

## Chapter One Home Sweet Home

“Geoffrey, have you seen my car keys?” Tommy Holden called from the bottom of the stairs.

“What?” His partner’s disembodied voice traveled down the staircase from the mansion’s upper floor.

Raising his voice somewhat, Tommy tried again. “My car keys! They’re not on the table! You see them up there anywhere?” Instinctively, he glanced down at the round, heavy oak pedestal table sitting in the middle of the large circular foyer, knowing that he had checked it for his keys several times already that morning — just moments ago, in fact.

“I didn’t see them in the bedroom, hon,” Geoffrey Roder offered as he appeared at the top of the majestically curved staircase, straightening his tie.

“I thought I put them right here on the table last night. Damn it! Why do I always lose those damned things when I’m late...it never fails!”

Geoffrey descended with one hand running lightly along the smoothly polished banister. “Calm down, babe. They’ve got to be somewhere. Did’ja check the pockets of the pants you were wearing last night?”

“Of course I did. I’m not an idiot...”

“Hmm, let’s see,” Geoffrey said thoughtfully, “you walk through the door...I see you...what is it I always say? ...something that sounds like ‘Good, the idiot’s home.’ Nope, you’re wrong.” He grinned, stepping onto the ground floor of their two-story home and giving Tommy a peck on the cheek.

“Uh-huh,” Tommy replied. “Be gone, before somebody drops a house on you, too.” After delivering this somewhat spiteful quip, he continued to scan the room, remaining focused on the floor under the assumption the keys had inadvertently ended up there. “This is ridiculous.”

“Come on, I’ll drop you off on my way to work.”

“This is the second time this month I’ve lost those stupid things...” Tommy grumbled, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

After pulling his own keys, jingling, from his slacks pocket, Geoffrey grinned widely. “Where’d they turn up last time you lost them?”

Tommy pointed at the table. “They were exactly where I thought I’d left them...right here on the table.”

“Well, they say the mind is the second thing to go,” Geoffrey said, patting him on the ass.

Childishly, Tommy jerked away from his partner’s hand. “Yeah? What’s the *first thing to go*?”

“If you don’t remember, then far be it for me to...”

“If you’re referring to my abilities in the bedroom, I can assure you that you have nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, I dunno...”

“You want a repeat performance of this morning? I can still run circles around any twenty-year-old.”

“No time,” Geoffrey said. “We’ve got to get to work. You ready?”

“I suppose.”

“Okay, let me grab my...” Geoffrey began, stopping himself mid-sentence while looking around the foyer.

“What’s wrong? You look like you lost your best friend.”

“No, just my briefcase. I thought I left it down here last night.”

“There, see! You’re a fine one to talk about me losing my mind!” Tommy told Geoffrey, smirking.

“Um...” Geoffrey snapped his fingers. “In the office! I’ll meet you in the car.”

While the marginally taller of the two men hurried away toward the back of the house, Tommy stepped through the heavy wooden door with its stained glass panel and paused beneath the pillared overhang to look out over the Seattle skyline, somewhat hazy with mist, though brightly lit by the Washington sunshine.

The air smelled cool and fresh after yesterday’s rain, and he noticed that the circular driveway was still damp in spite of the shower that had stopped early last evening. In the middle of October, things were not drying out as quickly as they had during the previous summer months, which had broken records with the relentless soaring heat that even in mid-September showed no signs of abating. When the mercury finally began to drop, Tommy imagined the entire city to have breathed a collective sigh of relief and enthusiastically returned to the accustomed ritual of dressing in layers.

Tommy sauntered out to the paved drive and paused beside Geoffrey's black Hummer, leaning with his back against the car, looking up at their house, and recalling the realtor's non-specific claims of its deep historical roots that spanned over a century. It was not the largest home in the city, but, styled after a grand southern mansion with eighteen rooms, it certainly held its own, possessing a stately demeanor and bold straight lines. The house's age was apparent mainly in the usual wooden creaks and groans that one would expect of a foundation settling over time. While that was something he had become accustomed to, Tommy believed the noises did not detract from the mansion's overall grandeur.

The selling price had been amazingly low considering the great condition the house was in, as well as the view it commanded from the front of the property. Not only had he and his partner gotten a stupendous deal, the owner had been pretty anxious to sell. *Or desperate*, he thought.

"Okay," Geoffrey said, closing the front door behind him and jiggling the handle with his right hand to make sure it was locked. The black leather briefcase was clutched in his left hand. "Which store are you going to today?"

"Did you check the back door?"

"Yup."

"Okay...just making sure. I was planning on going to the Alki store today, but since I don't seem to be able to drive myself," Tommy growled, "just drop me off at the Fifth Street store and I'll get a ride from Akando when he shows up this afternoon."

"You sure?" Geoffrey asked, unlocking the SUV doors with the remote on his key chain. "I can take you over to Alki if you want."

