

THE FIERCE PROFESSIONS SERIES

# FIERCE COMPETITION



HARLEY AUSTIN

HARLEY AUSTIN'S  
THE FIERCE PROFESSIONS

FIERCE  
COMPETITION

FIERCE  
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COMPETITION

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*For my beautiful angel;  
the love of my life and the very best friend  
anyone could ever hope to have.*



FIERCE  
COMPETITION



# 1

**M**an, what a week,” Thad groaned, lifting a light day pack onto one shoulder, then gently closing the hatch of his classic bright orange 240-Z. “Let’s not have any more of those, okay?” He half-smiled, his eyes now fixed on Jean-Luc getting out of the passenger side of the vintage sporty two-seater.

His new co-worker’s name was French but there was little else even remotely French about the guy—except for maybe the way he looked. Tall, maybe six-two or three, thick dark thick hair cut short on the sides and the build of someone who spent almost as much time lifting in the gym as Thad did, or at least as much as Thad had been. Work had pushed his lifting schedule totally off the calendar the past few of weeks. They needed three more people on the team and they’d only hired one—Jean-Luc.

Thad felt a little sorry for the new trainee. But Jean-Luc had handled his first week admirably. And he wasn't much of a trainee; the guy knew his way around SQL code like it was nobody's business, cranking out some ugly report requests within hours instead of the days or weeks it normally took some of the more entry- to mid-level engineers on the team.

Jean-Luc's only real setback was that some of the reports had been wrong. It wasn't his fault; more just a typical newbie mistake of joining a company and not know the in's and out's of how the executive staff preferred to view their numbers. The reports were technically correct, but that was the problem. His new bosses liked to see numbers presented in a little more embellished light. The hard numbers were always less exciting to the top brass than the "accentuated" ones.

"I thought you said we were going to Snoqualmie Falls?" Jean-Luc looked around at the small ranger station where they had parked. It looked like it also played double-duty as a tiny visitor's center with a couple of one-person restrooms.

"We're close. It's more fun to hike in than just drive up. We're only a few miles away."

Jean-Luc stretched in the cool still early morning air. He probably needed a hike like this. The first week of the new job wasn't going well. He was sure the executive manager who'd hired him, Garret, was going to fire him after only a few days. Apparently he'd made mistakes—big mistakes; sending out reports to people who weren't supposed to get them and not sending the right reports to the people who were. God, what a mess. He couldn't read minds.

As if Garret wasn't bad enough, then to literally get yelled at by some millennial bitch that was close to ten years his junior; how did she ever get into such a high-responsibility role? She had to be some executive's daughter or maybe granddaughter.

Garret was just as inept, telling him to do things with only the thinnest of details of what he wanted. But his boss' boss, that witch was evil. It was like she enjoyed seeing him frustrated and confused. If this was their department's idea of training, it was going to be a rough road ahead.

The only saving grace was another guy on the team, Thaddeus Bolt. Everyone just called him Thad. He'd been there the longest; ten years. Both about the same age and almost as tall as himself, Thad dressed well and had been much more friendly than the rest of the team. While everyone else was nose-to-the-grindstone in their short cube workstations, Thad had actually taken him to lunch on his first day and mentored him, giving him a boatload of tips—and a good list of things *not* to do. What Jean-Luc liked most about the guy was that he was nice. They actually talked back and forth over their short-walled work areas.

Thad had a similar hairstyle and close to his taste in clothes, but his lifter build was much thicker than his own. Jean-Luc's French genes left him with broad shoulders, a thinner waist and good definition, but no matter how hard he tried, he wasn't going to fill-out like Thad. The guy could be a Marvel superhero with the way he looked. He sort-of dressed like one most of the time as well. Snug-fitting mock turtleneck shirts and a collared polo on casual Fridays. Everything he wore sort of looked snug-fitting on the guy. The only thing missing was a large S branded across his chest. Jesus, who looks like that?

Maybe Jean-Luc was a little envious. If he had Thad's exceptional thick and cut build, he'd probably dress to emphasize it too. But the other oddity was the guy never wore a tie like the rest of them had to. He wondered about that. Even the fitted shirts he wore seemed to always be just this side of a bit too small with the top two buttons undone. Like he was trying to really emphasize his nice size with his clothes.

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Thad had dressed the exact same way for their hike this morning. Instead of the long loose khaki shorts that typically hemmed above the knee like his own, Thad's shorts were light, snug, and rolled cuffed around his bare upper thighs.

Clad in hiking boots, his khaki sort-shorts and some thin layered shirts, he looked great for a cool morning hike into woods.

Jean-Luc followed him past the little outpost ranger station as both guys headed into the forest, climbing the not-too-steep well-trodden path heading for the falls.

## 2

**L**et's not talk about work, please." Thad grinned, groaning in answer to Jean-Luc's policy question. The wide trail through the canopy of tall Ponderosas and the scent of pine straw left each with a kind of awe at the quiet beauty with only the subtle sound of the grand falls well in the distance. "At least not that."

Jean-Luc pursed his lips. "Sorry."

"So, what brought you to iCore?" Thad asked.

"I thought you didn't want to talk about work?" Jean-Luc snarked, chuckling.

"Uh, I don't. Just wondering what you've been doing. You still haven't accepted my LinkedIn invite."

"Oh, you're right. Sorry. Bad week."

Both moved at a slow but good pace up a steeper part of the trail. Jean-Luc had caught more than a few glimpses of the

backside of Thad's hiking attire now that he was following him up the narrowing path. The shorts didn't leave much to the imagination of the guy's bulging rounded glutes. Jean-Luc smiled to himself, shaking his head. His own ass was never going to look that good, no matter how hard he worked it.

The trail leveled off and widened, leaving both walking side-by-side again.

"Now I'm curious," Jean-Luc began. "How do you get away with wearing the clothes you do at work?"

"You mean not wearing a tie?"

"Yea. The rest of us have to wear them."

"Brittney."

"The teenage director that yelled at me this week?"

"That's her. Only she's twenty-four. She interned last year before she graduated and someone made her queen bitch of the department. Garret reports to her. I don't think she even wants to see me wearing a shirt—or any other clothes."

"Oh, lovely." Jean-Luc rolled his eyes.

"I think she has a thing for hunky guys. It's also a good reason why you probably got hired."

"Get out."

"No, I'm serious. She only hires hot guys. Look at the rest of her department. Not one woman reports to her and all the guys are either nice-looking or they lift."

"Brad's not big. He doesn't look like he lifts at all."

"Oh, right. He doesn't. But he's also her cousin."

"Cousin. Really?"

Thad nodded.

Jean-Luc groaned. "You're right. Let's not talk about work."

Both continued through the trees with fern underbrush lining the sides of the log-lined dirt path.

"I came for the new reporting job, but what brought you to Seattle?" Jean-Luc dodged a low limb that had grown to hang partway into the path.

"I'm originally from the Tri-cities."

"I'm not sure where that is."

"Southern part of the state. Richmond is one of the three towns there. Further south and east of Yakima."

"I'll take your word for it." Jean-Luc grinned. He was new to the state and the Native American names all sounded foreign to him. "Is that where you grew up?"

"Yea." Thad looked around at the lush greenery surrounding them. The Cascades were always beautiful in the summer. Much nicer than the deserts he grew up in.

"I take it you weren't big on the place?"

"It's alright. Nice place to grow up. If you like living half your life in the church."

"Oh." Jean-Luc felt some reticence, maybe even some pain coming from the conversation. "Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up—"

"Don't worry about it. I don't anymore." Thad pushed up a steeper incline. "It sounds like you grew up in the Midwest?"

"Not really mid-west. More like Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas. My family bounced around a lot; Rapid City, Billings, Buffalo."

"How did you end up with French name like Jean-Luc?"

