

REVERIE



DAWN KIMBERLY JOHNSON

“WHAT are you grinning at?”

“Huh?” Jake asked, coming back to himself.

Craig eyed him suspiciously. “You’re sitting at your desk, grinning like an idiot. What gives?”

“Oh,” Jake said, quickly gathering up the pages of his report and arranging them, “just a weird dream I had last night.”

“Didn’t look weird.”

“What?”

Craig stood in the doorway of the office, smiling knowingly at his friend and coworker. “Your expression was more along the lines of remembering an off-the-charts hot encounter, and that’s not weird, bro. It’s lucky.”

Jake looked at him over his glasses. “I’m not giving you any details.”

“Aw, why?” Craig whined.

“Because the last time you invited me to share the details, you asked me to substitute a woman for the guy I was fucking.”

Craig walked over and dropped into the chair in front of Jake’s desk. “So?”

“So... you’re supposed to find more straight-guy friends to cull your sexual fantasies from.”

“Sorry.” Craig smiled, blushing a bit.

The truth was, Jake wanted to talk about it, and Craig was the nearest fella at hand, but the details of Jake’s erotic dream would no doubt offend his frail, straight, masculine sensibilities. Nevertheless he began his strange tale, hoping his friend wouldn’t barf all over his desk.

In the dream he was at the Club, feeling lonely and horny. He watched the men on the dance floor, some shirtless—he was surprised to find he was as well—all sweating, happy, and beautiful. He’d gone over to the bar to order but couldn’t get the bartender’s attention, so he decided to simply wait until the crowd of demanding, thirsty customers had thinned. Then he saw him, the most gorgeous man he could imagine, which made sense, being a dream and all. He was slender with longish wavy blond hair, full lips, a dazzling smile, dimples, and sort of sad puppy-dog eyes.

He was dancing with some muscular, bald guy—not Jake’s type at all, but he was clearly appealing to Dimples. The two of them swayed together on the dance floor, the lights pulsating above them as Muscles embraced Dimples from behind. Dimples raised his hands and caressed his dancing partner’s shiny, smooth head, pulling the man down for a kiss.

Jake could almost feel the sensation of their tongues fencing with each other, his own lips parting as he watched them. Then the kiss was broken, and Dimples opened his eyes. He looked across the dance floor, through the undulating bodies surrounding him, past a couple of men getting into an argument and shoving match, around a

waiter rushing by with a tray of drinks, and directly into Jake's eyes.

Their gazes locked so long that a slow grin spread across Jake's face, and he stood straighter, taller, pushing off from the bar, just as Dimples stopped swaying with Muscles. For a moment it looked as though he might cross the room to speak to Jake.

The next thing Jake knew, he was in an unfamiliar room of a darkened house or apartment. "Hello," he called. His voice sounded funny to him, and there was no answer. He walked cautiously down a hallway and found himself in a living room. Then he heard muffled sounds coming from a room behind him, possibly the room he'd just exited. Jake turned and retraced his steps.

The door to the room he'd just walked out of was nearly closed, and a warm, welcoming glow now emanated from it. Jake walked right up to the door and leaned closer to listen. He heard grunting, gasping, heavy breathing, and skin slapping against skin—*ah yes, the sounds of sex*. He remembered those. He stepped forward and gently pushed the door open a little wider, hoping it didn't squeak.

As he'd suspected, there was sex happening. It was hard, sweaty, loud, passionate sex, and it was happening between Dimples and Muscles. Jake's mouth fell open in shock and then into a grin as he watched Muscles pound the cute blond into the mattress. Dimples was facing the foot of the bed and the door, hands clawing at the duvet, eyes closed, lips parted, hair wet and clinging to his forehead, ass in the air and gripped roughly by Muscles.

“Uh, uh, uh, uh... oh yeah, yes, uh, yes,” he uttered with each thrust. Jake’s grip tightened on the doorframe as he watched, his breath quickening, a heat growing in his belly. He felt himself grow hard. It had been too long—he’d been alone for too long. Suddenly Dimples came, shouting his release into the duvet he had twisted into knots. Muscles came right after, burying himself all the way in the blond and collapsing on top of him. They lay like that, panting and caressing each other.

Dimples practically purred as Muscles’ fingers slid along his back, up his neck, and into his hair. “Mmm... you like that?” Muscles asked, reaching backward with his left hand.

“Yes.” Dimples raised his head a bit, the look on his face sated and dreamy.

“You’re a beautiful boy,” Muscles said, stroking Dimples’ hair. “So smooth and slender.”

Dimples grimaced a bit, trying to reposition himself. “God, I can’t believe you’re still hard.”

“What can I say, babe? You’re so hot.” Muscles withdrew his hand from under the pillow, and in it was clasped something shiny. “So tight around my cock,” he whispered, tightening his grip on Dimples hair.

Jake’s body tensed, and he rushed forward into the room shouting, “No!”

Dimples recoiled, staring right at him. Muscles was thrown off balance, hitting his head against the headboard and dropping the blade he was holding.

“And then you woke up?” Craig asked in awe.

“Yep.”

Craig hopped up from his seat. “You’re right, man. That was weird.” Jake chuckled. “Why were you smiling about that?”

Jake unconsciously tapped his pen on the base of his lamp and shrugged. “He was beautiful. He wasn’t hurt.” Jake thought about it further and shook his head, pointing and shaking his pen at Craig. “That dude—Muscles—I’m convinced he was going to slice that guy’s throat while his cock was still inside him.”

Craig winced, and Jake wasn’t sure if it was from the “slice that guy’s throat” or “cock was still inside him.”

His friend nodded. “You saved him.”

“That’s right,” Jake said, smiling. “Pushing papers around here doesn’t exactly make me feel like a hero, but last night, in my dream, I was.”

“DANIEL!” Lotta shouted as she came dashing into his hospital room, arms outstretched. He smiled and embraced her, taking care to avoid being blinded by her spiky hair coming at him like bright pink needles.

“I’m okay. I’m okay.”

She released him. “What happened? Tell me everything.” She pulled up a chair by his bed and leaned forward eagerly.

Daniel sighed. “I took this guy home and—”

“A stranger?”

“Yes. I met him at the Club.” He paused, waiting, but when Lotta had nothing to ask or add, he continued. “We

had stellar sex, and then....” Daniel tried to recall exactly what had happened, but what he was considering sharing with his best friend, he had not shared with the police when they’d questioned him.

“What?”

“I saw... something... something startled me, and I jumped back. I guess I knocked him backward, and he cracked open his skull on the headboard.”

“Holy shit!”

“There was a lot of blood, and he wasn’t moving, so I called an ambulance.”

“Sounds horrible.” Lotta popped a couple of sticks of nicotine gum in her mouth.

He smiled at her interest and shock. “That’s not the worst part. While I was on the phone with 911, I noticed a... a sc-scalpel on the floor by the bed, and—”

“Oh, you didn’t pick it up, did you?”

“Of course not! Don’t we always say... when the hero kneels by the murder weapon, don’t we always say, ‘don’t pick it up!’?” Lotta nodded vigorously. “But I did mention it to the operator, and she said she was sending the police as well.”

Lotta seemed satisfied for a moment. “Why the stitches?”

“Huh?”

“In your head there?” she asked, pointing at the scar just above his right eye.

Daniel flushed brightly. “Oh, well... the cops who spoke to me said that guy matched the description of someone they

suspected in more than eight murders across the country.” Lotta’s dark red lips formed a rigid O almost as wide as her blue eyes. “All the victims were blond, had been fucked from behind—men and women—and had their throats slashed... and I, uh, I guess I... sorta passed out, hit my head on the nightstand.

Lotta rolled this information around in her head as she nervously chewed her gum and scratched absently at her leg, just above the top of her combat boots. “But you’re okay, right?”

