

Watchers

Warren just got in the door to his apartment when the phone began ringing. He was reading something held in his right hand while he carried his brief in his left hand. He was also thinking about something totally unrelated to the document in his hand. Leigh had pulled it up for him. And although it was pertinent information for him about the church, he was busy thinking about his conversation with her about Kit.

He wanted to know if he had called like Barnes had said he had. She was hesitant in answering. A loyalty divided between Warren and good faith with Kit. But he dragged it out of her. Kit called on several occasions when he didn't immediately know where Warren was over where he thought he should be. He'd also pressed the idea into Leigh that Warren didn't need to be bothered with him checking up on him. She apologized for keeping the secret and thought it was mostly harmless that it was just Kit's unwillingness to show Warren how much he cared over there usual interaction. Warren was amused by it in thinking Kit was brotherly towards him when he thought maybe no one else was paying him enough attention. Unlike Kit himself who couldn't find a spare moment alone, ever.

Warren left Leigh questioning how he was going to deal with it when he'd left, leaving her on edge. He'd finish the discussion the following day, when he was pretty sure he'd forgive her, but might also insist on a call log for everyone who called *his* office.

He set his stuff down, his brief case, the document he had out in the cab and his trench coat which wasn't being worn against the warmer temperature and the dry day. He picked up the phone thinking it was going to be Leigh who'd forgotten to tell him something after the state he'd left her in.

“Hello?” Warren answered.

“Warren Keith?” the voice on the other end of the line asked coming through a good amount of static.

“Yes.” He agreed.

“What in God’s name is wrong with you?” the now obvious feminine voice asked. A moment later the tone had him clued in to who it was exactly, Juliana, his sister.

“Nothing.” He answered flippantly.

“Do you *ever* read your e-mail?” she asked.

“All the time.” He answered.

“The ones from me?” she asked raising her voice some.

“I was getting to them.” He agreed.

“Do you have any idea what it is like to get a call out to you from where I am?” she asked.

“Can’t say as I do.” He answered.

“You *are* avoiding me.” She complained.

“As usual.” He agreed and almost laughed at himself, “The reason being anytime we do talk, its you wanting something from me.”

“You are so right about it.” She agreed, “But you cannot keep avoiding me like this. What if something important happens? I need to know I can at least talk to you on the God damn phone! And let me tell you this takes a lot more effort here to do than you can imagine, not to mention how much money I have to grease palms with just to get to a damnable phone.”

“What do you want?” he asked tired of her complaining already.

“I would think you would treat your sister, your *twin* sister better than this.” She went on complaining.

“If it is such a great effort to call me at such an expense, why not get on with it then? How much money do you need and where do I send it?” he asked.

“Jesus.” She complained even more.

“Actually no, this is Warren.” He said.

“Right, Warren, my brother, uncle to my son. You remember him?” she asked.

“Yes.” He agreed.

“They wouldn’t let me bring him with me this far. Warren, I had to send him back to the states.”

“Where are you?” he asked realizing curiosity was suddenly getting the better of him.

“I’m in Africa, you’d know that if you ever bothered to read the fifty or so e-mails I’ve sent you recently, wondering if you were even getting them at all!”

“What’s the point of the conversation?” Warren asked back equaling her loudness and ferocity.

“My son, Warren, Nathaniel, whom by my calculations, if I am not off a bit here, he’s been sitting at the airport for four hours by now wondering why the hell you haven’t picked him up yet.” She finished.

“What’s he doing here?” Warren asked.

“Read the God Damn e-mails to get all your questions answered, in the meantime, would you kindly go pick my son up from the airport?” she asked. At this point her voice was as loud as it could go and even through the static she was coming through loud and clear. “Warren, are you there?” she asked when he hesitated.

“Yes.”

“Can you go pick up my son?” she asked.

“Yes.” He agreed. What else was he going to do if he was already there? At this point she just hung up. He took a deep breath and set the phone down. He turned towards the door and started heading towards it. It wouldn’t be that much of an effort to ride a cab out and ride it back with the kid in tow.

He’d just started down the hallway towards the stairs when he saw him coming up them. It took Warren a minute to calculate his age against the way he looked. It had been a few years since he’d seen him. And if he was right, flipping

on the particulars of the exact birth date just then, he was either still fourteen or fifteen by then.

He looked tired to Warren. He had brown floppy hair swirling around his head completely uncontrolled by a comb. He had green eyes and he was supporting the frame of almost adult size. Maybe he was sixteen? Warren found himself back tracking his calculations again. No, he couldn't be sixteen, that would make him thirty-three and he would only be thirty-two on his next birthday.

The kid stopped to lean on the large skateboard in his right hand. It was more than half his height when stood on end. He looked at Warren with an unfavorable expression and dropped the board on its wheels. He took a deep breath and road it down the hall towards him, stopping between him and the door. He then dropped his large hiking sized backpack on the floor and looked at his uncle.

"About time you got home." He complained, "I've been in the park for several hours now."

Warren heard the tone of his sister coming from him. He turned and headed back to the door unlocking it and letting the kid drag his board and bag inside the door and leaving them three inches away from the opening. He went over and flopped his whole body onto the couch. Warren shoved the bag and board further away from the door. Then he looked up to see the kid rolling over on the couch on his back.

"Where do I sleep?" he asked. Warren pointed. The main part of the apartment was one large rectangle, containing on the door side the living area with a couch and the large TV on the wall on that end. Opposing it was the Kitchen on the other wall and between was the dining area.

On the living room end was a spare room, fully furnished for unexpected guests, and the bathroom on the other side of the end wall. Lining the front was a row of windows that opposed the entry-way wall. Kitchen side, headed back away from the front down past where the

outside hall ended was Warren's bedroom. He'd pointed to the guest room.

Nathaniel got back up off the couch and grabbed the straps from the backpack and began dragging it along the hard ward floor.

"Pick it up." Warren finally snapped at him when he couldn't take the sound of the metal loops scrapping along the floor anymore. The kid looked back at him, heaved his breath and yanked the pack just enough to get it off the floor and finish the trip into the spare room.

Warren shook his head as he headed into the kitchen area. He looked back a few times and realized that the kid must have crashed on the bed some. Warren started to get things out for dinner when the kid came back out and threw himself on the couch.

Warren stopped what he was doing to realize he was holding up a cell phone and dialing a number on it. His arm then dropped back down while he made his call. Warren tried to ignore he was even there, it lasted for about forty seconds, by that time he could hear his nephew talking loudly all the way across the room.

"Yo Jakester." He began, "Yea man, I'm here, shoot me something. Tap out an e-mail and let my Mom know I'm here safe."

Warren stopped what he was doing to pay attention. He decided if the kid wanted to be private about it, he could have made the call from his room. During which Warren slowly advanced across the room.

"No Man, his lame ass doesn't even have a computer in this place. Mom says he's still using dial-up at work...Yea Man, no shit, no games. I'm going to miss my PlayStation, it would be even cooler to have an Xbox, too...Yea man, the lame fucker didn't even bother to pick me up at the airport can you believe that shit? No respect man, this place blows chunks.

“I’m fucking exhausted, dude. I go all the way to fucking Africa, yea man, Af-fri-ca and they turn around and send me all the way back here to stay with my lame ass uncle.”

“Give me the phone.” Warren said as he reached the back of the couch and looked down at the kid.

“Do you mind?” Nathaniel said, “I’m having a private conversation here.”

“Give me the phone, Nate.” Warren said more forcefully.

“No fucking way, it’s my Goddamn phone. Mom gave it to me so I can call in case of an emergency.” He added.

“Give me the phone.” Warren repeated.

“I’m not giving you my fucking phone. Back off.” He hollered. All Warren could see was his sister being no different than the kid.

“Don’t force me to take it from your hand.” Warren said raising his voice even more. Nathaniel clicked it off and handed it to him.

“Now what am I suppose to do if I need to make a call?” he asked.

“You’ll see this again tomorrow.” Warren explained, “For now its mine. So let’s get a few things out of the way.

“First, you do not disrespect me in my house. I don’t care how you feel about me, you will not address me as lame or fucker from here on out. Take it to the street when you want to bad mouth me. You will not be doing it in *my* home.

“Next, you’re not going to be swearing in *my* house. No f words, s words, and I don’t want to hear you say God in any conversation favorable or otherwise.”

“Your nuts.” The kid shouted at him. Warren tried to remind himself that he was exhausted and just wanted to vent, but he couldn’t get past it well enough to cut him any slack.

“You will follow the rules as I lay them out. You will not break the rules and when you do, you will accept my

judgments about how it's dealt with without further discussing it. You have no inalienable rights. I don't want to hear anything about child abuse, unfair treatment or anything along those lines.

"It was your mother's decision to send you to me. That puts the responsibility on my shoulders in how to deal with you. The first two rules are clear, yes?"

"Jesus." Nate moaned.

"No, that in accordance with God is the same, not Jesus, God, God Damn and not God Damn fucker. Am I clear?"

"Yes, you freak."

"What did I just lay out for you?" Warren asked, "You will not disrespect me in my house."

"You said lame and fucker you didn't say anything about freak or freak-show or nutcase." Nate shot back at him.

"You're not listening to me, you've broken the only two rules I laid out for you so far." Warren said. He turned his head and looked at the skateboard. He then moved over to it and picked it up.

"Hey hey hey." Nate said coming up off the couch, "Those are my wheels."

"You'll get this back in two days, in the meantime, go to your room." Warren said holding the phone in one hand and the board in the other.

Nate opened his mouth to say something then stopped.

"When I say go to your room, you do it without hesitation." Warren added.

"Do I look five to you?" Nate asked.

"Four." Warren snapped back and the kid's eyes got big. "Now, Nate."

He got off the couch and headed to the spare room, now officially *his* room. He slammed the door hard enough to rattle the nearby picture on the wall. Warren eyed it to see

if it wasn't actually going to fall off. When it appeared to have settled he took the phone and the skate board into his room. He leaned the board against the wall and set the phone on his dresser.

He then headed back across the apartment and nudged Nate's door open a little. "And in the future we do not slam doors." Warren said, "Dinner will be ready soon."

He stood there waiting for a reply. When he failed to get one he closed the door and headed across the apartment, picking up the phone along the way as he headed towards the kitchen area.

He hit a number on speed dial as he worked one handed. "Hello?" Leigh answered.

"Hey, Warren, you want to get off the hook real easy?"

"Sure." She agreed sounding light and carefree to his ears.

"You know about those games kids play, right?"

"As well as any parent." She agreed.

"Okay." Warren said, "An X-Station or something."

She laughed, "An Xbox, Warren or a Play Station."

"Yea one of those." Warren agreed, "On your way in tomorrow, swing by and pick one of those up for me on my time. Whatever you spend I'll make good out of petty cash and just get me a receipt."

"I can do that, Warren, anything else?" she asked.

"You do that and I forget your fubar over Kit ever happened." He replied.

"I'll see you tomorrow then." She said.

"Night." He said and hung up the phone. He finished cooking and lay out two servings. He moved those to the table. He stopped for a moment, enjoying the peaceful quiet before he started the whole ball rolling again. He then headed back to Nate's door. He knocked this time before opening it just enough to speak through it.

"Dinner, something tells me your not angry enough to completely refuse to eat, so come on out long enough to do

that.” Warren said. He didn’t wait for a reply at all this time, he just left the door cracked, which would at least force the kid to get up and shut the door if he really wanted it closed.

Warren returned to the table and began eating. After a few moments Nate came out of his room and moved to sit opposite Warren at the table where Warren had set his plate down, so they could face each other. He stabbed at the piece of meat and twirled it around the plate.

“Tastes better in your mouth.” Warren said. The kid looked up at him, again not looking pleased at all over what could have been a cozy summer for him anywhere else in the world, Africa even, maybe, to being stuck with the only person he truly disliked.

After a matter of time and the kid was eating over anything else. Warren finished eating his own food before he spoke again. At least his meal was pleasant and made up for the greasy food he’d eaten earlier to get past the lunch requirement.

“Taste ok?” Warren asked.

“I can eat it.”

“The stated opinion is unclear, try again.” Warren said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Its fine.” He said.

“Good, I wouldn’t want you to report back that I refused you food.” Warren explained. The kid dropped the fork and glared at him. “A few more rules while I think of them. Should any come up after this you will not be held responsible if you’re left unaware.”

“Whatever.”

“Please note the time.”

Nate turned to see the clock over the rear sink on the end wall. He then looked back at his uncle. “Almost six o’clock.” Nate said.

“Right, from now on dinner is between five thirty and six o’clock. I close my office at four that means on any day I might be running late I should still make dinner. You will be

notified if any dinner arrangements make it so I won't be here. Should such be the case you will be left to fend for yourself, but when your not, you will be present for dinner between five-thirty and six every day. Are we clear?"

"Yes." Nate said as he drove a pea around his plate with his fork. While Warren paused he moved it and a few other things from the plate into his mouth.

"You do not have to eat anything I cook, it's your choice." Warren added, "In which case you'll still be present at the table, should you refuse to eat what I'm eating you can either fend for yourself or go without. After dinner we both clear the table. Once all the dishes are away from the table you will rinse them and load the dishwasher, should that be full you'll run it. If you're not clear how to do that I'll show you."

"Anything else you want me to clean?" Nate asked, "Clean windows? Vacuum? Become your slave monkey?"

"No." Warren answered, "It's a simple procedure actually and it should balance out the fact that I'm not only putting food on the table for you to eat, but providing a roof over your head so you don't have to sleep in the rain."

Nate groaned.

"I have a cleaning service. A very nice woman comes in on Tuesdays and Fridays between nine AM and one PM. Should you be present you will make an effort to stay out of her way in general. She will vacuum your room on the condition that it is not cluttered with your dirty laundry, which she will not pick up for you.

"You'll do you own laundry or wear it as is. The laundry facilities are to the right down the hall from my room.

"Also, you will be in house between ten PM and seven AM, no exceptions. Aside from that do whatever the hell you want, try not to get arrested your first full day here." Warren finished. He got up and began clearing his own dishes.

Nate finished clearing his plate and brought all his dishes to the counter between them and the rest of the kitchen. Warren came back to the table and cleaned it with a cloth. He then threw the cloth into the far sink. He turned to look at Nate as he hesitated around the counter trying, perhaps, to just locate the dishwasher. He finally looked back at Warren.

“What?” he asked.

“It startles me that you’d run around looking for something I can clearly indicate the direction of. You didn’t have the same problem asking where you’d sleep.” Warren answered. Nate shook his head in the negative.

“You’re unbelievable.” Nate said, “How would I know which room you’d stick me in? You might have me sleep on the couch. Thank God I don’t have to do that.

“And there’s only one stupid dish washer...right?”

Warren came flying around the counter, grabbed at the dishwasher door and opened it. Nate took a deep breath. “I’m going to over look you reference to God, this time. I realize you’re tired. But tomorrow is going to be a different story.”

“What did I do?” Nate asked throwing his hands in the air.

“It shouldn’t surprise me you don’t even realize what you’re doing.” Warren said, “With your Mother as a guide.”

“Don’t talk about my mother.” Nate complained.

“I’ll talk about her anyway I want. She was my sister long before you became her son. I was there.” Warren explained.

“What the hell is your problem?” Nate asked. Warren gritted his teeth. At this point he didn’t think he was going to be able to do it. He was trying to back off some, but the idea came back around to just how much he sounded just like her. And he’d lost the battle with her, never mind the fucking war.

“I was there for it, Nathaniel.” Warren shouted, startling even himself, “I was there when your mother had you at the rip old age of sixteen. And I stuck by her side for ten years while all the bullshit went on around you.

“Don’t expect me to just shove that all to the side. After ten years I’ve done enough. I don’t owe her a God damn thing at this point and I damn sure don’t owe you anything.”

“I hate you.” Nate shouted.

“I hate you too.” Warren shouted right back. Nate slammed the dishwasher shut and headed for the door.

“I don’t have to stay here and put up with this shit.” Nate claimed.

“You go out that door and there is no reason for you to bother coming back.” Warren shouted some more. Nate turned to look at him. “Be back by ten, if your not, then I’m calling the police and I’ll have them deal with your ass. Put you somewhere where you can swear all you want.

“Because you won’t get away with it here.”

“You’d make one suck ass parent.” Nate shot back at him.

“Which gives you a clear indication of why, one I have no children and two I don’t want one. I damn sure don’t want you either.”

Nate’s eyes got wide again looking at his uncle. “You’d do that? Call the police and drag them into this.”

“In a heartbeat.” Warren answered, “There is no reason for me to put up with any bullshit from you. You walk all over your mother, your not doing that to me. And if this arrangement fails and the police do pick you up all I have to say is I don’t want anything to do with you. I’m not responsible, and then it all falls back on your mother and her constant inability to do anything right.

“Why she thinks she can raise a child I’ll never know. She should have put you up for adoption just like our parents told her to do, but no.” Warren stretched out the word and

realized he was now going overboard about it, but he just couldn't seem to stop. "No she had to marry the fucker."

"Jesus." Nate complained, getting even more upset.

Warren made a bold effort to stop. The idea he was centering on in his mind was transference. His issues were with her, not her son. But one always marked the other. And he'd gone well out of his way to steer clear and it had all just come right back at him. In one of his weaker moments he admitted to her that he would shelter Nathaniel if she became desperate, but he would not shelter her.

They stood there staring each other down for about five minutes. Nate finally came back by him and returned to the kitchen where he began to rinse off the dishes and load the dishwasher.

