The Stairs, the Paper, and the Cannoli

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The Stairs, the Paper, and the Cannoli

by moonprincessnat

Summary

Travis finds himself in trouble and Beck helps him pick up the pieces, but will the puzzle fit together once he has?

Beck hummed softly as he cut up a nice, red, juicy tomato. In his experience, the fresher the produce, the better the dish. And this particular dish was an experiment. If it turned out well, he'd introduce it into his menu. He was enjoying the quiet, and even if there was a small part of him that missed the constant chatter of a certain irritant, he preferred to ignore it. Quiet was good. And he really didn't want to imagine the chaos that Travis would bring into his life if the annoying younger man were to show up on his doorstep. In the weeks since he'd returned Travis to his father, and then subsequently taken him away again, he hadn't heard from either Walker. He supposed he was lucky that Billy had held up his end of the deal. Normally, drugging someone with Billy's connections wasn't a good idea. But he had done as he'd promised--walked Travis right through the front door. There wasn't any clause in their agreement indicating that he couldn't turn around and walk him right back out again. As for Travis, he'd found him a nice, relatively inexpensive apartment, paid for six months rent up front, and instructed the younger man to stay out of trouble. He snorted at the thought. Travis and trouble were synonymous. But so far, it seemed that Travis had either been keeping his head down or was keeping his problems away from Beck, something that suited him just fine, he told himself firmly.

He was scraping the chopped tomato into a small bowl when he heard a knocking on the back door. Frowning, he wiped his hands on a towel and made his way to the door. The restaurant was closed for the night, and he certainly wasn't expecting anyone. Sliding the small viewer window open, he shook his head when he saw who it was. Almost as if Beck's thoughts had summoned him, Travis was bouncing on the balls of his feet impatiently. With a soft sigh, Beck unlocked the door and opened it. "What are you doing here, Travis?" he asked.
"Hey, big boy! Aren't you glad to see me? I was in the neighborhood and just thought I'd stop by. How's business? Packing 'em in? I bet you are. Aren't you going to let me in? It's kinda strange to be having a conversation in the alley."

Beck couldn't quite hide the small grin that formed. Travis hadn't changed a bit. Well, he was a bit cleaner than he had been in the jungle, but he still talked nonstop. He opened the door a bit wider and stood aside, allowing the younger man into the kitchen.

Travis whistled. "Wow, not too shabby. Looks very professional. Of course, since you are a professional, I guess that makes sense. Ooh, are you cooking? Can I have some? I kinda missed supper," Travis said, zeroing in on the food immediately.

Beck pointed to one of the stools next to the counter with his knife. "Have a seat. It's not quite done yet."

Travis sat on the stool, sniffing the air appreciatively. "Well, whatever it is, it sure smells good!" he proclaimed.

Beck smirked, but didn't say anything.

Travis watched Beck for a few moments, but the details of kitchen science had never really interested him. For him, cooking usually consisted of either take-out or sticking a frozen dinner in the microwave. Sure, when Beck was cooking, it looked more like alchemy, but Travis had never been one who could just sit still and watch. He needed to move... do something. Swinging his legs in agitation, Travis had to fight the urge to hop off the stool and prowl around the kitchen. But Beck had told him to sit, and the bigger man was currently wielding a sizable knife. "You want some help? I could chop something... maybe stir a pot or two?" he suggested.

Raising a brow, Beck looked at Travis in disbelief.

Travis held up his hands. "I know, I know... 'sit and don't touch anything,'" he mumbled, quoting words he'd heard several times while watching Beck cook.

"Glad you remember," Beck said, adding the last few cloves of garlic. "All right. This just needs to simmer for a few minutes. Now, why are you here, Travis?"

"Aww, maybe I just missed ya, big guy. Did ya ever think of that?" Travis asked.

Beck snorted. "Right. C'mon, Travis, you might as well just spit it out. What kind of trouble are you in now?"

"Now that hurts. You shouldn't assume that I'm in trouble. I wanted to see how you were doing," Travis protested.

Shooting him a look, Beck began cleaning up the kitchen. He knew the younger man wouldn't be able to hold out for long. Travis was always just blurting things out, no matter how much he might try to be devious. He just didn't really have it in him.

Travis scowled as Beck just ignored him. It was true that he'd missed Beck... but it was also true that he just might be in some trouble, too. He drummed his fingers on the table, debating. He wasn't sure why he was so reluctant to tell Beck now that he was actually here. After all, isn't that why he'd come? But he didn't like it that Beck thought he would only show up if he had a problem. The reasons for that he really wasn't willing to examine too closely just yet. Blowing his breath out, he decided not to tell Beck about his suspicions that his apartment was being staked out. After all, he could just be paranoid. Nodding to himself, he straightened up on the stool. "Did I tell you that I'm
taking some classes at the university?" he said.

"No," Beck said as he wiped down the counter. He frowned, wondering where this was going. He'd thought that Travis was about to finally come clean, but then something had changed. Turning around, he studied Travis, narrowing his eyes.

Travis just smiled back at him innocently. "Yep. If I'm going to go after the Kung Kau Po, I thought it might help if I learned more about the culture which produced it."

Beck gave him a skeptical look. "I thought you didn't think too much of academic types?"

Travis shrugged. "I don't, but it doesn't hurt to hear what they have to say. Plus, sometimes it's fun to yank the professor's chain," he said with a grin.

Snorting, Beck turned back to his sauce. It looked just about done, so he grabbed a couple of plates and some silverware.

"This one guy, Professor Lieber, he's the worst. He's all puffed up about himself and his doctorates, but he's never actually done anything," Travis said, watching Beck dish out the food with interest. "Oh, yeah, he's published a book, but it's a piece of crap. You can tell the guy's never actually been out in the field."

Beck just nodded, letting Travis prattle on. For some reason, he found the chatter oddly soothing. He set a plate in front of Travis and one next to it before heading to the fridge. He brought back two bottles of beer and set one next to each plate.

Travis dug into the food with gusto. "Wow, this is really good!" he said around mouthful of pasta.

"Swallow and then speak," Beck advised, but his lips quirked up at the compliment.

They were both silent as they concentrated on eating. Beck was trying to decide if he needed to add more oregano, while Travis simply enjoyed being in Beck's company once again. For one thing, the older man always made him feel safe. Beck wasn't trying to curry favor with Billy by spending time with Travis or keeping an eye on him, at least, not anymore. And he didn't hit Travis simply for being annoying, either. In fact, Beck had been incredibly patient during the time between leaving Billy's house and setting Travis up in his own apartment. Of course, he hadn't really seen the big man since, but Beck had probably been busy. He did have a new restaurant, after all... right? Travis suddenly frowned. Maybe Beck didn't want to see him. Maybe he had been too obnoxious. Maybe coming here hadn't been such a good idea...

"What's wrong?" Beck asked, noting that it had been quiet for much too long and that Travis looked slightly ill. He hadn't noticed anything off about his portion, but maybe some of the clams had gone bad?

"Huh?" Travis asked, glancing up from his plate to note Beck looking at him with what just might be concern. "Oh, nothing. Just remembered that I have a paper due tomorrow... Thanks for the food, man, but I'd better get doing. Didn't mean to just burst in on you. Uhh... take care of yourself," Travis finished lamely as he stood up hurriedly and practically bolted out the door.

Beck stared after him in surprise. What the hell had just happened? One minute, Travis had been fine, and the next... Scowling, Beck finished his meal, but for some reason it didn't taste quite as good as it had before Travis' abrupt departure. He shook his head. Understanding the workings of Travis' mind was not one of his skills. Maybe he'd need to check up on the younger man.