Opening the passenger-side door, Tommy pulled himself up onto the seat. "You'd be extremely late in the morning rush hour traffic. That's all right, downtown is fine."

"Mmm, okay. What about tonight? Where should I pick you up?"

"Probably in Alki, but I'll give you a call and let you know."

Hopping in behind the wheel, Geoffrey started the Hummer. After swerving around Tommy's dark blue Jeep, he drove down the driveway that was lined on both sides with squared hedges. "I still don't see why you don't just hire another manager for your stores, hon. It isn't as if you can't afford it. Why not just take life a little easier?"

"You know that I can't just sit around and do nothing. Besides, I've built these places up from scratch; they're a part of me."

"I know, but you're killing yourself trying to manage all five places."

Tommy looked at him. "Oh, come on, I'm not 'killing myself'. I'm working just like everybody else in this city."

"*Au contraire*, your employees work — you slave. You treat them better than you do yourself."

"I am *not* going to get into that with you again, Geoffrey."

"That's because I'm right. I just wish you'd have a little more faith in your employees and their abilities in...my God, again?"

"What?"

Geoffrey assumed a weird expression. "Don't you ever get enough?" he asked.

Tommy was nonplused until he followed the line of Geoffrey's gaze to his pants. "Don't get too excited, I'm trying to find something in my pocket."

"That's not where your pocket is, dear."

Frowning, Tommy scooted forward so he could get his hand inside the pocket in question. "Get serious. I remember putting it here yesterday before I left the store so I wouldn't lose it."

"What are you looking for?"

"The delivery invoice for the shipment to the downtown store. Last time they shorted me five bottles of syrup and I didn't have time to check the stock yesterday, so..."

"Why not just leave the invoice at the store? They don't usually just up and walk away."

"No, but I had an order sheet at home that I needed to check it against, which I forgot to do, damn it."

"I swear, you make more homework for yourself than a teacher."

Tommy switched to his left pocket and dug inside, still searching. "Son of a bitch. What the hell happened to that?" His back pockets were inspected next with the same result — nothing. "First my car keys, then the list...what's next, my head?"

"You probably won't miss it," Geoffrey told him, bringing the SUV to a halt at a stoplight.

"Miss what? The invoice, my keys, or my head?"

A mischievous silence was his only answer from Geoffrey, along with an equally mischievous grin. "Funny," Tommy grunted, sticking his hand into his shirt pocket. "I know I didn't take it out of my pants pocket..."

"Maybe it fell out of your pants when you put them on this morning. It'll show up."

"I suppose..." Tommy sighed in frustration.

"So, getting back to the problem at hand," Geoffrey began once more.

Tommy cast a suspicious glance at the man. "What problem?" he asked, a bit aggrieved. "I wasn't aware that I had a problem other than the entire contents of my life disappearing before my eyes."

"The problem of you working yourself too hard."

"Oh, that."

"Yes, *that*. We've got money all over the place, and you don't need to do this."

"I know that, but I...hey, watch out for the..."

"I see her," Geoffrey assured him while braking for a pedestrian who dashed across the street against the light, apparently not wanting to wait.

"What case are you working on now?" Tommy asked, changing the subject.

"If I told you that, I'd have to kill you," Geoffrey joked, receiving a glare in return. "Well, anybody with a sense of humor would think that was funny. It's some corporate anti-trust suit — should bring the firm close to twenty million bucks when all is said and done."

"A nice tidy sum."

"At least!"

They rode along in silence for a couple of blocks before Tommy turned to Geoffrey and sighed again. "You know, it just occurred to me that we don't get away as much as we used to."

"You might be right. Well, maybe we could take a weekend drive or something."

"Or," Tommy countered, "we could fly to another state, do the tourist thing."

"It has been awhile since we've flown someplace together, hasn't it? Tell you what, how about if we plan a weekend getaway?"

"What's with you and the skimpy *weekend* thing? I was talking about something a little more substantial than that."

"Okay, a week."

"Two weeks."

Geoffrey cast Tommy a glance and raised his eyebrows. "Do I hear three?"

"No, two should do quite nicely, thank you very much. Say, somewhere around Christmas?"

Turning his eyes ahead to the road, Geoffrey nodded. "That sounds like fun. Can I count on you giving yourself the time off? I don't want to put in for the vacation time at the office only to have you running back to your stores at the last minute."

"I promise. We'll make plans to go to Walt Disney World around the eighteenth of December, and..."

"Whoa, hold on there," Geoffrey interrupted. "Who said anything about Disney World? I thought you wanted to...why do I have the feeling that I've just been bamboozled into a Florida trip?"

"I don't know," Tommy said with a shrug, feeling guilty. He turned his face toward the window beside him.

Geoffrey drove without speaking for a block, then asked, "You already made reservations, didn't you?"

