



DEVAN
FREEMAN

Samuel
Queer Docs



Gay Romance

Samuel

Queer Docs I

by

Devan Freeman

Translated by Kel Barksdale

Samuel:

Queer Docs Volume 1

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The people and events in this book are fictitious. Any
resemblance to real people is purely coincidental and
unintended.

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The Author

About the author

Devan Freeman lives and works near Frankfurt, Germany. But she keeps a packed suitcase near the door, ready for the next opportunity to see the world. She's fascinated by the variety of human emotions and the beauty of nature, and is always looking for majestic scenes and moving stories to incorporate into her novels.

Most of the settings in her books are places she has personally visited, and she was able to observe the spectrum of human emotions while working in the medical field. Through both personal and professional visits, she has been able to collect impressions and experiences in many cities and countries.

The author has published a number of books under the pseudonym Alesia Fridman, telling tender and passionate stories that take place in exotic locations.

As Devan Freeman, she has created a rainbow-colored universe in the *Queer Docs* series, which is centered around a hospital in Berlin. These novels tell of the concerns and trials of sympathetic gay doctors. They may end up scattered to the winds, but they can all find love.

Samuel is the first novel in this successful German series to be translated into English.

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About the translator

Kel Barksdale grew up in Charlottesville, Virginia, and now lives and works as a freelance translator and writer in Germany. He has also been an installer of hospital telephones, a cataloguer of theater props, a library database gap-filler, and an unqualified grill cook. He lives with his cat Caterwalter.

You can find him at <https://fernwaytranslation.com>.

The Book

Gay romance—funny, steamy, touching, and with a happy ending.

Med student Samuel is enjoying life to the fullest. This son from a good family lives for the moment and puts no stock in long-term relationships.

When he begins an internship in the surgical department, he realizes that not everyone and everything can be dealt with lightly.

Jarrett, the grumpy head doctor on the wing, and his handsome brother Damian share a dark past. They soon put Samuel's rules about not getting involved with people to the test.

Which of the two brothers will succeed in winning Samuel's heart?

For you,

because you know my secret dreams.

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Station 48a

Samuel paced up and down the hall outside the Student Advising Office. Patience was not his strong suit. Usually, he was the one people waited for; his time management skills were horrendous. It was the first day of the new semester, and he was supposed to spend the next half year in Surgery. He couldn't wait to find out which unit he'd be assigned to, and he was feeling a weird mixture of elated excitement and nerves. As a child, he had dreamed of becoming a surgeon. His older brother Benedikt had found this hilarious, saying he had neither the finesse nor the patience for such a job. The point was valid. To Samuel's irritation, Benedikt was a model of patience and fine motor precision. He was currently a neurosurgeon, and as far as Samuel had heard, doing an excellent job of it. The fact that Benedikt had achieved Samuel's childhood dream got under his skin. He had always been overshadowed by his brother, and he didn't want to spend his professional life getting his brother's shining example shoved under his nose. He wondered if he should switch to another specialty that was less physically challenging.

A blond woman in her fifties opened the door. "Samuel von Hohenfels?"

"At your service," he said, and followed her inside.

She raised her eyebrows at him. Probably he hadn't managed to hit the right tone. It was another failing of his, but one he didn't spend much time worrying about. It was other people's fault for spoiling their own lives with a lack of tolerance and humor.

"Why are you so late? The other students were here over an hour ago and have already gone to their stations."

Samuel shrugged. "Traffic was a nightmare." There was no reason he should tell her that the journey from his apartment to campus was really only a few minutes' walk. The truth was, he'd overslept. He'd flown back to Berlin from New York the day before and was really feeling the jet lag. On top of that,

the semester break had been one long party for him and he needed some time to recover. And in his defense, he had been waiting a while to be let into the office. He stifled the impulse to mention this.

The wrinkles in the woman's forehead deepened while she paged through his file on the desk. Did she doubt his excuse? "All the stations are taken already. I'll have to double you up with someone. Station 48a, for example, has another student from your semester, Liah Klein," she said finally.

"That would be great," said Samuel quickly. He had known Liah since the introduction week in the first semester of the program. She was nice and down to earth.

His interjection earned him another skeptical look. "All right. Station 48a then," she agreed.

Samuel headed off to the station in Abdominal Surgery where he'd be spending the next few months. He knew this wouldn't be a simple nine-to-five job. For strength in this coming trial, he made a detour by the cafeteria and allowed himself a latte macchiato. His favorite daytime drink, the iced caramel macchiato, which had been his main form of nourishment in New York, was of course absent from the pitiful little hospital cafeteria menu. He stirred in two packets of sugar and hoped it would give him the turbo boost he was looking for. It didn't, really. He was exhausted. It would only be 5 a.m. in New York, after all—he couldn't expect his body to be on full power yet. It would have been better to fly back a few days earlier and recover before his hospital rotation started. That had been the plan. But Tim, at whose place he'd been staying, had convinced him to stay longer. And since they'd been enjoying each other's company on all levels, it hadn't taken much encouragement for Samuel to rebook his flight. Samuel thought longingly of those slow, lazy days in New York. They'd let themselves go with the flow, paying no attention to the time of day, social conventions, or any of that bourgeois nonsense Tim hated so much. Samuel smiled into his coffee. Tim, the eccentric artist, knew how to celebrate life. But if Samuel were honest, it had begun to feel somewhat

hollow by the end. Maybe it was better to take your life a touch more seriously and try to find some meaning in it.

When he finally meandered into the wing, he could smell the patients' lunches warming up on the cart in the hall. The latte rose up in his throat, and Samuel briefly wondered if it might be okay for him to just begin tomorrow. But Liah was already approaching. "Hey Sam, what are you doing here? Are you lost?"

"I'm supposed to help you out at this station."

A smile flitted across Liah's pale face. "That's great. I could use some help. And I probably don't need to ask why you're just getting here now."

"Well spotted." Samuel cocked his head. "You don't look so hot yourself. You've got rings under your eyes, you're as white as a sheet, and you look like you've lost weight. It doesn't suit you."

Tears started to gather in Liah's eyes. Quickly, he pulled her into an embrace. "Sweetie, what's wrong? Is it lovesickness?"

Liah gave a sob.

"Ah, got it in one." He stroked her hair. "Listen, Liah, no boy is worth crying over. And I have lots of experience with boys."

The next sob sounded almost like a laugh. "Not everyone has such a flexible attitude when it comes to men."

"You have to keep moving, sweetie: that's what keeps you afloat."

"What is this, Ms. Klein?" The irritation in the voice made them pull apart. "If you want to cuddle with your boyfriend, you can do that after work, not at the station."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Zadnik," Liah stammered. "He's not my boyfriend. This is Samuel von Hohenfels, he's been assigned to 48a as well."

"Do you greet all the new students so affectionately?" Dr. Zadnik, clearly the senior physician and head of this station,

narrowed his eyes as he turned to Samuel. “Welcome, Mr. von Hohenfels. If you saunter in again at noon tomorrow, you can turn right around and leave. I won’t want to see any more of you on my wing.”

“Uh, sorry, traffic,” stuttered Samuel. People didn’t usually have this effect on him. But the penetrating gaze from the head doctor’s dark eyes was terribly intimidating.

He breathed out in relief when the broad-shouldered doctor disappeared in the direction of the operating theater, his coat waving behind him. He seemed somehow familiar, but Samuel couldn’t remember where he’d seen him before.

Liah giggled. “Someone flustered Samuel von Hohenfels. I should mark the day on my calendar.”

Samuel did not find this funny in the least. It would not happen again. His good reputation was at stake.

They didn’t have any more time for private chat over the course of the afternoon. Liah, who, unlike him, had not spent the break bouncing from one party to the next—choosing instead to do an internship in Surgery—already knew her way around the station. She showed him how to register patient examinations in the computer system, how the discharge forms were created, and how to generate digital files for new patients. Samuel had a sinking feeling that his main job at the station was going to be relieving doctors of their paperwork duties.

Annoyed, he entered data into the computer for a patient who’d been admitted that day. “Do we ever get to go into the OR?”

Liah answered without looking up from the form she was filling out. “Of course; we can go along with the doctors. You’ll get your fill of that in the next few months, believe me.”

Samuel kept working, feeling dubious. Wielding a scalpel in the operating room sounded much more appealing than playing secretary at the station.

The daily meeting with the head of the department and the other senior physicians took place in the late afternoon. For once, it was not his fault that he was late. He had taken one last patient down to Radiology in a wheelchair and then hurried back to the conference room.

Dr. Zadnik, the lead senior physician, was giving the department head a report on the day's events when Samuel entered the room. There were no more seats available at the round table that filled almost the entire room. Several students from various stations were already standing on the side furthest from the boss. Of course, thought Samuel, the students have to stand. He quickly squeezed himself past the doctors' chairs. In doing so, he jostled Dr. Zadnik, of all people. When he reached his peers, he realized that Dr. Zadnik had stopped speaking. Liah cleared her throat in the silence that had spread across the room. She raised her eyebrows and gestured with her chin at the department head and the senior physician at his side. Slowly, Samuel turned around, feeling the eyes of everyone in the room on his back.

Though the department head looked somewhat amused behind his gold-rimmed lenses, Dr. Zadnik was giving Samuel a dark stare. Could the floor not just swallow him up right now?

Without turning away from Samuel, Dr. Zadnik began speaking again. "Since Mr. von Hohenfels has joined us and all the students are now present, I would like to welcome you all on your first day in the surgery department and impress upon you that we place great importance on punctuality."

The department head laid a hand soothingly on Dr. Zadnik's arm. "These things can happen on the first day. You need time to find your way around a big hospital like this." He nodded at Samuel in a friendly way. "You must be Wolfram von Hohenfels' youngest. I know your father, and your brother has been doing excellent work in neurosurgery the past few years."

Samuel nodded and pushed his glasses up his nose. He was just happy the department head hadn't mentioned how he often met his good friend Wolfram at the Rotary Club. This all was

uncomfortable enough, despite how used to these types of comments he was. In the past, he'd hated the way his noble heritage and his father's success were a constant point of discussion. At some point, he had decided he might as well own the fact that he was from a rich family—make it into a brand. Since then, he'd felt a lot freer.

Brothers

Jarrett Zadnik returned to his office on the top floor and closed the door behind him. Usually, he went straight back to the unit after the daily meeting and made his afternoon rounds. He had told the doctor who'd been standing next to him all day in the operating room that he had to make an urgent telephone call, and had then disappeared. He draped his lab coat over a chair, opened the angled roof window, and took a deep breath of air. But the muggy city air that hung over Berlin in September didn't help. He needed time to get over his irritation. And he was mainly irritated at himself—at the fact that his pants were bulging in the front, making it lucky that he had been wearing the long lab coat over top. Why did that arrogant, blue-blooded upstart set his pent-up hormones swelling? He looked so cute with his black-rimmed glasses and tousled dark blond hair, even though Jarrett usually went for much more masculine men. When the guy had pushed past him in the meeting, he'd gotten a whiff of an irresistible fragrance. The subtle, unmistakably expensive aftershave had accentuated the man's own scent rather than smothering it. Jarrett had felt a sudden urge to grab the boy, pull him into the closest storage room, and fuck him. Of course, Jarrett would never submit to such an urge. He was very controlled. Still, he was now asking himself whether the vow of celibacy he'd pledged a year ago was really such a good idea, if it meant he was going to want to bed every halfway handsome guy he saw.

Someone knocked on his door.

“What is it?” he yelled. Could he not have just a few minutes to himself in this hospital? He sighed as the door opened and Damian entered the room.

“Hey, bro,” Damian said, grinning. “They told me at the station you were in your office. What are you doing here in the middle of the day? Don't you have all kinds of important things to do? Operations and stuff?”

“The better question is what you’re doing here,” Jarrett countered. “I’ve told you not to come to the hospital.”

“I know, but this is kind of an emergency. Looks like I picked an inopportune time, though.” Damian’s eyes had fallen on Jarrett’s crotch. “What do we have here? Haven’t seen one of those on you in a while. Who happened to cross your path?”

Jarrett groaned. He hadn’t realized he was still sporting an erection. “None of your business.”

Damian laughed loudly. “Oh, come on. Who’s the guy that got my untouchable big brother all hot and bothered?”

Jarrett reached for his coat. “Glad I could entertain you. What is the emergency that brought you here? I have to get back to the unit; I don’t have time for small talk.”

“My credit card was blocked.”

“Again?”

Damian shrugged. “Can I borrow yours? I have to pick up some things I ordered. It won’t be very expensive, I promise.”

“That’s what you said last time, and when I got the credit card bill, I nearly had a heart attack.” Shaking his head, Jarrett pulled out his wallet and handed his brother the card. He couldn’t say no to Damian, despite what he knew of his brother’s expensive tastes.

Damian took the card quickly. “Your heart’s stronger than that. Anyway, I have no idea what you’re planning to do with all that money you earn.”

“I certainly don’t need your help spending it.”

“I could help you buy some nice clothes every now and then. I’m so sick of looking at the couple of outfits you own.”

Jarrett pushed Damian out the door. Everyone was waiting for him at the station. “I hardly have any free time; I don’t need that many clothes.”

“Since I already have your card, I could go ahead and get something for you too. I know your size.”

“Please don’t,” Jarrett called over his shoulder as he ran down the stairs.

Liah, Samuel, and the exhausted-looking assistant Sabina were having a cup of coffee in the station office while they waited for Dr. Zadnik.

Sabina tugged the elastic band out of her disheveled hair and pulled it back into a new ponytail. “Liah and I are assigned to the OR all day tomorrow. Can you manage here alone?”

Samuel grimaced as he tasted the bitter brew. This hardly deserved to be called coffee. “I guess I have to, right?”

“Nurse Elisabeth is really nice and she knows what we do here. Ask her if you get stuck. We can do the rest together once we’re out of the OR.”

“Got it. And can I redo your ponytail for you? It looks horrendous.”

Sabina gave him a bewildered look, but Liah laughed aloud. “Why don’t you grow your own hair out, Sam? Then you wouldn’t have to play with ours all the time.”

“I’d love to. But then I wouldn’t be able to pull the hot guys anymore. Most of them aren’t attracted to a flowing mane.”

This made Sabina laugh too. “Okay, get your fix with my hair then.” She pulled a comb from the pocket of her lab coat and handed it to Samuel.

He pulled the band back out of her hair and combed through the sleek brown strands. Sabina leaned back and closed her eyes. “Oh, that’s nice. Throw in a head massage and you’re hired.”

“I’ll give you one tomorrow if you’re very good,” replied Samuel, teasing her hair and then twisting it into a loose knot,

which he secured with the elastic. Finally, he tugged a few strands forward to frame Sabina's face.

"Are we opening a hair salon?" Of course this was the moment Dr. Zadnik would open the door to the station office. He looked as if the scene was causing him pain.

Well done, thought Samuel. You succeeded in pissing off your boss on the very first day. If things kept going this way, his days at this station were numbered. He had to find some way to get back on the right track. He wanted to keep working with Liah, and Sabina seemed like a smart worker too. Also, she had really nice hair. During the afternoon rounds, Samuel stayed in the background, listening closely and trying to internalize everything that was said. At 8 p.m. they had finally finished all their work, and they left the hospital together.

"Shall we get something to eat?" asked Sabina.

Honestly, Samuel was far too tired. The jet lag was killing him. But you have to make sacrifices to ensure a good office atmosphere, so he accompanied his comrades-in-arms to an Italian restaurant a few streets away from the hospital. Thankfully, neither of the girls was looking to go on an extended bar crawl either. Sabina seemed exhausted from the long day, and Liah looked gloomy now that she couldn't distract herself with work. What was going on with her? Liah had been happily dating Peter for three years. But Samuel didn't want to bring up Liah's heartache in Sabina's presence.

Samuel collapsed exhausted into bed after quickly brushing his teeth. His suitcase stood in the hall, still packed. He'd deal with it tomorrow or the day after, he thought, as he drifted into dreamland.

When the alarm rang early the next morning, Samuel pulled the blanket over his head desperately. He considered ignoring the alarm and rolling over. Maybe he should give up on the degree, or at least take a semester off. It would be his second extra semester. His father had threatened to cut off his funds if he didn't complete his studies now. On the other hand, though, his father made that threat a lot and had never

delivered on it. Sighing, Samuel rubbed his eyes. The thing that finally made him throw back the blanket, pad into the bathroom, and stand under the shower was a surprise even to him: he wanted to show that Dr. Zadnik! The expression on Dr. Zadnik's face when he looked at him the day before was clear. He saw Samuel as just a spoiled kid from a rich family who couldn't do hard work. And he really was that kind of pampered heir who'd never really had to work. He'd even taken care to maintain this image of himself—it had become his brand once he'd understood that you could turn almost any weakness into a strength if you went about it cleverly. But deep down, Samuel hoped he was more than that. And Dr. Zadnik and his disdainful look had hit that sore point.

A short time later, Samuel was on his way to the hospital. He made a quick detour by a coffee shop that had opened up close to his apartment. He'd discovered it on the way from the airport two days earlier. Previously, the shop had been a gallery that sold shrunken heads. They had looked frighteningly real. But clearly the market for shrunken heads in this neighborhood was lackluster, and the store had moved on. A provisional wooden sign over the café announced *Berta's Booth* in crooked letters. What had attracted Samuel were the words *caramel macchiato* among the other specialties written on the window. Berta must have furnished her "booth" from a flea market or possibly a dumpster; no chair matched any of the tables. But he was welcomed by the aroma of freshly ground coffee and groovy music that made him feel more confident in his decision to enter. He could tell at a glance that the coffee machine was high quality—Berta had chosen the right places to save money and to invest. A young woman in front of him was receiving a coffee to go; the store was otherwise empty. But it was still dreadfully early.

"Whaddya want?" asked a woman in her mid-forties with a purple mohawk and a poison-green tank top.

"I'd like one cup of each type of coffee drink and four cups of regular black coffee. Everything to go."

"Isn't it a little early for that kind of reckless drinking?"

"It's never too early."

With a disgruntled air, the woman—Samuel assumed this was Berta—began preparing the drinks. Samuel watched her rapid movements as she ground the beans, tamped them down, and slotted them into the machine. The machine began to hiss. It was a sound Samuel loved.

“You’re holding up the whole business with your massive order,” she complained after she handed him the fifth cup.

Samuel turned around. Behind him stood only a single man with a bushy gray mustache, wearing checkered pajamas. He was barefoot, playing *Angry Birds* on his smartphone, and not in any obvious hurry. “I’ll call ahead next time.”

“Make sure you give enough notice,” Berta responded.

Samuel had to grin. Berlin was a lot like New York—full of people huffing at him and ramming an elbow into his back on the bus. An exchange of blows in the morning made him feel alive, even if it was still not even six o’clock.

He arrived at the nurses’ office, where the morning shift change was happening. He was still running early; Sabina and Liah wouldn’t arrive for another hour.

“Good morning,” he greeted the assembled team politely. “For those who didn’t meet me yesterday, I’m the new student. The girls are leaving me alone at the station today. Since I obviously don’t know my way around very well yet, I need your help.” He lifted the folding crate he’d taken from home to carry the coffees and placed it on the table. “And to bribe you, I brought coffee. The whole coffee shop menu. It says what they are on the cups.”

The nurses laughed and handed the cups around.

“The caramel macchiato is for me,” he said, taking one of the cups. “May I listen while you do the handoff? Then I’ll at least know what happened during the night.”

Elisabeth, the head nurse at the station, nodded. “Of course. You’re welcome to.”

Samuel followed the reports of the night nurses carefully and took a few notes. Before his two colleagues arrived, he'd had enough time to go over the patient charts. Sabina and a tearful-looking Liah arrived at the station at the same time as Dr. Zadnik. He stuck his head into the nurses' office. "Rounds?"

Dr. Zadnik and his tiny retinue were soon off down the halls. Samuel stayed in the background and listened. Once Liah and the two doctors had vanished into the OR, Samuel took a seat at the computer and began making a list of things that needed to be done. Every patient got a column, and he noted which examinations needed to be scheduled, which results had yet to come in, when an operation had taken place or was planned for, and when the patient was scheduled to be released from care. It took him about half an hour. He was good at this kind of thing. He could think and work in structured ways. This fact seemed to stand in contradiction to his poor time management skills, but it wasn't his fault he had this particular combination of qualities.

He took the list into the nurses' office. "I need your help, Elisabeth. I don't know which examinations get scheduled where."

"We can do that afterward. You've got to take blood first." She pressed a white tray with vials and blood drawing equipment into his hands. "You've got to do that first thing each morning."

"Sorry, I didn't know."

"Now you do."

Samuel went from one room to the next, collecting several liters of blood from the veins of dozens of patients. As he did so, he engaged the men and women in lively conversation. He was good at that, too. He was quite the talker, and he was especially good at getting the women to laugh. In doing so, he learned a lot of things that hadn't come out during the brief morning rounds.

With the help of the nurses, he managed to schedule the examinations, filled out countless forms, and phoned around to

request test results.

“Yes of course, that’s great. You’re a dear. And you have a really sexy voice too. You’re giving me goosebumps.”

The laugh on the other end mixed with the sound of Elisabeth’s laugh. “My goodness, the way you flirt on the phone, you’re going to end up with complaints about sexual harassment.”

“I’ll be fine; I’m gay and I advertise it. And I only flirt with men when I mean it.”

Elisabeth shook her head and handed him a stack of paper. “Here are yesterday’s results.”

“What do I do with them?”

“Look through them, sign them, and if something stands out to you, enter it in the chart so Sabina or Dr. Zadnik can see it and react if necessary. And then they really need to be sorted into the files, but Sabina and Liah haven’t managed to get to that part for days.”

Sighing, Samuel got to work. The doctors’ office was pretty chaotic. You could tell that the doctors couldn’t spend much time at the station, and Sabina didn’t seem all that organized. He already knew Liah was a bit of a slob. He had met up with her often to study, eat, or party, and he knew the disheveled state of her apartment. Samuel’s apartment, on the other hand, was always tidy. Plus, Belinda came by twice a week to clean.

Hospital

Jarrett traipsed heavily up the stairs from the OR. He was dog-tired. The operations had been difficult and he hadn't slept well. He kept waking up in a sweat from dreaming about pounding that pampered brat. Getting up a few times and jerking off had only provided a brief respite. And now he had to deal with this Hohenfels lordling in his unit. For several months! Maybe Samuel would be inept enough that he could throw him out. Or he could torment the kid until he left of his own accord. He didn't look like he was very tough. Jarrett opened the door to the doctors' office and did a double take. Had he entered the wrong room? This morning, the files had been piled on the shelves every which way. Now they were arranged in neat rows. The stacks of paper covering both desks had vanished, and even the rings from coffee mugs on the worktops were gone. Samuel von Hohenfels was sitting at the computer and turned as he entered.

“What happened here?”

Samuel pushed up his glasses. He looked damn cute. Usually, Jarrett found the word cute ridiculous. “What do you mean?” asked Samuel.

“What happened to our mess?”

“I straightened up. Was that not okay?”

Before Jarrett could answer, Liah and Sabina came into the room, laughing and chatting. Sabina looked around wide-eyed. “Where are all the test results?”

Samuel ran a hand through his tousled hair, embarrassed. The stupid word cute shot through Jarrett's mind again. “I sorted them into the files.”

Sabina shook her head. Jarrett couldn't tell if she was excited or horrified at this student's industriousness. He himself was pleased to see things orderly. The chaos Sabina maintained at the station had frustrated him for a long time. Sabina was an excellent assistant in the OR but keeping a

system at work was not her thing. But the joy he felt didn't change his skeptical attitude toward Samuel.

“Can we begin the rounds?” Jarrett asked impatiently. The scent of Samuel's aftershave had reached him, which immediately caused increased blood flow to a particular region of his body. He needed a quick distraction.

During the rounds, Jarrett had to admit that Samuel had done an excellent job on his first day. All of the examinations were scheduled, and the results he'd asked for that morning were there.

“Wow, Sam, there's hardly anything left to do,” said Liah appreciatively. Jarrett just grunted. He certainly wasn't going to fawn over this boy.

“Have a good evening, Mrs. Dillinger. And if you have any pain during the night, give the nurses a call. We've prescribed something you can take,” said Sabina as they stood in the room of an elderly lady Jarrett had operated on a few days prior.

Mrs. Dillinger nodded and waved over Samuel, who had been standing partly hidden behind Sabina. “Young man, I've forgotten your name.”

He stepped forward. “I'm Samuel.”

Jarrett noticed with surprise that he left off the “von Hohenfels.” He had expected Samuel to introduce himself using his full name and emphasize the von that indicated nobility.

“Will you be doing the blood draws tomorrow?” asked Mrs. Dillinger.

“Yes, I plan to. Unless Dr. Zadnik kicks me out.” The second part must have slipped out unintentionally, because Samuel suddenly looked very embarrassed.

Mrs. Dillinger gave Jarrett an accusatory look. “You wouldn't throw out such a nice young man, would you? We had such a lovely chat this morning.”

Jarrett had to laugh in spite of himself. “If he behaves himself, he can continue to do your blood draws.” His and Samuel’s eyes met, and Jarrett’s blood pressure shot up. He was very glad to be able to leave the wing shortly thereafter. Sabina suggested he join them for coffee, but he thanked her and declined. He was supposed to go back to Dusters with his brother this weekend. He desperately needed to get his hormones under control.

“Did you all see that? A laugh from Dr. Z the Terrible. I didn’t think he could,” said Samuel when they sat down a while later to eat a pizza that smelled of tomato and basil.

Sabina laughed. “Dr. Z the Terrible? He’s actually really nice. And he’s a great surgeon. He also makes an effort to teach us assistants something, which is not something you can say about most of the senior physicians.”

“Well then, I look forward to standing with him at the operating table.” In truth, the idea of standing next to Dr. Zadnik in the OR made Samuel pretty uneasy. The look the doctor had given him earlier had pierced him to the bone.

“If you keep doing such a great job at the station, they’ll never let you go to the OR,” was Liah’s two cents. “But that’s a good thing. It means I can stay in the OR and not have to deal with the station stuff.”

Samuel didn’t reply. The work at the station had been surprisingly enjoyable. He’d gotten a lot of satisfaction from completing all the tasks and organizing the files. Plus, the nurses were friendly, and he’d had fun chatting and flirting with the patients. He had mixed feelings about the OR. Sure, as a kid he’d always dreamed of doing it. But he’d been present for a few minor operations so far, and it hadn’t been as exhilarating as he’d hoped. Breathing through the mask was oppressive, he found the loud machinery irritating, and the smell of open wounds made him feel ill. He was sure he’d get

used to it eventually, but he wasn't there yet. And Dr. Zadnik was unlikely to be understanding about his sensitivities.

Sabina said goodbye right after wolfing down her pizza because she still wanted to go to the gym.

“Okay, now you finally have to tell me what’s going on,” Samuel said to Liah once Sabina had left.

Liah immediately started crying, and Samuel put his arm around her. “Aw, sweetie, I’m sorry you’re so sad. Are you and Peter fighting?”

“He broke up with me.” Samuel could barely make out the words between the sobs.

“What? That can’t be right. What happened?”

“He fell in love with someone else. He’s been having an affair with her for the past six months. And I didn’t even notice. Can you imagine?”

Samuel kissed her on the forehead. “What an idiot. He has no idea how big of a mistake he’s making.”

Liah’s tears dampened his shirt. “And now I have to find a new apartment. I went back to my parents’ place, but now I have to drive two hours every day.”

“You can move in with me. I have plenty of space,” Samuel suggested impulsively—and regretted it immediately when he remembered how messy Liah was.

She looked up and blinked at him through eyes cloudy with tears. “Do you mean that? It would just be for a little while, until I find a new place.”

Samuel swallowed internally. Now he had to stand by his word. “Of course.”

“Okay, all done.” Groaning, Samuel carried the last crate in from Liah’s car and set it down in the hall. He put his hands on his hips and looked at the jumbled mess that was once his hallway.

Liah blew a strand of hair out of her face. “This will be nice, Sam. I promise I won’t turn your tidy apartment into a pigsty.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears.”

She hugged him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I’m really glad you ended up in 48a.”

Samuel’s own happiness was held in check by the sight of all those bags and crates.

Liah checked her watch. “It’s already 8:30. What do you say we go eat something, and then you can go to Dusters. By the time you get back, all this will be cleared up.”

