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Animal Instincts was written as part of the M/M Romance Group's "Love is Always Write" event on Goodreads.com

STORY PROMPT:

In response to a photo of a huge bulldog being examined by a handsome, mildly graying veterinarian, Leah submitted this story prompt:

This is Dr. Mac. The dog, Sir Winston is one of his best patients. Dr. Mac has two ladies working for him who have made it their mission in life to match him with a man who doesn't mind the long hours and a stray or two, or three. I'd like him to meet a gruff, surly type...maybe with a lap dog (like a Shih-tzu) and after a huge misunderstanding have a HEA.

STORY INFO:

Dr. Jordan Mackenzie has been alone, focused on his career and raising his son, for many years. He was fine with that until one prickly young man's intriguing quirks trigger a sudden need to take care of someone in an entirely different manner.

Calvin Sherbrook has issues. He knows it, and he can live with it. He's just decided it's better for everyone involved if he keeps to himself. And he might have succeeded too, if it wasn't for one particularly hot veterinarian, a crazy old lady and her meddling dog.

genre: contemporary

tags: age-gap, veterinarian, blue-collar, gruff character, father, dogs, matchmaking, first time, mild D/s, mild bondage

warning: none

words: 17,212

ANIMAL INSTINCTS

by: Kim Alan

Dr. Jordan Mackenzie ran a soothing hand over the broad back of the bulldog on his examining table, all the encouragement the hefty canine needed to flop sideways until his back pressed against Jordan. He was the biggest—and ugliest—bulldog Jordan had ever seen, complete with the under bite and snaggletooth. But, there was nothing wrong with the dog unless you counted a distinct lack of aesthetic appeal. And ambition. And personality.

Jordan shook his head. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Miller. I think Winston is feeling the effects of his age.” It was the same thing every couple months. “Have you switched him over to the diet we talked about?”

The eye dodge—ridiculously dramatic what with the volume of mascara weighing her down—was all it took to get the answer to that question. “I know, Dr. Mac. I just don’t have the heart to deprive him like that!” Thin, bejeweled hands fluttered dramatically.

Jordan withheld the long suffering sigh and prayed for patience. “It’s not depriving him, Mrs. Miller. It’s taking care of him.” He attached the dog’s leash—like the lazy thing would ever venture... anywhere—and hefted the animal off the table. He used his Trust-me-I’m-a-Doctor Voice, “Give it another try, and let me know in a month how he takes to it.”

Mrs. Miller was a wealthy, eccentric woman in her seventies whose visits to the vet had increased in frequency and hysteria since the death of her husband two years prior. She turned and led the way out of the exam room with the air of one who’d made the trip often and was just plain accustomed to people following her.

Jordan trailed behind, patiently leading the indolent Winston. The dog leaned against Jordan’s calves, making walking difficult, but as usual, Winston was determined to keep constant contact with him the entire time he was there. The walk was routine, and Jordan let his thoughts wander.

But just as things are wont to happen when one grows complacent, as they approached the door to the waiting room, Winston rallied a burst of ambition that drove him through the door with unprecedented enthusiasm. Jordan stumbled to a stop just as the bulldog slammed full-bodied into the back of denim-clad legs. Very nice denim-clad legs wearing boots and bowed just right. Attached to said legs was a long body capped with wide shoulders, snugly encased in white and topped off with an unruly mop of jet black hair.

The knees buckled and the man barely righted himself before whipping around, only to be brought up short by Winston settling his weight directly onto his boots. Jordan had about a second and a half to appreciate the man’s dark appeal when startled, thickly lashed brown eyes landed for one brief but stunning moment on his. Unfortunately, they dropped just as quickly to stare in shock at the huge bulldog that was slobbering all over his calves.

“What the—” the understandably stunned man grunted. “Somebody get this drooling beast off of me, please?” Okay, so not so much a dog person, Jordan noted. Or maybe he just suffered from an aversion to the drool of big, ugly bulldogs. Either way, he had to admit that he pulled off snarling with surprising appeal. And he might have noticed that the snarl did little to detract from the lusciousness of those smooth, full lips. They were the sweet, plump kind of lips where the top one is slightly fuller than the bottom so they appear a little pouty even when pressed together in annoyance.

“Excuse us!” Jordan hid his frown at the breathlessness of his own voice as he dropped to one knee in front of the bulldog that looked very much like he had no intention of releasing the attractive man from his fat belly clutches. Jordan scoffed at the animal that only moments ago had been rubbing up against his own legs. The traitor ditched him the minute a nicer pair of sticks showed up.

“Come here, Winston,” Jordan commanded, not willing to look up at the stranger even when he noticed he'd gone completely still. There was a strange male kneeling at his feet, after all. Jordan could only hurry this along as quickly as possible. He focused on the pale, watery eyes of the canine as they blinked, but otherwise showed no comprehension. Or interest. Jordan ground his teeth and leaned closer, keeping a firm grip on the leash while reaching for the dog's collar. He swore his daily allotment of patience was completely consumed by one encounter with this animal.

Jordan's skin prickled with awareness when his movements brought him alarmingly close to the stranger's rather impressive bulge, hugged so nicely in its denim trappings. For a second he imagined he saw swelling behind the fly but his damned professional ethics had him dropping his eyes quickly. Reason had him ruthlessly dismissing the thought. Heat tinged his cheeks pink, which only annoyed him more. He couldn't remember the last time he'd blushed, and he sure as hell had no intentions of starting again now.

“Today, please?” the stranger growled, shifting and trying to shove at the dog with one leg to tug his other foot free. Winston just sighed and followed, his weight falling back against those sexy legs. He couldn't really fault the dog for that. But Jordan did have to appreciate the stillness of the man, considering how likely it was that he really just wanted to kick hard at the obstinate thing.

Jordan could see this getting out of control far too quickly. His body was instinctively reacting to the inescapable vision of manhood standing before him, while the stubborn dog seemed intent on pulling him increasingly closer to temptation. He was one small dog-tug away from landing face first in an unsuspecting—and no doubt unwelcoming—man's junk.

Imagining himself doing just that was not going to help. Picturing himself booting the dog out of the way like a soccer ball and tackling the black-haired beauty to the ground, so he could hump and grind away on him like an animal, was even less productive. Jordan dug deep to rein in his sudden, inexplicably feral urges. He risked a quick glance up through his lashes and bit back a sigh. Okay, maybe not so inexplicable.

In desperation, he sent a meaningful look over his shoulder to Mrs. Miller, who was still standing motionless except for the glittering hands flapping over her gaping mouth. At his unspoken but undeniable demand, she snapped to attention and grabbed the leash from Jordan, tugging and chastising Winston in a voice that—please God—had to have penetrated the thick animal if the shooters in Jordan's spine were any measure of success.

Winston finally, with a great exhale of exasperation, responded to Mrs. Miller's pleas and shuffled forward only as far as necessary to make her stop. The, uh, victim was studying his legs as if afraid of what may have been left behind by the animal. The whole thing had lasted less than a minute, but it had played out in that long, painful, super slow-mo torture reserved for only the most awkward of situations.

Jordan stood with what dignity he could, horrified to find himself almost flustered. That hadn't happened to him since his teen years, when he'd struggled to keep his cool around Bobby Braggar in the high school locker room. He reminded himself sternly that he was, for all intents and purposes, a grown-up now, supposedly bearing some semblance of control over his nearly thirty-six-year-old penis. Still, he barely managed to acknowledge Mrs. Miller when she tugged Winston out the door. He took a deep breath before refocusing on the object of Winston's new-found adoration.

"I am so sorry about that, Mr. ...?" He was almost satisfied with the quiet calm of his own voice, especially since inside he still struggled to pull his professionalism around himself like the lab coat he wore. The one barely protecting him from an ugly sexual harassment lawsuit at the moment. It wasn't easy, he had to admit. Six feet of lean, tightly wound male stood before him looking like he'd just been molested. Which he kind of had been.

"It's just Cal." God, listen to that husky voice. Jordan's skin immediately resumed its tingling from the kneeling at the man's feet thing. "Calvin Sherbrook. No mister." The man still was not smiling and he didn't offer his hand. In fact, he frowned even more when Jordan tried a polite smile of his own. Even as it faded, though, the vet found himself holding eye contact, seeing... something in those almost fathomless eyes. Something he needed to think about later because they were rapidly becoming quite fathomable. In fact, they were starting to look downright pissed.

Recognition dawned too slowly. "Right. Cal." Jordan pulled himself together—again—like the professional he was supposed to be. "You'd be here for Nina's—your grandmother's—pup. She told me to expect you."

He was suddenly aware of the not so subtle whispers coming from his assistant and the receptionist, the two gossips thick as thieves. He could tell by the tension in Cal's shoulders that he was also well aware of their attention.

"Ladies," Jordan interrupted their chatter, his voice firm and authoritative. His I-am-The-Boss Voice. "One of you can get the dog while the other grabs several food samples for Mr. Sherbrook."

He sensed Cal tense next to him but ignored it. He probably objected to the tone he'd taken with his staff, not that it was any of his business. But then again, maybe he'd liked it. Jordan firmly scolded his rearing Id, usually buried much deeper than this, before returning to adulthood once again.

"I do apologize for the dog, Cal." Jordan the grown-up was back in business. A resounding "whew" echoed in his head. He ignored that, too. "I have no idea what got into him. He's usually so... well, lazy."

He shook his head and combed his fingers through his salt and pepper hair. Hair that he *chose* to leave natural, thankyouverymuch, because it contributed to the more seasoned—and therefore apparently more competent—image he knew appealed to his clients.

"You know ..." Small talk. Fill the awkward void. "That's the same thing Winston did when he met me." He shook his head, chuckling a little at the memory. "He's eased up slightly since then, but he still hovers. I've never seen him act that way around anyone else."

A black, perfectly arched brow lifted. "Guess I'm just lucky?" Cal's lips relaxed slightly in what might have been a small release of his irritation. Or maybe they were just getting tired from all the frowning.

Jordan laughed. "I wouldn't go that far."

The women returned, looking appropriately subdued. Jordan took the carrier from Lizzy and propped it on the counter in front of Cal. "Here you go."

Cal bent to look in the grated door of the small kennel. His lip actually curled. "Is this a joke?" He eyed Jordan, obviously not seeing the humor if this was, in fact, a joke.

"Nope." Jordan felt his lips twitch and fought the smile, knowing full well that that damn dimple at the corner of his mouth gave him away, anyway. "That's Brutus."

"Brutus?" He looked horrified, still, apparently, not seeing the humor. "Seriously?"

Jordan just shrugged, amused with Cal's calculated study of the animal, which was already nosing the grate, trying to gain his affection.

"Looks like an electrocuted rodent." Cal stood, lifting the pet carrier in front of his face. "From Whoville." Black eyes and a riot of white hair shook in time with the wagging tail. "This is a real dog?" He hefted the kennel and shook it slightly, eliciting a small yip from within. "Can't weigh 5 pounds, even with the box."