"Of course not," Tommy defended himself automatically.

"What hotel did you book us in?" Geoffrey persisted, needling in a tone that his partner knew all too well.

Tommy could be persistent, too. "I told you, I didn't make any reservations."

"You were a little too specific about the date not to have already made reservations. What hotel did you book us in?"

Tommy sat quietly for a couple of moments before answering sheepishly, "It's right on the property, and we can take the monorail directly into the park every day."

Smiling, Geoffrey cocked his head. "And when does our flight leave?"

"Six o'clock."

Geoffrey's smile disappeared. "In the morning?"

Tommy winced. "Yes."

Flicking on the turn signal for an upcoming turn, Geoffrey moaned, "Six in the morning...if I didn't love you, I'd kill you."

That evening, Tommy padded down the upstairs hallway, his footsteps softened by the Kashmir runner that spanned the entire width of the house. He made his way into the bedroom at the front of the mansion, a piece of bread in one hand and his keys jangling in the other.

Geoffrey, who had clearly just changed out of his suit into a T-shirt and Levi's, was seated on the side of the bed tying on a pair of tennis shoes. He looked up when Tommy entered. "Oh good, you found them. Where were they?"

"On the kitchen floor by the sink."

"Must've dropped 'em there last night sometime during dinner," Geoffrey proclaimed. He finished tying the shoelace into a knot and sat up straight.

"Must have," Tommy agreed, taking another bite of bread before offering the slice to Geoffrey, who eagerly bit off a piece. "Except that I didn't take them into the kitchen."

"Thanks. Mmm, damn, that's good stuff. What is it? Apple and cinnamon?"

"Yeah, from Costco."

"So what are you suggesting?"

Tommy swallowed. "Suggesting? I was agreeing with you; it's apple and..."

"Not that. What are you suggesting about how your keys got in the kitchen?"

"Oh, that. I don't know. Probably an imp running around the house hiding things from me. Oh, and this..." Tommy added, pulling a folded piece of yellow paper from his front shirt pocket.

"That the invoice you were looking for?"

"Yes."

"Where was it?"

Tommy's lips spread in what he considered to be a shit-eating grin. "In my pocket," he confessed.

"Uh huh."

"I swear it wasn't there this morning, Geoffrey."

"Uh huh."

"You saw me trying to find it."

"Uh huh."

"Shit," Tommy mumbled, shoving the paper back in his pocket. "I don't know why I even talk to you."

"Because you love me."

"That can be debated right now," Tommy teased. He gobbled up the rest of his snack. "I'm gonna get some more. You want a piece?"

"Of bread, or of *you*?" Geoffrey asked.

"Bread."

"You're no fun."

"We can negotiate the terms of my unconditional surrender when I get back," Tommy said, leering. He walked back into the hallway and ambled to the top of the stairs where he took a single step down before being stopped by the sight of something in the corner of his eye. Shifting his gaze to the right, he studied the empty balcony beside him for a moment before determining it must have been his imagination. Rubbing his eyes briefly, Tommy turned forward again. A second step down the staircase was interrupted by the same fleeting visual distraction to his right, only this time he stepped back up to the upper landing and walked across to the middle of the balcony overlooking the foyer to make a closer inspection. Although he could see nothing out of the ordinary, there was a remarkable drop in the temperature, enough to give him goosebumps. He realized the cold seemed to be in one particular spot. "Geoffrey?" he said.

"Surrendering already?" Geoffrey called from inside the bedroom. "I'd hoped to make you grovel a little before..."

"Come here a minute, I want to show you something."

"Now we're talkin'," Geoffrey exclaimed. Trotting eagerly down the hallway, he slipped up behind Tommy and threw his arms around him.

"Do you feel that?" Tommy asked, frowning.

"Not yet, but I'm working on it." Geoffrey's hand was slowly moving down Tommy's stomach, but it was stopped mid-way to its goal by Tommy's grasp.

"Not *that*," Tommy said, exasperated. "I'm talking about the cold."

"If you're cold, I can warm you up from the inside with a great big..."

"Stop that, I'm serious."

"So am I," Geoffrey cooed. He began to slide his free hand over Tommy's thigh.

Tommy stopped this caress as well. "You're not listening to what I'm saying," he said. "It's cold here."

“So come in the bedroom where it’s warmer.”

“But why’s it so cold just in this particular spot? Look,” he said, moving them both two steps to the left, toward the staircase. “It’s nice and warm here, but if you step back...see?” He suited his movement to his words, taking Geoffrey with him. “It’s at least ten degrees colder in this one spot.”

“Must be a draft somewhere.”

“How can there be a draft when the air isn’t moving? It’s perfectly still...shit, I can see my breath.”

