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DECEPTION PALM SPRINGS



Alex Ironrod

Deception takes many forms, especially when man-sex is involved, as young Palm Springs PIs, Mark and Dan, find out. And not just in their own Leather relationship. Mark is hired to locate a US Marine who comes back into his gay father's life, before disappearing again. Just who is the real Donald Bates and what's his game? From gay Palm Springs mansions to Kansas City leather bars Mark uncovers surprising and wonderful answers. Meanwhile Dan's following a husband who's unfaithful - with a woman or a man? Deception can lead you into sexual, wonderful, strange, and dangerous places.

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DECEPTION—
PALM SPRINGS

The Palm Springs PI Series

ALEX IRONROD

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With THANKS

To

The Men in My Life

My Partner

HANK

and for

michael & butch

who have so many great ideas

and who appreciate a good story

and

to the MLR PRESS team once again

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to help me so improve this novel

CHAPTER ONE

“But, Lieutenant Farrell, I don’t quite understand. Why do you want to set up here as a private investigator?”

I looked at the stocky man sitting at his mahogany desk across from me. He was still smiling, but looked puzzled. Bruce Taylor was in his fifties, in very good physical condition, and as far as I could judge, an important PI in Palm Springs—and I needed his help and advice.

“I recently retired from the LAPD, Mr. Taylor...”

“Bruce, please.”

I flashed a smile back.

“If you’ll call me Mark, please. As I was saying, Bruce, my partner Dan and I recently retired from the ranks of homicide detectives in the LAPD and want to bring our years of professional experience into the private sector. We thought that we would set up as private detectives and investigators. We know we have a lot to learn. We’ve applied for licenses from the California Bureau of Investigative and Security Services, and this morning Dan is applying for a local license to carry a concealed weapon.”

“But why here in the Palm Springs area? Why not in Los Angeles where, I’m sure, you know the city well and have most of your contacts?”

I decided I’d better be frank if I was to persuade Bruce Taylor to help us.

“Well, I’m not sure how closely you follow the trials and court cases around Southern California, but we’ve been involved in a rather sensational case or series of cases recently.”

“Farrell—I think I remember the trials. What was that group or gang called?”

“Group7. We were the two principal police officers involved.”

“Yes, of course, Mark. They seemed to be an unsavory pack

of businessmen with too much money, too much spare time, and some rather kinky tastes, if I remember. And you two were in the center of it, together with my friend Manning Thompson. I think I begin to understand. You're now looking for something less—is 'destructive' the right word?"

"I think that's a very good choice. Yes, the case came too close to home when one of the accused kidnapped my young daughter and insisted on an unusual personal ransom from me in the form of a ...er...video."

"Yes, the trial made all the tabloids, but you and your partner—Fortunato, is that right?—received high commendations, if I'm remembering correctly. So why resign now?"

I took the plunge again.

"Because of the notoriety my personal life became entangled with my professional one. My ten-year-old daughter's life was seriously endangered. Even my mother-in-law Edith, who lives with us and looks after us all, became concerned. The health and well-being of Dan and I had been compromised. We felt we needed to get away, and try a different career."

Bruce had been nodding sympathetically, then hesitated as something else occurred to him.

"I'm not quite sure how to phrase this, Mark, but I believe there was another element in your decision to change jobs and cities?"

I managed to smile. It might as well come out into the open now rather than later.

"I assume you're referring to the fact that we are both gay men and have become partners in our private lives as well as our chosen profession. Yes, some of that did come out at the trials as well as some of the kinky practices of the accused. All of which made for good tabloid fodder and titillation."

"Must've made it difficult to resume your police work."

"No one mentioned resignation, but I felt Dan and I would always be the subject of finger-pointing and snickering comments

around the water cooler. Plus the damage it could continue to shower on my family and our personal lives as well as my job. So we've retired with honor, taken our pensions, and now want to invest in something where we can make use of our expertise—ten years or more each in law enforcement and the military.”

Bruce leant across his desk, looking me right in the eye.

“It seems a sensible change of profession, although private investigation is becoming a crowded field with many veterans of law enforcement, like me, already established and newcomers hustling to get a start. Still, you're both young enough...”

“I'm just thirty-three and Dan is coming on twenty-nine. And we were considered hot shit at our jobs.”

He chuckled. The tension I felt began to lift, but I still needed his expert help.

“Yes, Manning Thompson gave you a very good reference—how you saved his life and all that. So how can I help you?”

“We're going through all the hoops to get ourselves accredited and set up as a company, but I believe we both seriously need some practical experience as private detectives and investigators—starting near the bottom—as ‘grunts’ or corporals. We would like to ‘intern’ with you and your company for, say, a month to get our feet wet and learn how you do things around here. We'd be glad to pay our way.”

Bruce looked startled for a minute, then laughed and banged the table with his meaty fist.

“Fuck, Mark, I don't need your money. But maybe we could use a couple of additional experienced brains and brawn for a few weeks. It won't be high profile or glamorous, but I think we can give you some idea of the range of work we take on. You'll start near the bottom, and we'll see what our team and I can teach you both. Shake?”

We both stood up and solemnly shook our hairy paws together.

“When can you start, Mark?”

“We need about a week to finalize our permits and licenses and to work out some of our accommodation needs.”

He consulted his phone diary. “Let’s see, Labor Day weekend is coming up in ten days’ time. How about the Tuesday after Labor Day? We start at nine o’clock, unless we’re on a case.”

“Great. I’m familiar with that kind of time-table. Thank you. I’m very grateful, and we won’t be in your way.”

“Oh, I’ll make sure of that. Now, let me check if I’ve got your cell numbers.”

Bruce Taylor’s willingness to help us this way was a great relief, and I marched out of his downtown Palm Springs office humming to myself. It was hot outside—about one hundred five degrees—probably a normal temperature here for the end of August. But Palm Springs looked wonderful, with the mountains all around it and a few small clouds lazing in an azure blue sky. So I stripped off my jacket and loosened my tie. My fingers speed-dialed Dan’s number.

“Hi, detective, how’s your morning going?”

“Hey there, boss. Okay. You’ll have to go to the PD yourself for your weapons permits, but they did give me the forms. And Dick, our realtor, has arranged for me to see another house this afternoon. How did the interview go that Manning arranged for you?”

“Terrific. We’re going to be PI interns in ten days’ time. I just hope our licenses come through in time. How about some lunch?”

“Fuck, boss, I’ve arranged to have a sandwich with two of the local detectives. I’m trying to get to know our local law enforcement colleagues.”

“Okay. No prob. I’ve got some errands to run anyway. See you this evening?”

Dan’s voice dropped low. “You won’t forget this is one of your service nights?”

“No, Sir, of course I remember. I’ll get myself ready for your

use, Sir.”

“Good boy. Until later, lover-man.” His voice had become husky and promising.

Some men in our small circle of gay and leather friends found it difficult to accept the way our sexual relationship had developed, but for Dan and I, it seemed both necessary and needed in 2009.

When I finally got home, I showered straightaway and cleaned myself inside and out, douching a couple of times as Dan insisted. I lubed my passage carefully then painstakingly worked the latest rubber plug up into my asshole. I grunted as it finally sank home.

We were staying once again in the *casita* of Manning Thompson’s Palm Springs vacation home. He was certainly generous with his hospitality, I think partly because it gave him the excuse to come down for weekends and to keep an eye on me and the possibilities for rough sex like we’d enjoyed on our dirty weekend last winter in New York, escaping from his danger and my conscience. But he had no future possibilities there now.

I had to hurry. Dan would be home by five, and I had to be ready and in position to avoid punishment on my nights of service to my Master.

My leather harness seemed to be all buckles. I started to sweat even in the air-conditioning. I hastily grabbed the brush to polish up my low black boots before I tugged them on over my white socks and laced them up.

Shit, that thick titanium cock-ring Dan had given me—where the fuck was it? I’d taken it off after our last session. I found it in the top drawer in the bedroom. It was tight; I needed a little lube to squeeze it over my cock and balls. Snug. Now everything but me was in position. Five minutes to go.

I knelt down in the living room, more or less naked, knees spread as wide as possible and hands clasped behind my back. Master Dan didn’t like me hooded to start with. I needed my tongue loose to lick his boots. Head up, eyes looking down. What about the fucking tit clamps? Master hadn’t said that I had to put

them on. But I better tease and pull on my tits to get them erect for him.

Fuck, I didn't need to be so nervous. I'd done all of this before and I hoped to be doing it, or something like it, for the rest of my life. I wanted to be his sub. I wanted and needed a tough loving Master. I didn't lose my masculinity in serving Master Dan. Frankly, I thought my complete active submission enhanced it.

I heard the Harley in the driveway, then the key in the lock. Pull my shoulders back; get that furry chest on display. My Master, my lover, my man was home. His boy, his submissive, his man was ready to serve him.

With my eyes lowered, I could see only his Wescoes and his jeans crossing the floor towards me, and stopping in front of me. My cock jerked eagerly, extending itself, hard, between my spread legs.

Master Dan chuckled. "Good boy. All prepared for an evening of service and games."

"Sir, yes, Sir."

He raised one boot. The sole trapped my boner firmly and drove it down to the floor. I hissed and shuddered, but kept my place.

"Lean up, boy. You may use your hands to unbutton my 501s and bring out my package. Then you know what to do. Breathe in my sweat, and work my prick and Prince Albert."

The way our sex play had expanded over the previous eight months had been an amazing surprise to both of us, I think. Almost immediately in our relationship Dan had established his dominance, while I, as the relatively newbie submissive in male sex, sweated and struggled to learn my part. I had finally fully submitted and committed myself to him at the beginning of the year.

Since then, we had made time for regular training for me and regular fucks and other pleasures for him. In the midst of the turmoil of dealing with the criminal activities of Group7

members that had churned up our professional lives as members of the LAPD, our private sex lives gave us release and balance. We both knew it and relished it.

“Fuck, stop daydreaming, boy. Get that mouth closed more firmly around my dick and get your saliva coating my stick properly.”

He thrust in more vigorously and I swallowed the hard metal of the piercing in the head of his cock, named after Britain’s Prince Albert and commonly known as a PA. I tried to relax enough to prevent myself from gagging. Shit, I’d had enough training in taking him, shaft as well as the exciting PA attachment. I focused on my role and my mind started slipping into its proper sub space. I felt a surge of endorphins and slobbered harder over my Master’s tool.

Dan was moaning more frequently, pulling my head into his crotch and rumpling my short tawny hair. Encouraged, I worked faster. Responding, his boot pressed harder on my penis already pinned to the floor. Eventually he gasped and pulled back. “Right, that’s enough of that. Shit, you’re becoming a real good cock sucker. But I want my dick up your ass this evening. You’ve prepared yourself properly?”

“Sir, yes, Sir. I’m always hopeful, Sir.”

He chuckled again. “Help me out of these clothes and we’ll move into the bedroom. It’s been too many days and I need to take you hard.”

I quickly pulled off his Wescos and jeans. Yes, he’d worn briefs today—maybe since he had spent the day in the ‘straight’ worlds of law enforcement and house hunting. He shucked off his jacket then his T-shirt; we looked at one another naked for a moment with pleasure and smiled in satisfaction.

That dark Italian complexion and killer smile of Dan’s set my cock raging and my ass twitching every time. I was taller, heavier, furrier, but he had conquered my body and my spirit over the past months.

“Okay, fur-ball, up on the bed on your fucking back. No

restraints tonight. I'm taking you full-tilt. So—into position, raise those meaty legs, and let's see how well plugged you are.”

“Sir, yes, Sir. I'm also clean, lubed, and ready for your power weapon, Sir.”

He was trying hard to look stern and forbidding, but those brown eyes were glazing over with lust and the new mustache was quivering almost as much as his pre-cum dripping cock. His knees sank down onto the bed around my body; he pulled my legs up over his shoulders, pulled out my plug, spat once into my winking hole, and pushed in. I was ready and hungry for him. We'd had to abstain for several days and we were silently telegraphing our need to one another.

I began to sweat as usual as I felt his pole moving up my well lubed passage. I sighed with pleasure as he pulled me further onto his rod, and I clenched my muscles to let him know. He reached up to twist my nipples and, as I thrashed around, he sank in the last few inches. We were complete and he leaned over to kiss my gasping open mouth.

I responded passionately. This muscle man could turn me on in minutes and I wriggled my body beneath him as he started moving his member up and down my chute. My ass muscles clenched him tightly when I thought he would leave me empty, and then relaxed as he filled my passage again and I sighed and shuddered.

Now Master Dan was sweating and snarling as he rampaged inside me, and my body answered him in turn, demanding that he fuck me full strength. I needed to submit to the powerful master I knew he was. We were breathing heavily, kissing and savagely pulling on each other's tits. My own cock banged between us, thrusting into the empty air.

“I'm going to cum in you, boy. I'm going to blast you to kingdom come, motherfucker.”

“I'm ready for you, Sir. I need you to skewer me, to fill me with your seed, so I can worship you with my cream.”

Fuck, less than a year ago that shout would've seemed to be

an unknown and unthinkable foreign language. Now it was the cry of a needy boy, a six foot two, two hundred and ten pound, furry, needy boy.

His penis pushed me up the bed. I banged my head on the headboard. He came in two gushing loads. I replied in the same way, spewing my jism over my stomach and thighs.

Dan collapsed on top of me, almost crushing the air out of me. I drew breath when he did. His stomach slid across my slowly drying cum. His dick gradually slipped out of me. My legs slid down and he rolled off me.

“Shit, Mark, but you’re one hot fuck. I think I want you more each time. Close up and kiss me properly.”

We munched on each other’s mouths, our tongues slipping in and out and exchanging saliva. Our bodies cooled down in the air-conditioning as we rolled in one another’s muscular arms. Outside the shadows lengthened as the sun began to slip behind the San Jacinto Mountains.

“Do you want to go out for dinner tonight, Sir?”

“So you’re getting hungry too? No, let’s just order a pizza in—and then I can think of some new kinky way for you to serve me. It’s our last night to ourselves. You told me we’d need to wrap up the rest of our immediate business tomorrow, then we have to get back to the family in Los Angeles.”

Funny to hear him talk about my family as his own now. Little more than eight months ago, we’d just become a professional detective team and he’d been the lone wolf, a newcomer to the LAPD Valley homicide squad, graduating from motor officer, and whose birth family was back in Philadelphia. Now, I suspected that he thought himself more at home in the house I owned in Reseda—the one which had just gone on the market for the move out here to the desert.

My family had made him feel wanted and loved—from my precious ten-year-old daughter, Mary, whose kidnapping had precipitated the final and violent encounter with Erich Sommerfeld, the silent leader of Group7, to my mother-in-law

Edith, who had run the house in addition to her full-time position as assistant principal of a nearby middle school. She had come to look after us when Blythe, my wife of six wonderful years, had died in childbirth together with our stillborn son. Edith had helped me deal with our grieving and gradually forced me back into life outside my LAPD duties. More importantly, apparently she had calmly accepted my move into the gay leather world and had welcomed Dan as my male partner when she saw how happy he made me, and how he brought the spark of joy, as well as pain, into our rough-house play together.

Actually it had been Edith's suggestion initially that had led us to consider leaving Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley and to think about Palm Springs and private investigation as a new way of life. With the help of my friend—I should probably also say 'temporary Master last winter'—Manning Thompson, the Los Angeles criminal lawyer, we were in the process of getting our small business set up and a new home established.

As we sat in the small breakfast nook and munched on pizza and salad, we compared notes on our day's activities and checked off the items on our wish list for opening our own operation in Palm Springs.

Dan was not too happy with the slow progress. "It just seems to be taking so long to free ourselves from our responsibilities in Los Angeles."

"Well, there were so many tasks we had to finish—like getting all the Group7 cases ready for the court proceedings."

"Yes, this time I think we've nailed them all, even that bastard Erich von Sommerfeld."

"Let's hope so, but he certainly is a slippery eel and managed to get bail again. Anyway, he's not really our concern anymore, since we've officially retired from the LAPD last month.

"Now how about the house Dick took you to see this afternoon?"

"I think it has real possibilities. There's a detached guesthouse for us alongside the main building. It's an older property, recently

rehabbed, in what's called South Palm Springs. Actually it was Manning who suggested it and I asked Dick to look into it, but it isn't yet on the market."

Good old Manning Thompson, our friendly, almost too friendly, attorney in Los Angeles, who seemed to have his fingers in so many pies and who always wanted to "help", partly to keep tabs on me.

"You want me to come and look at the house with you then? We could do it tomorrow before driving back to LA."

"Yeah, I'll call Dick now while you're cleaning up and getting yourself back into "service" mode for the rest of the evening."

I grinned, leaning over to kiss him heartily. Dan slapped my naked butt hard as I gathered up the plates and started to load the dishwasher. Actually, this combination of developing a small 'private eye' business and staying 'in-scene' during our play evenings was getting me horny.

Ten minutes later, I was freshly lubed and plugged, still naked, kneeling by the bed, awaiting orders.

Dan had changed into leather chaps, stuffed into his Wescos, with a black leather harness. His genitals swung freely between his muscled legs and his matching titanium cock-ring and the heavy Prince Albert caught the fading evening light in the bedroom. The air-conditioning fed cooler air into a rapidly heating atmosphere.

"Up against the wall, boy. I'm glad Manning told us about the carefully positioned hooks. Shit, they seem to be designed to look almost like artwork on the wall. Now face me while I secure your hands and gag you."

I scrambled up into position. I wasn't fond of the leather penis gag because I like to kiss and be kissed. I felt it and the restraints reduced me to an inanimate object. But I submitted, as ordered, taking the leather into my mouth as Dan buckled it tight behind my head. I stood up straight and proud, stretching out my arms. A set of shackles was attached to each wrist, and then to the hooks in the wall, forcing me onto my toes.

I began to sweat in anticipation. Dan always looked so hot in

a Master's outfit. My body was still hungry for his fat cock, which had begun to harden and rise again in front of me, and my own penis was responding to him.

He chuckled as he pulled my balls down firmly, giving them a slight twist. "No steel stretcher this evening, but I'm going to use a parachute and weight on your nuts. I want them lower and stronger."

"Sir, yes, Sir," I gurgled behind the gag. He leaned in, kissing my hard-gagged mouth, licking my face as I began to moan.

"Good boy, now I'm going to snap the parachute round those great round balls of yours and add a three pound weight, which you will keep swinging, if you don't want to feel the flogger right away."

He added a leather belt to pinion my waist to the wall. Now I was hung tight for his pleasure, trying harder to keep the weight moving between my legs.

Dan was humming to himself as he started lightly flogging my hairy pecs and nipples. I drew my breath sharply. Sweat was now running liberally down my back against the wall, and I twisted in the light, but firm bondage.

"Stand straight, boy, like I've taught you and fucking take it like the man you are."

I did my best to obey as he moved down across my abs and finally began to tickle my straining cock and inner thighs with his flogger. The weight seemed to swing of its own accord.

"That's got you nicely warmed up. Now let's get you turned around, so I can work your ass before I take you."

The waist belt was removed, the shackles unhooked, and I was turned round. We were both panting and Dan too was sweating in the air-conditioning. He took my head in his hands and smooched me, biting the top of the gag and nipping my lip. I shuddered in his grasp. He laughed in delight and slapped me into the reverse position. Now my dick was flattened against the wall, pre-cum oozing from my piss slit. My arms went back up on the hooks and I was stretched, shaking in anticipation.

“Get that fucking butt out, so I can flog it properly,” he snarled, getting into the mood. “I want to see that plug you got up your ass—now.”

I did as ordered; I felt his hands twist the dildo further in. By now, I was groaning loudly into my gag, so he tightened it, forcing the “mock penis” back towards my throat. I gurgled. He swung the flogger with his usual accuracy and my ass cheeks started to redden and glow. He worked them until he was satisfied and then ran cool sweaty hands over my hot sweaty skin. My moans intensified and the perspiration dripped down onto the rubber mat on the floor.

“Right, boy, fuck time.” Dan pulled the plug swiftly out of my hole and rammed three lubricated fingers into the space. He moved them around, stretching me. He began to groan too as he greased up his pole in preparation for penetration. His fingers had loosened me up again, so he slid his weapon up and down my ass cheeks a couple of times, checking its hardness. I quivered and thrust my burning ass out and back.

He lined himself up and was in me immediately as I took a deep breath to ease his entrance. I willed myself to open up and receive him. I wriggled to accommodate that thick prick, and he took hold of my arms and pulled himself into me.

We were matched. Now began ‘the rapture’, as I called it. Dan, my Master, explored my body, making use of it to pleasure himself and giving me pleasure at the same time. He moved slowly at first, letting me feel the PA ahead of his shaft. Deliberately he had kept my passage just wide enough for both of us to feel him inside me, surging ahead. So I worked my muscles in time with his pole, keeping him in me, helping him to surge up again.

He bit the back of my neck lightly. His hands slid down to pull on my tits. My demanding cock was beating against the wall, seeking release. He moved the fingers of one hand down to play with it, while the other still worked my nipple. I was sliding into my subspace, feeling possessed and possessive, as we panted and rolled our sweating torsos together.

Dan was breathing deeply, grunting with delight as he

thumped in my hole, swearing mightily and crushing his chest into my back. He was working hard for a good fuck, and I was giving him back every ounce of myself to receive my Master's fucking.

His groans redoubled as he thrust harder, banging me against the wall, pulling on my penis, seeking to go ever deeper inside me. Then I felt him beginning to pant like a steam engine, felt him raise himself to his full height, felt that pole at full stretch, and then felt the gift of his cum sluicing out of him and into me. I yelled into the gag, and my own penis started spurting my cream into his waiting hand. We stood, our legs shaking from the effort, glued to one another. Gradually our bodies shifted back to earth, and his dick descended. I sighed with pleasure and regret.

Five minutes later, we were washing one another in the large shower. Yes, I towed him dry first, but then he towed me and slathered some ointment on to the reddest part of my butt. We were transitioning back to normal life. The toys were cleaned and then put into their traveling bag.

We lay on the big bed, warmed by each other and comfortably relieved of the stresses of the day, and he burrowed into my furry chest, reaching out to exchange further intense kisses. It had taken us eight months to reach this stage in our sex-lives, but we were both well satisfied with what we had gained together.

"Tomorrow we'll get back to Reseda and finish getting that house ready for sale. We'll be citizens of Palm Springs, I hope, in less than a month," I muttered sleepily.

CHAPTER TWO

Dan and I allowed ourselves the luxury of sleeping in until seven thirty the following morning. The sun was already high in the blue Palm Springs sky and the temperature was pushing up towards eighty-five degrees as we drank our coffee and tidied up Manning Thompson's guest quarters.

We still made our nine o'clock rendezvous with realtor Dick Winslow to look at this possible house off South Palm Canyon Drive. Indeed, it had everything we might need—a separate *casita* or guesthouse for the two of us and a two-bedroom main house in Spanish colonial style in the front. According to Dick the building dated from the 1970s, but the kitchen and bathrooms had recently been attractively rehabbed. It even had a pool!

We told Dick we were very interested, but needed to think about the price, even though it was a bank foreclosure. Manning had found the house for us through his network of friends in strategic places, and recommended the realtor too. We asked for forty-eight hours to make a decision, thanking Dick and telling him it was definitely the most suitable house he'd shown us.

As Dan drove us back to Reseda, I drew up a sit-rep on the arrangements for this new life, professional as well as personal.

“On the business side, we've got the company formed and incorporated as 'Farrell and Fortunato Inc.' with the Secretary of State's office.”

“I like the name, boss, it suits us. And you've passed the Qualified Manager exam, praise the Lord.”

“Yes, it was worth all those hours of study, and the recommendations from Captain Anderson in the LAPD brass certainly helped for both of us. Are you sure you don't want to apply for the Manager certificate too, Dan?”

“No, I'm not the management type—at least not yet. I figure that's for you guys over thirty.”

“Thanks a lot, wise-ass. Still, you’ve been pulling your weight on the house hunting front. How many have you actually checked out? Must be at least a dozen?”

“Today is number eleven—and for my money, it’s a keeper. It gives you and me privacy in a separate building just for us with a living room, bedroom, and bathroom behind the main house.”

“And that pool too—fuck, I hope we can afford it, because, as you said, it’s perfect for both the ladies and ourselves. Great neighborhood and good schools for Mary. I imagine we should check it out.”

“We could ask Manning to help. Maybe he knows someone in the bank that owns it.”

“Dan, someday we, or rather I, will have to pay a stiff price for all Manning’s help.”

“Think he’d settle for one night in that dungeon space I rented before with both him and me working you over? Yeah, or maybe we can create our own play-space in our new home.”

“Hold it, mister, we haven’t got it yet. We haven’t even put a bid in for it. I wish Edith could look it over before we decide. There may be things about the place two thugs like us wouldn’t think to check, but a woman with Edith’s experience would notice right away.”

“When we get home, you could ask whether she has time to come and take a look—that should help.”

“That’s true. Then there’s also the problem of finding a buyer for the Reseda house.”

“Mark, I told you, Jack, that’s the Reseda realtor, has already had a nibble. Some junior lawyer or paralegal or something needs a place right away.”

“Why is it I sense the sticky fingers of Manning again? We’ll see whether Edith has heard anything further. Then what about office space for F & F Inc. in Palm Springs? Have you had time to follow up any leads there, Dan?”

“I’ve only had time to look at three of them. One impressed

me—it's near downtown in a building owned by a law firm, which has an empty separate, smaller suite and a couple of decent sized offices with a possible reception space.”

“How about price?”

“I think they might cut a deal. They've been paying for the dead space for over a year—expecting to expand but that hasn't happened yet. It didn't hurt when I threw Manning's name around.”

“Fuck, that man again. I'd swear he has more fingers in more pies of any guy I know.”

“At least we're keeping him and his fingers out of your asshole, Mark.”

“Yeah, for now. Thanks a lot.”

I had to chuckle as I remembered the incredible sex weekend with that lawyer in New York the previous winter. As a LAPD Lieutenant, who was conveniently gay, I had the task of protecting him from death threats that crept ever closer in Los Angeles, and that had stampeded him into fleeing to New York with me in tow for a very dirty weekend. It's been great, but there was a price to pay involving the devils in Group 7. Manning probably still wanted a repeat engagement with me. I really didn't want him, but he was very persuasive, very persistent, plus very sexy, and I'd given way before. How much was such a friendship worth?

Actually, Manning proved to be a most valuable friend over the next month. When we got home to Reseda around lunchtime, Edith, my mother-in-law, was full of her own news. First, there was a probable buyer for the Reseda house. Edith with the aid of two of our stronger male friends and my daughter Mary had spent the weekend cleaning and then ‘staging’ the house. Surplus furniture and possessions, on the advice of Jack Zackowsky, the realtor, had been carried over to the small apartment Dan had kept and to which Edith had a spare key, as my partner sheepishly admitted. “We didn't want to bother you, Mark, you had other things to take care of.”

The buyer was a young lawyer, with wife and baby, who was

joining a firm nearby in Encino and whose boss had been ‘tipped off’ about my house by Manning. The family had come over that morning to view the home, liked it, and the price, and wanted to make a firm bid that day, as they needed a place as soon as possible. Manning’s sticky fingers again!

He’d also called Edith herself to tell her about the house Dan and I had looked at that morning. He wanted her to drive out to Palm Springs as soon as possible to check out our choice, and he, Manning, would have the realtor negotiate ‘a favorable deal’ if we all liked it. So much for the efforts of us two males!

While she was in Palm Springs, Edith announced that she was going to talk to the local school district about a possible late opening for a substitute Vice Principal—the woman she’d be replacing needed maternity leave. An appointment had been arranged for the following afternoon, after she looked over the house and given her opinion. She’d stay the night in Manning’s guest suite, which we’d just vacated, and she’d like to take my daughter Mary with her on the trip.

I sat down rather suddenly in one of the few comfortable chairs left in the living room, surrounded by this crowd of laughing family members and wondered what I had done to deserve all this.

After that things moved fast. Edith and Mary approved the South Palm Canyon house and we put in a bid with a thirty day escrow at a price Manning ‘persuaded the bank’s Senior VP to accept on a property that had been stalled for months’.

The Reseda home had a thirty day escrow too, so we had to pack rapidly. Perhaps that’s the best way to leave the home in which I made so many life changes, and had been both very happy and totally desolate. Most of the furniture would fit into the new home, so some memories would still be with me. Dan’s small apartment we’d decided to keep for the time being, as an Los Angeles base for short visits.

Edith accepted the temporary assignment with the Palm Springs middle school, requesting only that she could have two half days off a week when necessary for her own business. She

was determined she was going to “manage” the office of F & F Inc., Private Investigators in the suite Dan had found on Tahquitz in downtown. “I want to be part of your new life, Mark, and to help pay all the bills that are mounting up.”

We were to move into the new offices on October second. Dan got to work designing a simple logo, ordering stationery, rental furniture, and equipment in his spare time. Me; I paid the bills, and hoped we could stretch our financial resources far enough to cover it all, with Edith’s generous offer.

Dan and I spent most of the month of September under the guidance of Bruce Taylor and his colleagues at Desert Investigations, Inc., as I’d arranged. We both gave our best, finding the ‘internship’ fascinating and frustrating. Much of it was similar to our previous police work, some of it was very different—we were ‘civilians’, no longer ‘law enforcement officers’.

We had to learn patience. “Here you don’t have the resources of a large metropolitan police force at your fingertips,” Bruce counseled us. “You need to make greater use of your natural wits and skills.” We learned to find resources for ourselves—birth and death records, phone and internet records, census reports, and taxpayer reports—and, of course, the Internet was a godsend.

“I don’t know how PIs managed before computers were in general use,” Dan moaned one day to Bryan Perkin, the senior member of Bruce’s team, who had twenty-five years of law enforcement and fifteen years as a private eye behind him.

“We managed well enough. It was a help that criminals didn’t have access to the technology either. We would carefully develop leads and follow-up on our background work. So much of our efforts depend on good research, taken step by step.”

Certain subjects we decided there and then that F & F Inc. would not handle in our early stages. “I don’t think I will ever know enough about child custody law, although I keep reading up on it,” Dan submitted. “I’m having problems with intellectual property cases,” I told him. “We’ll have to be careful about what clients and what problems we accept when we start up.”

We did learn a healthy respect for our investigator colleagues and their painstaking efforts to help distraught citizens and angry business owners. Patience, attention to detail, and using our brains were drummed into us. We were made to understand that keeping ourselves fit and our weapons skills sharp were just as important in the private sector as in law enforcement.

For one important client in a burglary case, we were able to provide good professional advice and Bruce was very grateful, so we felt we justified his faith in taking us on for the month.

Gradually the pieces fell into place. For my birthday that September, Edith and Mary combined to give me a “family plan” at World Gym; Dan was working on a mystery birthday present that he kept out of sight in his old apartment. He and I tried out the gym, were impressed by the range of equipment and enjoyed the ‘eye candy’ that was on view, mature and buffed, whenever we could get an hour away. To our surprise we were amongst the younger members of the gym; the average age was much more “mature”. Bruce recommended we make ourselves add workouts to our regular schedule—and we did.

At the end of September, we gave ourselves a week to make the move. All in all it went very well. There were a few problems—a new refrigerator went to the wrong house; two desks for our office got lost for three days. But we made it, and then we were in ‘like Flynn’ and settling into our new neighborhood.

After sorting out the main house, Dan and I gave ourselves the weekend to get the *casita* in shape and then to kickback for a few hours. Well, actually, we intended something more vigorous than ‘kicking back’ at the end of the work day. It was fortunate that the *casita* had previously been prepared as a musician’s studio. Dick the realtor told us that noises from the pool area could hardly be heard inside our guest-house and vice-versa. Our playroom area-to-be was totally sound proof to the outside world. We had bought the king-sized bed for us in Reseda—and added hooks and restraints to go with it. In the main beam in the ceiling of the living room we’d already installed a strong metal hook with a winch and a retractable chain, which could be put away.

Dan had been very mysterious about his special present and insisted on having the place to himself for an hour to finish it. When I returned, he wanted me to get myself ready for a fuck session.

“Did you attach the enema douche to the shower-head, boy?”

“Sir, yes, Sir, I did that earlier this morning, in the hopes I’d be told to use it later today.”

“And the toys are already back in the bureau?”

“Yes, Sir, they’re in the right drawers for your use.”

“Fine, get in the bathroom, shower, douche, and get back out here when you’re properly cleaned out.”

We were both getting horny and in need of some sex action after days of abstinence because of the moves. It was still warm so Dan cranked up the air-conditioning to cool at least the room temperature, if not ourselves.

In fifteen minutes, I was back, showered, cleaned, lubed, cock-ringed and booted, but otherwise naked. Dan had changed too—Master’s harness, black leather chaps stuffed into his Wescoes. His genitals hung clear and loaded, with the PA winking at me from the head of his cock. We were already in the bedroom and he had lengths of sisal rope and a full hood spread out on the bed.

“Over here, boy. Hands in parade rest. Feet apart. I’m going to rope you up good first. Yes, I know the sisal rubs against your skin and gets tangled in your fur, but that’s the whole idea. Suck your chest in, as I want to get the rope good and tight around your pecs. Need to make sure your tits stay free for clamping later. Shit, I’ve used up the first twenty-five feet of rope.

“Bend over and try to touch your toes—not so easy is it, with the knots around your torso? Never mind, I can still reach your anus and screw your latest black rubber plug in place. Here we go. I hope you’re lubed up real well, as this plug is brand-new and dry. Stand still, shit-head, until I get it firmly in place.”

I groaned as it slowly sank home, rubber grinding against

my velvet passage. Finally Dan had it in me up to the base. I shuddered and worked my ass muscles to give it room to touch my prostate.

“Now here comes a ball stretcher to get them hanging lower for me today. This metal version seems to work well in the ads, so let’s see how it fits you. Let me get your eggs down to the bottom of your sac—you need to shave again down there, by the way—now slide the metal into place and extend the plunger.” It felt as though my balls were going to be torn apart, but that didn’t happen, and I was soon breathing deeply to absorb the strain and the pain.

“The hood comes next, complete with gag today. Bend your head, boy, that’s right. Now let’s get it into the position—blindfold already in place. Yes, I can feel your nose now. I’ll pull it under your chin for you. Now open up and take the gag. Come on, you can open wider than that. Better—now I can press the studs in place round the mouthpiece. Finally lace you tightly in the back and add a posture collar—the three inch size will keep you properly braced. There, that’s all buckled securely. Stand up against the bed, mother fucker.”

He shoved me hard on my back onto the bed. I growled as the plug banged against my prostate and then settled inside me. Dan spread my arms and cuffed them to the hooks along each side of the bed frame. “Lie there until I’m ready for you. Shit, but you look hot and handsome trussed up like that.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I gurgled into the gag, and then I was alone, and unable to do much except wriggle around a little on the bed, feeling my plug sliding inside me, waiting for the feeling of ‘the rapture’.

Sometime later Dan was back for me, and unfastening the leather cuffs from the bed, but leaving them around my wrists. “Up, boy, and back at parade rest.”

I struggled slowly off the bed, feeling my way in the darkness of the hood. He helped me find my footing, swung me round, and then held me in his arms so that I felt his erect penis banging on the base of the plug deep inside me. His fingers mauled my

nipples until he had them erect and sore, and I was writhing in his grip. I guessed what was coming and started moaning in anticipation of the clamps. But all too soon the unshielded metal was piercing my tit flesh; he pulled the connecting chain to make sure they were seated properly.

At last my Master then released my balls from the stretcher, and, as I was trying to feel some relief, he led me forward by my cock shaft into the living room of the *casita*. Hooded and collared, I could only stare blindly ahead until my knees hit a wooden surface.

“Mount up, my boy. Mount up, Mark, onto your birthday present. It’s your own personal fucking bench, made to measure for you.”

So this was Dan’s mysterious present, which I couldn’t even see now. I stretched out my hand to thank him and tried to grunt through the gag. I could hear him chuckling quietly as I tried to climb up onto the unknown piece of fucking dungeon furniture. In the end, he took pity on me and pulled me roughly into position.

As usual, I was sweating and my endorphins flying as he tied me down tightly to the bench. There seemed to be a leather cover for my chest and the clamps were now crushed beneath me. My dick was pulled down and out behind me. My knees were cinched down by leather restraints, as were my hands up by my head, which was now forced to look out because of the posture collar.

“Now I’m going to use your other present to paddle this well-rounded butt staring me in the face, with a fine black plug deep in the middle.”

Of course I couldn’t see what this new implement of torment might be. But it certainly smarted and stung as my Master flogged my ass cheeks. It was hard and heavy and my butt twitched in pain and pleasure from his repeated blows.

“Your ass looks properly red and striped, boy, and ready to be skewered by your master’s pole-ax. It’ll be raw meat poking inside you today, lubed and polished, but not sheathed, as soon as

I can get this fucking plug out of here. Since it's all part of your birthday present, I'm going to prolong our joint pleasure and fuck you slowly and deeply. Stand ready for boarding."

Dan sank his heavy cock head and PA into my hole and I began to squirm with lust and excitement. By this stage, I wanted him in and I wanted him deep inside me. But my Master had other ideas, moving slowly at first, letting his PA thread the way to my inner space, prolonging the terrific agony and enjoyment as I tried to encourage him with my butt muscles.

Slowly, inch by inch, his tool turned inside me and his hands explored my body. Desperate for more cock, I pulled on my restraints, but the bench held me firmly. I panted; I choked on the gag as I tried to tell him my need, my need to be fucked fully and hard.

My Master started to chuckle, and to pinch my flesh, to yank on the tit chain beneath me, to reach behind to squeeze my iron-hard prick. Slowly he began to pick up speed, to spear in and then almost out of me, to work my ass muscles in response to his pole-driving.

He was pulling me up to the heights of 'the rapture'. He was making a feast of this fuck. He was giving his boy the most intense birthday present he'd ever received. Dan was driving the engine, his penis pulsating ever deeper inside me, but he wouldn't allow either of us over the edge to cum. He'd edge me closer, and then would pull back. I bucked on the bench to force him forward, but he still punched into me without reaching his climax.

It was like heaven and hell. I was sweating and moaning inside my leather hood; I was twisting my torso; I was pulling on the restraints, but the wonderful torment went on. Both our bodies were wetly slithering over one another. He was now bent over my torso, his hands kneading my shoulder muscles and then reaching all the way back to massage my penile muscle.

At last I heard the gasp. I felt his balls bracing against my lower ass cheeks and then that wonderful stream of cum streaking its way inside me, reclaiming his ownership of me. My dick jerked in reply and shot its own rope of cream out behind me onto one

of my Master's legs.

It took some time for each of us to climb down, to stop our hearts hammering in our chests, to let the last twitches of our orgasms leave us, to let my overheated body feel the pain of the restraints and bruises again.

My Master groaned as his prick slid out of me and he stood up slowly again. Then he moved to my head, began unbuckling the collar and unlacing the hood. My eyes blurred and blinked in the growing dusk of the living room and then focused on the still thick cock waiting in front of them.

“Suck it, boy, suck it clean and taste the last of my cum in your mouth as well as on your stomach.”

I struggled to take his shaft and to roll it and the PA around my mouth, using my saliva to make them clean and fresh as he demanded. Then Dan pulled out of me and began to release my tired body from the restraints.

Besides, I wanted to see the present he had given me. I staggered to my feet and looked at the well-crafted bench in front of me. Made of thick wood and upholstered in leather, the frame reflected a rich black gloss surface. The initials M and D were inscribed on the front in silver, and studs held the leather in place.

“Where did you buy this, Dan? Where did you find it? It's different from most fuck benches.”

“I, er, didn't buy it, Mark.” Dan was uncharacteristically quiet.

“You mean you made it yourself? How, when, why?”

“I wanted to give you something unique—to celebrate our year together—something that would signify the depth and focus of our relationship to one another.”

“That it does indeed.” I was running my hands over the smooth black surfaces. “You did all of this yourself?”

“Well, I did have help with the leather work, but the rest, yes, I made it.”

“Incredible! I think it's the best present I've ever received. Thank you very much. How long did it take you?”

“About three months off and on, and I was always afraid you’d find it by accident before it was finished.”

“I’m so glad I didn’t, Dan, and that was the best fuck you’ve given me to christen it. Thank you, my Master.”

I took him in my arms and hugged him as tightly as I knew how.

“Whoa, Mark, I do need to breathe—and to show you how to take the fucking thing apart, so that we can store it somewhere around here unobtrusively.”

That was what we did. Then we joined the ladies for supper and started to plan our future together in Palm Springs.

CHAPTER THREE

The first client for Farrell and Fortunato came through our friend Manning Thompson. That man really seemed to have contacts and friends everywhere. It was early October when he called to invite Dan and myself over for cocktails the following weekend in his Palm Springs house.

“It’ll just be a small gathering—nothing elaborate—about twenty of my Palm Springs acquaintances getting together to celebrate the beginning of another season in the desert.”

“That’s kind of you, Manning, and we’d enjoy seeing you again, but we’re thinking of getting away to Idyllwild for some hiking.”

“That would be a pity, Mark, since one of my guests is in need of discreet professional help from someone like you. I promised to try to bring you both together socially, to see if there’s a fit for a complicated piece of detective work.”

“Really? A live client? And what kind of assistance is he looking for that he doesn’t want to call up for an appointment like any normal guy?”

“It’s a case of a missing close relative, I believe, and my friend values his privacy. So why don’t you just put on your best cocktail party duds and come over next Saturday about six. You can meet, and at least size one another up.”

“Are you inviting Dan as well—or is this so you can feel me up before the end of the party?”

He laughed. “Such an idea would never have occurred to me, Mark. But you make it sound so promising. No, the idea is for both you and my friend Chris Bates to meet and decide whether you could work together on such a sensitive case. And, of course, Dan is always welcome too.”

“Now you’re beginning to intrigue me, Manning. All right, we’ll come over briefly on Saturday to meet your mysterious Mr.

Bates, and you might get a chance to grope me briefly at the end.” I chuckled as I disconnected.

Dan and I talked it over. We agreed that we needed the contact and the client, and we enjoyed Manning’s little parties, when he wasn’t being too horny or too obvious about his sexual interest in me.

Saturday evening found us both dressed in what we’d learned was smart casual Palm Springs attire—a Tommy Bahama-style designer-label shirt, sharp shorts, and expensive looking sandals. I agreed to get to Manning’s place early so that Mr. Bates and I could have a quiet talk before too many other guests arrived.

We were very familiar with the house in the Movie Colony area, since we’ve stayed there several times while we transitioned from LAPD cops to PS PIs. There were a few cars parked in front but no valet service, so this was definitely a small affair.

Still, we felt like new meat as we entered the large living room, where fresh blooming orchids were scattered around in Chinese bowls as conversation pieces. A quick glance around showed that we were decidedly younger than most of the other men already sipping their cocktails. Manning came towards us, smiling with those infectious twinkling blue eyes.

We were each enveloped in a bear hug and kiss from our friend, who was almost my height and build although over fifteen years my senior. A very successful trial lawyer in Los Angeles, he and I had shared a steamy weekend in New York the previous winter, when I was protecting him from an unknown possible killer. Then Manning claimed to have fallen in love with me, which entitled him to a quick grope of my groin now. My cock and I both jerked in response, not unnoticed by Dan, who frowned and sighed, and also by some of the other guests.

“Let me introduce you to some of my friends. Gil you know, of course.”

Sergeant Gil Richter of the LAPD homicide division was an old acquaintance with whom we had both worked during the Group7 murder cases. He and I were much the same build and

Dan swore we could be clones of one another. I couldn't see it, but Manning had become convinced and happily transferred most of his affections from me to train Gil as his boy. They were now inseparable, much to my relief, and we exchanged further bear hugs.

Gil steered Dan in one direction, while Manning moved me across the room, introducing me to a couple of other men who discreetly checked me out during brief conversations, and then steering me towards a handsome man in his mid-fifties.

"Chris, I'd like you to meet Mark Farrell. He's the very good friend I've told you about. Mark, this is Christopher Bates, whom I've mentioned to you. Perhaps you'd like to go onto the back patio to talk—after I get Mark a drink. Scotch and water as usual?"

Bates and I looked each other over, curious and alert. He was shorter than I, with graying hair in his temples, but a physically strong body with the beginnings of an expanding waistline. Well-dressed in a famous designer shirt, he was smiling, but his eyes were shrewd and a little anxious, I thought.

I smiled pleasantly in return and we examined one another more closely for a moment. I detected a slight twitch in his shorts. I wasn't sure how to begin the conversation with a potential client at a party. Manning returned with my drink and broke the silence.

"Now is your chance to talk before too many other guests arrive. Chris—you will need to give Mark some clues as to what you want. Then he can tell you something about his background if you need it. And, as you know, I'm more than happy to provide any references for both of you."

Bates chuckled. "Yes, Manning, and I'm familiar with your famous references. Mr. Farrell and I'll wander out onto the patio—it'll be cool enough by now."

"Please call me Mark, and I'm sure this may be difficult for you. So let me begin by asking who it is you're looking for?"

Manning had returned to his other guests. We wandered out back and stood looking at the sun setting over the San Jacinto

Mountains. My companion was having trouble starting.

“I’m not used to being in this kind of situation or needing this kind of help, but Manning says you’re very reliable and very discreet. So here goes. I need a professional to look for a young man who says he’s my son.”

“Then this is both a missing person case and a possible identity theft, for want of a better term?”

“Yes, this young man came into my life about three months ago and we became, well, like family, and then suddenly, just over a week ago, he disappeared.”

“Let me get a few facts, and then we can decide what needs to be done. First of all, do you have a son about this man’s age?”

“Yes, I was married right out of college and before grad school, had a son, but I lost contact after I was divorced, although I paid child support for a number of years.”

“How long is it since you last saw the boy?”

“He was about six months old when my wife and I broke up. I haven’t seen Donald since then and that would be twenty years and more ago.”

“So you’d like someone to find out whether this guy is indeed your son and why he suddenly turned up recently?”

“Some of it is easy to explain. He’s a sergeant in the US Marines, recently stationed in Twenty-nine Palms at the base not far from here.”

“That’s a logical starting point, but I’ll need much more background material. Now, why do you think he’s disappeared?”

“That’s more complicated. Do I have your promise that all of this will be kept just between us?”

“Of course, even though we haven’t yet signed a confidentiality agreement. And even if we don’t reach that stage, I won’t discuss this conversation with anyone, even my partner.”

“He’s the young guy you came in with? I take it you’re professional partners, Mark?”

“Yes, and we’re personal partners too—which I expect would have been your next question. Does that help with your dilemma, Mr. Bates?”

“I think you better call me Chris. Yes, I’m gay too—at least I have been for the past twenty-five years. And I think young Donald may be too. I’m going to have to trust you, Mark. I didn’t have a proper background check done on the boy when he first came into my life. He looked enough like me and he knew my background. We spent his free time catching up and getting to know one another over this past summer. For me, it was something exciting, new, and different...”

“Ah, there you are, Chris. I’ve been looking for you.”

Another man had come silently out onto the patio, definitely older looking than Bates, and possessive from the way the newcomer’s hand rested on the other’s arm.

“Mark, this is my partner, Alan Franklin. Alan, this is Mark Farrell.”

“Yes, the young man Manning is recommending for your search. If only you had done this earlier.”

“Alan, thank you, but I have to do this my way. Mark, it’s been good to meet you and talk.”

“Well, here’s my card. If you’d like to follow up...”

“Most definitely. Can we get together next week? I’d be happy to come to your offices. I too have a card, although I’m largely retired.”

“Chris, we need to be leaving if we’re going to make Lou’s dinner in time. So good to have met you, Mr. Farrell.”

“And you, Mr. Franklin. Mr. Bates, Chris, call me at the beginning of next week and we’ll set an appointment. We are a new operation out here, but we’re both very skilled and discreet operatives.”

“Thank you, Mark. I already feel that I can trust you.”

Franklin was steering him away as rapidly as possible. He didn’t seem to like me or was it the subject matter he didn’t like

me getting involved with? I shook my head, walked back into the house, sipping my drink.

The party was in full swing, with some twenty or so men, mainly in their fifties or well preserved sixties and a scattering of straight-looking couples. One of the latter seemed engaged in animated chatter with Dan and Gil. I circulated for a few moments, introducing myself when I could, trying not to intrude into the small cliques of men together, and discreetly handing out my card when possible.

Dan had finished his conversation and was making his way over to me, doing much the same thing. "Mission accomplished, Boss?"

"I think so. I think we might have our first client."

"The woman I was talking to wanted a card. Said she didn't know when she might find a need for a private detective. However, for most of the people here, detectives seem like rare and dangerous beasts."

"Especially young and muscular ones like us. Maybe that's an avenue we should pursue. Anyway, duty done. Let's say thank you to our host and head back home."

We worked our way over to Manning, who shook his blond mane of hair and twinkled at us. "You seem to have made the right impression on Chris Bates, Mark. He was double checking on you and I think you'll be getting a phone call in the next few days to set up a formal meeting."