Jordan had to laugh. "He is a dog, yes. A miniature mixed breed. Your grandmother picked him up from the shelter benefit last week. He's a sweet-tempered pup, about 6 months old."

Cal snorted, obviously not impressed. "Whatever, I guess. I'm just here to pick it up."

Jordan handed him the bag of food samples and several printed sheets of paper. "His post-op care instructions are here, though he's recovered nicely in the time he's been with us. I've already talked with Nina so she knows what to do from here."

"Post-op?" Cal squinted at the perfectly healthy-looking, if sort of freakish, dog. Jordan was sure he didn't imagine the tiny flicker of concern in those carefully veiled eyes. "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing. Just a routine neutering." He nodded sympathetically at Cal's wince, tempted to slap a companionable hand down on the man's shoulder. "I know, but it is the responsible thing to do."

Cal shrugged, not looking at all convinced, but he took the bag and the dog and headed for the door without another word.

"Cal, wait." Jordan was surprised – and aroused in a way he would evaluate later - when the man stopped dead at his command. Cal turned slowly and waited silently. "My after-hours numbers are on those printed sheets. You, or Nina, can call me if you need anything at all." A nod and a delicious flexing of hamstrings were his only response.

The second he was out of sight, Jordan rounded on his staff. "All right, you two. What is up with you?"

The too innocent looks didn't faze him. He sterned it up a bit. "Your behavior made our client visibly uncomfortable, and I'd like an explanation, right now."

Lizzy, always the talker for the two, stepped forward with a gleam in her eye. “You saw Winston glob onto him.” Jordan just lifted his eyebrows and waved impatiently at her to continue. “He's totally matchmaking you two!”

Jordan's jaw dropped. “What?” He gaped. “What are you talking about?”

Lizzy and Andrea giggled, grating against the last of the nerve Mrs. Miller and her dog had shredded. “That dog is a walking gaydar machine, Doctor Mac, didn't you know that? I can't believe Mrs. Miller didn't tell you all about it.”

He couldn't be any more dumbstruck if he tried. “That is the biggest pile of ...” He shook his head and turned to leave. “You know what? Never mind.”

Lizzy bounced on her toes. “But it's true!”

Andrea nodded, adding, “When Mrs. Miller brought him in here the first time and he did that to you?” Jordan could only stare mutely and wait for the rest. “She told us he has an ‘uncanny ability’” —air quotes included— “to identify gay men, and that he just *loves* them.”

Jordan snorted. “First, that’s ridiculous. And second, that man is the epitome of straight, ladies.” He turned towards his office, determined to give them no additional ammunition by revealing his interest. It was probably far more likely he was right and Cal was as straight as they come. Then again, dogs were incredibly sensitive animals, were they not? He couldn't help but wonder.

His pondering was put on hold when the girls' excited voices called to him. Turning back, he saw them pointing out the front door where, to his horror, Jordan saw that Cal was about to be accosted by Winston. Again.

Jordan was almost at the scene of the crime when the impact occurred. He heard Cal curse before he whirled to confront Mrs. Miller.

“Seriously, lady,” Cal began, just as Jordan arrived. She cut him off with a regal wave.

“I’m so sorry to bother you, but Winston just insisted we wait for you so we could apologize for his behavior.” The hand not holding the leash fluttered around her distractingly. Bright red nails on heavily ringed fingers flashed before him like a hyper hummingbird. Jordan noticed Cal keeping a wary eye on them, maybe concerned she was not in control of the flashy weapons. “He feels really bad about sitting on you before.”

Cal’s eyebrows rose as he processed her statement. He must have decided not to address the crazy and focused instead on the literal. “Yet, here he sits on my feet once again.” He cocked his head, making his dark hair flop enticingly over his brows. If he'd noticed Jordan's arrival he made no indication of it. He appeared almost enthralled—in a horrified inability to look away kind of way—by the eccentric woman with the too-much makeup and the yellow hair.

“I know, I know.” Flutter, flutter. But she did nothing about moving the drooling brute, instead actually stepping closer to Cal, peering up from her made-up eyes. Resisting the urge to brush at the black curls blowing in Cal's eyes, Jordan noticed randomly that Mrs. Miller's iron coif made not a single concession to the breeze whistling through the parking lot. But then she was getting too close, and his only thought was to intercept the uncomfortable encounter.

Jordan stepped forward, but Cal beat him to it. “Um.” Cal coughed. The universal ‘ahem’ of the exasperated. “Apology accepted. Now could you maybe get him off me?”

Jordan froze, suddenly compelled to watch this play out. He was closer now, close enough to be encompassed within the cloud of perfume that identified to any and all that there was a rich old lady nearby.

Mrs. Miller appeared not to have heard him. She tipped her head and squinted her eyes, huge spider legs tangling over crazy liquid blue. “You’re gay, huh?” Jordan held his breath, stunned at the boldness of her statement, but really, really needing to know the answer.

Cal gaped. Sputtering, visibly livid, he frowned and shoved at the dog, apparently done with the being polite to your elders bullshit. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business, or how the hell you get off asking me outright!”

Yep. Definitely gay, Jordan thought. Unfortunately, not exactly thrilled about it.

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Miller stepped back, over-rouged cheeks flaming even brighter. This time the random thought was that the pink of her skin clashed horribly with the rose red of her makeup. Her hand was flapping about again. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! That really was horribly rude, wasn’t it? I only asked because Winston is wildly sensitive to gay men. He almost never acts like this, but when he does, which is hardly ever, mind you, it’s always over a man and he always ends up being gay.” She babbled, and then gasped. “Oh, not that he turns them gay, because he obviously can’t do that. That would just be crazy. What I mean is I come to discover the men happen to be gay.”

Cal appeared to be stumped, edging towards perturbed. Jordan couldn't blame him. How does one react to that kind of nonsense? Run. That’s how. Cal responded before Jordan could even come up with what the hell to say to that. “That’s, uh, interesting, ma’am, but I don’t . . .” He trailed off, raising his eyes directly to Jordan's. But, to Jordan's dismay, they darted away too quickly to read.

Mrs. Miller was nodding vigorously, as if he were visually placing the pieces together before her very eyes. “That’s right. Doctor Mac is gay, too.”

Okay. Time to snap out of it. Jordan wrapped a hand around Mrs. Miller's bony arm and tugged gently to alert her to his presence. She hadn't once looked in his direction, even when the dog had grunted in

acknowledgment of his arrival. But to his horror, she ignored him and suddenly leaned in uncomfortably close to Cal to whisper way too loudly, “I think Winston thinks you two belong together.”

“Oh? Did he tell you that as well, then?” Cal snapped, and Jordan thought he must be wondering at this point how he had managed to get dragged along on this train wreck.

The illustrious Mrs. Miller only shrugged and held her hand palm up, as if to imply he had just answered his own question by stating the most logical conclusion given the ‘facts’ presented.

“Mrs. Miller,” Jordan intercepted, and she looked at him now, blinking owlishly as she stepped away from Cal. Winston, apparently taking pity on the flummoxed man trapped against the truck, shuffled forward to butt up against Jordan's knees.

But it was too little, too late. Jordan could see that Cal was well and truly past being nice. “So, I guess I should just invite the good doctor out on a date, huh?” he mocked, sarcasm dripping like it consisted of its own mass. Jordan winced, not quite able to deny the sting.

Remarkably oblivious to his tone, Mrs. Miller's eyes lit with glee, and she shot a triumphant grin in Jordan's direction. “Yes!” she screeched.

“No.” He maneuvered gracelessly sideways to reach behind himself for the door, almost frantically trying to get away. Jordan pulled her closer to him to allow Cal room to fit the kennel he still carried into the truck and slide behind the wheel. He was starting the truck before it dawned on Mrs. Miller to stop him.

“But—” The over-slicked lips gaped when she realized he was leaving. When those fierce brown eyes landed on Jordan, he gave Cal 'The Nod'—the one that said, “I feel your pain. Run, run while you still can.”

Cal shut the door and leaned over the open window. “It’s been a pleasure,” he drawled, shooting a glare at the panting bulldog. He was shaking his head as he drove away. Jordan sighed and led Mrs. Miller and her meddling dog to her mile-long 1975 butter yellow Cadillac. At least the yellow of her hair matched the car better than her rouge matched her still flushed cheeks.

Jordan sighed. His scattered thoughts of randomness hadn't exactly served him well in the role of Knight in Shining Armor. He was never so glad to have reached the end of a workday as when he reentered his clinic and shot past his employees, who were eagerly awaiting wedding invitations, no doubt. He wasn't about to fuel that fire.

He was running through the encounter for the twenty third time when he heard the unmistakable commotion of his son arriving on site. Those girls adored him to the point of the poor teen’s embarrassment. He smiled when Thomas poked his head in the door a few moments later. Judging

from the shit-eating grin on his face, he'd heard all about the girls' theory from the effusive Lizzy. Couldn't have come from Andrea. The poor girl could barely speak a coherent word when Thomas was within sight.

"Hey, Dad." The dimple at the corner of his mouth was the same as Jordan's. So were the deep blue eyes and dark wavy hair, though his was obviously not yet sporting the gray Jordan's did.

"Hey, son." Jordan never ceased to be amazed and humbled by the beautiful boy. Tall and athletic, smart and sassy, he was any single father's dream. Add to that his absolute ease with his dad being gay, and Jordan couldn't ask for anything more. "How was school?"

"Eternal and mind-numbing," Thomas quipped, flopping into the chair with exaggerated exhaustion.

"Ah. The usual, then."

"Yeah." He shot a sideways grin at his dad. "Heard you're scoping out new boyfriend material."

"As if there were old boyfriend material?"

"True." Eyelashes fluttered devastatingly. "So, you gonna ask him out?"

"No." Jordan's response was automatic. His reaction to it, an uncomfortable stab of disappointment, was a surprise. But as he recalled the downright visceral reaction he'd had to the man, he reconsidered. Refocusing his attention on Thomas, he had to grin at the look on his son's face.

"So that would be a yes, then," Thomas smirked.

"Hullo?" Jordan fumbled with his phone while he peeked through one eye at the clock next to his bed. Two o'clock. He tried not to groan out loud. It wasn't entirely out of the ordinary to be called to an animal emergency in the middle of the night. But no one answered his greeting. Then the phone chirped and vibrated in his hand. He squinted at the too-bright display and stabbed at it until the text appeared.

Do you know why I'm still awake at... 2 a.m.?

Jordan's body reacted immediately. He could only think of one person with reason to be sending such a message, but...

Cal?

Duh.

He had to laugh.

You have a crying dog. He'd suspected by the wicked gleam in Nina's eyes that she'd had plans for that little mutt.

Yes! You bastard, you knew exactly what Gran had planned for that dog, didn't you?

