

“Bohemian Pearl”*Author: D. Sanders*

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One Mr. David MacAlister was in good spirits as he took his final bow and headed back stage to his dressing room. Amid the cacophony of roses and flowers of every size and variety that made this small space smell like a bordello, he removed his tie and tossed it on the dressing table, and his jacket he tossed haphazardly on the back of the chair. His manager was soon to follow him into this tiny space.

“Another brilliant performance David,” Richard LaCrosse said as he waded through the greenhouse jungle.

“Thank you. Hey did anyone send those little petit four things? Lexi loves those,” David said looking through the myriad of wine bottles and fruit baskets laid on every available surface.

“I already set those aside.” Richard said smiling and pointing to a basket that had been emptied of its fruit and restocked with all the small pastries that had been delivered, plucked from the other gifts and set aside.

“Thanks again.” David said as he washed his face of his stage makeup. He felt like a tart, but knew with his pale complexion under harsh stage lights it was needed. Even concert pianists had to wear the “crap” as David so often called it every time the make-up artist came in to apply it.

“You’re welcome,” Richard said handing David more Kleenex to wipe of the cold cream covering David’s face. “You off for home?”

“Naturally.”

“You never do take in much night life, do you? You’re the only star I know who hides from his fame.”

“I’m not hiding. Why go out when I have something perfect waiting for me at home?”

“Monogamy is dead.”

David hated this argument with his manager. He turned to glare at the man perched on the arm of a chair. “Listen, I was with Lexi before I ever signed with you, and I will be with Lexi for as long as I damn well please. To hell with your marketing playboy strategies. I am not and have never been a playboy, and I certainly will not be seen around the city hotspots with one of your young heiresses all tarted up like a third class hooker on my arm. I’m not the next boy band front man; I am a classical musician and I’d like people to like me for my music, not my tabloid liaisons you seem to make up on a daily basis.”

“But David, Lexi is...”

“If you dare say anything insulting I will fire you so fast your head will spin. Lexi is my muse, with all his eccentricities in tact. Accept it.”

“Fine, then maybe Lexi should start attending your concerts, most people are speculating the existence of your lover.”

“Again, Lexi is NOT a public type person; crowds and Lexi do not get along. Besides, my piano at home is out in the middle of the loft, Lexi hears me all day anyway and usually my best performances; I play my best when I can just be me,” David said picking out a few of the prettiest flowers to make his own bouquet, mostly roses; Lexi loved the smell of roses.

“I just don’t understand you at all,” Richard said tossing up his hands in defeat.

David had it all at twenty-nine – fabulous looks, bad boy charisma, even if he was the boy next door once you got to know him, and that dangerous look about him that deceived. Not to mention, he put on a fabulous entertaining show. He made classical music fun for all ages; he was a natural comedian. He was Victor Borga and Liberace rolled into a harlequin romance stud off a book cover. He had the fans to prove it, sold out shows every night, standing room only. Little did they know he never kept any of the gifts they sent to him. He took only a few things with him at the end of each performance, and those he always took to give to Lexi, his mysterious lover whom Richard had only ever seen once when he went to David’s house to sign a contract, and he’d only had a glimpse of the ever elusive Lexi before the creature disappeared like a fey in the woods. David had explained Lexi was terminally shy of strangers and had not been properly dressed for company.

Richard thought Lexi was just one more strange bohemian littered throughout New York City, the city was full of them. Lexi was a left over from David’s early college education and ten years later was still around. Maybe it was love, Richard didn’t know and really didn’t care much, so long as David was famous and making him money, he was not going to quibble over his quirky, fey lover.

“Would you like me to help you understand a little?” David asked returning to his dressing chair.

“It’s really quite simple.”

“If you say it’s love I many vomit.”

“It’s more than that. Love isn’t enough to describe my relationship with Alexi. Would you like me to tell you how we met? It’s stuff right out of a cheesy romance novel, but it’s all true. It may help you understand Lexi better and why he is the way he is.”

“All I know is you met in college.”

“That’s the super condensed version. I was a sophomore, but it’s the details that make up what we have. Get comfortable, I’ll tell you about one Alexi St. Cloud and myself.”

David began grabbing two glasses and a bottle of wine from a basket as Richard cleared some room on a chair to make himself comfortable. David passed him a glass of zinfandel and began to paint the story...

Ten Years earlier

It was November, and so cold it felt like late January. The last bit of summer was long gone and it seemed autumn decided to take off for the season giving way to winter early. David had just finished his music theory class and was coming down a rather large, and slippery stone staircase, when he heard a commotion behind him. He turned just in time to see a rather reed thin young man, not dressed at all for cold weather in a long sleeve t-shirt and baggy overalls both covered in paint, carrying a large covered canvas, a back pack, and what looked like a portable easel. The boy was almost lost in the sheer amount of equipment he was carrying. But that’s not what caught David’s attention; it was the commotion surrounding the scene. As the boy was trying to walk, his head hung low and his medium brown hair, shaggy and unkempt obscuring his face, his shoulder’s slumped, he looked like a dog that had been kicked one too many times and was afraid of his own shadow.

Blocking his way, and circling the boy like a vulture around carrion was someone David detested. Gordon Steele, a talent-less humanities major, whose parents had bought his way into this college of the arts. He had no talent, and he was a bully, plain and simple. David was about to go rescue the boy from the verbal beating he was getting when his heart stopped. Gordon reached out and slapped the boy and on the slippery stairs it was like time slowed to a crawl. David saw

the boy spin with the force of the blow, his footing coming out from underneath him, his paints went flying, his painting slid down the stairs like a sled on a hill, the easel crashed to the ground and the boy with it, head first down the stairs coming to rest in a heap of limbs on the stairwell landing, splayed out in a very un-natural looking position.

Attention from Gordon was gone, and David was immediately by the boy's side. "Hey, are you all right? Anything broken?" David asked as he very carefully felt around the boy's body for damage before moving him. The boy sat up on his own holding his forehead.

"Nothing broken," came the almost inaudible whisper, eyes downcast not meeting David's gaze.

"What? I didn't hear? Hey, you're bleeding move your hand." David said pulling out the pack of travel Kleenex he had in his back pocket and pulling one out to dab at the jagged cut on the boy's forehead. "You whacked this good, you might need stitches. The campus infirmary is just a short walk across the courtyard here, can you stand?" David asked trying to stop the bleeding with his flimsy tissue.

The boy didn't answer, but tried to stand, only to sway dangerously. "Whoa. Okay bad idea, don't stand. Hey Missy, grab his stuff!" David ordered one of the on-lookers and she did as told and picked up the boy's scattered belongings as David picked up the boy. "Hold on. Damn, do you eat? You weigh less than my dog man." David joked to the silent boy as he hurried across the yard to the first aide station. Once inside the barely conscious boy was laid down and the on-call doctor saw to his injury. The nurse at the desk sighed and shook her head.

"Third time this week," she said as David flipped through a seriously out of date magazine on the table. The remark caught his attention.

"What do you mean?" He asked tossing aside the book to talk to the nurse.

“Let’s see, Monday he hobbled in here with a busted lip, said he slipped. Wednesday his palms were scrapped because he slipped; Friday, today, he’s got a concussion and a gash on his forehead and couldn’t even get in here under his own power. Did he slip?”

“Well, yeah, in a way, but not because he’s clumsy. Fucking Gordon Steele hit him, and he went flying. I picked him up, easy to send someone that light flying,” David said seething.

“That’s just this week, since he got here in September I’ve probably seen Alexi in here twenty or thirty times. He won’t tell me anything. He won’t tell the doctors anything. Heck, he hardly says two words together. I know someone is abusing that boy, and he won’t let us stop it.”

“Maybe he thinks if he says anything it will get worse. Any Psychology major will tell you that one is in lesson book number one,” David said as the doctor came out.

“He’s not talking.”

“Surprise,” the nurse said in defeat turning to David. “He needs help. I’ve done checking on my own on him. He lives in a huge swanky loft over-looking Central Park, prime real estate. His father is some sort of Investment guru and his mother is Russian with an aristocratic heritage that goes back centuries. He went to boarding schools in England and came here right after. I hear he never went home from boarding school on his vacations and moved here all alone. He hasn’t even seen his parents in five years.”

“Jesus Christ, isn’t that a crime, like Child abuse or something?” David asked and the nurse shook her head.

“He lived with teachers, he wasn’t lacking in food and shelter, and he was eighteen before he was living on his own. But my mother used to say, your soul is like a pearl and your body is its oyster. It takes love from family and friends to let the pearl shine and set it free from its shell. Alexi is a walking shell; that boy has never been treated right and it makes me so angry.”

“Connie, we both agree he has problems, but we can’t force him to get help. The immediate problem is the physical signs of abuse. I don’t like this at all,” the doctor said turning to look at the painting on the wall. “It amazes me that someone so emotionally bereft and so physically tormented can create something so beautiful.” David turned to look at the painting; it was, in a word, stunning. It looked like a hospital madam Currie would have worked in, the tones of the wood, the light coming in from the window falling on the nurse, who looked just like Connie, dressed in an 18th century nurses uniform illuminated her as she sat in a chair beside a patient, reading him a book. In the background you saw the doctor through a doorway, holding up what looked like vials of blood to examine, the doctor looked like Dr. Casey. It looked like a 200 hundred year old masterpiece from the French Renaissance.

“Did HE paint that?” David asked breathless with awe.

“He did. Marvelous, isn’t he?”

“I’ll say. Wow. It makes me want to snoop through his stuff now to see what else he has in that canvas case,” David said as he heard a door open and a frail and sickly looking Alexi stumbled out, still dizzy it seemed.

“Alexi, you should be resting, you’re not ready to leave yet,” the doctor said trying to steer Alexi back into a bed.

"I just want to go home. I'll rest there I promise," Alexi said, his tone of voice again almost apologizing for his very existence it was so quiet and effacing.

"I don't want you by yourself. You have a concussion."

"I can stay with him; it's no trouble," David piped in and Alexi looked up in shock as if not expecting him to be there at all. Finally, David got a look into those eyes, large, wide, and dark green eyes. Alexi had a beautiful, royal looking face even with the busted lip, black eye, and bandage around his forehead. David smiled. "I come at a price though. You have to show me more of your paintings," David added and a ghost of a smile was there and gone from Alexi's neutral placid countenance. He nodded acceptance.

"That satisfy you Doc? I have three sisters, I'm the master of babysitting," David said with a wink, and the doctor smiled.

"Okay, he can go if you stay with him. Make sure he eats something warm, preferably not something that comes from a place with a DRIVE-THRU, and, for gods sake, make him put on a coat. He doesn't need the flu too on top of this." David nodded shouldering his bag, and Alexi's on his broad shoulders. He picked up the easel and canvas bag and tucking them under his left arm and held the other out for Alexi to lean on for support.

"Come on you need a good rest, and I need a break from living over a noisy bar for a night. Chinese Food doesn't have a Drive thru, think that counts for dinner?" David asked as Alexi accepted his support, and they walked slowly outside.

Alexi shrugged. "Whatever you like is fine with me, thank you..."

"David, David MacAlister. Music Major, Sophomore. You?"

“Alexi St. Cloud. Artist.”

“So I gathered from your gear and the painting in the doctor’s office is fabulous.”

“Connie’s nose is too big, and Dr. Casey isn’t a pathologist.”

“Artistic license, it’s gorgeous. We’re all our own worst critics,” David said affably as they stopped street side just out of the campus grounds, and he hailed a Taxi.

Once inside the car, Alexi gave the address and in no time they were dropped off in front a gorgeous old building with ancient looking stone and marble, and gargoyles, David loved gargoyles. “Here this way.” Alexi said leading them to the elevator and pulling a key from a chain around his neck he tried to bend over to place it in the button panel and nearly fell face first into the closing door had David not pulled him back up to steady his balance. “Here allow me,” he said putting the key in the panel. “Which floor?”

“Fifty-five.”

“All the way to the top, cool,” David said punching the number and waiting, still holding Alexi’s arm for balance.

Alexi seemed lost in another world. It was hard to gauge what he was thinking; he wore such a perfectly schooled face all of the time.

The elevator was faster than David expected, and he had to whistle low through his teeth when the doors opened. Rather than opening into a hallway, it opened right into the loft’s main room.

“Holy shit, nice place!” David commented appreciatively as they stepped into the space, and David set his burden’s down on the floor. The expanse was huge; this “loft” was the entire 55th floor of the building. There were a few free standing walls, it looked like there was a proper bathroom and separate master bedroom, the living space was, however, the most unique. There were windows floor to ceiling along part of one wall, and there was an easel and all manner of worktables and a chaise lounge there, perfect for an artist wanting to work in natural light. Tall white linen curtains were pulled back to allow light to spill into that area of the loft. In one corner was a large kitchen area with a nice table, which was also covered in sketches and half finished works of art. There was a spiral staircase made of wrought-iron the led to a loft area of the loft, it lead to only a catwalk type area, perfect for a gallery space, but as of yet un-used.

There was very little in the way of furnishings so their footfalls echoed in the space on the hardwood mahogany flooring. Marble pillars flanked the elevator, and when the doors were closed, it looked like huge mahogany double doors rather than an elevator door.

“A piano would sound so good in here, the acoustics are perfect for it,” David remarked as he helped Alexi settle onto the chaise.

Alexi closed his eyes and actually smiled. “Yes, it would. I always loved the sound of a classical piano, its dynamics are very inspiring to draw by. I have a few CD’s I’ve practically worn out I’ve played them so much.”

David returned the smile and sat on the foot of the chaise. “Too bad a piano isn’t an easily toted instrument, I’d love to drag mine up here just for the acoustics alone. The appreciative audience would be a bonus.”

“You’re a pianist?”

David nodded. "I just wish my apartment would accommodate my upright. I've had it in storage forever. My place is too small, and my window isn't large enough to get it through."

"That's criminal," Alexi said rubbing his aching temples.

"How's your head?"

"Painful. I need aspirin," Alexi said moving to get up. David laid a hand to his shoulder and pushed him back to a reclining position.

"Remember why I'm here? Where do you keep them? I'll get it for you." Alexi directed him to the bathroom, and David retrieved the bottle of Excedrin Extra Strength from the medicine cabinet, detouring to the kitchen to grab a glass of water to wash them down with.

"You're very kind," Alexi said as he swallowed the tablets with a sigh. "I appreciate you helping me."

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it," David said moving to look at a stack of canvases propped against the wall. "May I?" He asked and Alexi nodded consent.

David was absorbed in the paintings, each one different in style and tone, as if each captured a separate emotion of the painter. One violent and angry abstract monstrosity in red and orange glared from the stack powerful in its impact. Another less glaring but equally impacting serene scene of a river at midnight, a lone street lamp illuminating the footbridge and water in the darkness and still of the night. Every piece was breathtaking, and David lost track of the time as he studied each piece of artwork.

It was dark outside before he'd realized he'd been entranced looking for almost an hour. Alexi had dozed off in the chaise, a light smile gracing his lips. David took a moment to study the artist himself. Long graceful limbs, he looked poured onto the chaise, he was tall and lanky, but lanky in a very fluid sense, his hair a darkish brown like sable and chestnuts was all one shaggy length and fell just below the chin. It was a wild mess, barely contained by the rubber band at the nape of Alexi's neck. Most of the hair had escaped the band anyway of the small useless ponytail. He must have been trying to grow his hair out, and it was at the annoying and awkward stage. It was at the adorable stage as far as David was concerned. David considered the most attractive thing about Alexi was his total and complete lack of self-awareness. He was handsome, lithe and totally clueless to how good-looking he really was. David thought perhaps most of that was due to what Connie had said earlier, you only become self-aware when someone else notices you, and Alexi was painfully shy and quiet. David would have never noticed him either had he not seen the incident.

Now David was angry again. He never did like Gordon, now he had added reason not to like the man. Alexi, had he landed different, could have died from that fall from snapping his neck, that long swan's neck looked fragile indeed. David looked from the forehead bandage to the remaining marks of a swollen split lip, and bruise on the left cheekbone, and scrapes on his palms. What other injuries couldn't be seen? Did Alexi have no friends at all? If he did have them, they did a poor job of helping him out. Alexi was not a fighting sort; from the scene on the stairs, he looked like a bird in flight from a predator much larger. David, on the other hand, took shit from no one, but he had the size to back him up. He was broad of shoulder, and fit. He'd been on the baseball team and track and field team in High School; he was well over six feet tall, and looked "mean" as his sisters used to say. He had hair not quite blond, not quite brown, but an earthy shade somewhere non-descript in-between. His eyes were a golden hazel brown, and narrow. His mother called him shifty eyed. He wasn't of course any of those things, but he looked it and people left him alone.

Alexi stirred, and David smiled at him as he woke. "Hungry yet?"

"Famished," Alexi said through a yawn.

"Good, I'll go grab us something to eat. Where's the closest Chinese take out?"

Alexi hummed in consideration. "There's Mr. Wong's two blocks north on the corner of First. They have great won ton and spring rolls. Or if you like Indian, there's a tandoori next door where everything is good."

"You do not want me eating curry if I'm your house guest." David joked and it took a second for the penny to drop, and David heard the most glorious sound of his life, Alexi laughed. Short but unmistakable laughter.

"I see. A body function symphony to curry is out. Truth be told, I think it does that to everyone," Alexi said pulling out money from his wallet and passing it over to David. "Dinner my treat in thanks." David nodded and stood.

