

## Chapter 10

Life went on. Max had returned to his regular cafe job on Monday morning, after a day wandering and wondering. How could his life make sense after Andrew's departure? Andrew had called to announce that he had arrived to his regular life, and Max couldn't ask if Andrew had envisioned that such regular life could include him some day. He couldn't ask, because after all he had been the sex worker who had become the lover, and who knew if it meant they could envision being boyfriends next. He knew there was a roommate, who also was a helper, at Andrew's home, but he didn't know what kind of relationship they had, if any, beyond that. It would have been easier if the helper had been female, it would have cleared the ambiguity. Or perhaps worsened it, perhaps she would have been his wife.

How to proceed, then, Max asked himself endlessly. He missed Andrew very much, he missed his presence, the proximity of his body. He missed the duplicity of Andrew's life, on the one hand extremely organized and sensible, and on the other hand extremely sensitive and generous. He also missed being a guide, ironically, because that's what Max's official employment with Jeremy's "tour guides" had been. Except that now he wasn't looking forward to returning to that job, even if it paid so much more than his daily cafe job. He needed it to pay rent, while the cafe job paid for food, transportation, and clothing from second-hand shops. In fact, after a quick calculation, he figured he needed a little extra money to pay rent at the end of the month.

He reluctantly picked up his phone during his lunch break to call Jeremy.

"I knew you'd be back," said Jeremy.

"It's really because I need the money," said Max. "My mind isn't quite in it any more."

"I don't want you to burn out," said Jeremy. "How did you leave it with Andrew, is he going to be jealous?"

"I don't know. I'm in limbo, I think."

"You guys didn't talk about it?"

Max preferred to remain silent. Did Jeremy really need to judge his relationship with Andrew?

"The last thing I want is a jealous boyfriend coming to shut us down, you know. That's happened before."

"You know that's not an issue."

"Well, anyway, I don't have anything for you this week. I'll call you as soon as something comes up. When do you need the money?"

"End of the month, which is Monday. Paul usually gives me 5 days, and then he adds 10%"

"I'll get you something. Maybe I'll give you a loan."

“I don't want a loan.”

“Whatever. I'll call you back.”

Max hung up, realizing he no longer wanted to work for Jeremy. He no longer wanted to be with any other man than Andrew, fully aware that this was not how anybody else saw it. He had been warned before, that in order to be a sex worker, you shouldn't become romantically involved with your client or anyone else. He had a job that he no longer wanted, but he had no alternative. He needed the money.

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The client was important enough to hold the deposition at an office Gerald's firm kept in Napa Valley, inside a single-story building behind a row of poplar trees on the highway. The limo had picked up Gerald at home and continued its smooth drive with its VIP passengers across the Golden Gate Bridge.

“Remember,” advised Gerald, “what you can say you know, and what you really don't know?”

“Sure,” said the self-assured man, “I don't know anything.”

“Except, of course, what you did.”

“Of course. Tell me again why we're doing this?”

“They won't settle. They think they can get 12 millions, we don't want to go over 2.”

“Bastards.”

The important man answered a call that lasted the entire trip, and Gerald browsed his e-mail. Sam wished him luck to conclude this case in which he had been involved long enough with frustrating results. They would relax in the Jacuzzi tonight.

They arrived in the parking lot where he could count three cars: a BMW, a Mercedes, and a Hyundai for the court recorder.

“They're already in,” said Gerald.

“Into the lion's cage,” said the man, as they walked out of the limo.

The limo driver moved the car to wait in the shade. After two hours and a half he saw two men in dark suits going to their respective cars and driving away. Then a woman drove away in the Hyundai. The driver's phone rang, he answered and started the engine to move the limo to the door. He walked out to open the rear door, letting Gerald and his client inside. They drove away.

“I need a drink!” said the man. He reached for the mini bar to see what he could get, sat back seemingly dissatisfied.

“Hey, how about going to a winery?” he said. He picked up the car phone before Gerald could

say anything. "Can you get us to a winery?" he asked the driver on the phone. "Is Clos du Bois a good one?" he asked Gerald, who nodded. "Yeah, that will be good," he said to the driver.

"We might as well get something good out of this day," he said. "Speaking of which, could you arrange something for me in town?"

"I can certainly try," said Gerald. "Dinner? Beach Blanket Babylon?"

"A boy."

"18 and over only," Gerald said.

"Yeah, sure," the man said. "Young, white, skinny type. It has to be discrete. I don't want my name ever mentioned. Send someone to pick him up. Rent a room with a private entrance, that sort of things."

"I can work my contacts," said Gerald.

"Good. Add it to our bill."

"I know a service that's entirely discrete and will bill us as if you took a tour of the city."

"Perfect. Now to the winery. We'll take a bottle for the road."

