



A Daddy for Christmas 2: Kitt

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Category: LGBT+

Description: It's almost Christmas, but Kitt Devlin is far away from his home back in Atlanta. He has run away from a complicated situation at home, and even worse, there's a murderous gang out to get him because he witnessed something he shouldn't have.

Kitt's nearly out of money, almost out of friends and definitely out of luck. Alone in a bar in Albuquerque, only a few nights before Christmas, Kitt is surprised and flattered when a handsome stranger asks him to dance. The man is big, handsome, bossy and delicious—everything Kitt wants in a man. What he doesn't know is that this man is there especially for him.

Rio Jeffries is an "Acquisitions Specialist," or someone who goes after runaways like Kitt and then brings them home whether they want to go or not. And Kitt really doesn't want to go. A fierce battle of wills ensues, and Kitt manages to get away—temporarily. Soon, Rio is hot on his trail, and it's a good thing, too, because this Christmas, Kitt is going to need all the affection and protection he can get. Kitt is going to need a Daddy.

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Riordan

Just a few days before Christmas and what was I doing? Was I getting together with family that I hardly ever saw during the year to stuff my face with way too much rich food? Was I putting up decorations only to take them back down again a few days later? Or maybe joining the teeming crowds at an overpriced mall, shopping for expensive Christmas presents for people I didn't even like all that much?

None of the above—although, come to think of it, none of that sounded like anything I wanted to do anyway.

Instead, I was sitting here in what was actually one of my favorite kinds of places—a seedy, dimly lit gay bar that smelled of sex, spilled whiskey, men's cheap cologne and maybe a little desperation. I was a thousand miles from home, waiting for the right opportunity to approach the gorgeous little fugitive I'd been tracking for the past few days and maybe figuring out a way to get him into bed before we started the long trek back to Atlanta. Maybe this was shaping up to be a pretty good Christmas after all.

When I first left the Army, I'd had trouble finding a job, because former Rangers tended to sometimes make bad employees. We're too damn independent and don't take direction well, or at least not in a civilian situation. That's what my first two bosses had claimed, anyway, as they were firing me.

After a few months of trying to work for other people, with at best mixed success, I decided to start my own business and became a Bail Enforcement Agent, working with a couple of bondsmen in town. That, of course, is a fancy way of saying I

became a bounty hunter. Though while “bail enforcement agent” looked better on forms when you were trying for a small business loan at the bank, it just didn’t sound nearly as badass.

I fucking loved the job, and I was damn good at it, so I didn’t want to give it up, even though it turned out that running my own business wasn’t something I actually excelled at. I hated doing paperwork, and dealing with bondsmen meant you had to stay on top of them to get your money in a timely manner. And that was another thing I couldn’t seem to be bothered with. I soon learned that running my own business meant I didn’t have the luxury of taking only the jobs that interested me, which made it a lot less fun.

When I’d first gotten out of the Army, I’d had a little trouble finding a job I wanted right away. I’d been living in North Carolina then, and for a while I was beginning to think I’d made a big mistake in leaving the service at all. Then one day I reconnected with an old friend at a bar I used to frequent. He was in town visiting old friends. Lucas Hayes was an ex-Army buddy, who had left the Rangers a year before I had, to go to work for his father-in-law, who had opened up his own private detective agency. He invited me to come see him in Atlanta where he now lived and meet his father-in-law, who was an impressive guy and who might have a job for me.

His name was Ed Colton, and though I called the business he ran a detective agency, in reality, it was more than that. I think he did some work for the government that was above my pay grade, and that was fine with me. The less I knew the better, as far as I was concerned. Plausible deniability and all that.

Ed was ex-FBI or ATF or some other alphabet agency—he was pretty cagey and secretive about which one, and there was definitely a story there that I wasn’t privy to. Probably because it was none of my business, and as I said, that was all right with me. He seemed like a good enough guy, and best of all he paid well.

When he found out I was recently out of the Army and looking for work, he'd asked me to step into his office and have a chat. Lucas came in too, and while I was there, Mr. Colton asked me about my service record. When he found out I had some commendations from my time in Afghanistan, along with a wound that had taken out my knee and caused me to take an early retirement, he had offered me a job. I had an artificial knee now, and I was still working at the agency, going on three years now, doing whatever they needed me to do.

So far, my job had consisted mostly of looking for people. All kinds of them. Runaways and missing persons, for sure, but also those who had skipped out on their bail or who had stopped paying their court-ordered child support. I was a lot like a bounty hunter in that regard. In Georgia, I didn't even need a license to hunt them. I just took a state course, and my agency paid the fees. The officers who worked for the state called themselves Bail Recovery Agents in Georgia, but I kind of liked the more old-fashioned term of bounty hunter—or what my boss called me, which was an “Acquisitions Specialist.”

I really enjoyed tracking down deadbeat dads who weren't paying any child support and encouraging them to make a better effort. I was given quite a bit of leeway, and maybe that's what I loved the most. State laws varied with regard to the rights of bounty hunters, but as a general rule, we had greater authority to arrest someone than even the local police. A fugitive could be taken into custody and removed to any state without extradition, and all I needed was a copy of Jazz Devlin's guardianship papers, which was in my suitcase, along with some airline tickets. Armed with that paperwork, I didn't need a warrant and could enter private property unannounced if I had reasonable suspicion. I didn't even have to read him his rights when I took him in because at that point, he didn't have any. All I needed was that handy reasonable suspicion that the fugitive was on the premises, and I could waltz right in. It was what enabled regular law enforcement to go anywhere they pleased in search of a suspect.

As a bounty hunter, I had the same rights. Even better because I didn't have to have a

warrant like the police did. I was also authorized to use deadly force, if I needed to. I gave my bail jumpers a choice. I told them I could bring them in warm or I could bring them in cold. It was totally up to them. So far, most of them had made the right choice.

I was in Albuquerque, New Mexico so close to Christmas due to an unfortunate incident involving a drunken poker game and a recent bad run of luck. My personal bank account was currently a little lower than I liked it to be, so I had agreed to take this assignment when my boss offered it to me, as it involved a nice little bonus for working over the holidays.

I glanced over at the kid again, Kitt Devlin, again to make sure he hadn't moved from his chair and that he was still quietly, steadily getting drunk, though it was hard to see how those fruity little drinks he was putting away could do much more than give him a headache in the morning.

This bar was the kind of place that did much better with the lowest lighting possible, and the murky, low-lying smoke hanging in the air helped too. I'd been in a lot of places like this over the years, and it was beginning to get just a little old. Or hell, maybe I was.

It occurred to me that I should consider settling down. Find myself someone cute and cozy to come home to and stay closer to my base in Atlanta.

It wasn't all that late, maybe around nine o'clock, but the place was nearly empty. I guess it was a slow night. A few customers were scattered around the room at various tables and booths, but nobody was on the tiny scrap of a dance floor. Hell, I was shocked there even was a dance floor, but I guess this place had once seen better days. The majority of people in the room were sitting at the large, semi-circular bar.

An old and catchy Dolly Parton tune, "Hard Candy Christmas," was playing softly in

the background, with Dolly singing about how she was, “barely getting through tomorrow, but still I won't let sorrow bring me way down.”

I felt that in my soul.

Kitt Devlin, the one I was here in Albuquerque to pick up, must have been feeling it too, as he was tapping his fingers on the side of his glass, keeping time, and he had a thoughtful look on his pretty face. One thing I could definitely say about the little punk—he was probably the best-looking thing I'd seen in...hell, maybe ever. Tall, but not too tall; lean but not too lean; dark hair that fell perfectly across his broad, unblemished forehead. I felt like one of the bears in the Goldilocks story assessing him, because to me, he looked just right.

He had the look of a wealthy, spoiled brat too. A haughty nose—the better to look down on people with—and dark slashes of eyebrows, one of which was currently quirked up on the side, showing his nearly complete contempt for this place. Nevertheless, here he was, and considering the early hour and the fact that he didn't look over legal drinking age in this state, it was a bit surprising that he'd managed to get served at all and able to get drunk so quickly. It probably spoke to both his ingenuity and his strong determination. I knew he had a fake ID—I'd seen him flash it—but he really didn't look twenty-one, so the bartender must be letting it slide.

He sure wasn't doing it on his charm alone, as he looked and acted sullen, jaded and extremely bored. Not to mention moody, like the bad-tempered teenager he wasn't all that far from being. Boredom was a big problem for Kitt, according to his file, because when he got bored, that was when trouble seemed to blow up around him.

I was a little surprised at the strong reaction I was having to him. From the first moment I laid eyes on Kitt two days ago in person, I'd felt an instant attraction that I'd been fighting hard ever since. I mentally chastised myself, because I should have been concentrating only on the job at hand—which was keeping him in one piece and

getting him back home to Atlanta.

My eyes fell to his wrists when he lit the cigarette, and I noticed not only how slim and somehow fragile they were, but also the little red and green beaded bracelets he was wearing on both wrists—a lot of them. Friendship bracelets, the Swifties called them. According to his file, he was only ten years younger than I was, but he seemed like such a kid.

Kitt had a history of being a loose cannon. It hadn't been long since he was kicked out of his college, and since then, he had been picked up by the police on three, separate occasions. Two of them were drunk and disorderly charges along with one resisting arrest charge. Since I'd been following him, he seemed to be almost always short of cash and was sleeping wherever he could find an empty couch to crash on. He drank too much, smoked too much, and ran that smart, little mouth of his way more than was good for him. He was also far too inquisitive—he liked to stick that patrician little nose of his in other people's business, which was probably part of what had landed him in the trouble he was in now.

From the information I had about him, he had witnessed a shooting in Atlanta, after being out clubbing half the night. The participants were members of the Everybody Killa gang, a hybrid criminal street gang based in the area that had ties to a major national gang called the Bloods. They had long been engaged in a violent feud with Red Tape Gang, another hybrid criminal street gang based in the city. For years, the rivalry between EBK and the RTG had resulted in several shootings and homicides. On the night in question, at around three in the morning, a man named Jamal Ferguson and four of his friends left a nightclub in a section of Atlanta called Five Points. As Ferguson and his friends headed to their vehicle, a second vehicle came down the street, stopping immediately next to Ferguson's car. A few seconds later, without provocation, multiple occupants of that vehicle opened fire on Ferguson and his friends. Ferguson and his friends returned fire, and both Ferguson and another man with him had died at the scene as a result of the injuries they sustained in the

gunbattle.

A person in a third vehicle parked in alongside Ferguson's car had witnessed the entire thing. And guess who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Kitt Devlin wasn't involved in any way, but he fled the scene. He did, however, stay around long enough for the other participants to see him. He called 911 from another location but refused to tick around and talk to the police. When detectives recovered the footage of the shooting from the incident, however, they identified the third vehicle by its license plate and requested Kitt's cooperation in testifying to what he witnessed. Kitt refused and when they insisted...he refused again. A warrant was issued for him to be taken into involuntary protective custody until a trial could be scheduled.

And then Kitt Devlin ran. It was such a juvenile, stupid thing to do, it was almost breathtaking.

Just then, Kitt got up unexpectedly and sauntered over to the old-fashioned looking jukebox in the corner. It was actually a new machine, just made to look retro. I hadn't seen a jukebox, new or old, in years, but it fit in with the country western vibe of this place. He leaned over it, studying the selections, I guess. He was wearing a denim jacket and sinfully tight jeans, ripped across the thighs. I sat back and admired the way he looked, and I wasn't the only one. He was lithe and slim and sexy, and though I considered myself to be mostly bi, there were times when only someone like Kitt would do. Not that I could do anything about it, except admire the way he looked. Not ethically, anyway—but I'd done a lot worse for a lot less.

I justified my interest to myself by thinking it was okay to look at him, as long as that's all I did. I needed a bit of kink to really get me going anyway. Not whips and chains or anything so dramatic. That was rare and it took the right kind of

guy—someone who actually got off on that. But spanking some cute little ass or dominating my partner a little if he enjoyed it and needed it—I could get into that. Unfortunately for me, Kitt seemed to fit that bill nicely. He was definitely a bottom and almost certainly a brat, if I were any judge.

I got up and walked over next to him before somebody else did, leaning against the jukebox and showing off his assets like he was.

“You look a little young to be in this bar.”

He glanced over at me and started to say something smartass and sarcastic—I could see it trembling on his pretty mouth—but then his eyes widened as he got a good look at me, and he let his gaze run up and down my body.

“What’s it to ya?” he asked, but he let a little smile play around his lips and even batted his lush eyelashes a little to show me he wasn’t mad about it.

“Well, I was just wondering if you knew what kind of place this is. Let me clue you in, just in case you wandered in off the street and didn’t know. This is a gay bar, though it’s not getting a lot of action in that regard tonight. Normally, guys come to a place like this to meet up with and fuck other guys.”

“Oh yes, I’m well aware.” He toasted me with his glass. “I didn’t just come in here for the drinks.”

I nodded and plucked the glass out of his hand, putting it on top of the jukebox as an old Conway Twitty song, “Hello, Darlin,” came on.

“Prove it. Dance with me.”

Kitt’s eyes widened, and he looked around the place—no one else was dancing.

“Are you kidding? No one else is doing that. We might look stupid.”

“So what? Do you only do what other people are doing?”

He gave me a reckless grin, and his eyes lit up. “No, I don’t, now that you mention it. Okay, then. Let’s do it.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me out on the tiny dance floor, but then he didn’t seem to know what to do once he got there. He held out a hand to me like he expected to lead, but I grinned again, grabbed his hand and tucked it behind his waist, while I pulled him so close he had to tip his head back to look up at me. He had no choice but to awkwardly put his free hand on my shoulder.

I began to move him around the tiny dance floor to the sad old song Conway was warbling, holding Kitt tight against me and enjoying myself probably way too much. I could feel the sweet lines of his body all up and down my own. His breath was warm against my throat, and though at first, he wasn’t doing much more than swaying a little to the music, I added a few fancier steps, and he tried his best to follow me. He looked down at his feet, though, so to keep him from it and keep him off-center, I whirled him around a few times until he was breathless and dizzy and holding onto me for dear life.

I hadn’t shaved since early that morning, so my beard scratched along his smooth cheek as I held him close and bent even closer to him. He looked up at me with a slightly confused expression, and I knew he was beginning to wonder if he’d gotten in over his head. His sweet submissive nature was coming out a little as we danced, and I was feeling it a little too much myself, actually, so I put a little distance between us, by twirling him out away from me and then reeling him back in. He drew in a sharp breath and threw his arms around my neck as I dipped him way down toward the floor. The music stopped, and he pushed at my chest to get me to let go of him. I set him back on his feet and pretended not to notice how unsteady he was.

“Thanks,” he said, looking a little pale. “But I think I’m probably done. Too much to drink, I guess. I’m going to sit down for a little while.” He stood there awkwardly a moment before giving me a slight smile. “Is that okay?”

There was that submissive nature showing itself again.

“Of course. Thanks for the dance, sweetheart.”

He blushed, as he grabbed his drink again and scooted quickly back over to his table.

I took a seat at a table nearby after a minute or two, not looking at him, because I could feel his gaze on me. I think he sensed something, and I made him nervous. I didn’t want him to get so nervous that he thought I was stalking him, so I pretended to ignore him.

He picked up his glass and threw back the contents remaining in it with a snap of his head. His hair shone as black as midnight in the light and his face was really gorgeous.

Not two minutes later, some guy came over and asked him to dance. Kitt laughed at something he said, and I noticed how infectious his laugh was. The guy who asked him was a tall drink of water, wearing jeans and a damn cowboy hat and boots. Then again, this was New Mexico. Kitt got up to go with him to the dance floor, and I felt a jolt of possessive jealousy.

The “cowboy” he was dancing with was showing him some kind of complicated line dance shit. Kitt hooked his thumbs in his belt loops like the guy showed him and started trying to follow what he did. It was cute as hell, and I thought again that he was way too young for me. I also noticed that he had begun to stumble a little, and I knew he was drunk on his ass. I still wanted him with a fierceness that shocked me.

He took off his damn shirt then and tied it around his waist, showing off a luscious, tanned body that looked strong and a little muscular, like he worked out a little. The cowboy gave him a sip of his beer that spilled and ran down the strong column of his throat onto his chest. The cowboy laughed and leaned over to lick it and that did it for me. I got up and went over there, grabbing his arm.

“I think this is my dance,” I told Kitt, and he looked up at me in confusion.

“Oh, hi. Did you want to join us? It’s a line dance, so you can if you like.”

I smiled at him, and the cowboy said, “Get your own, mister.”

I turned my back to Kitt and gave the cowboy a look that quickly changed his mind about arguing, and he took off back to the bar.

“He left,” Kitt said. “Why did he do that?”

“No idea,” I said. “Why don’t you just dance with me? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay,” he said, and I took him in my arms and began to whirl him around so fast he had to throw his arms around my neck to hold on. He gazed up at me with those big, dark-fringed eyes and his lush mouth fell open in surprise.

Somebody started playing “Little Bitty” by Alan Jackson on the juke box, and I pulled him into a fast two-step. He couldn’t keep up, so I lifted him off his feet and swept him around the floor. I may have made him a little dizzy, accidentally-on-purpose as I twirled him around so that he’d cling to me even harder. Finally, the music stopped, and he stayed in my arms, still holding on tightly and blowing his sweet breath in my face. He gasped out the words, “Dizzy,” and I pushed his head down on my shoulder and held him close.

I walked him back over to the bar and sat him down on a stool next to mine so he could rest a few minutes before I took him up to my room. I thought he was about ready to retire for the night, whether he knew it or not.

He pulled a cigarette from the pack in his pocket and inclined his head slightly to the side to light it up, twisting his head to avoid getting smoke in his eyes. Damn it, even that move was sexy as fuck, like every other move I'd seen him make. But I got the feeling he wasn't even aware of how good he looked.

One of the ones leaning over the bar at the far end was a salesman—at least he looked like one. Big and beefy, with a red face, he wore a rumpled suit and was going on and on, telling the bartender stories with a Christmas theme. The one he was currently in the middle of was about how much he used to love Christmas as a kid and how much better everything used to be back then. He was pretty obviously drunk and getting louder. Most of the other customers were trying to ignore him, except for one. I saw that Kitt had begun to pay close attention and had his head slightly tilted toward the guy, his eyes narrowed and his lip curling as he listened. I wondered what was going on in that pretty little head of his.

“Christmas morning used to be the best at my house,” the salesman was saying. “My brother and I would get up before everyone else and run downstairs to see if Santa Claus had come. To see what he'd brought us.” He chuckled. “We were too damn old for it by then, but we were afraid that if we told our mom that we knew there was no such thing as Santa Claus, we might stop getting presents. So, we'd run to the tree and make a lot of noise until we woke her and our Dad up and they'd come down, all ready to raise hell with us, but then they'd realize what day it was and plop down on the couch to watch us. Mom would go off to the kitchen to get Dad his coffee and make us her special Christmas pancakes. Dad would watch us open our presents and after breakfast, he'd be on the floor beside us, putting our toys together and saying that Santa must have forgot to do it the night before.”

“Oh yeah?” the bartender replied. “What kind of toys?”

“Trains and little toy cars that fit onto a track—you know the kind. Just cheap stuff that mostly tore up after a day or two—we were a little rough on them, but that was part of the fun. Christmas was the best back then, man. Not all commercial and expensive like it is today.”

The bartender, who must have been bored—though probably not as much as I was—kept talking to him. Maybe he knew the guy or else he was angling for a good tip.

“What about your pancake breakfast? What was so special about that?”

The guy laughed. “Not a damn thing. My mom was a terrible cook, but she’d stick some frozen pancakes in the toaster and then use whipped cream to make faces on them after she took them out of the toaster to make us laugh. I still remember how bad those damn things tasted. But man, I’d love to go back to that time again, just for that one morning alone.”

Kitt shook his head. I focused on Kitt as he signaled the bartender for another one of the fancy cocktails he’d been drinking. He’d had enough, but I let him do it, hoping he’d just pass out and not cause me any trouble about going along with me to my room. Whatever he’d ordered had another little umbrella in it and fruit hanging off the side. The bartender turned to look over at him and nod. That drew the salesman’s attention too.

“What do you think, boy?” the salesman asked. “Don’t you agree that Christmas is too commercialized and not what it used to be?”

Kitt turned his head a little and stared coldly at him. “Are you addressing me?” he asked in a prim, patrician little voice that was only a little slurred, but more than a

little incredulous. He sounded like the queen might have sounded if someone had asked her for a light for their cigarette.

“Well, yeah. I asked if you agreed with me.”

“About what?”

“That Christmas when we were little kids was the best! Much better than today. It hasn’t been that long for you, but don’t you agree, buddy?”

Kitt smirked and tilted his glass at him. “Whatever you say...buddy.” He took a long swig of his drink.