Jordan couldn't help thinking it was decidedly safer for him at the moment that Cal couldn't hear him.

I suspected.

Well? What do I do? I put him in the kennel like they said, but he won't stop whining!

Jordan's smile remained. He didn't need to ask who 'they' were, figuring Cal had most likely hit the internet like most new dog owners. But Jordan knew all about the process of moving in a new pet. His own home housed a dog, a cat, and his son's pet ferret, and that was only when they weren't taking in overflow from the local shelters.

You have two choices. 1. grit your teeth and deal with it until he's trained.

OR?

Cal was obviously not impressed with door number one. Jordan could practically feel the man's anxiety without even hearing his voice. He pictured the lean body pacing, naked from the waist up, light pajama pants hanging low on narrow hips. Of course he had no idea what the man slept in, but it was safer imagining him at least partially covered.

Or, 2, let him sleep with you, which is where he wants to be, and accept the fact that your dog wins and will probably get whatever he wants from you forever.

3?

3. I can call you and we can discuss.

Jordan grinned, waiting patiently for the decision, wondering if he'd even be told what it was. Moments later he knew.

Gah. Puppy breath. Gross.

Jordan's laugh warmed his entire body. Ignoring the fact that Cal was blatantly avoiding actual conversation with him, he was none-the-less charmed by this man, so rough on the outside, but—he was starting to suspect—not quite so tough on the inside.

He could have let the conversation end there. He didn't, of course.

Better?

Yeah. Guess I didn't need to wake you.

Jordan suspected that was paramount to a heartfelt apology for Cal. He hesitated only a second before diving in head first. He knew what he wanted.

I'm glad you did. It was entirely my pleasure.

He was about to concede the battle and attempt to go back to sleep when his phone beeped.

Oh.

Why that simple word said so much, Jordan couldn't be sure, but it settled somewhere deep inside him, and when he finally slept, his dreams were filled with images of one hot-headed Calvin Sherbrook.

Despite the late night call, Jordan felt decidedly chipper the next day. He'd been trying to decide if he should give it a few days before he pursued anything more with Cal. The thought of waiting at all chafed, but Cal was reticent and downright skittish. Doing this right was more important than satisfying his inner hedonist. But that didn't mean he wasn't learning more about him. Lizzy and Andrea scattered constant updates around him throughout the day. The two were entirely too eager for his comfort, even if he did suck up every drop of information they spilled.

“He's remodeling the old Sherbrook mansion.”

“He just up and left everything he'd had in Philadelphia to come home to help his gran. Isn't he sweet?”

“Well, I heard he had to come here because he'd lost everything in some shady business deal.”

“I heard he's some kind of genius. Went to Penn State on a full scholarship.”

“No way.”

“Yeah way. Graduated top of his class just a few years ago.”

“Then why would he come back here to work construction on some old house?”

“He loves his gran.”

“Oh.” Sigh. “So sweet.”

“Yeah.” Sigh.

Jordan didn't know whether to tell the two gossips to shut the hell up or grab a coffee and hunker down in the break room with them like a wide-eyed teenage girl hearing all about the cute new kid in school. He did neither, instead stealing a short reprieve in his office between patients.

It was then that it occurred to him that he now had Cal's cell number in his phone and he'd be a damn fool not to use it. He masterminded his method of attack while he stored Cal's number in his contacts.

What he came up with was downright brilliant.

Hey.

For the first time in years he carried his personal phone in his pocket during working hours. He waited anxiously for the responding vibration. It was with an embarrassing amount of relief that he finally read

the reply he figured was grudgingly returned. He couldn't be sure why that thought made him smile all the more.

Hey back.

You didn't crush your dog in your sleep, did you? Yeah. He was good at this.

No.

It came almost an hour later, and it made Jordan laugh out loud, surprising the girls who watched him constantly between scattering their crumbs of information around him. It gave him that much more pleasure to let them wonder about it.

Can I call you later?

No.

Why not?

I told you to call me Cal.

Smartass. I'll call you at 10:00.

No.

Jordan hesitated, sure the wisest thing to do would be to leave the man alone. That, however, was out of the question.

Don't want to talk to me?

It took another hour to receive a response. Jordan scowled, not impressed with himself. If he hadn't had his work to occupy him, he'd probably be sitting there staring at the phone like a lovesick fool.

Didn't say that.

Well, hmm.

Should I stop texting you?

Again he waited. And waited.

No.

Jordan grinned like a lovesick fool for the rest of the day.

He lived for the random moments he was able to touch base with Cal in such a simple way. The most ridiculous conversations made him grin for hours.

What's your favorite color?

Seriously?

Just trying to get to know you.
OK. I'm color blind.

Really?
No.

He wasn't to be deterred.

Whatcha doin'?
Balancing on the precipice of madness. You?

How 'bout now?
Watching my dog shit. You?

Not sure I should even ask...
I wouldn't.

Jordan had so often rolled his eyes at his son's insistence on the use of texts to communicate. But he was now convinced it was the most brilliant discovery ever. He learned quickly that Cal was sharp and funny and not a little bit sarcastic. He learned that the length of time Cal took to respond was determined entirely on how personal the question.

When, after three days—and nights—of frequent texts, Cal finally initiated the conversation, Jordan almost sprang from his chair in orgasmic delight.

The text that drove him to such a frenzy?

Mornin'.

Of course he realized he should have been disgusted with what a sap he was, and he would have been if a) anyone else had seen him—anyone at all—and b) he wasn't so preposterously happy. It was, however, only a baby step, as he discovered only moments later.

Go out with me.
No.

Coffee?
No.

Call you?

This time, the fact that he waited encouraged him. At least he knew Cal was considering it.

Fine.

He'd take it.

Every month or so the large Pet-co in town opened the back of their store to the animal shelter so they could display and hopefully find homes for their current boarders. This Saturday found Jordan and Thomas at the store early to meet several other volunteers. Jordan took the opportunity to check over any new arrivals as well as offer his assistance with the adoptions or questions from pet owners.

He had just tucked away the last of a litter of kittens when he heard the unmistakable screech of Mrs. Miller's voice. Taking a bracing breath, already filling with a cloud of perfume, he turned to greet her. He wasn't prepared for her to grab his arm and drag him with her. He shot a startled look over his shoulder at Thomas but the little punk just grinned and shrugged, helpless, it seemed, to come to Jordan's aid.

“You have to see this, Dr. Mac.” Mrs. Miller looked a tinge hyper, but not panicked, so Jordan followed—by choice, damn it—curious to see what had caused the peculiar gleam in her eye.

Rounding the corner, he stopped short at the sight before him. Standing in the middle of an aisle of collars and leashes stood Cal. He held a fluff of white close up to his neck in one hand, his other hand rested on his hip. He was staring down in obvious disbelief and mounting hostility at the massive Winston backed up against his legs.

But that wasn't the surprising part. Winston—the laziest, most apathetic animal Jordan had ever encountered—was actually growling at the young man in a Pet-co shirt standing against the rack across the aisle from Cal. Winston didn't appear overly aggressive, the boy wasn't in danger in Jordan's opinion, but the dog was certainly making his point.

“What --” Jordan's eyes lit from Mrs. Miller to Cal to the boy. Mrs. Miller rushed forward. Jordan hurried ahead, immediately stepping between the young man and the dog. “What's happening?”

Cal met his eyes and Jordan did his damndest to not react to the annoyance on the man's face. Seeing Jordan apparently did little, if anything, to calm him. Calm wasn't exactly the reaction Jordan was having either, for that matter.

Mrs. Miller started babbling. “We were just here to pick up a new rawhide chew when Winston trotted off down the aisle.” Her hands were doing the fluttering thing again. He noticed the tips of her fingers were a brilliant pink today. She waved them back and forth between Cal and the employee.

“Apparently he didn't like this young man talking to Mr. Sherbrook, because he jumped right in between them and started growling at ...” A hand waved helplessly at the boy.

“Uh. It's Lee.” The boy croaked, eyes remaining warily on the dog. Winston had relaxed marginally upon Jordan's arrival, but Lee remained motionless where he stood.

“It looked to Winston like Lee here was flirting with Cal—”

"I was only offering to help! It's my job!" Lee defended himself, though Jordan thought he looked a bit like he'd been caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

"—and Winston didn't like it one bit." Mrs. Miller finished as if the poor kid hadn't spoken a word.

"Lee." Jordan turned to him, the Adult in Charge taking control. "Why don't you go ahead and get back to work."

"She," he tipped his head towards Mrs. Miller. "She told me to wait here."

"And so you have." Jordan clapped him on the shoulder, turning him none too subtly away from the dog. He deliberately did not react to the growl that came from behind him. "We're good now. You go ahead."

Lee hesitated only a second longer before scurrying away. Jordan returned his attention to Cal, who was staring at him as if he'd somehow orchestrated the entire ordeal. The second the boy was out of their sight the dog relaxed heavily onto Cal's boots.

"Winston." Jordan commanded the dog with his tone and a single pat on his leg. The lazy dog sighed, but levered himself up, lumbering over to plop himself right back down on Jordan instead. Jordan smiled at Cal. The man was flushed and obviously riled, but he stood there with that little pup curled against him all protective-like and it completely ruined the effect. Not that Jordan was going to be the dumb-ass to tell him that. Besides, he was just so thrilled to see Cal's face again he couldn't have stopped smiling if he'd tried.

"Picking up boys at the pet store, are we?" Jordan couldn't help provoking him.

"I was not," Cal spat. "This damn cretin just hurled himself into me. Again." Jordan would never have been able to explain why the dark-eyed man's ire was so damn appealing to him. "I was trying to find a few things and the kid offered to help. It is his job, you know."

Jordan's grin just grew. "Relax, Cal. I was only teasing." He nudged the dog from his feet and snatched the leash from the floor. Walking much closer to Cal than necessary, he whispered, "*Stay*." Then, ignoring Cal's quick intake of breath, he handed the dog over to Mrs. Miller and nudged her gently on her way. When he turned back he had to laugh at the stunned look on Cal's face.

"You ... just *ordered* me to *stay*," He looked and sounded incredulous. But Jordan hadn't imagined that reaction and he certainly wasn't imagining the thickening behind the man's snug—and growing snugger—jeans.

"I did." Jordan agreed, stepping closer and speaking quietly. "And you did."

Jordan was fascinated, watching Cal's mouth work before sound finally came out. "Only because I was stunned stupid that you actually used your dog voice on me!"

Jordan was truly enjoying himself. "It was supposed to be funny, Cal." He tilted his head and waited while Cal studied him. When he finally relaxed—marginally—Jordan figured he believed him. Or at least realized he couldn't prove him a liar.

“Well it wasn't.” Cal huffed and turned his back to Jordan, staring at the huge array of collars hanging on the racks, though Jordan was confident he wasn't seeing them.