"Then I must thank you again, Manning. You really are the most helpful of friends. The problem is how to repay your kindnesses."

"My dear Mark, that's easily done. Just get Dan here to loan you out for another weekend."

"My dear Manning, that's why I found Gil for you, to keep your testosterone at a steady level. So you'll have to think of something else instead. My Master insists that he has sole rights to my services and, of course, I obey his demands."

“Oh, fuck, you can’t blame me for trying. Sorry, Dan, for trying to wrestle him away again, but you seem to have him well under control. Well, good night you two—thanks for coming. A couple of younger hunks always raise the temperature around here. See you soon, I hope. The Palm Springs Leather Pride weekend is coming up early next month and I expect to see you both there in your gear.”

There were further embraces and another expert squeeze of my package, and then we were gone.

I spent a restless weekend thinking about the future of our small firm. Even a flogging from Dan, followed by one of his good fucks, failed to settle me down properly. We needed clients and fees coming in if we were to make a success of our new enterprise. There were the regular running expenses of the new house and the new office. Edith had found work as a substitute teacher, although I didn’t want to take advantage of that. Dan and I had gained some good basic experience during our month with Bruce Taylor and his team, but, as our first potential client, Christopher Bates was the kind of man who would expect results. I hoped my own police experience would be enough to help me with his case. At least there didn’t seem to be any violent homicides to deal with—as far as I could tell.

Around ten o’clock on the following Monday morning, Chris, as he insisted on being called, was on the phone, keen to make an appointment as soon as possible. So we settled on nine thirty the following morning. Edith was fortunately free to play receptionist/office manager as she had wanted; Dan would be in his office in case I needed his advice. As I had promised Chris, I’d told my partner very little about the prospective case and he was naturally curious.

Now that I knew Chris Bates was serious about hiring our services, I thought I’d better do some quick research of my own, which included a phone call to Manning back in his office in Los Angeles.

“There’s not too much I can tell you, Mark, which would seem relevant to this case. I’ve handled some of Chris’s business affairs

over the ten years I've known him. He made a lot of money supplying services to dot com companies in the San Francisco Bay area, before retiring about four years ago when his partner had a heart attack. They bought a big house in the area called Old Palm Springs, and he lives a discreet leather lifestyle."

"What about the wife and son?" I queried.

"I know nothing about that period of his life, but I seem to remember him once mentioning he came from Kansas originally, before moving west soon after graduation from college. Hope some of that helped, and see you in a couple of weeks."

My own research didn't add much to the dossier. Indeed he had been born and brought up in Lawrence, Kansas, eldest son of four children. He got a business degree from Baker University, then immediately married Cora Sally Wilmot. In 1975 he moved to California for graduate work at UC Berkeley and started F/B Paper Products Inc. two years later with business partner Alan Franklin. The company became very successful in providing services to dot com companies, originally just in Northern California, then gradually opened offices in other major high-tech areas. Finally, the partners sold out in 2005 and the two men retired to Palm Springs, as Manning had said. Interestingly, I found no mention of a son or any other children or of a divorce from Ms. Wilmot. Clearly these were sensitive areas, which I would need to explore and investigate.

Tuesday morning I was in the office extra early to check everything out. The place looked ship-shape; friendly, tidy, masculine—by my standards, anyway. My commendations and marksmanship certificates were framed on the walls, together with an enlarged print of Uccello's hunting scene, another present from Manning. On my desk were photos of my daughter Mary and my lover Dan—which could lead to some interesting conversations. A fresh notepad lay open for any notes I might want to make, as well as my trusty pocket tape recorder. I was wearing a new short sleeve blue dress shirt, without a tie, and my best dress slacks with my Dehner boots underneath, for good luck. I was pumped. I was primed. I was ready.

At nine twenty-five, Christopher Bates walked through the front door, was greeted by Edith, then settled in with a cup of good coffee. He and I shook hands solemnly. It was time to begin with our first client.

“Good morning, Chris. It’s good to see you again—sooner than I’d expected. Clearly this is a matter that you would like us to get started on as soon as possible.”

“And as discreetly as possible, Mark. I’m happy to work out whatever financial arrangement you need in advance.”

“Thank you. I’ll want you and I to sign a confidentiality agreement this morning as well. I’ve got several questions to start with, following up on our short talk at Manning’s party.”

“Yes, I’m sure you have. Let me start with a few basic facts in addition to the local information on my card. I’m fifty-four years old, have lived here for about four years as semi-retired. I came out gay about twenty years ago, but it was my sexual interest in men which broke up my marriage before that. My former wife got a restraining order to keep me away from my son Donald. That, and the fact that she moved back to the Midwest with him soon after the divorce, was largely responsible for my gradually losing contact with him. I’m also partly to blame as I became wrapped up in making a success of our supply company.”

“You stayed in the Bay area and started your own business?”

“Well, I also met Alan Franklin—my partner—you encountered him briefly the other evening. Alan was largely responsible for our move to Palm Springs a few years ago following his heart attack.”

“Chris, I need to ask if you are sexual as well as business partners with Mr. Franklin.”

“Why, yes, that was what drew us together at first in San Francisco. He became a wonderful submissive and lover.”

Chris seemed to be relaxing in his chair, his hands unclenching.

“I’ll probably need to get more background about him later to understand how the pieces fit together in your relationships.

But I'd like to jump ahead to when your son Donald first made contact with you this year."

"Let's see, it was early summer—June, I seem to remember—when I got the letter from him. It was a polite, rather formal letter for a twenty-three-year-old marine sergeant to write."

"Do you still have the letter?"

"Yes, I think so, somewhere in my papers at home."

"I'd like to see it soon, as it may give us some clues about the man and his whereabouts. What did he write to you?"

"He asked whether I would be willing to meet him. He gave me enough background about his mother and himself to be convincing. He explained that this was the first time he'd been in Southern California long enough to make contact."

"And you obviously agreed to a meeting?"

"Yes, I was naturally rather curious," Chris paused, "and I thought I might be able to begin to make up somehow for the empty years."

"How did he know where to find you after all this time?"

"His mother and I had traded the occasional Christmas card, and I must've told her of our move to Palm Springs or she noticed the change of address. So I wrote back to him, gave him my phone number, and invited him to meet me at Koffi in Palm Springs for coffee."

"Not at your home—probably a wise first move."

"Well, Alan and I had argued about that. He felt I should ignore the whole thing. I obviously didn't want to do that, so we settled on a meeting on neutral ground on a weekend when Donald was off duty."

"And he accepted the invitation?"

"Yes, very promptly. Koffi was a good safe public place. I don't know whether you've already been there. I can recommend the wonderful back lawn with plenty of tables and chairs for a quiet conversation on a Saturday morning."

“What were your first impressions?”

“Very positive. I’d already sent a photo of myself and I saw this tall good-looking guy, muscular, very smart in a US Marines T-shirt, fatigue pants, and combat boots coming towards me, as I sat drinking my iced latte. And he looked quite a lot like me—at least I thought so.

“The conversation was a bit stilted at first. He told me something of his work in the Marine Corps and said that he would be getting out shortly. He asked if I had remarried again after his mother divorced me and I explained briefly about my relationship with Alan. He volunteered that he was still single, that there had been a few “relationships in the past.” But he’d been serving abroad for most of the previous three years and there hadn’t been opportunity or time during his short furloughs back in the States.

“Then somehow I steered the conversation onto baseball. His face lit up and his whole body became energized. Yes, his favorite team was the St. Louis Cardinals, and he ‘played a bit himself as a pitcher.’ We laughed and joked about it and I was sufficiently relaxed and pleased that I invited him back to our house.”

“That day?”

“Yes, I asked about his plans for the weekend,” Chris said. “He didn’t seem to have anything set up, other than getting off the base and mingling with civilians for a few hours.

“So I took a chance, suggesting he came back with me for a casual lunch and a quiet swim. He was hesitant at first, maybe didn’t want to upset any existing plans we might have made. But I reassured him and called my partner to give him a ‘heads-up’.

“Alan was not quite as welcoming as I’d hoped, but finally agreed it would be good for him to meet this possible son as well.

“Donald had hitched a ride to Palm Springs. So I drove over to our house on West Stevens Road. Alan was there waiting, scrupulously polite, if slightly suspicious of this young guy from nowhere.

“The boy was happy with everything, especially the pool. At

my invitation, he stripped-down, but hesitated with his y-front briefs. I told him we normally swam naked as the pool was secluded and we had no nosy neighbors to see over the hedges. Still, he hesitated. I looked at the lean, tanned young body with washboard abs and well-developed pecs—stripped-down all the way myself and dove into the warm water. A splash behind me was Donald following suit, but still wearing his briefs. He swam lengths, he frolicked like a young otter, and he even dared to splash me a couple of times.

“In short, we were having a wonderfully relaxed time when Alan called us in for lunch. He also thoughtfully provided Donald with a pair of shorts, since they seem to be about the same waist size and the y-front briefs could be left in the sun to dry. Lunch was a casual affair that day. We made our own sandwiches. Donald asked questions about how Alan and I met and about our professional life. Alan asked Donald questions about his early life. His mother had remarried when he was about eight—which I knew—and had another child, a daughter some fifteen years ago—which I hadn’t known. The stepfather had tolerated Donald while setting high standards for him in school and in their active church life. But at the age of eighteen, he wanted to get away, to see something of the world and so he joined the Marines.

“We had another swim after lunch and then Donald announced he must be going. I invited him to stay over, but he clearly felt that he didn’t want to abuse our hospitality. He climbed back into his clothes, briefs now successfully air dried, saluted, and shook both our hands.

“Would you like to come again, Donald?” I asked.

“A cautious smile spread across his face. ‘Yes, sir, but I wouldn’t want to be a nuisance.’

“Of course you’re not. You’d be welcome to come by any weekend. It might help to shake us up out of our ‘retirement doldrums’.

“And that became our new routine. Donald would call me every couple of weeks to check that he was still welcome before

coming down from Twenty-nine Palms, and he'd spend the weekend with us, or usually with just me. Some of our activities like hiking in the canyons were too strenuous for Alan with his weakened heart. I found the boy liberating and fun. I began to feel young again, with a handsome boy beside me in the gym or at parties."

"How long did this last?"

"About three months, I suppose, all across the summer. He'd appear, usually on a Friday evening or Saturday morning and stay until Sunday evening, when I'd drive him back to the base. Gradually the arrangement changed so that we got together every weekend he was off duty. Since it was the height of summer we spent a couple of weekends at the beach in Newport or even Malibu."

"So what drove him away, if that's what happened?"

Chris sighed, looked down at his hands for a long moment and finally looked straight at me. "I became attracted to him—sexually. I suppose it was inevitable. I never called him "son", except just once; he always called me "sir". I tried to maintain a suitable distance between us, but it became harder and harder. Here was this handsome hunk around all the time, stirring my libido, making me feel younger and more vital. He had a lively mind, but despite his military travels seemed innocent of the outside world. Yet there was sensuality about him, of which I think he was almost certainly aware. Occasionally we would bump into one another, and I'd swear there was an electric charge between us. I'd pat his shoulder or even swat his butt in the swimming pool and he'd laugh."

"And that was all?" The disbelief in my voice must have been obvious.

Chris looked defensive. "Yes, that is until a couple of weeks ago, when I finally decided to make a move on him. Yes, I know this might be considered a kind of incest—father and son—but I thought I no longer cared. I even no longer seemed to care about Alan. I wanted Donald. I wanted his virginal ass, and I wanted to make roughhouse love to him. I didn't know if he was gay, or if

he was even interested. I booked us into a boutique hotel in West Hollywood, full of ideas about my own interests in leather bars, leather gear, and male leather sex. It all went wrong, badly wrong. He left in the middle of the night suddenly and without warning, before I could lay my 'fatherly' hands on his torso. I haven't heard from him since."

"And now you want me to find him?"

"Yes, desperately. To apologize, to see whether he might be interested in a gentler approach to man sex, to hold him tightly in my arms, asking the questions I hadn't dared to utter aloud. I've been dreaming about his body, fantasizing about taking him hard, thinking of all the things I'd like to do with him in and out of bed, all these things a middle-aged man shouldn't be thinking about in connection with his son."

He ran down and just sat there for a moment, his head bowed, his hand shaking. "I hope I haven't shocked you, Mark. But, as you can see, I need your help, now."

"Thank you, Chris, but do you have any idea where he could have gone?"

"No, he seems to have just vanished. He won't answer my calls to his cell phone or even a letter. I tried asking the Marine Corps, but he enlisted correctly under his step-father's name, I think, so I'm not the next of kin. I'm not even sure he's still at the base in Twenty-nine Palms."

"Well, you can bring me the information that you do have, including his mother's address and phone number. I'll get to work to find him for you. Whether he'll want to resume the acquaintance or relationship, I can't say.

"And while I'm at it, you still want me to investigate his background, to check whether he is your natural son? Think of all the problems it will create, if indeed he is your child grown up!"

"Yes and yes. I am a gay man in his fifties lusting after a twenty-three-year-old's body, a father who's fallen in love with his own son. I should be ashamed. I should back up, apologize

to Alan and go back to my staid old Palm Springs life, but I don't think I can and I know I don't want to."

"I think that's probably enough discussion for a first meeting," I said. "Gather together what you have on Donald and your family, including any photographs. Come back soon and we'll talk about you and him and Alan. I need to think about what you've told me and to understand more clearly about your partner's involvement."

"Thanks, Mark. It's been very helpful just to unload all of this to a sympathetic ear. I've had nobody that I can talk to about this apart from Alan, and I don't want to continue to dump on him."

"Hey, I'm not into passing judgment. I'm into trying to resolve the problem, whatever that takes. I'll see you back here in a day or so, Chris."

Our first case was proving to be more intriguing and complicated than I'd expected. Being a gay man myself, I could only sympathize with the three guys Chris, Alan, and Donald, and the situation in which they'd found themselves. I wondered where this was going to land me and maybe Dan too. But my feelings were decidedly mixed about helping a father to attempt to consummate a relationship with his son. Incest is illegal, if that was really what Chris had in mind. How did young Donald feel about any of this mess?

CHAPTER FOUR

Chris Bates was back in my office sooner than I'd expected—complete with the information I'd asked for—and a need to talk some more.

“I want to be sure I didn't leave you with some false ideas last time, Mark, especially about Donald.

“My feelings for him grew gradually over three months. During that time, I never really put a finger on him, never kissed him but once and never groped him until that final night in the West Hollywood hotel.

“I tried to treat him as I thought any man would treat a grown son—not that I had any experience along those lines. He made me laugh, made me feel younger, and jolted me out of my middle-aged blues. He seemed genuinely interested in me and my life, besides having an inquiring brain, a winning smile, and a hot body—and the combination was my undoing.

“I even introduced him to the leather community and lifestyle. That was something I'd been into with Alan for many years, but we'd become much less active when we retired to Palm Springs. It was still my favorite fetish and I was still a member of BLUF, the leather and uniform organization, with its monthly events at the old Gauntlet bar in Los Angeles. One weekend we drove over there. I took my gear, having checked I could still get into my leather chaps and harness. I persuaded Alan to lend Donald part of his old uniform.

“We had a great evening—a quick visit to the 665 store to get Donald a suitable harness, a leisurely dinner in 'boys town' in West Hollywood, and then over to Sunset in the Vermont area. Donald was a great success at the bar in tight black leather shorts, his own combat boots, and the new harness. He had this strange, half-amused expression on his face as I paraded him around. I thought we made a handsome couple—a leather Daddy and his boy. Certainly he didn't seem to object to the occasional pats

and pinches he received from the other customers and I thought there would be further such evenings in the fall. It was not to be.”

“But, Chris, you said before that he gave you no indication that he was gay or remotely interested in you sexually. What has changed your mind?”

“I’ve been thinking some more about that and maybe I’m now reading more interest from him than there was. But we’d wrasse sometimes when we were swimming in the pool. By this time he swam naked too. Now he was Marine-strong, and I’m in good shape for my age—keep working out at World Gym. When we grappled, sometimes he’d get a boner, and he had a long dick, and sometimes I would and I’m at least the same size. We’d laugh about our erections and bat them down. But I think we both enjoyed them.”

“All that really shows is that you’re both horny men. Now, tell me about the kiss?”

“That was just over a month ago, during our weekend stay at the Marriott at Fashion Island in Newport Beach. Alan had not been feeling well and canceled out at the last moment. We went out on Saturday evening and both drank a fair amount with dinner. When we got back to the hotel, we had a couple more scotch and waters in the bar before going back to the room.

“It was a warm evening, like Septembers can be in Southern California, and we lay on our beds, chatting quietly with just our shorts on. I remember I was trying to tell him about the need we all have for relationships. He answered me with a sad tale about his best Marine buddy being killed near him in Afghanistan not long before, how he missed him, and how lonely it could be in the Corps, surrounded by dozens of other homesick men beating their meat off at night.

“I told him, ‘I’m sorry for your loss, son. Now let me know how I can help you.’

“So, meaning to comfort him, I found myself crossing to his bed—yes, we had two queen sized beds—grabbing his arms, pulling him upright, and kissing him hard.”

“And what did Donald do?”

“He gave a gentle sigh, opened his mouth, kissed me back, tongue and all. We held onto one another for several minutes, lip-locked, and I felt our cocks rising to acknowledge some kind of feeling between us.

“Then I stumbled back to my bed, uncertain about what I thought I was doing. This was my son. The next morning I was embarrassed, claimed I’d had too much to drink and was sorry if I’d offended him.

“I’ll never forget what he said. ‘Thank you, sir, but there’s no need to apologize.’ We got dressed, had breakfast, and enjoyed a stroll on the beach before heading to Twenty-nine Palms. Neither of us spoke of the incident again. But I think it started burning a hole in my brain, which led to the unfortunate hotel incident in West Hollywood a couple of weeks ago.”

“And you still don’t know why he ran away or where he ran to?”

“I’ve wracked my brain, Mark. I’ve replayed the scene in my mind many times. Once again we’d had dinner and a few drinks. We were getting ready for bed, both skinned down to our shorts. I moved in on him, close to him, drawn by his fresh scent of soap and warm water, and that youthful torso. I think I was starting to play with his dog tags and his nipples using both hands. For a moment or two he seemed to be responding. My penis and I began to get excited. As I yanked on his dog tags, he put his hand up to cover them, groaned, and pulled away abruptly. He fumbled himself into his shorts and T-shirt and slipped on his shoes. I kept asking him what was wrong. There was no answer as he shoved his things into his small duffel. Then he whispered only, ‘Sorry, sir. Good-bye, sir.’

“I seemed trapped in quicksand, unable to move fast enough. By the time I got dressed and downstairs to the front of the hotel, there was no sign of him, only a group of noisy guests celebrating someone’s birthday.”

“Did you see him again?”

“No, as I’ve mentioned before, I’ve not been able to contact him to know if he’s still on base. He’s due to muster out in a couple of weeks and then he could be anywhere.”

“Then we’ll start looking immediately. Did you bring a copy of the letter he wrote to you? His mother’s address and phone number? How about photos of your son?”

Chris produced his evidence. There were three candid shots taken recently of young Donald, including one with his father. Indeed, the two men did look somewhat alike; it was the strong jaw line and the thin lips. The sergeant’s letter was also interesting—a polite, anxious request for a meeting and some background information on his mother and himself, all phrased in the slightly stiff military style and written on a computer keyboard. It wasn’t very much to go on.

“Alan keeps telling me I should just forget him and treat it all as a summer interlude. He thinks I should get back to ‘real life’. But Donald and I have too much unfinished business together. I can’t leave it alone, mainly because I still want him, want to explore more of his body and his mind, and want to have him as a lover as well as a son.”

“I think he may be telling you that’s not what he wants, Chris.”

“That’s what I need you to find out for me.”

“And Alan, your partner, how does he feel about this and how is it affecting your relationship together?”

“Alan and I go back a long way—longer than many marriages these days—and we’ve weathered quite a few storms successfully.”

“Did he know you’ve been married and had a son when you first met—where was that—in San Francisco?”

“That seems so long ago. Spring of 1979, I guess. I had finished my Masters in Business at UC Berkeley and wanted to start making some real money. I knew by then that I liked men rather than women and that I wanted to fuck them and fuck them in leather.

“I’d had a Master while I was in my final year of college who

trained me well as a bottom and trained me even harder when he decided I was more suited to be a Top. Shit, I was five-ten, one hundred eighty pounds stripped, well-muscled and moonlighted as a trainer in the local gym as my second job.”

“Where did you meet Alan Franklin?”

“Initially he was one of my clients at the gym. In those days he was tall, in his early thirties, six or so years older than me, with a swimmer’s body and a delicate constitution, which he was fiercely determined to overcome. He was already working as a manager I think at Staples, and trying to get alongside some of the high-tech companies in the burgeoning Silicon Valley.

“I think there is a chance of making a bundle of money in paper products, Chris,” he used to say. “These new technology companies, they talk about a paperless society, but they also need basic tools for their computers—paper, ink, envelopes, and more paper. It’s like the gold rush of a hundred and thirty years ago, the guys who made money steadily and endlessly were the merchants who supplied the miners with their basics from coveralls to pick axes. And we could do the same—with the right products and the right connections.”

“I can still see Alan’s craggy face and gray eyes sparkling with enthusiasm about this pet project, as he worked to build his biceps and triceps in the gym. And he soon had me convinced too.”

“So how did you find out he was gay?” I inquired.

“It was almost by accident. My main job was with Hewlett-Packard in their sales division. After six months or so, I was racking up mega sales in the field, but I didn’t take to the corporate lifestyle. So at weekends I liked to blow off some steam by fucking some willing guy I picked up in a leather bar. It wasn’t very difficult. Although I hadn’t much money then, I’d acquired my leathers carefully over a couple of years and I looked hot when I dressed for my weekend hunts. My black leather chaps fitted tightly over my faded 501s, bottom button undone, with my scuffed Wescoes—bought on eBay. Trim leather vest, bare chest, and Muir cap completed the Master picture, and by then I

knew how and when to strut my stuff.

“So imagine my surprise when I walked into the Eagle about eleven one Saturday night and saw Alan Franklin standing on a corner of the long bar by himself, nursing a Bud. But it was a very different Alan from the gym rat I’d met before. He was wearing tight leather pants, low boots, and a neatly torn white T-shirt—the proper ‘boy’ outfit.

“I wasn’t sure he’d seen me and I wasn’t sure I wanted or needed him. I got my regular Johnny Walker on the rocks and leaned back with a booted foot against the dark wood of the bar, checking out the talent that evening. I nodded to a few other Masters I knew and ignored the variety of bottoms who came floating eagerly past me, twitching their asses and thrusting out their covered genitals.

“I kept one eye on Alan, curious about him in this setting. After about fifteen minutes he made his move. He went over to Sam, my regular bartender, and ordered a drink. Two minutes later, Sam brought over another scotch. ‘It’s a present from that boy over there, with his compliments.’

“I ignored that drink and took a swallow of my own scotch. I waited, impassive, fingering my crotch occasionally. Five minutes later Alan walked directly towards me.

“Sir, permission to approach, Sir.’

“Permission granted, boy.’

“Sir is looking very studly tonight. Would Sir be interested in a boy’s company, Sir?’

So he’s into Old Guard protocol, I thought. I could play by those rules. We pretend we don’t know one another. To Alan, I merely said, “That depends on the boy. Come closer.’

“He moved within a hand’s range, his breathing was getting louder. I tickled my crotch again, took another swallow of my scotch and looked directly at him. Instantly he drew himself up, showing off his gym-toned body, but his eyes dropped to the ground and his hands went behind his back, submissively.

“My fingers ranged over his chest feeling for his nipples. They were small, but they soon perked up when I twisted them through his T-shirt. My left hand slid lower, grasped the squirming package in tight leather jeans. He hissed loudly, but didn’t break his stance. I pulled him very close by his genitals.

“What does the boy offer this Master?”

“Whatever Sir wants this evening, Sir.”

“And how the fuck does it know what Sir wants?”

“Sorry, Sir, it means it would be proud to be used in whatever way Master wants, Sir.”

“I grabbed at the existing tear in his T-shirt. It ripped further, obligingly, exposing his chest, and now erect tits. ‘Take off the shit rag.’

“Alan instantly pulled the remains of his shirt over his head and thrust out his chest in expectation. Instead I took the shirt and wove it round his face as a blindfold and loose gag. He was obviously surprised and gasped before I shoved part of it into his mouth.

“Keep quiet and keep still.”

“The bar had also gone quiet around us as I started to play with Alan’s torso. But I felt the eyes watching behind me as I ran my fingers over the muscles we had worked on together in the gym. He stiffened and gave a brief gurgle when I took hold of his tits again, working them more savagely.

“I loosened his belt, so my hand could go round the back of his leather jeans and reached inside to cup a pair of firm and well-rounded ass cheeks. Alan jerked when I slid a finger into his hole.

“Hold still, boy, I’m not hurting you. Good solid butt. Must work out at the gym. Now undo the buttons and let me see the cock and balls.”

“I was curious as I’d never seen Alan’s genitals at the gym, but he pulled out a long, thin, quivering penis and a pair of meaty and hairy balls.

“Play with yourself, boy. Get erect and cum for Master.”

“This was a humiliating command and there was a momentary hesitation. I slapped his head hard and the hands moved forward to grasp his shaft and work it, lubricating it with the pre-cum that was beginning to trickle out of his piss slit. He began to grunt and pant as his fingers moved faster and faster. I swung him around so that my body covered his and no one could see as he sweated, shook, and finally climaxed and shot into his hand.

“Good work, boy. Now lick your hand clean.”

“A muffled ‘Thank you, Sir’ came out, as I pulled the makeshift gag from his head and he blinked in the dim bar lights. He did as instructed and stood, head bowed, licking the stickiness off his fingers, his prick and balls hanging loosely in front of him.

“Alan was now mine for the night and for however long I wanted to keep him. As he finished cleaning himself, I took a swallow of his scotch, gave him a sip which started to choke him, took a second gulp and spat the contents into his grimacing mouth and over his sweating face. It trickled down and over his chin, but he didn’t dare to lick it up.

“Time to go, boy. It’ll be cold out there. Put your shirt back on and get your package under cover.”

“The T was in tatters, but he pulled the damp sweaty remains over his head, shoved cock and balls back into the jeans, buttoned up, and then turned expectantly towards me. I grasped him by the arm, exchanged high fives with Sam the bartender, and took him home in my car.

“Home’ wasn’t much in those days, but I had a black tarpaulin to cover the bed and red candles to provide minimal light in the room. It was a one bedroom apartment on Guerrero Street in the Mission, not far from the Castro, but it suited my needs at the time. Alan certainly wasn’t going to object. He was busy taking his pants and boots off on my command as I stripped down myself. Naked, he stood at attention, looking straight at me for instructions. Then he realized his mistake and hastily lowered his gaze. Too late, I’d seen his break in his protocol.

“You know you did wrong, boy, don’t you? Looking your Master in the eye is *verboden*. I’ll need to punish you before the fuck.’

“Quietly Alan said, ‘Sir, your boy is sorry he offended you, and accepts your punishment, Sir.’ I led him to the bed, and then reached in the bureau nearby where I kept my toys. Out came the tit clamps first, then the leather strap, and finally the rubber butt plug.

“Alan was cautiously watching with a lowered head. His nipples had already been abused that evening, but I worked them hard for another ten minutes before applying the clamps and pulling on the chain to make sure they were seated.

“Bend over the bed. Fine, get that ass in the air, and let me finger your hole. I trust you cleaned yourself out tonight. Fuck, you’ve already taken three of my lubed fingers up there. Your hole gets regular servicing then, boy?’

“Yes, Sir, I hope Master will use it for his pleasure, Sir.’

“Spread those cheeks apart so I can lube those ass lips further and get this plug inside you. Good boy, work with me. Now it’s screwed inside you, I’m going to strap your butt for forgetting your own rules and looking your Master in the eye during a scene. The beating will also make sure that the plug is fully seated.’

“Alan was leaning on the bed now, his arms supporting him, as I walloped him five times with the doubled leather strap. His ass colored up nicely for me, and I rubbed my hand over the gleaming surface, soothing him in preparation for fucking him.

“I left him bent over for about ten minutes while I took a piss and pulled the waterproof tarpaulin over the rest of the bed. He was beginning to quiver in the awkward position, so I leaned in and pulled him upright by his hair.

“Up on the bed, on all fours. I’m taking you doggy style.’

“Sir, yes, Sir. At your service, Sir.’

“He scrambled quickly into position on the edge of the bed. I was beginning to realize that Alan was an experienced bottom,

who would need little training to suit my immediate needs.

“Right, you seem to know what to do. Take the clamp chain in your mouth and suck on it. Don’t grunt at me. It doesn’t hurt your tits that much and it will distract you from my cock ramming your tunnel. First, out comes the plug—nice popping sound as you expelled it. I’m already sheathed, so I’ll lube us both and then open you up. Don’t whimper. Ass up. Head down. Hold that position. You want to be fucked. You need to be fucked if I’m to be your new master.”

“Alan kept silent, but nodded his head vigorously several times and started to sigh happily and to sweat profusely. As I slid my weapon into his twitching hole, his cock was rising again in tribute to his treatment.

“He gave me a great ride, one of the best I’d had at that stage of my gay life. He positively sucked me in as I made my way up his passage, and really used his ass muscles when I was sliding up and down. We worked surprisingly well together for a first time. My expressions of ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’ were well matched by his ‘Yes, Sir, more please, Sir,’ as we sweated and humped together. My dong could reach far inside him and he moaned happily as I stroked his prostate regularly.

“We were enjoying ourselves, exciting ourselves, experiencing one another’s bodies, exhilarated by one another’s skills. I wanted the fuck to last, but he was demanding and I was horny. My cum rose rapidly, spilt and filled the rubber tip of the condom inside him. I felt him raise himself, give a loud groan, and spew his jism on the bed. Then I collapsed on top of him, my dick still embedded and he sank down into the pool of his own juice.

“We lay together panting until my dick slipped out of him. Carefully I pulled off the sheath and spread my cream over his face, his hair, and upper body to join his own essence that had coated his stomach. Both of us were sated and satisfied.

“For a while we lay in a tangle of arms and legs. Finally I pulled him to his feet, led him into the shower in the bathroom, and let him wash our essences off his body. Then he pulled me into the small shower compartment, soaped and rinsed me in

turn, before taking a bath sheet to dry me and finally himself with the damp towel. As if by agreement we fell into my queen sized bed, and we slept deeply, with Alan spooned in front of me and my cock occasionally rising to rub his ass.

“The following morning, when I awoke he was gone, clothes and all. I was puzzled, until fifteen minutes later there was a banging at my door. Alan stood there with coffees and the makings of breakfast in his hands.

“Sir, I don’t know your habits or your kitchen, and you were asleep. So I thought I better go and buy the necessities for our first meal together. It’s up to me to cook breakfast for my new Master, if you’ll show me the way to your kitchen, Sir.’

“I showed him the kitchen and the few pans, cutlery, and plates. He served excellent scrambled eggs and bacon to me, and then ate scraps from my plate on the floor by my now booted legs, which he nuzzled every so often. I grumbled about this over-the-top service. ‘Fuck this Old Guard protocol shit, Alan. We’re just two guys who spent a great night together. One I hope to repeat regularly.’

“Sorry, Sir, but my protocols are like an aphrodisiac for me. More than that, they are a necessity, just as I suspect your leather and boots are for you. I need them whenever I’m in a scene and last night was one hell of a scene, Sir. And I’d like to stay in the scene with you today, Sir.’

“I didn’t need much encouragement. After breakfast that Sunday, we fucked again. He insisted that I wore my chaps and boots, while he remained naked, roped to the hook above the frame of the bedroom door. I gagged him with his old T-shirt again—didn’t want to disturb the neighbors on a Sunday morning. It was leisurely and brutal at the same time. I took him hard and I took him long, because I wanted to hold back my climax and enjoy the pounding of the exciting and excited body in front of me.

“He still insisted on using his Old Guard language and behavior that day. I didn’t really mind it. He had wanted to be fucked and to be hurt by my strap, but he gave himself willingly

and completely to me. It was strangely intoxicating and that Sunday I knew that Alan had to be my submissive. He was too rich a prize to let go.

“And that was how I met Alan,” Chris concluded simply and suddenly.

As if on cue Chris’s cell phone suddenly rang; he glanced down at the screen. “I need to take this call, Mark. It’s Alan’s doctor.”

“I leave you here to have some privacy. I’ll be in Dan’s office next door.”

I wandered into my partner’s space. It was empty. Of course, he was back at the house working on his bike, I remembered—he had told me at breakfast.

On his desk were a group of Dan pictures. I’d never really looked closely at them before. In one he was in his old LAPD motor officer uniform—those tight blue breeches and tall boots. My heart and my cock lurched. That was what he was wearing when we first met—I was the lead LAPD detective in a probable murder case in the San Fernando Valley; he was the officer who’d discovered the body. I was looking for a new professional junior partner at the time and his quick mind and sharp observations made him a good candidate, especially since he’d already passed his detective exams.

That was also the same uniform he was wearing when I’d invited him for a family meal in my home in Reseda the next day. After dinner we both retreated to the back patio; his boot cleats echoed on the concrete and my cock woke up. Was I interested in finding a different kind of partner as we stood close together with our bourbon and water? I was too inexperienced to plan ahead like that, but I felt the heat between us.

I had to drive him home afterwards and he had my eager prick out my pants right away. I limited myself to massaging his groin as he was still in full uniform. At his place we were soon both naked and he took immediate control as my Master and soon he had taken easy possession of my all too willing body.

I think we both knew by the end of that evening that we were not going to be satisfied with an occasional ‘suck and fuck’. At least I wasn’t and, for the first time, Dan seemed to realize that he too wanted more, or so he told me later.

Well, we’ve made rapid progress in our one year together; we were now in a good place together. I smiled happily as I put the photo back on Dan’s desk.

Was that how Alan and Chris had felt at the beginning of their twenty year relationship, as Chris had just told me? I thought so. And I also realized that he was standing at the door of Dan’s office looking at me. I think I almost blushed. “Sorry, I was far away, remembering my first days together with Dan. I hope the news about Alan was good?”

“As well as can be expected, but he’ll need to take some more tests at the hospital.”

“How about a quick cup of coffee and then you can resume your story and bring me up-to-date.”

CHAPTER FIVE

After another cup of the dark roast Edith had brewed up this morning, we both settled back down in my office.

“So, Chris, I assume you moved in together soon after,” I inquired.

“Well, it still took us a while to adjust to one another. I hadn’t realized that Alan came from a wealthy background. But I found out the second weekend we were together, when he took me to his apartment on Russian Hill. We weren’t in a scene yet that evening, and so we treated each other as friends from similar work places, as we had when we met during the week and at the gym. It was part of our effort to get to know one another. Alan certainly surprised me with his quarters.

“Shit, Alan, I’d no idea you lived in such a big pad.”

“Not really, Chris, it’s only a one bedroom apartment.”

“It seems about three times the size of mine, and it has a view too. You’ve been holding out on me, boy. You can’t afford this on a Staples manager’s salary alone.”

“Alan sighed. ‘No, of course not. Okay, my family has money—railroad and transportation money from back East, which I broke away from to come West. I didn’t want to go into the family businesses. I wanted to strike out on my own—into the new technologies. And besides, I’d begun to realize I was gay, which wouldn’t have gone down well with my conservative parents.’

“So you came to San Francisco to try it all out for yourself?”

“That’s more or less right. I got a job in an industry that seems to be going places. As I’ve said, people will always need paper. And I came to realize I was sexually happier serving a man as a boy, and I wanted to become the best boy in the city.”

“How did you manage that, for God’s sake?”

“I asked around about Sirs or Masters who were willing to train ambitious and willing boys. And I found my way eventually to Master Jeff, who took me on about six months ago. Every weekend and about twice a week he worked on me and with me in his dungeon up on Pacific Heights. He’s very Old Guard, was an Army sergeant in Vietnam and is a Harley enthusiast. His training has been tough, but thorough. And then I met you, Chris.’

“But you only met me last weekend.’

“Oh, no, I met you in the gym, and I took one look at those muscles and that body and listened to your instructions and advice, and I was hooked. I didn’t know if you were gay or if you were interested in me at all. But I was desperate to get to know you better. One time you made some reference to the Eagle when we were finishing a workout session. I bugged Master Jeff to tell me where and what the Eagle was and persuaded him to prepare me in case I ever met you there. Last Saturday night it finally happened. I was terrified I’d blow my opportunity, but determined to do my best to attract you.’

“I chuckled. ‘So here we are. You gave such a good account of yourself last weekend that I’m back with you tonight.’

“Thank you, Sir. If you’d like to stay, I’ve got some food for dinner, and it won’t take long to heat up.’

“Great—give us time to talk some more. Then I’ll want to play with you again and hard, we both seem to prefer that. You asked me to bring my chaps with me and they’re in my duffel.’

“You’re wearing your boots already, Sir. Shit, you make me horny just looking at you, Chris, but I know enough that a boy isn’t supposed to say things like that, unless he wants to be punished...’

“And you like to be punished. Yes, I know, Alan. Okay, you get on with dinner while I check out your place.’

“Alan’s apartment was more elegant than mine, but I was interested in what the furnishings told me about his character. For one thing there was a large book case crammed with books—

most of which seemed to have been read. They ranged from old chemistry and economics textbooks to the latest novels. And there was a small section of Phil Andros' thrillers, which were a reliable guide to a gay and BDSM commitment.

"I peered into the bedroom—almost spartan neat with a queen size bed covered with dark blue leathery-looking comforter, heavy curtains, one bureau, and one nightstand. I was standing there when Alan came in. 'Food's ready, but would you like to see my toy collection first?'

"I chuckled again, kissed him lightly. 'First let's see what kind of cook you really are. Games can come later. And you will sit at the table with me this evening.'

"He grinned, a very boyish grin in that craggy face. 'Yes, Sir. Whatever you say, Sir.'

"Wait a minute? I had an idea. 'You got a rubber dildo in your collection? Great, get it out and pull your shorts down. Let's have it in you so you can sit on it and squirm over dinner. It'll give you a taste of pleasures to come and that asshole of yours needs stretching to take my cock.' I fitted it into him; he wriggled to adjust to the intruder.

"I slapped his butt, and we went back to the large living room, where dinner was set up on a table by the window. The food was indeed good, but simple—steaks, new potatoes, and salad, with fruit for dessert. We both had one Bud and left it at that.

"The conversation flowed easily. Actually, the previous weekend had been more fucking and less talking. But now that we were starting to know one another's bodies and liking them, we wanted to find out what made the other tick.

"Alan wanted to explain his 'paper project' in more detail and he'd clearly thought it out. 'The time is ripe for one company, or a well-connected startup, to offer the high-tech firms a complete paper service that's not available right now. As far as I'm concerned, the product would have to be good quality and the service first rate. I'm good at creating the business plan, raising the money, and managing the company. But I'm shit in terms of

sales. In fact, I'm fairly hopeless chatting up customers, nailing the orders.'

"And that's where you think I might come in?"

"Yes, if you're interested, Chris. I know you've been getting field experience with Hewlett-Packard, and you've certainly got the right personality. I think we could be a good team together.'

"But what about the health problems you mentioned to me when I took you as a client at World Gym?"

"Alan shrugged his shoulders. 'I have some kind of a heart murmur—it seems to run in the family. But so far I've been lucky and it hasn't bothered me. And oddly enough my blood pressure doesn't seem to rise off the charts when I'm having sex, or when I'm working out the details of my projects—something to be grateful for.'

"I had to laugh again as I pushed my dinner plate away. 'If I don't raise your blood pressure when I'm working you over, maybe I'm not doing my job right. Get the dishes done, and then I want to check my technique and see if it can be improved upon, after I change into my chaps and we've digested your excellent dinner.'

"About forty minutes later, my new boy found himself roped to the high headboard of his bed. His genitals had been laced into my leather separator, which split the balls into two round eggs. His nipples had on his own clamps biting into them, with additional weights for good measure. The leather blindfold from his collection deprived him of sight and one of his gags did the same to his voice.

"I pulled his legs up to join the arms already anchored to the headboard, jerking him up tight so that his naked body was splayed open for me. Alan looked hot that way, vulnerable with the black rubber dildo protruding from his ass. Seeing those round cheeks was too tempting. I reached for the riding crop I always carried in my bag of toys. My prick, which had hung tumescent between my leathered legs, had begun to rise with all these exciting preparations. Unexpectedly I flicked the crop hard

against his butt. His torso jerked and a startled grunt escaped round the gag.

“More muddled noises followed, as I slowly and carefully laid six stripes in a cross-hatch across the pink and white ass cheeks. Once again, he was coloring up beautifully for me, so I couldn’t resist a couple of carefully targeted cuts on each of Alan’s inner thighs. He writhed and pulled at the ropes, but he was tied tight, and his cock too was lengthening and hardening.

“My breathing was getting louder as I checked the prime cut of meat set out for me. The pecs and the abs we were working so carefully in the gym stood out well on the swimmer’s body with its light dusting of dark hair. I was sweating with effort and anticipation. My penis was hard and demanding. So I rolled a rubber over my shaft and lubed myself from the handy store in the night stand. It was time to fuck again.

“Leaning in, I pulled the plug out and his hole gaped in readiness for my weapon. I slid up the bed, my chaps rustling on his leathery comforter. I aimed, I pushed, I entered his rosebud opening, and my boy moaned between a sigh and a groan. I shoved my pole up into his space and his body quivered as it tried to accept the intruder.

“I settled down to plunder Alan’s body, reaching out to pull off the blindfold and then unbuckled the gag. He blinked, gasped, and then smiled at me. My new boy wanted his new Master fully inside him. I obliged, pushing my rod up and down his velvet passage, now coated with my lube and his ass juices, as his muscles began to match my action. That passage was still narrow enough to give my thick cock intense pleasure.

“My face moved closer to kiss his mouth and he sucked on me, desperate for the additional contact. I slithered my tongue into his mouth as I drove my dick into his innards. His hands and legs were pulling in their restraints as he worked with me in the fuck. Meanwhile his balls were turning blue in their leather prison. He knew very well how to respond to my invasion and flexed any and every muscle from ass to arms as best he could.

“Fuck me, Sir. Make your boy your slave, Sir. Take me hard,

Sir. Fuck. Suck. Harder, Sir.’ He was burbling and I was loving it all. He rolled his pelvis and his cock stood up straight and tall as I grasped his hips and hammered harder, faster, deeper.

“Now my breath was coming in short pants as I forced air into his mouth and his tongue reached out to wash whatever it could reach of my face. The sweat poured off us, but we didn’t care. We were glued together. Suddenly, without any hand-work, his penis erupted over his stomach, ropes of white cream decorating his torso. Immediately I felt the surge in my loins, liquid moved into my rubbered penis, and I climaxed deep inside him.

“I held him tightly, my heart thudding madly in time with his, my prick still pumping the last gasps of my orgasm. Slowly my weapon retreated from his passage. This time I let us both drink my warm cum from the sheath, and then we kissed possessively again.

“I untied his arms and legs, and he slid down the headboard and under me until our cocks made contact, and he groaned again. ‘Thank you, Sir. Your boy needed another good fucking. He’s probably always going to need his Master to throw one of those dynamo fucks into him at least once a week.’”

Chris sighed. “It’s funny how much of the detail of our first weekend I can still remember. So much of the following two decades together seems lost and forgotten. But that weekend remains vividly alive in my mind and maybe in Alan’s too.

“After that, we talked for hours, about our hopes and dreams, about ourselves and our lusts and even our lost loves. We went to the gym daily, we ate dinner together, even if we weren’t good cooks, we spent the nights in one apartment or the other, until we agreed it was time to move in together. We started afresh into a new apartment in the Castro on Van Ness. It was a big airy space, above an old auto repair shop, and I let Alan fix it up. Interior decorating has never been my thing.

“About a month later, Alan came home one evening, very excited. ‘I’ve got our first paper franchise and I persuaded a couple of companies in Silicon Valley to sign up for the products.’

“Shit, Alan, how did you manage it?”

“Well, you remember I was going to drive down the peninsula today to chat up some business acquaintances? I stopped first at work for a moment and there was the representative of LaSalle Papers. Maybe even you know how big they are. Anyway, I had talked to him before about my project, but this time I took him out for coffee and really sold him—you’d have been proud of me. Jim agreed that if I could get two customers signed up within a week, he’d give us a contract. So I drove on down, called on two purchasing managers I’d been cultivating and they each agreed to give us a six-month trial run. We’ve started, Chris, we’ve really started.”

“We hugged, kissed, and danced around our rather bare apartment and to celebrate he got a heavy session and a full fucking that evening, instead of a workout at the gym.”

“But the next day, I was suddenly anxious. ‘Where is the money coming from for all of this, Alan? There’s got to be startup costs.’”

“He looked a little embarrassed. ‘I didn’t tell you earlier I inherited a fair sum when I turned twenty-five a few years ago. It has been invested and will be more than enough to get us started and up and running. I didn’t know you then, and I needed to be sure about the marketability of my project and then of you. Now I’m sure on both counts, so I’m going to hand in my notice at work and see a lawyer friend about setting up a proper company. You still with me on this, Chris, please?’”

“His craggy features looked so anxious that I couldn’t refuse, but I wanted to be a part of the enterprise anyway. ‘Of course I want in, you idiot, but I can only bring a couple of thousand as my financial share.’”

“I want you as the other partner, Chris, and the money is secondary. I need you, and all your talents, in the field and on the bed.”

“So the deal was struck. My leather friend Brian Williams became the company’s lawyer and F/B Paper Products Inc. was born. Alan was right. Our timing was excellent, and we

soon grew and gradually expanded throughout the eighties and early nineties. We ran a tight ship, provided quality products and reliable services at a decent price and we worked very hard.

“We were young, moving through our thirties and forties, healthy and ambitious. High-tech companies came and went, but, as Alan had predicted, basic materials were always needed. We prospered, while dot coms failed. We moved into a comfortable small house on Hancock Street—at the price of San Francisco’s housing that was the best even we could afford.

“Some things had to suffer. Our relationship deepened as we found out how much we could trust one another and we decided we wanted to be monogamous together. But our sex life gradually became more routine and less adventurous, in my view, as the years passed. We tended to save our energy and time for company business and we ourselves in our private lives just drifted through time and space.

“Of course there was another major concern at the time—the AIDS epidemic hit San Francisco hard and altered every man’s lifestyle. In the beginning, when we first became partners in our home and sexual lives, as well as in business, we went out every weekend to the Eagle and other bars or to parties given by our growing circle of gay friends. We were about thirty, gym rats but we were also more than full-time businessmen. So even our boundless energy only went so far. And we still enjoyed playing exclusively with one another at this stage. So perhaps that was one reason we were spared in the early panic years.

“But some of our friends were not so lucky. There was Leo, a cute, cuddly, curly haired bottom, full of good nature and an insatiable appetite for new and handsome men. One weekend he was not to be found in the Eagle or any other bar. Nor ever again. There was Mel ‘the passionate poet’, the always gaunt six foot five African-American who enlivened the parties and whom we helped nurse through his final illnesses. There was Bruce, the poster Leatherman, six feet of muscle and sinew, who was at the Eagle every weekend to welcome us and any other man who caught his fancy. He was generous, giving, and charming, but

none of these qualities saved him from wasting away.

“So we focused on the company. That was succeeding and we thought we were essential. By some silent agreement, we concentrated our energies there and survived the epidemic. By the time the new drugs were being introduced, we’d settled down in our forties into a form of married life. Looking back, I’m surprised that was enough for us, but there was always some interesting or tiresome problem with the business or some new avenue we wanted to pursue to improve products or sales.

“I think we were happy and content with one another. As the twenty-first century dawned, we moved out of the city into a larger house we bought in Sea Cliff with a view of the Golden Gate Bridge. It made for a longer commute to our favorite leather bars, so we didn’t go every weekend, preferring to socialize locally with our circle of friends, now gay, lesbian, and straight.

“Alan’s health was beginning to give me concern. ‘You really should be having regular checkups with a cardiologist, as well as with your urologist,’ I scolded him. ‘You’ve already had a couple of minor attacks.’

“It’s just the same old heart murmur. I’m looking after myself. I’ll take it easy this winter. We’ll take a place in Palm Springs again for a month and laze in the sun.’

“You and Palm Springs. You always want to go there on vacation. I think you’d be happy to move there permanently and try to run the business from there.’

“We might consider doing that. We’d be younger than many in the LGBT community there, and maybe we should look outside for some fresh meat to liven things up.’

“Alan Franklin, I never thought I’d hear my boy talking about running around looking for younger men. You get a sound thrashing for that this weekend.’

“And indeed I roped him to our St. Andrews Cross that weekend and worked him over with my heaviest flogger for a good half hour before I pulled him down and threw a solid fuck into him. We both enjoyed the release of energy and endorphins,

slept well that weekend.