“You don’t sound too sure,” the salesman said, his tone getting more than a little belligerent. He probably objected to that smart-ass smirk on Kitt’s face, and hell, you couldn’t blame him.

“You got a different idea?” The man yelled at him, and he must have been drunker than I’d first thought, because he’d puffed up belligerently. It looked like he was trying to start a fight over nothing much at all. And Kitt was just the kind of boy who’d give him one. I tensed, getting ready to stop this if it went much further.

I had no idea why Kitt was getting so mad about the guy’s stupid, but innocuous question. I knew that his parents had divorced when he was really young, and that he and his father had a contentious relationship. Maybe that was it. But he was about to start a fight over nothing much at all and I wasn’t in the mood tonight. As Toby Keith used to say in his song, “there was a time, back in my prime, when I could really lay it down...” But like Toby says, I ain’t as good as I once was.

“Oh, are you still talking to me?” Kitt asked the salesman, looking over at him with an incredulous look on his face.

“Yeah, damn it, I asked you a fucking question, you little asshole.”

“The thing is,” Kitt said, taking a drag off his cigarette and blowing a long plume of smoke up in the air, “I’m tired of hearing you running your big mouth. I just came in this place to have a drink. Not to listen to you. Can you lower your damn voice or at least talk about something else that doesn’t have a question for me in it? Or better yet, why don’t you just do us all a favor and shut the fuck up?”

The man lurched to his feet and began coming around the end of the bar, his face hot and bothered. I stood up, all six-feet, four inches of me, ready to head this thing off.

“The fuck did you say to me?” the drunk guy yelled.

He was going to make me get involved, damn it, and the last thing I needed was drama that would attract undue attention. I sighed and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Why don’t you sit your ass down?” I said softly, my voice low and stern as I held the salesman’s gaze. You could have heard a pin drop in that bar anyway, though, as everyone suddenly got very interested. In the background, somebody was playing Brenda Lee “rockin’ around the Christmas tree,” singing her heart out about, “everyone dancin’ merrily, in the new, old-fashioned way.”

Looking a little surprised that he suddenly had a new opponent in this fight, the drunk guy glanced up at me and my disapproving face, and then he stumbled back a few steps as he got a good look at me. He fell back down on his bar stool, still looking like he wanted to fight. Now that I was closer to him, I could see how really drunk he was. He could barely sit up straight.

“Stay there and sober up, pal. As my mama used to say, don’t let anybody steal your joy. Those memories of yours sound nice. Don’t pay any attention to little assholes like this one.”

“Hey!” the little asshole yelled from beside me and started to get up. I pushed him back down again.

“Are you the bouncer?” the drunk asked.

Before I could answer, Kitt stood up beside me, trying his best to get in the middle of it again. “Maybe he is. Or maybe he’s just sick of hearing about your shitty frozen pancakes or your stupid Christmas toys, and your stupid daddy, just like everybody else.”

I turned to stare down at him. “Shut up, sit back down and let me handle this. And you don’t need any more of these,” I said, plucking the drink the bartender had just brought him out of his hand. I pushed it back across the bar. “He’s had enough. Bring him his check, please.”

“Wait—I wanted that! And I don’t need my check! I’m not ready to go yet,” Kitt said in a loud and petulant voice, trying his best to give me an intimidating look—all one hundred fifty pounds of him, soaking wet. “Who the hell are you anyway and why are you all up in my business?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “Get out your wallet so you can pay the nice man. Then get back on your feet, because you’re coming with me.”

“What?” he yelled and shoved me when I wouldn’t turn to look at him.

I turned back around, looming over him and suddenly he changed his mind.

“Okay, okay, don’t get excited.” His gaze roamed me up and down again as a blush stained his cheeks and a slow, seductive smile lit his face. “If you insist. Why not?”

I plucked his wallet from his back pocket to pay his tab since he still hadn’t made any

move to do it yet. He had very few bills inside, yet here he was, drinking up what little money he had left. I took his arm in a strong grip, and he didn't resist—mainly because he'd had quite a night for himself. And it wasn't over yet.

From beside me, the salesman slapped me on the back. "Thank you for those kind words, sir."

"You bet," I said and turned to take Kitt by the elbow and get him out of there.

"Hey, wait. Where are you taking me?"

"To my hotel room."

"Oh," he said, seeming to think it over. "Okay then. I guess that'll work. Why didn't you say so to start with?"

We went out into the cold night air—the temperature had dropped a lot since I'd been out there—and as I pulled him along, he leaned into me for warmth. That thin denim wasn't doing much for him. It was only a short walk, but I let him stay as close as he seemed to want to all the way. We went in the wide glass doors leading to the lobby, which was decorated for the season with strings of white lights and a pretty, though very artificial looking, Christmas tree towering up in a corner of the room. I walked us past it on the way to the desk.

I'd arranged for a room while I'd been sitting at the bar so all I had to do was check in and get my key. Kitt stood patiently beside me, leaning slightly into me, and my arm went around his waist, like it had a mind of its own. Luckily for both of us, I came to my senses and gently eased away from him, letting him stand on his own two feet instead. Thankfully, the clerk was fast and handed over the key a few minutes later.

I'd had an idea of what I thought this boy would be like when I was first given this assignment. I'd seen his photos, of course, though they didn't do him justice. In them, he'd looked like an actor or maybe a model, too good looking to be anything else, with a straight little nose, sad eyes and always a pout on his pretty lips.

Tonight, he also looked young and more than a little messy, like he was tired and hadn't showered lately. I knew he was staying with whatever friend he could talk into allowing it, so he was having a hard time. His oversized denim jacket was buttoned up the wrong way. He looked bad tempered too, but that was more than likely because he was.

I wasn't looking forward to explaining to him why I was here. Or the fact that when I left, he was coming with me. Like I said, I didn't need to be distracted, so the idea of spending time with him over the next couple of days was not pleasant. The last thing I needed in my life was complications. He had a history of running away and of throwing temper tantrums, too, so I'd have to be vigilant and stern with him.

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My agency been hired by his brother, Jazz Devlin, a wealthy Atlanta businessman. (I had no idea what their parents had been thinking with those names, by the way. One of them must have a fascination with double consonants. Not to mention silly names) Anyway, Jazz Devlin had chosen the private agency I worked for at random, from what my boss told me, and I'd happened to be the one to get this assignment.

When I talked to Jazz Devlin, he had been worried about finding his kid brother, Kitt, who had witnessed the gang-related murder in Five Points a couple of weeks earlier. The feds wanted his brother to testify, which he'd agreed to do. Yet when they warned him that the bad guys would be after him before the trial to shut him up, did he then do the right thing and let them put him into witness protection and agree to testify? Hell no, of course, he didn't. He'd decided to run away, like a kid, and he'd been on the run ever since.

His older brother Jazz had tried to reason with him, until Kitt stopped talking to him. They had a troubled history, going back years, Jazz had told me when I spoke to him over the phone. He'd said this wouldn't be easy, and I was beginning to think he'd been more right than he'd known.

I kept my hand locked tightly on Kitt's arm as I walked him down the corridor to my room. We reached the door, and I ushered him inside. This was a suite, paid for by my expense account, and it was dim and quiet at this time of night. The maids had already been in to turn down the bed and put mints on the pillows.

Kitt had been quiet all the way up in the elevator, and I wondered what he must be thinking. It didn't take me long to find out. He turned to me a little belligerently.

“Are you a cop?”

One hell of a time for him to finally ask.

“No, I’m not,” I replied. Which was absolutely true—I had no such affiliation.

He narrowed his pretty blue eyes at me. “It’s entrapment if you lie about it and say you’re not when you really are, you know.”

I smiled at him. I wasn’t a cop, and I couldn’t arrest him. That didn’t mean I wasn’t there to take him back home. I was going to take him into my custody in my capacity as a recovery officer, aka bounty hunter, and I was going to transport him back to Atlanta to hand him over to his brother. But I had no plans to arrest him, so technically, it wasn’t that much of a lie.

“I have no interest in taking you to jail.”

He seemed to think about it for a minute and then he lifted one shoulder. “Okay then.” He looked around the room. “This is nice. Are you rich?”

“No.”

He put his hand on his hip and gazed at me like he was trying to decide if I was lying or not.

Finally, he nodded. “Okay. Cool.”

I loosened my tie and took off my jacket to drape it around a chair. He watched every move I made like a little hawk. He made himself comfortable too, shrugging off his jacket and slipping off his shoes to tuck his feet underneath him as he lounged back on the couch.

“Why does a guy who looks like you,” he said, looking me up and down, “need to pick up someone in a bar to hook up with?”

“Who said I did?”

He held out his arms and wrinkled up his straight little nose. He was very cute. “Here I am. Isn’t that why you asked me here?”

“What if it was?”

“Then I’d ask you what you wanted. Why don’t you sit over here next to me and tell me all about it. I won’t bite.” He flashed me a flirty look. “Not unless you want me to.” Damn it, I’d thought my cock couldn’t get any harder but here we were.

I sighed, shook my head and took his hand in mine. “I can’t, Kitt. I’m here because your brother Jazz sent me to bring you back to Atlanta. Hopefully, you’ll cooperate, and this time will go by quickly for both of us. Can I count on your cooperation?”

It took a second or two for what I said to register, but when it did, his reaction was sudden and violent. He twisted away and jumped to his feet, turning on me like an outraged cat, his voice raspy and hoarse. “I need to get out of here!”

He squirmed away when I grabbed for him, snatched up his jacket and ran for the door. I was there before him, pulling his jacket from his hand and tossing it across the room. “No. I’m sorry, Kitt, but I can’t let you leave.” He blanched with alarm and gasped, and I could see the fear and panic in his eyes.

I backed away a step and raised my hands in the air to try to show him I wasn’t going to hurt him, but he wasn’t convinced and hell, who could blame him after the way I’d tricked him to get him here to my room.

Kitt stared at me furiously for a moment, but there was fear in his eyes too, and I hated myself for putting it there. He started wringing his hands a little. Then his face changed, and he straightened his back and gave me a shaky smile. He reached up to touch my jaw.

“I-I think we’ve got off on the wrong foot. If you want a blow job, I’ll be glad to oblige you. Just don’t get rough, okay? I’ll give you whatever you want.”

I felt like the worst kind of fraud as I reached for him, wanting to apologize and reassure him again that I wouldn’t hurt him, would never hurt him.

I told him that and when he smiled seductively, I said, “I just have to take you back to Atlanta.”

He flinched quickly away from me, as if from a wild animal, his eyes darting around the room, looking for a way to escape. He kept backing up until he hit the wall. I stopped and tried to make my voice gentle and calm.

“Kitt, listen to me, please. I’m sorry about all this. I’m not here to harm you or take advantage of you. I promise I’m not going to hurt you.”

He gave a bitter laugh. “Despite all evidence to the contrary, huh?”

Moving in slowly again, I just wanted to comfort him and let him know I didn’t mean him harm. He glanced up at me from under those thick eyelashes with a fearful expression in his dark eyes. “I’m really sorry,” I whispered and drew him carefully, gently into my arms. “Please sit back down. It’s going to be all right.”

Instead, he closed his eyes and lifted his lips to mine, though he was still trembling. Surprised and charmed by his actions, I couldn’t help myself. I lowered my head to kiss him. When he didn’t push me away, I deepened the kiss, sweeping my tongue

over his and tasting him. He tasted sweet. I moved my hands down to cup his ass and gently draw him even closer. I felt him whimper softly under my lips, and I made my kiss sweeter and even more gentle, teasing his tongue a little. I could feel his response in his rock-hard cock, which was now pressed up against my stomach, and I pulled his body closer, wanting to consume him, to own him.

He smiled up into my eyes and put a hand to the back of my neck to pull my head down to his. I leaned in, mesmerized by his beautiful dark eyes and noticed irrelevantly again the golden flecks radiating out from his pupils. When our faces were inches apart, and I could feel his hot breath on my lips, Kitt whispered up to me.

“Fuck you.”

Without any more warning than that, he pulled my forehead down to ram his, and I literally saw stars, just like in a cartoon. I reeled back away from him while he pushed me off him, and then he hit the door running hard. Not stopping for his jacket or his shoes, even though it was freezing outside, he streaked down the corridor before I could shake my head clear enough to go after him. I took a moment and then I ran after him and caught him as he jabbed frantically at the elevator buttons. I picked him up around the waist, manhandling him back to my room. He screamed bloody murder, but despite his yelling, I got lucky and not one person so much as stuck their heads out of any of the doors.

When he began to curse me at the top of his lungs, I clapped a hand over his mouth and got him inside, turning around to lock the door firmly behind us. I sensed him behind me and threw up an arm just in time to catch a lamp he'd intended to crash down on my head. He tried to make a break for the bathroom and slam the door in my face, but I shoved it open, grabbed him, and whirled him around to push him face first up against the wall.

Holding him there by the back of the neck, I nudged his feet farther apart. “Feet back

and spread ‘em, damn it! Now!”

Shaking hard, Kitt complied, and I hesitated. I should have been putting restraints on him, but I just stood there, sniffing his skin like an idiot, regretting so hard that we’d gotten off to such a bad start and wishing I could wipe away the last five minutes and start over.

“Please. Just let me go.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Who are you? Oh god, did my brother send you?”

“Yes, Kitt. I already told you that. I’m here to take you back home.”

“You can tell my brother you couldn’t find me. I won’t tell anyone, I promise!” He glanced over his shoulder at me when I didn’t reply, his lips only inches away. He was breathing hard, but his tone was resigned. “Please. Please let me go.”

“You know I can’t do that. I’m a bounty hunter. Your brother paid me to come after you.”

He gasped and looked back at me, his eyes wild. “I can’t go back there. I won’t!”

He glanced at the door, as if trying to decide if he could get out.

“What do you mean, ‘my brother sent you?’ What are you even talking about? And how do you know my name?”

“You’re not listening. Your brother Jazz sent me to pick you up and bring you to him so he can get you into protective custody.”

“But why? What does any of this have to do with him?” he said, his face still shocked and alarmed. I took a breath to calm myself and decided we could still do this the easy way. I tried again.

“Why don’t you sit down so we can talk? I’m going to order myself a drink, but you’ve had enough, so you can have a soda or some juice. Come on. This thing might take some time to explain, but I’ll tell you everything I know. Let me try to do that.”

“Okay,” he said, seeming to finally accept the fact that he was caught. I led him back to the couch with no restraints, since it seemed he was willing to be cooperative.

His long, lush eyelashes fanned down over his eyes as he stared at the floor.

“I’ll order you something to drink, okay?”

He nodded, but the second I turned my back, he suddenly shot to the door, pulling a chair that sat beside it down to the floor. He took off down the hall for the second time, while I had to take a second to move the chair out of the way. I raced after him, but the little shit was fast and lucky. He was already halfway to the elevators, sprinting down the long empty hallway. I was determined to stop him before he got on the elevator and got away. If he did, I’d deal with it, but I needed to catch him.

Kitt glanced behind himself, and the sight of me charging after him down the hall made him put on extra speed, like in a Roadrunner cartoon. The doors opened just as he got there, and he shot inside. I ran up, just in time to see him grinning and giving me the middle finger as the doors closed in front of him.

I flung myself down the service stairs nearby and raced down a few floors, jumping over a few rails to maximize my speed. Elevators could be notoriously slow in big hotels and if luck was with me, and he got stopped at a few floors, I could catch him.

I jabbed frantically at the elevator buttons when I reached the bottom floor, out of breath from all the running. I was getting too old for this shit. A minute later, the door slid open and there he was, looking wide-eyed and shocked. I stepped inside, got him around the waist and manhandled him to the back corner of the elevator. While he tried to yell and kick and curse at the top of his lungs, I clapped a hand over his mouth and held on tight. Some older ladies got on the elevator at the third floor, and he tried his best to appeal to them for help, but I held him tighter and shook my head at them apologetically.

“These kids today...I’m so sorry ladies, but my little brother sneaked out and had a little too much to drink, and our parents wanted me to find him and get him upstairs and into bed.” I sighed. “He gets vulgar when he doesn’t want to go someplace, and I don’t want to expose you ladies to all the cussing.”

One of them smiled. “You’re such a nice boy. You must be a good older brother.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I do try.” He stomped my foot, and I winced and took my hand away long enough to slap his butt.

“Ow, that hurt, damn you!” he yelled, and I clapped my hand back over his mouth.

“Settle down, now. You know Dad’s going to ground you for a month for this.”

I looked over at the ladies and shook my head. “He’s always been such a handful. Our poor parents.” I leaned in a little in a conspiratorial way. “It’s because he’s not quite right in the head.” I tapped my temple. “Poor thing never has been since he fell off the top of that playground slide when he was six years old.”

That garnered me some sympathetic looks and shakes of the head, and they smiled at me again as we reached their floor, and they got off. One of them stopped on the way out the door and looked back. “Your parents are so lucky to have you, dear.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, trying to look modest and well-meaning.

As soon as the door close, I popped his ass a couple more times and we rode to our floor. His face was flushed with anger. I hustled him off the elevator and down the hall, tossing him through the door and locking it firmly behind us. Spinning around, I caught him again as he tried to make a break for the bathroom, probably intending to lock himself in. I grabbed him and pushed him face first up against the wall.

I was trying really hard not to hurt him, because he was so much smaller than I was, but he was making it difficult. I leaned against him, squashing him in place with my body and putting my hands over his. “Settle down, damn it! Stop all that yelling and behave yourself. Now!”

He leaned over trying to bite my arm, so I turned him to face the wall and popped his little ass a few times as he yelled, “Stop it! No!”

Trembling with anger, he huffed and puffed and finally settled down, but still I hesitated. I knew I should release him; I knew I was probably scaring him, but I didn’t want him to run again.

Hell, the truth was, I didn’t want to let him go.

“Are you feeling calmer?”

I got a quick nod of the head.

“Are you going to be good if I let you sit back down?”

Another quick nod.

“Use your words, Kitten.”

“Yes,” he spat out.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I’ll be good! Damn it, let me go!”

I tightened my hold instead. “We’re going to be together for a little while, and I think we need to get a few things straight between us. I warn you that I don’t like bad boys. Are you a bad boy, Kitten?”

“Fuck you,” he said, pouty and sullen as hell. “And don’t call me that stupid name.”

“See,” I said, shaking my head. “I think I can call you anything I like. And that’s not an answer. I think you are a bad boy. So why don’t you own it? Just tell me the truth. Admit you’re a bad boy, but you’re going to be good for me now.”

He huffed a few times and squirmed and sighed, but I said it again in his ear. “Come on. Tell me, so I can let you go.”

“Fuck you,” he said through his teeth.

I grinned at how pissed off he sounded. “Still not what I need to hear. Tell me you’re going to change your ways now and you’ll be a good boy for me.”

I nudged him when he didn’t answer. “Will you?”

Finally, he shouted his reply, his face bright red. “Yes, damn it!”

“Yes, what?”

More sighs and finally, “Yes. I’ll be good. Just please get off me.”

“I like the word ‘please.’ Okay, I’m moving away now, and you’re going to be calm, right?”

A quick nod of the head.

I eased off him, and he whirled around, staring up at me, openly belligerent, both his fists clenched and ready for a fight. I looked down at them pointedly. “I don’t think you want to do that.”

We stared at each other a little longer before he finally dropped his gaze and unclenched his fists.

“Do you?” I prompted.

“I guess not.”

“I need a simple yes or no.”

“No!”

I pointed toward the chair he’d recently vacated. “Go sit down over there.”

He glared at me and couldn’t resist stomping past me to dramatically throw himself in the chair, showing me more of his bad attitude. He reminded me of a young, spoiled rotten teenager.

“What do you want from me?” He ran a hand through his pretty hair. “Who the fuck are you anyway?”

“I told you what I want. I want you. My name is Riordan Jeffries. I was hired by your brother, Jazz, and I work for a private detective agency. Is any of this sounding

familiar?”

“I don’t know you. What the fuck?”

I came to stand over him and leaned down, tapping the tip of his nose with my finger. He swiped at my hand. “Stop all that cussing. And apologize.”

He folded his arms over his chest and stuck out his bottom lip.

“No apology? All right, suit yourself for now. But as I already told you, Kitt. I’m taking you back to your brother in Atlanta whether you like it or not. He’s going to convince you to go into protective custody.”

“Oh, no, he won’t!”

“That’s between the two of you. I’m just telling you what I’ve been paid to do.”

“So, you’re just going to kidnap me? I don’t have any say in any of this?”

“I’ve been sent by your legal guardian. It’s not a kidnapping.”

“Yes, it is! I’m almost twenty-one now!”

“No. He showed me the papers. You’re subject to his rules and his control until you’re legally of age and until the courts release the guardianship.”

“Fuck him! Fuck the courts and fuck you too!”

“Maybe later. In the meantime, what did I tell you about all that cussing?” I asked, leaning over him. “Now apologize.”