"I'll bring us back a feast then. I won't be long."

"You'll be long if you don't take this," Alexi tossed him the elevator key. "I'll let the security guard at night know you're here so he'll let you in."

"Wow nice security. I'm always afraid to sleep at night, between the roaches and the gunshots," David said making a joke about his living conditions as he headed toward the doors. "Be back in a tick!" he said as the doors shut, and he began his descent.

As soon as the doors were shut Alexi sank back on his chaise and hugged himself tightly, then pinched himself to assure himself he wasn't dreaming or hallucinating. David was gorgeous, in that rugged, romance novel rouge sort of way. Classic good looks, tall, Alexi was tall at a good six foot if he stood up straight, but he felt almost dwarfed by David. David carried himself very self-confident and sure. He had a rough look about him that melted away when he smiled at you. His jovial nature was disarming, and Alexi found himself for the first time, unafraid. He felt nothing but goodwill and kindness from David; he was unlike any person he'd ever met. Alexi laughed to himself and fished the phone out from under a pile of sketches on the floor. He dialed the security desk.

"Good Evening Master St. Cloud. What can I help you with?"

"Good evening Sam. Did you see a tall, good looking man about my age just leave?"

"I did, he was whistling, black jeans and a beat up leather jacket?"

"That's him! He's just gone out to pick up dinner; I took a spill earlier and he's staying here tonight to make sure I'm all right. Let him back in please when he returns."

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"Just a slight concussion, and I'm a little dizzy from it, but I'm fine. Thanks Sam."

"Well, you take care of yourself Master St. Cloud, I'll let the gentleman back in for you. What's his name so I can sign him in as your guest?"

"David MacAlister." There was a dreamy tone to Alexi's voice, his soft British accent coming through plainly. Sam chuckled.

“We will be seeing Mr. MacAlister here often? I can put him on the permanent guest registry.”

“Oh god, I hope so!” Alexi said and Sam laughed.

“Good, I was beginning to worry about you, you know. Told the Mrs. myself the other day that a nice looking kid like you needed more visitors around, not healthy for a lad your age to be such a homebody. Not seen anyone visit you since that first fellow came by, not seen Mr. Steele here on the list in a while now,” Sam said and Alexi flinched.

“And you won’t. Please do not ever admit Mr. Steele back in the building.” Alexi’s tone was frightened and cold, Sam had suspected the worst, it had been confirmed.

“Never you worry Master St. Cloud, he’s been by a few times, and I’ve not admitted him, and I won’t.”

“Thank you Sam. Goodnight.” Alexi hung up the phone and shivered. So Gordon was still coming by at night too. Just the thought of Gordon made his skin crawl; he had been so different when he’d first met him. Charming, complimentary, and after a week Alexi had finally acquiesced to a dinner, that rapidly turned sour. Had he known having dinner in his loft would have turned into the night from hell, Alexi would have never let him in that night. Gordon had been by twice earlier and there had been nothing to suggest he would have turned so evil.

They had just finished their meal, when Alexi had his first encounter with the man who did not take no for an answer. His kisses hurt, his hands held so tight they left bruises where they held, when Alexi tried to run, he’d been beaten. He had not been able to walk at all the next day, and it took a week for him to heal properly where there wasn’t blood in his stool. He felt tore apart and tried to avoid Gordon at all costs. Gordon, however, was always around, hitting, slapping,

demeaning, and demanding. Alexi felt the bile rise in his throat and barely made it to the bathroom before he vomited out his grief.

David was surprised to see the security guard at the door holding it open for him since his hands were full. “Mr. MacAlister, welcome back. The name is Sam, and Master St. Cloud has appraised me of your being a welcome guest here.”

“Thanks Sam, just call me David though. Mr. MacAlister is my late father,” David said with a wink as he crossed the parquet and marble inlaid flooring of the main lobby.

“Sure thing Mr. David sir. May I beg a word?” Sam, an aged, grandfatherly looking black man, still looking fit as a fiddle, looked like he urgently wanted David to know something. David paused and nodded.

“Master St. Cloud is a good lad, reminds me of my own son sometimes. Listen, please treat him nice. He’s in sore need of friends. I never liked that last boy he had here, Mr. Steele. After his last visit, I didn’t see Master St. Cloud for days, and he looked a right mess when he did finally come down. I hate to speak ill of people, but that Mr. Steele still comes around, and I fear for Master St. Cloud.”

David’s eyes went wide, he’d made the connection, and he now knew that look Alexi wore, why he was afraid to say anything to anyone. He was ashamed for no reason; it was not his fault Gordon Steele was a slimy, good-for-nothing, waste of human space. “Don’t worry Sam, I know Gordon, and he’s not getting near Alexi again.” David made that vow more to himself than to Sam. He’d almost been in Alexi’s shoes, but he had the force of his own fist to tell his partner “no” under no uncertain terms. Date rape was sadly far too common, especially in homosexual relationships. It was a shockingly sad statistic.

Sam smiled and pushed the elevator button for David. "That's good to know. Welcome to Winchester House Mr. David sir. May your stay be indefinite."

David smiled as the doors closed and winked at Sam. "I'll be around. Count on it."

Alexi was not on the chaise when David entered the room and set the take out bags on the dining table. There was light coming from the bathroom, and David found Alexi, shivering on the bathroom floor, the telltale signs of purging still in the toilet. David rushed to his side and took his coat off to wrap around Alexi's shivering shoulders.

"Alexi, you're safe, look at me." David said softly, and the far-away terror in Alexi's eyes faded and the shivering lessened as Alexi sank into the warm coat. "Had a talk with Sam downstairs; he's a good fellow looking out for you. No one is getting in here to hurt you, I promise," He reassured, and Alexi began to sob uncontrollably, the pent up emotional turmoil exploded and David instinctively pulled Alexi close and let him sob on his shoulder. He stroked Alexi's back in a calming gesture and said nothing, letting him purge his anguish.

"He just won't stop," Alexi cried out, and David held him closer.

"I won't let him hurt you, that's a promise."

"You don't even know me. WHY? WHY?"

"Not all people are bastards Lexi. Some of us actually care about our friends."

"You... David... I..." David laid a finger to Alexi's lips to cease the stammering.

"I like you, I want to help you. Please let me, please trust me," David said helping Alexi off the bathroom floor and leading him to the table. "And Eat. You'll feel better."

"I don't know how you can like me," Alexi said eyes downcast in shame again. David leaned over and lifted his chin so their eyes met.

"Do you like me?"

Alexi nodded.

"Then can I toss back your question at you? How can you like me?" David asked and Alexi lowered his eyes.

"You're very easy to like."

"The same to you. Now eat before I have to make Chinese puree in the blender and pour it down your throat."

Alexi laughed softly in defeat and picked up a pair of chopsticks breaking them apart with long nimble fingers.

David carried his take-out box with him as he crossed the floor toward the stereo, chopsticks still sticking out of his mouth he hit "play" on the CD changer. Alexi had spoken true, a Beethoven Piano concerto began to blare, and David turned down the volume to a nice comfortable background level and returned to the table. "I love a little dinner music."

Alexi smiled into his chow mein. "So do I."

David grinned and stabbed a potsticker with his chopsticks. "Alexi, can I ask you something?"

Alexi nodded, mouth too full to answer.

"Tomorrow is Saturday, and there's a free symphony in the park tomorrow, if you're feeling up to it, would you like to go with me? It's supposed to be a little warmer, it's the last concert of the season in the open air, and I always go with a picnic lunch. You said you liked to draw to music, live music is always very inspiring, to me at least."

"I'd love to!" Alexi's eyes lit up like a child's on Christmas morning. "I knew I'd seen you before! I always go to the concerts, you're right they are inspiring!" Alexi said rummaging through sketchbooks on the table. "AH! This one!" He picked up one and flipped a few pages and then tossed it over to David.

"Hey, that's me!" David said looking at a pencil sketch of himself, sprawled on his favorite flannel blanket in the park, his eyes closed. Listening to the music, he recognized the outfit; he was wearing that at the September concert.

"You really looked entranced with the music, sorry I didn't ask to draw you. I knew I recognized you, but couldn't place where."

David laughed, "I should have wore a better shirt. I'm all wrinkled."

"You looked perfect, I couldn't help drawing you. You were part of the atmosphere." Alexi smiled, a truly warm smile, it was a happy memory for him. "I'd only been here a few weeks, and I'd heard the music from my window and went to investigate. I tend to draw all the time as the mood takes me."

“So I was a mood?”

“A muse. Turn the page.” David did and there was another one of him, just his face. The expression was one of controlled ecstasy. He was lost in the music and his face told the tale.

David looked up from the page, lost for words. He wanted to play, right now. He wanted to play for this man; he was inspired and wanted to inspire in return. “I really wish I had my piano right now; I want to play for you. I’m just, speechless.”

“I’d love to hear you play. If you put as much of your soul into playing as you do listening, I’m sure there is nothing else in the world as fine to hear. There is space here, if you’d like you can bring your piano here out of storage. As you said, the acoustics in here are lovely.”

“Are you serious?”

Alexi nodded, the warm smile still on his lips.

“I’d never leave, you know that?”

“You are welcome to stay. You said you lived in noise and gunshots; you’ve helped me, let me return the favor. You’re more than welcome to stay with me here; this loft is perfect for artistic purposes. I’d not need my CD player any longer, and you can practice to your heart’s content.”

David’s heart pounded, this was surreal. Divinely surreal. “Alexi, I think I love you. I’m overwhelmed; I’d love to. Honestly, I don’t know what to say here... Thank you is so inadequate.”

“I think our talents compliment one another. It would be a beneficial arrangement to us both.

Besides, I like your company most of all. I feel this is the right course. I too care about my friend.”

David noticed the lack of the plural to friend, but did not remark on it. He was floating on cloud nine, stunned at his sudden good fortune and stunned even more that it had come from Alexi. There was also a bonus to this arrangement that David was not going to ever mention. Gordon would never set foot in here again; David would be around permanently to insure his new friend and now roommate would be free of his torment.

There was however one thing, there was only one bedroom in the loft. Not that another one couldn't easily be partitioned off to accommodate a second person but that took time and David was about to make comment when Alexi spoke first.

"I never use the bedroom. The bed is far too big I feel lost in it. I tend to work until I pass out on the chaise anyway. So you may have the bedroom space," Alexi said picking up his empty carton and tossing it in the trash.

David leaned back in his chair and looked through the bedroom door to the huge four-poster bed. "You could sleep an army in that thing."

"I know. Besides, I don't like... never mind."

David's attention was derailed from his reverie and then suddenly focused on Alexi. "Bad memories fade eventually. Don't hate the object for a person's actions." He could see the scene in his head – a four-poster bed, Alexi tied to it, and Gordon... David hadn't realized his hand was crushing an empty container until Alexi's soft fingers took it from his grasp.

"It happened the night after I drew those pictures of you."

“Don’t Alexi; you don’t have to tell me anything. I know; I can guess,” David said taking Alexi’s hand. “I won’t ever hurt you, I swear it. And he’ll not ever hurt you again either.”

“I believe you. Your eyes are wide open to your soul David. You have a very good soul.” Alexi said pushing David’s bangs off his forehead and smiling with his eyes looking directly into David’s. David felt almost vulnerable in a very good way. His arms had a mind of their own, and he leaned forward and hugged Alexi’s hips, his forehead coming to rest on Alexi’s chest. It was perhaps the best, most intimate hug he’d ever had. Alexi held his shoulders in return. Words were not needed; they’d connected deeper than either could have foreseen. Their souls were very much in-tune with each other, and it was sublimely comforting. It felt as if everything fell into place, to say they “clicked” was an understatement.

When the innocent embrace ended, the feeling lingered long afterward. Alexi looked pale however and David insisted he go sit down while he put the leftovers in the fridge and cleaned up their mess. Alexi was curled up on the Chaise like a cat, looking out the large window at the New York skyline; David joined him, but rather than seating himself at the foot, he sat Alexi up and sat behind him so Alexi could use him as his lounger. Again, no words were exchanged, just intimate silence, soft music in the background, and a view to die for; it was a romantic backdrop right out of a modern day fairy tale. David felt on top of the world, Alexi was warm against his side, his arm draped over his shoulders showed Alexi was breathing slowly and deeply, almost asleep. David, with regret, had to wake Alexi up; he needed to change the bandage on his forehead before they both dozed off. “Lexi, sit up a moment, I need to look at your stitches.”

“I don’t want to move, you’re very warm. You’re making me sleepy.”

“I think it’s the music and your head making you sleepy. I promise I won’t be a minute fussing and then you can go to bed,” David chuckled as Alexi moved allowing him to get up and raid the bathroom for spare bandages and the antibiotic gel Dr. Casey had sent home with them.

David kneeled on the floor in front of Alexi, and with almost shaking fingers pulled the gauze away from the wound, it was sticking and at Alexi's hiss of breath David pulled his hands back like he'd been bitten. "Sorry." Alexi smiled.

"Not your fault. It's okay." Alexi reassured and David continued his task, the worst over quickly enough. Five small stitches held the gash together, and it had been weeping. David felt anger rise in the pit of his stomach and he squashed it, for now. The first opportunity he had to smash his fist into Gordon's nose he was going to take it.

David discarded the soiled bandage and took a cotton ball and poured a little alcohol on it, "This is gonna sting like a mother fucker. Sorry." David said taking the alcohol soaked cotton to first clean up the dried blood on the skin around the wound, then the wound itself. Alexi bit his lip against the stinging sensation, and almost melted into his shoes when David began to blow on the wound to help alleviate the sting of the alcohol. All pain forgotten in that instant, and a whole new sensation taking its place. That sensation remained as he focused on David who was now applying the anti-biotic ointment on the wound and taping on a new gauze pad with surgical tape.

"There – finished," David smiled at his handiwork, his eyes traveling down from the wound to meet Alexi's.

He fell into those eyes like a black hole, needing, wanting, desperate... David leaned over Alexi and forced himself to remain grounded. "You, my dear sir, are quite a temptation, you are living up to a role of a muse. If you want me to fall for you, keep looking at me like that."

Alexi smiled and reached a hand up to lay it on David's cheek. "In case you haven't noticed, your own actions today have already made me fall."

“Get well fast.” David grinned and Alexi gave him a curious look. “I cannot be a good boy indefinitely. I want you well before I drown myself in kissing you senseless.” David ran a finger over the still swollen lip. “I promised never to hurt you, and I won’t.” David placed a gentle kiss on Alexi’s damaged lip, and then sat back up. That was all that was going to happen tonight. “Come on, bedtime for you.”

David took Alexi by the hands and urged him into a standing position. “I think I may be lonely in such a large space. Keep me company,” David said keeping hold of Alexi’s hand as he walked toward the bedroom. He felt Alexi tense, but he followed without resistance. David was going to prove to Alexi he could be trusted, and he’d never cross a boundary he shouldn’t.

“Now I’m usually an underwear and my favorite ratty sweatpants man. I’m afraid you get my boxers Alexi, unless you have a pair of sweats I can borrow,” David said keeping the mood light, and it helped. Alexi’s tense grip loosened and he let go of David’s hand to pad over to a chest of drawers. He reached in and rummaged a moment until he brought out a pair of very new looking flannel red and black tweed print pants.

“Not sweats, but will flannel work? I’m tall, but not tall enough for these, I swim in them,” Alexi said tossing them toward David who caught them with a smile.

David was almost swimming in them himself as he stripped off his jeans down to his socks and boxers and pulled on the flannel pants. It wasn’t so much the length as the size. “Thank God for drawstrings, otherwise these would fall off,” David chuckled tossing his sweater and jeans in a pile on the floor. Alexi was just standing there, arms folded across his chest, smiling.

“They suit you.”

“They’re warm. And you dress warm, loose the bib-overalls, here put these on,” David said coming over and rummaging in the same drawer, pulling out a well-worn looking blue pair that matched the red pair he had on. He also found the matching top for the pants and tossed that over Alexi’s shoulder. “Get un-dressed. I’m off to warm up sheets.”

Alexi had to laugh as he got changed at David’s antics, under the covers, rigorously creating friction with his legs, looking like a cat stuck in a bag in the process. Alexi had no hesitation as he climbed into the now still bed. Warm, and comforting as he sank into the mattress and the warmth of David’s body. David had moved so he could hold Alexi, spooning up behind him and draping a hand over Alexi’s hip. A fan of breath over Alexi’s ear made him shiver with excitement.

“Goodnight, Lexi,” was all David said, punctuating it with a tender kiss behind the ear.

“Goodnight David.” Alexi sighed, happier than he’d ever been in his entire life.

~*~*~*~*~

David awoke to a strong aroma of coffee and it took a moment for him to assimilate his new surroundings and the soft, comfortable and warm bed he was in. It was even long enough that his feet didn’t hang off the end, such a simple pleasure. He remembered the previous evening with a smile on his lips as he stretched and just wallowed in bed. He could hear Alexi in the kitchen and then soft, bare feet pad across hard wood toward the bedroom. David pretended he was still sleeping. He felt the bed dip behind him and a chin press into his shoulder. “I know you’re awake. I made coffee, and I have fresh muffins.”

David rolled over to face Alexi, who was himself all ruffled from a good night’s sleep, still in his pajamas too. “Fresh? You’re still in your pj’s. Who delivers muffins?”

