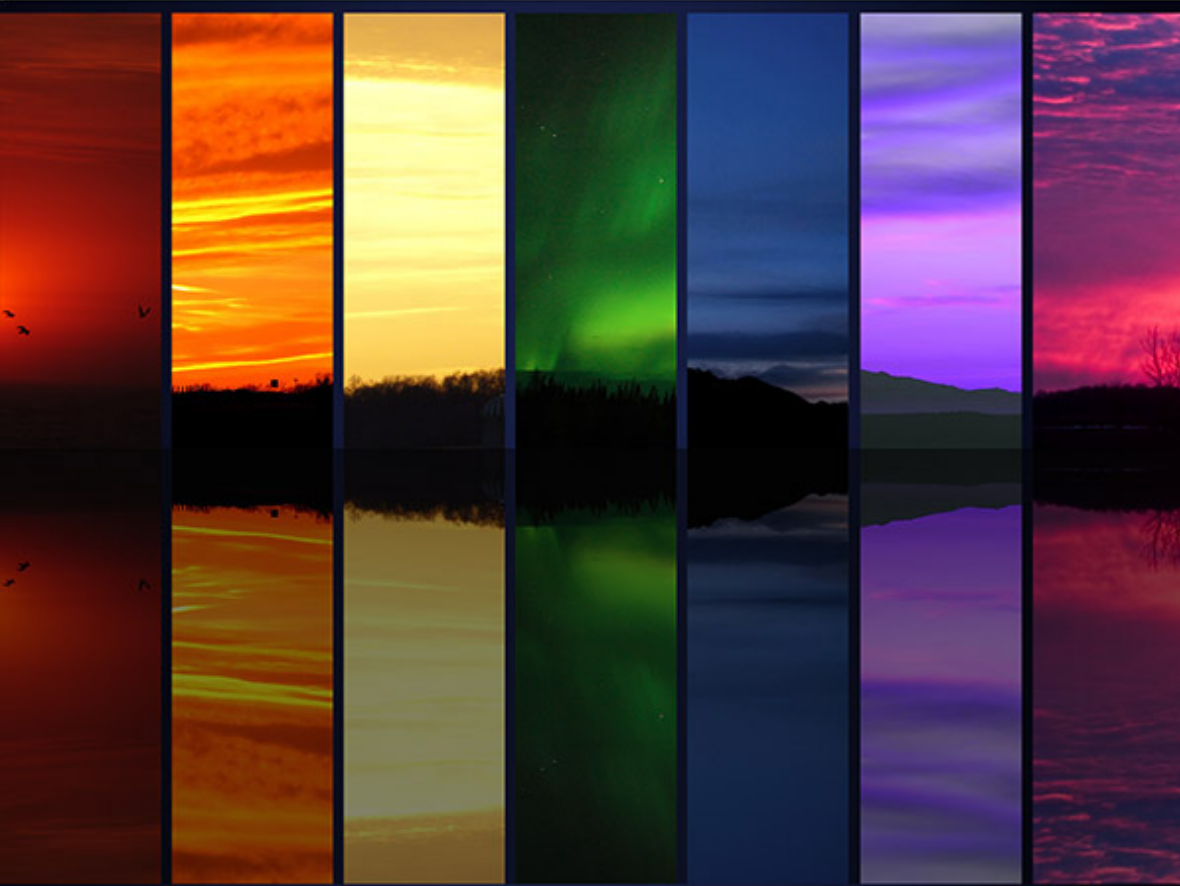


LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

BOUND

Amelia Bishop

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

BOUND

By Amelia Bishop

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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

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BOUND

By Amelia Bishop

Photo Description

A thin man, wearing only underwear, lies on his side in a low bed with a thin mattress. He appears to be sleeping, though daylight streams in through a window above him. No blanket covers him. A bottle sits on the floor by his side.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

When I was told I would never walk again and would be stuck in a wheelchair the rest of my life something inside me broke. I put up a cold and tough front to keep everyone at arm's length; it's easier that way. No one could ever love a man whose body is covered in scars, whose legs will never work again, who's lost himself.

*** This story can be m/m or m/m/m. I want this story to have a BDSM theme with the man in the wheelchair as the sub. And it would be nice to have more than one POV but is not necessary. An HEA/HFN is a must. Thank you.*

Sincerely,

A.J.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: accountant, BDSM, disabilities, grief, hurt/comfort, physical therapist, switch, wheelchair

Word Count: 21,887

BOUND

By Amelia Bishop

Chapter 1

First came the beeping. Then a low humming sound, and some clicking noises like an old dot-matrix printer might make. Adrian opened his eyes to the fluorescent-lit hospital room and remembered. The crash, the pain, the confusion. He closed his eyes again and breathed, slow and deep. *Calm down. You're alive.* He moved his fingers, flexed his arms. Everything worked, but his whole body hurt like hell. He tried to move his foot, just a little to the left to ease the pressure from what felt like a tight bandage, and he couldn't. The foot would not respond. Neither would the other foot, or his knees.

Panic rose, and he forced himself to open his eyes again, to look down and make sure his legs were still there, that the pain wasn't phantom. He pulled off the thin white sheet covering him, saw the bandages, the thick plastic braces. Still whole, but totally fucked up. He tried again, watching his big toe where it protruded from the edge of a compression boot. *Move.* It didn't.

He tried to shift his torso, and though it stung in places it was operational. His hips worked as well. He clenched his ass muscles and the sheets under him shifted. *Okay, good.* But anything lower: his thighs, his knees, his feet, nothing responded. Maybe just all the bandages... the strange plastic cast-things? It made sense that his thighs wouldn't move, they were clearly seriously damaged. But his feet? His knees? He should be able to move them.

Adrian screamed, silently at first, his voice dry and unused. It built to an ugly panicked yell, not a sound to be proud of, not a sound he had ever made before. He flailed his arms, pulling out tubes, and ripping off tape. Something split on his shoulder. People rushed in. Nurses, doctors maybe.

When he woke again he was under a thicker blanket, the room dimmer, the overhead lights off. His mother sat in the chair at his side, reading.

"Mom." Just a whisper, but she startled, then raised her eyes to him and smiled.

"Adrian." She was at his side in an instant, cool palm on his cheek, red-rimmed eyes glistening down at him. "How do you feel?"

He winced. What a stupid question. But her expression was so pained, so nervous. "Hurt. What..."

"You were in an accident. On the highway. It wasn't your fault. A woman in a SUV... she was texting. She hit a man in a pickup truck, he hit you. She

died.” There was an obvious lack of sympathy in that last statement, and she swallowed hard before she continued. “You’ll be okay, they saved your legs. But... the doctors aren’t sure you’ll ever walk again.”

He stared at her, numb. Tears streaked down her cheeks, and her lip trembled. He nodded, but not because he understood or accepted the information she’d given him, only to acknowledge he’d heard.

After a minute, when he didn’t respond, she continued. “Chrissy’s here too, down in the cafeteria with Dad. I’m so glad you’re finally awake. We’ve been worried sick.”

He grunted some response, and his mother said something else, but he didn’t hear or care. *Never walk again?* Blood rushed in his ears, loud: like a bike engine, like a car crash. He closed his eyes and tried to calm down, to think.

“Shh, I know.” His mother leaned over him, wiping his tears.

They’d replaced his IV, but he ignored it. He reached up and pulled her to him, buried his face in her soft chest, and sobbed. Sometime later his sister and father arrived, and he cried again, with them.

The doctor came in then, interrupting their embrace. He smiled with grim apology.

“Adrian. Good to see you awake. I’m Doctor Hamill.” His eyes scanned Adrian’s body, his chart, the machines at his bedside. “Any pain?”

“A little in my shoulder, and my hip,” he admitted. He glanced down at his legs, bandaged and braced, and tried to ignore the fact he couldn’t feel them at all.

The doctor nodded and made a note in his chart, then peeled back the bandage on his shoulder and checked the wound there. “Looks okay, but this is a deep one. What would you say the pain is, one to ten?”

“If ten is the worst? Maybe a four.”

He smiled. “Okay.” He leaned in and made some kind of adjustment to one of the dripping bags. “If it gets any higher, let me know.”

Adrian nodded and looked away uncomfortably. He wanted to verify his mother’s words “never walk again,” but he feared the truth. Dr. Hamill pulled a plastic chair close to the bed and sat, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

“You ready to hear this?”

Adrian nodded and pressed his lips together. Tears leaked from his eyes. Dr. Hamill ignored that, and explained everything in a soft, even voice. Severed nerves, crushed bones, steel rods—most of the information was a blur. Adrian gave permission for another surgery, another attempt to repair the nerve damage. But in the end, “never walk again” was confirmed, with the usual “we can’t be one hundred percent sure” caveat.

Through all of it, Adrian kept himself relatively calm. He nodded, he cried, he questioned, but he didn’t freak-out. Until he woke in the night, his left calf tingling with pins and needles, and the back of his right thigh burning with pain. He had a good freak-out then. If he couldn’t move his legs, why should he be able to feel them? Dr. Hamill had explained that the feeling might come and go over the next weeks, but they weren’t sure he’d ever regain full sensation.

The weeks that followed were painful in every possible way. His back, arms, and legs, covered with gashes of varying length and depth, slowly healed. Several dozen cuts on his arms, shoulders, and chest were so deep that they lingered, and would no doubt remain as permanent scars. There were burned areas as well, though none large enough to warrant any kind of surgery. Just enough to leave more scars.

He moved to a rehab center, where he spent his days staring out the window and his nights sedated. All the tiny scratches on his face healed, and the bruises faded away. Physical therapists and nurses visited, forced him to sit up and do things he didn’t want to do. Doctors and psychiatrists visited, asked him questions he didn’t want to answer and told him things he didn’t want to know. His family visited, their perfectly whole bodies and reassuring smiles reminding him that he alone was broken.

He fought the release as long as he could. Going home meant starting the rest of his life. It meant accepting his broken body as unfixable. But after almost six months, against his wishes, he was wheeled out to the car where his father waited to take him home. To his own house. At least they’d granted him that. His mother would have preferred to have him stay with her, but every doctor had agreed there was no reason he couldn’t “function normally” on his own.

Visiting nurses and physical therapists would come, his food would be ordered, a maid service would clean. His small single-level house proved easy to remodel to meet his new needs. They gave him a motorized chair and a manual one, and a massive quantity of medical supplies he never intended to use.

A few awkward visits from his friends, a dozen unreturned phone calls, several screens of ignored text messages, and finally people stopped bothering him. Alone, he didn't have to think about his old life.

But he wasn't always alone.

The maid was easy. She came twice each week, cleaned the entire house, did his laundry, and said nothing. She was kind and polite, and she understood. Adrian liked her.

His parents were horrible. Telling old stories, forcing him to talk. They visited almost every day until Chrissy intervened, seeing his discomfort, and made them limit their visits to three times each week, except for holidays or special circumstances. Chrissy didn't visit as often, but texted him throughout the day, every day. It was her way of checking on him, but it was less obtrusive than a physical visit so Adrian tolerated it.

The therapist was the real problem. He came Tuesdays and Fridays, and forced Adrian to move in ways he detested. Forced him to acknowledge his broken body. Worse, the guy was gorgeous. Young, tan, blond, serious eyes, and a wide white smile. Just the type Adrian would have flirted with before. His legs may be irreparable, but his cock remained fully functional, and it reacted quite strongly to Jim.

Jim noticed, of course. It was impossible to hide. But he was professional and said nothing, kept his eyes carefully averted.

After a few weeks, Adrian was able to control himself. He grew used to Jim's hands on him, accustomed to his voice and his smell and his laugh. He still fantasized about Jim holding him down and fucking him, but he managed to keep his dick in check during therapy.

It didn't help that Jim was the only nonfamily member he ever willingly spoke to. Or that Jim seemed happy to talk to him and happy to listen. He began to look forward to Jim's visits, to tell him way too much, to think of him as a friend.

"You should get out more, Adrian. Go for a spin around the block."

"Fuck that."

Jim smiled, good-natured as always, even in the face of Adrian's rudeness. "It would be good for you to get some fresh air, and to see people, and to learn how to use your chair on different terrain."

"Fuck that." But Adrian was smiling now, too, and Jim laughed.

“Would you do it if I came with you? We could go right now, it’s nice out.”

Adrian pressed his lips together. Jim knew. He fucking knew how much Adrian liked him, and this shit wasn’t fair. Offering to extend their session, do something different and special. He wanted to say no, to say “fuck that” again, but angrily this time, and wipe that smile right off Jim’s cute face. But he opened his mouth and said, “Okay.” *You fucking bastard.*

Jim popped up like a freaking jack-in-the-box, his super-white smile wider than ever. “All right, man, great! Here, grab a jacket.”

Jim’s hands stayed in his pockets. Which was good because if he even touched the handle of the chair this little adventure was going to be over. Adrian maneuvered with some difficulty, navigating the curbs which had certainly not been constructed with a handicapped person in mind. Fucking irregular slants, telephone poles in the middle of the stupid sidewalks, grass growing where it shouldn’t be... obviously no one gave two seconds of thought to anyone who wasn’t on their feet around here.

“This is good. Could you do this once a week, on your own?”

“I *could*.”

Jim sighed, but his ever-present smile was still in place. “Will you?”

“I’ll try.”