Warren went and sat down at the table trying to get a grip. He turned to look at Nate as he seemed to be completely calm at that point long enough to finish the detail of what he was doing. Something sparked as familiar about it to Warren in how despite how upset he might be he was doing it all the right way.

Warren pictured Nate's father briefly coming around the corner while Nate was doing something similar, not just loading the dishwasher, but washing dishes in the sink. He wasn't quite ten then and the dishes were still large for his small hands. With the soapy water a plate had slipped out of his hand and plunked loudly in the sink against other plates. Nate's father came around towards his son and cuffed him hard on the side of the head while Nate cringed. He wouldn't get away with crying, that had been an earlier lesson he'd learned.

Nate finally looked back at him when he was done. "Anything else?" Nate asked.

"You stay out of my room and I'll stay out of yours. You follow the rules and we should do just fine." Warren answered.

Nate came around the counter and sat down opposite him at the table again. "That's it?" Nate asked, "I can do whatever I want? Go anywhere? Be friends with anyone, whatever?"

"You're not to have anyone else in the apartment when I'm not home. That leaves you with evenings and weekends when I am here to have company. No exceptions."

"What I am asking you." Nate said, "Is you really don't care what I'm doing at all?"

"Get job, get a girlfriend, get a boyfriend, I don't give a shit what you do." Warren added.

Nate's eyes went big on him again. He continued to stare at him. "I can't believe Mom sent me here." Nate said.

"That's not hard to figure out. She got desperate, just like she always does." Warren said, "I'm always good for last minute things, like sending out a thousand dollars because you're trapped in Guatemala or wherever the hell you were."

Nate pushed away from the table and went into his room, slamming the door again.

"So much for our first day together." Warren noted to himself. At least he'd gotten the kid something to eat.

2

Warren's whole day was going well. He got in to work first against Leigh doing some shopping for him. He was standing in the office alone when Miss Clarkson came through and greeted him while he was busy shuffling through the paperwork on the church. He was amassing his approach towards his proposal when the red headed Woman leaned in his door.

"Hello." She greeted.

"Good day." Warren said as he pulled his paper work out of the way.

"You seem to be minus an assistant here." She said.

“She’s out on a mission.” Warren explained. He checked the time to see if she was being reasonable about it. He then smiled at the woman who was present.

“Jennifer Clarkson. I’m pretty sure you’ve had some inclination that I would stop by.” She explained.

“I did.” Warren said as he got up and approached her and shook her hand. “Warren Keith, welcome to my...humble office.”

“The pleasure is mine if everything I hear is true.” She said.

“Well, not that I know all that’s being said, but whatever questions you might have perhaps I can qualify with an adequate answer.” Warren offered.

“Well I didn’t bring any work with me this trip. I just wanted to meet you in person.” She explained. Leigh came in the front door then. Miss Clarkson turned to notice her and received a smile from her.

“I’d call it a success.” Leigh said as she put her bag in the only available corner. Then she came forward. “Would like me to close the door?”

“Up to you.” Warren said towards Miss Clarkson.

“I think we should be done rather quickly.” She answered.

“Okay.” Leigh said and moved to get settled at her desk.

“What can I do for you?” Warren asked.

“At this stage, set an appointment.” She answered, “Do you prefer business lunch or dinner?”

“Normally I might suggest dinner.” Warren said, “But for the time being I’d say lunch was more applicable to my current demands.”

“Well then, sometime next week?”

“Any day sounds fine to me.” Warren agreed.

“How about Monday then?”

“Certainly, should I choose a place and have my assistant call you with the details?” Warren asked.

“I do so hate surprises.” Miss Clarkson said, “I have your number and will detail the address to your assistant, either later today when I get to my office or tomorrow at the latest.”

“Sounds great.” Warren said. She extended her hand again and Warren shook it. “Owe.” Warren snapped his hand back.

“Oh I am so sorry.” She said as she looked at the sleeve of her dress jacket. “This old broach, I thought it would make a nice addition to what I am wearing. It appears the latch on the pin came loose.”

“I’ll be fine.” Warren said and smiled.

“I’ll just stick this in my bag here so I don’t have any further incidents today.” She said as she untangled the loose broach and put it in her purse. “Well then I’ll be off.”

Warren followed her to the door and they shared one more generic smile at the door before the woman turned and walked down the hallway towards the door that led back outside. Warren slowly closed the door.

“Everything ok?” Leigh asked. Warren slowly turned around to look at her.

“This is probably not the best way to start a business relationship.” Warren said, “Because I am having trouble seeing her as a person first.”

“I see.” Leigh said.

“I’ll adjust.” Warren tried to promise himself.

“Until you do, perhaps you can resist the urge to bring a box of candy or flowers to your first official meeting.” Leigh suggested. Warren made a more serious expression and she responded to it in kind waiting for him to speak.

“What do we know about her?” he asked.

“Nothing.” Leigh answered.

“Make some calls.” Warren said.

“I’m on it.” she announced and went back to her work. Warren bent down to look in the bag containing a box with

the game in it. He failed to be interested beyond the weird coloring and went on into his office.

Lunch went just as smoothly with him pouring down through all the stocks while Kit and Barnes talked excessively about sports, which he could conveniently ignore.

Kit interrupted him once pushing down the paper to get a look at him. "Just making sure your actually there and you didn't leave with the paper propped up to mark your spot."

"I'm sorry I missed lunch yesterday." Warren said. Kit narrowed his eyes. "Athena."

"Oh worthy, no problem Warren, had you known though you could have said so the night before while we were all at dinner." Kit said.

"I had it planned right. She just didn't fall in step." Warren said, "I'd have been there at eleven, five minutes to pass over the book and I should have been here on time." Warren explained.

"No Problem." Kit said acting like it really wasn't, when Warren could tell it was. Even if he hadn't had the extra knowledge of knowing Kit had called to check up on him, it was evident on his face that he wasn't happy Warren had caused him to worry. Warren let the paper back up to pick up where he'd left off. "What book?" Kit asked.

"Just an old book I thought Athena might have some interest in." Warren answered as he turned to the next page on the newspaper.

"Oh." Kit said and went back to his sports talk with Barnes which finished off lunch.

Barnes held Warren up at the door before they headed back off. Kit's lunch was going to last a bit longer and they'd left him at the table.

"Any word yet?" Barnes asked.

"No." Warren answered, "It might be weeks before she really gives it more than a glance."

“So it might just be taking up space as we speak.” Barnes said.

“More than likely.” He agreed.

“That means there’s still time.” Barnes said as she slapped his shoulder, “Time enough to keep her from opening Pandora’s box.”

Warren smiled and took a deep breath trying not to say anything against what he was now thinking were Barnes’ flights of fantasy. They then parted smiling at each other one more time.

Warren almost made it out of the office in keeping in tune with the smooth running day. It was Leigh moving into the office, avoiding the whole intercom issue that was a sign that it was about to be spoiled.

“It’s your sister.” Leigh explained, “Not taking no for an answer. I’m assuming her issue is about her son considering what you had me buy today?”

“Yes.” Warren agreed, “I’m sorry Leigh, from now on it’s probably best if I take all her calls if I’m in.”

“Okay, sorry about barging in.” she said as she retreated out of his office and returned to her desk.

Warren took a deep breath and picked up the phone. He then hit the button on the line that was flashing.

“Yea?” he asked.

“Not one day, Warren and I’m already getting an e-mail from Jake for Nathaniel telling me you turned into an asshole? You said some pretty thoughtless things, etc?” she asked.

“You sound concerned.” Warren said evenly.

“Of course I am.” She agreed.

“If you’re that concerned over Nate’s daily experience perhaps you should come back to Seattle and handle it personally. You know get a job here. After spending all that money to get a physician’s degree while I worked my ass off to support your mess and the best you can do is run all over the world on one hopeless medical crusade after another.

Meanwhile the kid you claim to be the most important person in your life suffered beatings from a father who wouldn't know love if it hit him as an asteroid that wiped out the United States of America.

"In the meantime you conveniently toss him in my general direction and whilst you continue on this way I'll handle the day to day stuff. I'll let you know should he be hospitalized for any reason or he ends up jail."

Warren hung up the phone. He leaned back in the chair for a minute as he thought about it some more. Her immediate problem was clear, she trusted him to do what was best for Nathaniel. Warren smiled at the thought.

He then got up and headed home, pissed now. He almost forgot the game, of which he'd already settled accounts with Leigh for. She failed to wish him a good evening with the way he moved to get out the door smashing the frame hard with his hand.

By the time he reached his own front door he stopped to try and force a calm trying not to take it out on the kid, even if he had incited her to call Warren at great expense to her low funds.

He turned the knob and found the door unlocked, which didn't elevate his mood. He moved in to see Nate lying on the couch with his feet hanging over the back of it and the TV on. Warren headed over towards him setting down the bag in his hand and retrieving the remote and bringing down the sound while Nate slowly chewed on what remained of an apple. Warren reminded himself he needed to up the grocery list to add more general food stock. Kids his age would eat a lot.

"What's in the bag?" Nate asked.

"Hello Nate." Warren said.

"Hi, what's in the bag?" he asked again.

"Probably something you don't deserve." Warren answered.

"That's for me?"

“As far as I can tell it would fail to hold my interest.” Warren agreed.

“Can I get my phone back now?” Nate asked.

“Yes.”

“My board?”

“No, that’s tomorrow.” Warren said. He moved to pick up his briefcase and bring it over near the table where he would pour over the documents in it some more.

“You got this for me?” Nate asked. Warren turned to look back as the kid pulled the box out of the bag and looked it over.

“Next time you decide to talk in the same room as me, try not to pretend I’m deaf.” Warren said. Nate’s face looked disappointed as he pulled the box all the way out and hung the bag upside down.

“You do realize I can’t do anything with this without an actual game, don’t you?” Nate asked holding up the box with one hand.

“No I don’t.” Warren answered honestly.

“This is just the game consol.” Nate began to explain, “The actual games you play on it are separate. They come on discs, you know like a DVD.”

“Ok.” Warren said.

“So I need a game to make use of this.” Nate moaned. Warren’s nice mode, as much as it was failing already completely shattered then.

“Then go out and get a job and buy one.” He said. He turned away from Nate’s cold look and headed for the table. He checked the time assessing how long he had before he got dinner started.

“You could be a lot nicer.” Nate said as he shoved the box to the side. His disappointment was not well masked and Warren didn’t appreciate it at all.

“And you could say thank you.” Warren said, “That’s what most people do when someone buys something for them.”

“It’s useless.” Nate explained, “You’re useless.”

“Go to your room.” Warren said.

Nate got that part down. He really didn’t want to lose his phone again before he even got it back. He also managed to not slam the door this time, which did elevate Warren’s mood. It gave him the chance to turn the TV completely off. Before he sat back down he unlocked his bedroom door and retrieved Nate’s cell phone and set it on the coffee table in front of the couch. If things went well Warren wouldn’t need to take it right back again.

He spent the rest of his lag time before starting dinner to look over the documents while the place was quiet and still. When he finally looked up Nate was standing by the couch, phone in hand.

“So.” Nate said, “When you send me to my room, generally how long is that suppose to last?”

“Until I call you for dinner.” Warren explained, “And if I send you to your room after dinner, then it’s for the night.”

“That’s like four hours of my time.” Nate said, “You never said when I had to go to bed.”

“Whenever you want.” Warren said as he put his work away. “As long as you’re in here by ten.”

“So you expect me to just sit in there, no TV, no radio and do nothing?” Nate asked.

“Are you trying to suggest you do not have some kind of personal music device?” Warren asked.

“Batteries died before I got back from Africa. I used up all my spares.”

“What kind?” Warren asked.

“A bunch of double As.” He answered. Warren was already getting up to move to get dinner started. He pulled out his wallet and looked at his cash. He quickly calculated how much he might need. He move and pulled out some of his cash.

“You probably have just enough time to get down to the drug store and back before dinner.” Warren said, “I want a receipt and change.”

Nate slowly moved over towards him and took the bills. “Be right back.” He said and then headed for the door. He did fail to keep it from slamming. And while Warren was sighing he opened it back up. “Sorry.” He said and closed it like a normal person would. Warren moved to get dinner started.

He picked up the phone in the middle of it and hit speed dial. “Hello?”

“Hey Leigh, Warren again.” He said.

“What’s up?”

“It appears our purchase was incomplete. I’m not sure whose fault that is. Since I know nothing about these things I find it hard to blame myself, however, this is what I get for getting an idea from just ease dropping.”

“I’m sorry, Warren. I had it in my mind that it would need a game, but when I got there I completely spaced that part in favor of getting in and out and on to work.”

“Well you take your time tomorrow. Get a few of the games to make the thing work.” Warren said.

“The price tag for each game can run pretty high, as much as like sixty dollars.” She informed him.

“Well I most certainly don’t want to take out a loan just to buy the kid a game to play. I tell you what. I’ll allot a hundred for this and get what you can. Think teenage boy.”

“Warren, that’s exactly what all these games are made for, it shouldn’t be a problem and I can probably get as many as five if I buy some of the older ones.” She explained.

“Sounds good, oh and is it also some place where you can get one of those large packs of batteries?” he asked.

“We have plenty at the office.” She informed him.

“Well not for the office, I don’t want it to get mixed in anyway. Just get me one of those jumbo packs of double A batteries on top of the game allotment.” He said.

“CD player?” she asked.

“I have no idea what it is, something that plays music.” Warren explained.

“You got it.” she said.

“Sorry I keep bothering you at home.”

“It’s not a problem, part of my job to keep things rolling smoothly for you.” She said.

“You also shouldn’t have to put up with my outbursts at work, which should let you in on the reason why I generally refuse to take her calls there.”

“I’m sure your distress is valid.” She said.

“Well hopefully that won’t become a daily occurrence.” Warren said.

“Ok.”

“Thanks.” He said.

“Bye.”

Warren hung up the phone and the door opened as he turned to see Nate coming through it. He closed the door behind him and began to move towards him.

“Is that locked?” Warren asked.

“Uhm, no.” Nate answered.

“New rule. That door is to remain locked at all times. You have a key to come through it when you’re on the outside of it. Otherwise the deadbolt turns easy enough.” Warren said.

“Paranoid?” Nate asked as he went back and locked the door.

“And whose fault would that be?” Warren asked feeling the edge come up. Nate failed to respond, avoiding another conflict in the immediate. He moved over towards his uncle, bag in one hand, and change in the other. He handed Warren the receipt and the change. Warren stopped what he was doing to look it over. “What is this candy?” Warren asked.

“Just a snickers bar.” Nate said.

“You got the buck for it?” Warren asked.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Nate asked.

“No, I most certainly am not.” Warren said, “I did not give you permission to spend my money any way you want. If I give you money to buy something, then it is expressly for that item alone. Do you have a dollar?”

“No, I spent all my running cash on the trip back here.” Nate admitted.

“Fine, it’s coming out of your allowance.” Warren said as he put the rest of the money away to get back to serving dinner. He turned back towards Nate once more. “Don’t do it again. You’ll get your allowance on Friday, no pre-spending from anything I hand you when it’s for something else.”

“Ok.” Nate cried, “I get it.”

“Good.” Warren said. “That enough to get it to work?”

“Yes, for a while.” Nate agreed. Warren filled bowls with soup and moved them to the table. He came back for the warm bread and Nate stood next to the table looking at it. Warren went ahead and sat down.

“You do not have to eat it.” Warren explained.

“You went ahead and put it in the bowl.” Nate said.

“Its there if you want it. Between the apple and the snickers bar something tells me you’re far from starving already.” Warren said. “You’re welcome to cook for yourself.”

Nate finally sat down and pulled the bowl close enough to smell it. He looked up at Warren. As far as the man could tell he didn’t know what the kid’s problem was. The soup was a completely balanced and well portioned meal.

He slowly moved to get his soup spoon in and finally tasted it. After that it all went down the hatch and he finished well before Warren did, who was busy scanning the paper now on the edge of the table just out of the spill zone.

Nate sat there not doing anything but looking at Warren while he finished. Warren finally looked back at him between flipping pages of the newspaper.

“What?” Warren asked.

“I’m not gay.” Nate said.

“I didn’t say you were.” Warren said.

“You said get a boyfriend.” Nate explained making it sound horrible.

“I also said get a girlfriend. The choice is yours. In this day and age it’s just as bad to assume someone is straight as it is to assume they are gay. In either case I don’t care what you are nor do I care what you do. That was my point in what I said.” Warren said.

“So I can just go do whatever?” Nate asked.

“A just assessment from the topic we are speaking of.” Warren said.

“I can go out and do drugs and you wouldn’t care?” Nate asked. Warren laughed briefly.

“Aside from the fact that you seem to be too poor to do that anytime soon, it’s a flagrantly ignorant thing to do. Never mind suggesting it out loud to me. It would just prove my point that you’re a lost cause.” Warren said.

“How can you sit there and say stuff like that to me? You don’t even know me.” He said.

“I know you from looking at you and hearing you talk. You are absolutely no different than your mother in regards to me knowing enough about you. It’s so easy for you to forget me being there for the first ten years of your life. I expect nothing great from you any more than I do from her any longer.”

“Stop talking about her like that.” He complained.

“As I said last night, I’ll speak about her any way in which I choose to. You don’t have to like it. You don’t have to like me. I think we cleared that up last night as well. We hate each other. My whole point is simple, Nathaniel. I don’t care. After ten years of being walked all over and being ignored for all my intelligent suggestions in accordance with her and you, I’m done.”

