Ours."

Nathan glanced down at Dane's erection and back into his face. Dane's lips were parted. He bit the lower one, a sweet pucker of worry appearing between his eyebrows. For a brief moment Nathan struggled with his own impatient desires. He wanted to throw Dane down and plunge into him. He wanted to fuck him until he screamed for mercy. He wanted to come hard inside him and then make Dane kneel up before him and jerk himself off. If he came before Nathan said he could, he'd make him lick it up.

Nathan swallowed and closed his eyes. Too soon. Far too soon. He had to go slow. He would take his time—all the time Dane needed. His cock and balls throbbed. Trying to keep his voice soothing, Nathan said, "You want it, don't you? You want me inside you." He curled his fingers around Dane's stiff shaft, massaging it as he silently willed Dane to agree. Slowly Dane nodded.

Yes.

"Give me something."

Dane understood and reached into his nightstand, tossing Nathan a condom. Nathan rolled it onto his cock. Dane flipped open the cap of the lubricant, about to squeeze some onto his fingers.

"I'll do that."

A spark of challenge flashed in Dane's clear blue eyes. Nathan stared him down, holding out his hand for the tube. With a shrug, Dane gave it to him.

He lay back down beside Dane, spooning him as he pushed him gently to his side. Squeezing lube onto his fingers, he touched Dane's asshole. Dane

pressed back against his finger. Nathan slipped a second finger in beside the first, relaxing the muscles with a circular motion.

He was aware some Doms never permitted anal penetration, viewing it as a submissive act and therefore not one they would engage in. He half-expected Dane to refuse on these grounds, and was pleased when he did not. For, in fact, this would be a submissive act, whether or not Dane admitted it. Nathan knew this and Dane, on some level, must know it as well.

He wouldn't push Dane to acknowledge what was happening between them. For now they didn't need to define it. Dane's passive acceptance, his permitting Nathan to control the scene, was enough. More than enough.

He withdrew his fingers and nestled the head of his cock against Dane's entrance. "Touch yourself," he said. This would distract Dane from the momentary pain of entry. He sidled against Dane, sliding the length of himself between Dane's ass cheeks. He kissed Dane's shoulder, nuzzling against him.

"I want you," he admitted. "I want you bad."

Dane didn't reply, except by pressing back against him. Nathan leaned up, noting Dane's hand on his cock, as ordered. Pleased, he lay on his side, again nudging Dane's nether entrance with his cock. Carefully, he pressed the head in. Dane grunted, his muscles clamping down.

He eased himself in, rolling onto his back and pulling Dane onto himself as he did so, using the weight of Dane's body to help his cock enter the tight, hot passage.

"Oh." Dane moaned. Nathan spit onto his hand and reached around to push Dane's hand from his cock. He gripped the hard shaft, loosely running his fingers over it as he began to move inside of him.

It felt so incredibly good. Dane was tight as a virgin, his cock like a bar of iron in Nathan's fingers. He closed his eyes, surrendering to the hot, aching

pleasure of Dane's ass. Dane was thrusting back against him, the movement causing his cock to slide against Nathan's slippery fingers.

Dane began to pant. "Oh, God. Oh, Jesus. Don't stop." Nathan felt the sudden stiffening of his body the second before hot spurts of ejaculate pulsed between his fingers.

Dane's orgasm was enough to send Nathan over the edge as well. He shuddered with pleasure as he ejaculated deep inside Dane.

He wrapped his arms tightly around his new lover, his cock still buried between his cheeks. *You belong to me now*, he thought. Someday he'd say it aloud.

* * * *

Nathan lay awake. Dane had pulled away in his sleep and his back was toward Nathan. The sky was lightening outside the bedroom window, dawn edging over the horizon.

Nathan pressed his palm against the warm bare skin of Dane's back, feeling the soothing rise and fall of his deep, even breathing. Was this the beginning of something real? Or just a passing infatuation between two men who, by definition, could never be more than casual lovers? Was Dane worth fighting for, even if the fight was with Dane himself?

Things had always come easy to Nathan. He'd been born with a natural artistic gift but hadn't fallen in love with it until he was a teenager. Art had become his passion during high school, when a particularly good teacher had inspired him.

When it came to guys, he supposed his looks helped him get what, or rather, who, he wanted. An easygoing disposition kept him from worrying about it too much if things didn't work out.

He liked to imagine himself as a still body of water, peaceful, warm and receptive to the world around him. If a man entered his world, a man he was

attracted to, he would invite them into the warmth and hope they would succumb to his desires.

He'd never called himself a Dom, nor thought of the men he'd loved over the years as submissives. Or rather, these weren't the defining terms in his life. Yet he couldn't deny there was something about taking control, watching a man dissolve before his eyes into raw, sexual desire, wrought by his own touch—by his whip, by his hand, by his command—that never failed to thrill him to his bones.

The men he'd gravitated to over the years were much like himself—even-tempered, artistic, dreamy. They were happy to fall under his dominant spell, eager to submit to him, sexually and otherwise. Yet, one by one they'd drifted out of his life.

Usually it was he who lost interest, his mind wandering away from them, occasionally yearning toward someone new, but more often than not toward his art, toward the unfinished piece his fingers were itching to return to.

He never broke hearts, or he tried not to. He tried to be gentle. He simply—released them, set them adrift with a symbolic push, watching them float away, helping them acknowledge whatever they'd shared had run its course.

How did Dane fit into this carefully constructed peace? Dane Bishop, an arrogant, dangerously handsome man, obviously used to taking what and who he wanted. Styling himself Dom, proud of the label, dependent on it. Certainly not the sort of man Nathan would normally choose.

Yet Nathan had seen the submissive spark in his eyes. He'd been drawn to it, even compelled by it. That first night he'd tried to shrug it off, rejecting Dane's more obvious overtures—telling himself he was uninterested in the club scene Dane represented and therefore in Dane himself.

Still, Dane had remained in his mind, distracting him from his work, whispering to him from some secret place, coloring his dreams. And once they'd reconnected, he knew he had to have Dane. Not just as a lover, but as his own.

Last night he could have refused Dane's challenge. He was reasonably sure he could have manipulated him to change his mind, but he recognized Dane still needed to hold onto his image of himself as Dom. He wasn't ready—yet—to let go of labels and his own carefully crafted persona.

So Nathan had allowed him to use the flogger, surrendering himself to its sensual sting. Though he didn't find sexual pleasure in being whipped, he enjoyed the challenge of letting his body flow with the pain, of absorbing and reflecting it, of becoming it.

Sucking Dane's cock, of course, wasn't a submissive act by any stretch. Nathan loved bringing a man to the brink of ecstasy and pulling him back. He loved the power of controlling another man's orgasm. It satisfied something deep in his soul.

When he'd straddled Dane's chest, using his cock to elicit a response, he'd watched the flush bloom on Dane's cheeks, his eyes dilating, his cock hard as steel. When he'd slapped Dane's face with his cock, he'd watched the fight wash over his features—at once wanting to assert himself and to obey.

The fact he'd wanted to obey at all said more than any words of protest he might have offered before or after. But the true test came when Nathan positioned him over the edge of bed, where he waited as submissively as a slave for Nathan to fuck his mouth.

He hadn't merely tolerated the exercise, he'd been as turned on by it as Nathan had been. Nathan had tested him—pushing deep into his throat, counting the long seconds while he held his own breath. Dane hadn't struggled. He hadn't resisted at all. His face had reddened, the veins bulging at his neck, his chest heaving, but he'd stayed still, allowing Nathan to choke off his air, to control, for those few moments, his very life.

And all the while Dane's cock waved like a tent pole at his groin, an enticing drop of pre-cum on its tip. He'd tried to laugh it off after, demanding what the fuck Nathan had thought he was doing, but they both knew. And, Nathan was pretty sure, they both wanted it. Though there was still resistance, the night had convinced Nathan more than ever of Dane's submissive nature, hidden beneath the layers of black leather and swagger.

Nathan was distracted from his analysis of the night's events by Dane rolling over in his sleep. As he turned, the sheet pulled away, revealing him in all his splendor, his cock rising from its nestle of curls like a beacon.

Nathan leaned over his sleeping lover and took his cock into his mouth. Dane gave a soft moan. His shaft quickly hardened to full erection, his breathing coming faster, though his eyes remained closed.

Nathan licked and suckled Dane to a quick, intense orgasm. He happened to glance up at Dane's face in the glow of the rising sun just as Dane began to buck. *Nathan, Nathan, Nathan.* Dane silently mouthed, his eyes screwed up tight, his body jerking toward ecstasy as his warm seed spurted into Nathan's welcoming mouth.

* * * *

Dane awoke to Nathan gently shaking his shoulder. "Come here," Dane said sleepily, holding out his arms. When Nathan didn't fall obligingly into them, Dane was forced to open his eyes and focus.

Nathan was fully dressed and clearly not planning to rejoin him in bed. "Dane, I have to go. I almost forgot I have to meet my sister and her family for brunch."

Dane sat up, at once wide awake. Nathan's words hit him like a sucker-punch. He was the one who dictated who left whom and when. Nathan couldn't go.

You can't go.

He could see Nathan was already out the door, at least in his head. Trying to be cool, he offered, "You need a ride—"

"No, it's okay. I have a cab waiting. I just wanted to say goodbye."

Don't go.

"You need money for cab fare?"

"No, no. I'm fine. Let's connect later, okay?"

Nathan bent down, kissing Dane chastely on the forehead. Unable to help himself, Dane reached up to pull him down into his arms, but Nathan gently extracted himself.

Dane had to bite his tongue to keep from begging Nathan to stay. Instead he merely nodded, trying not to lose himself in those rich brown eyes beneath the straight dark brows.

"I have to go. I'll call you. I promise."

He heard the click of his front door quietly closing. Mercifully, sleep reached out and plucked him back into its grip.

When he awoke several hours later his cock was hard, his brain teeming with images of Nathan. Though he couldn't remember the details of the dreams, they were soaked in erotica, steeped in passion.

He moved from the bed to the couch, still caught in the grip of the dreams, which intermingled with the long, strange night they'd shared. Idly, he stroked himself, pausing to sniff his fingers, which still had Nathan's spicy-sweet musk on the tips.

Was he falling in love with another Dom? Could a person fall in love so hard and so fast it left him dizzy and utterly confused? Or was this just lust that would be played out once he explored whatever crazy new feelings Nathan had awakened in him?

Dane wasn't ready to process just what was going on between them. He refused to dissect the events, to make determinations and decrees. It had been what it had been. He would think about it later.

His cell phone rang, vibrating on the side table by the sofa where he'd left it. He retrieved it and flipped it open. It was a Manhattan number, though he didn't immediately recognize it.

"Hello?"

"Dane. It's Rob. I just got in town."

"Rob, hey, how are you? It's great to hear your voice."

"You too. Listen, the convention doesn't start until tomorrow. Did you still want to try and do dinner this evening?"

Dane was silently grateful for the distraction of Rob's call and offer of dinner plans. "Sure. Where would you like to meet?"

"You tell me. I'm not from 'round here, y'all." Rob's drawled in an exaggerated, poor attempt at a Texan accent.

They had been casual lovers in New York, having met through a mutual friend in the city. Rob wasn't what Dane would call submissive, but he loved his sex rough, with plenty of rope and chain. They'd kept in touch by email from time to time since Dane had been transferred. Rob, a doctor, had said he was coming down to Austin for a medical convention that weekend, but it had totally slipped Dane's mind.

"I recently found this great Mexican place." Dane immediately thought of Nathan. He'd said he'd call. Did that mean he didn't want Dane to call first? Well, he wouldn't call first anyway. He didn't want to appear too needy, too eager. He shook the thoughts away, refusing to give in to what felt too much like teenage angst for comfort.

They met at seven. Dane kept surreptitiously feeling his cell phone through the fabric of his pants, resisting the urge to pull it out and make sure it was on and fully charged.

Once their dinners were ordered, they made small talk, catching up on their lives and work. Rob told Dane about a new club he'd discovered in north Jersey, members only, but he'd been a few times with a guy who was connected.

"It's really hot," Rob enthused. "They have real torture chambers, complete with racks and chains, whipping posts, the whole shebang. The guy who owns it, he's like this independently wealthy dude who's made a career of

collecting antique torture instruments. A really strange guy, but the place is fantastic."

"You'll have to take me when I come back up."

"When are you coming? Is this a permanent type move, or are they going to let you out of exile down here in Tex-ass?"

Dane laughed. "Hey, that's my adopted state you're slandering. It's not exile. People are easy to work with down here, and I get paid at a New York City rate, so I've been able to sock quite a bit away. You know, for that someday dream of two kids and a house with a picket fence and June Cleaver waiting at home with pearls and an apron."

Rob made a face. "Sounds more like a nightmare to me."

"Yeah. Well, maybe I'll have a naked slave boy waiting by the front door instead, a whip in his mouth."

Rob nodded vigorously. "Now that's more like it. Maybe I can apply for the position."

The food arrived, and they ordered fresh drinks. "I have some news," Rob volunteered.

"Yeah? Good news?"

"Yeah. I'm involved with someone."

"Sweet."

"Yeah. His name is Albert Sanchez. He's a nurse at one of the hospitals where I do rounds. It happened totally by accident. We work together and he invited me out one evening after his shift, and things just kind of took off. He isn't even into the scene, but he gets off on tying me up, which is really all I need. He's kind of young, which makes me nervous, but I love being with him and last week I suggested he move in and..." he paused for dramatic emphasis, "he agreed."

"How young?"

"Twenty-one."

"Hey, as long as he's legal. That's only, what, a ten year spread?"

"Yeah, but he only just moved out of his parents' house six months ago. He has three roommates he can't stand and was spending all his time at my place anyway. He's very mature, probably more mature than I am." Rob laughed. "Anyway, I can't get enough of his hot body and he, naturally, is in love with my brilliant mind."

"No doubt," Dane laughed and took a long drink of his margarita, glad for the distraction of his old friend's company.

"So how about you? Getting any action down here at the end of the world?"

"I swear, you New Yorkers think Manhattan is the be-all and end-all of civilization. What a bunch of snobs." Dane grinned, aware he'd felt the same way when he'd first moved down and equally aware he no longer felt that way.

"Wait, isn't it? You mean we aren't at the hub of the universe?" Rob grinned, adding, "Don't sidestep the question. Has someone finally managed to steal the heart of the impervious Master Dane?"

Dane looked down into his glass, the image of Nathan rising so sharply in his mind he might have been looking into a crystal ball. When he looked up again, Rob was grinning broadly. "Oh-ho," he said with a knowing smirk. "There is someone. It's written all over your face. Tell Dr. Mead all about it."

"There's nothing to tell," Dane lied. "I might have met someone. It's too early to say."

"It's never too early to say," Rob countered. "When did you meet?"

"Last week. We've only spent a few days together."

"Where'd you meet?"

"At a bar, believe it or not. Not even a gay bar."

"He into the scene?"

"You could say that."

"That's a definite plus, no?"

"Yes and no."

"Stop speaking in riddles, Bishop. What's the deal?"

"Well," Dane paused. "He's a Dom."

Rob, who had lifted his glass for a drink, sputtered into it and set it down. "And just how in the hell does that work? Do you toss a coin to see who's on top that night?"

Dane felt himself flushing. He shouldn't have brought this up at all. No way Rob would understand. Shit, he barely understood it himself. He sidestepped the question.

"He's not really into the scene. I mean, he doesn't like the clubs or anything like that. It's more of a state of mind with him. We've only been together twice. He's not like anyone I've ever met."

"How so?" Rob seemed genuinely interested. He leaned forward, his elbows on the table, waiting for Dane to continue.

"Well," Dane said, wondering how much to reveal. "He's an artist, for one thing. I usually hang out with more, you know, guys from the street."

"Wall Street."

"Yeah. Business types. Guys like me who wear a tie during the week and leather on the weekends. This guy—he doesn't even own any leather, and I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't have a tie either. He's one of those dreamy

types, who doesn't wear a watch, who forgets what time, or even what day, it is when he's involved in his art stuff. He's got hair to his shoulders and three days of stubble on his cheeks at all times. He's incredibly good looking but you get the sense he's completely unaware of it.

"I don't know how to describe it exactly. It's like he isn't vain at all, but he's very comfortable in his skin. He knows who he is and he feels good about it."

"All good things," Rob said. "Is he as into you as you are into him?"

Dane couldn't help the smile that burst over his face as he recalled falling asleep, held close in Nathan's arms, his cock still buried inside of him. "I hope so," he said.

"So what's the problem? Other than the fact you both want to be in control."

"Did I say there was a problem?"

"Well, you're tearing your napkin into tiny bits and when you aren't grinning like a lovesick teenager, you're biting your lower lip in that way you have when you're worried about something. So you tell me, what's the problem?"

"He thinks I'm a sub."

Rob stared a moment and then laughed. "Did I hear correctly? Master Dane, a sub? Is the guy crazy?"

Dane pursed his lips. He could feel his heart beating a touch too fast. He could tell he was blushing. He finished his drink, using the large glass to hide behind.

"Dane? Is there something to this?"

Perhaps it was the two margaritas he'd consumed. Or possibly it was just the relief of being able to say it out loud to someone. He set down his empty glass, put his hands flat on the table and said aloud what so far he'd avoided admitting, even to himself.

"Maybe."

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Chapter Eight

Theresa's cheeks were crimson. Dane instantly regretted complimenting her on her new hairstyle. To help her recover, he said, "Who's my nine o'clock?"

Theresa clicked a few keys on her computer. "The warehouse on West Sixth Street. You know, the one who's a friend of Mr. Bennett. I mean, his father is the friend. I gave you the appraisal and the financials last week. You did look them over, right? I told Betty Ann we were ready to move on this."

Her voice was faintly accusatory, tinged with an undertone of anxiety. Betty Ann mustn't, under any circumstances, be let down. Idly, Dane wondered how the executive secretary had amassed such power at the bank, but then, he'd seen the same thing before in other offices. The power behind the throne, he supposed.

"Yes, absolutely," he lied. In fact he'd forgotten all about the red folder Theresa had thrust into his hands, top priority.

Theresa didn't look entirely convinced. Her eyes returning to her screen, she said, "You'll be meeting with Mr. Thatcher and Ms. Chandler. They're Mr. Levi's financial advisors."

"And Mr. Levi?"

"He won't be attending. Not today. One of those millionaire types who breeze in to sign on the dotted line once everyone else has done all the work, I expect."

Dane nodded. Not that it mattered. His job was to make sure the loan was a sound one, based on good collateral and terms that made sense and promised a profit for the bank. He would have liked to meet the borrower himself before the deal got too far along. He was a firm believer in character being an essential component when making a loan decision. Still, Bennett had vouched for this one, so that would have to do.

He glanced at his watch. He had a half hour to prep—that should be sufficient to at least come up with enough questions to make the initial meeting worthwhile. “You wouldn't happen to have seen the folder—”

"It's in your in-box, right on the top. I put it there with all the new information so you'd have it at your fingertips this morning."

"Thank you, Theresa. What would I do without you?" Dane flashed a smile and turned toward his office as a new blush began to stain Theresa's round cheeks.

He sat behind his desk and picked up the folder. The name typed neatly on the tab—Levi—reminded him, naturally, of Nathan. He hadn't seen him since he'd left Saturday morning, promising to call.

He did, in fact, call later that night. He had sounded apologetic, explaining he had to get a bust he was working on for an opening done by the deadline or he'd lose the commission. He said he was going to work on it until it was done, which might mean going right through the night and on into Sunday.

In a way Dane was relieved. When he was with Nathan the rest of the world seemed to fall away. He felt like he was on a roller coaster, always off-balance, half-thrilled, half-terrified.

Nathan had uncovered feelings Dane hadn't known he possessed. He'd forced Dane to look inside himself, to question what he'd always held as basic truths. He was no longer sure who he was as a Dom, or what he wanted from a relationship.

He knew he wanted Nathan. That much was certain. Now if he could just figure out where things went from here...

He forced himself to focus on the loan package before him, opening the folder to read and analyze the information he should have looked at last week. West Sixth Street ... that had to be close to where Nathan lived. He'd been in such a daze that morning he'd dropped Nathan off, he hadn't paid attention to the street signs, only following Nathan's direction to turn left and then right.

He looked at the blueprints and photographs of the building. It looked very much like Nathan's, but then, so did the other two that were featured in the appraisal for purposes of comparison.

He glanced through the numbers. It was a simple deal—the purchase of the building via a sizable down payment, the balance financed by the bank over a term of fifteen years, with the building as collateral.

From the guy's balance sheet and income stream, he could have bought the building outright, but then, as Dane well knew, interest and debt could be expensed, while equity could not. Most of the guy's cash was tied up in investments that no doubt netted him far more than the after-tax cost of a loan. He'd do the same thing if he had that kind of money.

The telephone buzzed. “Your nine o'clock's here. Shall I send them in?”

“I'll be right out.” Dane liked to greet his clients himself, rather than waiting imperiously behind a desk. He stepped out of the office and moved toward a tall, slightly stooped middle-aged man with thinning red hair fading to gray. Beside him stood a very pretty young woman with too much eye makeup and a beautifully cut black pantsuit with a white silk blouse beneath the jacket.

“Bob Thatcher. Damn glad to meet y'all.” The man thrust out his hand, gripping Dane's fingers so hard it hurt. His voice was loud, with a practiced heartiness that grated on Dane's ears. He couldn't stand people who were damn glad to meet him, and while he didn't mind the use of the word, “y'all,” he could never get used to people using a contraction of a plural phrase as if it were singular.

Extracting his fingers from Bob's manly grip, Dane shook hands with the woman, who introduced herself as Brenda Thatcher. Her shake was crisp and firm, her fingers cool to the touch. He decided he'd aim his questions toward her.

After offering coffee, which both refused, Dane ushered them into his office, directing them toward a round table in the corner where they could

spread out. Because Bennett had already put his stamp of approval on the deal, Dane was really just there to hash out the details.

They talked at first about the Austin real estate market in general and then about the burgeoning warehouse district. They discussed the terms of the loan and reviewed the appraisal and the borrower's financial information.

"What are the plans for the warehouse?" He envisioned a trendy restaurant or perhaps a concert hall.

"Mr. Levi wants quiet."

"Excuse me?"

"He's, uh, a little eccentric. He could buy a luxury home on the waterfront if he wanted, but he likes his little art studio slash one room apartment on the top floor of a warehouse." Bob shrugged, his hands palm up to suggest there's just no telling with these rich eccentrics.

"There's a carpentry and metal-working shop below him," Brenda said, her tone defensive. "He lives on the top floor. He works unusual hours. He likes to sleep in, and they make noise."

