

# *“Caught in the Crossfire”*

An Art Appreciation Series Story

Author: D. Sanders

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## *Chapter One*

Matthieu Le Fleur, twenty-two, single, albeit unwillingly and an overworked convenience store employee forever stuck on the graveyard shift, was mopping up the sticky remnants of past patrons near the row of frozen drink dispensers and silently grumbled to himself that it was amazing how many people managed to miss the cup entirely. Did they make this sort of mess at home? He pondered to himself as he struggled with the persistence known as frozen coke on linoleum.

Being a clerk at a convenience store was not on his list of preferred professions, however it was a job and it garnered a paycheck weekly and for a young man who never graduated high school it was one of his only options. His daytime second job babysitting the coin-operated Laundromat near his home paid slave wages too, but he did get to use the nifty coin-on-a-wire tool to wash his own clothes for free. He knew beyond doubt his touchy-feely hag of a land lady certainly wouldn't let him use her washer and dryer. He didn't want to ask

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any favors of her either. It was bad enough he had to rent her spare room in her basement because that was all he could afford. Even worse that she kept coming into it whenever she felt like it and when she was drunk, which was often, her trying to get in his bed with him.

The first time he woke up, after coming off of working eighteen hours straight to have her pawing him up and down still gave him nightmares. She refused to believe that even if he weren't gay, he'd have no interest in a passed middle aged woman with three missing teeth and breasts, what were left of them, that sagged down to her navel. Matthieu didn't think his landlady had ever worn a bra in her life or knew what soap was. She was disgusting, but again he wasn't spoiled for choice.

Living in Chicago was expensive for everyone and even harder on people like Matthieu who didn't even have a GED to their names. He hadn't always known the hard life. Quite the contrary.

He'd grown up in the affluent suburb of Chicago, Villa Park, and was the only child of a cardiovascular surgeon and a lawyer. His father the surgeon was impressed with all things that elevated his social status and his mother was a lawyer for the church and they were staunch catholics on the outside and hypocrites on the inside. Love and tolerance only extended so far apparently.

He had been entering his senior year of high school, a straight A student on the honor role. He'd grown up taking dance and etiquette classes since he could crawl and had at one time an entire display case filled with dance trophies. Modern Lyrical Jazz had been his forte and he had aspirations of attending the prestigious Columbia College of the Arts to Major in Dance and become a dance instructor himself. He had loved his teachers growing up and for as long as he could remember that's what he wanted to do himself.

He hadn't danced to anything other than the radio, in the privacy of his own bedroom in five years. Not since the day his parents walked in on him and one of his dance class friends kissing on the couch. They probably would not have reacted so badly had the friend been a girl. Eric was most certainly not a girl and Matthieu had had a crush on him for years. The feelings had been mutual but sadly never went beyond those tentative first kisses as they both tested the waters of their sexuality.

Matthieu's world had been turned upside down in a matter of minutes. First his father threw Eric out of the house, then his parents spent hours yelling,

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screaming, crying and cursing at him for his 'evils'. They hadn't raised him to be Gay and he had turned his back on the church and was possessed of the devil. All those hurtful and hateful words still stung when he thought about them. So he avoided thinking about them whenever possible.

It had been August, just two weeks before school started and Matthieu found himself thrown out of his house with just a backpack stuffed with whatever he could carry. Five T-shirts, a spare pair of jeans, his toothbrush, a comb, five changes of underwear, two changes of socks, his smallest dance trophy for a token and finally the small framed photo of himself and his favorite dance instructor, Mary Willis. He'd been all of six years old in the picture and she had died in a car accident not long after the photo had been taken. However, he remembered her fondly, it was thanks to her he loved to dance and she was why he had wanted to be an instructor himself. She made learning a joy.

He had no money, no job, parents that flatly refused to even look at him and cut him off entirely and no prospects. He hitch-hiked to the city and went from shelter to shelter looking for work and trying to survive.

The first six months had been a living hell and how he managed to survive at all was a miracle. The job at the convenience store had been a godsend at the time and the room in Phyllis McGinnis' basement a roof over his head.

He'd been there ever since and stuck in a rut that fate had dug for him. He'd never seen Eric again after that day, his pampered life in Villa Park a distant memory. Every day was a struggle now. Get up at eight o'clock at night, eat a quick pot of instant ramen noodles, shower, catch the "E1" train and head to the convenience store and clock in by ten. Clock out six am, buy a breakfast bar from the store, run to catch the "E1" and get to the Laundromat to open it by seven o'clock. Work until one o'clock in the afternoon and then walk home four blocks to sleep and start all over again.

He had no life outside of work, his only day off during the week was Sunday and that he usually spent sleeping like the dead unless the convenience store called for him to cover for another employee. Which was far too often. LaShawn Johnson always managed to contract a new disease weekly, especially during football season. He knew if a game was being played on Sunday, his boss would be calling him into work to cover for LaShawn.

He had only had a handful of dates in the past five years, and calling them "dates" was too strong a word. They were more like random encounters

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with various men he met at work. Three from the Laundromat that followed him home for a quick, never see you again and let me leave money on the dresser for you one-afternoon stands. Two from the convenience store who chatted him up, got his phone number, got together the following Sunday for lunch and sex and then never called him again.

Matthieu gave up on love and relationships as certainly as he had given up hopes of ever getting a diploma let alone the job of his dreams. This was his place in the grand scheme of things and trying to escape the lot he'd drawn in the lottery of life was far too difficult when you were alone and barely making enough to cover food and rent.

Matthieu sighed as he put the mop and bucket back in the back room and glanced at the clock above the door. Almost two o'clock in the morning, Matthieu grinned. One of his regular customers would be showing up any time now. "Mr. Pack of Marlboro 100's and a large coffee with about thirteen amaretto creamers dumped into it" would be arriving soon. Matthieu had never gotten the nerve up to ask the young man's name, but he certainly looked forward to his arrival every night like clockwork. He was sinfully handsome in the devilish rogue, straight from a romance novel sort of way. His dark brown hair was always a mess, his bright green eyes always glinting with a hint of mischief, his smile always easily given and he always winked when he wished Matthieu a "goodnight" and left.

He'd been coming into the store for about a month now, was always friendly and cheerful and far too alert for a man coming into a convenience store in the middle of the night. Matthieu wondered what he did for a living since he seemed to keep such late hours.

The bells on the door chimed and sure enough, there was Matthieu's favorite regular customer. "Smells like Pine Sol in here." He said with mirth as he headed over to the coffee pots.

"Perhaps because I just mopped. Careful the floor is still a little wet over there." Matthieu replied and the regular grinned.

"Aw man, there goes my chance of slipping and falling and suing. Spoil sport." The man teased and Matthieu laughed.

"Not on my shift." Matthieu replied as he watched his regular dump pot after pot of creamers into his coffee. No sugar, just the creamer and a lot of it.

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Matthieu already had the pack of cigarettes on the counter when the man reached it.

“Oh man, you know my bad habits already.” He quipped as Matthieu slid the pack over and rang up the sale.

“I also noticed you like a little coffee with your international delights.” Matthieu teased and the regular chuckled.

“I love cream. I’m the sort who buys Oreos and just eats the center and throws away the cookie part too.” The man grinned and handed Matthieu his money.

Matthieu counted back the change and smiled. “You throw away the best part. Shame on you.”

“Next Oreo bender I have I’ll save you the cookie then shall I?” He asked and gave his patented wink and Matthieu chuckled.

“Pre-licked Oreos just somehow lose their appeal.” Matthieu smiled and the regular nodded.

“I’d have to agree with you there.” The man said holding out his hand to shake.

“By the way, the name is Peter and I can tell from your name tag yours. Matthieu that’s a French spelling isn’t it?” Peter asked and Matthieu nodded.

“Yes. The whole name is French actually. Matthieu Le Fleur. Nice to have your name at last too.” Matthieu answered shaking Peter’s hand.

“Le Fleur, that’s mean ‘the flower’ if I remember my old high school French class.” Peter said and Matthieu nodded.

“Correct again and a horrible name to be saddled with as a kid when other kids learn what it means.” Matthieu shivered and Peter rolled his eyes.

“I hear you. I was a fat kid with a hippy eccentric for a mother who loved to dress me like a reject from a commune. I can relate to teasing man. Peter Hollingsworth, who is almost as tall as his girth. I thankfully grew out of that

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stage by high school, but the scars remain.” Peter said with obvious commiseration on the subject.

“That’s just cruel and your mother sounds delightful.” Matthieu said and Peter laughed.

“She’s one of a kind and can only be taken in small doses. Never eat her brownies, you’ll be wired with more than sugar.” Peter winked and Matthieu laughed.

“I love her already.” Matthieu grinned.

“I’m her big disappointment. She wanted her little boy to be wearing a beret and painting in a sea of incense smoke. I paint graphics on a computer for corporate web sites and the only smoke in my house is from my cigarettes burning away in my overflowing ashtray. My sister is even worse, she’s a State of Illinois prosecuting attorney. We rebelled in reverse on her. We went corporate the evil of all evils.” Peter joked and Matthieu had to smile.

“I wondered what you did for a living with the sort of hours you keep.” Matthieu said and Peter shrugged.

“I get more work done this way. Trying to work during business hours my phone rings too much it’s distracting. I work on the websites at night. Less internet traffic and no crazy clients calling and asking if I’m finished yet. I take their calls from Nine until noon. Turn on my answering machine and turn off the ringer, catch a snooze and then work all night in peace. Working from home is the way to go and thank goodness for convenience stores open all night when I run out of cigarettes.”

“Buying a carton would probably save you daily trips ya know.” Matthieu said and was floored when Peter gave him a huge smile.

“Then I wouldn’t get to see you every day then would I? Have a good night Matthieu.” Peter gave him another wink then headed out the door with a jaunty spring in his step. Matthieu watched him walk away with a sigh.

“He’s Perfect too. Damn it all to hell.” Matthieu grumbled, shaking off his dreamy stupor and heading into the cooler to restock the soda.

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The next few days was the same routine. Peter came in every night at the same time, staying to chat for a while each time. By the fourth night, Peter was leaning on the counter for a good hour as they carried on a discussion of musical preferences between intermittent customers. During the course of the conversation they covered the whole spectrum from classical to jazz to hip-hop. Discovering they both had rather diverse tastes in music.

“I don’t care for the lyrics much in hip-hop, but it sure does have a great beat to dance to.” Matthieu commented and Peter nodded.

“I’ll give it that I suppose. I agree on most of the lyrics being a bit raunchy at times. I couldn’t comment on dancing since I have positively without a doubt two left feet.” Peter said emphatically and Matthieu grinned.

“If you can keep time, you can dance. It just takes learning the steps.” Matthieu said and Peter laughed.

“It also takes a fair amount of grace and coordination and I have neither. I trip over my own feet walking.”

“It’s training, pure and simple.”

“You speak as if you know.”

“I do, I spent twelve years in dance training. I used to want to be a dance instructor.” Matthieu said and Peter’s eyes widened.

“Really? What the hell are you doing working here then?” Peter asked and Matthieu sighed.

“A really long story that will bore you to tears. Let’s just say life got in the way of dreams. I’m not the only person who ended up in shit creek without a paddle.” Matthieu said as another customer came in, it was Eric.

“Matthieu?” He asked stopping short and gawking.

“Eric? Oh my gosh Eric! How are you?” Matthieu asked coming around the counter to hug his one time flame.

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“Not bad, Jesus man you just dropped off the face of the earth. What the hell happened?” Eric asked and Matthieu sighed.

“Well after Dad threw you out he threw me out. I’ve been on my own since.” Matthieu replied as Peter shamelessly eavesdropped and began figuring out the missing puzzle pieces. He’d always wondered why an articulate, well mannered and well spoken and highly educated person was working as a clerk at a convenience store. He’d been too concerned about prying to ask Matthieu directly. The last thing Peter wanted was to insult a man he was trying his hardest to get to know better and find a way to ask out on a date eventually. He hadn’t even broached the subject of being gay, even if he was fairly certain all the signals he’d been receiving were positive.

“You’re shitting me! My god Matt, that’s crazy! No one knew anything and any time one of us from class tried to call they just hung up on us. Mr. Sweeney was frantic when you just stopped coming to class right before the nationals. We all knew you were going to win again, that was your year. Damn man, I’m so sorry. Had I known just kissing you would have wrecked your life I’d have kept my damn hands to myself.” Eric said and Matthieu just smiled sadly.

“It’s not your fault Eric. It’s not anyone’s fault what happened. It happened, I’ve moved on and got on with things as best I could. It’s all water under the bridge now. So tell me about yourself now. Did you make it into Columbia?” Matthieu asked and Eric nodded.

“I did and have my BA in dance now. I just got back from Hawaii from my honeymoon. I met a fabulous guy, Steven, in college and we’ve been dating for four years. We decided to do the commitment ceremony last month and we’ve got a little brownstone over in Bridgeport. Please come by sometime and meet him and I’d love to have you over anytime. I feel like an ass for not knowing about what happened that night.” Eric said and Matthieu just smiled.

“Don’t feel bad Eric, really. I’d love to meet Steven sometime I’m so happy that you’re doing so well.” Matthieu said as Eric fished out a business card from his wallet and wrote his phone number on the back.

“Call me anytime Matt. Thanksgiving is coming up soon think you can come over for dinner?” Eric asked and Matthieu shook his head.

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“I’m sorry, I work all the holidays. It’s double-time and I need the money. I’d love to, but I can’t. Besides, I’m not the best of company on holidays. I get moody.” Matthieu said trying to smile away the sudden ache in his chest.

“I can understand.” Eric said turning to Peter.

“I’m sorry, I just totally trod all over your conversation. I’m Eric Wright, Matt and I go way back in dance class.” Eric said shaking Peter’s hand.

“I gathered that. Peter Hollingsworth, pleasure to meet you and congratulations on your marriage. Why you left Hawaii to come back to Chicago with Winter almost here is beyond me. Playing all naked and warm in the sun and sand versus bundled up in the slush and cold, I’d know what I’d pick. The only Sex on the Beach you get here this time of year is in a glass at a bar.” Peter said and Eric and Matthieu both laughed.

“Don’t I know it! The cold is the reason I’m here. Steven came down with a nasty cold today, I’m here for Nyquil and I’d better get back before he coughs up a lung.” Eric said getting the medicine and Matthieu returned behind the counter to ring it up.

“I do hope he gets better soon. Give him my regards and congratulations too.” Matthieu said as he bagged up the bottle.

“I will and please call Matt. Have a good night.” Eric said heading back to his car and sick spouse and Matthieu sighed as the door shut.

“It sucks when the past comes in and bites you in the ass. You handled that well.” Peter said a very sympathetic look in his eyes.

“Eric was my first crush. I guess you gathered what happened.” Matthieu said slumping against the counter.

“Parent’s caught you in a compromising position and tossed you out for being gay and living hand to mouth since. Got that loud and clear and I think it sucks donkey balls. For what it’s worth I’m sorry you had to deal with that nonsense. It makes me very appreciative of my mother. She knew I was gay before I did, coming out was never a problem.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled sadly.

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“I said it before and I’ll say it again. I love your mom. Everything you tell me about her and all her quirks just makes me adore her more. My parents are by the old school Catholics. They preach love and tolerance until of course they are faced with having to be tolerant. Suddenly, you’re possessed by the devil and begone Satan. Funny, I read the same bible growing up and I never saw anything in it that states being gay is a sin. Unless of course you really read into Leviticus more than what is written. Using that argument beating your wife should be a daily ritual to keep her in her place. I love the double standard of organized religion. Cruelty masked as religion. I’ll keep my peace with God on my own terms. I’m still Christian, but I’ll be damned if I set foot in a church again. It’s left me cold.” Matthieu said and Peter nodded.

“It’s the organization that corrupts. The teachings themselves, the basic fundamentals of Christianity are just simple moral values. The concept of Religion in and of itself are pure, add people into the equation and you get people bending rules to suit their own needs. Doesn’t the bible say wherever you gather in his name is good enough for God? You could gather on the “EL” and it would be, according to the bible, holy. You don’t need a building, you just need faith and that is sadly lost on the vast majority of people. I don’t go into churches either for that very reason. You and I agree on that point.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled. Peter had to catch his breath, the talk of religion had finally answered a question that had been nagging Peter for weeks.

Matthieu was beautiful, Peter had thought that the minute he laid eyes on the clerk behind the counter. However, there was a familiarity about his face and features that Peter had never quite been able to put his finger on.

Talk of religion answered the riddle. Matthieu looked like those old Victorian paintings of cherubs one saw emblazoned on wrapping paper and Christmas cards every year. He had soft and wild blond curls that framed his round heart shaped face. Big light hazel eyes and a face that could be slapped on wrapping paper and cards right alongside those cherubs and no one would know the difference. It was angelic beauty and even living in hell hadn’t taken that away from him.

“What are you looking at?” Matthieu asked and Peter smiled.

“A beautiful person, inside and out. I’m about to beg you for a date Matthieu.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled.

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“I wish I could. I really do Peter. I wasn’t lying though to Eric. You know I work two jobs and my schedules have me working the next fifteen days straight. I only have Sunday mornings off since the Laundromat is closed on Sunday’s but I have to be in here by ten. I could meet you for breakfast at most.” Matthieu said and Peter grinned.

“I’ll take what I can get. It’s Saturday night now, are you off in the morning?” Peter said and Matthieu smiled.

“Yes.” Matthieu grinned.

“It’s four o’clock now, you’re off in two hours?” Peter asked and Matthieu chuckled.

“Correct again.”

“So how about I come pick you up in two hours and take you out to breakfast? There’s a little place just around the block that makes a fabulous traditional English breakfast with cream tea and dripping with clotted cream scones and buttery crumpets. I eat there a lot for breakfast, I’d love for you to join me. Please?” Peter asked and Matthieu caved like a house built on sand. He’d spent the first four weeks drooling whenever Peter walked in and he’d spent the last five days falling in love with him beyond his handsome face.

“I’d love to. It’s a date.” Matthieu said and then his heart flew into his throat and his heart raced when Peter leaned over the counter and planted a firm kiss on his right cheek.

“Then I’ll see you in two hours handsome.” Peter said with a saucy wink as he sashayed out the door.

“You lovable idiot.” Matthieu muttered, flushed and happy as he flew through the rest of his shift somewhere in the vicinity of what is commonly called ‘cloud nine’.

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## *Chapter Two*

Matthieu began to get slightly worried when it was almost time for him to clock out and LaShawn had yet to arrive to relieve him. “Not today LaShawn, oh please not today.” Matthieu begged silently as he serviced the growing line of early customers getting coffee and donuts for their trek into work. Peter arrived and smiled and seeing the line of impatient people just loitered by the magazine rack out of the way.

Six arrived with no LaShawn and at six thirty the phone went and Matthieu juggled the receiver as he helped the multitude of customers jamming the counter. “Oh not today, please not today. Can't anyone else come in?” Peter listened to Matthieu beg the person on the other line.

“But I have plans... I see. Uh-huh. Alright.” Came the defeated voice as he hung up the phone and turned the most devastated gaze to Peter. He helped the last customer and then sighed.

“Peter, I'm so sorry. LaShawn called in sick and my boss said I either stay and work a double shift or stand in line at unemployment tomorrow. I'm so sorry I can't go.” Matthieu said and Peter grumbled.

“That's extortion. If he can't get anyone else to come in, as owner, he should get his ass here to relieve you. It's against labor laws to force someone to work overtime or double shifts.” Peter said and Matthieu nodded.

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“Yes, it is against the law. But you try and tell a boss that when they can think of any number of other excuses to fire you. I'm sorry Peter I really am. I really wanted to go out with you this morning.” Matthieu said and Peter just smiled.

“I know Matt. I understand but I insist on a rain-check. Next Sunday Morning?” Peter asked cheerfully and Matthieu smiled.

“Unless LaShawn calls in sick to watch another football game it's a date. Thank you for being so understanding Peter.” Matthieu replied as the store had yet another wave of early commuters beginning to arrive.

“Anytime beautiful and I can see you're getting busy. I'll let you get on with work and I'll see you later. How about I pick you up and drive you home? You're going to be exhausted after a double shift, taking the train is dangerous enough alert. It's not a date, but a little time with you outside of this store I'll take.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled, he couldn't help but adore Peter. They didn't make nice guys like him anymore.

“That's really not necessary Peter, but very sweet of you to offer.” Matthieu said and Peter just winked.

“I know it not necessary. It's me trying to be devious and get you alone for five minutes. I'll see you at two.” Peter saluted, turned on his heels and left swaggering. Matthieu grinned and felt almost giddy until cranky people began making his morning a living hell. He hated the morning shift. People were always crankiest in the early morning and it was bedlam on weekdays. At least today was Sunday and the only people working today were people like Matthieu who held crap jobs that were open seven days a week.

Matthieu applied himself and then when the lull hit, which was when most people were in church or at home sleeping in, Matthieu restocked shelves, mopped up more spills, and made himself busy until the rush after church let out started.

By quitting time, Matthieu was exhausted and could barely keep his eyes open. Early afternoon on a Sunday was dead, especially during football season. Everyone was at home watching the game or doing weekend warrior projects at home. It was easier to stay alert when you were busy, by the time Stephanie arrived to relieve him Matthieu felt like the living dead.

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“Matt? Oh jeez, did LaShawn bail on you again? The bastard. We all know he's home watching the Bears and Steelers game. You look beat.” She said as she clocked in and pulled on her store smock.

“Dead man walking. You're looking at him.” Matthieu yawned as the door chimed and Peter sauntered in grinning.

“Peter, really you don't have to drive me home.” Matthieu said as he clocked out and hung up his smock next to the time clock.

“And I told you, I'm taking every minute I can.” Peter said and Stephanie whistled.

“Hey Matt, lookin' good. Who's your friend?” Stephanie was a master at applying innuendo to the most innocent of phrases.

Matthieu actually blushed a little and the rosy hue to his cheeks didn't escape Peter's attention. Peter draped an arm over Matthieu shoulder. “An over zealous customer trying desperately to get him to go out with me. Even if it's just for the duration of a car ride. Ready to go Matthieu?”

Matthieu yawned involuntarily and just nodded. “You win Peter, I could never resist persistence and handsome faces combined.” Matthieu replied and Peter laughed and lead Matthieu out to his car. A classic 1968 jaguar in a deep kelly green.

“Wow, nice car. It's always so dark when you come, I never got a good look at your car. Gorgeous.” Matthieu said climbing into the passenger side.

“I'm a sucker for vintage cars. If I could get my hands on one of those Hollywood elite Rolls Royce specials from the late twenties and early thirties I'd auction off a kidney to buy it. I love those old beauties.” Peter said climbing into the car and starting the engine.

“Oh, I'd be with you on that purchase. They don't make cars like that anymore. Style is sadly lost these days.” Matthieu said around another yawn.

“Very true. Now, as your chauffeur Monsieur Le Fleur, what is our destination this afternoon?” Peter asked in his worst mock French accent.

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Matthieu chuckled. “30<sup>th</sup> and Halsted. I actually don't live too far from Eric and Steven. I'm in the Bridgeport part of town myself. I live in the basement of an old Brownstone there as well.”

“I know the area. Why on earth are you working way over here by Orchestra Hall? That's clear across the loop.” Peter asked as he headed down Michigan Avenue until he hit 30<sup>th</sup> Street then he'd cut across to Halsted

“Because it's Orchestra Hall. Sometimes I walk over there before going home and just marvel at the buildings. Chicago is a very pretty city. Where do you live around here? There's not much close by residential.” Matthieu asked as they drove.

“On Jackson and Lake Shore Drive. Almost right on the corner, I can walk here almost. I'm over in the Grant Park area in the Towers.”

“You live in the Towers? Holy hell that's swanky and expensive. Isn't Oprah Winfrey a resident there?” Matthieu asked and Peter chuckled.

“Wrong Tower. She's in the other one, the one with the better views. It's expensive as hell, which is why I drastically overcharge my clients.” Peter winked and Matthieu smiled.

“My Father has a place in the towers for when he's working in the city. He's a cardiovascular surgeon over at Northwestern Memorial. My parent's house is over in Villa Park.” Matthieu made drowsy idle conversation as they drove through stoplights.

“Villa Park, nice houses over there. I considered getting a house in the burbs, but I like the city. I grew up in Calumet City, I like a little urban grit I suppose. I like posh but I also like going out and getting shit faced at the House of Blues too.” Peter said turning right onto 30<sup>th</sup> and heading toward Halsted.

“Turn right on Halsted, it's the fifth brownstone on the right. The ugly rundown yellow one.” Matthieu said a little self conscious about Peter seeing the hovel he called home if Peter lived in the Towers. Peter parked and followed Matthieu down the small side alley of the building where a narrow and steep set of cement steps lead down to a private door that opened into the basement.

“This is my place, it's a hole in the wall, but it's a roof.” Matthieu said opening the door into what Peter would term crawlspace. The room was hardly

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more than twelve feet deep by sixteen feet wide with probably just a seven foot ceiling. Most basements had low ceilings but this felt like a claustrophobic cave.

There was gaudy, dingy and dark Victorian style printed wallpaper barely clinging to the walls that was probably as old as the house itself. It had just two very small basement rectangle windows to let in light and those were so dirty on the outside it was like they were tinted car windows. A single light bulb was suspended from the ceiling on an electrical cord with a chain pull to give meager light to the room.

Against one wall was a double bed on a tarnished brass bed frame. That too was probably as old as the house. A single old nightstand table beside it with an alarm clock, small picture frame, an old trophy and tiny lamp set on top.

There was what could be called a kitchen in the corner. A sink with about a two foot counter beside it. Under that was a small refrigerator that would be lucky to hold a gallon of milk and a carton of eggs and still shut properly.

On the counter was a small microwave. Two folding chairs and an old 1950's folding card table sat in the middle of the room and a lone little cup of half eaten ramen noodles and a fork sat on top of that which Matthieu picked up and threw away as they entered.

The last wall had three doors. One that led into the rest of the basement and back into the house upstairs which had the nightstand butted up in front of it so it couldn't open. One opened up a tiny closet space and the third was the smallest three-quarter bathroom Peter had ever seen. You couldn't even use the sink if the door was open. It opened into the bathroom so you had to go in and shut the door just to brush your teeth at the old pedestal sink. The toilet was something that looked to be taken out of an old prison room and the shower stall was just big enough for a person to stand in, moving around was not an option in that bathroom, it was as utilitarian and sterile as possible.

However, it was clean and tidy. Everything in the room was ordered appropriately. The bathroom cleaners were on top of a little shelf that was bolted to the wall above the toilet.

The kitchen sink had cracks in the ceramic but was clean and the little green container of “Comet” was sitting next to the bottle of dish soap. There was a single cabinet above the sink which probably held all of Matthieu's dishes and there was nothing else in the room.

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No television, no stereo, not even a radio unless you counted the alarm clock. Just a small stack of used and abused paperback books next to the bed.

Matthieu yawned again as he flopped into one of the folding chairs and took off his sneakers. “This place is a real dump, I’m almost embarrassed that you’re seeing all of this.” Matthieu said as he tossed his sneakers next to the door.

“It’s tiny as hell, but not a dump. It cleaner than my place.” Peter said taking up the only other chair.

“I find that hard to believe, but thanks for humoring me anyway. Thank you too for the ride home. I really appreciate it.” Matthieu said, his eyes drooping with fatigue.

“Mind if I ask a question? What’s with the nightstand up against that third door?” Peter asked and Matthieu groaned.

“That’s to keep Phyllis, my landlady, out. I woke up one time with her crawling into my bed with me. Having an almost sixty year old woman trying to have her way with me was the stuff of nightmares. There was no lock on that door so I put up the fail safe. Granted she has a key to the front door, but not the latch I can put up from the inside. I’m sure she’s poking around in here when I’m not home, but it’s not like I have anything an old woman might want. I’d gladly give her my cleaners if she’d use them occasionally.” Matthieu said stretching with joints popping in protest.

“It never rains but it pours for you doesn’t it? Jesus Christ, fanatical parents, crappy jobs, crazy sex crazed old women. It just never ends. How do you get up every morning? I’d have been committed for going postal on someone ages ago.” Peter said and Matthieu shrugged.

“When you’ve learned what it’s like to eat out of dumpsters, this is the Ritz Carlton in comparison. I manage, depressing as it may be, it’s the cards I’ve been dealt in the game. I’ve got a pair of deuces and bluffing in the game and hopping I come out even.” Matthieu said going to the cabinet and digging out two pots of ramen noodles.

“It’s not breakfast, or even I think food technically, but edible. Want one?” Matthieu asked and Peter shook his head.

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“No I ate lunch already before I came to get you. Let me make that for you and you go about taking a load off.” Peter said taking the noodles out of Matthieu's hand and setting about to fix it.

“Thanks.” Matthieu said grabbing some clothes out of the closet before he disappeared into the bathroom. He reemerged a few minutes later, changed into baggy sweats to sleep in and thick socks. He looked exhausted and beyond ready for some sleep. Peter set the noodles on the table.

“Eat and get some sleep. You look about ready to fall over. I'll get out of your hair and let you get some rest. Take care of yourself Matthieu, you're going to work yourself sick.” Peter said truly concerned and Matthieu just smiled and looped his arms around Peter's waist.