Jordan chuckled and stepped close behind the man, chest brushing against his broad back, making sure Cal felt his breath on his neck. “I'll call you later.”

Cal didn't say a word, but Jordan could feel the tension radiating off him in waves. Confident he'd successfully rattled him, he turned and left Cal to his thoughts. Of which there were obviously many.

Jordan and Thomas were just finishing their run the following Saturday morning. Despite several nights of little sleep, he felt energized and younger than he had in years. He'd been calling Cal every night, slowly working through the man's initial resistance until he gave in and talked. It had been like pulling teeth at first, but Cal was ever so slowly opening up and Jordan was falling deeper and deeper into his fascination with the enigmatic man. He would suffer endless nights of raging erections and disruptive dreams if that's what it took.

He let his instincts lead him. It worked for the animals, after all, right? Random texts during the day and the phone calls at night hadn't gotten Cal to share much more than the basics but he was getting a definite feel for the man. And every scrap Cal offered left Jordan craving more.

His own growing needs had him pushing even harder at work, at the gym, waking at ridiculous times of the night with an aching groin. Jordan couldn't remember anyone ever getting under his skin this way. He wanted Cal with a ferocity he would have feared if he wasn't so damn driven to *have*.

Jordan rolled his shoulders and paced up and down the sidewalk to cool down from the run, thinking about the straight up ridiculous number of times he'd jacked off in the past two weeks. He hadn't been this wound up since he'd discovered boys really, really did it for him far more than girls ever had.

Thomas was already on his phone chatting away to his friend Kody while they walked the last stretch to the house. Jordan was only listening with half an ear as they made their way into the kitchen. He was downing a giant glass of water when his emergency cell rang. Only mildly concerned to see Mrs. Miller's number on the display, he was still a little breathless when he answered.

“Dr. Mac!” Mrs. Miller sounded—not surprisingly—frantic on the other end. “I need you to come quick!”

“Calm down, Mrs. Miller. Tell me what's happening.” Jordan wasn't worried yet. He'd received more than one call from Mrs. Miller when she'd overfed Winston ice cream or she'd lost him when he'd napped somewhere hidden for too long.

“Okay.” She took a loud breath. “I was on my way to the park with Winston when he suddenly insisted we stop at the home improvement store. You know the one off—”

“I know the one.” Jordan interrupted, trying to keep her on topic, if there was one. He nodded at Thomas, who was indicating he was heading for the shower.

“Oh, okay.” He could hear the jangling of her jewelry as she made gestures he couldn't see but could easily imagine. “Well, I decided I could pick up some spring seeds to plant anyway, so why not go ahead and stop?”

Why not, indeed, thought Jordan, jabbing himself between the eyes with his middle finger. *Oh, yeah, maybe because taking directions from your barely conscious dog is bat-shit crazy?* Aloud, he said, “Go on.”

“So I pulled into the parking lot, and the minute I opened the door Winston barreled right over me and out the door, and the next thing I knew he was running around the side of the building and into the lumber yard!” And there was The Voice only this woman could produce. Jordan desperately tried to ignore it and concentrate instead on what it was saying.

“What do you mean?” He wasn't comprehending. “He ran away from you?” He was completely stunned. Not only did the dog rarely venture more than a few yards away, it was with even greater reluctance that he ran ... anywhere. Ever.

“Yes!” Mrs. Miller shrieked. “He's in there now behind the huge stacks of lumber and he won't come out, and the manager is getting really angry, and I don't know what to do!”

“Okay,” Jordan drew the word out, thinking. He was at a loss. “I'm not sure what you want me to do, Mrs. Miller.”

“Can you come?” Her pleading voice may have actually been worse. “He listens to you, kind of. He'll probably come right out to you, you know, because of the way he, well, you know.”

Jordan sighed. She was probably right. But he wasn't happy about it. “I'll be there as soon as I can.”

“Please hurry!” Egad, the decibel of the screech in her voice was directly proportionate to the level of her hysteria.

He checked his watch, debating running out as he was and trying to return to shower, or just making them wait. He decided a quick rinse in the shower would be best for everyone, since he had no idea how long this was going to take.

Jordan didn't know what to expect, but it sure as hell wasn't what he found. As he rounded the back of the building to the lumber warehouse, he could see Mrs. Miller gesturing wildly to the oversized manager, identified with quick deductive reasoning based on the clipboard clenched in the man's hand that wasn't planted on his hip. A hip that was remarkably smaller than the broad shoulders that sprang from them in a wide vee. As he shifted to say something to Mrs. Miller, the man's back obliterated virtually any view of her.

Jordan cleared his throat to announce his presence. “Excuse me. Mrs. Miller?”

The giant swung around at the interruption. Jordan braced himself for hostility but was surprised to see wide hazel eyes whose calm was only slightly marred with perfectly understandable frustration. Jordan smiled, relieved at not having to defuse an irate manager. In fact, he was rather nice to look at, he admitted, when he received a genuine smile in return.

“I’m Jordan Mackenzie.” He offered his hand, which was pleasantly enveloped in its entirety by a warmer, rougher hand. “I may be able to get Winston out of there.” He nodded his head towards the pile of lumber without breaking eye contact. He wasn’t blind, after all.

“Nate Daniels.” He held Jordan’s hand a little longer—the universal sign for ‘ooh, pretty’—before releasing him. “And I’ll be impressed if you can.”

Jordan could only hope to impress. He walked deliberately to a spot he knew the dog would be able to spot him. “Winston.” He pulled out his Master-of-all-Animals Voice. “Come.”

The grunt could be heard from where he stood, but it meant the beast was moving. He slowly walked towards Jordan, stubby tail wagging in what, for Winston, belied ecstasy, even as it probably appeared to the ordinary bystander to be downright sluggish.

Jordan heard Nate and Mrs. Miller approaching behind him, but he kept his attention on the dog, encouraging him with his firm but gentle tone. “That’s a boy.” He knelt to greet the dog, who nudged him under the chin with his wet nose and chuffed in his face. Jordan laughed and stood, not at all surprised to feel the dog’s heavy belly on his feet and his warm back pressed to his shins.

Jordan grinned at Nate and shot him a cheeky wink. “So? What do I win?” He teased, and then started with surprise when Winston grumbled low in his throat.

Nate didn’t hear the dog, or he chose to ignore him. He laughed, all twinkling eyes and engaging as could be. “How ‘bout dinner?”

“How ‘bout *no*.”

They turned in surprise at the angry voice. Standing barely within hearing distance now stood a tightly compact young man, flashing daggers with his bright blue eyes, and beside him stood a decidedly neutral-faced Cal. Jordan was inordinately happy to see the chocolate eyes he’d been dreaming about only a few short hours ago. They must have just entered the yard from the building because they sure hadn’t been there when Jordan arrived. The appeal of the beefy manager faded significantly, all of the sudden.

“Doctor,” Cal drawled, sharp eyes quickly taking in the scene before him as his eyebrow rose. “Are we interrupting?”

“I ...” Jordan glanced again at the fuming young blond facing off against the giant who apparently stood too close to Jordan. “I’m actually not sure,” he said before turning inquiring eyes towards Nate.

“Er. Everything okay here, Nate?” Jordan seemed to snap the dumbstruck man out of his stupor. Shaking his head, Nate blinked at Jordan before smiling. The wide smile created charming laugh lines and dimples and showed his nice white teeth. It also caused simultaneous growls from Winston and the younger man, whose face flushed red with anger.

“No. It’s not okay.” All eyes flew once again to the slightly built man.

“Take it easy, pipsqueak.” Jordan winced when the hot blue eyes darted back to Nate.

“Good God, man.” Jordan hissed. “Don't make it worse!”

Nate clapped him on the shoulder hard enough to unbalance him. “Can't really make it any worse,” he chuckled, and then stepped around him to stalk—there could be no better description—towards the fiery blond. He draped an arm over the young man, who resisted mightily but was no match against the sheer mass he fought. “This little spitfire is Alex.” He leaned towards Jordan, still grinning all over the place. “I think he's jealous.”

Alex shouldered himself out from under the muscled arm only because he was allowed. “I am not.” He tried valiantly not to pout, Jordan could tell. It was adorable, actually. “I was just coming to get you to help this guy, er, gentleman, and saw this sh..., er, business going down with the dog.”

Damned if he wasn't a sweet little catch. Jordan had to admire the tight body paired with shiny blond hair, nice lips, and gorgeous eyes. And caught he was, if Jordan was reading this whole thing correctly.

He raised an eyebrow at Cal, who sidled up next to him and murmured, “We were on our way to fencing supplies when he spotted you all out here. Little dude took off like a rocket.” He nodded towards the arguing men. “Got here just in time to hear the invitation to dinner.”

“Yeah, doesn't look like that's going to happen.” Jordan laughed.

“But it would have?” Cal's mouth snapped shut with an audible clacking of teeth. “Never mind. It's none of my business.” He grumbled, leaning down to pat Winston who was, now that Nate was gone and Cal was there, completely uninterested in the trivial human drama going on around him. Except that he had now scooted over Jordan's feet enough to rest his drooling mug on Cal's boot.

“Ugh.” Jordan gave him credit for gently removing his foot rather than yanking it out from under the big dog's head, but he was still caught up on the question. Hmm. Seemed Cal was maybe a little concerned about the answer.

“Is this dog the town mascot or something?” Cal grouched, moving away from him. And Jordan. Jordan just barely caught himself from reaching for him. Instead, he observed, fascinated all over again by the rough exterior so tenuously shielding what appeared to be a broken interior.

So curious. Jordan hummed to himself. *So damned appealing.*

But Mrs. Miller abruptly chimed in, all excited and flushed. “See?” Jordan jumped at the shriek, having managed to almost forget she was there. She reached for the leash in Jordan's hand. He was more than happy to hand it over. “I told you! I should have known my Winston had his reasons for wanting to come here today.”

Jordan shook his head in bemusement. She giggled with glee and waved a hand impatiently towards the other two men like he was daft. Glancing at them, Jordan noticed they were also now gaping at her.

“He's a matchmaker,” she declared triumphantly, with a long, meaningful stare that somehow managed to include both him and Cal. And with that, she tugged the leash and dragged Winston from the yard. He could have sworn that dog looked smug.

The four men stared at one another before Jordan and Nate broke into loud laughter. Alex and Cal were far less amused.

Still chuckling, Jordan shared a knowing nod with Nate. “You go ahead and take care of your boy, there, Nate. We’ll meet you in the fencing supplies.”

Nate’s grin only grew when Alex sputtered, “I am *not* his *boy*.” What could he say? Jordan couldn’t resist.

Watching the two walk into the building—Nate reaching for Alex, only to be batted away time and again—Jordan had to say he was delighted with the outcome of the odd morning.

