



Roughhousing
Laura Baumbach

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Chapter One

“You've got great architectural structure, but I don't see you as the drafting board type. I know *I* haven't seen you around Dunn and Piper. I'm new, but not that unobservant. I'd have remembered those shoulders of yours.”

Bram Lord turned away from the fresh-faced, flirtatious bartender mixing drinks behind the portable mirrored bar. Taking a sip of his drink, he glanced down and to his left in the direction the sharp, slightly mocking, feminine voice had come from. At six foot six plus, Bram had to look down at most people and the petite, rail thin brunette was no exception. He raised one eyebrow and gave the smirking, green-eyed woman a sultry smile of his own.

Wrapped in a skin tight, black cocktail dress with a single strand of white pearls nestled into the tiny valley of her barely there cleavage, the woman stared up at Bram and ran the tip of her tongue over her upper lip in a brazen gesture of seduction.

Holding her stare with his own icy blue gaze, Bram winked at her and said, “Actually, I love drafting boards. They can take a lot of weight and you can adjust them to get the best angle and height when you're working on a special project.” Bram's could feel one corner of his mouth quirk slightly. “And having the right angle is so important, wouldn't you say, Ms...?”

“Harper. Stella Harper, newest and only female architect to join Dunn and Piper.” The woman was attractive in a crisp, predatory way. Her dark brown hair reflected her manners, sharp-edged with a dangerous cut to it. She ran a suggestive finger over the thick muscles prominent under the layers of Bram's dress shirt and dinner jacket. “And you would be...?”

“Unavailable, but flattered.” He winked at her again and took a sip of his drink, cool gaze never leaving her sultry one.

Stella's smirking lips pursed for a moment before relaxing into something closer to a real smile. A playful twinkle replaced the predatory gleam in her eyes and she dropped her hand from his arm.

“I knew you were too great a catch to be single. I'm always a couple years late or two drinks ahead of everyone else in the room.” She turned to face the mingling crowd, leaning against the bar with a dramatic sigh. “All the good ones are taken.”

Bram smiled and settled next to her, studying the people talking and laughing in small groups around the Dunn's spacious, elegant living room. He automatically picked out a familiar head of dark curly hair in a group of people surrounding a frail, older, but still beautiful woman in a wheelchair. He sipped his drink and admired the way the man's well-cut trousers clung to lean thighs.

A small light of budding desire warmed him as the man crouched down in front of the wheelchair bound woman to talk with her at her eye level. The thin fabric of his trousers stretched enticingly over the curve

of the man's small, firm buttocks. Bram's lover was a shy, attractive young man.

Glancing around at the people surrounding his lover, Bram noticed several other people, both men and women, admiring the same view he was. A burst of possessive pride shot through him and landed in his cock. It stirred and grew, pressing lightly against the silk fabric of his black boxers. Everyone in the room could look at the man, but he knew who James Justin, favored junior architect of Dunn and Piper, was going home with. Tonight and every other night of his life, if Bram had any say in the matter.

Bram grinned, privately enjoying the hot flush of anticipation and desire that heated his groin. Glancing at Stella, he found her savoring the sight of James' tight ass as well.

Stella sighed again, this time it sounded real. Shaking her head, she took a large drink from the martini glass in her hand. Stella jutted her chin out to indicate James where he still crouched beside Mrs. Dunn.

“The man I brought with me is married, you're 'unavailable', whatever the hell that means these days, and the only other heart-stopping, attractive man in the room,” she nodded at James, “is gay. Or so they say.”

She cocked her head and tried to get a better view of James' backside. “Personally, I think he just hasn't been shown the ropes by a woman with enough experience to change his world view on the subject.”

Managing not to snort out the mouthful of alcohol he had just sipped, Bram swallowed, then set his drink down on the bar behind him. “You think you're woman enough to convert him? The way I hear it, gay men are born gay. It isn't a matter of choice. If another woman offered to show you a good time in bed, would you take it?”

Stella snorted and finished off her drink in one quick gulp. “Only if she looked like him,” she ran her gaze appreciatively over James' lean form then looked at Bram's broad-shouldered, handsome frame. “Or you.” She smiled and wiggled her eyebrows. “And came equipped with the right drilling tools.”

Stella shifted her hungry gaze to James again and licked her lips. “I'd sure be willing to try and convince him of the error of his ways.”

Bram smothered a chuckle, feeling slightly sorry for the woman. “What if he's already happy with someone?” Bram looked from Stella to James and back again. He slipped his hands into his pants pockets and let his fingers covertly graze over the tip of his half-hard cock. He thought about what his shy but passionate lover looked like without pants on and his cock jumped. He winked at Stella again. “You know, in love, committed?”

“With another *man*?” Stella gave Bram a smirking grimace filled with biting disbelief. “No man knows how to be any of those things at the same time. And frankly, unless his lover looks like you, which I doubt seeing as you're 'unavailable', it wouldn't be doing justice to the man. James,” she pointed at the crouching man with one long, red tipped finger, “is one hot, little architect. Too hot to waste on another man.”

Bram followed Stella's longing gaze to admire his lover.

James was smiling, his smooth, young face animated in conversation. The cut of his dinner jacket nicely accented his trim, lean build. Pulled tight by how he crouched by the wheelchair, James' trousers fit snug over his tight, little ass. His dark curls and deep blue eyes both caught facets of the bright lights in the room so that James appeared almost radiant.

Suddenly looking up, Mrs. Dunn caught Bram's eye. She nodded a greeting and then leaned over to whisper something in James' ear.

James' cheeks flared pink. He turned his head and glanced in Bram's direction, a bashful grin on his full lips. A hungry, uncertain gleam invaded his gaze when he locked eyes with Bram, his open expression full of unchecked longing and desire.

A sudden gasp from beside him told Bram that even tipsy, Stella had seen and understood the look on James' face.

James rose up from his crouch, murmured to Mrs. Dunn, and cut a direct path through the crowd toward Bram and Stella, smoldering gaze locked on Bram.

Smothering a small choking sound, Stella moaned, "Oh, Christ! Don't tell me, let me guess. It'll be less painful that way." She groaned and closed her eyes for a moment and then proclaimed, "You're Abraham Lord, owner of Eclipse Construction, and hottie James' new boyfriend."

Stella's voice held just enough resigned, self-mocking embarrassment to amuse to Bram. "Damn. I should listen to the water cooler gossip better. I thought for sure Lord was that forty-something bald guy that's been following James around the room most of the night. Damn!"

Bram noticed the bald guy as well, but brushed the man's interest in his lover off as someone trying to bask in the glow of James' quiet charm. Now he wasn't so sure.

Smiling indulgently, Bram chuckled and admitted, "Guilty as charged." He patted her sagging shoulder and took her empty glass from her unresisting hand to set it on the bar. "Don't feel too bad, Stella. I'm sure if anyone could change a gay man's 'world view' it would be you."

"Oh, yeah, let me make a fool of myself and then throw the broken woman a bone." Stella scoffed and grabbed another drink from a passing waiter's full tray. She took a sip and grimaced. As James approached, she pulled herself up to her full height of five foot three, in three-inch heels, and stepped away from the bar.

She primly announced to Bram, "You'll excuse me if I slip away before you share my stunning humiliation with your lover and my co-worker."

She glanced at James, whose eyes were trained solely on Bram, and mumbled, "I prefer to wait to start hiding my face behind blueprints and drafting boards until Monday morning, when I'll be sober enough to appreciate the full effect of his smirking grin."

"I wouldn't worry if I were you. Jamie isn't the vindictive type. If anything, he'd be embarrassed for you. Which is why I'm not going to tell him you have the hots for him. It'll make *him* feel uncomfortable." Bram frowned at Stella, a serious, firm tone to his suddenly commanding voice. "You should probably keep it to yourself, as well. I'd hate to see him pushed into an uncomfortable situation with a new co-worker."

Stella blinked at the sudden change in Bram's demeanor and gave a jerky, startled nod of agreement. "Sure, fine, okay. I can do that. We never had this conversation. I'll just go to the powder room and try and get my foot out of my mouth now."

She huffed out a disgruntled snort and straightened her shoulders before moving off. "Save me from get-

ting run over while he makes a beeline to you, anyway.” Stella scurried off, throwing a small, wry smile at James as she passed him.

James glanced at Stella's retreating back as she melted into the nearest group of dinner guests then raised his eyebrows questioningly at Bram. “Making new friends?”

The slight shadow of jealousy in his lover's eyes surprised him. “Just barely exchanged names.” Bram took in the slight lingering flush on James' cheeks that Mrs. Dunn had put there and felt his cock stir impatiently.

James moved closer to Bram until their arms touched. “You mean she didn't get your phone number, address, and jock strap size? She's collected everyone else's in the company since she arrived.”

When Bram chuckled and shook his head, James dropped his voice to a low, sultry but nervous drawl and added, “Good. I wouldn't want to have to wrestle it from her in a room full of witnesses.” He boldly ran one hand up Bram's lower arm in a light caress, but glanced hesitantly around at the people closest to them as he did it.

Bram smiled tolerantly at James' small attempt to be more open around his friends and co-workers. He snagged the other man's hand before James could pull it free and held on to it. “It's interesting how many of your co-workers have the hots for you. I may have to start objecting to those late night and weekend hours you put in at the office.”

Raising James' hand to his lips, Bram softly kissed James' knuckles and then lowered their hands, still keeping a tight hold.

James blushed and squirmed, glancing self-consciously around him again, but he remained in Bram's personal space, his intense blue eyes finally captured and locked in Bram's commanding gaze.

“Don't be crazy, Bram. If people are looking at anyone, it's you.” James shook his head, chewing nervously at his full lower lip, instantly drawing Bram's interested gaze to his mouth. “I've overheard at least two conversations where women were fantasizing about you to each other. And some bald-headed guy keeps following me. I think he wants me to introduce you to him.”

“There's only one person here I have the desire to get up close and personal with, Jamie.” Bram tightened his hold on James' fingers. “Guess who that is.”

James' expression clouded and his gaze flitted uncertainly around the room. “Seeing the number of people here trying to catch your eye, it could be hard to decide.”

Bram whispered a soft, insistent, “Hey,” and drew James' eyes back up to his own. He brushed their joined hands over his groin, letting James feel his stirring cock as it jumped and hardened at the touch. “There isn't any question in my mind who I want. There shouldn't be any question in yours, Jamie. Ever.” Bram's let himself leer as the pink spots on his lover's cheeks deepened.

Nervously clearing his throat, James shuffled his feet. One corner of his mouth tugged upward, but his voice still sounded unsure to Bram. “Stella seemed to question it.”

A young woman chose that moment to move past them on her way to the other side of the room. Her hand touched Bram's brawny upper arm and stroked over the fabric-clad muscles for several seconds before she moved on, an inviting gleam in her eyes. Bram smiled cordially at her, but he remained uninter-

ested.

James sighed and mumbled, “Lots of people seem to question it.”

“As long as you don't, other people don't matter, Jamie.” Bram shrugged off the unwanted attention. “Stella is well on her way to being drunk, but she still understood not to get between us. That's why she left. She was afraid you'd do her bodily harm for being next to me.”

“Now you're just making things up.” The grin trying to escape finally broke free. James quietly laughed, leaning into Bram. Actions shielded by their bodies, James pressed his fingertips over the bulge in Bram's trousers. Voice low and heated, James murmured, “But I can tell this is real.” After a brief, tentative touch, James tried to wiggle his hand free from Bram's grasp.

“Damn right it is, lover. And all for you.” Bram winked at James and tugged him a little closer. “Think this place has an alley out back?” Bram released James' squirming hand, but thwarted his anxious lover's effort to break free by grabbing Jamie's other hand instead.

“I don't think there is alley in this entire neighborhood. You'll have to save this,” James' voice quivered slightly as he brushed the back of his hand against Bram's zipper, “for later.”

Cheeks a bright shade of pink, James sighed, dipping his head to one side in a gesture Bram recognized as a subconscious effort to shrug off emotional discomfort.

Bram and James had been lovers for only a few weeks, but Bram knew his shy partner's self-conscious mannerisms very well. They were already deep into a committed, monogamous relationship.

Although they were both openly gay, James preferred to live life out of the public eye, where the bolder, more confident Bram took no pains to hide his feelings or his sexual orientation. After a chance meeting in a bar and a seriously hot, rough sex scene in the alley behind it the two men dove head and heart first down the rocky road to making a partnership that would last a lifetime.

They both had flaws and issues to work on, one being James' skittish discomfort in doing anything in public that brought attention to the fact that he was gay. Bram was working on changing that.

While not one for blatant displays, Bram still wanted to be able to hold Jamie's hand, sling an arm around his shoulders or hug him in public, just like other couples. Bram was a very affectionate man and James responded hungrily to almost any form of loving attention Bram gave him. Bram knew his partner craved it as much as he did, so he took advantage of any situation where he felt he could safely work a little public hand holding into their day.

Catching sight of a blatant display of public affection going on across the room, Bram wrapped his arms around his lover and turned James to face his boss, Philip Dunn, who was presently kissing his wife, the lovely older woman in the wheelchair James had been talking with moments ago. It was a chaste kiss, but it lingered. Smiles graced their lips and a youthful light shone in their eyes.

When Dunn pulled back from his wife, Bram turned James back around to face him and murmured, “If they can do it here, so can we,” just before he planted a soft, sultry kiss on James' startled, open mouth. Bram's touch was light, but his tongue moved against James' full lips, tasting it, before pulling away with a slight, toothless nip to James' lower lip.

Bram gazed down at James' still closed eyes. A primal, hungry urge grabbed him and he had to fight off

the urge to drag his responsive, young lover away to the nearest empty room. James' eyes flickered open and Bram smiled, slowly drawing back from where he hovered over James' panting mouth. He was pleased when James seemed to forget about everyone else in the room and stay focused completely on him.

A man cleared his throat behind James, breaking the romantic moment. James gasped, blinked furiously, and darted a quick look around them, but he didn't step back the way Bram was expecting him to. Bram's smile grew bigger and James matched it with a shyer version, nervously biting at his lower lip.

“You okay?” Bram slowly unwrapped his arms from around James' shoulders, sliding them down James' lean upper arms to rest at his elbows. His hands held on firmly, fingertips caressing the tense flesh under the expensive dinner jacket.

Releasing his abused lip, James dipped his head again, but smiled. “Yeah, I'm okay.”

With a nervous glance to the floor, James suddenly popped up on his tiptoes and placed a quick kiss on Bram's surprised mouth then darted another fugitive glance around at the surrounding guests.

Bram watched as Mrs. Dunn caught James' wandering glance, then smiled and nodded at them.

Seemingly unprepared for her accepting reaction, James gave her a hesitant, embarrassed look then turned to Bram. He swallowed hard, locked gazes with Bram, and just stood there, staring into Bram's eyes.

Bram made sure that the look on his face and in his eyes told James he was the only one in the room Bram had eyes for, no matter how many others might be looking at him. He let all of the love, deep affection and burning desire he felt for James express itself, holding back nothing. He felt the rush of desire for the handsome man in his arms flood his heart and travel south to his already interested cock. Bram loved the rush being with James gave him. No one had ever affected him as easily and as deeply as this small, shy architect did. Gradually, he felt James relax under his gentle hold.

A blinding smile transformed James' solemn face, as he slowly nodded and said, “I'm more than all right, Caveman. I'm yours.”

Pleased, Bram flexed his huge hands to momentarily tighten his hold on James' arms, winked at James and murmured, “Damn straight, Tiger. And I plan on showing you just how true that is the first chance I get to carry you off, too.”

James snorted, an amused, guttural noise, and pushed away from Bram's questing hands as they lightly traveled down the front of his body. James smiled, but murmured, “You're just going to have to wait. No caveman impersonations in public, please.”

Bram slid his hand down James' arms and captured his lover's wrists before James could break away. He nuzzled the side of James' face briefly, raking his lips over the man's sensitive ear, and whispered, “Then how about we find ourselves a little privacy?”

“What? We can't! Bram!”

Pulling a hesitant James along behind him, Bram guided the protesting man through the nearby kitchen doorway, past the curious but formal catering staff, and into a side pantry. Bram closed the door, swung James around, and pinned him to it, lips instantly sealed to James'.

Fingers curled into James' hair on both sides of his head, Bram swallowed down the other man's fading protests. He devoured his lover's heated mouth, working his tongue over every inch of James' teeth and warm, curved palette. He battled with James' tongue for a moment before coaxing it into his own mouth. He nibbled and sucked on the sensitive muscle until James' small, slender body squirmed helplessly against him, head held immobile in Bram's effortless grip.

Sliding one thigh between James' legs, Bram increased the intensity of their kiss until James was breathless and moaning.

Bram delighted in the feel of James' hands. First they pushed at his thick upper arms, then kneaded his muscles in what he knew was desire, until they finally twisted into the fabric of his coat sleeves with a desperate sense of urgency.

Bram waited until James began to rub against his restraining thigh before he ended his ravenous assault. He could feel the fleshy rod under James' trousers harden and shift. The twitching of his lover's cock was hot and unmistakable, held tightly confined against Bram's massive body by his weight and dominating strength.

Barely breaking away, Bram kept his hold on James' head and leaned their foreheads together, his lips brushing over his partner's as he spoke.

“Did that help you remember who you came with?” Bram kissed a trail of soft caresses down James' cheek to his exposed neck and back up to his mouth again. Instead of kissing James, Bram nipped at James' swollen lips and ran the tip of his tongue between James' lower lip and teeth, teasing the sensitive, slick membranes.

“I know who I came with, and who I belong with. I'm just a little nervous about showing it here.” James lowered his voice and his gaze. “You know that.” He squirmed against Bram's firm hold. Indignant, James hissed, “And it makes me even more nervous to have my boyfriend drag me off to some *broom closet* to make out in *my boss'* house.” He punched Bram hard on one beefy shoulder. “People will talk!”

Bram laughed and enjoyed James' increased squirming. “People are already talking. They're saying how attractive you are, how sexy you look, how desirable your ass is. Stella Harper couldn't stop talking about you.” He nuzzled James' ear and blew a stream of hot breath down his lover's neck, delighting in the gasp it produced. “First time I've been turned on by talking to a woman.” He rubbed his jaw over James' chin and up James' cheek, enjoying the slight, abrasive slide of their budding five o'clock shadows. “Made me all possessive and horny just listening to how much she wanted you.”

“That's nuts. I don't think about other people seeing me that way, you know that.” James moaned and licked at the cleft in Bram's chin as it passed by his mouth.

With a small understanding laugh, Bram kissed the tip of James' nose. “Yes, I do.” He ran his hands over his lover's lithe form, lingering over the firm globes of James' pert, rounded ass. “And I've vowed to help you overcome this horrible defect in your otherwise sterling,” he tipped James' face up by using the pressure of just his forehead to look directly into the other man's eyes, “and very arousing, character.”

Swooping down, Bram captured James' mouth in a searing, no holds barred kiss, taking away his partner's breath and a little of James' inhibitions with it. When he finally released his lover, James was panting, flushed and mussed, clothes slightly askew and lips red and delightfully swollen.

Bram ran his thumb over the plump flesh and then slipped it into James' parted mouth where it was im-

mediately sucked in and caressed with a hot, eager tongue. Bram, growled under his breath and let his gaze turn sultry and heated, locking it on James' own deep blue, needy stare. A timid knock on the pantry door interrupted, and both men reined in their rising desires.

Releasing James, Bram opened the door wide enough to shove one broad shoulder in the space and grinned rakishly at the sweet, young maid blushing outside the door. "We'll be through in a minute. Promise. Then the room's all yours, darling."

The young woman blushed and giggled nervously at the quick wink and wiggled eyebrows he gave her. Bram shut the door and turned to see James straightening his clothing, one hand absently rubbing over his inflamed lips.

Grabbing James' hand, Bram kissed his lover lightly, opening the door with his other hand. "Let's go get this dinner over with. I want to take you home and spend the rest of the night showing you just how aroused your character has made me." He wiggled his eyebrows again, earning a smile from his lover, then he pulled James out of the pantry and into the brightly lit kitchen. Ignoring the stares and knowing smiles from the staff, Bram led the way out into the main living area to rejoin the party.

James stepped back into the room, Bram at his side just as his boss raised his hands to attract his guests' attention. Dunn raised his voice over the murmured conversations. "I think it's time we moved this little party into the dining room. I'm hungry."

Ignoring the covert, curious glances from the people around them, Bram answered the few disapproving stares he meet with a blinding smile, slung one long, powerful arm across James' shoulders, and steered them both toward the dining area. When a hesitant hand settled on his low back, he rewarded James with a sly wink and a squeeze of the arm under a possessive hand.

Chapter Two

The dining room was a huge rectangle. In the center was a long table that easily accommodated the thirty dinner guests. James wandered down the sleek row of mahogany chairs until a nameplate signaled his seat. Bram was to his right, only four place settings from their hosts at the head of the table. Mrs. Dunn and her wheelchair occupied the empty space to her husband's right, the table being large enough for them to sit side-by-side at one end.

Feeling a little overwhelmed at the prospect of having to carry on a dinner conversation for an entire evening with his boss, James sat down, subtly moving his chair closer to Bram's.

Stella Harper shambled by, drink in her hand and wry twist to her red painted lips. She leaned in close as she passed, muttering in a biting stage whisper, "You two certainly play hell with the boy-girl-boy-girl seating arrangements, don't you?"

James blushed and blinked at her, unprepared for the forward comment. Not one to be wounded by a snide remark without returning fire, Bram just tossed his arm possessively around the back of James' chair and murmured, "Makes it less obvious there are some women here who had to come alone. Balances the numbers."

James' blush deepened, but he couldn't hide his grin when his lover gave Stella a saucy wink and a most charming smile. He heard a choked noise from behind him, but Stella had already moved off to find her seat at the other end of the table by the time he turned in his chair. James arched his eyebrows in admonishment, but Bram only gave him a brilliant, non-repentant grin.

James glanced around, eyes darting over the dinner guests taking their seats near them. When it was obvious no one else had heard or cared, he relaxed back in his seat. "I never was quick enough with the snappy comebacks." His neck settled into Bram's warm fingers still resting on his chair back and he allowed himself a covert moment of enjoyment at his lover's playful touch.

"One of the many reasons you keep me around. My ability to ward off unfriendly hordes of enemies and smite them down in a single blow." Bram leaned closer, pulling James to him. James shivered and huffed out a little gasp when Bram's moist lips brushed over the sensitive shell of his ear to whisper, "And when we get home, I'll show just what a single *blow* can do."

"God, Bram, not now, please." James quietly hissed, but his body pushed against the warm, soothing fingers at his neck all the same. "I can't go through an entire meal with a hard-on and my boss five feet away."

"Uh!" James hissed and jerked up straight when a groping hand materialized under the table in his lap. Fighting to keep the shocked arousal off his face, James felt the faint glow of embarrassment tinge his cheeks.

His one hand darted down to grab Bram's as it fondled and stroked his hardening shaft. Instead of shoving it off as he had intended to do, James found himself guiding the massive paw down to massage his balls and press up against the swollen length of cock. His shaft strained against the soft silk of his shorts and the cold metal of his trousers' zipper raked along the covered flesh with each slide of Bram's firm grip.

The stimulation disappeared for a moment as Bram shifted around in his seat, then it was back. This time Bram was using the arm that had been behind James' head. From any other diner's point of view, the two men were simply sitting side-by-side with one hand under the table, probably resting in their lap. Luckily for James, they were resting in his willing and responsive lap.

Dinner conversations began to get into full swing around him. James was having trouble concentrating on the various threads, Bram's handiwork at his groin having slowed to a leisurely pace that heightened his desire and frustrated his now leaking cock. The maddening caress didn't stop until Dunn cleared his voice and welcomed everyone, saying grace and getting the meal under way with a few short sentences.

With a final tug and squeeze, Bram's hand inched off his lap. James gave a sigh of frustrated relief, covering his slight groan with a nod and mumbled thank you to the serving staff member who placed a bowl of fragrant soup in front of him. With effort, he turned his attention to his hosts.

Philip and Lenore Dunn proved to be a very interesting and entertaining couple. Though in her seventies, and disabled by crippling arthritis, Lenore Dunn was a sharp, vibrant woman who James instantly liked. Still retaining a fair measure of her beauty and grace, her outstanding wit and keen mind were evident in her playful manner and comments to her guests. Between the two of them, the dinner passed quickly and before he knew it James was sipping coffee and swallowing down the last of his dessert.

Social chatting satisfied, the conversation turned to a topic James found more comfortable – work.

Philip Dunn leaned forward and addressed Bram.

“Mr. Lord, I understand you have a house in the East District. That's a beautiful old section of the city. I've always loved the architectural details from that era of construction. So much craftsmanship in each unique structure. Some of those buildings are amazing examples of creativity for their time.”

Bram smiled graciously at Dunn and nodded. “Bram, please, Mr. Dunn. My father always spoke very highly of you, your stunning wife,” he gave Lenore a dazzling smile, which she returned, “and your firm. He would never forgive me if I didn't insist you call me by my given name.”

Giving Bram and then James an appraising look, Dunn set down his coffee cup. “Your father was a marvelous man and a fine business associate. I was always proud to do business with Eclipse Construction when your father ran it and I am with you at the helm, as well. You've done great things with it, Bram. Your father would be proud of your accomplishments.” His kind gaze moved meaningfully to James and back. “Sound decisions on all fronts, son; your parents would approve. And call me Philip, please.”

Lenore leaned forward. Her voice shook with the effects of age, but it was crisp, her eyes clear and bright. “I won't be the only one here made to feel old. You may call me Lenore, young man.”

She smiled and her still smooth, flawless face transformed her into a classic beauty. “Your mother was a beautiful woman, Bram. She had marvelous organizational skills, too. I remember being jealous of her ability to keep both your father and you out of trouble. She was a strong woman.” Her thin, tastefully jeweled hand trembled slightly as she sipped from her glass. “We had many a garden luncheon together. I remember she loved yellow roses. I still grow her favorites out in the garden. I liked her very much.”