The serious health alarm bell finally rang. Alan had flown to Chicago in the middle of the summer to “persuade” one of our customers to pay his bills. Normally we do that on the phone through the local office, but this was a friend of his, so he wanted to do it in person rather than letting local representatives handle it. It was about six pm our time one July evening when I got the phone call.

“Can I speak to Mr. Christopher Bates, please?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Rush Presbyterian Hospital calling. Are you acquainted with Mr. Alan Franklin?”

“Very well. He’s my partner.”

“He gave us your name as next of kin. I’m sorry to tell you that he has had a major heart attack and he is in surgery at the moment.”

“My God, he’s in surgery! How serious—I mean how life-threatening is this?”

“It’s too early to tell at present, Mr. Bates, but the surgeon is optimistic.”

“I’ll be right there. I mean, I’ll be there as soon as I can get a flight from San Francisco.”

“Thank you, please come to emergency and we’ll update you then.”

“I hung up, dazed, but alert enough to luckily get a ticket on the late evening flight to O’Hare, to fling some clothes into a bag and to take a taxi to the airport, since I didn’t know how long I’d be away.

“I didn’t know Chicago that well, and it was dead of night and humid when I arrived. A taxi soon deposited me at the entrance to the busy emergency ward of the hospital. Once I’d established my credentials and gone over Alan’s insurance information, I was taken in to the surgeon, who was about my age and sympathetic.

“Your partner is alive and the prospects for his recovery are good. But it was a serious attack, and he has probably damaged his heart. We’ll know more in a day or so.”

“Can I see him Dr... er, Ishmael?”

“He’s asleep at the moment, resting, but you can see him briefly. I’ll try to find a social worker to help you get yourself sorted out. I don’t suppose you’ve had time to think about a hotel room?”

“No, I’d appreciate that, after I see Alan.”

“It felt strange to see him lying there, as white as the sheet drawn up under his chin. Tubes were attached to him; instruments were softly clicking and buzzing on the stand beside him. The lighting was dim, the air was cool, and the room was quiet and tranquil. Suddenly, I was afraid. I did not want to lose him.

“I looked at that craggy face. The lines seemed etched more deeply than I’d noticed before, the shadows under the eyes were darker and more pronounced, the skin was pale and clammy when I touched his hand. So much time had passed without notice or memory, since our youthful and carefree days. We believed we could do anything we wanted and in one sense, we had. We had built a very successful company. We had one another to love and comfort us, but I was frightened that I would lose Alan, and suddenly that mattered. That really mattered. I needed a man in my life to love me and make me complete. I knew I had to have one such person in my life, who was more important than the riches and successes of business. At that moment, that man definitely was Alan.

“Long story short. Alan did recover. Eventually I was able to bring him back to San Francisco, and we sat in our big house, endlessly reassuring one another that everything was going to be fine, and we still loved one another.

“One day I was back at work, catching up on sales and other business I’d neglected over the previous month, when Alan knocked on my door.

“What are you doing here? I thought the doctor told you it

would be another couple of weeks before you could come back to the store.’

“Yes, he did, but I was bored, so I just came in to check on a few things. Can I sit down? I think we need to talk seriously.’

“Here, sit in the good chair and tell me what’s got you stirred up.’

“I’ve had a lot of time to think recently, Chris. I wanted to come to work and see if it still has the power—the magic—to excite me, to make me happy. But, you know, I don’t know it does anymore.’

“What do you really mean, Alan? What are you leading up to?’

“I thought I’d want to get back here and get on with running the show. But I don’t think I’ve got the energy or the interest to do that anymore. I think it’s time for me, maybe for both of us, to make time to smell the roses, to follow the road less traveled, to move on.’

“Wait a minute—you’re still recovering from heart surgery. You shouldn’t be making decisions like this so early. Are you really saying to me you’re thinking of retiring or selling the company or both?’

“I’ve really had time to think this out, and it’s not a spur of the moment decision, Chris, I’ve kind of felt this coming. Don’t you see? Our stock price is high, dot com companies are booming, and we’ve built up more than enough business all over the country. We could make a tidy profit, if we sold out now.’

“I sat there, astonished. Alan, the workaholic, wanted to throw it all in. Then I looked at him and saw the lines still deeply etched in his face. I knew what Alan was still unwilling to say. The heart attack had warned him of his mortality and he wanted to finally explore life outside F/B Papers Inc.

“That was what we did. I wasn’t interested in running the business by myself or finding another business partner. Besides, I owed Alan, my life partner, the chance to enjoy whatever years would be left to him. By then, I knew he’d been warned that another major heart attack would almost certainly kill him.

“We sold the company for a good profit. We sold the house for a substantial profit. We packed up and moved to Palm Springs, which we’d enjoyed for a month or so in the winter over the past five years. We found a pleasant home in the Old Palm Springs area in the center of the city. We began to entertain and to broaden our small circle of “mature” gay friends. I don’t think we really missed the business. At least, not at first.

“Alan seemed to enjoy the more relaxed lifestyle of the desert, but gradually I found I began to get bored. Sipping cocktails at four thirty in the afternoon in one of the bars on Arenas soon became monotonous, and, while I was happy for Alan, I didn’t feel I wanted to retire from life in my fifties. The six and a half years between us seemed to become a gulf, a serious division. I started to look around for something or someone to interest and intrigue me.

“That was when the letter from Donald arrived. I’d almost forgotten I had a son, and I was more than curious to see how he turned out. What I hadn’t bargained for was that he would turn me on instead. At first I thought this was a normal father-son attraction. Gradually I realized this was becoming something more sexual. Finally I believe I became so besotted, so obsessed with him that I had to find out once and for all how he felt about me and how I could demonstrate my true interest in him. I blew it that night in the West Hollywood hotel. I lost him, and now I need you to find him for me, please.”

CHAPTER SIX

I sent Chris home soon after that, agreeing to meet him at his house the following morning. “I’m going to start our search with your ex-wife, Donald’s mother, and I’ll need all the information you can give me about her whereabouts.”

From my office window, I watched him, hands in pockets, amble towards his car. A late model Caddy. I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him, but I wasn’t sure how far I was willing to go towards reuniting him with his son if sex was the main reason in his mind.

His problems were beginning to weigh me down, so I made some rapid notes on my laptop, locked the office, and drove home early. Dan was in the garage, fiddling with the gears on his Harley.

“Hey there, boss man, what are you doing back here so soon?”

I crouched down beside him, shrugging off my jacket and tie in the non-air-conditioned garage. Dan seemed happy and greasy in a pair of old shorts. My cock stirred as I looked at his husky body.

“I need to talk to you, Dan. Chris Bates’ fixations are getting to me. No, shit, I need to do more than just talk to you. I need you to show me you still love me, and that things will still be all right with us twenty years from now.”

“What is this, lover-man? It’s not like the great Mark Farrell to give way under pressure or let some little problem affect him. Fuck, but you look tired. Come here, your Master knows how to make you feel strong again.”

He was sweaty and covered with oil slicks, but he got to his feet and pulled me into his thick arms. I didn’t care about my good clothes. I wanted to breathe in his musk and lose myself in his bear-grip.

“Just tell me you will always love me, Dan, and that twenty years from now, we won’t be drinking cocktails at Streetbar or

wherever each afternoon, and wondering whether to have sex on the weekend.”

He was looking at me intently, listening to the undertones of my voice. He knew me well enough by now to sense some of the frustration I was feeling.

“What the fuck are you talking about? We’re both in the prime of life and who knows where we’ll be in twenty years’ time. But if I have anything to do with it, I’ll still be your Master, and I’ll still want to fuck that hairy ass of yours at least twice a week.”

“Chris has been explaining how the relationship between him and Alan seems to be unraveling. What he wants now is a young stallion, in the form of his son, to see if he can still mount him.”

“Chris and his partner are not you and me. I don’t know their story and why their fire has died down and out. But I’m going to fucking well show you what we have going for us. Now get into the *casita* and get your clothes off, pronto. Your own Italian stallion will be right behind you in the shower and then we’ll see whose wick is wearing out.”

And with that he pulled off and kissed me hard, forcing his tongue to the back of my mouth and holding it there until I started to choke.

“Now git. I’ll be there in two minutes. We’ve plenty of time before dinner. I can feel a major fuck coming on, and I know who needs to take it very badly.”

Chuckling, I pulled out of his grasp and hurried into the *casita*, our private quarters, where we’d be undisturbed and our noise wouldn’t alarm my family. My spirits started to lift. I hurried out of my clothes, hanging up my jacket and pants and tossing shirt and briefs into the laundry bin. My excitement beginning to build and my cock rising in tribute. I turned on the shower and found the green industrial liquid soap for my man.

Dan was right on my heels, peeling off his shorts, flexing his biceps as he paraded in front of me.

“Master, your shower is ready for you. Your boy is here to serve you.”

Dan came up behind me, slapping my rump playfully. “Then the boy may soap me up and clean me down. Come on, get on with it.” His slaps drove me into the bathroom next to the shower.

He charged into the water, whistling some Garth Brooks tune under his breath. Leaning in, I started work on the dark curls of his chest, scrubbing off the oil and sweat residue, then I worked my way with the face cloth and soap down past his stomach to his groin. He pulled me in under the spraying warm water and shoved my face into his genitals, where his prick was already up and out.

“You’ve got something better than soap and water to clean my cock, haven’t you? Get that mouth wide open and take me in.”

What could I do but happily obey? He held my head with one hand and was sluicing water over my back with the other. I crouched down, sinking to my knees and sucking on his penis as he commanded.

“Okay, that’s enough of that. I aim to spurt my seed elsewhere this afternoon, so finish up with my cock, and let’s clean you out properly.”

Warm water was still cascading over us as he took the enema kit and stuck the nozzle up my ass, filling me slowly and easily as I bent over for him.

“Hold it in, boy, until I say you can let loose.” Five long minutes passed. “On my count now, you can release. Ready, steady, go.”

I only needed two douches to run clear that day, so Dan enjoyed himself by playing with my cock until it was as hard and veined as his.

“I think we both should be cleaned up by now. Turn the tap off and dry me.”

I’d scarcely started to wipe off the water before he grabbed the towel and started flicking it at my sensitive private parts as I stumbled out onto the rubber mats on the bathroom floor. Yelling in mock pain, I grabbed another cloth and slapped back at him. We chased each other into the bedroom, shouting threats

and insults at one another, until he tripped me and obligingly I fell onto our great big bed.

The ceiling fan stirred the air; the air-conditioning wasn't turned on. The room was hot, and soon so were we. The sheen on our bodies turned to sweat as we wrestled on the bed, growling back and forth, alternately kissing and fondling and then twisting tits and punching pecs.

I grabbed him, excitedly swinging my legs around him in a scissor grip while I tried to bite his ear-lobe. He was laughing and resisting until we both fell off the bed onto the floor. He yelled, pinned underneath me, and I swore the hardwood floor creaked from our impact. We rolled around happily, both trying to get the upper hand as we skidded over the other's sweaty naked body. Arms were twisted, cocks were jerked again, and legs went in all directions. Finally my thick tawny hair, which was plastered over my torso, gave Dan some kind of hold and he heaved me up on my knees into a half nelson.

“Okay, shithead, give up before I choke the life out of you.”

“Fuck you, Master, I'd like to feel you try that.”

He got a second arm around my waist and manhandled both of us to our feet. We were upright again, swaying in this fierce embrace, or rather strangle-hold. His penis was sliding round my hole, trying to find a way in, as his arm tightened around my neck and he bit my shoulder.

“That should give you a good hickey. Now give in to me or I swear I'll throttle you.”

I squirmed in his grip, loving the tension and our heavy breathing, feeling him and his dick trying to nail me. I tried expanding my wet and slippery chest to throw him off.

“I mean it, lover-man, you belong to me and I'm going to fuck you. And fuck you my way, bareback, unless you give in right now.”

I was beginning to black out, which was not part of my plan for the scene. “Yes, yes, Master, I give up. Take your revenge, or pleasure or what the hell you want from your boy,” I spluttered.

“Take one of those towels. Get up on the bed with it under you. Yeah, up against the headboard and hold your ankles, while I grab a rubber and some lube.”

We were panting, excited, wanting, and needing this fuck. The warm-up had been different, but the climax had to be the same—with him pounding my innards as if both our lives depended on it. I knew my position, and I flipped my cock back into a hard upright as my head cleared and my heart stopped racing. I fingered my hole, coating it with some of the pre-cum I found slithering out of my dick-slit. I moaned in anticipation as I stuck a second finger up there.

“What do you think you’re doing, mother fucker? Stop pleasuring yourself and use those hands to pull your legs up high for me. I want to see that hole of yours winking at me right now. That’s better. Look at me, my husky hunk, and keep your eyes open and on mine as I take my pleasure.”

Dan had slid slowly down the bed, his thick eight inches tightly encased in a heavily ribbed rubber. Lust glazed over his eyes. Whatever way we did it, we certainly could turn each other on big time. I was sweating and panting, moaning and mumbling in anticipation. He was silent, intent, breathing heavily as he lined himself up. Then he reached forward for my hips and I felt his penis sliding past my sphincter. I shuddered in pleasure as we gazed solemnly at one another, knowing what was to come.

“Yes, you feel good, juicy and hot in there to me, lover boy. Your tunnel’s nice and warm, just tight enough to give me some real pleasure. The ribbed sheath should tickle you too. So come on and work with me.”

The strenuous foreplay had warmed me in the hot bedroom; my body was relaxed and welcoming. I was filling my tunnel, and I humped back, encouraging him to push and penetrate me further. His eyes and his body lusted for me. I knew I wasn’t supposed to speak, but words just came out spontaneously.

“Yes, my Master, thrust your weapon into your boy. Yes, Sir, take him, take him and make him your own again.”

“Fuck me, if he doesn’t talk back. Okay, boy, you want me? You want all of me? Then open up. Come on, cunt-face, I want all of me up your chute right now. I’m going to fill you up tight. So get working, keep your eyes on me, and keep those legs up high.”

“Yes, Sir, just tell me what you need, Sir. Boy is here as your fuck-pit, Sir. Boy wants all of you in him, moving and spearing him, Sir.”

“Cut the crap, boy. Work harder. Use those muscles as I’ve taught you. You want to be fucked, then fucking well work with me.”

He leaned up and slapped my face.

“Yes, Sir. I hear you, Sir. Take me. Use me. Fuck me. I want your dick, Sir. Need dick, Sir, dick deep inside me, Sir. Fill me with your dick, Sir.” I was whimpering and gasping.

He leaned in again to grasp my hair and kissed me this time, tonguing me hard.

“Yes, boy, open for me. I’ll dick you. I’ll long-dick my good boy. Another shove further up now, another slither out. No, hold me in. Tighter. That’s it, squeeze my cock. Now I thrust up into you again. Now let’s get really going. Faster, deeper.”

“Whatever you need, Master. Oh, fuck, good, hard, deep. Yes, take me. Fuck.”

We were hard at it, our breathing took an effort, and I wanted that effort. We worked together. Sweat skimmed across our torsos. Words were no longer enough. He began to growl as he pushed my body higher up the bed. I felt like jelly, quivering in position. My cock was rock hard, but quivering too. We were on fire for one another. I felt ‘the rapture’ that I loved and needed. My body was his; pliant, malleable, desperate for his penis and his cream.

Dan snarled, gathering himself for that final thrust and I felt the surge of his cum as it spewed out of his penis into the rubber’s tip. At almost the same time, I gasped as my cock shot my seed across my stomach without any help.

All the time we had fixed our eyes on one another, but now he fell forward, and I jerked and released my legs, which slithered down either side of him. We half huddled, half lay on one another as we began to calm down. He was still inside me and I was full, content, satisfied. Dan was indeed a fuck-master and my frustration over Chris was forgotten.

He sighed as his penis slid out of me, still reluctant to move. I reached down and kissed and nuzzled his ear—all I could reach. I felt him chuckling on top of me. Then he reached down to carefully peel off the rubber.

“Better now, Mark?” I nodded. “Then let’s have a little cum drink together.” He tipped the contents onto his tongue and leaned in to share the taste with me. Gradually we began to move. I took his cock and carefully licked it clean. He bent over to taste the cum on my abs, then worked the rest up into my hairy chest.

“I suppose we better clean up and shower again.” I was slow to move. He looked down and thumped my chest. “Yes, we should get going, and let Edith know we’re home for dinner. And maybe turn on the air-conditioning.”

“Yes, Master.” I sighed and came back down to everyday life. “Thank you, Dan, I really needed that fucking. Now I feel I can get back to coping with normal life.”

Moving slowly into the bathroom, I turned on the shower to tepid, and we washed each other pleurably and thoroughly, enjoying a little extra cock and ball play along the way. I pulled on clean shorts and sandals and went over to the main house to report to Edith, while Dan tidied up the garage and put my car and his bike away.

By now, my family was adapting to desert life. We sat outside on the patio and ate soft tacos and salad as we watched the sun slowly going down over the mountain and the lights on the top of the Palm Springs Tramway grow brighter as the short dusk gradually descended into darkness. Our dog Wolf settled down between us and was soon snoring. We woke him up and sent him into his own large padded bed near the back door. I helped Mary with her arithmetic homework, a new subject for her and

my least favorite form of math in school. I was managing to stay ahead, but only just. That evening we all retired early. Edith was teaching the following morning, and I wanted to talk to Dan about my latest discussion with Chris.

We lay on our bed with his head on my shoulder. He murmured quietly to me, “Of course I can’t guarantee how we’ll feel about one another in twenty years’ time. After all, we’ve been together less than one year so far. But I do know that I need you and always will. And I’ll do my damndest to make it work.”

“And so will I, Dan. I never expected to find another relationship after Blythe died and certainly not one with a man. I know there will be challenges and problems, but I want you too, and I think half the battle is to be open and to keep communicating with one another in as many ways as possible. I guess our time this evening was just one example.”

I turned slightly and kissed the top of his curly head. I felt him chuckle and one hand reached out to flick my cock. I jerked and he rolled over to his side of the bed.

“Not to change the subject, Mark, but I might to be able to help you find this young guy. Donald, that’s his name, right? I still got a few friends among the chiefs and the old-timers in the Twenty-nine Palms Marine base; some old bike riding buddies and their friends. I could casually ask if they know Sergeant Whatever-his-name-is and whether he’s still on base. Nothing official, mind you, just casual interest in the former buddy of mine from my days in the service—well, the dates almost fit. I’ll need his proper name, but it’s worth a try.”

“Shit, it’s worth more than that. Thanks, lover-man. That would be very helpful.” I leaned down and gave him a proper kiss with proper tongue action.

“I’ll see what I can do over the next few days. That’s enough business for tonight. Slide down to cuddle and get some sleep. Don’t get so worried, I’m sure you will find a way to make it all work out.”

“Night, Dan. Thanks again and yes, tomorrow will be another

day.” I turned off the bedside lamp and looked out the window at those ever surprising stars in the clear night sky outside. Maybe I could make this search work out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chris Bates' house was similar to that of Manning Thompson—probably built in the fifties in Old Palm Springs and renovated at least twice since. For example, I was sure the kitchen would be full of state-of-the-art cooking equipment and the security, lighting, and sound systems inside and out would be fully computerized. The place seemed to ramble from one room to another; a large living space at its center had full-length glass doors, which opened onto a terrace and pool area. It was there that the Hispanic maid led me to meet Chris that morning.

“Right on time, as I'd expect, Mark. Welcome to *Casa di Principessa*, although we can't find any evidence that even Princess Grace ever lived here.”

“Still it's an impressive room, and you've furnished it so well.”

“Alan gets the credit for that, he has a flair for decorating. And the desert does invite you to use colors which might just look garish in, say, San Francisco or the Midwest. By the way, why don't you pop in and say hello to him before we start work. He's had a restless night, but I think he wants to ask you something. Come on, I'll show you the way.”

The bedroom was warmly decorated, as I'd expected, in shades of blue, gray, and cream. Alan Franklin was still in bed, but he'd been groomed and prepped for my visit and smiled as we came in.

“Good morning, Mark. It's good to see you again.”

“I'll leave you two to chat for a few moments, Mark, before we settle down to business. But don't tire him out.”

There were two vaguely familiar French Impressionist drawings on one wall, and I moved over for a closer look.

“These look like Toulouse Lautrec sketches, Alan. Are they originals?” Once again I was grateful for the art history classes my late wife had persuaded me to take in college.

“You have a good eye, Mark. Yes, I’ve been collecting most of my life, but the prices are too astronomical for my pocketbook these days.”

“These would really stand out in any space.”

“I’m glad you like them. I’ve had these two for almost forty years. They were a gift from my parents on my twenty-first birthday, and they follow me everywhere. Enough of that.

“You’re here to get some clues about the former Mrs. Bates to begin your treasure hunt, or perhaps I should call it your wild goose chase?”

“You don’t think Donald will be found?”

“I have my doubts. But I’ve had doubts about that young man since he first appeared. Maybe I can be proved wrong. I know Chris has become almost frantic in his efforts to find Donald and I worry about the real reasons for this infatuation—at least that’s what I’d call it.”

“Well, I’ve agreed to do my best to find him for Chris.”

“Manning seems to think you’re an honest and able young man. I just wanted to voice my concern before Chris sends you off to God-knows-where for these reasons of his own. I’m suspicious of Chris’s intentions almost as much as I am of the so-called Donald Bates. Still I can’t put my finger on anything the young man did wrong.”

“Why don’t you tell me exactly what you mean, Alan?”

“Somehow it seems too simple. Handsome young man turns up on the doorstep of wealthy older gentleman and cozies up to him. Granted, there was no suggestion of a fortune hunter, but Donald always seemed very vague about his plans for his future after he leaves the service in a couple of weeks. Is he planning to sponge off Chris, or, at best, get a well-paying job through his influence? I don’t know. It just makes me uneasy.”

Chris came back into the bedroom. “You’re telling Mark about your suspicions of Donald already. You never did give him much of a chance, did you, Alan? Well, let’s not quarrel about it

anymore. There's work to be done. Come on, Mark."

"It was good to see you again, Alan, and thanks for your thoughts."

Chris grumbled under his breath as he strode away. I was curious about the apparent tension in the relationship and by the fact that they didn't appear to sleep in the same room; Alan had been propped up on an elaborate double bed. However that was really none of my business. Still the questions nagged at me. If they didn't sleep together, did they still have sex together, or was that one reason Chris had been drawn to young Donald? I shook my head as I found myself in Chris's study or workroom.

This is a complete contrast to the other spaces I'd seen. A contemporary steel desk stood with matching chairs on the other side of it. Computer table with printer, even a fax machine, and what looked like a typewriter were over in one corner. Four or five matching filing cabinets and a couple of locked cabinets lined one wall with a small safe at the far end. There were a few more tubular chairs scattered around. Everything was clean and tidy; papers arranged in orderly piles, weighted down with paperweights of various shapes and sizes. It looked as though Chris had brought half his business home with him to live. The walls had been painted a light gray, with a few rather good enlarged photographs of San Francisco Bay and a discreetly placed Tom of Finland drawing as decoration. There was one window overlooking the pool area. It all suited Chris Bates' character as I knew it so far.

"We've had an overnight idea, Chris. My partner Dan is a former Marine, with a few contacts in Twenty-nine Palms. He's offered to go up there, chat up his old acquaintances unofficially, and see what he can find out about Donald for us."

"That's great, Mark, I'd be very grateful for anything he can unearth—off the record, of course."

"Of course, but he will need the full name under which Donald enlisted."

"I'll give you everything I've got on that and thank Dan for me."

“Nothing may come of it, but it’s an avenue worth pursuing. Now moving on to my suggested plan of action for the next few days, I’m going to try to find and hopefully talk to your former wife about your son.”

“Cora Sally Wilmot. It’s been quite a while since I really thought about her, but with Donald around the summer, she did come up in conversation more than she had in years.”

“Did you have the impression Donald was close to his mother?”

“Yes, I think he was when he was growing up, mainly in his early years. He had a few photos of them both from that time. I think when the new husband came along, Donald felt shunted to one side. Previously he’d been the apple of his mother’s eye for eight years or more.”

“But the new husband didn’t mistreat him?”

“I don’t believe so. The man seemed to ignore him to a large extent. I can understand that. He had a new wife, then a baby daughter, as I was told, a couple of years later. The father seems to have kept an eye on young Donald’s schoolwork, kept him doing homework and maintaining his grades, but didn’t take much more interest in the boy, apart from including him in the family going to church on Sunday.”

“They were regular churchgoers?”

“Yes, she came from an Assembly of God type church, I seem to recall, although I can’t be sure of that.”

“And Donald left home as soon as he graduated school and joined the Marines?”

“That’s what he told me. But he did go home on leave occasionally, usually for holidays in the first couple of years. After he was sent to Afghanistan, he hasn’t really spent any time at home, so to speak.”

“Your wife still lives in the same small town in Kansas? Jason Springs, I think you said?”

“Baxter Springs, Baxter Springs. She’s lived around there

ever since she left me way back at the end of the seventies. Her second husband is or was a store manager for one of those big supermarket chains. I'm not sure they're still together, as his name wasn't on the last Christmas card a couple of years ago. Their daughter must be around fifteen by now. What happens to speed the time past me so quickly?"

I was curious about this early part of Chris's life, and I needed to get a feel for the only woman apparently of importance in his adult past. "So tell me something about the lady you married back then?"

Chris thought for a moment and a smile chased across his face. "Cora Sally Wilmot was one of the prettiest little things I ever saw. Actually, she wasn't that little, came up to my shoulder. We were both taking an accounting class at Baker University. That's how I met her. I was a big swaggering upperclassman on the football team, as well as the Dean's list. By then I was already six feet tall and a trim muscled one hundred eighty-five pounds.

"In those days, I thought I was mostly straight, had my choice of pretty undergrads, but played standoffish. I guess you could say I was "half a virgin". She seemed to have a sense of style about her. Her parents had money too, while mine had much less, and I wondered how to attract her.

"My wish was granted when our instructor announced a class project for which I needed a partner and I made a beeline over to her after class.. I persuaded her to take me on as a class partner, but I don't think she was completely taken in by my charms at first."

Chris had turned to me in his chair, his eyes twinkling at the memory. "You've got to remember things were much more formal and regimented in the Midwest in those days. And maybe my reputation as a stud had preceded me. So I gave her the story about how I really needed help in that accounting class. That part was true.

"Well, things proceeded slowly. She had a quick mind and a head for numbers, which certainly helped us with the project and that quick mind in a well-proportioned body with chestnut hair

was fun to be with outside of school, and we gradually moved to dating, and then into necking as it was still called back then. Her ideas about sex were pretty conservative, derived straight from her parents and her fundamentalist church.

“Come on, Sally,” I would say. I hated the name of Cora. “What harm can there be in playing with my cock and your pussy? We’ve agreed to get married in the spring, just before we graduate.”

“I want to wait until we’re properly married, Chris, like it says in the Good Book. It isn’t that long to wait.”

“But I didn’t want to wait. At twenty-one my hormones were really raging and my sheets were regularly covered with nocturnal emissions. It wasn’t enough. Besides, by that time, I was already porking a fellow football team member on the quiet, sticking my very willing prick up his asshole as he wriggled over one of the locker room benches of an evening. Now I wanted to know if I could get my penis up and into a girl’s vagina, which is the proper thing for a man to do after marriage, or so I’d been taught in school and church. Only fags did it with men, and I didn’t think I was one of them, despite my experiments with my teammate.

“By February I’d achieved my objective a couple of times and by the May wedding, which went off really well, we both knew she was pregnant. No one else did, except for the doctor we went to see that summer as soon as we arrived in Berkeley where I was to start on my graduate degree. Donald arrived promptly in November at seven pounds five ounces. Someone said at the time, “What a bonny early baby”. No-one seemed curious enough to check the dates.

“But I was moonlighting regularly before that. Sally didn’t want any form of sex after her second trimester other than cuddling and kissing. That wasn’t enough for me. I guess I’ve always had this very strong sex drive. So I went looking for someone to stick my penis into, and I found several welcoming guys, especially in San Francisco. Fucking men occasionally, I convinced myself, wasn’t the same as having an affair with another woman and therefore wasn’t really breaking my marriage vows. God, how easily we con ourselves.”

I could certainly agree with that last statement, but it didn't make Chris seem less selfish and self-centered. "Did Sally find out about your extracurricular activities?"

"Not then, Mark, I was fairly careful about finding gay men away from the university. I was now getting real practice as a Top, almost always being the dominant partner. I did act the submissive bottom a few times, for experience, I suppose."

"Did you already know which role you wanted to play at that stage?"

"I was pretty certain. I knew what I enjoyed, but I also liked some variety. I'd met a guy called Ben in a Leather bar in San Francisco. From him I learned the basics of man-sex, fucking and sucking whenever I could get away".

I shook my head as I listened to his story. "And is that what you did before Donald was born, Chris?"

He looked at me sheepishly and nodded. "Yes, I couldn't stay away. Not every weekend, but kind of regularly. Ben and I would meet, first in the bar, and later at his place. By then I had told him my story and he had chuckled.

"I guessed it was something like that. But you seem to be developing a taste for men and for SM sex. What will you do when the baby is here, your wife's recovered and she wants your prick for herself?"

"I shrugged my shoulders. I really didn't know. 'Learning all this kinky stuff from you, Ben, maybe it's changed my outlook on sex. I was brought up to believe men dick women, and never other men. With your help, I'm realizing what I'd been missing out on and I'm not sure I want to go backwards.'

"What are you going to do with that bag of toys you've acquired with my help?"

"Hide it somewhere in the house, I guess. Well, I told you that Sally's due next week, and I guess it's good-bye for the time being."

"Just for the time being, Chris?"

“I only saw Ben a couple of times after that. In those months together, we’d rarely gone out to eat, to have a serious talk, to socialize with other people. I didn’t even know what he did for a living. But the sex was gang-busters for both of us and it seemed to be all that mattered.”

I shook my head at his story. “So you went back to Sally and the baby?”

“Yea, listen, Mark, I’m not proud of the way I went behind her back. But I needed release, I needed sex, and I found that more and more I needed sex with men.” He was blustering, trying to excuse himself.

“How long was it before Sally found out about your inclinations?”

Chris nudged his chair closer to mine. “Not for about six months. In the late spring of the following year. I tried to give her what she wanted, once she’d recovered from the birth. We even went back to Kansas for Christmas—our families wanted to see the baby. We finally slept together again in her parents’ home over the holidays. I could still get it up with her and seemed to satisfy her, but it didn’t satisfy me.”

I couldn’t resist probing some more. “What went wrong do you think?”

“Maybe she started to get suspicious when we got back from Kansas. She enjoyed herself over the holidays, enjoyed showing off young Donald, and enjoyed having sex with me again. She even started to like some of the rougher stuff.

“But by that time, at my request, Ben had fixed me up with Master Jim—who lived not far from Berkeley. I had already had a few sessions with him, before we left for the Midwest, and I was learning so much about obedience and a different lifestyle that there was no way I’d be willing to stop for her. At best, she’d have to share me with my new Master. I’d told him my story, and he was careful with his punishments—heavy welts on the buttocks, lighter marks that would fade rapidly on the back, limited tit torture so my nipples didn’t grow out of proportion.

“He was a great trainer, making me understand a Master’s responsibilities towards his boy, making me understand the exchange of energy and power between the Dom and his sub, making me feel like a proper man.”

“Whoa, Chris, this is getting complicated and I need a break to absorb some of this. You had a wife, a baby son—and now a Master—all competing in your life?” I shook my head in amazement.

He nodded. “Let’s take a coffee break, and talk of other things. Then I need to tell you the rest of my history, if I’m going to make you understand more of my true nature.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chris led me out to the kitchen, spotlessly clean with all the latest appliances. He asked the maid to make another pot of coffee with some small cookies. “Okay with you, Mark?” I nodded and we moved out onto the terrace, sitting on the steel and canvas recliners, and he talked about the pleasures of living in the desert and some of the places Dan and I should get to know—not just restaurants, but the Living Desert Museum and the Palm Springs Art Museum.

Then it was back to work in his study. Chris was trying to help me understand the sexual forces that were pulling him apart during his graduate student days in the 70s at Berkeley, Sally, the neglected wife with a new baby whom Chris adored, the new presence of a gay lifestyle which was becoming ever stronger and more demanding and the general feeling of student unrest and revolt on the campus.

“It was Master Jim who introduced me to leather, to the feel, touch, smell, the power of smooth black cowhide on my body. He gradually seduced me into this new leather lifestyle which became ingrained in my gay mentality as the symbol of masculinity and which I suppose has remained my principal fetish to this day.

“Oh, he was very clever and very careful in his leather seduction. The first time we met in his craftsman-style secluded home in the hills above Berkeley, Master Jim was concerned about us getting to know one another better. I’d been told to strip naked on arrival while he was fully clothed. Ben had already told him something of my needs and experience. But of this middle-aged stocky man with the grizzled hair and well cut beard, I knew almost nothing. I saw a muscular chest with well-shaped pecs almost covered by a leather vest, thick thighs in tight leather chaps with a pouch hiding what seemed to be a large package hanging between his legs.

“He was fingering his genitals as he prowled around me that

first time, testing my nipples. ‘Now why do you need to come to see me?’

“Stumbling and incoherently, I told him that I wanted to learn to become a Top, and, er, I guess I must be bisexual as I’ve fucked both men and women.”

He chortled and grabbed my cock, which had shrunk up into my balls. “And this is to be your weapon of choice, mother-fucker? Shit, this little stub couldn’t penetrate a baby, let alone a man. Nah, I think I’d be wasting my time.”

“Ben thought I was good enough to fuck him a time or two. And I shoved this weapon of mine into a couple of other guys as well as my wife.’ As if to justify my angry claim, my penis began to unroll and display itself.

“Master Jim laughed again. ‘Well, well, the numbskull has some fucking cojones after all and a prick that does have some life to it.’

“He toyed with me that first time, tied me up and walloped my butt with his big calloused hand until it felt red and blistered. He told me to report back in a week and to “keep that cock under control in the meantime, as I’ll want you to show me how fucking good you are at fucking”.

“Of course, by the following week my balls felt like bursting. Sally, still recovering from the birth of Donald, was not interested in sex with me, or anyone. I arrived a few minutes early, and, as ordered in advance, quietly entered the front room and undressed, my pole quivering in anticipation. Right on time, Master Jim strolled in, black leather again, with tall scuffed boots this time.

“Fuck, but shit-face has made it back here. Five points to you, boy, and five points for having your weapon primed.”

“I looked at his florid face, black beetle brows and broken nose, saw a twinkle in the dark eyes and felt so much better.

“Yes, how well I remember that first master class and most of the subsequent ones. Of course I knew how to stick it into a man, but not the real skills of an experienced fucker. Is it any

wonder that I kept going back to Master Jim when there was no such pleasure available at home? Anyway, I did keep going back to him, learning the ropes, so to speak, gradually finding out what it meant to be a Dom.

“Look, kid,” he said, “by now, I know that your dick works fine for you as a Top. You are learning control and you’re learning to select the right man to suit your tastes. And you’ve already earned your first piece of leather—a flogger, the one I gave you to use on Trevor last week.”

“Yes, Sir, I do believe I’m learning quite well and, Master, thank you for the present.”

“Don’t get carried away, cunt-bucket. You’re making some fucking progress. Now comes the harder part. You have to learn to be responsible and responsive. It’s another fucking human being you’re going to fuck. Another man, complete with feelings, fears, and anxieties.

“Shit, if you’re going to be a half decent Top, you have to be able to read your sub—to anticipate his fear of you and to calm him, to accept his gift of his fucking body and not to mutilate it, to work with him in the session, so that both the flogging and the fuck give him some pleasure as well as some pain. You understand any of what I’m saying, shit head?”

“Sure, Master, but sometimes my dick just takes over.”

“That’s not good enough in my book. So you’ll fucking well practice restraint in our next training session or you’ll be back in restraints yourself, while I fucking show you the way to learn to be a true Top. But if I didn’t think you could make it in the near future, then I wouldn’t be giving you a Master’s harness when I’m finally satisfied with your skill and performance. So that’s something to aim for.”

“He was right, of course, but I was twenty-two and hormone-crazy and leather sex-happy. I had several punishment sessions in shackles and chains before I grew up enough to accept some of my responsibilities. By that time I had begun to think again about my responsibilities as a husband and provider.” Chris sighed and

slowed down, appearing to be lost in memories for a moment.

I had even begun to feel sorry for Sally, the neglected wife, who clearly had no inkling of the changes in her husband's sexual outlook. "Chris, something must have finally alerted her to your other life?"

"Yes, it was my bag of toys. There was a lot of academic pressure going around that spring, as well as general student unrest. I wanted to complete my Masters in management and marketing in two years at Berkeley and my class load was extra heavy. I was also a teaching assistant, which required at least ten hours every week—that was helping to pay the bills. The apartment was small and crowded with the baby's things. Sally didn't want to go out to work right away, and I didn't push her. Besides I was still trying to behave like a husband and father in my own strange way.

"I really loved little Donald. He was cute, blue-eyed and dark-haired like me, and not too much trouble. At least I didn't think so in the hours that I was home. I liked to bathe the squirt in the little tub we'd bought—soap him up carefully and then wipe him clean. He'd usually gave me a piss fountain towards the end, so I'd have to hold the delicate slippery squirming mass in my hands, and then rinse him clean under the tap. Once I thought I was going to drop him, but one of my big mitts held onto his upper torso just in time." He laughed at the memory.

"We kept going till near the end of the spring semester, I remember. Then I got home late one afternoon—we were making plans to go camping somewhere warm like the desert here. Sally was waiting for me, my bag of toys open on the kitchen table.

"Chris, I really need to talk to you. I was pulling out some of the camping equipment from last year a couple of hours ago, when this bag fell out. I don't really know what half the stuff is, but things like this—she was holding out a pretty large dildo—aren't for what I'd call normal sex, and this—it was a small flogger—is what I think you'd call kinky. So what are they doing with the camping stuff?"

"Well, I never expected her to go rummaging through the

cabinets in the garage and she'd showed no real interest in the camping gear in the past. Still, how to explain my small collection of toys?

"Sally, I'm sorry you had to stumble across these. They're left over from when you were pregnant and didn't feel like having sex with me."

"She bristled. 'It wasn't that I didn't feel like it, I physically couldn't.'"

"Yes, well, yes, I got lonely and I met up with a guy in one of my seminars, and we got to talking. He was into the kinky side of things and so we kind of messed around..."

"With other women?" I shook my head sheepishly. "With one another?"

"It wasn't exactly sex, Sally."

"It surely looks as if that's what some of these things are for."

"But it's all over and done with, dear. It was only because I felt so needy and so lonely."

"How do you think I was feeling while you were messing around, waiting to have our baby?"

"I'm truly very sorry, Sally, I guess I wasn't thinking. It only happened once or twice. I put the bag away in the cabinet and forgot about it, when you came back to me. I don't need that stuff when I can hold you and make love to my own darling again."

"Then you're going to need to show me that this really was just a one-time thing by taking me to bed right now."

"With that, she swept the toys back into the bag, retied the knot, and flung it into the corner. I took hold of her, swung her into my arms, and what followed was one of the most passionate encounters of our married life right there on the kitchen rug."

"But as I was playing happily with Donald that evening, she laid down the law. 'I might forgive one kind of mistress, Christopher. Those were difficult days for both of us. But I wouldn't stand for something like another man again. I'd leave you, take Donald

with me, divorce you, and that's my final word.' The baby began to fret and cry, upset by the sharpness of her voice.

"Later, I used to wonder whether she just wanted a reason to "forgive and forget" my transgression and whether I really wanted to put my same-sex encounters into a locked box and throw away the key. I thought I could be a family man again, and satisfy Sally's need for a loving husband.

"So I tried yet again, for a few weeks, I guess. Then I wanted my Master and his harsh instruction besides Sally's gentler love. To cover my weekly session at Master Jim's home, I claimed to have an evening graduate seminar at that time. It was uncommon, but not unknown, and the fiction lasted a month or so until one Tuesday evening in April when I was getting ready to leave. I was in a hurry, and my attaché case fell open, once again on the kitchen table. It wasn't full of marketing textbooks. Just one, and my leather harness.

"The case slid sideways, knocking over a plastic coffee cup. I reached for a paper towel to mop up the spill. Hearing the noise of the cup hitting the floor, Sally came over with Donald on her hip.

"You'll disturb the baby with your noise. What on earth is in this case, some kind of leather straps, Christopher? What is this in aid of?"

"It's from the old stuff..." I fumbled in desperation.

"No, it isn't. I've got all that locked away. You're at it again, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean, Sally."

"Oh yes, you do, Chris, you know full well. You never really stopped your sinful ways, did you? And you hoped I'd never find out about your filthy games.' Donald began to whimper in her arms as her voice rose louder and shriller. 'And these Tuesday night seminars you've been going to? Well, they're not in the syllabus or on any schedule and Professor James Freeman is not on the staff of your department or any other at UC Berkeley, or is he some man you've also made up, Christopher? You see, I've

been checking up on you.

“I thought I could trust you. I thought if you sinned once and were shown the error of your ways, you’d stay true to your marriage vows, to your responsibilities to your son and family. None of it seems to matter to you, none of it are you prepared to work to save. You just want to wallow with your sinful homosexual friends. There, I’ve said the word. I never thought I’d use it of any man I knew, least of all my own husband. So I’m following up on what I warned you of before. I’ll be leaving you tomorrow, taking Donald and getting a divorce. I don’t care if I never see you again.”

“She went on and on, with our son crying in her arms. When I stretched out my arm to comfort him, she slapped it away. She packed and left the next day. I drove them to the airport in silence, bought her ticket, and saw them both off and that was practically the end of it. When the restraining order—not to come within two hundred feet of my son—arrived, I wanted to fight it, but my lawyer told me to forget it. Even if I were to admit my bisexuality or homosexuality, that in itself was sufficient of a crime or sickness at that time in the Midwest, and no jury or court would find in my favor.

“Sally was good about the divorce. She sued on the grounds of irreconcilable differences and, as far as I know, never breathed a word about our real problem. I paid alimony as best I could for the next few years, then regularly until she married Walt Thompson—that’s his name, then they naturally were allowed to stop.

“I would send a Christmas card each year and a birthday card for Donald’s birthday. They were never acknowledged, but eventually a Christmas card would arrive every two or three years, always signed with the family names and with a return address, as if she did want to retain some shred of contact with the father of her son.” Chris slowed to a stop; his head dropped and he was rubbing his hands on his pants.

I shifted in my seat. These memories seemed to have disturbed Chris Bates more than he expected, even at this distance of time.

“That’s the address you will be giving me to check out? Is there a phone number?”

“No, there’s just an address in the middle of Baxter Springs. I understand the town has shrunk quite a bit since I was there a couple of times while we were married over twenty years ago.

“Looking back, I blame myself entirely for what happened. I behaved despicably towards Sally, going behind her back, lying and cheating, having sex with men.

“Probably I should never have married her, but that’s what we all did in those days, and I really thought I loved her—in my own way at that time. I should have waited, tested my feelings for her against the new urges for gay sex that were pushing upward in my mind and body.

“But I thought that I could be normal, whatever that meant, with her help and that I could make her happy. I was young and full of restless hormones, far from home, but she deserved a great deal more. And, even with Alan’s love over the years, I have wondered about her whenever one of the Christmas cards would arrive. I’ve hoped she’s gotten over her bitterness towards me and found happiness with that second marriage. I think she’s a small business tax accountant these days. Certainly Donald turned out to be a credit to her and I hope you’re going to be able to find him for me.”

“I’ll certainly be giving it my best effort, Chris, but I can’t guarantee that he’ll want to have anything further to do with you.”

“Don’t say that, Mark, I really need him.”

“Maybe, but does he want or need you? Well, a great deal is going to depend on how much his mother is willing to help. I’ve booked a flight to Joplin in Missouri from Palm Springs early Monday morning. Then I’ll drive to Baxter Springs and look up Mrs. Thompson, if that’s the name she uses.”

“She may have gone back to her maiden name—the Wilmots were a well-known family then in that part of Kansas. I guess Donald could have enlisted in the Marines under either of those

names, most likely that of his stepfather Thompson.”

“You never asked him while he was out here?”

“No, the subject never came up. We talked a little about his early life—the time he felt closest to his mother in Kansas. It is enough to assure me he was a genuine Midwesterner. And he had those few pictures to show me.”

“Yes, I’m going to need to borrow at least one of those, together with two or three from this past summer, to show your former wife for identification purposes. Any other evidence you have that might help?”

“I’ll go and get whatever I have for you now—and a check to cover some of your expenses while you’re in Kansas. How long do you expect to be away?”

“Hard to say. Depends on what your ex-wife is willing to tell me and where your son might be. Could be a couple of days or a week. I’ll keep you posted.”

He went off and produced the photos and even one of the Christmas cards. “I’ve kept it in a drawer in my desk. Don’t really know why.”

I left the Bates/Franklin home still uncertain of my own feelings in this case. As a newbie private eye, I wasn’t sure whether I was supposed to get emotionally involved with my clients, and I seemed to be getting emotionally stirred up by Chris’ complicated story. My stomach clenched. Maybe I was also hungry. I checked my cell—one fifty pm. It was too long since breakfast and the cookies. I called Dan at the office.

“Hey there, you hungry? Feel like a burger?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you at Grind. Ten minutes okay?”

We’d found this brand-new burger grill upstairs overlooking Palm Canyon Drive. Dan favored it, because some of the PS motor officers ate there; it gave him a chance to catch up and reminisce with them. Besides the meat was choice—both the burgers and the men.

He’d found a table overlooking the street where he could

watch the parade of early-in-the-season tourists passing by and he was also enjoying the occasional male eye candy down on ground level.

“How was your morning, lover-man?”

“I dunno know, Dan. I learned all I want to know about Bates’ former wife and how he came out gay behind her back. It didn’t show him in a particularly good light, but maybe that was the way you had to behave in those days. I’m certainly glad I had to make my choice in the twenty-first century. What have you been covering?”

“First, I’ve arranged to meet my buddy, Staff Sergeant Jerry Turnbull, one of the MPs on duty at Twenty-nine Palms for a drink tonight. I can ask him casually about young Donald.”

“Great. I’ve got a couple of photos from Chris for identification and his last name on his enlistment papers is probably Thompson.”

“Well, all of that should help, and I’ve got some more important news to tell you. But let’s order first. You want it with fries or without? Coleslaw?”

We placed our order and I waited for the rest of his news.

“You remember the woman I met at Manning’s party, while you were chatting up Chris Bates?”

“Yes, the one with the good-looking younger husband, who took your card?”

“Exactly. When she called me this morning, I didn’t remember the name at first, until she reminded me—Mrs. Fiona Fontaine. Anyway, she may have a job for me and is coming into the office on Monday.”

“That’s great news, Dan, now we’ll both have clients. That evening at Manning’s is really paying off.”

“Don’t get your hopes too high just yet. I’m not sure what Mrs. Fontaine has in mind or whether it’s something I can do.”

“You know you could do just as well as me—and some things you do even better.”

“Yes, like running my head into danger a little too frequently.”

“Well, find out what she needs. It’ll keep you busy while I’m away. Why don’t we have a beer to celebrate?”

We had a couple of beers to go with juicy burgers and seasoned fries and then drove back to the office. I wanted to get my notes organized and we went over what we knew about Sergeant Donald Bates before Dan went calling on his old mates at the Marine base.

“I’ll see what I can find out this evening, but it may take them a day or two to check. I want this to all seem very relaxed.”

“You know best how to handle this. Any info we can gather will help. I just checked on the Internet, and there seems to be only one motel in Baxter Springs, so I booked myself in there for Monday night.

“Now what are we going to do for this weekend?”

“I can think of a couple of things I’d like to do to you,” he leered at me, “and there is also that play-party Saturday night I’ve been told about.”

I grinned. “I knew you’d come up with something for me to remember you by while I’m away. But don’t leave too many marks.”

CHAPTER NINE

In the end we decided to try the Saturday play-party. Dan had met the host at one of the Barracks' Sunday afternoon beer busts and thought he seemed a right guy, with similar kink tastes, including leather. Jack was his name, and he had a house in Desert Hot Springs, not an area we knew very well, but probably worth the drive over there. We dressed accordingly, Dan in leather chaps, jeans, and high Wescoes, me in my usual boy uniform of leather shorts and low boots. We both wore harnesses under our T-shirts for traveling.

It took us a while to find the address in the dark; it was some kind of compound. As we walked through a small front garden, there was a sand-colored house in front of us, with a sign pointing round the back. We could hear the sound of heavy rock music as we walked round the house and found ourselves in a very large sandy yard full of near-naked male bodies and plenty of fetish equipment. No one seemed to be in charge, so Dan made a beeline for a Saint Andrew's cross. "Haven't played with one of these in years—not since my training days with Captain James—and that's a shitload of years ago. Okay, boy, get your shirt off and spread yourself over the cross."

