

# **Release**

**The Sequel to “Advocacy”**

**A Post-Season 4.1 Oz AU  
Featuring Tobias Beecher and Christopher Keller**

**Author: Star  
Rating: NC-17**

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**This material is not suitable for all audiences as it contains explicit mature and/or slash content, which is defined as a pairing or relationship between characters of the same gender.**

**Millions of thanks to the Twisted Sisters and Mistery who beta-read, brainstormed and otherwise encouraged me to finish this. Y'all are the greatest fan-sibs out there and this is all your fault!!**

## Release

Fandom: OZ / A post Season 4.1 AU  
Pairing: Tobias Beecher/Christopher Keller

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### Chapter 1: December 22, 2004

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Scene: A conference room in Oswald Correction facility. A meeting is in progress, attended by Governor Alvah Case, Warden Tim McManus, EmCity Unit Director Sean Murphy, Sister Peter Marie Reimondo, Father Ray Mukada and the governor's two correctional system appointees, Tobias Beecher and Leo Glynn.

Case: Now for last item on the agenda. As you know, each year around this time I try to find one long-term prisoner from each of the major facilities to grant clemency to, alternating my selections among the various religions...

Glynn: <smirking>  
You certainly took a lot of heat for releasing someone for Yule that first year.

Case: <heatedly>  
Well, despite the president's pre-election blustering, Paganism was, and is, a federally recognized religion, although certainly not one Governor Devlin was willing to acknowledge.

Glynn: <raising his hands in surrender>  
Hey -- no argument from me. I've got some pretty gung ho Kwanzaa celebrants in my family.

Sr Pete: It's not quite the same thing. Yule is a religious holiday while Kwanzaa is more of a... cultural celebration.

McManus: <shrugging>  
Well, changing the release date to a 'cultural' celebration that next year didn't help much. We still had plenty of protests about Arif's release.

Mukada: <shaking his head sadly>  
He was so devastated by Said's murder -- I think the only thing keeping him sane was his dream of going to Mecca and training to be an imam.

Case: I wanted to represent the Muslim faith, but with Ramadan moving closer to Labor Day than Christmas... New Year's Eve seemed like a universally acceptable solution.

Glynn: And it makes a nice 'starting over' metaphor for the press releases.

Murphy: There's always gonna be some troublemakers. Look what happened with Rebadow last year. As if letting him out to spend his last few months with his family was gonna hurt anything.

Sr Pete: I've never been able to figure out if that was due more to anti-semitism or agism. Some of the pro clemency contingent felt a younger, healthier man would be more deserving....

Case: At any rate, as you've all noticed, clemency is controversial regardless of who's selected, so don't worry about that... just be honest in your assessment. You find me qualified inmates from the Christian faiths and I'll sell them to the media.

<aside to Toby>  
You've been pretty quiet today. You alright?

Beecher: Hmm? Oh, yeah. I.. I'm just distracted about the holidays, I guess.

Case: <doubtfully> Okay.

<to the group>

So, I expect to see your recommendations on my desk by early next week so I can make my decisions.

Leo, Toby -- I'll need names for each facility from both of you. <pauses> If there's nothing else?

<looks around> Meeting adjourned. Go finish your shopping -- and have a merry Christmas.

Toby shoots out of the room, eager to get to the counseling office before Sister Pete, who has taken to catching a cup of coffee in the staff room with Tim and Sean before making her own way back after their biweekly meetings with the governor.

Case: Alright people... you've known him longer than I have. What's going on?

Sr Pete: <quietly>

This time of year is particular hard on him....

Murphy: <with a muted glare in Tim's direction>

It sucks to be away from your partner for the holidays, but it's worse when there's a personal anniversary involved.

Everyone falls into an uncomfortable silence.

Case: <clears his throat>

Leo, why don't you walk me out and we'll let everyone else get back to work, hmm?

Glynn: <gratefully>

Sure thing, Governor. Happy holidays everyone.

Various season's greetings are exchanged as the two men exit, then the uncomfortable silence resumes.

Mukada: <overly cheerfully>

Pete, why don't you come to my office and we can start comparing our lists.

Sr Pete: Great idea, Ray. Gentleman... we'll, uhm, see you later.

McManus and Murphy nod, carefully avoiding each other's eyes as their on-staff clergy make their escape.

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Meanwhile... in the parking lot:

"Thanks for walking me out, Leo. I didn't want to put anyone on the spot and things were starting to sound pretty 'off the record' in there."

Leo chuckled. "You know how it is... with all the actual \*problems\* demanding your attention, there are certain situations you just let slide... especially if no one's getting hurt."

Case nodded, then prompted, "So... new year's eve?"

Looking uncomfortable, Leo shrugged. "You know Keller and Beecher's history, right?"

"Some. Mostly from what I've read in Toby's file. Chris helped the Aryans put him in the hospital, then kept Schillinger from killing him about a year later..."

"Yeah. Well, it was new year's eve when Beecher -- Toby -- got out of the hospital that second time, and he immediately asked Tim to move Keller back into his pod. Right before a 14-day lockdown."

"Ah, I can see why that didn't end up in his file in that case." He paused, looking thoughtful. "And Tim and Sean?" Leo looked even more uncomfortable and focused his gaze on his shoes. "I'm sorry. That's really none of my business..."

"No. No, actually it is, in a way. Tim works for you now instead of me and he was very upfront with me about it. He didn't want any trouble later if I heard rumors or anything, especially with Sean reporting to him and that trouble he had with Howell and the sexual harassment suit. Apparently it's been going on for a while -- they've been friends for a long time -- but just got serious last new year's eve."

"Hmm. Okay, then. Like I told Toby, it's not something I personally have any problems with, but I do need to be aware, just in case the media decides to get involved. So, do you need a ride anywhere?"

"No, thanks. I've got my car here. But if you have a minute..." He waited until Case nodded, then continued. "I know you want the complete list in writing next week, but I can give you my clemency recommendation for Oz right now...."

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Back in the conference room:

"Sean, I'm sorry, but..."

"But what, Tim? You're the warden, you finalize the schedules, you decided we're not spending new year's eve together." Sean stopped himself abruptly, realizing he was in danger of seriously losing his temper and this was neither the time nor the place.

Tim looked down, absentmindedly polishing the claddagh ring on his right hand with his left thumb. In the almost twelve months he'd been wearing it, he knew he'd made his share of mistakes -- and probably had borrowed several other guys' shares as well -- but Sean rarely actually lost his temper with him.

"I just thought that since I have to be here and you don't, you could grab some drinks with the guys or something..." he mumbled.

"On our first anniversary?" Sean asked incredulously.

Tim blushed, remember the previous new year's eve: how after a couple of years of what they both pretended was a casual 'fuck-buddy' relationship, Sean had showed up just before midnight with the rings, stone-cold sober and shaking like a leaf; how they'd held each other and talked all night, laughing over what their shared therapist must have gone through, listening to them pine over one another; how they'd slipped the rings on each other's fingers and then made love as if for the first time while the sun came up.

"So... you'd really rather be stuck in this dump with me?" he finally asked, his voice soft and hesitant.

Sean walked towards him, his glare softening into his usual mix of warmth and humor. "Hell, yes," he answered, reaching out and brushing his fingers through Tim's rapidly thinning hair. Forced by circumstances -- not the least of which being that Tim was his boss -- to be mostly closeted on the job, Sean was rarely affectionate at work, and Tim leaned into the unexpected caress eagerly. Grasping his hair, Sean shook his head gently. "Idiot. Of course I would. In fact, as much as he hates it here, I'll bet you \$20 that if you offered, Beecher would rather be in Oz with Keller that night than out there without him. And we're not even gonna be on the wrong side of the bars."

"Speaking of Keller..."

"Yeah?"

"What do you think?"

"About what?" Tim stared at Sean, finally noticing the grin he was trying to hide. "Already got it written, Timmy boy-o. Your's too. It's just waiting for your signature."

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And in Father Ray's office:

"Thanks, Ray. I really didn't want to get caught in the middle of that. Toby and Chris are quite enough for me to handle right now."

"I gather you didn't expect to end up a relationship counselor for gay couples when you became a nun, hmm?" Father Mukada asked with a smile.

Pete laughed. "Heavens, no. Thank God His Holiness John Paul III gives us more leeway to deal with that than his predecessor."

"Amen to that," Ray replied, crossing himself. "Speaking of Rome -- I was thinking of calling Cardinal Labgut."

"Really? Why?"

"I thought we could persuade him to co-sign a clemency recommendation with us...."

Sister Pete sighed mournfully as she reached for the phone. "I suppose this means I'll have to break in a new assistant."

"Look on the bright side." Pete paused before dialing and looked up. "Maybe the next one will be able to make a decent pot of coffee."

**Chapter 2: December 29, 2004**

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"I'm sorry to keep you here so late. I know how important spending evenings at home with your family is, especially this time of year."

Toby stared out the large picture window that took up most of one wall of the governor's office, watching snow flurries chase each other through the trees in the courtyard below. His lips curved in a humorless smile as he replied, "It's no problem. The kids are on vacation in Florida with Gen's parents until after the new year." Turning to face the desk, he asked, "So, is everything ready for signature or were there any other cases we needed to discuss?"

"No, I think that other than these," Case said, laying his hand on a couple of thick files set off to one side, "everything else was pretty cut and dried. Although I did notice that you neglected to give me a recommendation for Oz...."

Toby shrugged, dropping his gaze to the ornate Persian rug before opening his mouth to respond. 'Conflict of interest' would be putting it far too mildly, in his opinion.

"Not that it would've made much of a difference," the governor continued, the interruption startling Toby out of his growing melancholy. "The Cardinal's endorsement more than made up for your abstention." Smiling, he tossed a thin folder across the desk.

Toby picked up the folder and was suddenly grateful for the chair behind him as his knees grew too weak to support his weight. Speechless, he flipped through the supporting documentation: letters from the staff at Oswald, a brief note from Leo, and -- Toby blinked dazedly -- a fax from the Vatican. Finally he reached the last page, his eyes blurring until he could barely make out Chris's name on the sentence commutance form the governor had just signed.

"Tim said he'd be in his office around noon if you wanted to drop that by...."

"Governor... I don't... I'm..." Toby gave up and just stared as Case got up and walked around the desk.

Resting a large hand on Toby's shoulder, he smiled down at the stunned man and decided to save his other surprise - his conversations with head of the bar association regarding getting Toby's license to practice law reinstated -- for later, when he'd have someone to celebrate with. "Congratulations, Toby. You've both worked hard for it. Now get out of here and make some plans for new years eve."

Flashing a brilliant smile, Toby stood, shook Case's hand warmly, then headed for the door, wondering how the hell he was going to get any sleep during the next two nights.

**Chapter 3: December 30, 2004**

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At one minute after noon, the intercom sounded.

"Warden... Tobias Beecher is here to see you."

Tim couldn't resist smiling. "Well... what took him so long," he mumbled, then louder, "Gimme a minute, then send him in." Lifting the receiver, he dialed his old extension. "Sean? Yeah, he's here. Did Keller go to lunch already or... Oh. Of course she did. Could you swing by Sister Pete's then. Okay. See you in a few."

As he hung up the phone, there was a tentative knock at the door. Schooling his face into a neutral expression, he called out, "Come in," then sank back into the aged leather chair he'd inherited from Leo.

With the folder from the governor's office held almost like a shield in front of him, Toby entered the room, projecting calm, but obviously wired on too much coffee, too little sleep and a bad case of nerves. Tim raised an eyebrow and shook his head -- five and a half years in Oz and the man never had mastered a poker face. Then again, Beecher's uncanny strength always had seemed to stem from the depth of his emotions rather than any lack, the matter at hand being a good case in point.

"Beecher," he said gently.

Recalling himself, Toby focused his attention on the man across the room and resumed walking. "Sorry. Just... caught up in memories, I guess." He then tossed the folder onto the desk, carefully following its path with his eyes. "I.. uhm... wanted to thank you for recommending Chris...."

"Hey, no problem. You should really be thanking Sean though. It was his idea; I was planning on keeping him around as an example to the rest of the inmates, but Sean convinced me that his good behavior couldn't last indefinitely," Tim replied dryly.

Startled, Toby looked up and caught the hint of a smile on his former nemesis's lips and found himself unexpectedly grinning in return.

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Meanwhile:

Sean Murphy knocked brusquely on the doorjam of Sister Pete's office, causing both occupants to jump in surprise.

"Sorry, Sister," he said with a quick nod in that direction, then turned to Chris. "Keller, the warden wants to see you."

"Shit. Right now?" Chris asked, grimacing first at Murphy, then at the computer screen.

"Yeah, right now. What d'ya think?"