Summer passed quickly enough, but the autumn was miserable. His mother and the doctors allied to get him off the sedatives, and forced him to learn to drive a handicap-accessible car. The white van sat in his driveway for five days. Getting back behind the wheel, alone, was too scary. Until Jim informed him, pleasantly but firmly, that he wasn’t making any more house calls.

“What if I have an emergency? What if I’m sick?”

“Then you probably wouldn’t be up for therapy, would you? You’d call the office to reschedule.” Jim’s typical blinding smile was in place, but his eyes were hard. He wasn’t going to let Adrian off the hook.

“Fine.” Adrian turned away in anger, but Jim’s hand on his shoulder calmed him.

“Hey, I know why you’re nervous about this. It’s totally understandable. I got in a fender bender a few years ago, and getting back on the road afterward was a little tough for me. I can’t imagine how hard this is for you. But it’s been a year since the accident, and you only have to drive around town. You can do this.”

Adrian blushed at the gentle words. *What a fucking baby, needing Jim to hold my hand through everything.* “Okay, you’re right. Thanks.”

Jim just patted his shoulder and walked away. He had obviously learned to quit while he was ahead.

Adrian became responsible for shopping for his own food, and his physical therapy appointments took place at an office. The maid still came, his sister still texted, and his parents still visited a few times each week, but otherwise he was alone.

As his body healed, his spirit degraded. A few friends still made an effort, but he put them off. He hated the look of pity in their eyes, the stilted conversations, the awkward greetings. Without the drugs he had used for so many months, sleep was difficult. For a few weeks, he drank himself to sleep, but Jim caught on and shamed him into quitting.

He was happy to realize that between the insurance settlement and his disability pay, he’d be able to keep the house and not worry about working. His company asked him back, offered to make adjustments to his office. He declined. He couldn’t face those people the way he was now.

In late April, he ran into an ex-boyfriend at the supermarket, easily the most traumatic event since he’d come home. He held himself together through the awkward conversation, explained the accident, his recovery. He smiled politely and thanked Scott for his concern. Agreed that yes, they should get together for coffee sometime. Then he went home and lost his mind.

He avoided his bedroom, unwilling to climb onto the mattress where he’d actually fucked Scott two years ago. Instead he pulled his chair up to the kitchen table and poured himself a drink. The only booze he had left in the house was half a bottle of whiskey, which he didn’t care for, but he drank most of it anyway. He let it burn his throat, welcomed the sick, dizzy feeling it produced in him. After the third glass, he sunk to the floor and cried. He mourned the relationship he’d lost and the ones he’d never have.

Self-pity overwhelmed him, and he moaned his pain into the linoleum. He’d never again walk into a bar or a club, never dive into the waves at the beach, never dance, never meet his buddies at the park for a run. No one would ever desire him again. A lifetime of infrequent pity fucks was the best he could hope for.

When he thought he was done crying, he had to piss, and getting up proved a huge difficulty. His palm slipped on the tear- and mucus-slicked tile, and he bruised his elbow. He swore, lashed out, sent his chair rolling across the floor.

Then he had to drag himself to it: sobbing, frustrated, angry. He poured another drink when he finally got himself back in the chair, swallowing it in two gulps. He managed to piss mostly in the toilet, and collapsed on his bed.

The phone rang incessantly, but he ignored it, and tried like hell to stay asleep. He finally gave up and answered it at half past noon.

“Adrian, it’s Jim. You missed your session; I just wanted to be sure you were all right.”

“Fine. Sorry, hungover.”

“You’re drinking again?”

“No. Just one bad night. I’m fine.” Jim was a good guy. Possibly his only friend, except of course he wasn’t his friend at all, he was his therapist. He got paid to be nice, to take care of him.

“Okay. Let’s reschedule. Can you come in tomorrow?”

“Sure. Same time?”

The next day he rolled in to the office ten minutes early. Becca wasn’t at the desk. In her place was a guy with dark brown hair and a stubble covered chin. A very sexy guy. He flicked his warm brown eyes down at Adrian and smiled.

“Hi! Adrian?”

“That’s me.” Adrian looked away. Last year, when he was still whole, he would have smiled back, leaned onto the counter, kept his attention firmly planted on those sexy eyes. But not anymore.

Sexy nodded and clicked something on the computer. “Jim will be right out.”

After his session, sexy guy was still at the desk. Jim walked out with him, but Sexy waved him off. “I’ll get it.”

Jim nodded and smiled, clapping Adrian on the shoulder before he turned to walk away. Adrian groaned. *Great*. He was as horny as a teenager lately, and the old sweatpants he wore hid nothing. Now he’d have to try not to get a hard-on while he was making his next appointment.

Sexy’s chocolate eyes sparkled at him. “You want Wednesday again?”

“No. I’m usually Tuesdays, this was just... I got bumped from yesterday for being a no-show.”

“Okeydokey. Well, let’s see if anyone took your spot yet.” He winked, actually *winked*, at Adrian, and turned back to the computer, typed something, studied the screen. “You’re in luck! Ten a.m. Tuesdays, all set. You need a card?”

“No. Thanks.”

Adrian wheeled to the door, but before he could hit the handicap panel, Sexy jogged over and opened the door for him. He wore silky-nylon running pants that hugged his ass, and Adrian quickly moved his arm over his lap, hiding the evidence of his sudden arousal.

“Have a great day!” Sexy’s eyes flicked down to Adrian’s lap, then back up quickly.

“Thanks.” His face flamed, and he sped to his van, luckily in the first parking spot.

Friday, Becca was back, and he wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. He’d been sort of looking forward to seeing Sexy. That wink... probably just pity, or maybe he was the kind of guy who flirted with everyone. But it had been the first time anyone had winked at him since before the accident.

The next week Becca was there both days, and still no sign of sexy guy. He’d probably been a temp, or someone from another office filling in. Adrian chastised himself for caring. What did he think? That the guy would be interested in him? A skinny-legged, scar-covered, loser in a wheelchair? *Stupid.*

Chapter 2

The guy definitely had a boner. Had tried to hide it, too. Sometimes injuries caused weird reactions, though, so maybe it wasn't an "I want to fuck you" boner, just something the guy couldn't help. But he'd blushed when Nate had winked at him, and the way he lit up when Jim walked in was highly suspect. Over the next few days, Nate thought of the man often.

Thursday, Becca was still with her client, and Jim had gone to lunch. With no one in the office to see him, Nate pulled up Adrian's file and studied the details. He lived in town, alone, and came in twice a week. A Google search of his name gave no new information. He was just a man who'd survived a really bad accident. And got aroused easily.

Jim walked in carrying a bakery box, and Nate hastily closed the file.

"Hey, that for me?"

"Yeah, and Becca." Jim slid behind the counter and opened the box like he was showing off smuggled gems. "Pumpkin cheesecake muffins," he whispered reverently, eyes wide.

Nate sighed his appreciation for this great gift. "Wow. Dude, thank you."

Becca walked her client out, a young woman in a wrist brace. Nate closed the muffin box and slid it out of view. He helped schedule the woman's next appointment, and opened the door for her. When the three of them were alone in the office, they consumed the muffins in a silent frenzy, and then worked together to eliminate every crumb of evidence from the counter area.

"You guys are a terrible influence on me." Becca smiled as she opened a bottle of water.

Nate crushed the box into the garbage, buried it under yesterday's newspaper. "It never happened, Bec, it never happened."

Jim leaned his elbow on the counter and chuckled.

When Becca left with her next client, Nate turned to Jim. "Hey, that guy Adrian... what's his deal?"

Jim narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"Just, I don't know. What do you know about him?"

“Oh, man. You’re interested in him?” Jim shook his head, but he was smiling warmly. “He’s a nice guy. Varies between cranky and pissed off. I don’t think he gets out much, keeps everyone at arm’s length.”

“Hmm. Cute, though. Is he single?”

“Yeah, and I’d like to keep it that way. Half the stuff he does is only because he has a crush on me... I can’t give that up. If he gets a boyfriend, I’ll be powerless with him.”

“He that bad?”

“Let’s just say he’s never willingly done anything.”

Nate nodded slowly.

Adrian haunted him all week. The memory of those sad eyes, the blush when he saw Nate notice his hard-on, the way he wheeled himself away in shame and anger. A guy that strong shouldn’t be ashamed, and he was way too sexy to be alone. Maybe the erection was because he was horny? Maybe he just really needed to get laid.

Tuesdays Nate had off-site clients all day, but Adrian’s other weekly appointment day, Friday, he was off. A trade for working Sundays. He threw on jeans and a light jacket, and went to the office.

Jim groaned when he walked in. “Really, man? You’re going to do this?”

“He’s hot. I’m just going to ask. He’s not my patient, there’s no rule against it.”

Jim clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes, but said nothing. When Adrian came in, Nate watched his face carefully. *Yes, there it was.* A flicker of desire, excitement. Adrian shifted his weight in his chair, nodded at Jim, and began to wheel toward the therapy room. But he looked back at Nate a few times, as if he couldn’t help himself. Nate gave him a flirty smile, which wasn’t returned.

When the session was over Jim hung back in the hall, and Nate met his eyes in silent thanks. Jim smiled and ducked away, giving him some privacy.

“Hey, Adrian?”

Adrian was wheeling to the exit, and Nate had to jog and almost step in front of his chair to get his attention. He looked up, mouth tight, eyes flashing, waiting for Nate to speak.

“Can I ask you something?”

Adrian rested his elbows on the armrests of his chair and waited.

“Would you go to dinner with me?”

Adrian's shocked reaction was one of the saddest things Nate had ever seen in his life. Then it morphed into anger, and Nate raised his palms against it. “Hey, I thought—”

“Is this a fucking joke?”

Nate's face heated. “No! Why would—”

“Leave me the fuck alone.” Adrian maneuvered around him and sped out the door before Nate could process what had happened.

Jim came out and stood by Nate's side, and they watched Adrian drive away. “Sorry, man.”

“Jesus, he's wound tight, huh?” Nate's pulse was still racing from the rush of embarrassment he'd felt at Adrian's reaction.

“Yeah, I told you. You going to try again?”

“You sure he's gay?” That would explain things.

Jim nodded quickly. “Positive. He's mentioned ex-boyfriends.”

“Must be me, then.” Or something to do with that shocked expression Adrian had worn for a minute there.

“No way, man. So? You trying again?”

“Damn right I am.”

“Good.” Jim smiled and slapped his back.

There was really no reason for him ever to see Adrian again. Their schedules didn't overlap at all, and unless one of them went in on an odd day, their paths wouldn't cross. But Nate wasn't going to let Adrian brush him off so easily. At least he had to make it clear he was serious, that he was interested. If Adrian didn't return the interest, then he'd let it go.

So the following Friday, he went to the office again. This time, he arrived while Adrian and Jim were in their session, and he waited at the desk, doing unnecessary paperwork until they walked out. When Jim saw him, he smirked and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the wall, watching Adrian.

Adrian froze. He stared at Nate with open contempt, and then moved to the door, a scowl marring his handsome face.

“Hey, wait.” Nate ran to catch up, and physically blocked the door. “Listen, you don’t have to go out with me. But I wasn’t joking when I asked you. I think you’re hot. I’m interested. If you don’t like me, that’s fine, but don’t treat me like I’m a jerk.”

Adrian’s lip shook, and for a scary moment Nate thought he might cry. But then, he straightened his back and firmed his jaw. “Fine. Sorry if I offended you. Can I leave now?”

Nate slumped in defeat. “Of course.” He stepped aside and let Adrian pass. “Offer still stands, though. Dinner. Anytime.”

Adrian didn’t turn, but his hands paused on the wheels for a few seconds before he continued to his van.

“I think he’s coming around,” Jim said from the hall.

“Yup. Just a matter of time,” Nate deadpanned.

He watched Adrian drive away, his scowling face visible through the windshield. Sheesh, the guy was a tough nut to crack. But every interaction only increased his attraction, and Nate thought about how he might get Adrian to open up. He couldn’t ask him out again, especially not at the office. Running into him anywhere else would be totally stalker-ish, and he wouldn’t do that. His only hope was that Adrian would change his mind and make the next move.

But two weeks went by with no word from Adrian, and Jim said he’d never mentioned anything during their sessions. Nate tried to forget about him. He responded to a message from a guy in his online BDSM group, Strictly-Men. He checked out the guy’s profile, verified his real name, and asked a few guys he knew in the group about him. Everything checked out, and another Dom Nate trusted vouched for him, so he set up a date.

They spent the night engaging in some really hot spanking play. But when the guy asked to see him again, for a nonplay date, Nate balked. The last three relationships he’d had were with guys he’d met through the Strictly-Men group, and none of those had worked out. Each moved way past what he was comfortable giving, or receiving, in the bedroom. When the play escalated beyond a certain level, he’d always backed down and lost the guy as a result. He made an excuse and left, promising to play again sometime.

Sitting on his couch, sipping coffee, his dog Star curled at his feet, Nate scrolled through the TV guide. Nothing but game shows, talk shows, and crappy movies. Daytime television sucked. He was grateful when the phone rang.

“Nate, you busy?”

“Becca, hi. What’s going on, everything okay?”

“Not really. Jim just went home with a stomach bug, and his ten o’clock isn’t answering the phone. Jim says he sometimes runs errands before his appointment, so he’ll probably show up. I’ll cancel him when he gets here if I have to, but the guy only comes twice a week as it is, and he really shouldn’t miss a session. I’d do it myself but I already have a ten thirty. Any way you can come in?”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Wow, seriously? I thought I’d have to bribe you or something.”

