

Four Months

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Every gift which is given,
Even though it be small,
Is in reality great,
If it is given with affection
(Pindar)

To: Stacia
She knows why

PART I

Eric Mason drove into the parking lot of his new home. He noticed the diminutive lady standing by the entrance and waved to her. *Look for a tall man with brown hair and a red Ford Explorer, two door*, he told her when she'd ask him how she would know to recognize him. She'd not had any difficulty because he'd recognized her picture from the internet. She was one of those ridiculously cheerful people, no matter what time of day and no matter what life threw at her.

He got out of his SUV, pulled his backpack, the one with the most important papers, out of the back seat and headed over. She had a hand extended, so he shook it and then waited for her to go into her spiel about this and that. She was in sales after all; speaking was how she made a living.

"The apartment is a two-bedroom, one thousand square feet and you do have a weight room and a pool. Of course, you won't be able to use the pool until the summer," she said. She led him to the third floor. "There is no smoking in the units, so you'll need to step outside to do that. And, of course, there are no pets."

Apartment 312. The doors to each apartment were off the exterior walkway, like a motel. It seemed odd to Eric to have this set-up way up here in the north where the winters were going to be brutal.

Eric smiled and hoped it seemed sincere. She unlocked the door and stepped through, heading immediately to the small peninsula that separated the living room from the kitchen.

"Most of your neighbors will be workers on the oil rigs. They'll all be roughly your age and they *do* like to party, but there are very strict rules about that sort of thing. If you find the partying going past eleven you call the emergency number on your lease and we'll make sure it's taken care of right away."

Eric nodded and wondered what he'd gotten himself into. *Just what I need*, he thought, *to be up here with a bunch of horny straight guys swilling beer and chasing pussy*. But the apartment itself was quite spacious and really well maintained, so, if push came to shove, he'd spend all of his time in here. He doubted there was a gay bar, and with only nineteen other employees at the school, he didn't really see any lasting friendships developing.

Besides, he'd made a promise to himself: take the ridiculously high-paying job for a year or two, restore his bank account to what it had been before he'd ever met Jonathan, and then find his way back to civilization.

"Now, I have your copy of the lease and your keys." She was looking at him as if she feared he'd gone into some sort of catatonic state. "If there's anything else that you need, just let me know."

"I will. And thank you very much." He looked around the two-bedroom unit. "It's lovely. Just perfect."

She flushed slightly. *Perhaps she'd had some hand in designing it or building it?* She shook his hand one last time and was gone.

He closed and locked the door behind her, and then turned to study the decor. It wasn't hideous, but obviously whoever had decorated this apartment was a little too fond of beige. Everything

was beige, or beige-adjacent. Despite being gay, Eric was never the type to spend too much time matching colors or discussing the importance of *undertones* or *warm colors vs cold colors*, but even he knew that you could throw in a few blacks and dark blues in with beige without anyone running away in horror.

There wouldn't be too much of his own furniture or belongings coming up. His suitcases and bags were in the SUV and he had shipped his two prized possessions a week ago. With any luck, he'd have them within a day or two. He'd pass that time by making sure to update his licence, registration and insurance for this new territory.

"Territory", he said out loud. *I'm not even in a province anymore. I'm in a territory.* He wished at that moment that he'd paid closer attention in school all those years ago so he'd know if there were any significant changes to living in a territory.

He pocketed the keys and opened the door. He left the door to the apartment open. It would take two or three trips to get his stuff from the SUV, but then he could have a nice long hot shower and a nap.

"Howdy," the tall man said as they locked eyes. Eric hadn't noticed him in the doorway to apartment 311, right next door. He was smoking a cigarette. His skin was fair, his hair jet black and his eyes an emerald green.

"Morning," Eric said and walked past him. He turned around, glanced back. The man was still looking after him, eyes scanning up and down. *Great*, Eric thought. He'd had plenty of women, and

men, comment on how "pretty" he was. He was taller than average, had blond hair, blue eyes and had done a lot of years of gymnastics, so his body was fat-free and toned. But all anyone ever seemed to notice about him were his high cheekbones, long lashes and pouty lips. *Like a girl's*, he'd heard more times than he could remember.

He foisted two of the bags over one shoulder, a third over the other shoulder and had the last two, smaller bags in one hand. He shut the rear door and headed back to the stairs.

"Help you with any of that?" The man from the doorway was waiting at the top of the stairs. He didn't wait for an answer, just took the two smaller bags and the one shoulder bag and stood aside.

"Thank you," Eric said.

"Name's Kevin."

"Eric," he said pushing through the doorway to his new apartment.

"You working on the rigs?"

"No," Eric said, not really feeling like a conversation. He just wanted a shower and a nap.

Kevin followed him into the living room and dropped the bags on the floor. "Here good enough?"

"Yes, thank you, Kevin."

"Don't mention it," the tall stranger said.

Eric took a moment to study him, up and down. Well over six

feet, really wide shoulders, slim hips, firm ass, long legs and a chest that no shirt would ever be able to hide. The T-shirt strained against the big biceps and the jeans against the nice package.

"Well, welcome," Kevin said as he headed back to the door. "Hope you'll enjoy whatever it is you'll be doing here."

"Teaching," Eric said. "I'm here to teach. At the school."

"Makes sense," Kevin said. "Nice to meet you, Eric."

"Thanks again, Kevin."

Kevin held up a hand and disappeared through the door.

Eric scolded himself for wanting to see Kevin naked. *What the fuck is wrong with you, Eric? This is how you ended up with Jonathan. This is how you ended up here, you stupid fuck.*

He walked over to the door and closed it, still smelling Kevin's musk and cigarette smoke. As he headed to the bathroom for his shower, he told himself that he deserved a quick jerk off in the shower, for having survived this much. And if he thought of Kevin while he did it, well he couldn't control what images popped into his head, now could he?

With the water on the hottest setting possible, Eric closed his eyes, letting the imagines flash before him at random. The RCMP officer in Hay River who'd been kind enough to give him directions when Eric's GPS unit had decided to send him into a river. The officer had had a beautiful smile, perfectly straight white teeth, a deep growly voice that had sent electric shocks through Eric's balls, big blue eyes and had been built like the proverbial brick shit

house. And the tattoos on his forearms. They'd caught him off-guard since Eric wasn't sure that constables were allowed to show their tattoos. But either way, he'd noticed "Erica" right there on his left forearm. It didn't take much to drop the final vowel off the tattoo and imagine the officer's tall, muscled frame pounding into him over and over as Eric begged for more.

And then there was Kevin. All of a sudden, Eric wished that the wall they shared was the one he was currently leaning against. He fantasized about calling out Kevin's name as he came, which would lead to the man making advances that Eric would certainly accept, which would then lead to the two of them rutting and fucking the nights away. And Kevin's body was more than enough fodder for Eric's midday sexual release: his was one of those bodies that looked good naked or clothed. As Eric gripped himself and concentrated on long strokes, finishing with some extra attention to the head of his cock, he imagined Kevin in a crisp white shirt and dress pants that showed off that powerful ass while the crisp white shirt would show off those rounded cantaloupe-like deltoids.

Eric was breathing heavy as he imagined undressing Kevin, taking off the shirt, revealing the rest of the tattoos he'd seen just underneath the man's collar bones. His strokes grew quicker, more focused, as he thought of Kevin's briefs being unable to contain the huge erection that men like that always had.

"Fuck me," he muttered as he felt his balls pull up. "Fuck me, Kevin. Harder."

Eric bent his legs and shoved a finger in his own ass and then cried out. "Fuck," he screamed as he pumped himself dry.

He leaned against the side wall of the shower and then reached for the soap. After washing himself from head to toe, he turned off the water and dried himself thoroughly. He put on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt from one his bags and unloaded each of the bags, piling the items carefully so he could put them away in the dressers and on the closet shelves.

While he was doing that, he came across a discarded pack of cigarettes that he'd forgotten he'd had. During the two-day drive up here, he purchased two packs and smoked one within the first twenty-hour leg of his journey. They'd made him feel so nauseous that he must have blocked out the fact that he still had another pack.

He lit one up and then remembered the rule about no smoking. So, he headed outside.

"Didn't figure you for a smoker."

Eric turned and saw Kevin standing in his doorway again. *Had he gone in and come back out or was he lighting one off the other?*

"Got bored on the drive up here." Eric took a drag and felt the nausea return. "Thought it might help keep me awake."

"Did it work?"

"Not really," Eric said laughing. "Still got a second pack," he said holding up the cigarette in his hand. "Minus one, that is. You want 'em?"

"Never say 'no' to free smokes."

Eric held up his free hand and retreated into the apartment. He

retrieved the pack and the lighter and headed back outside. He approached Kevin and held out the smokes and the lighter. Kevin took them, slowly, his fingers sliding purposefully across Eric's palm. *This man is so fucking hot*, Eric thought as he tried to stifle a shiver.

"Thank you kindly," Kevin said and tossed the pack and the lighter on a table just inside the door.

"Don't mention it," Eric said as he decided he was done with the cigarette in his hand as well. He looked around, not wanting to throw it from the second floor.

"Roommate and me, we just use this," Kevin said. He pointed down to an old coffee can filled with sand. "Help yourself."

"Thanks," Eric said and pushed the cigarette into an empty section of sand.

"So where you from?"

"Lethbridge," Eric said, leaning over the railing and breathing the cool air. "You?"

"Edmonton." Kevin walked beyond the threshold of the door and stood a couple feet from him. "How long you planning on staying?"

"Year or two, I guess." Eric wondered where all these questions were coming from. But he didn't really want to go inside just yet. The guy smelled like smoke, but there was a heady musk underneath it all. "You been up here long?"

"Going on five years now."

"Five?"

Kevin nodded. "Time goes pretty quickly up here, especially when you're working two weeks on and one week off."

"So you're off for the week now?"

"Yup," Kevin said, turning around and bending over. He crushed his cigarette into the sand.

Eric took the opportunity to glance at that ass. His mind imagined it naked, pumping in and out of some slut, sweat dripping down into the crack.

"Got five days left."

"What do you do with yourself up here, then?" Eric looked around the area. There didn't seem to be a lot to do.

"Sleep mostly, I guess," Kevin said with a shrug.

"That's what I was afraid of," Eric said. "But the money's good, so I guess I can handle it for a year or two."

"Plenty of other distractions," Kevin said. "I like the one you already discovered." He nodded to Eric's apartment. "Do that a few times a day myself, even when I'm on the rig. Find it keeps me relaxed. And sane."

Eric felt himself blushing to the tips of his ears.

"Of course, it's not as much fun as doing it with someone else, but up here, you take what you can get, I guess." Kevin leaned his ass against the railing.

"Well," Eric said, turning back toward his door. "I've always had

trouble finding my *type*..."

"What *type* would that be?"

"Tall, dark, handsome, great body and a nice dick." Eric was trying to make the guy angry and show his true colors. *Show me what a fucking creep you are so I can hate you and stop thinking about you pumping into my ass.*

Kevin pushed off the railing. "You could start with me," he said as he stepped up to lean close to Eric.

Eric couldn't speak. He just stared at the green eyes and the two-day scruff and the high cheekbones. Suddenly, there was a hand on his chest, exerting some slight pressure, pushing him back into the apartment.

"Am I reading this wrong or you and I looking for the same thing?"

Eric looked down at Kevin's hands, one on his chest and the other moving below the waistband of his sweats.

"I'm looking to get fucked. You?" Eric's gaze was defiant, challenging even.

"Looking for someone to fuck, but I'll suck you first if you're worried I'm gonna beat you up."

"S okay," Eric finally muttered. He watched as Kevin closed the door and moved back to stand millimeters from him. "You kiss?"

"Every inch of you, if you want," Kevin said. "Imagine you probably don't want the taste of cigarettes right now, though, huh?"

"Don't care," Eric gasped. He put his hands on either side of Kevin's face and pulled him closer, devouring his lips and inhaling deeply.

Definitely some sort of natural musk on the man.

Kevin responded in kind, pushing his tongue into Eric's ravenous mouth. There were hands and fingers and furtive touches and exploring. When Kevin pulled away, Eric looked into his eyes. The man smiled and then pulled Eric's T-shirt over his head.

"Fine body you got there, Eric," Kevin said, punching his pecs and then smoothing a hand over his belly. Kevin pulled off his own shirt.

Eric heard a whimper from his own throat. "Jesus," he hissed. The man looked like some sort of superhero, with a little smattering of fur over the pecs. "You're gorgeous," Eric said, ducking his head and suck Kevin's nipples and squeeze the enormous deltoid muscles.

While he was busy exploring the body that turned out to make his shower fantasy pale in comparison, Kevin had the sweatpants around Eric's thighs and was stroking him slowly, concentrating on the head.

"Jesus," Eric grunted as he rested his forehead on Kevin's shoulder. "Sexiest fucking man I've ever seen."

"Well, thank you," Kevin said as he dropped to his knees and took Eric in his mouth. "You let me know if I'm taking liberties here, okay?"

"Do anything you want to me," Eric groaned. Kevin's hands slid down to his ass, kneading and caressing. Kevin growled and the sensation on Eric's dick was almost more than he could bear. He put a hand on the wall and tried to focus on his breathing. He'd just jerked off to images of this man, so hopefully, he wouldn't embarrass himself by coming to soon.

"Please," Eric panted. "My turn."

Kevin stood up, kissed him soundly, and then put his arms out to the side. "It's been dying to meet you since you first showed up today." Kevin claimed his lips again. "Although it's mainly interested in getting to this ass," he whispered against Eric's lips as both hands slapped and then caressed his ass.

"What do you want first?" Eric undid the buttons of Kevin's Levi's and stood back, awaiting further instructions.

"It's already very happy to see you, so why don't you turn around and I'll get you ready."

"Condoms," Eric panted as he stepped out of his sweats.

"Right here," Kevin said. Eric turned around and saw Kevin tearing open the package. "Always carry at least two."

"Wait," Eric said, turning around again. He fell to his knees. "Sorry, just wanted a taste." Eric pulled the jeans down by the extra fabric at the knees. The black bushy pubic hairs peeked out over the buttons of the jeans. He kept pulling the jeans and saw the base of a very thick cock, then a prominent vein, then more thickness. "Jesus, so big," Eric sighed as he finally came to the

glistening tip. "And it's not even all hard yet."

"Your choice," Kevin said, moving his hips from side to side.

Eric took the entire length into his mouth and created suction right away. Kevin's hands were in his damp hair, his hips pushing forward, gently.

"Fuck, yeah, man," Kevin moaned. "Can't wait to feel what that tight hole is like."

Eric took himself in hand and pumped, not having to imagine this time what Keith looked like or felt like in his mouth or his ass. As Keith grew larger in his mouth, Eric knew they were both leaking pre-come; he could taste Kevin's and he could feel his own.

He pulled off Kevin's huge cock and breathed rapidly for a moment. He was about to go back for seconds when Kevin stepped out of his jeans and put his hands under Eric's armpits.

"You want to do it here or on the bed?" Kevin had one hand at the back of his neck and the other tracing the crack of his ass.

"Bed," Eric muttered.

With that decided, Kevin lifted him by the backs of his thighs. Eric wrapped his legs around Kevin's waist and reached behind him to keep Kevin as hard as possible.

"I wanna put the condom on," Eric said as Kevin's legs hit the edge of the bed.

"You have lube?"

"No. Don't care. Use spit." Eric took the condom from him and

rolled it on, kissing the head and shaft as he went. "You have low hangers," Eric said. "So fucking perfect."

"Guys tell me it feels great when I'm fucking 'em fast and furious and my balls are slapping their asses."

Eric shivered and pushed some of his clothes off the bed.

"We need to get you some lube," Kevin said. He lowered himself to one knee and kissed Eric's just-washed hole. He placed his hands on Eric's torso and moved them slowly until his arms were butted up against the upturned legs. Kevin used the leverage to pull Eric closer to the edge of the mattress. "I'm off for seven days at a time." Kevin licked and poked. "I figure at least two times a night." Kevin plunged his forefinger inside Eric and licked around it. "And you're gonna be out here for a year?" Kevin kissed one ass cheek and then another. He crooked his finger and rubbed Eric's prostate.

"Ah ha, fuck, baby," Eric screamed as he arched off the mattress and closed his eyes. "Yeah, right there. Fuck, Kevin. Please fuck me."

"If my math is still good, I'd say we're gonna need a fucking carton of condoms and a carton of lube." He tapped Eric's gland again and again.

"Yes," Eric panted. "Anything. For you. Cartons. Fuck me anytime you want, Kevin."

"Can't think of any other place I'd rather be than right here," Kevin said. "Except maybe..."

Eric opened his eyes. Kevin had his arms braced on either side

of his chest. His hairy legs were bent, the thick muscles straining, as he teased Eric's hole with that fat cock.

"Except maybe here," Kevin said as he pressed inside. "Not looking to hurt you, so if we have to wait until we have lube--"

"Fine. I'm fine." Eric pushed his hands out in front of him and latched onto Kevin's massive forearms. "So fucking fine."

"You are really something, Eric." Kevin stroked his chest and belly. "Remind me of those ripped gymnasts on television during the Olympics."

"Was. Was a gymnast."

"Fuck, yeah," Kevin said and grabbed Eric's ankles. He pushed them out to the sides, practically laying them flat against the mattress. "Holy... Wrap 'em around my waist, baby." Eric did so and looked at the pure lust in Kevin's eyes. "You and I are gonna need a lot more than a year to do everything we should."

"Just fuck me. Fuck me, Kevin."

Kevin growled and began to pump faster. In and out. He leaned over and kissed Eric, neither of them staying with the kiss longer than a few seconds. They were breathing so heavy, both of their bodies slick with sweat after what seemed like an eternity of Kevin slamming in and out of Eric's ass.

Eric was completely lost in the sensations. He could smell the musk of their sex, see Kevin's flushed face and chest, taste the man in his mouth, hear the sucking and sloshing and slapping sounds. But none of those senses was as overwhelmed as his sense of touch.

He reached out, his fingers and hands trailing over rigid muscle. No matter where he touched, Kevin's body was as hard as granite: belly, chest, forearms, neck, biceps, triceps. Even the man's lips were more powerful than anything Eric had ever experienced.

Kevin grabbed Eric's erection and pumped it a few times. Eric watched the long, thick fingers. Such elegant and practiced movements. Within seconds, Eric dug his fingers into Kevin's forearms and called out the man's name, over and over again. He came so hard that he was seeing stars.

"Pretty fucking nice for someone who just jacked off in the shower," Kevin said before putting his cum-stained fingers up to Eric's mouth one by one. Eric lapped at them eagerly. "Save some for me," Kevin said. He licked his lips and then tongue-fucked Eric's mouth.

Eric put his hands back on Kevin's shoulders. "So good, Kevin. Don't stop."

"Soon, baby," Kevin warned. "So fucking tight you're gonna make me come soon."

Eric breathed deeply and relaxed his muscles, trying to prolong Kevin's--and his--pleasure.

"Nice, but I'm too far gone." Kevin grasped Eric's shoulders and punched into him three more times before calling out his name. Kevin's body shuddered, over and over again, as he rode out his own powerful orgasm.

Eric squeezed Kevin's cock.

"Oh, fuck," Kevin snorted. "I'm too sensitive after coming for that," he said, pushing Eric farther onto the mattress. "After a couple more nights, though, I should be fine."

The mattress sagged a little as Kevin climbed on, planting his knees on either side of Eric's ass.