“Yep. Had a CAT scan and everything. They just want me to stay the night.” He looked her over and smiled. “Why are you dressed like that?”

She smiled and stood up, turning and posing to model her raggedy cutoff Army pants, leather jacket, fishnet stockings, and Rambunctious T-shirt. “You like? We’re doing a retro-punk layout for the mag.”

“How much of this ensemble do you actually own?” Daniel asked with a smile.

“Just the T-shirt. Dad saw them in concert years ago.”

A nurse came in, interrupting the fashion show. “I’m sorry. Visiting hours are ending. Your sister will—”

“Sister?” Daniel looked at Lotta, and she nodded, wide-eyed. “Oh, yeeaahh. Okay. See you tomorrow, Sis.”

Lotta leaned over him and kissed his cheek, following that up by licking her thumb and using it to remove the lipstick from his face. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow. Just give me a call when you’re ready, and you’re staying with me. No arguments!” Daniel smiled and nodded. He wasn’t thrilled

with the idea of staying at his apartment any time soon. “All right, I’m outta here—oh, hang on,” she said, turning back to face him from the door. “What startled you?”

“Hmm?”

“You said something startled you. That’s what made you react the way you did, knocking murder boy off his game.”

Daniel glanced at the nurse as she took his pulse. “I saw a shadow... in the doorway.”

“A shadow? Was someone else there?”

“Not exactly, but it looked like a man, and he came right at me.” Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel could see the nurse watching him oddly. “Looked like he was screaming at me.”

“Yikes.”

“Tell me about it.”

DANIEL had trouble getting to sleep. He was on edge, and a hospital wasn’t the most relaxing place to spend the night. He kept eyeing the door, wondering if he could lock it, but he realized the nurses probably wouldn’t like that. However, just the thought of someone, anyone, being able to stroll right into his room made him shiver. He carefully got out of bed and went to the windows. He reached up and drew back the curtains so he could look out on the city.

It was a clear night. He could see all the way to the Space Needle and even a couple of stars, which was rare. He looked up and watched the passing clouds, smiling whenever the moon and its glow peeked through. He looked down on

the city again. It teemed with life, and still he couldn't manage to find one decent man in the crowd, one guy who wanted something more than a quick fuck—or *to slash my throat*. He shuddered, sighed, and went back to bed, leaving the curtains open.

There was that one guy. The man he'd seen watching him at the Club. He'd been a bit drunk, all into his murderous dancing partner, but he'd seen a handsome, shirtless man standing by the bar, watching him intently. He had jet-black, super short hair—so short it couldn't really be mussed. Daniel smiled, remembering he'd thought about running his fingers through the guy's hair even as he was rubbing Baldy. Daniel suspected the guy's head would feel like a puppy's, rather than the skinless boiled chicken he was currently caressing.

The crowd had been so thick that Daniel only caught glimpses of what Mystery Man was wearing, but it looked like shorts. Weird on a cool night like that. The guy had stood up straight, looking like he might cut in on the dance, but then Daniel lost sight of him. And even though he'd searched before leaving with his psycho, he'd been unable to spot him again. Daniel rolled onto his side, facing the windows and the night sky. *Those are my choices: a scalpel-wielding psycho or some hottie who can't dress himself properly.* Daniel drifted off before he noticed the shadows in the corner thickening.

JAKE took a bite of his sandwich and popped the top on his jar of iced tea. He'd chosen a table right next to the windows

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so he could watch the people milling about the courtyard while he ate. Craig dropped into the seat opposite him with a smelly mystery sandwich encased in plastic wrap.

“Craig, tell me you didn’t get that out of the machine.”

“Why?” He was biting into it within seconds. It was egg salad. And worse yet, it *smelled* like egg salad. Jake shuddered. They ate in silence for a little while. “So....” Craig ventured.

He turned from the window to look at his friend. “So what?”

“Any more freaky dreams?”

Jake grinned. “Yeah, but you definitely don’t want to hear about this one.”

“Why? More man sex?” Craig asked, grimacing.

“No, actually, there wasn’t any.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Well, there was no sex, but there was—tenderness.”

“Good God, that’s even worse!” Craig looked like he wanted to bolt, which tickled Jake to no end. He finished off his lunch as he waited for his friend’s curiosity to get the better of him. “Okay, tell me.”

“It had the same guy in it.”

“Yeah? The blond?”

Jake nodded. “But he was in the hospital. He was sleeping.”

“What’s tender about that?”

“I watched him sleep for a bit,” Jake said, blushing a little. “I could hear phones ringing at the nurse’s station and

people moving through the hall outside his door. He had a bandage on his temple, and I sat on the bed and....” He hesitated, remembering what he’d done and suddenly feeling embarrassed about it. “And I brushed some of his hair back off his head to get a better look at it.”

Craig shrugged, already losing interest and eyeing the redhead from acquisitions as she carried her tray to the garbage can. “No offense, man, but that’s lame.”

Jake’s laugh came out as a bark. “What do you mean?”

“In the last dream you were all James Bond-y, coming to the rescue and all. And in this one you’re hovering over him like my big sister used to do with me when I scraped my knee.” Craig reached over and snagged several of Jake’s potato chips. “Lame,” he said, popping them into his mouth and getting up to chat a bit with the redhead before she vanished.

Jake watched him go as he considered his friend’s assessment and absently ate his remaining chips. *Nope, it was nice. I liked it.* He turned back to the window. He hadn’t told Craig how he’d wanted to kiss those full lips. He hadn’t told him that he had looked out the window and recognized the Space Needle. And he didn’t tell Craig that Dimples had been startled awake and looked right at him again. Jake smiled. *Those beautiful warm brown eyes.*

“YOU seem distracted tonight,” Lotta said, placing a bowl of beef stew in front of Daniel. Pixie, Lotta’s Australian shepherd, immediately appeared at his side and planted herself, eyeing the bowl intently.

“Do I?” he asked, unconsciously stroking Pixie’s silver-black coat. “Sorry.”

She shook her head. “No need to apologize. I understand. I’d be surprised if you weren’t preoccupied, considering what happened.” She set down a plate of bread and butter, which commandeered Pixie’s attention. She simply turned her eyes—one blue, one brown—to the plate, while her bottom remained firmly next to Daniel. “I’m wondering if you’d like to talk about it.”

Daniel shook his head. Honestly he hadn’t thought much about the almost-dying aspect of that night. He’d been ruminating more on the shadowy figure that had startled him and, ultimately, saved his life. He lifted a spoonful of the dark brown comfort. It smelled so good, and he smiled as he watched the steam rising off it. He blew on it before swallowing and winked at Lotta, who sat watching him expectantly.

“Great! Glad you like.”

“Your mother’s recipe?” he asked, downing another spoonful.

Lotta snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous. Dad’s the cook. Mom’s too busy being fabulously creative.” He nodded as he ate. Lotta’s mother was an author, photographer, filmmaker, and, most recently, a magazine publisher—hence the retro-punk photo shoot. Lotta looked a lot more like herself today: short dark brown hair, no makeup, wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt. “How’d you sleep last night?”

“At first it was tough, but I eventually nodded off.” He watched her butter a slice of bread as he considered whether to say anything further.

Lotta noticed. "What?"

"I... uh, had sort of a weird dream."

"Share."

"Remember that shadow I thought I saw at my apartment?" Lotta nodded, her eyes twinkling. "Last night I dreamed I woke up and he was in my hospital room."

"He or it?"

Daniel thought for a moment, his brow furrowing. "This time it was more of a 'he'."

She leaned forward. "What did he look like?"

"He wasn't really that clear, or... or focused, I should say.... Still more shadowy than not. I could sort of see through him, but he had dark hair and blue eyes."

"Did he touch you?"

Daniel snorted. "It was a dream, Lotta."