“Thank you, Lenore. I've got pictures in some old albums of the two of you together. I made fun of the frilly hats and white gloves women wore back then.” Bram gave her his most charming and flirtatious smile. “You both look stunning to me now. It's amazing what a few years of maturity can do for a man's eye.”

“I'd love to see those pictures. They were very pleasant times.” Lenore chuckled, a light laugh full of confidence and joy. “You're just like your father, Bram. He could charm the blush right off the roses when he put his mind to it. He was a handsome man, as well.” Looking thoughtful, she quietly added, “I've missed them. Outside of Isabel, you're alone now.”

“I miss them all very much.” Bram nodded and casually, but pointedly, slipped his hand over James' lax hand resting on the table. “But I don't have time to be lonely. I bought a fabulous old home right in the heart of the historic part of town. It had been extensively renovated, but not to restoration specs, before I got my hands on it. I've tried to limit the modernization of it to a degree, but comfort is important to a man my size. My home, and my family,” Bram said, glancing tenderly at James and squeezing his hand, “are very important to me.”

James felt his chest tighten and his breath catch in his throat at the depth of love evident in Bram's eyes. He forgot all about the other guests at the table, unabashedly returning his lover's open stare.

Dunn tactfully cleared his throat, breaking the spell.

Bram grinned and turned his attention back to Dunn. “Jamie is a big fan of the era, too. His area of expertise, I believe. He did a fabulous workup on the Becker restoration project your firm has. His plans are outstanding.”

James squirmed in his seat, suddenly nervous. One quick look at Bram's reassuring face eased his pounding pulse and made his still half-hard cock stir. Bram gave him a wink and smile before turning back to Dunn.

“Shame no one's seen them besides me, but I can appreciate them from a builder's point of view, the research and attention to original detail is superb.” Bram took a sip from a snifter of brandy on the table, pausing a moment then asked, “Do you know he even found out there is a building missing from the present site that was there in the original blueprints? After seeing Jamie's plans I took a look at the proposed blueprints filed with the historical society yesterday and there wasn't any sign of it. I doubt many people know about it.”

“Is this true, James? Is there a building missing from our plans?” Dunn's concern seemed genuine, with no trace of blame in his voice.

“I don't know, Mr. Dunn. I haven't actually seen the firm's version.” James glanced hesitantly from Dunn to Bram and then back to Dunn. “I did all the research for it on my own time, over the last six months, and worked on the plans at home.”

Dunn turned to Art Wheeler, the architect who had been given the project. “Do you know about this, Art?”

Wheeler had come alone, stating his wife Eve was out of town visiting family. A distracted, closed expression marred his normally friendly face, Wheeler sat several chairs down on Dunn's left, close enough to make conversation acceptable. He started at Dunn's question. “What? Ah, excuse me?”

Dunn smiled tolerantly at Wheeler. “The plans for the Becker Estate. Is there an original building missing from our plans?”

“What kind of building?” Panic skittered across Wheeler's drawn face.

Pausing a moment to study Wheeler, Dunn frowned slightly and turned to the one person in the room who would know. “James?”

Shifting uneasily in his seat, James rubbed a finger on the edge of his dinner plate. He cleared his throat, aware that the entire table was now focused on their conversation. “The original architect's personal journals on record show it was an intricate gazebo with hand-carved pillars, elaborate lattice weaves, and birds carved into the facade. It was dismantled and sold to an English merchant two years after it was erected. Apparently, Becker's wife didn't like the birds.”

Wheeler gave James a blank stare. James colored a bit, embarrassed Dunn had put the man on the spot. “I'm sure you'd have run across a reference to it before long. It took me a while to find it, too, Art.”

Frowning, his voice low, almost monotone, Wheeler sighed heavily, slowly placing his napkin on the table. “I...I don't think so, James. I completed my research on the estate already and never found it.” He looked up from his half-eaten meal, his tone sincere. “Thanks for bringing it to my attention, though.”

Relieved the awkward moment had passed, James nodded. “No problem. Anything I can do to help, Art, just let me know.”

Raising his brandy glass, Dunn tipped the rim towards James and winked. “Well done, James. Why don't you bring those Becker plans to work Monday morning and we'll see if there are any other areas that might need a little more attention? Can't be too thorough, can we gentlemen?”

It was spoken as a question, but both men recognized it as an order. Wheeler just nodded, continuing to stare at his plate. James smiled, darting one last hesitant look between Dunn and Wheeler before murmuring, “I'd be happy to help in any way, Mr. Dunn.”

“Outstanding, then.” Dunn sipped from his glass and sat back, obviously satisfied with the conversation.

“I'm obviously prejudiced, but I agree,” Bram gave both Lenore and Dunn a secretive smile, “James is outstanding.” He subtly reached under the table and squeezed James' knee.

Bram's eyes were on the Dunns, but James knew Bram's thoughts were still with him. At the same time, James watched as Lenore Dunn touched her husband's hand and give him a warm smile. Suddenly the touch on his knee was more than a covert, sensual caress, it was a sign of support and acceptance from his own loving partner. He and Bram really weren't much different than Dunn and his aging wife. They were both couples in love living outside the traditional box.

Chapter Three

They pulled up outside of the old, rambling house. Bram parked in the driveway, placing his truck by the back door, bracketed on one side by a nine-foot hedge and on the other by the house. A single light from the kitchen window shone brightly into the truck. Its warm, golden glow mirrored the streaks of pale moonlight peeking out behind a thin layer of clouds.

Bram pulled James close to his side. He slid his left arm across James' lap and nestled his hand between James' legs. As his fingers stroked over the fabric of one inner thigh, he gave his lover a smoldering glance.

"I had a nice time tonight, Jamie. Thank you for inviting me." Bram squeezed the warm flesh under his hand, adding pressure to the continuous caress. "You've seen me with my crew; it was interesting to see you with your coworkers." He moved his hand a little higher to caress the bulge at James' crotch. "Do you have any clue just how hot you are?"

"To you, maybe." Stuttering a soft, disbelieving snort, James pushed his hips up to meet Bram's hand. He gasped as Bram made the touch firmer and more insistent. "God, Caveman." He clenched his eyes closed, and then glanced longingly at the back door. "Can't we get into the house first?"

"There's no maybe about it, baby." In one swift move, Bram pulled James down onto the seat and pressed him onto the truck's upholstery. Bram grinned down at his trapped lover, settling his upper body over James, pinning the man down chest-to-chest. A startled huff of air from James' parted mouth blew over his face.

"And, no, I can't wait." Muttering a decisive, "Gotta have you," Bram dove in to capture the breath, sealing his lips to James' open mouth, stealing James' air and a muffled "okay". He felt James melt under him, relaxing into the sudden, demanding embrace. Deepening the kiss, Bram explored the supple mouth under his, licking and stroking his tongue over the sensitive, hard palette and mapping the outline of James' teeth.

The faint whiskey taste and musky, masculine scent of his lover heightened his arousal. Bram slid one hand into James' curls and gently forced that head back. He pressed his lips more tightly to James', opening his lover's jaw wider, allowing greater access to the hidden treasures of James' sweet mouth. He caressed the tongue sliding under his, each thrust demanding and bold, ravenous in its quest for more contact.

Bram felt as if he could devour James with just this kiss. Need, desire, and a powerful force he didn't have a name for surged through him and added an element of primal urgency to this courtship ritual. Bram needed to reclaim James, mark him, take him, show the world that James had chosen him and him alone for his lover.

With their mouths still sealed together, Bram expertly tugged and pulled at their dinner clothing until he opened their shirts and removed the ties from around both of their necks. Releasing James, leaving him

red-lipped and panting, Bram made a trail of kisses and sharp nips across James' jaw and down his neck and shoulder while pulling James' unresisting arms up over his head and holding them there.

Latching onto the soft flesh of the curve of James' neck, Bram sucked and bit down, knowing he was leaving a mark, his mark, on his now bucking and writhing lover. James' squirming pushed his groin against Bram's abdomen. The heat of his lover's full, hard shaft fanned the flames of Bram's own raging arousal even higher. Wrapping the ties around James' wrists, Bram blindly lashed them to the passenger door handle. James struggled a little, his breathing turning shallow and rapid, but Bram could feel his cock grow harder. A tiny whimper vibrated against Bram's lips as they moved to lick and suck at James' throat. Bram raked his teeth lightly over the man's voice box and James' hips bucked and that body shook.

“That's it, baby, shake for me. Yeah, show me what I do to you.” Bram nuzzled the side of James' head, inhaling the scent of sweat and arousal, burying his nose in the soft, clean curls. He bit the tiny lobe of James' ear and murmured deep and low into it. “Going to make you come right here and now, baby, going to claim what's mine.”

Snaking his hand between their bodies, Bram unzipped his own pants, pulling out his cock. Rubbing the leaking tip with his thumb, he encouraged more fluid to drip from the sensitive slit while his other hand worked open James' trousers.

In one swift, graceful movement full of power and the fearsome strength his huge, well-muscled body was capable of, Bram surged up onto his knees in the seat, taking James' lower half with him. He curled James up, his lover's legs over his shoulders. His straining arms were planted firmly, one on the back of the seat and one the dashboard of the roomy king cab. Once he was steady, he grabbed the waistband of James' trousers and yanked them down James' hips, leaving them bunched at James' knees, trapping James' legs against his chest.

Leaning down, Bram crushed James to the seat, curling his knees to his chest and exposing his flexing ass to the cool night air. James grunted and squirmed, tugging at the ties as he made a move to lower his restrained arms.

Bram watched the futile efforts, a wicked grin twitching at his lips. He hovered over James for a moment, drinking in the sight of his lover, bound and trembling, a wild, restless look of need in James' wide, blue eyes. Every gasped puff of warm, whiskey-tainted breath James huffed in his face was like an invitation to devour the man and Bram took it.

Swooping down, he claimed James' mouth again, ravaging it, savoring the flavor and the feel of the hot, soft tissue and the rough, slick tongue struggling against his domineering kiss. His hands stroked and fondled over James' chest, teasing the nipples until their peaks were swollen and taut. When James began to moan and tug more insistently at the door handle, Bram only deepened the kiss, stealing away breath and subduing any resistance to him.

When James whimpered, shudders racing through his bent body, Bram slowly ended the kiss and pulled back, lips brushing over James', whispering low and sultry, “Love it when you tremble, baby, love it when you need me.”

Bram balanced upright on his knees and grabbed James' thighs. He pushed them forward and exposed James' firm, curved ass high in the air. James grunted and moaned, but Bram took his time, watching the small ring of muscle spasm and flutter as he stretched James' cheeks apart with his fingers.

“God, I love how your body begs.” Bram locked gazes with James, drinking in the sight of the other man,

rumped, panting, bound and bare, with a needy, fuck-me-now look in his eyes. Bram licked his lips and demanded, "Tell me what you want, Jamie, tell me what to do."

James whimpered again and squirmed, shoving his ass higher in the air. The look on his face was almost desperate, but no words came out of his parted, inviting lips.

"Still having trouble saying it, baby?" Bram kneaded and stroked the flesh under his hands, working his fingers tantalizingly close to the sensitive opening to James' body. "Come on, you can say it. Tell me what you want. Tell me what you need."

Clenching his eyes, James threw his head back, turning his face into the fabric on his stretched and bound arms. His throat bared and trembling, his Adam's apple bobbed wildly with each convulsive swallow. His words only came out as low groans of need. Finally, James grimaced and shook his head.

Stretching the flesh around James' opening wider, Bram rubbed his rough hands over the tender skin, lust-filled gaze locked on James' thrashing body, his eyes darting between his lover's contorted face and the fluttering, dusky ring inches from his lips.

He loved it when James' looked like this, vulnerable and sexy, trembling with need and desire, tongue-tied with a passion James couldn't express, wanton and wild under his hands, lithe, writhing body begging to be taken and claimed, explored and conquered. James was everything Bram wanted and needed – an equal mate in life and a responsive, ravenous lover behind closed doors.

Another desperate moan from James caused Bram's arousal to soar. Leaking and hard, he rubbed his shaft over the enticing curve of James' bent back, marking the smooth flesh with his scent. He slid the slippery head of his cock along the warm hollow of James' spine, groaning with pleasure at the teasing friction.

Hands spreading his lover wide open to his hungry gaze, Bram stared at James from between his trapped, bent legs, memorizing every detail of the man's appearance. He was entranced by the bunched, rumped crispness of James' white dress shirt, unbuttoned and gaping, the moonlight fading it to a luminous blue. The light heightened the deep sapphire shade of James' eyes and accentuated his clean-shaven, pale skin. Locks of tangled curls lay plastered to James' forehead, their disheveled strands dark with sweat. Eyes half-lidded with a wanton stare, James' mouth parted, his lips moving in a wordless plea.

The musky smell of James' pre-come teased at Bram's senses, mixing with the earthy scent of the puckered flesh under his hands, spurring on his desire. Bram dove forward, dragging the flat of his broad, wet tongue over the exposed, spread opening to James' body, licking over the tight hole and up the thin strip of sensitive flesh behind James' sac. James bucked and twisted in his grip, guttural, inarticulate noises escaping his throat.

"Come on, baby." Bram licked James' ass again, his movements slow and firm. "Tell me what you want. Let me give you what you need." He stabbed the tip of his tongue at the ring of muscle, flicking a few moist laps over its edges, then retreated. "Just tell me, baby, and I'll give you anything you want, everything you need."

"Christ!" James groaned and shuddered under Bram's hands. "Bram!" He arched his back and pushed his spread cheeks at his lover's face, wordlessly begging for more.

Bram grinned and ran his tongue lightly over James' hole, leaving a slick, cool patch behind. He blew a stream of warm air over the wet spot, delighting in the goose flesh that turned the smooth skin under his palms to pebbled, squirming mounds of seductive, delicious ass. He loved the taste of James, whether it

was the sweat from the curve of that slender neck or the pungent flavor of his lower regions; Bram savored every inch of the man he had fallen in love with. Wanting more, he sealed his mouth to the fluttering hole and sucked on the edges of its rim, teasing the tight muscle with little darting jabs of his pointed tongue and a rhythmic suction designed to drive his lover crazy with need.

“Bram...ugh...fuck!” James ground his ass against Bram's face, shudders wracking his bent and exposed body.

Bram gave a deep moan and the vibrations produced fine shivers in his lover. Despite the cool night air that had begun to invade the warmth of the truck cab, Bram shrugged off his dinner coat, toed off his shoes, and sat back on his thickly muscled haunches, dragging James' hips with him as he moved, never once taking his mouth away from James' opening. Slowing the rhythm of his assault, Bram varied the strokes of his tongue until he was just barely caressing the now highly sensitive flesh under his lips.

James gasped and juttied up his hips, a desperate, needy groan rolling up out of his heaving chest. His loosely tied hands smacked uselessly at the passenger door a few times, then he wove his fingers into his own hair, tightly gripping the strands.

Bram pulled back and murmured against James' skin, so close the warmth of his own breath was deflected back at him as spoke. “Tell, me, baby. Just...tell me. I'll do anything for you, all you have to do is ask.”

He licked around the puckered opening, bathing the wrinkled circle of darker skin with long laps of his tongue, tempting and teasing his shy lover.

As much as Bram loved hearing James tell him what he needed, Bram enjoyed these moments, too. Bram found James' shy reluctance to verbalize his more wanton desires endearing and sweet. James at the most vulnerable, all rumped, restrained, and tongue-tied, turned Bram on more than he thought possible. He was still having difficulty believing James was his, truly his.

Nights like this one, ones that drew his attention to the fact that other people also found the young, good-looking architect attractive, desirable, and important, made Bram realize how much he cared about James and how lucky he was to have found his lover. It reminded him to make sure he kept his lover sated, with both physical attention and emotional satisfaction.

Bram knew for his own sense of security, he needed to re-stake his claim on his clueless lover, wiping out any chance someone else might have a shot at invading his territory. Renewing his attack on James' body, Bram nipped and bit at the fullness of James' ass, kneading his strong, square hands into the lithe flesh of James' hips and thighs. “Talk to me, Jamie.”

Looking down at his lover between his bent, trouser shrouded legs, Bram's breathing increased and his arousal jumped as James panted and licked those swollen lips. Moonlight caught the cut of James' high cheekbones and slender jaw, its fine beams of pale light casting a surreal, unearthly glow to his dark curls and pale complexion. Mouth parted, panting, chest swaying in a rapid, shallow rhythm, eyes half-lidded, and blue gaze begging, James was the picture of wanton innocence.

Glancing down the curled, disheveled body, Bram took in the sight of James' proud, straining cock rubbing across his taut, firm belly, leaking droplets of thick cream that dribbled into the creases of his scrunched abdomen. Bram had to fight the primal, overwhelming urge to plunge into his lover that instant and take James in one brutal, possessive stroke. He lightly rubbed his budding five o'clock shadow over the strip of sensitive flesh connecting James' balls to his asshole and then bit the inside of James' thigh. His lover choked on a strangled scream, legs jerking closed then opening even wider than before.

“Jesus, God, damnit, fuck me!” James writhed under Bram and curled impossibly tighter, offering his ass, pleading for more. “Fuck me now, Caveman, now!” Eyes tightly closed, James tossed his head from side to side, panting, obviously wanting to say more, but unable to.

Gaining a firmer grip on James' hips, Bram positioned James' ass on his thighs and fumbled in his gaping pants for a small packet of lube he had pocketed while dressing. Tearing it open with his teeth, he pressed the gel out onto his fingers one handed and tossed the spent packet onto the dashboard. One quick swipe of his slick palm over his own swollen cock and Bram pushed his rod against James' eager opening, quickly burrowing into his lover in one smooth, slippery surge of lust-hardened flesh.

Throwing his head back, Bram groaned, instinctively pulling James' hips closer to him. “Oh, Jesus, you feel so good...so tight...so fucking hot.” He snapped his hips and began a rapid pounding of short, powerful thrusts, occasionally skating the tip of his cock over the swollen gland inside his lover. Every direct hit on James' prostate pulled a gasp from the man.

James' white-knuckled fist slammed against the passenger door. His moans became breathless grunts, each one deeper and more inarticulate as Bram increased the force of the strokes.

Bracing his sock-clad feet on the driver's door, his head bowed over James and his wide shoulders brushing the cab roof, Bram hammered into James. The look of wild pleasure on his partner's face was accentuated by the night. The pale moonlight on his skin, the sound of a hundred crickets, and the whisper of the wind as it rustled the nearby leaves made the moment seem feral.

James moaned, “Love you, love this,” in a low, lust-filled voice and his deep, blue eyes opened wider to meet Bram's matching gaze. Bram saw the love and wild desire in his mate. His breath caught in his chest as a burst of primal possessiveness washed through him and he suddenly felt like the caveman James was always accusing him of acting like.

Bram pulled James' bunched trousers off his legs and fell down over James. Burying his cock as deeply as he could, Bram pinned James to the seat, lips instantly seeking out and devouring his lover's open, panting mouth. He could see the sweat drip from James' face and trickle down one cheek and onto his own hands as he wound them into his lover's damp curls.

His tongue darted over every inch of James' succulent mouth, bathing and tasting the smooth, slippery surfaces and hard-ridged teeth. He stole James' breath and then gave it back as his hips slapped against James' spread ass and his cock explored the smooth, slippery surface of James' deepest recesses. Bram felt like his entire body was on fire.

The uninhibited sounds James made while making love were like gasoline on a fire to Bram's passions. The tiny grunts and throaty moans sent jolts of desire through his massive body and the undeniable urges to take, claim, and protect James all combined into one powerful mandate. He could never get enough of this man, wanted to spend a lifetime trying, and knew he would never succeed.

As his own climax approached, Bram pulled one hand from James' hair and shoved it between them, sliding it down until he captured his partner's swollen shaft. It only took one long pull before James shot over his hand, a garbled scream swallowed down by Bram's still clinging lips.

As he spilled into James, Bram froze in place, air trapped in his paralyzed lungs as the tight, fluttering heat of James' spasming body made him dizzy and breathless. The last pulses of his come spurting into James' channel and the intensity of the powerful orgasm slowly faded.

Bram released James' mouth, placing tiny, soft kisses on the edges of the puffy, wet lips. His eyes searched James' moonbeam-shrouded expression, pleased by the look of sated exhaustion and boneless bliss that lay on his lover's face. Heaving his weight off James, Bram slowly pulled out of James' body, helping to uncurl James' pliant form.

“Sit up, Jamie, and I'll help you find your pants.” Bram shifted, one hand exploring the floor of the cab under the steering wheel, trying to locate the lost items. He knew he had heard change and keys jingle out of pockets at some point in the lovemaking, but it hadn't been important then.

James' smile matched the sultry look in his eyes as he sighed, “Love to, but you forgot something.” A petulant but pointed tug on his restrained wrists drew Bram's gaze to the door handle.

An unrepentant smile lit up Bram's face. “But you look so good that way.” Bram leaned down to hover over James' pliant body, he held his weight off his smaller lover while gently taking James' mouth in a soft, soulful, thorough kiss that left them both breathless and on the verge of a new arousal.

While he worked over James' lips, he worked off the bonds around the door handle. Once James was free, he tenderly rubbed at the chaffed skin, his fingertips tracing the indented band where James had yanked against the ties. He rubbed over a small patch of raw skin on one and James gasped into the kiss, his mouth capturing the needy moan that followed it.

He ended the kiss and nuzzled the side of James' neck to whisper in his ear. “Still like a bit of rough in your loving, don't you, baby?” He teased the spot again and James' hips bucked involuntarily. “You look so nice and pretty when I have you tied down and spread. And you come so hard when I hold you down and shove my cock inside you. I like to remind you who you belong to, who owns your sweet ass.”

Bram nipped the side of James' neck then soothed it with a wet lap of his tongue. “Who loves every single, sweaty...” He licked again. “...shy, delicious inch...” And again. “...of you?” He licked across James' lips then dropped a quick, chaste, teasing kiss on them.

“Jesus, Bram!” James moaned and pushed at Bram's chest, struggling to sit up as Bram obligingly sat back on his haunches giving a cramped James more room to move. “Say one more word and we're never getting into the house.” His voice was low and choked, heavy with lust and reborn desire, his tone saying everything he couldn't put into words for his lover just yet.

James twisted his body, one hand groping blindly on the floor, the other stroking and pinching his stirring cock into temporary submission. Finding his pants, James surged up onto his knees and shoved himself chest-to-chest with his startled but grinning lover. He latched onto Bram's mouth and ravaged it, nearly choking Bram with his eager, questing tongue.

Excited by the unusually demanding move on his shy lover's part, Bram wrapped his arms around James' slender body and crushed the man to his chest. Taking control of the hungry kiss, he kneaded the bare ass under his palm, caressing the cleft between James' cheeks.

As James surrendered to his possessive embrace, Bram relaxed back on his hunches, readjusted his elbows to gain more maneuvering room, and the moment shattered as the blaring sound of the truck horn splintered the night air. Both men jumped and loosened their embrace. Bram smacked his head on the roof of the cab and his hip banged painfully into the unyielding steering wheel. James shifted back and one knee slid off the seat, forcing him to fumble for the dashboard to remain upright. Two doors down a dog began to bark, a high-pitched grating sound that made both men flinch. Several lights came on in the

house next door.

Glancing sheepishly at each other, they both burst out laughing. Bram released the door behind him and nearly fell out of the cab onto the brick-paved driveway. Still in his stocking feet, pants open, shirttails hanging free, he reached into the truck and forcefully yanked his breathless lover to the edge of the seat on the driver's side.

“I think that's our cue to take it indoors.” He looked down at James, a new sense of want boiling in his veins. The man sat with his legs dangling out the door, his still swollen cock poking darkly up from between his open shirttails, a just-fucked look on his handsome, little-boy face. James' hair was a halo of disheveled, dark curls and Bram longed to weave his fingers through them and bend James to his will. Bram felt his own shaft swell and his possessive urges bubbled to the surface again. He'd never get enough of this man, ever. “Let's move. The last thing we need is the neighborhood watch staring in the truck window while we're breaking in the upholstery.” A screen door slammed nearby and the dog's howls got louder.

“I'm only half dressed. Give me a minute.” James leaned back to grab his pants and found himself pulled and lifted into the air. “What the hell are you doing?”

Bram felt James' hands scabble at his back as he hefted the slight figure over one shoulder, careful to miss putting pressure on James' now full erection. Despite his lover's protests, the physical evidence of James' true reaction to Bram's caveman tactics was loud and clear. God, how he loved this man.

Playfully slapping one exposed asscheek, Bram grabbed the lost trousers, snagged a leather wallet off the floor by the pedals, and closed and locked the truck door. “Going in. Now.” He headed off toward the back door, James' half naked body securely swinging on one broad shoulder. Bram smiled wider and enjoyed the indignant wiggles under his protective hand.

“You asshole!” Sounding like he was stifling laughter, James choked out his objection. “Put me down, damnit!”

Just then a small, reedy, feminine voice from the other side of the hedges asked, “Mr. Lord? Are you boys all right over there?”

James sputtered and punched Bram hard in the back, but Bram merely pinched his ass, forcing him to strangle on an outraged yelp. Never slowing down, Bram continued to the house, yelling over one shoulder, “We're fine, Miss Emily. Sorry to have disturbed you. James was getting a little frisky in the truck.” A muffled complaint interrupted him briefly, but he quelled it with another pinch. “I'm taking him inside now. Don't worry. I know a way to keep him quiet.”

“Well, then, that's all right.” Her voice quivered, but Bram couldn't tell if it was from age or amusement. “A little friskiness is a good thing. Keeps you young and limber, I say. Good night, then.” There was a slight hesitation before she added, “Don't worry about keeping too quiet. I'll just turn up the TV set.”

Bram opened the back door. “Good night, Miss Emily. Enjoy your show.”

A faint, wistful, “You, too,” nearly made him drop James on the porch, but he managed to get through the door despite the death threats being muttered into his back.

