

KAJE HARPER

Avocado
PROTECTION

A young man with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a white lab coat over a light blue shirt, is shown in a laboratory setting. He is holding a test tube in his left hand and pouring a red liquid from another test tube into it with his right hand. The background is a blurred laboratory environment with shelves and equipment.

KAJE HARPER

Avocado
PROTECTION

Avocado Protection

Kaje Harper

Copyright © 2023 Kaje Harper

Edited by Liz Silver – *Ever After Edits*

Proofreading by Jeanette Walters

Cover image license – depositphotos.com

Formatting – [Beaten Track Publishing](https://www.beaten-track-publishing.com)

Cover © 2023 Kaje Harper

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission of the author. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

License Notes:

Image/art disclaimer: Licensed material is being used for illustrative purposes only. Any person depicted is a model.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Content warning: brief incident of abduction and on-page violence.

For adult readers only. This book contains explicit sexual situations between two men.

NO AI / NO BOT. No generative AI has been used to create this story. We do not consent to any Artificial Intelligence (AI), generative AI, large language model, machine learning, chatbot, or other automated analysis, generative process, or replication program to reproduce, mimic, remix, summarize, or otherwise replicate any part of this creative work, via any means: print, graphic, sculpture, multimedia, audio, or other medium. We support the right of humans to control their artistic works.

When Fynn invented the 'CadoBox, he didn't think it would change his life. Make some money? Sure. Fund his own laboratory? Hell, yeah. But not get him almost kidnapped, and land him with a six-foot-six bodyguard shadowing his every move. Fynn doesn't handle changes well. Having Nolan looming over him has his nerves on edge and his motormouth running. If only the big man wasn't so damned hot.

Nolan's owned his own security firm for five years. He's protected many clients. None of them dragged him into their lab and lectured him on avocado outgassing. And none of them seemed as oblivious of both their danger and their attractiveness as Fynn. Bodyguards shouldn't fall for their clients, but it's not "falling" to vow no one's getting near Fynn on his watch.

An opposites-attract, size-difference, bodyguard action romance with an ADHD scientist and the man determined to keep him safe.

Content warning for abduction, violence.

Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Kaje Harper](#)

Acknowledgements

Big thanks to Gabbi Grey, my partner in sprinting, general morale booster, and the author who made me aware of the HEA Collective. I'm grateful to my sensitivity betas – Jeanette, Belinda, Christine, and Tracey – who helped me keep Fynn's ADD as plausible and realistic as I could manage. (Neurodiverse folk are all individuals and ADD/ADHD varies person to person. Any errors in this portrayal are entirely my own.) Thanks also to my editor Liz for fitting in a fast turnaround.

And big thanks to the members of my Facebook Group – ***Kaje's Conversation Corner*** – who read my weekly free short stories, encouraged my writing week after week, and who asked if the “avocado guy” might get a story someday.

Chapter 1

Fynn Dempsey closed the door to his lab, turning left down the hallway— a huge, bearded stranger loomed up in front of him. Gasping, Fynn leaped back. *No strangers should be on this floor.* He clutched frantically for his phone. *Call 911.* Except his hand met an empty pocket because he'd put the damned phone in a drawer when it kept spamming.

Shit! He whipped a glance over his shoulder to his lab door. *Run down the hall? Duck back in and hide?*

Before he could decide, the man stepped away from him, hands raised. “Whoa, easy, Dr. Dempsey. I’m waiting for your brother.”

“Bullshit. Micah never comes up here.” His brother’s interest in the science side of the business began and ended with *Do you have anything new for me yet?*

“Micah’s going to introduce me to you. He had to go to the john. I’m your new bodyguard.”

Fynn didn’t say bullshit out loud again, but he backed up slowly, darting his gaze left and right.

Except Micah came out of the bathroom down the hall buttoning his jacket, and called, “Hey, Fynn. I see you’ve met Stone.”

Stone. Sounds like a fake name. A guy who was six-foot-six and built like a brick wall would probably be called Nifflebanger or Doozenberg in real life. Not Stone. Even a TV writer would be more subtle than that, unless they were writing one of those adventure video games that dumbed things down to the lowest common denominator. “This isn’t a video game.”

“Huh?” Micah came up beside the big guy, looking less imposing for once— the only benefit Fynn could see to having a bearded man-mountain standing in his

laboratory hallway. “What video game?” He waved off Fynn’s mumbled beginning of an explanation. “Never mind. I’ve hired Stone and his team to provide you with protection, after that kidnapping attempt two days ago.”

“Nothing happened. I was fine.” Fynn had to admit, things did get hairy for a minute. If he hadn’t decided efficient use of his commute time was worth hiring a driver, or hadn’t picked a driver with trained skills, that moment when they’d realized they were deliberately boxed in between two looming pickups might’ve led to... something really bad. He didn’t let his mind speculate on what. But Joe *had* defensive driving training, and they’d gotten away with only minor damage to the Lexus’s front fender. The cops said the pickup Joe hit had been stolen and abandoned. “It was just an... episode.”

That’s what he called it in his head. *The episode*. The bad guys were gone, Joe helped him trade in the Lexus for a replacement, and life went on. If George de Mestral had let himself get distracted by *episodes*, he wouldn’t have been able to spend years on his world-changing invention and its development. “We might not have Velcro.”

“Fynn, pay attention.” Micah got up close and waved a hand in front of Fynn’s face, a habit since childhood, and one he still hated.

He smacked at Micah’s hand and missed. Also a childhood pattern.

Micah turned to the man-mountain. “You’ll find Fynn’s rather easily distracted. I’m counting on you and your team to keep him safe.” Which would’ve sounded much more brotherly love-y if he hadn’t added, “In spite of himself.”

“You can’t hire him,” Fynn said huffily, because yeah, he was going to throw his weight around. He pushed his glasses firmly up his nose and sniffed. “I make all the company’s money and if I don’t want to spend it on gorillas in suits, those bucks won’t get spent.”

“Now, Fynn, be sensible.” Micah managed to sound like their great-aunt, a reminder Fynn didn’t appreciate.

“You don’t want to get kidnapped, do you? Anyway, the company has the right to take measures to protect its assets, and you’re the biggest asset.”

“Well, you’re the biggest ass.”

Micah mimicked Aunt Louise’s saddened-but-unsurprised expression all too well too. “You’re being childish.”

“I’m not a child!” Fynn strode over to the lab door, pulled it open, and gestured at the hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of expensive equipment. “Does that look like a sandbox? Could a child have made us twenty-six million dollars in one year?”

“I never said you were a child, and that twenty-six million is the problem. Someone figured out the company would pay a big ransom to get you back, and they might try again.”

“The company would, huh? Not my loving big brother?”

Micah’s exaggerated sigh was overplayed, intended to impress Stone, no doubt. “Of course, me, but you also made me president of the company. We’re one and the same.”

There’s part of the problem. He and Micah had never been close. The ten years between them meant they hadn’t been playmates or shared many experiences, until their parents suddenly died. Then Micah had been stuck raising a little brother he barely knew and couldn’t understand. They’d both heaved a sigh of relief when Fynn went off to college on early admission at sixteen.

Five years ago, Fynn’s need of someone practical— not an adjective ever used for himself— to develop and sell his invention, had bonded them financially. Sadly, their shared family ties were now probably the least important of their connections. Micah was all about the company and finances and expanding markets and new designs.

To Micah the president, Fynn was an *asset*. Of course, that was the truth. No company could survive and expand on the basis of one invention. Micah was as

dependent on him to keep innovating as he was dependent on Micah to do all the rest. He should be grateful— he *was* grateful— that Micah joining him had kept him from having to sell his idea to some other company to spoil or cheapen or take credit for. Gratitude still didn't make Micah the boss of him.

Fynn jerked his chin up, resenting the two bigger men for making him feel short, which he *wasn't*. "I'm working on something new. I don't know if I want to keep working today if that Mr. Brick will be hanging over my shoulder."

"He'll stay outside your lab." Micah's expression went avid. "What are you working on?"

"An expansion of..." He glanced at Stone. "Shouldn't he put his fingers in his ears or something?"

Stone said in his deep rumbly voice, "I signed a very detailed nondisclosure agreement, Dr. Dempsey."

Fynn kind of liked Stone's voice, although he wasn't about to admit it. "Do you know what I do?"

"I think everyone's heard of the 'CadoBox," Stone said. "My sister demanded one for Christmas."

"Does she like it? Use it?" Fynn was always interested in how his invention worked in the field. "Which model did she get?"

"Um, I'm not sure? The cover was green. It cost about a hundred and thirty bucks."

"The basic model, then." Fynn made a mental note that the basic was still selling. Economics perhaps, since even one-thirty wasn't cheap. Micah had insisted from the start that they not underprice the product. The sensors, electronics, and manufacturing only cost about twenty-three dollars but Micah said the market would bear a much higher price and he'd turned out to be right. The newer versions, in fancy colors with sensor lights and a smaller footprint, went for even more. "Does she use it?"

“Oh yes. She says it’s a minor miracle. Stick an avocado in the chamber, close the lid, thirty seconds later it tells her how close the avocado is to being ripe.” Stone chuckled. “Do you get angry letters from avocado growers? They probably sell half as many, now folks aren’t throwing out every other one for missing the miraculous window of ripeness.”

Micah said, “We convinced them folks would buy more avocados if they could be sure they weren’t wasting their money. So in the end, demand should balance out.”

“Did she think the ’CadoBox was too expensive?” Fynn was still embarrassed by how much profit there was in each one. “It wasn’t my idea... People shouldn’t feel ripped off.”

“No, don’t worry.” Fynn was probably projecting, imagining Stone’s voice sounded kind. “I bought it for her and she likes being indulged, plus one-thirty was cheap for something that gets me her homemade guacamole every time I go over.”

“Oh. Well, that’s okay.” Fynn locked his hands behind him and rocked on his heels, in the echo of departing stress. “Good.”

“You were talking about your new project,” Micah reminded him.

“Right. Not the PearBox extension yet.” He’d started working with Bartlett pears but sadly, it was clear he’d be as sick of pears as he was of plain avocados long before the work was done. He still loved guacamole, fortunately, but there were fewer things you could do with pears to dress up the flavor. Pear tart, maybe, although too much sugar did bad things to his brain functioning. Pears poached in rum? He wasn’t a fan of rum—

“New project?” Impatience tinged Micah’s tone.

Fynn blinked. “Yes. An advanced ’CadoBox. This one lets you load up a bunch of avocados in the keeper, and after twenty-four hours of calibration, it tells you exactly when each one will be ripe, a day, two days, four days, or a week or whatever later. Plus temperature and moisture

adjustments to speed or slow ripening. I thought we'd call it the 'CadoPlanner."

"Hmm." Fynn could almost see the wheels spinning in Micah's head.

"We could do an industrial size for restaurants too; really reduce waste."

"Get me the design specs," Micah said. "I'll get the manufacturing planners working on a cost estimate."

"As soon as the last revision is done. I'm still fine-tuning the ripening curve parameters." He'd tried to narrow down the relevant outgassing to fewer compounds, but the complete array was required for accurate predictions. "Oh, and I'm working on a portable tester. One a customer could take to the store, and scan the fruit on display, to pick which to buy. The design's challenging from a size and contact standpoint." Stores didn't want people putting bruisable fruit in and out of boxes and then back on the shelf. "It uses different sensor technology."

"Fine. Keep up the good work." Micah almost clapped Fynn on the shoulder before aborting the gesture Fynn hated. "I'll be off, then. Squash night. Gotta stay fit." He tapped his flattish stomach which looked less impressive next to the ripped abs revealed by Stone's snug T-shirt. "Stone, you keep my brother safe, you and your team. The plans we discussed sound appropriate. Report back to me." He strode off down the hall.

Fynn stared after him. *Plans we discussed. Report to me. What am I, some kind of pricey luggage?* When their parents died, he'd been unwanted baggage for Micah, only twenty-four at the time to his own no doubt annoying fourteen. Now he was perhaps *wanted* baggage, but the change didn't strike him as a big improvement. Perhaps it was better to be a Louis Vuitton than a ripped backpack, but both were *things* to be kept around when useful and stashed in a closet when not, even if the Louis Vuitton got a more luxurious shelf instead of the jumble in the bottom with the old shoes. "I'm sick of being stuffed in a closet."

“Um.” Stone eyed him uncertainly. “Your brother said you were gay. He didn’t mention being in the closet. Is your sexuality included under the nondisclosure, because I thought I’d read in Forbes—?”

“Not that kind of closet.” Fynn shrugged off the question. He was used to no one understanding him.

“If it helps any, I’m gay too,” Stone said.

Helps? Fynn stopped short, his orderly thoughts thrown into a jumbling rockpile by that piece of information. *He’s gay.* All that yummy muscle and square jaw and neat beard and big thighs, which Fynn could now admit he’d noticed.

Not that it matters. I’m no doubt as far from his type as the man in the moon. Though at least maybe Stone wouldn’t get mad if he noticed Fynn drooling over the eye candy, especially since there wasn’t much Fynn could’ve done if a guy Stone’s size did take offense. Physically, at least. Maybe legally? “There’s probably something in your contract about not beating up the guy you’re protecting, huh?”

“Beating up?” Stone blinked. “I promise, none of my people are homophobes. They wouldn’t work for me if they weren’t totally comfortable with taking orders from a gay man.”

“Ah. That’s comforting.”

“What are your plans right now? I’ll try to stay out of your way whenever you’re in a safe location. My best man is checking building security, and I’ll have a report for you tomorrow.”

“For me? You mean, for Micah, right?”

“He signed the contract, but I assumed you’d want to be kept in the loop.”

“You did?” Fynn looked Stone in the eyes. The man seemed sincere.

“Sure. It’s totally up to you how much information you want me to share with Micah. Your brother thought

you'd want to be kept out of the nitty-gritty details, but I got the impression you weren't pleased."

Got the impression. I was hardly subtle. Although Micah had either missed or ignored Fynn's displeasure. "I want all the details. Anything you'd tell Micah. In fact —" He tested his power in this situation. "—there may be things about my private life I don't want you to tell Micah. Can you promise confidentiality?"

Stone tilted his head. "Our only focus is your safety. I see no reason why we should share personal details with your brother."

"Really?" Fynn felt a smile tug at his lips. "All right then."

"You'll accept my team's protection?"

"I suppose so." *Protection...*

A shudder rocked Fynn as a sound blared in his memory—the crash of metal on metal, a blasting horn, a flashback to the blue pickup closing in beside his Lexus and the realization that the man behind the wheel wore a ski mask over his face. He'd yelped and clung to the door handle, as Joe snapped, "Hang on." Sudden acceleration and his belt slamming him back in his seat, the shudder as they bumped the truck but didn't stop—

He sucked in a breath and turned away, rubbing the spot over his shoulder where the seatbelt had bitten in hard. *Joe got us clear. Everything was fine. We were okay.* He didn't realize he'd bent over, breathing faster and faster, until Stone appeared, leaning down to peer into his face.

"Take a breath," Stone advised. "Slow and easy. In... Out... In... Out..."

Fynn followed orders because he couldn't think of anything else to do. A dozen shaky breaths eased the pounding of his heart.

Stone straightened. "Better? Your brother told us what you went through, and I read the police reports. That must've been scary as hell."

“I— Yeah, it was unpleasant. An unpleasant *episode*.” Fynn unbent and rubbed his face, trying to get his act together.

“I promise, my team and I are here to keep anything like that from happening again.”

Suddenly, a bodyguard didn’t sound like quite such a bad idea to Fynn. In fact... “You like guacamole, right?”

“Um, yes.”

“Plain avocados? Fresh pears?”

“I enjoy fruit. I try to eat well.” Stone’s cheeks flushed ever so slightly under his beard. “No innuendo intended.”

Fynn hadn’t spotted any innuendo. “You’re a big guy. I bet you can eat a lot without getting full.”

“Um.” Stone’s lips pressed together in an interesting way. “Well, yes.”

Finally, an upside to Micah’s life-management. Fynn had forgotten where he’d been headed when he left the lab, so presumably the errand wasn’t essential. He gestured at his door. “This could work out well. Mr. Stone—”

“Just Stone. Or Nolan, if you prefer.”

“Nolan.” He liked that. Much less cartoon-character-y than Stone. “Yes, good. And I’m Fynn. Come along, Nolan. Let me show you my laboratory.”

Chapter 2

Nolan had guarded a variety of clients since leaving the police force and moving into private security. Everyone from the reclusive octogenarian billionaire who'd hired him to be an unneeded tenth man on his protection team when one of his own guys was out for surgery, to the daughter of a famous actor desperate to get her father's attention by ever-more-dangerous stunts. He prided himself on summing people up after a few minutes together.

Micah Dempsey was easy, at least at a superficial level. All business, eyes on the bottom line. Nolan thought he probably cared about his younger brother, but his eyes lit up brighter when he talked about RipeBox, and the millions the company generated.

Fynn Dempsey wasn't so straightforward. Absentminded scientist, sure. Shaken by the kidnapping attempt, which was understandable. Nolan had seen the police reports and talked to Fynn's driver— good man, that Joe— but the use of two vehicles and at least two men worried him. That wasn't some single stalker or random impulse. Stone wanted to get Fynn's recollections, too. Not moments after an aborted panic attack, of course.

Normally, a dedicated science type would be telling Nolan to wait outside the room till called for, ignoring him, and going back to work, not ushering him into the laboratory. Maybe Fynn wanted to keep an eye on him, or maybe he was lonely. His brother Micah didn't seem like the warm and fuzzy type.

Nolan obeyed Fynn's demanding wave. He was curious about the set-up he'd be defending, and it paid to keep on the good side of his primaries. Stepping past Fynn, he glanced around.

The lab looked exquisitely clean, lit by large windows and steady, diffused overhead lights. A long bench ran down one side, loaded with an array of instruments. Across from it, a countertop island inset with a stainless-steel sink held what looked like a microwave trying to mate with an electric octopus, and a row of avocados. The other side of the room had four refrigerators standing between two closed doors.

“What are the doors?” he asked, going for the vital info first. Windows could wait, since they were on the second floor.

“Huh?” Fynn glanced at them. “Oh. One’s the bathroom. The other’s the airlock to a clean-room when I need one.”

Nolan crossed the room and opened the first door. A standard, single-use washroom, although containing a safety shower. *Vents don’t look big enough to be an access point. Ceiling...* He poked upward, his height letting him get a finger against the drop tiles if he stood on his toes. The tile lifted, revealing a space no more than eight inches high before the concrete of the floor above. Nearly impossible to crawl through.

When he let the tile settle into place and dropped his heels to the ground, Fynn was eyeing him, head cocked. “Looking for mice?”

Looking for ways someone might get to you. Memory of the panic-echoes in Fynn’s brown eyes made him say, “Something like that. What’s a clean-room?”

Fynn opened the other door, which swung toward them rather than away. The modest space beyond held a rack of white garments on hangers, a tray of booties, and a long bench. Another door with an inset window stood in the side wall. “If I want to isolate an outgassing compound in total purity, I can work in the clean room, at the laminar flow bench. This level of isolation is perhaps overkill, but nice to have.”

“Can I go in?”

“Don’t open the inner door.”

Nolan stepped around Fynn to inspect the first small chamber. *No risks.* Through the inner door's window, he could see another modest lab with benches and a bare stainless-steel rack. No hiding places, no other doors or windows. "Is there a second way in there?"

"No, only through this antechamber. Deliberate design."

A place to retreat, possibly. Not an entry. Nolan returned to the main lab and took a quick look at the windows. *Sealed tight, over twelve feet up, no windows in the adjacent warehouse, possible roof overlook but a hundred feet away.*

Fynn shut the anteroom door. "Happy now?"

"For the moment." Nolan checked his phone, although Sheridan's report should chime on arrival. Nolan would've liked to check the building himself, but he'd wanted to be first on their primary and by age thirty-seven, he'd learned to delegate. *No report yet.* Which meant no critical vulnerabilities so far.

"You can go if you have someplace to be." Fynn folded his arms and stood frowning.

Huh? "The only place I need to be is protecting you, until you're home safe at the end of the shift."

"You can't imagine I'll be attacked in my own lab?"

"When my colleague reports on building security, I'll let you know of any risks." Nolan didn't like the widening of Fynn's eyes, so he added, "You wanted to talk to me about guacamole?"

The suggestion eased Fynn's expression. "Oh, yes. Well, mainly the avocados. Everyone here's pretty sick of them, so if you like them, you can always take some with you." He pointed at the last fridge with a yellow Pac-Man sticker on it. "Anything in there's fair game to be eaten."

Nolan turned toward the row of fruit on the counter alongside the alien electronic-mating device. "What are you working on here?"

“That device is the 'CadoPlanner prototype. Well, a small version. If I can make it work with nine compartments, the design should be infinitely expandable.” Fynn went over, pulled on plastic gloves, and lifted one of the avocados. “The difficulty is in isolating and analyzing the outgassing of each piece individually. When a fruit ripens, it releases a variety of gaseous components. Ethylene, of course. Avocados are both sensitive and producers. But also a whole spectrum of molecules particular to the specific varietal—” He paused. “You can't possibly be interested in this. Even Micah isn't.”

Nolan might not care about avocado outgassing, which mostly made him think of his brother after a Mexican meal, but he did like seeing Fynn relax. For a guy who had to be in his thirties, he seemed rather tightly wound. Of course, strangers deliberately trying to hurt you could do that, for sure. “I'm not your brother.”

Fynn looked him up and down, mouthed as if speaking silently, then said, “He'd probably break a toe.”

“Huh?”

“Weightlifting. Never mind. Do you really want to know about this?”

“I really do.”

Admittedly, he listened with less than full attention to the list of critical biological components the device tested for, but he watched how Fynn gained confidence and animation as he spoke about his work. He made a mental note. If he needed Fynn calm in an emergency, a question about spectrophotometry might engage his brain and distract him.

When Fynn wound down, Nolan asked, “You do all this alone? I'd imagined a company as successful as RipeBox would have an army of scientists.”

To his surprise, Fynn flushed red across his cheekbones. “Well, there's a full scientific staff, of course. I direct their research and development, once an idea pans out for me. They replicate my data and work on the

practical equipment design. There are two large labs on either side of the main hallway.” He waved toward the door. “Back when we put the original product through beta testing, we had one common lab, but when we moved into this building, I asked for my own space. I find, well, that I think better without background interactions.”

“Nothing wrong with liking your privacy,” Nolan said. “Lots of folks do. I worked for one client who only communicated via written notes passed through their butler.”

“I’m not *that* bad,” Fynn said. “But they all seemed to want background music playing and there was always someone with life stuff to discuss. I don’t multitask well.”

“I don’t think you’re *bad* at all,” Nolan commented, driven by some unprofessional impulse.

Sure enough, color chased across Fynn’s face.

A thirty-year-old who blushed. Innocence at any age had never been Nolan’s type. He liked twinks, sure, but he liked them enthusiastic and skilled. He enjoyed guys who knew what they wanted and were on the same page about getting it. Still, Fynn looked good with his pretty lips parted and some color emphasizing his high cheekbones. His eyes behind those rectangular lenses held an amber glow in their brown— *Oh, no, you don’t*. Nolan mentally smacked down his libido. It’d been three weeks since he’d last hooked up with anyone, which apparently was long enough for his dick to forget the cardinal rule of the profession: don’t fuck your primary.

Good thing Fynn really *wasn’t* his type. A night out should fix this problem.

In the meantime... “Let’s talk about schedules,” he said. “When do you arrive at the lab? When do you leave? What do you do for fun in your downtime? Does Joe always drive you, or only to and from work?”

“I’m generally here by eight,” Fynn said. “I leave by, well, whenever I’m tired or the ideas stop flowing.”

Uh-huh. Nolan heard workaholic warning bells. “Which is usually when?”

“I don’t know. Nine or ten. Joe drives me to and from work, freeing me up to look through the day’s accumulated data on the drive.”

“And on weekends?”

“Joe has weekends off. I... go grocery shopping, and do laundry, and... the things people do on weekends.”

“Hobbies, sports, movies, bars? Places you like to go?”

“I don’t get out a lot. Anyway, what business is it of yours?”

Nolan smiled, keeping the expression gentle. “Wherever you go, I or one of my men go. That’s what bodyguard means.”

Fynn visibly swallowed, his eyes glazing for a second. “Good thing I’m not.”

“Not what?”

“Having an affair.” Fynn cleared his throat. “You’re going to stand around wherever I am, all day long? Isn’t that boring?”

“You know what they say about this kind of work. Days of boredom and, if you’re unlucky, seconds of pure terror. We’re frankly happy when everything stays on the boredom side.”

“Well, you can help me out here.”

“Doing what?”

“Be my ordinary citizen test case.”

“All right. Does the lab door lock?”

“Yes, of course. There’s very valuable data in here, and equipment too.”

“Is it locked now?”

Fynn blinked at him. “No. Not during the day.”

“If your humble ordinary civilian test case can make a request, please lock up. Then I’m yours.” A determined

assailant could get through a locked door, but not faster than Nolan could draw his weapon.

The sigh Fynn heaved suggested he thought Nolan was a paranoid bastard, or maybe wanted to pretend precautions were only paranoia. He went and punched a code on a panel beside the door, generating a click and a beep. Coming back, he moved to the work bench. “Happy?”

“For now.” Nolan would talk to Micah about installing biometric readers for access instead of a code, although if Fynn wore gloves a lot, perhaps not fingerprints. Iris scanners were easily available. “What do you need me to do?”

“This is my other current project. The PortaCado.” He opened a glass-fronted cabinet on the counter and pulled out another Rube-Goldberg box with a length of metal-tipped rubber tubing attached. “Something you could take to the store and use to test which avocados are ripe or unripe or overripe before buying. Only those rough categories, for now.”

“Could be useful.”

“Right?” Fynn cradled the box in his arms. “I’ll hold it, since it’s in a pretty fragile state of development. You handle the tube.” He went to where the line of avocados sat along the edge of the counter. “Here. Come along, now.”

Nolan came along, moving to stand beside Fynn.

“Take hold of the tube. It’s soft right now, but will become hard once the suction begins, so don’t let that surprise you. Keep a firm but gentle grip.”

Fighting not to smile at *it will become hard once the suction begins*, Nolan picked up the end of the tube.

“Hold the length between your fingers. Try not to be rough with the sensitive head.”

Nolan gritted his teeth and breathed through his nose, treating the *sensitive head* gently.

“Now, you’ll place the head against the surface of each avocado in turn. I’ll press a button and there will be gentle suction. Don’t let the tube’s response surprise you. We will do a five second count on each piece of fruit. Angle is important, but don’t overthink it. I want to replicate a real-world experience.” Fynn glanced at Nolan and licked his chapped lips, obviously a totally unconscious move.

One that didn’t help Nolan’s gravity. “Gentle suction.” He controlled his tone. “Don’t overthink the angle.”

Fynn gave him a narrow-eyed stare, as if sensing something was off.

Nolan widened his eyes innocently in response.

After a few seconds, Fynn nodded. “Right, let’s begin. Do one, then two, then three.” He pointed at the number pads in front of each piece of fruit. “Remember, a gentle touch is best.”