Dane swallowed. *Horace. N. Levi.* His mind absolutely refused to entertain the possibility. No way. Nathan was broke. A starving artist living in a loft. He didn't even own a car, for God's sake. Dane looked down at the borrower's birth date, doing the math in his head.

"Are you all right?"

"I"—Dane glanced helplessly from one face to the other, trying desperately to marshal his thoughts. His voice sounded distant in his ears when he spoke, as if he were hovering above the scene instead of smack in the middle of it.

"I'm just going to get a glass of water. Could I get either of you something?"

"You know, I think I will have that cup of coffee, if the offer's still good," Bob boomed. "Cream and two sugars." Brenda shook her head.

Dane left the office and headed toward the kitchen, his mind still refusing to cooperate. Horace N. Levi.

Horace Nathan Levi.

Jesus H. Christ.

The sweet, dreamy image of his starving artist lover was smashed like a pumpkin. What the hell was going on? Who was this guy, living like a pauper, dressed in rags, but in fact awash in riches? It was like some topsy-turvy fairytale and he didn't get it.

Why hide the fact you're rich? Why wear tattered blue jeans and live on the top floor of an old warehouse in Austin, Texas, when you could dress in cashmere and silk and live in a penthouse on Central Park West, or a villa in the south of France?

Dane grabbed a Styrofoam cup and poured coffee into it, stirring in the sugar and someone's half and half he found in the refrigerator. He forgot to get himself water, aware he had to get back in there and finish this meeting. The sooner he could get them out of the there, the sooner he could call Nathan and demand to know just what in the hell was going on.

Somehow he managed to muddle through the rest of the meeting, scribbling notes he hoped would make sense later. He told them he'd have the loan package ready for signature by the end of the week. After they left, he walked out to Theresa's desk, his briefcase in his hand.

"I'm going to go check out the property. I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"You have a two o'clock with George Thomas."

"Okay. I should be back well before that. I'll call you if I'm going to be delayed."

Theresa didn't ask what would cause a delay and Dane didn't volunteer.

* * * *

Dane parked near the warehouse on West Sixth and climbed out. It was a large brick building, three stories high. Large corrugated steel doors—one rolled open to reveal a shop within, the other shut—appeared to be the only entrances.

The building was flanked by a second warehouse on one side, in considerably worse repair, several of its windows broken out, others boarded up. On the other side was an empty parking lot, weeds growing up between slabs of cracked concrete.

What kind of strange, secret life was Nathan living? Did he keep this place as a cover for his Dom games? For all he knew, Nathan *did* own a second house on the waterfront and an apartment on the Riviera. He'd sent his financial advisors as flunkies to cover his real identity. Who was to say he'd put everything on his balance sheet? Who knew what other secrets this man was keeping?

Dane was edgy, his hands curling into fists, as if he were readying himself for a fight. He was angry. He'd been tricked, led on, made a fool of.

What did he expect? He barely knew Nathan. Just because they'd had mind-blowingly intense sex didn't mean a thing. He was old enough to know better. He'd let himself be blindsided by his emotions.

He walked around the side of the building, looking for an alternate entrance. He found it and turned the knob, giving it a push. It was locked. There was a small intercom beside the door. He pushed the button and waited.

Nothing.

He pushed it again, three rapid, impatient jabs. This time he got a response.

"Yes?" He recognized the voice in an instant.

"Nathan? It's Dane."

"Dane." Dane could hear the pleasure in his voice and it made him smile, despite his confused irritation. "I'll be right down."

After a minute or so Dane heard the sound of the lock being turned and the door was pulled open. There stood Nathan, his long hair pulled back in a ponytail, the requisite three-day stubble on his cheeks, wiping his hands on a paint-stained rag.

He was wearing a white button down shirt, or it had been white once upon a time. Now it was covered in smears and blotches of bright paint, as were the jeans and old sneakers. Nathan had a smudge of bright yellow paint on his cheek. He smiled broadly at Dane. "They let you out of corporate jail, huh?"

Dane, dressed in a dark suit, white starched dress shirt and hand-stitched silk tie, grinned back at Nathan despite himself. Recalling his mission, he sobered and said gruffly, "Nathan. We need to talk."

Nathan tilted his head, his expression quizzical. "All right. I'm kind of in the middle of something, but if you don't mind me finishing first, come on up."

Dane followed Nathan up the metal stairs to the top of the old building. The walls of the stairwell were painted a dingy green, lit by fluorescent bulbs that gave it a sickly cast. The air was close and hot, the smell of burning machine oil and wood shavings permeating it from the shops below. Who would choose to live here? Especially someone with Nathan's purported wealth?

There was a large door at the top of the stairs. They entered Nathan's loft, which was as different from the dank, smelly stairwell as day is from night. The room was awash in lemony light pouring through the windows that lined two of the four walls. Though it was summer and a muggy day to boot, the room was cool, the air fresh and pleasant.

Dane, used to assessing properties, recognized the slight green tint of the insulated low energy glass in the windows. There were central air conditioning ducts along the ceiling as well.

"Welcome to my castle." Nathan waved his arm around the large, open room.

Dane took in the living quarters, noting the high quality of the kitchen appliances and furniture and the clever use of space. He turned toward the studio and forgot why he'd come.

The space was filled with sculpture, some pieces large, some small, made from fired clay, polished wood and bronze. Some of them were abstract forms, the curve and bend arrestingly sensual.

The bronze pieces were smaller than the others, standing only a foot or so high. They were a study of nude men in various poses, each detail perfect, as if he'd poured bronze over miniature people.

The pieces were lined along high, wide tables that flanked an entire long wall. More pieces were scattered around the floor, some of them still in process. In one corner was a large easel, on which sat a partially complete canvas of the head and shoulders of a man.

Dane was drawn toward the painting, stepping in front of it with a sense of recognition. The portrait depicted a firm, square jaw and a wide, sensual mouth. The nose was long and thin, a slight bump at the bridge. The hair was painted in bright, burnished chestnut and copper strands, falling forward into eyes as blue as sapphire.

Dane realized he was looking at himself, or rather at a much handsomer version of himself. He looked toward Nathan, who was watching him with a small, shy smile. "I don't usually let the subject view the work until it's done."

"Nathan. I don't know what to say. It looks like me, only better. The colors are amazing. It's like it's lit up from within. Like it's shining somehow with life. It's really breathtaking."

Nathan looked pleased. "You like it? It's a new technique I've been working on. Maria showed me when we got tired of sculpting."

"The artist in Italy?" Nathan had mentioned his month abroad, but he'd been vague. Dane had filled in the blanks, picturing backpacks and youth hostels, Europe on ten dollars a day. Of course it hadn't been like that. He'd probably stayed in some gorgeous villa with a complete staff, spending his days studying art, his nights fucking handsome Italian boys named Giancarlo and Angelo.

Dane recalled his mission and tried to summon the anger and irritation he'd felt over Nathan's lies by omission, but he was captured again by the painting before him. All he could do was stare.

"It's not done. I'm not happy with the skin tone but I think I know what to do. If you wouldn't mind waiting a few, I just want to finish this paint mix I was working on before I forget. Give me like five minutes and then you can tell me your important news."

He smiled and Dane felt suddenly foolish. Nathan didn't owe him his life history. He hadn't given Nathan an accounting of his finances either.

He nodded and moved toward the sofa in the living quarters. "There's beer and soda in the fridge if you're thirsty," Nathan called out. His back was now to Dane, a paintbrush in his hand.

Dane sat and crossed one leg, his ankle resting on his knee. He drummed his fingers idly against the sofa arm. He wanted to get up and touch the small bronze sculptures but wasn't sure if Nathan would mind. Who had modeled in those intimate poses? Would he be asked to pose? Would he agree?

He was startled by the sudden, loud whirl of a piece of machinery. He could feel its vibration in the floorboards. Its pitch was high and grating to the ear. "What the hell is that?"

Nathan, his back still to Dane, answered, "The metal and wood working shop. The second floor is empty. The sound travels right up here. Annoying as hell."

Dane waited. Would he mention that was why he planned on getting a loan to buy the building? Would he confess he was wealthy, wealthy enough to purchase this building outright if he wanted to?

Nathan didn't confess. He continued to paint, standing there in his spattered, faded jeans, the very picture of a starving artist.

He'd shock Nathan into an admission. "I work for Cullen Federal Bank."

"Yeah? I've got a relationship with them, I think."

"You think?"

"Yeah, I forget the names of all those financial institutions. They all sound alike to me. Cullen Federal, Austin National, National Federal." He laughed without guile. Either he was being sincere or he was a very good actor.

Dane decided to try another tact. For some reason, he wasn't ready to confront Nathan directly. "So who saddled you with the name Horace? No wonder you go by your middle name."

That finally got Nathan's attention. He wiped his brush with the rag and set it down carefully on the lip of the easel. He walked over to the sofa and sat beside Dane.

"Cullen Federal," he said slowly. "And you're in real estate banking." His face brightened. "Are you doing my loan for this place? Is that what you came to tell me? What a small world."

Dane leaped up from the sofa and whipped around to glare at Nathan. "You lied to me."

"What?" Nathan looked genuinely confused. "About what?"

"You didn't tell me you were a fucking millionaire. You let me think you were this starving artist who can't afford a car and can't pay his bill at the restaurant."

Nathan's face darkened, his mouth turning down at the corners. He took a deep breath, as if he were counting to ten inside his head. Finally he said, "Dane. I'm sorry if you're upset that I didn't share my income tax returns with you, or whatever it is you think I owe you because we've had sex a couple of times. But I honestly don't know what the hell you're upset about or why you think I lied."

"By omission!" Dane knew he wasn't being fair. He wasn't even sure why he felt compelled to continue, but he did. He opened his mouth to let more toads fall out. "Is it some kind of sick game you play for your own amusement? Living in a loft, pretending to be poor so you can mingle with the little people? Do you laugh about it later on your yacht with your wealthy friends?"

Nathan looked puzzled, his mouth twisting from a frown to a smile. "Dane, are you on drugs or something? I never lied to you. If you'll recall, I tried to pay the restaurant bill each time but you were on a rampage, grabbing those bills like your life depended on it. I figured it was one of those macho things some men are into so I let it go. I never said I didn't own a car. I said I don't like to drive. I prefer to walk or ride my bike. If I need to be driven somewhere, I have access to a car and driver."

"A chauffeur!"

"I guess you could call him that. My parents employ a driver. I can use him if I need to get somewhere I can't walk or bike to and I don't feel like calling a cab."

"And this place!" Dane waved his hand around the room. "You led me to believe you lived in this tiny loft, squatting at the top of an old warehouse without a residential permit."

"No, Dane. I didn't lead you to believe that. You chose to believe that. You chose, it appears, to create some image of me in your head to suit whatever romantic notion you have of the 'starving artist in a garret.'" He used his forefingers to draw quotation marks in the air.

"I'm sorry if I've somehow disappointed you by not being who you thought I was. I don't generally make it a habit of flaunting my wealth. I didn't earn most of it, it's family money, and while I admit it has its uses, it isn't something I think about that much. It honestly didn't occur to me to show you my financial statements or talk about boring plans to buy this building." He shrugged, adding, "If you were planning on refinancing your house or getting some landscaping done, would you have run to tell me? We've known each other, what, a few weeks?"

"You betrayed me. You led me on, pretending to be poor so you could suck me in unaware—" Dane cut himself off, overcome by a sudden frightening insight as to why he was really angry. He sat heavily beside Nathan, falling back against the couch as he pressed his fingers against his eyes.

Nathan's voice was gentle, his touch light on Dane's thigh. "Dane, I think I know what's going on here. This isn't about me being rich or poor, is it?"

Dane, his face still hidden in his hands, mumbled, "I don't know."

"I think you do. I think you have this image in your head of what a Dom is and what a sub is. But when you and I get together, the images don't work. You, taller, older, stronger, used to being dominant. Me, younger, slighter, maybe more laid back. I think by casting me as the starving artist in your head, it made it safer. I couldn't possibly be a real Dom, at least not over you, because I didn't fit the mold.

"I think finding out I have money, though it means next to nothing to me in the grand scheme of things, certainly not in matters of the heart, is threatening to you for that reason."

Dane didn't answer right away. He dropped his hands and took a deep breath. Nathan was watching him, compassion in his face.

"Maybe," he finally admitted. "Look, I'm sorry. Whatever shit I'm dealing with, I had no right to take it out on you."

"Hey, it's cool. Sometimes we just react without thinking why something is affecting us. I'm guilty of the same thing. The fact you're willing to talk

about it honestly is a big step. We're still new, you and me. We can take our time. And anyway," he said, his voice suddenly lighter, "I'm glad you were attracted to me without being aware of the family money thing. It's obvious you aren't from around here. Levi is a big name. My grandfather made his money in construction—"

"Levi Construction," Dane interrupted. "Of course I'm familiar with them. I just didn't make the connection."

"I'm glad you didn't. I hate to admit it, but I've been with some guys who were way more interested in my assets than my ass. At least I know your attraction is to me, not my huge mansion here." He waved his hand around the space.

Dane smiled, feeling almost weak with relief that Nathan had been so understanding of his childish outburst. Still, he had to ask, "Why do you live here? When you could live anywhere?"

"I like Austin. I grew up here. I love this space. It's just right for me. I don't want some big house full of strangers I'd have to hire just to run it. What's the point of that? Someday, if I live with someone, it would be different. He'd need his own space too, so we'd find something bigger."

Dane nodded, imagining suddenly the two of them setting up house—Nathan with his studio on one floor, Dane with his office and workout room on another. The image flitted away as Nathan continued, "I've been looking into buying the building for a while. There were some legal snafus with easements and liens and stuff I don't concern myself with. It's taken nearly a year to get everything sorted out, apparently. Also I didn't want to just throw out the tenants in here now. I had my consultants line up comparable space for them two streets over. I'm going to pay for their relocation."

"Altruistic, huh?"

"I guess. I would have felt bad to just kick them out, but I can't stand the damn noise when I'm trying to sleep."

"So you'll just have this big, empty building?"

"Well, I was thinking about maybe putting in an art gallery and a studio. A bigger one than I have here. The kiln can get really hot. Especially in summer I'd rather have it in a different space. And I was thinking maybe of starting an art school. Something for kids. Pricey for the ones who can afford it, with scholarships for poorer kids who can't.

"I came into my own money last year and it seems crazy to sit on all that cash and not do something with it. God knows I don't need all of it."

"That's very admirable. And ambitious. You'll need someone who knows what they're doing to put all that together for you. It sounds very exciting."

"Are you volunteering? Shall I hire you as my personal consultant?"

"No way. I know better than to mix business and pleasure."

"Good. You keep the business. I'll take the pleasure. Now stop talking about all this money crap and take off that fancy suit before I mess it up." He reached for Dane's tie, using it to pull him close.

Their lips met and Dane forgot the money and his own righteous indignation. He forgot he had a two o'clock appointment, he forgot everything except how good Nathan smelled and tasted, and how right it felt to kiss him.

After a while Nathan pulled back and Dane leaned forward, still hungry. "Take off your clothes and wait for me on the bed," Nathan said. He was smiling, but Dane heard the steel behind his words.

The Dom in him stiffened, words forming instantly on his lips to refuse, but as he stared up into Nathan's dark, compelling eyes, the words died. His cock rose and he stood, removing his jacket and folding it carefully over the back of the couch.

"Good boy," Nathan said softly. "I'm going to shower. I'll be right out. Make sure your cock's nice and hard for me." He walked through the bedroom, disappearing through a door Dane presumed was the bathroom.

"Nobody talks to me like that," Dane yelled. Nathan, if he heard him, didn't respond. He could hear the sound of the water running. He looked toward the large, inviting bed, neatly made, its covers of black silk.

He slipped off his shiny banker's shoes and unbuckled his belt. His pants were neatly folded beside his jacket. He loosened and removed his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. He slipped the cufflinks into the pocket of his jacket and stood in just his underwear, which barely contained his swelling package.

Nathan was without a doubt the most unusual man he'd ever met. Rich or poor, Dom or sub, no matter who was what, and at this point Dane honestly didn't know anymore, he knew he wanted to lie naked on this man's bed.

He wanted Nathan, more than he'd ever wanted another man. And he would have him. One way or the other, Nathan would belong to him.

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Chapter Nine

"I've only got an hour," Dane said, watching Nathan towel his long hair, standing naked before him.

Nathan dropped the towel and moved toward the bed, his eyes hungrily roaming over Dane's bare body. "I'll take what I can get."

They made love quickly, Nathan taking Dane's cock into his mouth and sucking it until he moaned. "Fuck me," Nathan ordered.

Again Dane heard the command in his voice. He took the condom Nathan thrust toward him and rolled it onto his shaft, still wet from Nathan's hot mouth. Adding a dollop of lube, he slowly entered his lover, savoring the clamp of hot muscle. Nathan thrust himself back against Dane's shaft, their balls colliding.

"Do it. Hard."

Dane obliged, slamming himself into the yielding passage. Nathan was panting, his own hand flying over his shaft while Dane fucked him. It was only a matter of minutes before the white heat of orgasm tore through Dane's body.

"Come for me," Nathan ordered. Pleasure exploded through Dane's senses, leaving him blind and dumb as he fell forward against Nathan's strong, supple back. His body racked in a series of spasms he couldn't control, Dane came hard.

Dane lifted himself from Nathan and fell onto his back. He was sweating, the sticky condom still on his wilting cock. He thought perhaps he should shower before he put his suit back on, but he didn't have the energy to move.

Nathan rolled over onto his back and turned to Dane. "I want to try an experiment with you." His hand was still on his own cock, which remained

hard and unspent.

Dane laughed. "You and your experiments."

"Yep. Not now though. We'll wait until you have more time."

"What about you? You want to come?"

"No." Nathan dropped his hand. "I'm going to save myself for you."

Dane raised his eyebrows. "That sounds rather submissive of you."

"Not at all. I just don't like to rush." Nathan tugged gently at the used condom, tossing it into the can beside the bed. Leaning back down, he kissed the head of Dane's cock, the gesture curiously domestic and utterly sweet.

"When we get together next, I'll tell you what I want to do. I think it's time, Dane. It's time we unleashed your true potential."

Dane laughed nervously, trying to adopt a casual bantering tone, though his heart had begun a rapid tattoo. "Oh, yeah right. You're back on that theme—me as sub."

"I never left that theme. But I'm patient. Take all the time you need to get used to the idea. I'll be waiting. I'll wait a thousand years for you, Dane."

Dane didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. They lay quietly side by side for a while. Dane's thoughts were in turmoil as he tried to gather his defenses to deny yet again what Nathan seemed to hold as absolute truth. Each time he came up with a retort or clever remark, he knew he would just be saying it to say it.

Maybe he'd just go with Nathan's certainty. Maybe he'd trust him enough to find out for himself once and for all if what Nathan claimed about him were true.

Nathan was the first to move, sitting upright and swinging his legs over the bed. "You want to shower before you go?"

Dane looked at his watch. "I don't really have time. I'll just go wash up a little." He too sat, though his body protested, wanting to snuggle up with Nathan and take a nice long nap.

Nathan moved to dress, pulling on black dress slacks." I didn't know you owned anything not made of denim," Dane teased.

"I have to attend the opening of this new law office downtown. I've been warned I'd better clean up my act." He grinned. "They're unveiling the bust I did of the dead founder. A really ugly old dude, but I got them to find me some pictures from his youth so I could try to capture something of it behind the sagging wrinkles and faded eyes in the picture they initially gave me."

"That's what you were working on this weekend." *Why you couldn't see me, why you didn't call me...*

"Yeah. I've been messing with it for way too long. I decided I'd better get the damn thing done. Sometimes I can get kind of obsessive. If the earlobe is wrong or something, it just drives me crazy. I've been known to toss the whole thing and start over more than once." He grinned apologetically. "I'm running on fumes right now, actually. I've had maybe four hours sleep since I saw you last."

"Man, you must be exhausted."

"I must be, but I don't know it yet." Nathan laughed. "I'll crash after the reception. It's at four. I'll do the mingle thing and let them unveil the bust and hope to God it meets with their approval."

"They haven't seen it in advance?"

"Marilyn has. She's the daughter of the founder and a partner in the firm. She's the one who commissioned the bust for their front hall. Apparently she worshipped the old guy. She came herself with the curator to pick it up. She seemed pleased. I just hope the rest of the big wigs over there will approve as well."

"Are you happy with it?"

"As far as it goes, yeah. It's not a subject I would choose—the likeness of some old guy I didn't know. I prefer to create art about people I care about. About subjects that matter to me."

"So why do you do it? Why take these commissioned jobs that put you under pressure? Obviously you don't need the money."

"I don't know. I guess it's habit. I didn't have a lot of money until I turned twenty-five. My parents offered me an allowance but I didn't want it. I wanted to make it on my own, I guess, by the sweat of my own brow. Also, by taking these commissions, my name gets out there. I get invited to be in gallery and museum shows."

"You could buy your own gallery and set up a show every day of the week."

"I could. I guess it's vanity. It's like publishing your own book. You may be a great author, but if you're so great, how come no one else picked you up?"

"I'd pick you up." Dane said playfully, waggling his eyebrows. He too stood, heading toward the couch to retrieve his underwear.

He could feel Nathan's eyes on him. "I want to paint you. I want to sculpt you. Would you pose for me sometime? You'd make an excellent subject."

Staring toward the collection of bronze nudes across the room, Dane experienced an unpleasant spurt of jealousy. How many other lovers had Nathan painted and sculpted and immortalized with his amazing talents, before casting them aside for the next "subject?"

Then he recalled the painting on the easel, the vivid beauty and feeling in each brush stroke. Putting his childish insecurities aside, he said, "I'd be honored."

* * * *

Nathan nodded politely as a middle-aged man in a designer suit with a string tie, ten-gallon hat and cowboy boots, made from some kind of no-

doubt nearly extinct reptile, talked animatedly about his collection of oil paintings of the Old West.

Nathan was mentally calculating when he could decently slip away from the reception. He'd been there for days already, or so it seemed. He spied Gordon, his parents' driver, across the room and used the sighting as an excuse to extract himself from the present conversation. Gordon, who had been trained to respond accordingly when Nathan caught his eye at tedious family events, was waving energetically toward Nathan.

"If you'll excuse me, there's someone over there I have to see. Very important. I'm sure you understand."

He weaved through the crowd, accepting thanks and congratulations as he moved. The unveiling had been a success and as the liquor flowed freely the accolades became more effusive.

While Nathan appreciated the attention, he could never quite get used to it. Beyond that, the lack of sleep was finally catching up with him. He wanted to go home and sleep for maybe twenty-four hours straight.