Geoffrey blew out an experimental frost-laden breath. He released Tommy, looked at the ceiling, then looked down at the floor, followed by a glance toward the window at the end of the hallway near their bedroom. His puzzlement was clearly visible in his expression.

“See?” Tommy asked, gazing over his shoulder at Geoffrey.

“Yeah. Weird.”

Without warning, the bedroom door suddenly crashed closed, sending Tommy’s blood pressure shooting sky-high and driving his heart into his throat. Both he and Geoffrey swiveled around, wide-eyed.

“I guess,” Geoffrey said after a pause, “there *was* a draft after all, huh?”

“Damn,” Tommy whispered while he stared at the door, attempting to calm his racing pulse.

Hesitantly, he led Geoffrey down the hall, stopping in front of the door. Very gingerly, he reached over and turned the knob. The door swung freely under his touch. Somewhat apprehensive, he stuck his head inside the room and looked at the windows to see if any of them had been opened to let in a draft, but they were all closed.

“It didn’t come from in here,” he told Geoffrey. Without further comment, Tommy led his partner back to the center of the balcony to try and figure out the reason for the cold spot, only to find it was now the same temperature as the rest of the hallway.

“Hey, the cold spot is gone,” Geoffrey commented, slicing his hand through the air just as the doorbell rang, startling them a second time, though not quite so violently.

Letting out simultaneous nervous chuckles, Tommy and Geoffrey descended the circular staircase that hugged one side of the rounded wall in the foyer. The first to reach the front door, Geoffrey pulled it open to reveal a young, tall, tanned Native American man standing on the threshold.

“Hi, Akando!” Geoffrey greeted him with a warm smile.

“What’s wrong?” Akando Wells asked, looking vaguely alarmed.

“What makes you think something’s wrong?” Geoffrey asked, frowning.

“You two look strange. Did I catch you at an...um...inconvenient time?” Akando asked, shaking his head as he walked into the house and gave Tommy a particularly evil eye.

“No,” Tommy said while Geoffrey closed the door.

“You two *do* realize that the honeymoon is over now, right?” Akando exclaimed, sounding peeved. “Sex stops after the first year, and you’ve been going at it for almost three! You’re throwing a wrench into the national average. Knock it off!”

Tommy grimaced. “It’s nothing like that. We just had a little scare upstairs, and it caught us off guard, that’s all.”

Akando raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“It was nothing, really,” Geoffrey told the man. “The wind blew the door closed behind us and gave us a little scare, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” Akando said, smirking, “doors scare me all the time, too. My neighbor has a really scary one, all wood...don’tcha just hate that?”

“Akando, you’re such an asshole. I’m not talking about the door,” Tommy insisted, embarrassed. “I’m talking about how it surprised us when...”

“Although you’d really like the one I have in my bathroom...it’s really *hung*,” Akando snickered.

“Oh, you’re hilarious. I give up, Geoffrey, *you* talk to him,” Tommy instructed his partner. He was sure Geoffrey would have spoken up if he could, but the man was too busy chuckling over Akando’s wisecrack. “You should both join the circus,” Tommy exclaimed, pouting.

“What’s with him?” Akando asked Geoffrey, still smiling hugely.

“He was right; we did have a little scare. You want something to drink?”

“Most definitely.”

“Okay, come on. It started with a cold spot on the balcony and a draft of wind...” Geoffrey began, continuing to tell the story while walking down the hallway with Akando and Tommy in tow. He finished his abbreviated narration by the time they entered the kitchen.

"These old houses are notorious for drafts," Akando remarked. He opened the refrigerator door and poked his head inside. "Don't you have a 7-Up? I'm really craving a 7-Up."

Geoffrey and Tommy sat in two of the chairs that stood around a small table in what they had designated as a breakfast nook. The space was located on one side of the sizeable kitchen, where the last pale rays of early evening sunlight streamed in through the window above the sink.

"Whatever's in there is all we've got," Geoffrey said.

"What's with all this V-8 juice?" Akando went on. He glanced over his shoulder at Geoffrey. "You take out stock in the company or something?"

"I happen to like it," Tommy said, still pouting about being mocked.

"*Nobody* likes that shit! Oh, fine!" Akando grumbled. He withdrew a can of V8 and popped it open, then slammed the refrigerator door closed with his foot. At Geoffrey's frown, he muttered, "Sorry."

"So? 'Sup?" Geoffrey asked.

Akando crossed the room and took a seat at the table. "I need to yell at your lover again," he said.

"What'd I do now?" Tommy asked, no longer sullen, his hackles raised in anticipated defense.

Akando replied, "You screwed up on an order again today."

Tommy's eyebrows lowered as he scowled. "What? How'd I screw up?"

Producing a piece of paper from his back pocket, Akando unfolded it and held it out to him. "Did you really mean to order this much coffee? Five espresso shops couldn't use this much coffee in twelve years!"