Nolan swallowed back a grin and began gently touching a row of fruits with his hose. *God help me.*

Chapter 3

Fynn tossed and turned in his bed. His room was no doubt at the precise temperature he'd set on his AC, the sheets were silky organic bamboo, his nightlight glowed with precisely the same golden-green diffused LED illumination as always. But sleep eluded him.

Nothing new, of course. Some nights, he would get up for a couple of hours and work or build with his LEGO sets. Tonight, though, he'd been shaken by bad dreams of a looming truck, not a mere pickup but ten thousand pounds of semi bearing down on him. He'd woken right before the crash gasping Joe's name, his heart pounding. And he *resented* that.

Whoever'd tried to grab him, or possibly kill him, had failed. Which should be the end of the problem. Full stop. The driver of the truck that bumped them had fled the scene before the cops arrived. The disabled truck had been stolen from a parking lot with no surveillance. If there'd been fingerprints or other evidence, no one had told Fynn. Maybe a near miss didn't even warrant dusting for prints. Or whatever the cops did to get prints these days.

Did they still use powder? Surely there should be a better technique. Maybe lasers. Or a vapor that bound to skin residues? Stone might know. *Nolan*. "Stone" fit the man all too well, but Nolan made him seem more approachable. He'd been pretty patient in the lab. Not everyone was, when Fynn got going in lecture mode.

He moved restlessly, letting the sheets glide against his bare skin. He always slept nude, because clothes in bed made no sense. Simply a way to cause binding and annoyance. He wondered if bodyguards ever slept naked. It'd look pretty funny to jump up with your dick flapping and run after someone with a gun. Although *funny* was perhaps not the way to describe a naked Nolan Stone.

Fynn could only guess what lay beneath the snug T-shirt and comfortable chinos Nolan wore, but he liked his guesses.

He moved again, more purposefully this time, turning on his stomach to rub against the sheet. His dick enjoyed the friction, and for a few minutes, he let himself indulge. *Would it be even better to do this against Nol— a man's skin? To feel hair and ridged muscles and heat?* Not Nolan, of course. Crushing on the bodyguard was a terrible cliché, and he'd known the man how long? Twelve hours?

Fynn glanced at his clock. *Three a.m. Crap.*

Since he wasn't getting back to sleep, he'd get up and do something useful. Swinging his legs out of the bed, he put on his glasses and took down the robe he'd draped on a bedpost. The whisper of silk around him soothed his senses.

Coffee. LEGO.

He pulled open the bedroom door, stepped out, then yelped loudly as something moved in his dim apartment.

"What?" Nolan rolled up off the couch, pushing to his feet and peering around. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Fynn was glad the darkness would hide his red face. "I forgot you were here."

"It's the middle of the night. Is something wrong?"

"No. I'll go back to bed." *So much for my coffee.*

Nolan switched on a lamp and came over. "You don't have to. This is your apartment. Did you get the munchies? Want a drink?"

"Thought I'd make coffee."

Nolan blinked a couple of times. "Sure. If you want."

"It calms me down. I know I'm weird."

"Hey, one of my guys makes deviled eggs and eats them when he can't sleep. We're all a bit weird." Nolan headed to the kitchen. "Coffee maker or single cup?"

“I’ll do it. It’s not your job to wait on me.” He brushed past Nolan, who stepped back.

The way Nolan had moved into Fynn’s life made him twitchy. He’d enjoyed sharing take-out for dinner, delivered to the lab by an employee of Nolan’s when Fynn had worked past seven. Riding with Nolan in the back of the new Lexus behind Joe and being walked up to his apartment had let Fynn fantasize in a pleasant but not-meant-to-be-real way. Then Nolan had said the building’s security was crap, and he’d camp out overnight until they got some cameras in place and worked out a duty rotation.

Nolan ended up chilling on the couch, ignoring Fynn’s insistence that he’d been fine in his apartment for years and this was overkill.

Which it is. Right? Fynn set up a mug and cone filter for a single cup. “You want coffee?”

“No, thanks.”

“You’re here to protect me, but you don’t need to stay alert?” He clicked the kettle on. Maybe that was snarky, but his heart still raced under his thin robe.

“There’s degrees of alertness, and too much caffeine doesn’t help. I have an alarm on the knob of your door and laser sensors set across your accessible windows. I’d have advance notice.”

“Those wouldn’t be enough without you hanging around?”

“What would you do if they went off?” Nolan leaned against the counter, arms crossed over his frankly ridiculous chest.

Scream? Call 911? Fynn settled for pouring his water through the coffee in a very dignified way. His whole body shivered in awareness of the big bulk of Nolan standing there.

He’d never brought a man back to this apartment. Fumbling attempts at sex in college had taught him he wanted a retreat option as soon as the cum started

cooling. If he had sex, he went to the other guy's apartment. Not that he'd done anything in years.

Bringing a guy here was too risky. What if he didn't want to leave? Nolan was bigger and yummiier than any man Fynn had ever been with, but harder to shift too. Fynn was five-eleven, but Nolan would dwarf anyone who walked up to him. Although... "Maybe not Shaquille O'Neal."

"Um. Is that an answer to who you're gonna call in an emergency? I grant you, he'd be easy to hide behind."

"So would you," Fynn said, to pretend he hadn't just come out with something inane. *By coming out with something even more inane.*

Except Nolan grinned. "Yep, and that's what I'd want you to do if an alarm sounded. Duck down, hide behind me, and let me deal with it."

"That doesn't seem fair." The prospect wasn't settling Fynn's nerves. He added more water to the cone.

"Of course it is," Nolan said. "I'd be doing what I trained for and am paid a bunch of money for. You'd be making my job easier by staying out of the way."

Put like that, maybe hiding wasn't cowardly. "How much money?"

He wondered if Nolan would say none of his business, since Micah'd arranged everything, but Nolan answered calmly, "We're contracted for sixty thousand for the first month, for a single-guard twenty-four hour rotating detail. After a month, we'll see what your ongoing needs are."

Fynn had so lost track of what money meant since the launching of RipeBox that he couldn't decide if that was expensive or not. *Do the math.* Probably, it would take four or five people to have someone around him twenty-four seven, which meant something like twelve thousand per person a month, before expenses, less than he'd made as a premier-level research chemist at ZomaChem, before he'd had his breakout idea. "And I wasn't even being shot at."

“We don’t get shot at often. Very rarely, in fact.”

“But it has happened to you?”

“Once. A pissed-off ex-husband who was drunk as a skunk. Couldn’t have hit a barn, most likely, even if Sheridan hadn’t tackled him.”

“I’m glad. That Sheridan tackled him, I mean.” Fynn picked up his coffee and sipped it, trying not to burn his tongue. *Ah, the elixir of life. Come to Daddy.* Although calling himself Daddy with Nolan in the room was pathetic. Not that he wanted to call Nolan Daddy either. He’d never been into that scene. *But if I was, it’d be with him.* The soothing buzz of caffeine let him not say the words out loud.

Nolan straightened up and wandered the small apartment as Fynn drank his coffee. He didn’t touch anything, but Fynn had the impression he was cataloging and would remember. He stopped at the glass shelving in the living room. “The Millennium Falcon. Is that LEGO?”

“Yeah. I like it.” He could dive into a project and lose himself in the precise placement of tile on tile, blocking out the rest of the world. It was restful.

“I enjoyed that when I was a kid but haven’t touched it in years.” Before Fynn could wonder if that meant Nolan thought LEGO was childish, he went on, “One guy I work with builds ships in a bottle for fun. Or he says it’s fun. If one doesn’t work properly, you can hear him swearing a block away.”

“How many—” Fynn swallowed the word “guys” because that was sexist, right? “—folks, um, people do you have?”

“Five plus me, right now. I recently divested a crew to a client who wanted longterm security and liked my people. We’re small right now, sized for single target protection.”

“All men?” Fynn didn’t have female friends— well, he was short of friends in general— but Carolyn Vickers ran the adjunct lab at work efficiently, an iron fist in her

nitrile glove. No velvet for Dr. Carolyn. Fynn never discounted what a woman could do.

“I started with two women, lost one to another client for her personal staff. Amelia now holds up the female side very competently. My people are all highly trained professionals.”

“Stuck with protecting me.” He wondered how Micah had found Stone Security. Not that Fynn was complaining. If he had to have a bodyguard, Nolan was better than most. If he *did* have to. “What if nothing ever happens again?”

“Best-case scenario, right? You go about your life, we go about our job, no one gets hurt.”

“Do you think that’s what’ll happen?” Fynn really wanted the whole situation to go away.

“I hope so, but...” Nolan came back into the kitchen and faced him, blue eyes shadowed in the under-counter lighting. “That was a near-professional attempt. The stolen truck, the lack of fingerprints or trace evidence, the way they knew your route and boxed you in at a vulnerable spot, and then cut their losses when you slipped past? That’s not one random guy with a grudge because you undercut the avocado market. The cops found that duct tape and sedation drugs in the abandoned truck—” Nolan quickly took the mug from Fynn’s hands and grabbed his elbow as he swayed.

Duct tape and drugs?

“Sorry, I thought you’d have read the police report. Your brother requested a copy. He showed it to me as part of the hiring process, to help me evaluate the threat level.” Nolan gripped Fynn’s arm warmly, and once he’d set down the mug, he steadied Fynn’s shoulders with his other arm. “Really, sorry, I didn’t mean to spring that on you at three a.m. Come sit down.” He guided Fynn to the couch.

Fynn dropped onto the blanket Nolan had been dozing under. His hands weren’t steady, so he clasped them together in his lap. “I hoped it was all a mistake. Some

drunk guy who stole a truck and decided to sideswipe us for fun.” He’d almost convinced himself, although in his dreams, he saw eyes behind a ski mask and knew better.

“Sadly not. However, they might not have the guts to try again. Or whoever hired them might not have the money to pay for a second try.”

“You think someone hired them?”

“That’s my strong suspicion, yes.” Nolan sat beside him.

“*Who?*”

“That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? Do you have any ideas?”

“No.” His mind was a total reeling blank cloud of cotton candy, sticky tendrils floating into nothingness. “Fuzzy.”

“Your memory of what happened?”

“Anything about the man in the truck, yes. Black ski-mask, white skin.” Those were the only impressions he’d been left with.

“Is there anyone with a grudge? Someone who thinks they’re entitled to a larger share of RipeBox than they got? Someone who imagines you owe them?”

“You don’t think it’s just some random person trying to get rich?”

“Sure, could be. But they have to pick their target. You were low on security, but you had a professional driver. There are people wealthier than you with not much more security, day to day. So why did they choose you?”

“I don’t know. No one ever does choose me.” *Not for school ball games, not for dances although that was probably a blessing, not for conversations at parties, because I’m weird, right? Even Micah didn’t choose me, he’s stuck with me.*

“Well, someone did,” Nolan went on, oblivious to Fynn’s thoughts. “There may be an answer to who in figuring out why.”

Fynn shivered, wrapping his arms around himself. *Great. Someone finally picked me and it was for duct tape on my mouth and a syringe in my veins.*

Nolan slid a hand up Fynn's back and began rubbing his shoulders. "Sorry. I know this is upsetting—"

Fynn had to laugh because it wasn't *upsetting*, it was fucking terrifying if he let himself think about it. Apparently, his laugh didn't sound cheerful, because Nolan rubbed harder. "I'm fine," Fynn insisted, pride kicking in. "You're right. I should think about who might pick me as a money-maker."

Focusing on that question helped with his shakes, although he wished he'd drunk the last of his coffee. "They had to know the company earned enough to pay back the venture capital and still make a substantial profit." Micah had boasted about recent margins, though Fynn ignored the details. Their parents had been well off, so they'd never been short, but they now had ridiculous money.

"Right. They'd have to know you have serious bank. The information's out there but it's not obvious from the way you live. This is a nice apartment, and you have a new Lexus with a chauffeur, but that doesn't necessarily scream millions of dollars. There are pricier buildings a few blocks over with Jaguars and Teslas in the garage."

"They'd have to believe someone would pay a mint to get me back."

"That might be part of your appeal as a target. Your company president and CEO is also your brother, so he has two huge reasons to want you safe."

Fynn would've laughed again, but who knew? Maybe Micah believed he was showing brotherly love when he nagged and pushed and reminded Fynn how socially inept he was. "Could be."

"I like the idea of someone pissed off at the company. Someone you fired, perhaps, who didn't get to share in the generous bonuses at last year-end."

“How do you know about those?” Micah had wanted to give some kind of token holiday bonus to everyone, but Fynn had insisted on a real mega-bonus and put his foot down for once. He couldn’t rake in thirteen million dollars personally and not share a chunk with the folks who made his vision happen.

Nolan said, “We always research a principal before agreeing to the contract. I don’t want to find myself committed to protecting some asshole with no ethics. We talked to a couple of your employees. They were very closed-mouthed, but one did mention a huge Christmas bonus, enough to pay off all their credit card debt. That definitely won you their loyalty, by the way.”

“I didn’t do it to buy loyalty. Those bonuses were only fair.” Micah hadn’t agreed, but Micah had never felt the same sharp need for equity and justice in the world as Fynn did. Luckily, when Fynn gave him an ultimatum, Micah had accepted that dividing a million dollars between employees as cheap for the price of keeping Fynn in the lab and working. “We couldn’t keep the company going without everyone in our labs.” And in manufacturing, of course, but RipeBox contracted that part out and he didn’t know those people. He hoped the contractor gave them some kind of bonuses too.

“Okay, who *didn’t* get a bonus? Who might feel unfairly treated, cheated, left out in the cold till they’re willing to resort to kidnapping to get their share?”

Fynn tried to think back. For most of the past two years, they’d been building staff, not cutting people. Folks left, of course. Lester’s wife had a tough pregnancy and they’d moved to be near her mother. Julio decided to go back and get his PhD after all. Lori headed to pre-med. “Carolyn Vickers is the lab manager. She’d know on the science end. Micah should know about sales and management.”

“No one you can think of? Maybe someone you didn’t get along with? Someone you reprimanded or fired personally?”

He shook his head. Yeah, he was prone to being short tempered if he was interrupted, and sometimes when a coworker couldn't follow his line of thought, he got irritable. Back at ZomaChem, he'd never been popular with the other scientists, but he couldn't remember any actual arguments at RipeBox. Owning the patents and the company meant folks didn't push back on his ideas like they had at ZomaChem. "No one comes to mind."

"Oh, well." Nolan gave Fynn's back one last rub and stood. "Figures it wouldn't be that easy. While we work on the problem, I promise, Stone Security will keep you safe."

"For how long, though? What if they don't try again, and we're just... waiting forever?"

"Your brother told us he can afford our yearly rates. Or you might hire in-house security. We can help you with that process. I promise, we won't leave you hanging without protection." Nolan's deep voice held conviction.

I don't want in-house security. If I must have someone lurking in my space and following me around, I want it to be you.

Since he couldn't say that to a man he barely knew without sounding pathetic, Fynn went and emptied the last of his coffee down his throat, put the mug in the dishwasher, and headed back to bed. The coffee, and his awareness of six-foot-six of protective male bodyguard in the next room, let him eventually drift back to sleep.

Chapter 4

Nolan's whole body felt itchy by the time he had Fynn safely home the next evening, to stay settled under Ed's watchful eye. Itchy on the skin level and deep under the surface, burning along his nerves. He'd stayed with Fynn — their primary— for four shifts in a row, while the others did a security eval and bug check of Fynn's home, work route, vehicle, and the RipeBox labs, made a few fast improvements like adding video cameras, and Oliver ran a quick but deep dive on all terminated employees.

Taking four shifts wasn't smart, even with the chance to doze on Fynn's terrible couch while his people checked out and secured the building. Nolan couldn't say why he'd felt unable to step away until all their ducks were in a row. Charlie had given him a hard time about it, half joking, half serious, and he hadn't been wrong. There was something about Fynn Dempsey that woke all of Nolan's protective instincts.

They had more work to do on the security front. No likely suspects had turned up. Only three people had been fired since the incorporation of RipeBox, and two had since left the state. The other was home with a small child, and Amelia said if the woman was secretly a criminal mastermind, she'd eat her boots.

Nolan let himself out of Fynn's place into the hallway. Ed, waiting to take his place, popped Nolan on the shoulder. "Time to quit being stupid, boss. Go home, sleep, eat, drink, get laid."

Nolan rubbed his arm dramatically, because Ed had one heck of a right hook.

Ed gave him an unrepentant grin.

"I plan to do most of those things," Nolan told him. "Charlie will relieve you at eleven, and I'll be back at seven."

“You won’t hang around till eight at night again tomorrow, right?” Ed raised an eyebrow. “What happened to ‘stick to the schedule’ and ‘a tired bodyguard makes mistakes’? Don’t they apply to you?”

“I slept pretty well on the couch,” Nolan lied. Fynn’s couch was not made for someone his size. He couldn’t defend today’s decision to wait around the lab until Fynn was ready to go home, delaying the handover to Ed, so he didn’t bother to try. “How are the video feeds working?”

“Crisp and clear.” Ed held up his phone, showing a split-screen view of six monitors. In the one covering Fynn’s front door, their own images were recognizable. The three window cams revealed dark exterior skies. Additional views showed the lobby and back alley. “There’s a chair by the elevators I can hang out in, if Mr. Dempsey wants his apartment to himself.”

Fynn pulled the door open behind Nolan. Nolan pivoted to see him standing there still in his work clothes, sleeves rolled up and feet bare. “Don’t be silly. If Mrs. Nakimura sees you lurking, she’ll call management or the cops. You can stay in here. And it’s Dr. Dempsey, but please call me Fynn.”

“Just stay out of his way,” Nolan told Ed, unreasonably irked that Ed and Charlie would be the ones suffering on Fynn’s couch tonight. *They’re both shorter than me and got sleep last night. They’ll be fine.* Somehow that didn’t make him feel better. “Holler if anything comes up. I’ll see you in the morning, Fynn.”

Fynn gave an awkward kind of wave as Nolan turned to go. He forced himself to stride off down the hall, refusing to worry about leaving Fynn’s protection to someone else. *Someone I employ. Someone who’s probably better than me.* Ed was ex-Special Forces and taught mixed martial arts in his spare time.

Nolan forced his mind off the job as he drove home. He got takeout to skip cooking and ate out of the containers to save washing dishes. After a fast shower, minor kitchen clean-up, and running the vacuum

through his place, he still felt too wired to sleep. *Ed's right. I need to get laid.*

On a Wednesday night, the choices would be thinner, but Rockenstein attracted a decent crowd any day of the week. Nolan exchanged the hanging-around-home clothes he'd put on for a tight T-shirt and his fuck-me jeans and headed downtown. Chicago's nightlife rocked well into the small hours, so the streets were busy with cars and pedestrians, and the club lot was full. Nolan paid an arm and two legs to park in an off-street garage, then walked three blocks back to the club.

The doorman collected his cover charge with an admiring up and down look. The dude was only a couple of inches shorter than Nolan and not his type, but Nolan paid a quick homage to his bulging biceps and ripped abs. A lot of hours sweating in a gym, right there. Nolan avoided getting too bulky. At his size, he didn't need more muscle— speed and stamina were his goals— but he recognized dedication when he saw it.

The noise of the club hit him like a two-by-four to the brain as he walked in. He kinda liked that. A mental reset. Off with Stone, the security expert. On with Nolan, the guy looking to get laid. Giving his stride more sway than he would outside these walls, he headed to the bar.

“Strawberry daiquiri.” Standing there, six-foot-six with a pink drink in hand, always got him second looks. Plus he liked the damned things, and he could sip it slowly. Sleep-dep and alcohol didn't mix.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the first guy wandered his way and parked at the bar beside him, eyeing him from under lowered lashes. Too young and too... something. Nolan sometimes enjoyed femme guys, but tonight he wanted ordinary. Someone low-maintenance to suck his dick or let him suck theirs, nothing fancy. This guy, with his three-toned styled hair and makeup, looked high-maintenance. Nolan toasted him with the daiquiri, but turned away and a minute later, heard the guy flounce off.

Half an hour later, he decided he'd become too picky all of a sudden. *The next guy between twenty-five and forty who looks plausible wins.*

Which was how he found himself in the parking lot five minutes later with a tall, blond, handsome dude he had very little interest in. Although... when the guy ran a hand across Nolan's zipper, his dick perked up to "some interest."

"Where do you want to go?" Nolan asked. They'd mutually agreed to avoid Rockenstein's well-used bathrooms. Nolan never had sex where he might be observed or recorded. Too many clients who'd made that mistake. Which meant the parking lot was out, too.

"It's about half an hour to my place." The blond whose name was either Derrick or Darren— damn the club music— sounded uncertain.

Nolan was used to that reaction. Sitting on a bar stool, his full size wasn't as obvious as standing under streetlights. He wasn't the guy most men wanted to bring home on first sight. "Hotel? The Knightsbridge is five minutes away. I could meet you there."

The blond's shoulders relaxed. "Sounds good. I'll even pay." He moved close to Nolan and leaned in. Nolan wasn't into kissing hookups, but the guy only licked Nolan's neck and nipped his earlobe, murmuring, "Should be fun."

"I'm parked a couple of blocks away. I'll see you there."

"My car's over there if you want a lift." The guy gestured at a sporty-looking Nissan.

Nolan was glad of an excuse. "No one my size is going to fit in that front seat. I'll meet you."

"I do like your size." The blond looked him up and down and grinned. "See you in the hotel lobby."

Nolan had time on the walk to his car and the drive to the Knightsbridge to rethink his decision about five times. He wasn't as enthusiastically onboard as usual for a hookup with an attractive man. Maybe from the

exhaustion of working multiple shifts, even though he had gotten some sleep on that sadistic couch. But his flip-flopping ended up at *hell, yeah, let's get laid*, so he parked outside the hotel and went inside.

The Knightsbridge was low-rent for that part of downtown, sitting on the edge of a rougher neighborhood. The hotel was known among guys who frequented Rockenstein as reasonably clean, with thick walls in 1950s concrete, and not too pricey for a fast fuck. If there was speculation that the K kept their prices down by hotboxing and re-renting a room after a fast cleaning when the first customers didn't stay the night, well, whatever kept them in business.

The blond guy was waiting close to the check-in desk and followed through by putting the room on his card. Nolan got a look at his ID and his name was Derwyn which, okay, Nolan would give himself a pass for not picking that up in a noisy club.

They went up to their room. Nolan set a hand on Derwyn's back in the elevator, and the man leaned into his touch. The room was what they'd expected. Derwyn wanted Nolan to top, but he didn't feel like making the effort or taking the time to make sure his partner could handle his size, so he suggested a 69. It was good, it was fine. Derwyn knew how to use his tongue and throat and wasn't shy about hands as well. Nolan came with a shout and a rush of satisfaction, and made sure Derwyn did as well.

But when they were done and cleaned up, and Derwyn suggested exchanging contacts and maybe meeting again sometime, Nolan shook his head. "I don't do repeats. My job keeps me moving all around, and it's easier to go with the flow." Two half-truths. He'd had a few fuck buddies over the years, guys he had enough fun with to come back to in a casual way. Most of them eventually wanted something serious, and since he wasn't that guy, he let them go find someone who was. He was still friends with a couple of them.

And his job *had* moved him around. One actor had been prone to jetting off for Europe on a moment's

notice. But for right now, he wasn't going anywhere until he was sure Fynn would be safe long term. Derwyn was nice enough and serious enough to assume a second round meant something. Not happening. "You were really hot, though. I'll remember this one for a while."

Derwyn laughed, although his lips twisted. "Thanks. Don't strain yourself. I needed to get my rocks off, and it seemed like you did too. We'll call it a night."

"Sure."

"Go on, head out. I'll check out."

"Thanks." Shaking hands with a hook-up was always weird, so Nolan sketched a salute and left the room.

On the drive home, his body felt more relaxed, but not the way it should've after coming that hard. There was still an antsy buzz down deep somewhere. Maybe he should've drawn things out, taken the time to fuck Derwyn properly. But imagining that didn't appease whatever was nagging him, so he took himself and his stupid body to bed for a solid six hours of sleep.

Chapter 5

By the weekend, Fynn was mostly used to having bodyguards around him twenty-four-seven, though he had a feeling he'd be climbing the walls in another week or two. It helped that Nolan had apparently assigned himself daytime duty. Watching Nolan come in the door each morning and trade off with whomever had spent the night made some jittery part inside Fynn relax.

Fynn was usually wary of someone Nolan's size. All through school, huge and athletic meant a good chance that smaller, gay, and nerdy would end up shoved in a locker or picking books up off the floor. Knowing Nolan was gay took Fynn's self-protective prey-instincts offline, though. For once, a man's looming bulk was calming.

By the third day, Nolan had also clued in to Fynn's habit of leaving something important behind in the rush out the door. His interrogation of "Phone? Wallet? Keys?" would've been irritating if they hadn't wasted twenty minutes on Wednesday, and fifteen on Thursday, plus a double run up and down from the lobby, going back for Fynn's stupid phone twice and wallet once. Anyhow, Nolan made the words sound like a mission check, like "Ammunition? C-4? Machine gun?" Or whatever soldiers would use. Completely matter-of-fact without hidden impatience, a tone Micah had never managed.

So Fynn was disappointed Saturday to come out of his bedroom yawning and find a woman he'd only met in passing sitting at his kitchen table. Nolan had made a point of introducing all his people, but Fynn couldn't remember her name. He glanced at the microwave. Ten past seven. *Crap, I hate when someone screws with my routine.* "Is Nolan running late?" He hoped that was all this was.

The woman looked up. “No, he has the day off. I’m Amelia, in case you don’t remember.”

Oh. Of course, Nolan gets a day off. Just because you don’t know what to do with yourself on weekends doesn’t mean he’s equally pathetic.

Fynn hid his disappointment. “Sure. I’m going to get ready and then head in to the lab.”

“On a Saturday?”

“I had a cool idea yesterday, but got kind of sidetracked. I need to make up the time.”

“I’ll let Charlie know to meet us there at three. Or will you work a half day?”

“Once I’m there, might as well get shit done.” He flushed, because he’d used the word *shit* instead of *stuff* in an effort to seem less wimpy to this competent-looking woman who could probably beat him up with one hand tied behind her back. *Did it sound as fake to her as to me?*

Amelia nodded, though, and went back to swiping through her phone. She looked tall for a woman, probably Fynn’s height if she stood up, and her arms below her short sleeves showed a curve of muscle. Very unlike his mother’s slender fragility. Not that he remembered his mother’s appearance well. At fourteen, he should’ve had solid memories, but the ones that stuck around now, nineteen years later, seemed to be of her voice, her faint floral scent, her smile. She’d still been taller than him when she died, and he couldn’t say what her actual height had been...

Stop staring at the nice lady and get your ass in gear.

Fynn grabbed his first mug of coffee for the day, and headed back to shower and dress, trying to stuff his grumpiness away. He’d gotten used to a routine, and now they’d changed things on him. But how petty, to bitch just because they sent a new person. Nolan’s people catered to his every whim. If he’d said, “I’m going to the beach” or “I’m headed to the LEGO Store,” he’d bet Amelia would have that same calm acceptance.

