

Loose Id

FELICE
STEVENS

Rescued



RESCUED

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Dedication

To my husband and children, thank you for helping make the dream become a reality.

For my parents, I wish you were both here to share the joy. Thank you for always letting me read under the covers after it was bedtime and even giving me the flashlight. I miss you both every single day.

And to all the fur babies in rescues and shelters...hang on. Your forever home is out there!

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Chapter One

There was nothing like waking up from a deep sleep to a tongue licking your neck. Mmmm, that was one talented mouth. Ryder Daniels stretched in sleepy abandon, luxuriating under the cocoon of covers on his bed. Still in that half-asleep place where Ryder didn't know if he was awake or dreaming, he moaned as that tongue continued its delicious torture. God, it had been so long since he'd shared his bed with anyone. His erection jerked and swelled with need.

As he struggled to pull himself up out of the depths of slumber, anxious to taste his lover's tongue, lust spiked through him sharp and deep. He missed the smooth slide of a foot on his calf and the scrape of an early-morning beard on his back. It had been way too long since he'd held a hard body next to his. The friction of the sheets against his heavy arousal sent torturous desire rippling through him. Rolling onto his side, he reached to pull his man closer, desperate for the contact he remembered only his mouth could give.

A cold nose found its way to his ear.

"What the fuck?" Wide-awake now, he flipped over, squinted open an eye, and groaned. "Shit."

Stretched out next to him was his recently rescued pit bull, Pearl. Tongue lolling out of her mouth, hopeful brown eyes shining, and tail wagging furiously, she huffed out a growly bark.

Scrubbing his face with his hands, he drew in a shaky breath. Arousal still hummed through his groin thanks to the total mindfuck his body played on him. Damn, he was in worse shape than he thought, if he became so turned on by his dog licking him. Almost a year without sex would make anyone desperate and horny as fuck. He groaned again, this time in pure frustration.

At least his dog truly loved him. "Come here, girl." He patted the place next to him, and Pearl whined with happiness as she wriggled across the

bed. Smoothing her short white fur, he crooned to her. “That’s my sweetheart. Let me get up, and I’ll take you for a walk.”

As if she understood him, she yelped a response, jumping down to the floor, her nails scrabbling on the exposed floorboards. She raced out of the room, only to return a few moments later holding a leash in her wide mouth.

He laughed. “Okay, okay, let me brush my teeth and put on some clothes first.” Raking back the tangled hair from his face, he glanced down and took in the state of his aching cock. Though he knew he was better off alone than with his son-of-a-bitch ex-lover, neither his mind nor his body got that message. Both his heart and his dick still missed his ex-lover, Matt.

Screw it.

He threw off the down comforter and placed his feet with care on the cold wood floor. Even though it was Thanksgiving Day, he still was unprepared for the chill on his bare feet.

After a cold shower where a swift, mind-numbing jerk off brought a temporary physical release to his body, he pulled on his faded jeans and a sweatshirt. He had just finished lacing up his sneakers when the phone rang. When he checked the number on the caller ID, his heart dropped, while hope flared in his chest.

Mom and Dad. He stared at the screen as the phone rang a second time.

What could they want? Maybe he’d have someplace to go for Thanksgiving after all. He snatched up the receiver, gulping down a nervous breath.

“Hello?”

“Ryder, is that you?” A cautious bubble of joy rose in him at the measured, elegant sound of his mother’s voice. It had been three long months since they’d spoken. Perhaps his parents were at last coming around to welcoming him back home.

“Hello, Mom. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Yes, well, about that.” Her voice grew somewhat louder. “Your father and I want you to join us tonight. This foolishness has gone on long enough. You need to give up this lifestyle experiment and take your place back in this family.”

And a happy fucking Thanksgiving to you too. Was she serious? Any positive thoughts he might have had for this conversation flew straight to hell, where all good intentions ended up.

He fought to keep his voice cool and calm. “Mom, nothing’s different since the last time we spoke.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Her voice snapped at him, all pretense of a warm conversation gone.

Ahh, now that was the mother he remembered. God forbid you disagree with her or get in the way of her plans. She was a cement steamroller in the guise of a five-foot-tall ice-for-blood society matron.

“We’ve given you ample opportunity to find yourself, experiment with your sexuality. Now that you’ve had your little fling, you need to come home, join the firm, and find a nice woman to marry. I’ve already made some inquiries. Remember that sweet Olivia Martinson? She’s back in town after finishing a year at the Sorbonne and—”

“Mother.” The control he fought so hard to maintain whenever he spoke to her reached its limit and broke. She’d never tried to understand him, and she never would. “I’m not experimenting with anything. I’m gay, goddamn it, and you need to accept it.”

She blithely carried on speaking as if he hadn’t interrupted her. “Now, tomorrow night at the Yale Club, there is a get-together. Helen, Olivia’s mother, has assured me they will be there. I told her you’d be there as well.”

Ryder couldn’t help but laugh. “Are you serious? Have you listened at all to what I’m saying and have said for the past I don’t know how long? I’m not going to marry any woman. I love men. I kiss and have sex with men.” Stalking around the room, he gave the football that rested on the floor in his path a vicious kick. Pearl took off after it.

He didn’t give a damn anymore if he hurt his mother. He’d been cut off from his family as if he had died for simply loving what they thought was the wrong gender. “The sooner you understand and accept me, the sooner we can try to work out becoming a family again. I’m trying to keep it civil, but you’re making it impossible for me.” He fell back on the bed and closed his eyes against the hot prickle of unshed tears. Damn it, he wouldn’t let her get to him again.

He could picture her now, those red glossy lips pressed thin and tight, her pale blue eyes narrowed as she lectured him over the phone. “Why do

you always have to be different? And you're aware, it doesn't only affect your father and me." His stomach clenched, because he knew what was coming.

"Mother, stop."

"What of Landon? He worships you and doesn't understand why you haven't seen him."

A groan escaped his lips at the thought of his younger brother. A brother he loved with all his heart but wasn't allowed to see as long as he refused to follow his parents' wishes. "Mom," he begged, hugging his pillow to his chest. "Please, don't do this." He swiped at the wetness falling down his cheeks, hurt by her refusal to accept him unconditionally. His voice broke even as he struggled to maintain his composure. "Why can't you accept who I am? For Christ's sake, you're my damn mother. You're supposed to love me no matter what." Pearl whined and jumped on the bed.

Shit. He couldn't believe he'd let her reduce him to begging for her love, crying like a little kid. "I miss you and Dad and Landon. I want to come home."

Her chilly, exasperated tone cut through him sharper than any cold wind ever could. Since he was a child, she'd never understood him, never tried. She had some preconceived notion of how her life should turn out, and having a gay son did not fit her plan. "Oh, Ryder, It's time you stop trying to be different. Even as a child you were always rebellious, but now your actions don't only impact your life, they affect all of us. Know your choices have consequences, though."

"What kind of consequences? What does this have to do with Landon?" Ryder thought back to the last time he'd seen his baby brother. Ten years younger than him, Landon was a high school junior—good-looking, popular, and definitely straight. "Landon knows I'm gay. It doesn't matter to him in the least. He's my brother and says he loves me no matter what."

Like you're supposed to.

"This has nothing to do with love. You are our child; nothing can change that." Her offhand manner indicated to him she wished she could change that fact and have him be anyone else's child but hers. The family's social standing and her needs took precedence over everyone else. All his

life he'd been expected to live up to the standard she set for him, whether he wanted to or not. Deviation from the norm in any way was not accepted.

“Your decision to live an openly gay lifestyle affects everyone in the family. No matter how enlightened people are, your father would be horribly embarrassed at the firm, having to explain to clients that his son, his heir, isn't married because he's gay. You may think everyone is so accepting these days, but Daniels and Montague has some very important clients who wouldn't appreciate a homosexual attorney. They could take their business elsewhere.”

“I wanted to make it on my own, though. That's why I chose a different route. Dad supported me; he told me so.”

“Your father is a weak man, but let me tell you something. You broke his heart when you joined West and Hamilton. How do you think he felt, having his son turn down a position in his firm? Daniels and Montague has always passed down from father to son.” Ryder squeezed his eyes shut as he listened to his mother prattle on about how his behavior affected her and her social standing. In the life of Astrid Daniels, the sun and moon revolved around her; she was the center of her own private universe. “We know about your little fling with that other attorney in the firm. Do you know how much money it cost us to pay off that man? I live in constant fear he'll break his confidentiality agreement and spread some vile gossip about us. Could you imagine the scandal?”

That was when the trembling began, and Ryder thought he might vomit. “What are you talking about?” White-knuckled, his grip on the cordless phone tightened until his fingers turned numb.

His mother chattered along, as if it were a story in a magazine she was gossiping about, not her son's heartbreak. “No, you wouldn't know, but your father was approached by the young man—Joshua was his name, I believe. He said he needed money since he was getting married, and if we didn't want the story spread about your sexual orientation, we had to pay him before he left.”

That little piece of shit. Right after he started working at the firm, he'd met Josh, and they clicked. For six months they were together. He thought he was in love with the sweet, slightly geeky young man with the wicked sense of humor and an obsession for coffee. The night he told Josh he loved him, Josh laughed at first, but when Ryder, numb with hurt and shock, said

nothing, Josh grabbed his coat, pulling it back on in a hurry. *“You can’t be serious. Shit, man. It was all for fun and games, you know. I wanted to see what it would be like to have someone else besides my girlfriend suck my dick. Hell, you were great, but I’m getting married soon. No hard feelings, huh?”*

And Ryder, brokenhearted, shaking, and feeling as if his heart had been ripped out and stomped on, merely smiled. *“No, no hard feelings.”* He had no feelings at all as Josh shut the door behind him, walking out of his life as easily as he’d walked into it.

I can’t handle this shit anymore. Obviously his emotional stability, his life meant less to his family than the balance sheet for the law firm. Because everything always revolved around money for his father. If the firm’s clients’ conservative viewpoints didn’t match Ryder’s lifestyle, it was easier to walk away from his son than a million-dollar payday. And nothing could be permitted to interfere with the carefully cultivated existence Ryder’s mother crafted for herself. Not even her son’s happiness. Inhaling deeply, he made sure his voice was calm and controlled. *“Look, this obviously isn’t going to work. I’m warning you, though. I won’t let you shut me out of Landon’s life. You and Dad may not want to see me anymore, but that’s your choice. Good-bye. Oh, and happy Thanksgiving.”*

He cut the phone off and, as if trying to prove a point, immediately dialed Landon’s cell phone number. He and his brother had managed to keep in touch by texting and calling each other. A strange beeping occurred; then he heard this message: *“Welcome to Verizon Wireless. The number you were trying to reach has calling restrictions that have prevented the completion of your call.”* He tried texting and got the same message, citing restrictions on texting.

“Son of a bitch!” He threw the cordless phone on the bed. She must have checked Landon’s cell phone bills and blocked him. The only way he’d managed to keep his sanity these past months was by speaking with his brother. Now she’d found the ultimate weapon to break his spirit and his heart. He grabbed his coat from the closet and tried to snap on Pearl’s leash but missed the clasp because of his shaking hands. Closing his eyes, he employed the yoga breathing techniques his friend Emily taught him to deal with stress.

Namaste, Namaste.

Nope, that wasn't helping. He still wanted to punch the wall in. After a moment he tried again, this time with moderate success.

He'd figure out another way to see and talk to Landon. First he had to take care of Pearl, then go to the soup kitchen over on the Bowery to serve dinner for the homeless. Thanksgiving dinner for him tonight would be a takeout meal shared with his dog.

After walking Pearl, he began the trek from his apartment in the Village to the Bowery mission. A half hour later—fingers and toes numb—he reached the shelter. Waving hello to Meredith, the director of the shelter, he took his place in line next to his best friend, Emily.

“Hey, baby, how are you?” He kissed her soft cheek. She smelled like clean soap and some fruity shampoo. “Happy Thanksgiving. Where's your lesser half?”

“Hey, bro, keep your lips to yourself.” Emily's husband, Connor, pretend growled at him as they bumped fists and exchanged a hug. “Happy Thanksgiving.” His sharp green gaze raked over Ryder. “What's up? You look like crap.”

As they put on their aprons and plastic gloves and began serving the turkey-and-all-the-trimmings dinner, Ryder briefly filled his friends in on the conversation with his mother. Their matching horrified expressions actually had him laughing.

Emily in particular was outraged. “I'm sorry, sweetie.” She placed her hand on his arm. “Your mother sounds like the biggest bitch.” Her clear blue eyes shone with sympathy. “What are you doing after we finish here? Please come home with us for dinner, right, Con?” She nudged her husband.

“Yeah, definitely. We'll put the game on, eat pie, and get drunk.” A smile flirted on Connor's lips. “Emily promised I could if you came over.” He blinked, pouting at his wife, who rolled her eyes at him.

“Idiot,” she muttered, her eyes softening. But she kissed his mouth and whispered something in his ear that caused Connor's eyes to glaze over for a moment.

“I don't know, you guys.” Ryder placed some turkey on a toothless old man's plate and gave him an extra helping of mashed sweet potatoes. “You don't need me moping around being a third wheel.”

Emily poked him with a spatula. “Don’t be a jerk. You can’t be alone on Thanksgiving.” She smiled at a young woman holding the hand of a little boy. She gave them extra meat and the kid some extra marshmallow topping on his sweet potatoes. She was such a softy. “It’s, like, against the law or something.”

Chuckling, he continued to serve the long line of people who had no other place to go for the holiday meal. He should be grateful for what he had, but all he could think of was once again, he’d been abandoned and kicked to the curb. Worst of all, by his own parents.

He felt a squeeze at his elbow. “Don’t let her do this to you, sweetie. Come over tonight. Bring Pearl, and tomorrow night we’ll go out dancing to that new club, Tops and Bottoms.” Emily’s smile lit up her pretty face. “You know we love going to the clubs with you. Maybe you’ll finally find a nice guy.”

“Not likely at a club. If I want a quick blowjob in the bathroom, well, that’s a different story.”

“Blowjobs? Did I hear someone mention blowjobs?” Connor waggled his brows.

“Oh, you’re such an idiot.” She glared at her husband.

Ryder pulled Emily into his arms. “But he’s your idiot.”

She giggled into his chest. “Yeah. I think I’ll keep him. He’s good for...stuff.”

God, he loved these two. He’d met Emily after he left West and Hamilton, and introduced her to his best friend, Connor. They’d married not long after that. Unwilling to stay at his firm after the humiliation of Josh, and needing a fresh start, he decided to work at Rescue Me, the pit bull rescue organization she and Connor had started. He and Connor handled all the legal work the business required, and went out on rescues. Emily, however, was the heart and soul of that place. She was the dogs’ staunchest ally. No one loved those misunderstood dogs as much as she did. Woe be to anyone who took her petite frame, sweet face, and pale blonde looks for weakness. She held a black belt in karate and never went anywhere without her two muscular pit bulls, Laurel and Hardy. No one could get near Emily as long as her faithful bodyguards were with her.

Connor was a legal aid attorney who worked in downtown Brooklyn, specializing in helping LGBT teens and young adults discriminated against

in housing or the workplace. His casual joking manner hid a rapier-sharp intelligence and lightning-quick wit. With his ever-present grin, perfect smile, and cascade of dark curls, men and women alike fell for his charm. His shrewd yet mischievous green eyes never failed to see through anyone's bullshit. They'd met the first day of law school and had become study partners and best friends.

Connor and Emily were passionate about dogs, gay rights, food, and each other. They were the best friends he'd ever had, and he loved them to death. He had a standing invitation for Sunday brunch every weekend. They got him drunk when his parents rejected him, and told him what a piece of shit his lover had been to dump him. Emily even went so far as to tell him that the next time a man broke his heart, they'd have to deal with Laurel and Hardy.

"You haven't hooked up with anyone in forever, my man. Tomorrow night we're gonna take you out and get you laid." Connor hooked his arms around Emily's waist and, humming Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay," danced her around the tables holding the food trays.

Emily swatted her husband. "Stop it. Ryder doesn't need that. He needs to find someone who'll love him and care about him." She laid her head on her husband's chest. "I know the right man is out there for you, sweetie."

Ryder smiled and shook his head as he watched them dance. "Em's right. You really are an idiot. But as for the other, I'm not interested."

He was the real idiot to think he'd ever fall in love again. Love for a gay man was heartache; at least it always had been for him. All he needed were his dog and his friends. Once he found a way to get his brother back in his life, he'd find some quick anonymous fuck somewhere. But until then, he had no intention of risking his heart and falling in love.

Chapter Two

“Chloe. Where the hell are you? I told the guys we’d be there at eight, and it’s already eight thirty.” Jason Mallory was pissed. He was sick and tired of waiting night after night for his girlfriend to fix her freaking hair and makeup. No matter where they were going, even if it was to hang out at Drummers, their local bar, she thought she was making an appearance at the damn Oscars.

“Oh, chill, Jase. I’m coming.” She stopped halfway down the stairs, waiting with an expectant look on her face.

“Finally.” He huffed and motioned her to hurry down the rest of the steps, rolling his eyes, knowing she wanted him to compliment her on how good she looked. The guys in the neighborhood all thought she was hot with her curly black hair, big brown eyes, and large boobs, but after dating for three years, he was pretty immune to it all.

Yeah, she was cute and fun, but that was about it. At twenty-four she had no desire to move ahead, learn new things, or even get a job. She’d never gone to college, and bragged that the only degree she wanted was an MRS. When she wasn’t shopping, thanks to Daddy’s credit cards, she filled her days with hair-, nail-, and tanning-salon appointments.

Sometimes he thought about suggesting they see other people, but he worked so hard at his job, and she seemed so content with their relationship, he forgot about it. Hopefully, once he and his brother got their construction business up to full speed, he’d be able to make more time for the two of them, maybe go away to the Caribbean. Even the idea of an exotic vacation with her, though, didn’t excite him like it should. At twenty-seven, he already felt like he was in a rut.

If he had to admit it to himself, he had little desire to keep the relationship moving forward. When they’d first started dating, it was light, easy, and fun, but now as they grew older and he’d begun to take on more responsibility in his life, he had less and less time for her frivolous, childish

behavior. It saddened him, as they had known each other for so many years, but at this point, he had no idea who she was. Their relationship was a force of habit, like something you did because it was easy and available.

He felt like a shit, but since she never complained, he figured she felt the same way he did. Aside from wanting to get married, she never complained about their sex life, or lack thereof. He didn't blame her for any of it. The boredom between the two of them was as much his fault as hers. The memory of a long-buried, forbidden desire rose in his mind, as it had lately with greater frequency, but he tamped it down immediately.

Not going there. No way.

When he bent to kiss her, she offered her cheek instead of her glossy lips. "Don't mess the makeup, hon." Her heavily mascaraed eyelashes batted at him. "I hate smudged lipstick."

Hmph. Must be the reason why he couldn't remember the last time he'd had a blowjob from her. Come to think of it, he didn't think she'd given him one since they first started dating. Placing his hand at the small of her back, he steered her out the door of her modest two-family house in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. He idly admired her toned thighs as she slipped into the front seat of his truck and crossed her ankles in her strappy heels.

After he started the truck and she picked the radio station, Chloe pulled down the visor to check her makeup. "Did I tell you that Joey and Brianna got engaged?"

Whoa. That was a shocker. "Nope. When did that happen? The two of them haven't known each other that long, have they?" His surprised gaze flickered over to her, and he saw the red nails clenched into fists. Uh-oh. She was pissed. "What's the matter?" As if he didn't know.

"That's the point. They haven't known each other that long. When she showed me the ring today at the nail salon, everyone was so surprised. That bitch Deena even said to me, '*We all thought it would be you and Jason since you've been dating for so long.*' What was I supposed to say to them?"

Yep. That was what he thought. *Here we go again.* The nightly harangue about how they should get married. He found himself gripping the steering wheel, palms dampened with sweat. Not even together fifteen minutes and she was already bitching to him about marriage. "We've had this conversation before. Mallory Brothers is starting to get some good

clients. I can't afford to get married yet." His mouth tightened into a thin line of aggravation. "Jesus, I'm twenty-seven, and you're only twenty-four. What's the rush?"

"It's been three years since we started dating, and you haven't even said we're gonna get married. I don't have a ring or nothing." Her voice started to take that screechy tone that made him feel as though a nail was going straight into his head.

"What the hell? Why are you attacking me?" He pulled into a parking space half a block away from the bar and shut off the engine, but made no move to get out. Maybe they needed to have that talk after all. As he stared at her taut, angry face, it occurred to him he hadn't been happy in a very long time.

"Talk to me." He reached over to touch her arm, but she pulled away, folding her arms across her breasts. "You're angry because your friend got engaged before you."

"Well, yeah. They've only dated for six months, and I've known you since I was thirteen." She twirled an ebony curl around her index finger. "You spend all your time at work and never want to do anything fun. Like, guys are always telling me I don't need someone who'd rather leave me alone than take me out and show me a good time."

How nice. His girlfriend thought he was a bore. Amused, he settled back in his seat and shot her a look. "Go on, sweetheart. Tell me how you really feel."

Totally clueless as to how shallow she sounded, Chloe bumbled forward. "I mean plenty of guys have asked me out, and I've been tempted, for sure. Why wouldn't I be, when someone like Jimmy Goretzki tells me I'm hot? She examined her nails. "He bought a new Mercedes and asked me to go to Atlantic City with him this weekend. He has a suite at the Borgata."

Jason growled. "That fucker. He knows we're together."

Chloe shrugged. "He said we weren't engaged after all these years, and I looked like my man wasn't paying enough attention to me." She stared at him, a challenge obvious in her eyes. "He told me he could make me happy. I haven't given him an answer yet, 'cause I wanted to talk to you first."

That little pink tongue of hers licked her lips. It all seemed so calculated now. A sad kind of calmness settled over him. At least his

parents would be happy if he and Chloe broke up. They'd never liked her, nor did his sisters. They called her a big *Glamour* magazine *Don't*, which he really didn't understand but wisely didn't question. He had no idea what his brothers thought.

Memories washed over him—the times they'd spent together at the beach or hanging out at Coney Island. Their first kiss and the hot, desperate nights of making love. It was a sweet ache of loss, for what was gone and wasn't ever going to come back. He knew this was it, the end of their relationship, and that after tonight, he and Chloe would never be together again.

When he put his hand to her cheek, he saw triumph flare in her eyes. She thought she had him. “Hey, Chloe?” He unclipped his seat belt and unlocked the doors.

“Yes, honey?”

“Go be happy. Have a great weekend in Atlantic City with Jimmy. I wish you both the best.” He stepped out of the car and slammed the door shut. Through the windshield he could see the shocked look on her face. Her mouth was a perfect O of confusion and outrage. After struggling with her seat belt, she scrambled out of the car in full panic mode.

The beep of the car remote signaled that the doors were locked, and he waited for her, flipping the key chain in his hand. “Come on. I told the guys I'd watch the game with them.”

“How can you talk sports at a time like this? We're having a crisis in our relationship, and all you can do is think of your friends?”

And right on cue, the tears began to fall. Well, that might work for dear old Daddy, but not him. “No, we aren't, honey. There's no crisis.”

“Oh honey, I knew you were kidding me.” She took his arm. “You'd be stupid to let me go. I mean no offense, but it's not like you're gonna do better than me.” Miraculously, the tears dried up. She giggled and snuggled next to him.

Once they reached Drummers, Jason pulled her into a corner before they joined their friends. “When I said there was no crisis, I meant that I'm fine with you and Jimmy being together. Go to AC with him and have fun. You haven't been satisfied for a long time; I can tell.”

Not wanting to hurt her, he didn't say he felt the same way. But it was true. There was no spark of attraction, no longing to see her after a long day at work. He was hard-pressed to remember ever wanting to share a triumphant moment, like when he was awarded the winning bid on a big construction project or when he woke up terrified that he'd made the wrong decision striking out on his own with his brother. Shouldn't he have wanted her comfort and strength to lean on? Only once had he mentioned it to her, and she'd tossed it off, telling him, "*Pick whichever makes you the most money.*"

Three years together and she had no clue what made him tick, what his hopes and dreams were, nor did she care.

Even in bed together, more often than not they fell asleep, neither one of them willing to admit that the relationship had run its course, or that they'd never satisfied each other. Fear of failure and of being alone made for sad bedfellows. There was never a reason to move on, to think of saying good-bye. Work had consumed him so much lately he hadn't thought of sex for weeks, and she never pressed him for it.

"You don't mean that." Wild-eyed, her mouth hanging open, Chloe grabbed his arm. "You love me. I know you do."

For the first time, Jason felt sorry for her. He patted her hand. "Don't worry, babe. You can tell everyone you broke up with me, if that makes you feel better." With something akin to regret, he leaned over and kissed her lips. "Bye, Chloe."

Then he turned and walked away to join his brothers and friends at the bar.

"What was that all about?" His older brother, Liam, passed him a beer. "You and Chloe looked like you had some serious shit going down."

Jason downed half the bottle in one gulp. The coolness spread through his chest as he swallowed, relieving some of his tension. "I broke it off with her." His body hummed as he bounced on the balls of his feet. A lighthearted feeling swept over him after making that declaration to his friends and brothers. It was like the grayness and malaise he'd been under was swept away, revealing a clarity that forced him to see everything he'd been hiding behind. He swung the neck of the bottle between his two fingers and grinned at their shocked faces.

Three mouths dropped open at the same time, and he couldn't help but laugh. "You all look like a bunch of fish." He took another swig of his beer. "She wants to get married, and I don't. Plus, Goretski is dangling his bank account, and I'm not into fighting for her."

His little brother, Mark, grunted. "Surprised it took you that long to dump her. She always was a bitch."

Jason eyed Mark. Though Mark turned twenty-one recently, Jason always thought his youngest brother had the keenest insight to people. Maybe that was why he excelled at Brooklyn College as a psych major.

"What do you mean? I thought you liked her." Jason raised a brow.

"Oh man, she had you by the balls. You were always too nice a guy to see her for what she was." Mark spat out his words like nails.

Jason and Liam gaped at their younger brother. He wasn't one to use language like that about a woman. A creeping suspicion wormed its way into Jason's mind. "Mark, tell me. Do you know something I don't but should?"

Mark eyed him with sympathy. "I never thought it meant anything, but I saw the two of them, her and Jimmy, a few weeks ago at a coffeehouse in downtown Brooklyn. I shoulda said something, but I didn't suspect she was cheating on you." With his hand balled into a fist, Mark gestured over to the couple at the opposite end of the bar. "I'm sorry. I could beat the crap out of him if you want." The hopeful tone in his voice had them all laughing and earned him another beer.

Jason shrugged, and while he was disappointed, the reality of Chloe's betrayal didn't hurt him. Probably because he didn't care enough about her. "Nah." His only concern was that she hadn't been screwing both of them at the same time. He shot a look over at the opposite corner of the bar and saw Chloe tucked into Jimmy's side, his hand clamped on her skinny-jeaned ass. Their mouths and hips were fused together.

Guess that answered his question.

After three years together, he thought he'd be angry or at least upset, watching his girlfriend tongue-fuck another guy in public. Oh, right, ex-girlfriend now. Nope, it didn't matter in the least.

"Don't worry about it." He grabbed a chicken wing off the platter on the bar and gnawed on the meaty drumette. "It's been a long time coming. I

didn't realize it."

His friend and the bar's owner, John, who normally kept his opinions to himself, swallowed a slider in two bites, belched, then offered his opinion. "That bastard Goretski better not think I'm gonna keep his tab running forever." He slid another beer across the bar to Jason. "On the house, dude."

Jason tipped the bottle in a salute of thanks. "I thought it would bother me more than it really does. I don't like seeing her making out with him in front of me, but I can't really blame her." He stole a glance at them. They had broken their lip-lock, and now Chloe was sitting on Goretski's lap, having her cleavage manually inspected by his lips. "I honestly wish her well."

Liam swallowed his beer. "Well, there are more fish in the sea. I say you jump right back and show her you can get any woman you want."

The thought hadn't even crossed his mind. What was the point? Why start a new relationship when he'd only be accused of the same thing—being uncaring, unaffectionate, and not romantic enough? His gaze slid over the various women nearby, but none caught his interest. He sighed and drank his beer.

"Maybe Jase needs to take a break from dating women for a while." John's eyes met his with a neutral expression, yet Jason sensed there was something he wasn't saying. Or he knew something he wasn't ready to discuss. His friend turned away to take a call from his cell phone, moving to the opposite side of the bar.

"I don't have time for a relationship now. We need to make sure we get our business in order, Liam. Now that the housing market has come back and people are renovating again, we have to strike while the iron is hot. There's a lot of money to be made."

"It's gonna be a long, cold winter, though, dude." Liam's speculative gaze held his. His dark eyes were sympathetic and understanding. "You're used to having someone around to talk to, and especially to keep you warm at night."

"We didn't have much to talk about. And, ah, the nights were nothing special, if you get what I mean." His face heated as he started in on the plate of nachos John placed on the bar. "Damn, these are spicy." The cold

beer he gulped down doused the burning hot sauce. He fanned his mouth with his hand, hoping to end the conversation.

Mark huffed a laugh. “I’m not surprised she was a bore in the sack. Probably didn’t want to get her hair messed up.”

Jason hoped the dim lighting in the bar hid his burning face. Mark’s comment hit a little too close to home. “Yeah, well, it doesn’t matter anymore. Liam and I are busy now, and Mallory Bros. Construction will be taking up all my free time.”

Nope, he was finished with relationships and women. If he wanted companionship, maybe he’d get a dog.

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Chapter Three

The pulse of the music pounded into Ryder's brain. Why he allowed Connor and Emily to drag him here, he couldn't say. They meant well, but he had no desire to chat up some random guy to have hurried sex in a bathroom stall or a dark hallway.

"Come on, let's get some drinks. This place looks like it could be fun." Connor pushed him toward the large glittering bar, waving at the shirtless bartender to get his attention. "Two beers, my man, with lime, and one Sea Breeze." He grinned, and Ryder saw the bartender wink and smile at his friend.

"Another conquest, Con." Poor guy would be sad to know Connor was here with his wife. And not into threesomes. Ryder accepted the mixed drink from his friend and passed it to Emily. She stood, facing the dance floor, enthralled by the men dancing, the light show, or both. "Em, here, take your drink."

"Thanks." Her hand reached out, but her gaze remained fixed on two men out on the floor. Their bodies were sinuously entwined, arms and lips pressed together. To Ryder, they looked hot, wild, and sexy as fuck.

"They are so free and beautiful, aren't they?" He had to bend down to hear her. "I can't see how anyone could think this is wrong."

A tight little grin thinned his lips. "Well, obviously my parents do, since they have no desire to ever see me again unless I become 'normal' in their eyes." He gulped half his beer, licking his lips afterward.

Connor draped an arm over his shoulder. "Screw 'em, I say. You're doing nothing wrong. Live your life and find some happiness. We'll always be here for you. You know that, right?" His friend's arm tightened around his shoulder as Ryder nodded.

"They'll come around one day, Ryder. You have to believe that. In the meantime, find someone to share your dreams with." Ryder watched his friend's gaze flicker over to Emily, who returned his look with her sweet

smile. “It’s no good to be alone, man. It sucks the soul out of you.” Connor took his wife’s empty glass and placed it on a mirrored shelf next to where they were standing. “Now I’m going to dance with my wife, and I want you to find someone to dance with.” He took Emily’s hand and pulled her onto the floor.

Ryder chuckled and took another swallow of his beer. When he finished, he looked to put his bottle down, but instead caught the eye of a man who stood watching him. He recognized that look. It was one of heat, desire, and the need to get down and dirty as fast as possible. His groin responded, but he ignored it and instead returned to the bar to get another beer.

It took a while to make his way to the front of the bar and catch the bartender’s attention to order a drink. A large palm pressed against the small of his back. “Why did you turn away from me?” The voice murmured in his ear, sending tingles up his spine while a hard body pressed him into the wooden railing of the bar. An impressive erection nestled into the crease of his ass. He could feel the heat pouring off the man’s body.

Ryder froze. He took his change from the bartender, then spoke. “You need to take your hands off me.”

“Come on, I only wanted to talk and maybe get to know you better.” The man moved closer, rubbing himself against Ryder’s ass. In another minute the guy would be humping him in public.

That did it. Snarling, Ryder whipped around to face him. “I said back the fuck up, man.”

The stranger was extremely handsome. European, Ryder surmised, with a pale complexion, dark hair and eyes, and a full, sexy mouth that hinted at all things wicked. His six-foot-plus frame was clothed in an expensive suit, which did little to hide his broad shoulders and narrow waist. The thin shirt he wore pulled against the muscles of his chest, and Ryder could see the hard nipples poking through the silky fabric. Heat blazed in his glittering black eyes.

“I noticed you as soon as you walked in, so beautiful with your golden hair and skin and those bright blue eyes like a summer sky.” He licked his lips, drawing Ryder’s attention once more to their fullness. “I like your mouth too. I watched you drink your beer and wished your lips were

wrapped around my cock instead of that bottle. Imagine, a grown man being jealous of a bottle.”

Ryder sucked in his breath. He'd never been so blatantly seduced. In his mind he pictured this man stripped bare, pale body, glowing damp with perspiration, draped over Ryder's own naked flesh. If he wanted, he knew he could take him, lead him to the back, and have him on his knees within minutes. Ryder imagined sliding his zipper down, pulling out his dick, and stuffing the man's sexy, full mouth.

Sex with a stranger, in a club. How predictable and fucking depressing.

Finishing his second beer, he reined in his temper. “I don't like people touching me unless I give them permission first.” He leaned closer, catching a whiff of the man's cologne, mixed with the faint aroma of tequila and sweat. “And I didn't give *you*”—Ryder touched the man's nose with his fingertip—“permission to touch *me*.”

A groan burst forward from the man's mouth as he closed his eyes. Ryder took the opportunity to escape and join his friends on the dance floor. Emily slipped her arm around his waist. “What was that all about, sweetie? He looked hot and totally into you.”

Ryder shrugged and swayed his body to the music as he danced with his friends. “Nothing and nobody. Someone looking for a fuck buddy for the night.” The music changed, and he made a face. “I hate this song. Come on, let's get another drink.” He grabbed her hand, pushing his way off the dance floor, Connor trailing behind them, grumbling about rude friends.

“I've got this round, Connor. What'll it be?” It was so tight by the bar they overlapped shoulders. Connor, touchy-feely bastard that he was, clasped the back of Ryder's neck, resting his hand there.

“Get me another beer and Em another Sea Breeze.”

He'd given the bartender his order when he came face-to-face with the man he'd left before. Only this time the sexy mouth was sneering, and his handsome face twisted in an ugly grimace.

“So you let this pretty boy touch you, but you disappear on me?” His anger had Ryder taking a step back, forcing Connor to grasp him around the neck. The man's eyes flashed. “He came with a woman. I saw. You like it three way, maybe? I can arrange for that.” He stepped in closer, and Ryder knew he had to get out of there.

“I’m out.” He spoke over his shoulder to Connor. “See you tomorrow.” Ryder pushed past the man and hustled out of the club. The cold wind bit through his shirt. Shit, he forgot his jacket inside. He texted Connor to get it from the coat check and take it with him when he left. There was no way in hell he was going back in there. Hailing a cab was simple, and within minutes he was hurtling down Broadway back home. Another disaster. Letting his head fall back on the headrest, he closed his eyes, and as always when he was alone and depressed, his thoughts turned to his former lover, Matt.

Was the man even alive, or had the path he’d chosen—drugs over his love—sent him to an early grave? What a waste of life. Matt had been so vibrant and healthy when they’d first met at the gym. But his easygoing, California-surfer-dude mentality hid a dark side. Drugs had always been prevalent in the music industry, but Matt wasn’t into weed. He was into the hard stuff—heroin. Ryder begged him to get help, to go to rehab, but his boyfriend insisted he didn’t have a problem. Working for an Internet radio station gave him easy access to all the drugs he could ever want.

The last ugly episode, when Ryder came home to find Matt passed out with a needle on the floor, would remain forever scalded in his brain. Never in his life had he been so scared as he was at that moment.

“Matt, Matt.” His earsplitting screams had no effect on his unconscious lover. Waiting for the ambulance to arrive, Ryder thought he’d go mad. He tried slapping Matt, pushing him, anything to rouse him out of his stupor. But Matt remained unmoving.

Three days later in the hospital, still looking like shit, Matt tried to joke it off. “Come on, dude, it wasn’t so bad. I promise I’ll cut back.” He grinned that wide-open smile that before had always melted Ryder’s heart.

Not this time.

“I can’t do it anymore. You have to make the choice.”

Matt’s grin faded. “I don’t know, man. It makes me feel good. And life is about feeling good, you know?”

No, Ryder didn’t know. “I’m sorry, but no. I don’t want any part of it.” He stared at the man he thought he loved. Did he even exist anymore, or had the drugs leached into him too deep to let go? Was he wrong, forcing him to choose? “Aren’t I enough to make you feel good?”

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t make me choose.” Matt’s face tightened in anger, and his brown eyes darkened. “But it’s no problem, dude. I’ll pick up my stuff and head over to Troy’s. He’s cool with me.”

Pain sliced through Ryder’s chest. He gasped. “Have you been sleeping with him?” Though they always practiced safe sex, he didn’t want to know his lover had cheated on him.

A sigh of relief escaped him when Matt shook his head. “Nah, man. Troy’s not gay. We’re friends.” His face softened. “I’m sorry, Ry. We had fun, though, right?”

Fun. That was all their year together meant to the man? Matt didn’t love him, never had. Ryder turned on his heel and left Matt’s room and the hospital.

He never saw Matt again.

The gruff voice of the cabbie interrupted his thoughts. “Hey, buddy. We’re here.”

Swiping his credit card, he tipped the driver, then took his receipt. He scrambled out of the cab, anxious to get inside and out of the cold night air. By the time he made it to the entrance, he was shivering. Clarence, the doorman, pulled open the door.

“Mr. Daniels, where is your coat? It’s freezing tonight, sir.”

Ryder chuckled. “Clarence, you’re like a mother hen. Connor has it, and I’ll pick it up tomorrow. I trust you had a nice holiday?” He pulled his keys out of his pocket.

The elderly, gray-haired doorman smiled. “Yes, all the grandchildren were there, and they kept my lap busy. I trust you had a nice holiday, sir?”

Ryder nodded and knew his strained smile didn’t fool the man. “Well, good night, Clarence.”

“Shane wanted me to tell you he walked Pearl and fed her tonight. He even stayed and played with her a bit. Good night, sir.”

“When you see him, tell him how much I appreciate it, please.” Ryder took the elevator to the sixteenth floor and was greeted by a whining Pearl. She hated being left alone. Ryder gave her some treats, drank two glasses of water, and after shedding his clothes, fell into bed. Within moments he was asleep, his arm around his dog.

* * * *

At eleven o'clock on Monday morning, Ryder sat, manning the phones at Rescue Me, when an emergency call came in.

"Tell me the address, please." He jotted down an address in Red Hook, Brooklyn—an area well-known to harbor dogfighting rings. "Okay, we'll be there within half an hour at the latest. Don't touch the dogs, and give them plenty of space." He hung up the phone. Emily was readying herself for the trip. She took out muzzles, large blankets, and some food and bowls.

"I'm ready, Ry. You'll fill me in on the way there." She, along with Laurel and Hardy, jumped in their van. Crates were clipped to brackets on the floor. Ryder slammed the door shut, and they started out for the drive to the construction site, where it seemed the foreman had come upon some pit bulls he didn't know how to handle. Afraid of getting bitten, he called the rescue.

Not twenty minutes later, they were bouncing along the cobblestone and broken-up streets of one of Brooklyn's strangest areas. On one block were some of the toughest housing projects in the city, and on the next were gentrified townhomes, IKEA, and expensive, charming restaurants. They pulled into a double-wide parking area, their van squeezing by a truck with *Malloy Bros. Construction* emblazoned on the side.

From the passenger seat, he could see a crowd of men standing around, some in hard hats, along with curious onlookers. One man in shirtsleeves, tall and beefy with curly brown hair, stood off to the side talking into a phone. It was the other man who caught Ryder's attention.

He was tall, a few inches over six feet. His dark hair fell in loose waves that brushed the top of his collar and curled at the bottom of his neck. He was built strongly, and Ryder could see the muscles bulging through his button-down shirt. As cool as it had been on Thanksgiving, the temperature had risen to an almost balmy fifty degrees today. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows, showcasing his powerful arms.

"Wow, that is one cute guy." Emily nudged him. "I see you staring at him. Make sure you go over and speak to him."

Ryder scowled at her. "I'm here to work, not make a date."

Emily squeezed his thigh and poked him. "Maybe you can do both." She winked and gave him her saucy smile.

He kissed her cheek. “Now I see why you and Connor are perfect together. You’re both annoying.”

Her eyes sparkled as she kissed him back. “You love it. Come on, let’s go.” She opened the van’s door and hopped out.

When Ryder looked out the van’s window, he locked eyes with the dark-haired man’s intense stare. He licked his lips, inexplicably nervous.

What the hell is that about?

All thoughts fled as he saw a group of men approach the row of houses and start up the stairs. They had bats in their hands, and one held a chain. In a flash he jumped down from the van and raced toward the group of men.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

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Chapter Four

Jason paced up and down the paved area of the driveway. Time was money, and these people from the pit-bull-rescue place Liam had called better get here soon. The crew was plain lucky the dogs were tied up or in no condition to hurt anyone when they found them. Still, he knew they couldn't handle them, and since one of the crew knew about this place, they made the call.

Now all they had to do was wait for these people to show up.

Finally, he saw a van pull up and park near his truck. The driver was a cute blonde, and the guy next to her looked big enough to handle the job. Jason watched as they talked for a few seconds, and she kissed the guy's cheek. Either boyfriend or husband. He didn't care which; he wanted the job done.

The blonde opened the door and got out. Jason saw she was even prettier close-up than she looked in the van. When he met her boyfriend's gaze through the window, a funny feeling pinged through his gut. The guy stared at him with eyes that screamed sex on the brain. Then he licked his lips.

And all of a sudden Jason's dick woke up and said hello.

The fuck?

Jason bit back a curse and stalked over to the blonde. "Uh, hi. I'm Jason Mallory. We found these dogs in one of our buildings that we're preparing for rehabbing. Some are tied up, some aren't, but they look in pretty bad shape, so we've stayed clear of them."

She nodded with approval. "That's smart. Ryder and I will take over from here. Make sure your men stand back—"

A loud commotion came from the front of one of the buildings, and a shout rang out, presumably from the man racing like a fifty-yard Olympic sprinter toward the house.

“Oh shit, what now?” Jason took off after the guy, who had a murderous expression on his face. “What the hell’s going on?” His shout came in a panting breath as he caught up with the crazy man.

Then he spotted the bats. “Who the hell are you, and what the fuck are you guys doing here?” These weren’t his workers but rather random guys from the neighborhood who must’ve heard about the dogs they found.

One of the men leaned on his bat and glared at him. “I’ll take the dogs and sell them. I can get good money for them. Gimme me a few minutes to get them outta there.”