I had been looking around at the other equipment. I recognized two fuck benches and some kind of wooden horse. All seemed already in use with bottoms tied down on each of them and Doms either flogging or fucking. There was a regular swimming pool with guys jumping in and out, and a kids' wading pool with a naked sub lying in some kind of liquid. Overall there looked to be about twenty men busy with some kind of sexual activity, from nipple torture to full-out fucking, while the music drowned out any screams or shouts in the night air.

There were large lights providing general illumination of the main area and deepening shadows in the corners. Fires were burning in a couple of stands with guys chatting around

them. After all, it was nighttime in late October, and by desert standards, the evening is definitely cool, but that didn't seem to be bothering anyone.

"Hey, boy, stop staring—like you've never seen a little orgy before." Well, I hadn't. "Get into position."

I shrugged off my shirt and then my harness, dropped them on top of the bag of toys I'd been toting. Then I walked gingerly up to the cross and spread my arms and legs. It felt cool against my chest and I relaxed slightly. Dan had been checking on the workmanship and pronounced it of good quality. I realized all this was a part of his past I didn't know much about.

"How come you know about such things, Master?"

"When I was about nineteen years old, a high school senior back in Philadelphia, I was undergoing training from a US Marine Captain, James Arthur—a tough young son of a bitch who had his own cross, amongst other things. He's the man who realized I was more Top than bottom, and taught me the first stages of being a responsible Master. He was very good for me, and I... lost him."

Dan's voice trailed away unnaturally; his body slumped from the strict military pose he'd assumed. I broke position to go over and take hold of his arms. "Are you all right, Master? Can I help you?"

He wiped a hand across his eyes, but he shrugged me off brusquely. "Get back to your post, boy. We're here to play and we're fucking well going to play—and hard." And he swung the heavy flogger he'd picked up from the toy bag. But it went nowhere near me, and he didn't repeat the gesture. Whoever Captain James Arthur had been and whatever part of Dan's past he represented, I wasn't sure I wanted to know at that moment.

"Master, your boy is ready." I'd hurried back and was holding onto the upper metal rings of the cross with my raised arms and my ass exposed and my dick hanging over the cross in back. "Master, I'm here."

Dan strode over to me, his eyes dulled, his look intense. He

started wrapping rope tightly around my extended left arm; then he moved to the right side, this time continuing round my chest and waist and down my right leg before kicking my booted foot sideways and anchoring it to the last rung. He finished tying my left leg and I tugged experimentally, but I was tight to the wood of the cross. Dan was muttering to himself as he came around my front. He slid a thick blindfold over my eyes, pulled hard on my nipples, and then batted my rising prick for his own amusement and to further excite me.

“Master, I’m...” I got no further; three fingers of one gloved hand reached into my mouth to silence me.

“Shut the fuck up. Just hold on to that cross tight.” He pulled out the fingers, slapped my head hard a couple of times so that my ears rang, and moved away.

“Plug you now, ass-head.” Even Dan’s voice seemed muffled. “No lube for you tonight, damn you, just some of my spit. In it goes. Come on, dick-head, open up and let this shiny black fireplug in that shitty hole of yours.” His voice was hoarse, but his hands were insistent and he shoved hard until what felt like some real fire hydrant slid into me and he forced it home. I tried to cooperate, to use my ass muscles as he trained me, but this seemed bigger than any plug I’d endured before and the absence of lube made it rougher.

Well, I thought, he said he wanted to play hard tonight, and my cock seems to think it’s great. Just brace up, Mark, and stop complaining.

It was unlike Dan to be so uncommunicative with me; he didn’t seem to know the man who loved him was right there. I heard him rummaging through our toy bag and the swish of the flogger moving through the air.

That he started on me, no warm-up, no friendly hand on my body to steady me, but hard blows along my shoulders as he moved from left to right, laid on as fiercely as he could. I gasped for breath, but he only stopped to exchange weapons, to pick up his rawhide flogger and to lay fresh lines down my torso. He got into a rhythm and I felt the strokes lacing my back. There were sounds coming from him, but no more coherent words.

My skin felt on fire, overheating, and I think it was beginning to crack. Blood started trickling from my welts. I guess he must've noticed that, because he grunted, switched to my ass and began to mark it too with cross-blows along my cheeks. I began to moan loudly; Dan was really in full Master mode, and then some. I told myself I could take it; take this new dark form of 'the rapture'. He was also excited by action around us; I heard a murmur of voices; guys who must have drifted over to watch.

Then he started to mumble again. "Now, mother-fucker, I'll show you what I've learned. You know me well enough. I don't quit until I finish the job. I'm going to crop that white ass of yours, and mark it properly, before I give you a real fuck as I promised."

I'd always disliked the riding crop and the results it left on me. Dan was being particularly harsh that evening, and I started to protest, shouting loudly and even screaming for him to stop. I should have been embarrassed by my lack of control, but the pain was thudding right through me, forcing my torso into the wood, while my treacherous penis was standing straight out in front of me. I was fighting, twisting uselessly in the ropes, trying to move my ass out of his way.

"Okay, you're trying to tempt me? You want me to use you, shit head? You want me to fuck that fiery red ass of yours? You've got it, boss man. I'm going to pull out this plug and nail you to the cross with my fuck-stick. Nail you as hard as I know how with my dick. No protection, no lube, just some spit on my pole, and whatever juices you have in your hole. Fuck you, you bastard, fuck you."

I heard him almost sobbing and spitting onto his hands, cock and its heavy PA. He'd pulled out the fireplug quickly. I felt my hole quivering with need, and then he was in me, in me as hard as he could go. I tried to respond, opening up for him, as his PA hit my prostate, wriggling my butt in appreciation, but he seemed to have gone far away.

By now, the onlookers had increased; the whispering was louder, with the majority urging Dan to fuck me harder.

He didn't seem to need encouragement. He slammed his sweaty body into my sore back. His hands moved over me, grasping my nipples to pull himself into me, massaging my shaft so that I was muttering and moaning alongside him. My lust had broken free and I was humping him back as he loudly tried to sink himself ever further into my bowels. It was as if a devil was driving both of us to higher pinnacles of pleasure and pain. It felt harsher and more demanding than ever before. Dan was all fire and force, and yet somehow he was carrying me with him. We were unaware of onlookers, hearing only our own moans. He wanted to take me, to fuck me to the heights, but I wanted him in return.

We both could only make animal-like grunts. He was banging me hard into the cross. I was putty in his hands, yelling loudly as he fucked me. Finally he shouted. "Fuck you, Sir, I'm coming in you at last." I felt his cream flowing into me, and, in grateful acknowledgment, my own penis shot two long streams of jism onto the ground in front of me.

I heard a round of applause, some shouting and then gradually voices started to fade away. Dan's body was covering mine, his weapon still tight in my hole. He spurted one more time and then grunted. Slowly his prick shrank down and out, and he slid down me, collapsing on the ground and clutching my left leg.

What seemed like an eternity passed. I just hung there, sweating, exhausted, bound tightly, and waited. Finally, "Oh fuck, Mark, what's happened? Mother of God, look at your back. How did that blood and bruising get there?" Pause. "Don't tell me I did that to you? God, how could I have inflicted so much pain and suffering? Look at the cum and muck oozing from your hole. Did I do that too?"

I nodded. By turning my head sideways, and nudging up the blindfold, I saw his face and part of his body slumped at the foot of the cross. He looked terribly distressed and disturbed.

He rose slowly to his feet, holding onto my sweaty, beaten torso to do so. "Let me get you down from there. No, I'd better get some ointment on the places where I've cut you. Oh, fuck,

what was I thinking about? You're the man I love, not some nameless nobody. Even then, Captain James drummed into me about a Top's responsibility..."

He stopped. A wave of crimson crossed his face as some memory moment returned. "Mother of God, did I think it was him on the cross? Was I punishing him for leaving me all those years ago, without a word? No, no, shit, that's madness. I'll get some ointment from someone. Be right back."

I wasn't going anywhere, trussed up to a cross of wood, a blindfold now up on my forehead so I could see. I began to feel cold, started shivering. It was probably a reaction to the highs of the last half hour. It was possibly a reaction to the realization that maybe even Dan could get out of control—Dan, the Master I depended on in our sex play; Dan, the young detective who sometimes leapt into danger without thinking.

He was back in a few minutes with Jack and another guy to help. While he crooned words of sympathy and spread some vile smelling ointment on my shoulders and butt, the other two men unlaced me rapidly from the cross. I clung to the upper rungs, afraid to let go until I felt my booted feet come loose. Then Dan put his arms around me and I sank backwards onto his bare chest.

Holding me tightly, Dan was thanking the two helpers winding up the ropes, placing them and the floggers that were scattered around into our toy bag. Somehow he got my loose T-shirt and jeans back onto me, although I kept flinching as material rubbed against the whipped areas.

My Master was almost weeping as he cuddled and huddled against me. "Christ on a crutch, what have I done? Don't remember hitting so hard. Must've been me. Captain James. Why did you go away? My complete bad. Oh shit—my boy, my lover, I didn't mean it."

All the way home in the car, Dan kept talking—mainly about the time when he was a high school senior training with his first Sir, this mysterious Captain James. It was as if that Saint Andrew's cross in Desert Hot Springs had triggered memories from ten years before, together with some unfinished business between

the two of them. I scarcely listened; the waves of pain and discomfort kept washing over me, but I realized that sometime in the future we would have to exorcize that ghost.

Back at the *casita*, he washed me very gently in tepid water inside the shower, then applied the stronger unguent that Manning had given me months before. We just lay on the bed, too exhausted, too wired, too wounded to really sleep. But he kept his arm around my waist, seeking my forgiveness.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Dan. Yes, it was brutal and bloody. But most of the time I thought you were just testing me—testing my endurance at the hands of my Master. So I endured and enjoyed the pain as well as the pleasure. That’s what you’re teaching me, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Mark, but not like that. I went somewhere dark, got lost in a memory of frustration and despair, and took it out on you. I’m scarcely worthy of being called a Master. I have to make sure it doesn’t happen again. I need to always love you. That’s my responsibility and duty.”

“Try to rest, Dan, it will seem better tomorrow, I’m sure.”

I came slowly to the surface on Sunday morning. My whole body ached; my shoulders and ass at least were still very sore, despite the applications of ointment by Dan the previous night. Some memories of the whipping on the St. Andrew’s cross played in front of my eyes before I was fully awake and opened my eyelids.

Maybe I moved too; when I did finally stir I found Dan gazing at me intently, a look of concern and apprehension in his brown eyes.

“Are you feeling any better, Mark? You were very restless during the night, so I left you alone and slept on the sofa.”

I felt too tired to make some kind of friendly retort. “As well as can be expected, Master. You really seemed to have it in for me when you punished me on the cross.”

He reached out to touch my arm. “I’m sorry, I got carried away. I know that sounds pretty feeble, but I never meant to hurt

you to this extent. I don't think I really meant to harm you. It was going to be a Saturday night special all right, but I forgot myself and my own rule. I'm really, really sorry, Mark."

"Okay, maybe, but part of the time you seemed to be talking to someone else, not me at all. It was almost as if you were exorcising some demon, Dan."

My Master sat up in our bed and carefully pulled me to him. "Maybe that's true. You know, it's funny how little we've told each other about our pasts during this year we've known one another. We've been too busy living in the present, Mark, to bother about what happened before we met."

"But last night, someone or some episode from your past suddenly came back to haunt you, or worse, to take over your mind."

"Perhaps it was something like that. I honestly don't really remember all the details, and I certainly don't like the results—particularly my lack of control in my play with the man I love and respect." He seemed so desolate that I relented.

"How about we talk it over, Dan? That might help both of us to understand. It's too important to ignore or to pretend nothing happened. You were mumbling something about a Captain James, I think."

"Yes, Captain James Arthur USMC. Had I told you before that he was my guide and mentor in leather sex play when I was a senior back home in Philadelphia? Had I mentioned him at all before last night?"

"No, nothing really before last night. At the play party I think you said the St. Andrew's cross reminded you of him, that he owned the first one you'd ever seen."

"His was the first one I'd ever been roped to, ever been punished on."

"It must have been a powerful sex symbol to what, an eighteen or nineteen-year-old student?"

He nodded a couple of times. "Indeed it was—and still is. I

was roped to it several times that winter. The captain was on sick leave, recovering from war wounds he suffered in Iraq. For some reason he took me on as his student, his apt pupil in man-sex, and taught me the basics of honor, trust, and obedience, which I've tried to follow ever since."

"So what happened to break it up?"

Dan had climbed off the bed and was slowly moving aimlessly round the room. "Oh, I had it all planned out. After several heated discussions with my parents and Captain James about my future, it was agreed I should go away to college for two years and then join the Marines, to follow in his footsteps.

"As I graduated from high school, I also graduated from the captain's more specialized academy. You know I'll never forget his graduation present. By then it was becoming obvious that I was emerging as a Top in my leather education rather than as a bottom."

"You mumbled something about that last night. You knew your preference even then?"

"Yes, Mark, even at nineteen. On our final weekend together, my Master offered me his own body and asshole for my true initiation into the art of fucking a man, so that I would learn to perform properly and respectfully towards another human being. I've never forgotten that day."

I was decidedly curious. "But then something must've gone badly wrong soon after that?"

"Yes, I went away to college; he was recalled to active duty. I swore undying allegiance to him, and I thought he felt something of the same towards me. We exchanged emails for a month. Then suddenly complete silence—nothing, no word, no message. It was as if he dropped off the face of the earth. Since I had no family connection, I couldn't get information through any official channels. His sister, with whom he had lived in Philadelphia, had moved and left no forwarding address. I was alone, five hundred miles from home, and desolate. I lost him—and I never found him again—my teacher, my Master, my man." Dan broke down

and I pulled him onto the bed with me.

“Dan, Dan, I’m so, so very sorry. I had no idea. I never asked. I never knew. And somehow the dam you’d bottled up inside you broke last night?”

“I guess so, and so I whipped you instead of Captain James, the man who taught me and abandoned me, or so I thought.”

“You never found out what happened?”

“No, I spent much of my spare time during my Marine service trying to find out and I still keep looking, but no real resolution. I love you, Mark, as, in a sense, I must’ve loved him and your body was roped to one of the first crosses I’d worked with since. And you took the brunt of my rage and frustration. Again, what can I say beyond I do love you and I’m terribly sorry for whipping you that way.”

I kissed my proud, impulsive, determined, young lover. “I guess I should forgive you this time. But it was so unlike you to lose control during a session, and that worried me.”

“That bothers me too. Not least because one of Captain James’ first instructions was to always be aware of and take care of the guy you are working with.”

Suddenly there was a pounding on our *casita* door, accompanied by loud barking from our dog Wolf. “Daddy, Dan, Aunt Edith says you should come now if you want any breakfast this morning.” It was Mary.

We started to chuckle and Dan hugged me warily. “I guess normal life still goes on. We mustn’t keep Edith waiting.” So we dressed quickly, though I needed some help with loose-fitting clothes, and together we began the day.

But Dan was clearly still worried about what happened at that play party. “How about you and I get the bike out and go for a ride back to Desert Hot Springs this afternoon. I want to re-create Saturday night.”

“I’m game, if you really want to, and the ladies won’t miss us for an hour or so.”

That afternoon, quite deliberately, I'd dressed the way I had on Saturday night in my boy uniform of white T-shirt, harness underneath, leather shorts, and low boots. I was not surprised to find Dan in his chaps, jeans, and Wescoes. We both had only some vague ideas about what we wanted to do. I needed to find out whether Dan could escape his past and control himself.

"This morning I called Jack, the guy who owns the house where the play party was held and asked if we could come over for thirty minutes or so. He said okay when I admitted who I was. Is your butt really up for this, Mark? I don't want to irritate it any further."

"I'll manage. You did put a liberal coat of your "wonder ointment" over it all after breakfast, and besides, I'm off to the Midwest tomorrow, so this is our only chance to find out."

He nodded; we mounted up; no toys, no equipment this time. I held him tightly round the waist. That just seemed so right and natural. Surely we couldn't let one night upset the delicate balance of our relationship. Still, my ass felt freshly bruised by the time we arrived at the walled enclosure.

I vaguely remembered Jack, the owner, from the previous night. He seemed curious and uncertain about our motives, but agreed to leave us alone in the back area.

There was the St. Andrew's cross standing starkly upright amidst the other S&M equipment and some of the debris from the party. It looked less threatening than in my recent nightmares, but that was no surprise. It was simply a wooden cross, an instrument of pleasure and pain for S&M players. Above all, I didn't feel that it held any power or threat to me.

Dan marched, and I mean marched, straight over to it and spread his arms wide to embrace it. At first he stood rigid. I walked nearer. His shoulders were quivering and suddenly I was concerned and confused enough to move up and touch his shoulders. He jumped as if I'd given him an electric shock.

"Dan, it's me, Mark. We're here in Palm Springs. Come back to me—I need you." I kept my hands in place, and slowly he

calmed, but didn't move.

"Hold me, Mark. I'm praying for forgiveness, forgiveness for harming the man I love, forgiveness from Captain James wherever he is, for ignoring his teaching and his love."

I pressed myself into him, my cock beginning to stir in my leather shorts. I tended to sometimes forget how young he was. He may have been macho and physically strong, but I wondered whether his earlier inner emotional life had been anywhere near as complicated and convoluted as mine had been.

"Don't beat yourself up, Dan. You can overcome any power that cross has over you. It's the symbol of something powerful—yes, but it can also be good and noble for you. You were trained to revere that cross. You are trained to acknowledge its place in your existence. Now make it release you back to me."

Very slowly his hands let loose, his breath slowed, and his torso moved. I stepped away. Dan turned and faced me. He drew himself Marine proud and tall, took a few steps, and then stopped, looking lost again. I decided to take a chance and pulled off my shirt.

"Dan, I'm going to stand at the cross, arms and legs stretched. I'm spreading myself open for you alone. Now, show me you understand."

I felt excited and empowered. The sun shone down on my near-naked torso, warm against the wood. My cock swelled to full erection in my shorts, thrusting out over the top. Dan's eyes dropped to my crotch and then he started fingering his own genitals. I had taken my stance on that wooden cross, but this time I was facing him. This time my eyes held him, willing him to believe in me and send the spirit of Captain James or whatever it was back to the shadows.

"I am alive and well. It is my body that wants you, my cock that demands you. Come and claim your living and lusty man, Dan."

He started towards me; his face gradually eased into a smile and the earlier tension ebbed away. My hands gripped high and

tight to the wood and my legs were spread open.

He came to me, kissed me hard, and then slid down my torso. His hands found my leaking cockhead and he pulled open the buttons on my shorts. He chuckled when he saw the briefs I was wearing to protect my ass, and he reached to finger the outline of my eager dick. Then out into the sunshine he brought it to full mast before he yanked down pants and briefs to my knees. Suddenly I felt his hot mouth on my free prick head. I thrust my pelvis towards him as he sucked more of me into himself.

This was truly a rapture, an incredible first for both of us. We grunted together, or rather I did. My Master was too busy giving me the generous gift of himself, sucking me off, letting me know the power that I momentarily held over him, letting me know truly how much we needed one another. I felt his tongue rolling over my shaft. His lips locked tight as he swallowed me and my groans grew ever louder.

My body was cold and yet wet with perspiration from the hot sun. I pushed my booted feet more firmly into the ground as I thrust my dick into his warm, damp orifice. My rod was never harder nor fuller of life as my lover drew my very essence from me. I'd swear I felt the cross vibrate behind me, as I came again and again.

I think that was exactly what we both needed and we both felt free and open again with one another. No condom, no restraints, just physical passion between two men who needed to connect again. My pleasure overflowed into his mouth and he swallowed me whole. Our mission was a success. It was truly like a catharsis between us.

Later Dan told me how irresistible he'd found my actions. "You dared me. You stood up there on the cross that had caused you so much anguish. You were proud and vulnerable. You dared me to show you that I really did love you."

We climbed back onto the bike and rode home into the sunset of a desert winter afternoon. We ate dinner with the family, quiet and happy, with a new realization of how much we meant to one another. And we slept soundly and dreamlessly together.

CHAPTER TEN

Monday morning came far too early. With an apologetic look still on his face, Dan drove me to Palm Springs International Airport in plenty of time for a seven am departure. By the time I got to Joplin in Missouri, and picked up my rental car, it was mid-afternoon local time. My back and my ass were still bruised, but I knew I'd live, and more than just that.

I'd been looking forward to this trip. It would be my first time in the Midwest and I was curious as to whether the heartland would be all that different from California, where I'd been born and bred. Even my time in the Air Force had been spent largely in my home state and overseas, but I've flown over the middle of the country several times over the years.

It was twenty miles to my destination, the Baxter Motel in Baxter Springs, part freeway driving, part quieter country roads. The town no longer seemed very large, even though historic Route 66 ran through it, and I couldn't resist stopping at the corner coffee shop of the same name.

"Why, yes, I can remember this downturn area was bustling with stores and banks—even two movie theaters." The gray-haired waitress seemed happy enough to chat to one of her few customers that October afternoon. "Now, folks have drifted away to places like Joplin and there's scarcely enough customers to keep half a dozen places of business open. Not much to keep the youngsters here neither—or jobs. More excitements in places like Kansas City."

"I guess you've lived here quite a while." I was encouraging her to keep chatting as she casually cleaned the already tidy counter.

"Bless my heart, I was born and raised here in Baxter Springs, and I hope to rest my bones in Kansas. I like to think of this town as a Grand Old Lady, a little frayed around the edges nowadays, but she still got an ounce of spunk left in her."

I thanked her for the coffee and fresh peach cobbler, and got

directions to the motel. “Now you come by for breakfast in the morning, young man, and you’ll get the best homemade sausage and gravy in the whole state.”

Looking around as I drove down the main street, I saw what she meant. Stores were vacant, one bank building was closed, grass was creeping through concrete walkways and the autumn leaves were drifting off the oak trees.

The motel was beyond a bend of the highway, a pleasant enough place for a night’s stay with a friendly front office staff. Why did everyone here seem so much more easy-going and solicitous of strangers?

The room was quiet, quite spacious, and away from the main road. I unpacked my few things, washed and cleaned up, and checked the face in the mirror. I hope I looked clean-cut, earnest, and reliable and that the former Mrs. Bates might be home that evening.

The one-time Cora Sally Wilmot lived on 12th Street, up the hill from the downtown area. The house was a classic looking Colonial-style two-storey home, which had been carefully restored in white clapboard. My plan was to arrive at her home unannounced and try for a spontaneous reaction to my questions about her son.

I drove past the house, circled the quiet residential neighborhood, and parked my rental Ford a few doors down. There were other cars in driveways and on the street. Six pm was a time for dinner and relaxing, and I crossed my fingers as I rang the doorbell.

It was a moment or two before a middle-aged, attractive woman in a business suit opened the front door.

“Mrs. Bates? Mrs. Christopher Bates?”

She blinked twice and blushed slightly; one hand went to check her hair. “Bates—now there’s a name I haven’t been called in many a year.”

“Mrs. Thompson? Ms. Wilmot? My name is Mark Farrell. Your former husband has sent me to ask about the whereabouts

of your joint son, Donald.”

The face darkened immediately, then crumpled.

“Donnie was killed in action six, no, eight months ago in Afghanistan. Surely Chris knows that?”

“But, ma’am, that’s not possible. Donald has been visiting his father in Palm Springs all summer, from the US Marine base in Twenty-nine Palms. He disappeared about ten days ago and I’ve been retained to find him.”

“You better come inside. We can’t stand discussing this on the front step. What did you say your name was?”

She was ushering me into the house and into an immaculate living room obviously reserved for guests and furnished in early nineties’ rather heavy furniture. We stood uncertainly in the middle of the room.

“My name is Mark Farrell. I’m a private investigator in Palm Springs. Here are my credentials.”

She looked quickly, but carefully at my identification, and nodded.

“Christopher Bates was visited by Donald in June of this year. He’s a Sergeant at the US Marine base not far from Palm Springs.”

“That can’t be. I told you, Donnie was killed on active duty in the war in Afghanistan at the beginning of this year. They brought his body home and he’s buried in the cemetery on the edge of town.”

“But he spent most of his spare time this summer getting acquainted with his dad, until he seems to have suddenly disappeared just over a week ago. I’ve even got some photos of them together.”

I fished the photos Chris had given me out of my portfolio and handed them to her. I’m sure the confusion on her face was mirrored on my own.

“There’s a picture of Donnie on the mantle over there.” She pointed to the fireplace.

I walked over to take a look at the small snapshot in a wooden frame. There was a likeness to the guy in Chris's pictures, but it was not the same man. On the other hand, there was a distinct resemblance to Chris—a much younger Chris, the graduate student at Berkeley, as I imagined him.

"Mom, what's going on?" A pretty teenage girl erupted into the room. "Oh, I'm sorry, you have company."

"That's all right dear. Mark, this is my daughter, Megan. Megan, this is Mark. He's, er, a friend of Donnie's."

Sally Wilmot-Bates-Thompson was still quick-witted in giving me an identity, but not as fast as her daughter. "Who's in the picture, mom? Is it Donnie?"

The mother looked distractedly at the photograph she'd been waving during the introductions and handed it over. Megan, who had something of her mother's good facial features, held the picture in the fading light of the sunset outside.

"Oh, it's not Donnie, but it's Donald and who's the older guy?"

"That's Donnie's father, dear—Chris, remember, my former husband from long ago. Why don't you make some tea or coffee for Mark and me, please? I think we both have had something of a shock."

Megan bounced back out of the room. There was a distinct family resemblance—tallish, but nicely proportioned women with delicate features. Sally pointed to the chairs and I sank into the nearest one.

"Mr. Farrell..."

"Mark, please."

"Thank you, that would be easier. This has been something of an unexpected evening." She looked closely at the photos again. "It's the first picture of Chris I've seen in twenty years or so. He seems to be aging nicely, and I hope he is well, and his, er, friend, Alan?"

"Yes, thank you. I've only met them recently through a mutual

friend and Chris asked for my professional help. I take it the young man in the photo is not your son Donald, but some guy you both know, with the same first name.”

She sighed. “That’s right. The two boys did look somewhat alike, both about the same height and age. They met in Marine training, about three or four years ago now. Donnie thought it was funny that they both had the same first name and similar last names—Bates and Donald was Tate or Gate or...”

“Gates. It was Donald Gates, mom. Here’s the tea and I put some cookies out. Remember how he was an orphan from Kansas City and how he used to tease me when he came to stay here with Donnie.” She was smiling at the memory.

“Yes, dear, now Mark and I have some business to talk over, so why don’t you go and get started on your homework?”

“Oh, Mom, okay. Perhaps I’ll see you again later, Mark?”

Out she bounced again, still with a smile on her face.

“Teenagers, where do they get their energy? Do you have children, Mark?”

“Yes, one daughter, Mary—she’s ten—and wonderful.”

Sally looked at me more closely. “Oh, I thought, being a new friend of Chris, you might be...”

“Might be gay too? Yes, Mrs. Bates, I am gay too. My wife died some six years ago, and Mary is all I have left. But I now have a male partner for support and love.”

“I’m terribly sorry. That was very rude of me. Your life is no business of mine. Why, I hardly know you! But I’ve been rather shaken by this evening’s events—and seeing Chris’s picture again. I thought I’d learned to be less prejudiced and judgmental, but obviously I don’t always succeed.”

“No harm done. I’m sorry, but what should I call you?”

“Under these circumstances, I think it better be Sally, since I’ve been calling you Mark.”

“Thank you, Sally. So, the young man who came and

introduced himself to Chris as your joint son was no relative, but a close service buddy of Donald, I mean, Donnie.”

“Yes, it’s easy to get confused. Donald Gates was an orphan, as Megan said, and the two met in basic training in the Marines and became great friends. Donnie asked him to come and stay with us a couple of times on leave, before they went overseas, and they served in the same unit out there. In fact, Donald was right on the spot when Donnie was killed in an ambush. He too was injured and much shaken, but he came back with the coffin and attended the memorial services here. I wanted him to stay on here. He had no family of his own, but he was still in the Marine Corps and had to go back on active duty.”

“My job, I guess, is still to try to find him for Chris. Do you know where he might be? Did he have any relatives at all around here?”

“He never mentioned any family, real or adopted. That’s strange, considering what a pleasant outgoing personality he had. You’d think some couple would have taken him out of the orphanage, but apparently not. I seem to remember he’d been living in Kansas City, before he enlisted, but I’ve no idea whereabouts.”

“Perhaps I’ll try looking up there for him. Well, I’m sorry to have upset your evening, Sally, and I’m even sorrier for your loss. Donnie seems to have gathered some good friends around him.”

As we moved towards the front door, she stopped. “Would you, or Chris, like to see where Donnie is buried?”

I hesitated for a moment. “I can’t speak for Chris without talking to him. But, yes, I think I would like to do that, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“I could take you to the cemetery tomorrow afternoon, if you’re free.”

“That would be very kind of you, Sally. I’ll try to get Chris on the phone tonight and bring him up to date.”

We arranged to meet at the house at two pm the following day, shook hands politely, and then she suddenly smiled at me, and I

could see something of what must have attracted Christopher Bates some twenty five years ago.

“Good night, Sally, and thank you.”

“Say hello to Chris for me, will you, and I’m sorry to make you the bearer of the sad news about Donnie.”

I climbed back into the rental and drove the short distance to the motel. My mind was trying to sort out these strange new circumstances and thinking ahead to my phone conversation with Chris. His true son, Donnie Bates–Thompson was dead and buried, another casualty of war. An orphan stranger, who knew this area, that family, and who was a close friend of Donnie in particular, had assumed his identity to meet Christopher Bates. At least that got rid of any element of family incest in the case, but didn’t put the false Donald in a very favorable light. Maybe it was just that he’d been lonely and looking for some form of family life to attach himself to. How could I find this young needle in the haystack of Kansas City, if he was even holed up there?

I sighed as I parked at the Baxter Motel. First things first meant talking to Chris. Back in my room, I checked the time on my cell phone. It was seven-thirty local time, only five-thirty in Palm Springs. Maybe he and Alan would be having cocktails on their terrace.

Chris picked up on the second or third ring. “Are you in Baxter Springs? What have you got for me?”

“Evening, Chris, and how are you? I hope you’re sitting down, as I’ve got some bad news for you and some confusing, but maybe good news for you.”

As quietly and as succinctly as I could, I explained about the death of his son, and the proposed visit to his grave, and the mystery of the false Donald, the stranger who had assumed Donnie’s identity for unknown reasons. I mentioned that his ex-wife would like him to call her. I asked for further instructions.

There was a long pause on the other end. “Frankly, I’m speechless, Mark. This isn’t what I expected at all, and I need a few minutes to sort it out. It’s been a difficult day here. Alan

has had another attack and is resting in Eisenhower tonight. I'm hoping they'll release him from the hospital tomorrow as he doesn't seem to be in any further pain. I'll call you back in fifteen minutes or so, if that's convenient."

I assured him it was. Suddenly I was hungry. I'd eaten very little that day, but I didn't want to stray far from the motel. A call to the front desk told me that there was a pizza place in town that would deliver, and take credit cards. So I quickly ordered a large sausage and mushroom pizza with a soft crust, a soda, and a side salad, which were promised for delivery in the next half hour.

Chris was back in less than ten minutes. "I'm still trying to absorb what you've told me, Mark, and I thank you for all your efforts today and please thank Sally for being so helpful too. It also must've been very disturbing for her.

"Now, first things first, I can't fly out there at the moment with Alan back in the hospital. So will you order a nice wreath that you can take to Donald's, no, Donnie's grave tomorrow. Funny, I can't think of him with that name, but then I didn't really know him. Maybe I'll be able to visit the cemetery in the near future and pay my respects. What a loss to Sally! And what about her husband?"

"Now you mention it, he wasn't at home. In fact, he wasn't even talked about. Strange—I'll ask tomorrow when I see Sally again."

"As for Donald, I still want you to find him. There is some connection between us, even if it isn't family and I don't think it's just a sexual attraction, although I admit that may be some part of it. No, there's more than that. I know there isn't much to go on, but now you have his real name—Donald Gates. I like the sound of it."

"But it's not an uncommon name, Chris, and we don't know that he's come back here to Kansas. I can drive to Kansas City and check in local orphanages and start with that."

"Excellent, Mark, I knew you were the right guy for the job. Please keep on the trail and don't bother about the expense. I know this new search will take several days, but for me it's worth it."

“Even if it leads nowhere?”

“I’m more hopeful, but even I have to accept it could come to a dead end. Just keep me posted, and thanks again.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow night. Oh, I think the pizza man is knocking at my door with dinner. Good night.” I shouted at the door, “Just a minute. Be right there.”

It was indeed the deliveryman, a fresh-faced kid, probably a senior in high school. He grinned when he saw the tip on the credit card slip, but he was way too young to turn me on, and besides I needed to talk to Dan soon.

The pizza was freshly made; I was hungry and soon demolished it all and the salad. I felt much better. Then it was more than time to call home. Edith sounded glad to hear from me and relieved that I’d had some food. Mary wanted me to collect some proper Kansas souvenirs for a school project. Dan had just finished grilling some hamburgers for dinner, and offered to return the call within an hour. I gave them a simplified version of my search, explaining that I would be moving on to Kansas City for a few days and I’d let them know where I was staying and when I’d be back.

I needed to relax, so I did a few cardio exercises in the room before taking a long, hot, but lonely shower. Then I pulled out my laptop and booted it up. I started making notes of my conversation with Sally Bates-Thompson and pulled out the photographs again. There were two shots of Chris and the false Donald, one of Donald alone, and the one of a young boy with his mother. I looked closely at this again. The woman did not look like Sally Bates-Thompson. This lady was blonde and seemed more petite, while the boy, whom I guessed to be about four years old, was dark and serious with a strong chin line but could’ve been the false Donald—I must stop calling him that—with his real mother. After all, Donald had given it Chris, who presumably hadn’t checked it all too closely. I turned it over, but it was a copy with no clues on the back to help me.

Then Dan was on the cell. “Hey, boss man, I’ve got some info back from Twenty-nine Palms. Not too good, I’m afraid.

No one seems to have known this Sergeant Donald Thompson at the base.”

“That’s because that’s the wrong name. Our guy is Sergeant Donald Gates.” I gave him the full details of what I’d learned from the former Mrs. Bates.

“Fuck me, so it’s a real case of false identity and a son who died fighting in service for his country. God rest his soul. Wow, you’re really going to have a wild crazy ride. You think he’s holed up in Kansas City?”

“That’s the best clue I’ve got at the moment. It seems to have been his only hometown and maybe he bolted back there in response to Chris’s heavy come-on. I’ll check the orphanages, also try the gay and leather bars and hope he might show up there. At least I know what he looks like.”

“Why leather bars? Was that Donald’s fetish?”

“It’s Chris Bates’ favorite kink. From what I’ve learned, Donald didn’t seem to object. In fact he seemed to enjoy it while they were together.”

“I guess it’s a possible link, and a pleasant way to spend some time in a strange city, lover-man. Meantime, I’ll check the new name in Twenty-nine Palms. Donald Gates, you said. Spelled as it sounds?”

“I didn’t ask in the confusion this evening, but I’ll ask tomorrow when I see Sally again.”

“Sally’ is it? And what’s she like? I know Chris behaved like an idiot about his responsibilities when they were at Berkeley, but she sounded like the homophobic bitch from hell.”

“I think she’s eased up some since those days. We got on well enough under the circumstances. It came out that I was gay with a male partner, and she didn’t drive me from the house shrieking and screaming. I may find out more with the cemetery visit tomorrow.”

“Okay, lover man, just don’t think of changing your sexual orientation again back there in Kansas.”

“Not while I’m waiting to cuddle and have your dick up my eager ass.”

We talked dirty for a few moments and then hung up. It was getting late; I’d had a long day. But I was feeling horny, and jerked myself off into my hand, thinking of big bad Dan back in the Palm Springs *casita*, also all alone.

Next morning I drove around some, found the Walmart the desk clerk mentioned that had early donuts and coffee—shades of my LAPD days. Then I decided a walk was in order and went in search of the one local florist. She was helpful and promised a wreath of artificial flowers and foliage in autumnal colors by noon. There wasn’t much else to do in downtown Baxter Springs, but I ducked into a couple of souvenir stores to find something for Mary. There were some cute Route 66 T-shirts—and I found one in the right size—a couple of old-fashioned roadmaps and three vintage toy cars, as well as packages of *Route 66 freshly shelled pecans*—a local specialty, I was told. Well, it was a start.

By then it was time for an early lunch and I wandered back to the Route 66 coffee shop. My waitress wasn’t there. “Effie doesn’t come in until three o’clock today.” I settled on trying the local sausage and gravy as she had advised. It wasn’t half bad, and I felt much better as I picked up the wreath. She’d done a good job and I added a card. “For Donnie—from his absent but loving father Christopher and his friend Mark.”

Back at the motel, I decided to pay for a second night, as I didn’t know how much time I would have with Sally Bates-Thompson and I didn’t want to rush things. I also wasn’t sure what to wear to a cemetery and hadn’t brought much with me. So I settled for my travel outfit again—my dark sports jacket and slacks, with a matching tie and clean dress shirt. I had time to rinse out my polo shirt and briefs from the previous day and to hang them to dry. Weird, I hadn’t done my own laundry for years; was I spoiled rotten!

I offered to drive Sally to the cemetery that Tuesday afternoon. She agreed. Once again she was wearing a business suit, so I thought I might gain more background information.

“I hope I’m not taking you away from your job this afternoon.”

“No, I have a certain amount of seniority in the company. I like to come out here about once a month. Turn left at the next intersection. It’s about three miles further.”

“You’ve lived around here most of your life, I understood from Chris? By the way, he sent his regards and hopes to come out to see Donnie’s grave soon. There’s a wreath from both of us on the backseat.”

“That’s very kind of you, and Chris will be welcome anytime. And to answer your question, my family has lived in this part of Kansas— Sorry, you need to take this side road to the right. We’ve been here for about seventy years.”

“I’ve noticed that Kansans tend to stay close to home.”

She laughed. “Yes, we may fly away for a while—as I did to California with Chris—but sooner or later, we seem to come back and settle down. It’s a comfortable existence.

“Well, we’re almost there. You can see the Civil War Memorial on the left in the distance.”

The cemetery was larger, and also more barren-looking than I’d expected, not that I’m any expert on the subject. There seem to be few headstones, but innumerable plots laid out in squares or rectangles with flat grave markers. We finally stopped and I helped Sally out with the two plants she’d brought with her. My wreath and I followed behind. It seemed an exposed open area and a brisk breeze was blowing.

“This is the Wilmot family plot—that’s the tradition out here. There are my parents’ graves, my older brother who died near the end of the Vietnam War. Here’s my husband Walt. Donnie is lying over there and my space is between them. And there’s still room for Megan and any family she might have. The plants are for Walt and Donnie, to replace those dead flowers.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you’d also lost your husband.”

“Yes, about three years ago, he had a massive stroke at work and died immediately. It was a shock, of course, since he wasn’t

even sixty, but somehow Donnie's death remains more disturbing. He was so far away, and I could do nothing to help."

We placed our offerings near the paved headstones and stood in silence with our heads bowed, each lost in their own thoughts. She sighed, and then bent down to pat each of the stones. I left her alone for a minute or two, while I disposed of the dead flowers in the trash cans conveniently spaced at regular intervals.

It seemed a depressing place, the burial ground empty of any other people, the sun disappearing behind the clouds and the breeze strengthening. Sally looked around the family plot and then turned to me with the determined look on a face that was still relatively unlined. I'd noticed she wore little makeup, except for a subdued lipstick. I think the color was called coral—Blythe had also worn something like it.

"Can you spare me a few more minutes, Mark? I'd like a chance to talk to you about Chris, Donnie, and Donald. I haven't really had a chance to do that in recent years and our meeting last night got me to thinking."

"Yes, of course, and I've got a couple of questions perhaps you can help me with. How about having a cup of tea and a slice of peach cobbler in the Route 66 Coffee Shop in town?"

She smiled. "So you've already found it, and they do make the cobbler with fresh fruit every day. Yes, I'd like that."

We hurried back to the car, both seemingly anxious to leave this dismal home of so many sad memories.

"I've lived here almost all my days, happily enough. Baxter Springs has changed and declined. I doubt it can be brought back to life. I broke away with Christopher. He was exuberant and full of plans for our future with our children elsewhere. We were full of energy and hormones. At first it seemed so exciting and possible, but I now know our marriage was a mistake. I still don't completely understand why Chris drew away from me—and other women—and developed this overwhelming need to be with men.

"But I've read up, listened, talked, and come to realize that it

was inevitable. We were too hasty, too young to wait and we both behaved rather badly. I shouldn't have kept Donnie away from him, but I was ignorant and afraid. The divorce was necessary, I suppose, but at least I should have let him come to see his son. Has he been happy—with his partner, I think you call it?"

"Yes, I think so, although, as I've said, I don't know them very well. They've been together over twenty years, with the ups and downs of any relationship. But, privately, I think Chris needed someone like Donald to come along, to be his son and fill a gap that still existed. Well, here we are. Let's see what the pie special is today."

Effie was behind the counter again as we walked in. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Thompson. Good afternoon, young man. So you came back?"

"Hello, Effie, we both need some hot tea and some of your excellent cobbler."

"Well, it's peach again, but we made it fresh only this morning, and I think there's some left."

We found a quiet corner table and sat for a moment in silence.

"Sally, you've met Donald, what kind of man was he?"

"When he and Donnie were young Marines, he was always happy and thoughtful. I do think he was looking for a family and Donnie definitely seemed to fit his need for a big brother. They were almost inseparable, playing jokes on one another. They even started to look alike with that Marine haircut and, in uniform, it was hard to tell one from another, at least for a moment or so.

"But when Donald brought Donnie's body back for burial, he had changed, he was angry and belligerent. Perhaps it was the whole business of war. Perhaps it was the loss of his buddy, but he seemed hurt mentally as well as physically. With us, he was torn between wanting to hold on to some part of Donnie and wanting to get far away from any connection with that part of his life. So he was glad to go back to the Marines, although I'm pleased he was brought back to this country."

"That's what I'm trying to understand. Why would he come

in search of Chris and try to pass himself off as Donnie?”

“I don’t know either. Perhaps again it was a chance to connect to a family, perhaps to somehow connect to part of Donnie. Hopefully, you will find out.”

“Do you think he would’ve come back to Kansas?”

“It’s the only place which Donald could call home in any sense of the word. And somewhere like Kansas City is large enough to get lost in.”

“Did he have any trade or profession he wanted to follow when he came out of the Marines?”

“Remember that I saw him largely in the earlier years.” She stopped to taste the cobbler that lay uneaten between us. “I remember in one of the last Christmas messages, Donnie said that he and Donald had been seriously thinking of taking up careers in law enforcement, when they came out of the service. Oh, that would be about this time, wouldn’t it?” Her voice wobbled and she took a quick gulp of tea.

“Yes, I believe their discharge would be around the beginning of November. One last thing, would you look at this picture for me? I believe Donald gave this copy to Chris during the summer and I wonder who the people might be.”

She looked at the picture, puzzled at first, but then a small smile touched her mouth. “I’m pretty certain the boy would be Donald—that determined chin must’ve been there from an early age. The lady I don’t know, but my guess is that she was his mother. You see Donald wasn’t orphaned until he was four or five, and I believe that his mother was killed in an accident. There seemed to be no relatives, so the state eventually left him in the orphanage.”

“Do you remember the name of the orphanage?”

“No, Donald didn’t like to talk about it when he was with us, but he already had his full name, Donald Peter Gates, when he arrived there. Is that any help?” She handed the picture back. “Do you have an extra copy of the one you showed me of Chris and Donald?”

“No, but I’ll make certain Chris sends you one immediately.”

“Here’s my card, and I’ve put my home address and phone number on the back.”

“And here’s mine with my cell number on it. If you think of anything else that might be relevant to the search, please let me know.”

I paid the bill and drove her home. It was already almost five pm and the wind was strong.

“Thank you for all your time and help, Sally. It’s been a couple of days of surprises, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, indeed, and I’m pleased to have met you, Mark. If anyone can find Donald I think you would be the one. And tell Chris it’s time we made up. He’s welcome to come out here again. Too much time has been wasted, and hopefully we’re all a little wiser.”

“I must be on my way. I want to make an early start to Kansas City in the morning.”

“And you have a hotel reservation there?”

“Not yet. I’m going to check online this evening.”

“I have a better idea. Call the Crown Center tomorrow morning and ask for June Furness, the accounting department manager and a great friend of mine. I’m sure she’ll find a room for you for a few days. It’s a fine Westin hotel in the middle of the city, with a large mall all round it—the Hallmark Cards landmark.

“Will you come in for a few moments?”

“Thank you, Sally, but no. You have Megan to look after and I need to check with my family and with Chris. But I will let you know what happens with my search.”

“Yes, please do. I can’t do anything more for Donnie, but if I could still help Donald to get his life back together, then I want to do so.”

I’d seen her safely to her front door and seen that charming smile once more, and I moved on.

It'd be another active day, although I had only a couple more pieces of the puzzle, I was tired by the time I got back to the hotel. Dinner was a repeat of the previous night, including the gap toothed high school senior delivery boy, except I changed the pizza toppings. On the phone, the family all sounded cheerful, but missed me, and Dan was clearly disappointed that the search was going to take several more days. However he would be seeing his buddies at the base with a fresh full name to check. Only Chris seemed upset that Donald had not popped out from behind a tree. But, clearly touched by Sally's olive branch, he promised to call her soon and to send the photo.

I wrote up my short notes, made an entry for June Furness at the Westin Crown Center Hotel, finished up the last slice of pizza, took a shower, and fell deeply asleep with *NCIS* playing on the television.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I was on the road to Kansas City by eight thirty on Wednesday morning, after an early morning breakfast of sausage and eggs at the Route 66 coffee shop where I was greeted like a long-lost pal by my friend Effie. There was a fair amount of truck traffic on Highway 69 as I pulled into the middle lane and the weather was dull and windy with the threat of rain. Being a Southern Californian, I hadn't thought of bringing an umbrella.

Fall colors on the ground and the trees covered the gently rolling countryside as the miles rolled by. To my eyes, the landscape was flat as far as the eye could see, without the ranges of hills and mountains or the clusters of towns and cities back home. It was different, just as the people were somehow different—surer in their own skins perhaps, than many Los Angelenos.

I took a coffee break at Fort Scott, wandering through the ghostlike nineteenth-century barracks, imagining Civil War soldiers parading across the square. Then I picked up my cell to call Sally's contact for the hotel in Kansas City. It must've been her direct line, because Ms. Furness came on the phone immediately, perked up to hear Sally Thompson's name and I was booked for four nights at a great rate in no time flat.

Encouraged by the fact that I had a bed for the night, I got back on the road and, despite the gradual increase of traffic, I was in the lobby of the Westin Crown Center Hotel by lunchtime. I made a point of asking for June Furness, and another attractive middle-aged woman executive appeared. She was curious about my connection to her friend Sally and I gave her an abbreviated version of my mission, and my credentials.

To my surprise, she offered to help me locate local orphanages and disappeared while I checked into my corner room high in the hotel with a view across the downtown area.

I'd scarcely hung up my limited wardrobe before Ms. Furness was on the phone. "Mr. Farrell, it wasn't as difficult to get the

information you need as I'd expected. According to a friend of mine here, there are two main long-established orphanages. One is the St. Jude's Home and the other is the Midwest Homes for boys and girls."

"Well, you must have excellent connections, ma'am."

She chuckled. "June, please. I've even got the name of the superintendent at St. Jude's and both phone numbers for you."

"That's certainly more than I expected. Thank you. And will you let me buy you lunch or a drink in return?"

"It's my pleasure. I'll take a rain check on your offer for the moment, as I expect you want to get started. I can recommend the hot pastrami in the Brasserie for a quick bite of lunch. Let me know what you find out." And she was gone.

I called St. Jude's and made an appointment for two o'clock that afternoon. Then I hung up the rest of my clothes and went downstairs in search of food. As I devoured a pastrami on rye with coleslaw for lunch, I wondered again whether people in the heartland were always this helpful and outgoing or was it only to those who were strangers with connections. I decided my California suspicions were kicking in, and the answer was somewhere in the middle.

Despite my introduction, my visit to St. Jude's was a bust. I had explained my mission to the superintendent's assistant on the phone, and she'd agreed to look into their files before giving me the appointment. Superintendent Welles was a harder case—a severe six footer in his late fifties with rimless glasses. He was satisfied with my credentials, but suspicious of my purpose. Even I was uncertain how to present Christopher Bates and settled for a possible relative to Donald Peter Gates, who was trying to trace him. My evidence was sketchy. Even the possible dates in the orphanage were vague, since I had only Sally Bates-Thompson's memory to go by.

"We computerized our records about five years ago, Mr. Farrell, and we did not find a listing for a Donald Peter Gates for the time in question."

“What about any other combination of those names?” I was still hopeful.

“We did a cross check with no success. It appears that Donald was not one of our boys. But remember that we are basically a Catholic institution, although we do take in other orphans. He could have been in another home.”

“Like the Midwest Homes?”

