

All We Ever Have

By D.W. Marchwell

The past is a ghost,
The future a dream,
And all we ever have is now

(Bill Cosby)

For Neil

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Firstly, I'd like to address how I've dealt with the adoption process in this story. While the adoption process is, in any country, a very serious and painstaking procedure, I found myself faced with the unfortunate option of conveying the story of two gay men, married and committed to each, who embark on a quest to find, love and nurture a family, or providing an accurate account of the months of paperwork and security checks and home visits that these same two men would need to endure before becoming adoptive parents. For the sake of the story, I chose the love story over an overabundance of detail on the adoption process.

Secondly, the children's real names would not have been used on the website that Hank and Scott were browsing. This would have been done to protect not only the children, but also the children's other family members. I chose to make their real names appear on the website so I would not have to keep explaining that "Anthony" was actually "Jens" and so forth. I don't doubt that most readers would be able to handle the transition, but for the sake of clarity, I decided not to take the chance of having readers flipping back and forth wondering, "Who the hell

is Jens and what happened to Anthony from the website?"

Finally, I would like to thank all of those readers who have sent me many, many messages over the years detailing how much Hank and Scott's story has meant. For all of you, I present Hank's story, "All We Ever Have". I hope you enjoy it.

CHAPTER ONE

Hank stopped rifling through the T-shirts and held his breath. He cocked his head to the side, turning his left ear closer to where he thought the sound was coming from. He'd only come to the store to get a few T-shirts; Scrappy had begun to complain that Hank's existing T-shirts were starting to get a little too frayed and haggard. So, while his husband was in Toronto for the opening of his latest musical, Hank had decided to accomplish this particular task, and to tackle a few others as well. With any luck, Scott would show his appreciation when he returned in two days.

Hank was lost in his thoughts of Scott's warm, smooth skin when he heard the whimpering again. Or were they sniffles? He freed his hands, stooped over to retrieve his shopping bag full of toys for Matthew and Ellie, and walked toward the change rooms. He waited; the sound was getting louder. Definitely sniffles. He walked to the last change room and stopped when he saw them: two incredibly tiny sneakers, turned in like a snow plow.

"Hi there," Hank said, his voice a mere whisper. "Do you need some help?" Hank pulled his phone out of his back pocket and sat cross-

legged in front of the door. He looked around and wondered where all the other shoppers were. How did this little child manage to lose his or her parents? "My name is Hank. I know I'm a stranger, so I'm going to put my phone under the door. Do you know how to work the phone? Did your parents show you how to call for help?"

"Yes," the tiny voice responded.

Hank watched as a little hand reached out and took the phone, some tears glistening off a few fingers. "Okay, do you know your mommy or daddy's phone number?"

"Yes," the child said.

"Okay, good. Do you know where you are?"

"No," the small voice said. Hank wished he could give the little one a big hug and tell him or her that it would be okay.

"Okay, well, when your mommy or daddy answers, you tell them that you're in Marshalls in the men's section."

"Daddy? I'm lost."

Hank choked up as he listened to the child get out just that much before the little one's tears started again. There were more sniffles and Hank could only imagine trying to calm down a

scared child over the phone. He thought of his nephew, Matthew and his niece, Ellie. He wasn't even one of their parents, but he didn't have to wonder how frantic he would be if anything happened to one of them.

"A man gave it to me so I could call you."

Hank figured the father was wondering where the phone had come from.

"He said his name is Hank," the little voice said. The phone was placed on the floor and pushed toward him. "My daddy wants to speak to you."

Hank picked up the phone and put it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Do you have our son?"

"Well, no," Hank said, flustered by the question. "He's sitting in one of the change rooms and I'm sitting outside. I just let him--"

"Where are you?"

"Marshall's. Men's section change rooms."

"We'll be right there."

"I'll be outside and--" Hank was going to explain that he'd wave to them, but the line

went dead. "Your mom and dad are on their way."

"'Kay," the little boy said. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome," Hank said as he stood up. "You stay in there, okay. I'll keep an eye out for your parents. What do your mommy and daddy look like?"

"I don't have a mommy."

Hank cringed and felt awful. There's no way he could have known that, but still, he felt terrible that the little boy's poor father had to deal with a death, or divorce, and then being frantic about his son being missing, even if only for a little while. *But the man on the phone had said 'our' son, so that meant...* Hank shook his head and returned his attention to the scared child.

"Will you tell me your name?"

"Scott," the little boy said. Hank closed his eyes and smiled. *Of course, it is,* he thought. *What goes around... A Scott saves me and now it's my turn to return the favor.*

"I like that name. I think it's my favorite name in the whole wide world."

"Are my daddies here yet?"

"Not yet," Hank said, then wondered if he'd

heard correctly. He was torn between leaving the little boy and walking a few feet away to see if he could see his parents anywhere nearby and staying put to keep Scott comforted when he heard the clunk of the lock.

He looked down and saw a beautiful little boy with blond curls and two of the biggest, bluest eyes he'd ever seen. "Hello," Hank said and offered a smile. "Should we go and see if your parents are here?"

"Okay," Scott said as he wiped at his eyes.

Hank stood and walked toward the first available aisle, surprised when he felt Scott's fingers take hold of one of his. He looked down at the flushed face and felt as if his heart would burst out of his chest.

"Scott!"

Hank looked to his left and saw a short, stocky man running toward them. Scott let go of Hank's finger and ran toward the other man. Hank sauntered after him, not sure if he should just leave them alone or if he should introduce himself.

"Oh, thank God," the man huffed into his son's hair. "How many times have we told you not to wander off like that?"

"I'm sorry," Scott said, his eyes filling anew. "I didn't mean to."

"Probably playing on the escalators again."

Hank saw a second man approach. This one was taller, thinner and loaded down with about a half-dozen shopping bags, which he dropped before wrapping his arms around what was obviously his family. *Two daddies*, he thought to himself. *So I wasn't hearing things*.

"Are you Hank?" The tall dad asked, letting go of his partner and his son.

"Yes," Hank said, offering a smile. "He was very brave."

"Thank you so much for keeping an eye on him."

"Not a problem," Hank said as he offered his hand.

"Kyle," the tall dad said, shaking his hand. "And this is Doug. And you've already met Scott."

Hank laughed when Scott extended his hand. He shook it gently and turned to the shorter father. "Doug," Hank said, shaking the other man's hand. "You have a beautiful family."

Kyle and Doug exchanged a look and Hank wondered how many times they'd heard the

opposite. Even though this was Canada and same-sex marriage and same-sex parents had been allowed for almost a decade, there were still a certain portion of the population who saw both as nothing more than the decline of the western world.

"Thank you," Doug finally said before squeezing his son tight.

Kyle put his hand out and caressed his son's cheek and then rested that hand on Doug's shoulder. "We needed to hear that, especially after what that woman--"

"Kyle," Doug whispered. "He doesn't care about what that woman said."

"What?" Hank asked, although he had a pretty good idea of what the woman said. Hank imagined that it was probably something similar to what his father had said to him three years ago.

"He's right," Kyle said, his fingers raking through Scott's hair again. "It doesn't matter."

"Well, I've probably heard the same, perhaps even worse," Hank admitted. "I know it's not easy to hear, but... Anyway, I have my very own grown-up Scott at home who keeps telling me that I shouldn't let those comments get to me. And

he's usually right about everything else, so..."

Kyle and Doug exchanged another look. "Can we buy you a coffee? Or something? To thank you?"

"Sure," Hank said, figuring he could be a little late to Brian and Kari's. He'd call and let them know. Hank was curious to know if Kyle and Doug had adopted Scott, and if so, what the process had been like. "I just need to call my brother- and sister-in-law to let them know I'll be a little late."

"Oh, we don't want to keep you," Kyle said.

"They won't mind," Hank said. "In fact, I was kinda hoping to ask you how you, uh, came to be a family."

"It's okay," Doug said, still seeming reluctant to let go of Scott. "Scott knows he's adopted."

"You and your partner are interested in adopting?"

"More me right now, but I think I'm wearing him down." With his own Scott seeming less and less resistant to the idea of adopting children, Hank figured now was the time to act. "He doesn't think he'd be a very good parent."

"Sounds familiar," Doug said, looking over at

Kyle.

Hank laughed and wondered if he and Scott had just, quite possibly, made some new friends.

Hank was driving to Brian and Kari's for dinner. He was whistling one of the tunes that he'd heard Scott composing, 'the big show stopper' Scott had called it.

Hank couldn't remember the last time he'd been this excited. Not only did he have Doug and Kyle's phone number, but he'd also gotten a hug and a kiss on the cheek from little Scott. *Thank you for helping me*, the little boy had said, with no prompting from either of his fathers. Hank had been really patient for the past three years, giving his Scrappy time to adjust to the idea, time to deal with his apprehensions about becoming a father. Hank felt as if meeting these two men and their precious little boy was a sign. Now all he had to do was convince his husband.

Hank had lost count of the number of times they'd babysat Matthew and Ellie, and he'd lost count of the number of times he'd pointed out that Scott had become adept at kissing boobos and settling them down for their naps. The man

had become a master at calming the squeals of injustice when Matthew would take the toy right out of Ellie's hands. Hank would take Matthew aside and explain why that wasn't appropriate while Scott would soothe and comfort, a skill Scott shared with everyone and anyone, and one of the reasons Hank had fallen in love with the man.

But, just to be on the safe side, Hank would float the idea by Brian and Kari. If anyone knew Scott, it would be his brother, Brian. And Kari was no slouch at reading people either. She'd been in Brian and Hank's lives for many years, first as the helicopter pilot that Brian's company hired to transport the trees and then as Brian's wife--and Scott's brother-in-law. And during all these years, she'd always managed to distill any disagreements and conflicts down to the essentials.

Hank had already spent most of last night discussing this issue with his mother, Rose, when he'd been back on the mainland to have dinner with her. His sisters had not been there, as he'd anticipated, but Frank had been there. In fact, Frank had obviously been spending quite a bit of time with Rose, if Frank helping with the laundry and cutting the lawn

were any indication.

The idea that she was becoming close to another man did not bother Hank in the least. He was sincerely happy for her that she was, quite possibly, finding love again, and love that wasn't conditional on her making him happy as she'd done with Hank's father. What was bothering Hank a little was that she didn't seem to want to confirm Hank's suspicions. She was surprisingly tight-lipped about the whole thing.

Hank would have to relay his suspicions to Scott; if anyone could get her to open up about Frank, it would be his adorable and irrepressible Scrappy.

He parked on the street and grabbed the bag of toys for Matthew and Ellie, wondering if he would be able to stay a little later and convince Brian and Kari to let the kids stay up past their bedtimes, just this once. It was his usual refrain whenever he visited, other than consistently asking if the exhausted parents would like him and Scott to take the little ones for the weekend. Hank loved those weekends with the kids.

He knocked on the door and tried the door. Open, as usual. He let himself in and announced his arrival.

"Hi Hank," Kari said as she looked over the railing. She was wiping her hands on a dish towel and smiling. Until she saw the bag of toys. "Henry! I thought we agreed no more toys for a while."

"Really?" Hank decided to try to charm his way out of this, like Scott would do. "Were we on the phone at the time, 'cause you know the reception out here is really bad."

"Hank," Kari said as Brian walked up beside her, Ellie cradled in his arms. "We're running out of space."

"I wonder where he learned that particular trick?" Brian laughed and looked down at his daughter, pretending to nibble on her fingers. "Scott just called us."

"Oh yeah? Checking up on me, was he?" Hank took the stairs two at a time.

"No," Kari said, taking the bag from Hank as he reached the top of the stairs. "He called to let us know that everything is going well and he'll see us when he gets back."

"Two more sleeps," Hank said, taking Ellie from her father. "Yes, only two more sleeps. How's my precious little Princess today? Did you miss me?"

Ellie giggled and grabbed a lock of Hank's hair. "Ahnk," she said as Hank propped her up so they were eye-to-eye. No one was really sure if she was trying to say his name or his relationship to her. Hank assumed the former.

Hank tried not to laugh, but failed. He would miss hearing her mispronouncing his name. Matthew had not had any problems, but for some reason, to Ellie, Hank was Ahnk. He kissed her on the cheek a couple of times, luxuriating in the smell. He wondered why she smelled so good, and why her hair was slightly damp. "Did she just have a bath?"

"Little accident," Kari said, returning to the counter to finish preparing dinner. Brian joined her. "Which will explain why Matthew is in time out."

"Oh oh," Hank said, smiling into Ellie's bright blue eyes. "Did he hurt you?"

Ellie shook her head and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. "Mafoo's frew juice."

"Matthew threw his juice at you?"

Ellie nodded again, placing both her hands on Hank's face. "Sticky."

"Juice can be very sticky," Hank agreed and

pretended to bite Ellie's fingers. "Did he say sorry?"

"No, time out."

"What's his sentence, warden," Hank asked looking over at Kari.

"Another ten minutes ought to do it," she said as she drained the vegetables in the sink and then moved to the oven to check the roast.

"Sounds fair," Hank said, placing Ellie on the counter. "Is there anything we can do to help? Ellie loves helping, don't you Princess?"

"No," Brian said, cutting the bread and loading up the basket. "Kari's done most of the hard work." He moved over to the table to get Ellie's booster seat set up and the plastic plate and utensils sorted.

"It smells fantastic," Hank said. "It's been nice not having to eat all alone in that empty condo."

"How's your mom doing?" Brian finished his arrangements and walked over to take Ellie from him.

"She's great," Hank said. "In fact, I can't wait for Scott to get home and work his magic on her."

"Oh?" Kari pulled the roast out of the oven and placed it on the counter. Brian walked over, picking up the knife and fork before carving.

"It would seem that Mom and her friend, Frank, are sharing laundry duties. And when I arrived last night, Frank was just finishing up mowing the lawn."

"Good for her," Kari said, heading toward the bedrooms at the back of the house.

"May I?" Hank practically sprinted to reach her. "I'll explain later," he said shrugging his shoulders.

"Sure," Kari said. "But don't promise him anything. And don't tell him about the toys you brought."

"Roger that," Hank said and then made his way to Matthew's room. "Matthew?" He said before knocking on the door. He waited for his nephew to open the door and to tell him to come in. Nothing. "Dinner's ready."

"I don't care."

Hank opened the door and found the three-year old sitting by his bed, knees drawn up to his chest and his face wet from crying. Hank got

down and sat cross-legged, for the second time that day, across from Matthew.

"Bad day?"

"Yes," Matthew said, indignant.

Hank wondered if it had been hours or perhaps something more like a half-hour or so. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Okay. Will you come out and eat dinner with us?" Hank put a hand on his nephew's knee for a few seconds. "I'd really like it if you would come and eat with me. Maybe tell me about the good parts of the day."

"Only if I say sorry to Ellie."

"Why would you have to say sorry to her?"

"I threw my juice at her."

"Why would you do that?"

"She broke my Leggo castle."

"Do you think she did it on purpose?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think that?"

"'Cause I wouldn't let her have any pieces to play with."

"Did you need all the pieces to build your castle?"

"No."

"Then why couldn't she have some pieces?"

"They're mine."

"I thought all those toys belonged to both you and your sister."

Nothing. Matthew just chewed his bottom lip.

"When Uncle Scott and I bring you presents, they're for both you and Ellie. Otherwise, your room and Ellie's room would be completely overrun by toys. Two of everything just so you wouldn't have to share." Hank scooted a little closer. "Sharing's not that hard, is it?"

"I guess not."

"Will you come out and apologize so we can be together then?"

Matthew nodded, almost imperceptibly, and Hank pushed himself off the floor and scooped up his nephew and gave him a big kiss on the neck.

"It just wouldn't be the same if I didn't get to see your handsome face."

Hank put Matthew down when they reached the table. The little boy made his way over to his

sister and apologized for throwing his juice and then kissed her on the cheek.

Brian looked over at Hank and gave him a thumbs up. Kari just smiled and put some food onto Matthew's plate.

As Hank took his own seat at the table, he was more convinced than ever that he was ready to be a father.

CHAPTER TWO

Hank had been driving for almost an hour, his fingers tapping restlessly on the steering wheel, his left leg bouncing uncontrollably as he thought about seeing his Scrappy again. They'd been apart for less than a week, but Hank didn't like being without him. He didn't sleep as well, fell back into bad eating habits and then there was the feeling of being alone in that huge bed. No warm skin to snuggle up to, no tummy rubs and certainly no wandering hands combing through his chest hair or endless hours of foreplay.

He pulled the truck off Electra Boulevard, and had no trouble finding a parking spot. It was before noon on a Thursday, so Hank wasn't surprised to find the airport with only a few thousand people. At six feet five inches, Hank towered above everyone else, so he had no trouble finding the gate. He perched himself against one of the massive columns and waited. He had about forty five minutes to wait, time he would spend imagining all of the things he would do to Scott once they were alone in the truck.

He was smiling to himself at the realization that, even after five years together, he was just as much in love with Scott as he had ever

been. The long legs, the beautiful eyes that still looked at him as if Hank had hung the moon. And the desire. Hank had been worried, as the years passed, that it would all become less intense or somehow muted. But he'd worried for nothing: Hank would have only to see Scott, even fully clothed, and he would feel his heart beat faster, his pulse race and his head fill with the most impure thoughts he'd ever had about another human being.

It was one of the aspects of their relationship that pleased Hank the most, that they were both so physical. Hank had often heard the jokes from his straight colleagues about how the sex disappears after marriage, and even though Hank and Scott didn't go at each other as often as they'd done when they first fell for each other, each would still surprise the other from time to time. Scott would occasionally sneak into the shower when Hank was getting ready for work in the morning. Hank would surprise Scott with a dinner out somewhere nice, followed by a massage at home.

Yeah, Hank thought to himself, *we seem to have found a nice rhythm.* Which Hank was going to completely ignore tonight once he had his Scrappy behind closed doors. There were lots of

candles, massage oil, and enough lube to see them through the next twenty four hours. He felt his briefs growing uncomfortably snug and blushed as he looked around the airport. He needed to stop thinking about being naked with Scott.

He headed over to the little bookstore and rifled through the papers, not surprised to find that each one had some sort of column or critique about the new musical. He picked the most favorable review, which also happened to have a picture of a smiling Scott on the stage after opening night, and put it on the counter. He saw the breath mints and picked up two rolls, and then handed over the money to the cashier. With the paper tucked under his arm, he headed back to his post opposite the gate.

Hank hadn't been three steps outside of the bookstore when he heard the high-pitched laughter. He turned to see two little kids, a very blond boy and a very blonde girl, chasing each other while their mother--he assumed since she was just as blonde--held a third child in her arms and called for them to stop bothering everyone else.

The boy wasn't paying attention to where he was going and was on a collision course with

Hank's leg. Hank heard the mother call for her boy, Austin, to stop and pay attention. Austin ignored his mother and, within another couple of seconds, made contact with Hank's arms. Hank had squatted down to intercept the little boy, who was momentarily stunned after the collision.

"Are you okay?" Hank looked at the huge blue eyes and wasn't surprised when Austin didn't answer him. The boy retreated rather quickly back to his mother's side, his eyes growing even bigger as Hank stood up.

"He's fine," the mother said. "I'm so sorry about that. Their father is coming home today and they're very excited."

"Your dad is coming home?" Hank's smile grew as he looked at each of the children. "How long has he been away?"

"A month," the mother answered. "He's an engineer. He was up north doing some work for Hepra."

"A long month for you, I imagine."

"They're really good kids, usually, but daddy's coming home today, so..."

"When does his flight get in?"

"Another ten minutes. I hope."

Hank squatted again and looked at Austin and his sister. "I'm happy that your daddy's coming home today." Turning to Austin, Hank smiled. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Austin shook his head as the announcement for a flight from Yellowknife came over the loudspeaker.

"That's us," the mother said. She moved the baby to her other hip and used her free hand to herd the kids toward the gate. "Thank you for understanding."

"Anytime," Hank said, offering a final wave and a smile to the very blond children.

As he made his way back to his post, Hank wondered if he'd always been so surrounded by children and had never bothered noticing or if he was somehow becoming a magnet. First the encounter with Kyle and Doug and their son, Scott, and now Austin; Hank was wondering if his desire for children was somehow summoning them to him wherever he went. Or had the incessant thoughts of children lately made him much more aware of their presence?

He pondered that as he flipped through the paper, closing it when he reached the classified section listing all of the houses for sale in

the area. Suddenly, a thought came to him: if he was serious about children, he and Scott would have to find a bigger home. And while the thought of their own house complete with as many children as Scott would allow filled him with a certain joy, there was also the realization that he would be leaving the home that Scott had filled with such wonderful memories for the past five years.

Memories of the two of them babysitting, first Matthew, and then Matthew and Ellie. Memories of the two of them lounging in bed while the world struggled along without them. Memories of Scott tending to him while he recovered from his accident in Tofino all those years ago. It would be a fair trade if he and Scott could provide a loving and happy home, filled with new memories, for some unwanted child.

Hank heard the disembodied voice announcing the arrival of the flight from Toronto and made his way over to the gate. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet as people started streaming into the area, each with a loved one to greet them. He kept his eyes trained on the gate, waiting for that smile.

He didn't have to wait long. He heard Scott before he saw him. The unmistakable laugh

reached Hank's ears mere moments before he saw the tousled blond hair and the rich, brown eyes darting between his attractive companion and the many faces in the crowd.

Hank held up his hand, although he wasn't sure why, since he was a head taller than everyone else. Scott bid goodbye to the tall blond man that he had been chatting with and made his way over to where Hank stood. His smile grew as he approached.

When Scott was within reach, Hank bent his knees and wrapped his arms around the lithe body, closing his eyes, hearing the paper fall to the floor. He took a deep breath and allowed the familiar scents to calm him.

"God, I missed you," he said into the soft skin of his husband's neck. "So much."

"Love you, too," Scott said as Hank put him back on the floor. Scott bent down and retrieved the newspaper. "Were you waiting long?"

"Got here about forty five minutes ago." Hank took the carry on bag from Scott and put it over his own shoulder. "Good flight?"

"Same old," Scott said, pretending to push the strap further onto Hank's shoulder. He let his

hand linger for a moment.

"Made a friend on the flight, I see?"

Scott smiled and leaned against Hank's body for a moment. "He's nineteen."

"Seriously?" Hank looked off in the direction where the young man had been headed, but did not see him. "Kid's pretty well developed for seventeen."

"He's here visiting his girlfriend who is a competitive bodybuilder. He was telling me about how he's been thinking of pursuing the same interest once he finishes his degree in Physical Education."

"Oh," Hank said, feeling a little relieved.

"Thank you," Scott said, getting them both moving toward the baggage carousel.

"For what?"

"For being, or at least pretending to be, jealous."

"Who's pretending?"

"Well, just the same," Scott said, his hand finding the strap again. "I shall thank you properly when we get home."

Hank raised his eyebrows and put a hand in one

of his pockets to relieve some pressure Scott's frequent touches had created.

"Kevin is a very sweet young man. You should have seen his face light up whenever he talked about Sue, his girlfriend." Scott shook his head and looked at the luggage that was starting to make its way around the carousel. He turned back to face Hank. "He was raised by his grandparents. His parents were killed in a car accident when he was only eight."

"Tough break," Hank said, seeing the perfect opportunity to bring up adoption. He didn't want to do it in such a public place, though, and filed away the information for another time.

"He hasn't let it get him down, though. He seems very level-headed and ambitious."

Hank noticed one of Scott's bags and leaned past Scott to pick it up. The second and final bag was not far behind. Hank hoisted both of them and ignored Scott's protests. "I've got them. Let's get home."

"Can't wait to sleep in our bed."

"May have to wait for that," Hank said as they made their way toward the exit. "Told the office I'll be gone for a few days. Maybe to French Beach?"

Scott's cheeks flushed and Hank offered a wink. Scott cleared his throat. "How are Brian and Kari and the kids?"

"Fine," Hank said as he led the two of them across the crosswalk to the parking lot. "Ellie's learned the word 'no' from Matthew. Brian says he's having flashbacks from his childhood. Something about a certain brother who learned the word 'no' and would hold his breath until he practically passed out."

Scott laughed and wrapped his hands around Hank's bicep. "How awful for him. I didn't know Brian and I had a brother."

"Don't worry, though. I defended you." Hank said immediately.

"Can't wait to hear this."

Hank arrived at the truck and lifted the bed cover to stow the luggage. "I reminded him that you've offered, many times, to pay for his therapy."

"You're a prick," Scott said, walking up to stand in front of Hank, his arms circling Hank's waist.

Hank looked around and saw no one. He put his hands on Scott's ass and lifted the smaller man

so that they could give each other their first proper kiss. Scott's hands were combing through Hank's beard. Hank's eyes were closed, his tongue searching for its partner. The noises coming from Scott, combined with the noises that they two of them were making had their usual effect on both men.

"Need to get home," Hank said, putting Scott back on the ground and letting go. "Need you, baby."

"Missed you, Hank." Scott leaned up for one final kiss and then walked to the passenger side of the truck.

When they were both inside the truck, Scott leaned over and took another long, lingering kiss. Hank was happy to oblige, not bothering to point out that his erection was becoming more and more uncomfortable.

"Sorry," Scott said, pulling away and reaching for his seatbelt.

"Don't ever be sorry about that, Scrappy." Hank offered another wink and started the truck, threw it into reverse and made his way out of the parking lot and back onto Electra Boulevard. Once he was on Highway 1, it would be another hour or so until they reached the safety of

their bedroom. And once they did, Hank would do everything he'd been thinking about since he'd said goodbye to Scott a week ago.

They rode in silence for a few moments until Hank was on the highway. His leg was bouncing again, and his fingers were tapping the steering wheel. He didn't realize it until Scott asked him if there was something wrong.

"Everything's fine," Hank assured him.

"Work's fine?"

"Yessir."

"Brian's fine? Kari's fine? Matthew?
Ellie?"

"Yes, yes, yes and yes."

"Rose?"

"Mom's fine."

"House?"

"That too."

"Then what?"

"There's nothing wrong."

"Hank," Scott said, studying Hank's face.
"You know I can tell when something's bothering you. But okay, have it your way. You'll tell

me when you're ready, I guess."

Hank offered a smile and thought about telling Scott about the little boy he'd helped in the mall, and about meeting Kyle and Doug, and about learning all about what they'd go through to adopt a child in British Columbia. But he said nothing, yet again.

Suddenly, Hank felt as if he were lying to Scott. This man had given him everything and here he was repaying him by not trusting him enough to tell him the truth. He pulled the truck over to the side of the highway, onto the shoulder, and put the truck in park. He turned in his seat and looked at his husband.

"I know you still aren't sure, but I'm ready. I want to adopt. Now." Hank took a quick breath. "I've been thinking about it a lot and I even ran into this couple, Kyle and Doug, and they told me all about their experience in adopting Scott, who's the sweetest little boy who got lost in the mall. And I found him. And when it was time to go, he gave me the sweetest little kiss on the cheek." Hank took another quick breath. "I know I said that I'd always choose you, even if you didn't want kids, but baby, I see you with Matthew and Ellie, and I--" Hank stopped talking when Scott clamped a hand

over his mouth.

"Okay," Scott said, smiling from ear to ear. He removed his hand.

"Whuh?"

"I said 'okay'. Let's start looking into it."

"But..."

"I spent a couple of hours with Kevin, and I suddenly realized that he didn't have to go through the horror of foster care because he had his grandparents. Just like Matthew and Ellie have us, and Kari's family. But then I started thinking about all those kids who are alone and don't have any family."

Hank could see Scott's eyes start to water, and his voice get very soft. He reached over the centre console, but was almost strangled by the seatbelt. He undid it and reached again, enfolding Scott in his arms.

"God, I love you," Hank said, kissing his husband's face and head, over and over. "You make me so happy, Scott."

"Besides," Scott said, pulling away slightly and wiping at his eyes. "I think I've made you wait long enough. I'm sorry about that."

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to

me," Hank said, wrapping his arms around Scott again. "And the best thing that's about to happen to some kid without a home of his own. Or her own."

"I did some research many months ago," Scott said. He accepted another kiss from Hank before he buckled up and headed back onto the highway. "We're actually pretty good candidates, you know."

"Fuckin' A, we are," Hank said, feeling an elation he hadn't felt since Scott agreed to marry him.

"We're in a stable relationship. Married, in fact. Money's not an issue. I don't travel that often. You're not climbing trees as much now that you're Brian's partner." Scott stopped and looked over at his husband. "But we would need to have a different house."

Hank started laughing and didn't think he would be able to stop.

"What?"

He shook his head and looked over at Scott. "I was thinking the same thing just before you came through the gate."

"So, how long have you been thinking about all

this? How long were you going to wait before you told me?"

Hank shrugged and felt the heat in his cheeks.

"We'll have to work on that," Scott said, shaking his head, but wearing a huge grin.

"I'm sorry," Hank said, finally. "I just didn't want you to think I was pestering you."

"I wish you'd pester me a little more often," Scott said, his hand finding its way to rest on Hank's thigh. "Especially when I get panicky about stuff like this."

"Deal," Hank said, glancing over to see the smile on Scott's face.

Hank opened his mouth to ask one of the million questions he'd been saving for this moment, but then closed it right away. All of those answers would come in the days to follow. Right now, he wanted to enjoy the sun on his face, the man beside him and the endless possibilities for their future together.

CHAPTER THREE

Hank had dropped Scott's bags somewhere just inside the door, their clothes were scattered between there and the bedroom and there was a trail of water from the shower to the bed.

Scott was writhing underneath Hank, trying to get just the right amount of friction that would send him soaring through his second orgasm since arriving back in Duncan. Hank was busy pushing in and out of the incredible heat, Scott's muscles contracting around Hank's girth, pulling him farther and farther inside.

"Let go, baby," Hank whispered into Scott's ear. "I've got you." He felt Scott hook his ankles together across the small of his back and move in time to Hank's thrusting. He heard the whimpering as he licked at the shell of Scott's ear and continued to whisper encouragement. He felt the familiar splash of heat between their bellies and smiled. "My turn," Hank said as he straightened his arms so he could look down at the flushed cheeks, the look of utter surrender on that handsome face.

Scott's hands were combing the hair out of Hank's eyes, his rapid breathing punctuated with sighs and his own words of encouragement. Hank snapped his hips, over and over again, burying

himself balls deep each time, revelling in how the man underneath would writhe, how his eyes would roll back in his head.

"Close, Scott." Hank took a moment to place Scott's ankles against his shoulders so he could raise himself up onto his toes and let gravity help him pleasure his husband even more.

"God, yes," Scott hissed as Hank drove himself inside again and again. "So good."

"Missed you, baby." Hank did an impromptu push-up, lowering himself slowly so he could lick Scott's lips, tease him with his tongue. He was even closer and just needed that one final push from Scott. "So close."

Scott moved his hands to stroke up and down Hank's chest and belly, his touch alternating between a gentle caress and a playful slap. Hank had always been turned on by how much Scott loved touching his muscular physique. And the hands skimming over those muscles, combined with the encouraging words, were always just enough to send Hank over the edge.

"Fuck," Hank grunted, his eyes squeezing shut as he felt the explosion begin somewhere deep in his belly. His muscles tensed and he pushed into his husband, again and again, emptying

himself completely. He held himself there, suspended above Scott, for a moment and then lowered himself gently while Scott returned his legs to encircle Hank's waist. Scott's hands came protectively to rest against his neck and shoulders.

"Don't move," Scott said. "This is my favorite part."

"Me completely drained and defenseless?"

Scott chuckled against his ear. "No. You completely trusting and on top of me."

"Twice in three hours," Hank said. "Not bad for a forty year old, huh?"

"You won't be forty for another three months."

"Small consolation."

"Considering all of your assets, Henry Isaac Ballam, I don't think you have any cause to complain." Scott kissed him on the neck a few times.

"I love you," Hank whispered into Scott's ear.

"And I love you." Hank put his hands on either side of Scott's shoulders, ready to push himself off to the side. "No, not yet," Scott said, tightening his grip.

"Okay," Hank said, surrendering. "It's nice to be missed."

"God, I did," Scott said. "I think I'm done with these musicals for a while. I don't like the press and being away from you."

Hank raised his head to look into Scott's eyes. "What? I don't want you doing that just because of me."

"Not just because of you," Scott said, wiping his hand across Hank's damp brow. "Besides, if we're serious about adopting, I can't be traipsing off anytime I want."

Hank lowered his head, again, pushing his lips against Scott's. "You're gonna be the best dad ever."

"I think you have me confused with a certain logger slash business owner on this bed." Scott pushed against Hank's chest so that their positions were reversed.

Hank loved having Scott on top of him, with his long legs straddling him, because it allowed him complete access to Scott's body. He could run his hands from ankle to hip, or from shoulder to belly. And he could see it all, displayed right out there in front of him.

"Thank you for saying that," Hank said, his hands reaching for Scott's. He kissed each one and put them onto his hairy chest. He loved how much Scott enjoyed his hairy chest. He hadn't had to shave since he'd found Scott and stopped sleeping with women.

"It's true," Scott said, petting his way slowly across Hank's chest. "You're going to be an incredible father. You're kind, and patient, and loving, and generous."

Hank kissed Scott's hands again, but then wondered about his past again. His concern must have shown on his face.

"What's wrong?"

Hank thought of dismissing Scott's concern, but then realized that if they would be raising a child together, they would need to be a cohesive team. He tilted his head to one side and sighed. "I'm just wondering if my past might ruin our chances?"

"What past?"

"Indiscriminate sex. With women. Drunk on the job. Poor decision making skills."

"Please," Scott harrumphed and leaned down for a kiss. "Using that logic, they could refuse me

because I abandoned my brother to chase some ridiculous dream about becoming a songwriter."

"But you *are* a songwriter."

"And you're now in a stable, monogamous relationship with a songwriter who thinks you're the greatest thing that ever happened to him."

Hank chose not to go for the easy joke about not having received the memo about the relationship being monogamous and wrapped his arms around Scott's shoulders. "So you don't think--"

"No, I don't."

Hank chuckled to himself. "Thanks, Scrappy."

"You're welcome, Bunny." Scott smiled when Hank rolled his eyes at the continued use of the nickname that, if Hank were honest, had started to grow on him, and stole another kiss. "And thank you for such a romantic welcome home."

"It would have been more romantic if we'd gotten around to lighting the candles," Hank said with a snort.

"It's the thought that counts," Scott said, rolling off Hank to lie beside him.

Hank closed his eyes, pulling his husband a little closer, and sighing contentedly.

While Scott answered the door and paid for the pizzas, Hank set out the plates and glasses, careful to keep the laptop and the newspaper off to the side. Once they were done eating, they would be checking out the website to find out everything they could about the adoption process and also looking into the houses that were available in the area.

"Can't wait to get back to cooking real meals," Scott said as he came back into the kitchen and put the pizza boxes on the counter.

"Must be a drag drinking all that champagne and eating in five-star restaurants."

"Listen you," Scott said as he snapped the elastic of Hank's boxer shorts. "I keep telling you that it's more like ginger ale and stale sandwiches."

"Hey," Hank said, rubbing the spot where the elastic had stung him. "Too rough."

"Big baby," Scott said and offered a quick kiss.

"I'll take that as an apology," Hank said, pulling on Scott's T-shirt to bring him closer. He wrapped his arms around the smaller man and

held on. "Can't believe we might actually be fathers soon."