Maybe not if I said I was going hang gliding. He wondered what bodyguards did if the person they were guarding decided to do something dangerous. What if they insisted on, say, walking down the middle of a freeway or free-climbing their office tower? What if they were going to do something illegal? Was a bodyguard supposed to stop them?

I'll ask Nolan. Then he remembered he had Amelia today and felt his grouchiness return.

She led the way to his door when he was ready, checked something on her phone— *oh yeah, they put in cameras*— and then ushered him out. She seemed surprised when he hit the elevator button for the parking garage. “Isn’t Joe picking you up like usual?”

“Joe gets weekends off too.” *Like Nolan. Like normal people.* Fynn wondered if perhaps he should do some weekend thing, but he had his notes from last night waiting for him. “I do know how to drive.” Although his stomach fluttered unpleasantly at the prospect of driving down that same, slightly-secluded section near the lab. Driving wasn’t his favorite thing to begin with, and now he’d be passing the spot where the first pickup had lurked... *I'll be fine. Get back on the horse.*

He strode out into the garage resolutely. Amelia was at his side within two steps, though, and caught his arm as they neared his old Volvo. “Is this a habit, driving yourself to the lab on weekends?”

“Habit? I guess. Joe’s had the same days off since we hired him. I don’t always go to the lab, though.” *Sometimes I stay home and play with toys.*

“I wish you’d told me. I’d have brought down the bug sweeper to check the car for tracking.” Amelia sighed. “Come on, back upstairs, it’ll only take a few minutes.”

“You’re kidding.” He hated retracing his steps. Going back risked encountering distractions. Forward momentum was important. “Do we have to?” *Now you sound like a child pouting to his mother. Are you going to stamp your feet next?*

“Yep. Sorry.” She didn’t sound sorry.

At least the delay only lasted ten minutes before Amelia declared the car bug-free and set the detector on the back seat.

See, we could’ve skipped checking. Except he knew as a scientist that assumptions would come back to bite you in the butt, every time. Get the data. Luckily, data showed no one cared where he drove. He opened the driver’s door.

Amelia took the keys from him, nudging him aside. “I drive, you ride in style.”

“Why?” He resented the scared bit of him that said, *Yes, let someone else do it.*

“Protocol.” She tilted her head, waiting for him to be sensible.

In case someone tries again, doofus. He swallowed, nodded, and went round to the other side.

Other than the Volvo’s noisier engine, the drive felt abnormally quiet. Fynn wondered why, and realized he was already used to chattering to Nolan about whatever was on his mind while Joe drove them. *Is Nolan humoring me when he listens and nods and asks questions? Would he prefer this kind of professional silence?*

“Hmm.” Amelia sped up as they hit the freeway, moving to the fast lane.

Fynn glanced at the speedometer. “You’re doing seventy-five. Eighty!”

“I thought someone might be behind us. Just checking.”

Fynn swallowed hard, his heart racing. He clutched the handle over the door even though they were traveling smoothly.

Amelia drove a couple more minutes, then slowed, easing her grip on the wheel. “Don’t see them.”

He let out a whoosh of breath and released his panicked handle-clutch as she eased back into the right lane. “False alarm, huh? Does bodyguarding make a person paranoid?”

“Professional paranoia.” She didn’t seem insulted. “Ignoring warning signs is the way to make a really bad mistake.”

“I guess. Your null hypothesis is that someone really is out to get you.”

She laughed, then straightened and put both hands squarely on the wheel, flicking a glance into the rearview. “Maybe I wasn’t wrong. Hang on again and—”

A pickup came screaming up beside them, doing ninety at least, then began easing over into their lane right on their front bumper.

“Idiot,” Amelia muttered. “I tap them properly and they’ll spin out into the ditch.”

“Don’t tap them!” Fynn clutched the seat with one hand and the Jesus-bar with the other, his heart racing.

“Not with my client in the car.” She hit the brakes, but the pickup immediately slowed with them.

“This is the freeway!” Fynn glanced wildly around. “There are witnesses.”

“I guess they figure if they’re quick enough... There!” They reached an exit ramp and Amelia dodged down it, with the pickup continuing on the main road. “Got ’em—Fuck!” A car waiting near the bottom of the ramp suddenly pulled out into their way.

Instead of stopping, Amelia snapped, “Hang tight!” and swerved onto the embankment.

Fynn screamed through clenched teeth as they skidded on the sloped grass, gravity pulling at them. Amelia sped up instead of slowing down, letting the Volvo drift lower toward the waiting pond, then hit the gas harder. Fynn was thrown back against his seat and they lurched forward, wheels spinning, struggling up onto the pavement.

Amelia screeched them through a turn. “Straight road now. Get your phone out and call 911, then Nolan.”

Fynn unclenched one hand from the seat and fumbled at his pocket. *Phone. Phone.* His pocket was empty. An image of the phone sitting malevolently on his bathroom counter came to him. *No! Fuck!* “I left it at home!”

“Damn. Try to get to mine. Right front pocket.” She shifted her hips, attention fixed on the road. They hit a four-way stop but Amelia laid on the horn and blasted through it.

She blew the stop sign!

Where’s a cop when you want one?

To his surprise, a dozen seconds later, Amelia slowed the Volvo.

“What? Keep going,” he pleaded.

“They called it off, took the turn back there and split.” Amelia divided her attention between the road and the mirror for half a minute, then blew out a breath. “All clear. Get my phone and call Nolan. Put it on speaker.”

Letting go of the seat and digging into a strange woman’s front pants pocket with his hands still shaking was awkward. He worked her phone loose, his breath stuttering from the adrenaline. “It wants a c-code or, or a fingerprint.”

“There should be two emergency contacts. Top is 911. Second should be Nolan.”

He spotted the two options and hit the bottom one. The phone rang once, then Nolan’s voice came across. “What’s up?”

“Uh. Speaker?” *Where is it? Where’s the symbol? Stupid phone.*

“Speaker? Fynn? Why are you on Amelia’s phone?”

Amelia spoke up loudly enough to be heard, and Fynn held the phone out toward her at arm’s length. “We had an incident. Two vehicles, pincer attempt, no contact,

Royal Road exit off 280. One black F-10, license YY4 6373.”

Fynn blinked. “You remembered the plate?” *Through all that?*

She didn’t look his way, but grinned. “Part of the job.” Then added, “One midsize sedan, four door, silver, probably Honda Accord, didn’t get its plate.”

“Because we were sliding down a mountainside,” Fynn pointed out in her defense. Well, an embankment, same difference.

“On it.” Nolan’s voice came dimly from the phone. “Have you called 911?”

“Not yet. I wanted to get Fynn well clear, in case they had another backup waiting.”

“I’ll notify the cops.”

“Have them meet us at the lab. We’re only ten minutes out and I want our client safe.”

“The cops won’t like you not stopping, but I agree. I’ll be there ASAP too. I’m fifteen minutes away.”

Fynn raised his voice. “Sorry to mess up your day off.”

“Hey, not your fault. Stay safe and listen to Amelia.” The line went dead.

Fynn set Amelia’s phone in the cup holder and straightened his glasses. “We shouldn’t call 911?”

“Nolan will. There’s no point in both doing it, and I want our attention on the road.” Her hands were still at ten and two on the steering wheel and her gaze moved regularly from front to mirrors to front to mirrors.

Fynn shivered and decided to keep clutching the Jesus-bar over the door with one hand. Just in case. “Why do you think they did that? I mean, yeah, of course, to kidnap me, because for some ridiculous reason someone thinks that’s a good idea, but I have a bodyguard with me. Shouldn’t that stop them? I thought they’d give up.” His voice squeaked embarrassingly on the last word and he pressed his lips together.

“Sometimes they do,” Amelia said. “Lots of times we get called in and nothing further happens. But sometimes not. As for why they tried the same kind of move? I’d bet they know you regularly drive yourself on the weekends. No Joe to get you clear.”

“But you’re here. They had to see the driver wasn’t me. That there were two of us. And they still tried. Wasn’t that stupid?”

“My guess is they were waiting for you to come out, saw I was a woman, and figured I’d be bad at my job. Or maybe that I was your girlfriend and not even security.” She flashed him a sharp grin. “Lots of people underestimate me.” She took a left turn on a road Fynn had never driven.

“Aren’t we headed to the lab?”

“Yup. Going the back way.”

“Do you need your GPS?”

“Nope. Studying local maps is SOP.”

“Sop?”

“Standard operating procedure.”

“Oh. That’s good.” He didn’t want to sound like someone else who didn’t give her the credit she deserved, so he shut up, but seriously, *operating procedure*? Like he was some kind of spy or foreign diplomat visiting a war zone? Did Nolan really approach a simple protection thing like a military mission? Not that Fynn should be complaining, especially now. He’d wanted Stone Security to be overkill on Micah’s part, something he’d live with for a few weeks and then they’d decide it was ridiculous and move on. “This isn’t moving on.”

“Uh. Lab building is about six minutes out. We’re making decent time. I don’t want to get pulled over.”

“Right. Thanks.” He modified his snippy tone. “Seriously, thank you.”

“Part of my job. I love driving, and I really like making motherfuckers look like fools.”

Well, he was glad someone was happy.

A cop car waited for them in the lab parking lot, light bar whirling. Fynn let go of the handle at last, massaging his cramping fingers, as Amelia took the turn in and parked several slots down from the patrol car. A uniformed cop got out, hand hovering at his hip. Amelia opened her door slowly, telling Fynn, “Stay put till I check this guy out.”

“But he’s a *cop*.”

“Almost certainly.” She eased out of the car, her hands high and in view.

Well, isn’t that reassuring? Fynn watched as she approached the cop and spoke with him. After a moment, the cop’s hand moved away from his holster and Amelia lowered hers too. *Which presumably means he’s a real cop and we’re good now.* Fynn allowed himself a moment to drop his head into his hands and breathe hard. *Crap, someone tried again. The first time really wasn’t a fluke or mistaken identity. Someone’s out to get me.*

He pulled off his glasses and pressed his palms to his eyes, creating sparkles of light. An interesting phenomenon with retina receptors responding to pressure as if it was photons. He’d thought at one time he might go into human biology. There were surely biological underpinnings to gender and sexuality spectrums which he could help elucidate. But in the end, he’d decided he didn’t want to work with people. People were messy and unpredictable. *Like kidnapers. Fuck.* He rolled the word in his mind. *Fuck, fuck, fuck. I almost got kidnapped.* If he’d been driving alone, he’d have stopped for the sedan blocking the road, rather than risk driving the Volvo beyond the shoulder.

A tap on his window made him jolt and lunge forward. His seatbelt locked, slamming against his already sore shoulder from last week, and he yelped. Because of the pain. Exclusively. Shoving his glasses back on, he peered out.

Amelia mouthed, “Sorry,” through the window and gestured for him to come out.

He had to suck in his gut to remove the tightened seatbelt, but he managed to disentangle himself from its boa constrictor embrace and open the door. Easing out, he found his knees weren’t as steady as they should be. He kept a hand braced on the open door, trying to act casual.

Behind Amelia, the cop said, “Ms. DeMarco has given me the basics, but I want to hear your story about what happened.”

“The part where someone tried to stop my car? Where a pickup came right at us? Or where we skidded down the embankment like a wheeled bobsled?” He bit his lip to stop babbling.

Luckily for his self-respect, another cop car came peeling into the lot, siren and lights going, and behind it, a blue SUV with Nolan in the driver’s seat. They both stopped with an excessive flourish, and the siren cut off. The cop got out first, but Nolan strode faster, crossing the pavement toward them.

Amelia said, “Boss,” but Nolan held up a hand to turn to Fynn.

“Are you all right?”

“Shoulder’s a bit sore.” He rubbed it. Wanting to throw himself into Nolan’s arms was weak and illogical, and he wasn’t going to do any such thing, but he couldn’t help a moment’s fantasy about being caught and hugged by someone that size. Well, not just someone. Nolan, who’d taken all of Fynn’s weirdnesses in stride so far. *So let’s not scare him away now, amiright?* Fynn hugged his arms around his stomach and leaned a hip on the car door, trying to look chill and unworried.

Nolan said, “Hang in there. We’ll get you inside the building safely, then talk.” He turned to the new cop. “We’re pretty sure these were kidnapping attempts, not assassinations, but I’d still like to get my client behind walls ASAP.”

Assassinations? Fynn let go of his stomach to clutch the door again.

Nolan put a hand under Fynn's elbow. "Come on. Let's go on indoors and sit down."

Absolutely. Let's. Fynn let himself be guided to the front door and peered into the new iris-scan sensor to get them inside.

One of the cops went back to his cruiser, but the other said, "Fancy security," as they followed him in.

Nolan told him, "Dr. Dempsey's company earns tens of millions a year. It's appropriate."

"I guess." The cop looked around, spotting the logo on the wall behind the currently-unoccupied security desk. "Hey, my mom got a 'CadoBox for Christmas. She loves it."

Fynn didn't have the spoons to ask about what model and usage. He had a marketing department for research. Or at least, Micah did. Micah, who'd taken the threat seriously enough to insist on biometric locks and hiring Stone Security to protect Fynn. Which now turned out to be prescient. Money well spent, not wasted. "Has anyone told Micah what happened? He'll be pleased."

Nolan turned to him, eyebrows raised. "He'll be *what?*"

Fynn reran what he'd said. "Oh, not that something happened, but that the money for increased security was appropriate. He's always talking about justified expenses."

"Ah. Sure. Would you like to call him now?"

He felt heat flush his skin. "I forgot my phone." *Again.* Thirty-three years old and he still couldn't get out of the house with all his stuff. School had been a nightmare of making lists and forgetting to check them. "Maybe I should post a picture of my phone on the inside of my front door. Or get a smart watch and never take it off. Although I'd have to, to shower, so that wouldn't be foolproof." *Me-proof. I'm the fool.*

“You can use mine.” Nolan dug in his pocket.

“I want to wait.” Fynn walked to the nearest stuffed-cube seat and dropped heavily onto it. “There’s nothing Micah can do now anyway.” *Except say I told you so. Which he will.*

“Sure.” Nolan surprised Fynn by coming and sitting beside him, although Nolan perched on the edge of his upholstered cube. “Let me know whenever.”

The second cop came up to the closed front door and waved. When Amelia let him inside, he said, “My supervisor’s sending a detective along to head up the investigation. We have a BOLO out for the pick-up with the plate you reported. Officer Royce and I will stay here until the detective arrives.”

Fynn glanced around the lobby space. He’d never spent much time in here, since he usually parked in the employee lot and used the back entrance. The space was open and sunny, although the seating was an unfortunate avocado green. A color he’d seen way too much of already. *We should change that. Unless Micah picked green on purpose for some marketing thing. Would he have made that choice? Surely that color can’t be good for anyone—*

“Are you okay?” Nolan murmured to him.

Fynn realized he’d been staring at the chairs. *Crap, I need coffee!*

He looked up. The cops and bodyguards stood awkwardly eyeing each other, resembling a really weird cocktail party, or one of those college events he’d occasionally gone to, only to find he didn’t fit in with anyone else there. Except this was his company, which made him the host. “Does anyone else want coffee? I’d bet Ulrich has some back in his office.” He waved at the open room behind the security desk. He was pretty sure Ulrich kept a pot going, because one time when Fynn had come down to meet a supplier and he’d been in desperate need, reduced to inhaling steam from the mug standing on Ulrich’s desk, the doorman had gone and fetched him a lifesaving cup. “Although it might take a minute.”

Because Ulrich wouldn't leave the pot running on the weekends.

"We're fine," Nolan said. "Try to relax."

Easier said than done. Fynn had never had much physical hyperactivity, although his mother had insisted she thought he fit the label, but now he needed to pace. Or bounce on a trampoline. Or something. Maybe he should carry a stress ball like he had for a while in college, although it'd never de-stressed him all that much. He'd liked the cow one, not so much for the benefit of rhythmic squeezing but because the face would balloon out into bovine mockery that made him laugh. Laughter was good for stress. "I need an inflatable cow." He jumped to his feet and tried pacing, because movement was more civilized than cows.

Chapter 6

Nolan stayed sitting with an effort, trying to present a calm, steady demeanor as Fynn paced the lobby of his building, bouncing from desk to seating to the elevators. At least he showed no sign of a panic attack this time. Nolan's heart rate had recovered from the adrenaline hit of hearing Fynn over Amelia's phone, but he wasn't surprised Fynn was wired. This protection detail had gone from "might still be a threat" to "definite threat."

He was glad Amelia had been on duty. She was their best driver. But questions bounced in his head almost as urgently as Fynn's pacing. *Time to distract him and get a few answers.* "Hey," he called when one of Fynn's circuits brought him nearby. "Question. Why were you driving your old car?"

Fynn glanced his way. "I always do on weekends. Joe needs time off."

"You said you do chores on weekends. Laundry. LEGO."

"LEGO's not a chore. And sometimes, I come in to work, if I have an idea."

He wondered why Fynn hadn't mentioned the possibility. He'd ask when they didn't have an audience. Fynn looked flushed and evasive, not meeting his eyes. In a stranger, he'd have wondered if there was some problematic reason for the omission— a secret destination, or even collaboration with the kidnappers— but by now, he was sure Fynn was painfully straightforward. Maybe he simply forgot.

An unmarked car pulled into the parking area and stopped by the front doors in the handicapped spot. The detective, no doubt. He'd met plenty who thought they were too important for ordinary rules.

Nolan stood and went to the door, demanded and checked the man's ID before ushering him inside. *Detective Wilson Barrington. Hillside PD.* The man's uptight posture and superior expression went with the snooty name. *Wonder how he made it through his patrol years.* Coworkers on the streets usually knocked the high-class stuffing out of a guy, but maybe being elevated to detective gave it back.

Detective Barrington said to the uniformed cops, "One of you can take off now." The two of them looked at each other, and the guy nearer the door hurried out.

Smart man.

Barrington turned to Nolan. "Now, what's all this about a possible kidnapping attempt? Why are we six miles from the reported scene of the crime?"

Fynn stiffened, his head coming up and eyes flashing, and Nolan set himself to keep the peace between those two, despite the sparks he saw coming.

Sure enough, Barrington acted like he disbelieved everything Amelia and Fynn said. He made them go through their story several times, and demanded why they hadn't used their phones to record anything. Before Fynn had to admit to forgetting his, Nolan said, "While steering a car down an embankment and bracing for impact?" He left the "How many hands do you think they have?" part of his comment unvoiced, but hopefully clear in his tone. Fynn flashed Nolan a look he thought was grateful.

Barrington sniffed and went back to his questions.

Nolan eventually asked, "Have you touched base with Detective Gordon in the Lombard PD? She was in charge of the original case after the first event."

Barrington shrugged. "When I have my data collected, I'll see what Gordon has to offer."

That didn't speak well for interdepartmental cooperation. Not a huge surprise. Nolan really, *really* liked running his own firm without having to play politics.

By the time Barrington had all the info he thought he needed, the uniformed cop had gone and taken photos of tire tracks in the grass of the embankment, and the F-10 had been confirmed as stolen, they'd reached mid-morning. Fynn had quit pacing and shifted from rapid-fire answers and non-sequiturs to sitting limply and answering in monosyllables. Nolan hated seeing him looking so squashed down.

As the door shut behind Barrington's departing ass, Nolan did a discreet celebratory fist pump. He succeeded in making Fynn laugh. *Win.*

Turning to Amelia, he told her, "Take Fynn's car to a garage. Scan thoroughly for bugs—" He waved her off when she began speaking. "I know you did a scan already but recheck, focus on the undercarriage. Odds are, the perps were waiting outside his building. If they knew what route he'd take, they didn't have to follow close enough to ping your radar, but let's be sure. Have them check the Volvo carefully for damage too. Then you take the rest of the day off."

"I can finish my shift," she protested.

"I know you can," he agreed. Amelia was ex-Army and tough as nails when she needed to be. She'd been through much worse than a few seconds of tense driving action. "Indulge me. I'm going to be on edge the rest of the day anyhow. I might as well be on duty. Tell you what. I'll call you when we're leaving and you can come drive backup when we head home."

"Is that really necessary?" Fynn asked. "How will I get my car back?"

"I'll drive you home," Nolan told him. "We'll have your car delivered by one of my people, but if you want to use it again, I need to add dash and rear cameras, and some other safety features. Would you consider upgrading to a newer model?" Nolan was guessing not.

Sure enough, Fynn jutted out his jaw. "I like my car."

"Fair enough." Changing cars was a fight he wouldn't take on today. He'd ask Amelia how well the Volvo

handled in a pinch and if she said, “like a drunken pig,” then he’d push harder. “Why don’t we go up to your lab. You’ll settle better with something to do.” He already knew Fynn well enough to be certain of that.

“And coffee.” Fynn’s eyes brightened. “I’d kill for some coffee.”

“Are you sure your nerves need caffeine?” he asked as they went to the elevators and Fynn keyed the research floor lock.

“Yes.”

Well, that was pretty uncompromising. Fynn seemed to spend most of his time with his blood at fifty-percent coffee, outdoing any other caffeine addicts Nolan had worked with, but the man was an adult, and a bioscientist as well. It wasn’t Nolan’s place to argue, even though he worried about Fynn’s blood pressure.

Up in the lab, Fynn closed and locked the door, then went to a cabinet by a sink at the end of the room. Opening the cabinet revealed a professional-looking espresso machine. Fynn started the grinder. “Betty. The sole love of my life.”

“I haven’t seen her before.” Fynn usually used a simple filter and electric kettle in the lab.

“I save her for times of need. There’s more mess, but sometimes the crema on top saves my soul.” Fynn glanced over his shoulder. “Want a cup?”

Espresso might be overkill, but Nolan wasn’t going to turn down Fynn’s offer. “Sure. Show me what she’s got.”

Fynn patted the top of the machine. “She’s the best.” When the first tiny cup was filled, Fynn brought it to Nolan. “Tell me that’s not the best ever.”

Nolan was prepared to lie, but a sip of the creamy foam on the surface told him he didn’t have to. “Yeah. Good stuff.” He drank slowly, watching Fynn gulp his coffee down with his eyes closed and then inhale the aroma from the empty cup.

“I’d love another, but I should get to work.” Fynn held out a hand. “Let me wash up and run the fan. The aromatics have to be cleared, even if they’re not in the spectroscopic range of what I’m working on.”

“I can wash dishes.” Nolan took Fynn’s cup instead and turned to the small sink beside the cabinet. Running the water hot, he added a touch of dish soap to each cup and worked the surfaces clean with his fingers. Fynn hovered, so Nolan took his moment. “Why didn’t you tell me you were going to drive to the lab this morning in your personal car?”

“I didn’t know?” Fynn’s tone made that a question.

“You didn’t even list work in the weekend possibilities.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was pathetic, all right? Like I have no life outside my lab. Some weekends I don’t even come in. I had an idea in the night.”

“If you’d given me advance warning, we could’ve rigged dash cameras for your car. Or better, driven you in one of ours—”

“I get it!” Fynn snapped, his color rising. “I screwed up. Sorry. My bad. I’m just stupid.”

Nolan had to laugh.

Fynn colored redder and whirled away.

Nolan grabbed his elbow with a wet hand. Fynn’s arm vibrated like a livewire under his touch. “Hey, no, I wasn’t laughing at you. I was laughing because you’re so damned far from stupid.”

Fynn froze, glancing over his shoulder. “What do you call today’s mess?”

“Bad luck, bad timing. Maybe bad judgment, on my part as well as yours because I could’ve asked you specifically to clear any excursions with me first.”

Pulling free, Fynn strode across the lab, whirled and headed back. “What if I don’t want to clear my life with

you?” He hummed a sound in his throat, and added, “I resent them.”

“Them? The kidnappers?” Nolan felt a rush of pleasure when Fynn nodded. *Getting the hang of how he thinks.* “Oh, I do more than that. I hate them. I don’t *want* you to be in the position of scrutinizing every move you make for risk. But until we figure out who they are, or they give up and move on, we’re stuck with precautions. You’re stuck with me.”

“I don’t mind *you*.” Fynn stopped abruptly, a couple of feet from Nolan. Their eyes met. Something hot and electric and unexpected jumped between them, as if a static shock could cross open space.

Nolan licked his lips, trying to gather his thoughts. “I’m glad. Hopefully this won’t last too long.”

“Yeah.” Fynn sounded hoarse.

Nolan cleared his own throat. “So. Anyway. This attempt tells us these guys aren’t just opportunists who thought you looked like an easy target. They want you enough to try again. Which really puts ex-employees and people who might resent you higher on the list. No new thoughts?”

Fynn’s shoulders slumped. “No.”

“Ex-boyfriends, perhaps? Someone who wishes he’d stuck with you because now he’d be rich, so he’s gonna get his cut this way?” If so, Nolan wanted the pleasure of beating the guy’s head in personally.

“I haven’t had a boyfriend. Not really. I went out with a guy in grad school a few times, but he broke up with me. He hated that I was always running late for stuff. He claimed I didn’t care enough to pay him my full attention. He was probably right.”

“His loss,” Nolan pointed out. Yeah, Fynn’s brain seemed to run on a dozen simultaneous tracks when he wasn’t head-down in some intense focus, but that was part of his charm.

Charm? Look out, Stone. He's a client. They don't have charm.

But Fynn was different from all the other well-off people Nolan had protected. Fynn hadn't done anything to seek public attention, hadn't wanted it, and seemed to be getting very few perks in exchange for his wealth. He was easy to care about.

"I'll still need your ex's name," Nolan said. "You'd be surprised how resentment can smolder. Some guy working a crap job, looks up at a news story and sees the man he dated is making millions? That's a motive."

"I guess. Although I bet he doesn't even remember my name."

Nolan pulled out his phone. "What's his?"

"Leo Knowles." Fynn shifted foot to foot, looking away from Nolan's gaze. "He was in grad school at Northwestern when I was, getting his MBA. You're not seriously going to find the guy and ask if he is stalking me, though? Like, he already thinks I'm self-obsessed. Or did, back then."

"Give me credit for a little more subtlety." Nolan put the info in his to-do list. "I'll have someone check on his whereabouts. He might've left the area. Lots of folk do after graduation. If not, we'll check on his job, finances, get a feel for the guy."

"It's not him."

"Probably not, but we don't have a great suspect list." Nolan planned to recheck the fired employees. Maybe the ones supposed to be out of town had returned, or the woman with the toddler was more cunning than Amelia thought. "What about your old company? Any chance they resent you making a mint after leaving them, instead of giving them the patents?"

"I'm sure they're not thrilled." Fynn wrinkled his nose, an expression Nolan didn't want to call cute, but really, that should've gotten the guy a hug. "Their own fault for giving employees a plaque and a five-hundred-dollar bonus for any patent we generated."

“Five hundred bucks?”

“I know, right? Everyone in that lab said the same thing. If we had a great idea, we’d leave to develop it, not let ZomaChem get their mitts on it. Luckily the courts threw out their non-compete agreement when Simpson challenged it. We weren’t supposed to work in the same field for five years? Totally nuts.”

“So you don’t think someone in your old management would be behind this?”

Fynn gave a twisted smile. “I hope they fired my manager for losing me, but no. Kidnapping? That’s totally out of left field.”