He huffed and puffed a few times and said, “Okay! Sorry. I apologize.”

“All right then. Only the courts can dismiss his guardianship, no matter how old you are. A doctor has stated that you’re mentally unstable and the court put your brother in charge.”

He glared at me like he was trying to peel off my skin with his gaze.

Suddenly, he flung himself out of the chair and sprinted toward the door again, but I got in front of him, putting a hand on his chest. I meant only to stop him from leaving, but he reacted like I’d punched him, reeling back and falling down into the chair and looking shocked. I could see he was trembling all over and his eyes had gone wide. It made me feel awful, because he seemed so young and vulnerable. I was trying to ignore the actual physical spark that hit me when I’d touched him again too. He was looking down at himself, like he’d maybe felt it the same time I did, and he looked back up at me with big, scared eyes.

“I’ve told you I’m not going to hurt you in any way, Kitt. I promise I won’t. I’m sorry if I scared you, and I didn’t mean to. But I can’t let you go.” I kept my voice low and soft, and he stopped shaking at least.

“Please,” he said in a voice so low I had to bend closer to hear him. He looked up at me with big, limpid eyes, brimming with tears. He was killing me. “Please let me go.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s not happening. I’m taking you back to Atlanta.”

“It’s not safe in Atlanta. There are people there who want to hurt me.”

“The police will put you in protective custody. You’ll be fine.”

“But it’s almost Christmas.”

Damn it, what the hell did that mean? I groaned on the inside—holidays didn’t mean all that much to me, but I still felt bad for him. Realistically speaking, he’d been running for a few weeks now, and he had been literally homeless since then, relying on the kindness of his friends and complete strangers—and their patience was obviously wearing thin from the state of him. It wasn’t like he’d be missing some grand Christmas celebration here. He had come up to my hotel room with me willingly and would have taken money in exchange for sex if I would have cooperated. His clothing looked a little shabby and he seemed exhausted. Going back home was absolutely the best thing for him.

I hated to see this happen to him, but this was part of the job. You couldn’t feel sorry for the ones you were after—it was a trap that would backfire on you every time. Once when I first started doing this job, I took pity on a young, sixteen-year-old high school girl from Tennessee, who had run away to be with her “boyfriend.” She begged me with tears in her eyes to let her just call him and say goodbye. When I gave in, she managed to somehow let him know where we were during their brief conversation, and he showed up with his buddy and a tire iron to get her. The fucker was thirty-five if he was a day, so I didn’t feel bad about leaving him and his buddy injured and crying on the floor of the hotel room, but it was all unnecessary and cost me time and a lot of money paid to the hotel manager to keep my name and my client’s name out of it.

This trip home to Atlanta would only take a few hours and then this would all be behind him. And behind me. He’d be back with his brother, Jazz, and then it became his brother’s problem and not mine.

I told him as much as he sat very still, with those damn long eyelashes lowered over his eyes, refusing to look at me. He looked pale and wary and unsure, but why did I get the feeling he would still bolt at the first opportunity I gave him? And why hadn’t

his brother mentioned how fragile and young he was? I knew he was supposed to be mentally unstable according to the paperwork, though he seemed perfectly fine to me, if a little immature. I was regretting that I'd ever taken this assignment and wished I was anywhere but there in that hotel room.

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Kitt

The man who said his name was Riordan Jeffries—and why did he have two last names, anyway—sat back in his chair and stared at me. I'd drunk a lot and needed to pee, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of asking if I could go to the bathroom, because fuck him. No matter how good looking he was or how blue his eyes were or how much his big muscles strained against his shirt, I hated him. He was mean.

I was tired from not getting much sleep the night before. I was staying with a friend of a friend, couch surfing, I guess, since my friend Adam's current boyfriend kicked me out. Adam had been my good friend in school, even after I got kicked out, and he'd graduated and gone home to Albuquerque to live.

When I ran away, he was the first one I thought of going to. I knew he'd give me a place to stay until all that shit in Atlanta blew over. And he did too. Until his boyfriend came home from work one evening, and I was sitting at the kitchen bar, laughing at Adam being goofy as he flipped eggs in a frying pan. The boyfriend got jealous, for literally no reason at all, and I was asked to vacate the premises. Since he was paying half the rent, I really had no choice but to go.

Adam managed to find another friend of his, a guy named Benjie, who was willing to let me crash on his couch, but the guy's fat cat was determined to sleep on my chest all night. I guess the couch was his, and he resented me taking it. I couldn't blame the little guy, though, and he was really cute.

I squirmed in my seat, trying to get more comfortable, and Jeffries noticed, like he seemed to notice everything I did.

“Do you have to go to the bathroom, or do you have ants in your pants?”

I glared at him. Ants in my pants? How old did this guy think I was anyway? That was like something my Pop would have said to me years ago. The thought of my Pop brought me a little pain like it always did, right in the center of my chest even after all this time.

“I need to use the bathroom, yeah. If that’s what you’re asking.”

“Then go. Leave your shoes here and leave the door open.”

“What do my shoes have to do with anything?”

“It’s cold out, and I don’t want you to get the idea of making another break for it. You won’t do that with no shoes.”

I stood up, rolling my eyes so hard I almost did myself an injury. I pulled off my shoes and threw them down at the floor one by one. He looked on serenely. I guess he thought he was being clever and that not having shoes would help to keep me from running again. But he was wrong.

“Jacket, too,” the asshole said.

“My jacket? What do you mean?”

“That denim thing you’re wearing over your t-shirt.”

I rolled my eyes again and added a glare. “If I wanted to run, then that wouldn’t stop me.”

“Yeah, whatever. Just leave the jacket.”

“I hate you. I want you to know that.”

“I’ll try to bear up under the strain.”

I ripped my jacket off as dramatically as possible, hurled it at the floor and stomped toward the bathroom barefooted as he gave a loud sigh.

When I got inside, I thought about closing the door anyway, just to see what he’d do, but I knew what he’d do, so I just used the toilet and came back out to stand in the doorway and glare at him.

He was a really handsome guy, and big too. Probably like over six feet something and maybe close to two-thirty or so, but all muscle and not an ounce of fat on him. He had short, dirty-blond hair, and his eyes were intensely blue. He looked like a member of the Aryan brotherhood, and I already knew that he was almost as violent and mean as they were from the way he’d been manhandling me.

Okay, he didn’t really look like that, and I may have exaggerated about the violence...but my point was that he looked like he could be. Kind of. I remembered the way he’d held me when we danced to that jukebox in the bar, and how he’d twirled me around like I was a doll. People shouldn’t be that strong. He’d even picked me up and danced around with me when I couldn’t do that two-step thing. I’d felt like a doll or a kid in his arms, and I didn’t like to think about how that made me feel. But it wasn’t bad. Not at all.

He even had a lot of tattoos on one arm, like I supposed Aryans might have. No swastikas, or anything, though. Actually, I didn’t know fuck all about the Aryan brotherhood, but I just didn’t like this guy and that was the worst thing I could think of. His tattoos were cool though, and I held that against him too.

I had already looked closely for any tattoos that might have been done in prison, but I

hadn't seen any. That I knew of, anyway. He had a kind of cool flag tattoo on his shoulder and a spider web around his elbow that looked a little sus, though.

"What did you say your first name was?" I asked him, standing back in the doorway, looking at him.

"Riordan. My friends call me Rio."

"Well, I won't, because we're not friends and we never will be."

"Aw...well, you never know. Friends come and go, just like waves on the ocean... Maybe you'll stick around. Kind of like an octopus stuck to my face."

I smirked. "Oh, he has jokes..."

He smiled at me, and a few of my brain cells fainted. God, he really was sinfully handsome. I was pretty sure I hated him, though. Almost positive.

"Anyway, when do we leave for Atlanta?" I asked. "Are we going in your car?"

"We'll leave in the morning. It's too late tonight." He glanced over at me. "Go get a shower and get ready for bed. You look tired."

"Gee thanks. But I don't have any clothes or anything to 'get ready' with, remember?" I glanced over at the only bed in the room. "And just where am I supposed to sleep anyway?"

"In the bed is the usual place."

"With you?" I snorted, "Ha! Not hardly."

“You’ll do as you’re told, Kitt. You offered me a blow job earlier. So, sleeping with me should be a breeze. Besides, it’s a king-sized bed, for God’s sake, and it’s huge.”

“Yeah, well, so are you.”

“Put pillows between us if you’re worried.”

“No, I want my own room.”

“You’re not getting it. In fact, I don’t think you’re really understanding any of this, are you? You’ll be with me until we land in Atlanta and make it to your brother’s house. Then I can officially deliver you into his custody, and we can both breathe a huge sigh of relief and go our own separate ways. In the meantime, suck it up.”

I gave him the meanest look I could muster. “Did you say, ‘land in Atlanta?’ As in you think we’re going to fly there? Oh, hell no, I don’t fly. My brother must have told you.”

“What do you mean, you don’t fly? What are you—Rainman or something?”

I sneered at him. “I know that’s an old movie you’re referencing, but I don’t get it. Didn’t he count cards or something? Did he hate to fly too? How old are you anyway?”

“Never mind. But you’re getting on that fucking plane.”

“Read my lips. I. Do. Not. Fly. Period!”

“Bullshit. You do now.”

“It’s not bullshit. I have a phobia against flying that I’ve had for years. Ever

since...well, never mind, but I have one. My brother should have told you. And I'm not getting on an airplane."

"Stop being a pain in the ass. I'm not driving God knows how many hours back to Atlanta, so you need to just get over yourself."

I glared at him, trying to have a stare-down contest with him, but he wasn't playing. He rolled his eyes and turned away, so I changed the subject. For now, anyway.

"What about my things? My bag? I left it all at the last place I crashed. I can go over there and pick it up real quick, though. No problem. Won't take me but a few minutes."

"Uh huh. Nice try. But no."

"Well, what am I supposed to do about my bag?"

He sighed. "I guess we'll have to go get it, if it's that important. You say it's only a few minutes away?"

"Um... That might have been a slight exaggeration."

"How slight?"

"I don't know. It's maybe twenty or thirty minutes, okay? By bus. I rode a bus downtown tonight so it's hard to say with all the stops."

"Do you have an address?"

"Yeah, sure."

He held his hand out to me impatiently, like some mean teacher asking for my phone like they used to do when they caught me with it in high school. I dug the slip of paper out of my wallet and handed it over to him, and he nodded.

“Okay, I have a rental car downstairs. Do you have a key to this place in case your friend isn’t at home?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You keep saying that, but are you sure?”

I pulled out the key and showed it to him. “Happy now?”

“Just put on your shoes and coat, Kitt, and lead the way. It’s getting late.”

We went down the same elevator as before, and I had to stifle a smile at the memory of those elevator doors closing in his face. Almost immediately though, I could feel my cheeks start burning with humiliation when I also remembered how he’d hauled me right back up in that same elevator, his hand over my mouth to stop me from yelling. He’d spanked my ass too and told those nice old ladies that I was mentally challenged, come to think of it. He’d tapped his forehead like I had some kind of condition, and he said I had sneaked out of my parents’ room. What an asshole.

He stood calmly beside me on the way back down and took my elbow again as the doors opened to the lobby. It wasn’t too late, so people were still buzzing around downstairs, and I felt like all of them were looking at us and the way he was hanging onto me so tight.

Nobody was, of course, but it was still embarrassing to be treated like a criminal in the custody of my jailer.

We went out to find car he'd parked on the street near the bar. It was cold as hell out now, and I was shivering in my denim jacket, but it was all I had brought with me. I hadn't realized it got cold in Albuquerque in December. Within a few minutes, he found the rental—a big, black SUV—and we were on our way, following the onboard GPS. He turned the heat up full blast, and I held my hands out to get them warm. The place I'd been crashing was a little farther out than I'd remembered, but we found it way too soon, and I went up to pack my bag—with him right behind me every step of the way, of course.

Adam's friend Benjie wasn't home, and since I'd only been there for a little over a day and a night, it was easy enough to pack everything up. I did that, while he stood and watched me from the doorway, letting the traitorous, fat cat rub all over his pants legs and not even shooing it away like I thought he would. He actually bent over to pet it.

Then he grabbed my bag and held onto it while I wrote Adam's friend a quick note and left him the key.

He took my arm again, like I was going to make a run for it if he didn't—which I might have at that—and we went back down to his car. Instead of going directly back to town, he stopped at a motel not far from where I'd been staying. He pulled up outside a room and came around to my side of the car, pulling open the door.

“Get out,” he said. “I have to go get my stuff too.”

“Your stuff? You've been staying here? Have you been watching me?”

“What do you think?”

I huffed at his rudeness and got out to follow him inside. It was neat and almost spartan inside, and not the way a motel room I stayed in ever looked. He packed

quickly and we were on our way outside again.

“I could have stayed in the car,” I griped as we got in.

“Sure, you could,” he said, sarcasm dripping off the words. “And you’d have waited for me right here, huh?”

“Of course.”

Naturally I was lying, but I really did have to do something soon. I was running out of time—fast—and if he got me back up to that other hotel room, I was done for. I had to do something. I thought about it all the way back to the downtown hotel and got my chance when we pulled up to the front to valet park.

The valet came out and I noticed that Rio left the keys in the ignition while he talked to him. The valet gave him a ticket and Rio began to come around to my side of the vehicle, leaving his door open. I got out on my side before he ever reached me, but when he came up beside me to take my arm, I dropped to the ground, unable to think of anything else to do on the spur of the moment. The sudden move took Rio by surprise, and he reached for me. At the same time, I slammed my fist at his knee, and he overbalanced and came crashing down on top of me, throwing out his free hand and flattening me. He had been unable to catch himself before landing on top of me. And did I mention he was a big guy? I managed to roll slightly to the side as he fell, or otherwise he’d have knocked the breath clean out of me, and as it was, I was gasping. It was when he was trying to get back off me, and I was moaning and rolling around and pretending to be much worse off than I really was, that he somehow managed to connect his elbow solidly to my jaw.

I saw stars, just like in the cartoons.

“Damn it!” Rio yelled, lying on top of me, almost nose-to-nose. “Are you all right?”

I'm sorry—I didn't mean to hit you.”

The blow to my jaw had rocked my head back, and to add insult to injury and all that, the rebound made me hit the back of my head on the pavement. For a couple of seconds there, I was reeling.

He got to his knees beside me and was peering down with a look of alarm on his face. As for me, I played dead, even letting my eyes roll up a little as if I were unconscious.

“Kitt, are you okay? Can you hear me?” His voice sounded panicky, almost like he really gave a shit.

Good, let him worry. I waited until he bent close to my face to check my breathing before making my move, slamming my forehead into his nose as hard as I could again, like I'd seen people do on those cop shows on TV. I had no idea how much that shit would hurt though. It was the second time that night, and I thought I might have broken his nose this time.

I almost couldn't believe it when it actually worked. Taken off guard, he yelled out, clapped a hand over his nose and fell backward, blood spurting through his fingers. Though my forehead was throbbing, I managed to stumble to my feet and hobble around the car. I jumped inside, locking the door with only seconds to spare, right in front of the gaping valet parking guy, who'd been standing by, watching the show.

Rio, meanwhile, was right behind me all the way, yelling and calling me names and banging on the door, slinging drops of blood all over the side of the SUV. I had to admit I was kind of horrified, but I started the engine, threw the car in reverse and backed out of there. Rio was halfway hanging onto the door, and when I realized it, I panicked and slammed on the brakes. That knocked him off, and he went flying off and rolling across the pavement. Really scared now, I waited to make sure he wasn't

dead and then when I saw him stumble back up to his feet, I threw the car in gear and took off, peeling out of the parking lot and making the tires squeal.

As I raced out onto the street, I saw him shaking his fist at me in the rear-view mirror and yelling something I couldn't hear over the tires squealing. I thought that was probably a good thing. My head ached, and tears streamed out of my eyes because it was all a little overwhelming, and I really hoped I hadn't hurt him. I had never done anything like that in my life before, and I knew it was outrageous and over the top. Maybe I'd really gone too far this time. I knew he was going to be furious, and if he ever caught up with me, he might really kill me, like he was shouting he would when he was holding onto the door handle of the car.

I raced the SUV down the street, dodging traffic and glancing into the rear-view mirror, halfway expecting to see Rio catching up to me, blood still streaming down his face, like in a horror movie. I was headed for the interstate, though I had no clear idea of where the hell that was. This was my first time to actually drive in the city. This was a big SUV and had more power than anything I'd ever driven before, too, so I slowed down and tried my best to calm myself and stop speeding. The last thing I needed was to get pulled over by the cops. There was no way I could explain this car being in Rio Jeffries name. Plus, I thought the Atlanta PD might have put out some kind of lookout on me by now. Come to think of it, Riordan Jeffries would probably call and report this to the New Mexico police too. I was a wanted man in two states!

I'd really screwed up in Atlanta, and I still wasn't sure how I was going to get out of this mess. Or even if I could.

The whole thing had started with a friend of mine I knew from my college days, Jeremy Kline. I saw him around town often at some of the clubs I liked. I'd go to the clubs most weekends to dance and have a few drinks. Jeremy was gay, like me, so we had a lot in common, though there was never any attraction in that way, as we both considered ourselves to be dedicated and enthusiastic bottoms. If anything, we

competed in a way for some of the same guys. Like I said, I'd known him a while, and he was fun to hang out with.

Jeremy's cousin, Cherry, worked at a local nightclub downtown called the Golden Pony, and she was one of the exotic dancers there. It was located in Five Points, in downtown Atlanta, not too far from Underground. They called it Five Points because that was where five streets met—Marietta Street, Edgewood Avenue, Decatur Street, and two legs of Peachtree Street. It was also where the MARTA Five Points Station was located, which was the largest and busiest station on the whole MARTA train system.

So needless to say, there was always a lot going on down there. When I saw Jeremy at the club that fateful Friday night, he was worried because she'd called him sounding a bit nervous and scared, and asked him to come and pick her up at the club. She said something about there was going a big fight brewing in the club, but she didn't want to give any specific details. She just told him to come around to the side and she'd come out. She asked him to hurry.

Which he totally would have, I'm sure, if not for the fact that he was wearing his new club clothes and looked totally fabulous in them. Plus, the man he'd been after for weeks had just agreed to go home with him that very night. Well, what was he to do?

He was definitely in a quandary. He didn't want to leave his cousin Cherry stranded—but some things were just thicker than blood. Things like the fact that he'd put a lot of work into this man, and it had finally all come to fruition. Now Jeremy's ass had seen more action than the front seat of an Enterprise rental car, but he was sure this man was “the one.” That's what he told me anyway as he begged me to help him out and asked me to go pick his cousin up. He made lavish promises about how he'd repay me if I just did him this one favor, this one time, and I finally told him I'd go pick her up.

He gushed all over me and texted the girl, telling her I was on the way and told her what kind of car I drove, so she'd know what to look for. I pulled to the back of the Golden Pony about thirty minutes later, but there was no sign of Cherry or anybody else standing outside and no place to park except in the street, and that just wasn't much of an option. I decided to go around the block again, and this time I got stopped by a long redlight.

I was sitting in my car waiting for the light to change, when I heard loud rap music playing beside me as a car pulled up next to me at the light. I glanced over, as you do, and saw a car full of young guys, just vibing to the music and waiting for the light to change. Just then, another car pulled up on its other side. I was in the far-right lane, the guys with the music were in the middle, and the newcomers were in the far left. I reached in my pocket for a cigarette and lit it up. Just as I leaned over to get the lighter out of the dash, all hell broke loose. Two guys literally jumped out of the car next to me and were met by two from the car on the far-left. They began slugging each other, yelling and cursing with furious faces, waving their hands in the air, obviously embroiled in a heated fight. It seemed to have spilled out of the cars and onto the street. They weren't more than a few feet away from where I sat, but nobody even so much as glanced my way, so I didn't think they noticed I was even there. As it was, I had a ring side seat for whatever was about to happen, and it didn't take long to go down.

Suddenly shots rang out right next to me. In fact, bullets started flying everywhere and people were screaming.

I dived down to the floorboard and stayed there as the shots continued to zing through the air. It seemed to go on for a long time and when it finally stopped, I peeked my head up to take a look.

The light changed then, at about the same time as the ones in the car farthest away from me, noticed me watching them. They started yelling at me and coming toward

me. I didn't know what to do, but I did the only thing I could think of. I started flashing my headlights on and off at oncoming traffic and leaned down on the horn.

I just wanted it to stop, and it stopped all right—as they all came running at me. I totally panicked. I threw the car in Drive and got the hell out of there. By the time I managed to pull out onto the next street, they were already banging on the trunk and the top of my car.

I drove as fast as I could to the nearest gas station outside the downtown area, where I pulled in and sat under the lights with my doors locked to call 911. I told them I had just seen some guys get shot on the street near the Golden Pony and to send everybody as fast as they could. Then I hung up and drove the hell home. I figured Cherry must have made her own way home, or she could take a fucking Uber, because no way was I going back.

