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THE
TIME
OF HIS
LIFE

MAX GRIFFIN

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**The Time of His Life
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His and His Kisses

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T·H·E T·I·M·E
O·F H·I·S
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*To Sandy Samson
in gratitude for his critical acumen.*

CHAPTER 1

Jeff straightened his necktie and brushed at his auburn curls. He flashed his best you-can-trust-me smile and the face in the mirror grinned back, teeth gleaming and blue eyes twinkling. He slipped into his maroon sport coat and stroked the golden Lifetime Suspensions, Incorporated logo positioned over his heart. He hitched up his pants over narrow hips and licked his lips. He knew that his sales technique relied as much on his athletic good looks as on his pitch. *Good to see the hours in the gym help in the looks department. Now for the payoff in the cash department.*

A tone sounded and Marie's voice purred over the omnipresent Muzak, "Mr. Railsback, please see a customer on the showroom floor."

He tested his grin once more and tossed his head. His locks fell into perfect repose, framing his

square face and tickling his ears and the nape of his neck. Random golden highlights flecked the tips of his hair and accented his tan. "Okay, boy, you look ready," he murmured, "I'd sign your contract and so will the client."

The customer was a skinny, young guy, with wrists like pencils and wispy, blond hair that looked like it could use fertilizer. He peered at Jeff through thick, wire-framed glasses and favored him with a toothy grin. "Jeff! Good to see you again, man. Mark Phillips here."

Jeff pumped at the proffered hand, careful not to squeeze the life out of guy's dishrag grip. "Mark! Sure, great to see you!" A moment of panic struck as he thought, *Fuck. He looks familiar. Where did I meet him?* Despite his uncertainty, his salesman's demeanor remained unflappable.

"Great, great. How's Aaron and Kathy doin'? They still away on honeymoon?"

Got it! Outside Kathy's apartment, when I was walkin' Sam the other night. "Yeah, they're in Japan for another coupla weeks. I'll be stayin' at their place,

takin' care of the dog, until they get back." Jeff didn't miss a beat, but still this guy's presence was strange. *What the fuck's he doin' here?* Most of Jeff's customers were elderly, or terminally ill, or both.

"Yeah, that's what you said the other night." He took his hand back and wiped it on his pants. "You need anything, you let me know. Aaron and I been buddies ever since he moved in. I'm always glad to help out a neighbor. I guess that'll be neighbors, plural, now that they're the Coles."

"Thanks, Mark. I've been best friends with Kathy since junior high. They're both great people and I'm glad they found each other." He raised his eyebrows and tipped his head to one side. "So, what brings you here this afternoon?"

"You told me you worked here. I've always been interested in suspended animation, ever since it came out, what, ten years ago?"

"LSI has been offering cryopreservation services to the public for fourteen years and is the oldest and most respected firm in the business." The sales pitch rolled off his tongue without thought. *He's kinda*

goofy lookin'. Hope he's not hittin' on me. Not that I haven't slept with worse. Jeff's trust-me smile didn't falter and visions of commissions danced in his head.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. So, I might be interested in being a client. Can you tell me more about it? Like, how much does it cost, what's it like?"

"Why don't you come into my office?" He waved his hand toward the plush corridor that led away from the terrazzo-floored entry. "I can answer all of your questions there." Jeff flashed another of those practiced smiles. "Would you care for coffee, or a soda, or anything?"

"A Coke would be great, thanks." He shuffled behind Jeff, who asked Marie to bring them each a soda.

They settled into the over-stuffed, black chairs in Jeff's office. His glass-topped desk held only his phone and an empty in box. A crystal vase with fresh lilacs and lilies, their scent filling the room, stood on the frosted glass conference table. A floor-to-ceiling window looked out on the LSI campus where cobbled pathways meandered through brilliant patches of

flowers. The sun, filtered through the tinted window, warmed the soft leather of the chairs.

"So, Mark, why the interest in cryopreservation? I hope your health is well?"

"What? My health?" After a moment of puzzlement, his teeth flashed inside another perfunctory smile. "Oh, yeah, I read that most of your clients are sick. They hope that if they sleep for a few years, they'll wake up to a cure." His head pivoted back and forth on his spindly neck. "I take pills for a touch of anemia, but other than that, my health is great. Knock on wood." He looked around, frowned, and rapped on the burnished aluminum frame of the end table.

Marie arrived with two crystal tumblers filled with ice and soda. "Thank you, Marie." Jeff sipped his while he gazed at Mark, waiting for him to continue. *Let the customer sell himself.*

"Yeah, thanks." Mark's lips simpered as he sipped his drink. "Like I said, my health is fine, thanks. I expect to live a long time." He put his glass down and leaned forward. "I'm interested for a couple of reasons. First, I like the time travel idea. You

know, go to sleep and you wake up thirty years from now to a better and brighter tomorrow. But to enjoy that future, I was thinkin' of the compound interest angle. Let my investments grow while I sleep, and I'll wake up rich."

Jeff maintained an enthusiastic exterior, while thinking, *This guy's either already loaded, or stupid, or both.* Still, he focused on the sale. "Some of our clients do that, yes. But the initial investment is substantial, and there's the bond to cover the annual maintenance fee." He reached for a brochure on the table. "There's a sliding scale for the latter, depending on how long you plan to be in cryopreservation." He opened the folder and slid it across the glass to Mark. *If he can cover the setup fee and bond payments, he's loaded for sure. And if he expects to have anything left over to collect interest...maybe sleeping with him isn't such a bad idea after all.*

Mark glanced at the numbers in the glossy sales promo. "Yeah, that's what the article I read said to expect. My trust fund can handle all of that, and then some. According to my accountant, thirty years

from now, the annual income will at least double. I can go from a comfortable life to a life of unbridled luxury." He sat back, gulped his soda, and suppressed a belch.

Jeff wondered what kind of person would give up friends and family for a few extra dollars. He reflected that maybe Mark didn't have much in the way of either. *If it weren't for Kathy, I wouldn't have any connection with the here and now, myself. Not since I dumped that asshole, Craig. To say nothin' of that even bigger asshole, my brother.* The memory of his ex-lover in bed with his sibling pained him. For a moment, his salesman's shroud of good humor cracked.

"So, do you give a tour, or somethin'?" Mark's eyes bulged a bit, or else maybe his glasses made them seem to pop out, frog-like, from his skull.

Jeff gave a small start and returned to sales mode. "Yes, of course. If you'll follow me, I'll give you a tour." He led the way down the corridor to a steel-encased elevator and pushed the *down* button. "Our client chambers are all in a reinforced sub-basement. A nuclear device like the one that was used on Hous-

ton in '15 could go off downtown and it wouldn't part the hair on our client's heads."

They stepped into the elevator and faced forward. While it shot downward, Jeff continued with the pitch. "It'll take sixty seconds to descend the two hundred feet to the client area. Not only is our facility safe, so are our processes. Cryopreservation is a fully researched and robust medical technology. It was pioneered by scientists at LSI, working under secret contracts with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. Using the technology, the Allies pre-positioned soldiers in the Middle East, troops that were critical to the rapid response and victory in the Fourth Gulf War. Afterwards, DARPA released the technology for commercial use, and LSI became the premiere firm offering services to the public." The doors opened to a vast chamber filled with coffin-sized, stainless steel vaults. "This facility has the capacity for one thousand clients and is currently filled to eighty percent capacity."

"So, you said it was safe from a terrorist bomb. How about a natural disaster, say an epidemic like the bird flu?"

"Of course, respiration and other physiological functions are curtailed but not halted. An infection is theoretically possible, but the cryopreservation would slow its course. In any case, the client chambers all are hermetically sealed and have an independent air supply. We use the advanced nanocarbon filament in the air filtration systems, which keeps out even the most minute viruses and contaminants."

He droned on with the sales pitch, emphasizing the safety of the process and the site. Mark tagged along and asked the occasional question. After an hour, he took Jeff's business card and said he'd be back next week.

Jeff stood by Marie's desk and watched Mark wind his way through the campus toward the parking lot. She got out her compact and freshened her lipstick. "So, you think he's a live one?"

"Might be. He can afford the process, but he's not got the strongest motivation."

She snapped her compact shut. "Who'd be motivated to be a corpsicle, anyway, unless they were already half dead? Least ways, he didn't look sick to me."

"Marie! Don't use that awful word. They're clients. You know we are never to use that term." He sighed. "He told me his health was fine."

"Wasn't much to him, that's for sure. He looked so skinny that if he stood sideways and stuck out his tongue you'd mistake him for a zipper." She rolled her eyes. "So, if he ain't sick, why's he here?"

"He thinks he can invest his trust fund and be a billionaire instead of a mere millionaire when he wakes up. It'll probably work. Maybe he *is* the type to abandon family and friends for money." Jeff shrugged. "I don't care why he signs the contract, I just want him to sign."

"Yeah, right." She shook out her hennaed curls. "If I had a million bucks I'd never put myself in cold storage for thirty years. That's nuts."

"Risky, too. The procedure's safe, but there's no telling what his investments might do. If you've only

got weeks to live anyway, it's worth it." He shrugged. "But ours is not to question why, ours is but to sell and sell." He glanced at his watch. "It's after six. I'm gonna take off. The commute's a bear this time of day. Can you lock up?"

"Sure. See you tomorrow, Jeff."

He departed, not looking forward to another evening alone in a strange apartment. *At least the dog likes me*, he thought, anticipating Sam's goofy grin and floppy, red tale. *Of course, he probably just needs out to poop and pee and couldn't give a fuck whether it's me or some stranger who opens the door.* He sighed as loneliness clenched his heart and sent waves of gloom pulsing through his soul.

CHAPTER 2

Jeff pulled his battered coupe up to the gate into Elysium Arms and swiped Kathy's card across the reader. The ornate, wrought iron barrier swayed open, and he drove into the secured community. He followed the lazy curves of the shaded lane to the happy couple's condo, where he hid his vehicle in their carport. Most of the other tenants drove the latest in luxury, electric sedans, while Jeff's old clunker spewed foul-smelling, blue exhaust.

He trudged from his car to the covered entry of their condo, not looking forward to a frozen dinner and a night of mindless TV. He blinked as a momentary flash of light lit the shadows and a gust of hot air washed across his face. The faintest rumble of something, not quite thunder, pulsed through him. He cast his gaze about, but the skies were clear. His eyes

passed over a man standing across the street wearing blue slacks and a light blue shirt, almost like a uniform. The guy's head pivoted about as though he were lost and looking for landmarks. He brushed his heavy black hair back from his eyes and it fell into perfect bangs, parting in the middle over his forehead. Jeff raised his hand in a tentative wave, but the other guy looked away. He shrugged, and plodded on to the front door. *Fuckin' snooty rich people, anyway. Too bad, though. He was kinda hot.* Mark Phillips was the only neighbor who had deigned to speak to him in the last week.

Sam *woofed* at him before the door was open. The dog's clawed feet scabbled on the tiles in the entry way, running to greet him. Jeff grinned at seeing the Irish Setter, his soulful brown eyes staring at him and the leash already in his jaws. "Hey, Sam. Good to see you, boy! You need to go for a walk, don't you?" He ruffled the animal's ears and hooked the leash to his collar. "Let's go, boy. Come on!" Sam ran ahead through the open door, jerking on Jeff's hand. He paused to activate the alarm and latch the door before

they raced down the sidewalk to the brick pathway next to the street. The strange guy was nowhere in sight.

Thirty minutes later Sam and Jeff strolled back up the walkway to the condo's entrance, where the door stood wide open. A black hole of guilt collapsed inside him and sent tremors out of his fingers. "Fuck me, I could have sworn I closed that door." He raced into the house, unleashed Sam, and locked the door. *Someone's disarmed the alarm, too. It's too soon for Kathy and Aaron to be back, though.* Sam sniffed at the tiles on the floor, tail wagging, and took off up the stairs.