“Yes indeed, they have an excellent reputation. I suggest you try to reach Superintendent Tarkington or Mrs. Amberson. Here’s the phone number. Good luck.”

“Thank you, sir. You’ve been very helpful.”

There was nothing more to say. And, disappointed, I left.

When I called the Midwest Homes, I got the impression of a more casual atmosphere, as well as an appointment for four-thirty that afternoon. I would have to hustle as the address was across the river in another part of the unknown city. Fortunately, my GPS got me there in time and I was ushered in to meet Mrs. Amberson, another middle-aged, attractive looking woman with a generous smile.

“I’m sorry Superintendent Tarkington couldn’t meet you, Mr. Farrell, but he’s at a meeting in the city at the moment. I’ve been here for over twenty years and I’ve a good memory for the boys who’ve been with us.”

“Then I’m sure you will be able to help me, Mrs. Amberson, if anyone can.”

“Now you do have identification and credentials, Mr. Farrell?”

I gave them to her. She looked them over carefully and handed them back. We were seated in her small but tidy office, with comfortable chairs and a desk in one corner with files on it.

“I’m not quite clear why you’re looking for one of our boys, Mr. Farrell.” The eyes were watchful, although her expression remained pleasant.

“Oh, it’s not for me. My service’s been retained by a friend, Christopher Bates, who met Donald Gates this summer in

Palm Springs and they thought they were related. Mr. Gates is a Sergeant in the US Marines, but left the base unexpectedly about ten days ago. Mr. Bates is concerned about his whereabouts. I have some pictures of the two of them taken this summer.”

I slid the photos out of my portfolio, together with the older snapshot of young Donald and his possible mother. Mrs. Amberson looked closely at all of them, gave a nod, and returned the recent ones to me.

“Why are you looking for Donald here, Mr. Farrell?”

“Because Mr. Bates’ deceased son, Donnie, knew Donald in the Marines, knew he was an orphan and that he came from the Kansas City area. We’re hoping he might’ve come back to his roots.”

“I haven’t seen Donald in the last three years, except for one quick cup of coffee right here last spring. Yes, Mr. Farrell, he is one of our boys. And I too would like to know he is safe and well.”

“So you do remember him? You do think he might come back here?”

“I don’t know about any recent return, but Kansas City is certainly his hometown, if he can be said to have one.”

“I think you’ve seen that old snapshot before of Donald with a lady, possibly his mother?”

She smiled sweetly. “You’re very astute, Mr. Farrell. Yes, that was Donald at the age he came to us and that was indeed his mother, who called herself Mrs. Gates and who did wear a wedding ring. Poor woman, she was not from around here. I thought I detected a little of a New York accent in her voice...”

“So you met her?”

“Why, yes, she brought Donald to us when she could no longer take care of him by herself. She was dying of cancer. She’d come to Kansas City, I think, to escape from something back East—a failed marriage, an illegitimate baby, an unforgiving family—we never knew. Very brave she was, giving up the boy when she

couldn't manage. I only saw her the twice, once when we met and talked and then briefly when she left him here. Donald was a sad-faced, but determined little boy."

"And there were no relatives, no friends?"

"Mrs. Gates had said not—very firmly. Well, we still advertised locally and in the New York area. The state finally agreed he should stay here. I think he was five or six by that time, he settled in quite easily, sociable enough, but accustomed to being left alone, because his mother had to work long hours. Bright boy too, eager to learn."

"One thing has puzzled me, Mrs. Amberson. Those who have known him have talked of an outgoing lively man, eager to make friends. Is that how you remember him? And you do seem to remember him."

She smiled indulgently. "We're not supposed to have favorites, but some of them one remembers very clearly. Donald was one of those, and he stayed in touch even after he left."

"So why is it that no one adopted him, if he was bright and outgoing?"

"I think we tried placing him with families or foster homes. And he was also sick for a while. I pulled his file, just in case, so let me check the details. Oh, and here's your copy of the snapshot back. We have one of our own here." She had walked over to her desk and was tapping a thick manila folder that had lain separately. She stood reading silently for a few moments.

"Yes, I thought I was right. He had measles and even pneumonia when he was seven and nine. I remember when he recovered the second time he was even more determined to become tall and strong, taking extra PE classes.

"Here we are. He was adopted by Harry Holt and his wife when he was almost ten. Very sad case, they were both killed by a hit-and-run driver three years later. And Donald came back to us, as there was no one else to claim him."

She frowned as she read the file. Then she sighed. "We tried again with the George Moreheads and that proved to be a serious

mistake. Most of the foster care arrangements in this case were made by the wife, who seemed very eager to have a teenage boy. Mr. Morehead I only met once—a big man, not very amiable, but he'd passed the necessary tests to become a foster father."

She paused and looked quizzically at me.

"What went wrong with the Moreheads?"

"I'm not supposed to mention this, Mr. Farrell, and I'm not sure it has any bearing on your search. But Donald, who would have been fourteen, going on fifteen, was tall and strong for his age. He was sexually molested by that brute Morehead, not once but several times. Eventually he ran away back here. Our doctor examined him, of course, and George Morehead went to jail. But Donald was not the same for the rest of his time with us."

This rang a bell in my mind—something Chris Bates said about Donald's unconscious magnetic sexual attraction. *Surely not as an innocent teenager*, I thought. I was curious. "In what way did he change?"

"He was still usually lively and bright, but he became more withdrawn and who can blame him? Mother died, adoptive parents killed in a car accident, molested by a brute—and he was only sixteen. We sent him for counseling and I think that did some help. I'd appreciate it if you would keep the Morehead incident confidential. It's not in his file and I wouldn't want it mentioned outside these walls."

"Of course, Mrs. Amberson. And I would agree with you. Presumably he would have left here about at sixteen, at least I think that's the usual age. What did he do?"

"We kept him here for an extra few months to help him adjust and it did seem to help."

"What did he do when he went out into the world?"

"He talked of joining the armed forces or law enforcement, said he wanted to protect people. But he was still too young, so he became a police cadet, I think that's what they're called. He continued to community college on a scholarship and worked in a big hardware store to earn a living."

“Did he stay in touch?”

“Why, yes, he would drop by every couple of months to let me, rather us, know how he was doing. Soon after his eighteenth birthday he joined the Marines and we saw less of him.”

“Until this year, you said.”

She sighed again. “Yes, it was a brief stop and he’d changed. Maybe it was the death of his buddy, Donnie, I think the name was—who also came from Kansas. He came to bring the body home for burial. Maybe it was also the war itself. Donald seemed angry and confused, unhappy in the world in which he found himself. But he still remembered to hug me as he was leaving.” She looked away, embarrassed by her emotion.

“I think I understand, Mrs. Amberson. Donald seems to have that effect on people. And I’m wondering if he’s back here now somewhere in the city.”

“I wish you luck with your search, Mr. Farrell. You’ve certainly been very diligent. Of course I’ll let you know if I hear anything from Donald and I hope you will do the same. How much longer will you stay here?”

“A couple more days, I think. I’ve a few more possible leads to follow up.”

A bell rang somewhere in the building.

“Supper time for everyone. Would you like to stay and join us, Mr. Farrell?”

“You’re very kind. Indeed, everyone in Kansas has been kind and most helpful. But I think I should move along. I probably kept you too long and I want to talk to my family and my employer back in California.”

“Sunny Southern California, yes, I’ve been there a couple of times, but Los Angeles was a little too frenetic for me. Kansas City is just the right size. Good-bye, Mr. Farrell. I hope you find Donald and I do hope he’s all right. Tell him to let me know.”

She escorted me to the front door, and, as I drove away, I thought how fortunate Donald had been to have found Mrs.

Amberson in his disturbed and lonely younger life.

I took things easy that Wednesday evening. It had been a busy day, and I wanted to make notes on my laptop before I forgot the details of Donald Gates' early life. I checked in at home, chatted with Mary about my impressions of Kansas and promised to look for more souvenirs, told Edith I hoped to fly back by Sunday. Dan took the phone and wandered over to the *casita* to talk privately.

He was bursting with news. His buddies at the Marine base had checked out Sergeant Gates; he was on leave for ten days, due back also on Sunday. Some more dots were connected with his address given for his leave—the same as the Midwest Home for boys that I'd just visited. I didn't think Mrs. Amberson had lied to me. Donald had just not checked in with her—so far. When he got back to Twenty-nine Palms, he had just ten more days to serve his country and then he would be mustered out of the Marines.

With Dan's own case he'd met with Mrs. Fontaine who wanted to hire him to check on her husband. She suspected him of having an affair locally in the Palm Springs area.

"I'll give you all the details when I see you, and just exactly when is that going to be, lover man?"

I brought him up to date with Donald's early and sad history and my various plans to try to track him down there. Kansas City.

"My guess is that he won't know that many people here any longer, assuming he is indeed in Kansas City. So I'm going to stake out the leather bars and see if he turns up."

"That's a slim clue, but let me help you with that. I'll check the internet and maybe ask around."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate that. But I'll need the details fast, as I plan to be checking them out tomorrow night."

"Make sure you're just looking for Donald and don't go cruising any hot Doms you may find there."

"Yes Master, I know my duty. I'm trying to work out whether

Donald was a Top or a sub.”

“Interesting question, but I’m not sure it’s part of your investigation to find out first hand. That would guarantee you a tough punishment when you get back here. Besides, you’ve got me horny enough as it is. I’m fucking well used to having you available to me whenever I need you.”

“Thank you, Sir, I’m glad you’re missing me. And I’m lonely for your strong weapon myself. Don’t worry, I’ll just ‘look and not touch’ in the bars here.”

“I hope it won’t be too much of a shitty duty you’ve pulled. Keep me posted, and hurry home, so I can shaft you good.”

“Yes, Master, I’ll keep my 501s buttoned tight and my shirt on.”

Chris Bates seemed disappointed I hadn’t found Donald already. “Chris, this is a big city in a big state. The boy could be anywhere in town, but he could also be right there in Southern California.”

“Yes, I understand, Mark. Dammit, who or what is he hiding from?”

“I still can’t answer that for you. And you’ll be lucky if I find him at all. I’ll be back Saturday or Sunday. I don’t want to waste anymore of your money than necessary.”

“That’s the least of my worries. Don’t think I don’t appreciate all your efforts, Mark, it’s just the way Donald has covered his tracks. Maybe your idea about the leather bar will bring him out. He certainly seemed to like the gear those times when he was out here. Oh, by the way, I called Sally today and we had a good talk. I may be coming to Kansas myself in a week or two.”

That reminded me that I needed to bring Sally up to date, as I’d promised. She was grateful for the background on Donald in my phone call and wished me luck again in finally finding him. With that, I closed down for the night, ordered an Angus burger from room service, devoured it, and got eight solid hours of sleep.

It was raining the next morning when I decided to avail myself of a covered walkway over the road to the Crown Center mall, found a cheap umbrella, and looked around for a pair of inexpensive cowboy boots since I hadn't packed boots in my luggage and I was damned if I was going to cruise a leather bar in my shoes. Dan had taught me standards for dress as well as for conduct, but the only western wear store was pricey and I decided an army surplus store would be a better bet.

First, I wanted to check on Donald Gates' record as a police cadet there in the city. It was a long shot, but I was lucky and the desk sergeant in Kansas City Police Department headquarters steered me to the right Records Office. There was still a slim folder on Donald from 2003 with two addresses. One was the Midwest Home for boys, the other was listed as in Kansas.

"But I'm in Kansas, right?" I turned to the clerk.

He laughed. "This is when you find out that Kansas City is actually in two states—Kansas itself and Missouri and the dividing line is Stateline Road. You're actually in Missouri at the moment. That address is in Kansas across the invisible state boundary. You get used to it around here."

"It's certainly different from California." I grinned back at him.

After my geography lesson, getting directions to Donald's address back in 2003 and the name and address of a surplus store, I settled back in the car as the rain began to ease off. This excursion took me to a different part of the city, an area of blue-collar workers and small apartment buildings.

I found the right address with my GPS. It was an older building with a studio apartment vacancy sign. I'm not sure what I hoped to find—an older manager or custodian with a good memory. Perhaps, but I was out of luck. The woman manager was pleasant enough at first; she thought I was a prospective tenant. But she'd only been there a short time. "I guess it'll be two years next spring. Someone who was here in 2003? I can't think of anyone who could help you. People come and go here. No one stays more than six months, seems to me. Perhaps Bob

Prescott might remember. He's been here the longest, but he's out of town at present." She ran out of breath.

I took a gamble. "Thanks so much. One thing more—have you had a young man, early twenties, good-looking, tall, looking for an apartment this week?"

"Why, yes. Say, but what business is it of yours? You a cop or something?"

"Or something. I'm a private investigator. Is this his picture?" I shoved the single shot of Donald towards her. But she turned sullen and confused.

"Could be. What's your interest anyway? I've said enough. I don't know whether it's him or not. If you're not looking for a rental it's time you left."

I decided to go before she raised a ruckus. She'd given me a very slender clue to Donald's whereabouts—if the young man had really been there. Still, it was the first possible identification and placed him in Kansas City that week.

I was feeling more optimistic as I drove back. Suddenly I noticed an army surplus store coming up and pulled over into a parking space. It was the one whose address I'd been given, but it didn't look too promising and I declined the offer of help from the Asian owner, preferring to rummage around on my own. There was quite a selection of boots—western, army, law enforcement, even Eastern European knee boots. In the back corner was a well-used pair of black Corcoran side-zippered jump boots. I reached up to check them out—soles and stitching in good condition. I tried them on; they'd had a good amount of wear but had been fairly well looked after and oiled. More to the point they fit me and the price was right. But did I need a second pair of low black law enforcement boots? So I checked out some cowboy boots, nothing really appealed and besides, where else would I wear them? In the end, the Corcorans won and I added a tight dark blue wife beater I'd tried on. It would be important to look the part when I went bar-hopping.

Pleased with my morning's purchases and efforts, I headed

back to the hotel. It was late for lunch, so I settled for some sushi in one of the mall's food courts, while checking out other possibilities for meals over the next few days.

Back in my hotel room, I called Dan in the office for suggestions about the gay bars in the city.

"According to the Internet gay guide to Kansas City, there seem to be about ten possibilities, lover man."

"What about leather bars?"

"Let me check. Yeah, they seem to be the Lulu Belle and The Gauntlet and a cowboy western saloon."

"Let me have the addresses and I'll try to check them out tonight. Thursday is probably not the busiest night of the week, so it'll give me a chance to make some inquiries of the bartenders."

"But why do you think Donald would be going to a leather bar, or any bar for that matter?"

"What else would a young gay man do for an evening in a city where he must have very few friends?"

"That's pretty thin evidence to work on. You've no proof that he's gay."

"Well, the clues aren't exactly thick on the ground, you know. And I'm going to focus on the leather bars, because that's what Chris is into, and apparently Donald didn't seem to have a problem with that.

"Oh, I did get something of a clue from the manager of Donald's old apartment building. She said a young man of the right age had been looking for a place earlier that week, although she couldn't be certain from the photo."

"It sounds as though you're making some progress. I'm stalled as Mrs. Fontaine had to go out of town, seems as though she has a sick sister in San Diego. I'll let the family know you're still okay—and good luck with the hunt this evening."

"Thanks, Dan. Shit, I miss you."

“Me too, boss. See you at the weekend. Let me have your flight details when you know them, and I’ll pick you up.”

That reminded me that I hadn’t done anything yet about my return flight—and that would be from Joplin, a drive of three hours from Kansas City. I knew the bar hunt was a last resort, but decided to give myself a couple of nights at it. I knew Donald had to be back in Twenty-nine Palms by Sunday night. Maybe I should also check out flights from Kansas City on Sunday, and catch him that way.

I’d agreed to meet June Furness in the hotel for a drink early that evening, and so I changed into my faithful dark blue sports jacket and slacks for the occasion. Actually it turned out to be a very pleasant hour or so, since June was a relaxed companion who came with her girlfriend in tow. She made it clear early on that this was a more or less permanent girlfriend, and there was no mention of any husband, only a son away in college. They soon got my family history out of me, discreetly, and expressed the proper sympathy on the loss of my wife and great interest in my male partner.

Since I was expecting to spend two more days in Kansas City, I asked about places to see—and ideas for Kansas souvenirs. The shopping part was easy—both ladies highly recommended that I hightail it to the Plaza, where there were all kinds of ‘great’, ‘fascinating’, ‘wonderful’ stores. When they asked about my other interests, and I muttered, “Art”, they immediately mentioned the Nelson-Atkins Museum and its ‘great’, ‘fascinating’, wonderful collection of Chinese art. Actually they were lively and wide ranging conversationalists and our time was up before I had to go into too much detail about Donald Gates. I ended up promising to bring the family to KC in the spring and to stay at the Westin.

I invited them to stay for dinner, as I was getting tired of eating alone, but they wanted to get back home and anyway I would have to change my clothes before heading out for the bars. I thanked them again for their help and we parted friends with hugs.

There certainly was plenty of variety in the mall’s food courts

and so I tried Mexican for dinner. I didn't think the burritos were up to the standard of Las Casuelas in Palm Springs or most decent East Los Angeles cafés, but the salsa was hot and warmed my stomach on a cool October evening.

I'd thought long and hard about this bar-testing excursion. The two leather bars were my prime targets, but I could add on the western saloon, if necessary. And what image did I want to project there? I finally decided I would swing both ways as versatile. So I slid on the new wife beater, my only pair of 501s, and the slightly scruffy, but new-to-me Corcoran boots and set off in the car.

The Gauntlet was the first place I sampled. It was about nine thirty when I arrived and the music was loud and techno. I got a Bud from the not busy bartender, explained that I was looking for a buddy of mine, described Donald, and even showed him the photo. It seemed clear that the guy had never seen him in the place. Looking around at the small group of patrons, I soon decided that this was more for the young twinkie set and Donald would probably be looking for something older and harder.

The Lulu Belle was a classy joint with a long mahogany bar and stools about half occupied. There were some blown up Tom of Finland and similar drawings on the walls, a pool table at one end, even a boot black with his chair.

This looked more promising and I had to grab the bartender's attention, almost on the run. I gave him my spiel and showed him Donald's picture. He gave it a cursory glance, paused, and thrust it back at me. There had been that momentary hesitation.

"Why did you say you were looking for this guy?"

"I was told to look him up in Kansas City when I came through from California."

"Well, I don't think I know him."

"I heard he would be visiting around for ten days or so—could have been in last weekend."

"Nah, if he's big, like you say, and a stranger like you, I'm sure I would have noticed."

“Okay, I’ll have a Bud in the meanwhile, and see what comes through that leather curtain. I’m Mark, by the way, here for the weekend.”

“Hi, I’m Jake. You’ve been here before?”

“My first look at Kansas City—having a good time.”

“Well, let me know if you want some action. You look as though you can handle it.”

“Thanks, Jake, I sure will.”

The boot-black had seemed interested in our conversation, and the poor guy was apparently lacking in customers. The other patrons seemed to know one another or to be absorbed in their drinks. There were some leather vests and leather jeans and almost everyone was booted. I began to feel more relaxed and at home.

I cruised two of the more mature men by themselves at one end of the bar, exchanging some banter and jokes, but they turned out to be too entangled with one another to be interested in Donald or any other stranger.

So I drifted over to the boot-black. He straightened up as I came over—a cute youngster about five feet six inches, in his early twenties with an anxious grin.

“Shine those Corcs for you, Sir?”

I checked him up and down again. Men often confided in boot-blacks, I’d been told, and this one looked puppy-eager to be of any kind of service.

“Sure, why not? What’s the going rate here in Kansas City?”

“Er, this is only my second week, Sir, and I need to build up my customers. Right now I’m offering a ten buck special for new customers. Full boot service.”

I sat in the chair. “Let me give you a tryout. What’s your name, pup?”

“Thank you, Sir. It’s Tim, Sir. Would you put your feet on the pedals, Sir? You want a dull shine or high, Sir?”

“Always high shine, boy, where I come from. This pair has gotten really beat up. Show me what the fuck you can do with them.”

“Don’t think I’ve seen you in here before, Sir?”

“No, I’m visiting for the weekend from Southern California, looking for a friend of a close friend, who is also supposed to be visiting here. Big guy, early twenties, service man like me, could have been in over the past few days.”

Tim was working away, even licking my boots with his tongue to get them clean. I was impressed. He looked up expectantly at me.

“We’re not supposed to discuss the other customers without their permission, but I heard you asked Jake there at the bar.”

Quickly and quietly I slipped a twenty into the palm of his hand.

“Thank you very much, Sir. There was a guy like you described in last weekend, Sir. First time I’d seen him, but I’m new here too. Friendly type, chatted to me a bit when things were quiet, said he’d be back later this week to have his boots shined, Sir.”

“I’ve got a photo of him—would you recognize him?”

“You’re not a cop, are you? He hasn’t done anything wrong, has he? He seemed a nice enough guy. I don’t want to get him into trouble.”

“No, no, nothing like that. He was recommended to me by a close friend in Palm Springs, as a possible fuck buddy for the weekend. That’s all. Here’s his picture.”

Tim wiped his hands, looked at Donald’s face, and nodded. “That’s him all right. Yes, Sir. Mind if I roll your jeans up so I can get at the shaft of your boot, Sir.”

We talked some more as he worked. He was taking his time, well, there wasn’t exactly a line waiting. Tim was relatively new in town too, working his way through college. He’d learned his trade from his Sir, who was a boot-black Master—and he’d learned it well. I looked down as he finished with his polishing cloth.

“Very good job, Tim. Here’s the ten bucks I owe you. No, no, the other was a reward for information. Now, if and when you see Donald—that’s the guy’s name—tell him an acquaintance from Twenty-nine Palms is looking for him. We could really get it on this weekend.”

Tim looked me over again as I stood up and showed off my six feet two inches, two hundred ten pound frame, and well-shined boots. He nodded appreciatively and a small smile crossed his face.

“If that doesn’t work out, and Sir could use an eager puppy for his pleasure, I finish at midnight, Sir.”

I laughed, tousled his spiky hair, and gave him a hug. “Sir Mark’s the name. Thanks for the shine, Tim, and I’ll remember your offer.”

I nursed a second Bud for another half hour, checked out the pool players, chatted up another hunky guy about my own age and promised to be back the following evening. It was after eleven thirty and the place was emptying, and I needed to drive home safely.

In the car, I was jubilant. I’d finally established that Donald was in town and patronized one of the leather bars. True, I hadn’t actually met him yet, and I, or rather, both of us, only had two more nights in town. That problem encouraged me to drive more carefully, and to fall into bed as soon as I got back to the hotel. As I had crossed the lobby, I had wondered for a moment if any of the staff had noticed the difference in my appearance, but what the fuck did they care. I fell soundly asleep.

Friday morning I was kinda hyper, with the whole day to fill before trying again to find Donald, hopefully in the Lulu Belle. This week there hadn’t been much time for workouts, so that became the first order of the day. The hotel came equipped with both a fitness center and a pool—outside, but heated. I treated myself to a protein breakfast in the Brasserie before I started, and then it was time to work. The fitness center had most of the equipment I was used to and ninety minutes later, I had put myself through my regular regimen, so that everything ached

pleasantly, but my abs had suffered the most because they needed it most, or so Dan sometimes commented.

I grabbed a protein shake, gave myself ten minutes to walk briskly around outside and to check out the pool. The sun was struggling through the clouds, but it wasn't exactly Palm Springs weather. Still, thirty minutes of laps and exercises were essential and the water was pleasantly warm. By the end of the session, I was tired, but buff. Dan wouldn't be able to complain of excess ounces and I thought I'd look good in the bar that evening.

I suddenly wanted to talk to Dan himself and it was still early enough in California, so I took my cell out and speed-dialed the number. It also seemed a good moment to ask him how he was getting on with Edith and Mary in my absence.

"What do you mean how am I getting on? We're fine!" He seemed puzzled by the question.

"Well, this is the first time I've left all three of you together to fend for yourselves for what's going to be almost a week."

"Oh, I see what you mean." There was a pause and I could almost hear his brain ticking over. "I hadn't given it much thought. We seem to be having a great time. I mean, I cooked dinner last night and we all survived my recipe for spaghetti and Swedish meatballs again. We're going shopping for you on Saturday, I mean tomorrow. But now you mention it, I guess it is something of a new experience all around. Still, we had some months to get used to one another, and we've all more or less been living together most of this year."

There was a long pause. "Are you still there, Dan?"

"Yes, Mark, I was just thinking that we are something of an unusual household." He chuckled. "We're two adult men in a loving and intensely sexual relationship. Now I'm attempting to help bringing up an ten-year-old—your daughter—and we're all being supervised by your mother-in-law when she's not being a school vice principal and our office manager. And we seem to get on with one another, but I've not really thought how the household must appear to the outside world."

He was warming to his subject. “I guess the biggest changes have been for me. I came from a large happy family life in Philadelphia, the youngest of six. But I left home at nineteen—first two years of college, then it was three years of service in the Marines followed by a few months fucking around and then more than four years in the LAPD, all largely on my own.

“You and I, Mark, have talked in recent months about my lone wolf past, how I roared through life on my Harleys, not gathering much baggage or attachments until I met you. You have certainly altered my outlook very considerably. There have been some bumps along our path, and there will probably be more, but I think I’m changing into a more caring and involved guy, and Edith and Mary are helping to rub off some of my rough edges.

“I mean, one year ago. I don’t think I would have expected to find myself helping a bright young girl with her math homework. By the way, I think I may be better at math than you are—Mary seems to think so—but she was very polite about it; didn’t want to upset her dad, I guess. My own high school days are helping me out.”

We both chuckled. “You haven’t grown restless spending your evenings at home, Dan? Not felt the need to go out to the bars in Palm Springs?”

Dan played shocked. “Okay, give me more strength of character than that. You’ve only been away a few days. And it’s given Edith and I a chance to talk on a couple of evenings—mainly about you and us, of course.”

“What do you mean talking ‘mainly about me?’”

“She knows a lot more about Mark Farrell the man, the husband, the father, than I do, and she’s a wise woman, willing to exchange some of that knowledge for more background about me.

“I’ve found myself telling her things about my family and their influence on me during my years growing up in Philadelphia.” His voice faltered. “I even found myself...talking about Captain

James and my education with him. After last weekend, I felt the need to share with someone else. Edith was so warm and sympathetic, I was able to open up and try to explain what gifts he had given me—the concepts of honor, truth, and obedience, and the loss that I still can't fully explain or get past.

“Funny, I never thought I would be able to talk to anyone but you about this fucking part of my sexual education, least of all to a middle-aged woman. Tuesday night I found myself sitting quietly with a dash of bourbon in a glass, speaking about domination and submission, leather and BDSM. It actually was very liberating for me—and I think she understood most of it.

“At the end of the evening, she hugged me closely and said, ‘You’re essentially a good, honest, and loving man, Dan, who’s had some very hard knocks and learned from them. That’s why you’re right for our Mark, why I think you make a good pair together. You’re lucky to have found one another.’ I was rather stunned by it all, but I slept very well that night.

“Tomorrow we’re all going shopping for your Christmas present; Sunday evening, you’re back with us, I hope, and with the mystery of Donald Bates solved.”

“Well, I better get on trying to do that, rather than wasting my time talking to a no-good like you.” I chuckled. We exchanged a few hot dirty ideas, said good-byes, and I felt much better and ready for some food.

Lunch was a salad bar, as I wandered round the mall food area once more. That afternoon I was determined to give myself a couple of hours off; the previous evening the ladies had recommend one of the local art museums, so I got the car out and drove over to the Nelson–Atkins Museum of Art.

I wasn't sure what to expect, so the wonderful collections in the museum really blew me away. For instance, my practice with any new gallery or museum is to check the general guide on arrival before plunging in. My initial surprise was to find that the Nelson–Atkins had a Caravaggio, one of the few on public display in the United States. So I made a beeline to stand before his painting *Saint John the Baptist in the wilderness*. This

was no bearded old preacher, but a young muscled buck in his early twenties, almost scowling at the viewer, almost naked except for a robe discreetly placed across his groin and one leg. It didn't seem particularly saint-like, but the image was bold and provocative. Some part of him reminded me of Dan. The picture also reminded me of my hectic days as boy to our good friend, the lawyer Manning Thompson and the Caravaggio in his art collection. That triggered memories as well of his sexual domination for a weekend in New York last fall, while I was still with the LAPD on protective detail looking after him.

Chinese and Japanese art are relative strangers to me; the Nelson–Atkins collections were the second and greater surprise there. I wandered, fascinated, not only by the variety of antique objects on view, but by the lavish space and excellent layout. Above all, it was the serenity of those rooms which overwhelmed and calmed me. These scrolls and screens were created for the ages; my problems were merely of today, a speck in time.

Overall Friday was proving a casually wonderful day. I was only sorry that Dan couldn't have enjoyed it all with me. It also helped to put things back into perspective. The world wouldn't end if I didn't find Donald Gates, and, even if I did, did Chris Bates own the rights to him?

For the evening, I showered, but didn't shave; light stubble would be in character. Room service provided an excellent rib eye steak, medium, with broccoli and cauliflower, a Kansas City specialty I was told.

The weather looked colder outside so I added a black leather vest over the wife beater. It was the vest or my windbreaker, and I needed to show off the muscles that night. I decided to add my handcuffs that I brought with me on my belt to complete the Dom picture. I was dressed and ready by nine o'clock, but I forced myself to watch thirty minutes of some reality TV show in the room before I left for the man-hunt.

There was definitely more noise and action as I pushed my way through the split leather curtain of the Lulu Belle that evening. The bar was busy with a variety of guys, a few in complete leather

gear, a few in jeans and tennis shoes and plenty of everything in between. *I'll fit right in*, I thought as I elbowed my way to the bar.

"Evening Jake, Bud please." At least the bartender deigned to acknowledge my existence with his 'pleased to see you back again'. However, "Busy tonight?" got me just a cursory nod. I scanned the room rapidly, as I took up my post, one leg up against the wall, towards the back of the bar. There was no sign of Donald as far as I could tell. I checked out possible competition for his attention, if he did come. One likely possibility was a burly man in leather with the beginnings of a pot belly and into his forties, behaving like a dominant, with a couple of boys in attendance.

I wandered over to Tim, who was standing forlornly by his boot-black stand without a customer again. "Evening, pup, don't the men in Kansas City get their boots polished around here?"

"Oh, evening, Sir Mark. Well, some of them do their own work at home, and I'm still an unknown to most of the crowd. Guess this is going to take a while for me to get regular boot customers."

"Want to work on mine again? They're scarcely even dusty, but it will keep you in practice. I take it my would-be friend hasn't shown?"

"Not yet, Sir. I'd be honored to work on your Corcs again, Sir. I think I can get an even better shine on them tonight, Sir."

"Fine, as long as one of us has direct line of sight to the curtain. Okay, let's get started."

I was up higher on the stand, so I could see and be seen. That was part of the idea and a couple of probable subs drifted up to say hello to Tim and for me to check them out. Tim didn't allow himself to be distracted, but spit-shined my boots to a high-gloss. Once again I was impressed. As I leaned down to pay him, he looked up towards the entrance.

"Now, Sir Mark, he's just come in."

I tried not to hurry it, gave Tim the money, hugged him again, and tousled his even spikier head of hair. "Good luck, Sir," he whispered, and, chuckling, I turned to look at the new arrival.

There was no doubt that this was Donald Gates, the photos come to life. He was shorter than me, but equally well-built. His outfit that night was a tight black tank top, jeans covered by black leather chaps, a leather wristband worn on the right as well as the obligatory boots. He looked hot, and he knew it, but I thought he didn't seem quite comfortable in the role. He went straight across to Jake, who engaged him in a brief conversation and then nodded in my direction. Donald turned to look directly at me, beer in hand. I saluted him with my own bottle. This was the figure I'd been chasing all week. Now I knew what he looked like, I realized that wasn't enough. I needed to get to know the man behind the mask, not only because that was part of my errand, but for my own sake too. I needed to make the first move right now, and carefully.

He checked me out slowly. I tousled Tim's hair again and moved my bottle of Bud down to my crotch and rubbed it. Somewhat to my surprise, Donald came straight through the crowd, moving men out of his way. He stopped in front of me and we sized one another up. Two alpha bulls were snorting out the competition, except I thought that, despite the outfits, we were probably both subs at heart.

"Do I know you?" The voice was baritone and slightly clipped.

"No, you don't. Some friends at Twenty-nine Palms suggested I look you up while I was here for the weekend. I'm Mark." I could match the baritone and darken the timbre in my tone.

"Donald. You here from the desert?"

"Yup, and you're here from the same place, and come with excellent references." He colored very slightly and I saw the fist tighten round the bottle as he grunted.

I shoved my hand into his groin and felt the penis pulsing under my fingers. "Come over into the corner, and let's get acquainted." He grunted again, without expression on his face, but he followed me as I moved into a quiet part of the bar.

I'd made my opening, and it had apparently worked. Now I had to play out the rest of the vague scenario that I'd worked out.

I was a visiting Dom, he was a visiting sub, and we looked equally matched. I pushed him against the wall and kneed him hard in the crotch. This time he groaned and sagged, before pulling himself back up tall. "You're not a marine. At least not an active one."

"No, I'm just a friend to a few US Marines, and Gunny Jerry Turnbull," thank God, Dan had reminded me of the name, "told me you'd be here in town when I arrived for the weekend. You have a problem with that?"

His mouth twisted slightly. "I just wish Gunny wasn't so free with my name sometimes."

"Watch that fucking tongue of yours when you talk about your superiors, boy."

"Okay."

"Okay, what?" This one I had to win.

"Yes, Sir."

"That's better. Now, Donald, tell me about you." I was rubbing my cold beer bottle across his nipples. I watched them erecting under his tight shirt. It was as if he wanted this and I was actually enjoying myself now that the show had started.

"Well, Sir, I'm nobody really, I'm just a good soldier who's on leave, and enjoys a little fun every now and then, Sir."

"Never say you're a nobody. You're a US Marine, and a good one I'm told. Be proud of that."

He looked surprised and drew himself up tall again. That was good, but I needed to press on the sub-side of him for a few more moments. So I reached back into his groin and started fingering his cock. "Here, hold my beer while I check you out."

That filled both his hands and gave me free rein to move from a prick trying to get loose in his jeans to the tits which were sticking out proudly as I mauled them with my fingers. He was moaning softly as I played with him; it was fun to be the Top for a change.

Time for the next stage in the game, I shoved him hard against the wall, moving my body right up close to his, with one

knee back in his groin. I leaned in to murmur in his ear.

“Yes, I know all about you, Donald. Sergeant Donald Gates, US Marines, who took an unexpected leave of absence and who gets mustered out in ten days’ time.”

His voice was low and agitated. “Who are you? What do you want?”

I shoved my knee in further and the moan was louder. “My name really is Mark, Mark Farrell, and I’m a private eye from Palm Springs. I’ve been hired to find you, and that’s been fucking hard, and to talk to you.”

“Talk to me? What about? You want to have sex with me? Well, keep going, you’re on the right track.”

“No, it’s more important than that. My employer is Mr. Christopher Bates. He wants to know you’re okay, to have you back. My mission has been to find you, talk to you, and find out whether you want to go back to him.”

He struggled slightly, puzzled and wanting to get away. I leaned my full weight on him and he calmed back down again. “I just want to talk to you, Donald, for the moment, to hear your side of the story. I’ve spent a week learning all about you. From Chris, from Alan, and Sally Thompson and Mrs. Amberson. Now it’s your turn.”

The face had relaxed slightly. “You mean you’re not going to drag me away in those cuffs you’re wearing on your belt?”

“Fuck, I forgot all about them. No, I’m not going to use them, unless you try to cut and run before I get your side of this complicated story. What do you say?”

“You mean all this was a big act? To get control of me, so that you could explain your mission?”

“Yes, but you must admit it was convincing and I enjoyed myself mightily.”

The tension was beginning to leave our bodies. “Why should I trust you, Mark?”

“Because Mrs. Amberson and Sally Thompson and, yes, even

Chris Bates have trusted me with parts of your story. Now I need you to fill in the blanks.”

“I could just cut and run, as you said.”

“I don’t think you will. You owe me some courtesy, but if not, I’ll just take you out cuffed. You’re also entitled to tell your side of this tale, so that I can decide what to report back to Chris Bates.”

“You mean you’re not here to force me back to him, to make me return to his house?”

“Of course not, you’re both grown men. He’s entitled to know why you spent the summer pretending to be Donnie Bates. You’re entitled to decide whether, after the explanation I’m going to give him, you want to get back together again, with all that can mean.”

He grimaced and looked at me carefully. “So I get to decide what happens to me. I’m to be my own judge? And you, you’re just a glorified messenger boy?”

“It’s not as simple as that, but, yes, that’s the general idea. I report to Chris that you’re alive and well. I give him your explanation about the summer and I give him your decision about your joint future.”

I had moved away slightly and he shook himself. “Well, I thought I’d come here this evening for a couple of beers and chance to be taken home and fucked. Are you sure you wouldn’t still like to do just that? You made a fucking good start a few minutes ago?”

I chuckled. “Not tonight, Donald. I think you and I have a hell of a lot of talking to do, and we both have to get back to Palm Springs on Sunday—separately, I might add.”

“I guess I’ll have some questions of my own to ask. Like how did you find me here?”

“I’m a former detective. I used my sleuthing skills and you do have friends who were helpful to me and protective of you.”

“Former detective—what police force?” He suddenly seemed

very interested.

“Los Angeles PD. My partner and I have only recently set up shop as private investigators in Palm Springs.

“Now, how about we go find some coffee and you start filling in some of the missing pieces for me?”

He nodded. As we moved towards the exit, Tim came rushing after us. “Good night, Sirs, I’m glad you found one another and it’s working out for you both.” I high-fived him; we waved good-bye to Jake and left the bar.

“There’s an all-night diner a couple of blocks over, Mark, if you want to try that. Shit, I beg pardon, should I call you Sir or Master?”

“Plain Mark is fine. So is the idea of a diner, as I don’t think I’m dressed for high society.”

We laughed together and walked the couple of blocks. In the diner we ordered coffee and apple pie, and then, surprisingly, I was the one doing most of the talking. “I was hired by Chris because I have a reputation for being a discreet, effective, gay detective, and that is what he needed to find you.”

I filled in the background Chris had told me, not glossing over the sexual undertones, but also insisting the man had strong genuine feelings for Donald that he was trying to work out.

Donald nodded. “I know. I felt them and it all started to feel so wrong. Not because of the father/son possibility, that didn’t even occur to me at first. But I was sailing under false colors and the water was getting so deep and murky, that the only thing I could think to do was to cut and run as you call it.”

I didn’t press, not at this stage. “Chris was worried when you disappeared from the hotel room that night, when was it, a couple of weeks ago. He wanted to find you, to explain, but he didn’t know how. He had no official standing, as he was not your next of kin. In fact, as we now know, you were no blood relative at all. That had been Donnie.”

“Yes, Donnie,” he whispered, with a look of terrible loss on

his face.

I tried to lighten the mood. “So I was sent on this crazy quest last Monday with only Sally Bates-Thompson as a contact—and an uncertain one at that.

“I think that’s enough for tonight. We are both tired and need some sleep. What are your plans for tomorrow? Or rather, later today?”

Donald raised himself, with a flicker of a smile. “Plans? Well, I don’t have anything urgent to do tomorrow—and I guess we do indeed have a great deal to say to one another. All this is going to be just between you and me, Mark, right? Promise me?”

“Of course I do. I’m like a father confessor, and no one can compel me to tell anything without your agreement. Would you be willing to start with breakfast and block out most of the day?”

“I guess so. Where shall we meet?”

“You have to suggest a place. I’m staying at the Crown Center.”

He grimaced, and then changed his mind. “You know the mall that’s across the street? There’s a great omelet place, if you like eggs, called, er, Eggfast, and I think it’s still there. I could meet you at nine o’clock, unless that’s too early.”

“How about nine thirty? Despite the time difference, I’d like to talk to my family first, and I’d like to tell Chris that I’ve found you, but that I can’t promise him anything.”

He thought that over for a minute. “I’ll have to trust you, Mark, trust you to tell Chris you can’t promise anything with regard to me.”

“Trust me, Donald.” For some unknown reason, I reached across the table and touched his hand. It was like an electric shock as his fingers reached out to grab my hand.

“Yes, I think I do trust you.”

I drove him home. He had come to the bar by bus, but they’d stopped running by this time. “You can let me out here, Mark, I’ll walk the rest of the way. Can you find your way back to the

hotel?”

“I’ve got my handy GPS. Good night, Donald, see you at nine-thirty. Thank you for not running.”

“Night, Mark. I think I’m glad it was you who found me.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was raining quite hard on Saturday morning when I looked out of the hotel window. I wondered whether Donald would be there for breakfast, and I realized I'd no way of contacting him.

But first I had to deal with Chris, my family, and the airline. Because of the time difference, I tackled them in the reverse order. I was lucky enough to get seats on the Sunday afternoon connecting flights from Joplin to Palm Springs. Edith and Dan were already up and drinking their first coffee when I called. I had to be brief, but they were both pleased about the apparent success of my mission and Dan told me he'd meet my flight. I sent my love to Mary who was still asleep.

With Chris, I hesitated. What if Donald didn't show? No, I'd be positive. And of course he was excited. "You mean you've talked to him, and he's coming home?"

"I mean what I said. That I've met Donald and we started talking and we're going to spend today doing a hell of a lot more of it. He'll be returning to the Marine base tomorrow and we haven't yet discussed his future. You have to be patient, Chris. I'll call you later tonight and give you a sit-rep. Got to go. Having breakfast with him." I closed my cell, pulled on my windbreaker, grabbed the umbrella, and jogged over to the mall.

It was dead on nine thirty when I found Eggfast. It was busy with Saturday shoppers, but there Donald was at a table for two with a mug of coffee. He looked up and smiled, a beguiling smile, when he saw me.

"Morning, Donald, I'm glad to see you. Hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

He snorted. "Were you worried that I might not show up?"

I chuckled. "You've caught me out. Yes, I was concerned when I realized that I had no way of contacting you. How about you?"

“Oh, I knew you’d be here. I’ve already worked out that’s the kind of guy you are. I bet you’re a fucking good detective. Besides, I decided overnight it would be good for me to talk over some of this crap and get it out of my system.”

“Good idea. Now let’s eat. I’m treating, or rather Chris Bates is.”

He winced at the name, but recovered quickly enough to order a ham and mushroom omelet with egg whites and whole wheat toast. I asked for the same, but with an English muffin, no butter.

The diner was getting packed, the tables close together, not the venue for an intimate conversation about his past life. He was curious about me and my situation. So I filled in the time talking about my years with the LAPD, since I already knew that interested him.

“You know, Mark, that’s the kind of career I’d like to have. Finish my service in the Marines and go into law enforcement.”

“No reason you can’t do that. You’re still young enough and you have your military experience.”

“I’ve been online a couple of times, checking it all out—that police academy in Los Angeles looks good—and you seem to recommend it. Do I want to live in Los Angeles? Why not stay here?”

“That’s for you to work out. Finished?”

“I’ve been trying to think of somewhere we could go and talk quietly on a wet Saturday apart from my hotel room. Yesterday I went to the Nelson-Atkins Museum. It’s quiet, restful, and open, how about that?”

He thought for a moment, and then nodded. “I went there a couple of times from school and from the home. It was neat.”

On the way over in the car, he asked me how I’d found him and gave me a slip of paper with his cell phone number on it. “It has caller ID, and I’ll answer if I see your name.”

But not Chris Bates’ name. I thought to myself, but said nothing.

We hurried into the museum from the parking lot and I got to use the pop-up umbrella in the rain, to his amusement. I went straight to the Japanese collection. We wandered for a few minutes and he especially admired the folding screens. Then I steered him to a quiet bench near one of the walls.

“I don’t think we’ll be disturbed here. You said you came here from the home. What was it like living there?”

There was a long pause while he collected his thoughts. “Most of my memories are happy ones, or at least pleasant ones. But I can remember almost nothing of my life before the Midwest Home for boys. I don’t know anything about my father. I have vague flashes of my mother’s face, reinforced by things Mrs. Amberson told me over the years...”

“Speaking of that lady, for whom I have a healthy respect, you owe her at least a phone call before you leave Kansas City.”

He flushed and looked much younger. “I know. I’ve been putting it off. I’m an idiot. That’s the least I can do. I’ll take care of it today.”

“She’ll be very glad to hear from you. Without her memories of you, I might not have found you. She told me about your adoptions too. I’m sorry they worked out so badly.”

He sighed. “Yes, so am I. I’d been envious of the other kids who’d found a family. Being sick when I was younger didn’t help, and that’s when I worked out that I had to take care of my body and build it up myself. I did well, I think.” He flexed his biceps for me.

I nodded. “How was life with the Holt family?”

“It was my first experience of family life and it was strange at the beginning. I didn’t know how or where to fit in. Gradually we worked it out. Frank and Liz wanted a son, since she was unable to have any more children, and had decided to take in an older boy like me, as they were in their fifties with a grown daughter, Trish. We learned to adapt and we were doing well until it happened.”

“The car crash, you mean?”

“Yes, I was at a Boy Scouts meeting and they were coming to pick me up. They never arrived. The Scout leader took me home and waited with me until the police came. I remember the officer—I guess he was middle-aged—who tried to be kind and gentle in breaking the news. He let me cry for a while on his shoulder, and then called the Home. It was late, but Mrs. Amberson came right over and stayed the night with me. The next afternoon, the Holt’s daughter arrived. Trish was a single woman and couldn’t take me in, so I was returned to the home and the care of Mrs. Amberson.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” We sat in silence; I wanted to give him time and space. I felt he was opening up to me and I knew I had to push into darker territory.

“I believe you were adopted again? The Moreheads, was that the name?”

His face flushed; his mouth tightened. “I don’t know how you found out, but I guess it’s best if I spew out the whole damn mess of it. Yes, I was told the Moreheads wanted to take me into foster care. Apparently they’d been approved and they had a nice house out near Overland Park in the suburbs. She was a pleasant, quiet woman, never had much to say and was afraid of him. George Morehead was a brute, and a devious one at that. He was big, well-muscled, putting on weight. He must’ve been handsome in his time, but he was about fifty when I encountered him and running to seed. He’d checked me out beforehand through school—I didn’t know that—and liked what he saw. I was tall for fifteen, and had been working out in the school gym. Apparently that’s how he liked his boys—big and strong.”

“So you weren’t his first victim?”

“Apparently not. That all came out in court. Anyway, all went well for the first couple of months. He let me join another scout troop and took me to a couple of *Chiefs* games. Shit, we were going to be pals, he said. In the house, he would pat my butt in passing and demanded that I kiss them both good night every evening. That allowed him to slobber over me. Later, at his trial, he said I led him on by playing sexy. I didn’t even know what he

meant.”

“Anyway, one night about midnight I guess, something woke me up. I was deep asleep and was having trouble coming to. George turned on the nightlight by the bed and was standing there—in just his underwear with his cock straining to be released.

“Donald, my boy, you and I are going to play a little game. I’m going to show you my big dick and you’re going to take it in your hand and warm it for me.”

“Do you really need all the details?”

“No, Donald, I think I know what happened.”

“It hurt so much as he forced it into my hole, even though he’d lubed himself and my anus. I bit the pillow and screamed silently. He grunted and shoved, sweated and finally came into the rubber he was wearing, which I didn’t understand either. He gradually eased out, stood up, and then he kissed me with his tongue in my mouth and finally muttered, ‘This is our little secret. Be sure you don’t tell anyone, anyone at all.’

“The next morning at breakfast, I didn’t know where to look. Certainly not at him. He was chipper and calm, eating his cereal, kissing his wife good-bye before he left for the office.”

“I gather this wasn’t the only time,” I interjected. Donald seemed to shrink into himself, his body sagging towards mine.

“No, the bastard was back a couple of nights later.” His voice shrank to a whisper, “Over the weeks I began to enjoy it, to look forward to being shafted, to wait for a pole to poke my ass. I was so ashamed. His wife must’ve known what was going on but did nothing. Finally, after one really tough fucking, I’d had enough. The next morning I packed my backpack, stole a couple of dollars from the household cash on the mantelpiece, and high-tailed it back to the orphanage.”

I got to my feet, very disturbed by this insight into Donald’s first sexual experience. I thought *Maybe as an adult, he’s becoming aware of how attractive he is to other men; even I felt it the previous night. But I don’t think he had any concept of it as a teenager.* Out loud I said, “Do you feel like stretching your legs, Donald? Let’s get away

from these memories for a while.”

We got up and walked through the galleries, but Donald couldn't stop talking. It was as if I'd unlocked the floodgates and all the stagnant dirty water had to be washed away.

“Oh, Mrs. Amberson and the home were very good and very protective. The doctor examined me and confirmed my story. Doctor Burns was very angry and insisted that Morehead be arrested for the rape of a minor. The home was initially reluctant to attract that kind of publicity, but realized that what had happened to one foster child could happen to others. They did insist that my identity not be disclosed nor my name mentioned. The monster went to jail, where I hope he got buggered regularly in his turn.