Nate sighed dramatically. “How little you think of me. I’m hurt.”

Becca laughed, thanked him, and hung up.

He shaved, rushed through a shower, dressed in the first clean clothes he found, and hurried out the door. He watched the dashboard clock nervously. Already nine forty-five. If Adrian was early, would he leave before Nate got there? What would Becca tell him? He pulled into the parking lot, relieved the white van wasn’t there yet.

“Thank you so much, Nate. Jim was worried. He really likes this guy.”

“I know. I’ve met him actually. He’s a nice guy. Kind of sad, though.”

“Yeah, really sad. And angry. But he’s sweet, too. And here he is.” She lifted her chin toward the window where they could see Adrian’s van parking in the first handicap spot.

When Adrian got inside, he looked at Nate and his face went hard. He frowned and let out a little huff, making no attempt to hide his displeasure.

Becca darted her eyes back and forth between them, obviously worried. “Adrian, this is Nate, he’s filling in for Jim. Is that all right?”

“I guess.” Adrian rolled toward the therapy room.

Nate shrugged at Becca, who gave him a tense half smile in return. He followed Adrian into the room, and quickly opened his file to check what Jim had been working on with him during their last session. Adrian was mostly cooperative, and though he frowned and grumbled, he never openly complained. Nate carefully kept his hands where they belonged, and said nothing inappropriate. Asking him out again would be pushing it in any circumstance, but while they were working together, it was out of the question.

At one point, during a leg stretch, Nate's hand slipped from Adrian's knee, down over his inner thigh. He apologized and moved on, but he noticed Adrian's breath catch, saw his cheeks flush. He was interested, at least physically. So why was he hiding it? Did he think he was worthless now that he was in a chair? Or maybe he had some other issue, something else making him push Nate away?

It took real effort to remain professional. Adrian's fierce, determined look as he completed the exercises was sexy as hell. Not to mention the sight of Adrian's ass in his thin, tight, jogging pants: firm and high and all muscle. The scars that he could see on Adrian's arms, thick ugly marks over smooth muscles, spoke of a man who'd fought for survival and won. He'd worked up a sweat and still smelled fantastic. Nate tried to identify the cologne, but failed. He could only assume it was some combination of shampoo or soap, cologne, and natural body odor.

He wanted, badly, to ask Adrian out again. He decided that he wouldn't bring it up himself, but if Adrian started a conversation, then he could ask again without guilt. For the entire session, Adrian remained silent.

"Okay, great job today Adrian. I'll write up the notes for Jim, let him know what we did."

"Will he be back on Tuesday?"

"Should be. He went home sick, but I'm sure he'll be fine by then."

Adrian nodded, and Nate waited, hoping for more conversation but unwilling to initiate it.

"You were harder on me than he is." Adrian's brows drew together, forming a small line between them, and he stared at Nate intently.

Was that a good thing, or a complaint? "I thought you handled everything well. Were you uncomfortable?"

Adrian's mouth twisted in what almost looked like a smile, but he recovered quickly. "Not in a bad way. I was thinking maybe I could work with you again?" Adrian blushed fiercely but held Nate's gaze, his eyes nervous.

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Fine." He scowled and looked away, gave his wheels a strong push toward the door.

"Wait, Adrian." Nate had to jog to catch up, and was barely able to intercept him before he reached the exit. "I'd love to work with you, it's just..." He

waited, hoping Adrian would meet his eyes again, but Adrian kept his gaze on the floor, his mouth turned down in a scowl. “Listen—the truth is I’m really attracted to you. I think you’re sexy and I’d love to get to know you better. It was hard for me to keep things professional today, and I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. So it’s probably not a good idea. I’m sorry. Plus, Jim would be heartbroken.”

Adrian chuckled at that and raised his face to look Nate in the eye again. “Jim doesn’t think I’m sexy, though.”

“Well, he has a girlfriend, so I’m not surprised by that. But he does like working with you.”

“Yeah, he’s been good to me.”

Nate moved closer, watching Adrian’s face closely. When Adrian didn’t roll back, he took it as a good sign. “You could go on that date with me, and we could call it an unofficial therapy session. I promise to keep my hands where they belong.”

He was sure Adrian was going to say no. The frown hadn’t returned, but neither had the smile. Instead, Adrian had that little line between his eyebrows again. “Okay. But it’s not a date. It’s a therapy session, even if it’s off the record.”

Nate’s head got light as he processed the offer. “Okay, great.”

“Sunday? My house.”

“I work Sunday, but I could come by after. Like five-ish?”

“Okay, cool.”

Adrian had relaxed, Nate realized. His hands were no longer locked on the wheels of his chair, but lay gently dangling from the armrest. His shoulders had fallen to a more natural angle, and the line between his brows had almost disappeared.

“So, since it’s not a date, should I eat first? Or could we order a pizza or something?”

Adrian smiled then, a beautiful thing. “I’ll make sure you eat. Since you won’t get paid, I guess it’s the least I can do.”

“Dinner is a totally acceptable method of payment.” Nate held the door open with a smile, and followed him out to the reception area, grinning like an idiot the whole way

Chapter 3

Adrian sat behind the wheel and took a few deep breaths. He'd acted cool with Nate, left with a smile and a casual "see you Sunday," but his heart had been racing and his palms had been clammy. He had to get himself together before he drove home. Nate stood behind the front desk doing something on the computer, and glanced at him through the window. If he waited too long, Nate would probably come out to check on him. That was enough to get Adrian out of there, fast.

At home, his adrenaline had evened out, and giddiness took over. He laughed, alone in his kitchen, ran his hands through his hair, leaned back in his chair, and let himself be happy. *He was serious, he actually fucking likes me.* Adrian looked down at his wasted thighs, squeezed his fingers over the bumpy, scarred flesh. Nate had felt them. Had touched them often during the session: once accidentally, but several times he'd needed to hold Adrian's legs in position. He'd never seemed surprised or disgusted by them. Adrian had watched carefully, but Nate's face stayed warm and his eyes affectionate the whole time. *He thinks I'm sexy.*

Over the next two days, Adrian's confidence waned. He doubted Nate's words. He replayed their session in his mind a hundred times, and began to see that what he'd thought was affection may have been only kindness. This could still be just a pity date.

Sunday afternoon, Adrian decided to keep the whole thing strictly professional. Not a date: an "unofficial therapy session," just like they'd said. He ordered pizza and salad, stocked the fridge with a case of beer, and waited. Nate arrived at twenty past five, and pulled a duffel bag from his car. *Therapy stuff.* He smiled.

"All right if I leave these here?"

At Adrian's smile, Nate placed his keys and cell phone on the coffee table.

Adrian moved to the back of the living room, to the large area rug he'd used for a therapy area with Jim, and got himself down onto the floor. Nate looked gorgeous; his T-shirt was tight across his chest, and his hair was mussed. He'd shaved closer than usual, but his chin was shadowed with afternoon stubble. Adrian wondered if he was hairy everywhere.

Nate took an exercise band from his bag and got on the floor with Adrian. "Tell me if this is too much, okay?"

Adrian nodded, but knew he'd never admit anything was too much. Especially not to Nate. A few times he came close: sweat broke out on his upper lip, his muscles strained, and he'd thought "I can't do this." But Nate took him just to the point of exhaustion, never beyond. Each time he stopped, and let Adrian rest, and praised his effort. For the first time since the accident, Adrian felt strong, and capable, and respected. Nate pushed him harder than anyone ever had, and the experience was exhilarating.

"Okay, I think that's enough for today. I want you to be able to move tomorrow." Nate smiled, kneeling on the rug, still holding one of Adrian's ankles in his hands.

Adrian grunted his agreement and moved to hoist himself back into his chair.

"Can I help?" Nate was holding a hand out, being friendly.

"No." That came out rougher than Adrian had intended, but he wasn't sorry. He could get himself into his own damn chair; Nate should understand that.

"I know you can do it, man, I'm only offering to help since I just kicked your ass here." A sexy smile, his head tilted to the side.

Adrian snorted out a laugh. "No thanks. Takes more than that to kick my ass."

"I bet." Nate turned and walked away, leaving Adrian on the rug alone.

He got himself up, and had to take a minute to catch his breath. Nate was in his kitchen, doing who knew what. But he wasn't standing nearby, waiting for Adrian to fall. Wasn't watching him, expecting he'd need help.

A shout from the kitchen broke into his thoughts. "Hey, is this for us? The pizza?"

"Yeah. There's beer in the fridge, too." Adrian wheeled into the kitchen. "Plates in that drawer, napkins over there."

"Can I make you a plate, or are you going to get all snippy?"

Adrian smirked. He deserved that, he supposed. "I'll allow it. Two slices please."

He'd thought maybe they should eat in the living room: put the TV on, take some of the pressure off. But before he could mention it Nate brought the plates to the kitchen table and sat down.

“So, how do you feel? Was that too strenuous?”

“No. I liked it.” Truthfully, it had been difficult, but he preferred it to the careful exercises and gentle coaxing of Jim.

“You could ask Jim to go harder, tell him you’re ready for more.”

“I tried. He... It’s not his fault. I’m pretty terrible to him, and I think he’s afraid I won’t do anything if he pisses me off. Plus he’s been working with me since the beginning. I’m sure he still thinks of me like I was back then. Weak.”

“No one who knows you could think you’re weak, Adrian.”

His breath left him in a rush, and he stared at Nate, who stabbed at his salad with a fork, oblivious to the impact of his comment. Adrian swallowed hard and collected himself before Nate could notice any reaction. “Well, maybe I’ll ask him again.”

“I could talk to him, if you want. I’m going to have to tell him about today, anyway.” Nate took another bite of pizza and raised his brows in question.

“Okay, sure. Or we could have another unofficial session, and you could do it.”

“Oh, I’ll give you as many unofficial sessions as you need, man. No problem.” He emphasized the word “sessions” and raised his brows, and Adrian chuckled.

When they’d finished eating, Nate accepted a beer, and drank it while Adrian cleaned up. He offered to help, but weakly, as if he expected he would be refused. Adrian tried to remember all the reasons he’d had for keeping this a “non-date,” all the possible ways this could go wrong. But when Nate suggested they hang out a bit longer, he couldn’t help agreeing. The thought of Nate walking out the door so soon was unbearable.

They watched some dumb game show where contestants had to navigate an almost impossible obstacle course, and though it was ridiculous, Adrian found himself laughing at it anyway. He had moved from his chair to the couch, in an attempt to seem more normal, and was intensely aware of Nate’s body sitting only inches away.

“You want another beer?”

“No, thanks. I have to drive home, two is my limit. Unless you want me to stay?”

Adrian looked away uncomfortably, felt his face heat. He did want that, so much it was embarrassing to think about. Nate moved closer, so that their thighs touched, and ran his fingers over Adrian's neck, to his jaw. He turned Adrian's face toward him.

"Tell me if this is too much," Nate whispered, and moved in to kiss him.

The kiss was gentle, sweet, and soft. Nate kept his hand wrapped around Adrian's ear, his fingers buried in his hair. A little tip of tongue prodded in, and Adrian welcomed the intrusion. He relaxed into the kiss, grateful for it. He never wanted it to end.

But Nate pulled away, and looked into his eyes. "You okay with that?"

Adrian could hardly form words, but managed to nod and whimper something positive, and Nate smiled. "Good, 'cause I'm going to do it again." This time, the kiss he offered was deeper, harder, and even more to Adrian's liking.

He wrapped his arms around Nate's back, pulling him closer, and sucked Nate's bottom lip into his mouth. He was moaning, he could hear himself but he couldn't stop. Nate's hand crept along his stomach, over his hip, almost down to where he needed it. He tilted his hip in invitation, but the hand stayed where it was.

Nate moved his mouth away, trailed kisses down Adrian's neck, sucking and panting. "Damn, you smell so fucking good."

"Mmm." Adrian decided the best way to get what he wanted was to lead by example, so he moved his hand to Nate's cock and stroked it through the soft material of his sweatpants. Nate arched into his grip and sighed. And then, thank God, he returned the favor, slipping his fingers under the waistband of Adrian's pants.

Their mouths crashed together again, messy and rough, and they stroked each other wildly. Too soon, it went from deliciously exciting to holy-shit-I'm-there. "Stop, Nate, stop." Adrian locked his hand on Nate's wrist, pulled him away, and tried to halt his impending orgasm.

"Okay, sorry, you all right?"

"Don't wanna come yet." He closed his eyes, breathed out, tried to relax his abdomen.

"Ah, okay." Nate took his hands and guided them to his own cock, and Adrian gladly transferred his focus.

He stroked Nate as he kissed him, and moved his free hand under his shirt, across his chest, teasing his nipple and scratching down his ribs lightly. Nate seemed to have no reservations about reaching orgasm too soon. After only a minute or so he pulled his mouth away and moaned, tightened his grip on Adrian's bicep, and shot all over himself.

Nate's expression changed from blissfully relaxed to intensely desirous, and before Adrian knew what he intended, he'd launched himself at Adrian, taking him into his mouth.

"Fuck, Nate." Adrian sucked in a breath, overwhelmed by sensation.