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Travis slowed his pace as he neared his apartment and noticed that the door was ajar. He knew that he’d closed and locked the door. This was not good. Debating whether to beat feet and get out of there or to peek inside to see what the damage was, Travis hesitated just a moment too long, as the door suddenly opened and he found himself confronted with two much larger men wearing identical scowls. Eyes wide, Travis decided retreat was definitely in order and turned to run, but had only reached the stairs when he felt something met with the back of his legs and he was sent tumbling head first down the stairs. 'Oh, this is gonna hurt,' was the last thought he had before his head connected with a step and he knew no more.

"Shit, is he dead?" one of the men asked, peering down the stairs at the motionless figure.

The other one shrugged. "So what if he is? Boss said to get him out of the picture. Looks like he's out to me."

"Yeah but... I thought we was just going to scare him," the first one protested weakly. "Maybe beat on him a bit to get the point across. I don't want nothing to do with no murder wrap, man."

"What murder? Man tripped and fell down the stairs, end of story. C'mon, Joe, let's go. We don't want to be here when someone finds him."

Unable to think of anything that could counter his partner's logic, Joe gave one quick look back at the apartment they'd just left and then followed his partner to the back staircase. With the number they'd done on the kid's apartment, he doubted the kid's fall would be deemed an accident, but he knew there'd be no arguing with Frank. Besides, wasn't anything they could do about it now, anyway.

Neither of the two noticed the slightly cracked open door of the apartment two doors down.

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Beck frowned as he reached the top of the stairs. Even from this distance, the yellow police tape across Travis' door was unmistakeable. Suddenly, he had a very bad feeling. Maybe he should have pushed Travis a bit harder the night before... Eyeing the tape distastefully, he rapped hard on the door, unsurprised when there was no answer. Swearing heatedly under his breath, Beck was just about to try jimmying the lock, tape or no tape, when he heard a door open.

"He's not there," a voice came from behind him, and Beck turned to see a nerdy looking guy staring up at him.

"Where is he?" Beck asked, forcing himself to ask calmly.

The guy didn't answer, looking Beck over carefully, as if comparing him to some image in his mind. "You're not one of them," he said, finally.

"One of who?" Beck asked, confused. "Look, I'm a friend of Travis'. I just want to know where he is and what happened."

"Hospital, most likely. Lucky it's not the morgue. Way he went down the stairs, I was sure he was a goner, but he was still alive when the paramedics got here," nerdy guy said.

At the mention of the morgue, Beck felt something within him tighten painfully. "Are you saying he fell down the stairs?"

Nerdy guy gave a nervous laugh. "Only if you call someone hitting the back of his legs with a baseball bat falling. His apartment's trashed, too. Bet he won't be getting his security deposit back."
"The last was said sympathetically."

"Wait, someone pushed Travis down the stairs? And wrecked his apartment?" Now, Beck knew he should have pushed Travis harder about any problems. Well, he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. First, though, he had to find Travis. And then he would find who had hurt him.

"There were two of 'em. Never seen 'em before and I hope I don't see 'em again."

Beck studied him consideringly. "Why are you telling me? I'm not a cop."

"Travis was OK. Kinda hyper and occasionally a bit thoughtless, but he was nice to me and he helped me out a week or so ago. He took care of my cat while I was visiting my mother," nerdy guy explained. "Sides, I doubt the cops are going to do anything. They have more important things to investigate. They were convinced it was a drug deal gone bad, even though there wasn't a trace of drugs either in the apartment or on Travis. There was some mention of Travis' father, but I couldn't hear what they said about him."

Beck could guess, and he sighed. Even when he wasn't physically there, Billy could hurt his son. "Any idea what hospital?"

"Probably St. Brigitte's. It's the closest. If you see him, tell Travis I hope he gets better soon," Nerdy guy said and then scurried back to his apartment, locking the door behind him.

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When Beck got his first look at Travis in the hospital, he had to take a quick step back into the hallway. For one, horrible moment, he wished he had guns in his hands so he could mete out justice upon whomever had done this to Travis. It sent him back to the jungle, with Travis trapped in an old bus and enemies shooting the wreck into a piece of Swiss cheese while Travis screamed for him. He hadn't even known Travis that well then. But now... Beck clenched his fists. They weren't in the jungle and guns would bring nothing but trouble, and he had learned to do without them in any case. He couldn't believe Travis managed to escape from Brazil relatively unscathed but was almost killed outside his own apartment. Once his rage was under control, he strode into Travis' room as if nothing has happened.

Up close, Travis looked even worse. He was paler than normal and bruises were evident upon much of the visible skin. One arm was in a cast and the other was sporting an IV. His eyes, however, flicked open when Beck drew close to the bed. A bit glazed with pain and confusion, they nevertheless aimed at Beck's face, and he frowned.

"Beck?" Travis asked uncertainly. His vision still blurry, it almost looked to him as if there were two man-mountains towering over him, but still... "What are you doing here?"

"I went to your apartment. One of the neighbors told me what happened. What I want to know, is why you didn't call me? Or tell me what was going on before it went this far." Beck kept his voice low and even, but he was fighting against the urge to take hold of Travis and shake him--not a good idea, given the younger man's current condition.

Travis' frown deepened. "Huh. Must have been the cat guy..." His eyes drifted away for a moment before what else Beck said finally filtered into what was left of his brain. "Call you?" He was confused and his head was still pounding, so he figured he had pretty good excuses for having trouble following the conversation. After all, Beck wouldn't want Travis to bug him... would he?

"Yes, Travis. Why didn't you call me?" Beck asked with much more patience than he was feeling.
But he was also getting more concerned. Normally, Travis would be running his mouth a hundred miles a minute and have managed to say something to get himself into trouble with his first five words. Instead, he just blinked up at Beck blankly.

"I don't feel so good," Travis said weakly, and then he turned his head to the side, absolutely certain he was about to upchuck on Beck's shoes.

"Hey, hey. Take it easy, I got you," Beck said, holding Travis' shoulder easily with one hand while another held the small plastic tray he'd spotted on the night stand under Travis' mouth. Not much came up, but the dry heaves looked painful and Beck winced a bit in sympathy at the soft whimpers Travis made as they shook him. Finally, it was over and Beck eased Travis back down onto the bed.

"Oh good, I was afraid no one was going to come for him, and I really didn't want to release him without someone to watch him," a voice stated from behind Beck, and he whirled around, almost dropping into a crouch to face the possible threat before he caught himself. He felt a bit silly as he looked at the petite woman who had spoken. From the stethoscope and lab coat, he took her for a doctor. This time, it was his turn to frown. "Release him? You're kidding, right?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, no. He doesn't have insurance and there's really nothing more we can do for him, anyway. But he does need to be monitored. He has a serious concussion, but at least his skull wasn't fractured, which is a miracle in itself."

"Hey, doc," Travis said, his grin barely ghosting across his face before he grimaced and closed his eyes again.

"Hello, Travis. Anti-nausea medication isn't doing the trick, huh?" the doctor asked sympathetically. "Hopefully, it will go away on its own before too long. However, if you're still dizzy and feeling sick in a few days, I'll want you to head straight for the nearest ER," she instructed. Then she turned her attention back to Beck, who was watching the interplay with some amusement. "In addition to the concussion, he also has several broken ribs, his left wrist is broken, and he's severely bruised. I'm advising bed rest for several days, at least until the double vision goes away. It will help his ribs, as well."

Beck blinked. This wasn't exactly what he'd been planning when he came to see Travis, but now it almost seemed inevitable. "Any medication I need to know about?"

"Yes, I'll send the nurse back with his prescriptions along with his discharge papers. First, though, let me just take one final look at him."