"I know, but did he touch you in the dream?"

"I don't think so." Daniel sighed. "He was just watching me, leaning over me." He shrugged. "Anyway, he was there one second and gone the next."

"You're haunted, man."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"No, seriously. This guy, this apparition appeared when you needed him most, and then he *shows* up in your hospital room?"

"One was a figment of my imagination, Lotta, and this one last night was just a dream."

“Whatever you say, Daniel,” she said dismissively, tasting her stew and seeming satisfied. “I’m going to ask Manny about it.”

“Manny?”

“He owns that bookshop downtown.”

Daniel frowned. “Not that rathole that stinks of incense?”

“He knows about such things,” she declared, tearing another hunk of bread apart.

Daniel shook his head at her and then eyed Pixie, who whined a bit and licked her lips, shifting quickly from one front paw to the other. Daniel fished a chunk of beef from his stew and tossed it to her.

JAKE glanced at his office door. It was open but empty. He turned to his monitor and brought up Google, but his fingers tapped the keys lightly, ineffectually, as he contemplated his search. He glanced at the doorway again. Still empty.

He typed “Seattle, murder, razor” and hit enter.

The top three results were a StonerRock.com review of Black Breath’s *Razor to Oblivion*, The West Seattle Blog entry about a murder trial, and a murder suspect being placed on suicide watch. Jake selected the last of the three.

Vernon Talbot, a native of West Virginia, is being held in King County Jail on attempted murder charges. Talbot was arrested Friday night after an operator dispatched an ambulance and police to a Capitol Hill address.

Jake skimmed through the article until he came across a photo of the suspect being led into the courthouse by police. His heart skipped a couple of beats as he took in the muscular arms and bandaged bald head. He read on faster but soon realized there would be no real description of the intended victim. He smiled. *Would they say: “full lips, wavy blond hair, slender, dimples, and a smile that makes Jake Holden’s tummy flip-flop”?* Jake thought not. There was a name, however: *Daniel Mehmet, a local architecture student.*

An Officer Rich was quoted as saying that authorities had arrived at Mr. Mehmet’s residence around one-thirty in the morning and found the suspect unconscious and bleeding profusely from a head wound. Talbot was taken to Northwest Hospital and Medical Center for evaluation and, after being cleared and receiving stitches, he was released into police custody the following day and taken to jail. Apparently the suspect was a long-haul trucker and was suspected of having a number of bodies to his credit across the country.

Mr. Mehmet had been uninjured at the time “*but was later taken to the hospital for minor injuries.*” Jake scanned the article, but there was no explanation of that inconsistency.

He reached out and ran his finger over the name on the screen. “Daniel Mehmet,” he said softly, staring at the screen and smiling.

“Who’s that?” Craig asked, suddenly appearing in the doorway.

Jake started and quickly turned off his monitor. “W-what?”

“Daniel Mehmet. Who’s Daniel Mehmet?” Craig dropped himself into his favorite chair in front of Jake’s desk.

“Nobody,” Jake said, looking over his desk in search of papers to focus his attention on. Unfortunately he’d emptied his in-box for the day. There was nothing to gather, arrange, read, sort, stamp, or file. He folded his idle hands over each other and looked back at his friend.

“Riiiiight,” Craig said with a knowing smile. “You joining us for drinks tonight?”

“Oh, uh... nah, but thanks for the invite.”

“Come on, man. How are you going to meet anyone if you only go to work and home?”

Jake grinned. “I didn’t realize you were hoping to fix me up with my true love.”

“Well... I don’t know about *that*, but if you want to meet someone, you need to leave your safety zone—be more proactive.”

He had a point, but Jake was only thinking about one man and, crazy as it sounded—even to him—he wanted to see if that man, Daniel Mehmet, was the one of his dreams.

JAKE rushed into his apartment, tossing his briefcase into the nearest chair, his jacket on the floor, and toeing his shoes off. As he tugged loose his tie, he dropped onto the sofa and booted his laptop. While waiting for the computer to be ready, he went over to his bar and made himself a drink, then returned to the sofa. What he was considering surely meant he was losing his mind. He sipped his drink. *It*

wouldn't hurt to look. Even though Craig had urged him to take charge, make things happen, Jake doubted that applied to searching for evidence that a man he'd dreamed of actually existed.

He started typing: Daniel Mehmet, Seattle. An entry for Mehmet Construction popped up, and he went to the website and began reading. It was a bright, stylishly designed website and fairly easy to navigate. At random he clicked through a list of projects the company had worked on, through career opportunities, and through a variety of services the company provided. Then Jake clicked on About Us.

A picture came up of a group of men on a construction site. A handsome older man—probably in his early fifties, tall and broad-shouldered, wearing a suit and hardhat—stood surrounded by several other men in jeans, hardhats and T-shirts. The older man held sheets of blueprints and was clearly in charge, appearing to impart his wisdom to the workers around him.

Jake read a bit about the company. It was family-owned and operated, run by Tobias Mehmet and his three sons, the youngest of which was named—*Daniel*. His eyes flicked back up to the picture, searching it more closely. And on the other side of Tobias Mehmet, owner and CEO, stood the man from Jake's dreams.

His heart pounded against his ribcage, and his breath left him. *He's real.* Daniel was looking intently up at his father, as were the others. *Probably his brothers.* Compared to the rest of his family, Daniel was smaller and slight, but they all had basically the same coloring. *He's real.*

Jake smiled, reaching out and caressing the screen where Daniel's face was. What did this mean? He had dreamed about a real, living, breathing man who apparently lived in Seattle and was studying—he glanced at the printout he'd made of the article—architecture. Jake was mostly thrilled, a bit frightened, and totally lost. He didn't know what to do next. Should he tell someone? Craig? *No. Not yet.*

“IS PIXIE in there?”

Daniel paused in his vigorous petting of the dog and glanced at the bedroom door. “Uh, yeah, she is.”

He heard Lotta approaching, and then the door opened, and she appeared wearing pink pajama bottoms, a Zac Brown Band T-shirt, and a pair of fuzzy pink bunny slippers.

“Come on, girl,” she said, snapping her fingers and then slapping her thigh. Panting, Pixie looked at her, but she didn't move. Lotta looked at Daniel, and he shrugged.

“Maybe she's scared of your slippers,” he offered, eyeing the little black noses, whiskers, and button eyes on her footwear.

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” She refocused her attention on the dog. “*Pixie*. Come on, girl.” This time the dog put her head on her paws and looked up at Daniel, glancing quickly to the side as if to say, “Get a load of *her*.” Daniel smiled.

“I think she wants to sleep in here,” he said, scratching Pixie behind the ear. The dog stood up and licked his face.

Lotta sighed. “You okay with that?”

“Sure.” He giggled from the kisses. “We’ll be fine. I’d kind of like the company.”

“Fair enough, but she snores, just so you know.” Lotta started to leave but stopped. “Do you want the door open or no?”

“Open. I like the light from the hallway—and *yes*, I am an adult male,” Daniel said, rolling his eyes.

Lotta laughed. “No worries, pal. See you in the morning.” And she was gone.

Pixie settled down next to him again, and Daniel pulled the covers up to his neck. “Good night, girl.” Pixie sneezed, and Daniel laughed. He didn’t fall asleep immediately. He couldn’t seem to shut his mind off.

He thought back to his family visiting him in the hospital, his mother fussing over him while his father, Tobias, and two brothers, Thomas and Teddy, stood back and waited their turn—their turn to playfully torment him, that is.

He had seen in their faces that they were glad he was okay but hesitant to show their feelings too plainly. They would follow their father’s lead and remain stoic and strong. And so would Daniel. His mother, Marion, had left the room ostensibly to get him some snacks for the night, but he knew she wanted to find somewhere safe and private to fall apart. After all, he was her baby boy. They had been expecting a baby girl, had her name all picked out—Danielle—but *surprise!*

“I’m glad you’re okay, boy,” Tobias had said, placing a heavy hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Me too.”