“You are one hell of a nice guy Peter. If I had any energy in me at the moment you'd be getting lucky.” Matthieu grinned and Peter laughed and leaned down and kissed Matthieu's forehead which was perfectly aligned with Peter's lips. Matthieu was just shy of being a head shorter than he was.

“I'll remember that for next time Beautiful.” Peter said and Matthieu looked up.

“You missed.” Matthieu said and Peter cocked an eyebrow.

“My lips are here.” Matthieu said pointing at his lips.

“Then let's try that again shall we?” Peter smirked accepting the invitation and falling headlong into one of the best kisses he'd ever been a participant in. Matthieu's lips were as soft as they looked and he tasted of cinnamon crest toothpaste and scope but it was heavenly when coupled with newly awakened desires.

Peter had to pull back and he lowered his head to rest his forehead against Matthieu's. Peter's emerald green eyes searched deeply Matthieu's golden green hazel orbs. “You rock my whole world right now gorgeous and if I don't turn my ass toward the door, you won't be getting sleep any time soon. I'll see you tonight.” Peter said smiling, giving a final kiss to the end of Matthieu's nose and then marched himself to the door.

“Drive careful, thank you again.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled.

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“No, Thank You, handsome.” Peter winked and then saw himself out. Matthieu fell into his chair and ate his noodles happily. He'd do whatever he had to in order to make this relationship work. He was head over heels in love with Peter and there was no denying the racing of his heart was anything other than love mixed with a fair amount of lust. If he had to do cartwheels all across the city, he would if it meant one Peter Hollingsworth could be his, permanently.

He'd been praying for a guy like Peter to come along for years. “Perhaps my luck is finally changing. God, I hope so!” Matthieu said to himself as he finished eating and then flopped into bed and set his alarm clock. He was fast asleep just a few minutes later, a soft smile lingering on his lips.



Peter dialed his mother on his cell phone as he drove himself home, he was in high spirits and wanted to share his happiness a little. It rang twice and his mother sleepily answered after banging the receiver around a dozen times on the way to her ear.

“Sleeping all day again Mom?” He asked grinning into the phone.

“Cheeky brat. I was out with Rogelio last night over at the club. Tangoing and Mamboing to spicy Latin music and about three pitchers of Margaritas. I can't remember what time we rolled in last night. You be perky snot.” Bernadette Hollingsworth moaned, obviously hungover. She was a true bohemian spirit. Nearing sixty, never married, had more lovers than she had fingers with a spirit as wild and free as a bird. Peter adored her, she lived life to its fullest everyday.

“Still dating him? I thought you said he was too macho.” Peter said and Bernadette snorted and Peter heard the flicker of a lighter from the other end. He was positive it wasn't a cigarette she was smoking.

“Yes darling, he is typically Latin and can get my knickers in a bunch, but he sure does know how to show a girl a good time.” Bernadette answered, her voice talking around a large inhale of what was most likely a controlled substance.

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“Mom are you smoking a doobie?” Peter asked and Bernadette exhaled directly into the phone.

“You know I gave that up ages ago. This is the finest hash direct from Bangladesh I'll have you know.”

“The same thing mom! Jesus Christ, you are going to rot your brain.” Peter groaned rolling his eyes as he pulled into his parking garage.

“Just as you like to suck on cancer sticks, don't preach at me boy. I'm your mother. Now, what on earth do you want? I have a raging headache.” Bernadette said taking another drag.

“I met the greatest guy Mom. I called to gloat about him.” Peter grinned as he parked in his assigned spot and made his way to the elevator. The parking garage was underneath the building itself.

“Oh do tell! Is he cute?” Bernadette asked grinning herself into the phone.

“More than cute. You know those old paintings of cherubs you see everywhere? Those Victorian Era looking ones? I swear mom, he looks just like that. He's angelically beautiful. Seriously, no joke. Wild blond curls, a face to die for, big hazel green eyes with flecks of gold in them and a smile that gives me a raging hard-on. He's gorgeous!”

“He sounds it. But you're giddy and pretty faces alone never make you giddy. He must be a keeper too.” Bernadette replied as Peter started his ascent to the fifteenth floor.

“You know when they say when you meet 'the one' you just click into place and know you want to spend every day for the rest of your life with them? It's fucking true mom. He's insanely smart, well mannered, neat as a pin, elegantly refined, sweet, kind hearted, the list goes on and on Mom. I've yet to find something we don't have in common unless you count his shitty-ass luck in life.” Peter began expounding on Matthieu's virtues as he unlocked his door and kicked off his shoes and lit up a smoke as he fell onto the couch.

He went on to explain what he knew of Matthieu's past and his parents, his crazy situation and how he was working himself to death.

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“And you left him in squalor? Peter you march your ass back over there and sweep him off his feet! He sounds perfect for you and you're a dumbass.” Bernadette said and Peter chuckled.

“One step at a time mom. Let me actually have at least one date with him properly before I get down on one knee and beg him to move in with me. Not everyone in this world is like you and jumps into bed with the first man to strike your fancy.”

“Sometime several at once if there's a room full of hot ass.”

Peter cringed. “Too. Much. Information.”

“Like that's news to you brat? Hardly. Oh damn, I got another call coming in, it's Francois. Shit, I forgot we were going to the art museum this evening for the gala. I gotta run sweetheart. Call me later hon, tell me more about sweet cheeks later. I love you.” Bernadette said and Peter smiled, his mother never changed.

“I love you too mom, go have fun.” Peter said hanging up the phone and then giving an encore performance and called his sister to tell her all about Matthieu.

“Mom's right, you should have kidnapped him. Don't let this one slip through your fingers like all the others Peter. He sounds perfect for you.” Wendy said sipping coffee in her solarium while her husband watched the game in the living room.

“He is Wends. I know I have a track record of finding total narcissistic prigs to date but I finally found one who is prettier on the inside than he is on the outside. I'm no fool. I don't want to blow this so I'm taking it traditionally slow I suppose. He deserves to be wooed out of his socks and I plan on being the one feasting on his toes when the socks vanish.” Peter said and Wendy laughed.

“Dog. Hey are you coming over for Thanksgiving? Franklin is planning a feast.” Wendy said changing the subject.

“Wendy you married a chef. Every day breakfast is a feast at your place. I'll be there and can you do me a favor? Matthieu mentioned he always works holidays and it doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out he's probably

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emotionally in the pits on those days. Can Franklin make a care package for me I can surprise Matthieu with on his shift? That will probably brighten his spirits a little.” Peter said and Wendy smiled into the phone.

“That sounds like a great idea. I’ll ask him, I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to help.” Wendy said and Peter grinned.

“Thanks Wends. Listen, the adrenaline is wearing off now and I’m toasted. I’m gonna catch some shut eye for a while here. I’ll call you later. Love ya.” Peter said and Wendy smiled.

“Love you too. You are my only little brother after all.” Wendy said as they hung up the phone. She went to ask her husband about a Thanksgiving Day catering surprise for Peter’s new love and Peter fell into bed totally and irrevocably in love with one Matthieu Le Fleur.

He was everything Peter had ever wanted and Peter was determined to win Matthieu by pulling out every romantic stop he could. He’d take his mother’s advice for a change and totally sweep Matthieu off his feet until he didn’t know which way was up anymore.

Then and only then, once Peter felt he’d earned it would he take the next step. There was no sense rushing into sex, that had always been a horrible mistake in his past relationships. Pretty faces, lust and no substance was a lethal combination. Peter already knew Matthieu had substance in spades, a pretty face that induced wonderful dreams and drooling and lust was also serious contender.

However, when your target in your sights also had a history of living in hell on a daily basis, the wisest choice and the best choice would be to take each day slowly and build the relationship’s foundation securely.

The experts all agree when it comes to solid partnerships, they all last when it’s based on mutual respect and friendship first. Peter would be damned if he didn’t heed that advice and build this foundation, one brick at a time.



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## *Chapter Three*

Matthieu smiled brightly when Peter arrived at the store that night. “You look much better than you did when I dropped you off this afternoon. Sleep Okay?” Peter asked going over to the coffee counter and fixing his cup.

“Like a baby. I had this handsome fool come tuck me in, it was wonderful.” Matthieu grinned watching Peter load his coffee with creamers.

“Oh really? Anyone I might know?” Peter grinned right back and Matthieu leaned his arms on the counter.

“He's a regular here. Likes amaretto creamers with a little coffee. Handsome, intelligent and proves that chivalry isn't completely dead in the world.” Matthieu replied and Peter chuckled.

“Wow, he sounds like a keeper.” Peter said coming over the counter and leaning across it to almost touch noses with Matthieu.

“I'll say he is. Think I should keep him?” Matthieu asked and Peter smirked.

“Is he available for keeping?”

“I'd have to ask. So, you available for keeping?”

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“Baby, I’m already taken.” Peter said stealing a quick kiss and Matthieu chuckled.

“I just adore you Peter. You make me smile again. Thank you so much.” Matthieu said with a look of affection so deep in his eyes Peter wanted to melt into the linoleum right then and there.

“There’s nothing to thank me for Matthieu in case you hadn’t noticed the mutual adoration society is working overtime. So can I officially call you my new boyfriend?” Peter asked and Matthieu nodded.

“Only if I can do the same.” Matthieu replied and Peter nodded in return.

“Absolutely beautiful. I told my mom about you today.” Peter said and Matthieu shook his head.

“Should I be afraid?” Matthieu asked and Peter snorted.

“You? No. Me? I already got the earful from her. She thinks I’m an idiot and moving way too slow. This coming from the lady who sleeps with people before she even knows their names sometimes. I think we’re moving quite fast enough.” Peter said and Matthieu nodded.

“I agree. Nothing too fast, I’ve had one too many relationships that never got past the first day. I like this very much as is I don’t want to rush into anything. You’re technically my first real boyfriend.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled and leaned on the counter.

“The first and hopefully the last. I like you a lot Matthieu I want this to work just as much as you do. I don’t have a good track record either. You’re the first person I’ve met who I enjoy just being with and talking to as much as I think you’re hot as hell.” Peter said waggling his eye brows and Matthieu rolled his eyes.

“I have a baby face. I couldn’t grow a decent mustache or beard if my life depended on it. I tried, thinking it might make me look my age and it just grew in horribly. Just a little under my lip and a spot under my nose. I could do alright if Hitler style mustaches suddenly came into style. But other than that I’d be screwed.” Matthieu said with a sigh.

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“Grow a beard and I'll kick your ass. A face as nice as yours needs to stay uncovered. Besides, I hate kissing whiskers.” Peter replied and Matthieu waggled a finger at him.

“So do I. So bear that in mind.” Matthieu replied and Peter gave a gallant mock bow.

“Never fear, the razor is ever sharp. I don't like the feel on my own face even more. You'll never have to worry about anything more than a couple of lazy days worth of growth before it's driving me nuts.” Peter chuckled as a few late night customers, drunk from the local bar wandered in and made a rude ruckus before buying munchies for the night and leaving again.

Once the store quieted down again, Matthieu turned to Peter. “You know, I just realized I know nothing about you really. I don't even know how old you are. Mind giving me some details?” Matthieu asked and Peter hopped up to sit on the counter.

“Where do I start? It's colorful. I should probably start with mom and work my way up. Ready for a story?” Peter asked and Matthieu leaned against the counter.

“Regale me with your tale.” Matthieu said and Peter cleared his throat.

“One Bernadette Hollingsworth, youngest daughter of Sir. Nigel Hollingsworth an old school British bureaucrat investment banker. He was sixty when she was born to his fourth wife and Mom had trust funds, stocks and bonds invested in her name before she cut her first tooth. Grandpa Nigel passed away when she was seven leaving his fortune split between his last wife and his three children. He had over five hundred million in assets. Mom is stinking bloody rich and never had to work a day in her life. She's classic eccentric old money.” Peter began with a chuckle.

“Oh how grandpa is probably spinning in his grave over his youngest. When mom was twenty, she came to New York. It was the high life of Studio 54 and socialite eccentrics wanting to change the world. Disco dancing, booze and the who's who of the creative world. Mom claims she hardly remembers those years and I believe her. Along came my elder sister Wendy. Who's father is as unknown as mine is.” Peter said and Matthieu stood up.

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“Wendy? Your sister's name is Wendy? Like Peter Pan and Wendy?” Matthieu asked trying to keep a straight face.

“Absolutely. My middle name is Pan.” Peter said and Matthieu howled.

“Oh god, I'm sorry. Peter Pan? My boyfriend is PETER FUCKING PAN?”

“It gets better, my sister's married to Franklin Berger. She's a Wendy Berger!” Peter said and Matthieu was laughing so hard he choked.

“I'm sorry. Oh god that's sadly hysterical. I thought my name was bad, I can't imagine going through school with a name like Peter Pan. Don't tell me your sister's middle name is 'Darling'?” Matthieu asked and Peter smirked.

“It is. Wendy Darling and Peter Pan Hollingsworth. My mother has a sick sense of humor and was stoned out of her mind.” Peter grinned, he actually loved having a whimsical name. It gave him an excuse not to grow up after all.

“I'm surprised you don't have brain damage.” Matthieu said and Peter winked.

“You and me both. Now where was I? Wendy was born and then I was five years later almost to the day. Wendy was born on January third and I was born just after midnight making it January fourth. She'll be thirty and I'll be twenty-five this year.” Peter said and Matthieu grinned.

“Do carry on.” Matthieu urged.

“When I was five Mom met the one man she almost married. He was the only father I knew and he treated Wendy and I like his own. George Montgomery, a fabulous jazz musician from Chicago. I remember the first time I met him, I was fascinated with how dark his skin was. He was the blackest man I'd ever seen, it made his smile so much brighter and his eyes almost shine. He was a real man George. He absolutely refused to touch Mom's money. He'd say 'The day I can't support the people I love is the day I'm stone cold in my grave'. The only concession to Mom's wealth he made, he let her buy the house we all lived in in Calumet City. He wanted to come back to Chicago to play the blues and we all left New York to come with him.” Peter began a soft smile of remembrance on his lips.

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“He was the greatest and the only man my mother was monogamous with. He was ten years older than my mom and he would have been sixty-eight this year. But when I was eighteen, just a week before I started attending Northwestern he died suddenly of a heart attack. The man instilled in me what it meant to be a man. He made sure I went to school and did my homework and pushed me to make my dreams come true. He came home from playing a gig one night, sat in his favorite chair to watch the Cubs game he'd recorded on the video recorder that afternoon. Wendy was attending Harvard Law School, I was packing up to go to Northwestern and both Mom and I were asleep when he got home. I found him in his chair, he just looked asleep. That was probably the worst day of my life.” Peter said tearing up and Matthieu reached over and took his hand.

“How awful. I'm sorry.” Matthieu said sincerely and Peter gave him a half smile.

“That was a long time ago now, but yeah it sucks to lose someone you considered your father. I'll never forget George, ever.” Peter said wiping his eyes and continuing.

“We sold the house in Calumet City and Mom and I both live in the Towers now. Our condos are next door to each other. We didn't plan it that way, I started out living with her, but after I graduated and the condo next door became available I bought it. I want to stay close to Mom, she can be a little too carefree sometimes. She's not into hard drugs and never was. But give her too much Vodka and she's stumbling home. She was smoking a doobie on the phone with me this morning. I'm amazed she's upright half the time. I like to watch out for her, my mom really is the most loving of people even if she refuses to take care of herself. She looks fabulous though despite it all, you'd never guess she was almost sixty. She looks hardly a day over forty and a good looking forty at that. Mom is gorgeous even if she's nutty as a fruitcake.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled.

“I'd love to meet her. She sounds like one of the most colorful people on the planet.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled.

“You'll meet her, that's a promise.” Peter said as the conversation halted as a customer came in to buy some cigarettes. After he departed the story continued.

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“Wendy graduated Harvard Law school two years ago, came home, passed her bars with flying colors. I graduated with my degree in graphic illustration and business management and Mom cried all the while, stating she raised us to be free spirits not shackled to the conforms of the government and corporate sharks. Wendy had been dating Franklin for about four years and they finally got married last year. He's a a five-star chef, man that man can cook. I never turn down an invitation to dinner at my Sister's. She's a state prosecuting attorney and she and Frank live in a gorgeous apartment downtown near the courthouse so Wends can walk to work. Franklin has his own restaurant, 'Joyeux Régál', nearby and walks to work too. Their car just sits and gathers dust.”

“Wait a minute! Your brother-in-law owns 'Joyeux Régál'? Doesn't that place have like almost a two year waiting list for reservations?” Matthieu asked and Peter nodded.

“I told you he's a good cook.” Peter grinned and nodded.

“More than just a good cook Peter! He's a world famous French Chef. Oh he must love that you call him a 'cook'.” Matthieu said aghast and Peter chuckled.

“Precisely. It's my job as the younger brother to give my sister's husband hell. Franklin is great, you'll like him.” Peter said and Matthieu's head swam.

“Okay, enough family history from you, I don't think I can take much more. It's been a long time since I mingled in that sort of environment and I'm already feeling like a fish out of water. I'm almost sorry I asked.” Matthieu said looking more than a little self-conscious and Peter just leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“There's no need to feel out of place Matthieu. We're all really just simple people when you get right down to it. Mom would be the first to accuse someone of being a pratt and 'hoity-toity' and point fingers when people are being snobbish. You'll fit right in Matthieu. It what I like best about you, no airs and no falsehoods. Had I not told you, you'd have thought I was just a guy off the street right?”

“Yes, but...”

“Yes, But nothing. I am just a guy off the street. I like watching bad slasher movies, eating pork rinds and salsa and hot dogs and I belch and fart

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and do all the other things every other guys does. I hate when people judge each other based on what's in the wallet as opposed to what's in the person. The best value Mom taught us growing up was to look at the person first, everything else is secondary.”

“I love your mother. She's right.” Matthieu said smiling and leaning over to kiss Peter softly. “She raised a wonderful son too.”

“Who's head over heels for you right now.” Peter replied and would have dove in for another kiss had not another customer come in. After the woman left Matthieu turned to Peter.

“Don't you have work you're neglecting bullshitting here with me every night?” Matthieu asked and Peter grinned sheepishly.

“Yeah, but like I said I'm enamored with you at the moment. However, I should get some stuff done tonight, I didn't get any work done yesterday.” Peter said stuffing his cigarettes in his coat pocket.

“Yes, you should slacker. I'm not going anywhere and as much as I would love you to stay all night, I'd feel guilty monopolizing all your time.” Matthieu said following Peter to the door.

“And I'd feel stressed out if I let work slide too much. Can I pick you up in the morning and take you home again?” Peter asked and Matthieu shook his head.

“I'm not going home in the morning. I work at the laundromat right after I get off here remember? I'm used to pulling double shifts, I do it six days a week. Thankfully though, it's a shorter shift at the laundromat. I get off at one instead of two. I get an extra hour of sleep.” Matthieu said and Peter groaned.

“I don't know how you do it. I swear Matthieu you're going to burn that candle at both ends too much and make yourself sick. You eat horribly, don't get enough sleep and work slave labor.”

“Bite your tongue Peter, I can't afford to be sick. I have no insurance. I do what I have to. Ramen noodles are cheap, rent is expensive, monthly passes on the train aren't free and the gas bill is already late, the phone is already cut off because Phyllis didn't pay the bill and it's up to me to pay it so my bosses can reach me because I share the line with her. I've also got to somehow find a way

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and time to buy a coat. I've frozen my ass off in just a sweatshirt pullover for years and it's too ratty to salvage anymore. I need both jobs just to survive.” Matthieu said and Peter sighed.

“I can help.”

“No Peter. As much as I think you're sweet for offering, I don't want a hand out either. I lived too long on charity and I hated every second of it. I don't have much pride, but spare me what I do have okay?” Matthieu asked and Peter smiled and just leaned over and kissed Matthieu's cheek.

“And that is what I love about you Matthieu. You're the strongest, most tenacious and stubborn man I've ever met. You humble me. At least let me drive you around? I can spend a little time with you that way at the very least.”

“I'll give you that much Peter. I would like to spend more time with you too. I'll see you at six?” Matthieu asked and Peter nodded.

“I'll pick you up right on time, see you in a few hours.” Peter said with a final chaste kiss before he headed home to do work himself and left Matthieu to get on with his duties at the store.



Peter let half a dozen cigarettes burn away in the ashtray as he sat in front of his monitor and clacked away coding a client's website. The sooner he got the tedious job out of the way the more time he'd have contemplating his next moves with Matthieu.

He already knew he was thinking in the long term. The “let's get matching rings and live together happily ever after” type musings. He detested Matthieu working himself to death in jobs that he hated. He didn't like thinking that in emergencies Matthieu didn't even have a phone and was dependent on his land lady for contact to the outside world.

That however was easily rectified and Peter already had that problem solved. Before coming home he'd driven over to the twenty-four hour super

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department store just outside of the city and picked up one of those handy, pay as you go cell phones and several refill cards to go along with it. He also stopped in the men's department and picked up a decent coat for Matthieu. A nice sheepskin lined, brown leather bomber-style jacket. Matthieu could bitch all he wanted, it was a warm coat and it was freezing in Chicago already this late in November.

After arriving home and spending a good thirty minutes just trying to get the cell phone out of the molded plastic nightmare packaging he had it plugged in and charging and had already activated the phone and plugged in his phone numbers into the phone's memory. His home number and his cell phone number were already stored in the phone's address book and the speed dials already input.

He'd even gone as far as to be unusually cheeky and using the cell phone's camera had taken a picture of himself grinning like an idiot and made it the cell phone's wallpaper.

“I'm such a dork.” Peter said to himself as he finished his projects and then began to get ready to go pick Matthieu up from work. He stuffed the phone and refill cards inside the inner coat pocket along with a note that read: “I want you to be able to call me in emergencies as well as just to chat whenever you need me. I love you, deal with the present Baby. It has nothing to do with your pride and everything for my peace of mind. I just care about my boyfriend, sue me for it. Love, Peter”

He'd wait until Matthieu looked inside the coat to find the additional hidden gift. He grabbed coat and all and headed down to the elevator to pick up his brand new boyfriend.

Matthieu had just clocked out as Peter entered the store. It was packed full of Monday Morning commuters getting coffee and donuts and Matthieu made a beeline for Peter.

“Let's get out of Dante's Inferno.” Matthieu said bracing himself for the weather in only a thin sweatshirt.

“Wait, here put this on.” Peter said holding up the coat and Matthieu leveled a gaze at him that was threatening.

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“You didn't go out and buy me a coat did you?” Matthieu accused correctly and Peter grinned.

“I did, cope with it handsome. It's colder than a witches tit outside. Blame me for giving a shit, I don't care.” Peter said and Matthieu just smiled and held up his hands in defeat.

“Okay, you win I can't argue with you, I'd have done the same had it been in reverse. Thank you Peter, it's a beautiful coat.” Matthieu said turning around as Peter held the coat up for Matthieu to slip his arms into.

“Oh and so warm too. Good guess on the size it fits perfect.” Matthieu said zipping up the front.

“You're not too much smaller than me. I went down just a size. I wear a large so I figured a medium would work on you.” Peter said as they headed quickly to the car and got in.

“You have to be in by seven right? We've got an hour do you want to stop somewhere for fast food?” Peter asked and Matthieu nodded.

“Oh yes, I'm starving. Please. I could murder a breakfast burrito about now. There's a little Mexican restaurant right next to the laundromat we can stop in if you'd like.” Matthieu said and Peter nodded.

“That actually sounds great. What's the address?” Peter asked starting the car.

“Just a few blocks away from my apartment. Head toward my house then instead of turning right on Halsted, turn left for three blocks. The restaurant and laundromat are both right on the corner of 34<sup>th</sup> and Halsted.

“Gotcha, that is at least convenient.”

“Especially when I'm lugging my own laundry on my back.” Matthieu said as they drove toward his second job.

Matthieu was examining his new coat fondly when he discovered the hidden present.

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“PETER PAN HOLLINGSWORTH! You bought me a phone too?” Matthieu scowled and yelled. Peter just laughed.

“Read the note and quit belly aching. Can I help it if I'd like to know you can call me and I can call you? Consider it a belated birthday present. When is your birthday by the way?” Peter said as Matthieu flipped open the phone and laughed at the image looking back at him.

“You're so damn handsome, love the wallpaper choice.” Matthieu said before answering the question. “I turned twenty-two this past August twenty-ninth. I'm your typical anal retentive perfectionist Virgo.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled.

“So I'm not too late with the presents then. I want you to use that Matthieu and call me whenever you want to, I mean it. I know you said how bored you get just sitting in the laundromat office.” Peter said and Matthieu laughed.

“I could sit in that office naked and wanking and no one would be the wiser. I just sit in there, watch the security screen and wait for someone to knock on the door when a machine jams or eats their money. Boring job, I might just actually call you and talk dirty.” Matthieu said and Peter laughed.

“Please tell me that's a promise.”

Matthieu just grinned and winked and watched Peter's profile happily as they drove across town.

It took just over fifteen minutes and Peter parked in front of the laundromat. They had plenty of time to grab a quick breakfast and he hooked and arm over Matthieu's shoulders as they entered the small little restaurant next to the laundromat.

They each ordered the special breakfast burritos, filled with spicy sausage, scrambled eggs, potatoes, cheese and cilantro and two large cokes to wash them down. Peter insisted on paying and used his hip to bump Matthieu away from the cash register to pay. The meal only came to just under seven dollars, Matthieu thus far was the cheapest semi-date he'd ever been on. Matthieu only grumbled slightly and grabbed the tray to carry it to their table.

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“Horrible for your cholesterol and we probably don't want to know the quality and freshness of the meat but it sure does taste good and fills you up.” Matthieu said as they pulled up chairs at one of the tables to eat.

“They are as big as my car. If they didn't fill a person up on quantity alone then that person has a hollow leg and eating disorder.” Peter said piling his burrito high with jalapeño pepper slices and Tabasco sauce. Matthieu shivered.

“My tongue is revolting just watching you fix your plate. How can you eat all that spice?” Matthieu said just placing a few peppers on his.

“George trained my tongue with New Orleans Cajun cooking. He loved it and we both ended up with asbestos tongues in the process. Wendy can eat jalapeños straight out of the bag without ever needing a drink. Give her those cream cheese filled poppers and she'll make a bender of them. She can eat hotter food than I can. She even made George sweat watching her.” Peter chuckled as they both tucked into their meals and inhaled them. They had about twenty minutes to spare so they headed over to the laundromat and Matthieu unlocked the door and lead Peter to the office and shut the door behind them.

“Now, let me thank you properly for my birthday presents and breakfast.” Matthieu said turning and wrapping his arms around Peter's neck and kissing him throughly until Peter's knees went weak and he found himself sitting on the desk for support.

It was one of those earth shattering types of kisses and Peter was almost moaning into the heated kiss as Matthieu stepped back and shivered himself.

“I am so very into you right now Peter and if I didn't have a fear of someone walking in on us I'd be teaching you how to mambo, horizontally.” Matthieu said, his voice betraying his desire.

“I am so horny right now I can't stand up.” Peter chuckled and Matthieu grinned.

“That's not the phone you gave me in my pocket either.” Matthieu chuckled as they just leaned against each other and let their pulse rates come down again.

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“I refuse to have our first time cheap and tawdry in an office anyway. Baby when I woo, I woo right. I want you naked under candlelight and in silk sheets after dinner and perhaps an evening with champagne in my hot tub.” Peter grinned and Matthieu ran his fingers through Peter's hair.

“You'll spoil me Peter. I haven't been in a hot tub in years. You'll find me putty in your hands if you pamper my bones in heat.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled warmly.

“That is the general idea. Life is so very boring without a little old fashioned romance to spice things up. Even if your kiss seems spicy enough to get my blood boiling at the moment.” Peter said as they heard the first washer start up outside.

“Peter you just have to smile at me for me to want to have my wicked way with you. Add into it you're also the sweetest man I've ever met and I'm a goner. I love you very much Peter, I really do.” Matthieu said leaning close to rest his forehead on Peter's and gaze deeply into Peter's eyes. Which closed in a languid motion when Matthieu said he loved him.

“Say that again Baby.” Peter sighed and Matthieu chuckled.

“I love you.” Matthieu said again and Peter shivered and pulled Matthieu closer for another kiss.

“I love you too.” Peter sighed and it was Matthieu's turn to hold back tightly.

“One more time?” Matthieu asked and Peter grinned into Matthieu's neck.

“I love you Matthieu Pierre Le Fleur.” Peter said and Matthieu stepped back.

“How did you know my middle name? I don't remember telling you that.” Matthieu asked and Peter grinned.

“I looked you up on-line and came across your old high school website. You were listed on a message board. Someone from your class was looking for you.” Peter said and Matthieu almost make a double take expression.

“Really? Who was looking for me?” Matthieu asked.

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“Some girl by the name of Violet Temple.” Peter said and Matthieu's eyes widened.

“Please tell me you didn't answer her.” Matthieu said almost vehemently.

“I didn't, not my place to make those sorts of decisions for you. Why? You look almost panicked.” Peter said and Matthieu laughed.

“Violet my stalker in high school. Nice enough girl when she wasn't trying to stick her hand down my pants.” Matthieu said and Peter laughed.

“I had one of those too. Mary Rigby. Pretty, popular, a cheerleader and a total slut. She went through more boyfriends than my mother and that's saying something. She was on a mission to “save me” from my “gayness”. Because surely once I fucked a girl I'd change my mind about boys according to her.”