He reached Gordon, who said, "Ready to go, boss?"

"Don't call me that." Gordon laughed. In addition to being the family chauffeur, he was a family friend. In his forties, he'd been with them for as long as Nathan could remember. More than once he'd protected Nathan's ass when he'd lied about where he'd been all night while he was still living at home.

The reception had taken on the atmosphere of a cocktail party in full swing. Nathan and Gordon slipped quietly out into the hot Austin sunshine. It was six o'clock.

What was Dane doing now? As Gordon drove him back to his place, Nathan thought about the plans he had in mind for Dane. He was at once excited and apprehensive, not sure if Dane was ready, but aching to find out. He knew Dane was hesitant and still skittish as a colt. By the same token, he sensed Dane was ready to be claimed, or to follow the horse

analogy, to be broken to the saddle. Nathan desperately wanted to be the one to tame that particular wild stallion.

Once back in his studio, he called Dane. He answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Dane. It's me. I'm back from the thing."

"The thing. You make it sound like a funeral or something."

"If the shroud fits..."

Dane laughed. "I'm actually still at work. Stupid meeting went forever. I'm finishing up though."

"I want to see you."

"I want to see you, too."

"Thing is, I made a mistake. I sat down. I guess I'm getting old. I can't pull these all-nighters anymore. I think I'm going to have to sleep some."

"That's cool. How about tomorrow? I think I can leave work early, even, if you want. I had a client scheduled for tomorrow afternoon who's postponed until next week."

"You can just come and go, huh? No clock to punch?"

"Nope. I'm management. That means I make my own hours, as long as I work fifty or sixty every week and don't mind weekends and whatever it takes to get the job done."

"Do you love what you do?"

"I enjoy it. Love might be a rather strong word. I do love making a good living and feeling financially secure."

"Spoken like a true banker. So, tomorrow then. You want to come over here? Or should we meet at your place? I want you where you'll feel most

relaxed."

There was a pause and then a nervous bark of laughter. "You and your experiments, I know, I know." Another pause. Nathan waited, wondering if Dane was going to balk. "How about we'll get something to eat first? We could meet for a late lunch. Say around three? We can decide then."

"Sounds like a plan."

They met the next afternoon at a small Italian restaurant not far from Nathan's place. Nathan felt much better after a good solid fifteen hours of sleep. Over fresh pasta with shrimp, lemon and garlic, hot buttery bread and glasses of red wine, they made small talk, though the underlying sexual tension arced like an electrical current between them.

As they ate ricotta cheesecake and sipped coffee, Nathan gently steered the conversation toward what he knew they were both thinking about. "So, you ready for my next experiment?" He expected Dane to hem and haw and make jokes.

To his surprise Dane answered simply, "Yes." Nathan absorbed this a moment, sure Dane would have more to say on the matter. He did. "Whatever's going on between us, it's like nothing I've ever experienced. I find myself thinking about it all the time. While my head tells me I'm Dom, when I'm with you, my body tells me something else. I'm not ready to say I'm a submissive, but I'm willing to experiment, to use your words. To push the boundaries of my own experience."

"An excellent first step. What I have in mind is a little bondage and a light scene. Nothing too restrictive or too intense. The idea is to take away the decisions you have to make—to let you more fully experience the moment. Are you with me?"

"Yeah. I get it. I'm Dom too, you know. I understand the submissive mentality."

"Okay. Fair enough. But I want to ask you not to think in those terms, if you can help it. I want you to give of yourself. Not just to take whatever I mete

out, but to embrace it. Be conscious, be aware. Then afterwards we can talk about it. We can share what it was like for each of us. I'm feeling my way too, because I've never been with someone..." he paused, trying to find the right words.

Dane filled in the blanks with, "someone who's also Dom. Someone you can't control just by pushing the usual sub buttons."

Nathan smiled and shook his head. "You won't give up, huh? And no, that isn't what I was going to say."

"What then?"

"Someone I think I'm falling in love with."

* * * *

"Arms behind your back, grab your elbows."

Dane was kneeling naked in the center of his bedroom. The space was more intimate than the huge warehouse studio and no sudden blasts of machinery would interrupt their play. More importantly it was his house, giving him some vestige of control.

A voice in his head was screaming. *What the fuck are you doing?* He could barely hear it over the rush of his pounding heart. He hadn't realized he'd react so physically to being tied up. Having done it to others so many times before, he'd never stopped to think what it must be like—to be helpless and at the mercy of someone else, unable to resist what was happening.

He could feel sweat prickling in his armpits. He was breathing too hard and too fast. Nathan was working behind him, slowly but deliberately rendering him captive.

Panic edged through his gut as Nathan pulled the knots tight. All at once the panic bubbled over and Dane jerked hard at the rope, which burned against his skin as he pulled one wrist free.

"No," he cried. "No. I can't do it."

Nathan, kneeling beside him, said in a low, soothing voice, "Of course you can. You're safe here with me. If you'll slow your breathing and take a minute, you'll remember that. It's just me, Dane. You can trust me. It's all about letting go."

Dane felt suddenly foolish. It wasn't that big a deal to have your arms bound behind you. He'd hog-tied guys before, binding them so completely they couldn't even move and none had ever challenged him, none had balked as he was doing now.

It wasn't as if he hadn't known Nathan was going to do this. They'd talked about it in some detail as Nathan laid out the strips of rope provided by Dane from his bag of goodies.

As Nathan had calmly explained what he'd like to do, Dane's cock had hardened. He couldn't deny, as frightened as he might be, he wanted whatever it was Nathan was offering. That thought, in itself, was almost scarier than the prospect of sexual submission.

As if reading his mind, Nathan said, "Don't fight yourself on this. If you can, don't even think about it. We're just trying it out. We decide it's not for us, we stop. Period. I won't take you where you don't want to go, Dane. I would never do that.

Dane nodded. "Okay. Sorry. I'm just not used to this."

"I know. You want to try again?"

"Yeah."

Nathan again moved behind him, patiently retying the knots and pulling the rope tight. Dane's heart was thumping. Reaching from behind, Nathan put his hand lightly over Dane's nose and mouth.

"Easy. Slow down. That's right. Breathe deeply. Concentrate on your breathing." Dane struggled to obey, closing his eyes and taking in deep, tremulous breaths. After a moment, Nathan withdrew his hand.

He adjusted the rope binding Dane's wrists to his alternate elbows. "How's that feel?"

Dane pulled at his restraints. "I can't get out of it, if that's what you're asking."

"I am. And it's not too tight?"

"No." He breathed deeply again, wondering if Nathan knew how hard his heart was beating. *What the hell am I doing?*

"Good." Nathan, still fully clothed in his usual T-shirt and faded jeans, patted Dane's head. Dane bristled at the gesture but said nothing. He was determined to go through with this, if for nothing else than to prove Nathan wrong.

Nathan pressed a hand between Dane's shoulder blades, pushing his head toward the floor. "Forehead on the carpet. That's right." Dane was keenly aware of his vulnerable position, bowed to the floor, his ass and balls exposed. He closed his eyes, trying to remain calm.

Nathan knelt beside him. "You're doing very well. Flow with the experience. Let yourself go. Trust me. Trust yourself." He stroked Dane's hair, his hand gliding down his back toward his bound arms.

"Now the only thing you have to do is stay in position. I won't spank you too hard your first time out. I just want the intimacy of skin on skin. Okay?"

Dane didn't answer. A spanking. Though he'd agreed to it, the thought of Nathan's hard palm cracking against his ass was humiliating. It was one thing to endure the lash, braving its leather bite, but a spanking seemed so ignoble.

Nathan's voice hardened. "When you submit to me, which you are doing now, you answer my direct questions. Is that understood?"

How many times had Dane said the same thing, or some variation of it, to his slave boys? Of course Nathan was right. If he was going to play this

game, he might as well do it right, just to get in the spirit of things.

"Yes, Sir."

"The *Sir* isn't necessary, though if you wish to use it, I have no problem with that. Now, I'll ask you again. Are you ready to submit to a spanking, doing your very best to stay still and in position?"

His cock had snapped to attention at the mention of the spanking. Disquieted by this realization, Dane tried to bluff through his feelings by retorting with military loudness, "Sir, yes Sir!"

Nathan didn't respond. Dane again felt foolish. He knew he was behaving like an ass but he couldn't seem to help himself. Nathan began to stroke his skin, feathering his fingers over Dane's bare, upraised ass. "Spread your legs farther," he said softly, pushing against Dane's thigh.

He reached between Dane's legs, catching his cock in a light grip. "Relax. Stay open to the experience. If you feel afraid or it hurts too much, tell me. While we're still exploring I want to hear from you every step of the way. Got it?"

Dane nodded and tried to swallow. His mouth was dry, his arms aching in the taut rope binding. Hell, Nathan had taken a flogging without so much as a whimper. Surely he could handle a little spanking.

Nathan's voice was soothing and he continued to stroke Dane's cock. When he let it go Dane repressed his sigh. "Okay, Dane. Here we go."

The first smack landed on Dane's left cheek. It was hard but not so hard he couldn't handle it. Dane wasn't afraid of pain per se. He'd just never permitted himself to consider being on the receiving end of it. The second smack was just as hard, this time on the other cheek.

Nathan spanked him, alternating cheeks, the rhythm slow and steady. Suddenly he smacked him quite a bit harder, all on the same side in a rapid succession of blows. Dane grunted and shifted despite his intention to stay still. He pulled away, twisting his body to avoid Nathan's hard palm.

"Back in position," Nathan snapped.

"It hurts."

"It's supposed to. You know that. The question is how do you process the pain?"

Dane was sitting back on his haunches, his stinging ass resting against his heels. "I can't do this."

Nathan stood and moved in front of Dane, looking down at him. "You can't or you won't?"

"I won't." Dane knew he sounded like a petulant child. He felt his face heat.

Nathan paused a beat. "Okay."

His sudden capitulation startled Dane. He'd expected a lecture, filled with more mumbo jumbo about flowing with the pain and eroticizing the experience and connecting with his true self. He waited but Nathan said nothing more. His lips were pressed in a thin line, his eyes even darker than usual and somehow flat, as if he were shutting Dane out.

He moved back behind Dane and began to release the knots.

"Hey, what're you doing?"

"Ending the scene."

"Why?"

"You're not ready. You don't want it bad enough."

Though he was getting exactly what he thought a moment before he wanted, Dane found himself protesting. "I *do*. I do want it. I mean, I think I do. Shit, I don't know what the hell I want, Nathan." One thing he didn't want was to let Nathan down, and he knew by his behavior that was just what he had done.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Give me another chance. Please."

Nathan came again to stand in front of him. He stared at him for a long minute. His eyes slowly lost that hard, blank look, softening as he smiled. "Do you deserve another chance?"

"I don't know."

Nathan smiled, his eyes again sparkling. "At least you're honest. Okay. We'll try again. But you obey me this time. I'm going to spank you until I feel like stopping and then I'll use you in whatever way pleases me. Understood?"

Dane opened his mouth to demand who the fuck Nathan thought he was talking to. His words died on his tongue as those dark eyes captured his. *I want to please him. I want to suffer for him.*

As these words slipped past his censors, he knew they were true. Though he was frightened, not so much of the pain but of his own desires, he wanted to see this through. He *would* see it through.

He knelt back down, resting his head against the carpet, offering his naked, bound body to Nathan. "Good boy," Nathan said softly. He struck his ass on the same cheek, already tender from before. Dane drew in his breath and willed himself to take it. The generalized sting bloomed into burning pain. He pressed his lips together, breathing hard through his nose, determined to get through it.

All at once the blows shifted to the other side, to Dane's relief. The relief was short lived, however, as Nathan proceeded to treat the second cheek to the same intensive treatment. Jesus, how could a man's palm hurt so fucking much?

Dane began to pant, his forehead scraping against the carpet with each strong blow. His ass was on fire. He forced himself to remain in position. *I can do this. I can do this.*

Finally his mind switched off, giving over entirely to the sensation of stinging pain sluicing through his body. Dimly he became aware of Nathan's hand on his cock, stroking it while the other hand continued to rain blows on his tender cheeks. He was partially distracted by the pleasure of Nathan's erotic massage, but not enough to offset the pain.

He felt something tug at his hair. "Get up. On your feet." He struggled to comply, losing his balance without the benefit of his arms. Nathan was beside him, righting him. Then he was in front of him, kneeling to take Dane's cock into his mouth.

Dane moaned with pleasure as Nathan skillfully pleased him. Nathan reached around, continuing to smack Dane's ass while he drove him wild with his lips, tongue and throat.

Pleasure overtook pain as Dane's climax rumbled in his loins like a volcano ready to erupt. All at once Nathan withdrew, leaving Dane teetering on the edge.

"Control yourself." Nathan's voice was hard.

Dane opened his eyes, confused. He was so close. He looked down at Nathan, whose eyes shone with a burning power and he understood. Nathan controlled his orgasm. He wasn't to come until Nathan said he could. But oh God, he wanted to. He needed to. He'd *earned* it, damn it.

"Hey. I took the spanking. I didn't move out of position. I get to come now. It's only fair."

Nathan gravely shook his head. "You took the spanking. But you didn't submit."

"What?"

"You muscled your way through it. You took it 'like a man' as you once said to me. You didn't submit. You didn't give yourself to me, did you, Dane? You just played the game. You haven't earned the right to come. Not yet."

He stood and gripped Dane's throbbing shaft. He began a slow tease, his fingers dancing over it and tickling the balls beneath. The heat in his groin was matched by a different kind of heat on his ass. He pulled at his ropes but he was firmly bound.

In a softer tone Nathan added, "I'm proud of you. You worked through your fear. I wasn't easy on you. I don't think you want easy. And in the end it's really about what *you* want, isn't it? We both know that. We've always known that."

Nathan milked his cock harder, gripping his balls in his other hand as he whispered in Dane's ear. "So do it. Come for me." His voice had hardened again with dominant insistence. "Not because you've earned it, but because you want it and because I want it."

No longer knowing if it was despite Nathan's order, or because of it, or because he was too aroused to control himself for another second, Dane obeyed.

* * * *

I don't think you want easy.

The words kept playing in Dane's head. Nathan lay asleep beside him. After the spanking and his orgasm, they moved to the bed, Nathan quickly shucking his clothing. They made mostly vanilla love until neither could move.

Dane had again lost himself in licking and suckling Nathan's balls while Nathan pumped his own shaft. He experienced a peculiar sensation while doing this, one he hadn't had words for when it had happened the first time. The feeling was somehow transporting. When he paid homage to Nathan in this way, and yes, that's what it was, he somehow got out of his own skin.

The tight control he kept over every aspect of his life was loosened when he crouched between Nathan's legs and lapped at his hot, heavy balls. Was this submission? He'd experienced some of the same feeling after the spanking,

when Nathan had pumped his shaft for him and ordered him to come. He'd let go, just for that brief moment, and it had been wonderful.

No, he didn't want it easy. He wanted it to matter. He wanted to talk about it.

He nudged Nathan with his elbow. "Hey. You asleep?"

Nathan didn't move. Dane let him sleep, though his mind was brimming with questions and newfound answers. Maybe it wasn't so easy to submit as he used to claim. Maybe it did take courage, even if you were into erotic pain.

What had Nathan said—don't muscle through it. Yes, that's what he'd done. He'd taken the spanking, gritting his teeth and bearing it, instead of giving of himself, instead of offering himself.

Was that something he wanted? Before he met Nathan he wouldn't have hesitated to shout a resounding no. And no one could deny he was an excellent Dom. At least, he knew how to give a good whipping. He understood the mindset of the sub and how to make them obey and worship him in the process.

But was that really being a good Dom? Or was that just knowing the buttons to push? Knowing how to get a reaction out of someone because he could relate.

He'd always told himself he could relate so well because he was the complement, the opposite that attracted. Yet Nathan had sensed something deeper in him, something he himself hadn't known, or at least had never dared to admit.

He wasn't sure he was admitting it now, either. Just because Nathan managed to wrest reactions from him didn't make him a sub. No way. Yet he had to admit he was intrigued. He was curious what Nathan planned for him next.

He nudged him again. "Hey. Sleepyhead. I'm getting hungry. Want to go out?"

Nathan stirred and opened his eyes. His smile lit his face as he looked at Dane. Dane smiled back, a surge of something he didn't yet define coursing through him.

"How 'bout we order in?"

"Okay." They decided on Chinese. Dane placed the order by phone and returned to the bed, where Nathan still lay sprawled over the covers, sexy as hell.

Dane, who had pulled on jeans shorts, lay back down beside his naked lover. "I've been thinking about stuff."

"Yeah? Tell me."

"I was thinking about what you said about muscling through, as opposed to really submitting. I never thought about it that way before. I was thinking about the way you took the whipping the other night. You were submitting to me, or to it at any rate. You didn't get through it, you flowed with it."

Nathan smiled. "I've had more practice."

"You going to tell me now you're a switch?"

"Not precisely. But my first experience in the scene was a submissive one, or at least masochistic. And actually at the hands of a woman, believe it or not."

"Do tell."

"I was with an older guy. Quite a bit older, actually, at least when you're nineteen. Steve was twenty-nine and savvy. We met at one of my parents' huge parties for the upper crust of Austin. We flirted for a couple of hours and then he suggested we blow that particular Popsicle stand, and he took me instead to this S&M dungeon located on the outskirts of San Antonio."

"You were nineteen?"

"Yeah, but not inexperienced. I spent several years of high school in Europe and they're way more relaxed about this stuff than in Texas, I can assure you. I'd developed an interest in the scene, but up to that point it had only been a theoretical one."

"So he takes you to this dungeon..."

"Yeah, and Senora Lucinda took a fancy to me."

"She knew you were gay?"

"She didn't care. She was something. I'll never forget it. She must have weighed maybe two hundred pounds, but she was gorgeous. She was Hispanic, with long, thick black hair, flawless olive skin and huge breasts spilling over a crimson corset. She carried her weight well, distributed in all the right places, I guess. But that didn't even matter. It was her bearing that was so arresting. She was like a queen. An imperious queen, tapping the handle of a long, dangerous looking whip in the palm of her hand when we entered the dungeon.

"Steve introduced me as slave Nathan, which I thought was going a bit far, but I went along. She told me to strip and show her what I had. We'd been drinking beers the whole ride down to San Antonio and I was feeling pretty fearless, so I did."

"I bet she liked what she saw," Dane teased, alluding to Nathan's substantial cock.

"I guess she liked it well enough. She tied me to this flexible web kind of thing and knelt in front of me and sucked my cock while Steve watched, his hand in his pants. Then she did this weird thing with thin nylon rope, completely trussing my shaft and balls and then, with a single pull, releasing it. It was the oddest sensation. I mean, it hurt like hell, but it was also incredibly hot. The friction, the situation, the fact I was nineteen, whatever it was, I shot my load all over the place while Steve and Senora Lucinda applauded."

"Wow. So that started your career as a slave boy?"

"I wouldn't go that far. Steve and I messed around some, and he tried to dom me, but he never got the reaction out of me she did. We didn't have that kind of connection. I've come to learn that, at least in my case, it's always been something instant and primal. In her case it didn't even matter that she was a thirty-something woman and I was a barely legal gay man. The D/s connection was there and it was immediate."

He paused and looked deep into Dane's eyes. "It was like the first time you and I met, Dane. We both knew it from that moment, didn't we?"

Dane stared back, mesmerized by his melted chocolate eyes. Nathan continued, his voice hypnotic. "Now it's just a matter of embracing our true selves. Of being open to new things and learning to accept whatever it reveals."

Teach me.

The words formed in Dane's mind but wouldn't quite reach his lips. It was fear, he knew, that kept him mute.

The doorbell rang. The food had arrived.

Dane leaped from the bed, grabbing his shirt from the floor as he loped toward the living room. Nathan called out with a laugh, "Saved by the bell."

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Chapter Ten

Dane lay listening to the incessant, irritating beep for several seconds before processing that it was his alarm. He reached for it, fumbling to find the off button. Normally he awoke at least ten minutes before his six o'clock alarm, listening to birds outside his window and mapping out his day. But normally he didn't have a sexy naked man in bed beside him—a man who had kept him up most of the night making love.

He dragged himself out of the bed and went into the bathroom. A hot shower woke him up somewhat. A hot cup of coffee and a cold glass of orange juice contributed as well.

He stared down at the sleeping Nathan and leaned down to brush the hair off his face. Nathan, eyes still closed, murmured, "Come back to bed."

"I can't. I have to go to work. I have a full day."

"Take the day off."

"I can't. I have several loans going to committee, not the least of which is yours. Then I have to get ready for the quarterly regional corporate meeting on Wednesday. I have to fly down to Houston first thing, and I have to be ready with our division's real estate financials for the quarter."

Nathan sat up, his face smudged with sleep, the sheet falling to his waist. Dane resisted the urge to kneel beside the bed and lick the dark red coins of his nipples.

"The busy executive. How am I ever going to train you to be a proper submissive if you're always running off to work?"

"Like that's going to happen." Dane laughed, but his laughter caught in his throat as Nathan trained his sharp gaze upon him. Feeling his face heat, Dane turned away, pretending to adjust his tie in the mirror over his bureau.

He turned back, sufficiently recovered. "You can stay here as long as you like. The front door locks automatically. I guess you'll get your, uh, driver?"

"I'll probably call a cab. I hate to bother Gordon for unscheduled trips. I might even take the bus if there's a line near here."

Dane shook his head with indulgent disbelief. If he were a millionaire, no way would he take a bus, but then, nothing else about Nathan was typical, either.

"I'd kiss you but I don't want to mess up my makeup," he teased. In fact, he knew if he kissed Nathan, the urge would be too great to pull off his clothes and climb back into bed—loan committees and corporate meetings be damned.

* * * *

Nathan woke hungry but too comfortable to move just yet. He guessed by the slant of the sun it was late afternoon. Closing his eyes, he saw the image of Dane as he'd left for work at the crack of dawn, his burnished coppery hair slicked back, with his pale blue striped tie and crisp white shirt that would probably stand up on its own, it was so heavily starched. He cut a handsome figure in his corporate getup, but Nathan preferred him naked, his hair falling over his eyes, his arms bound behind him...

Dane was a busy man, no question about it. Nathan was busy too, but by choice. At the moment he had finished all of his major projects, except the painting of Dane, which was really not much more than a study. He knew he'd want to paint him many more times.

There was so much he wanted to do with Dane. Despite the initial resistance, the spanking had gone well, even better than he'd expected. True, he hadn't yet given of himself in the way Nathan would require once Dane fully belonged to him, but he'd been willing and that was key.