“Then why buy me stuff? Why the rules about me being here for dinner?” Nate asked.

“As a point to my showing responsibility to make sure you’ve eaten one good meal a day, or at the very least given the opportunity to.

“Other than that for anything I give you, all I want to hear from you about it is thank you. And if I fail to get one from you tomorrow when I do hand you your allowance, then you can rest assured that there will not be one the following week.”

“Screw you.” Nate said getting up. He started heading for the door again. “I’m not staying here.”

“There is in fact a homeless shelter not too far away.” Warren said, “You hit the street and go left. Five blocks down go right, three blocks that way and you will find it. Leave your key unless you intend to be back by ten, otherwise you’ll find the locks changed tomorrow.”

Nate stopped halfway to the door and looked back at him, glaring. Warren ignored the look and began to clear the table. He stopped, leaning against the counter, waiting to see if Nate would come back and clear his side or just leave.

He made some kind of noise that signaled defeat and came back to the table making faces the whole time he cleared his side of the table. Warren finished cleaning it and sat back down while Nate began to rinse the dishes and load the washer.

“There’s a good reason why I know right where that shelter is.” Warren said as he moved the newspaper up to where he could read it.

“Why?” Nate barked at him.

“It’s where I stayed after your father robbed me blind.” Warren answered calmly.

Nate bounced the bowl in his hands off the side of the counter where it spun in the air on its way to the floor where it smashed into little pieces. Warren looked at it and then looked at Nate.

“New rule.” Warren said, “In the future try not to break things and when you do, you clean them up.”

Nate stood there huffing his breath. Warren glanced at him again before going back to his paper, realizing he was now holding back. He wanted to go off again. Warren was reminded of what he was like when he was younger when his anger rivaled his father's. It was usually Warren who witnessed these outbursts outside of his parent's perception. He'd sat Juliana down on several occasions to express his concern. Never mind the fact that she took beatings from her own husband on a nearly weekly basis, but it was beginning to affect the kid.

It took her until Nate was ten for her to finally hear Warren and by then he was past reconciling with her. He told her just what he thought of her parenting process, allowing Warren to pick up the slack wherever it landed, somewhere between the kid's father's appearances at the house. Usually that occurred when he was low on funds. By then he was just plain ignoring Nate's existence, walking around him like he wasn't there and demanding that Juliana hand him over money, which she did for fear of a beating if she refused.

By then Warren was covering all the expenses as it were and barely above float. He'd come home to find that the other man had taken all of his valuable belongings, gotten access to all his bank accounts and managed to drain them against Warren's wishes by concocting a complex story about him and his sister.

The problem was Warren had given Juliana a key to access his apartment in case she decided to follow him out the door. He was out of town and he didn't want her to feel like she had no where else to go. Warren was already at the edge of his patience by then. After being robbed, after that Juliana looked him up and told Warren she'd finally left the bastard that she and Nate were struggling, could he help her out? She was already straining from the student loans, some of which Warren had used his inheritance to help pay off.

He turned her away at the door. He'd also said he'd never wished to lay eyes on either her or her child ever again.

And he lost contact for a whole year, in which time she had managed a meager position against her PHD, but she would have to go to Boston. She wanted Warren to keep Nate while she got settled. Again Warren turned her away.

It was in Boston where she first got involved with World Care. She joined the medical staff and began to go to small countries where there were not enough doctors to help take care of the sick and dieing in these poor countries. It was 180 degree turn around for her, not only helping herself and getting out from under the thumb of a tyrant, but taking her crusade to help anyone and everyone she could. She wasn't interested in the money and she just stayed above water to keep the bills paid and food on the table, which came and went like the wind.

She came back to Seattle in repast against her long sojourn in aiding the world of the needy and landed right on Warren's door step. Looking for all they were worth like tiny Tim and his vagrant mother. The contrast of knowing she was a medical doctor against the way she appeared then pissed Warren off even more.

At that point he said, stupidly for seeing the kid shivering without a proper jacket as they traveled light from one country to the next where it was usually warm. He'd said the kid could stay well enough to keep him from freezing to death. Warren didn't want that on his consciousness. But she'd survive one way or another elsewhere.

So she'd left Nathaniel at Warren's door and disappeared into the wintry night and didn't return for three weeks. During that time Warren was completely over run by Nate's tantrums, his constant complaints and him making demands against Warren's time. He'd ended up taking the time off from work to deal with this situation and he was whole heartily reminded of what it was like to be in the middle of their little family drama.

She came back, begging this time for him to let her stay with him. He turned her away again. He also pushed Nate out the door towards her.

She went off on Warren at that point. No longer pleasant with her words and asking nicely for favors, she blew up at him and started calling him every name in the book. He turned it right back on her and they were both getting so heated that they might have actually come to blows at that point.

What stopped them was their realization that Nathaniel was no longer standing there with them. For some damn reason Warren came off his soap box to help her find him walking the streets in the cold, calling law officers, looking all over the downtown area for a wayward eleven year old.

By morning they were reunited. And Warren had gotten so fed up and tired over the ordeal he told his sister that no matter what Nathaniel could always stay with him. He didn't want to go through the same experience ever again. She promptly took him up on the offer. This time keeping constant contact. The three weeks prior she was still just pissed at him and not wanting to talk because as long as Nate was safe she was fine. Or she could be.

At the end of a long month in which time Warren had truly come to despise all children on his single experience with Nathaniel, she finally came and took him away. Headed off to some place south of the border, where her travel expenses were paid for and included her dependant. They were that desperate for medical doctors down there.

Warren came back to the present to realize Nate was standing there, for all appearances, sulking where he stood. He glanced at the kid and then back at his paper.

"I'm not my father." Nate finally said.

"I am definitely not going to waste my time talking to you in regards to whether or not you are, because to me you are nothing more than a micro sized version of him and her."

“I don’t look anything like him.” Nate added, “I look like you.”

“Barely.” Warren said.

“I do, Mom says it all the time, you look just like your uncle Warren did when he was your age.” Nate said.

“It’s those damn twin genes.” Warren explained as he paged through his paper, “Other than the fact that your Mom ends up being a woman over me being a man we have identical DNA. In which case you end up looking like me for being a boy, but it is nothing more than what you’re getting from her. Not me.”

“But I’m not him.”

“Genes have nothing to do with the way they raised you so far.” Warren said, “Whatever his problem is you have it, too. She’s not the poster girl for a working mother at all either.”

Nate looked down at the floor in response. He was defeated again. Warren was already sick of the ongoing argument.

“If you don’t intend to do anymore, just go to your room. The mess will still be there tomorrow.”

“The cleaning lady will come tomorrow.” Nate said, “She can clean it up.”

“She will not be cleaning up after you like that, Nate.” Warren said, “I will call the service in the morning and expressly forbid her to do so. In which case you can go to your room either way at this point and maybe do better for it tomorrow.”

“No, I’m just going to keep right on standing here.” Nate said becoming defiant again.

“I have yet to return your skate board, up to you.” Warren said, “You want to go another day without it?”

Nathaniel finally moved, leaving the kitchen half done, ignoring the broken bowl. He grabbed the batteries and moved on into his room, where he could sulk privately.

And thanks to Warren's generosity, he could do so with music in his ears.

Warren finished the day reading his paper and then headed off to bed.

3

The sound of the TV woke him. He rolled over to note the time. It was two thirty in the AM. Warren rolled out of bed and wobbled for a moment. He was far from used to being woken up in the middle of the night. He was beyond grumpy for having to get up at all. The idea that the walls were rattling from the sound coming through the door was not only a personal issue it could easily involve the law.

He headed towards his door, unlocking it and letting himself out to see the TV lighting the main part of the apartment with no further lighting. Something was exploding. That explained the bulk of the sound. Warren was instantly regretting letting Kit talk him into getting surround sound for an entertainment center he hardly ever made use of beyond a few good movies, which it did enhance to some degree, and watching the news.

Warren wandered over to the couch and peered over it to see Nate staring at the TV. He was lying peacefully enough, but at first glance, even with his eyes open, Warren couldn't tell if he was asleep or not.

Warren grabbed the remote from his hand, startling him. That only pissed Warren off even more for having the sound so loud that he had no idea that Warren was there. He snapped off the TV.

"What in the hell do you think your doing?" Warren asked.

"Watching TV." Nate explained.

"Are you this dense, really?" Warren asked.

"What's the problem Uncle Warren?" Nate asked, "There's no rule about watching TV."

“The problem is I’m going to be damn surprised if I don’t get some nasty phone calls from the neighbors tomorrow and if I’m really lucky that’s all I’ll get and the police won’t come knocking on my door.” Warren explained.

“Why does it go so loud if you’re never allowed to crank it up?” Nate asked, sounding almost curious in his way of asking.

“Go to bed.” Warren said.

“Fine.” Nate said as he bounced up off the couch giving Warren a strange look for seeing him out of his room in sleeping pants, but no shirt. He then went to his room and closed the door, blessing upon blessings he didn’t slam it. Warren might have thrown him out completely just then if he had. Warren took the remote with him back to his own room.

4

In the morning he brought Nate’s skateboard back out for him. He teetered on the idea as he looked at the broken bowl still on the floor. He took a deep breath and resolved to do something else about it, because Nate had finally gone to his room against losing the thing for another day. The bowl issue would have to be treated some other way.

The TV remote, however, along with all the other existing remotes, got locked into Warren’s bedroom before he left. He wasn’t all surprised that the kid wasn’t up especially if he’d stayed up watching the TV the whole time, probably progressively turning the volume up. Or he’d cranked it just at the wrong time when things were beginning to blow up.

Warren grabbed up all his belongings he’d need for the day and locked himself out of the apartment. He’d had just enough time to get calmed down drinking his morning coffee he’d gotten from the local coffee shop when Leigh

passed his first call through to him claiming it was some kid complaining about a TV.

Warren hit speaker phone. "Go ahead." He said.

"Where's the remote to the TV?" the kid asked.

"It's unavailable." Warren answered.

"So what, I can't even watch the stupid TV while I'm trapped inside all day here with it raining like crazy."

"Not that the rain is anything new." Warren said, "You've just forgotten about it. I recommend one of two things. Buy yourself some rain gear with your allowance this week or suffer it out inside."

"And I can't watch the TV?"

"Last time I checked you can run the TV just fine as is. All you have to do is get up, walk over to it, turn it on and change channels the old fashion way." Warren explained.

"Don't even. They had remotes when you were just a kid, too." Nate said.

"In the future, this is an office where I do work. This allows me to earn money to pay for the apartment your in. That also provided the funds to purchase said TV that you want to watch. Do not call me here again unless it's an actual emergency." Warren said and then he hung up the phone.

He immediately got another line out and called the cleaning service. It became quite the effort to explain to them that he in fact wanted something left not cleaned up as opposed to having it cleaned up. He somehow managed though and wasted another twenty minutes in doing so.

After he got off the phone he found himself chewing on his thumbnail. Not being aware of it right away he immediately got frustrated that the old habit had resurfaced all on its own while he'd struggled to suppress it for years before it became a non issue.

Leigh caught his disturbed look as she brought him some paper work for him to go over. "You ok?" she asked.

"You know how they say you can never go back?" Warren asked.

“Yes.”

“They lied.” Warren explained.

5

Lunch was better. And although Warren was keeping something else in mind, he was amused by Kit running off all his jokes he didn't think Barnes had heard. He found himself laughing at some of the same old stories he'd heard more than once. It was marking his presence among them from behind the newspaper.

It was on the occasion as he dropped the paper to look at the two of them that he continued to notice the brown haired woman from across the bar looking at him. And each time Warren took notice of this she snapped her head away.

Warren finally folded the newspaper up, deciding he'd read more of it later. He took a sip from his drink. Barnes' current state of humor melted into a serious expression as she caught Warren's eyes.

“What?” she asked.

“I think we are being observed.” Warren answered. Kit began to look about the place. There were plenty of patrons at this point. The bar wasn't renowned for its entertainment value, but its food. And although it was a good place to get a drink, it was the best place to get lunch.

“Where?” Kit asked looking back at Warren.

“Brown hair. I can't make out her eyes from here, getting the glint from the lights.” Warren explained.

“Table C2?” Kit asked. Warren wanted to roll off in laughter that Kit would know something that specific. Warren however did not.

“Back wall, third from the front.” Warren explained.

“That's what I said, C2.” Kit explained back as he looked at her. The woman was not facing them at this point.

“Come on, don't stare.” Barnes suggested.

“Well.” Kit said, “If we are worthy of being looked at.”
Kit said, “Na, she’s...she’s Angela.”

“Maybe.” Warren said, “But whoever she is she keeps looking over here.”

“Probably looking at me.” Kit said as he leaned back and ran his hand across his chest and smiled at Warren, “Who could resist. But I wouldn’t be interested.”

“Why not?” Barnes asked.

“She’s Angela.” Kit explained. Barnes put her right hand out and rolled it wanting him to go on. “Oh right, Barnes. You haven’t heard that one. There was a girl named Angela, of course. Warren and I both agreed she was just kind of plain Jane looking. And ever since instead of being obvious in saying something just like that we always say ‘She’s Angela.’”

Barnes was shaking her head at him. She then looked at the woman in question herself. “I like her look. Rather stern, but kind.” She said. Kit laughed and she looked back at him.

“I know.” Kit said. He swung his head around. “Warren what’s the guy’s name again?”

“Todd.” Warren answered. Kit caught sight of their server and put his hand up.

“Yo Todd.” He called out causing a few people to look in their general direction. Kit laughed as he turned back to Barnes. “What?” he asked. She shook her head again in the negative. Kit laughed again as Todd came over. Kit leaned towards him and used his finger to get the man to lean down closer to him.

“Yes?” Todd asked.

“Girl in C2.” Kit said, “Bring her another of whatever she’s drinking and tell her it’s from all of us.”

“Certainly.” Todd said.

Kit amused himself by grinning at Barnes the whole time. They all glanced over as Todd brought the woman the drink and pointed them out. It gave her the chance to finally

look right at them and Warren finally caught the color of her eyes as Todd's person blocked the light that had been glinting in them. They were hazel. She didn't smile then. She looked kind of disturbed. As Todd backed away she slid further down along the bench as if she was wilting away from them.

"Now look what you did." Barnes said, "She probably wasn't even looking at you."

"She was." Warren insisted. Barnes looked at him a moment while he nodded towards her. Kit was still looking over that way. "Kit, maybe we shouldn't stare her down, especially if you're not interested." Warren suggested.

"Barnes is." Kit said, "She probably doesn't know which one of us sent it." He waved at Todd again. The woman in question glanced back at them once and then looked away.

Todd came back to the table. "Don't." Barnes said.

"Hey." Kit said, "I know what I'm doing."

"Yes?" Todd asked.

"Double your tip my man. Go back and tell her that all of us are available." Kit said. Todd glanced at Barnes briefly and then nodded. Kit laughed again. "There, if she is interested in you, Barnes, she'll know you might be too."

"I didn't ask you to do that." Barnes said.

"Tell me you wouldn't like to say hello?" Kit suggested. Barnes turned to glance at the woman as Todd approached her. She didn't answer Kit just then. After Todd made the brief announcement the woman slid out of the booth, tossing down some money quickly and walked out of the bar specifically turning her head away from them. "Holy shit." Kit said, "We can't all be that bad."

"You really know how to knock a girl off her feet." Barnes finally said. Kit roared into laughter and she followed. They both got going so bad that Warren started laughing, too.

6

Warren walked into his office. Leigh looked at him expectantly. "What do I have on my plate for today?" Warren asked.

"I'm to remind you that you need to work on the Smith and Gable project." She answered.

"Yes I do." He agreed, "That should keep me busy all afternoon. How about we keep the calls light? Anything serious, my sister, the kid calls needing bail money, pass that through."

"No problem." She agreed.

"Oh." Warren added, "When Miss Clarkson's assistant calls see if you can't get her on the line to speak with me. That's worth taking a break for."

"That wouldn't be your inability to keep things professional would it?" she asked.

"Maybe." He agreed, "We have yet to do business." He smiled at her and moved towards his door getting out his key.

"Warren." Leigh said turning towards him. He looked back at her while getting his door open. "I haven't been able to find out anything about her."

"You called Garner's office?" Warren asked.

"Yes." She answered.

"Well she's coming from him." Warren said.

"I know, but Garner is now out of town. I did talk to his assistant about her. Warren he's never heard her name, no contact or anything. According to him she's never done any business with Garner."

Warren got his door all the way open and stopped to run his hand along his chin. Then he smiled looking hopeful. "Maybe she's not intending to do any business then." Leigh returned his smile, but failed to look as hopeful.

Warren headed into his office and finished working on his project without any calls. He failed to hide his

disappointment as he came out of his office, locking the door behind him. Leigh caught his look as he moved to grab the bag of games she'd gotten for him.

"I'm sorry." She said finally, "You want me to call you if she calls before five?"

"At this point I don't expect it." Warren said. He smiled just a little, "But if she does, then yes. You have a good weekend."

"You too." She said cheerfully. Warren nodded and headed out the door and headed home.

Warren's front door was locked, but as soon as he got it opened he realized how loud the TV was just on the inside. He sighed as he went over to the end table near the couch and set the bag down. His motion caught Nate's attention and he immediately jumped up to turn the sound down. He looked curiously at the bag as Warren took off his trench coat and hung it off the rack near the front door.