Stepping back, Beck moved so the doctor could reach Travis. He watched as she carefully palpitated his torso, ignoring the hitches in Travis' breathing as she did so. Once she was satisfied that his ribs were still in the proper position under the tape and none of the bruises had turned hard, she brought out her pen light.

"Aww, doc, not that again," Travis complained.

"Sorry, just one more time," she promised.

To Beck's surprise, Travis just sighed. Normally, he would have kept protesting the entire time. That, more than anything, brought home just how hurt Travis actually was. And once again he felt that surge of rage against whoever had done this to the younger man.

"All right. Everything looks about as good as can be expected. I'll go start your paperwork. And, Travis, please try not to fall down any more stairs. You were very lucky this time," the doctor stated,
then she squeezed his hand and left the room.

Beck cocked an eyebrow. "I can see you've been hiding your true nature from the good doctor," he quipped.

"Ha ha," Travis said, but his lips quirked up. "I think it's 'cause I've been puking everytime I've seen her."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. You know, you don't really have to stay with me. Just drop me off at my apartment and I'll be fine," Travis said, his eyes closed.

"I don't think so. And you're not going back there. I'm taking you back to my place and putting you to bed," Beck stated before he could think about it.

"Promises, promises..." Travis muttered under his breath, but he didn't argue. Truth of it was, he didn't want Beck to just drop him off and leave him.

Beck stared down at him for a few more minutes, waiting, he supposed, for Travis to start talking, but the younger man remained quiet and his breaths evened out as he drifted off. Shaking his head, Beck glanced around the room. Travis' clothes should be around somewhere...

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By the time he got Travis safely ensconced in the guest bedroom, Beck was ready for some Scotch and a nice, long... He ruthlessly cut the thought off. It had been quite some time and, the way things were going, it would be longer still before he could relax that way. The image of a slightly rumpled Travis in his bed flashed through his mind and Beck groaned. It was official, Travis had driven him insane. Unfortunately, he didn't have time for a drink or anything else. He needed to get to the restaurant before the dinner crowd. His second chef was OK for lunch, but he preferred to be there himself for dinner. Besides, from what he could tell, Travis would be sleeping, anyway. He'd read all the instructions the nurse had brought with the prescriptions and was determined that Travis would be following them to the letter. That meant that for the next week, Travis would only be allowed out of bed for bodily necessities. 'Well, at least that should keep him out of trouble,' Beck thought.

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Travis started to turn over and gasped at the pain that suddenly enveloped him like a glove. 'OK, bad idea,' he thought to himself. His head throbbed in time with his pulse and forced himself to relax his muscles which were screaming at him in protest. A small whimper escaped and he briefly wished he had broken his neck when he went down the stairs--at least then he wouldn't be feeling this much pain. 'Of course, I wouldn't be feeling anything at all, so I guess pain is better than nothing.' Though, right now, it was a close call.

"Travis?" Beck's voice came and then the door opened and Beck's head poked in.

Squinting a bit at the light from the hall, Travis let out a soft groan as he felt his stomach muscles tighten up. Didn't he hurt enough already?

"Easy, just take deep breaths. You don't have anything left to bring up," Beck said softly, his voice a pleasant murmur in Travis' ear. Then a big hand was across Travis' back and shoulders, gently coaxing the muscles to relax.

Amazingly, the nausea did fade as Travis leaned gratefully into Beck's solid warmth. It felt nice to
have someone take care of him—something that hadn't happened since he was very small.

"Better?" Beck asked.

"Mmmm," Travis replied, nuzzling his head a bit into Beck's neck. The rubbing stopped for a moment, but then resumed. After a while, the pain had subsided to a dull throbbing and Travis managed to have a coherent thought. Unfortunately, it was 'Oh shit!' and he immediately tensed up again.

"Hey, what it is? Are you going to be sick?" Beck asked, leaning back so he could get a look at Travis' face. It was pale, but not green-tinged anymore. "It's about time for your meds and I have some soup and bread ready if you think you can keep it down," he offered when Travis didn't say anything, only stared at him intently. "Travis?" he prodded, when the younger man was still silent.

Travis blinked. Well, it certainly didn't seem like Beck was going to beat the shit out of him. In fact, all he could read in the other man's eyes was concern... for him. "Uh... I can try it," he said lamely.

"Good. I'll be right back." Beck was up and out of the room so fast that it almost made Travis' head start spinning again.

Furrowing his brow, Travis leaned back against the pillows. That was just... odd. Beck hadn't yelled at him once, not even when Travis had... What had he been doing? And why hadn't Beck complained? Thinking just made his head hurt worse, so Travis closed his eyes and decided to put it out of his mind for now. It wasn't like he was in any shape to do anything, even if he wasn't just reading things the wrong way. Which he probably was, as this was 'Beck.'

When Beck returned with a tray of food, he was all business and Travis wondered if what he had taken for concern earlier was more a case of wishful thinking than reality. But then again, Beck was taking care of him, so...

"Travis," Beck said again, and this time he caught the smaller man's attention. "Are you having trouble focusing? Any dizziness?" He peered into Travis' eyes, but the pupils appeared to be dilating correctly now. "Here." He held out the pills in one hand and, when Travis had popped them in his mouth, he handed over the bottle of water. Once he was sure Travis wasn't going to immediately spit everything back out, he retrieved the tray from the dresser. "Now, let's see if you can keep something in your stomach."

Travis nodded. He was starving, but also a bit hesitant. All he really remembered of the last day or so was pain and heaving, interrupted by long periods of sleep. His hand shook a bit as he took hold of the spoon, but once he started eating, he could feel some of his strength returning and he dug in with gusto.

"Hey, take it easy. It's not going to run away from you," Beck said. He had no desire to see the soup making a return appearance. He pointed to the bread. "Eat some of that. It'll help soak up the soup."

Biting into the still warm bread, Travis closed his eyes and moaned, but not in pain. "God, this is good. Did you just make this?" he asked, opening his eyes and looking at Beck.

Beck smirked, leaning back in the chair he'd brought into the room the day before. "Yep. Fresh out of the oven. Made the soup, too. I'm thinking of adding it to the lunch menu. What do you think?"

"Good idea," Travis said around the bread. Then he paused in his chewing, cocking his head. "Aren't you supposed to be at the restaurant now? For the lunch hour?"

"Nah, that's what employees are for. I don't have to watch them constantly, you know," Beck said,
shrugging.

Travis arched an eyebrow. "Since when?"

"Since two days ago," Beck stated flatly. "And now, since you can open your mouth without your guts trying to escape, why don't you tell me what's going on? And no, that isn't a question."

Flushing, Travis dropped the crust of the bread back onto the plate. He suddenly wasn't quite so hungry anymore.

"Travis," Beck growled. "Do you want your options?"

"No, I don't want the options. There are no options, I know that by now," he muttered, easing back against the pillows. He'd rather have flopped back, but he wasn't stupid--that would hurt like a son of a bitch. He dragged a hand through his hair and then glanced over at Beck, who had clearly run out of patience. Truthfully, he was surprised the big man had waited this long. Sighing, he shook his head. "I don't know."

Beck scowled and leaned forward. "What do you mean you don't know? There was something you were going to tell me the other night, but you changed your mind? What was it? And why didn't you tell me? Just what kind of trouble are you into now?"

Travis scowled back at him. "I told you! I don't know! About a week ago, I noticed that a couple of guys seemed to be staking out the apartment building, but I thought they were just mental or something. I haven't been doing anything." At Beck's skeptical look, he exclaimed, "I haven't! I've been going to class and doing some tutoring, but that's it. All of my free time has been taken up with research. I told you I wanted to go after the Kung Kau Po. Before I can do that, I need to know more about it and more about Mongolia. It's not exactly the same as Brazil, you know."