"You were serious?" Eric said, kissing Kevin's ear when he lowered his head. "I mean, I know there are probably others, but I meant what I said about being here whenever you wanted."

"So was I," Kevin lifted his head and smiled. "And you just happened to be fortunate enough to move next door to the only other fag in this hellhole."

"Not so much a hellhole now, though, I'm thinking."

"No, Eric," Kevin said, kissing him sweetly. "I guess it's not. Something tells me it's gonna be hell of a year for me."

"Maybe even more than a year," Eric said, wrapping his arms around Kevin's broad back.

"Yeah?" Kevin asked, surprised.

"Who could say *no* to a few years of you?" Eric was petting his chest.

"Well, then, I guess there's only one question I got for you now."

Eric raised his eyebrows.

"Can I buy you dinner?"

There was even more kissing in the shower. He had to bend over since Eric was a good six inches shorter than he was, but it was all good. The last fling Kevin had had up here in this town was almost two years ago and that was with some guy who had perpetual bad breath and a really bad toupee.

No, he thought as he fingered Eric's hole, this was definitely going to be a good year.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Kevin pulled his finger out of Eric's ass and kissed him sweetly.

"Did you gamble or did you know that I'm gay?"

"Hope, baby. Sheer hope."

Eric laughed and it was a sweet sound. "Seriously."

"Thought you might be, but then when I bent over to put out the cigarette and stood back up, I saw you were blushing and looking away. Figured you were looking at my ass because that was my reaction when I was looking at yours."

Eric caressed Kevin's ass. "Yours is really quite amazing." He caressed his belly and chest next. "Is all this just from working?"

"Pretty much," Kevin said. "Genetics, too, I guess. Dad and my five brothers. All built like this."

"Six boys," Eric gasped. "Your poor mother."

"Poor Dad," Kevin laughed. "Three of us turned out to be fags."

"Was he upset?"

"Nah," Kevin said, grinning. "He's a big softie."

"Six sons." Eric whistled and pressed against Kevin.

"What about you? Big family?"

"No. Just me. I mean, as far as I know."

Kevin's brow furrowed.

"Foster care. Aged out when I was eighteen."

"I'm sorry, baby."

"Yeah," Eric said. "The last foster family I had was nice, but once I turned eighteen, I had to leave."

"What brought you up here?"

"The job. The chance to get away."

"Man trouble?"

"No," Eric sighed. He stole a kiss from Kevin. "That had been over for a while, but he'd left me with some of his debt, so I saw the ad for the teaching job up here and figured I'd apply and if I got it, I could save up some and..."

"It's what I've done. Managed to save up quite a bit of money thus far."

"Man trouble too?"

"No," Kevin said, turning off the water. "Just figured if I was going to work on the oil rigs I'd come up where the pay is great for a few years and then go and live out some of my other dreams. I'm what they call a Class 3 driller."

"And what do they call you when you're at work?" Eric snorted. He grabbed a towel and dried Kevin's body, front and back, not missing an opportunity to kiss and lick. He lingered a little too long on the man's ass.

Kevin huffed a laugh. "You don't have to keep sweet-talking me. I'm yours whenever you want."

"Are you exclusively a top, Mr. Class 3 Driller?"

"No sir," Kevin said and spread his cheeks for Eric.

Eric sucked in a ragged breath and pressed against the rosebud with his thumb.

"We're never gonna make it to dinner, Eric, if you keep doing that." Kevin couldn't really say he'd be heartbroken about that change of plans.

"We could just order in," Eric said, starting to dry himself off.

Kevin took the towel and returned the favor. "No, gonna take you out." Kevin turned Eric around to dry his back. He cursed under his breath and pressed his lips to each of Eric's cheeks. "This has got to be the best ass I've ever seen. I mean, porn star quality."

Eric laughed and turned back to face Kevin. "Thanks, I think. You won't be worried taking me out?"

"About what?"

"Well, if you could tell--"

"I'm--"

"I can handle myself with the students, but I'm talking about you."

Holed up with those straight guys for weeks at a time, I don't want you having to fight any battles because of me."

"That's the standard insult around these parts. They'll call you a fag whether you are or not. Besides, they don't wanna end up dead, they pay attention to what they're doing not who everyone else might be fucking."

"Does anyone know? About you I mean?"

"I don't really care if they do."

"What about your roommate? You've never brought someone home to--"

"Only if he and I are on different rotations." Kevin stepped out of the shower and waited for Eric. "And you're the first I've even wanted to be with in more than a year."

Eric pushed himself up on his toes and kissed him tenderly. "That's one of the nicest things anyone's ever said to me."

Kevin furrowed his brow.

"The kind of men I meet think a compliment is pinching or slapping my ass and telling me how good *they'll* feel when they're buried in it. It's nicer the way you said it. *Be with.*"

"Don't get me wrong, baby. There'll be plenty of fucking, but I like your honesty. You could have made up some load of bullshit about why you came up here, but you didn't." Kevin put an arm around his waist and pulled him close. "And I'm the kind of man who thinks telling a man he's got the prettiest blue eyes is a lot hotter than telling him what those others said to you."

Eric kissed him again. "Are you sure we can't just order in?"

Kevin kissed his nose and shook his head. "Real restaurant. Real food. And then we're coming back here so I can *be with you*." He patted Eric's ass and got them moving to the bedroom. "I should warn you, though," Kevin said, pressing himself against Eric's backside. "I'm a snuggler, so if you wake up with me wrapped around you in the middle of the night..."

Eric turned around and slapped Kevin's chest.

"Okay," Kevin said.

Eric rubbed the spot he'd just hit. Kevin put his hand over Eric's.

"Okay," Kevin repeated. "I won't snuggle."

"You'd better," Eric said, pulling him closer. "I just wanted to make sure I wasn't dreaming."

"Aren't *you* the one that should get slapped or pinched or something?"

"We can do that *before* the snuggling."

Kevin's eyes went wide and his knees sagged. "Anything you're not into?"

"I guess we'll find out soon enough, right?"

"Jesus, help me," Kevin murmured and picked up his jeans.

"I'm gonna be hard all through dinner thinking of you without underwear."

Kevin grinned and picked up his T-shirt. Eric took it from him.

"Not yet," Eric said, taking one last opportunity to press himself against the very firm body. "I'll do whatever you want whenever you want and how ever many times you want as long as you understand you're not allowed to wear anything when you're over here."

"I think I may have met my match," Kevin said.

"What's your last name?"

"Oberman. You?"

"Mason." Eric kissed the tattoo just below his collarbones. "Is this German?"

"Sure is," Kevin said, looking down at his tattoo. "It means *unbreakable*."

Eric traced the letters with his fingers. "It's beautiful."

"Had it done many years ago when I was working the North Sea rigs." Kevin reached for his T-shirt and saw the light dim in Eric's eyes. "I say something wrong?"

"It's dangerous work, though, isn't it?" Eric asked, instead of answering the question.

"Can be," Kevin said. "But that's where the training comes in."

"Must be hard on your family."

"They understand that I'm always careful."

"You must get lonely up here sometimes."

"Not feeling that way right now," Kevin said, caressing Eric's

naked hip.

Eric turned and reached for his own jeans. He pulled them on and then picked up his own T-shirt.

Kevin took it out of his hands and led Eric to the bed. He sat on the edge and pulled Eric in between his legs and then fell back on the bed. "You mind if I say something right now? Get it all out in the open, so we know what we're dealing with here?"

Eric nodded.

"This can be whatever we want it to be, Eric." Kevin ducked his head and kissed his belly. "It can be as simple as two grown men getting each other through the night or we can look for something deeper. I'm okay with either."

Eric nodded again. "You must think I'm some sort of psychopath."

Kevin snorted. "With the lot that I supervise? Trust me, I can spot those types a mile away. And you ain't one of 'em. Now can we *please* go and eat so I can bring you back here and fuck that smile back in those irresistible blue eyes?"

Eric blushed and kissed him. "Sorry." Eric sat up and then stood.

Kevin was smiling at him across the table. It was just after four in the afternoon. The restaurant was almost empty.

"What?"

"Nothing," Kevin said with a shake of his head. "Just... Woke up

this morning thinking it was gonna be a day like any other."

"Me too," Eric said as moved his leg to touch Kevin's. He looked around for the waitress. He wanted to eat and get back to the apartment.

"Okay," Kevin announced suddenly. "This is my favorite part." He cleared his throat. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-six. You?"

"Thirty-one."

"I love older men," Eric said with a wink.

"Favorite color?"

"Blue."

Kevin nodded. "Orange."

"Seriously?"

"It makes me happy. I don't know why." Kevin took a sip of his water. "Favorite movie?"

"What genre?"

"Any. All. Of all time."

Eric concentrated for a moment. "Probably 'Shelter'."

"Good choice. Mine's 'How to Train Your Dragon'."

Eric laughed and moved his leg up and down against Kevin's. "Didn't see that coming."

"Favorite food?"

"Garlic bread smothered in melted cheese."

"Peanut butter and jelly on a toasted bagel."

Eric nodded. He shook his head. "You're just a big kid, aren't you?"

Kevin shrugged.

"That's a good thing, Kevin. A compliment."

"Well, thank you, then." Kevin started rubbing his leg against Eric's.

"Know anything about horses?"

Eric nodded. "Foster family before the last one, the father taught me everything he knew about horses and riding and grooming, so..."

"Really?" Kevin's smile became lopsided, as if he'd just solved the hardest clue in the Times' crossword puzzle. "Might have to invite you down to the ranch I'm gonna buy one day." He wagged his eyebrows.

"Well if it'll help you make up your mind about it, I'll definitely accept that invitation."

Kevin winked.

"Favorite position?"

Kevin's cheeks flushed. He looked around quickly. "Your ankles on my shoulders. Me up on my toes, hands on the mattress by your head. You petting my chest and calling out my name while I'm--"

"Here you go, gents. Anything else you need right now?"

Kevin and Eric shook their heads in unison. "Thank you," they said as the waitress turned and walked away.

"While I'm driving into you." Kevin shuddered. "Fucking love that."

"Got one you might like even more," Eric said, picking up his fork and digging into his fries.

Kevin picked up his burger and raised his eyebrows.

"Being a gymnast I'm very flexible. I'll show you when we get home."

Kevin stopped chewing and Eric snorted. "You're just gonna leave me hanging?"

"Let's just say that it involves me getting into a few positions which open everything right up for you."

Kevin's mouth hung open. His leg stopped moving against Eric's. Kevin leaned forward. "I think I just came in my pants."

Eric laughed and Kevin went back to munching on his burger.

"You have a great laugh," Kevin said, resuming his attention to Eric's leg.

"You got a great everything."

"You're doing this to me on purpose, aren't you? Torturing me? 'Cause I wouldn't order in?"

Eric smiled and shook his head. "No more questions?"

"What was his name? The guy that left you with so much debt?"

"Jonathan."

"You mind talking about him?"

Eric shrugged and wrinkled his nose. "I guess not." He looked over at Kevin and smiled. "Rather talk about you, though."

"Ask away."

"Can't think of anything right now."

"Kevin Arnold Oberman. Thirty-one years old. Apprenticeship in Rig Technician from S.A.I.T. I've got five brothers. Both parents still alive and living in Edmonton. Two of my brothers are married and have five kids between them--two girls and three boys. Other three brothers are like us, like I told you. Youngest brother is working on his Ph.D in Biochemical Engineering. They're all nuts, all weird and wonderful in their own way. I don't sleep around that much. Last steady guy I had was almost a year ago and then he moved back to B.C. I'm partial to blonds. I love my weird wonderful family and I hope, one day very soon, to find a nice ranch outside Edmonton so I can breed and raise horses. I only smoke when I'm bored. I don't drink more than a few times a year and I'm really hoping that you're liking what you're hearing."

"Have you ever travelled outside of Canada?"

"Went to England once, with a fella. Didn't really like it much." Kevin popped the last bite of hamburger in his mouth.

"England or the boyfriend."

"Either," Kevin said smiling. "Both."

Eric nodded and looked down at his untouched hamburger.

"Not hungry?" Kevin asked pointing to the burger.

"No, not really. Help yourself," Eric said, pushing the plate across the table.

Kevin picked up a knife and cut it in half. "You're gonna need your strength," he said. He grinned. "I can go for hours and hours just with the foreplay alone. Especially when I'm feeling inspired by a great set of legs and an ass that just won't quit. And in case that's offensive to you, we'll talk about art and other shit too."

Eric snorted and picked up the remaining half of the burger. "All Class 3 drillers this charming?"

"Probably not."

"By the way, I do. Like what I'm hearing, that is." Eric bit into his burger and looked up to find Kevin smiling at him. "So," Eric asked when he'd almost finished chewing his first bite. "Any disappointing answers yet?"

"No sir," Kevin said. He sipped his water. "And you?"

Eric shook his head. "If I'd known you were up here five years ago, I could have skipped what's-his-name altogether."

Kevin laughed and finished his half of Eric's burger. "Gonna make me blush," he said.

"Makes you almost tolerable," Eric said, his voice soft and husky.

"I'll remind you of that when you're tossing and turning 'cause of

my snoring."

Eric smiled and nodded. "I'm a pretty deep sleeper."

"Man," Kevin said, finishing his second glass of water. "This *is* my lucky day."

"Mine too."

Kevin held up his hand for the check and pulled out his wallet. As he opened it, Eric saw a small photograph with strawberry blond hair.

"Ex-girlfriend?"

"Huh?" Kevin took the check and counted out two twenties.

Eric pointed to the picture.

Kevin laughed and handed Eric the wallet.

"I'm sorry," Eric said as he studied the picture of the Labrador.

"That's my baby," Kevin said, smiling down at the picture. "No pets in the building so she's staying with my folks in Edmonton."

"What's her name?" Eric didn't want to let go of the wallet. It smelled like Kevin and spent most of its life nestled against that spectacular ass.

"Skeeter."

"As in Skeeter Davis?"

"No, although I love her stuff. Skeeter as in mosquito. She was always drawing blood when she was a pup."

"Biter?"

"She'd get over-excited and take a few nips here and there. She got better, though."

"She's beautiful," Eric said, finally handing back the wallet. Their hands touched and Eric closed his eyes. "How old is she?"

"She'll be ten next month."

"Must be hard to be away from her."

"Always see her at Christmas. We get our bonus 'round then. Free flight home and back."

Fuck, Eric thought. He won't be here at Christmas. I'll be all alone.

"This year, my one week off falls just before the shut down for the holidays. Maybe you might like to come with me? Unless you've built your own family since foster care, that is."

Eric's smile returned. "Just like that? You invite a stranger to come and stay with your family?"

"Oh, we won't be staying with them. You come along? You and I will be staying in a nice hotel room. Fancy sheets, thick walls, enough drawer space for plenty of condoms and lube." Kevin winked again. "Besides, I'm thinking that if you even agree to think about the invitation it means that you *are* liking what you're hearing."

"What if I don't like what I saw back there when you were naked?"

"Could have fooled me," Kevin snorted.

Eric laughed and tilted his head. "Well, Kevin Oberman," Eric said, pushing out of the booth. "You may have just found yourself a Christmas date."

"Isn't life funny, huh? I mean, one minute I'm thinking I might just go jack off and have a nap and the next, I'm sitting here with you and you can't wait to get out of here so I can fuck you all night long."

"Speaking of which," Eric said, grinning. "You're down to your last condom. I'll go buy some more, and see if they have any orange ones."

They made it to the door of Eric's apartment, neither of them capable of holding back anymore. As Eric unlocked the door, Kevin pushed his erection into Eric's ass and then pushed them both into the living room, each of them groping and touching through their clothing.

"Hang on, Eric," Kevin said, pulling off Eric's T-shirt and then his own. "Skin. Need skin."

"Fuck, Kevin," Eric was panting already. "Your hands drive me crazy."

"I'm guessing that trip's not that long."

"Only when you're around," Eric said. He was kicking off his shoes and tearing open Kevin's jeans. "God. Now I know what addicts feel like," Eric said as he dropped to his knees and took Kevin's cock in his mouth. He sucked and licked as he pushed the

jeans to the man's ankles.

"Sweet fucking mouth, baby," Kevin moaned.

Eric pushed his hands over the ripped torso, pinching nipples and eliciting as much noise as he could. He pulled off for a moment and glanced up. "You like noise when you're fucking?"

"Only if you mean it," Kevin said, pulling Eric to his feet. He kissed him over and over, the sucking and slurping sounds loud in the apartment. "Nothing gets me hotter than seeing a gorgeous man writhing underneath me when I'm sliding in and out telling me what he's enjoying and how much."

"Oh, fuck," Eric said, putting his head on Eric's shoulder. "Come on." Eric pulled him through to the bedroom, forgetting that Kevin's jeans were around his ankles. "Sorry," he said as he bent over and helped free the man's legs.

The clothes were still on the floor of the bedroom, from when Eric pushed them off the bed. From when he'd first been impaled by Kevin's beautiful dick earlier today.

Eric returned to his knees in front of Kevin and made as much noise as he could. He slurped and moaned and licked and growled as Kevin began pushing into his hungry mouth.

"Fuck, yeah, baby. Oh fuck." Kevin's hands were gentle on his head. He petted him and caressed him.

Eric pulled off and spit on the head of Kevin's dick. "I won't break if you wanna fuck my mouth."

"Oh, shit yeah," Kevin said and increased his speed and depth.

"So fucking good to me, baby. So good. So good."

Eric clamped his hands on Kevin's ass cheeks and pulled even harder. He snuck one finger to push at the man's hole. It seemed to spur even faster and more determined thrusts. He kept moaning, kept making the sucking and slurping sounds. Kevin pushed himself all the way in and used Eric's head for leverage, keeping himself there for a few seconds before pulling out and lifting Eric to his feet.

"Have something for us," Eric said and rooted around the piles of clothing. He found it and put it in Kevin's hand. "While you're fucking me, I'll keep the control."

"Holy," Kevin said, his knees sagging as he looked at the vibrator. "Love toys. We'll have to try this in me and me inside you some time."

"Anything you want, Driller," Eric said, meaning every word. He moved behind Kevin and opened the drawer. He took out the lube and slicked up the vibrator. He pushed against Kevin's back until those cheeks parted and he could insert the vibrating dildo. "Sweet man," Eric sighed. "Can't wait to feel how tight you are."

Eric moved to the mattress. He faced away from Kevin, put his hands in front of himself and then unfurled his legs to the side.

"Fucking hell," Kevin said as he watched Eric lean over after doing the side splits. His hole was right there, exposed for Kevin to get ready. "Thought you were joking back at the restaurant. Just trying to get me all hot and bothered."

"Wasn't joking," Eric said, panting. "Please, Kevin. Fuck me. Hand me the controller."

Kevin did so, ducking between his own legs to retrieve it first. He turned his attention to putting on a condom and then lubing himself and Eric with plenty of slick. He passed the controller under Eric's ass.

"This is the first setting," Eric said as he turned the dial on the simple vibrator.

Kevin yelped a little and grabbed two handfuls of Eric's ass. "Need to be in you, baby. You ready?"

"Please. Fuck me." Eric hit the button once more.

"Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Kevin said as he slammed into Eric without preamble. He timed his comments to his forceful thrusts. "So. Fucking. Good."

Eric flicked the switch so that it would provide a low level prostate massage at first.