Nathan understood Dane's resistance was primarily based on fear—fear of the unknown, fear of what Nathan expected, but probably first and foremost he feared his own reactions. Nathan was more certain than ever Dane was

ready to give of himself. It was Nathan's job to make sure he felt safe as they made the journey together.

What they needed was time. A good, solid block of time without office openings, meetings and business trips interfering. He could only imagine what went on in Dane's head when he was off by himself, no doubt reliving and critiquing every moment of the scene in his head, and finding ways to talk himself out of his deepest held feelings.

Nathan sat up, taking in the dull, functional bedroom. There was nothing offensive about it. It was just bland, like the rest of the house. It didn't tell him anything about Dane the man. Dane had explained it was just a rent house, with rented furniture.

A transient place for a transient man? Was Nathan falling in love with someone who might disappear in a year, transferred to the next banking outpost of his corporate empire?

Nathan grinned at himself. He was jumping ahead, way ahead. They'd known each other all of a few weeks. There was plenty of time to worry about the future.

Nathan was surprised at himself. It wasn't like him to look ahead, certainly not to worry about it. He believed in taking life as it came, one day at a time. Was this what love did to you—made you worry about loss?

He shook his head. It wasn't love that made people worry, he knew. It was fear and the failure to fully embrace what was offered at the moment, no matter what the future held.

He looked around the room again. Surely something of Dane was here. He'd been here for two years. He stood and moved toward Dane's bureau. On it was the usual clutter, a small pewter tray with keys, spare combs and a few receipts, a wooden cuff link box, several cologne bottles and a small ceramic bowl filled with loose change.

He pulled open the top drawer, which was filled with folded underwear and neatly rolled socks. The drawers below were as orderly, shirts folded in

three precise piles in one, shorts in the next, jeans in the bottom. Nathan grinned, comparing his own haphazard drawers, stuffed with barely folded clothing in the random order he happened to dump them after washing.

His parents were scandalized at how he lived—with no maid, not even a cleaning woman to come in once a month. His mother had delivered a stackable washer and dryer, which he'd wedged between the small refrigerator and the stove in his studio. He had to admit it had come in handy, especially when he needed clean paint rags.

They had begged him to get a “decent place” to live. They'd even tried to buy a property adjacent to theirs for him, but he'd headed them off, using his status as an eccentric artist to gain latitude. They had three other children from whom to acquire heirs and to foist their wealth and displays of status on, so they left him pretty much alone, especially once he'd come out.

They were pleased when he accepted commissions like the bust of the dead law partner, but were baffled and somewhat embarrassed by his occasional show, filled with naked bronze statues and paintings that were lushly erotic, even the abstracts. He knew he remained a mystery to them, the one they rolled their eyes over and shrugged when wondering “what went wrong.”

Dane's parents, he presumed, must be proud of their corporate executive son, moving steadily up the ladder in the business world. Did they, he wondered, sigh over the grandchildren Dane would fail to produce, or were they still in the dark as to his sexual orientation? There was so much about Dane he didn't yet know. He smiled, happy to think they had so much to discover together.

Not done exploring, he headed toward Dane's closet, recalling his duffel bag of toys. He found it on a shelf and pulled it down to examine the contents. There were the usual bevy of whips and crops, plus wrist cuffs, ankle cuffs and nipple clamps.

Ah, what was this?

At the bottom of the bag was a carrying case. It looked like a small briefcase, closed by a zipper around its perimeter. Nathan pulled out the case and carried it to the bed. He unzipped it, raising his eyebrows with interest. So Dane was into violet wands.

Nathan had engaged in this particular type of electrical BDSM play with a lover who was very into using static electricity for erotic stimulus. He'd had a huge assortment of glass bulbs and tubes, as well as metal attachments that transmitted a stronger, more directed shock than the sensual tingle of glass.

The kit was compartmentalized into many pockets and slots cut into foam rubber. At the center was a handheld generator that looked like a fat black plastic pencil with an electric cord at one end. All around it, each in its own separate cushioned slot, was an array of glistening glass. Nathan lifted a long, thin tube of glass with a metal base for conducting electricity. It was about seven inches long and a quarter of an inch in diameter, with a small disc at the tip. Perfect, Nathan thought, for cock and ball stimulation.

He took out the generator and uncoiled the plug. He found an outlet near the bed and plugged it in. Lifting out one of the larger glass balls, he inserted the metal tip into the nosecone of the generator and flipped it on.

The globe came alive with color—lightning bolts of amethyst, magenta, plum and royal blue sparking as the electricity danced through the glass. He held it just above his bare thigh, experiencing the gentle fizzing sensation, almost like champagne bubbles popping against his skin.

He detached the globe and inserted the cock probe, an image of Dane, naked and bound to a wall, rising like an erection in his mind. With the voltage set to low, he touched it to his own cock and jumped. It hurt, but not too much. The concepts of pleasure and pain were fluid when approached in the proper frame of mind. When the pain was eroticized, he knew the impact would be intense.

He returned the probe to its spongy compartment and withdrew a metal pinwheel. He'd used these before without the benefit of electricity, rolling

the sharp-toothed little wheel over sensitive skin. He could just imagine the heightened sensation when electricity was added to the mix.

His rumbling belly distracted him and he put away the toys, placing the kit back in the bottom of the duffel and hoisting it to its spot on the shelf. After peeing and washing his face, he went into Dane's kitchen, which turned out to be far better stocked than his own, with fresh juice, bread for toast and a broad assortment of jam.

He ate a banana while the bread toasted, a plan forming in his mind. With any luck, he could put the plan into action by the weekend.

* * * *

Dane was on his way to Houston, staring out the window of the small commuter plane. Below him were small neat squares of blue and green with a snaking ribbon of gray that must be the Colorado River.

He barely noticed the landscape, his mind back in Austin. When he'd returned from his workday, during which he hadn't had a second to breathe, Nathan was gone.

He'd left a note on the kitchen table, which read: *I'll see you when you get back from Houston. Miss you already. Love, Nathan.* Below the words he had drawn a picture of a bird-on-the-wing inside a heart. When Dane looked more closely, the bird was actually made up of the initials D and N artfully entwined together.

He took out the note now, which he'd handled easily a dozen times since then, and read it again. They hadn't managed to get together before he'd had to pack and leave early that morning for Houston. It was just as well, as Dane needed to be sharp for his meetings, but he, too, missed him already.

Funny how you could miss someone who only a few weeks before you didn't know existed. Nathan was the first man Dane could see himself with five years from now. He could even imagine growing old together, watching Nathan's hair turn from raven black to silver, while his own faded to gray.

Nathan.

He mouthed the word, sliding his tongue over the name the way he dreamt of sliding it over the pulsing vein along his cock.

They'd talked twice before he left, and each time Nathan had said he had an idea he wanted to run by Dane, but not over the phone. Dane, wildly curious, had tried to get him to give at least a hint, but Nathan had been adamant.

"I need to check something first. I'll have it figured out when you get back on Thursday."

Somehow Dane slogged through two days of meetings, giving his presentation, schmoozing over lunches and dinners and trying not to think of Nathan every second. When he deplaned at the Austin airport, he headed quickly through the terminal, his overnight bag slung over his shoulder, his head down.

It was raining, a warm July rain with no wind. He hurried to his car and pulled up short. There, leaning casually against the hood of his Mercedes, was Nathan, his hair and shirt plastered with rain, his face radiant.

For a split second Dane thought he'd conjured the image out of his own fevered imagination, so eager was he to see Nathan again. When he didn't vanish in a shimmer of mist, Dane exclaimed, "Nathan. What're you doing here?"

"Waitin' for you, darlin'," Nathan drawled, his usually light Texas accent thick as pig shit.

Dane laughed with sheer pleasure. He pushed the button on his key chain to unlock the car and threw his bag in the back. "Hurry, get in. You're soaked."

Nathan climbed into the passenger seat, shaking his long, wet hair like a puppy. Dane reached across him into the glove compartment and pulled out a folded hand towel he kept for emergencies.

"Here. For your face."

Nathan looked at it and laughed. "Only you would have a neatly folded washcloth in your glove compartment." He took the towel but instead of using it, he touched it to Dane's rain-stippled cheeks first. Then he wiped his own face and threw the towel into the back seat.

"Come here." Nathan reached for him. "I can't wait one more second."

They kissed, their damp faces close as they leaned together. After a moment Dane pulled away. Glancing through the rain-splattered window he said, "We're in a public place."

"Kissing is against the law?"

"Don't be naïve. All we need is some outraged shit-kicker with a gun passing by and getting his chaps in a bunch."

"Okay, okay. Sometimes I forget I'm in Texas. Take me home then, so I can have my way with you in the privacy of your rental home or my studio, your pick."

Dane eased his way out of the parking space, glancing repeatedly at Nathan by his side, still not quite able to believe he was there. "How'd you know where to find my car?"

"It wasn't too difficult. There aren't that many planes coming in from Houston at five, which is when you said you'd be landing. And as to your car, there aren't too many late model, luxury silver Mercedes in the parking lot near to the gate, which is where I figured it would be, since you had to leave at the crack of dawn to make the flight."

"Good deducing, Sherlock."

They drove in companionable silence for a while, as Dane weaved through the rush hour Austin traffic and merged onto 290.

"So," Dane finally said. "You ready to tell me your big secret now?"

"Yes. I checked and the lake house is free for next weekend. We can have it the whole week if we want."

"The lake house," Dane repeated, with no idea what Nathan was talking about. "What lake house?"

Nathan laughed. "Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself. Of course this all depends on you. On your schedule and what you're able to negotiate at work."

"Go on."

"My theory is this. Both of us want to explore our new relationship, but stuff gets in the way. Each time we get together it's like we have to start over in a way. You're new to the scene, at least from the angle we're approaching it, and it's hard to sustain a level of comfort when you're constantly torn away by work and other distractions.

"So I thought, if you could manage it, maybe we could take a week off. I imagine you have vacation time saved up, or whatever, at the bank." Dane nodded. He actually had three weeks to use up by the end of the year, and so far he hadn't taken a day.

"It would be just you and me," Nathan continued. "My family owns a lake house up in the hill country. Nobody's using it right now. It's available for the week if we want it. I just have to let the staff that takes care of it know a few days in advance so they can turn on the power, air the bedding, stock the refrigerator, make sure the sailboat and motor boat are good to go, that sort of thing."

"A lake house, huh," Dane said, picturing a small cabin like the kind his parents used to rent in the Catskills when he was very small, though he doubted that's what Nathan's family would own.

"Yeah." Nathan shrugged. "It's got everything we need, even a little beach, and the best part is it's completely private. No distractions. What do you think? It would give us a chance to really explore this thing."

"This thing. I'm not sure what you mean."

"Then I'll be very direct. I want to fully explore your submissive potential. I want you to be able to trust me enough to really open yourself to the experience. I know you have reservations. They're perfectly natural. You've defined yourself for so long and it's hard to break out of old patterns. It can be disconcerting, even scary. So I'll make you a deal.

"All I ask is that you remain open to new experiences. That you honestly examine your own reactions instead of just giving a knee-jerk response. Let me teach you. For this one week give me the promise of your obedience and openness.

"When it's over, then you take your time. Process the experience. Decide if it was right for you—for us. We'll talk it through, as much as you want. If you decide it's not right—that whatever I thought I saw in you wasn't there, well, no hard feelings."

"What are you saying? I either submit to you or you break it off?" He glanced at Nathan.

"No, no, not at all." Nathan looked hurt. "Are you kidding me? I'd take you on vanilla terms, absolutely. I'll take you however I can have you. I just think we owe it to ourselves, you owe it yourself, to really find out what makes you tick."

Dane didn't answer. His mind was roiling with everything Nathan had thrown at him. *I'll take you however I can have you ... I want to fully explore your submissive potential...*

Dane glanced again from the traffic toward Nathan, who was facing him, his expression expectant.

"So? What do you say?"

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Chapter Eleven

"By all means," Bennett said in his hearty good ol' boy Texas drawl. "Might as well use it. You know the policy—use it or lose it."

"Yes, Sir," Dane nodded. It was a dirty trick, he thought, but would never say aloud—to give senior management four weeks paid vacation, on the condition they use it all during the fiscal year, without giving them the time off to use it. Almost no one in senior management ever took advantage of the full vacation time allotted. There was an unstated but nevertheless real perception that whoever had time to take all their vacation wasn't doing his job. Dane himself had only managed two weeks during each of the two years he'd been in Austin.

"I apologize that it's such short notice, but a great opportunity came up and my department is running pretty smoothly at this point. There are a few new deals in the pipeline but nothing my loan officers can't handle."

Bennett bent over his appointment calendar. "Actually, next week would be ideal. The internal auditors are finally done. You've got your projects well in hand and you can always delegate what you don't get done by the end of today." He glanced up through thick, wiry eyebrows. "You don't do that enough, Bishop—delegate. This will be good practice for you."

"I'll have my cell phone—"

"Well, leave the damn thing off. I'm sure you'll have better things to do than answer questions from your loan officers about how to structure a deal."

"Yes, Sir." *If he only knew*, he thought with an inward grin.

"Where're you going anyway? Cancun? Corpus Christie?"

"Actually a friend has the use of a lake house up in the hill country for the week."

"A *lady* friend?" Bennett leered, waggling his bushy brows suggestively and winking broadly.

"Uh, no. Just a friend."

Bennett leaned back in his huge leather chair and laced his fingers over his substantial gut. "Sometimes that's the most relaxing kind of vacation. Leave the ladies at home to shop and whatnot. Take your hunting rifle and bag some wild turkey, take some fishin' poles, a case or two of beer and just kick back and forget the world. Heaven." He sighed wistfully and then brightened. "I might just join you. Think this place could survive a week without the two of us?"

While Dane tried desperately to come up with a tactful way to refuse in no uncertain terms, Bennett burst out laughing and slapped his desk. "Had you going, didn't I? Don't worry, the wife already has every second of my leisure time planned out from now to next Christmas. Between her and Betty Ann, it's a wonder I get to take a piss without it being on someone's goddamned itinerary."

Dane nodded sympathetically, dying to get out of Bennett's office and back to his own. Once he could tactfully extricate himself, he hurried to call Nathan. It went straight to voice mail. Dane glanced at his watch. What had he been thinking? It was only ten o'clock, still the part of the morning Nathan referred to as the crack of dawn.

Dane left a message. "I got my vacation time approved. Call me later."

He leaned back in his chair, swiveling it so he could look outside. He barely saw the brilliant pinks and purples of the azalea bushes that bloomed outside his window, his mind focused on what he had just done.

A part of him was terrified at what he was committing to. Nathan had asked that he open himself to new experiences without falling into his old patterns and reactions. He was crazy for Nathan and, if he stopped the noise in his head, he was wildly curious to go further in this new exploration of his submissive side.

For he could no longer deny he had one. Though he'd yet to truly submit, at least as defined by Nathan, he found himself intrigued with the idea of giving control of his body and his erotic choices to Nathan. Though a part of him remained conflicted, the memory of his arms bound tight behind him while Nathan spanked his bare ass sent electric pulses of desire through his bloodstream, headed straight for his cock.

How could he have gone a lifetime never sensing his own submissive nature? Or had he? Dane thought about what he most loved as a Dom. Though he enjoyed the aspect of control—of having men kneel naked at his feet, begging for his lash or his cock—what really moved him was something different.

It was when he made someone fly. When he brought them to the edge of infinity and gave them the push they needed to soar. It was the closest he'd ever come to being in love—that deeply intimate connection where he felt tethered to his partner by living tissue—blood and bone melding with spirit until they were no longer separate beings, but two parts of a whole.

Sometimes he'd felt jealous of his lovers when this happened, forced to content himself with being on the giving end. He'd wondered what it must be like to experience the slide from pleasure to pain to a sensation far more complex and powerful than either on its own.

Yet at the same time he couldn't deny he was afraid. *What am I afraid of?* It wasn't the pain. In a way he was aroused by the pain, or rather by his own willingness to endure it, and Nathan's willingness to inflict it. Nathan wasn't afraid of hurting him. He wanted to hurt him—not because he took pleasure in Dane's suffering, but because he understood the erotic component of that suffering and appreciated how essential the experience was in a D/s relationship.

Of course this was all theory. Dane understood it from a dominant perspective, but was only just coming to face it from the other side. He thought about the many men he'd dommed over the years, back in New York and here in Austin.

With them he'd been firm, sometimes even cruel, pushing their sensual envelopes because it thrilled him to do so. Most of them worshipped him for it, but some had balked, as he had. Unlike Nathan, he never stopped a scene. He forced his way on his subs, acting out a part, he now realized, without really thinking through the consequences.

Perhaps because the scenes had never been in the context of a relationship, his actions had been forgiven, or at least tolerated. It was disconcerting to think sometimes he'd behaved more as a bully than a Dom.

What would those same men think now if they had seen him naked, arms bound, ass in the air, while his Dom smacked his behind until he squirmed away? Would they lose all respect for him? Would he be a laughing stock at Chained back in Manhattan, and at Boot Camp?

How would Nathan respond to the question? He could almost hear him say, "What you had at the clubs wasn't about submission. It was game playing. It was S&M. Nothing wrong with it, but it only paralleled D/s, perhaps occasionally intersecting with it from time to time."

So what made S&M and the games at the club so different from what Nathan seemed to be offering him with D/s?

Love. As the word slipped into his mind, it was Nathan's voice he heard.

Yes. Of course. That was it.

* * * *

The phone rang. It was nearly three in the morning. *Who died?* That was the first thought that entered Nathan's head as he wiped the clay from his hands and reached for the phone. Then he saw the number.

"Hey. I didn't know you banker types kept such late hours."

"God, I'm sorry. I'm sorry to call so late."

"It's okay. I was working in my studio. I haven't gone to sleep yet. What's the matter?"

"I can't go."

"What?"

"Tomorrow. I know we've got it all planned, but I can't do it. I'm not ready."

Nathan was quiet, taking time to absorb what Dane was saying and, more importantly, the urgent anxiety he sensed beneath it.

Knowing this wasn't the case, he bought time by asking, "Something's come up at work?"

"No. No, it isn't that. Though I thought of lying to you and pretending that it was."

Nathan tried to keep his voice steady and calm. "I'm glad you didn't. So talk to me. What's going on?"

"Jesus, do you ever react! I'm telling you I'm bailing on our week and you sound like some fucking shrink."

Nathan didn't respond, though he was stung. He pressed his lips together to keep from lashing back, aware Dane was hurting. On some level he knew he'd been pushing Dane too fast. His own lust and longing had obscured his normally more careful judgment.

Dane spoke again, his voice contrite. "Look, I'm sorry. That wasn't fair. I feel like a shit. You set this whole week up and I call the night before, no, the morning of, to cancel."

"You don't have to cancel. We can change the terms. Just go there to hang out. Forget the whole submissive thing." Nathan tried to keep the yearning out of his voice.

"No. I can't. I can't forget it. It's all I think about. I've been lying in bed since eleven, thinking of nothing else. I thought I was ready. But I'm just not. Maybe I don't have the courage—your word. The courage to submit. Maybe I'm just a punk who hides behind his whips and chains to keep from

admitting my true nature. Maybe you've blown my cover and I'm too freaked out to handle it, so I'm doing the usual run and hide."

"Dane, calm down. It's okay. I don't think you're hiding. I think you're facing things that are frightening in light of your chosen lifestyle up till now. You're beating yourself up.

"Let me take one burden off you right away. It's okay that you don't want to come spend the week. It's no big deal. It's not like you're inconveniencing me or anything like that. I mean, yeah, I'm bummed that you don't want to go, but maybe the timing's just not right."

Dane was silent for a moment. Nathan realized he was gripping the phone so tightly his fingers were cramping. He closed his eyes, let out a deep breath and forced himself to relax.

He wouldn't admit to Dane how deeply disappointed he was, or how intensely he'd been looking forward to a solid week without interruption, with Dane all to himself. He told himself it would happen when it was supposed to.

Again Dane said, "I'm sorry. Are you—are you going to cancel the plans?"

"Me? No. I think I'll go anyway. I'll get Gordon to drive me up. I might as well, since my mother has no doubt had the staff going at full throttle to air and clean the place and load up the kitchen with enough food for twenty people to subsist on for a month." He forced a small laugh. "It'll be a nice break. It's so hot right now anyway. Always cooler up by the lake. I'll take my art supplies and do a few landscapes. Get some swimming in. Give you some space."

"I don't want space."

"I think you do."

"No. I want to be with you. I'm just—okay, I'll admit it. I'm scared. I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I don't know if I can do it. I'm afraid if we try this, I'll fuck it up and ruin everything."

His voice cracked and compassion allowed Nathan to respond gently, "Dane, take yourself off the hook. I promise, it's okay. I'm still going to go. I kind of have to now or I'll upset the delicate balance of the Levi Empire." He snorted, only partially exaggerating.

"Listen," he went on. "A week isn't very long. When I come back, we can pick up where we left off." He paused, forcing himself to add lightly, "Or not. Up to you."

"I'm sorry. Nathan. I'm so sorry. I never meant to lead you on."

Nathan tried to ignore the fault line opening across his heart. "I don't feel led. I'm glad that you had the courage to tell me now, instead of going up there with me, with us not on the same page. Listen, I'm still head over heels nuts about you. One week apart isn't going to change that. I promise.

He paused, unable to resist adding, "And hey, if you change your mind, it's in Kingland on the Llano Arm of Lake LBJ. Lakeview House. It's easy to get to. Anybody around there can give you directions."

Dane didn't answer and Nathan immediately wished he hadn't said anything. He wouldn't beg. Dane wanted to come or he didn't. "Listen, it's late. Why don't you try to get some rest? Things might seem clearer in the morning."

"Okay. And Nathan?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for understanding."

Nathan cradled the phone and stared for a long time at nothing. Had he played his hand too quickly with Dane? Pushed him too far too fast? Was he losing so soon the best thing he'd ever found? He dropped his head into his hands as hot tears slipped between his fingers.

* * * *

Dane didn't get out of bed until Saturday evening. He told himself it was because he felt a cold coming on and wanted to stave it off.

Why did Nathan have to be so fucking understanding about everything? It made him feel twenty times guiltier.

A part of him had wanted Nathan to explode with righteous indignation—to demand that he come with him and be his sex slave for the week. Even though he knew Nathan would never do that, he'd wanted him at least to exert more control, to talk him into coming, to convince him it would be okay.

But Nathan hadn't done that. Had his claims of longing to explore Dane's submissive potential just been a lot of poetic bullshit? When push came to shove, wasn't Dane worth fighting for?

He shook his head, aware that wasn't fair. Nathan had said himself, submission couldn't be demanded, it had to be freely offered. He had to want it bad enough.