Nate swirled his tongue around Adrian's cock, then took him deep and swallowed over the head. He leaned back against the couch, light headed and dizzy, and tried to hold out as long as he could, to enjoy this. But it was too much, too intense, and he'd been too long without it. Almost instantly he was shouting and filling Nate's mouth with his cum, his hand clasping the fabric of Nate's T-shirt, twisting and stretching it out of shape. He expected Nate to back off, but instead he kept kissing, gently, with little sucking nibbles. When Adrian pulled away, hypersensitive, Nate moved to his hips, traced the scar there with his tongue, kissed his belly while he cupped his hand over Adrian's balls.

"Damn, get up here." Adrian pulled him up, and Nate complied with a sexy smile. "That was great."

"You are so fucking hot, man." Nate took his face in his hands and kissed him, and for a minute Adrian felt "so fucking hot." The way Nate looked at him, the way he kissed him: he felt whole and perfect.

Nate looked down, saw the cum all over himself and laughed. "Shit, let me clean this up." He hopped up, jogged to the kitchen, and returned a moment later with a damp paper towel. "Where did I get you?" He searched Adrian's shirt for cum stains, found one, and wiped at it.

It was a sweet gesture, really. Nothing Adrian himself wouldn't have done at one point. But now, it wasn't something he could do. Ever again. And the reminder was too much. He didn't feel "so fucking hot" anymore.

Nate saw the change and sat near him, paper towel wadded in his fist. "What? What happened?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"Bullshit. Listen, I know you were into that, so if you're going to pretend now that it didn't happen, and we're going to go back to being all distant and careful, I'm... well, I'm not cool with that."

“No. No, I’m okay.” But he wasn’t really, and his tone made that obvious.

Nate’s face fell, his worried expression turned to hurt, and he pinched his lips together. “I see.”

“Nate, I... I’m fine, really.” He tried to sound more “fine,” and laid his hand on Nate’s thigh. “I’m sorry for being so fucked up.”

Nate smiled, leaned in and kissed him. “You can talk to me, you know. I’m good for more than PT and blowjobs.”

Adrian laughed, really laughed, and forgot his insecurity. Nate used the paper towel to dab at his own pants, and then leaned close to Adrian. “So, you have a job?”

“No. Not since the accident.”

“What did you do?”

“I... I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Seriously? Okay... Well, how about... Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

Adrian faltered. But that was an easy thing to reveal, and stupid to withhold. “I have one sister, older. Christine.”

Nate nodded, and Adrian realized he was waiting for him to return the question. “How about you?”

Nate smiled wide. “Two brothers, younger. But they both live near my dad in Colorado. I only see them a few times a year.”

Adrian nodded. He tried to think of something to ask that he himself wouldn’t mind revealing. Finally Nate spoke. “Why is this so hard for you? What are you afraid of?” His voice was soft, and his face held no judgment or pity, just interest.

Adrian bit back the rude response he had been ready to spit out. Instead, he said nothing, and Nate sighed in frustration.

“Okay, I get it. But I’m not giving up, man. I saw you, the real you, for a minute there. I’m gonna get that guy back.” He leaned back, so they were shoulder to shoulder, and handed the remote to Adrian.

Adrian found another show for them to watch, and when Nate clasped his hand, he didn’t move it away. They chuckled at the television, and he soaked up Nate’s gentle affection.

When the show ended, Nate got up and stretched. "I should go, I guess. My poor dog has been alone since noon."

"You have a dog? What kind?"

"German shepherd. She's a great dog."

"What's her name?"

"Star."

"Nice name." Adrian smiled, wishing he'd been more open earlier, now that Nate was leaving.

"Can I use your bathroom?"

"Down the hall, on the left."

As he waited for Nate, Adrian moved into his chair. At least he could walk him to the door. Or roll him to the door, whatever. *Fuck*. He fought down the wave of annoyance at his condition. Nate obviously didn't care, and acting like a douche about it was no way to get a second date. He smiled to himself, because he most certainly wanted a second date.

Nate's phone chimed and lit up. For a second, the incoming message was displayed, and he leaned over to see it, curious. The logo that flashed on the screen made his breath catch in his throat. He hadn't seen that logo in almost two years. Not since before the accident. He read the message quickly, but only the first ten words were visible in the preview.

Nate came walking in, and Adrian rolled away from the table, smiling to cover his racing heart.

"So, when do you want your next private session?" Nate scooped up his phone and keys, slipped the phone into his pocket without checking it.

"Sooner the better."

Nate smiled at that. "Well, I don't think two sessions on one day is a good idea, but if you want to make it a dinner date instead, I could see you on Friday."

"I could do that."

"Good. Can I take you out? Or is here better for you?"

"I can go out." *With you. For the first time in two years.* Holy shit, what had he just agreed to?

“Awesome. I’ll pick you up at six, okay?”

“Okay.”

At the door, Nate leaned down and kissed him, then whispered in his ear, “I’ll see you Friday.”

Adrian murmured his agreement and watched Nate leave.

He opened his internet browser with shaky fingers, and typed in the address of the BDSM group he’d been involved in before the accident. The logo he’d recognized from Nate’s phone greeted him. Yes, he was over eighteen, yes he was already a member, yes he remembered his password. The message board had a few names he recognized, and lots of new ones.

No one named “Nate,” but that wasn’t surprising. Most people used their email as a username, or made up something. He located the thread title that had flashed on Nate’s screen, and read all the posts. “*Doms wanted*” it was called. And a user named “*StarsGuy*” had posted that he was available, and instructed interested parties to “*PM information, real names only.*” There were a few more responses, mostly other guys offering their availability.

Adrian stared at the screen, thinking. Then he clicked his own profile page, double-checked the information. No photo, no real name, no address. Nate couldn’t have known he was ever on that site. Had he met him once, at a party or something? He looked up StarsGuy’s profile, and sure enough a photo of Nate greeted him. But he’d only joined last year. Long after Adrian had become inactive. So it was a coincidence. Not impossible, since there were only a few local BDSM groups, and just this one that was exclusively gay. But still, a hell of a coincidence.

Chapter 4

“My car, or do you want to drive?” Nate smiled at Adrian, who had clearly made an effort with his outfit: gray wool slacks, a thin sweater over a crisp shirt and tie, and shiny square-toed shoes. He looked great. Nate himself only had a few sets of “dress clothes,” reserved mostly for family functions and dates. Wearing sweatpants to work had its perks, but wardrobe-building wasn’t one of them.

“I can get in your car.”

Adrian seemed nervous, or maybe angry, and Nate decided to ignore it for now. Hopefully he’d loosen up as the night progressed.

The restaurant was half-empty, and since Nate had made a reservation they were shown right to the table. The waiter removed a seat so Adrian could remain in his chair, and took their drink order.

Adrian wore a small frown as he looked over the menu.

“You all right?”

“Yes, fine.”

Before he could ask anything else, the waiter returned with their drinks, told them the dinner specials, and took their appetizer order. When the waiter left, Adrian was still frowning.

“You going to tell me what’s wrong?”

“I said, I’m fine,” Adrian snapped, voice low but sharp.

“Well, you clearly lied. Did I do something wrong?”

Adrian sighed and ran his hand through his hair, messing up the perfect style. “No. You’re good. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s okay. Is this hard for you, being here?”

Adrian looked across at him with shining eyes. “A little.”

“Okay. I get it. But listen, you’re doing great, you look gorgeous, you smell fantastic, and you are on a date with the hottest guy in the room. So calm down.”

Adrian laughed, as Nate had hoped he would, and shook his head. He took a sip of his drink and leaned back, frown gone. “What do you feel like eating?”

“The salmon looks good.”

They shared the appetizer and nursed their drinks with not much more than small talk: what kind of exercises Adrian should be doing on his own, whether or not this had been an unseasonably cool spring, which movies would win at the academy awards. When Adrian seemed relaxed and happy, Nate risked some more personal questions.

“Tell me about your life before. What did you do?”

Adrian sighed, and the frown snapped back into place.

Nate recalled the look on Adrian's face after their first kiss. That guy was here, underneath the frown. Nate just needed to get him out.

“Keeping it a secret won't make it less painful. It'll just be one more thing I don't know about you. I wish you'd let me in.”

Another sigh, this time followed quickly by a long swallow of his drink. “Fine. I was an accountant.”

“Yeah? That's cool. So you could still work, if you wanted to.”

“I guess.”

“But you don't want to?”

“Not there. I guess I could work somewhere else, but I... I'm not ready for that.”

Nate nodded. If Adrian was this nervous on a date, how would he handle a job interview? Or meeting new co-workers? “I understand. But I bet someday soon you'll be ready. I bet you've done a lot even in the past few months.”

Adrian snorted. “Not really.”

“You're here with me. Would you have done this before?”

“I guess not.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, while the waiter brought their meals. Nate decided to keep pushing, to try to crack that shell. “So it was a motorcycle crash?”

Adrian froze, his eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted into a scowl. “I don't want to talk about that.”

“Ever? Or just right now?”

“Not ever.” Adrian’s voice was loud and angry enough to attract the attention of a couple dining a few tables away.

Nate realized he’d crossed a line. Still, “not ever” was a problem. “I’ll let it go for now.” He smiled, and Adrian met his gaze with an angry stare.

He ate in silence until he thought Adrian had relaxed enough for more questions. “Did you have a boyfriend?”

Adrian closed his eyes, dropped his fork, and pressed his lips together. “No.”

“Oh. Well... that’s good and bad, I guess.” He watched Adrian’s face change, his mouth relax.

Finally, curiosity seemed to get the best of him. “Why is that good and bad?”

“Good because if you did, and he left you after the accident, well, that would be terrible. Bad because it would give you an excuse for being so difficult on a date.” Nate smiled and finished his drink.

“Are you trying to make me upset, now? Is that what you want?”

He leaned forward, lowered his voice, looked Adrian in the eye. “I want you to talk to me. I want to get to know you better. I want you to realize I am not your enemy.”

“I know that.” Adrian picked up his fork again and took another bite of fish.

“Good.” Maybe he should back off. Adrian was trying, and pushing too hard could backfire. “You ever been here before?”

“Once, a long time ago. My sister’s birthday, I think.”

“You have a picture of your family?”

Adrian hesitated, but dug out his cell phone and scrolled through until he produced a picture of his parents and sister.

“Nice. She’s pretty. Your parents look happy.”

“Yeah. They’re great.”

Nate kept the conversation light, back to safe observations and neutral questions. When Adrian declined dessert, they left. He stood nearby while Adrian got into the car, trying not to look concerned. Adrian flashed him an annoyed glance, and he knew he’d failed. “You want to go out for dessert? Somewhere else?”

“No. No, thanks.”

Nate sighed. Too much pushing, maybe. He drove to Adrian's house, got his chair out of the trunk. Adrian frowned at him and grabbed the arm of the chair, pulling it out of his grip. Nate said nothing, waiting for him to get settled. Adrian got in the chair and immediately wheeled up the ramp to his house.

“Can I come in?”

“Sure.” Adrian unlocked his door and pushed inside, not even turning to see if Nate followed.

“I know you can do things, Adrian. I was just helping, that's nothing to get mad about.”

“I can't do things.” His chin shook, and he turned away.

Nate froze, unsure how to react. With anyone else he'd offer some comfort, an arm around the shoulder or a gentle word. But with Adrian, that was likely to make things worse. “I don't know what to say, how to be with you without you getting angry.”

“Then leave.” His face had turned hard and cold again, his mouth firm.

“I don't want that. Do you?”

A short nod.

“Really?” No, he couldn't mean that. They'd had some fun, some nice moments.

“Yes. I'm sorry.” He kept his face turned away.

His mind spun, what could he say to fix this? How could he get past Adrian's anger? He stared at the side of Adrian's face, his smooth jaw, recently shaved, and the carefully styled hair. He'd wanted this date. So why was he so ready to end it? Had it been that horrible?

“No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I pushed you so hard. Sorry I moved too fast. And I'm sorry you're not ready for a boyfriend, Adrian, because I'd love to be yours.”

He waited a minute, but Adrian never turned, never spoke. He kept his head tilted away and his mouth closed in the same tight frown he'd worn half the night, and so Nate left.

In the car, driving home, he berated himself for all his stupid questions and teasing. He'd known Adrian was fragile, emotionally. Known he was quick to

anger. What had he been thinking? With his fucking stupid, cocky questions, thinking Adrian would be so easy to win. Well, he'd blown it now. If Adrian didn't make contact again, Nate would have to give it up. If Adrian wasn't ready for a date, or a simple conversation, there was nothing else Nate could do.

Chapter 5

Why had he thought he could go out on a date? That anyone would want him? That he could do anything like a normal guy?

Everything had been wrong. From the awkward transfer into Nate's car, to the restaurant that had clearly been chosen for its handicap accessibility, to the horrible probing questions. And Nate, skipping over the curb to fetch his chair, standing by ready to help, carefully closing the car door for him. *Ugh*. No matter how good Nate's intentions, it was unbearable.

Adrian tried not to cry, not to care. Tried not to think about how hurt Nate had sounded right before he'd left.

He took out his phone and texted Chrissy, as he'd promised to do. "Home safe. Date over."

Barely a minute later her reply came. "Why so soon? How did it go?"

He thought about what to tell his sister. They'd grown closer over the past year and a half since he'd been home, texting every day. She was his only friend, unless he counted Jim. He had to be honest with her.

"I couldn't do it. He was too helpful."

Chrissy would understand that. She knew better than anyone how hard this was for him, how insulting he found most people's urge to assist.

"Thought you liked this guy? You should have let him help you, bro."