"Fuck, yeah, baby," Kevin growled. He leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Eric's chest. He kissed his neck as he pushed in and pulled out. Eric moved the button to the medium setting. "Ah, shit," Kevin moaned and dropped his forehead to Eric's shoulder. "Turn your head, baby."

Eric did and Kevin devoured his lips. He forgot about the controller in his hand while he lost himself in the excitement of being filled from both ends. He could feel the sweat forming between their bodies, could smell the potent musk of sex the two of

them were creating.

"Need friction," Eric panted between kisses. "Push harder. Need to come."

Kevin stilled. He released his hold on Eric. "Can do you one better," Kevin said breathlessly. He pulled out slowly and then rubbed Eric's legs as he gently pulled them straight behind him. "You remember my answer to your question about favorite position?"

Eric whimpered and scooted up to the head of the bed. He dropped the controller and wrapped his arms around his calves. His ass was off the mattress and ready by the time Kevin crawled onto the bed.

"That's my baby," Kevin said handing him the controller. "My beautiful baby." Kevin pushed his face into Eric's hole and kissed it, darting his tongue in and out for a few minutes. He slapped Eric's ass a couple of times and then wiped his forehead, pushing his hair out of his eyes. "Gonna make you come without any friction at all." Kevin put his arms on either side of Eric's head and kept them straight so he could look down as he guided himself back in. He positioned himself on his toes and then began to push in slowly. "Put your ankles on my shoulders, baby," Kevin commanded as he started to pump faster.

Eric released his legs and put his ankles on the broad shoulders, which freed his hands to explore and caress just like Kevin explained. He pinched nipples, caressed the tattoo, pushed a thumb into the wet heat of Kevin's mouth and smiled. "So fucking

gorgeous, Kevin."

Kevin lowered himself to one elbow and then the other. He devoured Eric's lips again, their tongues moving frantically inside of each other's mouths. Eric felt him moving his feet and then closed his eyes against the most exquisite sensations. Kevin was scooping with his ass, driving the head of his dick into his prostate then moving his rock-hard dick in circular motions and hitting every possible G-spot inside Eric.

"Like that, baby?"

"Kevin," Eric sighed. He latched onto the back of Kevin's neck and held his face just above his own. He stared into Kevin's eyes, finding the intimacy he craved. "Kevin," he said again.

"I know, baby. I feel it too. Wanna watch you. Let go, baby."

"Kevin." The name was just a whisper, disappearing into the musk-scented bedroom as Eric tried to keep his eyes open, his gut clenched and his ass squeezed Kevin's exquisitely talented dick. He emptied himself onto his own chest, his lips devoured once more, almost immediately.

"Eric," Kevin whispered. "Squeeze me. Keep squeezing me."

He did as he was told, pulling Kevin farther inside him. "Come inside me, Kevin."

"Ah, fuck," Kevin hissed as he pummelled Eric's hole once, twice, and then a final third time. He stayed there, trembling, his forehead pressed to Eric's.

"Move you arms, baby," Eric whispered. Kevin did so. Eric

wrapped his legs around Kevin's waist and then the man fell right on top of him. "I've got you," he said, stroking the sweat-soaked skin. "I've got you."

"Eric?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Can you turn that thing off now?"

Eric laughed and searched for the controller. He flipped the switch and returned his arms to Kevin's back.

"Fucking great idea," Kevin said as he rubbed his cheek against Eric's and then looked into his eyes. "Haven't been that horny since the first time we fucked today, but when you're not horny, that thing is just annoying."

"Sorry," Eric said. He dotted Kevin's sweat-slicked features with kisses.

"Not bad for an old man, huh?"

"I never called you old."

"I know," Kevin said. He pulled out slowly and rolled onto his back. "I just wanted to see if I could make you laugh."

"Know what sound you make that I like most?" Eric didn't wait for him to answer. He pulled off the condom and swallowed Kevin's semi-hard cock.

Kevin spread his legs and whimpered.

Eric held him in one hand and glanced up. "*That* sound." He went back to cleaning Kevin's cock.

Kevin woke up just before two in the morning. He'd helped Eric put away the clothes off the floor, make the bed and they'd even gone out for a nice long walk, so Kevin could show Eric the school, the library, the grocery store and the movie theatre. They'd even sneaked a kiss or two in a few secluded places along the walking path around the lake.

It wasn't out of character for Kevin to fall head over heels after the first fuck with some guy who could make him hard. And this hadn't been any different. He'd only been looking for a quick fuck, but there was something about this man lying in his arms. He didn't know what it was, but he could actually see the two of them breeding horses, raising them, making a life together back in Alberta.

He ducked his head and kissed Eric's forehead. He tried to come at this logically, like his father had always taught him. No doubt, the man was gorgeous, tight little gymnast's body, most muscular ass he'd ever seen, a wildcat in the sack, up for anything. But then there was that laugh, the way Eric's whole face lit up when he was happy about something. Kevin had the distinct impression that Eric had not had too much of that while he was growing up.

Maybe that's what it was: Kevin wanted to make him happy, wanted to show him that sometimes life gave you lemons *and* lemonade. And the man did say he knew his way around horses.

What was most interesting to Kevin, though as he pulled Eric even closer, snuggling in and closing his eyes again, was the

realization that--after a year with Eric--he would most certainly have fallen in love with the man by then. If he wasn't already starting to fall and fall hard.

PART II

Kevin stood on the deck of the rig, shaking his head out of frustration.

Jesus, fuck me.

He was watching the two new guys trying to wrap the chain around the bit as it was raised. He thought of Eric to try and calm his frazzled nerves.

"You're not circulating the mud," he shouted when he was close enough. "Circulate the mud."

The rookies nodded and checked the key and turntable.

Within seconds, the mud gushed out and the hole and Kevin checked the rock cuttings and the bit. He was pretty muddied and smiled at what he figured he must look like. Kevin reminded himself to send a selfie to Eric later.

"Okay, do the joints and then wait for the trip out. You're close."

He crossed his fingers and hoped they would remember the cement the casing once the depth was reached. Kevin took off his helmet for a second and pushed his hair off his forehead. He needed to get it cut. He made another mental note to get a buzz cut this time.

Between spending the hours on the rig and his weeks off with his sexy little gymnast, Kevin was looking for a style a little more low-maintenance.

He forced himself to stop thinking about Eric and focused on

watching the rookies.

After another ten minutes of drilling and no further problems with the rookies, Kevin slapped them on the shoulder and told them to make way for the casing crew. They would do their thing while Kevin and the rookies took a well-deserved rest until they were needed again.

Probably tomorrow, he thought as he headed down to his bunk.

He ducked into the washroom and looked at himself in the mirror. Pulling out his cell phone, he figured Eric would get a kick out of how he looked after a hard day's work. Kevin snapped the pic and looked at it before sending it off with a message.

Still think I'm sexy?

Remembering the photos they'd taken of Eric before that week they'd met was over and he was back on the rig, Kevin scrolled through and looked at some of them. He was hard in seconds looking at that shy smile and flexible body.

Fuck, have I got it bad or what?

He returned to his bunk and stripped down to nothing, wrapped a towel around himself and headed for the showers, not even caring that his was practically at full salute still.

Vibrations from all that drilling, he would simply say. It certainly wouldn't be the first time one of the men would show up in the shower with an erection. Nor would it be the last.

Kevin was back in his quarters and in bed less than twenty minutes later. He turned on his side, pulled the sheet over his head

and studied the photos of Eric. Kevin pushed a hand down between his legs and was smiling to himself when a message came in.

Even after you farting and drooling in bed, I still want you and find you sexy.

Kevin laughed out loud and stopped stroking himself to respond. He considered several different responses, but finally decided on one that would, hopefully, make Eric laugh as well.

You feed me and never wear clothes when I'm home. Farting and drooling? Your fault.

Kevin ended it with a winking emoticon and sent it. He returned to the pictures of Kevin, now suddenly more interested in the one of a fully-clothed Eric who was winking and smiling.

"Never in a million years," Kevin whispered to the empty room. That thought had crept into his brain several times in the last two weeks, ever since watching that long-legged, blond, stranger, schlepping all those bags up to the apartment next to his. Kevin had thought of going back inside to jerk off and have another nap, but something had told him to wait and offer assistance.

"I'm going to have to start listening to that voice more often," Kevin said as he phone chirped.

You always make me laugh. Missing you. Thinking about you.

There was a little flutter in Kevin's chest as he read the message over and over.

"You feel it too, don't you?" He asked after he turned back to the

clothed photo of Eric.

He bit on his bottom lip as he contemplated how to respond. Finally, he started typing.

Can't wait to be home with you again. 7 more sleeps. Good night, baby.

Kevin put the phone back on the mattress and forced himself to turn it off. He pushed the sheets down to his waist and put the phone on the little desk by the head of the bed. His mind was filled with random thoughts about Eric, about leaving the north, about finally finding that ranch somewhere.

There was plenty of money in the bank now. After five years of doing this insane schedule, Kevin had enough for a good downpayment for the kind of place he'd always dreamed of. And he was also thinking that he'd finally found the guy to go with it.

Finally.

He was pretty sure that Eric was a much more serious contender than all of the other men he'd been with during the last five years. Kevin had never really expected to find *the one* in a remote place like this, despite working on a rig with hundreds of other horny men. But there had been a couple of men who'd showed promise only to fizzle out and lose interest in anything more meaningful than mutual masturbation or the occasional blow job.

From Daniel, who was a colleague who'd left the rig after only one year, to Mark, a marketing manager or something for one of the only two banks in town who was another one who took the first

transfer available, to Joseph, a tall technology specialist who'd come up to supervise an install.

Joseph had shown the most potential, until Eric. But Joseph had only been sent up here for a two-month term.

He and Kevin had locked eyes one day in the grocery store and, three days later, they'd found an excuse to meet at the motel. Joseph had been a gift sent from the heavens, until Eric that is. Joseph had been five-ten or so, a few extra pounds, but he knew who he was and what he wanted. And he'd made it clear from that first meeting in the motel that he was wanting Kevin.

The attraction, unfortunately, had been for Joseph. Kevin admired the man's positive attitude and willingness to try anything, but ultimately, they had very little in common, especially time. Joseph would be gone within two months, so that had always been in the back of Kevin's mind.

And while the other two were more appealing in terms of physical assets and time, neither relationship was meant to be. Kevin wasn't even sure anyone would be able to call them relationships, since they'd seemed to end before they began. With Kevin's schedule and Mark's growing dislike for anything related to living in the north, and Daniel's constant worrying that he would be somehow outed at work, Kevin quickly lost interest and was not terribly sad to see them go.

For two years, Kevin had gotten by with just his hand and whatever visual stimulation he could find online. He would play the videos, regardless of length, for as long as it took him to find

release and then try to remind himself that he would meet someone some day. He'd resigned himself, after Joseph's departure, that he would have to wait until he was back in Alberta, but it was what got him through the long, dark days.

But two weeks ago, Eric had appeared in his life. And Kevin would have been ecstatic with just the occasional hand job or blow job, but the man was probably just as lonely and frustrated as he was. They'd each chosen to come up to this remote area, for similar reasons, biding time until they had enough money to return to civilization and pursue the things that mattered to them enough to make the journey north in the first place.

To say the meeting was a surprise would be an understatement. When Eric had first asked the question about knowing any men who liked dick, Kevin honestly thought he was so horny and desperate that he'd imagined it. Luckily, he hadn't been. Nor had Eric been joking.

They'd spent every day and every night together until Kevin had to fly back up to the rig. Every minute had been incredible, whether they were fucking their brains out or just sitting at the kitchen table eating whatever simple, but tasty meals Eric had prepared. No matter what they'd been doing for those five days, Kevin could not remember a time when he'd felt such a connection to another man. He spent most of their time together wanting to ask question after question, wanting to know every little detail about the man's life. There were even moments when Eric would get out of bed and Kevin would have to restrain himself from getting up to follow him.

Kevin suspected that Eric felt it as well, but he knew for sure when it was time for him to leave and Eric wouldn't let go of his neck. He hung on to the hug for what seemed like hours; a feeling Kevin thoroughly enjoyed. But when he saw that Eric's eyes were a little misty, Kevin knew that Eric was feeling the same thing he had been.

As he closed his eyes and thought of Eric, Kevin was pretty sure that he was falling in love. Only time would tell if Eric would be there long enough to hear Kevin make the admission he'd been waiting his entire life for.

Eric stared at the word on the screen of his phone.

Home.

He smiled and slipped between the sheets wearing one of Kevin's T-shirts.

"Definitely not what I thought I was getting myself into," he said as he turned out the light and scrolled through some of the pictures.

It was most certainly different than anything he'd felt for Jonathan. That had developed over time, the growing feeling that Jonathan had been what had always been missing in Eric's life. Jonathan represented stability and a sense of security that Eric had never experienced before.

Jonathan showed that he could handle himself. At first, he was confident and self-possessed. Granted, it turned out he was far *too* confident and self-possessed, but during the beginning of their

relationship, that's precisely what Eric had found so engaging, so irresistible. But as with everything else involving Jonathan, that particular attraction grew stale rather quickly.

Eric had spent far too much time thinking it had been his fault: he'd grown up always wondering why no one had ever wanted to adopt him, what was wrong with him that made him so easy to pass by in favor of some other kid. It was no surprise that this insecurity had led to certain people exploiting him. No one had ever forced him to do anything he wasn't willing to do, but there were some people who were willing to do anything to convince you that the one thing you didn't want was actually the very thing you wanted.

That had been Jonathan in a nutshell.

Unfortunately, by the time Eric had made up his mind to end the relationship and move on, alone again, Jonathan had managed to use his name on three different loans. Granted they were all fraudulent signatures, and even after spending thousands of dollars on a lawyer to help him, Eric had reported the fraud and identity theft, reported Jonathan to the police, and had followed the other twenty or thirty suggestions the lawyer had provided. But, in the end, Eric had still had to use almost all of his savings to pay back the more stubborn creditors.

It had been an expensive mistake and one that he would never repeat. He used two different banks, had requested passwords for all of his accounts, no matter how much money was in them, and checked his statements from each bank with a fine-toothed comb. Nothing was going to get by him this time.

Looking through the photos of Kevin, Eric now knew what a confident, self-possessed man actually behaved like and now knew that Jonathan had possessed none of the same qualities as Kevin. Unlike Jonathan, Kevin was strong, both physically and emotionally. He'd not been scared off when he'd noticed Eric becoming a little emotional when it was time to say good-bye. And unlike Jonathan, Kevin was self-assured without having to be negative or threatening to anyone else.

There would always be a glimmer of hope that would be rekindled inside Eric on those rare occasions when someone like Kevin showed interest in him, and although Eric had learned, over and over, how quickly that glimmer can be extinguished, he didn't feel ready to cut himself off from the possibilities that life presented him. He could have just as easily abandoned all hope, but then he would not have had those five days with Kevin.

And although Eric knew that those five days could be all they'd ever have, it was still nice, on nights spent alone, warm and sleepy in his bed, to imagine that the happy endings did happen eventually. They may not arrive on time, but as long as they arrived Eric could live with that compromise.

He turned off the phone, put it on the bedside table and closed his eyes. He was smiling as he took a deep breath and took in the scent from Kevin's T-shirt.

PART III

Eric heard his phone buzz just as the students were leaving for the day. He'd been with the students for a little over a month now and found them to be quite challenging, but in a good way. There were good days and bad days, but they seemed to like him and respect him. And he'd been with Kevin for just over two months. He'd found it difficult to concentrate when Kevin had to leave after those first five days together, and he'd tried his best to keep it together, but ultimately, he'd failed miserably. Kevin, like the gentleman he was, had just held him and let him cry.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Kevin had said, kissing him gently. "But I kinda like that we'll be apart. Imagine what will happen when I come back after two weeks? Don't think anyone's ever missed me this much before I'm even gone."

And he'd been right. Kevin had arrived back in town on a Friday night and came straight to Eric's place. He'd not even stopped to drop his stuff off in his own apartment. Slowly, but surely, most of his clothes had found their way to Eric's anyway. They'd spent almost the entire weekend in bed, getting to know each other again, savoring each moment and each other until exhaustion forced them to sleep wrapped around each other.

Eric's phone buzzed again and he picked it up. He swiped to see his new message. He laughed out loud when he saw that Kevin had sent him a selfie, taken on the deck of the oil rig. His handsome face was covered in oil and mud and whatever else was out there. But his smile was big and beautiful, his white teeth shining just for Eric.

During that first week back, after their first two weeks apart, Kevin had coaxed Eric into some provocative poses. *Something to help me with my stress relief*, Kevin had pleaded. Eric had relented and provided some gymnastic poses, all while completely naked, while Kevin snapped picture after picture. Ten in total.

Kevin had reciprocated, of course, and had even sent a few from the oil rig. Pictures taken in a washroom mirror showing Kevin, camera in hand, helmet still on his head, but naked from shoulders to ankles. His rigging outfit puddled around his feet, his seed spilled all over the mirror and counter. Kevin was wearing a huge grin in the next picture as he showed Eric how he'd relieved his stress. There, in the photo, Eric saw one of the pictures he'd posed for.

Not as good as the real thing, but helluva lot better than my imagination, Kevin had texted after sending the two pictures.

It was now a thing for them. The two of them making the best of a difficult situation. Being apart for two weeks and together for only one. It wasn't ideal, but it would do until Christmas. Then, they'd have three whole weeks in a hotel room just outside of Edmonton. The flights were booked, the room reserved and the condoms and lube taking up half of one of Eric's bags.

He gathered his schoolwork for the evening and decided to head home. Once he was there, he'd decided before reaching his SUV, he would send Kevin a little surprise.

Eric had had to stop himself from texting *Love you* to Kevin on many different occasions. He knew he loved him and he was pretty

sure that Kevin felt the same, but he wanted to say it in person.

And this Friday would be his chance. Two more days and he would have his Kevin home again. Sometime between the Thanksgiving feast he would be preparing for Kevin and the frantic hours they would spend letting their bodies get reacquainted, Eric would let the man know how much he meant to him.

Kevin headed down the gangplank and stopped in his little cell. He flipped open his phone and saw a brief message from Eric:

Be safe, baby

He smiled and flipped through the pictures on his phone until he found the one he wanted. It was a selfie that Eric had sent him several weeks ago. It was, by far, his favorite. It wasn't one of the naked ones that he used at least two or three times a day, whenever he couldn't seem to stop thinking about the man. It was the one that Eric had taken along the walkway. Eric was standing in the first hidden spot they'd come to on their walk all those months ago, the one where Kevin had stolen a kiss. In the photo, Eric's lips were puckered, as if still kissing Kevin, a little reminder of that special moment they'd shared. He sat on his bunk and stared at the picture. If he had any artistic ability, Kevin was sure he could draw that same picture, down to the most finite detail, from memory. He kissed the screen and headed for the showers.

Two more days and he'd be home with his Eric.

After cleaning himself of all the oil and mud and stench, he

wrapped a towel around his waist and left the showers, thinking about the dinner Eric was going to be making for them, just the two of them. Kevin passed a few of the other men, wondering what plans they had going on, if there was anyone special waiting at home for them.

Isn't it strange, he thought, that I've worked with these men for five years and yet we know next to nothing about each other. He got back to his bunk in time for a new message from Eric. Kevin was hard already, not even caring that it might just be a picture of Eric doing the dishes.

But it wasn't.

