

**Daniel & Kevin
Christmas in Spring**

It was Friday and already after 10 p.m. as Daniel Peters was about to call it a day when a co-worker caught him right in time as he was about to leave the police department.

“Daniel?”

With a wary feeling he turned around, as he noticed Susan’s undertone. “Yes?”

“I know you’re actually done for the day, but do you have a moment for me anyway?”

“Sure.” He let go of the door, and came back to her.

She stuck her head quickly into her office and spoke to someone in there. “Just a second, okay? I’ll be right back.” Then she closed the door and stepped aside with him.

“Any problems in there?”

“No, not really. A young man, who just got a restraining order, but ...”

“Against whom?”

“Against his parents.”

Daniel cocked his eyebrows. “How old?”

“Of age.”

“Of age?”

“Yes, but he’s still living at home. The private College he goes to is in town and doesn’t have a campus for locals.”

“I don’t really get where I come in here ...”

Susan briefly pressed her lips against each other, then she said: “He told me, he’s afraid that his father’s aggressions might turn against him next time.”

“Next time? What’s his name?”

“Kevin Sailor”

Daniel frowned. “Sailor?”

“Uhhuh ... You won’t believe it, but Brad Sailor is his father.”

“The guy that frequently beats his wife? Who then ...” he sighed and didn't finish the sentence; but Susan did it for him.

“... who then files charges and withdraws them shortly later. That’s exactly him. This year already three damn times.”

“Shit.”

“The thing really worrying me, is that shortly before signing, he almost frantically admitted that he would love to out himself, but his parents don’t know yet. He obviously has no idea where he’s supposed to stay. He doesn’t have any relatives in town. So there is actually more to it than the ongoing arguing of his parents.” She looked at him meaningfully. “You don’t by chance have room for him?” Susan was aiming at a small but very exquisite foundation he was running at home.

“No, I’m full. I could only offer him a guest room until we find a better solution. Not ideal, but I got a lot of room. And he would be safe for the time being.”

“You wanna speak to him?”

Daniel nodded and pulled out his cell phone. Shortly later he had his friend and colleague Mario Leonardo on the line.

“What shall I order for you?” he asked without saying hello.

Actually, they had planned on meeting at *Sean’s* although it was quite late. The bar was very popular with cops and it was a place where one could get a warm meal around the clock.

Daniel briefed Mario on the newest developments. "So better not wait for me. In case this Kevin accepts my offer, I drive right home with him. If it comes down to it, I will grab a burger somewhere. I assume the boy hasn't eaten anything anyway. You gotta have some balls to get a restraining order against your own parents, besides it being really really sad."

"Sounds quite bad. Hopefully you can convince him to come with you for now. Good luck."

"Thanks. I'll call you." The weekend finally was off after they had finished a complicated case and basically spent all day long with the final paperwork.

"See ya."

Daniel tucked away his cell. With his leather jacket in hand, he knocked and entered Susan's office. His gaze caught a young man, who was sitting quite unnerved on a chair in front of Susan's desk. He was tall, slim and made a neat impression, although his black hair looked as if he just got out of bed. If it had not been for the dark circles around his eyes and the worry lines, he would've been quite attractive.

Daniel didn't miss Kevin looking at him a bit worried since his shoulder holster identified him clearly as another police officer. Maybe he thought: *Two cops, only because I don't want my parents to contact me?*

"No worries. Everything's fine," Susan said right away soothingly, as Kevin protectively crossed his arms in front of his chest. With an uneasy look he glanced at Daniel.

"Hello ... Sir," he mumbled.

"Hi, Mr. Sailor. Officer Melrose informed me that you got a restraining order and don't have a place to stay."

Kevin stood. "Not your problem, I will find something ..."

"Kevin, at least listen to detective Peters' proposal, huh? I step out for a second." With these words she disappeared through the door.

Daniel hung his jacket over Susan's office chair and sat down. He didn't miss Kevin checking him out. At least he didn't bolt yet.

"Please sit down once more, Mr. Sailor. What I wanna talk to you about, has nothing to do with my police work. I only wanna offer you my help."

The young man seemed relieved at once and said: "Kevin. Please call me Kevin. My last name makes me puke."

"Sure." Daniel looked at him friendly and slowly Kevin sank back on the chair in front of the desk. "Office Melrose told me you don't know where to spend the night. Is that correct?"

"Uhhuh. I stayed at some friends' house because one of their roommates was in Australia for half a year, but he came back a few days ago and told me quite bluntly to take a hike. So I packed my stuff and got out."

"You actually lived there?"

Kevin shook his head. "No. I rather stayed there when it got really bad at home."

"I see."

"Officer Melrose hinted that you might be able to help me find a room for the night? I think she's wrong because I hardly have any money. Just about 15 bucks."

"I hope I can help, yes."

"At this late hour?"

"Officer Melrose was hoping that I might have a room for you, but ..."

"You also have roommates?" Kevin blurted. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you. I, uhm, I am a bit worn out. Sorry."

“That’s okay. And to your question: No, I don’t have roommates in the pure sense of the word, but I have a huge place. Half of it is filled with young people who have all once been in a similar situation than you are right now. I am running the *Jasper’s Rainbow Foundation* which helps young people in need, mainly as long as they go to school. Have you ever heard of it?”

“Ah, okay. Cool. No, I haven’t heard of it. And you got a room for me? That’s something else,” he mumbled, and a short glow appeared in Kevin’s eyes, until Daniel shook his head.

“Unfortunately not. There is no vacancy at the moment.”

“Would’ve been too good to be true anyway.” Kevin hung his head.

“But as I said I have a big place and I can at least offer you a safe place to stay. Not ideal, but I have three additional guest rooms with a separate bathroom each. So if you want, you can come with me for now.”

Kevin looked at him stunned. “Really?”

“Really. Although this is rather an exception.”

Kevin swallowed. “Why are you doing this?”

“What? Offering you a safe place to stay?”

Kevin nodded.

“I’m quite familiar with the name Brad Sailor.”

Kevin bit his lip and nodded vaguely.

“By chance you ended up with officer Melrose, who in turn knows about my foundation.”

“Must be fate then.”

Daniel noticed that he was fighting tears. “Officer Melrose said you are afraid of your father?”

“Uhhuh.”

“Your father ever attacked you?”

“Last time when I tried to intervene when he ...” he broke off and lifted a strand of hair on his forehead.

Daniel saw a fresh cut and frowned. “When did this happen?”

“Yesterday.” He hung his head again.

“Did you file charges?” Daniel asked cautiously, but he knew the answer beforehand.

Kevin shook his head. “Ever since, I almost begged her on my knees to leave him. Again.”

“Whom? Your mother?”

“Uhhuh.” A short pause, then: “I’m done.” Kevin’s voice broke and Daniel saw a tear fall onto his black jeans. He wiped his face with a gruff gesture and looked up. “I don’t wanna end up like her! I can’t do this anymore.”

“I can relate, and as sad it might be, I really admire you.”

“I’m still not a hundred percent sure that it is right what I am doing.”

“Eventually it comes down to a point when one has to do something. I think you did the right thing,” Daniel replied. “Does that mean you wanna come with me?”

“I’d like that,” he mumbled.

Daniel smiled relieved. “Well ...” He stood and extended his hand towards Kevin. “... I’m Daniel.”

When they shook hands, their eyes met for a short moment, and Daniel dove into two dark-grey eyes, which had seen a lot of sorrow. But beyond said sorrow, he saw a fighter. He liked it.

“I’m Kev.”

“You got any personal stuff with you?”

Kevin nodded to two big bags on the side. “That’s what I was able to grab.”

"In the event there is anything else you need, we can ask an officer to accompany you. Then you can get the rest."

Kevin winced. "Not for now. Thanks. A safe place to stay is so much more important for me right now." He smiled timidly for the first time.

Daniel opened the door and nodded at Susan. "We're done here."

"Did you accept Detective Peters' offer?"

Kevin nodded.

"Oh, great!" She seemed quite relieved. Then she walked up to her desk and picked up a piece of paper. "Don't forget this." It was his copy of the restraining order. "At the latest tomorrow morning your parents will be served."

Kevin tucked it away.

"For how long?" Daniel asked.

"One year," Susan replied.

"I never thought it would ever come down to this," Kevin mumbled. "And it tears my heart out," he added soundlessly.

"Kevin, you did everything you could. You accompanied your mother already three times this year. Nobody can ask for more," Susan said.

Kevin sighed. "Three times and it's only March. Last year it was three times until December."

"Parents should mainly be there for their children, not the other way around. Specifically, when they are young." She extended her hand, and Kevin took it. "Be safe."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

Daniel took one of the two bags. "Let's go. Good night, Susan. I hope the remainder of the night will be calm."