“Me, I was sent for counseling again. Two years before it had been grief counseling, this time it was sexual counseling. Since Morehead had been careful enough to wear protection every time, there's no question of any sexual disease, except in my mind.

“The therapist worked hard to convince me that none of it was my fault and that the memories would fade with time. She was largely successful, but a small devil in my brain nagged at me that maybe I had led him on, maybe something about me telegraphed a silent message that I was different from other boys and that men were going to be attracted to me.”

“That must've been a heavy load for any teenager, Donald. You were what, almost sixteen by this time?”

“I guess I must've been well into sixteen by the time all the noise died down. Mrs. Amberson kept me at the home as long as she could and made sure I could continue with some schooling. The job center tried to get me into law enforcement, but I was still too young, not even seventeen, and had to settle for becoming a police cadet. I'd already made up my mind I wanted to become a US Marine when I was eighteen, so I took a no-brainer job in a retail warehouse to pay my bills and I found other ways to supplement my income.”

He suddenly changed color and stopped on the spot. Something had jogged his memory, but that memory was not a good one.

“Are you okay, Donald? You’ve suddenly become very pale.”

“I need to sit for a minute or two, Mark. There’s something else I need to spill out loud to someone and I guess you’re elected.”

“Spill away if it’s going to help.”

We sat down in another part of the Japanese collection of the Museum.

“It’s about the time when I left the orphanage and struck out on my own. Now remember I was not yet seventeen years old and still innocent to the ways of the world. Well, not completely innocent, thanks to George Morehead. Anyway my hormones were racing around inside me and I was masturbating all the time. Of course, I’d had sex education in school and that had been reinforced by discussion groups, as we called them, at the Home.

“So I knew that men made love to women, often married them, often fucked them, and roughly how to do it. There hadn’t been much opportunity to practice any of this in the Home. So I started going out with girls as soon as I got a job and a room in an apartment building.

“The good girls were happy to kiss and cuddle, but not much more. A few would let me play with their cunts and put my dick in there. But my penis was thick. I was uncertain and usually it would shrink back into my balls, no matter how eager it had been at first. So I wasn’t a great success and grew increasingly frustrated.

“Eventually, after a year or so with zero scores, as I was coming up on my eighteenth birthday, one of the girls in the warehouse where I worked took pity on me. Ginger was her name, because she had a ginger-colored bush. ‘Donald, love, you need someone to help you. Maybe a professional.’

“A professional!”

“Yes, you know, a prostitute who helps the customers with erection problems. Maybe gives them a little discipline.”

“A little bell rang in my brain. George Morehead believed in discipline when I was slow to open up my body for him. He would take off one of his blue slippers and wallop my butt red until my ass was fully as open as he needed. That was not a memory I wanted to bring back.”

“You don’t have to revive all of this, if you don’t want to,” I interrupted.

“Yes, I do, Mark, I need to say all of this out loud to someone, get it out in the open. Will you be the listener?”

“Of course, that’s what I’m here for.”

“With Ginger’s help, I found a small, discreet brothel that catered to a kinky clientele here in town. I had to save up to go there and get some money on the side, but it was worth it, at first. I was by then eighteen years old and getting desperate. Darla was the name of the dominatrix in residence. Oh, yes, I soon learned what to call her. She specialized in flogging and caning her male clients and then either fucking them or getting fucked by them. She didn’t seem to mind which way.

“It was my second or third time with Mistress Darla that she opened up about how and why she was working on me. Driving music was playing softly in the dungeon as I walked in. “Tonight, Donald, I’m going to tie you up, spread-eagled in this wooden frame of mine. Get your clothes off now and take up the position.”

“Yes, Mistress Darla.”

“Come on, spread those legs and get your arms up high. That’s better. Let me get you properly restrained to the frame with these leather cuffs. Tug on them, make sure they’re tight. I’m going to put this blindfold over your eyes, boy, so you can’t see who’s with you tonight. You can still hear and feel me, and any guest I may bring in.”

“This excited me. It was different, yet I felt I knew all about it. Mistress Darla started work on my shoulders with her medium-

weight flogger. ‘Let’s get you properly warmed up, boy, before I really start on your buttocks. Stick them out for me to receive the discipline they need.’

“I thrashed in the frame, trying to keep my ass cheeks in position for the blows, trying to absorb the pain, feeling my dick starting to rise.

“The music changed—more charging—and the voice changed—a male voice deep and demanding and my prick rose straight up, searching.”

“Now, boy, now you’re really gonna get fucking thrashed. I’m starting at the top, starting to stripe you, to make your shoulders sting. You like that, don’t you? Come on, mother-fucker. Answer me.’

“Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir.’ Where did these phrases come from? They seemed so natural. My body twisted and turned and enjoyed the pain. He built up a rhythm and I tried to stay on the beat.

“I’m coming round to the front, boy, coming for those baby tits of yours.’

“My chest was thrusting out of its own accord, absorbing the strokes, and I was burbling words of thanks and praise. He moved in back. ‘Butt out, boy, for a caning. They’ll be just four well-placed cuts. Fuck, but those are juicy round globes waiting for discipline and maybe I’m just going to have to fuck you too. Let’s see how narrow your passage is.’

“I felt the fingers go in—two at first—and I shuddered with fear and anticipation.

“Someone’s been up here before, haven’t they, boy? Someone’s taken your fucking cherry?’

‘Sir, yes, Sir.’

“Thought so. Well, let’s see how you respond to me. You’re full grown, of age and you seem willing enough, and I’m putting on a rubber. I’m going to fuck you slowly and carefully tonight. It will be fucking painful at first, but pleasure should follow.’

“The stranger was right. His initial thrusts penetrated me

and reached my prostate. I tingled all over, I remember, but he waited while I adjusted. This was an exciting fucking, gentle yet powerful. The man played me like the novice I was. I felt his body sweating into mine, his breath growing heavier as he marched up and down inside me. I tensed at first, but gradually relaxed—all except my cock, which grew and pulsed and finally shot out a load of cum, as he emptied himself into the rubber deep in my body. That was how I met Master John.

“The music stopped. There was laughter from two voices. I was released, the blindfold removed. A muscular short middle-aged man in leather harness, chaps, and boots was eyeing me with a twinkle in his eye. Mistress Darla came up to me and kissed me. ‘That was very unfair, Donald, but I needed to find out how you would respond to male stimulus. You see, dear boy, I think your problem has been that you are gay by nature, and unaware of it. That bastard Morehead, as you’ve told me, must’ve sensed it, and took advantage of you.

“When you came to me, you wanted to learn how to perform with women. I sensed some inherent reluctance, so I invited Master John to join us this evening to check your true nature. You will be much happier as a gay man, and a useful member of society.’

“But I don’t want to be gay. I’m going to join the Marines in a few months and I want to have a proper girlfriend. So I just can’t be homosexual.’

“Son,’ Master John interjected, ‘you may not have any real choice. You were born that way, and you should be proud of it. Oh, you can try to hide your sexuality, hide in the fucking closet, try to live and love in straight society. But from my experience that only leads to an unhappy, unfulfilled life. You could marry, maybe even have kids, but in the depth of the night you’ll encounter your hidden longings and regret your choice.

“Or you can man up, learn to become a responsible gay man and live a full life. Even here in Kansas, as long as you’re careful. You have to choose.”

Donald turned to me and murmured, “What real choice did

I have, Mark? But if I was going to be gay, I was going to be the best gay man in the state. When Master John offered to train me, I agreed, and I even accepted his fees. Anyway, it could only be for a month or so before I went into the service.

“Training was strict, discipline was firm, punishments were to be expected regularly. I went to see him twice a week for a couple of hours to learn the duties of a boy, a sub, a butt-boy.”

“But, Donald, how did you pay for all of this?”

For the first time in our discussions, Donald actually blushed and hesitated. His reply was barely audible. “That was one of the first questions Master John asked too. I was kind of embarrassed, but decided to tell the truth. ‘I’m a street hustler on the side.’

“Here in Kansas City? Can you make any money at it?” He seemed surprised.

“Oh, yes, you would be amazed at the number of closeted men I’ve met. Well, maybe you wouldn’t be, Master John, but most guys would be. I mean, there were always these middle-aged businessman who needed blow jobs in the back of their cars or wanted a man’s hole to fuck. Some wanted the opposite with me in control. Of course I always insisted they wore a rubber, as I did.’

“Master John just laughed. ‘Kid, I’ve got to hand it to you. You’re going to be a success in life with your ‘you can’t keep a good dick down’ spirit. But, seriously, the hustling has to stop right away. Fuck knows what disease you may have picked up already. So stop and get yourself examined. I’ll send you to my doctor.’

“Then I won’t to be able to continue training with you, Master.’

“Because you can’t afford my fees, or is there some other reason?”

“It’s the money, Master. I’m learning such a lot from you, learning to be the best butt-boy in town.”

There was a pause.

“Here’s what we’ll do, Donald. How much time before the Marines claim you?”

“They told me it would be within the next month. I’ve already signed the enlistment papers.”

“Right, we’ll continue the training. You’re worth the effort. You can repay me gradually over time from your Marine pay. That may take a while!” He laughed.

“That’s what I did, Mark, trained to be a responsible first-class bottom before I signed up. And practiced off and on ever since, so I’m good at it.”

We sat quietly for a few minutes, each thinking about these details of Donald’s mixed early life.

“That’s the first time I’ve told anyone all, and I mean all, the details of my past, Mark. I’ve been too embarrassed about some of it—the dominatrix, the Master, most of all, my short hustler career. Now I’m glad to have told someone like you.”

His mood seemed to have lightened. I stood up, tapped him on the shoulder, announcing, “I’m fucking hungry. We are near the café, so we could grab a sandwich or a salad, if you like.”

We ducked into the café, each taking a big salad and some milk, and found a quiet table in one corner. The greens were fresh, the dressing was tangy, and I felt Donald relaxing again opposite me.

“I’m enjoying these talks so far, but I need a couple of hours off. I need to do some shopping for my family this afternoon. I’m told the Plaza is a good place to go.”

I happened to look up at his face. He looked stricken, like a puppy that had been abandoned. I silently cursed myself for my stupidity and tried to make up for it rapidly. “I was hoping you could help me pick out the right kind of Kansas souvenirs. Can you come with me?”

Immediately I knew I’d saved the day. His face creased in a big smile. “Sure, I’d be glad to. I don’t have anything really important to do this afternoon. So you have family? What? Dad and mom?”

Sister?”

“Actually, I have a ten-year-old daughter, Mary, who’s the light of my life, Edith my mother-in-law, who’s the mainstay of my life, and my partner Dan who’s the love of my life. Fuck, I’m getting poetic, but they’re all very important to me.”

Donald looked away for a moment. “You don’t know how lucky you are,” he said quietly.

“Yes, I do know, and I wouldn’t be the man I am today without all three of them. And our dog Wolf.”

“You were married?”

“Yes, for six years. Blythe died in childbirth, and when I eventually found myself recovering, I also found myself coming out gay.” I gave him some more of my background as we ate our lunch and he soaked up the information like a sponge.

As we were finishing, he reached over to touch my arm. There was that electric shock again. “Why can’t I have some of that?”

I chuckled briefly. “Of course you can. I’m almost ten years older than you, I think. I was a green kid looking around when I came out of the Air Force, about your age, and was lucky enough to find Blythe, who helped me through college, after I graduated from the academy and joined the LAPD. You can do the same. It’s hard work, but the rewards more than make up for it.”

“It’s not quite the same. I’m a gay man. I’m not ashamed of that, but would I fit into any police force?”

“Most big-city forces actively encourage minorities of all kinds to apply, and I didn’t really have a problem with my sexuality until the very end. That was the result of a murder investigation into an unsavory group of rich gay businessmen. Come on, let’s get going. The rain seems to have stopped, so show me to the Plaza.”

Donald pointed out landmarks as we drove there. We even found parking on a Saturday afternoon. The stores were elegant in a setting designed to replicate a traditional plaza in Seville, Spain, KC’s sister city. That gave me an idea for Mary’s present, and we finally found a doll-like flamenco dancer with vivid

and ruffled material for a skirt, who stood on a small wooden pedestal. I added a picture book on the state and a dozen scenic postcards for Mary's school project.

He was getting into the right mood, and when I told him what I wanted for Edith, he led me to a small jewelry store on one edge of the Plaza. There I found a pendant made from the state's mineral stones which shone in the dim interior of the shop. It was expensive, but original, and I knew Edith would enjoy it.

"What are you getting for your partner?" Donald inquired. I thought for a moment and then grinned. "He gets me back—after a week apart. I hope I can make it up to him." The boy-man looked at me strangely, and then smiled back.

I seemed to have got him relaxed, and I needed to pry into more delicate areas. "Is there somewhere else more private where we can walk around and talk?"

"There's Loose Park, if you really want to stretch your legs some more."

"I'd like that." We drove over to the city's best-known open space. There were not too many other walkers that gloomy afternoon where some pathways were still damp underfoot, which suited my purpose.

"Donald, I'm sorry, but I do need to talk to you about Donnie Bates. How about we begin with how and when you first met?"

"You know, Mark, in the late spring, this park is full of hundreds of blooming rose bushes, laughing couples, and happy families. Maybe this is the right place to talk about me and Donnie. I like to think we were happy together too."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We walked down the slope, away from the hill where the autumn leaves were being blown off the trees. Donald came to a stop and sighed.

“I knew that sooner or later you were going to ask this. It was almost by accident that Donnie and I ran into one another in basic training. There was mail call one day—about two weeks in—I went along, although I wasn’t really expecting anything. We formed a rough circle round the sarge, who was calling out names. Suddenly I heard, or thought I heard Donald Gates. I pushed my way forward.”

He seemed to be reliving the scene, moving forward with outstretching hand, pushing invisible men out of his way.

“As I reached to take the letter, I heard a voice at my shoulder. ‘Sorry, I think that letter’s mine.’ I turned my head to meet a freckled laughing guy about my height and weight.

“Donald Bates is what I said. Now make up your minds.’

“Why don’t we both take a look at it?’ He smiled.

“No, no, I’m sure it must be for you. I’m not really expecting anything.’

“Shit, I know how much I look forward to letters from home. That’s kinda stupid. I’ve only been away for a few weeks. I’m Donald Bates, by the way, but my friends call me ‘Donnie’.

“That’s totally weird, my name is Donald Gates. It’s almost the same.’

“And we even look a bit alike. Wow, we need to check this out. Got time for a cup of coffee?’

“There was always a break to give guys a chance to read their mail, so we grabbed a mug each and sat in the shade. It was really strange, or providential, that we had met and had these odd connections. We were both from Kansas, I from KC, he from

Baxter Springs in the south. I was an orphan, he had no real father. We were almost the same age and were both muscled and almost six feet. Maybe I had an inch over him. But the letter was indeed his—from his mother, it turned out.

“We realized we were in the same squad for training, but hadn’t really had a chance to get to know any of our fellow recruits in the two weeks we’d be in the Marine Corps Recruit Depot on Parris Island, South Carolina. The hours had been long, the work was tough, and we were being brow-beaten to the ground to turn us into real United States Marines.”

Donald started walking again, more rapidly and I hurried to keep up with him.

“Donnie and I decided to pal-up, to stick together, and the more we got to know one another, the closer we seemed to bond. I like to think our Midwestern upbringing of hard work and honesty stood us in good stead in those training days. Our efforts seemed to be noted because at the end of our twelve weeks of basic, we got the assignment we wanted and went on to gunnery school and eventually ended up in Afghanistan together.

“We often talked about the absence of real fathers in our lives. Mrs. Amberson had not been able to tell me anything about my father. Apparently, my mother hadn’t talked about him in that one meeting they had together at the home. Over the years I had fantasized about him coming to the orphanage and taking me off into some dream existence, but of course it had never happened. Frank Holt had given me an outline of a father figure in the three years I’d been a member of his family. That loving, well-adjusted being had been almost obliterated by the monster Morehead, and I listened avidly to Donnie’s stories.

“He actually had a living father in California, but he’d never met Christopher Bates and for years his mother wouldn’t talk about him. He and his stepfather had what he described as a ‘polite relationship’. Walt Thompson kept an eye on Donnie, checked on his schoolwork, and took him to church as part of the family every Sunday. But his love was given to his young daughter, who could do little wrong in her father’s eyes.

“Of course, Donnie had his mother, who he felt had brought him up well, and as he came of age, had begun to talk about his real father, a successful businessman who’d retired early to Palm Springs with a male partner. Donnie announced solemnly to me that Mr. Bates was a homosexual, a fact that greatly intrigued me. Donnie also planned to meet the gentleman one day.”

We had come to some benches in a sheltered part of the park and Donald sat down on one rather suddenly. Quietly I joined him.

“We had become close buddies, laughed and joked together, ate and drank together, went to the gym and worked out together. So it seemed natural that we would go out on the town together. That meant going to local bars, getting mildly drunk, and flirting with girls who hung out around the base or haunted the bars. Some I could recognize as ‘professionals’ from even my decidedly limited experience. Others were local girls looking for a good time and possibly a husband.

“Donnie passed among them, laughing and charming, and getting laid occasionally, when the need was great. My road was harder and both of us beat off silently and separately in the barracks many a night. Privately, I had also managed to hook up occasionally with other gay men on the base for a few moments of sexual release.

“We had a few long leaves while we were still in the States. I remember one Christmas Donnie took me home to Baxter Springs, and I enjoyed being part of a holiday family, giving and receiving presents, calling on relatives and both of us being admired in our Marine uniforms. It reminded me of my limited time as a teenager with the Holts. Now I was again, the stranger, hoping to be admitted to the closeness of the family fire.

“Not that Mrs. Bates—Thompson didn’t include me in all the festive activities as her son’s buddy, both that Christmas and on two other occasions. She even talked briefly about Donnie’s father and showed me pictures of them both as a happy couple in Berkeley long ago. I found her charming, if a little distant, and certainly never expected to find myself bringing her dead son’s

body home for burial.

“We tried visiting Kansas City for one shorter leave. It was not successful. I was welcomed back at the home like a conquering hero, obliged to tell the younger kids about our lives as Marines. Mrs. Amberson was delighted to see me looking so healthy and to meet my Marine buddy.

“But there was no family home to take Donnie to. We had to stay in a hotel, and not as grand as the one you’re in, Mark. So we went out to clubs and bars in the evenings, and one night I found us by accident outside the Lulu Belle. Where you met me—was it only last night? It was after midnight and a couple of guys in leather came staggering out and saw us. ‘Hey, Marines, you want a good time? Come home with us and we’ll give you satisfaction. Hey, don’t I know you, good-looking?’ I pulled Donnie away quickly, but he kept looking back at them. And I began to wonder about him.

“Back at the motel we showered, getting ready for bed. We also drank a further couple of beers and I was feeling no pain. Donnie flopped down on the bed beside me. ‘Those guys outside that bar...they were homos, weren’t they? And one seemed to know you, Donald.’

“Oh, they just saw a couple of soldiers in uniform and wanted to get a rise out of us.’

“You know, Donald, I think I’m drunk enough to finally ask you. I’ve wondered about you...and the girls...and men. Are you a homo too?’

“Time stopped for me and I felt instantly sober. I looked up at him, at my best friend with this anxious expression on his freckled face. I pulled myself together, and I said very quietly, ‘Yes, Donnie, I am a gay man. I’ve known it for the past year or so.’

“I’ll never forget his answer. ‘It’s a relief to know the answer. I’ve been worried about what your problem might be, when we’ve gone out. Now I know. What’s it like being a homo? I mean, being gay?’

“Bless his innocent and forgiving heart, he was not going to beat me up or throw me out of the room or walk out of my life. I’m learning, Donnie. It’s a lot like any other form of love. It’s not easy, but you keep looking for someone special to come into your life.”

“Have you found anyone, Donald? I’d like to help. You know my real dad is, er, gay, too, although mom doesn’t like to say so. I mean, he’s lived with the same guy for more than fifteen years.”

“To answer your question, the nearest I’ve found so far would be you, Donnie, and you’re straight.”

“That’s surely true. I do like women, but maybe I should try being gay, just once for experience’s sake.”

“If you’re serious about that, you can have that experience tonight with me. You want to try?”

“Fortunately we were both rather drunk by this time. ‘Sure, why not? The idea is making me horny. What would I have to do?’

“Well, let’s see, I could suck you off or you could fuck me or I could fuck you—but I don’t think that’s your thing, Donnie.”

“I don’t know about getting sucked off by a guy. That hasn’t happened since junior high. But I do enjoy fucking as you know. Can I please fuck you, Donald?”

“I had to laugh. It was such a crazy scene. ‘Can you get it up tonight, Donnie? If you think you can, then I’m your man. And I always travel with rubbers and some lube.’

“Doesn’t sound as though it’s very different from regular sex. Hey, my penis is getting really excited.”

“Okay, calm ‘willie’ down for a few minutes, while I get myself ready.”

“When I came out of the bathroom, I was naked and erect too. I’d cleaned myself out as best I could and lubed my anus. I was still giggling about this wild scene and Donnie started laughing too, as I grabbed his rampant cock—which was a big healthy one, by the way—rolled a rubber onto the shaft, and

greased him up too.

“It wasn’t the greatest fuck I’d ever had, nor was it the worst. There wasn’t much foreplay, but we managed a few kisses and bear hugs. Donnie wanted to try a new experience and got right on with it. I knelt on the edge of the bed and directed traffic, so to speak. He knew enough to go slow when he’d penetrated my outer ring. He was breathing hard and muttering to himself as he pushed further into me and started moving in and out.

“Donnie obviously had had experience with girls and fucking men or women needn’t be that different. That night certainly didn’t seem to be, and he was soon charging up and down and holding onto my hips for dear life. It didn’t last very long. We were both very excited and enthusiastic, which overcame some of the effects of the booze. I used my muscles and my body to good effect, and he was soon grunting hard to his orgasm. I let loose my seed into the towel I’d carefully put under me on the bed.

“Not bad, not bad at all for a first-time.’ Was Donnie’s comment as he pulled off the condom. ‘But I don’t think it will win over fucking women.’ He gathered me up in his arms, gave me a great kiss, tongue and all. Then we collapsed in separate double beds and he was soon asleep. As for me, I lay awake and wondered what I had done to our friendship.

“In fact, the next morning he never mentioned it and we just continued as if nothing unusual had happened when we flew back to base. But we never went back to Kansas City together again.”

Donald and I sat on the bench sheltered from the rising wind. He was smiling quietly—it seemed a happy memory for him, and I blessed the dead Donnie for his quiet understanding and friendship.

“Did you make love together again?”

“Only twice, as I remember, and both were months apart. Donnie and I remained buddies. He would occasionally have an opportunity to fuck some camp follower or other, but was always

careful to protect me and my different sexuality.

“The last time was a couple of days before he died. The situation in the village in remote Wardak Province that we were guarding had become tense. Taliban supporters had slipped into the town and were in hiding. We knew we would have to force them out.

“That evening, after a long and stressful day, Donnie came into my cramped quarters. ‘I found us a couple of beers, Donald... and I’ve a favor to ask. I’m tied up in knots, but my balls are full of cum and I need some relief. Can I please fuck you tonight?’

“Here in this scumbag place, Donnie?”

“Right here, on that crummy pile of blankets, and right now, after we drink these beers.’

“But I’m not clean. And my hole hasn’t been used for a month or longer.’

“Fuck that, just please show your best buddy a little kindness and let him blast off.’

“If you put it that way, how can I refuse? Come here, you handsome hunk and kiss me—properly, mind you.’ We drank our beers, exchanging saliva as we hugged and kissed. We needed the warmth of each other’s bodies, the strength of the bond between us.

“I’ll lie here against the wall, shove some lube up my anus and smear it around. While I’m doing that, here, get this rubber on yourself and take the tube of lube.’

“Once again, our surroundings weren’t a palace or even a motel, but for two buddies in a hostile place, it was human contact and human comfort. Back against the wall, I pulled my ankles up high, so he could see my hole winking at him, and we were looking each other in the eye and smiling. For some reason it was one of the hottest fucks I’ve ever had. Yes, our need was great and we were two big, muscular men in search of sex, like animals in heat, with no holds barred.

“He shoved his prick right into me. I groaned and opened

up for him. He hit my prostate and forced himself further. The rubber tip of his cock kept bumping into me and I began to shake with my own need. Then he moved quickly up to his hilt, and I was shafted, mounted on my best buddy's terrible thick sword, sweating and cursing. But we never stopped smiling at one another and he would lean in for an open mouthed kiss every so often. He drove me back against the wall, moving like a pulsating engine, driving his penis into my depths. I was loving every minute of it, encouraging his fiercest attacks. He tweaked my cock, rearing in front of him, and I almost leapt into the air. Fire was blazing between us that night. Two men needed to spend their lust in one another. We were shuddering. Our climaxes were building and then they thundered over us. We spent our seed, but remained locked together for many more minutes.

“Finally his tool slipped out. ‘Thank you, Donald, my buddy, my pal. We both needed that.’ And he was gone, back to his own little cubbyhole.

“Less than thirty-six hours later, he was dead, his head half blown away. That wonderful freckled face bathed in blood or so it seemed to me. I don't remember much about the incident, or ambush I guess it was. We were patrolling, hoping to lure out some of the enemy for a firefight. It didn't quite work out that way and Donnie caught the first bullets.

“I broke the rules going to his rescue and a bullet grazed my shoulder, knocking me down and out. Before my eyes closed, I saw what remained of his head, and I still see it in my nightmares. Oh, these have eased off over the months, but I imagine they will remain with me for most of my life. Yes, I suppose it is ‘post-traumatic stress syndrome’—my heritage from the war.

“As soon as I came to in a field hospital and found out that Donnie was dead, I told them that I wanted to accompany his body back for burial in his hometown. I wanted to go out with my buddy one last time, and I had some leave due too. It was unusual, but our captain supported me.

“One cold grey day early this year, I found myself in a small military convoy moving along the back roads of Missouri and

Kansas, looking for the Bates–Thompson plots in that cemetery on the outskirts of Baxter Springs. You told me how bleak you thought it looked last week. Well, imagine it in February, with a few flurries of snow blowing in the wind.

“The town turned out to mourn one of its own sons, with the high school choir and the mayor. The Marines did their job well too, with full military honors and rifle salutes. I had walked over to the family and stood with Sally and Megan, surrounded by other relatives. Of Donnie’s real father, Christopher Bates, there was no sign, no wreath, and no message.

“I didn’t see much of what happened. I stood ramrod straight, my eyes closed to squeeze back tears. Later, I was told how moving and affecting the ceremony had been and my hand was shaken innumerable times while I tried to smile politely.

“It had been arranged that I would spend a day or so with Sally and her family. We talked a great deal about Donnie and she gave me a couple of photos of herself and her son as a memento. We also talked about his real father, her regrets about keeping them apart, but it was too late for that. So I asked her why Chris Bates hadn’t been at the funeral. She looked puzzled for a moment, then shyly admitted she’d completely forgotten to invite him. Now father and son would never know one another, and I held both parents to account. Donnie could’ve had a complete family, but prejudice on one side and an apparent lack of interest or follow-through on the other had prevented him from knowing his natural father and left him as incomplete as I always felt.

“I was not very good company those few days. I went back to the cemetery a couple of times and told my only friend that I would find his real father and tell him about the son I felt he had abandoned too casually.

“Since I was in Kansas, I drove up to Kansas City, before I flew back to rejoin my unit. Of course I knew I had to see Mrs. Amberson at the Midwest Home. She made me very welcome as always, but, being the intuitive soul she is, she didn’t ask too many questions, just fed me a Coke and peanut butter cookies. I stumbled through some of my story, but couldn’t bring myself

to talk about my sexuality and the pain I felt about losing my only friend.

“In one sense I was glad to escape back into the war zone and Marine life. But I was only there another couple of months before my tour of duty was over and I was sent back to the States, to Twenty-nine Palms near Palm Springs. I suspect they may be glad to be rid of me, as I’d become morose and closed off. I got some counseling out there and more intensive efforts at the base in California. I think it helped. It forced me to think forward again and not to keep reliving my three years with Donnie. And I continued to think about his father now that I was close to Palm Springs, where I knew he lived, thanks to my conversations with his former wife.”

The wind had really picked up again and the light was fading. The afternoon was gone, and to my embarrassment, I was feeling hungry again. All this walking and talking seemed to increase my appetite. “It’s time we moved on, Donald, and it’s almost time for dinner. I guess this will be our last meal together for the moment, so where would you like to go?”

I could almost see the wheels turning in his mind; I was getting to know Donald Gates so well. Finally he chuckled, which was a good sign. “There’s a place I need to take you to—serves the best ribs in town—not too far away.”

“Great, I love baby back ribs and a baked potato with everything.”

We walked quickly out of Loose Park to my car and I drove back towards my hotel and its mall where I parked. Then he hustled me along until we stood outside an evidently well-established ribs place.

“Gates?” I exclaimed. “The same name as yours?”

We walked through the door, with Donald chuckling again. “Yes, indeedy, the very same. Can you find us a quiet table in a corner, miss? Thanks. Gates has been established here for years, I think from the forties or fifties, and now they have four or five restaurants around the area and their ribs are known throughout

the Midwest.

“I’ve been here a few times, and I used to fantasize that the owners must be my real family and that one day they would come and take me away. Well, it hasn’t happened yet.”

We settled down with the menus and I ordered a half rack of ribs St. Louis style, veggies, and a baked potato with sour cream and chives. I felt I’d earned it. Donald ordered much the same and insisted he was paying. “After all, we’re in my family’s restaurant.”

While we waited, I decided to go on with my interrogation. I needed to strike at the heart of his conundrum. “Donald, what made you decide to look up Christopher Bates and to pass yourself off as his son?”

He looked down at the beer glass in his hand and pondered for a minute or two. “That’s something I’ve thought about long and hard over the summer, and I’m still not sure I know all the reasons.

“First, I was curious, curious about the man who could ignore his only son for twenty odd years. I’d been told by Sally about the injunction she had taken out when Donnie was a baby, but why hadn’t the father made some effort in later years? That made me angry, and I wanted to shake up Mr. Bates, make him aware of the responsibilities he hadn’t assumed, of a debt in a sense he owed my dead buddy.

“Then I was curious about the gay middle-aged man, who’d been married and fathered a child, while also fucking and being fucked by men on the side. Bates was a guy who’d swung both ways at one time, and then had settled down and seemed to have been faithful to his male partner for most of Donnie’s life.”

“But why assume Donnie’s identity?” I was pushing because I needed this information to fulfill my mission, and I too was curious.

Again he thought about it and the answer was hesitant. “I think I did that because it was the easiest way to get in touch with him.”

“You could have said you were Donnie’s best friend?”

“That might not have sparked any reply to the letter I’d decided to write. Since he apparently didn’t know about Donnie’s death, I wanted to surprise him by reappearing as his son.”

“Was that the only reason?”

“No,” the hesitations were longer, “I think I wanted to punish him in some way for his neglect. And I guess I wondered whether I could bring off the impersonation. I liked the challenge. It sparked my sense of adventure, I suppose.”

“Anything else?”

The reply came so quietly I had to lean across the table to hear him. “I know what you’re thinking, Mark, and you could be right. Here was a well-to-do middle-aged man, who was also gay. Maybe he could be my sugar daddy. More importantly, perhaps he could be a real Daddy to me, become the father I’d never known. So there were several reasons—some true, some good, some mischievous, some bad—behind that letter. How many of them I’d thought through, I don’t know.”

The food arrived, hot and enticing, and we were silent for a few moments, absorbed in the succulent ribs and in mashing the inside of our potatoes. I also looked more closely at the man I’d met only the night before, the man I’d been tracking for the past week, the man I spent all day listening to.

What had I learned? That he’d had a bad and rough early life, that he’d survived and grown into a fine Marine and soldier, that he had cherished and loved a few people and had been cherished in his turn, that he was coming to grips with his sexuality and accepting his gayness, that he was a lonely spirit, with a warm heart to share, that his efforts have been blighted, destroyed, ruined in turn.

He caught me looking at him, and smiled that beguiling, almost innocent, sexy smile. “I spent a long time on that letter, and was pleasantly surprised at the immediate reply. I accepted Mr. Bates’ invitation to meet for coffee, put on uniform, and went into Palm Springs.

“I recognized him immediately. He looked so much like Donnie grown old. That almost stopped me in my tracks, and I couldn’t stop glancing at him as we sat in the garden there at “Koffi”, I think it was.

“It took a while to get the conversation going, and I had trouble adjusting to the fact that he didn’t know his real son was dead. Then he made it easier for me by inviting me out to the house. I was hesitant because that meant I really had to invest myself with Donnie’s persona.

“Christopher Bates seemed open and willing to accept me. I love swimming and the near-naked dip in that pool was a real treat. Alan, his partner, was rightly more guarded and I accepted that he was protective of Chris.

“It all seemed easy at first, and I was letting down my guard. What neither of us had anticipated was the sexual attraction that grew, like a serpent or the forbidden fruit. Even with my limited experience, I think I was the first to realize what was happening when our dicks would keep rising as we swam naked.

“To be honest, it both excited and repelled me. Chris was a big sexy man with plenty of experience, a leather man who seemed to appeal to my own kinks and desires. But I was supposed to be his son and that kind of sex was forbidden. Alan seemed to suspect, maybe even to see through my masquerade, and I didn’t want to upset this older man, whose health seemed precarious.

“So we danced around the problem for several weeks. Finally he took me to that high-class hotel for what was clearly intended to be a weekend of sex. I was totally conflicted. Here was a sugar daddy, maybe a real Daddy offering to take me into his family full-time. But here also was a father figure with the hots for his supposed son. I sensed Chris was struggling with it too.

“I’d tried to limit our physical contact earlier, realizing where it could lead, but that evening I was becoming aroused. Chris Bates had seemed to grow in energy over the summer, the years seemed to slide away from his body and I could almost convince myself it was Donnie I was spending the weekend with.

“We were messing around after drinks and dinner. He was testing my nipples when his hands started to move up to grab my dog tags. A red light went on in my befuddled brain. The dog tags read Gates, not Bates. If he looked closely, my game would be up. Besides, this was not Donnie, but an older man, a father figure.

“I wanted him, but not under these conditions. I’d boxed myself into an impossible space. So I had to get out of there, to get away, to think through my crazy scheme. I remember getting dressed, running out of the hotel, and taking a taxi back to Palm Springs where I could get transport to the base. It took all of my money and all of my courage to leave him there, and not to answer his increasingly desperate phone and text messages over the following days. I applied for immediate leave—I had plenty of time owed me—and I fled back here.

“For the past week I’ve prowled around the city, thinking of how I’d ruined another possible opportunity to find myself a family and had disappointed a generous and sexy man. I wanted to confess to Mrs. Amberson, but I was too ashamed of my fraudulent scheme.”

I had tried to eat, but Donald had merely poked at his food. We sat in silence for several minutes, with him huddled in a corner of the booth.

“So we’ve more or less come full circle, Donald. I’m leaving tomorrow to report back to Chris Bates. I have my own thoughts and ideas, but tell me what you’d like me to say on your behalf?”

“I’m not sure, Mark, I’m really not sure.”

“Well, do you want to see him again, or do you want to forget the whole incident and move on with your life?”

“What I’d really like to do is to start over, to meet him as Donald Gates and ask his forgiveness.”

“In other words, you’re prepared to man-up and confess your misdemeanor and, in a sense, throw yourself on the mercy of the court?”

“Yes, I guess that’s it. Even if he doesn’t want to have anything to do with me, at least I owe him that much. I think it’s all this

talking to you that helped me make up my mind, Mark.”

“Oh, I think he’ll want to talk to you, at least.”

“One thing more, I’d like to explain to Alan, his partner, or maybe have you explain that I meant Chris no real harm. Once I’d met him and seen the kind of man he was, my plans for revenge or money just seemed to evaporate.”

“I hope he and I can believe you, Donald. But where does that leave the sexual interest you both seem to have developed in one another?”

“I think I’d be willing to try again with Chris, to see whether we do indeed strike sparks in one another. I really do need a Daddy, a father as much as a sex partner. But we have to sort through all this baggage first. And, after talking to you, I guess I also need to get working on my own career future, to make serious inquiries about applying to the LAPD Academy.”

“I think this gives me more than enough to provide Chris with an upbeat report. Now try to eat some of the excellent dinner you’ve arranged. While you’re shredding that back rib, do you have any plans for your last evening in town?”

Donald glanced up at me, wiping a blob of barbecue sauce off his mouth. “I hadn’t really thought about it. Maybe I could persuade you to come with me to the Lulu Belle for a last drink?”

I chuckled. “That at least should persuade the locals that we become good friends. Sure, we could do a quick change after dinner and meet at the bar around nine pm.”

“And this dinner’s on me this evening, Mark, in case I didn’t make that clear before. Don’t worry, Marine sergeants get a good wage and I haven’t had much to spend it on this week.”

“Are you sure? It could be a legitimate charge on my expense account.”

“Thank you, but no. You looked after me so well today, listened to me by the hour, given me some good advice. The least I can do is to buy you a decent dinner—and a beer at the bar.”

We polished off the ribs and baked potato, declined the offer

of the delicious sounding desserts, and I thanked him again. He refused the offer of a lift back. I wondered where he was staying that week. I went back to the Crown Center mulling over all I had learned that day.

There was time for a leisurely hot shower to wash off the physical and mental grime of the day; then came a quick call home to reassure everyone I'd be on the afternoon to evening flights to Palm Springs and that the day's discussions with Donald had gone well. I had a quiet minute or two to reassure Dan that he was still the only important man in my life and that I looked forward to proving it on Sunday evening.

My wife beater could have done with a wash, but I figured I could get one more wearing out of it in the bar. My boots were still shining from the attention they had received from Tim on the previous two nights, and I was soon ready. I was beginning to feel at home as I pushed aside the leather curtain strips of the Lulu Belle about three minutes before nine. The bar was already busy although it was still early Saturday night. Jake had an assistant that evening, but he still had a Bud waiting for me.

As my eyes adjusted and I looked around, I realized that the usual drinkers and cruisers were all glancing in my direction and then back to the boot black stand. Young Tim was waving to me and beside him stood Donald, spruced up, boots shining, a big grin plastered across his face, and a leather collar round his neck.

We walked towards one another, colliding in a bear hug and an open-mouthed kiss, amid shouts and yells from our audience. "I've told them we've become good buddies on our day together and that we're having a small celebration, Mark, so drink up."

"Well, maybe I can manage one more, in your honor, but then I need to get back to pack. I've an early morning start. Got to get to Joplin by noon."

"And I've got an early morning flight to catch from here, but there's still time for that last drink."

"Let's give one to Tim too—I guess he's over twenty-one." We laughed together and brought Tim into the joke. "Of course

I'm over age, Sirs, or I wouldn't be working in a leather bar."

I limited myself to two beers, and then I wanted to be on my way. I put my arm around Donald's shoulders as I moved to the door, saying good-byes to my newfound friends of the Lulu Belle.

Out in the cool night air, I was zipping up my wind-breaker when Donald gripped my arm. "Take me back to your hotel, Sir, take me home with you."

I was shaken by the look of desperate yearning on his young face and reluctantly agreed after a long pause. I wasn't certain, but I had a vague idea of what Donald had in mind.

Both in the car ride and back at the Westin, he was silent and nervous, passive beside me. He was clenching and unclenching his fists and a light flush of sweat covered his face. Once inside my room, he flung himself on the floor and started licking my boots.

"Shit, Donald, what are you doing? Get the fuck off your knees."

"Sir, you gotta be my Sir for this evening. That's why I'm wearing this collar. For you." He smiled that gentle, but oh so seductive smile. Did he really not fully understand what a turn-on that was?

"I'm certainly not your Sir. I'm no man's Sir. Basically, I'm a leather boy like you, with a Master waiting for me back at home in Palm Springs."

"Mark, for just one evening, I need you to be the Sir for me. You've guided and mentored me all day. You've helped me to untangle myself. Now I want to thank you for your help." The voice was sliding down to a hoarse whisper. "I really only know one way to truly thank a man, and that's to give myself to him for whatever pleasure he can find in me."

"Donald, that isn't necessary. Just helping you find yourself is reward enough, and don't forget Chris Bates has paid me to find you."

That dash of cold water slowed him for a moment, and I moved further into my room. Then he launched himself at me and we both tumbled onto the king-sized bed. He was tugging off his shirt as he spoke. "You may be a gun-for-hire, but you're still one sexy guy and a trustworthy man, and I have to thank you somehow in the way I've been trained."

We were wrestling on the bed as he tried to pin me down to get at my cock, and I tried to fend him off. "Donald, forget it. You've thanked me enough, and I'll give a fair report about you back to Chris."

But it was becoming a losing battle. I'd spent the week in monk-like chastity and I was no longer used to that at home with Dan. Donald was indeed a turn-on. He knew it and my cock knew it too.

"Please, Sir, you've got to let me do something. I've had no sex for weeks. I'm hungry for cock, and you and your body really excite me. I've been thinking about this all evening and this is probably my only chance to take care of you."

He'd sprung up off the bed and was stripping off his boots, shirt, jeans, and chaps. He'd dressed commando, and soon he was wearing just the harness boots he'd pulled back on and the damned leather collar. The striptease had been intended to titillate and excite, a hurried but professional job.

I was being tempted, and he knew it. Dazed by that bronzed and muscled torso in front of me and the lust that was creeping through my body, I didn't really put up much of a fight as he unbuckled my belt and pulled down my pants. Then off came my new Corcs, followed by jock and pants and finally he maneuvered my wife beater up to expose my pecs and nipples.

"I knew you'd have a beautiful body, Sir, but all this fur is a real bonus. May I run my hand through it, Sir?"

His seduction was gradual, but the feeling seemed genuine and, of course, I was tempted enough to respond. His fingers ran delicately through my hairy chest, and he lightly tweaked my nipples erect before leaning down to gently suck and then bite

them. I groaned and reached up to grab his arms as he straddled my body. I pulled him down for an open mouthed kiss, our tongues reaching out for one another. My prick was responding rapidly to his skillful treatment and his dick was thumping on my stomach.

He whispered in my ear, “How would you like me to serve you, Sir? Would you like me to give you a first-class blow job, would you prefer to fuck my eager hole, or would you like me to ride your thick cock to glory? I’ve got protection and lube with me. I want you, Sir. I need you, Sir—especially this night, when we’re both lonely and so horny.”

He was certainly pressing the right buttons. I was desperately trying to keep the picture of Dan in my mind’s eye, but my animal lust was driving reason away. I was finally a receiver of Donald’s innocent sounding seduction, and I was falling for it. My mind gave way and I grunted back at him. “You can suck my stick, after you rubber it. That’s as far as it goes tonight.”

“Yes, Sir, whatever pleases you, the boy will perform.”

That was exactly what he did. There was a momentary pause while he retrieved a condom from the pocket of his jeans and fitted it over my ever willing and able weapon. Then he slowly stretched me out on the bed, using one hand to work my shaft to final hardness, while the other slid seductively down my arms into my fur and tweaked my nipples again.

I shuddered with desire. “Open up, boy, and let my cockhead rest on your tongue.”

“Sir, yes, Sir,” he moaned in return and, sliding his body into position, he took the tip of my pole which was pointing at the ceiling. His lips kissed the shaft as the head lay in the warmth of his mouth and I felt the first wash of his saliva.

Almost involuntarily I pushed in further. “Take it all, boy, take my rod and suck it all.”

He groaned a reply and expertly swallowed me whole. My rubbered tip was reaching for his throat. He bathed me in liquid warmth, his tongue rolling me into pleasure and excitement. His

lips closed firmly around my root, while his hands moved to massage my balls. I hissed back at him, “Work me, boy, pleasure me.” An eager grunt and nod of his head followed, as my prick was expertly massaged and my balls lightly pummeled with his fist. My body was moving of its own accord as we found a rhythm together.

He sucked more intently, breathing rapidly through his nose. His face showed a fierce concentration, which heightened as I reached down to play with his cock and balls hanging down almost behind him. Now, we were firmly enveloped in one another, with me tossing slightly and swearing loudly.

“Oh, fuck, yes. You’re doing a great job down there, boy. Suck harder, kid, I want to grow into your throat. Yeah, take it all; mouth it all, while I play with your prick. It’s growing like mine. Fucking hell, you’re one hot cock sucker.” He was grunting round the sheathed log in his mouth, sucking ever more enthusiastically.

I was quivering with lust and effort, sweat was dripping off him into my fur and we were both wanting and waiting to reach climax. Suddenly I felt my balls clench and my cum must’ve raced into the tip of the rubber, as I roared my orgasm in that hotel room. A minute later, I felt him rear up, move my hand so that he spurted to cover it with his spunk. He shook slightly from his efforts, licked my hand clean as my cock sank back out of his mouth and he slid sideways onto the bed. We lay there, panting for several minutes while I returned to earth, and felt vaguely guilty of betraying Dan yet again. “Let’s get showered and cleaned up, boy.”

It was strange to be treated like the dominant partner when taking my shower, being toweled dry before Donald could scrub himself clean. He’d performed well and it felt good to be treated like the Lord and Master for a few moments.

“Please, Sir, may I stay with you. I’ll promise not to bother you, but I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

“Dammit, I’m not sure I can resist your sexy charms, Donald. Still, fuck it, climb under the sheets and we’ll spoon together for a while, but nothing more.”

Truth be told, I was glad of company and a sexy younger body alongside me was a pleasant way to end a challenging week. Donald lay quietly in front of me and gradually my arms crept around him. He sighed happily and his hands reached up to hold mine. Surprisingly quickly, we were sound asleep and we rested cocooned together until my cell phone alarm went off at seven thirty.

“Thank you so much, Sir Mark. That was very generous of you to look after a lonely man who’s about to make some major changes in his life.”

“I told you I was here to help you, although I didn’t expect the result to be quite so wide ranging.” I chuckled. “You do know we can’t repeat this, Donald. We both have other responsibilities.”

“Yes, Sir, I hope you won’t think any the worse of me for taking advantage of your natural kindness and generosity last night. It’s given me relief, and enough courage to do the things that have to be done in the next two weeks.”

“I understand, Donald. Everything you’ve told me will only be passed on to Chris and perhaps to Alan. Nobody else needs to know. I’ll let you have a copy of any written report I give to Chris and I promise I’ll talk to Alan next week as well. Let me think. I guess the easiest way to give you their reactions will be to phone you midweek. That will give you time to make up your mind about how you want to handle your future when you leave the Marines.”

“Thanks again, Sir Mark.” He held his hand lightly over my mouth for a moment as I attempted to correct him. “Yes, I know, but you will always be a true Sir to me for your treatment of me over the last couple of days. Well, I’d best be going. I have to pack and my plane leaves here around eleven.”

“Good luck, Donald. Remember I’m always available if you need me in the future. Here’s my card with my cell number on it. You’ve been my first case, and I can always be called for follow-up advice, if you need it to reach a proper conclusion. Sure I can’t make you some coffee? Or breakfast?”

“No, Sir, I must be on my way. And I don’t want to damage your reputation any further in this hotel.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry about that. I’ve enjoyed getting to know you, and I hope we’ll remain friends. Now, you better be off. I’ll talk to you in a few days. Travel safely.”

“You too, Sir. Thank you again for everything, I mean it. See you in Palm Springs.”

He was gone. I sighed, glad I’d almost finished my mission, but feeling oddly protective of this lonely young man and his secrets. I packed, went down for a quick breakfast, settled the bill, and drove south back to Joplin across the flat autumn Missouri landscape.

I did wonder about the ethics of having sex with a man I’d been paid to find, but for me it had been the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle that made up Donald Gates, who had been taught only one way to thank those men who helped him in life. That was a sad commentary on all of us.

The three hour drive gave me more time to start organizing my thoughts and the plane rides finalized my ideas for the report I was going to give Chris Bates the following day. I’d arranged on the phone that morning to go round to their home to meet both Chris and Alan at nine am, assuring them that Donald was fine, that he had needed time to sort himself out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dan's hunky body stood out in the group waiting for passengers at Palm Springs Airport that Sunday evening. My tired eyes were so pleased to see him, tall, tanned, and looking eager for an embrace. That's one airport where men can hug and even kiss their arriving male partners.

"Where's your luggage?" he asked after we bonded with a bear hug and a quick grope. I pointed to my carry-on duffel bag. "Right, let's go. I can't wait to get you home."

As soon as we were out of the parking lot, he wanted my cock and balls out of my pants and on display. That was no problem; my penis was trying to burst out of my pants anyway. I sighed with relief, and turned to give him a wholehearted kiss before he'd even turned off Tahquitz. The drive to the house seemed too short between him tugging on my shaft and me distracting him and his nipples at every light.

We straightened ourselves out before turning into our driveway. The front door opened right away, and Mary came dancing out, towed by Wolf on his leash. Somehow we made it inside, to be greeted by an amused Edith. "Welcome home, Mark. Mary's been ready for the past hour and impatiently waiting for you."