Couldn't help myself

Kevin laughed out loud at the picture showing Eric, spread-eagled on the bed, the laptop up by his head featuring the fullscreen image of Kevin, helmet still on, cock in hand, and his come all over the mirror and the counter. He studied the picture of Eric. Legs akimbo, beautiful cock still in his hand, his chest and face flushed from excitement and little blobs of come on his chest, in his hair and on his tight belly.

My little geyser, he typed and hit send. And it was true. When the man came, it ended up everywhere. Kevin liked to think that that's what he did to Eric.

Kevin took himself in hand and was hard within seconds. He studied the photo, keeping his eyes open and imagining the photo moving. He imagined the ten minutes before, his cock being swallowed by that silky mouth, his balls being fondled by those

strong hands, the chest and face flushing when he finally pushed inside that tight hole.

"Fuck," he hissed inside the empty cell. He leaned his back against the cold metal wall and propped his foot against the door. His strokes shortened as he concentrated on the head of his cock. He flipped between the picture of Eric on the walkway and the one he'd just sent. "Fucking love you, Eric Mason. Love what you do to me. Love how you make me feel."

His balls pulled up, his spine began to tingle and he shot straight up into the air. Some of it hit the bunk above while a few drops hit his chest. Most of it fell back down onto his belly. He stared at the picture of his baby and licked his hand clean. He thought again of broaching the subject of going bareback. Getting tested so that it would just be skin against skin.

He stood up and used the towel to clean the bunk above and bent over when he noticed a little blob of spunk on his left work boot. He straightened and smiled, not cleaning the boot after all. It wouldn't last long there, out in this weather, but while it was there, it would give him something to smile about.

Friday arrived. Eric was on edge the entire day. He wanted it to be over. He wanted Kevin beside him, in his arms. He wanted to kiss him, smell him, taste him. He wanted to hear that growl as Kevin filled his mouth with his tongue and his ass with his cock. He ached all over for the man.

Having learned the same valuable lesson several times during the

month of September, Eric always scheduled some sort of quiz or test or computer lab assignment on Fridays. The students were tired and restless and so was he. It gave them all something to focus on other than where they'd rather be. And if the students didn't do so well, Eric was more than happy to let them try again, with a different test, of course. Some of the other teachers chided him for it, but he would just smile and remind them that the students were supposed to learn the stuff, that there was no rule or law dictating how many attempts were permitted.

He stood in the center of the computer lab and heard Sharon and Colleen gasping and turning away from the screen.

What now? He wondered as he ambled over to where the two girls were sitting.

"Mr. Mason," Colleen said, the disgust clear on her face. "Look. A video showing some oil rig collapsing."

"What?" Eric caught the panic in his voice and looked over her shoulder. The image was grainy, but he could tell that the video was shot during the summer. He double-checked the date and saw that it had been filmed three years ago. He breathed out and offered a quick smile. "Dangerous work, huh?"

"God," Sharon said through clenched teeth. "How could anyone survive in that water?"

"I'm sure they have safety procedures," Eric said and moved away, trying not to make it seem too quickly. He ducked into the librarian's office and pulled out his phone.

Come home safe. Miss you.

He stood there, pretending to scan the few shelves for some important periodical. After a few minutes, his phone buzzed.

Always, baby. You okay?

He let go of a breath he didn't know he was holding.

Much better with you in my arms.

He pressed his phone against his chest and closed his eyes for a moment.

Flight's boarding now. See you in an hour. Be naked.

Eric laughed and put his phone in his trouser pocket. He picked a magazine at random and headed back out to his students.

The twenty minutes until the bell were excruciatingly long. But, finally, the bell rang, the students headed to their lockers and Eric walked quickly to his room, stuffed his briefcase full of work he had no intention of doing that weekend and hurried out to his SUV.

He spent the next ninety minutes, dressed only in a pair of sweatpants, pacing back and forth over his living room floor. He'd already redone the bed with fresh sheets, lit a few candles and had a butt plug inside of him. It had been Kevin's idea of a joke a few weeks previous. "Fuck the foreplay. We got all week for that," Kevin had said. "After two weeks of pictures I can't touch or smell or taste, I wanna go from drilling one hole to drilling yours." Eric found the idea titillating, to say the least.

Eric tried to calm himself with thoughts of how Kevin had come

in, stripped himself, then Eric and pounded him into the mattress that evening. No foreplay, just frantic, furtive kissing and animalistic rutting. Eric's legs wrapped around the slim hips and Kevin's ragged breathing in his ear as he slammed into him again and again. But then once the urge to reclaim what was his was lessened, Kevin had been as tender as ever, caressing his face and kissing him so sweetly. He'd been concerned, as usual, that he may have hurt Eric, but Eric just smiled and said, "Nothing like a good, hard fucking to take the edge off." Kevin had laughed and started all over again, but with lots of foreplay.

As he paced, the memory still vivid in his mind, he heard a car door slam. He looked out the window and saw Kevin, his bag in hand, running for the stairs. Eric stripped out of his sweatpants and waited inside the door. It opened and, once Kevin was through the door, Eric jumped on him.

"Ah," Kevin said as he put his hands on Eric's ass and held him up. He fingered the butt plug and growled. "Fuck, did I miss you."

Eric buried his face in Kevin's neck, smelling him and tasting him with his tongue. Kevin leaned back against the wall and Eric regained his feet. He clawed at the man's jeans and freed his growing erection.

"Can't wait," Eric said, his voice raw and full of need. He reached behind him and pulled out the butt plug.

"Condom, baby."

"Fuck," Eric hissed and ran into the bedroom. He fumbled through the drawer until he found one, opening as he ran back to

find Kevin hadn't moved an inch. "On the floor," Eric ordered.

"Yes sir," Kevin said with a salute. "Now this is how a man likes to be greeted at the door." He sank to the floor, his jeans still around his knees.

"Shut up," Eric said and took Kevin's cock in his mouth. He created suction and pushed a finger into Kevin's ass. He sucked and pulled until Kevin was ready, then pulled off and rolled on the condom.

"Lube?"

"Can't... Just..." Eric guided him inside and sank all the way down until his ass was resting on Kevin's thighs.

"Fuck," Kevin said, drawing out that one word into too many syllables.

"Get this off," Eric barked as he pulled at Kevin's sweatshirt.

The sweatshirt came off and Eric began to move up and down, slowly at first and then with more passion. He flexed his ass muscles, doing a little scooping motion to take Kevin's cock all the way in. He braced his hands on the massive chest and stared into Kevin's eyes. With every contraction, every movement he was telling Kevin that they belonged together.

"Mine," Eric whispered. He pressed his forehead to Kevin's. "Tell me."

"I'm all yours, Eric," Kevin said, his brow furrowed. "And whose am I?"

"Mine. No one but me touches you."

Kevin put a strong hand in between his shoulder blades and rolled them over so that he was on top. He braced his arms, ramrod straight, on either side of Eric's shoulders and sank himself, balls deep, into the heat. Eric wrapped his bare legs around Kevin's hips.

"Say it again," he panted.

Kevin kissed him ferociously. "Mine. All mine."

"Yours," Eric gasped as Kevin began to pound with much more force. "Only you. Yours. Forever."

Kevin lowered himself onto his elbows. He kissed him and nipped at Eric's lower lip, then moved his tongue to the shell of Eric's right ear. "Never felt anything like I feel for you, Eric," he whispered into the sensitive ear.

"Me either," Eric sighed. He pushed his heels against Kevin's ass. "I'm gonna come, Kevin."

"Yeah. Come for me. Only for me. Look at me, baby."

Eric opened his eyes and knew. Kevin loved him. Loved only him.

"I feel it too, Eric."

Eric let himself go and arched his back as the most powerful orgasm crashed in him, around him and through him. He heard Kevin call out as well, felt the thrusts go deeper and deeper until he collapsed on top of him.

They held each other, just inside the door, on the floor, until they were breathing normally again.

"I'm sorry," Eric said after a few minutes.

"What for?"

"I panicked."

Kevin lifted his head and kissed him. "About?"

"Some kids showed me a video of an oil rig collapsing." Eric put a hand over his eyes as his voice broke.

Kevin kissed the back of his hand, then his quivering lips. "It's okay. Look at me. Please."

Eric uncovered his eyes and took a deep breath.

"I love you, Eric Mason."

"I love you too, Kevin Oberman." Eric croaked between ragged breaths.

"My sweet, sweet little worrier." Kevin wiped away a tear or two and smiled. "Mind if we move this to the bedroom? You never did put that weatherstripping at the bottom of the door and my ass is freezing."

"Kay," Eric said. He waited for Kevin to pull out of him and then pulled off his jeans and socks. They walked to the bedroom and Kevin got into the bed first. Eric joined him and snuggled up to his side.

"Is that what that was all about just now? You thinking I might get hurt?"

"Partly," Eric said, being honest.

"What's the other part?"

"You've only been back home for twenty minutes and I've already cried once."

Kevin snorted and kissed his nose. "So? Nothing wrong with crying for the right reasons."

Eric took a deep breath and hid his face. "Went into the foster system when I was ten. For eight years, I hoped and prayed that someone would want me, but--" Eric's voice broke again. He cleared his throat. "I don't think I could take it if anything happened to you."

Kevin kissed the top of his head and rolled him over onto his back. He kissed him sweetly, petted his belly and chest.

"No guarantees, baby. People lose each other all the time." Kevin kissed him with a little more passion. "I know it sucks, but that's what I signed up for. Big bucks for big risk."

"I know," Eric sighed. "Was different, I guess, when I... I thought we'd spend those first five days together and then you'd go back to your schedule and I figured we'd just drift apart. Maybe hook up once in a while if one, or both, of us was going through a dry spell."

"Caught me by surprise, too, Eric. This falling in love thing. Last thing I thought I'd find up here in this barren wasteland."

Eric rolled onto his side again and buried his face in Kevin's chest.

Kevin felt vibrations and he knew Eric was saying something but he couldn't understand it. "One more time."

Eric pulled back slightly and glanced up at him. "I'm sorry for spoiling your homecoming."

"Ah." Kevin rubbed his back. "My sweet, weird, little contortionist. You didn't ruin anything." Kevin kissed him on the lips several times. "Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting to say those words to someone? To feel what I'm feeling right now? To find the man who'd consider coming to live with me on my ranch?"

"I will," Eric said, pushing Kevin onto his back and straddling his hips. "I want to."

"I know, baby," Kevin said and grinned. "And once I'm done sorting through the applications--"

"Shut up," Eric said, laughing again. "That's not funny. I hate you."

"No you don't," Kevin said as he flipped their positions again. He wedged himself in between those wonderful thighs and rested himself on his elbows. He pushed Eric's blond locks off his forehead. "You love me. You said so yourself."

"I wasn't thinking clearly," Eric said as he reached down and slapped Kevin's ass.

"No taking it back. I love you, with all my heart and you love me."

"With all my heart," Eric whispered.

"Pretty fucking perfect way to welcome a man home, I'd say."

Eric wrapped his arms around the wide back and pulled him down.

"If it's any consolation," Kevin said after a few seconds. "You're as strong as an ox, so if your application isn't successful, maybe you'd like to be hired on--"

Eric shut him up by kissing him.

"So?" Kevin said as he pushed back from the table. "You want to do it again or what?"

"Nice," Eric said with a sneer.

"What?" Kevin stood up and scratched his belly. "Already got the milk *and* the cow. Now I can be my real self."

"You're a jackass," Eric said.

"And *whose* jackass am I?"

"The successful applicant's?"

Kevin laughed and came around the table. "You're quick. I'll give you that." He kneeled on the floor and rested his head on Eric's shoulder. "I adore you, Eric Mason. Think about you all the time. Can't get enough of being near you, in you, on top of you, underneath you." He kissed Eric's shoulder. "You make me happier than I ever thought I'd be."

"I'm kinda partial to you too," Eric said as he traced the letters of Kevin's tattoo.

"Say it for me again."

"The successful--"

"No, you ornery cuss." Kevin had him on the floor in seconds.

"Say it. Please."

"I love you, Kevin Oberman."

"Close, but that's not it." Kevin had him pinned with the weight of his body.

"Yours?"

Kevin shook his head.

"I want to live with you on the ranch."

"That's the one," Kevin said and kissed him soundly. "You want the job description?"

"Doesn't matter," Eric said, spreading his legs. "As long as at the end of the day, we're naked together in bed."

"What a coincidence," Kevin said, his eyes wide. "That's the most important qualification. And as for me, I promise to keep you nice and relaxed and laughing all day long."

"Deal," Eric sighed and put his hands on Kevin's face. "So handsome."

Kevin gave him a peck on the lips and then pushed himself up so he was standing, leaving Eric on his back.

Eric pulled on Kevin's sweatpants and they fell to the floor. "Fuck me," he said. "You should see how huge it is from this angle."

Kevin laughed and held out his hand while he stepped out of the only piece of clothing he was wearing.

"Come on," Kevin said. "Time for me to thank you for another amazing dinner."

Eric took Kevin's hand and got back on his feet.

"Second time making love today," Kevin said as he put an arm around Eric's shoulders. "Second time's always the best. No hurry, lots of foreplay. And then pure pleasure." Kevin put his hands on Eric's shoulders and kissed him sweetly before holding him close.

"You first," Eric said as he pointed to the bed.

Kevin got in and lay on his back, studying Eric as he crawled over and spread Kevin's legs.

"Can I be on top this time?"

"Fuck yeah," Kevin said with a smile. "'Bout time. Was wondering when I'd get to feel that pretty thing inside me."

Eric sat back on his heels. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Don't know," Kevin said with a shrug. "Just figured you liked me fucking you."

"I'm not as big as you--"

"Don't like 'em too big," Kevin said as he took Eric's cock in his hand. "Yours is just perfect." Kevin put his hands on Eric's hips and pulled him forward. He swallowed Eric's cock and swirled his tongue around the head.

"Kevin," Eric sighed as he braced his hands on the wall in front of

him. He began thrusting into the wet heat of his man's mouth, letting his moaning mingle with Kevin's. The big hands were squeezing and kneading his ass with each thrust. Eric pushed his hands through Kevin's thick black hair. *Safe*, he thought. *Safe and warm for a whole week.*

"Let me get you ready," Eric said as he pulled out of Kevin's mouth. He scampered down the mattress and put his hands under Kevin's knees, lifting them so he could kiss and lick his hole. He pressed his erection into the mattress, keeping time with Kevin's words of encouragement.

"Gonna push a finger in," Eric said as he cupped Kevin's big balls and held them out of the way. He pushed his middle finger inside and found Kevin's prostate. He bit playfully at an inner thigh while he massaged and pressed his finger against Kevin's gland.

"Fucking hell," Kevin grunted as he looked down his body to study Eric.

"Like that?"

"More," Kevin said, his voice husky and needy.

"Whatever you want, baby." Eric pushed in two fingers and tapped his prostate while he took sucked one of Kevin's testicles into his mouth. He scissored his fingers, preparing the hole for his cock. He kept grinding himself against the mattress, turned on even more by the dirty talk coming from his partner.

"Fuck me."

"Okay," Eric said with a smile. He reached for a condom and the

lube, slicked Kevin's hole first and then prepared himself. "Ready?"

"Yes, fuck, so ready," Kevin moaned and looked into Eric's eyes.

Eric leaned forward and pressed his lips to Kevin's as he sunk himself inside slowly.

"Ah, fuck," Kevin hissed. "Don't move yet. Just let me remember how to do this."

"Bear down. Take deep breaths. Don't push against me." Eric felt Kevin relax a little and pushed in deeper. His dick had a upward curve to it, so he went slowly knowing that he would eventually press the head against Kevin's gland. He held his breath and waited.

Kevin's head and shoulders came off the mattress and Eric smiled.

"There we go," Eric cooed. "Feel good?"

"Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck," Kevin said, his head moving from side to side.

Eric raised himself on his toes and moved his hands closer to Kevin's head. Kevin outweighed him by at least fifty pounds, so it didn't take long for Eric to be covered in sweat, straining to keep the big man's legs up near their chests. Eric began to move in and out more forcefully, pulling out and slamming back in. Kevin's moans, his very tight hole and his wandering hands were getting him so hot that Eric didn't think this session would last much longer.

"So tight," Eric whispered as he lowered himself to his elbows.

"Gonna make me come soon."

Kevin stared into his eyes, wrapped his arms around the strong shoulders and began to contract his muscles. He pulled Eric in, deeper and deeper. As he pulled out again, the head of Eric's dick brushed Kevin's prostate again.

Kevin's eyes went wide and he pulled Eric in for a scorching kiss. He reached down and wrapped a hand around his cock.

"Yeah, big guy," Eric whispered as he straightened his arms and looked down between their bodies. "Let me see how much you like getting fucked."

"So much," Kevin panted. "Especially by you."

"That's it," Eric encouraged as he kept moving his gaze between Kevin's flushed face and his hand around his fat cock. "Come for me, big guy. Come for me."

The vice-like pressure around Eric's cock increased steadily until, finally, Kevin's body almost jackknifed off the mattress. He sprayed his seed everywhere, on the wall, on his chest, in his hair, all over his hand and even on his face.

"Fuck yeah," Eric growled. "Fucking nice, Kevin." He leaned forward one last time and kissed Kevin, who held his head and tongue-fucked his mouth. He thrust faster and harder three or four more times and then emptied himself into the condom. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead into Kevin's tattoo, riding out each of the individual waves that coursed, like electricity, through his exhausted body.

He collapsed on top of Kevin and was immediately enveloped in those strong arms.

"Jesus, baby," Kevin panted in his ear. "We're definitely doing that more often."

Eric snorted. "I was just thinking the same thing."

He put a hand on Kevin's forehead and pulled it down slowly over the rest of his face. Kevin kissed his palm as it passed.

"I love you," Eric said as he lifted his head. "Forever."

"I love you too." Kevin kissed him soundly and then lay his head back on the pillow, both of them exhausted.

Freshly showered, but still naked, Kevin and Eric were in bed, snuggled up together, each lying on his side, facing each other.

"Had a crazy thought," Kevin said, kissing Eric's fingertips.

"Just the one?"

Kevin bit a fingertip playfully. "Thought we might get tested, so... you know... we could stop using... you know... protection."

Eric bounded out of bed so quickly Kevin didn't realize what had happened at first. He rolled over and saw him rummaging through a duffle bag in the closet.

"Aha," Eric yelled and jumped back into bed. He sat cross-legged and pulled out the contents of a manila envelope. "Was pretty sure I brought this with me."

"You were tested already?"

"After Jonathan, I thought I'd better be sure. Stupid fucker was nothing but trouble for me, so... And, it turns out he wasn't a complete asshole."

"So, you're okay with the idea?"

"Of fucking without condoms?" Eric shuddered with excitement at the idea and slunk down beside Kevin again. "I've never done it, but just the thought of you coming inside me, feeling it pump inside me while you're buried up in there..." He shuddered again.

"Fuck," Kevin said, his mouth hanging open. "Last one is a year old, so I'll get tested this week then."

"Have you done it without protection in the last year?"

"Nope."

"So, then where's the need?"

"Looking at me. That's where."

Eric flushed and kissed him.

"Have you ever done it without protection?" Eric asked.

"When I was a teenager. But that was with a woman."

"Eww," Eric sneered and then softened his features. "I'm just teasing."

"You've never fucked pussy?"

"No," Eric stated with, what seemed to Kevin, a certain amount of pride. "Never."

"I only ever did the one, so..."