“Me. There’s a bakery just off the lobby. They’re used to seeing me in my pajama’s.” Alexi said, his voice light and airy with no hint of his sadness showing through. Alexi grabbed David’s hand and pulled him out of bed and led him to the kitchen.

David first made his way to the coffee and poured a cup, adding liberal amounts of sugar and real honest to goodness cream, not the non-dairy generic powder he usually had on hand, and took a long drink before examining the muffin basket on the counter. Alexi was leaning on the buffet counter, mug in one hand his chin propped in the other, just watching David with a dreamy look on his face. David grinned over the rim of his mug and pulled a carrot muffin out of the basket. “How’d you sleep?”

“Wonderfully. I’ve only been up maybe half an hour or so. I slept right through,” Alexi replied truthfully picking at a blueberry muffin on a napkin. “That is until my bladder woke me up. I’d have wallowed in bed myself.”

David chuckled. “Bladders don’t tend to recognize weekend mornings sadly. Speaking of which, pardon me.” David tossed a hunk of muffin into his mouth as he made his own way to the bathroom.

Alexi had just finished his muffin as David returned, bandage gauze in hand. “Front and center mi-laddo. The doctor is in.” Alexi laughed and hopped up on the counter to sit.

This time around, the pad didn’t stick, and the weeping had stopped. It looked far better this morning than in had the night before. “I think just one more day of gauze, then let the air at it. It’s looking much better.” David appraised as he taped the new pad on.

“It doesn’t hurt, and the headache is gone thankfully.”

“That’s good to hear. Now then, I am going to run back to my place, grab some clothes, take a shower, pack up a few things to get me through until I can move my stuff over, like my toothbrush, and I’ll be back here by eleven complete with a picnic basket full of junk food. Sound good?”

Alexi nodded and from his seat wrapped arms and feet around David where he stood in front of him. “Hurry back and don’t forget the key.” Alexi slipped the elevator key around David’s neck.

“I’ll hurry,” David assured kissing the end of Alexi’s nose. “And until I pick up said toothbrush, that’s as close as you want to me and my lovely morning breath.”

“You have coffee breath.”

“So do you.” David winked as he went back to the bedroom to get dressed. He was quick, and with the remainder of his carrot muffin in hand, he headed out before nine. Alexi almost skipped to the bathroom to have his own shower and to get ready for the day.

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David was surprised how easy it was to hail a cab outside Winchester House, and had to choke back a laugh when he gave directions to his sleaze bag apartment. He paid his fare and took the stairs two at a time; he was a man on a mission. He tossed as many clothes as he could into his army surplus duffle bag. He grabbed his toiletry bag and stuffed it with his toothbrush and toothpaste and then took them back out again; he needed to use them first. So he stripped and jumped in the shower, shaved while he was at it, and preened like he was going out on a date, which in fact he was technically.

After he finished, he went back to his duffle and fished out clothes for the day, he was not thinking straight, he was far too excited. And it wasn't Winchester House either, it was Alexi. He hadn't felt this infatuated with a person since his first crush at fifteen. A fruitless crush his object of amour had been back then - James, body like a brick shit house, Newcastle a fellow track and field athlete. He was straight as a board, but oh so fine. He'd pined for him all through high school and through every new girlfriend. His first year of college, where he had options and a much larger dating pool, had been a string of short-lived affairs. They'd all been nice looking, but none of them made him feel the way Alexi did. He felt inspired; his fingers itched to be playing. Alexi was a living, breathing muse, his Calliope.

Packed, clean and dressed for a day in the park, with faded blue jeans, a thick virgin wool v-neck sweater in a camel color over a clean white t-shirt. His natural hide cowboy boots that were his favorite, well-worn and comfortable, and an overly long cream-colored wool winter scarf around his neck rounding off the outfit; David looked casually dashing.

David next turned his attention to lunch. He grabbed his Cell-phone and made a call to his favorite deli and favorite deli owner, Lucia. She reminded him of his grandmother, and fed him like it. She always seemed thrilled to hear his voice, and it helped he could speak fluent Italian; once more thanks to his Grandmother who had taught him to speak Italian.

When he described his needs for a nice picnic lunch and that he was having someone special with him, he was forced to describe in detail Alexi to Lucia and got a cackle of delight and a promise for a romantic picnic lunch for two... ready in twenty minutes. That gave David just enough time to walk three blocks to get it, and then hail a cab back to Alexi.

Shouldering his duffle, locking his door behind him, and whistling a jaunty tune as he walked to pick up Lucia's especial basket lunch for two, David was in high spirits.

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Alexi didn't hear him come in, the music, one of his favorite piano concertos, was blaring on the stereo. Alexi, sitting on the chaise with his back to the elevator doors, was busy packing his satchel with a sketchbook and supplies. He looked adorably frumpy in a very large oversized cable knit sweater in a pale cream color, marred from a few "accidents" with paint. He wore a forest-green turtleneck underneath that matched his eyes, and faded worn out jeans that also had seen better days where freedom from errant paint splatters was concerned.

David walked over and placed a kiss on the back of Alexi neck, and he swore he jumped clear out of his skin. "Oh my GOD! Don't do that!" Alexi grabbed his heart and willed its pulse to slow.

"Don't listen to the stereo so loud then handsome," David winked appraising Alexi's appearance.

"Do you own anything that hasn't become an artist's fashion victim?" David teased and Alexi laughed.

"Only a tux, and I doubt that fits me anymore. Everything I own I ruin with paint. These are my 'good' clothes," Alexi replied with good humor as he caught sight of David's duffle and basket. His eyes lit up, not at the basket, but the duffle. "Welcome home."

David smiled and came to sit beside Alexi on the chaise so Alexi could lean back across his legs. Arms wrapped around each other, they looked deeply into each other's eyes. "I'm glad to be home," David whispered, leaning in for their first real kiss. It lasted just long enough for them to want more when David broke it off. "And we'll end up staying home if we keep that up. Come on gorgeous, I'm taking you out on a date, damn it." Alexi smiled and stood, picking up his backpack of supplies. David fished the flannel fleece blanket out of his duffle, grabbed a couple of small throw pillows off the chaise, took up the basket in one hand, and Alexi's hand with the other. They

were soon down the elevator and crossing the street to the park to find a choice piece of grass to settle in before the concert started.

It was a chilly afternoon, but warmer than it had been in days. The sun was shining brightly. The breeze was light. The orchestra was tuning up, and the park lawn was beginning to fill up. David opted for his favorite spot under a large oak, whose branches seemed to catch and filter the sound down; it was the best listening spot. He spread out their blanket and both men settled down, backs resting against the tree to sit and wait for the performance to start.

Alexi opted to spy in David's basket. "What smells so good in here?"

"I've no idea. Lucia, I'll tell you about her sometime, great old gal, she runs the deli on 27th, she made it for us."

"Oh, Lucia Pougoli? Tuscany Deli?"

"You know her?" David asked and Alexi nodded.

"Si, mia bambino EAT – EAT," Alexi said mimicking her voice perfectly.

David cracked up laughing. "No wonder she cackled like a crone who knew too much when I told her who my date was today."

"She makes the best Focaccia bread on the planet, and she put in my favorite dried tomato and basil. Bless her." Alexi said noting the flat bread he favored from her Deli.

"You must speak Italian, her English sucks," David remarked and Alexi nodded.

"I speak six languages - English, Russian, Greek, Italian, French, and German."

"Shit. That's a lot."

"I went to school all over Europe; I had to learn," was Alexi's matter-of-fact response.

"I've been trying to place your accent, just what nationally are you technically?"

"American. I was born in New York actually. My father was here for a conference, and Mother decided she was feeling under the weather and stayed in the room. I was delivered by a maid in a suite at the Waldorf Astoria," Alexi began as he continued to rummage in the basket. "Oh!" He pulled out a thermos and unscrewed the lid and took a large whiff of the contents. "Zuppa Toscana, my all time favorite of hers... I love Lucia."

"You never finished your tale," David pressed wanting and eager to hear more.

"I was about a week old when we were off to my grandparent's in St. Petersburg where I was ceremoniously dumped on a nanny until I was four. French is still spoken in that house, so I learned that first, followed by what my grandmother still calls the common tongue, Russian. My nanny only spoke Russian." Alexi continued pouring some soup into the thermos lid cup and taking a long satisfying drink.

"At five, I was plunked on a private jet to England. St. Mary's boarding school for rich boys." Here Alexi rolled his eyes for emphasis over his obvious disdain over this point in his life, "I had to learn to speak English fast. I couldn't even ask where the toilet was, let alone ask to be excused to use it." David chuckled and just waited for more. Alexi was fascinating.

“I went from boarding school to boarding school because I was the gangly strange kid with no friends so I had tons of time to study. I was at school for Christmas, summer vacation, spring; I never left. So by fourteen, I was already taking collegiate courses,” Alexi said dipping his flat bread into his soup.

“By sixteen, I was finished with my bachelor’s of the arts then decided to be an art geek, and I went all around Europe touring museums. I got stranded in Germany for about a year; I met this nice Greek fellow and had my first real fling. Hence why I speak bad German and even worse Greek,” Alexi finished and David just gaped.

“So why on Earth are you here as a freshman all over again?”

“I’m not technically a freshman; I’m a grad-student. It’s just easier to say that since I’m the right age. I get less attention being average. I’m strictly taking art classes; because I adore the professor of fine arts. I met him in the Louvre last year, and he convinced me to come here. I’m really, I guess, his apprentice for lack of a more appropriate reference. I’m a semester away from my Master’s and then onto my Doctorate. I’m being groomed, as it were, to take over his curator responsibilities for both the University and the Art Museum. Living breathing Art is my passion,” Alexi said finishing his soup and passing the cup to David so he could finish what was left in the Thermos. David held up a hand.

“You eat it; you look like you’re having an orgasm with that stuff. I’m enjoying watching you.”

Alexi just smirked and poured another cup, not looking a gift horse in the mouth.

“What do your parents think about your goals?”

Alexi shrugged. "No bloody clue. I've not seen my Father face to face in about a decade. I saw my mother about five years ago when she had a layover in Heathrow airport for a few hours on her way to Switzerland. We did lunch in the first class lounge. They could care less what I do. I have a much older brother, Sergi, who's already been conveniently groomed to succeed my Dad in the financial shark business. Sergi's a snob; he's perfect. I've never met my younger brother; I think they named him Yuri. I've never seen him in my life; he's always with Mother. I think this last birth, since she was forty-six when she had him, hit home. He's her last shot of actually being a mother. He just turned ten, I think. I had no idea I even had a little brother until mother mentioned him during our little lunch I mentioned."

David reached out, took his hand, and kissed the back of it. "I admire your strength. No one can call a man who built his dreams with his own hands, all alone a failure. Ever."

Alexi leaned over and kissed David's forehead. "Thank you."

"You've nothing to thank me for. You're truly an inspiring person Lexi."

"I love that."

"What?"

"That you don't even notice you've taken to calling me by a nickname already."

"I like Lexi, just change one letter and you have..."

"Don't go there David," Alexi chuckled pinching his nose. "The concert is starting, you can tell me all about you after."

“That’s a promise.”

Alexi never bothered breaking out his sketchpad, his fingers were too cold anyway, and David was quite warm. They wrapped themselves up in the oversized blanket, fed each other flatbread and cheese, and drank wonderful sangria out of small Styrofoam cups. They were both underage, which was probably why Lucia put the wine into the non-descript white cups. European attitudes toward wine with a meal and the age of those partaking was vastly different to American laws and customs. They were, however, only small cups, and it was a romantic addition to a wonderful first date. Neither of them paid hardly any attention to the music. Their attention was mainly on each other, with lingering looks and smiles, David tracing patterns on Alexi’s back in time to the music, Alexi’s resting his head on David’s shoulder, eyes closed, living in the moment and never wanting it to end.

A love like this hit once in a lifetime, and when it did, only a fool didn’t hang on tight with both hands.

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The concert was over by two in the afternoon, and Alexi waited for David in the lobby of Winchester House while he put their gear away upstairs. David found Alexi at the security desk, talking to Sam who was just coming on shift. Alexi was grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Master St. Cloud tells me you’re no longer a guest.” Sam began with a wink. “Welcome to Winchester House Mr. David sir.”

“Thanks Sam,” David said shaking the man’s hand and looping his other over Alexi’s shoulders
“And we’re off for some coffee to warm up. We’ll catch you later!”

Sam waved them off and the couple headed down the street to a local café Alexi said made the best cappuccino he'd had since he'd been in Rome.

They sat at a little wrought iron table for two in the corner; hands wrapped around mugs of frothy rich espresso and steamed milk. Alexi licked the froth from his lip and smiled at David. "Your turn, tell me about your misspent youth."

"Not much really. I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. I have two older sisters and one younger. Beth, the oldest, is married to a boring accountant, Ted, has 2.5 kids, Jacob and Julie, owns some rat terrier I can't stand, and still lives in Joliet. Amy is career Navy. G.I. Jane, married another lifer named Mark, and they're stationed in San Diego. My kid sister is thirteen and starting High School next year. Katie is the only one who likes music like her big brother. She sings great; even when she was little she had a really mature voice and a perfect ear for pitch. She'll go far if she applies herself. Mom, Debbie, what can I say? My mom's the best. She raised us all working as a secretary at a car lot. Dad died when Katie was just a baby in a car accident on the way home from work from the steel mill. I hardly remember him, just that he was big, played Boogie-Woogie piano and was always smiling and belching the alphabet, I was only about seven. Grandma moved in with us to help take care of us kids, my mom's mom. Sophia Garibaldi, taught me Italian and an appreciation of all things Pasta. I love my grandma. She'll love YOU," David said, proud of his blue-collar family, and the love in his eyes as he spoke of the women in his life made Alexi long for that sort of family closeness. David reached out a hand and squeezed Alexi's "You will come home with me for Christmas if I have to drag you there by your beautiful brown hair."

Alexi laughed. "I'd love to go. It sounds like you have a wonderful family."

"I do. I want you to share in it; I mean that."

"I know you do, and I love you for it; I really do."

"You've knocked me off my feet; and I want to show you everything. I feel great."

"Me too," Alexi said, then all the vibrant color drained from his face, terror made his eyes glass over. David knew that look and turned around in his chair and moved his body to box Alexi in the corner out of sight. Gordon hadn't seen them; he was ordering a drink at the counter.

"What the fuck is he doing here? He lives blocks from here," David hissed.

"He waits for me; he's everywhere," Alexi whispered and just as if a siren had summoned him Gordon caught sight of Alexi and David and began walking over. David stood.

"Turn around and walk the other way Steele."

"MacAlister is it? Cute. But you have it wrong, that's mine." Gordon said pointing to Alexi

"Are you a Neanderthal? What part of NO don't you get? Shall I grunt it for you? Fuck off," David said, his eyes dangerous, and Gordon actually took a step back.

"We'll talk about this later Alexi."

"No we will not." Alexi said voice trembling. Gordon raised an eyebrow. Alexi never spoke back; he'd made him quite subservient. MacAlister was a bad influence.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard him. Leave him alone, permanently, or you will regret it. I am not bluffing."

“And just who are you to care?”

“Someone who loves him and will not let him be hurt by you. If you want to toss the word ‘mine’ around, that word would apply more to me. He’s my partner,” David said taking a step forward, and Gordon backed up, David was marginally bigger and obviously knew what he had done to Alexi.

“Partner? What you’re living with him or something?”

David smirked, “As a matter-of-fact... I am.” Then he moved in close, invading Gordon’s personal space, eye-to-eye, nose-to-nose, and David’s voice dropped low and menacing. “Be glad we are in a very public place. You could have killed him yesterday, and I know what you’ve done. I won’t be satisfied until I see you on the business end of my fist. Leave... now.”

Gordon looked pissed and turned around and stormed off. David had effectively run him off for the moment. David knew better though. Bastards like that always came back; they never learned, and it would come to blows eventually. David was confident he’d win, but he hoped it wouldn’t come to that. He turned to Alexi and took his hand as he sat back down. “Finish your coffee Lexi, it’s getting cold,” David said with a wink and Alexi seemed to brighten like a flower in spring.

“David...”

“He’s trash Lexi, don’t let him ruin our date. I’m not done with you yet.” David winked and Alexi laughed.

“David, nothing could ruin this day for me. You told him you loved me.”

"I do. Surprise you?"

Alexi was about to say yes, then changed his mind. He knew; he'd felt this feeling grow stronger and stronger all day. "No."

"Good. Now drink up so we can go home and keep warm."

"Good idea," Alexi said finishing his cappuccino with a flourish and slipping under David's welcoming arm. They headed home.

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They'd just gotten out the door when David's cell phone rang. He answered and his face turned ashen. "What do you mean flooded? I'm coming now."

Alexi listened to David's half of the conversation and didn't have to ask as David hung up; David looked pale and held out his hand for a cab. "My storage... my piano. TAXI!"

They both climbed into the cab, and David gave directions to his storage company's address. It was only about fifteen blocks away, and Alexi had to run to keep up with David, who stopped in abject horror when he saw the state of his bank of lockers. It looked to have been flooded for days and was just drained. David waded through sodden debris and unlocked his locker. It smelled of nasty mold, and several boxes that had floated against the door came falling out, their contents totally obliterated. But David hardly noticed; he shoved aside all his other ruined possessions to get to his most precious.