Tommy grabbed the sheet out of Akando's hand and scanned it. "Oops," he said, giving the man a sickly smile.

"Oops?" Akando said, snatching the paper back.

"I'm guessing that that 'one' probably shouldn't be there, huh? I'll take care of it tomorrow."

"No need, I already faxed in the correction. Geoffrey," Akando said, turning around, "would you get this guy to retire and let me run the business like it's supposed to be run?"

"I've been trying, believe me!" Geoffrey said. "He's as stubborn as a mule."

"Something here has conspiracy written all over it, guys," Tommy complained, suspicious. "Why do I get the feeling you two have been talking behind my back?"

Akando turned again to confront him directly. "Okay, I'm talking to you in front of your *front* — stay home and let me run things. We love your pretty little face and your sexy bod and your generous asset, but leave the business to me."

"I couldn't have said it better," Geoffrey agreed.

"I don't have a big ass," Tommy whined childishly, contorting himself in a futile attempt to view his own behind.

"That's not the 'asset' I was referring to," Akando said with a grin. "Look, we all love you oodles and we want to kiss you all over, but your mistakes are getting bigger and badder by the day."

"Swell. This puts me where?" Tommy asked. "In the Useless Americans Dumping Ground?"

"Well, now you know how *my* people have felt over the centuries," Akando told him, shaking his head. "No, Tommy, I'm not putting you out to pasture yet. I'm just trying to point out that you're taking on too much work with all five stores. You're making mistakes. This is exactly why businesses hire separate managers and delegate responsibility. That's half the fun of owning a business; you get to be a bigwig and walk around with your nose in the air while the underlings scurry around, cowering at your feet. Take advantage of it, dude! Make me a regional manager, then hire some managers for the individual stores. They'll all report to me and I'll report to you. It'll make things so much easier and lessen the chances of mistakes like this one," he said, shaking the paper at Tommy. "Now let's catch up with the times."

Tommy studied the man's face. "How long have you rehearsed this speech?"

"Honey, you have no idea."

"You've spent far too much time on this, Akando. You need to get yourself a man."

"Tell me about it," Akando moaned.

"Okay." Tommy could see the sense of Akando's proposal, especially when it was wielded like a blunt instrument. "Well, you could be right about this. Let me sleep on it tonight, and I'll let you know tomorrow."

"Good."

"You joining us for dinner?" Tommy asked.

"Where are you guys going?"

Tommy shrugged. "Nowhere. I thought I'd fix something here."

"I repeat, where are we going?"

"I know how to cook! There's nothing wrong with my cooking!" Tommy bristled.

"I hate to be the one to break this to you, girl, but if you'd cooked for our side, Custer would have won the battle without a fight."

Aghast at the insult, Tommy turned to Geoffrey for support.

Geoffrey looked at Akando. "Tommy's a good cook."

"See!" Tommy felt vindicated until out of the corner of his eye, he saw Geoffrey covertly open his mouth and thrust a finger inside.

"I saw that," Tommy growled, turning back to his partner and giving him a dirty look. "I haven't killed you yet, have I?"

"Look, Bickersons, let's give it up and go out and do steak tonight. I've been craving a big slab of meat all day," Akando said.

"Haven't we all?" Geoffrey said, ogling Tommy.

"Tommy, don't you ever service your man?" Akando asked. "I thought you were both joined by the..."

"I'll have you know I can hold my own in the bedroom, thank you very much," Tommy sniffed and smiled at his unintended pun.

Geoffrey glanced at Akando again. "You know what he's like."

"Fuck you both!" Tommy said, sticking his middle finger into the air.

"You already have," Akando retorted.

"Yeah, but I did you before I even *knew* Geoffrey."

"And why you chose that hunk over scrawny little me, I'll never know."

"If memory serves me," Tommy told Akando, "*you* were the one who dumped *me*. Remember?"

"And if memory serves *me*, you were falling all over yourself the second Geoffrey came into the store..."

"Gentlemen," Geoffrey interrupted. "Let's go get a steak. Whose car are we taking?"

Akando said, "The Jeep's in front of everybody else, so Tommy can drive."

Geoffrey stood up from the table. "Okay, let's boogie."

A short time later, Tommy, his partner, and his friend were seated in the dim steakhouse that had become a home away from home lately, there being so little time in his and Geoffrey's hectic schedules to cook at home. His head buried in the open menu, Akando perused the choices in silence before proclaiming his decision aloud. His choice was verbally batted around by Tommy and Geoffrey before other menu items were determined to be more favorable.

"I'm worried about that draft you two felt upstairs on the balcony," Akando said, interrupting the debate about their meals. He looked from one man to the other. "If I were you, I'd get somebody in there to seal the place up before winter sets in. A place that big is going to be expensive enough to heat without areas letting the cold air in."