When Warren looked back Nate was looking over the games. It took him a moment to finally look appreciative. Warren approached him and Nate looked at him. Warren made a disapproving expression as he pulled out his wallet and began to dig out some of his money. He then held out a twenty, two tens, a five and five ones.

Nate reacted slowly, as if Warren might just be teasing him. "Your allowance." Warren explained. Nate moved towards him and took the money.

"You're giving me fifty bucks?" he asked.

"Hey." Warren said sounding reprimanding already, "I was happy to get five bucks in my day."

"No, no." Nate said, "I mean I can't believe you're just handing me fifty dollars!"

"Well, it seems appropriate." Warren explained, "Considering an audio CD is what fifteen? A DVD twenty-five. And one of these games, well this one is thirty." He pointed at it.

Nate's expression was obviously surprise. Warren could picture him calculating the actual cash against the purchases Warren had made for him.

"That doesn't mean you have to spend it all at once." Warren said, "It's for the whole week. Don't come looking for a loan come Thursday against next week's allowance. You will get nothing."

"This is every week?" Nate said exasperated.

"Yes, don't get too excited." Warren said, "I'm pretty sure it's not going to be enough to maintain a heroine habit. If you need all that you'll have to resort to getting a job or dealing it like other junkies."

"I'm not a junkie." Nate said.

"I wouldn't know." Warren explained, "You were the one talking about doing drugs last night." Nate just looked at him holding the money out still like he didn't know what to do with it. "Do you have a wallet?" Warren asked.

"No."

"Do you have an ID?"

"Yes." Nate answered.

"Well where do you keep it?" Warren asked.

"It's in my pack." Nate answered.

"Go get it." Warren said. He then turned and headed to his bedroom, unlocking the door first. He came back and met Nate halfway across the length of the apartment. He handed Nate the wallet. "It's a little worn down, but it should get you started." He said, "Put your ID in it, then put your money in it. And try not to lose it. Once you start doing all of that it's something you'll be doing the rest of your life."

Nate took the wallet, looking it over first. It was worn looking. He then put his ID in it and started stuffing his money into it.

"Aren't we forgetting something?" Warren asked.

"Oh." Nate said, "Yes, Thanks...I mean thank you, and for the games, too."

“My dollar.” Warren clarified, but inside he was glad he’d finally said that even if Warren was forcing him to. He hadn’t actually counted on it. Nate pulled out a dollar and handed it to him. Warren took it and slipped it into his front pocket for the time being.

“Can I get the TV remote back now?” Nate asked.

“Monday.” Warren said.

“*Monday?*” Nate complained, “I have to go all weekend without it?”

“Last night’s incident with the volume was a serious infraction.” Warren explained. Nate frowned, “You want it back on Sunday instead?”

“Yes.” Nate agreed.

“Then you could start with an apology.” Warren said. Nate failed to seem to be moved by it. Warren headed towards the front of the apartment where the phone and answering machine were. It was all sitting on the small table between the two high back chairs with the windows behind them. Warren wiggled his finger getting Nate to follow him. He led him over to the answering machine and hit play.

“Hello Mr. Keith. Lucinda from downstairs. I rather got curious. Do you have a dog now? I swear I hear something pitter patting back and fourth across the apartment at all times of the day. That’s not really a problem, you know these buildings don’t prevent sound at all from one floor to the next. But maybe the dog got to chewing on the TV remote last night? It’s the only thing I can think of that would cause the sound of it to become so loud. Never had a problem with you before. I’d suggest keeping the remote up somewhere where it could cause no further incidences of the likes. Why I nearly had to call the doctor my heart started beating so fast. Well that should be all. Do you have a dog?”

The answering machine beeped and went to the next message. “Yo Keith, Dude. Digging the new audio man. I should probably drop by to watch wrestling sometime and we can both see how loud it really goes. But man, last night,

not cool. Sorry dude, not in the AM. I mean it's like I had it all going on, you know? It's me, the beach and Pamela A. I swear Dude. You would not believe how realistic it is. Lucid dreaming. Its something you practice, but man right smack in the middle of, I'm like Dude, something blew up. I'm like what the fuck, man? Is the whole place coming down around me or what? So I starts to get up, you know, Pam, she's long gone, I won't see her again for a while, she'll be pissed, you know? Then I get thinking, you know, really hard, like my brain cells might actually work still and I'm like it's that kid. I betcha, he done messing with the sound system, not cool. I'll thump him up side the head next time I see him alright? Yea man, keeping a kid, you know whatever floats your boat, but really keep it down, kay? Cause tonight I got like Pam Dawber scheduled. Yea I know she's a bit old, but I'm talking like from the days of Mork & Mindy when she kicked..." Warren hit erase shaking his head. He then turned to look at Nate's confused expression.

"Those are the nice neighbors." Warren explained as he pulled out a note written on lined paper from his pocket he'd snatched off the door on his way in. He held it up in front of Nate by the tape on his finger that was used to secure it to his front door. Nate's eyes got big while reading it. He finally looked back at Warren when he was finished, closing him mouth tightly for a moment.

Warren turned the tape around and hung the note off of Nate's right shoulder by taping it to his shirt. Nate wrinkled his nose at the move.

"I think you should wear that for a while." Warren said.

"No way." Nate said.

"You want the remote back Monday, Sunday or tomorrow?" Warren asked. Nate took in a deep breath and looked at the note hanging off him. He then looked back at his uncle.

“I’m sorry I cranked the TV in the middle of the night. How long do I have to wear this stupid thing?” Nate asked.

“Until you’re done wearing a shirt for today.” Warren answered. Nate groaned. “Now how about this bowl?” Warren asked leading him over towards it. “Why don’t you just clean it up now and be done with it?”

“Just as soon as you take back what you said about me being just like my father.” Nate said. Warren turned back towards him. He could have completed the comment by adding ‘and mother’. But it was clear Nate didn’t mind being like his mother and that only annoyed Warren.

“No.” Warren replied firmly.

“Fine it can stay broken on the floor then.” Nate said holding his hands up.

Warren walked past him. He went back over to the couch and picked up the stack of five games he’d had Leigh pick up. Nate followed him with his gaze as he came back and sat down at the table, pushing the stack to the left. He then looked at Nate. “These are yours.” He explained. He then took the one off the top and moved it to the right side of the table. “This one is now mine. You want to clean it up now?”

“No.” Nate replied. Warren moved the next one on the pile onto his side.

“Now?”

“No.”

Warren grabbed the last three and moved them all over onto his stack. “You want to get any of them back?”

“I don’t care, its not like I really had them anyway.” Nate said. Warren smiled at him and began shuffling through the games. He found the most expensive one and looked it over. After an initial attempt to do it bare handed, he retrieved a pair of scissors to get it out of the wrapping. He then opened it up and looked at the booklet that fell out for a moment.

“Well, I’d imagine these things break pretty easily.” Warren said. He popped out the disk and grabbed it with both hands. “Just like my bowl.” He then tried to wobble it a bit.

“Oh man.” Nate said, “That’s the best one.”

“It’s the one in my hands. It’s not going to last much longer.”

“Ok ok, stop. I’ll clean it up, geez.” Nate said. Warren popped the disk back in the case and closed it up. He then picked up the stack of games and headed towards his room. “Hey, I said I’d clean it up.”

“Not soon enough.” Warren explained as he dropped off the stack of games and put them on his dresser. He then came out empty handed. “For everyday things go well, you’ll get one of them back.”

“Where’s your broom?” Nate asked.

“You know I don’t really know.” Warren answered as he looked around the kitchen, “I’m not in the habit of breaking my things for no good reason. That tall cabinet maybe.” Nate looked at it and then headed over towards it. He opened it up. “There’s probably a duster in there, too, somewhere.”

“I got it.” Nate said as he pulled out a broom and a dust pan. After that it only took him a few minutes to clean up the mess.

Warren gathered a pad of paper and a pen from off the counter and took it to the table where he began writing stuff down. “What other fruits do you like besides apples?” He asked.

“Why do you want to know?” Nate asked.

“I’m adding things to the grocery list to cover your stay here. What do you like?”

“Bananas, pears, grapes, the usual common stuff.”

“Sounds good.” Warren said as he added that.

“What’s the rush?” Nate asked as he realized his uncle was writing pretty fast.

“Trying to get it all down before the grocery boy gets here so he’ll have it for next week.” Warren answered.

“A grocery boy?” Nate asked looking unbelieving. Warren met his eyes for a moment.

“Yes, a boy about your age who actually has a job. Keeps it year round, shops everyday of the week for someone different maybe as many as three or four on Saturday. My day is Friday. Most people don’t like Friday because they always have something going on, but it suits me fine.”

Warren went back to finishing up the list, stopping once to glance at the clock. “You’re saying some kid...” Nate started to ask. He stopped when the doorbell rang. Warren got up from the table and went to open the door.

“Hey Mr. Keith, have good week?” the kid on the other side of it asked.

“Not bad Brandon and you?” Warren asked. Nate wandered over to stand next to his uncle as the other boy took notice of him.

“Groovy.” He answered glancing between them.

“This is my nephew, Nathaniel. He’ll be here for a while. So the list is going to be longer for next week. A little bit more money for you percentage wise.” Warren said.

“Not a problem, Mr. Keith. I’m saving for a guitar.” Brandon announced.

“That sounds like a fine goal.” Warren said. The grocery boy turned to look at Nate a little bit longer. Nate looked baffled at his stare for a moment until he looked down to remind himself of the note hanging off his shirt.

“Oh man.” Nate cried as he turned his back to the door and took a few steps away. Warren smiled at the other boy who laughed a little, but not for long.

“I got more coming. I’ll be right back and help you bring it all in.” Brandon said as he headed back down the hall.

“You can help.” Warren said as he bent down to pick up some of the bags Brandon had already put on his

doorstep. As he stood up he met Nate's eyes as he looked back at him. It was obvious that the kid figured out that his uncle set him up with the note. The idea was actually pretty clear. Nate had embarrassed him and he'd done it right back.

Nate walked past him towards the couch. He then tore off his shirt and tossed it towards his bedroom door. Almost stomping as he came back he went and helped his uncle carry bags into the kitchen. Warren was impressed by his ingenuity in finding a loophole in the agreement, but in order to use it, he'd be without a shirt until he went to bed.

Warren headed back to the door just in time to take a few bags from Brandon's hands as he returned. Nate came over and got the last of it, getting another strange look from the other kid.

"How did you get so tan?" Brandon asked as he walked along side him towards the counter. Nate dropped the bags unceremoniously on the counter and looked back at the grocery boy.

"Bermuda." He answered.

"Oh cool, how long?" Brandon asked. At this point he was doing more than he usually did by unloading the bags. Warren turned away and smiled at the idea. He then looked back and they were both looking right at each other, absently emptying bags.

"My Mom and I were stuck there for three weeks before going to Africa." Nate answered.

"Cool, you went to Africa?" he asked.

"For like two days and then they sent me all the way back here." Nate answered.

"What did you do in Bermuda?"

"Nothing. Swatting bugs, running around on the beaches, the usual tropical scene."

"You make it sound common."

"It is to me." Nate agreed. The other boy nodded at this point and finally looked back at Warren.

“Oh yea, sorry Mr. Keith.” Brandon said as he started to dig into his pockets.

“It’s fine, if you’re not in a hurry. I’m not.” Warren said. Brandon handed him a receipt. Warren took that over doing anything more with the groceries. Nate started to put stuff away in the refrigerator.

Warren glanced back once on his way to his bedroom to see them both just kind looking each other over as Brandon continued to unload bags and started to hand Nate stuff.

“You play an instrument or anything?” Brandon asked.

“No.” Nate replied, “No talent. You play Xbox?”

“All the time.” Brandon answered.

Warren lost track of their chatter as he got his key out for the top drawer on his dresser. He unlocked it and pulled out his checkbook. He had a separate one for work related expenses, so it wasn’t anything he needed to keep on him at all times. He looked over the receipt and wrote out a check. He locked the checkbook back up and came back out into the kitchen where the two boys were leaning on opposite sides of the counter. Nate was busy recounting scores from his games, by name.

“Maybe you could come over and play some time.” Nate offered. Warren got in between them with the check. Brandon ignored Nate for the moment, getting back to business.

“I put extra in there to roll over into next week’s expense increase. That way you don’t have to put any money up front from your own pocket.” Warren explained.

“Right on.” Brandon said. He then looked back at Nate. “I’m done for today, I’ll play you a few games right now.”

Nate gave his uncle a forlorn look. Warren glanced at him, but he wasn’t at all about to bend. His attention kept being drawn back to the open door. He wanted it closed and

locked, but he had never closed it before for the length of time it usually took him and Brandon to conduct their business. At this point he wondered if Brandon was staying, if he was he could go ahead and close the door.

“Maybe some other time.” Nate said. Warren looked back to see the disappointment on both of their faces. “I only have one controller anyway.”

“Right.” Brandon said, “I’d have to bring mine over. Uhm I have your uncle’s number. If it’s alright with both of you, I’ll call you and we’ll hook up. I got a few games that I can bring over too. Man its summer, nothing to do all day anyway before I, you know, do my job here.”

Nate looked back at Warren again. Warren could already tell what his problem was now. The restriction on only having company when he was home.

“Alright.” Nate said.

“That should be fine.” Warren said, “This of course would be any time that Nate’s not here alone.”

“Sure.” Brandon said nodding. He then looked back at Nate suspiciously and then back at Warren. “Your list?”

“Right.” Warren said as he headed back to the table and got it. He handed it to Brandon, who was now no longer looking at Nate.

“The extra shouldn’t be a problem Mr. Keith.” Brandon said as they both walked towards the door. “You need anything in between, drop me a line on my voice mail.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Warren said, “I might fill in a few meals this week by ordering out, so it would be unexpected.”

“Right on, I’ll see you next week.” Brandon said as he headed out the door. Warren came up behind him ready to close and lock the door.

“Have a good weekend.” Warren suggested. Brandon didn’t look back as he headed on down the hall. At this point, as Warren closed the door and locked it, he did feel a small amount of guilt. It had something to do with how quickly

boys got excited about doing something together and how quickly it fell apart. Brandon had lost interest already. Warren lost the feeling when he got back in the kitchen as Nate glared at him between shuffling away the last of the groceries, hunting down where some of the stuff went as he did. "Problem?" Warren finally asked.

"You're definitely not stupid." Nate answered.

"I do not need to be informed of that." Warren said.

"You knew that would happen." Nate said, "You set me up. What a rip."

"I failed to instruct you on common decency. Considering that was only left up to your Mom, I'm not surprised by the TV incidence. In either case I never suggested you do something so careless either. And as far as the games go, you had a chance to just clean up your mess without anything else happening from it and you chose not to take it."

"Thanks a lot. He's not going to call." Nate said.

"I'd say you were correct."

"You made me look like an ass." Nate added. Warren smiled at him causing Nate to get even more disturbed.

"At this point, I'd say we're even. If Bill from upstairs actually does stop by to watch wrestling, you'll be the one watching it with him." Warren said. Nate's eyes got big again. He came to a complete stand still and Warren could see he was struggling with his emotions of what he might want to say over what he should. He needed to get out of trouble at this point, not into any more. "Are you sure you're not cold?" Warren asked.

"I'm fine." Nate answered raising his voice some. Warren let that slide, he moved from putting food away to getting things out to make dinner with. When he got back to looking around he realized Nate had gone into his room.

He knocked on his door to alert him the dinner was ready. At that point he noted that Nate had taken his discarded shirt into his room with him. Warren had to

appreciate that, for not having to tell him to do it. He turned around and headed back towards the table. As he sat down Nate came out of his room. Not wanting to lose the battle over the remote he was still shirtless. He sat down at the table and looked at the food. He then folded his arms and leaned back. Warren ignored the gesture.

“I’m going to Athena’s tomorrow, I think you should come.” Warren said.

“Why?”

“We will be painting her house. I’ll tell it to you as she told me, it can’t hurt you. She’ll also be feeding us. I assure you her cooking is much better than mine. That of course is on the likelihood that Ba’mosa doesn’t see the need to get the bar-b-q pit going. In which case it’s not bad, juts not as good as hers.”

“Do I have to?” Nate asked.

“No you don’t.” Warren answered, “It would take something pretty drastic for me to require that much of your time. It’s an invitation. If you don’t go you’ll be on your own for dinner.”

“Fine.” Nate said. Warren didn’t immediately know if that meant he was going with him or he’d be fine getting his own dinner. “I don’t have anything else to do anyway, no TV remote, no games.” Nate added, clarifying it for his uncle.

Warren focused in on his food. He could tell by Nate’s resistance to actually eating his portion he was trying to aggravate Warren. He shuffled from side to side in his chair bringing his uncle’s attention back on him. It shouted out ‘Unhappy Kid.’ to Warren.

“What?” Warren finally asked.

“I’m not anything like my father, ok? If anyone is like him, its you.” Nate said. Warren specifically put his silverware down.

“I’ll give you one chance to rescind that comment.” Warren said.

“What does rescind mean?” Nate asked.

“It means you take it back. I am nothing like your father. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“You keep saying it about me. I can say it about you.”

“No, you cannot. The stated opinion is different than any that might be inside your own head. In this case you speaking it out loud to me is disrespectful.”

“You’re disrespecting me.” Nate said.

“As I already told you. You have no rights here.” Warren explained again, “You have responsibilities and privileges as I see fit to give them to you. During your stay here you have no right to speak your opinion about me out loud. I on the other hand have earned the right to explain things to you in accordance to what I think you need to be aware of. In the case of my actions displeasing you. I can tell you that my maneuvers are in reaction to your own. If you don’t wish to lose privileges than act in accordance with the rules.