Samuel was honestly feeling too tired to go out. He’d been waking up very early all week and working long hours at the hospital. Since his guest bedroom had previously only contained a bed, he’d gone to IKEA with Liah to buy some of their horrible Billy shelves and an even worse wardrobe and carried them up to the apartment. Liah had put the furniture together—he was no use at that sort of thing. He’d played the assistant and regretted his offer. Maybe a few hours at Dusters, a couple of cocktails and a quick fuck would cheer him up.

Two hours later, he was standing outside his favorite club. No one was waiting yet to be let in. He was too early. The scene would change after midnight. The club was a classic, and popular not only among the gay crowd. Theodor was already in his broad stance in front of the black metal doors.

“Hi Theodor. How’s Ariane?” Ariane was the daughter of Theodor and Belinda. Nearly ten years ago, she had gotten leukemia. Her fragile constitution was a great cause of worry for Theodor.

“She’s great. She’s on a field trip this week. Belinda didn’t want to let her go, but I think she’ll have fun.”

Samuel nodded. “Yeah, she deserves to have some fun. I haven’t seen Belinda in a while. I was away over the break and now I work from morning to night.” Belinda was Samuel’s cleaning lady.

Theodor clapped Samuel on the shoulder. “Belinda said someone was moving in with you. You wrote her a note. Have you got a boyfriend?”

“No, of course not. I’d never tie myself down like that. A friend and colleague of mine is living in my guest room temporarily until she can find her own place.”

“Oh, I see,” said Theodor, looking almost disappointed as he opened the heavy door. “Then I wish you a fun night.”

As long as Theodor was the Dusters bouncer, those doors would open for Samuel. Even if he showed up drunk and naked. Theodor had been the one who fastened Samuel’s car seat before he could even walk. He was Samuel’s father’s chauffeur for many years. When Ariane got leukemia, Theodor had been in desperate need of money and had stolen from Samuel’s father. When it came out, Samuel’s father had been so upset by the betrayal that he’d wanted to press charges. But Samuel, who had been barely fifteen, and Benedikt, his older brother by eight years, had talked him down until he agreed to sweep the whole thing under the rug. Theodor did lose his job, though. Since a classmate of Benedikt’s named Igor had just opened a gay club in Berlin, they were able to get Theodor a job as the bouncer. Theodor was more than just a bouncer now. He was an institution unto himself, and he was also Igor’s right hand.

Dusters

“What is this?” asked Jarrett, lifting a bit of pale gray fabric off his bed.

“A shirt,” answered Damian through the open door of the bathroom where he was shaving. “Nice, right?”

“I don’t need a new shirt.”

“No more of that; I brought you three new ones. The light gray one is for tonight.”

Jarrett sighed.

“Are you sure you want to come to Dusters?” Damian came out of the bathroom buttoning his left cuff. “I’m happy if you are, I’m just surprised ’cause it’s been over a year since you came. Does it have something to do with the boner you were sporting in the hospital last week?”

“Possibly,” muttered Jarrett.

Damian grinned. “I told you from the beginning. Abstinence is unhealthy.”

“I have no issues with my health. But I can’t afford to run around with a hard-on at work. It’s too distracting.”

Damian stood before Jarrett, straightening his collar. He was half a head shorter than Jarrett, and despite his brotherly prejudices, Jarrett had to admit that Damian looked damn good. And Damian knew it, too.

“So, big brother,” he said after he’d smoothed Jarrett’s shirt. “You look snazzy. The shirt suits you.”

Jarrett took a look in the mirror on the door of his open closet and ran a hand through his short hair. He would never have bought this silvery-gray button-down on his own, but he had to admit that it really went well with the black jeans he was wearing. He barely recognized himself.

Damian clapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s go, then. It’s already past midnight.”

The line outside Dusters had now reached the other side of the narrow alley. Damian and Jarrett sidestepped the line and walked up to the bouncer.

“Hi Theodor, the place is hopping tonight,” said Damian.

A hint of a smile flitted across the bouncer’s face. “Hello Damian, looking good as ever. Try not to break too many hearts tonight.”

“After midnight I can only manage two or three.”

“Good evening, Jarrett. Nice to see you again. It’s been a long time since you were here. The boss will be glad to see you.”

Jarrett shook his hand. “See you later, Theodor.”

They entered into the dim lighting and ethereal music. Igor, the owner, would probably come by to greet them in a moment—Theodor would have informed him of Jarrett’s arrival. Damian and Jarrett had been coming to Dusters for many years. Two years ago, Igor had suffered a ruptured appendix and Jarrett happened to be the one who had operated on him that night. Since then, he and his brother had become VIPs in the club.

They had barely had time to hand over their jackets at the coat check when Igor approached them at a rapid walk. Jarrett had never seen a smile on Igor’s angular face, but he gave a small twitch with the side of his mouth to show he was glad to see the two brothers. “Jarrett, Damian. How are you?”

“My brother’s not doing well. That’s why he’s come to you,” said Damian with a wide grin.

“Can I do anything for you? Should I reserve you a room?”

Jarrett shook his head. “No thanks, it’s okay. I think I’ll go have a look around.”

Over the years, Igor had turned a dive bar for gays into a unique attraction where anyone could find what they were looking for. In addition to the regular club space with loud music, a dance floor, and cocktails, there was a separate

soundproofed bar area with cozy booths for chatting and canoodling as well as multiple dark and playrooms. Every room was different, and each could be reserved. The rooms were kept sparkling clean and free condoms were available to users. In return, Igor had strict rules about behavior. Anyone who broke these rules would be escorted out personally by Theodor and banned from the club.

“Where do you want to go?” asked Damian. “Straight to the club?”

“Let’s have a drink first.” It was more than a year since Jarrett had been to Dusters. The kind of anonymous fucking his brother enjoyed had never been his thing. He had been in a long-term relationship that had finally fallen apart due to the amount of time and energy he put into his job. Ralf was a sweet guy and had tried for a long time to come to terms with how much Jarrett worked and how little energy he had for other activities when he got home. After all, Ralf knew what hospital work was like. He himself was a nurse in the intensive care unit, and they had met when Jarrett did an internship there during med school.

Jarrett and Damian sat down on a sofa in one of the booths and Jarrett relaxed a little. He had completely forgotten how nice the atmosphere in Dusters was. It was like entering another world where everyone could be exactly who they were. That was Igor’s philosophy: everyone gets respect as long as they respect everyone else. His strict management had paid off over the years. The clientele was hand-picked, and unlike in other Berlin clubs, the general tone here was polite, and you could live out your fantasies in a safe environment.

A server came by with drinks before they could order. “Hello Damian. Here’s a Long Island iced tea for you and a 7 & 7 for your friend. It’s on the house, a welcome from the boss.”

“Thanks, Carlo. This is my brother Jarrett, by the way.”

Carlo set the cocktail down in front of Jarrett. “Welcome to Dusters, Jarrett. I wish you a pleasant evening.”

Jarrett nodded at him. “Thanks.” Igor had remembered that 7 & 7s were his favorite drink, despite how long he’d been absent. The little gesture raised his spirits a bit more. Maybe it would be a nice evening after all.

He leaned back and enjoyed his whiskey and lemon soda. The drink was pleasantly mild and refreshing. They didn’t speak for a while. Damian knew him well enough to know when chatter would get on his nerves and let his gaze wander around the room. Damian liked to talk and could go on without pausing for breath, but he respected Jarrett’s temperament and could shut up if he wanted to. That’s why they had managed to live together for so long. They had been orphaned when Jarrett was only twenty, and they’d arranged for his then-underage brother to remain with him. They’d been sharing an apartment ever since. Although they couldn’t be more different, he and Damian lived in surprising harmony.

“Want another?” Jarrett’s glass was already empty, and the Long Island iced tea had been reduced to barely more than a few ice cubes.

“Sure.”

Jarrett pulled himself up and headed for the bar. As he was passing the next booth, he nearly collided with a shapely rear in skintight jeans that was exiting the booth right in front of him.

“I’m gonna get some Oreos. I’ll bring a round of blow jobs back with me,” said a voice familiar to Jarrett. The rest of the body appeared from behind the booth’s red velvet curtain and straightened up.

Samuel jumped, seeing Jarrett right in front of him. “Dr. Zadnik,” he stammered, and his face reddened to match the curtains.

Jarrett raised his eyebrows. “Mr. von Hohenfels. Are you going to bother me in my free time as well?” The boy was standing far too close. And he didn’t have a long lab coat to hide behind this time. Luckily his jeans were tight and provided enough resistance—for now.

“Um, I’m sorry.”

Jarrett grunted, squeezed past him and went to the bar. When he put the drinks down on the table, Damian grinned at him. “Well, who was that?”

“A student who was assigned to my unit on Monday.”

“Did you know he was gay?”

“It’s pretty obvious. And he makes sure everyone knows whether they want to or not.” Jarrett didn’t like it when people flaunted their homosexuality the way Samuel did. It was a private thing and no one else’s business. He never talked about it himself.

“Could it be that this little snack is the cause of the hard-on I caught you with on Monday?”

“Nonsense,” was Jarrett’s reply to this assumption. He wanted to punch that constant grin off Damian’s face.

“Are you sure? I see him here a lot, by the way. He seems to be friends with Theodor and Igor.”

“That’s no surprise. I’m sure little Lord Hohenfels’ father has made him connections all over the Berlin club scene.”

Damian’s eyebrows rose with interest. “Ooh, that’s Samuel von Hohenfels? I’ve heard of him. But I assumed the heir to millions would be a scrawny pimply youth. That’s what you get for stereotyping. You could take a bite out of him.”

Jarrett’s desire to punch his brother in the face was becoming hard to control. He clenched his jaw and said nothing.

“And you’re sure you don’t want anything to do with him?” Damian continued, blithely poking Jarrett’s sore spot. He was too busy watching the backside Samuel was presenting them with as he leaned on the bar waiting for the blow jobs to notice his brother’s anger.

“Fuck no. Of course not.” Jarrett forced the words out. Why was he lying to his brother? Of course he wanted something to do with Samuel—he wanted that hot ass. Ideally, he wanted to drag him away from his blow jobs straight into

the neighboring dark room and fuck the living daylights out of him. But firstly, the kid was technically his student, and he didn't start things with colleagues or employees. He hadn't allowed himself to get involved with Ralf until after he'd left the intensive care unit. And secondly, this spoiled mama's boy was not his type. He didn't understand why his cock disagreed.

“All right, in that case you won't mind if I try my luck.”

Jarrett ground his teeth. This was the last straw. His brother the heartbreaker would make mincemeat of Samuel. Despite how Samuel tried for a cool exterior, Jarrett had the impression that he was still somewhat naïve and vulnerable. He probably hadn't had to struggle a day in his life and had had no reason to toughen up. Damian, on the other hand, had been exposed to the cruelties of life early on, just like Jarrett had. Jarrett had always tried to protect his little brother, but he'd been a child himself. He comforted himself with the thought that Damian would almost certainly only use Samuel for a few dates and then drop him as easily as he'd picked him up.

Some time later, Jarrett and Damian watched as Samuel came out of the booth with two other young men and a woman, and they left the bar in the direction of the dance floor.

Damian nodded to his brother. “Shall we?”

Sighing, Jarrett rose and followed Damian. He was no longer feeling this night. His good mood had vanished. He had no desire to watch Damian flirt with Samuel, and he was no longer the least bit interested in having sex with a stranger.

Damian plunged onto the dance floor while Jarrett ordered a bourbon. He needed something that wasn't watered down. When he turned around, his brother was already dancing close by Samuel and smiling at him.

Jarrett took a large swig of whiskey and shook his head. His brother certainly didn't waste any time. He was bending down to Samuel and yelling something into his ear. Samuel nodded and smiled. It was a stupid, romantic smile, thought

Jarrett, feeling the frustration rising in him. Samuel had already fallen for Damian. No one could withstand Damian's charms. Why was he doing this to himself? He didn't have to watch the two of them. He looked around the room. Should he reel in another man and at least get his needs tended to? No, the idea made his stomach turn. He would go. His brother could find his way home on his own.

Igor caught him on the way out. "Leaving already?"

Jarrett nodded. "Damian's staying a while longer, though."

"Hope to see you again soon." Was there a touch of disappointment in Igor's voice, or had Jarrett imagined it?

"Is that Jean Paul Gaultier?"

Samuel nodded to the stranger whose lips had gently brushed his ear while asking the question. Had he done it on purpose? Then again, the dance floor was pretty packed.

"Your aftershave smells really good." The stranger grinned at him, showing a row of dazzlingly white teeth.

"Thanks." The man was an inch or so taller than him and very good looking. Samuel had seen him in Dusters more than once, but they'd never talked or fucked.

They danced near each other for a while, and the stranger's arm or hand brushed against him a few times. This was definitely no accident, and Samuel began to look forward to a sexual encounter. The man was definitely easy on the eyes, and the hottie was circling him with elegant movements and laying his hands on Samuel's hips. He felt the man's breath on his ear, which made goosebumps rise up on his arms.

"I'm Damian. And you are?"

Samuel turned his head to answer. Damian used the opportunity to brush his lips across the corner of Samuel's mouth. His pants began to feel very tight in the crotch.

“Samuel,” he whispered in a raspy voice. Could Damian have heard that over all the noise?

“I could take a bite out of you,” Damian breathed, and nibbled on his earlobe. A pleasant shiver went up Samuel’s spine.

Damian turned him around so they were facing each other. Gently but firmly he pressed their bodies together, and Samuel adapted to Damian’s rhythm.

“Is this good? Are you comfortable?” asked Damian.

Samuel looked up at him in surprise. He hadn’t expected this level of consideration. The atmosphere in Dusters might be more polite than other Berlin clubs, but he had yet to be asked for permission in here. More often, someone he had no interest in would start flirting with him and he’d have a tough time freeing himself from their clutches. He didn’t want to free himself from Damian’s embrace though. On the contrary, he was itching to remove the layers of clothing keeping them apart. “Yes, very comfortable,” he answered.

Damian’s eyes flashed in amusement, and he pulled Samuel even closer so Samuel could feel his erection against his hip. Damian laid his head to one side and moved slowly toward Samuel’s mouth. He brushed Samuel’s lips very gently, then pulled back and smiled at him. Samuel felt a burning desire to press his lips against Damian’s and taste him. But Damian denied him gently and stroked his back. It was clear Samuel was dealing with a master of seduction. Not a man who was looking for a quick fuck and the subsequent sobriety it granted, but a virtuoso in the art of arousal. And Samuel was all too ready to let go and see where Damian would lead. He sank into Damian’s arms with a quiet moan.

“That’s right. Let yourself fall,” Damian whispered, and took the lead completely.

Samuel’s movements fell more and more into Damian’s rhythm. They melted together into a single form, and Samuel thought he could even feel their hearts beating in unison. He no longer heard the music and was barely aware of his surroundings. His whole world had shrunk to this unknown

man, the first name that was all he knew, and the gentle hand movements that were setting each part of his body ablaze one by one.

Samuel had no idea how much time had passed. He was in a trance, caught between arousal and relaxation.

“Would you like something to drink?” Damian’s voice tore him out of the sensual daze where he could have floated for many more hours. He was suddenly aware of how unpleasant the loud music and the heat of the dance floor had become. He swayed gently and Damian caught him, grinning.

“Should I carry you?”

“That would be nice,” sighed Samuel.

Laughing, Damian pushed him toward the counter and ordered two cocktails. Samuel took a sip and looked around. Everything was too harsh, too loud, too hectic. He wanted to vanish with Damian into one of the back rooms and let himself be spoiled some more.

“Let’s go into the bar,” suggested Damian, as if he could read his mind.

They were soon sitting together on one of the sofas. Damian had put an arm around him, and Samuel was leaning into him. He exhaled deeply. He’d never fallen so quickly and intensely under another man’s spell before. He had no idea where the people he’d met earlier had gone, and he didn’t care. As always when he came to Dusters, he’d found some people he could drink and chat with. Maybe they’d already left. Since Damian had put his arms around him, Samuel hadn’t had a glance to spare for anyone else.

Damian leaned over and kissed him, tenderly and playfully at first, then with urgency and passion.

Samuel was his. “Shall we find a dark room?” he asked breathlessly when Damian’s lips pulled away for a moment.

Damian shook his head. “Not here. I want to undress you slowly and see exactly what I uncover. And I don’t want to be disturbed doing it.”

“Okay,” Samuel said, drawing out the word. He was surprised and a little disappointed. He wanted to feel Damian inside him, here and now. He had no patience for waiting. Plus, it was a weird thing to ask for. Why go to Dusters if not for fast, anonymous sex in the dark? But okay, Damian had already shown he was up for something different.

Damian’s hand ran over Samuel’s thigh, wandered inward and up. He began gently massaging Samuel’s balls.

Samuel moaned.

“Could we go to your place? I live with my chronically irritated brother. I don’t want him to spoil the mood.”

Samuel never brought guys home. He fucked outward; his house was taboo. But how could he say no while Damian’s fingers were massaging his balls so expertly that he thought he could hear angels? “I live alone,” he gasped.

“Good, then we’ll continue this at your place.” Damian nibbled his earlobe.

At that moment, Samuel remembered that, as of this morning, he no longer lived alone. “Oh wait, I do have a roommate.”

Damian laughed quietly. “Excuse me?”

“You’re getting me so flustered I can hardly remember my name.”

“Then everything’s going according to plan. I want you to give yourself to me enthusiastically.”

“I’ll have to do that soon, or I’ll explode.”

A short time later, Samuel was unlocking his apartment with trembling hands. Damian pushed him inside with a kiss. He felt his way backward down the hall and stumbled over a crate. “Shit,” he whispered, hanging in Damian’s arms where he’d been caught. “Liah said this would all be gone when I got home.”

Damian's face was so close above his that he could see his grin despite the darkness. "I hope Liah isn't asleep in your bed."

"Me too."

Once they'd climbed over all the crates and bags that stood in the hall just as they had earlier that evening, Samuel opened the door to his bedroom, which was thankfully empty. He'd lost some of his good mood, and he was asking himself how he could be stupid enough to bring a total stranger into his apartment.

The sun was beginning to rise outside, and the sallow early morning light filled the room. Damian turned the lock and looked at Samuel. "Now you're all mine."

A cold shiver ran up Samuel's spine as Damian approached him with glittering eyes. Damian went down on his knees in front of him and slowly undid the zipper of his jeans. "Cute boxers," he said, grinning up at Samuel. "I've never unpacked a set of tiny red lighthouses before."

Samuel gasped as Damian's nose sank into his crotch and rubbed against his member. All of his worries had vanished to make way for his lust. "Feel free to keep unpacking. Maybe there's another surprise."

"Well, you certainly smell delicious." He pulled the jeans down and nibbled on Samuel's glans through the thin material of his boxers, causing a hot spike up Samuel's spine. Damian's hands kneaded his ass, and he rolled the sensitive skin of his cock between his teeth until it was almost painful.

Then he slowly raised himself off his knees, spun Samuel around with a jerk, bent him over, and tore down his boxers. Samuel gave a cry of shock, and the hot shiver was replaced by a cold one. Damian bent over him and licked down his spine to between his cheeks. His tongue left a burning trail on Samuel's skin.

"Are you trying to make me lose my mind?" gasped Samuel.

"Should I?"

“Absolutely.”

Damian alternated pampering him with tenderness and then grabbing him roughly, each time raising his arousal another few notches. “Hurry up and fuck me!” Samuel gasped, out of breath.

“Not yet.” Damian was in perfect control and seemed barely aroused himself. On the one hand, that turned Samuel on, but it also made him uneasy. He couldn’t remember ever having these kinds of mixed emotions during foreplay before.

“At least let me see your dick,” he said desperately.

Damian laughed throatily. “Pull it out.”

Greedily, Samuel pulled open Damian’s belt and zipper. He breathed out in relief when a stiff cock sprang out to meet him. “Thank God. I was starting to think you weren’t even into me.”

Damian lifted Samuel’s face and kissed him. “Do you have any idea how into you I am?”

Finally, once Samuel would have sold his own grandmother to have Damian take him, Damian lifted Samuel’s ankles into his shoulders and pushed slowly inside him. Samuel gasped loudly as Damian shoved into him and massaged his prostate. He pumped slowly and carefully at first, then faster and faster. Samuel reached for his cock, but Damian pushed his hand away and took over. Stars danced in front of Samuel’s eyes as he finally cried out and came on his stomach.

Samuel sank onto the twisted sheets, completely drained. “Jesus, I’m spent.”

“Mission accomplished. Now you can sleep.” Damian picked the duvet up off the floor, laid himself close behind Samuel, and put an arm around him. “Sweet dreams, cutie.”

Samuel didn’t really want to do that. He had never woken up next to a guy in the morning and wasn’t planning on

changing his habits. But before he could follow the thought to the end, he'd fallen asleep.

Several hours later, Samuel woke to the sun shining full in his face. Groaning, he pulled the duvet over his head. Why hadn't he closed the curtains? Why did he feel so drained? Then he remembered. Where was Damian? He pushed the covers away and sat up. The bed beside him was empty. Tangled and stained sheets told of the previous night's orgy, but Damian's clothes were gone. Samuel rubbed his eyes and groaned. He desperately needed to go to the bathroom. There was no sign of Damian's presence there either. Where was the aspirin? Was it in the kitchen? He padded down the hall. Liah was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper and eating muesli. Oh yeah, Liah lived here now.

She looked up. "Well, did you survive? With all your moans and cries last night, I figured you were either dying or getting the fuck of your life."

"The latter." Samuel dropped a pill into a glass of water and watched it fizz.

"You're naked, by the way."

"Does that bother you?" He groaned and collapsed onto a chair next to Liah.

"No, I just wanted to let you know."

"Thanks."

"Who was the stud that rode you last night?"

"Damian."

"And who is he?"

"No idea."

Liah turned the page of the newspaper and stirred her muesli. "There's fresh coffee. Want a cup?"

"In a minute." Samuel pressed his hands to his temples. Had he really had so much to drink? He couldn't remember.

The squeak of Liah's chair as she stood up made Samuel's toes curl. "Drink some coffee. Maybe you'll feel better. And

you should eat something,” she said. “And sorry I didn’t clear up the crates yet. I’ll do it today.”

Eating Liah’s organic muesli with goji berries and chia seeds felt like a death-defying feat to Samuel, but after a few bites he decided it really wasn’t all that bad. Maybe he should rethink some of his specific and more general biases. Plus, the headache was fading a little. He couldn’t tell if that was due to the aspirin, the coffee, or the muesli. As his head slowly cleared, he began to ask himself what the hell he’d been thinking in Dusters last night. He’d definitely had a good time, and there was nothing bad to be said about that, but he’d gotten far too emotionally involved in Damian. That was unhealthy. Plus, he’d broken his strict rule about not bringing men home for no-strings-attached sex. After all, home was where the strings were. Okay, Damian had left. But that was a case of luck rather than smarts. And now he should put the whole thing down to an exciting experience and forget Damian as quickly as possible. While he showered, lifted weights at the gym, showered again, and went out for dinner with Liah, he kept trying to push Damian out of his mind.

Smoke Break

Although it completely clashed with his philosophy of life, over the next few weeks Samuel discovered how well hard work could distract you from your problems. Not that he had problems, really. It was just that he couldn't get Damian out of his head. He kept having flashbacks, reliving every minute he'd spent with Damian over and over. In between replays, he considered whether he should maybe call Olaf, his mother's psychiatrist. His parents had forced him to go to Olaf a few times after he'd told them not to expect grandchildren because he wasn't interested in women. Samuel had been sure of this since he'd entered puberty, but he hadn't told his parents until he was seventeen. His brother Benedikt had already known for years by that point, and although the two had often clashed, Benedikt had stood by him in this respect. He couldn't protect Samuel from having to visit Olaf, though. To their parents' chagrin, however, Olaf had given Samuel a (mostly) clean bill of mental health, while using the intensive sessions to dredge smaller problems up out of his soul. Olaf explained to Samuel's parents that being gay was not a mental illness but a variation within the norm, and after a period of struggling with this, they came to accept Samuel's sexual orientation. In the final session, it came out that Olaf was also gay, and soon afterward he was strengthening Samuel's self-confidence not just when it came to his parents' support, but also by introducing him to the higher mysteries of seduction. This secret, kept carefully from his parents, bound them together as long-term friends. Olaf was the man of the hour whenever Samuel needed advice.

Olaf, however, was on vacation. And since Samuel had no desire to explain the situation over the phone while Olaf slurped cocktails on the beach, he was stuck with work as his only form of therapy. It worked surprisingly well. He hustled around the unit from morning to night, taking care of everything while Liah and Sabina assisted in the OR. They offered, of course, to take turns with him, but he turned them

down. “No offense, girls. But I’ve finally created order at the station. And if I leave the battlefield now, all my work will have been for nothing.”

Sabina shrugged. “If you’d really rather work here, I’m certainly not going to stop you.”

It was only three o’clock in the afternoon, and Samuel had done everything on his list. The others wouldn’t return from the OR until shortly before the afternoon meeting. He glanced at the list. That morning Ms. Schulz had been moved to 48a from Intensive Care. Dr. Zadnik had operated on her, but after a quick look in her stomach, he’d simply done a colostomy and sewn her back up. The cancer had metastasized to an extent that it was impossible to remove the tumors. Ms. Schulz was only forty-five years old. During the morning visit, she’d been groggy and had barely talked to them. Samuel decided to look in on her again.

He knocked on the door and entered. “Hello, Ms. Schulz. I’m Samuel, the student assigned to the station while the doctors are in the OR. I wanted to ask how you’re doing.”

Ms. Schulz turned her head to him slowly. She was pale, and it was clear she had been crying. “I’m not in any pain, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s something, at least. But beyond that, I imagine you’re feeling pretty awful.”

She didn’t answer, just looked at him. Was that not the right thing to say? What was the right thing to say in this situation? Why weren’t med students taught how to approach people in these types of situations? Not talking to them surely wasn’t the answer.

“I apologize if that sounded unprofessional. To be honest, I have no idea what to do here.”

A weak smile passed across the woman’s face. “I like that you admit that. It’s strange—even the professionals here in the hospital can’t speak normally to a dying woman. Either they keep it dry and formal like Dr. Zadnik, sticking to the technical

details, or they try to console me with nauseating platitudes. The only one who can have a normal conversation with me is Nurse Elisabeth.”

Samuel shrugged. “I’m sorry. They don’t teach us this sort of thing in training. And I don’t have Nurse Elisabeth’s life experience. Maybe you can help me. If I say something stupid, let me know.”

Ms. Schulz laughed. “Well, you’ve made me laugh for the first time in weeks, so that’s something.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing anyone can do for me. The only thing I’d really like to do at the moment is have a smoke, and I can’t do that here. Having to do without that and decent coffee is not helping the situation.”

“If you think of anything I can do for you, I’ll be hanging around the unit all day.”

“Just like me.”

Samuel smiled at her and left the room. He took a deep breath. Everything he’d been irritated by in the past few days (like the chaos Liah was spreading across his apartment) or that had worried him (like the fact that he woke up with a boner every morning from dreaming wildly of Damian) suddenly seemed laughable. Ms. Schulz would probably never go home. She was looking at a future in the hospital and then in hospice, awaiting a painful, humiliating death.

Samuel crossed the street in a thoughtful mood and pulled his jacket tighter around him. The mild weather of late summer had left for good, making way for chilly wind and rain. He avoided a pile of dog poop, stepped over the legs of a homeless man who was lying across the sidewalk, and tossed a few coins in the paper cup that stood next to him. Ever since he was a kid, Samuel had kept change in his pocket to hand out to beggars. He couldn’t help the fact that he’d been born into a life of luxury. In his mind, neither could the people who

had landed at the opposite end of society. He could at least pass on a little of his own money.

“Thanks,” murmured the man.

Samuel turned around in surprise. “I thought you were asleep.”

“Course I am. I’m out cold.” The man gave him a crooked grin, showing several missing teeth.

Berta’s Booth was full. To Samuel’s amazement, the furniture didn’t look quite so shabby when it was in use. There was also an impressive line of people in front of the counter waiting to be served. Samuel briefly considered whether he should just go home and make his own coffee, but the smell of freshly ground beans was seductive. So he joined the line, inhaled deeply, and let the voice of KT Tunstall wash over him. Her song “Beauty of Uncertainty” gave Berta’s Booth a sweet, melancholy atmosphere. The groove of the music kept drowning underneath the hissing steam of the coffee machine, and Samuel felt the stress of the hospital and his dread at the terrible fate of his patient fall away. Who needed relaxation techniques when you had Berta’s Booth?