"What for? Sister Pete...."

"I'm sure Sister Pete can do without your services for a few minutes. Now come on, Keller. I don't have all day."

"Go on, Chris. It's after noon anyway. I'll see you tomorrow," Sister Pete prompted, sharing a conspiratorial wink with the ex-CO behind Chris's back.

"Yeah. Alright. Later, Sister."

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A few minutes later, Chris's stomach tightened at the sound of laughter coming from the warden's office. In his experience, things that amused hacks and officials made life hell for cons. Bracing himself, he followed his new unit director into the room, only to stop in confusion at the sight of Toby -- his Toby, complete with a devilish gleam in his eyes and an angelic smile -- turning to face him.

"Toby?" he said, taking a step forward.

"Chris," Toby breathed, quickly closing the distance between them and -- heedless of their small audience -- pulling the startled man into a hug. "You're free, baby," he whispered into Chris's ear, and suddenly found himself blinking back tears of joy.

"What?" Chris asked, pushing Toby back to arm's length and searching brimming blue eyes.

"The governor commuted your sentence," McManus clarified, holding up the signed form. "Starting tomorrow, you're a free man again. In the meantime, we're moving you into protective custody to avoid any... unfortunate incidents."

Toby smiled his thanks and moved closer to Chris as memories of the last minute attempt on Arif's life flashed through his mind.

"Tomorrow when?" Chris finally managed after a couple of failed attempts at speech.

"The governor will be here for a press conference at 2pm," Murphy answered. "After that, you're free to go."

"Fuck," Chris whispered, resting his forehead against Toby's.

Meeting Tim's eyes over their shoulders, Sean's lips quirked in a grin. He cleared his throat, causing the two men to hastily separate, then added, "Actually... I think all the PC cells are occupied. We may have to put you in one of the conjugal rooms..."

"Sean..." Tim said warningly, sighing in defeat as he received a guileless look in reply. "That being the case, I suppose it \*would\* be a waste to have you drive all the way home for just one night," he directed at Toby, who looked more than willing to agree once the offer penetrated his already blissful haze.

"No," Chris answered before Toby could open his mouth to reply, then tried hard not to smile as Toby's face fell into it's all-too-familiar, I'm-nobody's-bitch expression, golden brows dipping low over stormy blue eyes, soft lips pulled into a taut pout.

Lowering his voice, Chris leaned close again and whispered, "No more prison beds, baby. Just one more night and then we can do this right, okay?" He nuzzled Toby's cheek briefly, then pulled back far enough to meet his eyes. Seeing reluctant acquiescence, he winked and said, "But think of me tonight. I'll sure as hell be thinking of you."

Grinning at Toby's blush, Chris turned to Murphy. "So, is it time for me to pack yet?"

"Sure thing, Keller. Let's go." As they exited the room, Sean turned and pointed at Tim. "And you... you owe me twenty bucks."

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Chris sauntered across the quad, a triumphant yet slightly dazed look on his face, only belatedly noticing Augustus Hill apparently doing some business with Ryan in their pod. Ordinarily he would have found something else to do -- one of the tricks to staying on good terms with O'Reilly was giving the man space to run his scams -- but he was in no mood for any delays. He didn't want to give anybody a chance to change their minds.

"You got the luck of the fucking Irish, Hill," Ryan was saying as Chris opened the door.

"Maybe that's where the term 'black Irish' comes from," Hill joked, flashing a sarcastic smile.

"Sorry to interrupt, gentlemen, but I've got some packing to do," Chris announced, stepping carefully around Hill's wheelchair.

"So we hear. And what a bea-u-ti-ful day for it," Hill responded gleefully.

Bending over his gear and stuffing clothes into a laundry bag, Chris glanced up, looking curiously from Ryan to Augustus. "What the fuck are you so happy about?"

"My man O'Reilly has just paid me one of the largest jackpots in the history of Oz, thanks to you and Beecher. Speaking of -- give him my regards, will ya? He's not so bad -- for a nut case." He waited until Keller chuckled in response, then rolled forward and held out his hand. "Seriously man, good luck -- to both of you." The two men shook hands, then Hill reversed course, spun around and wheeled out the door, smiling broadly.

Chris watched him go, then turned to his soon-to-be-ex-podmate, giving him a measuring look.

Holding up his hands, Ryan replied with an innocent grin. "Hey, just a friendly little wager about when you'd be getting out of here."

Chris sniffed ruefully, then returned to his packing. "So, when did all that start?" he asked idly.

"The day Beecher got out."

Chris stopped packing for a moment, considering, then continued. "And what day did you pick?"

"I didn't."

Yanking hard on the drawstrings of his bag, caught halfway between disappointment and anger, he asked "Why? You think I wouldn't make it out or somethin'?"

"No, man. I just... I didn't want to jinx it, ya know?" Ryan mumbled, shrugging awkwardly.

Chris stepped forward, closing the distance between them before Ryan could react. Pulling the suddenly tense man into a hug, he whispered, "Take care of yourself, ya mick bastard. I don't wanna have to come back here to kick anyone's ass."

"Hey, no sweat, K-boy. With Murph running the show, it's a good time to be Irish," Ryan replied. Giving Chris a wink, he stepped out of the pod and headed for the TV monitors.

Chris shot a grin at Ryan's retreating form before turning back to the bunks and tossing his bag over his shoulder. He took a long, slow look around the pod that had been his home for the better part of six and a half years -- every inch saturated with memories of the pain and pleasure roller coaster ride that he and Toby had taken each other on -- then walked away without a backward glance.

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**Chapter 4: December 31, 2004 / Oz**

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Chris stared balefully at the game of solitaire spread across his bunk, then gave up and starting tossing the remaining cards into the sink across the room. Protective custody was every bit as boring as he remembered, and knowing that this was his last day in Oz, the last few hours before he could be with Toby for more than a closely monitored visit, was only making things worse. No cellmate, no work-out, no computer, no music -- there were precious few distractions available to him and he sure as hell didn't want to jack-off \*again\*. He had his very own "Operation Toby" planned and at his age even an over-sexed, seriously-deprived man with a wildcat for a lover needed a little bit of a break. He grimaced as he felt himself harden again at the thought. Well, his dick was certainly ready to get with the program -- now if only the clock would move a little faster.

"Keller," Sean Murphy called out, unlocking the door. "Time to grab a shower."

// Hot damn -- something to break up the fucking day. //

As he reached for his bag to pick out some clean clothes, Sean dropped a garment bag in front of him.

"What's this?"

"From Beecher. For the press conference."

Chris shrugged. It wouldn't hurt to look nice, although he didn't plan on staying dressed for very long. He wondered if Toby knew where the nearest motel was. Grabbing clean boxers and socks, he rewound their short conversation and asked, "Toby's here already?"

"Nah. He sent this on ahead. Him, Glynn and the governor should be here in about thirty minutes."

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After a shower and shave in the relative privacy of the conjugal "suite," Chris unzipped the bag, expecting the usual -- a pair of jeans or khakis, maybe a dress shirt to wear over a new wifebeater -- and was instead confronted with jet black decadence. He reached in, stroking the butter-soft leather and cool silk with something akin to reverence. Unbuttoning the shirt, he found a note taped to the hanger.

"Hi baby --

I saw this outfit and couldn't stop imagining you in it. I'm sorry I can't be there to help you put it on for the first time, but I'll damn sure be there to take it off.

- T

P.S. I hope the pants fit okay. I had to guess a little at the size."

Pulling the well-oiled leather up his long legs, Chris was worried for a moment, but as the pants settled like a second skin over the curves of his ass and over his lean hips, he sighed in relief. They fit, barely, but he sure as hell wouldn't be wearing any boxers.

// Which is probably exactly what Toby had in mind. Good thing silk doesn't take up a hell of a lot of room // he mused, finding that he had to unbutton the pants again to tuck the shirt in without causing himself an injury. As he was lacing up the broken-in but well-polished boots he'd found at the bottom of the bag, there was a knock at the door. Pausing for a moment to give himself a once over in the mirror, he consciously stilled the minute trembling of his hands and whispered, "Showtime."

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Avoiding the milling crowd of reporters, Toby paced restlessly and checked his watch again. Five minutes to two -- about thirty seconds later than the last time he'd checked. Spotting Sister Pete by the main gate, he walked over to join her. Even if she couldn't do anything about his nerves, she was at least relatively used to them. Case had shot him more than one exasperated look, while Glynn seemed just about ready to put him in a chokehold.

"Hi Pete."

"Tobias. I guess I don't need to ask how you're doing today."

"Thrilled. In shock. Completely panicked and about," he glanced at his watch again, "four minutes from a nervous breakdown."

"I imagine Chris is feeling about the same way."

"Chris? Nervous?" Toby sniffed. "Not likely. Knowing him, he'll come strutting in here as if he owns the place and everyone in it." Paradoxically, that thought calmed him and he smiled. After all, wasn't that exactly what he'd had in mind when he picked out that outfit? Well, that and peeling it off him later. Toby jumped as Sister Pete nudged his arm.

"Looks like they're about ready for you," she said, gesturing to the podium where his new boss and fellow advisor had been joined by Tim McManus and were waving him over. Fighting the urge to blush, he mumbled a quick thanks and hurried over.

Tim shook Toby's hand, quickly filling him in. "Sean's gone to get Keller. Hopefully this group won't have too many questions and we'll be able to get you two out of here without a big hassle."

"Thanks. I'm sure we'd both appreciate..." Toby trailed off as the two men entered the room. He'd thought he'd done a good job of imagining Chris in those pants -- God knew he'd spent enough time on it -- but quickly realized he'd fallen far short of the mark. As he'd expected, Chris didn't look the least bit put out by the day's events, strolling along behind Murphy with a boneless grace that was every bit as feline as the predatory look in his eyes as he searched the room for Toby.

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Making his own more casual survey of the room, Sean Murphy saw heads turn and eyes widen as the members of the press elbowed one another, getting their first look at Oswald's latest release. Watching Keller make his way toward Beecher, Sean grinned, knowing that to the casual observer -- hell, to anyone who hadn't known Beecher inside Oz -- the governor's new advisor probably looked a lot like innocent prey being stalked by a very large and very dangerous animal.

Moving his gaze to Tim, his grin faded. His lover looked nearly as dazed by Keller's appearance as Beecher, and after all those years of watching Tim sniff around any skirt that got near him, Sean had no patience left for wandering eyes. Hurriedly following in Keller's wake, he was soon pulling Tim off to the side and heatedly whispered "Enjoying the view?" in his ear.

"Hmm? Oh, just wondering where Beecher got those," Tim responded, sounding distracted.

"What? Why?" Sean asked, anger rapidly transforming into confusion.

Turning his head to meet Sean's eyes, Tim smiled. "I thought I might get you a pair."

Blushing, Sean could only offer his own smile in reply.

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Toby dimly heard the governor's assistant call the press conference to order as Chris reached his side and greeted him with a wink. He let out his breath in a long sigh, realizing that he'd been holding it since the other man had appeared across the room.

"You okay, baby?"

Toby nearly groaned aloud as the low whisper ghosted across his skin. "Yeah. I am now," he replied, looking over and meeting deep blue eyes that danced with amusement and barely-banked desire. "But I'll be a hell of a lot better once this is all over," he said as the governor stepped up to the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I appreciate you taking time to join us today. I'll keep this brief since I realize we all have New Year's festivities we're looking forward to," Case began, with a quick glance over at Toby, who tried valiantly not to flush in response.

"As I stated during the election, I believe that correctional facilities should be more than just storage facilities for those who have been found guilty of crimes against society; that to truly succeed, they must offer the opportunity for a fresh start. Christopher Keller is one of Oswald's success stories. Despite a long sentence, he took advantage of the Emerald City programs initiated by then unit director Tim McManus; he earned his GED and for the past three years has served as the administrative assistant to our staff psychologist, Sister Peter Marie Reimondo. Mr. Keller was recommended for clemency both by my staff and by Cardinal Labgut and I'm pleased to be in a position to reward his hard work." Lifting his head, Case let his gaze encompass both Chris and Toby. "I'm confident that our faith is well-founded and that any future visits Mr. Keller makes to Oswald will be strictly voluntary. Now if there are any questions..."

Over the low murmur of the small crowd, Toby heard one of the pretty, young newscasters closest to the podium stage-whisper to her cameraman, "\*He\* was a secretary?"

"Mmmhmm.. apparently to a nun," the older man murmured in reply.

"What a waste," she sighed, then stepped forward, throwing a sexy smile in Chris's direction. "Mr. Keller, now that you're a free man, what are your plans?"