Roughhousing

Chapter Four

Landing on his back on Bram's over-sized bed where the big man had heaved him, James just lay there, rumped and sprawled. All thoughts of retribution for being blamed for the commotion outside and man-handled into the house and upstairs dissolved away.

The deep green bed covers were already pulled back as if waiting to embrace him. The sheets were cool and silky against his heated skin. Plump, soft pillows rested at the top of the mattress, leaning enticingly against the sturdy, carved headboard. James ignored them, choosing to gaze at his lover through half-lidded eyes.

Most of his clothing had disappeared during the trip upstairs. James was only dressed in his dinner shirt, its crisp, white cotton lines now crushed and wrinkled. It gaped open to his waist, held together by two tiny buttons that had resisted Bram's earlier attempts to access every square inch of James' chest. Gaze darting to his groin, James could see his own erection standing proud, heavily engorged. From between the parted edges of his shirttails, the glistening crown curved upward facing him.

Average in size and girth, the surrounding starkness of the white shirt accentuated its flushed, rosy color and jutting stance, making it appear larger and surreal, as if it was an erotic still life. A drip of pre-come filled the slit in the dusky tip, breaking the illusion. James groaned softly at the sight and one hand reached down to touch the needy, beckoning flesh. When a sudden, deep growl of disapproval rumbled out of his lover, his hand instantly fell to his waist, fingers fidgeting restlessly with the last unyielding buttons of his shirt.

“No touching yet.”

Pushing away the slight sense of helpless awkwardness he felt at laying there like an obedient, debauched but willing plaything, James couldn't stop the shiver that slithered through his body at the commanding tone of Bram's voice. No matter how much he was in control of his life and emotions, the moment they closed the bedroom door, he instantly needed to give himself over to the massive, tender-rough man. Sometimes it scared him how much he trusted and wanted Bram.

James' anxious gaze flickered up and he was captured in his lover's waiting, pale blue, heated stare. Fascinated stare locked on the tall, powerful body, James watched Bram slowly remove his clothing one tailored, fashionable piece at a time. As mouth-watering and stunningly attractive as the brawny man had been fully dressed in dinner wear, the expensive suit had nothing on the amazing body it covered. James swallowed hard to ease the sudden, unexpected tightness in his throat. He let his eyes take in the impressive sight.

Slowly unbuttoning his shirt, Bram shrugged it off his shoulders, one sculptured deltoid at a time. He let it slide down his arms, its soft brightness framing his tanned, contoured body. Chest exposed, Bram's muscles rippled with each movement he made, showcasing the graceful power that hid under the massive bulk of hard flesh.

Feeling the heat of arousal flush through him, James licked his lips and remembered how it felt to drag his tongue over the twin dark nubs that formed Bram's nipples. He loved the way the big man clutched his head to them as he suckled the sensitive buds, moaning and encouraging him with a heavy, demanding grasp, square fingers woven tightly through James' hair. He imagined he could feel the heat of Bram's palm on his scalp and his cock jerked at the thought.

A small whimper slipped out of his parted mouth and his breathing increased to a shallow panting. Eyes still directed at his lover, James' shook as his fingers fumbled with the remaining buttons on his shirt until they popped through the tight holes. The yielding fabric fell to his sides, exposing his quivering abdomen. He ran his fingertips lightly through the dark trail of fine hairs on his stomach tracing them down to his straining cock. One commanding glare from Bram stopped him just short of his instinctive goal. James took a deep breath and relaxed, dropping his arms to his sides, forcing his fingers to caress the cool fibers of the sheets instead of the bulging veins of his beckoning shaft.

Bram nodded approvingly and dropped his discarded shirt to the floor. Toeing off his socks, he ran his thumbs leisurely around the inside of his open waistband, pushing his pants and shorts over the firm curve of his muscular ass. Once free, he shimmied his hips and the cloth fell to the carpet in a whisper-soft swish. Bram stepped out of them and then bent down and retrieved them, giving James an amazing view of his ass.

Ridged with pulsing veins, Bram's full cock and heavy scrotum swung between his thickly corded thighs, broad shoulders bulging with each sinewy ripple of firm muscle as he gathered up his clothes and then stood. Bram took James' breath away. One look at the hot expression in the big man's eyes made his mouth water and his chest ache with a need to have Bram nearer to him. James' hands twitched with the desire to touch the luscious mountain of heated, tanned flesh unabashedly displayed before him. When Bram slowly slid one hand over the planes of that hard-packed abdomen and down to stroke that bobbing erection, James' hips involuntarily bucked up, wordlessly enticing his lover to come to him. His insides felt like someone had poured molten lava into his bloodstream as waves of raging fire coursed through every cell of his being. Even his mind felt fevered and his vision blurred, overwhelmed with a consuming emotion he didn't dare try to name. He knew he loved Bram, but this, this was something more, something indefinable and new.

God, the things this man made him feel, made him want, without even touching him, were absolutely frightening. Here he lay, sprawled and vulnerable, wanting to give everything he had to someone who had been a complete stranger only a few weeks ago. This whole relationship was terrifying on levels James couldn't even think about yet.

Afraid he'd run from the room if he thought any more about loving this possessive, perfect-for-him man, James forced out the verbal challenge again, inviting his lover to ravage him and stop his mind from spinning.

"Come on, Caveman. Reclaim me, take me again, I know you want to." James swallowed hard and raised one leg, provocatively exposing his opening to his lover's hungry stare. His voice was rough and unsteady. "I want you, Bram." James licked his lips, sucking his lower lip into his mouth, shutting off his words before he said too much. He felt his jaw tremble and he bit down hard on his captured lip to still it, hoping Bram wouldn't notice the tremor.

"Hey." A long, warm mass of flesh and muscle slid close as Bram plastered himself to James' side. He rolled part of his weight onto James' chest, hooking a leg over both of James' to trap them in place. Bram faced James, hovering over him. Bram tapped a callused finger against the tortured lip, slowly coaxing

the bruised, plump skin from between James' teeth.

Whispering softly, Bram smiled. "I have plans for those lips. Ease up, Jamie." He rubbed his thumb over the swollen contours, concern shining in his eyes. "Ravaging your mouth is my job."

James' eyelids fell closed at the first touch of Bram's skilled lips. Bram filled his senses, and he sank into the sensations flooding him as his lover's solid, reassuring weight and questing tongue pushed away his nagging fears and anxiety.

Suddenly overwhelmed by the need to have Bram even closer, he wrapped his arms around the big man's neck, hands feverishly touching and grasping at whatever part of his lover's body he could blindly find. James' fingers dug into Bram's sides and shoulders, only to release them and skitter off to take hold somewhere else seconds later. His tongue danced wildly against Bram's, darting and jabbing, fueled by a panicked impulse to devour and possess and be devoured and possessed. His hips ground up against Bram's firm thigh and his cock eagerly slid over the other man's warm, supple skin.

James felt like he was about to burst into flames. With a sudden rush of panicked energy, he rolled up and over until he was lying on Bram's chest, pinning the big man to the bed with his full weight.

He had never wanted anyone the way he wanted Bram, never needed anyone this way. James had known that after the first early moments in their relationship when Bram had declared his love to James. They had known each other less than twenty-four hours and Bram knew what he wanted and what he felt and had been able to say it. James had known, too, but hadn't been as brave as Bram. Now he wanted to shout it to the world, but the words were stuck, choked back by the intense emotions flaring through his frantic body and mind. He bucked hard against Bram, increasing his assault on Bram's willing mouth. Gradually James became aware of his partner's persistent touch and he let the sensation of Bram's strong, demanding hands invade his frenzied thoughts.

James felt Bram gradually take control of the manic embrace, starting with the kiss. Bram coaxed James' darting tongue into his own mouth and held it there, slowly stroking it again and again until its frantic actions became a mirror of his own leisurely caress. Bram's rough, blunt hands massaged and kneaded James' tense shoulders and back, working their way down to the curve of his hips and beyond, but never doing more. Their heat seeped into his flesh and their powerful touch reassured and comforted him, easing his desperate movements.

It was almost painful as his fears slowly ebbed away, but James relaxed muscle by tense muscle, and the panic subsided to a dull, pulsing ache under his ribs.

Gently breaking away from the long kiss, Bram pushed the sweaty strands of curls from James' face and murmured, "That's it, baby, I'm right here, just take it slow. This time it's going to take awhile." He locked blue eye with James, and James could see the understanding there. Bram winked and added, "We've got lots of time, because I'm not going anywhere." He rained a spattering of soft, coaxing kisses on James' mouth. Tone turning dark and raw, he huskily added, "And neither are you."

Before James could reply, Bram pulled him down and claimed his mouth again. James' body answered for him. He melted into Bram's embrace, his breath stolen, and his pulse pounding in his veins instead of pounding through his head. He didn't realize they were rolling over again until the cool sheets hit his back and part of Bram's body settled comfortably over him.

Bram's lips released him from the deep, passionate kiss only to pepper his face and eyelids with more soft, tiny kisses, the sensation like warm raindrops on his skin. One of Bram's hands carded through

James' sweaty hair, the repetitive motion loving and calming. Bram worked one knee between James' legs and James willingly opened for Bram, eager to bring them into closer contact any way he could.

A rough textured palm petted down James' side, kneading and rubbing circles over his heated flesh, calming his mind and inflaming his desire.

James gripped Bram's broad shoulders, sliding one hand up to tangle in the man's thick, honey-blond hair. The soft, silky strands flowed through his fingers like sand while the heat from Bram's scalp radiated gentle warmth into James' shaking palm.

The faint but rich scent of soap mixed with Bram's own earthy smell teased James' nose. He inhaled deeply, his body responding to the familiar, sexy scent that was only evident when they were wrapped around each other, making it intimate and alluring to James, like an expensive cologne. He felt his cock swell and his balls tighten, his body hungering for more.

Running one hand down Bram's chest, James let his fingers follow the sweeping curves of the man's sculptured muscles to the waist then retrace their steps to pluck at one taut, peaked nipple. A gasp of surprise escaped Bram, his warm, slightly Scotch-tinged breath wafting over James' face between light kisses. James smiled at the response and did it again, delighting in the way Bram's hands tightened on his flesh, gripping his hips and weighing him down. Desire flaring, pushed on by a new wave of panic, James spread his legs wider, drawing one knee up to coax Bram's thigh against his scrotum. He rubbed his hips against Bram's firm, stiff cock and wormed his hand down between them to grab the beckoning rod. James' hand was pulled off the moment it made contact.

With James' wrist in one hand, Bram took James' face in the other hand and forced him to lie still. James blinked several times to help clear his jumbled thoughts and emotions then focused on Bram's patiently waiting face.

Stare riveted to Bram's loving gaze, James relaxed. His wrist was slowly brought up and pressed onto the mattress beside his head. Bram smiled and James' chest tightened at the sight of the lopsided, seductive expression he had come to love seeing on his partner's handsome face.

“This time is going to be slow and gentle, Jamie. Slow and gentle and all for you.” Bram lightly kissed the side of James' neck. Leaving a trail of wet, red lip marks, Bram worked his way over James' throat and up the other side, snagging an earlobe and nipping it at the end of his quest. He blew a stream of warm air on the moist lobe and murmured in James' ear. “Not going anywhere without you, Jamie. We're together in this.” Raining a leisurely mix of kisses, nips, and licks on James' skin, Bram worked his way down the front of James' chest.

James squirmed and gasped as each new sensation buzzed along his nerves. By the time Bram began exploring his navel, he was gasping out loud, fingers of one hand working through the big man's hair and clutching wordlessly at those rippled upper arms and muscular shoulders. Each time Bram darted that tongue into the sensitive opening or sucked at the edges of the inward curve of his belly, James felt the pucker of his ass clench and quiver as if the two were connected by some newly discovered nerve ending. The heat of his lover's hands felt like branding irons on his goose-flesh peppered skin.

The feeling he had been sucked into a wild, surreal fantasy unexpectedly swept through him and he was suddenly insanely glad that Bram's hands never left his body. The heavy hand still holding his wrist was like an anchor in the swirling chaos of his emotions. Those familiar, strong hands were stroking, teasing, holding him in place, grounding him in the real world, reassuring him that this was true, this was real, this was his life and his lover. He was part of a lasting relationship and it had a real, solid future.

A molten hot sleeve of wetness unexpectedly engulfed his straining cock and James shuddered and groaned, his voice loud and foreign to his own ears. All at once, the cold wave of terror pounding relentlessly in his chest evaporated and his mind shifted all of its focus to the paralyzing ecstasy of Bram's skilled lips and tongue.

The lingering terror and chaos fled, replaced by a burst of passion and need so powerful James felt like he had been exposed to a flash fire. His skin tingled and his muscles tensed, shivers of want racing down every fiber of his being until they all joined at the base of his shaft and erupted in a nearly painful climax. And through it all, his lover worked him patiently, lovingly, thoroughly, concentrating solely on James and taking everything James had to offer.

Finally relaxing into Bram's possessive hold, James tried to catch his breath, but Bram gently, persistently, continued to lap at the soft skin of his spent cock until James was panting and arching up into the delicious hold on his re-wakening shaft. Once James was fully hard again, Bram pulled off and gazed up over the heaving contours of James' torso.

"Love the way you taste." Bram nuzzled the crease of James' groin and ran his beard stubble over the thin strip of pale flesh. "Skin, come, your mouth. Even your ass." His pale blue gaze was intense and his voice roughened with bare emotion when he added, "Love *you*."

Swallowing the sudden tightness in his throat, James hissed and arched his hips up to meet the coarse caress, sighing when Bram soothed the slight burn with a long, swirling lick of his tongue. His own watery gaze met the fierce, affectionate glare, feeling slightly unfocused. The ache was back in his chest, but this time it felt different, more comforting and right, as if his heart was assuring him it was part of this wild, passionate relationship as much as his body was.

"You sure?" James' voice cracked, and he had to blink several times to clear away the haze distorting the sight of his lover's earnest face. Hard fingers squeezed his trapped wrist and bruised the flesh of one of his ass cheeks.

"More than I'd thought possible, Jamie." In a slow, predatory crawl, Bram eased up James' body. Eyes locked on James', he came in close enough to brush his lips over James' open mouth and murmured, "Just have to convince you of it now."

His voracious lover dove down and claimed James' lips in a kiss so long, slow, and thorough, even the mattress under them seemed to melt from the force of it. By the time it ended, James felt as if a swirling tornado named Abraham had sucked him up into its wildly swirling energy and carried him off into a new dimension where all that mattered was the powerful man's skilled touch and the raging storm of passion and need it created in James' body and mind. James did what any reasonable man would do and surrendered to the force of nature now claiming his soul.

"Going to make this last, baby, last a real long time." Bram eased the head of his cock into James' tight hole, steeling himself against the delicious sensations teasing the broad, smooth tip. Only past the flared rim of the bulb, he held both himself and James still as his lover's stretched muscles clenched and unclenched around his thick shaft. Every squeeze was like a hot, wet caress and Bram had to concentrate to keep from plunging in deeper to find more of the heavenly touch.

James lay beneath him, pert, little ass angled toward him on a firm pillow, dark blue eyes half-lidded and unfocused, swollen mouth parted and panting, a please-fuck-me cadence to his rapid breaths and the restless, skittish movements of his head and hands. His dark curls were tangled and tossed, haloing his flushed face and contrasting sharply with the pale green of the pillowcase under his head. His slender torso was even more flushed with color than his cheeks. James' nipples chose this moment to flare and harden under his gaze, making Bram groan out loud.

James was the picture of debauched innocence to Bram – young, needy, pure and wanton all at once. Running his hands over James' abdomen and chest, Bram didn't think he would ever get tired of loving this hesitant but responsive man. He was willing to take his entire lifetime to find out.

Balanced on his knees between James' wide spread, quivering thighs, Bram eased out of his lover's body slightly then inched back in, savoring the velvety, sliding sensation in the slippery channel. He gradually stopped petting his lover, leaving one massive, square hand splayed on James' lower abdomen, both to keep James still and to reassure his lover.

Starting from the moment they left for the dinner party, Bram had watched James' insecurities bubble up one by one from the shallow closet where most of them stayed hidden. He had watched and waited, looking for the moment when they all came to a head and James began to break under the strain of their weight. Bram recognized the uncharacteristic frenzy James had displayed earlier. Bram saw the desire, the absolute need in James' eyes for Bram to claim him, mark him, to reaffirm their love was real and solid. He knew where the sudden panic and fear had come from, and he knew he was the only one who could convince his lover what they were meant to be forever.

He understood why James had tried to initiate a session of rough sex, needing the power, strength, and domination the familiar scene created. It usually catered to both of their basic needs, but tonight Bram wanted to take James to a new place, a place where seduction and slow, gentle lovemaking would burn the truth right past all the gates and walls surrounding James' hammering heart. Tonight, Bram was going to claim James right down to his curled, slender toes.

A shaky gasp escaped James, and Bram eased in another half inch, delighting in the way James arched his neck and clenched his eyes at the tiny invasion. James tossed his head from side to side on the pillow, fists digging deeper into the sheets bunched under his fingers.

“That's it, baby. Let me in. Feel every inch of my cock as it slides up that hot ass of yours.” Bram slowly pushed in again and pulled back out an equal distance, barely a third of the way into James. Sweat beaded on his back and ran down between his shoulder blades, his muscles taut, held under an iron control. This was going to last as long as James could stand it. And then maybe a little longer, if Bram could stand it. His hand kneaded the quivering muscles of James' abdomen, fine shudders transmitting up through his palm.

James groaned, his mouth working as he tried unsuccessfully to buck his hips up for more. Bram pressed down firmly on James' slim torso and the movement abated, but the groan became a whimper of protest.

“Don't worry, baby. I'm going to give you want you need.” His free hand tugged at the tight sac below James' cock, making the curved, hard shaft bob and dance, the tip slapping gently against James' own creased belly. “Always what my baby needs.”

With a final tug on the wrinkled sac, he ghosted his hand up James' ribcage and plucked lightly at the hardened, dusky nubs beckoning to him. Rubbing one firmly between his finger and thumb, Bram worked

it until it was hot and swollen, then moved on to the other and gave it the same attention, all the while slowly sliding in and out of James in a maddeningly measured rhythm that kept James' fists balled and breathing mere whimpered pants.

His cock buried itself another inch, sliding firmly over the small, peanut-sized gland deep inside James. Bram lowered his stance slightly, shifting his angle of penetration, and slowly bumped over the nub with each stroke.

James' eyelids popped open and he locked a dazed but heated stare on Bram. Swallowing hard, barely able to lick at his dry lips, James' gaze was a mix of lust, need, unease, and trust that touched Bram's heart. Bram hardened his quivering resolve and continued his slow, sensual claiming of his mate.

“You're all mine, Jamie. Mine forever. Mine to take, mine to keep.” He pinched a burning nipple and thumbed the rim of James' belly button with his other hand. Swaying his hips in a circular motion, Bram teased James' prostate with the head of his cock, choking back a gasp when the tight rim of James' asshole fluttered and clenched his length like a vise. James bucked his hips reflexively and this time Bram let him gain some ground, sliding in just a tiny bit deeper.

Leaning down, Bram settled over James, taking most of his weight on his forearms planted on each side of his lover. He licked the bead of sweat off James' neck and nuzzled his way up to the ear buried under strands of dark hair and growled, “Mine.”

His voice held a strained, animal quality to it that made Bram blink. James shuddered under him, either at the possessive tone or the word, and Bram took the advantage, rumbling into the curve of James' neck. “Can you feel me, baby? Feel my big, fat cock squeezing into your tight, little ass? Huh? Can you feel my blood pounding in it? Feel the way it grows just from the thought of you?”

Bram flexed his ridged abdominal muscles and his cock arched and thumped against the walls of James' innermost reaches. James hissed and whimpered, biting the flesh of his lower lip in what looked like an attempt not to scream.

“You make me hard and so hot, baby. So hot.” Bram nipped the soft flesh of James' neck and began kissing his way up to James' mouth between each carefully chosen word, words meant to excite, claim, and reassure his lover. “Hot. Raging hot. With your sexy eyes and spread legs.” He reached down and pulled James' thighs up to wrap around his waist, his cock finally fully seated deep inside.

Bram captured James' hand as it reflexively moved toward James' own neglected cock.

“Jesus, Bram!” James' voice was a whimper of need, his eyes pleading.

Bram kissed James' lips, laving his tongue over the bruised, swollen bite mark on the lower one.

“Not yet, but soon,” he soothed. “First I want to spend some time just loving you, slow and gentle and long, like I promised. Always keep my promises to you, baby. Always keep you.”

Setting a steady pace, Bram drove into James again and again while he lavished kisses over every inch of skin and lips he could reach, sometimes deep and passionate, sometimes gentle, but always powerful in their intensity. His own need boiled up around him, but he forced it back, concentrating on James' reactions, James' needs, pushing him almost to his limits and then pulling him back for more.

By the time Bram knew he couldn't hold himself back much longer, James was writhing under him.

Hands now clenching Bram's shoulders instead of the sheets, James began to chant in time to Bram's long, deep thrusts. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! Have to. Bram! Have to!"

Bram pulled back far enough to watch James' face twist, entranced by the way James' small, pink tongue kept darting out to moisten the purple-mottled corner of his mouth as he panted.

Gazes suddenly locked together, Bram gave a shudder of his own when James declared, "Love you, love you so much. You always know what I need. Always know. Love you. Just you."

James closed the short distance between them and took Bram's mouth in an all-consuming kiss that sent shocks of sizzling heat and energy through every limb of Bram's body.

Engulfed by an internal fire, Bram plunged deeper, nudging James' prostate and forcing the rim of muscle in his ass to stretch wide, knowing James liked the tiny burn. He fumbled for the dripping cock sliding between their plastered abdomens and jerked it twice. James cried out and arched up, momentarily frozen in place as his climax ripped loose and sprayed their chests.

"Ah, Christ, fuck! Love you, Jamie! Fuuuck!"

He pushed his cock through the viselike hold James' ass had on his shaft and threw his head back, face contorted in a grimace of blinding pleasure. His cock pulsed and blew, orgasm explosive and draining.

Falling carefully to one side, Bram encircled James in his arms as he settled on his side, effortlessly tucking his lover's limp and pliant body into the protective curl of his own.

Raising his head from the cool surface of the pillow, Bram studied James' face, pleased with the look of exhausted peace that had soothed the frown from James' forehead and the tension from around those eyes and mouth. Bram kissed James, hard and fast.

"You okay, baby?"

Barely able to raise his eyelids, James whispered, "More than okay." He grabbed sluggishly at Bram's wrist and Bram automatically pulled him closer. James closed his eyes, turned his face into Bram's chest and murmured, "I'm yours."

Giving James a squeeze that would have produced a protest from him if he had been awake, Bram pulled the comforter over them and turned off the bedside lamp. Once his hearing adjusted to the familiar sounds of the night outside his bedroom window, Bram barked out a chuckle and worked on blocking out the sudden sound of a very loud television set as it was turned on.

Chapter Five

Morning brought a fresh gust of autumn chill to the air. The first time James woke, the bedroom was still dark. The crisp tingle to the air in the old brick house sent a chill up his spine. He curled against the blazing furnace made of flesh at his side. Huddling closer, he practically crawled under Bram's skin, pressing the cool expanse of his bare back to the big man's unprotected and equally naked side.

His movement stirred the sleeping giant behind him. After a graceful shift and dip in the mattress that made James' ass slide over a half-hard cock, a thick tree limb of an arm fell across his chest and moved down to wrap around his waist. A light snore ruffled his hair and the hot breath warmed the nape of his neck. Still mostly asleep, James sighed and burrowed closer. Warm and secure, he was back asleep in under twenty seconds.

The next time he woke, the room was filled with sunshine and most of the chill had been chased away. He rolled back, searching for his own personal heater, but found an empty, wrinkled bed where Bram should have been. He cast a bleary look at the digital alarm clock on the bedside table. 8:34 a.m. Bram would likely have been up for hours, fresh and energized, bearing no signs of the late night, moderate drinking, and heavy sex from the night before. The man actually *was* made of steel.

James groaned and rolled over onto his stomach, muscles sore and tired. His ass ached and his bottom lip felt swollen and bruised, probably more from his biting it than from Bram's. His arms and legs felt like they belonged to someone else, heavy and unresponsive to his mental commands to move him to the bathroom to relieve his full bladder.

A sudden change in the air warned him he wasn't alone only a millisecond before a large hand lightly swatted his ass and then kneaded the stinging flesh through the protection of the comforter.

"About time you woke up, sleepyhead." Bram's deep voice and soothing drawl took the sting out of the swat.

"Christ! Bram!" James jerked and squirmed, but didn't actually move from under the fondling grip, enjoying the warmth and tingle it sent to his morning erection.

"I let you sleep in, Jamie. Figured you needed a little extra after last night."

James felt Bram cup and squeeze his left cheek, running a thumb over the crease of his ass through the comforter. The sensation made his hips curl and he gasped when his cock rubbed over the coarse wrinkles in the sheets. The thoughts of a little morning action surged and his cock swelled.

A swift, overly enthusiastic smack landed on the underside of his ass and then the touch was gone leaving him startled and disappointed. James rolled over to look at his lover. A sudden flash of burning ache flared between his cheeks. He hissed and slowly sat up.

Okay, maybe he wasn't ready to entice Bram back to bed just yet. His gaze landed on his lover's hand-

some face and the endearing, lopsided smile on Bram's lips reminded James that the lingering ache had been worth it all. Okay, maybe not the amused part, but the affectionate, lustful glint in Bram's pale blue eyes made up for it.

James held his lover's hungry stare until Bram's moved down his body and landed on his unflagging erection.

Taking a step closer, Bram dragged James to his feet and loosely wrapped both arms around him, letting James' jutting cock bob and brush against the soft, worn denim of his jeans. James hissed again, this time in pleasure, and swayed his hips, increasing the pressure on his shaft.

Bram lightly kissed his lips and murmured, "Looks like you're all rested. What do you say we should put that energy to good use, hmm?" He kissed James' mouth, gently tugging on the still tender bottom lip with perfect, white teeth.