Of course, that wasn't the end of it. Emergency Services had my number, and the CCTV cameras gave them everything else they must have needed. I got a call from the detectives the next day, and they brought me in for questioning. It turned out that the murdered guy and a few of his friends were well known to the cops. So was the guy they suspected of killing him from the other car. They had shown me mug shots of him and his known associates, and I was able to pick out the killer right away. The detective told me the men were both drug dealers and all-around bad guys you just didn't want to mess with. By the time the cops had arrived, the other guys were gone, and no one claimed to have seen a thing. I was their only witness. Even the film from the cameras that had identified me just fine had now been “conveniently” misplaced.

I told them I would testify, but that wasn't good enough for them. They said the murderer was very “connected,” and would be coming after me to shut me up, because without my testimony, he would walk. They kept at me for hours, but I just kept telling them I intended to testify, but I was not going into protective custody. No way. Forget it. With the court system the way it was, the trial might be delayed for

weeks or even months while the guy appealed and stalled. And all that time, I had to put my life on hold? No fucking way.

They wouldn't let it go though, and came to my house to talk to my brother about it. He told them he was my legal guardian, and when they found out why, they talked him into involuntary protective custody as the way to go—on account of me being “mentally incompetent.”

I was raging on the inside when they told me that, though I acted meek and tame on the outside. I asked if I could get a few things, and they'd let me go upstairs. Big mistake on their part, because I ducked down the back stairs and made a run for it, winding up a few blocks away. I went to an ATM and drew out all the money I could and decided to take a bus to go visit my friend, who lived in Albuquerque.

I knew the cops would be after me, but I never would have dreamed Jazz would privately hire someone to track me down too. I was in worse trouble than I'd been in to start with, and I literally had no idea how I was ever getting out of this mess.

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Rio

It was as I limped back to the elevator to go upstairs that I began considering my life choices and how our firm had come to take this job in the first place. It all started when Kitt's father, shortly before his death from cancer, asked a judge to make his brother Jazz his younger brother's guardian. It was an unusual move for a person Kitt's age, and I'd never heard of it being done before. But I guess if you were rich enough, anything was possible.

State laws varied with regard to the rights of a guardian over their ward, but as a general rule, it was an extreme and restrictive option that required petitioning the court to declare that an individual like Kitt lacked sufficient "capacity" to make their own decisions. Why would the father take such an extreme action? And how did he get a reputable doctor to sign off on it? Again, it was all about money. The very wealthy old man, a member of the Georgia legislature, had judges in his pocket, not to mention unscrupulous doctors who were willing to sign off on whatever he wanted them to.

Jazz said their father had done it for Kitt's own good. That he had found Kitt to be what he'd called "unmanageable" and obviously incompetent to make decisions in his own best interests. It was still a dick move, it seemed to me, but maybe the old man had really thought he was protecting Kitt. Jazz told me, however, that his father also had other reasons, one of which was that he found out Kitt was not only gay, but, as Jazz put it, "he had bizarre kinks" that Jazz didn't want to share with me. He said it wasn't relevant, and he'd rather not discuss it.

It was okay with me—for now. Knowing his secrets wasn't necessarily a deal breaker

if they weren't illegal or had nothing to do with the job at hand. But if it became relevant, the brother was going to have to tell me what was going on. I'd met a lot of crazy people in my line of work, and Kitt seemed fine to me. Maybe a little immature, but he was still young.

I found out a few things about what had made the old man so upset. Apparently, Kitt had used a fake ID and gone with friends to a gay BDSM club and then got caught doing whatever it was by the detective hired to follow him. Apparently, it was so kinky that it was the last straw for his ultra-conservative father. The old man had written Kitt out of his will, cut him off without a penny and had him declared incompetent. It was a wonder to me that he hadn't locked him in the attic.

Jazz himself had to get involved to keep his father from trying to have Kitt committed to a private sanitarium. He'd promised his father he'd watch over Kitt and not let him "ruin the family name." That had been the story we were given, anyway.

Things had only gone from bad to worse since the old man's death, though. Jazz said he still wanted to do right by his brother and help support him, but Kitt was fighting him every step of the way. Jazz had kept the guardianship intact, mainly as a means of keeping tabs on Kitt, but that only added to Kitt's deep resentment. He said that Kitt had threatened to hire lawyers to help him break the old man's will. Jazz said he wasn't really worried about it, because it was iron-clad, but he did worry about Kitt's well-being. And so far, he'd given me no reason to doubt that he meant what he said.

Jazz told us he'd been worried sick about him since he ran away and had hired our agency to track him down. He said he wanted me to get his brother back home, "by any means necessary."

"I'm getting married at Christmas," Jazz told me. "My fiancé and I are having a huge wedding, with a reception afterward at the Dunwoody Country Club, and I'd like this all to be finished and cleared up by then, with Kitt safely in custody. My fiancé's

parents are very socially conscious, so there can't be any hint of a scandal involving my family."

Jazz also told me that he knew that his brother had an old roommate who lived now in Albuquerque and thought he might have gone there, which gave me a good place to start looking. It only took me a week to find him, and if I could do it in a week, even considering I had the advantage of the tip from his brother, it probably wouldn't take anybody else too long either.

What Kitt didn't know was that when he'd handed me his bag in that friend of a friend's apartment, I had slipped a tracking device inside it, and he'd never even noticed. I'd figured it would be good idea to keep track of him when we got into the busy places, like the airport, never dreaming he was already planning an escape.

Since I wasn't in a big hurry, I rented another vehicle once I got back to the hotel and had it delivered. I figured he'd probably drive all night to put as much distance as he could between us, but he'd have to stop and rest sometime. I wondered how much money he had left and decided it probably wasn't all that much, from the glimpse I'd had inside his wallet.

I wasn't feeling too tired, so I decided to just start driving after him. The radio was playing Christmas songs, which got a little old after a while, so I turned it off. By that time, it was well after midnight. I stopped by a QuikTrip for a cup of strong coffee and a sandwich then headed west on I-40, following his trail. Kitt was headed slightly northwest, according to the tracking device, so I planned on seeing how far I felt like driving before stopping at a motel. I was willing to admit that I couldn't wait to get my hands on Kitt again, but I wanted to be at my best when I did. I was still angry. Since when had I been so damn careless? I should have had him cuffed the entire time I had him, instead of being distracted by his pretty face.

He'd played me for a fool, but I was worried, because he could really be in danger.

Though I hated to admit it, there was a little vein of hurt running through all that anger and worry. But there was a lot of anger too. I admitted to myself that I was feeling like I had something to prove.

In the words of some old actor in a late-night movie I saw once, “I got this badge, I got this gun, and I got the love of Jesus right here in my pretty green eyes.” Mine were blue, but close enough. As far as I was concerned, Kitt was a “felon” and a “fugitive” for sure now, because he had run away from me illegally after I’d clearly identified myself, and he had then assaulted me when I came to lawfully retrieve him.

I managed to make it into Arizona before I got almost too tired to keep going. I found an I-Hop and had breakfast, with eggs, bacon, grits, hash browns, biscuits, and lots of orange juice and coffee, even though it was midafternoon. Feeling energized again, I got back on the road, wondering where the hell he thought he was going. He had finally pulled off the road not too far from Flagstaff.

I followed his signal and was glad to see the car he’d stolen from me hadn’t moved in a while. He’d been on the road a long time, and he must have needed to rest. It had been over twenty-four hours by this time since he skipped out on me in Albuquerque and since he’d presumably not slept, other than perhaps getting a quick nap in a rest area, he should be exhausted by now.

I used the tracking device to direct me to a motel that was close to I-40, inexpensive, large and impersonal. With few cars in the parking lot so early in the day, it didn’t take long to find my SUV that he’d stolen. I pulled into a space next to it and sat there a moment trying to figure out what I should do next. A quick look inside the car showed the bag was with him in a room somewhere. I decided to drive back to the front and just ask which room he was in at the front desk.

The obligatory Christmas tree sat in a corner of the small lobby, as Christmas music played softly in the background. The young girl working behind the counter widened

her eyes at the sight of my deliberately flirtatious smile.

“Hello, miss, I wonder if you can help me out?” The girl, who had soft brown hair, a Christmas sweater and a big smile leaned toward me, nodding. Her expression indicated she would be glad to help me out with pretty much anything I wanted.

“My younger brother checked in about an hour ago. His name is Kitt Devlin. I’ve arrived a little early and wanted to surprise him. Can you tell me his room number?”

“Oh, I remember him,” she said, seemingly happy to be accommodating. Like I thought he would, the little dumbass had used his real name. “The cute boy with the dark hair?”

I winked at her. “That would be him. Oh, and can I get a key to the room now too, if it’s not too much trouble?”

The girl looked uncertain. “Well, we’re really not supposed to do that without calling the room first.”

I flashed a smile again. “I understand. It’s just that I really wanted to surprise him, but I don’t want to get you in any trouble. I’m actually a police officer myself, so I certainly know what it is to have rules and regulations to follow.”

Her expression brightened. “You’re a police officer?” She looked me over appreciatively. “Well, I guess since you’re his big brother and all, it actually wouldn’t hurt anything, just this one time.” She reached under the desk and pulled out a slim piece of plastic, punched some numbers into the computer and then swiped the card before handing it to me. “Here you go, sir. He’s in room 323, all the way around the back. You can just park anywhere back there. There aren’t any other guests on that hallway at the moment.”

Convenient if he tried to run, though that would give me a great reason to beat his little ass again. I took the card and slipped it into my pocket. “Thanks so much. I’ll be sure to tell the manager how helpful you’ve been.”

A blush stained her cheeks, and for a moment I felt a little guilty. I consoled myself with the knowledge that I really was working on behalf of the police and the court, and Kitt was in contempt. She was on the right side of the law here.

With a little wave, I went back outside and drove around to the back of the hotel.

It was getting to be late afternoon by then, and I ducked my head when I got out of the car, on the off chance Kitt might be looking out the window. I crossed over to where my rental was parked. I squatted down by the front tire and slipped a GPS tracking device under the front wheel, just in case Kitt somehow managed to give me the slip again but didn’t take his bag. I firmly believed in backup.

I used the key to get in the side door and took the elevator to the third floor. After locating Room 323, I listened outside for a moment. I could hear a TV inside, but no other light showed beneath the door. Tensing my muscles a bit, I slipped the key in the lock and let myself in.

The first thing I heard was Kitt’s soft snores coming from the bed. The room was dark, with the curtains pulled shut and a TV flickering on the wall. Kitt was in the middle of a king size bed, almost lost in a mound of pillows, a sheet pulled up across his waist. I walked quietly over to the bed and stood looking down at him. Even now, exhausted, his face lined with weariness, he was still beautiful. His dark hair fell across his brow, and his lips were parted ever so slightly, his breath puffing slowly in and out, his hands lying on top of his chest.

I sat down beside him on the side of the bed. His wrists were still decorated with bracelets. I took one of them and pulled him over toward me. I was barely even

surprised to see that he was naked.

“Wakey, wakey,” I said, leaning over to murmur in his ear.

He moaned and rubbed his eyes before blinking them open. I saw the exact moment my presence and more importantly, his situation, registered on him as his eyes shot open and he tried to get up or roll away. I tightened my grip.

“Oh no, you don’t. You’re coming with me. You’ve got yourself in trouble, little boy, and you’ve earned yourself a spanking.”

“No!” he shouted and tried again to raise himself up. I popped his bare ass, and he yelped.

“Stop, please!”

“What did I tell you back in Albuquerque about being a good boy?”

“Let me up!”

“No until I’ve spanked that ass.”

I pulled him over my lap and gave him five hard spanks to redden those plump cheeks.

“Are you going to be a good boy now and mind me? Or do I have to keep doing this?”

“No! Stop it please! I-I’ll be good. I promise!”

“I seem to remember promises being made before.”

“I mean it this time! I swear! Please!”

I pulled him up to sit on my lap. He put his hands down over his dick. I guess it was so I couldn't see it, and I shook my head at him. “I'm not going to molest you, damn it. You cost me time and money.”

“I-I'm sorry.”

“Not yet, but you're going to be.” I put him back over on the bed. “Now cover yourself.”

He pulled the sheet over his lap and stared up at me with big, tear-stained eyes.

“W-what are you doing here? How did you find me?” he said, staring into my eyes with panic as I glared down at him. “Please, please let me go!”

“Sorry, but I can't do that. Looks like you're well and truly caught, Kitten.”

“No, please! I-I'll do anything!” He reached for my groin, but I pushed his hand away.

In one of the passionate speeches I was already getting used to from him, he suddenly pulled me back down over him by my shirt front and gave me a long, soulful kiss. “Nooo, let me make it up to you, please. Please make love to me. I want you to. Please,” he said, in between kisses.

Anger flew over me at the idea that he was offering himself to me like that. Had he done something like this before? I was surprised at how furious the idea made me. I slapped his hands away and stood up, seriously thinking of putting him across my lap again. I forced the feeling down and pulled on his arm. “Get out of bed so you can get dressed.”

His face flushed bright red. “But don’t you want to make love to me? Doesn’t that interest you? Why don’t you want me?” His pretty eyes shone up at me, full of hope and hurt and willing to make himself a part of the deal.

My gaze roamed up and down Kitt’s gorgeous little body, as he pushed down the sheet to show it to me, and I had a surge of angry resentment. Angry because he wasn’t mine—so I really shouldn’t spank his little ass again for valuing himself so lightly, no matter how badly I wanted to. Yet the idea of him belonging to anyone other than me was like a giant fist clenching my guts. And where the hell had that suddenly come from?

I picked up the sheet and threw it back over him.

“I said to cover yourself. And what makes you think I would want anything like that anyway?” I said, knowing it was mean, but just needing to make him stop. Kitt’s eyes changed at the harsh words though, putting out that hopeful spark that had been shining up at me and changing to a look of hurt. Those sultry, dark eyelashes came down over his eyes, and he got a sweet little pout I knew he wasn’t even aware of. The flash of pain I saw before he carefully hooded his eyes made me feel even worse, and I wanted to tell him I was sorry, and I didn’t mean a word of it. I knew I’d probably hurt his feelings, but he was too in control of his emotions to show it—not a lot anyway. And where had he learned to do that?

“Get up and get dressed, Kitten.”

A little sob escaped his throat, and despite how angry I was at him, it almost killed me to hear it. He was such a child. Then he suddenly threw his arms around my neck again, giving it one last shot, and his rigid cock pressed into my stomach. Maybe he wasn’t such a child after all.

He was so luscious, and his kisses tasted so sweet. He sighed into the kiss, and his

hands roamed over my lower back and dropped down to caress my hips. He looked up and gave me that sweet, tremulous smile, the one that didn't quite touch the despair in his eyes.

"I'm begging you. I'm so tired and I know you must be too. We both drove all night. Just lie down here beside me for a little while and hold me. You don't have to do anything else. Then we can get up and go. I know you must be so tired. I am too—and if you lie here with me for just a little while and rest, then when we get up, we can leave. I won't cause you any more trouble, I promise! Cross my heart and hope to die!"

It was such a childish comment to make. But it still got to me. And he was right about one thing—I was exhausted and needed to rest. This room was paid for, and he was so sleepy and soft and smelled so good...he was hard to resist.

Kitt sighed as he saw my hesitation and immediately snuggled even closer against me. I didn't want to move away from him. He pulled me down beside him, and I allowed it, letting myself relax for just a few minutes. Maybe I could take a little nap and just enjoy the feeling of still being close to this beautiful body of his.

Kitt and I didn't say anything to each other, just lay there exhausted, our breath mingling. He put his face right onto my chest with his hand around my neck and soon I heard him breathing deeply. Damn it. I closed my eyes too, thinking a little nap might not be so bad—just a small one so I could get a second wind.

I must have slept hard, if just for a little while, and I only woke up when I felt his body sliding away from me. I opened my eyes and raised up on my elbow to ask him where he thought he was going and saw him standing over me holding the bedside landline telephone over his head. Sex and sleep had made me sluggish and stupid. Before I could move out of the way, he brought the phone crashing down on my head.

I didn't wake up until he was already gone. He'd left the door standing wide open and took not only his own clothes, but mine too, including my goddamn wallet with all my money, though he left my credit cards thrown down on the floor. I had more clothing in my suitcase, of course, so I stumbled to the bathroom, washed the blood off my face, and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

I was angry, numb, furious, and in pain, and I wanted to get my hands on him badly. I was maybe mostly pissed off at myself for letting him play me that way. He'd made a complete fool of me. No, I'd made a fool of own damn self. I looked at myself in the mirror and vowed not to show him any mercy at all when I found him. And I would find him.

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It was 255 miles from Flagstaff to Las Vegas. I found that out in Flagstaff when I stopped there for gas and to speculate about where Kitt might be heading. The tracking devices in his bag and on his tire were still working like a charm, and he was headed in the direction of Vegas. The GPS was still working in his bag and on the SUV, so the little dumbass had made no headway apparently in figuring out how I had found him in Arizona. He had to be close to running out of money by this time, so I figured he was heading for some other contact or friend who lived in Vegas, hoping to be able to crash with them for a while.

The drive wasn't all that long, so I managed to wait until he'd stopped again before I stopped to rest too. It was past midnight, by then, so I got a room at a hotel on the interstate, fell into bed, and slept hard till morning. Those little hotel "complimentary breakfasts" were never enough for me, so I found a Denny's close by and had a good breakfast, with eggs, bacon, grits, hash browns, biscuits, and lots of orange juice and coffee. Feeling energized again, I got back on the road, heading toward his location. The devices showed he hadn't moved in the last ten hours, so maybe he'd finally landed somewhere.

I got out my laptop and spent some time looking through the information his brother Jazz had given me and I found a name. Jazz had mentioned another name as a high probability of someone Kitt might run to if he'd already left Albuquerque. It was his best friend from high school, a boy named Jack Winslow, and that just happened to be the same boy he'd been caught with at the BDSM club in Atlanta. The incident that had sent his father over the edge. The young man had moved shortly after that, too, all the way to Las Vegas. His parents had kicked him out after what happened, and Las Vegas was where Winslow had wound up.

I remember thinking it was odd that he had no employment and was living with some guy there, who was quite a bit older. Could it be a Dom? I decided I needed to find out just exactly what the investigator Kitt's father hired had found in that BDSM club when he'd gone looking.

I made it to Vegas by early that afternoon and rode by Kitt's location. It was a set of modest apartments nowhere near the strip, but closer to the UNLV. The rental car was parked in the lot, so I pulled into a parking place out front to stake it out. After a few hours, a red Jeep Wrangler pulled up outside and two people got out—a young guy around Kitt's age and an older man, who was probably in his forties. They were holding hands as they went up to an apartment and let themselves in with a key. I sat there for another three hours, but no one came in or out. It was fairly late by then, so I went to find a hotel room to crash for the night.

I found one not too far away and checked in. The next morning, after a hot shower and a good night's sleep, I was back outside the apartment. It was the next day after that, though, before I got my first glimpse of Kitt. All three of them—Kitt, his friend and the forty-something guy—came out of the apartment around eight in the evening and got in the Jeep. Kitt was wearing skintight jeans and a leather vest, with that same denim jacket over it. I followed them to a club called The Red Door and waited until they all went inside.

I followed them in, paid the fee and began to look around. It was a typical club, like I'd been in before—dim lighting, the smell of sex and sweat everywhere and people walking around wearing nothing or next to nothing. This was Vegas after all.

But though I looked in the main room, spent some time in the dungeon room and even went by some of the smaller, specialty rooms, there was no sign of any of them anywhere. I was beginning to wonder if they'd seen me and had ducked out another entrance, when I saw some activity outside a door tucked behind the bar and down a long corridor. It wasn't too close to the bar—in fact, it was almost in its own separate

area, but I saw people coming and going from it a lot. None of them were dressed in fetish wear, which struck me as a bit odd. I headed toward the door, but I was stopped by one of the club employees. At least I thought he was an employee. He was wearing a shirt with the club name and logo.

“Good evening, Sir. Can I help you?”

“I’d like to go inside and look around.”

“I see, Sir. You are aware that this is the Littles Room, aren’t you? Most of them are accompanied, and you’re welcome to observe, but you shouldn’t approach any of them.”

I think I raised my eyebrows—thankfully, it was pretty low lighting, and I don’t think the bouncer noticed my slight flinch. A Littles Room—that could very well be why Kitt’s father had freaked out when he got the report from his detective. It wasn’t much of a stretch to see Kitt as a Little either. He was a brat, for sure. And a submissive—it wasn’t that much of a stretch.

“Yes, I know,” I replied. “I’m here to observe. I won’t approach any of them. I imagine their uh...Daddies wouldn’t like that too much.”

“No, not at all.” He checked my ID again and finally gave me a stiff smile. “Enjoy yourself, Sir.”