"No thanks." Maybe she didn't understand, after all.

"You're going to need to let someone help you, someday."

"Not yet."

Instead of another text, the phone rang. "Are you all right?"

Hearing his sister's voice was too much. He sobbed into the phone, and told her the whole story. Every detail of the conversation, every move Nate had made, every rude response he'd given. Finally, Chrissy sighed, a deep sound heavy with frustration.

"You need to talk to him again. Apologize."

"What? How are you not on my side about this?"

“Ade, you acted like an asshole. What was he supposed to do? Let you fall onto the pavement? Of course he had to set your chair up for you! And I know you’ve been on enough dates to realize that talking about your past and your family is kind of expected. Seriously, it sounds like he was being really nice and you were a jerk.”

“He was pushing me, and he knew it.”

“People push you because they care about you. Would he have pushed if he thought you couldn’t handle it?”

Fuck, she might be right. Adrian flushed with guilt.

“You still there?”

“Yeah. Fuck, Chris, you think I was an asshole?”

“A little bit. Call him, or go see him.”

“I can’t. I don’t know if I want to.”

“Okay, well just think about it. You deserve to be happy. Text me when you decide what to do, or if you need backup, okay?”

“Okay.”

He changed out of his date clothes, getting more and more depressed. His righteous anger seemed ridiculous now, his pride infantile. He dug out his emergency bottle of sedatives from the bottom of his sock drawer, swallowed one, climbed into bed, and slept.

The next day he woke late, and groggy. But it was Saturday and he had nothing to do, so he stayed in bed. Finally at noon, his hunger got the best of him. He got up and answered his texts from Chrissy while he made himself breakfast. He spent the rest of the day thinking about how, or if, he should contact Nate. A call? A text? A visit? Or should he just cut his losses and move on?

Sunday, he wasn’t much better. He’d skipped the sedative, but hadn’t slept well. Betty, his cleaning lady, came in the morning, and he sat up and smiled, acted normal while she was there. After she left, he curled up in his bed and read a while. When the private investigator solved the case and professed his love to his assistant, he closed the book in disgust. Must everything be a damn romance?

He checked the time: three thirty. If he showered now he could be at Nate’s office by closing time. Or he could call, apologize, and ask Nate to stop by. Or

he could be really smart and do nothing. He'd be sad for a few days, but if he pursued this with Nate there was a bigger heartbreak waiting for him. Because as much as Nate thought he liked him now, it most likely wouldn't last forever. Maybe it was best to end this before it started. For the both of them.

But Adrian got in the shower anyway, and got dressed, and then held the phone in his hand, debating what to do. If he called, Nate would come. He was pretty sure. But something about that didn't sit right. Before his accident, he wouldn't have asked a guy to come over so he could apologize. He would have gone to the guy himself.

Driving to the physical therapy office, he second-guessed his decision. What if Nate wasn't interested anymore? His asshole behavior at dinner had made it pretty clear that his issues went beyond the physical. Maybe Nate had decided he was too much work? He pulled into his usual spot just as Nate was locking the front door.

Nate saw him pull up, of course, and stood behind the glass door with his arms folded over his chest, waiting, while Adrian wheeled up the low ramp.

"Come in." Nate held the door open, then locked it behind him and lowered the blinds.

"Hi. I had to talk to you."

"Okay. Well..." Nate sat on the small vinyl couch in the office's waiting area and patted the seat next to him. "I'll listen."

He smiled softly at the action. Not only was Nate willing to give him another chance, he expected him to hop onto the couch just like anyone else. How had he thought he should "cut his losses" and let Nate go? He managed to transfer himself to the couch with little effort, relieved the cushion was firm and high. "Okay, well obviously I was an asshole during our date. I'm sorry, and I really want another chance."

He'd expected Nate to smile, to forgive him with the same good-natured attitude he'd shown during all their other meetings. But Nate's eyebrows pinched together and his lips thinned to a hard line. Adrian's mouth went dry.

"I'll give you another chance, if you make me a promise."

"Okay." Adrian barely got the word out, and Nate looked up at hearing his scratchy voice.

"You have to be honest with me, tell me about yourself, and let me help you

when you need it. I understand you keeping the rest of the world out, but if I'm going to let you into my life, I deserve to be in yours."

"Did you rehearse that?"

"Yeah." Nate chuckled. "Pretty good, right?"

"Yeah." Even better, it meant he had hoped they would see each other again. "I promise, but it might be hard at first. Will you be patient?"

"I will." He said it like a marriage vow, as he held Adrian's hand and stared into his eyes, and they both laughed.

Then Nate leaned forward and kissed him. Adrian tried to let go of everything, he tried to let his walls down and trust Nate, tried to be himself.

"Stop it."

He pulled away. "What?"

"Whatever you're doing. You're all stiff and nervous, thinking too hard. Jeez, man, I'm trying to slip you some tongue and I'm afraid you're going to bite it off."

"Sorry." Adrian huffed out a little laugh. "I was trying to be more open."

"Well, that felt like the opposite of open." He smiled and ran his thumb over Adrian's jaw. "Listen, I need to go home, let the dog out, and get out of these sweaty clothes. How about you order us some pizzas, I'll stop for wine, and I'll meet you back at your house in an hour? We can work on your open-mouth kissing technique."

"Sounds good." Adrian was already moving over to his chair.

Before he unlocked the door, Nate leaned down, kissed Adrian's neck, and inhaled deeply. "Mmm, love the way you smell."

Adrian clasped his hand on the back of Nate's neck and held him close. He wanted to thank him for accepting his apology, to thank him for the dinner date he'd ruined, to thank him for trying. But he just kissed him instead, and said, "See you in an hour."

Nate smiled and followed him out to the parking lot, waved at him from his car. Adrian drove home smiling.

He was just paying the pizza delivery guy when Nate arrived, brown paper bag in one arm. "Good timing."

“Hey.” Nate leaned down and kissed him, and Adrian’s eyes misted with tears. So normal and natural, as if he was any other guy on a date, not some broken man in a chair. He looked away quickly, hiding his emotion.

Nate unpacked the wine bottles, and took out some plates. “Where are your wineglasses?”

Adrian took out the corkscrew and glasses, poured the wine, and they ate in the kitchen again. Nate talked about his day, telling a story about the hair salon next door to the therapy office: how a few of the stylists were always coming in and asking for medical advice, as if he and Jim and Becca were doctors.

“I mean, so far it’s all been obvious stuff, but we’re not running a walk-in clinic, you know? I just hope they never have any actual injuries over there!” He laughed and cleared away their empty plates.

Adrian watched him and sipped his wine. This was going well, easy and relaxed. He followed Nate into the living room and sat near him on the couch, didn’t even flinch when Nate held out an arm to help him.

“So, tell me about your bike.”

Fuck. Adrian froze, fought down the wave of anger. *Breathe.* Nate was still and quiet by his side, waiting, and Adrian forced himself to look into his eyes. What he saw there calmed him. Patience and kindness. He was serious, he hadn’t asked to tease or to hurt; he knew this was difficult. Adrian closed his eyes, remembered the spot in his garage where he’d parked his bike, the hook where he’d hung his helmet.

“Yamaha Roadstar. A sixteen hundred. Dark blue.”

“I don’t really know anything about bikes. Is that a good one?”

Adrian laughed softly and opened his eyes. “Yeah. I mean, it’s not a Harley, but... I loved it. I used to map out long rides on the back roads, spent at least one day each weekend riding all summer long. The day of the accident I was on the highway. It was warm, a freak warm day in December. I knew it would be the last ride of the seas—” His words ended on a sob. *It was the last ride, all right.*

“Okay, okay.” Nate leaned down and scooped his legs up, folded them onto the couch. The move was so quick and smooth Adrian didn’t have time to get mad about it. Then Nate pulled him onto his chest, and ran his hands over his back, and Adrian relaxed onto him. Nate said nothing, but was clearly waiting for the rest of the story.

“So I was on the highway, going to head down to exit 3 and explore the old farm roads. I never rode too fast, was always careful. I bought my bike because it was big, a cruiser. I just liked the feeling of riding. I was in the low speed lane, and I felt something hit me. I just remember getting thrown, looking at the pavement from way too high. I don't remember landing, or anything else. I woke up in the hospital. They told me it had been a four-car pileup.”

“You're lucky to be alive.”

“That's what they say.”

“Thanks for telling me about it.” Nate kissed the top of his head, held him close.

After several minutes of silence, during which Nate drained his wine, Adrian sat up. His tears had dried, and he was done talking. He kissed Nate, wine still strong on his lips, and wrapped a hand around his back. This time, he wasn't trying too hard. His tongue danced with Nate's, and their bodies pressed together. Nate whimpered against his mouth, and arched into him, his arousal obvious.

“Can we go to your bed?”

“Fuck, yes.” He moved to his chair as fast as he could, and Nate followed him down the hall. In bed, he had a panicky moment when he realized that Nate would see him naked. The lights were off, but it was still light enough outside that the room was fairly bright. He wanted to go lower the blinds, but Nate was already at his side, kissing him, urging him onto the mattress. He tried to slide under the blankets, but Nate stopped him.

“Clothes off, first.” Nate was stripping himself, and barely looked at Adrian, assuming his cooperation.

Finally naked, Nate turned to him and realized he hadn't moved, hadn't taken off anything.

“What?”

“I don't...”

“Can I help?”

No. But he didn't say that. Instead he nodded and let Nate take off his socks. Nate's body was gorgeous, every muscle perfect. He was hairy, dark curls on his chest, a thick patch over his beautiful cock, and a thin covering on his thighs. He stood close and pulled Adrian's shirt over his head, then unbuttoned his pants and started to move them over his hips.

“Wait.” Adrian covered Nate’s hands. “I’m—”

“You’re fine.” Nate smiled and Adrian braced for the look of disgust that he was sure to receive when his legs were exposed.

Instead, Nate threw the pants to the floor, and touched his legs reverently. Nate’s strong fingers rubbed over his bumpy ruined thighs, tracing the straight surgical scars, palming the smooth patches where he’d been burned. Then he moved up, over his hips and torso, finding all the other scars and marks, acknowledging each one.

When he’d examined his whole body, Nate climbed on top of him, pulled the blanket over his back, and kissed him with just as much passion as he’d shown in the living room. It took a few moments for Adrian to get back into it, after the trauma of Nate’s inspection, but the kissing and rubbing did the job, and soon he was moaning with need.

Nate pulled away and asked, “What do you want?” Kissing his neck, squeezing a hand over his hip.

“I don’t know.” He’d always considered himself a “bottom,” really. And probably that would be easiest. Just let Nate roll him over, or hold his legs up. But he hadn’t been with anyone since the accident. Since a few months before the accident, actually. And he just didn’t know how it would be. If he was even ready for this at all. Maybe they could just suck each other off, take things slow.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” He answered immediately, and was rewarded by a proud smile from Nate.

“You have condoms? Lube?”

Adrian nodded, pointed to the nightstand. He closed his eyes, waiting. He did trust Nate, and he silently vowed to be accepting of whatever he did. If Nate held up his legs, Adrian would be cool. He’d have to tolerate some of that in bed, there was just no way around it.

But Nate shocked him by rolling the condom over Adrian’s stiff cock and mounting him.

“Holy shit.” He gasped in pleasure as he watched Nate lower himself, muscles flexing, the tight heat closing around him.

“This okay?” Nate’s voice came out low and thready; already he was half inside.

“Mmm, yeah.” *More than okay.* His eyes followed every move Nate made, every flex and twist. Nate rode him slow, and with a little pivot forward at the end of each down stroke. “Oh God, Nate.”

Nate smiled and kept going, stroking himself with one hand, the other planted on the bed, his body leaning to one side. Adrian's head spun, and he closed his eyes. He had to stop watching Nate's abs flex and his balls bounce if he wanted to last. But with nothing else to focus on, the pleasure seemed more intense, and soon threatened to overwhelm him. He fought it, hard: squirming on the bed, blowing out deep breaths, calculating percentages in his head. But Nate's relentless bouncing was too much. He tried to announce his orgasm, but all that came out was a broken shout, no real words. Nate knew what he meant, though.

Nate rocked up and down a few more times, then leaned back, and stroked himself fast. Adrian watched, still woozy and shaky, and sighed along with him when he came. Nate made sexy sounds— little moans and gasps— and Adrian just watched in awe.

The sun was almost down, and the last pink light filtered in and lit up Nate's chest, glistening with sweat. God, he was beautiful. *I don't deserve this kind of man.*

Nate got up, oblivious to Adrian's worry, peeled the condom from him, pulled a few tissues from the box on the nightstand, and wiped him off. Adrian hid his annoyance. *Calm down, he's just being nice.* Nate disappeared down the hall, going to the bathroom probably. He returned a moment later and lay down beside him, and Adrian tried to relax.

Chapter 6

Nate pulled Adrian on top of him, and hooked his leg around the back of his thigh.

“Ugh, Nate...” Adrian wriggled to the side, but Nate held firm.

“Stay here, please? You feel so good on me.”

Adrian groaned against his chest but stopped struggling.

He knew why Adrian wanted to move. He couldn't ignore the powerlessness of his legs in this position, not like when he was on his back. Well, tough shit. Maybe it would take some uncomfortable situations for Adrian to realize he wasn't interested in his legs, or what they couldn't do. He massaged Adrian's back, the muscles tight and firm, dropped his hands and kneaded his ass, hard.