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, I was thinking about that earlier. When we first got the place, we figured we'd build lots of fires in the fireplace to help with the heating."

"Doesn't your place have a heat pump?"

"Yeah."

"That's far more efficient than a fireplace."

"Who has time to build a fire, anyway?" Geoffrey said, shrugging. "I didn't realize how hungry I was. That steak sure looks good."

Glancing up, Tommy noted that Geoffrey was not looking at his menu but staring at a nearby table where two steak dinners had just been delivered. "Yeah, they do look good," Tommy said. He absent-mindedly patted his rear pocket and discovered a disturbing absence. "Oh, shit. I don't have my wallet."

"You said you were going to bring it," Geoffrey's expression was a mixture of concern and annoyance.

"I thought I did," Tommy said, digging in his other pockets without success. "I remember putting it in my back pocket but it's not there."

"Great. I didn't bring my credit card because you were going to..."

"Geoffrey," Tommy interrupted, worried. "My wallet's missing! Do you think somebody stole it?"

"Maybe you dropped it somewhere or it's in the car," Akando suggested.

"I'll go check," he said. He immediately walked out to the parking lot, where a quick but thorough search of the floor of his Jeep netted him nothing more than a quarter and an old French fry from a hastily consumed lunch a few days ago. Back inside the restaurant, he checked with the reservations desk before returning to the table. He sat down feeling defeated and fretful. "I didn't find it," he reported.

"Did you have much in it?" Akando asked.

“Just my license and the card I was going to use for dinner.”

“Well,” Geoffrey said, “when we get back to the house we can call and report the card missing and have them send you a new one.”

“Yeah, but I won’t be able to drive until I get a new license,” Tommy complained.

“Pretty sneaky way to get me to pick up the tab tonight, if you ask me,” Akando said. His crooked smile lightened Tommy’s mood somewhat.

Geoffrey gave Tommy a reassuring pat on the leg. “Don’t forget, there’s always the possibility that you accidentally left it back at the house or it’s sitting in the driveway. I swear,” he added, turning his attention back to Akando, “we’re losing more shit lately.”

“That happens at your advanced ages,” Akando remarked, drawing a frown from both Geoffrey and Tommy. He smiled, seemingly unaffected by their displeasure. “My parents both complained about misplacing things as they got older,” he explained. This supposed peace offering only made matters worse as far as Tommy was concerned.

“We’re not *that* old, Akando,” Tommy said, attempting to look really miffed in the face of Akando’s grin. “Besides, you’re as old as I am.”

Shaking his head, Geoffrey sighed. “This was never a problem before we moved out of our old place into the house on Capitol Hill.”

“Well, then,” Akando said, “that explains it. Everybody misplaces things after they’ve moved into a new house.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Geoffrey admitted uneasily.

“I didn’t misplace my wallet,” Tommy spoke with some irritation. Another annoyance made his frown deepen — the reappearance of a vague *something* in his peripheral vision. A quick glance to the left showed him nothing that could have caused it, so after making an exaggerated blink and rolling his eyes, Tommy went back to the matter at hand. “I distinctly remember putting it in my pocket. I think somebody swiped it.”

“I remember when I first moved into my apartment over on Queen Anne Hill I kept losing all my...Tommy, something wrong with your eye?” Akando asked.

“What? No. Why?”

“You keep blinking and rolling your eyeball around like you have something in it.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think...it’s...well, it’s hard to explain. It’s like I keep seeing a shadow out the corner of my eye, like I have something in it. I think it’s a floater,” he said, reaching up and rubbing his left eyelid.

Akando smirked. “Early stage of a cataract. See, I told ya you were getting old.”

“I have perfect vision, smartass.”

“Do you still see a shadow?”

Tommy looked around before finally shaking his head. “Um...no, not now. It’s gone,” he said, relieved. “Maybe a speck of dust or something.” He sat back in his seat and picked up his menu again. “So, since Akando’s paying for this meal, how about lobster and champagne?”

Akando’s squawk of protest made him want to laugh out loud.

“Well, that’s a giant relief,” Tommy exclaimed later that evening when he and Geoffrey had returned home and were getting ready for bed. He picked up his wallet from the dresser and thumbed through it to see if anything was missing before starting to get undressed.

Geoffrey, who was slipping out of his pants, said, “See? It all turned out okay. You worried yourself into a stew over nothing.”

“This from a man who has a cow if his socks are in the wrong drawer. A missing wallet isn’t *nothing*, my dear,” Tommy reminded him gravely. He draped his shirt over the back of a chair.

Sliding naked beneath the covers, Geoffrey picked up a book from his bedside table and opened it to the marked page. “Yeah, I’d be worried, too, if it was my wallet,” he admitted.

“I know Akando didn’t believe it was an accident when he ended up paying the bill for dinner.”