I opened the door and stepped inside. There were only about fifteen or sixteen people inside the room, which had a big screen television, with a wide carpet in front of it. Some men or boys were sitting on the rug, dressed in various outfits, like footed pajamas, clutching teddy bears and sucking on pacifiers. Most were watching cartoons, but some were on the rug, playing quietly with children’s toys. At the back of the room were several sofas and big easy chairs, with men sitting there quietly

watching their boys. They were the Daddy Doms, or just Daddies.

I saw Kitt right away. He was with his friend at a small table, working with Legos. They were building something that looked like a big robot and both were chatting and smiling. Kitt was dressed in jeans and a brightly colored t-shirt. He wore his bracelets—even more of them now—and a beaded necklace close around his throat.

He saw me at about the same time I noticed him. He gave a huge gasp, jumped to his feet and looked around for a place to run. I strolled over and stood looking down at him.

“Hello Kitt. Well, look at you—here you are, without a single telephone to bash my brains out with. Poor baby. What are you going to do?” His eyes got comically round, and a tiny sprig of pity tried to struggle up out of my heart to reach the light.

I stepped on it and mashed it flat. I didn’t feel sorry for him in the least. He had brought all this on himself. I grabbed his wrist and held onto him tightly before he could try to run.

Before he could move, however, I heard somebody say, “Hey! What are you doing? Let go of him!” right behind me.

I turned and waited, holding a sullen looking Kitt by his wrist as he tried to twist away. I didn’t have long to wait. A big, beefy guy came rushing over to us and headed straight for me. A few of the other “Daddies” were right behind him. I put up a hand to slow their roll, but the guy in front didn’t look as if he were in the mood to listen. Shoving Kitt behind me, but still holding onto him, I got ready for the newcomer to join our little drama, and when the guy strode belligerently up to me, I held up the paperwork from my pocket and held it in front of his nose.

“I’m a recovery officer from the state of Georgia, where this man lives, and I’ve

come after him,” I told him, and he gave me a blank, disbelieving stare.

I pulled Kitt closer, took him by the arm, and started out the door. We didn’t make it far before the forties looking guy, along with his companion, Kitt’s friend, the one he’d been playing Legos with, came boiling across the floor at me.

“Hold up,” I told them. “I’m a bounty hunter. I have the right by law to take this man into my custody. Look at the paperwork.”

“What are the charges?”

“He’s wanted in Georgia and he assaulted me in Arizona and stole money from me. Is that good enough for you? If not, I don’t give a fuck, because I’ll be removing him to another state, and I have all the necessary paperwork right here. Call the local cops if you want. They’ll tell you the same thing. This is a signed statement from his legal guardian, who wants him returned to Georgia.”

I held up my copy of the papers from Kitt’s brother, plus my own credentials again. “If you don’t want to be charged with harboring a fugitive, you’ll get the fuck out of my way.”

The forties looking guy snatched the paper from my hand and glanced over it. When he was done, he stuck out his chin pugnaciously. “I don’t see a warrant. As far as I’m concerned, you’re trespassing.”

“I don’t need a warrant. This paper here,” I snatched it back and waved it in his face. “Says I have the right to enter this property unannounced to take him into custody. Now stop obstructing and get the fuck out of my way, or I’m coming through you.”

The man and his boy reluctantly moved aside. There was a bit of an uproar going on with the other Littles and I regretted that I’d had to upset them. It was best that we

just get the hell out of there. I moved my grip to Kitt's hand and pulled him out the door and down the hall.

"I don't understand," he said, putting his other hand over his face and starting to cry—not loud, showy tears, but soft little heartbroken sounds with tears running down his cheeks that ripped my damn heart right out of my chest.

Well, shit.

"Stop all that," I snapped. "It's not working."

The problem, of course, was that I was lying. It was working just fine.

In my line of work, I'd seen a lot of tears. Fugitives had cried all over me, fought me, kicked me, begged me, and generally made a nuisance of themselves, but I was never moved by anything they said or did. My philosophy was that if you did the crime, you could do the time. Period.

But his tears were different, and I wasn't sure why.

I got him outside to my SUV and put him in the front seat, buckling him in.

"Put your hands down and look at me."

He did as I asked and turned his tear-splotched face toward me. When some people cry, they get patchy red skin and their face twists up and their nose streams. It makes them look ugly, but not Kitt. His skin got even paler and more porcelain-like, except for two, round rosy spots on his cheeks. His thick, dark eyelashes were tear-drenched, though, which made them even darker, and his bottom lip was puffed out in a little pout, like a damn baby's. It shouldn't have bothered me a bit. I should have been able to laugh at him like I usually did with my fugitives and keep on going.

I couldn't fucking do it.

I fought it like hell for a few more seconds. Then I turned toward him. I leaned over him to unlatch his seat belt and pull him across the seat and into my lap. "Stop that crying. No one's going to hurt you."

"Y-you don't understand."

"Then explain it to me. Are you afraid of me? I'm not going to harm you, despite what you did to me. I was only trying to scare you just now, but not this bad. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Please relax."

"What? No, please listen. I can't go back to Atlanta. There are people there who will kill me."

"No, Kitten, they won't be able to get to you."

He shot me a dark glance at my use of the pet name. I didn't even know where that name came from, or why I started using it, though it just seemed appropriate to call him that. He was like a prickly little kitten, all teeth and claws one minute and cute and cuddly the next. Also, I wouldn't mind making him purr, but that was a different story.

"But what if they do!"

"You're in much greater danger here, just running around with no protection. Not to mention your friends, as well. Now we're going back to that apartment you've been staying at to get your things."

"Okay," he said, pretending to be meek.

“Do you have a key?”

“It’s under the mat.”

“Good. Now sit back over in your seat and be a good boy.”

He widened his eyes at me, and I started the SUV and began to drive back to the apartment. I had spoken to him and was treating him like he was a Little, because it seemed right, and I didn’t know what his true mindset was. We were going to have to have a long talk about it soon though.

Once back at the apartment, we went inside, and he went to a bedroom to get his bag.

“I need to change clothes.”

“Just hurry up,” I said, though what he had on seemed fine to me.

He pulled off his shoes and then pushed down his jeans along with his Spiderman underpants to come over and stand way too close, his dick brushing up against me. It seemed he was still not willing to stop trying to seduce me. I suppose he still thought he could get out of this by trading his body for sex. His body was perfection—lean and hard, and his skin was smooth and white. His cock was pretty much perfect as well, just right in size—not so big as to make another guy envious, but large and full and ready for action, flushed a dark pink.

“Can I get a shower first?”

“Maybe later. Right now, we need to make up for lost time. No funny stuff or I’ll put cuffs on you, and I’ll take you out of here just like you are.”

“Aye, Aye, sir,” the little smart ass said, saluting me with his free hand. “Anything

you say, sir.”

“Oh, you think this is a good time to be a smart ass? With that bare butt of yours so handy?”

His eyes widened and he stepped back, holding onto his ass. “No. No, I’m sorry. I’ll stop.”

“Then get dressed or I’ll put you over my knee.”

He angled a look up at me and drew his pants on slowly, giving me an eyeful of that shapely ass. “How did you find me again anyway?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

He gave me another pouty look and started searching for a shirt. He finally pulled another t-shirt from the bag, very much like the one he just took off. I wondered what this all had been about, other than another chance to seduce me. I let him put on his shirt, but not the shoes.

“What? Do you really expect me to go barefoot? But I’ll get my feet dirty.”

“You’ll be okay. And easier to catch if you decide to run again.”

He huffed at that and held out his hands by his side. “Then I guess I’m all yours.”

Not yet, but you’re going to be.

The thought had popped into my head fully formed and so loud and strong I almost said it to his face, though I managed to stifle it at the last second. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Get your bag and put your shoes and socks inside it. Then let’s go.”

“Can’t I at least go pee first?”

I sighed. “All right, go ahead. But keep the door open.”

He grabbed his bag, shot me a resentful look—which I thought showed an awful lot of nerve—and went in the bathroom, making an elaborate show of pushing back the door.

I went to stand in the doorway just to be as big an ass as he was being. I watched him do what he needed to do and pull on a Superman ballcap he got out of his bag because I “hadn’t given him enough time to fix his hair, and it looked bad.”

When he finally finished, I took a custodial grip on his arm and took him downstairs. “Give me the keys to the car you stole from me.”

He blushed and handed them over. I walked him out to my rental and put the keys under the mat and locked the door. Then I walked him over to my other SUV and put him in the front seat, buckling him in. I grabbed his wrist and cuffed him to the armrest, while he looked on resentfully, as I called the Vegas office of the car rental agency and arranged for my other SUV to be picked up. I paid the extra charge over the phone and then we were back on the road, headed east.

He held out about ten minutes before he couldn’t stand it and started yelling as he saw I was headed to the airport.

“I’m not going on an airplane, and I mean it.” He folded his arms over his chest and stuck out his chin. “I’m not!”

“You’ll do as you’re told.”

He turned to me then, with honest-to-God tears standing in his pretty eyes again. Damn him, he drew those tears on me like a knife.

“Please don’t make me. Please, please... I just can’t.”

I sighed and pulled over to the side of the road. I needed to get to the bottom of this shit, because it was damned inconvenient.

“Why are you freaking out so much?”

He turned his head to the side and put both hands over his eyes.

“No, I can’t talk about it. Please don’t make me.”

“You’re going to talk about it, Kitten, because I can’t help you if I don’t understand. Now spill it.”

He squirmed and huffed and looked everywhere but at me, but I wasn’t going to let him off the hook that easy. Once he finally realized it, his shoulder slumped, and he turned to me with a tear-stained face.

“It was my Pop. My grandfather. He used to fly his own small plane. And-and he died in a crash. I-I can’t stand the idea of being on one of them now. I just can’t.” He reached over and touched my arm with his free hand. It was even trembling, which I thought was a nice touch.

“I think I’m going to need more information. Tell me all of it.”

He looked over at me and began wringing his hands. I was beginning to realize it was one of his coping mechanisms. “It-it was when I was a kid. He was taking me to Florida for the weekend. We began to take off and—something went wrong. I don’t

know what. He tried to land again. We crashed, and I don't remember much more after that. I woke up in the hospital."

"You were in the plane with him."

"Y-yes. I don't remember much though. And I don't want to." He looked over at me and took my hand in his.

"Please, Rio. Please, please. I'll do anything you say. I'll be so good. I promise! Please don't make me get on a plane. I'll have a panic attack."

I blew out a breath. Of course, I couldn't make him now. Now that I knew he'd been in an actual plane crash with his grandfather—who had died . Damn it. I didn't even have time to check the info before our plane took off. I couldn't believe I was letting him get away with this shit.

"Damn it, you're a lot of work. Okay, then, since you're freaking out so damn much about it, we'll drive back to Atlanta. Though I'd advise you to get some help for that someday soon."

"Okay," he said again, in a meek little voice that was a total lie. He didn't have a meek bone in his body. "Yes, sir. I will. I promise. And thank you. Thank you so much."

"Whatever," I growled back at him, because I didn't believe a word of it, and I'd just agreed to probably another day or two on the road with this little psycho. "But you're a total pain in the ass, and I want that on record."

"Yes, sir. I know. Duly noted."

I shot him another look to see if he was mocking me, but he seemed sincere enough,

considering what a little fraud he was. I turned around at the next off ramp and headed back in the direction of Albuquerque, planning to hit I-40 again.

He sat back in his seat, like he was greatly relieved, and he sighed and began staring out the window. I thought I might get a little peace then, but I soon heard his stomach growling.

“Are you fucking serious?” I asked him.

He smiled sheepishly at me. “Sorry. I didn’t have dinner and Ben, that’s my friend Jack’s Daddy, said he’d buy us chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese later.” He shrugged. Rubbed his stomach and looked out the window again. “I’m so hungry.”

He glanced over at me hopefully, but I ignored him. He sighed and turned to look out the window, still rubbing his stomach, the little shit.

We needed to have a talk soon, so I could learn more about him. It struck me that his brother hadn’t told us the whole story, and he’d been less than honest about Kitt.

He seemed to be younger than his chronological age. Or he did at times, anyway. I’d heard of Littles regressing at times. Was this it? He was twenty, not quite twenty-one if you went by his birth certificate. He still acted more like a young teenager at times. Maybe even younger than that. I wondered if it was because he’d been sheltered by his family or if there was something wrong with him mentally. I didn’t think that was true—he’d been sharp enough to outwit me a couple of times—but I wasn’t totally sure. Maybe it wasn’t so strange that his father had wanted him to have a guardian after all. Emotionally, he was kind of a mess.

It didn’t fit in with his history of going to gay dance clubs or his wild spending, or the way he smoked too much and drank too much—but then again, maybe it did. It was exactly the kind of silly, reckless behavior a very young teenager might get up to

when he was unsupervised, not made to follow rules and had plenty of money at his disposal. Jazz gave him a generous allowance and he had his own credit cards.

Jazz said Kitt had some kind of strange “kink,” and he didn’t like to talk about it. And Kitt had seemed pretty much at home in that Littles room with his friend. Was Kitt a Little? More specifically, a Middle? Could that be the secret Jazz was keeping?

I’d been to more than a few BDSM clubs myself over the years, though I’d never seriously been interested in being a Dom. Not for too long anyway. I wasn’t interested in whipping, flogging or caning anyone, for one thing, whether or not they wanted it or liked it. Nothing wrong with it, but it just wasn’t my thing. I’d seen a few Daddy Doms though, and that intrigued me a bit more, especially the more dominant Daddies and their Littles.

But the ones I noticed the most were the “caretaker” type of Doms. They were called Daddies because they acted almost like caregivers to their partners. They seemed to have such an extremely close relationship with their Little, who trusted their Daddy to know what they needed and to never abuse their power over them. The Little made themselves vulnerable to their Daddy and showed a side of their personality that was sensitive and really important to them.

Was there some guy that Kitt had trusted in that way? Had Kitt been with someone like that when his father caught him? Jealousy took me by the throat. I didn’t see him as being a really young Little. Littles could act like really young children—like from two or three to around six. Middles, on the other hand, were usually interested in acting a bit older.

They weren’t typically interested at all in babyish stuff like bottles, diapers, pacifiers, onesies, and so on. Or maybe some did, but it wasn’t the norm, from what I’d seen. In my somewhat limited experience, Middles were more often like twelve or thirteen, loving clothes and video games and music and all the latest dances. Their Daddies put

them on an allowance and made strict rules for them to follow. Often, they liked things like wearing pretty clothes. Or they might like being a Swiftie and wearing the friendship bracelets, though to be fair, plenty of adults did that too. I glanced over at Kitt's wrists, and he was still wearing his red and green beaded bracelets, as in multiples—maybe ten or more of them now—the colors of Christmas, of course. I wondered if he changed them by seasons. Some of the little “beads” were tiny Santas and Elves.

And Middles always, always seemed to have a lot of attitude, from what I'd heard. They weren't unlike some bratty submissives in that regard, except they needed even more direction from their Doms. Or in this case, their Daddy. Sometimes they could even be a little hyper-sexual too, especially with someone they considered—or wanted to be—their Daddies. Kitt definitely ticked that box. I was shocked by how jealous I felt that someone else might have acted like his “Daddy.” I fucking hated the idea. I don't know why it bothered me so much. God knew that if anyone ever needed to be looked after and told what to do, it was Kitt. And I was a little surprised at how abhorrent I found the idea of anyone else doing that job. Except maybe...me.

“So anyway,” I said, clearing my throat in a bit of alarm at that idea, “You're hungry?”

“Oh, yes, I'm starving.”

There was an Interstate sign ahead that looked like it had some food options on it. “Look at the sign and see what you might like at the next exit. I need to stop for gas anyway.”

“Okay,” he said eagerly, leaning forward. “Ooh look, they have a MacDonald's. But I don't have much money.” He glanced over at me. “I suppose I have enough for French fries.”

“What else is there?”

“Um, a Hardees. A Denny’s too.”

“No great choices, but I guess we’ll go to Denny’s. You don’t need any more hamburgers and fries. I’ll get you some eggs.”

“But hamburgers and fries are so good!” he said, smiling at me. “By the way, I...uh...you may have to loan me some cash. I don’t have much money.”

“Yes, you’ve said that a few times now, so I was able to figure it out.”

He blushed. “Don’t be mean.”

I blew out a long breath. “Tell me, because I’d love to know...just how were you planning on driving any farther after you left Jack’s apartment? You had to know you couldn’t stay there forever. How far did you think you’d get without money for gas?”

“Well, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. Maybe I would have gone to a gas station and told people I was stranded and begged them for some money? I think they call that panhandling. Or maybe I could have just left the car and hitchhiked?”

“Do you have any idea how dumb an idea panhandling is? Not to mention hitchhiking.” I realized I was shouting at him and tried hard to modulate my voice. “It’s dangerous. I should spank that little ass of yours again.”

He drew in on himself like I’d frightened him with the yelling or threatening him, and immediately I felt bad.

“I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to yell, but you make me a little crazy.”

“When I was on the way here, I stopped at a truck stop and some guy tapped on my window. It scared me and I drove off.”

“Tapped on your window? Where were you parked?”

“In the lot near the trucks.”

“Well, that explains it. He probably thought you were a lot lizard.”

“A what?”

“That’s what some truckers call prostitutes at the truck stops.”

“Oh.” His cheeks bloomed rosy red. “But that wasn’t why I parked there. I just thought it might be safer with all the big trucks around.” He was quiet for a moment and then frowned, blushing again. “That’s an awful name for someone to call people.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“People can be so mean.”

I nodded because I wasn’t sure what to say. He seemed so sensitive.

“Maybe it’s just me,” he said. “Jazz says I’m really annoying.”

“No, you’re not. Exactly. Stop looking like that and put your shoes back on. Your feet are turning blue. Why didn’t you bring your socks, anyway?”

I don’t like underwear,” he said, blowing my mind again. But he did as I asked, shooting me long, hurt looks. I had to wonder if he was doing this on purpose to

make me feel bad for him. I decided he had to be.

I pulled into a gas station, got out and pumped my gas. He sat quietly in the front seat, still cuffed to the door. He was being almost too good—I didn't trust him at all.

When I got back in, I continued my interrogation. "Where the hell were you planning on going from here?"

"San Francisco."

"San Francisco? Why there? Who do you know there?" I asked, my tone a little suspicious.

He shrugged. "Nobody. I just thought it might be fun to see the Golden Gate bridge. And take the boat out to San Quentin. Oh, and ride the cable cars on all the hills."

"You seem to know an awful lot about it."

"My granddad told me. He was going to take me there one day. Before...you know."

"So, after he passed away, you decided you'd just go on your own."

He nodded happily.

"Using what for money?"

He shrugged and got a look on his face like I'd just killed his puppy again, making me feel like a bully.

"I thought I'd just cross that bridge when I came to it."

I refrained from yelling at him again, but just barely. He really did need a keeper, damn it.

“A lot of people are homeless there,” he informed me. “I read about that. I thought maybe I could have slept on the streets like they do.”

I glanced over at that remarkable load of shit and shook my head. “People are homeless, because it’s so expensive to live there. Among other reasons, anyway. Besides, do you know how cold and windy it is in San Francisco?”

“Cold? But it’s California.”

“Yes, it’s in northern California, and it’s on the coast. It can get really cold there.”

“Even in the summer?”

“Even then.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

We were pulling up to the Denny’s by that time, so I leaned across him to take him out of the cuffs. He smelled good. I took a deep breath and then tried to steel myself against him. It was at that moment that my phone rang, blasting the car with Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.

I shot him an evil look as he giggled. I had left my phone in the console when we stopped for gas, and the little brat couldn’t stop himself from messing with it. He had downloaded what had to be the most obnoxious country song ever written for Christmas time. He looked back at me and giggled again.

I grabbed it up, shot him a dirty look and answered the phone.

“Hello,” I practically yelled and on the other end, I heard Lucas chuckle.

“Rio? Is everything all right there?”

“It’s fine. Just the kid being a smartass.”

“Is that why someone just called from your number and then hung up? Twice?”

“Damn it, he must have hit redial on my phone. Sorry to bother you, Lucas. It won’t happen again.”

He hung up, still chuckling, and I leaned in closer and looked Kitt right in the eye before I took him inside.

“I don’t want any more trouble out of you. You got that?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, sir.”

He blushed again. “Yes, sir.” He sounded nice and meek, which was totally bogus, and I didn’t even pretend to believe him.

“I won’t hesitate to take you out of there if you try anything. Got it?”

He nodded, his eyes wide. “And stop messing with my phone.”

“Yes, sir.”

I got out to open his door, and as soon as he stepped out of the car, I took his hand firmly in mine, and he glanced up at me in surprise.

“I’m holding onto you from now on, so you may as well get used to it.”

