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Gaylias

**OPERATION
THUNDERSPELL**

KAGE ALAN



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OPERATION THUNDERSPELL

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For my father.

Who told me I could be anything.
Boy...was he surprised.

Hugs & Appreciation To: Ralph (my Pookie), my parents, Jennifer Neault (my DragonCon partner in crime), Debbie Stokes, Joey Boiser, Our Lady of Inspiration Marianne Diva Labahn, Our Lady of Love Taps Kimberly Hayes, Jerry Yao, Christie Murphy, Don Zomberg, Pam Abel, Pam Carr, Andrew Yee, Elmer Connolly, Wempy Suhartono, Cindy Medley, Snooky, Carl Prytula, Le Minh Ky, Holly Phillips, Lucy Nettie Pfeiffer Basel, Robert Ball, Will Trestrail, CathyAnn Smith, Hieu Nguyen, Kim Baker Blair, Christine Kotila, David Francis, Yogi Yoeswoadi, Judith Warren, James Taylor Jr., Jerome Estoye, Judie Stewart, Dean Smith, Nicole Yao, Billy Kemp and Doro Pesch for her incredible song “Thunderspell.”

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❖ Chapter 1 ❖

NOBODY LIKED A GOOD OLD-FASHIONED, DOWNRIGHT SORDID scandal more than Byron and Tilda van Huffmeyer. Unadulterated gossip ran through their veins much like the ornate and severely overstated gold trim did around the rooms of their “modest” abode they opened on social occasions, i.e., dinner parties. After all, what better place to hear it out of the mouths of those who enjoyed spreading it than in the comfort and secret monitoring of one’s own home? This wasn’t just any gossip, either. Oh, no.

Nobody really cared who the rich and famous were banging, cheating on, cheating out of or otherwise screwing over anymore. The real focus was on all the up-and-coming wannabe hopefuls just under the radar who aspired to one day receive an invitation to such a gathering as the van Huffmeyer’s. They—the non-elite, the talentless ones desperately clawing their way to the top, were the prey. They were the ones now trying to bang the tabloid faces of the elite world.

Every gory detail, every dried stain of a questionable nature, every false promise made in the heat of an orgasm and every visit to a Beverly Hills physician who specialized in family planning—or, more accurately, family prevention—was carefully scrutinized to the nth degree. The real irony, though, the real Grand Poobah of them all, was that the van Huffmeyers were as credible as a certain senator’s account of what he was really doing in that airport restroom the day he was arrested.

A \$17.2-million mansion, purchased by a couple who didn’t exist working for a company that couldn’t be located and living on an income from a source unable to be traced never attracted too much attention from the neighbors, but somebody was bound to notice and

somebody did. The van Huffmeyers apparently didn't figure that into the equation.

Which left Nicholas Inker wondering if the husband-and-wife team were just that confident, which meant they had a back-up plan, or just that stupid, which meant they didn't. Whatever the case, they would have security measures to keep their secrets safe.

The door to the study containing Byron van Huffmeyer's private desk was already unlocked by the time Nicholas reached it, just as it should be. Unlocking a door wasn't any great feat, and it certainly wasn't the crowning achievement of the evening. No, that would be something else entirely. He took one glance in either direction to make sure the coast was clear, then guided the oversize poodle into the room and closed the door behind him.

"Was anybody suspicious?" a voice from the dark asked with just a hint of impatience.

"Not at all," Nicholas admitted, "so I flailed my arms around, snapped at people without provocation and acted like the biggest drama queen I could think of. Imagine the irony when your understanding, ever-tranquil mother came to mind." He reached over and turned on a small lamp as the dog sat down beside him.

"Is that for saying I don't want to pick up sushi on the way home tonight?" Anthony Hamilton stepped into the light, and the two thirty-somethings faced each other. "Or for mentioning earlier that your stubborn, annoying, whiny pissed-off side who hangs up on me when you don't like what I'm saying is reminiscent of that sweet, wholesome, ever-so angelically patient mother of *yours*?"

"I didn't say we had to have sushi tonight," Nicholas argued. "I just don't want clam chowder again. It gives me gas."

"What doesn't?"

"Sushi." He was still curious, though. "All I wanted to know—before the flailing started—is how you knew what we're looking for would be in here. Isn't this a bit too obvious? I mean, everybody leaves what they don't want to be found in the study. It's usually the solution in the FBI version of Clue—Mr. van Huffmeyer in the study with the incriminating evidence. I'd have started in the basement."

"I know you enjoy these little forays outside the office with me..." Anthony didn't bother hiding his patronizing tone. "...but since you're not field-certified, maybe you should simply listen instead of

questioning me. I can keep you safe so you can go back and make up all sorts of exaggerated stories for your little friends at the Agency's training complex."

"And here I thought we were equals since you aren't field-certified, either." He crossed his arms. "You upgrade computers, load software and pretend to understand why the network goes down when we all know it's because the directors stream music in their offices." Silence. "So...no explanation?" Nicholas pressed goodnaturedly.

"Okay. Let me make this simple for you." Anthony's patience was wearing thin. "You never let rich guests like these anywhere near where you don't want them to be because they feel entitled to snoop. For instance, I saw the Rothschilds heading downstairs to pick out a bottle of wine. Do you really think they aren't going to take the opportunity to poke around?"