Chris stepped up to the microphone, flicking his tongue over his upper lip while raking the young woman with an intense slit-eyed stare. In his best seductive growl he asked, "Is that an invitation?" Enjoying her obvious unease and the laughter of her compatriots, he smiled. "Actually, I plan to go to work for Oswald Advocacy." He glanced over his shoulder at Toby, the smile disappearing as he was faced with an icy blue stare. // Fuck, Toby. Not now. //

Sensing the tension between the two men, the governor handled the next few questions himself and quickly wrapped up the press conference. Once the cameras shut down, Chris wasted no time pulling Toby over to the side for some privacy.

"What the fuck's wrong with you?" he whispered, trying to stay calm.

"Nothing. I guess I should've expected this, but somehow I thought you'd at least wait until you walked out the fucking prison gate," Toby replied in that unique combination of fire and ice that never failed to push Keller's buttons.

"Expected what, Toby?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"You. Her. Now that you're out where you can get to women..."

Chris sighed, resisting the urge to slam Toby up against the wall and kiss some sense into him. "Toby... shit. It takes two to fuckin' tango, okay?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Chris stared into Toby's eyes, watching hope war with insecurity, trust with suspicion. He remained silent, knowing that Toby had to make up his own mind.

Toby blinked, looking from Chris to the pack of reporters slowly filing out the gate, then back again. "Christ," he breathed. "Chris, I... I'm sorry. I don't know what..."

Glancing around and finding them unobserved, Chris reached up and ran his fingers through Toby's hair, then rested his hand in the crook between shoulder and neck, gently stroking one of the places he most loved to leave his mark on Toby.

"There aren't gonna be any hacks out there, Toby; no one to pull us apart if we start throwing punches, and no one to lock us up together until we're forced to deal with our own bullshit." He paused, waiting until Toby nodded his understanding before lowering his voice and continuing with a lop-sided grin, "But since you asked -- what that means is that the only thing I want right now is to get the fuck out of here so that I can get you into that big bed you keep teasing me about and not let you up until the kids get back from vacation."

Toby stepped forward, letting his body brush against Chris's, his hand settle on the rapidly hardening bulge that the tight leather pants did little to hide. He smiled brightly at Chris's quick inhalation of breath and quickly moved away. "So, let's say our goodbyes then."

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Chris stood facing the wall for a moment longer, then turned and joined Toby for the short walk over to the main gate, where Governor Case and Leo Glynn were saying their goodbyes to Oswald's staff.

"You get shy suddenly?" Toby asked quietly, casting a pointed glance downward.

"Fuck no. Let 'em look. I just ain't used to walking around like this in leathers anymore. Takes a little... adjustment," he replied with a smirk and an exaggerated swagger.

Toby clamped a hand on Chris's forearm and tugged, abruptly quickening his pace. "Come on. We are *\*so\** getting the fuck out of here. Right. Now," he hissed.

Chris's familiar shit-eating grin made a brief appearance, but faded quickly once they reached the group by the door. He was a study in sincerity as he reached out to shake the governor's hand, heavy brows furrowed over electric blue eyes. "Governor Case, I wanna thank you for this opportunity. I know a lotta people stuck their necks out for me on this one and I want you -- want you all to know," Chris amended, looking around the small circle, "that I appreciate it."

Toby could only stare, a small, abashed smile curving his lips. Here he was, restive and ready to drag Chris out the door, while Chris, who virtually no one would consider the more civilized of the pair, was actually taking the time to thank his benefactors.

"You're more than welcome, Mr. Keller. I'm happy things could work out this way. Now, gentleman, Sister Pete, I really do have to be going. Big party at the mansion tonight and my staff'll kill me if I don't get back soon. Leo, I'll see you there, yes?"

"Yeah, since the rest of this crowd is either working or has other plans, I might as well."

"Good. Then we'll see the rest of you at our regular update meeting next week. Happy New Year."

Amid a quiet chorus of the well-wishes, the two men disappeared out the gate, leaving Sister Pete alone with her two most troublesome couples, both of whom seemed increasingly restless.

"Well," Tim said, breaking the awkward silence, "I guess we should get back to work and let you two get out of here."

"Working late shift on New Year's, McManus?" Toby asked, puzzled.

"Yeah. Leo learned the hard way that things can get away from you around here too damn easy if you don't keep on top of them, so I'm trying to be around for different shifts -- drop in on the units unexpectedly, that sorta thing." He shrugged diffidently.

"That sounds like a good idea," Toby said while surreptitiously nudging Chris with his elbow, quickly forestalling any wise-ass comments about who Tim might be trying to keep on top of. Tim and Sean might think they were getting away with something, and maybe among some of the staff they were, but the con grapevine had been buzzing about them for years.

Chris just smiled, watching the two men head back towards the hellhole he'd just been released from, then remembered something and called after them. "Yo, Murphy... where'd my stuff end up? Last time I saw it was in PC...."

"Oh yeah. I had Jones take it out to Beecher's car. I assume he's giving you a ride tonight?" Sean replied with a knowing grin.

"Or something like that," Toby said, leaning into Chris.

"Gentlemen," Sister Pete finally broke in, sounding both amused and exasperated, "there \*is\* a nun present."

Tim chuckled as the other three men suddenly took on the appearance of little boys caught with their hands in the cookie jar. "Come on," he said softly to Sean, then called out, "Get him outta here before he causes any more trouble, will ya, Beecher?"

"Sure thing, McManus. Oh, and, uh, happy new year," Toby replied.

Tim shot him a shy smile as he and Sean crossed the threshold back into Oz. "Yeah, you too. See you next week."

When Toby turned back to Chris, he found him looking down at Sister Pete with a peculiar expression on his face.

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Gazing down at the slight figure at his side, Chris realized that despite having three ex-wives, two of whom he still kept in contact with, Sister Pete had become the most important woman in his life. The way he saw it, she and Toby had pulled him back from the gates of Hell, and he found that for once he had no glib words to fall back on. Oh sure, he knew that according to the Church he still had several mortal sins to atone for, but like Toby had said to Said about their relationship and Allah, that was between him and God. Well, and Toby, since that's who he'd actually confessed to and received his absolution from.

Alerted by the confused look on Toby's face, Sister Pete turned her head and gazed up at Chris. Being much taller, broader and younger than she was, he was an imposing figure, but she found herself smiling comfortably. It certainly wasn't that she no longer considered him dangerous -- she'd have to be senile to think that, despite his improved behavior -- but somehow, somewhere along the line, she'd joined Toby on the other side of the line that Chris drew between people he'd use and people he'd protect.

"Thank you," Chris said softly, and she nodded in reply, reading in his face everything he didn't have the words for. Feeling a soft touch on her arm, she looked over at Toby, who was smiling again, the same warm message glowing in his eyes.

"You're a sneaky woman, Pete," he murmured. "Good thing you're a nun or we'd all be in trouble." She laughed at loud at that, breaking the tension and lightening the mood. "You still coming over for dinner next week?"

"That depends."

"On?"

"Who's cooking? If he can mess up coffee that bad..."

"Hey!" Chris interjected, looking from Pete to Toby, both of them dissolving into laughter at his mock wounded look. "That's it, I'm outta here," he groused jokingly, walking rapidly toward the gate.

"It's about fucking time," Toby mumbled. "See ya later, Pete," he called, catching up with Chris just in time to walk out the door at his side.

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**Chapter 5: December 31, 2004 / The Drive**

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Chris stopped just outside the door, a shiver running down his spine as he took his first breath of fresh air in over six years; one that, despite Toby's promises, he'd never really expected to take. It was nearly freezing, but he couldn't resist standing there for a minute, squinting up at the setting sun and enjoying the feel of the chill breeze on his skin.

"You too, huh?" Toby commented softly. Chris looked at him, a question in his eyes. Toby shrugged and let his gaze sweep over the nearby landscape. "I thought maybe it was just me, since I'd never been locked up before."

"Nah. Happens to everyone, I think. It's like when you first get out of the hole, except... bigger." Chris narrowed his eyes suspiciously as a long white limousine pulled up to the base of the stairs. "I thought the governor already left."

"He did. That's for us," Toby replied, walking down the steps as their driver, a young black man, left the driver's seat and opened the door to the passenger compartment.

Chris looked the car up and down and let out a low whistle as Toby slipped inside. "No fucking way."

"Yes fucking way," came a disembodied voice from inside the limo. "So, you coming?" Toby added, sticking his head back out and raising his eyebrows suggestively.

Acting as if limousine rides were an everyday event, Chris casually sauntered down the steps and slipped inside, taking the seat across from Toby. As the door swung shut behind him, he leaned back and stretched, the skin-tight leather creaking sensuously as his hips shifted, settling him deeper into the thick upholstery.

Toby, utterly captivated by the sight, visibly started when the engine roared to life and they started moving. Casting a grateful glance at the opaque privacy screen, he leaned forward, eager to get his hands on Chris now that they were alone.

"So, you live like this all the time now?" Chris asked, stopping him dead in his tracks.

"No," he answered guardedly, insecurity suddenly rearing its ugly head again. "Actually, this is a gift from the governor. Kevin, the driver, is his nephew and is working for this company while school's out for the holidays. He figured sending us home this way might be more... discrete, I guess." Toby shifted nervously as Chris nodded, not looking away, but not making any move to touch him either.

Chris broke the increasingly tense silence by asking, "You wanna tell me what happened back there?"

"What?"

"Why'd you lose it so quick over that reporter?"

"Chris..." Toby shifted his gaze to the floor as Chris continued to stare at him with characteristic intensity. "I... fuck. Look, I know that in some ways your life has been pretty crappy compared to mine, but... Shit, this is gonna sound stupid."

"Toby. Tell me," Chris demanded softly.

Toby sighed deeply, then blurted, "I know that it's always been easy for you to get pretty much anyone you want, you know, to sleep with you...."

"Except you."

Toby's mouth twitched into a semblance of a grin, but it faded rapidly. "Yeah, for a while anyway. But I've never known what that feels like." Seeing Chris about to object, Toby quickly added, "And I don't count those guys in Oz. They didn't want \*me\*, they wanted to get off." Chris grimaced, but didn't interrupt. "I guess what I'm saying is

that we both know how fucking sexy you are and I'm worried that now that you're out, you'll find someone more your type... more like you."

"Come here." Toby looked up, but didn't move other than that. Faced with his lover's blankest expression, Chris quickly lost patience, leaning forward to take Toby's forearms in a strong grip before muttering, "Get the fuck over here." He fell back, using momentum to help pull Toby forward to straddle his hips, then brought their lips together in a bruising kiss.

Toby gasped, startled, and Chris took advantage of the lapse to deepen the kiss, his focus immediately narrowing to the man in his arms. Toby's taste, his smell, the feel of his body, the way he kissed -- as if handing over the key to his soul -- everything about him turned Chris on. How could he think... but then again, how could he know if no one had ever told him. Growling in frustration, Chris broke the kiss and settled his lips on Toby's neck, just beneath his ear. Alternating teasing nips and soothing licks with words, he whispered, "Toby... baby. You \*are\* sexy... sexy as hell... perfect for me, baby." He groaned as Toby arched against him, grinding their rock-hard erections together. "You feel that, Toby? That's what you do to me... like no one else... just one fucking look from you and I'm so hot... I love you, Toby."

"Oh God, Chris," Toby panted. "Love you... want you." He slipped out of Chris's arms, sliding down until his knees reached the floor of the limo. He leaned forward insistently, spreading Chris's legs with the press of his body, reaching blindly for the fastenings of the leather pants. Finding his wrists caught in a strong grip, Toby looked up, sucking in his breath at the unguarded look of desire on Chris's face.

"How long 'til we get home, Toby?" Chris rasped.

"We... uhm... we're not headed home, exactly."

"Whatever," Chris growled, in no mood to quibble over details. "How long until we're alone?"

"About twenty minutes."

Chris concentrated for a moment, trying desperately to bring his higher brain functions back into play. This wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind, but no way was he going to be able to make it another twenty minutes, not if Toby kept looking at him like that. Leaning forward, he captured Toby's lips again, gentler this time, teasing him with quick flicks of his tongue until Toby grew impatient and sucked him into a full-fledged mouthfuck.

When Toby broke away for air a few moments later, he twisted his hands restlessly in Chris's grip and whispered, "Please, Chris, let me..."

"What's that the wiseguys say about making an offer you can't refuse," Chris joked, laughing shakily as he released Toby's hands, which immediately settled on and began roughly massaging his thighs.

Toby let his thumbs slide inside and upward until they brushed lightly against Chris's leather-clad groin. He grinned lasciviously as Chris jerked forward, seeking a firmer touch. Pausing for a few well-placed squeezes along the way, Toby's agile fingers quickly moved up to Chris waist, knuckles brushing against warm silk and hard muscle as he tried to work on both button and zipper at the same time.