"That's how you knew you're gay?"

"That and I thought about her brother the whole time."

Eric laughed and pushed himself closer.

"I think I miss your laugh the most when I'm gone."

Eric kissed him again. "I miss everything about you when you're gone."

"Any one thing more than the others?"

"When you're here I know you're safe and warm."

Kevin smiled and rolled onto his back. He coaxed Eric to put his head on his shoulder.

"What's it like?"

"Fucking pussy?"

Eric nodded.

"I can't really say as I remember. It's all a blur to me now. It was the first time my dick was in anything other than my hand, so I came pretty quickly."

"Did you hurt her with that thing?"

"I don't know," Kevin shrugged. "I was seventeen and she was the age you are now. I've always just assumed that I wasn't her first."

"She took your virginity?"

Kevin nodded. "Entirely forgettable actually. Can't even remember what kind of car we were in."

"So, an older woman, huh?"

"I remember the smell too. She explained about blow jobs but said I was too big for that. Then she explained about how to make a woman come was to eat out her pussy and lick her clit and I was so lost by then, I just stuck my tongue down there, moved it around and tried not to breath in."

"How did you ever get it up?"

"I was seventeen. I walked around with a constant erection at that age. Didn't you?"

"No," Eric said. "I tried not to stick out. No pun intended."

"Who was your first?"

"One of the other boys on my gymnastics team. Tommy Perlmutter."

"Love at first sight?"

"No, but he was very sweet." Eric adjusted himself in bed and pushed his head closer to Kevin's. "We were spotting each other during the floor exercise and after a few hours of our hands all over each other, we both had erections. We were sixteen. We didn't do anything about it that night, but a few weeks later, we arranged to meet."

"And?"

"And nothing. It was the first time for both of us. We held each

other's cocks for a minute, pulled a few times and thought we were dying or something because it felt like someone was pulling our brains out through the ends of our dicks."

"Your first orgasm? Ever?"

"Between school and training there wasn't a lot of time for anything other than sleep."

"You must have been beautiful doing those routines."

Eric raised his head and kissed his cheek.

"No, I'm serious." Kevin rolled onto his side and propped his head on his hand. He pushed the covers down to Eric's thigh. "I can't take my eyes off you now, so I can only imagine what kind of thoughts this body inspired when it was in peak condition."

"And what about your body?" Eric caressed the chest and belly. "Women must be so pissed when they see you, all six-five, ripped like Superman and find out you don't do pussy anymore."

Kevin laughed and pulled Eric on top of him. "I wouldn't know. I'm too busy looking at shorter blond men with asses I can bounce quarters off of."

"So you're an ass man?"

"Most definitely."

"Thank god you like mine then."

"What about you?"

"Ass, I guess, as well," Eric furrowed his brow and contemplated. "And eyes. You can tell a lot about a person by looking in their

eyes. I don't sleep with a man if I don't like his eyes."

"I guess I should be flattered," Kevin said, leaning up for a kiss.

Eric obliged him. "What did you think of me? Letting you fuck me that very first day we met?"

"Honestly?" Kevin wasn't sure Eric wanted to hear his true thoughts, but he didn't want to start lying.

Eric nodded.

"I thought maybe you were lonely. Like I was. I thought you just wanted some skin on skin contact. To feel close to someone, I guess. God knows, I did that when I first moved up here and realized how lonely someone can feel."

"Right on all counts."

"Did you think I was a total slut?" Kevin was pretty sure he didn't want to hear the answer.

"I was trying to make you angry at me so I could hate you."

"Letting me fuck you was going to make me angry?"

"No," Eric snorted. "We were talking about things to do and you made some remark about how you'd heard me masturbating. Anyway, I was trying to goad you into showing me what a creep you were by asking you where I could find guys who like dick."

"Oh, shit, that's right," Kevin chuckled. "And I thought I was calling your bluff. I'd make a move, you'd back down and then we'd eventually get to fucking our brains out anyway when you realized what slim pickings there were." Kevin traced his lips with

a finger. "Lucky for me you weren't bluffing."

"I wanted you so badly," Eric confided. "I had to know what was underneath that T-shirt and those jeans."

"What you thought it would be?"

"Fuck no," Eric snorted. "You took your shirt off and when I saw so little body fat and all those veins and arteries sticking out like some bas relief from Michelangelo, I thought just touching you would probably kill me."

"Saw you in your sweatpants, tight T-shirt, and thought if I was ever lucky enough to see you naked and writhing underneath me while you screamed my name, I'd die a very happy man."

"And then it turned out you weren't a creep after all. Turned out you are a very generous, kind, loving man who doesn't freak out when his boyfriend has a crying fit."

"And that's when I knew I loved you. When you cried because you didn't want me to go."

"I think I fell for you when you talked about your dream of owning a ranch down south, having your dog with you." Eric kissed the tattoo. "Finding a man to share it all with."

"Did I forget to tell you?" Kevin wanted to hear that laugh again.

"Tell me what?"

"Your application was successful. I'm choosing you."

Eric laughed and shook his head. "Jackass."

"This is something," Kevin said with a low whistle. "Never had this while I've been up here."

Eric stood back and put his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "That's why I did it."

Kevin held up his hand and ran into the bedroom. He came back out seconds later with his phone. He snapped some pictures and then pressed a bunch more buttons before returning the phone to the bedroom.

"Another fetish?" Eric asked when Kevin came back out.

"Only fetish I got is making you scream my name." Kevin winked at him and Eric flushed. "No, I promised Mom I'd send her pictures." Kevin smiled at him, just beaming, and ambled up to him, pinned him against the counter. "So we'll eat like pigs and then fuck like rabbits."

"I'll do anything you want," Eric said, looking into the green eyes.

Kevin lifted him up and set him on the counter. "Anything?"

"Anything," Eric repeated.

"Kiss me, baby."

Eric closed his eyes and parted his lips. He moaned as their lips met, tentatively at first and then more eagerly. Their tongues darted out and back in and then finally met in Kevin's mouth.

Kevin's hand was at the back of Eric's head. He turned his head and the kiss was deep and hungry. Eric pushed his hand down the front of Kevin's jeans, on the outside, rubbing and squeezing his

thick cock. Kevin's hand was under the waistband of Eric's jeans. He arched toward Kevin, granting access to the probing fingers that were seeking the cleft of his ass. With one quick movement, Kevin pulled him forward, their cocks touching through two layers of denim.

"Jesus," Kevin muttered as he panted across Eric's ear. "Can't keep my hands off you."

Eric grabbed fistfuls of Kevin's T-shirt and pressed their torsos together. "Then don't."

"Fuck," Kevin growled. "Need to take the edge off here, baby."

"What do you want?"

"Will dinner keep for a few?"

"Yes," Eric sighed.

"Got an idea," Kevin said and carried Eric to the bedroom. He had them both naked in a seconds. "Lie down on the bed."

Eric did so and Kevin straddled his head, then leaned forward and swallowed his cock. Eric took Kevin in his mouth and cupped his balls with one hand and shoved a finger in his ass. Kevin pushed his shoulders between Eric's thighs so he could alternate between sucking him off and licking his hole. Eric focused on pleasing Kevin and tried to ignore the sensations of a mouth on his dick and a couple of fingers in his ass.

"Fuck," Kevin hissed. He was arching his back and pushing into that hot wet mouth. Eric crooked his finger and made little circles across Kevin's prostate. "Shit," Kevin cried out after pulling off

Eric's cock.

Eric redoubled his efforts, licking and probing and sucking. His hips seemed to have a mind of their own, pressing into the mattress and snapping up to push Kevin's finger ever farther inside. They both pushed in two fingers, each of them finding the other's gland at the same moment. The both called out.

"Gonna come," Kevin warned. Eric did not pull off the thick cock. He wrapped his arms around Kevin's hips and pushed him farther inside his throat. "Baby, gonna come." Eric didn't want Kevin to be upset with him, so he relented and pulled off at the last second, content to lick the big balls and shaft as Kevin pumped into his fist instead of his mouth. Within seconds of feeling the hot ropy jets strike his face and neck, Eric bucked his hips, and Kevin tightened his grip. He pushed up, hard, several more times and then his body tensed, every muscle in his body seeming to be somehow tied to his dick. They each rode their respective orgasms and then went limp.

"The minute that test shows negative, I'm never pulling off again."

"Just thinking about you swallowing," Kevin muttered. "Gets me so hot I can't control myself." Kevin turned around and lay down beside him. "Stay here." Kevin hopped over him and Eric heard the faucet in the bathroom. He smiled.

Goofy romantic giant, Eric thought as he waited with his hands behind his head.

"Fucking love this part," Kevin said as he returned, already wiped clean. He leaned over Eric's face and neck and began licking his

own seed.

"What do you taste like?"

Kevin shrugged. "Don't know. Cardboard?"

Eric snorted. "Just a little taste? Please?"

Kevin raised his eyebrows and relented. He licked a blob from near Eric's nipple and then tongue-fucked his mouth.

"Sweet," Eric said, smacking his lips. "I've never wanted to taste anyone before. Can't wait to feel it in my throat and my ass." He sat up and shuddered at the thought.

"Just don't turn me into some withered old husk of a man devoid of any protein, okay?"

"No promises," Eric said, slapping his bare ass. "Speaking of protein."

They dressed and returned to the table. Kevin sat while Eric pulled the perfectly done turkey out of the oven. He scooped the stuffing into a bowl and quickly whisked the gravy.

"Sir," Eric said, holding the carving knife out to him. "The honor is all yours."

"I've never done it," Kevin said, sounding panicked.

"Neither have I," Eric said with a shrug. "We'll start our own tradition. Cubes."

Kevin laughed and stood up. "Slices are so over, right?"

Eric put his chin on his hand and studied Kevin while he sliced

the turkey. "First slice is perfect."

"Okay, good," Kevin said. His tongue was poking through his lips. "I think I remember my dad slicing horizontally eventually otherwise some of these pieces are going to be the size of Nova Scotia."

"Cubes," Eric said again. "Just do cubes. We'll make a fortune."

Kevin was laughing so hard he had to stop for a moment. "If you're not going to help, then quit making me laugh."

"Sorry," Eric said, frowning.

Within another ten minutes, there was more than enough slices to feed the two of them and possibly the whole apartment complex. Before he sat down, Kevin headed back to the counter and retrieved the bottle of red wine. He poured a couple of inches into each glass and then sat down.

"To my Eric. The love of my life, the reason I'm always smiling and the most selfless man I've ever met. I love you, baby."

"I love you too, Kevin."

They toasted and drank, each setting their glass down within seconds of each other.

"What are you doing with all the leftovers?"

"Keep some here for you, turn the rest into sandwiches." Eric scrunched up his face. "Some of the kids can't afford to bring more than a sandwich or fruit for lunch, so I always bring extra."

Kevin put down his fork and tilted his head. "Now *I'm* gonna

cry."

Eric shrugged. "I really like those kids. They're very uncomplicated, you know. They have a very unique view of what being happy means."

"I guess that explains where all the food goes," Kevin said as he cut off a piece of turkey and stuffed it in his mouth. He rolled his eyes. "Jesus," he muttered around a full mouth. "You are definitely doing the cooking on the ranch."

"Told you before: as long as we're together in bed and naked at the end of the day, I'll muck stalls and even groom the hired help."

"Hey," Kevin said in mock annoyance. "The only person you'll be grooming is the boss." He pointed his fork back at himself.

"Yes sir," Eric said, popping a small slice of turkey in his mouth. "With pleasure, sir."

"Seriously. Remember when we went grocery shopping and I asked you why you were buying so much when I hardly ever see you eat anything at all?"

"Now you know where it's going."

"Wow," Kevin sighed. "If I didn't love you before, that would have cinched it for me."

"Does your family do a big spread for Christmas?"

"Big?" Kevin stuffed some mashed potatoes in his mouth. "Big doesn't even begin to describe it."

"I guess I should go out and buy presents, huh?"

"No," Kevin said, shaking his head. "With so many kids, we made a deal a long time ago. Mom and Dad get presents, of course, and then the nieces and nephews. That's it." Kevin held up his fork. "I've already bought them. Do that in the summer. And I've already signed both our names."

"So you've told them about us?"

"Are you kidding? Who do you think wanted the naked pictures?"

Eric looked up in time to see the mischievous grin.

"Just kidding. It was just Mom who wanted to see them."

Eric laughed and shook his head. "Seriously, did you send them pictures?"

"Not *those* pictures. I only sent that one selfie you took on the walking path. My favorite one of you."

"My favorite of you is the one where you're covered in all that gunk, from head to toe."

"You mean the one you tell me you jerk off to?"

"Not the naked one in front of the mirror. The one you sent me a couple of days before you got back. You're covered in oil and mud and smiling at me through the camera."

"Oh, that one."

"The other one is pretty special too," Eric put his finger in the gravy on his plate. He licked it off slowly. "Must have been after a hard day because your muscles are all tense and bulging with all

those veins sticking out and your hands were dirty--"

"One more word and I'm taking you back into the bedroom."

"Sorry," Eric said, not really contrite at all.

"Yes, I've told my entire family about you. They're very happy for me. My two gay brothers are jealous. And between you and me I think one of the straight ones is too."

"Stop," Eric said, snorting. "And they all look like you?"

"Sort of." Kevin took a break and sipped his wine. "Chuck is the oldest at thirty-nine. He's straight and married and has two girls and one boy. His wife's name is Gwen. Then there are Ken, thirty-seven, and Rick, thirty-six, both gay, no partners, at least nothing that lasts more than a night anyway. Then there's Martin, thirty-four, married to... to... girl who lives in the mountains..."

"Heidi?"

"Thank you." Kevin got out of his seat and went into the bedroom. "I got pictures on my phone." He came back out, already scrolling through them. He put the phone down by Eric's plate and kneeled while he scrolled through them.

Eric saw one very good-looking man after another, some alone, some in group shots. They were all very tall, very well-built and very handsome.

Kevin got up and went back to eating his Thanksgiving dinner. "Then there's me and finally Bryan, who is twenty-eight, straight, married to Susan and has one girl and two boys."

"Jesus, did your family own the gene pool or what?"

"Yeah, but I'm the good-looking one." Kevin said around a mouthful of cranberry sauce and turkey.

Eric scrolled through a few more photos and came across a picture of Kevin's parents. The man was very tall, very built, almost no hair except for the white fringe around his ears and had piercing blue eyes. The woman was at least six feet tall, slim, well dressed, stylish silver hair and emerald green eyes. They were caught mid-laugh, the smiles bright and the eyes even brighter. He had his arm around her, tucking her close to his body.

"Mom and Dad," Kevin said. "Frank and Diana."

"So lovely," Eric whispered. He blinked rapidly trying to dispel the heat from behind his eyes.

"Baby? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Eric said, forcing a smile and glancing up. "Your family seems very happy."

"Lot of love there, that's for sure."

Eric picked up the phone and turned it off. He handed it back to Kevin. He picked at his food for another couple of minutes.

"They're really excited about meeting you." Kevin had stopped eating. He was just studying Eric.

"And they know I don't have any family? You told them about me?"

"Not my place," Kevin said. He got out of his chair and kneeled

beside Eric again.

"Thank you for showing me the pictures," Eric said, still staring at his dinner. He thought he had it under control until Kevin caressed his back. He turned away, not willing to believe that he was crying, again, in front of Kevin. He turned away.

"Is it too much? Am I moving too fast?"

"No," Eric said, sounding like a croaking frog.

"I wanted you to see your new family. That's all."

Eric's chest heaved and he wiped at his eyes.

"Look at me, Eric. Please."

Eric turned and forced another smile. "You must think I'm pathetic."

"I know it's a lot to take in, but you'll like them. Honestly, and they're gonna love you."

"It's not that," Eric said taking Kevin's hand. "I'm sure I'll love them because you do."

"Then what?"

"It's hard sometimes, seeing what other kids had. Just brings back all those memories. No one wanted me."

Kevin pulled him close and stroked his back, resting his chin on Eric's shoulder.

Eric heard him snuffle and pulled back. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to upset you too. Probably should get some help with this, huh?"

"Only if you think it's a problem," Kevin said consolingly. "I certainly don't."

"Don't want to ruin Christmas, I mean."

"Trust me, baby. You won't be the only one crying." Kevin kissed him gently. "Dad's one big pile of mush. You should have seen him when each his grandkids was born. We all had to wear rubber boots for weeks he was crying so much."

Eric laughed and caressed Kevin's face. "Thank you, Kevin."

Kevin kissed him again and went back to finish his meal. "And he's a hugger too. So, consider yourself warned."

Feeling a little bit lighter, Eric dug into his meal and finished most of what was on his plate.

Kevin had seconds and thirds.

Eric just sat with him and watched him appreciate a home-cooked meal since he couldn't be with his family.

Kevin had finally filled his stomach. Eric laughed when he patted his stomach and got up to get the pumpkin pie out of the fridge.

"Fuck," Kevin said. "Forgot about the pumpkin pie."

"No rush," Eric said as he set the pie on the table. "It'll still be here tonight. And tomorrow and the next day."

"I've noticed you're not a big eater. Would have thought your metabolism would be through the roof being a gymnast and all."

"Don't work out like that anymore, so I don't really need to eat

that much."

"Still," Kevin argued. "You're what? Six feet, lots of muscle on that frame."

"Five-eleven. Tops. And the muscle is just what's left over from all those years of training. Another couple of years it might disappear altogether."

"Guess we'll have to figure out a way to work out those muscles then, huh?"

Eric blushed and took Kevin's hand.

"Too soon, baby. Gotta give me an hour or so. Feel like a bloated pig."

"Calm down there, Porky," Eric said, hauling on Kevin's arm. "Got something else in mind."

Kevin followed him to the bedroom and the two of them lay down on the bed, Kevin on his back, Eric at his side.

"Wanted to thank you for putting up with me," Eric said, giving him a tummy rub. "I can get a little... ungrateful... around the holidays."

Kevin pulled him a little closer, then kissed his temple. "You're not gonna scare me off, Eric. You can cry, laugh, throw things, call me names, but once we're on that ranch, we'll be in it for the long haul. Wanna grow old with you. Wanna wake up and see those pretty blue eyes every morning."

"You're gonna make me cry again."

"Nothing wrong with crying. Already got the rubber boots because of my dad."

Eric pushed his hand against Kevin's stomach.

"Besides, you may meet the other gay brothers and run for the hills."

"Why?"

"Oh, they're gonna flirt with you mercilessly."

"Even though they know I'm yours?"

"Especially because they know you're mine." Kevin put his hand on top of Eric's. "It's just harmless flirting. Tell 'em to back off and they will."

"Okay," Eric said, caressing Kevin's full belly.

"Come up here, Eric," Kevin said, shrugging his shoulder.

Eric pushed himself up so he was looking into Kevin's sleepy eyes.

"Feeling better?"

Eric nodded and smiled sincerely.

"Thank you for going to all that trouble just for me. Well, me and the kids." Kevin kissed him tenderly. "Best Thanksgiving meal I've had in a long time."

"I'm glad," Eric said. He patted Kevin's belly. "Want me to leave so you can sleep for a bit?"

"No way," Kevin said, tightening his grip on Eric's shoulders. "I'm

gone again in three days, sixteen hours and twenty-seven minutes. Gotta fill up my tank, if you know what I mean."

Eric smiled and laid his head back down, rubbing Kevin's belly until he heard the man's breathing deepen and his arm fall away.

