



# Chasing Safe Harbor (Rugged Coast #1)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** The last thing DEA contractor Thorsen Magnus wanted was an assignment that brings him back to where he grew up, a small town four hours north of San Francisco. He left years ago to get away from his intolerant father and hasn't been anxious for a reunion. But he has a job to do, and his reward might turn out to be more than he hoped for.

Michael Constantine trained as an architect, but now works for his father's construction company. Unlike his golden child younger brother, he does all his family expects and still feels like he can never do anything right for his father. Needing time to think, he goes to his favorite spot overlooking the ocean, where he witnesses something strange through the fog, and in the process nearly falls right into Thor's strong arms.

Thor had been hoping to see a rendezvous off the coast, but Michael's presence changes everything. Thor needs to know what he saw, but as attraction builds with Thor's attempts to get Michael to confide in him, so does Thor's caution about starting a relationship, no matter how strong the desire. Eventually they agree to work together, but any investigation in a small town has the potential to come close to home and could terminate their fledgling relationship before it really begins.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

## Chapter Two

And look he did. Not that he hadn't gotten a gander at the guy earlier. Thorsen had spent a few minutes watching him on the cliff, cursing under his breath because he had been hoping to be standing where the guy on the barstool next to him had been. But in the end, it probably hadn't mattered, because there was too much fog to see much of anything. Still, he had a job to do, and he wanted to get it done and then get the hell out of this area again. The road was calling, and he was itching to answer.

"So that's how it is," the hottie answered. He had done his homework and knew this had to be one of the Constantine boys. He had said that the land he'd been using as a lookout was owned by his family, and that meant this guy was a Constantine, and maybe he was on that cliff watching for the same thing Thor had been, but with a very different intent.

"A look for a look..." Thor countered as the bartender refilled the guy's whiskey. This time he sipped it, but Thor could already see the heat of pure primal desire in his eyes. And that was good, because a guy who wanted to see what he was packing was a hell of a lot more likely to loosen his lips... and one who was already on his second double whiskey even more so. "You from here?"

Constantine Junior nodded. "You?"

"Raised here, but haven't been back in quite a while." One thing he had learned a long time ago: keep close to the truth and minimize the lies you tell. It was a hell of a lot easier than trying to remember what you'd had to spin up. "Sometimes family is a real pain in the ass."

“Amen to that.” He sighed, and Thor thought he was going to down the drink, but he sipped again. “Michael,” he said with the slightest of smiles.

“Thorsen,” he added a little formally. They didn’t know each other well enough for nicknames. He pulled the bowl of bar nuts over and ate a few, then nudged the bowl toward Michael. “So, I gotta ask. You like standing on the edge of cliffs?”

Michael smiled and leaned closer. “Sometimes I like the solitude. I figure you must have been watching me on that cliff for a while, so did you enjoy the view?” Maybe the whiskey was taking effect already, or maybe Michael was really into Thorsen’s charms. Either way, he could work with it.

“Didn’t get much of one other than you falling back on your ass.” And what an amazing one it had been too. That much he remembered in vivid detail. “Seriously, you like staring out at the fog?”

Michael hesitated, and maybe Thorsen had pushed too hard. He took a sip of beer and waited. Sometimes it was best to let folks come to things in their own time. “It’s not just the fog, but all of it. Standing on the edge of the world, the waves beating the hell out of the rocks, the wind racing past your ears. It’s all perspective. It gives me a chance to think and to try to figure shit out.”

“And did you come to any conclusions?” Thorsen asked. “Did any earth-shattering enlightenments hit you?”

Michael smiled much more brightly. “You mean other than my ass hitting the dirt? No. I didn’t manage to conjure up any life-changing epiphanies.” He turned on the stool, Michael looking right at him. “Sometimes when you’re watching and the fog is rolling in, it seems like everything is closing around you. But then, sometimes, the fog bank breaks just for a few seconds, and the sun shines through. I keep hoping for one of those metaphysical moments.”

Thorsen couldn't help wondering if that was exactly what happened out on those cliffs. That description seemed oddly specific, and if that had actually happened, then had Michael seen something out on the water? Shit, he wanted to ask, but he knew if he did, all he was going to get was shut out.

"Then how about another drink, and maybe the epiphany you're looking for will come from the bottom of the glass?" Thor finished his beer and requested another.

"That's the one place these kind of things are never found. I'm trying to figure out what I really want to do with my life, not get plastered. Sometimes a little lubrication is needed, but not inebriation." Damn, the kid had quite a vocabulary. "I work for my father, and let's just say it isn't at all what I was expecting."

"Is your father a dick?" Thorsen asked. He sure as hell knew what one of those could do to you.

Michael shook his head. "More like a controlling, untrusting asshole. The last building my father put up, the architect made at least half a dozen mistakes. I caught them all, fixed them, and actually saved my father thousands in rework and an equal amount in wasted materials, but all I got was shit for trying to make them look bad." Maybe Michael was taking the opportunity to bitch about his father to a stranger. But it was also possible that Michael was the black sheep of the family, and maybe that was something Thorsen could use to his advantage.

"So, you're an architect?" Thorsen asked.

"Yeah. Graduated top of my class, came back here to work for my father. After all, he paid for most of the cost." He pushed his glass back. "I figured I could really make a difference to the business and to my family, but all I get is a whole bunch of shit for my trouble. I'm thinking I should just leave and figure things out in San Francisco or Los Angeles. I have experience, and I've done some pretty amazing designs. Maybe

what I need is to put this place and my family in the rear-view mirror.”

“I’ve been saying that for years,” a man said as he plopped himself on the recently vacated stool on the other side of Michael. “Got caught up with crap at work.” He waved and smiled down the bar, and within seconds, he had a martini set in front of him. He sipped it and raised the glass. “I really needed that.”

“You’re a plumber,” Michael said with a hint of mischief in his eyes that Thorsen felt all the way to his balls. He had been on his own for way too fucking long. “When isn’t there crap at work?”

“Look who thinks he’s funny all of a sudden.” The guy leaned forward, all blue eyes, blond hair, and surfer tan. “I’m Roddy.”

“Thorsen.”

“Ooooh, do you have a magic hammer?” Roddy laughed at his own joke.

Thorsen had definitely heard that before and knew exactly the right answer. “Yes. Yes, I do.” And damned if Michael didn’t swallow hard, his eyes darkening. Now, that was a reaction he could get behind. Thorsen finished about half his beer and then got up from his stool. He paid his tab and said goodbye to Michael and Roddy before leaving the bar.

He had just stopped in for a beer, but in the end, he had gotten himself some information as well, so it was a good night. There was no need to hang around any longer, though, because he wasn’t going to get anything more. But he had found out that things within the Constantine family weren’t as perfect as their image led him to believe. He’d also learned that it was possible that there had been something to see out on the water, and that Thorsen had missed it. Still, that indicated that his information might just be correct, and if so, then in a few days, there could be yet

more to see.

Thorsen climbed into his truck and pulled the door closed with a creak. He really needed to get a new vehicle, but Bessy had treated him well for a decade, and he wasn't in a hurry to give her up. Also, it was a lot easier to go undetected in an old beater truck that most people looked past than it was in a brand-new one that cost fifty grand. He pulled out of the parking lot and climbed the hill out of the harbor.

As he reached the top, his phone rang. Okay, so maybe a truck with Bluetooth would be nice. He pulled off to the side and answered.

"You coming home?" His father never really asked a question; he just demanded.

"Not there, no." That place had stopped being his home a long time ago.

"You return to town and then stay away from the family. Are you doing something that you're ashamed of?" His father always thought the worst of him. "You stay away for years, come back and don't visit, but you're still here. I don't understand you. Why did you come back in the first place?"

"For work." He ended the call and tossed the phone on the seat next to him, but didn't put the truck in gear. He figured it would take exactly two minutes before his sister called. It was what she did. His father would call her to gripe, and then she called him. And sure enough, but this time it was after three minutes.

"Hey, Angie," he answered as though nothing was wrong. "Don't even say it. I have nothing to say to him, and I'm not going to go back there. He's still living in some dream world where he thinks he's the head of the family, and the rest of us have to do what he wants. I don't, and neither do you."

"Thor...", she started, using that tone she had.

“Don’t. Do you want your kid around that crap we grew up with?” Angie had married three years ago to an amazing man. Brian was an accountant, as reliable and gentle as the day was long, and he adored Angie with everything he had. The exact opposite of what they grew up with.

She sighed. “You two never got along, and while you’re here in town, you won’t even see him for five minutes. It hurts him.” Thor closed his eyes. “But I know why, and it’s not my right to push.” She groaned. “The baby is kicking. I swear this kid is going to be an MMA fighter or a kickboxing champion.” Another groan. “You have to do what’s right for you. But promise me you’ll come for dinner.”

“Eventually.” He was working—this wasn’t a pleasure trip. If he wanted a vacation, this end of the world would be the last place he’d choose to take it. His vacations usually involved sun, a resort, plenty of hot guys, and as little clothing as possible. Now that was a vacation. This was anything but. Hell, he had chased serial killers across three states and tracked down some of the most wanted people in the country, and yet coming back to where he grew up was giving him a stress headache the likes of which he had never known before in his life. “Now I need to get back to work. But I will call you, and we can have some of those amazing shrimp you always loved.”

“Nope. Baby hates shrimp,” she said as his phone beeped with another call.

After checking the display, he said, “I have to go. But we’ll talk soon.” He ended the call and took the new one. “What?”

“Is that how you answer the phone now?” the growly voice—and not in a good way—asked.

“It is when I’m busy, and you don’t have a clue who I’m with or where I am at the moment.” When he was on a job, he hated getting these kinds of calls. “And no, I don’t have much of an update. You know I will call you when I have something.”

That was their deal. “So, Miller, what is it you want?” Miller was his boss, friend of a sort, and an all-around pain in the ass. And to his question, he got silence. “You called, so you might as well ask.”

“Okay. Is there anything going on? Is the intel good or a bunch of shit?”

He turned off the engine. “Not sure, but I think it might be good. Something is going on, and it’s possible a rendezvous happened a few hours ago, just like the intel you got said it would. Don’t ask for details—it’s just a hunch—but there may have been a witness. I don’t know if the guy doesn’t know what he saw or if he’s actually involved. That’s to be determined.”

“Nothing is ever simple with you, is it?” Miller asked.

“If shit were simple, the local cops would have already found out what was happening and put a stop to it. No. Something is most definitely happening, and I just need to push the right buttons at the right time. But with how fogged in we were last night, I’d say it would be a great night for a handoff, especially if the craft were big enough and the parties involved were desperate enough.” He pulled out some notes. “Look, I need some information. All you can get on everyone in the Constantine family. They’re locals.”

“You think they’re involved?” Miller asked, and Thorsen heard the clicking of keys in the background.

“I don’t know. That’s why I need the information. My father had some run-ins with them a number of years ago. They worked it out, but as I recall, they run a legitimate business, even if they might skirt the line if they think they can get away with it.” And he wanted to know more about a certain son with the bluest eyes he had ever seen, and this was an easy way to do that. “Concentrate on the sons—there are two of them.”



“Why these people? And don’t tell me because your gut says so.” Miller was still typing.

“In order to do what I think they’re doing, it would take some real money to get a boat like that, and no one is just going to let you borrow one. The seas are rough right now, and there’s plenty of wind. A small boat would not be any good at all. Just get me the information. I might have grown up here, but I am no longer part of this community. I have to start somewhere, so I need to follow the money, and these people most definitely have it.”

“Give me some time to see what I can come up with. You keep your eyes open and watch for anything unusual. There has been a flow of illicit drugs into this part of the state for months now, and we need to stop that flow.”

“I understand.”

“No, I don’t think you do. Whatever they are bringing in is dangerous. Users think they’re buying one thing, but what they are getting is something else entirely, and the death count is starting to mount.”

“Are these guys amateurs?” Hell, in most places, dealers actually branded their stuff so their customers would know what they were getting.

“We aren’t sure. Just do your damned best to get to the bottom of this, and do it fast. Okay?” Miller sighed softly. “I’ll find out what I can, and you message me with anything.” Miller ended the call, and Thorsen started the engine and continued on out to the small motel on the edge of Fort Bragg. Here, where there were more people, he could be anonymous... and he didn’t have to deal with his father.

As usual, he entered his room carefully, checking the bathroom before relaxing and finally letting down his guard. Then and only then did he lock the door, take off his

shoes, and turn on the television. This had not been the way he'd intended to come back here. Though if the truth be told, he had hoped that he'd never have to set foot in this area again, but that was probably an unrealistic expectation. After all, his sister was here, and he was going to be an uncle soon, which meant he'd have come back at some point anyway, but at least that would have been on his time frame and on his terms.

He found something inane to watch, stretched out on the bed, and did his best to relax. Not that he was very good at that sort of thing. Thorsen had always been much better at kicking ass and taking names than he was at relaxing and patiently waiting for shit to happen. Part of him was regretting having left the bar. He probably could have flirted more, and he might even have been able to get some more out of the man next to him. But then again, maybe not. And Lord knows, getting mixed up with someone who might or might not be involved in the case he was working on was a bad idea, no matter what. Still, it was difficult to put that wicked smile, those blue eyes, and the sight of the guy falling back on that tight ass out of his mind. But he had to figure out how to do it, that was for damned sure.

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### Chapter Three

“You are not driving home,” Roddy said as Michael drank more water.

“I’m fine. I haven’t had anything to drink in an hour, and I didn’t have that much,” he countered. Hell, he could walk a straight line and unravel those stupid brain teasers that the police gave, though he did have alcohol on his breath. But so did Roddy. “Besides, you been drinking too.”

“I nursed a drink for the last two hours,” Roddy told him. “But something sure got under your skin if you can down three double whiskeys in a few hours.” He leaned close enough to him that Michael leaned back and nearly fell off the stool. Okay, so he wasn’t going to be driving. “What was it? The guy who was sitting next to you? Did he offer you something, like to jump your bones? Did he have some good shit? What?”

Michael shook his head, trying to clear the damned thing. When he drank, it loosened his lips, and he could already feel the urge to spill all the shit he was wondering about. “No. I think he was fishing.”

“For what?” Roddy asked in that expectant tone he had.

Michael shook his head and finished the bottle of water. Then he paid his bill and slowly got to his feet. “Take me home.” He could get his truck in the morning. No one at the bar was going to mind, so long as it didn’t take up a parking space for too long. Roddy paid his bill, and soon they were in his sporty little Miata, zipping around the curves. “Unless you want me to woof all over your floor, you need to slow

down.”

“If I do, will you tell me what’s going on? There’s plenty of shit with your father, but there’s always been that. So what’s new?”