"I know," Scott said, his hands skimming slowly over Hank's bare back. "Scary, and exciting, all at the same time."

"It is that," Hank said with a sigh. "Okay," he said, suddenly, pushing Scott toward the table. "Bring me the plates and we'll load up. We've got a lot of work to do."

Scott did as he was told, and when the plates were loaded with slices of pizza and the glasses were filled, the two men sat down to look through the houses listed for sale in the newspaper.

"Any idea what this place might be worth?" Hank looked over at Scott.

"Don't know," Scott said around a mouthful of pizza. "Maybe one fifty to two hundred."

"Okay. I've managed to pay back most of the loan to purchase my share of the business, and, of course, this place is paid off, thanks to you," Hank said, wiping some sauce off Scott's chin. "So, I'm thinking we could probably buy a three or four-bedroom without too much fuss."

"Or," Scott said, before taking a sip of his

milk. "We could buy land and build."

"But looking at some of these vacant lots, it might be cheaper, not to mention faster, to buy an existing house."

"And by 'cheaper', you mean we're not going to use my bank account?"

"No," Hank said, worrying about this particular conversation again. "What I mean is that I want this to be fifty-fifty."

"I'm not trying to start this old argument again. I know how you feel about paying your own way, but I think it's silly not to get the house we want right away. We're married, for pity's sake. What's mine is yours."

Hank leaned back in his chair. Of course, he knew that Scott made sense, as he always did. And he appreciated how willing Scott was to share everything, without hesitation. It was one of the things that Hank loved most about the man. But Hank was also enough of a realist to know that his pride would not allow him to let Scott pay for everything. It was why he'd been so dead set on purchasing his share of the business with his own money.

"I mean," Scott said, his voice animated, "what if the split is more like sixty forty?"

Would that be so terrible?"

Hank sighed. "I guess I could live with that."

"Seventy thirty?"

"Don't push it," Hank said with a wink.

They spent the next hour looking through the paper as well as online and quickly discovered that the prices for the size of house they would either buy or build were well within Hank's budget. The only decision now was whether they wanted to wait a year or find something they could move into much sooner.

Hank surprised himself when he finally explained that that particular decision might be made easier by waiting to find out more about the adoption process. If the process would mean a year or two of waiting, then they could afford the time to build. If the process could happen within months, as opposed to years, then it would seem to make more sense to buy something that was already built.

So, with that decided, they booted up the laptop and visited the Ministry of Child and Family Development.

"Everything is so well organized," Hank said,

his chin resting on Scott's shoulder. He watched as Scott navigated from one page to the next. "And Kyle and Doug said we could call if there's anything we don't understand on the site."

"Holy crap," Scott said as he scanned the page listing all the different kinds of adoption. "I guess we start here. Do you we want to adopt a waiting child, a custom adoption or an inter-country adoption?"

"Waiting child," Hank said without delay. "We can't give a home to all of them, but at least we can give a good home to one who's been waiting a while." Hank was looking at the screen when Scott turned to kiss him on the cheek.

"That's why I love you," Scott said, bringing one hand up to caress Hank's cheek while the other navigated to the page about adopting a waiting child. "Step one," Scott said, clicking on the link.

"There are only five steps," Hank said, smiling. "That's encouraging."

Two hours later, they'd worked their way through all five steps and were more familiar with the entire process than they had been. At

the outset, before step one even, Scott had opened up a word document to record all of their questions.

"Thirty seven questions," Hank sighed, scanning the list. "Does that mean we're thorough or clueless?"

Scott laughed and stretched his arms over his head. Hank took the opportunity to pull him closer and kiss his neck. Scott wrapped his arms around Hank's neck and rested his head on one shoulder. "I'm going with thorough."

"Good answer," Hank said. He closed his eyes, feeling somewhat elated at the prospect of starting the process with this man and somewhat deflated at how easy it would be to make a mistake somewhere along the way. "So, do we want to click on the profiles yet?"

"Absolutely," Scott said, disentangling himself from Hank's arms. "That's gonna be the best part." Scott clicked on the link. The page came up and he turned to look at Hank. "Jesus," he said, his voice soft and low. "There's so many of them." Scott turned back to the screen, but did not move to click on any particular name.

"Wasn't expecting that," Hank said, reaching

out a reassuring hand to caress Scott's back.
"Poor kids."

"So, I guess we start by choosing a boy or girl," Scott said, bringing a hand up to wipe at his eyes. "Sorry," he said. "Caught me off-guard."

"It's okay, baby," Hank said, placing a slow kiss on Scott's cheek.

"Should we consider more than one? I mean, some of these are brothers and sisters." Scott got a frightened look on his face and turned to look at Hank. "They don't send them to different foster homes, do they?"

"I would imagine, sometimes."

"How awful for them," Scott said, putting his hand back on the mouse. "I think it would have killed me to be separated from Brian when I was that young."

"So, you'd consider adopting more than one?"

"How can we not?"

Hank didn't bother correcting Scott, choosing instead to hug him close and give him another kiss. "Okay," Hank said, feeling even more excitement and trepidation. "Let's see what we can learn about the kids."

Hank held up his hand, ready to count off on his fingers what they'd decided. "Okay. So if I've understood all of this, we just spent the last four hours drinking three pots of coffee to figure out we don't care about how many, ethnic background, age or existing family who may want to visit?"

"Or physical or mental challenges," Scott said, nodding.

"Wow," Hank said, stretching out his back. "I'm not sure if that was the wisest four hours I've ever spent or a huge waste of time."

"At least we know now that we don't care about any of that stuff, that we're just interested in providing a good home."

Hank leaned forward and let his chin rest on Scott's shoulder again. He nodded to the computer screen. "Tell me the truth. Did you find a favorite or two?"

"If I did, will you think less of me?"

"Oh, thank God," Hank said, scooting forward to the edge of his chair. "I did too."

"Who?" Scott put his hand back on the mouse.

"The brother with the two sisters and a

possible fourth sibling. I think the name they have on this website is Jens. And his sisters--"

"You mean this one?" Scott clicked on the link and turned as soon as the descriptions appeared on the screen.

Hank studied the page for a moment and then smiled. "Yeah, those are the kids."

"Will you believe me if I told you those are the ones I was thinking about?"

"But there's four of them. One of them is only a year old." Hank moved a lock of blond curls behind Scott's ear. "And it says here that Jens has ADHD."

"So? The one-year old and Ellie will be best friends. And you've lived with me for all these years and I'm practically a walking advert for ADHD."

"And he's already nine years old."

"And he loves science and sports and camping and fishing and climbing trees." Scott looked over and offered a wink. "Sounds like a match made in heaven."

"It does, doesn't it? I'll have to brush up on my science, though."

"And Ingrid, the second oldest, is apparently a musical prodigy."

"Yeah," Scott said, scrolling down. "Piece of cake. But I'm worried about the second sister."

"Birgit? Why?"

"Her description is so short, less than half that of Jens and Ingrid, and it states here that she's in a different foster home and is just now getting to know her other siblings."

"I think we could make it work," Hank said, picking up the coffee mugs and heading into the kitchen.

"I do as well, but, it's just... Why separate them like that?"

"Maybe there wasn't enough room in the same foster home. Or maybe it's because she's only four. Maybe Jens and Ingrid don't need as much attention as Birgit."

"I guess," Scott said closing the laptop. He got up and walked to the sink.

"Come on," Hank said, steering Scott away from the dishes. "My butt's asleep, my legs are cramped and I feel like some fresh air. Let's go for a walk."

"A walk? It's..." Scott looked past Hank to

see the time. "Jesus. It's only seven. I thought it was more like ten."

"Even though it's still light outside?"

"Shut up," Scott muttered and headed for the stairs.

"If you're well-behaved during our walk, I'll buy you some ice cream."

"And if I'm not well-behaved?"

"I'll still buy you one, but I'll stick my finger in it."

"I could kill Brian for telling you about that."

Hank laughed at the memory of Brian telling him how he always managed to get Scott's dessert when they'd been younger. Hank put his hands on Scott's ass and pushed him to move a little faster up the stairs. "You've had your tongue on every millimetre of my body, but my finger in your ice cream is unacceptable?"

"I'm complicated that way."

Hank scooped him up and headed to the bedroom, tossing him onto it before heading to the closet to put on a T-shirt and pants. "How come rich people are complicated and the rest of us are just nuts?"

"I don't know. Now hurry up and dress me."

CHAPTER FOUR

Hank felt as if he'd been walking on a cloud for the past week. Scott was back home, they'd started the search for a child, or children, to adopt, they'd mentioned this fact to Brian and Kari, since Hank and Scott needed to use them both as a reference, and received nothing but encouragement and support from Rose.

Today, they were sitting in the waiting room of The Ministry for Child and Family, and Hank felt as if he would throw up at any moment.

"How's my tie?" Hank stood up for the tenth time and checked to make sure that his shirt was still tucked in. "I should have ironed these pants. How's my breath?" He sat back down and exhaled into Scott's smiling face. "Why aren't you nervous?"

"Okay," Scott said, placing a hand on Hank's thigh. "Breathe." Scott showed him how. "Your tie is perfect. Your pants are perfect. Your breath is perfect. And you are perfect. Stop worrying."

"What if she doesn't like us?"

"You can worry about that. I'm adorable."

Hank was surprised by his own laughter. "Yes,

you are." He patted Scott's hand and leaned back in the chair. "I'm sorry I'm so nervous. It's just that when we were just talking about it, it didn't seem real in a way. But now that we're here... What if I say something stupid?"

"You mean 'when', right?"

"Huh?"

"If you don't relax, I'm divorcing you."

Hank heard the door open and looked up to see a petite brunette coming toward them. She extended her hand as she approached. "Mr. Ballam? Mr. Alan?"

"Yes," Hank said, standing up and taking her hand. "I'm me. I mean, Mr. Ballam. Henry. Hank, actually."

"My name is Kelly Langner. Please call me Kelly." She turned to Scott, who was standing by then. "And you must be Mr. Alan?"

"Yes. Please call me Scott."

"Please come this way and we'll discuss why you've come here today."

Hank put a hand at the small of Scott's back, nudging him ahead. "I have the completed forms that the website told us we should have filled out, including the medical reports for the both

of us."

Kelly turned when she reached the door to her office and took the forms with a smile.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable. Would you like coffee or tea or some water?"

"None for me, thank you," Scott said.

Hank wasn't sure if this was a test or not. His mouth had suddenly become very dry and he wouldn't mind some water. "Umm, could I have a glass of water, please?"

"Certainly," Kelly said as he made her way over to a credenza and filled a tall glass before placing it in front of Hank. "Okay," she said, taking her seat. "So, you're interested in adopting a child?"

"Or several," Hank said, reaching out for the glass. He hadn't realized he was shaking until he lifted the glass and almost spilled its contents. "Sorry," he said before he noticed that neither Kelly nor Scott was looking at him. "I'm a little nervous."

"That's perfectly understandable, but I'll try to make the process as painless as possible." Before Kelly looked at the forms, she folded her hands over them and regarded each of them in turn. "So, why are you looking to adopt a

child?" She looked at Hank and offered a sincere smile. "Or several?"

"I've wanted children for as long as I can remember," Hank said, realizing that that wasn't quite the truth. "And especially since meeting Scott and coming to realize how much I want a family." Hank looked over at his husband when Scott offered a smile.

"I wasn't really sure I wanted children, to tell you the truth," Scott said. Hank felt like his stomach was somewhere up in his throat. "But my brother remarried several years ago and I have a bright and handsome nephew named Matthew and a beautiful little niece named Ellie."

"He's really good with them," Hank said, wondering if it was already too late. "Really, really good."

Kelly just smiled and nodded. "Those are as good as any reasons I've ever heard. And you feel you're both in a place, financially and emotionally, to accept all of the responsibilities of raising a child, or children?"

Hank nodded, dislodging a forelock of hair. He cursed not using enough gel this morning and

pushed it behind his ear. "Scott has no debt to speak of, but I have another year or two to pay off a loan I took out to purchase a percentage of the business I now own with Scott's brother, Brian." He noticed Kelly look down at the forms and thought he'd said the wrong thing. "But I've already paid off more than three quarters of the loan, so that shouldn't be a problem."

"Oh my," Kelly said as she scanned the application form. "No, I don't think we need to worry about finances. Congratulations," she offered, looking up at Scott. "And you're a composer?"

"Award-winning," Hank added.

"More like songwriter, really," Scott said. He shifted in his seat, leaning a little closer to Hank.

"I should be honest and tell you that I had *But For You* played for the father-daughter dance at my wedding. It's always been one of my favorites."

"That's very kind of you to say."

"And Hank, you work in the logging industry?"

"Yes, uh, yes," Hank said, rubbing his palms across his thighs. "But I don't do much actual

cutting anymore since I moved into management."

Kelly smiled and put down the application that she was holding. "I apologize if I'm overstepping here, but there's absolutely no reason for you to be worried, Hank. In fact, at this point, I'd say that you're excellent candidates."

Hank's shoulders dropped a couple of inches and he exhaled, loudly. "Okay. Sorry. You just said something about not needing to worry about finances and I figured that there was something else we needed to worry about. That's all."

"Well," Kelly said, putting aside the adoption application and picking up the questionnaire. "There is just one thing." She held up the questionnaire and turned it so both Hank and Scott could see it. "You didn't really understand this form, did you?"

Scott said 'no' just as Hank asked why she would ask such a question.

Kelly offered a muted laugh and put the form back down on her desk. "That particular form is to determine your experience and comfort level with special needs children. You've checked almost every box, which would mean you've had

experience with just about every type of special needs child in our system."

"Oh," Hank said and looked over at Scott. "I guess we thought it was to indicate if we'd be willing to adopt any children with those needs."

"Not to worry," Kelly said, reaching to her left to retrieve a new form. "We'll chat some more and see if you do have any experience with these special needs."

"So, if we don't have any experience, does that mean some of these children may never find a home?"

"Not at all, but before we place a special needs child, we want to make sure that the necessary supports are in place. For the child and the parents."

Hank thought of Jens, with his ADHD, and his three siblings. Hank wanted to tell her, to explain to her that he was willing to study and learn about ADHD so he could help Jens, but he figured he'd already made too big of a fool out of himself.

"We're in the middle of buying a new house, as well. A bigger house, that is. Just in case we're approved." Hank finished the glass of water and thought of asking for another, but

didn't.

Kelly smiled at him. Hank figured she was trying to be reassuring, but all he could see was patience and uncertainty. He slumped in the chair and wondered if Kelly was a poker player.

Hank was sitting out on the deck, beer in hand, feeling sorry for himself when Scott came out to join him. He felt as if he'd let Scott down at the meeting that morning. He'd thought he'd prepared himself, given himself enough of a pep talk so that he could handle whatever was thrown at him. Instead, he'd gone in an ideal candidate and opened his mouth and now, who knew what Kelly actually thought of him.

Scott sat down on the chair beside him and held out his hand. Hank took it without hesitating.

"Forgive me?"

Scott laughed and squeezed Hank's hand. "For what?"

"For embarrassing you."

"And how did you do that?"

"You mean besides speaking?"

Scott raised himself up so he could pull his chair closer to Hank's. He sat back down and sighed. "Do you remember when we first met?"

"Best day of my life."

"Do you remember what you said to me when I told you I was gay and that I wouldn't be offended if you wanted to cancel the camping trip?"

"Told you I'd already figured that out before I invited you to go camping."

"Well, I have a confession to make." Scott brought Hank's hand up to his lips and kissed it. "Somewhere deep down inside, I was hoping that you would cancel."

"Why?"

"Because it took me all of two days being around you to fall head over heels in love with you. From the first moment I saw your sad, scared face in that hospital corridor, I knew my life would never be the same. And if you did turn out to be irreparably straight, I didn't know how I was ever going to get over you."

Hank felt better, knowing what Scott was trying to say. He kissed Scott's hand and furrowed his brow as he looked into his

husband's eyes. "So, you're saying I should confuse Kelly by sleeping with her like I did you?"

"You're a good man, Hank. An honest, decent, hard-working man. I love you. Brian and Kari love you. Matthew and Ellie adore their Uncle Hank. Kelly and her colleagues would be absolute idiots not to recognize what we've all seen."

"Maybe I'm more nervous about this than I thought. I mean, maybe I'm not ready yet."

"Please," Scott snorted, pushing himself to his feet and pulling Hank along. "We both know that's not true. Quit trying to read more into this than you just being nervous."

"But--"

"Listen to me," Scott said, pulling Hank back into the living room. "I made you wait this long. You've always wanted this, right? So, maybe this is all my fault for making you wait so long that when the day finally came, you were stunned into cognitive chaos."

"Is that even a thing?"

"Beats me, but it sounded good."

Hank smiled and put an arm over Scott's

shoulders. "Thank you, Scrappy."

"Do you feel better?"

"Absolutely."

"Good, 'cause it's your turn to do laundry."

Scott moved away fast enough that Hank couldn't keep him close and kiss him into doing the laundry, again.

"Check your phone," Hank said, craning his neck to check both ends of the street.

"Because the first three times you asked me to check you didn't hear me or you think I somehow came up with the right answers on my own, or what?"

"Would you just check again, please?"

Scott pulled out his phone, shaking his head. Hank ambled over and stood close, letting one hand find its way to Scott's right hip. "I want a divorce," Scott said, pushing his hip against Hank's hand.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's come over me lately. I'm an uncontrollable bundle of raw nerves."

Scott found the text message from the realtor

and handed the phone to Hank, then brought his hands up to encircle Hank's bicep. "It's understandable. There are a lot of big changes going on in our lives right now."

"How come you're so calm?"

"Because I know that no matter what happens, no matter how much pain and sorrow, joy and satisfaction all these changes bring, I'll always have you."

Hank handed the phone back. "Yes, you will, baby."

"And a secluded cabin in Ontario that you've still never been to and therefore have no idea how to find."

"Very funny," Hank said, squeezing one of Scott's hands in between his arm and torso. "Why is that, exactly?"

"Because every time I mention it, you tell me you're too busy."

"I guess I have been a little preoccupied lately, huh?"

"That's not the word that I would use."

"Let me guess: neglectful, disinterested--" Hank took a step back when Scott punched him in the shoulder. "Hey, that hurt!"

"Good," Scott said, pointing a finger at him. "Have I ever complained, even once?"

"No," Hank said, feeling properly shamed as he rubbed at his shoulder.

"And I never will." Scott brought up a hand to soothe Hank's shoulder. "I told you when you bought your share of the business that I will always understand that you need to do this. To prove to yourself and to others that you can be a success, although we don't need proof that you can be successful."

"I know. I'm sorry, Scott. I was just feeling sorry for myself."

"I would have used the words responsible, diligent, trustworthy, ambitious, thoughtful--"

"I get it," Hank said, wrapping his arms around his husband. "Thank you, baby. Forgive me?"

"Maybe," Scott said, pushing himself away half-heartedly.

Hank was about to ask what he could do to make it up to Scott, but they heard the car approach and come to a stop on the other side of Beverly Road. It was Susan, the realtor that Kyle had recommended to them. She exited her vehicle and

waved to them before ducking back inside the car to retrieve a folder.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she said as she tucked a folder under her arm and then pushed the thick lock of red hair behind her ear. She practically skipped across the street, a big smile on her face. "My youngest is going through the terrible twos," she offered as she stopped in front of them. "So nice to finally meet you both. Susan Lepine."

"I'm Hank," he said, shaking her hand. "And this is my husband, Scott."

Scott shook her hand and then Susan was striding toward the front door of the very large house. She was also providing both men with a list of pros and cons of having children. She apparently loved being a mother, but didn't much care for the constant piles of laundry, the crayon marks on the floor or walls and would never understand why her once-sweet two-year old daughter had suddenly become so fond of the word 'no'.

Scott was trying his best to hide a smirk and Hank decided not to look at him. If Scott started laughing, Hank would as well and then they would probably, at the very worst, have to find a new agent, or, at the very least, owe

Susan a huge muffin basket. Hank plastered a smile on his face and entered through the front door, removing his shoes when Susan requested it.

"The floors were just done a few weeks ago, and, as you can see, the previous owners have moved away already." She put a hand to the side of her mouth and whispered, "Very motivated to sell, by the way. Advantage Hank and Scott."

Scott put a hand over his mouth and walked forward, leaving his shoes beside Hank's. He pretended to scratch something beside his nose as he studied the floors and then the crown moulding.

"The kitchen is just through there. As you can see, this whole area is open concept, the appliances are stainless steel and the counter tops are granite. Yay," she hooted, throwing her hands up in the air as if she'd just won the lottery.

"And the floors here? Are they--"

"They are laminate throughout the whole house, but, of course, tile in the kitchen." The previous owners had children, but you can always replace the laminate with something more to your liking."

"No, this is good," Hank said. "We're in the process of adopting. Well, starting to think about adoption, I mean."

Scott came back from the kitchen and gave a thumbs up behind Susan's back.

"So lovely," Susan said, turning to look at Scott. "How long have you two been married?"

"Three years," Scott said before walking off to look at the fireplace. "Wood burning?"

"Yes," Susan said as she moved closer to the hearth. "But if you're thinking of children, I'd recommend you consider replacing it with a gas insert. And there is a pool in the backyard, but it is enclosed by a very sturdy fence that little bodies cannot fit through."

Hank walked over to the french doors off the kitchen and saw that the pool was inground, was a fair size, taking up only about one-third of the entire backyard and was, indeed, surrounded by a metal lattice work fence about five feet high. The entire yard was also surrounded by its own cedar-looking fence, probably about eight feet high.

"Well?" Scott asked and looked at Hank.
"Looks safe for kids?"

"Nothing but wind getting through the fence around that pool. The bedrooms are this way?" Hank asked as he pointed past the kitchen and down the hall.

"Yes," Susan said, moving past him. "The master bedroom has its own ensuite and is positively enormous. And then there are three more bedrooms and a den, which you could convert into a guest suite or a media room. Quite spacious," she said as she stopped beside the door to the master bedroom. "The floors are laminate, as I said, and the ensuite has a shower and a jetted tub. I'd simply die without mine."

Hank didn't really know whether she meant the shower or the tub, but he walked into the bedroom and then stopped. The space was absolutely huge. Closets covered one entire wall, there were two long vertical windows instead of one large one and enough space for a king size bed or two. He left Scott to fend for himself with the barrage of questions from Susan. He walked into the ensuite when she asked Scott what line of work he was in.

It wasn't just a shower; it was more like a spa. Not only would he not have to stoop to stand under the spray, but he could probably

stretch out quite comfortably on the marble floor. And besides the large square shower head coming out of the ceiling, there were another dozen or so lined up on the back wall, all pointing in different directions.

Hank didn't bother looking too closely at the rest of the bathroom, opting instead to go and get Scott. He returned to hear Susan asking Scott what kind of songs he composed.

"His most well-known single is *But for You*," Hank offered and then looked at Scott. "Go look at the bathroom. Now." Scott did as he was told and Hank regarded Susan. "He's also written some music for musicals. Like *Eggs over Easy*."

"Oh my word," Susan shrieked. "I saw that a couple of years ago when the tour passed through Vancouver. I *loved* that show. I was humming those tunes for weeks."

"He's very good," Hank said, beaming.

"Are you in music as well?"

"No," Hank said. "I'm a partner in an eco-logging company."

Susan's smile faded somewhat and her brows came together.

"I'm a lumberjack."

"Oh, of course, silly me. Logging." Susan tried to recover as best she could. "So, what do you think so far."

"I really like it," Hank said, looking over to Scott as he returned from the bathroom.

"Me too."

"I don't mean to be indelicate, but will three bedrooms be enough or were you planning on adopting your own baseball team?" Susan asked, her laughter betraying her nerves.

"We're not really sure at this point," Scott said after offering a sympathetic chuckle. "But I'm sure three will be enough."

"Okay," Susan said, leading the way down the hall. "Well, let's get you through the rest of the house and then we can discuss whether you'd like to make an offer."

"Actually," Scott said, looking up at Hank. "I'm sold, but if you'd like to talk about it..."

"No, no," Hank said, raising his hands. "I think it's perfect."

Susan seemed momentarily stunned, but gave another little hoot once she'd recovered.

"That's amazing. I wish most buyers were so decisive." She opened her folder and took out a few papers. "Now, I do have some comparables here for you to look at--"

"Well," Scott said. "Do you feel the price they're asking is fair?"

"Most definitely."

"Then let's offer what they're asking," Scott said, looking to Hank for agreement. Hank nodded. "And let them know that it will be a cash sale, subject to a home inspection, of course."

"Uh," Susan said, seeming at a loss for words. "Of course."

"Neither one of us likes shopping, and this place is absolutely perfect, and we don't want to waste your valuable time playing looky-loos, so..."

"Wow. Kyle said you were eager, but he didn't mention just *how* eager."

Hank and Scott smiled at each other and then at Susan.

"Okay," she said. "Well, I do apologize, but I wasn't expecting this response, but I can put the paperwork together right away as soon as I

get home and then come to your home, get your signatures and then present the offer right away."

"Are there any other bids?"

"No, yours will be the first."

"Well, then, how about you prepare the work for tomorrow morning, we'll come by and sign and then we'll wait to hear from you."

Susan seemed a little stunned by Scott's counter-offer. "That would be wonderful! Are you sure you want to wait?"

"If there's another offer between now and tomorrow morning, we'll just up our offer," Scott said with a wink.

CHAPTER FIVE

The day after they'd toured the house, Hank and Scott took the day to sign the papers and then spend, precisely, two hours looking for furniture. Neither one of them was keen on the idea of more shopping, but the furniture they had now wasn't enough to fill the much bigger house, nor would any of it do a child, or children, any good to sleep or play on.

They'd been in the first furniture store for only fifteen minutes when Hank's phone rang. They'd both been trying to figure out what the metal contraption in front of them was. He answered his phone and left Scott to figure it out for the both of them. It was Susan informing them that the offer had been accepted by two very grateful sellers and that the home inspection could be arranged.

Both Hank and Scott had been excited by the news. Their first house together. The house they currently shared had actually been Hank's, but this house was one they'd bought together. Despite Scott's cool and relaxed approach to this whole situation, Hank could tell it meant a great deal to him. Not only that he and Hank had purchased their very first house together, but that Hank did not fight him on paying for

the house outright. Of course Hank would repay his share, but more than that, he'd allowed Scott to be the generous man he was.

When Brian's business had been struggling, Scott had offered his brother the finances necessary to get it back into the black. But Brian had refused, and Hank knew that his refusal had hurt Scott. And when Brian had offered to sell forty nine percent of the business to Hank, Scott had offered Hank the funds he'd been lacking. Hank had refused, determined to do it on his own. And while Scott had understood that, he'd still been hurt by that refusal as well.

With this new house, however, Hank didn't have the heart to refuse Scott's offer. Scott was fully aware that Hank would pay him back, but it actually made Hank happy to see the pride and satisfaction that Scott could provide for his family. Not that the money was the only thing Scott had to offer. Scott supplied so much to every member of his family, whether related by blood, marriage or friendship. He was reliable, funny, trustworthy and fiercely defended each of them if he felt they were being treated badly or unfairly.

Hank heard Scott's beautiful tenor voice

wafting from upstairs; he was working on another song. And like all the others, Hank thought it was the best thing he'd ever heard. He didn't always appreciate what some of these artists did with these songs once Scott surrendered them, preferring Scott's interpretation instead. Or that singer friend of his from Toronto, Rankin. Hank didn't know the man's last name, but he did know a good singer when he heard one.

He'd only met Rankin once, a few years back when he and his husband, Stefan, had purchased a summer home in Sooke Harbor, but he'd liked both men instantly. The two couples had spent a fair bit of time together whenever Rankin and Stefan were out at their summer home.

Hank was lying on the sofa, the television on mute so he could listen to Scott, and thought about where he would be in another year. Would he and Scott be in the new house surrounded by one child or several? Would they be packing up a minivan for road trips to French Beach to swim in the ocean? Would he be running out of the office at 3:30 to pick the kids up from school so he could take them to swimming lessons?

He stretched and pushed himself to his feet, marvelling at how one chance meeting at a hospital five years ago would lead to this life

he was living now. He made his way up the stairs, quietly, and sneaked into the spare bedroom where Scott did his writing. He knew he'd get a slap for scaring Scott, but he didn't care. He'd already decided they could both use a few hours of distraction.

"I think that's my new favorite," Hank said as he wrapped his arms around his husband and sat down on the bench. Scott tensed and the pencil fell out of his mouth.

"You say that about all my songs," Scott said, slapping a bicep. "How many times have I told you not to sneak up on me?"

"Four hundred and seventy five," Hank said, nuzzling an ear.

"Honestly, how hard is it to remember one simple instruction?"

"It's more fun for me when I forget."

"You're so immature."

"I know you are but what am I?"

Scott laughed and turned to face Hank.

"You're that bored, are you?"

"No," Hank said, kissing Scott's cheek. "I just thought we could both use a break."

"Keeping that sofa from hitting the ceiling is such hard work."

"I was working really hard down there."

"At?"

"Thinking."

Scott frowned and looked over at Hank. "No comment. I'm not taking that bait."

"I was down there thinking about you and how much you mean to me and I was thinking I could lure you into the bedroom."

"Now that bait," Scott said as he powered off his keyboard. "I'll take."

Hank was lying on his back, the sheet pulled up to his waist, his hands folded behind his head. Scott was lying beside him, the long fingers of his left hand playing in Hank's chest hair.

"I was thinking about the backyard at our new house," Hank said, bringing one hand to caress Scott's back and the other to still Scott's left. "Maybe we should get a dog or two, think about building a tree house or something."

"Good ideas," Scott said, smiling up at him.

"But maybe we should wait until we've settled and the home inspection is done and we actually have a child, or two."

"I know," Hank said, swatting playfully at Scott's naked ass. "I'm just planning ahead."

"Have you planned ahead for the possibility that we may have to wait a few years? Or that we may not turn out to be ideal after all?"

"I don't wanna think about that," Hank said, closing his eyes.

"Doesn't really matter what you want, Hank," Scott said, his fingers returning to playing across Hank's chest. "I know how much you want this and I know how disappointed you'll be if it doesn't happen, but we need to keep a level head here."

"You mean I need to keep a level head."

"Did I say 'you' or did I say 'we'?"

"I know what you meant."

Hank's eyes opened as Scott shifted beside him. The tousled blond head was now propped up, resting on a hand. Hank recognized the look on his husband's face. It was the look that said that Hank had said something he shouldn't have, that he'd spoken out of turn again. "I want

this as much as you, Hank. I want this as much for me as I do for you."

"I know. I'm sorry--"

"If this doesn't happen for one reason or another, I will be just as disappointed as you, if not more so. Because, not only will I feel a sense of loss, but I'll know that I wasn't able to make all of this turn out the way you wanted."

"I misspoke, baby," Hank said, wondering what had made him say it in the first place. "I didn't mean to upset you or take out my bad mood on you. And it isn't up to you, well, not only you, to make this happen."

"Hank, you're putting way too much pressure on yourself." Scott sat up on the mattress, cross-legged. "Haven't you learned anything from all the time we've spent with Matthew and Ellie? There's no secret formula for being a parent, or even for preparing to be a parent. We'll just have to do what we can and hope that it's enough."

"Kinda like to give our child more than just hope," Hank said, caressing Scott's thigh. "That's all I ever had with my dad and look how that turned out."

Scott lay back down beside Hank, his hand reassuring as it rested on the hairy chest. "I think we both know why that turned out the way it did, and since you're not as inflexible as your father when it comes to gender roles, I think - no, I know - that you're going to be an incredible father to *our* child."

"Or children," Hank said with a small smile.

"Or children," Scott echoed before closing his eyes and leaving Hank to stare up at the ceiling, his mind fighting to keep itself focused on his strengths and not his weaknesses.

Hank came awake suddenly, his hand shooting out to grab the phone on the bedside table. Scott propped himself on an elbow and waited for Hank to accept the call.

"Hello?"

"Hank? It's Susan, Susan Lepine. Did I wake you?"

"No," Hank said before looking at the clock. It was nine at night. He and Scott had fallen asleep. "No, we're awake. What can we do for you Susan?" He looked over at his husband, who mouthed the words *home inspection* and then

pushed himself off the bed. Hank watched a naked Scott walk to the bathroom.

"I wanted to call and remind you that we have the home inspection tomorrow. At eleven. That was the time we'd agreed on, correct?"

"Yes, absolutely," Hank said, throwing his legs over the side of the bed. He had no idea if that was the correct time since Susan and Scott had picked the most convenient time for their two schedules. "Did you want to speak with Scott?"

"No, no need. I just wanted to call and remind you both."

Hank wondered if he should bother telling her that he might not be able to make it and then figured Scott would fill her in. She'd explained how important it was for both realtor and buyers to be there, but if Hank did go all he'd be doing was worrying about missing the meeting that could do wonders for growing the business.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you," Susan said, her tone a mix of bewilderment and contrition.

"Don't be silly." Hank stretched his back for a moment. "Clients as scatterbrained as me need agents as organized and efficient as you." Hank

heard a snort and looked up to see a naked Scott standing in the doorway to the bathroom. He was brushing his teeth.

"Okay," Susan laughed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sure thing. Thanks for the reminder. Bye bye."

Hank disconnected the call and tossed the phone on the bed before standing and doing a proper stretch of his back.

"Why didn't you tell her that you have a meeting?" Scott walked back to the sink and spit out the mouthful of toothpaste.

"I don't know," Hank said, walking up behind his husband and wrapping his arms around the trim waist. "Didn't want to seem ungrateful, I guess."

Scott turned himself around and kissed Hank's chest several times. "Come on," he said, pushing Hank toward the shower. "We won't have too many more nights with this shower so we'd better get our fill before we move into the new house."

"What if the inspector finds all sorts of problems with the house?"

"Then we get them fixed," Scott said, turning on the water. He turned back to Hank and leaned up for a kiss or two while the water warmed up.

"What if the house needs a lot of work?"

"Are you trying to kill the mood here?" Scott reached down and took Hank in his hand, his thumb and forefinger pinching and teasing the foreskin. He smiled when Hank closed his eyes and sucked in a quick breath. "If the house needs a lot of work, we'll have it fixed up until it's perfect."

Hank had several follow-up questions and concerns he'd wanted to express, but he could also take a hint. What Scott was offering at that moment was far more interesting than asking the questions and expressing the concerns. *And besides*, Hank thought as he lifted Scott and wrapped the long legs around his own waist, *his answer is always the same: 'It's our money, not my money.'*

"Speaking of perfect," Scott whispered as Hank moved to set him down on the marble bench inside the shower.

"You referring to me or can you see the mirror from here?" Hank teased as he bit, playfully, at Scott's bottom lip.

"You, silly. Always you." Scott wrapped his arms around Hank's neck and pulled him closer, their lips and tongues moving slowly at first.

Hank heard the soft sighs and the moans as he pushed first one finger, then two, against Scott's entrance. "God, I love those noises you make." Hank moved his fingers in and out, very slowly, watching the flush move from Scott's neck to his chest. He was mesmerized, as usual, at how sensual this man was. Hank could touch him anywhere, and Scott's entire body would react and open itself completely.