Nolan added *ex-manager* to his list. If the guy really was fired, he’d have a motive for sure. “Was there anyone you worked with, or for, who might think they had a share in your idea? Someone who maybe expected you to take them along when you left?”

“No. None of my coworkers liked me much. I wasn’t good at the socializing part and didn’t really care about their weekends or who was dating whom. Like, five minutes, fine, tell me the gossip, but then let’s move on folks. Work to do, molecules to design.”

That sounded so like Fynn that Nolan had to chuckle.

“Speaking of which.” Fynn turned toward his refrigerators. “I should get to work. I don’t suppose you’re hungry for an avocado?”

“Not really, no.”

“A pity. The ripe ones are accumulating again.” Fynn opened the door of the middle fridge and took three fruits off a marked shelf. “This incubator is kept at a steady seventy degrees. The one beside it fluctuates like a typical indoor space, with a diurnal cycle between sixty-five and seventy-seven. I’m comparing the effects on ripening speed and outgassing for the ‘CadoPlanner. When I know the parameters, I’ll have the main lab confirm my findings.”

He set those three fruits in an acrylic tray and turned to the next refrigerator... or incubator or whatever.

Nolan waved. "Go ahead, do what you need to. I'll hang out over here and do some work."

He settled on a stool at a counter out of the way with a good view of the door. Pulling out his phone, he first texted Charlie to tell him not to show up at three. Nolan planned to stick with Fynn until he was safely back home. Of course, he got some lip from Charlie about overworking, but not even Nolan's oldest friend could deny that a kidnapping attempt would shake up a client. Fynn deserved to have the bodyguard he felt most comfortable with. Anyhow, Nolan cut Charlie a lot of slack, but on this he was the boss.

~I have other work for you, he texted. ~A list of names and people to locate, check further. I want you to hire PIs in the cities where those ex-employees moved to and confirm they're still there and haven't traveled out of town lately. Plus some more local possibilities to look into. He'd start with that ex-boyfriend. Take the bastard off the list. Fynn might've acted like the dude was a minor blip in his past, but there'd been a dark look in his eyes when he mentioned Leo.

Nolan thought Fynn's ex had damaged whatever confidence he had about his attractiveness. Which was damned unfair, because Fynn was gorgeous and special. Sure, his style of conversation took a bit of getting used to, and Nolan wanted to tie Fynn's phone to his pocket, but he was brilliant and enthusiastic and genuine, in a world full of phony people. The way his eyes lit up when he was in full verbal charge on a topic he loved, the way his lips parted and curved when he was focused on something? Fynn was attractive as hell, and damn Leo for making him doubt it.

Then he texted Amelia a list of security features to have added to Fynn's Volvo. Fynn's brother had given him a decent budget for equipment and investigations, but he was already pushing its limit. However, he wasn't going to compromise, especially now there'd been

another attempt. Micah would simply have to open the corporate pocketbooks wider.

No one's getting to Fynn on my watch.

Chapter 7

Fynn held himself together until he was home. He pretended to work for hours, although he had a feeling his notes would read like gibberish on Monday. He sat upright in the passenger seat of Nolan's SUV and pretended not to heave a sigh of relief when the unusual route Nolan followed back to his apartment avoided freeways. He'd happily take an extra twenty minutes of driving to not relive that moment when they were about to be sideswiped at seventy miles an hour.

Sheridan had been watching the apartment in his absence, apparently to make sure no one tried to sneak in there while he was gone and ambush him— *and doesn't that conjure up all kinds of lovely visions?* He thought Sheridan was supposed to trade off with Nolan, who'd spent all day in the lab, his sturdy presence on the stool a comfort.

After a glance at Fynn, though, Nolan had sent Sheridan off to get takeout for the three of them, and ushered Fynn inside. "I've done enough driving for one day," Nolan said. "He can earn his keep after a day lounging on your couch."

That sounded like an excuse, but Fynn wasn't about to complain.

As soon as the door shut behind Sheridan, Fynn felt his control slipping. "I'm going to have a shower," he managed. "Make yourself at home."

He heard Nolan ask if he was okay as he rushed toward the bathroom but couldn't pause to answer. *No. No, I'm not.*

Locking the bathroom door, he started the shower on hot and then collapsed on the closed toilet seat, took off his glasses, and dropped his head in his hands. *I'm losing it. Seriously, how is this my life?* He pressed on his eyes

harder, trying to focus on the faint green and yellow bursts of light. *Sensor confusion*. It didn't distract him this time, and he jammed a fist against his mouth instead.

Small sounds escaped from behind his hand, but he hoped the sound of the water drowned them out. His knees shook, and his stomach fluttered enough that he worried about the six bites of sandwich he'd managed for lunch. *No puking. Pas de...* He couldn't remember the word for vomiting in French. His mother used to say that to their cat, a plush gray Chartreux. She'd spoken French to the cat as a joke, pretending its lack of response to his father's commands was because it didn't speak English, instead of a cat's normal indifference.

I wish I had a cat. Or a dog. Something alive and warm to hug and hold onto and take care of, something to put ahead of himself, so he'd feel needed. A dog was impossible, of course—he wasn't home enough—but he could get a cat. Hell, he could afford to pay a cat sitter to come over and play with a kitty and clean up after it daily, if he was working late. Although, would his cat then like the sitter more than him? Most people seemed to like someone else more than him.

He'd heard there were automatic cat litter boxes which cleaned themselves, although also that cats didn't like them. Pierre, the Chartreux, certainly would've preferred human servants to a noisy robot. *Maybe a sensor system to pick up the odors of elimination, and a device to swap a soiled box for a fresh one, would be less traumatic. I could separate out the indicators for stool and urine—*

He reminded himself he couldn't just branch out into a whole new field, but at least his knees had stopped their stupid vibration. He stood, stripped, peed, and stepped under the shower. The warm water cascaded down his back and the noise was comfortably muffling. *Unless it hides the sound of someone breaking in. That's not comforting.*

Nolan was out there, though. Fynn admired Amelia's skills, and believed the rest of the crew were good, but knowing he had Nolan in the next room kept his heart

from racing. No one would get past Nolan, he was sure of it.

I wouldn't mind Nolan in this shower. Pure fantasy, but no one would know if Fynn imagined big hands on his skin, strong arms around him, Nolan's deep voice murmuring in his ear. Nolan naked with water sluicing down his hairy chest and forearms. *What would the rest of him look like?* Naked Nolan could be Fynn's compensation for being terrified.

If I called, would he come in? Except the door was locked, and he'd probably come barreling through looking for trouble. Maybe with his gun in his hand, which Fynn considered the opposite of sexy. Really, Fynn wasn't even close to hard anyway. He was craving being held more than being fucked, and that was just sad. *Waste of a gorgeous specimen of manhood,* he made himself think, but Nolan's hugs wouldn't actually be a waste.

The water kept flowing, hot and plentiful. An advantage of this apartment, versus the place he'd lived during grad school where the tank was perpetually empty. He washed himself well, shampooed his hair and even used conditioner, which he didn't usually bother with. Soaped up his pits again, because fear-sweat stank worse than the regular kind. *I wonder if Nolan noticed in the lab. Or the car. Jesus.* He washed a third time to make sure.

You're stalling.

Yes, he was. But he felt steadier, so stalling was justified, right?

When he finally turned off the shower, grabbed a towel, and stepped out, he hit another snag. No clean clothes. He considered putting on the shirt and underwear for a run to his room, but a sniff at the pits dissuaded him. *Big nope.*

This was his own apartment. He could wrap up in a towel and walk ten feet without embarrassment. Or he could call and ask Nolan to fetch him some clothes, but

that felt worse. The man wasn't a servant or a boyfriend, to perform personal services.

Fynn toweled off his hair, put on his glasses, and wrapped his largest bath towel around himself. *Okay. Good enough.* When he slipped out the door, he found Nolan and Sheridan both eyeing him. A squeak escaped his mouth as he scurried into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him. *Crap. Shit.* Nolan was one thing, but Sheridan intimidated him. Funny—the guy who was eight inches shorter and a hundred pounds lighter made him far more nervous.

He sat on the edge of the bed and toweled his hair some more. Then he dried himself, every fold and crevice. Underwear on wet skin was always unpleasant. Standing, he dug through his dresser drawers. *A nice shirt, fit for company? Or a ratty T-shirt, to show I don't care about sharing my space? Something casual, to show my composure?* He snickered at that option. *What composure?*

A rap on the door made him jump. “Yes?”

Nolan said, “Sheridan ran out to do some errands. It's just me here, and your food's getting cold.”

Fynn almost said he didn't care, he could go to bed, but his stomach rumbled, reminding him lunch had been minimal and hours ago. He did feel easier knowing only Nolan was waiting to laugh at him, and probably too polite to do it to his face. “Okay. Give me a minute.”

He split the difference on clothes by picking his best T-shirt, a brand new gift from Micah. The blue silk clung to his skin, but there was no annoying tag and the fabric felt soft. He added his favorite pj pants for comfort, left his feet bare, and opened the door.

This time, Nolan was all the way across the apartment, sitting at the breakfast counter. He slid off his stool as soon as he saw Fynn, but turned away, putting a plate into the microwave. “Should be just a minute,” he said casually over his shoulder.

That made it easier for Fynn to cross the room and sit at the other tall stool. When the bell chimed, Nolan pulled out the plate and set it on the counter between them, piled high with rice. He eased two cardboard containers into the microwave. “Curry. Do you want sour cream?”

“Do I have any?” He hadn’t grocery shopped for at least a week.

“Sheridan asked for a couple of containers.” Nolan took off a plastic lid and put the tub next to Fynn’s plate.

“What about Sheridan’s dinner? Are we saving him some?” Fynn couldn’t shake the impression he’d scared the guy off. “Will he be back soon?”

“He took the samosas with him to snack on. We’ll save some of the curry. I expect it’ll take him an hour or so.” Nolan set the rest of the food out, put a glass of water in front of his own place, and asked Fynn, “Water, coffee” He raised an eyebrow. “Mountain Dew Zero?”

Fynn might’ve been embarrassed about being known that well, but he’d burned out his embarrassment quotient for the evening. “Dew, thanks.” He settled back on the stool, opened the can he was given, and poured the first lifesaving hit of sugar-free caffeine down his throat.

Nolan sat across from him, dished himself some rice and curry, and pushed the containers toward Fynn.

Fynn doled out a modest serving. The way his stomach had been swerving up and down all day, he’d play it safe. “Did you really have something vital for Sheridan to do, or did you send him away for my sake?” *Did you see me about to lose my brain?*

“Both,” Nolan said calmly. “He’s fetching some equipment I want to install, but I sent him right now because I figured you needed your space.”

Fynn ate his curry silently. Nolan wasn’t wrong. Finding Sheridan gone had slowed the panicking butterflies in his head. He wasn’t sure he liked being so obvious. No, scratch that, he was positive he didn’t like

it. Even so, he hoped Sheridan wouldn't walk back in the door any time soon. Eating a meal with Nolan in companionable silence was too close to his occasional wistful dreams for safety, but he wasn't ready to give the moment up.

"Tell me about you," he said, when they'd finished half the food and Nolan made a move to get up. "Why security? Who is Nolan Stone?" He'd babbled all kinds of things at Nolan and now realized how one-sided that'd been. "You know a lot about me, but I don't know you."

"Bodyguarding's like that. We have to learn about our clients to protect them, but we're just employees."

I don't think of you as an employee.

Fynn was ready to take the comment as a refusal when Nolan went on, "I was a cop for seven years. That's a tough job. I was better at some parts than others. Police work grinds a guy down, not least because the brass claim we're there to protect and serve, but secretly believe civilians matter less than cops. In every situation, in every way, no matter what they say in public. Too many guys got away with bad shit, too many cops got reprimanded for doing the right thing if it hurt the force."

"You quit?"

"Yeah. Had a friend on the force, a Black woman. She put in a complaint, excessive use of force, on another cop who beat up a teenager. She had body cam and everything. They put that guy on paid leave for a week, but they forced her out."

"They *what*?" Fynn wasn't naive. He knew justice was hard to come by, but that sounded open and shut. "I hope she sued them."

"She wanted to, but a similar case took twelve years for the courts to give the woman back her pension rights. Toya was almost fifty and had a kid with disabilities. She needed the money. She signed a nondisclosure and they retired her on some bullshit reason so she'd get her benefits and pension."

“That sucks!”

“I agree. She didn’t want me to go to bat for her because that could void her nondisclosure, but I couldn’t keep working for the bastards. So I quit. Worked for a security firm for five years, then bought out the owner when he decided to retire. Changed the name to Stone Security and here we are.”

“Well, I’m glad.” *Was that too eager?* “I mean, who knows if someone who wasn’t Amelia would’ve saved me today?” He thought about that. “Of course, you would’ve done the same if you’d been there. Or probably your other people.” Fynn stopped before he dug that hole deeper.

Nolan chuckled. “Possibly, although Amelia’s the best driver among us, so you lucked out. I’m glad I quit, too. I like being my own boss.”

“You must be extra good at it, to rise to the top of the firm so fast.”

Fynn thought he was giving Nolan a compliment, so he wasn’t prepared for a slight wince. “No, see, that’s more about having the money than talent. Sure, Warren wouldn’t have sold to me if he didn’t think I could handle it, but Charlie has more skills, more background as ex-Special Forces, and more years in the biz. What he didn’t have was the cash.”

“How did you get the money?” Fynn eyed him. Hadn’t he said something about growing up poor? Or was Fynn misremembering? “Cops don’t usually have money unless they’re on the take. Which, if you were, you wouldn’t have quit over the bosses being corrupt. Unless —” He broke off his babbling as Nolan put a hand on his wrist. No reason that touch should shake him, but he stared down at Nolan’s wide tanned fingers on his own paler skin and felt a tremor shudder through him.

“Sorry.” Nolan pulled his hand back.

Fynn managed not to protest the loss. He snatched up his soda and took a long drink which did nothing to slow the pounding of his heart.

“It was family money, of a sort,” Nolan said, as if he hadn’t felt anything when they’d touched. “My great uncle Nolan died. My parents had hoped he might like a namesake, and he did. I didn’t inherit a fortune, but enough to cover some of what Warren wanted for the business and he floated me a personal loan for the rest. Warren liked the continuity of selling to one of his own people.”

“That’s good. I’m glad.” Fynn had lost track of his thoughts. “Um, what do your parents think about you doing this line of work? Wouldn’t they rather you did something safer?”

“They’d have rather I stayed on the force. We Stones embody the thin blue line. I’m from generations of Irish Catholic cops, firefighters, paramedics, soldiers. They couldn’t understand why I quit, especially when I couldn’t tell them any details.”

“Catholic? Do they care that you’re gay?” Fynn realized he was getting awfully personal. “Never mind, scratch that, none of my business.”

“It’s okay.” Nolan turned his water glass in his hands. “They’re not thrilled, but they love me. I’m pretty lucky. We play a kind of don’t ask, don’t tell, where the topic never comes up. I’d bet my grandmother prays for my soul every chance she gets, but she still sends me cookies on my birthday.”

Fynn wasn’t sure if he should say that was good or he was sorry. A man like Nolan deserved a family who’d support everything about him. At the same time, Fynn knew Catholic acquaintances in college who’d been disowned. “Micah’s my only family. Now, anyway. He doesn’t care that I’m gay, as long as I don’t fall for some fortune hunter. Ha. Joke’s on him because I don’t fall for anyone, ever, so he’s wasting his time worrying.”

“Never? Did your college ex burn you that badly?”

I didn’t care that much about Leo. Fynn met Nolan’s gaze, about to claim aloofness was his natural state, and was caught in the pure blue of Nolan’s eyes. A wave of everything this man was hit Fynn— of steady hands and

deep voice and calm competence, of muscled arms and broad chest and strong jaw under the close-cropped beard. This was the man who'd helped him through a panic attack when they'd barely met, and who'd sent Sheridan out at the smallest hint Fynn was uncomfortable. As their stare lengthened, Nolan's mouth curved up. Fynn already knew that smile, full of humor but without malice.

I could fall for him like a ton of bricks.

He pushed away from the counter. "I should head to bed. After I clean up the kitchen, I mean. You cooked." So much for his dignified exit.

"I microwaved," Nolan said. "I can handle cleanup. I didn't have nearly the day you did, although I admit my heart stuttered when Amelia reported to me."

Heart? Fynn gave himself a mental slap upside the head. Nolan meant his pulse rate, not anything more. "Thanks. I'll... see you in the morning?" He wasn't sure what the day had done to Nolan's schedule.

"Yep. I'll hand off to Sheridan once you're down, and then come back in the morning."

"Shouldn't you have an actual day off, though?" Fynn ruthlessly strangled his pleasure over Nolan returning. "You were going to have a whole weekend, and today was a bust."

"I don't mind," Nolan said. "With this new event, I want to be right on top of the situation for a while."

Would you like to be on top of me?

That right there was proof Fynn needed to get a solid bedroom door between him and Nolan, before he said something stupid. "Well, good night, then. See you." He headed to his room, turning in the doorway to wave.

Nolan waved back, a quizzical look on his face.

Fynn retreated, closed his door, and slowly banged his forehead against it over and over. *I am so totally in trouble.*

Chapter 8

Nolan arrived to relieve Sheridan half an hour early on Sunday. Wasn't like he'd been getting much sleep anyhow. He trusted his people, but his whole body relaxed when he could hear Fynn's faint snores through the bedroom door himself.

By the time Fynn stumbled out of the bedroom, blinking behind his glasses, his hair adorably mussed, Nolan was on his second cup of coffee and halfway through initial email reports on the new suspect searches.

Fynn looked his way and smiled so sweetly Nolan felt his heart lurch. *No, not heart, my stomach or something, because a client getting attached is always bad news.*

Then Fynn said, "Oh my god, fresh coffee. Come to Papa," and stumbled right past Nolan to the kitchen.

Nolan's taken-abackness definitely wasn't disappointment. "Yeah, I made a fresh pot. I figured you'd be up soon."

Fynn poured himself a huge mugful. "I forgot to set the timer last night. I thought I'd have to wait." He took a long swallow, then inhaled the aroma with a beatific look on his face.

Nolan slid his phone back into his pocket. "What's your plan for today?"

"I should grocery shop." Fynn drank more coffee a sip at a time. With Fynn's smile fading, Nolan could see dark circles under his eyes and a hint of strain around his mouth. *He probably didn't sleep well either.*

We could've kept each other company.

He stomped firmly on that idea. “You could order groceries in. I’m surprised you don’t use a service anyway.”

“I’m super picky about my produce. I have to choose for myself. When I first started working on my prototype, I selected every avocado by hand.” Fynn topped up his mug and sighed. “Not anymore, obviously. We get them delivered by the case. But I still like picking out the food I’m going to eat.”

“We can go to the store.”

Fynn stared into the depths of his mug. “I’m not sure I want to drive.”

“Hell, no, you’re not driving yourself anywhere. That’s our job.”

“I mean, even as a passenger. I feel like a wimp, but I don’t like the idea.” The cup of coffee shook in Fynn’s grip and he set it down on the counter.

“You’re not being a wimp. That’s reasonable. Cars haven’t been a safe space for you lately.”

“I hate it, though. The kidnappers shouldn’t have so much power over me. I refuse to let them.” Fynn eyed Nolan. “Maybe if you drive. I feel safer around you.”

Nolan tried not to like that too much. *He means your size, bozo. And because you’re the boss. Nothing personal.* “How about if Amelia drives, and you and I sit in the back? We can take my Navigator with all the bells and whistles. Different seating, different set-up. Would that help?”

Fynn tilted his head, eyes unfocused. “Yeah. Maybe. Might work.”

“I’ll message Amelia. What time do you want to leave?”

“Shouldn’t she get time off?”

“She’s had some. You let me worry about my personnel.” Although Nolan would by far take Fynn’s concern versus the clients who assumed all their bodyguards should be available round the clock on a

moment's notice, like inanimate objects. "Do you want a shower and breakfast?"

"Yes. Plus I should finish making a list. I'm feeding extra mouths."

"You don't need to feed us."

"I like to. Feels more like having friends over and less like... whatever this is. And I enjoy cooking when I have time."

"Well, make sure you take the cost out of what you're paying us."

"Right." Fynn said the word flatly enough Nolan was sure he wouldn't.

Nolan pulled out his phone. "It's seven-thirty now. Leave at eight-thirty? Nine o'clock?"

"Nine sounds good."

He texted a notice to Amelia and as added precaution, told Charlie to come play chase car. Better safe than sorry.

Fynn had turned to browse in his refrigerator, his mug once again firmly clutched in his hand. "I can make us cinnamon French toast. That'll use up the last of the bread and eggs. Then I can buy fresh. Added incentive to shop."

Nolan had eaten a sensible low-carb meal of lean turkey ham scrambled in egg-whites at five a.m., but he wouldn't turn down Fynn this morning. "Sounds tasty."

"I'll go shower, and then start food."

Nolan turned back to his emails. He'd finished reading the Denver PI's report confirming one of the fired employees had been a thousand miles away through the whole episode when he realized he hadn't heard the shower go on. A quick check of his cameras and alarms on the back windows showed nothing wrong. He cranked the audio on the bedroom camera nearest the bathroom, but all that came across were tiny, muffled sounds.

He wasn't in the job of spying on his clients. There was a reason the cameras pointed out of the apartment, not in. Fynn might be plucking his eyebrow hairs or rubbing one out or crying, and none of those were Nolan's business. *As long as he's okay.*

He sat out another half hour, getting more antsy as the minutes rolled by, until finally he slid off his chair and went to the bedroom door. He knocked gently. "Hey, are you okay? Do you want me to start the French toast?"

The door was yanked open two seconds later. Fynn stared at him, phone in hand.

Not teary-eyed, not looking upset. Nolan's worry settled. "Sorry. Do you want to push the shopping later?"

"No. Crap." Fynn stared down at the small screen. "I was looking up the weather to see what I should wear, and there was a piece about how much of the US is in drought. I got curious about which avocado-growing regions were affected, because growing conditions alter the flesh-to-pit ratio, which influences—" He cut himself off. "I got distracted."

At least you look more cheerful. "I can tell Amelia to come for nine-thirty."

"I'll shower now. Nine should be fine." Fynn shut the door in Nolan's face. Then yanked it open again. "Sorry! I didn't mean to."

Nolan waved. "Go shower. I'll start the French toast." He waited by the door, though, till he heard the shower go on.

Pancakes had always been Nolan's mother's go-to, but cinnamon French toast was easy. When Fynn came out, hair damp and glasses fogged around the edges, Nolan had a plateful on the table. He waved toward Fynn's seat, where he'd refilled the obligatory coffee cup. "Park it there and I'll serve breakfast. You don't have any fruit except avocados, but there's jam and I poured orange juice." *Give you some vitamins with the carbs and caffeine.*

“This is nice.” Fynn eased down into his chair. “You didn’t have to.” He took off his glasses, his eyes looking bigger and softer without the lenses, wiped them on the hem of his polo shirt, and slid them back up his nose. His soft smile squeezed something inside Nolan.

“Not a problem. Mom made sure all her kids could cook.” He set his phone handy beside his place since Amelia would ping him when she arrived and using an ear bud at the table felt impolite. Once Fynn had served himself, digging into plain slices, Nolan spread his share with strawberry preserves. “Don’t you like jam?”

“Not often,” Fynn said around a mouthful. “Too much sugar. Do you do things like this for all your clients?”

“Hardly.” Nolan paused to figure out the difference. “Most of them live like they’re wealthy. They have staff to cook breakfast, and large apartments or houses so we bodyguards are out of sight when they’re home.” Unlike this small apartment. Sharing a meal and crashing on the couch felt more like a friend’s place than a client’s. Maybe that was why Nolan’s detachment kept slipping.

“Micah bought a big house last year,” Fynn said. “He wanted me to do the same, or to move in with him, but I like this place. It’s familiar and I have all my routines. I don’t do great with changes.”

“Wouldn’t he be company, though?” Fynn had shrugged off a request to list his close friends with “Haven’t had any since grad school.” The man seemed painfully isolated, although he acted like he didn’t care.

Fynn wrinkled his nose. “Micah stepped in after our parents died and I pretty much burned out his patience then. I’m sure he heaved a huge sigh of relief when I turned him down.”

“You were a teenager, though, right?” Nolan thought he remembered that. “Everyone’s hard to live with as a teenager.”

“I still get on his nerves. He puts up with me now I’m making us money, I guess, and at least he’s one person I know I can trust.”

Nolan popped another bite of French toast in his mouth and didn't mention that he had Oliver doing a deep dive into Micah's finances. The fact that Micah'd hired his brother a good security firm was in his favor, but he wouldn't be the first person to try to wring extra money out of his own company by illegal means.

By the time they'd finished eating and washed the dishes, Amelia had pulled up out front. Nolan paused at the apartment door and ran a quick look up and down Fynn. "Wallet, keys, phone?"

"Got 'em." Fynn's tone held a hint of impatience.

"Shopping list?"

"Crap."

Nolan suppressed a smile as Fynn hurried into the kitchen to grab the pad off the refrigerator.

"I'm surprised you don't use your phone for that." He checked the hallway and lobby cameras on his screen, then ushered Fynn out and down the hall.

"My phone isn't always handy in the kitchen and by the time I find it, I've forgotten what I wanted to write down."

"Makes sense." Nolan stood ahead of Fynn in the elevator, settling his ear-bud in place, and checked the lobby before ushering Fynn out. A young woman coming in gave Nolan an admiring once-over and nodded to Fynn on her way past. Nolan stepped back to be out of her direct reach and made sure the elevator had closed behind her before leading Fynn through the lobby and up to the glass door. "There's the Navigator." He pointed at his car.

Amelia waved and got out, standing by the driver's door, scanning the street. She gave them a thumbs up, which meant no bogeys and no paparazzi. Apparently, the police report from the day before hadn't leaked anywhere yet. Maybe there was an advantage to having a detective who didn't give two shits about the victims.

Fynn took a shaky-sounding breath.

Nolan set a hand on Fynn's back. "Go on out, down the step, across the sidewalk, and get into the back seat. Twenty feet. I'll be right behind you. Scoot over to the other side and I'll get in after you. Piece of cake."

"Right." Fynn didn't move.

"Or we could skip shopping and order in. Or I could send someone to do it."

"No!" Fynn yanked open the door and strode out.

Nolan followed him at the correct distance, senses alert.

Fynn scurried down the walk, and Amelia rounded the car to open the back door. Fynn scrambled inside, and Nolan closed the gap, getting in after him. He'd opted for captain's chairs in the second row. Fynn moved over and collapsed into the one behind the driver's seat. Nolan seated himself and swung the door shut. Amelia rounded the car and got in.

"Looking good, boss. Any change of plans?"

"Nope. All-Foods Market. Nice and easy." He turned to Fynn who was still breathing hard and set a hand on his knee. "Buckle your seatbelt."

"Yeah. Sure." Fynn rubbed his shoulder and reached for the strap. "Hey. Bonus."

"Huh?"

"Last two times I was on the other side of the car, so this belt doesn't hit my bruised shoulder."

Bruised. "How sore are you?"

"It's okay." Fynn clicked the buckle, tugged on the strap a couple of times as if testing its security, and gave Nolan a sickly grin. "Ready."