He was silently crying as he ran a hand over the lid of the upright piano. The wood was covered in water damage and mold, and the keys were black with mud. David touched the keys and no sound came out. The insides were filled with muck. His piano was beyond salvage. He turned and slammed the side of his fist into the locker's door, going outside, kicking a box and sending it flying before sinking to the ground in defeat. Alexi was immediately by his side, one hand resting on David's hair, the other dialing his own cell-phone. "Yes, this is Alexi St. Cloud, I'd like to talk to Monsieur DuBois please." David looked up wondering what on earth Alexi was doing. He didn't wait long, suddenly Alexi was speaking in French and nodding. The conversation lasted only a few minutes. Alexi hung up and sat next to David.

"We wait here, my lawyer is own the way with a camera. This is gross negligence." Alexi looked furious, even more so than David. David just felt heartsick, at least one of them was thinking clearly.

Twenty minutes later a black Rolls-Royce rolled up, and a short stocky man with a handsome face got out of the back seat with someone that looked like a professional photographer. Alexi greeted him in French then turned to introduce David. "Monsieur DuBois, David MacAlister."

"Mr. MacAlister. Rest assured we will see you recompensed for your damages," Maurice DuBois said in a thick accent, all the while the photographer was taking roll after roll of detailed evidence.

"You can't replace that. That belonged to my Dad," David said, thoroughly heartbroken over the loss of a wonderful instrument, and the only thing he owned of his father's.

"We will save the wood; I will make you something out of it that can remain to remind you of your father, David," Alexi said taking David's hand to hold. David wanted to just sob; and could only nod. It was Alexi's turn to offer much needed comfort.

By this time, the owner of the storage company had arrived and Monsieur DuBois took over, talking for his client. "Lexi, I can't afford a man like that."

"David love. He's on retainer. He works for my family. You are part of my family, David. You are my partner, and I won't see you hurt either," Alexi said moving out of the way of the clean up crew that had arrived.

"I owe you."

"You owe me nothing but a song."

"On what?" David said dejected.

"Like we will not get you a piano to play? I think not. Come, there is nothing more either of us can do here, and the longer we stay the sadder it will become. I promise you, I will make you something beautiful out of your old piano. Your father will live on as an heirloom of a different sort."

"What will you make of it?" David asked as they walked.

"Do you have a photo of you and your father together I can have?"

David nodded.

"Then I know what I will do. And you'll see it when I am finished," Alexi said kissing the back of David's hand as they walked.

David's spirits rose a little, the piano never did stay in tune properly, and it was beat to hell, but it was sentimental in value, Alexi would keep the value for him, it wasn't lost thanks to him and his artist's ingenuity. "I trust you. I love you."

"I love you too." Alexi said holding out his hand and hailing a cab and gave directions home.

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David lay on the chaise, still depressed listening to music as Alexi made soft clinking noises in the kitchen. He was not paying much attention, thinking of his father, when he felt long fingers wind into his hair from behind, and Alexi leaned over to place a kiss on his lips. "Come and eat, I made soup," Alexi said leading David over to the table where he'd set out a nice intimate place setting with the soup bowls steaming and full, and two lit candles flickered merrily.

Before David sat, he pulled Alexi close for a grateful hug. "You're wonderful; I needed you today."

"I needed you. Now eat before it gets cold Love."

They sat and ate in silence, reaching out to touch one another occasionally for mutual comfort and reassurance. The bowls finally empty, David picked them up and placed them in the sink, then returned to Alexi who was changing disks on the stereo. "I need distraction; I need you," David purred, his voice thick with desire. Alexi turned around into his arms; and melted into him.

"As do I," Alexi replied in kind, lips meeting David's, his hands once more getting lost in David's hair. David had him pressed against the wall, devouring his kiss; Alexi's leg came up to wrap around the back of David's knees.

Hands quested, trying to find skin through thick layers of wool and denim, and an awkward dance began, trying to remain kissing, while simultaneously trying to shed layers of garments and walk toward a welcoming bed.

They stumbled and laughed and kissed and finally made it into the bedroom without falling, leaving a wake of clothes behind them, finally collapsing in a tangle of limbs and lips and groping hands into bed.

“If you leave your socks on David, I will have to hurt you,” Alexi teased propping himself up on one elbow to nibble across David’s lovely square jaw and to run his talented fingers up and down David’s smooth chest, teasing his nipples with gentle circular brushes of his fingertips. David groaned, and slid his feet up the mattress to roll his socks off, kicking them to the floor.

“Happy now?”

“Oh yes,” Alexi sighed still worshipping David’s form with his lips and hands. He straddled David’s middle, his teeth nipping along David’s collarbone. “You are a work of art,” Alexi’s voice was husky and low full of awe and raw desire. David’s head was back, offering his throat to Alexi’s eager mouth; he could only moan, his cock twitching with desire against Alexi’s round backside, just close enough to touch, too far away to make a meaningful contact. He was driving David mad with lust. David’s hands clutched and pawed at Alexi’s wonderful firm thigh muscles. He had to see Alexi, all of Alexi and with a grumble surged forward and flipped the tables, it was his turn.

“You are wicked,” David accused as he surveyed the man beneath him. He wore clothes so baggy David had no idea they had hidden such a fabulous body underneath. He’d half expected an overly skinny boy; he got a gloriously toned and shaped sculpture. Every long limb tight and firm, a chest that was small but perfectly shaped in proportion. His square hard pectoral muscles were begging for David’s touch. He was the most beautiful man David had ever seen, angular

and regal from head to toe. "You're... breathtaking," David sighed, eyes raking Alexi's form head to toe. "We are seriously going to have to do something about your wardrobe; you're far too fine to cover all this up all the time. Look at you; you're gorgeous."

Alexi smiled up at David and ran the palms of his hands up David's stomach and chest. "I don't like to stand out. The only person I want looking at me... is you."

David leaned over and kissed Alexi deeply. "I love the view," David said as their lips parted, and he proceeded to torment Alexi with his tongue and teeth. Ears, neck, collarbones, nipples, elbows, fingers, everything David could reach he sucked on, nibbled, licked, nuzzled and inhaled like an addict who was searching for a high.

And he was high, high on life, high on Alexi's subtle cologne, soaring on sensation alone. Alexi was mewling and undulating beneath him, desperately rubbing his swollen erection against David's runner's thigh. David was immensely proud of his perfect athlete's physique - firm, hard, and packed with power and stamina. He'd trained his body by running daily, even after high school and well away from baseball and track and field; David worked out and jogged every morning on his treadmill since running on the streets in his part of town wasn't a wise move. He was the epitome of health, and he was about to give himself one hell of a wonderful workout and have Alexi so boneless with passion they were guaranteed not to wake until noon the next day.

He already had Alexi as pliant as artist's clay, and the night had just begun. David ceased chewing on a very red and swollen nipple to trail his tongue down a firm hard quivering stomach. A glistening drop of precum was already beading on the tip of Alexi's rock hard erection, and when David sampled the taste, Alexi convulsed, arching his back with hands gripping the sheets, David's name echoing in the room as Alexi almost screamed his name.

"I think you liked that."

“David, don’t tease me. I’m already about to come and you’ve barely touched me,” Alexi whimpered, and David felt rather wolfish pride swell within.

“But I like to tease. I want to see you squirm; I want to blow your mind,” David replied with silken tones of intent.

He indeed had Alexi squirming relentlessly when he methodically and rhythmically began tasting Alexi in earnest. Long, slow movements, taking him in and out, alternately sucking and licking. David swirled his tongue around the tip of Alexi’s un-cut penis. The foreskin was barely visible beneath the tip of his cock it was so red and swollen with blood and lust. David was worshipping the natural beauty of something so perfectly male when he felt Alexi’s muscles tense, his breath coming in gasps, long fingers twisting in David’s hair. “David! Oh God DAVID! I’m...” He couldn’t finish his sentence; Alexi’s body began to spasm as he came, hard and fast. David, not releasing a single drop, devoured him completely. He was smirking like a cat that had gotten into the cream as he sat back, a finger dabbing at the single drop he missed. Alexi looked divinely rumped and sated, and as he turned his gaze to David, the love in his eyes nearly knocked David senseless.

“I hope you don’t think I’m done with you yet,” David smiled, giving Alexi a minute to catch his breath. Alexi rolled over and pulled David close.

“The thought never crossed my mind. I want you, and it’s my turn,” Alexi spoke softly, breath still ragged as he leaned over and across David, chest to chest, as his hand blindly reached for the nightstand. David heard the drawer open, and Alexi slid back and up to his knees, holding in his hand a very recognizable and useful item. David’s heart raced in anticipation.

Alexi made a grand show of pouring a goodly amount of the lubricant into his palm; and drizzling it over David’s throbbing unattended erection. A slick hand spread the slippery liquid around,

coating him thoroughly, making him ache with need. Alexi leaned close to David's ear, nibbling on the lobe as his hand slowly worked magic. "I want you to know something," Alexi's voice was like melting chocolate as he spoke sending shivers down David's spine. Alexi's hand stopped stroking and one obscenely long leg moved in slow motion as Alexi straddled David positioning himself above, his hand returning to help guide David's cock as he slowly began to welcome David into his body. David sucked in his breath; Alexi was tight and hot and unbelievably pliant. "I was built for this," Alexi finished as he seated himself completely, his buttocks sitting firmly on David's thighs.

"Jesus Christ! LEXI!" David's eyes rolled back in his head; he was so deep inside Alexi he was seeing stars. David had never had a partner like this; when Alexi said he was built for this, he meant every word. When Lexi began to move, David groaned, all the way out and all the way in again, beginning slowly and moving faster and faster. It was David's turn to squirm and pant; Alexi was making him climb to the bursting point so fast, too fast. "Lexi, slower! Good god I can't take it."

The speed only increased. "Oh I think you're taking this just fine," Alexi's voice was smug and brusque. He was extremely short of breath, practically impaling himself on top of David with every downward thrust.

David's fingers dug into Alexi's hips, his back arching into Alexi's movements, and when Alexi's muscles clenched even tighter around him, all hope of maintaining his control was lost and he came with great ragged breaths and hard convulsions of muscles. It seemed to go on forever before he stopped and his heart rate began to return to normal. Alexi was still around him, chest to chest where Alexi had collapsed atop him.

David just began to laugh and giggle uncontrollably. "Oh my GOD! I just won the lotto."

“Come again?” Alexi asked disengaging himself from his suddenly giddy partner and flopping onto his side on the ruined sheets.

“I feel on top of the world. I am so in love with you, I’ve just had the best sex of my entire life, and I mean that, and you... YOU. Where the hell have you been?” David said pulling Alexi back on top of his chest. Alexi smiled, his dark hair plastered to his face and forehead; he smelled of sex and spice and sweat. His eyes were alive, not the scared glassy orbs they had been when David had met him; they were vibrant, glowing, and full of affection.

“I’ve been all over,” Alexi began, resting his cheek on David’s chest listening to his heartbeat and closing his eyes. “But no where I’ve been had what I needed; no one I’ve met has ever been so as fulfilling to my soul. I adore you, and I love you David MacAlister.”

David smiled and kissed Alexi’s sweaty brow. “I love you too Lexi. I really love you too.”

Alexi sighed and sat up. “I’m gagging for a fag.”

“You just had one,” David grinned, Alexi’s British influence was poking through, and David couldn’t resist purposefully misinterpreting the previous statement. Alexi slapped his arm lightly.

“Crude bugger. A cigarette. I need a cigarette.”

“I know what you meant. I didn’t know you smoked.”

“Not often, only after really good sex or a fabulous meal,” Alexi said wrapping a sheet around him and padding over to a chest of drawers and pulling out a distinctive brown and white box. David shook his head; every artist he knew, if they smoked, smoked cloves. David surmised it must have been genetics or something in the blood that made artists smoke flavored tobacco.

Alexi moved over to the window and opened it and sat on the fire escape to smoke the pungent cigarette. David moved to sit on the ledge; it was freezing outside. "You'll catch cold in only a sheet."

"I'll live." Alexi smiled as his breath and smoke made a halo around his head, holding out the box to David who declined a smoke; he got other urges after sex. He'd give anything for a cold beer and pizza right at the moment. Instead he got up, walked stark naked into the kitchen and raided the remains of their lunch and munched on flatbread and shared a bottle of Perrier out of the fridge with Alexi through the open window.

"You look great sitting there naked; I hope you plan to do this often," Alexi commented taking a long drag of his clove.

"Would you like me to?" David took the bait gladly.

"Only if I'm allowed to make you sprawl on the chaise so I can paint you."

"You can paint me, so long as you promise my Grandmother and mother and sisters NEVER see the finished product."

"Deal." Alexi grinned stubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray that lived out on the fire escape.

He almost fell into the window, his thighs were no longer functioning; his muscles had given up the ghost. David only laughed and helped Alexi limp back inside.

"I over did it," Alexi said rubbing the cramping hamstrings.

"I'm not surprised; ride 'em cowboy," David teased helping ease the muscle strain with a deep tissue massage to the backs of Alexi's thighs where he lay on his stomach on the bed.

"The cramps are worth it, but next time you get to do the work there. I get to lay flat on my back, and you can drive me into nice comfy pillows," Alexi said through a yawn and David smiled. It seemed their position preferences were also quite in-tune with each other. David was not going to complain in the slightest. Alexi's yawns were infectious. David was yawning himself as he finished rubbing Alexi's legs, and he moved to join his lover in bed.

"What are we doing tomorrow?" David asked as Alexi snuggled up against his side.

"Sleeping in, then who knows. We'll play it by ear?"

"Sounds good to me. What time do you have classes Monday? I start at ten until one, off until three, then off by four-thirty," David said filling Alexi in on his schedule while he was thinking about it.

"I pretty much make my own hours. I only deal with Dr. Talbot all day. I've been going in about nine or ten; he usually doesn't come in until noon." Alexi said with a smile in his voice, "I can go in with you, and leave with you."

"I need your cell number just in case I'm running late or something. I'll give you mine, and I want you to use it anytime you need me."

"I will," Alexi reassured and at that point all conversation was over, he was passed out cold asleep.

David was right behind him into repose.

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The following morning, it was Alexi's turn to be awakened by the smell of coffee brewing and what was unmistakably bacon frying. He kept no bacon in the fridge that he knew of which meant David had been up at least long enough to run out to a store and back. Alexi stumbled out of bed, pulling on a short kimono style robe in the process, the palm of one hand rubbing a sleepy eye the other hand scraping back his tangled mass of thick brown hair as he shuffled into the main room.

"Good morning sleepy," David greeted his still half asleep lover as Alexi fell into a chair at the dinner table.

"Is it still morning?" Alexi yawned and David nodded.

"Only just, how did you sleep?"

"Like a man who had great sex the night before," Alexi said smiling as David brought him over a cup of coffee, stealing a quick good morning kiss in the process before returning to his cooking.

"Me too. I woke up famished and a fridge full of leftovers was not what I wanted. I'm sure you're as hungry," David said with a wink as he flipped a strip in the pan.

"I could eat an entire Las Vegas buffet this morning. I never heard you leave, or come back," Alexi stated taking a long drink.

"I like to run in the morning. I was up and stiff so I figured I'd go take a quick run and hit up a store I know a few blocks away in the process. How do you like your eggs?" David asked as he set the

cooked bacon out on a paper towel to drain off and absorb a little grease and turned to the carton of eggs out on the counter.

"I don't; I hate eggs. Those are all yours, Love." Alexi shuddered going over to the muffin basket on the counter from the previous morning. "I grew up quite continental, and a large breakfast will make me ill. I nibble in the mornings, usually a pastry or toast and coffee. I like my bigger meal mid-day," Alexi said not finding anything he wanted in the muffin basket and opting to just toss two slices of bread in the toaster, putting two in for David as well as David scrambled himself a few eggs.

Alexi with his buttered toast and coffee in hand, and David with a rather large bacon and egg meal in front of him sat down to eat and discuss their plans for the day. "I think I want to see if we can't find you a piano. If we cannot find one that we can bring home right away, at least let's find a store where we can go so I can at least hear you; I'm dying to hear you play," Alexi said, and David nodded thinking.

"That I think can be arranged. If we go uptown, there is a beautiful Steinway shop gallery I tend to stand outside drooling on the window display on a weekly basis. All those pianos, so little time to fondle them all," David said around a mouthful of bacon.

"Well considering it's a piano, I won't be too put out you want to fondle something other than me," Alexi teased and David chuckled.

"Don't worry handsome, my fingers will but only caress ivory and ebony remembering thy fair skin is even more divine."

“Ugh, please no poetry,” Alexi said but laughed anyway. David was such a card, he made everyday fun with the simplest things he said or did. He finished his toast and wiped his fingers on a napkin then sat back in his chair and fixed David in his gaze.

“Now before we go out shopping, there is something I think we should talk about,” Alexi began. David nodded, listening while he ate. “I want positively no talk of money; it’s not ever an issue with me. I want that perfectly understood from the beginning,” Alexi began and David was going to protest. Alexi forestalled him with a hand. “Hear me out first.” David nodded.

“I’m not much of a materialistic person by nature; my wardrobe is ghastly, and my pantry is usually bare. But not due to anything other than me being frightfully horrid about shopping for myself; I get sidetracked and distracted easily by art. I forget to eat sometimes I’m so absorbed in what I’m doing. However poor my parents were in showing affection in the physical sense of the relationship, they did, however, make sure I was more than amply ready to face the world on my own two feet,” Alexi stated going to pour himself another cup of coffee.