Hank wrapped his hand around his own engorged cock and pumped a few times. "Ready, baby?" Scott didn't answer, just opened his eyes and reached for the water-soluble lube that they kept in the shower. He put some of the slick on his hand and reached down to rub it, tantalizingly slowly, up and down the length of Hank's dick before positioning it at his own hole. Hank pressed his forehead to Scott's and closed his eyes, never growing tired of the feeling of being swallowed by his husband's intense heat.

Scott was petting his belly and chest, as he usually did, driving Hank into a frenzy of different sensations. Scott loved to kiss while

he was being fucked and loved touching and caressing because he knew how much it turned Hank on. But when he started calling out Hank's name and begging to be fucked harder and moaning, Hank knew he wouldn't last too much longer.

Hank wrapped his arms around Scott's back and brought him slowly off the bench. Hank laid him carefully on the bench and then took hold of his ankles so he could thrust more forcefully.

Scott's hands left Hank's chest and moved to cup his own balls and pump his own cock. Hank knew what this meant. Scott was close to coming. He leaned forward, bracing himself with his left hand and brushed Scott's hand away with his right. He took Scott in his hand and stroked very slowly at first as their mouths met and their tongues flicked playfully against each other.

Hank began to jerk Scott's cock in rhythm to his own thrusts, teasing and biting Scott's lips. The commands and the expletives coming from Scott's mouth did nothing but to spur Hank on. Just the thought that Hank could turn this normally gentle, kind man into some sort of foul-mouthed, sex-starved creature was more than enough to make him come hard.

He felt Scott's muscles tighten around his cock seconds before he felt the heat spill over his hand. He slowed his thrusts while Scott rode out his orgasm, burying his face in the soft skin of his husband's neck. Within a few seconds, the tight grip on his cock relaxed slightly and Hank pushed up with his left arm so that he could look down at the flushed face as he sought his own release.

And when Scott's hands found their way to Hank's hair, the long slender fingers combing and massaging, Hank closed his eyes and called out Scott's name. Well, he called out *Scrappy*, but for Hank that was Scott's name. The man beneath him wasn't a Scott, he was his Scrappy.

As usual, Hank was held close until the muscles of his thighs and knees screamed in protest. So, he pulled out slowly and pulled Scott off the bench. Hank sat down, Scott sat on his lap and they held each other, kissing and nibbling as long as they could before the water would turn cold.

CHAPTER SIX

Hank turned his truck onto the street of their new house and wondered what the home inspection had uncovered. He'd been fidgeting and distracted during most of the meeting and couldn't believe his luck when it had ended earlier than expected. He made a mental note to ask Brian if that had just been a coincidence or if he'd done it just to get rid of Hank.

He parked his truck on the street and ran over to the house. He rang the bell, but then heard voices coming from the back yard. He walked toward the gate and saw Scott standing there with Susan and some other gentleman. Scott was laughing as the tall, handsome man was telling them some sort of story involving bats and raccoons. Hank wasn't necessarily the jealous type - Scott had made it very clear that Hank was the best thing to ever happen to him - but when the man put his hand on his Scott's shoulder, Hank jogged the last few feet.

Hank greeted everyone, put his arm around Scott's shoulder, kissed him on the temple and then held out his hand to the stranger.

"Hank Ballam."

"Derek," the young, handsome blond said.

"Derek Bauman."

"Derek is the home inspector," Susan explained with a smile.

"He was just telling about some of his adventures inspecting houses," Scott offered as he patted the hand that Hank had on his shoulder.

"And?" Hank looked at Derek, who seemed momentarily confused. "Anything serious?"

"Oh," Derek said, waving a hand dismissively. "Might need a new roof in another five years or so. Foundation is good. No water problems. It's all in the report."

"Good," Hank said, offering his hand again.

"This is a nice surprise," Scott said as Hank led him toward the house. "I thought you'd be in a meeting."

"Uh huh," Hank said as he pointed to the papers in Scott's hand. "Is that the report?"

Scott handed it over without saying anything.

"What did Susan say? Can we trust this guy? He seems awfully young."

"He's my age," Scott said before stopping and standing in front of Hank. "He's been doing

this for almost twenty years."

"Uh huh," Hank said again as he made a show of studying the papers.

"Okay," Scott said as he moved away and went back to Derek and Susan. Hank listened as he thanked them both for their time and wished them a pleasant evening. Scott then came back, took Hank by the elbow and practically pushed him to the truck. "Bad day?" Scott asked as they approached Hank's truck.

"No," Hank said as he folded the papers and stuffed them in the pocket of his dress pants. "Good day."

"Uh huh, then what was that all about?"

"What?"

"When was the last time you put your arm around me in public?"

"You don't want me to show affection?" Hank knew he was deflecting, but it was preferable to the embarrassment of having to admit the truth.

"Henry Isaac Ballam," Scott said, raising a finger. "I will call your mother. Why were so rude to Susan and Derek."

"I wasn't rude," Hank objected, but knew he'd been caught. "Perhaps just a bit brusque?" He

studied Scott's face for a moment and then sighed. "It upset me to see you laughing at his story and then he touched you on the shoulder." Hank looked down at his feet and then glanced back up when he saw Scott move toward him. "I'm sorry. Don't be mad."

Scott was standing right in front of him now. He reached out and Hank took a step backward. "You are adorable," Scott said, pulling on the hairs of Hank's forearm. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being jealous."

"I wasn't jealous," Hank said, trying to save face. "Bothered is all. I was bothered."

"Uh huh," Scott said, making his way back to his own vehicle. "Well, you know you have no reason to be ... bothered. Right?"

Scott blew him a kiss and then hopped into his car. Hank got back in his truck and headed home as well.

He arrived back to the townhouse and came in through the garage just as Scott was playing a message from the social worker, Kelly Langner. All Hank heard was the tail end of the message, something about letting her know if they might

be interested in learning more about 'her'. Hank dropped his keys on the dining room table as Scott turned to him.

"Girl. Four years old. Kelly thinks she'd be perfect for us."

Hank felt the air rush out of his lungs. He'd had the same feeling before, a few times. Once when he first kissed Scott in that little lake at French Beach, once when Scott had told him he loved him for the first time and then again when he'd held Matthew and Ellie each, for the first time.

"She told us the profile is on the website, but I think I know which one it is." Scott ran for the stairs and Hank followed, feeling lightheaded. He breathed in deep and followed Scott into the little office that held Hank's weights and Scott's keyboard. He waited while Scott booted up the laptop. His palms were clammy and he could feel himself breaking out into a cold sweat.

"Oh who cares," Hank said as the little multicolored wheel kept spinning on the screen. "She's just a baby, she needs a home and some love. God knows we've got that."

"Hang on," Scott said as he pulled up the

website. "Kelly mentioned something about prenatal exposure to alcohol and openness with the birth family."

"What does that mean?"

"Openness?"

"Yeah," Hank said, squeezing himself onto the chair beside Scott. He looked at the screen as Scott searched for the young girl's name.

"You don't remember Kelly telling us about some members of the birth family wanting to maintain contact with the child?"

"Not really," Hank pushed himself off the chair and got down on his knees as Scott clicked on the name of the little girl that Kelly had mentioned in her message. "That doesn't seem to make sense. I mean, if there's a family, why not have them raise the child?"

"Money, drugs, bad environment," Scott said as the screen loaded with a few short paragraphs about the little girl. "Could be any number of reasons."

Hank read the profile of "Diana". He remembered from the meeting that the names of the children used on the website were not their real names. Nor were there pictures of the

children, which made perfect sense.

"Four years old, European ancestry, single mother, father not in picture, possible exposure to alcohol in the womb, bright, likes kittens and drawing." Scott turned to look at Hank. He had a big smile on his face.

"She's in daycare every morning, which is helping her to socialize with other children. Openness will be required because the mother is eighteen and does not know where the father is." Hank looked over at Scott. "So, does that mean we adopt the baby but the mother gets visitation?"

"Sort of," Scott said, leaning back in his chair. "If I remember correctly, once the court approves the adoption, after the six-month trial, we become the legal guardians but the openness that we have to agree to means that we have to allow contact between child and birth parents. But we can check that more closely. First things first," Scott said, pushing the hair off Hank's forehead. "Are we interested?"

Hank answered by wrapping his arms around Scott's torso and pulling him close. "We could be fathers."

"Is that a 'yes'?"

"Yes," Hank said, nodding against Scott's neck. "Should we call Kelly right away?"

Scott checked the time and then picked up the phone. Hank listened while Scott explained that they were interested and then spent the next five minutes nodding and scribbling words on a scrap piece of paper.

When he hung up the phone, Scott turned and shrugged. "She's going to get everything started. Pre-selection, visit planning, talking with the mother. She told us to sit tight."

Hank sank back onto his heels and brought his hands up to his face before running his fingers through his hair. "Diana," he said softly, saying the young girl's name. "Diana might be our first child." He couldn't wait to find out what her real name was.

"God," Scott said suddenly. "We'll have to get the house ready as soon as possible."

"It's not like this will all happen next week, Scrappy. We've got plenty of time."

"Still, we should go over there tomorrow and start making a list of things we'll need." Scott turned back to the profile. "Do you think she's allergic to any animals? Do you think she'll want dogs or cats or both?"

"We'll ask her when we meet her," Hank said, wondering when he had become the calm, rational one. "Right now, I'm starving. Let's go make dinner." Hank took Scott's hand and pulled him away from the computer screen.

"Is that house going to be too big for just the three of us?"

"At first, probably," Hank said, leaving his hands on Scott's shoulders as he followed him down the stairs. "But we do want other kids, so..."

"That's true," Scott said as Hank guided him to the kitchen. "Are we able to ask for a boy next time or are we only interested in the best fit?"

"You're not making any sense now," Hank said, leaning over and kissing Scott's neck. "It's not like ordering at a restaurant. We could most certainly find a boy who will be a good fit for our new family."

Hank took out the spaghetti from the cupboard while Scott busied himself with the tomatoes and paste and vegetables for the sauce. *One thing is for sure*, Hank thought as he watched Scott work off some of his worry. *These kids are in for some of the best cooking they'll ever have.*

Hank was lying in bed. Scott was tucked in beside him, his breathing shallow and his cold little nose pressed against Hank's shoulder. They'd gone to bed shortly after receiving a visit from Susan. She'd wanted to deliver the keys to the house. Hank and Scott were now officially out of escrow and were the proud owners of a house on Cygnet Drive.

A house with over two thousand square feet, five bedrooms and three bathrooms, a huge back yard and a lawn that Hank figured will most likely take him the better part of an afternoon to mow and trim. He smiled when he thought of that. His very own lawn.

Scott had purchased the home outright, the final cost just over half a million dollars, and it was going to take Hank at least a decade to pay back his half, but it would be worth it.

There would be Christmases, Thanksgivings, birthday parties, barbecues in the back yard, maybe even a dog or two for the kids to play with. He and Scott would have Brian's family over, their children would become cousins and best of friends, would go to school together, probably even fight and quarrel like all families. And through it all, Hank would be

right there, a part of it all.

He was lying there, wondering why he was suddenly so calm about it all. He'd made a fool out of himself when meeting with Kelly the first time, but tonight, after her phone call, he'd felt this - what could he call it - wave of peace, of tranquility wash over his entire body. The fears and trepidations he'd been feeling, the butterflies, they all vanished.

For once, Scott had been more nervous than Hank. He looked down at Scott's serene expression now and tried not to laugh at how many times Scott had studied that profile, looking for the hidden meaning in each description: *She's in daycare to help her socialization; does that mean she was difficult before? Her father's not in the picture; what does that mean, exactly? Does it mean he could come back any time and want to become part of her life? Would it be up to us to decide whether that happens or not?*

Hank had had to pull Scott away from the computer after he'd spent hours doing research on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. *We don't have to be experts yet*, Hank had said. *But it'll show we're serious*, Scott had countered. Hank couldn't really argue with that logic, but he

was more interested in enjoying the possibilities; the realities would come soon enough.

Scott stirred and Hank looked down.

"Can't sleep?" Scott lifted Hank's arm and draped it over his shoulder. He snuggled a little closer.

"Just thinking," Hank said as he pulled Scott a little closer. "Go back to sleep."

"I know what you want." Scott settled his head on Hank's shoulder and put his hand on his belly. Hank closed his eyes, finally, when he felt the familiar tummy rubs. He sighed and kissed Scott on the top of the head.

Funny, he thought as he felt his entire body relax, that he always seems to know what I want.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hank arrived home just before six in the evening after another day where he'd found it difficult to concentrate. He'd found that just about everything made him think of Diana, which would lead to a feeling of incredible exhilaration at the thought that he and Scott would soon be parents to the inevitable panic of wondering if he was ready.

It had taken him twice as long as usual to get anything done. He'd arrived early, having woken up before the alarm again, and had worked through lunch to try and make up for his lack of focus, but he'd still found himself apologizing to everyone for making them repeat themselves or for having asked the same question two or three times.

"Baby?" Hank dropped his keys on the dining room table and waited for Scott to answer.

The patio door swooshed open and Scott was there, smiling at him. "Just cleaning the windows."

"Cleaning the windows?" Hank walked over to him and pulled him close before kissing him softly on the lips. "Someone must be really, *really* bored."

"Trying to keep busy, that's all."

"I know. I'm just teasing." Hank pulled back a few inches and sighed. "What say we head out for a little walk and then pick up something for dinner? Unless you've already made something that is."

"I was doing Swiss Steak in the crock pot, but I guess it would keep 'till tomorrow." Scott soothed his hands up and down Hank's back before resting them underneath the waistband.

"No, that sounds good." Hank offered a final kiss before pulling away and heading to the stairs. "I'll change, we'll eat and then maybe go for a nice relaxing walk?"

"Sounds perfect," Scott said, heading to the kitchen to put the roll of paper towels away. "I've been kind of antsy all day."

Hank stood beside the bed and removed his dress pants, folded them properly and put them on a hanger and then removed his shirt, balling it up and throwing it on the floor by the door. He pulled off his boxers and socks before putting on a more comfortable cotton pair of socks for their walk later, but didn't bother with another pair of underwear. He slipped on a pair of faded jeans - a pair he knew Scott loved

on him - and a faded orange t-shirt that - according to Scott - hugged him in all the right places.

He headed for the door to the bedroom, and stopped to pick up his dress shirt. As he made his way to the stairs, he passed the spare bedroom and noticed that Scott had left the his computer on, and open. Hank made a quick detour to turn it off and close it, but as he did so, it came back to life and the screen filled with several windows, all of them pages filled with biographical information on various children listed for adoption on the government's website.

Hank was suddenly filled with a sense of shame. He'd been spending so much time thinking about what he wanted and what he was hoping to get out of this that he'd not spent too much time wondering what all of this waiting and uncertainty was doing to Scott. In fact, if pressed, Hank would have probably admitted to thinking that Scott didn't really want this and was only doing it to make Hank happy.

On a whim, Hank picked up the phone and dialled Doug and Kyle's number. If he and Scott were going out for a walk, perhaps they could stop by and visit with their new friends for a bit. Hank needed some of their optimism right

now, or at least an affirmation that he and Scott would eventually end up with their own child, just like Doug and Kyle.

He spoke to them, briefly, and was relieved to know that they would, indeed, be home and that they were more than welcome to stop by. They would probably be there for little Scott's bedtime, but then they could sit and chat on the back deck enjoying a beer or two in the cool autumn air.

He closed the laptop and headed back downstairs. At the bottom, he stepped briefly over to the laundry room to toss his shirt on the washer before finding Scott standing at the counter checking dinner. He came up behind his husband and wrapped his arms around the trim waist.

"I hope you don't mind, but I just spoke with Doug and Kyle and asked if they'd mind some visitors tonight."

"Of course I don't mind," Scott said, turning around and looking at Hank's t-shirt. "God, I love how this fits you."

"Why I wore it," Hank said, kissing Scott's neck. He spread his legs apart, to be at eye level with Scott, and cupped his husband's ass.

"So, I'm forgiven?"

Hank pulled his head back and looked down at Scott's impish grin. "Huh?"

"Derek? The home inspector?"

Hank closed his eyes and rested his forehead on Scott's shoulder. "I forgot about that."

"I'm not too sure about many things in this world, Hank, but I do know three things: I love you more than life itself and always will. Brian, Kari, Matthew and Ellie are gifts from the universe to make up for a crappy childhood. And there is no one, and I do mean *no one* who looks as good as you do in a tight t-shirt."

"Ah," Hank said, letting go of Scott and leaning back against the counter. "So it's purely physical?"

"Absolutely," Scott teased as he reached into the cupboard for plates and coffee mugs. "I married you just because of how you look in a t-shirt."

Hank took the plates and mugs from Scott and put them on the counter. He turned back to Scott and wrapped his hands around the man's waist before hoisting him onto the counter beside the fridge. He pushed Scott's knees

apart and pressed himself in between, pulling Scott toward him.

He claimed Scott's lips roughly at first and then pulled back slightly, licking and teasing them. His hands moved slowly, but purposefully, over Scott's back, squeezing the back of his neck now and again while he teased the hungry mouth with his tongue.

After a few minutes of kissing, Hank pulled away and looked at the flushed skin and hooded eyes.

"That's the only reason? Just because of how I look in a t-shirt?"

Scott swallowed and pressed his forehead to Hank's. "Point taken."

Hank wrapped his arms around Scott's shoulders and laughed before letting go and setting the table for dinner.

"I owe you another apology," Hank said as he squeezed Scott's hand.

They were walking, slowly but with purpose, down Cygnet Drive and heading toward Indian Road, which would lead them to Maple Bay Road and eventually to Frances Street where Doug and

Kyle lived with their son, little Scott.

Hank had wanted to go by their new house, partly because it wasn't that far out of the way on their way toward Doug and Kyle's house, but mostly because just looking at the house put him in mind that he would soon be a father. And he'd need to be a better father than he'd been a husband, well for the last couple of weeks anyway.

"Another one?" Scott looked at him with raised eyebrows.

Hank nodded. "You left your laptop open and I saw all of the windows open and all those bios about all those different children."

"So? I don't have any secrets from you."

"I know," Hank said, stopping at the crosswalk by the elementary school. He put his arm around Scott's shoulders as he guided them east down Maple Bay Road. "I had these thoughts that you weren't really wanting this as much as I was, that you were just going along because it was the path of least resistance." Hank leaned over and kissed his temple. "I was wrong. And I'm sorry."

Scott offered a one-note laugh and petted Hank's belly. "No need," he said, wrapping an

arm around Hank's waist. "Truth is I was trying to downplay my excitement because if this doesn't turn out the way we want, I knew you'd be more worried about me than yourself."

"I do seem to need something to worry over, don't I?"

"I think that's human nature, really." Scott squeezed his waist one last time and then reached for his hand as they crossed in the middle of Maple Bay Road to reach Frances Street. "I always thought that if I had lots of money I wouldn't worry about anything. But, of course, you know that's not true. I worry about everything still. You, Brian, Kari, Matt and Ellie. I'd worry if I wasn't worried about anything."

Hank laughed and squeezed Scott's hand. "And here I thought nothing would ever worry my little Scrappy."

"Very funny," Scott said as they approached Doug and Kyle's house. Scott handed over the plastic bag he'd been carrying in his other hand once they reached the door. The bag contained a book for little Scott. During their first visit with Doug and Kyle, shortly Hank's Scott had arrived back home, they'd spent an evening with their new friends and learned that little Scott

was a voracious reader; this was not a surprise once they learned that Doug was a school teacher.

Hank pressed the bell beside the door and, after a few moments, Kyle opened the door with little Scott pressed firmly against one of his legs.

"Come in," Kyle said as he tousled little Scott's hair, moving them both back and away from the door. "I'll take your sweaters, if you'd like."

Hank removed his hooded sweatshirt and waited for Scott to remove his own and then handed both to Kyle. "I found this great new story for you, Scott." Hank squatted down on his haunches and held out the bag for little Scott. "I remember last time we were here you told me that you really like trains."

"Yup," Scott said as he took the bag and pulled the book out. He studied the cover for a moment and then moved closer to Hank. The little boy wrapped his arms around Hank's neck. "Thank you." The boy then moved over to where Scott was now kneeling and hugged him as well.

"You're very welcome." Hank and Scott both stood up.

"Maybe if you ask nicely, Hank and Scott will read it to you before bedtime." Kyle hung the sweatshirts on a hook behind the door and then guided everyone into the large, open space that served as kitchen and family room. There were toys and kid's stuff to navigate around on their way to the comfortable sofa and love seat that both formed right angles with the fireplace.

"We would love that," Hank said as he ruffled little Scott's hair. "Where's Doug?"

"Down in the basement," Kyle said as he walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. "I sent him down for a bottle of wine. For me, that is. You two like beer if I remember correctly?"

"I'll have some wine with you," Scott said, looking over at Hank. "Just for a change."

"Great," Kyle said, pulling out two beers from the fridge and then retrieving two wine glasses from the cupboard above the sink. "Hank? Glass or bottle?"

"Bottle's fine," Hank said as Kyle popped the tops off. "Is he stomping the grapes himself or--" Hank was looking over at Scott when Doug appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Sorry about that," Doug said as he handed over the bottle of wine and the cork. "Took me

a while to remember what he sent me down there for." Doug winked at Hank and sat down opposite them. "It's definitely not like beer. Can't just remember the colors on the label; you actually have to read the damn thing. And don't get me started about the whole waiting for it to breathe nonsense."

"I married up," Kyle said as he decanted the bottle and let it sit while he delivered the beers to Hank and Doug. He returned to pour some wine into two glasses before offering one to Scott and then taking a seat beside his husband.

Hank and Scott laughed as they exchanged a look. "To marrying up," Hank said, leaning forward and touching his bottle to Doug's and then to the bases of Scott's and Kyle's wine glasses.

Hank enjoyed having another gay couple to socialize with. It wasn't something he figured he'd have living in Duncan, but, as if turned out, there were quite a few married gay and lesbian couples in town. Doug and Kyle had explained all about their circle of friends, comprised mainly of gay and lesbian parents like themselves. Not only did it help him and Scott to expand their social circle, but it also was a

constant reminder of hope for him that same-sex couples were now being seen as good and viable adoptive parents.

He would have to remind himself of this more often when the doubts and uncertainty overtook his thoughts.

They walked in silence mostly. They had covered almost the entire distance back to their townhouse without either saying much of anything, other than Hank commenting on what a beautiful fall evening it was and Scott, as usual, agreeing with him.

"He's quite taken with you," Scott said, his arm around Hank's waist as they walked back home.

"Who? Scott?" Hank rubbed his hand up and down Scott's back as they walked toward the crosswalk. "What can I say? I seem to have this effect on men named Scott."

Scott laughed and pinched his side. "I think someone is fishing for compliments about how he has that effect on everybody. Even the employees from what Brian has been saying."

Hank stopped and looked at him. "Brian talks

about me?"

"Of course he does, but nothing he hasn't said to you directly."

"What does he say?"

"He tells me how he's sometimes jealous about how the men come to you when they need help and not him anymore."

"That's just because I'm there more."

"Maybe," Scott said as he wrapped his arms around Hank's upper arm.

"Does he say anything else about me?"

"That you're going to be a wonderful father, and Kari agrees with him."

"But they're sleep-deprived, so they don't know what they're saying half the time."

Scott laughed and swatted playfully at the rock-hard bicep. "Like I said, fishing."

"Well, that's very nice of them, but there's only one person whose approval I'm looking for." Scott slid his left hand down and interlaced his fingers with Hank's. "Speaking of mom..." He didn't look down at the expression that he was sure was on his husband's face, but laughed and brought his hand up to kiss the back of Scott's.

"Just kidding."

"We should have her and Frank over for dinner soon."

"She called me at the office today," Hank said as they reached their street and turned south. "She and Frank are apparently planning a weekend together in Vancouver."

"Good for them. I'm so happy for them both."

"He's a good man," Hank said with a sigh. "Mom's still being cagey about the whole thing, though, so I don't know how she'd react if we invited Frank."

"Leave that part up to me," Scott said as he reached the front door and pulled out his keys. "I'll get it out of her one way or the other eventually."

"I must say, though, I'm not sure what she's waiting for."

"Did you tell her about us right away? Did you tell anyone about us right away? I know I didn't. It was kind of nice having you all to myself for a little while." Scott pushed open the door and stepped inside, closing the door behind Hank and locking it.

Hank didn't know how to answer those

questions. He hadn't told anyone, but for completely different reasons. He shrugged out of his sweatshirt, draped it over the banister and took Scott's hand.

"Speaking of showers..." He began to lead Scott upstairs, but Scott stopped short.

"Hang on," he said as he pulled his hand away and headed to the kitchen. "There's a message. I'll be right up."

"I'll wait," Hank said, shuffling behind Scott, keeping contact the entire way to the answering machine.

Scott hit the button and Kelly's voice followed the announcement of one new message.

Hello Scott and Hank. I'm afraid I have some unfortunate news for you. Can you call me at home when you get this message, please.

Scott jotted down the phone number and then picked up the phone.

Hank stood beside him, leaning down to try and hear everything. He finally gave up after a few seconds and leaned against the counter, growing more and more concerned by the disappointment spreading across Scott's handsome face.

Scott thanked Kelly for letting them know and

disconnected the call. He turned and offered a sad smile to Hank.

"There's been a complication with Diana."

"What?"

"Apparently, neither the birth mother nor her family are comfortable with an adoption to a same-sex couple."

"What does that mean? If she's up for adoption, doesn't that mean she's surrendered her rights?"

"I don't know. I guess," Scott said with a shrug. "Off the top of my head, I'm assuming their looking for adoptive parents that will be able to get along with the relatives that still exist, so there won't be too much friction, which, of course, would be bad for the child. And especially a child as young as four."

"So, what? That's it? We're out? She couldn't have checked on this before getting our hopes up?"

"I'm sorry Hank," Scott said, reaching for Hank.

Hank let out a big breath and hugged Scott, tightly. "Why? This isn't your fault. You haven't done anything wrong here."

"I don't think Kelly did this on purpose, Hank." Scott pushed himself up and kissed Hank's stubbled chin. "We knew that this could happen. At least we didn't get too far along and become attached before we found out."

"I guess," Hank said, becoming more and more annoyed with each passing minute. "Still doesn't seem fair somehow."

"We'll find someone," Scott said reassuringly. "Or several someones."

"I know, but I was talking about Diana. She might have to wait a hell of a lot longer for some couple who that family approves of. That's just not right."

"I know," Scott said, stroking Hank's back and beginning to rock back and forth a little. "I know."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hank was in his office, scrolling through the profiles of children, trying to figure out if there was any way he could tell from reading them if the existing relatives didn't want same-sex couples to adopt their unwanted children. He'd spent most of last night lying awake trying to convince himself he wasn't as disappointed as he really was. He always knew, going into this adoption process, that there might be resistance to two gay men adopting. He wasn't a fool; he knew that despite Canada's laws there would always be those individuals who would see him as less than a man, as someone not worthy of being a father. But what he'd not counted on were these feelings of anger over these same individuals giving up their parental rights to a child *and* still wanting some sort of control over what kind of home would provide the love and support that they were unwilling or incapable of giving.

"What's up your butt?"

Hank turned around and saw Brian standing in the middle of their shared space. He smiled and minimized the window of profiles on his screen. "Got our first rejection last night."

"Ah, Hank, I'm sorry. I didn't know." Brian

put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed briefly.
"How's Scott doing?"

"Hard to say," Hank said leaning back in his chair. "You know how he can be. But I think he's just as disappointed as I am. No one likes to hear that people think you won't make a good parent just because of who you love."

"It'll happen," Brian said as he sat at his own desk. "You'll see. And it'll be better than anything you ever imagined."

"I know," Hank said, scrubbing his hands over his face. "We were both awake most of the night. He was pretending to be asleep, but I could tell he wasn't."

"He's pretty stubborn. You know that. When he wants something, he always gets it." Brian pointed to Hank himself and smiled. "And you're not real good at taking no for an answer either."

"It's just too bad for the kids, you know. I mean, I spent most of last night trying to figure out how someone could think that foster care is somehow better than two men."

"It's not, but you can only help the ones who want to be helped." Brian stood up again and patted his back pocket. "Come on," he said,

heading for the open door to their office.

"It's almost lunch. My treat."

"Nah, I'm not very hungry." Hank stood up and stretched his back. "I was thinking I should go out in the field and check on how Chris is doing with those two new guys." Hank feigned a punch to Brian's midsection and ended up in a playful headlock when Brian proved too quick. "Pretty quick for an old geezer, you know."

"Maybe you're just too slow," Brian said jokingly and let Hank go. "Why don't you and Scott come by the house tonight for dinner? Spend some time with the kids."

"I'll check with him and then let you know." Hank made it to the door and then Brian called his name. He turned and looked at his brother-in-law.

"You're a good man, Hank. And you're gonna be a great father."

Hank smiled, feeling a little bit better, and headed out to his truck. He sat in the driver's seat for a minute before pulling out his phone to check with Scott about Brian's offer for dinner. He wasn't surprised when Scott readily agreed to another play date with his niece and nephew.

"Hey boss!"

Chris was still wearing his helmet and ear protection. Hank came up just as he was removing them, the way he twisted his head putting the large, diagonal scar along his neck in plain view. It was a reminder of that day so many years ago of the accident that had led Chris to be helicoptered to a nearby hospital in Tofino during a particular job. He'd not been paying close enough attention to the chainsaw. It had snapped and caught him a glancing blow off his protective gear before skimming along his neck and shoulder.

It was the accident that had forced Hank, so eager then to impress Brian, to stay behind, alone, to try and finish the job. It was also what had led Hank to become disoriented in the woods, to cut himself and to lose his way. The cut had become infected and he had passed out, only to be found by Brian early the next day. But by then, Hank had become hypothermic and the infections were ravaging Hank's body.

Hank didn't really like to think about that day. He still had a scar of his own to remind him that he had almost lost Scott and the promise of happiness that he'd brought along

with him.

"Hey, Chris," Hank said as he shook Chris's hand. "How are the new guys working out?"

"Great," Chris said, moving to stand beside Hank, the two of them looking up into the trees to see the two young men working away at stripping the branches before they would top those same trees. "Yeah, really great. No problems."

"Wouldn't think so," Hank said, offering a wink to Chris. "They had a good teacher."

"Thanks boss," Chris said with a huge grin. "Does that mean I get a raise?"

"You just got it," Hank said. "I said something nice about you."

Chris laughed and let his helmet and ear protection fall to the ground. "Listen, I meant to ask you this morning back in the office, but you were looking kind of distracted."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Scott and I got some disappointing news last night."

"Oh, well, if now's not a good time--"

"No, don't be silly. What do you need? You'd better not be quitting."

Hank smiled as he saw Chris's cheeks flush a little. "No, nothing like that, but I suppose I will need a few days off for a honeymoon."

Hank's smile faded as the words sunk in. "Seriously? You're finally going to ask her?"

"Yeah, it's been almost a year," Chris said, not really knowing what to do with his hands.

"About time," Hank said, extending his hand. When Chris took it, he pulled him in for a quick hug and then stood back. He gave his hand another good squeeze and then let go. "Bet your grandparents are excited huh?" Hank remembered working with Chris the first time several years ago and learning about Chris's erratic childhood, which finally gained some much-needed stability when his grandparents took him in.

"Yeah," Chris said, still blushing. "They love Shelby just as much as I do, and she loves them, too, so I don't think there'll ever be a better time."

"Good for you, man. Good for you." Hank said and then realized what Chris would need. "You take as much time as you'd like. I'll come back out in the field if I need to."

"We'll just need a week 'cause she won't be able to get too much time off from the hospital

and money'll be tight for a while."

Hank wanted to offer some money to help them out, but he knew that the idea of paying his own way and providing for his loved ones was very important to Chris. So, he kept his mouth closed. He'd just give them a big fat check as a wedding gift.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about, though."

"Okay."

"I was kinda hoping that you'd agree to be one of my groomsmen. I mean, I'll understand if you say no, what with you being my boss and all--"

"I'd be honored," Hank said, holding out his hand. When Chris took it, the relief was plain on his face. "Truly honored."

"Okay," Chris said with a huge grin. "Okay, thanks."

"Of course, I might skip out on the strippers and the hangover, but I'll be there for you."

"Oh no," Chris said, his face becoming serious. "Nothing like that. I asked my grandpa to be my best man, so at least I hope there won't be anything like that." Chris exhaled audibly and Hank could almost feel the

tension leave the kid's body. "Oh, and don't forget to bring Scott. That is, if you want to."

"Okay," Hank said warily. "But if *But for You* will be played at the reception, he might be a little embarrassed."

"In that case, you might want to tell him that it's one of Shelby's favorite songs."

"Does she know you know the man who composed it?"

The expression on Chris's face was one of incredulity and patience. "Are you kidding? That's what got me a second date with her."

Hank laughed and clapped Chris on the shoulder before the two of them headed over to chat with the two new guys who were just coming down from the tree tops.

Hank had talked some more about the wedding with Chris throughout the rest of the afternoon. It would be just before Christmas, which kind of shocked Hank, that is until Chris explained that Shelby was as low-maintenance as women can get without wearing plaid lumberjack shirts and chewing tobacco on the back porch. He'd wanted

to ask if the wedding was planned so quickly because there might be a little one on the way, but then chastised himself and returned that thought to the 1950's, where it belonged.

But the thought had entered his mind and he found himself driving back home thinking of little else. Part of his brain knew that it would happen, that he and Scott would become parents, but after the phone call last night, the other part of his brain--that part that reminded him of how intolerant and dismissive some people could be toward two gay men wanting children--had begun to reassert itself.

He'd not listened to anything that part had to offer since he'd met and fallen in love with Scott, but here were those same feelings of rejection. He wasn't good enough for his own father, he wasn't good enough for his two sisters and now he was being judged by some anonymous woman who might be thinking that foster care was better for her young daughter than an overabundance of love from two gay men.

As he pulled into the driveway of his townhouse, he shook his head and sent a little prayer heavenward for that little girl. He hoped that she would grow up to be more accepting and open-minded than her mother.

He walked through the door and called for Scott, as usual. He toed off his shoes and deposited his keys in the bowl before heading toward the stairs.

"In here," Scott called from the kitchen. Hank should have known from the exquisite aroma that seemed to pull him toward the kitchen.

Hank made his way there and snuggled himself against Scott's back, trying to keep his arms out of the way of Scott's chopping and mincing. "Smells good, baby."

"Thank you. It'll be ready in about twenty minutes."

"I received an invitation today."

Scott stopped chopping and turned to look at him. Hank just smiled and stole a kiss. "Well? Are you going to tell me?"

"Chris is getting married and he's asked me to be a groomsman." Hank let go long enough to get two beers from the fridge and twist the caps of both. He handed one to Scott.

"To Chris and..." Scott had a confused look on his face.

"Shelby," Hank said, touching his bottle to Scott's.

"I should have known that," Scott said after taking a swig of his beer.

"We've only met her twice, and the last time was almost seven months ago." Hank cleared his throat and tried not to grimace. "And there's something else."

Scott almost got the beer bottle to his lips, but stopped short. "What's with the face? What did you promise them?"

"Seems Shelby is a big fan of *But for You--*"

"You didn't!"

"Didn't do what?"