PART IV

Eric sat in front of the radio, waiting for more news. It was the last day of Kevin's shift and several students had been called out of the school because of an accident on the oil rig. The same one where Kevin was stationed. It was Friday, the day Kevin was due home. He'd raced home from school and parked himself in front of the Bose sound system that picked up the only radio station that broadcast this far north.

"Come on," he screamed as he listened to more crap about upcoming news and which host would be showing up when. "Please," he muttered over and over.

He'd already called all of the teachers he could think of, asking if they'd heard any news. The only thing that anyone was certain of was that there'd been an explosion, two riggers were critically injured and the rest had managed to be evacuated to safety.

Eric didn't even know what the odds were. Two riggers out of how many? If there were a total of a hundred, then the probability of Kevin being one of the injured was one in fifty. But if there were only twenty riggers, that upped the odds to one in ten. He drummed his fingers on the table.

Why don't I know how many workers there are during a shift?

Why isn't anyone calling me back?

Why was I so afraid to let Kevin list me as his emergency contact?

Why the fuck did I ever come up here?

Eric couldn't take the walls anymore. The more he paced, the

smaller the rooms seemed to get. He grabbed his cell phone and opened it, checked for messages.

Nothing.

The last one was more than ten hours ago. Another selfie of Kevin smiling for him.

Why couldn't he have been a straight creep?

Why...

Eric put on his parka, left it unzipped and grabbed his keys. He'd just have to walk there and find out for himself. It would take him the better part of a month, but at least he'd know one way or the other.

His first stop was the diner, where he and Kevin had shared their first meal together.

No news at all. From anyone.

Next stop was the grocery store.

Nothing.

The wind was bitterly cold, the temperature dropping with each passing second. By the time Eric reached the Anglican church, he couldn't feel his face or his hands or his legs. He'd only been gone from the warmth of the apartment he shared with Kevin for fifteen minutes.

He entered the church and sank into the back pew. He looked around the beautiful space and studied the stained glass. Scenes from the Bible. He'd never been a follower, but he knew all the

stories. Too many foster families trying to teach the little orphans to be thankful any attention at all.

One panel caught his eye. It depicted the story of Jesus feeding the masses with just a couple of fish and a couple of loaves of bread. Or was it one fish and one loaf? Eric couldn't remember. He thought back to Thanksgiving dinner and how happy Kevin had been, how excited they'd both been for the future. Eric thought he was finally going to have a family of his own. He'd clung to that belief with every fibre of his being. Clung to the idea that he would never again be alone.

He pulled out his phone and checked for messages. He had the volume on high and the ring set to the most annoying one he could find. He hadn't heard anything, but he checked anyway.

Nothing.

He scrolled through the photos, skipping over the naughty ones. There were the ones of Kevin smiling, with a helmet, without a helmet, with oil and mud on his face, without oil and mud on his face. There were the ones of Kevin handing out some of the leftover turkey sandwiches that they'd made together after waking up from their nap together. And then there were the ones of Kevin's family, waving to the camera, sending holiday greetings to the man their Kevin loved but now would probably never meet.

Eric put the phone away and leaned against the pew in front of him. The tears came quickly when he thought of Kevin's poor family. He'd only been in Eric's life for four months, but he'd been in theirs for decades. Decades of memories. His first tooth, his first

haircut, his first day of kindergarten. Thirty years of memories. His family would have to somehow console themselves with that. Eric would miss him for the rest of his life, but that's what Eric's life had been thus far: missing something that had never been, something that he wasn't allowed to have.

He pushed himself back up and pressed his back against the pew. He wanted to hurt someone, hit something, but he was too exhausted. He'd spent the day bargaining with deities he'd never worshipped. He hadn't worshipped them because they couldn't answer the prayers of one lonely little boy wanting nothing more than a family of his own.

Touching the phone in his pocket, he got up and headed back out the door. The tears froze on his cheeks almost instantly. He let go of the phone--there would be no news--and walked back to his apartment.

Eric chastised himself for being selfish. Kevin didn't belong to him. Kevin was his own person, seeking out happiness on his own terms. If working on the oil rig was what he wanted, then Eric had no claim to ask for anything different.

Four months, he thought as he crossed the street without really paying attention. *At least I got that.*

Kevin's flight was delayed. He'd made it out an hour before the explosion. Now they were taking volunteers off the plane so that the injured and the workers with kids could be transported right away. The airVac helicopter couldn't fly close enough to the rig.

Kevin raised his hand.

Eric will understand.

He searched through his bag for his phone. Then his pockets. He began to panic.

Shit, I must have left it on my bunk. Too much of a goddamned hurry to get home to Eric. He thought of the pictures. His phone was protected by a password, but he'd lose the pictures if he couldn't get his phone back.

He was about to ask to borrow someone's phone, but then realized he didn't know the number.

Fuck. He's probably worried sick.

He sat down on one of the chairs and tried to think.

Did I ever give his number to Mom and Dad? Ken? Ricky? Fuck.

Was there any way of reaching him?

He checked his watch.

The school will be closed by now.

Would anyone have kids in his class? Would the parents have his number?

If he called the principal, would... Fuck. I don't even know if the principal is a man or a woman.

Think, you fucking idiot. Think.

Eric opened the door to their apartment.

Just mine now again, I guess.

He let his parka fall to the floor, not bothering to pick it up.

He looked at the box in the corner, the one with his prized possessions. He'd not even opened it when it had arrived in late August, two weeks late. By then, he had Kevin, so the two matching Tiffany lamps didn't really seem to matter; the apartment was filled with a different kind of light.

The radio was still blaring in his ears, but saying nothing he didn't already know.

If he was okay, he'd have called by now. Or sent one of those stupid selfies with that shit-eating grin.

He turned off the radio and stood in the silence. Wrapped in it. For another six months until he could teach out the rest of the semester and then head back south. Alone.

Strange, but I thought I'd be an absolute wreck. Crying great gobs of grief over a man whom I'd goaded into fucking me because I was trying to piss him off.

But Kevin rarely got pissed off. He'd learned that very early on. Kevin was the happy byproduct of a happy and loving family. He was always cheerful, trying to make Eric laugh because he loved to hear it.

I wonder when the funeral will be.

Would his parents be upset if I showed up, unannounced? Might

they be expecting me?

He would wait until Christmas was over, then maybe check the internet--

The internet.

He ran to his laptop and booted it up. Maybe there would be more information on there. At the very least, he might be able to call someone at the company and find out if Kevin Oberman was one of the injured workers. He waited patiently for the connection to be made. It wasn't unheard of this far north for the internet to be slower than down south. He had time.

All the time in the world.

He ran back to his parka and retrieved his cell phone. He punched in the number on the screen and waited.

All circuits are busy.

Eric sighed and pushed himself off the chair. He stripped out of his work clothes and took a shower, focusing on one task at a time: wash hair, rinse; wash body, rinse; step out, dry arms, then legs, then... He pushed away the memories of laughter and more intimate moments he'd spent in the shower with Kevin.

Just like he'd had to push down the memories of one foster home and realize he was moving to another. It was all just mental memory. Elastic, like the rubber bands he'd confiscated from two of his grade nine math students this morning. It would come back to him.

Four months.

He'd spent more time in some of the foster homes and couldn't even remember names or faces now. Elastic memory.

He tried to call the number again.

All circuits are busy.

Kevin's flight was announced, finally.

At least no one was killed. Eric will be happy to hear that news. At least he knows I'll be coming home eventually.

He stowed his bag overhead and sunk into the window seat. He put a hand on his knee to keep it from bouncing.

Baby, if you can hear me. I'm coming home.

He closed his eyes and willed the message to Eric.

One of the other riggers sat down beside him. He tried to read the name sewn under the company logo.

Fuck.

He couldn't read it. He consoled himself with the fact that Eric would be glued to the news somehow and would know no one was killed.

"Oberman?" someone yelled.

"Here," Kevin yelled and stood up.

"You forgot your porn," the guy laughed and handed him his phone.

"Thanks brother," Kevin said and took the phone. He checked

the battery.

Thank Christ.

He sent a quick text and turned off his phone, hugging it, willing Eric to pick up his phone.

Don't forget about our Christmas date, baby.

He sank back into the seat and finally felt like he could breathe again.

Eric's eyes danced under his eyelids. He was dreaming of Kevin, of their ranch outside of Edmonton. Kevin had bought a pair of ridiculously tall Stetsons and was trying to coax him to put it on.

"Not if it's gonna make me look like you," Eric said, running away from him.

"Ah, come on," Kevin said, looking hurt and crestfallen. "We're ranchers now. We gotta look the part."

"Since when do ranchers have to look like they're wearing a bucket on their heads?"

"Since forever."

"I don't remember Wyatt Earp looking stupid."

"He was a sheriff."

"Okay, then I want to be the sheriff."

Kevin faked left and then cornered him against the barn. He pressed himself against Eric and took off his hat, tossing it to the

ground to join the one Eric refused to wear.

"Nothing I can do to change your mind?"

"Maybe," Eric said, slipping a hand inside Kevin's shirt.

"Name it, darlin'," Kevin whispered. "I'll do anything for you. You know that." Their lips were almost touching.

"Say it again," Eric murmured against Kevin's lips.

"You're the successful applicant."

"Close, but not quite." Eric pushed a hand between them, pressing it against Kevin's erection.

"I love you."

Eric shook his head.

"Will you marry me?"

Eric smiled and surrendered to the kiss. Kevin's hands were undoing the snaps of Eric's shirt. It was quick work. Kevin eased away and took Eric's hand, leading him into the barn.

"Won't the horses be jealous when they see you naked?"

Kevin pulled him close, one strong hand between his shoulder blades and the other behind his head. "Probably," Kevin said, tracing his lips with a thumb. "Elephants were."

Eric laughed and pressed himself against Kevin's chest. He snuggled as close as he could and then opened his eyes in horror. He glanced up and saw Kevin smiling.

"What's wrong, baby?"

Eric backed away, his shirt tail stuck in the back of his jeans. He ripped it free and turned, running as fast he could.

No heart beat. There was no heart beat.

Kevin waited his turn to get in the line heading off the plane, checking his phone again.

Nothing.

Did he get the message? The picture?

Is he not answering 'cause he's that angry with me?

He found Eric's name under M for Mason and punched the button.

We're almost off the plane. Can't hurt much now, right?

Straight to voice mail.

Fuck.

He got off the plane and found a cab outside the tiny airport, sharing it with three other men. They were all headed to the same section of town anyway. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a fifty and a twenty.

"You can keep it if you can get us there as fast as possible."

The driver nodded and pulled away into the swirling snow.

He checked his phone again.

"You not on the tree?"

"Huh?" Kevin asked as he glanced over.

"The tree," the guy said looking at him like he was an idiot. "Wives set it up a while back. Something like this happens, admin calls one and then she calls two and pretty soon every knows who's okay and who's not."

"No, I'm not on the tree," Kevin muttered. *Fuck, that's right. There's an emergency phone tree.* Something he'd never used because there'd never been an accident while he was up here. The human resources department had his father's information as emergency contact, and Kevin was single. *Why would I remember the fucking phone tree?*

"Here," the guy said reaching for Kevin's phone.

Kevin pulled it away.

"Sorry, buddy. Was just gonna punch in my wife's number and you can call her and give her your gal's name and number. Then she'll be on the tree."

"Thanks. Sorry."

"Wife's name is Krista, if you wanna type it in."

Kevin did just to make the time go by a little faster. *Idle hands* and all that as his mother would say. The guy rattled off a phone number and Kevin punched it in, then thanked him again.

"What's your gal's name?"

Kevin looked over at the guy and then glanced at his phone. He pulled up his favorite picture and turned the phone toward him.

"Eric," he said.

"No harm, no foul, brother," the guy said. "Got two brothers who are gay."

"So do I," Kevin said as the cab slowed.

Wrong side of the street, but Kevin jumped out anyway. "Thanks, uh..."

"Derrick," the guy said and offered a quick salute.

"Very much."

Kevin closed the door and ran across the street, clutching his bag to his chest.

He tripped on the stairs and banged his knee pretty good, but he got back up and ran down the outside hallway, huffing and puffing by the time he reached the door for 312. He took a deep breath and turned the knob.

Unlocked.

Kevin pushed inside and saw him. Eric was there, at the sink, wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants. Just like the first time he'd ever laid eyes on the man. Except his eyes were puffy and he looked very tired.

"Eric?" He dropped his bag on the floor and tore off his parka. He unclipped the suspenders of his snowsuit and ripped the velcro along the sides.

Eric's body was perpendicular to the counter, his head swivelled all the way, his stormy blue eyes fixed on Kevin. He wasn't moving,

wasn't saying anything. As Kevin got closer, he could see the hand holding onto the sink turning white.

"I'm so sorry. I was in such a hurry to get out of there that I forgot my phone." He was within an arm's reach of Eric, but the man still wasn't moving. "I know you're mad and you have--"

Eric threw himself into Kevin's arms.

"Baby, I'm so sorry. I know what the last few hours must have been like." Kevin stroked his back and squeezed as tight as he could, all at the same time.

There was no yelling or screaming or anger of any kind. There was no noise.

"I did try sending a text to show you I was okay." Kevin kept stroking and squeezing. "Did you get it?"

He tried to pull away from Eric, to see his face, but he had a death grip around Kevin's neck.

"Eric, please. Say something. Tell me how much you hate me, how pissed you are--"

The wailing started gradually and grew as Eric released his hold on Kevin's neck. There were great big gobs of tears soaking into Kevin's T-shirt. And then the punches started. Just a little one to his chest. Then another one, a little stronger.

Kevin closed his eyes and welcomed it all.

"You fucking bastard," Eric said as he punched him. "All I could think about was your family and whether or not they'd let me come

to the funeral." He punched his chest again. "I gave everything to you and you couldn't remember your fucking cell phone?"

"Eric, I'm so--"

"Shut up," Eric screamed and punched him again, this time in the shoulder.

Kevin was shoved backward and rubbed at his shoulder. He came forward again. If Eric needed to punch him, he'd endure as much as he could take.

The keening petered out to a long string of expletives. And then Eric seemed to run out of steam. He slumped against Kevin's chest.

"You knew I never had anyone until you. You promised me a family and a ranch and told me you loved me..." Eric grabbed fistfuls of T-shirt. Kevin lowered himself to a chair and guided Eric onto his lap.

"I'm so sorry, Eric. So, so sorry." Kevin made little shushing sounds and stroked the trembling back some more.

After a few more minutes, Eric pulled away and pressed his forehead to Kevin's.

"Can you ever forgive me, baby?"

Eric nodded.

Kevin touched a hand to his own chest. "I'm not so worried about you fending off my brothers now."

"Sorry," Eric whispered.

Kevin put his hands on the perfect ass and carried Eric to the

bedroom. He set him on the mattress and then lay beside him.

"You're gonna have bruises," Eric said.

"Don't doubt it," Kevin said, kissing him and getting kissed in return. "Had no idea how strong you really are."

"Kick your ass you ever put me through that again."

"Don't doubt it for a minute." Kevin kissed him again. "If I promise not to piss you off, can we get naked and rest up before our flight tomorrow?"

Eric nodded and pulled at Kevin's T-shirt. He sat up and then practically tore off his jeans and then his boxers and socks. He stripped off his own clothes and then crawled back on the bed and let his body fall on top of Kevin's.

Kevin rolled them over after a few minutes and kept shifting left until he could cover them with the sheet and duvet.

"Tell me again," Eric whispered next to Kevin's ear.

"I want you to live with me on a ranch." Kevin whispered against his cheek. "Forever. Just you. Just me. Just us."

"Kevin?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"I was really scared."

"I know, Eric. I know." Kevin pulled him closer and pulled the covers up some more. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Or hurt you."

Eric pushed himself up on one elbow and put his ear over Kevin's heart. He replaced it with his arm and then settled back down.

"Kevin?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"I know you do," Kevin said, his own voice breaking a little. "And I love you. Always have. Always will."

Kevin fell asleep before Eric did. So, he lay awake, his forearm resting over Kevin's beating heart.

The truth was, he wasn't sure he'd ever sleep again. Not knowing that it could all disappear so quickly. The foster homes were one thing. After a while, most of the foster kids learned that nothing was really permanent, that things could disappear only to reappear a few days or weeks or years later. It was like some sort of magic act.

But what Eric felt for Kevin was a completely different magic. With just three little words, Eric had given everything to Kevin: his heart, his life and his future. And in return, Kevin, with those same three words, had given him back a bigger heart, a fuller life and a brighter future. One with a family and a ranch and a reason to forget all those momentary happinesses he'd once lived for.

Kevin was giving him something permanent.

Losing it, if only in his mind, for a couple of hours had knocked him back to his fifteenth birthday when the social worker had told him of a couple wanting to adopt an older boy, a boy who would live with them and become a part of their family. He'd planned everything to the smallest detail. He knew he wanted a shelf where he could keep his own books, drawers where he could keep his few pieces of clothing instead of in garbage bags. And he wanted a puppy, a brown one with brown eyes, a boy puppy, named Bingo. He would walk him and teach him how to play fetch and go swimming in lakes and swimming pools and they would crash through fountains together until they both lay panting on the grass. Just before going in to eat dinner at a table with only three, or maybe four, people around it instead of ten or twelve. And he wanted to have second helpings instead of giving part of his meal to the younger kids who complained that their tummies hurt.

He could still see the social worker's face when, after weeks passed with no news, she'd sat him down and told him that they'd chosen someone else. Another boy. He'd cried himself to sleep that night, but with no noise. He'd learned to cry without making any noise. He didn't want to wake up the other kids, or the foster parents.

And he'd learned to keep to himself, working his way through university as a waiter and occasional go-go boy in his roommate's boyfriend's club. He'd felt safe there. It's where he'd also developed an affection for what the older men had to offer. Older men like Jonathan. They didn't speak like men his own age. They seemed wise and kind and affectionate. And it got him through the

most difficult years of living hand to mouth, of not really knowing if he would be able to pay his tuition.

He'd gotten a job right out of university. It was teaching a math to several grade nine classes at a high school on the other side of town. He'd been used to long hours and sleepless nights, so preparing lessons late into the night had been a welcome change for him. He liked the students and they seemed to like him. He wasn't too much older than they were, and it seemed to show in how they trusted him. It made him rethink his desire to be alone, to stay alone. And then he met Jonathan. Tall, gorgeous, fifteen years his senior, with sparkling blue eyes and a quick wit.

It had taken him months to realize that Jonathan had been just like all the others who'd come and gone out of his life. Jonathan was only interested in sex and money. The two things in Eric's life that meant the least. By that time, Eric had nothing left in the bank. He'd had to use it all to pay off the debt that Jonathan had taken out in his name, without his permission. Eric hadn't been too concerned, at first. But then the enrollment at the school dipped and since Eric was the last teacher hired, he was the first to be set free.

Then the interview via the internet, the job offer and the long drive up here.

And then Kevin.

Eric propped his head on his hand, trying not to wake Kevin, and looked at him. He could see the red marks from where he'd punched him earlier, could see that one of them would be turning

an ugly purple in a few days. One thing he'd learned from years of gymnastics was how to recognize the hundreds of different types of bruises. He didn't really know if there were hundreds, but it sure seemed like it when he was coddling an arm or leg or wincing every time he laughed.