"French-Canadian ancestry."

"Ah. Do you speak French too?"

Jean-Luc smirked. "Not a word. Well, *bonjour*, maybe."

"Well that sounded authentic."

Jean-Luc copped a snarky faux French accent, "It is only because, I have zee French genes, no?" The humor gave some levity to the conversation as the two moved deeper into the forest up the winding mountain trail.

# 3

**S**o what does Jean-Luc do for fun?" Thad met eyes with his handsome hiking partner who looked like he's started a few day's growth on his darker beard. The infectious smile Jean-Luc found on Thad's face was welcomed after their somewhat more serious dip in conversation a few minutes ago. "Dating anyone yet?" he grinned.

"Not. Yet. Jeeze. Give me another week," Jean-Luc snickered. "Someone's bound to hit on me from the office. It always happens. I'm assuming it will be Brittney." Jean-Luc winced.

"Oh. Yea. About that—" Thad began. "I'm sure that's bound to happen. She likes to do the office meeting kiss first. You know, behind closed doors. You should grab her ass when you kiss her, she likes that too." Thad rolled his eyes.

“Seriously? You have some personal experience with this, I take it? And you put up with it?” Jean-Luc was half shocked.

“Oh, yea,” Thad nodded. “Look, I’ve been with iCore for almost ten years now. She’ll move on; probably sooner than later. I’m happy with the gig. I just put up with it. We all do.”

“All?”

“All the guys.”

“You shouldn’t have to put up with that kind of harassment, Thad. Jesus. You should report her to HR.”

“Right,” Thad scowled. “And the director of HR, a woman, will laugh me out of her office. This is Seattle, not Montana. The complaint would go nowhere and then I’ll get targeted by the queen bee and lose my job after a bad review. Yea. No thanks.”

Both walked in silence up the path for a while, moving past thick forest where the sun barely shown through the canopy.

“What about you?” Jean-Luc asked. “I’m sure you’re dating someone?”

“No. Not at the moment.”

“Really? As nice as you look?”

Both exchanged a sly glance, with Jean-Luc suddenly looking away up the trail at some voices coming from around the bend.

Both early thirty-something guys feasted their eyes on a pair of young ladies half bounding down the path dressed for a morning hike. But instead of khakis and layered shirts, each looked more dressed for a running path in sleek cross-training running pants and long-sleeved matching Lycra running shirts that hugged their curved figures like a fine pair of leather driving gloves.

The path had narrowed and wasn’t wide enough for all of them to fit. The pair of ladies came to a quick stop just a few feet in front of the guys.

“OH. Hello?” the tall blonde of the two offered, a definite British accent in her words. At just over six feet, she was nearly as tall as Thad, a little elevated by the incline of their trail. The other young lady, an only slightly shorter brunette stopped next to her friend and immediately met eyes with Jean-Luc, then the both of them began darting their eyes all over each other.

“Ah, hi,” the brunette said, unable to keep her eyes fixed on just his face. Jean-Luc wasn’t nearly as big as Thad, but he was still a grand meal to feast one’s eye over. Was her accent British, or Australian? Thad couldn’t tell yet. But he was pretty sure Jean-Luc hadn’t even heard her accent. His eyes were all too glued to her pert chest wrapped in bright-yellow and black Lycra and more than casually danced up and down the rest of her in the running outfit.

“Hi.” Jean-Luc couldn’t seem to get any more words out of his mouth as they both continued to look at each other, oddly saying nothing. Jean-Luc couldn’t tear his eyes away from her. Any—of her. God, she was beautiful. Was she having the same problem he was just now?

“Wow,” both of them said, almost in unison.

Thad raised his brow at the tall blonde woman standing in front of him and then nodded with a half-grin at the two people just staring at each other, not saying a word. Or very few of them anyway.

“Do the two of you need a room?” the blonde asked, folding her arms, her British accent and humor definite now.

“Yea.” Her brunette hiking partner breathed, not taking her eyes from Jean-Luc’s, as if in a trance. “I mean, I’m sorry, what?!” she seemed to snap from her stare. She suddenly realized that she was half embraced with the strange guy, each holding onto each other’s forearms. She backed away a step, now embarrassed to be touching a guy she didn’t even know.

The odd thing was, she really didn't want to back away from him.

Jean-Luc smiled again at her, causing her to blush.

Thad looked at Jean-Luc, furrowing his brow while moving out of the way of the girls in front of him so they could pass by on the narrow trail. "Sorry."

"No apologies," the blonde offered with a short smile. "We're not really in a hurry, evidently," she unfolded her arms while half frowning at her friend who was still trying to tear her eyes from the handsome guy standing in their way.

"Jean-Luc," Thad began, "I think the ladies would like to get past."

"Oh. Um, yea," Jean-Luc moved to one side, still looking at the brunette.

"Ground control to Misty. Hello?" the blonde interjected.

"Misty—" Jean-Luc repeated.

She nodded.

"I'm Jean-Luc."

"Why is it always the French-Canadians?" Misty's blonde friend mumbled. She looked at Thad extending her hand. "Well since we're apparently not in a hurry and exchanging pleasantries, I'm London."

Thad grinned, taking her hand. She had a firm grip. "Thad," he offered. "Nice to meet you, London."

"Your friend doesn't talk much, Thad," London snarked.

"Apparently not around your friend, that's for sure." Thad and London watched and Misty and Jean-Luc lightly embraced forearms again, mumbling not much between the two of them.

Thad tried to ignore the apparent love at first sight moment. "How's the sky up by the falls? The report said it might rain this afternoon."

"No worries. A few clouds. I doubt you're in for any showers before you get there. We just came from the skybox."

“Oh—” Thad looked intrigued, “so, you know about that place? No too many people do.”

“It was on our bucket list while we’re here in the States. They said it was a great place to make out. They were right.”

“Great—yea, it is. If you know where it is.”

“We found it. Nice view, just don’t fall off.”

Thad nodded. He’d been there many times to just sit, relax, and unwind. Skybox was kind of his hideout; not many people knew where it was or how to get there.

“Well, Jean-Luc,” London took hold of the hand of her friend. “I’m terribly sorry for interrupting this little moment, but we have plane to catch this afternoon. Misty?”

“Oh. Sure.” She reluctantly pulled away from Jean-Luc.

“Hope you two have fun up there. Making out.” London smirked, pulling her friend down the trail.

“Yea. Great. Thanks.” Thad grimaced.

“Nice to meet you—Misty.” Jean-Luc waved as both he and Thad now watched the girls in their running gear head down the trail.

When they were both finally out of sight of the two women, whatever beguiling spell the comely brunette had cast over Jean-Luc finally waned.

“What was *that* all about?” Thad asked.

“Huh? Oh, you mean, her?” Jean-Luc seemed to clear his head. “Yea. I’m not sure. Sorry.” Jean-Luc turned to see if the women might be following them. But the trail was empty.

“It kind of looked like you two *needed* a room there for a minute. Like in a right now kind of way.”

“Yea.” Jean-Luc blew a heavy sigh, simmering his emotions. “Maybe it’s a good thing we didn’t have one. Wow, she was hot.”

“Dude, she wasn’t *that* hot,” Thad mused. Her friend was much better looking; at least to Thad.

"Sorry, Thad. That was really, different. I don't know that I've ever had that happen to me before. Just minding my own business and you see some girl, and suddenly, boom!"

"Define 'boom'?" Thad grinned. He knew exactly what Jean-Luc meant.

"Yea. I'd rather not."

Both moved up the trail now with the falls growing louder in the distance. Clearly Jean-Luc's mind was still simmering on Misty.

"Maybe we could double-date? You know, the four of us?"

"I—don't think London was all that into me."

"She shook your hand."

"Oh, you actually noticed that?"

"Yes." Jean-Luc half-grinned and frowned at the same time. "I wasn't totally beguiled."