"Yeah right." She rolled her eyes as a rampaging drunk was taken into custody outside.

Daniel waited it out until they had passed, before stepping outside with Kevin.

"My car is over there."

"Does this mean I am allowed driving in a police cruiser without being in trouble?"

"Sorry, just an unmarked car since I'm a detective."

"Ah, I see. Whatever."

A little later they loaded the bags into the trunk of Daniel's car.

"Oh man, is this a Carbon 7?"

Daniel was relieved that Kevin obviously was able to think of something else for the time being. "Jep."

They got in and Daniel drove off.

"I don't know about you, but I haven't eaten since noon and I'm starving."

"I only got a few bucks."

"That was not the question."

"Oh, uhm, actually I haven't eaten anything yet all day," Kevin admitted. "On the other side I'm not sure if I can down something at all."

"How about this: I order some burgers, then we pick them up and eat at my place."

"Okay."

Daniel called *Granny's Diner* which wasn't far from his home and placed an order.

Twenty minutes later he parked in front of the diner, jumped out, and returned shortly later with a big paper bag.

"Smells delicious," Kevin noted.

“And tastes even better, believe me. We’re almost there.”

Only two minutes later, Daniel turned into a driveway which ended after a few yards in front of an iron gate. He opened it with a remote control, and Kevin’s gaze fell on a plain sign reading “*Jasper’s Rainbow Foundation*”, while the gate slowly slid to the side. Then they rolled through and the gate closed again.

Kevin rubbed his eyes while they drove through a parklike garden. He wasn’t able seeing much in the dark although there were single spotlights every now and then, but the house was almost 100 yards further back. House? This was a Victorian style mansion. Damn!

“Holy shit, you live here?” he blurted once more.

“Uhhuh.”

There was dog barking and Kevin fell silent.

“Yes, yes, hold your horses,” Daniel mumbled, and stopped in front of the garage, which also opened at that instance. “Are you afraid of dogs?”

“Hm, usually not, but ...” He tried catching a glimpse.

“Don’t worry. Those are indeed two watch dogs, but as long as you come in with me for the first time around, there will be no danger for you. Stay seated for a moment.”

“Uhhuh.”

Daniel got out and gave two sharp commands, which sound like *Aus* and *Sitz*. Then his door was opened.

“What kind of language was that?”

“German. Come on, I wanna introduce you.”

Kevin felt a bit uneasy when he got out of the car, but he took the challenge. Two great German Shepherd dogs were sitting in front of the garage, and only had eyes for Daniel at the moment.

“This” Daniel pointed to the right one. “... is Elvis and this here is Max.” He pointed to the other. “These are our watch dogs, but they are also buddies to our residents. They only follow German commands. *Aus* means ‘shut up’ or ‘give me the ball’ and *Sitz* means ‘sit down’. They got it as you can see. May I introduce? This is Kevin. Be nice to him. Kevin, let Elvis sniff your hand. Trust me.”

Kevin did as he was told, and the dog touched his hand at once with his cold nose. He whimpered softly and briefly licked it.

“*Brav*. Means ‘good boy,’” Daniel translated for him. “Now Max.”

The procedure repeated itself.

“Looks like you’re okay,” Daniel joked. “Now off you two, do your job!”

And although Daniel didn’t give them a German command, the two of them ran off into the dark garden.

“Man;” Kevin said. “I was lucky, huh?”

“Looks like it.”

“But they don’t follow only German commands.”

“No, of course not. But they do when at work.”

Daniel fished for the burger bag on the backseat, and while the garage door closed, he walked to a connecting door, which apparently lead from the garage directly into the house.

Shortly later Daniel unlocked the door, and let him in.

“My little private entrance,” Daniel said, and put down Kevin’s bag.

Kevin did the same, and let his eyes wander through the vast, modern kitchen with a big island.

“Wow!”

“Shall we eat first? After that I show you around. Otherwise everything turns cold and that would be a pity.” Daniel placed the bag on the adjacent high table, and started unpacking, while Kevin took off his jacket and dropped it over his bag. “Look into the fridge and take whatever you wanna drink. I just get rid of my gun.”

“Okay.” He looked after Daniel, who disappeared in the depths of the rooms and returned shortly later without his shoulder holster.

A little later they sat on two barstools and albeit Kevin had thought not being able to down anything, he helped himself. The burger was huge with a lot of salad, tomatoes, cheese, cross bacon and a lot of meat. And it smelled of more. Daniel had ordered four, with it some fries and the best coleslaw Kevin had ever had.

After the first burger he found his speech again. “I never thought a cop, uhm ...”

“That’s fine.”

“... lives like this. How on earth can you afford this? I’m just wondering: is this real? Always thought cops, uhm, police officers don’t earn that much ...”

“They don’t.”

“Did you win the lottery?”

“No, but something along that line. Don’t worry, there’s no magic involved. I simply inherit all this.”

“Ah,” Kevin made, and turned a bit shameful. “Inherit means, that, uhm, that ... damn ...” He broke off since he had the feeling, he might not find a sensitive way of saying this.

“Let’s finish first, then I tell you everything. Okay?”

Kevin feared that otherwise Daniel might lose his appetite and nodded quickly.

“Go ahead.” Daniel pointed to the fourth burger, while he was at his second already, and took a big bite.

Kevin didn’t hesitate. Only now he noticed how hungry he really was. While they continued eating quietly, Kevin glanced at Daniel secretly. He had beautiful hands, he noticed. And the rest was a sight as well. Blonde hair, short cop haircut, bold chin, blue eyes, and the first laugh lines in an otherwise tanned face, which showed that Daniel liked to spend some time outside. Kevin guessed him to be around his thirties. They were almost the same height; Daniel maybe beat him by an inch, but not more. He was well-trained. And this good-looking guy actually offered him a safe place to stay? He was dumbfounded! Maybe for once luck was on his side?

Finally, they were finished. Only some coleslaw was left over, which Daniel put into the fridge since none of them was able to finish it up. He cleared the desk, took a beer from the fridge and sat back down with Kevin.

“First my story, or first a tour?”

Kevin felt like he wouldn’t be able to move a finger after this feast, and thus he said: “First your story.”

“Okay.” They toasted with beer and Coke and after each had taken a sip, Daniel cleared his throat.

Kevin saw a shadow creeping over his face.

“This was actually the house of my parents.”

“I would call it a mansion ...” Kevin noted, and kicked himself right away, since he had interrupted Daniel again. He really had to start working on getting rid of this annoying habit.

“Uhhuh. They started the foundation about 20 years ago. Back then my cousin Jasper was bullied at school so badly, after getting caught kissing another boy, that he took his own life.”

“Oh my God ...”

“Consequently, my mother and her sister Stephanie, that is Jasper’s mum, started this foundation.”

Kevin fell silent and was glad that he was done eating.

“Two years ago, my parents died in a car accident on Hawaii. It almost took me a year to recover from that shock, but now I continue with the foundation. Together with my Aunt Stephanie, who is living in the west wing of the mansion. She’s something like the heart of the foundation.”

“Oh man,” Kevin mumbled. “That’s really tough stuff.”

“Uhhuh. It wasn’t easy, and, in the beginning, I thought I can’t do it. But by now I noticed: Yes, I can. And I’m glad I continued with the foundation.”

Kevin looked around.

“Just keep asking. Fire away, no matter what it is,” Daniel encouraged him.

“I haven’t seen much yet, but when you inherit all this, then you surely don’t have to work as a cop any longer, do you?”

Now it was Daniel falling silent for a moment before answering: “True. But, to be honest, I had to continue for the time being. For the longest part I only functioned, since my parents were all the world to me. But there is a possibility that I might quit my job eventually and start something completely new.”

“You actually wanna continue working, although you don’t really have to?”

“Depends. As you already stated correctly, you don’t earn that much being a cop, and nobody can count on a nine-to-five job. I’m doing this now for ten years, and might even keep doing it, but a friend of mine recently asked me if I want to joint him as a coach for self-defense classes and at the same time as a shareholder of a similar studio.”

“Cool.”

“Uhhuh. This would be right up my alley, since I’m also doing this with the young people here. To do this for a job would be really interesting.”

“Could you show me something, too? I’m really a dud when it comes down to this.”

“Sure.”

“Hm. Crazy.”

“But before we go down that route and before I can actually show you a room, I have to ask you one more thing.”

Kevin looked up.

“For the said reason, all of the residents in the second floor of the east wing have more or less a LGBT background. Do you have a problem with that? And please tell me the truth. A lie will come back at you sooner or later. Should you have a problem with all that, I rather drive you to a motel and get you a room for one or two nights. After that we look for a different solution for you.”