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"It's your lucky day," Jeremy said. "I just got a call, an extreme closet case that will pick you up at your place."

"My place?" said Max, who didn't like clients to know where he lived.

"Of course not," said Jeremy, "I gave them the address across the street from you, 625. 9 o'clock. I'll call you if there's any change."

"Jeremy?" said Max. "Where do they take me? Your hotel?"

"No, this is arranged through a big law firm, they won't tell me who the man is, where he's taking you, but it's like a big shot. Pays double. Should be nice."

"OK," said Max. "I'll trust you."

Max hung up and wondered why, in this day and age, there were people concerned about tainting their reputation by saying they were gay. Or perhaps this VIP had a wife and children, and didn't want to be exposed. Maybe the money would all go to the wife in a divorce settlement. Max didn't care for these rich guys who thought they could buy the world to be at their feet. The sex wasn't good anyway, they always wanted something special, something to get them out of their closeted lives, like wearing panties and watching themselves in the mirror. He didn't like, in this case, to be picked up and taken to an undisclosed location. It gave him less control. At Jeremy's hotel, the clients were generally tame and respectful of everything including the furniture. The hotel people even knew him,

never asked questions, and he knew they would protect him if an idiot client pushed him out of the room, naked. They'd find a blanket, and request his clothes and things out of the room promptly.

But he needed the money. He looked at the time. He had time to go home and take a nap.

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At 9 o'clock, Max, sitting on the stairs of 625, saw a taxi driving down the street and stopping. It was for him. The driver lowered his window and said "625? Hop in."

They drove west, towards Golden Gate Park, and continued until they were near the beach. The driver turned into a long driveway and stopped at a gate.

"Here," the driver said, "they said to give you this." He handed Max an envelope, and drove away.

The envelope contained a key and written instructions.

"The key opens the gate. Follow the path to the door, and enter. Make yourself comfortable, undress and put a robe on. Have a glass of wine. Will be there soon."

It was like being in a mystery movie. The curtains were drawn on the very high windows that betrayed a luxury apartment. He entered and found an open layout of a living-room and kitchen, with a loft above. The lights were on, there was a gas fire in the fireplace. Max saw a robe on the white leather couch, a bottle of wine and two glasses on the coffee table. His instructions were to undress and slip into the robe, have a glass of wine, and wait. He piled his clothes on his backpack and shoes, in a corner near the door. Surprisingly, the bottle of wine was only half full, with no trace of an already used glass. He poured some and took a sip. He looked around the room for clues of what to do next.

After a long minute, a door opened in the kitchen. Max turned to see a large man wearing a Zorro mask and a business suit, maybe Armani.

"Hello," the man said. "Don't be afraid of the mask, I just want to remain anonymous."

"Hi," said Max. "I don't really care, you know. I'm not the kind to tweet that I'm in bed with a movie star."

"Good," said the man. "Let's go upstairs then."

Max preceded the mystery man up the stairs to the loft. There was a King-size bed covered with a white fur bedspread.

"I hope you won't mind," said the man, pulling a black scarf, "it would be better if I blindfolded you."

Before Max could answer, his eyes were shut behind the scarf.

"Well," he said, "usually the client wants to be blindfolded."

“It's so that I can take my own mask off,” said the man. He pulled the robe off Max's shoulders, and ran his hands down his neck and arms. At the wrists, suddenly, Max felt the grip of handcuffs, and was pulled violently back.

“Hey!” he shouted, “No! You can't do that! Stop!”

Soon the man had the advantage on him. A rubber gag was forced into his mouth and attached around his head with a strap. Max kicked his body around, but one leg after the other were finally brought into bondage. There was nothing to do. He smelled a strange smell, like a hospital smell, tried to avoid breathing it in, but after only an instant he fell unconscious.

He was not unconscious, in the sense that memory played tricks on his notion of time and sequence. Things happened. At one point he was entering a giant lava lamp, purple and pink, the gel rubbing on what felt like inflated hands, and entering his mouth through inflated lips. Perhaps that's what drowning felt like. Flashes of light came from all sides, green, yellow, and red, in a rapid sequence. He heard deep, muffled sounds, like a recording replayed at a very slow speed.

At another time, he had become a drumstick and was beating on the skin of a drum. It felt like diving hundreds of feet and crashing onto a hardwood floor, with a loud bang resonating through his brain.

Then a giant dog came to lick him as if he were a bone, scratching him with pointed teeth, and finally breaking through and cracking him in pieces.

Then he was a sausage dipped in batter and plunged into hot oil.

Then there was the rapid trip through an endless tunnel, as if a railroad had been distorted into a doughnut shape, and the orange and black tracks kept coming at him. He heard himself calling for help.

He was wet with cold sweat on the sidewalk when a big man took him in his arms and carried him home to his bed.