"Unless the van Huffmeyers wanted to hide it in plain sight," Nicholas offered.

"This is why I'm the brains and you just stand there and look pretty." Anthony glared. "Use your eyes. The three rooms of the house that are least accessible to a potential raid or burglary are the main bedroom, adjoining bathroom and this study. Of course, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the heavily reinforced fire door that separates this area of the house from the rest."

"I see." Nicholas watched him circle the desk. "So, aside from vague intelligence reports, your entire prep work for this consisted of examining blueprints?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Because you're about to pull that chair out from behind the desk."

"And?" Anthony put his hand on the aforementioned chair.

"I wouldn't do that," Nicholas warned.

"Why not?" He froze.

"It's booby-trapped." Nicholas crossed his arms. "That wouldn't be in the prints."

"Alright." Anthony humored him and took a step back from the desk. "Why do you think it's booby-trapped?"

"Because there's always a booby-trap." Hadn't his partner learned a thing from all those B-movies they watched? "That, and I'm using my eyes."

Anthony winced as the phrase was lobbed back at him.

“These people are a little like you when you’re off the job—sloppy. This is an expensive hardwood floor, yet there’s no padding, carpet or anything else under the desk to stop it from making indentations that’d require extensive and costly refinish work. Now, if you look at where the chair is, I’ll bet there aren’t any roller grooves. But if you look in front of the desk, what do you see?”

“What are...?” Anthony used a Mini Maglite to examine the area by the chair. “No grooves, just like you said.” He circled around to the front. “There’s some wear-and-tear here, though.”

“Exactly. Which means somebody has been spending a great deal of time on their back—nice for them, I might add, since I haven’t, as of late and through no fault of my own—but doing what?”

“Doing something underneath the desk,” Anthony admitted through clenched teeth.

“So, the question becomes ‘What’s underneath it?’” Nicholas hated to admit it, but he secretly enjoyed showing his partner up. No, come to think of it, he liked to admit it.

“Do you mind telling me why you felt the need to interject that rather obvious little jab at our sex life when...” Anthony stopped. “Hello? I’m talking to you. What are you doing?”

“I’m petting Precious.” Nicholas looked up from the dog with the most innocent expression he could fake. “Sorry. It sounded like you were going to blah-blah-blah for a while.”

“Why do I bother?” Anthony seethed. “Well, according to you, I *haven’t* been bothering.” Now he was simply exasperated. “And how many times have I told you it’s a bad idea to be overly friendly with the canine crew?”

“The same number of times I’ve asked you for a legitimate reason how petting a dog can be construed as being ‘overly friendly.’ Besides, Precious is a good girl, isn’t she?” Nicholas rubbed behind her ears. “She led me right to you.”

“A dog knows its master.” Anthony lay down on his back and, after grabbing another flashlight out of his little black bag, shimmied under the desk and carefully examined its underside. “You could learn from her.”

“And here I thought she was trained to sniff out the biggest ass.” Nicholas knew he wouldn’t get a reaction to the comment right away, but it was coming. “What do you see?”

“Here’s a shocking headline—you’re right,” Anthony purposely sounded surprised, which he knew would annoy Nicholas. “In addition to an overwhelming lack of cleanliness down here, there’s a series of filaments coming from the desk that are tied to three different parts of the chair.”

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“Oh.” There was a brief hesitation. “A small brick. I can pull some of it off—”

“I really wouldn’t touch that,” Nicholas warned.

“Why?”

“Stay where you are.” Nicholas knelt on the floor and positioned himself between Anthony’s legs, face down to his partner’s face up. “I’m going to crawl under here with you and use a mirror.”

“Please tell me this isn’t some sick little perverted way to get me into this position.” Because sarcasm never deflated a romantic moment, when they actually had one.

“Oh, no. If I were going to do that, your mother would have to be standing just outside the door, which you’d leave open so she could feel comfortable being able to check up on us and make sure we aren’t

doing anything. You know, kind of like the last month of our lives while she was visiting again?” He pulled himself up to where Anthony was waiting, then used a small compact mirror. “That’s not Silly Putty.”

“What is it?”

“C-Four.”

“Why in the hell would somebody have C-Four under their desk?” Anthony stared at him. “And exactly how is it that somebody whose job it is to take people through a repetition of sit-ups and time how fast they run a mile and a half knows what C-Four is?”

“I took a couple of the classes the Agency offered...and I watched *Alias*.” It sort-of sounded convincing. “You don’t see me questioning how a simple IT guy who denies people internet access to get his jollies managed to deactivate an entire security system, make his way upstairs and pick a lock in under ten minutes, do you?” Actually, Nicholas did wonder how that was possible. “And to answer your question, because it’s the most obvious place for a trap. So, please, keep raising your voice like that. Need I remind you how close you are to becoming a Canton-kabob?”

“A Canton-kabob?” Anthony glared at him.

“I heard it from Albert, that rice queen you work with. *Moh choh*.”

“No, you shut up! I hate when you try to speak Cantonese.” Anthony looked back at the hunk of explosive. “What do you want me to do now?”

“Do you see that wire on the side there?”

“Yeah.” He reached up.

“Don’t touch it.” Nicholas could feel the heat of his partner’s anger coming through their respective shirts. “Find another wire that’s the same color. It should be around the back in a very difficult to reach or see area.”

“Okay.” Anthony took his time. “Found it.”