Tobias smiled. “I’d better go find your mother.” He turned and left the room. Once he was gone, Thomas and Teddy moved closer. Teddy dropped onto the bed, and Thomas stood by the headboard. They were silent for a while.

“Scary, huh?” Teddy asked finally, and Daniel nodded.

“You really need to be more careful, Danny,” Thomas said.

“I know. It was stupid.”

“Damn straight!”

“Tommy, I’ve taken guys home before—more times than I can count—and nothing like this has ever happened.”

“You were lucky. All we’re saying is get to know someone a bit better before—”

“Need to find yourself a nice boyfriend,” Teddy interrupted.

Daniel had turned away from them and looked out the window. “Believe me, I’m trying.”

They fell silent again.

“Sarah has some friends she could—”

“I appreciate that, Tommy, but I really don’t want your wife fixing me up with one of the two gay men she knows.”

“Colleen knows more than two,” Teddy had added with a smile.

Daniel smiled and wondered what their father would have said upon hearing two of his sons trying to fix up their baby brother with a nice man. He had promised them he

would be more careful from now on, and that seemed to please them. They seemed to relax.

He kept playing over that night with his attacker. He'd been a damn good fuck, but a chill ran through Daniel at the thought of what could have happened if... *if what?* What had happened? He couldn't get the image of that shadow figure out of his head. He didn't imagine it. He'd seen it: a man-shaped figure rushing into the room, reaching toward him, looking as though it was shouting, but there had been no sound other than Daniel's shocked gasp. Daniel stroked Pixie's head unconsciously and stared at the illuminated doorway until his eyes grew too heavy to remain open.

DANIEL woke with a start. He blinked several times at the window he was now facing. What woke him? He didn't know if it had been the lightning flashing outside the window, the rain pounding against the glass, or the thunder rolling overhead. He had no idea how long he'd been asleep or what time it was. A gust of wind threw another sheet of water against the glass, and he flinched. And then, during a brief lull in the storm, Daniel heard Pixie growling long and low.

She was probably upset by the storm. Daniel rolled back over to comfort her, but she was no longer on the bed. She was sitting on the floor, facing the doorway, just staring at it. He could see her silhouetted in the light from the hall.

"Come here, girl," he said, patting the bed, but she didn't acknowledge him. Daniel looked at the doorway and back at Pixie. She sat stock-still. *What the hell are you growling at?* He glanced up again, sighed, and rolled back

over. *Stupid dog.* Then he remembered. He remembered several movies he'd watched with Lotta where someone had a dog for protection, only to end up yelling at it for barking. The two of them had always poked fun at those idiots. The dog was doing its job and catching nothing but grief for it.

And here was Pixie growling at an empty doorway, seemingly nothing, but....

Daniel slowly rolled back over and kept watching her. "Pixie?" This time she whined a bit and looked to him briefly before quickly turning back to the door, standing up, and growling even deeper. Daniel sat up in the bed and threw back the covers. He would watch with her. They stared at that doorway for several minutes, until the light and shape seemed to lose their meaning and bleed into each other.

The hall light seemed not quite as bright as it had been, but Daniel was sure that was just an illusion from staring at it for so long. Then a whip-quick flash of lightning lit up the room, and the light in the hall flickered as an explosion of thunder rumbled through the house. Pixie yelped and raced to Daniel's side, leaping onto the bed. He stroked her, attempting to comfort her, but he probably only transmitted his own terror to her.

They continued to watch as the light grew even dimmer and then winked out. Daniel couldn't see anything in the pitch-blackness, but it seemed he could hear his own heartbeat. Next to him Pixie began growling again, and Daniel stifled a groan. He reached for the bedside lamp, finding the switch and twisting it to no effect. Now, along with his heart, his breathing sounded unnaturally loud to his ear.

Several rapid flashes of lightning in quick succession lit the room like nature's own strobe light, and Daniel thought he saw a figure standing in the doorway, a shadowy figure. Pixie only whined now, or was it Daniel? Had there been thunder just now? More lightning, but the thunder sounded much farther away. The storm was heading off. Another bright flash and the lights came on—the hall light and the one by the bed.

Daniel could tell the lights were on, but only because they shone through his eyelids. He'd shut his eyes and now found himself afraid to open them. Pixie barked. He still didn't open them. But when Pixie licked his face, he laughed and looked at her. Unfortunately the shadowy figure standing before them knocked that grin right off his face.

It looked like a man made of black smoke. It swayed in front of him, seemingly uncertain of what to do. Daniel felt the same way, didn't know what to do. He knew what he *wanted* to do: scream for Lotta. Surely she hadn't slept through that storm. Surely she'd heard Pixie bark. As Daniel continued to stare, the figure turned its head as if looking around the room. Then it looked right at him, blue eyes beginning to form in its smoky face.

Slowly the figure produced a nose, ears, short black hair, and a smile. Daniel watched it become a man, seemingly flesh and blood—flesh, blood, and muscle, bare chested but wearing gray sweatpants and no shoes. *My mystery man from the Club!*

Daniel wanted to touch him. He looked touchable. Daniel stood and took one step toward him, and the figure watched. He didn't seem afraid. He seemed confused but

also wildly thrilled. Pixie hopped down from the bed and planted herself at the figure's feet. She wasn't frightened or threatened by him at all. He smiled down at her.

"Can you speak?" Daniel asked, reaching a hand out to him, almost caressing his torso but hesitating. Blue eyes followed the movement of Daniel's hand, and they seemed to both be wondering what would happen if they touched.

Every move he made was in slow motion, as if he were moving through water. "What's your name?" Dan asked. The man's mouth opened but no sound came out. Dan stepped closer. "*Where* are you?" There was desperation in his voice. The man pointed to his lips, and Daniel focused on them, watching them slowly begin to form words as if he were speaking.

"You okay?" Lotta asked, suddenly coming into the room. "I had to flip the break—" She froze in her tracks, surprised to see two men in Daniel's room. "You didn't tell me you were planning to have c—"

The dark-haired man slowly, so slowly, turned to look over his shoulder at her, his eyes brilliantly blue. He smiled and then vanished like a popping soap bubble. Lotta fainted.

MANNY MEEKS hopped up when his microwave's bell sounded. He danced from one foot to the other as he waited the recommended minute before opening the door and withdrawing a plate of Totino's Pizza Rolls. He carried it to his tiny kitchen table and took his seat. He was all set: a tall, chilled glass of chocolate milk and fourteen pizza rolls for breakfast—just in time for the last hour of NPR's Morning

Edition. He leaned forward and turned on his radio, but there came a pounding on the door of his shop.

The shop wasn't open this early on Sunday, so someone was probably lost and just needed to figure it out. He tried to focus again on what was happening in the news, but more pounding drowned it out. Manny scooted back from the table forcefully, stood, and tied his graying brown hair into a quick ponytail on top of his head before heading out to take a look.

He peeked through the ragged old curtain separating his living quarters from the front of the store. Just beyond the glass door, cast in silhouette by the sunlight, stood two people: one short and one tall. He couldn't make out their faces, but the shorter one pounded on the door again with such urgency that Manny hurriedly tied his bathrobe closed and shuffled through the darkened store to the door.

"We're closed," he said through the door, pointing to the fading store hours listed on the glass between them.

The smaller person froze for a moment, then began looking around frantically before stepping to the right and grabbing a fairly hefty metal ashtray standing by the shop door. "Open this door right now, Manny, or I'm breaking in!"

Manny blinked a couple of times and squinted, grabbing the glasses hanging around his neck and raising them to his eyes. "Lotta?"

"Hell yeah! Open up!"