A man in a suit and tie in front of him ordered a large caffè crema.

“Hawaiian Kona or Ethiopian Arabica?” asked Berta grumpily.

“Makes no difference to me,” said the man without looking up from his phone.

“Any idea what sorta difference it makes to me?”

The man looked up in confusion. “Uh, Arabica then.”

“You also got no opinion about what I grind for you?” Berta asked Samuel in an argumentative tone when he ordered.

“No, I have strong preferences when it comes to grinding.”

“You look like you do.”

“I’d like the Hawaiian Kona.”

Berta turned to the coffee machine and Samuel had an idea.

The next afternoon, once he had finished all the administrative work, Samuel stuck his head into the nurses' office. "I'm going on a quick run to the coffee shop to get some real coffee for Ms. Schulz. She requested some. Should I bring anyone else a cup?"

Nurse Elisabeth set down her pen. "That's a really nice idea, fulfilling that request. You can pay for it from the office kitty."

Samuel waved that away. "No need. You know I've got a rich daddy."

Elisabeth shook her head. "You're something else."

Samuel took the nurses' orders and hurried to Berta's Booth.

About half an hour later, he knocked on the door of Ms. Schulz' room. She was lying in bed just as she had the day before. "Hello, Santa Claus is here. I've come because of your wish list. I thought you might not be able to wait until Christmas Eve."

Ms. Schulz' face contorted into a half smile.

"Black coffee, cappuccino, or latte macchiato? You can't have the caramel macchiato, sorry. That one's mine."

"You'd have been left with that syrupy mess anyway. I'll take black."

Samuel handed her the cup. "I'll run the others over to the office. I'm sure someone will take them off my hands."

When he returned, Ms. Schulz was sitting up taller in the bed and her hair was freshly combed.

"Thanks for the coffee," she said.

Samuel pulled a chair next to the bed and went to the window. "I'm going to open this for a minute."

Ms. Schulz raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Samuel dug a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of his lab coat. He didn't really smoke. He only lit up every once in a while, when he was out with a bunch of other smokers.

"You're not serious," said Ms. Schulz as Samuel held out the pack.

"Why not? Are you afraid they'll kick you out?"

"I won't get kicked out, but you might."

"In your condition, you should stop worrying so much about other people."

"You're right, of course."

Samuel lit a cigarette for himself and took Ms. Schulz' hand to light hers. Her eyes flickered briefly as Samuel bent down and touched her. Maybe he was acting a bit too familiar, thought Samuel. Whatever, fuck that, was his next thought. He wasn't an official employee of the hospital. She'd probably only felt the touch of doctors and nurses for quite some time. He was just doing what he felt was right. He took a seat in the chair and a drag on the cigarette. Ms. Schulz' eyes were closed, and she was inhaling deeply.

"That does me a hell of a lot of good. I've been smoking two packs a day since I was fifteen. That might be why I'm lying here. But there's no point in quitting now."

"Too late for good intentions."

Ms. Schulz gazed at the glowing end of the cigarette. "I always wanted to live an independent life without a steady partner, without having to worry about anyone else, without children, without compromises. But I didn't consider how shitty it would feel to die alone."

"I'm convinced that most people with partners and children are alone at the end as well. And they also have to live with the disappointment that the people they relied on aren't there for them."

"For God's sake, how old are you? You sound much too wise for your young face."

"Thank you for the compliment. I'm already twenty-three."

Ms. Schulz grinned. “Already so old?”

“But my soul is much older. I’m gay, and also not interested in long-term relationships. Plus, I have rich parents, so I learned a long time ago that friends are only there for you if you have something to offer them. So I’ll probably be in your position eventually.”

“And you think it will be easier for you if you’re prepared for it?”

Samuel shrugged. “That’s what I tell myself, at least.” He took another drag. It tasted horrible, and he was going to have this disgusting flavor in his mouth for ages. “Do you wish you had married a man, just so someone would be sitting by your bed right now?”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “I’ve asked myself that exact question several times over the last few weeks.”

They continued smoking in silence until the door opened suddenly and Dr. Zadnik stood there with Sabina and Liah in tow. Samuel jumped up, took the stub from Ms. Schulz’ hand and went to the window, where he stubbed it out on the sill outside. Dr. Zadnik, this irritating man. Why did he always appear when he was least wanted?

Dr. Zadnik and the two women stared at him wide-eyed.

Samuel cleared his throat. “Sorry, I take full responsibility for this. Ms. Schulz had nothing to do with it.”

Dr. Zadnik looked from Samuel to Ms. Schulz and back again. “What are you talking about, Mr. von Hohenfels? I didn’t see anything. It smells a little odd in here, but that’s probably something coming in from the window.”

Samuel nodded slowly. “Yes, that’s probably it.” Huh, there were clearly other surprising sides to Dr. Zadnik.

A short time later, Samuel’s original impression of Dr. Zadnik was reaffirmed as he chewed Samuel out in the office for forgetting to schedule an examination for a patient who was supposed to be operated on the next day.

“And now we’ll have to postpone the operation, all because you don’t take your job seriously,” he berated Samuel.

“I’m sorry.” Samuel took the rebuke with his head down. He knew that this was also about Ms. Schulz, and he was willing to pay the price for it. “I’ll see if I can still schedule the CT scan.”

“You can forget that. The radiology department will only take emergency appointments now. Didn’t I tell you specifically this morning that we still needed the CT scan done?”

“Yes, you did, Dr. Zadnik. It was my mistake; I forgot.”

Once the surgeon had left, Samuel hurried down to Radiology. “I need you to save my life,” he said to the radiology assistant, who was standing right next to the doctor on shift. “I forgot to organize a CT scan for a patient who’s supposed to have an operation tomorrow.”

The doctor shook her head and frowned. “That won’t be possible. We’re only taking emergency cases now.”

“But this is an emergency.”

Irritated, the doctor replied, “No, it’s not. And why is a student here, anyway? This isn’t your job. Where is your station doctor?”

It was true that this wasn’t technically Samuel’s responsibility as a student. Dr. Zadnik should really have been castigating Sabina. But Samuel really wanted to fix this. “I made a mistake. Isn’t there any way you could help me make this right?”

The assistant pointed at the list the doctor was holding. “We have two patients headed here from the ER. If there are no pressing cases after that, I can take this other patient.”

“Please, that would be wonderful. I’ll wait up at my station and bring the patient down when you call.”

The doctor shook her head. “We can’t promise anything. If anyone else comes into the ER, you’re going to be out of luck.”

“I’m really grateful to you for trying.”

Samuel waited at the station until the patient was called to Radiology at ten o’clock that night. He accompanied her to the examination and then staggered home—where he once again stumbled over the moving crates Liah had not yet managed to take into the guest room—and fell into bed, utterly worn out. Why was he doing all this? He could have a much easier life. This wasn’t worth it, especially if he was going to have to put up with Dr. Zadnik’s abuse on top of everything. It had gotten worse since he’d run into Dr. Zadnik at Dusters. Samuel had realized since then that Dr. Zadnik had seemed familiar to him at the beginning because he’d seen him at Dusters about a year earlier. For some reason, Samuel had noticed him then. He’d found him pretty attractive—striking and masculine. But he hadn’t known back then how much of an asshole Dr. Zadnik was. Thinking about the club made Samuel’s thoughts return to Damian. Half asleep already, he felt Damian’s arms enfold him. At the time, he’d been uncomfortable with Damian lying down behind him. He’d felt trapped. So why was he dreaming of it and longing for it now?

Liah

Jarrett only half-listened to the head doctor speak about their professional training course the following weekend. He knew the details already—after all, he'd helped the head secretary plan the thing. He'd invited all the speakers and was giving his own talk on minimally-invasive surgical methods for advanced tumors. He watched Samuel, who was standing in the corner of the conference room beside Liah. The boy had surprised him quite a lot. For one thing, he did excellent administrative work at the station. For another, the nurses seemed to love him. And now there was the incident with Ms. Schulz. Jarrett had seen a lot in the twelve years he'd spent at the hospital, first as an assistant and now as a senior surgeon. But certain types of cases still got to him. Particularly when they made him feel as helpless as Ms. Schulz' did. There was really nothing he could offer her, not a single straw to grasp. Usually he could at least report that he'd removed part of the mass, or that there was the possibility of chemotherapy. But all he could give Ms. Schulz was the certainty of her approaching death. It made him angry and sad.

She had looked so relaxed yesterday, sitting beside Samuel with a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. As if she had been alive for a moment, even though her life was really already over. Despite his lack of professional and life experience, Samuel had found a way to get through to her and give her that moment of joy. It had shaken Jarrett so much that he'd then yelled at Samuel for a small oversight. It had been a complete overreaction. Sabina had even taken him aside afterward and reminded him that Samuel, as a student, was not responsible for the mistake, and that she should have been the one to take care of it.

Samuel had suffered the rebuke with sagging shoulders. To Jarrett's amazement, he had reacted like a man, making no excuses and taking responsibility despite not being at fault. Jarrett had immediately regretted letting his frustrations and

confusion about Samuel spill out like that. He wanted to take Samuel in his arms, comfort him and kiss him and...

And then, on top of everything, Samuel had managed to get the scan in after all, staying extra late in the hospital to wait for the emergency room to empty so that the patient could have her operation this morning. He really owed Samuel an apology, or at least a few words of acknowledgment. But he knew he wasn't going to manage it. Why did this boy have such an effect on him? And why couldn't he get the image of his brother and Samuel dancing out of his head? He had surrendered and asked Damian how things had gone with Samuel. And to his surprise Damian, who was usually more than happy to discuss his conquests, responded in monosyllables. All Jarrett was able to discern was that Damian had spent the night with him. And there was only one word for the feeling that gave him: jealousy! This gnawing jealousy had pushed him to ask Damian whether he was going to meet Samuel again. Damian was puttering around in the kitchen.

"Why do you care?" he asked Jarrett brusquely, continuing to crack eggs into a bowl.

"Just curious."

"I thought you weren't interested in him." Damian deftly separated the yolk from the white. Despite his surgical training, Jarrett had never been able to do this.

"I'm not," he lied to his brother again. "I just want to know if I'm going to have a weeping student hanging around in my wing in the next few days."

"I think you got the complete wrong idea about Samuel. He's definitely not going to come crying to you."

Why did that statement hit him so hard? Was he really so wrong about Samuel? It was true that Samuel had surprised him at work. But why was Damian being so gruff about it? That wasn't like him at all. The only explanation Jarrett could think of was that Damian liked Samuel. Since the day years ago when Damian had lost his innocence at Dusters, he didn't let anyone get close to him anymore. Jarrett looked at his little

brother thoughtfully. “Are you going to Dusters again this Saturday?”

Damian let the Kitchen Aid whine instead of answering.

Jarrett watched him silently. His otherwise garrulous brother had ended the conversation. And he was making a Sachertorte cake. It wasn't that Damian seldom baked. He liked to make batter and dough whenever he was particularly happy or sad, when he was bored, and when he was under stress. And now, he was probably using kitchen equipment because he was in love. In love with Samuel von Hohenfels.

Samuel unlocked his front door and stepped over a bag in the hallway. He didn't recognize this one. Instead of lessening, the number of hindrances in his way was growing. He was distracted from his rising irritation by the sound of loud sobbing.

Liah was huddled on the couch with her knees up, clutching one of his black silk pillows.

“Sweetie, what's wrong?” He sat down and put an arm around her.

Liah threw both of her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder. He waited until she managed to calm down a little. It took a long time. He put his nose in her hair and breathed in the scent. It smelled of strawberries and vanilla. He liked it. He was going to use her shampoo tomorrow. Despite all the boxes in the hallway, it was nice to have Liah around. What would he have been doing on this Saturday afternoon if she weren't here? He'd probably have turned on the TV to watch some stupid sitcom until it was late enough to go to Dusters. It was actually a nice change of pace to hold a nice girl, a real person, in his arms. Even if she was crying into his shirt.

He brushed her hair out of her face and kissed her on the forehead. “Don't you want to tell me what's going on?”

“Not really,” she sobbed.

“I assume it has something to do with Peter, the flowery bag that joined the others in my hallway, and a woman who’s been making herself at home in the apartment where you used to live until a few weeks ago.”

Liah howled and clutched him tighter.

Samuel sank back until he was lying in the corner of the couch with his head on the thick pillows, pulling Liah with him. She lay half on top of him with her face in his chest. He put a hand under her t-shirt and stroked her back. “Forget that idiot.”

Why couldn’t he forget his own idiot, the one who’d swept him off his feet two weeks ago? He hadn’t heard anything from Damian since. Of course, he’d gone to Dusters last weekend in the hope of seeing him. No luck. And he was going to go again tonight with the hope of seeing Damian. Liah sighed and began breathing deeply and gently. She must have gone to sleep. Samuel fished around for the remote with his free hand. He found his sitcom after all. Although it was pretty warm lying half under Liah and he was watching the show at a ninety-degree angle, Samuel found the situation pleasant. It was so familiar. This is how things felt when he visited Benedikt and his wife and two kids. He always felt a bit melancholy after visiting his brother. He didn’t want to live any life but his own, but that meant he’d never know how it felt to have kids and be responsible for a family.

It was already dark outside when Liah moved and woke him up. He must have dozed off too. Californian girls in hotpants wandered around the TV screen. All three had the same haircut.

“Ow,” he exclaimed. His arm had gone to sleep, and Liah was leaning on it.

“Sorry, Sam. Did I really fall asleep on you?”

“People tell me I’m a very comfortable bed.”

“People, or men?”

“Now women too.”

Liah rubbed her hand over his chest. “I drooled on your shirt.”

“Although it is my favorite shirt and I wanted to go out tonight, I forgive you.”

Liah scooted forward and kissed him gently on the mouth. “What would I do without you, Sam? Thank you for being so sweet to me and letting me live here with you.”

“I like having you here as well,” said Samuel, and kissed her back. It felt strange, not unpleasant, soft and warm. And it surprised him how little he felt about it. When Damian had barely brushed his lips two weeks ago, he’d felt it in his soul. “I would, however, like it more if I wasn’t constantly tripping over boxes in the hall.”

“I’ll move them, I will.” Liah laid back down on top of him and nuzzled his neck.

Samuel sighed. Presumably he’d have to move the boxes himself eventually.

“Want to come with me to Dusters later?” he asked after a while.

“I thought it was only for gays.”

“You’ve been misinformed. The straights love it too.”

“Okay, why not? Maybe it will take my mind off things.”

Later that night, Samuel stood at the bar and watched with concern as Liah drained her cocktail in one long swallow.

“God, Sam. You should have told me ages ago how cool this place is. This is my new favorite club.” Liah staggered back onto the dance floor. She had definitely had too much to drink. He followed her with a sigh. He hadn’t come to play babysitter; he was here because he was hoping to see Damian. But so far, there was no sign of him.

Liah was swaying back and forth on the dance floor with her eyes closed, waving her arms and failing to catch the

rhythm. He took her arm. “Let’s go home. You need to go to bed and sleep this off.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t be a party pooper. I want to dance and have another of those delicious cocktails.” She pulled away from him and pushed into the crowd. At that moment, a hand went over his eyes and a body pressed against him from behind. A white-hot wave went through Samuel’s body.

“You haven’t switched teams, have you?” whispered a voice.

“Definitely not.”

“Good. Did you miss me?”

“So fucking much.”

Damian’s throaty laugh in his ear made all the little hairs on the undersides of his arms rise. “Even better,” Damian said, turning him around to face him and gazing at him. The laugh lines around his dark eyes made Samuel weak at the knees. “Where have you been for so long?” he heard himself breathe before Damian’s lips closed his mouth, only to then push it back open with his questing tongue. Damian’s hands seemed to be everywhere—on his throat, in his hair, on his back, on his ass. The tongue in his mouth moved slowly and playfully, and Samuel felt himself succumbing to the pull of Damian’s body. Willingly, he let himself fall into the vortex and get sucked away to unknown lands.

“Fuck me. Now. Right here.”

Damian laughed and pressed against him, so their jeans-trapped erections rubbed against each other. “Patience, my dear. Later. Right now, I want to bask in the anticipation of your hot little ass. Then I want to undress you, pull your cheeks apart and take a look.”

Samuel gasped.

“And once I’ve admired your hole, I’m going to stroke it and lick it until it’s wide enough to fit two cocks.” Damian’s tongue spiraled closer and closer to Samuel’s ear, and then poked gently inside.

He had to clench his teeth to keep from crying out.

“And when I take you then, you’ll be lost. You’ll be mine.”

Samuel closed his eyes. He’d already fallen hopelessly for Damian.

An energetic tapping on Samuel’s shoulder made him jump. He had been miles away in a universe Damian had made for him. He loosened himself from the embrace.

Igor was standing there with a serious face. He cleared his throat. “Sorry for disturbing you. A young woman is causing a scene at the bar. Theodor says she came with you.”

Samuel sighed. “Yeah, that’s Liah. Don’t be mad, Igor. She’s lovesick and exhausted. I’ll go take care of her.”

“Shall I call a taxi?” asked Igor.

“Yes, that would be great.”

“Goodnight, Samuel.”

“Thanks for your understanding.”

Igor turned to Damian. “How’s your brother doing?”

“He’s okay.”

“Give him my regards.”

“I’ll do that.”

Igor nodded to Damian and went back into his office.

Samuel hurried to the bar, where Liah was arguing with the bartender for refusing to serve her another drink.

“You’ve had enough for tonight, my girl. Go home,” the bartender said, laying a comforting hand on her arm.

“Don’t touch me,” hissed Liah. “And do your damn job. It’s to make drinks, right? And I want a drink. I’ll pay for it. I have money.” She dug into her purse.

“Liah,” said Samuel, and touched her shoulder. Liah swung around and hit him in the temple with her bag.

“Ow! Jesus, Liah. That’s enough.” Samuel clutched his aching temple. It was bleeding. One of the metal rivets on the George Gina & Lucy bag must have gotten him.

Liah didn’t seem to have noticed. “Why does everyone want to tell me what to do? Everyone thinks they can make decisions about my life. My parents, Peter... They all know better than I do what’s good for me. I’m an adult. And I want another drink.”

Theodor was suddenly standing next to them. “The taxi is outside. Do you need help, Samuel?”

Samuel looked at the blood on his hand. “The woman is a danger to the public. And yes, I need help.”

Theodor took Liah under the arms and knees and lifted her up. She briefly kicked and complained, but by the time Theodor had reached the door to carry her out into the cold night air, she had laid her head on his shoulder and begun weeping quietly. Cursing, Samuel followed with the damned handbag, this murder weapon that Liah had dropped. He looked around. Where was Damian? His dream of a hot night had burst, and he hadn’t even been able to say goodbye.

A taxi was in front of the club, and to Samuel’s surprise, Damian was standing next to it. He opened the door. They maneuvered Liah into the car.

“Will you come too?” Samuel gave Damian a hopeful look.

Damian squished in next to him. “I can’t leave you alone with a violent woman. Plus, you’re hurt. Someone has to tend to your wounds.”

“Yes, absolutely. Someone has to tend to me.” He caught Liah, who had put her head on his shoulder and was nodding off as the taxi turned out of the narrow alley. “This is my housemate Liah, by the way.”

In the hall, Liah puked on the floral bag and Samuel’s floor.

Damian frowned as Samuel supported Liah around the boxes into the bathroom. “Maybe you should be choosier

about your roommates.”

“You’re absolutely right. I’m too careless,” Samuel called over his shoulder.

“Or too generous,” murmured Damian, and looked around for something to wipe up the vomit.

Once Samuel had helped Liah with the necessities in the bathroom, and put her to bed, he went back into the living room where Damian was sitting on the couch, looking out the panoramic window at the city lights.

“I’ll just clean up in the hallway, so it doesn’t stink, then I’ll be with you,” said Samuel.

Damian turned toward him. His face looked pale in the light from outside. “I did that already.”

Samuel collapsed onto the sofa next to him. “You didn’t have to do that. I would have taken care of it.”

Damian didn’t answer.

“Would you like anything to drink? Beer, or a glass of wine?”

“No, I don’t want any alcohol.”

“Should I make you some tea? Liah bought at least ten different kinds.”

“I definitely don’t want any tea from that woman.”

“Liah’s okay. She’s just lovesick at the moment.”

“I don’t like women who drown their problems in alcohol.”

“She doesn’t, really. She’s a hardworking and ambitious medical student. She just needs a little time to pull herself together.”

Damian brushed Samuel’s hair from his forehead and stroked his hand across the bandage Samuel had stuck over the bleeding wound while in the bathroom. “And I can’t stand women who then get violent.”

Samuel had his mouth open to defend Liah, but then realized what Damian was implying. He shut it again. What kind of childhood trauma was Damian carrying around with him?

Damian pulled his hand back and looked out the window.

“Well, the mood is pretty ruined,” Samuel said.

“I’m sorry. I’ve cleaned up a lot of vomit in my life. It brings back bad memories.”

Samuel stood up and pulled Damian from the sofa. “Let’s just go to bed. We’ll just sleep, nothing else. It’s late.”

“I’d rather go home.”

“Please, stay.”

Damian didn’t answer, but he let Samuel pull him into the bedroom without resisting. When Samuel came out of the bathroom, Damian was already curled up in bed facing away from him. Samuel slid under the blanket and scooted close to him. When Damian made no move to stop him, he put an arm around him and felt for his hand. He put his fingers over Damian’s and squeezed them softly.

After a long moment, Damian returned the squeeze. “The plan was for me to tend to your wounds, not for you to lick mine.”

Samuel kissed him gently on the neck. “I feel honored that you’re allowing it.”

When Samuel woke up late the next morning, the bed next to him was empty. Great, Damian had run off again. He reached for his glasses on the nightstand and looked around. Relieved, he saw that Damian’s clothes were still lying neatly on his valet stand. He was still there after all. This man was causing all his resolutions to crumble. Hadn’t he always said he didn’t want or need a real relationship? He didn’t know Damian at all. But he wanted to get to know him. The things Damian had alluded to touched him. He wanted to find out more about him, and above all, he craved Damian’s body.

Samuel threw back the covers, opened the window, and took several deep breaths. Had he fallen in love? After the first unpleasant experiences at school, when he'd fallen in love with a classmate and then been humiliated by him, he'd sworn to himself never to let things get that far again.

Sounds filtered out of the kitchen through his open door. He padded down the hall and observed Damian standing naked in the kitchen and opening one cupboard after another. Going by the smell, he'd already made coffee.

"Is this a kitchen or a showroom? You don't have flour, you don't have eggs, you don't have sugar. Apart from a few of those disgusting microwave meals, there's only tea and muesli."

Samuel took a cup from the cupboard and held it out to him. "We have coffee. And milk."

Damian poured him some, shaking his head. "I've never seen such a pathetically-stocked kitchen."

"I'm not much of a cook. And I don't think Liah can even make spaghetti."

"I can so," Liah interrupted, standing in the doorway in her underwear and looking very hungover. She shook her head and closed her eyes for a moment. "I still need to get used to having naked men in the kitchen." She took a glass from the cupboard and held it under the faucet. "Do you have any Alka-Seltzer, Sam? My head's exploding."

Samuel tossed a pill into her glass.

Liah took a large swig. "Thanks." She did a double-take and brushed Samuel's hair from his forehead. "What's this? Did you hurt yourself? You didn't have a band-aid last night."

"That was you. With your purse. When I tried to bring you home."

She put the glass down. "Are you serious? I don't remember that at all. I'm sorry, Sam. You act so nice to me, and I hit you around the head with my bag? You should throw me out."

“I agree,” Damian interjected. He’d taken a seat at the kitchen table and looked withdrawn.

Liah raised her eyebrows in surprise. “And who are you, exactly?”

“Damian.”

“Damian the stud?”

Samuel put his hand on his head and groaned. “You know what, Liah? Do me a favor and take your glass and your coffee and go back to bed.”

Damian stood up. “Not necessary. I’m going.” He left the kitchen.

Liah watched him go with a guilty expression. “And now I’ve ruined that too? I’m the worst friend in the world.”

Samuel didn’t answer. He was busy trying to analyze why there was a sudden painful pressure in his chest.

A few minutes later, Damian was standing in the hall, all dressed. “See you, Samuel.”

“Wait!” Samuel’s voice sounded heavy. “Are we going to see each other again?” He could hardly believe he was asking the question. He’d fallen so far.

“I’ll be in touch.” Damian kissed him on the forehead, and left him standing in the hall like a sad puppy.

Invitation

“Who’s being operated on tomorrow?” asked Jarrett, and reached for the clipboard with the department schedule that Samuel created and maintained. Jarrett had to admit that the schedule was very helpful. Previously he would have had to check all the charts again or rely on Sabina’s word, which was not always accurate. The schedule provided him with all the departmental information at a glance.

“Samuel marked all tomorrow’s patients in red,” Sabina confirmed Jarrett’s thoughts. “We’re still waiting on a lower gastrointestinal series, but Samuel called Radiology earlier and gave them another reminder.”

“And where is Mr. von Hohenfels?” It was kind of pathetic, but Jarrett couldn’t bring himself to call Samuel by his first name. He didn’t have any problem using Sabina or Liah’s names. And he always put a strange emphasis on the *von Hohenfels*, despite how stupid it was and how it just made him look like a small-minded idiot. Jarrett couldn’t understand why he had so little control over himself when it came to Samuel.

“Uh, he’s with Ms. Schulz,” Sabina said, speaking around the truth.

“Hmm,” grunted Jarrett. He really couldn’t allow these smoke breaks in the hospital room, even though he didn’t begrudge Ms. Schulz her little moments of pleasure in the least. “She’s being moved to hospice tomorrow, isn’t she?”

Sabina nodded.

“All right,” he sighed. He’d overlook this complete disregard for the rules one more time. It was for a good cause, after all.

The following afternoon, Jarrett exited the locker room into the hallway and headed toward the stairs. Sabina and Liah were a few yards in front of him.

“Do you have any idea why Dr. Zadnik has it in for Samuel?” he heard Sabina ask. She must not have noticed him, which wasn’t a surprise, because Sabina’s wooden-soled clogs were making a huge racket on the linoleum. He’d asked her more than once to wear different shoes, but she just ignored him. She only wore less-irritating shoes when she was on the night shift.

“No, not a clue,” answered Liah.

“He does a really good job at the station. He keeps all the admin stuff off our plates.”

“Yeah, but that can’t go on forever. He needs to do shifts in the OR as well. Since I nearly knocked him out with my bag last weekend and ruined his date, I really owe him. I’ll stay at the station the rest of the week and he can assist with the surgeries.”

Jarrett grinned inwardly. He liked the idea that Liah had made Samuel’s life difficult over the weekend.

“How long have you been here now?” he asked Samuel at the station a short time later.

“A few weeks,” Samuel said vaguely.

“Why haven’t you been in the OR yet?”

“I wasn’t assigned.”

“Well, it’s high time you were.”

Exhausted, Samuel pulled himself up by the railing. His legs hurt from standing so long. And he was unhappy. Large cracks were showing in his glorious childhood dream. Liah was of the opinion that she owed him something and had taken over the station work. That meant he’d been assigned to the OR for the past three days. Not with Dr. Zadnik, strangely, but with other senior surgeons. Liah had always been with Dr. Zadnik. But Samuel wasn’t all that surprised. Dr. Zadnik

seemed to have nothing but contempt for him. He was actually glad not to have been assigned to Dr. Zadnik, because Samuel wasn't exactly shining at the operating table. He felt uncomfortable and oppressed under the mask, cap, and heavy cloth gown. Sweat seeped out of every pore and made him dream constantly of a shower. And somehow you were supposed to concentrate on what was happening on the table. He found that terribly difficult. And he wasn't particularly adept at the job. Most of the surgeons were patient, but he'd gotten a few rebukes already for not reacting in time, or because he kept slipping with the retractor. Was it better if you were the one operating? Were you then able to concentrate on the work and forget how unpleasant it was in the OR? Samuel doubted it. But he didn't want to think about it anymore. Thankfully it was Friday, and in a few hours he could leave this hospital, where his plans for the future were slipping away from him.

It was still very early to be leaving the day shift at the hospital when Samuel opened his apartment door that afternoon. Liah had still been at the station when he'd said goodbye. She hadn't said anything. After all, he still had a bandage on his forehead. He put the mail on the kitchen table and put on a pot of coffee. Right now, he needed a shower.