“Take these...” Nicholas handed him a set of clamps. “...and very, very carefully attach them to either side of the wire, but don’t pull it out. Remember, our word du jour is *careful*.”

Now, if only he could remember whether they were supposed to pull the wire out or cut it.

“I’m just about—hey!” Anthony snapped when he was suddenly thrust forward an inch. “Do you mind? What the hell are you trying to do?”

“That wasn’t me.” Nicholas was both surprised and perplexed—someone had a grip on his sides. Nobody else had entered the room since he’d gotten there, and there couldn’t have been anybody in there before they’d arrived. Anthony would have noticed. So, who...?

He was thrust forward again, only this time there was an identifiable rhythm to it.

“Oh, hell, no!”

“What *is* that?” Anthony didn’t know whether they were being attacked or experiencing an earthquake. Whichever the case, the look of utter indignation on his partner’s face was priceless.

“Precious is a boy,” Nicholas informed him, looking as though he’d bitten into a lemon.

“What’s he doing?”

“What do you think he’s doing?”

“Well, he may sniff out the biggest ass, but at least he knows to hump the biggest bottom this side of the Pacific.”

“You know...” Nicholas glared. “...I used to be versatile before I met you.”

“You keep right on telling yourself that.” The whole matter could have been dropped right then, but Anthony couldn’t resist. “This is why I tell you not to be overly friendly with the canine crew. Now, tell him to get off.”

“Believe me, he’s trying.” Nicholas sounded thoroughly fed up. “And can I just point out that it’s sad, and I mean *sad*, that this is the most action I’ve had in the last month?”

“Then by all means, how is my competition?”

“Showing more interest than you have.” Nicholas craned his head towards the dog. “Precious, down!”

Precious wasn’t having any of it.

“Seriously, get the...if you leave a stain on my brand new William Fioravanti pants, I’ll neuter you with my teeth.”

“Excuse me?” Anthony tapped his partner’s shoulder. “When did you order a pair of William Fioravanti pants?”

“This is cute.” Nicholas turned back to him. “Interrogated by my partner about an internet purchase while under a desk with enough C-

Four to take out this section of the house all while being humped by an oversize poodle. Not the time for this conversation.” The door to the room jiggled. “Oh, shit. I think somebody’s coming in.”

“Didn’t you lock the door?” Anthony’s eyes grew wide.

“No. Didn’t you? Why do I always have to be the one to think of everything?”

He quickly backed up and obscured as much of his partner as he could. Sure enough, the door flew open, and there stood Mr. Rothschild. The nosey curmudgeon had already made his way from the basement to the upstairs. Not bad for a man in his seventies.

“What are you doing in here?” Rothschild had probably seen his fair share of kink, but this was something new, and from his expression he couldn’t quite take it all in and make sense of it fast enough to decide if he was turned on, revolted or both.

“Do you mind?” Nicholas demanded while Precious continued to go to town. “He’s not finished yet. Fuck off and wait your turn!”

The door shut as quickly as it had opened.

“Of all the things they say we’re going to hell for...” He pushed the dog away and moved forward to rejoin his partner. “Now...” He felt the same grip on his sides, indicating Precious hadn’t taken the hint.

“Do you want to do something here before either the dog or the desk explodes?”

“Hand me that black nose-hair trimmer-looking thing in your tool kit.” Nicholas reached while bracing himself on his free hand.

“There isn’t a...” Anthony stopped. “How did this get in here?”

“I packed it.”

“No, *I* packed it,” Anthony insisted.

“No, you usually forget lots of useful things, so I repacked it.” He grabbed the item, adjusted something on it with a flick of his thumb then tapped a switch.

“You repacked the bag I’d already packed?”

“Yeah. You didn’t pack the little black nose-hair trimmer-looking thing, did you?” Nicholas reached back towards Precious. “You can’t believe the stuff from the office I find in your drawers.”

A short hiss of air sounded, and Precious let out a surprised yip then fell silent.

“You’d better hope they never come looking for any of it.”

“First of all, stay the hell out of my drawers.” Anthony wasn’t in the mood.

“It’s been practically impossible to get into them with your mother there.” Nicholas returned the nose-hair trimmer-looking thing to his partner.

“Oh, shut up about that! And what the hell is this thing?”

“My new pen tranquilizer stun-gun.”

“You *tranked* the dog? Dominic isn’t going to be happy and... that’s not standard issue.” Anthony studied it.

“You’re right,” Nicholas agreed on both counts. Dominic, their short, flamboyant gay coworker and head animal trainer, was going to be spitting nails at him for this. “It’s custom-made. Trust me, Precious will be up and humping in an hour.”

“Custom-made? When did you buy that?”

“Uh...” Nicholas thought for a moment. “It came with the pants.”

“You and I are going to have a long talk when we get home. Now, do you want to tell me what I’m supposed to do to defuse this thing before the old guy alerts the entire household?”

“Sure.” Nicholas looked at the mechanism one more time with the mirror then started backing up. “You see that red wire?” Anthony muttered that he did. “I want you to take a pair of clippers and...um... cut it.” He stood and backed up towards the door. “I think.”