Studying Travis intently, Beck finally nodded. Rubbing his forehead, he asked, "Could it have been your father? It wouldn't be the first time he's sent someone after you," Beck said wryly.

But Travis was shaking his head. "Nope. Dad's more direct. If it had been him, they would have come right in after me and I wouldn't be here now. Plus, though he enjoys hitting me, I don't think he actually wants me dead," Travis said. "And why bother ransacking my apartment? I don't have anything anyone would want."

That was true, and it certainly wasn't Billy's style. If he'd wanted Travis dead, one bullet to the head would have sufficed. "Have you pissed anyone off recently?" Beck asked.

"Hey!" Travis protested.

"I know you. I think you can piss people off just by being in the same room with them, but it's usually your mouth that does it," Beck said.

Travis squirmed a bit, but didn't protest. His mouth had gotten him into trouble plenty of times, but he couldn't think of anything serious. Finally, he shrugged. "Not that I know of, but I guess it's possible. But enough to beat me down the stairs? That seems a bit extreme."

"You're not going back there. You'll stay with me... at least until we can figure out who did it," Beck stated.

"Aww, you don't have to do that. I mean, you already let me stay here before, and then you set me up in that apartment, and my rent hasn't even run out," Travis said.
"You're staying here. End of discussion," Beck said, then he stood up and reached for the tray. "Keep the fruit juice. You're still dehydrated."

Travis obediently snagged the bottle of juice from the tray. "You don't have to do all this," he protested feebly.

"No, I don't, but I'm going to," He glanced at the clock. "Your meds will probably kick in any time now, so while you're napping, I'm going to swing by your apartment and grab some of your things. Anything in particular you want me to get?"

"My backpack? It has my books and laptop in it. I have a paper due next week," Travis said.

"OK. And I'll find it where?"

Travis grinned. "Under the dirty clothes in the bathroom. That's my security system. I didn't think anyone would be brave enough to dig through that pile."

"Terrific," Beck muttered, but his lips quirked up. It actually wasn't a bad idea. Hopefully, it had worked and the backpack would still be there.

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Beck frowned as he studied the door to Travis' apartment. The police tape had already been removed, and he had a feeling that as far as they were concerned, the case was closed. They had no interest in finding out who tried to off Billy Walker's kid, probably figured it was a family feud. Shaking his head in disgust, he pushed the door open. No one had bothered to fix the lock, either. He stepped inside and once again felt anger about what had happened. It was obvious that whoever had broken in had no interest in the contents. No, this was pure, malicious destruction. Although, why go to the trouble of trashing Travis' apartment if they were just going to kill him, anyway? Maybe the plan hadn't been to kill him, just scare him, but then he'd arrived before they'd finished and they'd simply taken advantage of the opportunity? Mentally shrugging, Beck made his way towards the bathroom. It didn't really matter, because the fact was they had almost killed Travis, and for that they would pay.

Nudging the pile of clothes with his boot, Beck finally felt something solid. Rather than digging through the pile of odoriferous garments, he just kicked them out of the way until a rather battered looking leather backpack was revealed. He snagged it and then took a quick glance around, grimacing at the mess. The mirror had been broken and glass was all over the sink. Various toiletries were in the toilet. Well, looked like Travis wouldn't be needing anything else from this room. He was just glad the toilet hadn't been flooded--then the backpack and its contents would have been toast.

The bedroom hadn't been spared, either. Clothes were strewn all over, the drawers of the dresser had been dumped, and dresser itself was in pieces. The bed had been hacked up and the Tomb Raider movie poster had been torn from the wall. Heaving a sigh, Beck scrounged in the closet until he came up with a duffle bag and started stuffing clothes inside. Travis didn't really have that many, and some had suffered the same fate as the bed clothes, so it didn't take long until he was done. Checking his watch, he noted he would just have time to drop the stuff off at home before he needed to get to the restaurant. He figured Travis could paw through what was left once he was mobile. But he wasn't going to let Travis come back alone. No, if and when Travis returned, Beck was going to be with him.

He had just shut the door behind him when the nerdy neighbor with the cat poked his head out of a door down the hallway.
"Travis OK?" nerdy neighbor asked.

"Getting there," Beck replied.

"Is he coming back?"

"Not likely," Beck grunted.

"Oh. Well, he got a package. I signed for it. Could you take it to him?" the neighbor asked.

A package? "Sure." Beck shifted the backpack to his shoulder so he'd be able to take the package in the same hand as the duffle... as long as it wasn't too big. It wasn't. Looked about the size of a textbook, and, knowing Travis, that's probably what it was. "Thanks. He needs something to distract him for awhile. Broken ribs are a bitch."

"Oh, yeah, well, I'm glad he's doing better," the neighbor stammered out as he handed over the package and stepped back inside. "Bye." The door quickly shut and several locks were engaged.

Beck blinked in bemusement. He hadn't thought he'd been threatening in any way, but maybe the guy was just paranoid. Shrugging, he turned and headed down the stairs, trying to see where the package came from, but the return address seemed to be smudged. Whether it was accidental or on purpose was impossible to tell.

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Travis was asleep when Beck returned with his things, so he just set the bags and the package by the door, along with a paper sack that contained a sandwich, water, and Travis' next dose of meds that he'd marked "Eat" on, and backed out of the room, noting the empty juice bottle on the nightstand with satisfaction. At least Travis had been following all the medical advice. He didn't plan on that continuing for long, however, once Travis started feeling better. Keeping the younger man in bed was going to be a problem. A flush of heat ran through him as he thought of a better reason to keep Travis in bed, before he caught himself. Now was not the time. If he didn't hurry, he was going to be late for the dinner rush.

Happily, Rodrigo had everything well in hand when Beck entered the kitchen. Beck's later than normal entrance was noted with no more than a twitch of a mustache and then Rodrigo had returned to what he was doing. "Sorry, had to take care of some things this afternoon," Beck offered.

"Your ill amigo, he is doing better?" Rodrigo asked.

"Yeah, much better. I even got him to eat some lunch today," Beck said, smiling slightly.

"Eating is good," Rodrigo returned with a grin. "You'll be happy to know that the organic vegetables you ordered arrived on time and the tomatoes especially look muy bueno."

"Fantastic. I have just the dish to try with them, too. Has Marco put up the night's special yet?"

Rodrigo shook his head. "He knows better. But he's been coming back to the kitchen every 5 minutes to see if you're here."

"OK. What's your pleasure for dessert tonight?" Beck asked. They traded off--if Beck did the special, Rodrigo did the dessert and vice versa.

"Cannoli's fine. Just stash a few in the freezer for me to take home," Beck said and then he set off to find Marco before he started cooking.

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Beck was practically humming as he let himself into his house, a box of cannoli clutched in one hand. Rodrigo was a magician with desserts, which was just as well, as Beck generally preferred creating dinner entrees--more substance. But he had to admit, the cannoli were exceptional, and the perfect counterpoint to the tomato-based clam sauce he had made.

When he poked his head in Travis' room, he was unsurprised to find the younger man fast asleep with the laptop on his legs and books spread out beside him on the bed. A quick glance around also located the bag that held Travis' supper and medication, now crumpled up and half under the backpack on the floor. Moving quietly so as not to wake Travis, Beck closed the laptop and leaned it against the nightstand and then stacked the books next to it. He took a moment to study Travis. Travis' color had improved, but the bruises were starting to darken, adding color of their own. He was just about to turn and leave when Travis' eyes suddenly popped open.

Travis blinked a few times, orienting himself, then noticed Beck standing over him. "Hey," he rasped.

"Hey. How are you feeling? Any problems with supper?" Beck asked.

"Nope. I think I'm past the worst of it. It's kind of hard to focus on reading, but I can do it for short bursts.... then nap in between," Travis said with a slight grin.