Jeff's eyes scanned the apartment. The portraits of Aaron and Kathy still stood on the mantle in their silver frame. Next to them another silver frame held the portrait of Aaron's brother Caleb embracing his now-deceased lover Ben, both in Air Force uniforms. The frame that had held the portrait of Jeff and Craig was empty. The crystal still glittered in the hutch and the electronics still stood ready to provide entertainment. *Doesn't look like anything's missing. God knows this place has enough rent-a-cops and security. Who else*

would have a key and know the code? Aaron's brother has a key to this place, but I thought he's still off in Syria. He trotted upstairs to see what captured Sam's attention.

His unease grew when he reached the second floor and heard a voice murmuring from the bedroom. He paused for a moment and recognized the tones of a man making friends with a dog.

He hid in the hallway and gazed into the bedroom. The late afternoon sun streamed through the windows and cast long shadows on the bed, the dresser, and the two figures inside. Sam squatted on his haunches, his tail sweeping out red semi-circles of joy on the plush, green carpet. His tongue slathered sloppy doggie kisses onto one hand of the man, while the man's free hand ruffled at Sam's ears. His voice cooed canine nonsense, but Jeff wasn't listening. His eyes focused on the man's face, and relief pulsed through him. Even if he hadn't just seen the photo downstairs, Jeff would have at once known this guy was related to Aaron. This had to be Aaron's brother, Caleb!

"You're a good fella, aren't you? Yeah?" His voice was deep and full of warmth, a voice that touched Jeff's psyche and made him want to know the man who owned it.

From his attire, Jeff recognized that this was also the man he'd seen earlier, across the street. On closer inspection, his clothing looked like an Air Force uniform, from the gleaming shoes to the crisp seams of the shirt and trousers. Certainly, his broad shoulders and narrow hips revealed a soldier's athletic physique. But it was his face that held Jeff's attention. His cobalt eyes glowed under long lashes, and his ebony hair fell in perfect locks across his smooth brow. His aquiline nose gave his face a lean accent, while his tanned cheeks held a tinge of shadow that no razor could obscure. A tuft of coarse, black hair emerged from the open collar beneath his cleft chin. Even in the shadowed room, his teeth gleamed from the smile that graced his wide mouth and spare lips. He was the sexiest, most riveting man Jeff had ever seen. Jeff glanced down at his own lean form and felt incomplete in comparison.

He was like Aaron, but with a mysterious allure that tingled Jeff's loins and arrested his soul. *Strange that he's here now, after he couldn't get leave for the wedding.*

Jeff coughed. "Excuse me, you must be Caleb?"

The man raised startled eyes in his direction and frowned, as if he had to think about it. "Yes. My name's Caleb." He paused, and then repeated, "Caleb Cole," as if trying out the sound of it on his ears. "I'm here to visit Aaron and Kathy."

Jeff stuck out his hand. "I'm Jeff Railsback, Kathy's friend. I'm watching the place while they're away on their honeymoon in Japan. I see you know Sam."

Caleb jumped to his feet and grabbed his hand. His grip was firm without being challenging; his palm was warm and felt roughened from hard labor as he pressed it against Jeff's smooth skin. "Pleased I am to meet you, sir. Call me Cal."

"Nice to meet you, Cal."

He held Jeff's hand for just a beat too long before releasing it. His eyes cast about the room before

landing on the hologram of Kathy and Aaron on the dresser. He beamed as if enchanted and hesitant steps drew him to it. He ran his fingers over the surface and murmured, "They look so happy."

"They are. I wish you'd seen them at the wedding!" He paused. "I know that Aaron thinks the world of you." *Well, at least I'd think the world of you if you were my brother.*

Cal's gaze fell again on Jeff's face, and those arresting eyes quickened his heart. A smile toyed with his lips, as if he knew a special secret and couldn't share it. "I think the world of him, too."

Jeff shook his head and the spell between them broke. "Well, then, you must be on leave, or something? I'm sure that Aaron and Kathy would want you to stay here."

He blinked and his expression blanked for a moment before his smile chased the shadows from the room. "I would like to stay here, yes. With your permission, of course."

"Well, we sure don't want to bother the newly-weds by asking them. And I know it'll be fine." He

hesitated for a moment. "I hope *you* don't mind. I'm kind of between apartments at the moment. My new place won't be ready for another week, so I have to stay here too."

"I'm sure we can work something out." He touched Jeff's hand and a spark of static electricity flashed between them. Both men flinched backwards. "Kuso! I'm sorry. I must have brushed across the carpet!"

Jeff grinned, rubbing his finger. "S'all right." *I wouldn't mind if more sparks flew between us*, he mused. "Hey, I'm hungry. Have you eaten?"

"Food would be good."

"Yeah. They've got a great kitchen downstairs, and it's fully stocked. How about I thaw out a couple of steaks and put some baked potatoes in the oven?"

"Steaks? From real cows?" He seemed amused.

"Nah, from cardboard cows. What'd you think?" He shook his head. "Tell you what, let me get dinner started. Since you just got in, you can have first crack at the shower." He looked around. "Do you have bags or anything with you?"

"I seem to have arrived without my duffel."

There was that Cheshire smile again.

"Huh. Well, you're the same size as Aaron. His things are in the closet over there. Mine are there too, but I think you're a bit tall for my stuff." He headed to the door. "Go ahead and clean up. When you're done, I'll have dinner fixin' and you can have a drink while I hit the shower."

"That sounds like an excellent strategy." His fingers loosened the buttons on his shirt, exposing a mat of dark hair layered over rippling pecs. Jeff retreated to the hall before his physical reaction became too obvious.

Shit, he's hot. I know he's gay, but I don't want him to think I'm hittin' on him. Besides, it'd be weird bein' with Aaron's brother, him bein' Kathy's husband and all.

He remembered Sam and glanced back in the room to find him lazing on the bed and gazing at Cal. "Sam, come on, fella. Leave him alone while he showers."

The dog's head rotated back and forth between the two men. *Woof!* He stayed put.

"It's all right. He won't bother me." Cal stroked the dog's back.

"He won't leave you alone. I know." Jeff sighed and stared at Sam. "I'll feed you. Come on, Sam. Chow!"

Sam's head lurched up at the promise of food. He bounded off the bed and raced in front of Jeff to the kitchen. *Figures. He'll come to me for food, but he'd rather be with Cal. Come to think of it, I'd rather be with Cal myself.* He retreated to the kitchen too, where Sam waited next to his bowl, watching his every move.

"What do you think, boy?" he asked as he pulled out a can of dog food. Sam *woofed* in response. "I agree! I was so down just a few minutes ago when all I had to look forward to was a frozen dinner and reruns. And now look! Steak and potatoes, and a hot guy!"

CHAPTER 3

"First things first, eh, Sam?" Grinning at the animal's innocent eagerness, he set out fresh water while Sam sat on his haunches next to his bowls and waited. "There you go, boy! That's a good dog!" Sam made his food disappear amidst wet, gobbling sounds. "You should learn to eat with your mouth closed, fella." He chuckled. Sam looked up at him with reproachful eyes before he slurped at his water. "I know, you never spill anything. I guess your table manners are at least as good as mine." He grinned at his friend before turning to the task of preparing the people dinner.

He dumped charcoal into the grill on the patio and sprayed it with starter fluid. While it flared, he returned to the kitchen and pulled two thick, Porterhouse steaks from the refrigerator. He scrubbed two Russet potatoes, pricked them with a fork, and coated

them with olive oil and a touch of garlic powder. He wrapped each with aluminum foil and set them aside.

"Let's see, we'll want cheese and chives to go with the potatoes," he muttered. Finished with his chow, Sam sat and watched him walk to the refrigerator and pull out a block of cheddar and a bunch of green onions. He grated the cheese and put it in a bowl on the counter. Next, he rinsed the onions, dropped them on the cutting board, and started chopping. "Shit!" He jumped and stuck his thumb in his mouth, leaving a trail of pink across the white and green onions.

"Did you cut yourself?"

He glanced up to see Cal standing in the doorway. He was barefoot and wore a pair of Aaron's blue jeans, zipped up but with the snap at the waist undone. He hadn't buttoned his white shirt either, and it glowed against his dark skin and the mat of hair covering his torso. He stopped drying his hair and draped his bath towel over a chair while snatching a paper towel from the counter. "Here, let me help." He

took Jeff's hand and pressed the improvised bandage against the wound.

An electric thrill shot up his arm at Cal's touch and his loins stirred. Covering his reaction, he muttered, "I'm such a klutz. I always manage to put some of myself in my cooking."

Cal inspected his thumb while he dabbed at it. "This isn't bad, but these damned things bleed like the devil. Is there a first aid kit around someplace?"

"I saw some Band-Aids in the bathroom, I think. Really, it's nothing!"

"Well, let's go upstairs and get it fixed." He glanced around, still gripping Jeff's hand. "I see you've started dinner. Once we've got the bleeding stopped, you can shower and I'll finish up down here." He grinned, and those remarkable eyes lit up the room. Jeff could have sworn his thumb traced a little caress on his wrist before he released his hand. "Come on, I'll help with the bandage." He bounded out of the kitchen toward the stairs and Jeff followed, holding the paper towel against his hand.

Upstairs, he found Cal rummaging through the medicine cabinet above the sinks in the bathroom. "Great, there's some ointment here too." His strong hands grasped Jeff's wounded thumb and he scrubbed it with soap and water. "This is the best anti-septic there is." He smoothed on ointment and then tore open a Band-Aid and applied it with a flourish. "There you go! Good as new!"

Cal stroked the back of his wounded hand and his sweet breath washed across his face. He let his body brush against Jeff's for just a moment and his gaze didn't miss what bulged in Jeff's pants. His eyes, hooded under those long lashes, crinkled as he smiled. He licked his lips and, for an instant, Jeff thought he might kiss him, but then he broke away. "Take your shower. I'll finish downstairs."

"Okay. Sam will need to be let out too, since he just ate. The back yard is fenced, so he can go out there while the steaks cook."

"I'll take care of him. I saw martini glasses in the hutch. Do they have gin and vermouth? Would you like one?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

A hand brushed his shoulder and then he retreated. "Go ahead and relax in a nice, long shower," he called from the stairs. "Don't worry about dinner."

"Sure." Jeff stared after him. *Shit. What just happened here?* He closed the bathroom door and stripped out of his clothes. He ran his hands over his angular torso, his fingertips skimming across the soft, brown hair that toasted his body. They stopped when they got to his crotch and the erection that raged there. *Down, boy. He's way out of your league. Don't let your fantasies get the better of you.* He decided a long, cold shower was just what he needed.

Afterwards, he brushed his teeth and sprayed his favorite cologne on his chest. He blow-dried his hair, snarling anew at the difficulty of managing his curls. When he at last stepped into the bedroom, he heard the gentle strains of Chopin wafting upstairs from the stereo system in the living room. *God, it's like he's setting up a romantic dinner for two.* He stared for a moment at his underwear drawer, and then shrugged and decided not to bother. *Who knows, maybe I'm not*

imagining things. One less thing to take off it this goes the way I'd like. He slipped on a pair of blue jeans and grabbed his favorite lavender sports shirt. As he tucked it into his jeans, he thought it was a bit too big for his frame, but he liked the way it set off his narrow hips and broad shoulders. He left the top two buttons on the shirt undone, but was careful to fasten the jeans. *Don't want anything popping out before I'm ready.* Inspecting himself in the mirror, he admitted he didn't look too bad. He decided to not bother with shoes or socks and headed downstairs.

He found Cal, attired as before, standing over the stove sautéing something in a saucepan. He brushed those lush bangs out of his eyes and tasted the confection clinging to his spoon before reaching for the pepper. The scent of garlic, onions and basil filled the room.

"That smells wonderful! What is it?"

He looked up and a dimpled smile gleamed on his features. "I saw you grated some cheese, so I thought I'd make a sauce. Hope that's all right." He

held out the spoon with one hand cupped underneath. "Try some?"

"Mmm, that's yummy!" He wiped at his lip. "What's in it?"

"This and that. It's easy, mostly just onions, garlic, and cheese." He handed Jeff the spoon. "If you want to stir, I'll fix martinis. The potatoes are baking, but I left the steaks for last. I like mine extra rare."