“Oh I hate people like that. But they are everywhere sadly.” Matthieu said stepping back and stretching.

“Well, I suppose I need to get home so I can start taking my calls and I'm sure your boss would frown on me being in here with you so I will let you get to work and I will drag my sorry ass back to work as well. Want me to come pick you up to take you home later?” Peter asked and Matthieu shook his head.

“It's four blocks Peter, I can walk it. Besides driving all the way across town to drive me home four blocks is a little silly don't you think?” Matthieu grinned and Peter smiled.

“True, then I'll see you tonight as usual.” Peter said standing, helping himself to another round of wonderful kissing before he saw himself out and back home again.

Matthieu settled himself in the chair in the office and dreamily passed the time marveling at his new found happiness. Life was finally looking like something he wanted to revel in for a change, because it was suddenly very good to be alive and the object of one Peter Hollingsworth's affections.

About an hour after Peter left, Matthieu was looking at his new Cell phone and discovered Peter had already plugged in his number. A wicked grin crossed Matthieu's lips and he pressed the speed dial for Peter's home number.

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“Hello?” Peter answered and Matthieu grinned.

“There's a grass stain on the knees of my jeans and grease on the overalls.” Matthieu said and Peter was silent for a moment.

“What?” Peter said and Matthieu chuckled.

“I did tell you I'd call and talk dirty to you.” Matthieu said and Peter getting the joked laughed.

“Moron.” Peter said lighting up a smoke and kicking back in his office chair.

“But of course, you don't hold that distinction all by yourself you realize?” Matthieu said not really having anything else to say beyond the joke. However, as usual, they found things to talk about. Peter put him on speaker phone as he worked and Matthieu kicked back to watch the security monitor and they passed the time talking and laughing and falling deeper in love with each other with every passing minute.

Time flew by for Matthieu having Peter to talk to and Peter was amazed he managed to get work done even while being slightly distracted.

They talked for just under an hour and did the silly little things all new lovers do with making kissing noises over the phone while waiting for the other partner to hang up first. It was wonderful to be in love and life was joyful again for them both.

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## *Chapter Four*

Peter wrapped up his work for the day and made himself a sandwich for lunch and then decided to do a little more research on his new boyfriend, particularly to see if anyone had any footage of Matthieu actually dancing. Peter had to admit he was more than a little curious about the old Matthieu. Eric had mentioned he was a national champion and even the old high school website forum mentioned Matthieu was a competitive dancer. However, Peter never even saw Matthieu sway to the radio so his interest was piqued.

Trouble was where to start looking. The Google search on Matthieu had only brought up the high school forum. Peter remembered seeing Eric's business card and it had read "Tiny Steps Dancing School for Beginners". So he dialed information to see if he could reach Eric at the school. Perhaps he had old videotapes of past competitions.

A Man answered the phone with a rough voice, obviously still suffering from a cold. This must be Steven Peter thought. "Tiny Steps, Can I help you schedule a lesson?"

"No. My name is Peter and I met a gentleman by the name of Eric the other evening. He and my boyfriend Matthieu used to be in the same Dance class." Peter began and Steven's voice lifted.

"Peter, yes Eric mentioned you. I'm Steven let me get Eric for you." Steven said and put Peter on hold for just a minute and Eric answered the phone.

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“Hi Peter. Is something wrong with Matthieu?” Eric asked and Peter smiled into the phone.

“No, I'm calling because I'm curious. You don't happen to have any old videos of Matthieu dancing do you? I've never seen him dance and I have to admit I'm dying to see what he used to do.” Peter said and Eric sounded pained.

“I do, and I'm still angry that he's in such dire straights and didn't tell anyone what happened. Same old Matthieu, stubborn as an old mule and wouldn't ask for help if he were bleeding to death in the streets. He was the best, the BEST. National champion four years in a row, enough trophies to fill an entire room at his parent's place and more talent in one toe than I'd ever have with another fifty years of practice. Columbia was drooling to get their hands on him. It's all such a fucking waste. He could have been the best instructor and choreographer to come around in decades.” Eric was angry and Peter was stunned.

“He was that good?” Peter said and Eric grunted into the phone.

“Better than good. I have his last National competition on video. I came in sixth that year in Jazz. He took best in Lyrical, best in Modern, best in free-form and best overall. Wanna come by and see the tapes, I have them all here at the school to show the kids the potential they all have if they practice. Matthieu could move a stone to tears with the way he dances. We're located on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street and Michigan Avenue, next to the IIT campus. The old VanderCook College of Music building.” Eric said and Peter was already grabbing his Car keys.

“I'm on my way now. I'll be there in twenty-minutes.” Peter said still talking on his cell phone as he descended to the parking garage.

He walked into the school and smiled, all children under the age of six, all in cute little leotards and dancing shoes were lined up in front of mirrors looking adorable as Eric had them dancing around in pairs. Peter just leaned against the wall and watched until the end of the lesson and then Eric dismissed the kids cheerfully and then beckoned Peter over to a television on a stand.

“I've already got it queued up and ready to go. Have a seat and be prepared to be amazed.” Eric said as Steven joined them and they all sat in folding chairs as the old videotape began to play.

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There stood a sixteen year old Matthieu, he hadn't changed too much since then. He had lost a little of the roundness in his face and his body had filled out a little more, but it was beyond doubt Matthieu standing there in what looked like tattered gauze and cotton.

“This was his free-form Lyrical number. He's dancing to show the futility of fighting fate here. How prophetic his choice looking back on it now.” Eric said as the music started and for the next three and a half minutes Peter didn't breathe. He just sat there stunned into silence and in awe as Matthieu tore Peter's heart out and ripped it to shreds with the emotional impact of his lyrical dance. He showed a fight against cruel fates and the weight they placed upon the dancer's shoulders. Like a bird struggling to break free from the egg to gasp at life as the snake lay in wait. Like a drowning man making one last frantic breath before he was pulled under the water again. Like a lover, weeping over the grave of his loved one. Every movement spoke of tragedy and struggle and survival instincts clawing for just one more moment of life.

Peter was crying by the end as Matthieu's dance and his character finally lost the struggle and died, fighting right up until the last moment. “Jesus Christ, that was... I was not prepared for that.” Peter said wiping his eyes.

“No one is. Everyone thinks dancing is just two people swaying to music in a high school gym during prom. It can be a story, it's passions set free to writhe to music and convey in just a single gesture all the emotion in the music the dancer feels. Matthieu was and is the best at telling a story with his body. He not only conveys but he emotes when he dances. You can feel in your soul what he's trying to tell you. He's not Matthieu when he dances, he's whatever character in the story he's acting. He becomes tragedy, he becomes romance, he becomes that lover lost at sea or the villain destroying the world with his avarice and greed. Matthieu is the dance and the dancer combined.” Eric said and Peter swallowed hard.

“Is there more?” He asked and Eric smiled and nodded and began playing the rest of Matthieu's performances in that competition. He was faithful romance waiting for his lover to return in the modern competition. He was comedy in standard jazz, and in the ballroom competition he and the girl dancing with him made Peter's lungs have pity for lack of air as they did the fast paced American Swing both dressed like they came straight from a club during World War II. “Damn he looks nice in a uniform.” Peter had to admit as Matthieu came out dressed as a typical soldier from the era and his dance partner in a stylized uniform.

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“He looks great in anything. Matthieu always had a million girls following him around at competitions and quite a few boys for that matter. I should know, I was one of the drooling masses once.” Eric said and Peter smiled.

“I believe it. I suddenly feel sick. I want him to have his dreams and damn it all if he doesn't fight me over it. He almost took my head off for buying him a forty dollar coat. He thinks it's charity and a hand out and all I want to do is see someone I care about happy.” Peter sighed running a tired hand down his face.

“That's Matt. He's got stiff pride and he never did want anyone to help him. He practiced alone for hours until he was walking around on blisters. When he was thrown out, no one knew what happened to him because he told no one. He just simply vanished. When any of us tried to call him at home, his bastard of a father hung up on us and his Mother began preaching evils and sins. His mom died a few years back. I don't think he knows. She had intestinal cancer and it took her fast. She died almost three years ago, I really don't want to be the one to tell him either. He's had enough shit to deal with.” Eric said and Peter's eyes widened.

“No, that's news he should hear later. He's already on an emotional tight-rope without a safety net. He's working two jobs, living on a diet of instant noodles, and not getting nearly enough sleep in-between. That sort of news would just sit like a dead stone on him on top of everything else. I'm working on him though. Eventually I'll get him to concede to logic and quit his jobs and come live with me, but we've got to take this one day at a time. I'll tell him when the time is right.” Peter said and Eric smiled.

“You really do love Matt. I can see it in your eyes.” Eric said and Peter smiled.

“If I had my way, I'd kidnap him and make him quit all his jobs right this minute, keep him naked and pampered like a cat for about a month and then get him in school again right after I took him to Hawaii and stuck a ring on his finger. Oh yes, I'm totally gone, taken, smitten and whatever else you wanna call being head over heels in love with a stubborn fool.”

“Good, Matt deserves a guy like that. He may be stubborn, but he'd pull out all his teeth with just a string if someone needed them. He's the sweetest guy I know. He can't say 'no' either. Oh, don't get me wrong, he tries, but he'll cave like an anthill on sand if you push hard enough. People used to walk all

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over his kindness because they knew whatever they asked for, he'd give to them without giving too much of a fight.” Eric said and Peter scowled.

“I've already been privy to that behavior in him. His bosses walk all over him as do the other employees. He works like a dog and then works their shifts too. He's so afraid of losing his job he lets his boss break every labor law in the book.” Peter grumbled frustrated.

“Typical Matthieu behavior. He's also obsessively neat and orderly and will spend an hour cleaning a window so there are no streaks. You don't get anything half-assed if Matthieu is taking care of things. He finishes every project, well ahead of schedule and it's been triple checked for accuracy just to be on the safe side. He's so anal retentive, he has to be careful sitting down for fear of sucking up the furniture.” Eric said and Peter laughed.

“I noticed that too!” Peter grinned standing. “I should get back, I'm exhausted and need a little shut eye before I work myself tonight. Matthieu is probably heading home about now to do the same. Thank you for showing me those tapes, I really appreciate it.” Peter said shaking Eric and Steven's hands.

“Don't mention it, I'll make you copies for Matt if you'd like.” Eric said and Peter smiled.

“Please, I'd love copies.”

“Done.” Eric said and Peter gave his thanks again before heading home to ponder and sleep. Matthieu was being wasted and Peter was going to make damn sure Matthieu's dreams came true. If he had to drag Matthieu kicking and screaming all along the way.



Matthieu was mopping the floor when Peter arrived that evening and two arms wrapped around him from behind and a pair of lips planted themselves in the back of his neck making him shiver. “Baby, you're fantastic.” Peter sighed and Matthieu turned around in Peter's arms, still holding his mop handle.

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“What brought this on? Peter have you been crying? Your eyes are all bloodshot.” Matthieu went from amused to concerned immediately.

“I have actually. I went to see your friend Eric today and he showed me tapes from your last Competition. You... are... indescribably talented.” Peter said trying to formulate words to best describe his emotional state. He spent most of the evening depressed at the sheer waste of talent and then tossed and turned as he tried to sleep. He kept seeing Matthieu dancing in his mind and he couldn't shake the obsession to see him dance again.

Matthieu sighed. “That was a long time ago Peter. Please don't cry about it, I've shed enough tears over that for us both.” Matthieu said moving to return the bucket and mop to the back room.

“Not so long ago that the dream can't still happen Matthieu. Please let me help you chase your dream, it's such a waste that the world will never see what I saw this afternoon. It has nothing to do with charity or pride or a hand out and everything to do with me wanting to see someone I love share his gift with the world. I want to help Matthieu, please, please let me.” Peter was pleading with his voice, his eyes misty again.

“I can't Peter. Do you have any idea how expensive that would be? First I'd have to get my GED, then my degree and four years at Columbia isn't cheap. Then there is start up capitol for a school and then praying you get students. So many dance schools fail in the first year due to bankruptcy. I can't let you throw money away on a pipe dream. Peter you hardly know me. I know you love me and I love you too. So very much it hurts. But I just can't let you waste money like that. This is my life, like it or not.” Matthieu said wanting to cry.

“It's not a waste. It's investing in a dream, supporting someone I care about. Matthieu it's killing me watching you shuffle day after day in a futile rut. It's like your dance. The world crushing down on one person, weighing them down and pushing their head under the water. Yet, had there been another dancer, another hand reaching back, the weight would have been shared and endured together, the burden halved. Let me be your partner, let me support you in the dance while you teach it to me in return. I don't see it as a waste, I see it as sharing a joy with you. There is nothing I want more in the world right now than to see you dance, this time not on some tape, but on a real stage. I'm begging Matthieu. Take my hand please. I am Peter Pan, let's find that Neverland, together. Please Matthieu.” Peter said reaching out, tears streaming down his cheeks and desperate for Matthieu to take what was offered.

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Matthieu reached out and took Peter's hand and squeezed. "Peter, I love you so very much. I'll only accept on one condition. I can't take money from you without every intention of paying it back and don't argue with me. If you make a contract that states it's a loan contingent on me paying back every single dime even if it takes a lifetime then and only then can I accept the sheer magnitude of what you're offering me. I can't take it as a gift, no matter how much you love me and I love you in return." Matthieu said and Peter's eyes shone with victory.

"Done! I will have papers drawn up immediately if that makes you more comfortable. Matthieu I'm serious, I want you dancing and I want you dancing immediately. Shall we say I am also your new manager as well as your partner on paper? Will that look better on the contract?" Peter asked pulling Matthieu into his embrace. Matthieu chuckled fighting tears.

"I think that would be a nice touch. Peter, I'm going to cry." Matthieu said burying his face in Peter's chest his shoulders shaking as relief began to pervade his soul. Peter held on tight.

"Don't cry Matthieu. I've cried enough today thinking about all of this. Baby I want to see you succeed. I want to sit in the front row and shout and cheer and walk around all puffed up like a peacock that you're mine. Will you put in your notices at both places and your apartment? I want you moved in with me as soon as possible so you can start studying for your GED without distractions. Then I want you to focus on your education entirely. I've got a huge room I use for storage right now I'll gut it and turn into your own private dance studio at home. I want nothing getting in the way of the pursuit of your dream." Peter said and Matthieu just cried harder and could only nod against Peter's chest.

"I'll put in my two weeks notice in the morning. Okay?" Matthieu finally managed to croak out and Peter just cheered and captured Matthieu's lips in a hard kiss.

"Perfect. Start packing too. I want you moved in with me as soon as possible. Give Phyllis a month's notice and I'll pay her for the month, but you so are not staying there. I'm itching to get you home with me where you belong baby." Peter said and waggled his eyebrows and Matthieu laughed.

"Trust me Peter. I'm as horny and anxious as you are where that little detail is concerned too. What happened to us taking it slow?" Matthieu said and Peter chuckled.

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“Screw slow. I don't need any more time to know I want to grow old with you Matt. I don't want to steal a few precious minutes with you here and there. I want to come home and curl up with you on the couch and just hold you. I want to go to sleep with you there beside me and I want to wake up to your morning breath and bad bed head too. I want it all. The good and the bad.” Peter said and Matthieu just smiled.

“Me too Peter. Me too.” Matthieu said, a look of freedom washing over his face that took away the lines of worry and hardship and made him look like an earth bound angel. Peter fell in love all over again.

“I'm already itching to get started. I'll call a movers in the morning and I think I can arrange that by the time you get off work tomorrow afternoon you come home for good. I'll chauffeur you around these last two weeks to the laundromat. The apartment is only a ten minute walk from here tops.” Peter said bouncing on his feet like a boy excited on Christmas morning.

Matthieu laughed. “We're moving light speed now. But alright, I'm just as excited too. Oh Peter I'm so happy!” Matthieu said his smile bright as he hugged Peter within an inch of his life.

“Me too. Now give me your apartment keys, I'm going to go get a head start and start packing.” Peter grinned and Matthieu just chuckled and tossed Peter his keys.

“Mind the nightstand top drawer. Don't shock yourself.” Matthieu grinned and Peter chuckled.

“Does my baby hide a vibrator in the nightstand?”

“But of course darling.”

“That gets packed first. Daddy wants to play.”

“Stop you'll make me horny Peter and I am at work.” Matthieu said and Peter just chuckled.

“I've been perpetually horny since I met you Matt. Deal.” Peter said as he headed out practically skipping to his car.

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Matthieu floated through the rest of his shift lost in a state of utter shock and euphoria. He helped customers as he wrote a letter of resignation to his boss. He'd work for two weeks, enough time to train a replacement and then he was going to take a chance on love and a future and dive headfirst into Peter's persuasive arms. While he was at it, he wrote another letter for his boss at the laundromat and leave the keys on the desk. She didn't require two weeks notice, the job was so easy a monkey could do it, he didn't have to train a replacement and his boss was more than capable of covering for his absence for a day or two until she hired someone else to babysit her establishment. He'd call her first thing in the morning too and tell her over the phone as well.

Matthieu was over the moon with happiness. In the past month and a half his entire world had changed. Beginning with the stranger who first came in about two weeks before Halloween to get a cup of coffee and a pack a cigarettes. Matthieu would have never dared dream that the handsome stranger in blue jeans and a nice leather jacket with the messy dark hair and pretty green eyes would become the single most important person in his life.

Peter's friendly smile and attitude had warmed Matthieu right from the start. Then as they got to know each other, the love just sort of happened between them both. Somewhere between a myriad of diverse conversations and mutual growing attractions love had also taken them both in a strangle hold. Matthieu couldn't deny he thought about Peter almost obsessively anymore and the thought of moving in with him was making Matthieu almost giddy with joy as he helped the customers throughout the night.

Golden opportunity had arrived and his name was Peter Pan Hollingsworth. He was smart, funny, chivalrous and charming as well as persuasive and determined to push Matthieu in the direction of his dreams and damn the protestations. Peter simply cared and for that alone, if nothing else was enough for Matthieu to take his hand and trust his future alongside that man.

When Stephanie arrived to clock in that morning and Matthieu told her his good news she cheered. "I'll miss you Matty, but you deserve it man. I'm so happy for you." She said as Peter arrived grinning she turned to Peter.

"You'd better take care of Matty or I'll come kick your ass." She teased and Peter smiled.

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“You'd be in line behind my mother and sister if I louse this up.” He said turning to Matthieu.

“I got everything moved, everything you had fit in my trunk. I left the furniture but everything else is cleared out and in my trunk. Phyllis almost called the police on me until of course I paid her a month's rent in advance and gave her your notice of vacating immediately. She shut up pretty quickly after that and only came back down in a black nighty to 'help' me. Damn man, I have never seen breasts so nasty in my life.” Peter said and Matthieu laughed.

“I had the red nighty. You got lucky, the red is see-through.” Matthieu said heading out with Peter.

“Want to get breakfast again first?” Peter asked as they headed toward the laundromat.

“Yes, I can call Lupe from the restaurant. If I'm lucky she'll come by and just pick up the keys. Her son will probably do my job for the next few days until she can hire another washing machine babysitter. Lupe is very nice, she'll understand. So with any luck we'll have a whole morning free to unpack.” Matthieu said and Peter waggled his eyebrows.

“Just unpack?”

“We'll see what else happens when we get to the contents of my nightstand.” Matthieu grinned as they reached the little Mexican restaurant and Matthieu called his boss.

She was actually quite thrilled to hear of Matthieu's good news and drove over to collect the keys herself. She arrived as Matthieu and Peter were eating.

“I hate to lose you Matt hon, but I'm surprised you stayed as long as you did actually. I want tickets to your first performance.” She said as Matthieu stood to hug her and hand over the building keys.

“That's a promise. Let me give you my cell number in case you need to reach me. I'll call you if and when I actually have a performance. That will be a way down the road yet.” Matthieu said and Lupe smiled.

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“I know, but I still want to come. Stay in touch sweetie.” She said kissing Matthieu's cheek and hugging Peter too before she went next door to open up herself.

“She's nice.” Peter said as they went to finish breakfast.

“Very, I actually lived in the office for about two weeks when Phyllis had fumigators for roaches tent the house. Lupe brought me tamales every day. She makes fabulous Tamales.” Matthieu said as they finished and Peter stood grinning like an idiot.

“Well then, shall we go home?” Peter asked stressing the home part of the sentence.

“Yes, let's go and try not to speed.” Matthieu replied cheerfully as they got back in the car and headed to the Towers.

Home.

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## *Chapter Five*

Peter parked and turned to face Matthieu as he shut off the ignition. “Shall we baby?” Peter grinned and Matthieu smiled back.

“Absolutely.” Matthieu said opening the door a Peter went around to the trunk.

“I already took up almost everything the first trip. All that’s left are your clothes here, I didn’t want them to get all wrinkled on the move.” Peter said showing he took hangers and all out of the closet.

They draped Matthieu’s clothes over their arms and then juggled them to the elevator.

“We’re fifteenth floor. Number 1502. Mom is 1503.” Peter said as Matthieu hit the button and they began their ascent.

“I’m so nervous I feel like I’m gonna puke butterflies.” Matthieu said even though he was smiling.

“You and me both I’m so happy Matt.” Peter said right back as the elevator chimed and the doors opened to reveal a lovely hallway with marble floors and golden accents around ten mahogany doors. Just ten condos per floor. That alone to Matthieu was an indication he was about to walk into a palace. He also knew from experience, he’d been in his father’s tower condo once too. Same building but different floor. His father’s condo was number 1225, one of the

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smaller condos on the lower floors. He knew the higher up you went, the more palatial the condos became. Matthieu said a silent prayer hoping never to accidentally run into his father in the elevator. If he still even had a condo in the Towers. It had been a long time since he'd spoken to his parents.

“We're second door on the right, Mom is directly across the hall. Even numbers on the right, odd numbers on the left.” Peter said as they walked to the second door and Peter just laid his thumb on the scanner above the knob, the door locks clicked open.

“Whoa! Thumb scan technology, that's high tech.” Matthieu was in awe and Peter chuckled pushing the door open.

“And handy when your hands are full. Welcome home Baby.” Peter said stepping out of the way for Matthieu to enter.

There was a circular foyer all in marble with ebony and jade inlaid tiles in a very Moroccan flavor. To the right looked like Peter's office. All dark rich woods and leather. Several computers and what looked like a home data center nestled in cherry wood bookcases. To the left was a hallway which was probably bedrooms but it was hard to tell with all the doors closed.

Straight ahead lay the main living area and Matthieu could see all his possessions stacked neatly next to the biggest, most comfortable looking overstuffed white leather sectional sofa in the middle of the room. It had a recliner on one end and a cozy chaise on the other and it faced a fireplace with a huge plasma widescreen television hung over the mantle. It was flanked by floor to ceiling bookcases which held the rest of the electronic gadgets and gizmos as well as shelves of DVD movies and CDs on one side and books on the other. Matthieu gaped as he took it all in, he hadn't been in such luxurious surroundings in years.

The windows were floor to ceiling against one wall and overlooked the city side over the lake. It was a stunning view. It had a gourmet kitchen that looked into the living room, separated by a buffet counter. A large dining table and chairs were on one end of the great room living area.

Matthieu hadn't realized he was still just standing there holding his clothes until Peter came over and winked. “Come on, let's go hang up your clothes before we finish the tour.” Peter said walking to a set of double doors that opened out from the living room. The master bedroom was fit for a king. A

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massive four poster bed in walnut with burgundy wine colored linens dominated one wall of the room. Matching nightstands, chests and dressers also lined the walls. The walk in closet was a room all by itself and Peter obviously had already made Matthieu space. One side was totally cleared and Peter was already hanging up Matthieu's few sets of clothes.

“We'll work on filling this up too.” Peter said with a wink as they hung the clothes and then Peter took Matthieu's hand and showed him their master bathroom next.

It had a large jetted soaking tub and a stand alone shower that could fit twelve people if needed. “I love this shower. I got the idea when I went to Japan. I had the bathroom totally remodeled just so I could have this shower.” Peter said turning on the tabs and shower heads from every angle came on. Some in the ceiling to mimic rainfall, traditional shower heads and heads about chest level on two sides that would totally immerse a person in controlled streams of water.

“You will never get me out of here once I get in. I went to a spa once when I was a teenager that had a shower like this, I was in heaven.” Matthieu said as Peter switched the taps off and they continued the tour.

They crossed back to the foyer and down the hallway. The first door was the guest half-bath. Then three guest bedrooms each with their own private bath made up the rest of that wing. “I have never used those rooms, I have never entertained overnight guests and don't intend to start either. I like privacy at home.” Peter said as they made their way back to the living room and then up a spiral staircase.

“This has two stories?” Matthieu asked and Peter chuckled.

“Not really, just a loft space and you're going to love this.” Peter said as they walked a short gallery walk to a single set of French doors. It opened into a massive room that was the space above the guest room wing. It had beautiful wooden floors and a whole wall of windows looking out over the lake. Just a few random boxes, the Christmas tree box and decorations and a few blankets were on the floor.

“I've just been using this for storage, I never could think of anything to use this room for before I met you. I figured I'd turn this into your dance studio,

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put mirrors up on all the walls. What do you think?” Peter asked and his answer was Matthieu leaping into his arms and planting a huge kiss on his lips.

“I think you'd better take me downstairs right now before I sob and make a fool out of myself. I can think of a much better way to show my gratitude and that would probably be best displayed in the bedroom.” Matthieu said and Peter grinned.

“I haven't shown you the deck and hot tub yet.” Peter said and Matthieu gave him a wicked grin in return.

“That can wait until after I ravage you completely.” Matthieu purred and ran his tongue over the shell of Peter's ear. Peter shivered and turned on his heels, grabbed Matthieu's hand and made a beeline for their bedroom.

Once in the bedroom, they were all over each other and leaving a trail of discarded clothes as they kissed and tripped and undressed in a frenzy of lust.

Matthieu led Peter to the bed and pushed him down upon it and crawled on top of him. “Now daddy, whose your baby?” Matthieu purred running his tongue up from Peter's navel and over his chest.

Peter just groaned in response, flat on his back and his hands reaching up to grip the perfect round globes of Matthieu's posterior. “I certainly hope my baby is the man making me burn at the moment.” Peter finally managed to croak out and Matthieu pressed his chest against Peter's and nibbled his Adam's apple in his throat.

“Oh he is and I have only just started Peter. I'm gonna rock your world as much as you've rocked mine and then back again. Here's your first dance lesson, the Rumba, the dance of love and romance.” Matthieu said straddling Peter as he languidly arched his back up into a sitting position. Where he writhed and danced on his knees on Peter's lap. Grinding his posterior against Peter's aching manhood.

Oh but Matthieu could move, he was hypnotizing as he gave Peter the most erotic and intimate of dances. Rubbing his body all along Peter's making Peter moan and roll his eyes back into his head. He was going to lose it and Matthieu hadn't done anything other than twist and turn like a snake on his lap.

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Then he felt Matthieu reach across him to the items Peter had purposefully set on the right nightstand. The contents of Matthieu's nightstand. The bright purple plastic dildo and the bottle of lube. Matthieu came back grinning his hands holding the lube. He still writhed and danced but now Peter's manhood was dripping with lubrication Matthieu's hands had joined in the dance.

Rubbing and stroking until Peter's entire world was focused entirely on Matthieu and the erotic and sinful things he was doing to his body.

When Matthieu moved, raised up slightly and then impaled himself on Peter, sparks flashed behind Peter's eyelids. Totally engulfed in Matthieu's body and they both moaned together as Matthieu seated himself on Peter's lap. “Jesus Christ.” Peter moaned. It felt so insanely divine, he could only utter curses as Matthieu began to move up and down, taking Peter in and out of his body.

“Mmmm, Peter. So good. Such a big boy.” Matthieu moaned, picking up the pace and almost brutally bouncing on Peter's lap.

Peter was out of his mind with pleasure. Never had anyone made love to him like this. Usually he was the one in control and never had anyone ever been able to take all of him inside for long. He was a rather amply endowed man and all his past partners had always complained he was too big. It was just the tip usually they'd allow him to use. But not Matthieu, Matthieu was taking it all, and judging by the enthusiastic way Matthieu was bouncing, he wasn't in pain, quite the contrary.

“Fuck me, Matthieu! Holy hell so good.” Peter tossed his head back, gripped Matthieu's hips as he bounced and dug his fingers into the hard flesh of Matthieu's body.

Peter almost sobbed when Matthieu suddenly stopped bouncing and got off his lap. But it was only for a moment, Matthieu only moved to get on his knees, his posterior high in the air, his cheek in the pillows and he was sweating and panting. “Peter, oh please finish it. Take me, hard.” Matthieu panted and Peter was up on his knees and buried once again in Matthieu's body.

The wet sounds of flesh heavily slapping flesh and the panting and moaning of two lovers filled the morning air. Peter was sweating himself as he took the lead and drove his thrusts deep.

“Harder, oh Peter fuck me!” Matthieu moaned.

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“Baby like it rough?” Peter grunted half out of breath.

“Oh yes, YES!” Matthieu sobbed. Biting the pillows as his body surrendered to torment and spasmed in release. Peter almost yelled as Matthieu's body clamped down during his orgasm and already tight confines become so much more so. Peter followed Matthieu into total mind numbing oblivion as he emptied himself in Matthieu's body before they both melted into the mattress.