"Tell them I'd sing, or play at their wedding."

"No," Hank said, trying not to laugh. "Chris just wanted you to know that they'd be playing the song at the wedding. And that Shelby was so impressed that he knows the composer that you're the reason he got a second date."

Scott laughed and took another swig of beer before setting the bottle down on the counter. He turned back to his chopping and mincing and then tilted the chopping board so that all the tomatoes and onions and fresh spices slid into the frying pan. He reduced the heat and shifted

so he could see Hank.

"What are we getting them? Are they registered somewhere?" Scott's brow was slightly furrowed, which led Hank to believe that the second question was important.

"You're asking me like I should know what that means," Hank said, shrugging. "I'm not *that* gay, you know. Besides, Chris said something about money being tight, so I figured a big fat check would be good enough."

"We can't just give them money," Scott said as his brow furrowed even more. "Never mind. I'll have to call Shelby and find out. Are they sending invitations soon, or are we just going to show up?"

Another shrug from Hank.

"Do we RSVP somehow?"

Another shrug.

"Okay, then, I guess all we can do is let Chris know that we'll be there."

"Already did," Hank said as he wrapped his arms around Scott's shoulders.

"Of course you did," Scott sighed as Hank nibbled at his ear. "Because you know that all you have to do is...huh...that," Scott said as

Hank traced the shell of the ear with his tongue. "And I'll do anything you want."

"I can stop if you'd like," Hank whispered against Scott's ear. He kissed the ear one last time and then pulled away. "In fact, if I don't," he said pointing to the frying pan, "we might have to call for delivery."

CHAPTER NINE

"Should we call her, do you think?"

Hank was sitting on the bed watching Scott fold the laundry. They'd already made the bed, cleaned the house and even begun packing boxes for the upcoming move. But Hank's mind was still focused primarily on trying to figure out if not hearing from Kelly was as bad a sign as he thought it was.

Scott finished the last t-shirt and smiled. "It's only been three weeks."

"I know, but that's bad, isn't it?"

"No."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Because good things come to those who wait."

Hank sighed and fell back on the bed, his hands drumming nervously on his stomach.

"For example," Scott said, positioning himself beside his husband. "Brian and Kari. Matthew and Ellie." Scott held up his left hand, his thumb moving over his wedding ring. "You."

Hank felt his chest tighten at the words and turned on his side, propping his head on his hand. He looked into the hypnotic brown eyes

and kissed Scott on the lips before putting a hand on his chest. "Now I feel like a fool."

"You are." Scott patted Hank's cheek and moved to sit up. "You're *my* fool and worth every agonizing second of the wait." Scott put a hand on Hank's thigh and pushed himself up. "Come on. Let's go for a walk."

Hank sat up and pulled Scott onto his lap. "Okay," Hank said, pushing his hands through the blond curls. "But first," Hank whispered as he pressed his lips to Scott's. His eyes closed as he felt the never-ending excitement of holding this man. His husband. His Scrappy, who was always saying things like that, making sure that Hank understood he was the best thing to ever happen in Scott's life.

Scott's hands were on his shoulders, caressing and stroking. They pulled apart for a brief moment before Scott rested his forehead against Hank's. "I love you, too."

"I'm sorry about being such a pill," Hank said, skimming his hands up and down Scott's back. "I just figured... I thought... Ah, okay, enough moping around." Hank planted his hands on Scott's ass and pulled him closer. "Let's go for a walk."

Hank leaned forward and stood, still holding his husband. He let go when Scott's feet were on the floor again. They exited the bedroom and headed down the stairs to put on shoes and were just about out the door when the phone rang.

Hank jumped at the sound and ran back to the living room. "Might be Kelly!"

"Well, that was a lesson well learned," Scott joked as he followed.

Hank picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hank? It's Brian."

"Oh, hey Bri." Hank couldn't contain the disappointment in his voice. "How's it going? Everything okay?"

Scott laughed and walked back to the door, shaking his head.

"Sorry," Brian said, trying unsuccessfully to hide his amusement. "Bad time?"

"No, just thought it might be news about the adoption."

"It'll happen, buddy. Don't give up. Good things come to those who wait."

That made Hank smile. "I know. Your brother just said the same thing a few minutes ago."

"There you go."

"Did you want to talk to Scott?" Hank looked over at his husband.

"No, well you and Scott, actually," Brian said. "Kari and I are already making plans for Thanksgiving and were wondering if we'll be seeing you on the day or if you're planning on spending it with your mom."

"Honestly, I don't know what mom's doing for Thanksgiving." Hank put a hand over the mouthpiece and spoke to Scott. "Have you talked to mom at all lately?" Scott shook his head. Hank removed his hand and cleared his throat. "Can I get back to you on that?"

"Sure thing," Brian said. Hank was about to say his goodbyes when he heard Brian's tone change a little. "Listen, Hank. I know it's hard and I know it seems sometimes like it'll never happen, but you gotta keep believing. Come over here, go out for dinner, go to the mainland and spend time with your mom and her new beau. But sitting around thinking about it will drive you crazy. Trust me, I know."

"I know," Hank repeated. "Thanks."

Hank disconnected the call and wondered if Brian was referring to the years he'd spent

alone, the years before Scott had pushed him and Kari together. As he headed back to where Scott stood by the door, Hank wondered if Brian had actually spent all that time alone, pining away for Kari, afraid to do anything about his feelings for her.

"Remind me to call mom later and find out about Thanksgiving? Please?"

Scott chuckled and held the door open for Hank. "Certainly."

"I didn't realize I was this bad. Even your brother thinks I'm losing it."

"He does not," Scott said as he pushed Hank playfully. "He's worried about you."

"Sorry," Hank said, stopping in his tracks. "I haven't even asked you what you would like to do for Thanksgiving."

Scott laughed out loud and brought his hands up to caress Hank's furrowed brow. "You know I don't care whether we spend it with your mom or with my brother. For pete's sake, you know we'll be spending part of the weekend with one and the rest with the other. Just like we always do."

"'Kay," Hank said as he took hold of Scott's

left hand and kissed it. "I can't remember the last time I felt this..." Hank put his hands out in front of him, waving them slowly, trying to find the right word. "Anxious." He took ahold of Scott's hand again. "I mean, one minute I feel reassured, but then the phone call doesn't come and I get anxious again and then you have to talk me off the ledge one more time. I hate this feeling."

Scott got them walking again. "Do you remember our first weekend out at French Beach?"

"Of course," Hank said, furrowing his brow again.

"Were you anxious then?"

"Of course," Hank said again. "I mean I knew you were attracted to me, but when I actually made up my mind to... you know... do something, I was terrified that you would be insulted or that you might think I was just using you."

"But you wanted it? Wanted me?"

"Oh, sweet Jesus, yes," Hank said without hesitation. "Told you before that I fantasize about that weekend all the time."

"And you knew what you had to do to make it happen."

"I don't really remember, to tell you the truth." Hank put his arm across Scott's shoulders. "Just remember thinking about what it would feel like to be *with* you."

"Okay, then, so do that again. Don't focus on the how to make it happen. Focus on the when it happens. Start thinking about teaching our kid how to play baseball or how to climb trees or how to color inside the lines and stop thinking if those things will ever happen."

"Understood," Hank said and pulled Scott closer. "What about you?"

"I guess I'll teach our kid music and math. I was always good at poetry and novel studies."

"No," Hank said as he hip-checked Scott. "I meant about our first weekend."

"What about it?"

"Were you hoping that I'd seduce you?"

Hank looked down when Scott didn't answer. He was doing that raised eyebrow thing that meant Hank was asking a stupid question that he should already know the answer to. Hank laughed out loud.

"Knew it," Hank whispered as he squeezed Scott's hand.

"Feeling better?" Scott was sitting at his keyboard, but turned as soon as Hank entered the room. They'd gotten back from their walk, Hank had called his mother and Scott had come up to the office to do some work.

Hank sat down beside Scott, facing the opposite direction and leaned in for a kiss. "Of course. You have that effect on me."

"Good." Scott pointed to the door. "So, what's the plan?"

"Mom says she and Frank will be spending Thanksgiving together. His kids are visiting their respective in-laws on the day itself, so she officially invited us for Thanksgiving Day."

"Then it's settled," Scott said as Hank stifled a yawn. "We'll go to Brian and Kari's on Sunday and to your mom's on Monday."

"You want to call your brother and let him know?"

"Sure," Scott said leaning over for another kiss. "Why don't you go and get in the shower and I'll join you in a minute."

"Don't have to ask me twice," Hank said with a waggle of his eyebrows just as the phone rang.

"That's probably Brian. I'll let you get it."
Hank got up and Scott smacked him on the ass before getting up to go over to the extension on the desk.

Hank was almost to the bedroom when he heard Scott calling his name. He turned back and wondered who it could be. He had a flashback to the night his father had been rushed to the hospital and wondered if something had happened to his mother, or Brian, or Kari or one of the kids.

He looked into the room and saw Scott reaching for him.

"Okay, okay, Kelly," Scott said and grabbed ahold of Hank's hand. "I'm going to put you on speaker. Hank's here. Can you say that again, please?"

Hank heard Kelly's familiar, patient, chuckle. She took a breath. "Hi, Hank. I was just telling Scott that there is a profile I want you to look at. It's three children, ages five to nine--"

"You mean Jens, Ingrid and Birgit?" Hank sat down in the chair to be closer to the phone.

"Yes," Kelly said, obviously surprised. "Have you memorized all the profiles?"

"There's some that stick out more than others," Hank said. "I remember theirs because of the descriptions of what they like to do. Jens likes to be active outdoors and is really into science. Ingrid really likes writing, poetry, I think and Birgit likes animals and coloring."

"Well," Kelly said, still surprised. "I'm impressed."

"What about the birth family? If I remember correctly, they still want contact. And the oldest boy has ADHD?"

"Yes, there are family members who wish to maintain contact," Kelly explained. "But they have assured me that their only interest is a loving home. Mom and dad, dad and dad, they don't really care. They have a birth aunt who is lesbian and a birth uncle who is gay. They don't see them very often, but Jens knows about them and understands. As for the ADHD, wait until you meet him. I'm not sure they got this diagnosis right, to be honest. He can be a little too focused on certain things and not enough on others."

Hank turned to look at Scott, as if he was asking permission to get three treats at the store instead of just one. Scott nodded and

pushed the hair off Hank's forehead.

"Wait," Hank said as he turned around to look at the phone. "Wasn't there something about a younger brother who might need adopting? There was no name listed."

"Yes, there is still that possibility. Is that a deal breaker for the two of you?"

"No," Hank said and then turned back to look at Scott. "Is it?" He whispered. Scott shook his head *and* did the eyebrow thing and Hank pulled him onto his lap. He looked over at the phone. "No, not a deal breaker."

"Okay," Kelly said, seeming relieved. "Because the next step would be introductions during a supervised visit. You'll meet the three oldest for now. We can plan some sort of activity for a few hours."

"Do we let them choose or should we plan something or..."

"I can certainly ask them what they'd like to do, and, of course, you can make suggestions as well."

"Okay," Hank said, squeezing Scott tightly. "When? Daytime, evening?"

"Well, they're in school during the day, but

if you'd prefer that time, we can arrange something on the weekend."

"No," Hank practically yelled at the phone. "Anytime is fine. Evening is good."

"Okay," Kelly said again. "I'm required to draw up a written plan and discuss it with the children and you. So, I'll get that done within the next few days and I'll be in touch."

"Thank you, Kelly. Bye for now." Hank said as he looked back at Scott, who reached over to hang up the phone after Kelly had said her goodbyes.

Scott put his hands on either side of Hank's face and looked into his eyes. "You know what I just realized?"

"What?"

"Jens is Danish for John."

Hank's chest tightened and the breath caught in his throat as he remembered that night, just after his father's death, just after Hank had become Brian's partner at the logging company, when he'd had thoughts of eventually adopting a child with Scott. He remembered wondering, if the child was a boy, if Scott would let his name be John, after Hank's father. He'd shared that

secret with Scott a few days later.

Hank felt the burning behind his eyes and saw the look of concern on Scott's face.

"I'm sorry," Scott said, holding Hank close. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Not upset," Hank said, holding on tight. "Can't believe you remember that."

"I never forget these kinds of moments," Scott said, pushing himself off Hank's lap. "I love seeing you this happy. But don't get too attached yet, 'cause it damn near kills me to see you sad."

"This is it," Hank said, standing up and picking Scott off the floor in a bear hug. "I can feel it."

"We should clear our calendars, I guess, huh?"

"What, exactly, do we have to clear?" Hank laughed and lowered Scott to the floor. "It's not like we're social butterflies, going out every evening."

"I know. I just meant we should be preparing something." Scott smoothed some hair off Hank's forehead and let his hand linger there for a moment. "Any ideas on how to entertain pre-teens?"

"Of course not," Hank said with a smile.
"That's why this is so exciting."

Hank's head was swimming. He'd woken up and been unable to fall back to sleep, even with a comatose Scott's hypnotic breathing and cold nose pressed against his shoulder. He'd begun to think, again, about what Kelly had explained. When it truly dawned on him that he wasn't sure what *pre-placement* visits actually meant, he started to feel panicky.

So, he was now sitting at the dining room table, wearing only boxers, staring at the screen of the laptop. He'd found a document online which, he was certain, was for social workers who worked with adoptions. And it was very detailed, and confusing. He'd read over this same page about pre-placement visits at least ten times and still wasn't sure if he understood it. *God*, he thought as he rubbed his temples, *and just a few hours ago I felt so much better*. Of course, that's how he always felt after a shower with Scott. But over the past couple of hours, he was right back to square one: Feeling useless and out of his depth.

He'd even gotten up from the table and searched for a pen and some paper so he could

write down some questions to ask Kelly when they spoke next. But the list was getting longer as his nerve weakened. As he almost began to surrender to those thoughts in his head, the ones taunting him that he would never be ready for this, he heard the soft footfalls on the stairs behind him.

"Everything okay?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I thought I see what these pre-placement visits are all about. And then I remembered about how the younger sister is in a different foster home, so I wanted to check on how best to make a smooth transition for her once she's back with her siblings. And I started reading about ADHD, but there are so many opinions, and it's all so complicated and--"

"Hank," Scott sighed as he closed the laptop and took Hank's hand. "This is too much. This can't be good for you. Actually, I know this isn't good for you."

"I just wanted to find out--"

"Hank," Scott said, stopping on the first stair so he was eye-level with Hank. "You are a good, *good* man. Just the simple fact that you're doing this to yourself is enough to

convince me that you're going to be a wonderful father. You need to stop doing this to yourself."

Hank felt properly cowed. He looked down at his feet and Scott kissed the top of his head.

"I know I'm going to make mistakes. I know you're going to make mistakes. Every parent makes mistakes. How many times have we seen Brian and Kari trying to figure out why Matt does this or why Ellie refuses to do that?"

Hank looked up into Scott's eyes and smiled, feeling a little better.

"We will take the pre-placement visits one day at a time, one minute at a time. And we will do the best that we can do for them. ADHD, separation anxiety, Birgit getting to know her siblings. All we can do is be there and use our good judgment as to what's best for them. We can only be ourselves and hope that they'll want to be part of our family."

Hank turned Scott around and pushed him up the stairs, realizing for the first time that Scott was naked.

"Message received. Again."

"Good," Scott said as he walked up the stairs

heading to their bedroom. "Because," he added when he was crawling back into bed. "I love you more than anything. But if you keep this up, I'm divorcing you."

Hank laughed as he pulled off his boxers and snuggled up to Scott's back. "Empty threats," he whispered against Scott's ears and smiled at the shiver it caused.

CHAPTER TEN

Hank paced the floor of the new house. It was moving day. One week since Kelly had called about Jens, Ingrid and Birgit and six days since he'd been going through withdrawal symptoms. Six days ago, he'd promised himself and Scott that he would quit obsessing about the adoption, about the kids, about the visits, about everything. He'd never smoked a day in his life, but he wondered if they went through this kind of torture when they were trying to quit.

He'd been a pretty good drinker back before he'd ever met Scott, but once he had, drinking had never seemed as important as pleasing him. But this? The not knowing and the trying not to obsess seemed worse than the hours he spent looking at profiles and researching the entire adoption process. At least, he was finding some answers when he was obsessing; now, he was getting nothing at all to assuage some of his worries. He'd even added to them by doing all of the packing in his distracted state; he couldn't help but wonder how much of their stuff would arrive broken because he'd not used enough bubble wrap.

He checked his watch for the fourth time in as many minutes.

"Where the hell are the movers?"

"On their way," Scott said as he loaded the fridge and cupboards with the food from their old townhouse. "Perhaps you'd like to go to the store and look for a lawnmower? Still need one of those."

"Already ordered one," Hank said as he looked out the window. "Be here tomorrow."

"Would you like a beer?"

Hank looked over at his husband. "It's only two o'clock in the afternoon."

"So?" Scott said, holding out the bottle. "It's moving day. Everyone knows you drink beer on moving day."

"What if Kelly comes by?"

Scott shrugged and walked over to give Hank the beer. "She can have one too, but *only* if she helps."

Hank looked at Scott. There was that mischievous grin firmly in place. Hank relaxed his shoulders. He laughed and took the beer in his right hand. "I know," he said as he wrapped his arms around Scott. "Calm down or you're divorcing me."

"That's right," Scott said, accepting a kiss.

"And I've already got my eye on that one moving guy."

"Which guy?"

"The one with all the tattoos."

"The grunter?"

"That's the one," Scott said as he tried to pull away. "Seems dangerous."

"Gross." Hank said as he held Scott against his chest.

"Maybe," Scott said, pushing his hands under the waistband of Hank's pants. "But you know how much I like noise during sex."

"Sure, but what about the conversation afterward? He probably grunts all the time. Besides, he's not even hairy."

"That's okay," Scott teased, pulling at the hairs on Hank's ass. "Might be time to try something new."

"Oh really," Hank said softly as he pulled up Scott's t-shirt. "Like this?" He pressed the cold bottle against the warm skin of Scott's back. He released Scott as he began to jump around, smiling and laughing. He twisted the cap off the bottle and drank slowly, watching Scott return to the kitchen.

"That wasn't very nice," Scott said, closing the fridge and collecting the empty boxes and bags from the counter.

"Neither were you. I think someone owes me an apology for teasing me with his potential infidelity." Hank walked over to where Scott stood at the counter, his hands full of bags and boxes. "Or does someone need to be thrown into the cold ocean again?"

"You and what army?"

Hank put his beer down on the counter and raised his arms, flexing his biceps. "These babies are more than enough to carry you to the backyard and dump you in that pool."

"You keep doing that," Scott said, giving Hank his best seductive stare. "And you can carry me anywhere you want."

Hank was just about to molest his husband when they heard the horn outside. Hank actually felt disappointment that they would have to wait to christen the kitchen. He made his way to the front door, glancing back at Scott. "I guess you'll have to wait until later on when I'm all pumped up and sweaty." He raised his shirt and squeezed his abs before turning and opening the door, laughing to himself when he heard Scott

calling him a tease.

Seven hours later, the boxes containing the essentials had been sorted, opened and emptied. Some of the furniture, like the comfortable yet worn sectional was in the basement in what would become the children's play area and other pieces in their eclectic collection had been arranged and rearranged in the living room, the dining room and the master bedroom. Hank had joked with Scott that it all of that frenzied activity had brought back fond memories of when Scott's furniture had arrived from Toronto all those years ago. It had been a cool fall day then as well, Hank remembered. The day their life together had begun.

And here they were, beginning another chapter of their story. They were going to be fathers. Parents, responsible for three, possibly four, young lives. Five years ago, when Scott had agreed to stay in Duncan and move in with him, Hank had wondered how he would ever care for another human being, especially after the mess he'd made of his own.

But as he watched Scott smile at him from the other end of the love seat that they'd finally found the perfect spot for, he realized he'd

managed not to screw up once. Maybe he could do it again once the kids arrived.

"I'm never moving again," Scott said as he slumped down onto the love seat. "I'm done for today. We can take care of the rest of it tomorrow."

"Or whenever," Hank said as he flopped down beside Scott. "I'm beat," Hank said. He lifted his arm and sniffed. "And I smell."

"No you don't," Scott said, falling over and resting his head on Hank's lap. "But you *did* get all pumped up and sweaty." Scott reached up and caressed Hank's left bicep and shoulder. "You really are a magnificent specimen."

"Even though I'm not *dangerous*?" Hank licked his finger and put it in Scott's ear.

Scott swatted his hand away and sat up before inching his way closer to Hank's side. "Even though," he said before kissing Hank's neck. "I wouldn't trade you for anything."

Hank suddenly had an idea. He grabbed Scott, roughly, a hand grasping each shoulder, and kissed him. He was tender, but aggressive. Another memory flooded his brain of the first night they'd spent together after they'd returned from French Beach. Their lovemaking

had been feverish, defined by many positions and an overwhelming need to claim each other. He wondered if Scott was up for a little adventure.

"Don't move," Hank commanded. "Except to close the blinds and get your clothes off." Hank stood up, walked over to one of the boxes and pulled out a faux fur throw. He spread it out in front of the empty fireplace and then looked at Scott. "I'll be right back."

He went to the master bathroom. He opened the taps and began to fill the bathtub, checking to make sure the water was hot, but not unbearably so. He stripped off his sweat-soaked t-shirt, his jeans, his sneakers and socks. He threw the items in the corner before looking for that black Sharpie that Scott had been using all day. He chuckled to himself; Scott was the only person Hank had ever met who would have boxes moved to a new place, open them and *then* write the contents on the outside. As he was searching for the Sharpie, Hank found the box labelled "candles" and had yet another idea. He pulled them out of the box, found the Sharpie and returned to the bathroom. He checked the water temperature again.

He stood in front of the mirror. Writing on his left deltoid proved more difficult than he'd

thought, but it was the thought that would count. The "o" in "Scott" looked more like a deflated balloon, but it would have to do.

The last thing he had to do was arrange the candles around the bathtub - something the master bathroom in the townhouse did not have - and then went looking for a lighter. Interestingly enough, he found it in the box labelled "night stand". He lit each candle and checked the water temperature again.

"Hank, baby? Everything okay, Bunny?"

Hank turned off the taps, checked the water temperature one last time: maybe a little too hot, but the water would cool by the time they'd finished what Hank had planned in the living room. He took the lube from the medicine cabinet and towel from beside the sink, pushed his boxers a little further down on his hips and walked out of the bathroom, back to the living room. Hank noticed that Scott had turned off all the lights, but that there was a strange glow coming from the fireplace. As he approached, he noticed that it was the laptop, set with a roaring fire screen saver.

Scott was lying on the faux fur throw, on his stomach, his pert, tight ass just waiting to be fucked. His skin always made Hank think of

peaches. There were those fine, blond hairs that made Scott's skin so touchable. There was just enough soft flesh over solid muscle to give everything a muted hardness. It was a body that Hank knew well, loved as often as he could and was one of his favorite things in the entire world. Hank felt himself getting hard. After flexing a few times, he cleared his throat.

"There is no *Bunny*, here." Hank threw the lube and towel onto the faux fur throw.

Scott turned onto his side and looked up at Hank, his usual bright smile replaced by a look of concern. "Oh my God," he said as he stood up. "What happened to your shoulder?"

Hank tried to keep a straight face.

"Sciff?" Scott frowned and looked from the tattoo to Hank.

"Name's Snake," Hank said as he put his hands on Scott's shoulders and guided him down toward his growing erection pushing against the boxers. "Pull 'em down and show me how much you like dangerous men, boy."

The expression on Scott's face changed into one of comprehension and he did as he was instructed. He pulled down the boxers and Hank stepped out of them, pushing them aside with one

foot. Scott cupped Hank's balls with one hand while the other pinched and teased his foreskin.

Hank moaned and let his head fall back.

"Like that, Snake?"

"Fuck yeah, boy," Hank said, looking down at Scott's handsome face. "Why are you talking when you should be doing something else with that mouth?"

"Sorry, sir." Scott squeezed Hank's balls gently while he took him in his mouth. He did that thing at the back of his throat that allowed Hank to push in even further.

Hank was surprised at how turned on he was by all of this. Making love with Scott had never been staid or boring, but this? This was something he'd never even thought of.

Scott was moaning and slurping, coming up for air every so often. Hank kept watching him as if he were some sort of prison warden checking to make sure the inmates were doing what they were supposed to be doing. Hank noticed that Scott had taken his own erection in hand. He reached down and brought up Scott's hands and placed them on his chest and belly, encouraging the man to touch and stroke.

"You don't touch yourself until I say so. Got it?"

Scott nodded and pulled off for a few seconds. "Sorry, sir." He returned his attentions to Hank's cock and body, his hands now moving around to kneed the rock hard ass. Hank let his head fall back again, completely lost in the fantasy.

Hank knew he would have to stop soon; if he came to soon, the rest of the fantasy would be wasted. He reached down and gently pulled Scott off of his dick, pulling him up slowly. "You like to kiss, boy?"

"More than anything, sir."

Hank reached down and grabbed the backs of Scott's thighs, lifting him up so that they were eye-to-eye. He claimed Scott's mouth, tongue moving roughly over swollen red lips before moving inside to find its partner. Hank felt Scott's legs wrap around his waist and squeeze while his arms encircled his neck. It relieved some of the weight Hank had to support, so he moved one of his hands to Scott's hole and began to touch and tease. He pushed one finger inside slowly.

"Tight hole, boy."

"It's all yours, sir."

"I wasn't asking, boy."

Hank felt Scott shiver slightly and probed his hole one more time, very leisurely, before setting Scott back on the floor.

"Hands and knees. Now. Show me that tight hole."

Scott followed the instructions without a word. Hank lowered himself to his knees, moving slowly to first spit and then lick Scott's hole. He delighted in how it quivered and responded to his attention. He reached for the lube.

"How you want it, boy?"

"Deep." Scott's voice was a mere whisper, his fists clenching and unclenching the throw.

"Just fuck me, sir."

"Slow and deep, boy."

Scott pushed his ass a little further back, searching for some contact. Hank slapped Scott's cheek as punishment.

"You stay put, do as you're told, boy."

"Please, sir."

Hank slicked his cock with plenty of lube and then grasped Scott's hips, guiding himself

inside the hungry hole very slowly at first. He was balls deep and heard Scott whimper softly.

"Like that, boy?"

"Yes, sir. So big, sir."

Hank pulled out slowly and then rammed his cock back inside. He repeated this movement over and over until he could feel Scott trembling beneath his hands. He had no idea how long he'd been repeating these same motions. He pulled out one final time and reached for the towel.

"Clean me off, boy, and lie on your back."

Once again, Scott did as he was told. He cleaned off Hank's cock and then lay back on the throw.

Hank stood and walked so that he was standing over Scott's midsection. He bent over at the waist, his knees bent and pushed himself forward, so that his cock was suspended above Scott's mouth. He lowered his hips and let Scott nibble at the foreskin for a moment or two before pushing the entire length into that warm mouth.

"Fuck, boy. That's one sweet mouth."

Hank was lost in all of the sounds: the blood

pounding in his ears, the sounds of Scott's magnificent mouth working its usual magic and the mingled sounds of their moans. It was threatening to undo Hank, so he stopped again. He moved himself back so that he was suspended over Scott's body, no part of his body touching the one underneath him.

"You ready to get fucked again?"

"Please, Snake," Scott said, reaching up to stroke and caress the hairy chest and belly.

"You ever been fucked so good, boy?"

"No, sir."

Hank moved between Scott's legs. He rested on his heels and reached out his two hands. Scott took them and with one swift tug, Scott was now in his lap.

"Guide me in, boy."

Scott planted his feet beside Hank's hips and did as he was told. Scott's head fell back as Hank felt himself swallowed up by the heat.

"Ride me, boy. Make me come inside you."

Hank's hands were at Scott's back, holding him steady as he moved up and down. Hank watched Scott with complete and total rapture: his eyes were closed as he rode Hank, his hands caressing

the sweat-slicked skin of Hank's chest and shoulders. At this point, in their usual love-making, Scott would be jerking himself and probably would have come by now. But he'd been a good boy and obeyed all of Snake's orders.

Hank was about to tell him to touch himself when he heard Scott's moaning grow more insistent. Hank knew what that meant. He reaffirmed his grip on Scott and looked down in time to see the man come, hands-free all over himself and Hank.

"Fucking hell, boy."

Hank felt his balls pull up at the sight of his Scrappy so turned on that he could come without touching himself.

"You ready for me, boy. Gonna shoot."

"Yes, yes, yes," Scott chanted, finally opening his eyes and looking at Hank. He moved his hands over Hank's forehead and neck, wiping away the sweat.

"Breathe, baby."

Hank looked into Scott's eyes and dropped the fantasy. He felt the beginnings of his orgasm, unlike any other he'd ever experienced. He pulled Scott tight to his chest and pumped once,

twice and buried his head in Scott's shoulder, letting out a guttural cry like he'd never done before.

He pushed inside of Scott, again and again, becoming more and more turned on each time Scott moaned. Hank felt as if he was actually transferring part of his soul into his husband.

Hank turned his head to the side and took a deep breath, his chest heaving, his legs burning, his knees aching. Scott was stroking his hair and his neck. It took Hank a moment or two to realize Scott was speaking to him, muttering something near his ear.

"Breathe, baby."

Hank leaned forward, careful of Scott's head, so that they could lie beside each other on the throw. Hank was on his back, still breathing heavily, and Scott was snuggled up against his side. Neither spoke for a long time.

"I've got a bath for us," Hank said, finally. "But I don't think I can move."

"I wonder why," Scott said, laughing. He propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at Hank. "I can't remember the last time I saw the veins popping out all over you like that."

Hank rolled over onto his side and propped his own head on his hand. He stroked a hand up and down Scott's side, from shoulder to hip. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Of course not."

"Good." Hank pushed himself to his feet and held out his hands.

Scott got up on all fours, scuttled over to close the laptop, and then took hold of Hank's hands.

"Got one more surprise for you," Hank said as he pulled Scott to his side and led him to the master bathroom.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hank checked his watch, again. He'd called Scott almost fifteen minutes ago, from the office, to remind him about getting eggs. In the time since, Hank had arrived home - their new home - to find the driveway empty. He fished his keys out of his pocket and headed for the door just as he heard the familiar sounds of Scott's SUV.

"What took you so long? You said you were on your way home?" Hank asked as soon as Scott's door was open. He saw the blush spread across the clear skin of the man's cheeks. Hank began to laugh out loud.

"Shut up," Scott said, opening the rear driver-side door to retrieve the grocery bags.

"And after all those times you teased me for forgetting and absent-mindedly going back to the townhouse? I don't think so."

"I only did it once," Scott said as he handed two of the bags to Hank. "You've done it every week since we moved.

"Three times," Hank said, hefting the bags over his shoulder. "We've only been in the house for three weeks."

Scott locked the doors and laughed, pushing past his husband. "I'll get Snake to beat you up if you don't stop."

Hank laughed even harder and followed Scott to the side door. "I'm sorry, Scrappy. It's just nice to know that you're human sometimes."

"So, do we have a final plan? Have you finished obsessing yet?" Scott unlocked the door and the two of them entered, Hank closing the door behind them. They made their way to the kitchen, each of them depositing his bags on the granite counter.

"Well, Ingrid likes animals. Jens likes science. And Kelly says that Birgit likes attention, exploring and being on the move." Hank emptied his first bag, placing the items where Scott could reach them to put them away. "So, I was thinking we'd make a day out of it. Maybe lunch and then the raptors place and then horseback riding at Foxcove."

"Isn't Birgit a little young for horses? Hell, maybe they're all too young for horses."

Hank finished emptying the second bag and waited for Scott to catch up to him. "Called Foxcove this morning from the office and they said they have ponies and equipment for little

kids. Of course, we'll both be there and I don't mind staying with Birgit. You know, running alongside so she doesn't feel scared. Or she and I could just go and pet the horses, learn about them, you know?"

Scott stopped what he was doing and looked over at Hank. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to criticize." Scott pushed himself into action again and collected more items from the counter. "I'm sure the kids will love whatever you've got planned."

"I did not take it as criticism, so no apology necessary. Besides, the raptors place was your idea." Hank raised his eyebrows, emptying the final bag. "So if they don't like it, it'll be your fault."

"So much for being partners," Scott remarked as he put the eggs away in the fridge.

"But seriously, does that sound okay? You think Kelly will think it's too much or..."

"Doesn't really matter," Scott said with a shrug as he collected the final items. "Something she doesn't like, we'll just pick and choose."

Hank folded the empty bags and tossed them on the kitchen table. "True enough." He waited

for Scott to put the boxes of pasta away and then moved closer. "Only one more sleep before we meet them."

"One more sleep," Scott repeated. He laughed out loud. "That's what Brian used to say to me before my birthdays and Christmases. Only five more sleeps. Only three more sleeps."

"Speaking of Brian," Hank said, pulling away slightly. "What time are we supposed to be there tonight?"

"We've still got another hour or so. Why?"

"I was thinking we should try and finalize the plans for the kids' bedrooms."

"Funny you should mention that," Scott said as he retrieved the reusable grocery bags and stored them in the cupboard beside the fridge. "I was wondering if we should wait before we do anything drastic. You know, so we can let the kids decorate the rooms however they want. I mean, they're the ones that will have to live in them. And besides, we have a bigger problem to fix."

"What's that?"

"Well, if the youngest brother comes to live with us eventually, we've still only got three

bedrooms. Where's he going to stay?"

"Can't he share with Jens?"

"Jens is almost ten years old. I don't think a ten-year old should be made to share a bedroom with a two-year old."

"I disagree. Jens can learn some responsibility, get to know his brother and when he's older, we'll build something in the basement."

"The two-year old will be *our* responsibility, not Jens'."

"I know that."

"I'm confused, then." Scott crossed his arms over his chest and Hank realized he might be in some trouble. Scott only assumed this pose when he was pissed at Hank for something. "If it's our responsibility, why would you say that Jens could *learn* some responsibility by sharing a room?"

"I only meant that siblings share a room all the time. You told me once that you and Brian shared a room for years."

"Yes, but that was because our house was small and mom and dad couldn't afford a bigger one." Scott spread his arm and looked around the open-

concept kitchen-living area. "We have more than enough space here, more than enough money to provide these kids their own spaces."

"Okay," Hank said, raising his hands in surrender. "It's not like I was planning on making Jens our slave, you know."

"The only responsibility these kids will have around here is to do their best in school, clean up their own messes and be kids."

"I'm sorry, baby," Hank said, moving a little closer, uncertain if he should try to offer a hug.

Scott turned to face the sink, his right hand scrubbing at his forehead. "Brian didn't get a childhood because of me, because he tried to make my own as normal as possible. And if you want to raise children with me, I won't be responsible for anyone else missing their childhood."

"Hey, hey," Hank said, taking hold of Scott and wrapping his arms around the tense shoulders. "I get it. I'm sorry. And I don't think Brian blames you. And you're certainly not guilty of anything other than having a shitty childhood."

"These kids are going to be happy, get enough

sleep, not worry about where their next meal is coming from." Scott squared his shoulders and looked at Hank. "And if they want to quit piano lessons, then they can quit piano lessons."

Hank smiled and kissed Scott's forehead. "But aren't you kinda glad you didn't quit piano lessons now?"