Nolan said into his ear bud. "Call Charlie." When the reply of "Yes, boss," came through, he told Charlie, "We're about to head out. Keep your eyes open."

"Charlie's around?" Fynn craned his neck looking back as Amelia pulled out into traffic. "I don't see him."

“You’re not supposed to. He’ll hang back, make sure we don’t have a tail, and then watch the car and the exit while we’re in the store.”

“So I’m not being paranoid?” Fynn’s voice squeaked.

Nolan squeezed Fynn’s knee gently with the hand he somehow hadn’t yet moved. “We’re just being careful.”

Fynn grabbed Nolan’s wrist and hung on. “In this case, I like careful in a man.”

Nolan massaged gently with his fingers. *Distract him.* “But not in most cases? What do you usually like in a man?” *Oops, perhaps not that distraction,* but he didn’t take the question back.

Fynn tilted his head as if thinking. “Patience. Kindness.” He dropped his eyes to where his fingers ringed Nolan’s wrist. “I’m getting fond of big hands.”

That should’ve been Nolan’s cue to let go, but Fynn still clung to him like a lifeline, and Nolan didn’t want to dislodge him. He did stop his finger massage and made sure he stayed down close to Fynn’s knee. “And men who cook?” *Harmless distraction only.*

“Definitely gets my attention. I like good food, even if I get too busy most of the time.”

“Did my French toast qualify?”

“Seven out of ten.”

“Would’ve been eight if you’d had blueberries.”

“Maybe a nine.” Fynn blew out a breath and settled back in his seat, letting go of Nolan’s wrist. “Thanks. I’m better. Not freaking out.”

Nolan was almost sorry to be able to move his hand. He settled further into his seat too. “I’m glad.” He spoke to his phone. “Call Charlie.” And when he connected, “Report?”

“Not seeing any problems,” Charlie replied. “All clear on your six.”

“Go check the grocery parking lot then. It’s Fynn’s usual place to shop.”

“On it.”

Fynn turned to him. “I shop different days of the week, though. I can’t imagine someone would hang out for days waiting for me. In such a crowded spot too?”

“Nor can I,” Nolan reassured him. “Like I said, I’m being careful. The store isn’t the kidnappers’ MO. Both times, they tried to pull you over somewhere relatively isolated. That doesn’t describe All-Foods on a Sunday.”

“Right.” Fynn glanced forward and back, eyes on the cars they passed, tracking other drivers with jerky movements of his head. He wound his hands together, fingers tangling until Nolan ached to quiet them.

“It’ll be fine. I promise.” Nolan would make that true, dammit. “Hey. What’s your biggest indulgence in a grocery store? The thing you can’t resist?”

“Pringles.” Fynn laughed and his hands relaxed. “Sculpted, formed, mashed, dried and re-fried once-potato chips, with a day’s worth of salt, but soooo addictive. Especially the cheddar kind. Now they have these half-size tubes by the checkout to tempt me if I resist through the regular snack aisle.” He turned to Nolan, his brown eyes flecked with bright gold. “What’s yours?”

Today, I’m afraid it might be you. “Jellybeans,” he admitted instead, because that was true enough. “Luckily, I can avoid those by skipping the candy aisle.”

“Do you separate out the colors and eat one kind at a time?”

“No, I like to be surprised by what I get next.”

“Barbarian.” Fynn turned to the window as they pulled into the parking lot. “Oh, we’re here.”

“Yep. Amelia’s going to let us off out front, and then park and meet us inside.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll get out first, and you follow me out this side. Then right into the store.”

“Got it.”

Once they were inside, Fynn visibly relaxed. Nolan tried to hide his hypervigilance while still watching all the other shoppers for signs of trouble. Fynn grabbed a cart, pushing it toward the produce section. “I need fruit, although *not* avocados— Oh, look.” He pointed to the avocado section which was flanked by a small shelf holding green ‘CadoBoxes. On top of the display, a monitor played a video ad. Fynn drifted nearer, eyeing two women who’d stopped to watch the infomercial.

“I don’t know,” one of them said to the other. “Just for avocados?”

The second woman ran a finger over one of the cartons, tracing the logo. “Like it said, imagine never again being ready to make your avocado toast, cutting into the avocado, and it’s all brown inside.”

“Ew. Yeah. Wrecks my morning.”

“And hey, it’s on sale. Ninety-nine bucks. That’s not too pricey.”

“I guess not.” The first woman lifted a carton into her friend’s cart.

“Hey!”

“You try it. If you like it, then I’ll get one too.”

“Well, maybe I will.” The second woman took three avocados out of the display. “These should give it a test drive.” With a grin at her friend, she pushed her cart on toward the tomatoes.

Fynn glanced at Nolan. “Micah said his marketing department was trying a new strategy.”

“Seems to be working.”

“It’s a big price drop. Do you think people who paid full price will be mad? You paid thirty bucks more for the basic model at Christmas.” Fynn looked anxious rather than pleased.

Nolan couldn't resist a quick rub on Fynn's tight shoulders. "People expect technology prices to come down, and new fancier models to come out. This is no different."

"I suppose." Fynn watched a teenager stop to eye the infomercial, then shrugged. "At least it's not the video I'm in."

"You did a commercial?" Nolan would have to go looking for that. Fynn was easy on the eyes, for sure, but he'd have said the man had zero acting ability.

"Yeah." Fynn peered up at him. "It was Micah's idea—the man behind the invention. They used this clip of me pouring something into a test tube with smooshed avocado in the bottom. It was totally stupid. Plus, the pouring liquid was bright red like cough syrup. There's almost nothing in bioscience that color."

"I don't suppose people will know."

"It's the principle of the thing. The art guy said they picked the color because it made my eyes pop. I told him I didn't want my eyes to *pop*. That has to be the stupidest expression known to man."

Nolan chuckled. "Tell me how you really feel."

"I really feel like I belong in a lab, not a commercial."

The teen wandered off, but an elderly woman stopped at the 'CadoBox shelf. Nolan spotted Amelia coming in the door. She gave him a wave. He set a hand under Fynn's elbow and turned him away from the avocados. "Come on, let's pick out some blueberries. And maybe some Pringles." Fynn deserved anything that would make him feel better right now.

Chapter 9

Fynn woke from another nightmare, muffling his sounds with a fist pressed against his lips. His eyes stung with tears. In the dimness of his room, lit only by the yellow-green avocado nightlight Micah had given him for Christmas, he lay rigid on his bed, his chest heaving. *Not again, damn it. It's been almost two weeks.*

He was pretty much okay in the daytime. Sure, knowing someone had tried to kidnap him twice— *duct tape*— kept his stomach in knots and he'd lost a little weight, but he could handle it. Especially when Nolan was there.

Nolan had started working a split shift, covering both Fynn's morning commute and his drive home, however late that turned out to be. Joe still drove, having refused Fynn's offer to give him a vacation till things settled down, but Nolan rode with Fynn in the back seat. His calming presence was the only thing that'd kept Fynn's freak-out from becoming a full-blown panic attack the first time they got back on a freeway.

In the mornings, Nolan would sit in a corner of the lab working on his phone until Fynn submerged into the day's work and didn't care about being handed over to the midday shift. In the evenings, he rode next to Fynn in the car home, never impatient as Fynn expounded on his successes and frustrations. Nolan told stories, too— he seemed to find Fynn a good audience, even with his tendency to interrupt. Fynn didn't feel like he had to perform being ordinary around Nolan.

Life was good when Nolan grinned at him from across his own kitchen table or shared the couch as they unwound by watching sci-fi movies and reruns. Fynn had even hauled out his current LEGO project and Nolan had a knack and never seemed bored.

At night, though, Nolan had a right to his time off. He'd leave at eleven, handing off to one of his team members, and Fynn would go to bed. Only to wake like this. Apparently, knowing Charlie or Sheridan was out there on the couch watching the security screens didn't settle Fynn's sleeping subconscious worth a damn.

When Micah had found out the bodyguards were hanging out in Fynn's living room, he'd offered to have Fynn move to his house or suggested a hotel with good security. Fynn wasn't doing either of those. He didn't want to fall back into his teen pattern of Micah finding him too much, too loud, too wrong, while pretending not to be frustrated with him. He definitely didn't want to give up his familiar spaces for a hotel that wouldn't feel and smell like home.

I'd probably have worse nightmares in a strange room.

Not that these were fun. He bit back a whimper as a flash of car headlights cut through his field of view behind the curtains. *Not headlights, a helicopter, silly.* He could make out a subtle vibration and the sound of the rotors fading away, and anyway he was on the fourth floor. No headlights would shine in on him until they invented flying cars.

What a traffic control nightmare that'd be. Not to mention a security nightmare, if threats could come at you from three dimensions instead of two. With the way people drove, knowing who basically sucked behind the flying-wheel and who was approaching with nefarious intentions would be challenging.

Maybe I could design an analysis program to evaluate common human driving patterns versus deliberate threats. Except programming wasn't Fynn's strength. Nor was extensive data collection. He loved his current lab where he could come up with an idea, stress-test the details, then hand everything over to more methodical types to generate actual statistics—

Something thumped loudly beyond his door. Fynn *screamed.*

The door whipped open, and he crunched up to sitting, fumbling for the pepper spray Nolan had given him as a non-lethal defense option. He pointed the nozzle waveringly at the intruder.

Except that was Nolan peering in.

“What are you doing here?” Fynn demanded, his voice rasping. He dropped the spray and clenched his fingers together.

“Are you okay? You... shouted.”

I screamed like a frightened rabbit. “There was a noise.”

“Something fell off your shelf in the living room. Are you sure you’re all right?” Before Fynn could ask him not to, Nolan turned on the light.

Fynn blinked at him. He wanted to cover his face but by now it was too late. Nolan was observant, and he’d have noticed the damp on Fynn’s cheeks, the red of his eyes, the soaked flatness of his hair. Fynn jerked his chin up and stared back.

Instead of going out, Nolan slipped into the room, closing the door behind him.

“Isn’t Sheridan’s working tonight?” Fynn asked. Nolan had put the duty schedule on the refrigerator, because Fynn liked to know what was happening in his life, and he’d checked at bedtime. *To know who’s out there pretending they don’t hear me freaking out.*

“I had a job for Sheridan, so I switched with him.”

“You were on most of the day.” Nolan worked long hours and should now be home, fast asleep. Not shining an interrogation lamp in Fynn’s face.

Nolan leaned his shoulders against the door and sighed. “You want to know something stupid?”

About you? Anything. “Sure.”

“I relax better on your terrible couch than in my own room these days.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. If I’m here, I know everything’s fine.”

“Sheridan would tell you if it wasn’t.”

“Yeah, he would. So would the others, and I trust them, but something in me unwinds when I can see for myself.”

Fynn wanted to feel flattered, but maybe that was just how Nolan worked. “Sounds like a good way to end up with an ulcer.”

Nolan laughed. “Tell me about it.”

A wonderful, terrible thought occurred to Fynn. “This bed’s big, more comfortable, and if you’re in the same room, then you’d really know I was safe.”

“That breaks a bunch of my rules.”

“Just to rest.” He bit his lip and admitted, “It would help me too. Nights are always tough.”

“They are?” Nolan turned off the overhead light, pushed away from the door, and came closer. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Micah would tell me to see a shrink again, but the last one I saw tried three different meds for attention deficit, each of which made me moody all the time and upset my stomach. Eventually she said maybe I could do without meds. She told me I could learn to work around my issues. I asked how I was supposed to ‘work around’ bullies at school, and she said they were unimportant in the long run. I wanted to survive to *get* to the long run.” Fynn’s stomach burned, remembering her. To be fair, he’d been confrontational and uncooperative, but that’d been her job, right? To help kids who didn’t think they needed to be helped?

“How long ago was that?”

“It’s been years. I don’t need a psychiatrist, I need some sleep.” To his dismay, tears began to track down his cheeks again, echoes of his nightmare rising to tug at him. Having Nolan take a step toward him, hand

reaching out, let Fynn tell the truth. “I want to not be afraid to close my eyes.”

“Oh.” Nolan’s single syllable sounded like he’d taken a punch. He came over and sat on the edge of the bed. For a moment, he hovered his hand in the air, then his touch settled, warm and welcome, against Fynn’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Fynn rubbed at his eyes angrily. “It’s not your fault, all right? It’s some sucky bastard who wants to extort my money. I’m just frustrated.” *And tired. So tired.*

“Lie down,” Nolan told him. “I’m here.”

“If you lie down too. You don’t have to take care of me.” He ached to be comforted, but he wasn’t a kid anymore. Adulthood didn’t work that way. “I want us both to sleep better.” *Right? Nolan can’t be comfortable on that couch. Sharing’s just logical.*

“Okay.” Nolan stretched out slowly on the empty side of the bed.

Fynn saw his feet were bare, and something vulnerable about those naked toes made Fynn reach over and pat Nolan’s hip. “Now relax. You have all those alarm things, right? Cameras and stuff to keep us safe?” Fynn lay down inches from Nolan. He imagined he could feel the warmth of that big man crossing the space between them. “We can sleep.”

Nolan freed his phone from his pocket without sitting up. “I’ll get Oliver to watch the camera feeds. He’s up at this hour anyhow.” He typed away, then set the phone on the nightstand. “There.” Easing a gun out of his holster, he placed the weapon beside the bed too. A motion of the mattress felt like Nolan had wriggled deeper into it.

Fynn fought the impulse to roll toward him and drape an arm or a leg over him. He’d never slept in the same bed with anyone. Never wanted to. With Leo, when the sex was over, one of them always left because Fynn was a restless sleeper and Leo couldn’t handle fidgeting when he wanted to relax. Fynn bet Nolan could handle being close to him.

But closeness wasn't what this was about, so he rolled over to put his back to Nolan.

For several minutes, Fynn couldn't get comfortable. He was hyper-aware of his own breaths and when he moved his legs, he accidentally kicked Nolan's shin through the sheet. He realized Nolan was on top of the covers, and wanted to tell him to get under them, but it was summer and warm enough and Fynn was naked. That was probably another rule they shouldn't be breaking. *What do I do with my hands?* It was like he'd forgotten how to sleep. He shoved a hand under his pillow, then pulled it out and laid his arm over the sheets along his hip, then slid it back under. *Not touching my dick, at least.* He huffed a shaky laugh.

Nolan rested a hand on Fynn's shoulder, not rubbing, just pressing there like the comfort of the weighted blanket that was too warm for summer. "Go to sleep, Fynn," Nolan murmured.

Somehow, he did.

When he woke, bright sun filtered through the curtains and the other side of the bed was empty and cool. *Did I imagine Nolan there?* The deeply pressed shape in the crumpled covers suggested no, and Fynn vaguely remembered being woken from the onset of a bad dream and pulled into a comforting hold.

Better than the best teddy bear. I wonder if someone could create a Nolan-bear that could detect restless sleeping and activate a hug function. It'd need to be really big and solid and still wouldn't be the same comfort. He'd felt safe with Nolan, the echoes of the nightmare scattering before they'd fully formed, letting him fall back asleep.

Fynn rolled out of bed, stretched, and grabbed clean clothes out of the dresser. His phone said 8:04, so he hadn't slept in much. *I did sleep, though, for hours and hours.* He felt better rested than he'd been in days.

Wearing his robe, he headed across the hall toward the bathroom, but heard a clink and scraping sound from the kitchen. *Who's on duty this morning?* He squashed

down the little ache that complained about Nolan not saying goodbye— *because he wanted to let you sleep in, you fool*— and headed out to see.

Standing by the stove, Nolan gave him a brief smile. “Hey. It’s Saturday. You could’ve slept longer.”

“No, I couldn’t.” He dropped his clean clothes and crossed the apartment, stopping a few feet from Nolan. *What are we doing? Why are you still here? Am I imagining something special?* Instead, he asked, “Did you get some rest too?”

“Yes. You were right. The bed beats the couch. Although your night shift isn’t supposed to be sleeping.”

“You are when you were also the day-before shift.”

Fynn was surprised to see Nolan color and look away.

That made Fynn bold. He moved closer. “I don’t understand. Why do you keep hanging around?”

“I can go—”

“No!” He grabbed Nolan’s polo-shirt hem.

Nolan looked surprised but didn’t pull away.

“I don’t want you to leave. I want you to stay more. Longer. I don’t know why you’d want to, though.” Fynn forced his fingers to open.

“Don’t you?”

“Well, I have money now, but you’ve worked for other people with money. I bet that doesn’t impress you.”

“No.”

“You like taking care of people.” Fynn was certain bodyguarding wasn’t just a job in Nolan’s skill set, but vitally important to him. “I happen to need guarding.”

“If that was the only reason, I’d leave you to my competent team.” Nolan reached toward Fynn, then aborted the gesture, folding his arms. “I meant to, when Amelia relieved me this morning. Except I couldn’t leave.”

Fynn whispered, “Why not?” He was pretty sure the answer was going to either make him happy or rip him to shreds. He held his breath.

“You don’t realize how special you are.”

“I guess not many people could make millions off avocados.” Fynn’s voice came out strangled.

“Not many people are as kind, or as interesting, or as honest, or as funny as you are.”

“I’m mostly funny when I don’t mean to be, and I’m not sure I’m all that kind.” He didn’t want to chase Nolan off, but he didn’t want the guy staying on false pretenses.

Nolan reached out again and this time he touched Fynn’s cheek. “You care that the product you make your money from isn’t priced too high for people to afford. You care that all your bodyguards, not just me, get a full night’s sleep and days off. You tried to get your driver to take a paid vacation for his safety, even though you hate changing your routines.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to Joe.” Fynn ached to lean into that warm palm.

“Exactly.” Nolan moved closer, sliding his hand down Fynn’s cheek and under his chin. He tilted Fynn’s face up. Fynn felt those strong fingers trembling. “I’ve guarded plenty of attractive and rich and successful folk. You’re the first one I’ve wanted to get close to.”

“How close?” Fynn pushed higher onto his toes, feeling reckless and powerful. *I made Nolan Stone’s hand shake.*

Nolan’s lips parted as if he was about to reply, then he simply bent his head and took Fynn’s mouth with his. The kiss wasn’t gentle. Nolan claimed Fynn’s lips hungrily. His beard was perfectly rough against Fynn’s face and he tasted of coffee. He cupped the back of Fynn’s head and held him still to plunder his mouth.

Fynn was more than willing to be held. He kissed back as well as he could, his breath coming short. The brief kisses he’d exchanged with Leo had been nothing like this. Nolan nipped Fynn’s lower lip till it smarted, then

soothed the spot with his tongue tip, before groaning and jamming their open mouths together.

When they broke apart, Fynn was panting. He thumped his heels back on the floor. “Now you can’t leave, because showing me what that feels like and then going away would be mean, and you’re not mean.” He squeezed his eyes shut, because *way to go with the inane babble*.

But Nolan chuckled. “I’m not going anywhere. I do need to talk to my team, though. Give Charlie a heads-up that I’m deviating from our planned schedule for personal reasons.”

“Before you take me back to bed?” Fynn had never been the desperately eager one before. Sex was fun, but so were many other things and his brain was often running on too many tracks to focus on seduction, even when he was the one being seduced. Having Nolan’s mouth on his and Nolan’s muscular body pressed up against him turned out to be excellent for focus, though. His dick was totally onboard with *right now*. “I haven’t showered yet. I mean, we can shower afterward. Instead of twice.”

Fynn’s phone chose that moment to ring. He flinched, glaring at where it lay on the counter. *Ignore, ignore*. Except that was Micah’s ring, and if Fynn didn’t answer, his brother would keep trying. “Hold that thought,” he told Nolan, and scooped up the phone. “Yeah, what?”

“Good morning to you too.”

Fynn hadn’t had coffee and he hadn’t had sex. Micah couldn’t expect manners. “What do you want?”

“I’m on my way over there. I’ll be downstairs in about fifteen minutes.”

“What? Why?”

“I have an investor who’s interested in floating a big chunk of the portable-tester development costs, in exchange for a quantity of shares we can afford to part with, but he wants to speak with you.”

“With me?” The last thing Fynn wanted was to be paraded like a prize pony for someone who should only care about results. “Why not show him the lab? If he signs the NDA, he can have a demo.”

“Fynn, come on, you know that’s not the way these things work. We have to establish a rapport. Convince him we’re a stable and growing organization. That means some socializing.”

“I hate schmoozing. I’m not good at it. You do it.”

“I’ve already met with him. Don’t be a child. It’s just brunch at the yacht club. The food’s good, and we can go out on the water afterward.”

Going out on the water was Micah’s thing, not Fynn’s. When Micah bought the boat, Fynn had told him to have fun while Fynn kept his feet on dry land. Although he didn’t hate cruising— in the actual boat sense. Maybe Nolan would enjoy it.

Fynn hadn’t spent much time with Micah lately. That was Micah’s fault for treating him like a child, but some little bit inside him murmured *he’s all the family I have and I want him to meet Nolan properly*. At the very least, they’d have some time on the water when no kidnapper could possibly be sneaking up on them, and they could relax and talk.

“Okay, I’ll do the brunch thing, but this’d better be worth it.”

“Fifteen million dollars?”

“I guess.” The number seemed ridiculous. Millions of dollars didn’t feel real to him, even though he now owned as much. “Do I have to dress up?”

“Slacks and a good polo are fine. There’s no dress code for brunch. I’ll be there soon.”

Micah hung up before Fynn could change his mind. The words “dress code” stuck in his throat. He’d done the dinners with investors, back when they were courting venture capital. If he never saw another dinner jacket it’d be too soon. “Why is this still my life?”

“Why is what?” Nolan looked sympathetic but puzzled.

“My brother’s on the way to take me out to *brunch* with an *investor*.” He put heavy sarcasm into the words. “I thought we’d established ourselves, and I wouldn’t have to do meet-and-greets anymore.”

“Where are we going for brunch?”

The “we” made Fynn perk up a bit. *Right, I get to have Nolan there. I won’t feel like such a social loser around him. But I’ve better things to do with him than brunch.* “We have fifteen minutes till Micah get here. I’ve had sex quicker than that.” Talking to his brother had taken the edge off his hard-on, but a minute or two with Nolan would fix him right up.

“Nu-uh.” Nolan looked tempted, but he backed up instead. “The first time I have sex with you, there’s not going to be a limit before your brother comes walking in the door. I’m going to take my time with you.”

Fynn sucked a breath because that was *not* making him patient. However, he realized he desperately needed the shower he hadn’t taken yet, with the sweat of his nightmares still lingering. He discretely sniffed his armpit. *Yeah, if Nolan was willing to snuggle that, he really is interested.* Fynn waved toward his pile of clothes on the hallway floor, which *weren’t* a good polo and slacks. *Crap.* “I’ll go shower and get different clothes, I guess.”

“I’ll make us some coffee before we go.”

“You’re a lifesaver. And one other thing.”

“Name it.”

Fynn briefly let himself imagine some of the things he could ask for with a wide-open offer, but there was only one they had time for. “Kiss me again first.”

Perhaps Fynn did a better job of kissing back, or maybe they got the angle exactly right, but when they were done, Nolan’s arms around him were the only thing keeping Fynn upright. Fynn’s vision sparkled and Nolan’s erection against his stomach didn’t make

walking away easier. He blinked hard, let go of the thick biceps he'd been clinging to, and backed off a step. Then another. *Better than breakfast. Although I need my coffee. I'll pacify Micah for now, but hot damn, I'm going to get Nolan back in my bed ASAP.* "And it won't take a nightmare."

Nolan cocked his head, a frown forming, then fading from his forehead. "With luck, we'll have far better things to do in your bed than nightmares."

"Hold that thought." Fynn took one more look at Nolan, at the brightness of his eyes and the hard cock straining at his zipper. *For me.* Nolan was some kind of miracle. Fynn hurried off to shower and dress and get back to Nolan's side before disaster stepped in and took his miracle away.

Chapter 10

Nolan straightened up in the back seat of Micah's car as they turned in at the gates to Southwinds Marina and Yacht Club. In the driver's seat, Micah pulled out ID to show the gate guard. *At least there's some security.*

Nolan had thought about insisting on driving, but he'd wanted to keep his hands and attention free. He figured they weren't likely to need his defensive driving skills. This excursion had arrived out of the blue, unplanned, which meant no kidnapper should've had time to set up a roadside ambush. And brother or not, Nolan didn't want Micah Dempsey lurking behind him.

Nolan hadn't told Fynn his brother was on the suspect list— low down, but still on it. Micah had hired Stone Security but that could be a cover-up. Nolan remembered the D-list TV star who'd supposedly hired them because she was being stalked. The whole thing turned out to be a hoax to get media attention. She'd only destroyed her own property, so once they realized what was going on, they'd closed out the contract and backed the hell away. Let the cops figure her out.

Whoever's behind the attempts on Fynn, though, I'm bringing them down, even if it's Micah.

Oliver had discovered Micah was overextended on a property purchase and counting on next quarter's profits to dig him back out of a hole. RipeBox had essential employee insurance on Fynn. That made sense— Fynn *was* RipeBox, and if something happened to him, the company would need money to close down ethically, paying its debts and severance owed to its staff. But the policy also had ten million in kidnapping and ransom insurance, which meant if Fynn was held for ransom, the money wouldn't come out of Micah's pockets.

Might it go into them instead?

Sometimes, Nolan hated how his profession made him suspicious of everyone. He hoped for Fynn's sake that the tingling spider senses he had around Micah were just because Micah treated Fynn like a combination between a prized possession and a child. Already today, he'd criticized Fynn's choice of polo shirt— *too bright blue*— and slacks— *you should've picked something tailored*— and hair— *how long since you had a cut and style?* Then he'd told Fynn to stick to superficial conversation and avoid the details of the portable design. "*He's a science type himself, so he might understand you, but I guarantee he doesn't want to hear fourteen pages of design specs over brunch.*"

Fynn had sniped back that he could've worn his red "Trust me. I'm a biochemist," T-shirt, but now he slumped in the passenger seat, picking at his cuticles. Nolan hated the slouch of Fynn's shoulders. They should be back in bed with Fynn properly caffeinated, talking about where their relationship went from here. Instead, Nolan didn't even dare reach over the seat to squeeze Fynn's shoulder, because Micah would notice. Nolan couldn't risk that without getting the okay from Fynn.

Micah parked and led the way into an open, airy dining room. Despite the supposedly casual brunch, the tables were set with linen cloths and vases holding single chrysanthemums. Nolan brought up the rear, sweeping his gaze around the space. Most of the tables were occupied with two or more diners, the high-fashion logos on their shirts and three-hundred-dollar haircuts shouting their wealth.

When the hostess came over, Micah said, "Two tables please. A single for my man here, but bring the bill to me," with a gesture at Nolan, "and then there'll be three of us when my associate joins us. On the patio, I think."

"Right this way." She gathered up leather-bound menus and led them across the room.

Fynn leaned close to Micah and whispered, "What do you mean, a single table for Nolan? Why can't he sit with us?"

Micah raised a carefully shaped eyebrow. “We’re trying to woo this investor, not intimidate him. Anyway, I expect Stone would prefer to be far enough away to have a better view of the situation. Is that not correct?” He turned that eyebrow on Nolan.