“Fuck me.” Peter panted collapsing spent into sheets.

“I just did.” Matthieu chuckled, rolling over to nestle against Peter.

“I'll say you did. I feel like I just one the lottery. I have never had sex that fabulous in my life. If you ever leave me Matthieu I swear I'll become celibate. Nothing could ever top that.” Peter said and Matthieu grinned and rested his chin on Peter's collarbone.

“Famous last words. I'm just getting started Peter. I'm out of shape. Wait until I get my stamina back you won't know what hit you daddy.” Matthieu said and Peter laughed and rolled to face Matthieu and kiss him soundly.

“Baby, I'm so looking forward to it. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Matthieu sighed as they came down from the highest of highs. After a few minutes Matthieu stood on wobbly legs.

“I am out of shape, my thighs are toast.” Matthieu said with a groan.

“I'm not surprised, you abused your hamstrings there. Go start the shower and I'll come scrub your back in a minute, as soon as I can stand again.” Peter said and Matthieu nodded.

“Where do you think I was heading? As much as I love being a bottom boy, I hate lube stuck on my ass afterward.” Matthieu said and Peter chuckled from bed.

“It does tend to be a little sticky.” He said as Matthieu disappeared into the bathroom and started the shower. Peter could hear the sigh of relief as Matthieu stepped into the spray.

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Peter rolled out of bed on equally shaky knees and joined Matthieu in the shower. They kissed and washed each other and came down with a case of the giggles halfway through their shower and then stepped out to dry off together.

“I’m so happy Matt.” Peter said hanging his towel on the rack.

“So am I Peter. Over the moon right now.” Matthieu said hanging his towel next to Peter’s and slipping his arms around Peter’s waist.

“We should start getting you settled in before we crash. If we go to bed now we’ll wake up too early and you’ll have a hell of a long night as will I.” Peter said and Matthieu nodded.

“That’s true. I usually don’t go to bed until two, that way I get at least six hours of sleep. It’s not even eleven yet. Way too early. Where should I put my stuff?” Matthieu asked as they walked out to the bedroom and dressed again.

“Anywhere Love. This is your home now as much as it is mine. Put your things where you know where they are. I want you to feel free to do as you please. Oh but first, come here let me program your thumb print into the lock so you can get in.” Peter said taking Matthieu into his office and running the thumb scan.

“Scan accepted, please enter name.” The computer screen flashed and Peter typed in Matthieu Le Fleur.

“Scan and ID accepted. Transaction completed.” The screen flashed again.

“Okay, try the door Matt. See if it worked, this can be a little buggy the first time. It locked me out the first time.” Peter said and Matthieu went to the door and tried it. The lock worked.

“Works just fine.” Matthieu said coming back inside and shutting the door.

“I’ll get a duplicate key made too. Thumb scanner is great and all, but if there’s a power outage, only a traditional key will work.” Peter said as they moved over to the pile of Matthieu’s belongings.

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Peter picked up the framed photo that had been sitting on Matthieu's nightstand. "Was this you as a kid?" Peter asked and Matthieu smiled.

"Didn't the blond curls that never do what I want them to give it away?" Matthieu teased and Peter grinned.

"Smart ass. Yes, I assumed the cute kid in curls was you, just making sure. Who's the woman?" Peter asked and Matthieu smiled fondly.

"The best dance teacher there ever was. Mary Willis, my first dance instructor from age four to six. She died in a car crash and oh I cried for weeks. It's because of her I wanted to become a teacher myself. She made learning a joy." Matthieu said taking the small framed photo and setting it lovingly on one of the living room bookshelves.

Peter just smiled as they continued sorting through Matthieu's belongings. "Peter, you could have left the fork. I only had the one." Matthieu chuckled and Peter grinned.

"I just took everything except the furniture. I didn't know what you'd want to keep and what you'd want to toss." Peter said finding places on the bookshelf for Matthieu's paperbacks.

"Oh, 'the Nightrunner Series' I read these, these were great books. Seregil was such a smarmy bastard of a rogue." Peter said and Matthieu smiled.

"Poor Alec being taken along for the ride along with him. It's rare you see homosexual couples portrayed as the heroes in books. Usually were the sick and twisted villains raping babies in books. I wish more books were out there like those. Most gay novels are really gritty and full of real life problems I'm trying to forget. It mean it's nice to sit and read a real in your face hard core smut book once in a while. With ten inch dripping cocks of love juice and sweating grunting men. However, it's also nice to forget about prejudice and read a fantasy romance adventure too, using words other than 'cock', 'man-pussy' and 'rimming'. Gay men write for gay men and well sometimes it's a bit much even for me. I like how women write on the emotional side of the spectrum as opposed to the physical side." Matthieu said setting his little trophy next to the picture on the bookcase.

"You nailed it on the head Matt. Men do tend to write more visceral and women more emotional. Both are good for what they are. But you'll find a lot of

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gay men bashing women for writing sick romances and women thinking men are a bunch of brutish pigs for come shots. Having a balance is a good thing, there's something for everyone then. I read both and like both and take both as they were intended. You and I agree yet again.” Peter said finishing putting the books away when a knock came to the door and then just opened and a middle-aged woman just waltzed right in.

She was gorgeous, and had long dark hair with a single white streak at her right temple sweeping back behind her ear. Large brilliant and twinkling green eyes and dressed in the most colorful of caftan robes. Bangles around both wrists. She stopped short when her eyes fell on Matthieu and then she just squealed like a girl and rushed over and hugged him tight.

“You must be Matthieu. Oh you were right Peter, he does look like a Victorian Cherub. So cute! I could squish you and eat you up! You made Peter so sickeningly sappy lately I thought my teeth would rot with him gushing about you. It's so nice to meet you at last.” Bernadette began dragging Matthieu to the couch. Her English accent still evident even after years of living in the United States.

“Don't just stand there Peter, go make tea so we can chat.” Bernadette added and Peter just shook his head and went to the kitchen.

“Is there a reason you just barged in here Mom?” Peter asked from the kitchen as he set a kettle on to boil.

“Yes, but I forgot. I'll remember it again in a minute I'm sure. Nevertheless, Matthieu darling, Peter told me you're a dancer.” Bernadette said and Matthieu smiled and nodded.

“I am and hope to be again yes Ms. Hollingsworth.” Matthieu replied and Bernadette rolled her eyes.

“Either call me Mom or Bernie. Ms. Hollingsworth was my Mother the stiff old cow.” Bernadette said laughing.

“Can you ballroom dance?” She asked switching gears and Matthieu nodded.

“I had formal training in all the traditional ballroom dances but my main focus was on lyrical jazz later on.” Matthieu said and Bernadette's eyes lit up and

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she went to the stereo on the wall and grabbed a CD off the shelf and queued up a song with a traditional Tango rhythm. Matthieu could take a hint and stood and bowed to her.

“May I have this Dance?” He asked humoring Peter's mother and Peter grinned as he watched from the kitchen.

To Matthieu's surprise, Bernadette was a fantastic dancer herself. She was easy to lead around the living room floor and knew traditional Tango steps. It was fun to dance again and even better to have a partner more than decent herself. She was laughing as the song ended.

“The Tango, the woman must always look like the man she's dancing with smells bad so she has to keep turning her nose up and away. That's how my teacher once put it when I was a little girl.” Bernadette said as Peter brought out the tea.

“I didn't know you had dance classes mom.” Peter said and Bernadette laughed.

“Oh honey, every aristocratic pratt sends their children to ballroom dancing so they don't look like idiots at formal balls. I just happened to actually like it. Why else do you think I'm out dancing all the time foolish boy?” Bernadette said pouring tea and practically sitting on Matthieu's lap.

“I could tell you had formal training and I am rusty as hell. That was fun though. Care to practice with me occasionally?” Matthieu asked and Bernadette leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“Darling, you couldn't keep me away. Peter told me he intends on turning the loft here into a dance studio. I will be over with bells on to help you practice love. It's good exercise too and I am getting a little pouch here in my old age.” Bernadette said and Matthieu smiled.

“You're stunning and Peter has your eyes.” Matthieu said loving Peter's mother almost as much as he loved Peter.

“He does. So does my daughter. We all get it from my Irish grandmother.” Bernadette began and then rambled off into a tale about her Grandmother and how during World War I she lost her first husband to the trenches in Germany

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and how she married the messenger of his death later on. It seemed Peter's colorful family history extended even further back than his mother.

They drank tea and ate an early lunch of cucumber and cheese sandwiches Bernadette made to go with the tea and then she finally remembered what she'd come in for.

“My mind is going too. Peter, I came in to tell you that Wendy called this morning with good news. You're going to be an uncle.” Bernadette said and Peter cheered.

“Oh that is good news. Wendy and Franklin have been trying for a while now. When is she due? Peter asked and Bernadette grinned.

“Late April early May. She's just over two months along according to the doctor. They presume she conceived sometime in September. A grandma at last. At least one of my children will provide me grand-babies. Unless of course you adopt. Like that Angelina Jolie actress. Oh but she adopted such sweet little things. You two should look into that.” Bernadette began and Peter held up his hands.

“Whoa, slow down mom. Can you let us take one major step at a time. Matthieu has only been here two hours. Can you not have us parents to fifteen adopted children yet please.” Peter chuckled and Bernadette rolled her eyes.

“Yes, yes. Well I should be going, I have to get ready to meet Hamilton over at the Museum for a fund raiser gala tonight. See you later.” Bernadette said kissing both men on the cheek before seeing herself out again.

“I just adore your mother.” Matthieu said smiling and Peter smiled right back.

“You made her day dancing with her. I'm fairly positive you're also on the adoration list now. Let's get finished so we can catch some sleep I'm exhausted.” Peter said yawning and making Matthieu yawn as well.

“Those are contagious. Why don't we leave what's left for later and just go to bed I'm pooped.” Matthieu said and Peter nodded yawning again.

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They stripped and Matthieu crawled into the right side of the bed and sighed. “Oh this is nice. Is the right side okay?” Matthieu said and Peter nodded and crawled in on the left.

“Why do you think I put your stuff on the right? I always sleep on the left.” Peter said as they curled up under the blankets together.

“Set the alarm for eight?” Peter asked fumbling with the alarm clock.

“Yes please.” Matthieu said around yet another yawn.

Once the alarm was set and the phone ringer turned off, they both settled together and were asleep not long after. The long night and morning finally catching up with them both.

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## *Chapter Six*

Rather than awakening to the alarm, Peter found himself being nuzzled behind the ear. Matthieu was already up, showered and dressed. Sitting beside Peter on the bed to wake him. “Rise and shine handsome.” Matthieu purred in Peter's ear.

“What are you doing up already and what time is it?” Peter blinked sleepy eyes and yawned rolling onto his back to look up at Matthieu.

“I woke up about ten minutes before the alarm went off so I just switched it off. It's only eight-thirty. Breakfast for dinner is also ready too. Coffee is made, eggs scrambled and bacon done. Come eat.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled.

“You can cook too?” Peter asked sleepily sitting up.

“When I have a pan and a range top yes.” Matthieu winked and was about to stand when Peter's arms stopped him by grabbing him around the waist.

“Not yet beautiful. You robbed me of my chance to wake up beside you, but I still demand my wake up kiss.” Peter teased and Matthieu chuckled and wrapped his arms around Peter's neck.

“Do forgive me.” Matthieu said falling into a wonderfully sappy and romantic moment.

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Their lips parted smiling. “I love you Peter. Now get up and stop making me horny before I have to go to work.” Matthieu said grinning and standing and pulling a very naked Peter out of bed. Who was also in the same state of arousal.

“Damn. Hot as hell, hung like a horse and I have to go babysit Big Bites and Slurpees for eight hours. I know which Big thing I'd rather be biting.” Matthieu waggled his eyebrows and Peter laughed.

“Down boy no teeth allowed.” Peter cringed, stretched and just pulled on a robe and shuffled out to the table in the great room where his nose lead him to bacon and coffee.

“You look so cute all rumped and have great bed-head.” Matthieu mused pouring coffee into a mug for Peter and setting it beside his hand before running his hand through Peter's messy hair.

“My hair defies gravity normally. It takes twenty pounds of goop to get it to lay straight if I have to actually go somewhere formal. It's a pain in the ass.” Peter said smelling his coffee first before taking a big long drink.

Matthieu smiled as he joined Peter at the table. “Sure complain bastard. You don't have naturally curly hair like Shirley Fucking Temple to deal with. Men should not have to deal with ringlets. I just leave it this length and it will at least lay down with just a little water. Any shorter and I have an explosion afro on my head and any longer it's a frizzy mess. No combs work. No picks work. I finger comb my hair wet and then leave it. If I comb it dry I look like I stuck my finger in a light socket. You want to talk dealing with hair that is a pain in the ass, you're talking to the master here.” Matthieu said and Peter chuckled.

“I believe it. The eggs are perfect. I always have the pan too hot and make them brown in spots and I always burn bacon. Thank you for cooking it's delicious.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled at the compliment.

“I like to cook. I missed that a lot living on my own. There's only so much you can do in a microwave and hot plates scare me over the fire hazard risk. I had a crock pot for a while which was nice, but I couldn't have that plugged in and have the light on without tripping the breaker so I gave up. It's nice to eat real food again I hope you don't mind I raided the fridge.” Matthieu said and Peter reached over and took his hand.

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“Baby, this is your home too. Everything in this house is yours to use whenever you wish it. I want you not to feel like you're trespassing, because you most certainly are not. I love you. So much so I can hardly see straight I'm so happy you're here. If I could, I'd pack you off in a plane tonight and take you to Hawaii and play with you in the heat and sand and stand you up and marry you. I love you that much.” Peter said and Matthieu looked him straight in the eyes, searching.

“You're serious.”

“Yes, very. I'd marry you in a heartbeat if I thought for one minute you'd say 'yes' so quickly. The first night I saw you I thought you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever laid eyes on. Then we talked and I realized that beauty went straight through to your soul. You keep telling me that they don't make guys like me any more, the same can be said for you too. Looks, intelligence, kindness, talent, integrity and humility. You're perfect.” Peter said and Matthieu got up and went and straddled Peter in his chair and hugged him within an inch of his life.

“I'm not perfect and if you keep talking like that I am going to cry. Thank you Peter. For everything. I have never been so happy in my life.” Matthieu said, his voice betraying he was indeed fighting tears. Peter just held him back tightly.

“Me either Matthieu. I look forward to every minute with you. I have never shared an infinity with anyone like I did almost from the first day I met you. So let me rephrase. You may not be perfect and neither am I, but it certainly seems we are perfect enough for each other.” Peter said softly and Matthieu did start to cry then. Softly and quietly and he just buried his face in Peter's neck and said a silent prayer of thanks for this wonderful soul coming into his life and making it something he truly wanted to live again.

“Yes.” Matthieu whispered in Peter's ear.

Peter smiled. “Yes what?” He asked already knowing what Matthieu meant.

“I'd marry you tonight if I could.” Matthieu said sitting up and wiping his eyes that glistened with tears but were shining as brightly as the smile on his lips when he looked at Peter.

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“Baby, I’m going to hold you to that statement. How about Valentine’s Day we take a vacation?” Peter said and Matthieu laughed.

“You sap. I’ll agree but I have a condition.” Matthieu said and Peter grinned.

“You and your conditions. What?” Peter asked cocking an eyebrow.

“Oh don’t do that thing with your eyebrow, you’re too cute when you do that. My condition is a pre-nup. I don’t want any one ever accusing me of being a gold digger. I’ve seen it once too often and I detest it. I love you and only you I give a damn what is sitting in your bank account. I don’t even want to know how much money you have or don’t have. I’d actually prefer it if you didn’t tell me. I want it in writing that, God Forbid, something should happen and it doesn’t work out. I leave with just what I came in with, nothing and I still pay you back for the money you invested in me throughout the ‘marriage’. Please, it would give me peace of mind knowing no one can use that sort of argument against us. Especially since you and I will have enough woes entering into a gay marriage to begin with. Let’s not give fuel to a fire. Okay?” Matthieu said and Peter nodded.

“That’s sound logic and I won’t refute it, however I refuse the ‘nothing’ stipulation and the repayment of education. If you are my husband then I am damn well paying for schooling without thought of repayment. A marriage contract supersedes a business contract. No one would argue that against you. If they did they’re just callus. How many other spouses support the other during school? Too many to count. I want the pre-nup to stipulate any monies spent for educational pursuits are a wash. Secondly, I would never leave any one, not even a rival I thought was evil incarnate, destitute, that would eat at my soul Matthieu. We’ll work out something for the pre-nup, but please not ‘nothing’.” Peter said and Matthieu sighed.

“Oh I hate talk like this. You win. I’ll let you and your sister work out the details and I will sign anything at this point. I don’t like thinking of a break-up between us when the last thing in the world I want is a life without you in it. I love you and I’ll do whatever I have to in order to keep you. I’d sell my liver on eBay if it meant forever with you.” Matthieu said kissing Peter’s nose and getting off his lap.

“Finally, we are on the same page. I’d go live in a cave somewhere if that’s what it would take. So we agree and we’ll cross that bridge later. For now,

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let's just eat before it gets cold and I'll drive you to work.” Peter said going for his cooling coffee.

“There is no need to drive me Peter. I live substantially closer now, It's a ten minute walk from here. You can however pick me up in the morning and we can go get breakfast at that little Tea house we were going to go to Sunday.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled.

“Fair enough, however I will stop by as usual. It's nice to get out and take a break from work. Website coding is mind numbing tedious crap. Taking that walk every night gives my eyes a break. Not to mention I have about five cigarettes left, I'll be needing a pack.” Peter winked and Matthieu chuckled.

“Good, I like your visits too. It gives me a break as well since I don't technically get them officially. It's not like I can leave for lunch. I'll see you then later, I should get going soon so I don't have to rush.” Matthieu said standing and taking his plate over to the sink to rinse it and then put it in the dish washer.

“I love that you have a dishwasher. No more dishpan hands!” Matthieu cheerfully called from the kitchen as he came out with what was left of the coffee and topped up Peter's cup.

He bent over and kissed Peter's lips. “I'll see you later. I love you.” Matthieu said turning to grab his coat from the coat closet. Peter walked him to the door.

“See you soon Baby.” Peter said as Matthieu walked out and he shut the door. “Damn, I'm one lucky bastard.” Peter said to himself smiling as he went to finish his meal, drain what was left of his coffee and take a shower himself before he got to work as well.



Matthieu got to work almost a half-hour early and Stephanie was still there. “Did LaShawn bail on you this afternoon Steph?” Matthieu asked going to hang up his coat in the back room, but not clock in yet, it was too early.

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“Yes, the prick. I'm so tired. However, I've been dying to ask you about your new man. This is him isn't it?” Stephanie said bringing out a copy of a magazine that said “Chicago's top 100 most Eligible Bachelors” across the top and already opened to the page that indeed had Peter's picture on it.

He was sitting shirtless next to a swimming pool, his hair perfectly wet and finger combed and he looked sexy as hell. Matthieu grinned.

“Yep, that's Peter. He's also off the market, he proposed to me earlier.” Matthieu said and Stephanie slugged him.

“GET OUT! Did you read this?” Stephanie asked.

“No, I didn't even know he was in that. He's dead sexy and you should see him naked. Oh man, he's so hot he's on fire.” Matthieu said propping himself up on the counter.

“Sexy, hot and worth about three hundred million! Peter P. Hollingsworth, entrepreneur and owner of Synergy Strategies, the leading e-commerce firm for the fortune 500. He's a fucking genius with an IQ of one-ninety and it costs businessmen a cool million just to talk to him let alone design their marketing strategies on the internet. He turns down jobs left and right, you have to pay a whole lot extra to get him to design your shit rather than one of his one hundred employees based in the silicon valley in California. He's got the best computer brainiacs working for him and he's the elite plus a million. You lucky bastard. You hit the jackpot! Why on Earth are you giving Chopra two weeks notice? Are you crazy? Like you need to worry about burning a bridge to a convenience store? You should be home fucking his brains out!” Stephanie said and Matthieu laughed.

“I did that this morning thanks.” Matthieu said with a wink. “Don't read me any more of that article either, I told Peter I didn't want to know and I don't. He's so sweet and just a regular guy Stephanie. Really. I would have never known he was rich the way he drinks crappy coffee and jokes around. I love Peter, not his money.” Matthieu said and Stephanie sighed.

“Why oh Why was I not working the Night shift?” She said and Matthieu laughed.

“He's gay Steph, it wouldn't have mattered.” Matthieu chuckled and Stephanie tossed the magazine on the counter.

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“Yeah, and openly gay, it said it in here too. Sorry ladies, Mr. Hollingsworth is homosexual, but good news to single men in the 'Chicagoland' area. Crap.” Stephanie said rolling her eyes.

“All the nice guys are either taken... or Gay.” She said dramatically and Matthieu leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Should I see if he has friends?” Matthieu asked and Stephanie grinned.

“You'd better Matty!” She said as she helped a customer.

“So tell me, I gotta know. What's the “P” stand for in his name?” Stephanie asked and Matthieu laughed.

“You would never believe me. But it's true. He's Peter Pan.” Matthieu said and Stephanie howled.

“Oh man, how funny. No wonder he just uses his initial!” Stephanie said leaning against the counter and folding her arms across her chest.

“Now I want details. How is he in the sack?” Stephanie waggled her eyebrows and Matthieu gave her a wicked grin.

“Hung like a horse and knows how to use it. I think my eyes about fell out of my head when I saw the size of him under those tight jeans. That's really hitting the jackpot in my book.” Matthieu winked and Stephanie left.

“How are you even walking then? Cause I know you, you are the ultimate bottom boy Matty.” Stephanie said and Matthieu laughed.

“Yeah, I know I can't deny it. Lots and lots of lube. Speaking of which...” Matthieu began going over to the aisle that had the condoms and sexual aides and grabbing a bottle of KY from the shelf and then coming back and tucking it under the counter. “... I'm going to need more. Thanks for reminding me.”

“I'm so fucking jealous. I want pictures to cry over.” Stephanie moaned and Matthieu laughed.

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“No way. I'll tell you all my dirty little secrets only because I like you. Pictures would cost extra.” Matthieu teased as more customer's came in and he went to go officially clock in to relieve Stephanie.

“I'm so gonna miss you Matty. No one else here is nearly as fun to talk to. Promise not to lose touch when you leave?” She asked as she clocked out and took her till into the back room to balance the drawer before she left.

“Absolutely Steph. You're a good friend and I appreciate all you've done for me the past few years. Here's my cell phone number and the number to the condo, call me any time you want to go hang out. Please don't give out the home number, that's Peter's private line at the house.” Matthieu said jotting down his number which Stephanie immediately input into her phone.

“I won't tell a soul. I promise.” Stephanie said and Matthieu went out to take over the cash register leaving Stephanie in the back to count her drawer.



The store was unusually quiet that night and Matthieu was bored out of his mind. He had mopped, dusted shelves, restocked the cooler and curiosity had gotten the better of him and he had read the article on Peter. It was interesting and it somehow didn't surprise Matthieu all that much to tell the truth. Knowing Peter, his history and the man himself his success wasn't anything that surprised Matthieu. He found himself looking more at the sexy photo than anything else. It was the perfect shot, it did capture Peter's playful nature and his crooked grin was endearing.

Matthieu tore out the article and folded it carefully and stuck it in his wallet. He had every intention of showing the picture to Peter and begging Peter to get it blown up poster size for their bedroom.

It was almost time for Peter to show up as usual. About five minutes before two o'clock and when the door chimed, Matthieu expected it to be Peter. His blood froze, a man walked in with a gun pointed at him.

“Give me the money asshole!” The man in the hooded sweatshirt demanded and Matthieu hands shook as he went to open the till and give the man what he wanted. He'd been trained just to give them all the money and do whatever they asked. Knowing what to do and facing the end of the gun

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however were two different things entirely. Matthieu was terrified but managed to get the drawer open as the man hopped over the counter and held the gun at Matthieu's head.

“Faster Mother Fucker! Bag it!” The man demanded and Matthieu started grabbing cash and shoving it into the bag.

The door chimed again, and Peter walked in and froze. Time seemed to crawl and as the man spun to point the gun at Peter, Matthieu reacted automatically. No time to think, the man was going to shoot Peter!

Matthieu grabbed the gun as the man fired a shot at Peter. Matthieu's intervention sent the bullet flying into the coolers instead. However, the man easily wrestled his arm free, turned and fired two shots at close range into Matthieu. Matthieu crumpled to the floor and the man grabbed the money and fled.

“MATTHIEU!” Peter cried, leaping up from where he had ducked behind a shelf and over the counter. Matthieu lay in a puddle of blood on the floor, gasping for breath. “Hold on Baby! Hold on!” Peter sobbed. Dialing 911 on his cell phone as he knelt beside Matthieu and laid a hand to Matthieu's hair.

“Hurry! The 7-11 on East Jackson Drive near the corner of Michigan Avenue! My fiancé's been shot! Hurry, he's bleeding to death!” Peter choked out holding the phone to one ear as he knelt over Matthieu.

“Hold on Baby, oh please hold on.” Peter sobbed and Matthieu's eyes fluttered.

“Peter? Are you okay?” He asked, his breath strained.

“Fine baby, don't try to talk. The ambulance is coming.” He said and the operator on the other end listened and dispatched emergency vehicles.

“I love you Peter.” Matthieu said, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

“I love you too. Baby please don't talk, just hang in there I can hear them coming. You'll be alright baby I promise.” Peter said, uncontrollable tears streaming down his face as he tried to remain calm in the worst nightmare of his life. Matthieu had saved his life at the cost of his own. He was laying in a pool of his own blood and turning white as a sheet right before Peter's eyes. The

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wounds were in Matthieu's stomach and there was no telling how severe the damage under so much blood. It saturated his clothes, the floor and Peter's pants and hands where he ached to hold Matthieu but feared moving him.

“I couldn't let him shoot you. Don't be mad at me.” Matthieu said choking on his own blood.

“You saved my life baby and I could never be mad at you. Please don't leave me Baby. You promised to Marry me, and I expect you to keep that promise.” Peter said, wanting to just break down and sob. All the while the dispatcher remained on the line, recording everything.

“Kiss me please Peter. One more time.” Matthieu said, tears running down his cheeks and mixing with his blood. A choked sob escaped Peter's throat as he leaned closer and pressed his lips softly against Matthieu's.

“That's not the last one. You are not going to die Matthieu.” Peter said as the sirens blared outside and paramedics rushed in and Peter tripped and stumbled back out of their way, numb to his very soul as he watched the paramedics begin treating Matthieu.

One of the cops that had arrived came over and gave Peter a hand up off the floor and took Peter's cell phone and confirmed they had arrived and disconnected from the 911 operator.

The paramedics had Matthieu on a stretcher and were already loading him in the back of the ambulance. That was when the impact truly hit Peter and he just sobbed. The cop waited until Peter composed himself again.

“What hospital are they taking him to?” Peter croaked and the cop got on his walkie-talkie and asked dispatch.

“Northwestern Memorial.” The cop answered and then sighed. “I know this is tough sir, but we need a statement please. You saw everything?” He asked and Peter nodded.

“Yes, and Matthieu saved my life. I walked in on the robbery. Matthieu wouldn't have been hurt if not for me. It was because he grabbed the gunman to keep him from shooting me that he was shot. Oh God.” Peter broke down again and sank to the the floor. His elbows resting on his drawn up knees as he cried

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into his fists. The Cop laid a comforting hand on his shoulder as another cop came out of the back room with the security tapes.

“We have it all caught on tape.” He said as a crazed man came running in, looking like he'd just fallen out of bed. The store owner.

“Oh my god, is Matthieu alright?” He asked and the cop at the door shrugged.

“Shot twice at close range and in critical condition. That's all we know at this point.” The cop answered turning back to Peter who was struggling to regain himself. He felt gutted.

“You're the regular I see all the time on the security camera talking to Matthieu. Did you see what happened?” Mr. Chopra asked and Peter only nodded.

“I'm sorry to interrupt, can we get a statement? Are you composed enough sir?” The cop asked and Peter nodded.

“Yes.” Peter lied but swallowed his anguish.

“What's your name?” The cop asked.

“Peter Hollingsworth.”

“Not, THE Peter Hollingsworth of Synergy Strategies?” The cop asked and Peter sighed.

“Yes, the same. Does that fucking matter?” Peter asked and the cop shook his head.

“No, I'm sorry Mr. Hollingsworth. Can you describe what happened?” the cop asked and Peter sighed.

“I was coming in like I do every night to visit my fiancé and get a pack of cigarettes. I could really use one right now too.” Peter said and Mr. Copra handed him a pack from off the counter display. Peter lit up and continued.

“I walked in and the Guy had Matt behind the counter, when I came in he turned and fired a shot at me. Matthieu grabbed his arm, making him miss. He

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saved my life. I had dropped to the floor and the next thing I knew I saw the bastard empty what was left in his gun into my fiancé and then run like a bat out of hell. He was black, about six foot tall, wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt with a red bandanna around his nose and mouth. Black jeans and white sneakers. That's all I saw. At that point all I could think about was getting Matthieu help.” Peter said, looking like the world had caved in around his ears and infinitely devastated.

“Could you ID the suspect? We think we have him in custody. If you could come out and look please Mr. Hollingsworth.” The cop said and Peter nodded and followed the cop out. A squad car was parked and a man was handcuffed in the back. Peter looked into the window and saw red. “That's the son of a bitch. I want him nailed to a wall!” Peter growled wanting nothing more than to dive through the window and strangle the life out of the man in the back.