"That's not the point." Scott said, trying not to smile.

"Anything else you've been keeping bottled up inside that I should know about?"

"Yes," Scott said, straightening Hank's dress shirt.

Hank was surprised that there was something else, and that Scott's mood changed so suddenly. He waited.

"Probably should have discussed this before, but what do we do in terms of discipline?" Scott straightened the front of Hank's dress shirt. "I was hit, you were hit. I won't do that."

"Me neither. Doesn't prove anything other than we're violent."

"I mean, I know my dad did it because he was drinking, but--"

"We'll sit down with the kids, if we need to, and talk to them. I don't know, maybe take away privileges or computer time or... I don't know." Hank rubbed at his chin. "Quite frankly, right now, I'm more worried about how they'll discipline us."

Scott furrowed his brow. Hank tried to explain.

"I mean, if they don't like us, they could run away. Or if we do have to speak to them about bad behavior, they might not want us to adopt them."

"So we'll ask Kari and Brian?"

"And my mother."

"You ready?" Hank looked over at Scott just as Kelly pulled into the parking lot of the Doghouse restaurant. Hank and Scott had been here for Prime Rib Fridays, but have never really taken note of the extensive lunchtime and kids menus until they were trying to decide where to take the kids for lunch.

"As I'll ever be," Scott sighed and opened his door. He got out and met Hank on the driver's side.

Hank reached out and gave a reassuring squeeze to Scott's forearm before the two of them walked, slowly, over to Kelly's mini-van. They arrived in time to offer assistance, but Kelly made quick work of getting the two younger children out of their booster seats.

"Hello."

Hank looked down to his left and saw a little blond boy, obviously Jens, standing there with his right hand extended. "My name is Jens Gustafsson." Hank smiled, looked quickly at Scott and then bent slightly at the waist and lightly clasped the boy's hand.

"Hello, Jens Gustafsson. My name is Hank Ballam."

"How tall are you? In metres."

"Ah," Hank stammered. "About two metres, I guess." He looked at Scott again only to look back and find Jens scribbling something in a notebook that had not been there before.

"Hello," Jens said, stepping over to stand in front of Scott. "My name is Jens Gustafsson."

"Scott Alan," Scott said. Hank could tell he was trying not to laugh. "One point eight metres."

Jens scribbled that information in his little blue and grey notebook. "I'm one point three metres, which is statistically point two metres above the average height for a nine year old."

"Jens, did you close your door."

"Yes, Kelly, I did," Jens said, walking back to take the youngest girl's hand.

Hank and Scott moved a little closer to the children, shook hands with Kelly and offered, again, to assist with anything. Kelly picked up a tote bag off the ground, slung it over her shoulder and then held up her hands. "No, all set. Shall we?" She asked pointing to the restaurant.

"Absolutely," Hank said and stepped aside, walking beside the kids, noticing that they were dressed in jeans, t-shirts and comfortable hooded sweatshirts. The two girls wore matching pink sneakers while Jens wore a similar style of sneaker, but in navy.

Once through the front door, Hank provided his last name to the hostess and the whole group was shown to a table near the back of the restaurant, near the ice cream machine. Little booster seats were discussed, chosen for each individual child and within a few moments of

arriving inside, everyone was seated.

"Okay," Kelly began. "You've met Jens already."

Jens lifted his left hand and waved.

"These two beauties are Ingrid," Kathy indicated the taller of the two girls. "And Birgit."

"I'm Hank. And this is Scott."

Scott smiled and said hello to each of them in turn.

"Hello, Jens," Hank said as he looked at the boy. "Ingrid." He looked at the taller of the two girls and offered a smile, noticing how blond her hair was and how shy she seemed. "And Birgit. That's a beautiful name. You all have such great names."

"They're Danish. Scandinavian." Jens pulled out his notebook and flipped a couple of pages. "Is Ballam spelled with one 'l' or two?"

"Two."

"Do you know its origin?"

"You mean its etymology?" Hank delighted in the smile that Jens gave him. "I do. It's Anglo-Saxon in origin and means 'bend' or

'homestead'. It's earliest recorded use was in the Domesday Book of 1086." Jens made notes and then looked at Scott.

"Jens is a collector of sorts," Kelly said. "But his true passion is science."

"Really?" Hank said. "Science was always one of my favorite subjects too." He was lying, but only he and Scott knew that. Hank had hated science when he was in school, but that was probably because of the teachers he'd had.

"So you like to collect information?" Scott looked over at Jens as the menus were delivered.

"We might need a while," Hank whispered to the waitress, who just smiled, nodded and then left.

"Yes," Jens said, placing his pen inside the notebook so he wouldn't lose his place. "Facts, really. You never know when a particular fact might come in handy."

"Indeed," Scott said and looked at Hank. They exchanged smiles.

"Are there specific facts that interest you more than others?"

"No, any fact can be important."

"And Ingrid," Scott said, looking over to where she sat, beside her sister. "Do you

collect anything?"

She shook her head and blushed.

"Ingrid likes to collect books and write poems."

"Poems," Scott said. "I sometimes put poems to music."

Ingrid's sweet face broke out into a huge smile. "I know. You're like Mozart."

Scott laughed and looked over to Hank. "Sort of, yes."

"That's what Jens told me." Ingrid smiled and Hank noticed she was missing two teeth, one on the top and one on the bottom. He tried to remember, from all of his research, if seven-year olds should still be losing teeth.

"Except Mr. Alan's style is considered popular music, as opposed to classical," Jens said, looking over at his sister.

"You can call me Scott if you'd like."

Jens looked at Kelly, who just nodded. "Okay. Scott."

When the waitress returned with glasses of water, Hank felt lighter than he had in months. They hadn't even heard a word out of Birgit yet,

but Hank was completely and totally head-over-heels for these three kids. He wanted to take them all home right now and tell them that he'd be more than happy to take care of them for the rest of their lives. And he could tell that Scott felt the same way, if his bouncing leg was any indication. Scott only had that uncontrollable bouncing when he was excited about something.

Hank leaned back in his chair and watched the kids look at their menus. Kelly helped the two girls while Jens took care of himself. As he fell under the spell of these charming siblings, he felt Scott's leg against his. He looked over and knew, from the look on his husband's face, that they were thinking the exact same thoughts.

They waved goodbye to Kelly and the kids from the parking lot of the Foxcove, and then headed to Hank's truck. Hank was in first and started the engine.

As soon as Scott got in the truck, he leaned over the centre console, put his hands on either side of Hank's face and kissed him, soundly.

"What was that for?" Hank was surprised.

"I never would have lived this day if it

wasn't for you wanting to adopt."

"Really? You had fun."

"Are you fucking kiddin' me?" Scott was back in his seat, attaching his seatbelt. "Ingrid?" Scott put a hand over his heart. "Jesus, I was ready to kidnap her."

"What about Jens? Could he have been *any* cuter?"

"I'm impressed, by the way," Scott said as Hank put the truck in reverse.

"I know. He's obviously a very smart kid."

"I meant I was impressed by *you*."

"Me?"

"You've been studying, haven't you?"

"What do you mean?"

Scott raised an eyebrow.

"Okay," Hank relented, putting the truck in gear and pulling out of the parking lot. "I bought some books and keep them at the office. And sometimes, when you're busy, I look up various things on the internet."

Scott laughed and reached over to stroke Hank's forearm. "Why do you keep them at the office?"

"I didn't want you getting mad at me for getting my hopes up or for trying too hard."

"Mad at you?" Scott held up his hands. "I wouldn't have been mad. I've always worried about you getting your hopes up. It's not anger. It's worry or concern."

"But you would have teased me," Hank said, reaching over and taking Scott's hand.

"Guilty," Scott said, squeezing Hank's hand.

"I think Snake needs to teach you a lesson or two."

"Can I help with the tattoo this time?" Scott asked, running his hand over the thick muscles of Hank's deltoid.

Hank was wide awake, his little Scrappy sleeping soundly curled up beside him. He was staring at the ceiling, the biggest grin on his face, as he went over the day, again and again.

They'd taken Kelly's advice on choosing only one of the activities after lunch, and it couldn't have gone better. Each of the kids was completely enthralled with the ponies and the horses. Once Hank had explained the purpose of their visit, the elderly gentleman who owned

Foxcove had spent the first twenty minutes giving them an impromptu tour. He showed them the different breeds of horses and ponies, explaining to Jens how to care for them and what they ate while the little boy wrote furiously in his notebook.

Hank had been surprised to learn that none of the kids had been anywhere near a horse or a pony. A benefit for him, since he'd had almost two hours of watching each of the children be captivated by seeing, touching and riding the beautiful animals. He was definitely going to make that place a regular visit for them.

What had surprised Hank the most was how quickly Jens and Ingrid had opened up. Throughout lunch and while at Foxcove, each of them had become more boisterous, more talkative, showing more and more of their personalities. Hank had thought that Jens had been himself from the start, but was surprised to learn that the boy was not only very bright, but also incredibly protective of his sisters and quite sensitive. Hank had done enough reading about children lately to know that boys at that age are still trying to find their own identities, but Hank was fairly certain that Jens was already quite comfortable with who he was. Even

Ingrid seemed to have a good understanding of her likes and dislikes, and each of them seemed quite open and forthright about why they and Birgit were meeting with Hank and Scott.

Just after getting in bed, he and Scott had discussed Birgit. Each of them was worried about her. She'd not said much during the entire afternoon. Granted, she was very young, but still, Hank couldn't help but wonder if getting her back with her siblings wouldn't offer some kind of benefit for her development. It seemed almost cruel to keep them separated like that.

She was an affectionate enough child with her brother and sister, but she seemed a little wary of Hank. Maybe it was his size, or maybe it was that Scott connected so well with Ingrid, the sibling that Birgit was obviously closer with, but the two girls seemed to have grown quite attached to Scott. And Jens had made a connection with Hank. Even Scott had noticed it. And that was fine with Hank. For now. He would find a way to win those girls over.

He looked down at Scott's peaceful face, the cold little button nose pressed against his shoulder as usual. He turned his head and kissed the top of Scott's head, inhaling the

scent. He closed his eyes, the smile still on his face.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hank stood at the truck, outside of his office building, searching for his keys. He sighed and cursed under his breath when he realized that he'd left them inside. He ran back, pushed open the door and headed to find his keys. He didn't need this kind of delay. He scolded himself for being so forgetful, found his keys and headed back out, saying his goodbyes, again, to the staff as he went.

He had twenty minutes to get home and get ready for the second visit with the kids. Hank had two activities in mind, and would ask the kids, once Kelly arrived at the house, which of the two interested them more. After that, Hank and Scott would be taking them all out for dinner. He couldn't wait to see the kids again. Hank started to perk up from his hectic day at the office and thought about what Kelly had told him and Scott after the first visit. She'd called them the day after. She'd also encouraged them to get booster seats for their vehicles, so the children could ride with them the next time.

All three of the children had very good things to say about them. Kelly had been impressed, as well. She liked the easy rapport the two of

them seemed to create with the siblings, both Hank and Scott spending time getting to know each of the children. Kelly dismissed their concerns about Birgit not being quite as talkative; she was around older children most of the time, so was used to being quiet, not necessarily being as engaged as much as her brother and sister.

Hank arrived home and found Scott fresh from the shower. He gave him a quick kiss, a playful slap on his bare ass, stripped off his work clothes and hopped in the shower.

"You've got five minutes," Scott yelled.

"I know," Hank called back. "It's been the day from hell!"

"I packed a gym bag for us," Scott explained as he stood at the mirror and brushed his hair and then his teeth. "Bathing suits in case the kids pick the pool and sweatshirts and mitts in case they pick ice skating. Oh, and I called Kelly so she could ask them so they could bring their own appropriate attire."

"Good thinking," Hank yelled as he washed his face and neck. "I'm kind of hoping they pick swimming. Much more relaxing." He rubbed the bar of soap against his chest, working up a nice

lather. He pushed his hands all over his torso, legs, crotch and ass before rinsing off.

"Really? I was kind of hoping for skating."

"Why?" Hank was surprised at Scott's statement. And a little disappointed; he was hoping the kids would pick swimming so he would also be able to ogle his shirtless husband. He debated washing his hair, then decided not to. He wondered if he should get it cut, really short, to prepare himself for those hectic days when showering and styling his hair would become a luxury.

"I don't know. Something different I guess."

"Well," Hank said as he turned off the taps and grabbed a towel. "I don't care what we do, really."

"You wanna tell me about your day?"

"Nah," Hank said, exiting the shower. "Just the same old bullshit. Two steps forward, three back."

"How about you tell me about while I'm giving you a massage later?" Scott said as he walked back into the bathroom, leaving Hank in front of the foggy mirror.

"Sounds good," Hank said as he smoothed a hand

down Scott's back and rested it on his ass.

"Listen," Hank said as he spread the wet towel over the curtain rod. "Just to prepare you, I've been thinking about getting my hair cut. Make things simpler, you know? Not a lot of time to be worried about upkeep." Hank looked at himself in the mirror, his hair only slightly damp. He ran his fingers through it and pulled it all away from his face, trying to imagine what he would look like with a buzz cut. "I mean it's not like it takes up so much of my time right now, but I was just thinking about when the kids are here for good, it might be easier if I could just wash it and forget it."

"I'll miss it," Scott said, returning to stand behind Hank. He was dressed in jeans, a t-shirt and was just putting on a faded red sweatshirt. "Change is inevitable, though. As long as you don't do anything with this hair," Scott said as he hugged Hank from behind, moving his hands slowly over the muscular chest and taut belly. Scott kissed Hank's back and inhaled deeply. "God, I love smelling you."

Hank laughed and turned, pushing Scott back into the bedroom. "How much time?"

Scott looked at his watch. "You have five minutes to dress."

Hank pulled on a pair of socks, then boxers, then his jeans, a t-shirt, a sweatshirt and the two of them were out the front door, just as Kelly's mini-van pulled up in the driveway.

The unanimous decision had been for the swimming pool, Kelly announced, before turning back to the kids to see if any of them wanted to go in Hank and Scott's truck. Jens was the only taker. He got out and headed over to the truck. Hank waited for the notebook to come out and the details of his truck to be put on record, but Jens just stared up at the heavy duty vehicle.

"Okay, see you there," Kelly said, rolling up her window. She backed out of the driveway and drove away.

"Jens, would you like to sit in the front?" Scott asked, glancing over at Hank. "You're tall enough."

"Okay," he answered before reaching for the door handle. "Will you have enough leg room in the back?"

"Oh, yes," Scott said, opening his own door and throwing the bag in first. "We put two booster seats in for your sisters, but there's plenty of room back here."

Jens nodded and pulled himself into the front

passenger seat. Hank got in the driver's seat and looked into the rear view mirror, smiling at his husband.

"So, are you excited about swimming?"

"Yes," Jens said, fastening his own seatbelt. "I like seeing how long I can hold my breath."

"What's your longest time so far?" Hank said, starting the truck and easing it onto the road.

"One minute and forty seconds."

"Wow," Hank said, following it up with an appreciative whistle. "Almost two minutes."

"What's your goal?" Scott asked from the back.

"I'd like to see if I can reach two minutes by the end of the year."

Hank smiled. "Do you practice at home in the bathtub?"

"I try, but with six kids in the house, I can't always have a bath."

That'll be different when you're living with us, Hank thought as he stopped at a red light. *And you can practice all you want in the summer in your very own backyard pool.*

"I did some research after our last visit,"

Jens announced, looking over at Hank. "You said you are a partner in a eco-logging company?"

"Yes, I am." Hank glanced at Jens. The notebook was out now.

"Did you know that employment in the logging industry has dropped forty percent since 2005, and that the number of fatalities has dropped significantly due to increased safety measures?"

"I did know that," Hank said, glancing in the rear view mirror. He and Scott exchanged a momentary look, each of them remembering how they met and their misadventure in Tofino. "There are now very strict safety regulations that we have to meet."

"Is it fun? Working as a logger, I mean?"

"It can be, but it's also very serious work."

"Have you ever been hurt?"

"Just once," Hank said, smiling for Jens. "But it was my own fault. And I learned my lesson."

"I'd like to see what loggers do, sometime. If you want to show me sometime, I mean."

Hank's chest tightened and he took a deep breath. "I would be honored." Hank glanced in the rear view mirror again. Scott had his hand

over his heart. "Would you like Scott to show you what composers do?"

"No, thank you." Jens announced without any hesitation. "I think I have a good understanding of what they do."

Hank bit his tongue and looked at Scott, who just shrugged.

"But I know that Ingrid would like that very much." Jens said after a few seconds.

Hank wondered how anyone could give up this boy. Sure he's direct, doesn't understand the concept of subtle at all and thinks everyone loves these weird facts and statistics, but the boy was also earnest, kind to his sisters and very, very lonely. Despite six other kids in that boy's foster home, Jens craved companionship.

Kelly had not brought a swimsuit, so was sitting in the stands, watching the five of them as they enjoyed an hour of swimming and slides and practicing different strokes. The slides were Ingrid's favorite, so Scott had taken the opportunity to bond a little more with her while Jens was more interested in trying to dive to the bottom of the deep end and try to break

his .

Hank was there beside him, treading water, ready to rescue him should he run into any trouble. He was also there as a human buoy, alerting the other adults to the little boy's presence down beneath. He watched Jens take deep breaths and then dive under the water, his skinny arms pushing up against the water, expending a tremendous amount of energy, to keep his slight frame under the water. But Hank had to admit the young boy was determined.

Jens's head broke the surface of the water again, eyes closed, taking in huge lungfuls of air after only forty-five seconds.

"How long?" He asked, clearing the water out of his eyes and looking over at Hank.

"A minute and five seconds," Hank lied. "Why don't we swim over to the side and take a break for a minute or two?"

"Okay," Jens said, clearly disappointed in his time.

Hank kicked out with his legs a couple of times and was already at the side, holding on with arm while Jens did a smooth, slow front crawl.

"Come on up here," Hank said as he hoisted himself out of the water to sit on the pool's edge. "Wanna talk to you about this, scientifically, so to speak. Scientist," Hank said pointing to Jens. "To non-Scientist," he said, pointing to himself.

"'Kay," Jens said, easily copying Hank's movements and perching himself on the pool's edge.

"Can you remember what method you were using when you stayed under for a minute and forty?"

"It was in the bathtub at the foster home," Jens said, rubbing at his eyes.

Foster home. Hank was learning to dislike those two words together. "Okay, can you think of anything you might be doing here that might be preventing you from breaking the record?"

"What do you mean?" Jens looked at him, brow furrowed.

"Well, are you doing anything here that you wouldn't have to do in a bathtub?"

"You mean like using my arms to stay under?"

"Exactly!" Hank said and ran his hand over the short blond hair, squeezing out as much water as he could so it wouldn't keep trickling

in Jens's eyes. The boy's hair was thick, like Scott's, but poker straight instead of curly.

"So, I shouldn't try to keep myself down under the water?" Jens blinked a few times in rapid succession and rubbed at his eyes some more.

"I wouldn't think so. I mean, it might be easier if you just took a deep breath like you've been doing and then let your body go limp. As long as your face is under water, that's all that counts, right?"

"Okay," Jens said, smiling and seeming a little relieved. "Thank you, Hank."

"You're very welcome, Jens." Hank put a hand on Jens's shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. "You're the most determined young man I've ever met."

"Thank you. May I ask you a question? It might be kinda personal."

"You can ask me anything you want and I promise I'll answer, if I can."

"Why would you want to raise someone else's children?"

Hank raised his eyebrows and instinctively looked over his shoulder at Kelly. He turned back to Jens.

"I asked Kelly that one time and she told me that there could be any number of reasons. I was just wondering what your reason is. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"No, no," Hank said, in awe of how this young boy's mind worked. "That's a really good question," he added, feeling cold all of a sudden. "Here, let's get back in the water where it's warmer."

Hank let himself slide back in and put one arm up on the side to keep himself buoyed. Jens did the same, but ended up going under again. When he resurfaced a few seconds later, Hank reached out and ran his hand through the thick blond hair again, as he'd done before, starting to worry about how red Jens's eyes were becoming. Once Jens was settled on the side of the pool, he took a deep breath.

"I guess I don't see it as raising someone else's children, Jens." Hank knew that statement wouldn't make sense all on its own, but he was trying to layer this explanation so Jens might understand a little better just how Hank's mind worked. "There are plenty of adults in your life who take care of you, right?" Jens nodded. "Your teachers, Kelly, your foster parents. And you even look out for your

sisters, which I think is really great. You're a very good older brother. But sometimes those adults change, or aren't in your life for very long. So, I guess you could say that all of those adults, no matter how long they're in your life, make a contribution to raising you. For most children, there's usually a mom and dad, or just a mom or just a dad who are there--"

"Or a dad and a dad, or a mom and a mom."

Hank felt his eyes stinging a little at the sincerity on the little man's face. "You're right. Sorry, I didn't mean... Anyway, with all of these adults coming and going, there should be at least one or two who can provide a secure, safe place for sleeping and experiencing new things and asking questions and helping you go through all of the crazy changes that we all go through when we're growing up." Hank wasn't sure he'd explained that the best way he could have, but he thought he'd done pretty well considering he'd been blindsided by the question. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that if Scott and I can help you and your sisters be together and feel a little safer, a little more secure, then we'd like to. We're not interested in replacing anyone, like your parents or your other relatives. We're just

interested in being that one place you can call *home*."

Jens continued to look at Hank for a moment and then smiled. "Okay. Can I try it again now?"

Hank marvelled at the simplicity of youth. He wondered if Jens had zoned out somewhere in that long-winded explanation or if he'd understood it, accepted it and moved on to the more pressing matter of breaking his record. Hank still wasn't sure his answer had made sense. "Sure," he said, smiling back at Jens. He moved to the other side of the boy so he could see the clock and noticed Scott kneeling on the side of the pool, drying off the two girls. He made a hand to mouth motion, indicating that the girls were probably ready for food and gave a thumbs up. Kelly was already making her way down from the observation area to meet the girls at their change room.

"A couple more tries, Jens. I think your sisters are hungry."

"Okay," Jens said. He inhaled and exhaled a few times and then let his face fall in the water and his body go limp.

As he watched the second hand tick away, Hank

willed the young boy's circulatory system to slow, consume less oxygen and allow him to reach the two-minute mark. One minute ticked by, then one minute fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, forty seconds. When Jens's head finally popped up, Hank raised his hands in the air, and heard Scott laughing from the other side of the pool. He was standing by himself now, waiting for Hank and Jens.

"How long?"

"One minute and fifty seconds!" Hank yelled.
"A new record!"

He grabbed Jens's hand and raised it, in victory. "Come on," Hank said, guiding Jens behind him. "Hold on around my neck. I'll show you what my father used to call *the whale rider*. When you need air, just let go and kick to the surface."

"Okay," Jens said, sounding excited.

Hank placed a hand over Jens's and took a deep breath. He dove under the water, and undulated his body, like a whale, diving all the way to the bottom of the deep end and then making his way toward the shallow part, where Scott was waiting. He felt Jens's grip tighten a little and finally broke the surface, reaching around

with his hands and grasping the boy's thighs. He gave him a piggy-back ride to the side of the pool, where Scott was waiting with a towel.

"Congratulations, Jens," Scott said as Hank deposited Jens on the deck of the pool.

"Thank you," Jens said, taking the towel and rubbing at his eyes. "Hank helped."

"He's good at that, isn't he?" Scott said as Hank heaved himself up on the deck beside Scott and Jens.

"Yeah, he's cool."

Scott waggled his eyebrows and offered a towel to Hank.

"Now the best part of training," Hank said, smoothing hair off of Jens's forehead.

"Eating!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hank was in the truck, impatiently tapping his fingers against the steering wheel. It was Sunday, the day before Thanksgiving, and if they didn't hurry, they weren't going to be able to drop off the little presents that they'd bought for Jens and his sisters. They only had one house to go, since all three kids were at their grandmother's house today for a Thanksgiving-type meal. But Hank was anxious to get going.

Scott exited the house and Hank started the truck. He turned, for the fourth time, checking to ensure that the three little bags were still on the back seat. One for Jens, Ingrid and Birgit. There was nothing extravagant, just a few things for each of them, things that the kids had mentioned during their visits.

There had been four visits thus far, and Hank was falling more and more in love with those kids with each visit. Birgit was coming out of her shell, Ingrid was becoming Scott's shadow and then there was Jens. Hank's shadow. Hank thought about all of those kids, even the young toddler who wasn't even yet available for adoption, but he would be a liar if he said he thought about all of them equally. He didn't know what it was about Jens, specifically, but

he was completely hooked. He wanted to be Jens's father, or at least father facsimile.

He would find himself daydreaming about playing the pool with Jens, going on camping trips, fly-fishing, teaching him how to drive, taking him to the office and introducing him as *my son*. Parent-teacher conferences, driver's licence, first accident, first girlfriend... Hank wanted everything.

Scott got in the truck and Hank snapped out of his daydream. "Sorry, Rose called."

"Everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah, she was just calling to find out how our visit with the kids went yesterday." Scott looked over, a smug expression on his face. "Apparently, someone didn't call her as he'd promised. He got home last night and fell asleep on the sofa, in front of the fire."

"God, that was a good day yesterday. That kid is a fountain of knowledge."

"Each of them is pretty special," Scott said, fastening his seatbelt.

"Of course."

"I get a kick out of watching you and Jens. It's like a secret scientist club or something."

"I spend time with the girls too."

"Don't get defensive," Scott said, reaching out and squeezing Hank's arm. "I just meant that it's adorable the way you two have connected."

"Bonded," Hank corrected. "I know you won't be surprised, but I'm sure. I want to adopt them."

"Me too."

"Listen," Hank said and held up a hand, certain that Scott was going to be the voice of reason and explain why they should wait. Then the words finally registered. *Me too.* Hank pulled over to the side of the road, blocking someone's driveway. He turned to Scott.

"Seriously? Don't tease me."

"When have I ever teased you?"

Hank reached across and pulled Scott to him, kissing him once and then again. He let go and hit the steering wheel with his open hands.

"Looks like Christmas may come early for our new family."

"Looks like," Scott said, laughing. "Speaking of family," he said, pointing down the street.

"I'll call Kelly on Tuesday and let her know

we've decided."

Hank was busting to tell the three kids as they stood in front of him and Scott, each holding a bag of their own, that they'd soon have a home if they wanted one. But he knew that would be inappropriate; he still wasn't sure it was what the kids would want. So, he said nothing. He just waited while each of them reached into his or her own bag and pulled out a DVD of a movie they liked, or a book they'd mentioned or some other little gift that Scott and Hank had wanted them to have.

The grandmother, Eleanora, a very kind elderly lady in her seventies, who was the children's maternal grandmother stood in her dining room, watching with a smile on her face. She'd been gracious enough to allow Hank and Scott to not only purchase the gifts, but to allow them into her living room to visit with the children.

Jens seemed especially surprised, looking up at Hank after taking out each item. Hank had found several books online about freediving and decided on the one that not only contained exercises on breathing, but also smoothie recipes, stretching and visualization exercises and even stories of freedivers relating their

tips and experiences.

Jens pulled the book out and read the back. He looked at Hank, who was smiling.

"When you come to visit at our house, maybe we can make some of the smoothies? Try them out?"

Jens didn't respond right away, just put the book and the bag down on the floor near his chair and launched himself at Hank. He wrapped his arms around his neck. Hank closed his eyes and hugged the boy, tentatively at first and then with a little more conviction.

"Is that a yes?" Hank patted the boy's back as he pulled away.

Jens nodded and picked up the book.

"Are you sure you can't stay longer?" Eleanora came into the living room. "There's plenty to eat."

"We'd love nothing more," Scott said, helping Ingrid take the new barrettes out of the plastic packaging. "But we're going to have another visit very soon. And my brother is expecting us."

The elderly woman just smiled and nodded that she understood.

Hank looked back to Jens, who was just staring

at him. The boy looked away after only a few seconds, his cheeks flushing.

"Thank you," Jens said first, followed by the same words from his two sisters.

"You keep practicing. Okay?" Hank reached out and smoothed a hand over Jens's blond head, keeping it there for a few more seconds. He pinched playfully at the boy's ear and then pulled his hand away.

"I will," Jens said with a big smile.

"I got my own copy of that book," Hank whispered as he leaned closer to Jens. "So we can talk about it next time."

Jens's smile got bigger.

"I'm really looking forward to our next visit," Hank said, looking at each of the children in turn.

"Me too," Jens said, and once again, his sisters echoed their brother.

"Okay, then," Scott said. "Can we have a hug before we leave?"

The children obliged them and even got one from the grandmother, along with a rain check for a dinner the next time the children were visiting.

Hank and Scott were back in the truck in just under two hours and would only end up being ten minutes late for Brian and Kari's Thanksgiving feast.

"We're going to be late," Hank said as he started the engine and then turned to wave to the children looking through the living room window. "But it was worth it."

"Call your mother back right away and I won't get stuck answering the phone the next time." Scott glanced at him sideways, his sternness tempered by a smirk on his face. Hank laughed and put the vehicle in gear, checking behind him one last time before pulling onto the street. "And another thing," Scott said, turning toward him. "I thought we agreed we were going to discuss everything. Like telling me you'd made up your mind."

"You didn't tell me you'd made up yours." Hank licked his finger and drew a point in the air above the steering wheel. "Check."

"When did *you* know they were the ones, exactly?"

He's got me there, Hank said. He'd known after the second visit, after he'd spent almost two hours with Jens in the pool. He cleared his

throat but didn't answer.

"And that would be checkmate," Scott said, looking smug.

"Why do I even bother?" Hank said, bowing slightly to acknowledge that he should never second-guess his little Scrappy. He furrowed his brow and glanced over at Scott. "Honestly, I knew when the little scientist came over, introduced himself and then pulled out that little notebook. When did you know?"

"During the third visit, when Ingrid finally let me read some of her poetry and when Birgit told me all about how much she loves the movie "Babe" and how she wants to be a pig farmer when she grows up."

Hank laughed at the memory. He and Scott had both been stunned at how talkative Birgit had become. She didn't seem afraid of them anymore. "Between Ingrid and Birgit, you realize we're going to end up with a house full of animals, right?"

Scott shrugged. "Meh," he said, raising his hands in surrender. "It's either that or say no to those faces."

"We're in serious trouble if one of us isn't going to be the bad cop."

"We'll take turns."

"I do adore you, Scott."

"Everyone does," Scott said and leaned over for a quick kiss. "Even Snake worships me."

Hank laughed out loud and playfully pushed Scott away when he tried for another kiss.

"So, you're sure?" Kari had Ellie, red eyes and hiccups and all, on one hip while Brian was trying to coax Matthew to surrender Ellie's stuffed rabbit, Mr. Pinky. Hank wasn't really sure what the kerfuffle had been before he and Scott arrived, but apparently, Matthew was holding Mr. Pinky hostage for one reason or another.

"Yes, they're the ones," Hank answered right away.

"But three of them, all at once?" Brian stood up and held out his hand, still looking down at his son, waiting for Matthew to come to his senses. "Matthew, I'll give you to the count of three and then it's time out." Brian turned to look at Scott, briefly rolling his eyes. "One. Two. Three." Brian bent down, his tall, muscular frame scooping Matthew off the floor.

He shifted Matthew's tiny body under one arm like a football, the sudden, full onslaught of the injustice of it all manifesting as a scream of bloody murder from the little boy. Brian used his free hand to grab the stuffed rabbit and hand it back to Ellie, whose sniffles were quickly replaced by a *Thank you, daddy*.

"We're ready. We think we can do it." Hank took Ellie in his arms and kissed her neck, eliciting squeals of joy. "And there's no way we're going to separate them. The youngest girl is already growing up without her two older siblings and I'm not even sure the toddler has ever met his siblings."

"There's a fourth one?" Brian turned around as he neared Matthew's bedroom.

"Yes, dear," Kari said, heading into the kitchen, where Scott was trying to help with the dinner preparations. "They told us the last time they were here. Remember?" Kari looked at Scott and shrugged.

Hank continued to tease and kiss Ellie while he listened to the muted yet stern tone of a father disciplining his son. After a few more screams from Matthew, Brian reappeared. He dragged a hand over his short, greying hair and sighed.

"Well, if you're both sure."

"We are," Scott said, moving to the table to set out plates and glasses and high chairs and all the other necessities for dinner. "We definitely are."

"Besides, Scott was telling me the other day how lucky he was to grow up with you and that when we run into problems, he'll just think of what you would do." Hank looked at Brian and smiled. And then decided to have some fun at Scott's expense. "And then do the opposite."

Kari laughed, Brian turned to glare at Scott, who drew back his hand, but then realized he wouldn't be able to hit Hank when he was holding Ellie. Scott turned back to look at Brian.

"I never said any such thing." Scott went to stand beside his brother. Hank was always struck, at moments like this, at how much the two brothers had come to resemble each other. When he'd first met Scott, he was surprised that the two of them were biological brothers since they seemed like physical and emotional opposites. But over the years, Hank had come to see the similarities were in the little mannerisms, those little quirks that come to define someone's appearance.

Like the way both brothers' eyes grew impossibly wide when surprised or angry. Or how they both hugged someone--one hand on a shoulder while the other went to the small of the back. And the way they used the same mix of sincere emotion laced with unexpected insult.

"Please, Scott," Brian said, ruffling his brother's hair. "You think I ever believe anything that man tells me." Brian stood beside his wife and took the various items as she handed them off. "You know we'll be here for you whenever you need us."

"Speaking of which," Kari said as she retrieved the basket of bread from the oven. "When is the house warming?"

"We completely forgot about that," Hank said, in amazement. He looked over at Scott. "We could probably do it whenever. We've got almost everything we need in there already, and we could have you over along with Kyle and Doug and their little Scott. You could meet them finally."

"Sounds like a plan," Kari said. "You just let us know when and we'll bring whatever you'd like."

"They might be able to help us figure out what

to do with the kids' bedrooms." Scott said, heading to Matthew's room. "Matthew," he called as he approached his nephew's room. "May I come in?"

"What's he mean?" Brian asked, taking Ellie and putting her in her high chair.

"We're not really sure what furniture to buy, how to decorate or even if we should decorate without asking the kids. I mean, they're old enough to know what they want on their walls, right?" Hank sat down at the table.

"I'd wait until it's all official. Might make a nice homecoming, so to speak." Kari affixed Ellie's bib and sat beside her.

"She's usually right about everything, so that's my answer too." Brian said opposite Hank, beside Kari, and was soon busy cutting carrots and asparagus and meat into tiny Ellie-sized chunks.

"Funny," Hank chuckled. "That's what I've always said about Scott."

"Annoying, isn't it?" Brian looked over at Kari's playful frown and went back to cutting up vegetables.

"Here we are," Scott said, returning with

Matthew on his back. "Matthew has promised not to bother his sister for the rest of the evening." Scott placed his nephew on the booster seat, opposite his sister, and then sat beside him. "And Matthew has something he wants to say to his sister. Don't you Matthew?"

"I don't like it when you pull my hair," Matthew said, his eyes red and his voice defiant.

"Apparently, Mr. Pinky had to pay for Ellie's sin. It was an act of frustration and Matthew says he won't do it again as long as Ellie doesn't pull his hair." Scott looked around the table at the weary smiles on Brian and Kari's faces, then to Hank who was trying not to laugh. "So, do we have a *détente*?"