Michael burped up death-tasting breath. That alone was almost enough for him to ask Roddy to pull over. But he swallowed and inhaled the fresh air, breathing slowly in an effort to clear his head. “Nothing. I was standing at the point on the property.”

“Why? It was way too foggy to see anything.” Roddy slowed down as the fog where they were got thicker.

“That’s just it. I don’t quite know what I saw, but there was definitely something to see, and I think that guy at the bar, Thorsen, was also out there for the same view.”

“He was there too?” Roddy asked. “The hottest thing to hit this town in years and he was clearly interested in you... and you just let him get away?”

Michel breathed deeply once more, determined to clear his head. “That’s just it. I think he was fishing for something at the bar. I don’t think he saw what I did, and I don’t know if he was there because he was trying to get a handle on them or if he was the lookout or something. Maybe he’s involved and he was trying to find out what I saw.”

Roddy pulled to the side of the road. “You have been watching too many of those cop shows. This is Mendo, not Criminal Minds . And maybe this guy might be interested because he’s trying to stop whatever these guys are up to. I mean, what could you have seen? Were there boats off the coast in fog like that?” He didn’t wait for an answer; it must have been obvious. “They could have run into any of a million rocks out there. That was quite a risk.”

“I know. But what does it mean? It could be something innocent, like someone in trouble was being helped.”

“Yeah. But was it the coast guard? That’s who you call when you’re in trouble,” Roddy said, his eyes huge as Michael shook his head and regretted it. “Could you see the boats enough to describe them?”

Michael thought and then shrugged. “Maybe. The one was big. Like, really good-sized. The other was pretty big, too, but the one up from the south was the bigger of the two, and both boats were expensive.” This was exactly what he hadn’t wanted to do. It was best if he kept his mouth shut, and now he was blabbing everything to Roddy. “Just forget everything. I had too much to drink, and I don’t know what I’m saying. So forget it.”

Roddy pulled back onto the road and drove him the rest of the way home. Thankfully, the house was mostly dark, and when Michael got inside, Rosa was nowhere to be found. Michael took off his shoes and went right to his room, passing Peter’s closed door. He thought of seeing if little brother was home, but went to his own room, closed the door, and got undressed before collapsing on the bed into an instant sleep.

Michael woke and reached for his phone. It was a little after four, and he had to pee bad. He got up, relieved himself, and took some pain killers with lots of water before returning to his bed. He had just climbed under the covers when he heard footsteps out in the hall, and Peter’s door squeaked open and closed. He wondered where Peter had been for hours, but he was too tired to give it much thought and quickly sank back into sleep.

When he woke again, it was light, his head was clear, and, thank God, he was hungry. At least he hadn’t done too much damage last night and wasn’t hungover. Michael checked the time and jumped in the shower, cleaning up quickly before dressing and hurrying out to an old truck that had been his first vehicle when he was seventeen. It

still ran, and he didn't have time to go back to Fort Bragg and still meet the delivery at the Carson Hill job, so he took off and managed to arrive at the job site just as Hansen's trucks pulled in with the roof trusses, framing, and plywood sheeting they needed to enclose the monster addition.

"Thanks for doing this," Michael said as he approached Hansen, shaking his hand.

"You know our agreement. As long as I never have to deal with the ass that is your father, we'll continue doing business." He got the delivery men unloading while the crew got to work, stacking materials and beginning the framing process. These men knew their jobs and got right to it. The plans were in the trailer, and Michael checked that they were the latest ones. There had been a number of changes and updates, and he needed to ensure that the proper ones were being followed.

"This is going to be a great place," Hansen said as he checked over the design.

"Are you really going to go up against Dad on that property out at Rocky Point?" He couldn't keep the amusement out of his voice. Hansen shrugged, and Michael smiled. "That was a ruse, wasn't it?"

"Your father thought he had that deal all sewn up and for a scandalously low price. The owner is a seventy-five-year-old lady from Fresno. She had no idea what she was doing, and your father's agent talked her into it. So I just told her what it was really worth, and she did the rest. Let your father think I want to develop the land as well. He'll pay closer to the real value of the land, and the retiree will get what she deserves." He leaned against the worktable. "It just seemed fair to me."

Michael smiled slightly. He always knew his father would skin a cat to make a buck, but this sounded shady even for him. "My lips are sealed."

"I knew I liked you," Hansen said before turning to where the unloading was

continuing. “You got yourself a really good crew.”

“They’re some of the best, and I take a lot of shit from my father so they don’t have to.” It was the only way he was able to keep his team together. Lionel Constantine might be powerful and have money and influence, but he was not well liked, that was for damned sure. And as far as Michael was concerned, whatever deal his father had going on was no concern of his. It was best if he kept his mouth shut and stayed out of it. “Any other flies buzzing?”

“Just that a boat got caught out in the fog last night. Apparently, they got scraped up and limped back into Noyo after dark. It’s being patched up this morning, but apparently they only just made it.”

“Was it someone local?” Michael asked, but all Hansen did was shrug.

“Not that I heard. Probably some idiot who thought they knew more about the weather than the locals who live and work in those waters every day.” He went to check on the unloading, and Michael did the same with his men, making sure all the supplies were accounted for and properly organized. But Michael couldn’t help wondering just what was going on with that boat from yesterday. Maybe he could nose around while he was down at Noyo Harbor after he picked up his truck.

At lunchtime, Roddy was good enough to meet him back at the house and took him to pick up his truck. “You want some hair of the dog?” he called with a grin from his convertible as Michael headed inside.

“No. But thanks for the ride.” He rolled his eyes and went to the bar, being sure to thank Carl for letting him leave the vehicle there.

“It was no problem.” He leaned over the otherwise-empty bar. “Did you hear about the boat that came limping in? John Fisher stopped for a bite this morning, and he

said if they had hit the rocks any harder, their pumps wouldn't have been able to keep up, and they would have sunk. Stupid tourists. Any local would have known to stay in port on a night like that. Those waves are rough, and the currents are something else." He shook his head before patting the bar.

"Do you know who brought it in?"

He shrugged. "Nope. Didn't see them. But the boat is on the other side of the river. You can have a look for yourself. I can't see no one from around here doing what they did."

"Well, thanks," Michael told him. "I appreciate you keeping the truck safe."

"Don't make a habit of it. My business wouldn't mind the money in the till, but you should take it easier than you did last night. Let the tourists get plastered. We locals got to keep our wits about us." He went back to work, and Michael smiled, knowing that was Carl's way of saying he cared and was watching out for him.

"I will," he called before leaving the mostly empty restaurant and bar. He got into his truck and took the steep road up out of the harbor and then over the bridge before coming back down the other side and into the parking lot. Then he wandered over toward the river, where it took him three seconds to find one of the boats he had seen last night. As he drew closer, he recognized Thorsen as he looked over the boat.

"Word travels fast," Michael said, startling Thorsen slightly. "Even to someone who's been out of the loop a while?" He drew closer, checking for the dark stripes down the side of the otherwise white craft. It truly was one of the boats he'd seen. "Any idea who owns it?"

Thorsen shook his head. "I was going to ask you the same thing. A boat doesn't limp into port and get tied up without someone knowing whose it is or why it's here. Yet



here it is, and all anyone seems to know is that it doesn't belong to someone local." He seemed to be trying to peer inside.

"Well, if it were mine, I'd sure as hell not be hurrying to tell anyone I'd done something that stupid. Going out last night in that fog with those waves crashing on those rocks. Stupid is as stupid does, and all that." He sighed, still looking at the boat, with Thorsen watching him. Michael refused to let that steely gaze get to him and did his best to ignore it. But he was aware of every second, looking at the side of the boat. "If someone doesn't do something, it's going to end up on the bottom of the river damned soon."

"What?" Thorsen asked.

"See how low it's getting in the water? If someone doesn't get the pumps started, it's going to sink." He turned to meet that gaze. "I'd say we'd be doing the owner, however stupid he may be, a favor if we got that water out." Michael stepped onto the boat. The keys were on the seat, so he got her started and the pumps running.

Thorsen jumped on as well. "I think I better see how bad things are below." He went through and came right back out. "It seems dry."

"Hey, what are you doing?" a man hurried over, but his lips turned to a grin when he saw Michael.

"Hey, Wally. We heard what happened, and it seemed a little low in the water. Didn't want her to sink on you," Michael told him. Wally had taken Michael out on his first Pacific fishing trip when he was ten. Wally got two small salmon while Michael caught half a dozen. Afterward, Wally always said Michael was good luck. "The pumps got what was left."

"Good, I did a quick patch on the scrape this morning," Wally said as Thorsen

climbed off, and Michael turned off the boat's systems to preserve the batteries. "Didn't want it to litter up the harbor."

"But no one contacted you?" Michael asked, and Wally shook his head. "If you don't hear anything, you let me know. I'll make sure you get paid for your time and for the boat slip." Wally was just getting to retirement age, and there was no way he was going to let someone take advantage of his good graces.

"And if it's been abandoned?" Wally asked.

"Then I'll back your claim, since it was done on your property and you were good enough to keep it from sinking." He jotted down the registration numbers and handed them to Wally. "Call these in to try to find the owner, and then in a few days, if no one shows up, make the report of it being abandoned. If they do come around, be sure to have a bill ready."

"Oh, and lock it up. You have a claim against it now," Thorsen added and then they both walked back toward the parking area. "Do you want to tell me what that was all about and why you were so interested?"

Michael stopped next to his truck. "Do you want to explain the same thing? I'm a local and want to make sure Wally comes out of this whole. But you...." It was his turn to give the death stare. He wasn't ready to trust Thorsen quite yet. "Maybe you should be the one to spill your guts. A few well-placed words about you nosing around, and all doors will slam closed for you."

"Are you involved in this?" Thorsen asked, and Michael laughed.

"I don't have the foggiest clue what this is. But if you'll remember, I did just help you get a look inside the boat, and you disappeared into that cabin pretty damned fast. So I'm going to ask you the same thing. Are you involved in whatever this boat was

used for?” His instincts said no.

“Okay. I am, but more along the line of stopping it.”

Michael nodded. “I take it the boat was being used to smuggle something.”

“I think so, yes. But I can’t prove it, and the cabin was a mess, but there was nothing incriminating in it. Not that I really expected to find anything.” Thorsen drew closer. “What I really want to know is what you saw last night on the cliff. I watched you, and I saw you tense. You saw something.”

Michael wasn’t quite ready to give him that answer. “Is that why you were there?”

“Yes. We got a tip that there was going to be some activity last night. The fog was thick as shit....”

“But you were out there hoping to see something. Instead, I was there, and you think I saw what you were hoping to see.” Okay, he was talking in circles.

“I sure as hell hope you did. Because otherwise I’m at square one. So tell me what you saw. Did that boat meet someone out on the ocean?” Those intense eyes grew as hard as the stone walls of the harbor.

“Yes. That boat met another, bigger one from the south. The fog parted for maybe fifteen seconds. I recognize the boat here by the blue stripes, and whoever was piloting it just made it back. I’m guessing that no one is going to claim it, and Wally just got himself a boat once he reports that it’s abandoned and that he kept it from sinking. As for the other one, it was bigger, like really expensive. Maybe fifty feet or more. Whatever they were smuggling, there’s plenty of money involved, that’s for damned sure. A boat like that will cost plenty.”

“Could you describe the larger boat in more detail?”

Michael shook his head. “Not really. There’s only so much that I could see, and like I said, it was for maybe fifteen seconds. No longer. Then the fog came back in and the view was gone. It was maybe fifty feet, white, sleek. It really cut through the water.” He thought for a few seconds. “There is something I do know. That boat had to go into port somewhere, and it wasn’t here. I’m guessing it returned south, back where it came from.” He met Thorsen’s gaze and wondered what was going on behind those intense eyes.

“Thanks,” he said flatly before turning to leave.

“That’s all I get—thanks?”

Thorsen paused. “What do you want? A medal?”

Michael stalked closer, anger building. “I want to know what’s going on. I think I have a right to that much. I helped you with the boat, and I told you what I saw. Now I think it’s your turn.” He worked with plenty of rugged, hard guys like this, and he knew how to deal with them. Most of his crew fit into this category. They didn’t give up information very easily. “I can hear those doors closing all over town.” Michael had played his one card, and now he had to see how Thorsen reacted.

### Chapter Four

“You wouldn’t really do that,” he said flatly. “You already helped me, and you’re too curious for answers.”

Damned if Michael didn’t cross his arms over his chest, cock those eyebrows, and say nothing. God, he was glorious when he was pissed off. Part of Thor wanted to kiss that look off his face, but while he was pretty sure his flirting last night had had some effect, he didn’t know if the advance would be welcome, and doing it in the parking lot out in the open was probably a bad idea in any case. Hell, just thoughts like that were the worst idea he’d had in years, and yet the mere inkling was enough to make his heart beat a little faster. And still Michael said nothing.

“Is this a stare-down?”

“If it is, you just encountered the West Coast champion, so give the fuck up, and tell me what I want to know. You can trust me—you know it. Now spill your shit.”

He hesitated for a little while longer and then sighed. He wasn’t going to get anywhere here without some help, and Michael had already facilitated for him. “All right. But I need to get on that boat for longer. I didn’t get a good look around.”

Michael didn’t relax for a second. “I need to know if you’re with the police... or...?”

“More like an or what .... I work with the DEA in a semiofficial capacity. That’s all I can tell you right now.” He had learned long ago to play things close to the vest, and that was as much as he was willing to say. “Can you get me back on the boat?”

“Fine. I’ll ask Wally. But you and I are not done talking. You can hold back, but what’s to say that I haven’t too.” He glared at him for a second before striding back toward a small weathered shingled building. He peeked his head inside and then motioned for him to come over. “Wally says it’s no skin off his nose.”

Thor returned to the boat. “Just wait out here. If anyone comes, tell them the same thing you told Wally. I shouldn’t be too long.” He went below, starting at the bow, and worked his way through the small space, checking inside every compartment, but there were no signs of anything other than stuff you’d find on a boat. He even checked the tiny kitchen area and looked through small out-of-the-way spaces, hoping that something had been overlooked.

Once he’d been through everything, Thor hunched over in the tallest space available, looking through the cabin. The craft wasn’t that big, but still seemed smaller than it should be. Boats were studies in efficiency and space management. Yet this one.... He turned around, about to head out, when he noticed that the steps down were bigger than they needed to be. Usually, they were small, and you had to descend carefully. Thor checked their base and then tugged upward. The steps swung up to reveal a hidden space. He checked through it and used swabs to rub the inside.

At the far end, a few wisps of dust caught his eye. He checked closer before smiling, scooping what he could get of the substance into a bag. Then he slipped it into his pocket and lowered the steps back into place before climbing off the boat and joining Michael. “Let’s go.” He strode back toward the parking lot.