Refreshed and wet-haired, he sat down at the table a short time later and went through the mail. Bills, more bills, and junk. At the very bottom was a white envelope with no address or return label. Samuel pushed up his glasses and turned it over in his hand. It didn't look like junk mail; the paper was too nice. He opened the envelope and pulled out a postcard with an art print on the front:

You are invited to dinner on Saturday evening. I will pick you up at 7 p.m. If this doesn't work for you, text me.

Damian

There was a phone number underneath.

Anticipation rose in him, mixed with excitement. It made his skin tingle. Goodness gracious, he was really in love.

Samuel paced along the hall restlessly. No, this white shirt wasn't right. It was far too formal. He went back to the bedroom and changed.

“What’s wrong with you, Sam? I thought you were so cool when it came to men. You’re not nervous, are you?” Liah was sitting on the sofa, spooning ice cream out of a large dish and watching a Netflix series.

Samuel felt he didn't need to answer that. After another critical look in the mirror, he decided he should wear the white shirt after all. It was just after seven. Damian would surely ring the bell at any moment. He hadn't even finished the thought when the doorbell sounded. Samuel rushed past Liah and opened the door. Damian was standing there with a wide grin. “Nice that you didn't call.”

“I'd only have done that in an extreme emergency.” He was a hair's breadth from lunging into Damian's arms.

“Let's hurry. My car is in a no-parking zone.”

Samuel followed Damian and was just able to hear Liah wishing them a stimulating evening before the door fell shut.

Damian's car was a VW Golf with a few years under its belt. They drove through heavy traffic in the direction of Kreuzberg.

“Where are we going?”

“To my house.”

“What, really? You're cooking for me?” Samuel was touched. No one had ever cooked for him on a date before.

Damian laughed quietly. He brought the car into an underground garage and parked. “When the tickets got too

expensive for my brother, he rented us a parking spot. We share the car. It's not like you really need one in Berlin."

They walked for several minutes before they reached an old 19th-century building. Samuel looked up at the stucco facade. "Very nice."

"We bought the apartment many years ago. The prices have skyrocketed since then. We wouldn't be able to afford it now."

Samuel frowned. Many years ago? Damian must have been a teenager at that point. He couldn't be more than a couple of years older than Samuel. They climbed to the fourth floor. While Damian unlocked the door, Samuel looked around for a nameplate and found none. He would have liked to know Damian's last name.

Damian led him across a hallway into a large bright room. "I still have to put the finishing touches on the appetizer, but let's have a drink first." He opened a bottle of champagne and handed Samuel a glass.

"Thanks. And thank you for inviting me."

"I'm glad you're here. Make yourself comfortable. I'll bring the appetizer in just a moment."

Samuel looked around. The generously proportioned room had been created from three separate rooms by removing parts of the interior walls, leaving just enough to separate it into three distinct areas. Each one had its own character. The room facing the street had several windows, and they had set it up as a dining room. It contained a sleek oak table and chairs of metal and black leather. Damian had already set the table for two with cloth napkins and crystal glasses. Large paintings hung on the walls; some were very modern and colorful abstract works, and others highly detailed landscapes. In the large, well-lit room with its high ceiling, each painting had room to breathe.

The parquet floor creaked softly as Samuel entered the second of the three spaces. This one was furnished as a living room, with a TV and a large sofa with matching armchairs. In the third area, one wall was entirely covered by a tall

bookcase. It was piled high with books stacked up to the ceiling. A cozy armchair and a lamp stood in a reading nook. Everything was tastefully and comfortably arranged. Samuel walked along the shelves and read the spines of the books. There were many photo collections of exotic locations around the world, novels, and textbooks for physics, astronomy, and chemistry. To Samuel's surprise, there were also a lot of medical textbooks. Did Damian work in medicine too? It occurred to him again that he was standing in the apartment of a man he knew nothing about besides his first name. Samuel pulled out a photo collection of Norway, took a seat in the comfy chair, and paged through it while he drank his champagne.

Damian appeared in the dining room holding two plates. "The appetizer is served, my lord."

Samuel replaced the book and sat at the table. Damian had prepared a green salad with fresh chanterelles. A few edible flowers were arranged on each plate, giving the whole thing a professional look.

"This looks amazing."

"I hope it tastes good, too."

Samuel tried the salad. It tasted wonderful. Not over-seasoned—you could taste all the fresh herbs, and the exquisite fruity vinegar and quality olive oil highlighted the fine flavors. "It tastes fantastic. Are you a chef?" he asked.

Damian laughed. "No. I wanted to be one, though. More specifically, I wanted to be a pastry chef. But I eventually decided to go with something more practical and less risky, so I work in a bank."

Nothing medical after all, thought Samuel. "Well, at least I now know your first name and how you earn a living."

"About as much as I know about you. Although I know your surname as well."

"You do? How?"

"I have my sources. And they whispered to me that you're Samuel von Hohenfels and you study medicine."

Samuel frowned. How could Damian know that? Must be from Dusters. Igor had been on a first-name basis with Damian and had asked after his brother, but he couldn't be the informant. He was the model of discretion. There were lots of other people in Dusters who knew Samuel, though, and plenty of them were blabbermouths.

"You guys have done a nice job with the design in here," Samuel said, looking at the modern oil painting that hung over the dining table. "I really like your taste in art. The way you've mixed modern and classic works is great."

"My brother chose the pictures. He's interested in art. The modern ones are almost all final projects from young artists at the art academy."

"It's a really stylish, pleasant apartment," Samuel said appreciatively.

"The apartment is very important to me and my brother. It's our retreat, our safe harbor. We didn't have a place like that as children, so we really value it now."

Samuel let that pass without comment. He didn't want to pry. That would just make it harder for Damian to open up. He dabbed at his mouth with the napkin and leaned back in his chair. "Well, that was a fantastic opener."

"Thanks. I need another moment for the main course. I hope you don't have any allergies and aren't a vegetarian."

"Nope, neither."

"Good, because we're having filet mignon."

"Sounds excellent."

Damian stood up and came around the table. "Before I cook the steak, I thought we might have a little *amuse-bouche*." He took Samuel's glasses off and gave him a long, full kiss.

Samuel sighed when Damian's lips finally left his. "I could use a few more of those."

"You'll get them. Later." Damian set Samuel's glasses carefully back on his nose and cleared the plates.

“It will take a moment. I’m going to close the kitchen door so the smell isn’t so strong. Feel free to turn on some music if you want.”

“Okay.” Samuel leaned back in his chair to savor the aftertaste of such an intense kiss. After a while, he stood and went to the stereo system that was arranged on one of the library shelves. He decided to just push play. The epic tones of a Hammond organ sounded, and after a few bars Samuel recognized “Child in Time.” A classic rock ballad. Perhaps a little old, but still a good song. He let it play. While Blackmore’s guitar took over from the organ, the tempo picked up, and Gillian squeaked like his balls were caught in a vise, Samuel walked along the bookshelves and then further to the pictures on the wall of the library. He gazed at a wild modern arrangement of yellow and green while Gillian gave the bone-chilling shrieks that had later become a rallying cry for the Eastern European resistance movement.

When the organ took over again and the music grew quieter, he could hear hissing and sizzling from the kitchen. The intense smell of seared meat spread through the apartment. Samuel had been too nervous to eat all day, and the salad had only whetted his appetite. His mouth watered. It wasn’t long before Damian reappeared in the dining room with two large square plates. Duchess potatoes, fresh mixed vegetables, and three slices of pink seared steak were arranged appetizingly on each plate. A few drops of dark sauce completed the masterpiece. Samuel was amazed. If the food tasted even half as good as it looked, Berlin had lost out on an incredible chef.

Damian placed the plates on the table. “I hope you like your steak medium-rare.”

“It looks fantastic.”

Damian nodded. “Good. That was a test. If you had said you wanted your steak well-done, I’d have driven you right back home.”

“I got lucky, then.”

Damian reached for a carafe. “Red wine? It’s a Barolo. I decanted it earlier, so it’s had time to breathe.”

“Yes, please.” It seemed Damian didn’t have any general problem with alcohol, which Samuel would have found disappointing.

The meat was as soft as butter. It melted on the tongue, and the tasty sauce brought out the fine flavors of the high-quality steak.

“I’m really impressed,” said Samuel. “It’s absolutely perfect. Why didn’t you become a chef, with all this talent?”

Damian stared down at his plate. “I’m not entirely sure anymore. Sometimes I think it was a mistake.”

“If you hadn’t already seduced me ages ago, this meal would have definitely weakened my resolve.”

Damian just smiled. In the background, Barclay James Harvest’s “Berlin” was playing. Samuel thought it fit the mood wonderfully.

“I want to apologize again for how horribly everything went at my place last weekend. I’m glad you wanted to see me again anyway.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Samuel thought for a moment about whether he should say something in Liah’s defense, but he decided to leave it. This wasn’t about Liah; it was about him and Damian. He could be a little selfish. Damian served him a dessert of light Bavarian cream—chocolate—with fresh fruits, followed by an espresso and a nougat praline. Samuel felt satisfied, but not uncomfortably full. What had made Damian decide to work in a bank when he clearly had such a passion for preparing food?

Damian took another sip of wine and looked at Samuel. He appeared thoughtful, but he said nothing. After a while he stood up to clear the dishes. Samuel stood too, took the glasses, and followed Damian into the kitchen. It was a mess in there. Pans, pots, and used dishes were piled on the counter and in the sink. “I’ll help you clean up.”

“No, no, I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“I don’t want you to. You spoiled me with the food; the least I can do is help wash the dishes. I don’t mind. And doing it together might be nice.”

Damian looked at him doubtfully. “All right, if you say so.”

“Which would you rather?” asked Samuel. “Wash or dry?”

“Dry.”

“Perfect. I’d rather wash.” He moved a stack of dishes out of the sink and let the water run. Damian watched him with a frown.

“You don’t like having someone else fiddling around in your kitchen?”

“Hmm,” said Damian. “I’m just not used to it. My brother doesn’t come in here voluntarily. Although he does usually clean up if I’ve cooked. But beyond that, no strangers come into my domain.”

“I’m not exactly a stranger to you anymore.” Samuel gave Damian a sidelong wink. “Even though we don’t know much about each other. If it makes you uncomfortable, I’ll leave it. It’s not like I’m so eager to wash dishes, I just don’t like leaving you all the work. I don’t think your brother will do it.”

“No, probably not. He won’t be back until tomorrow, and since he didn’t get any of the food, he won’t do any of the cleanup.”

“Then let’s do it together.”

“Okay. At second glance, you look pretty sexy standing at the sink.”

Samuel grinned. “I look sexy in any situation.”

Damian began clearing out the dishwasher while Samuel washed the pots and pans. For a while, they worked next to each other in silence.

“Is this still making you uncomfortable?” asked Samuel eventually.

“No. It’s nice, actually. I wouldn’t have thought it would be. It must be you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“To be honest, I don’t bring anyone home with me.”

Samuel turned to look at him. “I don’t usually either. I don’t understand how it happened with you.”

Damian straightened up and stepped closer to Samuel, whose hands were underwater, and kissed him gently on the neck. “Maybe I’m special.”

“You might be,” said Samuel, and turned his head so their lips met. Damian pulled him closer.

Samuel resisted. “Your shirt will get all wet.”

“I’m planning on taking it off soon anyway.”

They didn’t get any further in their plan to clean the kitchen. Damian unbuttoned Samuel’s pants without breaking the kiss. He pulled them down and pushed Samuel toward his bedroom. Samuel tripped over his pant legs and landed on the wooden floor in the hall. Damian tried to catch him and ended up on the floor too.

“Is this one of the situations where you’re irresistibly sexy?” laughed Damian.

“Absolutely,” murmured Samuel, and found Damian’s mouth for another passionate kiss.

Damian pulled off his shirt and rolled onto Samuel. Samuel put his hands on Damian’s ass. It felt fantastic—firm and sexy. He found Damian’s lips greedily, kneaded his ass through the tight jeans, and explored his mouth with his tongue. Damian’s hands went into his hair, clutched his curls firmly, and pulled him even closer.

“The pants... The pants have to go,” gasped Samuel breathlessly and tugged at Damian’s tight jeans.

“I completely agree,” whispered Damian in his ear, and came to his aid. Damian’s cock popped out as they worked together to shove the jeans down.

“You’re not wearing underwear?”

“I thought we might be in a hurry tonight, so I didn’t put them on.”

“That’s hot.”

“You’re hot.”

Samuel slid downward and trailed his tongue down Damian’s stomach, along his shaft, and all the way to his glistening wet tip. He licked up the tasty drops of precum and Damian moaned. His tongue grazed back along the shaft and down to the balls. Carefully, he took Damian’s balls in his mouth and sucked gently. Did Damian like that? For Samuel, this was a very stimulating type of foreplay, but he’d had partners who found it uncomfortable. He looked up at Damian. His eyes were closed, and his stomach was rising and falling in a rapid rhythm. It looked pretty good. He intensified the sucking and pulled carefully on Damian’s balls. Damian ran his tongue over his lips. His mouth hung slightly open. Samuel reached out a hand and stroked it lightly across Damian’s lower belly while he worked the balls. Carefully, he sucked a final time, let Damian’s balls slide from his mouth, and let his tongue wander further down. Damian gasped as Samuel’s tongue found the sensitive wrinkly skin around his hole. Samuel paused and stroked his fingers along Damian’s ass.

Damian opened his eyes and lifted his head. “Don’t stop!”

Samuel smiled and kissed his knee. “I wasn’t planning to. But maybe we can move to your bed so you can lie more comfortably.”

“If you put your tongue back where it just was, I could kneel on a bed of nails.”

Samuel stood and pulled him up. “If that’s your thing, I’ll bring toys next time.”

“No, it’s not really my thing.”

“Fine, a comfy bed then.”

Sighing, Damian let himself be pulled down the hall. “But don’t forget where you were.”

“I won’t.”

“In here.” Damian pointed to a door that led from the hall into a room dominated by the color black. The shelves, closet, and bed frame were dark, and even the sheets were of black satin.

“Nice and gloomy in here,” said Samuel, who also liked black, but preferred it as an accent to lighter pastels.

“Like my soul.” Damian fell onto the bed. “I hope that doesn’t turn you off.”

“At this point, neither your sheets nor your soul can ruin the mood for my dick.” Samuel kneeled next to Damian on the bed. “Roll onto your stomach.”

With a leisurely grunt, Damian flipped around on the sheets. Samuel stroked his fingertips slowly over Damian’s neck and shoulders, drew them along the trapezoid of his back muscles and followed the rolling line of his waist and narrow hips. “Your body is so perfect it’s indecent.”

“Very indecent,” murmured Damian into the pillow, and stuck his ass in the air.

Samuel put his hands on it, massaged gently, and looked at the inviting pink hole that came into view. “And this is the finale.” He bit Damian tenderly on the ass and then slid his torso slowly up Damian’s back until his stiff cock pressed between Damian’s thighs. He covered Damian’s neck and cheeks with faint kisses until his mouth found Damian’s and he could explore it with his tongue. The taste of Damian and the scent of his skin made his mind whirl and his cock throb and twitch.

He lay on Damian with his full weight and reached around Damian’s hips. Damian eagerly made room for him to take hold of his shaft.

Damian let out a shallow breath. “Lick me,” he begged.

“With great pleasure.” Samuel pushed himself upward and ran his tongue down Damian’s spine and right into his crack. Whimpering, Damian leaned into him.

Injury

Before Samuel even opened his eyes, he could feel the warm body next to him. He had one arm and one leg flung over Damian, and their hands were clasped together. Had he really slept like that all night? He could hardly believe it. It was so unusual for him that he had to take a moment to decide whether he liked it. After he'd nuzzled Damian's neck and stroked his soft skin, he came to the conclusion that he did like the feeling. What was going on with him? He lay motionless for a while and listened to Damian's deep breathing. What was so special about this man that made Samuel feel so drawn to him? He closed his eyes and dozed happily, cuddled up close to Damian. But eventually the pressure in his bladder became too much. He really needed to get up. He carefully disentangled himself and stood up quietly. The blanket was somewhere on the floor, and the sheet had come halfway off the mattress. The previous night's exertions were clearly visible. He crept barefoot over the parquet floor and it creaked gently. Where was the bathroom again? Oh yeah, second door on the left. He sighed in relief as the pressure in his bladder gave way. Giving himself a quick rinse, he rubbed damp hands through his messy curls. There wasn't much to be done there. He looked at his hair in the mirror. It stuck out in all directions. He could make some coffee and bring it to Damian in bed, he thought, but immediately shook his head. That was a frighteningly intimate gesture. He probably shouldn't. He opened the bathroom door and went into the hall. A tall, broad-shouldered man stood before him.

"Dr. Zadnik!" he cried out in shock.

"Mr. von Hohenfels. What are you doing naked in my apartment?" His boss didn't seem particularly surprised.

"I, uh..." Samuel stammered in embarrassment. Then the penny dropped. "You're Damian's brother!"

"I am. And I'm beginning to feel like you're stalking me."

Definitely not, thought Samuel, and said, “Damian invited me to dinner.”

“I figured as much, based on the state of the kitchen. Wouldn’t you like to get dressed?”

“Yes,” said Samuel quickly, and grabbed up his clothes, which were strewn along the entire length of the hall. When he straightened up, he saw that Dr. Zadnik was staring at his ass with his brow knotted. Did he have something to criticize about that too? Samuel was pretty proud of his rear end. He’d gotten a lot of compliments on it.

He squeezed past Dr. Zadnik into Damian’s room. Damian had woken up and was lounging on the bed. “Good morning, handsome. What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I have. In the form of your brother, who happens to be my boss.”

Damian laughed and didn’t look especially surprised.

“Did you know that already?”

“Might have.”

Samuel didn’t like the wide grin Damian was giving him. He shouldn’t have let Samuel walk blindly into that. Did Damian also know that Samuel had gotten off on the wrong foot with Dr. Zadnik the very first day, and that Dr. Zadnik had been treating him with derision ever since? Samuel couldn’t really picture that. Dr. Zadnik seemed so closed off; he wasn’t the type to tell his brother stories about the hospital. Samuel slipped quickly back into his pants. “I’m going to take a quick shower.” He just wanted to get away. This situation was unbearable.

A short time later, dressed and with wet hair, he entered the kitchen where Damian and his brother were standing together peacefully. Damian was mixing eggs in a bowl with breathtaking speed, and Dr. Zadnik was washing dishes.

“Thanks for the exquisite dinner, Damian. I’ll be off,” said Samuel.

“Nonsense,” answered Damian, continuing to beat the eggs. “I’m making us all breakfast. My brother had the night shift, and we could also use a bite to eat.”

That was true, thought Samuel. The night had been physically taxing.

Damian put the bowl aside, took a cup from the cupboard, and held it under the nozzle of an automatic espresso machine. “This will pep you up.”

“Thanks.” Samuel took a sip and stood around in the kitchen, feeling a little lost. Eventually he put the cup aside, picked up a dishtowel, and dried the pan Dr. Zadnik had just rinsed.

Dr. Zadnik threw him a sidelong glance that made him gulp. Damian whirled around the kitchen, conjuring delicious omelets that they soon sat down to eat in the dining room.

“Jesus, Damian,” Samuel said, shaking his head. “How could you not have become a chef?”

“I’ve been asking him that for years.”

Surprised, Samuel looked up and caught Dr. Zadnik’s gaze. Suddenly he didn’t look so grumpy. He turned toward his brother. “You could still do it. You know that, right?”

Damian nodded and looked thoughtful. “I’m too old now, though.”

“No, you aren’t,” Dr. Zadnik said.

They ate their omelets in silence for a while.

“Well, Mr. von Hohenfels, how do you like working in Surgery?” Dr. Zadnik asked finally.

“It’s fine, thanks,” Samuel said tersely.

“Are you serious, Jarrett?” Damian interjected. “Are you going to insist on calling him that? We’re having breakfast together. And obviously you’ve seen him naked.”

Jarrett cleared his throat and looked at Samuel, whose face grew hot. “It does sound strange to say here. But I will

continue to address you formally at work. I'm Jarrett." He nodded to Samuel.

"That's fine," stammered Samuel. Despite how good the omelet and coffee were, he was feeling less and less at ease.

After breakfast they cleaned up the kitchen together. Then Samuel said a hasty goodbye and took the metro home. He wouldn't tell Liah about his embarrassing encounter with the senior surgeon, he decided as he opened the front door.

Luckily the night shift had been very difficult, and Jarrett was exhausted. If that hadn't been the case, his body would certainly have reacted strongly to the sudden appearance of a naked Samuel. He had been wearing nothing but his glasses. He had run a hand through his messy hair and stammered in embarrassment. That only made him more attractive. His brother had told him he'd invited Samuel to dinner. That was partly the reason he'd stayed at the hospital while he was on call. He often did that anyway, because he hated being called back in once he'd made himself comfortable at home. He'd installed a coffee machine in his office. There was also a nice computer, so whenever he wasn't busy, he could work on publishing his research.

Since his brother had warned him about it, he hadn't been surprised to see Samuel coming out of the bathroom. But he hadn't expected him to be in his birthday suit.

The kitchen looked like it had been hit by a hurricane, which Jarrett was used to. Damian's cooking was heavenly, but he used a dozen pots and pans to do it. Once Samuel had gone back to Damian's room, Jarrett had sighed and begun cleaning up. What he really wanted was to go to bed and sleep for a few hours. But he was secretly hoping Damian would make him breakfast first, as he so often did when Jarrett worked nights. He was starving. A few minutes later, Damian

came into the kitchen. He looked just as bleary as Samuel had. Wordlessly he began beating eggs.

“Good morning,” said Jarrett. “Did you get any sleep?”

Damian only grunted. “Mmm.”

Jarrett thought while he washed dishes. Was his brother really serious about Samuel? How strange that sounded: really serious. He briefly imagined himself in a suit at Damian and Samuel’s wedding, a bouquet of flowers in his hand. He shook himself mentally. What an absurd thought. On the other hand, Damian had never invited a date home and cooked for him. Plus, he was unusually terse and behaving strangely. At that moment Samuel entered the kitchen freshly showered, his hair damp. If his brother had fallen in love, Jarrett couldn’t blame him. Samuel looked like a snack. And he was clearly uncomfortable. Jarrett grinned inwardly.

When Samuel talked to Damian over breakfast about how he should become a chef, Damian didn’t react in his usual way. He seemed thoughtful and even somewhat open to the idea of going to culinary school. Jarrett had often suggested he follow this dream, but Damian had always been brusque about it in the past. Back when Damian graduated high school, their mother had been dead for five years and Jarrett had only just begun working as an assistant physician at the hospital. They’d sold their parents’ house and used the money for the apartment in Kreuzberg. They’d had to take out a loan as well. It had seemed more practical to both of them that Damian begin an internship at the bank, where he’d have a good salary from the beginning and safe prospects for the future. It also meant he could stay in Berlin the whole time, in the home they’d just bought. By now, though, Jarrett was making good money on his own, and it was becoming clearer and clearer to Damian that his heart wasn’t in banking.

The fact that Damian had responded somewhat positively to Jarrett’s suggestion must have been due to Samuel’s influence. They must have discussed the topic the previous night.

Over the following weeks, Damian and Samuel's relationship appeared to grow into something solid. It was difficult for Jarrett to watch. On the one hand, he was happy for Damian. He wanted to see his brother with a partner who made him happy. He had already started to lose hope that such a thing would happen. On the other hand, though, he couldn't look at Samuel without desiring him. And he realized that his first impression of Samuel receded the more he got to know him. He was generous, good-humored, and kind. Exactly the right kind of person for his traumatized brother.

They spoke no more than necessary at the hospital. He had begun using Samuel's first name but continued to address him formally. He did the same with Liah and Sabina. Jarrett was careful to ensure that Samuel's OR shifts were always with his colleagues and never himself. It was too much of a challenge for his self-control to have to stand next to Samuel for hours on end.

Samuel continued to manage the station with care, and he and Damian spent the weekends together. Since Damian didn't seem to like sleeping over at Samuel's, Jarrett often ran into Samuel at his apartment. At night, the sounds that came from Damian's room were hard for Jarrett to bear. Before, he had only slept at the hospital when he was on call. Now he was spending his weekends there too. Things couldn't continue like this, he thought. It was his home too. But when he and Ralf had been a couple, Damian had never complained about Ralf spending parts of the weekend at their apartment. How could he say anything to Damian now?

Jarrett was going through the list of patients for the next day's operations with Sabina. Samuel wasn't at the station.

"Oh, by the way, Samuel got hurt in the OR today," said Sabina.

Shocked, Jarrett raised his head. "What happened?"

"Dr. Zimmermann slipped with the scalpel and sliced him. Of course, he immediately stepped out and sterilized the wound."

“Has he reported it to the internal medical officer?” asked Jarrett.

Sabina shrugged. “Not as far as I know.”

“Who was the patient? Do we know anything about them? What’s their HIV status?”

“No, we haven’t looked into it yet. I just got out of the OR myself.”

“Okay, I’ll do that with Samuel later,” said Jarrett. He immediately radioed the colleague who had injured Samuel and had him describe the accident and give him the patient’s name. He didn’t find any information in the computer about the patient’s HIV status, so he went personally to the next station, explained the situation to the patient (who hadn’t properly woken up from the anesthesia yet), and withdrew a vial of blood.

When he got back, Samuel and Liah were sitting at the computer writing letters of discharge. “Samuel, please come with me,” he said.

Samuel spun around and then nodded. He stood and followed Jarrett into an exam room.

“Sit,” said Jarrett and took a seat at the table in the exam room. “You were hurt in the OR?”

Samuel waved it off. “Just a scratch.”

“Show me.”

Samuel put his arm on the table. In the lounge by the OR, he’d made do with an adhesive bandage across the heel of his palm. It was soaked through.

Jarrett pulled off the bandage and the wound immediately began to bleed again. He put on gloves and pulled the sides of the wound apart. “This is a fairly deep cut. I’ll give you a few stitches, so it heals better.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.”

Samuel watched silently as Jarrett pulled a sewing kit from the cabinet, applied a local anesthetic, and disinfected the area. Jarrett poked the needle into the skin around the wound and made a clean line of stitches before covering it with another bandage.

“Okay. Now I just need your blood to send to Infectious Diseases.”

Samuel looked at him questioningly.

“HIV and hepatitis.”

Samuel jumped up from the chair. “What? Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I’m HIV positive. I’m always careful.”

“Calm down,” Jarrett pulled him back by the arm. “It’s not about that. It’s about your safety. I’ve taken blood from the patient already. If he’s positive, you can start post-exposure prophylaxis. If you get infected anyway, it can be traced back to this incident. And hepatitis B is the most common work-related infection for medical professionals.”

Slowly, Samuel sat back down and stuck out his other arm for Jarrett. Jarrett put a tourniquet on Samuel’s upper arm and pulled it tight until the veins in the crook of the arm became visible. He disinfected the skin over the veins and inserted a needle. The vial immediately filled with dark blood. Jarrett quickly removed the cuff on Samuel’s upper arm and reached for a swab to press over the insertion point. The motions were all automatic. He had done this so often. And yet, it felt different. Although he tried not to, he had often fantasized about touching Samuel. And despite the fact that his dreams involved much more intimate forms of touching, the reality exceeded his fantasies. It was a simple medical procedure, but his fingertips tingled whenever he touched Samuel’s skin, and the tingles spread, covering his entire body. He was glad that the motions were routine enough that Samuel wouldn’t be able to tell how much it was affecting him. But his self-control had its limits. He remained sitting for longer than necessary, his hand around Samuel’s elbow, pressing his thumb over the prick. Samuel looked up, and their eyes met. It shot through Jarrett’s core. He felt himself getting hot. Samuel’s eyelids

flickered. He must have realized, must have felt how much Jarrett desired him. Jarrett's index finger brushed gently over Samuel's upper arm. Their eyes remained locked for several seconds that felt to him like an eternity. Then he took a deep breath, let go of Samuel's arm, stood up, and left the room. He couldn't do it. Samuel was his brother's boyfriend. It was completely unacceptable that he couldn't get himself under control.

Baffled, Samuel watched Jarrett go. What had just happened? Had Jarrett stroked his arm? And why had it made him feel so good? He stuck a bandage on his arm. Jarrett had tended to him with quick, deft movements. Samuel had felt safe and well-cared for in his hands. Like he could trust Jarrett. For the first time since he'd started working at the hospital, Jarrett had seemed friendly toward him. He'd been caring, almost tender. Why? Was it just that he'd gotten injured, and Jarrett was taking the necessary steps for dealing with an injured employee? But what had been the meaning of that gentle finger stroke? And of Jarrett's burning gaze? Had he imagined it?