“Oh God, that feels good.”

Adrian was completely relaxed on him, his whole body loose. “Ha! Now I know how to control you. Ass massage.”

“Yes. You cracked my code. Just don't stop.”

Nate laughed and kept rubbing. Adrian's butt was all muscle under his hands, the skin smooth. He pressed his fingers into the crack and smiled when Adrian arched up, allowing him better access. He ran his finger around Adrian's hole. “You want to bottom next time?”

“Yes.” Adrian sighed it into his chest. He may have even been drooling.

Nate chuckled and kissed the top of his head. “You should have said. We could have done that.”

“I know. What we did was great.”

“Yeah, it was.” He squeezed the cheeks in his hands, stretched his ass open. “You like to bottom?”

“Yes. Keep rubbing.”

“A bossy bottom, I see.”

“Mmm.”

He gave Adrian what he wanted, working the stiff muscles. “Good-looking guy like you? You must have had a lot of boyfriends.”

A soft chuckle against his skin, and Adrian tilted his hips in. "I had my share."

"What did you like? Guys like me? What was your type?"

Silence. Nate waited, unsure if he'd crossed a line, hit some unknown sore spot.

"I didn't have a type, physically. I liked guys with... common interests."

He laughed. "Bikers, or accountants?"

"Doms."

Nate's pulse sped. The room seemed extremely quiet all of a sudden. His mind raced as he tried to remember all their conversations, to figure out how Adrian might have known. "You... Did you know I—"

"Yes. The first time you were here you left your phone on the coffee table, and you had a PM alert from Strictly-Men pop-up. I saw the screen, and I knew." Adrian tilted his head, rested his chin on Nate's chest. "I used to be active in that group, before."

"No shit."

"Yeah."

The sun had set, and shadows masked Adrian's expression. Nate stared at his face anyway, trying to wrap his head around the coincidence that they were both in the same BDSM club. Then again, it did have several hundred members, so maybe the chances weren't that slim.

"So... about the group. What were you into?"

"I like things light. Spanking, bondage, teasing. Not a huge fan of real pain."

Nate smiled and continued his ass massage. "Me neither. And you're a sub?"

"Yeah. I looked you up. Your screen name said 'switch'. No preference?"

"I like Dom, I guess that's my preference. But I've subbed pretty happily too." He wrapped his arms around Adrian and rolled him over onto his back, straddled his slim hips. "Do you still want to play like that?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Yes." Their eyes locked, and even in the low light Nate could see the longing there. Not sexual, something deeper. This was a part of his old life, a part he could have back, a part Nate could give him.

“Ah fuck, Adrian.” Nate leaned down and kissed him, deep and hard, pressing his tongue into Adrian’s mouth with an aggression he hadn’t dared earlier. Adrian yielded, and moaned deep in his throat.

Nate thrust his tongue in roughly and Adrian took it, sucking it in, pursing his lips around it with a tight wet grip. As he fucked Adrian’s mouth with his tongue, he felt Adrian harden against his stomach. He reached down to stroke him, earning another little whimpering sound, and had to pull his mouth away.

They were both panting, staring at each other in the dimly lit room. Nate waited, unsure what the next move should be, afraid to go too far. Adrian moved his arms up and crossed his wrists on the pillow behind his head, never breaking their gaze.

A blatant invitation, and Nate accepted. He took one wrist in each hand, holding them down, and rocked against Adrian’s cock. Adrian moaned, threw his head back, and closed his eyes. *Beautiful.*

Nate whispered, “You want to come again?” into Adrian’s ear.

“Mmm, yeah.”

He stopped moving. “Ask me.”

Adrian opened his eyes and smiled. A wicked, naughty smile. He struggled to free his arms, tried to twist his hips, groaned his frustration. Nate held him firmly and waited, his own cock almost completely hard again as well.

“Please, Sir, let me come?”

Damn that sounded sweet. Nate rewarded him with more grinding, sliding their hard lengths together. He kept the contact firm and moved deliberately, giving Adrian as much sensation as possible. “This feel good?”

“Yes. Yes, Sir.”

“You going to come like this?” It had been less than an hour since their last orgasms, and even as turned on as he was Nate wasn’t sure he could get there again so easily. If Adrian could, he’d keep going. If not, there were other things they could try.

“Yes. Please.”

Okay then. He kept up the hard frotting, building speed. Adrian panted and twisted under him, made another effort to free his arms. Nate pressed harder against his wrists, and Adrian sucked in his breath with a little gasp. *You like*

that, do you? He lined up their forearms and leaned down, limiting Adrian's movement more completely. When he hooked his feet over Adrian's knees, holding his legs down, Adrian shouted.

At first he thought he'd made a mistake, that reminding Adrian of his legs had ruined the moment, but a burst of wetness on his stomach explained the shout and eased his worry. He thrust a few more times, then kissed Adrian's neck and released his hold.

He laid next to him, kissed his wrists where he'd gripped them, stroked his chest, and waited for his breathing to return to normal.

"Adrian?"

"Mmm. That was awesome."

"Yeah." Nate shifted closer and snuggled in to his neck. "Did I mention how great you smell?"

Adrian laughed. "A few times." He moved in and pressed a soft kiss to Nate's mouth. "Can you stay tonight?"

He glanced at the clock. He should get home and let out Star, she'd been alone for six hours now. "I have to get back for the dog."

"Oh, yeah. Star, right?"

"That's right. You don't like dogs?"

"I do. I did, I mean. It's just..."

"You can still have a dog. Or you can just visit mine anytime you want." Nate sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over, turning on the small lamp on the nightstand. Adrian squinted in the light, and then looked over Nate's naked body. He watched the change as it happened, watched Adrian's face go from soft and admiring to hard and resentful. "Hey, don't do that."

"What?" Adrian asked it sweetly enough, but he was frowning.

"You know what. You're getting sad, feeling sorry for yourself. I can see it in your eyes."

"You don't know me well enough to see that yet."

"Bullshit. I see that look all the time, man. On you, and on most of my patients." He picked up Adrian's right leg and held it in the air, bent the knee, pressed down. Worked through a series of stretches just like they were warming

up for a session. "At work I can't usually say anything, it's not my place. But with you? I won't let you fall down that hole, not while I'm here anyway." He gently dropped the leg, moved on to the left one. "You are beautiful, Adrian. Sexy and strong. Believe me?"

Adrian's frown had melted away, and he was watching Nate move his leg with patient affection. "Yes."

"Good. Let's talk about something serious, now... I canceled a date last weekend. With a guy from the group." At Adrian's raised brows, he explained. "Well, I'd made the date before our therapy session. Then after what happened with us, I know we didn't have any kind of agreement, but it just didn't feel right to go through with it. Anyway, the guy's limits page had sounded a lot like stuff you'd be into. Spanking: no marks, no broken skin. Rope play. So I was thinking, maybe you'd want..." He trailed off at Adrian's stormy expression. The scowling face and piercing eyes were not the reaction he'd anticipated. "What?"

"Take your name off the group list." Adrian's voice was angry and hard.

Nate let out a breath. Not angry about the play offer, then. Just unwilling to share. "Is that an order?"

"Please." His face reddened nicely, and Nate resisted the urge to cover it with kisses.

"As you wish." He gave in to temptation and kissed Adrian's frown, held his warm pink face in his hands. "A bossy bottom and a jealous sub. What have I gotten myself into?"

Adrian's eyes met his, and Nate's smile faded. Vulnerable, uncertain, hopeful, those eyes held him captive. *He trusts me. I could break him, and he trusts me not to.* "Only you, Adrian. I'll be yours if you'll be mine, okay?"

Adrian nodded, and his eyes shone. Nate kissed him quickly, deeply, to prevent any tears. He slipped an arm behind him, pulled him close. Kissed his neck, his shoulder, nibbled at his chest, rubbed his nose under his armpit, making Adrian laugh. He held him and cuddled him until there was no risk of sadness.

"Stop, I have to piss." Adrian laughed and sat up, pulled his legs over the edge of the mattress.

"Okay. I really do need to go home, now, too."

He dressed while Adrian went to the bathroom, and then kissed him good-bye at the front door, promising to see him Friday for a redo of their restaurant dinner date.

Chapter 7

Adrian watched Nate's car reverse out of the drive with a mix of embarrassment and excitement. What had he been thinking, with that possessive bullshit? "Take your name off the group list." *Shit. What an idiot.* Then Nate had responded with his sweet promise, and kissed his worries away. *Don't get too excited. He could still disappear.* But a little voice in Adrian's head said he wouldn't, and he hoped it was right.

The week passed slowly, waiting for Friday. At his PT appointment Friday morning, Jim seemed unusually quiet. "You all right?"

Jim smiled his trademark shiny grin, but ran a hand through his hair nervously. "You like Nate?"

He was stunned a minute, then he realized, of course, they must be close. It was natural Nate would have told him. "Yeah. I do."

"Oh thank God." He seemed to unclench, and let out a deep breath.

"Why? You were worried?"

"He said you guys were... but then on Tuesday you didn't say anything, and I was afraid..."

"Wait, you were worried about *him*?"

"Well, yeah." He stared at Adrian as if the reason should be obvious. When Adrian just stared right back, Jim rolled his eyes. "You can be difficult, Adrian. And I think he really likes you."

"Nate's pretty tough. He can handle me."

Jim burst out laughing at that, and slapped Adrian's back. "I hope so, man. I'd love to see you happy."

Well, if anyone can make me happy it's probably Nate. He smiled and followed Jim to the desk, said "See you Tuesday," and went home. It was way too early to get ready for his date, so he watched TV, and attempted to distract himself. But in the back of his mind, questions tortured him. Would Nate leave him? Would he get sick of dealing with a boyfriend in a wheelchair? Would he be embarrassed to be seen with him? Would his family approve? Would he recover if Nate broke up with him? Finally he gave up and got ready for their date, and then waited in the living room, dressed and nervous, for an hour.

When Nate showed up he acted like it was totally normal to go out on dates, like he had no problem riding in someone else's car. Adrian tried to counteract his horrible behavior on their last date by being extra accommodating on this one. He asked Nate to help him into the car, allowed Nate to lead him into the restaurant, and smiled at the waitress even when she placed her hand on the handle of his chair while seating them.

"You're scaring me." Nate studied his face, and his eyes did seem nervous.

"I'm trying to be nice."

"Tell me about your family."

"What the hell kind of conversation transition is that?" Adrian held in his laughter, tried to act serious.

"Since you're in a 'nice' mood, I figured I should take advantage."

His smile spread, and Nate matched it. But he did answer the question, and told Nate all about his sister Chrissy, and her texting habits, and his parents with their well-intentioned but annoying visiting. He talked about his childhood, and asked questions of Nate, and before he knew it the dessert was done and Nate was paying the bill.

"We should split it."

"You get the next time." Nate smiled a challenge at him.

Okay, yes. There can be a next time. "Sure."

At his house, Nate came in and poured wine and kicked off his shoes as if they had been dating for weeks. He was equal parts thrilled and terrified.

"I have a serious question for you." Nate sipped his wine casually, but his eyes were determined.

"Okay, shoot."

"If I didn't want to play, would you still want to date me?"

"Uh, yes." He looked Nate over, to be sure he was serious. "Of course. Why?"

"I've had a few boyfriends that wanted more than I was comfortable with. When I stopped playing, we broke up. I want to know how important the lifestyle is to you."

Adrian shook his head. For some people, the lifestyle was just that. For him, it was important, and fun, but not essential. He'd never been in an uneven

relationship, himself, and so he'd never judged. But knowing someone had hurt Nate pissed him off. Still, it was his gain that they had, so he dismissed his annoyance. "Well, considering I haven't had any kind of sex in over two years, it's not all that important." He moved closer and held Nate's hand. "I like it. I'm not going to lie. For a while it was pretty much the only way I liked to fuck. But even then I'd have given it up for the right guy."

Nate smiled, and Adrian knew he'd passed some kind of test. "So, then... let's talk about it. What do you like, specifically?"

"You want to see my profile?"

Nate nodded, and Adrian went to get his laptop, opened it to the site, and pulled up his page. A few clicks and he opened the private files he had ready to PM an interested Dom. He handed the computer to Nate and waited while he read it.

"Wow, this is all... stuff I could totally do. You the type who likes things to get more intense? Like is this going to get heavier as time goes on?"

"No. My limits page hasn't changed since I joined ten years ago."

"Perfect." Nate handed the laptop back, and Adrian took a minute to PM his information to StarsGuy.

Still, it was two months before Nate responded. Two months of dating, and learning about each other. He met some of Nate's family, and a few of his friends. To Adrian's relief, none of them seemed surprised or disturbed by the fact Nate was dating a guy in a wheelchair. Star was a fun companion, and often a tension breaker for them. When Adrian got too gruff and snappish, Star would place her head in his lap, and look up at him with her deep black eyes, as if she was scolding him. Adrian would apologize to Nate, and find some way to take the sting from his words.

The sex was good, just the way it was. At first he'd had trouble allowing Nate to hold his legs, or flip him around, or support his weight. But Nate tolerated his cranky comments, and learned how to coax him into compliance. He tried to let Nate in, tried to trust him. But part of him was still terrified of the day Nate would leave him. He kept their dates to no more than three nights each week, and was careful to remind himself they were only casually dating, no matter what his heart wanted. This way, when the end came he'd be ready.