With a snarl, the guy from the pit bull rescue pushed his way in front and blocked the entrance. “No fucking way. We’re taking them.” He widened his stance and crossed his arms, the fire blazing in his eyes directed at the three men.

Jason admired the guy’s balls to stare down these thugs.

They laughed at him, though, unconcerned. “Listen, you pussy. Move the fuck out of the way. Go back to Williamsburg or wherever your skinny hipster white ass came from. The dogs are ours.” As if to prove his point, he swung the bat a few times.

Liam came up behind Jason. “Should we call the cops? This could get ugly real fast.”

As Jason was about to agree, a piercing whistle split the air, and two blurred, growling figures shot past him, coming to rest beside the rescue guy. Two huge black pit bulls sat at his feet, silent, with their tongues hanging out and those oh-so-sharp teeth making their appearance.

Two of the men took several steps back, but the one with the big mouth decided to challenge the man and the dogs.

Wrong move.

Jason winced as the dogs jumped up on all fours and began barking. Like a shot, all three men dropped their bats and chain and took off running. After they had disappeared from sight, the dogs sat down, mouths open, tongues lolling. If he had to admit it, they looked like they were smiling. Even more shocking, the guy and his wife—he saw her wedding band and engagement ring—were petting the two beasts like they were sweet little puppies. And the dogs loved it.

“Son of a bitch, that almost gave me a heart attack,” Liam whispered in Jason’s ear. “I thought pretty boy was gonna get his ass kicked.”

Jason nodded, taking another look at the man. With his shiny, golden hair, bright blue eyes, and long, loose-limbed body, he looked more like he belonged on the beach rather than the hard-scrabbled streets of one of NYC’s roughest neighborhoods. Guess he should go over and thank him.

“Hey, that was pretty damn amazing.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Jason Mallory, and that chickenshit over there is my brother Liam. Thanks for running interference with those thugs. That was pretty intense. Do you run into these kinds of problems all the time?”

The guy stopped petting his dog and stood. “Name’s Ryder. Ryder Daniels. Yeah, we run into this kind of shit all the time. It’s why we bring the pups with us.” He glanced down at the two massive dogs with a smile.

“Pups?” Jason choked out a laugh. “Man, these dogs are huge.” One of them gave his pant leg a sniff, and he stepped back.

“Don’t you like dogs, Jason?” The blonde frowned at him.

“Yeah, absolutely. I don’t want him to like me for dinner, that’s all.” He huffed out a nervous laugh as the second beast joined his friend in an exploration of his leg.

Both the blonde and Ryder laughed. They made a cute couple, although he noticed that Ryder didn’t wear his wedding band.

She smiled. “Oh, don’t let them fool you. Laurel and Hardy are really pussycats. Aren’t you, my big babies?” She knelt on the ground, and the two dogs licked her face, their long tails wagging furiously.

Amazed and still a little freaked out, Jason snorted. “Jesus Christ, that is crazy. They could rip her face off if they wanted to.”

Ryder chuckled. “They’re Em’s bodyguards. She’s walked through the most dangerous neighborhoods, and no one would think of touching her as long as those two are by her side. Better than any weapon.” He leaned up against the door, squinting in the sunlight. “What are you guys doing with this property, anyway?”

“We’re gutting the houses and upgrading. Putting in all new wiring, roofs, and bringing everything up to code. There are a total of fifteen homes here, and the developer has another ten a few blocks away we hope to win the bid on if he’s satisfied with our work here.” Jason was proud of what

they'd accomplished, even though to an outsider, it must appear like one big mess.

Ryder surprised him, however. "It looks like you've done a solid job. Did you have a lot of trouble getting permits from the city for the C of O? This area isn't landmarked like the Heights and Park Slope, is it?"

Jason stared at him. "How do you know about all that stuff?"

The woman piped in. "Ryder used to work in real estate. He was a lawyer at one of the top firms in the city, specializing in real estate development, right, sweetie?"

Jason turned his gaze to the guy. He seemed distinctly uncomfortable. Hard grooves deepened by his mouth as he frowned, and his eyes looked dark and sad. "Yeah." He kicked the ground with his sneaker. "Em, let's get the dogs, okay?"

"But Ry—"

"Emily, please."

Jason watched the interchange with avid curiosity. It was blatantly obvious the guy didn't want to talk about his old job, no matter what his wife said.

"Hey, man. I know how it is to be bullied by a girlfriend, so I can only imagine it must be harder when your wife is doing it."

Emily burst out laughing, and even Ryder cracked a smile.

"Did I miss a joke or something?" Jason looked from one to the other.

Emily was still merrily laughing, as Ryder clued him in. "Em and I aren't married. We're friends, best friends. She, her husband Connor, and I all work at the rescue. He's a legal aid attorney."

After they all finished laughing, Jason led the way to the part of the house where the dogs had been discovered. He continued to talk over his shoulder. "I didn't take an accurate count, but I think there are three dogs. One is a puppy and didn't look in great shape, poor thing."

Ryder's lips thinned in disgust. "I fucking hate this shit. They use these dogs for bait, if they can't use them as fighters."

"You're really dedicated to this, aren't you?" Jason asked in a low voice. He was curious about a man who'd give up such a lucrative career to help unwanted dogs.

“I am. I love these dogs. They are misunderstood, and society would rather throw them away than take care of them. I can relate.” Ryder’s blue eyes shuttered.

Obviously he had some personal issues, and giving up a career in the fast lane was a form of punishment. Since everyone knew high-priced lawyers earned megabucks, it must’ve been some heavy shit that forced him walk away from that life. He articulated some sort of inconsequential noise of understanding, even though Jason had no clue what the guy was talking about.

As they started down the dim, narrow hallway, the piles of construction debris forced them to pick their way carefully. Jason called out a warning. “Be careful, Ryder. There’s tons of crap all over the place.”

Behind him he heard the man swear, then yelp in pain. “Ow, shit, damn.”

Jason turned quickly and was slammed into the wall by Ryder’s falling body. Before he had a chance to take a breath, Ryder lay flat up against him, his long, lean torso pressing him into the crumbling plaster wall. They were roughly the same height, with the other man maybe having an inch on him. Ryder’s head missed crashing into the wall, and instead his cheek took the brunt of the hit. He grunted in pain when he made contact.

The two of them stood in the hallway, their bodies frozen in place. A comforting heat from Ryder’s body seeped into his own, and Jason caught the faint scent of Ryder’s cologne, as well as the warm smell of his skin. Ryder’s breath puffed across his cheeks, and Jason felt the push-pull of his chest as it rose and fell against the other man. His own breathing slowed, and inexplicably, unforeseeably, and—holy shit, this was not happening—unbelievably, his dick hardened until it was like iron in his pants.

Son of a bitch.

Ryder lifted his cheek from the wall. Their eyes met, and Jason was shocked to see not embarrassment or shame, as he knew his own eyes portrayed. No, this man’s eyes blazed with defiance and pride.

Oh fuck, the guy is gay, and looky here. Jason’s dick was hard, happy, and clamoring to come out and play. With a guy.

In a flash, Jason realized why the guy must’ve left his cushy job to work with the rescue group. He could only imagine those snooty white-bread law firms might not want someone so open and proudly gay. No

matter that New York had made same-sex marriage legal, there was still that stigma.

None of that meant jack shit to his dick, which throbbed and painfully strained at his zipper, begging to be released. Jason bit back a curse and took a deep breath.

“Um, Ryder, are you hurt? Or dead? ’Cause if not, can I ask you to move off me?” Jason licked his lips, nervous for some reason.

Ryder glared at him, those blue eyes dark as midnight. “Don’t worry, Jason. I’m not contagious. You can’t catch gay.” The sarcasm in his voice pinched Jason’s heart with shame. But Ryder moved away, then bent down to rub his ankle.

Should Jason be concerned about Ryder’s ankle or pissed off about the attitude? Health concerns first. “Uh, how’s the ankle?”

Ryder barely gave him a glance. “It’s fine. I’ll live.”

“Oh, good. I’d hate for you to die of a twisted ankle. It would fuck up my insurance rates for the job.”

Jason caught the curl of a small smile tugging at the man’s lips. “So, about the other thing. I, uh, I’m not, like, gay or anything.”

Ryder merely raised a brow, then glanced at the obvious bulge in Jason’s pants.

Jason huffed out a nervous laugh. “Yeah, well, about that. I broke up with my girlfriend, and our sex life had been dead for a long time, so I guess... Shit. I don’t know.” What the hell was he telling a total stranger this for? Jason knew he sounded like a fumbling asshole.

“So I’m any dick in the storm,” Ryder drawled in what could possibly be the most sarcastic voice Jason had ever heard.

“No. I don’t know what it was, man. Don’t go all righteous on me. I’m not homophobic because I said I wasn’t interested.” He struggled to explain himself. “I don’t even know you at all. You’re here to get those dogs out, and I have a job to finish, so if you’re okay, can we get those dogs, please?”

In an instant, Jason regretted his speech. He knew he came off sounding like an absolute douche. “I didn’t mean it that way...” His voice trailed off, weak and halfhearted.

A cold smile twisted Ryder’s lips. “Hey. No problem. Like you said. I’m here to do a job. I don’t fuck where I eat, so don’t worry about it.” He

tucked his hair behind his ears and bent down to rub his ankle again.

Jason did feel bad the guy hurt himself. “If you need the ankle wrapped, we have a first-aid kit in the trailer.”

Ryder shrugged. “It’s fine. Can I see the dogs now? Emily will be in soon with the equipment.” His voice was cool and distant, his eyes flat.

Jason breathed out. “Sure. Let’s go. They’re right through this door.” He led him into a corner room and moved aside so the man could enter. Ryder passed through the doorway, surveyed the scene, and walked up to the first dog, tied to one of the iron rings bolted into the wall. He immediately sank to his knees. Jason watched with increasing admiration as Ryder soothed the suspicious dog. He sat on the floor, talking nonsense to the animal in a quiet singsong manner. In his hand appeared what Jason surmised must be dog treats. After several minutes, the growling stopped, replaced by whines and snuffles.

Damn, this guy was good. The first dog, a brown-and-white mix that hadn’t stopped giving Jason the stink eye when he stumbled into the room earlier today, now had his head in Ryder’s lap, eating out of his hand. After finishing the last treat, the dog heaved a shuddering sigh and closed his eyes.

“He’s really good, isn’t he?” Jason started and looked down at Emily. The blonde’s eyes were fixed on her friend as she spoke. “I think because he has so much feeling inside him. It’s like he takes on their pain, you know?” She stared at him, unflinching. “He knows what it’s like to be used and discarded. But like these dogs, any man who ends up with Ryder in his life is the lucky one.”

Shit, had she seen what went down between him and Ryder? Well, screw it. He didn’t owe her any explanations. “I’ll leave you two to do this. If you need anything, let me know.” He turned on his heel beating a hasty retreat down the hallway. Not quick enough to escape the uncomfortable feeling of Emily staring at his retreating back, wishing him evil. Once outside in the bright sunlight, Jason paused to catch his breath, and calm the alarming reactions Ryder caused in his brain.

One hour later, Ryder came out with the dog Jason had last seen on his lap. He was in a crate, which Ryder had no trouble carrying, despite the fact that it must weigh well over fifty pounds. Jason remembered the hard-

muscled body pressed up against him. His blood sizzled, and he squeezed his eyes shut, willing his mind away from those all-too disturbing thoughts.

In the driveway, Ryder placed the crate in the van, returned to the house, and within fifteen minutes came out with another dog in another crate. This dog looked less friendly than the first, and Jason winced as he heard the low growls coming from the crate.

“Isn’t it dangerous for them?” Liam came up behind him. “I’d be afraid they’d bite the shit out of me. That guy’s got balls.”

What would his brother say if Jason said, *Yes, he does. Two large ones and a pretty hefty dick as well?*

He was going out of his mind. Emily came out with a bundle in her arms, cooing into the blanket. Curious, Jason left the steps of the trailer to join the young woman. Smiling at her, he pointed at the dog in her arms. “What do we have here?”

She bit her lip, and he could tell she was struggling not to smile. She really was sweet, the way she defended her friend against him. “He’s still a puppy, undernourished and undersized. He may have something wrong with his paw. I’ll have to have him checked out by our vet.”

Jason watched as the little nose of the puppy made an inquisitive sniff out of the blanket. “May I touch him?” He didn’t want to do anything wrong that might hurt the little guy.

“Sure, but not on the face. Try behind the ears, gently, with no jarring movement.” She showed him where to place his fingers.

The puppy’s head was silky smooth, and when Jason rubbed behind his ears, he whined and looked up into Jason’s eyes. Such trust and affection from a creature who’d known nothing but pain and fear in its short, miserable life rattled him.

“He likes you. This one’s a sweetie pie.”

Jason agreed. “He’s a trouper, that’s for sure.”

Emily took his hand in hers. “Here, let him smell you.”

She put his hand in front of the puppy. The little guy sniffed his fingers, then licked them. His tiny tongue felt raspy. Soon Jason was getting his hand washed.

A shadow fell over them. Jason looked up. Ryder stood over them, unsmiling. “Ready, Em?”

“Sure, sweetie.” She smiled at him. “This little guy likes Jason here.”

“That’s nice.” He took the bundled puppy from her. “I’ll put him in the truck.” He walked away without a good-bye.

Jason motioned Emily into the trailer. “Come, I’ll write you a check. A donation for the rescue.”

“Cool, thanks. We appreciate it.” She followed him inside, leaning her hip on his desk as he wrote out the check. “So, Jason, are you married?”

“Nope. Single.”

When she opened her mouth, he cut her off before she could say anything. “My girlfriend and I broke up after dating for three years.” Was that a flash of disappointment he saw cross her face? “Here you go.” He held out the check, and she took it, folding it in half and slipping it into her back jeans pocket.

“Well, see ya around, Jason. Nice doing business with you, and please recommend us to all your friends.” She waved her fingers in farewell and left the trailer.

Within moments he watched the van pull out and disappear down the street. “She was cute.”

He jumped out of his seat. “Jesus Christ, Liam, you scared the shit outta me. What are you sneaking up on me for?”

“Making an observation, is all. Why didn’t you ask her out?”

“Because, asshole, she’s married.”

“To that guy?” His brother snorted. “I don’t think so.”

Jason cocked his head. “No, not him, but why are you so sure?”

“It’s the vibe I get. He’s gay, I’ll bet.”

“Does that matter to you, if a guy is gay?” Funny they’d never discussed this before.

“Nah, I don’t really care where a guy sticks it, I don’t want to have it shoved in my face, though ya know?” Liam laughed. “Figure of speech.”

Jason winced. “You’re a pig, dude. Yeah. Well, now that the dogs are gone, let’s get a move on the rest of the removal. We have a lot to do.”

“That was a cute puppy. What are they gonna do with it?”

Jason shrugged. “Not sure. It has something wrong with its paw, so they need to call the vet.”

“I hope it can be fixed. Otherwise they’ll probably have to kill it.”
Liam opened the door. “I’m heading out. Gonna check the delivery on the other site, ’kay?”

Jason nodded, his mind back on the puppy.

“No fucking way are they gonna kill that dog.”

He looked down at the card on the table, making a note of the address.

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Chapter Five

Ryder drummed his fingertips on his desk. The last text from Landon was up on the screen of his cell phone. Having to communicate using a schoolmate's phone was the final straw. To hell with their mother and her precious social standing; he was going to see his brother.

He left Rescue Me and took the train into the city. Landon's private school was on the Upper East Side, and according to a copy of his schedule, which Ryder had downloaded months ago, his last class was at two o'clock. As usual, the subway crawled its way uptown, and Ryder wove his way around people trudging up the stairs and out into the street, hurrying so as not to be late.

As he stood on the corner, waiting for the light to change, he spotted Landon exiting from the doors of Hawthorne Academy, the private school he attended. Though it had only been two months since he'd seen him, Landon had changed so much. Taller, with the same lean runner's body as Ryder, Landon looked a little less happy, a little more subdued. Emotion choked Ryder as the tears threatened, then receded. The light changed, and he hurried across the street, plastering a grin on his face.

Any doubts as to how Landon felt were blown away by the huge grin that split his face when he spied Ryder. Landon waved good-bye to the group of boys he'd been talking to and ran over to greet him. Conscious of not wanting to become involved in an overly emotional scene, Ryder fist-bumped him, giving him a grin. "Hey, dude. How's it going?"

Landon's smile said it all. "I'm great now. Shit, Ry, I missed you so damn much."

There went those tears again. Blinking fast, he slung an arm around Landon's shoulders. "Let's go. I thought if you wanted to, we'd hop a cab down to my apartment, order some Indian, and hang out for a while. It's better than sitting around a coffee place or restaurant, in case Mom has her little spies out."

Landon shifted his backpack. “Cool. Sounds excellent. I want to see Pearl, anyway. I’ll tell Mom I have an SAT study group after school until after dinner. That’ll give us plenty of time to catch up.” He pulled out his phone and texted a message. “Done. Now she won’t bother me. If she thinks it’s for school, she leaves me alone.”

Guilt swamped Ryder. “Hey, I don’t want you to have to lie to her to see me. We can figure out some other way.” He stopped on the corner and searched his brother’s face, inwardly cursing. No seventeen-year-old kid should have the strain on his face that Landon had. But then again, no seventeen-year-old should have to lie to see his older brother. Damn his parents for putting them in this untenable position.

Angry blue eyes, so like his own, held his gaze. “Do you know why she said you weren’t home on Thanksgiving?” The midafternoon crush on Second Avenue was dense with shoppers out for the after-Thanksgiving sales, so Ryder had to lean close to hear.

“I have a feeling I’m not going to want to hear this.”

“When we sat down to dinner, I asked where you were. She said, ‘*I spoke with your brother.*’ She doesn’t ever call you by your name anymore; it’s always ‘your brother.’ Anyway”—Landon gave a kick to an empty coffee cup that rolled to his feet—“she said, ‘*I personally invited him, but he had other plans, probably with a man, and wouldn’t be able to join us, no matter how hard I begged. Obviously, he chose a stranger over his own flesh and blood.*’”

It broke his heart to hear his brother in so much pain. Ryder prided himself that under the circumstances, the fact that he hadn’t lost it and gone bat-shit crazy was pretty damn amazing. Without answering, he hailed a cab and waited until the two of them got comfortable to speak.

“Look at me, Landon.”

His brother faced him, the evidence of his inner torment apparent by the downward tug of his mouth and the hurt in his eyes. Again Ryder wanted to punch something. His brother shouldn’t have to deal with anything other than his next trig test and how he was going to sneak beer into the school dance.

“I’m only going to say this once. I would never turn down dinner at home. Yes, I spoke to her, and yes, she invited me, but only if I promised her to give up my lifestyle and start dating the women she wants me to.”

The look on Landon's face was priceless. "She thinks you can give up being gay? Like cigarettes or too many shopping trips to Bloomingdales?" He gave a crooked grin. "That's pretty fuckin' stupid even for her."

God, he loved his brother. Landon *got* it. "Yeah. She even had my future wife all picked out for me." He burst into laughter at Landon's boggled eyes. "Don't worry, not happening."

Landon moaned. "Maybe I'll apply to the University of Tibet or something so she won't be able to bother me."

They shared a laugh all the way downtown and were still laughing as Ryder opened the door to his apartment. Pearl came loping down the hall, barking like crazy when she saw Landon. She and Landon loved each other, but his mother would never let Ryder bring his dog over to their apartment on Park Avenue, for fear she'd rip the throat out of her tiny teacup dogs.

Landon dropped his backpack and rubbed Pearl's belly. "She looks great, Ry. I'm so glad you took her in."

"Me too. She's been a great friend and keeps me company."

They took her out for a walk, then let her loose in the dog run for an hour. On the way home, Ryder stopped by the local grocery store and, leaving Landon outside with Pearl, grabbed some snacks, soda, and more beer for himself. They came home, and Pearl went right for her water bowl, slurping noisily. He brought over a soda for his brother and a beer for himself and threw several bags of chips and pretzels on the coffee table. Watching Landon eye his drink, he pinned him down with a stern glare. "Don't even think of asking, buddy. Just 'cause I'm your cool, gay older brother doesn't mean I'm gonna let you drink when we hang out."

"Not like I haven't had it before." Landon rolled his eyes and grumbled as he popped the top of the soda can.

"Don't be a schmuck. That's all I need, for you to go home with beer on your breath. Mom will find out, and then when will we ever see each other?" Ryder took a swallow of his beer. "Are you all going skiing as usual during Christmas?" Every year, they'd always gone to Jackson Hole for two weeks of skiing and snowboarding.

Uncomfortable, Landon nodded. "Yeah. I guess you weren't asked to come."

“Nope, and I didn’t think I would be.” Ryder switched on the TV and handed Landon the Xbox controller. “Come on, I haven’t tried out the new *Call of Duty* game.”

Nearly choking on his drink, Landon grabbed the controller out of his hand. “Dude, how did you score this? It’s sold out everywhere.” He turned the Xbox on and immediately started playing. “This is so awesome. Wait till the guys find out.”

“Remember Matt, the guy I used to go out with? He had a contact, and even though we aren’t together anymore, the guy always sends me the newest games before they hit the stores.”

Landon shot him a look before training his eyes back on the TV screen. “Yeah, I remember him. You really liked him. Whatever happened between the two of you?”

With the innate sense that dogs have to pick up when their owners always need comforting, Pearl came to him and put her head on his knee, looking for a scratch. “It’s been a long time. We wanted different things.”

Landon stopped playing. Whoa. That meant something serious was about to go down.

“I’m your brother, Ry. I may only be seventeen, but you can tell me. I mean I know you’re gay. So what? I know you loved him. Did he cheat on you, the fucker?”

Ryder was touched to see how much his brother truly cared for him. Maybe he was wrong not to push his mother and demand he be allowed to see him in the open, instead of going behind her back.

“No, he didn’t. It’s that he loved his drugs more than he loved me, and I wasn’t willing to be second place.” He petted Pearl’s soft, silky ears. He wondered if he was ever really in love with Matt, or if he was in love with the idea of being in love.

“So is there anyone new, anyone you’re interested in?” Landon’s voice was crunchy with chips.

Unbidden, an image of Jason Mallory, with his curling black hair and dark blue eyes, came to mind. Since their first meeting, Ryder had woken up many nights, gasping for breath, sweat-dampened sheets twisted around his ankles, his hand wrapped around a hard and aching erection, in the throes of a spectacular orgasm. And each and every time, his dream had

been of Jason Mallory, on his knees, taking him deep into that sexy, full mouth of his, or deep inside him, sliding in and out, over and over, harder and harder, until the friction and the burn, the thrust and the glide became so intense Ryder came, spurting endlessly into his sheets, the walls of his empty apartment echoing with his shouts.

Fuck me now.

“There is, isn’t there?” Landon’s eyes were bright with excitement. Thank God Pearl’s head was in Ryder’s lap and hid the bulge in his jeans he’d gotten from remembering his decidedly erotic and nasty wet dreams of Jason.

“No. There isn’t.”

“Bullshit. I saw your face. You were thinking of someone.” Landon went to the kitchen to get another soda. Even with Landon’s head in the fridge, Ryder heard the laughter in his voice. “Besides, you have a boner the size of a salami, so don’t tell me there’s no one.”

Fuck my life.

“Forget about it. I’m not discussing my sex life with my seventeen-year-old brother.”

Landon stood before him, challenging him. “Why not? If you were straight, I bet you would. Is it ’cause I haven’t been with a girl yet? That doesn’t mean I can’t listen to you or help you out.”

Agitated, Ryder jumped off the couch. “Let’s order dinner. It’s already five o’clock.”

“Wouldn’t you want me to talk to you about having sex for the first time, or if I had a serious girlfriend? Don’t you know I’m there for you, and you don’t have to be embarrassed to tell me because you’re gay?” To his surprise, Landon grabbed him around the shoulders. “Don’t shut me out. You have no idea how awful it is at home. Mom’s constantly criticizing everything I do, and Dad’s hardly there, always working.”

Parenting needed to come with a manual. Either that, or some people should never have children. Being straight didn’t mean you’d make a good parent. That should be obvious to everyone, with all the abused and neglected children in the world. Yet somehow he was a pariah, unfit to be a parent and, according to his mother, unfit to be her son.

“It isn’t that.” He pulled Landon down on the sofa next to him. “I’m not embarrassed. And yes, I hope you will come to me so I can teach you about safe sex.”

Another eye roll. “I know all about it.”

“Knowing it is one thing. Practicing it in the heat of the moment is another thing.” Ryder knew he sounded like an old fart, but safe sex was too important to joke about.

“Have you ever, you know”—Landon’s face flushed bright red—“not used a condom?”

“No, not ever.”

Landon exhaled loudly. “Good.” He punched Ryder in the shoulder and shot him an evil grin. “Now tell me about the guy.”

Ryder shrugged. “Nothing to tell. He’s straight, recently broke up with his girlfriend, and not into guys. End of story.” He breathed out. Not so bad, finally saying it in the light of day. “I’m not interested in a relationship anyway. Too hard on the heart. Best to keep everything light and easy, you know?”

Landon’s smile was sympathetic. “You can say it, but I know you. You’re too caring. I know you’ll find someone who’s right for you. He smiled. “I’m starving. Let’s order dinner. I want tandoori chicken and garlic naan.”

“When did you get to be so smart above love, my man?” Ryder snickered. “Are you sure there’s no girlfriend?” He placed the order and tossed the phone on the sofa.

Landon turned red. “Nah. Nothing. Let’s play this game. I wanna beat your ass tonight, before I have to go home.”

They played until the food came, and then Landon reluctantly left.

Ryder hailed Landon a cab but held on to his brother before he got inside. “I promise I won’t let her keep us apart. Let’s make it a set time that you come here every Wednesday for a brothers’ night.”

Landon’s face lit up with happiness. “Cool, definitely.”

Ryder gave him twenty dollars and watched the cab’s taillights disappear down Broadway, then headed back inside to his apartment. The phone was ringing as he opened the door and, thinking it was Landon, he dove headfirst onto the couch where he’d left the handset. “Hello. Hello?”

“Um, is this Ryder, Ryder Daniels?” It was a deep, somewhat familiar voice, and he searched his memory to place it, as he caught his breath.

“Yeah, who’s this?” With the phone wedged between his ear and shoulder, Ryder threw the takeout containers in the garbage and the cans in the recycling bin.

“Hey, it’s Jason, Jason Mallory, from the construction site a few days ago.”

Ryder almost dropped the phone. Holy shit. “Hey, yeah, sure, I remember you. What’s up?” He sank down into a chair in the kitchen. “Wait a minute. How did you get my home number?”

He’d bet his left nut it was Emily.

“I called the office, and Emily gave me your number.”

Of course. Emily Halstead, matchmaker extraordinaire.

“Okay, so what can I help you with, Jason?” The guy sounded nervous, so he was intrigued.

“Well, I know this is gonna sound lame, but you did such a great job with the dogs, and I wanted to say thanks.”

Yeah, it did sound lame, but what the hell. “Okay. You’re welcome. Anything else?”

Ryder knew he sounded like a prick, but he wasn’t in the mood.

“Uh, yeah. I spoke to Emily, but she said to talk to you about it. I’d really like to adopt that puppy if it’s possible.”

Ryder couldn’t help but smile. He’d seen the interest Jason showed in the puppy and hoped he’d want to adopt him, but as the days dragged on, Ryder figured the guy had forgotten about it.

“That’d be great. His paw is healing nicely too. He responded really well to the antibiotics for the bites, and the vet said other than that, he’s clean.”

“Wow, that’s great.” There was true happiness in Jason’s voice. “I really fell for the little guy. Um, there’s one more thing.”

Ryder braced himself. “Yeah?”

“I’d like to invite you and your friends over to my friend’s bar tonight to watch the game if you’re not busy. You do like the Nets, right? Tell me

you're not a Knicks fan, 'cause I may have to take back the invite." He laughed.

Ryder liked the teasing in his voice. This was good. He, Connor, and Emily could all hang out with Jason and his friends, no big deal. "Sure, that sounds great. Give me the where and when."

"Well, the game starts at eight, so anytime after that works. When I told Emily, she said to tell you Connor wants you to find your own way there and back. I could hear him laughing in the background, so I presume you understand why that's funny?"

"It's Connor being a douche." Oh, he knew why. Connor wanted Ryder to go home with someone. God, the two of them needed to stop trying to set him up with every unattached guy they met.

The object of his current nighttime fantasy sounded confused. "Well, all right. So I hope to see you. The place is called Drummers, and it's in Bensonhurst. A neighborhood place."

"Sounds cool. Thanks, Jason. See you then." He ended the conversation and looked at the clock. It was six thirty. He had time for a quick run and a shower before spending the night with the first man to interest him in almost a year.

Gorgeous, nice, and 100 percent straight. A sure recipe for disaster.

Chapter Six

“So who are these people, Jason? You’ve never invited anyone over to hang out with us before.” Mark dug into the platter of nachos as John set up the glasses on the bar. “Is the girl cute at least?”

“Her name is Emily, and she isn’t a girl, you Neanderthal. She’s a woman, and she’s married.” Ryder finished his beer. “Her husband’s name is Connor, and he seems really cool, but I doubt he’d appreciate you talking trash about his wife.”

John slid another beer across the bar to him. “There’s another guy coming, you said?”

Liam joined them. “Yeah, some surfer-looking dude named Ryder. No competition, though, for us with the chicks, ’cause the guy’s gay.”

John raised a brow. “You sound like you got a problem with that.”

Jason couldn’t believe it. “Are you serious, man? Liam doesn’t give a shit, do you?” Aside from that one stupid comment the day the dogs were rescued, Liam had never made any negative remarks about gay people before.

His brother grunted, took a plate, and started loading up on wings and sliders. “As long as he doesn’t make a pass at me, I’m fine.” He gulped down his beer and, waving a chicken wing in the air, declared, “I’m strictly a ladies’ man. I don’t want anyone’s dick in my ass.”

Jason winced at his brother’s crudeness. As he reached across the bar to pick up a plate, he froze at the sound of the voice that, for some reason, he couldn’t get out of his mind.

“Oh, good. I’ll make sure to keep it in my pants instead of hanging out in the open, looking for any ass in the storm like I usually do.”

Fan-fuckin-tastic. Jason’s heart sank as he heard Ryder’s icy-calm voice.

“Shit, man, this is really fucked-up,” John muttered. “I’m guessing this is the other guy, Jase.”

“Ryder, hey, glad you came.” At the guy’s sardonic raised eyebrow, Jason grabbed him by the arm. “C’mere.” He pulled the guy over to an empty table. “Let’s sit for a few.”

“I’d rather stand, thanks. If I’m going to get my ass beat or listen to any more bullshit, I’d rather be able to leave in a hurry.”

This was not how the night was supposed to turn out. He thought he’d invite Ryder, Emily, and her husband over and get to know them since he wanted to adopt the puppy from them. Emily told him Ryder always did the family evaluations to make sure dog and potential owner were a good match. But inviting them here to hang out with his friends was more than about adopting the puppy. He kept thinking of that confrontation with Ryder in the hallway of the town house but instead of it ending in anger, wishing they came out as friends.

When he thought how dedicated Ryder was to the animals, his admiration grew ten-fold for the guy and he wanted to become his friend. It didn’t matter to Jason if Ryder was gay, like he didn’t care that the other two were married. It was none of anyone’s business who slept with whom. Hell, if he wanted to sleep with a guy, he’d probably want to sleep with Ryder too; he was beautiful to look at. Plenty of women in the bar gave him the once-over when he walked by, but of course he was oblivious.

“Have you always known you were gay?” Jason couldn’t believe he’d blurted that out. From the speakers hanging above the bar, Michael Stipe of REM crooned about losing his religion. Jason was fast losing his equilibrium and his mind.

Ryder seemed to take it in stride, shrugging. “I knew something was different. I mean in high school, I went out with a few girls and tried to kiss them, but it did nothing for me. Then one day, I was in the locker room, changing after track and the football team was finishing up. I thought the room was empty, when one of the guys came over to me, slammed me into the wall, and started kissing me.” Ryder’s eyes took on a distant look, as though he were sixteen again and back in that locker room as he told the story.

“Ahh, that sounds like it might’ve hurt.” Could Jason sound any stupider? He downed another gulp of beer.

Ryder’s lips curved up in a sweet smile. “You would think, but I was so turned on I thought I’d explode. As it was, it took him three simple strokes

to get me off.” He blinked, as if realizing what he’d said out loud. He turned red. “Crap, I’m sorry if I embarrassed you.”

Jason couldn’t tear his eyes away from Ryder. For some inexplicable reason, his body responded to Ryder’s story, and he didn’t know why. Maybe Liam was right and he did need to get laid. “Don’t be stupid. Look who I’m dealing with, if you want to know embarrassing.” He pointed to his brothers, then slid a sideways glance to Ryder.

What was happening here? Lately, no matter how hard he tried to think of something else, the memory of his one crazy night years ago in college with another man wouldn’t leave him. But in his dreams it was Ryder he was kissing, not the friend whose face he could barely remember. He sat hunched over his beer bottle while his mind spun out of control. Picturing a young, seminaked Ryder, kissed into oblivion, all that silky golden hair spread behind him, lips probably wet and bruised from hard and rough kissing had his dick aching and his blood pounding. How could he confess that the story the man told him turned him on in a way he’d never thought possible?

“Damn.” He swore into his bottle, downing the rest of the beer.

“Hey, what’s the matter? You don’t look too good.” Ryder leaned down, his concerned face disturbingly near, and Jason caught a whiff of his scent again. His cheek was close enough so Jason could see the golden stubble on his jaw.

This is too fucking weird. He stood up so abruptly the stool almost toppled over. “Wait right here a sec.”

Before the night turned into a complete disaster, Jason dragged his brother back over to where Ryder was sitting. “Okay. Liam is going to apologize for his dumbass remark, right?”

Liam had the grace to turn red. “Yeah. I’m sorry, man. I didn’t mean it the way it sounded. I guess I meant to say I’m not into guys.”

“And you don’t want them in you,” Ryder shot back.

Jason cracked up. “Good one, Ryder.”

Liam’s lips twitched. “Am I allowed to laugh? ’Cause that was pretty fucking funny.”

Ryder snickered. “Yup.”

After staring at him hard, as if he was taking his measure, Liam smiled. “I like you, Ryder. Let’s get a beer.”

Crisis averted, Liam pulled Ryder over to the bar, with Mark in tow. Jason breathed a sigh of relief. He spotted Connor and Emily entering the bar and waved them over. “Hey, guys, come on over. Ryder’s already here.”

Emily pointed them out to Connor, who draped his arm over her shoulders in the universal symbol of possessiveness. Couldn’t blame the guy. If Jason had a woman like her, he’d want everyone to know it too. Gorgeous, nice, and smart—a killer combo.

“Hey, Jason.” Emily kissed his cheek, while Connor slapped his back, eyes on the bar and the platters of food.

“Oh man, Jase, are those nachos and tacos I spy with my little eye?” The man sounded like he might cry from happiness. “And there’s fresh guac. I’m in heaven. I’ll send your drink over, Em.” He kissed his wife and headed over to the food, giving Ryder a fist bump as he passed.

Emily’s met Jason’s amused gaze and groaned with mock despair. “He can’t help himself. His stomach is like the black void.” She waved to Ryder, who winked at her but continued talking to Liam and Mark.

“Who are those guys Ryder’s talking to? One of them looks familiar.” She accepted a Sea Breeze from the bartender with a wide smile. John blinked slowly as he fell under her spell, returning her smile with one of his rarely given grins. Emily was like that, Jason noticed. She was a woman whose presence brought out the best in the people around her.

“The tall one with the blue sweater is my brother Liam. He was at the construction site. Next to him is my brother Mark. He’s the youngest. Our friend John behind the bar, he owns the place.”

She looked over her shoulder at John and waved. Startled, he gave her a hesitant smile back. Jason had never seen John react to any woman before. Perhaps she could bring him out of his self-imposed shell. Connor, holding a full plate and munching on a taco, joined Jason’s brothers and Ryder. Jason was happy to see the earlier fiasco hadn’t spiraled out of control. As to how he’d physically reacted to Ryder before, he chalked it up to mere curiosity. Perfectly normal.

“Do you have any other family, Jason?” Emily sipped her drink and nibbled on a slider. “Oh, these are very good. You may never get rid of Connor.”

“John’s a great cook. He’ll make a good husband one day. And to answer your question, yes, I have two sisters, Nicole and Jessica.”

“And none of you are married. How about girlfriends?” She looked up at him. “You said you broke up with someone recently, but are you dating or involved with anyone yet?”

“You’re full of questions, aren’t you?” Jason huffed out a laugh. Why did he feel as though she was interviewing him for a position?

She smirked. “One of the benefits, or downsides, of being married to a lawyer. Take your pick.” She narrowed those pretty but sharp blue eyes at him. “You still didn’t answer my question, though.”

He chuckled her under her chin. “Nope. Not involved with anyone. I’m not really looking.”

“Probably ’cause no one would want you anyways.” A sneering voice interrupted him.

Spinning around, he came face-to-face with Chloe. He hadn’t seen her in the few weeks since they broke up, and he hadn’t missed her at all. “Hello, Chloe.”

She stood before him in her barhopping uniform, now that he recognized it. Black skinny jeans, tight tank top to emphasize her breasts, and killer heels. Her hair was perfectly curled, and the eye makeup rivaled Lady Gaga’s on a rough night. “Who’s this, Jase, my replacement? I didn’t think you were into skinny blondes.”

God, how could he have gone out with her as long as he had? It was almost embarrassing to have to introduce her to his new friends.

“Hello, my name’s Emily. Are you Jason’s ex-girlfriend?” Class act, that Emily, Jason noted.

Chloe’s dismissive gaze flicked over Emily, up and down. “I broke up with him a few weeks ago, honey. Don’t bother, though. He’s not interested in getting married.”

Jason was about to open his mouth when Connor came over and slipped his arm around Emily. “Who’s this, sweetheart?”

With reluctance, Jason introduced Connor and Ryder. Chloe dismissed Emily with a sniff. “Huh. I figured you couldn’t be his girlfriend. Jase is too boring and dull. Besides, he wouldn’t go out with anyone so quick after me. We were together three years, ya know.”

Jason's gut clenched. Had she really been such a bitch all the years they were together, and he'd failed to see it? He watched in fascination as Ryder approached his smirking ex-girlfriend, a glint of unholy amusement lighting up his bright blue eyes. The man was up to something.

"Well, hey, sweetheart. You're very beautiful, aren't you?" Ryder's gaze traveled up and down Chloe, and Jason watched as she preened and moved closer to him. "Jason must've been six fools to Sunday to let you go, huh?" No surprise Chloe would be on him like jelly over peanut butter. Ryder was an extremely good-looking man.

Her giggle, once cute, now sounded like nails on a blackboard. "Why, thank you. How do you know him?" She jerked her thumb. Apparently he didn't even rate a name when she flirted with another man. Jason had to hold in his laughter. What would she do when she found out she was flirting with a gay man?

Ryder leaned closer. "I'm sure Jason could never replace someone like you as a girlfriend." She moved closer to him until her breasts pushed up against his chest. Ryder continued to murmur into her willing ear.

Connor leaned over and whispered to Jason. "Are you brave enough to play along with him?"

A worm of worry crept through him. "Why, what's he going to do?"

Connor shushed Emily's giggles to answer. "Ryder will take things to the extreme if you play along with him. He and I have done some pretty funny stuff to prove a point or to piss people off."

"I guess I'm game." To a degree, he thought warily, but it was too late to back out now.

Chloe's nails were doing the scratch and walk up Ryder's chest. She had grabbed the top button of his shirt when Ryder closed his hand over hers. "Oh, honey, I don't think so."

A familiar pout tugged down her full, glossy lips. "Why not?" She dragged a long red nail over his hand. "We could go somewhere and discuss it."

"Wait for it," Connor muttered in his ear.

Jason braced himself for the unknown.

Ryder brushed her hands away. "Because, honey, I'm gay. And I have a hot boyfriend." He turned and pierced Jason with those bright blue eyes.

“Right, Jase?”

What the fuck?

“Are you willing to play along?” Emily’s breathy voice touched him like a caress, but he was more drawn to the man now standing in front of him. And with everyone around him, his brothers and friends, people from the neighborhood, he stepped up to Ryder with no hesitation at all.

“Got that right.”

Unashamedly, Ryder slid his arm around Jason’s shoulder and pulled him close “Don’t worry. I’m not going to kiss you. I wanted to shake the bitch up a bit.” Ryder’s mouth barely touched his ear, and they might not be kissing, but the trembling sensations in his body caused by the mere nearness of Ryder’s lips left him dizzy with uncertainty and never-before-dreamed-of desire.

Chloe wasn’t the only one shaken up, it seemed.

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Chapter Seven

Over the next several months, Ryder marveled at the changes in his life. The best thing was that he and Landon, in addition to spending every Wednesday evening together for their brothers' night, managed to circumvent the no-texting-or-calling moratorium set up by their mother, as Ryder got him a pre-paid phone. Month-to-month and untraceable, it was the perfect solution. He'd given his brother a key to his apartment, and there was nothing he liked better than coming home to the television blaring and Landon stretched out on the sofa with Pearl, a litter of junk-food bags surrounding him.

Jason's adoption of the puppy had also gone smoothly, and Trouper, as he was now called, settled into his new life as king of the house. Ryder chuckled to himself as he sat in the back of the cab on his way to Drummers. Before he'd brought the dog home, Jason had bought out the pet store's supply of chew toys and treats. That dog was one lucky fellow.

With or without Emily and Connor, Ryder had begun to hang out at Drummers after his day had finished. The bar had a good, homey feel to it with classic rock purring out of the walls and excellent bar food that never ended. He liked John, who never pressed him for inane conversation if he saw Ryder had a bad day; John would nod and pass him a beer with no questions asked and an understanding smile. Jason's brothers were fine, although the younger one, Mark, liked to try and psychoanalyze him a bit too much, and he'd learned to ignore Liam's less than enlightened remarks about current events.

But mostly he liked hanging out with Jason. They discovered a shared passion for running, and several times a week Jason would join him for an after-work run. Sometimes they ended up having Mexican food at the burrito joint down the block from him, or they might take the dogs with them, then pick up Chinese takeout and crash at his apartment to watch a movie.

There were times Jason couldn't make it, and even though he never said, Ryder was sure Jason was out on a date. It didn't surprise him. He was a normal guy, and Ryder figured he wasn't sitting at home by himself every night. What did surprise him was how much the thought of Jason out on a date bothered him. He tamped down the irrational stab of jealousy that centered in his chest on those nights and went for a run with Pearl instead. They were friends, nothing more, and Ryder was determined not to fall for the guy.

And all that was picture-perfect until he came home one night, anxious to see Landon, planning his ultimate defeat at *Call of Duty*, and the apartment was dark. Dropping his backpack, he heard Pearl's nails clicking in the wooden floor.

"Where is he, girl? What happened?"

He flipped on the light, and that was when he saw the note on the coffee table. The blood in his veins turned cold as he recognized his mother's elegant, precise penmanship.

Keep away from my son.