The crazy thing was, he *did*. Everything they'd done so far had excited and challenged him. He was deeply curious to explore his new feelings but too afraid to act on them. Why was he so reluctant? What was he afraid of?

He knew if there was anyone he could trust in this exploration, it was Nathan. He was grounded and sensitive. Sometimes it seemed like he understood Dane better than Dane understood himself. Maybe that was part of what he was afraid of. It was scary to feel out of control, especially for someone like himself, used to keeping a chokehold on every aspect of his life.

"What the fuck is wrong with me?" Dane said aloud. "I have a week off and the chance to spend it with the sexiest guy I ever met. Am I fucking nuts? I'm falling in love with this guy but instead of jumping at the chance to be with him, I wimp out because I'm scared of feelings. Feelings never killed anybody. Don't I owe it to myself to at least find out if this is for me?"

He thought about leaving then and there. Then he decided that was stupid. Who knew if Nathan was even there yet? He could call him and see if it wasn't too late to go together. No, that was stupid, too. He'd seem like such a flake. Which he was.

The next morning when Dane awoke he knew before he opened his eyes he was going to go. He'd already wasted one day. He reached for his phone but looked at his clock first. It was eight in the morning. No way would Nathan be up.

Dane got out of bed and showered and dressed. Sitting down at his computer, he did a map search for directions from Austin to Kingland. What if he just showed up? Would Nathan be angry? He'd left the invitation open, but maybe only as a courtesy. For all Dane knew, maybe he'd taken another guy. Nathan had never talked about anyone else in his life, but that didn't mean there wasn't someone. After all, how well did they really know one another?

Ignoring his qualms, he packed a suitcase with clothes he thought he might need at a lake, plus his shaving kit and several pairs of shoes and sandals. He glanced toward the closet where he kept his bag of BDSM toys. Without allowing himself to think it over too much, he retrieved it and placed both bags by the front door.

He dawdled around the house, checking that appliances were unplugged, making sure his stop mail request had gone through at the post office, emptying the garbage, putting away the two dishes he'd left to dry in the rack the night before. He was, he realized, going to drive himself insane with minutia if he didn't get out soon.

"Okay, Bishop," he said aloud. "Let's do this thing before you change your mind again."

About an hour and a half later Dane found himself in Kingland. The directions had been easy to follow. He'd lost his way a little on the search for the private drive, but eventually found the wide country road with a sign marked, "Private Property—Lakeview House." He glanced for the last time

at his map. This was it. About a quarter of a mile down the road he saw the house.

It was large by any standard, an imposing white structure with tall pillars flanking its front, reminiscent of an old plantation house. It was set back, a thick, green lawn between it and the road. Beyond the house he could see the lake dotted with sailboats.

He turned onto the drive and pulled up in front of the house, cutting the ignition. He looked at his watch. It was a little after eleven. If Nathan was in there, the odds were high he was still asleep. Dane didn't feel comfortable just walking in.

He popped the trunk and climbed out of the car. The air was definitely cooler here than back in Austin, a nice breeze coming in from the water. He retrieved his bags and walked up the stairs, his heart tapping a nervous beat.

There was a large wraparound porch. Not ready to knock yet, Dane walked around it toward the back of the house to survey the lake. It was a deep blue, the sunlight sparkling like skimming diamonds over the surface. Across the water he could see a long, low mountain dotted with dark foliage.

Returning to the front door, he rang the doorbell and waited. No one came. Was it possible Nathan hadn't come after all? What a fool he'd feel, having just decided to come without calling. At least no one would be witness to his idiocy. He leaned against the porch railing, pondering what he should do next.

A minute later he heard a sound from inside the house and turned expectantly toward the door. As it opened he stood, his heart beat faster.

There he was, Nathan in nothing but cutoff denim shorts looking even better than the sexy image burned into Dane's memory. When his eyes lit on Dane he smiled widely and held out his arms.

"I heard a car. I was hoping..."

Dane moved into his arms and they held one another for a long time, as if they hadn't seen each other in months, instead of just two days. When they finally let go, they stepped back, staring at each other with silly grins on their faces.

"Hi," Dane said shyly. "I was such a total ass. I'm really sorry for being such a jerk. I hope it's okay I just showed up. You're—you're alone, right?" He looked past the open door but could see nothing.

"Alone? Of course I'm alone. Did you think I found someone new between yesterday and today? You're the one I want, Dane. You. Not some random guy. You. And yes it's okay you just showed up. It's better than okay. It's the best present I ever got. It's my birthday today. On this day twenty-seven years ago, my parents got laid."

Dane laughed. "No way. Why didn't you tell me?"

Nathan shrugged. "I forgot, actually. My mother reminded me with a phone call. She thinks I arranged this week at the lake on purpose, to avoid having to go over for cake and crap. She's probably right. Subconsciously, that's what I did. Everything is always about her, in the end." He laughed and Dane laughed too, out of sheer happiness.

Nathan turned toward the house. "Come on inside. We'll get your stuff put away." He reached for the duffel bag. "Brought your bag of tricks, I'm glad to see." His eyes were suddenly bright with lust.

They stepped inside a foyer that led into a large room nearly as bright as the outdoors. He dropped the duffel in the foyer and Dane did likewise with his suitcase, following Nathan into the living room.

The entire back wall was flanked with windows that let in the sunlight and the spectacular view of the lake. The room held a large brick fireplace, around which several plump armchairs and a sofa had been placed, with end tables between them. The walls were paneled in light wood, with large framed watercolors of various views of the lake and the mountain beyond hung about the room. The pictures were inviting. Dane moved close to one, captured by its vivid use of color and artful, clean lines.

"You did this," he said, before seeing the tiny scrawled signature in the bottom right corner.

"Guilty as charged," Nathan admitted. "When I was sixteen. I was stuck here all summer with no one I wanted to be with. My mom insisted on hanging them all, even the crappy ones."

"There are no crappy ones that I can see."

Nathan laughed. "That's because she stuck them in the bathrooms, probably hoping no one would notice."

"Well, I'll check them out and tell you what I think." He walked from one painting to the next. "Man, sixteen, huh? All I remember when I was sixteen was masturbating, surfing the Internet, wrestling and playing baseball."

"I did that too. Well, not the baseball part. I preferred running track."

Dane spun slowly around the room. "This place is enormous."

"Yeah, the place is huge. Sleeps fifteen or something. My parents generally come up in August. I think my brother and his family will be using it in a few weeks, but for now we have it all to ourselves."

Moving close to Dane, Nathan said softly, "I'm glad you came, Dane. I was so hoping you would. I'm just going to ask this once, and please don't think I'm pushing you one way or the other. But are you here as my submissive? Or just as a friend."

Dane swallowed. He could feel his face flush, even as his cock came alive in his jeans. It was now or never. Before he could talk himself out of it again in his head, he said, "As your submissive. If you'll have me."

Nathan nodded and reached for Dane, holding him tightly for a moment. He let him go and cleared his throat, as if trying to pull himself from the grip of some powerful emotion.

Off the front hall was a staircase that curved grandly toward the second floor. Dane followed Nathan to the top, admiring his sexy ass as they walked. He peered in as they passed a room with the door ajar.

"That's the master bedroom," Nathan said, looking back. "My parents stay in there. We'll stay in the room I like to use when I'm here." He led Dane past three more doors to the last one and pushed it open. Inside was a large four-poster iron bed with a cream-colored silk swag draped over the high iron railings. The now-rumpled bedding matched in cream and pale green silk, and the walls were painted the same pale, soothing green.

Near the bed was a table topped with an intricate mosaic pattern of bright blue and rich green glazed ceramic squares. Beside it was a reclining chair with an ottoman—perfect for relaxing with a good book. The room had a large bay window that faced the lake. The open window let in a gentle breeze that ruffled the white gauzy curtains.

Dane sat on the chair and leaned back. He touched the mosaic tabletop. "Did you make this?"

"Yeah. Back in my artsy-crafty days. It might look pretty, but the bumpy surface isn't very handy for placing a full glass of liquid. I learned that the hard way." He grinned. "They really should have it covered with glass if they're going to keep it in here for guests."

"It's beautiful. It reminds me of the ocean."

"Sweet." Nathan moved close. "That's what it's supposed to remind you of. See those white bits there? Those are the wave caps."

Their fingers moved together over the pattern until they touched. Dane looked up at Nathan, who was watching his face.

"Are you sure, Dane? Is this what you want? Because if you're really here to explore your submissive potential, I don't expect you to change your mind from minute to minute. You have to give it your all if you're serious. So take some time to really consider if this is what you want. If it is, then from this moment forward you belong to me. Not just as my lover, but as

my possession, my property, my sexual slave. Not just while we make love, but 24/7 from now until next Saturday."

Dane nodded. Nathan sat on the ottoman and reached for his hand. "I take the gift of submission very seriously. I don't expect perfection, nor do I require it. I won't ask more than you can give. All you have to do is trust me to guide you and surrender yourself to the experience with grace. Can you do that? Do you want to?"

His eyes still on the beautiful mosaic, Dane swallowed hard. His heart had begun a tap dance against his ribs. 24/7. Would he be able to sustain the obedience and openness Nathan demanded? He honestly had no idea, but if forced to bet on it, he'd say the odds were against him. What the hell did he know of obedience and grace? Very fucking little.

Yet here he was. For whatever reason, he hadn't been able to stay away. He knew this might ruin the fledgling relationship they had begun. Or it might be what he'd been looking for all his life, though he hadn't known he was searching until he'd first stared into Nathan's eyes.

Nathan stood and walked toward the bed. He lay back against the pillows, folded his arms behind his head and looked at Dane, waiting for his answer. Losing himself for the thousandth time in those deep, dark eyes, Dane found himself whispering, "Yes, Sir."

* * * *

Nathan patted the bed beside him. "Bring your toy bag up here and let's see what you've got." He didn't mention he already knew. Though he wouldn't normally go through someone's things without their permission, he'd wanted to get insight into Dane's submissive potential without alarming him too early on.

Dane lifted the large duffel from the floor and came over to sit at the bottom of the bed. He set the bag down between them and unzipped it. He took out the large suede flogger he'd used on Nathan. "You've already seen this," he said with a sheepish grin. He laid it on the bed, neatly smoothing out the long, soft leather tresses until they were aligned.

"And felt its sting," Nathan agreed. His hands fairly itched to try it out, but he would wait. The most important thing was Dane had come to him. He'd agreed he wanted to explore D/s from a new side. Nathan would do his best to take him there, but not so fast he scared him away again.

Dane took out several crops of various lengths and sizes, as well as two canes, one that resembled the curved handle of an umbrella, though much thinner, the other long and straight, its handle covered in black leather. He removed a pair of black leather wrist cuffs, a pair of ankle cuffs and several ball gags, brightly colored rubber balls with leather straps dangling from them.

"You can put those back. I don't like gags," Nathan informed him. Dane glanced at him, something like relief flashing over his face, though he said nothing as he obeyed. Nathan could tell he was nervous. That was okay. They would work through it.

Nathan himself was deeply excited. His cock was bulging against his fly, fully erect against the length of it. If Dane weren't so skittish, he'd throw him against the bed, pull down his jeans and crop his ass with the short-handled red crop, after which he'd fuck him soundly, enjoying the heat of his marked ass as he moved against him.

Instead he remained outwardly calm, watching as Dane pulled items out and laid them neatly one beside the other for Nathan's inspection. He'd added nipple and cock clamps to the display, as well as several tied cords of rope and a black sleep-mask blindfold.

Nathan waited. Dane turned toward him. "That's it. My portable BDSM stash."

"Nothing else in there?"

"Nope."

Nathan lifted his eyebrows. "I think there's something else in there."

Dane flushed a dull red. "No. No, nothing else."

"Dane. Listen to me. If you're going to find out what it is to submit, you have to be completely honest. That means you hold nothing back. If you start out this week by withholding something from me, we might as well just go out to the dock and go fishing or something. If you aren't willing to be completely upfront with me, then you don't want this. Maybe we've made a mistake to even try."

"No. I do. I want to try it. I have to know for myself." Dane's tone was suddenly accusatory. "How come you're so sure there's something else? Did you go through my stuff when I wasn't there?"

"Yes."

Dane's head snapped back a little, as if he'd been physically struck by Nathan's admission. "You did?"

"Yeah. I was curious. I wanted to understand you better. I was intrigued to see the violet wand kit. It's a very nice one. So tell me, why are you hiding it from me?"

Dane reached into the bag and slowly withdrew the large, flat case. He set it on his lap and ran his hands over it, smoothing the grainy leather. His face was flushed, his eyes hidden as he stared down at his hands. "I—I hurt someone with the wand. I didn't mean to. I didn't know how to use it right. I had the voltage up too high and I left the probe in one spot for too long and I burned him." He gave a rueful laugh. "He freaked out and punched me in the face. He broke my nose actually." He touched the bump on the bridge of his nose. "He didn't mean to. It was just a reaction."

"Man, talk about a scene stopper."

Dane managed a smile. "You aren't kidding. Blood everywhere, him screaming that I'd burned his cock while also apologizing like crazy for hitting me. I got us both ice packs. He left with the pack in his pants and I took myself to the emergency room and got my nose seen to. I've never touched that thing since."

"Why did you keep it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

He fixed his gaze on Dane until Dane looked down. "I guess I thought maybe one day I'd ... want it." He looked up quickly, adding, "I mean to use again. On someone else. Not for it to be used on *me*."

"Not on you?"

"No way."

"When used properly, violet wands can be incredibly erotic. You've got a very nice kit there. I doubt you even hurt that guy much. He just got scared is all. It's static electricity. It's not like being shocked by a toaster or anything like that. The sensation is very sensual, and all the more so when you experience it at the hands of a Dom in whose trust you've placed your body." He paused. Dane was watching him with those big blue eyes.

He covered Dane's hand with his own and gently squeezed. "I would never harm you, Dane. I hope you know that." Dane nodded and Nathan made his voice firmer. "Put the case on the bed beside the other toys."

He waited. It was the first test of Dane's willingness to submit. For this, Nathan knew from Dane's reaction, would be an actual act of submission, since Dane was obviously afraid of the wand. After a beat and then another, Dane lifted the case from his lap and set it down beside the other toys.

Something shifted between them at that moment. Nathan could feel it and he was sure Dane could as well. The balance of power had tipped toward him at last. Dane was ready.

Nathan surveyed all the erotic toys on the bed and then raked Dane's handsome face and hot body with his eyes. Dane's erection rivaled his own. Now it was up to Nathan to bring the potential of Dane's erotic submission into full flower.

He couldn't wait.

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Chapter Twelve

Before getting down to a serious scene, Nathan suggested they take a swim. They headed down toward the lake, past tall, lush vegetation toward the narrow, sandy shoreline. They carried a beach bag with towels and lotion, and a small cooler filled with water and beer. They both wore bikini bathing suits, Nathan's dark blue, Dane's bright red.

"This is a private beach?" Dane looked in both directions. He could make out houses here and there along the lake, but the closest one had to be half a mile away.

"Yep. We can skinny dip if we want. I could tie you down with stakes in the sand and have my way and no one would be the wiser." Dane glanced sharply at Nathan. Surely he was kidding. Nathan's eyes were dancing and Dane decided he had been.

They spread out their towels and slipped out of their sandals. Dane pulled off his T-shirt and folded it, tucking it back into the beach bag.

"To quote Woody Allen," Nathan said, "I don't tan, I stroke." He held out the bottle of sunscreen and Dane took it with a smile. He himself tanned easily and already had a good base tan from weekly tennis and golf.

Nathan pulled off his T-shirt, tossing it in the sand beside his towel. He lay on his stomach, his face cradled in his arms as Dane liberally applied the lotion to his skin. Though Nathan was quite slender, his back was broad and strong, the muscles rippling beneath the skin as Dane smoothed the sunscreen over it. Dane's cock nudged against his suit in appreciation.

Ignoring it, he settled himself beside Nathan, stretching out on the thick beach towel, trailing his finger in the sand beside it. The late afternoon sun beat down on them from a cloudless sky, somewhat offset by a cool breeze from the lake.

Dane felt edgy, waiting for things to begin. He was glad he had decided to come up; glad, too, Nathan hadn't made too big a deal about it.

When he'd set out the toys on the bed, he'd felt something turn on inside him, like the whirl of some kind of sexual machinery that still hummed below the surface between them.

He could imagine the flogger, but the cane? The violet wand? He had arrived finally determined to give this submission thing a serious try. Could he handle it? Would he really learn to eroticize the pain, as Nathan had promised, or would he only endure it because it pleased Nathan?

Whatever was going to happen, he wanted it to start already. He lay still, letting the sun warm his body. He would wait and see. Nathan would know what to do. He just had to trust him.

Nathan rolled over, his shiny dark hair flopping into his face. He shook it away. "Want to go for a swim? There's a raft out there, see it? It's a good swim to reach it and then we can rest over there before we swim back."

Dane looked out toward a large, blue canvas raft secured by buoys bobbing gently in the water. They walked toward the water, which was shallow for several feet out, the sandy bottom sloping gently downward. Once it was deep enough, they began to swim.

The water was cool and felt fantastic against Dane's hot skin. He ducked down, swimming underwater until he had to surface to catch his breath. Nathan was quite a bit ahead of him, swimming in long, sure strokes toward the raft.

When Dane reached it, Nathan was already perched on it, sitting cross-legged, water dripping from his lean, hard body, his hair slicked back from his face. Dane pulled himself up onto the raft.

"Take off your bathing suit."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Nathan, people could see us—"

"Do as you're told."

And so it had begun. Dane didn't want to take off his bathing suit with the possibility of being seen by Nathan's rich neighbors. While he had no problem stripping for strangers in the right setting, this wasn't it.

Nathan's eyes were bright, the pupils pinpoints in the glare of the sun. Dane knew he was being tested. Would he fail so soon?

Hesitantly he pulled at his bikini, sliding it down his legs. His cock and balls, cold from the water, weren't much to look at.

"Lie down on the raft, on your back," Nathan ordered.

Dane obeyed, closing his eyes. Despite the cold, he could feel his cock stirring, aware of Nathan's eyes on him. He felt Nathan's mouth close over his cock. It rose at once, stiffening and elongating in the wet heat of his kiss.

Nathan gripped his balls as he suckled him. In short order Dane was gasping, near to coming. All at once Nathan pulled away. Dane opened his eyes. "Hey," he entreated.

"Hey what?"

"Don't stop."

"Is that an order?" Nathan's voice was teasing but his gaze was hard.

"No," Dane answered softly.

"Good. Don't forget yourself so soon. Remember, this is your week for discovery. It's your chance to find out if you're merely curious about the other side of the D/s equation or born for it.

"I've found heightened arousal and denial of orgasm can be very effective tools in putting a sub into the proper headspace. You won't be coming until I say so, and then only after you've earned it. Is that understood?"

Dane fought a confusion of feelings. Part of him wanted to grab Nathan, force his head back down to his crotch and make him finish what he'd started. Another part couldn't deny the thrill Nathan's words wrought deep in his soul.

He mumbled his agreement.

"I can't hear you. Speak up."

"Yes." As he said the word, heat licked at his face, dueling with the heat in his cock, which was suffused with blood and aching with need. He knew he was still fighting his submissive impulses but he couldn't help it.

If Nathan was aware of his internal conflict, he gave no sign. "Good. Put your suit back on. We'll swim back to shore and you can start earning it."

Without waiting for Dane's response, Nathan stood poised over the water, arced gracefully and executed a perfect dive. Dane followed suit, at once anxious and eager for whatever lay ahead.

* * * *

Dane's toys still lay on the bed in a neat array. Nathan observed Dane kept shooting glances toward them, though he made no comment. "Let's move these out of the way," he said, scooping up the toys and dropping them on the bureau.

Dane kicked off his bathing suit and reached for his pile of clothing. "Don't bother to put those on. I want you naked," Nathan told him.

He himself replaced his wet suit with his cutoffs. Dane stood naked by the chair, his hands modestly crossed over his cock and balls. Nathan could see he was nervous.

"Lie down on the bed. Close your eyes and relax." Dane did so. Nathan sat next to him, stroking his chest. "Before we introduce you to the receiving end of one of your whips, we'll begin with a lesson in self-control. I want you to relax and focus on what I do to you."

Dane nodded, his eyes still closed. His arms were by his sides. Nathan stroked one arm, moving his fingers along it. When he reached Dane's hand, he gently unfurled the clenched fingers. "Relax," he whispered. "This is all good."

He did the same thing with Dane's other hand and then focused his attention on Dane's gorgeous cock. He teased it to full erection with feather light strokes and the lightest touch of his lips. Dane moaned and lifted his hips, a silent signal he wanted more.

"Don't move," Nathan ordered. "Lie perfectly still. I'm going to touch you, sometimes softly, sometimes rough. I'm going to give you pleasure and I'm going to give you pain. You're going to take everything I give you without protest, without speaking, without asking for more or for me to stop. Only if you find the action is getting too intense, then tell me that. I'll stop at once and we'll take a break.

"I think you can handle this, though, Dane. You're not going to push through it like you did the spanking. You're going to welcome it. Embrace it. Accept the pleasure and the pain as two sides of a coin. A lot of this is mental. It's a mind game, a way of experiencing the physical by processing it in a different way than you might be used to."

As Nathan spoke, he had continued to stroke Dane's cock, enjoying the satiny feel of his skin. Now he reached up and caught hold of one of Dane's nipples. While he continued to fondle his cock, he twisted the nipple sharply.

Dane gasped, his eyes flying open. "What the..."

"Pleasure and pain go together now." He twisted harder, while still stroking Dane's cock. Dane groaned. He released the nipple and grabbed the other, twisting it harder still.

"Ah," Dane gasped.

Nathan let go of his nipple, replacing his fingers with his mouth. He tongued the smooth areola and nibbled at the tiny nubbin at its center. As he kissed Dane's chest, he slapped his cock.

Dane jerked and Nathan slapped him again. He lifted his mouth from Dane's chest and whispered, "For you, pleasure and pain are two parts of the whole. You crave one, you need the other. Eventually there will be no difference between them."

Gripping Dane's shaft, he leaned again toward his chest, catching a nipple in his teeth and pulling. Dane let out a sharp, sudden breath. Nathan continued to pull and stroke his cock until Dane began to buck against his hand.

"Jesus, Nathan. What are you doing to me? I can't ... I need to..." He began to pant as Nathan moved from his nipples to his cock, closing his mouth over the head and licking in a long, slow circle down the shaft until his nose met Dane's pubic bone.

He pulled back slowly, keeping the suction as he moved. Dane groaned and grabbed his head. Nathan abruptly let his cock fall. "Hands at your sides."