Samuel didn't see Jarrett again that afternoon, but he kept thinking about him until the following morning. He finally managed to shake off the weird feeling. Just because Jarrett was nice to him one time didn't mean he desired Samuel or even liked him. He wasn't entirely sure whether Jarrett was gay. He suspected so, but so far neither Damian nor Jarrett himself had mentioned it.

Fight

“What do you want to do this weekend?”

“We could see a movie?”

“That’s one option.” Samuel held his phone to his ear with his shoulder in order to fish some change out of his wallet. He’d gotten some more milk. Since Liah had moved in, milk consumption had risen drastically. “Or what if we get away? We could treat ourselves to a mini vacation.”

“I’d rather not,” said Damian after a brief pause.

“All right, a movie then.” Samuel tried to sound pleased. He was a little disappointed. The previous evening, he’d looked around on the internet for romantic weekends for two. His favorite option was a trip to Hamburg and tickets to see a musical. He could probably have finagled tickets to a concert at the Elbphilarmonie. His father knew people there. He’d been waiting all day to surprise Damian with the idea. He climbed the stairs to his apartment, lost in thought. Was Damian concerned about money? Samuel would have paid for him, of course. He didn’t want to come across as patronizing, though. It wasn’t a problem elsewhere. He didn’t care what other people thought about him, but he cared what Damian thought. It was undeniable that they were in a relationship now. They spent the weekends together, spoke on the phone daily, and texted back and forth throughout the day.

“Want to come back to my place, or should we go to yours?” The movie had been pretty boring. A lot of shooting, a few lofty words, and Let’s save the day. Samuel hated movies like that. The only good part had been Damian putting an arm around him and periodically stroking his arm with a finger. That had awoken his anticipation for the night to come. Frustratingly, it had also reminded him of Jarrett’s touch during the blood draw.

“Is Liah at your place?”

“Yeah, she’s home.”

“Then not to yours.”

Samuel frowned. “You’re being unfair to her. She’s not an alcoholic, and not violent.”

“I only saw that she was out of control.”

“If you’d just give her another chance, you’ll see how nice she is.”

“I have no desire to give her anything.”

Samuel was beginning to grow angry. Regardless of what Damian had been through, his behavior was childish. “And your place is better? Your surly brother is always hanging around. I don’t think he’s on call this weekend. Do you think I enjoy knowing my boss is in the next room?”

“No problem. Then you go to your place, and I’ll go to mine.” Damian’s voice sounded cold.

Samuel fought down the rising irritation. Maybe he needed to be more sensitive with Damian and respect that he didn’t want to be around Liah. After all, he didn’t know what Damian had experienced. He’d tried asking about it carefully, but Damian had evaded the questions. “I don’t want to fight.”

Damian didn’t answer.

“Why don’t you tell me why you have such a problem with Liah?”

“I don’t have a problem with her. I just don’t like her.”

“What happened to you? Was your mother an alcoholic?” All Samuel knew was that Damian and Jarrett didn’t have parents anymore.

“That’s none of your business,” Damian snarled.

Samuel put a hand on his shoulder soothingly. “I just want to understand.”

Damian shook him off. “You can’t understand anything; you’re a spoiled rich kid. You’ve never even had to spell the word *problem*.”

Samuel swallowed. Damian had struck a nerve. “If I’m just a spoiled rich kid, why are you going out with me?”

“No idea.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Samuel turned on his heel. “Good night, Damian.” He strode off in the opposite direction and tried to swallow the lump in his throat. For a moment, he hoped Damian would follow him. But the only steps sounding on the pavement were his.

Samuel heard nothing from Damian for two weeks. He tried to distract himself with work. That’s what he got for breaking his iron rules. He’d learned in his schooldays that giving his heart away only brought pain. It was his own fault for not learning the lesson. He’d go to Dusters on the weekend, go back to his old ways, and forget Damian.

“You all right, Samuel?” Theodor looked at him with concern when he said hello.

“Sure, tip-top.” He could tell from Theodor’s face that he didn’t believe a word. Theodor knew him too well. Back when Theodor used to pick him up from school, he could always read Samuel’s face like an open book. A few careful questions from him, and Samuel would be crying in the back seat and telling him everything.

Theodor’s probing questions were the last thing he needed right now. He hurried past him into the club. But he had barely knocked back his first blow job when Igor appeared next to him. Theodor must have called him over.

Igor laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Good evening, Samuel. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Yeah, you can leave me alone, thought Samuel. “No, thanks.”

“Where’s Damian? Aren’t you two together?”

“How should I know where Damian is? I’m not his babysitter.” Samuel’s voice caught.

Igor nodded with understanding. “Don’t drink too much, Samuel. And come find me if you need anything.” His voice was sympathetic.

Samuel’s blood was beginning to boil. He couldn’t handle this. Of course! He must have fallen for the city’s most infamous Casanova, and now Igor was here with a comforting hand. He felt like a complete idiot.

He sat alone at the bar and ordered another drink. He’d glimpsed a few acquaintances, but he had no interest in finding them tonight. He could maybe manage a fast, hard fuck. Two drinks later, a man sat down on the stool next to him. He turned his head. A middle-aged man was smiling at him. “Hello.”

“Piss off,” Samuel spat. He found the guy repellent, and he wasn’t in the mood to chat.

The man held up his hands defensively. “Okay, okay.” He got up and left.

“Make me another drink, Carlo,” Samuel called to the bartender.

Carlo frowned and paused in polishing a glass. “You’ve had enough for tonight. And we don’t tolerate that kind of behavior here. Go find some cheap dive if you want to snap at people.”

Wordlessly, Samuel stood. He was fed up. He couldn’t stand anyone else pitying him or telling him what to do. And he didn’t want to talk. He stumbled into one of the dark rooms. He’d let some random person stick their dick in him and then he’d take a taxi home to sleep off the alcohol. And then he’d start looking for a new club. Dusters wasn’t that cool anymore anyway.

He felt his way in the dark to the upholstered bench in the room. It had a plastic cover and smelled of disinfectant. Igor’s cleanup team wiped it down after each use. He fumbled with his jeans. What he needed now was just a hard cock to blow his mind clear for a little while. He heard steps behind him. He didn’t care who it was. Just so long as they were hard.

Hands grabbed him around the waist and lips brushed his neck. Samuel's knees went weak.

"Very naughty of you," whispered Damian in his ear.

Samuel managed only a croak.

"I should give you a spanking. Your bottom's already bare." There was a loud smack as Damian's palm came down on his ass.

Samuel moaned and forgot all his resolutions. He heard Damian undo his pants and put on a condom. Then he felt a hard cock between his cheeks. Damian pushed his way in slowly. Samuel was unprepared and it hurt a little. The sweet pain morphed easily into rapid arousal as Damian grabbed him and massaged his prostate with fast, hard movements. Samuel gasped and arched his back.

Damian took a hand off his waist, and reached for his dick. "Is this what you need?"

Samuel's breath left him and something seemed to explode inside his head as he came forcefully into Damian's hand. Damian took him roughly by the hips again and hammered into him until he also finished. Samuel leaned forward and supported himself on the bench with his hands while he felt Damian's last twitches inside him. Damian sighed heavily and slowly pulled out. Once he'd disposed of the condom, he pulled Samuel up and turned him around. Samuel's eyes had adjusted to the dark by now and he could see the rough outlines of Damian's face.

Damian brushed his lips gently. "I'm sorry I brushed you off after the movie. I don't have a lot of practice with relationship stuff." He kissed Samuel again, this time long and passionately.

Holidays

“Do you have Christmas plans?” asked Samuel. He was sitting on the sofa reading a textbook. It was getting to be time for him to start preparing for his third board exam. Graduation exams were approaching. Damian lay on the sofa with his head in Samuel’s lap and paged through a culinary magazine.

“Christmas sucks,” Damian said. His voice held all the disappointment of a child who’d been repeatedly forgotten at Christmas.

Samuel stroked his hair. “Let’s go away somewhere for the holidays. Just the two of us.”

“No.”

“Why not? I’ll take care of everything.”

“I’d rather stay here.”

“Then let’s do something fun here.”

“I’m sure your parents and brother want to see you at Christmas.”

“But I’d rather spend the holidays with you.” Samuel’s parents had indeed already invited him, as had his brother. In the past, he’d always spent Christmas Eve with his brother’s family, and they’d drive to their parents’ house together the next day.

“No. Go to your family. Be thankful that you have one.”

“You could come with me.” It would definitely be fine with Benedikt. His parents would probably gulp if he brought a man along, but they had good manners and would greet Damian with polished politeness.

“Absolutely not.” Damian got up and disappeared into the kitchen.

Samuel watched him go with a frown. He couldn’t get used to Damian’s habit of avoiding subjects. For Damian, the matter was settled and any further attempts to convince him would be

met with nothing but a shake of the head. Samuel had experienced this often over the past couple of months. He told himself to be patient. He needed to give Damian time and space.

“Oh, I switched my shift with someone, so I’m working on Christmas Eve.” Jarrett was emptying the dishwasher while Damian arranged deli meats and cheese on two plates.

“Okay.” Damian’s voice sounded strained.

Jarrett looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “I assumed you would be spending Christmas with Samuel.”

Damian shook his head. “He’s celebrating with his brother.”

Jarrett frowned. If he’d known that, he wouldn’t have traded his on-call shift with a colleague. “What are you doing, then? Are you going out?”

“I don’t think so. Lots of other damaged guys out on Christmas. I don’t feel like spending the whole evening looking at my own reflection.”

Jarrett was irritated with Samuel. Why was he leaving Damian alone during the holidays? Of course, he couldn’t know that Christmas was a rough time for Damian. Their father had died in mid-December, and in the following years, the holidays had always been a catastrophe. Still, he was mad that Samuel was ignoring Damian.

“Don’t worry about me.” Damian took the plates to the table. “I’ll survive.”

“Hey, cutie pie!” Samuel exclaimed, picking up his little niece and spinning her around.

Elvira crowed, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and managed to sweep his glasses off his face. Luckily, they got a soft landing on the flokati rug where her little brother was lying on his back, chewing a plastic ring with little bells on it.

Samuel put Elvira down and replaced his glasses.

Benedikt’s wife Sandra picked up little Vincent and brushed a hand over Samuel’s hair. “Your hair’s going every which way. The coffee’s ready. Elvira even made you some cookies yesterday.”

“That’s amazing. Just for me?”

Elvira stuck a finger in her mouth and nodded.

Sandra laughed. “She even added pink icing.”

Samuel took Elvira’s hand and went with her into the dining room. “Pink is a very nice color.”

“How are you liking Surgery?” asked Benedikt as they sat in the living room about an hour later. They’d already opened their gifts. Elvira was sitting in a big pile of wrapping paper, pulling the clothes off a doll.

“It’s all right.”

“You don’t sound particularly enthusiastic.”

“I like the station work. But I expected the operations to be more fun.”

Benedikt laughed. “I’ve always said surgery wasn’t your thing.”

Samuel hated it when Benedikt was right and began rubbing it under his nose.

“What do you think you’ll do, then?”

“No idea.”

“You’re going to have to decide soon. It’s only a few months until your exams.”

Samuel grunted. As if he didn't know that already. Elvira climbed into his lap and held out the doll and its pink dress. "On again."

"You want me to put the dress back on?" Samuel asked her.

Elvira nodded.

"Okay. I'm better at pulling them off, but we'll manage." He pushed the doll's stiff arms through the sleeves of the dress and velcroed it closed. "There you go."

"Thanks." Elvira immediately began ripping the dress back off again.

"Oh, I see. We want to get some practice."

As always, it was nice and relaxed with Benedikt and his family. Samuel played with Elvira, swung Vincent in his arms, and tried not to think about Damian. How was he doing? Was he alone at home? He had seen on the schedule that Jarrett had to work Christmas Eve. Maybe he should give Damian a quick call, just to be sure he was okay. He took his phone from his pocket.

"Damian?"

"Why are you calling? Are you bored at your brother's?"

Samuel looked at little Vincent, who was lying in his arms and trying to reach the phone with a clumsy hand. No, he definitely wasn't bored. "I just wanted to hear how you were doing."

"All good." Damian's voice sounded a touch too happy.

"Are you sure you don't want to come join us? My sister-in-law has so much food she doesn't know where to put it all."

"Thanks, but no. I hope you have a nice evening." Damian hung up. Samuel looked at the display, confused. He was convinced that Damian wasn't doing particularly well.

"Who was that? Did you want to bring someone along?" asked Benedikt, who must have heard the end of the conversation.

“Yeah, I actually wanted to bring my boyfriend. But he’s not really into all the family stuff.”

“Since when do you have a boyfriend?” Benedikt looked surprised. He knew Samuel’s attitude toward relationships.

“We’ve been together since the beginning of October.”

“Nice, I’m happy for you. Do you like being in a relationship? You never wanted one before.”

Samuel sighed. “It’s just as hard as I always suspected. I shouldn’t have gotten involved.”

“Are you worried about him?”

“Yeah. Damian didn’t have a good childhood. Christmas is hard for him, and I wanted to be with him over the holidays. But he wasn’t interested.”

“Give him time. You’ve only been together for a couple of months,” said Benedikt.

Vincent began mewling in his arms. Then his face turned red, and a pungent odor rose to Samuel’s nose. “I think someone here needs a fresh diaper.”

“I hope you have a quiet shift, Dr. Zadnik. And a merry Christmas,” said Nurse Elisabeth as she went to get her purse from her locker in the nurses’ room.

“Thank you. Happy holidays to you as well.”

“My daughter is coming to visit tomorrow with my little grandson. He’s just six months old.”

“That will be nice. Have fun with the little guy.” Jarrett nodded to her and absorbed himself in the charts again. He was actually hoping for a busy shift. Obviously, he didn’t want anyone to require an emergency operation, but if there was going to be one, now was the time. It would be a distraction. Christmas was hard for him too.

A few hours later, Jarrett shut the door to his office and stuck a pod in the coffee machine. His wish had been granted. He had been busy all evening, and already another operation was coming: a patient who'd been in surgery two days ago had burst her stitches. He had time for a cup of coffee while she was being readied for the OR. He could use the time to call Damian.

"Everything okay, little brother?"

"Yes, everything is fine. You two are just driving me crazy with your concern."

Jarrett frowned. "Who else?"

"Samuel has already called twice to make sure I'm not doing anything stupid."

"Why is he worried about you?"

"Foolishly, I mentioned to him that I don't have the best memories about Christmas."

"So why isn't he with you?" Jarrett shook his head in irritation.

"He wanted us to go somewhere. When I refused, he even made the ridiculous suggestion that I come visit his family."

Jarrett needed a moment to recover from his surprise. "And why didn't you want to spend the holidays with him?"

"It's becoming too much. Meet his family! Jesus. It's not like I'm about to marry him."

"I think it's really nice that Samuel invited you. And surely it would be more entertaining than sitting alone at home."

"I can entertain myself well enough. Now leave me alone." Damian slammed down the phone.

Jarrett took a sip of coffee and rubbed his forehead. Should he call back? Obviously Damian wasn't doing great. He didn't feel like his calls were helping, though. Plus, he needed to get to the OR. He sighed and reached for his lab coat.

“I’m gonna get you!” Samuel made a face and crawled after Elvira on all fours, wearing his pajamas. She gurgled and fled under the low coffee table.

“That’s so mean. Monsters can’t fit in that cave.”

Elvira turned and stuck her head out from under the table, laughing.

“Grr,” growled Samuel, and raised a claw-shaped hand in the air.

Elvira stuck out an insolent tongue and crept further underneath the table.

“Now I won’t get any breakfast because the little pink cupcake got away. And I’m so hungry.” Samuel rubbed his belly and made a sobbing noise.

Benedikt entered the living room. He was already wearing his tuxedo with the new bow tie he’d unwrapped yesterday. Samuel had picked it out for him. “If you don’t get ready soon, you really won’t get anything to eat.” He bent down and peered under the table. “Elvira, come get dressed. Oma and Opa are excited to see you.” Elvira stuck her little pink tongue out at her father too. Benedikt didn’t waste time. He pulled her out from under the table and picked her up. Elvira kicked and yelled.

Samuel straightened up and tickled her back. “Shall we make ourselves pretty, cutie pie? I want to see your dress.”

Elvira gave a targeted swipe and knocked his glasses off again. She continued her bid for freedom.

Benedikt held the temperamental little bundle tightly in his arms and carried her upstairs. “Get ready quickly, Samuel. You always take so long in the bathroom. I don’t want to be late.”

“You have no idea how fast I can get out of the bathroom now that I’ve been having to leave the house so early.”

Benedikt laughed and disappeared with Elvira into the children's room.

Samuel jumped into the shower, and a short time later he was back in the living room in his own tuxedo and shiny shoes. "That dress looks good on you, Sandra. Can I put your hair up? It would go great with the dress."

Sandra laughed and looked at her husband questioningly. "Is there time?"

Benedikt checked his watch. "Ten minutes. Is that enough?"

"Sure," called Samuel, already running up the stairs to grab the hairbrush and bobby pins from Sandra's bathroom cabinet.

Samuel tickled Vincent—who was in a car seat next to him—on the belly and looked at the luxury cars parked along the driveway to their parents' house. "We're not the first ones here. Are we going to get an earful right out of the gate?"

Benedikt parked the dark blue station wagon between a Ferrari and a Mercedes G-class, where it looked kind of pathetic. "We're only a couple minutes late. Only enough for a raised eyebrow or two."

Sandra pushed the stroller. Samuel carried Elvira, who had fallen asleep in the car, and Benedikt was laden with gifts and flowers. In the entrance hall, friendly staff relieved them of the gifts and their coats. Once they reached the drawing room, their mother rushed to greet them. "Benedikt, Samuel, here you are finally." She gave Benedikt a peck on the cheek and turned to Sandra. "How are you? You look pale. It's far too much for you to have two small children and no staff. Why don't I send Hannelore to you for a while so she can give you a hand?"

Sandra laughed. "Really, that's not necessary. I'm managing fine, and Elvira started going to daycare for a few hours a day in September."

Their mother turned to Benedikt accusingly. "You can't send Elvira to daycare with all those strangers' kids and all

their germs. Why don't you get a nanny?"

"Mama, Elvira's doing fine in daycare. She likes playing with the other kids, and the germs are good for her immune system. You don't need to worry."

She turned back to Sandra. "Your hair looks really nice, though. Where did you find a hairdresser that would do that for you on Christmas? You absolutely must give me their address."

Then she turned to Samuel, who was still carrying the sleeping Elvira. Since his mother couldn't hug him around the child, she stroked his cheek instead. "Hello, sweetie. Nice to see you." Her voice had gone a hair softer. Samuel had always been, and remained, her baby. She would probably never be able to see him as a grown man.

"Hello, Mama. Nice to see you too. Where is Papa?"

She gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Oh, he's doing business or politicking, I don't know. I'm sure he'll be here soon."

Samuel and Benedikt's parents held a brunch for their closest friends every year at Christmas, which meant about sixty people. The entryway, the drawing room, and the library were festively decorated. An event manager had set up standing tables and the food was handled by a caterer. Samuel looked for a place where he could put Elvira down. Maybe he should take her upstairs to his or Benedikt's room. But the toddler began to squirm in his arms. Suddenly she was wide awake and kicking to be let down. Samuel set her on the floor. "Oma!" she cried and grabbed his mother's legs. Smiling, she bent down and stroked Elvira's curls. He'd never be able to give his parents that, thought Samuel. And he'd never have any children or grandchildren of his own. Sometimes being gay sucked.

Just as Samuel was pondering how his life would have turned out if he hadn't been gay, another member of this particular minority approached and smiled at him. "Hi, nice to see you again."

“Hi, Olaf. How’s it going? How was Spain?”

“Stimulating.” Olaf gave a wicked grin. “How about you? You left me a strange message on my answering machine a few weeks ago. I tried to call you back a few times but couldn’t reach you.”

“Sorry. I’m currently assigned to a surgical station.”

Olaf nodded sympathetically. “That explains everything. Some poor bastards have to stay there permanently.”

“I was kind of desperate when I left that message on your machine. But that’s all in the past now, because I’m going out with the cause of the desperation.”

“Really?” Olaf looked around curiously. “Where is he?”

“He didn’t come.”

“That’s too bad. I’d have liked to meet the man who seduced you into a relationship. You’ve always rejected that type of thing.” Olaf took an hors d’oeuvre from a silver tray that a young lady was holding up to him. “Thanks,” he said, and gave her a friendly smile. Then he turned back to Samuel. “You’ll be graduating soon, right?”

“Yeah, just a few more months.”

“What then?”

Samuel shrugged.

“Hopefully you’ve been cured of your obsession with being a surgeon.”

“Not quite. It’s what I always wanted to be when I grew up.”

“Then look inside yourself and ask what the grown-up Samuel wants.”

“You don’t want the details on that.”

Olaf grinned and took a sip of champagne. “Yes, I do. That’s what makes my job so exciting.”

Samuel laughed. “To be honest, I do have some doubts about whether surgery is the right thing for me. I don’t have

any particular talent for it.”

“What about psychiatry? I’m sure you have a talent for that.”

Samuel sucked on his lower lip thoughtfully. “I’ve never considered psychiatry. But I’ll give it some thought.”

Olaf clapped him on the shoulder. “You should definitely do that. I’d be glad to have a competent new colleague.”

New Year's

On December 27th, Damian and Samuel met in a café for brunch. Damian wasn't at all talkative, and Samuel felt it was best not to bug him about it.

"Want to celebrate New Year's at Dusters?" asked Damian when the meal was nearly over.

Samuel looked up from his plate in surprise. "Sure, yeah." He was pleased that Damian at least wanted to celebrate this holiday with him, and Igor always made sure New Year's at Dusters was a special event.

"How was your family Christmas?" asked Damian with a mocking grin. "Don't you want to share?"

Samuel gave a relieved laugh. The ice around Damian was beginning to melt. "Pretty chaotic." He told Damian how Elvira had tried to swing from the tablecloth after dinner, resulting in all the dishes crashing to the floor. Sandra had started crying, because some of the plates they'd gotten as wedding presents had broken. And Benedikt had been angry with her for using a tablecloth at all. Elvira had simply stared at the mess in shock until Samuel took her by the hand and fled upstairs with her to her bedroom.

Damian shuddered. "Horrible little brats. Glad I don't have to deal with that."

"They're actually really sweet. If I weren't so terribly gay, I would like to have kids." Samuel thought about Vincent's tiny fingers, the unmistakable baby smell of his skin which moved Samuel to tears, and Elvira's clear little bell of a laugh.

The look Damian was giving him showed his utter disagreement.

Igor had turned Dusters into a glittering winter fairy tale. The sofas had plush coverings and little lights fell like snowflakes onto the crystals and candlesticks which hung

everywhere. Snowy-looking lumps were piled into niches and decorated with sleds and skis.

“It’s gorgeous,” exclaimed Samuel. “No need to drive to the mountains.”

Damian touched one of the crystal snowflakes hanging from the ceiling. “Igor really did a wonderful job decorating. But I’d still like to go to the mountains someday.”

“Have you never been?”

Damian shook his head. “I haven’t been around much. As a child not at all, and afterward there wasn’t enough money. I’d love to see the Atlantic, too.”

“You’ve never been to the sea?” Samuel couldn’t believe it. He loved traveling, and he felt sorry for Damian having never had the chance to see anything of the world.

“Just to the Baltic Sea. My dream is to go to Brittany.”

“Let’s dance,” Samuel suggested. On the dance floor, he embraced Damian and kissed him. He would make sure Damian could visit Brittany. They swayed to the rhythm of the music, and Samuel pulled Damian close. For some reason he felt he needed to cling to him. He didn’t want to lose him. Damian felt stiff in his arms. Was he holding on too hard? How should he behave? He wanted to leave Damian his freedom, while still showing him that he was there for him.

After a while, Damian pulled out of the embrace. “Let’s get a drink.”

“Okay. There’s a special New Year’s cocktail. Shall I get two?”

Damian nodded. “I’ll find us a seat.”

Samuel pushed his way into the crowd at the bar. “Carlo, can you please mix us up two of the New Year’s specials?”

“Right away.” With great energy and skill, Carlo mixed up a colorful drink.

“Samuel, it’s been ages!”

Samuel looked over. “Tim! Hi, how are you? I thought you were in New York.”

“I’m only in Berlin over the holidays.” Tim smiled at him. “Nice to see you.” He squeezed in next to Samuel at the bar. Samuel had lived with Tim while they’d gone bar hopping in New York over the summer. Their parents knew each other, and after Samuel had come out his mother had tried to set him up with Tim, who was a few years older than Samuel and living the illustrious life of an artist in New York. Samuel suspected, however, that Tim wasn’t financing his lifestyle through his art, but rather living off his father’s money. They had gone to clubs and parties and slept together, but neither Tim nor Samuel had been interested in a relationship.

“You look good, Sam,” said Tim, and stroked Samuel’s curls. “Are you here alone?” It was like him to get straight to the point. He was uninterested in too much talk or foreplay.

“Sorry, but I’m celebrating New Year’s with my boyfriend.”

“What? You have a boyfriend? How bourgeois. I didn’t expect that from you.” Tim looked aghast.

Samuel had to laugh. “Until a few months ago, I couldn’t have imagined it either. But then I met Damian.”

“I can’t believe it.” Tim shook himself. “Call me when you’ve recovered from this terrible illness. I’m sure you’ll get bored soon.”

“See you, Tim.” Samuel took the two cocktails and went looking for Damian.

The ice in each glass had long since melted, and some of the liquid had landed on Samuel’s shirt as he made his way through the crowd, still hunting through all the nooks and crannies of the club, looking for Damian. He couldn’t have just vanished into thin air. Samuel gave up and set the glasses on a standing table to fish his phone from his pocket. Damian hadn’t called. Samuel tapped Damian’s number and waited for it to connect.

“Well, where’s your boyfriend?” Samuel spun around. Tim was behind him, grinning broadly. “Did he already leave?”

When he reached Damian’s voicemail, Samuel hung up. “I hope not.” He rubbed his forehead, took a sip of one of the cocktails, and made a face. Without the ice, it was just sticky and sweet.

Tim put a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe the two of us can have a nice night after all.”

“No thanks,” murmured Samuel. He was beginning to get worried.

At that moment, Damian came through the curtain that led to the dark rooms. He was laughing and talking to a reddish-blond man with a stubbly beard. The man bent down and kissed Damian on both cheeks in farewell. It was clear what they had been up to. Samuel’s chest cramped up. Why did that hurt so much? Damian looked around and waved when he saw Samuel.

“Is that your boyfriend?” asked Tim when Damian approached. “Well, he seems to be amusing himself on the side. We could have some fun too.”

“Please, leave me alone.” Samuel’s voice was shaking. Tim gave him a sideways, pitying look. “I see,” he said. “You’ve really come down with it. I’m sorry.” He put his hand briefly on Samuel’s shoulder and then disappeared into the crowd.

Damian came over, smiling as if nothing had happened.

“The ice has melted,” said Samuel tonelessly.

“No problem. I’ll get us new ones.” Damian took the glasses and went to the bar. Samuel stared after him, stunned. Damian was acting like it was the most natural thing in the world to have sex with another man. Samuel didn’t have much experience with relationships, but he’d thought it went without saying that you were supposed to be faithful to your partner. And theirs was definitely a relationship.

The pressure in Samuel’s chest had not lessened when Damian returned with two full glasses a few minutes later.

“Here,” he said, and handed Samuel a glass. Then he frowned. “What’s wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Did you just have sex with someone else?” Samuel needed to hear it from Damian’s mouth.

“Yeah. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Yeah, I do,” Samuel admitted.

“Okay,” Damian sounded unconcerned. “You didn’t say you expected us to be exclusive.”

“I thought that was obvious.” Samuel’s emotions were all over the place. He was shocked, hurt, angry, and now he was starting to feel doubtful too. He didn’t want to make Damian to feel trapped or set expectations he would struggle to meet. Damian should feel free and happy with him. Samuel wished he were enough for Damian, so Damian wouldn’t want anyone else.

Damian slurped his cocktail noisily. “Anyway, you just let yourself be felt up by someone, and it wasn’t all that long ago that I caught you in a dark room. If I hadn’t seen you go in there, you’d have let someone else stick his cock in you.”

Samuel’s anger was getting the upper hand. “Firstly, Tim only touched my arm. That’s not particularly intimate.”