"Me, too. I see Sam's still outside."

"Yeah, he didn't want back in just yet." He measured out the gin and the vermouth into the shaker. "One olive, or two?"

"Two, of course."

"Okay." He pulled the martini glasses from the freezer. "I put them in here to chill. I like a sprig of ginger in mine, too. Want to try it?"

"Sure. Sounds interesting." Jeff nipped at the sauce. "This looks done to me."

"Okay. Just turn the heat on low. If you'll do the steaks, I'll finish that up." He handed over the martini. "Here, first try this."

Jeff took the glass and started to drink, but Cal stopped him. "Wait. We have to do this right." He nestled against him and linked arms, taking care not to spill their drinks. "That's better."

Arm in arm, bodies touching, they sipped their drinks. Jeff's jeans tightened at the closeness of Cal's body and the warmth of his breath on his cheek. "That was exquisite! You make a great martini."

Cal smiled and cuddled closer. "Thanks," he whispered. He took Jeff's glass from his hand and placed it on the counter along with his own. "Don't want to drop their fancy crystal," he murmured as his lips approached.

Jeff's heart quickened and he held his breath when Cal's lips brushed against his. He pressed his body forward and delighted at the hardness that met his own. Jeff let his hands trace a tentative line inside Cal's open shirt, and his fingertips rasped against the coarse hair that bristled there. Cal's fingers laced through his curls and his head rotated while their lips toyed with one another in a gentle caress.

A moan escaped Cal's throat and he pressed closer, opening his mouth and clutching Jeff's body near. Jeff dared to let his tongue probe those moist depths, and Cal's jaws opened in welcome. Their tongues danced together while their teeth touched in their eagerness for intimacy. Jeff's heart pounded in his chest and his eyes closed in rapture.

At last he had to break away, and he heaved a sigh. His fingers played with Cal's hair and he gazed into the depths of his blue eyes. "Wow." His breath caught in his throat and he rested his head on Cal's shoulder.

Cal pulled back and his cheeks dimpled. "Double wow. You kiss good. I'm eager to find out what else you do good."

Jeff glanced at a scratching sound from the patio. "Hey, Sam's at the door. I think he wants in."

Cal squeezed at his rear and whispered in his ear, "So do I, if you know what I mean." But then he pulled back. "I'm glad we've got that settled. Now we don't have to pretend we're not turned on by each other." He broke their embrace, letting his fingers trail

across Jeff's outstretched hands as he strode to the patio door to let the dog in. "Let's have dinner and then pick up where we left off."

He hitched at his pants, and Jeff caught a glimpse of what lay hidden there, snaking down his thigh. He stared in awe at the other's masculine beauty, and he sank for a moment into a sensual fog. "I'm not sure I can wait!" He heaved a sigh and tried to quiet his heart.

Cal dimpled again. "I feel the same way. But a romantic dinner will just make it even better when it finally happens, don't you think?"

Jeff adjusted his pants and shuddered in anticipation. "You seem to know what you're doing so far." He reached for the steaks. "Do you want barbecue sauce or anything on yours?"

"Why ruin a good steak with gunk? All mine needs is seared on the outside."

"Good, I feel the same way."

Sam *woofed* as Cal let him in, and Jeff went outside to fix the meat. Visions of sensual pleasures to come danced in his head, while Chopin preludes

echoed in his ears. *This promises to be the best day I've had in months. Maybe ever.*

CHAPTER 4

They sat at opposite ends of the dining table, candles flickering between them, and traded evocative glances. Chopin and Rachmaninoff lilted in the background, an aural seasoning for their dinner. Their conversation filled with those little details that nourish new romance and that presage the intimacy to come. These things matter most at the beginning, when they anticipate love, then again years later, when they are echoes of a life shared. They spoke of music and books and hobbies. Both adored romantic composers and disdained modern pop music. Jeff liked growing plants and raising flowers, while Cal enjoyed experimenting in the kitchen with new flavors and dishes. The occasional moments of silence filled with a natural intimacy. For no reason, they would burst into giggles, their eyes flashing like

semaphores between two souls. Sam sat on the floor, his head resting on his paws, and watched through golden eyes, his tail sweeping an occasional arc across the carpet.

After dinner, they carried their dirty dishes to the kitchen. As if they'd spent a lifetime practicing, they rinsed and loaded the dishwasher in perfect harmony. Now and again, one hand would pause over the other's and a smile would pass between them.

Jeff poured the last of the wine, splitting it equally between their glasses. "That was wonderful. I don't know when I've enjoyed a meal so much."

A grin toyed with Cal's lips and he stared at Jeff through hooded eyes while he sipped his wine. "Same here."

The silence stretched for a long moment before Jeff looked away. "Well."

"Well, indeed." Cal seemed to be enjoying his discomfort. "What's next?"

Jeff finished the last of his wine and rinsed out his glass. "It's after ten. I must have talked your head off."

"I seem to recall we both had a lot to say. I like listening to your voice." He swirled his wine and peered into his glass.

Jeff looked away from the alluring body, eyes lingering on the masculine hair that peeked from the open shirt. His gaze fell for a moment on his feet, but that didn't help. His toes, each covered with a tuft of dark hair, gripped the floor and seem to flex with tiny muscles of their own. "Uh, there's only one bed. I can sleep on the sofa, if you like."

That brought dimples and a glint to Cal's eyes. "If you like. But it won't be very comfortable, I think."

"Oh, I don't mind. Really. I've slept on it before and it's quite comfortable."

"That's not what I met." He paused a beat. "I think it's a little small for the two of us, don't you? Especially since I plan to have lots of hot sex with you tonight."

A thrill of lust burst from Jeff's core and flashed through his limbs. In an instant his pants tightened and he reached inside to adjust himself. "I

didn't want to be too forward. I mean, I hoped you might feel that way, but..."

Cal slipped to him and touched a forefinger to his lips. "Hush. What did you think I wanted, after that kiss?" His fingers joined Jeff's inside his jeans and stroked at his erection with a feathery touch. "That's nice. I love the feel of that."

He pressed close and wrapped one arm about Jeff, circling his neck. Their lips touched as his fingers unsnapped and unzipped Jeff's jeans. He groaned when his cock slipped free and he pressed it against the hard hose still confined inside Cal's pants. He retreated as fingers stroked him and teased at the head, tracing gentle circles about it and nipping at the tip. Jeff's tongue invaded Cal's mouth and the two embraced, their bodies yearning to eliminate the distance between them.

His arms slipped under Cals' shirt and wrapped about him, luxuriating in the feel of his heavy pelt. He tore at the shirt and Cal shrugged it off, letting it drop to the kitchen floor. At the same time, Jeff's jeans collapsed to his ankles and Cal's fin-

gers caressed his balls, then farther back between his legs. He spread his knees apart and tipped his hips forward while nuzzling into Cal's neck. His beard rasped against Jeff's cheek and his hot breath warmed his neck as teeth nibbled at his earlobes.

Cal pulled back and gasped. "Fuck, I've been dying to do this since I first saw you this afternoon outside the condo." His fingers laced through Jeff's curls and his eyes danced in pleasure. "Let's take it upstairs, shall we? It'll be more comfortable there." He pulled back and hopped on one foot while he stripped off his pants.

Jeff kicked off his jeans and pulled at his shirt. Each watched the other strip, enraptured by the glory of the male body before them. Jeff's eyes widened when Cal's cock sprang free. "Sweet Jesus. Do you have a horse in your ancestry, maybe?"

Cal flexed and it bounced, slapping against his abs. "It is kinda big, isn't it? Personally, I like yours better. I bet it'll fit inside me just right." He grabbed Jeff's hand and tugged. "Come on, let's go!" They

raced up the stairs, stopping midway for another deep kiss before running to the bedroom.

The night was cool, and Jeff had left the windows open after his shower. The scent of juniper and fresh-mowed grass wafted into the room, carried by the gentle breezes of eventide. The lace curtains fluttered at the windows and the moonlight danced a slow *pas de deux* with filigreed shadows.

Cal threw himself onto the bed and lay on his back. He opened his legs and his arms and murmured, "Come to me, lover, I want to feel you on top of me!" Jeff knelt between his legs and leaned forward, resting his palms on either side of Cal's head. He eased his body forward, letting his arms flex like a push-up, until their chests just touched. His lips toyed with Cal's while their cocks twined together. He slipped his manhood underneath Cal's and then thrust his hips back and up, leveraging the other's enormous tool underneath his. His tongue oozed into Cal's mouth and he rubbed his chest across the grizzly-like hairs on his chest. Cal's legs wrapped about

him and pulled him closer, while he tipped his head back and groaned.

"Fuck, I want you inside of me so bad!" Cal twisted his head back and forth and his ebony hair gleamed in the moonlight. "I don't suppose there's lube anywhere around here?"

"As it happens, there is. Just sec." Jeff pecked him on the cheek and rushed to the bathroom. "I guess straight people need this stuff too." He grinned as he slipped a condom over his shaft. He squeezed some lube in his palm to warm it and then slicked his fingers up and down Cal's pulsing erection.

"Oh fuck, that feels good." Cal gripped his hand and forced him to stop. "Wait, wait, I don't want to cum yet." He waggled his hips. "You need to put that a little lower, and behind, if that's all right with you."

Jeff grinned and warmed more in his palm. He squatted between Cal's legs and rubbed his palm back, far back, sliding his fingers into his crack. More lube went on his other hand, and he inserted more fingers in Cal's hole, feeling the sphincters resist and

then relax. Cal groaned and his eyes closed. "Fuck me, man. I'm so ready. Do it!"

Jeff smiled and touched the tip of his own cock, sluicing the lube over his shaft. He leaned forward into a one-handed push-up position and probed, guiding his organ with one hand while his body rotated over Cal's writhing muscles. When he found the hole, he pushed, then waited, and pushed again. Driven forward by the gasps plunging from Cal's lips, he advanced, slow but relentless, until his entire shaft was inside. Once there, he retreated until just the head penetrated. He twisted his hips and let the tip of his cock massage Cal's entry, slipping inside, almost out, and then inside once more.

"Fuck man, I can't stand it! Go all the way, like you're gonna split me in half. Do it to me!" Sweat gleamed on Cal's forehead and his eyes sparkled as he gazed up at Jeff. He reached out and pulled Jeff closer, down to him so that their bodies touched and his cock throbbed against Jeff's flesh.

Jeff gave himself over to the pleasure of the moment. Sensations overwhelmed him as his passion

resonated with Cal's, and their bodies danced in an ancient rhythm of sensual delight and intimacy. His thrusts pulsed harder now, and his breath heaved in his throat. Sweat dripped from his torso and pooled in Cal's coarse hairs, mixing with the pre-cum leaking onto his ribbed abs. Cal's arms and legs wrapped about him, urging him closer, demanding that he surmount the distance between them and make them one. His body and soul lurched at last as the sensations became too much to control. His orgasm seemed to last forever and to split him apart even as it brought the two of them together. Hot liquid splattered on his chest and across his face as Cal's enormous organ spasmed in harmony with his own. Their breath mingled while their fluids joined and their hearts throbbed.

When he was spent, he rested for a moment atop the hard body he had just ravished. "God, you know I'm usually on the bottom, but that was the best sex I've ever had." He pulled his head back and planted a quick kiss on his lips. "You're teaching me new things already."

The moonlight glistened in Cal's eyes. "We teach one another, I believe."

Jeff rolled to one side and reached for the towel he'd had the foresight to place by the bedside when he got the lube. He wiped Cal's face and chest first and then descended to his genitals. "You're so beautiful, did you know that?"

"You're no slouch in the looks department either." Cal pecked at his cheek and took the towel from his hands. "That's quite a tool you've got. You sure know how to use it." He wiped the detritus of their passion away while a smile flashed across his lips. "I'd like to go again, but that felt like about four orgasms at once."

"We'll have other nights. I hope. How long are you going to be here?"

Cal sobered at that. "Let's just think about right now. Tomorrow's another day. Hold me, okay? I want to feel safe in your arms."