“That’s not funny.” Anthony didn’t know whether he should cut the wire or just scrap the mission before they were caught. “Do you really want me to cut it?” No answer. “Nicholas?” He heard the door handle turn. “Where are you going? *Nicholas!*”



It took old man Rothschild three minutes to make it downstairs and relate the story to any listening ear in the vicinity and another three minutes for the van Huffmeyers to realize he wasn’t drunk and that they actually were being burgled. Of those six minutes, Anthony and Nicholas took two to finish disarming the C-4, one to find the hidden compartment, one to bicker about how to open the compartment, another to argue about who was going to carry the contents and a final one to pack the tools and pick up the dog. Each also accused the other of not moving fast enough.

“Stairs?” Anthony suggested, alert for any sign of danger.

“Good idea,” Nicholas agreed. “We can meet security head-on.”

“A simple ‘no’ would have sufficed.” It had been a stupid idea, so how could he turn it around? The easiest way was to blame Nicholas. “You seem to think you’re the brains. How do we get out of here?”

“First, by not finding a way to blame me if things go badly.” Nicholas was used to the trick. “Second, let’s go for the veranda outside the master bedroom.”

“And then what?” Anthony didn’t like the sound of this plan any more than his own. “I haven’t mastered the ability to float like they do in Chinese movies. This is more like *Crouching Asian, Half-Witted Gweilo*.”

“Have you ever considered talking to someone about all of this pent-up hostility you have?” Nicholas immediately recognized “the look.” “I didn’t think so.” He held up the leash. “We can use this to take us down one at a time.”

“A retractable leash?” Anthony could only think of one use for it right now, and he wasn’t sure he could get it around a certain someone’s neck before his intentions became transparent.

“It’s designer, compliments of the boys back at the lab, the ones who never get out much, and after meeting them, we understand why.” Nicholas smirked. “Or we could just jump into the pool.”

“What pool?” Anthony demanded.

“There’s always a pool. It’s part of the whole B-movie equation—evil couple in question plus plucky heroes plus forthcoming big explosion equals somebody jumps into the pool to escape.”

“You couldn’t tell me any of this earlier?” Anthony shot back.

“Whiner.”

“Hack.”

The two advanced down the darkened hallway until they came to the master bedroom. Oddly enough, the door wasn’t locked, but it turned out to be false security once they tried the one leading to the veranda.

“It’s locked.” Anthony jiggled it.

“They’re always something.” Nicholas knew he could get the door open the old-fashioned way, but he was still holding Precious. “You’ll have to do it.”

“Do what?” Anthony glanced back at him.

“Bake a homemade apple pie, Rose,” Nicholas delivered in his best Bea Arthur voice. “Open the door.”

“Okay!” Anthony glared then delivered a side kick to the door that sent him sprawling backwards onto the floor. “Ow.”

“Nice going, Hong Kong Phooey. I meant turn the lock to the unlocked position and step outside.”

“You get rear-ended by a poodle, and you’re giving me shit?” Anthony was a bit shaky standing up, but he managed to limp back to the door and examine the locking mechanism. “This isn’t your standard lock. It’s going to take me a minute.”

They heard a sound from the hallway.

“I think somebody’s coming,” Nicholas announced.

“Your powers of observation never cease to amaze me.”

Nicholas carefully laid Precious down on the floor and looked back in the direction from which they’d just come.

“Tell me again how I lucked out landing such a keenly aware stud like you?”

“Keep it up, and I’m going to tell them you’ve got TweetDeck loaded on your work computer.” Nickolas moved towards the hall.

“Where are you going?”

“I was thinking of stopping whoever it is,” Nicholas whispered, hoping the element of surprise would still be on his side.

“With what?”

“I don’t know. A baseball bat?”

“You don’t have a baseball bat.”

“Then I’ll use my penis.”

“So, it’s a softball game?”

“It’s certainly been one in our bed for the last month,” Nicholas muttered, then ventured out into the darkness.

“Simpleton.” Anthony rolled up his left sleeve and exposed his watch, then turned back towards the door leading to the veranda and, ultimately, freedom. “You get your jollies denying people internet access.” It felt good to mimic Nicholas when he was so close by, yet far enough away not to know he was being mimicked. “I’ll be fixing *your* internet access when we get back.” He pulled a curtain back to reveal an electric keypad. The room was definitely a trap for intruders—easy to get into, almost impossible to get out of. The operative word, of course, was *almost*.

“This is child’s play.” He flipped the top of his watch up to reveal a tiny keypad of his own. He tapped in a sequence, then flexed his

wrist in the direction of the pad on the wall. A tiny tubule shot out of the watch and landed dead center of where he needed it to. “I’m playing with nanotechnology, and he’s out there pretending to be a stereotypical straight guy. ‘Oh, I’ll protect you because I’m big, buff and bendy.’” It took a bit longer than he would have liked, but the pad on the wall finally made a series of short beeping noises, then clicked as the lock mechanism released. “Thank your lucky stars I love you enough to keep rescuing your white ass.”



Nicholas crouched low as he reentered the hallway. He could still hear Anthony mumbling to himself, but that was nothing new. Chances were he’d have to go in there and take care of opening the door on top of dealing with the intruder.

Fortunately, it looked like there was only one of those, which meant one of two things—they only had one guard, or they were only sending one guard up to assess the situation before several more stormed the area. Okay, so that was probably three things, but essentially two if one looked at it slightly skewed...or happened to be poor at math.

As any professional should, the intruder was moving slowly and methodically towards where Nicholas now waited. It wouldn’t be a problem taking the man down the old-fashioned way, but how undelightfully boring.