“Positive ID, book him.” The cop confirmed and then turned to Peter.

“That's all we need for now Mr. Hollingsworth. If I could get your contact information we can let you go. I know you want to get to the hospital I'm sure.” The cop said and Peter handed him a business card and wrote his home phone and cell phone numbers on the back.

“Thank you Mr. Hollingsworth.” The Cop said as Peter dialed his sister.

“Wendy, I need a ride to the hospital. Matt's been shot. I'm in no state to be driving. Please hurry and pick me up, it's an emergency and I'll explain what happened on the way.” Peter cried into the phone as his sister answered.

“I'm coming right now honey. Sit tight. Where are you?” She asked grabbing her clothes and purse on the fly. Franklin right behind her.

“Corner of Michigan Avenue and Jackson. I'm sitting on the steps of Orchestra hall.” Peter said, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“I'm on my way right now. I'll be there in ten minutes. Talk to me, stay focused. Franklin is driving so I'm all ears, talk it out Peter.” Wendy said and Peter did. He told her what had happened, crying almost hysterically as his emotions purged into the loving ears of his big sister.

Franklin screeched to a halt and Wendy came flying out of the car to crush her brother in a hug. “He'll be alright Peter, He will. Now come on, let's get

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over there.” Wendy said pulling Peter into the car and they raced North, up Michigan Avenue and across the Chicago River. Hanging a right on Superior Avenue heading east toward Lake Michigan and Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

They parked and ran to the emergency desk. “A young man was brought in earlier. Matthieu Le Fleur, shot twice. I'm his attorney and this is his fiancé. Can we get a status report on his condition?” Wendy asked all business and the nurse behind the counter clacked on her computer.

“He's in emergency surgery right now. Critical Condition. If you'd like to wait, go down the hall to your left, the ER waiting room is behind the third door. I'll have the doctor come in to see you after the surgery.” The nurse said and then the long night of waiting began.

Wendy stepped outside to call their mother and Bernadette arrived to wait along with them about an hour later. She held Peter as he cried and just offered comfort as Wendy burned up her phone getting the details of the crime from the police department. Making her case against the man who shot Matthieu. No one shot the man whom her brother loved without paying. She'd make damn sure she prosecuted him to the fullest extent of the law.

She called her legal assistants and had them all up out of bed researching the man's criminal history, then she went and made sure to request his bail to be set high, to keep him in custody for as long as possible. She had just hung up the phone with one of her assistants where she sat outside on a bench as Peter came out, eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot with worry and tears. He lit up a smoke and collapsed beside her on the bench.

“Talk to me Wends. Who's the ass I am going to murder?” Peter said as he exhaled sharply.

“Terrence Johnson. Rap sheet a mile long and cousin to LaShawn, an employee at the convenience store. We're sending a supena over right now to bring him in for questioning too. See if he knew about it before hand. It seems he called off work this afternoon.” Wendy said and Peter grunted.

“That's a habit of his according to Matthieu.” Peter sighed rubbing his eyes.

“He saved me Wends. Had I not been there he wouldn't have been shot.” Peter said and Wendy laid an arm across her brother's shoulders.

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“You can't know that Peter. Don't go down the 'what-if' road. Just pray for Matthieu. You'd have done the same for him had the roles been reversed. He loves you, he proved that beyond doubt tonight. Even with a gun to his head, he still thought only of you when you became threatened. If that's not love I don't know what is. I will ever be grateful to Matthieu that he cared so much about you that you are still with us because of his actions. We'll see him right Peter. He'll be okay and in a few months we'll be celebrating your wedding, have faith Peter.” Wendy said and Peter sighed and inhaled a long drag off his cigarette.

“I wish I could share your optimism right now. You didn't see the man you love laying in a pool of his own blood. It was bad Wends, real bad.” Peter said choking up again.

“And it could have only looked bad. Trust me Peter, I've seen enough evidence in my time that sometimes the bleeding is worse than the wound itself. Just keep positive, that's the most important thing right now for Matthieu. Never underestimate the power of positive thinking, it can help more than you know. He'll need you to be a support for him right now to pull him through.” Wendy said and Peter nodded stubbing out his smoke on the sole of his shoe.

“Trust me Wendy, I'll be a fucking stone if I have to in order to support him. Damn his integrity! Had he just fucking quit none of this would have happened! But No, he had to be honorable and give two weeks notice.” Peter grumbled and Wendy sighed.

“Would you have him any other way?”

“No. His integrity and honor is perfect and it fucking cost him. Ah damn it, there's no point getting pissed off either. I'm going back inside to wait.” Peter said standing and heading inside, shoulders slumped and his hands shoved in his pockets. He looked defeated.

Wendy sighed. “Please God, if you're listening. Please bring Matthieu through this. Peter's never loved anyone as much as he loves Matthieu. I've never seen him so utterly devoted to someone other than Mom and I in his life. Matthieu gave him such joy, please, let them have their happiness again. Amen.” Wendy prayed and then followed Peter back inside to wait again.

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## *Chapter Seven*

It had been over six hours and still no word on Matthieu's condition when a man walked into the waiting room wearing a white lab coat. “Any news Doctor?” Bernadette asked and the man shook his head.

“I'm not his surgeon, I've come to wait for news too. I just heard what happened on the news in my office here. I'm Matthieu's father.” The man said and Peter was across the room holding the man by the front of his shirt.

“You give a shit about him now? NOW! When for the past five fucking years he's been living in squalor, working two jobs just to have enough money to eat dog food and you care now?! You son of a bitch!” Peter growled and both Wendy and Franklin jumped up and restrained an over emotional Peter from doing something he'd regret.

“Peter don't.” Wendy said and Peter let go of Dr. Pierre Le Fleur and scowled.

“I couldn't find him. He never called.” Pierre said and Peter grunted.

“I find that difficult to believe Dr. Le Fleur. Running a social security number will give you at least the address of his current occupation. You're not talking to an idiot here. I also know Matthieu did try to call once, he told me as much and all that happened was he was hung up on. Would you have tried calling again?” Peter snapped and Pierre sighed.

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“I didn't know he called. He must have spoken to his mother.” He said sinking into a chair. “She passed away almost three years ago.” He added and Peter snorted.

“I know she did and Matthieu does not yet. I hadn't had the chance to tell him yet. Do not break that sort of news to him here either! What do you want Dr. Le Fleur?” Peter asked, his eyes hard and angry.

“Just to see him, I regret what happened.” Pierre said and Peter was furious.

“After you heard he was shot or before? During the time you crushed his dreams? During the time he was homeless for six months? During all the holidays he spent alone? During all the winters he spent just trying to keep warm? Tell me Doctor, just when did your conscience kick in?” Peter snapped and Wendy interrupted.

“Peter! That's not helping Matthieu.” She said and Peter snarled.

“No, but it's sure helping me. I don't take kindly to father's who destroy their own children because they have misplaced senses of value!” Peter growled and then just turned to the door.

“I can't even stand to look at you without wanting to beat the hell out of you. A cold hearted bastard like you should be the one in his place. Not angels like Matthieu whose only crime was having a sexual orientation different than yours! He's the most beautiful, caring, loving soul I've ever met and if he dies I will never forgive you. Because it's your fault he was working there in the first place. You gave him no choice and took everything away from him while still a God damn kid! Seventeen! He was only seventeen!” Peter was crying and slammed out of the waiting room to flee outside before he throttled Matthieu's father.

Peter was smoking a cigarette and fuming when Dr. Le Fleur came outside. “Do you want me to hit you?” Peter asked and Pierre sighed.

“Mr. Hollingsworth, you'd have every right, because you are right. I was wrong and I regretted my actions far later than I should have. I have no excuses and only a pile of regrets sitting before me while my son lays on a table struggling for life and it is all my fault. I heard he saved your life in the process.” Dr. Le Fleur said and Peter nodded.

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“In more ways than the obvious last night. He saved me from loneliness, he saved me from my despondency, he saved my heart and yes, he also saved my life. The best thing that ever happened to me in my life was Matthieu walking into it. I love him and I'll be damned if I let you hurt him again. I recognize you Dr. Le Fleur, you live in my building.” Peter said and Pierre nodded.

“I recognized you too. When they said on the news Matthieu had saved you I had wondered how you two knew each other. The top story this morning is how a shop clerk was shot twice while saving the multi-millionaire Peter Hollingsworth. They're making it a media circus already. Can you tell me how you two met?” Dr. Le Fleur asked sitting down beside Peter on the bench.

“The store. I walked in to buy cigarettes one night and instead stood looking at perfection. I came in every night to see him, working up my courage to talk to him. He started talking to me first, he has more courage than I do. I realized then how out of place he was in that setting. Articulate, verbose, witty, charming, like the finest trained aristocrat in a cheap red shop smock. I fell in love. Simple as that. He's quite easy to fall in love with, he's beautiful, clear down to his soul. Even after the hell you caused him, he had honor and integrity and damn fine pride. Not even living in abject poverty could take the nobility out of his bearing. He means everything to me. I can't lose him! Ah, God I can't lose him now.” Peter said breaking down and sobbing his grief all over again.

“From what I was able to ascertain from the staff and information available so far. He has two gunshot wounds to his abdomen. I looked at the CT scans and no damage to the spleen or bowels is evident which is a good thing. They are performing a negative laparotomy on him now. His chances are good Mr. Hollingsworth. The damage is to his stomach primarily and while it is a long and complicated surgery, he does have an eighty percent survival rate. The main issue is not the bullets themselves, but the subsequent abdominal fluids that have to be cleaned out and away from his other organs and out of his blood stream. Stomach acid must be neutralized and contamination contained and the stomach repaired first. That's a long process. Then bullets are normally removed, however looking at his CT scan, I saw no evidence of foreign objects which leads me to believe they must have passed through his body completely which is common when the shots occur at such close range. The best news however there is no damage to his spinal cord. He should make a full recovery if there are no complications from the surgery or secondary infections.” Dr. Le Fleur said and Peter let out an audible sigh of relief.

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“How long does this normally take?” Peter asked.

“It depends on the patient, age and health being the major factors. Matthieu is young and healthy so if surgery goes well he'll probably only be here two to four days. He'll be monitored for internal bleeding and infection and if he shows no secondary ailments he'll be sent home to recover. The main thing he'll be monitored for is clotting and aneurysms and in some cases recurrent hernias. Repair to the abdominal wall is tricky and wholly dependent on the patient's state going into the surgery. Matthieu has the best chances. If there is no clotting or post-surgical complications and the abdominal wall begins healing, he'll be sent home and it will be probably a month before he'll be allowed light exercise with gradual increase to build up the muscle lining again. Six months is a good estimate for total recovery. However he'll always be at risk for hernias the rest of his life. I'd not let him lift anything over fifty pounds by himself.” Pierre said and a flood of relief washed over Peter.

“He'll be able to dance again?” Peter asked and Pierre smiled.

“Yes, in time. That's actually the best exercise for him. An aerobic cardiovascular workout that won't put undo strain on his stomach but will help tone the abdominal midsection.” Pierre said and Peter leaned back on the bench with a huge sigh.

“That puts a lot of my fears to rest. I was worried he'd go through all this and then still have to give up his dreams.” Peter said and Pierre shook his head.

“No, if everything goes well, he'll only have a scar where he was shot to remember it by.” Pierre said as Wendy came running out.

“The surgeon just came out, hurry!” She said and both Peter and Pierre ran back inside to talk to the actual surgeon.

“Ah, Dr. Le Fleur, Mr. Hollingsworth. Matthieu had some severe damage to the abdominal wall and some secondary contamination that should clear within a few days. No damage to his intestines, kidneys or liver. We removed five percent of his stomach to remove the most serious damage and then closed it cleanly. Barring infection or clotting he should be well enough to go home in about three days. I want to monitor him though at least until Friday. I'll want him to come back in two weeks for a reevaluation naturally and then we can get him on a physical therapy program to get his strength back up. He'll get tired easily for several months yet. Wounds like this take some time to spring back

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from but he should be all right.” The surgeon said and Peter cried and hugged his sister and mother with profound relief.

“Can we see him?” Peter asked and the surgeon shook his head.

“Not yet, he's in recovery right now and then he'll be moved to a room. He's still heavily sedated and being monitored. I'll have the nurse come out and inform you when we have him in a room and you can see him. Probably at least another hour or two. He'll be asleep at least that long too if not longer. Go get yourselves some breakfast, I know you've all been here all night.” The surgeon said and Franklin stood and stretched.

“I'll go out and get us all fast food and bring it back. I know Peter isn't moving until he can see Matty.” Franklin said heading out and everyone sat back down with lighter hearts to wait until they could go in and see Matthieu.



It was just over two hours later when the nurse came in with news that Matthieu had been moved to a room and everyone picked up their belongings and tried to keep up with Peter as he made quick steps down the hall and then up to the second floor.

Everyone, including Pierre lingered in the hall and let Peter go inside first. Matthieu looked ghostly pale against the sheets, IV tubes plugged into both arms and a nasal oxygen tube under his nose. The blankets were pulled up under his chin so Peter couldn't see how severely he was bandaged but he was breathing quietly and to all appearances sleeping peacefully.

Peter sat down next to the bed and carefully took Matthieu's hand in his and laid his chin on Matthieu's pillow to whisper softly in Matthieu's ear. “Hey baby. I hope you can hear me beautiful. You gave us all quite a scare, but the doctor said you're going to be fine. I'll be able to take you home in a few days and pamper you silly. I love you Matt, please don't ever scare me like this again.” Peter said softly, but Matthieu didn't stir, he didn't expect him to. Not after a nine hour surgery and near death experience. Peter just sat there, holding Matthieu's hand and didn't budge as the others came in quietly to cluster around the bed and see Matthieu.

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“He's changed so much. He looks like his mother.” Pierre sighed standing behind Peter, his own eyes wet with tears. He picked up the chart from the foot of the bed and looked through it for his own piece of mind. Before he found a chair and sat in it looking almost as defeated as Peter. It had been a very long night and somewhere in between a silent truce had been declared between Peter and Pierre. Simply because of the joint concern they both held for Matthieu. They would not argue in his presence but Peter knew he'd never completely forgive Dr. Le Fleur, but he would at least be civilized and cordial for Matthieu's sake.

Peter gave his seat to his mother a few minutes later, Matthieu was sleeping soundly and he decided to see his sister and brother-in-law out. They were as exhausted as he was and Wendy's assistants were working overtime on the case. “I'll contact you with more details on the case as I get them Peter. I'm going to go home and catch a nap and then get started.” Wendy said as they walked outside and were immediately surrounded by flashing cameras and a slew of reporters.

“Mr. Hollingsworth! Is it true you narrowly escaped with your life last night during a gunfight?”

“Mr. Hollingsworth, is it true you were seeing the clerk romantically?”

“Mr. Hollingsworth, can you give us the details of last night's shooting?”

“Is that the clerks blood on your pants?”

Question after question, one on top of the other and flashes and microphones were shoved into Peter's face.

Peter had to take a deep breath and step back before he slugged someone. He opted to pinch the bridge of his nose to ward off the instant migraine. “Listen, I'm only going to say this once. Yes, I was almost shot last night and Matthieu saved my life. Yes, Matthieu is my fiancé. Am I going to give any further personal details about our relationship? No. I would like you all to please leave us alone so Matthieu can recover without any additional stress and duress. It's been a long night folks, please direct any further questions to my legal representative.” Peter said turning to Wendy.

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“We have no further comments at this time, please contact my office for any press releases regarding the incident.” Wendy took over graciously and Peter escaped back into the hospital and he found a quiet unattended side door to step outside and have a smoke to calm his nerves. The last thing any one of them needed was the press making a Cinderella story out of all of this. He was fairly positive that having Matthieu's dirty laundry aired on the mid day news was not something he'd appreciate.

Matthieu felt someone holding his hand and he felt sluggish and groggy as he blinked opened his eyes. He was in a hospital bed, he felt like he had twelve tons of rocks sitting on his chest and he couldn't move. He was flat on his back, a position he never slept comfortably in and he turned his head to see Bernadette sitting beside him holding his hand and smiling.

“Hello chicken, welcome back. Peter's going to be upset he stepped outside for a minute just as you woke up.” Bernadette said reaching over to run her fingers through Matthieu's hair.

“Is he alright?” Matthieu asked, his voice scratchy and his throat sore.

“Just fine love, not a scratch. You saved his life deary. How are you feeling? Do you remember what happened?” She asked and Matthieu licked his lips, dry to the bone.

“Just parts. I remember being held up, then Peter walked in and I grabbed the gun because he was going to shoot Peter. The next thing I knew, I heard gunshots and I was on the floor. I don't remember actually being shot. I vaguely remember Peter there talking to me and then the ambulance came and that's all.” Matthieu said and Bernadette nodded.

“That's about all of it according to Peter too. But you're going to be fine love, rest easy. Just a few days and we can take you home again.” Bernadette said as a Man walked up behind her and Matthieu lifted his eyes and then shut them and turned away as if he were in pain.

“Son, I'm sorry. So very sorry.” Pierre said reaching out to hold Matthieu's hand and he pulled away in a flinch.

“Please, don't. I don't want your pity, please leave me alone.” Matthieu croaked, he couldn't look at his father. The pain was still raw inside.

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“Please forgive me Matthieu. I was wrong.” Pierre began and Bernadette felt her very soul quake when Matthieu opened his eyes and she saw clearly the magnitude of his pain clearly.

“It was all clear how you felt when I had to read about Mom dying in the obituaries and see that she was survived by a husband, no mention of her son. You both wrote me off as if I never existed. Saying you're sorry now won't take that message you sent back. I wasn't even allowed the honor to attend my own mother's funeral. Never even sent a letter to let me know she was sick. It's too late for apologies.” Matthieu choked, tears streaming down his cheeks and Bernadette reached out to wipe them away.

“I'm so sorry.” Pierre said, his voice tight and Bernadette looked up at him.

“Perhaps it's best if we leave this alone right now Dr. Le Fleur. He's too weak to be dealing with this now.” Bernadette said and Pierre just nodded and left the room, truly regretting the damage he'd caused in his relationship with his son.

Matthieu silently cried as Bernadette ran tender fingers over his forehead. “Oh Matthieu love, some parents are the biggest of fools and make such terrible mistakes. Would that we could go back in time to stop and change past choices but we can't. You're not alone though love, you will never be alone again either. Peter loves you, I love you, Wendy and Franklin love you. Even your father loves you, as poorly as he's shown it in the past, he does realize his mistakes now. You do have a family and we won't let you down sweetheart. We'll see this through together love.” Bernadette said leaning over to kiss Matthieu's forehead.

“Thank you.” Matthieu croaked and sniffled.

“Thank you baby. You saved my son not only from a bullet but from himself. I haven't seen him smile like he has been recently in years. Not since his father died. He was devastated when George passed and I watched him bury himself in school and work to keep his mind off being sad. I watched him go through one fruitless relationship after another. All of them ending because Peter couldn't let go of his heart to someone else. Afraid he'd get hurt again. Then he found you, and I have never seen him show such unrestrained love to another before. He was full of joy whenever he said your name. I thought last night would kill him. There he was facing the same sort of pain he felt when George died, only so much more because now it was you laying there and as much as he

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loved George, it's not the same. The love he has for you is so much more. He won't stop worrying until he sees you awake again. He hasn't slept a wink all night and has paced the floor and smoked a dozen cigarettes or more. He's a nervous wreck he loves you so much." Bernadette said and Matthieu smiled.

"I love him too." Matthieu said as the door pushed opened and a strangled sob of unbridled joy escaped Peter's throat when he saw Matthieu was awake.

He rushed to the bed and just leaned over it kissing Matthieu's face repeatedly. "Matthieu! Oh baby don't ever, ever scare me like this again you hear me!" Peter sobbed and Matthieu reached up his hand to lay it against Peter's cheek.

"I can't make that Promise Peter. I love you too much. I was not going to let him shoot you." Matthieu said and Peter cried harder.

"I love you too. Oh baby, I love you too!" Peter broke down again and purged what was left of his grief into Matthieu's chest. Bernadette discreetly left the room to give them both some privacy. If she'd had any reservations about their relationship, they'd all been put to rest. Matthieu and Peter were made for each other and she said a silent prayer of thanks that they had found one another and that Matthieu was going to pull through.

Peter composed himself and sat up to wipe his eyes. "I was so worried, I'm sorry I'm blubbering like a baby here. It's been a long night." Peter said sitting up and threading his fingers through Matthieu's.

"So your mom told me. I saw my dad." Matthieu said, his voice sounding like gravel.

"Yeah, I know and I almost kicked his ass too. But we talked, and while I'll never forgive him for what he's done. I can honestly say he does regret it." Peter said rubbing his tired eyes.

"There's more I didn't tell you before Peter. My mother is dead and I had to learn about it while reading the obituaries in the newspaper. Is my wallet around here?" Matthieu asked and Peter nodded and dug into the night stand drawer where Matthieu's wallet and keys were.

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“Inside, I cut it out. Read it.” Matthieu said and Peter did, noticing there was another folded up article inside as well.

## ***Frances Abigail Le Fleur***

*Frances, 63, was a deacon of support to her church and community.*

*She passed away on Sunday, March 9th, 2003*

*from complications associated with her bout with intestinal cancer.*

*Services will be held for her*

*Wednesday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2003 at St. Francis Catholic Church*

*The loving wife of Dr. Pierre Francois Le Fleur for almost forty years.*

*She is survived by her husband and will be missed by all those she loved.*

*She was the epitome of love, tolerance and kindness.*

Peter read the obituary and sighed. “They totally wrote me off Peter. Like I never had been born at all. That’s when I knew there was absolutely no going back and my life was on my own. I didn’t see that until Thursday, too late. I was just flipping through the paper bored. Can you imagine finding that? Love and tolerance and kindness extended to everyone, so long as they weren’t her gay son. I got the message loud and clear. I was dead to them. I was on my own. That’s not something a simple ‘I’m sorry’ is going to just erase. I kept that to remind me to look to myself because no one else was going to give a shit about me but me. That was until I met you.” Matthieu said reaching out to take Peter’s hand.

“You made me realize I wasn’t alone Peter. That I wasn’t some reject and that someone could actually care about me. I can’t tell you how that makes me feel. I love you so much and I will never be able to find words enough to tell you how much I truly care about you.” Matthieu said and Peter was choked up all over again and lifted Matthieu’s hand and kissed every finger and palm.

“You don’t have to prove you love me. I already know you do, with just by the way you look at me Baby. I know. I love you too. I’m breathless sometimes just thinking about you. I’d give you the world if I could.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled.

“If you really want to give me something, take a look at the other piece of paper in my wallet. Stephanie showed me that last night. I want that picture of you blown up poster size and hanging up in the bedroom you sexy man.” Matthieu said and Peter opened up the magazine page and laughed.

“Oh god, I forgot about this. The Chicago top 100 bachelor’s list. I was so embarrassed. I thought I was just going to have my picture taken, not stripped into Speedos and varnished.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled.

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“I almost ate the page you looked so tasty. Please put that picture poster size on my Christmas Wish List.” Matthieu said and Peter winked and put the paper back into Matthieu's wallet.

“I think that can be arranged. How about I call the photographer and get one made of you too? A matching set would be nice. You all wet, half-naked and fine beside that would make me feel less self-conscious. I want to drool too over 'art'.” Peter said and Matthieu smiled.

“Deal.” Matthieu said taking a shallow deep breath and wincing.

“Should I call the nurse?” Peter asked concerned and Matthieu nodded.

“Yes, oh God pain.” Matthieu panted and the nurse came in quickly and shot more morphine into Matthieu's IV tubing. Peter watched it start working immediately as Matthieu's eyes took on a drug induced lazy shine.

“Oh, now that's goooood stuff.” Matthieu slurred and the nurse chuckled.

“It is. When you need it, just call. You're going to be in pain for a day or two yet hon. Would you like some water and ice?” She asked with a kindly smile.

“Yes, please. I'm so dry.” Matthieu said and the nurse returned with a cup of ice chips. Peter fed them to Matthieu and then held the straw to his lips so he could drink.

“That's not easy when you're flat on your back is it?” Peter said setting the cup aside.

“No, and I hate sleeping on my back. I'm a half-side, half-tummy sleeper. This is so uncomfortable.” Matthieu sighed and Peter nodded.

“I know. But no tummy sleeping for you yet, it's covered in stitches at the moment. He shot you in your stomach.” Peter said and Matthieu nodded.

“Can you tell me what they told you? I really don't know much of what happened after I got in the ambulance.” Matthieu said and Peter nodded and explained to Matthieu what the doctor had told him.

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He had just finished when the Doctor himself came in. “Well, you're awake. Are you in Pain?” The doctor asked coming over to look into Matthieu's eyes.

“Not anymore, I just got a shot of happy juice.” Matthieu said and the Doctor chuckled.

“Morphine, makes you stop caring about anything. You shouldn't need it much longer. A day or so most. Your color is so much better, a good sign. You were white as a ghost when they brought you in. We gave you a transfusion during surgery it's nice to see you almost pink again.” The doctor said going to Matthieu's feet and tickling making him jerk.

“Ow. Oh don't I'm so ticklish.” Matthieu said and the Doctor smiled.

“That is also a good sign, you can feel your extremities alright. I think just a few days of monitoring and you'll be fine to go home and recover. I want you with bed rest for the first week, just walk around the house a little. You can resume daily activities slowly and no straining yourself. No lifting anything that weighs more than five pounds at least for the first six weeks.” The doctor said and Matthieu cleared his throat.

“What about, um, other things?” Matthieu asked blushing and the doctor chuckled.

“Sexual activity?” The doctor asked and Matthieu nodded.

“Light to moderate with no exertion after three weeks is alright. Normal activity can most likely be resumed after six weeks. Just be careful, no swinging from chandeliers and you should be just fine.” The doctor said with a wink and Peter laughed.

“Don't worry doc. No trapezes either.” Peter said and the doctor laughed.

“God I wish I was in my twenties again. Rest easy Matthieu, I'll see you tomorrow.” The doctor said patting Matthieu's foot and leaving the room smiling.

“Three weeks. You'd better be free with the kissing between now and then Peter or I just might explode.” Matthieu said and Peter grinned and leaned over and kissed Matthieu deeply.

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“Baby, you never have to ask for those.” Peter said as Bernadette returned and Matthieu's drugs began kicking in. He fell asleep mid-sentence and Bernadette turned to Peter.

“You need sleep too. That bed is empty Peter Pan, use it.” Bernadette ordered and Peter yawned.

“Good idea.” Peter said standing and walking over to the empty bed in the room and curling up to sleep. Let the staff yell, he wasn't going home until they threw him out.

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## *Chapter Eight*

Bernadette was dozing in the chair, Matthieu and Peter were both sound asleep and the nurse had come in twice and just smiled at the pair sleeping, said nothing and just checked on Matthieu before leaving again. Bernadette was about to doze off again when she heard the tune of “Music Box Dancer” coming from the nightstand drawer. Bernadette quickly investigated and found it was Matthieu's cell phone and a name of “Stephanie” was showing on the caller ID. She answered it.

“Hello?”

“Oh, um. Is this Matthieu's phone?”

“Yes, Matthieu's sleeping at the moment, can I help you?” Bernadette said stepping out into the hall to take the call.

“Is he all right? I just found out and I saw it on the news. Please tell me Matty is okay!” Came the frantic concerned voice and Bernadette smiled.

“He's lucky to be with us, but is going to be fine. You are dear?” Bernadette asked and Stephanie laughed.

“I'm sorry. Stephanie Mitchell. I'm Matty's friend from the store. Today was my day off and I was just watching the news and saw them interviewing Peter and I about had a heart attack! Matty is the nicest guy in the world and he

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was so happy last night when I left the store. I couldn't believe it. Who are you by the way?" Stephanie asked and Bernadette grinned.

"The mean old mother-in-law. Call me Bernie." Bernadette said and Stephanie laughed.

"Oh, Peter's mom. With the way Matthieu talked about you I don't think mean and old apply." Stephanie said and Bernadette chuckled.

"That's good to know." Bernadette said sitting on a chair outside the door.

"Is it okay to come by and see him? Can he have visitors?" Stephanie asked and Bernadette smiled.

"Of course dear. The more support he has the better. He's in Northwestern Memorial room 232." Bernadette said giving the information.

"Great, I'll come by. Thank you Ms. Hollingsworth." Stephanie said hanging up the phone. Peter was sitting up in bed as she came back in rubbing his eyes.

"Who was that?" Peter asked as Bernadette put the phone away.

"She said Stephanie. Nice sounding girl."

Peter nodded. "Matthieu talks highly of her, he likes her a lot. I've only spoken to her a few times, but she threatened to kick my ass if I hurt Matt so she's not all bad." Peter said yawning as he stood to stretch.

"She's a sweetheart." Came Matthieu's voice from bed and both Peter and Bernadette came over to sit beside him. "She's got the most adorable daughter on the planet and the nastiest boyfriend. He's such a fucking bum and he hits Steph all the time. I don't know how many times she's had to sleep at my place because he was drunk and beating on her. She's tried to leave a dozen times and he pulls that stalking crap on her. She's more afraid to leave than to stay. The worst is Penny. She has to watch her Mommy get the crap kicked out of her. She's only two and just the sweetest kid. But Steph is like I was. Stuck. Her boyfriend can't hold a job, she's got no money because all of it goes to rent and daycare and every time she gets a shot at an office job interview, Rick beats the hell out of her the night before so she goes in looking like a train wreck so

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everyone writes her off as poor white trash.” Matthieu said wincing as he tried to get comfortable.