He blushed and nodded again. Those little blushes of his were so cute they were killing me.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:11 am

Kitt

I woke up when a sliver of sunlight came in the closed curtains, slanting right across my face. I was lying up under Rio, somehow, and it felt so good I never wanted to move. I lay there just remembering how he made love to me and basking in that memory. I hoped he wouldn't wake up and push me away. I dreaded the idea that he might say it had all been a mistake—it would kill me if he did.

I lay still for a while, seeing if I could go back to sleep, but I had no luck at all. My mind was racing, and I finally got up to go to the bathroom and splash water on my face. I brushed my teeth while I was in there, just in case there might be more kissing later, and then I went back out to the bedroom.

He was still deeply asleep, so I pulled on some sweatpants and a t-shirt and decided to go in search of food. This was one of those hotels that served complimentary breakfast, and they usually had waffles and some of those sounded pretty good about now. I took the key to the room from the pocket of Rio's sweatpants and decided to go downstairs before it got too crowded. I picked up his phone, while I was at it and downloaded another ringtone for him, just to mess with him later. This one was O Holy Night as sung by Conway Twitty. I tried to give him a variety.

I meandered downstairs, taking my time and found the little side room where they were serving breakfast. I loaded up on pastries and butter and made some waffles and got lots of syrup packets. Oh, and bacon, because I loved that stuff. I even got a milk, because Rio said it went well with sweet syrupy stuff, and then I took my haul back to a table and dug in.

I was about halfway through when Rio came rushing in, still unshaven, his hair all crazy and his eyes looking a little frantic. When he spotted me, his face got even redder, and I could tell he was mad. He came charging over to my table.

I noticed several people looking at us, so I grabbed his hand and pulled him down next to me before he yelled or something.

“Why did you leave without telling me?” he asked right away, obviously making an effort to keep his voice down, though he was still a little loud.

“I don’t know. You were sleeping and I was just going to let you rest. I didn’t think.”

“No, that’s obvious,” he said, his words clipped and sharp.

“I’m not a criminal, you know. And I was hungry.”

Rio blew out a breath and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. “You should have tried to wake me. Did it not even occur to you that I’d think you’d run away again?”

I could feel my face getting warm. “No,” I said. “I’m sorry. I should have thought, huh?”

“Kitt, it’s dangerous for you to be here alone. You have people looking for you. Dangerous people who don’t have your best interests at heart.”

“Oh.”

He took my hand in his. “I don’t mean to scare you—or maybe I do. You might need to be a little scared. Until you testify and put those guys in prison where they belong, it’s just not safe for you. I need to get you back home, so we can put all this behind us.”

“Us? I thought you’d be sorry this morning and in a hurry to get rid of me.”

“No. We’re in this together now. I told you. But you have to do as I say and start being good. You have to mind me, and you need to let me look after you.”

I grabbed for his hand and held on tightly to it. “I’m sorry...Daddy.”

He looked at me a long time and then finally sighed. And he didn’t correct me. “Don’t be sorry—just start thinking a little more and not taking off without letting me know.”

“I won’t do it anymore. I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Are you finished eating?”

Yes, but you need something too. Can I make you some waffles?”

He actually shuddered. “No, I’ll get some oatmeal and fruit. I don’t know how you eat like that and stay so slim. It must be your metabolism.”

“I guess,” I said, smiling at him. “Whatever it is, I’m glad for it.”

“I don’t like you eating all that junk. From now on, you eat healthier.”

I laughed and he looked at me oddly, probably thinking I was crazy. But I wasn’t used to anyone caring about what I ate, and it made me feel warm inside and started up those crazy butterflies again in my stomach when he said things like that.

After he finished his breakfast, we went upstairs so he could shower and get dressed. I got in the shower with him again, so it took us a little longer to actually get ready to go. He pretended to be mad, but I don’t think he really was. We went outside around

ten o'clock to leave, with Rio bitching all the way downstairs about how we got off to such a late start. In the car parked beside us was a woman with a cute white poodle. The little dog was friendly and happy looking and came up to the window to dance around and give excited little yips to get out. I wagged my fingers at it but got in the car so we could leave.

"You like poodles?" he asked me.

"I just like any kind of dog. I love them. They're all so sweet and so much nicer than people. Dogs really are too good for people."

He made a little scoffing sound, and I turned to scowl at him. "Well, they are! Dogs are loyal and good. They never say mean things to you or make you feel bad about yourself."

He glanced over at me and his eyes went dark. "Who made you feel bad about yourself, Kitten? Was it your father?"

"Why do you think I was talking about myself?"

"Just a hunch."

"Oh. Well, sometimes he did. And my brother sometimes. When my dad spoke to me at all, that is. I don't think I was the kind of boy he wanted for a son when I was younger. Well, ever. I think he wanted the kind of boy you probably were—the kind who likes sports and playing outside and going fishing and hunting and all of that. I bet you did that kind of thing, huh?"

He shrugged. "I guess so. But that doesn't make me any better than you or anybody else. There are all kinds of people in the world, honey, who like all kinds of things. I'm sorry no one told you how special you are just by being yourself."

“I’m not, though. I’m weak and I like girly things, like jewelry. That’s what I heard him say one time, right after my mom died and I went to live with him and my brother. He had found my friendship bracelets in my room, and he looked disgusted and threw them in the trash. That was just after I went to live with him. When my parents divorced, my mom took me, and we went to live with my Pop. My father took Jazz and kept him. Even then, he liked Jazz the best.”

“You were the youngest, though, right? Quite a bit younger than your brother. I’m sure Jazz was easier for your father. That’s all.”

I lifted my head and glanced over at him. “I think you might be prejudiced because you like me a little.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I guess maybe I am.” He winked at me. “You’re know, you’re wrong about dogs though. I mean, they’re cute and all, but they can also be a giant pain in the ass.”

“Why would you say a thing like that?” I said, feeling outraged, though I’d never even had a dog of my own. I knew he was just trying to distract me, so I was playing along. “Did you ever have a dog?”

“I did. Once. As a kid, I got a little mixed puppy—I was like ten or maybe eleven years old—she was just a little mutt my mom found somewhere, with long, reddish hair. She named her Pippi.”

“That’s cute.”

“I thought it was dumb as hell. It was after some fictional character in a book my mother read once. The character had red hair.”

“It’s original, anyway.”

“Is it, though? I’d hated the name—thought it sounded lame and refused to use it, and I just called her ‘Red’ in front of my friends. She didn’t mind though. She really wasn’t all that smart.”

“Oh, don’t say that. I bet she was really smart.”

He laughed again. “Not really. But she was a good girl. My mom picked her out of a box of free puppies from the back of a pickup truck in the Walmart parking lot, and she brought her home for my birthday that year. Pippi was a giant pain in the ass right from the start, following me around everywhere and sleeping at the foot of my bed at night, biting my foot if I moved it under the covers, like she thought there was a cover monster under there. She peed everywhere, except, of course, on the newspapers I put out for her. She’d was damn near impossible to housetrain, and sat beside me at the supper table, begging for food by putting her paw on my knee every few minutes, just waiting for me to do the right thing and slip her a bite.”

“I hope you did.”

“What do you think? And she got fat, too, because she loved to eat so much. My mom gave her cookies, no matter how much I complained about it. I saved up some of my allowance money to buy her a black leather collar to make her look a little tougher, but she had this unfortunate tendency of crawling up in my lap and licking my face every chance she got, and that didn’t look so tough. It was something I was never able to break her of. That and peeing on my bedroom rug and tearing the hair out of my little sister’s dolls. She ruined a bunch of them, not to mention that damn rug, so I had to eventually throw it out.”

“Did you keep her until you went into the Army at least?”

“No. Pippi died right in front of me when I was fifteen.”

“Oh no, what happened?”

“She got excited and ran out in front of a car when she came to meet me at the bus. I held her in my arms as she bled out on the pavement. I buried her in the backyard. I wrapped her up in the blanket from my bed, and I put in all her favorite little dolls and toys. And she was wearing her black, leather collar.”

“Did you cry?”

He glanced over at me and shrugged. “Yes. I wasn’t sorry about it either—she was a good girl, and she deserved to have someone cry over her. After that, I said I’d never have another dog. It hurt too much to get close to an animal that wouldn’t live all that long anyway. It was better to just avoid the pain altogether than to go through that again. My mom said I was wrong, and that I had to take chances on love. Because love didn’t come with guarantees.”

He glanced over at me when I didn’t say anything and widened his eyes when he saw my face, because I was sitting there with tears streaming down my face for poor little Pippi and that boy who lost his little red puppy and was afraid to love again. I knew it was a long time ago, but damn, it was a sad story.

“Kitt, don’t cry. What’s the matter, baby?” he asked me, his voice full of concern, and it only made me cry harder.

I waved my hand and wiped my eyes, embarrassed and hoping he wouldn’t think I was a “wuss” like my father used to call me. “Nothing. It’s just sad. But don’t say Pippi was a pain in the ass. Please. I know you don’t mean that. You loved her.”

“I know. Of course I loved her. I shouldn’t have said that. Stop crying. You’re right. I didn’t really mean it, and it was a long time ago.”

“But you really never got another dog? That’s so sad. I wish I could get you one someday.”

“I don’t need a dog, but once you get all this mess straightened out with the cops, maybe we can get you one.”

“Jazz won’t let me have it.”

“It won’t be up to Jazz. It’ll be up to you by then and no one else if you want a dog.”

I looked over at him so fast I almost got whiplash. “But he’s in charge of me and what if he says no? He’s my guardian and he won’t let me stay by myself.”

“I’d like to help you with that. You’ll be over legal age soon, and as soon as I can, I intend to help you fix this fucked-up guardian situation. It’s not right.”

“But why?”

“Because I care about you. I thought I made that pretty clear last night. We’ll get you a good lawyer. You can get out of Georgia if you have to. Out of the country, if it’s necessary. Now blow your nose and don’t wipe it on your sleeve—there are tissues in the glove compartment.”

“Okay.”

“Does...does this mean you’ll be taking care of me?”

“I...let’s wait and see about that, Kitt. We’ve just met, and so far things have been rocky between us. But I’d like to get to know you better. Much better. Now be a good boy and get some rest. We have a long way to go today, and I’d like to get as far as we can. Maybe Arkansas, if we make good time.”

“It’s getting pretty close to Christmas. There might be a lot of traffic.” I stared out the window and then sneaked a glance over at him. I was trembling a little. He hadn’t said no when I asked him if he’d take care of me. Not exactly, anyway. That must be a good sign.

“I guess you have big plans for Christmas.”

“Not really. I don’t have any close family left. My boss’s family has invited me over for dinner Christmas day, if I decide I want to go. You’d like them, I think.”

“I-I would? Me? Am I going?”

“If you can go, I’d like to take you. They won’t mind if I bring you. They have a huge place, and they always cook way too much food.”

I sat back in my seat and didn’t think about what he just said. It was too much to hold in my head.

Still, I wanted to clarify what I thought I’d heard.

“So, are you saying that you would take me...because ...why exactly?”

He glanced over at me. “I don’t like the idea of you spending Christmas alone or with people who aren’t nice to you.”

I smiled to myself and thought about a real Christmas dinner at a house decorated especially for Christmas—I hadn’t had that since my granddad passed away. I started to tear up again but stifled it because I knew he’d fuss and tell me to stop it. He might even tell me to “man up” like my brother did sometimes. I didn’t think he would, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to take words like that coming from Rio. And I’d been disappointed by people before. I just didn’t think I could stand it coming from him.

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Rio

We spent the night in Ft. Smith, Arkansas at another Hampton Inn just off I-40. I had gone shopping for some snacks he'd asked for the night before we checked in, and I made sure to buy some lube and condoms while I was at it. I didn't think I'd be able to put off making love to him for long, and I wanted to be prepared this time. He was too tired by the time we stopped and ate dinner, so by the time I'd taken a shower and come back into the bedroom, he was sound asleep on the king-sized bed. I pulled him into my arms to nuzzle his neck and he lifted his lips for a kiss that made my pulse go crazy, but he never fully roused. I stripped him and settled him on the pillows and climbed in beside him to wrap my arms around him and cuddle him all night.

I awoke him early the next morning though by rolling over and taking his warm cock in my hand to fondle it. He sighed and shifted closer to me, his shaft hardening in my grip, but his eyes still not opening.

"Good morning, kitten," I crooned in his ear. He turned and murmured something unintelligible that showed me he wasn't really awake, but he lifted his lips to me again.

"Sleepy, baby? I bet I can wake you up." I rolled over and found the lube and a condom on the bedside table and quickly got myself ready. Then I pulled back the covers and parted those pretty thighs of his. I nuzzled his throat, and he slowly opened his eyes and locked them on mine.

"Wha...? What are you doing?"

I was barely listening, too consumed with the feel of the warm flesh I'd taken in my hand to pleasure him. He said it again, though and I smiled at him.

"If you don't know, then I'm not doing it right."

I bent over to kiss the head of his cock and enjoyed his sharp little intake of breath. I deep-throated him, making the suction strong, as the head of his cock bumped the back of my throat. He made a hoarse noise in his throat, and at the same time, I slid a lubed finger up inside him, locating his prostate and giving it a nice little rub. He writhed on the bed and screamed his pleasure as he came so hard his entire body shuddered for a full thirty seconds afterward.

He looked up at me and shouted, "Rio!"

"That's me. Are you awake now, baby?" I teased him and added another finger to the one still inside him. I gave his prostate an even harder rub this time and watched him come apart in my hands. I took mercy on him and stopped torturing him, fishing out more of the lube and coating my shaft with it again. I lay down beside him and pulled him over on top of me.

"Ride me, Kitten."

He was still trembling with reaction, and it was maybe a little painful for him so soon after his orgasm, but he straddled my hips like a good boy as I cupped his ass with both hands. Slowly I lowered him over my shaft. As he sank down on top of me, impaling himself, he moaned and then began to grind into me. When I came after only a few minutes, the climax surprised me with its power and shook me to my core. It amazed me how fast he got me going and how I didn't have much control with him. Somehow the intensity of my feelings for Kitt had slipped up on me. It was like watching a snowstorm and seeing the flakes falling, but not realizing how quickly they were piling up until everything was covered by them. I had a feeling that I had

no hope of digging my way out of this, and I didn't know if I wanted to anyway.

I kissed him and fondled him for a while longer, but hunger finally drove us from bed. We showered together and got dressed. Then we went down to the little dining room to eat breakfast and get some coffee. Or I got coffee, at least. Kitt had a big glass of milk with his waffles, oatmeal and bacon. I liked that he was eating more like what I'd told him to. We had to work on the oatmeal a little to get him to eat it, and I had to cut up a couple of bananas to go in it. I had to add a little sugar too, even though it was already flavored, but that was something we could work on.

We went upstairs to get our bags, and I tried to hurry him along. Not that I hadn't been the one to delay so far, but I was getting a funny feeling that I didn't like in the pit of my stomach. After my time in Afghanistan, I'd learned not to ignore those strange, little feelings when they came. I felt like we should leave as soon as we could. And maybe even take a different route.

I settled up with the hotel, and we went out to the adjacent parking deck to get in the car. It was cold out that morning, and I thought I needed to find Kitt a warmer coat soon.

This was a midtown hotel, not far off the interstate, but it was a Sunday, so at this hour of the morning, we had the parking deck pretty much to ourselves. I opened the back of the SUV and threw the bags inside, and on a hunch, I reached for the tire iron in the back. I usually kept one handy, and I couldn't say why I felt I needed it now, but it all went back to that odd feeling again.

That's when I heard the sound of squealing tires. There was a flash of movement to my left and a black sedan with darkened windows came from below us on the deck, going way too fast and careening recklessly around the corners.

"Get in the car!" I yelled to Kitt. "And lock the doors! Don't get out for anything, no

matter what happens!”

The car screeched to a stop beside me, and I turned to face whatever this was. Almost before I could react, the doors flew open, and a couple of guys jumped out. I charged into the fight, not like a soldier, but like the bar fighter I used to be back in the days before the Army. It seemed appropriate to the situation. I kicked the first guy in the nuts and swung the tire iron at his head with enough force that it made a sickening crack. He dropped like a rock, but the other guy was on top of me by then, ramming his fist into my face. Blood burst out of my nose, and the blow stunned me for a moment, but then I saw him pull out a gun. He pointed it right at the center of my forehead and that’s when a bag suddenly slammed into the back of his head, surprising him more than anything else and giving me a chance to grab and twist his arm, almost breaking it. He fell on the pavement, writhing and moaning, and I kicked him in the head enough times that I thought he wouldn’t be getting back up again anytime soon.

I turned and grabbed Kitt, who was standing there, his chest heaving with exertion and holding his bag. I shook him a little because he’d scared me half to death.

“What are you doing? You could have been shot, damn it. I told you to get in the fucking car!”

“And let you get your ass whipped? He had a gun!”

“I know that!” I rifled through his pockets and found his wallet and a cell phone. I dialed 911 and when the operator answered, I asked for an ambulance to the parking deck of the hotel and told her there had been a fight and guns had been involved. I hung up as they were asking me my name.

I put both their weapons inside their vehicle and locked the doors with the keys still inside. Then I pushed Kitt into the car and we took off. I saw the ambulance and a

police car coming with lights and sirens by the time we hit the redlight at the end of the street.

“Are you all right?” I asked as he struggled to catch his breath beside me.

“I’m okay. They were after me, weren’t they?”

I laughed and said, “I’d have to say yes.”

“Were they gang members?”

“Maybe. The gangs involved in Atlanta are nationwide. And gangs in the big cities often operate in association with adult organized-crime syndicates.”

“Oh my God. Shouldn’t we have waited for the police and told them?”

“If you want to go into protective custody, yeah. It would take the Atlanta cops a day or two to get out here to pick you up. Maybe more—and you’d spend that time in a jail cell. I didn’t like that idea.”

He gazed over at me with wide eyes. “But they wouldn’t put me in jail. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I don’t think it would stick, but they could charge you with hindering the trial process if you continue to refuse to go into protective custody. Maybe even obstruction. I’m sure a good lawyer could get you out of that, but you might spend a couple of days in jail first.”

“I don’t want that.”

“I know. I don’t either. Don’t worry—I’ll get you home and we’ll take care of this.”

“But how did they know where we were?”

“That’s a damn good question. I’m ditching this SUV at the airport.”

“You think they’re somehow tracking us? But how would they even know you found me?”

“I don’t know. Let me worry about it, and you just relax.”

“You have to be kidding. I’m not some dumb baby.”

“You are, though. A little.”

I laughed and dodged his little fist as he swung it at my arm.

“And I’m still not going to fly.”

“Relax. I’m just leaving the vehicle there. I didn’t say anything about flying. Besides, we’re only about twelve hours from where I’m taking you, so it’s too close to fly. Let me make a few calls.”

I drove us to the airport and handed over the keys to the SUV at the airport rental agency. We walked out to the terminal and found a taxi to take us to a nearby hotel, where I paid cash for a room. I registered us under my old command sergeant major’s name, and once upstairs, I called my old friend and boss, Lucas Hayes, from the hotel phone.

“Is this a secure line?” I asked Lucas as soon as he came on the phone.

He seemed surprised, but said it was. “Yes, why? Are you okay? What’s going on? What do you need?”

The good thing about Lucas was that he always cut to the point. “I’m fine, but we got ambushed in a parking deck in Ft. Smith, Arkansas.”

“My God, are you all right? Is Kitt Devlin okay?”

“We’re both fine, but it could have been a lot worse. The attackers are in custody at this point, or at least I assume so. We left before the cops arrived. I ditched the rental and took a taxi to a hotel. I’m going to need an alternative way to get him home.”

“Okay,” he said, not missing a beat. Another thing I loved about him. “Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll have a car delivered to you. Tell me where you are and what name you used.”

“We’re at the Airport Hampton Inn, and I registered under our old sergeant major’s name. Listen, Lucas, don’t give that information out to anyone. Not even to his brother. In fact, especially to his brother.”

There was a silence on the other end. “Jazz Devlin? Really? That’s new.”

“Just a hunch, and I could be wrong. But somehow the information about us has gotten out. He’s paying the bills for all this, so.... who else could it be? It’s not that big a leap.”

“Devlin is getting married tomorrow in Dunwoody.”

“Is he now?”

“Big society Christmas wedding.”

“A wedding that his own brother isn’t invited to?”

I glanced over at Kitt, who was following every word. He was only getting my end of the conversation, but that must have been enough. His eyes were enormous. I wanted to take him in my arms, and I wanted to throttle his insensitive, asshole brother.

“Looks that way,” Lucas was saying. “He’ll be leaving on his honeymoon to Jamaica two days later.”

“How do you know all this?”

“He’s been blowing up the phones about his brother and whether or not you have him yet...demanding all the details.”

“Which you didn’t give him.”

“I wanted to speak to you first. Something about all of this doesn’t add up, Rio.”

“Agreed.