He reached out and felt a slim yet fairly sturdy table, but how could that help? The fire wall separating the two areas was still between them, and there were several support beams that went across the ceiling overhead and hung down fairly low in a decorative fashion. So, if he combined that with a scene he remembered from an early Van Damme film, it might just give him a fun little edge.

The guard continued his cautious approach until he was finally right on top of Nicholas. Or rather, Nicholas was on top of him, legs spread in a perfect split across the ceiling and feet anchored to either side of the wall. The man had no clue what hit him as Nicholas dipped his head and dove for the floor. He wrapped his legs around the guard’s neck on the way down and flipped the man head over heels onto his back. It was fluid and perfectly executed, but apparently not enough to knock him out. Nicholas tensed when he heard the guard struggling to regain his senses.

“Amateur.”

Isshinryu training immediately kicked in, and Nicholas applied pressure with both hands to areas of the man’s neck. It was anticlimactic and nowhere near what he was capable of, but there was always the chance Anthony might come looking for him. Getting caught showing off would be a very bad thing, not to mention against the rules. It was one of the stipulations Richard had insisted on when he learned Nicholas’s and Anthony’s relationship had turned into something more permanent nine years ago. And speaking of Anthony...

“So, it’s a softball game,” Nicholas mimicked his partner and sprang to a standing position. “Keyboard pusher. Thank your lucky stars I love you enough to keep rescuing your Asian ass.”

Now, just one last thing to attend to...



“What took you so long?” Anthony asked when Nicholas hurried back into the room.

“I...uh...had to do something with...you know...the thing.” Nicholas did his best to evade the question.

“Why? How many guards were there?” Anthony knew this particular game, too.

“Just the one.” He picked Precious back up.

“I thought I heard a commotion...or something.” The last bit was deliberately left vague, just on the chance there really had been a scuffle.

“No.” Nicholas shrugged. “The idiot thought he was going to surprise us and ended up jumping right into the study door. It’s probably a good thing, since I doubt I could have taken him. It’s not like I’m trained for that. What was with the lock?”

“Just like you said.” Anthony faked the best sheepish look he could muster. “It was a simple turn-and-open, only I was turning it the wrong way.” Something was still amiss. “What did you do with the body?”

“Put it somewhere safe. So...” Nicholas once again changed the subject. “...you know, I could probably go for clam chowder.”

Anthony would normally be a bit more suspicious about his partner’s willingness to accommodate him, but then, he’d exaggerated about the lock.

“Actually, sushi doesn’t sound all that bad.”

“Since when do you compromise?” Nicholas accused him.

“Since when do you give in so easily?” Anthony shot back.

“Hypocrite.”

“*Bak chee tsee.*”

Several loud noises sounded from the end of the hall and broke them out of their face-off. It was probably the entire security detail attempting to break down the fire door Nicholas had shut and locked.

“We should really go.” Nicholas hurried towards the veranda. “In fact, just jump when you get to the edge.”

“What did you do?” Anthony followed after him, now slightly panicked.

“I ran a wire from the C-Four to the fire door.”

“You did *what?*”

Two grown men—a well-adjusted gay couple consisting of a wide-eyed-with-alarm white male and highly agitated-and-expressing-it Chinese male—and one unconscious, oversexed male poodle with a gender-misleading name leapt over the second-story railing just as a large explosion and accompanying fireball rocked and lit up the area behind them. Bits of furniture, flooring, walls, clothing, battery-operated items from Mrs. van Huffmeyer’s nightstand and other debris rained down around and upon them until, at seemingly long last, they landed in the anticipated pool with several loud splashes.

A single, solitary sentence rang out in the chaotic aftermath.

“I hope your fucking Fioravanti pants are ruined.”

❖ Chapter 2 ❖

IT TOOK AN HOUR AND A HALF FOR NICHOLAS AND ANTHONY to make it back to the Agency's Los Angeles headquarters, with most of that time spent drying off, trying to rouse the still-groggy Precious and making sure they weren't being tailed. Dominic definitely wasn't going to be pleased that his animal had been tranked. The little Oompa Loompa would most likely threaten to bring them up on charges again, actually try, have it rejected and then give them as much grief as possible. Was it any wonder someone had taken a warning shot at him?

"There you are." Assistant Director Richard Landis set his phone down and looked up from a document he'd been jotting some notes on. "The lab just received the package you brought back, which means we should have something in the next few days. Albert will hopefully be able to give them a hand by then, too. Nice job, by the way, but did you have to blow up the house?"

"I didn't blow up the house," Nicholas objected. "Well, not the whole house."

"He's right," Anthony agreed. "He only blew up a few rooms on the second floor. I'm sure nobody will notice."

"Nobody died," Nicholas added. "I put the guard I knocked—who knocked himself out on the other side of the fire door. All the damage happened on our side, which works to our advantage, if you think about it." His partner and boss weren't putting much effort into seeing the upside. "They'll never know if we took what they were hiding, since the study is just a little bit dusty now."

"They call those cinders," Anthony clarified.

“I...” He gave his partner an annoyed side-look then turned back to Richard. “I’m sorry. You were saying about what a good job we did?”

“I’m hoping what you brought back gives us some indication as to where the van Huffmeyers have been getting their money and where it’s going.” Richard leaned back in his chair. “We’re thinking a political connection, maybe payoffs or blackmail.”