Nolan would’ve loved to insist on sitting right next to Fynn, especially after being called “my man.” Maybe play footsie under the table to bug Micah, if he suspected what they were up to. But field of view was important and he still didn’t know if Fynn wanted his brother in the loop. Glancing around, Nolan realized he wouldn’t be the only bodyguard sitting with his back to the wall and an eye on the room. “That’s fine,” he agreed as they passed a guy whose sidearm deformed the shape of his jacket.

The hostess gave Nolan a small table at the edge of the patio and led Micah and Fynn to a larger one. There were several occupied tables between them, but Fynn’s seat was within clear view. *It’ll be fine.* Nolan tried to relax into a comfortable posture while scanning the area, ignoring Micah showing Fynn the menu and Fynn’s mulish expression. Just because Micah was an asshole and Fynn was the best thing to ever happen to Nolan didn’t mean...

God, he really is. For a moment, Nolan lost himself in wonder. How had one intense, bespectacled scientist leaped past all the cool reserve Nolan prided himself on and grabbed him by the heart? What had happened to the guy who’d cruise a club, pick up the hottest man there for an hour, and then walk away?

Fynn happened. That was the only answer.

Five minutes after they were seated, the hostess led another man over to Fynn’s table. The investor was older than both the brothers, judging by the gray that streaked his temples, and out-of-shape in a way his perfectly tailored suit couldn’t disguise. Nolan thought his face looked familiar but couldn’t remember who or from where. *Some local mover and shaker, maybe.* The newcomer and Micah shook hands. Fynn gave the guy a little wave without getting up, his curled lip and frown earning him a sideways glare from Micah.

Much as Nolan didn't want to, he somewhat empathized with Micah. The business environment was cutthroat. In a perfect world, Fynn's brilliance would be all he needed but in this real world, social graces counted too. Micah's fault, though, for picking at Fynn like he was some kind of surly teenager the whole drive. Made a person want to act that way out of spite.

When his server stopped by, Nolan ordered a croissant, cheese, and fruit plate. Easy to drop, not messy. Coffee too, of course, although he and Fynn had each downed a mugful in their fifteen-minute oasis before Micah arrived. He was amused when Fynn's gestures to the server resulted in a whole carafe being left at their table. *Man does love his caffeine.*

Nolan was too far away to hear their conversation. About ten minutes into it, Fynn became more animated, losing his scowl and gesturing with his hands. *Probably talking about outgassing or temperature regulation or something.* He smiled inwardly at knowing exactly what that sounded like in Fynn's science-is-exciting voice. The investor looked interested, asking occasional questions. Micah sat back with a satisfied expression.

By the time Fynn's table broke up, each of them standing, Nolan was making his water last in tiny sips. He stood too, watching. The investor gestured toward the marina with its array of sleek, white boats and said something. Fynn shook his head. Micah and the investor spoke some more, but Fynn made a definite gesture of rejection and stomped off toward the inside bathrooms, his frown back in place.

Nolan hurried after him, keeping Fynn's back in sight. The restroom door swung shut between them but there was a delay of no more than ten seconds before Nolan followed him in. The only person visible was a tall guy washing his hands at a sink. Nolan's pulse stuttered for an instant before he picked out a familiar pair of tan shoes below a stall door. *All good.* He took the chance to pee, washed up, then put his shoulders to a wall out of the way and waited.

Fynn emerged from the stall zipping up his slacks, saw Nolan and startled, then smiled although the expression looked fake. “Hey, fancy meeting you here. Getting any ideas?” He stuck his hands under the water and rubbed a fist around one rigid forefinger, the gleam in his eye becoming more real.

“Cut it out,” Nolan said. “I have lots of ideas but they’ll keep till we get home.” *Home*. Somehow, that meant the small apartment where the bathroom wasn’t even en suite and the couch wanted to gouge out his liver if he lay the wrong way.

“Do we have to wait for Micah?”

“Don’t you want to? I thought we were going out on the lake in his boat?” When Fynn shook his head, Nolan pulled out his phone and texted *~Hey, Chuck. We need transpo at the Southwinds Marina.*

The answer pinged back from Charlie. *~Thirty minutes. Don’t call me Chuck. Just me as driver?*

Despite Nolan’s spider senses tingling, he couldn’t see a real reason to pull in more people. *~Just you. I’ll have someone new for Oliver to do a background check on, though.* No doubt the investor was legit— he looked like money— but anyone getting close to Fynn required the full treatment.

~On my way.

Nolan told Fynn, “Half an hour and we’ll have Charlie and our own car.”

“Thanks.”

“What do you want to do till then? We could hang around the bathroom, but despite being high-class, the ambiance is still eau-de-toilette.”

Fynn chuckled and the groove between his eyebrows smoothed out. “We can probably find somewhere less *toilette-y*.”

Nolan held the door for him, glancing toward the patio as they crossed the main room. Down past the railing, toward the docks, he could make out Micah and the

investor walking side by side, heads together. “Looks like your brother ditched you.”

“The investor wanted to show us his yacht. I said no, kind of clearly, and Micah said he’d go.”

“You didn’t want to see a yacht?”

“Are you kidding?” They left the building, and Fynn threw a renewed glare at his brother’s retreating back. “Yachts are all about *look how much money I can throw around on useless things.*”

“I thought Micah had one.”

“A boat, not a yacht.” Fynn gestured toward the docks as they wandered down the path under the dappled shade of the small trees. “Down there, between all the pretentious sails that pretty much never get unfurled, he has a water ski boat. I mean, he’s forty-three and he’s not going out on skis, so it’s almost as useless as a yacht, but it’s the boat he wanted when we were young. He takes it out to tool around on the water. It’s twenty feet long, not sixty.”

“Which makes all the difference.”

“Well, it does. Some difference. Compared to *‘Let me show you how I blew a million dollars.’*”

“You didn’t like that investor guy?” Nolan gave the distant men another look. They seemed pretty friendly, turning off the paved path onto one of the jetties, Micah gesturing about something.

Fynn wrinkled his nose and pushed his glasses higher. “At least he understands science, not like the guy who was mostly interested in where we were sourcing the exterior plastics, but he’s a total jerk. Ugh. I hate him.”

That seemed like a strong reaction for one short brunch encounter. Then again, there were people Nolan had pegged as jerks on the first three words out of their mouth.

“Will you take his money if he wants to invest?”

“Micah’s call, but I want to say no. I hated the guy back in my ZomaChem days and he hasn’t improved.”

“Wait.” Nolan caught Fynn’s elbow. “You already know him? What’s his name?” *I should’ve asked more questions.*

“Harrison Quenby. He was the department head in my lab at ZomaChem. My project manager’s boss. Very linear thinker and a giant snob. Trained as a molecular biologist but he was total management by then. We called him Harry behind his back, because he insisted on Harrison or Dr. Quenby.” Fynn mimicked a pompous tone on the names. “He talked about his real estate investments all the time. We figured he was making high six figures, plus he had some kind of personal wealth. Family money. I was barely worth his notice, except to yell at if I deviated from his precious schedule.”

That’s where the guy’s familiar from. Oliver had set up a file with photos of everyone even remotely on his suspect list, including everyone Fynn had worked with at ZomaChem. Nolan had last looked through the file a week ago. *Obviously not carefully enough.*

He called Oliver while darting looks around the quiet marina. If this was a set-up, the threat wasn’t obvious, but he couldn’t overlook the possibility. “Hey, I’m at the Southwinds Marina.” Still holding Fynn’s elbow, Nolan steered him over beside a small maintenance hut to provide some cover. Fynn stared but let himself be propelled along. “I have Charlie on the way, but get someone else headed over here. Micah’s meeting with Harrison Quenby, who’s on your list— *Shit!*”

A splash down by the boats marked Quenby being toppled into the water by two men in dark clothes and medical masks. The men grabbed Micah by both arms and hustled him onto a modest-sized motorboat with a low cabin.

“Hey!” Nolan yelled, despite the distance. “Police. Freeze!”

Fynn yanked his arm free of Nolan’s grip and charged down the path. Nolan leaped after him.

The two men ignored his shout and their running approach, although other passersby paused, staring at Nolan or at the dripping-wet Quenby, shouting and splashing in the water. No one did anything about the motorboat pulling away from the wharf with Micah now out of sight down in the cockpit.

“Stop that boat!” Fynn yelled, sprinting faster than Nolan would’ve thought he could.

Oliver’s voice crackled over the phone in Nolan’s hand as he worked to catch up to Fynn. “What’s up?”

“Call 911,” Nolan told him. “Kidnapping. Micah Dempsey. Two male perps, black clothes, surgical masks, in a speedboat leaving the Southwinds Marina. White boat, blue trim.” *Fuck, I don’t see a name and I know nothing about boats.* He could identify make and model of most cars, but not this. “Harrison Quenby’s in the water but I bet it’s a distraction. Make sure the cops don’t let him leave.”

Fynn skidded to a stop at the open mooring where the motorboat had been, staring out after it. “They have Micah!”

Nolan grabbed his arm to keep him from following Quenby into the drink. “Oliver’s calling 911.”

“It’s a boat! Shouldn’t we call the Coast Guard?”

“Chicago PD has a marine and helicopter unit. The chopper might be the best bet to chase them.”

“But how will they know who to chase?” Fynn stared out at the retreating boat as it headed for the open lake and the dozens of pleasure craft enjoying a warm, breezy Saturday on the water. He pulled away from Nolan’s hold and dodged back past him. “Come on.”

“Wait!” Nolan skidded on some loose gravel as he turned. “What are you doing?”

Fynn bolted down the next jetty and up to an even smaller boat, bending to untie the rope at its front. “Get in.”

“What? No way. You’re not going after those guys.”

“Yeah, I am.” Fynn tossed the rope down inside, then turned to one at the back, yanking on the slip knot violently. “You don’t have to come.”

“You’re not going.” Nolan grabbed for Fynn and missed as Fynn vaulted over the side into the boat.

“Last chance.” Fynn pushed away from the jetty, open water appearing between them.

Nolan jumped, landing awkwardly near the back end and rocking the boat. He grabbed for a handhold.

“Glad I remembered my keys this time.” Fynn flipped through his ring of keys, shoved one into the ignition, fiddled, did something, and then a motor behind Nolan roared to life. Fynn told him, “Hang on.” The boat churned half-sideways, cleared the rear of the sailboat tied ahead of it, then lurched forward as Fynn turned them toward open water. They picked up speed, the front end rising and a big pennant on a pole snapping in the breeze.

“This isn’t smart,” Nolan told him. “But okay, all right. If we follow them, we can direct the cops. Make sure the perps don’t get lost in the crowd.” That should be safe enough. He grabbed the rail around the side as the boat leaped forward. “Are you sure you know how to drive this thing?”

“Positive.” Fynn peered forward as they rounded the end of the harbor wall. “Crap, where are they? There’s a lot of people out today.”

Nolan went to stand by him, scanning the water ahead. He might not know boats, but he could identify shapes and relative sizes and trajectories. “That one.” He pointed at a white boat well ahead, cutting a straight line out toward deeper water.

“I think you’re right.” Fynn opened up his throttle farther. “Bastards aren’t getting away with my brother.”

“Stay back,” Nolan warned him. “We don’t want them to realize we’re behind them.” He pulled out his phone and called 911. Reception wavered between one and two bars. *Good enough.*

The emergency dispatcher wasn't very helpful. She kept telling him to wait for patrol officers to arrive, and he kept telling her they were in a boat on Lake Michigan, which would make that impossible. "Connect me to the marine and helicopter unit," he insisted for the fourth time. "We're in a small water ski boat flying a flag with a big apostrophe-C-B logo." For once, Micah's love of promo might be useful.

"Stay on the line, sir. I'll have an officer to speak with you shortly."

"We need a helicopter, or these kidnappers will get away with their victim."

"I'm relaying your information to marine dispatch, sir. Stay on the line and stay calm."

Nolan gritted his teeth. *I am calm. I need you to do your job.*

Fynn steered the boat with surprising skill, weaving them around the occasional sailboat or speedboat, his eyes fixed on their target. After several minutes, the boat ahead turned right, angling farther away from the shore. Fynn adjusted their course to follow. A minute later the motorboat turned back left—

"Shit!" Nolan realized. "Don't follow them."

His words came a moment too late as Fynn adjusted their course again. "What? Why?"

"I think they made us. They were testing to see if we were following them." Sure enough, the boat ahead suddenly leaped forward.

Fynn bared his teeth and opened up their own speed. They powered through the waves, bouncing as they hit the increasing chop of more open water. Fewer other boats cruised nearby now, making the chase obvious. Nolan clung to the railing and his phone, wishing he could pull his weapon from the hip holster under his loose polo. Not that he'd do any good with a handgun at long range from a bouncing boat, but they were gaining ground. He didn't have enough balance to let go of the rail, though.

“We’re faster,” Fynn noted as they bounded along. “All right!”

“No! Slow down. Don’t get too close.”

“What does it matter? They know we’re here!” Fynn pushed another fraction of speed out of the boat, the engine rising to a whine.

“It matters because— Fuck!” The sound of a shot echoed across the water. Nolan couldn’t tell where the bullet went. Odds were, the kidnappers also couldn’t hit the side of a barn in these conditions, but he didn’t want to tempt fate. The raised front end screened Fynn some but not enough. “Stop! Pull back and keep low.”

Fynn ignored him. “If I stop, they’ll get away with Micah. Or shoot him.”

Nolan crouched down, shouting into his phone. “Shots fired. We need immediate assistance.” Static answered him and he glared at the screen. “You still have one bar, you piece of shit!”

“—sir, say that again?”

“Shots fired. Where’s the chopper?”

“This is Sergeant Woods of the marine unit,” a deep voice replied.

“*Thank* you.” Nolan paused to tell Fynn again, “Stop here! I have the cops on the line.”

Fynn slowed, letting the gap between the boats widen again, but didn’t stop. “I’m not letting them get away.”

“What’s the situation?” Woods asked over the phone.

Nolan told the sergeant, “We’re in pursuit of a motorboat with one hostage, Micah Dempsey, and at least two kidnappers. I’m security for his brother, Fynn. Two masked men snatched Micah off the dock at the Southwinds Marina. We’re following them out on Lake Michigan on the Dempseys’ boat, flying a flag apostrophe-C-B.”

“What’s your location?”

“We headed northeast from the marina, about ten minutes now by fast motorboat.” *Whatever the hell speed that is.* “Still following.” He peered at the distant shore but didn’t recognize any landmarks. “Let me check GPS.”

He tried to get into his maps program, but the browser kept freezing. Suddenly, the boat swerved and lurched violently under his feet. He hit the side with his hip, and his phone flew from his hand. Futilely, he grabbed for the device as it bounced on the edge of the boat and dropped into the water. “Shit!”

“Sorry.” Fynn looked over, his eyes wide as he turned the boat sharply. “They’re coming at us!” Now off to the right, the motorboat had swung around and was plowing through the water toward them.

“Run away!”

“I’m trying!” Fynn put body language into turning the wheel, the boat tilting to one side.

Two shots rang out, different sounds. *They’ve got a rifle!* A bullet pinged off something, and Fynn yelled.

“Are you okay?” Nolan demanded. “Go, go, go!”

Fynn got them straightened out, retreating, then another shot and crunching ping were followed by a stutter in the engine noise. A rougher stutter. A cough, as their speed slowed abruptly. Fynn moaned, “I think they hit the motor.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Nolan glanced around wildly. “Hopefully, they’ll leave once they see we’re disabled and can’t follow.”

“Leave with Micah?” Fynn stared at him. “Can’t you shoot back?”

“Not and hit anything.” His compact 9mm was good for close protection, but useless right now except as a warning. He didn’t want to start a shooting war with multiple bad guys who sounded better armed.

Bad guys who were still powering toward them, not making the smart move by turning and leaving. *Why,*

why, why? Surely they don't know who we are? Although maybe they had binoculars, or Micah recognized his boat and told them... After a moment's thought, Nolan dropped down into the bottom of the boat out of sight.

Fynn cursed the grinding motor as they continued to slow, then demanded, "What are you doing down there?"

"If they haven't gotten a good look yet, I want let them think you came out here alone. They're getting close enough now to see us." Vague options raced through his head. "Do you have any waterproof bags here?"

"Probably in the emergency kit." Fynn pointed to a white box with a red cross on it. The motor coughed again and quit, and the boat glided to a stop, sinking deeper into the choppy waves. "Shit! Nolan, they're still coming."

Nolan dug into the box and found a heavy Ziplock. Dumping its first-aid contents, he slipped his weapon inside and zipped the bag. With care, he worked a corner of the plastic through the trigger guard. Awkward but he could still fire it in a pinch.

"What are you doing?" Fynn whispered, his eyes locked on the approaching motorboat. "You need that gun."

"We can't meet them head on. They have two armed guys, at least, and longer-range weapons. I want an element of surprise. Shift your weight over this side so the other one goes up."

Fynn moved next to him, leaning over the edge. The boat tipped slightly, raising the side between them and the approaching men. "This won't block bullets."

"Not the point." Quickly, before the kidnappers were close enough to see, Nolan slithered up over the far side of the boat and into the water. The chill of Lake Michigan, even in summer, took his breath away. Still, he lowered himself deeper till his head was screened by the boat, clinging to a cleat on the side with one hand.

The boat rocked as Fynn moved close to where he hung. “What should I do?”

“Don’t look at me. They don’t want to kill you.” That was Nolan’s one desperate hope. They’d stopped shooting once the boat was disabled. “They want money. They’ll either talk to you about ransom or try to kidnap you too.”

He could hear Fynn’s heaving breaths despite the whine of the approaching motor. “I don’t want to be kidnapped.”

“You won’t be. Stay cool inside, but I want you to act like you’re flipped out. Shout and jump around, make noise and be distracting. Scream at them. Just don’t get yourself shot. I’ll either use my weapon from under the bow—” *And pray I can get off two solid body shots before they get Fynn.* “—or I’ll try to swim under and get behind the boat, if they come close enough.” He heard the motorboat still chugging toward them, although he couldn’t see it. “If anyone fires a gun, drop down into the boat. Get as flat as you can. Okay?”

“Okay.” Fynn sniffed. “Damn them. Don’t get hurt, promise me.”

“I’m good. You worry about you.” *Take care, Fynn.* This was a hairbrained idea, but Nolan didn’t have a better one. “Now, focus on them. Pretend I don’t exist. Be loud.”

The sound of the motorboat grew closer... closer... then faded to an idle. Nolan let go of the cleat and swam alongside until he could peer around under their bow. The motorboat had come to a stop perhaps twenty feet away. Not a bad range for him with a handgun, but only one man stood on the deck in the open holding a rifle. The other was hidden by the cockpit, only the side of one arm visible.

Can’t risk it.

The rifle man shouted across the water, “Who are you?”

“You shot at me!” Fynn yelled back. “Are you crazy? I’m out here enjoying the water and you shot my boat!”

The man turned and said audibly toward the cockpit, “It is the science brother. Not one of the bodyguards.”

That’s what you think, motherfucker.

“Fuckin’ A,” the hidden guy said. “You were right. We’ll get them both. Bonus time.”

The man at the front turned back to Fynn. “We have your brother. If you want him to stay alive, you’ll do exactly as—”

Nolan tuned out the rest, taking a few long breaths. Then he sank beneath the surface. Down here, vibration from the boat’s idling engine carried but other sound was lost. He swam deeper, heading toward the shadow of the other boat’s hull, the Ziplock gripped in one hand hampering his strokes. *Fuck, it’s cold down here!* He made his way underneath the boat and surfaced as silently as he could on the far side.

“—not listening!” he heard Fynn yelling as he surfaced. “Go away! You’re maniacs! You’re stupid. I called the Coast Guard. I called the Marines. Aaargh! Idiots!”

Good man.

“Shut up and listen!” The man at the rail sounded frustrated. “We’re coming closer, bringing the boats together. Keep your hands where I can see them.” Nolan couldn’t spot the other guy, but he didn’t want to wait and have the boat start moving again. He eased down along the side to the back end, where the high rail gave way to a low flat platform. Peering around the corner, he could see into the cabin. The second man stood by the wheel, hands on the controls, not a weapon, while staring over toward Fynn. A huddled man on the floor had to be Micah. No third kidnapper.

Silently, Nolan freed his weapon from the baggie, keeping it clear of the water.

Showtime.

With a powerful kick, he surged out of the lake, grabbed the edge of the boat with hand and free elbow and hauled himself up and in, rolling as he landed. The man at the rail shouted, pivoted, and a rifle shot echoed past but didn't seem to hit anything. Nolan rolled to one knee, steadied his weapon, and snapped off a shot. Rifle guy screamed as the round hit, blood spraying as he dropped his weapon and fell. Nolan pivoted to aim at the man standing by the wheel. "Freeze! Hands up!"

The man stopped moving but his hand hovered near his hip.

"Hands *up!*" Nolan barked. "Up or dead!"

The guy hesitated, his harsh breaths counterpoint to the moans of the guy Nolan had shot, then slowly he moved his hands above his shoulders.

"Higher. Fingers locked behind your head." Nolan took one small step at a time toward the guy, trying to listen to the other man in case he wasn't as incapacitated as he'd seemed. Nolan's wet clothes clung to his legs and as he passed into the shade under the sleek canopy, he gritted his teeth against a shiver.

"Stone?" Micah said from where he lay. "Is that you?" He rolled over but Nolan didn't have attention to spare.

"Stay put, Micah! Don't move till I tell you."

"Okay."

Two more steps, and Nolan was close enough to touch the kidnapper. *Damn, what I wouldn't give for a pair of handcuffs right now.* He shifted nearer, the muzzle of his 9mm inches from the guy's chest. "Don't move, motherfucker. Don't breathe." *Weapon in a hip holster left.* He slid a hand down the man, closed his fingers on the grip, and eased a handgun out of the holster. *Got it.*

Stepping back, he said down to Micah, "Are you hurt bad?"

"Not really."

"Okay, look behind me. What's the guy doing?" The moaning had stopped.

“Lying there. Not moving. Is he dead?”

Or unconscious, one can hope. “Keep an eye on him. Let me know if he moves. Are your hands free?”

“No.”

“Tied in front of you or behind?” He didn’t dare drop his attention for a second. The kidnapper’s stance screamed his plan to attack at the slightest opening. *Not giving you that chance.*

“Taped in front. My ankles are duct taped too.”

Of course they are. “I’m going to go down on one knee beside you. In my right front pocket there’s a multi-tool pocketknife. I’m keeping my gun on this motherfucker. See if you can get my knife out. Don’t touch anything except my pocket and don’t get in front of my gun.”

“All right.”

Gradually, he eased down to one knee next to Micah. Three feet away, the kidnapper shifted his weight as if thinking about a kick. Nolan snapped, “Freeze! Shooting you would be easier.”

The bastard subsided again, glaring at them, clearly waiting for an instant of inattention to jump him. Nolan wanted to look back to check on the other man, didn’t dare.

Micah fumbled at Nolan’s pocket, dragging his slacks down his hip.

Come on, come on. Nolan shifted, trying to make things easier.

“Got it,” Micah said, strain in his tone. “Trying to open the blade. I... yes. Got it. Hard to... crap. Wait. Ouch!” The sound of duct tape ripping came as a welcome relief. “All right, ankles.” Another rip. “Yeah, ow, pins and needles but I’m free.”

“Do you know how to use a gun?”

“I’ve never touched one.”

Well, fuck, so much for giving him the one in my left hand. Nolan was not going to pass a newbie a loaded handgun on a rocking boat. He told Micah, “If you saw where they put the duct tape, get it.”

Micah fumbled around, digging into a bin, then said, “Here. What should I do?”

“Start with that bozo’s ankles. Wrap ’em up good.” One step at a time. Nolan kept his gun steady on the motherfucker who’d be much less threat once he was hobbled.

“Gladly.” Micah shuffled forward on his knees, duct tape in hand—

A handgun went off behind them. The bullet hit the canopy nearby. Nolan dodged sideways in two quick steps, controlling both his weapons as he whirled to look back. Fynn knelt on the back platform, soaking wet, wrestling with the first kidnapper, hands locked around the man’s arm. The man’s bloody fingers clutched a weapon.

Shit. Nolan leaped toward them and kicked the bastard’s wrist hard. The kidnapper screamed. The gun flew free, hit the side of the boat, and dropped to the deck.

Fynn raised his head and shouted, “Look out!”

A scuff behind Nolan warned him in time to duck away from a swing from cabin-dude. *Bastard!* Nolan landed a solid kick to the guy’s midsection. The man grunted and collapsed back on his ass. *Fuck him.* Nolan kicked him again, mid-chest, as hard as he could. He took an instant to be sure his blow had put the guy flat on the deck, gasping wildly, before turning back to Fynn and motherfucker-one. “Freeze! Fynn, get clear.” He couldn’t see past Fynn well enough to get a shot at the bastard.

At his shout, Fynn scrambled backward on hands and ass. Nolan aimed at the bleeding kidnapper, but the man collapsed onto the deck moaning and shaking, one hand scrabbling randomly, his eyes closed.

Fynn sat on the back platform inches from the edge, propped up on both hands, sucking in air, his chest heaving and eyes huge, his glasses missing.

There's blood all over him! “Fynn, you okay?”

“Y-yes?”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

Thank god. But not safe yet. Nolan backed against the side of the boat, angled so he could hold a weapon on each of the collapsed men. He wouldn’t fire an unfamiliar gun left-handed unless he had to, but he bet they didn’t know that. “Micah, you got that tape?”

A moan answered him.

“He’s hurt!” Fynn pushed to his feet.

“Wait!” Nolan snapped loudly enough to make Fynn hesitate. “Get down, hands and knees, stay below my line of fire. Get that duct tape from your brother.”

“But—”

“Quickly.” The guy he’d kicked wasn’t all the way out.

Fynn scrambled forward past Nolan. “Micah! Are you okay?”

“He hit me.” Micah sounded winded, but “hit” wasn’t “stabbed” or “strangled” and Nolan relaxed a fraction.

Fynn reached for his brother, his hands shaking, touching his arm, his chest, his hair. “Where are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Micah told him. “You don’t need to pat me.”

Nolan directed, “Fynn! Safety first. Brother second. Get that duct tape.”

“What? But... okay. Got it.” Fynn dropped the roll. “Fuck! Got it now.” He clutched the tape in both hands.

Nolan moved a step closer to the man he’d kicked, who’d pushed up on his elbows, glaring. Shifting his aim from center-of-mass to the guy’s forehead, Nolan

ordered, “Lie down flat, arms up high, hands together. Fynn’s gonna duct tape your ankles and your wrists. One wrong move, and I’ll blow your brains out.”

The man snarled.

“*Right?*” Nolan took a step closer.

“Fuck.” The kidnapper slumped to his back on the deck and put his arms in the air, fingers clasped together.

Nolan told Fynn, “Get his hands secured. Use lots of tape.”

“Tell me, like, *clearly.*” Fynn edged closer to the kidnapper’s side. “What do I do?”