"Can I have the burned edges?" Matthew was tugging on Scott's sleeve and pointing to the roast.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Hank looked around the table before he filled his own plate. The calm *after* the storm. Everyone happy, everyone's belly about to be filled, another moment of peace before the next family skirmish. He could just see Matthew and Ellie as grown-ups, coming together with

families of their own, reminiscing about their shared childhood memories. He could see them growing to love each more and more, learning to depend on each other until the slightest offence against one would be cause for all-out war against the unfortunate soul who'd had the nerve to mess with a family member.

This is why I'm doing this, he thought to himself, smiling at the scene before him. *This is why I want to adopt all of them. I want them to grow up, together, and learn what a family really is. It's not blood, it's not DNA, it's recognizing and learning to love the people who care about you, who love you, who will chase down the bully who made you cry.*

Hank had never really been able to put it into words before. But there it was, displayed in front of him like some Norman Rockwell portrait. He looked around the table one last time. *This is what matters. This will be the most important thing I'll ever do with my life.*

Hank started to load up his plate, thinking of the kids. Of their future.

A hundred years from now, there will be one, or two, or twenty people walking around in the world, working, living, helping to make the planet a better place. As a teacher, as a

doctor, as a plumber, as a secretary or as Prime Minister. They will have one thing in common, that little group of people: they will all be descendants of Jens and Ingrid and Birgit and that little brother, and they will all be the people they are because of two men who had more than enough love to share with four lost little children.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hank was pacing. And pacing. He checked the camera, for the fifth time. He checked the video camera for the sixth time. He had enough spare batteries ready to go in the chargers. He tried to calm himself, to tell himself that he was ready, but he couldn't stop pacing. And checking.

He had a lot riding on this night. Not just the first overnight visit with the three children, which was more than enough to fray his nerves, but he had also planned a special surprise visit for the kids with Eleanora, their grandmother. They'd seen her just two nights ago and weren't expecting to see her again until just before Hallowe'en, but Hank had called Kelly and discussed the possibility of having the grandmother over for the evening, as a surprise for the children. Kelly had readily agreed and made the arrangements.

Hank had also found out from Kelly that Eleanora was not well. Heart problems. When Kelly had informed him of this fact, Hank remembered his office becoming very narrow, a tunnel, as if he was in one of those Hitchcock films where the face in the foreground seems to get closer and larger while the background

retreats into the distance. He couldn't help but think of his father. Hank may have played a part in the kind of relationship he and his father had shared, but he would make sure that the grandmother and her grandchildren would spend every possible moment together.

He didn't know just how long Eleanora had or what, specifically, was wrong with her, but it didn't matter. He wasn't a doctor, or a psychiatrist. He was the prospective parent and the only thing he needed to know was that his prospective children needed to spend more time with the one relative who wanted to take them, but couldn't.

"Anytime now," Hank called down the hall.

"I'm coming," Scott called back, suddenly appearing in the hallway, hopping on one foot as he pulled on his jeans. "You keep putting things back in the wrong place."

"Me? No, you keep putting them in the wrong drawer." Hank stepped up to his husband, took hold of the jeans and snapped them shut and pulled up the zipper.

Hank kissed Scott's forehead and held him by the shoulders. He looked up, quizzically. "Who was it that toured the house and then said,

Thank God, we can each have our own drawer in the bathroom?" Hank looked down at the blush on Scott's face.

"My deodorant misses yours," Scott said shyly.

"Whatever," Hank said, heading for the front door. "Besides, that takes all of three seconds. You were taking forever."

Scott stepped into his shoes and was out the door first, holding the door while Hank had to tie his laces. "I showered, powdered and was ready in five minutes." He let the door go just as Hank reached it. "I defy you to find a gay man who can beat that."

"God dammit," Hank hissed. "Why can't I ever win an argument with you?" He goosed Scott on the ass as they approached Scott's SUV, both of them heading to the driver's side.

"This is *my* vehicle."

"Sorry," Hank said, holding up his hands and walking over to the passenger side.

"Maybe it's because you always think you're in charge?" Scott winked and got behind the wheel, shutting his door, starting the engine and fastening his seatbelt.

"I do not," Hank protested as he slid into the

passenger seat and buckled his seatbelt. He turned suddenly, looking into the back. The seats for Ingrid and Birgit were there. "When did these--"

"I did that this afternoon while you were at work. Would you relax! Everything is going to be perfect."

"Yes," Hank announced with conviction. He let out a big breath. He breathed deeply. "Yes, it will be. Positive thinking."

"That's my little steam engine," Scott cooed, patting Hank on the cheek.

"I think it's time for Snake again soon. You're getting a little bit of an attitude."

"Or do I have the attitude because I want Snake?" Scott laughed and put the SUV in reverse, backing out onto the street and headed to pick up Eleanora. She would be waiting inside the house, along with Scott and Hank, by the time the children arrived.

Hank met Kelly and the children at the door. Eleanora was sitting at the kitchen table, with her cup of tea, slightly hidden from view. The children would not be able to see her until they

were in the family room, away from the door.

"Come in, kids! Hello Kelly!" Hank got down on one knee and gave each of the kids a hug.

"Are you ready for an exciting sleepover?"

"*Two* sleepovers," Kelly corrected. She'd explained that the overnight visits were usually done over two nights and two days, to allow all concerned parties to see what life together would actually be like.

Hank didn't care. These children were already his. He'd found himself thinking that on so many occasions. It was just a matter of time before he would start referring to them as *our kids, my kids, our son, my son, our daughters, my daughters*. He was already looking forward to reading school newsletters, attending parent-teacher conferences and holding Birgit's hand when they went trick-or-treating. It sometimes frightened him how happy all of this made him. He couldn't remember being this happy and nervous since he'd met Scott.

"Who wants to see their rooms?"

"Me!" All three kids spoke at once.

"Okay, but there's something even better you may want to see," Hank said and pointed to the kitchen.

"Grandma!" All three children ran to the kitchen, Birgit still in her shoes, and there were hugs and kisses all around.

"What are you doing here?" Jens asked.

"Hank and Scott invited me to spend the evening with you."

Jens turned to look at Scott and then ran over and hugged him. Then Jens turned to regard Hank with such a look of gratitude and wonder. Hank tried not to cry, but when Jens ran toward him, he closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around the little boy.

"Thank you," Jens said into Hank's neck.

"You're welcome, buddy," Hank said, his voice cracking. "Okay," Hank said, letting Jens pull away first, then addressing all the children. "You let me know when you're all ready to see your rooms. You each get your very own room."

"I'll take a look," Kelly whispered behind Hank.

"Oh, of course," Hank said, quickly wiping at his cheek. "Follow me."

"That was a beautiful idea you had, inviting Eleanora."

"Thank you for making that happen," Hank said

as he entered the first room, the smallest room and flicked on the light. "This is Birgit's room. It's the closest to ours, right across the hall, there."

"Excellent furniture."

"We'll make changes, of course, depending on what the kids want. I mean, we would if the kids would want to... What I mean is, if this works out the way I was mentioning to you..."

Kelly put a hand on Hank's forearm. "I know what you mean. And I can't speak for the kids, but the Eleanora is very much hoping that you and Scott want to adopt her grandchildren. She tells me you're all they talk about."

Hank suddenly felt a tightness in his chest. In light of the news of Eleanora's condition, he wasn't sure he liked the idea of the kids speaking so much about him and Scott when they should be thinking about their grandmother. Of course, the children didn't know how much time she had left. No one did. Not even the doctors.

"I know," Kelly said, stepping aside so Hank could proceed to the next room. "It's a difficult situation." Kelly seemed to have had the same thought as Hank.

"This will be Jens's room. It's the largest."

Kelly nodded and then proceeded to Ingrid's room. Kelly approved of it all. The furniture, the linens, the scattering of books and personalized objects that would make the children see this house as their home.

"Come on," Kelly said as she turned off the light in the last room and headed out the door. "Let's see what the kids think."

When they arrived back in the open area that was the kitchen and family room, the children were filling their grandmother in on all that had happened since their last visit with her. Ingrid's class at school had welcomed a new mascot: a hamster named Binky. Binky belonged to their teacher, but since they were learning about animals, the teacher had decided to bring Binky in to explain about adaptations. And that wasn't the only animal. Several students, with the help of their parents, had brought in their cats and dogs and there had even been one snake.

Birgit was explaining about her last morning at daycare. She'd learned a new game that she promised to show Scott later on, after dinner. She'd also learned about some new shapes and had even done some painting to find out what different combinations of colors make. And

Birgit had also learned some new letters: how to read them and write them.

Hank didn't know that students learned that at pre-schools nowadays. He'd always thought it was just playing games and learning to take turns. He smiled as he caught sight of the plain, stainless steel surface of the fridge. He wondered what it was going to look like with report cards, paintings, calendars and invitations covering the front of it. He was wondering if stainless steel is magnetic.

"Hey, Jens," he said, moving to smooth some hair of the young boy's forehead. "Is stainless steel magnetic?"

"I don't know," Jens said.

"Can we check your notebook?"

"I don't know where it is."

Hank looked over at Scott and then Kelly and then back to Scott. He felt panicked. *No notebook?* That just didn't make sense.

"Can we see our rooms now?"

"Sure thing, buddy," Hank said, leading the way. He stayed in the hallway so that he could talk to Scott when he came up behind. "Can you keep the girls busy for a minute? Something

doesn't seem right here."

"Absolutely," Scott said, reaching out a finger and quickly caressing the back of Hank's hand. "I noticed it too."

Thank God, Hank thought. *It's not just me.*

"Jens, buddy," Hank said, stepping into the room as Scott led Ingrid and Birgit to their rooms. "What do you think?"

"It's great."

"Can I ask you something?" Hank sat near the foot of the bed. "It might be kind of personal and I'll understand if you don't want to discuss it."

"Okay," Jens said, sitting near the head of the bed.

"Have you just grown tired of your notebook or is there another reason you don't have it?"

"It's nothing. It's just stupid, that's all."

"Why is it stupid?"

"It just is."

"That's not true. And that's not really an answer." Hank kept his tone very calm and even. "Does that mean you don't want to talk about it."

Jens looked down at his hands. He was picking at the duvet cover. It had a navy blue background with planets and asteroids and galaxies and a Space Station and a million and one stars.

"Thank you for my room. It's the nicest room I've ever had." Jens said, looking up briefly.

Hank could see that he was trying not to cry. He scooted closer to Jens. "You're very welcome."

Jens said nothing in return, just kept tracing the outline of Saturn's rings with his finger.

"Hey, did you see what Scott and I put on that shelf over there?" Hank got up and walked over to the bookshelf, painted in alternating stripes of white and navy blue. "Your very own supply of notebooks."

Jens said nothing. He just closed his eyes and Hank noticed a tear run down his cheek. He was back on the bed, sitting in front of the boy in a one second. He took his time, letting Jens know that he wasn't going anywhere. He reached out and smoothed a hand over the blond head.

Jens jolted forward, wrapping his arms around Hank's torso and burying his head in his chest.

"Hey," Hank said, stroking the boy's back. "What happened? I'd love to help you if I can." He heard sniffles and felt a wet spot beginning to soak through to his skin. "Okay, you take your time. You'll tell me when you're ready."

The sniffles subsided a little and Jens pulled away slowly, looking up at Hank, who ran his hand over the blond head a couple more times and offered an understanding smile. Finally, Jens took a deep breath, wiped at his eyes and looked over at the notebooks on the shelf.

"Sharif and Shea took my notebook last week. They threw it in the garbage." Jens glanced up at Hank, then went back to tracing Saturn's rings. "They tore some of the pages out. It's ruined."

"Why would they do that?"

Jens shrugged. "They're just mean that way. Sharif even cut a girl's hair once."

"Do they pick on everyone, or just certain kids?"

"Just the kids that are weird or different. That's what they call me. Weird."

"Have you spoken to any of your teachers about this?" Hank continued to smooth Jens's hair or

squeeze his shoulder.

"Yeah, but nothing happens," Jens said with a resigned shrug. "The teachers don't care. I told Mr. Ammeter, 'cause it happened during Science class, but he just told me to sit down and finish my work."

Hank thought for a moment, then reached out and put his arms around Jens. "Thank you for telling me. I'm sorry that happened to you. You didn't deserve that." Hank put his hands on Jens's shoulders and held him so he could look into his eyes. "I don't know if I can do anything to help you, but maybe we should mention this to your foster parents."

"No, it's okay," Jens said.

"Have you told Kelly?"

Jens shook his head and Hank felt a sudden urge to hit someone. *If the boy doesn't feel like he can tell anyone, anyone who'll care, then what the hell is he supposed to do, just put with up with this kind of shit and shut up?* The thought was immediately followed by a solution: Hank would go to the school. And that thought was immediately followed by Scott's voice telling him to wait. He could practically hear it: wait until it's official and we are the

boy's guardians. Then, we can go and raise hell.

Hank closed his eyes and gave Jens another hug.

"Okay," Hank said, at last. "You let me think on your school problem for a while. In the meantime, how would you like to go and practice your freediving in the bathtub?"

Jens smiled for the first time in hours, or so it seemed to Hank.

"Okay, you get your bathing suit on and I'm going to see what Scott and the girls are up to. You get the bathtub filled and..." Hank pointed to the top drawer of the desk. "If you check in the drawer, you'll find another surprise."

Hank kissed the top of Jens's head and then stood up, looking back at the anticipation as Jens looked at the desk drawer. He got on the other side of the door and watched for a moment while Jens opened the centre drawer and pulled out a brand new stopwatch.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hank stood in the doorway, the camera slung around his neck, watching as Eleanora put the book down on the nightstand and tucked in her granddaughters, careful not to wake them. She'd just read them a story, after each of the children had brushed their teeth, washed their faces and asked grandma for "just one more story" at least five times. She'd happily obliged, even though Hank could tell she was running out of steam.

Eleanora kissed each of them on the forehead and then walked toward Hank. He wanted to take pictures of this moment, but he didn't want to wake the children. He would just have to remind them of it, over and over again.

"You're welcome to stay, Eleanora," he whispered, but she just waved her hand. "Scott and I can sleep on the pull-out sofa in the basement."

"Nonsense," she said, holding onto Hank's arm. "This is your house, and I have to get out of the way so these children will see you as their parents."

He escorted her out to the kitchen, where Scott and Kelly were still chatting at the

kitchen table.

"Eleanora," Scott said, pushing himself away from the table and standing. "Won't you please reconsider and stay? I'm sure the children would love to wake up and find you here in the morning."

"No, thank you," she said with a gracious smile. "It's time for me to go home." She turned to Kelly and then looked back at Hank. "You've made an old woman very happy tonight. I can't thank you enough." She looked back to Kelly. "I'm ready to go home, please."

"Please," Hank said, holding onto the hand that was on his arm. He looked over at Kelly. "I'll take her home, if that's okay."

Kelly smiled and nodded. "Of course it is."

"Thank you, dear," Eleanora said to Hank as she turned and headed to the door. Hank helped her on with her coat.

"Will you call us tomorrow if you change your mind about spending some more time with us?" Scott stood in front of her, his face pleading. "I think Hank and I enjoy having you here as much as the children do."

Eleanora patted Scott's cheek. "You are

sweet. I'll see how I feel tomorrow."

"Fair enough," Hank said and watched as Scott embraced her. He handed his keys to Hank, with a look that seemed to say that the SUV might be easier for her to enter and exit.

Hank led her out the door and down the steps to the SUV. He made sure she was in safely and then ran around to the driver's side.

"I'm so sorry," Hank said as he got in. "I should have warmed this up first. I wasn't thinking far enough ahead." He hit the necessary buttons and soon the seats were warming up.

"This has always been my favorite season," Eleanora said, rubbing her frail hands together. "Joseph and I were married in October, you know."

"Were you born on the island?"

"Born and raised. Both Joseph and I were. We met in elementary school." She looked over and offered a muted laugh. "I wouldn't have anything to do with him until high school, however. He was a mean little boy, always pulling girls' hair and teasing them."

Hank smiled and put the SUV in reverse,

letting Eleanora reminisce.

"My father passed away when I was in high school, quite suddenly."

"I'm so sorry," Hank said, glancing at her briefly.

"Momma had difficulty making ends meet. Joseph began to share his lunch with me so I would have something to eat."

"Sounds like he grew up to be a good man."

"Oh yes," Eleanora said, lost in her thoughts. "He proposed to me when I told him that I would have to drop out of school to help Momma and my brothers and sisters. I was only sixteen and Momma insisted that I get an education." She laughed at a memory that only she could see. "He asked me every week for a year."

"And you finally said yes?"

"No," she said, forlornly. "He stopped asking."

Hank looked over, having to remind himself that she eventually married him, so it probably wasn't as sad a story as it appeared to him at that moment.

"He went away to university in Vancouver. And when he came back after his first year, he asked

me again. I was so happy I said yes right away."

"By then you'd finished school?"

"Yes. And we were married and I worked as a secretary and sent as much money as I could back home to Momma and the family."

"How did you end up back on the island?"

"Joseph became sick," she said, looking over at Hank, her eyes moist. "Cancer. He was the eldest in his family, so the house was left to him when his father passed. We'd been told that we would never have any children, but when we moved back to the island, suddenly I was pregnant. Joseph was thrilled. It seemed to cure him, almost. But he passed when Becky was in high school, and she lost her way, getting into all sorts of trouble. She met a man who got her hooked on drugs and then the poor children were born and I wanted so much to take care of them..."

"Please, Eleanora, you don't have to tell me any more."

"I wanted to take the children, but I'm not well myself. Ever since Joseph passed and Becky..."

Hank pulled his car into her driveway, undid his seat belt and turned to face her. He took her hand between his. "Come on, let me get you inside where it's warm."

He released her hand and exited the vehicle, coming around to her door and helping her out. She leaned on him for support and when they reached the door, she pointed to a potted plant.

"The key is in the bottom of the pot."

Hank let go of her for a moment to retrieve the key from its little hiding place. He opened the door and led her inside. He took off her coat and hung it up for her.

"I have something you'll need when you adopt my grandchildren," she said as she walked to the dining room. Hank followed, uneasily. "I have been working on these for the children. They may want them some day." She caressed, one at a time, one photo album after another. "They may want to know where they're from, who we were."

Hank was blinking rapidly to dispel the heat behind his eyes. He felt ashamed and selfish; he was planning his life with the kids before Eleanora had even said goodbye to hers.

"I tell them stories about their mother, what she was like when she was a little girl. Always

asking daddy for one more horsey ride around the living room." Eleanora smiled, looking past Hank to the living room, seeing something that had not been for more than thirty years. "The doctors tell me that I don't have much longer," she said, finally looking up at Hank. "I can't tell you how much easier it will be knowing the children have you two."

"I love them very much," Hank whispered, tears spilling down his cheeks.

"They'll need that," Eleanora said, patting Hank's hand. "They've not had an easy start to it all."

"I'll make sure it gets easier for them, that they have the best."

Eleanora approached Hank and put her arms around him. He closed his eyes, tears falling anew.

Hank was lying in bed, wide awake, unable to think about anything other than how his happiness was coming at the expense of another woman's heartbreak. He couldn't get the images of Eleanora out of his head. Every time he closed his eyes to try to sleep, all he could see was the young woman, in love for the first

time, off to Vancouver to start a life she thought would be nothing short of perfect. The shame would wash over him again and again, deriding him for having wasted so much of his life, having treated his own family with such callousness and indifference.

He wiped at his eyes as he heard the noise.

Hand was out of bed in a shot. *The children*, he thought to himself. *Something's wrong with the children*. He went to the closet out of habit, looking for sweatpants to cover himself, but then realized that he and Scott were now wearing pajamas. Scott had purchased them one day. Scott's had cowboys and Hank's had bunnies. At least Scott had found it funny.

Hank walked out into the hall, his fists clenching and unclenching. Maybe it was a burglar. He was about to call out, to ask who was there, but then heard Birgit's tired voice. He walked to her room, the door still open as per her request. Her bed was empty.

Panic seized him immediately. Had she gone outside? Was she lost in some other part of the house? He ran to check Ingrid's room. Gone, as well. He was turning to go and alert Scott, and then call the police, when he heard Jens telling each of his sisters to stop fussing and go to

sleep.

Relief flooded his body and he reached out to steady himself against a wall.

When he felt steadier on his feet and the adrenaline rush had slowed, he made his way over to Jens's room and slowly pushed open the door.

In the one twin bed were three bodies, all huddled together. He stood there for what seemed like hours, willing himself to stop thinking about all the horrible things that didn't just happen to the children.

They miss each other. They're all together. It made him think of puppies or kittens, all huddled together in a pile while they slept.

He backed out slowly and went to the kitchen, opened Scott's laptop and began the search for a contractor.

He made a mental note to order a double bed for Jens's room, and to make sure it was here for their next visit.

"You want to do what, exactly?" Scott was at the stove, making bacon and eggs, while Hank was getting out all of the cereals they'd purchased, and then the milk. With last night's little

session of musical beds, Hank figured they'd let the children sleep in a little longer.

"Break through one of the walls, so they kids can reach other more easily."

"And what's wrong with using the doors?"

"Nothing, Mr. Grinch," Hank said, moving to the counter to blot the bacon on some paper towels. "But I thought it might be easier to have one large room for the girls and then make some sort of a passageway so they could get to Jens if they needed to."

"What if Jens doesn't want that?"

"Then we won't do it," Hank said, popping a slice of bacon into his mouth. "Simple."

"Okay," Scott said as he dumped some more bacon onto the paper towels.

"Okay, who are you and what have you done with Scott?"

Scott laughed and returned his attentions to the eggs.

"I thought I would have to work harder for this one."

"Listen," Scott said, putting down the spatula and turning to look at his husband. "The state

you were in last night when you got home? I'll do anything if I don't have to see you like that ever again."

Hank smiled, weakly, remembering Eleanora's photo albums. "Life can be so unfair sometimes."

Scott emptied the frying pan of its contents onto another plate and put the dirty dishes into the sink to soak. He turned and put his head on Hank's shoulder, commiserating. They stayed like that until they heard voices from down the hall.

"Everything ready?"

"Just waiting for the hungry tummies," Scott said, moving to the table.

"I'll go and get them."

Hank disappeared down the hall and approached the door to Jens's room. "Good morning," he called as he pushed against the door. "Anybody hungry?"

He smiled at the three puffy, red faces that greeted him. Jens's hair was all over the place, Ingrid was smiling already and Birgit was rubbing at her eyes and looking around the room.

"Where's Betsy?"

"Is that her pushed up under the pillow?"
Hank moved into the room and pointed.

Birgit turned around and pulled out her doll, kissing her as she smoothed down the synthetic hair.

"Okay, Scott has made us bacon and eggs and we have every kind of cereal you can think of, and milk and juice and toast and peanut butter and jam." Hank clapped his hands together. "Last one to wash up and be at the table has to wash the dishes."

Hank jumped to the side as each of them made a beeline for the bathroom. He sauntered out after them, wondering how they were going to react to his plan for their bedrooms.

"How did everyone sleep? Well, I hope." Scott was loading up the table with plates of scrambled eggs, eggs over easy and bacon.

"Never sleep that good unless I'm at grandma's," Jens said, sitting down first and gulping down half a glass of juice. "Is this all for us?"

"Of course," Scott said, tousling the boy's hair. "What would you like to eat first?"

As Jens pondered his options, Ingrid came over

and wrapped her arms around Scott's waist, followed by Birgit who could only reach as high as Scott's thighs. Hank was the last to arrive.

"Oh oh," Scott moaned. "Looks like Hank is last."

"Dishes," Birgit announced pointing to Hank.

"You three are just too fast for me," Hank said, sitting down at one end of the table as Scott sat at the other end.

"So," Scott said, looking at all three kids. "Who wants eggs?"

All three put up their hands and Scott stood to make sure each of them got a good helping of eggs, followed by bacon and lots of milk and juice.

Hank studied the scene, memorizing what each of the kids liked. He knew some of their preferences from the couple of times they'd been to restaurants, but this was when he'd learn the most about each of them. Jens was like him, preferring eggs over easy to scrambled, Ingrid liked both and Birgit made a yucky face at everything except the bacon. He would have to figure out how to coax more food than that into her.

"Scott and I have something to ask you all," Hank said, filling his plate with eggs and bacon. "We were wondering if you might like us to build a little portal between your rooms, you know like a secret passageway so you could visit whenever you wanted to."

The three kids looked at each other and then let their eyes fall to their plates.

"Why?" Jens asked as he dipped a piece of bacon into the runny yellow yoke of an egg.

"Well, I noticed this morning that you were all together in Jens's bed. So, either you feel safer like that or there was an enormous wind last night that blew you all together."

The children glanced at each other again.

"I'll tell you what," Hank said after a few moments. "Why don't you three talk about it and if you'd like your very own secret passageways, you tell me or Scott and we'll figure something out."

"You won't be mad?" Jens asked, gulping audibly. He finished his juice and looked back and forth between Scott and Hank.

"Why would we be mad?" Hank tried to smooth down the cowlicks that had appeared during the

night. No good, they just sprang right back up.

"At the foster home, they don't like us doing that."

"Well, we won't tell them then, will we?"

Jens smiled and looked over at his sisters. He got out of his chair and hugged Hank around the neck.

Hank looked over at Scott as he patted Jens on the back. "So it's settled? Secret Narnia doors for everyone."

When Jens pulled away and took his seat, Hank had an idea. "I was thinking Jens. Maybe you and your sisters might be able to come up with some ideas for what the passageways might look like and you could jot them down in your notebook."

Jens smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

"And later we'll make everyone some smoothies, that is after we do some more training in the bathtub." Hank offered the boy a wink. "But you need to eat up." He turned to Birgit and pointed to her plate. "Do you want to try some eggs?"

The little girl scrunched up her face and shook her head so hard that some of her silky

hair fell across her face.

"Some cereal then?" Hank asked, pushing the hair behind her ear.

Birgit nodded and pointed to the Rice Crispies.

Thank God Scott only got the ones with low sugar, he thought as he looked over and saw Scott smiling at him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The two days were over too soon.

It seemed like the children had just arrived and then they were leaving again. Before the kids were even out of bed on the second morning, Hank was already planning their next visit. He was also already missing them.

He'd had a nice conversation with Jens, who promised not to be bullied by the boys at school and to let him know if he needed any help. Jens had tried to explain that calling out the boys only seemed to make the problem worse. Even some teachers were afraid to discipline the boys, Jens had confided during their freedive training.

And that was why Hank was feeling guilty, sitting alone in his truck, in a part of town he'd never been to before.

He'd held off for almost a week. Even as he sat there, in his truck, he knew he shouldn't be here, but he just had to see for himself what Jens faced every day. He'd made sure to look up the bell schedule at school so that he could arrive and depart while Jens was in class, but the classes were only thirty-three minutes long. He could have tried to show up as a prospective

parent looking for the right school for his nine-year old son, but he would have had to come, discuss and leave all within thirty-three minutes.

So, he had decided to wait until the last bell, park outside of the school, watch the students leave and then head in and find out what he could about this place and the kind of adults who did nothing about bullies, vandals and thieves.

He arrived minutes after the bell rang and saw the exodus of students. It was an elementary school, so the sheer number of students astounded him. He couldn't imagine what it was like to put up with that kind of noise on a daily basis. He wondered how the teachers weren't deaf.

He smiled as he saw Jens leave, another boy beside him and Ingrid on the other. They were smiling and laughing as they made their way to the school bus. *Hang in there, buddy,* he thought, willing the sentiment to his future son.

The crowd of students dispersed fairly quickly and he got out of his truck and walked the hundred yards or so to the front entrance. The halls were filthy, some of the lockers covered

in graffiti and foul language and the language from some of the remaining kids in the hall was worse. He followed the signs to the front office and pulled open the heavy glass and metal door, scaring one scowling girl with too much make-up and an attitude to spare. She backed up through the door, yelling at someone and then turned ghostly white as she back into him and turned around. Her expression was one of disgust and, Hank assumed, a *Fuck You* was halfway out of her mouth when she went white and looked all the way up to his unamused mien. *Sorry*, she said, practically a whisper and then scuttled down the hallway toward the front door.

Elementary-aged kids wearing make-up? What the hell happened to schools?

He smiled at the haggard looking middle aged woman behind the desk, which was in such disarray that it didn't surprise him that it took her almost five minutes to notice his arrival.

"Sorry," she said, trying on a smile. "May I help you?"

"Perhaps," Hank said. "I'll be moving to the area soon and I was checking out the schools in the area. Is there an administrator available?"

She turned around and faced the back of the office. Hank noticed a door before he heard her bellow. "Tom! Visitor!"

Hank was pretty sure the tour would be all downhill from here, but he was willing to offer the benefit of the doubt. He just wasn't sure for how much longer. This was no place for someone of Jens's abilities. *He must be miserable here.*

At last, a small, pot-bellied, bald man in his late forties came out of a back office. There was a grease stain on his ruffled shirt and his tie barely reached his navel, let alone his belt. He waved a hand at Hank and darted back into his office, coming back out seconds later shoving himself into a suit jacket.

"Thomas Middlebo," the man said. When they were beside each other, Hank noticed the principal barely came up to his shoulder and had some sort of sauce at the corner of his mouth.

"Henry Alan," Hank said, feeling a little guilty for taking advantage of his husband like this. "I was wondering if I could get a quick tour of the school."

"You have children?"

Hank looked at the man. *No, I'm a sex*

offender and am looking for a new hunting ground! "Yes," Hank said instead. "Nine, seven and soon-to-be five."

"Ah, very nice," the man said, opening the door and letting Hank pass. "We have a K to 8 school here..."

Hank figured that explained the make-up on his new friend that bumped into him on her way out of the office.

"We offer a balanced curriculum of core subjects and options--"

"What options are those?"

"Home Economics, Industrial Arts and Physical Education."

"Physical Education is an option?" Hank said, hoping he didn't sound as shocked as he was.

"Well, there is Phys. Ed. Three times in a six-day cycle, but then the students can choose an option that is more like Outdoor Education and Leadership."

"And the students can choose all three?"

"No, the students can only choose two."

"Okay," Hank said, drawing out the word for two or three seconds. "And science? My son is

quite the little scientist."

"Well," the man said. "Just up ahead, we have Mr. Ammeter's room. He's our Department Head for Math and Science."

Oh, this is too good to be true, Hank said, wishing he could laugh maniacally and rub his hands together. "Okay."

They entered the filthiest room Hank had ever seen. There was garbage on the floor that looked like it had been there for weeks, gum stuck on the *top* of the first three desks, more graffiti and foul language on the desks than there was garbage on the floor and posters on the wall that Hank remembered from his days in elementary school.

"Gordon? This is Mr. Alan," the Principal said to the short, very skinny man sitting at a desk that had certainly seen better days. "I'm just giving him a tour. He may be enrolling his children and his son is a bit of a scientist."

Gordon didn't even stand up, nor offer his hand, so Hank moved closer to force the man to do both.

"Pleasure," Hank lied. "I'm particularly interested in enrichment opportunities. The school where Scott is enrolled right now has him

keeping a journal with all of his questions and then setting him up to investigate them. You know, to challenge himself."

"We can certainly arrange for that," the Principal said.

Hank noticed a thin bead of sweat break out on the man's upper lip as he looked to Gordon for help. Gordon couldn't have cared less.

"Thank you, Gordon," Hank said and turned to exit the class. The principal was not far behind.

"And if you'd like to follow me--"

"What about bullying?" Hank made sure he was standing in full view of the science teacher, his voice raised slightly.

"I'm sorry."

"I noticed some signs in the school about bullying and something about telling an adult. Is this some kind of school program or divisional program?" Hank didn't move. He wanted Gordon to hear this. Even if Gordon didn't care.

"It's a division-wide initiative that rewards students for good behavior. It's more of a modelling type of system, whereby students are

reinforced when their behavior is what we expect of them."

"And when it's not?"

"Well," the principal stammered. "That would depend on the offence, but we would, of course, begin by involving the parents."

"Of course," Hank said, turning and taking one last look at Gordon. The little weasel was back to looking at whatever was on his desk. Hank hoped it was retirement papers that needed signing. "Well," he said suddenly. "Thank you very much, Mr. Middlebo." Hank held out his hand, his eye drawn back to the sauce stain again.

"Do let me know if there's anything else you need." Mr. Middlebo shook Hank's hand.

"Will do," Hank said, walking away and wiping his hand on his jacket.

Two hours later, and after visiting the school that was much closer to their own house, Hank was home and staring at an expressionless Scott.

"Say something," Hank said, taking off his dress shirt. "Please?"

Scott sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed

his forehead.

"I didn't use my real name and I never mentioned Jens once."

"Look, Hank," Scott stood again and began pacing. Scott never paced. "I'm as upset by Jens's bullying problem as you are, *but...*" Scott held up a finger. "We're not his official guardians--"

"Yet."

"Don't interrupt me."

"If Kelly finds out about this or if someone saw you or..." Scott sat back down, scrubbing at his forehead. "Fuck me."

"Baby, listen to me. There's no way they'll find out."

"What about when they do become ours and we have to go there for parent-teacher interviews? Huh?"

"No fucking way are those kids staying in that school."

"Is there a closer school?"

"There is," Hank said. "I visited that one too." Hank, still shirtless, moved to sit beside Scott. "Baby, you wouldn't believe the

difference! It was clean, the principal didn't have a grease stain on his shirt or food on his mouth, the science teacher's room was immaculate and they'll get Physical Education every day!"

"Oh," Scott said, looking amused. "Okay." He pulled at Hank's chest hair. "Problem solved." He got up to move away, but Hank pulled him onto his lap. "But if Kelly finds out about this, it's all on you."

"Deal," Hank said, nuzzling Scott's neck.

"Why do I put up with you?"

"You signed the marriage certificate."

Scott slapped the back of his head and Hank tried to look hurt. "Which will be worthless if you pull anything like this again."

"Sorry," Hank said, pouting. He stood up and undid his slacks, letting them fall to the floor. "Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

"Yeah," Scott said, stepping closer and slipping a finger inside the waist band of Hank's boxers. He put his lips near Hank's but did not make contact. He pulled his finger out as far as he could and let go, the elastic making a loud noise when it snapped back and hit

Hank's skin. "You can cook dinner. I'm starved."

"Ouch," Hank said, still pouting. "But you've been home *all* day!"

Scott reached for Hank's boxers again, but Hank was too quick for him. He wrapped his arms around his husband, pinning Scott's arms by his side and fell back on the bed. He kissed an ear, the side of his neck and then his mouth. He pulled away slightly and looked at Scott, a smile on his face.

"So you're not interested in anything else I have to offer other than my culinary skills? Tomorrow's overnight visit number two, so this is our last chance for another three days."

Scott squirmed until his left hand was able to grasp Hank through his boxers. "This doesn't get you out of cooking," he said as Hank released him.

"Fair enough," Hank said before Scott was pulling off his boxers and nipping at his foreskin. "Fuck me, fair enough."

Hank sat across from Kelly, his leg bouncing, seemingly of its own volition. He couldn't seem

to stop it. This was a regularly-scheduled visit at her office, not only to discuss any concerns either the children or Hank and Scott might have, but also to begin the process whereby the two men would become recognized foster parents.