Manny quickly unlocked the door and opened it, stepping aside to let them in. "What's going on? I'm missing NPR."

“Fuck NPR!” Lotta snarled. “We’ve got some serious shit going on!”

“Whoa! Whoa! Your energy is *way* agitated, Lotta. You want some chamomile?”

“No we don’t want any fu—” She stopped herself, glancing at Daniel who hadn’t said a word. He was simply looking at Manny and around the shop, trying to take it all in. Lotta took a deep, cleansing breath, and Manny smiled and nodded. “What I mean to say is we’ve seen something... something we can’t explain, and we need your help.”

A slow-growing grin spread across Manny’s face until he looked like a child on his birthday. He locked the door and pushed past them, leading the way to his back rooms. “Come on in. Have a seat.” Daniel and Lotta stepped through the curtain, eyeing the tiny table in the tiny room. “Pizza rolls?” Manny offered, but they shook their heads. “Yep. Probably lukewarm by now anyway.” He rushed over to a tiny closet and pulled out two folding chairs, carrying them back over to them. “Here you go,” he said, unfolding the chairs and cramming them in at the table. He sat. “Tell me *everything*.”

Daniel told him everything, from the first appearance of the shadowy figure and how it had probably saved his life to Lotta seeing it vanish right in front of her. After their story Manny stared at them as he munched thoughtfully on his last few cold pizza rolls. Daniel and Lotta stared back, waiting.

Manny took a long swig from his chocolate milk and sighed. “You two ever seen *Freaky Friday*?”

Daniel and Lotta glanced at each other. “You mean that movie with Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan?” Daniel asked.

“That’s a remake, but it’s basically the same movie. Jodie Foster’s version was better, though.” Manny got up and carried his dishes to the sink. “I don’t think you’re haunted.” He began rinsing the dishes clean. “What it sounds like to me is a desire coupling.”

“Huh?” Lotta asked.

“That’s what I call it.” He blinked at them. They blinked back. “Just like the movie, you and this guy wanted the same thing at the same time. He was looking for love and so were you.”

“I wasn’t looking. I’d found a guy—”

“For the night,” Manny interrupted. Daniel didn’t know what to say to that. “Am I wrong? Were you expecting him to be the love of your life?”

Daniel snorted. “Hardly.”

“So you were still looking, still hoping.”

“Yeah... I guess I was.”

“Hang on, Manny,” Lotta said. “There have got to be hundreds of thousands of people looking for that ‘special someone’ at any given time. How—”

“Because *they*, these two, were meant to be—cosmically speaking,” Manny said as if it made perfect sense. “The only thing is I don’t know how you’ll find him. It’s a big planet, hell, a big universe, man.”

“He’s in New York,” Daniel said.

Lotta looked at him sharply. “Huh?”

Daniel smiled uncertainly. "I couldn't hear him, but I read his lips. He wanted me to understand where he was."

"Did you get his name?" Manny asked.

Daniel shook his head.

Lotta turned to Manny. "Why now? Daniel's been looking for Mr. Right for as long as I've known him."

"Hey!"

"Sorry." Lotta smiled apologetically.

"Well," Manny said, coming back over to the table and taking his seat. "I'm guessing the planets simply aligned—not literally," he added quickly. "What I mean is you were both thinking the same thing at the same time, and *you*," Manny said, pointing dramatically at Daniel, "you were nearly killed."

"What's your point?" Daniel asked.

"Something like that—that murderous intent... evil, if you will—that gets noticed, makes a lot of noise. All evidence to the contrary, something like that announces its presence to the cosmos. It—"

"You're pulling this out of your ass, aren't you?" Lotta asked.

Manny blushed. "Not entirely." He turned to Daniel. "If the two of you were meant to be together and that extra-crunchy nutbar was about to remove you from the cosmic equation...." He relaxed back into his chair, throwing his arms up in surrender. "I'm just saying perhaps the universe had other ideas."

They allowed that to ruminate for a few moments. Then Lotta and Daniel looked at each other and then back at Manny. “Now what?” they asked in unison.

“Depends on what *you* want, Daniel.”

Lotta and Manny watched him think it over for three entire seconds.

“I want him.”

“Have you ever done any meditation?”

“A bit.”

“Then let’s go get him,” Manny said, getting to his feet.

“WHAT’S all this?” Craig asked, looking around and noticing the TV wasn’t on and tuned to the appropriate channel. “Kickoff is in fifteen minutes. I thought we were watching the game.”

“Yeah, yeah, but first I need to show you something,” Jake said, grabbing Craig by the sleeve and tugging him down his hallway and into his home office. Jake shoved his friend into a chair, and Craig nervously set the six-pack he was carrying on his lap, hugging it protectively.

“Jake, you’re acting freaky. Should I crack open one of these now?”

“Huh?” Jake looked up from behind his desk. He was hurriedly shuffling through some papers. “Here!” he shouted, rising to his feet.

Craig flinched but managed to complete opening his can of beer with minimal spillage. “Wh-what is it?” he asked,

sucking foam from the rim of the can and taking hold of the paper Jake was shoving toward his face.

“This is the guy I dreamed about.”

Their eyes met over the paper: Jake’s twinkling with excitement and Craig’s beneath furrowed brow and with a glint of fear.

“Dreamed about?”

“You remember. That guy was going to slice his throat while—”

“I remember,” Craig said quickly. He took another gulp and stared at the paper in his hand. He examined a picture of several men at a construction site. A red circle with bold red arrows pointing to it was drawn around one of their heads. “Which guy?” Jake frowned and Craig laughed. “Sorry, sorry—okay so you’re saying this guy was in your dream? He exists?”

Jake nodded happily and passed Craig the printout of the newspaper article, pointing excitedly to the picture of the suspect being led into the courthouse. “That’s the guy! That’s the guy with the blade!” Craig stared at his friend for a moment and then began reading the article. After he’d finished he looked back up into Jake’s expectant face.

Setting the pages aside, he said, “Jake, I know you were fucked up when Richard dumped you last year.” Jake stopped grinning. “I know getting back out there is tough, but—”

“I’m not crazy. I’m not imagining this.”

“Believing someone you saw in a dream is real... that’s not okay. It’s not the healthiest choice.” Jake snatched up

the papers and returned to his desk, where he filed them away. He sat forward, arms on the desk, and hands clasped in front of him. "You... you want a beer?" Craig asked, holding one out to him.

"He spoke to me last night." Craig didn't appear to know what to say to that, so he drained his beer and opened another. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes." He took another gulp.

"Well, what do you think?"

Craig shook his head. "Buddy, you don't want to know what I think."

"Spill!"

"I think you've completely lost touch with reality, and... and I'm frightened."

Jake laughed, and Craig was relieved to see it. "Reality?" Jake asked. Craig nodded, gulping more of his beer. "You and I work with numbers, yeah? Two plus two equals four. That's true throughout the known universe."

"Agreed." Jake stood and reached down, lifting a chart he'd made onto his desk. Craig froze, his beer poised mere inches from his lips as he quickly scanned the chart. "Uh—"

Jake held up a hand to silence him and produced a short rubber-tipped pointer. "In my dream a man was nearly killed by a buff bald guy with a blade, yes?"

"B-B-B, got it."

"The next night I dreamed of his intended victim in the hospital, yes?" Craig nodded, now following the pointer as it took him through the steps of this insanity. "That day at the

office I looked up information on matching incidents in Seattle—”

“Why Seattle?” Craig asked.

“Oh, in my dream, when I was in his hospital room, I could see the Space Needle was part of the skyline.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I’m telling you now,” he said, glaring at Craig.

“Go on,” Craig said, giving up on the football game.