Cuddled on the bed, sleep came sooner than either of them expected or wanted. Sam sat in one

corner with his head on his paws and watched until their snores filled the room, then he slept too.

CHAPTER 5

Jeff woke to sunshine streaming through the open bedroom windows and the sound of robins singing in the trees. He stretched, the pleasant soreness in his muscles an echo of last night. The clatter of cookware in the kitchen and the scents of coffee and bacon wafted up the stairwell. He smiled and stroked the hollow that Cal's head had left in the pillow next to him. *He must be fixing breakfast for us.*

He padded to the bathroom for his morning ablutions. He paused with his toothbrush hanging out of his mouth and examined his image in the mirror. His hair tangled about his head and his face was seamed from where he'd slept on it. But his eyes glittered and he couldn't stop grinning. *Yesterday was just what I needed.* Then he frowned, recalling that Cal

wouldn't say how long he'd be able to stay. *I'll take what I can get of him. Something is better than nothing!*

He slipped into a pair of boxer shorts and bounded down the stairs two at a time.

He found Cal, similarly attired, sitting at the kitchen table, reading something that looked like a letter. His hair fell across his brow in two semi-circular bangs, divided in the middle of his forehead. Somehow his hair looked perfect this morning, in contrast to the explosive mess that topped Jeff's head.

Jeff paused at the entry to the kitchen without speaking and gazed in wonder at this man who had chanced into his life, just in time to stave off smothering depression. A plate covered with paper towels held crisp bacon and a delicious aroma drifted from the oven. Cal sipped at a steaming cup of coffee, and then he did a strange thing. He placed his fingers on the letter he had been reading and seemed to type on it.

Sam chose that moment to bound to the patio door and rake his paw across it. He barked once and then waited for someone with hands to let him in. Cal

looked up and his face beamed when he spotted Jeff. "Hi, sleepy head! I'm fixing breakfast for us!"

"So I see." Jeff poured a cup of coffee and added cream and sugar. "What's in the oven?"

"It's Momma's special baked pancake. I found some apples in the fridge and whipped it up. You'll love it!" He opened the sliding glass door to the patio and let Sam in, who slurped some water and curled up in a corner to watch them. Cal returned to the table and his coffee.

Jeff peeked through the oven door. "Kathy makes a dynamite baked pancake. I love 'em." He grinned. "I bet yours is better." He leaned down and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before sitting next to him at the table. He glanced at the sheet laying flat in front of Cal. "What're you reading?"

Cal blinked and folded his paper in half, then in half again, but not before Jeff caught a line of type streaming across the page and a keyboard glowing at the bottom. "Nothing important."

"Shit man, what *is* that? Your phone? I've never seen one like that. It's paper thin."

Cal pursed his lips and paused, with his fingers guarding the sheet on the table. He seemed to reach a quick decision and unfolded it again. "Yeah. It's a special phone, kind of experimental." His fingers stroked the keyboard and the surface flashed. "The chip is all photonics and is embedded in the fibers of the fabric, which is what makes it so thin." He pointed to a bulge at the bottom edge that Jeff had missed. "That's the battery." He slid it across the table. "It's pretty cool."

The oven dinged and Cal strode across the room, hot pads in hand, and removed a round, white baking dish from the oven. A golden pancake poofed up from the dish and the scent of apples, cinnamon, and melted butter filled the room.

Jeff looked up from examining Cal's phone. "That smells just plain decadent." He patted his stomach. "I can tell I'll need to do some extra sit-ups tonight."

Cal dimpled. "I can think of some exercises we could do together, if you're interested."

Jeff's attention returned to the device on the table. "This thing is amazing. I don't quite see how to make all of it work, but it looks like it's a computer built into something like a handkerchief." He hefted it. "And it doesn't weigh anything! Where can I get one?"

Cal lit the burner under the griddle and eggs started to sizzle. "Right now the only way is to be part of a secret military project, I'm afraid. How do you like your eggs?"

"Sunny side up, please."

"I'm an over-easy guy, myself. You don't like 'em runny on top, do you?"

"You look so cute and domestic, standing there at the oven in your underwear! Yeah, I like 'em runny." He turned the device over and ran his fingers across the back. "So this is, like, what? A DARPA project?"

Cal arranged bacon, eggs, and a slice of pancake on a plate and served Jeff with a flourish. "Yeah, they started it, I guess. Like the internet and stealth

technology and Teflon, for all I know. DARPA's behind all kinds of shit."

Jeff poured OJ and milk for both of them from the pitchers on the table. "This is a wonderful breakfast. Thank you! This is the best start to my day I've had in months!" *We're just like an old married couple.* That thought made alarm bells clang and somewhat chilled his mood. *Don't go there, boy. You've known him less than a day. He could turn out to be just like all the others.* Somehow, though, Jeff knew that wouldn't be the case. Cal was like a reflection of himself, except better, as though he was Jeff's ideal self.

Cal planted a kiss on his lips. "I'm here to serve."

He snatched up his phone, folded it twice to the size of a thick handkerchief, and put it to one side. Jeff thought for an instant he saw a Wal-Mart logo on the back before his attention returned to his breakfast. "This is marvelous. Kathy's baked pancakes are good, but I was right! Yours are the best."

Cal blushed and a secret smile played across his lips. "My momma taught me good, I guess."

Sam trotted over and sat at their feet, not begging, but just in case some morsel might drop to the floor. Cal broke off a piece of bacon and slipped it to the dog.

"You know, Aaron was pretty specific that I shouldn't feed him at the table. They don't want him to learn to beg." He smiled. "I'll tell them it's all your fault."

Cal laughed at that. "Hah! When he thinks no one's looking, Aaron feeds him from the table all the time. I've caught him at it." He ruffled Sam's ears. "Besides, Sam's a good dog, aren't you!" Sam *woofed* and his tongue lolled out of his mouth. "So, what's on deck for today?"

"I have to be at work by ten, and I'm supposed to stay until six." He glanced at the clock. "I really should shower and get ready pretty soon."

"I'll clean up here. Go ahead and do whatever you need to." He finished the last of his juice and carted his dirty dishes to the sink. "Where is work, anyway?"

"It's way on the other side of the city. This time of day, I can get there pretty fast on the Beltway. The evening commute is worse."

"I meant to ask what you do for a living, not where it's at. That's interesting too, though. I'm interested in everything about you." He paused at the table. "You done with your dishes?"

"Yeah, thanks. I'll have one more cup of coffee, and then I gotta get ready." While he fixed it, he said, "I work at Lifetime Suspensions, Incorporated. I'm in contract acquisitions, which is a fancy name for sales."

"LSI. I've heard of them." Plates and flatware clinked as he loaded the dishwasher. "It's for the terminally ill, right? They go into suspended animation and they're revived when there's a cure for whatever ails them?"

"Yeah, that's our main client base. Cryopreservation is even included in most high-end health plans."

"Seems like I've read it's kind of risky. Some of the soldiers from the Fourth Gulf War came out of it a little stupid, as I recall."

"They screwed up and rushed the resuscitation process. Done right, it's totally safe, near as I can tell. For sure, we've not had any problems. Even if there were some risk, if you're gonna die anyway, it gives you a chance."

"You said most of your clients are terminally ill. Who else pays for this?" Cal poured himself a cup of coffee and sat next to him. Jeff noticed for future reference that he drank it black.

"Well, elderly people, but they're hoping for a cure for old age, so I guess they're like the terminally ill. Then there's people who like the time travel aspect, or who want to invest their money and wake up rich."

"Like in *The Sleeper Wakes*, by Wells." Cal nodded. "I think I might have some ethical problems selling thrill-seekers or greedy gluts, an expensive procedure just to satisfy their urges."

"I've thought of that. But who am I to make that decision for them?"

"I guess that makes sense. If they know what they're doing, why stand in their way? That'd be like

the right-wing nut jobs who used to keep gay people out of the military, forcing their morality on everyone else."

"Exactly." He sipped his coffee. "So, what will you do today?"

"I'll hang here for a while. I've got some research I can do with my phone. And I wanted to do some sight-seeing while I'm here. It's been years since I've been in DC." That same Cheshire grin flashed across his face, like he'd just made a secret joke with himself.

"That's cool. There's a metro stop about half a mile from here. Turn right at the gate and you can't miss it." He gulped the last of his coffee and stood. "Sorry, I can't be late!" He stooped down and kissed him. Cal's fingers twined through his curls, pulled him closer and, for an instant, their tongues exchanged love taps. He heaved a sigh. "Wow. Hold that thought until tonight, okay?"

"Until tonight, then." He returned to cleaning the kitchen while Jeff bounded upstairs to the shower.

CHAPTER 6

Despite his late start, Jeff managed to arrive at LSI a few minutes before ten. "Good morning, Marie! Is the coffee ready?"

Marie sat at her desk with the morning sun at her back. Her hair corkscrewed about her head, hydra-like, in a coiffure of peroxidized tentacles held rigid by layers of hair spray. A single red rose, the color of her lipstick, rested in a vase on her desk, its scent overwhelmed by her heavy perfume.

"Hey, Jeff. Coffee and donuts are in the break room." She peered at him. "My, aren't you chipper today? If your smile was any bigger, you'd have to turn sideways to get through that door." She sipped at her coffee, her lips leaving a crimson tattoo on her cup.

Heat flushed across his neck and up his cheeks.

"Well, it is a nice day. And the traffic wasn't too bad this morning."

"Jeff Railsback! You can't fool me! You got your ashes hauled last night, didn't you?"

"Marie! What a question! Didn't your Momma teach you that nice boys don't talk about such things?"

She snorted. "I wasn't askin' what you talked about, I was askin' what you did." She hunched forward. "Now you tell ol' Marie all about it. Is he hunky? Where did you meet him?"

"Yeah, he's way hunky." Jeff wanted to shout it from the rooftops, but telling Marie would have to do. "I met him at my friend Kathy's apartment last night. You know, where I'm dog sitting while they're away."

"At her apartment?" She frowned. "Say, it wasn't that skinny guy from yesterday, was it? What's his name? Phillips. He ain't hunky!"

"Oh, God no!" He shuddered. "It's Kathy's new brother-in-law, Cal. He's on leave or something from the Air Force and he just showed up. He's got these tremendous blue eyes, and no one should have shoul-

ders that broad above such narrow hips. He can cook, and he's funny, and he has these cute dimples when he smiles!"

She held up a hand. "I get the picture! He's as lovable as a basket of puppies and twice as cuddly. What I want are the juicy details." Her voice fell to a loud stage whisper. "How is he in bed?"

Jeff smirked. "Let's just say we were both pretty exhausted when we finally got to sleep."

"So you did sleep, then?" She shook her head. "He can't be that terrific, if he put you to sleep."

"Trust me, he was incredible. Let me get some coffee and we can chat some more."

When he returned to the reception area, Marie was on the phone and jotting notes on her memo pad. He sat on the corner of her desk and munched on his donut. She brushed his crumbs on the floor and motioned him off her desk. "Yes, sir, Mr. Carstairs. I'll let the sales staff know. Two o'clock today in the executive conference room. Is there anything else?" She took a few more notes and then hung up.

"So, what's the boss up to?" Kevin Carstairs was the Vice President for Sales for LSI. Jeff thought he was a pretty face in a suit who couldn't sell water in the Sahara.

"There's some kind of mandatory meeting for the client acquisition staff today at two in the corporate offices on P Street. You gotta go, along with all the other sales guys."

"Really? Did he say what it's about?"

She snorted. "What do *you* think? I'm just the dumb, blond secretary. I swear, that man thinks the sun comes up just to hear him crow. Bless his heart." She pulled a note card from a file on her desk. "Here's your schedule for today. I'll have to redo this afternoon's appointments since you'll be out of the office."

He scanned the list of clients and scheduled phone calls. "Mr. Phillips called back already for an appointment? I thought he was going to wait a week."

"Yeah, he called early this morning. I had him set up to see you this afternoon, but now it'll have to wait until tomorrow. Don't worry, I'll take care of redoing it, and you'll rope him in."

"I hope so. I sure could use the commission."