“What did you find?” Michael asked.

“Not here.”

“Then meet me where we first met in an hour,” Michael offered. “I have something I have to check on.”

“An hour,” Thor found himself agreeing, then got into his truck and pulled out of the lot, heading up the back to the main road before turning south. As he drove, he got Miller on the speaker phone.

“You got something?”

“Yeah. A number of somethings. I have a boat registration I need you to run.” He rattled off the information as well as the name of the boat. “I also found a little of the cargo from last night’s rendezvous. I believe the boat has most likely been abandoned. It got damaged, and they probably limped into the local harbor and took off. Too many questions would have to be answered. And I think we got it wrong. I don’t think product is being run into the area up here. I think our little boat went out to make a delivery, not a pickup. The larger boat isn’t going to fit in Noyo Harbor. It’s likely they returned down the coast and back to San Francisco.”

“But wouldn’t they need shelter as well?”

“Not necessarily. They’re bigger and could go farther out, away from the weather. The waves would lessen, and last night was just wind. It wasn’t stormy, just too much for smaller craft.” He groaned. “Our main quarry is probably getting back to the city, where it’s blending in with all the other boats.”

“Do you have anything on that craft?” Miller asked.

“Not a thing. All I have is a boat here that you need to try to trace for me, and my witness, who did indeed see the meeting.”

“For God’s sake, keep the guy safe. Remember the mess in Kansas City,” Miller warned him. Not that the witness getting killed was his fault or that it was even his assignment, but that muck-up had nearly cost everyone in the organization their jobs, and no one wanted a repeat, least of all on his watch.

“I remember, and this guy isn’t like that. He’s rugged, and I have an idea that he can take care of himself.” Michael was no small man. He was built and had a fire in his eyes. “But I intend to watch over him and make sure no one is aware of what he knows.” He ended the call and continued down the road toward the cliff where Michael had ended up on his ass. That image was seared into his mind.

Thorsen made the turn off ten minutes later, parking just off the road where his truck wasn’t going to be seen. Then he watched from the underbrush as Michael arrived and walked across the dune grasses toward the edge of the cliff.

“I know you’re there,” Michael said as Thorsen approached. “You have this real voyeur thing going, don’t you?”

“I learned a long time ago to know what I’m getting into.” Being cautious had saved his life more than once.

“Fine, I get that. So what is it you want to know? I saw the boats out there. Maybe just past the line with those large rocks. The larger boat came from the south, and I suspect went back that same way. There is nothing that could harbor a craft that size for hundreds of miles to the north.”

“And where do you think our boat came from?”

Michael sighed. “If it were me, I’d put in at one of the rivers, possibly Albion or Little River. There are access points, and no one is going to question it. They sail out, the fog comes in. They meet their contact. But those rivers have no navigation lights. In the fog, they’d be lost. So they go North to Noyo because it’s lit, and they can get in before they sink. My one question is how they got away.”

“They had to have someone pick them up,” Thorsen said.



“Which means that this isn’t someone from out of the area, but folks with local connections.” Michael groaned. “When you hear about shit like this, it’s so easy to think of people from outside, strangers you have no connection to. Not people you might know.”

“Yeah,” Thorsen agreed.

“Do you know what they were carrying? Did they take delivery, or were they dropping off?” Michael asked.

“Well, I’d say they were dropping off. The small boat didn’t have to come that far, so they went out and were probably overloaded weight-wise. Scraped the hull, but managed to make their delivery before limping back to the harbor.” Thorsen reached into his pocket and pulled out the plastic bag. “I think this is meth. I have to have it tested, but I found it on the boat. One of the containers must have scraped open and some of the contents spilled. I suspect it was a bumpy ride while they were offloading.” He looked out over the ocean, which seemed flat until the waves broke around the rocks at the shore. “Do you think it was like this last night?”

“The seas were probably a little rougher. The wind had died down some, and that’s what drives the waves, at least locally. But in the fog, it would be hard to see and maneuver. All they would see is gray all around them. But they must have offloaded their cargo and gotten the hell out of there and back up to the harbor.”

Thorsen nodded. “I have to ask. Do you know anyone who might be behind this?”

Michael shrugged. “This isn’t the richest area. I don’t know of anyone who could afford to buy a boat, use it, and then just toss it aside. Boats here are for fishing or used to make a living. They’re for pleasure, but even then, most of them are to generate cash somehow. It costs a lot to keep one.” Michael lifted his gaze. “You might look into trailers.”

“How so?” Thorsen asked.

“They have to be registered with DMV. One had to be used to drop off the boat, since it isn’t kept in the water anywhere.”

“How does that help?” Thorsen asked.

“Maybe it doesn’t. Let’s look at the facts. The boat was used to transport drugs, and they met someone out there. It gets damaged, and they head for safety. Then they just park the boat, leave the keys, and get the hell out of dodge. What does that tell you?”

Thorsen pulled out his phone and sent a text message. He had no signal at the moment, but he knew it would go through as soon as he got one. “I bet it’s stolen. Wait... that isn’t possible.”

“Why?”

“Because they modified the steps as a hiding place, and I bet there are others. No. We need to keep an eye on this, because I’m willing to bet that as long as it’s floating, they’ll sneak into the harbor and get the boat out... eventually. It’s too much of a link to them.” There were so many things that just didn’t quite add up. Like why leave the keys unless they wanted people to think it had been abandoned? Why even bring it into the harbor at all? Did these guys know anything about boating at all?

“Lots of questions,” Michael said softly, the sun shining on him, his eyes bright as he licked his lips. “I have to get back to work, or my father is going to have a heart attack. But I promise I’ll keep my eyes and ears open.”

Thorsen handed him a card with a phone number on it. “Call me if you hear or see anything.”

Michael took it and shoved the card in his pocket, pulling his jeans tighter for a second. “And you better do the same. I’m trusting you to be on the right side.” He dug in his wallet and found a business card with his cell, handing it to Thor.

“It isn’t me who has to worry about sides. I know what I’m doing and what I need to accomplish... and who I work for.” He moved close enough for Michael to inhale a teasing bit of his scent. He wanted more, but this was not the time, and he took a single reluctant step back. “This is my job. You need to remember that there is a lot of money at stake here, and the kind of people who do this don’t care who gets in their way. So be careful. Don’t talk about what you saw or suspect. The best thing for you to do is to go about your life like nothing happened. Do normal things, and forget about the boat and me if you can.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “You may be hot, but I think I can force myself not to think about you all the time.” Sarcasm rolled off his lips, but Thorsen smiled slightly, knowing there was some truth behind the words, especially with how Michael’s cheeks blazed red. But Thorsen had to give him credit—Michael stared at him like he was daring him to comment on it. “I need to go back to work. I have an appointment in Mendo in half an hour.” He strode across the grass and back toward his truck.

Thorsen couldn’t help watching him the entire time. When Michael turned around, like Thorsen knew he would, he smiled. “You think I’m hot?” Michael hesitated for a second before flipping him off and getting into the truck, and all Thor could do was smile as Michael pulled away, the hum of his engine disappearing quickly under the roar of the ocean.

Thorsen stood for a few minutes, looking out to sea, before he began feeling exposed. He looked around to try to locate the source of his discomfort before heading back to the truck. He climbed in, intending to go back to his hotel and see what Miller had been able to dig up for him, when his phone rang. “Hey, Angie.”

“Look. I’m going out to Dad’s. Would you come with me? I know things between the two of you are difficult, but maybe if I’m there, you can stand to be in the same room with him for more than five minutes.” He growled under his breath. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, but give the guy a chance. Dad is getting old, and if something happens to him....”

“Don’t you dare try the guilt card. I’ll stay away just to be stubborn.” He considered doing that anyway, but Angie was the one and only person he found it nearly impossible to say no to.

“I won’t. But will you come? I’m big as a beach ball, and the kid is kicking like crazy. I have constant indigestion, and yet I’m always hungry for shit I can’t have. And to top it off, I can’t even see my feet.”

“Fine. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes, but if you aren’t there when I arrive, I’m pulling away.” It wasn’t like he was afraid of his father—that shit had ended years ago. Now he was scared of what he might do to the old fuck when his father pushed him too hard.

“I’m five minutes away. Maybe we could get something to eat. Like I said, I’m always hungry. The Patio has an amazing BLT, and the kid is screaming for bacon.”

Thorsen growled once more. “We’ll see.” It was as close to a no as he seemed to be able to muster. “I’ll see you when I get there.” He jabbed the button on his phone to end the call and headed north along the coast highway, passing through Little River and then on to Mendocino, his stomach roiling the closer he got.

Since leaving home at nineteen, he’d trained as a police officer and been recruited by the DEA. From there he’d talked down drug dealers, protected himself against very desperate men, and busted up international trafficking rings. Since going off the grid and off their books, he was someone wanted by half the cartels south of the border,

yet they had no idea who he was. The agency had scrubbed Thorsen Magnus—a last name he had chosen for himself in a moment of cockiness—nearly out of existence, except for a place he owned in Cleveland, which was actually an address that had been condemned and was now an empty lot. So if anyone came looking, they would find nothing for their troubles. And yet, after all that, seeing his father again made his stomach churn, and he hated every second of it.

When he pulled up to the small white house with a rose trellis in the front yard that had been his mother's, Angie stood at the gate, holding her belly like she was afraid it was going to get away from her. "Hey, preggo."

She smiled. "Hey, yourself," she said as he gave her a careful hug. "Dad is out back with a contractor. The house needs some work, and I convinced him to call someone in rather than try to do it himself. I don't know if he'll listen, but...."

His father came around the side of the house, looking at least a decade older than Thorsen remembered, with Michael following behind.

"What's he doing here?"

"Michael is the contractor I called for Dad. He and Brian were friends back in school, so when Dad needed some help, Brian called him. Why?" Her expression went to suspicious in a second. "Do you know him? Michael is single, and I know he bats for your team." He glared at her. "You met him already," she whispered with a knowing smile. "And you like him, I can tell. Your ears are turning red, and you're doing that thing with your eyes where you try to look anywhere else, but you still can't stop watching him." She actually laughed.

"Not funny."

"The hell it isn't." She winced for a second. "Okay, kid. You can stop kicking any

time you want.” She rubbed her belly and turned, doing a half waddle into the house. “You coming? Or are you going to stay out here and watch?”

Michael caught sight of him at that moment, and Thor could see the wheels turning behind his eyes. Thor hated that sort of thing, so he followed his sister into the house that they’d grown up in, a place he had once vowed never to set foot inside again.

### Chapter Five

This truly was a small town. Michael pulled his attention back to Mr. Eriksen and the work he needed. “How soon are you hoping to do this?” he asked, half watching Thorsen as he went inside. “We have a number of big jobs, and this should take a few days. If you’re willing to wait a little, I can probably work you in when I have gap. That way you help keep my men busy, and I can give you a better price.” He had promised his old friend Brian to do what he could to help.

“That would be great. Being on a fixed income sucks, and it takes all I have to keep this place up.”

Michael could only imagine the property taxes on the house. Even if he didn’t have a mortgage, the taxes alone had to run through much of Mr. Eriksen’s income. “We can help you,” Michael said, and recapped the work Mr. Eriksen wanted done. “Let me get you an estimate in the next few days, and we’ll go from there.” He was already figuring out how he could get the supplies at a lower cost. Often there were things left over from various jobs, and Michael had been diligent about gathering them up and setting them aside for future use. He knew he had a number of the things that would be needed already available, so it was just going to be the labor cost. Michael made a few notes for himself regarding the supplies and the hours he thought would be required and how he could give him a break.

“That would be great,” Mr. Eriksen said as he slowly walked toward the front door. “Can I offer you something to drink?”

“I need to make a call first.” His gaze followed to where Thorsen had gone, and he

was curious as hell about him, so the offer of a drink was appreciated.

“I’ll see you inside, then.” He went around to the walk, and Michael called in to the office, letting them know where he was. He also called out to the job site and got a report on the work and how it was progressing. Unless there was an issue, his men knew what to do and what was expected. Once he was sure things were under control, he knocked on the door, and Angie let him inside.

“They’re in the dining room staring at each other across the table,” she said softly.

“I didn’t realize Thorsen was your brother.” Their paths had crossed a number of times because of Brian.

“He changed his last name, which my father will never forgive him for, and my father has done things, because he can be a self-entitled asshole. Thor won’t forgive him for those, so the two of them glare at one another.” She snickered. “What neither of them understands is that they’re so much alike, it’s ridiculous.” Angie rubbed her belly. “If this kid doesn’t stop kicking me, I swear....”

“Brian said you were due in August,” Michael said, getting the feeling that there was more to the story than Angie was saying. Or maybe she simply didn’t know what was really at the heart of the matter. Two stubborn mules might fight with each other, but this seemed even deeper than that to him. Thor, he liked the shortened version, didn’t just want to stay away from his father; he’d changed his last name and gone away for years. That wasn’t a disagreement, but something that went to their identities and how they saw themselves.

“Yeah.” She took his hand, pacing it on her belly. “Feel that?” Michael nodded. “That’s the baby. There are times when I wish he’d settle down, and then every time he moves, I know he’s there and that I’m just waiting on him. Though two more months of this is going to drive me around the bend. All I do is eat, burp, fart, and get



kicked from the inside out.” Michael knew she was teasing. “Let’s go in and stop them from killing each other.”

She led the way, and sure enough, Thor and Mr. Eriksen sat across from each other, both with a mug of coffee that they weren’t drinking. Not that his relationship with his father was much better than Thor’s, but this was strange.

“Knock it off, both of you. Dad, you complained that Thor was in town, but didn’t see you, and you act like this when he does come to see you.”

“He only came because you made him.”

Angie shook her head. “Do you really think I can make Thor do anything? How long have you known the stubborn ass, you belligerent old mule?” She managed to sit down, and Thor got up and brought her a glass of water.

“I think I’m going to go,” Thor announced and headed for the door. Angie started to get up, but only ended up groaning as she got to her feet. By the time she was on the move, the front door had closed behind him, and Angie had little chance of catching up.

“See, what good did that do?” Mr. Eriksen asked.

Angie whirled on him like dervish. “What do you expect? Him to fall into line and kiss the ring like you’re the pope? That isn’t how this works, and you damned well know it.”

“He could have just...,” he began.

“What? Given you whatever you wanted? If you go down that road like you have before, I’m going to leave, and I have a husband and a life that you don’t need to be

part of either.” Man, he made a note never to get on Angie’s bad side. “When will you understand that you don’t have the right to impose what you want on someone else? In this case, you won’t get what you want because you have no right to it. Thor’s future is his to decide, not yours. And for that matter, so is mine.” She walked off in a huff, and Michael figured it was time for him to go.