Turning his full attention to Cal, Jordan couldn’t miss the sudden wariness in the darker man’s expression. “It was just a bit of harmless flirting,” Jordan assured him. “I had no intention—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Cal cut him off. *Prickly again*, he noted. *Hmm*. “You can do whatever you want.”

Jordan narrowed his eyes and stepped closer. Cal froze. “I think it does matter.” He moved closer still. Cal was coiled tight, and tempting as sin, but ready to bolt at the slightest infraction. Slowly, Jordan raised a hand and ran a single knuckle over Cal’s unshaven jaw. The rasp of whiskers almost covered the sound of Cal’s breathlessness before he jerked his head away and stepped back. The flare of arousal had been as unmistakable as the sudden retreat.

Curiouser and curiouser, thought Jordan. But he didn’t push. Keeping his voice casual, he moved towards the building. “Building a fence for the pup, then?”

Cal was watching the ground as he walked. “Yeah.” He exhaled slowly and appeared to be focusing entirely on breathing. “We’re ready to get started on the house. The rest of the crew will be rolling in on Monday, so I’ll need to be able to leave him home alone.”

Jordan nodded. They’d actually talked in depth about the restoration project he was heading at his grandmother’s family mansion. It seemed to be the only topic so far that made Cal comfortable enough to actually ramble.

“I might be able to get you some cheap labor.”

Cal shot him a sideways look but raised his eyebrows. “How’s that?”

“Thomas and his buddy are always looking for work. I won’t let him get an after school job because I’m a tyrant who insists his academics and extracurricular activities come first during the school year, so he picks up work on the weekends when he can and busts his ass all summer.”

“Huh.” Cal thought for a minute before he shrugged. “Sure, I guess. I’d really like to get this thing knocked out. Why don’t you send him out?”

“I’ll call him.”

“Okay.” They were at the entrance. Jordan brushed a hand down Cal’s arm, just needing to touch. God, he was sinew and strength, muscles bunching beneath his touch. He somehow resisted grabbing for

more. "I'd better get to work."

Cal nodded while he shivered and rubbed his arm. Jordan wondered if he even realized he was doing it. He threw on his most brilliant smile and shot Cal a cocky wink before turning to leave.

"I'll swing by later and check out your fence." Jordan tossed it over his shoulder as he walked away, not allowing Cal room to protest. He turned back when he reached the outer fence and was rewarded with the sight of Cal still standing there staring after him. He couldn't read his face from there, but the fact that he remained was good enough for now.

The day dragged by in an excruciating loop of visuals. Cal pounding posts into the ground for his fence, wearing nothing but tight, faded jeans and a low-slung tool belt. Cal perspiring in the afternoon sun, stopping to douse himself (in slow motion, naturally) with a somehow bottomless bottle of water. Eternally grateful for the shapeless length of his lab coat, Jordan suffered through his imaginings half hard the entire morning.

By the time Jordan had ushered out the last minute drop-in and finished his paperwork, his half-day had lasted until late afternoon. Finally, though, he was on his way. He was as anxious to see his boy as he'd been on his first date. Jordan froze with his hand on the key in the ignition. He'd just thought of Cal as his boy. And judging by the beat of his heart and the swelling of his cock, he liked the idea a whole lot.

Several miles out of town, the foliage thickened and the earth seemed to quiet. Jordan turned the radio off and slowed to take the turn that would wind him through woods just beginning to hint at the green to come. He realized he barely remembered the drive beyond automatic turns and stopping at reds. His mind had been consumed with highly adult-rated daydreams involving a particularly handsome carpenter.

The former plantation-style house stood somewhat worn but strong, stately and white, columns and wraparound porch included. It looked ready for Cal's crew, half surrounded by scaffolding.

Around the back of the house and beyond the stables that had been converted to modern garages years ago, a small forest bordered the estate. Just beyond was the overgrown drive that led to the old caretaker's cottage. Cottage being a relative term, in this case, since it referred to a house easily big enough for a small family.

He parked next to the older model sedan Kody drove and studied the house. Barely out of the vehicle before the front door flew open, Jordan squinted against the sun. He grinned at Cal's grandmother, wondering how this seventy-six-year-old woman managed to somehow combine regal authority with bohemian love child and make it work.

Nina smiled warmly and trotted down the steps as spry as a twenty-year-old. Warm, thin hands clasped Jordan's as he bent to receive a quick kiss on his cheek. "Nina." He held her arms wide. "You look amazing, as always."

"Oh, hush now." But she was beaming. "I was so thrilled to see Thomas and his friend show up to help Cal with the fence, I couldn't resist the chance to bring some treats down. That son of yours is more handsome every time I see him."

“Judging by his cell phone bill, you're not the only one who thinks that,” Jordan laughed. “How's Brutus settling in?”

“Oh, we just call him B.” She laughed and wrapped her hand around Jordan's elbow, directing him around the house. “Brutus was just too big a name for the little thing.”

“B. That's cute.” He hid his frown, wondering why Cal wouldn't have mentioned that. He shook his head. It was strange, the things Cal kept to himself, as if releasing them would be handing over just that little bit too much of himself.

They entered through the open door into a freshly remodeled house decorated in soothing earth tones. He immediately felt welcome. His eyes lifted to the loft, the space lit brightly by sun shining through a window he couldn't see. Hardwood floors gleamed in the open design. It was inviting and comfortable. “Cal must feel quite at home here.”

“I think he does.” Nina glanced around with a keen eye, obviously pleased with the results. But then she sighed, and Jordan caught a hint of sadness in it.

“Well, I'll leave you here.” She moved towards the entrance. “You'll find him out the kitchen door.”

“You're not staying?” Jordan asked, a little puzzled that she would leave.

“He sees me enough,” she answered with a smile. “He needs company other than my old bones.”

Jordan laughed. “It's always good seeing you, Nina.”

“You too, dear.” She left quietly and Jordan glanced around the room, eyes returning to the loft, imagining a naked Cal bathed in that golden light, before heading towards the kitchen.

The sight before him was his wet dream come true. Cal was, in fact, bare-chested in his torn and dirty jeans. A tool belt did, in fact, hang low on his hips, tugging ever so temptingly at the waistband of those jeans. His tanned torso was gleaming with sweat, shoulders growing pink in the sun. He had just enough hair on his chest to shadow the valley between his pecs. And make Jordan's fingers itch to feel.

His mouth went dry when Cal stood to listen intently to something Thomas was saying. Jordan appreciated the complete attention he gave the teen-aged boy. He sighed out loud when Cal dragged a hand through his hair, pulling it back from his forehead where it had clung in damp curls. A professional posing such a picture couldn't have done it better. Cal's moving to remove his tool-belt and set it aside was damn near pornographic. Like he should be bending over that fence and begging Jordan to take him like he meant it.

But then Cal did something that was to be the end of rational, take-it-slow Jordan. The stunning man threw his head back and laughed. Open and carefree and loud, abs clenched into ridges, eyes squinted almost closed in absolute delight, laughter. The wide smile, white teeth, laugh lines, and an inner shine transformed the solemn man before his very eyes. Jordan could do nothing but stare, completely mesmerized. His heart pounded audibly in his chest, and he rubbed at it through his shirt.

The two sweaty teens were suddenly moving past him, saying something about getting drinks, and Jordan nodded to them absently. He barely realized he was moving until Cal turned, alerted to his presence by the tiny woof from Brutus, er, B. The smile faded from those beautiful lips and dark chocolate eyes stared, turning more and more cautious the closer Jordan came. They were almost toe to toe. Jordan's attention dropped from the suspicious eyes to the clenched jaw and stubborn mouth before he frowned and lifted his hand to touch a fingertip to Cal's firm bottom lip.

“What?” Cal clearly tried for obstinate but blinked rapidly at Jordan, undermining the effect. Jordan could feel Cal's struggle to allow the contact and was proud of his boy's refusal to back down.

Jordan tugged Cal's lip hard enough it had to sting and finally lifted his gaze to meet Cal's eyes. He made sure he had Cal's undivided attention before he said, “I would give anything to watch you do that again.”

Cal tensed even more and narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?” Jordan couldn't tell if Cal was more irritated with his reaction to Jordan or his inability to hide it.

“I mean ... I feel like I've been cheated. Like you've kept this incredible secret from me by never letting me hear you laugh. Or see you smile like that.”

“Like what?” *Oh, yeah.*, Jordan thought. Breathless was good.

“Like ... with your whole being.”

Cal's cheeks flushed and he snatched his head away, looking almost wounded. “Come. On.” He snarled, turning away from Jordan. “Give me a break.”

“No.” Jordan's tone stopped Cal in his tracks.

He glared at Jordan over his shoulder. “No?”

Hostile was less good.

“No.” Jordan stood firm. His muscles actually ached with the effort to appear calm when everything in him wanted to rush to the man and hold him tight until he submitted. “Come back here.”

His pulse pounded and he had to remember to exhale while he waited. Cal didn't move. His eyes were locked on Jordan's as if trying to find ... something. Whatever the man needed, Jordan was willing to give it.

“Cal.” It wasn't a plea, but it was close. “Come. Here.” As Jordan waited, he felt the pressure build in him, absorbing every emotion Cal experienced. He saw fear, indecision, desire, everything Cal felt in that eternal suspension of time he spent studying what seemed like the very depths of Jordan's soul. Jordan couldn't have opened himself more at that moment. He felt brutally exposed, but he wasn't hiding anything. Cal would know it in an instant, and that would be the end.

The standoff had Jordan fully, impossibly erect and straining against his khakis. There was no hiding it from Cal, should he be compelled to look, but Jordan wasn't about to hide his reaction from the man who did this to him.

Finally—God, *finally*—Cal's expression seemed to settle on one exquisite emotion. Want. Jordan could barely think when Cal took that first step toward him. He could hear Cal's breathing, imagined he could hear his pulse pounding in time with his own, but then Cal was there, standing closer to Jordan than he'd ever been.

“I think I've given you enough breaks,” Jordan said softly but with the confidence of one absolutely certain of what he wants. He wasn't giving Cal any room to doubt him. He framed Cal's face in his hands, holding him still so he could finally taste the man who'd been tormenting him so sweetly.

The first brush of lips brought matching sighs. Cal's eyes fluttered closed, and his lips parted. Jordan tilted his head and melded their mouths together, gently at first, lingering over the smooth, soft skin, but he couldn't help himself. He pressed closer, harder, needing more. Cal's mouth opened under his, and he drove his tongue inside, tangling with Cal's, tasting him, consuming him.

Cal remained passive only a moment before he was meeting Jordan's kisses with his own. Jordan groaned when Cal's tongue came for him. They battled and retreated and teased and tormented. Cal's hands gripped Jordan's hips and pulled their bodies closer. Jordan slid one hand into Cal's hair, tangling roughly in it to hold him while he plundered. His other arm banded tightly around Cal's firm waist to grind their groins together. Their bodies seemed to move of their own accord, thrusting together, seeking more and more.