"I brought home some cannoli. Do you want one?" Beck offered.

"Sure. Just give me a hand up, will you? I need to..." Travis trailed off, waving his hand in the direction of the hallway.

Beck offered his hand silently and pulled Travis up, careful not to move too fast. Once Travis was steady on his feet, he let him go and watched him travel carefully across the room. It was obvious that it was painful, but he just kept moving. Assured Travis would be all right, Beck returned to the kitchen for the cannoli and some tea, along with Travis' next dose of meds.

After relieving himself, Travis eased back into bed with a low groan. He was kind of glad Beck wasn't there to watch, as it hurt like hell. The fact that the big guy was being so nice to him was kind of disconcerting, but he wasn't about to complain. And in his current condition, he really didn't want to piss off Beck. Not only couldn't he run, but he didn't have any place to run to. Which brought him back to the problem at hand--who the hell had he pissed off in the first place? He hadn't been lying to Beck, he had no idea what was going on. And that was unusual. Usually, when someone was after him, he at least had an idea of who and why. This time, though, he was sure he hadn't done anything. He hadn't gone out with any girls... or boys, he hadn't smarted off to anyone... well, at least not overly much. Certainly not enough to call for someone to trash him and his apartment both. In fact, the most acrimonious argument he'd had with anyone had been his professor, but it seemed unlikely the geezer would send thugs after him for that. What would be the point? It wasn't as if anyone took anything Travis said seriously, anyway.

Before he could continue his train of thought that was doing nothing more than making his head throb, Beck stepped into the room, once more carrying a tray. This time, Travis smirked a bit. Seeing Beck act like someone's butler was just so incongruous that he couldn't help it.

"What?" Beck asked, frowning.
"Nothing," Travis said, waving the hand that didn't have a cast on it. "You're just so... domestic," he decided on.

Beck snorted. "Don't get used to it."

"Yeah," Travis sighed, his amusement leaving as quickly as it had come. He needed to remember that this was temporary. As soon as he was back on his feet, he was sure Beck would find him another apartment and wash his hands of Travis once again. The thought was depressing. He looked down at the bed, his mouth turning down at the corners.

"C'mon, cheer up. You'll be out of bed in no time. For now, however, try one of these. They're terrific," Beck said, thrusting a cannoli towards Travis' face. He wasn't sure exactly why Travis' mood had shifted so drastically in a matter of seconds, but he figured sugar would help. When Travis looked back up, Beck wasted no time in smashing the cannoli against his lips, laughing as the brown eyes widened in shock and then a curious tongue poked out, licking at the cream, and Beck almost choked.

"That's really good!" Travis exclaimed, leaning forward to take a bite out of the pastry that Beck was still holding in front of his face. He had been startled by Beck's action, as he hadn't seen Beck in a playful mood before, but he had to admit that he liked it. And the cannoli was as good as promised.

The rush of heat Beck felt this time had nothing to do with rage. Watching Travis eat from his hand was a total turn on, something he hadn't expected. When Travis reached Beck's fingers, Beck felt a shudder run through his body and he was bending over and pressing his lips against the sweet lips, licking cream off them as he kissed. He wasn't sure who was more shocked at his action, him or Travis, but then the mouth opened under his and a tongue touched his own lips and all thought was banished.

When Beck pulled back, panting slightly, he had to stop himself from lunging forward again. Travis was temptation itself--eyes half-lidded and glazed with passion rather than pain, lips swollen from kisses, hair sticking every which way. But he was also injured and vulnerable, and Beck didn't want to take the chance of hurting him more. He watched as Travis blinked a few times, his mouth opening and closing, and then reason flooded back into the expressive eyes.

"Uhh..." Travis said, for once, completely speechless.

Beck smiled internally. This was an important piece of information--next time he wanted Travis to shut up, all he had to do was kiss him. "Want another cannoli?" he asked innocently. Travis nodded, wide eyes regarding him warily. "Take your meds, first," Beck directed, holding out the tablets.

Travis took them without a word, still staring at Beck. He had no idea what was going on, but he liked it. He liked it a lot. Weeks of fantasizing about Beck had nothing on the real thing.

Watching as Travis swallowed his meds with the water he handed him, Beck then held out the second cannoli. Without prompting, Travis leaned forward, his eyes never leaving Beck's, and opened his mouth. Beck fed it to him slowly, occasionally flicking glances down to watch Travis' throat. He could easily imagine something else sliding down the smooth expanse and barely managed to wait until Travis had finished eating before he pressed his mouth hard against the other man's once again. He wanted nothing more than to press down against Travis entire body, but that was going to have to wait. Good thing he was a patient man.

This time, Travis pulled back, needing air and to rest. He really wished he could keep going, but he was worn out. Breathing heavily, he looked up at Beck and offered a shaky grin. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I can't keep my eyes open much longer." Even as he spoke, his eyelids were
drooping shut and he could feel himself slumping back into the pillows.

"Don't worry about it," Beck assured him, even as he helped ease him down. The meds, combined with Travis' battered body, were working against them both.

"Wanna do it 'gain..." Travis slurred out just before his breaths evened out and he drifted off to sleep.

"Yeah, me too," Beck said softly. He pulled the blankets up so Travis was covered up to his chin and then retrieved the tray. Guess the tea was all his, along with the rest of the cannoli. Unfortunately, he needed a cold shower before he could enjoy either of them. Sighing, he took one last look at Travis and then left the room.

*****

The next morning, Travis would have sworn the previous night had all been some kind of wish fulfillment dream, except for the lingering taste of the cannoli when he licked his lips. Obviously, both he and Beck had missed some of the sweet cream. It was a good thing, too, as otherwise he never would have believed that Beck had actually kiss him. And the man could kiss, no question.

Once he'd made his slow, painful journey to the bathroom and back, Travis stopped by the duffle next to the door. The day before, he dragged the backpack to the bed, but hadn't looked any farther than that. Now, he found that Beck had brought him some clothes, as well. Also, there was a package that had fallen between the duffle and the wall. For a moment, he frowned, trying to figure out who would have sent him a package, but then the memory came to him and he grinned. "Oh yeah! I ordered this a couple weeks ago," he said, shaking his head ruefully at his failing memory. "'Course, the knock I took didn't help any," he muttered.

"Talking to yourself already?" Beck's voice came from the door and Travis jumped and then winced at the jarring movement.

"You need a bell, you know that, right?" Travis asked.

Beck smirked and entered the room. "Think you're up to a shower?"

Travis paused, considering. He hurt and kind of wanted to lie back down, but he also felt grungy in a way that he hadn't since he left the jungle in Brazil. Taking an experimental whiff, he scrunched up his nose. Yeah, he definitely needed a shower. However, he was unsteady on his feet and wasn't sure he would be able to maintain his balance in a slippery tub.

"Come on, I won't let you fall," Beck promised, taking a hold of Travis' elbow to help him back to the bathroom. "I think I even have a stool we can use so you can sit down while I wash your hair. First, though, I have to get a plastic bag to wrap your cast in. Can't get it wet."

Letting himself be pulled along, Travis was amazed at how prepared Beck was. Of course, in his line of work, the big man had probably had lots of experience with various injuries. "You just want me to see me naked, don't you?" he teased.

"Mostly, I don't want to have to smell you," Beck quipped back.

Travis scowled, but didn't argue. He was already breathing hard from both the exertion and the pain. Suddenly, he wasn't sure this was such a good idea. He hadn't had his meds yet, and was definitely missing the fuzziness they gave the pain.

"Just a little farther and then you can sit down. I'll get your meds and some toast and you can rest a bit before the shower, OK?" Beck asked, not liking the way Travis had paled significantly, his skin
taking on a greyish tinge. "If you don't feel up to it after that, we'll skip the shower for today and try again tomorrow."