“I understand. No, I don’t have a problem at all with that. Honestly,” he assured.

“The residents of this house get a great deal of protection from me. Right now, there are three young men and two young women living here. And that is exactly, what this foundation is for.”

Kevin huffed. This was really crazy. “Listen.” He bent forward and lowered his voice, although there was just him and Daniel. “Since years, I feel like, uhm, I ...” he stopped and looked into a corner and then back to Daniel. “I really hope that what I’m going to say will stay between you and me?”

“Of course.”

“I, uhm, I would’ve never dared having my coming-out at home, although I already know it since I’m, I don’t know, twelve ... That’s exactly why I told officer Melrose that I start being afraid of my

father. So far, he has no clue, but when he finds out, then ..." He broke off again. "That's what I told officer Melrose, as well, and that my parents have no idea. She didn't tell you?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, she said something along those lines, but I wanted to hear it from you directly. You will have enough opportunities to talk to the others about it."

Kevin looked him directly in the eyes and asked bluntly: "Only to the others, or also to you?"

Daniel looked at him, confused.

"I mean, uhm, are you, are you, uhm gay as well? Or are you doing this only, because ..." His voice trailed off.

Daniel looked at him quietly for some seconds before he replied. "That's quite a private question and actually has nothing to do with what we're talking about. But I'm always for playing with an open deck. So, I can answer your question with a Yes."

Kevin's eyes bulged. "A gay cop?"

Daniel lifted his hands. "My sexual preferences are off the record, but I'm sure I'm not the only one."

"Sorry, that was really tactless," Kevin mumbled, and looked at the desktop.

"That's okay. It's important to me that there won't be any misunderstandings here."

He was relieved that Daniel wasn't mad at him and was glad that he changed topics.

"How much longer you have to go to school?"

"This and next year. I visit a private College. But my father always threatens to pull the plug on my College funds if I ever leave the house before graduating. He's a total control freak. I guess I gotta switch schools or maybe I can't even finish it. This year is already paid for, but the last one is not. That really sucks." He sighed deeply. "I doubt that I can earn that much money on the side doing some odd jobs to pay for my last year. It's really really expensive there. How much would I have to pay to live here?" he then asked.

"Nothing."

"Say again?"

"That's what the foundation is for. Our residents can stay until they finish school and as soon as they have a job or an apprenticeship – and with this we are of course happy to help – then they leave us again. They don't have to pay anything to live here, even the food is free. They all cook together almost every day. With Auntie – that's what they all call my Aunt Stephanie – you can learn how to cook." Daniel didn't tell him that nevertheless some of the cooking experiments ended with screaming smoke detectors. But at least nobody ever burned down his house.

"I love to cook, but I am also eager to learn more."

"My foundation can also take over the school funding."

"What?" Kevin stared at him in shock. "Are you kidding? You know how expensive my College is? I could never pay that back!"

"You don't have to pay it back," Daniel calmed him. "But I would love a promise that you try graduating and not drop out of school. Of course, there will be some paperwork for your and we need a health certificate. Auntie can take care of all of that with you."

"Man, that would be awesome! And maybe I could get another partial grant."

"How come?"

"I'm pretty good with computer science. Besides sports this is my second focus in College. And this year I was up for a partial grant."

"Cool. You already know if you wanna do this for a job later on?"

“Uhhuh. I wouldn't mind going to the police and work at a cyber-crime unit or something like that. Maybe they have some use for a nerd like me.”

“I'd like that idea.”

“And I don't say that because you're a cop.” He swallowed. “Damn ...”

“Don't worry, it's not a cuss word.” Daniel looked at his watch. It was almost half past one in the morning. “Shall I show you your room? I can show you around by tomorrow. It's rather late.”

Kevin looked at the clock, stunned. “You gotta get up in the morning?”

“I'm finally off this weekend.”

“Oh, okay. Cool. – yeah, sure.”

“Come with me.” Daniel emptied his beer, and slid off the barstool. Shortly later he opened the door to a big guestroom. The high Victorian windows were shut with automatic blinds. The furniture however was modern. There was a king size bed, a sideboard, a walk-in closet and a desk, further two armchairs and a small table.

“Damn, I only had a very narrow bed for the most part of my life.”

“Do you think this is okay for the time being or you wanna have a look at the other rooms first?”

“That's just fine. This is almost like a little apartment.”

“It's a bit over 400 square feet not counting the bathroom.”

“That's back there, huh?” Kevin pointed at a door.

Daniel nodded. “Come on, we get your stuff. I hope you can find some sleep.”

“Uhhuh.” Kevin glanced longingly back to the huge bed with all those dark blue pillows. It was even his favorite color by chance. Then he hurried up to catch up with Daniel to get his stuff.

“Did you bring things like towels or a toothbrush as well?” Daniel wanted to know.

He shook his head.

“No problem. I'll be right back.”

While Kevin carried his bags into his room, he heard Daniel opening a cupboard at the end of the hallway. Shortly later he came back with two towels, toothpaste, shower gel, a toothbrush and some toilet paper.

“Tomorrow we'll see what else you might need, okay?”

“Thanks.”

“Try getting some sleep, huh?”

Kevin nodded. “I'm dead tired. Last night I wasn't able to get any rest at all.”

“I believe that. We'll catch up having breakfast.”

“Sounds good. Good night.”

“Sleep tight.”

Daniel stood for a long time under a hot shower which he even needed at this late hour. Afterwards he pulled on some comfortable shorts and T-shirt and fell onto his bed. Although it had been a turbulent day, he almost fell asleep immediately.

But sometime at night he jerked up, because he thought he had heard something. He remembered that he was not alone, and listened. There it was again. A muffled cry, something like a *No!* then silence again until it started anew when Daniel sank back into his pillows. *Stop it! Leave her alone! Don't!*

He jumped out of bed, took his gun and a small flashlight from the drawer of his bedside table and went to the door. The hallway was quiet. The sounds came from Kevin's room. Was there a burglar? That was almost impossible. Again muffled words and a whimper.

Soundlessly he opened Kevin's door and let his light beam wander over the bed.

With a jerk Kevin was sitting bolt upright in his bed, and stared blinded into the light. Daniel noticed his face being wet with tears.

"Hey, everything okay with you?" he asked worried and put his gun on the sideboard in the hallway, so Kevin wasn't able to see it. He didn't want to scare him. "I turn on the light, okay?"

Kevin only mumbled something incoherent, while Daniel switched on the light. At the same time, he turned off his flashlight.

"I heard yelling and thought at first there might be an intruder. Sorry, if I woke you up," Daniel apologized and came closer.

Kevin ran his hands through his face in a despair attempt to hide his tears.

"I think that might have been me ..." he mumbled. "I, uhm, had a nightmare." He stared at the blanket and Daniel saw that he was still breathing hard.

"I'll be right back." Outside he quickly took the flashlight and his gun back to his bedroom and grabbed a glass of water, also to give Kevin a moment to compose himself.

"Here you go."

"I'm sorry."

"No reason to apologize. Take a sip." Daniel notice that he didn't feel like talking about it. "Just remember: You are safe here."

Kevin nodded and didn't reply.

An hour later Daniel jerked up again. But this time the cries subsided quicker. He assumed that Kevin had woken up himself.

Until morning dawned, he heard Kevin four times and now he wasn't surprised any longer why the young man had dark circles around his eyes. Apparently, Kevin's life was hell for quite some time. He felt really sorry for him and was glad that their paths had crossed by fate.

Around half past seven Daniel got up since he wasn't able to fall asleep anymore, so he took another shower. While he stood in the warm rain, he wondered how to proceed. Even if there was a vacancy upstairs, he couldn't board Kevin there. No way. He would keep four people from getting a sound sleep with his nightmares. He thought about Nele, who had experienced something similar after she moved in. But even with her they had managed that the nightmares had stopped, eventually.

While he got dressed, he heard Kevin taking a shower as well.

He went to the kitchen, and turned on the espresso machine.

Kevin came around the corner, as he threw some eggs and bacon into a pan, and the first toast slices jumped from the toaster.

"Good morning," Daniel yelled over the sounds of the pan.

He was only able to read Kevin's reply from his lips, not more.

"Feel like having breakfast?"

He shrugged, but Daniel ignored it and kept going. After loading bacon and eggs onto two plates, he turned around to Kevin, who stood uncertain next to the chairs.

"What's up?" Daniel now asked bluntly.

Kevin looked at him shyly. "Were you able to get any sleep?"

"Don't worry about it. I can fall right back to sleep. Thank God. I know a lot of people who can't."