“Mr. Eriksen, I’ll call you with the estimate and get the work scheduled,” Michael said before leaving the small house. He passed Angie out in the yard, fuming silently.

“I’m sorry about that.”

Michael nodded his understanding and returned to his truck. “I’ll take care of things for your dad,” he told her after lowering the window.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

Michael nodded and was about to raise the window, but paused. “It’s none of my business. But I think your father... he’s lost, in a way. The world is moving fast, and he’s holding on to the way he’s always done things. And maybe he’s trying to hold on to you and Thor, but he’s doing it too tightly?”

Angie shrugged. “That’s possible, but Thor can’t stop living his life just because our father refuses to live in the present.”

Michael nodded. “I get it.” And he did. He raised the window and pulled away from the house, heading out to the job on Carson Hill.

His father wasn’t home when he arrived, and for that Michael was grateful. The job was a little ahead of schedule, and Michael made sure the office had all the invoices so Hansen could get paid on time.

“Where’s Peter?” his mother asked when he found her in the sunroom, knitting and watching the fog as it rolled in over the coast.

“I haven’t seen him,” Michael said, sitting across from her. She sighed, her needles never stopping. “Why? I know he’s probably busy.” He was supposedly setting up his business, but the hours he seemed to keep didn’t correspond with any type of business that Michael understood. “Has he said where he was going?”

“Just that he had some meetings... or something.” She was clearly concerned, and Michael pulled out his phone, sending Peter a quick message asking him to get in touch with Mom because she was worried about him. She lowered her knitting into her lap, meeting Michael’s gaze. “I just get the feeling that something isn’t right.”

Michael leaned forward. “Like what, Mom? What has you so worried?”

“I’m probably being stupid, but I heard him on the phone this morning. He was really agitated, saying that everything was fine and that there was nothing to worry about. That he’d take care of it and that he’d arrange to get it back. Peter sounded frightened, and when he saw me, he smiled and that was when he said he had a meeting he needed to get to.” She leaned closer. “I keep wondering exactly what kind of business he’s involved with. He keeps such strange hours, and he gets phone calls late at night.”

“Have you talked to Dad about it?” Michael asked. The only person Peter ever listened to was their father, and if Mother or he were to broach the subject, they’d get shut out.

“I tried, but he just says that starting a business isn’t a nine-to-five job and that I’m probably imagining things.” She picked up her knitting again as Rosa came in with a tray of iced tea. She set it down and was about to leave, but Mother stopped her. “Sit down, please,” she told Rosa.

Rosa perched herself on the edge of one of the other chairs, like she was expecting a ticking off and wanted to make a hasty retreat. Mother set her knitting aside and poured glasses of tea, handing one to each of them.

“What is it I can help you with?” Rosa asked, sending a questioning glance in Michael’s direction.

“Mom is worried about Peter,” Michael told her.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything about him.” She held her glass, the ice tinkling slightly. “His comings and goings are none of my business, and....” She appeared scared.

“Mom. It isn’t fair to ask Rosa to spy for you.” She had been with them for years. “It’s putting her in an awkward position. We expect her to be discreet about what goes on in this house, and if that’s so, then we need to do the same.” He sipped from his glass and refused to make a face. He never really liked tea the way his mother did, as sweet as possible. Still, he drank some of it.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Rosa. I should never have asked you.”

Rosa got up to leave.

“Oh, please sit down for a few minutes and have some tea. Keep me company.”

She nodded, and Michael set his glass on the tray and left the room. His mother was correct. Something wasn’t right, but he didn’t want to worry her. There was one way to find out what was going on.

Michael headed upstairs and down to Peter’s suite, pushing open the door. The bed was unmade and the chair covered with clothes. It looked like the room might have

been ransacked, except the furniture was all in place, but nothing else was. It was good to see that some things never changed, and his brother was as big a slob as ever. Michael stepped over the clothes and went to the desk against the wall, the surface covered in papers to the point that the wooden top had been completely obscured. He picked up a few and set them back down, shaking his head. If his brother was up to something, it would take forever to go through this jumbled mess to find anything of use. Still, he glanced at what lay on top, hoping that related to what his brother might be most concerned with now.

Most of the papers were phone bills and crap like that. Months of them were piled all over the place. He picked up one, the top indicating a number he wasn't familiar with. Did Peter have a secret phone? He made a note of the number in his phone, then shoved it back in his pocket. A creak from downstairs made him jump, and Michael wondered what the hell he was doing. Peter was his brother, and yeah, there was definitely some resentment there because of how his father favored him, but was this right? He hated spying and turned to set the bill back in place and paused.

He pulled out his phone once more and took a photo of the document. It pertained to a boat, and the one in Noyo harbor flashed in his mind. It was probably not related at all, since the size of the one in the document clearly indicated that it was larger than the one in the harbor. He put the phone bill back and guiltily left the room, closing the door before going to his own. Inside, he looked at the picture once again and thought of just deleting it. Michael knew he shouldn't let his father's feelings influence him.

"Mom, I'm fine. I had a meeting in the city, and a friend flew me down in his Cessna," Peter was saying as he headed for the stairs. Michael shoved his phone into his pocket as Peter passed his door.

"What's going on?" Peter asked without pausing for an answer. He seemed happy and damned chipper. Whatever issue there had been, it seemed to have been

resolved—and to Peter’s satisfaction. Michael closed the door, undressed, and showered before going down to join his mother before dinner, trying to put all this out of his mind. To his surprise, he succeeded, but only by letting his mind wander to Thor and his seemingly never-ending curiosity about the man.

The boat is gone.

The text came in a little after ten, and Michael read it a second time before he understood what Thor was talking about.

Did Wally get paid? Michael sent back and waited for an answer.

Don’t know. I was down at the harbor at the bar, hoping a certain local architect would make an appearance, and when I came out, it was no longer tied up.

Michael wondered what he could do about it as his phone rang.

“One of the guys in the bar said that it was loaded onto a trailer and hauled out about an hour ago,” Thor said without preamble.

“Then it could be anywhere by now.” Including well out of the area. He made a note to contact Wally in the morning.

“Yeah. But I found out something interesting, and I promised I’d keep you in the loop.”

Michael hummed. “So you’re saying that I’m thirsty, and I might need a drink?”

“I was thinking somewhere less public,” Thor said. “Like maybe a walk at the cliffs.”

Michael groaned. “Too dangerous. There is no light at all tonight, and it’s too easy to

step in a hole or get too close to the edge. Out there, it's dark as anything. And if we're in town and seen, then we can't be up to anything... if you know what I mean."

"Okay. Come to where we met before. I'll get a table." Thor ended the call, and Michael grabbed his keys and headed out, passing his mother and letting her know he was going to town to meet a friend.

"I'm glad you made it," Thor said as Michael strode into the bar. Thankfully, the place wasn't busy, and he was able to sit down without seeing people he knew.

"What did you find?" he asked quickly. "You said that the boat was gone."

"Yes. I ran the registration numbers, and it belongs to a company out of San Francisco, North Shore Holdings. They own two more boats and are owned by another company, West Coast Excursions International, which owns other companies, and since all of them are privately held, we ran into a brick wall regarding who owns them."

"I see."

Thor nodded. "The boat wasn't listed as stolen, and this evening, someone loaded it onto a trailer, and it was carted away, most likely someone sent by the company that owns it." He smiled and showed Michael an image. "There is a camera outside that end of the harbor, so I was able to get a plate from the trailer. It's registered to the same shell company as the boat." He seemed frustrated.

"Okay. So you didn't get very far. I'm not really sure how I can help."

Thor shifted the image on the phone. "Do you happen to know this man? He's the one who loaded the boat onto the trailer."

Michael peered closer at the image. “I do.” He felt a chill run up his spine as the ramifications of what he was seeing sank in. “He works for my father. His name is Hank Robards, and he isn’t on my crew because I wouldn’t have him. He isn’t someone I trust. I caught him doing something under suspicious circumstances, and my father didn’t believe me, but I refused to work with him. He’s under one of the other supervisors.”

Thor remained quiet as one of the servers came to the table. She took their order and hurried back to the bar. “I hate to ask, and I know I’m taking a real risk here, but...” He seemed to pale even in the dim lighting.

“Could my father be behind this?” Michael asked. “I don’t want to think he could. My father is many things... a major pain in the ass and a self-serving dick are definitely two of them. I know he’s skirted the edge of the law a few times, but I refuse to believe that my father would be involved in something that would rip away everything he’s built. There’s no way. Dad used to... fly closer to the line. I remember him and Mom arguing about it. But as he’s gotten older, he’s been a lot more interested in protecting his reputation and all that.” As much as he and his father didn’t get along, he would never suspect his father of running drugs. “My father was one of the people all up in arms when they legalized pot because he thought it was going to be the end of civilization as we know it. And legal or not, he has fired more than one person for drinking, smoking, or using pot while on the job. Hell, Dad still drug tests, and you fail, you’re out—and he still considers pot a drug. It’s written in every employment agreement that all our people sign.”

Thor nodded slowly, his eyes widening. “Then maybe it’s one of your people. Can you give me a list of Hank’s friends, folks he’s close to? Either Hank is directly involved in this, or someone he knows asked him to pick up the boat, and he’s being used as a mule.”

That was possible. It wasn’t as though Hank was particularly bright, and he was a guy



who seemed anxious to please his friends, so he'd be an easy mark and would have no idea he had picked up a possible drug boat. "Sure... got a pen?"

### Chapter Six

Thor sat back and let Michael write down names as the server brought their beers.

“I’m not as familiar with the guys as someone else might be, but these are ones I know Hank hangs out with.” He passed the paper over, and Thor took it without breaking their gaze. There was something about Michael that drew his attention and made him want to throw aside all the rules he knew he shouldn’t break. But damn, he wanted to know more about Michael, especially what was under those flannel shirts he seemed to wear each and every day. The fabric hinted at something pretty amazing, and Thor found himself fascinated by the hint of chest he got a peek at through the open buttons at his collar.

“I hate to say this, but we need to find out more about Hank. If he’s involved, then we can probably use the fact that there were drugs found on that boat to pressure Hank into telling us what he knows.” Thor was getting to the point that he needed to pull any thread he could to get to the bottom of this operation.

“And as soon as you do, everyone in town is going to know who you are and what you want. Hank is not going to keep his mouth shut, and if you arrest him, then people are going to talk. There isn’t a way to keep it quiet.”

“I know.” Thor was desperately trying to come up with his next move. Making a quick call, he called Miller and requested a BOLO on the boat and trailer. At least if it were spotted, he might find out something.

“Do you really think that’s going to get you anywhere?” Michael asked. “If I were

someone using that boat for anything illegal, I'd dump it or hide it fast, and it wouldn't see the light of day for some time. I certainly wouldn't use it again."

Thor nodded. "Thankfully most criminals aren't as smart as you are. They got the boat back, and since it wasn't being guarded and was just sitting there, they might think that no one really cared about it. And it was floating and wasn't taking on water, so maybe they would think it was seaworthy." He gave Michael his best smile as Michael leaned over the table, a hint of admiration in those eyes, one that Thor let himself bask in for a few seconds.

"You're hoping they use it again?" Michael whispered.

"Yeah. They'd already fitted it out with hiding places, so let them think they got away with it and that the boat is safe. Maybe they'll either leave the boat out in the open or try to use it again the next time they need to make a delivery at sea." Either way, he would get a lead on it and might be able to bring this whole thing to a close. Thor sipped from the mug, but barely touched the liquid itself. It was more of a prop anyway. Technically he was on duty.

Michael took a good-sized swig and then set the glass down. "So we just wait?"

Thor leaned over the table. "I just wait, and you go back to your normal life. You've been a lot of help, but I can't allow a civilian to get involved in this sort of thing. You need to stay safe, and the best way to do that is if you just forget about me and what I'm doing." That was best for Michael and for him. If Michael stayed away, then so would temptation, and if Thor was honest, Michael was sex on a stick—as tempting as a Snickers to a starving chocoholic. Even now, just having Michael across the table had him tugging at his collar and wishing the bar were ten degrees cooler.

"Really...?" Michael said with a dramatic roll of his eyes. "You would be nowhere with any of this if it wasn't for my help. You cast aspersions on my family, and now

you expect me to just back off and pretend nothing has happened. Well, bullshit, Thor. I'm not going to. I'm as involved with this shit as you are. And let me ask you, if another deal goes down, how are you going to identify the other boat? I'm the only one who saw it, and even though I only got a glimpse of it, I'm the one who could tell you if I saw it again." He was a smug bastard, that was for sure.

"Casting aspersions? What is this, Master Minds?" Thor retorted, to try to lighten the situation. Michael wasn't having it, cocking his eyebrows in that sexy way he had, sending heat through Thor and nearly knocking him off his game. "I can't put you in danger."

"And why is that? I'm sure you put yourself and others in danger all the time." He took another sip of beer, then licked his lips, showing Thor the very tip of that tongue, making him wonder just what Michael wanted to do with it.

"But not others if I can help it," Thor said.

"I'm more than capable of taking care of myself. I grew up here, and in spite of the fact that my family had money, I am very good at watching my own back."

Thor had no doubt of that. From what Michael had told him, he had been doing that for most of his life.

Michael pushed back his beer and stood. "I need to get home so I can get to bed and be up by six to be at the job site. But you let me know when you think there's going to be another shipment, and we'll be on the lookout together." Michael leaned over the table, his face a few inches from his, close enough for Thor to smell the hoppy beer on his breath. "And don't think of trying to cut me out of anything." His voice was almost a low growl.

"And what are you going to do if I do?" Dammit, he had to ask, and he had to push. It

was his nature, and Thor sure as hell hated being told what to do.

Michael didn't back away for a second. "You'll have to wait and find out." And fuck all if he didn't wink at him before striding out of the bar, those hips swaying just enough for Thor's eyes to follow the rise and fall of his ass cheeks in those damned tight jeans.

Thor's throat was suddenly very dry, and he took a gulp of beer and set down the glass. No matter which way he looked at it, Thor was fucked. If he let Michael get any deeper into the investigation and something went wrong, he was screwed. And yet if he just walked away and never saw Michael again, he figured he was equally screwed, and in neither case in the way he would like. Not even close. The fact was that, at least for now, he needed Michael, but he sure as hell was not going to let him get close enough to the people involved here for him to get hurt. That was how it was going to have to be, and Thor hoped to hell he could pull it off.

That night and the next day, Thor tried to make sense of what he knew, ran down leads, and spoke to Miller for additional information, but basically got nowhere. They hadn't been able to find the boat, and that pissed him off, even though there was a lot of ground to cover.