Alone at his kitchen table one Friday at lunchtime, a text came through from Nate, *I'd like to try a scene tonight. You up for it?*

He replied immediately *fuck, yes*, and imagined Nate laughing when he read it.

A few seconds later, the response: *LOL I'll be there at four.*

When Nate showed up, carrying a large black nylon duffel bag, Adrian's stomach flipped with nerves. Was he ready for this? What if he safeworded? Would Nate want to try again, or would he give up on him? Would Nate go too easy on him?

"You look nervous." Nate dropped the bag on the floor and kissed him, looked at him with concern.

"No, I'm fine." When Nate cocked his eyebrow in doubt, he admitted, "A little nervous."

"Let's sit and talk."

Nate had printed the "negotiation" page from the resources section of the group site, and they went over it together. It only took a few minutes, as there were only a few areas which interested them both. Adrian chuckled at the list they'd created. "We're pretty vanilla, aren't we?"

"Yeah. That's fine with me though. I'm not into doing anything that requires first aid afterward."

"Me neither." He dropped the list on the coffee table and threaded his fingers together.

"So, what are you nervous about?"

"It's been a long time, what if I can't finish?"

Nate scooted closer to him on the couch and pulled him into a hug. "We can try. And whenever you want to stop, we'll stop. Then whenever you want to try again, we will. This is supposed to be fun, man. If it's not fun, we don't do it, okay?"

Adrian closed his eyes and relaxed onto Nate's chest. "Okay."

Nate bound his wrists with long strips of cloth, secured one to each side of the headboard, leaving less than an inch of slack. Adrian pulled against the restraint, pleased by the sensation. His legs were similarly tied, and though the binding there was unnecessary, it thrilled him the most. He studied Nate's expression carefully, but not a flicker of amusement crossed his face during the tying of his ankles.

His cock had stiffened almost fully by the time Nate was done, partially as a result of the binding, and partially from Nate, his Dominant demeanor, his authoritative voice. When Nate stood at his side and spread lube over his cock, he hardened completely.

“You do not have permission to come. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Nate stroked him masterfully, bringing him quickly to the edge of orgasm. He would have warned Nate of his arousal, but at the perfect moment Nate dropped his hand and massaged his balls, then dove lower and pressed against his hole lightly.

He clenched every muscle from his lower belly to his ass, and rode out the teasing edge of pleasure. When Nate's hand returned, it was tortuously light, barely grazing the sides of his shaft, skimming over the head, his fingertips dancing over everything.

Adrian groaned with need, and Nate gave him a taste of more sensation, a few strokes that were just right, almost there, and then left him aching again. He growled with frustration and pulled against his bindings.

Over and over Nate took him to the edge of the cliff and back down again, never allowing him over the other side. He lost all pride and control, and shouted a demand at Nate, ordering him to stroke harder, faster. Nate ignored him. He fought against the ties, pulling and twisting, and yelled again, demanding more, now, don't stop. Nate dismissed his demands with a lighthearted comment. He knew Nate wouldn't stop, not unless he spoke the safeword, and so he was free to plead. Most Doms loved the begging anyway. He hoped Nate would, too, because at this point he couldn't control it.

Finally, when he was whining for release, Nate promised, “Almost.”

Nate removed the restraints from his ankles and pushed his legs up, exposing his ass, and forcing his sore dick against his belly. Then Nate was at his entrance, pressing in, and the stretch diverted his attention for a moment. He wondered briefly if they were skipping the spanking, but one look at Nate's face and he forgot all about that.

Nate's eyes were hooded, his breaths puffed out short and fast, his bottom lip shook, and his mouth formed a soft frown like it did when he was about to come. *You're just as gone as I am.* The thought made his cock ache even more.

Nate thrust with uneven rhythm, then seemed to gather his control, and shifted his weight to one arm, using the other hand to wrap Adrian's cock. "You may come, whenever you're ready."

"Th-thank you Sir," he managed to reply, as Nate's fingers massaged him. It wasn't a stroking motion, but more a squeezing, and he couldn't be sure if that was intentional or if it was simply the best Nate could manage in his current condition.

Either way, he was soon on the edge again, and this time, with the pounding in his ass and the strange pulsing around his cock, he toppled over, and screamed with the intense relief of it. His body shook, and he spurted like a geyser, covering himself with cum. Every thrust forced out a bit more, and Nate's hand continued to work him.

He expected Nate to come, too, but the pounding didn't stop. Nate's face was a tight grimace. *He's holding it in.* The first twitch of discomfort from his dick reminded him why. He'd agreed to this, said he liked it. And he did. But damn, right now he wanted it to end. Nate's hand teased and rubbed, stimulating his hypersensitive cock to another kind of edge, the one between pleasure and pain. He squealed and shouted, making some sounds he would never be able to re-create and would never want to. Finally, Nate collapsed onto him, and removed his hand, leaving his cock to recover untouched.

Adrian panted and closed his eyes, enjoying the gentle tingling coursing through his whole body. His skin where Nate laid on him was sweaty, and the untouched areas cool. He kept his mind blank and focused on the physical.

A minute later he was untied, wiped off, and snuggled in Nate's arms under the soft comforter. Golden light from the setting sun streamed in through his windows, filling his bedroom with a warm glow, and Adrian felt perfect: comfortable, happy, surrounded by beauty.

"I'm sorry I fucked that up." Nate was red faced, eyes downcast.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I didn't do everything: the spanking, the plug... Are you disappointed?"

"No. Nate, come on. That was great."

"I just couldn't— you just— man, you got me so fucking hot I couldn't think."

Adrian wanted to respond, but his heart was pounding and he couldn't stop smiling. He held in a giddy laugh. Had he ever made a Dom lose control

before? Not that he remembered. But the only guys he'd dated long-term were either not in the lifestyle, or were much more serious, as Doms, than Nate.

There was something between them, something strong. It had made the scene more powerful for him, and obviously for Nate as well. He didn't want to think about it too closely, though. Because right on the heels of that heart-racing thrill of attraction and closeness and affection came the terror of knowing it would end. It would certainly end, and the deeper he let himself get, the more painful it would be for him when that happened. So he kissed Nate's chest and chuckled softly. "Got you so hot you couldn't think, huh?"

Nate laughed and squeezed him tighter. "Yeah. Gonna have to build up my tolerance to you, I guess."

Over the next few months, Nate did just that. They went on more dinner dates, and spent a lot of nights at home, watching movies or reading, snuggled side-by-side on the couch. He even slept at Nate's a few times, and found that with a few adjustments, he could manage his chair easily around Nate's house. Nate urged Adrian to do more, to take risks, and to try things he'd never considered. He went shopping at the mall, had lunch in town with some old friends, and even went to the beach, using a special fat-wheeled chair Nate borrowed from the office.

Adrian still kept their dates to three times a week, though Nate pressed for more. During those three nights, Nate spent time learning Adrian's body. He uncovered every kink, and soothed each insecurity. Their play did escalate slightly, but it was still tame as far as scenes went. And Adrian loved it. He loved Nate, if he was honest. But whenever a moment came that would be appropriate to say so, he changed the subject. And any time Nate got too serious, he made a joke or brushed him off.

Back before the accident, he'd have already said "I love you," a hundred times over. But "I love you" was too much like a promise, a commitment, a binding he both craved and feared. Once that line was crossed he'd be fully invested, fully at risk, and that seemed too much, now. The thought of someday losing Nate hovered always in the back of his mind. He might survive the loss of a casual boyfriend, but losing a love would destroy him. So he tried to pretend they were not in love. Sometimes, he even believed himself.

Chapter 8

Nate held Adrian's hands down, with one hand at the wrists, under the small of his back. With the other hand, he stroked Adrian's leaking cock, his touch light and teasing.

"Please, please harder."

He smiled, tightened his grip, and gave a few firm strokes.

Adrian moaned and arched his back "Yes... yes."

He pulled his hand away abruptly, leaned down, and sucked Adrian's nipple.

"Fuck!" Adrian's body shook and his cock bobbed wildly.

He stroked it again, barely touching, not nearly enough, and watched Adrian closely. They'd been at it for at least twenty minutes, and he'd brought Adrian to the edge of orgasm five times. His face gleamed with a thin layer of sweat, the top of his blindfold was dark with moisture, and his biceps flexed against Nate's hold. He could have pulled free, if he wanted to. Nate was slightly larger, but after almost three years of being chair-bound, Adrian's upper body strength far exceeded his slim stature.

"Ungh! Harder!"

"Watch it, bossy." Nate smiled and removed his hand entirely. Time to move on.

"Oh God!" Adrian's whole body jerked with need. "Please Sir, please let me come!"

Nate moved his other hand to reinforce the hold on Adrian's wrists, and waited for the moment to pass.

Adrian bucked and flexed, straining for some contact. A full minute ticked by, both of them panting in the silent bedroom. Nate's eyes stayed on Adrian's cock, waiting for the moment he could safely ask him to roll over. Too soon and he'd be creaming the sheets.

Finally, Adrian's breathing slowed and his cock rested on his hip. Still hard, but not so insistent. He pulled the blindfold off and met Adrian's gaze, leaned down and kissed his glistening mouth. "Okay, on your stomach."

He'd attached ropes to each of the bed's corners, fitted with padded cuffs. He made sure to secure Adrian's ankles properly, pulled his legs out, and clasped the ankle restraints on firmly. Just as he would do for any man. Adrian arched his back, and Nate slapped it down lightly. "Stay still."

Adrian's head dropped to the pillow, his face hidden.

Next, he secured the wrists. He ran his hands over Adrian's strong arms, down to his wrists, hooked the cuffs on, then shook them to be sure of their security. Splayed out like this, Adrian's body hid nothing from him. The thin, wasted thighs, the smooth well-muscled back, the tight biceps, bumpy with scars, straining against his ropes.

"Still, Adrian."

Adrian's back arched again, his ass lifted, and he moaned. Nate smiled and used the strap to deliver a sharp slap. Again, Adrian squirmed and tilted his hips up.

"Should I tie your back down, too? Is that what you need?"

"No, Sir." Adrian lowered his hips to the mattress obediently.

Nate heard something in that "no, sir," something encouraging. Something like pride. "Look at me. Should I tie your back down?"

Adrian turned his head, and again said, "No, Sir," but at the same time he twisted his back, so one hip lifted off the mattress, just an inch. His eyes held Nate's and the side of his mouth twitched up.

Nate turned away to hide his smile. *Such a brat.* He pulled a long rope from the play bag and threw one end of it under the bed. It took some awkward reaching, but he got it tied over Adrian's back, and placed the short paddle under it, aligned with his spine, to keep Adrian down. He tightened the rest of the restraints as well, pulling Adrian's arms and legs out as far as possible. He was really bound now, and Nate watched him carefully for signs of distress.

But his forehead was smooth, his mouth open, his eyes closed. His legs were far enough apart that his hole was visible, as was the thin strip of hair above it. He arched his back again, but impeded by the rope and board, he couldn't move more than an inch in any direction.

Nate squirted a large puddle of lube into his palm and let it drip onto Adrian's ass. He spread it around, over his cheeks. Then he reached under and coated Adrian's balls, stroked his cock, pulled it back so it stuck out between

his legs, the angry purple tip pointing downward. He thumbed at the slit and pinched the head, until Adrian moaned for mercy. He gave in, briefly, stroking the entire length a few times before returning his hand to Adrian's ass.

Adrian yelped when he slid his thumb into the tight hole, and arched his hips back as best he could. Nate fucked him with his thumb, roughly, knowing he wanted more, a deeper penetration. *Not yet.*

He picked up the wide leather strap, ran it over Adrian's back. A shiver followed its path. Without warning he delivered two sharp slaps to the recently oiled buttocks, and Adrian gasped. He let those burn for a minute, then gave two more. After those, the redness lingered.

Adrian's face was still smooth, his mouth still soft and open, his eyes still closed. Nate laid down three more hard spanks. This time they produced a low moan, and a little hip wriggle. He gave another slap to discourage the movement. Adrian's mouth had closed, but his brow remained uncreased. Nate decided to give him a short reprieve, and leaned in to finger his ass, slipping his long middle finger in as deep as he could.

Adrian groaned his approval, panted as Nate fingered him, and whined when he slid his finger out.

Three more strokes with the strap. Adrian's cheeks were deep pink now, glistening with lube. His cock jutted down between his legs, needy and neglected. Nate rummaged in the play bag for the vibrating sleeve. He took the bullet vibrator out of it, and set it aside. For now, the rubber toy alone would be enough.

Adrian was still slick, and the sleeve slid over his cock easily.

"Please, please fuck me, Sir."

"Not yet, bossy." He positioned Adrian's cock under his belly, right side up again, but pulled his balls down so they still peeked out between his legs. "Remember, no coming until I'm inside you."

"Yes, Sir."

Nate delivered another slap, harder this time, and Adrian hissed in his breath. Another, and another, and then Adrian was emitting a low needy wail. His ass had gone from pink to red, and Nate decided it was time. He rolled a condom on, squirted out a small amount of lube, coated himself. He squeezed the shaft in his hand. He'd been hard and dripping for as long as Adrian, at this point. He hoped he would last as long as he needed to.

He twisted the bullet vibrator to low speed, and reached under Adrian, slipping it into the sleeve. Adrian howled at the sensation. His cock was certainly oversensitive, after the earlier edging. The vibrating sleeve would give him release, but if he came too soon he'd be forced to tolerate the buzzing until Nate came as well, and that would be close to torture.