"Well, I think London was more into Misty than me."

"Really? You think *they're* a couple?"

"She just said they'd been to skybox, making out, Jean-Luc. I guess you missed that part?"

"Oh. Yea, I totally did."

"Do—women always fall for you like that?" Thad asked, the two of them hiked up the trail that was growing steeper now as the trees thinned a bit allowing more sunshine onto the path. They could easily hear the falls now.

"Never. That never happens. The truth is, I'm usually getting hit on by other guys."

"Ha. That figures." Thad grimaced rolling his eyes. His new friend was apparently a little slow with the way he'd dressed for him this morning. "You're not the only one." Thad frowned looking away from Jean-Luc with a sigh.

"You too?"

Thad just nodded but didn't answer.

"I've actually thought about going out with another guy a couple of times." Jean-Luc admitted.

"Really?" Thad now looked back at him.

"Yea. Just—never got the nerve to, I guess."

"I've asked out other guys before." Thad suddenly felt the conversation improving after their brief run-in with the two women.

"You have?" Jean-Luc sounded intrigued, but not exactly surprised. "How many have you been out with?"

Thad met eyes with him. "Only a few. Not many, really. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. I guess—I've always wondered what it would be like to date another guy." He sighed not looking at Thad. "But, when you're raised in the parts of the county I was, that's not really an option you can explore."

"I'd go out with you, Jean-Luc. If you wanted to."

Now Jean-Luc looked at him. A cautious smile moving across his handsome lips. "I think I have a confession to make."

"Oh? Did you sin?" Thad smiled.

"No. But some in my family would think so."

"So would mine," Thad admitted, his tone not hiding his disdain.

Jean-Luc nodded. "I've sort of been watching you all week."

"Yea?" Thad's feelings welled. He grinned widely.

"What's so funny?"

"Jean, I've sort of been hitting on you all week. I took you to lunch on Monday, partially because you were the new guy, but—also because I wanted to get to know you. You're kind of hot. Just so you know."

"Hitting—? Jeeze. I haven't been paying very close attention, Thad. I'm sorry. It's been a hellacious week. New guy on the job."

"I hear that."

"You were really hitting on me?"

Thad nodded, grinning.

“I thought dating other employees is against company policy. I read that in the manual this week.”

“I guess we’ll have to keep it in the closet then.”

Both chuckled as they moved just a little closer together up the path toward the sound of the falls.

# 4

**F**alling water roaring in the not so far distance at the top of the bluff filled the air with a fine peaceful sound. The guys came to an area of the path that had leveled off and been railed to either side with thin debarked and sanded smooth tree logs. Thad found a locked gate with a barely noticeable path beyond and simply hopped over it along with Jean-Luc following behind through the ferns and underbrush. The barely-there trail was lined with warning signs of a sudden cliff danger. The trail then dropped quickly and ended onto a kind of natural stair-step of long rocks not more than eight feet wide. Beyond the last step of rocks was open air and a sheer drop into the forest and river far below.

“Wow.” Jean-Luc followed Thad out onto the first rock step and then down to the last one that was barely more than a yard wide. The breathtaking view left both of them in awe.

"It's a good thing I'm not afraid of heights," Jean-Luc peered over the edge of the last rock step at the river below.

"I try not to look straight down," Thad admitted, slipping off his daypack and then taking a seat on the first rock step like it was a bench seat.

Jean-Luc sat right beside him. Their arms and legs touching in an affectionate gesture that Thad was eating up. "So this is called skybox?"

Thad nodded, just taking in the view that looked over the tops of trees and all the way into the Fall City valley in the distance. Jean-Luc peered through some hanging evergreen limbs that mostly obscured their 'skybox' from the half-filled tourist platforms on the other side of the river gorge. It was doubtful anyone from the other side of the gorge could see them.

"So, what's it like?" Jean-Luc relaxed back into the flat-stone seat next to Thad, setting down a water bottle and looking out at the view.

"What's what like?"

"Going out with another guy?"

Thad smiled and then shrugged. "Just like going out with a girl."

"Sure it is." Jean-Luc wasn't exactly buying it.

"No, I'm serious."

"Really?"

"Actually, I think guys are easier to date. Well, most guys anyway."

"They are?"

"I think so. Guys are more up-front. I'm not having to second-guess what I say or read between some lines about what she's thinking."

"Not all women are like that."

"No, probably not," Thad agreed.

“I think this is going to sound really naïve, Thad, but—did you make out with the guys you dated?”

Thad breathed a chuckle. “We probably did a little more than just make out.”

Jean-Luc smirked. “I guess I already knew that.”

Thad met eyes with him again. “Jean—we, don’t have to do anything. I mean, I brought you up here because this is like one of my favorite places. I was just wanting to get to know you; you know?”

Jean-Luc nodded.

“I really didn’t bring you up here to make out—I mean, if it wasn’t going to be your thing.”

“What makes you think making out with you wouldn’t be my thing?”

“Oh, just that whole thing with Misty back on the trail. That left me wondering. That maybe you weren’t into guys.”

“Maybe I like both?”

Thad smiled. Then nodded. He knew that feeling all too well. “I like both, no doubt.”

“See—” Jean-Luc bumped his shoulder into Thad’s. “You’d do that London chick in a heartbeat if she were here. Especially in that white running outfit she was wearing.”

Thad smiled wide. “Probably.”

Each relaxed into the rock seat to admire the view again.

“So how many guys have you dated?” Jean-Luc asked looking out over the trees and into the river valley.

“Honestly?”

Jean-Luc nodded. “Yea. Honestly.”

“Only three.”

“Really?”

“You thought it’d more—”

“Actually, I did. I mean, with how you look. Thad you’re built like Superman. I mean the comic book version.”

"Thanks. You're built more like Spiderman—the comic book version."

Jean-Luc guffawed with a wide grin. "I *wish* I looked that good. So is that why you came to Seattle? To date other guys?"

Thad shook his head. "No. Not really. I was sort of dating a guy in Richmond, actually."

"In the closet?"

"Oh hell yea."

"Was he cute?"

Thad nodded. "He was cute. I guess we both were. We met in Scouts."

"Scouts? You were still in your teens?"

"Both of us were sixteen when we met."

"How long did it last?"

"Off and on, for about eight years, I guess, until we both graduated from college."

"That's not just a fling."

"No. It wasn't."

"Why didn't you just marry him?"

Thad sighed as the memories both good and bad flooded back to the forefront of his mind. "Because his family was part of our church. His dad was one of the pastors; so was mine. Our church sponsored the Scout troop."

Jean-Luc nodded, but said nothing.

"Everyone had their suspicions about us, I think. But then one day he just stopped returning my calls. I'd heard he'd moved back East and married some uber-religious Carolina girl."

"I'm sorry."

"Yea, me too."

"You're not over him."

Thad forced a smile. "I probably never will be."

"That's a beautiful story, Thad."

Thad said nothing, but just stared out at the view.

# 5

**Y**ou wanted to see me, Mr. Garret?"  
"Thaddeus, yes; come in and close the door."  
"Everything alright?"  
"Yes. Fine. Have a seat."

Thad took one of the chairs at the little table in the executive manager's small office.

"I've been on the phone with Brittney and her boss this morning."

Thad nodded.

"We're going to be updating the report structures again."

"Sure. What do you need?"

"Legal wants changes made to the code. And because of the sensitive nature of these changes, I need to remind you of your confidentiality agreement. Not just outside the company

but within the company as well. Our conversations never leave this office.”

Thad nodded again. “I understand.” He wasn’t exactly sure why, but his palms were cold and suddenly sweaty. He rubbed them imperceptibly over his suit pants.

The manager offered him a small black, company-logoed flash drive. “The new reporting queries are on this drive. Tonight, I want you to VPN into the network and hot-fix the report files with these new ones.”