“That narrows it down to about a hundred senators and four hundred-thirty-five members of Congress,” Nicholas theorized.

“That’s not funny.” Richard’s brow furrowed.

“I’m not laughing.” He moved to sit in one of two seats in front of their boss’s desk.

“Did you wash your hands after handling the dog?” Anthony piped up.

“Yes...” Nicholas’s jaw clenched. “...I did.”

“Did you use soap?”

“Yes.” He saw the hint of a smile forming on Richard’s mouth. “And before you ask, I used the antibacterial kind you make me keep at my desk. Now, can we finish our lesson in politics here?”

“I’ve always wanted to ask you.” Richard leaned forward. “Since your political affiliation seems to be a source of amusement around here. How is it again that you’re a registered Republican?”

“First...” Nicholas sat down without further interruption. “...it does my heart good to know they’re aware they have an out and proud gay American on their mailing list. Second, and most important, I’m a registered Republican who goes home, gets down on all fours and is willingly plugged, plowed, prostate-pruned and many other descriptive P-words by a Democrat as often as I can get it.” He enjoyed watching Richard cringe. “And I can’t get it often enough.”

“Now you know why we don’t have many friends,” Anthony interjected. “He insists on saying that at every dinner party we go to.”

“Just the one,” Nicholas corrected him.

“Yes, the Republican National Convention.”

“Are you familiar with ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell?’” Richard asked with deadpan sincerity.

“In the same way the Bush administration was familiar with the legality of wiretapping.”

“Speaking of people in charge...” Anthony wanted very much to move things along. “...won’t your wife be upset you’re here working late yet again?”

“I believe she recently bemoaned that her ‘little Pookie-Monster’...” Nicholas couldn’t help mentioning the pet name she’d let slip during one of their many long conversations. “...wasn’t spending as much time at home whippin’ her little—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence!” Richard cut him off. “And you have no idea how much I hate that she still talks to you after all these years.”

Dominic stormed in.

“I need to speak to you!” He crossed his arms and stood as straight as he could, mostly because he thought it made him look a little taller than his actual five feet, five inches. It was also because Nicholas liked to rest his elbow on Dominic’s head and make a crack about the man’s age, height, attire and lack of sexual prowess with either sex.

“Oh, look. It’s royalty. Good evening, your heinous.”

“What’s wrong with his anus?” Anthony knew the dance.

“Look at it.” Nicholas gestured toward Dominic’s ass. “It’s huge!”

“It certainly isn’t improved by those ten-dollar T.J. Maxx pants, either.” Anthony hated people who couldn’t dress. It was like dating someone who wore cheap shoes.

“Would you two please stop?” Richard glanced at his watch and sighed. “It’s late, Dominic. What do you want?”

“I’d like to know who used a tranquilizer dart on my dog?” Dominic spun around and glared at Nicholas and Anthony.

“That would be him.” Anthony pointed.

“That would be me.” Nicholas raised his hand. “I had to disarm the dog before Anthony could disarm the C-Four and before he finished humping my new pair of William Fioravanti pants. ‘He’ being Precious who was doing the humping, of course.”

“Thank you.” Anthony appreciated the clarification.

“Your dog’s fine,” Nicholas reassured the troll. “He’s just a little groggy and disoriented.”

“Like your dates at the park.” Anthony couldn’t help himself.

“What I’d like to know...” Nicholas crossed his arms. “...is who gives a male dog a name like Precious, anyway?”

“What’s wrong with it?” Dominic demanded.

“It’s a little *Silence of the Lambs*.”

“I can’t tell you how often I’ve told him not to be so friendly with the animals,” Anthony added. Tonight was just a buffet of excess.

“Yes.” Nicholas turned to him, “Please keep bringing that up, Hannibal Lecture.”

“I realize you guys could do this all night,” Richard interrupted, “but I’d like to get home to my wife while she still wants me there.” He glanced at Dominic. “No charges tonight, okay? Just go check on Precious again, make sure she’s—”

“He’s,” Nicholas clarified. “Ya see how easy it is?”

“*He’s* alright, then go home. Okay?”

“Fine.” Dominic gave Nicholas and Anthony one additional dirty look each then stormed out of the office.

“What a...” Anthony started.

“Fucktard,” Nicholas finished.

“You two are something else.” Richard rubbed his temples. “You’ll snipe at each other, yet the moment someone else takes a shot at one of you...”

“We go after them like Albert does Asian men?” Nicholas offered.

“That’s hardly a fair comparison,” Anthony objected.

“It’s fair. People think *I’m* a rice queen until they meet him.” Nicholas threw the comment out knowing full well Richard would take the bait.

“What’s a rice queen?”

They provided him with the definitive answer. “Albert.”

“Where is Albert, anyway?” Anthony inquired. “I figured he’d be in the lab, but we didn’t see him and then you said something about him helping out in a few days.”

“Medical quarantine.” Richard held a folder up for them to see.

“For what?” Nicholas wondered if Albert had been hanging around Dominic.

“HIPAA.” Richard seemed reluctant to say anything else. They were going to find out anyway, though, weren’t they? They’d press and guess and guess and press until he finally gave in no matter what the Health Insurance and Accountability Act stated he not tell them. “Itching.”