Nodding, Travis just concentrated on reaching the bathroom. He really needed a shower now, as the cold sweat that had broken out all over him was uncomfortable and sure to add to his already stale smell. They were almost there, but it seemed as though the distance from bedroom to bathroom had increased considerably. By the time they arrived, Beck had taken on most of Travis' weight and was practically dragging the younger man.

"Here we go," Beck grunted, easing Travis down onto the closed toilet seat with a sigh of relief. "Don't move. I'll be back in a minute."

Travis just leaned back, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. It seemed like only an instant later when Beck was kneeling in front of him and coaxing him to open his eyes. Slowly, he did so, squinting slightly as a wave of dizziness hit him.

"Are you going to be sick?" Beck asked, studying him carefully.

"God, I hope not," Travis replied. He felt miserable, but not actually nauseaus... at least not yet.

"Take these first," Beck instructed, holding out the tablets and then the juice. Once Travis had swallowed them down, he held out the toast. "Eat slowly." When he was sure Travis didn't seem in imminent danger of vomiting, set the juice on the counter. "Eat all of it," he said.

Travis nodded, nibbling on the toast and chewing each bite slowly with his eyes closed. Just sitting down had helped immensely, but he knew food also helped the pain medication to kick in quicker, too. He heard something bump against a wall and opened his eyes to see Beck carrying in a stool, some towels, a spool of medical tape, and a plastic bag. "Are you sure it's worth it?" he asked weakly.

Cocking an eyebrow, Beck looked Travis up and down and then nodded. "Yep. I changed the sheets on your bed, too. Once you're clean, you can take a nap until lunch."

"Oh goody," Travis muttered. He was already getting pretty tired of lying in bed all day. True, he didn't have any energy and he was exhausted just from walking down the hall, but still... he was bored. And, he needed to work on his paper, but kept falling asleep.

Beck ignored him, instead focusing on getting everything ready for Travis' shower. First, he set up the stool, making sure it was secure and wouldn't slide when Travis sat on it. Then, he turned back to Travis. The younger man was still wearing the scrubs that the hospital had provided after they'd cut his clothes off him. It was probably for the best, as they were loose and easy to remove, unlike Travis' preferred attire of form fitting jeans and T-shirt. "All right, just let me do the work, you concentrate on remaining upright and not puking on me."

Working quickly, he soon had Travis naked except for the tape binding his ribs. "I'm going to take this off for your shower, so try not to move too much. Once you're dry, I'll tape you back up, OK?" Beck asked.

Travis nodded. He wasn't looking forward to the experience, but he did want to be clean. He could still smell the hospital on him and that wasn't really something he cared to dwell on. Hissing as Beck pulled on the tape, he clenched his one good fist, keeping the one with the cast resting on the counter. Once all the tape was off, Beck placed the cast in the plastic bag and taped it shut. Glancing down, Travis blanched at all the bruising. No wonder he felt like crap.
"Ready to move to the shower?" Beck asked. He waited until Travis nodded and then took the younger man's elbows to steer him towards the tub. He balanced Travis as he lifted first one leg and then the other over the side of the tub and then eased him down slowly. He had a handheld shower head, so he turned the spray on while holding the head close to the drain while they waited for the water to get to the desired temperature. "Just close your eyes and enjoy the experience," Beck advised. "This isn't something I do everyday."

Travis snorted at that but did as instructed. He flinched a bit when the water first hit, but it was warm and felt good. Beck was quick but efficient, keeping his touch light as he rubbed soap onto muscles that were bruised and sore. The pain medication had done its job, and Travis was having a difficult time not simply melting under the combined relief of being washed and his muscles relaxing. The water cut off and he roused a bit as Beck carefully rubbed his hair dry and then continued moving the towel downwards, trading for a fresh one when the first towel became too wet.

"Much better," Beck proclaimed as he stood up and stretched. "Let's get you out and taped up and then it's back to bed."

Yawning, Travis didn't even bother with a token protest. The bed was sounding pretty good right about now. Beck taped him up, dressed him in some soft, warm sweats, and then all but carried him back to the bedroom. He blinked sleepily as Beck leaned down and kissed him, and then drifted off with a smile on his face.

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While Travis slept, Beck decided it was time to get to work on discovering just who was responsible for hurting the younger man so badly. He knew that Travis didn't think Billy had anything to do with it, but he wanted to be sure, so he made a few calls to some contacts he still had in the organization. From all accounts, Billy was content to ignore Travis for the time being, as he had more important things to worry about. Beck was of two minds about that--one, it would have been easier having an enemy that he knew about; two, Billy wasn't someone he really wanted to go up against. Sure, he'd defied him by spirited Travis away, but nobody had been hurt and he'd technically fulfilled his contract. Declaring war would be messy and most likely have a ridiculously heavy body count, with Travis one of the likely casualties. So, all in all, he decided it was for the best that it wasn't Travis' father. Problem was, that left him with a dearth of likely suspects.

Who would have Travis watched, his apartment trashed, and then have him pushed down the stairs? Or was the stair pushing more an act of opportunity? Maybe Travis had walked in on whoever was trashing his apartment? Still, that didn't help much in his search. He thought back over his conversations with Travis over the past couple of days. The only person Travis had complained about had been some professor... In fact, Travis had mentioned him that night at the restaurant. Beck scowled. It seemed like a long shot, but it was the only one he had. He'd have to wait until Travis woke up, however, as he had no idea what the man's name was. Satisfied that he'd done as much as could for the moment, Beck decided to start lunch. Now that Travis could keep things down, he could be used as a guinea pig for some of Beck's new lunch entree ideas.

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This time, when Travis woke up, he knew exactly where he was and couldn't be happier. Well, that wasn't quite true... he'd rather he didn't ache and that various bones weren't broken and that someone didn't obviously want him dead and, of course, being in Beck's bed would be even better... He scrubbed his face with his good hand, as he couldn't scrub his mind, and told himself not to get ahead of himself. But it was hard. He'd been attracted to Beck since he first saw him in the mirror in Mariana's bar. Of course, that had been before he'd discovered Beck was there to take him back to
dear old Dad, but the attraction had never gone away. In fact, after Beck had saved his life, he thought the feeling might be more than one-way, but then Beck had handcuffed him and returned him to LA anyway... and then taken him right back out. Talk about mixed messages. But now, Beck had kissed him; kissed him like he meant it, as well as taken care of Travis for the past few days. So, not one-way after all and maybe more than just attraction, too. That was the most surprising part. In Travis' experience, most people weren't interested in Travis himself, just what he could do for them--influence his father (ha), find them a priceless treasure (Marianna), sex with the added bonus of sticking it to a spouse (crazy lady in Chicago). But Beck... for the life of him, Travis couldn't see how he could do anything for the big guy. As far as he could tell, it was all the other direction, and he wasn't sure he liked that, either. Wasn't that why he hadn't mentioned the men following him to Beck in the first place? Travis scowled, the good mood he had when he woke up fading fast.

"Get your lazy butt out of bed and come have lunch," Beck stated from the doorway. He'd been watching Travis as his expression had changed from happy to something darker and decided the younger man needed a change of scenery before he started brooding. The kitchen would have to do, as he didn't think Travis had the strength to go too far just yet.

"Geeze, warn a guy, will ya?" Travis complained, trying to calm his heart down after the start it had given him when Beck had spoken. He hadn't even know Beck was there. 'No one that big should be able to move that quietly,' he thought to himself. 'It's just freaky.'

"What would be the fun in that?" Beck asked, then he returned to the kitchen without staying to see whether or not Travis followed. He knew Travis would.