“No deployment?”

“No, there isn’t time for everyone to go through QA and then insert the deployment into the next release. Hot-fix is the only option until the offshore team can push the code into source control and make it permanent. We have VP approval.”

“Okay. Sure.” Thad nodded taking the drive.

“These are encrypted binaries. You just need to drop the files into the reports plugins folder. Don’t worry about backing up or overwriting anything, in fact, I don’t want anything backed up. We need the files to overwrite the existing ones.”

“Ah. Okay. Sure. No problem.”

“Excellent. It needs to be done tonight, after midnight but before 2:00 AM when the reports job runs.”

“Yea, I can do that.”

“Perfect.” Garret stood up. “Normally, I’d just fire off the files with an email, but with legal involved,” he rolled his eyes, “you know how the lawyers are.”

“I’ve worked with legal before, Mr. Garret. Trust me, I know how they are.” Thad pursed his lips.

“They’re good people, Thad, but, damn, they can be obstinate sometimes.”

“Don’t we all know,” Thad grinned.

“Thaddeus—your tie.”

“Oh—um. Yea—”

Garret straightened his collar. "Looks nice. You look nice without a tie. Very modern. Just the kind of man we need in this office. Way too stuffy around here."

"Thanks." Thad smiled.

"Remember. Legal needs this kept on the QT. After midnight but before 2:00."

"Sure."

## 6

**H**ow is your day going?" Jean-Luc asked, sitting down at a table in the company cafeteria with a full lunch tray. The place was still bustling with people, but the crowds were at least thinning now that it was close to 1:30 in the afternoon.

Thad yawned, setting his own tray on the table. "Fine. I was up late last night and then stupid meetings all morning until now. Whoever schedules noon meetings needs to be fired. There's a reason everyone's schedule is available from noon to one, and it's not for your meeting scheduling convenience."

"Yea. That's very irritating. I had one with marketing myself. At least they offered lunch."

"You didn't eat with them?"

"No. Nothing was vegetarian. Turkey, ham and roast beef everything."

"You never told me you were vegetarian?"

"I guess it never came up."

"How did you become vegetarian growing up in cattle country?"

"Ever take a tour of a slaughter house?"

Thad shook his head.

"Don't. Not if you want to remain a carnivore."

"I've heard," Thad grinned, taking a bite of his ham and cheese sub. "How did you get sucked into a meeting with marketing?"

"They wanted a report review. I guess they didn't like the numbers."

Thad stopped chewing. "What numbers?"

"The daily reports."

"Were they bad?"

"No. They were really good, in fact. So I re-ran them for the quarter. Apparently we're doing a lot better than expected."

Thad began chewing again. "Oh. Well, that's good."

Jean-Luc lowered his voice. "I also had a meeting with Brittney." He frowned.

Thad stopped chewing again. "Oh, God. Tell me she didn't stick her tongue down your throat."

"Alright. I won't tell you."

"Jeeze," Thad scowled looking down at the table.

"Oh, it gets better—" Jean-Luc glared.

"Huh?"

"She takes my hand and starts moving it around her thigh."

Thad put down his sub. "You didn't. I mean she didn't. Tell me you didn't."

"Well—God, Thad, what was I supposed to do?!" Jean-Luc kept his voice low.

"Did you tell her no?"

"A few times. I mean, I tried to be nice about it. It didn't matter. She just kept it up. I didn't want to piss her off and lose my new job."

"Let me guess—she wasn't wearing any underwear."

"How did you know?"

"Hello? Been there. She likes to wear that black stretch skirt when she's horny."

Jean-Luc scowled. "Thanks for the warning. Maybe you could put that in your list of onboarding tips next time. 'Avoid the executive director if she's in a black stretch skirt'."

"I'm sorry, Jean-Luc. She's trapped me a few times with that one. Did she touch you?"

"No. She just wanted to be fingered while we made out."

"How long did she make you do her?"

"Twenty minutes, I think. She came a few times."

Thad grimaced. "She's made me do that to her too. How many times did you have to wash afterward?"

"Six."

"That's about my average."

"Average? Jesus, Thad! How often does this happen?"

"Depends. A few times a month sometimes. You get used to it. It goes faster once you know where her G-spot is."

"Yea? Well I'm not doing her again. She can find a frickin' boyfriend."

"Obviously, she can't," Thad smirked.

"I wonder how many people she's done this to?"

"Look at her department. It's full of guys like us."

"You think she's done this to all of them?"

"Jean-Luc, some guys *like* doing their boss. She probably pays them for the overtime," he scowled. "No what I mean?"

Jean-Luc grumbled. "Well she can find someone else to be her boy-toy."

Both went back to eating their lunches while watching the cafeteria empty of even more people.

“Speaking of boyfriends, what are you doing for the weekend?” Jean-Luc asked.

“Staying home and sleeping.”

“Want to grab a movie?”

“There’s nothing on until September now.”

“We could hike up to skybox again.”

“You just want to see if that Misty chick is going to be there.”

“Maybe,” Jean-Luc grinned. He leaned in close to Thad’s ear. “Or maybe I’d like to finally get the chance to make out with *my* new boyfriend.” Jean-Luc flashed his brows at Thad.

Thad smiled. “Make out, huh?”

Jean-Luc smirked. “Well, yea, for starters.”

Thad drew a sudden eager breath. “I—could probably be talked into another hike,” he smiled at Jean-Luc. “But seriously, I need some sleep. Let’s wait until Sunday.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dressed again in similar hiking boots and khakis they had the week before, both guys had left their layered shirts behind in Thad’s Z on the much warmer late summer morning. Their nature-toned tan and forest-green stretch-cotton muscle shirts were even a little warm to be wearing on the way up the trail.

“You got some new shorts,” Thad trekked up behind Jean-Luc where the trail narrowed. They looked a lot like his own and hugged Jean-Luc’s ass like they were tailored for it, the seam of his shorts riding between his cheeks and showing off his glutes like they were gloved. The guy had a nice ass, not totally rounded, but his glutes were nicely matched with his thick thighs.

Thad bit his lip watching him climb the trail.

Jean-Luc suddenly felt someone’s hand gripping one side of his shorts as Thad move up the trail behind him.

"I was wondering when you were going to notice," Jean-Luc grinned over his shoulder.

"Oh, man, I noticed, trust me." Thad gipped him and then spanked the other side of his butt as the trail widened again.

"I've been wanting to do that to you all week," Jean-Luc admitted.

"No one's stopping you," Thad moved closer to him. Jean-Luc reached out taking a handful of Thad's ass for the first time as the two made their way up the mountain.

Both soon relaxed on the cool rock stairs looking out at the river valley in the distance again.

"I'm nervous," Jean-Luc admitted.

"About what?"

"I've never kissed a guy before." Jean-Luc had been rolling a cinnemint around in his mouth since before they'd hit the trail.

"I'm not going to make you kiss me."

"I know. What if someone sees us?" He looked over his shoulder through the tree branches that kept their skybox mostly private from the sight-seeing platforms across the gorge.

"No one's going to see us. They're all looking at the falls." Thad leaned back into the side of rock with a sigh, like the steps were an easy chair.

"Maybe you should kiss me?" Jean-Luc suggested.

Thad glanced over at him. "Do I turn you on or not?"

"I dream about you at night, Thad. Of course you turn me on."

"So what's the problem?"

"Nothing, I'm just, you know. Nervous."

Thad sighed. He closed his eyes, relaxing against the cool stone enjoying the sound of the falls in the distance.

He soon felt Jean-Luc close to him. Then felt Jean-Luc's hand resting lightly on his chest. He could feel the warmth of Jean-Luc's skin now moving very close to his own.