Jake went on to explain what he’d found during his internet search and then proceeded to fill Craig in on the dream he’d had last night. He told of the storm, the dog, and Daniel walking toward him and asking him who he was and where he was. He left out Daniel’s reaching out to touch him and how that had excited him. But he was quick to include the sudden appearance of a young woman who seemed surprised to see him.

“She could see me,” Jake said in awe.

“And then you woke up?”

“Yes.”

They stared at one another for several moments. “So now what?” Craig asked.

“Huh?”

“What do you plan to do now?”

“Do you believe me? Do you believe he’s real?”

Craig hesitated, mulling it all over: the dreams, the article, the information about the Mehmet family in Seattle. “I... I will concede that it warrants further investigation.” That seemed to satisfy Jake. “But what’s next?”

Jake dropped into his desk chair and sighed. “No idea.”

“You know about his family and their company. Why not contact him through them?”

“I tried,” Jake said. “First, I had trouble coming up with a good cover story—”

“Ha! Yeah, you can’t exactly tell them the truth.”

“And when I got through to someone who could help, they refused to give out his contact info.”

“Did you leave a message?”

Jake shook his head. “And I quote, ‘The youngest Mehmet is not employed by this company, and his family will not be carrying messages to him. If you were a friend, you would know how to contact him, would you not? *Click.*’”

“Oh... I see.” They sat in contemplative silence for a few moments. “Well... while you think it over, can we go watch what’s left of the game?”

Jake smiled and nodded, and Craig jumped to his feet, carrying the remaining beer with him into the living room, and parking himself in front of the flat screen.

SEVERAL hours and many beers later, the two of them slouched on the sofa, watching the second game of the day. Jake thought college ball was a waste of time, but Craig was a dedicated fan. Not being a big drinker, Jake could barely keep his eyes open and kept losing track of who had the ball. He found himself jerking awake whenever a roar rose up from the crowd on TV or when Craig shouted profanely at the screen.

He couldn't stop thinking about Daniel. What *did* he want to do now? He tried to compose an ad for Craigslist in his head, but the proper wording wouldn't come: *Your name is Daniel. I dreamed of you. Did you dream of me? Call Jake at 555-blah blah blah.* Jake had to admit he didn't have any real proof that Daniel even knew he existed, and despite his assertions to Craig, no real evidence that this wasn't some bizarre fantasy on his part. Yes, he'd dreamed of an actual event, but there was no way to know if Daniel had really seen him. *Just a dream?*

"I gotta drain the snake," Craig said, struggling to his feet and shaking Jake from his thoughts. "Pizza should be here soon." He rushed from the room, and Jake relaxed, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling.

His eyes closed. *How do I find you, Daniel?* The air conditioning kicked on, brushing a blast of cooler air across Jake's face. Several minutes later there was a timid knock on the door, one Jake was sure Craig hadn't heard.

"Pizza's here!" he shouted, opening his eyes and freezing at the sight of Daniel Mehmet standing over him. They gazed at each other. Daniel's wavy blond hair hung in loose curls. His eyes were warm, dark, and ringed in long lashes. Daniel grinned, and those delightful dimples appeared, making Jake's tummy flip-flop. He sat up suddenly. "I'm dreaming?" he asked, but Daniel slowly shook his head.

"I got it, dude," Craig said, strolling into the room, grabbing the cash from the kitchen counter, and opening the door. Not once did he look in Jake's direction, but Daniel's eyes were on him from the moment he re-entered the room. Jake suddenly reached up to touch Daniel, his hand passing

right through his thigh, and Daniel's eyes slowly followed the movement. Their eyes met again, and Daniel smiled sadly at him.

"My name is Jake—"

A strangled gasp, followed by the unmistakable sound of a six-pack hitting the hardwood floor was enough to pull Jake's attention away from Daniel. Craig stood by the door with a mouthful of pizza and a horrified look on his face. He was using the slice he'd just bitten to point at where Daniel had been only a second before.

"IT WAS too quick."

"Daniel, calm down," Lotta said, trying to hold him down on the small cot he was lying on.

"No. I didn't have time."

"Mmm, yeah I was afraid of that," Manny mumbled. They stopped their struggles and looked at him. He was puffing thoughtfully on a pipe.

"Afraid? Of what?" Daniel asked.

Manny took a couple more thoughtful puffs, then leaned forward, looking at the two of them. "The universe can't hold itself still for you, can't slow down for you. You get a brief shot or momentary blessing when the gods look down on you and actually see you—"

"Manny!" Lotta shouted, causing the man to pause and blink at her. "Spit it out!"

“He’s saying it’ll stop. It’s all going to stop, right?” Daniel asked. Manny nodded and began puffing on his pipe again. Daniel jumped up. “Lotta, take me home.” He headed past Manny, through the curtain, and straight for the front door.

Lotta rushed after him, fumbling for her car keys. “Thanks, M-Manny.”

He nodded and puffed a few more times before getting up to lock the door after them, then returning to his kitchen and popping in some more pizza rolls to eat before opening his shop for the day.

“YOUR cab’s downstairs, Craig.”

“But... but aren’t we going to talk about... that guy just—”

“Nope. Monday. We’ll talk Monday,” Jake said as he shoved his friend toward the door. He felt a sense of urgency he couldn’t explain. “I’m sorry. I need you to leave. Take the pizza and the beer and—I’m sorry. I need to be alone right now.” Craig struggled and jostled his food and drink all the way out the door of Jake’s townhouse.

Once the door was closed and locked, Jake quickly went through his home, turning off the lights. He unplugged the phone and headed for his bedroom, stripping as he went. Getting quickly down to his shorts, he drew the shades closed, threw back the covers on the bed, and hopped in, pulling the comforter up to his waist.

He closed his eyes and tried to make himself go to sleep. He'd been thinking of Daniel when he was on the sofa. *I thought about him, and he came to me.*

DANIEL tore through the yellow crime tape and entered his apartment. It was the first time he'd been back since that night. Lotta followed at a discreet distance as he flicked on the lights.

"Are you sure you want to be here?" she asked.

Daniel kept walking, slowly taking in his surroundings, refamiliarizing himself with his home. "I have to come back sometime," he said softly. "Why not now?"

"But what are you going to do?" Daniel didn't answer. He turned left and went down the hall to his bedroom. He gently pushed open the door and gazed at his bed. He had a brief flash of him in bed with his serial killer, but it was quickly replaced by the shadowy blue-eyed figure rushing to his rescue. "Dan?"

He turned to face Lotta. "I'm going to sleep here tonight." She started to protest, but he cut her off. "No, I'll be fine." He hugged her. "Thanks for taking such good care of me and introducing me to Manny."

"B-but what are you going to do?" she asked, glancing at the bed. "It's still early."

"I'm going to take a nap, but I promise to call you later. Maybe we can order out, watch a movie?"

She looked him over for a couple of moments. "Uh... okay, if you're sure."

“I am.” He walked Lotta to the door and locked it after her. Heading quickly back to his bedroom, he turned off the lights, undressed, and climbed under the covers. He found himself staring up at his ceiling. *Jake? His name is Jake.*

JAKE opened his eyes. At least he thought they were open. Eyes need light to work, and there was no discernible light coming from anywhere. His surroundings had a grayish, smoky texture to them, nothing of detail for his eyes to latch on to. And it was silent. The only sounds he could make out came from him—his heartbeat, his breathing, which was speeding up as he began to panic. Jake spread out his hands and felt around to understand what he was lying on. It felt a lot like a bed—firm, supportive, yet giving. He sat up, blinked, and strained to make out something, anything.

“Hello?” he called out, his voice reverberating around him. He was met with more silence, but then his breath caught in his chest as he felt a hand caress his shoulder. “Are you there?”

“Yes,” Daniel whispered in his ear. “I’m here.”