“I hate men like him.” Peter said shaking his head.

“Tell me about it. I locked fists with him once when he hit Steph in the parking lot. I sucker punched him and it felt really good to lay that bastard flat. He's a little guy with a complex so he takes it out on his girlfriend. I'm not big either, but I'll not sit by and let some guy beat the crap out of someone for no reason. I gave Steph a set of keys to my apartment so she'd have someplace to run to he didn't know about. I have no idea what she's going to do now.” Matthieu said just as the topic of conversation came in the room. A toddler on her hip.

“You brought my munchkin!” Matthieu said all smiles from the bed as Stephanie walked over and Matthieu held his hand up to Penny.

“Hey squirt, goodness you're getting so big. Every time I see you, you've changed. You're such a pretty girl.” Matthieu said and the little girl gave Matthieu the biggest of smiles.

“What do you say to Uncle Matty?” Stephanie prompted and Penny smiled.

“Thank you Unca Matty.” Penny said as Stephanie sat down beside him.

“I hope it's okay I brought her. I wanted to see you were okay and I don't have a baby sitter.” Stephanie said and Matthieu just smiled.

“Of course it's okay. You know I love her to death. She looks more like you all the time.” Matthieu said as Penny took a fascination to Bernadette's bangle bracelets. Bernadette agreed with Matthieu's assessment of the child and her terminal cute factor and took off one of her bracelets to let the child play with it. She was very demure and docile for a two-year-old and was quite well behaved sitting on her mother's lap.

“She does. How are you feeling Matty?” Stephanie asked and Matthieu sighed.

“Like hell, but it could be worse.” Matthieu said and Peter emphatically agreed.

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“Amen to that. How bad are the news crews out there?” Peter asked and Stephanie rolled her eyes.

“Like flies on crap. The vultures. They give a damn about a person's private life. I was sitting there making Penny lunch when the news came on and I saw how they cornered you the minute you stepped outside and then they went on and on about you and your past high profile break-ups and then began speculating on your 'Cinderella'. People are talking everywhere. Some saying you were just slumming it to those who are desperately trying to dig up dirt on Matthieu. It's repulsive. Why can't they just say, Matthieu got shot? Why does there have to be juicy details involved? If Matty was a girl none of that crap would matter.” Stephanie said as Penny moved off her lap to play with Bernadette.

“Because sadly, I am apparently front page news and whomever I date ends up food to the vultures. I'm sorry Matt.” Peter said and Matthieu just smiled.

“I don't care. They'll get tired of it eventually. Let them make me a sob story if they feel they must for ratings. I can turn off a television and the people who matter know the truth.” Matthieu said as Penny giggled from Bernadette's lap.

“Oh I could just eat you up! Ms. Mitchell, Matthieu was telling us earlier you've been looking for secretarial work is this true?” Bernadette began and Peter knew from the look in her eye, she was up to something devious. He knew his mother.

“Yes ma'am.” Stephanie said and Bernadette rolled her eyes.

“Oh, goodness no calling me ma'am. Call me Bernie. Now then, where was I? Oh yes. I've been meaning for sometime to get myself a good personal assistant. I have so many engagements and social events to keep track of I lose my mind most times.” Bernadette began and Peter laughed.

“You lost that years ago.” Peter said and Bernadette scowled.

“Cheeky boy. But he's right. I'm afraid I'm just not getting any younger and find I need help. Just the standard things. Keeping my calendar, sending off thank you notes, I'm so horrible at remembering to do that...”

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“Roll her out of bed in the morning.” Peter added and Bernadette slapped his arm.

“Spank my son for being a rude git. Things of that nature. It would require you living with me of course, coming with me to Paris and London occasionally, New York in the Spring, Monte Carlo in summer. It's a full time job dear make no mistake. I can be quite flighty. However, you and this darling girl are just what I'm looking for. I will pay you, oh let's see, what is the current wage for a personal assistant Peter?” Bernadette said and Peter grinned.

“A good one that has to wait on you? Seventy-five at least.” Peter said and Matthieu was trying not to laugh from his bed watching his lover and his mother stage yet another rescue.

“Just Seventy-five? Let's just make it a hundred, that's easier. One hundred thousand a year and naturally all living expenses since you'll be with me. Well dear, would you like the job?” Bernadette asked and Stephanie looked flabbergasted.

“What? Are you serious?” Stephanie asked and Bernadette nodded.

“Rarely, but in this case yes. What say you girl?”

“When do I start?” Stephanie squealed and Bernadette grinned.

“Immediately. Get on the phone, call a movers and get your things packed and sent over to my place. Here's the keys darling, have a set made for yourself while you're at it. I have three guest rooms I never use pick whichever two you want for you and little one here. Oh and I know from Matthieu you might have a little trouble, so I'll call my dear, dear friend Takashi to escort you. He's my Judo instructor and personal trainer. He'll be more than happy to make sure things move smoothly with no trouble. I take him everywhere when I travel for personal security. Then once you get that sorted, you and I will just have to go shopping dear, we must get you appropriately attired just in case you need to accompany me to functions occasionally. But first let's get you moved and our first order of business will naturally be making sure Matthieu's needs are taken care of first. Hop to it girl, I can baby sit while you take care of things.” Bernadette said and Stephanie hugged Bernadette so tight her eyes bugged.

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“Thank you! I'm on it! Penny be a good girl Mommy will be right back!” Stephanie said bolting out the door. Peter almost choked he was laughing so hard.

“Mom, you are a devious woman. That was brilliant.” Peter said and Bernadette smiled and just bounced Penny on her knee.

“Hon, I do need help and how could I resist the fringe benefits of having a little one this darling under my feet again? Can you say Grannie Bernie Penny?”

“Grannie Bernie!” Penny cheered and Bernadette just laughed.

“Takashi also likes blonds. You're playing match-maker too.” Peter said and Bernadette just grinned.

“But of course. She's a beautiful girl, he'll flirt with her all day.” Bernadette laughed and Matthieu just smiled from bed.

“You're both crazy.” Matthieu said feeling his spirits soar.



Stephanie came back about twenty minutes later. “The movers will be at my place at nine tomorrow morning. If it would be alright I keep emergency overnight things in my trunk and Penny and I can just make do tonight. There was kiosk key maker across the street so I had copies made while I was talking to the movers.” Stephanie said handing the originals back to Bernadette who had a sleeping Penny all curled up in her lap.

“Wonderful. We also have security in the building so you need not fear dear. Matthieu told us of the troubles you've had.” Bernadette said with her voice lowered since both Penny and Matthieu had drifted off to sleep again.

Peter was reclined in another chair looking wasted himself. “Not to get too personal Steph. This Rick fellow are you going to have visitation problems with the squirt? We can make sure you have personal security.” Peter said and Penny shook her head.

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“Rick is not Penny's father. She's my ex-husband's. He ran off while I was pregnant with her. I got a letter from California that had divorce papers in it. He's never made a single child support payment either let alone ever show any interest in wanting to even meet his daughter. One thing is for sure, I'll tie Penny up before I let her get married right out of high school. What a huge mistake that was. I was eighteen and gave up college because Tim talked me into getting married instead. I worked while he went to college. He graduated, ran off with another girl after four years of marriage and I haven't seen him since. I'm still getting his student load bills because I co-signed the loans as his spouse. I was shafted.” Stephanie said and Peter rolled his eyes.

“Sometimes I'm ashamed to be male. Whatever happened to honorable men who stood up as men and not spoiled little boys? We'll talk to my sister, she's a lawyer. You should not have to still be paying his student loans since you are divorced and they are his debts. Not to mention child support. Regardless if he wants to see her or not, he's responsible and walking away does not negate his responsibilities. We'll take care of all that later though.” Peter said yawning.

“You look terrible. Would you like me to go get you some clothes or something? Am I or am I not a personal assistant now?” Stephanie grinned and Peter smiled.

“That would be most appreciated. I can't walk outside without getting mobbed. The staff understands so I'm kind of camping out with Matt until they parole him. If you could just toss me a pair of jeans and a couple of shirts and underwear in a bag I'd appreciate it. Toss a change of clothes in for Matthieu too so he has something to wear home. A pack of Marlboros and my toothbrush and some fast food I'll be your slave.” Peter said and Bernadette stood.

“I'll go help pack and stay home to babysit the little Ha-penny here and get some sleep myself. I'll come back in the morning.” Bernadette said leaving with Stephanie and Penny.

Stephanie felt like she'd stepped into a wonderful dream. First they went inside Bernadette's lavish and highly eccentric apartment. Every room was like walking into a different part of the world. The African safari foyer led into the decadence of Imperial India in the living room area. The Kitchen was all in Spanish tiles and the Master Bedroom was an English Castle. Even the guest rooms had international flavor.

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“I think the Italian Villa room will suit you dear. It's the largest room and bath.” Bernadette said leading Stephanie into something straight out of the Renaissance. Stephanie set her overnight duffel-bag on the bed.

“Whoa, this is gorgeous. I love this place, it's like a mini-United Nations in here!” Stephanie said as Penny sat perfectly content on “Grannie-Bernie's” hip as they took the tour.

“The world is rich with beauty and I like it all. I think Penny will love the Arabian Room.” Bernadette said opening the door. Rich silks draped the bed like a Bedouin tent. Tassels and crystals and Persian carpets. It was like walking into a story from “1001 Arabian Nights”.

“A tent! Whee!” Penny cheered scrambling up onto the bed and playing peek-a-boo with Bernadette.

“See, little ones always love this room.” Bernadette grinned and she left Penny to play in her new room while the tour finished.

The Third guest room was French country manor and all of it divine. “Let's get Peter's bag packed and then I'll entertain the short one with some Ali Baba and some soup and get her settled.” Bernadette said as they left the front door open and crossed the hall. They left both doors open so Penny could follow if she got bored exploring her new room and Stephanie marveled at the difference in condos.

“It's an identical floor plan, and I can see he's got a little of you in him from the tiles in the foyer, but the rest. High tech. Peter likes sleek.” Stephanie said as they walked into Peter's condo.

“He likes minimalist with just touches of color. His room as a boy was always neat as a pin as opposed to my cluttered chaos. He has a very aesthetic color palette. Everything must be color coordinated. That's the artist in him, he cannot stand my clashing color schemes. He claims my apartment looks like Michaelangelo, DaVinci and Picasso had a brawl in my place.” Bernadette chuckled as they pulled down a small travel bag down from the top shelf in Peter's closet and began packing both Peter and Matthieu clothes.

“I'll grab his toothbrush and shampoo. Maybe he'll find a place he can shower too. I don't think he realizes he's all bloodstained.” Stephanie said wandering off into the bathroom.

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“He does, and he's probably going crazy but hiding it well. Peter hates to be dirty and just the thought that he's covered in Matthieu's blood is more than likely driving him slowly mad. He's hiding it for Matthieu's benefit.” Bernadette said as she zipped up the bag as Stephanie dumped the toiletries inside.

“Okay, that leaves cigarettes and burgers. What does Peter like fast food wise?” Stephanie asked as she picked up the travel bag.

“Peter isn't picky. He'll eat anything you shove under his nose if he's hungry enough. Much to the dismay of his brother in law. Franklin could have the finest of cuisine spread out for a feast and he'll catch Peter with his hand shoved into a bag of pork rinds. Peter does it on purpose to watch Franklin go bonkers. Peter is ornery.” Bernadette laughed and Stephanie grinned.

“See, he is your son after all.” Stephanie said going into Penny's room. She was out like a light curled up in her pillows.

“Out cold. She didn't have much of a nap today. I'll be back soon. Thanks again Bernie.” Stephanie said and Bernadette smiled.

“Don't mention it dear. I was honest, I do need extra hands and a mind around these days. Besides sometimes you just want to sit around and chit chat over tea. What better way than to make it a tea party with a little one around?” Bernadette said and Stephanie left to go buy Peter cigarettes and a Big Mac and Fries.

Matthieu was still sleeping when she returned and Peter was dozing on the other bed. “How's Matty doing?”

She asked as Peter dug into the fries in the bag. “All right, the morphine is making him sleep but the nurses say he's looking very well considering he had his stomach blown apart last night.” Peter said shoveling in food between words.

“How are you doing?” Steph added and Peter sighed.

“Hanging in there by a thread. I won't be relaxed until he's home. I hate hospitals but I'm not leaving until they throw me out. Thanks for the grub. I haven't eaten since this morning.” Peter said and Steph smiled as she leaned over to check Matthieu.

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“I can imagine. I scoped out the joint coming in. All the press are out front or back. There's roof access and I'll bet they'll let you go up there to smoke off your nerves.” Steph said and Peter chuckled.

“I've already found it and there are about a dozen spent butts up there. The staff here has been more than helpful considering they'd rather I not be smoking. Now is not the best time to kick the habit.” Peter said, devouring his burger.

“I smells French fries. No fair, I'm on Jell-o!” Matthieu said quietly from the bed and Peter leaned over and held a fry to Matthieu's lips.

“Just chew it until it's mashed. They said you could have moderate solids tomorrow. Close enough.” Peter said and Matthieu relished the French Fry.

“Oh so good. Thanks.” Matthieu said as his eyes rolled back in his head and he was sleeping again.

“He really does just pass out there.” Stephanie said and Peter nodded.

“Sleep is a good thing right now. He hasn't needed another shot in hours now, so he's healing. Thank goodness. They just brought him back from x-ray not long ago while you were out and the doctor came in and said everything is holding well, and he can start eating again soft solids. In a week, no dietary restrictions. He's requested to celebrate that with a pizza.” Peter said and Stephanie smiled.

“Uno's cheese, sausage, pepperoni, onions and green peppers. That's his favorite.” Stephanie said and Peter winked.

“Got it.” Peter said finishing his burger and slurping what was left of his soda as he opened the bag.

“Great, shampoo. Thanks. The nurses showed me the shower stall here at the end of the hall I am going to make use of that here shortly. I really appreciate the care package.” Peter said and Stephanie smiled and just shouldered her purse.

“Don't mention it, I seem to have been the recipient of a far greater caring earlier. It's my pleasure. Have a good night.” Stephanie said leaving as

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Peter grabbed a change of clothes and his shampoo and headed for a much needed shower.

He tossed his old clothes in the trash, he never wanted to see those bloodstained things again. He didn't need to be reminded how close he'd come to losing Matthieu forever.

After a nice long and hot shower, Peter dressed in the sweatpants and shirt that was packed and headed up to the roof to smoke. It was cold and it was starting to snow and Peter's breath puffed in the air as he shifted foot to foot to keep warm. There were a few nurses up there too taking their own smoke breaks and wondering about the press below.

“Vultures. Can't they leave people alone? Just because someone is rich doesn't mean they are heartless. My god, his boyfriend almost died and all they want is for that Peter guy to give them details. How sick is that? What if it was their mother or something? How would they feel if people kept asking for the gory details while you're still upset?” One nurse complained and the other nodded. They couldn't see Peter was up on the roof with them. He eavesdropped.

“No doubt. I heard he hasn't left either. He's been with his boyfriend since they came in. How sweet is that? I wish my boyfriend was like that! I'd get an hour or two before he left to go watch TV at home. Rich, handsome and sweet. I wish he had a brother!” The other nurse said and Peter made a discreet exit.

He didn't think he was the only guy in the world who would stay by the side of someone they loved. But sadly, judging from what he was hearing recently apparently he was a dying breed. He thanked George again internally for giving him the moral values he held so dear. “I am what you made me Dad. Thanks.” Peter said as he walked back into the room checked on Matthieu and then settled in bed and turned the television on quietly to relax and just wait to see if Matthieu needed anything.

He was asleep halfway through a M\*A\*S\*H rerun.

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## *Chapter Nine*

Peter woke up to the nicest sight he'd ever seen. Matthieu was sitting propped up in bed and smiling as he ate his runny scrambled eggs and drank a half-pint of lukewarm milk. "Good morning sleepy." Matthieu said sounding so much more himself again. Peter sat up rubbing his eyes.

"Good morning to you Mr. Perky. You certainly look like you're feeling better today." Peter said getting up to go sit beside Matthieu.

"Much. The grogginess has worn off. I'm weak and achy and tired but not that drug induced haze surrounding me today. I'm even enjoying nasty hospital food. It's amazing how wonderful shit tastes when it's flavored with hunger." Matthieu said and Peter chuckled.

"At least you're hungry! That's a positive sign that at least you still have a stomach in there." Peter said and Matthieu grinned.

"Ninety-five percent of one at least. I could murder some meat right now. I don't get meat that isn't pureed for a week, damn it." Matthieu said poking at his eggs.

"I've got some protein shake you can suck out of a sausage later." Peter said wagging his eyebrows and Matthieu groaned.

"You pig and damn it that's three weeks yet. Don't tease me!" Matthieu said all smiles, his humor was back and it was wonderful to see.

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“Want some eggs?” Matthieu asked and Peter shook his head.

“No, eat. I’ll head down to the cafeteria here in a minute and grab something.” Peter said as the doctor walked in.

“Well good morning Mr. Le Fleur. You certainly don’t look like the same young man I met just over twenty-four hours ago. How are you feeling this morning?” The Doctor asked coming to the foot of the bed.

“Stiff and sore. I can feel the stitches pulling when I sit up like this, but it’s not painful so much as just incredibly sore. No more stabbing pains since yesterday afternoon.” Matthieu said and the doctor nodded reading the chart notes.

“Your x-rays came back nicely too. I don’t see any signs of infection and the abdominal tissues look healthy. You’re very lucky, the bullets passed through cleanly and the only damage was to your stomach and surrounding muscle tissue. You’ll feel that soreness for sometime yet as you build back the tissue you lost. Let me check your incisions.” The doctor said coming over and peeling back the bandages from Matthieu’s middle.

There were three small areas showing stitches. Two three inch sections which was probably where the bullets entered Matthieu’s body judging from the locations and about a six inch section by his lower abdominal muscles right at the fold where his groin met his torso. There were also two places in his back, where the bullets had exited his body. They were far closer to Matthieu’s spine than Peter liked. Just two inches separated him from a total loss of his legs or worse.

“Those are actually smaller than I’d thought they’d be. I feel sliced apart from stem to stern.” Matthieu said looking down at his future scars.

“The incisions are small, but we cram a lot of tools and scopes in there and poke about. I’m not surprised you feel like a turkey on a platter so close to Thanksgiving.” The doctor said examining the stitches.

“No infection, no swelling or redness, all good Mr. Le Fleur. I wish all my patients were of such sturdy constitutions. I see no reason to keep you much longer. If complications were going to arise, they’d have reared their ugly little heads already. All that’s left is rest and recovery and it’s always nicer to do those

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things in your own bed. I'm going to give you a prescription for pain killers and a diet plan. Continue soft solids for the next week. Eat small portions and often. Every few hours or so. Light meals often will keep you from feeling hungry and allow your stomach to adjust and heal without undue pressure on the wound. We cauterized it with a laser, however it can pull apart if you try to eat too much. Let it heal slowly. No lifting anything heavier than a remote control for at least six weeks. Stay down, limit your physical activity to just walking to and from the bathroom and use assistance the first few days. A cane or a convenient boyfriend to lean on." The doctor said smiling at Peter who chuckled.

"By thanksgiving you can eat solids, but remember to be moderate, don't stuff yourself, no matter how good the stuffing is." The doctor said scribbling notes.

"In three weeks you can begin resuming normal activities. Take walks, that will help get some strength back in you. You'll get tired easy, so when you do, sit down and rest don't push yourself. In six weeks you should be fine to do what you normally do. I hear you're a dancer, that's very good exercise to engage in. It's aerobic and cardiovascular stimulation, that will only help build your stamina again. That's probably why you're springing back faster than most. You're healthy and fit and it shows. The average stay for gunshot wounds is two days. I don't need you another day." The doctor said finishing his notes.

"I'll get this to the nurse so she can type up your discharge instructions. You should be home by lunch time Mr. Le Fleur." The Doctor said standing and shaking his hand.

"Oh thank you! Is sitting on the couch okay or do I need to be in bed?" Matthieu asked and the doctor smiled.

"So long as you keep your feet elevated, the couch is fine. Wherever you're comfortable." The doctor said leaving and Peter almost danced around the room.

"Home, home, home! Hallelujah! Baby you amaze me. You don't need to prove to me again you've got balls okay?" Peter said and Matthieu laughed.

"Trust me, I don't want to tango with bullets again. I'm sore as hell. But I am so glad I can go home, this bed is murder on my hips. Hospital beds suck and I just fell in love with that memory foam mattress you have at home. Heaven." Matthieu said as he slowly turned to let his feet dangle from the bed.

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“I also have to take a major piss. Mind being my crutch?” Matthieu asked and Peter grinned and came over to hook Matthieu's arm over his shoulders.

“I didn't need Doctor's orders to take care of you. Ready to stand?” Peter asked and Matthieu nodded.

“Oh, that hurts.” Matthieu groaned as his stitches pulled as he stood on very weak knees. The shuffle to the bathroom was slow and long and he leaned against Peter so he could stay upright long enough to relieve himself. Then the shuffle back left him winded.

“Jesus, I am wiped out just taking a piss. It's amazing what you take for granted until you're not firing on all cylinders.” Matthieu said as Peter helped lift his legs back into bed.

“At least they're still firing baby. That's the most important thing.” Peter said leaning over to kiss Matthieu's forehead.

“You still keep missing Peter. Haven't I told you before my lips are down here?” Matthieu said with a grin and Peter kissed him properly.

“I was never a good pitcher.” Peter said and Matthieu gave him a devilish grin.

“I wouldn't go that far. This catcher isn't complaining.” Matthieu said and Peter laughed.

“No innuendos when we must abstain for the next three weeks bastard!” Peter said as the nurse came in with the discharge paperwork.

While Matthieu signed them, Peter called his mother to have her send a car to get them, preferably a limo with dark windows. The less pictures the better.

A half hour later, the car arrived and Matthieu was dressed and in a wheelchair. “Be prepared for the scavengers Matt. They'll swarm us. I'll get you to the car as fast as I can.” Peter said as the orderly pushed the wheelchair toward the doors.

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“I can handle it Peter. Don't worry.” Matthieu said as the sliding automatic doors opened and the sea of reporters and photographers began assailing them with flashing lights, video cameras and microphones.

“There he is! Peter Hollingsworth and his savior clerk!”

“Can we get a statement? How are you feeling Matthieu?”

“Is it true you are dating Mr. Hollingsworth?”

“Did you do it for money?”

The last statement rankled Peter and he spun to face the crowd as they pushed their way through to the car.

“Who said that? That's disgusting!” Peter said and all eyes turned to the reporter.

“It's all right Peter, they were bound to ask that.” Matthieu said from his chair and looked the reporter square in the eyes. “Last I checked the shooting was over money. But what was in a cash register's drawer not what Peter has in the bank. All I did was stop the man from shooting Peter, because I love him and I could care less about his money. Maybe if you cared less about his money you wouldn't be so rude.” Matthieu said then turned to the crowd.

“Please, I'm tired, I hurt all over and all I want to do is go home and sleep. I'm not a hero, I'm not a gold-digger, and I'm not a saint. I'm just Matthieu and I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time to meet and fall in love with a guy who likes cheap coffee with cream and cigarettes. I met Peter first, I fell in love with a regular customer and a regular guy. He's sweet and kind and impossible not to love when you get to know him for who he is. I'd take a million bullets in his place for that alone. So would any of you for those you love too. Have a nice day.” Matthieu said and Peter just smiled and helped get him into the back seat.

He shut the door and faced the cameras. “There you have it. I couldn't have said it better. Now perhaps you can see why I fell for him too. Good day.” Peter said going to the other side of the car and getting in.

“That was beautiful baby.”

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“It was just the truth. Let's go home.” Matthieu sighed and the driver pulled away.

The reporters were waiting for them at home too it seemed. The limo pulled up outside and Peter could barely see the front doors for all the camera equipment set up between the street and the building. Peter got out of the car and before he opened the door he addressed the sea of scum. “Please make room, There is no way in hell Matthieu can walk through you people as you are. Have a little respect for someone recovering from being shot. If you won't move, I'll have you moved.” Peter said and it took an agonizingly long time for people to give them a mere two feet worth of path.

“Fuckers.” Peter mumbled opening the door and helping Matthieu out of the car. Matthieu leaned heavily on him.

“I'll never make it Peter. I'm wasted and they're everywhere. Maybe coming home so soon wasn't such a good idea.” Matthieu said wobbling as he stood and blinded by flash photography.

Peter just scooped Matthieu up in his arms “Hold tight.” Peter said walking quickly though the crowd and inside. The security guard barring the doors so the reporters couldn't follow.

“Those are going to be interesting pictures all over tabloids tomorrow.” Peter said rolling his eyes as they got in the elevator and Matthieu reached down to push the button still in Peter's arms.

“I feel like a god damn bride being carried across the threshold here. You're pretty hefty there Peter, I weigh a ton.” Matthieu said and Peter groaned.

“I know.” He said winking and Matthieu pinched his nose.

“Ass. You're supposed to say, 'Why no darling, you're light as a feather'.” Matthieu said and Peter chuckled.

“I will never lie to you baby. You are no delicate maiden and I am no knight in shining armor. Holy hell I'm out of shape.” Peter said as they made the trip up to their floor and Matthieu laid his thumb on the scanner to let them inside.

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“You're right, that is handy when your hands are full.” Matthieu teased and Peter carried him inside and set him carefully on the couch.

“Hands full and back broken.” Peter teased with a wink as he lit up a smoke and walked to the window. “Assholes. I cannot wait until some celebrity does something stupid and they forget about us. I hate press.” Peter said as Bernadette and Penny came in. Penny scrambling up beside Matthieu on the couch.

“We saw you on TV!” She said and Matthieu smiled and ruffled her blonde hair. She was still in her pajamas and cute as a button.

“You did? How neat. How do you like your new room munchkin?” Matthieu asked and Penny beamed.

“I'm Ali Bababa!” Penny said standing up and putting her hands on her hips. “Open Says-a-Me!”

Peter laughed and pointedly looked at his mother. “She's in the Arabian Room and someone has been telling stories.”

“Naturally.” Bernadette said going into the kitchen. “Sit, both of you. I'll make food. Steph and Takashi are over with the movers now. You should have seen his face when he saw who he was escorting today. He was flirting before they made it to the elevator. Ha!” Bernadette said banging around pots and setting the kettle onto boil for tea.

“Just hope Rick is not home. This will be ugly otherwise.” Matthieu said getting comfortable and watching Penny play magic carpet on the living room rug. “Damn she's cute.” Matthieu grinned as Peter leaned over his head and squeezed his shoulders.

“She is. I used to play magic carpet too.” Peter said and Matthieu looked up at Peter, resting his head against the back of the couch.

“I think we all did. Come here and Kiss-a-Me.” Matthieu said and Peter chuckled and bent down and kissed him.

“Nutcase.” Peter said as Bernadette banged around cupboards.

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“What can you eat Matthieu?” She called out and Peter walked into the kitchen.

“Soft solids Mom.” Peter answered sitting down at the buffet counter on a stool and finishing a much needed cigarette.

“Cheese and eggs then.” Bernadette said and Matthieu called from the couch.

“I’m really not that hungry, just one egg please. I have to eat light and often. I’d love a big glass of something cold to drink though. I’m parched.” Matthieu said and Peter got up and poured him some iced tea and brought it out.

“Ah, thanks.” Matthieu said taking a long drink as Peter flipped on the TV, intending to find something for Penny to watch and they all groaned at the news cast.

“How romantic isn’t it folks. Two worlds collide and come together so sweetly. Look how Peter carries his partner inside after such a harrowing near death experience. It’s a modern day fairy tale. We’ve learned that Matthieu Le Fleur is the son of a prominent surgeon and a former, four time national dance champion...” Here old footage of Matthieu dancing was shown.

“...Thrown out of his house when he came out of the closet and we’ve learned he lived homeless for six months. His dreams of finishing his senior year of high school and then going on to Columbia, already with a full scholarship approved gone overnight and he lived hand to mouth for years working several jobs just to get by.” The reporter said and then Phyllis McGinnis, all tarted up was being interviewed.

“My tenant for years and always such a nice boy, never late on his rent and worked to death he was. Hardly saw him and then he just slept when he was here. Quiet as a mouse. That boy did not deserve to be shot and I am sick of all these damn shows implying he’s trash out for money. He’s no such thing.” Phyllis said and then Lupe was on the screen.

“Matthieu was my best employee. He never complained and never missed a day of work. I’ll miss him, but he met such a nice man recently and I’ve never seen Matthieu look so happy with life. I wish him all the best and I’m so shocked to hear what happened. Matthieu honey if you’re watching this sugar you call me

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and let me know you're okay and I'll bring you tamales!" Lupe said and Matthieu laughed.

"Where's my phone?" He asked and Peter chuckled but they continued watching the train wreck being played out on television.