At this, Geoffrey looked up from his book and smiled. “You pay him well, he can afford it. Besides, it does him good to foot the bill once in a while.”

“How do you figure?” Tommy asked, sliding into bed beside Geoffrey and pulling the blanket up to his chest.

“Makes him feel important. We’re always paying for everything when the three of us go out. He keeps offering, but we never take him up on it, and tonight he got his wish.”

“I guess. But I’d sure like to know how my wallet got back on the dresser.”

"You forgot it, that's all."

"No, I didn't," Tommy insisted rather strenuously. "I told you before, I remember putting it in my pocket right after I changed my pants."

"Then what? It walked back over to the dresser?" Geoffrey asked with mild sarcasm.

"Apparently it did," Tommy replied and opened his own book in an effort to drop the subject. Regardless of his intentions, his gaze kept straying to the dresser. Finally, Tommy crawled out of bed and crossed the room. He stood there staring, not touching the black wallet lying on the left side of the dresser's top. "You notice how it's on the left?"

Geoffrey glanced up. "Hmm?"

"My wallet. It's on the left side of the dresser. I always put it on the right."

"So you accidentally put it on the left," Geoffrey said. He returned his attention to his book.

Tommy turned toward the bed, feeling slightly resentful that his partner did not seem capable of taking his word for it. "Name one single time that I've put my wallet on the left hand side of the dresser," he said. "Just name one time."

Laying his book on his lap with a sigh, Geoffrey focused on Tommy. "What's bothering you tonight? You seem kind of edgy."

Heaving a sigh of his own, Tommy returned to the bed and balled the pillow up behind his neck. "I've been losing and misplacing so many things lately. What if Akando's right? What if senility is setting in or something?"

"You're only forty, Tommy. Senility is a long ways off."

"Then you explain all these things I've been misplacing."

"Your mind is on too many things lately. It's normal. Relax."

"You think that's it?" Tommy asked, really wanting to believe the answer was this benign.

"Yeah, I do. Happens to the best of us. Don't worry about it."

Tommy cuddled next to Geoffrey, who reached over and pulled him closer.

"Feeling better?" Geoffrey asked, smiling warmly.

"I have been thinking a lot about Akando wanting to be a regional manager for the stores," Tommy admitted.

"I know you have."

"I just don't know if I feel comfortable with it, that's all."

"Well, ultimately it's your business so it's your decision. He'll have to live with whatever you decide."

"He does make a lot of sense, though. Maybe I am putting too much of myself into this thing. Maybe it's time for me to back off a little. I mean, look at the mistakes that I've been making lately down there. Fortunately, Akando's caught every single one. And with me losing so many things here at home..." Tommy began, his words trailing off as his mind wandered aimlessly for a couple of seconds. He yawned and continued, "Yeah, I think it's probably time to give him the title and a raise. God knows he's earned it."

"As long as you feel good about it, then do it. If not, Akando can wait."

"Yeah, but can the stores survive if I make another major mistake like the one I made today if he doesn't catch it?"

Geoffrey gave him another hug before removing his arm and returning to his book.

Tommy scooted down in the bed and adjusted his pillow. He was getting comfortable when a soft unintelligible sound caused him to tilt his head slightly in an attempt to identify what he had just heard. "Do you hear something?" he asked in a whisper.

Geoffrey listened intently a moment and finally answered, "No."

"Sounds like water. Is it raining outside?"

"Not supposed to be."

"Did I leave the water running in the bathroom?" Tommy wondered aloud. He dragged his naked body out of bed, shivering since the heat pump was programmed to a lower temperature at night, and headed to the adjoining bathroom.

"No, everything's off in there," Tommy muttered after peeking into the bathroom and checking the sink and tub faucets. They were dry. Nevertheless, he remained convinced that he had heard the distinct sound of water running. He grabbed his bathrobe off the padded cedar chest at the foot of the bed. "But there's definitely water running somewhere. It's louder in the bathroom. I'm gonna check the other rooms."

"Okay," Geoffrey replied absently, turning a page.

In the bathroom at the other end of the hall, Tommy turned on the light and made a brief inspection. Nothing. He remained certain there was water running somewhere in the house; the noise in the pipes was unmistakable. Going downstairs, he checked both the kitchen and downstairs bathroom but found no evidence of a leak.

"I think we've got a busted pipe or something," he informed Geoffrey when he re-entered the bedroom, removed his robe, and began stepping into a pair of jeans. "The flashlight still in the kitchen drawer?"

"I think so, yeah. What're ya' gonna do?"

"I'd better check under the house to see if I can see water coming out of anywhere."

Geoffrey put his book down on the blanket and threw his legs over the edge of the bed, starting to sit up. "I'll help you."

"No, I can handle it. You go back to your book."