Chris groaned as Toby unconsciously swiped his tongue over his upper lip, then caught the lower one in his teeth as he concentrated on getting Chris's pants unfastened as quickly as possible. He wished Toby could see himself right now -- blue eyes lit with passion, soft lips glistening and swollen, raw hunger etched into every curve of his face -- 'sexy' wasn't enough of a word for the kind of fire Toby kept hidden under his cool exterior. "Oh fuck, baby," he gasped as Toby peeled open the leather and took a long, wet lick. Struggling to resist surging up into the hot mouth that was slowly engulfing him, Chris swore he'd find a way to convince Toby of that... and soon.

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Toby moaned deep in his throat as Chris's unique flavor flooded his mouth, eagerly seeking out more via the simple expediency of falling forward, swallowing slick heat until his nose met crisp dark curls. Taking a deep breath, he savored the rich scent of Chris Keller wrapped in leather before pulling back, giving his tongue room to work at Chris's most sensitive spots. Several years ago on this same night he'd been scared to death of this very act, worried that it would be brutal and humiliating like it had been with Schillinger. Instead, Chris had shown him, by example, that it didn't have to be about getting someone off as quickly as possible so they'd leave you alone; that it could be about love and lust and driving someone to the edge over and over again, until they were begging for release. Alternating a slow, rhythmic suction with teasing licks and several other tricks he'd picked up over the years, he worked diligently to push Chris toward that state.

As if reading Toby's thoughts, Chris whispered, "Christ, baby, you know it drives me crazy when you do that." Toby would've smiled if he could, but settled for carefully brushing his bottom teeth against the underside of the hot shaft once more. The desperate noise he got in response made his own erection pulse painfully. Leaving his left hand nestled between Chris's thighs, his thumb roughly caressing along the seam of the tightly stretched leather, Toby reached down with his right to unfasten his slacks.

Sensing the motion, Chris forced his eyes open and focused them on Toby before hissing, "Don't."

Startled, Toby looked up, obediently moving his hand back into Chris's lap before reluctantly freeing his lips to ask, "Why?" Letting his hand continue the rhythm he'd set, Toby smiled as Chris struggled to remain coherent, a small rational portion of his mind cataloging the thought that, now that they didn't have to wait for lights out, he really wanted to do this while looking into Chris's eyes more often.

"Cuz as soon as we... we're alone," Chris began, breaking off to utter a guttural moan as Toby's deft strokes pushed him closer to the edge, "I want you to fuck me."

Toby rocked back on his heels, feeling a wave of heat sweep over his face as Chris's words registered. Thanks in part to a sympathetic hack and a duplicitous nun, they'd managed to maintain some sort of minimal sex life during the past two years, but the one time they'd actually made love -- after his fuck-up with Carol -- he'd been too desperate to feel Chris inside him to think of turning the tables.

Chris's gaze drifted downwards and the heat followed, stabbing at Toby like a blade as Chris's mouth fell open and the tip of his tongue traced along his bottom lip. His untouched cock throbbing in time with his heartbeat, Toby searched frantically for an image to drive back his impending orgasm.

// Ah! Ryan and Howell... egh... yep, that always worked. //

Feeling the urgent desire to explode recede, he glared up at his dazed lover, plaintively calling him a bastard before lowering his head again. This time there was no teasing; Toby wrapped his hands around Chris's hips and sucked him deep inside, showing no mercy as ragged breathing transformed into harsh pants and that delicious purring moan started rumbling out of his chest. Within moments Chris sucked in one final gasp, his hands coming to rest on Toby's shoulders in a bruising grip, his body arching repeatedly against the seat as Toby swallowed in time with each salty pulse.

After a final twitch of pleasure triggered by Toby's thorough clean-up, Chris slumped bonelessly against the seat, chuckling quietly as he was gently tucked back into the pants, which were then carefully rezippered.

"What's so funny?"

"I'll bet you were the kind of kid who actually put his toys away when he was done playing with them."

Flashing a toothy grin, Toby nodded, then quipped, "Except I'm not done playing with you."

"You're not, huh?" Chris replied with a spark of interest, despite his current satiation.

Toby shook his head. "Nope, never." He held Chris's suddenly serious gaze for a moment longer, then looked down, carefully placing his hands to either side of Chris's thighs and levering himself up and back towards the seat behind him.

"Uh uh," Chris muttered, catching Toby in mid-motion. Turning sideways, he rested his back against the side of the limo, crooked one leg up onto the seat and pulled Toby down to sit in front of him. Wrapping his arms around Toby's waist, Chris nuzzled contentedly at warm skin and baby-fine curls. "You sure about that? 'Never' could mean a pretty long time," he said softly, his voice thick.

Toby settled comfortably into Chris's embrace, gently stroking the strong arms holding him close. When they'd first gotten together he'd been surprised by moments like this, but soon learned that Chris craved affection -- anything from subtle touches, like a thigh pressed against his under a cafeteria table, to a full-body hug like this -- even more than sex. It was only after he was paroled that Toby realized what Chris craved most of all -- the reassurance that he was loved, beyond any limitations of time, place or circumstance. Leaning his head back, he answered, "Yeah, I'm sure, if by 'pretty long time' you mean 'always'."

Chris tightened his hold and settled his face into the sweet spot where Toby's neck and shoulder met. Before he'd gotten to Oz, words like 'always' and 'never' held little meaning in his life, other than 'always getting screwed' and 'never catching a break,' but somehow what had started out as one of Vern's little projects had changed all that. Somewhere along the line he'd fallen in love with the man hiding behind the 'nutcase ex-prag' facade, the man who turned out to be the only person he'd ever known who could not only accept all of his darkness along with all of his passion, but was able to match him, emotion for twisted emotion. In answer to the rhetorical question, he bit down hard, then sucked, renewing his mark, smiling as Toby's startled gasp changed to soft whimpers of pleasure.

Afterwards the two men sat in silence, nearly dozing, enjoying being together without an audience and without fear of interruption, until the limo slowed to a stop and the driver's door opened. Twisting in Chris's grasp, Toby gave him a quick, almost chaste kiss before announcing, "We're here."

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**Chapter 6: December 31, 2004 / The Arrival**

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"Yeah, so I figured. Where's 'here'?" Chris asked, bemused by the obvious excitement on Toby's face.

"Come and see," Toby replied, clamping on to Chris's wrist with one hand while opening the door with the other. He stepped out, impatiently tugging on Chris's arm until he followed.

Chris looked around, taking in limousines and other luxury cars, valets, doormen, red-carpeted luggage carts -- all the favorite trappings of the idle rich -- then looked up, and up, and up, at a five-star hotel that made all but the hottest digs in Las Vegas look shabby in comparison.

Toby, meanwhile, met Kevin at the back of the car and made sure that the bellboy who'd picked up Chris's laundry bag ended up with both the correct room number and a generous tip. Observing Chris's subdued reaction to their location out of the corner of his eye, he chatted with Kevin for a moment, thanking him for the ride and wishing him a happy new year, flushing abruptly as Chris's gaze finished making its rounds and settled back on him with a palpable heat.

Kevin leaned close and whispered, "I can certainly see why you thought he was worth waiting for," before heading back to the front of the car, leaving Toby gaping after him.

Chris tensed and glared as Kevin passed him, then hurried to Toby's side. "What was that all about?"

With a grin and a rueful sniff, Toby turned to Chris and said, "Well, either it's just you...." He paused, looking Chris over before continuing, "which I'm not entirely ruling out, or I just figured out why the governor is so understanding about us."

"What? Him?" Chris glanced over at Kevin, who gave him a smile and a wink, then slipped into the front seat of the limo, shut the door and drove off into evening traffic. "Huh. Guess so."

"So, you ready to go to our room?" Toby asked, backing towards the entrance, so unwilling to take his eyes off Chris that he found himself resisting the urge to blink. He'd had dreams start off like this fairly often during the past few months, only to have Chris disappear part way through. This time he wasn't taking any chances.

Chris smiled and stalked after him, then stopped short, barely managing to avoid tumbling Toby backwards onto the steps. Seeming to understand the dilemma, he casually let his hand settle on Toby's lower back before steering him up the stairs and into the hotel. As they had at the prison, they walked through the doorway side by side, and Toby felt his fears of this turning into another nightmare evaporate as Chris used the enforced closeness to pull him close before reluctantly releasing him to enter the lobby.

Once inside, Toby headed straight for the elevators, slowing and eventually stopping as he realized Chris was lagging behind. He turned, expecting to see his lover as sardonically amused by the excessive opulence as he'd been the first time he'd seen it, then frowned as the ease and contentment Chris had shown in the limo disappeared under the uncaring mask of a hard-edged street hustler. By the time Toby made it back to his side, Chris was aggressively eye-fucking anyone who looked their direction, visibly bristling at those who didn't take the hint quickly enough.

"Don't you gotta check in?" Chris asked, his jaw tight, nodding towards the front desk.

"No. I dropped off the car and my stuff this morning and picked up the keycard then," Toby replied carefully and began walking again, praying to get to the elevator without any major incidents. He'd seen Chris in 'protective predator' mode many times and it usually led to violence. Or sex. Personally, given a choice, he'd prefer the latter.

Chris only grunted in reply, then looked askance at Toby as he bypassed the main bank of elevators and slid a keycard into a slot off to the side. Toby gave a hesitant smile and stepped into the small private elevator as soon as the door opened, finally reaching out to pull Chris in after him as the glowering man got into a staring contest with a disdainful concierge across the lobby.

"Chris," he said softly, reaching out to brush his hand through the other man's short black hair as the elevator started up, then drew back awkwardly as Chris's head jerked away from his touch. "What is it? What happened down there?" Toby let his hand drop down to a broad shoulder instead, absently massaging muscles so tense they were nearly vibrating.

"Just those kinda people," Chris began, staring straight ahead. "This ain't the first time I've been in a hotel like this, Toby, getting stared at by them. You looking like that," Chris continued, gesturing at Toby's obviously expensive suit, "and me dressed like this -- I know what all those motherfuckers thought. Of course, I'm a little old to be playing rent boy...."

Toby could only stare in shocked silence as Chris's voice faded into a shrug, the pain of old memories shadowing his eyes. "Oh god," he finally whispered, moving to stand in front of Chris, letting his free hand slide up to rest on the other stiff shoulder. Chris hadn't shared many stories from his past, but he'd eventually let slip that the bust that landed him in Lardner, and thereby Vern's not-so-gentle clutches, was petty theft of a john. Toby just hadn't thought it through -- a heavy sentence like that implied a 'victim' with plenty of money and status rather than the type who ducked into a cheap bar for a blowjob in the back room. Wincing as the elevator bumped to a halt, he wondered if coming here was such a good idea after all.

"What?" Chris growled, seeing doubt and guilt creep into Toby's expression.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made you wear that... or taken you straight home instead...."

"Toby," Chris interrupted, his irritation at Toby's self-inflicted guilt-trip rapidly driving away the ghosts of the past. He wasn't a kid anymore, and this wasn't some fucking high-priced hustle. This was Toby -- his very own, one-and-only, frustrating-as-hell, angel-eyed and undeniably-sexy Toby... the one who looked at him like he was something precious and rare; who'd forgiven the unforgivable, then challenged him to do the same; who hadn't just walked away and forgotten about him... and who he was suddenly utterly alone with. In a hotel. "Toby," he repeated, his growl gone smooth and sexual, his hands coming to rest on Toby's hips.

Toby looked up, saw the fire glowing in Chris's eyes above the familiar sensual grin, and felt his knees get weak.

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**Chapter 7: December 31, 2004 / The Room**

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Stopping forward, Chris guided a suddenly unsteady Toby out of the elevator and into the room behind him.

// Room? //

Chris paused, looking around for the obligatory long, narrow hallway and finding instead an airy and well-appointed room that appeared to be the centerpiece of a rather extravagant suite.

He turned questioning eyes to Toby, who had apparently recovered from Chris's brief distraction and was biting at his lower lip in a nervous and unconsciously seductive way. Deciding that explanations could wait, Chris set about rescuing the abused flesh by flicking a teasing tongue across Toby's upper lip, then sucking the lower into the safety of his own mouth when the resulting gasp released it from its temporary confinement.

Feeling a hot, slick tongue gently soothing the bite marks, Toby let his raw hunger for Chris wash over him, driving any thoughts of worry and deep conversation to the furthest reaches of his mind. He slide his hands down the front of Chris's shirt, silently cursing the silky impediment as he first thumbed, then gently pinched Chris's rapidly hardening nipples. During that first night of exploration, five incredibly complex years ago, Toby had been delighted to discover that Chris had an extremely sensitive chest, something that came in handy when his playfully sadistic lover was in one of his late-night, Murphy's-on-duty, let's-tease-Toby-until-he's-delirious moods. Knowing that a properly timed lick or bite or graze of fingernail could practically bring the other man to his knees had become his best defense against the smoldering aura of sexuality that Chris seemed to wear like a second skin.