“Poison ivy?” Anthony made the obvious guess. After all, the man frequented Griffith Park. Wasn’t that also where Dominic hung out?

“Not exactly.” More hesitation.

“Then what?” Nicholas knew Anthony wasn’t going to back down, so Richard might as well just get it out in the open.

“He returned two days ago from seeing...” Richard paused as if deciding how he could put it and still respect Albert’s privacy, not to mention remain the least bit politically correct. “...um...”

“His little brown boys in Bangkok?” Anthony offered. They all knew about Albert’s trips and tastes in ethnic men.

“Where he goes to bang his...” Nicholas suggested.

“Yes.” Richard winced. “Thank you for that visual, Nicholas.”

“When did he go into quarantine?” Anthony persisted. “I just saw him twenty-four hours ago.”

“This morning.”

“What did the doc say?” Nicholas hoped it wasn’t anything serious, but then, Albert did tend to do these kinds of things on a frequent enough basis to know better. It must be horrible to go through life getting an instant erection around anyone of Eastern ethnicity. Would that constitute a new form of allergy? He’d have to ask.

“Medical says he should have sought immediate attention when he first started scratching.” Richard really shouldn’t have told them that, either. “We’re getting off the subject again. I want you two to relax for a couple of days, enjoy yourselves for a change, and I’ll give you a call when we have something.”

“Wait a minute.” Anthony realized something wasn’t adding up. “Seriously, scratching? He went from itching to *scratching*?” He reached down and involuntarily scratched his leg. “When did that happen?”

“I wouldn’t,” Nicholas warned Richard.

“A day ago.”

Nicholas turned to Anthony. “Don’t ask him.”

“Crabs?”

Nicholas turned to Richard. “Don’t answer him.”

“Scabies.”

“Oh, God.” Anthony held his head in hands. “He was sitting at my desk yesterday. Those things—they can stay dormant for up to three

days. I have scabies living on my chair!” Something else dawned on him. “I could have brought them home.” He looked Nicholas, horrified. “Do you remember when I was itching earlier?”

“You don’t have scabies.” Nicholas knew he’d be repeating that over and over during the next twenty-four hours.

“We need to stop by Walgreens on the way home.” Anthony was already putting a mental list together of everything he’d need to eradicate the little sons-of-bitches—and then some.

“Thank you for this.” Nicholas glared at his superior. “You try living with a hypochondriac.”



“Did you take your shoes off?” Anthony had barely walked through the door, taken his own shoes off and set the contents of his nonprescription pharmaceutical buying spree down on the counter before starting their nightly routine.

“Do you see my shoes sitting there?” Nicholas headed to the refrigerator and pulled a Vernors out. It was the Detroit remedy for almost any throat or stomach ailment.

“I’m just asking.”

“I’m just saying.” He turned the cap and took a quick swig. Anthony would soon demand he use a glass, but for right now, he needed immediate relief. “Of course, I can understand why you might have missed them, since they’re actually, you know, where they belong.”

“You’re just in a bad mood because I made you stop at the drugstore before we came home.”

“No,” Nicholas corrected him, “I’m upset because you made me stop at *three* drugstores before we came home. Any restaurant worth getting carryout from was closed. I hate having microwave burritos for dinner.”

“This from the guy who would have existed on Coney dogs five days a week if it hadn’t been for me.” Anthony’s brow furrowed the moment he saw Nicholas drinking from the bottle. “I’d swear you were born in a cornfield.” He moved to the cupboard and pulled out two glasses.

“Burritos give me gas.” It was a valid complaint.

“What doesn’t?” It was a valid response.

“Sushi.” Nicholas didn’t skip a beat.

“Don’t start.” Anthony reached for the Vernors.

“Close the cupboard.” Nicholas withheld the bottle until he did.

“Speaking of your deficiencies.” Anthony emptied the entire contents of his pockets—Kleenex, loose change and receipts—out onto the kitchen counter, another endearing habit of his. “What was up tonight with you repacking my bag? That’s insulting.”

“Please throw the Kleenex away. That’s disgusting.” What grudge his partner had against garbage cans and their capacity to store used Kleenex remained a mystery even after all these years.

“I happen to be one of the top minds at the Agency in my field.” Anthony picked the Kleenex up and opened the garbage-can lid. “I take a certain amount of pride in my work and deserve a certain amount of respect.” He dumped the small pile in then turned back to lecture Nicholas some more.

“Please close the lid.”

“They...” Anthony paused, closed the lid and whirled back around with a vengeance. “They pay me a handsome salary to get the computers up and running, not to mention keep them running at any given time. Do you know how organized and aware of everything I have to be?” He fished in his pockets for keys, which were missing from the counter.

“You dropped them in your shoe when you closed the lid.”

“Shit.” Anthony retrieved them, then put his hands on his hips and stared at Nicholas. “You know, you could help me.”

“I’m always helping you.” He refilled their glasses, then opened the freezer to grab some ice.

“Did you wash your hands yet?” Anthony stopped him before he could touch a single cube.

“Did you?”

They both walked to the sink and lathered up with antibacterial soap.

“Do you want to tell me about the William Fioravanti pants?” Anthony figured since Nicholas was trapped at the sink for a minute or two and couldn’t easily escape it was as good a time as any to follow up on that little matter.

“What about them?” He played innocent.

“You couldn’t tell me you ordered them?” It was in the guise of a question, but it was really an accusation—a little trick Anthony had learned from his mother.