James moaned and nodded. "Yeah, I'd like to put my *energy* some place." He rubbed his cock against Bram's thigh and ran his hands up the big man's solid arms to steady himself. Just as he tilted back his head to better reach his lover's mouth, a hot palm landed on his ass hard enough he was sure fingerprints had been left behind this time.

"Fuck!" James jumped out of Bram's embrace, one hand nursing his stinging cheek. He threw a pissed off scowl at Bram, but only got a wide smile in return for his efforts. "What the hell was that for?"

Smirking, Bram turned on his heel and strode to the bedroom door before answering. "We've got things to do and I don't want you taking forever in the shower." His gaze dropped to look significantly at James' groin before he added, "Works almost as good as a pinch." He winked at James. "Hurry up, okay? Breakfast is waiting."

The door closed with a solid thud while James gazed down at himself. He ran one hand over his dwindling hard-on and stalked off to the shower, his gait a little more cautious than he had hoped it would be.

After a huge breakfast of pancakes, sausage, toast, juice, and coffee that Bram seemed to consume by the pound instead of by the serving, James helped Bram clean up the nearly spotless kitchen. By the time he put the last cup back on the cabinet shelf, James realized how much he enjoyed doing the little domestic chores with Bram at his side. He liked the huge, old house with its drafty floors and too-high ceilings. He didn't even mind the charming, if inquisitive, neighbors.

Even something as simple as sitting down for a meal, an unappealing task on his own, had become a focal point to their mornings together. It was a time spent talking, teasing, planning and negotiating the events of the day. Bram seemed to have a master plan for the weekends, but he seemed willing and eager to adjust things to include James' needs or desires. In fact, today he insisted James plan at least one item on their schedule. It forced James to share the mundane tasks of his life like picking up his dry cleaning and finding a new security lock to add to his apartment door until he moved out.

Just after ten o'clock they set out for a large nursery near the city limits. Finding 'something special' for the courtyard outside the French doors in the beautiful, empty library in the old house had suddenly become a priority for Bram. Seeing what his lover thought was suitable for the style of the house intrigued James. Besides, any time spent in Bram's company was time well spent for James. He was beginning to feel more comfortable at the man's side than any place else he had ever been. James found it a little scary

the way they fit so naturally together.

With fall setting in, the store's current stock of plants consisted of dozens of varieties of evergreen trees, rainbow-hued mums, and hardy species of bright ground cover too numerous to name. A light mist drifted in the air and the rhythmic thumping of oversized fans worked as a backup band to the irregular conversations between salespeople and customers. The smell of dirt, loam, and fertilizer was peppered with the heavy scent of fresh pine and shrubbery.

James knew a little about plants from summers spent helping his mother plant and weed the tiny but colorful flowerbeds around their house, but most of the exotic foliage this nursery carried was foreign to him. Occasionally, a whiff of something heady tickled at his nose.

Bram grabbed James by the hand and began dragging him through the rows and rows of potted and flowering specimens. Bram wove around tables and down aisles under the frosted glass canopy of the greenhouse's massive roof like an experienced, familiar shopper. Just when James thought they were going to run out of pebbled, Japanese-inspired walkway to navigate, Bram took a hard right and entered a hidden concrete courtyard.

The noise from the greenhouse suddenly dropped away, replaced by the gentle sound of fluttering leaves and the trickle of running water. Everywhere James looked in the wide, circular space was a working fountain of every size, shape, and style imaginable. There were even a few James couldn't have imagined in his wildest dreams.

Leading the way over to a huge marble fountain topped with an ornate dome of scrolled wrought iron, Bram gave the structure a critical look then glanced at James. "What do you think of this?"

"Of this?" James raised his eyebrows and walked around the massive base, eyeing the four-tiered, clamshell-shaped basins and the regal likeness of Poseidon perched at the top of the towering design. The ironwork was so far above his head he couldn't touch it to feel the grain of the textured surface. "It's beautiful, but what's it for? This can't just go anywhere. It's a formal piece meant for an estate or a three acre garden."

"I thought so." Bram stuck his hands in his pockets and frowned at the fountain. "I've been looking to replace the one in the courtyard. It's not original to the house and it's too small for it." He began slowly walking around the fountain, examining it, until he ended up at James' side. He gave James an exasperated sigh. "The people here keep reassuring me it fits the period of the house, but I just couldn't see this one in my backyard."

"That's because it doesn't belong there. The period is right, but the design and size are all wrong for your place. This is for the courtyard off the library, right? That great room with all the glass doors and the bookshelves?"

"Mmmhmm."

James eyed Bram, catching the slight nod of his head as the big man continued to frown at the fountain. The mid-morning sunlight glinted off the sun-lightened strands of blond in Bram's hair each time he moved. The rich dark tan of his skin turned a golden copper and his pale blue eyes were bright with interest while the corner of his mouth that James loved to watch curved into a lopsided smile with an unhappy twist to it.

"The house needs something less formal and smaller." James touched one of the six smooth, polished

marble pillars that supported the heavy wrought iron dome, enjoying the cool slick surface under his hand. Except for the temperature, it felt firm and satiny smooth like Bram's stiff cock did against his palm. James felt a tingle of desire stir in his groin and he removed his hand and pushed away any similar thoughts before the bulge in his jeans became more than just the curve of his zipper. "This is gorgeous, but it's too overbearing for the courtyard at home."

Bram's gaze flicked away from the fountain and locked on his. James watched the unhappy twist at the corner of his lover's lips draw up into that crooked smile that made his heart thump and his cock ache. The affectionate, appreciative glint in Bram's eyes brought the tingle back to his groin and James wondered what had suddenly put it there. Then he decided it didn't matter as long as it was directed at him and only him. A quick wink had James licking his lips.

His lover turned away from the fountain and began surveying the other display pieces in the courtyard. "See something here that fits the bill better for us?"

"Well, not right here. But it looks like the smaller ones are over there." James pointed to the left. "We need one about half this size. One without a tall dome, either. It's too formal for us."

Bram grabbed his hand out of the air and began strolling toward the area James had chosen, a firm but casual grip on James. Bram's fingers laced together with his and the big man's usual long stride shortened to match James' pace.

In the end, James picked out the style and size appropriate for the house and courtyard while Bram had the final say in the design. It came down to two fountains. They were both three-tiered works of art, one with fluted bowls, six swans at the base, and a trio of cherubs frolicking at the top. The second had a quartet of stallions forming the base, smooth, deep bowls for the waterfalls topped by a regal, thick-maned lion calmly surveying his kingdom. The lion won by unanimous vote. James vaguely understood they had just made their first household purchase as a couple, but shied away from examining the fact.

By the time they had examined all the smaller fountains and made their choice, James found himself edging closer and closer into Bram's personal space, comfortable as a couple in the quiet display area, even with other customers milling around them. No one paid the least bit of attention when Bram swung his arm over James' shoulder and pulled James to his side to walk out of the nursery. When Bram planted a quick kiss on his temple as they walked, a burst of pleasure blossomed in his chest.

As he slipped out from under Bram's warm embrace to get into the truck, he realized how open they were being. He glanced around at the other parked cars and Saturday shoppers. Again, no one but a toddler hanging from his passing mother's tight grip even looked at him. The child grinned and wordlessly offered him a grimy, little fist full of animal crackers as his mother heedlessly breezed by. James smiled and waved and took his seat in the truck, his nervousness replaced by a bright smile for his lover as Bram slid behind the wheel. It had been a good morning so far.

The rest of the day was spent shopping for groceries, picking up dry cleaning, and taking over an hour for Bram to help select the right lock for his apartment door. James would have purchased the easiest one to install, but Bram had insisted on finding the hardest one to break instead.

By afternoon, they had stopped for lunch at "Bits and Pieces", a local diner near Bram's place. James had feasted on a steak sandwich so stuffed with savory meat, onions, cheese, and mushrooms he had trouble getting it into his mouth. He met several more neighborhood regulars there, and even one of Bram's crew dropped in. The diner was a very popular haunt.

At home Bram decided to spend the next couple of hours cleaning up the courtyard and disassembling the old fountain, all the while musing about what to do with the empty library. He dropped the hint that it was big enough for two people to share as an office without danger of crossing over into each other's space. James absently agreed, but in his head he indulged in the fantasy of his drafting desk set up near the bank of glass doors and his collection of architectural digests and books on the rich mahogany shelves.

Shaking himself out of the daydream, James put his back into the job of clearing the neat, well-worn paving stones of dirt and leaves, happy to be included in the simple domestic chores. He'd missed the feeling of accomplishment working on a personal project gave him. If he was truthful with himself, he missed having a real home. His apartment was comfortable, but it had never given him that sense of permanence or security that even just spending time at Bram's home did. He hadn't felt that way since leaving his parents' house, and knowing he wasn't welcome back there had added an extra hollow spot to his heart. It felt particularly empty right now.

A rough hand ruffled through his hair as he swept away a pile of dry leaves. Looking up, James caught an expression of gentle fondness mixed with simmering heat on Bram's dirt-smudged face. It brought a grin to his lips. The cold ache that had been building in his stomach vanished. Damn. One glance from the passionate, free-loving man and James' body and soul responded and warmed. Bram seemed able to fill all the lonely spots in James' life, even the ones the other man didn't know existed.

James returned the smoldering look, but doggedly went back to sweeping away the debris from the cozy courtyard. There would be plenty of time to put out that fire later. He was sure of that. Bram was a very loving and demonstrative man.

Bram chose that moment to lift off the top tier of the old fountain and James stopped working long enough to appreciate the man's bulging muscles and tight ass and thighs as he hefted the heavy section and carried it out the side gate. James wasn't sure which made him hotter, the man's buff body or the raw, sensual power Bram possessed. Maybe it was both. Then again, he decided, maybe it was the surprising depth of tenderness and caring that lay under all that hard flesh.

Despite the cool breeze picking up, by eight o'clock they were both hot, sweaty, and tired. Bram brushed the remnants of crumpled leaves off the knees of his jeans. He arched his back.

“What do you say we call it a night, Jamie, okay?”

James pulled the last weed growing up from the fine cracks between the ancient stone pavers and tossed it into the wheelbarrow at his side. Standing, he groaned and mirrored Bram's stance, blinking at the sound of his vertebrae popping back into place.

“I'm down with that.” He hissed and rubbed his low back. Shrugging, James worked one shoulder, then the other, trying to loosen the sore muscles. Getting a whiff of himself as he raised his arms, he wrinkled his nose and pulled his sweat-stained shirt away from his sides to let the night breeze flow around him. “Need a shower.” His stomach growled loud and long.

Bram chuckled and rubbed a rough, grubby hand over James' stomach. Eyes bright with desire, his hand lingered, then dropped lower to rub over the front of James' pants where the fabric had suddenly become strained.

James returned the heated stare, swallowing hard. “Need... a couple of things, but I want a shower first.”

Bram wrapped his arms around James' waist and tugged him close. His large hands kneaded the curve of

James' ass while his lips rained a shower of light kisses over his lover's upturned face. "Here and now is good for me, baby, but if all slick and soapy is what you want, far be it from me to deny you." He pulled back, threw his arm around James' shoulders, and began walking them toward the library doors. "Showering with you is near the top of my list of favorite things to do. Let's see if we can find something new and interesting to do with a loofah."

James rolled his forehead back and forth over the cool tile wall; a small groan escaping his lips as the showerhead pulsed a steady rhythm of hot water over his back. Legs spread comfortably apart, he kept his balance by placing both hands on the smooth surface of the over-sized enclosure. Tiny rivers of moisture trickled down his skin, following the path of his arched spine and hunched shoulders until they converged at his lower back and tickled the crease of his ass and tumbled over the curve of his hips.

Each droplet hammered down on his sore muscles, stinging and pelting every exposed inch of his flesh. The barely tolerable heat seeped into his skin, washing away the grime of the day and leeching out the remainder of his flagging energy. The shower's mist filled the air and the warm humidity invaded his lungs, bringing a heaviness to his body. His thoughts slowed and his senses heightened.

Groaning out loud again, James shivered despite the heat. Scalding plates of iron worked over the muscles of his calves. Bram's large, rough hands massaged his legs, working each ankle, foot, and even his toes. The big man knelt behind James between his spread legs.

If James tried, he could just see the powerful curve of one bent knee on the floor between his thighs, its muscles and tendons taut, corded in a crouch that held more energy and strength than James imagined he possessed in his whole body. The sight made his cock stir and it began to curve up from its resting place nestled against his own thigh.

The rough yet tender caress worked up his thighs and James jumped as Bram mouthed over the swell of his ass. The other man licked at the crease between his cheeks and bit at the soft underside of his butt where thigh joined cheek, alternating the pressure and sharpness of the attentions. James didn't know what to expect next, a tender touch of Bram's talented tongue or the sting of teeth. His breathing increased and his head swam, a mix of anticipation and need combined with a touch of fear of the unknown.

The thrill of giving over control to this man was intoxicating. James often felt like he would pass out just from Bram's slightest touch when they were like this, loving each other, giving each other what each desired most during lovemaking. And nobody knew him the way Bram did. No one instinctively met his needs every single time the way this primal, possessive, caring mountain of a man did. Bram always knew what James needed even when James didn't know it himself. Like now. James had envisioned a hot shower and a quick, mutual jerk off session. Bram had other plans.

Too tired to give much thought to sex when they came upstairs, James had instantly turned control of his body over to Bram. From the slow, sensual stripping off of his clothing to the sudden, unexpected fireman's carry into the wide, luxurious shower, Bram had been working his body and his mind until James hovered on the brink of ecstasy, held there by his lover's massive, protective hands.

Hands that were now kneading his ass and spreading his cheeks to let a stream of hot water and a whiff of cooler air alternate over the sensitive, needy ring guarding the entrance to his body.

James whimpered and rolled his head, using the chilled surface of the tile to help him keep focused. His fingers curled, nails dragging over the ceramic squares, the fine scratching noise next to his head oddly

loud in his ear.

He felt a tongue invade his hole, its rough texture and sliding heat sending a jolt of delight deep into his pelvis where the sensation became a heavy ball of unsatisfied desire. With each plunge of the thick muscle at his rim, the sensation built, sending out tendrils of liquid lust that flowed through his flesh seeking out his already inflamed and straining tissues. It curled around his balls and pushed through his cock, forcing it to swell until its head glistened a dark, rosy red, the tightness milking out droplets of translucent white pre-come from the slit. It bobbed between his outstretched legs looking for comfort and attention, but he had been positioned away from anything that he could rub against for relief except for his lover.

A deep, soft voice pulled James out of his ass-centered, spiraling thoughts.

“That's it, baby, shake for me. You know I love it when you tremble under my hands.” A warm wall of iron-hard muscle suddenly draped itself over James' back and a hard shaft rubbed between his ass cheeks and up his lower back.

James shivered again as the steam-filled heat from the water was replaced with the satiny smooth, hard lines of his lover. Bram worked his hands between them and his strong, relentless fingers kneaded the flesh of James' back and shoulders, working out the kinks and literally squeezing out the soreness of the day's physical strain. In his mind, James could see his aches and pains pushed out of his pores by Bram's sheer strength to drip off his body and disappear down the drain.

Kisses peppered the curve of his shoulder and neck and bulging, thickly corded, well-defined arms wrapped around his chest. Through half-open eyelids, James watched as Bram's fingers plucked and rolled his nipples. Out of the blue, a fist-sized loofah appeared and its coarse weave stroked over the crinkled, rosy buds until it felt like a flaming match tip instead of a sponge. James felt the heat rise in his face as his tits burned, puckered and taut under the torturous, sensual assault. He pressed back into his lover's body and moaned.

“Fuck!”

“Not this time, baby.” Bram's other hand slid over James' quivering abs and grabbed hold of his cock, stroking and teasing its length with a heavy, firm grip. “Sweet as your tight ass is, it's time for something simpler tonight.” Bram grabbed James' hips and turned him around, one hand reaching for James' cock and the other for the container of liquid soap hanging from a handheld bar.

James pressed his palms against the solid ripples of Bram's chest, thumbs finding the man's large, swollen nubs without conscious thought. He shook the cascading water out of his face, shifting slightly to redirect the flow between their bodies. The scent of soap and his own musky come drifted in the air. James glanced down in time to see Bram's slicked fist close around both of their shafts before he flung back his head and arched into the swift, almost brutal rhythm his lover immediately took up.

Tight, slippery strokes pressed his cock against Bram's thicker shaft, the pulsing veins and heated rod like velvet glass on his flesh. Bram's callused thumb pad swirled under the rim of his cock head and then rose up to dip into the tiny, leaking slit. Each swirling pass pushed him closer to climax, then a firm squeeze of his shaft would back off the need.

Panting, body restless and tense with the physical demand for release, James shuddered and whimpered, mouth devouring the salty curve of Bram's armpit and tender side. One deeply searching lick pulled a low growl from his lover and James' head was yanked away and his lips were swallowed by Bram's possessive, hungry mouth. Teeth nibbled at his lips and a commanding tongue forced its way in, laving and

stroking his palate in time to the swirling, tugging heat on his cock.

The hand in his hair and the one around his cock clenched and James cried out, the sound swallowed down by his lover. His climax boiled in the pit of his groin, spreading in slow motion as it fanned up and out, the sizzling, sparking flames roaring through his nerves like a grass fire out of control. Come soared from his cock, coating his stomach and baptizing Bram's shaft. On James' final spurt, Bram's own climax jetted up and his lover stroked their combined offerings into their flesh as he continued to milk every drop of pleasure from it.

James' climax stole his breath and made his heart pound mercilessly in his chest. It washed away his awareness of the moment as if it was as fragile as the soapsuds drifting down the drain. Time skipped a beat and when James opened his eyes he was supported against Bram's chest. For several long seconds he watched Bram's confident hands gently dry off his body, then the room dipped and swayed and cool sheets enfolded him. Just before sleep turned the room black, James felt warm breath ghost along the dip of his spine and a softly murmured "Love you, baby, so much," was burned into his flesh from the sheer heat of Bram's raw, throaty voice.

Chapter Six

Sunday was spent finishing the last of the clean up work on the courtyard, preparing it for the arrival of the new fountain the following weekend. After a quick clean-up, they spent the afternoon visiting Bram's sister, taking turns reading her chapters from the latest romance mystery author she had fervently read before her accident ten years ago.

Disfigured, paralyzed, and comatose as a result of being forced off the road and into a bridge abutment by a jilted boyfriend, Isabel Lord had spent the last ten years in the care of a rehab and nursing facility. Or at least her body was there. The medical staff had long ago established that her brain activity was gone and without the ventilator and feeding tube, Isabel's body would cease to exist. Legally responsible for his sister's care, Bram could have removed her from life support, but his love for her and his guilt over not being there to prevent the attack wouldn't let him. Once a week, every week, Bram spent time with his sister, telling her about his work, his life, and his problems.

Wanting to be a part of Bram's life, James had no problem with the arrangement. Whether he gave Bram a few hours to himself for the visit or he tagged along, James understood and respected the man for such devotion. He loved Bram even more for it. It made him think about the lack of ties he had to his own healthy but closed-minded family.

They returned to Bram's home a little after five o'clock, but despite the early hour, James was beginning to feel antsy. He liked staying here. He liked being at Bram's side, liked it too much. Too much too soon had always led to heartache and disappointment before. He needed to take it slow, be sure. Staying another night would only make it harder to leave the next day.

He didn't want to start looking needy, but having someone like Bram in his life was addictive. James kept clothes here for emergency stay overs, but it wouldn't be smart to monopolize Bram's entire weekend, every weekend. They hadn't had any rough spots in their relationship as a result of too much time spent together, but it was only a matter of time, wasn't it?

Walking through the back door into the gleaming, cozy kitchen, James resisted the urge to remove his jacket and get comfortable. He stuffed his hands deep into the pockets to keep them away from the zipper. His stomach was silently churning, but he tried to look non-nonchalant.

"Guess I'll just grab my dry cleaning and head on back to my apartment." He swallowed down the lump forming at the back of his throat. "It's been a great weekend, but we both have work tomorrow." James chanced a quick look at Bram's face and the disappointment that greeted him made his resolve quiver a bit. He stammered, suddenly unsure of his decision. "You'd probably like some time to yourself before Monday morning rolls around, anyway." He smiled and shrugged, but he couldn't hold Bram's gaze for fear the man would see his true feelings.

When no response came, James moved to run upstairs to grab his things, but at the last minute a band of iron wrapped around his wrist and tugged him back.

“Hold on there, Tiger.” Bram shifted his grip from James' wrist to his hip, easing their bodies together face to face. He used his other hand to tilt James' face up.

Feeling exposed and somehow guilty, James' gaze darted to Bram's face and then away, only to find it drawn back up by some invisible force to lock with the other man's patient stare.

“What's the hurry, Jamie? It's still early.” A soothing hand ran down his hip and back up, and then settled on the low curve of his spine. The heat radiated through his jeans. James clenched his ass to stop the tingle the warmth started glowing in his groin.

“What do you say we make something to eat? Spend some time on the couch watching the news?” Bram's expression looked hopeful and James knew his resolve to remain partially aloof was crumbling fast.

Bram winked at him and slid a hand down the back of James' jeans, letting it rest against the beginning swell of his ass. “We've been going at it full speed all weekend. I've been looking forward to a few quiet hours that didn't involve anything more strenuous than holding on to you.”

The hand on his chin moved to cup the back of his head. James immediately relaxed into the kneading pressure.

“And that,” Bram said, pulling James closer until their thighs rubbed, and his breath warmed James' cheek, “requires you,” he added, kissing the corner of James' mouth, “to be here.”

James melted into the tightening embrace, opening his mouth to the insistent nudge of Bram's tongue, sweetening the gentle kiss until it became a passionate, fierce clench.

When Bram was done devouring him, he pulled back a mere inch or two. James was surprised when he realized his fists were wrapped in the front of Bram's shirt. Whether it was from the lack of food or the intensity of the kiss, his knees went suddenly weak and he leaned into Bram's solid, inviting body for support.

James licked his lips and tried not to pant. Even his eyes refused to focus for several long, heart-pounding beats. He gave a jerky, little nod. “Yeah, okay.” He wet his tingling lips again. “I could hang out for a while yet.”

“Good.” One of Bram's square hands began to stroke his ass through his worn jeans. “It's been great having you here all weekend. I'm not looking forward to letting you go.”

“Don't like to sleep alone?” James was surprised to hear his own voice was raspy, desire roughening his words and stirring interest south of his waistband.

“Don't like doing things without you to share them.” Bram touched their foreheads together then straightened, gaze locked on James. “Including sleeping.” He kissed James' chin, winked, and gave an exaggerated leer. “And any other activity that includes you being naked and willing.”

A sharp sting bit his butt cheek. James yelped and jerked forward, crushed against Bram's chest.

Bram soothed the swell of flesh he had just swatted, a chuckle rumbling up out of his chest to vibrate through James' entire body. James felt the man's hands grab hold of his hips and gently push him away as he said, “Right now, I'll settle for some old-fashioned cuddling on the couch. I'm starving and as exotic as

it sounds, I really don't want to eat hot chili out of each other's navels.”

Rubbing the last of the fire from his butt, James chuckled. “I'm with you. Let's find some bowls. Your navel, as nice as it is, doesn't hold anywhere near enough to feed a starving man.” He boldly ran a hand over Bram's hard-packed abs and playfully wiggled his eyebrows at a surprised but grinning Bram. “But we might have to reconsider that option for dessert.”

Monday morning at the office was a bit more hectic than usual for James. He had tried to schedule time to talk to Mr. Dunn about the restoration project additions Bram had brought up over dinner, but Dunn had been called away unexpectedly. James had been reassured by his secretary that it had nothing to do with Mrs. Dunn, but she wasn't forthcoming with a more detailed explanation. There was a palpable air of anxiety among the secretarial staff and murmured whispers around the water cooler that seemed to die away whenever James approached. He caught snatches of conversations where Eclipse Construction was mentioned.

James attributed it all to the dinner party Friday night. He assumed his co-workers were adjusting to his uncharacteristic openness in bringing a boyfriend with him to a business-related function. And not just any boyfriend, he was dating Abraham Lord, owner of the biggest and best construction company around. He hadn't given it much thought until just now, but Bram was an amazing catch and it was natural people would gossip about it. James shrugged off the whispers and hesitant smiles, suddenly strangely okay with being the center of discussion.

Coming straight to work from Bram's house had thrown off his routine. He felt vaguely like he was hurrying to catch up with the day despite having arrived half an hour earlier than usual to accommodate Bram's early schedule.

Even with the slight disorientation it lent to his day, James didn't regret it. Sleeping with someone who cared about you won hands down over sleeping alone any day. He could easily get used to it and that worried him more than anything else did. Diving in too fast to a relationship was a trap he had fallen into when he was younger. He'd learned since then. Slow and easy, no surprises and no expectations. Bram's repeated declarations of love and commitment, and his own desires aside, James told himself repeatedly it was better this way for both of them. If Bram really meant it all, time would show him.

Two phone calls from Bram later and a quick agreement to meet at Bram's after work the following day, James finished off his workload and reluctantly headed home to his own apartment.

Waiting for the elevator to arrive, James mentally relived the moment weeks ago when his neighbor had attacked him. Williams had assaulted him, attempted to grope, fondle, and kiss him while holding him pinned to the wall by his throat, but James ended up being the one the superintendents had served an eviction notice on.

If Bram hadn't shown up early for their first date and intervened, James was pretty sure what the outcome could have been for him. He shuddered at the memory and his stomach flopped and churned. As it was, Bram had planted the man's face in the wall and killed one of Williams' pet pit bulls with his bare hands to save James. Now James was faced with the prospect of running into the vindictive, ugly man every time he entered or left his own apartment. He really needed to start looking for a new place to live.

Exiting the elevator, James cautiously stepped out into the hallway, briefcase protectively held high and his keys protruding from his clenched fist. If he was going to meet trouble, he was going to be more pre-

pared than last time.