“When I decided to come to New York, I called my father and asked to use this loft because I loved the space and the way it lends itself to artistic endeavors. Not only did he consent without hesitation, the property was given to me outright, deed placed into my trust no questions asked. That leads me to my trust. You know very little about me David, and what I adore about you is you fell in love with me and not my money. I can tell from the look on your face, money had never once entered your thoughts. You are a rare man, David. I think your unselfish, totally honest nature is perhaps the part of you I love most of all,” Alexi said coming back to sit at the table.

“Let me fill you in on a few details that no one knows. Well, Lucia got very close, but she’s in jest when she teases me and calls me ‘Little Romanov’. She’s very near the mark actually. My mother’s ancestry dates back to Russian Czars centuries old. My Great-Grandmother was indeed a Romanov, not the immediate Royal family that fell mind you, but she was a cousin to that

family. The old money from before the communists took over was hoarded away in a multitude of Swiss bank accounts, and that's just my mother's side of the family," Alexi said making sure David got the full background before he dropped the big one. David sat with rapt attention.

"My father started out with a silver spoon in his mouth, the youngest son of an English Lord. My Paternal Grandfather sat in the House of Lords and sent his sons to the finest schools. My father took to financial business like a fish to water. After he graduated Oxford, he went to work at one of those Swiss banks I mentioned. There, he became the most sought after financial advisor to a host of very important people. My father looked after his own investments during that time too. He had just made a very savvy stock trade for one of his clients and made them both millions in the process. His client was so grateful; he invited my father on a cruise. That client was my maternal Grandfather, and on that cruise, my father met my then eighteen-year-old future mother. The rest there is history - they married, had Sergi, made a lot of money, had me, made a lot more money.

To make a long story short David, I've had a trust fund since I was in the womb. My father made several lucrative investments for Sergi and I, and he's doing it for Yuri now too, I've no doubt. My father may have been emotionally distant, but he does love his children and made sure none of us have to ever worry about finances. I have about seven hundred million sitting in banks, stock and bonds, and investment funds all over the world. I have no clue where it all is, but I do know I'd never be able to spend it all, and it keeps growing. So never, ever worry about money. I want you never to be put out if I want to spoil you and buy you things. I love you, and I want you to share everything I have David," Alexi said walking over to where David was sitting stunned, and he slowly sat in David's lap, kissing David deeply.

"I'm stinking bloody rich in other words." The last comment did the trick and David was laughing so hard tears were in his eyes.

“Okay, I promise not to quibble or complain too much. Blue collar habits die hard,” David said and Alexi smiled.

“You appreciate what you have David, it makes me want to spoil you rotten, and I’ve never been a spend thrift myself. I don’t desire much. I desire you, however, and I am getting a cheap thrill as I begin to see all the possible bonuses of being your sugar daddy.”

“Sugar Daddy?” David lost it again, almost choking as he laughed. “Shall I sing a chorus of Minnie the Moocher?”

“No,” Alexi said grinning and standing. “You are no ‘low down hoochie-choochee’. Just what is a hoochie-choochee?”

“I’ve no fucking clue. It rhymes,” David said getting up to follow Alexi into the bedroom, where they proceeded to get dressed to head out for the day.

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They took a cab uptown, and as they walked up the street, they passed a men’s wear boutique with a lovely display of winter coats in the window. Here David paused “First stop Mr. Ghastly wardrobe. You said you forget to shop for yourself, allow me to remind you, you need a decent coat,” David said and Alexi nodded.

“You’re absolutely right. I do, and I’m freezing.” Alexi smiled and followed David into the shop. He also needed clothes that were free of paint, and since they were out and about anyway, now was as good a time as any to buy some much needed garments.

Alexi, however, proved he did get distracted easy; he kept finding things he wanted to see David dressed in and not himself. “Shop for YOU not for ME Lexi,” David chided as he looked through a rack of lovely cashmere sweaters.

“I’m a fashion victim I’m afraid,” Alexi sighed not knowing what he wanted to look at.

“Then be glad you have me, the vain peacock, at your beck and call. Trust me?” David asked and Alexi nodded.

David got a wicked gleam in his eye. “Oh... good. March your lovely round ass to the dressing room and don’t bitch when I hand you things to try on,” David ordered, grabbing the high-end sales clerk on his way. “You my good man, you see this handsome creature here? We’re gonna make your commission check sing today, let’s get him outfitted like the hottie he is.” David almost cackled and the sales clerk smiled and sat them both down in a pair of chairs. High-end clothing stores usually had models and sure enough very handsome young men began coming out from the back, modeling various outfits.

Alexi looked lost. David was in his element, appraising the outfits as they paraded past, making note of the ones he thought Alexi would look good in; Alexi, however, was doing the opposite, wondering what David would look like in those various outfits.

“Oh god David you have to get that one!” Alexi gasped as a man of very similar coloring to David came out in a dark blue suit. Tailored pants, white collarless shirt, long matching suit jacket, the vibrant colors were making Alexi’s color palette appreciative eye sing. The whole outfit would compliment David’s dun coloring.

“Look for you not for me, damn it.”

"I'm looking, and you are so having that. It's not my fault you're hot, and I can see you performing in that suit."

"That is a nice suit. What colors does it come in?" David asked the sales clerk, and he brought out the swatch samples.

The first purchase was matching suits. Alexi was adamant David get the blue one that was modeled; the same suit with an officer's cut short jacket rather than the longer coat to make it just a little different in a burgundy wine color with a cream colored shirt was set aside for Alexi's darker sable coloring. They would look wonderful together in those suits, cut different enough where they didn't look like the Bobsey-Twins side by side, but similar enough to be highly complimentary. "You get paint on that suit Alexi, and I'll spank you."

"I promise not to paint in it. But can I still have that spanking?" Alexi commented and the sales clerk choked, and the model in the blue suit that looked a lot like David laughed. David gave him a good natured grin.

"No flirting with my boyfriend, only I get to spank him." David wagged a finger at the model who made a dramatic fake pout of defeat, before going back to change.

Several upon several purchases later, both men were completely re-outfitted, and Alexi was whipping out a credit card and making arrangements for the items to be delivered later that day, keeping only one item each to wear immediately. They both sported new winter coats, David a handsome black leather stadium cut coat with classic straight lines, the coat that had originally caught his eye in the window. Alexi's was the same coat in natural suede, again cut only slightly different. David's coat had a neckline that was simply collared, Alexi's collar swept into a deep hood, which was pulled up against the elements as they continued up the street hand in hand.

They stopped at a quaint looking French Bistro for a late lunch, where they both opted for the special of quiche Lorraine and fresh bread followed by chocolate mousse and strong coffee. It was hard to shop on grumbling stomachs after all.

It was nearing three in the afternoon by the time they made it to the Steinway Gallery, and David stood in his favorite spot in front of the large display window for a moment, taking in the sheer majesty of the shining black grand on display. "That is a beautiful instrument," Alexi said appreciating the craftsmanship and classical beauty in the window.

"Isn't it just? I've played all sorts of Grand Pianos, from all the makers, and they all have different tones and different qualities, but that baby right there is my wet dream. Steinway just cannot be beat when it comes to making the king of grand's."

"So get it."

"How on earth are you going to get that up 55 stories?"

"Ever hear of a crane and taking out a window?"

David looked at Alexi like he was crazy. "Lexi, it would cost you ten grand to hire that sort of heavy equipment just to MOVE the piano up that many stories."

"David..." Alexi's tone was warning. "What did I tell you about worrying and about money?"

"I know Lexi, but come on, that's a little extravagant. I don't NEED a grand. Every pianist wants one of these babies, but they aren't practical in a city if you don't live on the ground floor. These are designed for concert halls; they're big so the sound can carry over a very large space. For our loft it's not necessary, and I'd have to shove pillows in it so it didn't rattle out our teeth," David

said taking Lexi's hand and kissing the back of it. "I promise to pick a piano that I want, but is also practical for the space we're putting it in and can be brought up in the elevator okay?"

"Okay, I just want you to have the one you want is all."

"I know, and your generosity is appreciated more than I can express. I will, however, put my foot down and not let you waste money on me either. Okay?"

Alexi smiled, David really was like no other person he knew. "Okay."

Together, they headed inside to look around. Alexi stopped short almost immediately and pointed at a small white baby grand. "I had no idea they came as a blank canvas... can you paint a piano? Will it change the sound?"

David's eyes began to dance. "No, paint won't hurt it, are you... tell me I'm picking up on your thinking."

"You are. Please buy a white one; I want to paint all over it and make it a mural in the middle of the room. I can see it now; the nine muses, a few satyrs or something, and a musician and a painter sitting draped in barely concealing fabric being - inspired." Alexi looked about ready to explode with ecstasy.

David shut his eyes and he could envision it in his mind's eye. "Oh god, Lexi, that would be beautiful!"

Alexi was practically bouncing with excitement as David walked over to the baby grand and sat on the bench. "Now, since we know the size and color choice let's find the one that sounds the best." David said cracking his knuckles. His hands caressed the lid that covered the keys like a

lover touching the skin of his beloved, the smooth polished surface of the wood cold against his fingertips. He lifted the lid and reverently pressed a simple A minor chord – perfectly in-tune, a rich full tone.

Alexi sat down on another bench, hand propped in his chin. “Play for me love.”

And David did. He closed his eyes and let his fingers take over. He began with Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” slow and regal. He loved to warm up slowly to this, the first classical piece he’d learned to play, and the one he always tested new instruments. It allowed him to connect with the piano, feel her potential and sound out any possible flaws. Once he’d sufficiently gotten the feel for the instrument, he decided he’d show off a little for his lover and the hovering crowd of desperate music students, also known as weekend sales clerks, which had begun to gather around the prospective customer. He paused as “Moonlight Sonata” finished and waited for Alexi to finish clapping before grinning devilishly.

“Now that I’ve put you all to sleep, how about I wake you up?” David, the showman that he was, winked and went right into “Flight of the Bumblebee”, one of the fastest pieces ever written for the piano, and one he loved to show off with. He was a natural ham; he lived to grab an audience and keep them in the palm of his hand so he proceeded to grab and hold as he made quite a grand show of pretending to look exhausted while his hands were a blur of movement on keys.

Alexi looked like he was about to come all over himself or die laughing at David’s peculiar antics and showmanship. David was now quite familiar with that face, and he was more than smug about it as he played for his lover for the first time.

David finished with a flourish, and Alexi sprang off his seat into David’s arms. “Oh my god! You’re BRILLIANT! Take me now!”

David barked once in laughter “Later love, later. What do you think?”

“I think if we do not have that piano in our loft immediately I shall have to weep. And if you tell me you are studying to be a teacher and not a performer I will have to change your mind using every evil tactic I know. David... DAVID you are amazing to watch, and even more amazing to hear!”

“One, I agree we must have this little lady here; this is a fine piece of work. Two, I have no patience to teach; I’m a performance arts major. Three... can you use those tactics of persuasion on me anyway? I’m intrigued,” David said, Alexi still on his lap.

“But of course, Love. Shall I break out the MasterCard?”

“If you would be so kind.”

David watched the sales clerk whisk away Alexi’s platinum colored piece of plastic and Alexi beg for immediate delivery. It cost more, but they promised to have the piano loaded and brought over to Winchester House by eight that night.

So they left and caught a cab home. The clothes they’d bought were piled around Sam at the security desk when they arrived home, and the pair went over to load up their arms to carry everything upstairs, informing Sam that they were expecting the piano by eight. Sam promised to call them the minute the truck pulled up outside.

It was just after five; it gave them both plenty of time to put away their new clothes and start making dinner before the piano arrived. It had been a fruitful and glorious day indeed.

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David and Alexi were both in the kitchen fixing dinner. David at the stove fussing over 'proper' sauce for pasta, none of that pre-made jarred or canned variety for his noodles. While he fussed and tasted and added just the right amount of herbs and seasonings to his Grandmother's Alfredo sauce, Alexi smiled to himself, highly amused with David's quirks as he cut up some vegetables to make the salad. The water had just come to a boil, and David added the pasta to the water as Alexi set the salad on the table and set them each a place setting.

He had just finished when David carried over the fettuccini Alfredo and set that on the table. They sat down to eat just before seven, and had barely two bites eaten before the phone rang, it was Sam. The piano was here.

Both men looked like seven-year-old boys on Christmas morning. David quickly covered the pasta to keep it warm and edible as Alexi raced to put his shoes back on. They were in the lobby almost before the deliverymen.

The piano had come in several boxes. The legs had been removed, so had the lid, and those smaller items went up first. It took four men to wrestle the body of the piano into the elevator, and they had to position it on its side at an angle to get it in. It barely made it in and it took everyone's strength to hold it up at that angle while the elevator groaned its ascent.

"I think we're over the weight limit," David groaned, crammed in the back corner.

"David I don't think this weighs 5000 pounds. We're fine," Alexi chuckled, wedged between the piano and the button panel.

Alexi held the door open button while the others carefully carried and lugged the piano into the vast loft space. "Right there! Put it right there!" Alexi said as they reached the middle of the room.

“Right out in the middle of the floor?” David asked and Alexi beamed.

“YES! Let it fill the room. Let it be the first thing we see when we come in; it will look grand there.”

“Okay, here it is. It will sound good here,” David said as the legs were screwed back on and the piano was positioned. Once set, it wasn’t likely to be moving anywhere without casters, and casters would wreck the hardwood floors. It was set, and the lid was once more attached, and David had them close the lid. It looked great open, but would be too loud in the loft; there was not enough furniture or rugs or anything else in that space to help absorb sound. Closed lid would be more than enough.

Alexi tipped the deliverymen as David carried over the stool and set it in place. He could not believe that this was his; no more practicing until the janitors threw him out at the university anymore. He could come home to practice – home to his partner and his piano; he was surely dreaming an impossible dream.

He was just standing there absorbing the shock when he felt arms wrap around him from behind and Alexi propped his chin on his shoulder. “Happy?”

“In shock with it.”

“Then let it sink in and play me a song on your new toy.”

David smiled and nodded moving to sit at the keys; he knew precisely what to play to christen his new life, love, and piano. Franz Liszt’s *Liebestraum No. 3* “Dream of Love”. The soft opening cadences that climbed up the register filled the room. The rolling, music echoed like angels singing in the loft; Alexi stood by the piano, eyes closed, lips curved into a smile of love and happiness, fingers lightly tapping out the six-eight time signature as David played. The light

melody faded to the final gentle chord, and Alexi let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

His eyes opened and his face turned to David's, his eyes were wet with tears. "I love you," he breathed in almost wonderment and awe. He was utterly spellbound by David's music.

David stood and took Alexi in his arms and kissed him tenderly and deeply, releasing him from the kiss but not from his arms. "I love you too," he said lifting a finger to wipe away the tear on Alexi's cheek, tasting the salty drop as he brought the tear to his lips. "And that is the finest gift you could ever give me Lexi."

"The piano is lovely."

"I'm not talking about the piano. I'm talking about your soul. Tears come from the soul, like pearls from the sea. You cannot buy them, you cannot sell them, but to receive one born from love is priceless."

"Forget what I said this morning about poetry David. You can spout it any time you wish. I am sufficiently wooed out of my socks."

"I mean it."

"I know you do. And if we do not break this mood I will be blubbering like a baby in a moment," Alexi said, wiping the tears from his cheeks, smiling so brightly he seemed to glow. David rested his hand on Alexi's cheek.

"You're beautiful; I hope I can always make you smile like that."

“Just keep being you, and I shall.”

David smiled and nodded and took Alexi’s hand in his. “Let’s eat before it’s too cold, then I’ll play for you again alright?”

Alexi nodded in agreement, needing to escape the moment before he broke down weeping with joy, and they returned to the table to finish their meal.

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After the meal and joint clean-up, David changed into his favorite sweats and university t-shirt and headed over to the piano. Alexi also changed and grabbed a soft leaded pencil. “Mind if I scribble on it?”

David chuckled as he began to play a little Mozart. “Be my guest.”

While David played, Alexi began working on the legs, lightly sketching grapevines up them in a very early renaissance style. He was fast, but he was just sketching, his foot tapping out David’s tempo as he worked. He amused David to no end, and David began selecting pieces from his rather vast repertoire that seemed to drive Alexi’s pace.

Alexi was fascinating to watch be creative. He had the tip of his tongue between his teeth, totally immersed in his “canvas”. He was driven by the moment and the music; his world was focused to the minute space between his hand and eye. He looked like a little bohemian god hard at work, blowing errant locks of hair out of his eyes out of the corner of his mouth. Alexi had commented that he thought David was entertaining to watch; Alexi was too, in his own unique way. Especially the way he would squint and pause occasionally, leaning back to get a broader scope before diving back in again.

David watched the vines grow from the floor into the side panels of the piano creating a framework for the as of yet unknown scene along the side. God only knew what Alexi had in mind for the vast lid space. He was building the base to a masterpiece; David has seen Alexi's finished paintings, and whatever his little artist had in mind, David was positive he was going to love it.

They lost all track of time. Alexi finally had to stop; his eyes were red and he looked exhausted. David's hands were beginning to cramp as well, and as he turned to look at the clock, he gasped. "Jesus Lexi, it's almost three in the morning. We should be going to bed, school tomorrow."