He watched the strong chest rise and fall. It was a beautiful chest. A strong chest. He'd let Eric hit him over and over, refusing to stop him or move away. He loved that chest, almost as he loved what was underneath it. The heart that beat a little faster whenever it was near Eric. The lungs that pumped air in and out a little more forcefully every time Eric kissed their owner. It was the most beautiful chest Eric had ever seen. Because it belonged to the most beautiful man Eric had ever seen.

And then there were the eyes that looked right through Eric. The eyes that saw everything, observed and studied Eric day and night, never missing anything. They were emerald. Eric knew Kevin had inherited his mother's eyes. Kind eyes. Laughing eyes. Eyes that twinkled when he was happy and clouded over when he was sad. Like he'd been tonight when he'd realized how scared Eric had truly been.

Unbreakable.

Eric traced the air above each letter. He didn't doubt the tattoo's message now, not anymore. While Eric had been ready to move on after assuming the worst, Kevin had come back, charged into the apartment and wanted to make everything right again. He'd admitted his mistake and wanted Eric to know how sorry he was.

That wasn't like any of the other men Eric had known.

It's why he'd reached out and hugged him. After the dream he'd had, the one where Kevin had had no heart beat, Eric needed to be sure he wasn't in yet another.

And there it was, beating furiously against his own, slightly out of synch. Kevin's heart beat. He closed his eyes and felt it. If he closed his eyes, he could summon a million moments, a million sensations that Kevin had given him over the past four months.

"Four months," he whispered to himself. He opened his eyes and saw Kevin smiling at him.

"Can't sleep?"

Eric shook his head.

"I'm sorry, baby," Kevin said, pushing himself up on his elbows. He winced.

"Let me get something for that," Eric said, but Kevin held him firm.

"You're not going anywhere," Kevin said, pulling him back down into his arms. "Every time it hurts, it'll remind me of how stupid I was."

"Will you be okay to fly tomorrow?"

"Of course, why not?"

"I don't know. Maybe reduced air pressure or increased cabin pressure..."

"I'll be fine," Kevin said and kissed his forehead. "Come on now.

Snuggle close," he said, taking Eric's arm and putting it on his chest. "And get some sleep."

"You won't tell your family I hit you, will you?"

"That's gonna be the first story out of my mouth," Kevin laughed and then winced. "Right after the one where I tell them what a fuckwit I was by making you worry. Trust me, they'll all be on your side."

"Tell me again."

"I want you to come and live with me on a ranch. Forever. Just you. Just me. Just us."

Eric finally closed his eyes.

Kevin was vaguely aware of something wet between his legs. He opened one eye and snorted.

"Preflight ritual? This is better than my mother making us all do the Chicken Dance."

Eric glanced up and pulled off of Kevin's erection. "No, but once we're there."

"We'll be in a hotel. Remember?"

"Not all the time."

"Fair enough," Kevin said and started twisting his body to the right. "Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Little help here, Bruiser."

Eric positioned his cock above Kevin's mouth.

Kevin growled and sucked it all in, right away. He pressed his thumb against Eric's warm hole and the eased it in slowly. He moaned and eased it in a little farther. He pulled off Eric's dick. "We just looking for relief or can I fuck this pretty little hole?"

Eric pulled off and moved farther down the mattress, ass held high. "I was afraid to ask."

"Why?"

"I thought you might still be upset with me."

"On your back, baby. Why would I be upset with you?"

Eric flopped onto his back and pointed to the bruises on Kevin's chest.

"These little things? That's nothing. I can take a lot more than that." He held up a hand. "That's not an invitation."

"I'm sorry," Eric said and spread his legs parallel to the mattress.

"Apology," Kevin said as he grabbed the lube and settled on his stomach and then pushed his face in between Eric's ass cheeks. "Accepted," he muttered against the sensitive flesh.

"Your scruff," Eric said, flinching a little. "Feels wonderful."

"Fuck yeah," Kevin pushed his scruff in between the man's cheeks and went first clockwise and then counter-clockwise.

"Ah, Kevin," Eric sighed. He was straining to see what was happening.

"Fucking love this hole, Eric."

"Your hole."

"Sweet sweet hole," Kevin muttered with his lips pushed against the sensitive flesh.

"Looking forward to this hole for two weeks."

Eric lost track of time as Kevin reacquainted himself with the writhing body beneath him. It was never the same routine, never the same series of events. Kevin made sure of it. It was as if he was studying new techniques while he was away, or perhaps it was because he was away for two weeks at a time that he didn't remember the exact same steps he'd followed before.

"Gonna try something," Kevin said. He stood facing away, his ass hovering over Eric's torso and bent over lifting him up by the hips. He moved him over to the headboard and propped him up there, Eric's shoulders and neck the only things touching the mattress. "Have to keep reminding myself we don't need condoms anymore." Kevin growled at the memory. "Remember that night, baby. We got my test results. And you were right. You've swallowed every load since then."

Kevin wondered if Eric knew what was coming. They'd watched in a Pay-per-View porno one night. Kevin seemed to remember this position as being standing reverse cowgirl but couldn't swear to it. Whatever the name, Kevin could come just from looking at Eric play with his own hole.

"Need a little more air," Kevin said and put his knees on either side of Eric's head. He shoved his dick in Eric's mouth and began thrusting. "Jesus, sweet fucking mouth." Kevin played with his

hole, making it twitch and plugging it with as many fingers as possible. When Eric slapped his ass, he pulled one out. Kevin tapped at the hole, then sucked on Eric's balls for a while.

When he felt that heat creeping up his spine, Kevin pulled out of Eric's mouth and then bent over and kissed him soundly.

"Ready?" Kevin didn't wait for an answer. He knew Eric was always ready for him. He pushed in just the head, then bent his knees so he could look through his legs. Eric's eyes were closed. "Fucking sweet. Nothing between us. At all. Love that." Kevin put his hands on Eric's cheeks and spread them as he pushed all the way in. "Oh, Jesus," he growled. "Yeah, squeeze me. Fucking hell."

Eric reached up with one hand and petted Kevin's ass before pushing in a finger, and then two. He massaged his prostate, his pressure increasing each time Kevin pushed in a little more forcefully. He caressed the quivering thigh that was closest to his free hand and then slapped Kevin's ass.

"Deeper," Eric moaned. "Fuck me, baby."

"Fuck," Kevin hissed as he pushed in balls deep. He withdrew and repeated the procedure, increasing both his and Eric's pleasure as he picked up speed. He pushed in a finger beside his dick and waited.

"Jesus, Kevin."

Kevin smiled and looked between his legs. "Feel good, darlin'?"

Eric's eyes were still closed and his head was thrashing from side

to side.

Kevin could see the flush creeping over Eric's chest and neck. He was close to coming. So, he pulled out slowly and then repositioned Eric's body on his side. He pushed up behind and lifted Eric's top leg. Eric held it there with one hand on the sole of his foot.

"My sweet little Gumby," Kevin grunted as he pushed inside again, using his abs and ass to slam inside of the man. He wrapped one arm around Eric's chest and held him fast while he pumped in and out. He took hold of Eric's rock-hard cock and began stroking it in time with his thrusts. "So sweet to me, Eric. So fucking sweet."

Kevin used his free hand to turn Eric's head and then kissed him. He licked Eric's lips and then tongue-fucked his mouth. The heat returned to Kevin's spine and he pumped and stroked even harder. He pressed his forehead against Eric's neck and whispered the man's name over and over.

Seconds before his own orgasm, Kevin felt Eric's muscles clamp down on his cock, felt the warmth of Eric's release flow over his hand and onto the clean sheet. He brought the hand up to Eric's mouth and then his own. He used that hand to turn Eric's head. He kissed him, swapping Eric's seed between their mouths.

"Oh, fuck, baby," Kevin hissed through clenched teeth.

Eric reached behind him and held Kevin where he was. The man loved nothing more than being full and experiencing Kevin spraying his insides with hot spurts of come. He pulled Eric close and kissed his shoulder and ear.

When Kevin got his breath back, he let go, pulled out slowly and then settled back between Eric's ass cheeks. Since they'd stopped using condoms, this was Kevin's new favorite part. He kissed and licked the hole until he got some of his own seed back and then climbed up to do some serious kissing, the two men sharing ever bit of themselves.

Kevin settled himself on top of Eric and braced his elbows on either side of the flushed face.

"You okay?"

Eric smiled and grazed his palm over Kevin's face. "Never better."

"Wonder if I should get us some more pornos for Christmas."

Eric snorted. "I thought we were doing okay on our own. You bored with me already?"

"Never in a thousand lifetimes."

"All I was hoping to do this morning was give you a nice blow job as an apology."

"When have I ever been able to leave it at just a blow job?"

"Never," Eric sighed.

"Happy, baby?"

"Didn't realize how much until last night," Eric said. He kissed his fingertips and pressed them to Kevin's lips.

"I'm--"

"I didn't say it to get another apology."

"I was gonna say, 'I'm glad.'"

"Liar," Eric said. He stretched his arms above his head. "I forgave you last night. You promised not to do it again. Enough said."

"Kay," Kevin whispered. He put his left hand between Eric's shoulder blades, and used his right to sit back on his heels, bringing Eric up with him. "We got four hours before we have to be at the airport."

"You should try and get some more sleep," Eric said, wrapping his arms around the strong neck. He kissed him lazily and wiped some residual sweat off his forehead.

"Kinda like this," Kevin said, shifting them to the side so their heads would land on the pillows. "Going down," Kevin said as he lowered their bodies back down to the mattress. He moved to Eric's side. Kevin draped one leg over both of Eric's and then put one arm under his head and the other across his chest. "There. Now you can't move."

"You sure about that?"

"Well if you're gonna fight dirty."

Eric laughed and rolled toward him.

"There it is," Kevin said, kissing him. "Hoping I could make you laugh again."

Kevin looked into the blue eyes and strengthened his hold on the firm body.

"I was gonna wait until the flight to show you one of your surprise gifts, but I'd like to show you now." Kevin let go with one arm and reached to the bedside table. He took his phone and scrolled to the letter K in his contacts. He turned the phone toward Eric.

"Krista?"

"She's in charge of the emergency phone tree for the workers. I'm gonna call her while we're at the airport and give her all of our information."

"Thank you," Eric said with the sweetest smile. "That's the gift to beat so far."

"Challenge accepted," Kevin said, thinking of the other surprise gift.

"I love you, Kevin." Eric was held firm against the strong warm body.

"I adore you, Bruiser."

Eric laughed and pinched Kevin's nipple.

"I love you too, Eric."

"That's better," Eric said.

"Do I get one of mine now?"

"I didn't beat you to death last night."

"Touché," Kevin said with a nod.

"If you'll let me go, I'll go and pick one for you."

"Pass," Kevin sighed. "I'm happy with this one."

"Kevin?"

"Yeah, baby?" Kevin smiled. "You want me to tell you again?"

"No," Eric said. "What if I have to pee?"

"Nice try. You're not leaving. You're going to get some sleep."

"Kevin?"

"Yeah?"

"You could have told them about my past."

"I know."

"Why didn't you?"

"The only thing they need to know is that I love you."

"What if they don't like me?"

"They don't have a choice."

"I don't want to be the cause of any friction in your family."

"That," Kevin said, ducking his head to kiss his lips. "Is why they'll like you. 'Cause you're as nice as they are."

"Kevin?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"When we move onto the ranch, can we get a brown puppy with dark eyes?"

"We'll empty the shelter if you want." Kevin smiled. "What would you name him, or her?"

"Him," Eric said. "Bingo."

"Sweet," Kevin yawned. "I love puppies."

"Have you ever thought about having children?"

"You mean adopting?" Kevin thought about that for a moment. "Not really, but since I met you, I've been thinking differently. And if I spare one kid what you went through, I'd be an idiot to dismiss it outright."

"I want to be closer to you."

Kevin released him and Eric pushed closer and snuggled up against his chest.

He lay there, studying the serene expression of a happy man, a man with no demons and no greater worry than deciding if his ranch could hold one puppy or one hundred. A man so content with his chosen lot that he'd be willing to share it if it meant sparing a lonely child a lifetime of wondering why another child had been chosen.

Eric watched as Kevin struggled to keep his eyes open.

When Kevin's closed, Eric closed his as well.

"Eric?" Kevin sat up and rubbed gently at his chest. "Baby?"

"Right here," Eric said as he came into the bedroom. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Woke up and your side was cold."

"Just checking that our flight is on time and looking up the number for the taxi."

"Come back to bed," Kevin said through a yawn.

"Can't," Eric said, shaking his head. "We've got to get going in half an hour."

"That'll give us twenty-five minutes to fuggle."

"Fuggle?"

"Fuck and cuddle."

"No way. If we miss that flight you know who your family will blame?"

"Me."

"Not bloody likely."

"Ten minutes. Just snuggling then."

"We can hold hands on the plane."

"Not the same," Kevin whined. "Please?"

"No," Eric said and walked out of the bedroom.

Kevin scrambled out of bed and checked his luggage. He was pretty sure that Eric wouldn't go snooping for his other surprise gift, but he wanted to make sure. He stretched, reaching for the ceiling and balancing on his tip toes and then headed out to the kitchen.

"Are jeans okay?"

"For what?"

"Meeting your family?"

"Never thought of naked, but I'm game."

"Be serious," Eric chided.

"Baby," Kevin said as he wrapped his arms around his little bundle of nerves. "Jeans, khakis, little black cocktail dress. It doesn't matter. We'll probably all be in jeans. And even if they aren't, I will be, so... You choose."

"I guess I'll decide once we get to the hotel."

"Good choice."

"Would you like me to fix you something for breakfast?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

"You won't get the chance to eat again until much later tonight."

"Food on the plane," Kevin said through another yawn.

"I see what you're trying to do here, Mr. Oberman."

"What? I can't hug the man who's partial to me?"

"You're naked. I'm only wearing sweatpants. And this is cuddling."

"No," Kevin said, swaying back and forth a little. "Cuddling standing up is called hugging." Kevin pulled Eric to the sofa.

"Hugging lying down, say on the sofa, is called--"

"Do you see where my pen is right now?"

Kevin looked down and then grinned at Eric. "Go ahead. You're only hurting yourself. I can always pee into a bag."

Eric laughed out loud and let Kevin pull him onto the sofa. "Ten minutes."

"Nope. You threatened me. We're back up to twenty-five."

"Where's that written?"

"Why? You gonna go and check?"

"I just want everything to be perfect."

"For my family?" Kevin wrapped his arms and legs around him. "I guarantee you that within the first five minutes, Ken or Rick will make a comment about your ass, Martin or Chuck will wonder out loud why you *chose* someone like me and Mom and Dad will be shoving baked goods at you like some crack dealers behind the elementary school at recess."

"That doesn't mean I shouldn't try, at least."

"That's exactly what it means." Kevin closed his eyes.

"Wake up," Eric said, trying to struggle free.

"No use," Kevin sighed. "I'm stronger than you and your pen is nowhere near enough to Mr. Porterhouse."

"You named your penis?"

"Didn't you?"

"No," Eric said. He was laughing so hard that he was making the two of them bounce on the sofa.

"God, love that sound."

"Why Mr. Porterhouse?"

Kevin opened his eyes and sneered. "Uh...thick and juicy." He closed his eyes again.

"I guess there's a certain logic to that." Eric continued to struggle. "Will you let me go now?"

"Eighteen minutes left."

"How could you possibly know that?" Eric asked, incredulous. "What if I promise we'll join the mile high club?"

"What shall we call yours?"

"My what? My penis? Nothing."

"Mr. Nothing? No. Gotta be more positive."

"Kevin, please let me go."

Kevin opened his eyes. "Name it or wait seventeen minutes and twenty-three seconds."

"Jesus," Eric hissed, dropping his forehead to rest beside Kevin's neck. "You're worse than the students."

"Do I have to have a chat with some students who want you to fuggle with them?"

"Eww, you're sick."

"Fifteen minutes."

"Okay. How about Mr. Gumby?"

"Eww. Gumby is green."

"You called *me* Gumby."

"Shall I call for a judge's ruling?"

"Who's the judge?"

"The person who's naked. Did you not study your playbook?"

"What playbook?" Eric calmed down and Kevin became suspicious. "Kevin?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"If you let me go, I promise, when we get the hotel, I'll do whatever you tell me to do."

Kevin shook his head quickly. "I can already make you do whatever I want. Thirteen minutes and twelve seconds."

"Fine. I give up," Eric sighed. "Do whatever you want with me."

Kevin opened one eye and studied him. "Nope. Can see you're trying the fake and run."

"No, I'm not."

Kevin felt him wiggling again.

"I'll prove it to you. Help me. Use your legs and pull these sweats off my legs."

Using two pairs of legs and feet, they managed to free Eric of his sweats.

"There," he said. "I'm completely at your mercy."

"Always have been."

"Then I'm confused. What is it you want from me?"

"Just got it. Seven minutes. Close enough." Kevin released him, but Eric didn't move.

"Now I don't want to move."

"Have to. Taxi's gonna be here any minute." Kevin picked him up and tossed him onto the other part of the sectional sofa. He hopped up and ran, his erection swinging back and forth, to the bedroom.

"You haven't even showered yet."

"Oh, shit," Kevin called from the bedroom. "I'll just wear a toque."

"At least put on some deodorant."

Kevin trotted to the bathroom. "It's gone."

Eric sighed. "You packed it perhaps?"

Kevin stepped out of the bathroom and gripped his dick. "Takes so much blood to fill this, so little left for thinking." He heard Eric's laughter all the way to the bedroom. He shoved himself into his jeans, put on a T-shirt and then socks and rummaged for a toque.

"Baby," he called and then saw Eric standing in the doorway, Kevin's favorite blue toque in his hand. He stuffed it over his unruly hair and kissed Eric's cheek. He walked past him to get his chukas and smacked his naked ass. "How come I'm the only one who's ready?"

More laughter as Eric started dressing in the bedroom.

"Were you serious?" Kevin leaned over the armrest.

"About what?"

"Mile high club," Kevin whispered, his lips barely moving. He looked around.

"We could be arrested, you know."

"Only if we're caught. I'll tell them I'm a doctor doing an emergency prostate exam."

Eric covered his mouth with his hand.

"I'm going to check it out."

"Kevin," Eric hissed but it was too late.

He's gonna get me into so much trouble, Eric thought as he craned his neck around the two empty seats beside him.

Kevin returned within a few minutes.

"Well?"

"Now you're suddenly interested?"

"I hate you." Eric went back to reading his book.

"Too small," Kevin whispered.

"Uh... gymnast. Remember?"

"Seriously? Fuck me," Kevin muttered. "Go take a look."

"Count to twenty," Eric whispered. "If I'm not back by twenty, it's

on."

"Fucking hell," Kevin hissed and clamped a hand over his mouth.

What the hell is he talking about? Too small. Eric stood inside the bathroom. There were a hundred different possibilities in a bathroom this size.

He heard the knock at the door and opened it. Eric pulled him inside and put a finger to his lips.

"We've got five minutes. Tops." Eric whispered and dropped to his knees. Kevin was hard within the first twenty seconds.

Totally do-able, Eric thought as he undid his jeans and turned around.

PART V

Kevin returned to his seat first, then a few minutes later Eric sat beside him. They were flushed and still panting slightly, but no one seemed to be the wiser. And Kevin had checked. No one noticed that his toque was inside-out, or that his lips were red and swollen.

"Fuck," Kevin hissed and threaded his fingers with Eric's. "You're my new hero."