"I'm really sorry ..." Kevin started again, but Daniel came to him and took him soothingly at his shoulders.

“Stop! Please!”

Kevin bit his lip.

“I’m sorry that you have to go through all of this. But we will take care of it; wouldn't be the first time, okay?”

A weak glow appeared in Kevin’s eyes. “You think so?”

Daniel nodded. “You really don't have to apologize. I don't wanna hear it again.”

“If you say so.”

“Coffee?”

“Uhhuh. Love to.”

Daniel nodded toward the machine. “I’ll show you.”

After a short briefing, Kevin made himself a coffee, while Daniel chose a cappuccino.

Little later, they were eating in silence back at the high table. Daniel also had a separate dining area, but he never used. Of course, his parents had done so.

“Two months ago he moved my room to the other end of the house, because ... because I had to many nightmares,” Kevin said after a while in a low voice.

“Nice,” Daniel growled.

“After that, it even got worse.”

“We’ll take care of it, okay?”

“I don't know ...”

“Not from one day to the other, but we’ll manage.”

They fell silent for a while.

“You gotta go somewhere?” Kevin asked, and his voice sounded a bit worried.

Daniel looked down at himself. He was wearing jeans and boots, with it a T-Shirt and a flannel. “You mean because I’m already all dressed?”

Kevin nodded.

“When I’m off like today, I love going down to the beach after breakfast and go for a long walk with Max and Elvis.”

“Ah.”

“Wanna come with me?”

Now, for the very first time, Kevin’s eyes lit up. “Seriously? Love to! I go change.” He pointed at his sports pants.

“Take your time.”

Half way to his room, Kevin turned around. “Uhm, who will be watching the house while we’re gone?” he wanted to know.

Daniel smiled. “Those are not the only dogs. We got two more. Besides, the house has a security system and is not empty. At the moment, everybody is home.

“Okay.”

The weekend with long walks, and a lot of talking, did Kevin really good, although his nightmares returned also the following night, and tore Daniel from his sleep.

Until Sunday night, when they cooked a simple meal with pasta and tomato sauce in his kitchen, Kevin had met all of the other residents.

There was Davante, who was close to graduating from College. He loved to play basketball with Julio, who in turn had lived two years on the street, before Daniel gave him a safe place to stay. Julio tried catching up what he missed in school. Both already lived about a year here. Then there was Nele,

who had moved in only three months ago and was eager to become a nurse as soon as she had finished school. Eve was already living here for three years, and was studying for her exams. She and Davante would most likely be the next to move out to live on their own. The fifth was the quiet Benny, who was only five foot two and, thus, the smallest resident. He loved to bury himself into books.

Daniel had a long talk with his Aunt before he introduced Kevin to her. She was happy that he had made an exception and had given Kevin a safe place to stay, although Daniel might face some limitations what his personal life was concerned, while Kevin was living in his part of the mansion, since there was no vacancy. Because of his nightmares, she agreed with Daniel that it was better for the time being not to change anything what the living accommodations were concerned.

They were almost done eating when Kevin's cell phone rang, but he didn't even hint picking it up.

"You don't wanna answer?" Daniel asked when it rang the fifth time.

Kevin pulled it out of his pants pockets and threw it on the table. He shook his head and pushed it away from him.

Daniel glanced at the display. He was able to read one word: Mum. He looked up. "That's a violation of the restraining order."

"It's already the tenth time today."

"You answered any of it?"

Kevin quietly shook his head.

"Shall I answer?" Daniel asked.

Kevin only shrugged.

Daniel took the cell phone, which had kept ringing continuously. "Detective Peters here, who am I talking to?"

He listened.

"No, you cannot."

Again he listened.

"No. Since there is a restraining order, you are now talking to me."

Daniel looked at Kevin, who was watching wide-eyed.

"Don't give me that nonsense, Ma'am. I *know* that you and your husband have been served with respect to the restraining order. By officer Melrose herself. So don't take me for a fool."

Again silence while Daniel listened, and then huffed.

"Listen, if you wanna help your son, then you leave your violent husband. – What? Your husband is not violent? Again a lie. I know the file. You still take me for a fool, Ma'am. – No, I'm not listening to you any longer. If you call your son one more time, or contact him otherwise, you will get charged, and in the worst case you go to jail. – Yes, jail. The violation of a restraining order is a crime. You should better think how much strength it had cost your son to make that step. Very sad. Really sad, that you don't wanna see this. Your son is much stronger than you are, although he suffers like a dog, Ma'am. Think about that! And don't you dare call this number again or show up at school. – My name? Detective Peters. – Yes, have a nice day."

Daniel placed the cell phone back on the table.

Kevin felt quite flattered while Daniel took sides with him, although he felt bad at the same time, since he didn't talk to his mother himself. But he had thought about this step for a long time. A very long time. Almost for half a year, on a daily basis. And yes, Daniel was right. With this decision, he nevertheless suffered like a dog that got beaten.

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"You're welcome. Ever thought of getting a new number?"

He listened up, but then he lost heart again. "I can't even afford my current contract. Soon I won't have one at all."

"Maybe you will," Daniel contradicted him. "We can get you a new number, although one without a lot of knickknack, meaning no endless data limit. Just one for emergencies. Think about it."

"I don't have to think about it. I say yes right away. What do I have to do to get one?"

Daniel shrugged. "Maybe take a dog from Auntie? The pups are four months old by now, and slowly one should start working with them. Nele and Benny already signaled that they wanna help; so there is still one available. How about it?"

"You mean train them a bit?"

"Playfully at first, yes, but they gonna go to the K9 unit one day. Auntie can tell you all about it. But if this is not right up your alley, we'll find something else."

"No, that would be just fine. Although it sounds rather like fun than like work."

"Well, if we'd ask Davante, he would contradict you right away," Daniel replied, winking.

Over the next few days, Kevin's nightmares didn't improve a bit and tore Daniel frequently from his sleep. When he concluded that he wouldn't get any further with just feeling sorry for Kevin, he screwed up his courage and talked to Nele.

He thought back and forth for a few days, whether she would be willing to give up Buddha yet, who was with her almost from the day she moved in. Buddha was another German Shepherd dog, who was living here in retirement after serving in the K9 unit. He had been shot while being on duty and thus missed his right front leg, which had to be removed in an emergency operation, but other than that he was fine, and he had adapted quite well. The K9 unit had looked for a good place for him where he could live out his retirement, and Buddha had found the best place on earth.

Ever since, Buddha was taking care of traumatized people. In this case, Nele, who, like Kevin, had had fierce nightmares after she moved in. At the beginning, Nele hadn't been very fond of Buddha, and was even afraid of the big dog with the amber eyes, which had stubbornly stuck to her side. But this was old news.

Now they were sitting in the common room, in the first floor, and Nele had listened to him, attentively.

"Buddha has run downstairs for the last three days, and laid down in front of your door. I was totally surprised, because he never did that before. I thought, he wanted to go outside ... But then this couldn't be the reason." There were several automatic dog flaps in the mansion. Most of them lead only outside, but not vice versa. It was the resident's duty, letting them in again.

Daniel frowned. "Really?"

She nodded. "Somewhen at night he then came back. But it all makes sense now, after what you just told me. Maybe he can also help Kevin?"

"Maybe. You think you're strong enough by now to try without Buddha?"

She blew her cheeks. "Don't know. That's all coming a bit by surprise, and I really love that guy, although I almost peed in my pants at the beginning."

Daniel smiled. "And how about a swap?"

She listened up. "Swap?"

"You could take one of the pups. Best would be the one you wanna work with."

"Oh, yes! That would be great."

"Of course, it's much more work than with Buddha. At least at the beginning."

“Who cares. When we could do this swapping thing, at least in the beginning, then I don't have anything against it.”

“We should let Buddha decide, how about that? If he really wants to join Kevin, then he will watch out for him sooner or later. Just like he did it with you.”

“True. And I'm gone next week anyway.”

“How come?”

“We go down to San Diego on a school trip.”

“Ah, I remember you telling me that. Then that would be just the right point in time to see what happens, huh?”

Nele nodded. “Would be nice if Kevin could stop having bad dreams. He looks like crap.”

“He feels like crap, too, although he would never admit to that. He refuses to stay home for a few days and insists on going to school.”

“It distracts him, I guess.”

“Possible.”

They fell silent for a moment.

“When are you leaving?” Daniel then asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“Then we'll see what happens while you're gone, huh?”

Next day, Daniel saw Kevin walking up the path from the gate, coming home from school. Buddha was lying in the hallway and perked his ears, as Kevin closed in on the house. He tilted his head, listening.