“And if you’re still unclear on the matter. The incident with the TV is you being disrespectful towards me. I have no further requirements from you. Now are you going to rescind your comment?”

“Fine.” Nate said, “You’re not just like him. You’re a jerk in your own way.”

“You’re not really paying attention here.” Warren said, “I’ll let this one slide, but it comes with a few opinions of my own. Firstly, you made an appearance for dinner. If you do not wish to eat you are not required to stay. Secondly, no conversation is required. I’d rather not be speaking to you at all at this point. I’d rather be eating over hearing your consistent complaining.”

“You’re going out of your way to piss me off.” Nate said becoming animated and pointing at himself. Warren took a deep breath. Nate was grinding the tips of his fingers into his palms at this point and making fists. Warren recognized the gesture too well. He didn’t want it to escalate either.

“It’s too easy, Nate.” Warren said trying to appear relaxed, “At the most I’m doing nothing but talking to you. There is no good reason for you to be upset. I have no tolerance for it.”

Nate jerked in his chair. He then looked away making faces. Warren looked down at the last of his food. He wouldn’t get back to it. He was already past wanting to eat and Nate’s actions would be preventing him from wanting any more on top of it. He picked up his dishes and got up with them. After moving them to the counter he turned to look at Nate as he struggled with his emotions.

“Its matters not how you feel towards me.” Warren said. Nate turned to look at him. “At some point you need to take a serious look at your issue. At some point you’re no longer going to be able to keep your anger in check. It’s completely inappropriate here.

“I have yet to get angry towards you myself.”

“You could have fooled me.” Nate snapped.

“You annoy me greatly, yes. But I’m not angry towards you, not like I am with your mother. And with good reason, I assure you. In this case your actions are running off your unchecked emotions. If you are cold you should let logic and reason dictate your actions, not your emotions and go put your damn shirt back on.”

“I’m not cold.” Nate cried. Warren could tell he still thought he was winning that battle and wasn’t about to give in.

“Fine.” Warren said. They glared at each other for a while. Warren finally moved away from the kitchen area all together and sat down in one of the high back chairs. When he finally did glance back at Nate he was shoveling food into his mouth, but was far beyond enjoying the meal. After he finished he cleaned up and loaded the dishwasher, getting it going all by himself.

Nate passed Warren on his way to his room. “I hate you.” Nate said as he went by.

“I hate you too.” Warren said, but he was far from shouting it. Nate glanced back and then sped up his course towards his room.

7

Warren gave Nate five more minutes. After which he was going to leave without him. He’d already knocked on his door three times, the first time right before Warren had gotten the coffee pot going and the last right before he turned up his watch to mark five minutes before he decided he needed to be gone.

He turned to see Nate finally come out of his room. At this point he had his music with him, headphones hanging around his neck. He was wearing high top sneakers, a plain red t-shirt and shorts that went down past his knees only exposing his ankles. Warren doubted it would be warm enough, but at least he had his jacket on, even if it wasn’t at all zipped up.

Travel cup in hand Warren led them out of the apartment. Nate didn’t speak at all and set the pace for the entire trip out, first in a cab to get Warren’s car and then driving out to where Athena and family lived. Warren passed through a donut shop, getting a refill for his coffee mug. Since Nate was busy listening to music and not speaking he hadn’t requested any donuts. Warren got them croissants handing one to Nate. At first he looked like he wasn’t going to take it. But the smell of food finally won him over. Warren handed him a hot chocolate next, not caring what he actually wanted to drink at that point. Nate took that as well.

Nate didn’t speak until Warren actually pulled up into the driveway of Athena’s house. Nate popped off his headphones. “She lives in a house?” he asked, “I thought she lived in an apartment.”

“That was a few years ago.” Warren explained, “You really can’t raise a few kids without a house.”

Nate made a face waiting for Warren to go on about it. “You don’t like kids, right?” Nate asked for clarification.

“Not particularly.” Warren agreed. Nate looked him up and down for a moment judging him. It had to have been of some interest to see how his uncle would act around Athena’s kids so Nate went ahead and got out of the car when it stopped. Warren was right behind him.

As they approached Athena came out with her three little darlings. She went to Nate first. “Look at you.” She said smiling. Nate responded with a smile of his own, “You have gotten so much bigger since the last time I laid eyes on you.”

“Growth hormones.” Nate explained. For a brief moment Warren had to wonder if it wasn’t a joke and his mother had done something even stranger to him along those lines. He shook it off. Athena hugged Nate and he accepted a little awkwardly. She then brought her kids around to her front.

“You remember Errol.” She said showing off her oldest, her lad. Warren was well aware that he was Ba’mosa’s pride and joy. Happy to get a son first he wasn’t complaining when she gave him two daughters after that. “And Nina.” She promoted the middle child, looking seven to Warren’s eyes, but he failed to remember her age. Next up came the baby. “And Bree.” She said. Nate smiled at the little girl filled out in a frilly little girl’s dress against her brother and sister dressed down and ready to get paint on them. Bree moved towards Nate and offered her hand. Nate laughed when he took it into his own.

“Kiss.” Bree said.

“Cinderella.” Athena explained, “You know where he kisses the back of her hand.” Nate accommodated the fantasy by bending way down to kiss the little girl’s hand. She giggled furiously and backed away landing in her sister’s arms.

“Come on.” Errol said leading Nate away from the grown ups. Warren didn’t know how the two of them would relate with Errol being barely nine, for some reason Warren

remembered that, with Nate towering over him. The girl's followed the boys as they headed around the house going out back.

Athena moved to stand next to Warren to watch the kids leave. When they were gone she looked at Warren who was looking at the front of the house. "We have that done." She explained. Warren glanced at her. The house had gone up under a blood red maroon color. For some reason Warren decided Ba'mosa had final say on the color. It was dark and stood out against a more common white or a lighter shade of blue. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Looks good to me." Warren said.

"We have the back started, and then if the weather is good tomorrow we can get to the far end." Athena said.

"And where is he?" Warren asked, noting the lack of her usual hug and kiss.

"He's out back getting the staging set up." She explained.

"Well I should go check it out." Warren said and began to move to head around the house. Athena moved up beside him and curled her arm through his causing him to smile at her.

"This should be fine." She said. "And if you can manage it, putting your arm around his shoulder would be the equivalent."

"I somehow doubt that will happen." Warren said.

"Don't be timid." She said.

"That's just not me." He explained.

"Mmm hmm." She said and looked at him mischievously. They proceeded around to the back. "Look what I found." Athena said as Ba'mosa came in sight. He smiled at them as they approached looking like a couple. Athena pulled away from Warren and imparted the quick hug and kiss to her husband that Warren failed to get. He entertained the idea that it was actually for him, especially against the way she smiled back at Warren. Then she moved

off to go round up the children as they were already starting to get into trouble against doing anything productive.

“Warren.” Ba’mosa greeted.

“You’re doing a bang up job here.” Warren said, “How are you?”

“Good.” He said. The further Athena got away from them the less friendly his expression was. He then moved closer to Warren. The instinct to back away overwhelmed Warren. “She promised me you’d be on your best behavior.” Ba’mosa said. Warren turned to meet his eyes.

“I will be.” Warren agreed. The other man smiled again.

“Good, we’re glad to have you here. Not to mention we could stand the help. But Warren?”

“Yes?”

“You didn’t really dress for it.” Ba’mosa suggested.

“It’s okay, these are older clothes.” Warren explained, “Not a problem should I get any paint on them.” Even as he said it, he was already setting it up as a challenge to do otherwise.

“You’re wearing a tie.” Ba’mosa clarified. Warren looked at it. He then grabbed it from its end and stuffed it into his shirt between the top two buttons.

“There, now I’m ready.” Warren said. Ba’mosa laughed and shook his head.

“Okay my man, I’m going to work you though.” Ba’mosa explained, “Our goal today is to go all the way up.” Warren stepped closer to the staging. He looked it over.

“You rent?” he asked.

“No, borrowed. It’s cheaper that way.” Ba’mosa said.

“Kind of on the old side.” Warren said as he looked at the much older design of the pipe staging.

“Yea, that’s why it’s free, not really being used unless absolutely necessary.”

Warren, now in work mode, relaxed with other man standing so close to his side. He looked over the staging.

Ba'mosa had two sets, both to the sides of the house with planking across them and in between. It looked fine for that, but Warren was drawn to the idea that each set two stages high, only had four X-braces when they should have had four for each set. He had one brace on the back side for the lower staging and one on the front for the higher one. "There's supposed to be braces on both sides." Warren explained.

"I thought the same." Ba'mosa agreed, "But they just didn't have enough. I was told this would work fine. Maybe not for going any higher, you know how they stack these things right up along side tall buildings, maybe as many as five high."

"They usually tie it to the building when they do. And they wouldn't use this old stuff anymore." Warren said, "They might also just use a lift in most cases now a days."

"I know, but this is what we got."

"It's just not good practice." Warren suggested. He gritted his teeth and rubbed at his chin.

"It's safe, Warren." Ba'mosa explained. Warren turned to look at his serious expression. It then softened some. "Athena and I were both up there in the front and the south end last weekend. It wasn't a problem. If you don't want to go up there, that's fine. I'm sure we can work it out."

"I'm not afraid to go up there." Warren said, "I'm sure it will be fine for what you're doing, but you know me, I'm tenacious and have to say something."

"Of course and I'm sure you mean well." Ba'mosa said, "Not to worry the kids are not going to be up there, not even Errol. He's going to be our hand it up boy. The girls, for what they can do will be painting on the ground starting the on the north end."

"I'm sure it best to keep them off, but I'd be worried about us, too. You, me and Athena." Warren said.

"She definitely prefers the staging over painting off a ladder." Ba'mosa said, "We did that last time and it took forever."

“Alright.”

“So if you don’t want Nate up there, that’s not a problem either. He can team up with Errol, keeping us all going, less up and down that way.”

Warren turned to look at Nate. He was mixed in with the other kids and Athena had them all setting up the paint on the picnic table. Bree was hanging off Nate’s arm, trying to get him to just look at her over paying attention to what they were doing. Warren looked back at the other man. “Nate’s old enough to be up there if he wants to be.”

“Good.” Ba’mosa said sounding excited. “With the three of you up there I can coordinate from the ground.” Warren looked at him suspiciously. “I’m not that happy being up there myself. Although I can be if needs be. I was all last weekend, but after a while I just have to get my feet back on the ground, you know?”

“Sure.” Warren agreed. Ba’mosa smiled.

“Let’s get to it then, shall we?”

The planks on the staging followed the paint up the building. Ba’mosa got on and off helping them along, but as it got higher his stay on it was shorter. By the time it was all the way up he’d said it would be safer with one less person on it and returned to the ground more permanently.

Nate showed no signs of stress as he went higher up. Warren glanced at him occasionally, but stayed mostly focused on his work. He was giving it his best efforts. It had been a while since he and Kit had to actually grind down and fix something themselves, taking a day and a half while the crew who should have done it right the first time were elsewhere, possibly standing in the unemployment line.

Athena sided up to Warren rolling her paint roller along as she went. That put them both on one end while Nate was on the other. “What are you doing way over here?” Warren asked.

“I have thusly worked my way over here.” She explained.

“You have to admit, I’m being good. Don’t make it hard on me.” Warren said as he smiled at her. She smiled right back. She then glanced at the ground smiling at something Ba’mosa was doing.

“It should be fine. It’s nice to have the help, really, especially way up here where Ba’mosa tends to just stop and grab at his stomach. At which point he has to get down. But aside from that you are here to visit and we are allowed to talk.” She said.

“Just not alone.” Warren clarified.

“Not really alone.” She said, “And he’s been siding up to you well enough were its mostly even. I’m most definitely not going to be forced to avoid you. What then would be the point?”

“Keeping it even, interesting.” Warren said.

“In the past you have always had the knack of not only ignoring him, even if you have nothing to say you tend to move away from him. Up here that’s hard to do, you get my meaning. If you ask me, he’s just as afraid you don’t like him as you thinking the same of him.”

“I like him fine.” Warren said.

“Good, because I am so very fond of the both of you that it would thrill me if you managed to find some common ground even if it’s just being able to stand near one another.” Athena explained.

“I’m just afraid I’d make him uncomfortable.” Warren said.

“None sense. When he is with his other friends, they side right up to one another, arms over each other’s shoulders. Beer belching, laughing. You know chums, like you and Kit.”

“I don’t even do that with him and you know who he is to me.” Warren said. She smiled mischievously at him again. Warren narrowed his eyes at her, since the talk had started the work had stopped. He was preprogrammed to give her his full attention when she smiled at him.

“Hmm.” She turned to look back at Nate, steadily painting with his headphones on. He was still able to hear, but you had to raise your voice. “I’d like to talk about something.”

“What?” he asked.

“Nathaniel.” She answered. Warren’s smile for her faded.

“Go ahead.”

“He’s too quiet for a boy his age.” She remarked.

“I consider it, him being on his best behavior.” Warren said, “I would know.”

“He’s getting along fine with my kids, though. Smiling, looking natural. It’s you he keeps looking at like he might just be thinking it was nice if you fell off this thing.” She suggested.

“I rather think he has other concerns over anything that happens to me, good, bad or otherwise.”

“Do you mind entertaining me while I disagree?” She asked.

“Go ahead.”

“Well, with his father in prison, not that he’s my first choice for anything, he’s left without a male role model. That naturally leaves you. With him being here anything you do will impress on him what he thinks about being a man is going to be like. With him not even looking at you with any concern, I rather doubt he’s going to be left with any good impression.”

“I’m not a role model for anyone.” Warren said, “If you ask me he’d be better off here with you and your family. At least then he’d be exposed to true good family values, unlike everything he’s ever known. I am too involved. I can’t adjust myself well enough to make a positive impression. At this point I’m having trouble just tolerating him and likewise him for me.”

“You cannot be this stuck in the pattern, Warren. And you don’t have to remind me about any of it. But it’s been

years since. He's had a chance to grow up some without all of that around him." Athena said. Warren gave her a more serious expression.

"It wasn't just his father, it's his mother. At times I'm not even sure which one is worse for him, his father's actions or his mother's neglect." Warren said. Athena folded her arms, cleverly holding the paint roller off to the side. Any closer and she might just get him with some of the actual paint. So far he still didn't have a drop on him. "What?" Warren asked.

"That's just how you see her through your anger." Athena said, "I somehow think you're blowing up her failures to make them much larger than they really are because of it."

Warren took a deep breath. "I'm not going to disagree with you. But you're proving my point. I'm no better for it, either."

"But you can be. I've seen you change, you can change about this. Just...just open up to him some. He has to have questions right now. Questions that he might not want to ask his mother about. Errol is already pulling away from me in regards to this. He has his father to get these answers from and when I strike up a conversation thinking we can have that, he shies away. But then Ba'mosa tells me how by me starting one they'd finished it, without him being nervous like he is with me."

"Nate is anything but nervous." Warren said, "I know you mean well, but trust me when I say that we fail to relate."

"Try harder. I'm done here. Going back to the other side now before I do get us in trouble." She said and smiled again. Warren smiled back at her and she rolled her way back down along the house getting to the other side and moving Nate back towards Warren.

Nate was being pretty clear though. Warren was on one end of the staging and covering half the house while Athena was on the other end covering a quarter. Nate was

refusing to come over to the same set of staging his uncle was on. He was also busy bopping his head to music like he didn't have a care in a world. At one point Bree was exorcising her right to speak when not spoken to by shouting his name. He of course wasn't hearing her over the music.

Both Athena and Warren had given her a cursory glance from where she was standing on the ground and then went back to work after she quieted down. Warren focused in on Nate and the music. He took a deep breath thinking about it and then looked out over at Ba'mosa as he was helping Errol keep a paint tray steady and talking to him kindly as they headed around towards the north end of the building. They left the tray with Nina. Warren glanced back to see them headed towards the picnic table, the man's arm over his son's shoulder. Warren turned to look at Nate again. For some reason he just couldn't see him doing the same, especially with the age difference between the two boys. He somehow doubted Nate would accept it from him anyway.

The sound of something clinking had Warren looking around trying to find the source. He then stepped back to see what it in fact was. Bree, not being satisfied by being ignored was now taking a more proactive stance in getting to Nate. She was climbing on the staging Warren was currently on. And since she had gone unnoticed for a short length of time, she'd already ascended to the second set of staging. The sound was that of the pin coming out of the X-brace as it caught on her frilly dress in her purposeful climb and had already been pulled out.

"Stop her!" Warren shouted, startling all of them. Athena's look was frantic as she looked around not immediately seeing what the problem was. "Ba'mosa!" he added. The man was too far away then, though. And although he was already running to catch her, Warren could see the second pin on the upper part of the X-brace getting caught in Bree's cute little dress.

Knowing he might just be making it worse Warren headed towards her causing the planking to shake at the speed he was going. He then threw himself down on the plank to get to her. She was just looking up at him as Warren reached down with his right hand and grabbed at the back of her dress. Thinking how easily it would be for him to just yank it right off her he twisted it in his hand making it tight against her and then yanked her up by it bringing her straight up in the air. He rolled onto his back and got her on top of himself.