The hall was empty, but as he strode past Williams' door, the sound of several deep, male voices jeering and hollering at what sounded like a ball game of some kind on the TV carried out into the hall. Great. Now there was an entire apartment full of assholes here to taunt him.

Gripping his briefcase tighter, James fumbled at the lock to his apartment and hurriedly opened it to slide in behind its protective weight. Compared to having Bram at his side, the door was a flimsy excuse for protection, but it was better than his leather briefcase.

He rolled the tumblers of the old lock into place, slid the deadbolt home, and heaved a sigh of relief. He had insisted Bram let him handle the problem on his own, but in truth, Williams scared him.

Williams had gone from bully to potential rapist in a short span of time with James. The hard-muscled man was all brawn and very little brain. He was crude, immoral, and enjoyed hurting things. He bred pit bulls for use in illegal fights and used them to scare the children in the building. James had actually overheard the man boast about the joy of watching a competitor's dog die a grisly death at the hands of his own bulky, vicious beasts.

James loosened his tie and shrugged out of his suit coat. Angry at having the memory of the incident dredged up again, he shook his head and spoke to the empty room, "Fucking cretin!" The thought of Williams laying his hands or his lips on James again sent a surge of bile up the back of James' throat.

A loud slam shook a wall. It was followed by a hooted cheer of triumph and the faint sound of glass breaking.

It was too early on a workday evening for this.

Disgusted, James shook off all thoughts of his neighbor and went into the bedroom to change.

Dressed in worn jeans and a loose, soft sweater to fight off the slight autumn chill in the night air, James grabbed a granola bar, took a couple of swigs from the bottle of water in the refrigerator, and wandered into his living room. He spent the next couple of hours poring over the blueprints and modifications he had designed for the Becker Estate.

Immersed in his favorite addiction, James ignored time until his stomach complained again and his eyes were watering from the reflected light off the drafting table.

The microwave clock read eleven-fifteen p.m. when he warmed up a cup of instant noodles and set it on the counter to cool. James wandered to the bathroom, relieved himself, and then flopped down on the couch, leaving only the TV to act as a light in the room.

Fifteen minutes later, soup uneaten and TV muted and forgotten, James burrowed down into the couch cushions where he and Bram had made out on their first date and drifted off to sleep. Visions of the passionate, gorgeous, mountain of a lover he had stumbled into a relationship with played over and over in his head.

The apartment was dark when James woke up. The faint light from the silent TV set cast a dim glow around the room, making gray shadows dance over the furniture and walls. Moonlight streamed in through a parted curtain, but the feeble rays fell just past the windowsill.

At first, James couldn't remember what had awakened him, but he knew a sound or a touch had startled him. Blinking back the hazy film of sleep from his eyes, he let his sight adjust to the darkness. He lay completely still, waiting for whatever it was to repeat, eyes searching the apartment for a hidden intruder or something out of place.

Nothing happened for several hammering heartbeats. Then just as James was about to dismiss the whole thing as a dream, the sound of metal scraping on metal pulled his eyes to the front door. It was a faint rasping, more like a mouse scratching than anything else, but when the doorknob rattled and turned a quarter turn, light reflecting off the brass handle, James shot up off the couch like a rocket.

Once on his sock-covered feet, James stood frozen in place, uncertain of what to do next. Thoughts of the new lock Bram had spent so much time picking out surfaced in his mind. It lay forgotten in this morning's rush to work from a different part of town, boxed and waiting on Bram's kitchen counter.

The handle wiggled again. James started breathing again and moved toward the door, grabbing a heavy, old, iron lamp off a side table as he tiptoed closer. Torn between calling the police and barricading the door, James irrationally chose to do neither. Instead, he pressed his ear to the door and listened, eyes riveted on the door handle.

The faint scratching sounds grated on his hearing at first, then two muffled but clearly male voices whispered deep and drunkenly on the other side of the thin wall of wood. James' heart skipped a beat when he recognized one as Williams' harsh, bullying tone.

“Fuck! It's taking too long. Just bust the door in.”

“Shut the fuck up. I'm almost done.”

The scratching continued, suddenly convincing James that dialing 911 would have been the better option earlier. He started toward the phone just as the door handle turned all the way and the door shook on its hinges. James froze. He mutely watched the door strain against the ancient, brass deadbolt still securely anchoring it shut, his only defense against the two drunken men on the other side.

“Little bastard's got it double locked. Shit!”

It felt like an eternity passed until the door eased back into place and the handle stilled. He heard footsteps shuffle away down the hall followed by the abrupt slam of a door. Despite the sudden silence, James found his feet glued to the carpeting.

A shudder of fear ran down his back. The room swayed slightly, the darkness disorienting. James was forced to drop to his knees to keep from falling. The lamp tumbled from his nerveless fingers and rolled across the carpet, shade dented by its own weight. James closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, willing away the spots before his eyes and trying to force his mind to clear.

The feeling of being overwhelmed tightened his chest, making him think of lightheaded moments he experienced in the shower with Bram. He was pretty sure that a mind-blowing climax had nothing to do with it this time.

The room gradually came back into focus and James rocked up to his feet. Cautiously moving to the door, he pushed the sofa in front of it and dropped back down onto its cushions. Edgy and exhausted as he was, sleep eluded him for the rest of the night. The cold, gray blush of morning found him bleary eyed and weary.

Roughhousing

Hoping it had all been a dream, James examined the lock on the way out the door for work. His fingertips brushed over fresh scratches and fine dents in the metal housing, the marks marring the usual bright shine of the brass. Casting an uneasy look over his shoulder at Williams' door, James locked his door, hefted his briefcase, and left the building.

First thing on today's agenda was looking for a new apartment.

Chapter Seven

“Why the fuck didn't you call me?” Bram felt his face flush with the sudden rise in his blood pressure. God, nobody put him through as many emotional hoops as Jamie did. Loving the slender young man standing in front of him, with his shoulders hunched and his face pinched closed, was like living on the roller coaster at the fair - exciting, thrilling, and down right out of control. “Do you realize what could have happened if those two assholes had gotten into your place?”

The unhappy, tight-lipped glare James shot him made Bram back down a few notches. “Okay, okay, that was a stupid question. Of course you know.”

He exhaled slowly and glanced at the 'v' of exposed, smooth skin that showed in the gap of James' loosened dress shirt. “You probably still have his hand prints on your neck from the last time.”

He couldn't resist running his own hand over the warm flesh of James' chest and neck, letting his palm come to rest cupping his lover's faintly shadowed jaw.

“Bram.” James moved against Bram's hand, bleary eyes sliding shut for a moment before he looked up, a determined glint in his eyes. “I handled it. I'm fine.” James stifled a yawn. “Just lost some sleep.”

Bram gave him a quick hug before James pushed back to rub his hands over his face.

It was obvious James was trying to shrug off the incident, but Bram could see the fine lines of worry around his mouth and the uneasy look in his eyes. Even standing still, James looked like he was jumpy and tense.

“What about tonight? You're not going back there alone.” No matter how hard he tried, it still came out like a command. As much as he wanted to, it wasn't his decision to make and he knew it. Bram softened his voice and added a conciliatory, “Are you?”

Face bowed, James shook his head. “No. I'm not.” He glanced up, nervously eyeing Bram, his gaze darting from his lover's face to the room behind Bram.

“I was hoping I could stay over here for a few nights. Just 'til things blow over.”

Bram could see the uncertainty and hesitation on James' face. It shocked him. “You have to ask? Really, Jamie?”

“I wasn't sure.” James bit his lower lip so hard Bram thought it would bleed before he released it to stammer out, “I mean, this... this would be like everyday for the rest of the week...or until you get tired of me.”

“That's not going to happen, Jamie. I can't think of anything I'd like better than to have you here.”

Bram moved around the kitchen, pulling food from the refrigerator to start making dinner for the two of them. Taking his focus off James seemed to help relieve some of his lover's unease. Before too long James began to set the table while Bram cooked. The smell of steak and fried potatoes filled the air, making the huge kitchen feel warm and homey.

“But this will be morning and night. I'll be in your way and under foot. I'll be snoring in your ear and shaving in your sink and leaving dirty clothes on the floor.” James filled both glasses on the table with ice water, the clink of ice to glass almost drowning out his muttered, “You'll be hunting for a place for me to move out to in no time.”

Turning down the heat on the stove, Bram moved to capture James from behind, pulling the man to his chest. After only a split second of hesitation, James leaned back against him. Bram could feel the heat being pulled out of him into his lover's chilled, tired body.

“I could take having you 24/7 if you wanted, baby.”

“Don't joke about it, all right?” James tensed in his arms. Bram rubbed a hand over James' stiff abdomen. In time, he felt his lover slump against him again.

“Who's joking?” Kissing the nape of James' neck, he murmured into the dark curls under his nose, inhaling James' end-of-the-day scent. “This house kind of feels empty now when you're not here. You don't snore, but I miss those little sighs you make in bed.” He chuckled and squeezed James' waist. Voice low and suggestive, he added, “The ones you make while you're asleep.”

His arms shook as James echoed his chuckle, the tone low and weary. James sighed and turned in Bram's embrace, arms sliding around Bram's thick torso, pulling him in tight.

“I like the way you make me make those sighs when I'm awake, Caveman, but sleep sure sounds good right about now.” James yawned. “I'm whipped. It's been a long day. I'm barely thinking straight.”

Keeping his grip on James' waist, Bram walked them over to a chair. He pushed his partner down on it, then moved back to the stove to rescue their dinner. “You need food, baby. You skip too many meals. I can feel your ribcage poking me.”

He winked at the scowl James gave him, heedless of the wordless warning to stop the lecture before it started. “If you lived here, I'd make sure you got three meals a day,” Bram said, as he turned and caught James' eye, “and a bedtime snack, too.”

The last was said with an exaggerated wink and leer just to see the scowl crack and a small smile brighten James' drawn face. That accomplished, Bram brought the food to the table and sat down next to James. They ate in a companionable silence broken only by an occasional embarrassed yawn.

James had barely made his way through half of his food by the time Bram had finished. Bringing fresh coffee to the table for both of them, Bram watched as James picked at his remaining food. He hoped James was in a more receptive mood after being lulled by a full stomach and a secure environment.

“You know, Jamie, you could just move in here.” Bram sipped his coffee and watched as confusion clouded the other man's face.

James' head snapped up. “I thought I was.”

“For more than just a few days. For real.”

“You mean like live here?” A frown settled in the deepening furrows between James' eyes. “Permanent address like?”

“Yeah, permanent like.” Bram gripped his cup with both hands and thought about the sudden panic that appeared to seize James. His lover squirmed and stuttered, teeth digging into the corner of his turned down mouth. Bram could actually hear the man's stomach churning.

“No. I-I mean thanks, but...but that wouldn't work.”

“Why not?”

“It just wouldn't, okay?” James fiddled with his fork, then dropped it on the table, hands sliding down to rub over and over again on the wrinkled fabric covering his jiggling thighs.

Frowning, Bram rested his elbows on either side of his plate. He leaned towards James, his voice was soft and controlled.

“No, it's not okay. We're lovers, Jamie. You spend weekends here anyway. We've discussed having a life together. We love each other.” Bram hesitated. James' overly bright gaze darted away from his, suddenly finding something more interesting in the plate of half-eaten food. “At least, I know I love *you*.”

“That's not fair. I love you, you know that.”

“Then what's the problem?”

“There isn't any problem. It just... wouldn't be right... to impose on you. Not so soon. It's only been a few weeks. It just wouldn't be right.” James' eyes shone with unshed tears.

The panic from earlier was back in full force. James jumped up from his chair and paced back and forth on the far side of the room, out of Bram's reach. “Wouldn't work. Couldn't do it.”

Recognizing the same agitated state that James had been in immediately after Williams had attacked him weeks ago, Bram sat quietly in the chair, slumped low, looking as non-threatening as possible and waited.

He knew if gave James enough time, James would regain some control. He also knew the last thing James could tolerate right now was to be overwhelmed by him, by his physical size or his domineering personality. He had seen the fear in James' face when he had related the events of the attempted break in. It still clouded his lover's face, but now it was mixed with an uncertainty that stabbed at Bram's heart. He knew James loved him, believed it with all his heart, but it didn't do much good if James didn't believe and trust in it, too.

“Hey, baby.” Bram's voice broke through the constant pacing.

James jerked his head around to stare at Bram and Bram waited while James made the visible effort to focus on Bram and stand still at the same time. James' shoulders were slumped and the lines of exhaustion accentuated the lost, little boy expression on his face. No matter what the real problem was, James wasn't in any shape to discuss it.

“What do you say we let it go for now? Call it an early night. I could use some extra shuteye myself. Got a long week ahead of us yet.” Bram eased out of the chair, making sure James didn't shuffle farther out of his personal space as he moved closer. “Sound good to you, baby?”

He ran the palm of his hand up James' back, ending the touch with a firm squeeze of James' neck. Satisfied things were getting under control when James didn't shrug away, Bram released him and began cleaning up the kitchen.

Wanting to give James time to unwind, he offered, “Why don't you go on upstairs and I'll join you as soon as I get this place in shape. Hate to wake up to a messy kitchen. It slows down breakfast too much.”

That pulled a small chuckle from James. He shook his head and scoffed affectionately, “God, you weren't kidding when you claimed to be domestic. My mom could take lessons from you.”

Bram smiled at the more relaxed tone to James voice. He winked at him, but continued to fill the sink with hot water and dish soap.

Stifling a huge yawn, James blushed and rubbed his eyes. “Guess maybe I will go on ahead.”

“Good idea. Before you fall down.” Bram gestured toward the front staircase. “I'll be right up. This'll only take a second.”

“Kay.” James hesitated then added, “And... thanks.”

He paused in his task and looked James in the eye. “You don't need to thank me, Jamie. I'm just glad you're safe and, well, here. With me.” The tension seemed to drain out of James at that.

Without another word, James turned and hurried out of the room. Bram could hear his footsteps on the staircase, then lost track of him as the spacious house swallowed him up. He washed, rinsed, and dried the dishes before turning off the lights and going up to bed, making sure James had sufficient time to himself.

Only the dim bedside lamp was on when Bram entered the room. He swiftly discarded his clothes, hung them up, and slid under the covers naked. Resting on his side, facing James' back, Bram made himself comfortable. One hand lightly touched James' side in reassurance before Bram settled down to sleep.

Just as he was beginning to drift off, James shifted back and curled into the curve of his body. Wordlessly, Bram draped his arm over James and anchored his lover against his chest. Burying his nose in the dark, silky curls tickling his cheek, Bram fell asleep wondering what tomorrow would bring them.

The bedroom was shrouded in hazy gray, a jigsaw puzzle of charcoal and black. Eyes wide open, James jerked upright in bed. Chest heaving and breath shallow and labored, he frantically scanned the surrounding semi-familiar shadows looking for signs of what had awakened him.

Abruptly, loud, tapping sounds forced his gaze to the window on his side of the bed. Long, quivering fingers of the branches from the oak growing along the house danced erratically on the glass, keeping beat with the gusts of violent wind that had kicked up during the night.

Heart bouncing off his ribs, James cringed and gasped when a warm, possessive hand gripped his arm.

“Take it easy, baby. It's just me.” Bram's sleep roughened voice rumbled against his side. Bram eased James back down to the mattress and threw one stout arm over James' chest. “Go back to sleep, Jamie. Just the wind. Nobody here but us, baby, just us.”

The leaden weight of Bram's arm held James pinned to the bed, its mass awkward and oddly stifling, but James still took a huge amount of comfort in it. Bram seemed to always be protecting or sheltering him from something. Even in his sleep Bram knew James needed him and he was there.

James had the sudden urge to tell Bram the truth about his fears about moving in, but the man was already fast asleep. Light snores ruffled James' hair, tickling the side of his face.

Concentrating, he willed himself to take slow, deep breaths. By the time he was breathing normally again, his heart had stopped pounding and the sweat had dried on his chest. The scratching at the window faded to a mild annoyance and James slipped into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Eight

The room was still dark. This time it was a firm touch that pulled James out of sleep and into the gray shadows of the morning gloom. A strong hand moved over his skin leaving a trail of warmth everywhere it touched. Bram's rich, earthy scent teased his senses, evoking visions of sweaty, straining muscles and passionate, hungry kisses. Sleep fell away like a discarded cloak as his lips were claimed and Bram's weight settled over him.

James could only make out the outline of his lover, but his memories supplied the details of intense blue eyes and rippling pecs and abs. Seemingly on their own, his fingertips explored Bram's chest and arms, reaffirming his mental image of his powerful lover, adding the texture of fine hairs and curved, solid flesh.

Soft but demanding lips kissed his mouth, urging him to open it to them. James surrendered to the kisses, moaning into the heat and force of the tongue that invaded. He returned as good as he got and got even more back. His mouth was ravaged, devoured.

The blackness of the room heightened James' senses. Lost in the consuming embrace of hands, lips, and tongue, he barely noticed the thigh wedged between his own legs or the questing touch on his abdomen until his cock was captured in a coarse sheath. Three long pulls and his shaft was hard. Two more delicious tugs and it was released to lay abandoned, full and eager against his groin.

Silent, Bram moved to rain light kisses over James' closed eyelids and flushed cheeks. The kisses traveled to his neck, adding little nips and sucking motions to the seduction.

As the distracting kisses marked James' chest and upper arms, his fingers entwined with Bram's thick, square ones. His arms were eased up under the pillows.

Stretched and exposed to the chill of the room, James shivered, then moaned as a wet, rough tongue invaded his armpit, lapping at the soft hairs and sensitive skin secreted there. He arched his back, grinding into the weight of muscle and bone pinning him to the bed, head thrown back and eyelids tightly clenched.

“Oh, yeah.” Bram's raw, passionate voice sounded like a lion's growl in the night, startling James. “Tremble for me, baby. Show how much you love me.”

Desire coursed through him, making his skin burn and his mind spin. He shuddered, his body grinding into Bram's voracious embrace. No one made him feel the way Bram did. No one else had ever known how to achieve the right balance of rough dominance and skillful tenderness that James craved from a lover. James shook his head, throwing out all thoughts other than the joy of the immediate moment. He sank into the erotic pleasure of his lover's knowing touch and let Bram carry him away on a tide of lustful need.

Every lick and sucking nibble sent an electric jolt along his nerves. Part of it rocketed to his groin and lay sizzling in his balls, building and tightening his need. Another part lodged under his ribs, an ever-expanding globe of want, anticipation, and hunger that only responded to Bram -- the touch of Bram's work-roughened hands, his supple, firm body, his earthy, masculine smell, and his wanton, devouring mouth.

Pressed chest to chest, James could feel his lover's heart beating against his. In his mind, James could see it reaching out to touch him, soothing his own rapid, hammering rhythm, calming it until it matched his lover's pulse, beat for beat.

His wrists were pushed down onto the mattress, a firm, unspoken warning to leave them there. James groaned, the desire to caress and stroke his lover's smooth skin suddenly overwhelming once the ability to do so at will was taken away. He fisted the pillowcase, digging his fingers into it to keep his arms from reaching for any part of Bram he could find.

The weight on James shifted as Bram moved down his torso. The absence of physical restraint made leaving his arms in place even harder. It also made his cock swell and jerk.

The constant path of Bram's teasing, wet tongue journeyed over his ribs, and then laved a nipple until it was hard and hot. The other nipple received the same attention. Bram mouthed and suckled it until it was swollen, then rolled and plucked it between his teeth until James felt the burn all the way down to the base of his cock. His asshole clenched and flared, empty and protesting. He could feel his climax building, coiled in the heavy sac between his legs.

An abrupt swirl around the rim of his navel jerked James' concentration back to Bram's busy mouth. He sucked in his stomach and squirmed, the sensation both exciting and unbearable. Bram's powerful hands held his hips still as that tongue plundered his belly's sweet spot over and over again. While that tongue worked, Bram's thumbs stroked over the crease where thigh met groin, caressing tantalizingly near James' neglected cock.

James' hips bucked and he bit back a cry as Bram burrowed his face into the light growth of hair at the root of James' cock. Bram nuzzled the shaft, licking the sides and base, lips soft and wet against the hard flesh.

Through the shadowy gloom, James saw Bram unexpectedly loom up between his wide-open knees, his legs gripped in the big man's hands.

Mouth still loving James, Bram pushed his lover's thighs forward, giving him access to the hidden pleasures James had to offer.

His tongue bold and strong, Bram made it dance over the wrinkled sac beneath James' cock. He explored the tender strip of soft flesh stretched over the root of James' shaft, then dipped lower to moisten the rim of his opening.

The sensation was hot, wet, and all too suddenly gone. The crunch of the pillowcase fabric squeaked in James' ears, his fists desperately twisting the cloth in the effort to keep his hands in place.

Sharp bites and soothing licks wandered up the length of his inner thighs, visited the back of his bent knee, then traveled down his tensed calf and ankle. By the time Bram reached his feet, James' toes were curled and his spine arched, every muscle taut with anticipation and unreleased passion. He nearly screamed when Bram worked his way back down his leg and up the other, pausing only once to lean away

and fumble for something from the bedside drawer.

When Bram turned his efforts back to sucking the curl right out of James' toes, James concentrated on the bruising grip his lover had on his thighs to keep from coming.

The sharp snap of a bottle cap being opened was followed by the sudden glide of cool gel against his ass.

“Take it slow, baby. Gonna take it nice and slow.”

Bram's low, raspy command sent a shiver through James. One finger, then two eased into his ass, toying with the rim, stretching it, starting the familiar burning ache deep in his pelvis near the root of his cock.

“Gonna make it good for you, baby.”

With one hand stroking inside of him, Bram used his other to grip and tug James' cock.

James snapped his hips to the rhythm of the strokes, first grinding down on Bram's fingers then thrusting up into Bram's fist. Each downward movement brought him into contact with Bram's shaft, its broad, wet tip nudging at the small of his back again and again.

The dual sensations of filling Bram's tight, slick fist and of his ass being filled drove James to the edge of climax, where he hung on, waiting. Each time he approached orgasm, Bram would vary the speed or the depth of his strokes and the moment would fade a few degrees. James thought he would explode if he didn't come soon.

“Christ! Fuck!” Gritting his teeth, James hissed, then begged, “More. Harder. Just a little bit more!” Arching his back, he shoved his ass down hard, impaling himself on Bram's hand, forcing the stiff fingers in deep. The new angle allowed Bram's fingertips to brush over the small, hidden gland. James cried out and rocked his hips harder, lost in the approaching bliss of mind-shattering orgasm, egged on by Bram's throaty demands.

“That's it, baby. Give it to me. Give me all you've got.”

His climax boiled up, white-hot and burning, from his balls and shot out in short, stuttered dabs of white. He felt it coat the head of his cock and trickle down the sides.

His ass flared around Bram's hand, each spasm milking the fullness inside of him, trying to draw his lover's essence into himself. His orgasm faded, and James regretted the loss of substance the moment Bram's fingers eased out. His lower torso was laid flat on the bed.

Pliant and sated, James made a contented sound in his chest, primal and universally known to lovers. Shudders ran down him from head to toe, the lingering pleasure of orgasm still tingling in his bones. The sudden, supple weight of his still unsatisfied lover flowed over him like a favorite blanket.

Groaning, Bram aligned their slick cocks. He thrust his hips back and forth, sliding their heated shafts over each other, letting friction and pressure work their own brand of magic.

James' cock stirred, reluctant to respond to the provocative rhythm. Half hard, he bucked his hips up in time to the ancient beat, primal drive replacing reason.

He yanked Bram down for a blistering kiss, their tongues dueling for control. He won the battle until

Bram lifted him up and wrapped those arms around James' slender back, engulfing him in a crushing embrace that left no question who the dominant male in the room was.

Surrounded by an amazing amount of strength and power, James relinquished both the kiss and himself to his lover. Knowing hands roughly caressed his skin while his full erection traded Eskimo kisses in the dark with Bram's.

The moment turned fast and furious. James felt a wave of dizziness wash over him, his second orgasm taking away his ability to speak. His sudden release forced a cry from him.

“Jesus, Bram, damn! Fuck!”

Bram grunted and increased the speed of his thrusts until he abruptly froze in place, neck tendons taut and head thrown back. The firm shaft pressed into his groin pulsed and liquid heat splattered between them.

“Oh, baby! Shit!”

In the moonlight, James could see sweat beading on Bram's forehead. The sweat ran down his face to drip off the corner of his square jaw. James wiped at the next drip that threatened to fall, hand as unsteady as his racing heartbeat.

Rolling on his side, Bram dragged James over with him, pulling James in close so he could run his hands over James' bare back and hip.

James rested his head on Bram's chest and listened to the fast but steady heartbeat. The hypnotic, comforting rhythm like a favorite fairy tale, lulled him back to sleep. He felt a quick, rough kiss brushed across his forehead and then awareness slipped quietly away in the dark one more time.

Chapter Nine

The hunt for an affordable apartment was tedious and frustrating. James had invited Bram to go apartment shopping with him in an effort to soften his refusal to move in with the man. Bram sullenly agreed to accompany him. Making good use of his construction background, Bram was quick to point out every flaw and negative aspect of each place until even the landlords began looking at the buildings with a more critical eye.

Almost completely through the newspaper's available listings, James thought he would never find an acceptable, safe and convenient apartment that wouldn't break his budget or send Bram into fits. By mid afternoon, the two of them had looked at eight apartments and one duplex, all of which were either in a bad neighborhood, too expensive, too rundown, or too far from work for James. With one address left to check out, James was tired and discouraged.

Parked at the curb, James stared out of the passenger window of Bram's truck at the next rental possibility. It was a moderate-sized, three story, brick apartment building. He was unexpectedly pleased by the sight of its neatly manicured shrubbery and even walkway leading to a sturdy-looking, security-keyed lobby door. The quiet street had little traffic for the middle of the afternoon and the surrounding neighborhood was neat and clean. He double-checked the address against the newspaper to be sure they had the right place.

"You sure this is it?" James asked.

"Address on the curb matches the one in the ad."

"Uh-huh."

"Let's take a look."

"If it's for real, it's probably gone by now."