Jordan finally had to pull away, gasping for air and clenching his jaw, fighting hard for control. Resting his forehead against Cal's, he gave a breathless chuckle and murmured, “Holy God, I just about came in my pants like a damn teen—”

They gasped simultaneously, immediately coming to their senses. Lifting their heads they scanned the yard looking for Thomas and Kody. Finding only an empty lawn and a half-done fence, Jordan remembered the boys had left them alone. They relaxed somewhat and Jordan turned his attention to Cal's neck, licking the salty sweat and humming in approval before brushing his mouth again with his own.

“Gawd. Aren't you done yet?” Thomas's voice rang with humor and Jordan raised his eyes to see him standing in the doorway. He didn't move away from Cal. He wasn't willing to let go just yet, so he held him close when he was sure the man would have bolted. Probably better for innocent eyes if they waited a minute anyway.

The two boys had fresh sodas in their hands, and Thomas snuggled a content B against his shoulder. Kody stared slack-jawed, and Jordan tipped his head in his direction, indicating to Thomas he should take care of that.

Thomas glanced over at his friend and laughed, chucking him under the chin with his can to remind him to close his mouth.

“Oh. My. God.” Kody breathed. Jordan braced himself, feeling Cal tense even more beneath his hands. Cal dropped his head back and closed his eyes with a pained groan. Waiting. Jordan waited too, but was not in his wildest dreams expecting to hear, “That was so *hot*.”

Thomas snorted loudly and elbowed the shorter, lighter boy through the door. “Dude, shut up. That's my dad.” But his eyes were a little extra bright, and he met Jordan's gaze with a look shining with approval and pride.

Kody blushed to the roots of his hair, but he still stared. “I don't care, man. That was the hottest thing I've ever seen.” He bounced on the balls of his feet. “Do it again?”

Jordan was still waiting to do it again several hours later. He paced the floor of his kitchen, eyeing the lowering sun and wondering if he'd been stood up. Cal had kicked him out, refusing to let him help, promising that he and the teens would finish up for the day and meet him here for dinner. Jordan was thrilled to have him in his home. Or he would be if he ever showed up.

“Relax, Dad. He'll be here.” Thomas came into the kitchen and stuck his head in the fridge. He emerged with two bottles of water tucked in his arm. He disappeared again and reappeared with a handful of baby carrots, one already caught between his teeth. Jordan had stopped for a few groceries and come home to shower and prepare the steaks he was going to grill.

He'd been followed shortly by Thomas and Kody, both of whom were also freshly showered now. The three of them padded bare-footed around the house in assorted shades of jeans and t-shirts.

Jordan caught sight of Kody hovering in the doorway. “C'mon in, Kody. Something to drink?” He was doing his best to ignore the curious way Kody watched him, desperately hoping the kid would get over it quickly.

Thomas tossed Kody a bottle of water and shoved him out the door, hissing not at all quietly, “Knock it off, dude. You're creeping out my dad.”

“I can't help it, T, he's so ...” Kody's voice faded, thankfully. Jordan snorted, amused but relieved. He'd heard enough, and it was time to get back to worrying if Cal was going to bail on him. He eyed the clock and decided he should get the steaks on the grill soon if he didn't want the teen-aged garbage disposals to gut the refrigerator because he'd failed to feed them quickly enough.

He waited until Thomas finally threatened to start gnawing on the woodwork if he wasn't fed soon. Jordan exhaled a loud sigh and headed for the grill with the plate loaded with steaks. He had to acknowledge that he just might have pushed Cal too hard. He'd reacted completely on instinct, feeling pretty good about the results, but he'd hated leaving Cal alone with time to reconsider, which is exactly what it seemed he'd done.

Jordan scoffed under his breath, turning from the grill to return the dirty plate to the kitchen. He would not pout, damn it. He was telling himself that for the third time when he heard the knock. His heart jumped in his chest like a freaking tween-aged girl, but he was Lord of the Manor when he opened the door.

Cal looked dark and intense and shiny and new. Freshly shaved, hair curling as it dried from the shower, he wore clean denim with a black t-shirt. He clasped a six-pack of some kind of imported beer in one hand. His snuffling white dog held against his chest with the other was the only thing keeping Jordan from dragging him in by a handful of t-shirt and throwing him against the door to have his way with him.

Instead, he settled for stepping to the side of the door so Cal could enter, then nudging him back against it and planting a hot, possessive kiss on his lips. He lingered, rubbing his face against Cal's like a cat. "Mm. Smooth." He added a brush of fingers across Cal's jaw before releasing him.

Cal shifted uncomfortably and shoved the six-pack towards him, so Jordan took the hint and backed off. "Relax, sweetheart. We are going to talk later. But right now, let's just get these kids fed and enjoy what's left of the beautiful day." He stole a quick kiss. "Okay?"

Thomas's dog, a very old basset hound, moseyed into the kitchen and sat at Cal's feet. She waited patiently for introductions, accustomed as she was to welcoming guests into their home. Jordan rubbed her head, making her long ears flop. "This is Sadie. She takes her job as hostess very seriously."

"Um." Cal blinked at the dog, whose sad brown eyes somehow managed to appear maternal.

"Put B down, and she'll show him the ropes." Cal hesitated, but Jordan nodded his encouragement, and the protective man carefully set the pup down so the dogs could sniff each other out. Seconds later, the two trotted off like lifelong friends.

Jordan laughed at the look on Cal's face. Or he might have just been giddy as a school girl that the man finally stood in front of him as a guest—a date—in his home. "I bring a lot of strays home. She's gotten pretty used to it."

Cal nodded and followed Jordan, who suddenly remembered the steaks on the grill. "Damn." He handed Cal a bottle of beer and set the rest in the fridge. "Follow me," Jordan tossed over his shoulder. "I think I need to save the meat." He hurried through the sliding glass door and left it open for Cal.

Thomas and Kody were tossing a baseball, hanging out in the backyard that was several steps down from the wide patio. Jordan called out to Thomas, "You got that salad ready, son?"

"Yeah, Dad." He snatched the ball from the air easily with his mitt. "Is it time?" He caught sight of Cal behind him. "Oh, hey, Cal. You made it."

"Hey." Cal smiled at Thomas and nodded at Kody, who was staring again. "Kody."

"Uh, hey, Cal."

Jordan turned his back to the boys. "Kid's been watching me like a science experiment since they got here."

Cal took a sip from the sweating beer bottle. "Yeah, he was all kinds of weird after you left." He grimaced. "I was hoping he'd be done with it by now."

“No such luck.” Jordan directed Cal towards the table already set for dinner. “Grab a seat.” His eyes burned their way over Cal from head to toe. Jordan growled low in his chest. “Hurry up before I make another scene that poor Kody will never forget.” He stepped close and brushed against Cal on his way to the door. “God, you’re tempting.” The quick flash of heat in Cal’s eyes—and his cheeks—made Jordan pause for a quick kiss that only increased the tight ache in his groin.

Cal moved quickly to the nearest chair, propping an ankle over his knee and cupping his bottle strategically in his lap. Jordan smiled, not so subtly adjusting his own length on his way back inside for a beer for himself. He grabbed everything they needed for dinner and piled it all on a tray to save trips.

Leaving the tray on the table, Jordan took a stack of plates to the grill and started serving. “I can pretty much manage medium rare or charred beyond recognition. The medium rare are ready now. If you want charred, you’ll have to wait.”

Cal chuckled. “Well, temped as I am by the latter, I’m too hungry to wait.”

“You got it.” Jordan glanced over his shoulder, and then did a quick double-take. “You look good there.”

Cal groaned and rubbed his face.

“What?”

“You have to stop.” Cal’s cheeks flushed. He twisted the bottle of beer in his hand. “I don’t know how to respond to these things you say.”

“Then you haven’t heard them enough.”

Cal grunted, and Jordan turned his attention back to the grill, swallowing the anger at whatever or whoever had caused Cal to reject any attention he received.

With the internal timing only hungry teen-aged boys seem to have mastered, Thomas and Kody clattered up the steps to join them at the table. Thomas dealt with the tray, handing the loaded salad to Cal to serve himself and pass along.

The weight of silence that descended around the table made Jordan feel a bit guilty. People only concentrated on their plates with that kind of intensity when they were beyond your basic hungry.

Not surprisingly, it was Kody who spoke first. “Dude, you gonna be hiring workers for your restoration job?” Kody asked Cal. Jordan noticed he hadn’t actually eaten a bite yet. Probably been busy staring, he thought with a sigh, and then stabbed his fork towards Kody’s plate in the universal parenting sign for ‘eat your dinner.’ He grunted with satisfaction when the boy stabbed a tomato from his salad and obediently ate it.

“Probably.” Cal nodded. “I’m sure I’ll need some general laborers.”

“We’re general laborers!” Thomas and Kody reacted at exactly the same time. Jordan and Cal laughed.

Cal narrowed his eyes at them. “I have one condition.”

“Anything!” Kody was on the edge of his seat. Jordan shook his head and focused on his food.

“You have to stop calling me 'dude,’” Cal said.

Kody just stared at him blankly for a second before breaking out a huge grin. “Yes, sir!”

Cal groaned and dragged a hand over his face. “Ugh. Okay. 'Dude' it is.”

“Me too?” Thomas asked, eager to cement their summer employment.

Cal sighed loudly. “Fine. You can call me 'dude,' too.”

Jordan choked on his laugh, and Thomas rolled his eyes. “I mean do I have a job, too?”

“Oh. Sure. Yeah.” Cal grinned and chuckled at the excited teens.

Jordan settled into the corner of the sofa and took a sip of his fresh beer before setting it on the coffee table. Thomas and Kody had not so subtly decided they should go 'hang' at Kody's, so they'd finished the dishes quickly and he and Cal were finally alone. Jordan had left the dogs happily exploring the backyard and getting to know each other.

Arms spread casually across the back of the sofa, Jordan watched intently as Cal made his way towards him. When he hesitated, weighing his seating options, Jordan grabbed his hand and tugged. Propping one leg up against the cushions and one foot on the floor, Jordan tucked Cal back against him. “Put your feet up and relax.”

Cal shifted a bit to get comfortable, sliding down far enough to settle his head against Jordan's shoulder. But he was still tense. Jordan wrapped one arm around Cal's torso, while he combed his fingers through Cal's silky black curls. His hair was even softer than he remembered.

Saying nothing, just combing and enjoying the feeling of the man in his arms, Jordan waited as Cal relaxed in painfully slow increments. When his head finally rolled against Jordan's shoulder with an accompanying exhale, Jordan spoke. “I know we should talk, but this just feels so damn good.”

“No.” Cal groaned. “Can't we just—” He squirmed as if to rise.

Jordan held him tight and sighed, rubbing his cheek in Cal's hair. “For now.”