A few minutes were needed to settle everyone down. Wolf had to lick my hands and arms; Mary was eager for her presents and thrilled with the assortment of Kansan things I'd picked up in Baxter Springs and Kansas City. Edith and Dan seemed content to watch, like indulgent parents—an odd role for Dan, I thought in passing. My mother-in-law was delighted with the pendant I'd found for her in the Plaza and had to get me to put it around her neck immediately.

She'd prepared some sandwiches and a beer to deal with my hunger pangs, and everyone sat around the table as I gave a carefully edited account of my travels in the Midwest. Then it

was past Mary's bedtime and Edith led her firmly away, clutching her flamenco dancer.

Dan turned to me and smiled. "Come on, lover man, I'm waiting for my present." We retreated to our *casita* and he waited patiently while I unpacked in my usual careful manner. Then, obeying his silent signal, I undressed completely and knelt at his feet. I noticed he was wearing his good boots and a crop had mysteriously appeared in his right hand.

Tentatively I leaned down to start licking his Dehners. He pulled me up by my hair. "Okay, Mark, what have you brought home to me?"

"Your grateful, boy, Master, who has badly missed you and your powerful prick." I looked up to his face. He was trying to look cool and stern, and I blushed.

"That's good. I missed my boy too. But I suspect you have something to confess."

I sighed. My face always seemed to give me away to Dan, if not to other outsiders. "Yes, Master, I have to tell you that I slipped again. I allowed a man to suck me off. Donald, last night. He needed it. I guess we needed it. That's no excuse, and I'll accept your punishment."

"You better tell me the rest, while I decide what to do with you. Maybe I'll send you to bed alone, without any sex with me."

"Please, Master, no, I need... Yes, Master, whatever you want." And I told him briefly the story of Donald, with his confused and complicated life, the sad fact that only through giving himself sexually did he feel able to thank men. Dan listened attentively and, I thought, sympathetically.

"Since it's your cock that seems unable to behave itself, I'm going to begin there by putting it into chastity for tonight. Present yourself and gently massage your penis, while I get out the CB 3000 from the drawer."

I watched as he carefully fitted the ring round my cock and balls, and then slid my prick into the hard acrylic cage before anchoring the whole device in place with its screw. I tried not to

shiver or wriggle, but I felt truly confined and disciplined.

“Now climb up and spread yourself over my lap. Get that butt in the air, and keep that chastised dick under control.”

He pulled a heavy gardening glove out of the bedside table. “You know you have to pay for your behavior. You’re forbidden to come tonight, no matter how much I edge you.”

He proceeded to wallop my ass, rhythmically moving from one cheek to the other. The glove’s rough surface hurt almost as much as the slaps, but gradually he built up the momentum until I felt as though my rear end was blistering. It reminded me too well of the previous weekend. Then he switched to the crop, marking me with welts that I’d feel for the next day or so. The whole scene was becoming reminiscent of our recent evening in Desert Hot Springs.

I was wriggling constantly on his blue jeans’ knees, like an overgrown schoolboy, desperately trying to stay in place and to keep my imprisoned penis under control. Finally he seemed to tire of the glove game and rolled me onto the floor.

“Thank you, Master, your boy thanks you for a well-deserved punishment.”

“I’m not finished yet. I’ve been waiting all week to get up your hole again, and I like it in that rosy red and blue condition. I can still see some faded bruises from last weekend. So get back on the bed, doggy-style, and present your ass to be properly fucked.”

I did as I was told. Dan had brought out a packet of lube and began to poke grease into my rear end. I moaned in pleasure and anticipation, until he silenced me with a clip on the ear. So I panted and sweated, while he got both of us ready, stretching my passage with his fingers and rubbing the lube over his powerful shaft and the heavy PA in its head. I sank my shoulders into the bed and my penis-in-chastity firmly beneath me.

“Ready or not, here I come. Fuck, but it feels good to get my cockhead back inside you. I can feel it starting to poke around, but I’ll give you a minute or so to get used to me again.”

It felt equally good to me to have his shaft start edging its

way into familiar territory. He moved slowly but surely, pushing the pole up my passage, filling up my needy space. I shivered, using my muscles, opening myself to his advances. We were both breathing hard, bodies heating in pleasure, and sweat running from one torso to the other.

It still amazed me how quickly and thoroughly I'd grown accustomed to having his cock deep inside me, and how much I needed and wanted it regularly and powerfully. I knew I had to play my part, to show how much I appreciated these fucks, to signal my desire to be plundered and pierced deeply by squeezing and urging his prick further inside me, by lining my passageway with lube and my juices to smooth his way. I was moaning my pleasure, and I could hear him muttering and cursing as he slid up and down.

“Fuck, this boy can really deliver. Shit, up I go again. Need to get deeper. Let him feel my PA in his innards. Poke that prostate. Yeah, the shit felt that all right. Good boy, you squeezing my fuckstick. Back down—squeeze harder, boy. Yeah, my cum is rising. Been too long. Need to fuck these final inches into my boy. Prong him good. Yeah, fuck, my cream is coming. I'm gonna breed him. Yeah, breed him again. Fuck, yeah, boy, coming now...now...fuck.”

I'm not sure I heard all of it, but his body was rising up, his hands gripping my hips, his breathing short and staccato. My body was wide open for my Master's gift. I felt the power of him filling me up once again. I was bred. I was his, and his alone. Fuck, but I surely needed that.

Slowly he sank down, covering me on the bed. He kissed my neck and I groaned in acceptance. Only my poor cock remained unsatisfied, squeezed beneath us in its cage and unable to erect. A fitting punishment, I guess, for a man who couldn't resist sexual temptation. But then Dan hadn't yet encountered the full force of Donald's seductive smile.

Eventually his pole shrank down and out. Dan slapped my butt. “Don't move, boy, I'm going to plug your hole, big dildo time, to keep my gift inside you overnight. And the CB 3000 stays

on you too.”

I sighed happily. I needed to be kept in line. Funny, how being the boss all week, acting as the seasoned detective I was on the trail didn't complete me any longer. I'd learned to submit privately, because I wanted to and I needed to, but only to Dan. Almost effortlessly, I'd been trained and accepted my place in my sex play, and didn't feel any loss of masculinity having him as my Master.

To prove the point, my body accepted a larger than usual butt plug, which required five minutes of effort by both of us to get it firmly in place. Then he took me into our super large shower, and I soaped and washed him before he did the same for me.

We collapsed onto the welcoming bed. He wanted to spoon with me in front, butt-plugged and cock-caged for his pleasure. He played with my nipples for a few minutes, while I was trying to lie back to kiss him. But all too soon I was falling asleep. We relaxed together and slept soundly until the alarm sounded on Monday morning.

We both stumbled out of bed. Dan came over and unscrewed the chastity device. He checked I was still in working order by kissing me full force and twisting my tits; my penis jerked and rose cheerfully into a full upright position. He slapped it down, bent over, and slowly worked the plug out of me. I covered his mouth with mine and we tongued one another, surprisingly eager for an early morning. Then I cleaned myself out and the day began.

We joined the ladies for breakfast. Mary had already packed her Kansas materials, including the little cars, for her school report. Edith made pancakes and bacon, a special treat for a weekday. But then both of us were going to work. Dan's case was opening up. Mrs. Fontaine was back and wanted a meeting first thing to discuss her philandering husband. I was due to meet Chris and Alan and report about Donald. I'd made a few notes on my laptop that I wanted to print out before I left, and I needed to get my expenses in order before the day's meeting.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

At eight fifty-five that morning I was parking outside *Casa di Principessa* in Old Palm Springs. My portfolio had in it my written report on Donald Gates, a few recent photos of him, including one taken on my cell phone of both of us together on Saturday evening in the Kansas City bar, and my expenses sheet.

Chris Bates opened the front door almost as soon as I rang the bell and enveloped me in a big bear-hug and kiss. “Welcome home, Mark, and thanks for all the detective work over the last week. You had a very busy time. Is he back here at the Marine base now?”

“To answer the last part first—yes, I assume Donald made it safely back to Twenty-nine Palms. He should’ve got here before me yesterday, and we’ve agreed to talk on the phone midweek.”

“Maybe I can join you on the phone call?”

“Steady, Chris, we’ve not reached that stage yet. We need to sit down and talk this out. And I promised to consult Alan too.”

“Alan had another heart attack last Thursday. He’s been home and resting all weekend. He does know you want to talk to him. Anyways, let’s go into my office and you can fill me in. How about some coffee?”

We made polite conversation for a moment or two about my trip and especially Baxter Springs, while two mugs of decaffeinated were brought in by the maid. I produced my written report and expense sheet. The latter he dismissed immediately.

“Very reasonable, Mark, I’ll give you a check before you leave this morning and we’ll settle your fee at the same time. Now give me a few minutes to read the report.”

I’d limited myself to facts as I knew them—secondhand—about Donald’s early life, about his friendship with Donnie Bates, Chris’ real son. I concluded with Donald’s explanation of his impersonation over the past summer and the reasons he gave me

for leaving so abruptly.

It was interesting to watch Chris Bates' face as he skimmed the pages, his expression changing from sympathy for the young orphan, to something like regret over Donnie's tragic death. The final section he read more carefully and he sighed as he put the pages down.

"Do you believe his explanation, Mark? Do you think he's telling the truth about why he passed himself off as Donnie?"

"Yes, I do. Admittedly our acquaintance has been short, but I think I've been a good judge of character as a detective. Donald is an intelligent young man, who's been knocked about by life since an early age. Several other people spoke well of him on my travels. He's been resilient in moving forward, and in the course of several hours last Saturday I sensed the confusion, the anger, and the shame that followed his impersonation.

"But you spent all summer with him. How do my findings fit your impressions?"

Chris was silent for several minutes, glancing down at the report once or twice. "I think you're probably right, Mark. Basically, he seems to be an honest young man with brains and brawn. Oh, I admit I was delighted to have such a handsome lad as my son and I didn't want to look any further. Over the summer months, I began to realize I hadn't done very well as a father."

"It's not my place to criticize you, Chris, but I feel bound to say you could have done more for Donnie."

"Yes, I know. After Sally slapped the injunction on me when he was a baby, and I found Alan and started the business, I think I just wanted to forget that time in my life. We were very busy together and it was easy to close that door and ignore a boy growing up far away. That's no real excuse, but it's what I let happen.

"Strange, but I think sending Christmas cards was my solution to an occasional guilty conscience."

"Perhaps you can see how a fatherless boy, like Donald, felt compelled to make you understand, even pay for, the loss of

Donnie, who'd had a real father—you—who totally ignored him, even at his funeral.”

“But I didn't know about it. Mary didn't tell me...”

“Because you weren't part of their lives, you weren't important enough to them. I'm sorry, Chris, I didn't mean to hammer you like this. It's just that I think I can understand Donald's actions now I've met and talked to him.”

“I want the chance to explain some of this to him, Mark.”

“That isn't the only problem, is it? What seems to have driven him away is your sexual attraction for him. Not very fatherly was it?”

“No, I resisted as best I could at first, but Donald gives off this almost unconscious sex-heat, and I was drawn to that, to a husky handsome man of twenty-three...”

I chuckled. “Oh, I know what you mean. I've seen something of Donald's magnetic attraction for men. It's part of his makeup, his DNA, if you will. Somehow he's come to believe that the only way he can thank a man who is kind and friendly towards him is to provide him with sexual favors.

“Donald was drawn to you as a handsome older man, a real Daddy figure, but I think he wanted, no, he wants something more than just giving you a blow job, or letting you fuck him.”

Chris almost recoiled from me. He was pale and upset, now walking up and down the cramped office space. “But it wasn't just that I was looking for.”

“Wasn't it? Didn't you just want to feel that young body under you while you screwed him? Didn't you want to forget that he was your son?”

“But he wasn't, I mean he isn't my son.”

“You didn't know that when you took him to that hotel in West Hollywood. You seem to have been perfectly happy to forget all that. You told me so yourself.”

He collapsed into his desk chair, nodding his head repeatedly, his fists curled in frustration or anger.

“That was why Donald left you. He knew he was not your son. He thought that he should reward you, gratify you sexually, for your kindnesses over the summer, as he’d been taught. But he wanted more, much more. He wanted to be part of your family, now he’d experienced it. He wanted a real father, a husky man like you, not just a sugar daddy. So he ran away, because he thought you wouldn’t or couldn’t provide him with that.”

I stopped. I’d far exceeded my remit, but someone had to put Donald’s case to Chris, to try to make him understand there were multiple and complicated strands to this story.

Chris was silent, trying to make sense of my outburst, looking stricken by his own thoughts. I took a deep breath to bring myself back under control.

“I’ve said enough to you for the moment, Chris. You see this search was not as simple as it first seemed to be when you talked to me about Donald. I’m not your father confessor, nor your judge, but I wanted to explain something of Donald’s thoughts as I understood them.

“Would it be possible for me to now talk to Alan separately? I promised Donald I would do that, before I asked you both how you want to proceed.”

Still looking shocked, Chris nodded, called for the maid who led me through the house to Alan’s lighter and more spacious bedroom. He was lying in the bed, propped up on pillows; he looked tired and older, the creases were deeper under the eyes in that craggy face, but he also looked pleased to see me.

“Mark, good morning, this is a pleasant surprise. I wasn’t sure I’d get to see you to congratulate you on finding Donald for us in Kansas City. Excellent detective work, if I may say so, and I wonder how you did it.”

“Good morning, Alan, I’m sorry you’re having health problems again. I don’t want to tire you. But Donald Gates insisted that I talk to you separately as soon as possible after my report to Chris.”

“Really, how interesting. I wonder whether I made too hasty a

judgment about that young man. Well, tell me what you've learnt on your travels last week."

I provided a rapid overview of my 'tracking skills' and a more detailed description of the young man I'd unearthed at the end of the trail. Once again I went over Donald's troubled early life, his friendship with Donnie—I didn't omit my thoughts about Chris's lack of parental involvement—and the reasons for him posing as the Bates' son.

I knew Alan had always been more suspicious of Donald's motives and he quizzed me more closely about my take on the impersonation and the final flight from Chris.

"My feeling, Alan, is that Donald was an angry and frustrated young man when he met your partner earlier this summer. As a fatherless orphan, he couldn't forgive Chris for his neglect of Donnie at first. Yes, I do think he considered himself possibly as an avenger, possibly as a fortune-hunter, although that doesn't seem to have loomed large or long in his thoughts. But Donald has also been looking longer and harder to belong to a family and has been frustrated or repulsed two or three times in his young life.

"Gradually over the summer, he found himself drawn into a family situation with the two of you entertaining him, providing, if you like, a temporary home. This was something Donald needed and wanted above all. But then he and Chris were sexually attracted to one another. I'm sure you must have also noticed Donald's almost unconscious allure—I certainly felt it with him in Kansas City.

"So he became more confused as the summer went on. He felt it was wrong to want to reward Chris with sexual services, although they weren't related. He wanted much more from you both, but was afraid Chris wanted only his body. So he ran away from you, and has stayed away."

"You do put a different light on his intentions, Mark, and you seem convinced about his basic honesty."

"Remember I'm a trained observer, and although I had only

one day with him, I was sure by the end of it. Donald is a lonely spirit, waiting to belong to somebody, or, better, to a family.

“I think that’s why he asked me to talk frankly to you, Alan. Donald would not want to break up your long-term relationship with Chris. He admires your love and devotion to one another. Yes, he would like to join your family. Yes, I think he is partly in love with Chris as a possible Leather Daddy. But I also think he would get out of your lives completely if you felt he was a threat to your relationship with Chris.”

“You’re certainly forthright in your suggestions, Mark. You make a good advocate for the young man.”

“Thank you. I know I’ve exceeded my task in this case, but I do feel strongly that you each need to hear Donald’s story from a third party before I have to report back to him by phone. And between the three of you, you need to reach some common ground.”

“Rest assured, Chris and I will give this our immediate and careful attention. Clearly we owe that much to Donald, and also to you for the detailed investigation you made into his past. I, for one, never really asked him about his early life. I sat on the sidelines, watched the pair of them all summer and wondered whether I should encourage this attraction that was growing between them.

“What you’ve been telling me this morning puts a new and helpful light on the situation. As you can tell from my health, the vigorous sex that Chris needs is no longer possible for me and the medical prognosis is not good.”

“But how can you be sure?”

“No, don’t interrupt. I know what my doctor’s telling me—more bed rest, less exertion for my damaged heart. But Chris is still in the prime of life and wants to enjoy his sex play. I’ve faced the fact that he’s going to look elsewhere, and I’d encourage that under safe conditions.

“To be blunt, Donald could be the answer. He’s a younger active man needing a Daddy and family, if we can all forgive and

forget some of the reasons for his impersonation. Chris and I have to decide first, and then we would need to find out how Donald reacts to the decision. As you said, all three of us need to be in agreement, and to take it slowly, if we do move forward, with plenty of time to think it over.”

“Yes, Alan, you and I need to do some serious talking.”

“Indeed we do, Chris. How long have you been lurking in the doorway?” Both Alan and I had our backs to the door and hadn’t heard Chris Bates’ approach.

Chris chuckled. “Long enough to hear Mark make a good case on behalf of Donald, and you, my love, to humble me with your thoughts.”

I decided to leave them to reach some solution to their problem. I too was touched by Alan’s selfless offer to allow Chris to become Donald’s Leather Daddy, or something like. Yet he could also be the important cornerstone in creating the larger family young Gates really needed.

“I think I’ve said enough for one morning and I hope it’s going to be helpful.”

Chris looked at me very thoughtfully. “You seem to be wiser than your years, Mark Farrell, and I count myself very fortunate to have entrusted this search to you. The clues were faint, but you were determined and you seem to have gained Donald’s trust too.

“Now how long before we need to give you an answer for you to pass on to the young man? You’re going to talk on the phone?”

“I told him I’d call his cell on Wednesday evening. He expects to be only on light duties at the base this week, since he’ll be mustered out the following Tuesday.”

“Why don’t you come around for a drink about six tomorrow evening? That should give us enough time, don’t you think, Alan?”

The older man smiled. “We were always quick making up our minds before, Chris. I don’t think our gray matter has deteriorated

too much. And why don't you invite your partner to join us? Dan, isn't it? It would be interesting to get to know him too."

I left them to it, although I had a shrewd idea about the outcome. It was really Alan who had the decisive vote and I think he might be swayed towards Donald, with certain safeguards. *Altogether, a successful morning*, I thought to myself as I deposited Chris's check in the bank with its more than generous bonus.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was almost lunchtime, so I gave Dan a call to see how his meeting with Mrs. Fontaine had gone and whether he was interested in food.

“Sure, if we can go back to The Grind.” He chuckled. “I’ll bring you up-to-date on my morning and you can tell me about yours. Meet you there in fifteen minutes.”

When I got there he was chatting to a couple of PSPD motor officers, both big burly guys. “Hi, Mark, this is Al Bloom and Phil Baker. Guys, this is the other half of our private eye team, my former LAPD partner, Mark Farrell.” We talked about how we were settling in and briefly about my missing person case, then the visitors had to get back on patrol.

“Still building bridges, I see.”

“Does no harm, boss man, and they’re interested in our time with the LAPD.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t get into our personal lives.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll steer them away from anything like that. You look pleased. Good morning with Mr. Bates?”

“I think so. They’re making up their minds. I’m joining them for drinks tomorrow, and you’re invited too, buddy boy. I’d be grateful if you’d come and give me your impression on whatever they propose.”

“Wow, I’m moving up in the world. Actually my case may be moving me up in society too. Apparently, Fiona Fontaine and her husband Jefferson are well entrenched in the local community. He’s an architect, from a prominent southern family, so he also has a practice in Alabama somewhere, and a large family plantation, according to his wife.”

“Well, we are traveling in high circles, all thanks to Manning Thompson, and also to our own abilities. What exactly does Mrs. Fontaine want?”

“She’s been married for twenty-two years, spends time here and back home near Huntsville. Only one kid as far as I could tell, who’s away at college. At first this morning she seemed quite hesitant.

“Well, I think my husband is having an affair right here in Palm Springs. He’s been leaving his downtown office every Monday and Wednesday afternoon for two or three hours.’

“Perhaps he’s seeing clients, Mrs. Fontaine?’

“I doubt it. His assistant keeps track of all that, and she’s been told to keep those afternoons free for him.’

“Do you have any idea where he goes?’

“Not really, but a good friend of mine who had been visiting a patient at Desert Regional Hospital spotted Jefferson on a residential side street not too far away as she was driving home. That’s about two weeks ago now.’

“Do you have friends in that area?’

“Certainly not. It’s not a neighborhood we’d normally frequent.’

“What would you like me to do for you, Mrs. Fontaine?’

“She smiled a little coyly. ‘Please call me, Fiona, if I may call you Dan. You come highly recommended by Manning Thompson. What I’d like you to do is to follow my husband on those afternoons, see where he goes and who he meets.’

“Tell me, has he had such affairs, if I can call them that, before now?’

“There have been a few occasions when I wondered about him, and, of course, I don’t really know what happens when he’s on the estate in Alabama, since I’m usually not there.’

Dan said this had surprised him. “You don’t go with him when he visits there?’

“Oh, maybe once or twice a year for a few days, but the plantation’s way out of town, almost an hour’s drive and there’s little or no society around. I much preferred living here, and

spending summers in La Jolla, where there are lively people and parties and entertainment.’ She laughed at her own description.

“I looked at her more closely, guessing her age as late forties. She was an attractive blonde with a little too much makeup, who obviously took good care of her face and figure. She knew she could still turn men on, was trying to charm me too, but there was something at odds with the rest. The voice, while pleasantly southern in accent, screeched occasionally, making her sound like a parrot.

“Er, Mrs. Fontaine, are you considering divorce proceedings? Will you want photographic evidence, if possible?”

“Oh, that would be splendid, Dan. Can you start right away?”

“Well, it’s Monday today, and I’d set aside most of the day for our conversation. So I guess I could follow him this afternoon. Now tell me where his office is and where he was seen walking, and I’ll need some photographs of your husband, so I can recognize him by sight.”

“I brought some pictures we had taken this summer when we were on the coast, around the pool, but you can see him clearly.”

“She handed over some digital shots. Certainly, Jefferson Fontaine was a handsome man in his early forties, with thick hair swept back and just starting to gray around the temples. He wasn’t tall, but he was well-built. Looked like a guy who goes to the gym with his own trainer and works at it. He would probably stand out in any crowd.

“Well, Mrs. Fontaine, I’ll take your case. Here’s our standard contract and list of fees. If you’d be good enough to read through, sign it, and give me a check for, say, three days of observation, I can get started later today.”

“Oh, Manning said I could trust you, so show me where I should sign and how much I should write the check for. It’s really quite exciting. I’ve never been involved with a private investigator before.’ Dan said she even batted her eyes at him. ‘But it’s also sad that I have to resort to this. I’ve always had faith in Jefferson.’ She was attempting to look forlorn.

“Well, Fiona, if I may, let’s wait until I’ve had time to check your husband’s movements for at least a couple of days.’

“That was it, Mark. She swept out like an empress and here’s the check.” To me, he looked like an overgrown schoolboy for a moment, sitting there at lunch. “We’re meeting again tomorrow afternoon, if I have information for her. But I insisted it be in the office, as I don’t altogether trust Mrs. Fontaine’s inclinations. I’m wondering if she isn’t the one straying from their marriage.”

“That’s a great start, Dan. Now we’re both employed with money coming into our bank account. Eat up your burger, you’ll need your strength for your afternoon surveillance.”

Over the course of the next day or so, I learned from Dan some of the surveillance highlights of his case involving Mrs. Fontaine and her philandering husband.

“After our lunch, I decided to try to get a sight of Jefferson Fontaine himself if I could, so that I’d know the guy I was to follow. So far, all I had was his wife’s photo of him in swim trunks. First, I decided to try his office, which was actually on Tahquitz, not far from our own place. It was a low-rise building, probably of architectural interest, but that’s not my thing. There was parking in back, with maybe half a dozen cars there. I guessed the recent model black Jaguar belonged to Mr. Fontaine.

“Bruce Taylor had said when we were training with his company, that in cases like this, it was better for the investigator to be as honest as possible. So I told the young blonde receptionist that I was a partner in a new local private security company and want to discuss safety measures for offices and homes with Mr. Fontaine. She seemed rather thrown by my inquiry, but went over to a glass-fronted large office and talked to the occupant. He stood up to check out this unexpected cold caller and we both got a quick sight of the other. He was indeed a good-looking man in his forties. Pity he wasn’t gay, or I might be tempted.

“According to the receptionist on her return, Mr. Fontaine didn’t feel the need for office security, but might be interested in something for his home and I could leave my literature. That wasn’t exactly my aim, but we’d had a leaflet published on the

subject to go in our *F and F* folder, so I left that and went back out to the parking lot to wait.

“In fact, I’d only been in the car about ten minutes when Fontaine came out of the offices. To my surprise he didn’t make for the Jag, but for a rusty old Kia, which was sitting off to one side. Well, my job was to follow the quarry, not to argue about the form of transport.

“Soon we were on Indian Canyon going north, above San Rafael, heading eventually for the 10 Freeway. But he suddenly turned left on West Las Vegas and then another left onto a residential street. This was not exactly the typical quiet residential streets of Palm Springs, as I knew them. These houses were mainly ramshackle or in disrepair, with boarded-up windows and neglected front yards.

“Yes, there were some homes whose owners or renters had made an effort with paint and repairs. Fontaine stopped in front of one of these and was getting out of the car as I drove slowly by. He was going up the short walkway, looking definitely out of place in a sports jacket and tie. I drove quickly round the block, then parked a few houses down and started checking the area.

“There were a few people around, mainly young guys in their early twenties hanging about. They were all African American and I suddenly realized that maybe this was their part of the city, and I didn’t really belong.

“I walked carefully round to the back of the house I’d seen Fontaine disappear into. It was an ordinary cookie-cutter stucco home with side door and a large window in the back. There seemed to be nobody around, so I pulled myself up using the sill to try looking in the window. It was a bedroom, but the room was empty. Back around the front there was another window with a large closed blind covering what I guessed would be a living room.

“Frustrated, I returned to the car I’d rented for the week of surveillance. It was unobtrusive to most people, but I thought it was too recent a model to be left unattended for long in that neighborhood. I moved it slightly, so that I had a good view of

the front door in the hopes I could get shots of Mr. Fontaine leaving. There was nothing to do but wait, so I drank my coffee and watched the sun moving down to the summit of Mount San Jacinto. After about forty minutes I wandered round to the back again. The bedroom light was on, but a curtain had been drawn across the window and I could see and hear nothing.

“Maybe an hour later, as the light was beginning to fade, the front door opened and Mr. Fontaine came out, followed up by a young African American man in his twenties, who shook his hand briefly and disappeared back inside immediately. I did manage to grab a couple of reasonable shots of the two men, and then another discreet picture of my quarry climbing back into the Kia before he drove away.

“He went straight back to his office, leaving the Kia in its former space and then going off in his Jaguar into the Movie Colony area of Palm Springs and turning into the driveway of the house whose address had already been given to me by Fiona Fontaine as their home.

“My curiosity was aroused, but I wasn’t sure what was going on and what the rendezvous really represented, as I told the wife at our meeting on Tuesday morning. I detailed my surveillance to her and showed the three pictures. Her reaction surprised me.

“Oh, Mr. Fortunato, it’s only another man. But why would Jefferson be meeting him in that kind of neighborhood? And driving that model of car? Perhaps he didn’t think it’s safe to leave the Jaguar there for, what did you say, a couple of hours?”

“I can’t answer the questions for you yet, Mrs. Fontaine. I did warn you that I would need to follow your husband for several days before I could provide a detailed report.”

“Can you follow him on Wednesday afternoon for me, Mr. Fortunato?”

“I think that can be arranged, and I’ll report back on any results.”

Dan looked pleased, but a little frustrated with his efforts. He shrugged his shoulders as he talked to me in the office.

“Well, I’ve agreed to do that for the lady, Mark, and to see whether I can work out what’s going on.”

“You’ve made a start, Dan, maybe you’ll have better luck on Wednesday.”

“I surely hope so. I just don’t like skulking around the house out there in broad daylight. I’m going to wear some kind of coveralls, so that I might blend in better. At any rate, I hope to have the whole case wrapped up before the weekend. I don’t want it to interfere with our first Gay Pride weekend here in Palm Springs.”

“Shit, Dan, I’d almost forgotten with all the other things going on this week. I get to take you to your first Gay Pride Parade.”

“Hold it, boss-man, I’ve seen the one in West Hollywood in my LAPD days, off duty of course, and once in Boston during my couple of years of college. But, yes, it will be my first one out here, and my first with you.”

“Then we’ll have to turn Sunday morning into a special celebration just for us. Maybe have breakfast out somewhere beforehand.”

“Hopefully we’ll get both cases wrapped up by then.”

“No, I don’t think we’ll have settled the future of Bates and Gates—I rather like the sound of that—we’ll have to wait for his discharge. Maybe we can still bring it all to a satisfactory ending by Leather Pride the following weekend. Let’s see how we get on with Chris and Alan tomorrow evening, and remember I’ll want your impressions afterwards.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On Tuesday evening I duly presented myself, with a somewhat reluctant Dan in tow, at the Bates/Franklin house and was immediately ushered out onto the terrace where both men were waiting. Alan was up and dressed very casually, looking less pale, although he apparently was only drinking water, while Chris had an almost empty glass of scotch in his hand.

“Hello, Mark, and thank you for coming too, Dan. I’m glad you could spare the time. I don’t think you’ve really met my partner, Alan Franklin, before, and we thought we should become better acquainted with the other half of the ‘Farrell and Fortunato’ team.”

There were a few minutes of general conversation while Alan politely quizzed Dan about his police background, and how we met. Chris mixed drinks for us at an outside bar and freshened his scotch.

“Sit, make yourselves comfortable, guys, and two cold Buds coming up as requested. Mark, we’ve made up our minds regarding what we want to do about Donald and we’d appreciate it if you’d pass on our message when you call him tomorrow night.”

“I’m happy to do that, Chris, and I’m assuming you’re speaking for both yourself and for Alan. But remember, there are three men involved in this case. Donald also has had time to think things over. He must be considering what happens to him when he leaves the service next week. But let’s hear what you’ve decided.”

“Essentially, we’d like Donald to become part of our family, to come and live with us. We believe the deception or impersonation was an impulse that he came to regret, and in which all three of us were at fault. We want to put that firmly in the past. I’m going to Kansas in a week or so to visit Donnie’s grave, and to meet Sally and her new family. Perhaps Donald and Alan will be able

to come with me.”

“I’m glad you’ve reached that decision, and I’m sure Donald will be too. But that doesn’t answer the problem which caused Donald to run away from you, Chris. How do you really feel personally about the man now?”

His face turned crimson and then paled. “I guess I didn’t behave too well over the summer. Donald is such a sexy young man that I allowed my hormones to take control over my head. I’ll not deny that I’d love to develop some kind of Daddy relationship with him, but I’m prepared to accept whatever Donald wants. If he wants only to become a kind of foster son, I will have to learn to live with that. If it becomes something more, Alan has given his blessing. But we both want Donald to feel he’d be welcome to live with us in our home as part of a family, no strings attached.”

Alan butted in. “As I told you yesterday, Mark, I’d like to get to know this young man who’s impressed you so much more than he did me during the summer. If he and Chris want to have some rough sex together, I won’t be upset or stand in their way. I think that could liberate all three of us.

“That’s basically what we want you to tell Donald, and please let us know what he thinks.”

“I’m not sure I’ll get a complete answer for you tomorrow night, gentlemen, but I’ll let you have any immediate reactions.”

There wasn’t much more to say. Dan and Alan had discovered a mutual interest in bikes, which surprised the other two of us, but gave them some kind of a bond. Chris and I talked about the upcoming Palm Springs Gay and Leather Pride weekends. We finished our beers and left, with me promising again to relay the gist of Donald’s comments later the following evening.

Dan’s opinion was that the ‘family’ offer was genuine enough, but that Chris hoped for more along sexual lines, and Alan had accepted that, largely out of necessity. They were two somewhat lonely, older men and Donald had brought fresh vigor and interest into their existence during the summer. Dan had his own case to work on, but now was becoming even more curious as to

how the triangle with the young man would work out.

By seven pm on Wednesday evening I was beginning to feel slightly nervous about my prearranged phone call with Sergeant Donald Gates. I'd gone out on a limb for him with Chris and Alan. What if he wasn't interested in their proposal? What about his own plans for his life when he left the Marines in a few days? I punched the numbers into my cell. I heard the phone ringing, but no one picked up. The only thing I could do was to leave my name and phone number. I was cautious about saying anything more. But my stomach was making nervous rumblings. What had happened to Donald and our phone appointment? Had he gone cold on the whole possibility of a reunion?

My cell vibrated five minutes later with an apologetic Donald, who had just wrapped up his duties for the day, filling in for someone on guard duty. He sounded pleased to hear my voice.

"I'm so glad you remembered, Mark. I was afraid you'd forget about me and my problems."

I laughed. "Hardly, Donald, it seems I've spent most of the last few days discussing you with Chris and Alan."

"So they're still talking about me? You explained my concerns separately to Alan?"

"Yes and yes, I did as I promised and, if you've got time now, I'd like to tell you a proposal they've asked me to pass on."

"I've got all evening. And I've done some thinking myself since I got back here—about my future. But you go first."

I told Donald Chris' and Alan's wishes to have him become a member of their family as a trio of men who lived together, with no strings attached. The impersonation during the summer would be relegated to the past and would not be discussed again. If he was interested or willing to pursue some kind of sexual relationship with Chris—having him as the Leather Daddy of the triad—both men would probably be even happier.

"And Alan is agreeable to all of this?"

"Yes, I think Alan realizes his health is precarious and he can

no longer satisfy Chris' stronger and rougher sexual urges. He wants his successor to be a man he can trust and respect, rather than some guy Chris picks up in Palm Springs or wherever. He wants to get to know you better, but he seemed content with my description of you, Donald, as an honorable man."

"You seem to have argued well on my behalf, Mark. I thank you very much for that, and I'm kinda grateful to Chris and Alan for their offer.

"Have you told them that I'm gay?"

I thought for a moment. "Not in so many words. But I think I've probably inferred it in our discussions. With your agreement, I was fairly honest about your background or as much as you've told me."

"That's fair enough. I think it's time to let myself out of the closet. I hope to be as openly gay as possible in the future. Does Chris still seem attracted to me as I am to him?"

"I would say so. But he's agreed to have you as a family member without any sexual involvement on your part, if you want that."

"I don't think I can give you a proper answer on the phone tonight, Mark. I need to think it over. It's more generous than I had any right to expect. But, as I said, I've been working on my own future too in the past few days. The one thing I don't want to become is a kept boy or slave or whatever in that wonderful home in Palm Springs. I've no intention of living off Chris and Alan. Oh, I might stay with them for weekends and holidays, but I'll need a job.

"So I went online for information on joining the Los Angeles Police Department. I filled out the preliminary application and I've talked to the recruitment office, explaining about my military background. I should have an interview in about ten days' time. I'm taking your advice, Mark. If this works out, I'll probably have to move to Los Angeles, and I may need help and a recommendation from you."

"Well, congratulations. You've certainly been busy since you

got back. And I think you will be a success as a gay ex-Marine police officer.”

“Thanks, Mark, I’m glad you approve. That’s very important to me. I don’t want to sponge off Chris and Alan and I want to have a professional life I can be proud of. What I need to think about is how to become a member of the LAPD and also a member of what I guess could be a Leather family.”

I had to laugh. “Well, you seem to be in a more enviable position than you were exactly one week ago.”

Donald chuckled too. “Yes, indeed I am. I’m a fortunate bastard, and it’s all thanks to you, Mark.”

“Never mind about that. I’m very pleased it’s all working out for you, Donald, but what do you want me to say to Chris and Alan?”

“For the moment, thank them very much for the generous offer. I do need a day or two to think it over as I make plans for my professional future in law enforcement. I need to see whether the two can be combined. I promise to get in touch with Chris on the weekend by phone. But please give me more time to think it all out. I’ve also got another favor to ask of you, Mark.”

“Go ahead, shoot.”

“I understand this coming weekend is the Palm Springs Gay Pride Celebration. I’d very much like to be there for the parade as a newly emerging gay civilian coming out in an established gay community, to get a feeling for my new life. Could I join you and your partner next Sunday morning, assuming you will be there? Would you have time for a proper serious talk with me as well?”

“Dan and I were just making plans for Sunday, and you’d be most welcome to join us. We’ll just be on the parade route somewhere. Hey, maybe you can come and meet my family too? Have lunch and we can talk that afternoon.”

“I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your family arrangements.”

“I’m sure they’d be very interested in meeting you, so no problem. Chris and Alan, do you plan to see them too?”

The voice faltered at the other end of the phone. “Actually, I’d rather limit this visit to you and your partner. I’m feeling my way into this wider gay world and I feel secure with you.”

“Fine, I won’t mention it to them. Hopefully you will be seeing them a day or so later anyway. We have a favorite breakfast place, A Little Bit of Country, on Indian Canyon near Baristo. You could join us there first and we can just walk over to the parade route on Palm Drive after we’ve eaten. Meet us there about eight thirty?”

“Thanks very much, Mark. I’ll tell you what I decide when I talk to Chris. I hope the results are going to be good for all of us, but I do need the time to work out some details.”

“I’ll pass on your message as you have given it to me, Donald, and we’ll see you on Sunday. I don’t think Chris and Alan will be watching the parade. I’m sure they’ve seen it several times before. So I’ll say good night, and good luck with your planning for your future.”

“Good night, Mark, and thanks again for all your help.”

I closed my cell and sat in my office thinking. I felt like some kind of arbitrator, trying to bring two opposing sides together in an industrial dispute. No, that wasn’t quite fair; maybe a *Yenta*—a matchmaker with hopes of uniting three rather different men. I sighed; this wasn’t exactly how I envisaged my career as a private eye to start, but, truth be told, I would feel good if it all worked out.

Chris answered my call on the second ring. I filled him in on Donald’s professional plans and his grateful response to the invitation to join the family. But I also warned him that young Gates needed a few days to make a decision about combining his public and private possibilities. Chris’s disappointment could be heard in his acknowledgment. But I needed him to understand the magnitude of Donald’s decision.

“Chris, you’re basically asking a twenty-three-year-old to set the roadmap for his life—family and profession. Did you know what your future would be at that same age?”

“No,” he sighed, “I guess I was still at Berkeley at that stage, trying to sort out my sexuality and with no real profession in sight.”

“Then you can understand Donald’s dilemma. He has no intention of coming to live with a sugar daddy—just the opposite—he’s interested in the possibilities of a Leather Daddy, who’d be the head of the family unit in which he works. He expects to have the freedom to pursue this LAPD opportunity. You both will need to give him time and space to decide this. He’s promised to call you with his answer at the weekend. My advice, for what it’s worth, is to proceed slowly and carefully this time. You wouldn’t want to frighten him away a second time would you? There would be no third chance if I read Donald correctly.”

“I hear you, Mark, and I thank you. I’m going to try to screw my head on straight this time round. Your advice matches that of Alan, and I promise to listen carefully to both of you. Thanks for warning me. My testosterone level needs to come down. I’ll let you know what happens.”

It wasn’t a real conclusion, but it was another step forward. “*One step at a time, you guys,*” I thought, as I started to close the office.

My cell rang again with Chris calling back. “Sorry, Mark, but Alan has reminded me that I was supposed to invite you and Dan to join us as our guests for the Leather Pride formal dinner that Palm Springs Leather Order of the Desert is organizing in a week on Friday. It’s a dress-up affair and the weather is usually cool enough to bring out the leather. We do hope you can join us.”

“Thanks, Chris. I need to double-check with Dan, but I think we’re free and would be happy to accept.”

“Great, I believe Manning Thompson is coming too, and bringing his young sergeant with him. Has anyone ever told you how much alike you both are? I got confused that evening when we were first introduced.”

I laughed. “Yes, Gil and I do look alike and actually we

worked together on a case in the LAPD, but I doubt that's the main reason he's Manning's boy. It will be fun to all get together and catch up. Talk to you soon, Chris. Good night."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Dan's second surveillance duty on the Fontaine case took place on Wednesday afternoon, with several surprises, as he told me after my evening phone conversations with Bates and Gates.

"This second time I'd rented a uniform that looked like the Gas or Electricity Company, and I dusted up the car a little. But the first surprise was that Jefferson Fontaine left his office early—before two pm. I'd scarcely parked in the lot before he came out, more casually dressed in what looked like a polo shirt and chinos instead of Monday's sports jacket, tie, and dress slacks. He was also in a hurry that day. Just jumped into the Kia and was off. I'd trouble keeping up with him, and lost him on Indian Canyon when a large truck slowed me down. But his car was parked outside the same house, as open as can be.

"I figured he'd be in there for a while and decided to drive around the nearby streets a little more. It is a sadly blighted area, without any stores, not even a supermarket visible to serve the unfortunate inhabitants, who seem cut off from the rest of the city.

"I felt a little less conspicuous in a uniform, hoping I didn't stand out quite so obviously. My check around the premises was more careful this time. Somebody clearly lived there, a couple of trash cans had the remains of frozen and fast food packages and there had been some efforts at planting some flowering bushes in the front area.

"My big surprise was in the back. A light was already on in the bedroom by this time, and I approached the window more cautiously. There were a couple of discarded pots nearby—they had probably held the recently planted bushes—which I quietly pulled up to one side under the window. The curtain had not been drawn, thank God.

"Two naked men were having sex on the double bed. At least one was having his cock sucked very vigorously by the other. Mr.

Fontaine was thoroughly enjoying a blow job from the younger African-American now naked with hands tied behind his back, and seeming to be providing good service.

“Mystery solved. I could get plenty of pictures of that action, and of later when my quarry was forcing a large dildo up the asshole of his younger companion—seemingly something new for the unfortunate victim. After that, they started kissing and cuddling, probably coming down from the high of their scene.

“I grabbed a few final shots, before quietly removing myself and my pots away from the window and walking back to my car. In less than half an hour the two men had said their good-byes on the doorstep again and Fontaine was driving away in his old Kia. Assuming he’d follow the same routine, I left the depressing area and then called Mrs. Fontaine on my cell.

“Well, Dan, I hope you have something for me this afternoon, since you seem to be calling me early. What was my husband doing this afternoon? Was I right? Was he being unfaithful?”

“Possibly, Mrs. Fontaine. I’ve got plenty of pictures of him having sex in bed with a younger man.’

“With another man? Are you quite sure of that?”

“Absolutely certain.’

“And just with a man?”

“Why, yes.’

“Thank God. There was no woman involved?”

“Now I was confused. What had she been expecting? Sex with a man seemed acceptable to her, but not with some other woman, who might be competing with her? I was in over my head for a moment and scarcely heard what she was saying.

“Will you come over to the house for coffee tomorrow morning at ten? And bring the pictures with you. I want to confront Jefferson with the evidence of his behavior and I need you as witness.’

“I don’t think that’s what normally happens, Fiona. Er, Mrs. Fontaine, but I can be there if that will help you to settle the case

with your husband.’

“I’ll make sure he’s here at ten o’clock.”

“And we left it like that, Mark.” Dan sighed as he finally told me all of this late Wednesday evening.

The following morning I thought Dan seemed a bit nervous about meeting with his client, Fiona Fontaine, and her husband. He was fussing about what to wear and what to expect.

“Look, Dan, you’re there to present the evidence in the photos and to be a witness to their conversation, that’s all. It’ll be a breeze for you.

“So you say, but what if one of them gets too excited and pulls a weapon of some kind? I think Fiona Fontaine is quite capable of producing a kitchen knife at least, if she gets riled enough.”

“These are supposedly sophisticated people. And I’m sure Mrs. Fontaine will have already told her husband what’s been found out.”

“You’re probably right. What I don’t get is why she seemed so relieved it was another man he’s been having an affair with. Oh, what the fuck, it will all come out in the next hour or so and I’ll give you the details at lunchtime, boss man.”

“Good luck, Dan, try to stay cool and calm.”

He was back within a couple of hours, looking very pleased with himself and waving a more substantial check than he’d expected.

“I got to the Fontaine home in the Movie Colony with five minutes to spare. It’s quite a house, restored midcentury modern, she’d told me, but with all kinds of gadgets. I guess you’d expect that in an architect’s home. Both the Fontaines were waiting for me in the living room when the Latina maid showed me in. Coffee was offered, but I’d had enough caffeine that morning so I settled for Perrier water.

“Thank you for coming this morning, Mr. Fortunato. I don’t believe you’ve met my husband, Jefferson? And you’ve brought

the pictures?’

“I handed her the folder with yesterday’s shots and shook hands with Mr. Fontaine who looked at me suspiciously as if he was trying to place me. I smiled politely and sat down on an elegant-looking sofa. They were already back sitting on an adjoining couch and she was passing the photos on to him after she’d looked at them. The only sounds were the rustling of the pictures and loud ticking of an ornate grandfather clock I located in one corner of the room. It all felt like an old silent movie. After viewing all the shots she turned back to me.

“Excellent work, Mr. Fortunato, I’m very pleased. Now, Jefferson, that is quite clearly you in most of the pictures in the bedroom and leaving that house.’

“Yes, my dear, I’ve no intention of denying it. That’s me having sex with young Kevin Barlow. I told you last night, he’s the son of our steward in the Alabama house, who’s been sent to me for some additional training.’

“I tried not to let my mouth fall open. Here was the husband calmly admitting to having a blow job, and playing with dildos, and his wife didn’t seem all that disturbed. Jefferson Fontaine smiled and looked at me.

“Mr. Fortunato, you were recommended to my wife by our mutual friend Manning Thompson, because you’re gay, discreet, and intelligent, so perhaps you weren’t too shocked by what you saw. But I think some explanation would be in order.

“I was brought up in the deep south—near Huntsville—on a large estate which has been in the family for generations. My father, also an architect, was often away on business for weeks at a time. My mother developed an addiction problem after the difficult birth of my brother, who died early from pneumonia when I was three or four, so I never knew him. My sister is about twelve years older than I, and had left the house by the time I was a teenager.’

“Fiona Fontaine interrupted him. ‘My in-laws were lovely people, Dan, when they were around, and the house was old and

impressive, but it was all so remote and far from civilization as I knew it. Also there were some strange family customs.’

“Her husband laughed. ‘Really, Fiona, you make my early life sound like something out of a Tennessee Williams play. It wasn’t really, and I was very happy there, quite content to be brought up by the staff. Mr. Barlow was the steward who ran the house. Mr. Coulour managed the plantation for my father, or rather for the family. Both of them are now doing the same for me—I’m a believer in the old custom of family retainers, if you will. They and most of the staff are people of color who are serving the second or even third generation of the Fontaine family and it seems to work very well for us.’

“For goodness sake, Jefferson, hurry up. Tell Dan what you gave me last night as the reasons for your strange behavior this last month.’

“As I said, essentially I was brought up by Mr. Barlow. He supervised my home-schooling at first, since we were so far out of town. In my teens I was sent to boarding school and always came home for vacation. I developed early, and by the time I was sixteen, I was having nocturnal emissions as they were politely called and masturbating regularly. Mr. Barlow apparently consulted my father, and for a month in my sixteenth summer, he and I stayed in a discreet hotel near town, which had an even more discreet brothel close by. There I was taken in hand by Mrs. Pankhurst and taught the fine art of fucking, both women and men. My father wanted my education to be complete, or perhaps he recognized some latent suggestions that I was interested in both sexes. It was a good education and I continued the practice back at Bel Air—that’s the name of the plantation.

“Since it became clear by the time I reached college-age that my preference was for men, Mr. Barlow took me in hand personally and gave me lessons in blow jobs, edging, nipple play, cock and ball work, some bondage and discipline, as well as just plain fucking.’

“I was so caught up in this story that I couldn’t help interrupting. ‘But you’re married and have children, or at least

one child, I've been told.'

"Why, yes, of course. I have my family duties. Fiona did me the honor of becoming my wife and I did the honors in giving her a baby boy, our son, who's now away at college and following the family traditions. You see I'm definitely bisexual, which isn't all that common.' He turned back to his wife and smiled charmingly at her.'

"We still sleep together occasionally, don't we dear? She has her side-liners and I have mine. It's worked remarkably well for our marriage.'

"I really felt pissed. 'So you're practicing a form of deception on one another, as well as on your friends and business associates in this and presumably other communities? Isn't that wrong?'

"We're not harming anybody with this deception. People believe what they want to believe. We're not the only ones with difficult marriages.'

"I guess not. And where does this young man fit into your frame, Mr. Fontaine?'

"Kevin Barlow you mean? Well, he's in training to become the steward of Bel Air, when his father—my trainer—retires. This fall I've arranged for him to work in one of the larger estates in Bermuda Dunes as an assistant butler. It's the winter home of some friends of ours—a ten acre property with full staff. He's been apprenticed to their British butler for six weeks and then twice a week he's getting specialized training from me, at his father's request.'