He stared at his list of duties for the morning. "This is a pretty full day. I guess I should get started. Thanks, Marie. I don't know where this place would be without you!"

"Just so you know who's really in charge." Her phone chimed again as he strolled back to his office. *Shit, what a waste of time. What am I doin' here when I could have spent the day with Cal? I should have called in sick.* He sighed as he plopped in his desk chair and started making his calls.

That afternoon, Jeff fought the late noon hour rush on the Metro, negotiating the security checkpoints and metal detectors with little patience. Still, he arrived at Dupont Circle a few minutes early for his meeting. He lingered for a moment at the white marble fountain in the middle of the park and thought of Cal. *Maybe later this week we can come here and eat at Café Japone,* he mused. *Or just dance in the clubs. It's been too long since I've been out with anyone just for fun.* Two elderly gentlemen sat at one of the stone checkerboards playing chess, wisps of white hair floating

above their heads in the gentle breezes. One wore a necklace of rainbow pride rings. Jeff nodded when he passed by and they waved to him before returning to their game.

The conference room was already full when Jeff arrived. He huddled in one corner, as far from the other sales staff as he could get. Even though he was expert in the false intimacies and forced conviviality of salesmen, today he longed for the honest glow of Cal's smile. Heavy oak panels covered the walls, and a Persian carpet lay atop the marble floor. Portraits of LSI's board members lined one wall, while windows on two other walls looked out on Dupont Circle, ten floors below. While he waited, he checked his messages on his phone, scrolling through calls from customers. There was no message from Cal, and he hadn't answered the phone at the apartment at noon either. *Damn. I should have gotten the number for that fancy phone of his.* He switched his to vibrate when the executive team entered.

Kevin Carstairs led his entourage into the room like Alexander leading a phalanx of conquering

Macedonians. Except that this group all wore thousand-dollar suits, had daily hundred-dollar haircuts, and devoted hours to building Olympian physiques and acquiring tans the color of honey at night. Jeff suspected that a plastic surgeon had sculpted Carstairs' perfect features; every sinew of his face and every muscle in his jaw testified to his power and glory.

Carstairs positioned himself at the head of the room and surveyed the sales force. The sunlight gleamed through the window at his back and, for an instant, a golden halo surrounded him. His knuckles rapped on the heavy, oak conference table.

"Gentlemen, please. May I have your attention." It was a command, not a question.

In an instant, the room fell silent.

"Gentlemen." He stopped, and his green eyes bored into the each face gazing upon him. The crowd held their collective breath, waiting for his next word. "Our fine corporation is about to be attacked. You know that the liberal media hate free enterprise, and so they hate us and all we have achieved. A scurrilous

reporter is about to publish a story about our company, a story filled with lies and untruths." His eyes flashed with malice for the evil people who would attack an innocent soul such as himself.

He waved a hand and two of his assistants passed out glossy, crimson folders to his assembled flock.

"You know that our cryopreservation procedures save hundreds of lives every year, lives that would otherwise be lost to pain, suffering, and death. Our procedures are the fruit of years of research. The success of our military in the Fourth Gulf War is but one of the many proofs that our procedures work. Not one of our brave soldiers from that war suffered any ill consequences from the cryopreservation procedures pioneered by LSI."

He held up one of the folders. "In here, you will find the facts, the truth that the liberal media would never tell. You will find how many lives we have saved since the government licensed our process for sale to the public. You will find the hundreds of tests that the Food and Drug Administration mandat-

ed for that licensure. These tests validate the safety of our procedures. Hundreds of tests, gentlemen. Seven hundred and thirty two, to be exact, all sanctioned and approved by the government of the USA. And not one – not one! – shows any significant evidence of danger from cryopreservation."

He glowered at them and his voiced deepened. "But now, based on one test, the media are about to launch an attack on our fine corporation. One test, run in *France* of all places, claims to show that some people, subjected to long term cryopreservation, might have increased risk of cerebral failure on resuscitation. Even the authors of the study admit their results are subject to error."

He pulled up a black-bordered report from his folder. "This is the report, the *French* report. This is what the liberal media will try to use to destroy our company and take away your jobs. Are you going to let that happen, gentlemen?"

Led by his assistants, the room shouted "No!" back to him.

He nodded, his mouth twisted in a grim line.

"Very well. In your folders you will find listed all seven hundred and thirty two positive tests, and this one, doubtful, maybe negative test. When this story is published, your customers will want to know the truth. Your folders contain the truth. Share it with your customers. Save their lives and save your jobs."

His cold gaze surveyed the room. "I want you to meet Mr. R. E. Mann." One of his assistants raised a hand. "He will guide you through the modified sales dialog. By the end of the day, you will be powered with the truth, and the truth will power your sales!" He paused and then strode from the room.

Jeff spent the rest of the afternoon poring over the contents of his gold-trimmed, crimson folder. His head filled with assurances of safety, and vague, xenophobic aspersions on foreign research. By the end of the day, he was certain the brilliant corporate spin would transform this story to a positive development for corporate sales.

CHAPTER 7

When Jeff opened the door to Kathy's and Aaron's apartment Sam sat at in the entryway waiting for him, his tongue lolly-gagging from his mouth, Jeff knelt and ruffled the dog's ears. "Hey, fella, how are you?" Sam slobbered ecstatic doggie kisses on his face, his tale flopping back and forth like a furry feather duster. *Woof!*

"Where's your leash, fella? Don't you need me to take you for a walk?" Jeff dropped his crimson sales folder on the dining room table and followed his nose to the kitchen. The scent of ginger and garlic and the sound of pots and pans clattering promised he'd find Cal there, fixing dinner.

He paused in the doorway and surveyed the organized chaos in front of him. Cal stood at the cooking island, the tip of his tongue peeking from between

pursed lips. His gaze focused on the dance of his fingers, a cleaver and vegetables. Coffee cups served as improvised prep bowls, holding little piles of shredded carrot, minced scallion, and chopped zucchini. He was barefoot and his jeans were zipped but un-snapped at the top. He wore no shirt and he'd draped a dishtowel over one shoulder. His ebony hair hung in a pair of perfect curls, framing his brow. A hickey on his neck, an echo of last night, brought a smile to Jeff's lips.

The evening sunlight streamed through the patio door and glistened off the travertine floor. Jeff blinked and called out, "Hey, handsome! What's up?"

Cal looked up and his smile warmed Jeff's heart and made the sun's glow dim in comparison. "Hi! I'm fixing dinner for us. I hope you like Asian." He wiped his hands on the towel and held out his arms. "Give me a hug!"

Jeff cuddled up to him. His arms wrapped around those broad shoulders and across the hairs that bristled on his back. Their lips brushed against each other and Cal pulled him close. His manhood

responded at once, matching what already throbbed inside Cal's jeans. Jeff opened his mouth and surrendered to the other's tongue, tasting a mix of garlic, ginger, and sauces.

When at last he had to breathe again, he broke the kiss and squeezed Cal's body. "You taste yummy."

"Sorry. I've been sampling as I go. I bet I reek of garlic!" He stepped back and cupped a hand over his mouth. "Oooh! I do! I'm sorry!"

"I like the way you smell. Anyway, I always say you can never have too much garlic."

"I'm glad you feel that way." He resumed chopping. "Why don't you go ahead and take a shower while I finish in here? I'm about twenty minutes from having dinner ready."

"I need to take Sam out for a walk." He scrambled the dog's ears and Sam licked his hand in response. "Usually hydraulic pressure is irresistible by the time I get home and he's standing at the door with his leash, waiting."

"I already took him for a walk. Run along and take your shower." He smashed a garlic clove with

the cleaver before chopping it. "You want a martini again tonight?"

"Sure, I guess." He patted Sam one more time and bounded up the stairs. *God, it's nice to have someone to come home to. I've been looking forward to this all day. All my life, really.*

When he returned downstairs, he found the dining room table set with plates, silverware, and chrysanthemums from the back yard. An envelope with his name on it rested on one of the plates, next to his scarlet sales folder. He strode into the kitchen to find Cal at the stove, stir-frying the vegetables at one burner and swirling a spoon in a saucepan at another.

"This place smells even better than before!" He stood behind Cal and slipped his arms around his torso, planting a kiss on his neck.

He wagged his hips in response. "That feels nice. I've got the Martini fixin's out, if you want to mix them. Or you can stir here and I'll do it."

"I'll fix the drinks. Let's see if I can do it as good as you did yesterday."

Cal glanced back at him and grinned. "I'm glad to see you're in uniform, too." Jeff had followed his lead and dressed only in blue jeans, with the top button undone.

"Should be convenient for later, don't you think? Are the glasses in the freezer?"

"Yeah, next to the ice maker." He tasted the sauce and added some salt. "It'll be convenient, dressed like this. Less to take off later. Give me something pretty to look at over dinner, too."

"Whatever. What are we having tonight? It smells terrific."

"Sesame chicken, fried rice, and stir-fried veggies. I've got the chicken and rice warming in the oven while I finish up the sauce and the veggies." He gave a final swirl to the mixture and dumped it in a waiting bowl. Then he pulled two dishes from the oven and placed them on the counter. "I fried up the chicken before you got here, so it'd be ready to go." He poured the sauce on top and sprinkled it with sesame seeds. "I'll be back in a sec. Let me take these to the dining room."

When he returned, Jeff held two Martini glasses at the ready. "Here, tell me what you think."

Repeating last night's ritual, they hooked their arms together and took the first sips. "That's wonderful. I see you used a sprig of ginger, just like I did."

"It adds a nice zing, I think." Jeff placed both glasses back on the counter. "Come here, you. I need another of those kisses." He draped his arms around Cal's neck and cuddled close. His thick pelt brushed against Jeff's skin while their hips ground together. The tips of their noses toyed with one another and their gaze plumbed the depths of each other's souls. A sigh gusted across Jeff's cheek and he closed his eyes, letting his head tip to one side. Their lips grazed one against the other and their chests heaved in unison. Jeff opened his lips in bliss and tasted the tangy flavors lingering in Cal's mouth. Their tongues teased one another and his heart fluttered in his breast.

He pulled back and kissed Cal's cheek. "God damn, man, you kiss good."

"No better than you do!" They gazed at one another for a moment longer. "Dinner will get cold if we keep this up."

Jeff planted a quick buss on his lips. "After all your work we wouldn't want that to happen!" He picked up their drinks and handed one to Cal. "To us!"

"Yes, indeed, to us." Their glasses clinked together. "Shall we debark to the dining room?"

Jeff sat at his place at the table and held up the envelope he'd found earlier. "What's this?"

"Just a little something I picked up for you when I stopped at the store." Cal dimpled before he loaded his plate with rice, chicken, and vegetables.

"That's nice, but I didn't get you anything."

"Sure you did. You came home. You gave me a kiss. What better gift could I ask for?" He slid the dishes across the table and sipped at his Martini. "Oh, and you made a dynamite Martini for me. I think you plan to ploy me with liquor and have your way with me. At least, I hope you do."

Jeff opened the envelope. "It's a lottery ticket. Thanks."

"I know, I know, the chances of winning are, like, one in a zillion. But that's my lucky number on that ticket. We'll watch the drawing tomorrow night. I have a feeling it's going to be your lucky day."

"That's sweet of you, anyway. Tell you what, if we win, we'll split it three ways. You, me, and Kathy and Aaron."

"It's my gift to you, so you can do what you want. But I'd rather you gave my share to Aaron and Kathy's kids."

"They don't have any kids. At least not yet." Jeff spoke around a mouthful of food. "Wow, this is wonderful stuff. Where'd you get the recipe?"

"I found one of Kathy's cookbooks in the kitchen. Cooking is easy, if I don't think too much about it. I just pretend the kitchen is like a chemistry lab and the recipe is a formula." He touched his napkin to his lips. "So, I spent today sight-seeing, grocery shopping, and cooking. What did you do today?"

"Worked at my nasty job. Half my appointments got canceled because we had a big meeting at corporate." He tapped his folder. "The sales pitch got changed a bit. There's some bad press coming out, some safety thing. They taught us how to spin it."