His chest heaving, Dane obeyed. His nipples were shiny and red from Nathan's teeth and tongue. Nathan grabbed both nipples at once and twisted them, wrenching a cry from Dane.

Still holding them tight in his fingers, Nathan said, "Don't come. You are not to come. If you do, you'll be punished."

"Punished," Dane whispered, as if he didn't know the word, or was trying it out for the first time.

Nathan released his nipples and sank back down, lovingly caressing Dane's cock and balls with his mouth and hands. It didn't take long before Dane began to tremble, his body shuddering as he neared climax.

Nathan pulled back. "No. Remember. Not until I say." He stroked Dane's strong, flat stomach, ignoring for the moment Dane's erection and his own. He stood and Dane opened his eyes. His lips were parted and he continued to breathe hard, though he had fallen back from the edge of orgasm.

"That was excellent, Dane. You are my brave, sexy man." Dane said nothing. Nathan knew he wanted to come. Not yet—he would have to earn it. "I think you're ready now. Come pick the first toy you want me to use on you."

Dane opened his mouth and then closed it again. "What?" he finally said, though Nathan was sure he had heard him.

"I think you're ready. If you stay the course, you're going to learn that words like pleasure, pain, suffering and ecstasy can all be interchanged when you're in the right headspace. You're going to learn that submission isn't about getting through it, but giving into it, and to your Dom, completely and without reservation."

He could see a muscle clenching in Dane's jaw. If Dane hesitated or balked outright, Nathan would try to take it in stride. They would try something easier, something less threatening, though Nathan knew Dane wanted what he offered, if only he could find the inner courage to embrace it.

But it had to come from Dane. He wasn't going to push and pull him into submission like some stubborn mule. Dane had to want it, and want it bad, or it wasn't going to work.

He waited. Slowly Dane stood and moved toward the bureau. He picked up the flogger, the one he'd used on Nathan. Nathan let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

"Present it to me. On your knees and offer it. You know what to do."

Dane did know what to do, though that didn't stop him from flushing as he did it. Though it was sometimes stressful, Nathan found himself turned on by Dane's obvious struggle. He likened it in his mind to taming an

especially difficult wild horse. The prize of submission would be that much sweeter, once attained.

Dane knelt in front of Nathan and balanced the whip in both hands, his palms up. He raised his arms toward Nathan and bowed his head. Nathan took the whip. "Very nicely done," he said. "Now lie down over the ottoman."

Setting down the whip, Nathan opened the top drawer of his bureau and removed two large cotton bandanas. "I'm going to tie your wrists to keep you from squirming too much." Dane didn't say anything. He was bent over the ottoman on his knees, his cheek resting on the edge, his face averted.

Nathan continued. "I know this is your first whipping, but as I'm sure you know, a flogging is usually easier to take than a spanking, so you shouldn't have any trouble with the physical aspect of it.

"Being tied down might be a panic issue for you, based on your initial reaction the other night when I bound your arms. So I want you to communicate with me, okay? If you're having trouble or freaking out, you tell me. Don't white-knuckle it. I don't want to force anything on you. Everything we do this week, we'll do together. That doesn't mean it won't be hard sometimes, or scary. But remember I'm there with you. We're doing this for *us*."

Dane lifted his head and their eyes met. Nathan moved in front of him, knelt down and took his face in his hands. He kissed him for a long moment and Dane kissed him back, almost fiercely. He wanted this, of that Nathan was certain.

He stepped back. "Hang your arms over and grab the legs of the ottoman." Dane did so and Nathan tied his wrists securely. He moved behind him and smacked his ass.

"Spread your legs wide," he ordered. Dane shifted into position. He looked incredibly hot, spread with his balls and asshole appealingly displayed.

Nathan drew the flogger over his back and ass. Dane shuddered at its touch. He stroked Dane's exposed balls with the tips of the leather and drew it up again along his body. He flicked his wrist and the tresses slapped at Dane's bare ass. The touch was light—just the slightest taste of what was to come.

He struck Dane harder, hard enough to elicit a small gasp. He concentrated on his ass for a while, steadily increasing the intensity of his stroke until Dane's ass began to redden prettily.

Each stroke hardened Nathan's cock a little more. He loved the thrill of power that raged through his blood when he had a whip in his hand.

So laid back and easygoing in his day-to-day life, when he dommed someone, it was as if a switch turned on inside him. It wasn't that his personality changed, but more that his desire for intensity of feeling escalated into something bigger than himself.

When he was in that state of mind, it wasn't enough just to please a lover or have them please him. He wanted to control him—control every aspect of his pleasure and pain. His own pleasure was derived directly from the intensity of experience he could give his submissive. The high he got from it was similar to the high he got from creating art, only better.

He struck Dane across the ass and then delivered a stroke across his shoulders that made Dane jerk and give a small cry. If possible Nathan's cock hardened still more. Dane was breathing rapidly. His tan skin was beginning to redden and he jerked at his restraints.

Nathan was torn between continuing to whip him and dropping the flogger so he could fuck him then and there, bound and splayed like a slave boy offered up for his use. Because Dane hadn't protested and seemed to be handling the flogging well, he forced his own immediate lust aside and decided to continue.

He whipped Dane's thighs and calves until they too reddened. He moved up and aimed carefully, catching Dane's balls with the tips of the leather. Dane cried out and jerked forward, but couldn't get away.

"Don't fight it. Accept it. You were born for this. It's what you've always been waiting for." Nathan tenderly stroked his back with his free hand for a moment. Dane continued to breathe hard, but the tension in his body ebbed.

He focused again on Dane's ass, striking him with more force now that Dane's skin had adjusted to the sting. Dane's hands clenched into fists and his toes curled.

"Relax your body. Unclench your fingers and uncurl your toes. Stop fighting the sensations. Flow with the pain. Give in to it." Dane's hands opened, his toes relaxing. He was in enough control to hear what Nathan was saying and to respond.

"Take a deep breath and let it out. Again. Yes." He waited a moment as Dane struggled to get control of his ragged breathing.

"I'm going to go harder now. Don't fight me. This is what you need." He struck Dane's back and Dane grunted. He struck his ass even harder and Dane groaned. The slow breathing of a moment before quickly ratcheted into a pant.

Nathan continued to strike him hard, wondering if it would happen. Could Dane get there? Would he be able to get past his own resistance and emerge on the other side of the pain?

Dane was gasping audibly now with each stroke. His hands had clenched again and the muscles at his shoulders were bunched. Nathan would have to stop soon. He didn't want to take Dane too far too fast if he wasn't ready to go.

Then it happened.

Dane's shoulders suddenly began to ease. It was as if he were melting into the ottoman where a moment before his body had been rigid with tension. His head turned to one side, his eyes fluttering shut, his lips parting. The rapid, panicked breathing of a moment before slowed and deepened to that of someone sleeping.

"Yes," Nathan whispered, barely able to contain his excitement. "Dane, you're almost there. It's going to happen for you, your first time."

Nathan held his breath as he was swept along with Dane. He was tethered to him not only by the leather tresses, but by the intimate, intense connection that blossomed between Dom and sub when the sub enters that headspace Dane called flying and Nathan thought of as a state of erotic grace.

Fascinated as he always was by the trancelike state he had induced, he continued to flog Dane for several more minutes, slowly easing the intensity.

Dane didn't move. He didn't struggle or cry out, though Nathan whipped him soundly from calf to shoulder. Finally he dropped the flogger and knelt behind Dane. He pulled off his shirt so he could feel skin on skin. Gently he draped himself over Dane's bare, whip-heated body. Dane sighed but remained inert.

"Stay where you are, baby," Nathan crooned close to Dane's ear.

Dane made a sound but Nathan couldn't catch what he said. He leaned closer to his face. "What?"

"Nate..." Nathan was pretty sure he'd said his name, but Dane was still drifting in that particular nirvana reserved for those lucky few who managed to transcend erotic pain and come out soaring.

Nathan had been in that state of grace during scenes with skilled Doms before he'd embraced his basically dominant nature. He knew what it was to fly and derived enormous satisfaction from taking a sub there through his skill and attention.

After several minutes he stood and bent to untie Dane's wrists. Dane didn't move or open his eyes. He looked perfect, splayed and ready. Nathan's cock raged.

"I have to fuck you." Still Dane didn't move, though the hint of a smile flitted over his face.

Hurriedly Nathan shucked his shorts and grabbed a condom from the box he kept on the night table. It was pre-lubricated, which was lucky for Dane because Nathan was too eager to stop and find the lubricant he'd packed.

He knelt again behind Dane and pressed the fat head of his cock against Dane's tight hole. Forcing himself to go slow, he eased his way inside. Dane, so utterly relaxed, didn't flinch or tense this time, as he had each time before when adjusting to Nathan's substantial girth.

He lay peacefully, permitting Nathan to penetrate him completely. Once inside, Nathan savored the hot clench of Dane's passage gripping his cock as he moved in and out.

Dane began to shift and move beneath Nathan, coming alive. He pushed back against Nathan's cock and moaned. Nathan gripped his shoulders and began to fuck him hard, unable to control himself any longer.

He gripped Dane's hair, pulling his head up as lust blazed through him like wildfire. His orgasm blasted through his loins and expended itself deep inside his lover. He collapsed against Dane's back. When he could speak again, he whispered, "You belong to me."

* * * *

Dane didn't want to move from the ottoman. He knew Nathan thought it was because he was still coming down from the incredible sensation of flying. And partially that was true, though the hard fucking had snapped him out of it pretty quickly.

No, he didn't want to move because of what had happened while Nathan had fucked him. With the clinical Dom part of his brain, he knew he was going to be punished and that he deserved it. The newer, more tentative submissive part only knew he was nervous and embarrassed.

"You okay?" Nathan leaned over Dane and patted his shoulder. "Did I fuck you into a coma?" He gave a small laugh. When Dane didn't answer he knelt beside him, concern in his voice. "Dane, what's up? Seriously, is everything okay?"

Dane turned toward him and grimaced. "Uh. Something happened. An accident."

"What? What're you talking about?"

"I, uh—I came by accident. When you were inside me. The friction against the ottoman, I guess. I couldn't help it."

Nathan raised his eyebrows, his expression one of complete surprise. "You came? After I told you not to?"

Dane bit his lip to keep from retorting something sarcastic and decidedly non-submissive.

"Get up." Nathan's voice was hard.

"Look, Nathan. I didn't mean to—"

"I know." Nathan cut him off. "But as you well know, I gave you an express command and you disobeyed it. If you were the Dom here, what would you suggest is the appropriate course of action?"

Dane let out a breath. Of course he had known this would happen. The instant he realized he was coming, along with the mind-numbing pleasure, he knew he would pay later.

"I asked you a direct question."

"Punishment," he mumbled.

"That's right. Although in this case it's really a correction. I think of punishment as a consequence of your willfully disobeying a rule. Whereas correction is to teach you better control and discipline. Get up. I know just the place for your correction to take place."

Nathan pulled on his shorts and swept out of the room. Dane scrambled up from the ottoman, glancing with dismay at the sticky stain he'd left. Semen was smeared on his belly and in his pubic hair. He grabbed his underwear

and shorts and pulled them on over the mess so he could hurry after the disappearing Nathan.

He stepped out of the room and saw Nathan waiting at the top of the stairs. "Come on. We're going out to the boathouse." He led Dane through the living room into a large game room that held a pool table and a ping-pong table and several sofas for lounging and relaxing.

There were large French doors on the back wall. Nathan opened them and gestured for Dane to follow. They walked barefoot along a stone path that bordered a well-tended lawn.

The yard was enclosed by a tall white fence. Nathan led Dane through the gate. They walked toward the boathouse, which abutted a large covered boat dock.

There was a wooden deck beside the dock. A large hammock had been strung between two sturdy poles in one corner of the deck. The hammock was made of thin, strong rope woven in a diamond pattern.

The summer sun blazed overhead. Though still riding high on the endorphins of the flying experience, Dane was exhausted from it as well. He would have liked to lie down in Nathan's cool, green bedroom with the overhead fan whirring gently above them and fall asleep in Nathan's arms. Then he wanted to wake up and talk and talk and talk about what had happened.

Though the accidental orgasm had put a damper on things, he still could barely process the excitement and sheer thrill of what had occurred. For the first time he understood on a personal, visceral level what it meant to fly and why his subs had been so slavishly grateful for the experience.

He had never in his life felt so transported, so at once utterly at peace and brimming with melting desire. He'd never wanted to come down. If Nathan's cock hadn't pulled him back to reality, he might still be floating over the clouds of his consciousness, adrift in a kind of sensual peace.

But Nathan hadn't asked him what he wanted. He was to be corrected for his lack of physical control. Perversely, this notion also excited Dane. A part of him, he now admitted, hadn't thought Nathan had it in him to properly discipline a sub. He was too soft—too romantic to have the balls it took to keep an errant sub under proper control. Or so he had thought.

"Take off your clothes and lie on the hammock on your back."

Dane knew better than to protest, even though they were outside, and anyone passing nearby on the water might see he was naked. He took off his things, glancing at the sailboats drifting in the distance. He was nervous about whatever was coming, but determined to endure it.

Now that he'd tasted firsthand the intense passion of flying, he wanted to experience it again and again. He knew he'd have to earn his way back into Nathan's good graces in order to get what he craved.

Obediently he lay down on the hammock. Nathan disappeared into the boathouse. He came back a moment later with a bucket, which he set beside the hammock.

Dane had begun to sweat in the humid, warm air. Nathan pulled a bottle of water from the bucket and took a long drink of it. He too was sweating, a line of moisture running along his sternum.

"Thirsty?" he asked Dane. Dane nodded, reaching for the bottle. Nathan put it on the ground. "As soon as you've taken your correction you can have water. If you behave properly, that is."

Dane became at once horribly thirsty. Of course, he could have just reached down and taken the bottle. He could have told Nathan to go to hell—he was going to have a drink and obedience be damned.

But he didn't. He dropped his arm and waited, his cock rising in anticipation of whatever devious correction Nathan had thought up.

"Put your hands over your head. No matter what I do, don't you dare lower your arms." As Dane obeyed, Nathan reached into the bucket. His hand

came up wet and Dane realized what he held the split second before he dropped it on and around Dane's cock.

"Jesus," Dane hissed, as Nathan held the ice in place, rubbing it on Dane's balls and cock. "Ah, that's so cold."

"Yes. Maybe this will remind you next time you're about to come without permission. I can keep it on ice, you know. I can put your cock and balls into a ziplock bag filled with ice until your balls turn blue. This is just a taste of what awaits you next time I have to correct you for this particular error."

He reached into the bucket and added more ice to the little pile balanced on Dane's balls. With freezing fingers he slid a large piece of ice up and down Dane's shaft. Dane groaned and grabbed hold of the hammock to keep from knocking Nathan's cold hands away.

"Had enough?"

"Yes. Please, yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Sir," Dane managed.

"Good boy." The cold hands were removed, replaced by a very hot tongue. Dane's erection, which had wilted beneath the cold ice, rose at once in Nathan's mouth.

He licked and sucked with such ardor that in only a few minutes Dane was driven nearly over the edge. Nathan's still cold hands cupped his balls, one icy finger sliding down to penetrate his ass as he worked his magic on Dane's cock.

"Oh God," he groaned. "Please Nathan. Either stop or let me come. I can't help it. I can't control it. I can't—"

Nathan pulled back his head. "You've earned it. Come for me. Now."

He did.

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Chapter Thirteen

Dane rocked slowly in the glider swing, sipping his coffee. It was late morning but he'd been up quite a while. He stared out at the lake, glittering in the sunlight. When he'd first walked out onto the porch that morning, he'd been arrested by the eerie, beautiful sight of a fog rolling on the water. He'd watched it slowly dissipate as the sun rose, his mind empty, feeling more at peace than he ever remembered feeling.

Something inside him had shifted during that intense flogging. He wasn't sure precisely what was different. He wanted to talk more to Nathan about it, but he was still sleeping. He recalled how Nathan had said early on he didn't like to define or limit himself by terms like Dom or sub and now Dane understood.

Why fight with himself over what his precise sexual orientation was with regard to D/s? What did it really matter?

He felt different somehow. It wasn't just a matter of being relaxed. It was more, so much more. He was perched on the edge of something and ready to take off. He wanted to take the leap, to feel it again, to experience the incredible sensual release he'd achieved when he'd finally let go.

Staring across the water, he saw two hang gliders suddenly soar into the air—bright nylon triangles of color, a small body attached beneath each like a butterfly. He laughed to himself, instantly equating the sight with his own experience of flying. He hadn't been prepared for it when it came over him. He'd almost missed it by resisting.

For a minute or two he'd nearly begged Nathan to stop. The stinging pain of the flogging had edged into something nearly intolerable. The only thing at that point that had kept him silent was sheer will.

Recalling Nathan's stoic handling of the flogging he'd endured, he didn't want Nathan to think he was a wimp. He didn't want to be viewed as the sort of man who could dish it out, but couldn't take it.

At that point he'd still been fighting it. He'd been muscling through, to use Nathan's term, instead of flowing. And then—and then something shifted. It was gradual but inexorable, like a river overflowing its boundaries after a long rain. Once it began, it swept him along. He didn't have to do anything more. He didn't have to get through it, endure it or take it.

He simply—was. There was no whip. There was no Nathan. There was no Dane. Though he could feel the leather striking his skin as hard as ever, he no longer felt its sting. He was lifted out of himself, borne along by something as strong as the current carrying those gliders. He had been connected to Nathan in a way more intimate than sex and certainly far more intense than the BDSM play he'd engaged in as a Dom.

"Hey, I woke up and you weren't there."

Dane startled. He was so lost in his thoughts he hadn't heard Nathan come out. Nathan slid onto the swing beside him, looking out across the water. "Hey, the hang gliders are out. You ever try that?"

"No."

"I did it a few times. It's pretty amazing, as long as you don't think about plummeting to your death." Nathan laughed.

"I think I'll give it a pass," Dane said dryly.

Nathan touched his leg, letting his hand rest heavily on Dane's thigh. Dane's cock responded instantly but after a moment Nathan lifted his hand, using it to push his hair back from his face. "Did you eat?"

"No. I made some coffee though." Dane held up his mug. "Want some?"

"Yeah. I'm hungry too. You want some eggs or something?"

"Sure."

They walked together back into the house. In the kitchen Nathan removed eggs and butter from the refrigerator while Dane got fresh coffee for himself and a cup for Nathan.

He watched Nathan breaking the eggs and stirring them with a whisk. The whole scene was so domestic, but instead of the usual dread such a scene would have caused, he found himself touched by it.

"We're like some old married couple," he said aloud, grinning.

"Hardly," Nathan retorted with a laugh. "More like newlyweds."

Dane made toast and poured orange juice while Nathan cooked the eggs. They sat together at the large kitchen table to share their meal.

"Talk to me," Nathan said. "Tell me about your first day. Is it what you expected?"

Dane, usually so articulate, wasn't sure how to respond. All the thoughts and feelings that had been whirling through his brain all morning seemed to jumble together as Nathan sat, his head tilted, waiting patiently.

Nathan put his hand on Dane's arm. "It's okay. You've got a lot to process. You've been on the other side for what, nine years?"

"Yeah, that's about right. I got into the scene at around twenty." He put down his fork and stared at Nathan. "Just tell me this. How the hell did you know? What made you so sure I had these submissive feelings when I didn't even know myself?"

"It's like I told you. I have this kind of sense about people. I don't know how to define it exactly. With you, it was something in your eyes. In your bearing. In the way you caught your breath when I first suggested it." Nathan smiled and shook his head. "Don't get me wrong. It's not like I can just look at some guy and automatically peg him as Dom or sub. I have to have a connection. Something has to click between us.

"That first night we met, when you invited me to come with you to the club, I should have gone. Not because I like that kind of scene but because by sending you away I risked losing you. Even then I knew, on some level, you weren't what you seemed to be on the surface. I'm glad we connected again. And I'm so glad you had the courage to give this a try."

"Me too." Dane thought about the hours he'd spent waiting at that bar, hoping in vain Nathan would return. Dane, who had never chased a man before in his life, knew he would have come back again and again. "Me too," he reiterated with a rush of feeling.

Nathan took a ripe peach from the bowl and bit into it. Without knowing he was going to say it, Dane blurted, "I want to fly again, Nathan. Please."

Nathan wiped the peach juice from his chin with a linen napkin and laughed. "My greedy boy." He sobered some, adding, "You know, it's not just something I can make happen. You know that from your own experience, I'm sure. Everything has to be right. Mostly, it's up to you. You have to be able to give yourself over to the experience."

Dane found his words then, and in a rushing tumble he tried to share with Nathan all the thoughts that had been whirling in his head for the last several hours. Nathan let him speak, sitting in that still, calm way he had, giving Dane his full attention.

"I figured out something this morning. Well, you already told me, but I *got* it this morning. It isn't necessary to define myself as sub or Dom. I think that was part of my struggle. I didn't like to think of myself as sub, because to me that meant someone weak. I didn't understand before the courage it takes to submit. I don't mean just being able to handle a whipping. I mean the willingness to give of yourself, to be able to trust."

He was quiet a moment. Then he looked up at Nathan, who was watching him with those dark, solemn eyes. "I trust you, Nathan. You're the first man I've ever really trusted. That's quite a realization for someone almost thirty."

"Thank you, Dane. I promise never to abuse that trust." He took another bite of peach. "Now, enough lofty talk! Time for your lessons, slave boy. Let's go pick another toy."

* * * *

Dane stood in front of the bureau. Nathan stood back, waiting to see what he would pick. His hand moved over the crops to the canes and back again.

He didn't touch the violet wand case, not that Nathan had expected he would.

Instead he chose the longest crop. It was black, the square flap of leather at the end smaller than the other crops, which made its sting more concentrated. He turned toward Nathan.

"Present it to me."

Slowly Dane, dressed in his conservative khaki shorts and Polo shirt, knelt in front of Nathan and held the crop toward him.

"Not like that. Take off those clothes. Never present to me unless you're naked. This week when you wake up in the mornings, don't get dressed. You'll dress when and if I decide, and only then. If I choose to take you out naked on one of the boats, that's how you'll go. Got it?"

Dane furrowed his brows and pursed his lips. Nathan could see him fighting to remain silent, but he managed. He nodded and unzipped his shorts. Nathan stifled a sudden impulse to rip them from him, instead waiting while his obsessive lover folded his things.

Once naked, Dane again knelt in front of him and held the crop up toward him. Nathan took it. He set it down and picked up the leather wrist cuffs from the bureau. They were well worn, though not by Dane, but by his casual lovers over the years. How odd it must be for Dane to watch him finger them now, turning toward him to say, "Hold out your wrists."