He checked out the areas around the various rivers yet again, looking for any sign of someone putting in or taking out, but all he came across were families and pleasure boaters and definitely not the craft he was looking for. His phone dinged with a message as soon as he got back on the main road and out of a dead zone. "What do you have, Miller?" he asked once he pulled off to the side of the road and returned the call.

"Don't know. We managed to get a little more information on the shell companies. They were incorporated within the last year, and the boat purchases were made in various locations. We tracked down the paperwork, and the purchases were handled

by lawyers. They aren't going to give up anything without a subpoena, which I can't get without more information."

"Even with the drug connection?"

"They'll simply say that the residue was there when they bought the boat at auction, and we can't prove otherwise," Miller said, and Thor rolled his eyes.

"What I need to know is when they might try another rendezvous," Thor said. "Or maybe they've had enough of handoffs at sea, and they'll simply drive their shit down."

"I don't know. They could be making this stuff just about anywhere. The DEA has satellite images of the entire area, and we haven't been able to find where the stuff is being produced. The only break we had is the drop-off that you missed and the boat that disappeared."

"Look, they have no idea that we're on to them at all. They brought their boat into port and took it out again with no trouble. My gut is telling me that it worked well last time, so they'll do it again. They think they got away with it. So why fix what isn't broken." He sighed softly. "No. There will be another drop-off, and probably in a few days. Getting product to market is how they get paid, so they aren't going to want to wait."

"Then you'll need to be sure to see this next one."

"I intend to." Thor ended the call and headed to his hotel. He was going to need to sleep, because one thing was for damned sure. He was going to perch himself on that damned cliff for the next week if he had to.

"Have you decided to camp out up here?" Michael asked as he strode out toward the

edge of the cliff. “You’re going to dig a path, and that isn’t good. Paths lead to erosion and a lack of cover for the land.” He stopped next to him, and Thor lowered his binoculars.

“How did you know I was here?”

“A neighbor saw someone out here, and since it’s our land, they called the house. You’re lucky Rosa gave me the message rather than my father. Otherwise, you’d be talking to the sheriff, and he would have a lot more questions than me.” Michael drew closer. “And to answer your next question, we’ve had folks camping out here on a number of occasions, so people keep watch.” He reached for the binoculars and looked through them. Thor knew Michael was able to look out over the water for miles in every direction, as he had been doing for over an hour. “It’s too early in the day, but the surf conditions are perfect. It’s not too choppy, and it’s expected that the marine layer will form and roll in this afternoon.”

“How do they find each other in that soup?” He already knew the answer, but was hoping to get new information.

“My guess is GPS transponders that each boat has the frequency to,” Michael explained, and Thor nodded. “I take it you didn’t find one.”

“No. But if they were smart, they took it with them when they brought the boat in. That way it can’t be traced to them, and they could transfer it to another boat without an issue.” He took back the binoculars.

“It’s too early, and you standing up here for hours is only drawing attention to yourself.” Michael turned and headed back, following a slightly different route. Thor sighed, knowing he was right, and followed him. Michael had parked his truck next to Thor’s, and he climbed in the passenger seat. “My truck is known, and no one is going to question it being here.”

“Where are we going?” Thor asked.

Michael waited until he had fastened his seat belt before leaning over the console. “Why don’t you buy me a late lunch, and then we can find something to keep us occupied for a few hours.”

Damn, the heat in the cabin of the truck went through the roof. Thor wondered if Michael meant that as it sounded, but Thor really didn’t care at the moment. He kept reminding himself that he was on a job and had no time for distractions. And Michael was most definitely a distraction—one he was finding it harder and harder to resist.

Their lunch was the world’s best shrimp and chips at Noyo River Grill. “Damn, those were amazing,” Thor said once he paid the bill, and they were back to the truck.

“Yeah. Fresh-caught shrimp, tempura, and fries so hot, they burn your fingers.” Michael groaned. “They opened six years ago down in the harbor and moved up here last year. You never ate here before?”

“Haven’t been back in that time,” Thor said, his belly more than happy and thrumming a little each time Michael turned toward him. “Where to now?”

“Let’s check out the possible boat launches to the south,” Michael suggested, and Thor made a right turn, went through the traffic circle, and headed south before making the left turn down into the ravine and along the outflow. There were no cars or boats as Thor pulled off the road, leaving the engine running.

“Well, this was a bust.”

Michael opened his door, got out, and went around to Thor’s door. He pulled it open, and Thor turned off the engine and slid out of the seat. “Is there something you wanted to show me?” He was unable to glance away from Michael’s deep, blue eyes.



“No.... Well, maybe....” He cocked those eyebrows and then drew even nearer.

Thor held that gaze. “What is it?” he asked in a whisper, and Michael reached up, sliding his hand around the back of Thor’s neck, sending a shiver up his spine.

“Do you really need me to give you an answer?” Michael whispered, and Thor swallowed hard, nodding ever so slightly. “Because I can. I could talk for quite a while and say nothing at all.” He moved a little closer, the heat wafting off his body. “But there are times when words are vastly overrated.”

“And is this one of those times?” Thor whispered.

“Definitely.” He closed the gap between them, and Thor got the first taste of his lips. The kiss was soft and didn’t last too long. Michael drew back, their gazes meeting before he kissed him again, this time with more heat and force. Thor wound his arms around Michael’s waist, pulling him to his chest as he returned the kiss, deepening it. His entire body seemed to be on fire, and he hoped to hell it never ended. Michael was one hell of a kisser, controlling the interaction, ripping down the walls that Thor had spent years building in a matter of seconds.

Once he pulled back, Thor inhaled deeply and went in for another kiss, but Michael stilled. “Don’t move. There’s a boat coming down.” He remained close, his gaze settled over Thor’s shoulder.

“Is it the same one?” Thor asked, the desire fog around his mind instantly clearing.

“No.” Michael relaxed and drew close once again. “It’s a family with kids, and I’m glad we’re on the far side of the truck from them.” He kissed Thor hard, pressing him back against the side of the seat.

Laughter drifted through the fog that was quickly taking over. When Thor pulled

back, Michael groaned. “What?”

“We have people around, and I don’t think those parents are going to thank us if their kids see us going at it next to my truck.” Thor took a deep breath, letting his blood slow in his veins. “As much as I’d like to see what’s possible between us, we don’t need to be putting on a show.” He raised his gaze, noticing that the sun was now shrouded by mist. “Besides, I have a job I should be working on, and my boss is not going to let me off because I had something better to do.” He took a deep breath, clearing his mind. “Go around to the other side of the truck before I forget myself. Okay? I need to do this.”

Michael didn’t say anything, but got into the passenger seat, and after Thor started the engine, they climbed back up to the street, taking off for the cliff overlook.

“It’s not likely that we’ll see anything,” Michael told him as Thor handed him a set of binoculars. Then he closed the door and headed out onto the cliff, settling in the now-damp grasses.

“Flip the switch on the side and look through them now. The ocean will show up in shades of blue to black, with people in the yellows and a boat engine red. This will read the heat signature of anything out there, and by now there shouldn’t be much. Our craft will be close to shore, while any commercial vessels will remain farther out. If they make an appearance, we should be able to figure it out.” He calmed down, and Michael did the same.

“Do you think they’ll come from different directions again?”

“I’m willing to bet on it. There are only so many places our small boat can come from, and they are all to the north. There is nothing in that direction that can handle a boat the size you described coming from the south.”

“And what do we do if we see them? How much detail are we going to get?”

“Not sure,” Thor answered. “Never used these before, but any difference in heat is going to display in color, so we are going to need to be sharp.” He shivered as the dew began coating his back. Still, he stayed as quiet as possible and hoped that their quarry showed up sooner rather than later. The waiting was getting under his skin as he lay there, watching.

Minutes clicked past, and he waited as the light continued to fade. “If it gets too dark, they aren’t going to be able to see to make the transfer,” Michael commented. “I wonder if we should....”

“Yeah. Just a half hour more and—”

“Wait,” Michael cautioned. “There’s something headed down the coast, small, with an engine that I’d guess is putting out all she has. Anything from the south?”

“Not quite yet...,” Thor said, watching the edge of the point as heat indicating color appeared around the edge. “We got something.”

“Okay. What do we do?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:03 am*

### Chapter Seven

Michael lowered the heat-sensing binoculars, turning toward Thor. “We can watch what’s out there all we want, but we don’t know what exactly is going on.”

Thor sighed. “I know. There is only so much detail that we can make out. Sometimes this job is frustrating as hell.

Michael went back to watching, looking as closely as he could, hoping to see something that could be helpful. He concentrated on the larger boat, figuring they had gotten a good look at the smaller one. “It’s sleek and built for power. Whoever owns it has plenty of money, because those aren’t cheap by any means. I’m willing to bet that there’s a great deal of power in her engines.”

“Could you recognize it if you saw it again?” Thor asked.

“Hell, yes,” Michael answered without hesitation. “It’s the same one I saw the other day. And since there are no other safe harbors south of here, it’s coming up from San Francisco. And we know its schedule for the last week.” Michael watched and rattled off as much of the detail as he could remember, as well as what his mind was filling in from the heat signature. “Maybe someone could check on a boat of that description leaving and returning to the bay area at about that time,” he offered, and Thor patted him on the back with one hand.

“Good thinking. I wish there was a way for us to get the name of the boat or some kind of specific information. But I can’t see that kind of detail from here, and I don’t think the fog is going to grace us by lifting again the way it did before.”

Michael lowered the binoculars. "I'm afraid not. There's nothing but pea soup out there." He really wished there was a way to get the name, but this equipment only showed heat variations, and the paint on the back of the boat with the name was not enough to change that signature. Still, he spent as much time as he could providing the details he could see to Thor. "They're both slowing down."

"Yeah, and look, the smaller boat is sitting lower in the water."

Michael could see that. "I think Wally's repair is failing, and they're taking on water." The two boats were getting closer even as the smaller of the two sank deeper. "This is bad. They aren't going to make it." He grew more and more anxious as the two craft met. The men on the smaller boat began transferring things to the larger one and then jumped aboard. The larger boat backed away. The heat signature of the engine quickly grew dark, and Michael figured the water had reached it. "It's gone."

"Yeah. I'll need to call the coast guard." Michael continued watching as the larger boat turned around and headed south. Then he returned to where the smaller boat had been, but any signs of it was gone.

"I hope no one was hurt," Michael said as he stared at what was now just a cold patch of ocean. He lowered the binoculars.

"They got off," Thor said. "There were two on the small boat, and I saw them get to safety." Michael nodded as the light around them continued to fade. "Just stay there for a minute." He pulled out his phone and made a call, letting the coast guard know of the possible wreck. Then he hung up the phone and shifted closer to where Michael lay in the grass, an arm sliding over his back.

"I know you do this all the time, but what did we accomplish tonight?" Michael turned toward him as the night settled in around them. "We don't have the name of the big boat, and the smaller one is at the bottom of the ocean. It might break up and

wash on shore eventually, but it was probably just far enough out that who knows if it will ever be seen.” The whole exercise seemed kind of futile.

“But like you said, we now know what’s going on, and we have a timeframe for the last two runs. I’ll contact my boss, and he can help track down the larger boat. Now that we know the schedule, we can set up a trap for them.” Thor pulled him closer, and Michael went willingly.

“You know, this is probably why I became an architect rather than going into law enforcement. I thought I could be helpful and maybe see if I couldn’t make the area where I live better.”

“You are making it better. You’re the reason that I had anything to go on in the first place.” He drew nearer as Michael swallowed hard, then inhaled deeply. The damp evening air did nothing to hide Thor’s deep scent. Hell, he rested his head against his arm just so he could get more of it. Thor took the binoculars, along with his own, and set them aside. Then he tugged Michael closer, sliding his lips over Michael’s, taking his breath away in a matter of seconds. In an instant, everything to do with boats, his family—all of it—flew out of his head.

Michael pressed against Thor, the heat radiating off his body warming Michael quickly. “Would it sound bad if I said that I’ve wanted you since that first day I saw you on the cliff?”

A low, rough laugh greeted him. “I know. I could tell. But then, I wanted you too.” Thor slid his hand under Michael’s shirt, his fingers gliding over Michael’s skin before finding a nipple. Thor kissed away further conversation as he lightly pinched, making Michael whimper against his lips out of sheer mind-clouding passion.

“Jesus,” he mumbled as Thor pressed even harder, taking possession of his lips, fingers roaming, spreading heat, making it bloom all over him.

“Exactly,” Thor said, pulling back. Michael could barely make out any details in the fading light, but he didn’t need any. His mind filled them in perfectly. He knew the cut of Thor’s jaw, the way his eyes grew deep as the ocean, and how the muscles bunched in his shoulders. He’d been watching him more closely than he should, and all those things and more were impressed on his memory. He let his hands wander, finally feeling those muscles under his palms as Thor straddled him, leaning closer, blocking out the last of the sky, filling his vision as he filled his senses.

“Do you think this is a good idea?” It was getting darker, and the only thing he could hear over the crashing ocean waves was the thumping of his own heart in his ears. He wanted this more than he dared to let himself admit. To say that Thor was hot was an understatement. The man was smoking, and he made Michael feel the same way, which only added to the attraction.

“I think it’s a fucking fabulous idea,” Thor whispered, a hand resting on Michael’s belly.

“You and me is a great idea. It’s the location I’m questioning,” Michael said as he slowly sat up, and Thor backed away. “This grass can cut, and there are bugs and things that are not conducive to this sort of activity.”

Thor slowly got to his feet and offered Michael a hand. Michael managed to stand, and they picked up the equipment before heading back to the trucks. Without a word, Michael climbed in his and followed Thor out to the main road, heading north to his hotel, his mind swirling the entire time. More than once, he questioned if this was the right thing to do. It wasn’t likely that Thor would stick around once he had figured out who was running the drugs from the area. As he drove, keeping an eye on Thor’s taillights, he wondered if he could handle Thor leaving, if taking the chance was worth it. Still, he followed and pulled into the hotel parking lot.

Michael sat in the truck until Thor got out, and even hesitated until Thor turned to

look at him, those eyes inviting him forward. Michael shut off the engine, climbed out of the truck, and followed Thor inside and down the hall to his room. They both seemed to pause at the door, and then Thor unlocked it and held it open. Michael went inside, and Thor closed the door behind them. He stood next to the bed, waiting for Thor, feeling the indecision washing off both of them. Part of Michael's mind screamed that it wasn't too late and reminded him that Thor was going to leave, but then Thor turned to him, the naked passion in his eyes tossing logic out the fucking window. Suddenly Michael didn't care. If Thor left, then he left, and Michael would figure it out.