"Bad press? I thought you said cryopreservation was a pretty old technology, well tested and safe?"

"Well, yeah, it is. But we're only now getting experience with clients who've been under for ten years or more. There's one study in Europe that says some people may have increased risk for brain damage."

"Really?" Jeff could swear he paled a bit at that. "Are there tests, or something, to find risk factors? Or does it apply to everyone?"

"You know, they never said." Jeff opened his folder and pulled out the black-bordered report. "Hmm...this is pretty technical." He leafed through the pages. "Yeah, here it is. It says there's a rare blood type, rh-null, that puts people at risk for the drugs used in cryopreservation." He flipped through to the

end and shrugged. "I wonder why they made a big deal out of this if it only applies to one rare blood type?"

"Well, if there's one new risk out there, maybe there's more still to be discovered. You'd have to really trust the process to put yourself to sleep for thirty years."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Our whole sales pitch is built around how safe this is, even for people who are deathly ill." He shrugged. "Whatever, all I've got to do is sell the product."

"Won't you tell your customers about the risk? Test them for the risk factor?"

"It's not in the script." Jeff didn't like where this was headed.

"Don't you think it should be? I couldn't sleep nights if I thought someone died because I withheld information from them."

"Really." He put his fork down and stared across the table. "I'm just working there. I don't make the policy."

"I know that. Still, each of us controls our own decisions, right?"

"Look, it's all I can do to make ends meet. If I don't do what they say, I'll lose my job and they'll blackball me. I won't be able to get work sacking groceries." Heat rose in Jeff's neck and his face warmed. *Where does he get off criticizing me for trying to make a living?*

"Well, I don't think my job is worth risking another person's life." Cal shrugged and wiped his hands on his napkin. "Maybe that's just me."

"Didn't you say you're in the military? Isn't it your job to kill people?"

"The goal of the military is to be so strong we don't have to kill people. You know, 'peace is our profession.'"

"So if peace is your profession, is war just your hobby?"

Cal stared back at him, his mouth agape. "Jeff, what's wrong with you? I was just making conversation, asking about your day. Besides, I never said I was in the military. You assumed it."

"You were calling me immoral." He pointed to the other room. "If you're not in the Air Force, then why are you in uniform in that picture on the mantle?" He wished he could stop, but hurt and guilt drove him forward.

Cal flushed and glanced at the photos in the other room. He lowered his eyes and murmured, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you angry. Can't we just go back to where we were?"

"Whatever." Jeff picked up his fork and stuffed chicken in his mouth, but his anger washed away the flavor. They finished their diner in silence. When it was over, Jeff cleared the table. "I'll finish up here. You can go on to bed. I think I'll sleep on the sofa tonight."

Cal touched a finger to his cheek and he flinched away. Without a word, Cal spun on his heel and retreated upstairs. Jeff pretended to not see the tears in his eyes as he left. He ignored the tears on his own cheeks, too. Sam spent a restless night, dividing his time between the bedroom and the sofa.

CHAPTER 8

The next morning Jeff woke with a headache, stiff muscles, and the afghan twisted about his body. Sam nestled on the floor next to the sofa watching him with golden eyes. He stretched and stroked the dog's back. "Hey there, fella. I guess I really screwed up last night, didn't I?"

Sam sat up and licked his face. *Woof!* His tail whipped out a semicircle on the carpet and he waited, with doggie patience, for Jeff's next words.

"Shh! Don't wake Cal. I bet he's still asleep." Jeff glanced upstairs and a knot formed in his throat. He sat up, stretched, and scratched. "Are you hungry, boy?" Sam's ears perked up at that and he jumped to

his feet, his eyes focused on his friend. "Okay, let me take a leak and then I'll feed you."

Sam scabbled to the kitchen while Jeff staggered to the downstairs bath, wiping sleep crust from his eyes. After he peed and flushed, he stared at his image in the mirror, running fingers through the snags in his hair. "You're a fuckin' idiot, did you know that?" He murmured to his image. "There's this great guy upstairs, and you picked a stupid fight with him. What a loser." He shook his head.

Sam reappeared and licked at his hand. *Woof?* His eyes gazed up at Jeff and his tail hung like a tattered rope between his legs.

"Sorry, Sam. Here I am feelin' sorry for myself and you're hungry. Come on, fella. Chow!" The two trotted to the kitchen where Jeff cracked a can of food and put fresh water in his bowl.

"I wonder if there's a breakfast I can fix that says 'I'm-an-idiot-will-you-forgive-me?'" Sam was too

busy gobbling his chow to answer. "Or maybe I've fucked up so bad he'll hate me forever."

"I don't hate you. On the contrary."

Jeff spun around to see Cal standing in the doorway, gazing at him. His hair erupted at odd angles from his head, as though Frank Gehry had abandoned architecture for cosmetology. Sleep creases marked his face, while a wrinkled seam ran under the hairs on his chest and disappeared into his boxer shorts. His eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed. Jeff's heart sang at the welcome sight of his face and the heady allure of his body.

"Cal! I'm so sorry. How can you ever forgive me?"

"I'm the sorry one. I shouldn't have criticized you. It was none of my business, and I was being a self-righteous SOB."

"No, you were right. I just didn't think it through." He held out his arms. "God, I felt so *bad* last night, but I didn't know what to do! I wanted to go to

you, but I'd been so mean. I was afraid you'd kick me out."

Cal fell into his arms and held him close. "I slept like crap. I wanted to come downstairs and apologize, to hug you and tell you how wonderful you are. But I was afraid I'd screwed up and you'd still be mad at me."

Jeff's throat tightened and tears welled in his eyes. "I wasn't mad at you. I was mad at me, for thinking only of myself, my sales, and how to spin things."

Cal pulled back and his cheeks dimpled beneath misty eyes. "So, we were both miserable last night, and both of us were afraid to be honest with each other. Let's never do that again, okay?"

A hysterical giggle bubbled up through from his chest and he wiped his eyes. "Okay. It's a deal!" He planted a quick kiss on Cal's lips and melted against him as their embrace deepened.

Woof! Sam pawed at the back door and looked at the two men. *Woof!*

Cal pulled back and laughed. "Just like clock-work. He eats and then he poops." He squeezed at Jeff's butt. "Tell you what. I'll let him out and fix some bacon and eggs for breakfast. You can go shower."

"I don't want to leave!" He pulled him closer, but Cal resisted.

"It's almost nine. Don't you have to be at work by ten?" He opened the patio door and Sam bounded into the back yard. "Let me fix breakfast for us. You go to work and I'll be here when you get back tonight."

Jeff glanced at the clock and ran a hand over the stubble on his cheek. "Shit! Yeah, I'm way behind at work after that conference yesterday. I really do gotta run. Thanks!"

"Great. I'll fix a special dinner for us tonight and we can watch you win the lottery and celebrate."

"Right." He gave him another quick squeeze and a buss on the cheek before he trotted upstairs.

* * * *

Jeff raced through the glass doors and into the reception area at LSI. "Marie! Sorry I'm late."

She pulled his appointment list out. "Your first client is due in about twenty minutes. Shouldn't be any problem with that." She leaned forward and whispered, "But watch out. Mr. Carstairs is here, and he's got a bee in his britches. Bless his heart."

Jeff he took the card from her without looking. "Did he notice I was late?"

She simpered at him. "I covered for you, hon. He's clueless as ever."

"Great! Thanks! I don't know what I'd do without you." He scanned his appointments. "Marie, could you be a sweetheart and bring me some coffee?"

"No problem, hon. Just let me finish this letter."

He looked up. "I see Mr. Phillips is coming this afternoon."

"Yeah, at two. He's hot to trot, says he's ready to sign up. I told him to bring his medical chip with him so we can scan it in."

"Great! I sure can use the commission." Jeff raced down the hallway to his office, hoping that Carstairs wouldn't see him sneaking in ten minutes late.

The day passed like many other days. Most of his calls were follow-ups to terminally ill patients and their loved ones, answering questions about finances or about details on the contracts. Two adjusters from health care insurers consumed an hour each, processing claims forms for clients whose deals closed in the last month. The only customer due today who hadn't already signed a contract was Mark Phillips.

Jeff scurried to Marie's desk when she called to tell him his two o'clock was here. "Mark! Great to see you again, and so soon!" The little man's hand felt like sticks covered with tissue paper as he pumped away at his arm.

"Afternoon, Jeff. I figured there was no time like the present." He pulled his hand back and wiped

it on a handkerchief he pulled from his trousers.

"Shall we get to it?"

"Sure, of course. What can we get you? Coke, coffee?"

"I think I'd like ice water, perhaps with a spritz of lemon, if that's not too much trouble?"

He spoke with a faint lisp and his tone reminded Jeff of a drag queen he'd once seen. *I think her name was Ivana B. Queen. If this guy was in a bad wig and high heels, that name would fit him to a T.* Still, he kept his practiced trust-me smile in place. "Of course, of course. Marie, could you get a coffee for me and water with lemon for Mr. Phillips?" He clasped his arm over Mark's shoulder and led him down the hall.

He glanced back and grinned at Marie as she tossed her head and her lips mouthed the silent words, "If that's not too much trouble." She stuck out her tongue and went after the drinks.

When they arrived at Jeff's office, he gestured to the guest chair and settled behind his desk. "Well, Mr. Phillips, have you gone over the materials I shared with you?"

"Yeah. I did some research on the internet too. I'm ready to take the next step, whatever that is."

"That's excellent news! I'm sure you'll be pleased with the services we provide." His fingers clicked on his keyboard. "Do you have your medical information chip, by any chance?"

Mark reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out what looked like a small USB thumb drive. "Here you go."

Jeff held it in his hand and asked, "Do I have your consent to open your medical records, Mr. Phillips?" He gestured at the camera hidden in one corner of the ceiling. "Of course, our conversation is being recorded for your protection."

With a roll of his eyes, Mark shrugged and muttered, "Sure, sure. That's why I gave it to you."

While Jeff loaded the device Marie showed up with their drinks. "Here you are, Mr. Phillips. Will there be anything else, Mr. Railsback?"

"No, that will be all. Thank you Marie."

Standing behind Phillips, she stuck her tongue out again at Mark before she left.

Jeff pointed to the arm of the visitor chair.

"There's a fingerprint reader built into the chair. If you will swipe your thumb across it, I can load your records into our system."

Mark complied, while complaining, "I don't see why you need my medical records. I thought this was safe no matter whether you were sick or not."

"Yes sir, that's correct. That's not why we use your medical record. Since so many of our clients are here because of health related issues, insurance is often the source of payment. Because of this, we've built our client information system around the information on the standard medical chip. This also safeguards your medical information in our secure databases, so that you can be confident that it will be available when you wake." Jeff clicked through the screens. "It looks like everything's complete."

"Great. So what's next?"

"There's contracts you'll need to sign, and, of course, the origination fees to establish your account. You'll also have to set up the bond that assures payment for your monthly maintenance in our facility. I'll

print these all out for you, Mark." He clicked his mouse to populate the standard forms from the information on the chip and his printer began to spit out papers.

"How long will all that take?"

"Since there's no medical exigency involved, there's a thirty day waiting period before we can finalize the contracts. It will take just a moment for these to print." Out of idle curiosity, Jeff scrolled through Mark's basic record. That was when he saw the blood type. "Er, I see your blood type is highlighted in red?"

"Yeah. That's because it's so rare. Most people are rh-positive or rh-negative. I don't have any of the rh antibodies, so I'm rh-null. I'd be anemic, except I take pills. Does that matter?"

Jeff stared at him and glanced at the camera in the corner of the ceiling. *He's a jerk. I need the money. It's only one report, and it just said 'increased risk.'* He started to speak, and then thought of Cal's words. *Fuck. Suppose he dies. Being brain dead would be worse*

than being dead. He hadn't been fooled — he knew what "cerebral failure" meant.

He pulled a crimson folder from his drawer, clipped together the papers from his printer, and slipped them inside. He slid the folder across the desk. "Here are your contracts and other forms. My business card is inside. If you'll come to the conference table, I'll go over what needs done with each form."

Mark reached for the folder, but Jeff pulled it back.