"Never know unless we go in. It looks great."

"Uh-huh."

"It's close to the office."

"Uh-huh."

"And not that much farther from your place than where I'm at now."

"You're at my place now. The perfect distance away. None."

"Bram. We went over this."

“Uh-huh.”

“Will you stop that?”

“What?”

“That!” James scowled at the innocent, affronted look Bram gave him. “Christ, never mind. Let's go.” He climbed out of the truck and waited for Bram to join him on the sidewalk. “It'll probably be too expensive anyway and then you can say 'I told you so'.”

“You'd save a whole shitload of money just staying where you're sleeping now.”

“You never give up, do you?”

“Uh-uh.”

James growled under his breath and stalked to the lobby door. Bram followed behind, critically examining every aspect of the building on the way to his lover's side.

In the end, the apartment was available. The rooms were spacious, the kitchen and bath recently updated with new fixtures and appliances, and the carpet had been replaced only six months prior. The obvious cosmetic touches had been attended to, but the elderly, wooden front door was secured with only one ancient lock that fought back when the landlord tried to open it. It took three tries before he was successful.

After quizzing the landlord relentlessly, including insisting on knowing how often the police were called to the building, even Bram couldn't find an outstanding problem to complain about. That still didn't erase the unhappy expression from his face.

They waited while the landlord ran a credit check, each exploring the apartment, James with obvious pleasure and Bram with thinly disguised disappointment. Fifteen minutes later, James paid a first month's deposit, signed a six-month lease, and got the okay to move in. James heaved a sigh of relief while Bram's frown deepened.

“Where do you want these, Jamie?” Bram tilted the box in his hands so James could see the stacks of dinner plates inside.

Crouched over an open box of files and loose papers, James twisted around far enough to look inside the carton in question. He sighed, cast a weary glance over the cluttered, disorganized room, and answered, “Just leave them on the floor in the kitchen for now. I'll sort them out in the morning.”

He stood, aching, one hand rubbing roughly at the small of his lower back. The apartment was livable, if disorganized. All of the furniture was in place and the majority of his belongings had been sorted out to the proper rooms. He could function on a day-to-day basis for the next week while he slowly found places for everything else.

Eyeing the remaining disarray, James shrugged. “I don't know about you, but I'm beat. Moving everything out of the old place into this one in one day is a hell of a lot of work.” He tossed an empty box

aside. "I'm just thrilled Mitch and the other guys came over to help out. That was really great of them to give up their Saturday." James made a face and sourly added, "I could have done without the dog jokes, though."

Coming back from the kitchen, Bram laughed, "What? You don't agree with Mitch?" He ran a hand over the side of James' head, ruffling his dark curls, playful and teasing.

"I don't mind his opinion of me. I just wish he'd stop with the barking and yipping." James shrugged again and grimaced. "But they get going and they're kind of relentless."

"That's just because they like you." Bram kicked aside a few empty cartons and moved to stand close to James, towering over him, intentionally invading James' personal space.

"Lucky me." James shifted so that his hip brushed against Bram, the earthy scent of sweat and Bram's spicy aftershave filling his senses. He smiled up at his lover, pleased to finally be alone with him.

"The guys are kind of crude, but they're good men. I'd rather spend time with them than in the boardroom." Bram returned James' smile, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "But I agree with Mitch, you do make a great teacup poodle. Just about a handful." Bram's touch turned possessive and sensual, both hands wrapping around James' waist and pulling him close. "That is, as long as the hands are mine."

He leaned in and kissed James, pulling James roughly into his arms. James relaxed into the embrace and held on, relieved to be out from under the group of construction workers' watchful gazes and teasing comments. The kiss deepened, and hands wandered over broad shoulders and firm buttocks on both sides of the passionate clutch. Just as things began to get more serious, a loud crash and angry, raised voices startled them. Both men broke away to stare at the far wall of the living room. James half expected something or someone to burst through it.

The distinct sounds of a physical domestic argument leeches through the thin walls joining the apartments together. Another unpleasant bang actually shook the wall, then an eerie silence fell.

Trading uneasy glances with Bram, James made to step back from his lover, but Bram held onto him, strong, insistent hands on his waist. "That's," he said, tipping his head toward the abused wall, "not a good thing. I wonder how often they toss dishes at each other."

James' face became a deep, unsettled frown. He blinked furiously for a moment, lips drawn into a tight, twitching line.

"Kind of reminds me of my parents." He gave Bram an embarrassed glance, face flushing with the admission. "They used to fight like that sometimes." James swallowed hard and added, "I hated Friday nights. Payday. Dad'd have a couple of drinks on the way home and then some little thing you never expected would set him off and he and mom would be at it."

He stared at the dividing wall again and mumbled, "I hated it. Really, really hated it." His face hardened, but his eyes were rimmed with unshed tears. "I'd lie in bed and listen to the yelling and the slams and thuds, trying to imagine what was making each sound. I knew in the morning my mom would be all tired and really quiet. Way more than the usual quiet. Her face would be all swollen from crying all night. Once she even had a bruise on her cheek. I never knew how that happened. She wouldn't talk to us kids about it."

He blinked several times, shoulders hunched and his voice low and faint. "I hope they don't do that very

often.”

“You don't have to live near that.” Bram's tone was slightly biting even though his words were obviously meant to comfort. “You can still come live with me, Jamie.”

His tone raised James' defenses. “Come on, Bram.” He gestured at the empty boxes and disarray around the room, his own tone exasperated. “I'm all moved in.”

“We can un-move you. It wouldn't take long.” Bram tried for a lighter tone, but the underlying hardness was still easily heard.

“I'd lose my deposit.” James' stance mirrored Bram's, hands on his hips. “I can't afford to do that.”

“It isn't that much. And you wouldn't need it if you were living under my roof.” Bram tried to soften his words with a smile. “It's paid for.”

Voice terse and low, James declared, “I can pay for my own 'roof', thanks.”

Bram scowled. He reached for James, but his lover stepped back a pace. “I'm just saying, you could save money and live someplace nicer at the same time.”

“This apartment is nice!” James bristled.

“Maybe. But it's not any more secure than the last one.” Bram waved an arm at the now silent wall. “You moved to find a safer place to stay and this place is showing all the signs of having just as many problems as the last one. The only time my neighbors get rowdy is when Miss Emily loses her hearing aid and turns up her TV too loud.” He took two steps forward and pulled James into his arms. “I'm just worried about you.”

James slipped out of Bram's loose embrace, but stood his ground directly front of the man. “I've told you before; I can take care of myself.”

Eyes narrowed, Bram's face clouded over and his tone darkened. “Like you did with Williams? He damn near choked you unconscious in that hallway. What would have happened then if I hadn't shown up?”

Blood drained from his face, but James dug his heels in, determined to show he was Bram's equal in protecting himself. “Who knows?”

“Who knows? Are you insane?”

Bram towered over James, his size intimidating and a little scary. James refused to be influenced by it.

Voice booming like he was on a noisy construction site, Bram continued, “I've got a pretty good idea and so do you. He wasn't trying to break into your place the other night to steal your stereo, Jamie. He waited until the middle of the night when he knew you were home, in bed, asleep. What does that tell you?”

“It tells me the guy is nuts.” James automatically matched Bram's tone and volume, confusion leaking into his voice as he began to lose control of the argument. “What's it got to do with this?”

After a moment of terse silence Bram continued in a quieter tone, icy blue gaze locked on James. “Yesterday you lived next door to a violent asshole who liked to beat on people.” As if on cue, another thud hit

the living room wall.

James cringed at the sound of a young child's mournful cry. He chewed at his lower lip, making it sore.

Bram looked from the wall to James' face and demanded, "You want to tell me what's different here, Jamie?"

A fleeting moment of indecision tugged at James until Bram added, "Come home with me."

Indignation and fear reared their ugly heads, confusing the issue for James. What had started out as fear of commitment had turned into a battle of wills. James knew it, but couldn't seem to stop pushing at Bram.

"I've told you before. I don't need someone controlling my life." James was determined to win this battle. "Sex is one thing. Real life is another."

"What?" It was Bram's turn to sound indignant. "You don't think our having sex is real? You think this is all a game?"

"I didn't say that." James backpedaled. "I mean they're separate. Just because I like giving over control during sex doesn't mean I want to give it up any place else. I don't need a keeper."

Frowning, eyes narrowed, Bram said, "Then don't act like you do."

"Oh, so you think I'm some incompetent, little twink that needs a daddy?" James' pacing increased, weaving in and out of the obstacle course of boxes on the floor.

"No, I think you're some thick-headed idiot who needs his ass kicked so he can think straight!"

James eyes flashed to Bram's and his breathing came in shallow puffs, fear of revealing his true feelings squeezing his throat.

"Right! The big man's answer to everything. If it doesn't do what you want it to do, hit it!" James shoved at Bram's immovable chest. Bram grabbed James' hands where they gripped the front of his shirt and held on to them, forcing James to stand still.

"I'm not the bad guy here."

Reason fled and James grabbed the opening to end the fight. "Maybe you just shouldn't be *here* at all right now."

Not falling for the quick fix James wanted, Bram said, "*Maybe* I should go next door and fix the problem for everyone."

"*Maybe* you should just *go*." James yanked his wrists out of Bram's hands. He walked several feet away and then turned his back on Bram, hoping to hide the unshed tears in his eyes. He was vibrating with visible tremors.

"That's your answer to problems, Jamie." Bram followed a few feet then stopped and watched James pace and shiver. Expression softening, Bram added, "You turn your back on them hoping they'll go away. Hiding doesn't solve anything."

“I'm not hiding.” James spun on his heels to face Bram.

“You are. I know you want to be with me, but you're so busy trying to hide your feelings from everyone else you can't find them yourself.”

“Everything doesn't have to be a confrontation. Some problems do go away.” James shoved his hands into his pockets to keep them from visibly shaking.

“Williams certainly didn't go away. He was prying open your door in the middle of the night, for Christ's sake.” Bram took a step toward James then stopped and stepped back, obviously wanting to go to his lover. “How were you going to handle that? With a lawyer?”

Shrugging, James didn't have an answer for him.

“You really think you were going to get time to call for help if that bastard had gotten into your place that night? Really? He's still out there.” Bram swung his arm and pointed out the window of the apartment. “Just because you moved to a different apartment doesn't mean he isn't still obsessed with you.”

“What?” That got James' attention. He hadn't thought about Williams coming after him. Everything the man had done had been isolated to the apartment building. James figured moving would leave the problem behind. Maybe he had been too naive about certain things.

“Do you really want to be alone with that guy still out there?”

“Now you're just trying to scare me into doing what you want.” The words were bold, but they didn't reflect any amount of genuine confidence. They both knew it, too.

“I wouldn't do that, Jamie.” Bram's voice was quiet and defeated. “I'm just worried about you.”

It sounded odd to James, odd and frightening. Bram was always in control, always full of self-confidence. The change was unsettling. James responded the way he always did when he didn't know what to do, he distanced himself from the situation.

“Well, you don't have to worry. I can take care of myself! I don't need you.” James stalked to the door and flung it open. He didn't honestly want Bram to leave, but he wasn't thinking clearly and he needed time alone.

Bram hesitated, narrowed eyes glinting with displeasure, his mouth a thin line of exasperation and worry. “Fine. If you change your mind and decide you really do need someone in your life, you know where I am.”

He took his coat off the large, antique, brass hook on the back of the front door, grabbed James and planted a rough, wet kiss on his bruised lips, and then left without another word.

James slammed the door on Bram's retreating back. The moment the noise stopped echoing through the strange apartment, he regretted letting his temper get the better of him. But he knew living together would be a mistake. When Bram tired of him, James would be left homeless and abandoned. Just like when his family had kicked him out, only worse.

Sympathizing with the faint wail on the other side of the wall, James grimaced. James yanked the door open intending to call Bram back before he got too far away. James didn't get one foot out the door before

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he ran face first into a woman standing right outside his door.

Chapter Ten

A blond, well-endowed, thirty-something woman teetering on five-inch, clear Lucite heels stood smack in the middle of James' doorway. She appeared to be dressed in nothing but the heels and an electric blue kimono that barely reached to the top of her thighs.

“Hi. I'm Macy.” Her voice was a breathy whisper meant to make a person lean into her personal space to hear her. Long, bright pink nails fluttered in James' face making him flinch back a few inches. “I live next door.” Macy pointed at the apartment to his left, directly across from the battling couple.

“Say, you're pretty cute. So's the big guy that just left. Are you two brothers? Can I come in?” Macy batted her long, blue, artificial eyelashes and gave James an innocent smile.

Stunned into silence, James could only step back as Macy thrust her amply exposed cleavage into his face and shimmied past him into his apartment.

Torn between chasing after Bram or leaving a stranger in his new home, James clenched his fists, grunted an inarticulate curse, slapped his forehead in frustration, and followed Macy back into his living room. By the time he'd turned around and shut the door, Macy had discarded the short kimono.

“Lady! What the hell are you doing? Who are you?”

Probably five foot five in her stocking feet, Macy towered over James in her heels. Her double D cups spilled over the top edges of her lift-and-separate, hot pink and black, lace shelf bra like rising bread dough out of a too-small, buttered loaf pan. A matching thong hid almost none of her clean-shaven assets and showed off her shapely thighs and the curve of her slender hips well. She moved in close to James and giggled when her breasts nearly put out one of James' eyes.

“Macy. Macy Love.” Instead of offering her hand, Macy clasped her own hands together and jiggled in place, apparently excited by her next admission. “I'm an exotic dancer. You know, like in that movie *Flashdance*? I dance at the Tipster Club.” She widened her eyes to accentuate the importance of the club's name. “Part-time, anyway. I have classes in the mornings.”

Without missing a beat Macy batted her false eyelashes at James and cooed, “I just got a new outfit for the club and I need a man's opinion on it.” She pirouetted on the toes of her Lucite stacks.

James had to give her credit. She twirled in place on those stiletto heels with the grace of an experienced, confident dancer. She was a shapely, toned woman. After one full turn, she twisted sideways and presented him with a view of her shapely, exposed rump, a thin line of black lace straining between her cheeks.

“So, does it make my butt look big?”

“What? Ah...yes, no! I mean no. It looks ...fine. I guess.”

“Oh, good! Say, you really are cute! It's been so *boring* living here without any good looking guys around, you know?” Macy shimmied again and ran one pointed nail down James' chest.

“I mean, I'm between boyfriends right now. Vince broke up with me again and five times is the limit with me. I'm through with him.” She paused and a slight frown marred her perfectly tanned, unlined, make-up-laden face. “Anyway, I think he might be married.”

Macy shrugged, patted at her bouncy Marilyn Monroe hair-do, and brightened. “The last guy that lived here only stayed a couple of months. Tenants don't usually stay long in this apartment. That's why I had to run over here quick and meet you before you decided to leave, too.” She tugged at the thin string holding the scrap of thong in place and winked at James. “He wasn't as cute as you are. What's your name, handsome?”

As casually as possible, James yanked open the front door and leaned against it, suddenly feeling trapped. “Ah, hi. I'm James. Nice to meet you. Do you think you could get dressed and leave, please?”

The last thing he needed on top of a fight with Bram was a strange woman stripping in his apartment. He quickly crouched down and retrieved the discarded kimono off the floor. He tried to drape the robe over Macy's front, but she just giggled and pushed the robe away.

“Aren't you just the forward one?” Macy batted at James' hands, then grabbed one and pulled it to rest over her heart on the swell of her left breast.

James yanked his arm back like he had been set on fire. “Actually no, I'm not. But I think I'll have to be.” He grabbed Macy's arm, her robe, and the doorknob and pushed the woman toward the door. “I'm on my way out. It's been really nice to meet you, but I can't talk right now. Maybe another time.”

“Well, gee, okay. I just thought maybe we could be, you know, *friends*.” Her innocent expression contrasted with her body language, sending mixed, confusing messages. “You know, like neighborly.” Macy stumbled over the threshold, grabbed the kimono James shoved in her hands, and gave him a crushed pout that almost stopped him cold.

Blocking the doorway, James paused, then sighed. “Listen, Macy. It was really sweet of you to stop by and say hello.”

Macy grinned and jiggled her breasts at him.

James closed his eyes for a moment before adding, “I appreciate the ...warm welcome to the building, but...I'm gay.”

Frowning, Macy nibbled on one perfect, pink fingernail and asked, “Like in... you don't like girls?”

“I like girls. I just don't date girls.”

“Do you have sex with them?” Macy sounded hopeful. “Ever?”

James choked a little, but solemnly shook his head no.

“What about the other cute guy? The big one?”

“My boyfriend. Sorry, Macy.” James crossed his fingers behind the door and hoped the truth would send her running in the other direction.

Macy seemed to think about it for second, then her frown disappeared and a bright, toothy smile split her face. “That's okay. We can be friends anyway, Jimmy. Maybe you'll change your mind.”

“It's James.”

“Okay.”

Suddenly the same muffled baby's cry as earlier wailed from behind the door across from Macy's. Both of them turned to look at the battling couple's apartment. The cry sounded again, long and mournful, a wail that raised the hair on James' arms. Before he could comment about it, Macy sighed, turning big, sad eyes toward him.

“That's Kitty. She cries a lot.” She shook her head and stared at the apartment door. “They don't pay near enough attention to her.”

“Is it like that all the time?”

She nodded, clutching the robe to her breasts and managing not to cover them at the same time. “That's why no one stays in your place long. The crying gets to them after a few weeks.”

As if on cue, the wail broke out again, but went instantly silent when a heavy thud hit the wall.

Taking a step toward the apartment, James clenched his fists at his sides and stopped, unpleasant childhood memories flooding his mind. “Why doesn't anyone do something about it? Call the police or something?”

“Oh, the police are here all the time. Nick, that's Sheila's husband, he gets drunk a lot and they're always fighting about something. Shelia goes off to her sister's for a day or so and then comes right back.” She shrugged then brightened. “I get to babysit for Kitty then.”

“They let *you*, ah... ask you to babysit?” James didn't know why he was startled these people would trust this nice but ditsy woman with their child. The dancer might actually be the more stable of the group. Not surprisingly, Macy didn't seem to notice his implied criticism. She smiled and her eyes sparkled at the mention of babysitting.

“Oh, yeah. I just love Kitty and she loves me. We have a great time together. I wish she was mine.” She sniffed dramatically and looked longingly at Nick and Sheila's door. “I wouldn't let her cry like that.”

James studied Macy, seeing the sincerity and determination in her painted face. When she wasn't batting her eyelashes and flirting with him, he could suddenly see she had a very pretty face under all the pancake and eyeliner. “I bet you would take good care of her, Macy.”

“Yeah.” She leaned closer to James and whispered, “You're sweet.” Another heavy noise echoed from Sheila's place, making Macy wince. “Stay away from Nick. He's the landlord's nephew. He'll give you trouble if you complain.”

The strong scent of lilies and baby lotion tickled James' nose as Macy's body heat touched him. She really had no idea what personal space meant. James shifted a little to widen the tiny gap between them so he

could grab a breathe of unscented air. “Ah, thanks for the tip, Macy, but I think I can handle myself.”

“Okay, Jimmy, but don't say I didn't warn you.”

“James.”

“Okay.”

Macy nodded vigorously and flounced off, turning back when she reached her own door to flutter her overly long nails in James' direction again before disappearing into her apartment.

Bram long gone, Macy's perfume still clinging to the air, and a dull ache pulsing behind his eyes, James wearily closed the door to his own apartment and leaned against it, defeated, confused, and frustrated. What was it about him that attracted every nut case in every apartment building he lived in?

Skipping dinner, James downed two Motrin and wandered back into the living room. He shoved aside a stack of books on the floor and threw himself down on the couch. A small animal statue on the coffee table drew his attention and he stretched to scoop it up off the table. It had been a gift to him from Bram and it held a special place in his affections, a symbol of the other man's sensitivity and caring.

Resting the small figure on his t-shirt clad stomach, he wiggled his jeans-covered hips deeper into the cushions of the sofa. He closed his eyes and fingered the edges and curves of the animals, the resin cool to the touch. The animals had been meant to represent Bram and him, symbols of the roles each took in their relationship. It was a kind of declaration of their love for each other. It showed just how much one completed the other. James loved it. It was his most prized possession next to his grandfather's old, broken pocketknife he always carried in his pants pocket.

James was lonely, but a new kind of emptiness began to gnaw at him. His stomach churned and his head pounded despite the Motrin. It had been his decision to be alone, to live alone. He knew it was a sensible decision that would save him time, money, and pain later, but it didn't seem like that now. He should have been honest about his misgivings, but he didn't really want to hear placating promises that would eventually change as Bram's feeling for him tired and faded as he knew they would. They always did. But it sure didn't feel like the right decision now.

He debated calling Bram and explaining, but he couldn't find a way to put his feeling into words. Nothing seemed adequate to describe the pain and rejection he was trying to avoid.

Putting the statue back on the table where he could look at it, James turned on his side and used his arm for a pillow. Eyelids heavy and body exhausted, he fell asleep with thoughts of crying babies, blond-haired breasts, and rough, manly touches dominating his dreams.

They were shouts this time, not wailing cries. Though still muffled, they were also closer. They had a higher pitch and it took James several sleepy blinks before he realized they weren't part of his restless

dreams that had been populated by his parents and sisters, Macy and Bram, and an unseen child huddled in a broom closet, crying.

The shouts died away, followed by low sobbing. Several thumping noises dotted the odd silences between sobs.

Startled and confused, James lay very still in the darkness of the strange apartment and tried to make out the gray shapes around him. The layout was different, but the shapes slowly took on the features of familiar furniture and remembered stacks of unorganized belongings.

Marginally more awake, James sat up on the edge of the couch, blinking hard to push back the darkness. He fumbled for the knob on the nearest lamp-shaped item only to discover it hadn't been plugged in.

The muffled sobbing suddenly was lost in a barrage of rough, raspy shouts that pulled James right out of his seat. A child-like, mournful wail joined the chaos and James was at his door, yanking it open, before coherent thought had a chance to form in his sleep-blurred mind.

He rocketed into the hall just in time to see a man and woman tussle in the open doorway to the apartment Macy had said belonged to the argumentative couple, Nick and Sheila. Keys hung from the partially open front door and a woman's handbag lay on the floor by the threshold.

The man was only a couple of inches taller than James with neatly trimmed brown hair. James guessed the guy was in his late thirties. He wore some type of designer jeans and a pale blue polo shirt.

The woman was dressed in low-heels and a green halter dress that clung to her too-thin frame. Her face was hidden, locks of dark red hair obscuring all of her features. James had the fleeting thought that she must be freezing if she had worn only that dress out for the evening. James couldn't see enough of her to guess her age.

Unaware of or unaffected by James' presence, the couple continued battling. The man held the woman by her upper arm. He punched the wall between words with his free hand. He shook her hard, his voice low and rough, a deep, raspy sound that showed the effects of too much booze and too many cigarettes over the years. It grated on James' nerves, faintly reminding him of his own father's voice.

“God damnit! I saw you flirting with him, Sheila! Don't tell me I didn't!” His voice was unsteady and slurred.

“I wasn't, Nicky. I swear! I just smiled at him. That's all!” Sheila raised an arm to push the hair out of her face and James could see it was tear-stained and puffy. Large, sad, brown eyes were rimmed with a pool of fresh tears.

“Don't lie to me! I saw the *way* you smiled, bitch!”

As James moved closer, the reek of alcohol assaulted his senses. Before James could speak, Nick slapped Sheila, releasing her arm and sending her stumbling against the doorframe.

James dove to catch her, but he was too far away. “Christ! What's your problem, asshole?” Crouching low at her side, he tried to help her to her feet. “Are you all right, miss?”

Sheila huddled on the floor, legs tucked close and head protected by one arm while she used the other to brace her upper body up off the worn carpet of the hallway. When she darted a panicked glance at James,

a trickle of blood oozed from the corner of her mouth.

“Jesus.” James searched unsuccessfully through his jeans pockets for something to press to the wound.

“Who the fuck are you, buddy? Get away from my wife.” Nick stumbled back and bounced off the wall, but remained on his feet.

Shooting a glare up at a swaying, still swearing Nick, James grabbed the handbag off the floor and offered it to Sheila.

“Got a Kleenex in there? Something for your lip?” He motioned at Sheila's mouth. “It's bleeding.”

Sheila didn't answer, but she nodded and accepted the bag, huddling into a tighter ball while she pulled a small tissue out and dabbed at her face.

Offering comfort, James patted her shoulder and again tried to help her stand. Sheila cringed and shook her head, glancing in Nick's direction without actually looking up to face him.

A low, menacing growl came from behind James. “Get your hands off my property!”

James sighed and began to stand, but he was suddenly shoved to the floor, a solid weight on his back. Air swooshed from his lungs and his chin brushed along the coarse carpet. He could feel a sudden, sharp burn as layers of skin were rubbed off. Somewhere to one side he heard a door open and just as quickly slam shut.

“Fucker!”

The smell of Scotch puffed over his shoulder and hot breath blasted against the back of his neck. A heavy, bare-knuckled punch hit him just above his right kidney and James instantly retaliated.

Slamming an elbow back, James connected with soft flesh. He was rewarded by a grunt and a sudden lessening of the weight on his back. Rolling out from under Nick, James shoved the man away and regained his feet. One hand pressed to his bruised flank, James panted through the blinding pain and leaned against the nearest wall.

Sheila was still sobbing on the floor by his feet. James leaned down and touched her shoulder. “Go call the police.” She shook her head no and crawled away from him, a fresh round of tears breaking out.

Regaining his breath, Nick climbed to his knees. He suddenly sprung to his feet charging full tilt at James. He knocked James into the wall and landed two good punches to James' face. One clipped his mouth and jaw, but the second punch was a direct hit, smashing into his left temple, splitting skin and sending shooting pains through James' head and down his neck.

Reactions slowed by alcohol, Nick gave James time to regroup and retaliate. Lashing out with all the strength he could muster, James delivered an upper cut to the drunken man's chin and fiercely shoved Nick away.