“He was giving you a look. He wanted to have sex with you.”

“But we didn’t have sex. And about the dark room back then, I thought you’d broken up with me when you told me in your charming way that you didn’t want anything to do with a spoiled rich kid.”

They stared at each other for a moment. Samuel had to fight to keep tears out of his eyes. Why was he doing this to himself? He had been happy single, and now he was pissing his pants at the thought that Damian might leave him.

After what seemed like an eternity, Damian stepped forward and took him in his arms. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t hurt you. You’re a sweet guy and you don’t deserve that.”

Samuel gave a sob. The words were not comforting. What did Damian mean, he shouldn't hurt Samuel? Had he done it on purpose? And "sweet guy" was not very high on the scale of compliments for a sexy, desirable partner. But he felt Damian's heartbeat and the warmth of his body, and that voice that had sent shivers down his back the first day they met said into his ear, "Sorry, sweetheart. I'm an idiot."

Assault

Jarrett was exhausted and pissed off. He'd spent the whole night in surgery and had then had an argument with a colleague from Gynecology. In the early hours of the morning, he'd had to operate on a woman with an acute abdomen. A diverticulum had ruptured, and her entire abdominal cavity had become inflamed. The woman had been suffering from severe pain for days, but hadn't come to the ER until she'd gotten a high fever the previous night. During the operation, Jarrett had found an abnormality on her ovary and had called in the attending physician from Gynecology to look at it. The other doctor was annoyed that he'd been called in and had bitched at Jarrett. Then they'd had a disagreement about what to do. Jarrett seethed, thinking about how arrogantly the snot from Gynecology had spoken to him. The concluding rounds with the assistant physician on shift, a frustrating man who moved at a snail's pace, did nothing to improve his mood.

He opened his front door in a fury. He would make himself a cup of coffee, take a shower, have a bite to eat, and then go to bed. Maybe a few hours of sleep would let him mentally distance himself from the hospital. And he really ought to go to the gym this afternoon and work off some energy. He entered the kitchen and was confronted with a huge mess. Along with the dirty dishes, Damian's and Samuel's clothing lay all over the place. He pulled a pair of boxers off the coffee machine with his fingertips. Unacceptable! The boxers were printed with red sailboats. Did they even make this stuff in men's sizes, or did Samuel wear kids' clothes? His desire for coffee had vanished and his rage was climbing again. Sighing, he went into the bathroom and got into the shower. Letting the warm water run over his head helped. After a long shower, he turned off the water and began drying off. He listened as the door was opened, the toilet lid raised, and a splashing noise began. Jarrett stepped out from behind the wall that separated the shower niche. Samuel was shaking out the last drops.

Jarrett felt all the anger of the night boil up uncontrollably inside him. “Don’t you knock?”

Samuel jumped. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t know you were in here.”

“Where did you think all the steam had come from?” Jarrett’s voice was cold.

Samuel looked around in confusion. “Steam? Oh. I didn’t notice. I guess I’m not fully awake.”

“This place looks like a pigsty. I live here too. I have no desire to come back to such a mess after a difficult shift.”

“I can understand that. I’ll go clean up the kitchen.”

Samuel’s understanding, almost pitying look was the last straw. Jarrett let the towel fall, reached Samuel in two steps, grabbed his wrist, and twisted his arm up behind his back.

“Ow, that hurts,” complained Samuel, and struggled to escape Jarrett’s grip, stumbling and hitting the wall.

Jarrett twisted Samuel’s arm farther up, making him cry out. “You’re going to dislocate my arm,” he gasped.

Jarrett pressed him against the wall and stood close behind him. “You should stay away from my brother.”

Samuel only whimpered.

When Jarrett realized how close he was to Samuel, and the smell of Samuel’s skin reached his nose, his cock raised up and pushed itself between Samuel’s butt cheeks.

“Stop,” gasped Samuel.

“What? You don’t want it?”

Samuel didn’t answer.

Jarrett pressed closer to Samuel and reached around him. “You do have a hard-on. Don’t tell me you don’t want it.”

“You’re crazy. Let me go right now.” Samuel’s voice was shaking.

Jarrett suddenly became conscious of what he was doing. His fury gave way to horror at himself. He let go of Samuel

and hurried out of the bathroom.

Shaking, Samuel turned around and massaged his shoulder. What was that? Jarrett was clearly losing it. The mirrored cabinet diagonally across from him threw back his reflection. Jarrett hadn't lied. His cock was jutting upward and trembling with arousal. Slowly, he sank down the wall and sat on the cold tile floor.

It took him a good ten minutes to figure out what had aroused him. Jarrett had been rock-hard behind him, and the rough way he'd grabbed him had been honestly sexy. He hadn't been afraid, even though Jarrett had been kind of hurting him. He had assumed that Jarrett had only contempt for him. Maybe he did and wanted to fuck Samuel anyway. Or maybe he wanted to scare him off. Clearly, he felt he needed to protect his brother from Samuel. Damian had indicated that Jarrett had been more than a big brother to him. After their father's death, their family had broken apart. Their mother hadn't been able to deal with the loss, and Jarrett seemed to have been the one to care for Damian. Damian hadn't really told Samuel what happened after their father died, but he occasionally made remarks that let Samuel piece it together. According to his limited information, the time had been traumatic for Damian, who was only five years old at the time. Their mother had begun drinking and had not only neglected her children, but also hit them.

Whenever Damian let something slip, he clammed up as if he immediately regretted giving Samuel a glimpse of his childhood. Samuel didn't know how to convince him that he wouldn't violate his trust. They hadn't been together that long. Samuel might not have had any experience with relationships, but he assumed that it would take a lot more time for Damian to open up to him completely. Jarrett was probably mistrustful of his and Damian's relationship because he was worried about his brother. He wanted to make sure Damian didn't get hurt.

That must be why Jarrett had hassled and threatened him. But Samuel wouldn't throw in the towel so easily. Maybe he should try to speak to Jarrett. But it was probably a good idea to wait until he was no longer working at the station. In a few weeks, this part of his studies would be over.

Sighing, Samuel got up and padded back to Damian.

“What took you so long?” murmured Damian sleepily.

Samuel didn't answer, just cuddled up to Damian and put an arm around him. Damian grunted happily and scooted his butt backward to get closer to Samuel. He wouldn't hurt Damian, Samuel thought. He would take care of Damian and his scars.

“We're going for a beer afterward. Want to come?” Gregor, a colleague from Trauma Surgery, was pouring himself a coffee in the OR break room.

Jarrett held out his own mug. “Why not? It's been a long time since we did that.” Once upon a time, they had gone out to a bar nearly every Friday after their shifts—Gregor with his boyfriend Adrian from Radiology, Deniz and his wife, who both worked in Internal Medicine, and a few other colleagues from other disciplines. But somehow that had fallen by the wayside over time.

“How was your vacation?” asked Jarrett a few hours later as they stood in a bar and clinked glasses. “I know it was several months ago, but we never had a chance to speak about it.”

“Adrian risked his life again, but otherwise Iceland was really nice.” Gregor put his arm around his partner.

“Come on, it wasn't that bad,” said Adrian, shaking his sun-bleached curls. He was deeply tanned, wiry, and loved extreme sports. He frequently limped to work in splints and casts because he'd injured himself again.

“What happened?” Jarrett took a step to the side to let a small group of young people pass. The bar was packed, and the clientele were not exactly gentle. They were not averse to using their elbows to get through the crowd.

“Adrian claimed he could climb up a rock face without safety equipment, and he fell.” Gregor frowned and shook his head at Adrian. “Every time I think about it, I want to bend you over my knee again.”

Adrian made a dismissive gesture. “Yeah, but I wasn’t very high up. I just twisted my ankle and got a few bruises.” He grinned at Gregor. “I’ll get back to you about that offer, though.”

Jarrett laughed. Gregor and Adrian practiced BDSM. He knew about it because they liked to do scenes at Dusters. Damian, who sometimes played with them, had told him about it. “That could have gone terribly wrong,” he said.

Gregor pulled Adrian closer to him. “It could have. And I’d be really glad if you’d stop doing such stupid stunts.”

Jarrett smiled at them both. They were a sweet couple. Back when he and Ralf had been together, they’d often met up. Usually there were a few other gay couples with them, but over time the group had dwindled. “How is Jaron? Have you heard from him?”

Gregor’s expression grew somber. “I write him an email every once in a while. A few times he sent short replies, but I haven’t gotten an answer in months.”

“Poor thing,” said Adrian. “He lost all his lust for life with Gabriel.”

“And he was always such a happy person before, in his quiet way. He had such a positive energy.” Jarrett turned his glass in his hands thoughtfully. He had seen in his mother how much the loss of a partner could change a person. His memories of before his father’s death were faint, but he could remember her joyful laugh, how he’d sat in her lap while she read him a story, and how lovingly she had played with Damian while he lay on the changing table. He swallowed and

tried not to think of the shabby wreck she'd turned into. But the images of her shrieking and laying into Damian with a belt were too vivid. He closed his eyes briefly. "Where is Jaron now?"

"He moved to Lapland," said Gregor.

"To Lapland? What's he doing there?"

"His uncle has a husky farm up in the north of Finland. He used to visit often as a child. My understanding is he's living there now."

Adrian sighed. "The good old times are over. Jaron and Gabriel are gone, you don't bring Ralf anymore, and Dominic moved to Canada after he and Lias broke up. We're the only ones left. Oh, but here come Deniz and Tina at least."

"Hey," Deniz called, and waved to them as he pushed through the crowd, pulling his wife Tina behind him. "Sorry we're a little late. Of course, our boss had to come this afternoon specifically to do a thorough round of the ward. He hasn't done that in ages."

"So, what's new with you?" Jarrett asked them both.

"You mean privately, or in the department?"

Jarrett laughed. "You have a private life?"

Deniz grinned. "Our private life may be about to get pretty exhausting."

"What, really?" Adrian stared openly at Tina's belly. "You're not showing at all."

She rubbed a hand over the barely noticeable bulge. "It's still very early. I wanted to keep it between us for a while longer, but Deniz doesn't want me doing night shifts. So we told our boss this week."

"Is it a boy or a girl?" Adrian asked curiously.

"A girl."

"You're so lucky," sighed Adrian. "I'd like a little daughter too. That's the only downside of being gay."

“These days you can have kids as a gay couple too,” said Tina. “You could adopt or look for a surrogate.”

“Don’t put foolish ideas into Adrian’s head,” Gregor interjected. “One of the biggest advantages of being gay is not having to worry about contraception all the time, or about little spawn that make your life difficult. My sister has three children of her own and a stepson. And believe me, it’s hell on Earth.”

Adrian elbowed Gregor in the side. “I’m sure the twins your sister had a few weeks ago are a lot to deal with all at once. But her little daughter Martina is really sweet.”

Jarrett grinned to himself. He agreed with Gregor. He could not understand the desire to bring children into the world and pass on his genes.

Deniz clinked his glass against Jarrett’s. “How are you doing? I really put my foot in my mouth a few months ago when I asked Ralf if you two were coming to the graduation party at the nursing school. I had no idea you weren’t together anymore.”

“We broke up over a year ago. But Ralf and I are still friends.”

“Do you have a new partner?” asked Deniz.

Jarrett shook his head.

“No?” Adrian was shocked. “I heard a rumor you were with a student who works in your department.”

Jarrett frowned. That couldn’t be. Who was spreading that sort of rumor? “No, he’s going out with my brother.”

“Is that why you never assign him to your operating room? People are wondering.” Gregor took a sip of beer and gave his glass a rueful look. “Now I have to swim back through the crowd and spend ages waiting at the bar.”

Jarrett left the question unanswered. He didn’t want to admit the real reason, even to himself.

Gregor stood up. “Anyone else want another?”

“Bring me one please,” Deniz asked. “And water for Tina.”

“Okay,” said Gregor. “Anyway, you’re not missing out by not having Samuel’s assistance. He helped me recently because all our students were out sick. He’s pretty clumsy. I hope he’s not thinking of becoming a surgeon.”

Jarrett watched Gregor thoughtfully as he disappeared into the crowd. He wasn’t particularly surprised by the remark. The idea that Samuel was all thumbs in the OR fit his image of the boy. He had no idea which discipline Samuel wished to pursue. He’d asked all the other students what their plans were, but Samuel put him so out of sorts that he couldn’t even get out that simple question. Instead, he’d attempted rape. He was such an ass! He needed to apologize to Samuel. And he needed to pull himself together and find a way to behave normally around him. He had to do that for his brother’s sake, regardless of how hard it was.

Breakup

“Are you working this weekend?” Damian straightened his tie and poured himself some coffee. He usually left the apartment much later, but this morning he had an early appointment.

Jarrett, who was buttering a piece of toast, looked up. “No, I don’t have to work. Am I in your and Samuel’s way?”

Damian took the piece of toast that Jarrett had just put a slice of ham onto. “Thanks.”

“I actually made that for me.”

“You can make yourself another one.” Damian took a large bite.

Jarrett looked at the clock. He had a few more minutes before he had to get going. He put another slice in the toaster. “Why don’t you spend the weekend with Samuel? He must have a nice place too, the way he talks about it.”

“Not as long as his stupid roommate is there.”

“Liah is only living with him temporarily. She’s very nice.”

“I disagree. But that won’t matter for much longer anyway.”

“Is she moving out?”

“No, but I’m planning to end things with Samuel this weekend.”

Jarrett set down his coffee. “Why would you do that? I had the impression things were going really well between you.”

“They are. Too well. Samuel is a really sweet guy, and although he isn’t pushing the issue, he’s causing me to talk about ‘back then’. About Mother and stuff.”

Jarrett was very surprised. Damian never talked about their past. Not even with him. He cocked his head. “Maybe it will be good for you to open up to him.”

“Possibly. But I can’t do it. I’m starting to feel trapped.”

“So why not talk to Samuel about it? About how you need that distance still. Give the whole thing another chance.” Jarrett had the impression that the relationship with Samuel was doing his brother good. He’d become calmer and more thoughtful. He didn’t bounce from activity to activity anymore. Jarrett wanted so much for his brother to find peace in a relationship with another person.

“Don’t stick your nose into my business,” hissed Damian.

“I’m not. But I don’t understand what you’re doing. If you like Samuel, and you feel good around him, why are you running away from the relationship?” Jarrett had been assuming the whole time that Damian would break up with Samuel. He’d just hoped he’d be wrong this time.

“I’m not running away. I just don’t want this.”

“This isn’t about that time you first went to Dusters, is it?”

“Even if it was, that’s none of your business.”

Jarrett put a hand to his forehead. “Damian, you’re not serious. That was so long ago, it was your first time, and you don’t even know who it was. How can you throw away a real relationship with a nice man because of that?”

“I have to go,” said Damian, and left the kitchen.

Shaking his head, Jarrett watched him go.

When Damian had told him he was also gay, Jarrett had blamed himself. Their father had died when Damian was five and Jarrett eleven. He’d had cancer, and the last year of his life had been horrible. It was during that time that their mother began drinking. Jarrett took care of his little brother. He made sure Damian was fed and that he went to kindergarten and later to school. He checked that Damian was doing his homework, and later, when their mother began to hit Damian, Jarrett comforted him. For years they slept in the same bed.

Jarrett knew relatively early that he himself was gay, and he had no problem with it. But when Damian admitted to him at fourteen that he was also interested in men, Jarrett wondered

if it was his fault. He was Damian's only male role model, and maybe their closeness wasn't good for his development. He began to distance himself. But Damian found that unbearable. The more Jarrett tried to pull away from his brother, the harder Damian clung to him. Eventually Jarrett gave up. Clearly his brother needed him. And Jarrett wanted to be there for him and accept the fact that he was gay. Damian always spoke very openly about his sexuality. At seventeen, he told Jarrett he wanted to gain some sexual experience by going to Dusters. He'd gone on the internet and found out that it was a gay club with dark rooms. And he said the reviews of the place were good.

Jarrett was upset. He'd hoped Damian would find a nice boyfriend and they could discover their sexuality with each other, the way Jarrett had. But Damian wouldn't hear of it. He said he wasn't interested in having a boyfriend, only sex. Jarrett was very worried about this and wanted to protect his brother from bad experiences, so he went looking for the club owner. Igor was very friendly and understanding. He promised Jarrett he'd keep an eye on his little brother, but he had no control over what happened in the dark rooms. As soon as Damian was eighteen, Jarrett went with him a few times to Dusters to take a look at the place. But Damian made sure to choose a weekend when Jarrett was working to try out the dark rooms for the first time.

After his first sexual contact in a dark room, Damian was a changed man. He withdrew into himself and refused to speak a word for several days. Jarrett was filled with worry, but Damian assured him that nothing bad had happened. He wouldn't say anything else about it. For several months he didn't go back to Dusters, but then he began having random sex with strangers. Jarrett wasn't happy about this at all, but Damian could not be talked out of it. It wasn't until years later that he admitted to Jarrett that his first time in Dusters was the best sex he'd ever had. And that he'd never seen the man who took his virginity, but he couldn't forget him and had been searching for him and that kind of sexual fulfillment ever since without success. Damian's sexual restlessness had not ceased until he'd invited Samuel over for dinner several weeks ago.

How could Jarrett help him? It made him sad to see how emotionally damaged Damian was. Their mother's abuse had destroyed him and taken away all his trust in people. But just like back then, Jarrett couldn't really help. All he could do was support him and remind Damian he'd always be there for him.

"I'm sorry. But I just can't do this."

"But why?" Samuel's voice was shaking. Damian had been trying to explain to him for several minutes that things were over. He spoke as if trying to teach something to a small child.

"It's not you. I'm the problem."

"If you really wanted to be with me, you could try to solve the problem," said Samuel tonelessly. "I can give you as much time as you need."

Damian shrugged. "There's no point."

"What has no point?" Samuel pressed.

"Please, Samuel. I don't want to hurt you any more than I already am. You don't deserve that. I thought for a while that maybe it would work out with you. You're a great guy. But I just can't."

What was Samuel supposed to say to that? It sounded like a polite dodge, and you can't force people to love you. Samuel stared at Damian in bafflement. They'd been together for four months. He wanted more. He'd wanted more since the beginning. But Damian wouldn't let the relationship get any deeper. Periodically, he would talk about something from his past, but he never wanted to talk about the future. And now it was over? This couldn't be happening! Maybe Samuel would wake up soon and find it was all a bad dream.

The breakup with Damian caused Samuel physical pain. He was shaky and out of sorts. He couldn't concentrate. There

was a pain in his chest that made breathing difficult. All he wanted to do was lie in bed, close his eyes, and forget everything around him. Nothing made sense anymore. Why should he take his exams? What was the point of getting up in the morning and working so hard? There was nothing left. His heart was empty. After two days of retreating to his bed, Liah threw him out.

“It smells like a pigsty in here. You’re getting in the shower and coming to work with me.” She pulled the covers off him forcefully and held her nose.

“Leave me alone. I can’t work. I’m sick.”

Liah pulled up the blinds and threw the windows wide open. “This type of illness is best helped by distraction and work.”

“Go away, Liah. I’m suffering. I didn’t bitch at you when you were suffering; I comforted you.”

“Sweetheart, I’ll hold you once you’ve had a shower and brushed your teeth.”

When Samuel made no move to get up, Liah pulled the fitted sheet off the mattress and rolled him out. He landed in a heap on the floor. “Ow, you’re crazy.”

“Go on, get ready. Otherwise, we’ll be late to work.”

Cursing, Samuel went into the bathroom and managed to show up at work only half an hour late. Surprisingly, Jarrett made no comment when Samuel joined the rounds. Before the first procedure, they had time for a coffee in the OR break room. Samuel slumped on the sofa and sipped at the bitter drink. When he looked up, he met Jarrett’s searching, almost sympathetic gaze. Of course he knew. He could be satisfied now and give up threatening Samuel. However, Jarrett’s gaze showed no sign of pleasure or self-satisfaction. He looked more concerned than anything. And when Samuel laid the room chart in front of Jarrett that afternoon to introduce the newest patients, Jarrett put a hand on his shoulder for a fraction of a second. That was pretty unusual, but the gesture had something comforting in it.

By the evening, Samuel's self-control had left him and he lay crying on the sofa. And as she had promised, Liah took him in her arms and tried to console him. But her attempts to find comforting words fell more into the category of "throwing fuel on the fire."

"Sam, it was obvious that Prettyboy was going to abandon you. He had his little bit of fun, took advantage of your kindness and generosity, and now he's gotten bored and moved on."

Samuel gave a howl. Liah was displaying a whole new ability to put the scalpel right where it hurt the most. At least she was patting him on the back. "The idiot never appreciated you. And the way he looked at me, like he wanted nothing more than to jam a kitchen knife into my stomach! He was quite useful in the kitchen, though: I'll really miss the doughnuts he sometimes made on the weekends."

The delicious smell of the doughnuts and yeast rolls Damian baked seemed to waft through the room, adding another layer to the stifling pain that took Samuel's breath away. Liah was definitely not the ideal comforter. Who needed enemies when you had friends?

Liah sighed. "He did look disgustingly good. There's no denying that. If he wasn't gay, there's a good chance I would have fallen for him."

Samuel shrieked and covered his ears. "Please shut up, Liah."

Despite her inability to find the right words, Liah made sure Samuel arrived more or less on time to work every day. And he was able to realize again that interaction with patients much worse off than he was, and the responsibility he had at the station, were both good for him. He had no time to wallow in heartsickness, and although the pain continued, it stopped smothering him after a few days.

Unconscious

Jarrett entered the operating room with his hands raised. They had had to change the OR schedule at the last minute because of a sick colleague. Jarrett had already done two procedures in another operating room and was only getting to his own patients in the late morning. This patient was already under anesthesia, and the OR nurse, Angelika, was holding open a surgical gown. He slid his arms into it, let Angelika help him into his gloves, and spun on his heels, letting the gown wrap around him. He went to the table, where Sabina was already waiting for him. Next to her stood Samuel, Jarrett noticed with a frown. So far, he'd successfully avoided having Samuel at his operating table, a fact his colleagues had laughed about.

Without speaking, he began to open up the patient's abdomen. Inside was a mess. Everything was adhered and scarred. The patient had undergone multiple past operations, which—just like chronic enteritis—left marks. Jarrett sighed. The three hours he'd allotted for this operation would not be enough. Carefully, he began separating the adhesions.

“Samuel, you need to get on my side,” he said after he'd worked down part of the way toward the area to be operated on. “I need you to hold the intestine out of the way.”

Samuel came around the table and stood next to Jarrett.

“Closer.” Jarrett pressed the retractor into Samuel's hand. “But don't pull too hard: just hold it carefully out of the way.” Samuel scooted close to him and reached through under his arm.

Jarrett nodded. “That's right, good.” The thought of how he'd shoved himself at Samuel in the bathroom flashed through his mind. He was sorry about the incident and really, he wanted to apologize. But somehow, he hadn't been able to find the right moment. He pushed the thoughts of Samuel quickly from his mind; he needed to concentrate on his job. It worked surprisingly well. He continued with practiced routine;

Samuel's nearness didn't bother him. He hadn't needed to keep Samuel out of his operating room after all. He did find that his colleagues' comments about Samuel not being particularly adept were true. Samuel was constantly slipping with the retractor, and his hands trembled when Jarrett asked him to clip off a thread. But Jarrett noticed that Samuel was focusing and trying hard to do everything right. Patiently he corrected the positioning of the retractor, repeatedly taking Samuel's hand and moving it to where he needed.

"Don't clip the thread too close, Samuel, or the knot could come loose. And only use the very tip of the scissors so you don't damage the tissue."

Samuel did his best to follow the instructions correctly.

"That's right. And once you've cut, don't pull back so fast. Do it carefully, in case the scissors stick, or you haven't cut all the way through. Otherwise you might pull the stitches back open. The vessels I've just sewn up are very fragile."

Jarrett felt Samuel nod beside him.

The operation was difficult and lengthy. Jarrett let Sabina begin the bowel resection, but the tissue kept tearing and wouldn't hold the stitches. So he took over again, and continued working in careful concentration.

It took several hours for Jarrett to restore the continuity of the intestine. Sighing, he stood up straight for a moment and cracked his shoulders. His eye fell on the clock. "It's so late already. Is Liah at the station?"

"No," answered the circulating nurse, who was outside of the sterile sphere and responsible for procuring necessary equipment and keeping track of used sponges. "She's also still in the neighboring room."

"Someone needs to go take care of the station," said Jarrett.

"Should Samuel go?" asked Sabina.

"No, you can go. We'll quickly finish up the colostomy together and then Samuel and I will close everything back up."

“Are you sure, Dr. Zadnik?” Sabina gave Samuel a doubtful look.

Jarrett looked over. There was sweat on Samuel’s forehead. “Okay, then Samuel will go. Let’s just get—” Jarrett felt Samuel sway next to him and then fall backward. Without thinking, he took a step back and caught Samuel, who landed in his arms like a wet sack.

“Shit,” he said, groaning as he lifted Samuel up.

“Bring him into the break room,” called the circulator, and held open the swinging door. “I’ll look after him.”

Jarrett carried Samuel, who was heavier than he’d thought, into the break room, and laid him on the sofa in the corner. The circulator hurried after them. “I’ll grab a glass of water. Will you stay here until I get back?” she asked.

Jarrett nodded and knelt by the sofa. Samuel’s eyes were shut, and he was as white as chalk. Jarrett took off Samuel’s mask and cap. “Samuel?” he said in a soft voice, and stroked his cheek.

Slowly, Samuel opened his eyes. “Jarrett? What happened?”

“You passed out.”

“Oh no. I’m sorry.”

Jarrett brushed Samuel’s hair off his sweaty brow. “It’s okay.”

At that moment the circulator came back and handed Samuel a glass of water. “Have a sip. You’ll feel better right away.”

Jarrett stood up. “I’m going back in.”

Samuel looked up at him. “Thanks.”

Jarrett gave him a nod and hurried back into the operating room. Only Angelika and the anesthetist were still with the patient.

“I sent Sabina out for a moment so she could use the bathroom and get something to drink,” said Angelika.

Jarrett nodded. "Sorry for catching the kid. That was pretty unprofessional."

"No it wasn't, Dr. Zadnik," answered Angelika. "Samuel would have hit his head on that metal box and might have been seriously hurt. You reacted well."

"All right, I'll go wash up again." Jarrett turned around.

"Did you use the bathroom and have something to drink?"

He grinned. "No, ma'am."

"Then take a few minutes' break yourself. The operation is sure to take another two hours. I'm going to excuse myself soon as well."

"That's fine," Jarrett said unresistantly.

About three hours later, Jarrett headed down the hall toward the station. He'd sent Sabina and Liah home after the operations were over. It had been a very long day. He needed to check back on the station he'd abandoned all day. Nurse Elisabeth came to meet him.

"Can we go do the rounds right now?" he asked.

"Samuel did the rounds with me already. There are a few questions left he'd like to discuss with you."

Jarrett's eyebrows went up in surprise.

"By the way, Samuel's feeling pretty dejected about collapsing in the OR. Maybe you could make an exception and be nice to him."

Jarrett nodded. Had he really treated Samuel that poorly? When he remembered what he'd done in the bathroom a few weeks ago, he felt nauseous. He absolutely needed to talk to Samuel. He found him hunched on one of the spinning chairs in the doctors' office, resting his head in his hands. He shot up when Jarrett entered.

"How are you doing?" Jarrett sat down next to him and suppressed the impulse to stroke his cheek again the way he had in the OR.

“Better, thanks. And sorry again for interrupting the procedure.”

“You couldn’t help it. That can happen to anybody.”

“I bet it never happened to you.”

“Hm,” Jarrett hesitated. It was true—he’d never had to leave an operation.

Samuel put his chin back in his hands. “You were right about me from the beginning. I’m a total failure.”

“No, you’re not. It’s true, my first impression of you wasn’t particularly good, but my opinion of you has changed.”

Samuel looked up. His surprised and wounded expression pierced Jarrett to his soul.

“It’s nice of you to try to make me feel better,” said Samuel. “But I can tell I’m no good in the OR. When I was little, I always dreamed of being a surgeon. Now I’ve come to the sad realization that I’m not made of the right stuff. Even though I give the impression of taking everything lightly, it’s a hard blow.”

Jarrett wouldn’t have guessed Samuel had so much self-awareness. “If you really want to be a surgeon, you can do it. It’s a craft you can learn.”