Gasping as a white-hot shaft of desire shot from his chest to his rapidly recovering groin, Chris released the captured flesh, pausing to pull Toby closer before swooping in and taking his mouth in trade. He felt Toby's tongue twine briefly with his own, then slide past, eagerly staking a claim, it's aggressive pistoning motion reminding Chris of his urgent request in the limousine. A deep groan rumbled up from his chest as his hips automatically started a slow grind against Toby's.

Toby felt Chris's forearms wrap around the small of his back, iron bands holding him in place as the tall, muscular body molded itself to him, begging for what it needed in the simplest terms possible. Chris's groan echoed throughout Toby's body, the low vibration causing a painful throb which immediately convinced him it was time to move this to another room. Reluctantly pulling back from the intense kiss, he watched as dazed eyes, more black than blue, flickered open, then almost dove right back in when he saw love and trust and need all swirled together in their depths. He'd often felt that he could literally drown in Chris's eyes, and it was only when the slide of leather against wool brought their erections into direct contact that he was able to surface long enough to recall his original intention -- getting them both naked and horizontal as quickly as possible. Or at the very least naked and wet.

"Chris?" he whispered, his voice low and hoarse.

"Yeah, baby?" Chris replied, running a hand up Toby's spine until his fingers brushed lightly against the sensitive skin at the nape of his neck. A teasing smirk curved his lips as he watched Toby's eyelids droop halfway shut in response.

Toby shivered, opened his mouth soundlessly, then cleared his throat and tried again. "What do you think about getting cleaned up?"

"A shower? Now?" Leaning forward, Chris nuzzled along Toby's jawline while tightening the arm around his waist and pressing their lower bodies closer together.

"Not exactly," Toby replied in a mischievous tone.

Intrigued, Chris loosened his hold and leaned back. "What did you have in mind?"

"Come and see."

Chris lifted both hands off Toby in a surrendering gesture, then watched with steadily increasing desire as the slim blond walked across the room, unself-consciously shedding clothes as he went. The jacket and tie went first, tossed casually onto the couch. His shoes ended up under an end table and were followed quickly by his socks, removed by virtue of a couple of bends that reminded Chris both of how limber Toby was and what a tempting ass he had, even when it was hidden under wool slacks. By the time the dress shirt hit the floor, Chris could feel every pulse of his cock against the tight leather.

Toby stopped in the doorway and looked back, smiling wickedly at the slack-jawed look of pleasure on Chris's face. Slowly lifting his t-shirt, Toby held Chris's eyes for as long as he could, then pulled it over his head and left it dangling from his fingertips for a moment before letting it fall in a heap. "Coming?" he asked, reaching for his belt buckle.

"Soon, I hope," Chris grumbled, absently rubbing at the bulging ache in his groin as he sauntered, slightly bow-legged, across the room. Toby chuckled, but Chris waited until he was well into the other man's personal space, their faces an inch apart, before growling, "What?"

Toby shook his head and shrugged, his smile turning softer. "You're so comfortable with your body, with doing whatever makes you feel good."

Chris's fingertips ghosted over Toby's bare chest and stomach, tracing arcane pattern in the fine hairs and leaving goosebumps in their wake. "Mmmm... your's too."

"Yeah, mine too," Toby agreed breathlessly, undoing the buttons of Chris's shirt with trembling fingers before slipping his hands underneath the warm silk to return the favor.

"So, uhm, I assume this getting cleaned up involves being naked?" Chris murmured, frissons of desire dancing along his skin in response to Toby's adept touch.

"Mmm-hmmm," Toby replied, pulling Chris's shirt open and pressing kisses along his collarbone.

"Good." Chris swiftly unfastened Toby's slacks, then tugged down sharply, grinning smugly as both they and a pair of pale gray boxers pooled around his feet. He reached for the fastening of his own pants, only to find his hands slapped away.

"Uh uh. My toys, remember?" Toby ran a teasing finger over the distended leather, then hooked his thumbs in the beltloops and -- carefully stepping out of the fabric tangled around his ankles -- pulled Chris forward, over the threshold and into the dark room beyond. "Besides, we \*could\* try getting you out of your boots \*first\* this time, right?" he teased as the motion sensor picked up their presence and the automatic lights flicked on.

Reluctantly looking away from Toby's naked form, Chris quickly took in the glint of well-polished chrome, the smooth elegance of fine marble and porcelain tile and... "What the fuck?" he asked incredulously. Toby followed his glance and groaned, hiding his face in his hands. "A \*bubble\* bath, Toby?" Chris chuckled.

"I asked Kevin to call right before we arrived and have them run us a bath. This must be his idea of a joke," Toby mumbled into his hands.

Chris pulled gently on Toby's wrists, revealing the rest of the deep blush which -- he noted with some amusement -- had spread over most of the pale and tightly muscled body in front of him. "Toby, baby, it's cool. Hell, it'll be fun." He paused, tilting his head, considering. "Well, as long you don't have any rubber duckies stashed anywhere, that is."

"What?" Toby asked, curiosity overriding his embarrassment.

"Nothing. Just one of Ryan's twisted bedtime stories." He stepped back and spread his arms, leaning back against the wide ledge surrounding the jacuzzi-sized sunken tub. "So, you gonna get me outta these?"

**Chapter 8: December 31, 2004 / Bathtime**

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"Yeah," Toby replied, casually making his way over. "Lift up," he said, tapping Chris's leg and motioning for him to raise his foot.

"Aw, you're not gonna kneel at my feet?" Chris quipped, his eyes bright with humor as he took a seat on the ledge of the tub and straightened his knee obligingly.

Toby caught his ankle and tugged on one of the laces, considering. Chris seemed to be in a playful enough mood, but he knew that a practical joke now would almost certainly lead to some kind of diabolical payback later, like waking up tied to the headboard some morning. Then again....

With no more warning than the flash of a crooked smile, Toby bent and pulled up Chris's other leg, got a firm grip on both calves, then stepped forward, reveling in the shocked look on Chris's face just before it disappeared beneath the bubbles. Toby jumped back quickly, neatly dodging the waves of warm, soapy water splashing out over the sides of the tub as well as any immediate retribution.

Chris sprang to his feet with a roar, bubbles and water streaming off him in equal measure. "Beecher! Are you fucking crazy?!" He ran his hands down the soaking wet shirt, scooping up bubbles and glaring at them and Toby in turn.

Toby could only stare silently in salacious wonder for a moment. Adrenaline and annoyance had combined with water-splashed eyelashes to make Chris's diamond-blue eyes glitter more brilliantly than usual, while the black silk clung to his upper body like a fresh coat of paint, outlining and accentuating each muscular curve. Then he burst into laughter, as Chris went cross-eyed watching a thin trail of bubbles slip between his furrowed eyebrows and make its way down his long hooked nose.

"You are one serious nutjob," Chris muttered, running a hand over his face and pushing any other errant bubbles up and over his head. "You do realize you've totally trashed these pants, right?" Leaning back against the edge of the tub, he carefully lifted one foot and pensively watched as water ran off the surface of the boot and into the bubbles below. "The boots might be salvageable though."

Seeing Chris standing there -- up to his hips in bubbles, watching his boot drip with a serious, thoughtful expression on his face -- Toby couldn't quite contain a small chuckle as he made his way over to the tub. He climbed in and was met with a scowl. Shrugging, he said, "So, I'll buy you another pair of pants."

"Toby...." Chris pushed himself up on the ledge and started tugging at his waterlogged footwear, clearly irritated.

"Okay, okay. \*You\* can buy yourself a new pair then. You'll certainly be earning enough to buy all the leather you want." He sighed as Chris gave him a that's-not-the-point glare. "Oh hell, Chris. It's not like I live some kind of extravagant nouveau-Yuppie lifestyle."

"No? Then I suppose this suite is courtesy of the governor too? Nice boss ya got there -- or maybe I'm not the only one around here who knows how to pull off a good old-fashioned hustle to get what he wants," Chris growled, inexplicably angry at Toby's cavalier attitude.

Remembering Chris's earlier comment about no longer being able to depend on hacks to curb their destructive tendencies, Toby bit down hard on the inside of his cheek rather than retaliate in kind. He tasted the sharp tang of blood, then counted to ten twice before calming down enough to respond.

"No, actually. This," he said quietly, gesturing around the room, "is a gift from Ryan." Taking advantage of Chris's momentary shock, he moved closer and began matter-of-factly untangling the sodden laces Chris had been fruitlessly struggling with.

"You're... uh... good at that," Chris said, peering up contritely in tacit apology.

"Kids," Toby replied simply, peeling the dripping boot and its accompanying sock off Chris's foot and dropping them over the side. "Switch," he said, dropping the bare foot and tugging on the other leg. "Let's get you out of the rest of this; I wanna run some more hot water before this thing gets ice cold."

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Chris switched one leg with the other, still looking at Toby warily, wondering if this was just the calm before the storm.

"What's the matter?" Toby asked, tugging the other boot and sock loose and smirking as he tossed them aside. "Waiting for the other shoe to drop?"

"Aw, Christ, Toby," Chris groaned, using the excuse of sliding forward off the ledge to pull the other man into his arms. Relieved at the lack of resistance, he rested his head on Toby's shoulder and sighed deeply. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Buttons," Toby muttered, stroking Chris's water-slicked hair with one hand while rubbing his back with the other. "We both have plenty, but we'll learn to work around 'em. We've got time."

Chris lifted his head and reached up to trace the tender smile that had appeared on Toby's lips, feeling his own curve into a lopsided grin as he let himself sink into the comfort of that statement. "I love you, Toby," he said softly.

"And I love you," Toby replied, nipping at Chris's fingers and tugging impatiently at the slick fabric that still covered his torso. "Now get naked while I run some hot water," he continued brusquely, stepping backwards and turning toward the faucets.

Chuckling, Chris quickly stripped off his shirt, then paused to admire the view as Toby leaned over to adjust the temperature. "So," he began, distracted himself long enough to manage the fastening on the pants, "Ryan set this up, huh?"

"Yeah. He put his actual riot settlement in a trust fund for Cyril to cover private doctors and legal costs, but the interest goes into Ryan's personal account. It adds up to quite a bit after a while."

"How did he manage to get a room like this on such short notice? And on New Year's Eve?" Chris asked, forcing the wet leather to the bottom of the tub, then silently stepping out of each leg in turn.

"Luck of the Irish?" Toby quipped, turning off the water, then gasped as a hot, wet and very aroused body suddenly pressed against his back.

"Mmmm... you're right," Chris murmured, his lips brushing against Toby's neck, his fingers gliding smoothly over the seductive curves of hipbone and stomach, then drifting lower. "It's probably best not to question exactly \*how\* Ryan gets things done."

"Chris," Toby groaned, melting into the solid body behind him.

"Yeah?" Chris kept his touch light, barely grazing Toby's eagerly straining shaft before moving his hands down to stroke the sensitive flesh of his inner thighs.

Drawing on the last of his willpower, Toby forced himself to stand up straight, then turned and quickly remolding his body to Chris's. He ran his hands over the slick body in front of him – tracing scars and muscles, caressing familiar hotspots -- and was sharply aware of Chris's hands following similar paths on his own body.

"I'm not really interested in Ryan right now," Toby breathed, sliding his arms around Chris's waist, roughly massaging the tense muscles at the small of his back before lowering his hands. As blunt fingers dug almost painfully into the perfectly-formed ass waiting just below the water line, Chris let out a low moan and pulled Toby even closer, their hips and cocks reflexively fitting together like pieces of a puzzle.

Overwhelmed with sensation, Chris let Toby take control, something he'd never felt comfortable doing with anyone else, but that somehow felt right -- hell, more than right... exhilarating and almost frighteningly arousing -- with Toby. When fingers brushed gently over the opening to his body, he cried out wordlessly, louder than he'd ever dared in Oz, giving voice to his suddenly all-consuming desire to feel Toby deep inside him.

Toby froze for a second, his cock throbbing urgently in response to Chris's hoarse cry. He'd often wondered if Chris was naturally quiet or if that was just to keep the hacks at bay, but he'd never expected anything like that -- so primal, so openly needy. As Chris's wild gaze settling on his face, Toby pulled him forward and sealed their lips together, greedily sucking Chris's tongue into his mouth while moving him carefully back toward the edge of the tub.

"God, baby... please..." Chris begged when Toby finally let him breath again.