Devastated, Ryder slumped to the floor, hugging Pearl to his chest. In the back of his mind he knew the good times spent with his brother had all been an illusion. Stupidly, he'd fooled himself into believing one day he'd be able to go home again and be accepted with loving arms. He envied the gay men and women he'd seen interviewed on the television, talking about how their families accepted them for who they were, loved them no matter what. He'd never know that pleasure.

The times he'd been allowed to spend with Landon were more precious to him, now that they were gone. Tears fell unchecked on Pearl's fur as he cried without shame, knowing he'd lost a part of his heart and his soul.

"What am I going to do, girl? It hurts so bad." He almost couldn't catch his breath. His cell phone rang, but he let it go to voice mail. The one person he wanted to talk to was out of his reach. It rang again, and he didn't bother to check; he turned off the ringer.

He grabbed a beer and lay down on the sofa. A thought came to him that if Landon still had his phone, Landon would be able to text him. With raised hopes, he checked his phone, only to see three missed calls from Connor and Emily's number. He turned back on the ringer but didn't bother

returning the calls. Much as he loved his friends, he couldn't pick himself up to call them back.

He must've dozed off, because the next thing he knew, Emily was kneeling beside him, shaking him. "Ryder, sweetie, are you all right?" A hazy fog hung over his eyes, and he blinked hard to clear his vision.

"Wh-what's going on? What time is it?" Ryder struggled up on his elbows and squinted at his watch. "Shit." Remembering Landon was no longer going to be there, he broke down in tears. "He's gone, guys. She took him away, and she won't ever let him come back."

* * * *

After a long night of talk and soul-searching, Connor persuaded him to go out the next evening to Drummers, even though he felt like crap. "Come on, man. The game is on, and John said he was doing wings five different ways." Though Connor teased, his concern was evident. Ryder had called in sick today, preferring to spend the day moping at home, unshaven, unwashed, and feeling completely unloved.

"Why don't you and Em go by yourselves? You don't need me. I'm in no mood to socialize." He rolled over and closed his eyes. Every text he'd sent Landon on the phone had been returned as undeliverable. His mother must've discovered the phone and disabled it somehow.

"Ryder, please. You can't sit here by yourself. Maybe if we all put our heads together, we can come up with another way you and Landon can see each other." Emily's sympathetic face hurt his heart. He knew she grieved over his mother's unfair treatment of him. She put her hand on his shoulder, comforting him with her warm presence. She had a point. Maybe he could talk to Jason's younger brother, Mark, the psych student. Mark might be able to give him some insight into his mother's behavior and how he could best deal with her.

He pulled himself up and shrugged. "Okay, but don't expect me to be great company."

Connor smirked. "I'm going for the wings, man. John makes some awesome sauce."

Shaking his head, Ryder got out of bed to shower and change. Only Connor could put a smile on his face. And Jason. Inexplicably his body

tightened and the blood raced through his veins. He missed Jason's company.

Connor found a parking spot right outside the bar. He cackled with glee. "A perfect night is when you find a spot right away." He grabbed Emily's hand. "Come on, babe. Ry, let's rock and roll. The wings, they are awaiting."

One would think the man hadn't eaten in a week the way he carried on about the food. They entered the bar, and Ryder's spirits were lifted immediately by the warm and raucous welcome they all received. Connor naturally made a beeline for the much-discussed wings. Emily, who had a personal champion in John, kissed the blushing bar owner hello first, then greeted their other friends.

"Ry, over here." Ryder turned to see Jason beckoning him over. He shouldered his way through a knot of people, greeting the now familiar faces of the people he'd been hanging with for several months. He realized he was glad Emily and Connor forced him to come. He strengthened his resolve to find a way to see his brother again, and let him enjoy himself tonight.

"Hey, dude, what's up? How's Troup?" Ryder hadn't seen the little guy in a few days and missed his puppyish exuberance. The little mutt never failed to bring a smile to everyone's face with his antics.

A smile broke across Jason's face. "Ahh, he's great. I took him over to my parents' house yesterday, and the girls fell in love with him. He's a real charmer." He plunked himself down at a table, indicating Ryder should join him. "I'm gonna take him over there some mornings when I know I'll be late on the job."

"You could bring him to my apartment if you want, and he could hang out with Pearl," said Ryder, keeping his voice casual. "Of course that's if you're still doing a job close by, like you are now." Mallory Bros. Construction had scored a condo conversion on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, so he knew Jason was traveling into the city every day. "I could give you an extra key and let Clarence know to let you up, if I'm not home."

Jason seemed uncertain. "I don't want to put you out or anything."

Ryder shrugged. "It's cool. No big deal."

"Okay, thanks." Jason smiled at him. "How about a beer?"

Ryder agreed, and Jason left for the bar to get their drinks. Emily slid into his vacated seat.

“Hey, baby.” He squeezed her fingers. “I have to thank you for forcing me to come out tonight. You were right.”

Her smile lit up her face. “I’m glad, sweetie.”

He and Emily sat quietly for a moment before she spoke. “You really like Jason, don’t you, Ry?”

“He’s become a great friend. Sure, I like him.”

Lowering her voice, she touched his hand. “I see how your eyes follow him across the room. You look wounded, because you think happiness is impossible for you. Since you guys started hanging out, you’re the happiest you’ve been in years. It’s more than friendship for you, isn’t it?”

Ryder opened his mouth, then snapped it close. Jason leaned against the bar to talk to John and flirted with a pretty redhead who was paying for her drink. The overhead lighting cast his face in half-shadows, outlining the planes of his cheek and jaw. His dark, curling hair brushed his neck, touching the collar of his shirt. His faded jeans hugged his muscular legs, and Ryder eyed the curve of his ass as he propped his leg up on a stool, bending down to listen to the woman. It shouldn’t surprise or upset him to see Jason with a woman, but the heart never followed the direct instruction from the brain. It was like a child turning his back on his elder and wiser parents, declaring he would do what he wanted and no one could stop him.

“No.” He shook his head, more determined than ever to shield himself from the pain falling for a man like Jason would cause to his heart. It was as inevitable as the wind and as harsh as the brightness of the sun on a crisp winter’s day. And in the end, he’d be left once again, devastated and alone.

Emily’s wise eyes studied him for a heartbeat. “The road leading to happiness is never the straightest one. The obstacles and curves it throws in our way make us wiser and stronger.” Her warm hand held his, fingers curling around his palm to give him a comforting squeeze. “You will find happiness, sweetie. You’re at a curve right now and need to pick a path.”

“Emily, you’re talking in riddles. You sound like one of those New Age gurus.” Jason returned with the beer, along with a plateful of food for them. “Thanks, man.”

Under lowered lashes, he studied Jason's profile. The blunt, strong hands of the man fascinated him. He'd seen those strong fingers stroke his dog with tender care, as well as haul heavy Sheetrock panels. Ryder's mood darkened as he imagined those same powerful hands gripping the headboard above his bed as Jason, naked, sweaty, and calling out his name, pounded into him. Smothering a frustrated curse, he shoved a chicken wing into his mouth and chewed.

Emily excused herself after shooting him a frustrated glare and returned to Connor's side.

Ryder drank down his beer, then casually asked, "So, did you get her number?"

"Nah." Jason shrugged and drank his beer. "Not my type."

Surprised, Ryder said nothing, choosing to drink his beer and eat the wings and sliders Jason had piled on his plate rather than talk. Idly he listened to the music from the TV, which played one of the music channels. All at once he froze, hearing a familiar voice, then stared in disbelief at the screen, watching an interview of music's up-and-coming producers.

Matt. His former lover. The bottle of beer slipped from his nerveless fingers to crash on the floor. "Shit."

Jason jumped out of his seat. "Ryder, are you okay? What's the matter?"

Ryder didn't answer. How could this be? It was definitely Matt, looking healthy and happy without a care in the world. "Shh." He waved his hand for Jason to be quiet. "Let me listen to this." The interviewer posed a question concerning Matt's rise in the industry within the past year.

As he stared at the face of the man he'd once loved, Ryder's heart broke open all over again as he listened to the answer.

"I was in a bad relationship for a long time. When I hit rock bottom from all the drugs, I knew I had to change my life. I changed my diet, my mind-set on life, and met my girlfriend. With her love and help, I won my battle. We married last month, and I've never been happier."

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Ryder jerked his concentration from the screen and met Connor's sympathetic eyes. Many a night he'd spent with Connor, getting drunk after he and Matt broke up. That was the great thing about his friend. No judgment, simply a shoulder to cry on and

someone to drink with, who kept the beer coming. Someone who knew him as well as he knew himself. “How could he say that load of crap? Bad relationship? The man was high all the time. I begged him to get help every single fucking day, but he brushed me off.” He downed the rest of his beer and reached for Connor’s. “I need to get drunk. This has been one hell of a day.”

He pushed himself away from the table and headed toward the bar, Connor following. “Ry, slow down.”

Was he kidding? “John, let me have a beer, and keep ’em coming.” After downing half the bottle, Ryder placed it back on the bar and faced his friend, arms folded across his chest. “What are you gonna tell me? That it was a long time ago and I should be over it by now? That I’m better off without him?”

“If we’re being honest, aren’t you?”

Perversely, he wanted to pick a fight with Connor, who was only trying to help. But he didn’t want to be rational and calm. He wanted to scream, yell, and break something.

“So time heals all wounds?” The bitterness in his voice disgusted him. How pathetic he sounded. Shouldn’t he have gotten over Matt by now? But it wasn’t Matt, rather than the realization that his love had never been returned or appreciated. Why did he allow himself to be used by men? He picked up the beer and finished it, holding out his hand for the next one. A decidedly unsteady hand he noticed.

“It does, if you let it.”

“You know, my heart doesn’t have a use-by date. There’s no expiration for my feelings when you can say time’s up, you’ve mourned long enough.” Another drink and another half bottle gone. He was getting good at this. Hazy from the beers, he swayed, then braced himself by leaning on the bar.

“Hey, Ry, look at me.” Connor patted his cheek, and Ryder met his friend’s unflinching, honest green eyes. “You know you’re like my brother, right?”

Choked up, he could only nod.

“So don’t punch me when I tell you to grow a pair of balls and move on. That shithead used you for a year, and he’s gotten on with his life. He’s

had no trouble forgetting you, so forget him.” Connor gave him a thin smile. “You know they say living well is the best revenge.”

Emily tugged on Connor’s sleeve. “Babe, I don’t feel so good. I need to go home.” She gave him an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry; it’s been a really long day.”

“Don’t apologize, baby. Go ahead, you and Connor. I’m hanging for a while.” Ryder slumped against the bar and toyed with his beer bottle. Jason came to stand by his side.

“I can take you home, Ry.” Jason’s solid presence sent out danger signals to his already overstimulated senses.

“I can grab a cab. ’S all right.” Desperate to keep his distance from the man who invaded his thoughts but would never be interested, he fought to stand straight and failed miserably.

“Cool it, man. Sit and chill for a while.” Jason pointed to John. “Give him water.”

His mouth tightened with anger. Everyone believed they knew what was best for him, like he was some kind of kid. Ryder’s breath caught as Jason’s arm draped over his shoulder.

“Shut up and drink your water. Then I’m taking you home.”

Oh damn, he was so screwed.

Chapter Eight

Ryder refused to leave for another hour. He became testy when John tried to cut him off, but when the bar owner threatened to kick him out, Jason got Ryder to agree that for every beer, he'd drink a glass of water. At least there was another liquid other than alcohol going into the man's system. Jason also forced him to eat a turkey sandwich.

"What happened? Why's he getting so trashed? It's not like him, from what we've seen over the past few months." Liam pulled Jason aside, and he filled him in on what he knew, that this guy Matt had been Ryder's boyfriend and a drug addict. Now he was married to a woman, and in cleaning up his act, he blamed their relationship for his troubles.

"I guess Ryder feels lied to, 'cause he thought they had a serious relationship. He'd been in love with the guy for a year." Jason shrugged. "It's gotta hurt to hear this guy say their relationship was bad and the reason he became hooked on drugs."

Liam glanced over at a dejected Ryder, still sitting at the bar, shoulders slumped. "That's seriously fucked up, man. He's a good guy. I mean, I've never known anyone who was gay, but he's cool."

Mark, who'd also been listening, while at the same time keeping an eye on Ryder, coughed out a laugh. "Not that I don't blame you for wanting to smash that bastard in the face, but how would you know if someone was gay unless they told you? And the way people like you react, why would they tell you when there is still so much prejudice?" Uncomfortable, Jason felt the weight of his younger brother's provocative question. "Do you feel uncomfortable being friends with a gay guy, Jason? Like people might think you were gay too?"

There was something behind Mark's interrogation, Jason decided, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Mark never said anything that didn't have meaning behind it, being the psych student that he was, but Jason didn't

have time to figure it out. It was almost one in the morning, and he needed to get Ryder home.

Jumping up from his seat, he stretched out a huge yawn. “That’s stupid. Like I’m gay by association. I don’t give a shit what people think of me, and I don’t care who Ryder sleeps with. If they think I’m gay because of my friends, fuck ’em.” He headed toward the bar. “I’ll catch up with you guys tomorrow. I promised Connor I’d take Ryder home.”

He slipped into the seat next to Ryder, who failed to acknowledge him. Trying to lighten the mood and cheer him up, Jason bumped shoulders with him. “C’mon, Ry, let’s go. It’s getting late, and I’m sure you want to go home and sleep it off.”

Ryder faced him, his eyes so full of pain Jason flinched. “I was a good guy, Jase, y’know? I thought he loved me; he tole me so. Now I don’t have him, don’t have my brother, and my parents don’ want me.” He knocked back his glass of water, then squinted into it. “Even John doesn’t like me anymore ’cause he won’ give me another drink. Says I’m drunk when I’m not.”

Ryder leaned over, almost toppling into his lap. Jason grabbed him around the waist before he fell on the floor, and held him upright. “C’mon, buddy, let’s get you up and outta here. Time to go home.” Still holding on to his swaying body, Jason tried but couldn’t ignore the firm play of muscles underneath Ryder’s shirt and the light, clean scent he always carried on his skin.

“Hoo-kay, boss. Le’s go.” He pulled away, walking unsteadily toward the door. Jason called out a good-bye to everyone and hurried after Ryder.

He caught up with his friend, who stood outside, blinking and peering down the street. “This way, Ry. Come on.” Jason led Ryder to his truck and helped him inside. After buckling him into the seat, Jason stood and observed him for a moment. Ryder lay back against the headrest, eyes shut, that amazing hair spread out behind him. His breath came out in soft puffs. All the pain that had been etched in his face earlier seemed to have been wiped clean from his face, leaving him looking young and vulnerable.

With shaking fingers, Jason reached over, poised to touch Ryder’s face. Realizing he stood in the public street, he lurched away from him and slammed the door shut. Jesus, what the hell was he thinking? He shot a furtive look down the block, hoping no one had seen what he’d almost

done. Satisfied he hadn't been caught, he climbed onto the driver's seat, buckled up, and took off. The opened windows allowed the crisp night air to flow into the truck. That plus the Stones singing "Satisfaction" from the car stereo brought forth evidence of life from his dead-drunk passenger.

"Mmm. Love this song. Story of my life." Eyes still closed, but looking less white and strained, Ryder smiled faintly. "How much longer before we get to my apartment?"

Jason looked at the clock on the dashboard. "Hmm, about twenty minutes."

"Wake me when we get there, 'kay?" Jason froze as the top of Ryder's head leaned on his shoulder, brushing his chin. A warm breath sighed into his chest as Ryder settled into him, making himself comfortable for the ride back into the city.

After about half an hour, Jason pulled up in front of Ryder's building. He put a tentative hand on Ryder's head, smoothing down the thick silken strands of hair between his fingers. He wriggled out, leaving Ryder sleeping, and approached the doorman.

"I have to help Mr. Daniels upstairs. Is there anyone who can park my truck or me?"

"Certainly, sir." The doorman who'd previously been introduced as Clarence picked up a house phone and spoke quietly into it. Within moments a young man wearing a porter's uniform appeared.

Perhaps he was used to tenants coming home in less than stable condition, as Clarence was brisk and efficient. "Mr. Mallory, if you give Shane here your keys, he'll park the truck while you take Mr. Daniels upstairs. I'll have your keys waiting for you when you return."

After thanking the doorman, and with Shane's assistance, Jason helped Ryder out of the truck. He'd woken up, thank God, so he could walk on his own two feet, although he was unsteady and uncommunicative. Jason allowed the young man to help him until he got to the elevator.

"I'll take it from here, thanks." He gave the guy five bucks as a thank-you for his effort. "I'll be down later for the truck Clarence said you'd leave the keys at the front desk."

The young porter smiled. "I will. Thank you, sir. Please tell Mr. Daniels I walked his dog tonight and fed her earlier." He held the elevator

door open for them. “Good night, sir.”

Jason wished him good night and, with his arm still around Ryder’s waist, helped Ryder into the elevator and punched the sixteenth floor. Ryder said nothing, merely leaned against the wall. The elevator settled, and the door opened.

“Come on, we’re here.” Jason touched Ryder’s shoulder, and his eyes opened.

“Hey.” Ryder cleared his throat. “You can go home. I can make it from here.”

Jason pushed him out of the elevator before the doors closed on him. “Don’t be an asshole. I’m coming inside with you.”

Ryder yawned, then shuffled and wove his way down the hall. After two missed efforts, he fit the key into the lock, and they finally made it inside the apartment. Pearl met them at the door, whining and yelping. Ryder mumbled about taking a piss as Jason played with Pearl and gave her fresh water.

When he looked into Ryder’s bedroom, he saw the guy lying across his king-size bed, unmoving. Ryder hadn’t bothered to take off his pants, socks, or shoes, and even kept his jacket on.

Exasperated, Jason stalked over to him. “Come on, man, let’s get you undressed.” First he took off his own jacket, then removed Ryder’s. He pulled off sneakers and socks and was debating whether or not to remove anything further, when the phone rang. Ryder lay unmoving on the bed, seemingly passed out cold.

The phone continued to buzz. Late-night phone calls were never a good thing. As his mother said, “*Nothing good happens after midnight on the road or on the phone.*” With some trepidation, he picked it up.

“Hello?”

He heard a quick intake of breath, then a voice that sounded more whisper than speech. “Ryder? Is that you?”

“No, it’s Jason. I’m a friend.” Who could this be? Maybe Ryder had a boyfriend. He really didn’t know anything about the guy’s life.

“He never mentioned you before. How long have you known each other?”

Jason suppressed a smile. This guy, whoever he was, sounded like a nosy mother rather than a jealous boyfriend. “I adopted a dog from the rescue, and he, Connor, and Emily hang out at my friend’s bar.”

“Oh, yeah, he mentioned you.”

There was some whispering in the background, and Jason had the distinct impression that whoever this was, he was trying to hide the conversation. “Who are you?” Jason glanced over at Ryder, lying curled on the bed, muttering to himself.

“I’m his brother, Landon. I-I wanted to speak to him. We haven’t talked in a long time.”

Jason’s heart broke for the kid. He couldn’t imagine not being able to talk to his brothers or see his family. “Listen, Landon, he’s asleep now. He had a little too much to drink, so I drove him home. Is there any way he can reach you?”

“No. I snuck away with my friend’s phone, but he’s gotta leave and needs it back. I thought...” His voice dwindled away, the disappointment evident.

Oh hell. Poor kid. Jason wished he could help him and Ryder. An idea suddenly clicked in his mind. “Hey, Landon, Ryder told me you’re interested in architecture and design, right?”

“Yeah, so? I gotta go in a sec.” Now Landon sounded like a normal impatient seventeen-year-old.

“Meet me at the coffee place on the corner at Seventy-Third and Lex, tomorrow at four. I have an idea for you and Ryder.” Jason had no idea why he needed to involve himself in this situation, but after seeing how desperately unhappy his friend looked tonight, and now hearing how miserable this poor kid sounded, he wanted to do something to help.

“What? Okay, I gotta go. Sure.”

In the background Jason heard someone yelling, “Give it to me, Daniels. Let’s go.” The phone went dead.

Jason dropped the phone on the bed. His idea was plausible, and he knew he could make it work. Closing his eyes for a moment, he lay back on the pillow.

* * * *

Warmth flooded through Jason as, in a light doze, he curled himself around the body lying next to him. Instead of the soft curves of a woman, he hugged the bulk of well-developed shoulders and biceps. As he slowly awakened, the dim light filtering in through the half-opened shade revealed he was in Ryder's bed. He must have fallen asleep after speaking with Landon.

Ryder lay, for want of a better word, cuddled in his arms. Their bodies pressed into each other, chest to chest, hip to hip. The heaviness of Ryder's erection pushed against his own alarming hardness. In the presence of glaring daylight and normal behavior, he would have jumped away. But here, in the sanctuary of this bed, it all seemed so right. Like where he was supposed to be.

As if he were watching his body from above, his hand trailed down Ryder's arm and caressed its way up the strong planes of his sculpted chest. It traced the jut of Ryder's cheekbones, then cupped his jaw. He'd have thought the stubble of hair on the man's face would be off-putting, yet inexplicably, his lips drew nearer, coming to rest at the tender spot beneath Ryder's ear. That clean, irresistible scent of him, plus a light tang of sweat, set his senses reeling. Without a second thought, he pressed a kiss to Ryder's jaw, then swept his tongue over the man's neck to taste him. Temptation. He needed more; he craved it.

"What? What's goin' on?" Ryder's breath wafted by his ear, but Jason chose to ignore the question, concentrating instead on savoring the man next to him. He hummed his pleasure as his tongue tickled Ryder's earlobe, then nipped and nuzzled the strong cords of Ryder's neck. He was in foreign territory as to what would make a man feel good, so he kissed him as if were kissing his girlfriend.

Obviously his tongue and lips were in the right place, as Ryder moaned, rolling his hips, thrusting his cock directly against Jason's. Their bodies rocked together, humping and rubbing, as every nerve ending in Jason's body centered around the point of friction they were creating between them. Ryder, eyes wide open now, stared at him in total shock.

Jason forestalled any anticipated protest, hungry and needy to continue physical contact. It was something he'd never imagined, yet right now, he couldn't tear himself away from this bed and this man if a bomb exploded around them. "Shh. Let me, please." The words came out almost as a groan

as he nibbled and licked Ryder's neck. The intimate little noises coming from Ryder sent Jason's cock jerking painfully against his zipper. Jason slid on top of Ryder, shifting so that their cocks rubbed against each other through their jeans. Blood rushed through him, heat pooling in his groin. He bucked his hips against Ryder's in a desperate move to create more friction. Face-to-face, Jason could stare at the man who'd been invading his dreams for months.

To Jason's surprise, Ryder looked neither pleased nor happy, but rather confused and a bit fearful. Even in the dimly lit room, Jason could make out the disbelief on his face.

"Jase, what the fuck is going on? What are you doing here?" His sleep-roughened voice sounded wary and tense.

"I have no fucking clue," he whispered, right before he bent down and brushed Ryder's lips, tasting Ryder's mouth. From his cock and his balls straight to his heart and his brain, a sizzle of electricity shot through Jason, and all he knew was this driving force—an insatiable desire to kiss and be kissed. Jason cupped Ryder's jaw, slanting his mouth across the other man's. The urge to claim him was stronger now, to suck and lick those firm lips, as he slipped his tongue inside Ryder's mouth. Their tongues tangled, and they tore at each other, teeth scraping and clashing as an insatiable hunger to possess overtook him. Their breathing grew harsh and labored in the silence of the bedroom as their mouths devoured each other. Nothing in his life prepared him for Ryder's lean body writhing beneath him, as his probing tongue ravaged the inside of Jason's mouth.

There was nothing sweet about these kisses. No pretense it might be a woman if he closed his eyes. A hunger rose within him, all-consuming and overpowering, like a conflagration, burning him up alive. His insides liquefied, all that heat and blood pooling to his dick, which grew harder and thicker with each swipe of Ryder's tongue in his mouth. The pounding of his heart beat a matching tattoo to the throbbing in his dick and the pulsing of his blood. Body and soul, connected.

Jason pulled Ryder closer, tangling his fingers in Ryder's silky hair. That softness played in sharp contrast to the unfamiliar raspy stubble against Jason's chin and the driving, powerful thrusts of Ryder's tongue. It was as if Ryder was fucking his mouth. Jason couldn't help but moan as their lips slid against one another. He nipped and sucked at Ryder's neck,

completely undone, helpless with want. He returned to the man's amazing mouth, almost snarling in his need and hunger, as Ryder clutched his back and shoulders in a firm grip so hard Jason was certain he'd sport some interesting bruises. Ryder shifted, sliding his legs around Jason, locking his ankles behind Jason's thighs.

A strangled moan escaped Ryder's mouth, and Jason pulled back when he felt those hands pushing him away. Somewhat confused and dazed by the overwhelming sensations zinging around inside him, he leaned on his elbow to stare down at his friend. Ryder's mouth gleamed, wet and passion-swollen. In the shadowed light of the bedroom, his eyes remained dark and unreadable.

Pale streaks of moonlight hit Ryder's grim-looking face. "I don't know what game you're playing, Jason, but it needs to stop."

Jason couldn't believe what he heard. Game? What the hell? That was not the reaction he expected. Shit, he didn't know what to expect. Holy hell, he'd kissed another guy, and his body's reaction was like *nothing* he'd ever anticipated. His balls still ached, his dick was hard as a rock, and even now, when some rational thought managed to return to his brain, he couldn't blame it on sleep; he still wanted to shove his tongue in Ryder's mouth and kiss him senseless, regaining that fire.

"I'm not playing a game. I admit, I didn't intend to sleep here. I closed my eyes for a moment." He leaned back on the pillows, his hammering heart slowing down to its regular steady beat. "But as for the kiss, I'm not apologizing. I don't know why it happened, but neither of us looked like we had a problem with it."

"Look. Just 'cause I'm gay doesn't mean I sleep around. I'm selective in who I sleep with and monogamous when I have a relationship. But"—here Ryder took a deep breath, staring hard into his face—"I'm not a freaking sideshow act for you to look at, and I don't plan to be an experiment for you to practice whatever feelings you think you have. Trust me, you don't want this life."

Jason's face burned. What the hell had he done wrong? He'd never intended this to happen. "I didn't mean—"

"No, of course you didn't *mean* to do it. But I've had my heart stomped on enough already, and I don't need it anymore. Thanks for bringing me home; I appreciate it." He lay back down and closed his eyes.

Well, that was that. Jason knew when he was being dismissed. He gathered up his jacket and pushed his feet into his boots. Before he left, he studied Ryder—his long, loose-limbed body curled like a question mark on the bed. He hesitated, then blurted out, “I never meant to offend or hurt you. I hope you know that. And I hope we’re still friends.” When Ryder didn’t answer, he left the bedroom, gave Pearl a pat good night, and closed the door silently behind him.

It wasn’t until he crossed the Brooklyn Bridge that he realized he’d forgotten to tell Ryder his brother had called and the plan he’d come up with.

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Chapter Nine

Ryder didn't need a clock to know it was morning. He could feel the warm streams of sunlight hitting his face and bare back as he lay in bed with his eyes closed, waiting to die. The hammering inside his head was like a fist banging on a door—insistent, hard, and unceasing.

He opened his eyes and squinted at the clock. Shit. Ten o'clock. He never slept this late. From the side of his bed, Pearl gave him a disappointed look, as if she knew what had happened the night before and how fucked up his life had become in a heartbeat.

Luckily he was working the afternoon shift at Rescue Me. It took a major effort to haul himself out of bed. After staggering a few steps he stood still, waiting for his head to clear. He bent down, bracing his hands on his thighs, and took some deep breaths. The slight nausea passed, but he needed a piss, to brush his teeth, and to get some major caffeine injected into his system right now.

When the banging he heard didn't stop, he realized it was the door. Who the hell was here, so early on a Friday morning? He allowed himself the wild hope that it was Jason, and they could continue what they started last night, but he quickly dismissed that idea. First, he had no intention of ever allowing that mistake to happen again, although if his cock had anything to say about it, that wouldn't be the case, as it perked up and hardened at the thought of Jason. No fucking way. *Down, boy.*

He ruthlessly shoved himself into a pair of sweats, wincing as he tucked his optimistic erection in. He hoped his sour thoughts would deflate his hard-on as he went to see who the hell was bothering him.

“Hold on.” When he looked through the peephole, Connor's cheery grin greeted him. Fantastic. Ryder yanked open the door and growled without even bothering to say hello. “You better have some fucking coffee with you if you're here so early.”

“You know you love me.” Connor bumped his shoulder and went straight for the kitchen. All negative thoughts about his best friend flew out the window when Ryder saw the two extra-large cups in his friend’s hands. A warm vanilla smell hit his nose. Nothing, not even sex, would be better than coffee.

“You are correct when you bring me nectar of the gods.” He accepted the cup from Connor and took a sip. He loved that instant when the heat of the warm coffee spilled through his body. “Ooh God, I love you for this.” He moaned and took another sip of the hot vanilla-flavored brew.

“Come over and give me a kiss, then.” Connor grinned and made kissy noises. “I like a lot of tongue.” He laughed and took out a bag of fresh bagels, putting them on plates, and got the cream cheese out of the refrigerator. “Em is working this morning, and I wanted to come by and see how you were doing after last night.” He cocked his head, staring hard. “You okay? You have a funny look on your face.”

Ryder’s face heated, and he took another sip of coffee, more so that he didn’t have to subject himself to Connor’s probing gaze. The guy was an excellent lawyer, and his bullshit meter was almost always perfect in detecting when someone was lying.

“Yeah, I had a bit too much to drink last night, after seeing Matt.”

“Bastard.” Connor swore, swiping his cream cheese onto his bagel. “What a totally shitty, asshole thing to say.”

Ryder shrugged. “Whatever.” He finished his coffee and forced himself to eat some of his bagel. “I’m gonna shower. Stick around, and I’ll go back with you to the office. I’m working this afternoon for a while anyway.”

“Sure. I’ll walk Pearl for you and feed her.”

Connor’s words came out garbled with the bagel in his mouth as he put on Pearl’s leash. Twenty minutes later, when Ryder returned from his shower, Connor had finished rinsing out his plate, and Pearl was powering through a bowl of food. Freshly showered and shaved, and feeling almost human, Ryder had on a blue sweater over a white button-down and his favorite faded jeans.

“Thanks for walking her. Let me finish my breakfast, and then we can roll.” He sat for a few minutes, chewing his bagel and sipping his coffee, while random bursts of memories from last night exploded in his mind. Still shocked at Jason’s behavior, he allowed himself a brief fantasy of

continuing where they'd left off, wondering what Jason looked like underneath his clothing.

He could sit here all day, dreaming of Jason's beautiful body and talented tongue. God, he needed to stop. After stuffing his keys and wallet in his pockets, he grabbed his coat from where it hung off the doorknob. "Let's stop somewhere first and pick up some lunch and bring it back to the office. The dogs are also running low on treats, and we need some snacks and stuff."

Connor eyed him. "You certainly look better than you did when I came in."

"I feel better too. Nothing like a good shower," he admitted. He pulled on his down jacket. "And coffee." He drained the last of his cup.

They left the apartment, Pearl in tow. He liked taking her with him to the office to show people what wonderful pets pit bulls could make if treated and trained correctly. She loved the attention from everyone there and the playtime with the other dogs.

"Good morning, Clarence." He smiled at his doorman, who bent down to pet Pearl.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Daniels, and you too, Mr. Halstead." Clarence gave Pearl one final pat. "I hope your friend got home safely last night. He left quite late."

"Uh, yeah, he's fine. Thanks. I'll see you later." Shit. Damn. Ryder winced, as his secret was exposed. He caught a glimpse of Connor's smirk.

"So, what was that all about? I know Jason took you home." Connor tried to play nonchalant, but given past experience, he was ruthless when he wanted information. Ryder knew he was in for an interrogation.

Trying to keep it casual, Ryder flipped down his sunglasses, hiding his eyes from Connor, who was now in full lawyer-interrogation mode. "Yeah, he did. It was no big deal."

"You guys have gotten pretty close lately, huh?" Connor reached over and took off Ryder's shades. "Don't try that. I know you too well."

"Oh, fuck you." But even to Ryder, the curse sounded halfhearted, and Connor wouldn't take offense. He grabbed back his sunglasses. "Yeah, we're friends. So are you and Emily with him. And everyone else. So what?"

“I don’t know; there’s something different. I said it to Em the other night. It’s nothing I can put my finger on.” Connor stopped in front of their favorite Thai place. “Want me to grab some pad thai and curry? I’ll get it while you wait outside with Pearl.”

Happy to get a reprieve from the conversation, Ryder agreed and waited outside. In less than fifteen minutes, Connor was back with several bags.

“Okay, so want my take on Jason and you?” His friend’s bright green eyes bored into him.

Like he had a choice in the matter. “There is no Jason and me. We. Are. Friends. Nothing more.”

Ignoring him like he usually did, Connor kept right on talking. “The way I see it, you like the guy but won’t let yourself get close to him, because for starters, he’s not gay, and you don’t want to fall for a guy who isn’t gay.”

They reached Connor’s car and climbed in, Pearl jumping to the backseat. After they buckled in and started the drive to Brooklyn, Connor picked up the conversation where he left off. “But I noticed something.”

Ryder stretched out his legs. “Do tell.” He smirked. “It’s not like you need my permission to talk.”

Connor grimaced, his voice unusually solemn. “I said to Em the other night, and she agreed—Jason watches you.” Ryder caught his glance in the rearview mirror. They entered the traffic for the bridge. It was stop-and-go all the way across the span. Ryder could see the Statue of Liberty and the new Freedom Tower rising into the sky. Damn, he loved this city. No matter how many times it got knocked down, it picked itself up and came back better than ever. He could take a lesson from its spirit.

Changing the radio station to something more classic rock from Emily’s Top 40 hits, Ryder tried to downplay Connor’s observation. “I don’t know what you mean. We’re friends. We hang out, watch the game. Sometimes he’ll bring Troup over, and we’ll take the dogs out when we go running. That’s all.”

Finally free of the bridge traffic, they eased into downtown Brooklyn on their way to the rescue office located in Bushwick. He stared out of the window so he wouldn’t have to watch Connor’s face.

“Yeah, yeah. But I’m saying he *watches* you. Not like a friend, but like someone who’s interested in you as a man.” Connor turned the car into the lot behind their building, which they shared with a bodega and an auto supply store. “I know what I see.” He hopped out of the car, taking the bags of food with him, leaving Ryder, nonplussed, to follow with Pearl.

They entered the office, where Emily was talking into the phone, her face bright and animated. She said good-bye to whomever she was speaking with and hung up.

“Hi.” She kissed Ryder, and her husband, then bent down to hug Pearl. “Ooh, I smell Thai.” She took the bags out of Connor’s hands and put them on the table, then turned around with a wide smile.

“Guys, guess who that was on the phone.” Her eyes sparkled.

“No idea, babe. Who?” Connor greeted Laurel and Hardy, giving them, as well as Pearl, each a treat from the bowl on the desk.

“It was the president of the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce. They want to give us a service award for all the help we’ve given the community by rescuing and helping the dogs while still being respectful of the home owners and developers. He thinks we can turn it into a big fund-raiser for Rescue Me.” She hugged Connor. “Isn’t that great?” After dancing across the room, she grabbed Ryder around the waist. “I know it must be partly because of how great a job you did getting the dogs out that time from the site Jason was working on.”

At the mention of Jason’s name, Ryder’s stomach did a little flip. The memory of their kissing and rubbing against each other on the bed last night rose so strongly in his mind his face burned.

“What’s going on? You’re blushing. Ooh, did something happen between you two?” She pounced on Connor, who had reentered the room. “Did you talk to Ryder about Jason?”

“Come on, Em, knock it off. Nothing’s going on. He took me home ’cause I was drunk. That’s it.” No way would he allow her to drag any information out of him. Besides, he knew what the score was. The guy had some beers in him and probably hadn’t gotten laid in months, so when he fell asleep, he must’ve thought he was in bed with a woman. By the time they were fully awake, they were too into eating each other’s mouths to stop right away.

It had been a long time for him without a lover, and he wasn't about to shake up his carefully constructed life to allow a straight guy in who was looking to play on the gay side until he found a girlfriend. Ryder had enough being second place with other men, or no place when it came to his family. Everyone in his life, except for his brother and these two friends, had let him down. While he'd never denounce who he was, being gay had never been easy for him. That was why he preferred to be left alone. If he was alone, he couldn't get hurt. Jason Mallory, while he was the temptation of a lifetime, was too dangerous to be anything more than a friend. Getting closer to him was a certain guarantee to having his heart kicked to the curb again.

The door opened behind him, and the dogs barked and whined. Ryder's nerves went on high alert as Emily's blue eyes gleamed with delight.

"Jase, it's so nice to see you. What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be on-site today?" Ryder turned to watch Emily give the man a hug and kiss. "Want to stay for lunch? Connor, as usual, got enough pad thai to feed a small country."

Jason squatted down to greet the dogs, who swarmed around him. Laurel and Hardy now accepted him, as he'd spent some time here before adopting Trouper, and when the two big pit bulls jumped on him, they sent him sprawling to the floor. He fell down laughing as they licked his face.

In a flash, Ryder recollected Jason licking his neck, sucking at his skin. Faint bruises remained this morning to remind him of the man's domination over him. Desire swamped him, recalling the heaviness of Jason's cock through his jeans as they frantically rubbed and humped together. The thrust, the push-pull of Jason's tongue in his mouth, mimicked Jason fucking him. The man had delicious lips, all full and soft, yet firm and demanding.

Shit. Not two minutes before, he'd resolved to keep the guy at a distance, yet here he was having dirty fantasies about him. He had to stop this. His dick was like a pole in his jeans, and he knew from the laughter in Connor's damn knowing green eyes he wasn't hiding a thing from his friend.

"Hey, Jason, how's it going?" Ryder accepted licks from the dogs as he extended his hand to help the guy up from the floor. Jason's wary eyes

flashed at him as he took his hand, gripping it tightly for a moment before withdrawing it after he was on his feet.

“Uh, can we talk a moment, in private?” Jason stood close enough for Ryder to feel the tension rolling off his body. His smoothly shaven jaw clenched tight, a muscle ticking in the hollow by his ear.

Another surge of pure lust jolted through Ryder, which he immediately and viciously smothered. “Uh, well, I just got here...”

Emily, the matchmaker, pushed them into the back office. “Go, go. We’ll set up lunch. It’s slow so far today, Ry. No calls. Connor and I can start planning the chamber of commerce thing.” She winked at him, even though he tried giving her his best evil glare. “Take your time, boys.” She slammed the door behind him.

He sighed and faced Jason. “So.”

Jason kicked the floor. “Umm, how’s your head this morning? I’m thinking you must have a wicked hangover.” The room they were in was pretty small, without much space to maneuver around. Jason backed up and leaned against the desk.

Remaining by the door, Ryder shrugged. “Not so bad. Guess all the water I drank at the end helped, and Connor gave me some aspirin before he left the bar.”

Jason’s blue eyes pinned him so that he couldn’t look away. “Well, I didn’t come here to talk about your drinking habits.”

Ryder raised a brow. “No? So why are you here, then?” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Last night I thought I said everything that needed saying.”

Still glaring at him, Jason moved a step closer. “I know you did, but I didn’t get a chance to say anything. You dismissed me like I was a stranger. I thought we were friends, Ry.” He raked his hand through his hair as his voice, full of frustration, rose a notch. “Look, I didn’t plan on it happening. It surprised me as much as you, but I thought you knew me well enough to know I wouldn’t fuck around with you.”

Ryder tried to ease Jason’s agitated state. “It’s fine. Let’s forget about it, all right?” He gave him an uncertain smile. Better this way. They could work through Jason’s uncomfortable feelings, and as for his own yet-to-be-reckoned-with desires, he could push them back into that black box where

he kept all his life's disappointments. Right now it contained his parents' treatment of him, his inability to see his brother, the brief affairs with Josh and Matt. Jason would be one more depressing addition.

Jason cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. "I don't think you understand." He took a step closer. "I'm not sorry for kissing you."

Jason's soft, husky voice sent a shiver through Ryder. He backtracked back a few steps. "I am, though. I'm not looking to teach someone to be gay. You either are or you aren't, man, and you're straight." It pained him to push the guy away, but he wasn't about to sacrifice a friendship for casual sex.

Jason snorted. "You don't really know shit about me. If I was perfectly straight, would I have dreams about you?" His blue eyes took on a glint Ryder had never seen before as he continued. "Dreams that have you on your knees sucking my brains out through my cock. Dreams of me sucking you."

Ryder retreated until he ran out of space and found his back up against the wall, his eyes still caught up in Jason's mesmerizing dark blue regard. All the air seemed to have been sucked out of the room.

"No one's ever had this effect on me, not any woman I've ever dated or slept with, none of my friends." Jason swallowed, a heavy, nervous gulp, then huffed out a self-conscious laugh.

Ryder stood mute, in a state of suspended belief that Jason was here saying these things to him. His heart beat a wild, stuttering rhythm while blood pounded in his head. The room tilted as a wave of dizziness overcame him. He held on to the doorknob to keep himself upright.

Jason turned away as if he couldn't bear to face him with what he was about to say. His normally steady, calm voice shook somewhat, betraying exactly how deep his uncertainty ran. "I don't know what I'm doing here. Am I gay now, 'cause I dream of you, your mouth, your tongue *in* my mouth? God, I can't believe I'm even saying this, but it's been making me crazy for weeks now, and I'm not sure what's happening to me anymore." He tried to laugh, but it came out choked. "I'm kinda lost at sea here, floating around without a paddle. You know"—a red flush stained the back of his neck—"sex with my ex-girlfriend was never that good. When I look back, it was always a way to get off quick." His whisper sounded like a shot

to Ryder's ears. "Maybe it's why I've never thought of settling down. Maybe I knew something was missing."

He ran his hand through his hair, still turned away, then braced his hands against the desk. "I'm not doing anything to hurt you, Ry, but you gotta believe me when I tell you I'm not fucking around here. I'm as surprised and confused as you."

Dumbfounded by Jason's confession, Ryder attempted to regain his equilibrium and soothe Jason's rattled senses. The guy was still his friend. "Hey, why don't you turn around and look at me?"

Jason turned, his face reddened, eyes full of caution and fear.

"We're friends, first, no matter what you think you feel for me otherwise. I'm flattered you think you have these feelings for me, but having a sex dream about one guy doesn't make you gay." Ryder forced himself to laugh, his voice catching in his throat like sandpaper. Maybe, if his life weren't such a fucked-up soap opera, if his parents accepted him and he hadn't been scraped off the bottom of Matt's shoe and tossed aside like garbage, maybe then he could envision trying for a relationship with someone as special as Jason, letting him into his heart. Not an option, so these hurtful, troubling thoughts got squashed down into that black box of disappointments.

"Have you ever had a sex dream about a woman?" Jason's halting voice sounded doubtful but curious.

Ryder couldn't lie to the guy. "No, but I've always known I was gay."

Someone banged on the door. "I'm coming in. Put your clothes on." The door opened, and Connor's smiling face appeared. The smile died when he caught Ryder's scowl.

"Uh, food's getting cold..." Connor's voice trailed off.

"Be there in a sec." Ryder made an impatient gesture. "We're finishing up."