Shortly later, Daniel let Kevin in. Buddha thumped his tail on the floor, and finally got up.

“Hey, Buddha, you're not with Nele, what's wrong?” Kevin asked, surprised, and stroked Buddha over his greying head.

“Nele went to San Diego for the week. School trip.”

“Ah, right. Maybe he wants to stay with me while she's gone?”

“Sure, let's see if he's up to.” Daniel opened the door, but before they could enter, Buddha passed them by.

“Yeah!” Kevin cheered, and Daniel grinned to himself.

Buddha looked around, and finally stopped in front of Kevin's door.

“How does he know?”

“Smart guy, huh?” Daniel replied. „Maybe he wants to check out your place first, before he decides if he wants to stay?”

Kevin opened the door to his room, and let Buddha in, who started sniffing around everywhere. Finally, he sat down in front of the bed, and looked at Kevin, expectantly.

“Looking good, huh?”

“I think so.”

“Shall I get his stuff? Bowl, water, bed?”

Kevin nodded. “Shall I help you?”

“That's fine, I'll get it.”

When Daniel woke up next morning, he at first didn't know what was different. Then he sat up quickly. Nothing had torn him from his sleep! Could that be true? First night Buddha sleeping over at Kevin's? He remembered vaguely that he actually did wake up, because he thought he heard

something, but then he had fallen asleep again right away. Interesting. He was curious to hear Kevin's story.

Kevin appeared about half an hour later, showered and fully dressed, in the kitchen and got two mugs out of the kitchen cabinet. He scratched his head a bit confused, while he sat down with Daniel.

"What's up?" Daniel asked and smiled encouragingly at him.

"Do I get in trouble if Buddha slept in my bed?" he asked hesitantly.

"Buddha?" Daniel decided to act the fool. "Doesn't he have his own bed?"

"But he didn't sleep in it."

"But?"

"In my bed."

"Strange."

"He, uhm, you maybe won't believe this, but I think he nudged me when I started, uhm, dreaming some shit. Is it possible he notices?"

Daniel shrugged. "Guess it's possible."

"Did you hear me last night?" Kevin then wanted to know.

"No, coming to think of it."

"Anyway, this morning he was lying right next to me in bed. His snout on my chest. I think he misses Nele."

"Maybe he tries becoming friends with you? Buddha wanders around from one person to the other quite a bit. He is very friendly."

"I noticed. I don't get into trouble?"

"Because he slept in your bed?"

Kevin nodded.

"Bull."

Now a beaming smile spread over Kevin's face. "Cool."

A week later, Nele returned and when she finally caught Daniel all by himself, she was very curious. "And?"

"What and?"

"Did it work with Buddha? I've just seen Kevin. The circles around his eyes are gone! He doesn't wear make-up or something, huh?"

Daniel laughed. "No, he's not. Yes, it indeed worked."

Nele jumped up and down, clapping her hands. "Buddha is the best! He greeted me sweetly, and ran right back to Kevin. I guess you don't have to worry that he wants to sleep in my room again."

"Kevin is still dreaming, but it turned less, and yes, Buddha wakes him in time. Just as he did with you."

She made the victory sign.

"But I didn't let Kevin in that this is Buddhas expertise. So: psst!"

"My lips are sealed, promise. And now I gotta run and unpack."

Everything went back to normal over the next few weeks. Kevin was still living in his room in Daniels part of the house, and loved Buddha's attention. He even looked so much more at peace and even went out with the others.

They playfully started with little exercises with the pups during the week in the afternoon. Even Benny was very excited and talked even hours after they finished about his pup being the fastest to learn *Heel!*

Also, Daniel noticed little changes around the house. Kevin had a talent to bring a smile on his face after a long day of work. Whatever little cooking tip he got from Auntie, he had to try it, and quite often a cooked meal was waiting for Daniel.

Most of the time, Kevin even got up ahead of him and took over the kitchen duty, so that he only had to sit down at the breakfast table. By now the quite attractive Kevin had surfaced. The circles around his eyes were gone and the worry lines as well. Daniel was quite content.

Thus, he was a bit surprised when he only was greeted by a tail-wagging Buddha one night, who then went straight back to Kevin's room.

Nothing showed that Kevin had worked in the kitchen, and although it was not a must, Daniel had to admit that he missed it at once. But maybe Kevin just got home himself? For all his efforts he should finally take him out for a pizza at the Italian restaurant, he contemplated.

But first he took a shower, as he always did when he got home and changed. He listened. Still no cheerful *Hello*.

Frowning, he went to Kevin's room, and knocked on the half-ajar door.

"Are you home?"

"Uhhuh. Hi."

He immediately picked up on something being wrong. He stuck his head into the room and saw Kevin sitting on the bed, reading.

"Hi, everything okay with you?"

"Uhhuh."

"Have you had dinner yet?"

"Not hungry."

"Too bad, I am. Thought we would go over to *Luigi*. My treat. How about it?"

He noticed a pleased glow in Kevin's eyes, which vanished again quickly.

"Really nice of you. Maybe some other time? For some reason, uhm, I don't feel too good today."

Since Buddha was sitting in front of the bed, with his head on it, Daniel walked deeper into the room, and stopped at the foot-end of the bed. Almost immediately he caught sight of Kevin's upper arm, showing some bruises. Black bruises.

Kevin noticed his gaze, and jerked. He was about to turn away, but it was already too late to hide it. He dropped his book.

"I only stumbled over something ..."

Daniel felt rage welling up, although not at Kevin, but at his mother. Those were surely her words. He waited, and the silence seemed to bother Kevin more than if he would've retorted something.

"Bad lie ... I'm sorry," he finally mumbled with trembling lips.

Daniel kept his calm, ignored it at first and instead sat down. "Did you get into an argument with someone?"

Kevin shook his head.

His tone turned a bit sharper. "You didn't run into your father, huh?"

"No!" Kevin gasped. "God help me. Then it would be much worse!"

“No argument? But?” He dared pushing up his sleeve and counted four finger prints. He lifted Kevin’s arm and saw the fifth. They looked like those of a big man’s hand, and Daniel was sure that those bruises hadn’t been there yesterday. Now he noticed also that Kevin was kind of short-breathed. “What else?”

Kevin swallowed.

“What else, Kevin?” His tone had turned even more insistently, and now Kevin’s eyes started welling up. “Hey ... shsh ... it’s okay. What did you get yourself into? We can talk about everything, I hope you know that.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Kevin blurted shocked and gasped for air.

Daniel gave him more time, but when Kevin didn’t start talking, he asked: “Why don’t you just tell me what happened?”

“Because he said, if I tell anybody, it’s only getting worse,” it came back quietly.

“Who?”

He fell silent, but Daniel waited it out.

Finally Kevin caved in, and mumbled: “An asshole.”

“A bit more precise?”

“An asshole, who jumped on me after school.”

“Someone from school?”

Kevin shrugged. “Don’t think so. It mostly happens close to my bus stop,” he finally started telling the whole story. “He always wants money. Only small amounts, but ... I didn’t have anything.”

“Why is he doing this?”

Kevin shrugged again.

“And then he started a fight?”

“Uhhuh.” Kevin placed his hand on his abdomen. “Right in the stomach. Hurts like hell.”

“He hit you?”

“He grabbed me by the arm, and hissed at me to better have something for him next time, then he hit me. I tried twisting out of it, but was too slow.”

“Can I have a look?”

Wordlessly, Kevin pulled his T-shirt higher and Daniel’s gaze fell onto his stomach. “He hit you right here, huh?” He pointed at the region right below his sternum.

“Uhhuh.”

“And here he grazed your ribs when you turned away. That’s why it’s not as bruised, because there’s more room in the abdomen.”

“I still can’t breathe right.”

“No wonder you’re not hungry,” Daniel grumbled, sympathetically. “That’s assault. You really should file charges.”

Hastily, Kevin shook his head.

Daniel grinded his teeth. Again a similar reaction, which, however, wasn’t surprising at all. “What does this guy look like? Can you describe him?”

“A greasy fat moron. Always wearing a jeans vest with stickers, skull tattoos, pierced lip, thin hair, pony tail.”

“How old?”

“Older than I am.”

“How much?”

“No idea. Maybe few years? He’s also doing this to others.”

“And never ever someone steps in to help?”

Kevin shook his head.

He asked him for the location on which the assaults usually happened, and made a note in his head. Then he stood,

“Is it okay when I ask Auntie to look at this? She used to be a nurse. The alternative is driving you over to the hospital, so they can check you out.”

“First Auntie.”

Daniel nodded and disappeared.

Little later he came back with Auntie, who looked concerned at Kevin through her round glasses.