Alexi yawned and nodded. "I'm knackered. When I can no longer focus it is time to stop," he said rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

"You squint a lot, you might need glasses."

"Probably. Both my parents wear them."

"Then go to the doctor already."

"I forget," Alexi said standing and stretching.

"Well, then I shall nag and remind you. Your eyes are kinda important if you're an artist, ya know," David said standing to go get a good look at the sketches.

"Very true. Alright, I'll try to make an appointment this week."

"Good. Shall we hit it?"

Alexi nodded once, allowing David to lead him to bed.

They were both asleep practically before their heads hit the pillows.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The alarm clock began to buzz promptly at seven, and David's hand blindly struck out and clobbered the snooze bar. He absolutely detested waking up to an alarm clock, but it was a necessary evil Monday through Friday when you had to be to school or work by ten in the morning.

He heard a soft moan beside him; Alexi was disturbed but had not wakened fully. David rolled over to look at him, hair splayed over his pillow as he lay there on his back, face turned toward David, the arm closest to David bent at the elbow, and that lovely creative hand, fingers bent in relaxation resting with the back of the hand on the pillow beside and partly obscuring Alexi's face. The other hand lay on his chest, atop the covers. Alexi looked like a painting of a prince in repose. Even the vibrant purple of the sheets and the purple and gold brocade comforter lent itself to the atmosphere of the scene.

Alexi moaned and sighed again, shifting his hips slightly under the covers. David smirked and let his eyes travel downward. A slight tenting of the covers proved Alexi was having a very nice dream. David apparently wasn't the only one this morning who had awakened quite, aroused.

David leaned closer, and trailed a finger over the back of Alexi's hand, down his wrist and down the soft inner side of his forearm. Alexi's eyes fluttered open and he gave a sleepy smile to David.

"Good morning, Beautiful," David said softly propping his head on his hand, still tracing lazy lines with a finger on Alexi's arm.

“Good Morning,” Alexi replied in kind, reaching up to gently push David’s unruly morning hair away from his face. David took that opportunity to lean over Alexi where he lay still on his back to kiss him. Alexi’s arms wound around his neck and pulled David closer. “What time is it?”

“Seven,” David answered moving to chew purposefully on Alexi’s earlobe, and Alexi sighed with delight in response.

“Oh good. There’s time,” Alexi purred pulling David so he’d lay atop him. “I am quite happy to see you this morning.”

“I noticed. Good Dreams?”

Alexi just smiled in response, eyes lidded with barely contained lust.

“Me too.”

It was nearing eight by the time they managed to finally get out of bed quite happily sweaty with their morning activities. Alexi had kept David to his threat of making David’s legs be the ones to have the workout, but from his angle he’d had little strain and had the most glorious sight of looking at Alexi’s face, looking up at him with those large, deep green eyes as he came, twisting helpless beneath David’s body, leg’s wrapped tightly around David’s hips, his feet urging David deeper until the moment they both tumbled into their passion headlong.

It was a good thing the bathroom was very large, and the shower stall easily fit them both comfortably without crashing into one another. They were now pressed for time, and separate showers would waste that time. David noted the bench in the shower would be one place he would dearly love to try a tryst on as they washed. Alexi laughed. “We just finished and you’re

already planning our next rendezvous?" Alexi asked tipping his head back to rinse the shampoo from his hair.

"Naturally." David grinned as he shaved using the small fogless shower mirror.

Alexi laughed in response, a merry twinkle of mirth in his eyes as David finished and he moved to step out of the shower. Alexi was brushing his teeth with one hand and blow-drying his hair with the other. He looked absolutely ridiculous and utterly adorable, as David took up residence at the other vanity sink thankful there were two sinks as he too found his toothbrush and followed suit.

Towels wrapped around their waists, it was a pleasant surprise to walk into a vast closet to find the new clothes they'd forgotten they'd purchased. Alexi stood confused, debating what to wear. "David, I know I'm going to ruin all these nice things; I do work with paint and stain and all manner of messy things all day long. Why do you think my previous wardrobe was in the state it was in before?"

David laughed and pulled out a nice sweater and khakis for Alexi. "Wear a smock."

"I do. Well, I forget usually until it's too late."

"Well, start a new habit; you look too hot in these not to wear them. Besides, they are warm and look at the frost on the windows this morning. Dress warm," David said pulling on a nice pair of jeans, long sleeve blue shirt and a cream cardigan for himself.

"True. Dr. Casey did already chastise me about flu season," Alexi said pulling on his clothes.

"Precisely. Speaking of which, those stitches can probably come out soon, it looks almost healed," David said as Alexi moved to tie back his hair.

“I forgot it was even there, so you’re probably right. Thankfully, I’ve cut myself often enough with exacto knives I seem to heal quickly enough,” Alexi said pulling on his shoes and going to grab his backpack. He walked over to the pantry in the corner of the kitchen and reached into and grabbed a handful of granola bars, tossed some to David for his bag in the process, which were promptly stored for easy access.

“We can grab coffee downstairs; we’re pushing for time in traffic now,” Alexi said grabbing his coat and pulling it on, as David slipped his coat on and jabbed the elevator button.

“Tell me they have donuts; a crappy little granola bar will last me about 5 minutes. I’m starved. I’m always hungry as a bear after...”

Alexi laughed as the elevator doors opened, and he stepped inside. “Then I guess we should keep more food in the house for you then.” David smiled and hit the lobby button.

“For the plans I have concerning you and all the myriad of places I plan to take you, that’s a wise move.”

The doors shut on their laughter.

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They reached the campus by nine-thirty with coffee in hand, David’s bear claw devoured before they made the first block in the cab. He was much happier with something fairly substantial in his stomach, and since they were no longer urgently pressed for time, they walked through packs of students towards their respective classrooms.

"I have composition first until noon in Garrett Hall," David remarked as he walked sipping his coffee.

"I'm easy to find, I'm always either in one of three places. The art rooms off the Rosehill Memorial Gallery; you can't miss that monstrosity of a modern architectural nightmare of a building. I'm not into contemporary buildings; I like classical design. Oh, where was I? Right, I'm in that building being an Art Geek, or I'm in the Library. Again, I'm sure you know where that is. Otherwise, I'm off campus at the actual Art museum two blocks north. Just call me if you can't find me here. If I'm in the museum, I'm usually working in the basement workshops with Dr. Talbot. I'm always there on Wednesdays. Monday I won't be there; I'm in the art building all day on Mondays. I'm a graduate assistant. In other words, I baby-sit undergrads all day – my age but more commonly older than myself," Alexi said as the Art building complex came into view.

"When's your lunch break scheduled?" David asked as they passed the large iron hodge-podge structure/fountain in front of the building.

"I don't usually have time to get out of there on Monday. I should have it from noon until two, but by the time I get around to looking at a clock, I've got five minutes until the afternoon class starts."

"I'm off noon until three... I will bring you lunch." David said kissing Alexi's cheek as they reached the front doors. "I'm off; I'll see you at lunch handsome." With that David was trotting off to Garrett Hall, halfway across campus in the opposite direction.

Alexi just realized he'd been walked to class for the very first time in his life, and it sent a shiver of delight down his spine. David was incredibly thoughtful, and his kiss was still warm on Alexi's cheek. "God I love that man," Alexi said to no-one as he turned to go inside.

Alexi went inside to his desk next to Dr. Talbot's and set down his bag. The room was filled with project tables where art projects, still in progress, were still covered under tarps for protection. Some students beginning to filter in to their tables, Dr. Talbot right behind a pair of chatting Goth-punk girls – pierced everywhere, hair died a horrible flat black, and dressed in black from head to toe. Dr. Talbot smiled as he got to his desk. "You certainly look in high spirits this morning Alexi. Have a good weekend?"

"Very," Alexi said smiling and finishing his now cold coffee.

"Oh? Would it happen to have anything to do with that handsome young man I saw kiss you on the stairs this morning?"

"You never miss a thing, do you, Marcus?"

"No. Do tell; don't keep me waiting."

Alexi smiled. "His name is David MacAlister; he's perhaps one of the best pianists I've EVER heard play. And I have heard some of the best mind you."

"I know. That good, eh?"

"Oh yes. I'm going to make absolutely sure Richard LaCrosse attends one of his recitals eventually. He manages the finest classical musicians in New York."

"You are not going to tell David, are you?"

"Of course not. He's going to earn that deal on his own talent. I will just make a phone call to a friend of a friend of a friend." Alexi winked, laying his finger on his nose. "Monsieur DuBois I know

has a daughter married to a fine tenor at the Met, who just happens to also be managed by Mr. LaCrosse.”

“For an absentminded young man, you certainly remember the smallest details. He forgets to eat, but remembers someone’s daughter is married to so and so with connections. You certainly are one of a kind Alexi.”

“Thank you.”

“What else? There’s more to David than his talent, or was the kiss something innocent?” Marcus asked and Alexi tried to look innocent; his smile gave him away.

“He’s at least dressed you properly. About time too wear your damn smock.”

“That’s exactly what David said this morning. I promised I’d try to remember.”

“Living with you, is he?”

“Yes. God Marcus, I know it’s crazy, but you know those moments when you get an epiphany? Where you’re sitting there and everything, absolutely everything, seems to drop and snap into place in brilliant clarity? That’s David in a nutshell. I cannot look at him without getting this overwhelming feeling of peace. I have never felt like this in my entire life.”

“Sounds like good old-fashioned love to me. It does that to people. Been with my partner going on fifty-years. You just know kiddo.”

“I never believed it until I met David. Now I do,” Alexi said standing to pull on his smock, rolling up his sleeves. “And as much as I’d like to tell you all about David and our weekend, it looks like

Cindy needs help," Alexi said going over to one of the girls in the corner weeping over her painting.

"I just cannot get the light right!" she sobbed like it was the end of her universe. "I'm going to fail light and shadow."

Alexi leaned over her shoulder and looked at her work. It wasn't nearly as horrible as her tears were making it out to be. "You won't fail, here let me show you a trick I use," Alexi said moving to take up her brush. A few strokes and he demonstrated his technique of creating a beam of sunlight with paint.

"I'll never be as good as you," Cindy sniffled.

"I have faults too. I have just been practicing longer. That's all. Everyone with an eye that appreciates beauty can learn to capture it. There is no secret, it just takes long hours and many failures."

Cindy sighed dramatically. "Yes, everyone says that. But talent is also something you were born with."

"No, I wasn't. I failed my first art class miserably. It broke my heart, because I wanted it so badly. So I worked hard for it. If you want it badly enough, work for it with all you have inside your heart." Alexi said encouragingly and Cindy smiled at him.

"You look nice today."

Alexi was taken aback by the compliment. "Um, thanks."

“New outfit?”

Alexi was totally out of element now; small talk about things other than art, and he was a shy eighteen-year-old boy and embarrassed. “Uh, yeah. David and I went shopping yesterday.”

“David? Who is David?”

“David MacAlister, he’s uh my... um...”

“Alexi! Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Yeah, I guess you’d call him that I suppose.”

“Oh my GOD! Too cool. Wait, hey I know him! Tall guy with gorgeous hazel eyes and the great body to die for, music major... piano I think?”

Alexi nervously laughed. “Yeah, that would be him.”

Cindy groaned. “Why is it all the REALLY HOT guys are gay? He’s in my English Class. I sit behind him, and I’ll refrain from checking out your boyfriend’s ass in the future.”

Alexi wanted to be anywhere but by Cindy as she gushed and called it ‘cute’. When she started in about wanting to sketch them together, Alexi made a hasty, embarrassed, and mortified exit. He did not like being the center of anyone’s attention other than David’s. And even then he preferred it in surroundings less public. He certainly did not want to pose for Cindy, no matter how flattering. He did not view himself as art-worthy material and just the thought of anyone but David seeing him naked made him turn a very bright shade of red. Cindy laughed at him. “Don’t be shy Alexi! Congratulations!”

Her remark, loud enough to make the entire room focus on him, made him want to crawl under his desk and hide indefinitely.

The room was now buzzing with queries about what she was congratulating him about. Cindy supplied the answer loud enough that the whole room could hear. "Alexi's got himself a HOT, and I mean HOT, boyfriend."

Alexi was ripe as a tomato; his heart was racing. All the clapping, catcalls, and whistles were making him hyperventilate. Thankfully Dr. Talbot knew him; and knew how he got panic attacks when he felt cornered, and he was rescued.

"All right, enough. Back to your projects; we're here to study ART not talk about our lives outside of this classroom. Save the chit-chat you pack of bohemians."

Alexi took his escape to the bathroom to calm his nerves. He really hated his jitters. All his life he preferred being the boy in the shadows; being in the spotlight was not his cup of tea. David belonged in those lights, not he. He wondered how David was fairing once people knew, probably a lot better than Alexi was, that was certain.

David's professor was late, as always on a Monday morning. And he had his feet propped up on the desk, looking casually bored out of his mind. A few of his fellow music students clustered around him.

"Okay Dave, talk! No where in sight this weekend, your land-lady said you'd put in notice when we tried to hunt you down and Maggie saw you get out of a cab this morning with a brunet that apparently is, as she describes, 'a long cool drink of water'." Chico, the Classical guitarist demanded. David smirked.

“Long Cool Drink of Water, eh? That, I think, is appropriate,” David said, making them beg for more info.

“So tell us already. Is he hot?” Susan, the cellist asked, eyes beaming wickedly.

“Very.”

“He nice?” Amy, the shy Violinist asked; Alexi would like her, soft spoken girl, a lot like Alexi really.

“Extremely.”

“God damn it, Dave, do I have to knock out all the details with my fist?” Karen, straight from the Bronx and one hell of a Viola player threatened, and David held up his hands.

“Okay, okay! His name is Alexi St. Cloud; he’s a grad student of the arts even though he’s only eighteen. He’s fucking gorgeous, totally blind to it, generous to a fault, talent dripping from every pore, and yes, I’m serious about him, before you ask. I am totally, one hundred percent in love with him. He’s a definite keeper and then some. I’m living with him.”

“Damn Dave! How long have you been seeing him behind our backs?”

“Since Friday.”

“Get the FUCK OUT MAN! In one weekend, you’re already living together?”

“Yup.”

“Are you NUTS?”

“Yes. But honesty guys, it’s like surreal. You know what they say when you meet ‘THE ONE’ you just know. It’s fucking true man, I kid you not; it was like instant affinity. God, he’s like a real living breathing muse. I played non-stop for seven hours last night, just looking at him. I only stopped playing cause my hands were toast, time flew by, I never played better.”

“Damn, you are serious.”

“Totally.”

“Wait a minute, what were you playing on? Your piano is in storage.”

“It’s ruined; the place got flooded. Alexi’s gonna turn it into something, so it’s not totally lost, and he bought this gorgeous Steinway baby grand for the loft. You should have seen us getting it up 55 stories. What a trip.”

All David’s friends just stared at him mouths open wide in astonishment.

“He just up an bought you a piano?”

“He did, and he’s already drawn all over it. He’s going to paint a mural on it.”

“DAVID FUCK ME! Do you know how much those things cost?” Chico asked, and David nodded.

“Intimately, I have Steinway’s catalog memorized.”

“Just where is this loft?” Karen asked.

“Winchester House,” David replied and Karen almost fell out of her seat.

“Not like THE Winchester House overlooking Central Park!”

“Yes, that one.”

Karen whistled through her teeth. “Alexi’s loaded; he has to be. A loft there is easily, easily worth ten million.”

“I’ve no clue; I didn’t ask. And none of you bring up money either. Alexi HATES that. Yes, he’s rich, leave it at that, please. He does not want people seeing only his money, and I cannot blame him for it. I had no clue he was loaded and I give a shit about it. I love him for who he is, not his money. Don’t embarrass me or hurt his feelings or I’ll murder you guys. He’s terminally shy and has had some rough times. I won’t see him upset; is that clear?” David asked, his face deadly serious. He would not stand for anyone, not even his friends to make Alexi feel uncomfortable and all his friends nodded.

“We won’t David. He does sound very nice,” Amy said just as the professor arrived and class came to a very late start.

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Alexi was helping a student in the front of the classroom staple and stretch a canvas over a frame he didn’t see David walk in. He had his back to David and only realized he was there when the whistles began again, and Alexi flushed.

David chuckled. "I take it they know about us?"

Alexi visibly relaxed just at the sound of David's rich tenor. "It's your fault; Cindy brought up my new clothes. I said we went shopping, and I've no clue how they figured out the rest," Alexi sighed, jamming a staple into the frame forcefully.

David noticed the tension in Alexi's shoulders and turned to the room and the noise. "Hey guys come on, knock it off. Thanks for the fanfare and all, but damn, can we leave high school behind please? Thanks," David said and his dangerous looks once again served him well, and the fun was over, people began to leave for lunch.

"Thanks David."

"You look horrid. Have they been razzing you all morning?"

"Pretty much" Alexi said firing the last staple home. "There finished, get me out of here David before I have another panic attack."

"Panic attack? That bad?" David asked as Alexi grabbed his coat off the back of his chair.

"Yes, I get them when I feel cornered. I almost had one; I can't help it either. I really wish I could handle people."

David took Alexi's hand as they walked outside. "Not all of us can. Not all of us can be natural hams." David made the mood light teasing himself. Alexi slipped under his arm.

"I like hams."