Jake turned in the darkness, searching for his face. Their hands met and came into view. Quickly they realized that everywhere they made physical contact would become visible, become real. Jake reached out, stroking Daniel’s hair, and the blond curls became visible. He cupped his face and could suddenly see his smile and dimples. They hurriedly began touching each other wherever they could. Laughing as they happily slid their hands over shoulders, chests, abdomens, backs, and thighs, the effect was much

like creating a watercolor painting with their hands, color and light appearing wherever they touched.

Daniel gripped Jake's ass, and their delighted frenzy evaporated as the two of them fell silent—only panting, smiling, and gazing at each other, taking in the other's features.

"Thank you for saving my life," Daniel whispered, looking deeply into Jake's crystal blue eyes.

"Oh... uh, you're—"

Daniel grabbed Jake at the back of his neck and brought their mouths together, and suddenly Jake couldn't remember what he'd wanted to say with those full lips—the lips he'd dreamed about—pressed to his. Daniel's tongue slipped into Jake's mouth as his hands slid inside Jake's shorts, squeezing his firm bottom.

Jake squirmed beneath his touch and reciprocated, sliding his hands down the back of Daniel's briefs to cup his cheeks. Daniel moaned in response as they ground their erections against each other.

"We... we need to get these off, okay?" Jake asked breathlessly.

Daniel nodded quickly as they shimmied out of their underwear, freeing their straining cocks. Then he pressed himself—the length of himself—back down on top of Jake, kissing him and caressing him.

Feeling like things were spiraling beyond his control, Jake spoke up. "Uh... maybe we should slow down a bit?"

"I... I don't know how m-much time we have," Daniel said hurriedly between kisses.

“Huh?”

“Your name?” Daniel asked, kissing him, nuzzling his neck, gripping Jake’s cock and spreading pre-come over it. “What’s your name, my gorgeous blue-eyed dream man? Where do you work?”

“Y-you think I’m g-gorgeous?” Daniel nodded, and Jake wrapped him up in his arms, grabbing a handful of his hair as he cradled his neck, flipping him onto his back, and pinning him down. “Jacob Holden,” he said urgently, his eyes burning into Daniel’s shocked gaze. “Burns and Colby, Limited. East 48, New York City. Then Jake kissed him hungrily as he reached under Daniel’s leg, lifting it to rest on his waist. He spread Daniel open with his fingers, stroking his entrance, which quivered in response.

Jake collected pre-come from his cock and slid two wet fingers into Daniel, who responded audibly. He massaged Daniel, curling his fingers inside him and riding him as his body undulated, rising beneath him in reaction. Jake spit into his hand and repositioned himself, pushing slowly into Daniel and causing the young man to cry out and arch his back.

Daniel moaned, thrashing beneath Jake, trying to relax, but he never stopped clinging to him as they rocked together. He began to repeat a mantra of sorts: “J-Jacob Holden, B-Burns and Colb-by, East... guh... East 48, N-New Y-... uh... York City.” He looked up into Jake’s eyes and panicked, realizing Jake didn’t know him or how to find him. “Uh... nguh... I’m... I’m—”

“Daniel M-Mehmet,” Jake groaned in his ear. “Seattle, Washington, architecture st-student.” Daniel’s surprised

eyes caught Jake's. "Googled you!" Jake shouted as he twisted his thrust to hit that special spot inside Daniel, causing him to shout, see stars, and cling even more tightly to Jake. They came together a few thrusts later, both blinded by the lights going off in their minds.

JAKE didn't wake up until the next morning. He woke up coated in dried come and running late. He cursed relentlessly as he rushed to get ready for work, dashing out the door at the last possible minute.

"Cutting it close, buddy, aren't you?" Craig asked when he spotted Jake walking by his office door on the way to his own. Craig leapt up in pursuit.

"Yeah, sorry." Jake kept walking, snatching a collection of messages from his assistant as he passed her desk. "Thanks, Lydia."

"Are we gonna talk about what I saw yesterday?" Craig asked, following him into his office. "I mean how freaky was—"

Jake held up his hand to silence him as Lydia carried in a cup of coffee and set it on his desk.

"Burns wants to see you for lunch," she said. He sipped his coffee and nodded at her before sighing and leaning back in his chair. "I think he wants to congratulate you on the Wilson merger. I made reservations for Trattoria Trecolori at one."

"Thanks, Lydia." She left the office, and Craig quickly closed the door after her, then took a seat.

He only waited a few seconds before speaking up. “Well?”

Jake frowned. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Oh no, dude! You said we’d talk about things today. You promised!”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Craig.”

“Did you dream last night?” Jake nodded. “And?”

“We made love, but I woke up in the same condition as any wet dream would leave me—and I woke up alone.”

“But...” Craig said, sitting forward in his chair, eyes wide, “I *saw* him—saw him standing over you as clear as day.”

“You were drunk—we were *both* drunk.” Craig shook his head violently, but Jake ignored him. “I managed to tell him my name and where I worked. But if this is all only some fucked-up fantasy, what good will that do?” He sighed deeply and began rubbing his temple.

“I think you should try calling him again. Badger his family until they cough him up.”

Jake grinned at his friend, apparently fully on board now and encouraging him to alienate a powerful Seattle family in his search for true love. “I’ll think about it.”

“WAS Lyd right?” Craig asked, interrupting his aggressive flirting with the redhead from acquisitions. She didn’t seem to mind. In fact she appeared relieved, if Jake was any judge of body language.

“About?” he asked, strolling right past the two of them as he continued on to his office.

“Burns? Lunch?”

Lydia had been right. He’d received numerous attaboys from his boss over lunch, and for dessert he was given an extra week of vacation and a bonus. But Daniel had occupied Jake’s thoughts throughout the meal: how he’d looked, tasted, smelled, felt, and sounded in Jake’s arms, how tight and hot he’d been around his cock. It had seemed so real. He couldn’t have imagined it all.

Jake shook his head. “Uh... I’ll talk to you about it later, Craig,” he said, vaguely hearing his friend mumble something like, “Heard that before.” Jake reached his office, shut the door, and collapsed into his chair. He sighed and put his head on the desk.

If someone were to walk into his office, they’d never guess he’d just received kudos and a raise from his boss.

THE redhead was warming to Craig, even laughing at a couple of his jokes. He watched as she pulled out a pen and hesitantly scribbled her phone number on the corner of a legal pad, tearing it off and holding it out to him. He smiled and reached for it just as the elevator doors opened behind her. Over her shoulder he saw several people step out. Several walked on, knowing where they were headed, but one young man delivering flowers stopped by the reception desk to get directions.

The receptionist pointed to the right, no doubt giving him an office number, and the young man headed toward Craig and his new sweetie. Just as Craig absently took the slip of paper with the redhead's phone number, his eyes met the delivery man's, and the man grinned at him. He had longish blond hair and—dimples.

"Craig, are you listening to me?"

"Huh?" he asked, never taking his eyes off the delivery guy.

"I said—Oh! What a lovely bouquet!" she said suddenly, her voice going up an octave. "Isn't that lovely, Craig?"

He didn't know. He supposed it was. The only flowers he recognized were lavender roses. Then there were flowers of white, yellow, and a deeper purple. The young man reached them, slowing his pace a bit as he passed, glancing oddly at Craig from the corner of his brown eyes and turning right again.

Craig noted that he wasn't dressed like any flower-delivery guy he'd ever seen: no uniform or old jeans, T-shirt, and a ball cap. He was wearing dark jeans, a blue, oxford shirt, and a suit jacket.

Then Craig's mouth fell open as recognition gripped him. He dropped the redhead's number, turned, and dashed into his office, stumbling at the corner of his desk and hitting his knee as he dived for his phone. He hastily punched in some numbers and waited. When there was no answer, he hung up and dialed again, this time hitting the intercom.