For a moment he could breath easy. He was just catching his breath when he heard the X-brace pop off completely from that side of the staging. Her dress had still caught the second pin. As the brace swung out, without one on the backside, the end of the staging pulled away against the swinging metal and separated enough from its companion so that the planks on that end fell off the edge. The same planks Warren was currently on. He was already picturing himself sliding down them. He grabbed Bree with his whole arm instead of holding just her dress. As the planks slid off the other end, now falling freely, but likely to hit the staging on the way down, Warren grabbed the flopping brace with his left hand.

He held on long enough to come up to his feet. But it wasn't going to prevent him from falling all the way to the ground. He could hear Athena scream as Ba'mosa yelled, "Hold on!"

The planks descended without catching the staging at the angle they were on. When they hit the ground on the far end though, the other end lined up smacking down along the staging making a tremendous noise with Warren's weight on them. When they stop dropping Warren found himself to still be on his feet without having anything else to hold on to. It was few years of practicing balancing he was relying on.

Ba'mosa came in under the staging and took Bree from his arms. He then backed out and away from the

staging looking up at it. He held Bree out and looked her over with the same expression.

“Your okay Baby.” He said more to assure himself than her as she appeared to be just fine. He hugged her tight to him and looked over her at Warren. “Warren?” he questioned. Warren finally looked up at him. “You ok man?” he asked.

“You always forget that it’s going to hurt like hell.” Warren answered.

“Come out of there, before something else falls.” He said with his head shaking nervously up and down. He was also making a nervous swallowing motion. Warren came out and walked towards him slowly as the stinging in his ankles reminded him he wasn’t exactly made of steel. “I...I can’t imagine why she would do such a thing.” Ba’mosa said.

Warren stopped when he got close to the other man and looked up to see Athena up near Nate with her around around to his front. She might have been holding Nate back from doing anything himself. If that were the case and it seemed to be a natural thing for her to be doing, Warren appreciated it.

It was Barnes’ words that came back to Warren then. *Don’t let the girl near the boy.* He took a deep breath and looked back at Ba’mosa. “I’d say it was a crush.”

Ba’mosa stopped swallowing and nodded more naturally while still hugging and caressing his baby. He looked up at the dismantled staging and then over at his wife and the kid. “Athena, Nate, come down. No one else is going back up there until there are braces on both sides of all of it.” he then looked back at Warren. “I should have listened to you.”

“It would have been fine.” Warren said. He approached closer and untangled one of the pins from Bree’s dress. “Just a case of the unexpected.” He explained as he held the pin up. “I doubt she meant to do it on purpose.” He smiled than trying to ease Ba’mosa’s mood. The other man

smiled back at him and reached out with his right hand while easily holding his daughter with just his left. He grabbed the back of Warren's head and shook him some, still smiling.

"My man Warren." He said still holding on to him as Athena approached him after getting to the ground. Ba'mosa let her take Bree from his arm. She was all teary eyed at that point. She hugged her daughter close and looked at Warren. Ba'mosa seemed a bit more relaxed, as long as his eyes weren't actually looking at the staging. "You want a beer?" he asked.

"Yes." Warren answered. The other man let go of him and headed towards the house. Warren decided he just needed to sit down and get off his ankles. He dropped to the ground and stretched his legs out. He looked up Athena. She finally smiled at him after being reassured that her child was okay. She set Bree down.

"Go give Warren a kiss sweetie." She instructed. The little kiss walked over to Warren and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you." Warren said. She then ran away getting caught up into a hug with her sister whose eyes were completely overrun with tears. Athena knelt down in front of Warren.

"How?" she asked, "How do you know just what to do?"

"That's not my first fall." Warren said, "You have to know when to think quick. You don't lose your head, you keep thinking and you have to act."

"Incredible." She admitted. She wiped the last of the wet from her face, "My Man Warren." He smiled at her way of saying it. "And you don't have anything more to worry about with Ba'mosa. You just won him over. He told me I'd know he was okay with you if he offered you a beer."

"I could use one." Warren admitted.

"I kept telling him, despite your ways with me, you are definitely one of the good guys and if I wasn't caught

between the two of you and it was just you..." she stopped there not wanting to get him riled up.

"And we wonder why he worries!" Warren said. He got them both laughing then. She reached out and put her hand on his face.

"Thank you, I love you." She said and then stood up as Ba'mosa came back with two beers. He tried to hand one directly to Warren. Athena intercepted it and opened it for him. She then handed it off.

"Thank you." He said looking at both of them. Ba'mosa opened the other can and started to tip it towards his mouth.

"Where is mine?" Athena asked. He glanced over towards her looking confused and then just handed the one in his hand to her. "Thank you dear." She said as she took it and herself over to the picnic table.

Ba'mosa then moved to sit down right beside Warren looking back at his family and then the man beside him. Then he laughed. "The man in the tie saves the day." He said and reached over and put his hand on Warren's shoulder.

"Power tie." Warren said and looked back at him over his upturned can of beer. Ba'mosa smiled at him while griping his shoulder.

"Dad, is Bree okay?" Errol asked as he approached them.

"Yes, she'll be fine." His father answered, "Thanks to our friend here, Warren. He...he protected her from herself."

"Ok." Errol said as he looked at Warren curiously.

"How about you get your father a beer?" he asked. "And another for our friend."

"Sure Dad." Errol agreed and started to head towards the house. He stopped and looked back at Warren attempting to say something. He just didn't seem to be able to say what. Warren nodded at him and the boy smiled and then ran off.

Ba'mosa moved closer getting his arm all the way over Warren's shoulder and pulled him against his side. "Our hero."

"You wouldn't keep thinking that if I sit here and complain how much it hurts." Warren said.

"You okay? I can take you to the hospital."

"I'll be fine, it just stings." Warren explained, "Not the first time I've come down hard from that high. Even staying on my feet." He finally reciprocated and put his hand on the other man's shoulder.

"Aspirin?"

"No, that will mess with the beer." Warren suggested.

"How about I get you over to the table. Then I'll get the fire going and we can all eat. I think we're done painting for today."

"Sounds good." Warren agreed. Ba'mosa got up on his haunches and hoisted Warren to his feet and held him up while they went over to the picnic table. Athena gave them both a dashing smile as they approached. Warren sat down on the bench and the other man pulled away from him.

"Fire time." He said excitedly. He took the beer from Errol as he returned with it.

"You keep those flames down." Athena said, "Not shooting way up in the air. We can agree we've had enough excitement for one day, yes?"

"Yes dear." He agreed. "I'll handle it just fine."

Errol followed his father over to the bar-b-q pit after giving Warren his second beer. Athena was still hugging Bree in her arms as she looked at Warren and smiled again. He smiled back at her, but lost it when he finally looked over at Nate who seemed to be staring him down from across the table. It didn't, however, spoil the rest of their stay.

Nate did not put his headphones on right away after they left Athena's house. Warren's ankles were still wrinkled, but not so bad he couldn't manage the car. Both Ba'mosa and Athena said they were welcome to stay the night. Warren

explained that he wouldn't have anything else to wear the following day and he was fine to drive, he'd only had a few beers and they were spaced out.

"What?" Warren finally asked knowing Nate was building himself up to say something.

"It's kind of hard to believe you don't really care about kids after today." Nate said.

"You do realize I'd do anything for Athena. And right now what she wants is for me to see her as part of a family and care about all of them. So, if needs be, then I definitely will go out of my way on account of that." He explained.

"Still." Nate said. Warren looked at him as the kid smiled just a little, but then stopped.

"Fine, you caught me, I'd rather see a kid go on unharmed. What are you going to do about it?" Warren asked. Nate leaned towards the car door in response. After another few moments of silence Warren asked "Would you like something more to eat?"

"A milkshake." He replied from where he was leaning.

"Sounds good." Warren said. The kid looked at him again. Warren stopped and got them both a milkshake before he drove them back into town.

8

Nate came out of his door. He stopped in his tracks taking in his uncle's presence on the couch. Warren had already been up for a while. He wasn't cooking breakfast though. Instead he had a coffee on the end table. He also hadn't gotten dressed yet. He was sitting in his sleeping pants on the couch. He also had music playing. When he looked at Nate he could see how baffled he looked.

"Good morning." Warren offered.

"Are you really listening to that?" Nate asked, "Or did you just turn it on and that's what's on?"

"It one of my audio CDs." Warren answered.

“No way, that’s like new music.” Nate said, “Stuff I like.”

“I like this, too.” Warren explained. Nate narrowed his eyes. He failed to be convinced. He then moved off to the kitchen and returned with something to eat. He slowly sat down on the couch and hugged the side of it he was on. He was completely watching his uncle then as he sat still, except to take another drink.

“You don’t look like your hearing it.” Nate said. Warren turned his eyes towards the kid for a moment.

“That would be because unlike you I am not bouncing around all over the place.” He said.

“Most people do.”

“Not everyone, not me.” Warren said. He lifted the remote and clicked it setting the song back one. “How about that one.” This time Nate had to consider that he did actually have a CD in the audio system.

“It’s cool.” Nate said still looking at him warily. “Turn it up.” Warren turned it up some. “More.”

“That’s loud enough to hear.”

“But not enough to really jam to.” Nate said.

“Then I am not interesting in jamming if that’s what’s required to do it.”

“Play number one.” Nate said. Warren turned up the remote and changed it to the number one song. Before to long Nate was helplessly nodding his head to it. Warren smiled at him and he immediately stopped. “Well if you like that...” he said getting up. He went into his room and brought a CD back out. He interrupted the current song and opened the CD drawer. He put his CD in and closed it. The song began to play.

“Yes.” Warren agreed, “I just have not gotten around to getting that one yet. Unlike you, I don’t require new music each week.” Nate laughed.

“If you had a computer you’d have it already.”

“I don’t like them to begin with, so the idea of me having one at home is unlikely.”

“Right.” Nate said, “Stealing account numbers and such.”

“Happens all the time.” Warren agreed.

“I suppose.” Nate said. They got quiet after that listening to more songs on the CD. Warren skipped a few of them, which bothered Nate as he seemed to want to hear them all.

Nate got up and tossed away the remains of his breakfast. He washed his hands in the kitchen and came back slowly as Warren let his head fall back listening to the current song. Nate fell over the back of the couch. He rolled down on his back and looked at Warren, who now looked disturbed at the way the kid was disrespecting the couch.

“You going to get dressed?” Nate asked.

“No.”

“So what? It’s like your day off from wearing clothes?”

“Yes. Everything is done, the week is over. It’s raining so we won’t be painting. So I am just going to relax all day.” Warren explained.

“What if someone shows up? You going to answer the door like that?” Warren made another face at him.

“I’m not expecting anyone.”

“What if I have company?”

“Well if you had company then I would be dressed.”

“What about just for me, I’m company, right?” Nate asked.

“No, you’re staying here. That’s a different matter. One in which I see no reason to change my ways just to please you.”

“In other words you don’t care that I’m here. Not even worth getting dressed for even. I could stay in my room all day and it wouldn’t matter to you.” Nate complained.

“You are more than welcome to do that.” Warren agreed thinking at least it would be nice and quiet while he

listened to music, so much for trying to bridge the gap. Nate got off the couch and finally unpacked the Xbox. Now that he had one game he had a reason to. A little later in the day and he'd have two. He didn't ask when he began hooking it up. He just went ahead and switched the entertainment over to the game whether his uncle was done listening to music or not.

Warren finally surrendered the couch and moved over to one of the high back chairs where he got comfortable with his feet up and digested the Sunday paper. The sounds of things being blown up didn't even bother him. He was use to ignoring background noise while he read the paper. He stopped long enough to fix them some lunch. By dinner time he'd read most of it and Nate had already gotten bored with the game and was staring at the ceiling doing nothing else.

Warren stopped what he was doing to grab the next game off the stack in his room and dropped it on Nate's lap. Even if he wasn't happy about anything, he'd stopped complaining for the moment. Nate rolled with it, getting the game going and getting back to action while Warren finished making dinner.

It was the first time he could just say that dinner was ready. Although Nate wasn't saying anything, he kept looking at his uncle from across the table where he was now the one without a shirt.

"You're not cold?" Nate finally asked.

"If that I were, I'd have put more over my bare skin sooner." Warren answered. Nate got up and began clearing his side of the table as Warren watched him.

"Something must have happened to you." Nate decided as Warren started clearing his side of the table.

"What makes you say that?"

"Something happened to make you end up being so weird." Nate clarified.

"I'm not weird."

“You have no reason to think maybe you shouldn’t run around like that with a kid around?” Nate asked.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re not dressed.”

“I’m sufficiently covered.” Warren countered. Nate took in a deep breath as he worked on the dishes.

“On any other day you wouldn’t be caught dead without a shirt and tie, even to go paint a house. That’s weird by the way. Even Errol said you were weird about that. And now today you spend the whole day wearing what you would wear to bed.”

Warren stopped talking just to appreciate him being more articulate. He decided it wouldn’t last. He was only going to do it long enough to make a point. Warren failed to see it past him just trying to cause another scene by antagonizing him. “Okay.” Warren said, “I’m still a little suspicious that your grandmother dropped me on my head. That might explain it.”

Nate smiled just for a few seconds and stopped, perhaps not liking him to suddenly appear funny.

“Is there something further to this inquiry?” Warren asked.

“No.”

“I don’t believe you.” Warren said, “What is on your mind Nate? Why the sudden concern? You being serious and intelligible are suddenly my cause for concern. Is there something you wish to share at this time?”

Nate stopped looking at him then and didn’t reply as he finished with his dishes.

“I’d like an answer. It will go in your favor over your generic assessment that I am just weird.” Warren said.

“I don’t like it, ok? It makes me uncomfortable just looking at you.” Nate said.

“I’m sure that’s your problem. Next Sunday you can either generate a plan to be gone the whole day or spend it in your room. I’m not going to worry myself over your level

comfort. Unless there is something else you'd like to add? Another comment? Another idea about me that's the cause of this?"

Nate continued to look down at the opened dishwasher. He'd finished loading it, but was waiting to close the door so he could pretend to be doing something with it. He finally looked back up.

"Just say it." Warren suggested.

"My dad said to be careful around you. Not to let you get too close. Not to let you undress in front of me." Nate said.

"And this is the basis of your angst towards me." Warren exclaimed, "Why am I not surprised? It serves you just, Nate, for listening to that spiteful man. Trust me when I say this to you, I don't even want to be this close to you. Get out of my sight. Go to your room. Now."

Nate didn't hesitate, not even bothering to close the dishwasher as he launched towards his room. Warren came around the counter and was slamming the dishwasher door closed the same time Nate slammed his bedroom door.

9

Warren was aware of something being familiar. Something beyond the lay of the street, the fluctuating temperatures and the smell of the bakery as he approached the coffee shop. Being the observant man he always set out to be he stopped long enough to try and figure out exactly what it might be. After the weekend he'd had it wasn't quite on the surface of his thoughts just then. He was only just aware of something.

As he looked around it became clear. Across the street, leaning against the lamppost was a man reading a newspaper. Warren could just make out the orange color of his hair over it. It had been more of an eye catcher than

most. In this case it was the second time Warren had caught sight of him. He'd seen him on Friday as well.

Warren turned away and headed towards the door of the coffee shop. At this point he could see the street's reflection in the glass. While he was pulling the door open he could see that the man had dropped the paper and was now clearly looking across the street at him. Warren closed his mouth and proceeded into the shop.

He was going to relax. At least that was the plan. Throwing himself at his work day was going to take care of his still lingering mood. But the smell of the coffee mixing well with the bakery next door was failing to do it. What also didn't help was another familiarity. It wasn't the girl behind the counter's now ever constant warm smile towards him, which started after the day he'd had there the week before. She'd taken to being super nice towards him after that. No it was the young man sitting at the table sipping coffee. And Warren wasn't lost on the fact that it was the same young man from that day. It had all been imprinted in his memory in such a way he could instantly recall everyone's features.

He stepped towards the counter and tried to tell himself that it was nothing more than a coincidence. He'd been there the week before, on Tuesday instead of Monday, but Warren was a repeat customer so why couldn't he be?

"Good morning Mr. Keith." The girl greeted. He no longer had to order. She established his usual and had it ready for him, taking his money right after his approach and the boy, now replacing the other girl for that day, handed him his Mocha Latte Tall.

"Thank you." Warren said.

"You have a great day...and week." She said.

"You too." He said as he turned back towards the door. His eyes went up quick and caught the guy across the street. He was still looking until Warren began to actually approach the door. After that the paper came back up in front of his face. Warren looked back quick at the young man

before getting completely out the door. His head snapped away as well. He was now completely involved in the posters on the wall near him.

Warren finished exiting and headed on down the street towards his office. He was just putting the men out of his mind when he approached his front steps. Crouched down in the slowly misting morning was a man in coveralls, finally, fixing the brick stairs. He had already broken out the cracked bricks and was about to begin replacing them.

“Good morning.” Warren greeted. The man with the white hair and gray beard turned to look up at him.

“Hello.”

“It’s nice to see this getting fixed. I’d like to personally extend my gratitude towards you for it.” he said.

“Just doing my job, although I agree, we like things when they are right, yes?”

“Yes, very much so.” Warren said.

“Better get to it then, ‘day.” He said and turned back to his work. It elevated Warren’s mood and he took that into his office and managed a smile for Leigh when he was forecasting a day without one.

“Good morning, Warren.” She said.

“Yes, it is, thank you, how was your weekend?” he asked.

“The usual squabbles, hair pulling and biting. In other words just great.” She answered. “And yours?”

“Running a close second.” He said. She smiled at him. “Did you see that, they are finally fixing the steps?”