“What did you get yourself into?”

“Met an asshole.”

“Oh, c’mon ...” she reprimanded him, and looked at him sternly, while her right eyebrow shot straight up.

“Sorry, Auntie, I know you hate cuss words,” he apologized at once. “But he really was one!”, he then blurted.

“Auntie, please, can you just forget about your scolding for a minute?” Daniel asked a bit irritated. “After all, we’re talking about assault here, and I want your opinion if we have to go to the hospital or not.”

Auntie sighed and started with her exam. Then she looked up at Daniel. “No, I believe Kevin is only totally cramped up after this hard hit. And here on his ribs you can see how brutal it was.”

“But you can do something about it, can’t you?”

“Well, I think, you would be just as good at it, but if Kevin allows, I would love to try, yes.”

Kevin looked confused from one to the other and it was obvious that he had no idea what they were talking about.

“Lay down flat on your back. That’s it.” Then she placed her left hand onto his stomach. “Close your eyes, and try for a moment not to think about, hm, Mr. A.”

Daniel smiled behind her back. “I leave you guys alone.”

In the kitchen he made himself a cappuccino and checked his mail.

20 minutes later, Auntie came around the corner and he looked up from his paper.

“Well?”

“I will bring you some painkillers. Let’s see how he feels by tomorrow. I told him to stay home tomorrow and he didn’t even flinch.”

“Thanks, Auntie.”

She came closer and stopped in front of him. “You easily could’ve done that yourself.”

He swallowed.

“That’s okay.” She smiled and stroked his cheek. “Maybe next time.” She turned away, and Daniel heard her mumbling under her breath: “And whoever did this, you better teach this jerk a lesson.”

Shortly later she closed the door.

He grinned, folded the paper back up, and put his cup into the dishwasher. When he turned around, he saw Kevin slowly rounding the corner.

“How do you feel?”

“Better. Uhm, I ... I’m just a bit speechless.”

“How come?”

"Because she only placed her hand on my stomach, and then, uhm, then everything turned really warm, and ... I don't know. It was an incredible feeling. It took a while, but suddenly I was able to breathe better. Really weird. I don't get it."

"Auntie masters Reiki."

"Is that something spiritual?"

"Something the like. She always had healing hands."

Kevin huffed. "I believe that in a sec."

"Good, that you feel better."

Kevin looked at him directly. "What did she mean by you would be just as good at it?"

"She exaggerated completely. I am no Reiki Master. Sometimes our dogs come to me when they feel some pain. Mainly Buddha." He shrugged. "I guess that's what she was talking about."

There was a knock and Daniel opened the door. "Give this to Kevin," Auntie said, and gave him some painkillers. "Ah, there you are. Better?"

Kevin nodded, and stammered: "Thanks, Auntie."

"You're very welcome." Then she was gone.

Kevin took two pills with water.

"Shall we now go eat some pizza?" Daniel asked, distractingly.

"Love to, even though I feel like crap ..."

"Didn't you just say you feel better? Wait until the painkillers kick in, huh?"

"Not because of that."

"But?"

"Because I honestly told you: *I only stumbled over something*. And you are an expert cop." He swallowed hard. "I'm really totally sorry."

"Hey," Daniel said softly.

Kevin looked up.

"You heard that damn sentence for years. Don't beat yourself up because of it, huh?"

Kevin only managed a nod.

Little later they left in Daniel's car.

"Maybe I should let you teach me how to defend myself," Kevin finally mumbled at a light.

"Well, the offer still stands, although you've already turned me down twice." Daniel had already noticed this habit. After all, Kevin had brought the topic up himself the first night, and then he pulled back every time Daniel had brought it up. This, too, was probably due to his mother's habit for years.

Kevin seemed interested. "You're not mad at me, because I turned you down twice already?"

"Bull. The offer still stands. As soon as you feel better, we do that. Promise. A bit of self-defense training can't hurt."

"Can you show me something tonight?," Kevin burst.

Daniel smiled. "No, sorry, I only want my pizza. Tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay."

"I hold you to it!"

A few days later, Daniel rounded up four of the six he was in charge of, and drove with them to a police training area, which he was allowed to use for that purpose. Only Eve and Davante did not accompany them, since both were already pros when it came down to what he wanted to practice. They had already participated many times.

From a cupboard Daniel pulled a box and brought it back to an area where four dark figures made of wood were mounted.

“This is training pepper spray. It’s an advantage to train with it since it won’t be any good if you guys don’t know how to use it in a case of emergency. Or does anybody know?”

Nele lifted her hand, which wasn’t surprising since Daniel knew that she had already used one once.

“Does anybody else know?”

“You just have to press some kind of a button,” Benny suggested.

“Nope, first you gotta break the security latch,” Julio disagreed.

Daniel looked at Kevin. “I also thought, you simply press it,” he said.

Daniel demonstrated it with one of the cans, which sprayed a tight fog. Since no pepper spray was in it, it did no harm.

“Everybody takes a can, and lines up here. I let those figures come at you on a cable pull. You guys try to spray them right in the face. I start with Nele, then Julio, and so on.

After their first round, Nele was the only one actually meeting her goal. All the others sprayed too soon. But this got better the more turns they took. It was easy to tell that they all got more confidence, and after everybody had sprayed the figure twice in the face, Daniel applauded smiling. They all had done well.

Eventually, he gave them each a genuine pepper spray, and repeated the whole procedure. Again there was a difference, a noticeable hesitation, to actually use this weapon. Only Kevin didn’t hesitate a second, and Daniel knew quite well why.

“You can put your protective glasses in here, and then we go on to the next exercise. After all, it’s a difference if it is a wooden figure coming at you, or if it is a real attacker. Thus, a friend and colleague of mine will help us. Come with me.”

A man wearing a white overall and protective glasses joined them.

“This is my colleague Mario Leonardo. Each of you will go into this room with him, and Mario is going to ...” Daniel painted some quotes in the air. “... *attack* you. You guys try getting him with your spray. Nele, yours is yellow, Julio yours is green, Benny blue and Kevin, yours is red. The stuff is water with food coloring, but please try taking it seriously, anyway. Nele, you wanna start?”

She nodded.

“We will be able to watch you guys.” Daniel pointed to a screen on which they saw a kind of maze from the top, being mainly made from upright plywood. “Nele, you enter here and try to get out to one of the other doors.” There was one on each side. “Mario is hiding somewhere. Go get him!”

The others stared at the screen, while Nele disappeared in the training room.

They watched Nele switching from one walkway to the next, until suddenly Mario popped up, who ran at her at once. Nele didn’t hesitate one second and hit Mario full in the face.

The others outside cheered and applauded.

After Mario had cleaned his protective glasses, Daniel sent Julio in. But he got so startled once Mario appeared, that he dropped the spray, and thus didn’t get a score.

Hangdog, he left the training room. “What a bummer,” he mumbled.

“Don’t be sad, shit happens when it gets serious. That’s why we practice. You can go in again at the end if you like,” Daniel tried cheering him up.

“Oh yes please!”

“Benny, now it’s your turn.”

When Mario appeared, Benny didn't drop the spray, but he only managed to spray when Mario was way too close to him, and he only hit him in the groin area.

Expectantly, he looked at Daniel once he came out of the room, but he shook his head. "Would only be painful, if the attacker is nude. So no score for you either."

"Damn. May I try again later, as well?"

"Sure." Daniel looked at Kevin. "Ready?"

"Oh yes," he mumbled, and checked his spray.

"Go get him."

Everybody looked back at the screen, and this time Daniel fought hard not to laugh when he saw Kevin not only meeting his attacker, but also emptying the whole can. Mario wasn't able to see a thing afterwards, and he heard him ask a bit uneasy if the can was really empty, so he could take off and clean his glasses.

Daniel pressed the button of the intercom. "Yes, Kevin is empty. Don't worry. He really got you good."

"He really meant it, huh?" Mario growled.

"I send in Julio again, so better put on your glasses again."

Meanwhile Kevin joined them, beaming, and the others gave him a high-five.

"Congratulation," Daniel said smiling.

Kevin grinned crookedly. "I had someone specific in mind."

After the two remaining ones had also managed to spray their load right into Mario's face, they switched to another task outside. Usually, it was rather uncommon to have a pepper spray handy, thus, they practiced pulling it out of a pocket in a dangerous situation, and start spraying controlled.

In the end, Daniel and Mario were rather wet, and their four students quite proud. It took a while, but after an hour even Benny and Julio had managed to hit their aim while being on the move.

So all were in high spirits on their way home where they ended the day in a common barbecue with the others.