"Jake! Jake! I know you're in there, man!" Craig's voice shouted from Jake's intercom. "Pick up! Pick the fuck up

right now!” The redhead was peering into his office from the doorway, confused by this strange turn of events.

“Aw, leave me alone, Craig,” Jake moaned over the intercom. “I’m not in the mood.”

“No, man. You don’t understand. He’s—”

Jake turned off the intercom, lowering his head onto his desk again. He opened his eyes and looked at the messages Lydia had given him, little pink slips of paper scattered on the desk right in front of his face. He squinted, making out part of a name on one of them. Raising his head in disbelief, Jake grabbed one of the slips and smoothed it out to read it more easily.

It read: *On my way. D. Mehmet.*

With his heart stuttering in his chest, Jake hit the intercom button again and said, “N-not now, buddy.” He turned the message slip over and over between his fingers, then reached for the other messages to look them over. “I’m trying to work out some—”

OVER the intercom Craig heard a knock at Jake’s door, and then the line went dead again. He stood by his desk, staring at his phone—his silent phone. Eventually he walked back out of his office. He wasn’t surprised to find the redhead had gone about her business, and if he hadn’t been so rattled, he would have kicked himself for letting her slip through his fingers.

He looked left, down the hall toward Jake’s office. He caught Lydia’s eye and smiled nervously at her before

stepping backward into his office once again and calling her extension.

“Yes?”

“What’s going on down there?”

“Going on? What do you mean?”

“With Jake? Who’s that in his office with him?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Mitchell, but that’s none of your business.”

Craig hung up, straightened his tie, threw back his shoulders, took a deep breath, and marched out of his office and down the hall to Jake’s. Lydia saw him coming and noticed that he didn’t seem inclined to stop.

“Mr. Holden asked not to be disturbed!” She jumped up and rounded her desk to block his way. She stood in front of the office door, spreading her arms and legs. Craig towered over her, knocking on Jake’s door, opening it, and striding into the office—carrying Lydia with him.

He froze when he saw Daniel Mehmet kissing Jake feverishly, pinning him against the back wall of the office, his hands busily snaking beneath Jake’s shirt as the “lovely” bouquet lay strewn across Jake’s desk.

“Ahem!”

Daniel paused in his mauling to turn and look embarrassed at Craig. Jake’s lips were kiss-swollen, his eyes half-open and lust-drunk. He smiled stupidly, a lot like the day Craig had walked into his office and learned of that first dream of his.

“Oh, uh... hi there,” Daniel said, smiling, flashing those dimples.

Craig dislodged Lydia from his path and stalked over to where his best friend stood gazing at Daniel. He walked up to the young man and unceremoniously poked him in the arm. Satisfied that all was once again correct in the world, he turned, grabbing Lydia by the arm, and left the office, closing the door behind them.

Daniel turned back to Jake, who grinned at him. “I was prepared to call every Jake Holden in New York City last night,” he said, running his hand over Jake’s short black hair and smiling.

“Sorry, I’d turned my phone off,” Jake said, reaching for him again and pulling him back into a kiss.

“That’s okay. Turns out I didn’t know what to say anyway.”

Jake laughed. “I know the feeling.” His eyes searched Daniel’s face. He couldn’t quite believe this man was in his arms for real.

“I didn’t know if you were real,” Daniel said, kissing him again breathlessly. “Thought I was hallucinating.”

“Mm-hm....” Jake managed.

Daniel broke their kiss reluctantly, leaning back to take in Jake’s handsome face and lovely eyes. “You wanna get outta here? Can you?”

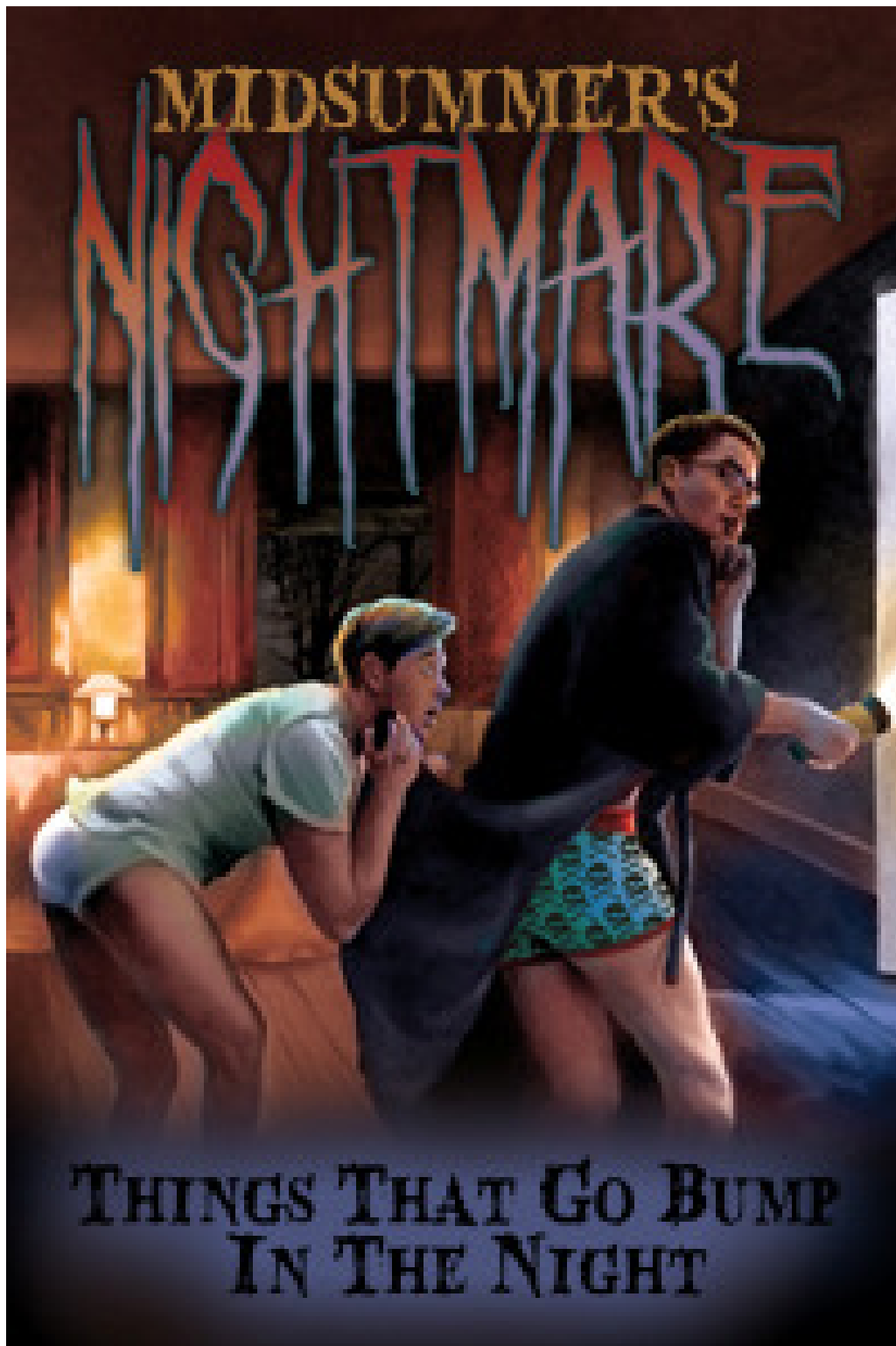
Jake nodded. “Absolutely. My boss just gave me an extra week of vacation.”

Daniel smiled broadly. “Fantastic. I’d love to spend that time getting to know you for real—on this plane of existence.” He pressed himself against Jake, feeling his excitement pushing back against his. “What do you say?”

Jake nodded. “I would like the opportunity to Google you again,” he said, nibbling Daniel’s ear.

They were both laughing out loud as they left Jake’s office and headed for the elevator.

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