"There's one more thing, Mark." He reached into his desk and pulled out a black-bordered report. "You should really read this report before deciding to proceed. I believe our process is safe, but a researcher in France recently released this study that suggests that people with your blood type might be allergic to some of the drugs used in the cryopreservation processes."

"What the fuck? You told me this was safe!" His eyes flared and his face flushed.

"Mark, I just want you to have all the information before you make this decision." Jeff's phone rang. He frowned when he saw the caller ID. "If you'll excuse me a moment, please. I have to take this call." He picked up the phone and said, "Yes, Mr. Carstairs?"

"Just what the *fuck* do you think you're doing, shit head?" Carstairs' voice blared from the earpiece. Jeff winced and turned to face away from Mark.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I saw you give that customer the French report. That is a confidential company document. I want you in my office right now."

"But sir, I have a customer with me."

"I'll send someone else, someone who's fucking competent, to handle your customer. My office. Now. Shit head." The phone buzzed. He'd hung up.

"Mark, I'm so sorry. I've been called away. Another of our customer representatives will be with you in a moment."

"What's wrong? You look like you swallowed a goldfish and don't got no place to barf."

"I'll be fine. Please excuse me." Jeff hid his trembling hands and walked on weak knees to the corporate suite at the end of the hall.

Carstair's door was open, but Jeff stood in the hall and rapped on the jam. He looked up from the papers cluttering his desk and glared at him. "Come in. Don't bother to sit down, you dumb fuck." Carstairs had taken off his coat, and his crisp white shirt was unwrinkled except where his suspenders creased the shoulders. His jaw muscles jumped and his eyes flashed. "I was watching you with that client on the camera, fuck face. I saw what you did. Didn't you listen to anything at the sales meeting yesterday?"

"Sir..."

"Shut up. Don't talk, listen. This is a business. People are either team players, or not." His finger jabbed in Jeff's direction. "*You* are not a team player." He held up a piece of paper. "Do you know what this is, shit head?"

"No, sir." *God, am I fucked or what?* Jeff struggled to keep his voice steady, while his breath shuddered in his lungs.

"This, Mr. soon-to-be-ex-employee shit face, is your non-disclosure agreement. In it, you have agreed to not reveal trade secrets of LSI during or after employment. If you violate this agreement, you have agreed to pay liquidated damages to LSI in the amount of one million dollars for each instance. That means that you cannot discuss anything about this company, including our confidential sales information, with anyone. You even think about it, and we'll destroy you. Do you understand that, fuck face?"

"Yes, sir." *What a fucking mess. Just let me out of here.*

"Good. You are fired, effective immediately. Do not go back to your office, just leave." A uniformed security officer appeared from nowhere. "Get this piece of crap out of my sight." The guard jerked at Jeff's arm and pushed him from the office. He stumbled down the hall, his mind numb and his legs unsteady.

I'm so fucked. What a loser. I can't even keep this shitty job.

CHAPTER 9

Jeff sat in his car and stared at the door to Kathy and Aaron's apartment. His hands still trembled from the confrontation with Carstairs. *God, could I be more of a loser? I just sat there and took it.* He flexed his hand and rolled his wrist. It still throbbed from when the guard had wrenched it. *What am I gonna do? No job. I bet they say I was fired for cause, too, so there won't be any unemployment either.* He heaved a sigh and tried to focus. *All right. Things always work out, one way or another.* He repeated the mantra that had gotten him through coming out after his parents had disowned him.

He stared at the door and shuddered. *What will I tell Cal? God, what a fucking loser I am.* For a moment, anger flared in him at Carstairs, at LSI, even at Mark. *Shit, I probably saved his rich, skinny butt and he'll never even know what they did to me.* He shook his head and unknotted his tie. *This mess won't go away just because*

you don't want to think about it. He got out of his car, gave the door a satisfying slam, and strode up the walkway. He jammed his keys in the lock and let the door drift open.

Woof! Sam jumped for joy to see him and licked at his hand, his tail slicing at the air in mad swirls.

"Hey, fella, how you been? I'm glad to see you, too." He squatted down and made kissing noises with his mouth. Sam planted sloppy smooches on his face and panted with glee to have his friend home again.

"Is that you, honey?" Cal's sweet voice called from the kitchen.

Jeff looked up and pursed his lips. "Yeah, I'm here."

Cal emerged from the hallway, wiping his hands on a towel. He was dressed in blue jeans, no shirt and was barefoot. A streak of red frosting clung to his cheek and flour dusted his hair. The scent of angel food cake and roast beef wafted from the kitchen in his wake. "I'm so glad to see you! I've missed you all day!" He held out his arms in welcome.

Jeff stood and a wan smile parsed his lips. "I've missed you, too. More than you know."

Cal gazed at him before clasping his arms around his shoulders and pulling him close. "You look like you've had a horrible day. What can I do to make it better?"

Jeff rested his head on his shoulder and nestled in the comfort of his strong arms. "Just hold me for a bit, okay?"

Cal squeezed him and then, still holding him close, stroked his hair. "I'm here for you, babe. Anything you need, just let me know."

They stayed like that, arms about one another, Jeff's head on Cal's shoulder, for long moments. When Jeff pulled back, he gazed into Cal's eyes and ran his fingers through his ebony locks. He rubbed at the frosting on his cheek and said, "You're a mess, did you know that? There's frosting on your cheek and flour in your hair."

He dimpled. "I've been baking. If you think I'm a mess wait'll you see the kitchen." He tipped his

head to one side and turned serious again. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Jeff broke their embrace and sighed. "I lost my job today. I'm such a total loser."

"I'm sorry! You want to tell me what happened? And you're not a loser! Don't you dare say that!"

Jeff strode to the living room, stripping off his coat and tie, and plopped on the sofa. "There was this customer. I was about to close the deal. I printed out the contracts and everything for him."

"And then what happened?" Cal sat tailor-fashion on the floor by the sofa, pulled off Jeff's shoes and socks and started to massage his feet.

"Well, I loaded his customer data into the system, off of his medical chip. Since most of our clients are paid by health insurance, we use that as the basis for our customer record." He laid back and flexed his toes. "That feels so good. Don't stop." Under Cal's strong hands, the tension seemed to flood down his nerves and out the soles of his weary feet.

"I won't." He worked in silence for a few seconds, before asking, "So what happened?"

"By chance, I looked at his blood type."

Cal's eyes peeked at him from under his long lashes and then returned to watching his hands work on his feet. "He was the blood type in that report, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. Rh-null. I wasn't gonna say anything, y'know? He was kinda creepy. I mean, he was gonna sign a contract just so his fucking trust fund would get bigger!" He heaved a sigh. "But then I remembered what you said, if someone died and it was your fault. And I knew I couldn't do it. I gave him a copy of the report and told him to read it before he signed the contracts."

"Jeff! I'm so proud of you!" Cal's eyes shown at him and a smile graced his lips. "You acted against your own interest to help a stranger. That's the definition of heroism."

"Yeah, well whatever else it was, it was stupid, too. The big boss was listening in, and he fired me. For all I know, some other salesman will get to that

customer and he'll sign the contracts anyway. God knows, they'll do their best to make that happen."

"They eavesdropped on you? That's terrible!"

Jeff shrugged. "Hey, that's standard sales technique. The sales manager is almost always listening in on any major purchase you make. Like, if you're buying a car and the deal starts to go south, the manager can bop in and work magic with some piss-ant little freebie to help close the deal. I thought everyone knew that."

Cal shook his head. "It must have been awful for you to always have your boss looking over your shoulder, second-guessing you."

Jeff shook his head. "I guess. It was a crappy job. But today the VP for sales was there and he really reamed me out before he fired me. Called me every name in the book and threatened me with lawsuits if I told anyone about LSI."

Cal's eyes twinkled at that. "Well, I'll be discrete, I promise. You don't have to worry about getting sued from me telling tales after school."

Jeff grinned. "Thanks. I guess it was a shitty place to work and I'm better off not being there. And for sure I can't work there if they're going to make me be dishonest with clients. My god, he could die if he signs that contract!"

"I'm so proud of you!" Cal stood and kissed him on the lips. "Don't worry about the job. You're going to win the lottery tonight!"

Jeff snorted. "I could use the dough, that's for sure. I think I've got enough saved up for about six weeks, then I'll be homeless."

"Kathy and Aaron wouldn't let that happen. Neither would I." A timer dinged in the kitchen. "Shit! I've got to baste the roast out! How about you go change? I'll work on dinner and fix Martinis." He ruffled at Jeff's curls. "I've got champagne chilling for later, after they announce the lottery winners!"

Jeff shook his head. "You're goofy, you know that? But you're my kind of goofy." He pulled him close and their lips brushed against one another. "You've made me feel better. Thank you for that," he murmured.

Cal stood. "You make me feel better just by being here. Sorry, I've gotta go be the good wife and finish dinner. Get comfortable and I'll have a special treat when you come back down!" He looked at the Sam who sat in a corner watching and slapped his slacks. "Sam! Come on, fella. I'll feed you!" Sam woofed and danced at his feet.

Jeff watched him rush back to the kitchen while a smile toyed with his lips. *I think I'm falling in love, I really do.* He gathered his coat and tie and climbed the stairs to shower and change.

Half an hour later, he stood in front of the mirror blow-drying his hair. He wore a tattered pair of denim cut-offs and nothing else. *Fuckin curly hair, anyway,* he cursed as his brush fought with snags. When his cell phone rang, he turned off the blow drier but continued to struggle with his hair. "Hello?"

"Jeff! It's Kathy!" Her voice bubbled with laughter.

"Kathy! How are you? What are you doing calling me while you're on your honeymoon?"

"Aaron's out getting us some sushi from down the street. I just had to tell you!" Jeff pictured her petite form bouncing up and down, waves of blond hair flowing about her head.

"So what's going on? Is everything all right?"

"Everything is wonderful! I wanted you to be the first person we told. I'm going to have a baby!"

"Kathy! That's wonderful! But, well, how can you know this soon? I mean, you've only just been married and all?" He gave up with the brush and ran his fingers through his hair, letting the curls spring wherever they wanted.

"Silly, we've been trying for a while now. I just took the test and it says I'm pregnant. Isn't that grand!"

"It sure is. Wow, I'm gonna be, what, kinda like an uncle?"

"Yeah. We've decided if it's a boy we're going to name him Caleb Jeffrey, after Aaron's brother and my best friend. What do you think of that?"

Jeff thought about Cal downstairs and grinned like Mr. Drysdale when the Clampetts came to town. "That's terrific. So will Aaron call Cal and tell him?"

"What? Oh, we can't do that." Her voice lost some of its fervor. "Aaron got a text message from Cal's CO last night. He was injured in an insurgent attack and he's been MEDEVAC'ed to the Air Force hospital in Landstuhl. We don't know yet how he's doing."

"What? That can't be right. Cal's not in Germany." A black hole formed about Jeff's heart and sucked his breath away.

"He is, trust me. A Red Cross rep called us from Germany to tell us he's arrived and is in surgery. Aaron's pretty worried about him. Hey, I hear him at the door now. I've gotta run. Love you!" She rang off.

Jeff's knees buckled and he toppled to the bed where he sat, staring at his phone. His breath came in short, reluctant pulses, and the room seemed to swell and collapse about him. In a daze, he stumbled down the stairs to the living room and snatched up the picture of Aaron's brother from the mantle. He stared at

the face in the photo, disbelief welling inside him. *It's not him. They look a lot alike, but it's not him.* He stared at the kitchen as Cal entered the room carrying two martini glasses in his hands and merry smile on his lips.

Jeff held the portrait out to him. "Tell me, who are you, really?"

He frowned. "What are you talking about? I'm Cal. You know that."

"Kathy just called. Aaron's brother Cal is in an Air Force hospital in Germany." He shook his head and pointed at the portrait. "I admit you look something like him, but you're not him." He blinked back tears and his voice trembled. "I trusted you. I still do. But who are you?"

All the color drained from Cal's face and he collapsed on the sofa. "I forgot. I knew this would happen, but then I forgot." He turned a stricken expression toward Jeff. "I can explain."