"You smell nice." Jean-Luc spoke softly next to his ear, a faint cinnamon scent rising from his warm breath.

The sensation of Jean-Luc this close gave Thad a sudden tingle over his skin. Wow. The sensuous feeling was a little unexpected. A light caress of Jean-Luc's lips over his neck sent warm ripples down Thad's skin, tingling and tightening his nipples beneath his t-shirt. His eyes still closed, Thad reached out to gently embrace him, to let him know he appreciated his touch.

Thad opened his lips part way as he felt Jean-Luc's hovering over the side of his. Their lips now both slightly parted, Jean-Luc lightly moving his over Thad's, barely touching him.

"Hmmm." Thad's pulse jumped.

But Jean-Luc wasn't really kissing him. The light lip touch was really tantalizing.

"You're just teasing me—" Thad complained.

"Maybe." Jean-Luc smoothed his lips ever so lightly over Thad's now eager open pout. Thad felt his groin suddenly twinge with the sensations Jean-Luc delivered over his lips.

"God you smell nice," Jean-Luc complimented again.

"You're just," Thad tried to steal a kiss but Jean-Luc retreated. Thad slipped his hands to the front of Jean-Luc's perfectly cut chest, his palms sliding over the smooth stretch-cotton fabric of his shirt to feel his firming nipples beneath. The sensations of Thad's palms gliding over his chest rocketed warm ripples all through Jean-Luc, making his groin twinge with anticipation. Thad's touch was giving rise to both his emotion and what was laying inside his briefs.

“You are teasing me.” Thad attempted to steal a more firm kiss but Jean-Luc’s retreating lip-play was sheer mastery. Thad was now drawing deeper breaths.

“You’re not teasing me, you’re torturing me.”

Jean-Luc grinned now, barley tasting Thad’s lips with his own. “Get used to it.”

“Ahhh, God, Jean, please, just—”

Jean-Luc folded his lips gently, precisely into Thad’s as both dove into a longing warm kiss.

Thad had kissed and been kissed by other people before, but nothing like this! Jean-Luc didn’t just kiss him, the way the guy touched him, moved himself next to him, it was like a kind of magic that flowed between them. Both sat next to each other half facing on the stone now, their muscular legs wrapped while their fingers wandered the bulges, ridges and valleys of each other’s masculine builds.

# 6

**T**had had lost track of time. He didn't know how long the two of them had been making out on the stone stairs. Was it an hour? Maybe not that long, but neither had let up in their first-time makeout—and now Thad was beginning to feel it between his thighs. “Hmmm,” he complained into their kiss.

Jean-Luc pulled back. “Are you okay?”

“Yeaah,” Thad breathed deeply, catching his breath. “But I don't think these shorts were exactly made for making out. Especially with you.”

Jean-Luc grinned, his hand sliding over the side of the snug short khakis. “Maybe you need to unzip them?”

“Maybe you should—” Thad smiled.

“It's a little warm up here anyway.” Jean-Luc smirked.

Thad watched as Jean-Luc untucked Thad's muscle shirt and then peeled it up and off of his body. It didn't take but a

few moments for Thad to peel away Jean-Luc's shirt as well. Thad moved his hands over Jean-Luc's taunt nipples. He felt Jean-Luc's touch and watched him carefully, slowly unzip the snug shorts revealing the huge bulging front of white briefs beneath them.

"Better?" Jean-Luc watched Thad sigh some relief.

Thad nodded, but then felt and watched his shorts being peeled away from his waist and over his sizable thighs.

"God, Thad," Jean-Luc's eyes were suddenly wide looking at the front of his briefs and the huge bulge beneath them. The guy was unreal he was so large; the length of a long thick cock reached all the way to the side of the high-cut briefs, barely containing him. "No wonder these hurt." Jean-Luc pushed Thad's khakis down past his knees to his hiking boots. "Hung much?"

Thad rocked his hips, feeling himself growing even harder and standing taller than he already was beneath the white cotton briefs. "Sorry. Hmmm," he winced feeling nicely freed of the shorts. "Can I help it if I'm a little more blessed?"

"Blessed?" Jean-Luc chuckled. "Dude, you're a little more than just 'blessed' here." Jean-Luc ran his fingers lightly over the long thick hardness covered by Thad's briefs. "This is more like *miraculous*."

"Ohhh," Thad felt the tingle of Jean-Luc's fingers along the length of his cock moving his emotions. "God that feels nice."

"I've never touched another guy like this before."

Thad had to rock his hips with Jean-Luc's delicate touch. "You do it well, trust me."

Thad leaned up from his reclining on the rock and loosened Jean-Luc's khakis, pulling them away from his waist and over his thighs until they feel around his own boots. Both guys set their shorts aside on the rock and returned to making out in just their underwear with Jean-Luc kneeling between Thad's thighs, the hard-bulging fronts of each of their briefs gliding

softly against each other with both tightly embraced and locked in a deeply desperate kiss.

Whatever nervousness Jean-Luc had felt about making out with Thad quickly evaporated in the heat of their new embrace. Still sitting on the stone, Thad tried as well as he could to rock his hips against Jean's, but Jean-Luc had no trouble making sure the hard bulges filling their briefs slid against each other's while their hands moved in eager exploration of well-muscled bodies while their lips grew more aggressive.

Thad's pulse pounded with anticipation. Jean-Luc wasn't just talented with his lips, the way he held Thad in their embrace, how his hands glided across his skin tantalized Thad in a way he'd never experienced before. He couldn't remember ever being this hard. He needed to be holding Jean-Luc. Sliding his hand between them, Thad slipped his fingers into the front of Jean-Luc's briefs, tangling through a thick male bush before wrapping them around a respectable rock-solid spire still trapped beneath the white cotton. Thad gently squeezed around the base of his cock.

"Aaahhh—" Jean-Luc breathed into their kiss. "God, Thad, that's nice."

Thad smiled into his lips while slowly sliding and gripping Jean-Luc's shaft until he'd finally reached his tip. Thad had already noticed that Jean-Luc seemed to be long, but with his hand exploring the guy he discovered just how long-tall his friend was. Thad lifted Jean-Luc's solid spire from beneath the confining briefs while his fingers lightly smoothed and teased a spire that easily rose past Jean-Luc's navel.

Thad retreated from their kiss to look between them at the impressive tall-standing length. "And you said I was big. Jesus!"

"Do I look okay?" Jean-Luc asked.

“Okay?” Thad chuckled. “Jean-Luc, you’re way longer than I am.”

“You’re still way bigger.” Jean-Luc’s fingers slipped into Thad’s briefs releasing his broad, thick hardness that didn’t quite stand to his navel, but Thad was huge and thickly-wide.

Feeling Jean-Luc sliding his briefs down, Thad lifted himself from the rock just long enough for Jean-Luc to slide them down to his thighs. Everything about Thad between his thighs was well-sized, including his jewels. Even though his glands had been drawn up snug against the base of his shaft, they still looked huge and overfilled.

“You shave down here?” Jean-Luc slipped his fingers under Thad’s smooth-shaved heavy glands, cradling him with light squeezes and caresses; then slid them over the neatly trimmed skin around Thad’s cock. He was practically bare around his cock. Jean-Luc had never seen a guy trimmed like Thad was.

Thad nodded.

“I guess I need to.”

Moving his hands over Jean-Luc’s smooth ass, Thad slid his briefs slowly off to around his thighs. Jean-Luc sported a wild thick black bush around his cock that Thad now moved his fingers through.

“Don’t you dare trim this.” Thad kissed him.

“Really?”

“Hmmm,” Thad kissed. Thad pulled his cock down from his abs and began moving his tip through Jean-Luc’s bush. It took only a moment for Jean-Luc to get the message and take over. Now Jean-Luc gripped Thad’s cock and seductively teased his still partially sheathed tip through his bush.