It was the solution to Hank wanting to have the children move away from the foster homes they currently had, and a solution to Jens and Ingrid being in that awful school. Hank and Scott would become their foster parents while they waited for the adoption to become official, which, Kelly explained, could take the better part of a year.

There was also the added advantage of Hank and Scott being willing to take the children to spend time with their grandmother a lot more often than once a month or so. Both Hank and Scott agreed that wasn't nearly enough.

"So, are there any questions for me?" Kelly looked at both of them, in turn, and smiled.

"No," Scott said and looked at Hank.

"No," Hank said, feeling guilty. "Not really." He added after a few seconds.

Kelly didn't say anything or ask any other questions; she seemed to be waiting Hank out, as

if she knew he had something to confess.

"Sorry, yes." Hank scrubbed at his forehead. It was slightly damp. "I mean, it's not a question. Well, maybe it is." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I did something that I shouldn't have."

"Oh," Kelly said, leaning forward in her chair. "What's that?"

Hank took another deep breath and explained about Jens and his notebook and the bullies and how he'd gone to the school to check out the environment. It all came spilling out of him, as if there was no off switch. When he finished, he noticed Kelly glance over at Scott and offer a smile. Hank couldn't help but wonder if that was a smile of sad condolence, one that said, "And you were so close." Or if it was one that said, "What the hell do you see in this guy?"

Kelly looked back at Hank and then looked down at the folder on her desk. Over the past months, Hank had watched that file grow thicker and thicker. Every detail of his entire life had been collected and stored in that file. He couldn't even be sure that there wasn't a DNA sample in there somewhere.

"Do you know what that tells me, Hank?" She opened the file. "Do you know what all of this tells me?"

"What?" Hank looked over at Scott, ready to apologize for screwing everything up.

"It tells me that you're worried about a little boy who's been in foster care for most of his life. It tells me that you want to make his life a little bit better, safer, a little more secure."

Hank looked down at his hands, remembering what Eleanora had said to him a week ago. "So I didn't ruin this for us?"

"Well, I'm going to *strongly* recommend that you wait until your Jens's and the girls' *legal* guardian to do anything else like that, but no, you haven't ruined anything." Kelly closed the file and leaned back in her chair. "I still trust you to do the right thing by those children." Kelly looked at both men, but her eyes settled back on Hank. "And apparently," she said, smiling coyly, "so do they."

Hank's leg stopped bouncing and he looked over at Scott and then back at Kelly. "I promise I won't do anything else like that. Until they're ours."

"I know you won't," Kelly said, pushing herself out of her chair. "And I, for one, can't wait to be in that courtroom to sign the papers."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The children were over for their second overnight visit, except this one would be for three days, which included one school day. Hank had panicked, initially, until Scott told him that he'd take Jens and Ingrid to school so Hank wouldn't run the risk of revealing his subterfuge. Hank wasn't entirely sure the principal would remember, but he didn't want to embarrass Jens. And that was part of the reason he was out here, on the back deck, sitting beside Jens, wondering how to confess what he'd done.

He knew he was taking too long, trying to find the right words, but then Jens spoke.

"Is it something I did?"

"Huh?" Hank looked over and saw the concern on the boy's face. "Oh God, no!" Hank said, putting his arm over the boy's shoulders. "No, no, not at all. You and your sisters are perfect. Absolutely perfect."

Hank sighed and decided he had to quit being a coward. "I have something to tell you, something that I did that may make you mad. And if you are, I promise I'll never do it again. But seeing you so upset when you had your

notebook ruined..." Hank stopped himself and turned to face Jens. "I went to your school last week, just to see what you have to go through everyday."

Jens looked at him, but said nothing.

"It's okay to be mad at me, you know. I did something without your permission, something that I shouldn't have done without asking you if it would be okay."

"I'm not mad," Jens smiled. "That was nice that you did that for me."

Hank decided to lay all of his cards on the table. He'd apologize to Kelly if he was overstepping, but he wanted Jens to know the truth.

"I'm going to tell you something that is just between us men right now. Okay?" Hank was relieved to see Jens nod. "Scott and I want to adopt you and your sisters. And even your brother if he's ever in need of a home. A permanent home. I went to your school because I care about you. And I care about your sisters. Scott and I care about all of you a great deal."

Jens rubbed at his eyes and Hank thought maybe it was too cold out for the boy.

"Are you cold? Are your eyes bothering you? Should we go inside?"

Jens shook his head. "I used to pray so hard every night that mom would come and get us. Me and Ingrid. And then Kelly told me that Birgit had been born and that she would be in another home. And I stopped praying then because if she gave up a baby, I knew she wouldn't come back for us." Jens looked up and Hank could see tears forming. "I would hear the other kids at school talking about their moms and dads and I always wondered why I didn't have that. Grandma did her best to explain it and I even asked her to take us out of there, but she said she couldn't, that some day, if I kept praying, some nice family would come and would want us."

Hank put a hand on the boy's back and that's all it took. Jens jumped into Hank's lap, his arms wrapped so tight around his neck that he felt dizzy after a few moments.

"Hey, hey," Hank said, stroking the back as Jens cried. "It's okay. You let it all out." Hank closed his eyes and thought about a scared little boy wondering why no one wanted him, worried about what would happen to him and his sister. "You're a very brave young man, Jens. Scott and I love you all, very much."

No matter what Hank said, he just seemed to be making Jens cry even harder. So he stopped talking and continued stroking the blond hair and the trembling back, telling Jens that everything was going to be okay.

After a few more minutes, the sniffles subsided, the grip on Hank's neck loosened and Jens let go.

"Here," Hank said, putting his arm under the boy's legs and setting him on his lap in a more comfortable position. "I know you're probably too old to be sitting on my lap, but it makes me feel better. And I want to tell you a story."

Jens's head was resting on Hank's shoulder. He didn't struggle to get off, his energy seemingly spent from the release of emotion.

"I've been thinking some more about that question you asked me when we were at the pool. Remember? Why I'd want to raise someone else's children?" Hank tightened his arms around the skinny body, trying to keep Jens warm. "For the longest time, I thought I didn't want kids. I thought that I would go do exciting and interesting things with my life, go travelling, fight fires, do things that made me feel alive." Hank smoothed his hand over the blond hair a few times. "And then I met Scott. And he made me

realize two very important things. Do you want to know what those two things are? You know, for your notebook."

Jens nodded and Hank chuckled.

"I thought you might." He took a deep breath and continued. "Scott made me realize that I'd been wrong to think I wanted to be alone. *And* he made me realize that I had a lot of love inside that I wasn't sharing. I probably didn't realize it on my own because of how my own father made me feel about myself. I didn't always get along with my father, but I loved him anyway. We don't always get to choose our family, and sometimes that means we're disappointed, maybe because we think they don't love us or maybe because we think that they don't want us. And sometimes, like I did with Scott and his family, we get a very special chance to choose to spend the rest of our lives with certain people. I *chose* Scott because he makes me happy. And I want to make him happy." Hank smoothed a hand over the blond hair again. "And when I pictured my life with Scott, there were always going to be children. I just didn't know who they would be, where they'd come from. But I knew that there were children out there who were praying for me to come and give them

all the love that Scott showed me I had."

Jens looked up and Hank nodded. He smiled as he wiped the tears off Jens's cheeks.

"So while you and your grandma were praying for someone to come along and give you a home, I was praying that I would find children who were kind and caring and smart and funny and who I could love for the rest of my life. And here you are. Scott and I would like to be your family. So, if you want to live here for good, we're here to answer your prayers. But my prayers have already been answered."

"How come?"

"Because after meeting you and your sisters for the first time, I told Scott that you were the children I'd been praying for. I didn't have to wait anymore."

"We want to live here all the time." Jens said, his face so sincere and earnest.

"That's good, because Scott and I would be very sad if you didn't."

Jens smiled and latched himself around Hank's neck again.

"And Scott and I promise to make sure you get to spend as much time with your grandma as you

want. All your relatives, if you want."

"When can we come here and not have to go back to the other place?"

Hank smiled and held on to Jens. "Kelly is working on that right now. As soon as she says we are foster parents, Scott and I will bring you over here forever."

"What do I call you and Scott?"

"Well," Hank said, rubbing Jens's arm through the thick sweatshirt. "You already have a dad, and you should never replace him in here," Hank said, pointing to Jens's heart. "So, you can just call us Hank and Scott." Hank scooped him up and threw him over his shoulder, making Jens giggle. "Now, let's go in and see what Scott made for dinner. And tomorrow, I'm going to take you out to the woods behind the house here and show you what I do for a living."

"Really?"

"Absolutely," Hank said as he deposited Jens by the patio doors. "You still want me to show you what a logger does, right?"

"Yeah," Jens said, his eyes brighter and his smile as broad as it had ever been.

Birgit was the first to yawn. That was just before seven, and Hank wondered if he shouldn't put her to bed. He didn't because he didn't want to say goodnight to her. He was having too much fun learning all the things that these children knew, things that he'd never even heard of. Things like Wii. It had been a present from Eleanora last year, for Christmas, at what must have been--Hank figured--considerable expense. He would figure out a way to get it back to her.

What Hank wasn't enjoying was being beaten, soundly, by Jens at just about every game. Tennis, something called Just Dance and some other game about cartoon ducks finding treasure. Even Ingrid and Scott managed to hold their own. Of course Hank pretended to let everyone win, but he knew he wasn't fooling anyone. And he was loving every minute of it. It wasn't about him, and he was more than fine with that.

"Okay, I give up," Hank said, falling onto his back in front of the television. "I'll never get the hang of this."

"I seem to remember someone telling Jens that he needs to practice if he wants to get better at freediving." Scott stood beside Hank's prostrate body and bent over, slapping playfully

at his belly.

"It's different for us old people," Hank said, sitting up and offering a wink to Jens.

"You're not old," the boy said with a shrug. "It's just a number."

"Tell that to my knees and my back," Hank said, laughing. He reached over and tousled Jens's hair. "But thank you for that."

"Okay, kids," Scott announced. "Time for a serious discussion. And those are always best when you're eating ice cream."

Ingrid and Birgit cheered and Jens began to pack up the Wii station and the various games. Hank wrapped his arms around the young boy's waist and lifted him off the ground. "I can do that. It's time for ice cream." Delighted with Jens's giggles, Hank headed upstairs behind Scott and the girls.

Within minutes, Birgit had a bowl with one scoop of vanilla and one scoop of strawberry, Ingrid had a bowl with chocolate and strawberry and Jens had a bowl filled with only chocolate. Hank was leaning against the counter while Scott sat at the table, in between the two girls.

"During your next visit next week, Friday will

be Halloween," Scott said softly with eyes wide. Hank smiled at the how he lured them in, three sets of eyes glued to his face. "And we need to think about costumes."

"Kitten," Birgit announced without hesitation.

"Okay, one kitten. Do you know what kind of kitten, sweetie?"

"Persian. Pink."

"Done," Scott said, pushing some stray hair behind Birgit's right ear. He looked to Ingrid and then Jens.

"Elsa," Ingrid said, shyly.

"Ooh, very nice," Scott said confidently, although Hank was pretty sure they'd be looking that up on the internet as soon as the kids were in bed. He turned finally to Jens. "Any ideas?"

Jens blushed and shrugged. He glanced at Scott and then at Hank.

"I know," Hank said, feeling quite sure of himself. "A freediver?"

Jens didn't look up and Hank wondered if he'd been wrong. He was about to ask Jens if he'd had other ideas, but Scott beat him to it.

"Might be hard to walk in flippers," Scott said, rubbing his chin exaggeratedly.

"Uh, they're called *fins*," Hank said, indignantly. He took a seat beside Jens. "Total red card, man?"

Jens laughed and looked over at Hank. "Actually, I was thinking about being a logger."

It took Hank a moment or two to realize he'd heard correctly, but then he smiled and reached over to pull Jens against his torso. "I think I can help with that," Hank said, studying Scott, whose smile was as big as he'd ever seen it.

"Okay, bedtime," Scott announced when he saw the bowls were empty. "Brush your teeth, wash your faces and we'll come and read to you."

"Make sure you're all where you want to be so you won't have to get up later on," Hank said. He kissed Jens on the head and released him to go follow Scott's instructions. Hank followed the three of them, stopping short of entering the bathroom with them.

When the children were all in the bathroom, Hank listened for a moment and heard Jens helping Birgit with the stool so she could reach the sink and then with putting toothpaste on her toothbrush.

He turned, his hand over his heart and headed back to the kitchen, where Scott was shaking his head as he cleaned up and loaded the dishwasher.

"Oh. My. God." Scott put his hands on Hank's forearms. "Could that boy be any more adorable?"

"They're all pretty special."

"He wants to be you for Halloween," Scott said, popping a detergent capsule into the dishwasher and closing it. "None of them wanted to be me."

"Perfection is hard to reproduce," Hank said, taking Scott's hand in his and kissing it.

Scott pushed himself against Hank's body. "You are good," Scott whispered as he pushed himself up on his toes for a quick kiss.

"I'm only as good as my inspiration," Hank said, smoothing some hair off Scott's forehead.

Scott's face changed entirely. There were moments, like this, that would always be with Hank. These moments where he said the right thing, or did the right thing, and Scott's expression showed nothing but love and pure happiness. All those years ago in the hospital hallway when Scott had been trying to make him

feel better; that afternoon, at French Beach, when Scott had given himself to Hank; their entire wedding day; their honeymoon; and countless nights when Hank would awake and look down at the most perfect face he'd ever seen.

Hank's smile faded as he leaned forward and placed a lingering kiss on Scott's lips. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Scott's.

He heard giggles, but he didn't feel like moving.

"I love you too, Hank." Scott's voice was soft and quiet.

Hank put his hands on either side of Scott's face and stroked the flushed cheeks with his thumbs. He backed away slowly, missing the contact immediately. He wanted to say something, but he had no words. And he didn't trust his voice, or his emotions.

"Everyone where they want to be?" Scott called from where he stood in the kitchen.

Hank smiled and turned toward the bedrooms, delighted by the giggles he heard coming from Jens's room. After a few steps, he snapped his fingers, remembering he'd forgotten the camera.

"Look how big it is," Birgit was saying as she bounced up and down on the bed.

"Birgit, stop bouncing on the bed. You're going to hurt yourself." Jens took Birgit's hand and pulled her down beside him. "Or one of us."

Hank chuckled to himself and looked down at the screen on his Canon. "Say cheese!"

Hank and Scott were lying on their sides in their bed, facing each other, Hank recapturing the earlier moment in the kitchen without any difficulty at all.

"Thank you," he said, softly.

"You're welcome." Scott pushed a hand through Hank's hair.

"I told Jens that we want to adopt him, his sisters and even his brother." Hank grinned at Scott's patient smile. "He told me about all the nights he prayed that his mom or dad would come back and take him away from that foster home."

"As bad as I had it growing up," Scott said with a sigh. "I never doubted that Brian would always be there for me. Can't imagine what

those poor kids have been through."

"I told him a story. About you."

"Oh," Scott said, raising his eyebrows in anticipation.

"I told him how I thought I wanted one kind of life, without kids, but then I met an amazing man who believed in me, who showed me just what I had to offer." Hank took Scott's hand and tried to kiss it, but he had to push down the too-long pajama sleeve first. He held Scott's hands there. "I told him that we would do the same for him and his sisters. Be there for them. Show them just how special they are. Just like you did for me."

Scott kissed Hank's knuckles. "You know, you keep telling people how I saved you, but do you ever tell them how you saved me?"

"No," Hank said, frowning. "Because I didn't."

"For as long as I can remember, songs-- complete and finished--have been popping into my head. I would play them on the piano and mom would ask me where I'd learned them." Scott lifted his head off the pillow they were sharing and put it down closer to Hank's face. "I would just smile and tell her I couldn't remember. It

didn't seem important to tell her that I'd made them up." Scott reached out with a finger and traced Hank's bottom lip. "Meeting you was like that, sort of. I was very unhappy in Toronto. I was a success, with more money than I'd ever imagined, but I was very unhappy. And then I met a lost, lonely man who was just as miserable as I was. I could see it on his face. All I could think about was making him smile, making him see that he was more than what other people thought he was. And I succeeded. He came out of his shell. He began to *really* see himself." Scott sighed heavily. "But I didn't count on falling in love with him. And like with my songs, I didn't care if he ever knew, or even if he loved me back. I was just happy to see him smile, to give him someone to talk to."

"But I did know. And I did love you back."

"I know," Scott said, his smile sweet and sincere.

Hank kissed him tenderly on the lips and then on the backs of his hands. "We saved each other, then."

"Yes, we did. And now that lost, lonely man is about to make three, possibly four, children the best father in the world."

Hank kissed Scott's forehead. "There's just one question I have."

"What's that?"

"Once those kids are living with us, how will I ever get to sleep next to your bare skin again?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Okay, boss," Hank said, pushing himself out of his chair and turning to look at Brian. "I'm off. Gotta go get everything ready."

"Sure thing, Hank," Brian said, rubbing the back of his neck as he turned to see Hank. "Five whole days for this visit, huh? Including Halloween."

"Yup," Hank said, stuffing some papers into his briefcase and patting his pockets to see where his keys were. "A kitten, a princess and a logger."

Brian laughed and stood up, stretching his back. "I know. I was talking to Scott last night. Apparently, you were in the garage tailoring one of your old belts so it would fit Jens."

"He's gotta look authentic, right?" Hank spread his arms out to the side, as if the explanation shouldn't even be necessary.

"I'm real happy for you, Hank."

"Yeah," Hank said, his smile growing. "Have to pinch myself sometimes. I mean first Scott and now these incredible kids."

"And your incredibly understanding business

partner."

"Well," Hank said, reaching out to punch Brian on the arm. "Into every life a little rain and all that."

"Hey, now, you just stow that shit, Ballam. It's not too late for me to convince Scott he can find someone better." Brian patted Hank on the cheek.

"Good luck with that," Hank said and winked, remembering the conversation that he and Scott had shared in bed a few nights ago. He headed for the door to their shared office.

"Remember Saturday night," Brian called. "Kari's got a huge dinner planned for everyone."

"Wouldn't miss it," Hank yelled from the front office, before saying his goodbyes and ignoring the smiles and knowing glances from the women who kept asking when they were going to meet the children. "Ladies," he said. "Stay safe tonight."

His cell phone rang just as he reached his truck. He looked at the display. It was Scott. He accepted the call.

"What are you wearing?"

"Uh, Hank, Kelly is here with me."

"Oh, shit," Hank stammered, feeling himself flush. "Sorry about that. Is everything okay? I'm on my home right now."

"I'm kidding," Scott said. "I have to run out so I won't be home when you get here."

"That wasn't funny, you know. My stomach is somewhere up in my throat." Hank pulled open the door and got into the driver's seat.

"Couldn't resist," Scott said. Hank could just imagine the shit-eating grin he was wearing right about now.

"What's wrong? I mean, is it something I can do on the way home?"

"No, no," Scott said, sighing. "Just need to drop something off at the post office, for my agent."

"Okay," Hank said, starting the engine. "I'll see you when you get home."

"I've got everything ready for the kids when they arrive and I spoke with Eleanora."

"And she still doesn't want to come and spend the evening with us and the kids?"

"No, she said she enjoys handing out candy to the little ones that come around her house."

Hank put the truck into gear and pushed down on the brake. "Okay, well I'm just about to pull out of the parking lot, so I guess we'll just have to be happy with a visit to her place. Oh, did you check--"

"Batteries are charging and my eyes are already throbbing at the thought of a geshmillion flashes during the evening."

"Maybe pick up some sunglasses when you're out."

"Very funny," Scott said. "Love you."

"Love you back," Hank said and disconnected the call.

He took his foot off the brake and steered his truck toward the street, and home.

Knowing there was no rush to get home, Hank stopped at the local Safeway and bought extra candy and two big bouquets of flowers. He would make sure Eleanora got the extra candy and one bouquet, while the other bouquet he would give to his husband. Their anniversary had been months ago, and Scott wasn't necessarily the flowers- or jewelry-kind of spouse, but Hank bought the extra bouquet just the same.

He arrived home to an empty house. After setting the boxes of candy by the front door, he stored the bouquets in the fridge and then went to check on the costumes. The first thing he noticed was how small they were. Birgit's kitten costume was barely bigger than an actual kitten. Hank held it up and couldn't help laughing. *God, this night is going to be so much fun.*

He was about to pick up Ingrid's costume when the phone rang. He thought about letting it go to voicemail since it would be for Scott--the house phone was only ever for Scott--but then thought it could be Kelly. Hank ran to answer it, picking it up on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Scott?" The voice was male. And deep. And sexy.

"No, this is Hank. His husband. Who is this?"

"Oh, Hank. So nice to finally meet you, so to speak. Scott has told me so much about you."

Hank didn't say anything for a moment, wondering who this guy was and if it was possible Scott was keeping secrets.

"Hello?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Sorry, I thought we'd been disconnected," the man said. "Anyway, my name is Devin. If you could ask Scott to call me as soon as possible. It's about the cabin."

"Will do, Devin."

"Great. Thank you. It was nice chatting with you."

"Right. Goodbye."

What cabin? The cabin in Ontario? And who the hell is Devin?

Hank hung up the phone and stood there for a few moments, his hands on his hips and his curiosity irrevocably piqued.

Without any answers, Hank figured he'd have to wait until Scott's return. He thought of going back to Jens's room to finish admiring the costumes, but then decided to take a shower.

He stripped down, turned on the faucets and waited for just the right water temperature, finally stepping in and enjoying the relaxation that showers had always brought him. He stood under the water for as long as he dared before soaping his body and rinsing away the stress of

the day. He poured some shampoo into his palm and thought again, while working up a lather, of getting himself a buzz cut. Nothing too drastic, but maybe something that would allow him to see what it would feel like not to be constantly brushing hair out of his eyes.

It would be difficult at first, he assumed. And he would miss the way Scott pushed it aside while Hank was on top of him, looking down at the handsome face. No one had ever accused him of being vain. He had grey chest hairs and a few grey hairs by his temple, but he'd never given them a second thought. But when it came to Scott's hands in his hair, he wasn't really sure it would be the same if he cut it.

As if the mere thought of the man had summoned him from the subconscious, Hank turned as the door to the shower stall opened. Scott stood there, completely naked.

"Done already?"

"Grocery store doesn't take that long," Scott said, stepping into the shower and hugging Hank from behind.

"I thought you went to the post office," Hank said as Scott's hands worked their way up his chest to his soapy hair. Scott turned him

around and took hold of his cock, moving against him so Hank was forced under the downpour of water. The nimble fingers worked quickly to slick the hair back as the soap disappeared. Hank wiped the water out of his eyes and looked down.

"You really want to talk about where I went?" Scott took a nipple into his mouth, not bothering to wait for an answer.

"Fuck, no," Hank said as his head fell back, his erection growing with each delicious nibble on his sensitive nipple.

"Lean back," Scott commanded as he got down on his knees. "Spread your legs."

Hank did as he was told. He sucked in a deep breath and looked down. Scott had the entire length in his mouth. Hank surrendered to the sight and braced himself for what was to come.

Scott was sitting on his lap. Hank was sitting on the sectional in the family room off the kitchen. They'd dried each other off and had eaten some leftover chicken with potato salad before Hank had led his husband to their current location. He wanted to find out more about Devin.

"Devin called while you were out," Hank said, trying to look innocent and unconcerned.

"Really? What did he want?"

Hank's hands travelled over Scott's body, slowly, as they'd done a million times in these relaxed kinds of moments. He couldn't sense any tension or accelerated heartbeat.

"Don't know. He said it was something about the cabin."

"What about the cabin? Did he say?"

"No," Hank said seconds before his lap was empty. "Ah, who's Devin?"

"My secret lover," Scott said as he picked up the phone and dialled a number. Ten digits. Scott came back and plopped himself back on Hank's lap. He reached out with a thumb and pressed it into Hank's forehead.

Hank had not realized he was frowning so vigorously. He reached up and ran a hand over his own forehead just as Scott began to speak.

"Hi Devin. It's Scott Alan."

Hank could hear bits of consonants coming through the line, but he could not make out a single word in its entirety.

"And do you think that's fair?"

Still nothing intelligible.

"I know, but I'm asking *you* what *you* think."

Nothing. Hank tried to distract himself with the little bits of piling on Scott's sweatshirt.

"Okay, well send me the papers and I'll sign them."

Scott turned and smiled. Hank smiled back. Scott's thumb returned to his forehead.

"Okay, works for me. I'll FedEx them back as soon as they're signed."

Scott was nodding at something only he was hearing.

"Perfect. Thanks for everything. Bye, Devin."

Scott pushed the button and the call ended. He tossed the phone on the ottoman and turned to regard Hank.

"You're divorcing your secret lover?"

"Just the oldest one," Scott said, deadpan.

Hank wrapped his arms around him and pulled him underneath all in one swift movement. "Do I need to call Snake?"

"Yes, please."

"Scott Alan, if you don't tell me what's going on, I will do... something... you... won't like."

Scott laughed and took pity on him. "I sold my cabin in the Muskokas. Devin is a real estate agent."

"What?" Hank said, sitting back up. "But you love that cabin. I think you said that was the first thing you bought when you made some money."

Scott scrambled back onto Hank's lap. "I did love it. And it was the first thing." Scott reached out and pushed some hair behind Hank's ear. "Can't believe you remember that."

"Remember everything about you," Hank said, rushing through the words. "Why? What's going on? Do you need money?"

Scott chuckled and snuggled against Hank's chest. "How did I find the kindest, most thoughtful man in B.C., huh?"

"Is that it? You're having money problems? I might be able to leverage my stake in the business to pay for my half of the house within the year."

"No," Scott said, pushing himself so he could look at Hank. "We are worth--at last check-in with my accountant--almost four million dollars."

Hank's eyes bugged out of his head and his mouth dropped open. Scott shut it with a finger.

"I'm selling the cabin because I haven't been there in years. It used to be a place of refuge and relaxation, but now I have you for that. And some corporate CEO wants to buy it." Scott caressed Hank's cheeks. "I was going to mention it to you once it sold, so then I could mention to you my idea of buying a cabin out here. For vacations, with the kids and Rose and Frank and Brian and--"

"I was really worried there for a minute," Hank said, pushing Scott back to the cushion again and twisting his own body so that he was lying beside the man. "I thought with the new house and the vehicles that it might have been too much. Holy shit, I had no idea I married that kind of money."

"It's your money too." Scott said as he pushed the hair out of Hank's eyes. "And it keeps coming in every few months."

"Just from your songs?"

"Hey," Scott said, pulling Hank's hair.

"That's my artistic and intellectual property."

"Ouch," Hank complained. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I just meant, is there *that* much money is selling a song?"

"I don't sell them. They're mine. People pay me to use what I own."

"So all these people who tell you they played your song at their weddings? They send you money?"

"No, those are freebies. It would be impossible for me to try and get payment from everyone who plays my songs."

"Makes sense, I guess."

"And the general rule of thumb is that if someone plans to use my songs to make money or sell something, then they have to pay royalties. Someone playing my song at a wedding isn't doing it to make money."

"I had no idea," Hank whispered. "Why did I never know that until now?"

"Because you have your own life. Your own things to think about." Scott pushed Hank aside so he could sit up. "And it's not like I go out

of my way to ask you about eco-logging."

"That's because you already know everything I do."

"Does Brian know that?" Scott asked, with a smirk. "I may have to float him some money."

"Ha ha," Hank said, pulling Scott back underneath him. "Think that's funny?"

"No, sir," Scott whispered, pulling Hank in for a quick kiss. "Now get off me. You have to go pick up the kids soon."

"Wait," Hank called. "Where is this new cabin?"

"Haven't even started looking yet."

"Where will you be looking?"

"We will be looking in French Beach, or thereabouts."

Hank pushed himself to his feet, taking a moment to rearrange himself in his jeans. He lunged for his husband and caught him in a bear hug. "I should have guessed. You big romantic idiot."

"I have to keep up with you," Scott said, stealing a kiss and going to the kitchen. "Now, do you want something to eat or will you be

pigging out on candy?" He walked over to the fridge.

"Stop," Hank yelled and walked over to stand in front of the door. "You can't go in there."

Scott frowned. "Why not?"

"A surprise," Hank said as he led Scott out of the kitchen. "Promise you won't ruin the surprise."

"Okay," Scott agreed, then took Hank's hand and led him to the bedroom. "I'll give you your surprise when you give me mine."

"Mine?" Hank said and then remembered how Scott had distracted him in the shower. "Where *did* you go after you called me?"

"You'll see," Scott said, pulling a large box out of the closet. "Promise you won't open it until tonight."

"Deal," Hank said, wondering what could possibly be in the nondescript, unmarked box.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The children were all in their costumes, complete with long underwear and sweatshirts so they wouldn't get too cold, and were now awaiting a turn with Scott, the make up artist. Ingrid, AKA Elsa, had beautiful braids and a shimmering lips and sparkles on her rosy cheeks. Birgit, AKA The Kitten, had the beginnings of whiskers and a heart-shaped black nose. Hank was changing into his costume--his own logging gear--and couldn't wait to see Jens, AKA The Logger, with a bit of stubble on his chin.

Hank pulled on his big boots and stood up. He headed to the kitchen table, his grin growing with each step as he saw each of the kids.

"Wow," he said as he tweaked one of Birgit's ears. "Pretty kitty." Birgit meowed for him and he laughed. "And Miss Elsa! Very pretty."

"Okay," Scott announced, turning Jens around for everyone to see. "Five o'clock shadow and simulated wood chips complete."

"Hey, buddy," Hank said as he took in the sight of the young boy. "No one will be able to tell us apart." Jens was blushing, but smiling nonetheless. "Okay, kids," Hank said, moving to stand over by Scott. "We have another surprise

for you."

"What?" Birgit jumped forward a couple of inches.

"Well, we're going to take you around the neighborhood and then we're going to visit someone very special."

"Grandma!" Ingrid clapped her hands together.

"Are we that predictable?" Hank whispered to Scott, who just laughed. "Yes, we're going to see grandma and make sure we get lots of pictures."

The children erupted into squeals of delight.

"But first, we have a whole hour to walk around the neighborhood and get as much candy as we can." Hank looked at each of them in turn.

"Does anyone have to go potty?"

There was a unanimous chorus of *no*.

"Are you sure?"

Birgit didn't answer this time.

"Got it," Scott said as he took her paw and led her to the bathroom.

Hank led Ingrid and Jens to the front door so they could put their boots on. "What are we going to say when we get candy?"

"Thank you," Ingrid said without hesitation.

"And are we going to eat it all tonight?"

"No," the two of them said together.

"And are we going to eat anything that isn't wrapped?"

"No."

"Good," Hank said, standing up and reaching for his and Jens's helmets. Hank had taken the time to scuff up the smaller helmet and had even put a piece of tape on the front with Jens's name. It made Jens smile at the authenticity of his costume.

"Okay," Scott said, leading Birgit over to her boots. "Anybody else?"

"No."

"Then off we go," Hank said, pushing open the door and watching as Jens stood aside to let his sisters go first.

He did that at each house. He walked behind his sisters and stood close behind them at each house, watching out for them and stopping every now and then to ensure they were getting similar amounts of candy. He would take a handful out of his own bag and put it in Ingrid's or Birgit's. Hank stayed off of the doorsteps, a

few yards behind the kids, only speaking to the neighbors when they acknowledged him or asked about the children.

There were a few introductions made throughout the hour, Hank introducing himself and Scott as the newest additions to the neighborhood. And, as Hank expected, the reactions ranged from a quickly vanishing smile to handshakes and invitations for their children to come over for play dates.

"Be interesting to see if some of these torches are still here tomorrow," Hank whispered after one particular neighbor was rather blunt with his opinion about 'their kind' moving into a 'good neighborhood'.

"Couldn't give a shit about us," Scott said, his voice low. "But the first one who says anything to these kids is going to find out why Brian called me the *Tasmanian Devil*."

Hank let out a low whistle. "I'd pay to see that."

"You will," Scott said, deadpan. "Because you'll be helping me bury the bodies afterward."

"Maybe we should get Doug and Kyle to move into the neighborhood."

"I'd love that," Scott said. "Speaking of which, Kyle called today and invited us over for dinner next weekend."

"We'll have the kids," Hank said. "Hopefully as new fosters."

"They don't care." Scott shrugged and took a mini Mars out of Hank's little bag, which was acting as overflow for the children's smaller bags. "Told me to bring along all the children, including you."

"Ha ha," Hank said. "You know when Doug and I are talking, we're never rude about you and Kyle."

"But that's because you're not very quick," Scott said, tearing into the treat and popping it into his mouth.

"Thought you liked it slow," Hank said, leaving Scott's side as the kids walked up to one of the few remaining doors. He turned around once he was about a yard away. "Tell me that wasn't quick." He winked and turned back to watch the children.

Hank stood near the bottom of the stairs, watching as a beautiful young woman, probably one of the children who lived here, opened the door and smiled at each of the kids. She

reached into a big bowl and pulled out full-sized chocolate bars, placing one in each of the bags.

"One for the kitty," she said as she leaned over to speak to Birgit.

"Thank you," Birgit said and turned to run down the stairs.

"And one for Elsa."

"Thank you," Ingrid said, turning and walking slowly and royally.

"And one for the handsome logger," the girl said.

There was no response from Jens. He seemed to be transfixed. Hank called to him, but he didn't move. He was about to go and see if everything was okay when the girl smiled at Jens and put another chocolate bar in his bag.

"Jens?" The girl continued to smile and waved to Hank. "That's a great name."

"Thank... you," Jens said, finally. He didn't turn to come down the stairs until the young lady had closed the door.

The four of them walked back toward Scott. "What's wrong?" Scott put his hand on Hank's forearm. "You've got that look on your face."

Hank lifted his chin in Jens's direction.
"When do boys start to notice girls?"

"What?"

"I think I remember reading something about it happening at age nine or ten?"

"Yeah," Scott said and then seemed to catch up. "No."

"I'm not asking him about it, but he seemed to find something fascinating at that last house we were at. And she was very pretty." Hank looked down at Scott. "And called him *handsome*."

Scott reached in Hank's bag for another piece of candy. Hank was trying not to panic and imagined Scott was doing the same.

Hank grabbed the bouquet, his Canon camera and the video camera and followed the rest of his family out to Scott's SUV. The kids were practically vibrating with excitement over seeing their grandmother again so soon.

"Shoot," Hank said, pushing open his door.
"Forgot the candy."

"Got it," Jens announced from the back seat.
"Scott gave it to me to carry."

Hank looked at Jens and then at Scott. He closed his door. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Scott said as he started the engine.

"Scott and I have been trying to convince your grandma to come for a sleepover. Maybe you kids can help us with that."

"Where will she sleep?" Birgit asked.

"She could sleep in your bed, or Ingrid's," Hank said turning to smile at them both. "Since you three are glued together in Jens's new bed."

"Yay, sleepover." Birgit clapped her hands together.

Hank hoped that they would be able to convince Eleanora to cooperate. He was becoming increasingly worried about her living all alone.