Connor opened his mouth, but Ryder speared him with a look that promised all sorts of horrible things would happen if he remained in that doorway. Or continued to speak. Connor put up his hands. "Oohkay, see you in a few." He shut the door behind him.

Jason seemed to have pulled himself together and calmed down. "Listen, the reason why I came over really is I forgot to tell you last night

your brother called, and I spoke with him.”

All thoughts of their prior conversation fled as Ryder jumped on Jason with questions. “What did he say? Is there anything wrong?” He approached Jason, his stomach churning. If his parents were hassling Landon, he was going to make sure to do everything in his power, legally and maybe a little illegally, to see his brother again. Full-blown warrior mode kicked in as he struggled with his impotence to protect him. No one was more important in his life than Landon.

“Cool down, Thor. Everything is status quo, but while I spoke with him, an idea popped into my head, and I wanted to run it by you before I mention it to him.” As he spoke, Jason grew more animated, his voice rising with excitement. “I thought since you said he was interested in architecture, he could come on-site at the project we’re working on now, on the Lower East Side. He can shadow me or Liam and help us with the plans, to get some hands-on experience. And you could maybe stop by and visit to say hi to us.” His blue eyes glinted bright. “What do you think?”

Ryder stood stock-still, rendered mute with shock. “You’d do that, still, after what we talked about?” Shame coursed through him, as well as guilt. “I think it’s amazing of you to offer, and no matter how badly I want to see my brother, there’s no need for you to involve yourself in my family problems.”

“No worries, Ry.” Jason passed by him on his way out the door. “That’s what friends are for.”

Ryder followed him out of the office, contemplating what he’d said, excited at the chance he now had to once again be back in his brother’s life, and thankful Jason still wanted to be his friend.

Chapter Ten

Jason exited the train at Seventy-Seventh Street. It was still bitterly cold for March, and he was happy he'd made plans to meet Ryder's brother inside the coffeehouse. He arrived a few minutes before four o'clock and, seeing that Landon wasn't yet there, ordered his coffee, sat down, and waited. Ryder had shown him several pictures of the kid, so Jason knew what Landon looked like, which was basically a younger, thinner version of Ryder.

He sipped the hot, steaming brew, keeping his eyes trained on the door as his mind wandered back to the afternoon he'd spent at the rescue. The four of them had shared lunch; then he'd watched as they began to coordinate for the fund-raiser for Rescue Me. He was impressed with their organizational skills and their ability to pull together notable philanthropists from the neighborhood, as well as many owners of local businesses and restaurants. Emily could charm anyone to contribute their time, and Ryder and Connor took care of all the legalities of the tax implications of charitable filings, and the rental of the space for the fund-raiser.

The door opened, ushering in a gust of chilly air. Several napkins fluttered across the small, round table. After retrieving them, Jason blinked and watched as Ryder's brother entered the coffeehouse. He realized while he knew what the kid looked like, Landon had no idea who he was meeting.

"Landon, hey, over here." Jason raised his hand, waving him over.

The teenager approached him, eyes hooded, somewhat on his guard. There was no welcoming smile on his face. He looked around, first to the line of people waiting for coffee, then back to Jason, a frown tugging down the corners of his mouth.

"I thought Ryder would be here." His shoulders slumped, and his voice shook with discouragement. He blinked rapidly, but Jason caught the sheen of tears in those melancholy blue eyes. Jason had a sense of what Ryder must've looked like as a teenager, all long limbs and angled cheekbones.

Coupled with those startling eyes and thick, shining hair, Landon was a devastatingly handsome kid.

Ahh shit. “Come sit down. Ryder was afraid your mother would find out and punish you, so he had me meet you.”

Landon dropped into the small chair, pushing his backpack under the table. After refusing Jason’s offer for a drink, he asked, somewhat harshly, “Who are you again, and what do you want?”

Jason steeled himself as he explained his scheme. “I know you and your brother are being kept apart, and it’s killing him. He hides it well, but he’s miserable and refuses to allow himself to move ahead with his life unless and until you are part of his again.”

Landon nodded, his silky golden-brown hair falling into his eyes. Brushing it back, he no longer sounded angry, merely sad and curious. “My mother can’t handle his lifestyle and his choices and wants to forget he exists. When she isn’t bad-mouthing him to me, she has people watching me, so I can’t stay here long. My dad says nothing at all, but I barely see him as it is. Ryder and I are caught in the middle, as usual.” He shredded the napkins before him into a pile of brown paper. “Where do you fit into any of this anyway?”

Jason quickly filled him in as to how he and Ryder met. “So I think if I have you over at the site, you can actually help our company. It’ll be a win-win-win. We get an intern; you get to see your brother and also get something to put on your résumé for college.”

He could see Landon becoming more and more excited as he outlined his plan.

“Yeah, I really think this could work.” Landon’s brow furrowed, and his face screwed up momentarily. “I still don’t understand, though. You haven’t really known Ry that long, and you’re such good friends?” His mouth curved up in a slight smile. “Are you guys dating? I knew he was interested in someone, but he wouldn’t tell me the details.” Happy expectancy brightened Landon’s dejected attitude. “He’s a great guy and the best brother.”

“We’re friends, that’s all.”

Landon looked unconvinced. “Well, whatever. I don’t care who you are as long as I get to see my brother. Nothing’s been right since my mom

became crazy and refused to let him come home.” He ducked his head, and Jason watched him surreptitiously brush at his eyes.

Right at that moment, Jason decided no matter what he had to do, he was going to make sure Ryder and his brother would overcome their mother’s attempt to keep them apart. Having a close relationship with his own sisters and brothers, he couldn’t begin to imagine not having the support of his family. It was terrible for Landon, but at least he had the comfort and familiarity of his home. For Ryder, though, he’d lost both his home and his family, everything familiar and dear to him.

“Hey, Landon, I promise I’m going to make this work. On Monday, come to the site, and I’ll make sure Ryder will be there too.” Jason scribbled the address of their work site on one of the napkins Landon hadn’t torn to pieces and gave it to him.

“Cool.” Landon checked his watch. “Shit, I gotta go, or my mom will probably have the cops out looking for me or something. Um, like I said, I still don’t really understand why, but thanks for doing this.” He flashed a smile. “I’ll see ya Monday.”

Jason gave him a fist bump. “See you then.” He watched the boy hurry out, disappearing into the Friday-evening crowd on Second Avenue. Happily sitting back in his chair, he wanted to let out a cheer of accomplishment. Instead, he picked up his phone and texted Ryder:

Spoke to Landon. Coming by to tell you how it went.

He jumped out of his chair and hurried out the door. The normal rush-hour madness had begun to build, forcing him to weave his way through the crowds and down the stairs to the train.

About half an hour later, Clarence let him up to Ryder’s apartment, where the door was open before he had a chance to knock. Ryder pulled him inside.

“So? Tell me how it went. First of all, how did he look?” Jason could tell Ryder had already had a drink. Not drunk, merely relaxed and in his happy place.

Jason unzipped his jacket and tossed it on the chair. He settled on the couch, and Ryder, wearing sweats and a T-shirt, sat next to him. Damn, the guy always looked good, but tonight he looked like a male model for a sleepwear ad. The sweats hung on Ryder’s lean, narrow waist, and the T-shirt stretched across his muscular chest and broad shoulders. A wedge of

pale golden skin gleamed above the top of his pants, winking at him. Jason chewed the inside of his cheek, forcing his mind away from thinking how hot the man looked. Instead he concentrated on recounting his meeting with Landon. “He looked good. Pissed as hell at your parents. And as concerned about you as you are for him.”

Ryder nodded. “And he agreed to work with you guys, right?”

When he nodded, a huge grin split Ryder’s face.

“That was so freaking smart of you, Jason. I really can’t thank you enough, man.” His lips twisted in a grimace. “So damn ridiculous that we have to sneak around like this. I wish... Ah, fuck it.” He leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes.

Poor guy. “Hey, Ry. It’ll all be good. Things are starting to work out, right?” Jason moved closer to Ryder, studying his profile. The guy really was gorgeous. A frisson of excitement rolled through him.

“I suppose so, but I wish it didn’t have to be this way. It’s so unfair to put a kid through this because they have a problem with me.” Ryder’s eyes opened, and Jason locked onto that bright blue gaze. “They have no idea how hurtful their behavior is to him.”

Impulsively, Jason put his hand on Ryder’s shoulder. “Hey, and what about you? You count too, you know. Look what all of this is doing to you. I know you worry about Landon, but he looked like a pretty well-adjusted kid to me.” He tightened his grip and leaned in. “Who worries about you, though?”

Ryder licked his lips. “I guess Connor and Emily. They’ve stood by me and will always have my back.”

Jason shifted near, pressing his thigh into Ryder’s. “I’m on your side too. You know that, right?” He held his breath as Ryder lifted his hand. Was he going to push him away again? This wasn’t like the night Jason took Ryder home. Jason wasn’t half-asleep, and Ryder wasn’t drunk. Ryder’s warm hand landed on his own, patting it.

“I know. I don’t know why, though. I certainly haven’t been that nice to you.” He smiled slightly.

That spark of excitement exploded into a full-fledged fire within his blood. Without a second thought, Jason leaned over and kissed Ryder on the lips.

Ryder's eyes widened, but he didn't pull away. "I thought we decided this was wrong."

Jason settled himself more comfortably next to Ryder. "No, you decided. I think it's a good idea." He kissed him again. "A very good idea." He cupped Ryder's jaw and brushed Ryder's lips with his own. "This may be the best idea I've had in a long time, as a matter of fact."

Jason caught Ryder's face between his palms, tracing the jut of Ryder's cheekbones with his thumbs. "You have no idea how much I want to kiss you. I've thought of little else today. Now it's time for you to stop thinking and kiss me." Jason captured Ryder's mouth with his. For several minutes they kissed, Ryder's lips warm against his own. With a firm, deliberate slide, Jason slipped his tongue into Ryder's mouth, sweeping into its velvety heat. Ryder tasted like fine chocolate—sinful, rich, and unbearably sweet. Tongues touched and breaths merged, and the world tilted on its axis as he clutched at Ryder's shoulders, grabbing on to his muscled arms. So different from a woman, but not wrong, no, never wrong in his mind.

And finally that memory, the one he'd never dared allow into the light of day, clawed its way to the surface. It was a recollection of stumbling back to the dorm with his friend Brian Leary, both of them a little drunk from a freshman fraternity rush party. Face-planting on Jason's bed, Brian asked if he could crash with him, and he agreed. When he woke up in the middle of the night, though, Brian's mouth was pressed to his in a tentative kiss. Instead of pushing him off, Jason returned the kiss with enthusiasm. To his surprise and shock, he became tremendously aroused, and he and Brian dry humped and rubbed each other until they both got off in their shorts. He might have continued exploring those feelings, but in the days following the incident, Brian ignored him every time he brought up that night. Not long after, Jason met a girl whom he started dating and having regular sex with, and he'd put Brian and that kiss out of his mind until now.

But the man before him was unforgettable. A kiss from Ryder was not one to be forgotten or pushed out of Jason's mind. Not that he wanted to. Ryder groaned and tipped his head back, revealing the strong, corded lines of his neck. Christ, this man was beautiful. Jason needed him. Now. Growling with supremely restrained desire, he licked Ryder's thick neck, tasting the man who'd occupied so much of his mind for so long. Jason

sucked and kissed his way from Ryder's jaw to his chest, then returned to Ryder's mouth, hungry, needy, and dizzy with desire.

The next thing he knew, Ryder flipped him onto his back and hovered over him. "You want me to say it? Okay, I will." Ryder leaned down and nipped at his mouth. Jason shuddered, his body aching, his cock hard and full in his jeans.

"I want you. Fuck, I'm dying for you. I don't think I've ever wanted someone so badly in my entire life. I tried not to think about you and to push you away, but I can't fight it any longer; it's killing me. I want to bury myself deep inside you and make you scream so loud and so hard the walls will come crashing down around us. There, I said it." Ryder kept kissing Jason, teasing him, brushing his mouth tenderly over Jason's lips, his cheeks, his jaw. Ryder licked down his neck, biting, sucking, and nuzzling. "Now say it back to me. Tell me what you want." Ryder seized Jason's mouth with his own, his tongue invading, sweeping, and searching. Their teeth clashed, chests heaving. Jason writhed and whimpered with need. Oh God, he was going to explode.

"Tell me," Ryder demanded as he licked Jason's ear, sucking the lobe into his mouth and pulling on it. "You've pushed me as far as I can go, and I can't say no anymore. You want this, want me?" Ryder's lips and tongue were everywhere, invading his mouth, his ear, the hollow of his throat. But still, Ryder didn't touch him, wouldn't press that rock-hard body against him and give him the friction, the hardness he so desperately craved.

"Fuuuuck, yes, God, I want you. Touch me, please," Jason whined, begging into Ryder's neck. Adrenaline rocketed through Jason, sending his heart ping-ponging in his chest.

Without warning, Ryder stood and held out his hand, fingers wiggling. A smile quirked the corners of his kiss-swollen lips. Jason loved the way Ryder looked, hair all tossed about, thoroughly debauched and sexy. "C'mere."

Jason took his hand and found himself pulled up tight in Ryder's arms. "Let me take you the right way. Not hurried and quick on a sofa." They walked to the bedroom but remained standing by the bed. Neither made a move to lie down.

Take him? Shit. Was he ready for that, so soon? He swallowed, gulping down his nerves. "Uh."

Ryder bent close to him, whispering softly. “Don’t worry. You trust me, don’t you?” Ryder kissed that secret spot behind Jason’s ear, dragging the wet trail of his tongue down Jason’s neck. An ache, sweet yet painful, grew within Jason and he tremble under the pinpricks of nerves running riot through him.

“Do you trust me, Jason?” Held within Ryder’s arms, he peered up into his friend’s face. Trust him? He’d better. This was life-changing for him, like a fucking volcanic eruption of epic proportions. He opened his mouth, but no words came out, so he merely nodded. Shivers racked him as Ryder tucked him closer into his hard chest.

A warm palm cupped his face, the thumb stroking his cheek. Jason was one step away from breaking down and falling apart in Ryder’s arms. Another shiver rolled through him.

“Hey, listen to me. Relax. I won’t do anything you don’t want me to,” Ryder murmured, calm and strong, one hand caressing Jason’s face, the other circling his back with soothing strokes.

What did he want? He had no fucking clue. Now that the time was here, with Ryder standing before him so open and honest, he had to be honest with himself. He licked his dry lips, suddenly shaky with nerves that popped up all over the place. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do or, um...”

Helplessness was not a feeling he normally experienced. He was used to being in control, giving orders. But here, he was in so over his head he was completely lost. He was hurtling down a runaway rollercoaster without a seat belt. Death defying and dizzying.

“Shh. I’ll take care of you.” Ryder smoothed back his hair. “I love your hair.” He dragged his fingers against Jason’s scalp, tugging at the curls. “So damn soft and beautiful. Do you know the first time I saw you, I wanted to grab you by it and kiss your gorgeous mouth?”

Jason groaned and pressed himself against Ryder. “Do it now, then.” He grabbed Ryder around his neck. “Kiss me. I can’t fucking stand it anymore.”

Ryder pushed him down on the bed, caging him between his arms. “Don’t you want me to touch you?” Their lips touched, and Jason bit back a moan as he arched his body.

“God yes,” he ground out, frantic to keep Ryder’s lips on his. But Ryder seemed content to tease him with tantalizing, soft kisses.

“Where do you want me to touch you?” Ryder’s warm breath kissed his throat. “Here?” Ryder kissed Jason’s collarbone, working his way across Jason’s neck, nipping and sucking. “I’m going to mark you, let everyone know this is mine.” Ryder bit down on his shoulder, sucking the skin into his mouth.

Jason cried out and writhed as his cock tried to punch a hole through his jeans. He’d never been so turned on in his entire life. “Please.” He strained upward, trying to touch him, push up against him, but Ryder remained out of reach.

“Should I touch you here?” Once again, those torturous lips skimmed the shell of his ear.

Jason whimpered. The need to touch and be touched by Ryder was so powerful it scared him. He rubbed his erection through his jeans, feeling the dampness where, in his excitement, he’d already leaked through his boxers.

“Or here?” Ryder’s lips kissed Jason’s hand. The hand that was now stroking his dick through his jeans.

Jason’s heart stood still before it resumed thundering as Ryder popped open the fly, then dragged down the zipper. With his teeth.

Holy shit.

The feel of Ry’s mouth on his stomach, the damp gusts of hot breath so close to his painfully engorged cock, almost caused him to come on the spot. He barely noticed Ryder pulling off his sneakers and finish yanking down his jeans as a tingling began in his balls and his body trembled and shook.

“Shit that was the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.” He squeezed his dick to hold off on prematurely ending this all too soon. Ryder hadn’t taken his eyes off him, and he could see the rapid rise and fall of his chest and hear the effort it took him to take each breath.

“Do you want me to help you with that?” Ryder indicated his hand, now holding his erection, which rose above the waistband of his boxers, the wet tip of him peeking out.

His hand faltered for a moment. Did he? Before he answered, Ryder took him in hand, holding him. Jason’s dick thickened and swelled, leaking

another burst of liquid from its flushed head.

His brain might not be sure, but his body knew what it wanted. Meeting Ryder's gaze, he jerked a quick nod, gasping, "Don't stop."

Ryder's face broke out in a smile that chased away the sadness lurking in his eyes. "I knew from the first you'd be trouble for me. But I couldn't stop thinking about you, wanting you, even though I tried." He bent down and stole a swift kiss. "No turning back now, right?" His hand began to move in long strokes, and Jason could no more tell Ryder to stop touching him than he could stop his own heartbeat.

"No. No turning back."

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Chapter Eleven

Ryder spoke the truth when he said he knew Jason would be trouble for him. Sitting next to him on the sofa, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off the man's narrow waist and fine ass, the T-shirt stretched across broad shoulders, and faded jeans he wanted to tear off. How was Ryder supposed to turn away from Jason now, as he lay beneath him on the bed, gasping for breath? Jason's thick cock pulsing hot and heavy under his hand? From the first heated kiss, Ryder wanted nothing more than to rip off Jason's jeans and slide his mouth onto that beautiful dick.

Turning back was a joke. He wanted Jase, wanted every gorgeous inch of him. He tugged off Jason's boxers, and finally that beautiful cock sprang free. It jutted up proudly, waiting for his touch. His breath caught in his throat at the thought of taking it in his mouth.

"Ry?" Jason's voice broke into his thoughts. When he met Jason eyes, Ryder's heart softened as he once again saw the uncertainty in his lover's face. "I, uh, don't really know what I'm supposed to do here." Jason bit his lip, and Ryder grinned. God, this guy was adorable.

"Hey, it's okay, babe. I'll take it from here. I promise to make it good for you." Ryder bent over Jason, giving him a kiss on the lips that he meant to be quick, but the slight tremor in the man's voice, coupled with the insecurity in his eyes, made him slow down to kiss the man properly. The way he deserved. "Your eyes get me every time, you know?" Ryder took Jason's face between his hands and ravaged the man's mouth. Their tongues met and thrust against each other. It was a kiss that stole his soul and invaded his heart. Jason tasted of warmth, passion, and hope. Everything Ryder had been missing in his life. A driving hunger and need rose within him to make sure Jason would never forget his first time. To have him here in his bed, to touch him and kiss him was exhilarating, awesome, and utterly terrifying. Everything was about to change, but it would be easier to stop a train racing out of control than to keep from touching and loving Jason.

No turning back.

The kiss was wet, it was nasty, and it was what his man needed to relax. Letting go of Jason's lips, Ryder gazed down at him with fondness. "Up." Jason lifted his arms up and Ryder tugged off the long-sleeved T-shirt he wore, revealing wide shoulders and muscled arms that spoke of countless hours of physical labor. Jason was no pretty boy content to sit back and let others do the dirty work at his construction sites. His chest was broad, with silky dark hair that formed a happy trail down to his straining shaft.

Ryder bent down and licked the beautiful cock bobbing in front of him. The smell of Jason surrounded him, the man's musk was irresistible, and he breathed deep as he licked the root of his cock, wetting the springy curls of his groin. He slid his tongue around the head, then engulfed him in his mouth, taking him all the way to the back of his throat, drawing him in deep with a hard sucking force.

"Oh Christ." Jason cried out, almost coming off the bed. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as he relaxed onto the pillows.

Spurred on by the obvious pleasure Jason was getting, Ryder began the heated wet slide of his mouth over the man's cock, lapping at the liquid that seeped from the head, swirling around the sensitive underside, all the while continuing to stroke the base. Starting from the base, he drew his tongue upward to the tip, keeping a soft yet unyielding pressure. He used his saliva and Jason's fluid to create the wet, slick friction necessary to allow his strokes to slide smooth and easy. The heady scent of musk and man filled his senses, and Ryder could feast on him all day long.

Jason was beautiful, Ryder decided. He looked like a blissed-out pagan god, his naked, muscled body all warm and enticing, laid out for an offering.

"Ry, don't stop. You're killing me." Jason's moans turned into whimpers as his hands reached out for Ryder's.

God, those sexy little noises nearly made Ryder come undone. His heart twisted, and right then Ryder knew, despite all the walls he'd put up to protect himself, the ship had sailed. He was a goner for this man.

"Ry, gonna come." Jason thrust his hips faster. He mumbled some inarticulate words as his head thrashed back and forth on the pillow.

With his hand still jerking Jason's cock, Ryder licked down the shaft to his balls. He nuzzled, then rolled one into his mouth, then the other. Jason's harsh breathing and muttered cries spurred him as he licked at the slant of his hip bone, then took a nip of his thigh. When Ryder sat up on his knees, it was only to more firmly grasp Jason's cock before once again taking it deep within his mouth, sucking, tasting, swirling, then swallowing him down to the root.

Jason's hips bucked, and he slapped at the bed, grabbing the comforter, twisting it into knots. Ryder reached up and seized his hand, entwining their fingers, holding on for dear life.

"Ryder." Jason's sob resonated against the walls of the bedroom before he exploded in his mouth and down his throat. Ryder continued to lick and swallow Jason's pulsing cock, until it softened and finally slipped free of his mouth.

Never mind no turning back. Ryder was so far gone it was scary.

* * * *

After his orgasmic meltdown, Ryder left Jason sleeping in his bed while he walked Pearl and picked up a few things at the supermarket and drugstore. It was nice to think of someone waiting for him when he returned home, especially when that someone was Jason, all sleep warmed and disheveled in his bed. His body hummed into overdrive, reminding him that he'd neglected to take care of his own needs. There were no regrets, as he didn't believe in being a selfish lover. It was Jason's first time with a man; therefore his feelings and needs were more important.

As he walked, hunched against the cold, brisk chill of a mid-March evening, Ryder had no illusions about where this relationship between Jason and himself was going, even as arousal purred through his veins. Having lived as a straight man his whole life, Jason was most likely disillusioned from the breakup with his longtime girlfriend and looking to try something new. Ryder didn't hold it against him; hell, he knew the score when he let the guy kiss him this evening.

It was so cold the basketball courts were empty tonight. Ryder remembered the two of them were going to go to Drummers later to hang out. How would Jason act in front of his friends and family now?

Don't be an asshole. You don't have a relationship because you gave the guy a blowjob. Of all people, you should know better than that.

There comes a point where you become tired of the loneliness and need a human touch, a caress to make you realize you still exist as a person. His friends were the best people in the world, but they couldn't replace the aching void within him. Everybody needed to feel loved, be wanted by someone else, even for a fleeting moment.

He turned down his street and entered his building. "Hey, Clarence. How are you this evening?"

"Good evening, Mr. Daniels. Bit of a chill still in the air tonight."

"Yes, indeed. I'll see you later."

Both his hands and his feet were freezing, and he couldn't wait to get inside to the warmth of his apartment. He opened the door, heard the shower running, and smiled to himself. It was nice to come home to another person. He dumped his coat on the chair and stood in front of the open refrigerator, putting away the milk he'd bought, when he heard a noise and turned around. Jason stood in the doorway, naked, with only a towel slung around his slim hips, drops of water clinging to his broad shoulders. "Hey, you." An uncertain smile chased on his lips.

Ryder swallowed. "Hey, yourself. I stepped out to get a few things." The man looked good enough to eat, all damp and sweet smelling.

"No worries." Jason leaned up against the counter. "You know, I thought about it, and this isn't right."

Here it comes. The brush-off. Ryder had prepared himself to be disappointed but hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

"What..." The words died on his lips as Jason pushed him up against the counter, muscling into his face.

"I asked you before who takes care of you, and it's no one." To Ryder's shock, Jason unwound the towel from his waist and dropped to his knees in front of him, dark blue eyes glinting bright with wicked humor. He reached up with one hand and yanked down Ryder's sweatpants, which fell in a heap around his ankles. "I'm gonna take care of you tonight."

"You don't have to." But Ryder's protest fell on deaf ears as Jason palmed him through his boxers. His dick responded, jerking full, hard, and thick, twitching under Jason's fingers.

“Have to, want to,” Jason mumbled, pushing down Ryder’s boxers, allowing his dick to spring free. It bobbed right in Jason’s face, and he swiped his tongue over the head. “God, you taste amazing.” He gave another lick, and Ryder grabbed the counter behind him to keep from falling to the floor.

“Shiiit.” He could hardly draw a breath. In all his life he’d never seen anything so erotic as this beautiful man, naked and glistening wet, kneeling before him, lips wrapped around his cock. His body shuddered with desire as Jason gripped him.

“You don’t have to do this. I don’t want to rush you... God.” He bit off a moan as Jason licked the head of his dick and gently sucked it, flicking his tongue all around the swollen, sensitive tip.

Jason took his mouth off him. “I’m not as innocent as you think.” He grinned, that wicked glint entering his eyes again. “You weren’t the first guy I’ve ever kissed.”

That admission startled Ryder. Right now, with Jason’s lips all wet and tight like a vise around him, he didn’t give a shit about anything else except this man and his insanely talented mouth and tongue. Ryder’s head fell back as he spread his stance.

Jason’s lips wrapped around his shaft, sliding Ryder farther and farther into his mouth, swallowing Ryder’s cock down his throat. Ryder closed his eyes as the sensation of Jason’s mouth and swirling tongue flowed over him like warm honey. He moaned and cupped the back of Jason’s neck with his hand, guiding him, urging him to move faster, harder, deeper.

Through slitted eyes, Ryder observed Jason working his own erection. That sensual tableau coupled with the feel of Jason’s mouth on his cock set off a fluttering at the base of Ryder’s spine. It had been almost a year since Ryder had been with a man, and he wouldn’t last long, if the way his balls drew tight and his strong and quick thrusting were any indication.

”Fucking hell.” How Ryder managed to keep his footing, he’d never know. He erupted within Jason’s mouth before pulling out, still coming in spurts against Jason’s chest and chin. Ryder sank to the floor, and together they stroked Jason to his own shattering completion. The scent of sex and sweat rose around them, hazy and thick. Ryder leaned over and kissed Jason, loving the fact that he could taste his essence on the man’s skin. He licked his face, then kissed his lips again.

“Hey, that was pretty fucking awesome.” He took the towel Jason had rested on and wiped them both up.

Jason simply nodded, wrapping his arm around Ryder. “I need another shower now before we go out tonight. Wanna join me?” His grin was a promise of all things wicked.

Ryder kissed the corner of his mouth. “Let’s go.” He jumped up and snapped the towel at Jason’s very fine-looking ass.

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Chapter Twelve

Jason walked into Drummers with Ryder that night around eight thirty. He grinned and bumped against him with his arm. “Good thing there’s lots of food, ’cause we kind of missed dinner.” Faint patches of red stained Ryder’s cheeks.

They’d spent almost half an hour in the shower, and Jason could honestly say he’d never come so hard in his whole life. The recollection of a naked Ryder kneeling at his feet, with all that slicked-back hair and steamy water spraying over his gleaming body while he sucked him to oblivion was enough to set off another raging hard-on.

“Asshole.” The softness in Ryder’s blue eyes tripped a beat in Jason’s chest. “You’d better not speak so loudly if you don’t want people to find out.”

Jason didn’t like it but agreed. “Yeah. I know it sucks, but I don’t want to say anything until I tell my parents and the rest of my family.”

Ryder touched him on the shoulder. “Hold up a sec. Are you sure you want to tell your family about yourself, about us? It can wait until you have time to come to grips with it.”

Jason disagreed. “No, I don’t want to wait. There’s nothing to come to grips with.” An edge of concern crept into his voice. “Are you having second thoughts about this?” Now that he and Ryder had given in to the blaze of attraction between the two of them, he didn’t think he could ever go back to the way life was before. The thought of how they’d spent the past several hours sent a wave of heat and lust through him that had him biting back a groan of desire.

“It’s not a matter of second thoughts. It’s you coming to terms with identifying yourself in a new way. Dealing with the looks from people, their snide comments.” Ryder’s mouth tightened, hard lines bracketing his face. “Family and/or friends not being supportive.” Those beautiful blue eyes turned haunted. “Are you willing to tell them and face that unknown?”

“Hey, I know you’ve had it rough.” Jason wished he could hold Ryder and give him the comfort he so needed. His heart ached for Ryder and his continued estrangement from his family. Jason knew his own family would be supportive, and as for his friends, fuck ’em. If they couldn’t accept who he was, then he didn’t need them. “My family won’t have a problem with it.”

Sure, he was a little surprised at his brother’s initial reaction months ago to meeting Ryder and hearing he was gay. But now they were buddies and often watched the basketball game together, just the two of them. Jason knew they were planning on going to several Yankees games once the season started up again.

“Come on, before Connor eats all John’s food.” He winked at Ryder and casually squeezed his arm. It was going to be hard keeping his hands off this man, knowing all the smooth golden skin that lay beneath the clothes. After years of an emotionally dead relationship, he sensed his body coming alive, like a plant bursting through the ground to reach the warmth of the sun. Ryder was his sun. He warmed his soul.

Jason slid onto a bar stool and greeted his friends. “Hey, John, let me have a beer.” He smacked at Connor’s hand and grabbed the last slider off the plate. “Damn, man. You need to get checked for a tapeworm.”

“I’m a growing young man, I’ll have you know.” Connor slapped him on the back and went to greet Ryder. Jason watched the two men talk and joke around, happy to see Ryder relaxed. He failed to realize anyone had sat down next to him until Emily spoke quietly in his ear.

“You’re together, aren’t you? You and Ry. I mean like a couple.”

His hand gripped his beer a bit tighter. Shit, Ryder wasn’t kidding when he said Em was perceptive. His expression a mask of neutrality, Jason took a deep breath before he swiveled around to face Emily. “Why would you say that?”

She huffed an impatient sigh. “I’ve known that man for years, and I’ve always been able to see through him, his bullshit, and all that guilt he piles on himself.” A smile warmed her face as they watched Ryder and Connor pretend argue over who knew what. “As soon as he walked in here, I could tell something was different. And I think that something is you.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but she held up her hand. “You don’t have to say anything, ’cause you must have a reason for not wanting to

yet.” She leaned forward, all trace of humor wiped clean from her pretty face. “But know that if you hurt him, you are dead to me and Connor.” Without waiting for an answer or even a reaction, she slipped off her seat and left him to join her husband.

“What the hell was that about?” Liam slid into Emily’s vacated seat. “I heard something about dead to her and Connor. Is she gonna sic those big dogs on you?” Enjoying his own joke, Liam elbowed Jason, his hearty laugh booming over the bar.

“You’re hilarious, man. It was nothing.” Jason drank down his beer. “So, I have to tell you that I took on Ryder’s brother as an intern for us. Kid’s a high school student, but he’s interested in architecture, so I figured he could learn, and we could have someone around to be like a gofer, as well as show him some of the ropes.” He rolled the bottle around in his hand, inexplicably nervous about Liam’s reaction.

“Huh.” Liam’s eyes flickered from him to Ryder, then back. “How come you didn’t think to talk to me about it ahead of time? We’re partners, I thought.”

“It’s not like we’re paying him, so it doesn’t cost us anything.” Jason hated how defensive his voice sounded. It was time, however, to tell his brother the real reason for taking on Landon. “Besides, I figured it would be a way that Ryder and his brother could get a chance to see each other. I’ve told you what a bitch their mother is. So everyone wins here.”

Liam’s dark eyes darted between him and Ryder again. Jason knew he suspected something else was going on but couldn’t figure it out. “You’ve really gotten involved in Ryder’s life, Jase. I know he’s a good friend, but this is kind of above and beyond, dontcha think?” Those dark eyes pinned him until he was forced to look away, unwilling at this point to go any further.

“Not really. Think how you’d feel if you couldn’t see Mom or Dad or any of us, and hadn’t for months?” Obviously it was a sobering idea, as Liam’s expression turned from suspicious to contemplative.

At Liam’s sigh, Jason relaxed a little, knowing his brother understood. “Yeah, that would suck. I forgot how shitty they are. It’s okay. I don’t really have a problem with it.” He finished his beer, then leaned closer. “So listen, I met this hot lady, and she has a friend. Wanna double-date? I saw the friend’s picture on Facebook, and she’s also a cutie.”

Shit, fuck, crap. How was he going to get out of this one? He and Liam had occasionally double-dated, but hadn't in a long time, not since he'd dated Chloe. "Ahh, when were you thinking? 'Cause I'm kind of busy now."

"Yeah? What are you doing that's more important than spending time with a gorgeous woman?" demanded Liam, looking like there could be nothing at all that could ever top that.

What could he say? Spending time with a gorgeous man—naked and in bed? Yeah, right. He sighed his agreement. "All right, fine. Make sure you tell me when."

Liam busted out a grin as he punched in the numbers on his phone. "Hey, Courtney, it's Liam. Yeah, my brother said yes, so how about we meet you in, like, half an hour at the restaurant? Sounds good? Great, see you soon." He ended the call. "Right now, buddy boy." Liam called over to John, "John, we're heading out. Jase and me have dates."

The fuck. He didn't want to leave Ry here, but he couldn't stay now either. It would be too suspicious to bail on his brother and a date to hang out with his friend. Helpless, he slid off the stool and caught John's eye. His friend shrugged.

"You don't look too happy, Jase. Something going on?" John's perceptive gaze searched his face. Out of all of them, John was the quietest, rarely revealing his feelings, but for some reason, Jason knew he could trust him to understand.

"You'll be around sometime? Maybe we could talk."

John didn't bat an eye. "Always here for you, man. You should know that." They gave a quick fist bump, and then Jason turned to an anxious Liam. "Christ, Liam, hold on. You sprang this on me with no warning. I have to say good-bye to everyone. Unlike you, I have manners."

Liam flipped him off, which Jason chose to ignore, joining Connor, Emily, and Ryder. "Uh, hey, guys. I gotta take off. It seems my asshole brother set me up on some blind double date." He fixed Liam with a death glare. His brother ignored him and made a "hurry up" motion with his hand. "I'm sure he thinks he's going to get lucky tonight, even though I'm not in the mood."

Connor merely smiled and said, "Have fun, man," his attention drawn back to the game on the screen. Emily, on the other hand, shook her head

and turned her back on him. Truthfully, he didn't really give a shit what they thought; he was only concerned with Ryder. And if Ryder was feeling anything like him, he'd be disappointed, annoyed, and a little angry. Instead, his lover gave him a weak grin.

"Go on. Liam looks like he's going to pop you one if you don't leave already. Talk to you whenever." And with that, Jason was dismissed.

He stood there a moment, his gaze boring holes into Ryder's back, willing him to turn around even though he knew the man was too proud. What was the point anyway? He couldn't tell him how he felt, that he'd rather be here with him than anyplace without him. That he knew it wasn't going to be easy being together, at least until he could tell his family. He vowed that before the weekend was out, he'd have that talk with them.

Turning on his heel, he barked at his brother, "Let's go and get this over with."

Liam matched him stride for stride as he stomped out of the bar. "What the hell are you so pissed about? I get you a date with a hot woman, and you act like I did something wrong. What's the matter, Ryder jealous?"

Jason stopped dead in his tracks. "What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

Liam snorted. "Jesus, you're dense. Anyone can see the guy's got the hots for you." They reached Liam's car and got in. "I mean you have to see it. I like the guy and everything, but it would creep me out to think a friend of mine wanted to suck my dick and all."

Oh shit, Jason was so not having this conversation now. What the hell would his brother say if he blurted out, *Never mind a friend. How would you feel knowing your brother spent the afternoon having mind-blowing sex with a man, that included him sucking and having his dick sucked?*

Definitely not the conversation to have in a moving vehicle.

* * * *

Ryder picked at the label of his beer bottle and yawned. Between planning the fund-raiser for the rescue and doing some legal research on whether a landlord could kick a tenant out of his apartment if he owned a pit bull, he was bone tired. The weekend had flown by, and now he was vegetating on his living room couch, feet up, relaxing while watching college hoops. It was time for March Madness, and it was all basketball, all

the time. Typical Sunday afternoon. Except that he hadn't seen Jason since Friday night and had only one hurried-sounding text from him that there was some emergency on-site, and he'd try to stop by if he could. The disappointment was stunning. Here Ryder was, minding his own business, no need for a romantic entanglement, when he got swept off his feet and pulled under the tide so completely he was drowning.

His phone buzzed, interrupting his musings, and his heart quickened when he saw the text was from Jason. *Hey, did you eat? Feel like Chinese?*

A smile broke out as he texted back. *Sounds great, but give me time to get dressed.*

The phone buzzed immediately. *Don't bother; I like you better undressed. Open your door. Now.*

He jumped up and ran to the door, Pearl at his feet. After unlocking it, he flung it wide open to see Jason and Trouper. The two dogs barked, no doubt happy to see each other, and took off running down the hall, leaving him staring at an exhausted, ruffled Jason, who looked like he hadn't slept in days. He had at least a two-day stubble on his chin, and his hair flopped over his brow, tousled and messy, like he'd rolled out of bed. Ryder's heart turned over at the sight.

God, he could eat him alive.

"Hey, you." Ryder took Jason by the arm and dragged Jason inside the apartment. With his foot, he kicked the door shut behind him. He didn't let him go as he took the bag of food and put it on the small side table. No matter how exhausted he looked, the sight of Jason standing before him, so large and overpowering, was intoxicating.

"Hey, you. I'm sorry I was MIA, but there was a problem—"

Ryder cut him off with a passionate kiss, sending a heartfelt thank-you to heaven that there was no hesitation on Jason's part as they tangled tongues. He pushed off Jason's jacket and pulled his shirt out of his jeans, never breaking contact with his mouth.

With trembling fingers, he slid off Jason's belt. "I don't care. You're here now." He took Jason by the hand and led him into the bedroom. "Let's get you cleaned up. Then I'm going to kiss every fucking perfect inch of you."

Jason's blue eyes flared dark with heat. He tugged his shirt over his head, unlaced his boots, and shucked his jeans, then followed Ryder into the bathroom. Ryder had already gotten naked and turned the water on as Jason stepped into the shower.

"I missed you. Let me take care of you, babe." He pressed up close to Jason, every dip of muscle and curve of bone imprinting itself on Ryder's body.

Jason groaned and leaned up against the wall, already hard and huge. As Ryder pumped the bodywash into his hand, he watched Jason relax in the heated spray. He rubbed his hands together, forming silky suds. Perfect. The suds spread in glossy bubbles over Jason's broad chest and ridged stomach. A ripple ran through those tight abdominals as Ryder spread the bodywash all over Jason's torso. He rinsed him off with the handheld attachment and leaned over to kiss the flat little nipples.

A loud moan resonated in the glass-enclosed shower. After pumping more gel into his hand, he grasped Jason's cock as well as his own and, with slow, deliberate, slippery strokes, began to jack both of them off.

"Oh shit, oh fuuuck..." Jason sagged and might have fallen to the floor of the shower had Ryder not been holding him against the wall with his body, pushing him, crowding him so that they were flush up against each other, cocks rubbing and sliding together as the hot water continued to sluice over them.

"How does that feel, babe?" he whispered in Jason's ear, kissing that sweet tender spot by his jaw. He made sure his hand never stopped pulling and tugging at their cocks as Jason began thrusting into his hand, harder and quicker, mumbling under his breath.

"Don't stop; don't ever stop touching me." Jason panted as his fingers clutched and slipped against the tiles. "Feels so fucking good. Shit, what you do to me." He leaned his head back against the wall, hair drenched, stubbled face all wet and gleaming, eyes closed, and mouth open and breathing hard.

Jason was a beautiful fucking sight to behold. A spike of lust shot through Ryder and he plunged his tongue into Jason's mouth. Their tongues warred with each other as both of his hands wrapped around Jason's cock and deliberately increased the friction and pace of his rubbing and pulling. Sparks tingled in his spine, and his vision blurred. His heart thundered hard

and fast as he sensed the onslaught of his impending orgasm. With a rush, it was upon him, a firestorm raging as he jerked and pulsed out endlessly against Jason's stomach. Ryder's chest heaved with exertion, and he slumped against Jason, still stroking his cock.

Not a minute later, Jason spilled himself between the two of them. Ryder could feel the throbbing of his cock as it ejaculated, snuggled up tight against their bodies. Jason's head fell down on Ryder's shoulder in a dead weight of exhaustion.

Ryder rinsed both of them off, patted Jason down, and put him in a terry-cloth robe his mother gave him one Christmas, when she still considered him her son. With his arm around him, he pushed him toward the bed and took off the damp robe, leaving it to lie on the floor. His mouth dried at the sight of a nude, sleepy Jason. Devastating. The man looked so sweet and cuddly. Something hard inside Ryder broke open, awakening long-dormant desires, and his heart twisted.

This was new, this overwhelming happiness. He pulled down the covers, pushed Jason into bed, and slid beside him, remembering as he lay back on the pillows that tomorrow he was going to see Landon, all because of the man lying beside him in bed. He couldn't help but smile with contentment as he lay soaking in Jason's heated, drowsy presence by his side.

The late-afternoon sun sent warming fingers of light across the bed. Outside in the hall, he could hear the jingling of the dogs' collars as they played together. Jason rolled over and put his arms around him, spooning him, kissing his cheek. Sleepy and satiated, Ryder stroked his arm. "Come on, Sleeping Beauty, take a nap. The food will keep."

Chapter Thirteen

“Damn it, this was supposed to be done last week. Didn’t the Buildings Department tell us that we’d have the permits? Where the hell are they?” Jason raised his gaze to the ceiling and took a deep breath. God help him, if they didn’t get these permits, they were so screwed. Spying Landon hovering at the doorway, he waved him in. He mouthed, *Take a seat*, and gestured with his chin to the chair in front of the desk.

Landon slouched down in the chair, dropping his backpack on the floor. Frustrated with the runaround he was getting on the phone, Jason lost the little patience he had left. “Look, I don’t care about the bureaucratic bullshit. Fix it.” He clicked off and tossed the phone on his desk.

“Uh, problems?” Landon glanced up at him from under the fall of his bangs. The kid looked so much like Ryder it made Jason realize how much he missed the man today. They hadn’t had a chance to speak since early this morning, after spending the entire night wrapped around each other. He had to be at the site early, and Ryder had a meeting with the city’s Small Business Association.