Grumbling quietly to himself about bossy people, Travis threw back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed. He felt much better than he had earlier, so he stood up with only a momentary instant of dizziness. Pleased, he shuffled towards the kitchen where he could already smell the aroma of lunch. It always amazed him that someone with Beck's deadly skills was also a very talented chef. 'Maybe it has something to do with the knives?' he mused to himself. No matter what it was, though, Beck had yet to cook something that wasn't delicious and Travis' stomach growled in anticipation. The toast before his shower was long gone.

"You move like an old man," Beck told him when Travis finally eased himself onto a kitchen chair.

"Feel like one, too," Travis said, hissing a bit as he jarred his ribs sitting down.

"Broken ribs are a bitch," Beck stated.

Travis grunted in agreement, but his attention was on the coffee mug that Beck had just placed in front of him. Bringing it up to his nose, he hummed in appreciation before taking a careful sip. Oh, it was the good stuff, too.

"You need to drink water or juice, too. Coffee will dehydrate you," Beck said as he set a glass on the table and indicated the two pitchers, one filled with water and the other with orange juice.

"Sure. OJ's good," Travis said. He then noticed the rest of the table. "How hungry do you think I am?" he exclaimed. There was a rather large dish of something that looked like chicken in marinara sauce with cheese, a basket of bread, and a bowl of salad.

"What we don't eat, I'll freeze. I'm testing out restaurant size portions," Beck said.

"Oh." Travis watched as Beck dished out the amounts he planned to serve, thinking the big man might be a bit too generous with his servings. Then Beck served himself and sat down across from Travis. "So, um, how's the restaurant doing, anyway?"
"Pretty well, actually. I lucked out when I hired Rodrigo. He's a decent second chef. Might even be good enough for first chef if I need to take a break from the kitchen sometime," Beck said. He took a bite, trying to decide if he should have added more cheese or not.

"This is good. What's it called?" Travis asked.

"Pollo alla Valdostana," Beck told him. He waited a few minutes, letting Travis eat undisturbed as he gauged the other man's condition. Travis' color was better and the bruises weren't as angry looking, though they were still quite colorful. Also, the shakiness seemed to have dissipated and Travis was doing fairly well with his one good hand. "How's your head?" he asked.

Travis started to shrug, remembered why that was a bad idea, and settled for scrunching his nose. "Not too bad. Still aches a bit, but nowhere near as bad as it was before. Plus, there's only the one of you, so that's an improvement."

Nodding, Beck took a bite of bread and stared at Travis thoughtfully. "Tell me about this professor of yours," he said.


Beck cocked an eyebrow. "Did you happen to mention this opinion in class?"

Travis blinked. "Uh... maybe," he offered weakly. "But you don't think... I mean, come on, he's a professor!"

"And you don't think professors are capable of being evil?" Beck asked skeptically.

"Oh no, they're definitely evil," Travis stated. "But evil in the 'I'm going to hire some thugs to beat you up' way? Just seems, I don't know, kind of a stretch. What would be the point, anyway?"

"I don't know, why don't you tell me? Did he threaten you in any way?" Beck asked.

"Only academically, but since I'm just auditing his class, there's not much he can do, anyway. It's not like I'm trying to get a degree or anything," Travis said, starting to shrug again and wincing at the movement. He was really beginning to hate that. He'd never really noticed before how much he tended to just move--all the time.

"It's a place to start, if nothing else. From what I could find out, you were right--your dad doesn't seem to be involved," Beck said. "I don't even think he knows what happened."

"Just as well. He'd just call to let me know what a screw up I am and that I never cease to give him headaches," Travis said bitterly.

Beck frowned, but decided that was one subject he wasn't going to touch at the moment. He'd seen for himself that the father/son relationship between the two was less than ideal. That was something for a later date, if ever. "Is there anything else you need from your apartment? I could stop by there before going to the restaurant this evening."

"Naah, I'm good. All the important stuff was in the backpack--laptop, books, and iPod." Travis grinned.

Shaking his head, Beck stood up and started collecting the dishes. "Don't get used to this. Once you're steady on your feet again, you can start helping out with the household chores. Dishes, laundry, cleaning..." he trailed off, smirking as Travis lost his grin.
"Yeah, yeah, I remember. Vacuuming, cleaning the toilet and tub, taking out the garbage..." he took up the litany, having become very familiar with it during his last stay with Beck.

"Good. I'd hate to think all my training went to waste. Although, there might be a few changes," Beck stated cryptically.

Travis glanced at Beck suspiciously, but the big man didn't say anything else, just started placing dishes in the dishwasher. Experience had taught him that pestering Beck wouldn't do any good, although sometimes it was satisfying in its own right; he'd just have to wait. Not one of Travis' favorite activities, but at the moment, he was having to wait for a lot of things, not the least of which was for his body to heal up enough for him to do more than kiss Beck. A warm flush swept through him at the thought and he could feel his cheeks reddening as certain parts of him decided to prove how healthy they were. Sneaking a peak over at Beck, Travis stood up as quietly as he could.

"Where are you going?" Beck asked, not even bothering to turn around.

Freezing in place, Travis forced himself to relax. "Just back to my room. You know, the doc said bed rest for a week. Wouldn't want to undo all her hard work. And, of course, there's that paper I have due. Not that it matters all that much whether or not I turn it in, Lieber'll probably give it an F without even reading it. But I could use that as evidence that he's a crappy professor," Travis babbled as he slowly inched forward, desperate to escape to the bedroom before Beck could notice his condition.

"Travis," Beck started, turning around with a frown. He wasn't sure what had spooked the younger man, but something had--he was making even less sense than usual. When he got a good look, however, he figured it out. Leaning against the counter, he asked. "Is that for me?"

Travis groaned, dropping his head forward. He should have known. He never could get anything past Beck, and he shouldn't have even bothered with the attempt. If he'd just stayed at the table, he could have just waited it out. He flinched when a large hand dropped onto his shoulder, but when it started to rub gently and was joined by another, he relaxed into the impromptu massage.

"It's nothing to be embarassed about. I'm flattered. Unfortunately, you're in no shape to do anything about it just yet. Come on, I'll help you back to bed," Beck said, moving his hands down so he once more had Travis' elbow. "You rest and I'll see what I can dig up on Professor Lieber."

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Having exhausted what he could find via Google, Beck was about to resort to more traditional avenues of mining information when he heard Travis exclaim from the down the hall.

"Son of a bitch!"

Beck wasted no time in running into the room to see what the problem was. He stopped short, however, when he saw that Travis was sitting on the edge of the bed with a book in his hand and the brown wrapping from a package at his feet. Scowling a bit at the trash, he stooped to pick it up but before he could do so, Travis was shoving the open book under his nose.

"Look at this! It's practically word for word! The son of a bitch is a plagiarist!" Snapping the book shut practically in Beck's face, Travis sank back down onto the bed, breathing hard. "I knew he had no clue what he was talking about, and this just proves it. Not only is he a cheat, but this is one of the most ridiculed books in archaeology there is. No one reads this because it's well known to be useless drivel."

Beck grabbed the book that Travis was waving around and tossed it to the foot of the bed before
gently catching hold of Travis' forearms. "You need to calm down. You don't have the strength to be
getting this upset, and it won't do any good, anyway."

"But, don't you get it? He's a fraud," Travis said, so angry he was shaking.

"Yes, and that gives him motive," Beck stated flatly. "Could you have given him some reason to
believe that you could expose him?"

Travis paused, breathing hard. Had he? It was hard to say. He'd certainly disagreed with the
professor in class, pointing out things that he knew to be untrue because he'd been there... But had
there been anything specific to make Lieber think Travis was a danger to him. Finally, he shook his
head. "I don't know, maybe. I mouthed off some in class. Maybe he thought someone would listen to
me?" Then his eyes widened. "Oh."