He swallowed, realizing in a momentary flash of self-insight that he spent most of his life surrounded by people, yet he was still alone. But this past week or so, that feeling had been absent. Even when they weren't together, Michael hadn't felt alone. He liked that, and he was going to hold on to it for as long as he could. He swallowed, meeting Thor's gaze, even nodding slightly. In that moment, everything changed. Thor practically threw himself across the room, pressing against Michael with enough force to nearly knock him off balance, but then Thor was there, his arms around him, holding him up, lips pressed against his.

Michael gasped and then held Thor, returning the kiss with years of stored-up desire. His head spun as Thor pulled at the base of his shirt. He lifted his arms, and off it went, Thor pulling away for a moment before he was back. It seemed like their kiss hadn't stopped. Thor shed his own shirt, and Michael groaned at the skin-to-skin contact.

"Fuck, Thor...", Michael groaned deeply.

"Oh, I intend to," Thor returned, his voice as rough as gravel, pressing Michael toward the bed. "I intend to keep every damned person in this hotel up half the night with your yelling." The expression in his eyes was wicked as all hell. "Now, you're wearing too many clothes."



“Look who’s talking,” Michael countered.

Thor backed away and began kicking off his shoes. Within ten seconds, Michael stared at a naked Thor, standing stock-still, completely forgetting what he was supposed to be doing. Thor, however, remembered and pushed Michael onto the bed. He hadn’t even stopped bouncing on the damned mattress before Michael found his pants yanked down to his ankles.

“You forgot my shoes.”

“Then get them off,” Thor growled, and Michael managed to kick them off his feet. The pants followed, but by then, Michael’s arms were full of Thor, and he had him pressed into the bed, the heat between them reaching explosive in seconds. Thor kissed him and then moved to his neck, sucking lightly as the hottest hands in history wandered over him, sending Michael into a writhing frenzy.

“You’re fucking hot...,” Thor told him, and the words might have been a little cheesy, but Michael couldn’t have cared less. He was about to say that he found Thor the same, or something to that effect, but all that came out was a cry as Thor slid his lips down Michael’s cock, taking him deep, with a loose-throated talent that Michael had only dreamed of in his wildest alone-in-his-room fantasies.

“Thor...,” Michael crooned as he threw his head back, trying to hold on to some sort of control. Thor pushed all his buttons, and Michael hadn’t had this kind of hair-trigger lack of control since he was a fucking teenager. Thor pulled away, his eyes filled with delicious mischief, tongue sliding over a slightly swollen lower lip. “What are you trying to do to me?”

“Make you scream. Maybe make you remember what it’s like to be completely out of control.”

Michael's breath hitched, and Thor kissed him. "You almost had that... and more...."

Thor drew closer, his eyes looking deeply into Michael's. "Then give it to me. Don't hold back. You aren't with your family or anyone else with any kind of ridiculous expectations of how you should act or who you should be. All I want is Michael, pure, unassuming, unpretentious you. Nothing else." Thor slipped a hand down his belly and then gripped his throbbing cock, holding it still and hard in his hot hand. "And let me tell you, it's taking every bit of talent I have not to take all you've got to give... and that's considerable."

"Oh... you like what I've got?" Michael smirked.

"Don't be coy with me. You've got plenty, and you know it." Thor grinned, and Michael used that moment to roll them on the bed.

"Look who's talking," Michael said as he gripped Thor's large mouthful and took a big taste for himself. He had talents, Michael knew that, and he thanked God that sucking cock was one of them. He loved it—the rich flavor, the head sliding over his tongue, but most of all, he loved the way big, strong, confident Thor seemed to come apart under him. That alone was heady as all hell.

"Oh fuck....," Thor groaned, his entire body seeming to shake. Michael relished every movement and reach, and every strangled cry as he took him deep and then slowly backed away, knowing he was driving Thor out of his mind.

"Smug bastard....," Michael said, backing off for a moment.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you." Michael gripped Thor's cock, stroking slowly, wanting to keep him on edge for as long as possible. "You think you're the only one who knows how to make

a man scream.” He took Thor again, determined to get him to cry out his passion.

“Is this a contest?” Thor gasped between heaving breaths.

“Do you want it to be?” Michael asked, swirling his hand around Thor’s spit-slicked cock. “I could make it one, but you’d lose.” He grinned. “Or since your eyes are about to roll back into your head.” He returned to his delicious task, and Thor gasped, gripping the bedding as his mouth hung open.

“Don’t stop,” Thor whispered, though Michael had no intention. He sucked hard, taking Thor’s considerable length all the way down until he felt him still. Then he backed away, stroking as Thor went to pieces under him, coming hard as he cried out in an ecstatic display, the sight and sound searing themselves deep into Michael’s long-term memory.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:03 am*

### Chapter Eight

Thor lay still, his eyes wide, staring up at the ceiling and wondering if he had somehow died and gone to heaven.

“Did I scramble your brains?” Michael asked, smiling at him.

“Maybe...,” Thor answered as he turned to where Michael lay next to him. “I guess you proved your point.”

Thor nodded. “You’re a competitive fucker, aren’t you?” Not that he was complaining about it for a second.

Michael propped himself up on his arm. “You don’t know the half of it.” He winked, and Thor pounced, pressing Michael down onto the mattress.

“That may be true, but I know plenty.” He took Michael’s hands, pushing them over his head, and then kissed him hard. “And I fully intend to show you just how much that is.” He groaned, because in truth, Michael had sort of worn him out, and his head still spun.

“I know you’re just stalling for time.” Michael gave him a cocky grin. It was clear, judging by the hard cock pressing against his hip, that Michael was ready to go. “It’s okay. You older guys need more time.”

“God, I’m, what, maybe three years older than you?” He grinned and slowly erased the distance between them, lighting a fire with his kiss that sent quivers through

Michael. He could feel everything Michael did. The man was so expressive and unreserved, at least with him. Thor knew that in most situations, he put people on edge. He was big and could be demanding. When he was working, he could be intimidating as all hell. But Michael saw past all that. Hell, he saw through him to who he really was and didn't hesitate to call him on shit. Maybe that was what had gotten under Thor's thick armor so damned easily.

"Yeah. You're old," Michael teased and pulled him down into a kiss that curled Thor's toes. "Do you think you can get it up again, or do I have to give you a helping hand... or lips?"

Thor groaned, because everything about Michael made his heart race. "I'm more than ready for you...." Thor growled as he used his knee to part Michael's legs. Michael lifted his knees and folded them to his chest, needing Thor, who fumbled a few seconds with his kit on the bedside table before managing to retrieve a condom.

"Were you a Boy Scout?"

"Fuck no. But I like to be ready, and there was plenty of hoping where you were concerned." He ripped the square open and rolled it on before leaning over Michael once again, muscles stretching as he dug around before straightening up with a small bottle of slick. Michael gasped, smiling slightly to himself at that admission.

He groaned as Thor prepared him and writhed on his fingers before doing his best to relax as Thor's impressive cock slid into him. He pushed out, and Thor slowly filled him. The burn was heavenly, and Michael gasped and did his best to breathe evenly. Then Thor lightly pinched his right nipple, adding a new level of sensation that split his attention. Michael hissed and groaned, his brain nearly overloading from all the pleasure signals Thor sent rushing through him. "Jesus...."

"Am I hurting you?" Thor asked, stilling completely.

“Fuck no,” Michael groaned and looked deep into Thor’s eyes.

“But...,” Thor started, and Michael squinted, his body adjusting to the amazing intrusion.

“I’m not made of glass.” He smacked Thor on the shoulder. “Are you going to get on with it?” His vision was already a little clouded just from the excitement, and when Thor moved his hips, Michael nearly came unglued.

“Is this okay?” Thor asked, stopping once more.

Michael lifted his head. “Of course. What is this about?” He wound his arms around Thor’s neck, pulling him down. “Sweetheart, I’m really fucking flexible, and I can take all you have to give me, so go for it.” For a second he wondered who in the hell had done a number on Thor, but he didn’t have the brain power for that at the moment, and once Thor started moving again, all questions flew from his head as Thor sent him on a damned wild ride.

“Are you always that... athletic?” Michael asked as he settled on the bed with Thor, after disposing of the condom, lying next to him. “It was... pretty damned hot.” He turned toward him.

“Good.”

Michael leaned a little closer. “But who the hell sold you a bill of goods?” He held Thor’s gaze, expecting evasion. “Because whoever they were was full of shit.”

“I had an ex who said I hurt him and....” Thor cleared his throat. “I never did it on purpose, and he said it wasn’t my fault exactly, just that I was too much for him....”

Michael rolled his eyes.

“I liked him, and I guess it made me a little sensitive.”

Michael pushed Thor onto his back and then straddled his hips. “You don’t need to worry about that with me. I like you just the way you are, big dick and everything.” He cocked his eyebrows. “I like that you’re worried and careful, but I also loved when you just let yourself go....”

Thor kissed him, and as soon he backed away, Michael tried to stifle a yawn, but failed. Then he checked the clock and groaned. “You can stay,” Thor offered.

Michael smiled and nuzzled his neck. “I’d love that more than anything. But I have to get home before my mother worries and my father starts asking a whole bunch of asshole questions.” He slipped out of bed. “But I will be thinking of you.” He sighed, leaned in to kiss Thor, and then started dressing. “Besides, I get the idea that if I stay, neither of us is going to get much sleep, and I have to be on the job by seven or else my father is going to get involved, and that is never a good thing.” He pulled on his jeans and shirt, then sat on the side of the bed to put on his shoes.

“I suppose.”

Michael stood and turned to Thor. “I know how this looks, leaving you in the hotel room.” He leaned over the bed. “But it’s taking all my willpower not to strip off and climb right back into bed with you.” He kissed him. “Call me in the morning, and we can arrange to have lunch, maybe try to figure out where we go from here.” Michael stopped, his hand on the door. “I want to try to help.”

“I know. But this is just about where things get dangerous. The closer we get to these guys, the more desperate they are going to get. A cornered snake is most likely to strike.”

“Then we’ll just have to get them before they know they’re cornered.” He took one

last look at the stunning naked man in the bed before leaving the room and heading home.

“Where were you?” his father asked as Michael walked into the house. It seemed he had been waiting for him. “I called you a couple times and sent some messages. There’s an issue at Carson Hill.”

“The drywall? It’s being delivered at seven. I already handled it.” He continued through the kitchen.

“I should have been able to get hold of you,” his father snapped. “You have responsibilities.”

Michael turned around. “Which I handled. My guys know what they’re doing, and the job is right on schedule and is coming in slightly under budget, which should make you happy. We have a small amount of breathing room if something goes wrong.” He returned to the table, but didn’t sit down. “What is it that has you so pissed off? That there might be something wrong, or that things are going right?” He glared at his father.

“I didn’t know, and when I heard there was an issue....” He sounded different, maybe a little contrite. “But I couldn’t get hold of you.” His lips drew into a straight line, and Michael returned his father’s stony glare.

“You could have trusted me to have it under control. I always have. But you just can’t seem to do that. If there had been a real issue, I would have called you.” Probably so you could yell and make it worse. But he didn’t say that, though he wanted to. “Maybe I can’t do anything to make you happy, and I should quit trying.” There was nothing he could do to change the way his father acted, and arguing wasn’t going to do any good at all.



Michael left the room and went to his own, where he took a shower and crashed into bed.

He woke when his alarm sounded a little after six. He showered and dressed before going to the kitchen, where Rosa gave him a quick breakfast, and then he headed over to the building site.

Michael stayed on-site until nearly lunchtime before returning home. He'd left his phone charger in his room and needed to get it. As he came in the back door, Rosa stopped him. "I need to do laundry today." She seemed nervous, which was so unlike her. "Peter didn't bring his things from his room, and he gets mad if I go in there."

"It's okay. I'll get his laundry." Michael went to his own room and grabbed his phone charger before entering his brother's room. In Peter's bathroom, the hamper overflowed with dirty clothes. Michael pushed them down inside the liner and pulled it out, heading for the door.

As he passed the desk, a stack of papers fluttered to the floor. Michael set down the bag, gathered the papers, and was about to place them on the desk, but a set of numbers and letters stopped him in his tracks. He found himself holding the registration for the drug boat he'd seen in the harbor, the one that seemed to have sunk during the last rendezvous. "Shit..." he said softly, wishing he had the guts to take the page. Instead, he pulled out his phone, took a picture of the page, and filed through the others, taking images of additional marine registrations. Then he slipped his phone back into his pocket, set the papers on the desk, and headed for the door, opening it to find his startled brother.

"What are you doing in here?" he snapped.

Michael lifted the bag of laundry. "Rosa asked me to get it for her." He looked around the room. "You know, this really is a pigsty." Let his brother fume over that

and maybe he wouldn't notice that his papers had been moved. Michael continued out the door, only pausing once the door closed to catch his breath.

Once he was able to make his feet move, he continued through the house, put the bag of laundry near the machines, and headed out, glad he didn't pass anyone else, because he was pretty shaken and needed a chance to think. Once in the truck, he contacted Thor.

"I'm a little busy running down a few leads. Can we meet for dinner?"

"Thor, I've got something big. Bring your laptop and a portable network connection. We can meet at The Pub in Mendocino. I'm on my way there now."

"Michael...."

"It's important, and I don't know what to do." He waited, his heart still pounding a mile a minute.

"Okay. I'll be there as soon as I can get there." Thor ended the call, and a few minutes later, Michael made the turn into the small town of Mendocino, then wove over to the restaurant and found a parking spot right in front. He was able to get a table outside under the canopy and sat down, ordering a Bloody Mary and watching the entrance for Thor. He had finished half the drink before he arrived, Thor's eyes widening.

"What happened?" Thor asked. "Are you in any danger?"

Michael shook his head, pulled out his phone, and showed Thor the images he'd taken of his brother's papers. "Rosa, the housekeeper, asked me to get my brother's laundry. I guess Peter is squeamish about having her in his bathroom. Though now that I've been in there, maybe she's the one who doesn't want to get anywhere near

his mess.” Michael had some more of his drink to steady his nerves.

“Okay. What is it you’re showing me?” Thor asked as he went through the pictures. Michael knew the instant he saw the first one. “That’s the boat from the harbor. The one we believe sank.”

“And check out the owner, North Shore Holdings.”

Thor nodded. “That jives with the information I got earlier. But what scares me is why your brother would have this.”

Michael swallowed hard. “Look more closely at the other pictures. Two of the boats are under the name North Shore Holdings, and the last page has the name West Coast Excursions. Those are the holding companies you told me about.” He leaned closer. “Which means that my brother’s boats, owned by various companies, are involved in trafficking drugs.” All he could do was shake his head. “What the hell do I do? He might own the boat, but I can’t prove that he’s involved, and it’s likely the one boat we can tie to the trafficking is at the bottom of the ocean. And with its location, it’s not safe for the coast guard to retrieve it.”