“Boy, that’s good to hear,” David said kissing Alexi’s forehead as they walked. “What do you want for lunch?”

“Shall we pay a call on Lucia?”

“She’ll give us hell.”

“She’s allowed; old women can get away with murder when they feed me as well as she does.”

“Amen to that. I could go for some of her soup myself; I’m frozen. The heater in Garrett is on the fritz; it’s either boiling hot or sub-zero in that building.”

As they walked Cindy caught up to them. “Hey, um Alexi, sorry for embarrassing you and all. I just thought it was really sweet. I mean, you’re such a nice guy and you really help me a lot and I was happy for you, you deserve it ya know... so I just wanted to say sorry.”

“It’s all right, Cindy. I just, I’m just really shy. I have issues.”

“Hey, don’t we all? I talk first think later, ya know? So we’re cool?”

“Yeah, I’m not mad or anything.”

”Whew. Heya David,” Cindy said smiling falling in-step with them.

“English lit right?” Davis asked placing where he knew her from in his mind.

“Yup, I sit behind you,” Cindy said and David smiled at her. He knew her now, the girl who always looked at his ass.

"My ass is taken." It was Cindy's turn to blush.

"Argh, busted. Yeah, I know; I told Alexi I'd keep my eyes to myself," Cindy replied, not embarrassed for long.

"That's good to hear," David said good-naturedly as they reached the main street.

"Well, I'm off, gotta get to the bookstore before my next class. See you in class! And hey if you change your mind about the sketch, let me know!" Cindy said, gone in a flash of a long blonde ponytail.

"What sketch?" David asked, and Alexi groaned.

"She wants to sketch us."

David perked, "Really?"

"Yes."

"She any good?"

"Yeah, she draws in charcoal very well."

"Let's do it."

"ARE YOU CRAZY DAVID?"

“Yes, why not. I’d love a picture of you and me together.”

“She wants us NAKED.”

“So? You’re hot naked.”

“You don’t have a problem with that?”

“No, don’t tell me a man who paints nudes is afraid to be the model.”

“Yes, actually.”

“You’re hot, Lexi!”

“You really want to sit there naked for hours in front of someone we have to see everyday?”

“I sit naked in front of you.”

“I’m your lover, big difference.”

“Okay, so we do some creative draping of a sheet so your lovely bits are covered, what then?”

“Maybe.”

“I can be persistent. I think it would be fun, and that picture would be something to hang in our bedroom.”

“Okay, but ONLY if I don’t have to show her anything intimate.”

“Deal. I’ll tell her it’s okay in class then.”

“You’re insane David.”

“You love me.”

“Yes, I do. God help me.” Alexi rolled his eyes as they entered Tuscany Café and were greeted by a happy, fat, and grandmotherly proud Lucia.

She fed them soup, pinched their cheeks, and sent them off with wedding cake from her granddaughter’s wedding from the day before. Telling them that she hoped it would bring them many years of romance and good fortune.

“If we could, I’d marry you in a heartbeat. I really would,” David said out of the blue as they walked back to school. That warm sensation crept up from Alexi’s stomach again, and he felt warmth in his eyes, tears of joy that he fought back.

“AH David. I love you. If we could, so would I.” It was a melancholy joy; marriage between people of the same gender was still not allowed in many parts of the world. Only a few places in the world recognized the love that people shared could not be blinded by race, gender and color and allowed them to marry.

This was not one of those places. They’d have to be content being committed to each other just as they were. David’s arm pulled Alexi closer to his side as they walked. “We could always move to Hawaii.”

“Too hot. We could drive to Vermont.”

David smiled. "There's a thought. How about we plan on a first anniversary "ski-trip" to Vermont then? I think that would be a nice way to celebrate. We've rushed a lot of things; we should make something like that special."

"You're serious."

"Absolutely."

"God, I love you. Agreed. I accept your proposal."

David grinned and winked. "Who's the wife?"

Alexi stuck out his tongue. "God, you're horrible."

"I know." David laughed as they reached the Art Building. "I'm done at four-thirty. I'll come get you."

"I'm done at four; meet me at the infirmary. I need to see Dr. Casey anyway."

"Okay, will do. Love you," David said once more giving Alexi a peck good-bye before setting off back to class.

"Love you too." Alexi was lost in happiness as he went back to his desk to prepare for the afternoon class. He didn't see who stood in the doorway glowering.

"Just like that you dump me for him?" Gordon asked walking into the room; Alexi clutched his desk and tried not to look terrified.

“There was never an us to begin with. Three dates and you raping me does not constitute a relationship.” Alexi swallowed the bile for once in his life. He needed to stand up to this man; he needed to be free of him. David, like now, would not always be there.

“You were begging for it baby.”

“I believe I was begging for you to stop. Get out of my classroom.”

“Do not attempt to grow a spine Alexi. You’re mine.”

“I said get out Gordon or I will call the campus security and have you removed.”

“This isn’t over, Alexi.”

“Yes it is.”

Gordon stormed out, too many people were coming into the room. He’d show Alexi who was boss, and he was certainly not going to give up that little piece of rich meat to a blue-collar slob like David MacAlister.

Alexi was shaking like a leaf. Dr. Talbot knew the reason; he saw Gordon leave.

“Go home Alexi, get some air, take the rest of the day off.” Marcus was the only person other than David who knew what had happened; he was the one who had taken Alexi to the hospital that night.

Alexi picked up his phone and with shaking fingers dialed David’s number.

David's blood ran cold; the tremble and fear was back in Alexi's voice. "David, Gordon... I'm going home. I told him off, but I feel sick."

"I'll take you home. I can skip today. I don't want you alone if he's out and about being a prick."

"It's not necessary David. I'll go straight home."

"Yes it is necessary. I'm already on my way back. Wait for me there, I'll walk you out."

"Okay. I'll wait."

"Good, I'll be two minutes. I love you."

"I love you too." Alexi said hanging up the phone.

"David taking you home?"

"Yeah."

"Now, that's a real man. Hang onto him Alexi; he cares about you."

Just then, David walked in, and Dr. Talbot stood to shake his hand. "I'm Marcus Talbot; thank you for loving Alexi as much as I do."

David nodded and shook Marcus' hand. "Don't thank me, it's not necessary. Come on, Lexi; let's get out of here, Love."

Alexi nodded and almost forgot his coat. Both Marcus and David met eyes as David reached to pick it up off the back of the chair and drape it over Alexi's shoulders; it seemed Alexi was only absent minded when he was afraid. That was going to end eventually; David was not going to let Gordon get away with it. That man was on borrowed time. The first chance he had, when Lexi was not around to get upset, David was going to find Gordon and beat the living daylights out of him to see how he liked it.

They hailed a cab home, and once inside Alexi curled up on the chaise. David played until Alexi was lulled into a fitful nap.

He let Alexi sleep and continued to play all the most soothing songs he knew to help ease a very troubled soul.

Alexi needed his strength, and he was going to give it until Alexi was healed, inside and out.

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Alexi slept a few hours and woke up looking miserable; David stopped playing and walked over to the chaise smoothing Alexi's hair back from his face with a gentle hand. "It's just about dinner time. I thought I'd run to the store and make us something to eat in; are you hungry?"

Alexi hugged his knees as David perched himself on the arm of the chaise, one hand lightly stroking Alexi's back. "Not really. I feel sick."

"You should eat something. How about some peppermint ice cream? That always helps settle my stomach," David asked, and Alexi leaned back and laid his head on David lap.

"That actually sounds wonderful. I'm sorry..."

“Do not ever apologize over this Alexi. Never. You are not the one who should be saying he’s sorry,” David said leaning over to kiss Alexi’s forehead. “Never say you’re sorry, Love. Not ever.”

“You shouldn’t have to deal with my baggage.”

“You shouldn’t have baggage to begin with, and I love you, ALL of you, and that includes everything that makes you who you are for good or for ill. I’m here for you.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“I’ll decide that,” David sighed finger combing Alexi’s hair. “I love you, and it’s killing me to see you like this. I wish you wouldn’t blame yourself.”

“It’s my fault; I should have never let him up here.”

“Alexi, I don’t care if you were running around naked, no still means no. He had no right.”

“I hate myself for being too weak to stop him.”

“Lexi... He’s bigger and stronger; we all have someone we can’t beat.”

“He makes me feel... helpless.”

“And that’s how he wants you to feel; it’s a power trip for guys like him. You said you told him off today, that’s a start.”

“Then I collapse like an infant ready to puke my guts out after. I want this feeling to stop. I hate feeling so small. I’m not small.”

“No you’re not, but you’re smaller than he is, and that’s what he’s targeting.”

“I can’t get past one moment; I keep reliving it over and over. I should have trusted my initial feelings that something was wrong. I thought it was just me being my ever paranoid self. I’ve never really gotten along with others; I always felt out of place. There are only two people I’ve ever known that have made me feel comfortable with myself. Marcus and you,” Alexi said fighting back tears.

“He was so different at first; he was everywhere, begging for a date, sending flowers, just always there. He seemed nice enough but made me tense. I finally caved in after a few days, and we went out for coffee. Simple, he seemed alright. Pushy, but not dangerous. I’m just so neurotic I thought it was me. Second date we went to see a movie, some horrible action adventure he wanted to see. Again I thought it was me, I’m weird like that; I’m not much of a movie person. I’m quiet and withdrawn; he was really into it, but most men are, so once more I chalked up my discomfort to me being strange. I was not going to see him again, but he was showing up here every night until finally I said okay. I was fixing dinner for myself anyway; he could join me. That was my fatal mistake.” Alexi began to cry now, and David’s heart was breaking, but he was going to stay silent as Alexi purged what he needed to get out in the open.

“He was all over this place like a dog marking territory; he looked greedy almost. I thought to myself, just feed him and he’ll go away. When the meal was over and I said I was tired and that I was sorry but I’d like him to leave, everything changed. He grabbed me and kissed me, hard, it hurt so I shoved him away and said to get out. He said that he wasn’t going anywhere and he grabbed me again. That’s when we fought. I kicked; I screamed; I did everything I could think of to break his grip on me. He hit me so hard I was dizzy and seeing stars, and I was so angry and

furious and scared that I bit him, and he let go, but I was in such a horrid position I fell and cracked my head on the counter there. I was knocked out. When I woke up, I realized the worst. He had come prepared. He had one of those bondage ball things in my mouth so I couldn't scream; I was tied to the bed being torn in two. No lube, no cushion for my wrists and ankles; I was hanging there helpless. He stopped twice to eat and sleep, leaving me there bound and gagged. He spent all night in here, over and over and over. Around four in the morning, he left, leaving me tied up. I thought I was going to die." Alexi was sobbing now, and David was too.

"I managed to get an arm free, and thank God my cell phone was in my pants on the bed. I called Marcus, and he came and helped me. I was unconscious by the time he got here; Gordon really tore me up. I was bleeding horribly from everywhere, including my ears from where he hit me in the head. I spent two days in the hospital and another five here. It was two weeks before I could go back to school and there he was again. Oh God, David, I just freeze when he's around. I fall back into that nightmare just looking at him." Alexi was in hysterics now, and David held him close.

"Lexi. Dear god, Love, there's not a man alive who could go through that and not freeze when the object of fear keeps coming at you. Why didn't you tell the police? Arrest him!"

"I can't prove it, and David we're GAY. They think that shit is NORMAL. They don't care; I did tell the doctor in the hospital and nothing. Not a damn thing. I humiliated myself telling that doctor; I wasn't about to go through it again."

"Dr. Casey cares, I care, Connie Cares, Marcus cares, Sam cares. Gordon has to pay for his crimes; do you want him to do that to someone else?"

"No. But it's too late now."

“It’s never too late, Love. But I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do. Always keep your cell on you, and if he even sets FOOT within a hundred paces, I want you to call me immediately; I don’t care where I am or what I’m doing. Promise me you’ll call me.”

“I promise.”

“Good; because I will not let that bastard touch you again,” David said, his voice furious.

“He’s strong, David.”

“Yeah, well so am I, Love, so am I,” David said standing up and grabbing his coat and keys. “And I need to get us supplies for the night before the store closes. Why don’t you take a nice hot bath and relax, and I’ll be back in about an hour with enough junk food to make us puke for good reasons,” David said kissing Alexi’s cheek. “I love you; I won’t be gone long.”

“I love you too. Thank you.”

David just cupped Alexi’s cheek and smiled at him and headed out to the store.

He needed a brisk walk in the cold; he was furious and needed to calm down for himself or he’d be no use to Alexi. Now that he knew all the details of what happened, he was certainly going to make Gordon rue the day he was born.

David wandered the store aisles throwing all manner of fattening and rich foods – from salty, greasy potato chips, to Oreo cookies, to nice pastrami and rye bread for sandwiches for dinner, to that peppermint ice cream he’d promised Alexi – into the basket he carried. All these foods were childhood favorites, all terrible for your cholesterol levels, but wonderful for your spirits when you

were upset – good old-fashioned comfort food. David was just about to pay for his bounty when Amy walked up behind him, out shopping for herself.

“David, your heart will hate you for all that later; buy antacid tabs too while you’re at it,” she teased, and David smiled.

“Good idea actually,” David said tossing a few rolls of Tums from the check out aisle into the basket.

“Where’s Alexi?”

“Home, he had a bad day.”

“Karen said she saw you walk him out right after lunch,” Amy said as David paid for his goods.

“Yeah, there’s a long story attached. Let’s just say, I am on the war-path and a certain asshole’s days are numbered.”

“That’s too bad. Please don’t do anything stupid.”

“You sound like Alexi,” David said waiting for Amy to pay for her things and walking out with her.

“Well, he sounds intelligent then.” Amy smiled as they walked and almost bumped into a tall man coming around the corner.

The next thing Amy knew David’s bags were on the ground, and he had the man shoved up against the wall.

“You fucking prick!” A solid right hook landed in Gordon’s face. “If you ever touch Alexi again I’ll kill you!” Another punch, this time swung by Gordon, caught David in the ribs.

“He’s mine MacAlister; that little bitch is using you to make me jealous.”

David rubbed his rib. “Bitch?” David looked mean; Amy backed up into the shadows horrified at seeing her friend like this.

“You are a fucked up son of a bitch who needs to be in jail for what you did to him! Jesus Christ you raped him and left him to DIE!” Amy’s eyes went wide as David lunged like a wild animal and a brawl ensued. They were tearing each other apart; the things she heard them yelling at each other made her weep. She had never known David to lie; he was so easy-going normally. To get him this angry, Amy knew everything she heard had true.

Poor Alexi... What he must have gone through, and David, she could see how much this hurt him too. He really did love Alexi, only love drove such a gentle man to violence in defense of those he cherished. He was showing Gordon no mercy, and he was winning. Gordon had fallen, and David stood back, not one to kick a man when he was down, even if he wanted to. “Get up, I’m not done with you yet,” David hissed, wiping blood from his lip.

A flash of steel and bright flash followed by a loud bang. David was down, holding his stomach and Gordon was off running. Amy screamed and lunged to help David, dialing 9-1-1 on his cell he’d dropped. Blood was dripping out of the corner of his mouth, and he coughed.

“Alexi. Call. Lexi.”

“Shut up, David. Yes, my friend he’s been shot! Hurry! Corner of Madison and Fifth. Hurry!” she sobbed, hearing the sirens blare close by. The cops arrived and soon the ambulance, and David was being loaded within minutes of him being shot.

“Lexi!” David sobbed as the doors shut. Amy was telling the police what she saw, all that had happened, all she had heard, why they were fighting, everything she knew. David’s phone still in her hand.

It rang. She answered. “H-hello?”

Alexi froze. What was a girl doing with David’s phone and why did she sound so hysterical?

“Where’s David?”

“Is this Lexi?”

Alexi’s blood drained from his face, who was this sobbing woman on David’s phone? “Yes.

What’s wrong with David?”

“Oh god, Lexi, he’s been SHOT!” she sobbed, the cops taking the phone from her.

“Is this Alexi St. Cloud? Officer Williamson here. He’s being taken to Mercy General, gunshot wound to the stomach. Witnesses state it was a man named Gordon Steele, and it involves a dispute over you. I’d like to talk to you.”

“Oh god. No!”

“Can we come collect a statement from you? There are accusations...”

“Yes, yes! Where are you? I’m on my way now.” Alexi was throwing on his clothes and racing down the street talking on the phone as he ran.

Right into Gordon.

“Oh my God! GORDON, this is FIRST and STIMPSON, what are you doing here?” Alexi said clearly into the phone. The Officer listening began to run toward the direction Alexi had given praying he kept talking so he could hear. The suspect was right there.

“Killing time and trash.”

“Did you shoot David?”

“Self defense.”

“LIAR! OH GOD GORDON WHY?!” Alexi sobbed still holding the phone, Officer Williamson hearing everything.

“You are mine!”

“I am not yours. Gordon, you’re crazy! What are you doing?” Alexi asked as Gordon pointed the gun at him.

“Getting you to understand my darling, you belong to me, in that alley.” Gordon motioned to the alley with the gun. Alexi didn’t budge.

“Are you going to shoot me too? Are you? Well, fine shoot me because I’d rather be dead than ever go anywhere with you! You murderer! If you’ve killed David, I swear I won’t rest until I’ve seen you fry for it!”

Four other officers trailed Officer Williamson as they ran, and they could see the pair up ahead, the one holding the gun had their backs to the police.

“Pity. I loved you,” Gordon said, his eyes blank.