“But the question is whether I should cling to a childhood dream now that I see I don’t have the right constitution for it.”

“Maybe you should spend more time thinking about where your strengths lie.”

“Are you saying I have those?”

“I’ve never had a student who managed the station so well. And you have a good way with people. They trust you.” Jarrett thought about Ms. Schulz, and also his brother, whom Samuel had gotten to open up. It was unfortunate that this caused Damian to be so afraid that he ended the relationship. “I could imagine you being an excellent physician or even a psychiatrist.”

“Thanks,” Samuel said quietly, looking down at the table.

“I’m really sorry about what I did in the apartment. My behavior was unconscionable.”

Their eyes met. “It’s okay,” said Samuel. “You don’t need to worry about it anymore anyway. Now that Damian’s broken up with me, there’s no chance of me hurting him. Not that I ever would have.”

“What? That’s not what I was worried about at all. I wanted to warn you about him, because I was afraid he wouldn’t be able to handle a long-term relationship.”

“What?” cried Samuel. “You were trying to protect me?”

Jarrett looked down at his hands in embarrassment and made a low noise in his throat while Samuel stared at him. He cleared his throat. “You did the rounds already?”

“Yes, but I have a few questions left.”

They bent over the charts, and although Jarrett had stood right next to Samuel all day, he had to fight with himself now to keep from grabbing and kissing him. He was glad when he could finally leave the office. He went over to Intensive Care.

“Has the patient I operated on today been moved out of the recovery room yet?” he asked a nurse in passing.

She nodded. “Just arrived. He’s in room three.”

Jarrett entered the room, where Ralf was busy changing out an infusion vial from which a liquid dripped into one of the patient’s veins.

“Hello, Ralf.”

Ralf turned. “Evening, Jarrett.” After their breakup, Jarrett had found it hard for a while to see Ralf at work. But Ralf had made it very easy for him. He always remained friendly and polite. By now Ralf was in another steady relationship, and he and Jarrett treated each other as friends.

“How’s he doing?” Jarrett looked at the elderly man lying pale on the bed with his eyes closed.

“His circulation is stable, but it was a long operation.”

Jarrett nodded. “There were adhesions everywhere. How much has come through the drains?”

Ralf lifted the plastic drainage bags that hung on the side of the bed and collected blood and serum that dripped out of the wound through tubes. “I haven’t changed them yet. There’s 100 milliliters in this one and about 150 in the other.”

“That’s okay. Keep an eye on them?”

“Of course.”

Ralf went around the bed and threw something into the trash can at the foot of it. “Want a cup of coffee? You look dead on your feet.”

“Why not?” Jarrett followed Ralf out of the room.

In the office, Jarrett sank groaning into a chair while Ralf turned on the espresso machine. Ralf took another glance at the monitors and made a note in the patient’s chart before he took a seat next to Jarrett.

“What’s wrong?” he asked without preamble. “It’s more than just a long operation.”

Jarrett snorted. Ralf knew him too well. He couldn’t hide anything from him.

Ralf looked at him sideways, searching. “Is it about Damian?”

Damian had been a point of contention in their relationship. Ralf had wanted to move in with Jarrett, but Jarrett didn’t want to leave his brother alone. Ralf had been unable to accept that Jarrett still felt responsible for his brother. He was a grownup, Ralf said, and it was time for Damian to take responsibility for himself.

Jarrett leaned his head from side to side. “Yes and no.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Jarrett looked at Ralf. He had always been a good listener, but it wasn’t until after they broke up that Jarrett came to really appreciate what a reliable and loyal person he was. He

never aired his dirty laundry in public—his behavior was always fair and correct.

“Damian had a steady boyfriend for the first time in his life. But it only lasted four months. As expected, he began to feel trapped after a while and ended it.”

“That’s really too bad. I always thought a steady relationship was the only thing that could help Damian.”

“The relationship was good for him. He changed; he was more settled.”

“It sounds like he found a really nice man. Maybe Damian will realize he misses the guy, and he’ll try again with him.”

Jarrett turned his coffee cup in his hands. “Maybe that’s not what I want.”

Ralf’s eyes widened. “Aha! You want him.”

“I’m not actually sure. My dick wants him, definitely, and has since I first laid eyes on him, before he and Damian were a thing. But I found him unlikable at first. Pretty young, one of those spoiled, arrogant, coddled types.”

“A student, you mean.”

Jarrett had to laugh. Ralf didn’t have a very high opinion of doctors in general, and he was particularly aggravated by medical students and their often quite arrogant attitudes. It had taken a lot for him to go out with Jarrett, who had been one of those students at the time. “Yes, he works at my station. But only for a few more days.”

“I assume he’s not as horrible as you thought.”

“No. The more I’ve gotten to know Samuel, the nicer I find him.”

“So you feel about him the same way I felt about you back then.”

Jarrett grinned. “I was not the coddled type, and I wasn’t arrogant either.”

Ralf raised his eyebrows meaningfully. “And now? What are you going to do?”

“No idea.”

“Does he know you’re interested?”

“I ambushed him in the bathroom once and almost stuck my dick in him. Against his will.”

“What? Are you insane?”

“Yes, completely. I am basically an asshole to him all the time.”

“You must really have a thing for him.”

“That makes me sound like a teenager.”

“Yeah, you’re acting like a teenager.”

Jarrett sighed. “When you’re right, you’re right.”

They sat in silence for a while.

“You can’t let Damian be the reason you don’t try your luck,” Ralf said finally.

“You said it yourself—maybe Damian will get back together with him. And Samuel was really good for Damian.”

“Damian ended the relationship. That means you don’t need to worry about his feelings.”

“Imagine how uncomfortable it would be for Damian if I got together with his ex. Anyway, I don’t know if he even wants me.”

“You’ll never find out if you don’t go for it. And if it bothers Damian, he can start looking for his own place.”

“The apartment belongs to him, too.”

“You know what I mean.”

Jarrett nodded. Ralf had often told him that he thought Jarrett’s relationship with his brother was too close. “You’re smothering him with your care. You need to let go of him, or he’ll never be able to grow,” he’d said.

“Thank you for listening, and for your advice,” said Jarrett. “How are you doing? What’s Johannes up to?” Johannes was Ralf’s partner, with whom he now lived.

“I’m good. His carpentry work is going really well and it takes a lot of his time. But I know what that’s like.”

“Are you happy?”

“Sweet of you to ask. Yes, I am happy. After you and I broke up, I was very unhappy for a while. But now I think it was for the best, at least for me.” Ralf stood and clapped Jarrett on the shoulder. “I hope you’re also able to find happiness. You deserve it.”

Jarrett rose too. For a moment they stood and looked at each other. Jarrett considered whether he should hug Ralf. It would be comforting. Ralf’s hugs had always helped. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He turned and left the intensive care unit.

Samuel strolled home thoughtfully, opened the front door, and started looking around in the kitchen for something to eat. A few weeks ago he would have found something. Damian had gone shopping regularly and restocked the refrigerator. But now the cabinets yawned empty again. Sighing, Samuel took Liah’s muesli from the shelf and shook a large serving into a bowl. He was starving. Liah had texted, saying they were in a restaurant and asking if he wanted to come join them, but he wanted to be alone. His thoughts were in turmoil, and he needed to sort through them. He had utterly failed. He’d felt ill in the OR and his blood pressure had gone haywire. He’d fought with himself to keep going, but when Jarrett had said he should stay for a few more hours, his vision had gone black. As he was falling, his last thought had been that this was the end of his dream of becoming a surgeon. When he came to, Jarrett’s face was close to his, his eyes looked concerned, and his hand was on Samuel’s cheek. He had not used Samuel’s weakness as an excuse to berate him, the way Samuel had expected him to, but had instead been gentle and empathetic. And he’d given Samuel a compliment, saying he was doing good work at the station.

The way Jarrett operated was impressive. He had what Samuel did not: steady, clever hands that worked with speed and precision. His hands were amazing. They were big, with long, strong fingers—incredibly sexy. What would it feel like to have those hands running over his body? Were Jarrett's hands equally clever when it came to stimulating erogenous areas?

Samuel stirred the muesli, lost in thought. He thought about how aroused he had been when Jarrett had pressed against him in the bathroom. And he thought about Damian. He missed him. And he felt as if he had failed Damian somehow. Why hadn't he been able to help him? He had been headed in a good direction, and then Damian had suddenly ended the relationship. Right after the holidays. Why? Had it had something to do with Christmas? Had Damian's old wounds reopened? Should he have tried harder to convince Damian to spend the holidays with him? He hadn't wanted to pressure him too hard.

Samuel stood up, put the bowl in the dishwasher, and went into the bathroom. These two brothers were making him crazy. Maybe he'd feel better after a shower and a bit of sleep. In a few days, he'd be leaving station 48a. Then he could get some distance from Jarrett, and thereby also from Damian. Once he'd done that, he'd pick up his old life where he left off half a year ago and forget the whole thing.

Exam

Six months later

“Liah, did you pick up the stuff from the dry cleaners?” Samuel came out of the bathroom agitatedly and went into Liah’s room. Hopefully she hadn’t forgotten. He really wanted to wear his dark blue Zegna suit to the exam. His parents had given him the suit a few years ago and it brought him luck.

She was standing in front of a mirror in her underwear and combing her hair. “Of course. The stuff is still hanging in my closet.”

Samuel sighed with relief and freed the suit from its plastic covering. “Jesus, I have to pee again. I’m so nervous.”

Liah slid into her black skirt. “Sam, you can do this. You’ve studied so much over the last few months.”

She wasn’t exaggerating. Over the past several months, Samuel had done student work in psychiatry and spent every spare minute studying. Right from the beginning, he had felt at home in psychiatry. Whether he was dealing with schizophrenic patients in the closed ward, anorexic young girls, or elderly people with depression, he always felt like he was in the right place. And he was desperate to get the psychiatry residency he’d applied for. This goal had motivated him to study like a fiend. Plus, it was a good distraction. The thing that hadn’t panned out after his breakup with Damian was his plan to resume his old life. He had tried to—he had gone to Dusters and done some no-strings-attached flirting and fucking. But he hadn’t gotten much out of it. He missed the familiarity and intimacy he’d had with Damian. He missed waking up next to Damian, feeling his breath, and thinking about him.

Liah and Samuel were in the same examination group. The first impression Samuel gave was not exactly a brilliant one.

“Name the stages of acute pancreatitis.” The head of the surgical division shuffled papers together and tapped them on the table.

“Uh, the stages of pancreatitis?” What were they again? Had he even read about that? Yes, he could see his textbook in his mind’s eye, could see the exact pages, but the text swam and blurred. He simply could not remember.

“Yes.” The head doctor pressed the tips of his fingers together and raised his eyebrows.

Samuel rubbed his forehead. “I, um, I remember reading it, but it’s not coming to me.”

“Miss Klein?”

“Edematous, partially necrotizing, and necrotizing,” Liah rattled off.

Shit, thought Samuel. Why couldn’t he remember what was written on the pages of the textbook?

“Would you please repeat that, Mr. von Hohenfels?”

“What? Sorry?” Samuel had been so busy beating himself up for his forgetfulness that he hadn’t been properly listening.

The head doctor shook his head. “You can do better, Mr. von Hohenfels.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so nervous.”

He at least had an answer for the next question, and once the psychiatrist began to probe him, things went very well.

“Congratulations, my darling.” His mother gave him a big hug.

“Thanks, Mama.” The first sip of champagne went straight to Samuel’s head. He hadn’t eaten anything all day due to nerves.

His father shook his hand formally. “We’re very proud of you, son.” He had invited Samuel, Benedikt and his family, and Liah and her boyfriend Franco out to eat to properly celebrate Samuel’s exams. He had passed with a B. The head of Psychiatry had told him the results and said he could begin his residency in September. A weight had fallen from Samuel’s chest.

After the appetizer, Benedikt stood and tapped his fork against his wine glass. The fine crystal rang softly. Samuel rolled his eyes. This was going to be embarrassing.

“Dear Samuel,” Benedikt toasted and smiled at him across the table, “we’re so glad to be able to celebrate this graduation with you and Liah. You two have not only successfully completed your degrees, but you both already have jobs starting in a few weeks. Congratulations!”

They all raised their glasses to Liah and Samuel.

Samuel hoped that this was the end of the speech, but Benedikt did not seem ready to sit back down.

“All of us had doubts at some point about whether you would finish the degree. You are my little brother—I’ve known you since you were born—but you still manage to keep surprising me. You’ve always gone your own way and haven’t let yourself be pressured by others’ expectations of you. I’ve always been a little envious of your freedom.”

Samuel looked up in surprise. Benedikt was the one who always mastered everything with ease, the trailblazer, the one Samuel looked up to. But Benedikt had envied him? For his freedom?

Benedikt nodded at him. “You were a difficult little brother. We fought a lot, and I spent a lot of time telling you what I found annoying about you, what I didn’t like and didn’t understand. Today, on this special day, I want to say that despite all that I’m glad to have you for a little brother. You have an incredibly big heart, and the way you stood up for Theodor all those years ago really impressed me. You’re generous, and you have a good sense of humor. In your unconventional way, you continuously push me to see my own

life from another perspective. More than once, this has helped me get out of a rut and consider what I really want. So for that I thank you, baby brother.”

Samuel covertly wiped a tear from the corner of his eye as he stood up. Benedikt came around the table and hugged him. “Congratulations, Sam, and I wish you all the best for the future.”

“Thanks, big brother. I’m happy to have you as well,” Samuel whispered, a catch in his throat.

The main course was served a short time later. Although the lamb was of excellent quality and exquisitely prepared, Samuel had difficulty swallowing it. The lump in his throat was too big. His brother’s words had touched him. He looked around. Everyone else was sitting in pairs; only he was alone. This wasn’t the first time it had been this way, but it hadn’t mattered to him before. His freedom had been more important. Now, though, he had tasted life in a relationship, even if it was only for a short time. He thought about how Damian had accompanied him home to tend to the wound on his forehead. He thought about how he’d held Damian in his arms as Damian was overcome with painful memories. It was nice to be able to take care of someone, to hold them close to you, and it was also nice to matter to them. Maybe it was time for him to get out of his own rut. His old life no longer satisfied him. He had changed.

“Congratulations on your exams.” Theodor shook his hand so tightly that Samuel had to grit his teeth to keep from wincing. “And you’ve already got a placement—in the psychiatry unit, Belinda says. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you. I’m very happy to have gotten the job as well.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Theodor pulled him in and hugged him tightly. “You’re a good boy, Samuel. I wish you lots of joy and success.”

Samuel gasped as Theodor let go and slid quickly past him through the door. He didn't want Theodor to see that his eyes were moist. He couldn't handle all these emotions. He had barely stepped inside Dusters when Igor hurried up to him. "Benedikt wrote to me and said you'd graduated. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Your drinks are on the house today."

"In that case, I can really get plastered."

Igor laid a hand on his shoulder and bent close. "Damian is here, just so you know," he said quietly.

Samuel nodded. Things were not going well. He hadn't seen Damian since the breakup. He wasn't in the mood for Dusters at all. Why was he here? After all, he'd hardly come here at all over the past several months. Oh yeah, it was because he didn't know what else to do with himself. Liah had gone away with Franco for the weekend, and there were still three weeks of sitting around aimlessly before he could start working in the psychiatry unit. He never used to have trouble passing the time. He would have flown somewhere and lived it up. But he didn't feel like it anymore. He wanted to work. Something was wrong with him. Samuel glanced at the exit. Would anyone notice if he just turned around and left? Igor pushed him toward the bar and told the server that Samuel's drinks were on the house. Then he nodded in farewell and went back to his office.

Samuel looked at the blow job before him. He'd lost the taste for that as well. He sighed. Maybe he really should get plastered for once. Then he'd stop thinking and questioning everything so much. And he wouldn't have time to tomorrow, because he'd be busy dealing with a headache. But then he thought of Damian and his frozen expression when Liah had tried to drown her own sorrows. Samuel closed his eyes for a moment. He had been satisfied with his life. He hadn't wanted for anything. He'd felt at home in his skin. Why couldn't he just get past this experience with Damian and pick back up

where he'd left off? He should never have gotten involved with him!

“Hello, Samuel.”

He spun around. Damian stood before him as if he'd materialized out of his thoughts.

“Hi.” He was irritated at how squeaky his voice sounded.

“Jarrett told me you passed your exams. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

They looked at each other silently for a moment. Jarrett appeared next to Damian, holding two glasses. “I haven't congratulated you yet on your exams and on getting a position in the psychiatry unit. Congrats.”

“Thanks,” Samuel repeated. He couldn't think of anything else to say. He seemed to have lost his eloquence along with his *joie de vivre*.

The brothers nodded at him and turned away.

Samuel ordered another cocktail. One more, and then he'd go home. He couldn't stand being in Dusters any longer than that. He didn't want any more congratulations. He didn't want to talk to anyone else. He took his glass and sat down in a booth.

Samuel hadn't looked particularly happy when they'd congratulated him. His usual easygoing, carefree manner had vanished. At the beginning, that aura around Samuel had caused Jarrett massive irritation. How could someone spread that kind of mood around in a world full of pain and anguish? At the same time, Samuel's joyfulness had exerted a magic pull on him. And now Jarrett was not only missing it, but shocked to see that Samuel had lost it as well. What had happened? Was it because of Damian? Had his brother hurt Samuel that badly? Jarrett's gaze kept drifting to the booth

where Samuel sat. His head was tilted slightly down. A lamp on the wall illuminated his thin neck. Jarrett had to restrain himself from standing up to go lay his hand gently on that neck. Samuel looked so fragile.

“You keep staring at Samuel.” Damian’s voice startled him out of his reverie.

“Hm,” he grunted.

“Go to him,” said Damian. “I know you’re into him. You’ve been crazy about him from the beginning.”

Jarrett looked up, frowning. Had Damian really noticed that?

“There’s no need to pretend.” Damian’s voice sounded hard. “When I went after Samuel last year, I was trying to get under your skin. I could see that you wanted him.”

“Why, though?” Jarrett asked tonelessly. “Why did you want to get under my skin?”

“You’re always The Hero, The Savior, The Success, and I’m just The Failure. I wanted to take something from you that you wanted to have.”

Jarrett swallowed. He waited to feel anger toward his brother rise in him. He had taken care of him his whole life and always put his own needs second. He waited for the rage. But it didn’t come. He just couldn’t be mad at Damian. Maybe Ralf was right. Their relationship wasn’t normal.

Damian dropped his gaze and looked at his hands. “I feel bad about it now. I’m an asshole. You’ve always been there for me, and I was trying to hurt you.”

Jarrett didn’t answer. He couldn’t think of anything to say.

“But I reckoned without Samuel,” Damian continued. “He’s a really special person. And he really lit something in me. Stirred up a bunch of things. On the one hand, it was really good for me. It was like being freed from a heavy weight that had hung around my neck all these years. But on the other hand, I was afraid of what else I would find in there. That’s why I ended the relationship.”

“Do you miss him?” asked Jarrett quietly.

“Yes, a lot.”

“Would you like to get back together with him?”

Damian shook his head. “No. I can’t, and I don’t want to. But I’d be happy for you to have him.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes, I’ve gone over and over it in my head. I really can’t do it. You take him.”

“Samuel is going to have his two cents about this as well. The way I’ve treated him, he’s hardly going to want to go out with me.”

“You have to fight for him. Plus, I think he likes you anyway.” Damian stood up. “I’m going now. You’re up.”

With mixed feelings, Jarrett rose and headed for the booth where Samuel was sitting with a half-full glass. “Samuel?”

Samuel raised his head and looked at him questioningly.

“May I join you for a moment?”

“Sure.” Samuel slid over so Jarrett could sit next to him in the booth. He looked around searchingly. “Where is Damian?”

“He left.”

Carlo approached them. “Can I bring you two beauties anything?”

“Thanks, I’m good.” Samuel held up his half-empty glass.

Carlo smiled at him. “You don’t have to hold back just because the boss is treating you. You’re too polite, Samuel.”

“That’s just one of his positive qualities,” interjected Jarrett. “I’ll take another 7 & 7.”

Carlo nodded and left.

Samuel looked at Jarrett with his head cocked to the side. “Are you ill? Or have I missed something?”

Slowly, Jarrett nodded. “You may have missed some things because you were deceived.”

Samuel shook his head. “You’re talking in riddles. And I’m not in the mood to solve riddles. In fact, I’m feeling pretty miserable, and I was about to leave.”

“Let’s go dance.” Jarrett stood and pulled Samuel up by his arm.

“No, really. I’m even less in the mood for that than I am for riddles.”

“The mood will follow.” Jarrett pulled him into the next room and onto the dance floor.

Sighing, Samuel stumbled after him. What was this? What did Jarrett want from him? And why on the dance floor? It didn’t make sense.

At the edge of the dance floor, Jarrett began to move to the rhythm. He stood across from Samuel, leaving a fairly large space between them, and watched Samuel with narrowed eyes. This made Samuel feel pretty uncomfortable, and he had trouble finding the beat despite usually being a good dancer. Jarrett moved smoothly and cut a surprisingly good figure on the floor. Unwillingly, Samuel thought of the night Damian had so artfully seduced him.

Jarrett bent toward him. “Do you remember the night you danced here with Damian for the first time?”

“Can you read minds? That’s exactly what I was thinking about.”

“Do you miss him?”

Samuel shrugged. “Things are how they are. You have to keep looking forward.” He’d asked himself that question often in the last several months. Yes, he missed Damian, but what he missed most was being in a relationship. Contrary to his expectations, he’d enjoyed it.

They danced a while longer without talking. “On that evening, I wished I were in his shoes,” Jarrett said finally.

Samuel stopped dancing. “What is that supposed to mean? You thought I was horrible.”

Jarrett stopped dancing as well. “Yes, horribly attractive.”

Samuel shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

Jarrett stepped closer to him and touched his shoulders. “May I?”

Samuel looked into the dark eyes that were neither irritated nor impatient this evening, only pleading. He nodded. Jarrett pulled him close and began moving to the music again. Samuel followed. It was strange and confusing to feel Jarrett’s arms around him. His bitter scent was intoxicating. Jarrett held him loosely at first, but gradually tightened his hold. Samuel laid his head on Jarrett’s chest and let himself drift around. The strong arms, the broad chest, the quick and heavy heartbeat in his ear... It overpowered him. It felt good and he wanted to let himself fall, to give in to the pull of it again, but something held him back. He had made this mistake already and been burned once.

He pushed himself away from Jarrett. “I’m sorry. I can’t do this. You Zadniks are making me crazy.” He turned to leave, but Jarrett grabbed his arm to stop him.

“I understand,” he said. “Can I at least take you home?”

Samuel hesitated for a moment. “Okay, fine,” he said finally.

They strolled together quietly through the cool night air.

“When do you start in the psychiatry unit?” asked Jarrett after a while.

“In three weeks.”

“What are you doing in the meantime?”

Samuel shrugged. “Not much.”

“Are you going anywhere?”

“I don’t have anything planned.”

Jarrett shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. “Are you looking forward to working in psychiatry?”

“Yes, a lot. I never thought I’d be so excited about a job.”

“You’re good with people and you’ll be great at it.”

Samuel gave Jarrett a sidelong look. By this point he had hardened himself against Jarrett’s critical and derisive remarks. But he had no idea how to deal with his praise.

“I live here,” he said, and pointed at the modern building housing his apartment. Should he invite Jarrett up? He could imagine where that would lead. The idea was not unpleasant. On the contrary, he felt an expectant twitch in his loins. But as before, an inner voice held him back, telling him to learn from his mistakes for once.

Jarrett made the decision for him. “Good night,” he said, before turning and hurrying away.

Samuel watched him thoughtfully. He didn’t want to think about the idea that Jarrett wanted to win him for himself. He was surprised and flattered, and the memory of Jarrett’s scent and his strong arms made his jeans feel tight.

His phone rang the next evening.

“Hi Samuel, this is Jarrett.”

“Hi.”

“I don’t want to be pushy, but I’d like to spend a few days with you. I want to apologize for my previous behavior and explain a few things, and I’d like it if you gave me a chance. Get to know me and then decide.”

“And how exactly did you imagine this scenario?”

“I’ve booked two rooms at a hotel in Schorfheide. For three nights. We can go for walks, and talk.”

“Go for walks? Like an old married couple?”

Jarrett gave a harsh laugh. “Old married couples aren’t the only people who go for walks. My father used to walk with us

often.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever just gone for a walk. Definitely not with my parents. My mother gets her sports car out of the garage just to go to the end of the driveway. And it’s not like it’s more than a couple hundred yards.”

“A couple hundred yards?” Jarrett repeated.

“Yes. That still doesn’t scare you off? You’ve never liked that I’m a spoiled child of rich parents.”

“I still don’t like it. But there are other things about you that I find very alluring.”

“Are you sure you don’t just want sex? There are easier ways to get that.”

Samuel could practically see Jarrett’s grin on the other end of the line. “I do want sex. I want it very much. But I want more than that. And if you’re not interested in anything else, I’ll forgo the sex.”

“Fine,” said Samuel. “The walls are closing in on me here anyway. I guess I can go walking with you.”

“Wonderful. I’m looking forward to it. Bring sturdy shoes.”

“Sturdy shoes? What do you mean by sturdy shoes? Sneakers?”

Jarrett’s laugh sounded on the line again. “You wear size 8 ½, right?”

“Good eye.”

“Then I’ll pick you up Thursday afternoon.”

“We could take my car. Like any good, spoiled brat, I drive a pretty sweet sports car.”

“If you’d prefer.”

“I would. Your Golf is about to fall apart.”

“All right. You pick me up then.”

“Sure thing.”

Samuel hung up and took a deep breath. He had provoked Jarrett on purpose, thinking it might be better if he scared Jarrett off rather than getting involved with another Zadnik. But Samuel had the feeling Jarrett wasn't going to let himself be turned that easily from his mission to get Samuel into bed. Jarrett was stubborn, and when Samuel thought about the feeling of Jarrett's hard torso as they'd danced together, he felt another twitch in his loins.

Several Walks and a Swim

A few days later, Samuel pulled up outside Jarrett and Damian's apartment in his blue Audi TT and honked. It didn't look like there was any chance of finding a parking spot, plus he had no desire to see Damian. Soon, Jarrett came out holding a sports bag. He tossed the bag into the trunk and sank into the passenger seat. "Cool car."

"Thanks. It was a present from my daddy."

"How nice of your father."

Samuel gave Jarrett a sidelong look. Was he thinking of his own father? "My parents are really pretty okay. They have their quirks, but who doesn't? And when things get serious, I can always rely on them and my brother."

"It's a blessing to have people who give you that kind of stability. It's what gives you the security to develop freely as a person."

Samuel drove on for several miles without speaking. "You're the one person Damian can rely on. But who gave you your own stability?" he asked finally.

Jarrett looked out the window and didn't answer.

They didn't speak any more until Samuel had parked in front of the hotel. Was Jarrett mad at him? Had the question been too personal? Didn't Jarrett want Samuel to get to know him better? That was the whole point of this trip. For that to happen, he was going to have to open up a little. Otherwise, they might as well turn right around and drive back to Berlin.

Jarrett had reserved two adjoining rooms that shared a balcony. Across a meadow, Samuel could see a lake surrounded by trees and shrubs. Jarrett opened his balcony door and stood next to Samuel at the railing.

"Can you swim in the lake?" asked Samuel. It was the first thing either of them had said to each other since Berlin.

"I think so. If you enjoy swimming in cold, dark water."

“Does it creep you out?”

“Maybe.” Jarrett turned his head away.

“Then at least I’ve learned that you’re afraid of swimming in lakes in the woods.” Samuel grinned at him. “That’s progress.”

Jarrett shook his head and laughed. “It was pretty naïve of me to suggest you get to know me. I completely overlooked the fact that you’re a psychiatrist-in-training and would immediately strip me bare.”

“Stripping you bare doesn’t sound like such a bad idea.”

“No, that does sound pretty appealing. But maybe we should eat something first.”

“I’m not at all hungry yet.”

“Do you want to go for a bit of a walk? There’s a path around the lake.”

“All right. Let’s test out this walking thing.”

Jarrett went back into his room and returned a few seconds later holding a pair of shoes.

Samuel looked at the clunky gray hiking shoes. “They’re not very stylish.”

“But they’re comfortable, and they have hard soles. Try them on.”

Samuel sat down on one of the plastic chairs on the balcony, took off his eye-catching Pantofola d’Oros with their gold stitching, and donned the tightly-laced shoes. “They fit, at least.”