“And all we have is what I gathered from it on our visit, which I sent to my boss.” Thor groaned. “So basically we have next to zip as proof.” Still, he smiled. “But we have a lead, and I have just the person who can follow it.”

“Miller?” Michael asked.

“Yeah.” Thor said. “Now that we have a little more information, it will help put together the trail of ownership, and maybe we can get a better picture of what’s going on.” He pulled out his phone and got up from the table, wandering out front. Michael couldn’t help watching him go, even as he wondered what the hell Peter had gotten himself into.

He and his little brother used to get along so well when they were younger, but the teenage years had been hell for Michael, particularly once he figured out that Peter was his father's favorite and could do no wrong. Peter worked it out, too, and then the games began. If Peter behaved badly, he blamed it on Michael. When Peter wanted something Michael had, he'd either take it or beg their father to get him one. Either way, he'd get what he wanted, and Michael couldn't do shit about it.

He avoided his brother and his father when at all possible out of self-preservation. It really sucked, but it was how things were.

"Miller's going to work on it," Thor said when he returned to the table, sitting back down.

"Have you ever actually met Miller?" Michael asked. "Or is Miller just a voice on the phone?" He was curious and wanted to talk about anything other than his brother.

"Miller is very real. Though I know Miller is a cover. We've met a few times, but always in shadow. Miller is someone I know I can trust with my life, but beyond that I know very little. Sometimes not knowing something is the safest thing for everyone. If someone wants to know anything, I can't help them."

"But what if they think you can?" Michael asked.

"Miller is a name and a phone number. When I met Miller—sort of—I didn't even see a face. But we've worked together for two years, and trusting is what counts. That's all that matters."

"Is it really?" Michael asked. It seemed kind of strange, but then, he had never had any contact with this kind of business before. "Sorry. You know more about this than I do." He took another sip of his Bloody Mary before pushing it away. "What do we do now?"

Thor's expression grew hard. "You do nothing. I think I need to talk to your brother, and you shouldn't be part of this. Send me the pictures you took and then delete them off your phone. Make sure to delete them permanently—your family doesn't need to know that you're involved with this in any way. The least I can do is try to keep from causing you any trouble."

Their server came to the table, and Thor ordered a burger while Michael got a salad. He wasn't very hungry, and thoughts of his brother being involved with this kind of activity left him cold.

"What is it?" Thor asked.

"I don't know how, but my father is going to find a way for all of this to be my fault. Somehow this will come back to me."

Thor leaned over the table. "You're a talented person with lots of offer. Quit working for your family. Follow your own path. You don't need them, though it's pretty clear to me that they need you a hell of a lot. What is your father going to do without you?"

Michael smiled slightly. "He has no idea about everything I do. I can't just abandon the family. My father is a pain in the ass, but there's my mother and even Peter. I can't just leave them hanging out there."

Thor placed his hand over Michael's. "Do you always think of everyone else before yourself?"

"Someone besides my mother has to," Michael countered. "Anyway, that's enough of the Michael Constantine pity party. It's a waste of time and effort." He liked that Thor kept his hand on his. "How are you going to handle this with Peter?"

"I'm not quite sure yet. But I need to know where he'll be. I want to take him by

surprise and maybe get him a little lubricated beforehand. Do you know where your brother likes to hang out?"

"North Coast Brewing, because he likes their beer. But his late-night hangout is Golden West Saloon. He's well-known there and has a number of friends, so he isn't likely to be alone... if you know what I mean."

"Lots of lady friends?" Thor asked.

"Oh yeah," Michael said as he nodded. "Peter is good-looking, and he can be charming when he wants to be. It also doesn't hurt that he carries the Constantine name, and everyone knows that means he has money. Not that he has all that much of his own at the moment. There are trust funds set up, but neither of us gets the money until we're thirty. Still, that doesn't seem to matter. Dad makes sure Peter has plenty of pocket money."

"Okay. Thanks for the information. It looks like I'm going to need to check out the bar and see if I can run into your brother."

"You know this task would be much easier if you were a woman. Peter isn't likely to give you the time of day." Michael smiled. "You can smile and be as interesting as you like, but you have nothing Peter wants."

"I'll figure it out."

Michael nodded and hoped there was some sort of explanation for what he'd found. He might not get along with Peter, but he sure as hell didn't want him mixed up in this mess.

### Chapter Nine

Michael was right, damn it all. Thor had spent three hours in the bar attempting to hold a conversation with Peter and getting a cold shoulder in favor of the blonde who came over to talk to him. And she was followed by a brunette that Peter talked up for an hour and eventually left the bar with. Thor sighed, paid his bill, and left, heading back to the hotel.

“Did you have any luck?” Michael asked when Thor called him from the car.

“Nope. So I’m going to need to switch to plan B. Let me know when he gets home, and I’ll talk to him there. I hate to speak with people on their home turf, though.” He pulled to a stop at one of the lights, waiting for it to change. “Miller came through with more information, and the coast guard confirmed that the boat that sank was the one we’ve been following. But it’s in an area with strong rip currents and it would be dangerous to try to retrieve it.”

Michael was quiet. “I’m at home now. But I might be able to help you. I’ll call you later.”

“Either that or you could just tell me in person.”

“Give me twenty minutes,” Michael said before ending the call.

Thor grinned as he continued on his way to the hotel and went inside. He locked the door and flopped down on the bed, his mind running through ways to get Peter to come clean about what he was doing. He probably had enough to scare the guy half

to death, but what was really important was to get everyone who was involved and that meant being more subtle.

A knock on the door startled him, even though he knew Michael was coming. He checked and then opened the door. “What did you find out?”

“Peter is going to be at the job site tomorrow afternoon. I told my father that I needed some help because of a plumbing issue... that doesn’t exist. Peter has basic skills, and Dad said he’d send him over.” Michael grinned. “I simply played into my father’s narrative that I can’t do anything right, and Peter can do no wrong, and I got what you wanted. There’s a construction trailer there that you can use to talk to him.” Michael drew closer, his eyes growing darker. “Now, what about what I want?”

“And what would that be?” Thor asked as Michael closed the distance between them.

“Let’s just say that it isn’t likely you’re going to get much sleep tonight.” He stayed close enough that Thor could smell his warm breath, and Thor wound his fingers around the back of Michael’s neck. A lack of sleep was a small price to pay for a night with him.

Damn, it had been difficult to get his eyes to stay open. Thor had no idea how Michael had managed to get up and out of the room so damned early. Thor remembered a kiss and then falling back into a restful sleep almost immediately. His phone had woken him, and now he was on his way to Michael’s worksite after making a call to Constantine Construction inquiring about Peter and being told he was going to be on a job site. That call would give Michael cover. He’d be damned if he’d cause trouble for him.

The site was crawling with workmen all going about their tasks. Thor strode up to Michael, giving no indication that they knew each other. “I’m looking for Peter,” he said softly.



“Right over there,” Michael said, pointing him out and following Thor as he went to where the younger Constantine brother hauled supplies to some of the work teams. It seemed like chaos to Thor, but as he watched, some of the movement patterns began to make sense, with men working and others supporting them, making sure they had supplies and the tools they needed.

“What do you want?” Peter snapped when Thor stopped him. “I have plenty of shit to do, and I can’t wait to get the hell out of here.”

“Construction not your thing?” Thor got a snort in return as Peter set down the sheet of greenboard.

“Wouldn’t be here unless my dad told me to be. I want to finish the hell up and get back to more important things.”

“Like what?” Thor asked.

Peter paused, his gloved hands resting on his hips. “What are you—the none-of-your-fucking-business police?”

Thor paused. “No. I’m the guy the coast guard called when they located your drug boat at the bottom of the ocean, and I’m the guy who can take you in for meth distribution. It was found on the same boat while it was laid up in Noyo Harbor, before you had one of your friends retrieve it.” He smiled. “Now, you can lay off the attitude and answer my questions, or I’ll make a few calls, and you can be taken into custody right here in front of all these men.”

Peter stood taller. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Other than trafficking drugs along the coast. Your boat was used to run drugs out to the pickup point where they’re transferred. Now, like I said, all I need to do is make a

call.”

Peter turned to look around, his face growing paler by the second.

“Can we talk in there?”

Peter nodded, and Thor led the way, pulling open the trailer door, ready in case Peter decided to try to make a run for it. He climbed the steps, and Thor followed him. “I only let them use the boat.”

“Let who use it?” Thor asked as a knock sounded on the door. He opened it and sighed, letting Michael inside.

“I’m his brother and this is my job site,” Michael said. Thor wanted to tell him to leave, but didn’t have time for an argument.

“Stay quiet and out of the way.” Thor turned back to Peter. “I think you better start from the beginning.”

Peter practically collapsed into the chair. “I have been trying to start a charter boat business out of the area. Take people out fishing and things like that. But it’s impossible. The weather is too unpredictable, and there are too many days when no one can go out, so bookings had to be canceled and refunded. I was losing my shirt. Then I was approached to use one of the boats on a regular basis. They paid me good money.”

“And you didn’t think about what they wanted it for?” Michael asked.

“How was I supposed to know?” Peter really seemed clueless.

“They retrofitted part of it to hide and transport drugs. And they nearly sank it a week

ago. It came in damaged and was repaired.”

“Yeah, I know. Wally said he fixed it, and I paid him for his work.” Thor wondered how Michael’s brother could be this stupid.

“It was a temporary patch,” Michael broke in. “Wally needed to make permanent repairs.”

“And now your boat is on the bottom out there. The insurance isn’t going to pay because it was used to smuggle drugs, and you’re out a boat.” Thor found a pencil and paper and placed them in front of Peter. “I want everything you know about the people who rented the boat. What the dates were, what they did. How they looked. Everything.”

Peter sat at the small table against the wall and began writing. Michael took the chair across from him. “How did you meet these people?” he asked, but Peter continued writing a second before pausing, looking at Michael and then Thor.

“Who the hell are you?” Peter asked. “You’re not a cop. I know the local ones.”

“I’m with the DEA,” Thor answered.

Peter nodded and slowly turned to Michael. “Are you working with him?” Peter asked Michael. “You seem pretty chummy even if you’re trying to act like you aren’t. You two knocking boots or something?” Peter was clearly trying to get under Michael’s skin, and Thor wasn’t going to allow it. He needed to be the one in control.

“You write. That’s your job. And answer your brother’s question. How did you meet these renters?”

Peter continued looking at each of them.

“Whether you believe it or not, Michael is trying to help you.”

“Hank Robards introduced me. They seemed nice enough, and they paid in cash up front for three months. It was enough to keep the business afloat.” He sighed. “I should have fucking known it was too good to be true.”

Michael’s expression softened. “That’s what usually happens.” He leaned over the table. “Swear to me that you didn’t know what they were using the boat for.” He held up his hand. “Remember when I found you and Sally up in the treehouse when you were fifteen?” Thor wondered what this was about, but he kept his mouth shut. “Mom and Dad never found out. And remember what you swore then? So swear you didn’t know.” The intensity in the shed was almost overwhelming. “And if you lie to me, I will know.”

“I swear I didn’t know. I thought they were going fishing.”

“In the evenings in the fog?” Thor pressed.

“I didn’t know when they used the boat. They paid me to have it at their disposal, and they paid extra after it was damaged. I think they just wanted to keep me happy.”

Michael nodded. “You give Thor everything you have on them, and if they come calling again, you tell them that your boats are all spoken for and that you have nothing available right now.” Michael was impressive. “Don’t try to find out who they are or press for any additional information. Just say thank you for their business and walk away. If you know nothing, they might just leave you alone.”

Peter groaned. “You think they’ll come after me?”

“Not if you make like you know nothing about what they were doing. The boat sank, and they can’t expect you to keep supplying them after that. So just walk away and

keep yourself safe. If they think you're a danger to them, they will come after you." He couldn't stress that enough, and Peter seemed to understand, judging by the way he paled.

"Am I going to get in trouble?" Peter asked.

"As long as you stop letting them use your boats and you didn't know, then you'll be fine," Thor explained. "But keep your eyes open. Looking for the quick fix is a surefire way to get yourself in deep trouble." Hopefully they had gotten to Peter before he was in too deep.

"Are you done?" Peter asked.

"Have you written down everything you know?" Thor looked at the page. "Include how they contact you and any phone numbers or email addresses. How they paid. Was anything sent to you? I need everything. Did they only rent the one boat?"

Peter paused, and Thor held his gaze, not letting him off the hook. "The first time, they rented one of the other ones, but it was a mess when they returned it. I cleaned it up myself and then only let them use the one boat. It was one I bought at a police auction, and I didn't pay all that much for it."

"Thor is going to need to see that first boat," Michael said. "I know you cleaned it, but they might have left something behind that he can use."

Peter seemed defeated. "Okay. It's in storage at the moment. I was paying docking fees and no one was renting, so it was cheaper to take the other boats out of the water. If I get a job, I put it in the river and we go out."

"Okay. You finish with that and then we'll take a ride." Thor let Peter complete his task as Michael watched his brother closely.

“Are you working with him?” Peter asked as though Michael had betrayed him somehow. “Did you set me up to get me here?”

Thor smacked the top of the table, making both Peter and Michael jump. “This is not a family crap thing or anything between the two of you. I could have simply gone to your house and held you for suspicion. The reason I’m not is because of Michael... at least in part. We’re talking here because of him, and I’m going to run down your story to verify it. But know this: you’re getting the benefit of the doubt because of your brother, so think about that.”

“Why?” Peter asked. “You don’t owe us anything.”

Thor met Michael’s gaze. “You may not know your brother as well as you think you do.” He flashed a smile and then gave Peter one of his coldest looks. “He’s honest and caring, and he takes a lot of shit from his family because he’s loyal, and he cares.” Thor had stopped giving a shit about what most of his family thought of him a long time ago. “So you don’t get to blame him for what you’ve done. Understand?” He took the paper from Peter, read it over, and had him sign it. Then he folded the page and put it in his pocket. “Now let’s you and me take a ride so I can see this other boat.”

Peter nodded and stood. “What about Michael?”

Thor was glad Peter couldn’t see the shine in Michael’s eyes. “He may have work he needs to finish here, but if he doesn’t, he knows where we’ll be.” Thor opened the door and followed Peter out. “We’ll take my truck.” He had no intention of giving Peter a chance to run. Thor waited until Peter was inside, then climbed into the truck, started the engine, and pulled out, not surprised at all when Michael followed them.

Thor climbed onto the boat. This was much nicer than the one he’d searched in Noyo harbor. “I can see why you’d want this kept nice.”