Nick stumbled and tripped, hitting the edge of the open doorjamb with his left shoulder. A gristly crunch made James flinch and Nick screamed as he went down, crumpled and wedged between wall and floor at an odd angle. The man's left shoulder twisted unnaturally. Every attempt to get up only resulted in a bel- low of pain and frustration from him. Slurred curses were mixed with demands for assistance that went

ignored from a silent and glassy-eyed Sheila.

Back to the wall, James debated trying to make it to his apartment versus calling for help when Macy's door popped open and she fluttered out still in heels and a slightly longer, powder blue kimono.

James slowly eased down the wall to sit in a sprawled heap, head pounding and the walls spinning around him. Nausea flared, but he managed to pant through it until it subsided. The sudden sound of sirens registered on James just as Macy knelt down at his side.

She pressed a cool hand to his sweaty forehead. "I called the police and an ambulance. Someone always needs an ambulance."

He raised his gaze to meet Macy's wide-eyed stare, trying to blink away the triple images of the dancer that shimmered before him. Macy made a tsk-tsking sound and gave him an exasperated smile. "Couldn't stay away, huh?"

"Guess not." James grunted and clutched his side, a low groan escaping as he leaned forward to try and lessen the pain.

Macy sighed and held onto his arm, helping to keep him upright. "It's okay. I didn't think you would. The nice ones can't."

A bone chilling baby's wail came from the open apartment door a few feet away.

"Christ, we forgot about the baby." James struggled to stand, but the room dipped and the floor under his feet dissolved. His ass hit the carpet hard and he gasped as the jarring impact rippled through his bruised body and head.

"It's okay. Kitty's fine. Aren't you, baby girl?" Macy smiled and snapped her fingers low to the floor. A tiny, tan and gray-tipped streak rocketed out of the apartment. It raced across James' lap to jump into Macy's waiting arms.

The small Siamese kitten gave James a baleful, blue-eyed stare and let out a thunderous, spine-tingling wail, the same cry that haunted his earlier dreams.

"Macy," James ground his teeth against the increasingly sharp pain in his flank, "is that 'Kitty'? The same Kitty you baby-sit?"

"Uh-huh. Isn't she just gorgeous?" Macy cooed and petted the sleek little animal until its contented purr filled the sudden silence. Kitty wailed again, the cry still mournful and disturbing to James, sounding just like a baby's wail.

Crumpled and pale against the wall, Nick stirred long enough to spit in their direction and shout, "God damn rodent. Shut up!"

"You leave her alone, Nick." Showing the first signs of intelligent life since she hit the floor, Sheila crawled on her hands and knees to sit beside Macy. The two women shielded the kitten from Nick's murderous glare with their bodies, both wearing stern, protective frowns.

James thought how much that look reminded him of his own mother after one of his parents' arguments. Both Sheila and his mother would take abuse aimed at them without comment, but even suggest harming

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someone else under their protective arm and they were all fire and brimstone. He didn't think he would ever understand women.

Sheila's eyes brimmed with tears again, but she managed to look Nick in the eye. "You can't stand me loving something that loves me back, can you?"

"Bitch, no one could love you." Nick's words were slurred and tired. Even the venom in them held no real conviction that James could hear. He decided these two were so used to fighting they couldn't even find new insults to hurl at each other.

The elevator pinged and the stairwell door burst open at the same time. Heavy footsteps jogged up to them and James tilted his head around far enough to see four policemen and two ambulance medics coming toward them.

"Everybody stay where you are!"

The cop's command echoed down the silent hallway.

Suppressing a groan, James licked away a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth and whispered, "Like I could actually move anyway." He rested his head on the wall. His vision blurred, the edges ringed in a fuzzy black. Then the darkness leeches toward the center of his sight.

Someone knelt down beside him and jarred his shoulder. The sharp pain that had been dancing behind his eyes unexpectedly lanced through his head and James slipped into the comforting shadows of oblivion.

Chapter Eleven

James' return to consciousness was neither pleasant nor voluntary. An insistent voice nudged at the edge of his consciousness, coaxing and cajoling him, calling out his name again and again. It was irritating. The voice wasn't unpleasant, just unrelenting. A woman's voice, firm and commanding, but with a kind undertone that made James think she wouldn't really mind if he ignored her for a little while longer. A sudden, brisk, painful knuckle-rub over his sternum chased away that little fairy tale.

"James? Jim?" The insistent voice was joined by the irritating rub.

James heard himself groan. The rubbing stopped, but the voice continued to nag at him. "All right! Signs of life." He could actually hear the sense of accomplishment in the voice. "Can you open your eyes for me, Jim?"

His lips felt tight, immovable, while each eyelash had turned into a heavy weight holding his eyes shut. Bright lights danced across his vision. He raised a hand and it flopped down over his eyes to block out the spotlight, but harsh pinpoints of glaring light remained. He rubbed the back of his hand over his face and realized his eyelids weren't even open. Great. No relief in sight. The fireworks display was inside his head.

"Jim? Answer me."

He groaned again and found the strength to correct her. "ames."

'Jim' was his father and he would never be that man. He ran his dry tongue over even drier lips and tried again. "Not Jim. James."

"Okay. James it is. Can you open your eyes for me, James? I want to get a look at your eyes. Need to check your pupils." The voice was close by.

James felt the warmth of a body standing at his shoulder. A cool hand touched his cheek before it moved up to pry open an eyelid. A laser beam of pain flashed across his eye once then again at the other. He flinched and jerked, but stopped when the top of his head threatened to explode. He moaned and swore softly, frozen in place by a burst of pain and nausea. The hand held him in place and the beam of light obediently followed his movements.

"Okay. Sluggish, but they're equal and reactive. That's good." The hand released him and the sharp light disappeared. "You're lucky. The CAT scan of your head was negative. Looks like you'll be all right in a couple of days."

"Wha'?" The sudden hum of an electric motor buzzed beside his head and something squeezed his arm until it pinched, beeped, and then released him. Nothing made any sense.

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Despite the rising nausea, James needed to see where he was and who was talking to him. He raised his head up and looked around the semi-darkened room to find himself in a totally new and strange environment.

It took a few moments for it to register that he was in a hospital emergency room lying on a hard, uncomfortable stretcher. A lumpy pillow cushioned his aching head and a thin, coarse blanket covered him from toes to mid-chest. His shoes were missing.

He pushed to prop himself up on his elbows, breathing through the round of nausea that hit him. Tape pulled at the tubing attached to the crook of one arm and a dull ache deep in his flesh told him an IV catheter was in place under the dressing.

The small movement was too much for him. James couldn't stop the unexpected surge of stomach contents that spilled out his mouth. Strong hands pushed and pulled at him until he was on his side and a large basin was shoved under his chin.

The room swirled and dipped, even with his eyes closed. It took a good five minutes before he realized people were again talking to him. Instead of sitting up again, he stayed on his side and focused on the face nearest him.

The woman was middle-aged, medium height, and dressed in a horrible, geometric-patterned, black and white scrub outfit. If he wasn't already dizzy and nauseated, her outfit would have made him that way. She was blond, twenty pounds overweight, and the hand that gripped the steel side rail in front of his face was bent and twisted with arthritis. Her face was free of make-up, and her skin slightly ruddy, but her eyes were kind and her voice was soft and coaxing.

“Lie back and take some deep breaths, James. It'll pass if you lay still. My name's Wanda. You're going to be all right. Shh. Just relax and breathe.”

James listened to her calm voice, relaxing his shoulders and taking deep breaths through his nose. Slowly the nausea subsided and the room only twirled a bit.

The rustle of fabric and the distinctive squeak of leather on leather forced James to tilt his head to locate the source of the restless noise. Near his feet a uniformed police officer paced back and forth. His hands rested on his gun belt, one palm absently rubbing over the grip of his stun gun. When he realized James was staring at him, he stopped pacing and stepped closer, gaze never leaving James' face. The steady stare seemed to take in every centimeter of James, examining and assessing him both inside and out.

“Awake, huh? Good. James, is it?” The officer looked to the nurse for reassurance he had gotten it right, then turned back to James. “Can you remember what happened?”

“Tried to help a lady up off the floor and got the crap beat out of me for it.” James looked at Wanda and asked, “Is she okay? Sheila, I mean. The lady in the hall. The one he hit.”

Wanda gave him a sad half-smile and nodded. “She always is. So far.” At his confused expression she added, “We see those two a lot here.”

The officer cleared his throat and pulled out his notebook, obviously trying to change the subject. “Yeah, well, even with that being the case, I'll need a statement from you sometime soon, especially if you plan on pressing charges.”

James rolled to get into a more comfortable position and a sharp pain stabbed through his right flank. He jerked and grimaced, a tight hiss of agony leaking out between his clenched teeth. “Holy shit!”

He grabbed at his side and the room swirled and shimmied again. Without any warning he vomited, suddenly finding a basin clamped tight to his jaw and a gnarled hand holding his forehead.

“Later, Mark, okay?” Wanda's firm tone penetrated the haze blanketing James' mind. He missed what response the officer gave, but he heard the slap of footsteps as the man moved away, but not out of the room. He could still hear the creak and bend of leather.

A cool cloth wiped over his lips and his shoulder was pushed back so he was lying on his side again, head now supported with two lumpy pillows. Wanda pulled the blanket up to his chin and smoothed his hair off his damp forehead. James just sighed and tried to stop the entire world from trying to throw him off.

Wanda patted his head and bent down close to his ear. “You'll be allowed to go home in a couple of hours, James. You can't drive or be alone. Is there someone I can call to come and be with you?”

No matter how much he hated doing it, there was only one person he wanted right now. One person who could make him feel better even when he was falling apart. One person who might not even agree to come, but he'd never know unless he tried.

James started to nod, then stopped when the first jarring movement made the nausea lurking in the pit of his stomach swell. He settled back, closed his eyes tightly, and licked his lips before croaking out an exhausted, “Yeah. Yeah, there is. 555-4554. Ask him to come get me.”

“Okay.” He heard the scratch of pen on paper. “Who do I ask for?”

“Bram.” He almost choked on the word. A wave of longing and misery washed over him.

“Bram. Got it. Is he your brother? Cousin? Friend?”

Keeping his eyes closed, James took a deep calming breath and clearly stated, “Boyfriend.” The creak of leather stilled and the room got very quiet for several heartbeats. “He's my boyfriend.”

“Gay?” The officer sounded like he was talking to himself. Wanda seemed to ignore him well enough. “He dislocated Ellwood's shoulder, broke his arm and his nose, and he's gay. Shit! Who'da guessed?”

The cool cloth swiped over James' forehead again and Wanda patted his shoulder. “You got it, slugger. I'll call for your ride.”

Bram barreled through the double automatic doors into Emergency, coat tails flying. The expression on his face and his towering bulk kept most people from getting in his way.

He was too familiar with the hospital and all of its closed doors and stammering clerks and security personnel that guarded its facade of legal confidentiality and flimsy patient rights.

He'd spent months here in this exact same hospital and emergency department where his sister had been brought at the time of her traumatic car accident. The bland, pale blue walls and cold, hard floors held

only sad memories and bad news. He couldn't believe he was back in here again, looking for someone he loved who had been hurt by another. He couldn't shake off the feeling that he'd failed again.

Ignoring the older security guard's commands to stop, Bram firmly shouldered the man aside. The man, wisely, didn't follow. He barely slowed down at the nurses' desk long enough to demand, "James Justin. What room?"

The young girl behind the secretary's desk blinked wide eyes up at him as he towered over her and pointed to the area Bram knew was used for the most serious patients, patients like Isabel had been.

"He's in trauma one, but I don't think the police are done with him yet, sir." The secretary's young voice wavered and then trailed off to a self-conscious stammer. "Sir, you might have to wait a minute. Sir?"

Now Jamie was in the exact same cubicle his sister had been in. The nurse who had called reassured Bram Jamie was going to be all right, but she made it clear he was injured and needed someone to care for him. He intended to be that someone, earlier argument with James aside. Bram increased the length of his strides, the people around him becoming nothing more than faceless blurs.

The rooms were all clearly marked with large, twelve-inch numbers over their doorways. Trauma one was immediately to the left of the station, its striped curtain pulled shut. Several pairs of identical, black polished shoes and black pant legs showed at the bottom of the curtain. Thin stripes down the pant legs marked them as officers of the law.

A man's voice rumbled low and measured, most of it too soft for Bram to hear, but the words "Justin" and "pressing charges" carried loud and clear. He couldn't care less what these men wanted. They stood between him and his injured lover.

All of his protective instincts geared up to maximum, Bram yanked the curtain back, feeling fierce, ready to battle anyone or anything. "Jamie?"

Gaze darting from the huddled form on the stretcher to the various wires and tubes leading from bedside equipment that disappeared under the off-white blanket covering James and back, Bram strode into the room. He barely nodded at the police officers as he pushed past them to get to James' side.

"Jamie? Hey, I'm here." Bram bent over the stretcher and gently ran fingertips alongside the sutured cut on James' forehead and the bruises dotting his jawline and mouth. He felt a sudden queasiness grip his gut and old memories of this room in another time threatened to crash in on him. He pulled back his hand and whispered, "Jesus, Jamie."

Bram watched as James opened his eyelids to half-mast. "I'm okay. Kind of." He gave Bram a tentative smile that turned to a grimace. "Just got banged up a bit."

James tried to push into an upright position. Bram pulled the head of the stretcher up a few notches to help while the nurse slipped in and adjusted his pillows. Wincing, James uttered a tight hiss, but managed to sit up, looking more alert. He gave another weak attempt at a smile.

Red specks flaked off James' face where blood had dried in the corner of his eye. If he didn't think it would make James uncomfortable, Bram would have reached out and brushed them all away. Instead, he allowed himself the small pleasure of gripping one of James' hands where it lay at James' side, bruised, with knuckles raw. The pointed throat clearing behind them just made him hold it tighter. His eyes found James' watery, dazed gaze and locked onto it, refusing to waver even as the shuffling of feet from behind

him came closer. Bram wondered how much shit James had been subjected to from these guys before he arrived.

“Your friend stepped into a domestic. He may look bad, but he more than held his own. Believe me, the other guy got the worst of it, Mr. Lord.”

A deep, confident voice interrupted his thoughts, drawing both his attention and his gaze to the thirty-something officer at his side. The man had a head of distinctive, bright red hair and an air of self-assurance. His face was open and surprisingly friendly. All the same, Bram couldn't keep from moving just enough to block James from the man's view as much as possible. He made a point of keeping James' hand securely in his own firm grip.

“I'm sorry. Do I know you?” Bram's stare flickered from one officer to the other still standing by the open curtain. Neither face brought a name to him. Although there was something faintly familiar about the red-headed officer, he couldn't place it.

“Sergeant Pete Barclay.” He extended his hand.

Bram shook it, a furrow of confusion still slightly marring his brow. “Nice to meet you, Sergeant.”

The sergeant hooked both his thumbs in the top of his gun belt in a relaxed, less official pose. “I recognized you. Your company helps sponsor the annual softball tournament to raise money for the Survivors Fund every year.”

The other officer let out a surprised, somewhat impressed grunt. “Oh, Hell, yeah. I wondered where I knew you from.”

Barclay turned and gave his partner a nod before facing Bram again. “I played against your team in the tournament this past June.” Barclay gave a twisted smile full of grudging admiration. “You and your construction buddies are a tough group of men to beat. You destroyed more balls in that one game then we lost all season.”

“It was hard to keep Mitch from chewing on them.” Bram's tried for a sincere smile, but he knew it had to look strained. He was tired, worried, and still in the dark about the extent of James' injuries. James grimaced with each restless shift on the stretcher.

He looked from Barclay to Wanda and then down at James, taking in his lover's pale, sweaty face and pained expression. “Anybody care to enlighten me about this situation? What happened? How badly is Jamie hurt?”

The nurse, who introduced herself as Wanda, spoke first. She touched the top of James' head and softly asked, “Okay if I tell him about things, James?” Without opening his eyes, James gave one brief nod and sucked his lower lip into his mouth as if to bite off a small cry of pain.

Bram gave up any pretense of not caring and gently stroked one thumb over an unmarked spot on James forehead. “Just lay still, Jamie. I got this one.” He looked up expectantly at Wanda. She obediently launched into a recitation of James' injuries from the minimal to the potentially serious.

“He sustained numerous abrasions and bruises to his face, jaw, and the knuckles of his right hand.” She gave an unseeing James an exasperated look. “You can't punch something hard and not walk away with a few trophies of your own.”

Glancing back at Bram she started counting off injuries on her knobby, bent fingers one by one. “One suturable laceration over his left temple, a huge, fist-shaped, mottled area over his right flank that marks the spot where his kidney's been bruised.” Wanda glanced pointedly at James' groin. “He's going to be passing blood-tinged urine for a few days. That's normal. CAT scan shows it's not too bad. Don't worry about it unless it gets really dark or clots form.”

Taking a deep breath, she went back to her finger counting. “The biggest problem he has is the concussion. It's technically only a mild one, and again CAT scan shows there isn't any brain hemorrhage present at the moment, but he's got all the worst symptoms. Headache, nausea, vomiting, photophobia, motion sickness, and disorientation.”

She looked up from her counting and studied Bram's face. He knew he looked overwhelmed. He felt it.

Wanda shook her head. She patted his hand where it covered James'. “All this is normal for a head injury, even a mild one. It'll last forty-eight to seventy-two hours. If it gets worse, you need to bring him back.”

“Can he go now?” Unsure, Bram looked from James' distressed expression and tense body to the nurse.

“No, not until the doctor releases him. He wants to watch him another hour or so. We like to keep them for about three hours after the time of the initial head injury. Most severe symptoms show up by then.” She checked the monitor attached to James and then moved to the doorway. “Oh, by the way. His lab work shows he's anemic and his blood pressure is consistently low for man his age. It's a sort of vasovagal reaction thing he's got going due to the chronic hypovolemia. That's dehydration for you non-medical sorts. I'm surprised he doesn't pass out more often.”

She caught the guilty look that passed between Bram and her patient. “So he does pass out now and then?”

James blushed and Bram nodded, drawing the nurse's attention back to him. “A couple of times,” he paused to find a way to say it with out embarrassing James, “In the shower when he's...hot and spent...”

“I got it.” Wanda grinned and tapped at the injured side of James' now pink tinged face. “He can't be alone for the next few days either. He'll need a keeper.” She looked at his and James' joined hands and then glanced at Bram, giving him a teasing smile and a wink. “You know. Someone to watch over him.”

Wanda left the room humming the old, romantic Ella Fitzgerald tune of the same name. Bram had to smile. The words certainly fit the situation.

He squeezed James' fingers and turned to the waiting pair of officers. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Barclay glanced at a silent, trembling James briefly, then looked up at Bram. “I guess he won't mind or he wouldn't have asked for you. Nick Ellwood,” he gestured over his shoulder to the open doorway, “he's in the room two doors down getting his sorry ass looked at. Nick and his wife Sheila were going at it again.”

Barclay sighed and exchanged a look with his partner. “They're a frequent domestic call. Ellwood's uncle owns the apartment building so he never gets tossed out. Every tenant, with the exception of Macy Love, she lives across from the Ellwoods, seems to have a run in with them. Mr. Justin walked into the middle of one of their arguments and Ellwood jumped him. I'll need to get the story from Mr. Justin when he's feeling up to it, but for now both Ellwood's wife and Ms. Love made an official statement to that effect.”

“So there're no charges against Jamie?”

“No. There won't be any.” Barclay pulled a driver's license out of his shirt pocket and handed it to Bram. A quick glance at it showed it to belong to James. “Needed it to confirm his identity while he was unconscious.”

“Unconscious? You were unconscious?” Bram turned an incredulous, steely glare on James. It did him little good with James' eyes clenched shut, so he turned it on the officers instead. “He was unconscious? When? For how long?”

“He passed out when we first arrived at the apartment. He stayed that way until about an hour ago. Wanda called you almost as soon as he could give her your number.

“Slept through all the tests and scans and stuff. Best way to do it, if you ask me. All those needles and crap,” Barclay's partner added, then self-consciously thrust his hand out to introduce himself and shake Bram's hand. “Officer Tom Westcott. Nice to meet you, Mr. Lord.”

“Officer.” Bram bent over James and calmly asked, “Jamie? Are you sure you'll be all right to go home?”

Keeping his eyes closed, James licked his lips and drew in a shallow breath before answering. “M 'kay. Just wanta go home, Bram. Take me home, 'kay? Your place 'home'.” His voice was raw and weak. Bram could see what the effort was costing him.

“You got it, Tiger. Just let me talk with the nurse again. We'll be out of here before you know it.” Bram patted James' arm and released his hand. Reaching for the call bell hooked to the side rail, he pressed it and waited. When Wanda reappeared, Bram pointed a finger at her and said, “Lady, we gotta talk.”

The drive back to Bram's house was rough and slow. James remembered little of his hospital stay and next to none of the trip. He roused a bit when Bram helped him out of the truck, but got the distinct impression his feet left the ground for the remainder of the trip inside the house and up the stairs.

The next thing he was aware of was his naked body sliding between soft sheets and a warm, cozy comforter drawn up to his chin. Once he lay on his side, a slab of heat plastered itself to his back and strong but gentle arms held him securely in place while the room spun and dipped. A deep, reassuring voice mumbled soothing things into his hair while his surroundings dissolved into a dark void and blissfully disappeared.

He only woke twice during the night. Both times to heave into a basin that miraculously appeared under his face when he needed it the most. Between bouts of draining illness, a pounding headache hammered his consciousness back into submission and James drifted into a fitful sleep, hands gripping the thick arm wrapped around his waist, sure it was the only thing keeping him linked to the real world.

Chapter Twelve

The blinds and curtains were drawn, making the bedroom a shadowed, quiet sanctuary. James cracked an eye open, the other still buried in the plump pillow. He waited until he was fully awake before lifting his head and rolling over onto his back. He moved with exaggerated care, unwilling to do anything that would change the tolerable, dull ache at his one temple into a jackhammering explosion of agony. He'd had enough of that last night to last a lifetime.

Cautiously, James made it to his back with more than a slight increase in the pain in his skull, but the urge to relieve himself was growing and the ache in his injured kidney was fast becoming a burning, distinctly unpleasant sensation. One that flared up to an intense level the moment he struggled to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. He couldn't help but let out the raw groan that had been lurking at the back of his throat since awakening.

“Holy shit!” He moaned and clutched his side, hoping pressure would stop his kidney from trying to explode with the need to empty itself. “Guess no good deed goes unpunished.”

Grabbing a hold of the night table, he pushed to a wobbly stand and stood swaying, naked, morning erection bobbing between his legs, and bladder screaming for relief. He stared balefully at his uncooperative cock, knowing he'd never get to take a piss until the erection went away. Even the pain wasn't doing its part to help fade his stubborn blood flow. “Explains why I'm dizzy. All my blood's in my prick instead of my head. Christ!”

He sat down on the bed with a jarring thump that had him moaning and clutching his side. He slowly fell over on the mattress, arm pinned under him pressed to his flank. The steady tread of sure footsteps neared and James watched through watery eyes and the bumps of the comforter bunched under his half-buried face as Bram quietly slipped through the doorway.

The big man paused, then strode to James' side and helped him sit back up. “Having trouble, Tiger? I heard you moan all the way downstairs.”

James couldn't unfold from the huddled position without everything hurting more. “Help me stand? Need the bathroom.” He leaned into Bram's side and desperately added, “Really, really bad. I think my one kidney is going to self-destruct.”

Bram gave a chuckle and gently eased James to a standing position. “Can't have that. It'll make a mess all over the room.”

“Thanks for the sympathy.” He braced himself against Bram's side and let his lover take the brunt of his weight. They began shuffling toward the bathroom. “It would be a lot funnier if I thought it wasn't a real possibility.”

James hissed when Bram's free hand slid down his lower belly and brushed along the shaft of his swaying

cock. "It may be possible, but I doubt your taking a piss is going to happen any time soon from the looks of things."

"Bastard."

They had made it to the bathroom. James stood in front of the commode as Bram plastered his chest to James' back, holding him with both arms while his hands worked at James' most pressing dilemma.

"Maybe I can give you a hand with at least one problem." He stroked James' rod and rubbed a thumb over the slit. "Want a little help, baby, or can you see to it yourself. I could just watch."

His voice a husky, enticing whisper in James' ear, James pushed his cock into the fist Bram wrapped around it and shivered as waves of pleasure started to override the constant buzz of discomfort. Bram began kissing his neck and face, carefully working around bruises and healing cuts.

James hissed when Bram touched the abrasion on his chin, but his ass pushed back into the hard outline of Bram's cock, rigid and thick in his jeans. The stroking action on his cock increased, along with the pressure, and James felt the first stirring of his needed climax already building.

He stood perfectly still, letting Bram take his weight and work his body. Any movement or twisting caused the pain to flare up high enough to blot out the pleasure, so James didn't move. He closed his eyes, leaning back on his lover and letting Bram take care of him.

He suddenly realized he was also letting Bram 'care for him' as much as 'take care of him'. It was a first for James to have someone who would do both for him. Unexpected tears burned his eyes and his throat tightened. A choked moan of warning was all he could manage before his balls tightened and his cock jerked, shooting its load into the toilet.

He sighed and allowed himself to bask in the afterglow for a few seconds before nature called again. He began to struggle to regain his own balance to pee, pulling away from Bram's comforting, secure hold. Bram pulled him back and nuzzled the crook of his neck, hand keeping a firm hold on his spent cock.

James shifted, restless with need. "I really have to take a leak, Bram."

"Just go ahead, baby. I've got you." Bram aimed his cock in the right direction with one hand and placed the other across James' chest, supporting him and pinning him to Bram's towering frame, letting James use Bram's strength to bolster his depleted energy.

"Uh, well, I don't know..."

"I got you. Do it, baby." Bram whispered in James' ear again, voice demanding, raw, full of tenderness and power. "Just relax and let it go."

James did, trying not to cry out as he watched the stream of bloody urine that flowed from his body. His side spasmed and he swore.