"Shhh," Toby soothed, pressing a finger to Chris's lips while reaching into a nearby alcove with his free hand. He barely refrained from dropping the towel into the water when Chris sucked the finger into his mouth, but somehow managed to get it safely onto the ledge. "Lay back," he whispered, retrieving his finger, then encouraging Chris to let himself float while Toby guided his head and shoulders onto the towel. Chris looked confused for a moment, but comprehension dawned when Toby slipped between his thighs and bent to teasingly brush his lips over Chris's chest.

Wrapping his legs around Toby's waist -- which caused a whole new set of tantalizing sensations, leaving him trembling with anticipation in their wake -- Chris growled his lover's name. Toby looked up at him briefly, a combination of mischief and lust in his eyes, then dipped his head back down, giving a sorely neglected nipple a sharp nip, then soothing it gently with his tongue as Chris's body arched beneath him, sending fresh streams of water flowing over the sides of the tub.

His hands freed by Chris's grip on his body, Toby reached into the alcove again, palming the small tube of waterproof lube he'd left there earlier in the day, then squeezed hard, popping it and liberally coating both hands. He knew to the day how long it had been and, although they both usually enjoyed a rough ride, he had no intention of doing any actual damage. Canting his hips back, he lowered both hands into the water that rushed in between them, one hand supporting Chris's lower back, the other massaging... spreading... fingers gently slipping inside, curled slightly, searching for just the right spot.

"Oh fuck yessss..." Chris hissed, his legs tightening, his long arms stretched taut across the length of the tub, hands gripping the edge, trapped by rapidly escalated need in a pose much like that of the pain-wracked figure on his shoulder.

Moving with the arch of Chris's body, Toby pressed in deeper, stretching slowly and carefully until his movements and low moans became more demanding, culminating in another of those wordless cries that seemed to reach out and grab Toby's cock in a phantom grip. He moved into position, pressed snugly against Chris's body, then waited until passion-darkened blue eyes rolled open to met his own. At Chris's nod, he thrust forward.

Chris grunted, gritting his teeth until the slight burn faded into a pleasure so intense it held a pain of its own. It had been this way since that very first time, on the fourteenth and final night of the millennial lockdown; it always felt as if Toby was slipping inside of his soul as much as his body. And the thing that had made it bearable -- the thing that eventually made it so fucking sweet that he would rather die than give it up -- was that Toby so willingly offered his up in return.

Holding on to his own control by the skin of his teeth, Chris managed to keep his eyes on Toby for several slow, deep strokes -- watched the trim muscles of his chest and abdomen clench and relax as his hips rocked, saw the chords of his throat grow taut as he tried to hold back from simply pistoning mindlessly into the fierce heat of Chris's body -- then let his head fall back onto the improvised pillow, giving himself over to the fire of Toby's steadily increasing rhythm.

Toby rocked forward, lube-slick fingers digging hard into lean hips. There'd be bruises tomorrow, but for now all that mattered was getting deeper inside and finding just the right motion to make Chris's body thrum with pleasure. A stray thought hit him suddenly, that although the body was sweetly, even intoxicatingly, familiar, the position was

something altogether new. And on the heels of that thought came the realization that -- for a little while at least -- everything would be new: sleeping in a real bed together, without having to worry about sneaking into his own bunk before dawn; walking into a room and locking the rest of the world out, rather than having the world lock them in, or away from each other; being able to touch, kiss, or even make love when and where they chose. His eyes flew open in shock as an intense sense of freedom swept over him, even more powerful than the day he'd walked out of Oz. \*This\* was what freedom truly felt like, being here with... inside... Chris, and knowing that it when it was over, it was still only the beginning.

"Oh God," Toby moaned, blood pounding in his ears as his thoughts drove his body past the point of no return. Redoubling his efforts, he tilted his hips up, changing the angle of his thrusts until Chris's gasps of pleasure echoed his own.

Chris groaned in a combination of desire and frustration. He wanted desperately to touch Toby, to run his hands over the slick body expertly coaxing him toward release, but knew that moving either arm would upset his precarious balance. For a moment he felt trapped, helpless, and he froze, not even breathing, until Toby's firm grip on his aching cock brought him back to the here and now. He opened his eyes and caught Toby staring at him with a look of such love and lust and wonder than it only took a few quick strokes to push him over the edge.

Toby felt Chris tighten convulsively, then pulse in his hand...felt his own release surge within him... then they were both coming, Chris calling out something vaguely resembling Toby's name while Toby blasphemed several gods in turn in a harsh, almost pained, whisper.

As his knees began to buckle, Toby let Chris's legs drop, then fell forward, shakily wrapping his arms around the trembling body now leaning bonelessly against the side of the tub. Settling deeper into the water, he let his head rest on a broad shoulder and sighed contentedly as strong arms pulled him closer and smiling lips brushed the side of his neck. "Well, that was a new one on me. How about you?" he asked, chuckling wryly.

"Hmmm?" Chris replied, almost purring.

"The tub."

"Oh." Chris tensed, memories of a particular client surfacing. Nobody really special, other than his kink for baths -- just another in a long line of men whose only concern for the body in front of them was that it be hot, tight and paid for.

"Chris?" Toby prompted.

For a moment Chris was tempted to just shrug it off, but then he remembered what Toby had said about buttons. "There was one guy," he began hesitantly, looking down into the water until gentle fingers coaxed his face back up. "One of the guys who took me to places like this. He liked to do it in water." Chris paused as Toby winced, then continued in a rush. "But it was nothing like this, Tobe, honest. That was a job, ya know. This was...." He shrugged, not knowing how to explain. "Us," he finally settled on, hoping Toby would understand.

Caressing the planes of Chris's face first with his fingertips, then with his lips, Toby whispered, "Yeah, I know," against his skin. For a brief period of time, he'd fucked and been fucked by a series of men that meant less than nothing to him. Sure, it hadn't been for money, but he figured the results were pretty much the same. "I know," he repeated, then eased his way into a long, slow kiss, stopping only when Chris's stomach rumbled loudly.

"Guess that means I should have them bring dinner up." Still smiling, Toby stood, made his way out of the tub and grabbed a towel. "No, you stay," he said, pushing Chris back down into the water as he tried to follow. "Relax for a bit. It shouldn't take long. Everything should already be prepared." He leaned forward to steal a quick kiss, then headed for the door, toweling off as he went. "I hope you like what I ordered," he called over his shoulder.

Chris grinned and sank back down into the seductive heat of the water. "Baby, as long as it ain't chicken nuggets, you got nothing to worry about."

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A few minutes later, when Toby -- dressed in jeans and the type of comfortably worn sweatshirt that his mother or Gen would've relegated to a rag pile -- peeked in, he found Chris almost dozing, idly flicking what was left of the bubbles back and forth across the surface of the water. "Hey," he called softly.

"Hey," Chris replied, looking up and giving him a sleepy smile.

"Dinner's here."

"Good." Chris stood, rubbing at his stomach. "I was about to fall asleep and drown in here anyway."

"You that tired?" Toby asked, concern furrowing his forehead.

"Nah, just relaxed. Get some food into me and I'll be good to go," Chris replied with a wink and a slow, thorough appraisal as he climbed out of the tub. He wrapped a towel around his waist and crossed over to Toby, immediately sliding his hands under the sweatshirt to touch the warm, silky skin beneath. "Speaking of dinner -- you look good enough to eat," he growled, leaning in to nip at his throat.

"Mmmmm, so do you," Toby said, running his hands over Chris's bare back. "This always has been a good look for you, although it's missing something without the boots." He jumped back with a muffled laugh as Chris dug his fingers into the ticklish spot just under his ribs. "Okay, okay! Your clothes are in the bedroom. Go put something on so we can eat." He turned Chris toward the other door and gave him a small shove.

Chris looked over his shoulder and grinned, asking, "Why?" while nevertheless strolling obediently toward the other room.

"One, because it's chilly out there, and two, because I'm really hungry and you're too damn much of a distraction like that."

Apparently satisfied with the answer, Chris laughed quietly and disappeared into the bedroom.

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**Chapter 9: December 31, 2004 / Dinner**

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Toby paced restlessly between the fireplace and the room service cart, casting nervous glances toward the bedroom. // Jesus Christ, it's not like this is some goddamn first date. What the fuck is wrong with me? // he thought, running his hands through his hair, leaving it tousled to one side. But he realized that in some ways, some very important ways, it was. Sure, he'd lived with Chris on and off for several years, but that was in Oz, where someone else controlled almost every aspect of their lives -- when they slept, what they ate, when and if they could leave their pod, even whether or not they continued to share a pod. Out here, they were on their own and that changed everything.

Toby's gaze passed over the bathroom door and he grinned. // Well, not quite \*everything\*. // If anything, the sex was even better than he'd remembered, but he wanted to remind Chris that -- unlike his four failed marriages -- their relationship was about more than just sex. Too many people in Chris's life had dealt in 'just sex,' turning it into a commodity, something to be traded for safety, power, money... even love and affection. Toby had the feeling that -- with the possible exception of Bonnie, who must've known what she was getting herself into, at least on the second round -- he was the first person in a long time to look past the hardbody physique and arrogant swagger, and now he wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

Oh, he'd gone through all the appropriate 'romantic' motions with Gen -- sometimes because he genuinely wanted to, sometimes just because it made her happy -- but with Chris, he was at a loss. Seduction, love, lust, betrayal, jealousy and even death had all played a part in their relationship, but romance? Toby shook his head, frowning down at the dinner trays thoughtfully. Despite their rough beginnings, they'd managed to string together a few tender moments in their time, but Toby couldn't even begin to predict how Chris would react to what he'd planned.

"Fuck it. Chris is right. Sometimes I think too damn much," he mumbled, carrying the larger of the food trays over to the coffee table before kneeling in front of the fireplace and setting a match to the kindling. // If he thinks it's stupid, then he thinks it's stupid. It's dinner in front of a fucking fire, not candlelight and flowers. //

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Dressed in low-slung sweats and a well-worn workout jacket, Chris leaned in the doorway, watching as Toby frowned, came to some sort of decision and then disappeared behind the couch. He stepped into the room and eyed the room service cart warily. Breakfast back in Oz had been its usual bland affair and he'd skipped lunch entirely, figuring he'd have a refrigerator to raid that night. Judging by the rest of the hotel, 'dinner' was more than likely some snack-size delicacy, but maybe later he could talk Toby into running out to a burger joint or something.

Hearing the crackle of flames, he continued forward and found Toby poking moodily at the fireplace with a small shovel. "Hey, what'cha doing?" he asked, smiling wryly at the obviousness of the answer.

"What?" Toby looked up, startled, not quite meeting Chris's eyes. "Oh. I, uhm, thought it'd be nice to have a fire. To take off the chill, ya know?"

Glancing around, Chris took in Toby's nervous expression... the dinner tray... the bottle of something he assumed was appropriately celebratory yet alcohol-free chilling nearby, and felt a warmth sweep over him that had nothing to do with the fire. // Not so fucking obvious after all, I guess. Leave it to Toby to pull something like this, as if being able to breathe the same air as him again wasn't enough. // Swallowing around the lump in his throat, he asked, "You want me to get the lights?"

Meeting midnight blue eyes and finding an almost shy pleasure rather than the mocking amusement he'd expected, Toby nodded. "Yeah. Uhm... Chris?" Chris paused in mid-stride, looking back over his shoulder. "Thanks."

"Sure thing, Tobe," he replied, no trace of his familiar smirk in the accompanying smile. "So, what's for dinner?" he asked, making his way back, then lowering himself to the floor to use the couch as a backrest. Stretching his arms out along the seat of the couch, Chris tilted his head inquisitively toward the covered tray. Toby sniffed, struggling to hold back an incredulous laugh. "What?"

Shaking his head and chuckling, Toby made his way to Chris's side, kneeling next to the coffee table. "Nothing. It's just hard to believe this is real, I guess. I keep expecting to wake up."

Leaning forward, Chris captured Toby's lips in a slow, sweet kiss. "That help?" he asked, quirked an eyebrow confidently.

"Definitely. But I may need more convincing later."

"Hey, not a problem, baby. After dinner, you'll have my undivided attention."

Reluctantly turning away from the heated promise in Chris's eyes, Toby reached for the cover of the tray. "I hope this turned out okay. I remember you saying you liked both of these, but I wasn't sure about the combination...." He trailed off and lifted the cover, revealing a very large and heavily-loaded pizza.

"Pizza," Chris exclaimed happily, shooting Toby a toothy grin. "Holy shit. You know how long it's been since I've had pizza?" Grabbing up a slice, he bit into it eagerly, then gave Toby a quizzical look. "What's on this?" he mumbled.