Dane obeyed. His cock, Nathan was pleased to note, was already erect, matching the bulge in his own shorts. Nathan slipped the cuff around one wrist, pressing the metal ring through a slit in the leather. He used the clip attached to a second ring to close it and did the same with the other wrist. Then he clipped the two together.

Dane's chest was rising and falling, the only hint he was nervous about the proceedings. Nervous or not, his cock remained hard. Nathan took the ankle cuffs and attached those as well, though he didn't clip them together.

Finally he opened his bureau drawer and took out a handful of alligator clips he'd brought in his own duffel. He slipped them into his shorts pocket. "Let's go outside."

Crop in hand, he walked out, certain Dane would follow him. They walked downstairs and through the house toward the French doors in the game room. Nathan opened the doors and stepped out. He turned. Dane was hesitating on the threshold.

Nathan raised his eyebrows. "Is there a problem?"

"Someone might see us."

"This is private property. The sooner you learn to trust me, the easier things will be for you. Now come on. We're going back to the boathouse." Dane stepped over the threshold and down onto the cool stone patio. Again a hesitation, though only slight, as Dane followed Nathan down the path.

When they reached the hammock, Dane glanced at the bucket, which contained the melted reminder of the ice play, and back at Nathan. But Nathan had something else in mind today. "Lie down on your back. Lift your arms overhead."

Dane climbed awkwardly into the hammock, hampered by his cuffed wrists. When he was in position, Nathan unclipped the cuffs and re-clipped them to the hammock, pulling Dane's arms taut. He did the same with each ankle, spreading Dane's legs apart and locking them into place against the sturdy rope of the hammock.

"You look incredibly hot like that. How do you feel?"

"Vulnerable."

"Good. You are. See?" He smacked the side of Dane's cock with the crop. Dane jerked and winced. "You can wriggle all you want, but you can't get away." He smacked him again, this time on the sensitive head. Dane grunted.

"Think you can fly from a cock beating?" He smacked Dane's balls and Dane gasped, his face reddening.

"Nathan. I can't do this." A trace of panic edged his voice.

"Of course you can. You just need to focus on what you're starting to learn—flow with the pain instead of fighting it. Take your satisfaction in pleasing me. It pleases me to watch you suffer." He smacked him again, several times in succession, up and down the reddening but still rock-hard shaft.

Dane squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his lips tight. Nathan leaned over him and kissed his mouth. "Stop it. This isn't how you do it, baby. You're withholding yourself from me. Open your eyes."

Dane slowly opened his eyes, exactly the color of the deep blue sky overhead. Nathan stroked the hair from his forehead. "Your body wants this. Your cock doesn't lie." He reached down and grasped Dane's erection. "So let your mind catch up. Don't hold on to old fears. You *can* do this. If not for yourself yet, do it for me."

Dane nodded, his lips parting, his eyes closing as Nathan massaged his cock. Removing his hand, he lifted the crop and struck Dane again. Dane jerked.

He shifted the focus for a while to Dane's inner thighs, the sound of the leather smacking against flesh as the skin reddened. Slowly Nathan moved the crop closer to Dane's crotch. He struck the shaft and Dane cried out.

With his other hand, Nathan soothed the sting away. "You're doing good. You need this, don't you, Dane? Tell me the truth."

Dane lifted his head and opened his eyes, which were burning with intensity. His cheeks and neck were flushed. He didn't speak. "Answer me. You need this. Don't you."

Dane closed his eyes and let his head fall back. "Yes," he whispered. "Yes."

Nathan nodded and dropped the crop. He unclipped the cuffs and said, "Turn over on your stomach and wait for me. I'll be right back."

Nathan went into the boathouse, heading toward the shelves where the fishing tackle was kept. He found what he was looking for and came back outside. Dane looked so cute, the little dimples above each ass cheek as charming as the one in his right cheek when he smiled.

"Turn diagonal so the hammock supports you better. I don't want to put strain on your back." Dane shifted, and after making certain he was properly supported Nathan re-clipped his ankles and wrists in a spread-eagle position.

He sat cross-legged beside the hammock and opened his hand, examining the four tear-drop lead fishing weights he'd selected. He'd also grabbed a spool of fishing wire and a small knife. He cut small lengths of the wire and looped them through the hole at the top of each weight, tying them off. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the alligator clips and pressed them open one at a time, looping the wire around each so the weights dangled from the clips.

Dane, his face toward Nathan as he did all this, was watching him with wide eyes. Nathan smiled toward him and then scooted beneath the hammock. He lay down on his back, positioning himself so he could easily reach Dane's cock and balls. "Lift your body a bit. I'm going to pull your cock and balls through the openings in the hammock, okay?"

Dane obeyed without resistance, though he must have known what was in store for him. What progress they'd made in such a short time!

Carefully he pulled Dane's erect cock downward through a diamond opening. Carefully he bunched the soft ball sac and managed to get it through as well, though the fit was tight. The cock and balls were reddened from the cropping, but more so from the suffusion of blood that engorged them. However much he protested, Dane was very turned on by what was happening.

One at a time he attached two of the weights to Dane's cock by pinching a bit of flesh and closing a clip over it. Each time Dane jerked and gasped. When he clamped his balls Dane cried out.

"You can do it. I know you can," Nathan assured him. "You *are* doing it. All four weights are attached and you're taking it for me, sexy boy." Dane was breathing hard. His cock and balls swayed, the skin pinched in the sharp teeth of the clips.

Nathan wanted to climb over him and fuck him then and there with the clips still in place and the weights swaying beneath them, but he knew it would be too much too fast for Dane.

He could hardly believe Dane was tolerating the weights as well as he was. He flicked the weights and watched them sway. Dane groaned and his breathing was labored, but he didn't beg for Nathan to take them off and his cock remained hard as bone.

Deciding he'd had enough, Nathan removed the clips one by one, and each time Dane groaned. Nathan stroked his cock and balls for a while before scooting out from beneath the hammock to unhook Dane's wrist and ankle cuffs. Gently he pulled at Dane's shoulder and Dane turned over onto his back. His cock and balls were marked with four angry red bites. Nathan knelt and licked at the tortured flesh.

Dane moaned, arching up toward his mouth. Deciding Dane had definitely earned it, and also because he couldn't help himself in the face of such masculine beauty, Nathan lowered his mouth over Dane's cock, not stopping until Dane's sweet offering spurted against his tongue.

* * * *

"Christ, is there anything you *can't* do?" They were out in the middle of the lake, Nathan skillfully managing the sails of the small sailboat while Dane watched.

Nathan shrugged. "I grew up around this stuff. I can ride a horse, swim, and sail a boat, but you don't want to see me behind the wheel and I can't

balance a checkbook.” He laughed. “I don't even have a checkbook.”

"You are a most unusual man," Dane said, laughing too. Nathan lowered the sails and they drifted to a stop, the water gently lapping the sides of the boat.

Dane leaned back, enjoying the soft breeze and the fresh air. He realized with something approaching shock he hadn't even thought about the bank until that moment. His cell phone was back in the bedroom with his wallet and keys. What if they were trying to reach him to close some especially sticky deal? Reflexively he glanced at his wrist, but his watch was back in the bedroom as well.

"You're thinking about work, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"You've got your work face on. You get this kind of intense scowl."

"Yeah? I didn't know I had a work face."

"You have lots of faces. I'm coming to know them." Nathan sat across from him and lifted his hand, counting his fingers as he said teasingly, "You have your sexy oh-my-god-I'm-about-to-come face, your I-can't-take-one-more-stroke-of-that-fucking-whip face, and then the best one, which I've only seen once so far but I know I'll see again." No longer teasing, he said, "When you were in that state of grace last night, there was such an expression of sublime peace. I want to paint that face. To capture the serenity."

Dane felt himself blushing. "You make me very self-conscious, you know."

"That's okay. You'll get past that. We're still getting used to each other."

"I don't want this week to end."

Nathan smiled. "We still have plenty of time."

"I know." Dane tried to stay in the moment, something that had never been easy for him. He was always looking one step ahead, sometimes barely experiencing where he was, so intent on the next thing. This worked well for him in his professional life, as he never procrastinated or let his subordinates do so. But in his personal life, he'd all too often looked ahead and seen the writing on the wall before it was even written.

In doing so, he had sabotaged more than one relationship before it had had a chance, already looking to a future where he felt held down by someone who couldn't possibly interest him once the sexual thrill had run its course.

He looked at Nathan, his dark hair blowing back, his eyes bright, his strong, sexy body draped casually against the side of the boat, and knew with him things were different. If he hadn't been certain before, he was now. Nathan was like no man he'd ever met and the experience they'd shared was like nothing he could ever have imagined.

His life was permanently changed. He realized with something like an epiphany things would never be the same. Even if Nathan disappeared, Dane was a different person. A door had been opened inside him to feelings and desires he'd never known he possessed. There was no going back.

He could no longer see himself frequenting the BDSM clubs he'd spent so many hours in over the years, swaggering about in his leather and chains while men bowed and cringed before him. By the same token he couldn't see himself there in their place. He understood on a gut level now what Nathan meant about it being a game.

He looked up at Nathan, disconcerted to see his eyes steadily on him, as if he were listening in on his thoughts. "I just figured out something."

"What's that?"

"You've given me a gift."

"Yeah?"

"This is going to sound really corny, but you've given me the gift of submission. I mean, you're helping me realize my potential in that regard. And while I'm crazy about you and don't want to lose you, if for some reason I did, I would still have that gift, that knowledge, a new understanding of myself."

"I didn't give you that gift, Dane. It was always there. I'm just helping you to find it."

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Chapter Fourteen

The days slid into one another, time marked by sleep, lovemaking, and intense sessions, each of which heightened Dane's grace and eagerness to submit.

Sometimes they did nothing but talk. Dane did most of the talking, his words tumbling and rushing in his excitement and joy at his newfound freedom. Nathan fell in love even more with him at each step, watching him blossom as a submissive, embracing his true nature with fervor and honesty.

"I never got it before," Dane said late one morning. They were lying in bed, Dane resting his head on Nathan's chest. He'd taken to sleeping in, since Nathan kept him up until he was done with him, which sometimes wasn't until nearly dawn. Nathan liked waking with Dane beside him. It would be lonely to return to his loft. It would be hard to go back to the solitary life that, before Dane, had suited him so well.

Not that they would stop seeing each other or anything like that, but Nathan knew it would be different, once Dane was returned to his own environment—to his busy workdays and his schedules, deadlines and obligations. Nathan pushed these thoughts from his head, reminding himself to stay in the present.

He focused on what Dane was saying. "Part of me is angry. Well, maybe anger is too strong a word. But I can't believe I got so far in my life before figuring out I've been going at this thing all wrong. I thought I derived my satisfaction from being in control, but now I'm learning the opposite.

"With you, when we scene, I can let go. I mean, for the first time in my life I can really get out of myself. It's an amazing experience. I think I'm starting to get it, Nathan. To really get it, not just take your word for it. Everything you do to me. Everything we do together—it isn't about the pain or the pleasure or the obedience or the control or loss of it.

"It's about this thing between us. This connection that brings it all together. It's amazing. I feel—free!" He laughed as he said this, the surprise and delight ripe in his voice.

He couldn't seem to stop talking, and Nathan didn't try to stop him. He loved listening to his lover's voice. He loved watching Dane discover the real poetry of D/s on his own terms.

Dane, his head still on Nathan chest, continued. "It's weird, too, because while I enjoyed domming guys, and probably would still enjoy it, I didn't get the intensity. I didn't appreciate what some of the guys I was with were experiencing.

"I just saw them as getting too involved, and I would usually cut them loose pretty quick. Because I was afraid of getting involved, you see. I saw it as being tied down. I wasn't going to get myself all tangled up in messy relationships. I wasn't going to get hurt.

"I realize now, by holding myself back I was keeping myself safe, yeah. But I was also denying myself so much. I wasn't opening myself to ... to..." Dane faltered and took a breath.

Nathan stroked his head and said softly, "Love."

Dane lifted his head and moved back to look into Nathan's face. "Yes," he said with a kind of wonderment. "Love."

* * * *

Dane's arms were pulled taut overhead, his wrists secured by a sturdy chain to large eyehooks in the ceiling of the room Nathan had referred to as the sunroom. It was a small room off the game room, its windows facing a side garden. Large potted plants hung from the ceiling.

Nathan had removed two of the plants so he could use the hooks to suspend Dane for his first caning. "I've always thought these hooks would come in handy," he said with a grin as he secured Dane in place.

Dane was nervous but excited. He'd awoken Nathan that morning by sucking his cock to erection and not stopping until Nathan had come. He was getting better each day at handling Nathan's very large cock, learning how to open his throat so he wouldn't gag when Nathan thrust forward.

Afterwards Dane slipped from the bed and returned to kneel beside it, offering the long black-handled cane in his upward-turned palms. Nathan turned toward him and smiled that lazy, sexy smile that slid over his face when contemplating some new erotic torture.

"So you're ready for the cane, eh?"

"Yes, Sir." How easily those words slipped from his lips now, after several days of constant sexual stimulation and erotic torture at Nathan's skilled hands. "If it pleases you, Sir."

Nathan laughed and ruffled Dane's hair. Dane kept his head bowed, his cock hard, his heart beginning to thrum with anticipation. He wanted the cane, but he was still afraid of it. Nathan was helping him to understand fear wasn't necessarily something to be avoided at all costs. It was something to work through and overcome.

He was naked and facing the windows. He could just make out a strip of the lake in the corner of the far window. It shimmered under another perfect, cloudless day.

Nathan moved behind him and reached around him, pressing his naked body against Dane's. "I'm going to mark you, Dane. This cane will raise welts. Do you want that?"

Dane shivered involuntarily. He was scared but he did want it. He wanted to feel the cut of the cane, to experience the intensity of its bite. "Yes, please, Sir," he whispered.

Nathan swished the cane beside him, cutting the air with sound. Dane stiffened and drew in his breath. "Close your eyes," Nathan said, his voice soothing. "Remember what you are, who you belong to and why you need this."

Dane obeyed. Though he feared the cut of the cane, at the same time he longed for it.

Nathan began to ease him into the proper headspace with the words he'd begun to use before each scene. These words never failed to at once fiercely arouse, and at the same time relax Dane.

"What are you, Dane?"

"A submissive, Sir. Your submissive."

"Yes. And who do you belong to?"

"You, Sir."

"And what do you need?"

"To suffer for you, Sir. To please you. To let myself go where you take me without resistance and without reservation."

"That's right. And Dane?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"I love you."

He heard the whoosh of the cane the split second before he felt it. A line of fire burned across his ass, causing him to jerk hard against his wrist cuffs. He felt dizzy, almost sick.

Nathan was in front of him. "Hey, it's okay. Take it easy." Nathan stroked his forehead, pushing the hair from his eyes. "Slow down your breathing. Easy. Easy." Nathan's voice calmed him, as it always did, its tone deep and soothing.

His body processed the pain and the dizziness dissipated. He drew in a bushel of air and let it out slowly. Nathan stroked his cheek. "Are you ready to continue?"

Dane nodded.

Nathan stepped behind him again, standing to the side. Another line of fire marked him just above the first. Dane moaned but managed to control his breathing. He no longer felt the edge of nausea and dizziness that signaled it was too much to handle.

He wanted more.

Nathan obliged, adding five more stripes to his ass in rapid succession. Unable to help himself, Dane twisted away from the cane, so the last lash caught him on the hip.

"Ah," he cried. It hurt far more than on his muscle-padded ass.

"You moved out of position. That's what happens. Stay still. I'm not done with you."

Nathan flicked the cane, catching Dane several more times, this time across the back of his thighs. Dane felt himself edging toward panic. *You can do this, you can do this*, he told himself, willing himself to believe it. Sweat trickled down his sides and coated his forehead and upper lip.

The sharp cut of the cane was suddenly replaced with the heavy, thudding kiss of the flogger. The leather blanketed his skin, striking his welted ass, moving up to cover his shoulders and back.

Nathan struck him hard, forcing his body forward with each crashing blow. He knew he was cresting on the edge of the wave of erotic pain. He would either tumble from it into panic or be swept away on a tide of ecstasy.

Suddenly Dane felt as if a weight were pulling him down. Giving in to it, he let his head fall back, his lips parting of their own accord. He sagged hard against his wrist cuffs, his legs barely supporting him.

The jangled pounding of his heart eased. He could feel it slowing. His lungs filled with deep, cleansing air, which he released without effort and drew in again. The flogger continued to smash against his back and ass but he didn't

feel it. Or more accurately, he felt it but he no longer resisted it on any level. He embraced it. He wanted it. He never wanted it to stop.

He felt himself soaring, pulled even farther out of himself than the first time, if such a thing were possible. "Yes." Dimly he heard Nathan speaking, though he had trouble processing the words—it was just soothing, sensual sound, blending with the erotic pain and the intense pleasure thrumming through his very relaxed body.

He didn't know how long he hung suspended in his chains, his head back, his mind blank, his soul utterly at peace. It could have been a minute or an hour.

He came slowly to himself. Nathan was standing in front of him, his arms wrapped around Dane's body, his head resting on Dane's shoulder.

As Dane slowly reentered the world, Nathan stepped back. "Hey."

"Hey," Dane said, but no sound came out. His mouth was dry. He tried again.

"Hey."

Nathan smiled and kissed him. "Can you stand on your own? I'm going to release the cuffs."

"Yeah. I think so." Nathan, climbing on a small stepstool, unhooked Dane's cuffs from the chains.

"You want to see the marks?"

"Yes."

Though the endorphins were still skittering through his blood, sensation was beginning to return to his ass, the welts gently throbbing. He followed Nathan into a powder room. There was a full-length mirror on the inside of the door. Dane twisted back to see.

There were ten horizontal red lines striping his ass and thighs, one above the other. The symmetry was only slightly marred by the thin diagonal stripe along his hip, caused by his twisting out of position.

The Dom in Dane was impressed with how neatly Nathan had been able to deliver the blows. The sub in him thrilled to the marks—proof he'd been able to take a caning. Not only take it, but fly from it.

"Wow," he said softly. "Wow."

"Yeah," Nathan said, grinning. "You did it. What do you want to do now?"

Dane looked at Nathan, devouring him with his eyes. "I want to suck your cock, Sir."

Nathan let him.

* * * *

Dane lay in a beach lounge on the sand in the soft light of twilight. He was nude, one leg bent, his eyes closed in repose. Nathan stood nearby, the canvas on his easel nearly complete. He'd done several paintings of Dane over the course of the week, always at a different time of day to get a different light.

Dane had been self-conscious at first, as Nathan posed him and focused so intently on him while he sketched in the rough drawing with charcoal. Now he lay still, perhaps sleeping. Nathan admired the long, lean lines of his sexy body. He lingered on his cock, nestled against a thick tuft of pubic hair.

Maybe I'll shave him, he thought. He liked the look of bare cock and balls. It was a vulnerable look, implying easy access. Yes, it would be hot to use an old-fashioned straight-edge razor. He would have Dane sit up on a broad counter by a sink. Slowly, sensually, he would denude his lover, making the act sexual for him.

But not yet. That was something to be shared between fulltime lovers, not new lovers nearing the end of their first solid week together. Dane was so thrilled and grateful for the discovery of his true nature. This might be coloring his feelings for Nathan as a man.

Right now Dane adored him, even worshipped him, or thought he did. But what he really adored was his newfound freedom to finally be what he had held back and hidden from himself for all these years.

Without the heady, sensual overlay of D/s, would Dane still find Nathan so appealing? Would he still look at him with that love light in his cerulean eyes?

Not that Nathan wanted to take away the D/s. But he knew once Dane returned to his workaday world two days from now, the intensity of what they shared would diminish. There was no way around that, and Nathan knew he needed to be prepared for it, even for something of a withdrawal once Dane awoke from the dream he was now experiencing.

He dabbed some paint on his brush, adding more copper to the chestnut of Dane's hair. At Nathan's request, Dane hadn't shaved for the last three days, and the sexy stubble on his cheeks glinted in the setting sun.

Dane stirred and opened his eyes. "I must have fallen asleep. What time is it?"

"Dinner time, I guess," Nathan answered. "Want to go out to eat?"

"Go out?" Dane sat up. He looked confused, as if he didn't understand the question.

"Yeah. You know, leave the property. Drive somewhere? We could go out to eat. There's actually a very decent restaurant not too far from here. If you want. We can stay here and grill something on the barbeque if you'd rather."

"No, that sounds good. I guess I sort of forgot there was a world out there. It seems so complete here. I'm so content. I haven't even thought about Cullen Federal for days. I guess they're managing without me."

"Yeah, imagine that." Nathan grinned. Dane wasn't the first man he'd met who seemed to think the world, or at least his chosen profession, couldn't possibly function without his constant presence and vigilance. This vacation was probably good for Dane in more ways than one.

They showered together in the large master shower, which sprayed them from all sides as well as above. Back in Nathan's room, Dane pulled out a pair of khaki pants from the closet where he'd hung his clothes. "Is this good?"

"Sure. Maybe you can help me with my outfit. I have to decide between my jeans," he paused, "or my jeans."

"Ha ha," Dane said. "Maybe the pair with the least amount of holes."

Nathan laughed. His family despaired of how he dressed. Maybe Dane would finally get him to wear "real clothes" at some point.

Dane pulled his car around from the three-car garage where Nathan had had him park it. Nathan climbed in and they drove down the private drive toward the town.

Over steak and potatoes and large steins of beer, they talked and laughed. Dane talked some about his work, and where he saw his department going over the next few years.

Seeing this as good a segue as any, Nathan said, "So, you've been in Austin two years. You rent your house and furniture. What do you think you'll be doing, oh, a year from now? Is the Austin assignment permanent? Could they transfer you somewhere else?"

"I don't know. I really like Austin. I do miss New York. I left my stuff up there in storage. My position down here is still listed as interim on the books. My boss has said a few times we should talk about making it permanent. I guess I wasn't ready to do that." He paused and looked shyly at Nathan. "Until now."

* * * *

It was their last night together at the lake. It had been the most amazing experience of Dane's life, one he would never forget, no matter what happened going forward. In the space of six days he'd fallen completely in love, not only with Nathan Levi, but with his own submissive nature and desires.

Normally suspicious of such outright happiness, he kept waiting for something to go wrong, but it hadn't—so far. He couldn't help wondering what would happen when they went back to the city.

In a way he dreaded going back to the office, aware the work would be piled to the ceiling upon his return. He would have to dive headlong into it to make up for the week away.

Yet a part of him was itching to get back into it, if for nothing else because he didn't like to put things off. Still, wouldn't it be nice to stay here forever, safe and cherished in Nathan's arms. He was afraid the magic of the week would disappear once they left this idyllic environment.