“Ahhhhh, HMMM!” Thad breathed and then flinched warmly against Jean-Luc’s lips as a sudden spike of the intimate sensation shot through his cock. “God. What are you doing?”

“Just shut up and kiss me.”

Thad didn't argue. Whatever Jean-Luc was doing to him sent another bolt of searing intimacy through his jewels. “God, Jean, I'm gonna come all over you if you keep doing that.”

“I want to see you come, Thad.” Jean-Luc continued his intimate assault of Thad's cock, teasing his helmet by running it through his pubic hair.

“AHHHH—” Thad drew an uncontrolled rippled breath. “Keep doing that and trust me, it's gonna happen.”

Thad quickly discovered that Jean-Luc's fingers moving in teasing waves over his sheathed thick tip were way more talented than just moving his cock through Jean-Luc's bush. Jean-Luc pulled Thad's briefs to his boots and then pushed him back gently to recline against the stone. Thad was a beautiful eyeful the way he softly rocked his hips with low soft moans under Jean-Luc's torturous teases. Thad lifted his thick arms, locking his fingers behind his head while the rest of his body lifted and rocked as powerful intimate sensations rocketed from between his thighs into his limbs.

Jean-Luc had never been so hard, kneeling between Thad's thighs, just watching him, watching Thad's body writhe in the pain of building ecstasy, watching his handsome face grimace with each new peak of the pleasure rising within him.

It didn't take nearly as long as Jean-Luc thought it might before Thad was clearly moving rapidly to his edge. Thad's fingers were clawing at the stone beside his thighs now, his ass lifting off the rock as if trying to air-fuck Jean-Luc's fingers now playing the bare wet unsheathed helmet of his cock. Thad wasn't just groaning now, his mouth was half open and he was calling out with each deep exhaled breath. Jean-Luc's cock throbbed just watching how beautiful Thad was in the throws of climax.

“OHHHH! JEAN-!” Thad whined, his face contorting just before his whole body flinched and Thad called out loudly.

Both of Jean-Luc's hands wrapped around Thad's massive cock. Jean-Luc felt him pulse heavily. The first of his seed shot high into the air with force, splashing down against his neck and upper chest, wetting his skin. With each new pulse, Thad's whole body bucked and fucked under Jean-Luc's still teasing fingers. Again and again Thad continued to shoot, not just wetting but half drenching his chest and abs with a lot more wet-excitement than Jean-Luc would ever have expected. Thad just kept pulsing. After what seemed like more than a dozen shots and Thad's body half-wildly writhing, Thad continued to pulse dry. Jean-Luc's teasing fingers were wet and slick now as he slid in new teases over Thad's impressive helmet, causing him to buck as the intense wild ecstatic aftershock rocketed through his body.

"OH. GOD! JEAN-LUC, NO! PLEASE—don't do that!" Thad begged.

"Do what?" Jean-Luc sprouted an evil grin. Jean-Luc's own cock was always super sensitive after he'd come; he was pretty sure Thad would be as well. Jean-Luc teased his tip again.

"AAHHH!" Thad writhed with the painful ecstatic sensations. But he kept his hands to his sides, gripping his own ass, not at all trying to move Jean-Luc's torturous fingers from his ultra sensitive cock.

Jean-Luc watched Thad call out, cringing with another painful ecstatic bolt. He wanted to keep teasing Thad like this. God, the guy was beautiful with the way his abs and pectorals flexed under his intimate onslaught. But he could also see that Thad was in some real pain. He was enduring the teasing just for him. Jean-Luc relented. His merciless fingers left Thad's wide tip and slid wet down to a much less sensitive length of his overly-thick shaft.

Thad's chest rose and fell heavily. His pulse pounded in his ears. His skin had grown damp all over, and not just on his

chest and abs where he'd splashed. He was pretty sure he'd never come this hard in his life.

"You okay?" Jean-Luc asked.

"Do I look—" Thad drew another badly needed breath "Okay?"

The guy looked tortured and on the verge of ire.

"I'm sorry, Thad. I just—"

"Oh, God that was sweet!"

Jean-Luc gripped his thick cock again. "You liked that, huh?"

"Did it look like I liked it?"

"No. It looked like you were in pain."

"I was. God that was intense. Yea. Next time don't stop. Even if I tell you to. WHOOOO!" Thad released a deep breath.

"You know you look really hot when you're coming?"

"I do?" Thad smiled at Jean, a little embarrassed. "I wonder how you look when you are?"

Thad leaned up and took Jean-Luc's hard length in both hands, pulling Jean-Luc by his cock up to a kneeling position on the rock between his own thighs. Thad kept Jean-Luc's knees together, his muscular thighs pressed tightly against the other with his jewels and length riding on top, out front and center.

The guy was really tall, not nearly as wide as Thad but still thick with clearly overfilled smooth glands at his base. Jean-Luc groaned softly with his hard shaft in Thad's grip. With Jean-Luc's hands resting on Thad's shoulders, Thad watched Jean-Luc's body respond to the teases he sent into him through his long cock.

Thad moved his fingernails all along his tall length, but it was really Jean-Luc's tip that Thad found the most sensitive and caused Jean-Luc to rock his hips as if trying to fuck Thad's fingertips.

"OH, God that's going kill me—" Jean-Luc complained.

Thad smiled. “Dude, I’m just getting started ...”

A middle-aged, fit-looking man with a military-style haircut and dressed in warm-weather tourist attire moved with the crowds, his DSLR camera snapping shots of the falls with the myriad of other tourists that filled the outdoor vista terrace. Casually moving to the railing through the crowds, his finger now slipped the unit into U-HD video record mode as the lens swept away from the mist of the falls and panned the far edge of the gorge through the trees while the auto-zoom of the unit zeroed in on the two subjects through a break in the tree branches wearing nothing but hiking boots. For long moments he recorded and shot near gigapixel stills, then moved further down the platform for new shots of the falls, and the two buff employees frolicking *au naturel* through the trees a few hundred yards away.

Thad’s skin was now even more wet, his chest and abs glistening with not only his own, but Jean-Luc’s ecstatic excitement spilled all over his front as well. Both Thad’s and Jean-Luc’s briefs were still around their boots as both rested pressed next to each other on the cool stone. Jean-Luc was still catching his breath. Each of their hands still lightly glided over the hard spire of the other while both recovered in afterglow.

“You’re really sexy without clothes on.” Thad relaxed and lightly squeezed Jean-Luc’s still very hard length that towered well past his navel.

Jean-Luc breathed a soft groan, feeling Thad’s fingers grip and squeeze his cock again. “You’re the one who’s sexy. I didn’t think you were going to stop coming.”

“I—guess I shoot a lot when I come.”

"A lot?" Jean-Luc looked at Thad's still heavily wetted chest and abs again. He could barely get his fingers around the girth of the guy's still very hard spire.

Thad's eyes danced all over Jean-Luc's still slightly rocking body, his skin nicely aglow in perspiration.

"I may not let you wear clothes when you come over."

"I'm not that hot." Jean-Luc smirked.

"Yes, you are. New rule. When you come over to the apartment, you don't get to wear clothes."

"What about you."

"No. I get to."

"Not if—"

"I hope we're not intruding—"

The fine British accent was instantly recognizable. Both mostly unclothed guys watched as two familiar young women stepped out of the forest underbrush and onto the stone stairs of the skybox. Thad's and Jean-Luc's fingers were still wrapping each other's spires.

"Oh, God!" Jean-Luc closed his eyes tightly while reclined next to Thad. "Please tell me this is *not* happening!"

"Don't freak, gorgeous," Misty consoled. "We've been watching for the past half-hour."

"More like twenty minutes actually," London corrected, unable to erase the grin from her fine lips feasting her eyes now on the two very naked and aroused men.