"Venison. At first they looked at me like I was crazy," he paused as Chris's expression shifted to patently mock surprise. "Prick," he commented with a wry smile, then continued with his explanation. "I figured this was the only way to get around the ridiculously small steaks this place serves. Is it okay?"

"Ya know, surprisingly, it's actually damn good. Dare I ask what's for dessert?" Toby leered suggestively while reaching for his own slice of pizza. "Besides that, I mean."

Smirking, Toby stretched his legs out under the coffee table, then leaned back against the couch and settled comfortably at Chris's side. "Tiramisu. Hey, hand me that bottle, will you?" he said, taking in nearly half the slice in one bite as his stomach suddenly reminded him he'd eaten next to nothing for the past two days.

Chris stared at Toby for a moment, wondering when he'd stop being surprised at the other man's proclivity for filing away every conversation they'd had word for word. Or maybe he was just puzzled -- and a little suspicious -- that anyone would bother; there was something both comforting and disturbing about being known so well. Vaguely conscious of the beginnings of a foul mood, Chris pulled the label-less brown bottle out of the ice and handed it to Toby. "What the fuck is that anyway?" he growled, wincing inwardly at the rough sound of his own voice. The first day out always messed with his emotions and this was the first time he'd tried to deal with it sober.

Chris waited, bracing himself expectantly, but instead of looking hurt like Bonnie, screeching at him like Angelique, or tossing him out on his sorry ass like Kitty, Toby simply opened the bottle and handed it back, rubbing his thumb along the back of Chris's hand in a quick caress as they made the switch.

"It's home-made root beer," Toby said softly, understanding shining in his eyes. "One of the guys in my AA group used to be an avid home-brewer, so now he makes this instead."

// AA. Yeah, I guess Toby knows all about facing this kinda shit sober. // Chris took a long drink, then managed a small smile. "It's sweet."

"Really? Lemme see." Chris held the bottle out, nearly dropping it when Toby leaned over and sucked the remnants of the sugary liquid off his lips. "Mmm... very sweet." Rescuing the bottle from lax fingers, he sat back and nudged Chris's leg. "Now eat. We gotta keep your strength up, right?"

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**Chapter 10: December 31, 2004 / Family Matters**

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Thirty minutes, half a large pizza, and two heaping servings of tiramisu later, Chris stretched out on his back in front of the fire, groaning his contentment. "Damn, baby, you keep feeding me like that and I'll be living in that gym in the basement."

Loading the empty trays back onto the cart, Toby laughed. "If \*I\* keep feeding \*you\*, huh? Don't hold your breath, Chris; I'm not one of your wives."

"Hell, I know that. None of them woulda put up with my shit even half this long." He paused, watching Toby closely. Discussions about their respective pre-Oz pasts tended to go south quickly and he didn't want to spoil the mellow mood they'd settled into over dinner. "Or treated me half this good," he added more seriously.

Toby was silent as he pushed the cart into the elevator and sent it on its way, but was still smiling faintly when he turned and made his way back to the fire. He stood, looking down with an almost puzzled look in his eyes until Chris reached over and tugged on his pant leg, cajoling, "Come on down here." Chris waited until Toby was stretched out beside him, then rolled onto his side. "What is it?" he asked gently as Toby, still silent, settled eagerly into the circle of his arms.

"You're here. You're really here," Toby whispered, his breath hot and heavy against Chris's neck, his body trembling as he slipped his arms around Chris's shoulders and pulled him close.

"Yeah," Chris replied, his voice thick, his hands moving slowly up and down Toby's spine before settling at his lower back in a firm embrace. "I'm here." He understood exactly how Toby felt. Everything had happened so quickly; neither of them had been prepared for such an abrupt change, however welcome. Chris realized that they'd both been running on adrenaline, frozen in a state of shock that was rapidly melting under the combined influence of warmth, comfort, good food and more time alone than he, at least, had ever dared dream of.

They held each other close as the storm of emotion washed over them, then Toby languidly unwound his arms and shifted, pushing Chris flat on his back. He took a moment to enjoy the play of light and shadow across angular, unconventional features -- the Roman nose, heavy brow, strong jaw and sensual lips that lent themselves so well to Chris's unique blend of attractiveness and menace -- then lowered his head to the broad chest. Whether calm and comforting, like now, or racing wildly in passion, Toby loved the sound of Chris's heartbeat. Like the man himself, it was strong and vital and -- as Toby had finally realized after inflicting all too many wounds of his own -- almost painfully vulnerable. Slipping one hand under the jacket, he caressed the surprisingly soft skin stretched over the taut stomach, grinning at the purr-like rumble vibrating against his cheek.

Chris arched into the knowing touch, one hand coming to rest on the subtle curve of Toby's hip while the other settled at the nape of his neck, long fingers combing soothingly through the red-gold waves. In response, Toby unzipped the jacket and pressed his lips to the warm expanse of flesh beneath.

"God, baby, that feels so..." Chris interrupted himself with a huge yawn. "Good," he finished on the exhale.

"Tired?" Toby murmured, sounding amused.

"A little, I guess," Chris replied, abashed and slightly defensive. "It's this fire and all that damned food. What the fuck time is it, anyway?"

Reluctantly lifting his head, Toby checked the clock above the mantle, then laughed softly. "Well, that explains it."

"Hmmm?" Chris queried, already half-asleep.

"It's almost 6pm. Naptime." During the two years between their second reconciliation and Toby's parole, both men had gotten into the habit of sleeping away the earliest of the interminable hours between evening lockdown and lights out. It proved to be a good way to make up for the sleep they'd lost the night before while simultaneously avoiding interference from any hacks who might take exception to the pre-lights out games they couldn't resist

playing with each other. Technically there were no rules against inmates writing letters or reading or playing chess together alone in their pods -- in fact, quiet, peaceful activities of that sort were generally encouraged -- but somehow when they did it, sparks flew, which led to eyefucks so hot Toby often wondered how they'd avoided steaming up the plexiglass walls of their cell.

Chris grunted in reply, pressing Toby's head back down and tucking it under his chin. "S'okay. I like this better."

"What?" Toby asked quietly, scissoring his leg between Chris's. He felt a slight shrug, then heard a somnolent whisper in reply.

"Sleeping next to you instead of in those fuckin' bunks. Always hated that."

Smiling, Toby let his eyelids fall shut, secure in the knowledge that when he woke later that evening, Chris would be there.

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Jarred awake by the trill of his cell phone, Toby scrambled out of Chris's loose embrace and dived for the suit jacket draped over the back of the couch. Hampered by the dim light of the dying fire, it took him two more rings to get the phone into his hand and flipped open. "Hello?" he said groggily, taking a seat on the couch and rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his palm. "Oh, hi Johanna. Yes, everything's fine. We were just catching a nap. Yeah, he's right here. I'm sure he does. Hold on a sec."

Leaning over, Toby nudged Chris's ankle, eliciting a low groan, but no other response. Grinning, he ran his fingertips lightly across the arch of one bare foot, causing the entire leg to jerk away violently and prompting one sleepy blue eye to pop open and focus on him in a half-hearted glare, the other remaining stubbornly shut in denial. Chris rarely enjoyed being woken up, least of all by having one of his rare ticklish spots exploited. Holding up the phone, he asked, "You wanna talk to the kids?"

Chris propped himself up on his elbows, looking around in confusion, rapidly taking in his surroundings. "Shit, Toby, for a second I thought...."

"Yeah, I was like that for weeks, on and off. So?" he asked, gesturing pointedly with the phone.

Chris sat up and moved closer. "Huh? Oh. Hell yeah. They know I'm out?"

"No. I, uhm, didn't want to jinx it, or get their hopes up, in case anything went wrong."

Chris nodded his understanding -- convicts tended to be nearly as superstitious as athletes, especially about tenuous things like release dates. "Let's give 'em the good news then," he said, leaning back against the couch near Toby's legs.

"Johanna? Go ahead. Put her on." Toby paused as Gen's sister handed the phone to Holly. "Hi sweetheart. Happy new year to you too. You behaving for your aunt and your grandparents? Uh huh. Harry too?" Toby laughed and swung his legs up onto the couch, stretching out on his side. "Well, he's not all grown up like you are. Hey -- I've got a surprise for you. Hold on." Eyes alight with happiness, Toby handed the phone down to Chris.

"Hey, Holly? Yeah, it's me. No, are you kidding? I wouldn't let your dad spend new year's eve there. Not yet, but we'll be there when you two get back. Of course. Sure, put him on. Hi there, buddy. I sure am. Yep. For good, like your dad." Chris froze for a second, then cleared his throat and replied, "Yeah, well, I was pretty sad without him too. Hey, he's right here. Wanna say hi? Okay, Harry. See you soon. Tell your sister good night for me, huh?" Chris handed the phone back up, then closed his eyes and leaned his head back against Toby's stomach.

One hand gently caressing Chris's neck, Toby took the phone in the other and wished both gleeful children a good night and a happy new year, then did the same with his ex in-laws, adding a speedily dismissed apology for getting the kids wound up so late in the evening. "I guess you're right, Joh -- it's not like they were likely to go to sleep

anytime soon tonight anyway." He listened for a moment, then burst into laughter, a quickly muffled snicker that prompted Chris to look over at him with an inquiring gaze. "Please tell me your folks and the kids aren't still in the room. Thought so. And, no, we're not likely to either, thank you very much. Where? No, I don't think so." Chris's brow furrowed as Toby shot him a measuring look, gave a wry chuckle, then said, "Oh, you have no idea." Another short pause was followed by, "Alright then. We'll see you early on the 2nd. Give them hugs and kisses for both of us. Right. Night, Joh." Toby hung up and found himself the subject of an intense, curious stare.

"What was that about?" Chris growled playfully, twisting to rest an arm on either side of Toby's body, holding him in place physically as well as with the growing heat of his gaze.

As Chris levered himself off the floor and crawled sinuously onto the couch, looking every inch the jungle cat stalking his prey, Toby licked suddenly dry lips and croaked, "What?"

"You have no idea," Chris repeated, hands sliding up to tangle in Toby's hair, legs tightly bracketing restless thighs, eyes focused on freshly moistened lips.

"Oh. She suggested we go down to Florida. To South Beach," Toby replied, wrapping his arms around Chris's waist.

"And?" Lips curved into a teasing smile, Chris resisted Toby's efforts to pull him down into closer contact.

"Then she asked if you were too butch to consider going someplace like that."

"Ah. And I am, huh?" Chris murmured, lowering his hips, sucking in his breath as Toby arched into the welcome weight.

"Hell, Chris, \*I'm\* too butch for South Beach," Toby growled, moving one hand to the back of the dark head to pull his teasing lover into a hungry kiss. After a moment, he realized that Chris was responding, but not with his usual fervor. "What's wrong?"

Chris shrugged, a movement made awkward by his position – shoulders hunched, his face tucked into the curve where Toby's neck met his shoulder. "Ya know, if you wanna go someplace like that, we can. I'm not ashamed of what I am anymore."

Toby sighed, remembering long, painful discussions both with Sister Pete and alone in their cell. He'd had his own problems coming to terms with their relationship and its implications, but -- unlike Chris -- at least he'd been raised in a home where political correctness precluded overt homophobia. Digging his fingers into tight shoulders, he pulled Chris up to meet his eyes. "Let's not get hung up on this label thing again, okay? Yes, functionally we're both bi, but what matters most to me is that we're together. You and I, as people. And however that plays out is up to us, not anyone else's idea of what's socially acceptable." He waited until the tense muscles under his hands relaxed and the warm glow returned to Chris's eyes, then added, "So, do you wanna talk, or do you wanna fuck? Because I've got a surprise for you too."

**Chapter 11: December 31, 2004 / Release**

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Lifting up on his elbows, Chris glanced down between their bodies, then flashed a bright smile. "Hell, baby -- that ain't no surprise."

"Not that, asshole." Smirking, Toby pushed at Chris's shoulder. "Get up."

"Got that covered too," Chris quipped, rolling his hips against Toby's, preening as the other man involuntarily responded in kind.

"Chris..." Toby huffed.

Chuckling, Chris rolled toward the back of the couch, letting Toby slip out from under him. "How the hell do you do that?"

"What?" Toby asked, sitting up.

"Get all uptight and huffy and be so fucking sexy at the same time. It ain't fair."

Standing, Toby looked down at Chris with a smug grin. "Haven't you heard? All's fair in love and war."

"Well, we've had too damn much of one and not enough of the other, so come back down here."

"Uh uh. Don't forget about your surprise," Toby replied, neatly sidestepping the arm Chris threw out to recapture him. "Give me about two minutes and then follow me, okay?" Eyes bright with mischief, he stared at Chris until he got a reluctant nod, then disappeared into the bedroom.