“Do you need anything else from me? Backup? More cash?”

“Cash would be good. I don’t know if anyone is tracking my credit card use, so I’m not using it until further notice. I’ll get a burner and text you the number. Talk to me on that if you need me. Don’t use the office phones. I’ll call you when I get back to Atlanta.”

Lucas gave a little laugh. “Sounding a little paranoid, buddy.”

“Yeah, maybe so. I hope that’s all this is, and that none of this is necessary. But it might not be a bad idea to run a few checks with the staff.”

“Yeah, maybe not.” There was a pause as I heard him speak to someone else in the

office. “I have a meeting. I’ll run this by Ed, but I’ll get what you need out to you right away. Leave that location as soon as you can. In the meantime, it might be a good idea if even we don’t know exactly what route you’re taking from the hotel.”

“Agreed. I’ll be in touch,” I said and ended the call. I glanced over at Kitt hugging himself by the window and held out my arms to him. He came hurrying over and I pulled him onto my lap.

“What are you looking so worried about?”

“I don’t understand what’s happening. Was that your boss? What was he saying about my brother?”

“Jazz is getting married tomorrow, it seems. Did you know he was engaged?”

“Yeah, to a girl named Miranda, but I’ve never met her. I think her family is pretty well off.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I saw Jazz at a club with her, I think. One night in Buckhead,” he said, mentioning an uptown and upscale commercial and residential district in Atlanta. “He didn’t introduce me. They were in a big group, but I think I know which one she was. She was tall and blonde. And very, um...thin all over. Like too thin. I waved at Jazz, but he pretended not to see me.” He looked up at me and shrugged. “I didn’t really care.”

“Okay, good.”

“But what are we going to do now?”

“We’re going back to Atlanta. We’ll go to my place and hide out for a few days until

I can talk to your brother. I need a little more information from him before I give you back to him.”

“Information about me?”

“Yes.”

He began playing with a button on my shirt and so he didn’t have to look directly at me. “And then you’ll take me back to him?”

“In a manner of speaking. We’ll go see him. But what did I tell you in the hotel? I’m going to help you find a lawyer and get you out of this mess first, okay?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes...Daddy.”

I meant for him to say ‘sir,’ so the Daddy surprised the hell out of me. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, and I didn’t want to lead him on. I put it off to think about later.

“I’m not your Daddy, Kitt,” I said as gently as I could. “But don’t look like that. It’s just too soon for that, okay? And stop acting so scared. I’m handling things, so you don’t have to worry. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Da... uh, sorry. Sir.”

“Good.”

He held up his lips to me sweetly to give me a kiss, with his eyes tightly closed, and

what could I do but brush my lips across his. It was all I could trust myself to do, because if I kissed him like I wanted to, then I was taking him to bed for the rest of the day. Unfortunately, that was just going to have to wait. Like a lot of things.

I put him firmly back on his feet and told him to turn on the television and find something to watch while I waited for the car and the cash Lucas sent to be delivered. It didn't take too long before the clerk at the front desk called up to say I had a visitor downstairs.

“Grab your bag, Kitt. We're leaving.”

We went down to the lobby, because I wasn't leaving him alone anymore, even for a few minutes, and a messenger was there with a key to the car he'd parked outside and a large envelope. I tipped him, and we checked out and went outside to find the vehicle. I used the key fob to find it, this one was a big, dark gray Infinity SUV.

The most direct route from where we were was to head over toward Memphis on I-40 and keep on till we got to Birmingham, Alabama and then on back home to Atlanta. I could take a more circuitous route, but what would be the point? Now that I had a secure vehicle, we should be able to travel with no difficulty. It was after we got there that I was worried about.

I was taking Kitt somewhere safe that no one outside of my agency would know about—my own home. I wasn't going to take Kitt back to his brother's house. Something wasn't right there, including why Jazz had lied to me about Kitt's inheritance. Did this somehow have to do with his new marriage? I needed a little time to figure it all out and do a little research. In the meantime, I needed to avoid his brother Jazz, who was still his legal guardian in the eyes of the law. That meant keeping my agency out of this mess too, to limit their involvement. As far as Jazz would know, I'd simply dropped out of sight, and even the agency was looking for us too.

“With so much happening the last few days, I lost track of Christmas. Jazz will be mad that you didn’t bring me home, I guess.”

“He’ll get over it. Besides, he’s busy with his wedding, right? I’m not worried about him. Are you?”

“No,” he said, grinning at me as I slid in beside him.

“Are you sad that you weren’t at the wedding?”

“No. If he doesn’t want me there, then I don’t want to be there. He doesn’t really want me in his house, and that’s good, because I don’t want to live with him anymore. Especially with that Miranda.” He peered over at me as I pulled out of the parking lot. “Aren’t you going to argue with me, like you did the last time I told you that?”

“No, not this time. I believe I need to do some research on your brother and his situation,” I told Kitt. “Something doesn’t feel right about this. Or I need someone who has access to computers and who knows how to find out some things for me. I think I know a guy—I did some work for him about three or four months ago, and he was something of a computer whiz. A hacker, actually, named Walter Reilly, whose girlfriend had left him, stealing quite a bit of money from him. He was even willing to let that go, but she also took his grandfather’s gold watch and tried to say he had given it to her. Threats about lawyers and lawsuits flew back and forth between them for a while until he hired us to see about it for him. I went to visit her and convinced her to do the right thing and give the watch back.”

Kitt laughed. “I can only imagine. Okay, sounds good. Will this guy help us?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I think he will. He owes me a favor.”

I called and spoke to my friend Walter, the computer guy, around the time we hit Birmingham. By the time we were coming into Atlanta, he'd called back to say he had the information for me on Jazz Devlin. Like I said, he was good at what he did.

"The guy is seriously in debt," he told me. "Devlin has been trying for loans, but the traditional banks are turning him down. He just refinanced a mortgage on his home and a building he owns downtown, and those are going to be due in a couple of months. An auditor in his firm recently resigned, saying that the company's financial statements couldn't be relied on. In other words, someone has been cooking the books.

"Devlin is dealing now with a nontraditional lender, an on-line bank with a history of handling atypical loans. They use crippling high double digit annual interest rates, so most people use them as short-term solutions. They also specialize in loans to foreign nationals and have offered Devlin a type of loan that will allow him to turn around and instantly take money back out of it. A loan like that can involve money laundering."

"Okay. Can you send me the files in case I need them?"

"I'm sending them now. Your email the same?"

"Yes. Thanks, Walt. I owe you one."

"Nah, no problem. Let me know if you need anything else."

I turned to Kitt, who looked stunned. "Did you know anything about your brother having money problems?"

He shook his head. "No. He never talked about anything like that with me. If he's so hard up for money, do you think he's going to take my inheritance?"

“No, he wouldn’t be able to touch that. Unless...”

I glanced over at him, and the blood had already drained from his face. “Unless I was no longer alive. Then all of it would go to him.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions, baby. We don’t know anything for sure.”

I could see Kitt getting more and more nervous the closer we got to Atlanta, but there was no need. I reached over to squeeze his hand and reassure him.

“What’s going on in your head?”

“Just worried about what’s going to happen now.”

“Right now, we’re going to stop by the store to get some food. I haven’t been home in a while, so the refrigerator is empty.”

I pulled in the parking lot of the closest grocery to me just a few minutes before they closed the doors and ran inside to get a few things. I had some staples, but I picked up some milk, bread and fresh fruit, some hot dogs and chips and a rotisserie chicken. I got Kitt a frozen macaroni and cheese, and even found a Christmas cake for him. Like I said, I didn’t have long to shop. They actually locked the door behind me as I left the building, no doubt in a hurry to get home to start their holiday, and who could blame them? It was almost Christmas Eve.

Kitt turned in surprise as I loaded the bags in the back. “I’m starving,” he said, and I smiled at him.

“Me too. I got us some things to last for a day or so until things open back up after

Christmas. We'll have plenty to eat, though it might not be fancy."

In another ten minutes, we were at my apartment, and I pulled the SUV into the parking lot, and we went upstairs. I lived on Peachtree Road, near midtown, in a high rise on the sixth floor, with a pretty good view of Piedmont Park. It was possible, though unlikely in my opinion, that anyone was watching my apartment, but we entered from the garage area just in case. It was restricted to residents only, so I thought it was pretty safe. Besides, I was running out of places to take him and places for us to hide. I decided that if they were watching my home, then I'd cross that bridge when and if I came to it, and I wasn't planning on staying there too long anyway.

While Kitt was looking around my apartment, I went over to get a fire started in the fireplace to help knock off the chill inside and then fix us some dinner.

Kit was wandering around aimlessly and stopped by a window to stare outside. I knew Jazz was still on his mind. I decided to fix the hot dogs, because they were quick and easy. When they were done, I put them on paper plates and set them on the counter. There were condiments in the refrigerator, and I added a bag of chips and got out a soda for Kitt too.

"You don't get to eat like this all the time," I told him. "It's not good for you. This is just for tonight, because we're both tired."

"Okay," he said and grinned at me as he stuffed way too many chips in his mouth, like he was afraid I'd snatch them back if he didn't eat fast. Then he shook up his can and held it out toward me like he was going to spray me with it.

"Stop that and behave yourself. You'll make a mess and you're a guest in my house, so stop it right now and mind your manners."

He flushed and looked instantly chastised. “I-I’m sorry.”

“Put that soda back in the refrigerator—it’s undrinkable now. Get yourself a glass of milk instead.”

“Okay,” he said meekly, which I didn’t believe for a minute, and he poured himself some milk.

“Can I have the Coke later?”

“No. You blew it.”

“But I said I was sorry.”

“So?”

His face fell even further, and I gave him a few minutes to think about it before I relented. “There’s ice cream in the freezer, and you can have some of that if you eat all your dinner and behave yourself.”

He frowned at me. “I’m not five, you know.”

“Then stop acting like you are. You were about to make a huge mess in my kitchen. Who was going to clean that up?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think.”

“I know. But you need to start trying a little harder. If you want my attention, all you have to do is ask for it. Don’t act out to get it. And use your damn napkin. Don’t wipe your mouth with the back of your hand.”

He got bright pink patches in both cheeks and lowered his eyelashes until they swept over his cheeks, but he settled down after that and ate his food without any more playing around. He did make a big, sarcastic display of using his napkin when he was done, but I ignored him and finished my own dinner. I got up and poured myself a drink to help me relax.

I hated “being mean” to him, the way I knew he was thinking, but Kitt needed direction and rules to follow. If I was going to be his Daddy—and I couldn’t seem to shake that idea—I needed to be strict with him.

“Can I have one of those?” he asked me, gesturing toward my drink.

“No.” I gestured toward the mess. “Clean all this up and put everything away. Then I’ll show you where your bedroom is.”

“Why do I have to clean up?”

“Because I’ve been driving all day, and I’m the one who shopped. It won’t kill you to do a little something to help out.”

He shot me a dirty look, and I went over to sit by the fire and enjoy my drink while he huffed and puffed and banged things around for a while, no doubt trying to get a rise out of me, but I didn’t give him the satisfaction.

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I had noticed that whenever he was feeling uncertain or afraid or whatever big emotion he was feeling at the time, he acted out. Maybe it was to get my attention, like a bratty sub, or maybe he was having trouble handling his emotions. Right now, I thought it was because he was in a strange place, and he wasn't sure about what was going to happen to him, so he was trying to pick a fight and get me to react. I decided he needed help calming down a little before bedtime.

"I'm finished with the dishes," he said, a few minutes later. "Now what do you want me to do? Mop the floors? Wash all the windows?"

"Right now, I want you to apologize for that smart attitude. I mean it, Kit. I won't put up with it."

He looked up at me with tears in his eyes, but those eyes were still flashing. He opened his mouth to say something else, and I held up a hand.

"No. From now until I tell you, you're on speech restrictions. The only thing—and I mean the only thing—you're allowed to say is 'Yes, sir.'"

He stomped his foot and glared at me so hard it must have hurt. He folded his arms, and I could see the thoughts tumbling around in his head. He wanted to smart off to me so bad.

"I'd hate to spank that ass at Christmas, but I will. Go ahead and test me."

He thought it over—and it was a real struggle. Then finally, mind made up and no doubt knowing I wasn't kidding, he bit out the words, "Yes, sir."

“Well, all right. Now, let’s see,” I said, ignoring his dirty looks and keeping my tone level. “Do you want to watch a Christmas movie?”

He nodded.

“What’s that?” I said, cupping my ear.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well good. I have a lot of different streaming services here.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, still so huffy.

“Got anything else to say?”

He shook his head, still glaring.

“You can write me a note if you need to.”

He stood in the kitchen, determined to be a disagreeable little shit. I could only imagine what would be on that note. In his world right then, any attention was good, whether it was negative or positive. He was hugging himself, and I thought he might be cold, but was ready to cut off his nose to spite his face rather than write a note of apology and be good. I turned on the big screen TV and patted the sofa next to me.

“Sit over here and wrap up in this fur throw until the house warms up.”

He just stood there so I made my voice more stern.

“I’m not asking. Now do it.”

“Yes, sir!”

He flounced over and threw himself down beside me, pulling the throw over himself but made damn sure not to get too close to me. He was still pouting, so I let him and found a Scrooge type movie I hadn’t seen before on Netflix and settled back to watch it, sipping my drink and not giving him so much as a glance.

This version of the Dickens story was a fairly new musical with Ryan Reynolds and Will Ferrell. Pretty soon, I noticed that it seemed to be catching his attention. But the heat of the fire as it warmed the room, the soft, fur blanket and the dim light soon made him start blinking his eyes and he rested his head on the back of the couch. After half an hour, he was softly snoring.

I thought I should probably move him to the bed, but by that time, I was just too comfortable and warm to get up myself. I put my own head down on the back of the couch and fell into a deep sleep. I woke up a few hours later, and I must have gotten cold at some point, because I was flat on my back, with the fur throw—complete with its warm, soft inhabitant—stretched out over me. Kitt had snuggled his face into my throat and had wrapped his compact little body completely around mine.

“Hey,” I said softly, so as not to startle him. “We need to get up and go to bed. It’ll be more comfortable in there.”

He gave a small moan and burrowed more deeply into me, so I gave up, turned over on my side on the wide couch, taking him with me, so that I was spooning him as we fell back asleep.

I woke up to someone kissing me and pulling at my clothes.

“What are you doing, Kitten?” He pointed to his mouth, and I grinned. “Okay, you’re off speech restriction. Say what you want.”

“I want to make up. Please. I was mad at you last night, but it’s Christmas and I want you to know I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so grouchy. Are you still mad at me?”

“No, baby, I wasn’t mad to start with. Not at you. Just your behavior. I know you were just tired and maybe a little upset about Jazz’s wedding.”

“I want you to make love to me. Please.”

How could I resist him?

I stripped off my clothes in record time—especially when I noticed he was already naked. Despite how turned on I was, I had to stop and slip on a condom that I had in my pants pocket. Then I turned back to take care of him.

He was flushed and out of breath by this time, just from watching me strip. I got back on the sofa, nudging his legs apart, and I reminded him to relax as I looked down at him. I stroked a finger over his entrance, and he hissed in a breath.

“Are you okay?”

“That’s...I love that, but...oh god, I think I might come too soon if you keep...”

I flipped him over on his stomach and bent over him to swipe my tongue in a long, slow stroke from his balls to his pretty hole, delivering a shock of pleasure so intense that he bucked up and arched his back, shouting out my name. I soothed him and held him in place.

“Easy now. I’m not going to be through with you for a while, so you might as well relax, or you’ll wear yourself out.”

He laughed softly, then his breath caught as I slipped a lube-slick finger inside and

worked it up to press against the spot I knew would have him flushed and begging soon. I twisted my fingers and massaged him again and again until he was gripping the sofa cushions and squirming uncontrollably.

“Wait...please! I’m gonna...”

“No, you’re not,” I said, “You’ll wait until I think you’re ready. I’m not going to hurt you, Kitten, and I get the impression you haven’t had a lot of anal sex.”

“No, not much. Mostly I give guys blow jobs. Everybody always seems to be in a hurry and doesn’t like to take the time to get me ready.”

I saved my opinion of those guys who had been in such a hurry with him. He was so beautiful it was hard to believe no one took the extra time with him. He deserved to be cherished like the gift he truly was.

When I was sure he was ready, I slipped all the way inside him, easing my way in, stretching him wide as he cried out in pleasure. My cock nudged his prostate again and he rocked back into me, crying out that he needed more, harder. He was desperate for it, he said.

I leaned over him and murmured in his ear, saying things I probably shouldn’t have, but he was too far gone to understand. He pushed back against me as I pushed in, ignoring what he thought he wanted. This was new to him, and I knew what he could take and what he couldn’t. We set up a strong rhythm that soon drove us both insane. He was moaning and crying a little at how good it was, when I reached under him and found his hard cock. It jumped eagerly into my palm. I pulled him back as I rose to my knees so that he was on my lap, impaled on my cock, while I stroked him with a strong, sure hand.

I felt my orgasm rushing toward me, and I knew it was going to be good, but I was

still unprepared for the jolt of pure pleasure that hit, an explosion of feeling that shot from my spine to my balls and back up again.

He threw back his head and screamed, filling my hand with his hot release. I came hard inside him, and when it was over, we fell back down, my cock still inside him, and we lay like that for a few minutes, while we both caught our breath. I could feel the thump of his heart against my chest.

“We should get up and go to bed, sweetheart,” I said softly in his ear.

“Can we just lie here for a while longer?”

“I don’t see why not. We can stay here all day, as far as I’m concerned,” I said, and I snuggled him closer, throwing my leg over him. He made a soft sound of contentment that sounded suspiciously like the purr of a kitten.

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The next day, I felt more rested after falling into a deep sleep in my own comfortable bed with Kitt safely beside me, but I was still unsettled and uneasy. I was feeling more protective of Kitt than ever before. I needed more information to figure out what was going on and why his brother had said their father had left Kitt out of the will, when it was a lie.

I began to wonder about the guys who attacked us in Arkansas—had they really been associates of the gang from Atlanta who had threatened to come after Kitt? Or had it been someone else sent after him?

Whoever they were, they had been ready and willing to take us both out. I had no doubt that they had come to Arkansas with that specifically in mind, and we had both been on their hit list. I needed to find out if the police had determined who they really were. After what Walter told me about Jazz Devlin, I felt that obviously, I'd been mistaken—or deliberately misled—about what was going on all along, and that made me feel like I was played for a fool. I didn't like that worth a damn. Once Kitt was up and showered, we went out for breakfast. Neither of us had much to say, but Kitt kept touching my hand and nudging my shoe and using any excuse to touch me, reassuring himself, I guess.

After Kitt ate some scrambled eggs and toast and I had some fruit—which was about all I could stomach that morning, Kitt sat back in his chair and stared across the table at me. “Aren't we going to talk about my brother?”

I glanced around us and shook my head. “Not here. Let's wait until we're back in the car.”

He nodded, but I could see he was impatient and bursting with questions. The problem was that I didn't have any answers for him.

As soon as I paid for our food and we reached the car, he turned in his seat to face me.

"Tell me who attacked us in Arkansas."

"I have no idea, and they had no ID on them. But they were obviously there to kill us."

"But how would they know where we were? Did they find out from your agency? Are the people you work for in on this too?"

He was too smart for his own good and mine. He had immediately smelled a rat in all this. I still didn't have any answers for him, though I hated the fact that it sounded like he might be beginning to doubt my motives. I rubbed a hand over my face, feeling exhausted. "I don't know, Kitt. I've been trying to figure that out myself and decide what to do about it."

"You have to talk to your boss. But don't you go to that office. Set up a meeting in a public place. Then all we'd need is a good plan to get back out safely."

"When did you get so smart?" I asked, smiling to show I was teasing. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves. I need more information first. Lucas might not be involved at any of this. I've never had reason to doubt him, and I don't like to start now."

He surprised me by scooting over beside me and kissing me. It was so sweet I wanted more. It was all I could do to keep from taking him back inside my apartment and keeping him there in bed all day. "What was that for?"

“I’m just glad it was you who came after me in Albuquerque. And especially in Las Vegas. I just wanted you to know that. I don’t doubt your intentions toward me at all. I know you want the best for me.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, because it is what I want. But you’re way too distracting. Sit back over there and let me think.”

He moved back to his side of the car, pouting a little, so that I had to go ahead and give him a few more kisses anyway. This thing was getting out of hand, but there didn’t seem to be much I could do about it.

After a while, I put him firmly aside and tried to think of what to do next.

He was like a runaway train, though, and there wasn’t any stopping him. “Do you think my brother hired your agency to track me down and k-kill me?”

“No,” I said firmly. “No, Kitt, my agency is more or less a private detective agency, and that’s all it is. There was never any question of us hurting you. Not ever. Surely you know I’d never...”