“I got a good deal on it. The boat had been repossessed a year ago, and the bank needed to sell it,” Peter said. “I love taking it out, but I don’t get too much of a chance. Renting it is a little pricier than what most people would pay,” Peter explained as Thor started in the very front of the cabin, methodically working his way through. He had hoped that Peter had missed something, and it was ten minutes before he found what he was looking for in the one of the compartments under the table.

He took pictures and then got some samples, then opened the portable drug kit and swabbed the area, the test coming back positive. He bagged the rest of the substance as well as the test results and continued searching, but came up empty otherwise. Once he climbed on deck, Peter and Michael stood together, both looking at him. “I have a positive test.”

“Shit...,” Peter grumbled. “Are they going to impound my boat?”

“I don’t know,” Thor said softly. “But I suggest you cover it and leave it where it is; don’t try to take it anywhere. We may need to access to it later.”

Peter nodded and swallowed hard. “What about me?”

“Provided everything you’ve told me checks out, I’ll treat you as a witness. But if it doesn’t, I will come after you. This sort of thing is not taken lightly by anyone.” He held Peter’s gaze until he nodded.

“I told you everything I know,” Peter said. “Can you take me back to my car so I can go home?”

“Yes. But don’t leave the area.” Thor got in his truck and waited for Peter before driving him back to the construction site. “If you are contacted by your renters, don’t promise them anything, but be sure to let me know. Pay attention to anything unusual

that might allow us to find them.”

“I will.” Peter got out of the truck. “I want this over as much as you do. I didn’t know, and I feel so stupid for letting one of my boats be used for something like that.” Thor didn’t say that he should, but he thought it. Peter closed the truck door, went to his fancy car, and pulled out. Thor followed him a little way, making sure he actually went home.

His phone rang, and Thor smiled at Michael’s name on the display.

“What do you think? Is Peter in as much trouble as I think he is?”

“I told him the truth, and I hope he did the same.” Thor pulled off to the side of the road. “I meant what I told him. Now, I need to know where I can find Hank Robards. I think he’s the next person I need to speak with.”

“I don’t know, but some of the guys will. I’ll ask a few of the guys I can trust and get back to you.” Thor pulled back on the road, and Michael called back five minutes later. “He hangs out at The Wheel in Fort Bragg.”

“Cool. Looks like you and me are going out tonight.”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:03 am*

“He’s inside,” Michael said as he leaned into Thor’s open driver’s-side window.

“Did he see you checking the place out?” Thor asked, and Michael shook his head.

“He was easy to spot at a table with some girl. He was in deep conversation with her and didn’t seem to be paying attention to anything else.”

Michael was nervous and a little excited. Thor seemed to understand that and put a hand on top of where Michael’s rested on the door. “I know how this feels. I remember early in my career.” He leaned closer, and Michael bit his lower lip, wondering if this was going to be one of their last adventures together.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want this for you,” Thor added.

“Oh....” He pulled his hand back, about to turn away.

“I don’t mean that I don’t want you, because I so fucking do.” Thor glanced at the tavern. “This is not the time I wanted to talk about this shit. Hell, I’d be happy if we never had to talk about it. But I don’t want this life for you. I want you safe and somewhere that the people I deal with in my business can’t find you.” For the first time since he’d met him, Thor seemed nervous, and Michael realized that part of his confidence might be a veneer.

Thor leaned closer, and Michael thought he might try to kiss him right here on the street across from the bar, but he stopped, gaze as intense as ever. “If I hide where

they can't find me, would you be able to do the same?" Michael loved the fierceness of that gaze. "We don't always get exactly what we want. But when it's damned close, we hold on with everything we've got." Michael squeezed Thor's hand and smiled as Thor turned it over and held Michael's in return, his gaze never faltering.

"You know what to do?" Thor asked.

Michael nodded. "I got your back. Let's do this." He stepped back, and Thor got out of the truck as a car pulled up behind them. Thor strode across the street, and Michael watched every step, memorizing every movement, especially the rise and fall of the world's most amazing ass.

"Jesus..." a woman's voice said from next to him. He looked at her and realized she was watching Thor almost as intensely as he was. "You don't see that every day. Is he yours?"

Michael hesitated and then nodded. Because whether Thor knew it or not, he was his, and Michael intended to make sure he knew it.

"Lucky bastard." They both watched until Thor glanced back. Michael flashed a smile because he couldn't help it, and then Thor went inside and the woman turned, heading into the convenience store behind him.

Michael got back in the truck and waited five minutes before walking across the street and entering the bar. They had agreed to go in separately. Michael's gaze instantly went to Thor, who, beer in hand, headed for Hank's table. Thor sat down, and Hank tensed instantly. Michael wished he could hear what Thor was saying to him, but he could imagine it. Thor was direct, and before his eyes, Hank paled and then tried to slide out of the booth.

Michael went over, blocking his exit. "I don't think so." Hank tried to push past him. "Sit back down," Michael demanded, and pressed Hank back. He slid back into the

booth.

“What do you want? I’m not at work right now. I ain’t got to take your orders.” He tried to push past Michael, and in that instant, he knew Hank had a gun. Michael met Thor’s gaze and then looked downward, hoping Thor understood what he was telling him. If they threatened too much, Hank could pull his gun, and Thor could be hurt.

“I had a nice long talk with Peter today about boats and some of his clients. People you recommended to him.” Thor’s voice remained calm, while Michael’s leg bounced under the table. Thor nudged it with his leg, expression not changing, and Michael calmed. “I want to know who they are and everything else you know.”

“I’m not telling you shit. Now let me out of here.” His voice nearly cracked, and Michael knew Hank had gone from confident to scared in two seconds. He tried to shove his way out. “Let me go or someone is going to get hurt.”

“Do you think I came in here without muscle of my own? I have heat trained on you at this moment, so put your hands on the table and settle back, Hankie boy, because you’ll tell me all I need to know, and you’ll do it with a fucking smile, or I’ll shoot your balls off.”

Hank moved slowly, placing his hands on the top of the table. Michael grabbed a napkin and pulled the gun from under Hank’s coat and leaned forward to set it on the floor under the table before kicking it over toward Thor, well out of reach. “Now, tell us what the deal is.”

“Hey, there’s plenty to go around. The deal is big enough for all of us.”

Thor leaned over the table. “The DEA isn’t interested in any of your deals.”

Hank’s fear level rose sky high. “Hey, I didn’t actually do anything. I was just getting a boat for friends and trying to help Peter out at the same time.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.” Thor pulled out his phone and passed it over. “Send a message to the first contract and tell him to come on in. We have who we want on a silver platter.”

Michael sent the message. The response was almost instant. On the way.

“It ain’t me. I don’t make the stuff or anything. They....” Hank stopped and paled even more until he was almost ghostly white. “If I tell you anything, they’ll....” He groaned. “These aren’t nice people. They’ll kill me if they think I’ve been talking to anyone.”

“Who are they?” Thor asked. “I want everything you know. Otherwise, I can call the local police, and they’ll come in here and arrest you in front of everyone, and I’m sure that will start tongues wagging.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” Hank whined.

“Other than drag my brother into this,” Michael snapped, keeping his voice low. “Now, are you going to tell him everything he wants to know?”

“But my job....”

“Has already flown out the fucking window. You need to be worrying more about how much time you’ll be spending behind bars.” He was fed up with Hank and wanted to beat the hell out of him right here. But he knew he shouldn’t, and losing his temper wasn’t going to help anyone.

The door to the bar opened and a woman in her late thirties entered. She seemed to take in the place and then walked their way. Thor smiled as she stood at the end of the table.

“What can we do for you, little lady?” Hank asked when she smiled at him.

She leaned over the table, giving him a good look at her chest. “You can quit acting like an ass, and come with me. These two are going to follow, and if you’re good, all your buddies are going to think you scored big time. But if not, I’ll beat the shit out of you, and everyone in town will see you get your ass whipped by a woman. Understand?” She flashed another smile, and Hank nodded slowly. Michael stood, and Thor did the same. Once Hank got to his feet, the woman took his arm. “Thor can shoot you before you bat a lash, remember that.” Then she guided a shell-shocked Hank toward the door. Thor quickly retrieved the gun from under the table, and they followed the “happy couple” out of the bar.

“Is that Miller?” Michael asked.

Thor nodded. “Best boss I ever had.”

“Could she really do all that?”

“And more. She is one badass. Everyone underestimates her, but she could have killed Hank half a dozen ways between the table and the door.”

Michael swallowed. “Could you?”

“Probably,” Thor answered, and Michael shivered as they stepped out into the night.

“Does that do something for you?”

Michael thought for a second and then nodded. “It shouldn’t, and that kind of scares me. But I know you’d never hurt me.” He continued watching Hank and Miller as she got Hank to her SUV, where she cuffed him and got him in the back seat. “What now?”

“She’ll take him to regional DEA headquarters, where he’ll sing like a canary.” Once Hank was secured, Thor gave her the gun Hank had carried, and she secured it as evidence. “Thanks again for all your help with this.” She half smiled. “Both of you.”

Michael gaped a little. “Is that it?” He turned to Thor. “Don’t we get to go in and watch them break this guy into a million pieces until he spills his guts? And then we set a trap to catch the rest of them?”

Thor slipped an arm around his waist. “You’ve been watching way too many cop shows. This is just one piece of the puzzle. It’s all about information and working our way up the ladder.”

“Don’t worry. The rest of the organization will be found. We take things one step at a time, and this is a big one. But we also know that as soon as they know they have been compromised, the operation will pack up and move elsewhere.”

“But....”

“This is my job. I gather information and lay the groundwork. I’m often not involved in the actual arrests. That isn’t my function, and I’m not an official agent.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow, but there’s going to be more work for you to do here,” Miller said. “Enough to keep you busy for a while.” She got in the SUV and drove away.

“Okay. It feels like a bit of a letdown,” Michael said.

“Not for me,” Thor told him. “You heard her. She has plenty of work in this area.”

Michael nodded and swallowed. “Are you going to take it? I understand if you don’t want to, with your family and all their drama.”

“The issues with my father are why I stayed away for so long. At least that was what I told myself. But maybe what I really needed was a reason to come back.” That intensely heated gaze nearly knocked Michael’s knees out from under him.

“You’ll stay?” He barely let himself believe it.

“Let’s go somewhere more private where you and I can talk about it. Preferably in a more horizontal position with a lot less clothing.” He winked, and Michael got into Thor’s truck, wondering about his non-answer answer.

Michael closed the hotel room door and pounced, tackling Thor onto the bed. He smiled at him and straddled his hips, holding down his arms.

“You like this?” Thor asked.

“Yeah, you promised that we’d talk, and I intend to hold you to that.”

Thor grinned like a mischievous little kid.

“You said that just to wind me up, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, and it worked.” He raised his head and kissed Michael hard. “I’m going to stay. My father may be a complete pain in the ass, and I’ll tell you right now that he and I are never going to get along. But I want to be close when my sister has her baby. I want to be the coolest uncle Thor ever, and I want....” He paused, looking to the side. Thor only did that when he was nervous.

“If you can’t say it, then you can’t have it. It’s that simple.”

“It is?”

“Yeah.” He drew closer. “All you have to do is say what’s going on behind those damned walls of yours, and you can have whatever you want.”

“If you’re so anxious to talk about your feelings, then why don’t you start?”

“Because I asked first,” Michael said. “It’s pretty simple. You gave lots of reason why you’re staying, and they’re good reasons. So why should I stay? I could get a job

down in the city or go to the East Coast. Anywhere I want.” He released Thor’s hands and was about to give up when Thor put his arms around him, drawing Michael even nearer.

“I want to stay, and I want you too. I don’t know where things are going. I have a crappy track record with relationships. Just look at the mess that is my family if you want proof.”

“Okay. I get that. My family isn’t exactly the Brady Bunch , but we can figure it out, if that’s what you want—what we want.”

“And it is. That’s what I want, but I don’t know if I have a right to it. What I do is dangerous, and....”

“How about if you let me make the decisions for me?” Michael closed the gap between them. “We’ll figure it out... together.” He kissed him, and Thor pulled him closer, the kiss deepening. It appeared that the time for talking was over.

When Michael woke early the following morning, the bed was empty, and Thor sat at the table, already dressed, speaking softly on the phone. He noticed Michael and smiled, but continued his conversation. Michael used the bathroom, and when he returned, Thor had hung up. “Miller?”

“Yeah. She was able to get a lot of information out of Hank, and they’re running down those leads. They also found the yacht being used out of San Francisco. They tracked down the owners, who’ve been in Zurich for the last two months and were shocked to find out their vessel was being used at all. Apparently they had closed it up before they went away.” Thor left his phone on the table. “The DEA is going over it to see what they can find.”

“But there isn’t going to be much.”



“We’ll have to see. Like Miller said, these things are long-term operations.” He got up and approached Michael. “Just like I hope this is beginning of something that will last a very long time.” Thor slipped his hot hands around Michael’s back, tugging him to his chest before kissing Michael breathless.

“As much as I’d love to stay here with you. I need to check on things at the job site to make sure everything is buttoned up for the weekend, and then I’m going to need to go home, check on Peter, and speak to my father. It’s way past time that he and I put a stop to the way he pits us against each other. His favoritism hasn’t helped either of us, and it’s time it stopped. I’ve had enough of it.”

“And Peter?” Thor queried. “Do you think he’ll go along?”

“Yeah. Dad’s pressure and expectations were part of what pushed him to do what he did. He was desperate to make his business a success in part because my father expected it.” Michael sighed softly. “I used to hate Peter because my father seemed to love him more, but maybe being the apple of my father’s eye isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

Thor nodded. “I figured as much. Get dressed, and we’ll go.”

He smiled and wanted to ask Thor if he was sure, but he got his answer in those amazing eyes. Michael backed away and began dressing. “You really up for a round of Constantine family drama?”

Thor sat down next to him. “I am. You had my back, and now it’s my turn to have yours. It’s what you do for your boyfriend? Partner? I have no idea what the proper term is.”

Michael smiled. “Lover?” he asked tentatively.

“Yeah... that too,” Thor whispered as Michael finished getting dressed. “Now let’s

go do battle with your old man, and then we can get something to eat, come back here, and repeat what we did last night... two or three times.”

“What? You need practice?” Michael asked, jumping away, and Thor reached for him. “I didn’t think so, but then practice makes perfect.”

Thor caught him and held him tight. “Then you don’t need it, because you’re perfect already.” He kissed him hard, and Michael groaned and figured what the hell; the guys always stowed everything when they were done, and the talk with his father could wait an hour... or two. Thor pushed him back on the bed.

Okay, maybe he and Dad could talk tomorrow.