When Kevin sat down to have breakfast in the morning, a pepper spray was right next to his mug. His jaw dropped. "Is this genuine?"

"Uhhuh. Just in case, huh?" Daniel said winking.

Kevin beamed. "Thanks!"

"I think you know how to use it by now."

"I think so, too."

What Daniel didn't tell him though, was that he wouldn't just put the incident at the bus stop to the rest. On the contrary. And this had nothing to do with the fact that Auntie thought so, too. He had already talked to Mario about it, and thus they waited around two p.m. near the stated address, close to the bus stop. This time, they were in Mario's car, since Kevin might recognize Daniel's car. Intently, they scanned the street.

"That might be him. Look at four o'clock," Mario growled, who seemed to recognize the guy at once due to Kevin's description.

Daniel's eyes followed Mario's nod, and his eyes narrowed. "What a mean character. Look how he's checking the surroundings." Daniel lifted his jacket, and without taking his eyes off the guy, he pulled off his badge, which was hooked to his belt.

"Wait another sec."

Daniel was growling incoherently.

Mario cursed, and sat bolt upright behind the wheel, when suddenly Kevin appeared, and the guy was at him in a split second. Since he was coming from behind, Kevin didn't manage implementing what he had learned the day before.

"That's him," Daniel hissed. "Fuck!" He could see Kevin wincing when the man grabbed his arm again.

Mario reacted in a flash, and briefly sent the siren wailing twice, which of course was part of this unmarked police cruiser.

Hastily, the guy let go of Kevin, who took his chance and ran. Shortly later he had vanished, while the guy was still looking around in panic, and walked backwards towards a graffiti sprayed entrance, in which he eventually disappeared.

"Back me up!" Daniel growled, and disappeared through the same door as well.

Mario quickly got out of the car, and took his position in front of the entrance.

"Hey, what the hell you want, fuckface?"

"Fuckface, huh?" Daniel slammed him against a wall, and when the guy pulled a knife, he already pressed the muzzle of his Glock under his chin. "Drop it!" he whispered icily. "Now!"

A metallic sound was proof that the man obeyed.

"That's better. One wrong move and your brain is pulp! Doesn't make much difference in here anyway."

"Whatta ya want? Money? I give you money!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Ponytail fell silent, and Daniel managed to see some tiny pearls of sweat despite the dim light. Apparently, he didn't get threaten that often.

Two juveniles who didn't look very trustworthy either, aimed at the entrance, but Mario only flashed his badge, and the two decided to disappear in the adjacent store.

"Hurry up!" he hissed to the open door.

Shortly later he heard Daniel aiming some unmistakable sentences at the guy, followed by a hoarse, muffled groaning. Then, Daniel reappeared, knife in one hand, with a napkin around its handle.

"Shall we arrest him?"

He shook his head and they walked to their car.

Little later, a few blocks down the road, Daniel dropped the knife into an evidence bag. "Check for finger prints. I'm sure this ass is in the system."

"Will do. Did he threaten you?"

"Yes, but I beat him to it." He fished for his badge and attached it to his belt again. "You've seen Kevin somewhere?"

"No. What did you do to this fucker?"

Daniel grimaced. "Better you don't know."

"Assuming by his whining, I think you kneed him."

Daniel didn't reply.

Mario grinned. "Aha."

When Danial got home that night, Kevin was cooking again. He was relieved because it was proof that the little incident with Mr. Asshole didn't throw Kevin off.

"Hi. Wow, it smells delicious," Daniel said when he closed the door and petted Buddha's head.

"Hi! Not quite done yet," Kevin yelled at him. "You can take a shower first."

Ten minutes later, Daniel sat down at the table, freshly showered.

"I believe, I can really get used to this. If you ask me, you don't have to move upstairs as soon as there is a vacancy," Daniel slipped.

Kevin's grin widened. "Sounds great. I like it down here with you better anyway."

Their eyes met a few seconds longer than usual, then Daniel continued chewing.

"How was your day?" he changed the topic.

"Believe it or not, but I ran into this ass again," Kevin told him this time right away.

Daniel looked at his plate and concentrated on his meal. "So?" he asked. "Did you pepper him?"

Kevin groaned, agitated.

Now he did look up.

"Nope, was too slow. Believe that? After all the practice yesterday? He came from behind."

Daniel managed a frown. "Did he touch you again?"

"Yes. But then I was incredibly lucky. From somewhere a police siren wailed. Only briefly. Not because of me, but for some other reason. But it was enough, and I was able to tear away and run. I jogged to the next bus stop. But it starts getting on my nerves. I guess, I should get a scooter or something."

"Not a bad idea. If you like, I can also pick you up from school for the time being. We are quite often in that area", he lied.

"Seriously?"

Daniel shrugged. "Why not? Unless you feel embarrassed getting picked up by a cop?"

"Are you nuts? That would be so cool!"

Again their eyes met for a moment longer than usual.

"We take care of it. And we will continue with our pepper spray practice, how about it?"

"Sounds good!"

"As soon as your ribs don't hurt anymore, we can start with the self-defense training." He felt his heart go out to Kevin as he answered with a happy smile.

"Are you coming with me to *Sean's*, or are you going home right away?" Mario asked Friday night, and almost sounded like he was counting on the latter.

Since Kevin had moved in, Daniel hardly took the time to grab an afterwork beer with Mario. However, he felt bad turning him down again.

"Sounds good," he thus replied, although he indeed rather felt like going home.

"You're lucky or I might rather look around for another best friend," Mario growled, and patted his shoulder.

Daniel grinned, crookedly.

Shortly later they found the last spare seats at *Sean's*, and toasted each other with a Guinness for the first time in weeks.

The bar was filled to the last place and it was so loud this Friday, one could hardly hear his own words. At the beginning, Daniel managed to concentrate on Mario, but they were frequently interrupted by colleagues, who stopped at their table making small talk. Thus, he didn't notice Mario talking to him again, or better trying to talk to him. Only when Mario slammed the table with his flat hand, he jumped and stared at him, confused.

“For crying out loud, what’s wrong with you? Did you get anything I said to you for the last five minutes?” Mario complained, and shook his head.

“Uhm, five minutes?” Daniel asked cautiously, to compose himself, but he couldn't remember a word Mario said to him.

“Rather ten ...” Mario sighed. “What did I talk about?”

Daniel tried a shot in the dark. “About our current case?”

Mario rolled his eyes. “I spoke about Jason’s and Dave’s new business idea with the fourth studio. The one we are supposed to hop in the boat. Jason called me today and asked if we meet up next week for some kind of brainstorming.”

Daniel looked at him embarrassed. Of all things! And he didn't hear that? Jesus.

“Thought so ...” Mario looked at him for a while in silence. “Talk to me. What’s up?”

“What?”

Mario stared at him with his dark eyes, but Daniel evaded his gaze, which made Mario hit the table once more. This time with his fist. “Look at me, damn it!”

Daniel jumped again and looked up.

“I am your partner for eight years, and your best friend if I may add. You really think, I don't know what’s going on?”

“Namely?” Daniel asked frowning.

“You really want me to tell you?”

He shrugged.

“Seriously?”

Silence.

Mario waited it out for some minutes, in which they only looked at each other. Then he had enough. “Damn it, you’re head over heels in love!”

Instantly, Daniel felt his face starting to burn as if someone had smacked him. It was glowing, all the way back to his ears.

“And I’m not only saying this because you incidentally started to check yourself out in any mirror we pass, or suddenly wear cool stuff.”

“I wore cool stuff before,” he retorted a bit lame.

Mario huffed. “After all, you don't argue it! Do I have to be more precise?”

Daniel waited.

“Kevin, right?”

Again the heatwave rolling over him like a Tsunami. He closed his eyes.

“Ha! Knew it!” Mario yelled triumphantly.

“Stop yelling.”

“He’s in love!” Mario hollered at once, and pointed at Daniel. None of the other guests even reacted, since all were talking.

“That’s enough!” Daniel hissed, and glared at him.

“Are you now talking to me? Then I will stop yelling.”

Instead of an answer, Daniel ran both hands over his face.

“You act like you’re 18.”

“He’s 18. And this is exactly the problem,” Daniel replied.

Without saying another word, Mario got up, went to the bar, and came back shortly later with two Irish Whiskeys. One of which he placed right in front of Daniel, and looked at him while shaking his head. “I see, he’s of age. That is *indeed* a problem ...” he replied sarcastically.

“Damn ...”

“May I remind you, that you – wait a sec, let me think – had a steamy affair about three years ago with a damn young guy? Ah, forgot, he was already 19.”

Daniel blinked. He completely forgot about that.