“I did.” She agreed, “I’m glad for it, but that man, not very friendly.”

“I just spoke with him, friendly enough to me.” Warren said. Leigh shrugged.

“Must be me then.” She said.

“Older guy.” Warren said as if that explained it.

“So as far as I know, you have nothing on your plate.” She offered, “Anything more for me to do in the way of research?”

“Not yet. I am waiting for a feedback call from Ryan’s office. Knowing him it will be midday. If I’m already to lunch forward his call to my cell.”

“Will do.” She agreed.

“Her office never called?” Warren finally asked, already knowing the answer. She shook her head making a sad apologetic expression. He sighed, “I suppose I should let that go. I’ll see what I can’t find out about it when Garner gets back into town.”

“Ok.” She agreed. Warren proceeded into his office. He got settled in and picked up his list of phone numbers falling on the building management number. He hit speaker phone and dialed the number while he booted up his computer.

“Odessa properties. How may I direct your call?” a woman answered.

“Yes, Warren Keith at the Chelsea Brownstone, I’d like the representative for this area.”

“Downtown?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Putting you through now.” She offered. The phone started ringing and Warren finished getting his coat off.

“Larry Kinsley.” A man answered.

“Good morning Mr. Kinsley. Warren Keith at the Chelsea brownstone office complex.”

“How can I help you?”

“After all these months, assuming the hold up was nothing more than the winter term it is nice to see you people finally doing something about the appearance of the front of this place.”

“Could you clarify?”

“The front steps, Mr. Kinsley. I have only been calling about it occasionally for the past several months. Each time I

ask for the representative of this area I always get a different person, they always assure me it will be taken care of. This is your lucky day because the tone of my call is thus. Thank you.” Warren said.

“Did you say something about the front stairs?”

“I did indeed.” Warren agreed.

“Mr. Keith, right, I have spoken to you before. On occasion I’m not present in my office in my absence Lizzy Montgomery takes my calls. I have to tell you she does many things well. But she failed to organize against matters like this. Not to put it off on her or anything, since you called me before. This was requested of maintenance. As far as I knew it was handled last month. Are you telling me someone is just now getting there?”

“I am indeed.” Warren agreed, “Perhaps the wheels in motion over there turn rather slowly if such is the case?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure you have other things to do and the tone of your call would be most welcomed, except I have to approve this work personally. I’m not just the rep but the area manager. This is considered a much larger project and is not something that needs fixing just to keep things running, am I clear?”

“Yes.”

“In regards to that, by what’s on my desk, there shouldn’t be anyone there doing anything to that building at this time. According to my paperwork, it should have been done already.”

“Well it slipped by you then, maybe the foreman just now caught up to it and decided to finish it off today, finally.”

“That would be great, Mr. Keith, except I can personally locate maintenance personnel who would do something like that on your building. Gary Woods. He’s not even in downtown today. It’s a three day weekend for him.”

Warren moved towards the window. He couldn’t get a look at the man working the steps from his vantage. “So who

would this kindly older gentleman be out there working to get this fixed be than?" Warren asked.

"I have no idea." Larry replied, "I'd imagine, if he was actually doing something like damaging the exterior, it would be a good time to call the police. If in fact he's actually fixing them. Well, he may be hired help I don't know about. That might indicate a cover up somewhere down the line where I was left to believe it was done. But I assure you our politics around here don't require that much deception.

"I'll personally look into this. I need to find out for sure myself, to see who's doing the work. Make sure it's done right and by a qualified person. May I return your call about this?"

"Certainly." Warren agreed. He was rather amused by it.

"Thank you for your call Mr. Keith."

"Good day."

Warren sat down in his chair shaking his head. After that he began going over his proposal he'd worked on the previous Friday getting it ready for the printer. He'd been finished with it for fifteen minutes while he caught his breath. His mind was elsewhere when the return call came.

"Mr. Kinsley on line one." Leigh pushed through.

"Got it." Warren called out through the door over hitting the intercom. He picked up the line and hit speaker phone. "Go ahead."

"Yes, Mr. Keith I believe I have located the error in question. If I had been the one to receive your call the last time, I'm sure it could have been resolved then. Have you ever shown up to look into a problem in your line of work to find there is fact nothing presently wrong?"

"That happens on occasion." Warren agreed.

"Well that would be the case. As maintenance showed up at the brownstone they in fact were looking at stairs in full repair. But, as I look at the document more closely, although it clearly shows Chelsea on the top the physical address is in

fact the Annabeth Brownstone. I'm afraid Mrs. Montgomery came to the same conclusion I did just by looking at this document after you called and talked with her, that it was in fact done.

"I do apologize. We are definitely not intending to ignore things like this. As far as the work being done today, I cannot claim that the person doing the work is actually working for us. I've made several calls on the matter."

"Could you hold, please?" Warren asked, "I'd like to go see if he's still out there."

"Yes."

Warren hit hold and headed out of the office. He went down the hall and right out the front door. He was now looking at the steps in full repair. Aside from the wet cement, there was no sign of the workman at all. He was done. Warren definitely appreciated that much.

He headed all the way back to his desk and took the line off hold. "Mr. Kinsley?"

"Yes I'm here."

"He is in fact gone and the work is now done." Warren announced.

"Why it's the oddest thing." Larry said, "I don't think I've come across a situation like this before."

"At this point I consider it a non issue. As far as the mix up, I have had no other problems in dealing with your company." Warren said.

"Well...I guess it's taken care of. I'll have someone come by and inspect the work, make sure its quality...but this just leaves me baffled."

"I'm sure it'll get ironed out." Warren said.

"Very well, good day Mr. Keith."

"Good day." Warren said as he hung up the phone. It wasn't amusing to him anymore. He sat down and finished writing his proposal to disk. He then popped it out and shut the laptop down. He headed out of his office and locked the door. Leigh looked up at him.

Warren handed her the disk. "Get that to the printer for me. When the documents come back, put them on my desk and I'll inspect them and hopefully we'll have that out today and things will be pretty much accomplished for the week. Everything else will be gravy."

"I'm on it." she assured him.

"I'll be at the church and on my cell if anyone starts looking for me." He said.

"I'll be here." She said and smiled. He smiled back at her and then left. He stopped for a moment, only not to be concerned about the steps being damaged any longer, but about the mystery of them now being in full repair. He hailed a cab and rode it out to the church.

Going up towards the church Warren didn't want to waste any time. He looked up at the window. "Good day Howard." He greeted, sounding even to himself, like some sort of madman on the street. He turned away and when he looked back he was clear to go in.

He went right towards the back. Barnes watched his gate as he approached. He turned around and sat down on the dais. "Hello." She greeted

"Barnes."

"Everything ok?" she asked.

"Perhaps not." He answered.

"Am I the person to talk to?" she asked.

"That would be why I am here." He agreed, "Then of course I'll ride with you to get lunch."

"That would be good." She said.

"I'm coming to a conclusion." He explained, "Several maybe. The first one is your bland arbitrary statement seemed to have some emphasis on an event that happened over the weekend."

"Don't let the girl..."

"Yes." He agreed interrupting her. "Part of me still thinks it is one of those physiological mechanisms, one where the suggestion is made and you go all the way out of

your way to match it up to something. Other than that it's your element of danger that makes it more vivid. Because I couldn't concoct a conclusion worthy of your warning unless something like that actually happened."

"What happened?" she asked.

"I fell about a story and half off some staging." He explained.

"You worked this weekend?" she asked.

"Not professionally, no. Part of the problem in relaxing my judgment to bring myself to this point. Aside from the likelihood of something coming from that, I cannot fathom how you would see the rest."

"Spill it." she demanded.

"The girl, Athena's four year old was desperate for Nathaniel's attention. And while we were up on the staging with her on the ground he was drowning out all sounds with his headphones. He was not intentionally ignoring her, although her attention might have precipitated his agreement to go up there to be away from her. An unsuitable match at any rate, but she was so insistent that while all of our heads managed to be turned she not only climbed almost to the top of the staging, she managed to bring it down with her and I on it. Luckily all was well. But it sunk into me. Because if not for your words I might not have been looking for that flaw. I heard something that I could have written off on another day, but it struck me that the sound was precipitating something else. I was able to perceive and react because of that. In which case your warning, maybe not your prediction itself, kept that little girl and myself from any greater harm."

"She's ok?"

"Yes she's fine." He answered, "I ended up looking pretty heroic in fact."

"You know your right." Barnes said.

"About?"

“What you’re describing, you are trying too hard to match it to my vision. I’m glad the warning helped, but I’m afraid my prediction hasn’t come to pass yet. I’m still not clear on the specifics. But the boy and the girl I’m seeing, they are the same height, which might make them the same age.”

“The only boy anywhere near me is Nathaniel.” Warren said. Barnes held her hand out over the floor.

“He’s about this tall.”

“That would be him.” Warren agreed. Barnes took a deep breath. “Is this warning for me?” he asked.

“Yes.” She answered.

“Well then I have to tell you the rest, or maybe it’s not related. I have drawn another conclusion that I’m still unsure of.” Warren said. She completely stopped working on her painting at this point to give him her full attention.

“What?” she asked.

“I feel foolish even considering saying it out loud.” He admitted.

“Well, if your not ready.” She said.

“The way you just said that, are you somehow in tune with what I might say?” he asked. She looked away and pursed her lips, trying to look innocent. She then followed it with a shrug. “Alright, fine.” He said, “I’ll proceed without knowing. Let’s start by what you saw of it. The woman at the bar.”

“Ok.” Barnes agreed.

“She was most definitely watching us. Or rather myself, because as near as I can tell she’s not alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean she’s not the only one watching me.” Warren explained, “I’d like to think they are trying really hard not to be noticed. But I have such a keen eye for details already. Add that to your suggestion to look for flaws in a different light in general and I’m seeing these people watching me. The woman, a man behind a newspaper at the coffee shop.

Perhaps a young man inside the coffee shop who was present last week the same day we met. A repair man at the office, this morning, who could not be accounted for by the parent company owning the real estate I rent from.

“That and lastly my visit from Miss Clarkson. She left a strong impression on me. Perhaps it was meant to distract me at some point. But it’s clear she never intended to do any business with me and was inserted into my presence for all I can tell, just to get a close look at me. Now how does that sound?” he asked.

Barnes walked over and sat down beside him. “What kind of impression?”

“I was taken by her look.” Warren explained smiling.

“Oh.” She said, “And nothing else happened?”

“No...well there was the matter of her broach nicking me. It was clearly an accident and she was regretful about it.” he offered.

“Blood sample.” Barnes said barely audible.

“Excuse me?” he asked. She turned to look at him.

“Like a needle. Just enough of a prick to get a blood sample.” She said. Warren leaned back on his hands shaking his head back and fourth.

“I regret telling you any of this now.” He said.

“I am not laughing at you, please don’t immediately think what I am saying is somehow stranger.”

“I’m afraid it is.”

“Fine.” Barnes said, “You tell me what you think she wanted then?”

“It was clearly an accident.”

“Okay, so what did she really want?” she asked.

“Adding a bit of logic to my assessment I could gathered a more appropriate answer.” He said, “Garner talked me up, made me out to be bigger than I really am. She showed up expecting a full sized office, much like his own and realized I was nothing like that and made a hasty retreat.”

“Now state you don’t know any of that for sure.” Barnes said.

“I’m guessing this is another one of your worthwhile exercises?”

“Go with me.” She said.

“True, I do not know anything along those lines for a fact. However, it bears a greater resemblance to a more logical conclusion.” He stated.

“What’s the flaw?” she asked.

“She inadvertently drew some of my blood.” He admitted.

“Okay, don’t eliminate that as a mere accident until you can be sure.”

“Barnes, what would anyone want with my blood?” he asked.

“Why would anyone be watching you? Maybe one person for their own reasons, but a few more?” she asked.

“Now you will tie this into your predictions about the book.” He decided.

“No I won’t.” She said. He sat back up and looked at her more closely. “You don’t have it.” she added, “As long as that’s the case I can’t see how it wouldn’t be doing anything to you.”

“Likened to a curse.” He said.

“Forget narrowing it down.” She said, “Think of different things. I can think of several. I cannot however conclude any of them are right. The best I can do is draw on the feeling. It flashes threw me. Like when I see the boy and the girl get too close to one another and I get a terrible feeling. She shouldn’t be near him. For several seconds I could pass out and faint. That’s just not me so I don’t. Then it passes. The feeling I had about that book came from being near it. Both things are relevant to you.”

“Alright, I’ll play. You probably have no good reason to think I’m not just going nuts in seeing people watching me...”

“Watchers.” She offered.

“Okay, the Watchers.” He said, “What would anyone want with my blood?”

“I’m not even sure.” She said, “It just happened to be what I thought of. Why you would get nicked. What’s it for? I don’t know Warren. You have any idea why people might be interested in you?”

“No.” he agreed. She shrugged. Warren was making an unsatisfied face when it suddenly moved to a smile. He pulled his cell phone out of his coat and clicked a speed dial number. It rang straight through.

“Kyle.” The man answered.

“Warren.”

“Hey, do we have something going on I forgot about?” he asked.

“No. I do have a quick question, not even related to work if you have a moment?”

“Sure do.” He offered.

“I’m having one of those debate things, passing the time. I remembered that you always seem to be reading those crime novels.”

“Yes.” He agreed.

“Okay with that as your expertise I’d like for you to speak the first answer that comes to mind. Given the circumstances were not critical. As far as we know no crime has been committed. The person in question has had a sample of their blood taken without them knowing. What does the other party want it for?”

“DNA matching.” Kyle answered.

“And how would that be useful?” Warren asked.

“Going here on my PI type character. Not really a get a warrant kind of guy...or gal. They might need a sample to match it to a scene.” He offered.

“What if I am sure there is no crime?” he asked.

“Harder.” He answered and took some time before answering. He finally laughed some, “Okay, this has got to be

all Ellen's fault, because she's always watching those damn talk shows. It's the biggest thing, Warren. They get young kids on the show. She's had a baby and wants to prove he's the father, while he claims it's not his. They use DNA to do a paternity test. Sorry, that's all that comes to mind."

"Does that work?" Warren asked.

"It generates a high probability if he is the parent, but not one hundred percent. What can happen is it can definitely eliminate the possibility. That is what they...Yes Mel, thanks. Okay Warren gotta jet."

"Thanks Kyle, I owe you a beer."

"I'll count on it. Bye." He said and hung up before Warren could say the same. He slowly let the phone down and made another face.

"What?" Barnes asked. He looked at her with his confused expression.

"DNA matching for paternity." He said and laughed.

"Are you sure someone wouldn't be questioning you for that?" she asked.

"Without question." He answered. He then made a face. "I'm making something real obvious here."

"Nothing to be ashamed of." She said. He leaned back some pursing his lips. "Just the one girl?" He didn't answer. "Ok." She said, "You know for sure though."

"Without question." He replied.

"What about for you?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"What if you're the child in this?" she asked.

"You are not suggesting my mother had an affair are you?" Warren asked. Barnes shrugged. "Seriously, I know exactly who my parents are, despite Juliana's claim that we were adopted...I immediately regret even mentioning her name."

"Ok." Barnes said, "But why would she say that?"

Warren took a deep breath. "This is in accordance with her usual instability. At the time of her announcement

she was having her stint with the use of recreational drugs. She was such a disaster that when she said such a thing, claiming she remembered other people as our parents from the ripe old age of two years old, I countered with this. I said I wish we had been adopted separately then.” Barnes respectfully remained quiet while Warren’s mood changed according to the topic. “Ok, should I never mention her around you again it will be a good thing.”

“Ok.”

“How about we go meet Kit for lunch now?” he asked.

“That sounds great.” Barnes said getting up, “Let me tidy up.” She covered her current work, set her brushes to soak and walked out of the church with Warren as he called for a cab.

They were silent while they waited and remained that way for the ride to the bar. When the car pulled up Warren spotted Kit standing outside smoking a cigarette. Warren held the door for Barnes. After he closed it he headed towards Kit and pulled the cigarette out of his mouth. “No smoking.” He explained.

“Ah come on it’s just one.” Kit complained as Warren flicked it away.

“One, then another one.” Warren countered, “Don’t forget you begged me to help you quit. After all that, don’t expect me stand idly by while you start up again.”

“It’s been a suck ass day so far.” Kit explained, “I hate Mondays. All the guys come in, still recovering from drinking all weekend. They are all walking around like zombies. It puts me into a firing mood.”

“Let’s just go in and eat.” Warren suggested as he led the way. Kit and Barnes followed with Kit wrapping his arm over her shoulder. She pulled away from him as they got to the door and held it open for them.

“Thank you darling.” Kit said. Warren just offered her a smile. They headed inside and sat down at their table. Kit’s mood brightened. “I want a big, long sub sandwich.” He

deiced. Warren looked at Barnes and they both laughed. "What?"

"Nothing." Barnes said.

"Hey no private jokes between you two. What's the deal?" Kit asked.

"Just struck me funny." Warren explained, "I figured Barnes would have the same thought."

"What thought?" Kit asked. Lori came over to their table.

"The usual rounds?" she asked.

"Yes." Kit answered.

"Still on coffee." Barnes replied.

"My usual." Warren agreed.

"Coming right up." Lori said and darted away to get to another table. Warren's eye followed her as she moved.

"Well?" Kit asked. Warren saw just the side of the man's head as he turned to look at her. Warren leaned back in his chair. "Now what?" Kit asked noticing his face.