He rubbed his face with his hands. “It’s so frustrating dealing with the government. They don’t realize we need things, like yesterday, and when they promise it’ll be ready and then it isn’t, it royally screws us up.”

“Maybe I can help. After all, that’s why you want me here, right? What if I go get what you need? That way you don’t have to wait for them to send it to you.”

Satisfaction shot through him. “Yes, that would be excellent. Let me give you the specifics—address of the Buildings Department and the person you have to see.” Jason fumbled through some papers on the desk. Finally, after some muttered curses, he found a copy of what he had filed. “Here. Take this and show it to them. Say you work for me, and don’t let them give you the runaround. Here’s my cell phone number if you need to call me.”

He checked his watch and saw it was only two o'clock. "How come you're out so early? You didn't skip class, did you?"

"Nah, man. I get out early on Mondays. You want me to go now?" Landon was bent over his phone, concentrating on entering all the information, when a sound from outside caught Jason's attention.

The day improved dramatically when he saw Ryder lounging in the doorway of the office. It was the first time Jason had seen him dressed up all corporate in a business suit, and it was all he could do to restrain himself from hopping over the desk and grabbing him. The man was dangerously edible. The sleek navy suit sat on his lean runner's body with grace and style, showcasing his broad shoulders and narrow waist, while the pure white shirt and bright blue tie enhanced the unbearable hotness of this man. His lover's eyes brightened when they caught sight of Landon, who had yet to realize Ryder was there.

Hey, you. Jason mouthed the words, knowing instinctively that Ryder wanted to surprise his brother.

Ryder winked at him, mouthing back the same greeting.

Landon, finally finished, slipped his phone back in his pocket. "Okay, so I guess I should get ready to go, right?" He reached down to grab his backpack.

"You have a few minutes. The office doesn't shut down until four thirty. There's someone I want you to meet. He says he knows you, but he's kinda shady." Jason couldn't keep the grin from his face any longer. One thing he'd never had was a poker face. He couldn't lie for love or money.

Landon turned in his chair, and when he saw Ryder, he jumped up and ran right into his brother's open arms. "Ry."

The kid sounded so broken and emotional. Jason didn't want him to feel embarrassed, so he decided to give the two brothers some time to themselves. As he passed Ryder, who still held on to Landon for dear life, he squeezed his arm and whispered, "I'll be outside when you want to find me. Take all the time you need."

Ryder nodded, and Jason left the trailer, closing the door behind him. He'd picked up his coat on the way out, but luckily it was one of those late-March days when you knew spring was coming. The air blew warmer, and the sky was bright blue, free from any clouds or threat of rain.

He wandered inside the lobby of the soon-to-be completed building, noting the clean workmanship while listening to the crew yelling out jokes to each other in Spanish and English. They had put together a good group of people who knew how to get the job done. Liam's loud voice could be heard above all the others as he good-naturedly ordered them to pay attention to their work and stop talking about women and sports.

A grouping of chairs had been placed against the wall, and Jason dropped onto one of them, stretching out his legs, still thinking about Ryder and his reunion with his brother, when Liam joined him, choosing a chair next to his.

"You're looking pretty serious, bro. Is something bothering you? Is that why you bailed early Friday night?"

Liam's concern only increased the guilt Jason carried over not telling him about his relationship with Ryder. Now was as good a time as ever, he decided. After all, there was no shame, no reason to hide it.

"Nothing's bothering me. I was thinking about Ryder and his brother."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. Is the kid here?" Liam checked his phone and answered a text, talking to himself. "That Courtney, man, she is sweet and gorgeous. I'm seeing her again tonight." He shot Jason a quick glance. "Want to try it again with her friend? I'm sure she could arrange it."

"Landon's here with Ryder. I left them to hang out awhile in the trailer. Then Landon's going to go over to the Buildings Department and pick up those permits for us." This time spent together with his brother would help Ryder so much toward healing how broken apart he still was inside over his parents' rejection.

"Okay, good. So are we set for tonight, then? I'll let Courtney know to tell Jen." Liam was poised to text, when Jason put a hand on his arm.

"Uh, no, I'm not interested in her, sorry." The nerves made his hands shake, and his heart started racing.

"What, are you nuts? She's hot. What more could a guy want from a woman?" Liam stared at him as if he had two heads.

The blood pounded in his head. *Go on. Say it already.* "Uh, well, the thing is I'm kind of seeing someone else." *Lame ass.*

Liam's face creased with confusion. "What? You're kidding. Who?" His voice grew loud, demanding an answer.

“I never planned for it to happen, but I know it’s the right thing for me.” He faced Liam, holding his gaze, searching his dark eyes for understanding. “I want to know I have your support.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Jase? Oh, no.” A light seemed to dawn on Liam’s flushed, angry face. “You’re not back with that bitch, Chloe, are you? Tell me she isn’t pregnant. That’ll kill Mom.”

In the darkest moment of Jason’s life so far, he had to laugh. “No, you dumbass, I’m not back with her. Never.”

Liam fell back on the bench, exhaling a loud and long sigh. “Thank the Lord. Then what the hell, man? Who is she?”

They were interrupted by Ryder and Landon. Landon had his backpack slung over his shoulder and his phone in hand.

“Uh, hey, Jason, I’m going down there now. I’ll pick up what you need and bring them back as fast as I can.” Landon looked at Liam.

“Oh, right, you guys never met. Liam, this is Ry’s kid brother, Landon. Landon, my big brother, Liam.” Jason watched them shake hands, but his regard was solely on Ryder.

It killed him to have Ryder standing so close to him and having to pretend they were mere friends, when he could still taste the man on his tongue and feel the touch of Ryder’s hands stroking his body. Waking up this morning to find a warm and naked Ryder curled around him, all that smooth golden skin begging for his mouth to lick and kiss, was a feast for his soul. He wanted more, though, now. He wanted him low and filthy, hard and hot in his mouth, begging, whimpering, completely undone.

He met Ryder’s passion-filled gaze. Heat sizzled between them and Jason would swear Ryder knew. Knew his dirty, secret thoughts. An aching need to touch and be with this man again slammed into him. Jesus, he’d better get control of himself, or he’d be running to the portable toilet to jerk off. His hands fisted with frustrated impotence.

“Hey.” His gaze touched Ryder, but it was enough to catch his smile.

“Hey. I’m going to go downtown with Landon. I’ll catch you later.” Ryder said good-bye to Liam, and the two left.

Liam remained standing when Jason sat down, his large body tense, dark eyes narrowed.

“What’s the matter; didn’t you like Landon?” With arousal still vibrating through his body, it took Jason a few minutes to notice Liam’s antagonistic stance.

He knew.

Jason’s whole body stiffened as he prepared for what would be the mother of all confrontations.

Liam stood still, arms crossed, his heavy, harsh breathing the only indication of his anger. “Look me in the eye and tell me right now. Tell me I’m wrong, and then we’ll laugh about it and go have a beer. But I need to hear you say it.”

Though fear clutched at Jason’s throat, he surprised himself and managed to speak in an almost casual tone. “Why don’t you ask me the question first?”

“Tell me that guy didn’t get to you, that he’s not fucking you.” Liam’s raspy voice begged. “Shit, I can’t believe I asked you that. Forget it; I’m sorry. Of course he’s not.” He huffed out a shaky laugh. “I know he wants in your pants. That’s what they do.”

Jason’s blood ran cold. Here it was. Moment of truth. “Would that upset you so much? If I came out and told you I was gay. Would you stop being my brother, not talk to me?” His speech was deceptively calm, considering how he shook and sweated in his jacket. “Wouldn’t you still love me?”

Another nervous laugh. “Don’t fuck with me. You can’t be gay. You dated Chloe for years and had other girlfriends.”

“But you didn’t answer me. What would you do if I said I was gay? This has nothing to do with Ryder and everything to do with us as brothers.”

Liam crouched down next to him. “Why are you doing this? You want to play an April Fools’ joke on me early, is that it? Okay, ha fucking ha. You got me. Not funny.”

Jason stared into the fearful, confused eyes of his older brother and knew he was going to shatter his world. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I had hoped you would be okay with it.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Wild-eyed now, Liam backed away.

“I’m gay, Liam.” He’d climbed hundreds of feet in the sky with a thin rope and a prayer, but coming out to his brother was the single scariest thing he’d ever done in his life.

“No.” Liam pushed his hands through his hair. “No fucking way. You had girlfriends, lots of them. You screwed women. You don’t go from liking pussy to sucking dick. It...it doesn’t work like that.” He jumped to his feet. “No brother of mine is a faggot. Let me call Courtney; she’ll set you up, and you’ll see. You’ll want to be with a woman.” He pulled out his phone.

“No, don’t. Listen to me, please.” Jason put his hand out to stop his brother.

“Don’t touch me,” Liam snarled, pulling away from his touch.

The pain from the disgust and loathing in Liam’s eyes choked him. As long as he lived, he’d never forget the heartbreak of his brother’s rejection. He dropped his hand, thankful his breathing, to his great surprise, came steady and calm. “I see.” At least his shaking legs were able to hold him as he stood, anxious to get as far away from Liam as he could.

“You know what, Liam? Growing up, I always looked to you as my champion, as the person I wanted to be like. Not Dad, but you. I thought you knew everything.” It was the end of Jason’s hero worship of Liam. He’d never be able to look up to his big brother again. Not after this. “It’s hard to deal with it when your dreams are shattered, and everything you thought true was a lie.” He drew in a deep breath, brushing away the tears that started falling.

“You’re disgusted and ashamed of me because I want to be with a man. That’s my life and how I am. There’s no choice there. And you want to know something?” His voice broke. “I’m ashamed to call you my brother because you choose to be a bigoted, fucked-up, homophobic asshole. I’d rather be me than you any day.”

He didn’t wait for a response, and left Liam standing there as he walked away. He returned to the trailer, pulled out his phone, and texted Ryder.

I need you. Can you come to my house at 5:30?

Five minutes later, his phone buzzed.

What’s wrong; what happened?

He didn’t want to tell him over a text.

Shit went down with Liam. And other stuff.

Ryder's response was immediate.

I'll be there.

Right now he wondered if Ryder was the only one he could count on in this world. He had so much to say, so much to tell him. But face-to-face. Tonight he'd bring him to meet the rest of his family. He thought back to what Ryder had said the first time they were together, and repeated it in his head like a mantra to hold on to.

No turning back.

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Chapter Fourteen

It was closer to six o'clock by the time Ryder returned home, changed, picked up Pearl, and drove to Brooklyn. Traffic was its usual bitch, and by the time he pulled into Jason's driveway, his head was ready to explode. He leaned back against the headrest to gather his thoughts and, once again, for about the hundredth time, wondered what had happened to force Jason to send out a distress signal.

"Come on, girl." He snapped on Pearl's leash, unwilling to let her free in an unfamiliar area. Although he'd been to Jason's home a few times, more often than not they'd hang out at Ryder's apartment. He suspected it was because Jason didn't want to have to explain who he was in case his family dropped by.

Before he reached the door, it opened, revealing an agitated Jason in a T-shirt, faded jeans, and bare feet. Pearl spied Trouper and ran inside, but Ryder remained on the stoop, staring at the unhappy man in front of him.

"Hey, you."

Jason opened the door wider. "Come on inside."

Ryder stepped into the warm house. "I hope you have beer ready for me, 'cause it was a nightmare over the bridge—"

The words died in his throat when Jason's mouth closed over his. He managed to slam the door shut when he found himself shoved up against the wall, flattened by Jason's hard body. There was nothing he needed to do but close his eyes, accept the probing tongue, and enjoy those strong, rough hands rubbing against him.

He laughed, hugging Jason tight before letting go. "Mmm, if this is why you needed me, why not let me in the house and we can get comfortable." Getting no response, he opened his eyes to see Jason standing before him, head bowed, chest heaving, and those sure, strong hands clenching and unclenching into fists.

Uh-oh. Something really bad had happened. “Hey, Jase. Look at me.” When Jason continued to stare at the floor, Ryder cupped Jason’s jaw and lifted his face so he could stare into his eyes.

Ah hell.

Fury wound its way through Ryder as Jason blinked away his tears. He’d bet his last fucking dollar Liam had made some stupid comment about gays. Because of his own parents, Ryder understood Jason’s upset all too well. The only thing he could do was be there for him, listen to him, and try to take away his pain until they figured out how to handle the situation. Together. That was if Jason still wanted him. Deep in his heart, the fear lived on that one day Jason would return to his life as a straight man, leaving him behind, alone and devastated. Nothing would remain of him but scorched earth.

“Hey, you. Eyes to me.” He brushed his hand through Jason’s silky dark hair. “Jase, please.” Ryder caressed Jason’s bristly cheek with the pad of his thumb. “You’re scaring me. Please, talk to me.”

Jason stopped examining the floor, finally meeting his eyes. Pain had replaced his normal cheerful expression, and his dark blue eyes stared straight ahead, vacant and haunted. “He hates me, can’t stand the sight of me anymore.”

Ryder strained to hear. “Who, babe? Liam?”

Jason nodded. “I told him, Ry. I told him I’m gay. I didn’t want him to keep trying to fix me up with women. I tried to tell him about us, but he said such vile, disgusting things.” He shuddered, and Ryder held him close, close enough to feel the steady beat of his heart.

“You’re so goddamn brave, and I’m so proud of you.” Ryder continued to hold him, rubbing soothing circles on his back. His lips found Jason’s hair, and he kissed him. Nothing sexual, but an attempt to heal and comfort his man.

“If he could have spat on me, he would’ve, you know? I mean, I always knew he wasn’t the most enlightened person, but I’m his brother, goddamn it. How could he look at me like I was something dirty because I have sex with the man I love?”

Ryder stilled, his hand faltering on Jason’s back. He remained silent, absorbing the hurt and sorrow pouring out of the man he held within his arms, while inside he reeled from the impact of the words Jason uttered.

“The man I love.”

He was under no illusion Jason believed he was in love. It was something that slipped out, like a child might say in haste and anger to his parents to make a point. Still, hearing it rocked his world, because he knew he was head over heels in love with Jason.

“Don’t let it get to you, Jase. There will always be haters. I’ve learned to deflect their negativity.”

Jason turned an anguished face to him. “But how do you deal with this? It’s like the ultimate betrayal. Your family should always love you no matter what, right? I’m still the same person I was before he found out, so why should it matter?” A sob broke free, and he swiped away the tears with impatient fingers. “I don’t know how you’ve pulled through without anyone by your side.”

Jason’s hand touched his cheek, then swept the hair from his face. “I think you must be the strongest man I’ve ever known, and I’m so proud you’re mine.” He rested his head in the cradle between Ryder’s neck and shoulder.

Ryder tightened his arms around Jason, too overwhelmed to do anything but nod and hold on for dear life. Here he was supposed to make his man feel good, but instead, he was the one being comforted.

“Don’t think about me. I’m here for you. I have to think Liam will come around once he’s had a chance to think about it.” Much as he hated Jason’s brother right now, he wasn’t going to bad-mouth him. The two were close, and if Liam didn’t apologize soon, Ryder planned on paying him a visit.

Jason pulled away and threw himself down on the sofa. “I don’t give a shit anymore. You wanna know something?” He patted the seat next to him, and Ryder sank down but kept his distance. Jason didn’t need sex; he needed understanding and whatever advice Ryder could give him.

“What? Tell me whatever you want. I’m all ears.” Ryder slipped off his coat and found a place for it over the end of the sofa.

“There was always something missing every time I was with a woman. I enjoyed being with them, but the sex was never, you know...” Jason broke off, and it tickled Ryder to see his face turn red.

Oh, it was fun to tease him. “What? Tell me.” He stretched out his foot and rubbed Jason’s thigh. “Was it better than how we make each other feel?”

“Hell, no.” The denial was instant and certain, and Jason’s deep blue eyes crinkled with amusement. “Damn you, Ry, I know you’re kidding me. But I’ll say it out loud. I don’t mind.” Jason reached over and took his hand. “No one has ever made me feel like you have. The sex is amazing, but it goes much deeper than that; I hope you know it. Does it mean I’m gay? I guess it does. What I know for certain is that I want you. I need you in my life.”

Although he was touched by Jason’s declaration, Ryder remained practical. He was, after all, aware of how things could go south in a hurry, and at the end, Jason would never give up his entire family for him if they refused to accept his lifestyle. Nor should he. Ryder would step aside rather than have Jason ostracized from his loved ones.

“I know, but you’re too close to your family to allow what we have to destroy your relationship with them. They’re too important to you, and I understand that.”

“Don’t be a jerk. Put your jacket back on, and let’s go.”

An irritated, bossy Jason was a sexy Jason, and Ryder was fast becoming turned on. He’d like nothing more than to stay home in bed, showing him exactly how much he wanted him and his body. “Aren’t we staying here? Where are we going?”

Jason had already pulled on his jacket. “I want you to meet the rest of my family—my sisters and my parents.” He whistled for the dogs, and they came skidding back into the room, barking and excited.

Alarm shot through Ryder. “Are you kidding? After what happened today, you really think this is the best idea? Don’t you think you should talk to them alone first and tell them about yourself before springing me on them?” Ryder knew he sounded panicky, but what if they blamed him for turning their son gay? It could get very ugly, very fast.

Jason held out his hand. “I need your support and want you by my side.”

Who was Ryder kidding? Whatever Jason needed Ryder would gladly give him—his support, his friendship, and most of all, his love. Despite all the walls and the warning bells, he’d fallen for this man. From the moment

they'd met, he couldn't shake him out of his mind. There was some inevitable string that continued to reel him in, closer and closer until here they were, at life's turning point. Wherever Jason went, so did he. There was never any doubt.

No turning back.

He took his lover's hand. "Okay. Let's do this."

Twenty minutes later they pulled up to a sprawling Victorian house in a quiet tree-lined neighborhood he'd never imagined existed in New York City. The homes were all large, well maintained, and were the perfect setting for young, well-to-do families starting out.

They put the dogs on their leashes and got out of the car. "How long have your parents lived here?" Ryder studied the brick facade and gorgeous stained-glass windows that graced the front of Jason's parents' home.

"My father's parents bought it in the early 1960s when it was dirt cheap. My parents have lived here since the early 1990s. They keep talking about selling and moving to Florida once my youngest sister graduates high school, but we know better and laugh at them. They'll never leave." Jason bumped his shoulder. "Maybe one day we'll buy it from them."

Ryder gulped down a nervous laugh. "Yeah." Shit, he was shaking. He'd never met anyone's family before. What if they were all like Liam and hated him on sight for what they thought he'd done to their son, or their brother? "Um, so before we go in, tell me your sisters' names again."

Jason took him by the shoulder and forced him to meet his eyes. "Stop worrying it'll be fine. My parents aren't like Liam. They are much more liberal. I don't know where he got his narrow-minded ideas from, but I swear not from here. My older sister is Nicole, and the younger one is Jessica. We call them Nic and Jessie. You already know Mark. My dad is Anthony, and my mom is Helen." Jason pulled him by the arm. "Let's go. Stop worrying."

Trouper recognized where he was and whined to be set free. Ryder had no intention of letting him off leash, so he followed Jason up the brick steps and waited while Jason opened the door with his key.

"Mom, Dad, anyone home?" Jason called out.

"Jason, is that you, sweetheart?" an older woman's voice called out. "I'm coming."

Ryder could hear the chatter of conversations farther on in the house. At Jason's instructions, he let the dogs off leash, and they scampered to the back of the house, Pearl happily following in Troup's wake. As Jason and he shed their coats, a man's deep voice yelled out. "Jase, what's this? You took in another one?"

The man whose voice Ryder heard came striding down the hall, a broad smile on his face. "Hello, son." He hugged Jason, then turned to Ryder. "Hello, young man. Ryder, right? Jason told us all about you. Glad you could join us."

Oh, not quite everything, I'll bet.

Ryder couldn't help but laugh as that thought popped into his head. "Hello, sir. It's nice to meet you." Jason's dad was a handsome, strong-looking man in his late fifties with dark hair and the same dark blue eyes as Jason. It wasn't hard to imagine this was how Jason would look when he reached his age.

"What's this 'sir' nonsense? I'm not interviewing you for a job. Call me Tony." Jason's dad clapped him on the back. "Here's my lovely wife now. Helen, come meet Jason's friend, Ryder. He's the one who helped with our Trouper."

"Oh, hello, so nice to meet you, Ryder." Her dark eyes held his, and he sensed an instant chemistry with her. She had a kind, sweet face, one that you wanted to unburden all your problems to and have her give you a hug to make it all better. "We've heard so much about you from Jason, and we love our little Trouper." She bent down to pet him and laughed as he jumped up on her. Pearl stood behind him, eyes bright and tongue hanging out. "Is this your dog?"

Beckoning Pearl, Ryder made the introductions. "Yes, this is Pearl. She and Trouper are fast friends." He smiled as Jason's parents made a fuss over his dog. She loved it and, after a few minutes, followed Troup out of the room as if she'd always lived there.

Helen wiped her hands on a dish towel. "Let me clean up, and I'll join you all in the family room. Tony, go with the boys. Jessie and Nic are already in there, fighting over what movie to watch."

Tony chuckled. "Those two girls will be the death of me. If they aren't fighting over clothes, it's over boys. Do you have any brothers or sisters, Ryder?"

They continued walking through the wide hallway to the back of the house. Everywhere he could see, the walls were covered with pictures of school graduations, birthday parties, and family vacations. The house as a whole was beautifully restored with polished original parquet floors, crown molding, and fireplaces in every room. The entire home radiated warmth and love, so different from the sterile, perfect atmosphere his mother had accomplished in decorating their family apartment. Ryder could see that each piece of furniture and knickknack meant something and was more than a showpiece.

“To answer your question, yes, I have a younger brother. Landon is seventeen. You certainly have a beautiful home here, Tony. I never knew such houses existed in Brooklyn.” Ryder stood in the doorway to what must be the family room. It had glass-and-wood-framed French doors that opened to a huge, almost thirty-foot room. One wall was taken up with a stone fireplace, above which resided a sixty-inch flat-screen television. Several comfortable couches and chairs were arranged for optimal viewing of the screen, with sturdy antique tables set with platters of sandwiches, fruit, and salad.

“Thank you, son. We’ve lived here almost thirty years and enjoyed every moment. I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.” Tony stepped through the doorway, and everyone in the room stopped talking, waiting expectantly for him to speak.

“Welcome to movie night at the Mallory house. I can’t guarantee you a great movie, but there’s never a dull moment here, that’s for sure.”

Ryder shook his head and caught Jason’s eye. The damn fool was actually laughing. Suddenly, Ryder saw the humor in the situation, even if he was still scared shitless.

Oh, you have no idea.

Chapter Fifteen

Jason stepped forward to make the introductions and watched with amusement as his sisters checked Ryder out. Sure, his man was gorgeous, but to see his sisters' faces light up and eye him up and down like he was a dress on the sales rack at their favorite department store was almost too comical.

Jason put his hand on Ryder's shoulder and steered him over to the girls. "Ry, this is Jessie and Nic. Jessie is a sophomore in high school, and Nic is a senior. She'll be going to Cornell next fall."

Ryder smiled at them both. "Great school, Cornell. Do you know what you want to study?"

Nic pushed her long dark hair out of her face. "Oh, I don't know yet. I haven't decided on a major, but maybe prelaw, since I love to argue." She stared at Ryder with frank approval. "What do you do? Do you work with Jase?"

"No, I'm a lawyer, but I work full-time now for the pit bull rescue where Jason got his puppy. I handle their legal work and their rescues, which is how I met your brother."

"I didn't know you were a lawyer, Ryder. Jason never told us." Helen must have come in behind them and had now taken a seat next to Mark. "That must come in very helpful with the dog rescue. I watch that show on television where people go to jail for abusing their animals, and that makes me so happy. It should be a crime to abuse any animal."

Jason relaxed, thrilled to see how comfortable his parents made Ryder and how well they all got along.

And then the shit hit the fan, and Liam came in.

"Hey, hope I didn't miss—" He stopped short and looked around the room, his face hardening when he saw Ryder. "What's he doing here?" There was no mistaking the sneer in his voice. Jason tensed and stood up.

“Liam. What’s wrong with you?” His mother’s shocked voice reverberated against the walls of the room. “Ryder is a friend of your brother and a guest here.”

“A friend of my brother, huh?” Liam spun around and faced him with barely restrained contempt. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

“Shut up.” Jason advanced on Liam, fists clenched. “I have nothing to say to you and even less desire to hear your mouth.”

“What’s going on here? Are you two fighting about something?” His father sounded bewildered.

“Go on, Jason, tell them. Destroy your parents. Or are you afraid?” Liam’s face twisted in an ugly grimace of anger.

How could this man be the brother Jason so loved and admired? Jason searched for Ryder, only to find him standing pale and shaking by Nic and Jessie. Oh God, how could this have spun so far out of control so fast?

“It’s okay, you know. Whatever it is, I’m sure it isn’t as bad as he’s making it out to be,” Mark whispered in his ear, standing next to him. “I’m with you, no matter what.”

Jason took a deep, shuddering breath. “I need everyone to sit down. I need to talk to you, and no, before you ask, I’m fine. I’m not sick or anything.”

“Sick in the head, if you ask me,” muttered Liam.

Mark stormed over to him and, to Jason’s amazement, grabbed Liam by the shirt and, breathing hard, stood nose to nose with him. “If you don’t shut the fuck up right now, I’m gonna bash your face in.” His mother gasped, and Mark, shooting a glance over to her, muttered, “Sorry for the language, Ma.”

She remained silent, sitting with her hand to her throat, looking scared.

Mark let go of Liam and nodded to Jason. “Go on, Jase.”

Jason elected to sit by his mother and took her small, shaking hand in his. “For a long time now, I haven’t been happy. I dated a lot, and even though I went out with Chloe for all those years, something was always missing.”

“You haven’t met the right girl yet, honey. You’re still young, though.” His mother patted his hand.

She's so sweetly naïve. He stole a glance at his father. He seemed more thoughtful and tuned in to the tone of the conversation. "Uh, that's not the problem, Mom. I'm doing this wrong. I don't want you to think that this is something that happened out of the blue. It's been with me for many years, but it's only now that I realized it."

Nic put her hand up to her mouth. "Oh my God. Jase, are you gay?"

He let out his breath and nodded. "Yes. I didn't want it to have to come out like this, but—"

"But now that he has a boyfriend, he thinks everyone will be fine with it and welcome them both with open arms." Liam stood in the center of the room, his face red with anger. He pointed at Ryder as he continued shouting. "Well, we don't accept it. I knew this guy was trouble from the moment I laid eyes on him. I told Jason he was after him, and Jason laughed at me. And now look at him. For Christ's sake, he brought his lover, a pervert, to meet your daughters, Ma. Tell him to leave, and then we can get back to normal." He sat down in a club chair and smirked.

"You should leave." Jason's heart jumped in his throat, and he thought he might vomit. It never occurred to him that his mother wouldn't accept him. Over the pounding of the blood rushing to his head, he heard his mother continue to speak.

"I won't allow you to talk to Jason like this. To think I raised one brother to behave like this to the other. It breaks my heart." With wonder in his eyes and a heart full of hope, Jason tore his gaze from the floor to find his mother smiling with tenderness at him. "I will never turn my back on one of my children, never. I love you, Jason, no matter who you love."

His father, sounding older and gruffer than usual, broke into the conversation. "You say you've felt like this for many years, but how? You were with that girl."

"Ugh." Jessie shuddered. "What a horror she was. I'm not surprised you're gay after being with her."

Out of the mouth of babes. The tension broke as Ryder choked back a laugh, and everyone else joined in. Everyone except Liam and his father.

"Dad." Jason left the couch to sit by his father. "I can see you're having a hard time with this."

“Well, you can’t expect me to jump up and down with joy over it. It’s not that I’m antigay or anything, but never to have children, no grandchildren?” He shook his head. “The happiest days of my life were when you and your brothers and sisters were born. You’ll never get to experience that.”

“Not true, Dad.” To Jason’s surprise, Mark interjected himself into the conversation. “Many gay couples adopt children now or use a surrogate to have a baby for them. Let me ask you a question.” His blue eyes shone with honesty and Jason’s heart swelled with pride as he watched his younger brother. “What would you tell me if I got married and my wife couldn’t have children? Or if I was the one who was sterile? Wouldn’t you want us to adopt or try some other way? If your only problem and concern is having children, then I think we’ll all be fine, except for Liam the asshole over there.”

He’d never been prouder of his brother. This was how he’d hoped his family would react. With understanding, compassion, and unconditional support. He grabbed Mark, wrapped his arms around him, and hugged him hard and long. “Thank you,” he whispered. “I love you.”

“Love you too, man.”

“So Ryder is your boyfriend, Jase?” Jessie sat, twisting a strand of her long brown hair round and round her fingers, her big blue eyes wide as she looked from him to Ryder.

“Yes, Jess, he is.” He left his father’s side to kneel by her chair. “We’ve been together almost two months now.” He heard Liam’s derisive snort in the background. “Does it bother you, honey?”

To his relief, she gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head, slanting a curious look at Ryder from the corner of her eye while giving him a shy smile.

“I’m leaving. This is ridiculous.” Liam stormed out, and Jason heard the front door slam.

His mother winced, then sat back, disappointment radiating from her, while his father said nothing, a stoic yet unreadable expression on his face.

Nicole sat, a miserable expression on her face. “It’s so unfair.”

Perplexed, he perched himself on the arm of her chair and gave her shoulder a little squeeze. “What’s unfair, cookie?”

“Ryder. He’s so hot. How come all the good-looking guys are gay?” she asked, her dark eyes all mournful. “As long as you’re happy, I don’t care at all. Now can I at least kiss your boyfriend hello?”

He rolled his eyes. “Glad to see nothing has changed. Go ahead. Welcome him, Nic.”

She hugged Ryder, who still seemed stunned by the entire event. “Welcome to the family, Ryder. We’re crazy, but you’ll find that out soon enough for yourself.”

“Nicole, please. You’ll scare the poor man away.” His mom waved a hand to Ryder. “Come, Ryder, sit by me so I can get to know you better.” His mom patted the seat next to her and proceeded to take Ryder under her wing. She had an inner eye for the wounded and probably sensed Ryder’s internal turmoil. There was nobody better at putting people at ease and soothing their hurts, and she was the one everyone turned to for comfort.

He always knew his mom was amazing, but to see her accept him and Ryder so easily almost brought him to tears. His dad, he suspected, would have more of a problem with the situation, as he remained quiet, no doubt still stunned by what he’d heard. Jason wanted to put it all out in the open so they could talk about it. He and his dad had always been close, and if this was going to be a problem, the sooner they could work on it meant the sooner they would reach a solution. “Do you want to talk about it? We can go to the kitchen where we can have some privacy.”

His dad nodded. “Yeah, I think we should.”

He walked out, his dad following behind him. When they got to the kitchen, he opened the fridge and took out a beer. “You want one?”

His father shook his head. “No offense, but I need something a little stronger to handle this.” He took a bottle of scotch from the cabinet and poured himself a neat shot.

“Why don’t you ask me what you want to know so we don’t get caught up in all the misunderstanding and bullshit?” Jason swallowed his beer and sat down at the long, weather-beaten kitchen table. He’d spent so much of his childhood sitting at this table it only seemed appropriate to be here for this, the most important conversation of his life.

“I guess *how* is the main question. How, after all these years, do you suddenly realize or think you’re gay? Isn’t it something you would know all along? And you’ve had girlfriends; doesn’t that mean you’re bisexual?”

Relieved to see his father wasn't angry, merely bewildered, Jason gathered his thoughts together to try and make him understand.

"It wasn't something I ever wanted to speak about, but this wasn't my first experience. In college, there was an incident with another man that, had I chosen to pursue it, might have changed my direction then. But what I said before was true." He gulped his beer, embarrassed even at his age to discuss his sex life with his father. Kinda weird. "It's never been great with women. It always felt like I was going through the motions to get to the end result."

"And with this young man?" His father coughed and took a quick drink.

Oh yeah, his father was uncomfortable discussing his son's sex life. But it wasn't because Jason was having sex with another man. Growing up Jason always talked to Liam about sex, not his father. That's what big brothers were for, or so he thought. "We haven't, uh, gotten that far yet in our relationship, but everything about it, about him, is different. He's always on my mind. I wonder what he's doing during the day, and I worry about him getting hurt when he goes out on calls to rescue the dogs. I'm proud when he goes to court and wins a victory for the business." He stopped to catch his breath for a moment and then whispered, "He makes me happy, Dad."

His father sipped his drink, then looked him in the eye. "How do his parents feel about him and you?"

"They kicked him out," he answered softly, almost as if Ryder's pain was his own. Which, in fact, it was. "He hasn't seen them in well over six months, and even though he pretends it doesn't matter, I know how devastated he's been. It's only recently that he's been able to see his brother again, since his mother cut off all communication between the two of them. Landon is seventeen, and I gave him a job as an intern with the firm. Ryder saw him today, and now he'll stop by and get a chance to see him all the time."

His father's faced grew stone cold. "What a terrible thing to do to your child."

"Yes, it is, isn't it? Rejecting your flesh and blood because of who they love?" He met his father's troubled eyes across the table.

“I would never reject you, son. I’ll always love you. I’d hoped you knew that. It will take me some time to wrap my head around it. As for your brother Liam, he’s a different story.”

Jason set his jaw. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

A noise from the hallway drew his attention. Ryder stood in the doorway. “Uh, Tony, the girls want to start the movie, but they say they can’t unless you’re there to give the okay.” He fidgeted, unable to meet Jason’s eyes. It was so unusual to see the normally confident Ryder so unsure of himself. Not in control.

“Dad?” Jason took his father’s hand. “Are we okay?”

His father smiled. “We’re better than okay. We’re the same. Same as we ever were.” He left the kitchen, but not before giving Ryder an awkward pat on the shoulder.

Jason stood and held out his arms. “C’mere.”

Ryder hesitated, looking over his shoulder. “Are you sure?”

It took Jason less than five seconds to cover the distance to where Ryder stood. He cupped his cheek and kissed him on the lips. “Hey. Don’t worry about it. I think it’s going to be fine.”

Ryder put his arms around him. “Your mom is unreal. She made me feel so welcome. Everyone did. I wish... Oh, never mind. It doesn’t matter.” Jason heard Ryder’s pain, and his heart squeezed. Although he tried to hide it, Ryder had never gotten over his family’s rejection. No matter how they treated him, they were still his family, his blood. Jason knew he and Liam would have to come to terms one day. But right now, he needed to reassure his lover.

“It *will* work out, Ry. You have to believe that one day your mom and dad will come back into your life and accept you. And if they don’t, then you have my family to claim as your own.” There was unexpected joy in knowing his family for the most part had readily accepted him and Ryder.

“You are incredible.” Ryder kissed him on the cheek. “I’m so lucky to have you.”

Jason touched his man’s cheek. In his mind, he was the lucky one to have found a man like Ryder. “Will you stay with me tonight? Be with me? I feel like it’s a whole new beginning for us, and I want to be yours.

Completely.” A slight shiver raced through him, and he ached to have the deep, ultimate connection with his lover.

A sweet smile broke over Ryder’s handsome face. “I’d love to.”

“Ahem.” They broke apart, laughter coming from the hallway.

“Nicole.” Jason spied his sister waiting outside the kitchen door and wanted to wring her neck.

“What? I wasn’t spying, honest. Mom and Dad want you guys to come in and eat already.” She whispered as he and Ryder walked by, “That was really hot, by the way. You two are adorable together.”

“Nicole.” His warning fell on deaf ears as she laughed her way down the hallway.

If only his problem with Liam could be solved so easily.

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Chapter Sixteen

Ryder and Jason left the Mallorys' house around eleven at night, with promises to return for Sunday dinner. After settling the dogs into the backseat, it was a quiet ride home.

They pulled into the driveway, and Jason opened the car doors to let the dogs out before they locked up for the night. Once they were all safely ensconced in the house, Ryder raided the refrigerator for a beer, then collapsed on the sofa. "Oh my God, I can't believe this day." He'd gone from the high of spending time with Landon to the low of hearing about, then seeing for himself, Liam's homophobic rant and betrayal of Jason, back up to the biggest high of his life—acceptance from Jason's family. He'd hung out at Drummers enough with Mark to know he'd accept Jason's coming out, and the girls were sweet and funny. He'd been most scared of Jason's father, but he had to give it to the man; although Tony was uncomfortable, Ryder knew he tried because he loved his son.

Jason's mom was the best. Perhaps she was shocked and disappointed, but she didn't show it, acting gracious and caring, like a mother should. He closed his eyes, willing away the memories of his mother's hateful words in his ear. *Abnormal, deviant, perverted.*

"Hey, Ry, what's the matter? You were sitting there with such a smile on your face, and then, all of a sudden..."

Jason dropped down next to him, his dark blue eyes tender, then reached over to brush the hair off his face. "You were thinking of your parents again, weren't you? I've seen you do that. One minute you're fine, and then your eyes get that distant and sad look, as if you're running unhappy conversations in your head."

Obviously he wasn't as adept as he thought in hiding his emotions, but Ryder didn't want to talk about it. That was what he always did, ignore or deflect. "What's the point in talking about it? They're never going to change, and I should accept it. At least now, I'll get to see Landon."

He put his bottle down on the coffee table and drew Jason into his arms. “Thank you for doing it. I know you don’t really need anyone to help you. I know you only did it for me, and that means more to me than anything.” He kissed Jason, loving the rough stubble of his beard. The kiss started out soft and sweet, lips touching, tongues licking, but it didn’t take long before the delicious slow ache kindled into a fire.

“Let’s go to the bedroom where we can continue this, okay?” He stood and took Jason’s hand, drawing it around his waist. They stopped every few feet to kiss and caress each other, and by the time they reached Jason’s bedroom, he knew if they didn’t slow down, their lovemaking would be over before they’d had a chance to begin.

“Shh, let me undress you, ’kay?” The man was glorious in his passion, those blue eyes glazed and unfocused, full lips parted, broad chest heaving. Utterly desirable and all his.

Ryder pulled the sweatshirt over Jason’s head and undid his jeans. As he removed his own clothes, Jason stripped as well so that they stood together, naked and aroused. Ryder watched as Jason’s cock jerked and swelled to an impressive hardness, tiny pearls of moisture leaking from the head. His mouth watered, and he couldn’t help but grab him close and, using that delicious wetness, rub their cocks together in a sensual, naked dance. The slickness of their mingling liquids and the hardness of their aching shafts left them gasping for air.

“Get in the bed.” Ryder pushed him down, and Jason scrambled to the center of the king-size bed, lying spread-eagled. His body was a smorgasbord of erotic delicacies, and Ryder intended to feast from every part. After straddling Jason’s body, he grasped both their cocks with his hand and began to stroke and rub them together, continuing the friction as he took Jason’s mouth in a hungry kiss. The man overpowered all his defenses, and Ryder knew, with the little mind he had left, that he had fallen so deep and hard for Jason he could never let him go. He groaned and licked his way down the man’s straining neck, nipping and biting him, tasting his sweat and his skin.

“I’m gonna mark you, babe, so everyone will know you are mine.” He bit down on Jason’s muscled shoulder, then kissed the reddened mark, hearing the quick intake of breath, knowing it turned Jason on by the corresponding jerk of his swollen cock against his abdomen. “Mine, all

mine,” he mumbled as he continued tonguing his chest, finding the little nipples and drawing first one, then the other nub hard into his mouth.

“Oh God, Ryder.” Jason moaned loudly, his hands holding Ryder close, hips bucking. “Want you so bad. Please, now.” He writhed underneath him, begging and gasping, Jason shifted, trying to climb from under him.

“Not yet, babe. I want to hear you scream for me.” Ryder brushed his fingers over Jason’s erection, loving the feel of that heated flesh against him. Bending down, he swiped his tongue across the silken tip, causing Jason to thrust his cock and his hips upward in swift movements. Ryder swirled his tongue around the full head and sucked in all that delicious man taste of Jason.

“Ryder, please,” Jason moaned, begging for more.

With a wicked smile, Ryder let go of Jason’s cock, giving it one last kiss. “Not loud enough. Besides, I want you inside me.”

There was no sound in the room as even Jason’s ragged breaths grew still. His cock jumped, and Ryder bit back a smile. “Do you want that too?” He crept back up Jason’s body to stare deep into his lover’s eyes. The longing and need in them nearly caused his heart to stop.

“I want to be inside you. I’ve wanted it for a while.” Jason kissed him, his tongue tracing Ryder’s lips. “Show me what to do. I want it to be perfect for you.” Ryder was brought back to the day when Jason wanted to take Ryder in his mouth for the first time but didn’t know what to do.

His sweet guy. Ryder kissed Jason’s rough cheek and, in a hard and demanding voice, ordered him. “First, get the lube and condoms.”

Jason scooted over to the night table and pulled open the drawer, grabbing the small bottle and a strip of condoms. He returned to Ryder’s side, putting his hand on Ryder’s cock.

“I’ve dreamed so many nights about this moment. I want you so badly. I’m afraid I won’t last inside you.” Jason’s hand moved in long strokes, stoking his fire as he nuzzled his neck and ear. Ryder writhed with yearning as Jason’s questing mouth suddenly seemed to be everywhere on his body; breathing hotly in his ear, nipping at his jaw, sucking at his nipples.

Taking a deep breath, Ryder halted the movement of Jason’s hands on his cock. “It’s been so long since I’ve been with anyone, since I wanted anyone.” He licked his lips, eyeing Jason’s cock. His body clenched with the

thought of Jason inside him. As Ryder wound his arms around Jason's neck, he whispered into the corner of his mouth. "You changed me from the moment I met you, and made me willing to take risks I never dreamed imaginable."

He waited, spread out on the bed like a sacrifice, then smiled. "Make love to me, Jason."

JASON UNSNAPPED THE container of lube and trickled some of the slippery gel onto his fingers. He tossed aside the bottle and took in the sight of Ryder lying spread before him like a golden god. "Tell me what to do. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. I promise."

Ryder's quiet voice and gentle smile reassured him, as he kissed the curve of Ryder's neck, then trailed his fingers down the crease of his ass. With a tentative touch, Jason pushed the tip of his index finger into the tiny opening. When Ryder shivered, growling low, he stopped, concerned and worried. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, don't stop." A flush crept over Ryder's face as he moaned with undisguised pleasure.

The desperate strain in Ryder's voice excited Jason as he continued the slide into his lover's body until his finger was buried. It was tightly held inside soft velvet heat and wetness. Excited and turned on, Jason stroked himself with his free hand.

"Jason, God, don't stop. Please."

Ryder's head was thrown back, his teeth worrying his lips and his hands stroking his cock. The man looked turned on and blissed out. Jason sank a second finger next to the first, stretching the small, snug opening.

His own cock, stiffer than it had ever been, pulsed with need. Because he wanted to please this wonderful man, he'd watched some man-on-man videos over the past few weeks, trying to learn how best to pleasure a lover. Now that his initial nerves were dispensed with, he stroked Ryder's firm thighs, reaching up to gently tug his balls and tickle the sensitive skin behind them.

Ryder jerked, causing Jason's fingers to spread apart even more inside. He stretched his fingers wide, then pushed them in, curling upward until he

touched the small knot of tissue he'd only read about. He brushed his fingers across it and listened to Ryder wail his pleasure.