“Ah, you remember now?” Mario concluded at once. “And the situation is different now, not only because you bought new clothes, but also because of your little aggressive performance the other day in the hallway of that house, when you beat up that guy that assaulted and blackmailed Kevin. You surely broke a few rules for that. And when the Captain finds out, all hell breaks loose. You know that, huh?”

“I do.”

Mario nodded and lifted his glass. They drank, wordlessly.

“And I would do it again in a second!” Daniel came back.

Mario looked at him for a while in silence, then he said more gentle: “You didn't have a lover since your parents died. The last one bolted when you were grieving. He was an asshole. After that, you didn't feel like it any more, no wonder. I understand. But now, now all is taken care of. You really found your place with the foundation. Damn, don't be such a moron!”

“I'm really afraid this time.”

Mario cocked his eyebrows. “You finally admit that you're in love?”

Daniel needed a few more seconds, emptied his glass and finally nodded.

“What're you afraid of?” Mario dug further.

“I never ever started something with one of my residents, and it just doesn't seem right.” He rolled his eyes. “I really don't know what to do.”

“Did you hint interest yet?”

“Hell no!”

“Hell no? Damn, you're exaggerating completely.”

“But he's sending me a lot of signals. I was afraid I was so overdue that I completely get it wrong. So I went out in a club the day before yesterday, but after half an hour I left, disgusted.”

“What kind of signals?”

“He cooks for me almost every night.”

“Really?”

“When I come home, there's a meal on the table. Same with breakfast, even when school starts later. He always gets up as early as I do. He basically took over all the work around the house.”

“Maybe he just wants to show his gratitude?”

Daniel shrugged. “Maybe. But he also leaves sweet little notes for me.” He pulled out his wallet from his pocket, opened it and showed Mario a small yellow post-it. *You are the coolest guy that I ever met.* Next to it a Smiley and the name Kev.

“Hmm,” Mario grumbled, unsure.

Daniel turned the note around and showed him a little p.s. and a heart painted next to it.

“Uuuuuh.” Mario grinned. “That's something else after all. Not only via WhatsApp.”

“He holds back with that, although we write more and more directly instead of using the foundation group.”

“Aha.”

“It might be best if he'd move out.”

Mario huffed. “Yeah, right.”

“On the other side, I might worry to death if he did.”

"Don't you think you're standing in your own light? Why should he move out?"

"What would the others think if I suddenly start ...?" Daniel got himself worked up.

"... but maybe you only completely underestimate your residents?" Mario countered. "Wait it out. Look what happens if it really comes down to it. You still could call for a meeting, and talk it over with them. See if anybody has a problem with it."

Daniel fell silent. Then he mumbled: "I think I can't make the first move this time around."

"Then let him do the first step. Apparently, he already started." Mario nodded to his wallet. When he didn't reply, Mario emptied his Whiskey and signaled for Daniel to do the same.

He cocked an eyebrow.

Mario pointed to the door.

15 minutes later they sat in a small cozy restaurant, and Daniel finally started talking it over. He was really thankful that Mario finally made him talk about what was bothering him for weeks. After all, he was indeed his best friend.

"Don't," he mumbled a bit embarrassed when he felt lips on his face; to be precise on his forehead, his nose, his ears, his chin. Very unusual.

"Shsh," he heard a soft voice. "Just enjoy. I love doing this."

Again someone nibbled at him. Now he even felt a body close to his. Sideways. He sighed softly, when a hand landed on his pants.

"Apparently you like what I'm doing, huh?"

Daniel swallowed. This was Kevin's voice! What the hell ...?

"I like it, too."

Daniel noticed the buttons of his jeans being opened, then a hand pushed inside. He couldn't help, but pressing into said hand.

"Oh yeah ..." He gasped softly, when the hand started a skillful massage.

Daniel jerked up, and found himself in bed. Alone. With his hand in his pants. He was breathing hard, and he needed a moment to realize that he had been dreaming. Again. He listened, but everything was quiet.

Groaning softly, he sank back into the soft pillows. When he started to pull his hand out of his pants, he noticed how hard he was. At first, he didn't want to give in, but finally he couldn't help it, and he simply did it.

When the orgasm finally subsided, he cleaned himself with a Kleenex.

He had talked about Kevin all evening long with Mario. So no wonder that he was now dreaming about him. But this was only half the truth, because Kevin visited him in his dreams already since over a week on a regular basis, and he couldn't do anything against it. What he tried to avoid during the day, his subconsciousness did when nobody watched it.

Daniel sat up, sighing, and fished for his water bottle, but it was empty. For a short moment he thought about staying in bed, but he was thirsty.

So he picked himself up, and went barefoot to the kitchen. Moonlight was shining through the windows of the dining area and gave him enough light. He grabbed a glass from the cupboard, and filled it with tap water, which he drank greedily. Then he braced himself with both arms against the kitchen counter, and stared into darkness. He heard a soft noise. Dog paws, which came closer. Little later, Buddha nudged his leg.

"Everything's fine," he mumbled distracted, and listened as Buddha laid down to his feet. Then his mind wandered further again. He didn't feel like going back to bed, since he knew, he would dream again.

The silence engulfed him, and it felt good, until something touched his shoulder.

"Hey? Are you okay?", he heard a soft and concerned sounding voice right next to him.

He jumped as if bitten by a snake, and stared at Kevin, standing only two feet away from him. Their eyes met, and again he dove into those gentle looking eyes. He was immediately paralyzed, and only stared at him in shock.

Kevin answered his gaze in silence.

"I was just thirsty, did I wake you?", he asked softly, as if he was afraid that one word in normal volume might tear him from his trance. Vaguely, he saw Kevin shaking his head. Before he could say something, Kevin came even closer, and he held his breath. Their bodies still didn't touch, but the little air in between seemed to be vibrating and charging constantly. He swallowed.

"Why are you fighting so hard against it?" Kevin whispered.

Daniel felt his knees getting weak and there was a soaring sound in his ears, as his blood pressure rose in unexpected heights. Did he get that right? His mind was playing tricks on him! Almost automatically, his hand closed towards the light switch, but then he felt a hand on his chest. Right on top of his wildly beating heart.

"Don't," Kevin said, still quietly, but his tone was begging.

They stared at each other for some more second, then Kevin leaned forward and kissed him, tenderly.

It was as if hit by lightning, and thousand emotions shot through Daniel's body at the same time. This couldn't be true! He must be dreaming!

At the same time, Buddha's snout pressed into his hand, as if the dog wanted to convince him of the opposite. He heard him whimper softly.

Daniel inhaled sharply, but Kevin didn't back up.

"Why Danny? Would it really be so bad?" he asked softly, and with each word Kevin's lips tickled him.

His hand went to Kevin's cheek, and he felt soft stubbles covering his face. Tenderly, his thumb stroked over Kevin's lower lip, which he kissed at once without hesitation. Then Kevin looked at him questioningly again.

When Kevin overcame the half inch separating them, and their lips met again, Daniel was lost, and finally also their tongues met for a tender game.

Both sighed, stopped, did it again. Still they were standing close to each other, and it seemed that none of them wanted the magic of the first kiss to end.

Finally they only stood there, foreheads leaned against each other.

And again it was Kevin, who broke the silence with a soft whisper. "What are you thinking?"

Daniel huffed quietly, then he looked up. "I pray to God that I'm not just dreaming again."

Kevin rewarded him with a gorgeous smile, took his hand, and pulled him from the kitchen. Daniel swallowed, and followed him.

At the door to his room Kevin stopped, and looked at him. "My place or your place?"

"Your place."

Little later they were lying in bed.

Kevin was bending over Daniel, and shortly before their lips met again, Buddha jumped on the bed.

Daniel lifted his head, when the dog got comfortable by placing his head on their interlaced legs.

“Uhm, sorry to interrupt, but we would really like a teeny-tiny bit more privacy, you mind?” he asked Buddha, reproachfully. “I’ll watch out for him, promise.”

He lifted his head, licked his snout, and jumped off the bed.

They looked at each other stunned.

Kevin propped himself up and looked after him. “He walks to his own bed. Unbelievable, he got that.”

“Smart dog,” Daniel mumbled as Kevin bent over him again.

He looked him in the eyes and seemed almost a bit surprised while he shook his head.

“Hm?” came from Daniel.

“Thought this day would never come,” Kevin mumbled and kissed his chin. “Today’s Christmas, huh?”

Daniel smiled. “Today is first day of spring, but I agree with you: It definitely feels like Christmas.”

With these words, he pulled Kevin back down, and they kissed again.

Finally, they heard a faint snoring from the floor, which brought a grin to both men, and which doubtlessly showed, that Buddha was quite content with the situation.