After making sure the fire was safely burned down, Chris impatiently watched the minute hand of the clock. // Fucking drama queen... loves to make a big production outta the simplest things – like sex. // Grinning indulgently as it clicked over one more notch, he strode rapidly toward the bedroom. // Good thing for him he's worth every fucking second of it. // He stopped abruptly at the threshold, letting his eyes adjust to the inky blackness. "Toby?" he called out in a deep whisper.

"Over here," came the sultry reply.

Turning toward the sound, Chris could just make out pale flesh moving into the darkest corner of the room. Absently licking his lips, he stepped forward, only to have Toby disappear again. "What the fuck?" he murmured.

"Remember that first time we got to be alone after I got out?" came the disembodied reply.

Shrugging off his jacket, Chris followed the trail of words across the room, smiling at the memory. "Yeah...."

"And what you said you wanted to do to me?"

Thinking back, he remembered saying something about wanting to make Toby scream and.... "Oh fuck." His cock twitched as he recalled the fantasy he'd shared. "Yeah, I do," he growled, taking another step forward.

Heavy drapes receded on silent tracks, revealing a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the city skyline. "I know it's not at a beach or in the woods, but will this do?" Toby asked, stepping forward into the light of the full moon. Gilded by the cool glow, he radiated a combination of coy sensuality and undeniable need that drew Chris in like a moth to a flame.

"God, baby," Chris breathed, his eyes taking in every tantalizing curve and angle of Toby's nude form. "You look like... like one of those fucking Greek statues or something."

Tilting his head and running a hand through his hair in an endearingly shy gesture, Toby attempted to dilute Chris's intensity with humor. "So, you in the mood to play Roman conqueror and Greek slaveboy?"

Chris shook his head and crossed the remaining distance between them in two quick strides. Amazed at Toby's ability to joke about something like that after everything he'd been through at Vern's hands -- and his own, for that matter -- his face fell into a contemplative frown. Gazing deep into his lover's eyes, he wondered if maybe the reason Vern hated Toby so much, the reason he'd been the one prag he could never get over, was because of that ability -- because, despite the worst that Vern had thrown at him, he'd never completely broken. In fact, the Toby he knew had a lot more conqueror in him than slave.

// Or maybe 'conqueror' isn't quite the right word // Chris thought, reaching out to rest his fingertips on the sensitive skin stretched tight over Toby's collarbones. Letting his hands drift down slowly, his touch reverent, he leaned in close and asked, "But weren't all those statues of gods and heroes?" Breath hitching as the teasing touch crept lower, Toby nodded. With a crooked smile, Chris sank to his knees, nuzzling the hot flesh that arched instinctively towards him. "Then I guess a little worshipping's in order," he murmured, holding Toby's eyes as they glazed over with anticipation.

Toby gazed down, speechless. If there was any sight more arousing than Chris Keller on his knees, a satyric leer dancing counterpoint to the love shining up from the depths of his blue-black eyes, Toby was sure he'd never imagined it. With the tip of his tongue slowly tracing his parted lips, Chris leaned forward, hands sliding up the back of Toby's thighs to cup the downy curves of his ass. As a rough cheek brushed teasingly along his inner thigh, Toby braced his hands on Chris's broad shoulders and bit down on his bottom lip, stifling a low moan.

Roughly digging his fingers into the smooth, taut flesh he'd been caressing, Chris waited until Toby's mouth opened in a combination of surprise and wordless protest before swooping forward, as eager to hear Toby as he was to taste him.

"Oh fuck," Toby gasped as he was engulfed in wet heat. "Jesus fucking Christ, Keller," he growled, reflexively tightening his grip on Chris's shoulders, only subconsciously realizing he was creating a set of bruises to match the ones Chris was no doubt leaving on his ass. Chris hummed contentedly, drawing a long, low moan out of Toby, which was immediately rewarded with a sudden increase in suction.

Chris repeatedly pulled back far enough to give his tongue room to play and make his broad smile even more evident, then sucked his way back towards Toby's body, relishing the way hoarse obscenities and rough endearments -- who would've guessed being called a 'twisted fucking beautiful bastard' could be such a turn on? -- alternated with full-throated moans. He knew that with kids in the house they'd have to be more quiet in the future, but for tonight he needed to hear Toby, to lay to rest the last of his deeply buried doubts that this -- and he -- was really what Toby wanted.

Sliding his fingers closer together, he let them slip into the crease of Toby's body and quickly discovered that his increasingly vocal lover had used his two minutes to prepare himself and was consequently hot and slick -- and more than ready to get fucked, judging by the incoherent noise he made when two of Chris's fingers pressed gently inside. Feeling Toby's muscles tighten, then freeze, Chris immediately rocked back onto his hips and pressed hard on the pressure points at the base of Toby's cock.

Lightheaded from his barely averted orgasm, Toby only vaguely registered movement as Chris stood, spun him around and -- pausing only long enough to step out of his sweats -- pushed him forward with the press of his long, lean body. It wasn't until the front of his body made contact with the frigid cold of the window that he came fully back to his senses, nearly knocking Chris over as he yelped and jumped backwards.

"Shhh, baby, it's okay," Chris soothed, wrapping his arms around Toby's stomach and chest, nuzzling behind his ear.

"It's fucking cold!" Toby replied, resting his palms against the window, but leaving his arms relaxed.

"Not for long," Chris murmured, trailing gentle nips and wet kisses from one side of Toby's neck to the other. Dropping his hands down to protect the most cold-sensitive parts of his lover's body from the chill, he pressed forward again. "I promise."

Trapped between the muscular bulk of Chris's body and the window pane, Toby spread his legs and rested his forehead and chest against the glass, gasping at the cold, but feeling oddly protected and content. As happy as he was that he and Chris had finally come together as equals, there were times -- times like this, when he let Chris's seductive intensity and physical strength overwhelm him -- that it felt good to give up control, to trust Chris to take care of him. He sniffed wryly and pressed his hips backwards in an unobtrusive reminder, knowing that trust, even more than freedom or love, was the most precious gift they could give each other.

As if reading his mind, Chris paused, pushing against the glass with his forearms, then asked, "Are you sure this is safe?"

Unable to help himself, Toby burst into laughter. "Safe? After everything we've been through, everything we've done, you're worried about \*this\* being sa.... unnhhh!" Toby's question morphed into a startled moan as Chris took full advantage of his relaxed state to slip deep inside his body with one careful thrust. "Bastard," Toby hissed, rocking back to draw Chris even deeper inside, moving his head to stifle another moan against his forearm.

"No, Toby, don't," Chris breathed against his neck. "I love hearing you, baby. It's so fucking sexy. Just like you. Sexy and hot and all fucking mine." Punctuating each sentence with a slow thrust, Chris pressed Toby closer and closer to the glass until -- just like he'd promised -- their combined heat drove the chill away.

Fingers scrambling for purchase on the featureless glass, Toby arched back hard, driven both by Chris's words and by the almost tauntingly slow love-making. "Then fuck me, Chris," he demanded in a husky whisper. "Fuck me until I scream."

Like a predator marking his mate, Chris growled low in his throat, biting down hard on the sensitive skin at the crook of Toby's neck and shoulder. Abruptly releasing Toby's straining cock and rapidly tightening balls, he trailed his hands lightly over taut stomach muscles and down trembling arms, then tangled his fingers with Toby's, anchoring them to the windowpane. Sweat melded their bodies together as he pressed even closer, pumping deeper and faster into welcoming heat with each stroke, letting hoarse cries and ragged moans guide his movements.

Slick with a mixture of precum and sweat, Toby's cock rubbed against the heated glass in time with each powerful thrust. The sensation was a radical change from the firm, hot grip of his lover's hand, but when combined with the consummate rhythm of Chris's hips, it was enough to send him spiraling over the edge. "Chris," he gasped, feeling every muscle in his body tighten to the breaking point.

"Wait," Chris hissed through gritted teeth, pistoning harder as Toby whimpered and writhed against him. "Oh God, Toby... please, baby...." he whispered at last, trailing off into a deep, rumbling groan.

Blood pounding in his ears, Toby felt more than heard the ragged whisper, but as Chris came inside him, his body moving in long, shuddering waves, he understood completely. Feeling as if every straining muscle was melting into hot liquid, Toby let go, screaming Chris's name as he painted the window with his own release, then bonelessly slumped forward, grunting contentedly as Chris did the same.

A shiver rippled down Chris's back as the chill air penetrated his stuporous contentment. He wasn't sure how long they'd been standing there, but when he reluctantly lifted his head from Toby's shoulder, his neck gave a loud pop in protest.

"Falling apart on me already?" Toby asked, chuckling quietly.

"Hey -- I'm still plenty healthy enough to wear your ass out," Chris replied, wrapping his arms around Toby's waist and pulling them both away from the window, his solicitous manner at odds with his harsh tone.

Toby breathed a small sigh of disappointment as Chris's backward motion separated their bodies, but was immediately soothed by soft lips brushing gently against the deep indentations at the base of his neck. Tilting his head to the side to provide easier access, he let his eyes slit open and couldn't contain a low groan. "Oh God. What a mess."

"Wha?" Chris asking, lifting his head. "Damn, baby," he quipped, then laughed, feeling the heat of Toby's blush spread across his skin. "That's the funny thing about fantasies, Toby," he said, hugging the other man close. "You never quite figure on all the messy details."

"Mmmmm... it was worth it though," Toby purred, then yawned. "C'mon, let's get us and... that... cleaned up and try out this oversized bed, huh?"

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After a surprisingly short time -- living in a fish bowl for a few years did wonders to improve one's glass-cleaning ability -- Chris found himself slipping between decadently soft sheets, staying far to one side of the bed and apprehensively watching Toby toss wet towels into the bathroom and turn off the overhead light. Back in Oz there hadn't been much choice in sleeping arrangements -- it was either separate bunks or pretty much on top of one other. Chris knew which he preferred, he wasn't sure about Toby, who had often been a restless sleeper and then felt guilty for keeping Chris awake.

With the bright moonlight illuminating his path, Toby padded silently across the thick carpet and settled under the covers. Laying back with a soft groan, he turned his head and noticed that Chris was staring blankly up at the ceiling -- and was much too far away. With the memory of precious moments spent tangled together in a sated jumble of sweaty limbs clear in his mind, he rolled onto his side and slid toward the center of the bed, the motion drawing Chris's carefully shielded regard. Halfway across, Toby paused, his own expression guardedly hopeful.

Relieved, Chris gave a lazy grin, then extended an arm and slid over, not stopping until Toby's head fit easily into the shallow curve where sculpted pec met tattooed shoulder. As Toby's arm settled across his chest, fingers idly toying with the light dusting of hair around his right nipple, Chris exhaled in a long sigh and finally allowed himself to relax into the thick mattress. "Toby," he whispered.

"Hmph?" came the sleepy reply.

"Thanks."

Toby lifted his head and met achingly serious midnight blue eyes. Pressing their mouths together in a gentle kiss, he murmured, "My pleasure," then -- anchoring himself to Chris by tangling their legs together -- lowered his head and drifted off to sleep, a grin still tugging at lips. Tightening his grip on the warm body draped halfway over his own, Chris did the same.

**Chapter 12: December 31, 2004 / Fin (x2)**

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Chris woke slowly, briefly considering the notion that he'd just had the most amazing dream of his life, at least until pleasantly sore muscles reassured him that last night had been undeniably real. He lay still for a moment, enjoying the quiet. For too many years he'd been jarred awake by a harsh buzzer and the shouts of hacks, followed by the squeak of cheap bedsprings and the grumbling, shuffling noises of too many men packed too close together.

// Never again, // he thought, half promise and half prayer. But could he really do it, he wondered. Could he stay legal and sober and carve a niche for himself in the lives of the man sleeping next to him and his children?

Stretching, he rolled over and opened his eyes, content to just watch Toby sleep for several long minutes. He'd done that a lot in Oz, but had never seen him look so relaxed, so peaceful. Reaching out, he traced the curve of a lightly stubbled jaw with a gentle finger, pausing as groggy blue eyes fluttered open and a sleepy smile appeared.

"Hey," Toby mumbled, slowing focusing on Chris's intense expression. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Chris whispered, realizing he was answering his own question as much as Toby's. He knew it wouldn't be easy but... "Hell, yeah," he repeated, smiling and leaning in for a kiss to seal the bargain. "Happy new year, baby."

<fin>

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ChrisMuse's alternate ending:

Chris opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling of his cell at Cedar Junction in despair. Another New Year's Eve; another hopeless fantasy of what might have been. "Happy fucking new year," he mumbled, rolling over and letting himself drift back to sleep, praying not to dream.

<fin>

<< END >>