Eric grinned and kissed Kevin's hand.

"God, I love you so much."

"Remember your promise," Eric said, holding up a finger.

Kevin made an X across his heart and closed his eyes, grin firmly in place.

"Kevin?"

He opened his eyes and turned to Eric.

"We're landing. Fasten your seat belt."

"Did I fall asleep?"

"No," Eric said. "The flight is supposed to be fifteen minutes long."

Kevin shook himself awake and clipped his seat belt around his waist.

"By the way," Eric whispered. "The flight attendant found this in the bathroom."

Kevin glanced down at his phone in Eric's hand.

"I'm gonna staple that thing to your forehead as soon as I can find a stapler."

"You were in there last," Kevin mumbled. He leaned over and puckered up. "Every one knows the last one out checks for this kind of thing."

"Everyone?" Eric asked sarcastically and then obliged him with a quick kiss.

"You're the best," he said. "Can't wait for the flight home."

Eric turned and glared.

"Oh, right. Sorry. I promised once would be enough." He grinned sheepishly. "I was talking about the peanuts anyway."

Eric smiled and interlaced their fingers.

"Feeling relaxed yet?" Kevin asked.

"Surprisingly yes."

"Good," Kevin kissed the back of his hand. "Time is it?"

Eric checked his cell phone. "Four hours until your parents."

"Nap as soon as we check in?"

"Will you be naked?"

"And showered." Kevin said waggling his eyebrows.

"I'm in."

The plane landed, they got their bags collected and then headed out to find a cab.

Forty minutes later, they were checked in and in the shower together. There was washing, lots of kissing and petting, and then they crawled under the sheets of the king size bed.

"I may have been a little hasty making you promise that," Eric said, snuggled up to Kevin's warm body.

"I knew it," Kevin grunted. "Knew you were as turned on as me." He rolled over on top of Eric, settling in between his legs.

"I'm not making any promises," Eric cautioned. "We'll see how observant the flight attendants are."

"Smart, funny, gorgeous, best ass in the whole world and a little kinky."

"Only after meeting you," Eric said, kissing him. "Can't seem to say no to you."

"Shall we talk fantasies we should explore?"

Eric smiled. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"Well you just fulfilled one of mine, so what's one of yours? Doesn't have to be kinky."

Eric propped himself up on one elbow and studied him for a moment. "Okay," he said. "And then you'll try to get some sleep?"

Kevin nodded and turned on his side, his green eyes sparkling.

Eric took a deep breath and let go of most of it. "A typical bar. I'm the bar tender. We've just opened for business and I've got my hands full wiping tables, stocking the fridge, you know, bar tender worries. Five minutes after unlocking the door, a tall, dark and

handsome stranger walks in. He casts his eyes around the place and I ask him if he needs some help. He says nothing, just walks over to me and steps behind the bar, takes me in his big arms and kisses me like I've never been kissed before. But I mean so hard and long that my knees get weak." Eric cleared his throat. "He lets me go and, in a rough voice, tells me to take my clothes off, which, of course, I do without question. He picks me up, puts me on the bar and then puts one hand on my chest and the other across my thighs and sucks me dry. I've never been more satisfied, you know, sexually, in my life. I'm practically begging this guy to fuck me now. He picks me up and carries me over the pool table, lays me out on it and then strips his clothes, so slowly that I think I'll probably just come from watching how his muscles move. He tells me, in that gruff voice, to put on a show for him. 'Make me want to fuck you,' he says. So, I pull my legs apart, show him my ass, show him how flexible I am and beg him to tell me his first name. He asks why I need to know and I tell him it's so I know who I'll belong to. He tells me that his name is--"

"Kevin."

Eric laughed. "A tough, gruff guy named Kevin?"

"Hey."

"Anyway, turns out that Kevin likes to interrupt stories, so I climb off the pool table--"

"Sorry. Sorry. I promise I'll just listen."

"I'll meet you halfway. Did you have any nicknames or anything like that when you were growing up?"

"Thunder. From when I was on the football team in high school."

"He tells me his name is Thunder. I thank him and then lie back. I suck on my finger and stick it inside me pulling my legs behind my head. I ask him to show me just his bush and a some of his cock. Once again, he asks why. 'So I know how many fingers to use to get myself ready for the such a big man.' He undoes the button of his jeans and pulls them down just a little while I'm moaning and begging him to fuck me. 'Thunder,' I moan as I turn around and do side splits, reaching behind to put my fingers back inside me, 'My fingers aren't nearly big enough. You'll have to use your fist to get me ready.'"

"I am so hot for you right now."

Eric ignored him.

"Thunder steps over slowly and smacks my ass. Tells me to let him know if that was too hard. 'It'll never be hard enough,' I say to him. He smacks me again and picks me up and holds me against his chest. Kisses me long and hard again. Puts me back on my belly, on the pool table and tells me to unzip him. If I do a good job of sucking him, he'll fuck me and take me with him. I pull myself over to the edge of the pool table and pull him out of his jeans. He's huge and hard as a rock already. He pounds my mouth and then starts poking fingers into my ass, until finally he's fisting me."

"I think I just came."

"When he's had enough, he picks me up, tells me to put my arms and ankles on his shoulders, that I'll need to hang on for the twenty

minutes he's going to fuck me, harder than I've ever been fucked before. He impales me and tells me if I stop kissing him, he'll just go find some other slut who'll give him what he deserves."

"I don't like this guy."

"Too bad. He's huge and fucks me to within an inch of my life. He comes like a geyser, I never stop kissing him and he tells me that I belong to him now. Tells me that if any man even looks at me, he'll kill him."

"If I fought him and won, would you come with me instead?" He wrapped his arms around Kevin, not really liking this fantasy anymore.

"What if he's so much bigger than you that--"

"I'd keep getting up until he goes down and you'd be mine."

"And what would *you* do with me?"

"This," Kevin said, pushing Eric back on the warm sheets. He kissed him, gently. "Tell you I love you. Tell you that you never have to go with him or even see him again." Kevin caressed his chest. "Then I'd show you how a man is supposed to make love to someone like you." He got between Eric's legs and spread them wide. He settled on his belly and kissed his hole, closing his eyes and savoring the heat and the responsiveness and the feeling of Eric's long fingers on his head. He put in a finger, then two.

He looked across the flushed, writhing body and withdrew his fingers. He pushed himself off the bed and found the lube. He stood there, naked, and slicked himself and then crawled back on

the bed to get Eric ready.

"I'd enter you. Slowly. Make sure you know how pleasurable it can be to give yourself to a man." Kevin pushed inside. He seated himself right to the base of his cock. "I'd tell you about my ranch, about how you never have to worry about being alone again." He moved slowly, purposefully. Kevin understood what the fantasy represented in Eric's mind: someone who wanted him was better than being alone. "Promise you a lifetime of kissing, a warm bed, hours of foreplay, hot baths, a roaring fireplace, even my weird family. And as many dogs as you want."

Eric closed his eyes.

"Look at me, Eric," Kevin said softly.

He opened his eyes.

"I want you, Eric. Forever. We'll be happy on *our* ranch. Forever. Just you. Just me. Just us. And Skeeter. And Skeeter's new best friend, Bingo."

Eric laughed. "Then I'd have no choice. I'd have to go with you."

Kevin smiled and kissed him. He pushed in and out, reassuring Eric with every thrust just where he belonged.

"Please, Kevin," Eric whispered against the skin of his neck. "Move. Need to feel you."

Kevin kissed him and pushed harder and faster. "Tell me again, baby."

"I'll always go with you." Eric wrapped his arms around Kevin's neck and rubbed himself against his belly.

Kevin heard a whimper and then felt Eric's release. He pushed his lips to Eric's one last time and whispered his name as he rode out the waves of his own orgasm.

Eric looked at the big house. It was festooned with Christmas lights of every variety.

"My dad," Kevin said as he paid the cab driver.

"Frank," Eric whispered to himself. "And Diana is your mother."

"Keep the change," Kevin told the driver and opened his door.

Eric's hand was trembling as he put it on the handle. *God, please, let them like me.*

Kevin was waiting for him on the sidewalk. He took a deep breath, picked up the bag full of present beside him on the seat and pushed open the door.

"Thank you," Eric said to the driver and got out, closing the door behind him.

"Left foot in front of the right, then--" Kevin said, laughing.

"Shut up," Eric said, gripping the bag's handle tightly.

"Okay," Kevin said with a shrug. "I'll have them come out one by one and introduce themselves."

"Not funny," Eric said, moving beside Kevin. "Frank and Diana,"

he muttered to himself.

They were halfway to the front door when it opened and two slightly different copies of Kevin walked out onto the wrap-around veranda.

"Hey, Squirt," one of them said.

Eric glanced at Kevin.

"I'll tell you later. The one with the black jeans is Ken, the other one is Rick."

"Ken and Rick," Eric said under his breath.

"Merry Christmas, Peabody," Kevin said to one brother before embracing him tightly. "Merry Christmas, Socks," he said to the other, embracing him just as tightly. He turned to smile at Eric. "Ken and Rick? This is Eric Mason. Eric? This is Ken and Rick."

Eric shook each of their hands, amazed at how much the three brothers resembled each other.

"I know," Ken said, taking the bag from Eric's hand. "It freaks everybody out. People used to think we were triplets."

"I'm the good-looking one, though," Rick said, coming in for a brief hug. "It's nice to finally meet you in person. We thought you were another of Squirt's imaginary friends until he sent Mom and Dad a picture."

"He wouldn't tell us anything about you."

"Like do you have any gay brothers? Or at least curious straight ones?"

Eric laughed. Kevin put an arm around him and led him into the house from the cool wind and brilliant sunshine.

Frank and Diana were waiting just inside the door.

Before he could get his coat off, Eric was being hugged by Frank while Diana embraced her second youngest and kissed him on the cheek. Ken and Rick walked through to the back of the house.

"Dad," Kevin said and hugged his father tight. "Mom? Dad? This is Eric."

Diana stepped forward and embraced him, kissing him lightly on the cheek.

"So you're the boy who stole our Kevin's heart?"

"Dad," Kevin sighed. He turned to Eric. "I did warn you."

"He didn't give me a choice after stealing mine," Eric said, blushing.

They laughed and Frank helped him off with his coat.

"I just finished a batch of Kevin's favorite cookies," Diana said. She took Eric's arm. Kevin stayed behind, in the foyer, with his father.

Eric glanced back at him and got a wink. He wondered what Frank was going to say.

He didn't give me a choice after... God, shut the fuck up already.

"You have a beautiful home, Mrs. Oberman."

"Diana. Please."

"Sorry. Diana."

"Please. Sit." Diana pointed to a huge harvest table in the middle of an equally huge kitchen. There were cabinets and granite counters for miles all around the perimeter of the kitchen. Eric inhaled the scents of cinnamon and sugar, cherries and strawberry jam.

Eric sat down beside Ken. "Kevin and I brought something for you, Mrs.... Diana."

"How thoughtful," Diana said.

Eric looked at Ken, who pointed since his mouth was full of cookies. Eric got up and took a beautifully wrapped gift from the top of the bag. He presented it to Kevin's mother. "Thank you for inviting me. Or letting Kevin invite me."

"You're very welcome," Diana said, accepting the gift. "Any time."

"Kevin told me about your collection," Eric said, rubbing his palms down the front of his jeans. "I hope you like it."

"Shall I open it now?"

Eric shrugged. "If you'd like."

"Kevin has told us nothing," Rick said, wiping his hands together after popping some nuts into his mouth. "Are you from the north?"

"No," Eric said, sitting back down beside Ken. "Lethbridge."

"Didn't we have cousins living there once?"

"No," Diana said, carefully unwrapping the gift. "Medicine Hat."

She used her manicured nails to expertly peel back the tape from the glossy green paper.

"You're not spending Christmas with your family?" Ken asked, then popped another cookie into his mouth.

"No," Eric said, taking a deep breath. "I was in foster care until I turned eighteen."

Ken and Rick stopped chewing and Diana stopped unwrapping. The three of them looked at each other and then back at Eric. He could feel his hands become clammy, the flop sweat at the base of his neck.

"Nice going, Peabody," Rick muttered.

"I'm sorry," Ken said. "I didn't know."

"It's okay," Eric said. "Not everyone is as lucky as you and your brothers."

"Kevin tells us you're a teacher?" Rick went back to eating more nuts.

"Yes, that's right. High school. Math, mostly."

"Math? Oh, you and Peabody, uh, Ken here are going to get along very well. Probably bore the rest of us with statistics and Fermat's enigma or whatever it's called."

Eric shrugged. "Enigma or Last Theorem," he said matter-of-factly.

"So, what the hell are you doing with Squirt then? We're much better looking, and smarter."

Eric knew they were joking, but he couldn't resist giving it right back. "Not smart enough to be there to help me with my bags when I was moving in next door to Kevin's apartment."

"Touché," Diana said. "Oh, Eric," she sighed as finally freed the present from its sturdy box. "This is simply stunning. You have a very good eye." She carried the crystal bowl over to the table and put it in the center. She put a hand on the back of his head and kissed his forehead. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Eric said.

Kevin and Frank entered the kitchen and stopped. Kevin was grinning. He pushed Ken out of his chair and moved closer to Eric, putting his hand out, palm up. Eric placed his on top. Kevin closed his.

"Your Eric has just been teaching your brothers some manners," Diana said. She moved to stand by Kevin, then bent over and kissed the top of his head. "Thank you for the gift, dear."

"That was all Eric. He even wrapped it." Kevin took a cookie and popped it in his mouth. "What'd these idiots say to you?"

"Why didn't you tell us that Eric doesn't have a family?" Ken took another seat by Rick.

"Not my place," Kevin said with his mouth full. "But he has one now." He leaned over and kissed Eric.

"Yes, he does," Frank said coming over to admire the crystal bowl.

"Would you like a tour?" Kevin pulled him out of his chair before

he could answer. "I can tell you where the nicknames came from."

"Just be sure to mention why we call you 'Squirt'," Ken warned. "Or we'll show him the pictures."

Kevin led him upstairs, never letting go of his hand. Once they were at the top, he ducked his head and kissed him. Several times. He was running his hands over arms and chest and belly. "No blood. No broken bones--"

Eric slapped him on the bicep.

"Come on," Kevin said, laughing. "I'll start with my old room. Mine and Bryan's."

He led Eric into a modest sized room, two twin beds on opposite walls with two matching nightstands in between them. "Which one was yours?"

Kevin pointed to the one on the right, against the outside wall. Eric sat on it and smiled.

"What?"

Eric shook his head and looked up at him, furrowing his brow. "Squirt?"

"I was eleven and woke up one night screaming for Dad. When he came in I showed him why I'd been screaming. That's how I learned about nocturnal emissions." Kevin flushed to the tips of his ears.

Eric tilted his head to one side. "Aww. Bless your little heart."

"Ken's nickname is Peabody because of the cartoon. Mr.

Peabody and Sherman. Loser used to drive us nuts reciting facts and figures."

"And Socks?"

"Rick's big, like me," Kevin said, moving a hand in front of his crotch. "Used a sock to, you know."

Eric held up a hand. "Got it. Thanks." Eric got off the bed and crossed the short distance between them. "Why aren't you called 'Socks' then? Or is your other nickname 'Christmas stocking'?"

"Flirt," Kevin said and kissed him. "I had two pillows. When I felt the urge, I'd put one in the middle of the bed and..."

"Lucky pillow," Eric said, kissing him. "Is it wrong that I'm picturing a tall, gangly sixteen year old with a beautiful ass coming all over the pillow between his legs."

"Only if that sixteen year old isn't me."

Eric laughed and pressed himself to Kevin's warm body.

"Happy, baby?"

"Only if you are."

"Good. Then we're both happy," Kevin said and kissed the top of his head.

Kevin stood, hands in his pockets, leaning against the door jamb, and watched his family fall under Eric's spell. He'd never doubted it for a minute. They'd fall even faster than he did.

Eric had learned their names already, even the children. The three remaining straight brothers had arrived a few hours ago, wives and kids in tow. Eric's smile lit up the room. It kept everyone from dwelling on the fact that the man had grown up alone, shuttled from one house to another.

He was too busy studying him to notice that Eric was staring back.

Love you, he mouthed.

Eric blushed and went back to playing "Go Fish" with Melissa and Susan. He was letting them win.

"Nervous?" Frank asked as he came up behind his son.

Kevin took a deep breath. "Yeah. Terrified."

"Nothing to worry about, son." Frank put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll wait for your signal."

"Thanks, Dad."

Kevin looked back at Eric. He was laughing at something one of the girls had said.

God, but he's beautiful.

He pushed off the door jamb and walked outside, steeling his nerves.

Maybe it's too soon.

Four months.

Is it too soon?

He dismissed the thoughts and let the cool wind strengthen his resolve. He put his hand in his pocket and gripped the velvet box. He'd had to draft his father to find the perfect ring. It's why he'd sent Eric on ahead of him just after they'd entered the house. It was the special gift that he'd been hiding for the past three weeks. And it was the reason he'd forgotten his phone just before the explosion. He'd patted his pocket to make sure the ring was still there and forgotten all about his phone.

Kevin opened the door and went to find his father. He was in the kitchen. Both of his parents were sitting at the table.

"Okay," Kevin said, rubbing his hands together. "I'll go and get him."

He looked at his parents. His dad was the first one to dab at his eyes. His mom was smiling.

Backing up from the table, Kevin turned and headed into the family room, just off the kitchen. He studied Eric for a moment and then called to him, holding out his hand. He nodded to the kitchen and, amid promises to return to the girls right away, Eric got up and took hold of his hand.

He could see the hesitation in Eric's beautiful blue eyes, see the flush spread across those cheeks he'd kissed too many times to count. Kevin led him to the table and pulled out a chair for him and Eric sat down, looking at all three of them in turn. He returned his gaze to Frank, who was still dabbing at his eyes.

"Is everything okay?"

Kevin sat and took his hand in between his own.

"Eric," he began, his mouth already dry. "I've made a decision about my future." He held Eric's hand a little tighter when he felt it begin to tremble a little. "About our future." He nodded to his father. "Dad's been helping me over the last couple of months. He's been helping me to find a nice ranch outside of town." Kevin brought Eric's fingers to his lips and kissed them. "I won't be renewing my contract at the end of May. Dad and I found the perfect place, so I'll be moving back here when my time is up."

Eric nodded and looked down at Kevin's hands. "Okay," he said softly.

"Remember I told you my dream was to find a ranch, find a man to share it with and raise horses."

"I remember."

"I always thought I'd find the ranch first, but it didn't quite turn out that way. I found you first."

Eric's chin quivered slightly and he started blinking faster.

Kevin got up and bent down on one knee. "The others don't know about this, but I told Mom and Dad because I needed their help."

Eric's eyes never left his, until Kevin reached into his pocket and pulled out the velvet box.

"I love you, Eric. With all my heart. I know it may seem sudden. Only four months, but I knew the first time I had to leave you that my life would never be the same. Can't imagine it without you."

Your smile. Your laugh. Everything about you, really."

Eric put a hand to his chin, trying to stop it from quivering.

Kevin saw the tears form in Eric's eyes. He cleared his throat, trying to make this perfect.

"Just you. Just me. Just us." Kevin let go of Eric's hand and opened the box. "Will you marry me?"

"You did say forever, right?"

Kevin grinned, clutched Eric to his chest and turned to his parents. "That's a yes."