Jarrett reached out a hand and helped him up. “Then let’s go.”

They walked over the meadow to the lake, which was surrounded by a narrow, meandering path. The ground was soggy, and branches laden with heavy droplets hung over the path. The air smelled musty, and the lake spread out before them, smooth and pitch-black. Jarrett led the way along the narrow path and occasionally held branches aside so Samuel

could pass without bending over. They didn't speak. Several times Samuel wondered if he should say something, but it didn't seem like the right thing to do. He found the silence here unexpectedly beautiful. The soft ground dampened their footsteps, and sometimes they could hear a bird twittering or leaves rustling. Samuel let his gaze wander over the lake and breathed in the smell of damp earth.

Samuel made it easy for him and didn't keep asking questions. Jarrett had lured him here with the promise that they could talk, and Samuel would have the chance to get to know him. And now he had no idea how to start and couldn't even answer the question Samuel had asked. To be fair, Samuel had immediately touched a raw spot. But what did Jarrett expect? That's how Samuel was. He'd seen it often enough with his brother and the patients at the hospital: Samuel noticed when there was something poking at you and immediately went looking for the thorn.

To his surprise, Samuel didn't chatter the whole time. Quite the opposite. Could he tell that Jarrett needed time and quiet to collect himself? Ralf was a wonderful man, but he'd never recognized when Jarrett needed peace. And he needed peace often. He was someone who had to turn inward to find strength. It wasn't that he necessarily wanted to be alone, but there were very few people whose presence allowed him to find it. Damian knew exactly when to be quiet, and his brother's presence had never bothered him. Jarrett held a branch aside so it wouldn't hit Samuel in the face. Their eyes met. With amazement, Jarrett realized he felt comfortable in Samuel's company. The stress of the working week fell away, and he felt sure Samuel wouldn't push him to open up. Samuel could feel how hard it was for him, and he would be patient. Jarrett sighed with relief and shook his head inwardly at how poor his opinion of Samuel had been when they'd met. The more time they spent together, the sweeter he found him. And he wasn't going to just sleep with him, although Samuel had

given him pretty clear signals that he was up for that. It had been nearly two years since Jarrett had last had sex. When he and Ralf had first split up, his libido had entirely disappeared, and he'd been celibate. For a while, that had felt good. At some point, the lust had returned, but he'd decided to wait until he found a man who meant something to him. He wasn't interested in quick physical satisfaction without any emotional connection, even though his body sometimes gave other signals. With Samuel, it had given clear signals from the beginning: the scent of him, one glance at his rear, and he was ablaze. And still, he was prepared to wait or abstain. He wanted all of Samuel or nothing.

“Shall we turn around?” Jarrett asked after they'd been walking for about half an hour.

Samuel nodded and led the way back toward the hotel. Jarrett couldn't tear his gaze away from Samuel's ass in those tight jeans and the way it swung back and forth invitingly. Hopefully he could meet the standards he was setting for himself.

Once they got back to the hotel, they went right to the restaurant and ordered meatballs in gravy.

Samuel tasted a steaming meatball. “This tastes good, but when Damian made it, I liked it much better.”

Jarrett nodded. “Damian really has a knack for food.”

“Why doesn't he follow his passion? I'm sure it would make him happier than his office job.”

Jarrett shrugged. “Damian is self-destructive.”

“Maybe he doesn't think he's earned the right to be happy.”

Jarrett looked up in surprise. “What makes you think that?”

“As a child, he never earned his mother's love, so it's not a stretch to think he still doesn't feel like he's worthy of being loved and feeling happy.”

“Put the psychiatrist away: that's too analytic for me.” Jarrett poked around at his plate, frowning.

Samuel looked thoughtfully over his wine glass. “Is Damian okay with the fact that we’re spending the weekend together?”

“I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Jarrett measured Samuel up with a sharp look. “Damian needs me. I would never let him down. You need to understand that before you make your decision.”

“Are you trying to scare me off?”

“No, I want you and I want to be in a relationship with you. But you have to know what you’re getting into. It will be particularly uncomfortable for you because you and Damian used to be together. And I don’t know if you still have feelings for him.”

Samuel tilted his head back and forth, thinking. “I don’t know how to answer that. It’s not that I don’t care for him, but I do think he made the right decision. The more I learned about him, the more I wanted to help him. And I don’t think that’s a good basis for a relationship. I pushed him too hard in my efforts to help. I wanted to change him; I couldn’t just accept him as he was. And his behavior often disappointed me. I wouldn’t have been happy in that relationship in the long term.”

“That’s very analytical too, but it sounds plausible.”

Carefully, Samuel reached out a hand and laid it over Jarrett’s on the table. “If we ever get together, I promise I’ll respect the feelings of responsibility you have for Damian. I’ll never try to get between you. Maybe I am the right person for you, precisely because I know Damian so well and still care for him.”

Jarrett stared at the hand that lay on his. The touch burned his skin and Samuel’s words burned in his heart. He had never looked at it from that perspective. Maybe it really was good that Samuel had been together with Damian. And did Samuel’s words signal that he was ready to get involved with Jarrett? He looked up with the question in his eyes.

“To be honest, I am worried about myself though,” said Samuel, as if he could read minds. “You Zadniks can really get under my skin. Both of you. And I actually didn’t want to let anyone get that close, because there’s too much danger that I’ll get hurt. The breakup with Damian hurt a lot. He left a hole behind, despite the fact that I wasn’t missing anything in my life before I met him. Any more holes and I’ll have to go back to therapy again.”

Jarrett raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You went to a therapist? Why? You seem like such a positive, happy person.”

Samuel grinned. “My parents made me go when I told them I was gay.”

“Really? And was the therapist unable to cure you of this horrible disease?”

Samuel’s grin widened. “Not at all. In fact, we had some pretty hot sex.”

Jarrett laughed loudly. “That sounds like you.” Then he grew serious again. “I can’t promise never to hurt you. That would be foolish. But I will never do it on purpose. I can assure you of that.”

After dinner they ambled back to their rooms. “Goodnight, Samuel,” said Jarrett, then turned quickly and disappeared into his room.

Samuel stared after him in befuddlement. He had assumed they would have sex and had been looking forward to it. Once they’d left the city behind them, Jarrett had turned into a different person. All the tension and latent irritation he was always exuding had begun falling away. And Samuel found that he liked what was underneath. Jarrett came off calm and thoughtful; his intelligence no longer seemed arrogant, but instead interesting, and even his face had changed. The wrinkles on his forehead were barely visible, and the eyes that usually glared gazed at Samuel with quiet interest instead.

Samuel was drawn in and wanted to find out what to expect from Jarrett in bed. Didn't Jarrett want to know whether he and Samuel could enjoy themselves on that level? Sure, as a gay man who really didn't much care for relationships, Samuel wasn't particularly picky. Sometimes you just wanted to fuck. But Jarrett wanted a relationship with him. He'd emphasized this several times, and Samuel was supposed to make the decision. But he wasn't about to buy blind. Before Jarrett got an answer, Samuel was going to get a few of his own, and most importantly, take a test ride.

The sunlight streamed through the canopy and landed in individual beams like spotlights on the forest floor. Here a fern glowed a deep, dark green; there a brown root snaked over the ground and drank up the sunlight. Samuel looked up and squinted as he stepped into one of the cones of light. In front of him, Jarrett tromped off the path in his hiking boots. "Are you sure we'll find our way back?" Samuel asked doubtfully.

"I have a good sense of direction."

"Sure," muttered Samuel. He couldn't say the same. Turn him around in place once and he was lost. "I guess I have to trust you."

"Yes, you do."

Samuel reached out a hand to catch a sunbeam. Being at Jarrett's mercy wasn't a bad feeling at all. It kind of turned him on. The big broad-shouldered man in front climbing the hill would look out for him.

Jarrett turned to face him. "So how do you like walking so far?"

"It's nice. It's so peaceful here in the woods."

"I find there's nothing better for clearing your head."

"Your father used to go for walks with you?" asked Samuel. Maybe Jarrett was ready to tell him something. He wasn't going to pry, but he could at least give Jarrett a little push.

“Walks with our father are some of my most treasured childhood memories. Early on, Damian was in a stroller, or my father would carry him in a sort of backpack. My grandfather was a forest ranger and passed on his love of the woods to my father. He showed us the trails of forest animals, identified trees and other plants, and collected mushrooms with us in the fall. It was wonderful.” Jarrett had stopped walking and was looking past Samuel into the distance. His face was a mask of grief and longing. The emotions swept over Samuel as well, and he wanted to take Jarrett into his arms. But Jarrett turned and continued on.

After a while they came across a wide path and Jarrett turned onto it. Samuel quickened his pace to catch up beside him.

“You asked me a question yesterday,” Jarrett said after a while. “I’ve thought about it and come to the conclusion that Damian is also the person who gives me stability in return. He needs me, and that gives my life meaning.”

They kept walking in silence. Jarrett seemed to be searching for words, and Samuel wanted to give him time to find them.

“When I was seventeen, I fell in love for the first time. Andreas was a really nice guy. He’d just graduated high school and had been admitted to study medicine in Tübingen. We were happy. We celebrated and made plans for the future. The following year it was my turn to graduate, and I wanted to study medicine too. I wanted to get away from home, away from my mother, and live with Andreas in Tübingen. When I got back from a graduation party, Damian was crouching on the floor crying and cleaning up vomit. He was eleven at the time. Mother had beaten him with a belt and then thrown up several times. She was lying between empty bottles on the floor in front of the sofa. Damian was trying to wipe the vomit off her face, despite the fact that she had recently beaten the shit out of him. When I came in, he fell around my neck, crying. At that moment, I swore I would always be there for him. I gave up my plans with Andreas.”

Samuel took Jarrett's hand carefully and squeezed it. After a moment, Jarrett returned the squeeze. Hand in hand, they continued along the wide path that led them through the bright hardwood forest.

"I don't mean for that to sound bitter," Jarrett continued. "I've never regretted it. In his own way, Damian gives it all back. He's always there for me too. He takes care of the apartment, does the laundry and shopping, and he cooks for me."

"It would be hard to find a better cook."

Jarrett didn't respond. He seemed lost in memory. "My last partner was understanding at first," he said after a while. "But I assume he hoped that I would come to rely fully on him instead. He wanted us to move in together, for me to let Damian go. He said our relationship was too close to be healthy, especially for Damian."

"He might not be wrong." Samuel decided to say it, even though it probably wasn't what Jarrett wanted to hear.

Jarrett gave him a thoughtful, sideways look. "That's possible, but I can't change it. If Damian decides to leave on his own, I won't stop him. But as long as he wants to stay with me, he can."

"I understand that."

"It's not easy for a partner to deal with. You'd have to share me with Damian."

"I don't have a whole lot of experience with relationships, but I don't think that would be a problem for me. I'm not possessive."

"I know. You're generous." Jarrett stroked his thumb along the back of Samuel's hand.

They had been walking for five hours, and Samuel was wondering when Jarrett was going to turn around. His feet were beginning to hurt, despite the inelegant but comfortable shoes. He wasn't used to long hikes. Samuel stepped over

some tall ferns and stumbled over a root. “How long do you want to keep walking? It’s fun and all, but let’s not overdo it right at the beginning.”

Jarrett laughed and pointed ahead. “We’re almost there.”

Samuel squinted. A dark lake glistened between the trees. “Is that our lake?”

“Sure is. I told you I had a good sense of direction.”

“That’s actually really impressive.” Samuel hadn’t noticed at all that their route had curved around back to where they’d started.

They reached the hotel about half an hour later.

“Want to have a cup of coffee on the balcony? It’s such nice weather.”

“We could do that,” Samuel replied. “Will you get the coffee and a large bottle of water? I need to get these shoes off immediately. My feet are killing me.” Groaning, he fell onto a plastic chair and undid the laces.

Jarrett returned a short time later, carrying a tray. “I brought a piece of plum cake, too.”

“Yum.”

Jarrett sat down, reached for Samuel’s foot, and put it in his lap. “Show me those tender feet.”

Samuel tried to pull his foot back, but Jarrett wouldn’t let go. “No! They’re all sweaty.”

Jarrett just grinned and massaged his heels.

Samuel leaned back, groaning, and closed his eyes. The massage felt so good.

“Shit,” said Jarrett.

Samuel opened his eyes. A little black bug was climbing along his lower leg. “What’s that?”

Jarrett picked off the bug and squished it. “A tick.”

Samuel jumped up in shock. “A tick? Those horrible little creatures that can give you Lyme disease and encephalitis?”

Jarrett pulled him back down onto the chair. “Don’t panic. Take a shower later and then we’ll check you to see if you picked up any more. It’s a good idea to put the clothes in a plastic bag, and don’t wear them again until you’ve washed them.”

Samuel usually liked plum cake a lot, but he wasn’t enjoying this one anymore. He had the sensation of hundreds of ticks crawling all over his body and trying to suck him dry. He stood up as soon as he was finished. “I need a shower now.”

“Okay. I’m going to finish my coffee. Will you leave your balcony door open so I can come over to your room? I have a fine-toothed comb I can run through your hair.”

Samuel nodded and hurried into his room. He tore his clothes off and shoved them into a plastic bag, tying the top tightly. In the shower, he scrubbed his head thoroughly and soaped himself from head to toe. He remained in the shower for ten more minutes, enjoying the warm stream of water that massaged his back. Then he wrapped a towel around his waist and left the bathroom. Jarrett was already sitting on his bed with damp hair, wearing only his boxers. Samuel’s gaze wandered over Jarrett’s muscular torso. He was definitely hot.

“Have a seat,” said Jarrett. “I’ll comb through your hair.”

Samuel sat on the edge of the bed obediently. Jarrett stood in front of him and combed his hair a few strands at a time. Jarrett’s belly button, his six pack, and the boxers with their tantalizing contents were right in front of Samuel’s face. Samuel closed his eyes desperately. How was he supposed to sit still with this view? He tried to concentrate on what was happening with his hair. Jarrett massaged his scalp gently with his fingertips while he combed carefully through the hair. It felt so good that he couldn’t suppress a quiet moan. What he really wanted to do was lean forward and rest his forehead on Jarrett’s stomach to inhale deeply of his scent. The sharp mixture of body soap and Jarrett’s own smell was intoxicating.

“There wasn’t anything else in your hair,” Jarrett announced, putting the comb aside and stroking the tips of his

fingers over Samuel's temples, behind his ears, and down his neck. "Lie back and I'll look over the rest of your body."

With a happy sigh, Samuel let himself sink back onto the sheets. Jarrett put his palms on Samuel's chest and moved them slowly over his torso. He lifted Samuel's arms one by one and stroked his shoulders, his upper arms, gently touched the tender skin in his armpits, and worked his way down the forearms to his hands, where he inspected each finger. Samuel kept his eyes closed and savored the tenderness with which Jarrett was examining him. Jarrett slid down and checked over the soles of Samuel's feet and each individual toe. Then his hands began to wander slowly upward. The higher his fingertips went, the stronger the pulling sensation in Samuel's loins. Jarrett tugged at the corner of the towel so that Samuel lay fully revealed before him. Samuel's shaft began to jerk when Jarrett grasped it gently and pulled back the foreskin. He stroked his fingers over Samuel's balls and the insides of his thighs.

"Turn over." Jarrett's voice was like a cat's purr.

Samuel rolled onto his stomach and savored the soft touches on his back, his butt, his calves. He gasped when Jarrett spread his cheeks apart and stroked a finger down his crack and over his asshole.

"You are officially tick-free," said Jarrett, and pulled his hands away.

"I don't think you looked carefully enough," murmured Samuel. "I'm sure you missed all kinds of ticks."

"Want me to look again?" Jarrett bent over and kissed Samuel between the shoulder blades.

"Definitely."

Jarrett began to go over every centimeter of Samuel's skin for a second time, this time massaging gently. Samuel grunted happily and sprawled on the bed under Jarrett's sensitive surgeon's hands.

"Fuck this," Jarrett cursed as he pulled back the foreskin on Samuel's stiffly upright member. "I can't take it anymore." He

bent over Samuel to suck his cock.

Quickly, Samuel grabbed his head in both hands and held it back. “Stop! How do I know you’re also tick-free? They’ll jump off of you onto me, because I taste better.”

“I couldn’t blame them for that,” Jarrett growled.

Samuel twisted upright under Jarrett. “I need to put you under the microscope first. Sit down.”

Groaning, Jarrett straightened up, but then he sat obediently on the side of the bed. Samuel stood so close to him that his stiff penis touched Jarrett’s chest. Jarrett grabbed Samuel’s hips and lowered his head to get closer to the desirable body part.

Samuel pulled Jarrett’s hands away from his hips. “Don’t be so impatient. You have to stay still.” He combed through Jarrett’s short hair with the fine-toothed comb, periodically wagging his hips a little to tickle Jarrett’s chest with the tip of his cock. Then he pushed Jarrett backward, sat on him, and ran his fingertips along the insides of Jarrett’s upper arms, across his armpits, and sideways across his chest until he reached the nipples, where he stopped. Jarrett was breathing heavily underneath him.

“Looks good up here. Let’s check down below.” Samuel rose and then sat back down on Jarrett’s chest, facing the other way. Slowly, he pulled the boxers off Jarrett’s hips. A large erect cock popped out to meet him. To get the shorts the rest of the way off, Samuel leaned forward and pushed his butt toward Jarrett’s face. Jarrett’s grabbed his hips again and pulled his cheeks apart, groaning. Samuel sat back up and tried to remove Jarrett’s hands. “I’m not finished.”

But Jarrett’s grip was like iron. “I’ve had enough of your games.” He sat upright, lifted Samuel off, threw him onto his back, and clambered on top of him. “You’re killing me.”

Samuel laughed, but his laugh was cut off by Jarrett’s lips meeting his own. Greedily, Jarrett’s tongue pushed between his lips and forced its way inside his mouth. Jarrett gasped and

pulled away. “I can’t stand it another minute. Where are your condoms?”

Grinning, Samuel pointed at the bathroom door. “In the toiletry bag.”

Jarrett sprang up in a wild hurry and returned seconds later with condoms and lube. He rolled on a condom and grabbed Samuel’s thigh and lifted it up.

Once he’d gotten the tube open with his teeth, he slapped some lube onto Samuel’s ass, stuck a finger in his hole, and then shoved his dick deep inside in a single push. He came in seconds, after only three strokes. Then he collapsed, trembling, on top of him. “I’m sorry,” he gasped.

Samuel was shaking with laughter. “My goodness, you really needed that. How long has it been since you had sex?”

“Ages,” gasped Jarrett breathlessly, and pulled out.

Samuel couldn’t stop laughing.

“Seriously?” Jarrett said as he pulled off the condom. “I sleep with you, and you laugh at me?”

“It was very romantic.” Samuel was holding his sides.

“You just wait. You won’t be laughing for long.” Jarrett pulled him close by his legs, bent over his midsection and licked at his penis, which was lying flaccid against his thigh. Within minutes it was standing back at attention and Samuel was groaning and arching up to meet Jarrett. Skillfully, Jarrett brought Samuel right up to the edge of an orgasm—he hadn’t forgotten—just to back off and let the arousal ebb. He kept up the game until Samuel reached for his own cock in desperation, trying to finish himself off. But Jarrett pushed his hand away. “I’m not done with you yet.”

“I can’t take it anymore! Let me finish!”

“Only if you promise not to laugh at me anymore.”

“I won’t laugh at you anymore, I promise! Just let me come!”

Finally Jarrett showed mercy, taking Samuel's cock deep into his throat and bringing him to climax.

Jarrett hugged the exhausted Samuel, fished around for the blanket, and gave him tender kisses. Once he'd regained his breath, Samuel cuddled against Jarrett's chest and draped a leg over him. Jarrett squeezed against him and whispered, "I don't think I can let you go."

"Maybe I don't want to go," murmured Samuel.

They must have drifted off, because when Samuel opened his eyes, it was pitch dark outside. He was too warm in Jarrett's embrace. Carefully, he attempted to peel Jarrett's arms and legs off him, but Jarrett grunted and held on tighter. Samuel needed to get free. For one thing, nature was calling, and for another, he had to cool off. He lifted Jarrett's arm and tried to wiggle away, but Jarrett, half-asleep, pulled closer and rolled on top of him.

"Jarrett," Samuel whispered. "I can't breathe." He shook Jarrett's arm.

Jarrett opened his eyes with a groan.

"I'm trapped here," said Samuel.

"You're right where you belong."

Samuel laughed. "Let me out before I suffocate."

Jarrett rolled off of him unwillingly. Samuel went to the bathroom and opened the window. Then he returned under the blankets and lay down on top of Jarrett. Jarrett let his fingers glide sleepily over Samuel's back, his butt, and his thighs. After a while his motions became more focused and his hands more insistent. His fingertips found Samuel's crack and his asshole. They circled it gently and then pushed inside. Jarrett's dick lifted up under Samuel and poked him in the belly. Jarrett grabbed the area between his butt and thighs, pulled his legs apart, and lifted him further up so he could kiss him. He played around in Samuel's mouth with his tongue, and in Samuel's asshole with his fingers. The slow, intense motions lit a blazing fire in Samuel. "Fuck me," he gasped breathlessly when Jarrett briefly took his tongue away.

“You’d better not laugh,” warned Jarrett, which of course caused Samuel to laugh.

Jarrett gave him a smack on the butt. “You little brat.”

“Please,” Samuel whispered. “Give me your nice thick cock. I want it in me. And if possible, for a little bit longer than last time.” He grinned at Jarrett provocatively, which earned him another smack on the butt.

Samuel fished around for the condoms and lube that Jarrett had left on the nightstand and put a condom on Jarrett. “That’s a real nice piece. I can’t wait.”

Jarrett had to laugh too. He couldn’t remember ever laughing so much during sex. Samuel’s easy lightheartedness was freeing. For a short time, he could throw off the burden of responsibility and the worries that had accompanied him since his youth and just enjoy the pleasures of physical union with Samuel. Samuel felt wonderful, much better even than he’d spent the past year imagining. His scent, his warm soft skin, the taste of him, that well-proportioned face right above his... it was like a dream. He lifted Samuel, who was sitting on him, and lowered him gently onto his stiff member. Samuel clutched him tightly and it blazed within him. He watched the way Samuel closed his eyes, laid his head to one side, and moaned softly. A few hours ago, he had been so aroused that just a fleeting touch made him explode. This time he could take his time and savor the excitement welling up within him, while also tending to Samuel’s needs. Jarrett stroked Samuel’s hips and thighs gently with his fingertips while moving his shaft up and down in a stately rhythm. Slowly, he let his fingertips wander forward to fondle the sensitive skin around Samuel’s glans.

Samuel opened his eyes and their eyes met. A strange feeling took hold of Jarrett. He had arrived. After a long, hard road, he had found someone he felt at home with. Samuel

leaned down and kissed him tenderly. It was as if he wanted to confirm Jarrett's thoughts. Despite the fact that they hardly knew each other and had yet to master any of the hurdles of day-to-day life, Jarrett couldn't suppress the words on his lips. "I love you," he whispered huskily.

Samuel's breath caught as those heavy words met his ear. Jarrett would never admit to loving him if he didn't mean it seriously. Did they know each other well enough for such grand words? He had never heard them from the mouth of another man. It felt strange—disturbing and comforting at the same time. What could give him a greater sense of security than the knowledge that he was loved? And what were his own feelings? There were too many open questions for him to return the sentiment. "I need some time," he whispered.

Jarrett pulled him close again and kissed him. "Take all the time in the world."

They maintained eye contact while they slowly approached mutual orgasm. Samuel had never felt so completely united with another person. Jarrett was looking directly into his soul, and Samuel could see the love in his dark eyes. But he could also see the hurt that Jarrett felt as strongly as his brother. He could watch as Jarrett opened up to him and allowed him entry into the pits of his past. He wouldn't have to ask any more questions, because he could feel the entirety of the pain that tortured Jarrett. And Jarrett would let him tend to those wounds. He would not push Samuel away.

The orgasm was not an explosion, but a warm wave that rolled over them both. The warmth spread across Samuel's entire body, and he sank limp and heavy into Jarrett's arms.

They spent the night coiled together, trading languid caresses and breathy kisses on sleep-warmed skin. Samuel blinked when he opened his eyes. Angled sunbeams tickled his

face. Jarrett was lying across from him and looking at him. Samuel yawned. “Are you watching me sleep?”

“It’s incredible. You look cute even when you’re sleeping with your mouth open and drooling.”

“Awesome. I didn’t actually want to know that much detail.”

Jarrett chuckled and bent forward to kiss him. “I love you.”

“So, you didn’t just say that yesterday because your dick was clouding your vision?”

“No, I meant it. I admit that it’s a little early, but I’ve never been so sure of a thing.”

Samuel just looked at him. He didn’t know how to respond.

Jarrett stroked his cheek. “I’m sorry if I’m coming on too strong. But after spending so long pretending, I have to finally be honest with you. And with myself.”

“A year ago, I wouldn’t have believed anyone who told me you had feelings at all.”

Jarrett laughed and sat up. “I’d love to pick right back up where we left off in the night, but I’m starving. We skipped dinner last night, after all.”

“You’re right, we had nothing but breakfast and plum cake yesterday,” Samuel fished around for his glasses and set them on his nose.

“If I don’t get some calories into me, I’m going to collapse.”

Samuel looked at his watch on the nightstand in shock. “Jesus, it’s already after ten. If we don’t hurry, we’ll miss breakfast too.”

“Then let’s throw our clothes on. We can shower after.” Jarrett pulled on his boxers and opened the balcony door.

“Or we can bathe in the spooky dark lake close by,” Samuel called after him. He heard a snort from outside.

“Come in, it’s very refreshing. I haven’t seen any sea monsters so far.” Samuel swam a few strokes and enjoyed the feeling of the soft water against his skin. He wasn’t a great swimmer, but he loved being in rivers, lakes, and the ocean. It gave him a feeling of freedom and adventure; it immediately put him in vacation mode.

“Give me another minute,” said Jarrett, who was sitting on the wooden dock and dangling his feet in the water. “I need to get used to the temperature first. It’s very chilly.”

Samuel turned onto his back and kicked the surface of the lake with his feet, splashing Jarrett. “You’ll get used to it faster this way.”

“You’re going to get used to something in a minute when I catch you.”

“You’ll have to get in first.”

“I can’t see the bottom at all.”

“That’s because of the horrible depths in this perilous pool.”

“You’ll have to get out eventually, and then you’ll regret your snark.”

Samuel just laughed and splashed him some more.

“Do I really have to get in?” Jarrett’s voice sounded small.

“You’ll like it.”

“Are you sure?”

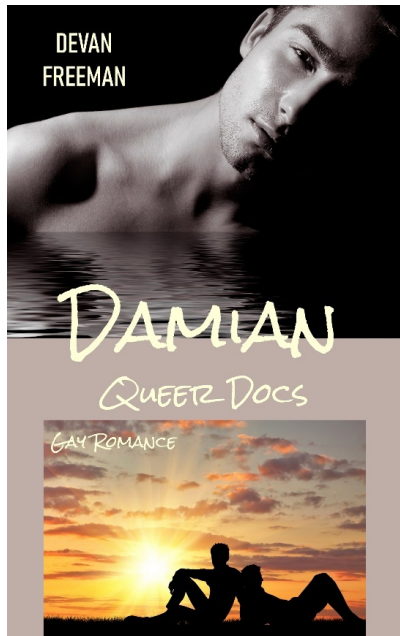
Samuel rolled over, swam up to Jarrett, and stroked the tops of his feet gently. “I’m waiting here for you, and I’ll look after you.”

Jarrett looked him in the eyes. “Is that a promise?”

“It is. I’m here for you and I’ll accompany you wherever the future leads us.”

Jarrett took a deep breath and pushed off from the decaying wood planks. He let himself fall and felt the cold water close over his head. He felt light and free and safe as Samuel's hands gently pulled him up to the surface and into an embrace.

Damian: Queer Docs #2



Gay romance—dramatic, emotional, steamy, and with a happy ending

Damian's good looks and easygoing manner hide the fact that he carries trauma with him. He is deeply scarred and unable to be happy in a relationship or in his job. When a terrible accident changes his appearance, he is plunged even deeper into the pits of despair.

Igor, the owner of Dusters club, is a witness to the accident that nearly costs Damian his life. He feels guilty for not having prevented it and begins taking care of Damian, who relies on his assistance to begin a new life in Brittany. Will Igor be able to get through to Damian's heart?