Scott made good time, despite the growing number of older trick-or-treaters criss-crossing the streets. There were some of the older teenagers who didn't even bother to dress up; they were just carrying black and orange garbage bags filled with candy. He also noticed that, as they drew nearer to Eleanora's house, there seemed to be a shift in the general attitude of the teenagers. Lots of foul language, a few

eggs here and there. He would be glad to get them all out of this neighborhood.

The children, once liberated from the car, ran up to their grandma's house and rang the bell. Eleanora was expecting them, but made a big production out of not recognizing them when she opened the door. Hank and Scott stood back and watched, grinning from ear to ear.

"These are the *best* costumes I've ever seen," she exclaimed as she put handfuls of candy into each of their bags. "What clever imaginations you have to be so original."

"Hello, Eleanora," Hank said as he and Scott approached the steps. "The children wanted to show you their costumes."

"And I'm so glad they did. What a treat for me." She stepped aside and the kids ran into the house.

"For you," Hank said, holding out the wrapped flowers. "I thought you might like a little bit of summer in this dreary weather."

Scott took the bowl of candy from her and she let the bouquet settle into the crook of her right arm. She reached out and gave each of them a kiss on the cheek. By the time they were all inside the house, she was wiping quickly at

her eyes.

"Please sit," she said. "I'll get us some tea and put these in some water."

"I'll come and help," Scott announced as he got up to follow her.

Hank took his camera and pointed it at the kids, snapping pictures and playing photographer. He instructed the kids to pose near family photos of their grandfather, their mother. They may have never known or met most of the people in these photographs, but with his photos and videos and with Eleanora's albums filled with details and stories, each of the children would find answers to whatever questions they may have later on in life.

Scott came out with a beautiful crystal vase filled with the assortment of flowers and set them on the dining room table. Hank looked at the flowers, a sad smile on his face. He tried to stop looking at them, but he couldn't. He scolded himself for such a bad choice. He should have thought harder, thought of something that would last and not wither away and die before the end of the week.

"What game should we play?" Birgit was standing near Hank's knees looking up at him.

Hank picked her up and set her on his lap. "What's your favorite game to play when you're at grandma's?"

"Hungry hippos," Birgit said with a big smile. "But Jens and Ingrid don't like it."

"Well then they can't play with us, can they?" Hank set her down on the carpet. "You go and get your hippos and we'll have lots of fun without them."

"'Kay," she said. She ran off down the hallway.

Hank looked back to the flowers and sighed. *Right now.* The words popped into his head from out of nowhere. That's all anyone ever really has. This moment, right now. *The flowers will wilt and die, the children will grow up and one day, hopefully fifty years from now, Hank and Scott will be separated.*

"Right now," he whispered to the empty room. He got down on the floor, readying himself for a spirited game with Birgit.

Scott and Eleanora came back into the room. Scott carried a tray of tea and cookies. Scott set it down on the coffee table just as Birgit bounced back into the room carrying a box.

"Hungry hippos," Scott exclaimed. "My very best favorite!"

"The more the merrier," Hank said and looked over at Eleanora. "Care to make it an even four?"

"No," Eleanora said with a muted giggle. "Sometimes watching is just as fun."

After the ceremonial scrubbing of faces and brushing of teeth, after three stories and two lullabies, Scott and Hank were sitting at the kitchen table. The bouquet of flowers was in a vase on the table. Hank sat and watched, mesmerized. Scott was playing with Hank's fingers, stopping every now and then to twist the large gold wedding band around and around.

"I think I'm going to do it," Hank announced suddenly. "And I want you to do it to me."

Scott laughed, his brow furrowed. "What would that be, exactly?"

"Buzz cut," Hank said, freeing one of his hands and running it through his thick auburn waves.

"Are you sure?"

"Sort of," Hank said shrugging. "It'll always

grow back."

"Okay," Scott said and let go of Hank's fingers. "I'll get the clippers and meet you in the bathroom." Scott got out of his chair and retrieved the broom and dust pan from the kitchen closet.

Hank got up from the table and walked to the bathroom, careful not to wake the children. He stripped off his clothes and took out the step stool that Scott used to clean the top of the eight-foot tall shower stall.

Scott entered the room, propped the broom against the wall, put the dust pan on the counter and plugged in the electric clippers. He handed the appliance to Hank.

"You make the first move, so I know you're serious."

Without hesitation, Hank flipped the button and drew the clippers down the centre of his head, looking down as some long strands of hair fell into his lap and bounced off his shoulders. He handed the clippers back to Scott.

"When's the last time you had a buzz cut?" Scott stood behind him and ran his fingers across the stubble, which made Hank shiver.

"Kindergarten, I think."

"Okay, but I put a number five guard on these just so it won't be too short."

Scott went to work and Hank watched the never-ending tufts of hair fall heavily all around him.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone with so much hair," Scott said as he turned off the clippers. He put on another guard, a number four, and ran it only along the sides and the back of Hank's head. "When it's short like this, you can definitely see the grey." Scott turned off the clippers one last time. "Okay," he announced.

Hank stood up and looked in the mirror. He'd had a blunt cut to his shoulders for as long as he could remember. He wasn't necessarily vain, but he knew he'd inherited good hair from his mother's side of the family. A unique mix of dark and light brown with just enough red to catch any light. Scott had said many, many times that he'd found the combination of auburn hair and dark green eyes hypnotic.

"I look like a toothbrush," Hank said as he ran his hands over his short hair.

Scott laughed and took the broom, cleaning

first Hank's back and ass and then the floor. "You do realize that even when your hair is that short, I can't see scalp. Your hair is standing straight up because there's no room for it to fall over." Scott put the broom aside, and stripped off his own clothes. "Come on, let me wash the rest of these hairs off you."

Scott reached inside the shower stall and turned on the faucets. He held out his hand and Hank took it.

"I can see more grey at the temples," Scott said, reaching up to touch Hank's head. "And the rest is just a deep, gorgeous auburn. Still floats my boat."

"And that's all I need to hear," Hank said as he pressed his lips to Scott's. Hank didn't really like it, but it would grow back.

They washed each other off, each of them yawning more than once and then dried each other before putting on their pyjamas.

"Did you want *your* surprise now?"

Hank had completely forgotten about that. He sat on the bed, cross-legged and nodded, absent-mindedly pushing away hair that had not fallen over his face.

Scott put the large white box in front of him and sat opposite.

Hank pulled open the box only to find another box. This interior box had a clear picture of the item inside. It was a Vitamix blender, complete with several containers of varying capacity, water bottles and recipe books.

"The last time we were making smoothies, I noticed our blender was having a hard time, so I did some research on what some of you freediving coaches recommend."

"Jens is gonna love it," Hank said reaching out to open the box and then stopping.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Hank said, closing the outer box and setting it on the ground beside the bed. "It's perfect. And you're perfect. Thank you."

"My pleasure Mr. Ballam."

"Come here," Hank said, pulling Scott to him as he lay down on his back. "Bunny wants to snuggle with the Tasmanian Devil for a little while."

Hank closed his eyes, grin on his face, as he listened to Scott's laughter.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"I've had some ideas for Christmas presents," Hank announced as he exited the bathroom, his hand still subconsciously moving over his shorn locks.

"Christmas?" Scott was pulling the sheets off their bed. "It's only the second week of November."

"Exactly," Hank said, rubbing his hands together. "If we start planning now, it will be amazing for the kids."

Scott threw the sheets toward the door. The laughter started as a low rumble and built to a snort. He sighed and moved to stand in front of his husband. "So this is just for the kids' benefit?"

Hank felt his cheeks flush. "Well, yeah."

Scott put his hands on Hank's chest, the laughter coming again as he moved his hands to tug at Hank's earlobes. "Okay," Scott said, grinning at Hank. "You know, for the kids. Especially the one named *Hank*."

Hank leaned forward and kissed his lips, softly. "I knew you'd get it." Hank walked toward the door, stopping to scoop up the

sheets. "Mall opens in an hour. You wanna come with me?"

Scott raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry, forgot how much you hate shopping," Hank said as he moved out of the bedroom. He turned when Scott called his name.

"Actually," Scott said, holding up his hand. He walked into the bathroom to gather dirty towels. He met Hank in the hallway. "I will come with. Birgit and Ingrid have mentioned particular things they want and Eleanora mentioned that she hasn't been able to get out to look for them yet." Scott followed him down the stairs. "And I've been working on a special present for Ingrid."

"The only present I can't figure out is Eleanora's," Hank said, stopping in the middle of his descent. Scott ran into him. "Should we get something for Kelly?"

"I don't see why not," Scott said as he pushed gently on Hank's back. "And we're moving forward now, please."

"Sorry," Hank said, resuming his usual pace of taking two steps at a time. "Would we get her in trouble?"

"Of course not," Scott said as they reached the laundry room in the basement. "It's like buying gifts for the teachers at school." Scott dropped the towels and took the sheets from Hank's arms. "If we keep it something simple, like, I don't know, a nice bottle of whiskey or champagne. Besides, she can always regift or refuse it."

"Shit," Hank said, bringing a thumbnail to his lips. "I forgot about the teachers." Hank scrunched up his face, like someone had just passed wind. "Although, I'd like to go on record with my moral objection to getting a gift for any of those teachers."

"Objection noted," Scott said, pouring some liquid detergent in the washing machine, pushing some buttons. The machine came to life. "And overruled. I don't think those kids want to be the only one who doesn't give a present to the teacher." Scott shrugged. "Who says it has to be anything spectacular." He patted Hank's belly as he passed, heading for the stairs. "Box of chocolates? A dusting cloth and portable vacuum for that science teacher?"

Hank laughed and followed Scott up the stairs. "That's funny. I'll let you write the card for him."

"Let it go," Scott said, wagging a finger.

"Wait," Hank said, stopping suddenly as he reached the top of the stairs. "What did you say about a special present for Ingrid?"

"I set one of her poems to music," Scott said, turning and looking at Hank for a second.

"You wrote her a song?" Hank's mouth was hanging open.

"It's what I do for a living, remember?" Scott shrugged.

"Will you do one for Birgit and Jens?"

"Sure," Scott answered right away.

"How the hell can I compete with that?" Hank felt very inferior all of a sudden.

"Stop that. She may hate it." Scott chuckled and headed down the hall to the Birgit's room. "What time did the contractor say he's coming to start the work on the rooms tomorrow?"

"Nine in the morning. Why?" Hank went down the hall to meet Scott in the smallest of the bedrooms.

"Just wondering. You know Kelly is coming over tomorrow evening right?"

Hank nodded. "Are you kidding? As soon as we

sign those papers, I'm going to get those kids and bring them here. For good."

"I know I'll sleep better once they're here."

"Second thing is to pull them out of that school and register them in the new one."

"We're officially foster parents." Scott put his arm around Hank's waist and squeezed.

"Soon to be *adopted* parents."

"I think you mean *adoptive*."

"Nope," Hank said, reaching up and pulling a lock of Scott's blond hair. "We've been adopted by them and they by us." Hank looked over and saw Scott's expression of surprise. "Not just another pretty face, you know. All this book learnin' I been doin' done teached me some real 'portant stuff."

"We know who's helping them with grammar homework."

"Indubitably."

Scott smiled and waved his arm around the room. "Well, let's get to it. We also have to look over some of those websites," Scott said. He looked around the room for a moment. "The sooner we find the perfect cabin, the sooner we can fix up anything that needs fixing. I want

it ready for the first long weekend in May."

Hank sat down on the edge of the desk and pulled Scott between his legs. "Love it when you get all take-charge and bossy."

"Really?"

"Absolutely," Hank muttered as he began to nibble Scott's ear.

"Okay, good." Scott pulled away and walked to the other end of the desk. "Pick up that end and lift. We have to move out all of this furniture before tomorrow at nine."

Hank's head fell forward and he sighed. "Incomplete pass," he mumbled and picked up his end of the desk.

"More like a fumble."

Hank backed out of the room. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, just keeping trying and you'll eventually score."

Hank awoke with a start. Scott's head was still on his chest. They'd fallen asleep while watching television. Ever since the children had become part of their lives, Hank and Scott didn't seem to be able to stay up as late or get

through a television program or movie without falling asleep. Hank grinned as he thought about that; he was having so much fun being a father.

He kissed the top of Scott's head and flexed his chest. Scott came awake slowly, lifting his head and rubbing his eyes.

"Sorry," Scott said, pushing himself off the sofa. "Good show?"

"Don't know," Hank said, getting up and taking hold of Scott's hand. "Can't even remember what we started watching."

"What?" Scott looked down at their intertwined hands.

"Time for bed," Hank announced, pulling Scott behind him.

"I was gonna make us some coffee," Scott protested.

"No, no coffee. After tonight, I'll have to wear those goddamned pyjamas again. Skin. I want skin."

Scott chuckled and followed Hank into the bedroom, each of them tossing their clothes aside, in or near the clothes hamper.

Hank was naked first. He sat down on the bed

and watched as Scott pulled off his jeans. Scott's ass was right in his face.

"No underwear," Hank said, grabbing Scott's hips and pulling him onto his lap. "You slut!" Hank wrapped his arms around the tight torso, closing his eyes and smoothing his hands up and down. "God, I love your body."

Scott's hands were on his. Hank could feel himself getting hard, could feel Scott's skin getting warmer.

"Love your skin. Love your smell. Love how I can make you so hot."

"Should we shower first?"

"Can't wait," Hank said. He scooped Scott up in his arms, turned around and put Scott down before straddling his hips. "Need you."

Scott pushed himself down and took Hank in his mouth, teasing the foreskin and stroking his balls with one hand. The other hand was petting the taut belly.

"Fuck, yeah," Hank panted over and over. "Hold still, baby."

Scott did as he was told and Hank began to clench his ass, pushing in and out of the hot mouth, slowly. Scott was making those sounds

that drove Hank insane. They were those moans that meant Scott couldn't get enough. Hank had always known he had an impressive cock, but the way Scott attended to it, Hank felt like he had the longest, fattest dick on the planet.

"Don't want to come yet, baby." Hank pulled out and then pushed himself off the bed, grabbing the lube from the nightstand. He moved to stand over Scott. He squatted down on the floor and put one hand under each knee. He pulled them apart and pushed them back toward Scott's head. Scott whimpered in anticipation. Hank knew he'd be leaking copious amounts of pre-cum once he started licking Scott's hole.

Hank pushed down the final few inches that would completely expose Scott's hole. He spit a few times and then pushed his tongue into Scott's entrance. He closed his eyes when he heard Scott gasp. He looked up, across the writhing body and wanted so badly to take hold of his own cock then. But he didn't.

Despite his fondness for the dirty talk during sex, Hank had found that this particular phase of just wanting to hear the panting and the moaning and the groaning was overwhelmingly erotic. Or when Scott would grasp his arms or caress his muscles, Hank couldn't remember being

more turned on. He'd long ago assumed that all couples went through these phases.

Hank released his hold on Scott's knees, stood up and reached for his hips, flipping him over onto all fours. He bent his knees and pushed them against the mattress, lining up to push inside of Scott. Once inside, he ran his hands over every inch of skin he could reach. He could feel himself getting close to orgasm and didn't want to let go. He slowed himself considerably, smoothing his hands over the alabaster skin of Scott's back and ass.

He pulled out slowly and lay down beside his panting husband. "Put your hands on the pillows, keep facing down," Hank said as he reached to position Scott's cock above his mouth. He lowered his arms and stayed that way while he licked and nipped and sucked. The moans of pleasure coming from Scott were becoming too much. He'd often wondered if he could come just from the sounds, but he didn't want to find out right now.

He pushed Scott out of his mouth, the smaller body suspended overhead until Hank was sure he wasn't going to come. Hank would then lower Scott again and start the routine all over. Scott was beginning to beg. He wanted Hank to

be in him when he came. And Hank had never been able to refuse Scott anything.

Hank lowered Scott to the mattress, smiling at him as they both panted with the exertion. "How do you want it, baby?"

"Fuck me," Scott puffed. "Just fuck me, Hank."

"You got it," Hank whispered, grabbing Scott's ankles and pushing them away. He slid inside again, slowly at first and then with increasing speed. He moved his hands to Scott's knees, hooking them across his forearms. He bent forward, knowing that Scott would need the friction against Hank's taut belly to make himself come. It was Hank's favorite way to finish: pushing in and out while Scott's hands pushed through his hair or wiped the sweat off his face.

Scott's hands found their usual spots and Hank let his torso press against Scott's writhing body. Scott opened his eyes, fixing them on Hank's face. He wiped his hands across Hank's forehead.

"Move, baby. Make yourself come against my belly."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than

Scott was squirming. Hank could feel the pressure building up inside of their two bodies. He moved against Scott, providing the needed friction.

"Oh, fuck," Scott sighed, clenching the sheets above his head.

Hank closed his eyes and buried his head in Scott's neck as he felt the muscles tighten around his cock. He thrust once more, burying himself completely in the tight hole and then let himself go. He pulled out and pushed back in as he rode out his own orgasm, kissing Scott's sweat-soaked neck with each thrust.

He removed his arms, pulling Scott's legs around his waist. He brought his hands up to hold Scott's head and raised his own so he could look at his husband. He pushed wet hair off Scott's forehead and kissed the swollen lips.

Scott smiled at him and wiped at his forehead again. "We need to shower."

"Not yet," Hank said, softly, his hands caressing hair and forehead and cheeks. "Not just yet." He kissed Scott tenderly.

"What about your knees?" Scott asked, running his hands slowly over the slick muscles of Hank's shoulders.

"This is worth the risk," Hank said, offering a satisfied grin.

The workmen had cleared out just as Hank arrived home. Scott was in the bedroom staring at the huge hole in the wall between Birgit's and Ingrid's rooms. The plan was to put up a perfectly round door painted with images of Alice, the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat and other scenes from the famous story.

"What's wrong?" Hank saw him standing there with his hands on his hips. That was Scott's how-am-I-going-to-fix-this stance.

"Huh?" Scott turned and smiled. He walked over and offered a welcome-home kiss. "Nothing. Why?"

"You looked pissed off." Hank stroked Scott's back through the denim shirt.

"No," Scott said with sigh. "The woman who was going to paint the murals won't be able to do it for another 'till the end of the month now."

"What? Did she say why?"

"Family emergency," Scott said with a shrug.

"Oh, okay."

"The kids will understand," Scott said, smiling suddenly. "Come and see Ingrid's room." Scott took his hand and led him next door. He moved to the corner and did a Vanna White move beside the tall, oddly-shaped rectangular-ish opening. "Once the mural is done, this corner will look like an opened door leading to a snow scene featuring--"

"Let me guess. Elsa."

"You are correct," Scott said, clapping his hands together. Scott stepped closer and hooked a finger in Hank's waistband. "I owe you an apology."

"Me? What for?"

"When you first had this idea, I thought you'd lost it. I thought I'd have to be the reasonable one to step in and explain that the kids would just have to learn to sleep by themselves." Scott looked down at his sneakers and then lifted his head and met Hank's gaze. "I'm glad I waited to see how it would play out. Those kids are so much happier when they're together."

"You're not wrong, baby," Hank said, putting his arms around Scott and pulling him closer. "Eventually they'll have to get used to sleeping

alone, but for now, it's not hurting anyone."

"I guess I should have done as much reading as you, huh?"

"Nonsense," Hank said, stroking Scott's back. "The kids love you. Granted not as much as they love me, but--" Hank tried to keep Scott's hand away from his chest hair, but was too slow. "Kidding," Hank said, wincing in anticipation. "I was just kidding."

Scott let go of the handful of hairs and gently patted the area. "I know."

Hank was saved from further torment when the doorbell rang.

"That's Kelly," Scott said, moving past Hank. "You want me to tell her you're changing?"

"Sure," Hank said, moving quickly into the master bedroom to change into his jeans and sweatshirt. "Be right there."

When he entered the family room, Kelly and Scott were already seated at the kitchen table.

"Okay," Kelly started when Hank took a seat. "No sense beating around the bush." She pulled out a pile of forms and put them in the centre of the table. "Once you sign all of these forms, you're officially foster parents."

"And I can pick up Jens and the girls tonight? For good."

"Yes," Kelly laughed. Hank wasn't doing a very good job of hiding his impatience at getting the kids out of the other foster homes.

"Since you will be adopting the children eventually, I need to remind you that the funding you'll be receiving on their behalf will end once the adoption is finalized." Kelly held up a hand when Hank opened his mouth. "And I know that won't be a problem for the two of you. But I am required to tell you that."

"Fair enough," Hank said, searching carefully and quickly for each little sticker that showed him and Scott where to sign. When he was done, he handed the pen to Scott, his knee bouncing. "Do I have to wait for him to finish or can I go and get them?"

Kelly laughed again. "Can I call the homes to let them know?"

"Sure," Hank said, reaching into his back pocket. "Here. Use my phone."

Kelly looked over at Scott, an amused and satisfied expression on her face.

"Sorry," Scott mouthed and went back to

signing the papers.

Hank walked over to the front door, put on his jacket and waited for Kelly to give him the all-clear.

"I'll get some treats ready for the kids," Scott said.

"You're coming with me," Hank ordered, pulling Scott's coat off the hook. "And then we're going out to stuff those little tummies with anything they want." Hank was tapping his foot. "I might even keep them home from school tomorrow. You know since they're never going back there."

Scott held up his hands in surrender. He walked back to the kitchen table and made a neat pile of all the papers while Kelly finished her last call.

"Okay, Speedy Gonzales," Kelly said with a chuckle. "Go get 'em." She put the papers in her briefcase and walked with Scott to the front door. When she reached Hank, she held out his phone, but he wrapped his arms around her first. Scott wanted to laugh at how he was practically bent over to hug the petit woman. "I pulled a lot of strings to make this happen. *Don't* disappoint me."

"No ma'am," Hank said taking his phone and handing it to Scott.

"Thank you so much, Kelly. For everything." Hank said, looking down as Scott stuffed a phone into his front pocket.

"I'll still be around," she said with a playful stare. "And watching."

"Goodnight Kelly," Scott said. "And thank you."

She waved goodbye and disappeared through the door.

Hank turned to Scott and picked him up.

"Can't breathe," Scott wheezed and Hank put him down immediately. "Sorry."

"Come on there, bruiser," Scott said, patting him on the deltoid. "Let's go get our kids."

"*Our*," Hank said, reaching into his pocket. "Why did you put your..." Hank stuffed the phone into his back pocket. "That's my phone. Right. Forgot I gave it to Kelly. You don't think she was made I was rushing her, do you?"

Hank and Scott ended up at the driver's side of Scott's SUV at the same time. "I think I'll drive." Scott said, taking hold of Hank's shoulders and turning him around.

"Right. Sorry. I'm a little distracted anyway."

"Not at all," Scott said as Hank made his way around to the other side of the SUV. "Certainly can't tell."

EPILOGUE

In the early morning hours, just before the sunrise, Hank was lying in bed looking into Scott's beautiful brown eyes. There were so many things he wanted to say, wanted to express, but would never find the words to make it happen. *The man who fell in love with me, saved me from myself, married me, promised to love me no matter what happened. He's given of himself every day, has worked right along side me to make all my dreams come true. And now we've created a family together.*

"Almost one year," Hank whispered. He reached out to trace Scott's tattoo: a stylized capital letter "H", with the children's names as the crossbar and his and Hank's names as the stems on either side. Hank had explained his idea just after the adoption had been made official. He'd only meant to tell Scott that he was getting the tattoo, but, as usual, Scott had surprised him by wanting something similar to mark the milestone event.

"I know," Scott said, smiling as Hank pinched his nose. "Has it been everything you wanted?"

"And then some," Hank sighed. "And you deserve all the credit. You've made four people incredibly happy." Hank put a finger to Scott's

lips. "And I'm not talking about the money."

"Thank you," Scott said, pushing his head forward on the pillow for a kiss. "But I could say the same thing about you." Scott took a deep breath. "You're an incredible father, husband, friend, business man." Scott smoothed his hand over the buzz cut. "Everyone's so proud of you, Hank. I'm sure your father is proud of you too."

"Love you so much," Hank said before taking a kiss of his own.

"Love you more."

"Impossible," Hank said and rolled onto his back. The cool part of the sheet that touched his back was refreshing. Scott snuggled up to his shoulder, the man's nose still cold even in this heat.

This was set to be one of the hottest summers in Duncan's history. The temperature the day before, when they'd arrived at their new cottage, had been thirty five Celsius. Even the evenings didn't seem to cool down much. And they weren't expecting the air conditioner to be fixed for another three days.

It's why they'd been spending so much time in the ocean. Their very own little strip of ocean

near French Beach, where it had all begun. And where it would continue until they were meant to be separated.

Hank didn't spend much time worrying about that, however. He had this moment, right now. And there had been plenty of exciting and challenging right nows ever since the adoption had been finalized.

Jens and Ingrid were in their new school before Christmas and loved it. There were new friends, more smiles, better grades and Jens was even now part of the gifted program. Hank had no doubt that Ingrid and Birgit would soon follow. They were just getting warmed up.

Ingrid and Birgit still used their portal to find comfort with each other now and again, but Jens had not. He was even fond of telling his sisters that nothing bad would ever happen to them in their new home, with their new parents. And it seemed to be working, until Eleanora's death.

It had been a difficult time for everyone. Although she'd warned him, Hank had come to see Eleanora as invincible. It seemed that nothing would stop her. She visited two or three times a week, even stayed overnight sometimes to appease the children, and even hosted a few

sleepovers at her own house so Hank and Scott could have a date night now and again. They'd made sure, working with executor--Eleanora's only remaining sibling--that she was laid to rest next to her husband, and had even insisted on replacing the cracked headstone for her husband, choosing one large one that covered both graves, an engraving with their names and dates and an image of two hands holding each other. In the end, Hank had been glad he'd gone out of his way to ensure he captured as many memories as he was able. Ingrid and Birgit were still too young and resilient to have stayed down for long, but Jens was a different story.

Hank had held him while he cried, wanting to know why the one person who'd loved them was taken away. Hank didn't have an answer, other than to tell the troubled boy that there would be plenty people who would love him. *I would imagine everyone that meets you,* Hank had said, trying to get a smile from him.

They'd even spent most of a Saturday going through Eleanora's photo albums, which turned out to be more like scrapbooks filled with pictures and anecdotes and letters. Jens got to see his mother grow up in pictures. He might never know her in person, but he could see her

as the curious and intelligent student who was unfortunate enough to lose her way somewhere in high school.

And then there were Hank's pictures. Jens was in charge of them. He downloaded them dutifully and spent hours cataloguing and commenting on them. Where they were when the pictures were taken, what they were doing, who said what. It would all be there. Jens seemed intent on making sure that no one would ever forget him again; it seemed important that he leave some sort of mark in this world. And Hank understood why.

Jens's preoccupation with leaving a trail lessened, but only a little, a few weeks after they'd all stood in front of a judge and heard her declare that Hank and Scott were now the legal guardians of all three children. Jens had tears in his eyes, as if he wouldn't allow himself to believe Hank's promises until a judge verified them. It had been an emotional day for Hank, as well. He'd spent most of the day trying not to cry and then finally doing so only when he was alone with Scott at the end of the day.

Hank sat up in the bed and massaged the back of his neck. It was wet. He'd been spoiled for

too long. He hadn't grown up with air conditioning, but he'd certainly grown accustomed to it over the years. He looked over at Scott, the sheet exposing that sexy cleft above his ass cheeks. As he reached out to touch it, Scott rolled over onto his back.

"Reminds me of growing up," Scott said, as he sat up and kissed Hank's shoulder.

"At least you're not covered in sweat," Hank said as he caressed Scott's chest and belly. "Do any of you hairless men sweat in the heat?"

"Depends on what's making the heat," Scott said, wagging his eyebrows.

"Great," Hank huffed. "Thoughts like that will bring my body temperature down."

"Let's go for a dip, then."

"Sounds good to me," Hank said, standing up and walking over to pull on a pair of swim trunks. "Remember the days when we could skinny dip and make love in the water?"

Scott pulled on his own trunks and walked past Hank, slapping his naked ass. "You get plenty of action for an old married father of three."

"I'm not old!"

"Shh, you'll wake the kids."

"I hope there are sharks out there," Hank said, pouting.

"I'm only good as a toothpick, though, remember? You're more what they're looking for." Scott left the bedroom and checked on the children before heading out to the deck that led right to the beach.

Hank smiled as he remembered that first morning at French Beach. Scott had been afraid to go and wash up in the ocean. Of course, Hank had teased him about having seen fins out in the water, which had scared Scott off the idea of hygiene. Hank had tried to assuage any fears by explaining that the sharks wouldn't get anything more out of Scott than a good toothpick. His efforts to assuage were met with failure.

Hank peeked into the room shared by all three children. Jens was lying on his back, maximum skin exposure to the air, while Ingrid and Birgit were huddled together in Ingrid's bed, both of them curled against each other. It was moments like this when Hank wondered why no one had invented a camera that could take a good picture in this kind of low light without the use of a flash. *Maybe Jens will invent one*, he thought and chuckled at the idea before heading out to meet Scott on the beach.

"So, any fin sightings?"

"No," Scott said, wading up to his knees. "A couple swam up asked me if I was all that was available. I said yes, and then they just shrugged and took off."

"Rude," Hank said, coming up behind Scott and hugging him. "So very rude," he said as he walked forward, pushing Scott further into the ocean. "I miss the good ol' days when sharks had manners."

"You're silly when you're sleep-deprived."

"Which has been always lately," Hank said, turning Scott to face him. He pushed one of his legs between Scott's, working them farther apart. Hank squatted and pulled Scott onto his lap, bobbing up and down in the water.

Scott rested his elbows on Hank's wide shoulders. He dipped his hands in the salt water and then brushed them over Hank's very short hair.

"You miss it?"

"No," Scott said, wiping away the water that dribbled in Hank's eyes. "It's been so long since you've had those long waves. I think I prefer this, though."

"Why's that?"

"You seem to like it more. And I can see even more grey, which is sexy as hell."

"You think so?"

"Only reason I gave up my secret lover," Scott said, trying to push Hank's head under the calm, flat surface.

"Think that's funny, huh?" It didn't take Hank long to get the upper hand. He turned Scott around, picked him up and threw him over his shoulder. He carried him, fireman-style, back to the beach. He kneeled down and scooped up some sand.

"Don't you dare," Scott said.

"Never should have told me how much you hate sand in your bathing suit, then, huh?"

"I'll behave," Scott said, trying not to yell. "Please?"

Hank dropped the sand and headed back out to where they'd been. He would never have done it, but he wasn't about to give up all his secrets. They resumed their former positions and Scott went back to wetting his hair.

"What time are Brian and Kari getting here?" Hank asked as he basked in the attention.

"Should be here before noon, they said."

"Birgit know?"

"No," Scott said, hugging Hank a little closer. "Thought it would be a nice surprise."

"It's adorable the way she thinks Ellie is her very own baby."

"And how about Jens with Matthew? Brian spends most of his time with his mouth hanging open, wondering how Jens gets Matthew to behave like that." Scott kissed Hank. "Jens might even be better at than you."

"Do we need to go back for some sand?"

Scott answered him by kissing him, his tongue coming out to part Hank's lips. Hank closed his eyes as Scott used his hands to explore and caress whatever he could reach. After a few minutes, Scott pulled away.

"I accept your apology," Hank said. "Speaking of Jens."

"I was thinking of finding some sort of museum or science place, or whatever they're called, that might host birthday parties for budding scientists."

"How did you know that I wanted to talk about that?"

Scott just raised an eyebrow.

"Right. Stupid question. Sorry. I'm always talking about the kids." Hank began to wade toward shore as the sun rose higher and higher in the sky. "I haven't been looking for museums, but I do know there's bowling, the pool, and heck," Hank said as he reached the beach and let go of Scott. "We can always go somewhere and then go back to the house for the party. Make sure the swimming pool is ready to go. Probably still be this hot at the end of July, that's for sure."

"You know I hate it when you say things like that," Scott said, pulling on Hank's chest hair.

"What?"

Scott raised an eyebrow.

"Okay. Sorry."

"You do *not* always talk about the kids. For example, this morning. Last night."

Hank smiled. "Last night was fun, wasn't it?"

"I'm just surprised we didn't wake the kids."

"Well, that'll have to last us for a while," Hank sighed. "With Brian and Kari coming out for three days and then Rose and Frank after them, we're gonna have to find some cave over

there just to make out."

"Poor baby," Scott said as he patted Hank's cheek. "So did your mom give Frank an answer yet?" Scott perched himself on the dock and dangled his feet in the cool water.

"No," Hank said, sitting on the beach, perpendicular to his husband. "She's not sure she wants to be married again."

"Well, I highly recommend it." Scott flicked some water at Hank who just smiled at him.

Hank was still in his bathing suit, standing over Jens who was trying to break his record. He watched the stopwatch close in on three minutes as Jens head popped out of the water.

"Did I do it?"

"No," Hank said with enthusiasm, trying not to sound too coddling. "But that was two minutes and 55 seconds." He pushed a hand over Jens's brush cut to squeeze out the salt water.

"Almost there, buddy. Another couple of weeks and we'll start working on four minutes for sure."

"One more time?"

"No," Hank said, nodding his head in the

direction of the cabin. "Scott's got lunch all ready for us. Time for a break. And a smoothie full of spinach and kale and all that other good stuff." Hank followed his son out of the water. He put the stopwatch on the table and looked around.

"Where's my towel?"

"Sorry," Brian said, holding up the stained towel. "Ellie wasn't feeling well."

Hank laughed and waved it off. "No problem. I'll get another." Before he reached the patio doors, he turned to look back at his growing family. "Anyone need anything?"

"Coming through," Scott said as he slid past with a platter of meats and cheeses. "Who's manning the barbecue? You or Brian?" Scott waited for an answer, but Brian was the first to chime in.

"If we want to be able to eat it, I'll do it," Brian said, throwing the stained towel at Hank.

"I'm not that bad," Hank muttered to himself as he threw the towel on the washing machine. "Burn a couple of hamburgers and I'm banned for life."

He was headed to the shower when he heard the

chime of his cell phone. He walked back to the kitchen counter and took the call.

"Hello?"

"Bad time?"

"Hey, Kelly," Hank said, his mood brightening. "Not at all. You changed your mind and want to come for a visit?"

"I wish," Kelly sighed into the phone. "No. No rest for the wicked, I'm afraid." She took a breath. "Is Scott there with you?"

"Just out on the deck. We're getting ready to eat lunch."

"Okay, good." Hank heard the rustling of some papers. "I need an answer to a question. It's very important. Are you with your family yet?"

"Oh. Sorry. No. Give me a second." Hank walked over to the patio and called for everyone's attention. "Okay, what's the question?"

"Do you and Scott have room for a sixth name on those tattoos?"

"No," Hank yelled. "Finally!" Hank walked out onto the deck and looked at Scott. "Are you serious? He's up for adoption?"

"One two-year old by the name of Adriaan Gustaffson. I'm sure."

Hank was practically shaking. "Kelly's on the phone. She wants to know if we have room for a little boy named Adriaan Gustaffson."

Hank watched as everyone looked at each other, mouths agape, expressions uncertain and hesitant.

"Well?" Hank said.

The roars and the cheers started at full volume, no slow build whatsoever. Scott came to stand beside Hank as he grinned and plugged one ear.

"Kelly?" He kissed Scott and looked over at the children. "It's so hard to tell from that reaction, but I think the answer is yes."

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