“Didn’t I?” Nicholas did his best to fake some warmth into his smile, a little trick *he’d* learned from Anthony’s mother. “Well, in all fairness, you didn’t tell me when you ordered your pair of Ralph Laurens.”

“Yes, and as I recall, you went and picked up an H. Huntsman as soon as you saw them.”

“Which then prompted you to shop for a Jon Green.”

“Exactly who is it you’re trying to impress?” Anthony changed the direction of the disagreement.

“Nobody,” Nicholas replied matter-of-factly. “I’m just trying to annoy you.” He reached over, grabbed a towel and dried his hands.

“Well, it worked.” Anthony took the towel from him.

“See?” Nicholas grinned. “Mission successful. I’m two for two this week.”

“This conversation isn’t over,” Anthony warned as he watched his partner drift into the living room in search of the mail. “Not by a long shot.” He set the towel down onto the counter.

“Hang the towel back up.” Nicholas didn’t even have to look to know he’d have to say it.

Anthony joined him a few moments later, further annoyed that he’d been ordered to perform a chore that was obviously something his insignificant other should have willingly done for him.

“Why are you frowning?”

“Credit card statement.” Nicholas waved it in the air.

“What’s wrong with it?” Anthony walked over to the stereo and opened the single-disc component. While they evenly split the Sony 400 Disc MegaStorage CD changer, the single disc holder was fair game.

“For starters, I found it lying on top of the envelope instead of in it.”

“Kai?”

“I don’t mind that your cousin comes over, keeps an eye on the place, brings in the mail, eats our food, screws up both entertainment systems because he doesn’t understand the remote controls, goes through our drawers, tries to pick the locks on our personal studies,

uses our phone to call Hong Kong during peak hours and leaves stains of a questionable nature on my leather chair in the TV room while surfing internet porn on the flat-screen, but I do draw the line at invasion of privacy.”

“Alright, I’ll talk to him.” Anthony stopped. “Who took out my CD?”

“That may have been me,” Nicholas confessed. “I did it on the chance company might drop by. Do we really want to force somebody to listen to Everything But The Girl? I mean, could you be any more gay?”

“Since when does listening to Everything But The Girl mean somebody’s gay?” Anthony didn’t bother waiting for the answer. “It’s worldly, like Sade.”

Nicholas cleared his throat a little too loudly.

“Oh, yes, because the latest Doro is so relaxing and meditative. Nobody likes playing your Wanger collection either.”

“That’s Winger,” Nicholas corrected him. “I like listening to Winger and playing with your wanger. Do you think you can keep them straight?” He turned and headed towards their bedroom.

“There’s something very wrong with you.” Anthony closed the CD deck, turned the stereo off and followed him. First, though, he checked the lock on his personal study to make sure Kai hadn’t actually gotten in.

Nicholas, meanwhile, checked the answering machine. The indicator showed only one new message, so he knew it wasn’t Anthony’s mother. She tended to leave multiple messages with multiple demands, none of them particularly important and all of them just to tell Anthony what he should be doing for her. The woman hated when Nicholas answered, which he tried to do whenever he could and for that very reason.

“Hi, this is Lackluster Video calling. You have several DVDs that are overdue, and we’ve put a freeze on your account until they’re returned. The titles are...um...” There was a distinct pause, and when the voice started speaking again, the tone was hushed. “*Boned On The Fourth Of July, A Cockwork Orange, It’s A Wonderful Lube and Carlito’s Threeway*. We’d appreciate it if you could drop them off at your earliest convenience. Thank you.”

“What was all that about?” Anthony hobbled into the room, taking his clothes off as he went and leaving a trail behind him. Never mind that they had two baskets sitting out next to the closet, one for colors and one for whites. No, it was much easier if he just left everything on the floor for Nicholas to pick up.

“Dishonorable and annoying cousin borrow honorable Lackluster Video card again.” Nicholas surveyed the scene in disbelief as Anthony’s socks went flying in different directions.

“Porn?”

“Yep.” Was there anything else as attractive to an eighteen-year-old twink? Nicholas took a deep breath. It was time to test the waters of another area of their relationship. “Are you ready to do that thing we still do together so well when your mother isn’t here?” He playfully raised and lowered his eyebrows several times.

“Absolutely.” It was almost too easy, but Anthony was actually looking forward to it. He needed it tonight. “It’s been too long.”

“I’ll get the washcloth and buff-puff for your back.”

Nicholas knew Anthony’s idea of Heaven was nothing more than one giant scrub in the shower to get rid of all the dead skin and nasty things that only existed in his head. The man hated being given a massage, but he loved being buffed. If Nicholas played his cards right and scrubbed all the hard-to-reach nooks and crannies, Anthony might relent and offer up a little nookie in his cranny before dozing off. It could happen, but it probably wouldn’t. But it could.

“What bath-and-body gel do you want to use? *Polo*, *Tommy*, *Harvard* or their new scent?”

“The new one.” Anthony turned the shower on and waited for the water to warm up. He was going to enjoy this sooooo much, but it was still toooooo cold to get in.

“By the way.” Nicholas shed his clothes and came up behind him, put his arms around him and pulled him close. “I think your cousin might be gay.”

“Did you wash your hands again after touching the mail?”

Nicholas pushed Anthony into the still-chilly water.

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