"I don't know." Warren said, "I think I might just be too tense. Seeing things that are not there. Imaginings perhaps."

"About?" Kit asked, forgetting about the joke.

"You don't want to know." Warren said.

"Barnes?" Kit asked. Barnes looked between them guiltily.

"She has a better ear for it, ok?" Warren asked.

"I'm all ears Warren, especially with that look. You had it for a solid year and I don't want to see anything like that happening again." Kit said.

"It has to be in my head." Warren suggested.

"Try me." Kit said.

"That girl last Friday..."

"Angela?"

"Yes." Warren agreed, "I swear she was watching me. Not necessarily us. And then there's this guy with a newspaper. I must be too sensitive, I've only seen him twice,

but I swear he was doing it too. And now, along side the mysterious Miss Clarkson, there's a young guy, maybe twenty. I saw him this morning in the coffee shop. And as of right now, he's over there. His looking away, but it looks like the same guy."

"Him?" Kit asked looking over. They were still early and there weren't that many people there yet, the rest of the crowd was still coming through the door.

"Yes." Warren agreed.

"They say it's a big city, Warren." Kit said, "But we all do this. We all run around in a circle here going to all the same places."

"I saw him last week, too." Warren added, "The day you sent me to the church."

"Okay, so he likes the same coffee shop." Kit said, "Now he's hooked up with the bar here. Word gets around, if he's new to you, maybe he's just new in town?"

"Maybe." Warren agreed. Lori came back with their drinks. She set them down and waited for their order.

"Soup of the day." Barnes requested.

"I want a big honking sub." Kit said, "Just load it up good. You know what I like. I'm not going to be picky."

"Okay." Lori agreed.

"I'll have what he's having." Warren said, "Just half the size."

"You got it." she expressed and darted off again. Kit tapped the table once and looked at Warren and smiled.

"I'll take care of this." He said getting up.

"Kit, don't make another scene." Warren said.

"I got it. I'll be back in time for my food. Just stay put." Kit said. He grabbed his beer and headed off towards the table where the younger guy was sitting. Warren watched as Kit casually slid into the bench seat across from him and moved right into animated conversation.

Barnes turned to say something to Warren just as his phone rang. "Sorry." He said, "I need to take this." He

answered the phone call he'd been expecting and watched Kit as he continued to move about on the bench. Warren was having trouble paying attention to the call for watching. But he managed to space the difference listening to the most important information. It was followed up by the guy telling him he'd send the file over and Warren was busy thanking him when Lori finally got back with their food. This gave Kit an excuse to get up and return to the table. He sat down just as Warren hung up.

He got right into his food. Barnes began sipping her soup, but Warren couldn't take a bite until Kit said something. Their eyes met.

"Eat." Kit said.

"What did he say?" Warren asked.

"Eat."

Warren began eating while Kit almost had his finished. He left the last of it to pick against his next few beers and smiled at Warren.

"It's nothing. He's new. Just started working at the hotel. Found the coffee shop last week, hadn't got back to it until today waiting on money. Then someone sent him here for lunch." Kit said, "I don't even think he knows you exist."

"He was watching me." Warren claimed, but it was starting to sound argumentative even to himself. Kit shrugged.

"He isn't watching you now, Buddy." He explained and took another bite of food. Warren sighed and looked at Barnes to see if she had an opinion. Despite her blood sample theory, she was looking at him like he was imagining things.

"I'm sorry." Warren said.

"Okay, but something is really bothering you." Kit said, "Not this...whatever, something else. *What?*"

"The kid is driving me crazy." Warren answered.

"Oh." Kit said. No further explanation was required after that. Kit attempted to lighten his mood by making

faces. It was absolutely childish and Warren wished he'd stop, but he had Barnes going already and Warren fell right in step and the three of them were laughing well enough as the young man approached the table.

Kit's laughter died. Barnes and Warren's wound down as well. "Sorry to interrupt." The guy said. He quickly stuck out his hand towards Kit holding out a piece of paper. Kit took it from him slowly. "Just in case...you know...you change your mind." He took a step back quickly once the paper was no longer in his hand. "Have a good day." He got off before he made a hasty retreat. Kit appeared paralyzed holding the paper up until the guy had left the bar. Then he swung his head past both of them and smiled.

"I think he got the wrong idea about me." Kit said. He then turned the paper up to look at it between his two fingers, he eyed them again. "I'm afraid this is wasted here at this table." He paused for a moment and smiled. "But I think I know who to give it to." He then stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He focused in on Warren. "That give you any idea why he might have been looking at you?"

"Me?" Warren asked.

"Considering it never hurts to just look. My search for the truth got us a phone number. Not that mysterious at all."

"But me?"

"Barnes help me out." Kit said.

"He might have found you to be attractive." She explained.

"Me?" Warren asked.

"You are attractive, so yes you." Barnes answered. Warren shrugged like it wasn't possible. This time Barnes and Kit laughed while Warren was left out of the loop.

"In the end I win." Kit added. After a moment he said, "Even if I'm not interested."

Warren was going through his mail as he entered his apartment. When he looked up from it he noticed Nate with his game paused looking at him from over the back of the couch. "Uncle Warren." He started to say.

"I don't care to hear it." Warren assured him as he turned away from the kid and headed towards the table with his mail and briefcase.

"I'm sorry." Nate said causing Warren to look back at him.

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"I'm sorry I said anything out loud. I didn't really believe him. Well not until yesterday..."

"I do not care to hear this Nate." Warren said.

"It's just that..."

"Don't" Warren commanded.

"You're definitely angry now." Nate shot out before he could be interrupted again.

"And with good reason."

"You weren't dressed." Nate claimed, "It came into my head what he'd said and I might of not thought more about it, but you...you were being nice to me."

"Not to worry, Nathaniel, it will *not* happen again, I assure you. As far as my attire on any given day it is none of your concern. I can attest with certainty that my sense of common decency outranks yours by far.

"The idea that you could draw a conclusion based information from such an unreliable source and then dare speak it to me? Perhaps you should refrain from speaking at all. As far as your brain capacity it could be best used by someone else."

Nate turned around and went back to his game sinking down on the couch.

"I am going to watch the news at six." Warren said in a calm voice, "Be done with your quest by then."

"I can sa..." Nate started to say.

“I don’t care about the particulars, Nate. Just be done by six. At seven you can then watch the TV afterwards right up until your eyes start to bleed.” Warren said. Nate’s character on the screen died as the controller fell from his hand. He then got up and proceeded to change the system back to television and went into his room closing the door softly behind himself.

Warren went over and got the remote and muted the sound. He’d bring it back up at six. In the meantime he took the opportunity to go over some of his work. He started dinner after that.

Warren knocked on his door twice. Once when he was preparing the food and after he’d gotten it all to the table. When Nate still failed to come out he headed back and cracked the door open. “You will come to the table.” Warren said and left the door open. After he got sat back down Nate came out. He looked completely pissed off as he sat down. He didn’t even look at the food. He just stared at Warren. “You’ve arrived.” Warren marked, “If the food is not to your liking you may depart.”

Nate got up and went back to his room. Warren sighed heavily. He then attempted to eat, telling himself he’d enjoy the meal with the quiet. But he never got past three bites. He watched the news while he cleaned up. After which he was sitting on the couch running his hand through his hair trying to figure out how he could still be hungry and refuse to eat anything.

He got up and started towards Nate’s door. He stopped to reconsider his next move. The last thing he wanted was to give the kid any leeway. He’d run him over with it. Warren had seen Nate convince his mother of doing things against any adult’s better judgment just to please him. He would definitely have to step carefully. He couldn’t go on not eating at this point, either.

Warren knocked and then cracked the door. “Nate come out here.” He instructed. He then closed the door and

stepped back waiting. He gave him plenty of time during which he shifted back and fourth on his feet leaning to the side and looking out the window.

Nate finally opened the door and looked at him through it. Warren waved him to come all the way out. Nate stepped out but didn't come any closer. Warren closed the gap finally himself stepping forward to have the boy right in front of him.

"I'm sorry." Warren said.

"About what?" Nate barked.

"I should have allowed you to apologize. You were doing something right and I didn't give you any credit because I was busy being angry. It only goes to serve my point about it, letting emotion get before logic.

"The idea that you could ever think that of me after everything I've done for you in the past, even if I care nothing for you by now is disturbing to me. My emotion ran away from me. I accept your apology."

Nate just looked at him like he was someone else, a stranger even. Warren turned away from him and went to his room. He came back towards Nate with the last three games. He offered them to him.

"I have accepted your apology, will you accept mine?" he asked.

"I wouldn't want my eyes to bleed." Nate said.

"I'm sure you can manage how much time you spend viewing the TV. If you require some guidance on the matter I can make a suggestion." Warren offered.

"What?" Nate asked as he finally took the games from his uncle's hands.

"Limit yourself to just a few hours. After that do something else. Read a book, go outside, or listen to music." Warren said, "I'm thinking you spent the whole day doing nothing else with your time after seeing you yesterday."

"Actually I did go places today." Nate said, "Yesterday was just because of the rain."

“Well perhaps for the days when it rains you could get a book.” Warren decided. “You have a library card, yes?”

“Yes.” Nate said.

“Good.”

Warren left him and headed over to one of the high back chairs. He sat down and got into the last of his paperwork. After a while of the quiet continuing he looked up to see Nate still standing where he was holding the games and not moving. Warren attempted to ignore him. He'd settled it, that would do, he didn't need to get any more involved than that.

Nate set the games down and walked over towards him. He sat down in the chair on the other side of the small table and looked at his uncle. “You needn't worry about it any further.” Warren suggested.

“I'd...I want to talk more about it.” Nate said.

“There is no need.” Warren assured him.

“But I want to, please.” He requested.

“Dinner is in a container in the refrigerator. All you need do is run it through the microwave for a few minutes.” Warren said. Nate groaned and started to get up. “Alright, sit.” Warren said as he put his work away. He was mostly done anyway. “If you'd rather talk then eat, go ahead.”

“I have my own thoughts about it.” Nate said, “You being weird to me.” Warren took in a deep breath and leaned against the side of the high back looking at his nephew.

“Go ahead.” He said.

“You live alone.” Nate started.

“There is nothing wrong with me living alone.”

“I've never seen you with a woman.”

“Yes, that would be because you were not anywhere near me while I experienced a year wasting my time on one.” Warren said.

“And all the time I've known you before that?” Nate asked.

“Not that you should be spending so much of your time worrying about it, but I was occupied for the most part. There was enough going that I didn’t have to think about it. Before that I had a girlfriend in High School, you missed that because you were still only just newly born. That was back when we still had your grand parents around.”

“And now?” he asked.

“I assure you Nate. It’s none of your concern.”

“It makes a kid ask questions.” Nate said.

“Like what?” Warren asked. He took another deep breath knowing that was probably an invitation to further discussion.

“Like maybe you don’t like woman.” Nate said.

“That’s enough Nate, conversation over.” Warren stated as he started to get up.

“You’re the one who said not to assume it.” Nate said.

Warren fell back into the chair and looked at him again.

“I have given you my answer.” He said.

“There are other things.”

“I find it difficult to believe you could draw an appropriate conclusion based on it.” Warren said.

“So you don’t want to tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Warren asked. Nate got up shaking his head and headed towards the kitchen where he reheated the food. “I’d like some of that as well.” Warren admitted as he got up. They both ended up at the table with the reheated food on clean plates. They were quiet during the meal and Warren was glad that whatever was preventing him from eating before was no longer there. When he finished he leaned back in the chair and didn’t immediately get up to clean again.

“You can tell me.” Nate said as he finished and they looked at each other across the table, “It’s not like I can’t guess anyway.”

“That probably would be a bad idea.” Warren suggested.

“So just tell me then.” Nate said. Warren tapped the table for a moment. “I’ll clean up.” He got up and began doing that while Warren glanced at him occasionally.

“I see no reason to bother you with it.” Warren said.

“Okay, I’m done asking, ok?” Nate asked. Warren sighed.

“Athena.”

“Yea there is that too.” Nate said.

“The way you say that, Nate, it sounds like you have an unstated opinion about it.”

“Yea, get over it already. She’s married and has three kids, find someone else.”

“If only it were as easy to change one’s heart as it is to change one’s mind.” Warren explained.

“You could try.”

“I did try and I’m working on it.” Warren said.

“Fine you tried someone else, try a new someone else.”

“I do not need to say this again, Nathaniel, this is not your concern.”

“Fine, whatever, just don’t think I’m stupid about it. I’m not ten anymore.” Nate said as he finished with the dishes.

“The last time I saw you, you were eleven.” Warren clarified.

“I don’t want to remember being eleven anymore than I want to remember being ten.” Nate said.

“Fine.”

They went to their respective corners until it was time for Warren to go to bed.

Warren was in a better mood in the morning than he had been the day before. He set out to ignore the guy with the newspaper. As he approached the coffee shop he was

somewhat relieved that he wasn't anywhere in sight. Warren was running earlier than usual. He went into the empty coffee shop and his coffee wasn't ready yet.

"Good morning." The girl offered, "Coming right up."

"Thank you, trying to beat the rain." Warren explained.

"You got your umbrella anyway." She noted.

"That I do." Warren agreed as he paid for his latte. The other girl had returned. It was now a week from the day and Warren couldn't help think too much had changed during the interim.

After getting his drink he turned to head towards the door when the young man came in. He smiled at Warren. "Hello." He said.

"Hi." Warren greeted.

"Kit's friend, right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Uhm, have to ask. Do you...do you think he'll call me?" the guy asked.

"What for?" Warren asked.

"You know, to like get together." He said. Warren remembered Kit and Barnes banter about it. He remembered them laughing, too. But he didn't think it was at all funny.

"No, he won't call you." Warren said almost trying to sound apologetic. The guy made a face like he couldn't understand Warren. He stepped back and then turned to go get his own coffee.

Warren went ahead and headed out the door. He brought his head up just in time to see the redheaded guy, now appearing late to Warren's schedule and looking at him with an exasperated expression. The rain tore out of the sky and they both put their umbrellas up at the same time.

Warren checked the traffic and then bolted across the street towards the man. He failed to react. Instead of hiding behind his newspaper he was looking down the road like he was waiting for a cab. Warren approached.

“What do you want?” Warren asked. The guy looked back at him.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not unaware of your activity. Why are you watching me?”

“I’m not watching you.” He explained.

“You most certainly are.” Warren said, “You’re looking right at me. This is not the first time. Why? What do you want from me?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. I’m standing here waiting for my friend. My car broke down and he passes through here on his way to work. So, I’m just waiting for a ride. I don’t know you.”

“Look.” Warren said, “Whatever your excuse, I want you to know I’m not unaware of your activity. And I know your not alone, so whoever you are a part of, whatever, you tell whomever, if they want something from me to come forward and ask me. This spy business is unsuitable and the lot of you are really bad at it.”

“You’re crazy.” The guy said. Warren turned and headed down the street. “That’s right, take your paranoid self up on out of here.”

Warren ignored him after that. His good mood was gone and he failed to smile at Leigh as he came through the door.

“Good morning.” She tried.

“Wish I could say the same.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nothing you’ve done.” He explained as he moved towards his door and unlocked it. He entered his office and got settled in.

“Garner line one.” Leigh passed through on the intercom. Warren picked up the phone.

“Go ahead.” He said.

“Warren, sorry about the delay. I’m looking over your proposal first thing this morning.” Garner explained.

“I’d have to guess you didn’t get a chance to last week before you left?” Warren asked.

“I’m just now seeing it, Warren. I took off before it arrived.”

“Excuse me?” Warren asked.

“I left on Monday, Warren. Got back last night. I was intending to get right to this, but something came up. A funeral no less, nasty business, lucky for me it wasn’t a personal experience, but I still had to fly back to the East coast.”

“You called me on Wednesday.” Warren said, “You gave me the heads up about sending over a new client.”

“You lost me Warren, did you say last week or do you mean the week before that. Last week was just this side of hell for me. I come back and the whole place has just ground to a halt. They claim I do nothing and when I’m not here nothing actually gets done. I called back three times and everything I suggested when on undone, so I’m playing catch up here. But you’re first.”

“Are you saying you did not actually call me last Wednesday?”

“Couldn’t, really. Are you sure about the day? I had a lot going on but I think I’d remember talking to you.”

“You mention Golf on Sunday.”

“You know I missed that, too. I was going to meet someone, make a new contact, now I’ll have to rework all of that to get a second chance. At least I can count on you not to be held up on my account, yes?”

“Yes, Garner, but I swear, I spoke with you. You said you were sending over a potential client. She showed up. I can’t convince myself this never happened.”

“Who?” he asked.

“Jennifer Clarkson.”

“Doesn’t ring any bells.” Garner said, “You say she showed up?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe someone was playing me to you, you know boost her up or something. How did that meeting go?”

“It didn’t.” Warren said, “She never got with me past the initial greeting. Garner, I can’t believe someone faked being you to me. You said all the same things you always do.”

“I’m not going to spend the rest of my life worrying about it. I’ll get your proposal out of the way and I got something else I want you to look at for me. Pass me over to your assistant and I’ll pass her mine. Ben, Jesus, Warren you think this guy would have done one thing while I was gone. He’s done zip.”

“Sure Garner.” Warren said, “Hold the line.”

“Don’t get caught in the rain.”

Warren put the phone on hold and passed over the line to Leigh. He then sat down in his chair and tried to figure it out. By the time Leigh passed him his next call he hadn’t thought of anything.

“Warren Keith.” he answered.