Next came Eric and Steven being interviewed at the dance studio. "We were shocked when we heard. I knew Matty since we were kids and then he just disappeared right before nationals. I ran into him last week by accident at the store he was working in. I met Peter too and let me tell you, I had no idea who he was but he was such a nice guy and all the things we're hearing about the two of them are just awful. Matty is no gold-digger and Peter is about as honest as they come. What they have is real and people are making it all sound so cheap. It's wonderful what they have and people should just leave them alone! You should be more worried about Matty getting better. Matty call me when you get out and let me know you're alright." Eric said and Matthieu was touched by just how many people cared about him.

Next was Mr. Chopra from the store. "It was awful. Blood was everywhere and poor Mr. Peter was just shocked to death he was. You would have never known he was some big shot. I was seeing him come all the time on the security tapes to visit with Matthieu. Matthieu is a good man and I could always count on him to be here. He will be most hard to replace and I am very sad he was shot and I hope he is feeling much better." Mr. Chopra said and then images from the security tapes began playing.

Starting with just random images of Peter and Matthieu talking over the counter. It was like a montage of their courtship with a date counter in the corner.

"As you can see, the romance was some time in the making. You see Mr. Hollingsworth's first visit was on October the third and it took until just a week or so ago for them to break the ice. Now look at Matthieu's bravery in action." the reporter said as you saw the gunman walk into the store and Matthieu go behind the counter to open the drawer. He was bagging the money when the door opened and Peter walked in. The gunman turned, raised the gun and Matthieu flew into action. Diving for the gun to knock it out of the way. You could see the first shot barely miss Peter as he dropped to the floor and the cooler door shattered. Then you saw the gunman pull his arm free and two flashes come out of the barrel that was against Matthieu's stomach. The gunman then ran from the store and Peter ran for Matthieu and then you saw the overhead camera shot

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of Peter dialing 911 and comforting Matthieu. The counter showed only over a minute lapsed during the entire event. The 911 taped conversation played and Peter's frantic voice with the 911 operator could be heard. Subtitles appeared at the bottom of the screen as the tape played over the video footage.

*"Hurry! The 7-11 on East Jackson Drive near the corner of Michigan Avenue! My fiancé's been shot! Hurry, he's bleeding to death!"*

*"Sir, please remain calm and on the line. Paramedics are on the way."*

*"Hold on Baby, oh please hold on."*

*"Try and keep him conscious until Paramedics arrive."*

*"Peter? Are you okay?" (mumbled voice of Matthieu.)*

*"Fine baby, don't try to talk. The ambulance is coming."*

*(Mumbled words from Matthieu not caught clearly on tape.)*

*"I love you too. Baby please don't talk, just hang in there I can hear them coming. You'll be alright baby I promise."*

*(More is said by Matthieu and the tapes are not clear.)*

*"You saved my life baby and I could never be mad at you. Please don't leave me Baby. You promised to Marry me, and I expect you to keep that promise."*

*"Kiss me please Peter. One more time."*

*"That's not the last one. You are not going to die Matthieu."*

The security camera footage ended and then the footage from outside the hospital and outside the apartment was shown again before coming back to the reporter live who was standing outside the building still. "As you can clearly see, initial speculations and tabloid headings fall well short of the truth. We all wish you a speedy recovery Matthieu from WGN and I'm sure many others in the Chicagoland area do too. You're a true hero." The reporter said and Matthieu sighed.

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“Wow, I bled all over the place. I don't remember hardly any of that. It happened so fast.” Matthieu said turning to Peter who looked white as a sheet and was shaking.

“Peter?” Matthieu was concerned and reached out to take Peter's hand.

“I could have lived a lifetime never having to see that again. It was bad enough the first time.” Peter said and Matthieu squeezed his hand.

“Hey, look at me Peter. I'm all right and right here.” Matthieu said and Peter just moved behind Matthieu on the couch and held him close.

“Thank God.” Peter said as Bernadette came in with food on a tray.

“Eat and turn that thing onto the Disney channel or something. The news will get bored soon enough.” Bernadette said as they ate and watched cartoons with Penny.

After breakfast, Matthieu called Lupe, Phyllis and Eric and let them know he was okay much to their relief. Lupe promised to bring over tamales when Matthieu could eat solids again and Eric and Steven were invited over for Thanksgiving since Wendy and Franklin insisted on moving the celebration to Peter's place so Matthieu wouldn't have to travel.

Stephanie and Takashi were laughing like old friends when they arrived later that afternoon with the movers and everything settled again. Peter and Matthieu curled up together on the big fluffy sofa and watched old black and white movies together until Matthieu's day caught up with him and he fell asleep leaning back against Peter's chest.

Peter carefully helped him to bed and Matthieu was out cold before Peter made it to his side of the bed. He smiled as he undressed and shut off the lights and curled up against the best thing that had ever happened in his life.

Now Peter could finally relax and set his worries aside. Matthieu was home and he was going to be just fine.

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## *Chapter Ten*

Matthieu awoke the following morning to a nuzzling behind his ear. Peter was pressed against his side and was paying intimate attention to the little patch of skin just behind his ear. “Good morning Beautiful.” Peter purred and Matthieu sighed happily and smiled sleepily.

“Good morning to you too and stop that you're turning me on.” Matthieu whined and Peter grinned.

“I'm already on. If I can't make love to you yet I am certainly going to do what I can.” Peter said right back leaning over to kiss Matthieu deeply before sitting back up again, propped up on an elbow.

“Fucker.” Matthieu whined. Totally aroused and not a damn thing either of them could do about it.

Peter snickered. “Yeah, well cope. What would you like for breakfast?” Peter asked changing the subject wisely.

“A fried egg on toast would be nice.”

“Over easy or Over medium?” Peter asked sitting up and stretching.

“Medium. Whites cooked, yolk runny. It soaks into the toast nice that way.” Matthieu grinned and Peter nodded.

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“That is does and how I take it too so that's easy enough. One egg or two?”

“Just one egg and one slice of toast. I really want to be careful. Even if I feel I could eat a whole dozen this morning.” Matthieu said as Peter reached over to help him sit up.

“I don't doubt it. Need help to the bathroom first?” Peter asked and Matthieu nodded and was helped to the toilet first before Peter got him settled on the couch comfortably.

“I am dying for a bath. I stink.” Matthieu said and Peter chuckled.

“You don't stink. Getting a tad ripe but not stinky. I'll help you after breakfast. I could use a bath too and lucky enough the tub is big enough for two.” Peter said going to the kitchen to start cooking breakfast.

“That could lead to trouble. Damn you being so sexy and so good at it! I'm having addiction withdrawal symptoms!” Matthieu whined and Peter grinned.

“Can I be absolutely crass and crude and ask you when you knew? For instance, I knew I preferred topping the first time. I have major control issues and just couldn't enjoy it because I felt way too vulnerable and exposed. I'm pretty sure it would have felt good had I not been obsessing over lack of control.” Peter said and Matthieu laughed.

“You'll laugh. I was sixteen and I got my hands on and was flipping through a gay porn magazine. Curiosity got the better of me and I had no boyfriend and was still firmly in the closet. So I bought that little purple dildo you have in the bedroom and tried it on myself. That little thing has seen a lot of mileage since. I like it even more when I can just sit back and enjoy the ride.” Matthieu said and Peter did laugh.

“You're actually the first that did enjoy it with me to be honest. I was shocked you didn't complain and tell me to stop.” Peter said as he buttered toast.

“What? Just who did you date Peter? Were they nuts?” Matthieu was shocked.

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“Hello, you said yourself I’m big. I never usually got past the tip before they told me to stop. When you did the whole thing on my lap that first time I thought I was gonna die it felt so good. No one and I mean, no one, has ever done that to me and certainly never all the way in.” Peter said bringing over breakfast.

“Oh man, that’s just cruel and crazy! How on earth did you do anything?” Matthieu was shocked and Peter just shrugged.

“Lots of oral and hand jobs.” Peter said and Matthieu rolled his eyes.

“You’ve been deprived, how horrible. Yes, you’re big, but damn it certainly isn’t that big where it doesn’t fit. Then again, I love it so I relax. That’s probably it, they were too nervous about your size and clenched up on you or something. Don’t worry daddy, my ass is all yours. Baby likes it when Daddy gets all rough and dirty.” Matthieu said grinning and Peter chuckled.

“So baby likes when daddy talks dirty?”

“Oh yeah, especially during. I’m kinky.” Matthieu said biting into his toast with relish.

“Oh man, three weeks will not pass by fast enough and I am so getting off on you calling me Daddy right now.” Peter groaned and just buried his head in his hands.

Matthieu leaned over and blew in his ear. “Like my insides don’t do little flips when you ‘Baby’ all over me? Think again. I happen to really like your little nicknames and will not be telling you to stop anytime soon.” Matthieu said resting his chin on Peter’s shoulder.

“What a disgustingly sappy and blunt pair we make.” Peter said turning to kiss Matthieu.

“You can say that again. Now eat and let’s talk about anything other than sex because I want you bad.” Matthieu said turning to finish breakfast and pointedly not talk about anything that might turn him on further.

After breakfast the phone rang and Peter went to answer it. “Hello?”

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“Hello, my name is Mia Mitchell. Is this the number where I can reach Matthieu Le Fleur?” The woman asked and Peter was instantly leery.

“What is this regarding?” Peter asked in a stern tone.

“I’m not the press. Am I speaking to Peter?” She asked and Peter sat down next to Matthieu on the couch.

“Yes and you didn’t answer my question. Who are you?” Peter asked again.

“Just tell Matthieu my name, I do hope he remembers me, he should.” Mia said and Peter put his hand over the receiver.

“Do you know a Mia Mitchell?” Peter asked and Matthieu’s face transformed.

“Mia Mitchell’s is on the Phone?” Matthieu asked and Peter nodded. Matthieu grabbed the phone almost frantic.

“Ms. Mitchell? This is Matthieu.” Matthieu said and motioned for Peter to pick up the extension and listen in on the conversation.

“Matthieu darling. I thought you up and died and then I see yesterday a story on the news that made me cry boy! I am so happy to know you are still alive and how are you doing?” She asked and Matthieu smiled.

“Recovering. I’m surprised you remember me.” Matthieu said and Mia laughed.

“Remember? Darling I watched your amateur career most avidly. Listen, I’m coming in from Los Angeles on Monday. I’d like to talk to you about your career and getting it back on track. I will not lose track of you a second time Mr. Le Fleur. I know you are probably unable to meet me so can I come talk to you?” Mia asked.

“Certainly Ms. Mitchell. Do you know the Towers on Lake Shore Drive?” Matthieu asked.

“I do. North or South Tower?”

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“North Tower, 1502. What time can I expect you?” Matthieu looked excited.

“My flight gets into Midway at Ten and I'll be checking into my hotel so around lunchtime?” She asked and Matthieu confirmed.

“I'll see you Monday Ms. Mitchell.” Matthieu was beaming.

“Yes you will darling.” Mia said hanging up the phone.

“Who was THAT?” Peter asked and Matthieu looked drunk.

“Only the most prominent lyrical jazz choreographer in the world. She does everything from music videos for people like Madonna to movies, commercials, Broadway. You name it, she's at the top. I met her once at my last National competition and she asked me if I had plans to study. I told her I had been accepted to Columbia and then she handed me her card and told me to call her and I lost the damn card. She makes careers.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled.

“Wait a minute, is she that really bohemian looking lady on that show, that dancing show on TV? Dancing Off the Streets?”

“That would be Mia Mitchell. The competition show that every dancer wants to be on. If I could have gotten off work the last time they held auditions in Chicago I would have been there with bells on.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled.

“Looks like she remembers you. That sounds like a good sign.” Peter said and Matthieu grinned.

“I'm so flattered, she's amazing. I'm so curious what she wants.” Matthieu said and Peter lit up a smoke and reclined on the sofa.

“Well whatever it is, it's probably big if she wants to talk to you in person. I know if I'm wanted for a big project it's never done over the phone.”

“I just hope it's not something soon. I can't possibly dance yet and then I have to get back in practice again. I'm rusty as hell with only dancing in my little apartment occasionally. I'm also incredibly out of shape.” Matthieu rolled his eyes and Peter laughed and poked Matthieu's rather nicely toned chest.

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“Baby, if that body is out of shape then I’m King Tut. You’re perfectly in shape, you don’t get a tight body and ass like yours being idle.” Peter said and Matthieu grinned.

“I used to be a lot tighter Daddy. I used to Dance every day for at least three hours in practice and then spent an hour on the treadmill and then an hour on doing pilates or yoga to keep limber and strengthen my lungs. Oh no Daddy, I am well out of shape there. When you get six hours a day to yourself and you need sleep, working out becomes a thing of the past. I will have to start again.” Matthieu said and Peter whistled low.

“Damn. I’m winded just thinking about it. Don’t push it baby. A step at a time is wise.” Peter said and Matthieu nodded.

“I know. Walking first. Is there a gym in the building?” Matthieu asked and Peter nodded.

“First floor has a gym, pool and sauna with personal trainers available for hire. I am sadly remiss in visiting any of those healthy things.” Peter said and Matthieu laughed.

“Well, when I can start again, care to join me to keep me company?” Matthieu asked and Peter smiled.

“Sure. I should actually, I’ve always meant to and never got off my lazy ass to do it. I’ll call and see if we can get a good trainer to whip us into shape here starting in the New Year. You my dear are still on probation for six weeks. You are only allowed to use the treadmill in three weeks and I’ll be watching you so you don’t over do it.” Peter waggled a finger at Matthieu.

“Peter, I can barely stand to take a piss right now. Believe me I have no intention of having a relapse. I hate being weak like this.” Matthieu said as the phone rang again.

This time it was a client and Peter took the call and rolled his eyes as he spoke. “Yes, that was me you saw on the television. Yes, it was horrible. Thank you for extending the deadline, but it’s not necessary. I have most of your project completed and can still have it ready by the original deadline. No, it’s no trouble. Matthieu is here with me so there is no need to take time off since I

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work from my home. Thank you. Thank you. Yes. Yes, you too. Have a nice day Mr. Sakamoto.” Peter said hanging up the phone.

“We're news even in Japan. Jesus Christ.” Peter said flipping on the answering machine and then picking up the phone.

“Hi Angie, listen I'm going to forward my calls to the office there for a while. I'm behind and just do not want to take calls right now. Yes, you heard correct. Matthieu? Oh yeah he's hot.” Peter said with a wink to Matthieu on the couch.

“Yes, he's even cuter in person. Angie you're horrible. I pay you to run my office as my assistant not gossip about my lovers. You wicked girl. I need you too Angie, how soon can you get a flight out here? I need to shuffle some things around and I've been meaning to rent an office and get a receptionist to screen my calls anyway. So can you come out for a few days and do that voodoo you do so well? I'll have you home in plenty of time for thanksgiving. For now have Mark take my calls, he's up on all the projects and can field questions. I e-mailed him the last batch of files before all the shit happened. So he's current. I want you to hire an assistant for yourself just to field the calls and manage the crap I bury you with. We're going to have our hands full and I just want to focus on Matthieu right now and just do the plans. I'm of no mind right now to code dick. So hire a few good coders too while you're at it. Can you be here Monday? Great. See ya Angie.” Peter said hanging up the phone and Matthieu cocked an eyebrow.

“I didn't know you had a personal assistant.” Matthieu said and Peter grinned.

“She's in California. My office is technically there and she is a whiz at running a business. I went to school with her at Northwestern. She's my right and left hand girl and I bury her with shit work. I've been meaning to get her help for ages and lightening my load as well. Especially now with you, I want to spend more time with you too and get back on daylight hours again. I need a satellite office here and I am the boss damn it, I'd rather make the game plan and let someone else actually code it. Thats the tedious monkey work. I hate coding.” Peter said stretching.

“Now, how about a nice bath?” Peter said changing the subject and Matthieu smiled brightly.

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“I'd love one.” Matthieu said letting Peter assist him into the bathroom for a nice leisurely and much needed bath.



The weekend passed leisurely, the phone didn't ring, they purposefully did not watch the news and spent the entire weekend snuggled on the couch in-between Matthieu's frequent naps. His pain medication was helping nicely and by Monday morning Matthieu just felt sore and tired but not at death's door anymore. He even managed to stand long enough with Peter's aide for a nice shower that left him feeling more like himself again.

Angela Hernandez arrived precisely at nine o'clock in the morning while Peter and Matthieu were finishing breakfast. Peter greeted her at the door and the mutual affectionate hug in greeting proved they were long times friends as well as business associates.

Peter led her into the great room and Matthieu smiled at her from his chair. “Angie, this is Matthieu, Matt, Angela Hernandez the great.” Peter introduced and Matthieu extended his hand.

“It's a pleasure to meet you. Peter has told me a lot about you.” Matthieu said gesturing for Angela to sit at the table.

She sat beside Matthieu, a huge grin of the evil variety plastered on her face as she sized Matthieu up and down. “Peter has been a tight lipped old biddy about you. Wow, you look so much better in person than I feared. From the way the news has it, you were blown to bits and shredded.” Angie said and Matthieu smiled.

“Just on the inside and that is healing just fine.” Matthieu said as Peter brought out more coffee for Angie and joined them at the table.

“Thank goodness. Still take it black Angie?” Peter asked pouring.

“Just like my men, yes.” Angie quipped and Matthieu chuckled. He could see why Peter and Angie had been friends in college. They both radiated a jovial and fun loving nature. It was a bright morning, even if the sky outside was gray and overcast with snow clouds.

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“How is Andre? Are you still dating him?” Peter asked and Angie smiled.

“Of course darling! You know what they say? Once you go black you never go back!” Angie said sipping her coffee and Matthieu choked on his own coffee. She was exactly like Peter.

“So I hear. I'll take my pasty white boys though. I like cream in my coffee.” Peter answered right back and Matthieu rolled his eyes.

Angela just laughed. “You always did. Does he still dump half a cow in his coffee?” Angela asked Matthieu who smiled.

“Yup.” Matthieu grinned. His own coffee just slightly creamed and heavily sugared.

“You never change Pete.”

“Neither do you.” Peter said getting up and bringing over a note pad he had sitting on the counter.

“I wrote some notes what I need you to do Angie. It does not have to be done right away but the sooner the better.” Peter said sitting back down.

“Fire away Hoss.” Angie said kicking back in her chair with her coffee.

“Number one. Hire yourself an assistant, you should not have to do all the tedious crap I send you.” Peter said and Angie smiled

“I already did Friday afternoon after you called. She starts next Monday. Next?”

Peter grinned and scratched that off the 'to do' list. “Number two. Get me a receptionist Office Manager and a satellite office here. Just to route my calls through. Get me some coders I can pawn off the tedious crap too. I totally detest coding.” Peter said and Angie laughed.

“You always did and you really don't have to do it yourself, you just are a fucking perfectionist Peter Pan. I've already got Mark interviewing coders for you for your special projects, since he will be their direct supervisor. Getting you a secretary to screen your calls is a piece of cake. You don't need an office front,

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we can set up whomever you hire from home and get him or her in the network. We'll get someone local to run your errands and answer your calls.” Angie said and Peter shook his head.

“I thought of that, I need office space. I want to get the servers and paper files out of my office here, they are cramping me and making my little office into an oven. I want the secretary here in an office to do the crap filing and see if my special project coders can be local too. They can work in my office here and mind my servers at the same time. I really just want to step back and do just the art boards and strategies. I want to do the artsy-fartsy and marketing stuff and leave the technical crap to those who get off on typing code. I want them close enough to pick up hard copies and reports and take away to file out of my house. I only have so much space here.” Peter said and Angela jotted notes on the note pad.

“That's easy enough and I'm so glad you finally said it, you're wasted on coding when you're so much better as a designer. Done and about time too. You work too much, it's about time you stepped back and let others take a load off your shoulders.” Angela said and Peter smiled.

“I have other more important things now I want to devote time to.” Peter said reaching over to squeeze Matthieu's hand. Matthieu's inside melted and Bernadette's words rang back to him.

*“You saved my son not only from a bullet but from himself. I haven't seen him smile like he has been recently in years. Not since his father died. He was devastated when George passed and I watched him bury himself in school and work to keep his mind off being sad. I watched him go through one fruitless relationship after another. All of them ending because Peter couldn't let go of his heart to someone else. Afraid he'd get hurt again. Then he found you, and I have never seen him show such unrestrained love to another before.”* Matthieu could see the truth in those words watching Peter rearrange his life so that he could actually live it for a change.

“What's wrong Matt?” Peter asked as Matthieu wiped a tear from his eyes.

“Nothing, just thinking on something your mother said to me. She's right, you're an amazing man Peter Pan. I love you so much I can barely see straight at the moment.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled and leaned over the table and kissed Matthieu.

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“I love you too beautiful.” Peter said and Angie just grinned in her chair.

“If I doubted this relationship at all, I don't now. Wow Peter, PDA, you never ever display affection publicly. I'm shocked.” Angie said and Peter smiled at her.

“I can't help it with Matthieu. I want everyone to know he's off the market and mine.” Peter winked and Matthieu chuckled.

“All yours.” Matthieu said as he tapped the paper in front of Peter. “You're also distracted. Back on track Mr. Hollingsworth.” Matthieu said and Peter laughed.

“You are a distraction. Okay, office needs sorted and hopefully implemented within the next two weeks. Get me an office anywhere downtown, I don't care where. I don't plan on visiting it, just big enough to hold four people and all the crap I have here. Onto number three. After the holiday, contact some contractors for me to renovate my storage room into a dance studio. The same ones who did my bathroom, they were very good. Here's the room's dimensions and have them send over some concept sketches for Matthieu to choose from. I'd like to have this started and completed by Christmas if we can manage it.” Peter said and Angela nodded.

“Anything else? This is all fairly easy stuff Pete.” Angela said taking the notepad and putting it in her briefcase.

“Not really. That about sums it up.” Peter said and Angela smiled.

“Then I'm going into your office to start. Just keep me supplied with coffee and I should have at least most of this done by tomorrow night.” Angela said picking up her briefcase and heading into Peter's office.

Peter tossed her small carry on luggage into a guest room. “I have you in the back bedroom Angie.” Peter said popping his head in the office. Angie was already on the phone and just nodded and smiled and held up her empty coffee cup. Peter chuckled and went to go fill it.

“She's great.” Matthieu said still sitting at the table.

“She is, efficiency is her middle name. When she says tomorrow night? She means tonight. She does not mess about. I expect in less than an hour she'll

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be out here giving me twenty pages of notes.” Peter said filling Angie's cup and taking it back to her. It wasn't even ten yet.

By ten thirty, Matthieu and Peter had moved to the living room to watch mindless daytime television when Angie wandered out with her laptop and kicked her feet up beside them on the couch.

“Okay, I'm heading out in an hour to go downtown to look an an office space for rent. If it's nice, I'll get the papers signed and then get some office furniture ordered. Contractors have your room dimensions and designs will be sent by courier in ten days. Upon approval of design, they can have workers in by December Eighth and completed by Christmas. I've contacted Kelly Services and they are sending me applicants for secretaries. I'll read through the resumes when I get back from the office search and set up interviews.” Angie said shutting her laptop and stretching.

“You're a magic woman Angie.”

“Of course darling.” Angie said standing and grabbing her coat and purse.

“I'm so glad I went to school here and know my way around. I'm heading downtown. Want me to bring back pastries? I know the building with the vacancy is near Prescott's bakery.” Angela said and Peter's face took on a sinful expression.

“God, I haven't eaten at Prescott's since you and I were doing mid-terms on sugar highs. Yes, please. Anything Cinnamon, you know me. Matthieu?”

“I'm still on soft foods, so something no heavier than a cake consistency, preferably chocolate, a brownie if they have them. I love brownies.” Matthieu said and Angela grinned.

“Oh I love you already Matt. They make the best brownies, that's my favorite too. Brownies and Cinnamon rolls upon my return from the trenches. Adieu Amigos.” Angela said heading out and Peter grinned.

“I told you. It was forty minutes.” Peter said as he kicked back with Matthieu to watch more Judge Joe Brown on the television.

As the time neared noon, Matthieu began to get nervous. “I wonder what she wants.” Matthieu said awaiting the arrival of Mia Mitchell.

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“I wouldn't worry, I'm fairly positive it's good for her to come to you.” Peter said as he fixed a pitcher of iced tea and cubed some cheese and crackers for nibbles and set them on the table.

“True, but I'm in no shape right now to do anything.” Matthieu said and Peter smiled and came over and leaned over the couch to kiss Matthieu.

“Love, she'll know that too. Just relax, you don't need an ulcer on your stomach.” Peter said running his fingers through Matthieu's hair as the doorbell chimed.

“That's probably her.” Peter said heading to the door and opening it. Mia Mitchell stood there looking like she'd raided Bernadette's closet. Bohemian artistic women must have their own fashion stores Peter mused as he took in the sight of her standing there smiling.

“Ms. Mitchell I presume?” Peter asked stepping back to allow her to enter.

“Yes. Mr. Hollingsworth?” Mia said holding out her hand and Peter shook.

“Just call me Peter, Matthieu's in the living room. Follow me.” Peter said leading their guest inside. Matthieu made an effort to stand and Mia waved him down.

“Sit darling, I know you're toasted dear.” Mia said leaning over to hug and kiss both Matthieu's cheeks.

“I am. It's lovely to meet you again Ms. Mitchell.” Matthieu said and Mia just sat beside him.

“It's just Mia dear.” Mia said as Peter brought in the Tea, cheese and crackers and set them on the coffee table.

“Oh, wonderful. I'm parched and airplanes don't serve meals anymore, Just horrible little snack boxes of disgusting salami and garlic overpowered crackers. This is lovely.” Mia said accepting a glass of tea with a sigh of gratefulness. She took a large drink before she continued.

“Now then, to why I am here. Everyone, and I do mean everyone was up in arms when you didn't show for nationals that year. My dear friends and

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Colleagues over at Columbia were calling everywhere to find you. I myself had the severe displeasure of speaking to your mother. She hung up on me not three sentences into the conversation. You just simply vanished and it didn't take much to deduce what happened. I've seen it before, just not sadly to the extent you've endured. When I saw you on the news, I squealed like a schoolgirl. Then nearly had heart failure when they said you'd been shot. How are you dear?" Mia asked and Matthieu smiled.

"Sore and tired but other than that I really cannot complain. It could have been much worse." Matthieu said and Mia nodded.

"Thank Goodness for that. How long do they estimate your recovery?" Mia asked and Matthieu shrugged.

"It depends on me really. Average is about six months though, I'm hoping sooner. I don't like being idle." Matthieu said and Peter frowned.

"Just don't push it. I'm watching you Matt." Peter said with a growl and Mia chuckled.

"Yes, what your man said, don't push it. What I am here for is to deliver good news. Your scholarship is still good and will wait for you until you're ready to return to school. If you can get your GED over the next few months, you can start in the Spring Semester. I am starting a pilot program there and I want you in it Matthieu. I know you wanted to be a teacher and I am here to convince you a performing arts career is for you. You're too young and too talented to go right into teaching. Save that for retirement love. I want you, and I have wanted you for years. I want to see you on the stage, not behind it. You have such potential, I can easily see you becoming a choreographer yourself. We need good ones in this business. You have vision and that is rare. I want you in my performing arts program and I want you trained as a professional choreographer. I want you working with me Matthieu." Mia said and Matthieu's eyes bugged out of their sockets.

"Are you serious?" Matthieu asked dumbfounded and Peter just grinned into his glass.

"Very. So Matthieu, what do you say?" Mia asked and Matthieu swallowed hard.

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“Spring may be a bit soon. I really need to get back into shape first. Fall semester will probably be wiser and give me time to get healthy and back in shape again if I work out in earnest. I must also admit honestly I'm well out of practice. I haven't danced in five years. I would be embarrassed with myself starting in the spring. I need to work first.” Matthieu said and Mia nodded.

“That's probably wise. So can I count on you in the fall? It's a two year course, but in-between classes I will be calling on you for projects. Can you handle that?” Mia asked and Matthieu smiled.

“Yes. It's a dream come true. I won't let you down.” Matthieu said and Mia just leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“I never thought you would. Dancing is in your soul Matthieu. A Dancer like you comes around once in a lifetime I'm not letting you disappear again.” Mia said as Angela returned with several pink bakery boxes and everyone sat around laughing and talking over pastries coffee and tea. Matthieu's life was solidly back on track again. Peter watched Matthieu's face come alive with joy as hope returned and happiness overflowed. This was the 'before-Matthieu'. The Matthieu not plagued with worry over his next meal, not afraid to dream, not afraid to love. This was a Man, though scarred, had learned to trust again. Who had taken a gamble with his life to be shown rewards he'd never hoped for before.

If Peter hadn't already loved him, he'd have fallen in love all over again. Matthieu was beautiful, from the tips of his unruly curls to the tips of his toes and everywhere in-between and the beauty on the outside was only surpassed by the radiance that came from within.

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## *Chapter Eleven*

Mia left that afternoon full of smiles and demanding updates on Matthieu's condition saying she'd 'pop back by' to see him after the New Year. She'd be back in Chicago in January. She made it clear that to her, Matthieu's education was a formality, he was her protégé and future assistant and she fully intended him to succeed her in the business. She was adamant she was not going to lose track of him again.

After Mia left, Angela, Peter and Matthieu settled around the table for a late lunch and went over her notes from the office.

“It's a nice place, already furnished with a reception area, file room and four individual offices plus a meeting room and a larger suite for 'da boss man' or his overworked assistant.” Angela said and Peter laughed.