He was surprised when Cal initiated the kiss, a little awkward but determined in a way that twisted Jordan's heart. Cal shifted so he could turn his face towards him, breath skittering over Jordan's parted lips. Jordan didn't need any more invitation than that. Doubting he'd ever get enough of Cal's mouth, Jordan struggled to keep it gentle, but from the first touch of their lips, he was fully erect, pressing insistently against Cal's back, which was rapidly expanding and contracting with his every shallow breath. Licking lightly at the barely parted lips, Jordan nipped at him for entrance. And when Cal's tongue flicked out to tease him, he moaned deep in the back of his throat and dove in for more.

Though Cal met every thrust of his tongue with his own, and his body vibrated with need, his fingers bit into Jordan's arm as if it were the only tether he had to the ground. Releasing his mouth with a gasp for air, Jordan nibbled and licked his way down Cal's neck and under his jaw. Against his pounding pulse point, Jordan whispered, "Shh, sweetheart. Easy." His free hand brushed gently over Cal's white knuckles until his grip eased.

Slowly, giving Cal time to adjust and relax into his touch, Jordan gradually worked his hands under the hem of Cal's shirt and found his warm, smooth skin. Jordan's groin throbbed when Cal's abs contracted under his hands. Obviously lost in sensation, his responsiveness to Jordan's slightest touch was arousing beyond belief.

Cal moaned and his head fell back on Jordan's shoulder. Jordan studied the closed eyes and flushed, kiss-reddened lips. God, he was stunning. Cal's eyes opened and met his, glazed with desire. But then he looked alarmed, like he'd been caught doing something wrong. Jordan cupped his cheek and kissed him, humming soothing sounds until he responded. Cal closed his eyes and leaned into Jordan's kisses.

Jordan dragged his teeth down Cal's neck to his shoulder, and the man shivered in his arms. He returned to the skin of Cal's torso, working Cal's shirt up under his arms so he could see what he touched. "God, look at you." He sucked on Cal's neck and ran his hands over every inch of visible skin. Cal was quivering under his fingertips, inadvertently vibrating on Jordan's aching shaft. It was an intoxicating sensation.

Cal reached blindly for Jordan. Arching his back, he clutched Jordan's neck and tugged him down for his kiss. His mouth was demanding, hot on Jordan's, sucking and licking and biting. His fingers drove themselves into Jordan's hair, grasped his neck, his shoulders, clutching, seeking purchase.

With sudden insight, Jordan knew just what his boy needed. He lifted Cal's arms over his head and slid the t-shirt to his wrists. He wrapped the shirt tight in a knot and tucked it into Cal's hands. As long as he held on to it, the knot would hold. If he released it, he'd be able to free his hands easily. But he didn't release it. He sighed deeply and relaxed into Jordan's arms. Easing the tied wrists to rest behind Jordan's head, Jordan smoothed his hands from Cal's wrists, under his arms, and over his clenching belly. He smiled, watching the goose flesh form in the wake of his touch.

The tortured groan and the instinctive thrust of Cal's hips was breathtaking. "Stunning." He trailed light fingertips from Cal's naval to sternum before circling nipples that tightened instantly. Cal whimpered and arched into the touch. Jordan brushed the responsive flesh firmly with his thumbs until Cal was squirming and making the most delightfully needy sounds in his throat. When Jordan pinched and tugged gently, Cal's whole body lifted. He gasped and whimpered, but his hands stayed determinedly behind Jordan's head.

Holding Cal still, Jordan buried his face in his neck and fought for control. Watching Cal's chest rise and abs clench with every ragged breath wasn't helping. The solid length straining against Cal's jeans was luring him with every twist of the man's hips. He had to ... "May I?" His hand hovered over Cal's erection until he received the nod and Cal's hips thrust upwards impatiently.

Releasing the button and the fly, Jordan tugged the denim open and pushed it out of the way. Shoving Cal's boxer briefs down his thighs, Jordan quickly levered upright, almost frantic in his need to have the clothing completely off. He needed to see it all. Cal seemed to share his urgency, because he twisted and kicked, helping to work the stubborn material off.

Jordan drank in the sight before him. Cal's chest rose and fell rapidly. His legs shifted restlessly. Hooking his ankles over Cal's, Jordan spread his legs, forcing Cal's to open with them. Sure that Cal still had a grip on the knotted shirt, Jordan slid his hands from torso to thigh, cupping Cal's tightened sac, drifting a feather light touch over the mouth-watering length of rigid flesh that arced over his abdomen. Cal's cock flexed, seeking real contact, and Jordan held his palm over the straining shaft until it bobbed up to meet him. Their moans blended together in a coarse harmony when Jordan finally held him in his grasp.

Jordan nudged a hand under Cal's chin, lifting him for a searing kiss before he raised his head. Holding Cal's jaw, Jordan rasped, "Look."

Cal shook his head and tried to lay it back down, but Jordan held him, stroking his cock, sliding his foreskin up and down the flushed head that gleamed with the pre-come Jordan squeezed from him with his movements.

"No. I can't." Cal's hips never stopped moving. "I need ..."

"I know, sweetheart ... Cal." Jordan's voice held undeniable authority that stopped Cal's restless movements. "Look. Watch what your beautiful body does for me."

Jordan held Cal's chin until he looked, smiling with satisfaction when he heard Cal's breath catch. Jordan saw him biting his lip, and he kissed him hard so he'd release it. "You're incredible." Cal shook his head, and Jordan released his flexing cock, laying his hand firmly on Cal's hip. "You're beautiful, and I want to watch you come for me. I want you to watch me make you come."

There was that whimper again. It made Jordan's aching groin throb, and he thrust against Cal's back with a pained groan. Cal squirmed in his arms, hips lifting, seeking, begging for the return of Jordan's touch.

Releasing Cal's head only when he was sure he was going to do what he was told, Jordan resumed the slow torture of Cal's glistening erection. Jordan kept their cheeks pressed together so they were both watching. Not dropping his rhythm on Cal's cock, Jordan returned his other hand to Cal's chest, thumbing Cal's nipple until he arched and cried out. Pulling Cal back against him, Jordan rasped in his ear just as he tugged hard on the nipple and squeezed the wet head of his cock, "Come. Now."

Two erratic thrusts into Jordan's hand and Cal was shooting streams of white over himself and into Jordan's eager clutch. He shouted his release, entire body tensing and contracting with every wave of the orgasm that shook him. Jordan maintained a firm grip on the erupting shaft while he tightened his arm around Cal's chest.

Their mouths found each other and clashed together in a desperate meeting of tongues and teeth. Jordan thought he tasted blood, but then he was coming so violently his eyes rolled back. He held on and rutted against Cal as his reality imploded with the most intense orgasm he'd ever experienced. *Holy God*, Jordan thought. He'd just creamed his shorts like a virgin.

Shaking, slick with sweat, they clung to each other, gasping for air and shuddering through the aftershocks. Jordan licked his way up Cal's neck to his mouth, sharing the salty sweat in a kiss before collapsing against the sofa like dead weight.

He slowly released Cal's softening penis, careful not to overstimulate him. Holding his hand up so they could see the cum-covered digits, Jordan brought his fingers to his mouth to taste.

“Mm,” he moaned, savoring the salty tang he already knew he'd be craving again soon. Wickedly, Jordan held his thumb up to Cal's mouth until he opened. Sliding into the wet heat, Jordan unbelievably felt his cock attempt an early recovery.

Cal's hands were still locked tight behind Jordan's neck. He seemed content to leave them there, and he was seemingly unaware of his legs still spread wantonly over Jordan. In fact, the man was so relaxed that if he hadn't been sucking on Jordan's thumb, Jordan would have thought he'd fallen asleep on him.

With a heavy sigh, Jordan removed the shiny clean digit and brought Cal's hands down in front of him. Releasing the knotted shirt, he used it to clean the sexy splatters from Cal's abs and chest before he attempted to sit up. “I'd better get cleaned up or I'll have to chisel my shorts off.”

“Wha—” Cal sat up, blinking himself from his daze. “What are you talking about?”

He dropped a kiss on Cal's shoulder, humming happily when it caused him to shiver. “I'm talking about my lover being so damned hot I just shot off in my shorts like I haven't done in twenty years.”

Cal gaped, and then bit his lips together, visibly fighting laughter.

“What, you didn't notice me spasming all over you?” Jordan chuckled when Cal gave up and hooted with laughter.

“Uh, no. Guess I was a little preoccupied,” he answered, and then ducked his head. His blush was adorable. Something about having the ability to make this strong, stubborn man shiver and blush and cry out made Jordan feel like the most powerful man in the world.

“Preoccupied with coming on demand.” He couldn't help the throaty sound of his voice any more than he could stop smiling at the gorgeous man who was grinning even as he squirmed in embarrassment.

Jordan maneuvered around him and retrieved Cal's jeans from the floor. As loath as he was to cover such a sight—

Scratching at the screen door alerted him that the dogs had had enough of being outside.

“I've never done that before.” Cal admitted, standing to pull on his jeans. Jordan reached the door and turned just in time to watch him tuck.

Jordan held the door for the dogs, rolling his eyes at the way they bounded through like they hadn't had human contact in days.

He returned his attention to his half-dressed lover. “Done what before? Come on command? I'm impressed, actually. Some subs can take years to master the ability to do that.”

Thinking back, Jordan had to admit he probably wouldn't have been smart enough to rethink the statement even if he hadn't just gone stupid from the mind-numbing orgasm. As it was, he knew he'd made a mistake about a second after the words left his mouth.

Cal went absolutely rigid. His face froze and his jaw clenched. "I'm no *sub*."

"Uh." Jordan blinked, completely blindsided. "It wasn't an insult, sweetheart."

Cal glared. "If you think because I let you semi-restrain me that I'm somehow into abuse and slavery and beatings, you are way off base."

Jordan went from stupid to furious in the space it took him to comprehend what Cal had said. "Do I strike you, then, as someone who's abusive?" His tone was low and controlled, but barely.

"You won't *strike* me at all." Cal turned on his heel to stalk away. He stopped and scanned the floor with what bordered on frenzy until he scooped up B, tucking him possessively to his chest. "You think I'm going to be some kind of whipping boy you can use at your convenience and throw away?"

"Oh, no you don't." Jordan grabbed his arm and spun him. His fury was just as quickly replaced again by confusion. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but I am *not* that kind of person, and I'm sure as shit not some kind of whack job that gets off on raping and abusing my partner."

Cal snorted, sneering over his shoulder as he ripped his arm from Jordan's grasp. "Partner. Right."

He was bolting for the door and Jordan rushed to cut him off. "Cal! What the hell? I would never hurt you!" He held him by the shoulders and bent to try forcing eye contact. What he saw when he got it was chilling. "I don't know what's made you think these things, but you were ... God, Cal! You loved being taken! You loved the submission; I could see you craving more. It's in you."