"Oh?" Beck repeated, arching an eyebrow.

"I, uh, I might have mentioned that book," Travis said, indicating the one Beck had tossed onto the
bed.

"Oh is right," Beck muttered. "OK, looks like we have a suspect." He released Travis' arms, staring
at him critically. "Why are so angry about the book, anyway? Seems to me you should be more upset
that he most likely hired someone to trash your apartment and push you down the stairs."

Travis scowled. "I'm still not sure about that... I mean, sure, he's a weasel and a fraud, but somehow,
I just can't picture him resorting to physical violence, even by proxy. What gets me is that he was
boasting about how he'd written a book, so of course he knew what he was talking about, while I
didn't even have a single degree." Travis snorted. "I don't need a degree. I found the Gato just fine
without one and I don't need to lie about it."

"No, you don't," Beck agreed. This wasn't the first time he'd heard Travis speak of getting a degree
with contempt, and someday he hoped Travis would confide in him just why that was, but right now
they had more immediate concerns. "Since he seems to be a con artist, it could just be he's a good
enough actor to fool you. Plus, he's the only suspect we have right now. What I don't understand,
though, is why did he do it? I can't imagine too many people would be interested in buying his book,
so why would it be worth the risk of someone discovering it was plagiarized?"

Narrowing his eyes, Travis stared off into space for a moment. Beck was right, it did seem to be a
fair amount of risk for little gain... But, if Lieber was a con artist, maybe there was something bigger
to it. "The class and the book aren't the point," he said slowly. "They're part of the scheme, but not
the main scheme. To make money, there has to be more involved." Then he thought of the Gato and
how Marianna intended to sell it in order to get money for her people. "Artifacts," he stated, his gaze
moving to Beck. "I bet he's part of an operation that sells artifacts, most likely fakes, same as he is."

Beck blinked and then sat on the bed next to Travis. It was easy to forget how smart Travis actually
was, as he normally presented himself as a smart-mouthed kid. But he had found the Gato when no
one else had. Travis was able to make intuitive leaps in logic that were, frankly, amazing. But, he
had to admit, the theory was sound. It made sense. And now, it was time to go hunting. Beck
allowed a feral grin to emerge as he turned and grasped Travis' face. "You're brilliant," he said, and
then kissed him hard and fast before jumping to his feet.

Stunned, Travis opened his mouth to comment, but Beck was already gone. Then, what Beck had
said penetrated and slow smile spread across his face. Beck had called him brilliant and kissed him.
Things were definitely looking up. Plus, from the look on Beck's face when he left, someone was
going to be choosing their options quite soon--and they weren't going to be pleasant. Sighing
contentedly, Travis laid down and snuggled into the covers. He'd done enough for the moment; it was time for a nap.

*****

Beck pulled up outside the residence that he had last left after drugging the occupants with a harmless looking South American fruit and turned off the ignition. He had debated about whether or not to make this visit, but finally decided it would be the best solution... and might possibly make up for that last visit. 'No time like the present,' he thought to himself as he finally reached for the door handle of the truck.

Before he even reached the steps, the front door opened and one of Billy's ubiquitous body guards greeted him with a dark look and a hand fingerling his sidearm. Holding his hands out to show they were empty, Beck slowly turned around in a circle so it would be easy to tell that he was unarmed. As he was only wearing a tight fitting short-sleeved shirt and khakis, there were few places for him to hide a gun. Grunting, the man jerked his head towards the interior of the house.

"Good day to you, too," Beck muttered, but he crossed the threshold, not even flinching when the door slammed shut behind him.

Billy was doing paperwork at the kitchen table when they entered and didn't bother to look up until he'd let Beck cool his heels for a few minutes. When he did raise his head, his expression was less than friendly. "You have a lot of nerve showing your face around here again after what you pulled. And where's that no account son of mine? Did he take off on you?"

"No. But I do have some information you might be interested in, and not just about Travis. I came as a good faith gesture, as I realize things didn't exactly turn out the way you would have liked last time," Beck said, choosing his words carefully. Billy had a volatile temper at the best of times, and Beck would rather not rile it.

"Now there's an understatement. So, where is Travis? And what's this information?" Billy asked, setting aside the document he had been perusing.

"I discovered a rather lucrative black market operation going on... one that hasn't been approved by you," Beck said.

At this, Billy straightened in his chair, frowning. "What kind of black market operation? And who's running it?"

"Phony South American artifacts. Man by the name of Edward Domingo is running it, but he has others in his employ--some muscle, a guy posing as a professor to authenticate the stuff, a few dealers..." Beck shrugged.

"And how did you come by this information?" Billy asked.

Beck's face hardened. "A couple of the muscle men trashed Travis' apartment and nearly killed him when one of them pushed him down the stairs."

Billy stared at Beck. "But he's all right?" he finally asked.

"He will be."

"You're not bringing him back here, are you?" Billy stated more than asked.

"No, I'm not."
Billy nodded. "I'll take care of it."

"Are we square?" Beck asked, not wanting to have any misunderstanding between them.

"We're square, but that doesn't mean I want to see your ugly mug any time soon," Billy stated.

"Understood." With a nod, Beck let himself out, easily ignoring the guards who gave him dirty looks as he strode by.

*****

"Travis!" Beck called out as he strode into the kitchen, placing the groceries he'd picked up on his way home on the counter. When he'd left, Travis had been lying on the sofa watching TV with books spread out around him, but he wasn't there now. When he didn't receive a response, he frowned and called again as he went to check his bedroom, which they now shared. "Travis?" Still no answer, and there was no sign of the younger man. He was starting to get concerned when he heard the front door open. Stalking into the living room, he glared at Travis who was slowly moving toward the sofa while holding his ribs and panting slightly. "Where have you been?" he demanded.

Grimacing, Travis eased himself down before answering. "Just down the street to the post office. Oh, and I picked up the mail, too," he said, holding up the hand that was still encased in a cast but currently clutching what was no doubt a fistful of junk mail.

Beck scowled. "You're supposed to be taking it easy." He narrowed his eyes as he studied Travis and then turned abruptly and headed for the fridge. When he returned, he had a bottle of water and couple of pain pills in hand.

"Oh man, you're a life saver. Thanks," Travis said gratefully as he accepted the profferings. Once he'd downed both, he relaxed back into the sofa with a sigh. "I didn't go far, and I had a package to send out. I do believe Professor Lieber will soon be out of a job," he said with satisfaction.

"Oh? And why's that?" Beck asked, he hadn't informed Travis of his intention to alert Billy to the scheme they'd uncovered, so he wondered what Travis was up to. He sat down next to Travis, easily accepting the other man's weight when Travis leaned into him.

Travis grinned. "I just sent off a couple of books to the university with some relevant passages marked quite clearly. Old Lieber will be out on his ass by tomorrow afternoon."

"Ah. So that's why you like the cat that ate the canary. Well, I don't think we'll need to worry about any of Lieber's associates, either. I had a little chat with Billy today, and everyone knows that he doesn't like to share," Beck said.

"Ain't that the truth," Travis muttered. He yawned and rested his head against Beck's shoulder. "Did he give you a hard time about the fruit?" he asked, though his voice was getting softer.

"Nope. In fact, I don't think he'll be bothering us. In his own way, I think he was concerned when he found out you'd almost been killed."

Travis made a soft noise that might have been agreement and then his breathing evened out as he fell asleep.

Looking down, Beck couldn't suppress a grin of his own. The men responsible for hurting Travis would be dealt with, the restaurant was doing well, and Travis had moved in for good. Once Travis was healed up, maybe he'd even take some time off from the restaurant to help him go look for that Mongolian diamond.
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