"Dane," Nathan's voice pulled him out of his reverie. "It's our last night. There's still one toy we haven't used."

The outside world again fell away as Dane turned toward his lover, who was holding the large, flat briefcase that contained the violet wand. "You know, I'm not sure—"

"Dane," Nathan interrupted. "What are you?"

Dane swallowed. "Your submissive, Sir."

"Who do you belong to?"

"You, Sir."

"Why do you exist?"

"To please you, Sir. To ... to suffer for you, Sir."

"Yes. And it pleases me to use this tonight. I don't want you to be afraid. What happened with that guy has nothing to do with us. You've trusted me so far. Trust me to give you this experience and remember I would never harm you."

Dane nodded. Of course Nathan was right. And he did want to please him, more than anything in the world. "Strip and lie on the bed," Nathan said. As Dane obeyed, Nathan set the case on the mosaic table and unzipped it. He removed the generator from its slot, as well as a large, glass globe.

He unwound the generator's long chord and plugged it into the wall. While Dane watched, he fitted the globe into the nosecone and flipped the switch. He cupped his palm over it, causing it to glow with neon light. Nathan met his eye. "You see, it's just static electricity. This one is very gentle. I'm going to touch it to your skin so you can see. Just stay relaxed and focused."

He sat on the bed beside Dane. Dane couldn't help tensing as the glass made contact with his bare stomach. He felt nothing until Nathan lifted the glass so it hovered just above his skin. Purple sparks emanated from outside the glass. He felt a warm, fizzy sensation, which intensified as Nathan moved the glass just a little farther from his skin.

The glass glowed with color as it tickled his flesh. Nathan drew it lower down his groin, toward his cock. Dane held his breath as Nathan rolled it over his shaft, leaving a bubbly trail of sensation as it moved toward his balls.

Nathan pulled it away, breaking the arc of electricity. "See? It's not so bad, huh? Kind of nice." As Dane nodded, Nathan removed and fitted the glass rake into place. He turned the dial at the base of the generator to a slightly higher setting and touched the rake tines to Dane's stomach. Slowly he lifted it. This time the sensation was stronger, a warm, almost sharp tingling along his flesh that intensified as Nathan lengthened the distance of the arc. He ran the rake over Dane's cock and balls. The sensation shifted from tingling to pain and Dane gasped. Nathan pulled the rake away.

"I want to use the cock probe on you. I know this will be a true act of submission for you. Work through your fear. I know you can do it. Here's

what I want you to do.” Nathan reached for a pillow from the pile beside Dane's head. “Lift your hips. I want better access to your cock and balls.”

Dane complied and Nathan slipped the plump pillow under his ass. “Good. Now spread your legs and keep them spread throughout the session. I will regard you closing your legs as a direct act of disobedience and you'll be punished. Not corrected, but really punished. You won't like it.”

Dane stared. This was a side of Nathan he hadn't seen yet. The stern taskmaster who would brook no disobedience. Though he only half-believed him, Dane found himself thrilling to the promise, or rather the threat, of a real punishment.

What would it be? Would Nathan lock him in a dungeon with only bread and water? Dane grinned to himself. There were no dungeons around here—everything was built on sand. Maybe put him on the raft and leave him there for hours, naked and chained?

He realized his fantasies of punishment revolved around being left, being abandoned. That, he knew, would be far worse than any whipping.

Nathan continued. “Keep your hands to your sides. Better yet, put your hands underneath you. It'll be less tempting that way to use them.” Dane shifted to obey, aware his cock was bobbing lewdly toward Nathan, fully erect, in spite of his anxious anticipation.

“I could tie you down,” Nathan went on, “but I don't want to. I want you to exercise the discipline you've been developing over the week. Show me what an obedient sub you can be. Take what I give you without squirming or moving out of position. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes, Sir,” Dane whispered, hoping to hell he could.

His heart was beating high in his throat as he watched Nathan lift the cock probe and insert it into the generator. He tried not to dwell on his own misuse of the probe so many years before. Nathan knew what he was doing. This session was, as much as anything, a matter of trust. Without trust, a D/s relationship could never fully flourish.

Nathan switched it on. The glass glowed neon pink as it approached Dane's cock. Dane closed his eyes. "Open your eyes. Stay in the moment."

Dane obeyed, watching with fascinated horror as the round glass tip of the probe hovered just above his shaft. It sent a shock through him that traveled the length of it. He gasped, unable to control his body's spasmodic jerk. Nathan touched it again, and again he gasped and jerked.

"Beautiful," Nathan pronounced, as the pink and purple sparks moved up and down Dane's shaft. When it reached his balls, Dane cried out, his hands involuntarily flying down to protect himself.

"Move your hands. Now." Nathan's voice was hard. Dane forced himself to obey. He was trembling. Despite his fear, perhaps partially because of it, his cock continued to throb with desire, fully erect and hard as steel.

Nathan touched his balls again with the probe. "Stay still," he ordered. Slowly he pulled it back, building the arc of electricity until Dane cried out again. Yet this time he managed to keep his hands beneath his ass. Again and again Nathan touched his cock and balls with the fiery probe until Dane was writhing and jerking out of control.

The sensation was like nothing he'd experienced, at once painful and highly, almost fiercely erotic. Dane found himself transported to a very submissive headspace. It wasn't like flying—it wasn't peaceful, but it was intense and nearly as involving. He wasn't sure if he was going to be burned or to orgasm. He only knew he was incredibly turned on.

When at last Nathan withdrew the probe, Dane's body fell back, limp as a rag doll. He rolled from the pillow to his side, drawing himself up into a fetal curl. His heart was pounding, his breath rasping, his cock on fire, literally and figuratively.

Nathan set the probe down on the table and returned to the bed. He lay down beside Dane, his head near Dane's knees. Gently he forced Dane's legs down. Tenderly he took Dane's burning cock into his mouth, soothing it with his cool, wet kiss.

Dane sighed with pleasure, surrendering himself to Nathan's attentions. He became aware of Nathan's bare shaft, erect and warm near his own face. Greedily he sucked it into his mouth. Soon Nathan was moaning around Dane's cock as they each drove the other into a frenzy of pleasure.

If I died now, Dane thought, *it would have been enough*. But he didn't die. Instead he came, shooting his hot seed into Nathan's mouth just as Nathan released himself against Dane's tongue. Eagerly he swallowed, not letting go until Nathan pulled gently away.

He felt Nathan shift, and in a moment his strong arms were around Dane. “The wand's not so bad, huh?” He murmured against Dane's neck.

No, Dane had to agree. Not so bad.

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Chapter Fifteen

Dane's office phone rang. He didn't get it, intent on finishing the memo he was typing before he lost his train of thought. It continued to ring. Where the hell was Theresa?

With a glance at the time, he realized she must be at lunch. Caller ID showed it was a call from the main office in New York. He grabbed the receiver. "Dane Bishop."

"Bishop. How are you? Long time no speak. How's life down in the boonies?"

"Mr. Packard?"

"Who else?" George Packard, Executive Vice President in charge of all the real estate divisions of Cullen Federal for the entire country, and Dane's boss's boss, boomed into the phone.

"Hello, sir. It's nice to hear from you. What can I do for you?" Packard had never called him before, not in the two years he'd been down here. Dane felt his gut tighten, wondering if he'd done something wrong.

"Bennett's told me what a fine job you're doing. You've really turned that department around. We've been meeting in executive committee on the corporate chain of command and doing a little shuffling. I won't beat around the bush. Dan Winston is retiring at the end of this year. Your name came up as a possibility to take over his job. If you haven't gotten too used to wearing cowboy boots and spitting chewin' tabbacky into the spittoons I hear they have in the offices down there, we could use you up here."

Dane laughed politely at the slur on Texas, surprised by his own defensive reaction to it. Then the reality of what Packard was offering hit him. He stared at the receiver, speechless.

"You there, Bishop?"

"Yes. I don't know what to say."

"Well, you don't have to say anything yet. Just let me know if you're interested. At this point nothing's in stone. You're just on the short list. If it goes through, you wouldn't need to report for another four weeks or so. I want some overlap with Winston so we can assure a smooth transition."

"Maybe you could fly up next week to meet with me and the interview committee. You'll get a chance to talk directly with Winston and his staff. Get the lay of the land, see if the fit is a good one. I wanted to give you the heads up, give you a chance to put it in your pipe and smoke it a while."

Trying to ignore Packard's annoying habit of speaking in idioms, Dane said, "Thank you, sir. It's quite an honor. I appreciate even being considered on the short list."

"Well, you've done a damn fine job down there. I know Bennett will be sorry to lose you, if this works out. But he'll understand. He's a team player, just like you."

"Does he know yet?"

"No. And mum's the word, Bishop. No point in ruffling any feathers until we have our ducks in a row. For now just tell him you're popping up for a one-day corporate meeting. I'll have my secretary work out the details for your trip so no eyebrows are raised."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"You earned it. We'll be in touch."

Dane hung up the phone in a daze. Four weeks! Four weeks to decide on the promotion of a lifetime. A promotion that would take him away from Austin.

Away from Nathan.

He hadn't been fooled by Packard's assertion he had a real say in the matter. If they tapped him, he'd have to go, or no longer be considered a "team

player"—that characteristic so highly valued by the top dogs.

He could always refuse. He could find another job here in Austin, maybe even change careers altogether. He could move in with Nathan and get a job modeling for him and his artist friends. He knew even as these thoughts passed through his mind he wouldn't be happy living off his lover.

It was Tuesday, and he hadn't seen Nathan since they'd parted company late Sunday afternoon. Anxious about what awaited him in his inbox, he'd gone in Sunday night just to wade through and make manageable piles of the work he'd tackle with a vengeance on Monday.

Though he missed Nathan, he was almost scared to see him. How could the intense intimacy they'd shared over the amazing week at the lake possibly be sustained back in the real world?

And now this.

How did he tell Nathan he had to fly up to New York in a week for an interview that could change his life—change both their lives—forever?

They'd made a date for tonight. Dane knew this was something he couldn't put off telling Nathan. He owed it to him to be upfront about it. Maybe it would all come to nothing. He was on the short list—that meant there was at least one other person being considered for this position. He'd fly out, check things out and wait and see. No need to borrow trouble.

* * * *

When Nathan opened the door to the building he now owned outright, Dane held out the bottle of very fine champagne he'd purchased, along with two crystal champagne flutes.

"Happy belated birthday."

Nathan took the bottle and they embraced. "Hey, wow. You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to."

He followed Nathan up the stairs to his loft, but instead of stopping on the top floor, Nathan gestured him onward, pointing toward a second smaller set of stairs Dane hadn't noticed before.

"I have a surprise too."

The small stairwell ended at a large metal door. Nathan pushed it open and they came out onto the roof of the building. The sky was a deep blue, edging toward black as the stars began to twinkle.

Nathan led Dane to the far side of the building, which overlooked the gently rolling hills that surrounded the city. A large Oriental carpet had been spread out over the concrete and on it was a table set for two, complete with covered dishes, a pitcher of ice water, silverware and glasses, and a vase with a single red rose at its center.

Dane turned open-mouthed to Nathan. "This is like a movie setting. Is that stuff real?"

"I paid the caterers enough, it better be." Nathan laughed. He moved toward the table and Dane followed. "I thought it would be fun to eat out—literally. This way we can talk without worrying about other people listening in. I wanted our first time together after the lake to be special."

They sat across from one another. Nathan set the champagne bottle down and Dane placed the glasses beside it. "This champagne is the perfect touch." Nathan twisted the metal tie that held the cork in place. "It will go perfectly with the meal."

When the cork popped, he poured the champagne into the flutes and they lifted their glasses. "To us," Nathan said.

"To us," Dane echoed as they clinked the crystal.

The setting was so romantic and Nathan looked so happy sitting there across from him. His hair was still damp from a shower and he was wearing a black button down shirt over his least faded jeans, which Dane knew was

his effort to dress up for the occasion. Dane was touched by this, by the whole elaborate display he'd obviously gone to a lot of trouble to prepare.

Now Dane was going to splash water in his face, figuratively speaking, and ruin the night and possibly everything else.

But not yet. He couldn't say anything yet. Not while Nathan looked so happy.

Nathan lifted the dome over his plate, urging Dane to do the same. "It's just barbeque," he grinned. "But the finest pulled pork this side of the Mississippi. And the beans are baked slow with molasses and bacon. And the corn bread, it melts in your mouth."

"This smells fantastic. I didn't even know I was hungry till I smelled it." Dane tucked into the delicious food with gusto. There was beer in a cooler beneath the table, but they drank the champagne instead, barely noticing they'd consumed the bottle in short order as they ate.

"You have enough?" Nathan asked.

"More than enough. I'm stuffed," Dane said.

Nathan put his napkin on the table and stood. "Come here. I want to hold you." Dane stood and moved into his arms. He felt woozy from the champagne. He had to tell him. He couldn't put it off another minute.

He pulled away and Nathan dropped his arms. "There's something I have to tell you."

"Yeah? There's something I have to tell you."

Not expecting this, Dane said, "There is? What?"

"I love you."

"Oh," Dane responded lamely, guilt assailing him afresh. "I love you, too. I really do. That's why this is so hard."

Nathan's expression became serious. "Hey, it's okay. You can talk to me. Here." He sat cross-legged on the carpet and patted one knee. "Come lie down. You've got to be exhausted after two days back at the office."

Dane lay down, resting his head in Nathan's lap. Nathan stroked his cheek, waiting. "Okay. I don't know how to say it, so I'll just say it. I've been offered a promotion at work. A really big one. Well, offered isn't exactly the right word. I've been tapped. Faced with an offer, if it's made, that I can't refuse."

"But that's great news. Why do you sound so miserable about it?" He pushed the hair from Dane's forehead and stroked his scalp. It felt good but Dane wouldn't be distracted.

"It is great news. Or it would have been a month ago, before I met you. It means moving, Nathan. It means leaving Austin and returning to New York."

Nathan was silent. His hand stilled in Dane's hair. Dane sat up and shifted so he was facing Nathan. "I have to go up in a week for the interview. I don't know all that much yet about the job. That's when I'd find out the details. Here's the thing—I'm on a short list. That means there's at least one other person up for the position. I might not get it."

"Do you want it?"

Dane didn't respond immediately. "That's a good question. My gut reaction is yes, absolutely. It's a huge honor to be tapped for senior VP before the age of thirty. It'll be a challenge to learn the new job. Keep me from getting bored. And not only that, it will mean a lot more money. Plus, I do miss New York. I love Austin, but I never really saw myself settling here permanently. Until I met you, that is."

"You should go for the interview then."

"But—"

"No buts. Go. It doesn't mean you're committing. It means you're finding out more about it. Knowledge is power."

Dane felt better at once. Nathan was right. He would fly to New York and learn more about the position. It might not even be the right fit, to use one of Packard's idioms. All his worrying would be for nothing. He and Nathan would still be together...

But for how long? Packard had intimated his work in Austin was done. It was probably a matter of time before they transferred him to some other department in some other state that needed fixing. He was a single man, technically fancy free and ready to move on short notice. If he didn't get this job, when would his phone ring again, with Packard's booming voice on the other end informing him there was work to be done in Iowa or California or Florida?

How he envied Nathan his complete freedom. Not only the financial freedom of being independently wealthy, but the freedom his work afforded him. He could do his art wherever he was. He wasn't tied down by jobs and career choices.

"Earth to Dane," Nathan said softly. "Come inside. If you don't, I'll end up raping you right on this roof."

"I'd much rather be raped in your bed," Dane laughed, his cock instantly on the alert.

* * * *

Nathan lay on the fine old carpet, staring up at the stars. He'd been there quite a while, just lying there, letting his mind drift. Dane was in New York at that moment. The interview was over, as was the dinner they'd taken him to afterward at some fancy Manhattan restaurant.

Dane hadn't called, but he'd sent a text message that the interview had gone well, and he would see Nathan tomorrow. Nathan toyed with the idea of surprising him again at the airport but decided that wouldn't be fair—to either of them. Not if Dane had news that would rip their world apart.

They'd spent most every night together from that Tuesday until Dane had left Sunday morning to pack. They'd stayed in Nathan's loft, making love and experimenting more with the violet wand. Ironically the wand had become Dane's favorite toy. On Friday Dane had brought his laptop and his briefcase so he could work while he was there. Normally Nathan didn't like anyone around him while he was sculpting or painting, but he found he liked having Dane nearby. He liked knowing they were in the same room, even though neither felt the need to talk or interact. Just knowing the other was there was enough.

Wasn't it ironic, to finally fall in love with someone who had to leave? Nathan should have been more sensitive to the situation from the beginning. The clues were there early on. Dane was in a temporary job, living in a rental house with none of his own things around him. All this pointed to a man who wasn't ready to settle where he was. It had only been a matter of time before Dane left. If it hadn't happened now, it would have happened next month or next year.

What would life be like without Dane? Would they maintain a long-distance relationship, flying back and forth, frequently at first, and then less and less often as time went on? Was their relationship so fragile that time, and distance, would destroy it?

Nathan watched the horizon as the sun began to creep over its edge. The sky around it lightened to navy blue, gray, pale purple, and finally pale blue streaked with pink and gold as the sun rose over the mountains like a huge orange ball.

Dane had been like that, a sunrise bursting into Nathan's life. Could he go back to the darkness of being alone? Content to live his solitary, strange life while the world went on around him?

He sat up suddenly. He would not let that happen. He could not. In the short time they'd known each other, Dane had come to mean everything to him. There was no way he was going to lie down and give up. If Mohammed couldn't come to the mountain, then by God, the mountain would go to him.

* * * *

Dane did a double take as he pulled into his driveway. It was nearly seven o'clock at night and he was beat from the whirlwind courtship with upper management, the flight back to Austin and the rush-hour traffic.

There was Nathan sitting on his front step in tattered jeans and a sleeveless tank top that made Dane's heart flip flop with lust. Even as his cock stiffened, his heart felt heavy. They'd offered him the job and though he'd asked for a few days to think it over, he knew in his heart he had to take it if he wanted to keep working for Cullen Federal.

He parked the car and jumped out. Nathan ran to him and they briefly embraced. "Hey, didn't expect to see you sitting on my doorstep," Dane said, trying to keep his voice light.

"I couldn't stay away. I figured you'd be home soon."

"Well, come on in."

He unlocked the door and set down his garment bag, flicking on the lights in the dull, undecorated living room he'd called home for the past two years. He'd hoped to have a little time to pull his thoughts together before facing Nathan with his news.

Oh well, now or later—they had to talk about it sometime. But first, to taste those lips ... they melted together, kissing long and deep. Jesus, in just one day he'd missed Nathan so much. How could he live without him?

When they finally parted, Nathan said, "You got it, didn't you? You got the job."

"Yeah."

"And you accepted?"

"Not yet..."

"Well, accept it. Take the job."

"What?"

"I'm coming with you."

"What?"

"Why not? I'll move, too. I've been thinking about it ever since you left. We love each other, right?"

"We do." Dane smiled.

"You have a career that's forcing you to make choices. Well, I got to thinking, why are we putting you in that position? There's nothing keeping me in Austin. Nothing but habit."

"Nathan, I couldn't possibly ask you to—"

"But you're not. You didn't. Don't you see, it's what I want. And it's not like I can't come back down here to visit. We aren't moving to China. It's just a three hour flight away, for heaven's sake."

He sat down on the sofa and Dane sat beside him, still not quite taking it in. Nathan was animated. "See, I've grown up here, so it's what I know. My work is good—I know it is, but it hasn't really found a market here. I need more exposure. Imagine the possibilities in New York. Plus, if I made it, I wouldn't always be wondering if I was in fact trading off the Levi name, instead of my own merit. I'll bet nobody up there's even heard of Levi Construction."

"You're going to move to New York? For me?"

"No, not for you. That would be the kiss of death on the relationship, right? Not *for* you, but because I want to be with you, and because I would like to see if I have what it takes to make it on my own in one of the most important art centers in the world. I could buy a loft in the Village. You could get your own place or we could be roomies. I've heard rents are pretty steep up there." He grinned.

"Nathan," Dane breathed, stunned. Nathan laughed. "You look like someone hit you with a bat. Is it such a terrible idea?"

"No. No, no, no, no! It's a wonderful idea. I just can't believe what I'm hearing. I never dreamed ... I've been agonizing over this."

"Well, agonize no more, my sexy submissive. You'll still get your regular whippings and sessions with the wand. In fact, I'm thinking of designing you a collar, something just you and I will know is a collar. Something in gold you'll always wear to remember who you belong to."

"Oh, Nathan."

"Meanwhile, I want you to have this." Nathan pulled the gold ring from his finger. "It's just a token—something to remind you of me when we aren't together." Nathan took Dane's hand and slipped the ring over his finger. It was heavy, the gold a rosy tint, some kind of crest stamped into the face.

"It's beautiful," Dane said, fingering it. "This is worth a lot, though. It looks like an antique. Are you sure you want me to—"

Nathan laughed. "I made it, actually. A couple of years ago when I was experimenting with jewelry design. It's the only piece I ended up keeping. The crest is just something I made up. Your collar will be special—just for us."

"The bird," Dane said, recalling the note Nathan had left him, which he carried in his wallet.

"What bird?"

Dane pulled his wallet from his back pocket and extracted the much-read note. "This one." They looked together at the heart Nathan had drawn at the bottom of the note, the D and N entwined in its center to look like a bird-on-the-wing.

"You kept that?"

"Yeah. I look at it all the time," Dane admitted shyly.

Nathan smiled broadly. "You're right, it's perfect. We'll use that design for your collar." He pulled Dane close, taking possession of him with his hands

and his mouth.

"What are you?" He finally whispered.

"Your submissive, Sir." Dane felt the mantle of submission fall over him at these ritualistic words.

"And who do you belong to?"

"You, Sir," he breathed, his cock straining hard against his fly.

"And Dane?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"I also belong to you. Please don't ever forget that."

Dane was so happy he thought his heart would break free from his chest and fly around the room like a dove released.

"No, my love. I won't."

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About the Author

Claire Thompson has written erotic fiction since 1995. Much of her work focuses on the romance of erotic submission, as well as the darker exploration of BDSM. Her most recent work focuses on the romance of male/male romance and erotic submission. Claire has published numerous novels and short stories, both in print and ebook format. Says a reviewer for eCataRomance, "...Claire Thompson draws a compelling, graphic picture of a loving dominant/submissive relationship. Erotic and confronting, yet tender and intimate."

Claire's website address is www.Clairethompson.net, where you will find all of Claire's novels, new releases and upcoming releases, as well as more detailed information about the author.

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