"Isn't that rather a strange neighborhood for him to be staying in?'

"Well, he's only there on two or three of his free afternoons. He's paying the rent himself and it's important he learns how to balance his personal accounts.'

"I shook my head, still bewildered. 'Mrs. Fontaine, I hope I provided the service you needed?'

"More than I expected, Dan,' she screeched in her parrot-like

laugh. 'I'm happy with the results and my husband's going to write you an additional check—a large addition just for expenses.'

"My only expenses have been for gas and, of course, this card from my camera with the only copies of the pictures, with my compliments."

"Never mind, Dan, I appreciate your skill in getting me what I wanted. Now I'm going down to the stores on El Paseo to pick up a new ring or bauble for my collection—my reward for keeping this marriage going."

"Dearest Fiona, you know you value your position in society too much as the wife of a leading architect to ever think of giving it up. And I wasn't really straying this time, merely providing part of the training for a member of the family's staff. Have a good time, dear, but don't spend too much of my money."

"She came over, shook my hand, kissed me on the cheek. 'Until next time we meet, Dan Fortunato.'"

"Her husband had been writing the check for me, and this time my name seemed to ring the right bell in his mind. 'Now I know where I've seen you before. You came by my office the other day, offering some kind of security package for home and business. Am I right?'"

"That business offer still stands, Mr. Fontaine."

"There was a pause. Then suddenly he started to laugh, a loud joyous sound, and I saw something of what must be his appeal to both sexes. 'I may just take you up on that, Dan. Here's my check in the amount my wife told me to give you. I hope it satisfactory. And I also hope this business will remain just between us.'"

"Of course, Jefferson, we pride ourselves on our confidentiality."

"He was still chuckling. 'I bet you do, and it's been a pleasure doing business with you. I'm sure we'll see you again at one of Manning's soirées. He has such interesting friends.'"

"I could swear it was a smile of invitation in his final remark. I just nodded, shook his hand hard, and cleared out. I think you do

better with the rich and famous than I do, Mark. I'm just a plain dumb policeman at heart."

It was my turn to take him in my arms. "Fuck that, Dan Fortunato, your every bit as skillful a detective as I am, and far more devious as a Leather Master. After all don't we all practice some form of deception on one another?"

"We don't," he mumbled stubbornly.

I chuckled. "I hope you'll still be right in five years' time. Even we're only human."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Sunday morning of the Palm Springs Pride Parade promised a warm, but dry day in the upper eighties. Dan hadn't been to the event before, but I had, once. Was it three or four years before that Peter had brought me? He had been my first Master organizing my first gay encounters. How liberating I'd found it, and I hoped Donald would feel the same.

Dan had pulled on a tight-fitting black T-shirt, shorts, and low boots. I thought he looked incredibly sexy and tough, as he hadn't shaved for a couple of days. My cock lurched forward. At seven thirty in the morning too. Dan laughed. "Come on, boy, time to get dressed. It's boy uniform for you with that light gold collar I gave you for Christmas. We're on parade today."

"Yes, Sir." I scrambled into my own tight white T-shirt, black shorts, white socks, boots, and the collar given by my Master. I was proud to show that I was owned on an occasion like this.

The smell of fresh coffee greeted me as I walked into the kitchen of the main house and I poured two cups. *Damn, Edith must've got up before us*, I thought. Indeed she had and was standing, smiling and drinking her freshly brewed dark roast. A sleepy-eyed Mary stumbled out of the bedroom with Wolf in tow as we prepared to leave. "We'll see you for lunch—with a visitor, Donald Gates, I hope. I know you'll like him," I promised.

We took my car and parked in the Staples parking lot, since the store was closed. Behind the store, across Indian Canyon, was our busy breakfast place. Waiting in line for us was an anxious looking Donald, in an equally tight white tee and shorts and white sneakers.

"I've put our names down for a table for three on the patio," he explained.

"Fine," Dan answered and the two men took their first measure of one another and seemed to approve. I stood back, relieved, while we exchanged the traditional bear hugs. Donald

gazed with interest at the collar round my neck. Of course he'd only known me in my Senior Investigator/partner role and the change must've been a surprise, although he hid it well.

Over scrambled eggs, bacon, wheat toast, no butter, and more coffee—all ordered by Dan—I explained, “What I remember about the parade was the sense of fun and camaraderie with colorful, almost home-made floats for different organizations, causes, and their lively, cheering supporters—both gay and straight. Mind you, that was the parade of three or four years ago. It could be different this time.”

“It's even better this year,” chimed in a sharp-looking guy in a club T-shirt and 501s. “You guys new in town? I can show you the ropes.”

“Thanks, that's a handsome offer.” Dan was answering in Master mode. “But we've got our own ropes, and other toys, at home.”

The other guy laughed. “I just bet you have. Well, I believe in meeting any hot guys who come my way. I'm Tom Babinski, by the way. And you are?”

Of course it was Dan who introduced the three of us. Donald was looking at him in awe. I tried to hide my smile. Dan asked Tom if he wanted to join us; he laughed again. “Three's a family, four's a crowd.” And got up to pay his bill. “See you guys around, I hope.”

Dan sat down and finished his coffee. “Excuse me, Sir,” Donald began, “I'd like to thank you for including me today. You've heard that I'm more or less a newbie at public events in the gay world, and I appreciate the invitation from, er, Mark, er, boymark?”

My Master had the grace to chuckle. “Well, that actually makes three of us. My relationship with Mark, or boymark if you insist, has been mainly a private affair, while we also find our feet in the whole Palm Springs community, straight and gay. So I suppose this is really our coming out in public party too. And any guy as hunky as you is a welcome addition.”

The smile that slowly lit Donald Gates' face and the blush that followed made my day. Dan had struck just the right note, and we all relaxed. The parade, the whole morning was a kaleidoscope of bright colors, streamers, uniforms, costumes, music, and men of every shape, size, and color.

We sat on the wall outside the store and watched eye candy for every taste pass by. We looked at them; they looked at us. We were three handsome youngish men in excellent physical condition, who were clearly enjoying themselves. Donald was the proverbial kid in a candy store, fascinated by every man and everything. His sexual allure was spilling out onto the sidewalk. I felt it, and so did Dan, I noticed. He hugged Donald a couple of times, but he also grabbed me even more frequently, giving me a firm, tongue-touching kiss at one moment.

No one was bothered by us, nobody noticed us as the floats and bands and cars passed along the street. We were close to the end of the parade, but those taking part still seemed to have spirit and voices left to reply to the cheers from the crowd. The morning grew warmer and we took off our T-shirts which naturally seemed to attract more attention from the men strolling by, especially my collar.

As the parade ended and the crowd broke up, we made our way back to our car. Donald had grown silent. "I guess I better say good-bye here and thank you guys."

I looked surprised, and then realized I hadn't confirmed our invitation. "Hey, Donald, you do remember you're invited to lunch? The rest of the family is expecting to meet you."

"I wasn't sure you really meant it on the phone, and you hadn't mentioned it this morning."

"My bad. Master Dan will take it out on me later. You're definitely coming for lunch. There'll be time to talk later, if you still want to."

"Oh, yes, please. If that's okay with you, Master Dan?"

"Sure, you need to meet Mark's family. It's only been a year since I was introduced. Now I feel I've known them all my life.

Climb into the car, the crowd's thinning, and let's get out of here."

On the way home, Dan started asking Donald about his years as a Marine, and they swapped a few war stories. My Master was interested in Donald's experiences in a war zone different from Iraq, where he'd been stationed. It was strange; I'd never heard my partner talk about his service time. I knew there were some dark corners I was still not permitted to hear about, but they both deliberately kept it on a lighter note that morning.

We were dressed again, tidy, and my collar under my T-shirt, when we got home. As usual, Mary was first out of the door, with Wolf on his leash. Donald was polite, but not quite at ease with the young girl. There had been no sister in his life, only fellow orphans. Edith had waited inside and shook Donald's hand warmly. His eyes went instantly to the mineral pendant she was wearing round her neck. Bless her heart, she may not have known that Donald had found the store for me, but she must have guessed that he was somehow connected to the purchase I'd made in Kansas City.

Lunch was a casual affair with cold meats and salads, since we'd been uncertain when we'd get back. We all chatted about our impressions of the parade; Mary announced that she would come with us next year, and then proceeded to monopolize Donald by asking him questions about Kansas. "I'm going to interview you for my school report," she announced. "You're a real Kansan, right? And that should help me get a good grade."

I sat back and watched how Mary drew Donald out by asking for details of the state he'd grown up in. She'd been told he was an orphan and wanted to know whether 'that was hard for you to bear'. Donald relaxed in the family warmth and years seemed to fall away from him as he and Mary talked over his past and her interests. Dan and Edith and I ate, changed plates, ate more food, and served coffee listening to the charmed circle in our midst.

Finally, I broke it up. "Mary, my love, Donald would also like to talk to me today, so I'm taking him for a walk in the Indian Canyons."

"Daddy, please, please, can I come too?" She looked so

appealing that I hesitated. It was Dan who saved me.

“Mary, who am I going to talk to, if you take your dad off with Donald and talk business together?”

“Talk business? Oh, that will be boring. Would you take me on a different walk in the canyons, if I asked politely, Dan?”

He smiled charmingly. “It would be my pleasure, Mary. We might even take Wolf, if we can squeeze everyone into your dad’s car. What about you, Edith? Would you join us too?”

She laughed. “I think this walking group is big enough. I’m going to take a rest instead.”

“But the dishes get done first,” I said firmly. Since everyone pitched in, including Donald, that task seemed to take no time. Forty-five minutes later, we had two parties ready to take different trails in Andreas Canyon, part of the Indian Canyons preserve. It was an ideal afternoon, gradually cooling in the shade of the Fan Palms. There were quite a number of families and couples of all sexes out for the afternoon. We arranged to meet back at the car in an hour’s time.

Donald and I set off down one slope. Almost as soon as the others were out of sight, he turned to me. “Mark, I truly want to thank you for such a wonderful day. The parade was fun, seeing so many different gay men together, enjoying themselves. This morning was awe-inspiring and having lunch with your family was wonderful. How do you do it?”

“Do what, Donald?”

“Get along so well together? You have four people, and Wolf, enjoying themselves together. Is that what a family is really all about?”

I’d slowed down. “I don’t really know. I think that’s true in my case, but I can’t speak for too many others.”

“But how do you manage it? You told me before in KC that you had a young daughter and your mother-in-law, and, of course, you have a male partner. How is it you all manage together so well?”

I thought about that for several minutes as we stood on the edge of Andreas Creek. “I guess it’s because we love, respect, and honor one another. Edith is really the cornerstone. I think she first accepted me because I loved her daughter. She made me get on with life when Blythe died and Mary needed a father. She accepted my change of sexual orientation, and she welcomed Dan when she saw that we loved and needed one another. Yes, she is the linchpin, without whom I would fall apart and maybe so would the family.”

“I’m not so sure, Mark. You see, to the slightly jealous outsider, it looks as though you all love one another. And maybe that’s what binds you together.”

I smiled at him. “You could be right. I’m hoping you might find something of the same with Chris and Alan.”

“Shit, I’d almost forgotten to tell you in all the excitement. I called Chris last night and told him that I’d be honored to join his family, if he could accept that I need to earn my living and work in a profession, namely law enforcement. He and Alan agreed. In fact, he’s offered to come and pick me up outside the base when I’m let loose on Tuesday.”

“That’s wonderful news, Donald. I’m so pleased for you, and for Chris and Alan.” I turned and hugged him and he returned the embrace fiercely. A couple of other male walkers just smiled as they passed by.

Donald laughed shakily. “Wow, this certainly seems to be a very understanding community.”

We started down the trail again. “Yes, we think the Palm Springs area certainly is, with such a large percentage of LGBT inhabitants. But I understand the rest of the country is not so broad-minded. The Midwest I’m sure is not that welcoming to gay men.”

“I hope not to be spending too much time there in the future. My roots aren’t very deep anywhere. Southern California seems to be a good place to try to settle down, now that I am more certain of my sexuality.”

“And soon you’ll have your own family, and friends like us to support you.”

“Will you remain my friend, Mark, or will you fade away, once I’m no longer your client or whatever I’ve been for the last couple of weeks?”

I stopped dead in my tracks. “Donald Gates, I hope you know me better than to think I’m going to ‘fade away’ as you call it. You’re my first case as a private eye, and I by no means consider the case closed or the resulting friendship ending anytime soon.”

He smiled that beguiling smile. “I’m so glad you said that. I’m going to need men like you and Dan to help guide me in the LAPD, if they accept me.”

“I’m sure they will. You’re just the kind of young guy they need, especially with your Marine background. They’re generally ‘gay-supportive’, but I wouldn’t recommend flaunting your preferences too openly or too soon. I imagine it’ll be rather like being back in the Marines.”

We spent the rest of the walk talking about his chances and opportunities in the LAPD. Once again I was reminded that he was like a sponge, soaking up as much information as he could. Dan, Mary, and Wolf were waiting by the car when we got back.

“Daddy, we’ve had a great time and Dan is going to teach me all about Native Americans and the tribes around here, and around Philadelphia. That’s where he’s from, Donald, in case you didn’t know.”

I glanced at Dan; he looked sheepish but pleased with himself. He turned to Donald and asked how our walk had gone. Again came the engaging smile. “We had a wonderful conversation, thank you, Sir.” I just shrugged my shoulders and started the car.

Edith had made some fresh ham sandwiches and lemonade for our return. “Why don’t you men go and shower first and then we’ll eat. Mary, you better have a quick shower too.”

Donald hadn’t known about or seen the *casita* and his eyes opened at some of the unusual furnishings and erotic art on the walls. “Don’t worry, Donald, we keep the door firmly locked and

clean it regularly ourselves. It's a private space." I chuckled.

"You two are such lucky bastards to have one another and this place," he quietly replied.

Dan whipped around towards him. "We work at it, Donald, we work for all of it. We work professionally to keep this place so that we can enjoy it, and Mark is the boss man. We work even harder at our relationship. We may have been together for only one year, but I know Mark is the only man for me. I love him, I want him, I need him. Yes, I may flog him, and I may fuck him, but that only works because he submits, he consents. To me, he loses not one ounce of his masculinity in doing that. I'm proud of him as my sub, because I could not take on that role myself. And so we work at it every single fucking day. Don't we, lover man?" And he hauled me close and kissed me hard.

Donald sighed."Yes, Master, I see that more and more now, now that I'm with you both. And I thank you for the example you give me."

We took turns in the shower, although Dan and I crowded in together as usual, and finally pulled in Donald, who'd just dried himself and we showered him all over again. We were laughing as we flicked towels and dried off. We were naked, and all three cocks were beginning to stir with interest.

Suddenly, Donald sank to his knees in front of Dan, hands behind his back. "Master, please let me pleasure you by sucking your cock."

I froze in place, but Dan was ready. "No, Donald, I'm your friend, not your Master. I appreciate your generous offer, but save it for him." He pulled Donald up by his arms, hugged him, and kissed him firmly. "I value your friendship, I admire your body, but I don't want you to think that you have to thank me that way. It isn't necessary and friends don't normally expect it.

"I know what happened with you and Mark in Kansas City. He told me as soon as he got home last Sunday, and he agreed I should punish him, which I did. He's used to coming three or four times a week when I work him over, and he'd been without for

six days by then. So, I understood his need, and his exhaustion, but I don't want you to keep thinking that sex is the way to repay a man's kindness. A hug is great, a kiss is fine, a few words of thanks are even better."

Donald looked stricken, once again, like a small puppy. "Yes, Master, I understand, and I will always respect your wishes, Master. I meant no disrespect, only that I am needy as well as horny right now. My hope was that you, Master Dan, would take pity on me. It's been months since I had a hard cock up my ass. Even here, on the base, I've been reduced to beating off to keep myself fit. Yes, boymark did me the honor of allowing me to suck his cock last weekend, and I truly enjoyed that service. But I need a real Master to use me and put me right once again..."

"But you have a Master, Donald. You have Master Chris right here in town."

"Pardon me, Master, but Chris Bates is not yet formally my Daddy. And it's still possible that our arrangement about me joining the LAPD will not work out. After observing your strength, your power all day, Master Dan, I ask you to show mercy to me and use me. Fuck me hard, flog me hard, but allow me the rare pleasure of being forced to cum for you."

Donald's little boy sex appeal was having its effect on Dan. It had been having an effect all day, and I suspected he was as well aware of it as I was. All three of us were motionless, with our dicks now fully erect in the charged atmosphere of the bathroom while Dan tried to make up his mind. Finally he wrapped his arms around Donald, and I breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"Very well, I'm not sure this is in any of our best long-term interests, but we'll have a fuck session tonight—all three of us together. That will be something fresh for Mark and me. You seem to be giving me ideas, Donald. First you both need to clean yourselves out quickly. Mark, help him use the enema spray in the shower after you've done yourself. I'm going to butt plug you before we go over for supper and I don't want to keep Edith waiting."

I was getting excited. Donald seemed more trim and muscular

than ever as we worked on one another to clean out our passageways. We did a quick drip dry with the used towels and bent over the wash basin for Dan's rapid inspection.

"I'm trying three lubed fingers in your hole first, Donald. Yeah, I think you can easily take three. You must have been regularly stretched and used not too long ago."

"Yes, Master, Gunny Sergeant liked to poke me with his big pole about once a week when we were overseas."

"Then I'm going to fit the largest plug I've got into your cunt, boy. Let me get it properly lubed while you move over and touch your toes. Open up for me, shit-head. Pull your ass cheeks apart properly, and let's work this inside you, slowly. Use your muscles to help. Yeah, moan a little, but it's going all the way in. That's it. Another inch to get the knob inside you. Right. A couple of good hand slaps will get it properly seated. Now get your shorts and shirt back on—and sit on the bed for your sneakers. That'll make sure you're properly plugged."

Donald was flushed and gasping. "Thank you, Master."

"Okay, out of the way. Now, Mark, over here, boy, and touch your toes while I stretch you too. You're not going to let Donald best you in the plug race are you? I thought not. So I'm greasing up the big black fireplug for you."

I grimaced; the rubber fireplug was the largest I'd been able to take. But Dan was right. I wasn't going to be second to Donald. "Sir, yes, Sir." It was more of a struggle in my case, as I suspected my hole had less experience than Donald's had. But the sight of his anus stoppered by that obscenely large black rubber bulge made me more determined, and with Dan's unyielding hand and my wriggling and twisting, we finally had the plug in place. I dressed quickly to eat with the family. Just before we left, Dan batted down our rampant pricks and pulled on his own clothes, while I made sure I still had his collar on under my shirt.

We waddled our way up to the main house and I noticed that we both sat down rather cautiously and jerked occasionally during the meal when the plugs moved inside us, touching our

prostates. Fortunately, the others didn't seem to notice. Anyway Mary wanted to explain her new plan for learning about the local tribes. Edith and Dan both chipped in with their knowledge and even Donald added some comments about Midwest tribes. I was content to watch them all happily talking away while I tousled Wolf's ears and back. Edith encouraged the three of us to have a last discussion together, before Donald returned to camp. I did wonder if she suspected what we might be up to.

Back in the *casita*, with the door firmly locked, Dan ordered us naked again and on all fours on the floor. We watched him bring something out of the bottom drawer of the bureau where we stored our toys, as well as his favorite flogger. It was an impressive double dildo. I didn't know we/he even owned one.

"boydonald, you've seen one of these before? Been mounted on one?" The nod was more reluctant the second time. "Then it will be finding its way inside you first. boymark has never experienced one before, right?" I nodded in turn, uncertain about my ability to take it. "We'll proceed carefully with you. But, pig-boys, you're going to take it into your cunt-holes and feel the jolt as it hits your prostate. There's nothing like it for exciting two men, and bringing them much closer together." He chuckled.

"Come on, line up, facing away from one another. Butts up, head and shoulders down. First, the plug comes out of you, boydonald. Help to squeeze it out for me."

I heard his groan and then a gasp as the plug slid free. I looked ahead and realized I could see what was happening reflected in the mirror directly in front of me. Dan was carefully sliding the lubricated end of the sausage shape into Donald's gleaming hole and feeding more of it into him until it was almost at the half way mark.

"Now, boymark, I'm going to mount the other end in you as soon as the fireplug is out. So be prepared to feel the smooth end slithering up your freshly greased passage. Yes, it's big, but not too big for a boy like you. Ease yourself backwards, now that I've got it started. Take it slowly. It's something new for you. I'm guiding it in and your anus will start to enjoy it."

I wasn't sure of that. It felt like a large log trying to force its way into my innards, a long log that I had to accept. I gritted my teeth and took it. Trembling, I felt our torsos getting closer. Donald's breathing was rapid and shallow. The butt I suddenly felt behind me was sweaty and quivering. Now Dan had us double-dildoed, joined tightly together asshole to asshole, with a thick rubber tube gluing us into one beast.

I could hear Dan moving around us, checking that he had us in the position he wanted, easing me further back up against Donald. Then he reached underneath me, and seized my erect and throbbing cock with one hand, forcing a leather slipknot over the head with the other. He pulled the cord tight, wiping off pre-cum dribbling from my slit. I groaned with pleasure at his touch. Then I felt him doing the same to Donald, who moaned in his turn. Dan took Donald's cord and pulled his penis forward until it was level with mine. Then he twisted that cord around my shaft, quickly tying it off and did the same to Donald. Our bound dicks strained together and leaked in unison. Now we were connected at two different, but equally vulnerable parts of our body.

"That should keep the pair of you tight, but squirming, I think. Now raise your head and shoulders, keep your arms and hands extended. That's good. Look at yourselves in the mirror for a moment, because I'm going to flog you in that position."

I shuddered, but I couldn't stop looking, not even when the flogger swept across my back and then Donald's. Our Master started out slowly, lightly drifting the strands from one torso to another. Each of us shifted as we were first tickled by the cords, but we were joined together and with every move one of us made, the other was forced to compensate as the dildo shifted inside us. The blows intensified, focusing first on our upper asses and thighs. Our butts quivered, trying to remain in place in response to Dan's crisp commands. Each stroke jerked cocks, as well as buttocks. With our cocks tied together and stretched beneath us, they began to leak pre-cum all over each other. Our penises slid slightly, increasing the rub of hard shafts on one

another, heightening the erotic tension as we panted and groaned together.

Soon the lightest touch of the flogger sent one set of bruised ass cheeks pushing against the other, heated flesh against slippery flesh, exciting our torsos and especially the pricks tied together and slicking our juices faster from our cock slits.

Then Master Dan laid into our shoulders, switching effortlessly from Donald to myself in turn. Now we shuddered more violently and the dildo jerked inside us, hitting our prostates and bathing its rubber surface in our own juices. Our bodies were shaking as we fought to keep our difficult positions on hands and knees. The overall effect was electric, stimulating, painful, and unlike anything I'd experienced before in our sex play.

I watched in the mirror as our shoulders and our butts were beaten, as the skin glowed red and bruised. My hairy ass and Donald's smooth one were shuddering with effort and pain, but it was an exciting and fresh pain that took us to a new and different subspace.

Dan kept flogging for ten minutes or so, until all three of us were sweating and grunting, but not in chorus. "That's enough of that excitement. I'm going to rest awhile. You two can look at one another, if you want to, but keep your bodies still or your dicks will be stretched even more."

Something about Donald's pale but exhilarated face intrigued me. We were both panting, sweat stained and well flogged, but I judged we both felt great, as if we'd run an obstacle course or a sexual marathon and survived.

"Let's get you loose from the dildo. First I'm going to carefully cut the cords tying your dicks together. Don't move or you may end up singing falsetto." We both kept very still. He gradually dismounted us from the dildo; we slid carefully and slowly backwards. Finally we lay apart, our torsos quivering again from exertion and fear.

Dan left us there while he pulled out the fucking bench. "Right, Donald, you're on first. I'm sure you're familiar with this

piece of apparatus, so get mounted again and make sure that waving prong of yours stays out behind you.”

Donald was a little shaky on his legs at first, but he shook himself, stretched his limbs, and assumed the position on the bench. Our Master soon had him restrained in place with the leather cuffs and checked that the hole winking at me was still well greased.

I had a shrewd idea of what was coming next, especially when Dan rolled a condom over my excited pole. I'd been the meat in the sandwich once before and followed Dan's orders reluctantly. He checked my prick was hard and pulsing, and then ordered me to 'shove it into shithead's waiting hole'. He led me into position by my rubber-sheathed cock and guided it into the winking rosebud. I stumbled forward and fell onto Donald's sweating and beaten back; he groaned loudly. Dan slapped my own sore ass with his flogger and I started thrusting hard into the man beneath me. My arms were pulled forward and tied alongside Donald's, so that I was a helpless fucking machine.

Dan was right behind me, checking my anus in turn. I shivered, but spread myself out in preparation for receiving his thick pole up my passage. It wasn't long to wait. He plunged right in, PA hard in front, and started moving inside me, establishing a rhythm, working with my own thrusts.

I stole a quick look in the mirror again. It was a hot sight. Three men were locked together, shoving their members into one another with enthusiasm, and the bottom man straining to receive the thrusts and bear the weight. We were each excited, sweaty and panting, but it was a sexual high that couldn't be prolonged. There was a shout from Donald and I soon felt his cum trickling down one of my legs. That was enough to send me over the top, pouring my seed into the sheath I was wearing inside him. My final thrusts brought Dan to full boil and I found myself receiving his gift in a fast flowing burst.

We lay there, hearts thudding, sweat trickling between us, backs bruised, but feeling good from such an exciting session. Maybe it was the presence of a third man, but that early evening

was one of the most spirited fucks involving Dan and myself.

A quick shower followed, once we could stretch and move. Then Dan spread some ointment on our butts and shoulders before we pulled on our rather soiled clothes again. By then it was time for Donald to get back to base. We told him we would drive him since the last Marine transport back to Twenty-nine Palms had probably left Palm Springs. It was a pleasant drive without much traffic in the dark. Donald was tired from his first day as a gay civilian, but we knew he'd enjoyed it from talking over the various activities. As we neared the main gate of the base, Donald turned to us. "Do you know what the best things have been today? It's been watching the two of you together, seeing how you look at one another, seeing two men working out a real relationship, just as you had told me, Mark. That's something entirely new for me. It will be an example to help me with Daddy Chris and Master Alan, as I hope to call them. For that I will always be grateful and for the session this evening. Thank you both."

We hugged clumsily in the car; he climbed out, waved when he went through the gate, and disappeared into the dark.

I turned the car around and we headed home across the desert and down the mountain, not saying very much. After I'd parked, we poked our heads into the main house. Edith was still up, watching television and drinking hot cocoa. "Thank you for today, Edith, you made a lonely young man feel part of a family, maybe for the first time."

"He's a charming young man, Mark, and it was no trouble. I hope we'll see him again."

"I'm sure we will. It was a wonderful day all round. Good night."

"Night, Edith."

"Good night, Dan, take care of one another."

"Now what do you think she meant by that?" I whispered to him as he unlocked the *casita* door. "I'm not sure, but I know what I need to take care of tonight, in addition to that three-way

fuck, and that's you."

"You know how much I enjoy having you take care of me, Dan, but what exactly do you have in mind for this evening?"

"How about our own private fuck?"

"Shit, you're insatiable. I just had your dick way up inside me a few hours ago. Where would you—where would we—find the energy?"

Yet even as we were talking, my cock was curling in my shorts, and, looking over at Dan, the outline of his rod was pressed against the fabric of his pants. We both started to laugh—two horny men in almost permanent lust for one another.

"Come on, Mark, I can see your body likes the idea, so switch that overactive brain off for another hour and let me show you how I can fuck slowly and still with power and pride."

I was already taking off my clothes, sliding my cock-ring back on and flicking my penis to full strength. Dan was matching my speed, peeling off the outer layers until that dark tanned chest, the thick shaft, and the gleaming PA further down were all on display. His arms opened and I stepped inside, rubbing our penises together. My mouth opened and his tongue slid home, lapping round my teeth and sucking on my lower lip.

"The fuck bench is still out. You want me spread over it, Master?"

Dan shook his head. "I'm going to take you on our bed, so get your back against the headboard and legs spread wide for the moment."

I grinned at him and assumed the position, while he rummaged in the bureau for a blindfold and tit clamps—two pair, one for each of us. "The clamps go on both sets of nipples, for that special arousal, although my dick is leaking well enough already. Grab your legs, boy, I'm going to check your hole. You probably need some more lube up there."

"I dunno, Master, it still feels pretty moist inside."

"Shit, don't argue with me. I may be doing this for you, but

when I say “lube”, I want you lubed up properly for me. I want to slide my sword right up to its hilt this time.”

“Yes, Master, whatever you say, Master.” I rolled my hips forward and presented my winking anus.

“Not bad, but I want your passage smooth and silky for me. Still we don’t need to stretch you again. Hmm, your waving prick says you want me, boy, and you want me full bore. So I’ll clamp myself first. Get my nubs alert again. Here I come. Fuck, that pinches. Now you, lover man. Left tit—stretch the connecting chain—right tit. You look fucking sexy. Let me get the blindfold into position.”

I groaned first as he lubed me up and I moaned again as the clamps bit home, but I felt my body tingling. No need to tell me to grab my ankles and to pull my legs up high, I was already doing it.

“Did I tell you to do that, boy? No, I thought not, so a couple of slaps on those bruised ass cheeks as punishment, and as an incentive to get your muscles ready for my frontal attack.”

Because of the blindfold, I couldn’t see Dan, but I certainly felt him as his cock and PA rammed itself through my opening, past my sphincter, and up my passage. Then he slowed down, making love to me with his penis, with his hands massaging my body, and with his mouth, sucking and kissing mine.

I was quivering again, my endorphins flying as I was hoisted on his hard staff, knowing, but not seeing, that he was taking care of me. We crooned words of lust and love to one another as he moved powerfully but gently inside me. I held his muscle tight whenever he tried to leave me, and held my legs up high for his maximum penetration. It was rapture time.

We were truly making love, our bodies moving rhythmically together, and our mutterings and heavy breathing deepening as we reached our orgasms almost simultaneously. His seed shot into me for the second time that evening, and I tried to clench my ass muscles closed as he slid out. He was already leaning heavily into me to lap up my cum on my groin and transferring it from

his mouth to mine. Suddenly, for the first time ever, he lowered his head, mouthing my hole and using his tongue to reach some of his own cream as it started to seep out of me. I felt my cunt was on fire from his tongue and mouth, and I writhed on the bed, desperately still holding my legs up high.

“Dan, Master, fuck, stop. No, don’t stop, it’s wonderful. Let me loose. My legs are slipping. Get one last tongue full. I’m coming down. Thank you, Master, for loving me in so many ways.”

“Make the most of it, boy. I’ll only be eating you on a very special occasion,” my Master half-snarled at me.

We stayed on the bed for a while, hugging, exchanging the taste of cum in each other’s mouths, pulling on the tit clamps to gain another kiss. Then we staggered into the bathroom, got rid of the clamps, and showered together again toweling each other dry, before collapsing back in bed. “There’s going to be a hell of a lot of laundry to do tomorrow, Mark.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

As November had rolled around the weather had definitely cooled down; it was time for Dan and I to do some work around the house, as well as in the office. So we spent the next few days, with professional help, getting a proper watering system installed to help our desert garden bloom. In addition, there was always paperwork at the office as we developed our own computerized filing system.

These were necessary make-do tasks while the next act of the Bates/Gates case began to unfold. There was a Monday morning phone call from Donald thanking us again for Sunday, reminding us of our promise not to tell other people of his gay day off, and one from Chris Bates on Wednesday, announcing that he and Alan had picked up the former Marine and installed him in their guest room. He was trying to fulfill his promise 'not to molest the young man just yet'.

Finally, it was the day of the Palm Springs Leather Order of the Desert's formal dinner in a local restaurant. Dan and I weren't sure what to wear, but didn't have much choice with our leathers. Dan had his good Dehner boots, Langlitz motorcycle jacket, and Ranger breeches; I had my leather vest and shorts and some presentable low boots. We cleaned everything with some combination of elbow grease, mink oil, saddle soap, and Parade Gloss boot polish. In the end we decided we looked hunky and hot once we were each dressed and accessorized with tight new T-shirts from 665 in West Hollywood, together with the gold collar round my neck that my Master had given me and Dan with new black leather and steel bicep armbands. I felt shy of showing myself dressed that way in public, but Dan reminded me that it was part of my new personality, that he as my Master required it, and amongst the guests that evening it would serve mainly as an identifying uniform.

We walked into the restaurant in Palm Springs, past some

regular patrons who halted their dinner to stare or ogle at the line of leather-clad men parading through the dining room to their separate banqueting room. Black leathers gleamed, silver badges flashed on Muir caps, cleats on Dehners, Wescoes, and other boots echoed on the polished wood floors. There were dozens of variations—some realistic looking cop uniforms complete in every detail, some sports gear, some forms of undress or semi-dress, and a few visitors in suits and ties. The noise level was high, with a couple of hundred men downing their first or second drink and loudly greeting old friends as we looked around for our own group.

Actually, Manning Thompson and Gil Richter found us—both resplendent in tailored leather—breeches and boots for the Master and jeans and harness for his slightly self-conscious boy. They were certainly delighted to see us and Manning managed a quick grope of my genitals as part of the initial greeting, while he sent Gil off to find some drinks for us.

Moments later, Chris came into view, forcing a path through the crowd for Alan in a wheelchair pushed by a beaming Donald. More black leather all round, even Donald was breeched and booted. “Alan lent me his other set,” he explained in an aside. We stood around with our drinks, making general conversation, being checked over by the other guests and apparently meeting approval.

Somehow Chris had reserved a table, and after ordering more drinks for everyone with help from Donald and Gil, we settled into assigned seats in the booth. I found myself between Manning and Donald, who had Chris naturally on his other side. Over the second drinks, we listened to the Bates’ account of collecting Donald from the Marine base.

“We tried not to look like two sugar daddies hoping to pick up some well-built Marine. But at eight o’clock in the morning that seemed a little unlikely. I didn’t recognize Donald at first. He seemed taller and the haircut was shorter, but Alan knew him right away, and we were the only new Caddy parked near the main gates.”

“Well, you certainly made a good choice,” chuckled Manning. “And I hope you’ve enjoyed getting reacquainted. In fact, I’m looking forward to getting to know the young man myself.” I’d forgotten that he’d never actually met Donald before and, knowing something of Manning’s tastes in men, this could be interesting.

“Yes, Manning, we got him safely home Tuesday morning. He’s been settling in and we’re doing well. Very well indeed, aren’t we, Donald?”

Donald nodded and blushed slightly. “Yes, Sir.”

Food started to arrive and conversation became more private. Manning rapped my knuckles. “So, your first two cases have gone well, I hear, Mark.”

“All thanks to you and your contacts, Manning.”

“I’ll take some of the credit, but I understand a great deal depended on you—your tracking and negotiating skills. You must tell me all about them sometime.”

“I’d be glad to when we’re next in Los Angeles.”

“I understand from Dan that you may have some spare time soon, since he’s thinking of going back east for the holidays.”

That was news to me, but no great surprise. It was almost two years since he’d seen his family back in Philadelphia. “Yes, it’s been a while since he was back there.”

“It might be convenient for both of us as Gil has pulled holiday duty as a single man. Well, officially he’s still single, as far as the LAPD is concerned. You and I could spend some time together.”

I turned to look at him—and the sparkling eyes inviting mischief—and I chuckled. “You never give up, do you, Manning?”

“Not where you’re concerned, Mark. It’s been almost a year since our most agreeable New York weekend, and I want to repeat something like it.” He squeezed my groin under the table.

You want to get back into my pants, I thought. “I’ll have to see what my family plans may be,” I said aloud.

“Don’t think too long, Mark, my dick is hardening already in anticipation.”

Fortunately he was distracted by something Alan was trying to tell him. So I turned to Donald. “How’s this new arrangement working out?”

“Better than I thought it might. Oh, we spent the first couple of days walking round one another on eggshells. I knew Chris wanted to screw me and I wanted him too, but it was Alan who broke down the barrier. Last evening, after a few drinks on the terrace, he turned to us.

“For Christ’s sake, you two, stop sitting around drooling with your tongues hanging out and your cocks tenting in your pants. Go and get your rocks off now.”

“Chris hesitated. ‘You’re okay with that, Alan?’

“Yes, Chris, we’ve talked about it often enough. Go and find out if you really fit one another.”

“My Daddy, as he was about to become, seemed suddenly shy. ‘What about you, Donald? Do you want to try out this old man?’

“Fuck, Sir, you’re not old, and, yes, I want you. I’ve wanted and waited, almost without realizing it. I hope now I’m part of the family that I can have what I really need.”

“Chris seemed relieved and excited. ‘Right, my bedroom—now.’

“I kissed Alan good night, murmuring my thanks. ‘Enjoy him, my boy, but treat him kindly, whatever happens.’

“I followed Chris to his bedroom, and we shrugged off our clothes, all of them. Then it was just two naked men, lusting for one another, but not quite certain how to start. He came towards me, hesitantly, perhaps remembering our last unfortunate encounter. I pulled him into me, banging together our risen penises and I kissed him fiercely, forcing my tongue into his mouth.

“Yes, boy, that’s the way. Kisses first and then some man-to-man action. First let me look at you naked again. You don’t seem

to have changed much in the last month, but so much else has changed around us. Now we're free to fuck and suck, so let's get to it.'

"We both trembled a little at first, mainly from excitement long suppressed. Then he began to run his hands over my body from my face slowly down past my chest to my groin. I shuddered, at the same time trying to stand still and silent, enjoying the foreplay.

"Here," I thought, "is a man who will train me to his pleasures. A mature man who will want me for the fire I'm relighting in his cock." There was no more time for thought. His dick was erect and waiting to enter me. I'd been hoping and preparing for this moment and my ass was ready for him.

"Bend over, boy, and let me check your hole. Fuck, what's this big black plug doing in here? You cheeky bastard, all this time you've been expecting me. Out it comes. Shit, it's a good-sized one too. You should certainly be able to take my weapon right now. Up on the bed. You need restraining this first time? No? Good, I want you doggy style first.'

"My Daddy didn't waste time. I'd hardly scrambled into position—ass cheeks up, head down on comforter—before I felt his penis at my pucker pushing right in and up. He steadied himself with one hand on my back and then his cock started climbing up inside me. We were both panting hard. Then he was fully home and working me, one hand on my nipples, the other on my dick.

"I have to say my Sir was all I'd hoped for. Okay, that first time was hard and very fast and my passage was not yet fully stretched. But he was worth that momentary pain. It was even better this morning, when he fucked me slowly and sensually, with much kissing and nibbling. All this was before breakfast, where Alan commented on how rested we both looked. I don't know whether he was kidding or not, but I felt well-used, and home at last.

"Daddy and I have already agreed that we both want and need the fucks and much more. We're willing to adapt each of our lifestyles to make it work. I'm ass-plugged and tit-clamped as I

sit here beside you, Mark. I wanted a father-figure. Now I've got a Leather Daddy. Even better, because I can be his 'son' in this community. In my family and in parts of this Leather world, I'm a true son finally, and it's all thanks to your perseverance."

"It's good of you to say that, Donald, but it was Chris's perseverance that got the process started, and you that made him want to have a fresh rough sex life again."

We smiled at one another, groping each other hard under the table and rejoined the general conversation as the dessert was served. I nodded across the table to Dan, who'd been trying to guess the gist of my conversation with Donald and then smiled at Chris, who colored slightly before a smart-ass smile creased his face. He looked five years younger already.

The rest of the evening was an introduction to Palm Springs' leather life—a mix of mature men of Chris and Alan's age group and a smaller number of younger guys like Dan, Donald, and me. I was happy to get cruised a couple of times on my way to and from the restroom and to refer them to my Master, "Who's sitting at that table over there". Dan fared equally well on his excursion.

Then we all watched the introduction of well-known judges at such events, of the hot leather contestants themselves and of other guests of note, including one well-known local author of BDSM novels.

"We don't want to lose touch with you." Chris was hugging me as the dinner broke up. "We give a large Thanksgiving buffet each year, and we'd like you to bring your entire family, if you'd like to, or come and have a drink or two over that weekend."

"Thank you for the invitation, Chris, and for tonight's wonderful dinner. I haven't enjoyed meeting so many people in a long time, and I'm so glad you and Donald seem to be really exploring one another." He smiled again and patted my back.

Manning didn't let me leave without another proposition. "I may have another client for you, Mark, quite soon. We must talk about it when Dan's away." I laughed and kissed him good night.

Manning never stopped trying, and I hoped Gil realized that this was his nature.

I think both Dan and I were glad to get home to our private *casita* with the door firmly locked. I knelt to start to undress him, beginning with his Dehners when he stopped me and pulled me up hard against him.

“That was a great fun evening, and it even gave us the chance to meet some potential clients. I’m glad I took some of our cards to hand out. How did you do? Manning is useful that way, but he gets to be a bit much, fussing with me about my plans for the holidays...”

I chuckled in his arms. “He’s hoping he can have me again if you’re away.”

“Fuck him. He really still has the hots for you, Mark, doesn’t he? Poor Gil may not be sufficient as a substitute. Well, he’s out of luck and I’d be grateful if you don’t encourage him at all. But, seriously, that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

He paused, took a deep breath and I knew this was going to be serious.

“After tonight, I think I can see what you’ve done for that young man, Donald Gates, in addition to your efforts at just finding him for Chris Bates the other week. From our short talk before dinner, my guess is that you’ve given him purpose and direction in what must have been a very lonely existence. With my large Fortunato family back in Philadelphia, it’s hard for me to imagine life as an orphan. You’ve rescued him from that, just as, in another sense, you rescued me from the life of one night stands and lone wolf encounters. You gave me a partner for life. You’re a wonderful man, Mark Farrell, and don’t you forget it.

“And now I want to fuck your brains out.”

Dan sat down suddenly and started removing his breeches and boots by himself, then the 665 shirt. Finally he yanked off his jock and fluffed his dick before grabbing our harnesses from the hangars in the closet.

“Get naked for me, Mark Farrell, I’m so fucking hot for you

after those compliments I made you. Just get boots and harness on. Then lean over, while I lube your asshole and stretch you.”

I was obeying blindly; a rush of testosterone was filling both brain and body. The evening of full leather outfits and handsome men probably had something to do with it too. I stood up and he followed to harness me in leather again down to the titanium cock ring. I pulled my boots back on and bent over. A moan of pleasure escaped me as three of Dan’s meaty fingers started exploring me, followed shortly by the black rubber fireplug being fitted into my hole.

My Master had me leaning against his chest, fingers now ruffling through my hair, then using them to trace the contours of my face and pushing them into my mouth. My teeth nibbled gently, my tongue spread saliva on them, and I gurgled in delight.

Then he pulled his fingers out and used one of them to twist my tits, first right and then left. By now I was moaning constantly and my cock stood out hard and willing. Finally his hands moved down to my scrotum wanting to check the state of my balls—waiting to be tugged and pulled, and my prick, now proud and alert and leaking.

Dan laughed, wiping my pre-cum onto his own shaft, ordering me to work my juice into his thick boner, which was growing straighter and taller by the minute. We were both gasping with pleasure and anticipation, both waiting to complete the fuck.

He pulled both of us down into a sitting position on the king-sized bed again, the black neoprene sheet already spread out. I felt the fireplug hit my prostate and guessed what might happen next.

“Kneel up, boy, you’re going to ride me tonight, to ride me like you did that first time we went to the limit in my ‘luxury condo’ in Woodland Hills. Remember how explosive that was, boy? First, let’s get that fireplug out of you—you stretch so much more easily for me these days.”

My Master was sitting back on the end of the bed, booted feet on the floor, his black leather breeches back on, but fully

open below his Master's harness. With that thick cock pointing skyward, the PA glinting in his cock-head and his chest expanding in rapid panting breaths, he was a magnificent brute, and my mouth watered at the prospect of being speared by his sword.

He slid back up the bed and lay flat. I moved into position, facing him, kneeling upright between his thighs and spread my ass cheeks. We smiled at one another—happy and horny bastards, the pair of us. I reached behind me until my hand held his cock head with his own pre-cum seeping out of the slit. He nodded. We were ready. I positioned the head at my entrance and pushed myself down onto him.

It was like coming home, as I encircled his poker. My passageway had expanded in the past eleven months. I could accommodate him without any real pain, but both of us felt the force and the friction of him completely filling me.

“Slide all the way down, Mark. I need to kiss you and prove what I said about you a few moments ago.”

“Yes, Master, I need you to fuck me like this. Freely, no restraints, no floggers—just Sir and boy together. Fuck, what could be a better way to end my day than having your pole holding me upright.”

With that I started to move my thighs, raising and lowering my legs as he thrust up to receive me. We kissed as I descended, and he worked my tits as I worked my way back up. I was careful to squeeze hard when his head approached my exit. He grunted in appreciation, and, breathing hard, kissed me fiercely as I slid down more rapidly. I leaned back slightly so my butt grazed his pubic hair. His penis thrust harder and sweat broke out across my chest.

We got our own special rhythm going. He was moving his hips and raising his torso slightly for full penetration. My legs were pulling and pushing with greater abandon. I fingered my own shaft—hard as iron and excited as shit. We were grunting together, still smiling, both eyes locked together in lust and pride. We shared the rapture.

“Fuck, Mark, I’m going to come. One more plunge should do it. Slide down on me, let me feel myself pulsing in your passage. Yes... More... Now... Down... Fuck... Kiss... Squeeze... Fuck... Cum... Now...”

The geyser of his cream soared into me, and, without help from my hand, my own seed sprayed across his stomach. I was possessed by this man, but for the moment I was the possessor of the most valuable muscle in his body.

We both started to laugh as we tried to catch our breath. I was still held upright, and proud of my power and position. Slowly Dan’s penis began to shrink and I became free. Quickly I rolled over, taking my Master’s tool and PA in my mouth to clean it and to get a taste of his cum. It gave me a final burst as I tongued him. Then he pulled me up beside him, so that he could lick my cream off his and my stomach and he could give me a swallow as he kissed me open mouthed.

We lay there on the black counterpane, still breathing hard. My head rested on his shoulder; one of his hands was stroking my hairy chest. We had one another, a family and a home; we’d finished our first cases.

“I wonder what’ll come up next,” I muttered into Dan’s ear.

“Stop worrying so much, Mark. Something will turn up, I’m sure. We’ll find ourselves doing fuck knows what, but at least we’ll be doing it together,” he sleepily replied. We were still wearing our leather, but we didn’t care. I slid back into his arms; he held me tight, his cock nuzzling my ass.

It was well after eight the following morning before Mary pounding on the door and Wolf barking finally woke us up.

“Shit, just another day in paradise.”

AUTHOR NOTE

DECEPTION- PALM SPRINGS is the first novel in a new series by Alex Ironrod set in the area around Palm Springs – the Coachella Valley. The two hunky heroes, Mark Farrell and Dan Fortunato, have become private investigators professionally as well as Leather partners privately. After several years as homicide detectives in the LAPD [LEATHER NIGHTS and LEATHER DAYS], they have moved on to solving kinky mysteries in the Desert Cities. CAGED – CATHEDRAL CITY [late 2014], REVENGE – RANCHO MIRAGE [2015], PASSION – PALM DESERT [2015]. And there may be many more, as many more as there are cities in the Coachella Valley. These new books follow the great success of his first *MASTERS and slaves* trilogy SUBMISSION, DOMINATION, OBSESSION [finalist for the Fiction Prize of the International Leather Coalition 2010.

Alex likes to vary his periods – RED KNIGHT RISING tells the adventures of two gay English Knights who sign up to go on Crusade in the Middle Ages. THE HIGHWAYMEN takes readers into the bawdy and dangerous world of 1750s London and then ‘the American colonies’. He also has two collections of varied short stories THE IRONROD CHRONICLES PARTS I and II.

Details of all his books can be found on his website www.alexironrod.com.

Alex is the play and pen name of a mature Leatherman, who grew up in the North of England and has lived for many years in Southern California. His leather and boots fetishes go back to his teenage years, but only recently has he used them for writing fiction and gay BDSM fiction at that.

In addition to giving readings from his novels in Los Angeles, Palm Springs, and San Francisco, he has taught workshops and classes on various aspects of the Leather lifestyle and appeared on panels about gay erotic fiction at such events as International

Leather Sir/boy, MAL, CLAW, Kinky College Chicago and the Desert Fetish Authority.

Now semiretired, he enjoys life as a writer, a working theater director/ actor, a researcher and a member of several charitable boards. He still enjoys riding occasionally, both Western and English, after many years as an owner/ rider.

Most importantly, he values his relationship with his partner Hank, with butch and boymichael and the camaraderie and support of men around the world.

TRADEMARKS ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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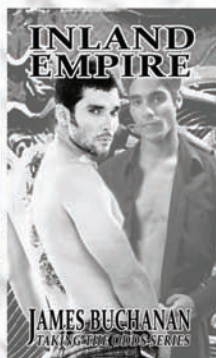
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