“No, I don’t mean you. I mean the people you work for. Could my brother have promised them money to get rid of me?”

“No! I mean...I don’t know, but I certainly intend to find out. I’m going to talk to Lucas.”

“I can go with you to see him.”

I just gave him a look and shook my head. “No, Kitt. I don’t want to put you in any

more danger until I can figure out what the hell is going on.”

“We could meet Lucas in a public place.”

“What’s this ‘we’ business? No, there’s actually no need to leave you alone while I see him in person. I think I’ll just call him instead.”

“That won’t be nearly as much fun.”

“Exactly. But I think I’ve had enough ‘fun’ to last me a while.”

That evening, I gave Lucas a call and he answered right away.

“Rio. I’ve been waiting for you to call me. Where the fuck have you been?”

“Nice to talk to you too, Lucas.”

“Why haven’t you contacted me before this?”

“Because it occurred to me that I wasn’t sure exactly who set us up in Arkansas. I had to protect Kitt, and that has to be my number one priority.”

The explosion on the other end of the phone came pretty quickly. “Are you saying...? You seriously think I set you up?”

“What would you have thought? I couldn’t take the chance.”

“Why the fuck would I want to do that, Rio?”

“I don’t know. But I did find out some interesting information about Jazz Devlin.”

“Like what?”

I filled him in on Jazz’s financial problems and there was a silence on the other end.

“Shit. So he lied to us? But what would be his motive to get us involved?”

“He needed to find Kitt and get him back here. He lied to us about the inheritance, and he’s probably been lying the whole time. Kitt was never cut out of any will and he comes into his inheritance on his twenty-first birthday, in another month or so. The motive is money of course. If Kitt was out of the way, Jazz Devlin will inherit Kitt’s part of the money from his mother’s will.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes. How come the firm didn’t know about all this anyway?”

“We don’t run a credit check on our clients, Rio. And we don’t question what they tell us without cause. We had no reason to doubt his word. He told us about his father’s will, and he told us that Kitt had been cut off by their father. We had no reason to suspect another will. Jazz is a successful businessman as far as we knew. He said he was Kitt’s only source of support, and we had no reason to doubt his word. He paid for our services up front, and his only concern seemed to be to find his kid brother. There was no reason to think otherwise.”

“Okay. Well, just so you know, I’m finding him a good doctor and a lawyer, so he can get this ridiculous guardianship dismissed. After that, we’re going to go to the police over the attempted murder in Arkansas, and they can sort all this out.”

“Wait a minute—you’re finding him a lawyer? Why you? What’s your interest in all this?”

I hesitated. Then took a deep breath and just said it. “Kitt is my interest.”

There was a short silence and then Lucas sighed. “Rio, I hope you know what you’re doing there. Kitt Devlin is young, and he has a lot of problems.”

“You don’t know him. Don’t assume you do.”

“Do you have any proof that his brother doesn’t have his best interests at heart?”

“Other than the fact I believe he sent killers after both of us? No, that’s about it. Do you have any proof that he does?”

“But are you sure? You can’t just go around accusing people unless you have proof. Don’t you think you might be jumping to conclusions?”

“Anything’s possible. But I’m not accusing anyone of anything. Yet. We’re getting a lawyer to work on the guardianship, and then we’ll take his advice about going to the police. They can be the ones to investigate this thing.”

“Wait. Let’s talk about this.”

“I think we’ve talked enough, Lucas. I’ll be in touch.”

I ended the call and turned to see Kitt looking at me with wide eyes. “Did you just quit your job?”

“I’m not really sure.” I shrugged. “Maybe. Looks like we might be staying in a hotel tonight. I don’t think the apartment is safe right now. It’s just a hunch, but they’ve been right so far. We’ll go by and get a change of clothes. Tomorrow we’ll find that lawyer.”

I packed a few things in a hurry—I was getting pretty good at that now. I heard Kitt moving around in the living room. I checked the thermostat on the way out, turning

down the heat a little while I'd be gone. It was then that I heard the front door suddenly open, as Kitt gave out a scared, startled shout of alarm.

“W—who are you?” I heard him say. “What are you doing here?”

It was then that I got the biggest scare of my life as I heard a familiar, raspy voice say, “Hello. You must be Kitt. Just be quiet and answer my questions. Where's Rio? Tell me now.”

I recognized the voice, of course. It belonged to my boss all right, but not Lucas. This was Ed Colton, the owner of the firm, and Lucas's father-in-law.

Maybe Ed had some perfectly good reason to be here—maybe he had come with some kind of message for me—but then why hadn't he knocked? Why had he just barged in? There had been no call ahead to let me know he was coming either, so I could only assume the worst. And the worst was knowing that my Kitt was out there alone with Colton—and Colton was holding a gun on him.

I immediately got that sick feeling—the crazy one I got sometimes when I was on patrol back in Afghanistan and still got when shit was about to go down. Those old instincts kicked in and I instinctively crouched down, easing out of the bathroom and slipping next door to the bedroom, looking for my Glock. I knew exactly where it was in my bag which was on the floor just inside the door.

I heard Kitt talking, saying I had gone out. I knew Ed wouldn't believe him. I sent up a few fervent prayers for his safety and somehow kept going.

I eased back out in the hall, peeked around the corner and saw him. Ed was an older guy, but he had a large frame, and right now, he looked like a stranger, dressed in all dark clothing and with a grim, determined look on his face. He was still standing by the door, his eyes darting around the room.

“I said, where’s Rio?”

“I-I don’t know,” Kitt said, sounding scared. It broke my heart to hear him. If Colton so much as touched him...

“He’s gone out.”

I could see that he was holding a similar Glock to the one I now had in my hand. His gun was trained on Kitt, who was crouching down beside the sofa on the floor, hugging himself, his eyes wide. He looked scared out of his mind.

Don’t move, baby , I kept saying over and over to myself in my head, scared for both of us, but mostly Kitt. That gun was big and lethal and pointed right at him.

I knew I had only one chance and that it wasn’t even a good one. I had to draw Colton’s fire away from Kitt long enough for me to take him out, which meant I had to take him off guard. Not easy with someone who was well trained, especially when he was surely expecting something. And when and if I got a chance to take my shot—probably the one and only chance I’d be getting—it had to take him out the first time. I had to kill him first and ask questions later.

The idea that a person could or should aim for an arm or leg anyway is the result of people watching way too many cop shows on television. It also greatly overestimated most people’s sharpshooting skills and mine in particular and reflected a misconception of real-life dynamics.

In reality, hands and arms are the fastest-moving parts in the human body. The average trained shooter could move his hand and his forearm across his body to aim at me as I came around that corner in a twelfth of a second. Of course, he could pull a trigger on the gun he already had pointed at Kitt in far less time than that. There’s just no way I could react, shoot and reliably hit him in the time it would take to keep him

from killing one or both of us. No fucking way. My only chance was to aim for his center mass, hope I could eliminate the threat, and keep shooting until he wasn't shooting back. Period.

My plan, such as it was, was to dive around that corner shooting and hope for a fucking miracle. I had about a tenth of a second to react to him once he pointed his gun in my direction, which I knew he'd do the second he saw me.

I took a deep breath and tensed myself to go. It was at that exact second that the ringer on my phone went off, blasting out Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock!

The phone had been in my pants pocket the day before, and at some point, I'd taken it out and put it on the kitchen counter. Then I'd forgotten all about it. Kitt must have found it and been up to his old tricks again of changing my ring tone.

Colton whirled and fired off a shot in its direction, blasting the phone all to hell, but I was already diving out from around the door, twisting my body and aiming for his center mass. I dropped the son of a bitch where he stood.

The aftermath of any sudden and shocking event is always a little chaotic and this one was no different. My ears were ringing with the sound of the shots still reverberating around the room. I wondered if anyone would come to investigate or if the neighbors had called the police. Kitt was shaking so hard I thought he was somehow hit at first, but a quick check proved that he was just scared out of his mind, and rightly so. If it hadn't been for that stupid phone going off when it did and distracting Colton for that split second, we'd both probably be dead.

A glance at him as I'd passed by him on my way to Kitt showed me that he had to be already dead, but I went back over to check his pulse anyway. There wasn't one. Colton was dead, and the wounds were on his chest. Though they were messy, they were relatively small. I knew the exit wounds would be so much worse.

I went back to get Kitt to his feet and I sat him on the couch, pulling his head down to my shoulder so he wouldn't have to see the body.

"I need to call the police," I told him.

"He shot your phone."

It occurred to me suddenly that Ed Colton might not have been acting alone and someone else might be on the way to finish the job. I went to the door and looked outside, but the hallway was empty. A quick check of the immediate area proved there was no one else around, though I hoped someone had called from another apartment and help was on the way.

I went back in and found Kitt still where I'd put him and told him to come with me. We'd go down to the security desk in the lobby to make sure the police were coming.

I hadn't wanted to go to the police yet, but a dead body had a way of changing plans. We made our way downstairs and found the security guard playing on his phone, completely oblivious to the shots we'd fired several floors up. After he called for the ambulance and the cops, I asked him to call Lucas and to tell him to get over there as soon as he could.

"I'd still like to know how the shooter got in the building," the security guard said, as we waited for the police to arrive. "Did he have the code?"

"Who knows? You tell me."

"Other than residents we only give the combination out to cleaning services and the pest control people. But they're the only ones who have it, other than people who live here."

“It’s out there, then, so someone may have been paid off to give it out.”

“It needs to be changed then. Hopefully, the police can figure this mess out, but in the meantime, we’re changing the front door lock codes.”

“Fine by me.”

The police arrived minutes later as well as the ambulance and from that point on, I was answering questions. I told them what I knew over and over again. Kitt did too, but they kept asking.

Lucas arrived and things went from bad to worse to terrible once he found out about Ed. The detectives wanted to take Kitt and me down to the station, and we left while Lucas was calling his wife to break the awful news. I didn’t want to hang around for that anyway.

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It was later that evening before I talked to Lucas again. By that time, Kitt and I both had been thoroughly questioned by the police. Jazz Devlin was out of town on his honeymoon, but the original officers who had questioned Kitt back months ago when he'd witnessed the shooting in the parking lot of the Golden Pony were called and they corroborated Kitt's story.

Lo and behold, they weren't even looking for him anymore, because the shooter in the street incident had been brought into the station on another charge a couple of weeks earlier and he had confessed to everything.

Nobody was looking for Kitt anymore—not the police. Not the bad guys. Not anybody. They said they had called and spoken to Jazz Devlin about it ten days earlier, and he'd had the information all that time. The investigation into why Ed Colton had come into my apartment to attack us would be ongoing. As for me, the police released me and Kitt as there was no evidence of any crime I'd committed.

We had been shot at in my home by an intruder, and since Georgia was known as a "Stand Your Ground" state, I had no duty to retreat from imminent danger before defending myself and others. My gun was licensed, and as long as the threat was reasonably imminent—and it didn't get much more imminent that a Glock 17 pointed directly at Kitt's face—I could use force to protect him and myself without being required to first try and get away. Then too, there was the shot-up cell phone as proof that Colton had fired and that he had meant business.

I took Kitt to yet another hotel near my apartment after we left the station, because I knew the forensics team wouldn't be through with my place yet. The detectives told me they'd "let me know," as soon as it was cleared. I used the company credit card,

because why the fuck not?

Kitt hadn't wanted much to eat. I finally tempted his appetite with buttered toast, smeared with honey, along with a big glass of chocolate milk. After he ate, he lay back down and started snoring softly in minutes.

It was about two hours later that Lucas called.

"We need to talk, Rio."

"It's a little soon for me. I usually need a day or two to get over my boss trying to kill me."

There was a long silence and then a bitter little laugh. "You always did have an odd sense of humor."

There wasn't much to say to that, so I kept quiet. After a little while, he picked up the conversation again. "The police are investigating this thing. Do you think Devlin was paying Ed off to make sure Kitt never made it home?"

"I don't know, Lucas. But I can't think of any other reason he'd try to kill me and Kitt. Can you?"

He gave a heavy sigh. "No, I can't. My wife is taking this really hard. The whole family is, as you can imagine."

"I know. I'm a little shaky myself."

"How's Kitt? Was he hurt at all?"

"Kitt's resting. He'll stay with me until the police finish talking to his brother. He has

no desire to go back to Devlin's house at all, and I can't say I blame him. I wouldn't let him go if he wanted to. We'll find him a good lawyer in the morning."

"Kitt may not have a choice. Devlin's his guardian."

"No. Kitt's not going to him."

"You can't just say no, Rio. Jazz Devlin has the legal right to take him home. The good news is that he's on his honeymoon somewhere and won't be available to pick him up right away, but if he gets back..."

"Devlin can go fuck himself. Kitt's not going anywhere with him. Look, take care of your family. I'll sort this out with Kitt. And don't worry about getting rid of me—I know how awkward this is—to say the least. I'll just need my severance pay, and I won't be coming back in the office."

There was another silence and then a sigh. "I'm sorry about all this, Rio. I don't know what else to say."

"There isn't anything else. We'll talk later, Lucas. After we find out more about this."

We both hung up after that. I really hoped Lucas wasn't more involved than he was letting on. But just then I didn't trust anyone. I went over to the bed and sat down beside Kitt, who was still sound asleep. The kid could sleep through anything.

I had a lot to think about. In the short time I'd known him, I'd seen that he had a truly bad temper, and he flew off the handle whenever he got angry. He had to be absolutely comfortable at all times, or he'd stomp his foot like a toddler and storm off. He was lazy and almost impossible to get along with at times. He argued about almost everything, and he would lie to suit his purpose. In fact, he had only a nodding acquaintance with the truth, and trouble seemed to follow him wherever he went. He

needed a very firm hand.

Yet, despite all that, I wanted him desperately. I needed him like I needed to breathe. The fact that he was a Little, or more correctly, I guess, a Middle, didn't matter to me in the least, though normally, I might have run from that. None of it seemed to matter. I simply couldn't imagine a life without him. I was in love with him. It was as simple and as complicated as that.

That didn't mean we didn't have obstacles in our way. I was older than he was, and he was going to be much richer soon, while I was almost certainly about to lose my job. I wouldn't have him support me—no way I'd allow that to happen. So, all that would have to be worked out. It seemed on the surface to be just too much trouble. I didn't know if we could work it out at all or if we'd just been living in a dream world.

But then I felt a hand on my arm and looked down at his sweet face. And just like that I changed my mind.

“How are you, baby?” I asked.

“I'm all right. But it was pretty scary, wasn't it? I was so afraid he'd hurt you.”

“It was scary. You did great though. And if you hadn't changed that ringtone and made it so loud...you saved us, Kitt. That makes twice now that you saved my life.” I bent to kiss him, and he pulled me down beside him. His mouth was luscious and hot and open to me, and I plundered it hungrily. I thought I could taste a trace of honey in that mouth, and I was greedy for every bit of it. I stayed until I'd tasted him thoroughly.

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It was a week past Christmas—New Year’s Eve—and so much had changed for both of us.

First of all, I’d found a lawyer, who agreed to take Kitt’s case on a contingency basis until we won it, and Kitt was cleared to receive his inheritance. The lawyer even suggested a reputable psychiatrist he’d worked with before, who was able to clear Kitt’s medical records right away with a few tests and a few sessions with Kitt. He signed documents for the court that declared there was no reason Kitt needed any kind of “guardianship,” and in light of the other circumstances with his brother, the judge had quickly dismissed the hold that Jazz Devlin had on Kitt.

As for me, I’d decided to leave my job for sure. I didn’t blame Lucas—his father-in-law, Ed Colton, hadn’t been the man either of us had thought he was, and his family had been in the dark about what just what kind of person he truly was. I was convinced in the end that Lucas had been taken in by him as much as I had, but Colton had still been getting his information from Lucas on our whereabouts. That and the fact that I had been the one to kill Colton—even though it was in self-defense—changed things between us. He had his family to consider after all. I couldn’t argue with that.

It turned out to have been Ed Colton who had hired the men who attacked us in Arkansas and who were now spending time in the Ft. Smith jail, pending trial. We both agreed with the lawyer that we needed to travel back there and face the music with the cops. We would receive some minor charges for leaving the scene without talking to the police, but our lawyer said he’d be able to work it out if we agreed to testify against them.

From what Lucas could piece together from various texts and emails to Colton, Jazz Devlin had hired him to “take care” of Kitt because he was in deep financial distress, and he was desperate for the inheritance Kitt was set to receive on his upcoming birthday.

Ed Colton, as it turned out, had a shady past that Lucas and the rest of his family had never known about. It included some contract killing. All of that sordid mess was set to come out at Jazz Devlin’s trial later on.

I was looking for another job when Kitt had another idea. He told me he wanted to set up his own detective agency and he wanted to offer me a job running things.

“No way, Kitt. It’s sweet of you to want to help but...”

“You need a job, right? I just got all that money from my mother, and I want to do something worthwhile with it. I need you to help me.”

“If I had the money to buy in, maybe I’d take you up on it, but...”

“So, take out a loan. I can give you very favorable terms, and you don’t even have to pay me back.”

“No babe, it wouldn’t work. I want to marry you someday.”

His face lit up and he smiled. “Then it will be half yours anyway.”

“Georgia’s not a community property state, so it doesn’t work that way.”

“Well, however it works. I don’t care. I have some new clothes I want to buy and I need to get us both some pretty rings—maybe platinum with diamonds. You can pay half of that. But I want to work too, answering phones or whatever.”

“I don’t know, Kitt. It doesn’t seem right.”

“Why not? Would you give me a job if I needed one?”

“Well, yeah, of course, but...”

“But nothing. It’s the right thing to do, Daddy. And I’m good on the phone.”

“I’ll bet you are.”

“Then will you shake on it?”

I looked at him sternly. “If we do this—and I’m not saying yes—I’m definitely paying you back. With interest.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“And you’re going to go on an allowance—no blowing all that money on clothes and jewelry. We don’t need platinum and diamonds, Kitten. Plain gold is good enough.”

“Yes, Daddy. Anything you say.”

I looked over at him and smiled. “Why do I not believe a word of that?”

“So can we shake on it then?”

“I think we can do better than that,” I said. And we did.

As time passed and things began to settle down, I realized that I had never gotten around to giving Kitt a Christmas present. And I knew exactly what that present would be.

I went to the local Humane Society to find Kitt a puppy but wound up with a four-year-old charmer of indeterminate parentage, who called out to me with a siren's voice as I passed her cage. Her big brown eyes got to me when I stopped to pet her, and I found I couldn't leave her behind.

She came home with me, and the two of us surprised Kitt as he was watching a soap opera and doing his nails because we were supposed to be going out later that night. I was afraid those plans might have to be put on hold.

"I love her!" Kitt said, looking up at me with shining eyes as the dog crawled into his lap and proceeded to lavish him with kisses. I think it was love at first sight for both of them.

"What's her name?" he asked me, looking up at me excitedly.

"That's up to you. She's your dog."

"I always liked the punny names."

"Punny names?"

"Yes, like Mary Puppins, or...ooh, I know! Sarah Jessica Barker. That's it! Doesn't she look like a Sarah Jessica to you?"

"If you say so," I said, laughing at both of them.

"I'm taking her to work with us. She can be the office dog."

He leaned down to accept a big sloppy kiss from the newly christened dog, who apparently approved of her new name. I was still laughing at them both and sat down in the chair next to Kitt to watch him enjoy his present. I realized that it had been a long time since I'd felt so happy with my life. And it was all due to Kitt.

We hadn't yet addressed the big issue between us. I knew that Kitt wanted a Daddy, and that scared me a little. I'd never been anyone's Daddy, and I wasn't sure I could be what he needed. But I was going to try. And since I couldn't even imagine a world in which anyone else had that title and took care of him, I decided that it had to be me. It was a daunting prospect in many ways, but we could make this work.

He would be trusting me to know what he needed and relying on me to always take care of him. It was a big responsibility. He would be making himself vulnerable to me, showing me a side of his personality that was sensitive and very important to him. Basically, he was trusting me with his whole life. And I was up for the job.

He looked up at me then and smiled, and I wondered how I'd ever gotten so damn lucky. I loved him, and I wondered why I'd been so afraid to admit it before, even to myself. I wanted to be his Daddy and his caretaker and his lover when he needed that, and I had no idea where it would all lead. But as my mother once told me, love didn't come with guarantees.

He plopped himself in my lap and kissed me.

"Now that we have a dog together and you want to marry me...does that mean you...you want to be my Daddy?"

"That's exactly what it means. If it's what you want too."

His face was always beautiful to me, but just then it was extraordinary. He lit up from within, and I wrapped my arms around him and he and Sarah Jessica were both suddenly filling my lap. I pulled them close. It seemed like I'd taken that first frightening step, and it turned out to be just what I'd wanted and needed all along.

I guess taking it had been the only way for me to get to where I needed to be—right here with Kitt. Looked like Sarah Jessica and I had both found our forever homes.

The End