“Tape around his wrists.” Nolan schooled his voice slow and calm. *Fynn’s pretty shaken. Easy does it.* “Peel six inches loose to start with, stick the end to his arm and go round and round. He won’t move.” *Not if he wants to live.*

“Oh. Okay.” Fynn extended a tentative hand with the loose end of the tape. Nolan kept an eagle eye out for the motherfucker so much as twitching a muscle, but the bastard held still for Fynn to stick the tape to him. By the time Fynn had the third loop wrapped around, pinning the man’s wrists, Nolan backed off his hair-trigger.

“Take the roll in between his arms too. Go round that way.” Nolan flicked his gaze back and forth between the two kidnappers. Shot-fucker lay still now, breathing harshly. Not-shot-fucker was getting well mummified at Fynn’s hands. “Good, now tape his ankles together. Same deal.”

When Fynn had managed that, Nolan allowed himself a long breath. “Micah? You gonna survive if we deal with the other bastard?”

“Yeah. Just sore, I think.”

“Good. Fynn, I don’t suppose you know guns?”

“Not even remotely. Plus my glasses went in the lake.”

Nolan made a mental note to fix that ignorance. Fynn might never want to use a gun, but knowing *how* was a

vital skill. *Get through today first, firing range lessons later.* “Okay, same deal with the other guy. Tape him up.”

“He’s bleeding. A lot.” Fynn’s voice went wobbly. “There’s a ton of blood on me.”

“I’ll look as soon as I can put the guns down. I need you to restrain him first.”

“He might die...”

Too damned bad. But Fynn wouldn’t like that. “You taping his feet won’t kill him. Then I can safely see about first aid.”

“Okay.” Fynn crawled over and made a decent job of securing the guy’s ankles. When he took hold of one of the man’s hands, shot-guy screamed and Fynn hesitated. Nolan figured they were safe enough.

“That’s fine,” he told Fynn. “Let me search the other douchebag and then I’ll come get his hands. Back away from him.” Nolan reholstered his own gun, grimacing at the wet leather, and moved the weapon he’d taken to his right hand. He knelt and did a thorough one-handed pat down of not-shot-fucker, finding nothing more threatening than keys. *Other guy now.*

Shot-fucker was oozing heavily from the bullet wound high in his arm. Nolan thought the humerus might be broken, but the bullet had missed the chest and there was no arterial spurting. *He’ll live.* The man’s tanned skin showed pasty undertones, and the wrist Nolan had kicked didn’t look great either. He screamed again and passed out as Nolan taped his blood-streaked arms securely in front of him.

“Is he dead?” Fynn asked breathlessly.

Nolan checked the guy’s pulse. *Rapid but fine.* “No, but I bet it hurts like a motherfucker.” He took off his shirt, wadded the fabric up, and duct taped it tightly around the guy’s shoulders to apply direct pressure over the mess of the wound. He went ahead and searched him, faltering as he found a switchblade in the guy’s pocket. *If he’d got that into Fynn...* Nolan set the knife

safely out of the way. The man stirred as he finished, moaning again. Nolan rolled him onto his good shoulder in case he puked, and stood. “We need to get cops and paramedics out here. My phone went in the lake. Fynn, does yours have bars?”

Fynn checked. “Um. It’s dead. I swam with it.”

Oh, yeah. “Micah?”

“They took mine. It must be here somewhere.”

“I could call you and ping it,” Fynn said breathlessly, “Except mine’s waterlogged.” He giggled, the sound high-pitched.

“No worries,” Nolan soothed. “Not-shot-dude has one in his front pocket. You should be able to call 911.”

“I can do it.” Micah scuttled sideways and dug into the guy’s pocket, coming up with the phone.

Not-shot-dude snapped, “That’s stealing.”

Fynn laughed sharply. “Tell the cops.”

Nolan said, “Give me a strip of tape.” He took the piece Fynn ripped off and slapped it over the bastard’s mouth, ignoring his muffled protests. “Problem solved.”

Micah stepped clear of the awning with the phone, dialed, and answered the dispatcher’s, “What’s your emergency?” with, “I was kidnapped and the shot guy’s bleeding a lot,” and Nolan finally relaxed. *That should bring out the professional assistance.*

Fynn reached for him, but Nolan held up a hand. “One more precaution.”

He eased the magazine out of the handgun he’d taken from not-shot-fucker, checked the chamber, and set the unloaded gun and ammo safely into the open storage bin. Then he unloaded both of shot-fucker’s weapons, collected the knife, and stowed them safely too.

Then finally, *finally*, he had time to turn to Fynn. Nolan meant to grab his man in a hug, maybe kiss him, but what came out of his mouth was, “What were you

doing swimming over here? I left you safe on the other boat.”

“I saw the guy you’d shot trying to get up again behind your back. What did you expect me to do?”

“Yell? Say something? Not fucking swim over here and jump into the mix with guns and knives?”

“I didn’t want to jog your elbow. You were dealing with the other guy.”

“So you figured you’d wrestle a kidnapper who had a gun?”

“He didn’t have that gun when I got in the water. Anyhow, you’d already shot him. I may not be a fighter, but I can handle a guy who’s bleeding to death.”

You almost didn’t. Though to be fair, Fynn had looked like he was winning. Nolan wanted to shake him and impress on him that he was never, ever to do anything like that again, but a slump of Fynn’s shoulders gave him pause. *He deserves better.* “That took guts,” he admitted. “You probably saved my life. Getting caught between two assailants is a bad, bad spot to be. I underestimated shot-fucker.”

Fynn choked and his shoulders straightened. “Is that what you call him? Shot-fucker?”

“Sure.” Nolan gestured at the two men. “Shot-fucker, and not-shot-fucker.”

“What if you’d had to shoot the other guy?” Fynn cocked his head, eyes brightening.

“Shot-first-fucker and shot-second-fucker?” Nolan felt a smile tug at his lips.

“Hah.” Fynn pushed to his feet and took a step toward Nolan.

Nolan opened his arms. “C’mere.”

Fynn took another step. “I’m soaking wet.”

“Do I look like I care? So am I.” He shivered again, half wetness and lake air, half a realization of how close

they'd come to disaster. Fynn had been so damned strong for a civilian, but he still looked shaky. "I need a hug." Not something he'd admit to anyone else in the world, but maybe something Fynn should hear.

Fynn lunged at him, and Nolan yanked him close, wrapping Fynn up in his arms, rocking them side to side. "Fuck," he breathed against Fynn's lake-wet hair. "I lost a year of my life when I saw you fighting that guy."

"I lost *ten* when I saw him trying to shoot you."

"Fair." Nolan closed his eyes and reveled in the wiry, safe, soggy, perfect feel of Fynn up against him. "Thank you."

"You did it first."

"My job."

Fynn brushed his lips under Nolan's jaw and that simple touch sent a shudder through Nolan. "Just your job?"

"Not even close." Nolan eased his frantic grip enough for them to see each other. "Yeah, my job is to protect people and I do, but you're so much more than a job to me. Even Micah matters extra because he's your brother and you love him."

Fynn peered at Micah over Nolan's shoulder. "Love might be an exaggeration."

Nolan couldn't resist kissing Fynn's narrow, elegant nose. "Sure, you'd chase after armed kidnappers for anyone."

"Maybe I didn't want to pay ten million dollars."

"Your company has insurance."

Fynn chuckled and shifted his gaze back to meet Nolan's eyes. "Okay, maybe he's all right as a brother, but there's only one guy I want hugging me right now."

Nolan's breath hitched. An ache built under his ribs. *Me too.* What he managed to say was, "Yeah? Someone I know?"

“He’s this strong, tall, smart, protective bodyguard who listens patiently when I go off on my latest fixation and holds me tight to ward off my nightmares.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“Except I can’t figure out what he sees in an avocado-obsessed, four-eyed nerd with—”

Nolan cut that thought off with a fast kiss. “You’re brave, and gorgeous even soaking wet, and resourceful, and... and any other ego boosting you need will have to wait till your brother isn’t glaring at my back.” His neck was prickling.

They both turned to look at Micah, who, sure enough, although still on the phone with emergency services, was giving Nolan a death glare.

Fynn tugged Nolan back toward him. “If he’s going to disapprove, let’s give him something he can really object to.” He wrapped one leg around Nolan’s calves, bringing their damp groins together, slid both hands behind Nolan’s head, and pulled him down into a long, hot kiss.

“To be fair,” Nolan murmured when they took a break, not letting go of where he’d locked his hands on Fynn’s ass, “this isn’t what he hired me for.”

“Neither was bodyguarding him and rescuing him. He’s getting a bargain.”

Behind him, Micah said, “Fynn, don’t you think—”

Fynn interrupted, “Nope. I do too much thinking. Right now, I’m going to feel.” He guided Nolan back into the kiss.

Ten minutes later, Nolan heard the rotors of the first helicopter approaching. He and Fynn broke apart to wave up at the cop peering down from the chopper, and Nolan grinned. A shot man bleeding on the deck, a duct-taped kidnapper, and Fynn’s older brother watching had been enough to keep his dick under control. But his lips tingled, he’d probably put permanent fingerprints on Fynn’s ass, and he felt happier than he ever had in his life.

Chapter 11

Fynn led the way into his apartment, kicked off the sneakers that Sheridan had brought to replace his squelching shoes, and collapsed on the couch. He dug in his pocket, pulled out his damp wallet, and spread the contents on the coffee table to dry. “Home, sweet home. I thought we’d never get back here. That police station was awful.”

Nolan followed him in and locked the door. “You could’ve been back here hours ago with one of my people, if you wanted.”

“Not without you.”

“You could’ve hung out with your brother.”

“I’d have shredded his last nerve. He’ll be happier at his friend’s place. Thanks for sending Amelia with him, by the way. I’m sure he feels better having protection, even if the worst threat’s over.”

Nolan came to stand in front of Fynn. “I wanted him to feel safe. I wanted you to know he was safe.”

Fynn blinked up at him. The replacement eyeglasses Sheridan had also fetched were larger lenses, less fashionable, and not quite the same prescription. Nolan looked equally wonderful through them, though. *He was still thinking about what I needed while under interrogation.* Or whatever you wanted to call that half-hostile questioning by the detectives, who were apparently angry they’d gone after the kidnappers instead of standing back for the *professionals*. Even if those professionals hadn’t been around when they were needed. “They took forever letting you go.”

“I shot a man. They had to be careful.”

“It was self-defense. Micah and I were both there.”

“Which is why I’m here now, instead of still in some interview room going through my story for the sixteenth time.” Nolan eased down on the couch beside Fynn and performed the same sad wallet routine.

Fynn liked how their stuff looked scattered side by side, his warped co-op affinity card next to Nolan’s disintegrating carwash punch card. *The bits of our lives, mingling.* He tried to force his thoughts out of that sappy rut, fishing a foil-wrapped XL condom out of Nolan’s haul and slipping it into his pocket. “This might be useful. Good thing the packet’s waterproof.”

Nolan laughed.

Fynn fidgeted with damp bills, arranging them in neat rows. *Is the threat over?* He didn’t know how to quit worrying. “Do you think Quenby really was behind the kidnapping? Will they arrest him?”

“Yeah, didn’t they tell you?” Nolan slid an arm around Fynn.

Fynn leaned back into the support of Nolan’s shoulder. *Mm. I like this.* “They didn’t tell me much of anything. Asked a lot of questions.” After the third round, Fynn had started going off on tangents deliberately, to make the steam come out of the uptight detective’s ears, which might be why he was let go sooner. Being annoying for the win. “They said they were ‘looking into’ Quenby.”

“I guess me being ex-LEO meant they were less close-mouthed. Not-shot-guy spilled all the beans, hoping for leniency. Quenby was supposed to bring you down to the waterfront where they would fake hitting him and grab you. When you wouldn’t go down with him, he decided to grab Micah instead. Everything was in the kidnapper’s text messages. Quenby told them he was coming down and to take Micah, but offered a bonus if they got you too. I guess he wasn’t sure if the company would pay out as much for Micah. Plus he hates you. They busted him a few hours ago and apparently he began ranting about how you stole his idea and made ill-gotten millions.”

Fynn straightened indignantly. “I didn’t steal his idea!”

“I know you didn’t.”

That bastard. “He hasn’t had an original idea since before dinosaurs roamed the earth. The ‘CadoBox was all mine. I wonder if he’s stolen other scientists’ inventions. I should pass the word. Maybe they can sue him.”

“He’ll be in prison for kidnapping. A lawsuit might be overkill.”

“They could get back some of his money.”

“He’s mortgaged to the hilt and owes gambling debts. He was moving up on Oliver’s suspect list.”

“Oh.” Fynn sagged deeper into Nolan’s hold. *Nice strong arms.* “Well, then, not worth their time.”

“Speaking of worth our time.” Nolan bent toward Fynn and kissed him.

Fynn wanted to get lost in the kiss, but hours and hours in the police station waiting room after they were done with him, with greasy takeout, bad coffee, and nothing to do except browse the internet on Sheridan’s phone, had set his mind racing. He pulled away. “What happens next?”

Nolan tilted his head. “I’m voting for a shower and bed, in that order.”

“Well, yes, but... we caught the kidnappers. Does that mean your contract is over?” *Are you going to leave?*

“No. We contracted as a bodyguard service, with month-to-month renewal. Solving the case was supposed to be the cops’ job. It’s up to you and Micah whether to renew the contract, but I would say...” Nolan shifted around so they faced each other. “Whether it’s Stone Security or someone else, you should keep protection around for a while. Today’s story’s already leaking.”

“Like Micah’s boat.” Fynn should’ve felt worse about the bullet hole in the hull, but it’d happened in a good cause, and after the “don’t touch him” glare Micah had given Nolan— *as if I was his virgin daughter*— Fynn had taken mild satisfaction in Micah’s expression as the boat sank lower and lower during the tow back to the harbor.

Anyhow, it was Micah's fault, because when the kidnappers asked if he knew who was following them, he'd identified his own boat. Which had made them turn around to see who was in it. "It's like he wanted me to get caught."

"Micah? I think he was scared and trying to cooperate to save his life."

"I know. He's just stupid." Although that was unfair. Fynn might've been equally inept if he'd been the one duct-taped. He bounced to his feet. "If we keep paying you, you'll stay?" He paced to the wall and whirled to peer at Nolan through the annoying blurry glasses. *What's that look on his face?*

Nolan stood and came to Fynn. "You're not paying me. I took myself off the payroll a week ago. You're paying Stone Security for Charlie and the rest, but only one thing decides if I stay or go, and it's not the contract."

Fynn's breath came short. He quipped, "The perks?" but then shook his head. He didn't want to joke right now. "Me?"

"You." Nolan reached out and ran his thumb along Fynn's cheekbone and then down across his lower lip. "I've fallen for you in a big way, and it scares the shit out of me. I've never needed anyone before, and now I get antsy if I haven't seen you for a few hours. Every time my mind's free, I start thinking about you. So if you want me to stay, say so."

"I want." The words came out with almost no sound behind them. Fynn cleared his throat. "I've always been a loner and I don't know how to be anything else. I'm not sure if I'll be an awful boyfriend. I might be. I probably have bad habits I'm not even aware of because it's hard to notice those things in yourself, and if I snore, it'd be while I'm asleep—"

"Shh." Nolan touched Fynn's lips again. "I've been living in your back pocket since Micah hired us. Nothing you've done could scare me away. I'm probably the worse relationship bet. I've been a loner longer."

“Then maybe we’re supposed to stop being loners together.” Fynn winced. “That sounded more romantic in my head.”

“I don’t need romantic. I want you, with all the quirky things you say, and the way you look at me, and your mouth—”

Fynn employed his mouth in a hard kiss on Nolan’s lips. “Will you move in with me? This apartment’s kind of small.”

“I could be happy here,” Nolan said. “With you. But if the media run with the kidnapping story and you end up in the public eye, you may want to move somewhere more secure.”

“Stupid media.” Except Fynn realized the idea of moving didn’t annoy him the way it used to. Yeah, it’d be a pain in the ass to change his routines, to find a new grocery store he liked, to know how to navigate to the kitchen and turn on the coffee maker half-asleep without his glasses. With Nolan, though, a new place would feel like home right away. Maybe he could buy a bigger TV so they could watch movies together in more comfort. “And a bigger couch.”

“Definitely a bigger couch. I like your bed, though. It fits both of us.” Nolan’s blue eyes shone.

“We could shower and then confirm that hypothesis.” Fynn winced again but Nolan smiled and reached for his hand.

“Good plan.”

Nolan led them to the bathroom and started the shower. The space felt small with a guy Nolan’s size in it, but Fynn didn’t mind. The strains of the day were hitting him. Having Nolan there to grab his elbow when he tripped and catch his glasses when he tried to take off his shirt and forgot these were the larger ones was... perfect, was what it was.

When they were naked, he took hold of Nolan’s wrists to keep him from getting under the water, and *looked* at him. Fynn had never seen Nolan without clothes. He’d

imagined the man naked more often than he wanted to admit, but he hadn't pictured the width of Nolan's thighs, or the way the hair on his chest swept downward in soft amber swirls across his belly to merge with the trimmed curls around... *That. Okay, didn't quite imagine that.* He'd figured Nolan would be well-endowed, to fit the rest of his size, but he was also uncut. His balls hung low and furry below that gorgeous cock which began to fill, the head emerging from the foreskin

Fynn whipped his gaze back up.

Nolan grinned at him. "I like that you're looking at me. I love finally looking at you. But I still feel yucky about lake water on my skin. Can we shower first?"

"Sure. Absolutely." Fynn whipped the curtain aside and stepped into the tub.

Nolan pulled the curtain away on the far end and stepped in, enclosing them again. "If I'm between you and the showerhead, you're staying dry."

Fynn laughed and reached for the bodywash. "I'm not that short."

"Relatively." Nolan held out a hand. When Fynn filled his palm with soap, Nolan swiped his hand down Fynn's chest, lathering his nearly hairless skin and stroking white foam around his nipples. Fynn's dick perked up at each touch. Nolan ran a finger down Fynn's shaft, making him twitch and harden further. "Wait till we're clean." Nolan patted Fynn's dick and then moved on to soaping thoroughly around Fynn's balls and down his thighs.

"My turn." Fynn grabbed soap, leaned aside for a moment to get spray onto Nolan, and set to work learning Nolan's muscular body using palms and fingertips. All that body hair held the suds, turning white and frothy, and Fynn played with it, swirling the foam into peaks on Nolan's chest. "Turn around."

Nolan pivoted obediently. His back was lightly furred too. A long scar ran from shoulder to hip, and Fynn

wanted to know why. *Later. We'll have time for lots of stories.* Nolan's ass was a miracle of form and function, tight-muscled and wonderfully curved, with a deep cleft. Fynn slipped one finger into that shadowed space. "Do you ever..."

"Bottom? Yeah, with the right guy. I would happily for you." Nolan shifted his weight. "Do you want to?"

"Sometime. Not tonight." Fynn took a breath and said what he'd been imagining. "I want you to fuck me."

He felt a shudder run through Nolan's body. "Yeah. That."

"Now." Fynn's dick was fully onboard.

"Shampoo? Rinsing?"

"Spoilsport." But he passed Nolan the shampoo, because yeah, lake water was not the cleanest stuff. Better than the rivers, but that wasn't saying much. Probably worse along the shore, though, cleaner toward the center. "Good thing it was deep out there."

"I did imagine getting left behind, miles from shore, if they somehow swooped in, grabbed you, and drove off."

Not happening. Fynn threw his arms around Nolan and squeezed, his hands slipping in the soap. "Scary stuff."

"Yeah."

"I didn't realize you were scared too." He'd somehow imagined Nolan as superhuman in a crisis, but of course he wasn't. Efficient, trained, and brave, not superhuman. He hugged tighter.

"Terrified a time or two. Worst when I thought he might've shot you. I saw blood on you."

Recall gave Fynn his own tremor. "I was afraid I hadn't grabbed his arm in time and he got you."

Nolan turned and enveloped him in a hug, and they stood there letting the water sluice down them. Fynn closed his eyes and breathed the scent of Nolan's damp skin. After a while, Nolan began maneuvering them into

the spray. Fynn blinked and looked down, watching the swirls of white slide off Nolan's sturdy legs and flow toward the drain.

"Rinse?" Nolan murmured.

Fynn tipped his head back into the downpour. Nolan cupped his hands around Fynn's forehead, guiding the water through his hair. Fynn lingered in the moment, luxuriating in the rush of the water and the warmth of Nolan's fingers against his face, but they couldn't stay that way forever. *No matter how tempting. I guess we wouldn't die of dehydration in a shower, but food would be an issue. Or maceration of our skin from all the moisture? Although perhaps falling asleep and slipping would be the first risk. Anyway, Nolan in a bed would be even better.* He turned into the shower to rub his face with wet hands, then took hold of the curtain. "You'll need space to rinse. Soap's bad in delicate places." Nolan was still dotted with suds on his shoulders and the edge of his beard. Shampoo glistened in his hair. Probably down his back and ass too.

I need a new apartment with a larger shower where I can install multiple showerheads. Moving sounded better the more Fynn thought about it.

He stepped out, dried off quickly, and ducked into the hall. In his bedroom, the air cooled his bare skin as he tossed everything he'd been wearing into the hamper. His wet clothes were at police headquarters to be tested for gunshot residue or whatever. *They can keep them.*

Still naked, he pulled down the covers and stretched out on the sheet, ignoring his wet hair on the pillow and setting his stupid glasses aside. *New ones soon.* His dick had softened in the cool room, so he took himself in hand, starting a lazy stroke, thinking about Nolan's ass and veiny forearms. *Mm, not so soft now. Wish I was touching him.*

The water-noise shut off and a minute later, Nolan came in fully nude, carrying his clothes.

Ooh, look at all that gorgeous skin. "You can put yours in the hamper with mine."

“Thanks.” Nolan dropped his clothes inside but set something on the dresser.

His holster. “Will they give you your gun back?”

“Eventually.”

“Is it important?”

“Not that particular gun. I mean, it’s lightweight and has a nice, smooth trigger pull, but I can replace it anytime. I do feel a bit naked without a weapon in here, but I have Charlie on exterior surveillance tonight, so I don’t *need* one.”

I wish you didn’t ever need one. Fynn couldn’t deny the gun had helped today. “You’re off duty. No guns in bed.”

“Good rule.” Nolan came over and sat beside him on the edge of the mattress. Fynn saw his big dick was only half-hard.

I can fix that. “Lie down with me.”

Nolan raised his feet and stretched out beside Fynn, propped up on one elbow.

Fynn rolled toward him, looking up into his face. “Now kiss me.” He’d figured Nolan would take over in bed, but if the man was going to dawdle, Fynn had other ideas. He ran his thumb over Nolan’s lips, then cupped the back of his head, tugging down.

Nolan leaned over Fynn and brought their mouths together. For an instant he hovered, just out of touch, their breaths mingling. Then he set a wide palm against Fynn’s cheek, closed the gap, and his lips brushed Fynn’s

Oh, yeah.

Nolan deepened the kiss slowly. Fynn parted his lips to beg for more. Nolan tilted his head and sealed their mouths together harder, his tongue sliding against Fynn’s. Fynn let out a shaky moan and Nolan shifted further over him.

Please.

Fynn wrapped his arms around Nolan's shoulders, pulling him close. His weight came down slowly, pressing Fynn into the mattress. Fynn felt cradled not crushed. He craved that blanketing force. Spreading his legs, he hooked both up around Nolan's wide thighs. The steel rod of Nolan's cock pressed down into the groove of Fynn's groin. His own dick strained between them, more eager than ever, pressed into the soft-on-hard flesh of Nolan's belly.

Bucking against Nolan for friction, arms and legs wrapped around him, Fynn whined, begging without words. *More. Closer. Please.* His cockhead rubbed through coarse curls in the tight space between them. Language deserted him. *Now, now, now.*

"Wait," Nolan gasped. "Stop doing that if you want me to fuck you."

With a shudder, Fynn stilled himself. His cock jerked in protest, but he managed to say, "Yes. Please."

Nolan rolled off him. "Lie on your side, back to me."

"Not hands and knees?" Fynn had imagined Nolan pounding into him from behind.

"Sometime when we're not both exhausted."

Fair enough. Probably smart. Fynn did like intelligence in a man. He rolled onto his side, then froze. "The condom was in my pocket. Now in the hamper." *Damn it.*

"Luckily my legs work." Nolan pressed down on Fynn's shoulder. "Stay there."

Fynn closed his eyes, listening as Nolan crossed the room, rummaged, and came back.

The bed creaked under his heavy weight as he stretched out behind Fynn. "Lube?"

"Drawer on your side."

The drawer slid. "Got it." Cap clicked. Lube squelched. Then Nolan's fingers, damp with slick, eased from the base of Fynn's spine between his asscheeks. Fynn raised

his upper leg, bending the knee. The broad touch against his hole was probably only one finger. *He has big fingers.* Fynn tried to relax, bore down as Nolan's touch breached him.

"Been a while?" Nolan murmured, slowly working deeper.

Fynn *appreciated* that casual tone, the lack of assumptions of *are you an ass virgin?* or *are you sure this is a good idea?* Yeah, he was absolutely sure. "I've used toys recently." *Like the other night, dreaming of you, trying to come silently.* He'd gone small-sized with the dildo, though, trying not to grunt and moan with Sheridan in the next room.

Nolan wasn't small anywhere.

That's a second finger.

Nolan pulled out, got more lube, and when he came back, Fynn's ass decided to cooperate. Nolan's touch slid deep, the itchy stretch giving way to a deep ache and a growing heat— "There! Fuck!" Fynn's dick jumped, precum welling. He cupped himself in one hand, rubbing his thumb over the wet head. Nolan pressed Fynn's prostate again and he groaned. "Ready." He wasn't, not really, but he also didn't want to come on Nolan's fingers. "Ready. Fuck me."

He expected an argument, but Nolan simply pulled his hand away and Fynn heard the condom wrapper tear. *God, this man. He listens!* That felt like an incredible gift.

"Okay, sweetheart," Nolan murmured.

Fynn shivered. *No one's ever called me that.*

"We'll go slow. Let me know if you need to stop." Nolan set a hand under Fynn's thigh, pushing him higher. There was another lube-squirt, then Nolan gripped Fynn's leg and firm, wide pressure at Fynn's hole demanded entry.

Yes. Please. Please. Fynn took slow, steady breaths and bore down, remembering the first time he ever did

this and how the fit felt impossible, then implausible, then became necessary and right and— “Ungh.” The rounded head of Nolan’s dick stretched Fynn’s outer rim. He bore down again as Nolan rocked into him, and the stretch deepened. “Good,” he murmured breathlessly, in case Nolan was worried. “Like that.”

Slowly, steadily, inch by inch, Nolan rocked and circled, eased back and pushed in. Fynn was stuffed full, stretched to his aching limit, and still there was more. He groaned, but when Nolan froze, Fynn rocked his hips back. *Don’t stop.*

Nolan took up his slow rhythm again. Their breaths rasped faster. Sweat and precum scented the still air. Fynn stroked his dick, keeping his erection from flagging. Nolan kissed the back of Fynn’s neck, pulled back, pushed deeper, pulled back, pushed in hard. A bead of sweat dripped off Fynn’s eyebrow. *Please.*

“Look at you,” Nolan whispered. “Taking it all.”