CHAPTER 10

"So, what is your name? Why are you here and who are you?" The tears streamed from his eyes now and he didn't wipe them away. He still cared for the sudden stranger before him, even though fear of betrayal gripped his soul.

Cal shook his head and gulped his martini. "It's complicated. Will you let me tell the whole thing, start to finish? Do I deserve that much?"

"Yes, and more. I won't make the same mistake we made last night. We have to talk." Still, memories of his old lover Craig, his brother, and their betrayal cascaded through him and filled him with a miserable blackness. *I'm a born loser. Everyone lies to me and uses me. I'm just a worthless piece of shit.*

Cal's crystalline eyes gazed at him and then dropped to the floor. For just an instant, Jeff lost him-

self in those deep pools of sincerity and the promise of that chiseled face. "Tell me." He sat on the edge of the chair opposite where Cal perched on the sofa and sighed. "Please tell me it's all right."

Cal heaved a sigh. "I promise it'll be all right, in the end." He glanced up and before his gaze dropped back to his hands, twirling the stem of his martini glass, rotating it round and round. "I guess I should start at the beginning. I'm here because of another top-secret DARPA project."

"You said you weren't in the military." Jeff's voice fell flat and his heart sank. *So he's lying after all.*

"No, I never said whether I was or wasn't. As it happens, I'm not. But you're not in the military, and the place you worked used technology created by DARPA, right?"

The memory of this afternoon slammed back into Jeff's head. His humiliation and failure at his career flooded over him, piling atop the degradation that inundated him after his brother and lover betrayed him. And now, on top of it all, his hopes and dreams for love with Cal lay in shattered shards. It

was too much. "Right. Where I used to work. Thanks for reminding me."

Cal's face filled with remorse. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. But think of the internet. That started as a DARPA project, too, back in the sixties. They're behind lots of technology."

Jeff sighed and drained his martini. "So you're tellin' me you're part of some super-secret military project? What's that got to do with us, I mean, with you bein' here? You did lie to me, right?"

"Jeff, I never lied to you. I let you believe some things that weren't quite true, but I never lied to you."

"How clever of you. That still sounds like lying." His voice shook and the tears started again.

"You're right, I shouldn't have done it. But when I first got here, I was confused. I couldn't even remember my name until you told me it was Cal. There's these randomized quantum effects that take a while to wear off. I think I've got all my memory back now. Just too late."

"So you're saying this is all my fault. Figures. I'm such a fuckin' loser. It's always my fault when things fall apart."

"No, no! Everything that went wrong between us was my fault! The good things happened because of you, of us. The bad things, those were because I fucked up, not you!" Now tears welled in Cal's eyes too, and he blinked hard but they streamed over his cheeks anyway. "May I go on?"

Jeff shrugged. "Sure, why not?" He strode to the wet bar in one corner of the room. "You won't mind if I fix myself something a bit stronger?"

"As long as you let me stay, you can do anything you want." There was a slight tremor in his voice, whether from relief or fear, Jeff didn't care.

In the mirror over the bar Jeff saw Cal wipe his eyes. *Great. I've made him cry. That's perfect. He's a weepy loser and I'm a loser, too. What a pair.* "So, go on. Tell your story." He pulled down the gin and tonic water and mixed a drink, long on alcohol and short on everything else. *Gin, the loser's best friend.*

Cal heaved a ragged sigh and gazed at him before continuing. "Okay, then. DARPA had this idea to build a matter transmitter. They thought they'd be able to plop tanks or missiles or whatever just in time, wherever they were needed. Sort of like the way they used cryopreservation to pre-position troops before the Fourth Gulf War."

Jeff snorted. "Right. Beam me up, Scotty." He rolled his eyes and guzzled his drink.

Cal frowned, as if puzzled by the reference. "What? Oh, you mean like beaming matter with radio waves? No, that won't work. This was different. They discovered a way to fold space-time in a little bubble." He picked up magazine from the table in front of him and folded a page back on itself. "Kind of like this, where the different parts of the page touch one another. Except that this folds two dimensions through three, and they folded the universe through half a dozen dimensions. The object didn't move; instead they created a space-time bubble about it, and then dropped it wherever they wanted."

"That sounds practical." Jeff finished his drink and poured another. He left out the tonic this time.

"Yeah, well, it didn't work quite they way they'd hoped. The little bubble they created wasn't stable, and when it collapsed the objects popped back to their original position. They can't even predict with certainty how long the object will stay put—there's more random effects, depending on the magnitude of the displacement."

"This is all so very intersht...interst..." He stopped and licked his lips. "*In-ter-est-ing*. But I don't see that it explains why you lied to me." *Fuckin' lips are numb. Not used to drinkin' like this. What a loser.*

"I'm getting to that." Another sigh shuddered past his lips. "Here's the deal. What they figured out was that they could displace these little bubbles of space-time wherever and *whenever* they wanted. Since they warped the space-time continuum to do it, they could drop the object anywhere in the four-dimensional universe we experience."

"Whenever?" Jeff's mind wrapped around that word. "You mean like a time machine?"

"Yes! That's it exactly."

"You're saying you're from the future?" *He must think I'm an even bigger dumb-ass loser than Carstairs did.*

Cal beamed. "I knew you'd understand!" He took a deep breath and held it before his next sentence exploded out of his lips. "My full name is Caleb Jeffrey Cole. The man in that picture is my namesake. My parents named me for him, and for my mother's best friend."

Jeff's head jerked up at that. "What? You listened in when Kathy called me? You were spyin' on me, just like at work?"

"Momma, I mean, Kathy, called you? When? I've been in the kitchen cooking and feeding Sam, remember?"

"I don't believe you. That's the most flat-assed, preposterous story I've ever heard."

"I bet you'll believe me when you win the lottery tonight. I didn't pick that number at random. I *know* you're going to win the big jackpot."

Jeff staggered to the sofa and sat down, almost missing the cushions. "Okay, so let's suppose, for the sake of argument, this is all true. Why would the military let you come back here? It can't be so you can buy a lottery ticket and make me rich."

Cal dimpled at that, as if he sensed victory. "That's part of the reason I came back, yes. And the military didn't have to approve it. They licensed the technology after the Nigerian campaign, just like they licensed cryopreservation. All you need is a bucketful of money and anyone can purchase a temporal excursion."

"So you're rich?" Jeff sneered at that. *Fuckin' snooty rich people, anyway.*

"I was, thanks to you. You gave half your winnings to Kathy and Aaron's children. That'd be me." He looked smug. "I spent all my money to come back here and buy that lottery ticket to give to you."

Jeff shook his head and regretted it at once. The room continued to spin around him even after he held his head still. "Lemme see if I've got this. You spent all the winnings from the lottery to come back

here and buy a lottery ticket so that, in the future, you'd have the money to spend to come back here and buy a lottery ticket." His head wobbled a bit on his neck. "And so on. Right?"

"You've got the basics. Except I only spent my half of the winnings. You keep half."

"Sounds pretty pointless to me. At least from your perspective." He thought a bit more, and realization slammed into him like semi hitting a mosquito at freeway speed. "That means you're gonna disappear! Go back to whatever, wherever, *whenever* you came from?" Loss flooded through him and left a dead pool of gloom in its wake.

Cal's mouth turned down and reverse dimples popped on his cheeks. "Yeah. Sometime soon, probably before morning, I'll slip back to the future. Thirty years in the future."

"Then I'll never see you again!" Jeff couldn't keep the sorrow that filled his heart from leaking into his voice and his washing across his face.

Cal stood and grasped his hand. "Yes, you will. Think about it, babe. Tomorrow you'll be rich. Rich

enough to do whatever you want. If you want to see me again, there's a way." A wan smile drifted across his features. "That's the last reason, the real reason, I did all this. So we could fall in love. If you want, there's a way we can be together again. You can travel to the future and be with me."

"What? That don't make no sense. Ain't no time travel now." His head weighed a ton and his pulse thudded in his ears. "Sorry. Not used to drinkin' like this."

Cal let a finger trail down his cheek. "There is time travel today, just not the kind I used to get here. You're twenty five now, right? I'm not born yet. I don't think I'm even conceived yet. Unless...is Kathy pregnant?"

"How'd you know? That's why she called me." He took another slug of gin.

"All right. So, I'll be born about nine months from now. But you'll be in cryopreservation."

Jeff's head wobbled back and forth. "Why would I do that?"

"Because twenty-five years from now, you'll wake up. And when you wake up, I'll be twenty-four and waiting for you. You'll be my mother's long lost friend who gave me half his lottery winnings and I'll be anxious to meet you. To say thank you and be your guide in the future."

Jeff blinked. "In the future?" He couldn't quite follow what Cal was saying.

"Right, in the future. You're so cute when you get there, so in awe of the littlest things. I couldn't help falling in love with you. Then you told me how we'd met before, in the past. How we'd met two days ago and twenty five years in our past."

"Why tell you what we both did? I don't get it."

"Because when you wake up, I haven't done it yet. Don't you see? We'll be together again forever once I pop back to the future tonight."

Jeff shook his head and his mind seemed to float away to the ceiling and land back on his neck. "I don't get it. I just know I want to be with you." He gazed into those blue eyes, bordered by ebony lashes

from heaven, and knew that Cal spoke the truth about how he came to be here. "I believe you, even though it's fuckin' crazy. I'm sorry for ever doubtin' you."

"I would have doubted me, if I'd been you."

Cal tipped his head at a scratching noise from the patio door in the kitchen and barks from the backyard.

"Jeeze, how long has poor Sam been out there begging to get in? Poor fella." He planted a kiss on Jeff's cheek.

"I did all of this for you, for us. That's the real reason I came back. You know that, don't you?"

The tears that now flowed from Jeff's eyes washed the doubts and fears and anger away in a cleansing flood of emotion. "I love you. I really do."

"I love you too. Let me take care of Sam and I'll be right back."

"Hurry!"

"I will. We've got all the time in world." He retreated to the kitchen.

Jeff relaxed on the sofa and reflected on the amazing story he'd just heard. The kitchen door opened and closed and Sam trotted into the room. "I

guess I'll just have to ask him how, eh, Sam?" The dog *woofed* and licked his hand.

A flash of light filled the room and he started, staring into the kitchen. A touch of something not quite like thunder rumbled through the condo and rattled against his chest. A gust of hot air brushed against his face and lifted his curls. Then all fell still again, the tempest vanishing like the memory of a ghost.

"Cal? Where are you?" He strode to the kitchen where the roast steamed on the counter next to an angel food cake. The oven door stood open and he closed it while he inspected the backyard. Cal was nowhere to be seen. "Cal?" His voice thudded against the soundproofing and filled the apartment, but there was no answer. He raced upstairs and searched the bedroom and bath. Empty. Cal was gone, vanished like dust in the wind.

Panic flushed through Jeff's soul and his breath heaved in his chest. His heart, so full of love moments before, exploded now in sorrow and loss. He fell face down on the bed and wept, before realization

dawned. He knew what he must do. *Twenty-five years, he said.*

He wiped his eyes and turned on the television; it was almost time for the lottery drawing. *I guess I'm a winner, now, thanks to Cal.* His mind filled with plans for their future. For the first time ever, he looked forward with joy and his heart filled with the promise of the time of his life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

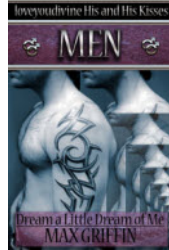
Max Griffin is the pen name of a professional mathematician and academic. Under his professional name, he is the author of a graduate textbook in real analysis and numerous research articles. When he is not writing fiction, his days are filled with teaching mathematics and statistics, research, and administrative work at a major comprehensive university in the southwest. He is the proud parent of a daughter who is a librarian. He is blessed to be in a long-term relationship with his life partner, Mr. Gene, who is an expert knitter.

The two humans in Max's household are the pets of an Abyssinian cat named Mr. Dinger, short for [Erwin Schrodinger the Cat](#). Mr. Dinger graciously lets them live in his home in return for food and occasional petting.

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