"Oh God, Jason, please." Ryder bit back a moan, eyes squeezed shut, his hand jerking his cock with hard tugs. "I want you inside me now, please." The pleadings grew heavier and rougher. "Need you, babe, please."

Jason removed his fingers, tore open the condom wrapper with shaking hands sheathed himself, then poured more lube over his erection. He positioned the head of his cock at Ryder's impossibly small opening. A moment of uncertainty stopped him.

As he glanced up, Ryder's dark gaze pinned him with a hungry desire he'd never seen before. "Do it, Jase. Slowly push yourself in. I promise it will be all right. I can't wait to have a part of you inside me." He gave him a lazy smile. "Don't you know by now how much I love you?"

Pure joy filled Jason, and his heart tripped with happiness. He pressed a swift kiss to Ryder's lips, then whispered against his mouth, "I was so scared at first. Scared of the way I wanted you more than anything else I've ever wanted in the whole fucking world. I was overwhelmed by everything. Overwhelmed, overpowered, and in way, way over my head."

"And now?" Ryder's luminous eyes shined, even in the dimness of the bedroom.

Jason kissed him again, resting his forehead against Ryder's. "And now I love you more than I ever thought possible. I'll do anything to keep you happy."

"Then get on with it, babe. Make us both happy." Ryder's lips smiled against his cheek.

Jason pushed the head of his cock into Ryder's opening and felt the resistance, but hearing Ryder's soft cries and gentle urgings, continued to push through the tight barrier. He stopped at his lover's hiss, then continued on past that ring of muscle, sinking himself into a man for the first time. His pulsing cock was gripped tight, clutched in a velvet slide of hot pleasure. He knew for certain, once he was inside Ryder completely, this was where he was meant to be.

"Move, please, dear God," Ryder whispered, and Jason lifted on his hands and pulled out halfway, then pushed back in. Remembering Ryder's extreme reaction when he hit his prostate, he tried to aim for that pleasure spot once again. The head of his cock rubbed against the spongy knot, and

Ryder moaned his passion. He stroked that angle, relentless in his desire to please, while underneath him, Ryder writhed and begged, scrabbling at the bedsheets, calling out in unintelligible gibberish as his hips frantically bucked up against him, slotting him deeper and deeper inside. Jason reached down and pulled on Ryder's straining cock, stroking rough and fast. Within minutes, Ryder arched and exploded, jerking endlessly all over his abdomen and chest. The thrill of having Ryder shatter beneath him, knowing he'd given this beautiful man such joy, rushed over him in a blinding wave of passion and heat.

He pounded into Ryder's body, unrelenting in his need to claim him and become a part of him forever. "Look at me." Jason gritted his teeth as he drove himself deeper inside Ryder. "Open your eyes when I'm inside you. I need to see you." He groaned loud and long. "I need all of you, Ryder, to become all of me."

His thrusting grew harder and faster as his body began to shake, and a tingling radiated up his spine. His balls drew tight, and sparks appeared in his peripheral vision. "Ryder." He sobbed as he grabbed his lover's shoulders, digging his fingers into the skin, sliding himself inside the man as far as he could.

All at once his orgasm hit, roaring through his body, engulfing him in hot white light, driving him forward to collapse in a sated, puddled mess on top of Ryder's sweat-slicked body. His dick pulsed and throbbed as he emptied himself into the condom. After several minutes, when Jason discovered he could once again move, he slipped out of Ryder. After disposing of the condom, Jason slid back into his lover's arms, flinging a leg over Ryder's hip to snuggle close. Strong arms pulled him near.

Jason found himself lying atop an amused yet tired-looking Ryder. "Hey, you." Ryder kissed him, then searched his face, concern clouding his eyes. "How do you feel?" They rolled on their sides, bodies still touching. Ryder's hands kneaded his back, and Jason arched into the incredible sensation, moaning his pleasure. "Can I assume you feel okay about everything still?"

Jason forced himself to stay awake long enough to kiss Ryder and pull the covers they'd kicked off earlier over their exhausted bodies. "I feel better than okay. All thanks to you." He snuggled into Ryder's arms. "I hope I didn't disappoint you."

The even sound of Ryder's breathing led him to believe he was asleep. As Jason was about to drop off himself, though, Ryder spoke.

"I didn't realize how being with the right person could change your world and your outlook on everything, but you have to know you rescued me from myself. You've made everything in my life so much better from the moment I met you."

Jason said nothing, listening to Ryder speak from his soul.

"All I ever wanted was to be loved. Being with you tonight, though, forced me to admit that I'd never really been in love before. I'm in so deep with you, Jason, I don't ever want to let go."

Jason trailed his fingers over the strong muscles of Ryder's back. "Tonight, telling my family and having you by my side seemed as natural as breathing. No one's ever cared about me like you have, and I don't know how I got so lucky, but I'll never let you go now. Even if my family hadn't accepted me being gay, I would choose you."

They hugged tight, and the sticky feel of their bodies alerted Jason to the fact they needed to shower. "Dude, come on, we're gross." Feeling energized, he jumped out of bed, slapped Ryder's ass, and winked. "Bet you'll be sore for a while."

He laughed until Ryder manhandled him into the shower, turned on the water, and got on his knees. Then it was no laughing matter at all.

Chapter Seventeen

Ryder had a smile on his face the next morning as he walked into Rescue Me with Pearl. He was surprised to see Connor there, as it was during the week, when he normally worked at legal aid.

“Hey, what’re you doing here?” Ryder chose a muffin from the box Emily had on her desk. “Shouldn’t you be downtown?” He bit into a cranberry and hummed his appreciation. “God, these are good.” After another bite and a sip of coffee, he sat at his desk and checked his calendar. The soreness in his ass reminded him of the night spent with Jason, and as he shifted in his seat to get comfortable, he couldn’t help grinning. Waking up with Jason, having breakfast, and doing all their mundane morning tasks had him imagining how it could be if they ever lived together.

“Hey, dream lover. Get your head out of your ass, or whoever’s ass it’s been in.” Connor stood before him, snapping his fingers to get attention.

“Hmm? What is it? What do you want?” He checked his phone to find a text from Jason.

Landon will be here at 4. Dinner later then Drummers? I want to talk to John.

He immediately answered. *I’ll be there at 5 so Landon can work. Everything else sounds great.*

Connor’s face split in a huge grin. “You got laid. Hallelujah. Emily, did you hear? The man finally got laid.” Connor cackled with glee as Ryder peered at his best friend in disgust.

“I didn’t get laid, you asshole.”

Emily sat down on his desk, scrutinizing his face. “You do seem different, sweetie. Care to share with your best friends?” Connor stood behind her, sliding his arms around her waist. “You tell us your secret, and we’ll tell you ours.” She kissed Connor’s cheek.

Instantly, he was on alert. “What’s going on? What secret?”

Connor stared him down. “Uh-uh, man. You first.”

He could feel the heat creep up his face. “Jason and I are a couple.”

Emily squealed, and Connor laughed. “A couple of what?” He snickered, and Ryder rolled his eyes as he accepted Emily’s hug.

“Your husband is such a jerk.”

“I know. Ignore him like I do. When did this all happen?” She bounced up and down on her toes. “I knew you were perfect together.”

“We’ve been together for a while, but I met his family last night. Everything was fine, except for Liam.” It still hurt replaying Liam’s hurtful words. He’d thought they were all right with each other, friends even. Never once had he ever thought Liam actively hated gays. “He was pretty awful.”

“Guy’s a fucking prick.” Connor swore viciously. “I always knew he felt like that.” He came over and hugged Ryder. “I’m happy for you, man. Jase is cool and a great guy. I never knew he was gay.” He cocked an inquiring brow.

“There was some guy in college, but it didn’t lead anywhere, so he never pursued any other relationships with men. I don’t even care. I’m happy.” Ryder’s two friends grinned back at him. “So what’s your secret, you two? I don’t think I’ve ever seen such mysterious smiles on your faces.”

Emily looked at Connor, then back at him. “We’re going to have a baby.” She placed her hands over her still-flat stomach. “In about six months or so.” Her face flushed pink. “You’re going to be an uncle.”

Letting out a whoop of congratulations, he picked Emily up and hugged her hard. “I’m so happy for you, baby. You’re going to make an amazing mommy.” Connor stood watching them, a smile on his lips. Ryder hugged him close. “Hey, Daddy.” Their baby would be so lucky to have a man like Connor as a father.

Connor turned white as chalk. “Oh shit. I’m going to be a father.” He wobbled and grabbed the back of the chair. “I gotta sit down.”

Ryder busted out laughing.

Emily whispered to him, “He fainted in the doctor’s office when we found out. He’s such a wimp.”

Ryder laughed until the tears rolled down his face. His joy reached no bounds.

* * * *

“So the vents have to be placed here; otherwise the smoke and cooking smells from the restaurant will be drawn back into the building, right?” Landon pointed to the blueprints unrolled on the desk.

“I don’t think the people would appreciate paying however many millions of dollars for their lofts and having them stink like yesterday’s dinner.” Jason grinned at Landon.

The kid was smart. He asked the right questions, never complained when asked to do something menial, and was always on time. A great assistant. The fact that Ryder was his brother was irrelevant for work purposes, except that Landon’s presence assured Jason he’d get to see his boyfriend. His lover. He couldn’t help the goofy grin he knew was plastered on his face. The happiness in his heart glowed bright for anyone who cared to notice. Even the crew made cracks about it, joking, “Bossman must be in love,” or “Look at that grin. He must be getting some.”

His cock pinged with interest as he replayed last night in his mind. In his deepest fantasies, he’d never dreamed that making love to a man would bring the pleasure it had. All the years with Chloe and other women were like a drop of rain in a puddle—nothing lasting, no woman ever standing out. One night with Ryder and he couldn’t get the feel of his lover’s tongue sliding in and out of his mouth, or wrapped around his dick, out of his mind.

Last night, when he’d entered Ryder’s body, he had a sense of rightness, of belonging. Right now, he could still feel that grasp and pull of Ryder’s body, drawing him in farther and deeper and hotter...

“Uh, Jason? Everything all right?”

He jerked back to the present, his breathing strained, and—*oh shit*—a rock-hard erection straining against his zipper. Embarrassed, he cleared his throat and moved behind the desk. “Er, yeah, sure, fine. I’m, ah—”

“Thinking about your girlfriend, from the look of it.” Landon snickered, rolling up the blueprints and placing them back in their protective tube. “She must be hot to get you so worked up.”

He glared at Landon. “Shut up. You’re only seventeen. Don’t even think I’m gonna talk to you about sex.” He took the blueprints from Landon and replaced them on a special rack he had built to hold them. He checked

his watch. "Want to come with me for a walk-through on today's work? I can't believe it's almost finished."

Landon jumped to his feet. "Definitely. I can't wait to see what it looks like inside." He grabbed his backpack. "Ryder said he'd be here around five, and then we'd hang out until you guys were ready to leave." He hesitated a moment. "Sorry about the girlfriend crack."

Jason decided Ryder had better tell his brother they were together as soon as possible. It wasn't fair to the kid, especially now that Jason's family knew. Besides, he liked Landon and didn't want to keep anything from him. He didn't think Landon would have a problem knowing that Jason and Ryder were lovers.

"No, I'm sorry I snapped at you. Let's go, then." He put on his jacket and left the trailer. "It's getting warmer every day, thank God. This winter was a bitch."

Landon trailed in his wake, checking a text he'd received. "Oh, shit."

Jason turned to see what the problem was. A white-faced Landon stood frozen, staring at the screen of his phone. "Trouble?" Whatever it was couldn't be good. He'd never seen the kid so scared.

"My mom," he said, lifting his blue-eyed gaze to the ceiling, then him.

Jason could see fear etched in his face. What kind of woman inspired such panic in her own child? Then he remembered how she'd treated Ryder, and he understood.

"Sh-she's here, outside, and wants to talk to me. I know it's a trap. She must suspect something or know that Ryder and I have been seeing each other again." He smashed the door with his backpack. "Why can't she leave us alone? He's my brother. I'm never gonna stop wanting to see him."

Jason glanced away from the stark plea in the boy's eyes. Why couldn't his brother feel like Landon? "Don't worry. You're here working, and Ryder isn't due for almost an hour. We can deal with her, and she'll be gone before he gets here."

Landon rolled his eyes. "She's sneaky and smart, remember. I know she's up to something." He picked up his backpack. "Let me go meet her before she decides to come in."

Well, there was no way in hell he was letting Ryder's mother onto his site and not being there to meet the bitch. He needed to lay eyes on the

woman who had rejected her son so callously simply because he was gay. Once again, he thanked God for his mother, who loved him no matter what. Even if she didn't understand his choices, she stood by him, the way a mother should.

“I'm coming with you.”

Landon's eyes flared with alarm. “No way. She'll eat you alive. You'll see, she'll make you somehow tell her about Ryder.” A pale sheen of sweat dampened his face, and his voice quavered with nerves.

Jason scoffed. “Shit, better men than your mom have tried to bully me. Big ugly construction workers.” He patted the kid on his shoulders. “Don't worry. I can handle her. Come on.”

They walked out of the trailer, and Jason spotted her immediately. Small, very thin, and very blonde, Mrs. Astrid Daniels exuded disapproval from every pore of her fine-boned body. Jason shuddered.

“Damn, that's your mom?” He shivered again. It was as if a cold wind swept through his body at the sight of her. The woman had no warmth to her at all. Amazing that she had birthed two loving children like Ryder and Landon.

Landon didn't bother to answer him, choosing instead to confront his mother head on. “Mom, what are you doing here? I'm working.”

She ran a disapproving eye over Jason, then turned to her son. “I am aware. I'm sure this is not the right atmosphere for you. You needn't be here, with all these rough men and dangerous equipment. If you wanted to work, your father could find you a job at the firm.”

Jason didn't give Landon a chance to respond. He turned on his charm and gave her the “meeting your girlfriend's mom” smile. “Mrs. Daniels, what a pleasure to meet you. I'm Jason Mallory, owner of the firm, and I must thank you for allowing your very talented son to work here as a high school intern. I'm amazed at how helpful he is, and I know I have only you to thank.”

“Well, yes, but I'm not sure it's—”

“This will be an excellent extracurricular activity for his college résumé, and I know he's learning so much, right, Landon?” His hoped the kid would catch on and play along.

“Yes, Mom. Mr. Mallory is showing me how to read blueprints and learn all about the internal structure of various buildings. I know this will help me with my grades as well, since we discuss theories based on physics and other aerodynamic problems.”

Jason laughed inside. Kid was good on his feet. He had to hand it to him. Mrs. Daniels, however, was no fool.

“How did you even meet my son? Mr. Mallory, did you say your name was?” Her eyes narrowed. “Where are you from?” The snobbery oozed out of her. “You don’t live in Manhattan, do you?”

“No ma’am. I live in Brooklyn. My firm works with many high schools to give the kids a chance for hands-on experience in the field of construction or architecture.” It was doubtful she’d check with the high school to learn that was a bald-faced lie.

“But you aren’t an architect. You’re nothing more than a glorified construction worker, are you?” Her lip curled in distaste.

Oh, the woman was a bitch. But it was four thirty, and he needed to make nice and get her out of here before Ryder came.

“I have a degree in architecture from Syracuse University, ma’am. My brother and I started this construction firm. So I guess you could say I’m both.” He put his arm around Landon. “Your son’s never on the physical site of the building when the men are working. He’s either here in the office, or at the Buildings Department, or other city agencies when I need assistance. I’d never put his safety in jeopardy.”

Her nose wrinkled as she gave a disapproving sniff. “Landon, this all seems rather menial to me. Couldn’t you find something in an office where you wouldn’t have to grub around with all these people?” She gestured to the group of men who were on their break, sitting around laughing and telling jokes. “You’d really be much better off working in a corporate environment like the one the firm provides. After all, one day you’ll be working there.”

“Mom, I really like working here. And it isn’t for too much longer.” Jason watched Landon attempt to reason with her for approval. “Once finals start, I won’t be working. Plus, I have all my SAT stuff to do. So really, it’s only for, like, another month or so.”

Jason could virtually see her brain searching for a reason to forbid her son to come, but she couldn’t come up with a viable response to Landon’s

well-thought-out plan. “Very well. I’ll allow this for one more month. Then I think you’ll have acquired enough ‘experience’ or whatever it is you think you’re getting here.” Those thin lips of hers pinched with distaste.

At least she had a heart concerning one son. “Thank you, Mrs. Daniels.”

“Yes, well, Landon, isn’t it time for you to come home? I have James here with the car. You can ride home with me.” A black sedan waited by the curb.

Shit, no. “Ahh, we weren’t finished for the day, Mrs. Daniels. Landon has one more thing to finish here, and then I promise I’ll send him home in a cab myself, as I know you wouldn’t want him on the subway after dark.” He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

She raked him with another disapproving, icy glare. “I can’t imagine what you have him doing so late in the day, but very well.” She turned the full force of her frost-bitten glare on her son. “Dinner is at seven thirty. I expect you to be there. Your father will be joining us tonight. He’s invited his old friend who is on the admissions committee at Princeton. Make sure you aren’t late.” She gave him a curt nod. “Mr. Mallory.” Then she was gone.

They watched the driver hold the door for her as she entered the car, then drive away. After the sedan disappeared down Broadway, he chuckled. “God almighty, kid. Too bad you aren’t old enough to drink. ’Cause you sure deserve one after that.”

“Yeah, right?” Landon huffed a brief, strained laugh; then his whole demeanor changed. A brilliant smile broke over his face as he waved at a tall figure walking down the block. “Over here,” he called.

Ryder.

Jason’s heartbeat quickened at the sight of his lover. Once again Ryder was in a suit, but this time it was a dark charcoal gray. He’d paired it with a crisp white shirt and a green-patterned silk tie. The man was nothing short of mouthwatering. Jason frowned, noticing plenty of women and quite a few men checking out his man.

Look, but no touching. All that is mine.

Jason’s hands itched to run through all that golden, shining hair flopping over his man’s brow. His face heated recalling how only last night

he grabbed Ryder by that gorgeous mane as he slammed into his perfectly shaped ass. Lost in a sexual fantasy, he jumped, startled when Ryder called his name.

“Yo, earth to Jason. What’s up, man? You were a million miles away.” Ryder’s laughing face and wink let him know he knew exactly what Jason was thinking. “I hope it was something special.”

Jason smirked back at Ryder. “Nothing big.”

The three of them returned to the trailer, and Jason made Ryder a coffee and gave Landon a bottle of water.

Landon stood watching the two of them, a perplexed look on his face. “Jason, can I ask you a question? And I hope you don’t get mad at me.”

He shrugged. “Sure, go ahead.”

Landon licked his lips. “Are you two together, like in a couple? The only reason I’m asking is that you looked so happy to see Ry today, and Ryder always talks about you so much.” His voice trailed off as he looked at both of them.

Jason quirked a brow. “Ry?”

Ryder cleared his throat. “I wanted to wait until things were settled between Jason and me, but now that it’s all good, yeah, Jason and I are together. You’re sure you’re all right with it?”

Jason stood by Ryder’s side, his hand resting on his lover’s shoulder. “You’re still okay working here, right?” He’d really hate to lose the kid.

Landon broke out in a big smile. “I think it’s cool. Jason’s a great guy, and I’m really happy for you.” Tears prickled in Jason’s eyes as the brothers hugged. This was the best of all possible outcomes. He pushed aside thoughts of Liam and his own disappointment.

“Landon.” He suddenly remembered Mrs. Daniels’ visit. “Tell Ryder about your mother.”

Ryder’s face turned dark as Landon recounted the afternoon visit.

“But honestly, I think she left being okay with me being here. Don’t worry.” He checked his phone. “Shit, I gotta go home and get ready for that stupid dinner.”

Ryder hugged him. “It’s okay.” His face fell. “Um, does Dad ever mention me or talk about me? Ever? Like even when Mom isn’t around?” Jason’s heart broke all over for him.

Landon shook his head. “He’s never home. I think this is the first time he’ll be home for dinner in over a month. The few times I did see him, he looked really sad and tired.”

“I’d be sad too, if I was married to your mom. No offense, but God, that woman is arctic.” Jason shivered. Astrid Daniels could freeze water with a look.

Landon agreed. “Yeah, tell me about it.” He hugged Ryder. “It was great to see you. Tomorrow too?”

Ryder nodded. “Yep, provided the slave driver you have for a boss doesn’t work you too hard.”

They all laughed, and Jason received a shock when Landon gave him a fierce hug good-bye, whispering in his ear, “I’m really glad you’re with Ryder. You’re the best.” He picked up his backpack and ran out.

Ryder’s arms slid around him. A warm breath drifted over his neck as Jason relaxed in his lover’s embrace.

“You’re the best.” Contentment spread through him, as Ryder nibbled on his ear, sending an electric shock directly to his groin. “I thought about you all day while I was in court.” Ryder’s husky voice set Jason’s blood on fire. “Instead of my case, all I could think of was how I wanted you in my mouth.”

An inarticulate sound escaped Jason’s throat.

“I wish the door had a lock.” As Ryder continued to rain kisses on Jason’s neck and jaw, his hand moved under Jason’s sweater to caress his back.

The naked hunger on Ryder’s face was palpable. “There is,” said Jason, his voice rough with desire.

Ryder’s blue gaze darkened. “Go do it. Now. Lock the door.”

Jason scrambled and locked the door. “Ry.” He couldn’t take another step, his legs shook so. In one long stride, Ryder was there, hard up against him, pulling down Jason’s zipper, freeing his engorged cock from his jeans.

“God, do it. Do it now.” Jason moaned, gripping the doorknob behind him.

Ryder smirked. “Not so fast, beautiful. I need to enjoy this view.” He went down on his knees and yanked down Jason’s pants and boxers. Ryder held the base of his cock, squeezing it hard. He licked Jason’s balls, then

transferred his attention to the pearly drops trickling from the tiny slit at the tip of his erection.

Jason cried out, jerking his hips forward, trying desperately to find Ryder's mouth. "Suck me already, or I'm gonna come all over your face."

Ryder's eyes gleamed with delight. "Save that thought for tonight." In one fluid motion, he engulfed Jason's dick into the hot cavern of his mouth.

Stars flickered before Jason's eyes, and he began thrusting, fucking Ryder's hot, wet mouth. "I can't hold on too much longer." Whatever Ryder was doing with his tongue should be illegal, he thought in a haze of lust as it wrapped around his cock. It took every ounce of strength not to scream the trailer down as the suction, heat, and friction drove him to the edge of oblivion.

Ryder's fingers massaged his balls and slid toward his ass. "Inside me, please, please." Jason heard himself begging, shameless with greedy desire, but didn't care. "Now, goddamn it. Do it." He moaned loud and long, arching into Ryder's hand, hungering for his finger, his lips, anything to end the need scorching within him.

A fingertip brushed up against his hole, circling, then entering the tight opening the tiniest bit. That was all he needed, and with a shout, Jason exploded, emptying himself in Ryder's mouth. It was the most blinding orgasm he'd ever had, incinerating his senses and his ability to think. When he came to, he was sitting across Ryder's lap, resting in his arms.

"Hey, you. You're beautiful when you come, you know that?"

Jason's face heated. "That was intense." The heady scent of their bodies mingled with the smell of sex as he nuzzled into Ryder's chest. Jason yawned, then stretched, curving his arms around his lover's neck to press a kiss against the still rapidly beating pulse in his neck. "It's never been like that before with anyone, ever."

Ryder's arms tightened around him as he managed a weak chuckle, then returned the kiss. "Let's get you cleaned up and grab some dinner. Remember you said you wanted to talk to John about us." He kissed him again, smoothing his hair back.

Jason would love nothing more than to spend the entire night in bed, underneath Ryder, but that would come later, after he spoke to John and told him he was gay.

His heartbeat quickened, praying John wasn't going to be like his brother Liam.

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Chapter Eighteen

It wasn't without some trepidation that Jason entered Drummers that night. Even though he had all his friends and Mark around him, he knew very well that Liam could turn the scene ugly in a hot minute.

He and Ryder took a seat at the bar. It was crowded, what with March Madness nearing its close. John approached, an easy smile on his face. "Hey, guys. The usual?" At their nods, he uncapped a beer for Ryder and slid it over. "Dude, I finally got your favorite on tap. You want that, or you still want the bottle?" He smirked. "The way your boys from Syracuse are playing, maybe you need a whole pitcher for yourself."

"Shut up, man. I'll take it on tap." Jason grabbed some sliders and pushed the plate over to Ryder. Mark hurried in, cheeks red from the cold, his arm around a blonde young lady. A few minutes later, Connor and Emily arrived. Her face glowed with happiness. Jason jumped off his seat and pushed his way through the crowd until he reached them.

"Hey, Ryder told me the news." He bent down and kissed Emily, then hugged her. "I'm so happy and excited for you."

Emily returned his hug. "Thanks. I'm so happy for you also, honey. I knew you two were perfect for each other. I saw it the first day we met you."

Connor came and hugged him too. "Ryder's been my best friend since law school, and he's the greatest guy I know. His heart is so full and open; that's why he can't understand people who treat him like shit, because he would never be like that himself." No one knew Ryder better than Connor, so to have his approval meant everything to Jason. "You've been so good for him, Jase. He's never been as happy as when he's with you. The breakup with Matt was bad, but when his parents turned their backs on him, I worried he might do something drastic."

How lucky Ryder was to have a friend like Connor. Jason had thought his brother would be like that, steadfast, always having his back. Thank

God at least Mark stood by him, but losing Liam was like losing one of his limbs—the ache still remained, even though the physical part of the body was gone.

“I’ll never hurt Ryder,” Jason assured them both. “I love him. He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Emily wiped the tears from her eyes. “That’s all we ever wanted for him. To find someone to love and to be as happy as we are.” She sniffled and fumbled for a tissue.

“She’s so emotional lately.” Connor’s mock whisper had Emily glaring at him. “Must be all those hormones.”

“Ooh, wait till I get my hands on you.” Emily grabbed her husband, and Jason couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’re in trouble now, my man.”

Connor smirked. “She gets horny when she’s feisty. I’ll reap the rewards later at home.” He ducked when Emily tried to smack him.

Jason beat a hasty retreat, leaving the warring couple to kiss and make up, and returned to Ryder, who’d been joined by his brother Mark and the girl.

“Hi.” He and Mark briefly hugged, and he waited for an introduction.

“This is Julie.” Mark smiled at the young woman. “She and I are in the same psych class, and when I saw her wearing a Nets shirt, well, you know I had to ask her out.”

Her light laugh rang sweet. “Big Nets fan here. I’m so thrilled they’re back in New York now.” She took a sip of her drink. “Ryder was telling me about the pit bull rescue. I’d love to help out after classes and on the weekends if you need me.”

Ryder draped his arm around Jason’s shoulder. This was the first time they’d gone out together as a couple. Instead of fear or shame, warmth and contentment settled within Jason at the thought that he would be going home with this man. Every single night. A shiver ran through him as Ryder’s hand idly stroked his shoulder. The acceptance by their friends and family made the night seem almost celebratory. If Liam could only understand him and share in his happiness, his life would be complete.

He slipped his arm around Ryder’s waist. “That sounds great, Ry, doesn’t it? I know you guys need help now that you’re preparing for the

fund-raiser.” He took the beer Mark handed him. “I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“Me too,” Mark joined in. “Whatever you need, I’m there. I love Troup. He’s a great dog.”

“Well, what do we have here, a queer convention?”

Jason’s heart sank at the sound of Liam’s sneering voice. He tensed and withdrew his arm from around Ryder’s waist. “Keep moving, Liam. No one is asking for your opinion.”

Ryder whispered in his ear, “Don’t let him get to you. He’s trying to make you angry. Rise above it.” He squeezed his shoulder.

“Make sure you listen to your boyfriend, Jason. Is he the master in the bedroom too? What do you guys call it, a top?” Liam snickered, then walked up to the bar. “Yo, John, gimme a beer.”

John stood behind the bar with his arms folded across his chest. His hazel eyes blazed fierce with anger.

“No.”

Liam’s grin faltered; then he laughed. “Quit fucking with me, man. Give me a beer.”

John braced his arms on the bar. “I said no. See the sign?” John pointed to the sign over the bar that read MANAGEMENT RESERVES THE RIGHT TO REFUSE TO SERVE ANY PATRON. “I’m refusing.”

Liam sputtered in his rage. “What the fuck? What did I do?”

“You’re a fucking jerk, the way you talked to Jase. So unless you’re willing to apologize and act like a decent human being, you can walk the fuck out of my bar.”

“Don’t tell me you’re okay with him and this queer.”

“Shut the hell up, you goddamn asshole.” John’s large fist banged, causing several glasses to fall and shatter. The entire bar quieted down. “Do you know what you’re doing, treating your brother like this? It’s so fucking wrong to speak to anyone like this, but your own brother, your flesh and blood?”

John grabbed a picture off the wall, and Jason’s heart skipped. “Ah, shit.”

Ryder leaned over. “Who’s that?”

Jason whispered back, “That’s Eric. John’s older brother. He died in his first tour in Afghanistan three years ago.” He blinked back tears. “He was a great guy, and John’s only sibling—his only family, actually, since his parents died years ago.”

“Shit.” Ryder scrubbed his face with his hands. “That’s fucking awful.”

John shoved the picture under Liam’s pale face. “Do you remember my brother, Liam? Of course you do. *We fucking worshipped him.* Remember how we toasted him right here three years ago and told him that bar stool would be waiting for him when he came home? Do you?”

Liam nodded.

“But he isn’t coming home. He isn’t ever fucking coming home, and he’ll never sit there again. And every day I open this bar, and all I want is for Eric to walk through that door, laugh, and tell me it was a joke, and I can wake up from this fucking nightmare that he’s gone, and I never had a chance to say good-bye and tell him I love him.”

Jason could hardly see through his tears and heard Emily weeping. Ryder put his arm around him, and the wetness on Ryder’s cheek mixed with his own.

Mercilessly, John continued. “My brother died alone in a strange country with no one around who loved him. So now I want you to tell me that you’re going to turn your back on your brother, one of the nicest fucking guys I’ve ever known, and walk out of his life and never speak to him again because you don’t approve of who he sleeps with. And what the fuck happens if he gets hit by a car when he walks out of this bar tonight, and you never have that chance to say you’re sorry or to say good-bye and he dies alone? Do you want the last memory between you and him to be your anger, your hatred?”

John’s chest heaved as he pushed his face into Liam’s. “Are you going to be able to live with yourself? Because I’m gonna fucking tell you, you won’t. I had the best relationship with Eric, and I almost put a gun to my head to end it all because I couldn’t stand the pain of his death. Will you be able to live with your pain?”

John beckoned Jason, and after taking a deep breath, he walked over, standing next to Liam. “Do you love your brother, Jase?”

He nodded. “No matter what he says to me, he’ll always be my brother.”

John turned to Liam, who, to Jason's shock, looked devastated. "And you. Do you love your brother? Or are you willing to throw it all away because of your ignorance and stupidity? What's happened to you? The man I've been friends with since high school would never behave like this. Are you willing to say good-bye to Jase forever? Are you willing to risk it all?"

The only noise in the bar was John's heavy breathing. Liam's head bowed, and his shoulders shook. Jason put his hand on Liam's shoulder. "Hey, Liam. It's okay."

Liam shook his head. Jason put his arms around his brother, holding his breath in case Liam pulled away from him, praying that he didn't.

He didn't.

There wasn't anything else he could do, except hold on to Liam, his heavy body, damp with sweat, racked with the effort of containing his sobs.

"I'm sorry." The words wrenched out of his mouth, guttural and laced with anguish. "Oh God, Jase, I'm sorry. I'm a fucking idiot. Don't walk out on me. I couldn't deal with losing you, like John lost Eric." Liam slid down to the floor on his knees, still holding on to him, head still bowed. "Please, I was wrong. Don't hate me."

There was no joy here in flaying Liam apart. His humiliation would run deep and strong for a while, but that was Liam's cross to bear. The best Jason could do was try to regain the bond of family there was between them. It would take time to mend the rift, as what Liam had said to Ryder and him was so devastating and hurtful. But, if his brother was willing to make the effort to change, he would make the effort to help him.

"I don't hate you." It was true. He couldn't hate his brother, even if he didn't understand why Liam felt the way he did. "You've made it hard for us to like you these past few weeks, though."

Liam stood up, and his mottled, tear-streaked face flushed a deeper red. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then shut it and shook his head, scrubbing his hand over his face.

"Let's sit over here." Jason led him to a table in the corner. He sat with his back to a scowling Ryder. He knew Ryder would be angry with him for forgiving Liam, but he'd deal with him later. This wasn't so simple. It was his brother. He had to give him a second chance. "Why don't you talk to me now? No one else can hear us."

Liam slanted a look up to him as his fingers began to systematically crumble the chips inside the basket on the table. “It was so weird. One minute you’re banging Chloe; the next you’re kissing a guy.” He swallowed hard. “I don’t understand you.”

“I’m not asking for you to understand me. I’m asking you to stand by me. Support me. Who I choose to love isn’t a group project. You don’t get to decide what’s right for me.” Jason grabbed the basket to focus Liam’s attention. “I’m not even asking you to like Ryder or approve of our relationship.” Liam’s eyes flickered behind him to where Ryder stood with everyone else, and Jason waited until his brother’s concentration returned back to him. “But this is who I am, and who I’m going to be with. You don’t ask my approval for who you date or sleep with; I’m not asking for yours. I ask only that you be civil and not make nasty comments.”

Liam hesitated, then asked, “Are you really in love with him?”

Without any hesitation, he nodded. “Yes. I am, very much so. And he is with me. We fit. I don’t know how else to put it. When I’m with him, I’m the happiest I’ve ever been. So whether you like it or not, Ryder’s here to stay, and you need to make peace with that. Got it?” He glared at him.

“Trying to be a hard-ass, huh?” Liam paled. “Oh shit, I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry.”

Jason burst out laughing. “Actually that was pretty funny. I know you didn’t.” He stood, anxious to get back to his lover. “We’re all good, right?”

“Yeah, Jase. We’re good. You know I’m an idiot sometimes. I’ll make the effort, I promise.”

“That’s all I wanted.” Liam stood, and they hugged each other. “I’ll catch you later.” Jason returned to the group, where they pounced on him with questions. Everyone but Ryder, who leaned against the bar, pensive and remote.

Jason excused himself to join Ryder. “Hey, you.” He touched Ryder’s shoulder. “Why so quiet? Everything all right?” It was unusual now for Ryder to brood and be distant.

“I don’t know, Jase. Is this a good idea, you and me? I’m driving a wedge between you and your brother. I know your father doesn’t really understand or like our relationship, and I’m sure, as sweet as your mom is, she’d rather you settle down with a nice girl and have babies.” His haunted eyes stared across the room. “I’ve really fucked up your life.”

What a shit storm this night was turning out to be. “You know what isn’t a good idea? Being here with all these people right now. Be with me, and let me show you how right we are together.” Jason leaned over to whisper in Ryder’s ear. More than ever, he needed him. Tonight. “Fill me up with your body the way you’ve filled up my heart.” The rapid pulse beating in Ryder’s throat signaled how affected he was.

“Don’t you want to stay and hang out with everyone?” Ryder’s voice shook.

“I want you inside me. Make me yours completely, Ry, in every way.” Jason put out his hand. “What do you say?”

Ryder gulped down the rest of his beer and took Jason’s hand. “Good night, everybody.” They practically ran out of the bar, to the grins and catcalls of their friends and family.

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Chapter Nineteen

They held hands throughout the entire car ride and kissed like lovesick teenagers at every light, drawing honking horns from cars filled with women and sometimes men, giving them the thumbs-up. Ryder couldn't give two shits who saw what, as long as he got his man home and in his bed as soon as possible.

"My parents have Troup since I knew it would be a long day, so we can go to yours, okay?" Jason steered the car onto the Gowanus Expressway, toward the Brooklyn Bridge. The magnificent skyline of the city, dripping in twinkling lights, rose in front of them as they made the curve onto the BQE.

"Mmh. Sure. Sounds perfect." Anything that involved Jason in his apartment for the night was more than fine with him. The only thing he could think about was Jason, stretched out on his bed or on top of him, riding him into oblivion. He pictured that thick cock of his rising from his body, flushed and proud. The man should be proud. It was beautiful, and Ryder intended to worship it completely tonight. Although Jason spoke bravely, Ryder wanted to make his first time perfect for him. It was going to hurt and feel strange, so he was willing to do anything he could do to ease his discomfort.

He remembered his own first time, in college. It was awkward and painful. After a while, it became easier, but it never satisfied anything more than a physical urge. Being with Jason now, he understood what Connor meant the night he told him he was going to ask Emily to marry him.

"It's hard to explain, man, but you know how it is when you find that last piece of a puzzle and it's completed, and it finally makes sense? That's how she makes me feel. Like I make sense and I'm finally whole."

Ryder never understood that until now. Jason was his puzzle piece. By some chance in this crazy big city, one little dog had brought them together.

He leaned over and kissed his cheek as they headed into the city. “I love you.”

Jason grinned. “I love you too.”

Luckily they made all the lights on Houston Street, and it wasn't long before they pulled into the garage under his apartment building. He'd gotten Jason a guest parking pass to make it easier for him to park his car in Ryder's garage. Jason gave the keys to the valet and told him it was for overnight parking, and the young guy smirked.

Ryder wasn't in the mood for any more bullshit tonight. Stepping into the guy's face, he challenged him. “You have a problem with something?”

The valet paled and scuttled away from him. “No sir.”

“Good.” He turned around. “Let's go, Jase.”

He and Jason waited for the elevator that would take them to the first level, and it seemed an eternity before the doors opened. They stepped inside, and no sooner did the doors close than he pushed Jason up against the wall and took possession of his mouth. Their tongues met and clashed; their lips pressed and sucked until his heart was pounding so hard he thought it would explode out of his chest. He reached down and cupped Jason's hard-on, rubbing and squeezing it through his jeans.

“If you don't stop that, I'm gonna come in my jeans, making this an early night.”

“Oh, babe, if you think you're only gonna come once tonight, you're in for a surprise.” He stuck his tongue in Jason's ear, delighting in the moans that echoed in the small elevator chamber. “I'm gonna make you come so many times and so hard you won't be able to crawl, never mind walk.”

Jason's cock jumped beneath Ryder's roving hand, and his whimper only served to make Ryder suck his ear and neck harder. He pulled away when the bell rang, leaving his lover dazed, confused, and quivering from head to toe. Tucking Jason into his side, with his arm wrapped around him, Ryder walked past a smiling Clarence.

“Good night, Mr. Daniels, Mr. Mallory.” Clarence tipped his hat. “Have a good evening.”

“Good night, Clarence.” Jason, he saw, could only muster a smile. They entered the elevator, where Ryder once again, flattened him against the wall and proceeded to kiss him senseless.

“Do you want to know what I’m gonna do to you, hmm?” He licked his way down Jason’s neck, biting and scoring his skin as he held him pinned up against the elevator wall, chest to chest, cock to cock. Ryder rolled his hips against Jason’s, rubbing at the hardness straining to break free. The breathy moans of his lover were like an opera for his ears.

“I’m going to suck and kiss your mouth until I steal the breath from your body. Then I’m going to lick you from your neck down to your toes.” He squeezed Jason’s cock, feeling the jeans grow damp under his questing fingers. The elevator dinged for their floor, and he half dragged, half pulled a stumbling Jason to his door.

Once they were inside, the bedroom door shut in the face of a disgruntled Pearl, Ryder pushed Jason down on the bed and straddled him. “After I finish kissing you, I’m gonna fuck you so hard into this mattress you might end up in the apartment beneath this one.” He grinned at the feel of Jason’s cock jerking under him, and he pulled down the zipper. “Let’s get naked. Now.”

He stood and shucked off his clothes, watching as Jason did the same. Soon his man was fully and magnificently nude. His mouth watered at the sight of his lover’s heavy erection. Ryder couldn’t wait until it was his turn to be inside Jason.

JASON NEVER GOT tired of seeing Ryder naked. From the first, there was something about the man’s golden skin and smooth muscles with their dusting of blond hair that had him in a perpetual state of arousal whenever they were together. The thought of Ryder’s beautiful cock inside him sent his head spinning with desire. His ass clenched.

“Ry.” He reached out a hand to Ryder. “Hold me?” Now that the time had come, he was hit with a bout of unexpected nerves.

“Hey, you. Look at me.” Ryder cupped his face so Jason was caught in his mesmerizing, bright blue gaze. “Are you nervous?”

Jason jerked an embarrassed nod.

Ryder slid his arms under and around him. “Don’t be. We don’t have to do anything if you don’t want. I’m happy to have you here to hold all night, if that’s what it comes to.”

“I don’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

“Disappointed in you? Jason, you’ve changed your whole life for me. I’m in fucking awe of you and your courage. The way you brought me into your home and made everyone, even your father, accept me was unreal. You stood up to your brother, the man you work with and looked up to your whole life, and told him you’re gay and you chose me over him.” Ryder shook his head. “I could never be disappointed in you. You’re fucking amazing. However, I’d never have let you choose me over your family.”

“But—” Jason started to speak, but Ryder cut him off.

“Family is always the most important thing. I’m glad Liam came around, but I couldn’t live with myself if I caused dissension between you and your family. Luckily, we don’t have to concern ourselves with that anymore.” Ryder kissed him, and as always, it only took the simplest touch of his lips to stoke the simmering fire inside. Jason’s cock swelled further, leaking all over his stomach. It knew what it wanted, even if his brain didn’t want to process it.

“Go with your heart,” Ryder whispered against his mouth. “Let it guide you. Whatever you decide, I’m not going anywhere unless you’re with me.” Ryder rained kisses on his lips, cheek and jaw. “I’m here for the long haul, and it will take more than not having your sexy ass tonight to get rid of me.”

Jason kissed him back, the need for Ryder building within him.

Ryder growled as he rolled on top of him, straddling him. “I told you I’m going to kiss and lick every inch of you, and I always keep my promises.” Jason’s cock twitched and grew as Ryder licked his lips. “Look at you. So fucking gorgeous and so fucking mine.”

Ryder kissed his lips. “Mine.” He licked down Jason’s neck and chest, nipping and sucking at his nipples. “All mine.”

Jason twisted under him. “Shit, Ry.” His body sought Ryder’s hardness, greedy for the friction to bring him relief.

“Not yet.” Ryder moved down his body, kissing his stomach and the springy curls at the base of his jutting cock. “Fuck, you smell so good. I could eat you.”

“Fuuuck, Ry, please, fuck me.”

But he didn’t. Jason moaned, begged, and pleaded, but Ryder tormented him with kisses and licks down his thighs and the backs of his

knees.

“Please, fuck me, damn it; I’m gonna die.” Jason whimpered, grasping to hold on to Ryder, but the man moved out of reach.

“Do you want me inside you, Jase?” Ryder touched his ass, sliding a finger between his cheeks. “Do you want my cock in here?”

Jason couldn’t speak; he moaned his assent.