Nate wasn't going to make this easy. This was the part Adrian loved, and needed, Nate understood that. The longer it lasted, the better. He mounted Adrian, and slid in with a smooth motion. The grateful moan and gentle squeezing nearly sent him over the edge, and he had to lie still for a moment. He bit Adrian's shoulder lightly, and continued thrusting, grinding his hips against Adrian's ass.

The moans and whimpers turned to pleading, and Nate increased his pace. He wanted Adrian to come first, but not by too much. Last time, Adrian had admitted he'd almost safeworded at the end, to escape the vibrator.

Adrian was grunting, trying to hold out as long as possible, he knew. He slammed in hard and deep, again and again, holding Adrian's hips in his hands, pushing him past the point of control. Finally, Adrian surrendered, shouting into the pillow, spasming around his cock.

Nate was ready, but held himself on the edge, waiting. When Adrian began to thrash and pull at his restraints, growling, clenching his ass, Nate pounded into him, filling the condom. He reached under and pulled the sleeve off Adrian's tender dick, and tossed it aside. For a minute, he allowed himself to rest there, on top of Adrian, both of them sweaty and satisfied.

Running his hands over Adrian's body, he soothed and petted him, kissing and stroking every inch of his skin. He removed each restraint, and wiped the lube away gently with a warm wet towel. Adrian stayed in place, soaking up the attention, a soft smile on his face.

Nate put everything away, wiping down the strap and washing the sleeve first. Adrian would be happy to wait. When he returned to the bed, he coated Adrian's ass with lotion, and rubbed it into the sore skin. He kept his touch light over the hot, red flesh, and Adrian moaned softly. A glance at Adrian's face revealed he was still out of it. He'd be drifting and incoherent for a while. Nate kissed the small of his back and applied another layer of lotion.

Adrian slowly came out of subspace. Nate watched the change as it happened, smoothing his hands over Adrian's back the whole time. Adrian drew his arms in first, laying them under his head. His face lost that soft,

orgasmic look and fell into its usual expression. When Adrian shifted his hips, trying to get more comfortable, Nate knew he was back.

He lay on the bed, and pulled Adrian on top of his chest, a position he no longer complained about. "How you doing, bossy?"

"Uunh."

He laughed and kissed Adrian's forehead. "That good or bad?"

"Mmph."

He wrapped his arms around Adrian, and buried his face in his hair. "I love you."

Adrian froze, then pulled away slowly, looking into his eyes.

"I do. I don't care if you don't believe me, or if you don't want to say it back, or if it scares you. I love you, Adrian."

Adrian's face crumpled and tears sprang to his eyes. *Well, not the most ideal reaction.* He didn't really need to hear the words, though. He knew that Adrian loved him. He also knew that any talk of a commitment scared him, brought up all his self-doubts, all his fatalistic worry. But Nate was done hiding it, and he was ready to take their relationship to the next level.

"I am so in love with you. When something good happens, I want to tell you first. When I'm upset, you're the only person I need. I love talking to you, and kissing you. I love fucking you, and doing these crazy scenes with you, and just watching TV with you. I love how you trust me, and how you let me help you, and how you boss me around. You don't have to say it back, because I know you love me, too. But I'm not going to keep silent about it anymore. I love you."

Tears streamed down Adrian's cheeks. Nate kissed them away, and pulled him back into an embrace.

Then, in a raspy whisper at his ear, hot and wet, Adrian said, "I love you too, Nate. Oh, God, I love you too." He shook, shuddered out a sob, and dug his fingers into Nate's ribs. "But what if..."

"Shhh, I'm not going anywhere."

The next week, during breakfast, the doorbell rang. Nate jumped up to get it, while Adrian sipped his coffee with a suspiciously knowing smile.

"Hey! I'm John from Fence Pros." The man stuck out his hand. "We're here to set the posts, could you bring the dog inside?"

“Uh, sure.”

“Thanks!” He turned and jogged down the steps.

Nate approached Adrian with his arms over his chest. “You’re putting up a fence?”

“Star shouldn’t be tied up so much, and I like you both here.”

He shook his head. “So bossy.” But he was smiling, and full of happiness as he went to bring in the dog.

Chapter 9

The “only three dates each week” limit had been blown months ago. Adrian now spent at least half the week at Nate’s house, mainly because he enjoyed playing with Star while Nate was at work. Lately, on Friday mornings, they took Star to the dog park, and then ate lunch out. One warm Friday, Adrian was cleaning up from breakfast, Nate still sipping his coffee, when the phone rang. Nate got up and paced the hallway as he talked, as usual, but since the house was small and quiet, Adrian heard the whole conversation.

“I understand, Lisa, but I still think it’s not fair... I realize that... The point is, it’s not my property, so I shouldn’t be responsible for... But I am, if they’re raising the rent, then that’s exactly... Fine. Okay, well thanks for talking to them anyway.”

Nate slammed the phone down in an uncharacteristic show of annoyance.

“What’s going on?”

“Ugh, that was the property manager. Fucking landlord’s raising the rent. Again. Coincidentally right after the city assessment came in, and the property taxes went up. So basically, I’m paying the increase. But I don’t have a lease, and so it’s either pay it or move out.”

“So move out.” Adrian’s heart pounded. He should think about this, shouldn’t rush such a big decision. Yet he couldn’t imagine a down side. Unless Nate said no. “Move in with me.”

Nate’s annoyed expression turned to shock, his brows shot up, and he looked at Adrian in surprise. “Seriously? You’d want me to live with you?”

“Well, yeah. We’re already together almost every day. I mean unless you don’t—”

“I’d love to.” Nate smiled and swooped down to take his mouth in a sloppy kiss. “On one condition.”

Adrian froze. “What?” *Anything*. He’d promise almost anything to keep Nate in his life, close to him.

“You need to put up a Christmas tree this year. Last year was terrible.”

Adrian laughed and pulled Nate’s shirt, dragging him back for another kiss.

Nate turned his life upside down. How he'd thought living together would be easy, or fun, was a mystery to him now. First there were the renovations. Since Nate insisted on paying rent, and contributing to the household, there was extra money. And Nate decided the best use for it would be to convert the bathroom to a more handicap accessible space. Custom sinks, a bath with built in seats, and multiple showerheads. Next came a paved walkway around the yard so Adrian could go outside more often. Then a few doorways needed to be widened, so Adrian wouldn't bump his knuckles anymore. All good changes, Adrian hated to admit.

Then there were the "suggestions": Let's visit your parents at their house this week. Let's meet your old friends for dinner. Let's accept that invitation to my cousin's wedding. Let's go on vacation somewhere warm this winter. Over the next two years, they got more and more ridiculous. Finally, there was the worst one: "you should think about going back to work."

Though Adrian always said "no" quite firmly, in the end he found himself doing whatever it was Nate had suggested. To his horror, he usually enjoyed it, and was forced to concede it had been a good idea. The going-back-to-work suggestion was his biggest "no" failure. He fought it tooth and nail, but Nate refused to give up until Adrian had landed a part-time accounting job at a small local company. He found himself, after that first three-day workweek, full of stories and in a mood so great nothing could have brought him down, not even the "told you so" smirk on Nate's face.

So when Adrian got the idea to propose, he thought nothing of driving himself into town, rolling right in to the jewelry store, and asking for his and his wedding rings. He left with three tiny velvet lined boxes, and jangling nerves that had nothing to do with self-confidence. Still, he kept the boxes hidden in the bottom of his pants drawer for three months. He wanted to ask in the perfect way, at the perfect time. But after considering and dismissing dozens of proposal ideas, he realized he had to either make his own "perfect time," or just do it anytime, and hope for the best.

One Saturday in late August, he looked out on their backyard to see Nate bent over the flowerbed, weeding. A bag of mulch was propped in the wheelbarrow and Star slept in the grass nearby. The gardens looked better than they had in years. Even before his accident, Adrian had been no landscaper. But now the whole property stayed well-groomed, colorful flowers added interest and depth, and the grass grew lush and green. The path Nate had insisted upon installing wound around the yard, a smooth flat surface for his chair to

negotiate. He recalled all the afternoons spent reading in a lawn chair while Nate gardened. He dug in his pants drawer for those tiny boxes, and met Nate in the yard.

“Hey... can I talk to you?”

Nate looked up, concerned. “Sure, babe. What’s the matter?” He took off his gloves, and wiped his hands on the front of his jeans.

“Nothing, I just need to talk.” He led Nate to the little patio filled with matched chairs, a table, and a chaise where they had spent so many happy hours. Nate sat and waited. There was a smudge of dirt on his chin, and Adrian wondered if maybe this was the wrong moment after all. Maybe it was too casual, and Nate would be disappointed. But he didn’t want to wait any longer. “Have you ever thought of me as a burden?”

“Uh, no. Why?”

“Do you think I’m going to be a lot of work, when I get older? I mean, I’ll need more medical care, and—”

“Did someone say something to you? What brought this up?” There was an edge of protective anger in Nate’s voice, and worry in his eyes.

“I’m fine, I’m just asking. You’ve never treated me like a burden, and I just wanted to know if you ever thought it. I promise I won’t be angry.”

Nate sighed, leaned back in the lawn chair, and crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, now that you mention it... yeah, you are a burden, man. You’re constantly saying ‘no’ to all my best ideas, you never want to go out for sushi, and you don’t flush the toilet after you piss in the middle of the night. I don’t know how I stand it, actually.” He was trying to keep a serious expression, but his eyes danced with humor.

Adrian shook his head, smiling. “I love you.” He pulled one box out of his chair where he’d tucked it beside his thigh. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you as your husband, if you don’t think it’s too much to ask. Will you marry me, Nate?” He held out the little box, and Nate took it with a shaking, soil-stained hand.

He opened it silently, and his mouth dropped open. “Is this a wheel? Are those diamonds?”

“It’s a nautical wheel, like a rudder. Because you steer me in the right direction. But it also looks like the wheel of my chair. I thought you might wear it as an engagement... thing.”

Nate's eyes glistened with tears, shocking Adrian. Nate wasn't a crier. "I'd love to marry you." He choked on the words as he tried to clasp the thick chain around his neck.

"Here, I'll help you." Adrian reached up to do the job.

Nate leaned down and turned so he could fasten the necklace. Then stayed there to kiss him, the dirt on his chin rubbing off and drifting down Adrian's shirtfront. Tears still gleamed on Nate's cheeks, but his smile when he pulled away was beautiful and strong. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Nate jogged into the house, and Adrian sat on the patio. *What the hell is he doing?* Star had lifted her head at Nate's exit, and she looked back at Adrian, sharing in his confusion but unwilling to get her old body up off the grass. "It's all right, girl. Daddy's coming right back." She lay down again, as if she understood him, and he smiled.

Nate returned a moment later and dropped to his knees in front of the chair, his elbows on Adrian's thighs. He held his own tiny box, and opened it for him to see. Inside was a small pendant, like a coin, with a lion in deep relief. It looked ancient, and there were some strange letters below the lion's feet that might have been Greek. "Is this a coin?"

"Yeah. It's really old. I was looking for a lion pendant, and I found this on auction online... anyway, Athena is on the back."

Adrian flipped it over to see a female profile beneath a battle helmet. He looked up at Nate for more information.

"I know it's corny. I thought of the lion because, well, you're a Leo. And also because of the strength, you're the strongest person I know. And then when I saw this, the coin, I thought of your job... and then Athena, goddess of mathematics and strength and warriors— it just seemed so perfect. It didn't come in time for your birthday, so I was going to give it to you for Christmas. But maybe you can wear it as an engagement thing, too?"

"I'd love that." He reached back and unclasped the necklace he always wore, and Nate slipped the pendant on.

They stared at each other, both smiling like fools, until Adrian blurted out, "I already bought our rings."

"No shit? Let me see them."

He dug them out of the side of the chair, and Nate opened his box like a kid on Christmas, so fast he almost dropped it. "I love it! Can we wear them now?"

“No! We have to get married first.”

“Let’s just practice, no one will know.”

So they put them on, and spent the afternoon planning their wedding. Nate had some ideas, and Adrian shot most of them down. By the evening, they’d settled on pretty much the exact plan Nate had initially suggested: a few dozen close friends and family at a small beach-front hotel. The sooner the better.

In bed that night, he kissed Nate’s chest and relaxed in his arms, perfectly content.

“You know you didn’t need to get me an engagement present, right? I mean, I’m all for diamonds, but I don’t need any incentive to marry you. You could have just asked.”

“I know. It just seemed right. I’m always snapping at you and bossing you around and being difficult. I just wanted to show you that I appreciate what you do for me.”

“I already know that, babe. Just like how you love to be bound, but you always pull against your bindings. I think you just like to know they’re strong enough for you, that you can depend on them.” Nate held him close and kissed the scars on his shoulder, then started to lick them, in the way that Adrian knew meant he wanted to have sex.

He smiled and pressed himself against Nate, encouraging the idea. He was about to say, “You’re not a binding,” when he realized that was exactly what Nate was. Holding him tight, supporting him, forcing him sometimes to do what he needed to. Never failing him, no matter how he was tested or strained.

And as long as he was bound to Nate, Adrian was strong and free and whole.

The End

Author Bio

I write erotic-romance of all varieties: usually male/male, and often dipping into the paranormal. When I'm not writing, I enjoy hunting for shells at the beach, making all types of crafty-things, and consuming large quantities of rum.

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