“You have no idea what love is! Gordon you RAPED ME, that’s not love! You left me to die bleeding, that’s not love! You’ve beaten me every day since, that’s not love!” Alexi openly wept, waiting for Gordon to shoot him, to end the nightmare.

“You belong to me. You’re mine!”

“I was never yours! Never! Admit the truth you bastard! You know damn well what you did to me!”

“I may have raped you in your mind. Your body told me otherwise. You wanted it, you needed it. You liked my big cock up that tight ass! You want it now too.” Gordon cocked the gun.

“You are mad! You’ll have to kill me. I am never touching you willingly, and I will never be bullied by you again. You took my David from me; you can send me to him because you will never get me again.” Alexi walked up until his chest was touching the gun. “Shoot me. Go on, kill me. The only way you’ll fuck me again is over my dead corpse. I hate you! SHOOT ME!”

“At least this time you won’t struggle. It would have hurt less had you not fought me Alexi.”

Gordon pulled the trigger; Alexi heard the click of an empty gun.

“DROP YOUR WEAPON!” The police lunged and seized Gordon, Officer Williamson, tackling Alexi and getting him out of the way.

“You gave me a heart attack son! Don’t ever tempt a man with a gun.”

“He killed... DAVID!” Alexi sobbed collapsing to the ground, huge gasps and sobs shaking him to pieces. Officer Williamson knelt by the boy, no more than his own son’s age, and let him cry on his shoulder.

“He’s not dead. Never you fear lad. He was talking when they took him away, asking for you. Come on, I’ll take you to the hospital myself. I’ll get a statement later; I heard every word anyway on the phone. You were very smart to give us directions immediately and to get him to confess right in my ear.”

“David was right; had I insisted the night he raped me he be arrested, none of this would have happened. The doctor didn’t believe me. I tried then!”

“I’m sorry son. Yes, you should have insisted, but hind sight is always 20/20, but that does not make tonight your fault,” Officer Williamson said as he opened the squad car door for Alexi and they headed, siren’s blaring, to the hospital.

Alexi was clenching his pants in his fists, crying with rage and anger and frustration. “If he dies... I... I’ll...”

“Son, see him right; put that man away where he won’t hurt anyone else,” Officer Williamson said as they arrived at the hospital. Amy was in the waiting room, talking to officers and still clutching David’s phone, her eyes red with tears. She saw Alexi race inside and the hospital staff stop him.

Amy walked over and took his hand. "Alexi right? He's in emergency surgery we have to wait. I'm Amy."

Alexi hugged her tightly, both of them crying. "You got him here. Thank you."

"He's my friend. I saw it all Alexi; it was Gordon."

"I know," Alexi said releasing her and falling into a chair. Officer Williamson joined them with paper.

"I'll take notes, start at the beginning son. I'm Ted, and I'm all ears."

Alexi told Amy and Ted Williamson everything, from the first encounter with Gordon to the last on the street. Amy was in shock hearing how Alexi had run into Gordon on the way to the scene and how he had pulled the trigger against Alexi's chest. An empty chamber was all that had stood between Alexi and death.

The demon had been faced with courage, and love and he had lost the war. The damages however were vast, and David's fate was still unknown.

Hours later, the doctor came out, and Alexi was frantic for news.

"He's strong and stable. That boy has a lot of muscle in his stomach that was damaged, but nothing vital. He'll be down for weeks, but he'll be fine. He's groggy, but awake and asking for a Lexi. Is that you miss?"

"That's short for Alexi. Me," Alexi said and the doctor nodded.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend."

"It's all right. May I see him?"

"I'll take you in."

David looked drawn and pale, his face showing signs of a nasty fight, his hands bruised, his right eye swollen shut and his left eye heavy lidded from the anesthetic. He was bandaged all around his middle, but he was smiling as Alexi came into the room behind the doctor.

"David!" Alexi cried when he saw him and fell to his knees beside the bed, kissing David's hands, holding them as tightly as he could without hurting him.

"Hey baby. Sorry about your ice cream."

"David! You insane, loveable fool!" Alexi had to laugh through his tears. "How do you feel, Love?"

"Like I've been shot."

"Yes, Love, I know, but seeing as I have no frame of reference, can you elaborate please?" Alexi said standing and running his fingers through David's hair.

"I hurt like a mother fucker. I think I won't be in school for a few days."

"A few weeks," Alexi corrected, his spirits beginning to soar, seeing that David was still full of his good humor.

"Weeks, days, whatever."

"Amy is here; she waited too."

"She's a great gal. You'll like her."

"I do, we've been talking for hours waiting on you."

"I kicked his ass."

"I know, Love, and he's in custody. I ran into him coming after you."

David's heart monitor began to speed up. "Calm down or I won't tell you what happened."

"Fucking tattletale monitor." David swore, but it slowed.

Alexi calmly related what happened, and David took it in. "It's over then."

"Yes, he's not going to hurt us anymore. Twenty years to life, but I don't think he's sane. He really was crazy tonight. I pity him."

"Only you could have a heart big enough to forgive and pity him, Lexi."

"You gave me my heart, David."

"I just cracked open your shell. That pearl was always inside you, shining."

"I'm a pearl now?"

“My bohemian pearl.” David grinned, and Alexi leaned over to kiss him.

“Sometimes your poetry is wonderful; sometimes I think you’re on too much morphine,” Alexi teased; David was fading, falling asleep.

“Morphine is goooood.” David was smiling as he passed out asleep.

“Let’s hope you don’t need much more of it,” Alexi said tucking the sheet around David and kissing him once more before he moved to the chair beside the bed to wait until David awoke again.

“Don’t get comfortable son. We need you out here again,” Ted said poking his head in the room and Alexi stood and followed him out.

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“I want pizza,” David moaned from the hospital bed.

Alexi looked up from the chair and smiled. “Pretend its pizza”

“It’s Jell-O.”

“You have a hole in your stomach. It’s pizza.”

“This room smells like a bordello with a Lysol fetish,” David remarked about the sterile hospital and his room full of get well floral bouquets and balloons.

“My, we’re in a pissy mood today.”

“Five days, two TV channels, a nurse that I swear is pinching my ass when she comes into change my dressings, no piano, nothing but broth and Jell-O to eat, and you, looking fabulous and me immobile, you stay cheery.”

Alexi got up and walked over and kissed him. “You go home tomorrow, I’ll pinch your ass to change your dressings, and you still have to eat Jell-O.”

David smiled, “When do I get to eat pizza?”

“Two weeks yet.”

“Fuck.”

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David was on the chaise, he was moving better, but he still hurt getting up and down. Muscle took a long time to heal, and a goodly portion of his abdomen had been shredded with the close range bullet. Alexi was in the kitchen making him soup; Amy was at the kitchen table trying to get David’s attention. “Look, David, you’ll fall behind in class. What’s the scale for Dorian mode?”

David answered; his teachers had sent home planning lessons to help keep him up with the class until he could return to school. Amy taped all the lectures and brought them over for him to listen to. Chico and Karen helped him study their notes; they were currently bickering over something trivial. They were always bickering over something; it was amazing they were still dating, let alone planning on getting married.

Alexi stayed home. Marcus brought him projects to the loft to work on for the museum, and a few of Alexi's students stopped by once a week for their tutoring. Alexi had been helping them at school and consented to lessons out of his home so he could stay with David.

Cindy was a regular at the loft, stopping by every few days to have her lesson and just to help run errands to the store for them. She had become a good friend to them both, especially Alexi, who had taken to mentoring her; she showed potential. She also introduced Alexi to art he'd never appreciated – Japanese anime and manga, and more specifically a genre known as Yaoi, gay orientated material.

Some of the books she brought over were hot stuff, and she confessed to them she had a passion near obsession for the material. Her work in that genre was stunning, and she was currently turning Alexi and David into a rather racy comic book or manga as she called it. Their comic personas looked a lot like them in real life, but in that unmistakable anime "look".

They had a beautiful painting of their comic forms, entwined with a red ribbon and not much else hanging in their bedroom; they didn't need to pose at all it seemed. She did her own creation and it was beautiful.

They had a rather eclectic group of friends, and the loft was usually full of laughter and merriment as everyone pitched in to help David get back on his feet and keep him from failing his classes. Everyone was usually gone after dinner, leaving time for Alexi and David to share some time alone before bed. They usually talked or listened to music. Occasionally they'd watch a little TV, Cindy was bound and determined to get them both hooked on her anime. She brought over lots of things for them to watch.

Alexi loved the art and the animation; David liked the bizarre story lines and vast variety in the soundtrack music – very unique meshing of traditional Japanese music with western influences.

Most of the time, however, they spent in silence, just touching each other. David loved Alexi's fingers in his hair, those long fingers massaging his scalp sent him to sleep every time within minutes.

During this mending period, life was also busy in other ways. David had gotten a phone call from Monsieur DuBois, he'd gotten a settlement on his piano that left him slack jawed for a week. He bought his mother a nicer house out of it, put a college tuition away for Katie, and still had half a million sitting in the bank.

Maurice had gotten him a huge settlement and had seen to it the wood from the piano had been salvaged and brought to the loft. Alexi refused to let David see his project until it was finished. It was behind a bunch of hanging sheet walls. The secret project room ala a Bedouin tent in the far corner of the loft. David promised not to peek, and so far had kept his word.

The piano was nearly finished; being home all the time, Alexi had ample time to devote to the mural. David sat in his wheelchair and played while Alexi painted. The grapevines, ripe with fruit wound up all the legs and the nine muses danced with Centaurs and Satyrs all along the sides; the whole scene wrapped around the whole piano.

But the lid, the lid was amazing. Alexi had painted David and himself in a rose garden. Blue skies and ivy and palm fronds abounded with tall Parthenon style columns framing them in the picture.

David sat on a stone bench, a lyre in hand and laurel wreath in his hair, playing to Alexi who was seated at his feet, drawing on a parchment that only the David in the painting could see what was being created for him. The Alexi in the painting had his head tipped back, head on the other David's knee. Looking up, their eyes meeting in love and devotion; it looked like the painted David was pleased with what his lover had drawn for him and was moments away from kissing him.

It was elaborate and something the likes of Michelangelo would have painted on a chapel ceiling. Even the fingerboard had been painted so when closed the entire piano was a massive work of art. Alexi said it was the best work he'd ever done and meant the most to him. David could see the love poured into this creation; it sang. David would never part with this piano; it would always be his most beloved possession.

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Christmas came, and since David couldn't travel home, Alexi brought his family to him. Alexi put them all up in a suite at the Waldorf Astoria for the duration of their stay, and Katie, Sophia and Debbie had the vacation of their lives. Shopping in downtown, Broadway shows, Katie just had to see one, so Alexi gave her tickets to four of them for Christmas. Debbie, of course, fussed over her son, and then fussed over Alexi, and Sophia made them all gain ten pounds with her cooking morning, noon, and night in the kitchen. Every one of David's favorites just had to be made at least once if not twice.

David gave his mother the house he'd bought for her for Christmas; he had to beg her to stop crying. His grandmother got the kitchen of her dreams including a hefty gift-certificate to a local kitchen supply store in Joliet so she could totally outfit her new kitchen in the new house with all the appliances and cookware she wanted.

Alexi gave Debbie and Sophia a plethora of paintings to hang in the new house. David had picked those out of Alexi's finished projects that he knew his mother and grandmother would love most. He had been right; they squealed like young girls in delight.

Katie got a new stereo and Karaoke machine, and Alexi went overboard on the disks for it. He bought her all the titles they had just to make sure she had enough to sing to. It was a fabulous.

David's gift from Alexi was saved for last. The wood from the old upright had been carved and molded, glued and sanded into a gorgeous three-dimensional frame that looked like the old upright. Painted above the keys was a portrait taken from a photograph. A five-year-old David sat at the keys with his father. David MacAlister, Sr. was showing his son how to play. David openly wept; they hung the piece on the wall of the main living area. David didn't know which he loved more - his piano mural or this masterpiece that had saved his beloved first piano from ruin. Alexi had given him the world; he fell in love all over again.

It was a Christmas morning to be remembered for a lifetime; the loft was a mess of paper and ribbons, a huge tree and lights and massive amounts of love.

Katie gave them all a concert on her Kareoke machine while Sophia and Debbie fixed Christmas dinner. Alexi sat on the chaise with David, who was beaming proudly like a big brother should. She was very talented. Alexi was utterly in love with all of David's family. They made him feel like a part of their close-knit circle; he knew what family was supposed to be like for the first time. He was over the moon with joy.

He cried more than David when they finally had to say good-bye after New Years, but they promised to come see them during summer vacation.

He had to promise Katie he'd ride a roller coaster with her at Great America when they came. He hoped he wouldn't puke; he'd never ridden one before.

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Eight weeks to the day saw David finally returning to the university. He was greeted with cheers as he and Alexi climbed out of the cab that morning and a huge banner that said “WELCOME BACK DAVID” hung at the main entrance.

Gordon was still awaiting a hearing; he'd broken down after his arrest and had been sent to a psychiatric ward for observation and treatment. Alexi had been right, he was clinically mad, and even David pitied him; his sanity had cracked. He wasn't fit to stand trial and until he was he was staying in his maximum-security ward. Monsieur DuBois would handle the prosecution and was monitoring the treatment of Gordon, waiting until he could push through the trial quietly and without a lot of media attention. Alexi would not stand up well under a high-profile trial; if it could be settled out of court, it would suit them both just fine.

Things slowly returned to normalcy. David was back to his old self again by Spring, and when he wasn't making love to his piano by playing, he was making love to Alexi in their loft, or in the elevator, or in the shower stall, wherever and whenever the mood struck.

Their friends still came by regularly, or they all went out in a group for a meal at Tuscany Café, their favorite hangout at lunch since it was so close to campus.

David's end of term recital was coming up fast, and Alexi made sure that Richard LaCrosse would be in attendance. David looked smashing in his blue suit. Alexi, in his burgundy wine suit, was seated front row center, Richard LaCrosse beside him and totally unaware it was Alexi who had made that phone call to his friend of a friend of a friend.

David had no idea who was here to listen to him play. He didn't need to know; it would make him nervous. Alexi knew, however, and he was intimately aware at how good this recital was going to be; he'd heard David practicing for it for months.

The recital went divine. David was a natural showman; he was a stadium rocker in a three-piece suit to classical music. Richard LaCrosse was on his cell-phone calling up a contract before the second song was over.

Alexi was thrilled and he, and David celebrated his lucrative contract until dawn.

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The term ended; Alexi's master's degree was gained, and the degree lay in a frame in a drawer with his bachelor's. David passed with flying colors, naturally, and the couple had three months of summer vacation to play with. June was dedicated to the MacAlisters; the month long trip to Joliet was a whirlwind of fun and food.

Alexi vowed never to ride a roller coaster again. Katie would never let him live down his utter failure at amusement parks. She was far too much like her older brother.

July was back in time to watch the fireworks out of their loft window, and David was in the recording studio working on his first album.

August was the trial. Gordon's medication was working, and he was a changed man. He was remorseful and sobbed his apology to Alexi in the closed court, where he pled guilty and was sentenced to twenty years on a plea bargain.

David and Alexi were satisfied; he would serve his time for his crimes, and that was all they wanted.

September had them back to school; David starting his junior year, and Alexi beginning his doctorate while taking over all of Marcus' freshmen classes.

Teaching suited Alexi; he had a very patient disposition and the students seemed to love him. They could relate to him; he was their age. He understood, and it showed.

November came, and so did a trip to Vermont one weekend – a quiet ceremony with just the two of them exchanging vows in secret. This was their commitment to each other, and they wore plain simple gold bands on their right ring fingers.

They didn't even tell their friends or family, it was enough for them to have this secret; they each went home at night to a husband they adored and were content to know that they were together and whatever the world threw at them they would survive as long as they had one another.

Ten Years Later

David set down his wine glass and looked at Richard. "So now you know. Do you understand?"

"I do. I am sorry I ever tried to make you tabloid fodder." Richard said in awe. He never knew the depth of the relationship. It was more than love; it was once in a lifetime.

"It's all right. Lexi understands and is really quite amused by it all," David said absently turning the ring on his right hand. "And if you'll excuse me, he's probably passed out on the chaise waiting for me to come home."

Richard nodded. "Give Dr. St. Cloud my regards."

"I will, and never call him Doctor. He hates the title. He's still that little bohemian pearl I fell in love with after all these years; even if he's never learned to wear his smock." David chuckled as he picked up the basket of Petit Fours and the bunch of roses.

Alexi was indeed asleep on the chaise, the cat they'd picked up five years ago off the fire escape laying on his chest. The orange tabby stretched when David came in and hopped down to greet his leg with a stroke. "All safe on the home front Madame?" He asked stroking her ears as she wandered off into the bedroom to lay on HER bed.

David leaned over the chaise and ran the roses over Alexi's cheek. "Miss me handsome?" David asked as Alexi opened his eyes and smiled.

"Always. Did you bring me pastries?"

"Don't I always?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, Sweet-tooth," David said setting the basket of Petit Fours on Alexi's chest as he sauntered off to the bedroom to get comfortable.

Alexi followed him, munching on a pastry, shooping out the cat, and shutting the door behind him.

"Shall I show you how much I missed you?" Alexi asked as he helped David undress.

"Please."

The cat ended up sleeping on the chaise that night.

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~fini