“It's nice, I'm going to go after lunch and burn up your business credit card and get us computers in there. It's a piece of cake to dial them into our intranet. I'm going to hold interviews there tomorrow while I set up, if some computer geek would come with me for an hour to set up the 'puters. Peter.”

Peter laughed. “I'll come, shouldn't be a hour or two.” Peter said and Angela nodded.

“Precisely. I talked to Mark while I was driving back. He's going to e-mail you four resumes for coders in the area. He said pick the three you like best and

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then he'll phone interview them tomorrow.” Angela said and Peter talked around a mouth full of lunch meat and cheese.

“Just hire all four, you said there are four offices right? Just fill them up with geeks. Is there a place for the servers?” Peter asked and Angela nodded.

“The previous tenants were an IT group, there is a server room next to the file and storage. You and I can share the main office with Mark when any of us comes to do corporate crap. The reception area is nice and I can pick up a good multi-line phone to plug in and then have one of our IT guys do the voodoo with getting the lines set up. Power is on, I'm going to get all the other office stuff set up before I fly out on Wednesday. I'll come back Monday after the holiday and get the office set-up completely and get our secretary trained. Mark will come out to get your coders all squared away.”

“Fabulous. I'd better stock up on Corona, he drinks like a fish.” Peter said and Angela laughed.

“Not anymore. He's a good boy recently. His new man Wilhelm put his foot down. He's a personal trainer and has put Mark on a healthier diet. He's looking great. You'll hardly recognize Mark. He's actually got muscle now.” Angela said and Peter chuckled.

“I know about Wilhelm. I got the whole low down in an e-mail from Mark. Including pictures from their trip to Aruba. I saw Mark, he is looking good. I didn't know about the diet though. It's about time someone got Mark to stop living off pizza and beer.” Peter said as he chewed through his sandwich.

“Now you're settled. The three musketeers are all happy at last. Between the three of us, we always knew you'd be the last one to settle down.” Angie said and Peter grinned and took Matthieu's hand.

“I had to wait for the right one Angie, pure and simple.” Peter said and Matthieu just smiled and then yawned.

“Tired Baby?” Peter asked and Matthieu nodded.

“I'm pooped. Long day and it's only three. I need a nap, the medicine is making me sleepy.” Matthieu said and Peter nodded and helped Matthieu to bed and came back out to Angela.

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“He's perfect for you. I'm so happy that you're happy now Peter.” Angela said and Peter smiled.

“I am. He's the best. Oh and one more favor Angie, this one is a surprise for Matthieu. Contact that photographer that took that bachelor photo of me by the pool. Get a poster size copy made for Matthieu, he asked for it for Christmas. Also see if he'll come out after the New Year and take some matching shots of Matthieu for me.” Peter said and Angela laughed.

“You hated that picture.” Angela said and Peter grinned.

“But Matthieu loved it and asked for it big for our bedroom. I told him yes, if only I had one of him all baby oiled and varnished to go alongside it.” Peter said with a grin and Angela made a note in her palm pilot.

“Got it. Make note to get duplicate copies for my bedroom.” Angela joked and Peter groaned.

“You've already seen me naked Angie.”

“Naked and drunk and pucking on your socks and a host of other things being your roommate in college. You're still dead sexy and hung like an elephant on steroids. You make women cry when they find out you're gay.” Angela teased and Peter rolled his eyes.

“Can't help it, never could. The only thing that stopped Mark and I from dating in college was we're both hung up on being in control. It's like two magnets with the negative ends facing each other. We were much better as best friends than lovers. We'd have killed each other trying to be partners.” Peter said laughing at old memories when the three of them shared an apartment during college.

“I'm just glad I don't live with the two of you anymore. Between your obsessive neatness and his terminal clutter and empty pizza boxes and beer bottles I'm not yelling at you both anymore to stop yelling at each other. Although having two sexy men walking around buck ass naked from the shower to their rooms every day I miss. I think I'm the only woman alive that has seen you both in your birthday suits other than your mothers.” Angela said and Peter chuckled.

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“You're probably right. But then you were like Mom to two stupid guys for four years. I owe you lots Angie.”

“You don't owe me squat Peter. How many times did I use your shoulder to cry on? How many times did you bail me out of tight spots during college? Who was my best friend when I needed one? Who gave me the best job I could ever want or hope for? Who bought my house for me and refused to take a dime because he said he loved me? You did Peter. You're the sweetest, most loving guy on the planet. I'd dance through fire for you Pete, because I love you too. You're the best and I'm so happy for you and Matthieu. He loves you too, every time he looks at you I see it in his eyes. You're insanely hard not to love Peter.” Angela said taking his hand.

“Thanks Angie.”

“You're welcome. Now I have to go hire you a secretary and schedule interviews for tomorrow and then I am going to go rape your credit card at Best Buy electronics.” Angela said heading back into the office and dialing the candidates for interviews.

“While you're at it, Pick Matthieu up a nice laptop so he can use it to get his GED. He'll need it.” Peter said and Angie nodded as she disappeared into the office. Satisfied, Peter decided a nap was in order for himself and went to curl up beside Matthieu for a while.

Angela was out when Peter got up, she'd left a note saying she was shopping and would be back by eight and she'd bring back dinner with her from take out.

Matthieu was still groggy and opted to stay in bed the morning had just zapped his strength so Peter left him in bed with a kiss and wandered out into the living room and kicked back with some coffee and his laptop and got a little work done while the television ran in the background.

He did research on getting a GED through the state and even found an on-line course Matthieu could take from home. A three week course that he could do at his leisure.

“Knowing Matt, he'll have this done in an afternoon. Christ, this is a no brainer course.” Peter said to himself looking over the requirements and

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bookmarking it so he could send it to Matthieu's laptop once he got it set up and tweaked.

Peter loved computers and was looking forward to getting his hands on what Angela would bring home for Matthieu. He had drawers full of add-ons and upgrades and spare parts in his office. He was forever building his own machines and tweaking them. He'd have Matthieu's laptop singing once he had his hands on it.

Which was not long in coming. Angela was back by seven-thirty with food and gadgets. “I just brought Matthieu's computer home, the rest will be delivered to the new office tomorrow at nine o'clock sharp. The first interview is scheduled for ten so you have an hour to set up computers if you want to avoid the interview process.” Angela said setting the food on the counter.

“I'm just a handy man tomorrow. I'll go grab the computer out of your car if you'll dish up the grub.” Peter said and Angela tossed him the keys.

“I'm parked next to you. The Red Honda Civic is my rental. The computer is in the trunk.” Angela said and Peter headed down to lug up the box and Angela set about taking dinner out of Styrofoam boxes.

Peter walked back in and the smell was divine. He set the Computer box on the coffee table and took a deep inhale.

“What did you pick up? It smells great!” Peter said and Angela grinned.

“For you I got Cajun fried chicken, red beans and rice. For Matthieu and I some gumbo and dirty rice on the less spicy side. You and your asbestos tongue of yours.” Angela said as Matthieu shuffled into the room.

“It smells great in here. My stomach was rumbling just from the attack on my nose.” Matthieu said as Peter went to go offer his arm to help Matthieu to the table.

“She brought Cajun, I'm already salivating.” Peter said helping Matthieu in a chair and then bringing the pitcher of tea to the table before he sat down to a little slice of heaven.

“I've never had Cajun, but from the smell I can guess I'm going to love it. It smells divine and oh so spicy. I think I am going to avoid what is sitting in

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front of Peter. I know he can eat fire.” Matthieu said as Angela set the bowl of gumbo in front of Matthieu with a cup of rice on the side.

“You would be correct Matty. I got mild stuff for you and I, Peter can eat the paint stripper.” Angela said sitting down herself.

Matthieu set into his rice first. “Oh, just enough to bite your tongue but so good. What is this?” Matthieu asked and Peter pointed with his fork.

“Dirty rice. I actually make killer dirty rice so if you like it, I’ll make you some whenever you want it. I made it for George all the time, it was his favorite. Here taste the red beans and rice, it’s just a little spicier.” Peter said holding over a fork full for Matthieu to try.

His eyes rounded. “A little my ass.” He said, taking a long drink of his tea. “Oh, my tongue. Keep your fire turds in rice hell. This is as spicy as I go.” Matthieu said and Peter chuckled.

“Wimp.”

“And I like having all my taste buds intact thanks. God, it made me sweat.” Matthieu laughed wiping his brow.

Matthieu tried the gumbo and fell in love. “Oh now this is the way to have stew! I love this. It looks god awful in the bowl, but the smell and the taste divine. I want to learn how to make this. This would be great in a slow cooker. It would make the house smell good all day.” Matthieu said being careful and eating slowly even if he wanted to shovel it in and never stop.

“If you cook me gumbo, I will blow you do hard you’ll see stars. I am a sucker for anything Cajun Baby.” Peter said and Matthieu grinned.

“Make note, want blow job, make gumbo. Got it.” Matthieu said and Angie chuckled.

“You’re both rude. You deserve each other.” Angie snickered and rolled her eyes.

The doorbell rang and Peter arched his brow, not expecting anyone he went to the door.

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Dr. Le Fleur was standing outside. “May I see Matthieu?” He asked and Peter sighed and stepped back.

“Might as well get this over with I suppose.” Peter said leading the way into the great room and Matthieu was in mid-bite when he noticed who was behind Peter.

He set his spoon down with a sigh. His appetite gone.

“How are you feeling son?” Pierre asked walking over to Matthieu.

“Why do you care now?” Matthieu asked coldly, his eyes a mask hiding pain that even Angela could see. She looked to Peter and his facial expression was one that promised an explanation later.

“I'm so very sorry Matthieu. I want to make things right again between us. I miss you son.” Pierre said and Matthieu just looked down into what was left of his dinner.

“Five years Dad. That's not something that can be changed with just an apology. You can't give back what you took from me. You can't take back the pain I felt knowing my own mother went to her grave despising me so much I wasn't even told she died. Never given the chance to say good-bye. The last time I spoke to her, she told me to fry in hell for my deviant and immoral ways. I had to read about her passing in the obituaries, and it was after the funeral services I saw it. No mention of her son surviving her, just you. It was as if she'd never had a child at all. That sort of message is hard to ignore and harder to forgive. Why now do you grow a conscience? Was it because they are maligning you on television? Was it because I got involved with someone more socially upstanding than you are? Or was it really because your only child got shot. Judging from your past track record dad, I'd bet money on the first two options.” Matthieu said and Pierre sighed.

“I don't blame you Matthieu. In the past I was that sort of shallow person. I've taken time to look at myself in the mirror and I hated what I saw. I regret so very much what I did to you, it is my fault you ended up nearly dying and not just from being shot. I wish I could go back and change what I'd done, kept you from living homeless and hungry. I was wrong. So very wrong and I can't give you back what I took from you. But I can promise to try to make amends. Please can we try Matthieu? I miss my son.” Pierre said and Matthieu sighed.

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“I want to say no. I want to say I never want to see your face again. I want to cry and throw things and it would all be pointless. I can't promise you anything. But I can at least take the offered olive branch. I'll try, that's as much of a promise I can give you.” Matthieu said and Pierre nodded.

“It's more than I deserve. Thank you son.” Pierre said and Matthieu nodded.

“I want you to know, I have all your things still. I have them downstairs. All your trophies and memories and all the things you saved. I saved them. Your mother tried to throw them out and I brought them here instead right after you left. I can bring them up for you anytime. They belong with you.” Pierre said and Matthieu started to cry and Peter went to sit beside him and hold his hand.

“Please, I'd like that.” Matthieu said quietly and Pierre nodded.

“I'll bring them up tomorrow. Is that alright?” Pierre asked and Matthieu nodded.

“Then I won't disturb you more this evening son. Thank you for giving me a second chance.” Pierre said seeing himself out.

“I want to go to bed. I'm too tired to deal with anything else today.” Matthieu said and Peter nodded.

“Alright, let's get you comfortable.” Peter said leading Matthieu to bed.

“Hold me for a while? I need you right now Peter.” Matthieu said as he fell into bed emotionally strung out to a thread. Peter just silently crawled into bed with him and held Matthieu until he stopped crying and fell asleep.

Angela was putting dinner away when Peter came back out and sat at the counter on a stool and smoked.

“So the news reports on Dear old dad are true?” Angela asked and Peter nodded.

“The ass, yes. Matthieu has more grace than I do. I'd have told the man to get bent and get lost. Take a look at the obituary Matthieu mentioned.” Peter said picking Matthieu's wallet up off the counter, fishing out the old scrap of

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paper and handing it to Angela. She read it and then slammed it down on the counter.

“I can't imagine what it felt like reading that by accident. Talk about gutting a person clear down to the soul. What sort of parents can do that to a child?” Angela asked and Peter sighed.

“Misguided Zealots. Love and tolerance are only for heterosexuals, we're devil spawn don't you know? Sub-human, baby raping demons from the ninth-level of hell. We don't breed for procreation, we must be evil incarnate for not popping out yet another sheep for the flock every nine months. Sex is only about procreation after all. It's not supposed to feel good and love should not be mixed with duty to create offspring. Unless of course it's between opposite genders and then it's okay. Same gender people aren't capable of falling in love with each other, it's all about being carnal and depraved. It's bullshit.” Peter snorted and Angela stole one of his cigarettes from his pack and joined him at the counter.

“You're preaching to the Choir sadly. I know you, nothing about you is depraved. Even with your past romances, you tried to make it more about the relationship than the sex. You just couldn't connect with anyone, but not for lack of trying. You give more effort to relationships than most heterosexual couples do. We're just as guilty at falling into lust and falling out again. More so, there's more of us if you want to talk failed relationship ratios. Look at the divorce rate, it's disgusting. Yet, because we're pumping out kids, it's alright. Unless you're catholic, nothing is okay there. Biggest guilt trip of my life was spending my grade school years in parochial school. Just breathing is a sin. I'm going to hell for sleeping with Andre and not being married to him. Neither of us can be assed to do it. He's not going anywhere and I'm not. We've been together, goodness, six years now. That's longer than some marriages. People focus far too much on sex than feelings. Whatever happened to love?” Angela asked and Peter shrugged.

“If you find out the answer let me know. I've wondered that often enough myself. I'm grateful I found it at least.” Peter said and Angela nodded.

“And it found you too. Thank God. Now go keep him warm, we're up early bucko.” Angela said and Peter nodded said goodnight and returned to Matthieu sleeping quietly.

Peter wrapped around what was most precious to him and went to sleep. It had been a long day.

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Matthieu was still sound asleep when Peter and Angela set out for the office. Bernadette, Stephanie and Penny came over to adult-sit Matthieu in case he needed anything and Peter let Matthieu sleep as he headed out to be a computer geek for the morning.

The office space was nice, although Peter hated the generic office furniture. “God this place is sterile. I mean it’ll do to start but have it renovated like our office in California.” Peter said noticing Angela had also gotten a cleaning crew to come in, the place smelled like Lysol.

“Aye-Aye Captain. I knew you’d say that.” Angela said getting her laptop fired up in the meeting room while Peter inspected ‘his’ office that he never intended on using if he could avoid it.

“The meeting room is nice. It’ll give me a place to actually hold a meeting rather than in a restaurant. Have our office done up in Cherry wood, I love cherry. Have the floors marble tiled here in the foyer. Carpet under our receptionist desk though, marble is cold.” Peter said rambling as Angela took notes, knowing Peter rambled his thoughts.

“Get our Logo on the front of the receptionist’s desk and on the door. Make it glass so we can get some light in from the hallway and so our receptionist can see out. I’d not want to stare at a wall all day.” Peter said going into the file room.

“Get better cabinets in here, these cheesy old metal file cabinets are ancient and dented all to hell. Nice wood ones and new carpet in here.” Peter said moving to the server room.

“Have the ventilation and climate controls redone in here. New tiles on the floors. I want this room sixty-five degrees at all times. Have Jesus come out to supervise this room and get the servers installed. I trust him not to fuck this up.” Peter said going to check out the offices that would belong to the coders.

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“At least they all have good views of the loop. Let our coders pick their own desks and chairs from the catalog, I always like my space comfortable to work with. New carpets in here in our steel blue color to match our logo.” Peter said and Angela chuckled.

“You and blue.”

“I like blue.” Peter grinned as the computers arrived. He was a boy in a candy store taking out computers and setting them up in offices. He was on his cell phone with Jesus in his IT department getting the first one on the network as the first applicant arrived to be interviewed.

Peter had expected a woman, most receptionists tended to be female but the first to arrive was a young man, queer as a three dollar bill too. Peter could tell just from the swish in his walk. He had impeccable 'gay-dar'. He wasn't bad looking either. About twenty-four, small in build like Matthieu, but dark. He had at least one parent from India looking at his features.

Peter listened to Angela interview him while he tinkered. Sanjay Patel was his name, Peter was right about the nationality and he had a pleasant tenor that would sound nice on a phone.

He had good references too. He'd just moved to the area which was why he was between jobs, he'd come with his 'partner' from New Jersey. His job had relocated which was why Sanjay had registered with the temp agency.

Peter interrupted the interview and sat down to hear properly. “Carry on Angie. Sorry to barge in, I was interested for a change.” Peter said and Angela laughed.

“Sanjay, Mr. Hollingsworth, your boss if we hire you.” Angela said and Peter held out his hand to shake.

“I noticed. Saw you on the news a lot recently. How is your partner doing?” Sanjay asked politely and Peter smiled.

“Matthieu is doing much better. He's probably still sleeping, the pain killers knock him out. Thank you for asking.” Peter said and Sanjay smiled.

“It's hard enough being gay without all the undue pressure of the press. My partner had a similar situation. He was mugged and shot and I know first

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hand what you're going through. Took him almost a year to recover. They got him twice in the stomach, ruptured his bowels and twice in the chest. He is very lucky to be alive. He spent three months in ICU in a coma. I thought I was going to die with worry. I can very much relate to what you've been through. That was while we were still in college.” Sanjay said and Peter's eye boggled.

“Makes me very thankful Matthieu only lost a bit of his stomach. In the chest? How did he survive if you don't mind me asking.” Peter said and Sanjay smiled.

“Not at all. It punctured his lung but thankfully missed his heart. There was a witness to his shooting so emergency got there quickly for him. That's what saved him, immediate response. Terry would have died otherwise. They kept him under sedation while he healed. The coma was medically induced, but opened up a whole other can of worms for afterward. When you're kept under like that your muscles start deteriorating. He had total muscle atrophy to deal with when he woke up. He was just, very literally, skin, bones and water. Most of his rehab was physical therapy. They never caught the guy who shot him either. I'm very glad to be out of Jersey. So is Terry. It's a fresh start here for us.” Sanjay said and Peter nodded.

“Sounds like it. I don't need to hear anymore. You have fabulous references and I like you. Bonus for me. Hire him Angie.” Peter said and Angela smiled.

“You heard him. He's the boss. Can you start Monday?” Angela asked and Sanjay smiled.

“I can start now if you need help. I'm a fair hand at computers too. I took a networking course in college.” Sanjay said and Peter grinned.

“Double bonus! I won't have to explain the evil computer to you. Yes, roll up your sleeves and join me. Angie?”

“I'll cancel the rest of the interviews and get Jesus on the horn to get Sanjay his passwords. Get his computer set up first then.” Angie said getting on her cell to dial Jesus.

Peter and Sanjay went to work establishing his work station. “It's all fairly straightforward what I'll need you to do Sanjay. Just field calls, file my crap and run local errands occasionally. Most everything gets done in my office in

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California, this is just for my special projects. Pass me the Ethernet cable would you?” Peter said from under the desk as he plugged in wires. Sanjay handed him the cable.

“Angie will give you all the lowdown on pay and benefits here, I have no idea about any of that. You will rarely if ever actually see me in the office. I work at home. I only ever want to talk to clients if it's an emergency and their idea of an emergency and mine are two entirely different things. We'll go over that later.” Peter said coming out from under the desk and firing up the computer.

“Great. Now to get you dialed into the intranet. Angie do you have access codes for him yet?” Peter hollered and Angie came out.

“Mr. Impatient, only just. Here. Now I'm stealing Sanjay to get the rest of the paperwork filled out.” Angela said leading Sanjay back to the meeting room.

“You'll get used to Peter. He's very rarely serious and a control freak.” Angela said and Sanjay chuckled.

“He reminds me of my partner. All hands on even when they claim they don't want to be.” Sanjay said and Angela laughed.

“Bingo. Okay, fill out your W4 and W9 Forms there. Here's a copy of our standard employee manual, basic stuff. Your salary is forty-five a year, full medical, dental and vision benefits. Peter has the best insurance for us and it will cover life partners so long as you've co-habitated more than six months. Peter also detests a benefits waiting period. Insurance begins immediately. He may be quirky, but you'll soon learn you couldn't have a better boss.” Angie said bringing out all the papers from her briefcase.”

“Just for me, Terry has his own insurance through his job. Thank goodness you have benefits, his company doesn't cover alternative relationships. That's a load off my mind. I can already tell He's gonna be a boss I'm not going to want to leave soon. Wait a minute, did you just say forty-five thousand a year?” Sanjay stopped short and Angela laughed.

“I did. Peter also pays well. But he expects a lot too. You'll earn it.”

“Oh my God! I'll do back flips for that much if he asks me to!” Sanjay gasped and Angela grinned.

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“Don't tell him that, he'll ask.” Angela winked as Peter walked in.

“I heard that! No scaring my new employee wench.” Peter said picking up more cables and disappearing again.

“That's my job Oh Ye Anal Master!” Angela hollered back and Sanjay laughed.

“You two have known each other a long time.”

“Since the first day of college. He was my roommate for three and a half years too. I know all his dirty habits and all his good ones too. Right, okay where was I? Yes, forms done, I'll get those input into the system. Do you want direct deposit for your paycheck? Every other Thursday is payday. I'll get payroll to get you established today so we can at least get you paid for this week this Thursday. I'm heading back home tomorrow for the holiday but will be back Monday to show you the ropes. For now, you'll just be fielding Peter's calls so I don't have to. We'll get the servers moved from his place here next week and get the place renovated and we'll have some coders starting too probably next week. It'll be a crash course training next week.”

“I'll manage. It sounds like a piece of cake really. I've worked corporate for years, this is very laid back in comparison. What's the dress code?” Sanjay asked and Angela laughed.

“There isn't one unless there's a client coming in, Peter will e-mail everyone a warning to “look sharp” the week before so we can mark it down. Peter doesn't care if you wear your pajamas and fuzzy bunny slippers to work so long as the work gets done. He's very casual. I doubt you'll get more than one client in here every six months. Peter's picky about who he will help and who he won't and even then you'll have plenty of warning before he brings someone in here. He'll hardly bring himself in. He's not an office person.” Angela said as Peter came back.

“Okay Sanjay, let's get you fired up out here.” Peter said and Sanjay followed Peter outside and sat at his desk.

“Your internal e-mail is written down there. All I ask is make sure people don't forward you crap with attachments. We had a virus once that was nasty. I don't mind personal e-mails at all, just no having your mom forwarding you

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every chain letter, it bogs down the server and is a security risk.” Peter said and Sanjay smiled.

“I know that well. I hate them anyway, everyone knows not to forward me those things. The only person in my family that even has a computer is my brother and Terry.” Sanjay said setting up his e-mail quickly.

“I also don't give a toss if you surf the net either so long as the work gets done. It can get boring as hell between calls if I have no other crap for you to do. Just again, don't download anything and I'm happy. It's just viruses I worry about, not porn. Well unless it's your wallpaper, don't scare the clients.” Peter said and Sanjay laughed.

“No hot gay man action on the desktop. Got it. I wouldn't anyway. How tacky is that at work?”

“I like you even more. Precisely. Go ahead and surf around our site, there are employee sections and newsletters you can read while Angie gets everything else sorted. I'm almost done back here then we can call it a week. It is Thanksgiving Thursday. I close up shop Wednesday through Monday every year. No one works the day before or the day after. I like long weekends myself. You have plans for the holiday?” Peter asked and Sanjay shook his head.

“Nope, we only got in last week, we're still living out of boxes at our apartment. All my family is in California and Terry's never talks to him so it's just us and some TV Dinners.”

“Would you like to come to dinner at our place? We'll have more than enough and it'll be a nice time to just socialize and go over agendas over great food. Dinner is set to start at two, but anytime after noon is a good time to show up. I'd like to meet Terry and I'm sure Matthieu would too seeing as they have something quite in common.”

“Oh, that sounds great. I'm sure we'll make it, we had no plans and Terry mentioned himself the other day watching the news how much he'd like to meet Matthieu and tell him it does gets better. He grumbles at the television whenever they bring him up to “leave the poor guy alone already! He's been shot you assholes!” to quote him exactly.” Sanjay said and Peter laughed.

“Terry and I seem to think alike. I'll leave you to it, I'm off to finish up so we can all be home by lunchtime.” Peter said heading back as Sanjay thanked

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his lucky stars and started surfing the company website to learn about his new boss and job.



Peter returned home to see Matthieu sitting on the couch with his father. Bernadette was in the chair and Stephanie was in the kitchen making lunch for Penny who rushed over to greet Peter when he walked in. He couldn't help but smile, she as full of life and adorable in little pigtails with blue ribbons, one of his mother's scarves around her waist and her arms stacked full of bangles out of his mother's horde. She jangled when she ran.

“Hi! Mommy is making us all chicken soup for lunch!” Penny said grabbing Peter's hand to drag him away from the door. He followed chuckling.

“Hello love. How did you sleep?” Peter asked leaning over to kiss Matthieu's cheek.

“Like the dead. I only woke up about an hour ago actually. Did you get everything done?” Matthieu asked as Peter settled beside Matthieu on the couch avoiding the boxes all around him on the floor.

“Pretty much. You'll like Sanjay our new receptionist and office manager. I invited him and his partner Terry over for thanksgiving. Apparently, Terry went through what you did a few years back. Two shots to the stomach that ruptured his bowels and two shots to the chest. He spent three months in ICU alone and almost a year in rehab afterwards.”

“Oh my gosh. He's okay now?” Matthieu asked and Peter nodded.

“According to Sanjay he's back just fine. I thought you might like to meet him.” Peter said and Matthieu nodded.

“I would. Wow. It puts my injuries into perspective.” Matthieu said handing a book to Peter.

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“My Junior year, yearbook. Take a look at that baby face.” Matthieu said and Peter looked at the open page. Matthieu looked thirteen and not sixteen. But still utterly angelic to Peter.

“God, you're cute.” Peter said and Matthieu rolled his eyes.

“I looked ten.” Matthieu chuckled picking up an old photo album.

“My dance photos and all my trophies. I think when we get the studio built I'll display them in there. It'll remind me I can do it even when I think I can't. I've a lot of work to do. By the way, what is the laptop for on the table?” Matthieu asked pointing to the still unopened box.

“For you my dear. For your GED and college. You'll need it.” Peter said and Matthieu just smiled and leaned over and kissed Peter's cheek.

“You're wonderful.” Matthieu said and Peter grinned.

“I know.” He replied with a wink and Matthieu just shook his head chuckling and going back to sorting through his old memories and sharing them with the love of his life.



Thanksgiving came and went in a blur of friends, family and food. The new office was established and running smoothly under Sanjay's direction and very capable hands.

Matthieu diligently went to work on his GED and had the three week course finished in three days. He aced the test and was waiting for his GED certificate to arrive in the mail.

The three week anniversary was spent wallowing in bed all day making love to each other. It had been a very long three weeks and just kissing and cuddling wasn't going to satisfy any longer.

They took it easy, but loving again was wonderful and they never made it out of bed the entire day for anything longer than to eat.

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By Christmas Matthieu was walking around easily and taking a half hour every day on the treadmill in the gym downstairs. Feeling much more himself but taking it carefully. He did not want to relapse or push his luck.

At six weeks he resumed normal activity and spent more time in the gym and in his brand new dance studio getting back into shape. He still got tired easily and faster than he wished, but he stopped and rested and was good about taking breaks when he needed them. No more mindless pushing his body, Peter was adamant he take care of himself, and he did.

Peter's New Year's resolution was to quit smoking and even though his temper was shot to hell, he was holding out. Spending time with Matthieu in the Gym and chewing a lot of nicotine gum in the process.

February saw the immediate family on a plane to Hawaii, with Matthieu and Peter having a private commitment ceremony on a lovely and warm secluded beach.

They stayed two weeks in paradise and came back home again to cold and snow and a pair of colds to go along with their matching wedding bands.

Life took on a routine, with Matthieu spending most of his time focusing on dance. Peter often took his laptop upstairs and sat in the cozy chair in the studio to work and watch Matthieu practice.

Nothing was as beautiful as watching Matthieu glide across the floor like he weighed nothing at all.

By June Matthieu was confident again and was gearing up to start attending fall classes.

Peter was thrilled. He had the best, most talented lover he could have asked for. He never doubted he was loved, nor ever left Matthieu in doubt of the returned affections.

A matching set of poster sized prints graced the bedroom walls. One of Peter and one of Matthieu in Speedos by the pool. In-between that was a third poster of them standing together on the beach exchanging vows.

# *“Caught in the Crossfire”*

*An Art Appreciation Series Story*

*Author: D. Sanders*

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It was wonderful, it was home and it was a love that was shared when fate had brought them together over cheap convenience store coffee and cigarettes.

No one could ask for more.

-END