Thad smirked.

Jean-Luc groaned. "Maybe you could have said something—" Jean-Luc had let go of Thad's cock. Finding his twisted-up briefs tangled around his hiking boots, he was unsuccessfully attempting to pull them up quickly.

"Oh—please don't get dressed," Misty pouted stepping closer to him. "You'll look much better without those on."

"I—ah. Really?" Jean-Luc met Misty's fine smile with his own. Both she and her blonde friend were wearing running attire, but this time both had chosen Lycra short-shorts and snug tanks for the much warmer day. Misty sat down right next to Jean-Luc on the stone, resting her hand on his still slightly damp cut chest.

"You look perfectly handsome, actually," Misty offered in a sweet, alluring Aussie accent.

"Uuughh," Thad groaned, rocking his head back as he watched the two of them suddenly embrace. It only took them moments before both were lip-locked in one of the hottest kisses Thad had ever seen. And it didn't take long before Misty's fingers were taking over Jean-Luc's spire where Thad's had left off.

London rolled her eyes. Thad watched the beautiful blonde move around the two kissing lovers and sit down on the other side of him.

"Sorry for the intrusion. She's quite infatuated with your friend."

Thad pursed his lips. "Apparently he's infatuated with yours."

"We didn't mean to spy on the both of you. But the show had already started. It would have been rude to interrupt."

"No. I get it." Thad would not have wanted to be interrupted with the way he and Jean-Luc had been carrying on.

"You're ah—quite nice here, Thad," London complimented, her eyes dancing all over his body but lingering around his still very thick hard male.

He half scowled. "Thanks."

"Don't be ill with us. Please. It was an innocent fate. We really had no idea the two of you would be up here. You would have done the same if you'd found Misty and I up here and we were—" London's brow lifted beautifully, "compromised."

## FIERCE COMPETITION

“I guess,” Thad half agreed. Both now watched Jean-Luc’s hand reaching around Misty’s ass pulling her Lycra running shorts down to her knees.

# 7

**H**ey,” Jean-Luc wandered up to Thad by the office cafeteria’s row of Keurig machines. “What happened to you and London? You two just left us.”

“Oh, you noticed?” Thad grumped, not looking at him.

Jean-Luc eyed him with a curious glare. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know? You just dropping some strange woman’s shorts and start banging her might have something to do with it.”

“Yea, that was—a little fast,” Jean-Luc admitted with a sigh. “I can’t explain it, Thad. It’s like were just drawn to each other. It’s weird the connection we have. It’s like it’s mystical.”

“Ha. Ha.” Thad snarked at the pun. “Did she stay at your apartment last night too?” Thad continued to look unhappy.

Jean-Luc frowned but didn't answer.

Thad dropped a K-cup into the machine, closing the handle probably a little harder than was necessary then hitting the brew button. He just stood there watching the cup fill.

"Listen, Thad—I'm sorry about yesterday."

"Yea, me too."

"Sometimes you just meet someone and you just—"

"Have to fuck them senseless in public?" He scowled at Jean-Luc.

"No. It's more than just that. I can't even begin to explain it."

"Didn't look that way to me. At least London and I were talking. You two just go in for the kill."

"We talked. Some."

Thad poured some sweet creamer into his still filling cup.

"It's not like what we had yesterday was meaningless."

"It's all meaningless, Jean-Luc."

"No it's not. It's not meaningless. I'd never been with a guy before you."

"Dude, you switch-hit like it's nobody's business."

"So? Doesn't make it meaningless."

"Maybe you should check your definitions then." Thad took his coffee cup and walked out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"And where have you been since yesterday?" London watched as her companion closed the door of their extended-stay hotel suite. "You didn't even text me until this morning."

"You knew exactly where I was. I spent the night with Jean-Luc at his apartment."

"This is going a little beyond professional, Detective. I don't need you *actually* compromised."

"I agree, Inspector. I can't explain it. He's just—incredibly appealing. It's a bit uncanny, I admit."

"Well perhaps you could rein it in—just a bit. He can't be *that* alluring."

"Says the woman who spent half the afternoon talking with a man dressed only in his boots?"

"It was hardly half the afternoon," London countered. "Besides, *he* at least got cleaned up and dressed."

"With your help, I noticed." Misty parried with a half grin.

"I'm surprised you noticed a thing, the way you were snogging the poor guy riding his joystick."

Misty walked up to London, wrapping her arm around her thin waist, bringing their lips together briefly. "You are jealous."

"Hardly." London half smiled then turned out of her embrace, returning her attention to the reporting app on her phone. "While you were pumping Jean-Luc all night, I don't suppose you actually learned anything?"

Misty sat down on their bed, crossing her long legs elegantly. "He just started with iCore last week. He already hates his boss—make that bosses. And since three of their team left for greener pastures over the past few months, your hunky Thaddeus Bolt is now the senior team-lead, large and in-charge of technical reporting."

"Interesting. I don't usually like using the rank-and-file, but iCore's security is tight. A couple of keen developers on the inside could be exactly what we need at this point."

"You want me to keep seeing Jean-Luc?"

"If you can manage—" London glared.

"Oh, I'll manage." Misty's beautiful lips smiled.

## 8

**L**ong time, no see,” London met eyes with Thad as he got up out of his chair at the posh downtown restaurant. He helped her with her chair and then re-took his own. “Thank you. I didn’t realize gentlemen in Seattle still helped ladies with their chairs?”

“I’m not actually from Seattle.” He smiled. He’d been a little surprised to get a call from her. He’d not remembered giving her his number. Then again, she could have gotten it from Misty through Jean-Luc. Sitting across from London, he again realized how incredibly striking she was. Her thick blond hair, fair complexion, tall face and high cheekbones, not to mention full lips, a perfect smile with a cute beauty mark just above her lip were all much more alluring than her friend. Still, Misty wasn’t at all unattractive. Maybe it was London’s British that made her just a little more so—at least to him.

"And I'm not actually from London," she smiled.

"Oh? Where's home for you?" Both watched as a waiter poured them some wine and then retreated from their table.

"Birmingham." She tasted the wine as Thad watched, fixated on her lips touching the edges of her glass.

"Alabama?"

"West Midlands, England."

"Oh. Yea. Of course." He felt a little stupid now.

"Where's home for you?"

"Ah, more or less here now."

"Do I detect some discontent for the old homestead?"

"Probably, a little."

"I'm sorry, Thad. I don't mean to pry. It's none of my business."

"No. London. It's fine." He sighed, letting the bouquet of the wine fill his senses. It seemed to relax him a bit sitting in front of her. God she was beautiful.

"I wanted to apologize for the two of us barging in on such a personal moment the other day. Between you and Jean-Luc. It was rude."

"No, don't apologize. I really didn't mind at all. Apparently neither did Jean-Luc," Thad snarked.

London gave him a keen look. "You're still sore about your friend and Misty."

Thad looked down at their table. "Probably."

"I'm sorry, Thad. Misty and I had words about it, actually. She never should have barged into your relationship like she did."

"Well, it's not much of a relationship now at this point. Not one I'd want to talk about. Jean-Luc and I aren't talking."

"Why not?"

"His family doesn't really approve of him seeing me anyway. They're evidently from a small town. Probably for the best anyway."

“Oh,” London finished a new sip from her glass. “Where you’re from, it’s also a small town—they don’t approve of guys as couples there either?”

He raised his brow. The woman was smart. She’d put two and two together quickly. “Your intuition is uncanny. But, yea, you’re right. They don’t—didn’t.”

“There’s nothing wrong with leaving someplace, to go and be who you are, Thad.”

“No there isn’t,” he agreed.

“If it’s any consolation, Misty and I have been dating for years. She meets your friend and now she won’t keep quiet about him. She’s quite taken with him.”

“I’m sure.” Thad frowned.