Since Geoffrey's sneakers were handy, Tommy slipped them on and quickly trotted down to the kitchen where the sound of running water seemed louder than it had in any of the three bathrooms. Retrieving the flashlight from the drawer and switching it on, he headed out of the back door into the chilly night air, wishing he had put on a shirt.

The crawl space at the rear of the house was quickly located. Tommy removed the little wooden access door, dropped down on his hands and knees, and peered into the darkness. With a slow controlled movement, he swept the flashlight's beam from left to right, seeing nothing but posts, insulation, and dry soil.

"Find anything?" Geoffrey asked from behind him.

Startled, Tommy jumped and bumped his head on the top of the crawl space doorway. "Ow!"

"Sorry...didn't mean to scare you," Geoffrey chuckled, his hand covering his mouth.

Rubbing his head, Tommy stood up. "Nothing that I could see. But I can definitely hear it."

"Yeah, I heard it in the kitchen."

"You don't suppose we've got a busted pipe somewhere in the walls do you?" Tommy asked, replacing the door and clamping it into place with two wooden blocks that had been nailed to the door frame.

"I hope not. Maybe we'd better call a plumber."

"Not yet. I wanna check the outside faucets first."

"I'm right behind you."

Tommy took his partner's hand, and together they made their way around the outside of the house, checking the exterior faucets as they passed. The culprit proved to be the faucet in front of the house, the last one they checked. Water was gushing out onto the ground, and Tommy quickly turned it off, closing the file on what he had privately named the *Case of the Open Spigot*.

"Probably kids," Geoffrey said, glancing around the area, which was lit by two street lamps at the end of the circular drive.

"Look at my flowers. Damn!" Tommy cursed, shining his light on the flowerbed directly below the faucet. His belladonna delphiniums had been crushed by the torrent of water.

"They'll probably perk up again," Geoffrey cautiously suggested.

"The stems are all broken."

"Well, we'll plant some more over the weekend."

"Yeah," Tommy grumbled, annoyed by the prospect of having to replant new flowers. He glanced around, hoping to spot the criminal mastermind behind this evil plot to destroy his delphiniums, but everything seemed in order. There were no strange or obvious shadows lurking about anywhere, and no overt or indiscreet movements in the hedges caught his eye, so he listened while Geoffrey remained silent. Over the low roar from the freeway far below the hill, Tommy heard very little — a faint boat whistle from the Sound beyond the city, in addition to the merry-sounding chirping of crickets in the yard.

"Well, crisis over," Geoffrey said, putting his arm around Tommy's bare shoulders and leading him toward the side of the house.

Tommy was unnerved by the prank and more than a little concerned over the issue of their safety and vulnerability. However, he considered that if a couple of broken flower stems and a higher-than-normal water bill was the worst vandalism they could expect, life would probably go on pretty much as usual.

"Should we call the cops?" Tommy asked once he and Geoffrey were back inside the house and the flashlight had been returned to the kitchen drawer.

"Over the water or the delphinium homicide?"

"No, I guess not," Tommy agreed, realizing the folly of his question. A thought suddenly hit him.

"Come to think of it, I don't recall seeing any footprints in the mud around the flowers. Did you see any?"

“Didn’t notice. It’s mostly grass around there anyway, except for the flowerbed.”

“Mmm...”

“What, you thinking the faucet turned itself on?” Geoffrey asked, a growing smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“No, I’m not making up another conspiracy theory,” Tommy said, rolling his eyes. “You’d think the outside lights would have scared away whoever was out there. What’s the matter with people, anyway?”

Throwing an arm around Tommy’s waist, Geoffrey drew him out of the kitchen and down the hallway. “You worry too much. Come on, let’s get back to bed; it’s late.”

“I’ve got a creepy feeling. Maybe I should stay up for awhile and keep an eye out front, see if they come back,” Tommy said, feeling somewhat violated — as if his home, his sanctuary, were not only under surveillance but the target of a planned series of pranks.

“Oh, come on. You’re letting your paranoia get the best of you again.”

“No, I’m not,” Tommy said defensively.

“Okay, let’s step into the Wayback Machine and revisit our old house when the element in the oven burned out, and you were convinced the power company had intentionally caused an electricity surge just so that...”

“That was different,” Tommy interrupted, embarrassed by the recollection. “It started a small fire in the oven, and elements don’t do that.”

Geoffrey made a scoffing sound. “The tip of the element had a little flame on it like a match. To hear you talk, you’d think there was a massive wall of flames in there. Stop worrying. Some kids were pulling a prank with the water just now. It’s over. Forget about it. We need to get some sleep.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll just watch for a couple more minutes before I...”

“No, you come to bed. Besides, I have some provocative ideas that just might interest you right now,” Geoffrey said, leering at him.

“Well, in that case...” Tommy began slyly before he stopped speaking, took Geoffrey’s hand, and almost literally dragged him upstairs.