In the recesses of his mind, Jordan was screaming at himself to shut up, shut up, shut up. "It doesn't mean you want to be beaten or harmed. Just ... taken. By the person who knows just how to take care of you." He was digging himself deeper and deeper, but he couldn't seem to stop.

Cal shook his head furiously. "No."

"Yes." Jordan held him when he would have bolted, stunned by the barely restrained fury vibrating under his hands. "It's as natural to you as breathing." He tried soothing them both with his voice, but it wasn't working—for either of them. "I can *see* you. I'm your—" He didn't say it. "I can feel you. What you need. I can give it to you. Would love nothing more than a chance to take care of you."

"You mean *dominate* me, don't you? *Own* me." Cal spat, and Jordan was horrified to see tears shining in the deep brown eyes before they went cold. "Now move, because I can, and I will, kick your ass if you don't let me out of this house right now."

Jordan was speechless. His head was spinning. He stared for another minute, struggling for some argument, some way to penetrate the obviously skewed impressions in Cal's head. Clearly something—someone—had done some serious damage. They could work on that, if only Jordan could reach him.

“Cal,” he tried, but Cal only shook his head and shouldered past him. He didn't even stop long enough to put on his shoes. Just snatched them from the rug by the door and was gone. Jordan was still blinking stupidly in the empty hall when he heard Cal's truck roar out of the driveway.

It had been nearly twelve hours since Cal had stormed out of the house. It felt like days. Jordan's calls went straight to voice mail. His texts went unanswered. He'd considered driving out to confront him in person, but Jordan honestly didn't know yet what he would say. Besides, he knew the boys would be working with Cal again today, and he couldn't stomach the thought of them witnessing what would no doubt be a rather revealing confrontation.

He thought about promising Cal that he would do nothing more that would imply dominance or submission in any way, but Jordan honestly didn't know how to do that. He didn't consider himself a hard core “Dom.” But he would never be able to stop seeking the buried—and surface—needs of his lover and doing everything he could to meet those needs. Denying they existed wasn't a valid option. He'd never be able to do it.

“Dad.” Jordan stared at the phone in his hand. He had no recollection of it ringing or of answering it.

“Dad!” Patience was not a virtue his son was blessed with.

Jordan snapped out of his thoughts. “What?”

“What happened last night?” Thomas demanded, sounding like he was trying to avoid being heard. “Cal was all fun and cool yesterday, and today he's all pissy and bossy.”

“I don't know.” He shook his head. Jordan still hadn't figured out how to define all that had transpired yesterday. “Did you guys finish the fence?”

“Almost.” Thomas sighed. “Thanks to the human post-pounding machine.”

He didn't pretend to know what that was supposed to mean. “Good.”

“No, Dad,” Thomas argued. “It's not good.” He lowered his voice and hissed, “You need to fix this.” Having properly chastised his father, he promptly disconnected the call. And left Jordan wondering just how, exactly, he was going to fix anything.

Jordan had gotten only as far as a shower when the phone rang. He sighed and groaned when he saw Mrs. Miller's number. “Yes, Mrs. Miller.” That was good. Cool and professional.

“Dr. Mac, you have to help me!” The shrill voice stabbed directly into Jordan's spine, somewhere between C6 and T2 vertebrae, he estimated.

“Calm down, Mrs. Miller.” Jordan took the words to heart himself. “Tell me what's wrong.”

“He's gone!” The decibel of her screech reached record levels. “Winston is *gone!*”

“What?” Jordan was moving entirely too slowly today. “What do you mean, gone?”

"I mean I let him out into the backyard and now he's missing!" Mrs. Miller was clearly working towards full-on panic.

"Okay." Jordan thought. "First, are you absolutely positive he didn't fall asleep under the porch again?"

"Yes. And he's not in the bushes and he's not in the house ..." Mrs. Miller sobbed. "I've looked everywhere, Dr. Mac!"

Jordan's personal cell was ringing, but he couldn't leave Mrs. Miller. It was Thomas. Jordan shot him a quick text that he was on another call.

Almost immediately came the reply:

You'd better get out here.

Jordan sighed. "I'm on my way, Mrs. Miller. Don't go anywhere."

"Okay," she sniffed.

Jordan disconnected and dialed Thomas. "What is it, son?"

"You're not going to believe this," Thomas whispered.

"What?" His patience was at an end.

"It's Mrs. Miller's dog."

Jordan shook his head. "No, it can't be."

"It's him, Dad, and he's got B pinned under him and if we go near them he freaks."

He was already to his vehicle. "I'm on my way." He shook his head. "I don't know what's gotten into that crazy dog."

On his way, Jordan called Mrs. Miller and told her to meet him there. She lived on the other side of town, and it would double his time to get there if he picked her up first.

Pulling into the driveway, Jordan couldn't see anything because of the way the house sat. He entered where he'd been welcomed by Nina just yesterday, and made his way to the kitchen. Stepping into the yard, the teens spotted Jordan immediately.

"Dad!" Thomas ran towards him. "That was fast."

"You called him?" Cal sounded offended, but Jordan was so overwhelmed by the sight of him he couldn't care. He found small pleasure in the fact that Cal looked like he was as miserable as Jordan.

"Dude," Thomas scoffed, with a pointed look at the dogs. "I'm no dog whisperer. What did you think we were going to do?"

Jordan snapped to attention, forcing his eyes to drop from Cal. He carefully approached the dogs. Winston lounged almost casually over the miniature B. Held under the bulldog's foreleg, the white ball of fluff laid on his back, looking for all the world like the most contented animal Jordan had ever seen. Stepping closer, Jordan knelt next to Winston.

"What's going on here, boy?" He murmured. Winston chuffed in his face, and dropped his leaking jaw to tuck B under his chin. Holding a hand out to get permission to touch, Jordan was allowed closer. Winston appeared perfectly calm, but when Jordan reached for the tiny pup, he growled.

Jordan sat back on his heels and left a hand on Winston's head. "Huh." He cocked his head. "Seems Winston has a thing for your B, Cal."

"He can't," Cal snapped. "He's male, and he's twenty times his size."

Snorting, Jordan glanced over his shoulder and cocked an eyebrow. "Seriously? That's your argument?" He chuckled when Cal snarled and looked away.

"How 'bout it, buddy?" Jordan leaned closer to Winston. "Afraid somebody's going to take away your pup?" Winston gave a soft woof and burrowed his nose into B's fluffy white fur.

Jordan stood and faced Cal. "Well, he's not hurting him." He scratched his head. "But I'm not really sure how to convince him to let him go."

Winston was studying them, watery eyes flicking back and forth between the two wary men. At Jordan's words, the huge dog gracelessly rose and, with a last nose-to-nose with B, lumbered towards them.

Jordan and Cal watched wordlessly. Thomas and Kody rushed forward to snatch up the little one, though he was obviously perfectly fine, if a bit drooled upon. Thomas made a point of announcing they were taking B inside to clean him off, leaving the men alone.

Cal gazed suspiciously back at him and Jordan found himself without words. He stepped forward, reaching for him, but Cal retreated. Then he was gone. Jordan blinked, seeing Cal on the ground, where he'd landed on his ass thanks to Winston's interference. The big dog panted up at Jordan. He could practically hear the "you're welcome."

"Damn menace," Cal grumbled, glaring up at Jordan from his seat on the ground. Jordan grinned and held a hand towards him in an offer to help him up. Cal snarled. "I can manage."

Jordan raised his hands. "Suit yourself." He didn't move, deliberately crowding him so he'd have to come close to him to rise or make a scene by rolling away first. Cal wasn't to be intimidated. He was on one knee, on his way to standing, when Winston slammed into him—again—from behind.

"God damn it!" Cal caught himself on his hands, damn near landing with his head between Jordan's legs. He knelt back on his heels immediately and wiped his hands on his thighs. For his part, Jordan was in equal parts agony and sympathy. His cock was responding to the sight of Cal on his knees, but the man was obviously distraught enough that it twisted something in Jordan's chest. This time, Jordan was solemn when he offered his hand, not wanting to sting Cal's pride any further.

But when Cal clasped his hand, he didn't rise. He remained on his knees, holding Jordan's hand, eventually raising his head to stare helplessly into his eyes. Jordan was lost. Cal had to see that. And so he must have, because he sighed and lowered his eyes, then leaned forward, so slowly, until his shoulder rested against Jordan's thigh. Cal's head dropped, hugging Jordan between his shoulder and neck.

Jordan couldn't breathe. He stared down and reached for the dark curls resting against him. "Cal." He could barely hear himself.

"You said—" Cal's voice was muted, hidden away as he was. He stopped abruptly and shook his head.

"What, sweetheart?" Jordan tugged gently at the curls to lift his face so he could see him. "Don't hide. Tell me."

Cal swallowed audibly, and then, in an achingly tight voice, said, "You said you saw me. That you knew what I needed."

Jordan knew immediately how he'd screwed up. "I know. I'm sorry."

"You let me leave." Cal dropped his forehead to Jordan's thigh, and Jordan let him rest there for a second before he dropped to his knees in front of him.

"I was wrong." Jordan cupped Cal's chin and brushed his hair from his forehead. "I know that now."

But Cal still looked unconvinced.

"Sweetheart, I'm not perfect." Jordan brushed light kisses over Cal's face. His brow, his cheeks. "I was so terrified of losing you that I let doubt influence me. I shouldn't have." Cal's eyes had closed and he sighed as he accepted Jordan's touches.

Cal eventually spoke. "I don't know how to do this. The right way to do this." He swallowed. "But I want to. I want this. You. Us," he whispered, opening his eyes, a plea for understanding shining in the dark depths. "I want to try."

"We'll do it together." Jordan's voice was strong, steadying because his world was clicking into place. "We'll take it slow." He didn't know what the future held for them, but he'd be right by Cal's side, and that felt more right than anything had in a long, long time.

Cal looked away, not quite hiding a quick flash of panic. "I can't promise I won't freak out on you again. I—I have a mess in my head I still need to deal with."

"*Together.*" Jordan repeated. "You're not going to scare me off." Jordan brought Cal's face back to his to bump their foreheads together. "I won't make the same mistake twice."

"How can you know?"

"Oh, I know." Jordan sealed his mouth to Cal's, hot and possessive. Staking his claim until they were both gasping for air. "I'm not letting you go again."

Cal shivered. It was delicious. Finally, a small smile tugged at his lips.

“Oh.” The gasped cry brought them back to earth. They turned towards the doorway in time to see Kody bury his face in Thomas’s shoulder with a noisy sniff. Thomas grinned at Jordan over Kody’s head. He could barely hear Kody’s muffled voice. “It’s just so beautiful.”

Jordan smiled. He had to agree.

THE END

Author bio: When Kim can be torn away from her torrid love affair with Jon Stewart, one might find her keeping house in Minnesota while impersonating an ordinary mid-western wife and mother of three boys. Don't be fooled.