Fynn was full of Nolan, not just his aching stretched ass, but each breath, every sound, Nolan’s hands on his skin, Nolan’s smell in his nose. “Please.” He said the word aloud this time, and Nolan kissed his shoulder.

With a slow, slow arch, Nolan drew back, his huge dick sliding out of Fynn’s hole part way, halfway. Then he pushed home faster than before. Slid out again. Thrust home.

“Oh!” A jolt from Fynn’s prostate sizzled through him. “There!”

“Yeah?” Nolan pumped in and out again.

Fynn saw stars and made a sound he couldn’t spell.

Nolan chuckled against Fynn’s skin, then clutched him harder and took up a rhythm. Retreat, pause, thrust, retreat, pause, thrust. The motion deep inside Fynn sent him spiraling, shocks of pleasure flashing through him, his vision turning dark around the edges. He panted, his breath a whining jolt as he exhaled, as if Nolan was driving all the air out of Fynn’s body. He fumbled for his dick, trying to match his strokes to the slow, inexorable

rhythm of Nolan's fucking. Precum welled out steadily, slicking his hand.

"Ah. Fuck," Nolan gasped behind Fynn. "Fuck. Soon. Fynn?"

"Do it." Fynn ached to feel Nolan spill inside him. "Come on." He pushed back on Nolan's thrust and was impaled, Nolan's groin grinding into his ass, Nolan's cock halfway to his throat. "Come on!" He stroked himself frantically, his dick hot and tight under his hand, trapped, aching, a wave of desire building till he felt lifted higher and higher, desperate for release. "Please!"

Nolan pushed Fynn over onto his front on the bed and pinned him flat, fucking him now, hard and deep, rhythm lost. Fynn's cock was trapped under him, his fist wrapped around the shaft, but that didn't matter. His dick was irrelevant. Breathing was irrelevant. His hole clenched, stretched and tight, the focus of his universe, and his balls drew up. Another deep thrust drove him to breaking. A wave of heat crashed through Fynn, ass to groin and out along every nerve, jetting spunk between his trapped fingers. His last breath was forced from him in a long, deep groan.

Nolan drove into Fynn once more, twice, then grunted and ground against Fynn's ass, his body shuddering over Fynn's. "Oh fuck. Oh god." He jolted and trembled again.

Fynn closed his eyes. His vision sparkled and each breath rasped in his dry throat. *Jesus*. Every muscle was a limp noodle. Nolan's weight bore him down to the center of the universe and he was willing to go there. An aftershock ripped through him and he gasped. Coming down from that peak, he became aware of stretch becoming tenderness, of hand stickiness and difficulty breathing. *Worth it. Wow*. He basked in sensations, the discomfort tiny pinpricks in the warm honey waves still rocking him. *Wow*.

Nolan groaned softly and murmured, "I don't want to move. That was perfect."

"So don't move." Fynn managed to get a hand behind himself, pulling Nolan's furry thigh against him.

“Not letting you get too sore.” Nolan’s weight lifted off Fynn’s shoulders, a touch fumbled at his stretched hole, then Nolan drew out, slow and steady.

Fynn’s asshole clung to Nolan as if reluctant to let him free. Then Nolan was gone and Fynn felt loose and empty, clenching. He whined.

“Shh.” Nolan slipped a fingertip into Fynn’s hole, massaging his rim gently for a minute. “Better?”

“Yeah. Mm.” The careful touch soothed his soreness, and he slumped deeper into the bed. “Y’r good at that,” he slurred. *Not moving for sixteen gazillion years. Or until I have to pee.*

“Thanks.” Nolan shifted around, then settled back down, pulling Fynn back onto his side in a spoon. “You look so prim and proper and sciencey with your glasses and your labcoats, and then there’s this incredibly sexy man under there.” He kissed Fynn under the ear. “You’re so damned hot.”

Probably Nolan was deluded, but Fynn wasn’t about to disillusion him. “Well, you were right.”

“About what?”

“This bed is big enough for the two of us. Sturdy enough, too. Although we could stress test it further.”

Nolan chuckled. “You want to?”

“Eventually. After we sleep.” *And run to the bathroom, because biology is inexorable.* He shifted his legs against the clench of his ass. *You can wait, though, asshole.* Being held like this, tight in Nolan’s arms, was worth any amount of discomfort.

“I’ll pencil it in,” Nolan said. “Bed stress testing, nightly. How many repeats should I include?”

“Infinite number,” Fynn told him. “Reminder repeats nightly, ad infinitum.”

Nolan’s arms tightened around him. “You’re sure you won’t get tired of me? I’m a working grunt. I’m not half as smart as you are.”

Fynn pushed free and rolled over to face Nolan. “You don’t give yourself credit. Anyhow, I don’t want you in my life to help me do science. I want you to laugh with me and remind me about my phone and share our awesome hugs and watch sci-fi movies and eat my guacamole.”

“I love your guacamole.”

“See? You’re fulfilling your destiny.”

Nolan caught up Fynn’s sticky hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed over his knuckles. “I love you.”

Fynn leaned past their hands to kiss Nolan’s mouth. “I love you, too, and I’ll prove it by bringing you back a wet washcloth after I clean up.”

“Greater love hath no man.” Nolan grinned.

“You bet. Keep my spot safe for me.” He forced his wet-noodle legs to move and sat on the side of the bed.

“Your spot, here in my arms.” Nolan patted the bed in front of his chest. “Always safe for you.”

“Mushy,” Fynn muttered, pushing to his feet. “Six-foot-six, built like Paul Bunyan, carries a gun, and underneath, he’s mushy.”

Nolan’s warm laugh followed Fynn out the bedroom door.

Epilogue

Ten months later

Nolan walked the perimeter of the yard, evaluating preparedness. Amelia waved from behind the boulder that hid her. Sheridan, over by the back gate, cocked his head, then gave Nolan a thumbs up. Nolan drifted to his left into the cover of a tall bush. Lilac, if he remembered correctly. Sheridan slipped around the corner of the house. For a moment, silence prevailed.

Then the back gate opened and Fynn stepped through. “Hey, Nolan? What—”

“*Surprise!*” Every member of Stone Security jumped out of hiding, blowing noise-makers and wearing party hats.

Fynn shrieked and leaped three feet sideways, staggering as he landed, his arms windmilling.

Nolan sprang forward to grab him in a hug. “Careful. No breaking the birthday boy.”

“Me?” Fynn pounded at Nolan’s arms with his fists, although his anger wasn’t convincing. “What did you just do?”

“A surprise birthday party?” Nolan gestured around the yard. “You said you’d never had one.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean...” Fynn scanned the grinning audience of Nolan’s employees in paper hats.

Nolan glared at them over Fynn’s head. *Not one word about how sappy this is.* Although everyone working for Stone Security knew he was a fool for his boyfriend.

Sheridan pointed at a long, dish-laden table. “The boss cleaned out all the ripe avocados in your lab and made your guacamole recipe. So you’ll start the week with an empty fridge.”

“Out of the generosity of his heart,” Fynn drawled. Nolan didn’t have to see his face to know he was grinning. “Not because he likes it.”

“I even peeled the tomatoes,” Nolan said against Fynn’s hair, not letting go.

“I should hope so,” Fynn huffed.

“And I bought the organic corn chips you like.”

“We didn’t let him bake the cake, though,” Amelia said. “Bakery all the way.”

“I can bake,” Nolan complained.

“As long as it’s from a mix.” Fynn compounded his slander by elbowing Nolan in the ribs.

Nolan let go and pouted theatrically. Fynn laughed, then stretched upward to deliver a kiss on Nolan’s cheek. “All right, you can bake, but you’re too busy right now.”

That was true enough. He’d brought four new employees on board for RipeBox where he now ran personal security. Plus three new people for Stone, and they were about to start a short-term contract with a local bank, protecting some wealthy investors flying in to be wined, dined, and shown Chicago real estate. Coordination would be fun— *not*— since those guys each had their own security, and bodyguard teams all tended to be control freaks. Luckily, the details would be Charlie’s headache. Nolan had stepped away from day-to-day team operations so he could be home with Fynn most nights.

The back door of the house opened, and Micah stepped out, followed by several of Fynn’s lab coworkers. Micah had a foil gift bag in hand. “Where do you want this?”

“Table over there,” Amelia told him.

Micah hovered, though, eyeing Fynn. “How did the software test go?”

“It’s his birthday,” Nolan protested, sure the effort was futile. “Shop talk can wait.”

“It’s not actually my birthday yet,” Fynn pointed out.

Nolan hadn’t forgotten, but his team was going to be tied up starting tomorrow, so it was party two days early or never. “Adds to the surprise, right?”

“Yeah. About that.” Fynn tugged on Nolan’s shirt. “In a normal surprise party, the guests are terrible at hiding and can’t help making noises, so the birthday person isn’t actually startled. There’s probably a law against doing it with trained ninjas.”

Nolan grinned. “Not in my books.”

“The test?” Micah nagged.

“Oh yeah. The test.” Fynn turned to his brother, pulling a sad face.

Nolan wasn’t fooled, but Micah began frowning. “What? Do you need to recalibrate? Do we have to put off the launch?”

Slowly, Fynn allowed a smile to creep across his face. “Nope. Went perfect. Adding the software to ‘CadoBox4 has been accomplished. The PearPerfection extension is a go.”

“Oh, thank god.” Micah glared. “You had me worried.”

“Wouldn’t want you to take me for granted,” Fynn told him.

Nolan felt like Micah did that already, but he had a rule not to meddle between Fynn and his brother. Much. He put an arm around Fynn and steered him down the garden toward the gift table. “Come check out your loot.”

“Why is the table down here?” Fynn let himself be guided past the patio with its barbecue and along the vegetable bed to the far end behind the screening fence.

“To keep the gifts away from food and fire,” Nolan lied. He glanced back. Micah had started to follow them but been headed off by Amelia. *Good work.*

Despite the crowd now digging into food up by the house, the far end of the garden with its tall, wide-canopied maple tree felt secluded. Nolan liked this

property. The house itself was smallish with two spare bedrooms, one serving as his office and the other available for someone guarding Fynn when Nolan had to be away from home. The cushy basement held a big screen TV, a LEGO table, and a panic room Fynn called *massive overkill* but which eased Nolan's worries when he was gone. The best part was the almost-acre of grounds, all privacy-fenced. He could feel the way Fynn relaxed in their garden.

Fynn grinned up at him. "You could give me my special present back here. We're kind of out of view."

I plan to. Although the gift wasn't what Fynn was thinking of. That would wait till tonight. *I lied. The best part of this house is the huge walk-in shower with five showerheads, a bench, and sturdy grab rails.* He'd demonstrate his appreciation of Fynn in there later. For now... "Check out this one." He pointed at his clumsily wrapped gift.

Fynn laughed. "That's exactly the size of the 'CadoBox4. I thought we should make the design more vertical. Reduce the countertop footprint. Except fruit's more likely to bruise when inserted upright and since we were planning the pear extension, handling was important. Pears are so delicate. I've thought about increasing the cushioning factor of the lining. There are some new materials—"

"The gift?" Nolan nudged. Not because he didn't enjoy hearing Fynn race off on a new idea, but he was close to holding his breath, and that had limits.

"Oh yeah. I wonder..." Fynn pushed his glasses— an exact replica of the pair he'd lost— up his nose and peered at the card, then glanced over his shoulder. "From you? What is it?"

"Open it." He didn't hold his breath, but he did lock his hands behind himself in parade rest to help with waiting.

Fynn ripped the paper off the outside. "Hey, it is a CadoBox4. Wait, this is *ours*. I recognize the scratch from when I accidentally dropped the knife-block."

Nolan did too. That hadn't been his favorite moment, rushing into the kitchen to find Fynn hopping around dripping blood from his foot. Luckily all Fynn ended up with was a small scar.

"You gave me a used 'CadoBox?" Fynn stared at him.

"Look inside."

Fynn opened the curved top and blinked. Nolan knew what he saw. Down inside, on the washable mesh cradle, sat a blue velvet box. Without reaching in, Fynn said, "I'm not much for jewelry. Awkward in a lab."

"Carolyn wears her wedding ring." There, big hint.

"I guess." Fynn lifted the box out carefully, popped the lid open, and stared at the gold bands nestled side by side on white silk.

Nolan wasn't going down on one knee. There were a ton of people watching idly from the top of the lawn, and only a couple of them knew what he was doing. He'd wanted their friends around to celebrate, but if Fynn was going to say no, he'd really hate any fuss. Nolan wasn't about to expose him to that. "Just a thought. If you wanted to. No pressure. I'd sign a preup, of course." Nolan realized this time he was the one babbling.

"Preup." Fynn stroked the curve of one ring with a fingertip. "Our preup'll say, 'If Nolan ever gets tired of me, he gets fifty million dollars.'"

"You don't *have* fifty million dollars."

"Yet." Fynn looked up at him, eyes bright. "So better to not have a preup. Then I won't go into debt."

"That's not how it works." Nolan took a breath. "Is that a yes?"

Fynn bit his lower lip. Nolan stared at where his white teeth dented that delicate pink flesh, rather than meet his eyes, but when he saw a smile start to form, he looked up. Fynn grinned at him, his eyes shiny and damp. "Yes. Oh yes. To the getting married part. Not the preup. But are you sure? You do so much for me and I—"

“You do so much for me too, and I don’t mean your money or your delectable ass. Remember when you tackled a guy with a gun to save me? Even though you had no training and it was my job to save you?”

“We saved each other that time.”

“Exactly. And when I wake in the night, you’re there for me.” Both of their nightmares had gradually lessened, but there was still deep comfort in having someone to turn to after bolting awake gasping, someone who’d offer a tight, loving hold and repeat, *“It wasn’t real. You’re safe. We’re safe.”*

Fynn said, “You do that for me too.”

“We fit together. Before I met you, I couldn’t have imagined you. Now, I can’t imagine life without you.”

Lifting the bigger ring out of the box, Fynn ran a finger over the tracery around the outside. “What’s this?”

“Avocado leaves. I was going to have her do avocados, but she showed me the initial attempt and they looked like blobs. The leaves are prettier.”

“Though not as useful. Although of course, without leaves you wouldn’t have fruit since all the energy-balance for the tree comes from photosynthesis.” Fynn stopped. “Can I put the ring on you now?”

“Now. At the wedding. Whenever.”

“Now. And again at the wedding.” Fynn peered up the lawn at their friends who were starting to turn their way. “We’ll get married like this, in the garden, with these exact same people.”

“And my family,” Nolan said, although he wasn’t absolutely sure who would come. He’d brought Fynn home with him a few times, and everyone was polite, but they still called Fynn his “friend.” He’d invite them, though, and it’d be their choice.

Fynn wrinkled his nose. “Okay. No homemade wine.”

Nolan laughed, joy flooding him. “Yeah, that was vile.” His dad had pushed his dandelion-wine on them last

time and it was not a success. “Mom’ll keep him in line.”

Fynn looked up at Nolan. “Hold out your hand.”

He sobered and extended his left hand.

Fynn took it, his slim fingers cool under Nolan’s, and slid the band home over his knuckle. “With this ring, I thee wed, or at least will wed at some future date of our choosing, but not when the ’CadoBox4 extension hits the shelves because Micah will want publicity and I don’t want our wedding to become a marketing thing. Even though it’d be a good one, because you’re very photogenic and all the people who drool over body-buildy guys would drool over you too, but even if that did generate sales, I want you to myself.”

Nolan did the only thing in the world he wanted to do right then. He set his newly-ringed hand under Fynn’s chin, raised his fiancé’s face toward his, and kissed him.

the end

.
.

Since this was originally written for a multi-author thing, the guys showed up for an interview, to give readers a little added content...

Fynn, Nolan, and Guacamole

Interviewer: *So, guys, what bonus do we have for your fans today?*

Fynn: *Why do we even have fans? I don't get it. Although Nolan deserves fans, because he totally could be a body double for Jason Momoa except Nolan's better looking.*

Nolan: *Thanks, but you're a bit biased. Actually, a lot biased. I don't have close to his muscles. I work out, but I try not to bulk up too much. Speed and flexibility are more important.*

Fynn: *I do like you flexible... Remember when you put your foot—*

Nolan: *Ahem, we're doing this interview?*

Fynn: *Oh, yeah. I'll remind you when we get home. Although we might need to stop by the lab on the way. While we were in the car heading here, I came up with a better way to flow air through the PortaCado sensor, but it'll mean some recalibration.*

Nolan: *Wait, I thought you were paying attention to me on the drive.*

Fynn: *Well, I was, but I saw the way the breeze from the vents was moving your hair and that got me thinking about air flow and, well, ideas happen.*

Nolan: *They definitely happen to you. So what's your idea right now for a reader bonus gift?*

Fynn: *I suppose you'd say no to a gif of you stripping your shirt off?*

Nolan: *Definite no. What about your awesome guacamole recipe?*

Fynn: *There are lots of recipes for guacamole out there.*

Nolan: *Yeah, but yours is the best. Don't tell my sister I said that.*

Fynn: *I don't tell your sister anything if I can avoid it. She still thinks I'm some kind of delusion of yours and you'll come to your senses eventually and drop me like a hot potato.*

Nolan: *No delusion and no dropping. I'm yours forever. Tell the nice folks your recipe.*

Fynn: *Okay, here's what I do.*

Fynn's Guacamole*

1/2 of a red onion, finely chopped

1-2 chiles finely chopped – pick the level of heat you like

(I mostly use jalapenos and take out the membranes and seeds, because my brother Micah never got a taste for spicy food, but for Nolan, I add a serrano; heat for the hottie)

1/4 cup minced fresh coriander

(or to your taste – up to 14% of the population are coriander “tasters” meaning they have one of several genes including OR6A2, that make the aldehydes in coriander smell and taste like soap. Those folks won't want to use this much herb. Interestingly, this is not the same “bitterness PTC taster” gene which may affect how much you like olives or Brussels sprouts... ahem, getting back to guacamole.)

1/4 tsp salt or to taste

2 medium avocados *(use your 'CadoBox to make sure these are at optimum ripeness.)*

1 large ripe tomato or 2 smaller ones

Grind half of the chopped onion, half of the coriander, the chiles, and the salt with a mortar and pestle until they form a thick lumpy paste. (This part is really important, otherwise you just have a jumble of diced ingredients. If you don't own a mortar, you could try a different method of grinding, but they need to be well smooshed.)

Cut the avocados in half, remove the pits, and separate the peel from the flesh. *(Don't cut yourself doing this. Do not hold the avocado in your palm to slice into it. A study published in the American Journal of Health Behavior in 2020 found 49,331 avocado-cutting-related injuries that resulted in emergency room visits in the U.S. between 2000 and 2017. This fruit fights back. Be smart. Maybe the next thing I need to invent is the foolproof 'CadoCutter...)*

Dice the avocados and then mash them up roughly with a fork, along with the herb-chile-onion paste from the mortar. *(You can mash them more thoroughly if you like your guacamole smoother.)*

Drop the tomatoes into boiling water for ten seconds to loosen the peel, then run them under cold water, remove the peel, seed them, and dice up the flesh. *(Don't get distracted in the ten seconds they're in the water and lose track, because cooked tomatoes don't have half the nice texture the raw ones do, and they like to explode in the water and turn to mush. Ask me how I know.)*

Combine the mashed avocado-herb-onion-chiles with the diced tomato, the unsmooshed chopped onion, and the minced coriander in a nice serving bowl.

Fynn: *And then you have guacamole. Serve it right away to preserve the fresh green color best. If you need to hold it, cover the surface with wax paper or plastic wrap to prevent the phenolic compounds from oxidizing to quinones—*

Nolan: *From turning brown, is what he means.*

Fynn: *That's what I said.*

Nolan: *Just translating.*

Fynn: *Anyhow, serve with your favorite tortilla chips. Organic, if you can, to help the environment, but I know not everyone has money to spare to go organic.*

Nolan: *This recipe serves four people, fewer if they're bodyguards.*

Fynn: *I used a dozen avocados last time you had your team over and the bowl was empty in fifteen minutes.*

Nolan: *Amelia ate half of it.*

Fynn: *Amelia can have anything she wants, forever and ever.*

Nolan: *Agreed. So, interview-person, can we head out? If we stop at the lab, it's going to be hours till we get home, and I have a date to demonstrate my flexibility.*

Interviewer: *Thanks for stopping by. Now I have a yen for guacamole.*

Fynn: *I have a yen for Nolan. Maybe we can skip the lab, this once.*

Nolan: *I'm writing this date down for posterity. Come on, Fynn, let's go home.*

#####

*Fynn adapted his recipe from his mother's copy of Diana Kennedy's *The Cuisines of Mexico* © 1972

.
. .
.

If you enjoyed Fynn and Nolan, you might like meeting Sean— in 1981, Sean headed off to college to change his life, but he never expected he'd fall for a guy he caught vandalizing his car.

[Like the Taste of Summer](#) is a **FREE** novella, wherever ebooks are sold.

I yelled and dove toward my Corolla. Suddenly the dark figures broke away from our cars, running all-out for the pickup truck. I couldn't see most of them, but one guy was right there, still crouched down by the door of my ride. He lurched upright, swinging at my head with something in his hand. I caught his wrist and hung on. He fought me desperately as the doors on the pickup slammed and the engine roared, revving impatiently.

“Let go!” His voice was light and panicky. “Let the fuck go!”

“Fuck that, you son of a bitch.” I took a glancing punch in the ribs and jerked him to his knees, trying to look around him at my car. “What the hell did you do to my wheels?”

Up on the hill, the other students were coming in a pack, screaming curses and threats. The pickup gunned its motor one more time, and then screamed off down the drive, laying rubber. The guy I was holding onto looked both ways and then his face in the streetlight got pale as milk. “Oh, shit.”

- Self-discovery, first times, coming out, poignancy and a solid HEA

Get Sean and Jack’s story for free :

<https://books2read.com/u/bzdzpE>

Or check out

[A Midnight Clear](#)

Friends to lovers, second chances novel, as two young EMT students go from roommates to lovers, to different paths forward. What will it take to bring Adric and Royce together again?

Looking up made me dizzy and I staggered.

Royce was there in a second, an arm around my back. “Dude. How many beers did you have?”

“Not that many.” I felt nicely floaty and couldn’t resist leaning into his hold. “I’m a lightweight.”

“Don’t feel that light.” He shoved my door closed and steered me toward the steps. “You have to climb on your own. I’m not carrying you.”

“But you’re so stro-ong,” I sing-songed, flinging my arm over his shoulders. “You have those great muscles.”

“I’m so gonna video you and put it on Instagram,” he muttered, but he didn’t pull free, and his hold on me tightened.

Get *A Midnight Clear* free when you [sign up for my newsletter on my website.](#)

I write M/M romance in a variety of sub-genres from contemporary and mystery to paranormal, and have several other free novels, novellas, and stories, among my over sixty published books.

You can find weekly free short stories on my Facebook group – [Kaje's Conversation Corner](#)

And a complete list of all my books with links is on my website at <https://kajeharper.com/books/>

About the Author

I get asked about my name a lot. It's not something exotic, though. "Kaje" is pronounced just like "cage" – it's an old nickname, and my pronouns are she/her/hers. I was born in Montreal but I've lived for 37 years in Minnesota, where the two seasons are Snow-removal and Road-repair, where the mosquito is the state bird, and where winter can be breathtakingly beautiful. Minnesota's a kind, quiet (if sometimes chilly) place and it's home.

I've been writing far longer than I care to admit (*whispers – forty-five years*), mostly for my own entertainment, usually M/M romance (with added mystery, fantasy, historical, sci-fi...) I also have a few Young Adult stories (under the pen name Kira Harp).

My first professionally published book, *Life Lessons*, came out May 2011. I have a weakness for closeted cops with honest hearts and teachers who speak their minds, and I was delighted and encouraged by the reception Mac and Tony received.

I now have a good-sized backlist in ebooks and print, including Amazon bestseller *The Rebuilding Year* and Rainbow Award winner for Best Mystery-Thriller: *Tracefinder: Contact*.

I'm always pleased to have readers find me online:

Website: <https://kajeharper.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/KajeHarper>

Facebook group: Kaje's Conversation Corner:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/208207893795147/>

Goodreads Author page:
https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4769304.Kaje_Harper

Other Books by Kaje Harper

Self-Published/Indie:

Changes

Changes Coming Down (Book #1)

Changes Going On (Book #2)

Tracefinder

Tracefinder: Contact (Book #1)

Tracefinder: Changes (Book #2)

Tracefinder: Choices (Book #3)

Finding Family

The Family We're Born With (Book #1) – free novella

The Family We Make (Book #2)

Necromancer

Marked by Death (Book #1)

Powered by Ghosts (Book #2)

Bound by Memories (Book #3)

Trapped by Greed (Book #4)

Beset by Demons (Book #5)

Consumed by Fire (Book #6)

Found by Jasper (Book #7)

Magic Burning (Carnival of Mysteries)

Hidden Wolves Re-released

Unacceptable Risk (Book #1)

Unexpected Demands (Book #2)

Unwanted Appeal (Book #3)

Unjustified Claims (Book #4)

Unsafe Exposure (Book #5)

Hidden Wolves New Stories

Undeniable Bonds (Book #6)

Unplanned Coda (Book #7)

Unseen Past (A Hidden Wolves Prequel)

Rebuilding Year Re-released

The Rebuilding Year (Book #1)

Life, Some Assembly Required (Book #2)

Rebuilding Year New Stories

Building Forever (Book #2.5)

Life Lessons Re-released

Life Lessons (Book #1)

Breaking Cover (Book #2)

Home Work (Book #3)

Learning Curve (Book #4)

And to All a Good Night (Book #1.5)

+ *Bonus Story Getting It Right* (Book #1.8)

Compensations (Book #3.5)

Stand-alone Books:

Rejoice, Dammit

Unfair in Love and War

(in the charity anthology *Another Place in Time*)

Not Your Grandfather's Magic

(in the charity anthology *Wish Come True*)

Don't Plan to Stay

Love and Lint Rollers

Second Act

A Midnight Clear

Alec: Single Dads of Gaynor Beach

Hidden Blade: The Road to Rocktoberfest 2022

The Distant Hills and Other Stories

Magic Burning (Carnival of Mysteries)

Rocking Karma: The Road to Rocktoberfest 2023

Audiobooks:

Into Deep Waters – Narrated by Kaleo Griffith

The Rebuilding Year – Narrated by Gomez Pugh

Life, Some Assembly Required – Narrated by Gomez
Pugh

Building Forever – Narrated by Gomez Pugh

Life Lessons – Narrated by JF Harding

Re-releases:

Sole Support

Gift of the Goddess

Fair Isn't Life

Nelson & Caleb

Where the Heart Is

Re-releasing soon:

Full Circle

Ghosts and Flames

Possibilities

Tumbling Dreams

Stand-alone Free Novels:

Into Deep Waters

Nor Iron Bars a Cage

Chasing Death Metal Dreams

Lies and Consequences

Laser Visions

Stand-alone Free Short Stories:

Like the Taste of Summer

Show Me Yours

Within Reach

Shooting Star

**A full list with blurbs, and
download and buy links can be
found at:**

<http://www.kajeharper.com/books/>

Table of Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Kaje Harper](#)