Ryder chuckled low. “I’ll take that as a yes. I’m going to make you ready for me, all right?” He bent over and kissed him. Jason grabbed hold of him around the neck and plunged his tongue deep into Ryder’s mouth, needing that connection. They spent several minutes kissing.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you, lover.” Ryder’s touch was as gentle as a butterfly wing against his cheek.

Jason heard the bottle of oil snap open, and seconds later, one of Ryder’s fingers probed his opening, sinking inside, stretching and invading. The clever, twisting finger curled and slid within his passage. A slight burn and sting accompanied it, but Jason barely registered it as Ryder’s second finger joined the first, sending a different type of heat throughout his body. The gentle sweep of Ryder’s fingers imprinted themselves on his soul.

“How’s that feel, gorgeous?” Ryder whispered in his ear.

“Okay, a little strange, but— Oh holy shit—”

Ryder’s questing fingers bent, then brushed a spot, sending blinding fire through him. His body bowed off the bed as Ryder continued to stroke that secret spot that cause such sweetness.

“What. The. Fuck.” He panted, unable to catch his breath as wave after wave of desire crashed through him.

Ryder manipulated those wicked fingers inside him until he couldn’t remember his name, and he begged for release as he thrashed his head on the pillows.

“You’re ready, Jase. Do you want this?” Ryder kissed him back to reality. “If it’s yes, climb on me and lower yourself. That way, you control it.” Ryder tore open the foil package and slid the condom down on his cock. Jason watched him stroke himself, as his ass clenched with need.

He straddled Ryder, who helped him steady himself. The blunt head of Ryder’s cock nudged at his opening, and Jason tried to relax, but his heart was pounding too hard.

“I’m going to put myself in. Is that all right, babe? Then seat yourself slow and easy, bearing down.” Ryder held on to his hip with one hand, then grasped himself with the other. He pushed the head of his cock inside, and Jason ground down on his jaw, squeezing his eyes shut. The burn and stretch hurt, and he gasped with the initial shock of the intrusion of Ryder’s cock, yet as the first tight ring of muscle was breached, allowing Ryder to slide farther and farther inside him, the searing pain was replaced with a feeling of completeness. Soon he was fully seated on top of Ryder, knees straddling his body.

Jason’s erection lay flat against his abdomen, dark and heavy. Ryder grinned at him. “You did it, babe. Now when you’re ready, move up and down and find your sweet spot.”

Jason took a deep breath and lifted a bit, then slid down, the strange full feeling remaining. He continued, lifting higher each time, bracing his arms on either side of Ryder’s head.

“Keep going.” Ryder panted.

He leaned forward, changing his angle, and there it was again. That blazing-hot firestorm of desire bursting throughout his body, incinerating his skin from the inside out. He continued the slide up and down on Ryder, gliding on his stiff erection, which battered him in that spot over and over again. Whimpering, he grabbed on to the headboard to give himself traction. His nerve endings ablaze, his vision blurred, he cried out as Ryder gripped his hip, working him into a frenzy of passion and lust.

“Look at me, Jase,” Ryder urged.

Jason opened his eyes and watched his lover stroke him as he rode his cock, hurtling toward oblivion. He moaned, pounding himself up and down, their sweating bodies slapping against each other.

Ryder’s fingers bit into his hip as he gripped him. “Look at me and know I’m the one who loves you, forever. That even when we’re apart, I’m with you. Do you see it, feel it? Do you know you’re all fucking mine?”

Ryder thrust himself up inside him, and the white-hot flame burst through him as he cried out in his completion. Jason split apart into a thousand shattered, electrifying pieces, only to come back to earth, redefined and realigned. As he collapsed on Ryder, he climaxed, arching up into him, spurting hot and wet all over his chest and stomach.

Jason had no idea how long they lay there. The smell of sex, mingled with the scents of their bodies, surrounded them. Thankful all his body parts still worked, he slipped off Ryder and disposed of the condom, wincing at the unfamiliar soreness in his ass.

Ryder chuckled. “You’ll ache for a few days, but I hope it was worth it.” The smile faded from his face, and his voice sounded anxious. “Are you all right, really? Did I hurt you?” Real concern resided in his eyes. “I wanted to make it good for you.”

Jason took Ryder’s hand in his and kissed the palm. “Why don’t we shower, and I’ll show you how good I really feel.”

Ryder’s blue eyes shone as he leaned over and kissed him on the lips. He jumped out of bed and headed for the bathroom. “You mean everything to me.”

Jason’s chest tightened, and he fell back onto the pillows. The course of his life had taken so many turns in the past several months; he’d hardly had a chance to catch his breath. It didn’t seem possible that he no longer could foresee a life without Ryder, and that scared the shit out of him. The one thing he’d always prided himself on was the control he maintained at his job and with the people around him.

With Ryder he had no control at all.

“Are you coming?” Ryder called. “The water’s getting cold.”

“I’m coming.” He’d deal with his confusing thoughts later, as a vision of a naked, wet Ryder was not to be ignored.

Chapter Twenty

Something was wrong. Two damn days and no Jason. Two long days since the man who'd stolen Ryder's soul had walked out of his apartment after they'd made love, and not a single word, phone call, or text. It could only mean one thing.

Jason couldn't handle being gay.

Once again, he'd given his heart, only to have it ripped from his body and shredded. What had he done wrong? They hadn't quarreled or had a bad word cross between them. After the confrontation with Jason's brother in Drummers, it had been a night of passion and love. Or so he'd thought.

"I'm a fucking jerk, Pearl, aren't I?" He lay on the couch, Pearl stretched out beside him. Her head lay in his lap, and she licked his hand as he fondled her silky ears. "I thought he was different, but I've never been a good judge of character." For what seemed like the hundredth time, he checked his phone, feeling like a teenager with his first crush. Nothing.

Against his better judgment, he hit the speed dial he'd assigned to Jason, but like all the other calls he'd made, it went to voice mail. Since he'd already left several messages to call, he wasn't going to beg the man. It was obvious what had happened. Things had gotten too real, too soon. Maybe Liam had met up with Jason afterwards and they had a heart-to-heart. Jason might've realized the enormity of what he had done and had regrets.

Ryder pressed his fist against the hurt in his chest, attempting to soothe his aching heart. How could he have let his guard down so easily? It took him so long to recover from Matt and protect himself, only to be swept away in Jason's magnetic gaze and sweet, caring nature. By disregarding all the warning bells his brain sent him, he'd set himself up for heartbreak.

"Asshole."

He wasn't yet willing to say if he meant Jason or himself.

Pearl whined and wriggled up to lick his face. “I know, girl. I owe you another walk, don’t I?” At the mention of the magical word, she leaped from the couch and went to get her leash. If it wasn’t for her, he’d never leave his apartment, preferring to lie on the couch and mope.

“Okay, girl. Let’s go. The fresh air will do us both some good.” He didn’t bother to shave. No one would care, and he certainly didn’t. Ryder recognized he was in the beginnings of full-fledged breakup mode, but fuck it. He thought he’d finally found a man who loved him. He was entitled to sulk and get drunk. He snapped on Pearl’s leash and opened the door.

Jason stood with his hand up, as if he was about to knock.

“Uh, hey. How are you?” Jason shifted under his glare.

The man looked terrible, his blue eyes dull, the skin under them bruised as if from lack of sleep, and his face could use a good shave. Maybe it was wrong to feel satisfaction at the air of despair he sensed, but Ryder didn’t care. “I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?” Ryder bared his teeth in a sham of a grin. “If you don’t mind, I have to take the dog out.” Pearl, the traitor, jumped on Jason, licking him madly, her tail wagging like a crazy metronome.

“I need to talk to you.” Jason attempted to put a hand on his arm to restrain him, but Ryder sidestepped his touch.

“What is there to say, Jason? You’ve obviously had a change of heart since our night together, and because you’re a nice guy, you think you need to come here in person to break it off with me.” Leaning up against the door frame, he kicked his sneaker at the marble threshold. “Let me make it easy for you. It’s over. I didn’t want to get involved seriously with anyone anyway, so—”

“Oh, shut up and don’t be an idiot.” Jason shoved him back inside the apartment, Pearl in tow. Ryder didn’t have a chance to object, as he found himself pinned up against the wall by Jason’s hot, hard body. “Drop the leash and take off your jacket.”

Mulishly, Ryder stuck out his jaw. “Fuck you. No.”

With an angry growl, Jason slammed the wall with his hands, caging him in between his arms. “Ryder, it isn’t what you think. I want to talk to you.”

“Too fucking late.” Ryder spat out his words, the hurt over Jason ignoring him bubbling to the surface and overflowing. “I wanted to talk to you the past two days, and you shut me out.”

“I needed some time to take stock of all the change and upheaval in my life. Can’t you understand?” Jason slid his arms over Ryder’s shoulders, holding him close.

“Please go. You’re only making it worse.” Ryder bit his lip, overwhelmed by Jason’s nearness, his deep blue eyes and intoxicating warmth. This was the man he dared to dream might be his forever. Realizing he was about to lose that crippled his ability to think straight and remain calm.

“Ryder, you’re going to have to listen to me.” Jason’s mouth hovered by his ear.

Summoning the last vestige of strength he could muster, he dropped the leash but only to cross his arms defensively in front of his chest. “Screw you. I listened to you crying out my name when I was inside you. I listened to you telling me never to leave you.” Giving Jason a shove, he pushed away from him. “I’ve listened enough. Now get the fuck out and don’t bother me anymore.”

He tore off his jacket and strode away toward his bedroom. A heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder.

“Don’t be a fucking asshole.” Jason’s hand slid to take his neck in a possessive hold, his fingers searing like a brand on Ryder’s skin.

“I’m not the asshole who went into hiding. I was here. Where were you? You left me.” He didn’t care he was shouting now. “You left me after you promised you wouldn’t.”

Jason pulled him into the bedroom, pushing him down on the bed. “I’m here now.” Standing over him, Jason tore off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt, fingers flicking open the buttons. When he finished, he left it on, hanging open. “I’m staying.” Without ever taking his eyes off of Ryder, Jason unbuckled his belt and slid it out of its loops, then toed off his sneakers. “And I want you.”

As excited as he was at the sight of an aroused Jason in his bedroom again, Ryder pushed himself away, farther up the bed. “You can’t come here after total silence for two days and expect to fuck me.”

It seemed Jason didn't get that memo, as he unzipped the fly to his jeans and pulled them down. He jumped on the bed, crawling up to Ryder, an intent, hungry look in his eyes.

"I don't want to fuck you. I want to love you." Jason reached out to him, but Ryder scrambled away, rebuffing his touch.

"You gave up your right to touch me in this bed when you disappeared without a trace." Little did Jason know his body burned for him, and his mere touch would render him a helpless fool. Ryder was determined to keep his distance and not allow his emotions to overrule his heart this time.

Jason pounded his fist in the bed. "I'm sorry. I was an idiot. I panicked and got so scared and thought it all was happening too fast." He crawled closer, and Ryder continued to move backwards, until he hit the headboard. "Don't tell me I blew it, Ry. I love you. I fucked up and lost my way, but I came back to you, to us."

"Please, Jase." Ryder licked his lips as he gazed into the burning eyes of the man he so desperately loved. "I can't do it."

Stricken, Jason moved on him, his big body straddling Ryder's thighs. "No, don't say it. Punish me, hit me, curse me to the devil, but don't break it off."

Ryder's breath caught in his throat. Never had anyone laid himself so completely bare to him. Could he forgive him and learn to trust him again? "I-I don't know. What if it happens again?"

Jason's lips brushed his. "I won't let it. I holed up in my house and spent all my time thinking about my life and us and what I wanted."

"And what did you end up with? What do you want?"

"That it's all shit without you. It's hard to know what you're missing until it disappears. But when you weren't there, Ry?" Jason leaned down and nuzzled his neck, and Ryder couldn't help but arch into his touch. "It was like the other half of me, my heart was missing. Let me in again. Let me come home."

Ryder couldn't speak. Could he dare trust him? "Undress me." He sat up, pushing Jason off him, his gaze hard and hot. "Now."

Jason grinned. "Okay, babe."

"I wouldn't smile if I were you. By the time I finish with you, you'll be lucky to crawl away."

Jason's grin faded at his ruthless smile. Although Ryder had decided to forgive his lover, Jason needed to learn to never take advantage of him again.

Ryder pulled off his shirt and lifted his hips as Jason popped the button of his jeans and unzipped his fly. "Take them off."

Jason complied, and Ryder took in his glazed eyes and rapid breathing when his lover realized he wore no boxers or briefs. It seemed his man got very turned on by his going commando. "Now take off all your clothes."

He lay back, stroking himself as Jason ripped off his boxers and socks. Jason's body never failed to excite him, and from the size of his erection, he was pretty damn excited as well. Jason's gaze never strayed from his, so Ryder swirled his fingers over the slick, wet head of Jason's cock, then brought them to his mouth and sucked them.

Jason's loud groan caused Ryder to smile. "Kiss me."

He had no idea a man as large as Jason could move so fast, as he found himself pinned to the bed, his mouth taken in a ruthless kiss. Jason's tongue swept inside his mouth, and their tongues fought and tangled with each other until they gasped for breath. Their cocks rubbed together, slick from the precum that leaked from them both.

Ryder's control was slipping fast. "Get the condoms and lube from the drawer." Jason grabbed at the drawer and pulled out a strip of condoms and a small bottle.

"Let me inside you, Ry, please," Jason begged, blue eyes darkened to almost black, his face damp with sweat. "I want to make love to you." His hand drifted down between their bodies to grasp their cocks and rub them together.

"Is that what you want?" God, it felt so good to have Jason's hands on his dick. He pressed his lips to Jason's ear. "You want to fill me with that big cock of yours, do you?" His excitement grew as he massaged the smooth, heated skin of Jason's back and squeezed his firm ass. A whimper escaped Jason's lips.

Their bodies entwined, becoming a sticky slide of tangled arms and legs. "Please, baby. Please let me love you." Jason's teeth nipped Ryder's jaw as his hips rolled and his fingers dug into his shoulders.

“Do it,” Ryder gritted out. “Fuck me, now.” He couldn’t hold back, not with his mouth tormented by Jason’s lips and tongue. Jason’s fingers, now cool and slick from the lubricant, teased and probed him. One of his thick fingers sank into him, beginning its wicked stretch. It was soon joined by a second digit.

Ryder could do nothing but hang on as Jason’s intent, dark blue gaze focused on him, drawing him deep into his depths. “I’m sorry, Ryder. I never meant to hurt you. You know that, don’t you?”

Ryder couldn’t think about anything while Jason’s fingers were creating such sweet, blissful havoc within his body. “Inside me, now,” he gasped, wild with lust.

Jason withdrew his fingers, then ripped the foil package with his teeth, rolling the condom down on his erection. He slicked himself up and wasted no time in nudging the thick head of his cock at Ryder’s entrance. “I’m sorry, babe. Please say you forgive me.”

Ryder pushed down, accepting the sting of the entrance of Jason’s large cock into his body. He moaned loud and long. “All the way.”

Jason thrust into him, pushing himself in fully, until he was firmly seated inside. “Move, Jason.” Ryder grunted his order, anxious for the friction to continue. “Move, now.”

Jason complied, gritting his teeth as he angled his thrusts, snapping his hips while never breaking eye contact. “Say you forgive me, Ryder.”

The glow of passion kindled to an inferno as Jason continued stroking inside his body. Ryder grasped Jason’s erection with one hand while stroking his balls with the other. He struggled to hold on to his sanity as his body drew tight, vibrating with the onslaught of his orgasm.

Jason pled with him. “Baby, please say it already; say you forgive me and still love me.” As he dipped his head down to kiss him, Ryder met him halfway.

“I forgive you, because I love you.” Their mouths met, and the kisses were sweet and loving.

Then Ryder’s orgasm hit like a cascade of sparks exploding throughout his body, the fiery embers showering down inside his blood. He cried out in his happiness at having his lover back in his bed and his life. The taste of Jason in his mouth, his aching body stretched to the limit, Ryder’s life had

never been more complete, more real than at this moment, when he knew his heart had at last found its home.

When he returned to some semblance of normal and Jason pulled out of him, getting rid of the condom, Ryder pushed the man down on his back and took his cock deep within his throat while sliding slick fingers inside him. As Ryder massaged his gland, he licked and tormented Jason's cock until he lay helpless beneath him, writhing, whimpering, and shaking.

And when Jason climaxed, Ryder withdrew his fingers, and kissed Jason, even as he lay soaked with sweat, breathless and twitching. "Don't ever leave me again, or this will all look like child's play." Gentler, he kissed him again, whispering tenderly into his ear. "Remember what I told you once before. You're mine, for now and forever."

Jason didn't open his eyes, merely nodded, and curled up in a ball.

Ryder laughed, slipped under the covers, and cuddled next to him, holding him within his arms.

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Chapter Twenty-One

It wasn't until Jason became a more permanent part of his life that Ryder knew what true love meant. After Jason's freak-out and disappearance, he became an eager pupil, willing to give as well as receive, and it was rare that a morning went by without Ryder waking up to find Jason's mouth on him, bringing him to a breathtaking climax, or simply spooning him, burrowing into his body, holding him tight. His hot, wet kisses and firm hands touched him with such gentleness, it nearly took his breath away, and Ryder was more than happy to return the favor.

He loved coming home now, opening the door to hear Jason puttering around the kitchen, watching television, or taking a nap on the couch. That was the most fun, when he could sneak up on him, waking him with a kiss or a cuddle. Late afternoons, he always made time to meet Landon even if only for a quick coffee or a snack, to catch up on their lives. Sunday evenings were spent with Jason's family, for dinner and watching movies. Helen's warmth and compassion had him unburdening the pain of his parents' rejection while enjoying the acceptance into Jason's loving family.

Since Emily had announced she was pregnant, she and Connor had them over for dinner once a week, to catch up and relax away from the office. Last week, when they were all standing around the kitchen, she took his hand and placed it on her stomach. After a moment, he'd felt it. A little ripple, like the flutter of a butterfly's wing against his skin. He'd smiled with openmouthed wonder, then exchanged glances with Jason, now daring to dream of a day when maybe they too might have a family of their own.

Sitting at his desk in the office late one April afternoon, enjoying the feel of the sun on his back as it streamed in through the windows, Ryder took a break from his computer screen to make a cup of coffee and relax. The fund-raiser was only a month away, and things were progressing right on target. They had rounded up sponsors who were donating gift certificates for local restaurants and boutiques, as well as some big-name celebrities who lived in Brooklyn and were very involved with animal rescue.

Hopefully the fund-raiser could raise enough awareness and money to staff the office for Rescue Me properly, and work on educating more people.

How different this year was than last, when he was half out of his mind with grief over the demise of his relationship with Matt. He'd spent so much of his time after their breakup wondering what he'd done wrong and how he could change to try and make Matt love him again. He shook his head now in disbelief at how insecure and needy he'd been with his old boyfriend, contrasting it now with the confidence in his heart whenever he was with Jason.

What he'd missed in his relationship with Matt was any consideration of his feelings. He was so busy worrying about how Matt might like things or react to something, he'd lost his sense of self-worth. It was a one-sided love affair, all on his part. He'd thought what he felt for Matt was love, and made the man the center of his world simply because he needed to love someone so badly. The only thing he wanted was to matter to someone, so much so that his own needs became secondary or completely unimportant. It was self-destructive, and though his friends had tried to warn him, he'd refused to listen.

When the drugs took control and the relationship blew up, he'd once again blamed himself, thinking if he'd only tried harder or changed, Matt would've given the drugs up. With the love and support of his friends he discovered a wellspring of inner strength and realized Matt wasn't ever going to change. And with that discovery came the ability to make that final break and walk away.

He shuffled through the paperwork on his desk, sipping his coffee, and spent the next hour securing more sponsors and donors for the fund-raiser, then he heard the front door open. Laurel and Hardy growled and stood, flanking him on either side. Normally, people didn't drop by the office, so he shushed them and stood to see who it was. A tall blond man with his back to him studied the posters for the fund-raiser.

"Can I help you with something?" Ryder leaned against the doorjam, petting the top of Laurel's head, then reaching down to scratch her ear.

The man spun around and gave him a slight smile. "Hi, Ry. Long time no see, huh?"

He'd always heard the phrase "heart dropped to the knees," but until now he hadn't experienced it. "Matt?" He couldn't do anything but stare at

the man before him, the almost shrill sound of disbelief ringing in his voice. “Is that really you?”

Matt laughed and nodded. “In the flesh. You look great.” His hooded amber eyes darkened as they stared at each other. “Fantastic, actually.” He licked his lips.

“What do you want? Why are you here?” Ryder remained standing, not offering his former lover a seat, coffee, or any encouragement to stay.

“Can’t a friend stop by to see how you’re doing?” Matt took a step closer but stopped when the dogs started up their growling again. “Call off your killers. I’m not here to hurt you.”

Ryder’s discomfort grew as Matt continued to eye him like a piece of meat. What the hell was this about? The man had a wife and a baby on the way, if he remembered correctly. “No, I’d say you accomplished that already. Oh, and let’s not forget that interview a few months ago about the ‘bad relationship’ you had that your wife saved you from.” His lips twisted in a grimace of a smile. “Thanks for that.”

“Oh, come on, you know I didn’t mean it. I had to say that for Abby’s sake.” At his questioning look, Matt explained. “My wife. She knows all about you, about us.”

“There’s no us. You decided the drugs were more important than I was to you and left. I went on with my life. End of story.” He gestured toward the door. “Now if you’ve nothing else, I’m very busy, so—”

“I miss you.” Matt’s soft voice hung in the air.

Shocked, Ryder struggled for an answer that wouldn’t sound too harsh, then gave up and decided full steam ahead. “Fuck off. I’m sorry for you, then. I don’t miss you. I’ve moved on.” There wasn’t any need for niceties or to pretend a friendship that wasn’t there. Did Matt think they’d be lovers turned friends, going out for the occasional cozy brunch or dinner? He had no desire to be friends. Where maybe last year his heart would have still held out hope and he’d have been overjoyed to hear these words, now they meant little.

“Come on, don’t lie to me. I know how much you were hurt when I left. But we can have it all back, now.” Matt took a few hesitant steps closer until Ryder could smell the lemony scent of his aftershave and see the desire glowing in his eyes.

“Christ you’re a married man, and I—”

“She doesn’t have to know, and she wouldn’t care anyway. The marriage was a mistake. I got drunk one night and ended up in bed with her. When she told me she was pregnant, I felt, you know, obligated. But I don’t love her.”

The man was lying, but once again it didn’t matter to him. “Leave me alone. I’m in a relationship now and have no desire to be your friend, never mind your back door lover.” The past had truly been exorcised from his soul. Nothing remained except pity for a man whose shallowness outweighed his own vanity, believing he could charm his way back into Ryder’s life and his bed so easily. Matt was like that marshmallow fluff he teased Jason about eating. No substance, only the crash and burn of the sugar high that made you sick to your stomach once you’d eaten it.

The thought of Jason brought a smile to his lips, which Matt jumped on, misunderstanding.

“I knew you’d want me back. You were so in love with me. You couldn’t have forgotten how good it was when we were together.” Matt grabbed the back of his neck, pulling him close to kiss him.

Ryder wrenched free. “Get the fuck off me and get out.” The dogs sprang to their feet, barking, completely on the defensive. Ryder needed to calm them down, which meant removing Matt from the scene. They were as protective of him as they were of Emily and Connor and had that innate animal sense, knowing when the object of their affection felt threatened. “I said get out. There’s nothing left for you here. I’m with someone now and happy. Try and make something out of your marriage. Don’t come back to me again, because the next time they won’t be as pleasant.” He gestured to the two dogs, whose collars he was hanging on to. Laurel and Hardy were quiet now, but Ryder sensed the coiled tenseness of their quivering muscles.

Matt blanched, a trickle of sweat ran down his forehead, flattening his long sun-streaked hair. He looked nothing like the highly stylized man who’d breezed in earlier, overly confident his overtures would be welcomed with open arms. His cockiness had been replaced by something Ryder had never seen in Matt before. Fear.

“Please leave.” Ryder urged him, a little gentler now. “There was never anything real between us.” Turning his back on the man had never been easier. He should be thankful to Matt, because if he hadn’t been treated like

dirt, he never would have recognized what a truly healthy relationship should be. A man like Jason was the real thing, and the love they shared meant everything to him. It had taken him a while to realize he was worth it, but now he had the love of his life, his dearest friends, and a family who accepted him, even if his own didn't.

As he watched Matt walk to his waiting car, it was as if his life had separated into two parts, before Jason and after with only a few people remaining constant through both—Connor, Emily, and Landon. Now, along with Jason and his family, Ryder's persistent struggle to gain acceptance from his parents was no longer a burden he had to carry. It wasn't acceptance he wanted from his parents, he understood; it was their love. That unfortunately wasn't as easy for him to put aside.

Hardy licked his face. "Come on, you two terrors. Let's find you some treats for a job well done." They danced around his legs. He'd just finished washing his hands when the phone rang.

"Rescue Me. How may I help you?" He held the phone between ear and shoulder while he dried his hands.

"May I speak with Mr. Ryder Daniels?" It was a pleasant-sounding woman's voice, but not one he recognized.

"Speaking. What can I do for you?" He sat down at his desk and entered his password to unlock the computer.

"My name is Patty Walsh. I'm a senior partner at Everett and Winston. We met at the zoning board meeting a month or so ago."

Ryder searched his memory and came up with a picture of a woman in her early fifties, tall and thin, with an easy smile. "Yes, I remember. How are you?" He had absolutely no idea why she'd be calling him. E&W was a premier boutique law firm in the city. They liked to take on many socially conscious cases, but aside from seeing the partners at the zoning board meetings he'd attended and a few other times he'd appeared at various city agencies, he had little contact with them.

"I'm well, thank you. Mr. Daniels, I'd like to know if you could come to our office for a meeting tomorrow."

Obviously she was not one for small talk. "Can you tell me what this is about? I'd like to be prepared for the meeting."

“Oh, it’s nothing you need to prepare for. Shall we say ten o’clock?” Her amused voice raised his curiosity to an even higher peak.

“That’s fine, but—” She had hung up. Damn. What was that all about? He sat wondering about it until he heard the door slam, and Mark’s girlfriend, Julie, entered the office. She’d begun volunteering after that spectacular night at the bar when Liam and John had their fight.

“Hi, Ryder. Are you the only one here?” She was a really sweet young woman, smart and funny. Jason’s brother Mark adored her.

“Yes, and I’m leaving early. It’s slow, and I have my cell if you need me.” He added the appointment tomorrow to his calendar and turned off the computer. “Hopefully it will stay this way. We haven’t had any dog-sighting calls in a while.”

She put her bag on the desk. “Don’t worry. I know how to get in touch with you if anything happens. Besides, Emily left me the numbers of some more vendors to call, and I have my friends putting up the posters about the fund-raiser in stores all over Brooklyn and downtown Manhattan.” She flicked her long hair over her shoulder and pulled a granola bar out of her bag, unwrapping it as she spoke. “Are you seeing Landon?”

That surprised him. It must’ve shown on his face, as Julie laughed at him and explained. “Mark told me how Jason cooked up a way for you and your brother to see each other.” Her face softened in sympathy, and Ryder understood why Mark was so smitten with her. “I think it’s wonderful how close you and your brother are, and how you and Jason are making sure you guys get to see each other.”

He bent down and kissed her cheek. “Thanks, sweetie. Yeah, I’m off to see them now. I figured to get in a little early and hang out with them since it’s slow now. Once it’s closer to the time for the fund-raiser, it’ll be crazy.”

She shooed him out. “Go ahead then. Go on. I’ll talk to you later.”

He grabbed his leather jacket and ran out of the office, anxious to surprise his brother and Jason.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jason viewed the completed building with unabashed pride. It wasn't only because he had made quite a bit of money from the project; it had also been the thrill of seeing the MALLORY CONSTRUCTION sign on the building site. The Sunday he and Ryder had taken his parents for a drive to show them the work, his father hugged him, and his mother's smile beamed bright as the sun.

"We're so proud of you and Liam for what you've accomplished." His father had swiped a hand over the tears spilling from his eyes. He touched the sign with their name printed on it. *"You're so young to have accomplished so much already."*

It was one of the best days of Jason's life, next to meeting Ryder. Nudging Landon with his shoulder, he pointed down the block. "Look who's here." He couldn't help the silly grin on his face when he caught sight of his boyfriend walking down the block. No matter where he was, Ryder attracted light, creating a golden aura that drew people toward him. Jason remembered how sad he'd looked when they first met, his luminous blue eyes dim and haunted.

There was an exuberance and joy to Ryder these days, Jason noted, watching Ryder's confident, easy stride. A thrill shot through Jason, knowing Ryder was his. The passion and love they shared was something Jason never dreamed existed in those cold lonely years he dated Chloe. Each day built upon the next, weaving together a life built not only on physical love, but trust, friendship, and respect.

"You really care about him, don't you?" Landon's gaze flickered from him to Ryder, the same blue eyes as his brother's, only more serious.

"Yeah. I really do. And you're still okay with it, right?" Jason constantly worried that for some reason Landon would have as hard a time dealing with his brother being gay and in a relationship as Liam had.

“Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” Landon punched Jason on the shoulder. “Maybe one day you’ll be my brother-in-law.” He smirked, then greeted his brother as he approached.

Jason didn’t smile back, but merely stared at Ryder as he hugged Landon. Jason would love to marry Ryder sooner rather than later, but he wasn’t sure if Ryder would want to take that step so fast. First, though, he wanted to make every attempt to try and reconcile Ryder with his father. His mother was a lost cause as far as he was concerned.

“Hey, you. That’s a really serious look on your face.” Ryder brushed his lips to Jason’s. “I hope whatever it is, it isn’t something upsetting.”

He shook himself out of his unsettling thoughts. “Not at all. I was showing Landon the finished building. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Ryder put his arm around him and gave him a brief squeeze. “It’s amazing. I’m so proud of all you’ve accomplished. What jobs do you have lined up next?”

“I actually am glad to be getting back into the smaller one- and two-family home rehabs as well as doing some condo conversions. Liam and I managed to snag some good contracts that should keep us busy all summer long.”

“That’s great, babe.” Ryder chuckled. “You’re working hard, and here I am playing hooky from work. I figured I could get a chance to hang out longer with you guys today.”

Jason checked his watch. He hesitated. The way the trains ran at this time of the day, it could take an hour to get uptown. “I have some errands to run uptown. Why don’t you guys hang out, and I’ll come back? I’m expecting a delivery around four. Can you stay for it, Landon?”

“Sure,” Landon agreed. “I can hang out and show Ry what I worked on with you.”

Jason gave Ryder a kiss good-bye, then left to take the train uptown.

* * * *

It was close to four o’clock by the time Jason emerged from the subway at Grand Central, and his nerves started kicking in. Was he doing the right thing? When he first thought of the idea, it seemed to be, but now that he was about to step headfirst into the fray, he wasn’t so sure.

But then he remembered last Sunday's dinner with his parents. He'd heard Ryder confiding to his mother that it was his father's birthday and during the week he'd tried calling to wish him a happy birthday, only to be rebuffed by his mother.

If Jason had a gun, he would've had no qualms about shooting that bitch through the head.

He swallowed his fear and rode the elevator up to the forty-fifth floor of the impressive but cold-looking steel monolith of a building that housed the law firm of Daniels and Montague. A twinge of anxiety nibbled at him as he studied himself in the ceiling mirror. He certainly didn't belong here in this corporate land of suits and ties and knew he looked out of place in his button-down shirt, jeans, and work boots. Well, fuck it. This was who he was, and Ryder loved him. But knowing Ryder had been forced to give this all up made his mother's snobbery almost understandable now. The prestige, wealth, and power of his family put him on a different planet than Jason came from. Hell, a different galaxy. These were the people in the society pages and multimillion-dollar homes.

Jason had jokingly asked Ryder how he afforded his apartment, considering he worked for a nonprofit. He regretted it immediately, noticing how uncomfortable Ryder became, before he admitted that after his grandmother died, she'd left him a large amount of money that allowed him the freedom to work and live how he wanted.

The elevator stopped and whooshed open, revealing a glass-fronted office with men and women in suits, bustling about looking important as Jason thought lawyers often did.

Alexander Daniels stood tall and lean by a secretary's desk. Jason had looked up his picture on the Internet, but now in person, Jason could see the striking resemblance between the older man and his two sons. What Jason could also see was the incredible weariness and ineffable air of sadness that surrounded the man.

Here goes nothing.

Jason pushed open the glass doors and strode through the puzzle of desks, coming to stand by Ryder's father. "Mr. Daniels, I'd like to speak with you."

The alarmed secretary pinned him with a fierce glare. "Who are you, young man, and what are you doing here?" She looked to her boss. "Should

I call security, Mr. Daniels?” Her hand hovered over the phone, an anxious mother lion protecting her cub.

“What is it that you want, young man? I have no appointment with you, correct?” The man might look drawn and sad, but his voice rang with a quiet strength that commanded respect and attention.

Jason eyed him, not with fear but with determination. He decided he was very stupid or very much in love. He preferred to think the latter.

“No, sir, you don’t.”

“I’m sorry, then, but I’m very busy.” Daniels turned away.

“Too busy to speak about Ryder?”

That got him the attention he deserved, as the man whirled around, his face drained of color. “He’s all right, isn’t he? Nothing’s happened to him?”

In that moment Jason knew how very much this man cared for his son. It was there in the sweat beading on his brow, the paleness of his face, and the fear and longing in his eyes. Eyes, Jason noticed, that were the same luminous blue as Ryder’s and, like Ryder’s, revealed every emotion fighting within him.

“Can we speak somewhere in private, please?”

Daniels nodded, beckoning with his hand as he strode toward the back of the office. “Come with me. Jane, hold my calls.”

“Yes, sir.” To Jason’s surprise, she flashed him a small smile before turning back to answer the ringing phone. He hurried after Daniels’s retreating back, following him down the labyrinth of hallways, closed doors on either side.

Finally they came to a door marked PRIVATE. Daniels unlocked it and gestured for him to enter. Jason seated himself at the small conference table and waited for Ryder’s father to join him.

“What are you here to tell me about my son? He is well; at least tell me that.” Although Jason felt for the man, hearing the strain in his voice, he had to remember this was Ryder’s father, the man who threw his son out and cut him off from his family simply because he was an embarrassment.

“Ryder’s fine and has no idea I’m here. My name’s Jason Mallory.” He locked gazes with this formidable man. “I’m the man who’s in love with your son, and I’m the luckiest man on earth because Ryder loves me back. No matter what you and your wife did and said to him, he can’t and won’t

change who he is. And I thank God for that, because it means that we can be together. I'm not here to plead his case as to why you should accept him because he's gay."

"Now look. Wait a minute, young man." Daniels's hand reached out, but Jason drew away.

"I don't want to wait a minute or an hour. I'm here to tell you that what you're doing to him is breaking his heart. He loves you and his brother, and God only knows why, but I think he even loves his mother, no matter she's been keeping him and Landon apart."

"What are you talking about? Ryder doesn't want to see Landon. Why, my wife told me he couldn't even be bothered to come home for Thanksgiving. He was too busy with his friends." Daniels stood, his face no longer pale but flushed with anger. "She said she called him and begged him to come home, but he laughed and said we didn't fit in with his lifestyle. He especially didn't want to see myself or Landon because he knew how much we'd disapprove of him."

Was this a joke? "Didn't you try and contact him yourself, sir, and find out what was going on?"

Daniels dropped into his chair, his face red. "I've never been a man who's been close with his family. The only thing I know how to do is work and make money. It's all my father taught me. My wife took care of the boys—"

"Oh, she took care of them, all right," said Jason, his laugh bitter and hard. "Do you know how much your children crave your love? They're desperate for you to show them any attention, but you aren't home to ever see that."

"I'm trying to make sure they have everything they need."

"What they need is you, goddamn it, not your money." Jason slammed his hand down on the table. "Ryder has nightmares and is haunted by the fact that his father doesn't love him because he's gay. And Landon's crying out for you to spend some time with him, to know him. Grab this time with him; he's a great kid."

"How do you know my younger son?" Daniels asked.

"He's worked for my construction company after school for several months now. One day he'll make a fine architect."

“Architect?” Ryder’s father stared at him. “I had no idea Landon was interested in architecture.”

Jason couldn’t help the harshness in his voice. “Of course you didn’t. How could you? You don’t know a single thing about either one of your children, but I bet you can recite how much money this place took in last year.” He couldn’t believe he had the nerve to talk this way to one of the most prominent lawyers in New York City. But all it took was remembering Ryder’s anguished face and self-doubt, all caused by this man and his careless disregard.

“I’ve never stopped loving Ryder. I didn’t understand why he wouldn’t join our firm; I still don’t. It’s his heritage, his legacy.”

Jason scoffed. “But only if he’s straight, right? You can’t accept him because he’s gay. He’s become one of the city’s foremost animal-rights attorneys. Did you know that? He and his friends are running a huge charity fund-raiser next month and have already raised over two hundred thousand dollars for Rescue Me. He did that, him and his friends, all by themselves. It’s what he’s passionate about. If you’d only take the time to find out about your son, you’d realize what a special man he is.”

“I’ll admit I was shocked and a little sad when he told us he was gay. But only because I knew how much hate there is in the world and how hard it was going to be for him to make his way.” Daniels’s phone buzzed, but he ignored it.

“I’m sorry, but that’s a bunch of BS if you ask me. It’s only been hard for him because he’s had to do it alone. Until now, of course. If that were the case, you and your wife wouldn’t have ostracized him and prevented him from seeing his brother.” Jason leaned back and folded his arm over his chest.

The buzzing of Daniels’s phone continued; then Jason’s vibrated, but he chose to ignore it as well.

“That’s not true, young man. My wife would never keep the children from seeing each other.” But Jason knew he’d insinuated a kernel of doubt in the man’s mind, and his voice sounded less sure of itself than it did in the beginning.

This was going nowhere. “Look, Mr. Daniels, I wanted you to know that Ryder misses you, all of you. I’m telling you he wants his family back. But if you and your wife don’t want to see him, that’s fine. Because he has

me now, and my family to turn to when he needs support. They love him and accept us as a couple.” He stood and walked to the door. “Please don’t keep him from his brother, though. They love each other. Soon Landon will be off to college, and you won’t be able to control him as much as you can now. Do you want to risk the chance of losing both your sons because of your pride and your prejudice?”

He turned the knob and opened the door. “Good-bye, sir.” He didn’t look back, shutting the door carefully behind him. With a shake of his head, he walked past the windows of the conference room that framed the hallway. He couldn’t help but see through the half-opened blinds, Daniels still sitting where he’d left him, his head cradled in his hands.

It was all in the man’s hands now. From now on, the only person Jason was concentrating on was Ryder.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ryder gave his brother a congratulatory fist bump. “I have to hand it you, I didn’t think you were serious about this stuff.” Landon had finished explaining the blueprints he’d unrolled on Jason’s desk, and the animation and excitement on his face filled Ryder with a sense of pride. The flooring and solar panels Jason’s crew installed made it one of the newest “green” buildings in the city.

“I love it, and Jason’s a great teacher. I’m going to use what I learned here to make my portfolio for when I apply to colleges next semester.” Landon rolled up the prints, then slid them back into the tube. He clicked on the computer screen and brought up Jason’s new website. “Look, I helped him and Liam with this the other day.”

Ryder tensed at the mention of Liam’s name. Though they’d made up, he still resented what Liam had put Jason through and wasn’t sure he could trust him. For Jason’s sake, he kept quiet, though. “Looks great.” He checked his watch and wondered where Jason had to run off to in such a hurry. When he heard footsteps outside the trailer, he smiled. “That must be Jason now. Guess whatever he had to do didn’t take too long.”

Anxious to get home and spend some quality alone time with his lover, he opened the door before Jason, a wide smile on his face. “Hey...” The smile died on his lips as he came face-to-face with his mother.

“I knew it.” His mother’s pale blue eyes flayed him like a steel-carving knife as she spat out her words. “I knew all along something was going on here, but I couldn’t catch you sneaking around until now.” She pointed one of her perfectly polished nails at Landon. “This is how you repay me for everything I’ve done for you? You deliberately disobey me and go behind my back to see him.”

“My name’s Ryder, Mom. I’m your son too, remember?” Ryder stepped closer to Landon. Although he hadn’t seen his mother in almost a year, she looked the same as she had the last time he stood before her. Pale,

thin, and angry. Always angry. Her eyes narrowed until they were nothing more than slits in her frozen face. He wondered how she took in enough oxygen through her pinched nose and tight lips. Everything about her screamed *hands off, don't touch*.

“I wish I could forget.”

The absolute viciousness of her statement rocked him. Before he had a chance to catch his breath, Landon spoke.

“Mom. What kind of mother are you? How can you be such a miserable bitch?” Landon placed a trembling hand on Ryder’s shoulder. “I love him. He’s my brother, and nothing you can say or do will ever make me feel any differently.”

Tears slid down Ryder’s face. What a man his brother was turning out to be, even if he was forced into this untenable situation far too early for a kid of seventeen.

“I love you too, and I’m so proud of you.” Ryder hugged Landon. “Maybe you should go, though, before she gets even angrier.”

“No.” Landon’s jaw set in a mulish thrust. “I’m going to be eighteen soon. She can’t tell me what to do and who to see anymore.”

“Now you listen to me, young man. I’m your mother. I didn’t raise you this way. You think it’s fun now to go slumming? You won’t think so when we cut off your allowance. Your trust fund doesn’t kick in until you are twenty-five. Your father and I are prominent members of society and have a reputation to uphold.” She flung open the door so hard it banged back on its hinges. “Let’s go.”

Landon stayed put. “I’m not going. If you want, you can throw me out too. Is that what you want, Mom, to lose both of us?”

His mother’s eyes filled with panic. Ryder made one last-ditch effort to reason with her. “Why can’t we work it out where I don’t have to see you and Dad, since you have such a problem with me, but Landon and I can still see each other?” He forced a smile. “Is that too much to ask?” Her eyes flickered from him to Landon. “Do you hate me that much? Hasn’t the punishment gone on long enough?”

Her lips pursed as if she smelled something rotten. “I can’t accept it, Ryder, and your father and the firm can’t afford to be tainted by your

associations. I don't want Landon exposed to your life. You have a partner?" She swallowed, looking supremely uncomfortable.

He nodded. "I'm in a relationship, yes."

Before they had a chance to continue, the door opened, and Liam blustered in. "Hey, Ry. What's shakin'?" He stopped dead as he caught Ryder's eyes. "Uh, sorry to barge in. I didn't know you had company. I thought it was only you and the kid in here."

Ryder caught his mother's horrified glance. "Tell me this is not the man you're with." He almost laughed at the pleading sound of her voice. Liam was fresh off the site in dirty jeans, heavy boots, and a sweat-dampened work shirt that clung to his thick biceps. The clean scent of the outdoors mixed with the smell of the sweat from his skin. He looked every bit the common construction worker his mother had been deriding. If Ryder were a mean person, he'd play a rotten trick on her and pretend Liam was his lover, but he doubted Liam would play along.