“I think you’re quite taken with him too.”

“Was.”

“Oh?”

“I—sort of blocked his number. He kept calling me.”

“I thought you worked together?”

“We do. I try not to talk to him.”

“I’m sorry. Looks like you and I are kind of in the same predicament.”

“You and Misty no longer dating?”

“She hasn’t been back to our hotel since Sunday. I called you to have dinner and commiserate.” She lifted her glass again.

Thad lifted and then touched his to hers. “Well, here’s to commiserating then,” he smiled at her.

\* \* \* \* \*

“We missed you at stand-up this morning.” Jean-Luc found Thad just before lunch working on his MacBook in one of the small collaboration areas. They were the only two in the

twenty-by-twenty-foot open collaboration space. He took the chair next to Thad's.

"I was up late last night."

"Oh? I didn't know there was a release going out."

"There wasn't. I had dinner with London. We were up late talking."

"You had dinner?" Jean-Luc's eyes widened in surprise.

Thad nodded.

"Wow."

Thad looked up from his screen. Jean-Luc had astonishment running all over his face. "You look surprised."

"Well, yea. I didn't think—" Jean-Luc lowered his voice, "you were into girls."

"I'm *into* commitment." Thad frowned, closing the lid of the laptop.

"Thad—I think we need to talk. Just the two of us."

"What's there to talk about? You like fucking Misty. End of discussion. I get it."

"No, I don't think you do."

Thad offered him an incredulous stare.

"I wouldn't have done what we did last—" Jean-Luc stopped talking as another member of their team walked by on his way to somewhere, "last weekend if it was just meaningless. That's not who I am."

"Apparently it is."

"No, it's not. I still want to see you."

"You want to date *both* of us—" Thad scowled.

"You went out with London."

"So? You dumped *me*, remember?"

"I *didn't* dump you." Jean-Luc sighed. "Misty just sort of came out of nowhere. You saw the two of us on the trail. Long before you and I ever did it."

Thad didn't say anything. Jean-Luc did have a point. The pair had a blatant, natural connection the moment they'd laid eyes on each other. *That* was patently obvious.

"Have lunch with me."

Thad groaned a sigh.

"Please?" Jean-Luc faux pouted.

Thad smiled and then chuckled. He shook his head. "Alright, I'll have lunch. Just, stop making those stupid faces."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So what did you and London talk about last night?" Both walked crossing the street heading for a Chipotle not far from iCore's downtown office high-rise.

"What else? You and Misty."

"Really?" Jean-Luc chuckled. "We talk a lot about you and London."

"What?"

"Seriously. Misty and London have been dating for quite a while now."

"She told me. She's not all that excited about you swiping her girlfriend either."

"I'm sure she's not. How long did you guys talk?"

"Oh, well, not that long."

"I thought you said you were up late talking?"

"Yea, I guess."

Jean-Luc caught Thad's arm stopping him on the sidewalk. "You don't come in to work late missing stand-up because you were just 'talking'. Do you—"

Thad groaned.

"Well, do you?"

"She—might have spent the night, sort of, last night."

Jean-Luc smirked, letting go of Thad's arm. "You are such a hypocrite."

"She wanted to see my place. I wasn't going to say no. And we *were* just talking, until it got late."

"So you suggested she sleep on the couch, huh?" he mocked with a grin.

"No."

"And—"

"And what?"

"Then what happened?"

"Jean-Luc, I'm not going into what happened."

"Oh yes you are. I want to know. Misty tells London what we do."

"Oh, Jesus, this is getting weird," Thad rolled his eyes.

"London's going to tell Misty everything you two did. You may as well let me in on what happened." Jean-Luc opened the door of the restaurant.

# 9

**W**here have you been?" Misty tapped off her phone as London came in the door. "Vauxhall is having kittens this morning."  
"As they should be. I've been on the phone all morning trying to convince the FBI to stand down. They'll ruin everything—months of work."

"They just want the credit."

"Well they need to be more patient. We're not quite there yet. I still don't have the files."

"Did you search his apartment?"

"Every centimeter after he left for work. Nothing. Even his laptop was clean."

"What about his phone? Jean-Luc's was clean."

"Haven't gotten there yet."

"They didn't transmit the files. Obviously they gave him a device."

"I looked for flash drives. Nothing."

"It's out there, Inspector; we just need to find it."

London nodded tapping up an app to transfer data from her phone to Misty's laptop. Both were quiet as Misty scanned the data files for anything interesting.

"So how was he?" Misty asked with a slight smile, not looking at her.

"I was wondering when your curiosity was going to get the better of you."

"Protocol, Inspector." Misty's grin widened.

"Hardly." London scowled at her; but the detective could also see a smile on the tips of London's lips.

"He's quite large." Misty mused.

"Is that what this is about? Your infatuation with large knobs?"

"It's more jealousy, actually." Misty glanced at the data filling her screen.

"Jean-Luc not endowed enough for you?"

"Plenty. But I couldn't help but notice your fingers wandering Thad's body last weekend after the two of them had finished with each other."

"Someone had to help clean his skin after your guy sprayed all over him."

"Sure they did." Misty offered the Inspector an askance eye.

"Well, if you must know, Thad was rather gutted by your running off with Jean-Luc. Monopolizing his time. Perhaps you should spend a little less time at his flat and a little more time here?"

"I think maybe we're both growing a little jealous."

London nodded. "Your attraction to Jean-Luc is more than just professional, Detective."

She nodded. "And yours?" Misty raised her brow to her superior.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm sorry if I sounded jealous earlier, Thad," Jean-Luc apologized as both ate in the park on a secluded bench. "It sounds like you and London had a very romantic night."

"I—have to admit, Jean-Luc; London's beautiful. I've never been fucked so slowly in my life. I just needed to—well," Thad could feel twinges between his thighs just thinking about her now.

"Did she make you wear protection?"

"I don't think that was on either of our minds last night."

"I'll take that as a no."

"What about you and Misty? You sure didn't use any when the two of you went at it last weekend at skybox."

"Yea, well, I was *trying* to knock her up."

Thad chuckled. "I don't get you two."

"We don't either. Trust me, we've talked about it. It's just this strange natural attraction."

"Well, truth be told, the two of you look good together. Seriously. I, probably shouldn't admit this, but I—might have enjoyed watching you going down on her."

Jean-Luc smirked. "You and London make a great looking pair."

"You're just saying that."

"No, I'm serious."

"So what about the two of us?" Thad asked.

"We make a great pair too, Thad." Jean-Luc assured.

"Jean-Luc—I know this is going to sound odd, it's not my typical line of thinking, but maybe the four of us need to, you know—maybe date. Together. All of us."

"Misty and I already talked about that."

“Really? And?”

“We weren’t really sure if you or London would be on board with it. Two people falling in love is hard enough; let alone four. We all have to like each other. As best friends.”

“I like you, Jean-Luc. A lot. And I like London too.”

“And Misty?”

“Misty’s hot. Not as hot as London, but—”

“Would you ever want to make love to Misty?”

“I don’t know? Maybe. I don’t know her yet. Not like you do. Right now, she’s sort of the woman who stole my boyfriend.” Thad chuckled as well as Jean-Luc.

“Misty’s really smart, Thad. And she codes.”

“What? Get out.”

“Yea. She took computer science in college, and she knows her way around the inside of a server.”

“Wow. That’s—”

“Sexy?”

“Yea. Drop-dead cute and geeky. Nice.”

“What does London do? Besides you—”

“Ha. You know, I don’t know. I haven’t asked her. It never came up. Mostly we were talking about you two.”

“Do you want to get together this weekend? Have dinner; just the four of us?”

“*Just*, the four of us?” Thad grinned.

“Well—”

“Sure. Let’s see what the girls think.”

\* \* \* \* \*

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