To his surprise, Liam answered. "Who are you?" He stepped all the way inside the trailer, closing the door behind him. It was a relatively small space and crowded now with the four of them. Liam circled past her to stand next to Ryder, and if he didn't know better Ryder almost thought of it as a show of solidarity on the man's part.

"It's my mother, Liam."

Light dawned in Liam's eyes. Ryder still assumed the two of them were on rocky ground. They hadn't really talked about anything of consequence since that highly emotional night at the bar, but even Liam was clued in to his life enough to know about the problems with his parents.

"So, Mrs. Daniels, you've come to say hello to your sons. They're great guys, aren't they?" To Ryder's shock, Liam draped a heavy arm around his shoulders. His mother's lip curled in disgust.

"May I presume, young man, you are Ryder's...partner?" She shuddered as she spoke the words.

"No, you may not presume anything. I'm Liam Mallory, and Jason, my brother, is his boyfriend." Liam's arm around his shoulder felt strangely comforting to Ryder.

"I can't believe you and your family condone your brother's abnormal behavior." Ryder stared at his mother and wondered at her capacity to love

anyone, if she could talk this way about her own flesh and blood. Her brittle voice and stiff posture made him think of childish stick figures. They held no life or emotion, acting as mere placeholders for the flesh-and-blood pictures they sought to portray.

Ryder pushed off from Liam. “Mom, enough already.”

Liam advanced on Ryder’s mother, jabbing a none-too-clean finger in her face. “Look, lady. Ry here may have to put up with your shit, but I don’t. To be honest, no, I didn’t like it at first. But it doesn’t matter what I like, right? There’s only one thing that matters to me in this world, and that’s my family. If my parents and brothers and sisters are happy, then so am I.”

Liam caught him by the shoulder with a meaty hand and held on tight. Ryder couldn’t move if his life depended on it. “This guy has made my brother happier than I’ve ever seen him. It’s like every fucking day is Christmas morning when you see them together. You should get down on your knees and thank the Lord Ryder’s found someone to love who loves him back.”

Liam stormed toward the door, then stopped and turned back. “And don’t think for a minute Jason doesn’t care for him. My brother adores him, loves him, and would give him the fucking moon if he could. So stay the hell away from them and let them be happy.” He slammed the door behind him and left.

Ryder gaped, staring at the door after Liam’s outburst. Never in his wildest imagination would he have believed Liam to be his champion. Instead of the coldness and pain of his mother’s rejection, the warmth of finally hearing Liam’s acceptance flowed through him, giving him the happiness and inner peace he never thought he’d be granted. Only his father’s recognition and declaration that he still loved him could make him feel better, but since that would never come to pass, Ryder remained content.

His mother gathered her handbag and opened the door. “What a common man. I hope at least his brother has more class, but I’d assume not.” She shut the door carefully behind her. The sound of her footsteps receded.

Sometimes there was no place for words, where silence was more of a friend. He and Landon sat down, each of them staring off into space. The

realization he and his family would never reconcile no longer suffocated him, paralyzing him so that he couldn't think or see straight. His brother wasn't ashamed of him, and that was really all he needed. He'd have to get used to it and had, for the most part. Having Jason and his family's acceptance of them as a couple made his own parent's rejection easier to forget. Thank God Jason had the most wonderful loving family, especially his mom. Now with Liam coming to terms with his and Jason's relationship, they could forget the past, forget his parents' abandonment, and move forward with their lives.

"Hey, I texted Jason and told him what happened." Landon nudged him with his foot.

"Did he answer?" Ryder pulled out his own phone, but he had no text from Jason. Strange. They always told each other where they were going to be during the day.

He heard footsteps outside, and he braced himself for round two with his mother, but when he opened the door, it was only the delivery person Landon was waiting for.

After placing the box on the desk, Landon checked his phone again. "Yeah. He said he's on his way back. That was sent a few minutes ago, so it should be, like, fifteen more minutes."

Good. He couldn't wait for Jase to get here so they could go home. Tonight more than anything he needed to feel his lover's arms around him, anchoring him with a strong, steady presence. They planned to go to dinner at Connor and Emily's. He wanted to tell them about Matt's visit and get their take on the meeting he had tomorrow with the partner from Everett and Winston.

The doorknob rattled, and Jason came storming inside.

"Hey, you." Ryder gave his lover a weak smile.

"Are you all right? Shit, and Landon was here too. Was it really awful?" Jason threw his jacket on the table and came close to peer into Ryder's eyes. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that by yourself."

Ryder put up a hand. "We weren't alone. Believe it or not, Liam came in and blew my mother out of the water."

Landon stood up and grabbed his backpack. "Yeah, he was great. Really shut her up. I gotta go now, though." He gestured to the package on

the desk. “Jason, there’s the delivery you were waiting for. I entered it in the system.”

“Thanks, man.” Jason patted him on the back. “Will I be seeing you again?”

“I’ll text you and let you know the plan.” Landon turned to Ryder. “I’m definitely coming to the fund-raiser next week. Nothing they can do or say is gonna stop me.”

Ryder pulled Landon into a hug. “You’re the best. And don’t worry. No one’s going to keep us apart anymore.” A smile tugged at his lips. “You’ll be happy to know Jason’s sister Jessie will be there, and she’s cute. She heard a lot about you, so I’m sure you’ll have a good time.” He smirked as Landon flushed a deep red and left the trailer, mumbling under his breath about dumbass brothers.

Jason’s arms came around him, holding him against his solid body. He could feel the play of muscles in Jason’s arms under his shirtsleeves as they held him close, and shivered when Jason’s warm lips kissed his neck.

“Now that he’s gone, tell me the truth. Was it awful? Was *she* awful?” Jason’s firm hold and soothing kisses relaxed him, emptying his mind of all the tension and pressure of the past hour.

“It wasn’t that bad, babe. I told her I didn’t care anymore about her and my father’s approval, as long as I got to see Landon.” He turned in Jason’s arms to face him. As always, the tenderness in Jason’s blue gaze tripped his heart, setting prickles of electricity through his arms and down his spine. This feeling inside went so much further than mere sex or lust.

“I love you, Jase. I love you so much sometimes it scares me. And if I didn’t think I’d have everyone within a city block hearing me scream this trailer down, I’d show you right now how much I fucking love you.”

Jason’s wicked grin matched his own as the need and hunger rose within him. It only took two steps for Jason to lock the door and unbuckle his belt. “The crew’s gone for the day, and I don’t give a shit if the entire city hears you call my name when I bury myself inside you.”

Ryder’s dick twitched as his lover unzipped his pants and dropped them. He didn’t even bother taking off his boots. Ryder reached out a hand, but Jason knocked it away.

“Turn around, undo your pants, and drop them.” Jason’s seductive voice rumbled low and authoritative, causing Ryder to shiver. “Do you know how many hours I’ve spent fantasizing about you bent over this desk and what I’d like to do to you?” He growled and bit down on Ryder’s shoulder through his shirt, then licked the sore spot.

Ryder moaned and struggled to undo his pants with shaking hands.

“Here, let me.” Jason brushed aside Ryder’s trembling fingers with a strong hand, and yanked down his pants and boxers. Ryder was so hard and so turned on already he knew it wouldn’t take long for him to come, as Jason’s rough hand grasped his cock and began to stroke.

“Jase, now. Do it. Right now.”

Hearing the crinkling of the foil, he spread his legs wider, bracing against the desk. Jason scrambled into his desk drawer and pulled out a little tube. Within moments, Ryder felt slick fingers probe his opening, enter, and twist. Whatever his lover was whispering in his ear made no sense to him at all, as the wicked machinations of Jason’s clever fingers, slipping and sliding, twisting and snaking into his channel, set his brain on fire.

“Jason.” He pushed against the evil digits inside him, whimpering with ecstasy as Jason brushed his prostate again and again.

“Ready, love?” Jason stood behind him, smoothing his rough hands over Ryder’s ass.

“Yes,” he gasped. “Jase, please.”

With one strong thrust, Jason entered him, then immediately pulled back, only to push forward again. The torture was exquisite as Jason invaded his body, turning Ryder’s insides into a quivering mass of jelly. With unerring accuracy, Jason hit his sweet spot. Ryder came undone, torn apart by the sensations rocketing through his body.

“Jason.” He cried out so the walls echoed around them. The shock and awe of his orgasm bore down on him as he spilled himself into his hand. By now, Ryder could sense immediately when his lover climaxed, from warmth flooding his insides, Jason’s desperate grasp as he pulled Ryder close, and his wispy, stuttering breath against Ryder’s shoulder.

They lay half-slumped against the desk until the sharp edges began to dig into Ryder’s thighs. “Jase, I gotta move.”

“Why?”

Ryder smiled at Jason’s testy grunt. His lover liked nothing better than to cuddle up and take a long nap after lovemaking, but they had to leave here soon, get the dogs, and go to their friends.’ “Come on, get that gorgeous rear in gear. We’re having dinner at Connor and Emily’s.” He pushed up, laughing as Jason cursed under his breath.

“Shit. I wanna go home and get into bed. With you.” Wagging his dark brows, Jason leaned in for a kiss. “Sure I can’t convince you to cancel them and come home with me?”

Ryder pulled his pants up and tucked in his shirt, watching Jason’s eyes follow his movements as he straightened his clothes. “Chill out, lover boy. You’ll have to be satisfied with the quickie we had until later.” Ryder laughed, then took Jason’s face between his hands. “You’re mine. I know I tried to hold back at one point, but never again. I love you so fucking much it hurts to breath sometimes, ’cause I’m afraid I’m gonna fuck it up and you’ll leave me.” He put his hand on Jason’s neck to pull him closer. “Don’t give up on me. I need you to be there when it gets too dark sometimes.”

The room seemed even smaller now, as all that mattered was the two of them standing toe to toe.

As their foreheads touched, Jason cupped his hand around Ryder’s neck, his rough thumb stroking a calming pattern on Ryder’s skin. “I could never give up on you, babe. There was never any choice once I met you. From the first time I saw you, I knew you’d be mine.”

Ryder struggled for breath, then rested his lips against Jason’s cheek for a moment before kissing his mouth. “Let’s get going. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can leave.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Dinner was the usual chaotic affair at Connor and Emily's brick town house in Carroll Gardens. Knowing they were expected and the door would be unlocked, Jason put his hand on Ryder's back and followed him inside, only to be greeted by the couple's two large dogs, their whip-long tails wagging. The canines exchanged a series of excited barks and woofs with Pearl and Trouper before all four skidded away to the rear of the house.

Connor's eyes lit up when Jason and Ryder entered the kitchen. "Save me. She wants to kill me."

"Can I have his iPad, Em?" Ryder leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "Pearl stepped on mine yesterday, so it would save me a trip to the store."

"I'll take his car." Jason snatched a stuffed mushroom from a platter and gave Emily his own kiss. "I love those old sports cars."

Emily laughed and put down her kitchen weapon. "He's been a pest all day. *'Don't stand on your feet too long. Are you sure you don't want a drink of water? Make sure you eat your fruits and vegetables.'*" She wrinkled her nose at them. "It's like living with my mother all over again."

He and Ryder shared a look, then burst out laughing. "Why, Connor," he gasped through his snickering, "you old mother hen, you."

"Oh, screw you," muttered Connor. He sat on the counter, never taking his eyes off his wife.

While Ryder busied himself getting beers out of the refrigerator, Jason pulled up a stool at the kitchen island. He loved their house. It was warm and cozy, not one of those huge, rambling brownstones, but a three-story brick townhome. No matter that there were plenty of rooms, everyone always congregated here, in the kitchen. Emily had the walls painted a creamy pale yellow to contrast with the glass-front dark cherrywood cabinets. The counters were poured concrete, and the floors were the original hardwood plank.

She loved to cook and have guests over and had a huge restaurant-style stove and refrigerator, as well as a long scrubbed-wood farmhouse table. Jason sniffed with appreciation as the tantalizing aroma of her homemade sauce filled the air.

“What’s for dinner?” He hefted the bowl in his hands. “We brought salad.”

Connor’s face brightened. “Good, she’ll eat her greens now, since you brought it. If it was me, she’d probably throw it away.”

“Or dump it on your head,” she cooed. “And to answer your question, Jase, eggplant parmigiana.” Her deceptively sweet tone set Ryder off in gales of laughter.

“Guess the honeymoon period is over, my brother.” Jason accepted a beer and shared a smile.

Connor shot them both evil, dark looks. “Wait, Jason. One day this bastard will do something to piss you off, and then you’ll see how it feels.”

Jason continued to chuckle, stealing another stuffed mushroom. After taking a bite, he poked Ryder with his elbow, offering him the rest. When Ryder failed to respond, he poked him again. “What’s wrong? You look kind of weirded out.”

“Um, I need to tell you guys something.”

Jason had never seen Ryder so nervous. He glanced at Connor, who shrugged.

“Go ahead, babe. What’s the matter?” Figuring to offer him comfort, Jason put his hand on Ryder’s arm, but instead of his partner relaxing, Ryder tensed and drew away. “Ry, what’s going on? You’re making me nervous.”

“It’s nothing bad. It’s just that, um, Matt came to the office today.”

Emily dropped the ladle she’d been holding, splattering hot tomato sauce all over the floor. “Shit, damn. Did I hear you right?” Her worried gaze first searched Connor, then landed on Jason. “You know about him, right?”

Still stunned, he nodded. “Yeah. After the time he gave that interview on television.” He slid off the chair next to his lover and stood before him. “Why didn’t you say anything earlier? What did he want?” A cold, panicky thought burst out of his mouth before he could censor it. “He wants you

back. I know it. I'm sure he came on to you. Did he kiss you? Did you let him?"

"Jesus Christ, Jase, stop." Ryder slammed his hand down. "How can you even think I would want him after everything we've talked about?"

From the corner of his eye, Jason watched Emily take Connor's hand and leave the room, but it barely registered. "You loved him, though. And you left in such a bad place with each other, with nothing resolved. I thought maybe seeing him today might bring back all the old feelings you once had for him."

Ryder put his arms around him, holding him close. "What I once had with Matt was an unhealthy relationship based on me giving and him taking. I don't ever want you to put us and what we have together on the same level as that."

"Why didn't you tell me you'd seen him?" Jason's heart rate slowed as Ryder's words sank in.

"I know I should've called you right away, but then I got another call, and after everything that happened with my mother this afternoon, frankly, it didn't seem that important anymore."

"Did you have any feelings when you saw him again? Don't worry about hurting me. I need to know." He'd crash and burn later if Ryder admitted he still cared about Matt. The guy was exciting and good-looking, and Ryder had been so in love with him. Worse, he'd been Ryder's first love. Someone special.

"The only feelings I have are pity and a little disgust at myself for allowing Matt's needs and wants to take over my life." Ryder kissed his cheek. "Don't you understand how much you mean to me? Your heart, it's mine, man. I'm going to hold it and make promises to it and love it for as many years as you give it me." Ryder pushed him up against the counter until their eyes locked. "I always tell you, you're fucking mine, but baby, I am fucking yours until the day I die. You own me."

Jason slumped against his lover, his best friend, and held on for dear life. "God, Ry, I got so scared for a minute. I didn't know what to think. All I saw was the sky crashing down on top of me when I thought of you with him."

"Oh, babe, I'll try and always be here to hold up the sky for you. I can't guarantee I won't make mistakes, but from when we first met, it's

only been you, and it only ever will be you. Everything is nothing if you aren't with me." Their lips met, and Jason's world settled back on its axis with the smooth, sweet slide of Ryder's tongue in his mouth. Jason kissed him for a few moments before pulling away, meeting Ryder's bright blue eyes with his own.

"Don't keep things from me, though. We've had enough of that shit already." Grumbling and still annoyed, he paced the floor in front of the table. "Is there anything else you haven't told me?"

"After Matt left, I got a call from the senior partner at a very prestigious firm in the city. They want to speak with me tomorrow morning." Ryder placed the salad in the refrigerator.

"What about, do you think?"

Ryder shrugged. "Who knows. Maybe they want to offer me a job. I'll find out and promise to tell you right away." He raised his brow. "Is that okay with you?"

"Would you take it? A job there, I mean." It had never occurred to Jason that Ryder might one day leave the rescue to practice law again.

"Not sure. If I could handle it where they'd let me do the animal-rights work, maybe." Ryder drank his beer. "I've never thought of going back to a firm, but it might be nice, if we could swing it at the office."

There was a sudden shriek and a loud thump from the living room. Ryder beckoned, and together they crept inside. There, sprawled out on the sofa and locked in each other's arms, were Connor and Emily, oblivious to anyone but themselves.

Jason chuckled as they tiptoed back to the kitchen. "All is forgiven, as usual." Taking up the bread knife, he began to slice the crusty Italian bread, stealing the end piece.

"How do you think she got in her situation in the first place?" Ryder smirked.

"I heard that," an outraged voice called out from the living room.

Jason couldn't stop laughing as he helped set the table.

* * * *

The next morning at ten thirty, Ryder was escorted into the waiting area at Everett and Winston. While not as large or as venerable as his

father's law firm, it was prestigious enough in its own right to pick and choose from the best and brightest law students, including former clerks to US Supreme Court justices.

Ryder was offered coffee or water and turned down both. After waiting several minutes, a young man, most likely a first-year associate, came by to escort him to the senior partner's office. He was shown in and introduced to the woman he'd spoken with on the telephone. There was one other individual in the room, aside from the associate, whose name, he learned on their walk to the office, was David.

"Mr. Daniels, this is Stewart Clinton, another senior partner with the firm."

"Nice to meet you, Daniels. I know your father quite well." Clinton's handshake was firm and quick.

Ryder's smile faltered for the moment. "Nice to meet you as well." And he left it at that. If Clinton noticed any awkwardness, he failed to let on.

"Now, then, may we call you Ryder? I'm Patty."

"Of course." Ryder preferred using his first name. Only athletes and presidents should go by last names, in his mind. "I'm truly at a loss why I'm here."

Patty smiled at him. "Here at Everett and Winston, we've always prided ourselves on being on the cutting edge of the legal community. We were one of the first law firms in the city to tackle sexual discrimination against LGBT individuals in the workplace and in the schools, and we also have a very strong family law and women's rights division." She took a breath and a sip of water.

All very interesting as background information, but nothing new anymore. Those divisions, while once unique, were now a big part of most general practice firms. Still, he listened with a polite smile on his face.

Stewart spoke next. "Ryder, we are aware of the work you and your friends do for the dog rescue and are quite impressed with the arguments you made before the zoning board and the other city agencies where we've seen you speak. You're very passionate about this cause, aren't you?"

A gleam of interest perked up in his brain. "Yes, I'm very dedicated to the rescue and to the dogs."

Stewart stroked his chin. “Do you own one of these dogs?”

“I do indeed, and my partner rescued one as well.” Ryder clicked on his phone to bring up a picture of Pearl and Troup, showing it to Stewart and Patty.

“We are also aware,” Stewart began again, “of the fund-raiser you are having next week. We plan to attend and, once again, commend you on your ability to raise such interest and money.”

“Thank you both, but I’m not quite sure why I’m here, still.”

Patty handed him a folder. “Inside here is a new division we are creating in the firm. An animal-rights division. Not only for dogs, you understand, but for all animals and for the people who care for them. We would like you to start it up and are prepared to make a very generous offer.” She sat back in her chair.

Ryder glanced at the paperwork, stunned by the offer. He found three sets of eyes staring at him when he looked up. With a weak grin, he hefted the papers. “I need some time to digest this, talk it over with my partner and the other founders of the rescue.”

“We understand, Ryder. But we can’t underscore how serious we are about this effort and you spearheading it.” Patty came from behind her desk to stand next to David, the associate. “David here is also interested and has asked to be included in the new division.”

Ryder shifted his attention to the young man, returning his friendly smile. “It’s something I will give plenty of thought to, but as I said, I’m afraid with the fund-raiser I can’t give you an answer until after that date.”

Stewart stood then, a sure sign the interview was finished. “I look forward to the fund-raiser. All three of us are going, so we’ll see you there.” He shook Ryder’s hand. “David here will show you out.”

Ryder said good-bye and walked out with David.

“So how long have you worked with the rescue?” David held the door open for him. “Is that where you met your partner?”

“I’ve worked there almost three years, but Jason and I have been together almost four months.”

They reached the elevator, and David pushed the button, then leaned up against the wall, apparently content to wait with him. “I hope you come on board here. It’s a great firm and a very friendly work environment.”

The elevator dinged, and the doors whooshed open. Saved by the bell. “It was nice to meet you, David.” They shook hands. “I hope to see you at the fund-raiser.”

“You definitely will, Ryder.” David gave him the same wide, friendly smile.

The elevator doors closed, and Ryder skimmed through the folder. They had thought of everything. The benefits were amazing, and they’d done their homework on the pending legislation on animal rights. This opportunity had come out of the blue, but he wouldn’t make any decision without first discussing it with Emily, Connor, and Jason. He’d never leave the rescue in a lurch. None of this would be decided until after the fund-raiser next week. Emily was stressed enough, and he refused to add to her anxiety. Not that he’d have a choice. With Connor hovering around his wife like an angry wasp ready to sting anyone who dared approach her, it wasn’t high on his list of priorities.

As soon as he left the building, he texted Jason. *Hey, sleeping beauty. I finished the interview.*

He received an immediate text back. *Hey, gorgeous. Bet you killed it. Can’t wait to hear.*

Maybe it would be easier to raise awareness for the rescue if he took this job. He’d talk to Jason about it. An idea popped into his head, and he grinned happily to himself. He stopped and pulled out his phone to text Jason again. *Playing hooky this morning. Bringing coffee. Be naked or be sorry.*

Chapter Twenty-Five

It was the night of the fund-raiser, and Ryder was a bundle of nerves, unable to sit or stand still for more than a few moments before jumping up, remembering an errant detail he thought he'd forgotten but of course hadn't. He, Emily, and Connor had been unusually snappy with one another for the past several days, and although he knew it was stress and emotions, it had him off-kilter and unsettled.

"Hold still, babe. I can't tie your bow tie if you keep fidgeting." Jason kissed Ryder's neck, flooding his body with warmth.

"Try keeping your fucking lips off me if you don't want me to move." Ryder yelped when Jason nipped his ear.

"Stop that and calm down," Jason growled.

Those wicked lips, however, continued to move across Ryder's neck as Jason's tongue dragged tantalizing patterns along his skin.

"Calm down?" Ryder's voice rose, incredulous at Jason's demand. "If you want me to stop, then keep that fucking tongue off my neck. I swear to God it's like a lethal weapon." He moaned when the wet tip of Jason's tongue entered his ear.

The destructive evil lips of his lover quirked up in a smile. "That was your ear, not your neck, if we want to get technical."

"What the hell, Jase?" Twisting away, Ryder held up his hands in self-defense. "You're killing me tonight. I can't afford to be so, so..." He shrugged, helpless with inexplicable feelings of anxiety.

Jason's arms came around him, pulling him close. "I'm sorry. I thought it would settle you down, not overexcite you."

Ryder breathed in his lover's familiar warm scent, and his muscles relaxed, the tension releasing from his body. They stayed that way, forehead to forehead, holding each other as Jason's strong, sure hands massaged his back in soothing circles.

“I don’t know why I’m so tense,” he admitted, straightening up and yanking at his tuxedo jacket. “I guess we’ve been planning this for so long the fact that tonight’s the night overwhelmed me for the moment.”

“Understandable. I know you’ll be fantastic. My whole family is so excited, Jessie especially.” Jason checked his reflection in the mirror. He too wore a tuxedo and had confessed to Ryder it was the first time he’d worn one since his high school prom. That necessitated a shopping trip to Madison Avenue, where Ryder gifted him with a sleek designer tux. At first Jason had objected when he saw the cost, but after he accepted it as a belated Valentine’s Day gift, it was obvious how much he enjoyed wearing it. Ryder had caught him touching the soft, smooth wool of the jacket, visibly preening at its luxurious feel.

Ryder chuckled. “Who are you kidding? She’s as excited to meet Landon as she is about the fund-raiser.” His eyes softened at the sight of Jason. “You look gorgeous. I’ll be the envy of everyone there tonight.”

The buzzer rang, and when Jason answered, he heard Clarence’s voice announcing their car was waiting downstairs. They both grabbed their wallets, keys, and phones, and after securing the dogs on their leashes, headed out. Once in the car, Jason took his hand. “Are you really that nervous? You speak in front of strangers all the time about this stuff.”

“True, but never in front of you guys, and our family. And who knows who else will be in the audience.” The collar of his shirt felt tight around his neck, and he tugged it to try and breathe a little easier. “This is so damn important to us. And then there’s the job offer, which I still haven’t mentioned to them.” He scratched Pearl’s ears. “I’ve never kept something this important from the two of them, and I kind of feel like I’m betraying them somehow.” Pearl licked his hand as if she knew he needed extra comforting and reassurance.

Jason leaned over and kissed him on his cheek. “You aren’t. Emily’s so crazed right now it would only add to her stress level, and Connor would probably kill you.”

Of that he had no doubt. He hadn’t spoken to Emily in over a week, so there hadn’t really been an opportunity for them to talk. Connor was so distracted by the pregnancy that he didn’t notice Ryder’s silence. “I want everything to go smoothly. You never know who might be in the audience. This night has the potential to change everything.”

Jason laid his head on Ryder's shoulder. "As long as you're with me, I don't care what happens."

Ryder couldn't help but smile as he kissed the top of Jason's head. "That's a given, babe. Together forever."

* * * *

Their car glided to a stop across the street from the Green Building on Union Street in Carroll Gardens. The night was warm, and the food trucks they hired were busy dispensing their various treats. There were lobster rolls, barbecued brisket sandwiches, gourmet grilled-cheese sandwiches, and spring rolls and dumplings. There was a smoothie truck for those who didn't want anything alcoholic from the two bars set up inside the space. For dessert there was one truck with cotton candy and one with old-fashioned ice cream treats. From the long lines, the trucks were the big hit Emily had predicted.

"Ry, this looks amazing." Jason squeezed his hand as they stood on the sidewalk surveying the scene. The party planner Emily worked with had outdone herself, as the indoor space was showered with thousands of twinkling white lights. Coupled with the music from the pianist and violinist they'd hired, it created an overall dreamlike, magical atmosphere.

"Guys, over here." Connor waved at them from the front door.

Ryder nudged Jason and tugged Pearl's leash. "Let's go. I need to mingle, and I want you with me." His heart lurched at the happy grin that spread across Jason's handsome face. He must have done something right to get so lucky to have found this man.

A much-more-relaxed-than-usual Connor had his arm wrapped around his sparkling wife. Emily, now visibly pregnant, with that glow only expectant mothers had, threw her arms around Ryder as soon as she spotted them.

"Oh, Ry, you look gorgeous, sweetie." She kissed him and turned to Jason. "You too, honey. My two gorgeous men."

"Hey." Connor cleared his throat. "What am I, chopped liver?"

She brushed him off with an airy wave of her hand. "I live with you. It's different." Ryder knew better and smiled at the warm kiss she planted on Connor's lips. Seemed like everything between the three of them was

back to normal, now that all the planning was done and the event was in full swing.

He turned to Jason. "Let's put the dogs outside with the others and mingle." The four of them made plans to meet up in an hour to coordinate the speeches. Then he and Jason made their way to the back, stopping to greet acquaintances as they walked past.

"Jase, Ryder, over here," Jason's sister Nicole called over the din of voices. Ryder took Trouper's leash from Jason. "Why don't you go over there and say hi while I take the dogs out to the garden? I'll be right back."

Jason nodded. "Okay." He leaned over and kissed him. "Don't be long. I don't want anyone else taking you away from me." He winked and threaded his way through the crowd to greet and join his parents, brothers, and sisters.

Whatever nerves or hesitation Ryder might have been harboring evaporated. He had the man he loved, the surrogate family who loved and accepted him, and his friends. Pearl and Trouper happily joined Laurel and Hardy in the makeshift dog run, and after spending a few minutes playing with them, he hurried back inside to join Jason and his family. On the way over to them, he spotted Landon entering the building and waved him over.

"Hey, I'm so glad you're here. What did you tell Mom?"

Landon's face tightened with anger. "I told her I'm going out and hopped in a cab. I didn't wait for her to answer." A strange look crossed his face. "Dad and her have been fighting a lot, late at night when they think I'm asleep. Something about her keeping secrets from him and stuff."

Ryder had no interest. "I wouldn't worry. Mom's a master manipulator, and I'm sure she'll talk her way out of whatever it is." By this time, they'd reached the crowd of Jason's family. Aside from his parents and siblings, Ryder noticed Liam had brought a date, and Mark, of course, was there with Julie.

Landon met Jason's family and was quickly surrounded by Jason's mother and sisters. Inwardly Ryder couldn't help but laugh at his brother's panicked expression. Kid didn't have a chance against those three, and he was much too well mannered to walk away. Besides, Jessie was adorable. It might be a good thing for his brother to have a girlfriend.

"Hey, Ryder." Liam clapped him on the shoulder. "I'd like you to meet Courtney." The petite woman shook his hand, greeting him with a warm,

friendly smile.

“I’m so happy to finally meet you. Liam talks about you and Jason all the time.”

Ryder arched his brow. “You do?”

Liam put his hands up. “Only good things, bro. Come on, you know we’re good, right?” His dark eyes met Ryder’s.

Ryder hugged him. “Yeah, I’m kidding. We’re cool.” And they were. Ever since the incident with his mother at the construction site, Liam had been nothing but a staunch supporter of him and Jason, finally understanding that he was in Jason’s life to stay. Forever, if Jason felt the same way he did.

“Hey, Ry, I’m gonna take Jessie outside to meet Pearl, okay?” His brother’s gaze remained fixated on the pretty sixteen-year-old, and Ryder couldn’t blame him. With her hair bouncing over her shoulders in smooth brown waves and her big blue eyes, not to mention the sparkling black cocktail dress that made her look like she’d stepped off a Paris runway, Jessie Mallory looked as beautiful and fresh as an April morning.

A smile quirked his lips. Considering how many hours Jessie spent with Pearl on Sundays when he and Jason came for family dinner, he wondered how she’d manage to make Landon believe she’d never met his dog before. From the way his brother couldn’t take his eyes off her, though, he guessed it didn’t matter.

“Go ahead, you two, but I’m making my speech in a few minutes, and I don’t want you to miss it.” He patted his brother on the back. “Behave yourself. She’s only sixteen.”

“Yes, Mother.” Landon smirked, then grabbed Jessie’s hand and hurried outside.

Shaking his head with a sigh, he accepted a drink from Jason. “Thanks.”

“Don’t worry, Ry. Landon’s a good kid. I think it’s cute.” Jason took his hand and squeezed it.

Ryder relaxed. What was he worried about? They were young kids, and Landon was responsible. At a tap on the shoulder, he turned around, a smile on his lips at the ready to greet a guest.

It was Matt. With a pregnant blonde woman.

The smile froze on his lips.

“Hello, Ryder.” Matt drew forward the woman next to him. “This is my wife, Abby. This is Ryder, sweetheart. He and his friends here run the rescue.”

“Hello, Ryder.” Her open, friendly demeanor indicated to Ryder that Matt had most likely lied and had never disclosed the true nature of their relationship to his wife. Still holding Jason’s hand, he made the introduction.

“Welcome, Abby. It’s nice to meet you. This is my partner, Jason Mallory. Jason, this is Matt Hawkins and his wife, Abby.”

Matt and Jason greeted each other with stilted nods, Jason saving his usual friendly personality for Abby.

Matt’s eyes were drawn to his and Jason’s entwined hands. “So have you two been together long?”

“About four months,” Jason answered, his voice clipped. Ryder hadn’t seen him this angry and upset since the confrontation with his brother.

“I didn’t expect you, Matt. Why are you here?”

At least Matt had the grace to look embarrassed. “My production partner is a big fan of pit bulls. When he heard about this fund-raiser, he was bummed he was in Canada and couldn’t make it, so he asked me if I would come.”

Jason’s hand squeezed his. “I see Emily’s trying to get your attention, Ry. It’s time for your speech.”

“Thanks, babe.” Ryder leaned in and pressed his lips to Jason’s ears. “Don’t let him fuck with your head.” Then he kissed him on the mouth. “I love you.” Making his way through the crowd, he nodded to Landon and Jessie as they returned, hand in hand. He finally reached the makeshift stage and climbed the steps, standing next to Emily and Connor.

This was the night they had strived for all these months. The crowd hushed, and Emily took the microphone. The stage stood about five feet off the floor, so they would have an overview of everyone there, all one hundred and fifty people.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming tonight to support Rescue Me. With the help of my husband, Connor Halstead, and dear friend, Ryder Daniels, I started this service to help these wonderful dogs who have been so

misunderstood by society. It all begins with the training. Like a child, a dog learns from its master. If you treat them well, they will return the favor in kind, tenfold. A dog is one of the most loving animals on earth.” She handed the microphone over to Ryder.

He took it and smiled at the crowd. “Good evening to you all, and thank you. Over the past three years, we have rescued hundreds of dogs from abandoned homes or yards, fostered them, and placed them with loving families. I took one in, and my partner adopted one almost six months ago.” He found Jason in the crowd, standing next to his family and Landon. “It was how we met, actually.”

The crowd laughed, and several women sighed. He continued. “Unfortunately, not all stories have happy endings. Many dogs we find are so badly abused they are near death, or have been so brutalized that they are unadoptable. We have no choice but to have them put down. It is our hope that the practice of using these dogs, or any dogs for the purposes of fighting, including bait dogs, will be outlawed and the owners prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

From the corner of his eye he saw Stewart Clinton, Patty Walsh, and the associate, David, by the bar, listening to him. “We need laws to protect the animals from these criminals, for that’s what people who train these dogs to fight are.” People were still walking in, paying for their tickets at the door. “There is still so much prejudice against these dogs...” His voice caught in his throat as he spotted the tall, straight figure of his father enter the building. “Uh, and...” He couldn’t help but track his father as he made his way through the crowd to come to stand near the stage, beaming up at him with quiet pride in his eyes. “We need to make sure we do all we can to protect these animals who can’t protect themselves.” Dazed, he sought out Emily and Connor. *Help me*, he mouthed beseechingly.

“Take the mike from him, now,” Connor murmured to Emily. As if in a trance, Ryder walked off the stage, the crowd parting before him like he was Moses in the Red Sea, until he stood before his father. Behind him he heard voices and instinctively he knew they belonged to Landon and Jason, but he never took his eyes off his father.

It had been almost one year since they’d seen each other. Ryder was astonished at how much his father had aged. There were swaths of gray in

his once-golden hair, and the skin beneath his haunted eyes was creased and puffy.

“Dad.” He needed to clear his throat several times, as he couldn’t seem to find his voice. “Why are you here?”

“I deserve that and more, I know, son. But can we speak, please? Or if you don’t wish to speak to me, would you listen to what I have to say?”

This wasn’t the strong, sure man he knew as his father. That man made grown men quiver in their shoes with a mere piercing glare. But this man before him was broken, his voice a bare whisper, so Ryder had to strain to hear. His hands trembled, and his eyes shone with a suspicious glassy sheen.

“We can speak right here. There’s nothing to hide. As a matter of fact, there’s someone I’d like for you to meet.” Ryder glanced over his shoulder and waved Jason over. His voice hard with defiance, Ryder made the introduction. “This is my partner, Jason Mallory. Jason, this is my father.”

“Hello, sir.” Jason stuck out his hand, and to Ryder’s surprise, his father, without any hesitation, gripped it, shaking it firm and strong.

“Hello, son. Nice to see you again.”

Feeling as though he were in an alternative universe, Ryder looked from his father to Jason. “When the hell did you two meet?” His voice trembled with confusion and disbelief.

“The day your mother came to the trailer, I was at your father’s office trying to get him to see how wrong he was about you.” Stupefied by Jason’s admission, Ryder watched his lover and father converse in a congenial manner, as if they were meeting for a beer.

Picking up the thread of the story, his father continued, “After that, I went home and confronted your mother. She had told me all along you didn’t want to be a part of the family anymore. That you’d rather be with your lover than with us. I thought maybe you would show up for Thanksgiving dinner. I wanted to see you so badly, but she said…” His voice caught, and he put a hand over his eyes, like a shield from his pain. His father’s breath hitched; then he continued. “She said she begged you to come, but you refused. You didn’t want to see us, to see me.”

Landon broke in. “That’s a lie. Ryder always wanted to come home, but she wouldn’t let him unless he became what she called ‘normal.’”

Landon's voice cracked with emotion. Ryder wanted to comfort his brother but couldn't process all this at once.

"You really wanted to see me? You wanted me to come home?" Ryder held his breath, waiting, hoping.

"I've failed miserably as a father and as a human being for you to think otherwise." His father's voice escaped in a great whoosh of breath. "God help me, you're my son, and I love you, both of you." His gaze traveled to Landon, coming to rest back with Ryder. "I never, I swear to God, never wanted you to leave the house. Ryder, your mother lied to both of us, and I'm sorry to say I fell for it."

His father came closer and put his hands on Ryder's shoulders. In all the years he could remember, the one memory he didn't have was his father's touch.

Until now.

"Please forgive me. I know I've made horrendous mistakes, and I can't erase the past, but will you allow us to move ahead for the future? Together as a family?"

Jason took his hand and whispered in his ear, "Everyone deserves a second chance."

Ryder remembered Jason and Liam's problems and how now they were closer than ever. He opened his arms to his father and hugged him, feeling his arms encircle not only him, but drawing in Landon, until the three of them embraced. In the background, he heard clapping and cheering but didn't care.

His father let him go, and Jason's arm slipped around his waist, holding him firm. "You did the right thing. You have such a wonderful heart for love and for forgiveness. Now you can have your entire family around you and be happy."

Ryder touched his forehead to Jason's, leaning into the familiar, beloved warmth of the man he loved beyond anything. "My heart was empty and cold until you rescued it, rescued me from the darkness that swallowed me up and consumed me for so long. Thank you for saving me and loving me." He took Jason's face between his hands. "Thank you for giving me back my life."

"I love you too." Jason hugged him hard.

Taking his father's warm, slightly trembling hand within his, he pulled him toward the back of the room. "Come with me, Dad. There's a group of people I want you to meet." He, Jason, and his father stopped in front of Tony and Helen and Jason's brothers and sisters.

"Everyone, this is my dad." Meeting his father's gaze with his own, he smiled. "Dad, meet your new family."

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Epilogue

“Daddeee.” Ryder held out his arms as one-year-old Gemma pulled herself up by the table leg and took an unsteady step toward him, chubby arms outstretched, her round, bright blue eyes wide with excitement.

“Come, baby, come on.” She took a few more steps before he swept her up in his arms, smothering her with kisses, falling in love with her sweet baby scent all over again. Jason stood behind him, videoing her on his cell phone.

“What a big girl.” Emily clapped her hands, letting go of two-year-old Jack’s hand. “Look at Gemma, Jack.”

He pursed his little lips. “Gemma’s a baby.” With that pronouncement, he caught sight of his father and took off after him at top speed, screeching with delight as Connor picked him up to throw him in the air over and over again.

Ryder continued to snuggle his little girl, blowing raspberries on her stomach as she shrieked with laughter. Today was her first birthday, and he marveled at the changes in his life over the past two years.

He and Jason had married at his father’s Hampton estate two years ago in a beautiful beachfront ceremony. Three months later, they found a surrogate who agreed to carry a baby for them, and Gemma was born. Never in his life had he known such happiness existed. This little girl had made his marriage a true family in every sense of the word.

“Dude, where’s the birthday girl? Ah, there’s my favorite niece.” Liam burst into his parents’ kitchen and grabbed Gemma from him, tickling and kissing her.

“Idiot, she’s your only niece.” Jason hugged Liam. “Hey, Courtney, can’t you keep him in line?” He kissed his brother’s fiancée while Ryder greeted Mark and Julie, who walked in behind them.

“How’s Landon, Ry?” Mark bent down to pet Pearl and Trouper, who ran into the kitchen from the backyard.

“He’s good. He and Nicole are driving down from Cornell this weekend to see the family.” Landon was still dating Jessie, who was graduating this year and planning to go to Vassar.

After Ryder took Gemma from Liam to change her diaper, he carried her into the family room where everyone had assembled. As soon as Gemma saw her grandmother, she began to squirm, reaching out to her.

“Nananana.” Her sweet baby voice brought a smile to everyone’s face. Although Helen held Gemma, Tony couldn’t resist sneaking in a few kisses. Many a Sunday afternoon found Grandpa Tony snuggled in his lounge chair with baby Gemma, the two of them fast asleep.

The doorbell rang, and in walked Ryder’s father with Denise, the woman he’d begun seeing after his divorce became final last year. Alexander Daniels immediately went to give his granddaughter a kiss, then greeted his son and Jason.

“Ryder, what did you think of that decision from the court on that case of yours?” Ryder had joined his father’s firm, starting a division of animal rights. He still volunteered at the rescue on the weekends, but after the fund-raiser brought in so much recognition, they were able to hire a full-time staff. The donations and contributions kept them afloat, especially with a hefty contribution from his law firm.

“I was happy the judge put him in jail. Bastard deserved it for what he did to those animals.” He greeted Denise with a warm smile. She was a sweet person, and he hoped she and his father would eventually marry. From his mother, he heard nothing and he’d learned to let go of the pain. Maybe one day in the future they would reconcile, maybe not. He went in search of his husband.

“Hey, you.” His breath caught in his throat when he saw Jason, leaning up against the refrigerator, looking devastatingly handsome in a blue polo and faded jeans. His black, silky hair curled around his neck. Ryder pressed a kiss to his mouth, never getting tired of the spark of lust that flared at the mere touch of this man.

“Hey, you,” Jason answered, “I have good news. Mom and Dad are going to take Gemma and the dogs for the weekend. That leaves us all alone.”

At the thought of a weekend alone with his husband for the first time in over a year, Ryder’s heart beat a bit faster. He loved Gemma to distraction,

but getting up for those late night feedings were a bitch for both of them, as they shared the burden equally. Neither he nor Jason would trade the sleepless nights for the world. That baby meant everything to them. “What should we do, babe?” He pressed up against Jason, inhaling his familiar warm scent.

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll think of something,” Jason teased, kissing his neck.

Hand in hand they walked back through the house to their family, and Ryder smiled, remembering the day he’d gone to a building site to rescue a dog. Who knew he’d be rescued too?

~The End~

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Felice Stevens

Felice Stevens has always been a romantic at heart. She believes that while life is tough, there is always a happy ending just around the corner. She started reading traditional historical romances when she was a teenager, then life and law school got in the way. It wasn't until she picked up a copy of Bertrice Small and became swept away to Queen Elizabeth's court that her interest in romance novels became renewed.

But somewhere along the way, her tastes shifted. While she still enjoys a juicy Historical romance, she began experimenting with newer, more cutting edge genres and discovered the world of Male/Male romance. And once she picked up her first, she became so enamored of the authors, the character-driven stories and the overwhelming emotion of the books, she knew she wanted to write her own.

Felice lives in New York City with her husband and two children and hopefully soon a cat of her own. Her day begins with a lot of caffeine and ends with a glass or two of red wine. She practices law but daydreams of a time when she can sit by a beach somewhere and write beautiful stories of men falling in love. Although there is bound to be angst along the way, a Happily Ever After is always guaranteed.

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