"Shit." The burning pressure was relieved a little at a time and it helped convince him that things would improve. A sheen of sweat broke out over his face and he felt his limbs tremble.

"They said it would be red for a few days, remember? It'll be okay. We'll just keep an eye on it." Bram ran a soothing palm over his neck and shoulders while turning him in the direction of the door. "Let's get

you back to bed.”

Stumbling with the first few steps, James leaned heavily into Bram's one-armed embrace. Before they were out the door, Bram lifted him off his feet and carried him to the bed.

For the first time since the big man had started with his caveman tactics, James didn't even think about complaining. He dropped his head on Bram's shoulder and didn't say a word, allowing Bram to put him to bed, cover him up, and tuck him in. He muttered an incoherent reply to Bram's reassurances of returning with something to drink and faded off into blissful darkness.

When James woke, the room was still in shadows, but they were deeper this time. No crack of daylight seeped in around the curtains. Only the soft, regular breathing and occasional shift of the body at his back broke the silence of the room.

James closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of his lover sleeping at his side. His head felt clearer and less painful, while the pain in his side had faded to a dull but still present burning ache. He felt worn out, hungry, safe, and loved. Bram had fed him, made him drink something every few hours, helped him to the bathroom between liquid snacks, and insisted he take Motrin every four hours for the pain. It was the strongest thing the doctor said he could take with a head injury. James decided it must have helped because he felt better.

Snuggling back against the man behind him, James uncurled a bit to take advantage of all of Bram's body heat. His movements produced a predictable reaction from Bram. He rolled over on his side, threw an arm over James' waist, and tucked him in close. He nuzzled his face through James' hair, sighed, and was back asleep within seconds.

James smiled, relaxed into Bram's warmth, and tried not to think about the fact that he could be having this every night if he would stop being so afraid. Sleep was a littler harder to come by this time.

Monday morning James called off work, giving a brief explanation and a promise to be back in the office on Tuesday. He would rather have kept the whole thing to himself, but there was no way around it. The bruises were going to still be very much in evidence by the next day and there would be questions and gossip galore. He might as well give them the facts up front.

After a little breakfast and a hot shower, he and Bram were back at his apartment to gather up a few more of his things. Bram arranged to take the day off to stay with James, claiming being boss had a few good perks.

Gaze scanning the room of James' still disorganized and haphazard living room, Bram gestured across the room at a large, opaque carrying case. “Do you need that portfolio over there by the wall?”

“Uh?” James stood by the door, surrounded by two suitcases full of clothing and personal items and a well-stuffed garment bag. He didn't want to come back here again for anything for a few days. “Oh, yeah, I do. That's the Becker Estate project plans. I'll need those.”

Bram frowned at James, then lifted the heavy case, tucking it under his arm. “What's it still doing here? I thought you were going to give these to Dunn last week? Did he change his mind about wanting to see them?”

“I don't know. Maybe. He was out of the office and then unavailable during the first part of the week. He hasn't actually asked me for them again.” James shrugged his shoulders, feeling defeated and weary. Everything had to be an uphill battle some days. “Now I've been gone. The opportunity to present them hasn't reopened yet.”

“Dunn really needs to see them if he wants the project to be an exact renovation.” Bram's tone was casual, but with a professional undercurrent. James knew it was the businessman in him coming out. “He'll understand that when he looks them over and examines the old architectural sketches you found.”

Nodding, James absently rubbed at the dull ache in his side, uninterested in work issues right now. “If I get the chance to present them, he will.”

“You should push him a little.” Bram carried the portfolio over to James and added the wardrobe bag to his load, still keeping one hand free. “Time is getting short if your friend Art has already filed tentative plans with the Historical Society.”

“Yeah, I know.” James picked up the larger of the two suitcases, but Bram took it out of his hand. “I'll try and get a meeting with him this week. Maybe he'll let me join Art on the project.”

Bram looked like he wanted to say something more, but he just gave James a wink and said, “You get 'em, Tiger.”

A brisk, loud knock startled James. He nearly tripped over the luggage at his feet in the attempt to answer the door. When he opened it, the blond bouffant hair-do, long false eyelashes, and bright pink lipstick that seemed to define Macy Love jumped out at him.

She was crouched down to his eye level, apparently trying to look through the one-way peephole in the door. Dressed in pink short shorts, a skin-tight, pink tank top, and a pair of jute, five-inch wedge sandals, Macy jumped up to her full height the moment James opened the door. James was forced to leap back a step to prevent himself from getting a mouthful of Macy's bustline. The woman *really* had no clue about other people's personal space comfort limits.

“Hi, Jimmy.” She fluttered her fingers at James.

“Hi, Macy.” He thought about pushing her out the door and telling her they were on their way out, but his manners and her sweet, ditzzy smile forced him to open the door wider. Plus the woman came to his rescue when he'd needed a helping hand.

He smiled, self-consciously rubbing his sore side. “Ah, Macy? I wanted to thank you for calling the police the other night. I appreciated you getting involved. Not everyone would have helped a stranger.”

“Don't be silly. You're not a stranger! We're neighbors!” She touched the stitches over his eye and then the large, purple bruise at his temple, her gaze darting from one obvious facial injury to another. “I wasn't going to let that stupid, old Nick hurt people without having to own up to it.” She shot a glare at the Ellwood's door. “He's nothing but a bully.” She sniffed and stood up straighter. “I'm not sorry you broke his shoulder. Now he can't throw things at Sheila and Kitty.” She sounded both resigned and sad to James when she added, “For awhile, anyway.”

Having nothing to add, James nodded. "We're just leaving, but would you like to come in?"

"Okay, Jimmy." She actually squealed, making James chuckle despite his desire to be gone. She swayed past him into the apartment, neck craning to get a better view of Bram.

James rolled his eyes and muttered, "I'm James, Macy. James."

"Okay."

She walked right up to Bram and nearly pressed herself to his chest, forcing him to set down the items in his arms. He took her fluttering fingers off his chest and shook them, a huge, amused smile on his face.

"Hi there. I'm Macy. I live next door. Pleased to meet you." Her words were puffed out,, soft little billowing streams of airborne sex. She winked at Bram and coyly returned his smile.

"Hi. Bram Lord. Jamie's mentioned you." Bram stood his ground, letting Macy enjoy the close contact without looking like he was the least bit uncomfortable with her forward attitude.

James felt a little flash of envy at Bram's ability to relate to people, followed by a bigger flash of jealousy when Macy continued to remain bare centimeters from Bram's body.

"Jamie?" Macy's eyes opened wide and she turned her head to give James an admonishing stare. "You should have said so. Jamie is *so* much easier to remember!"

James noticed Bram's smile increase to an amused grin. He shook his head, stretching his own eyes wide open in mock amazement. "Yeah, of course. Why didn't I realize that?"

Macy reached out and patted his arm without leaving Bram's side. "Silly. That's okay, Jamie." She brightened, obviously pleased. "See, it *is* easier to remember!"

Stunned, James couldn't think of anything to say. Macy was just Macy and there was no understanding the woman's point of view as far as he was concerned. He decided accepting her and her off-kilter reasoning was probably the best approach if he was going to continue living here. He somehow knew Macy Love was going to be a frequent visitor. Especially since she had moved closer and was now plastered to his lover's chest.

Macy busily ran her perfect, pink nails along the outline of Bram's broad shoulders, her heels making them easier for her to reach than they were for James. She oohed and ahed over them, making little, indistinct, female sounds of appreciation that James never could understand the real meaning behind. His sisters had often done the same thing over a particularly pretty dress or a good-looking boy in school. Somehow they were much more irritating when they were directed at his boyfriend.

Glancing at Bram, James relaxed. The pleasant but disinterested expression on his face soothed James' rising wave of unexpected jealousy. The seductive wink and lustful gaze Bram shot his way over Macy's head calmed the rest of the lingering emotion. James smiled, listening to Macy's chatter, studying Bram's reaction to her.

"Jamie said you're his boyfriend." Her fingers worried the first fastened button of Bram's blue denim work shirt.

“He's right.”

“Good!” She brightened and flashed a sexy look at him, breasts jiggling in their overstressed push-up bra. She was close enough they brushed Bram's chest as she giggled. “Since you two are already lovers,” she said, looking to Bram for confirmation, continuing when he nodded. “I was hoping maybe, if you don't like to leave each other out of things,” Macy continued, running a nail along the V of Bram's open neck line, playing with the pale hair on his chest, “that maybe...” She chanced a glance at James before adding, “We could all like, be together sometime?”

James gave the back of Macy's head a disbelieving glare and glanced indignantly at Bram.

Bram merely smiled and captured her roving hand in his own. “That's a very generous offer, Macy. You're a beautiful woman.” Her eyes glistened with excitement and her smile beamed. “But Jamie and I are monogamous.”

Her expression grew a little clouded, but her eagerness was undaunted. James wondered if Macy knew the meaning of the word or was just holding out hope that the situation would change in the next few seconds.

Bram gently gripped her upper arms and shifted her back a few inches until she wasn't leaning on him. James watched him hold back a smile before he added, “We don't see other people. We're faithful.”

“Oh.” Macy frowned, and then pursed her lips in the perfect imitation of a little girl pout. “Darn! I had this fantasy thing going on there for a little while ever since I saw you two. Jamie was so nice; I knew any guy he dated would be nice, too.”

She heaved a dramatic sigh, shrugging her bare shoulders in a practiced gesture that sent her breasts straining against the thin fabric of her tank top.

“I can understand. It's like I said, you're nice guys.” She sighed again. Eyes wide in amazement, she added, “I just never knew a guy who wanted to be faithful, you know? Let alone two of you! Wow!” Her frown eased. She leaned into Bram's space again. Giving them both a co-conspirator's nod, she confided, “I totally respect that.”

“I knew you would, Macy. You strike me as a very empathetic and understanding woman. I want to thank you for helping Jamie out and making sure he got medical attention. You're a special woman, Macy Love.”

The man really was great with people. James watched Macy beam a megawatt smile around the room, her girlish giggle light and full of pleasure. “You're nice, Bram! A girl doesn't get to meet a lot of nice guys these days, married or single. I could be friends with you guys!”

James exchanged a smile with Bram. Bram winked at James, tilting his head to indicate the door. James moved forward and took Macy by the arm. He gently led her toward the waiting hallway. “We are friends, Macy. But we're also tired and on our way out.” He opened the door.

Macy suddenly stopped walking. “You're leaving? Already?” A genuine distressed pout made her look young and naive. “So soon?”

Coming up behind her, Bram soothed her with a pat to one shoulder and helped edge her out into the hallway. “He's spending a few days with me. Until he feels better.” Bram gathered up his original load,

blocking off any return entry into the apartment.

James grabbed the remaining suitcase as Bram herded Macy further down the hall. He locked his apartment with only a tiny sigh of regret at leaving behind what was supposed to have been his new sanctuary. His life always seemed to be just slightly out of control since college. The only time it seemed secure and stable was when he was with Bram. Then his own fear of losing that security made him run in the other direction. He just couldn't seem to get it right.

James turned back to the others in time to catch Bram saying, "Unless I can convince him to make it permanent."

He gave Bram a weak smile. Bram gave him a heated, possessive stare and a knowing smile that left James feeling weak-kneed.

He took a few deep breaths to calm the flip-flops his stomach was doing. There was no doubt about it, Bram was a gorgeous man. Even Macy was hanging on his arm, staring up at him with a look of sheer adoration on her face. James still couldn't believe the man wanted him and only him. His life never worked out this good.

"Come on, Jamie. It's getting late and I need to get you to bed." Bram hefted his burden higher and waited for James to join him. Macy giggled at the dual implications of Bram's comment and James blushed.

Embarrassed, he huffed, "Okay, I'm coming."

When Macy giggled louder, and Bram chuckled, he realized what he said. His blush deepened.

"You two are not nice." A wave of fatigue washed over him and he rubbed lightly at the side of his head. "Let's go before you have to carry me, too, Caveman. Bye, Macy."

He waved at Macy and watched as she let herself into her own apartment, then followed Bram out to the truck and the blissful promise of food and a good night's rest. Tomorrow he'd be back at the grindstone.

Chapter Thirteen

When James arrived at work Tuesday morning the offices at Dunn and Piper seemed unusually solemn, but playing catch up with his workload all morning didn't give him a lot of time to think about it.

He spent most of his time ignoring the shocked stares and curious questions of his co-workers. He gave a brief but adequate explanation to one of the secretaries, knowing that by mid-morning the entire firm would have the story, more or less, and stop asking him about it. Personally, he was just glad he'd stopped peeing blood and that his side didn't go into spasms every time he moved.

He didn't care about the whispers or the stares. Those had been going on since he started dating Bram and he'd adjusted to them. Even overhearing Bram's name in a murmured conversation didn't illicit more than an unsettling rush of possessiveness in him now. He knew it wasn't true, but it seemed just about every woman in the firm either wanted James to marry him or wanted to marry Bram herself. James found himself in the odd position of being the envy of the secretarial pool. He didn't want to know how many of the males in the building were interested in his boyfriend.

Just after lunch, James got a call from Mr. Dunn's secretary asking him to come up to Dunn's office to discuss the Becker project. He took a moment to enjoy the flush of contentment settling in his stomach. It had been Bram who nagged him into bringing his plans into the office that morning. Now he was glad he had given in and listened to Bram. It felt nice to have someone looking out for him, especially about little things. He'd forgotten what that felt like until recently.

Dunn's secretary had implied he needed to hurry. James grabbed his portfolio and presented himself to his boss' secretary in under three minutes.

Mrs. Allen was in her fifties, plump, efficient, and totally dedicated to her job and Mr. Dunn. She'd been stationed behind her desk for so many decades people teased she had come with the building when it was erected one hundred and twenty years ago. No one ever remembered her calling off ill and her vacation always coincided with her boss'. If it wasn't for the fact they were both openly dedicated to their spouses, rumors would have been flying.

As James approached her desk, Dunn's door popped open. Startled, both James and Mrs. Allen turned to face Dunn as he strode out of his office. Giving James a welcoming nod, Dunn moved quickly out into the secretarial area.

“Ah, James! Good.” Dunn’s gaze critically examined James' face, gaze lingering over the exposed suture line embedded in the deep purple bruise at his temple. Nonplussed, Dunn didn't comment, but his voice took on a softer tone.

“I'm late for a meeting, but I wanted to turn the project over so you could get started on revising the designs.”

Roughhousing

James frowned and glanced down at his unopened portfolio. Dunn hadn't even seen his work yet. "Turn it over? I don't understand, sir. I thought this was about the Becker project?"

Dunn nodded. "It is."

Frown deepening, James resisted the urge to chew on his lower lip. "That's Art Wheeler's project."

"Not any more." Dunn looked away, glancing at Mrs. Allen then back at James. His expression seemed grim. "I'll explain things in more detail soon, but for now, the Becker Estate project is yours."

"But you haven't even seen my plans." He offered the portfolio.

Dunn gently pushed it away. "I trust your judgment, James. You're a very good architect." He gripped James' shoulder. "You'll go far with this company."

"But--"

"Trust me. The Project is yours. Get started on it as soon as possible." Dunn stepped away. His secretary immediately rose and Dunn accepted a folder from her. "We'll need to register the blueprints with the city so we can start accepting construction bids as soon as possible. Final decisions on them will be made in three weeks."

Dunn's clipped tone made it obvious he was done with the discussion. James had no choice but to accept it.

"Okay. Ah, thank you, sir." James looked to Mrs. Allen for a clue about what had just happened, but only got a noncommittal smile from her. He looked away when her distressed gaze darted over his face. Holding her hands clasped tightly together, she fidgeted, looking for all the world like she was having trouble resisting reaching out and touching his bruises.

"Um, I'll do the very best I can with it, sir."

"I know you will, son." Dunn began to walk away, but turned back suddenly. "Oh, speaking of construction companies, I just hung up from talking with Bram Lord. Very persuasive man." He nodded, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I like him."

Taken aback, James stammered, "Bram?" A burst of suspicion twisted in James' stomach. "Why?" Dunn did nothing to alleviate his rapidly growing distrust.

"Can't talk further right now. I have a committee waiting." He patted James on the shoulder. "We'll have a longer, private chat later."

Striding away, Dunn called out over his shoulder. "Lisa, please schedule an appointment for James at my first available opening." His confident, reassuring gaze landed on James. "You'll do fine." Dunn disappeared down the hall and into one of the large, executive conference rooms.

James was left standing in front of Lisa, his unseen renovation plans in hand.

Why had Bram called his boss? A dozen possible excuses flashed through his mind and were just as rapidly discarded. Nothing made sense.

Bram had insisted James take his plans to the office and find time to show them to Dunn, reminding him once before they left the house and again when Bram dropped him off at work.

They had both decided James would forego driving until the dizziness and pounding headaches disappeared completely. He appreciated the thoughtfulness and help, but now he felt slightly trapped and isolated without his own car. It didn't matter that he shouldn't be driving it at the moment.

The nagging feeling Bram had interceded on his behalf with the project kept popping up between the hammering beats of the headache that just wouldn't stop growing at the side of James' head. He closed his eyes and gingerly rubbed at a patch of scalp that didn't hurt as much as the rest of it and tried to think. A sudden touch on his arm jerked him back to the moment and he opened his eyelids to see Mrs. Allen's concerned face.

"Are you all right, Mr. Justin? Can I get you something?" She frowned as she took in all of his bruises close up. "Headache?"

James sighed and dropped his hand, taking a firmer grip on his portfolio. "Thank you Mrs. Allen, but I'm all right."

Embarrassed, he turned away, retreating from her concern and curious gaze. Not that he didn't appreciate her good intentions, but it made him uncomfortable to be the object of a stranger's concern.

James hurried away, his hand automatically back to rubbing his head, trying to erase the doubt and suspicion that burst to life and fed on the confusion and pain in his head. He had a dozen questions he wanted to ask about the project, but the need to distance himself overrode his need for answers. Besides, he felt sure there was one place he could get all the answers he needed and probably a few he didn't want.

The cab pulled up outside the now familiar construction site. James spent a few minutes scanning the workers looking for someone he felt confident to talk with about Bram's whereabouts. It only took him half a minute to find out Bram was at the office today. James returned to the waiting cab and took off, leaving a chorus of curious stares behind him.

The ride from the site to the prestigious offices of Bram's firm did nothing to calm down James' agitation and suspicions. Eclipse Construction was a huge, influential firm that worked with companies like Dunn and Piper all the time. There could be an assortment of business reasons its president would call his boss, but James couldn't get past the idea Bram was doing what Bram did best--taking care of things.

James had been so sure they had come to an understanding about him controlling his own life outside of sex that the heavy disappointment pressing in on him from all sides made it difficult to think. His headache was screaming at him to the point his vision blurred with the pain, but he had to focus on clearing up this issue before he could accept the project with a clear conscience. The idea that he might have gained the most important job of his career thus far because of an outside influence tore at his self-esteem and magnified his insecurities. Wasn't he good enough to get the job based on his own talent?

Once the cab stopped at the curb in front of the Eclipse offices, James flew onto the sidewalk and stormed into the building. He paused at the main desk long enough to get directions to Bram's office, still seething. But by the time he walked through the huge, elegant lobby, rode the elevators to the top floor, and was directed to a large, mahogany-lined reception area, nerves, tension, and no small measure of awe had replaced most of his ire.

A middle-aged, tall, well-dressed woman sat behind the desk guarding the doorway to what James had been told was Bram's office. She stood as James approached and offered her hand before he had the chance to speak.

“Good morning, sir. I'm Angela Bell, Mr. Lord's administrative assistant. May I help you?” Her voice was clear, firm, and confident, like Bram's voice. Her eyes were kind and her pale pink smile seemed genuine.

James shook her hand. He appreciated the fact that after the first once over, her gaze didn't linger curiously over his obvious injuries. He wished he had taken a moment to freshen up before coming. He didn't know if it mattered now, but first appearances were important and his curly hair never seemed to stay put. He wanted to impress Bram's staff and friends as much as Bram had his own.

Suppressing the nagging feeling he was making a mistake, James took a deep, calming breath. “I'd like to see Mr. Lord if he's available. I don't have an appointment. It's personal.”

Her smile stayed intact, but she cocked her head to one side and looked more closely at him. “Personal? I'm afraid I don't understand.”

James suddenly realized his facial injuries could give the impression of being a problem. He'd obviously been in one fight. It wasn't impossible that the woman thought he was here to cause trouble.

Swallowing down his embarrassment, James explained, “I'd like just a moment of his time.” She still didn't make a move toward her phone, so he added, “I'm James Justin.” Her expression didn't change at the mention of his name so he added, “Bram and I are seeing each other.”

“Oh! *Jamie!*” The woman's neutral expression cleared like clouds parting to let the sunshine through. She moved rapidly around the desk and warmly shook his hand again. “I'm so pleased to meet you. Mr. Lord has talked so much about you! I'm sure he'll be delighted you're here.” The woman returned to her seat and picked up the phone. Seconds later she was murmuring into the handset.

Not bothering to listen to her announce him, James sighed and muttered to himself, “I wouldn't count on his being all that delighted.”

Angela hung up the phone, with a broad smile for James. “Follow me please.” She led the way to the large carved door that separated the two offices, opened the door, and gestured for him to enter. James slipped by her and stepped into another part of Bram's world.

The room was huge, tasteful, masculine, and powerful, decorated with deep earth tones, heavy wood furniture, and elegant details. The walls were lined with stuffed bookcases and the carpet was so thick it swallowed the sound of his approach. The room was over sized, just like its owner. James felt small and insignificant here.

James almost gasped out loud at the sight of Bram, sunlight all around him highlighting his sharp facial features and turning his honey-blond hair to spun gold as it streamed in from a bank of windows. Behind him lay an impressive view of the city.

In front of a paper-strewn desk, Bram stood waiting for him, a delighted smile on that handsome face and playful twinkle in those eyes. He was holding what looked like several photographs, their edges yellowed and objects in them made of shades of faded gray. He put them on the desk as James approached him.

“Well, good morning. Again. What do I owe the pleasure of this visit to?” Bram's deep, rich voice played hell with James' libido, but he quelled it, concentrating on his building nausea instead. But it was hard.

He had seen and admired Bram at home when the man had dressed in his tailored business suit with all the trimmings. The man transformed from the laid back, comfortable cowboy in worn jeans and boots to a crisp, flawless executive with the ease of a man born to the role. James knew Bram preferred a hands on role with his own company, but when he needed to become his company's spokesman, he looked every inch the powerful man in charge. James felt his resolve to confront Bram weaken.

A sudden pang of fear shot through him and he fought to control his breathing to keep it from becoming too rapid. The pounding in his head had eased slightly while talking to Angela, but it picked up tempo and force with every step James took. He was out of place here. Bram was an influential businessman, and a man with a growing, prosperous company and a staff of hundreds, maybe a thousand. No wonder he was so in control and self-confident. Bram had a right to be.

As James looked around the office and at his bold, beautiful, massive lover, a cloak of heavy sorrow fell over him. His stomach churned and twisted. He didn't belong here. Fear and defensiveness choked him and the pressure in his head made his vision blur. He thought he might pass out until Bram's warm, strong hands grabbed him and pulled him in close.

“Jamie?”

The dizziness faded to a tolerable level. Not wanting to, James gently but insistently disentangled himself from Bram's embrace.

Bram didn't object, but didn't let James get too far away either, holding onto him by one shoulder. He dropped his arm when James looked him in the eye.

“Jamie? What's wrong?” Bram tilted James' face up and gave him a critical, concerned once over.

James knew he was a sorry-looking sight, hair wind-tossed, face bruised and battered, skin dark where he hadn't been able to shave away all of his morning stubble effectively around the multiple cuts. But he knew there was something in his face that made Bram take notice. There was no point in beating around the bush. Not knowing was eating him alive.

“I got handed the Becker Estate Project this morning.”

“That's great!” Bram's concerned expression took on an element of confusion. “Dunn liked your plans then? I told you he would.”

“He never saw them.” James' tone became testy. Even he could hear the unspoken accusation in it. “He gave it to me out of the blue.”

Cautiously, Bram said, “He must know you're capable of the job.”

“It belonged to Art Wheeler. I would have loved to have been allowed to just join the project, but Dunn turned it completely over to me.” James felt his dismay and frustration growing. “Art isn't even a part of it anymore.”

Bram sat back on the edge of his desk, thick arms folded across his hard chest, and gave James a thoughtful look. “He must have had his reasons. Didn't he explain his decision?”

“No, he was in a hurry to get to a meeting. The only thing he did mention,” James stared at Bram, his expression waffling between a glare and a beseeching grimace, “was a call from you.”

Understanding seemed to dawn on Bram and he slowly stood up. “Oh.” He gave James a hard stare. “You think I had something to do with getting you the assignment, don't you?”

“Did you?”

“Do you have to even ask? After everything, you actually have to ask?”

“I know you.” James started pacing in front of Bram, hands gesturing in the air as he talked. “You like doing things for me. You like being in control of things.” He was talking to himself now, words tumbling out and eyes darting between the floor and the tips of Bram's shoes. “And, and I've been stalling on showing him the plans, I know. And it's your nature to make things happen, to get things done.” James could barely catch his breath he was talking so fast. His head was pounding, his vision hazy, and his balance felt slightly off. “And, and, and this is just one more example of your following your nature.”

To keep from stumbling, knees suddenly weak, James stopped in front of a silent Bram and stared up at him, so unfocused he could barely see his lover through the pounding haze of pain behind his eyes. Getting upset while suffering through the aftereffects of a head injury seemed to be an unwise decision, but he couldn't stop the words and feelings from flowing out.

“I've worked all my life to get where I am and I've done it alone. No family, no partner, no support, and no encouragement. On my own. And maybe that's the only way I'm meant to be. Alone.” James wiped the tears off his face and looked Bram in the eye. “Maybe it's the way I'm supposed to be.”

“That's it? I don't get any say in the matter?” Bram's voice was very quiet and controlled, so fitting with the corporate image he was projecting. So controlled and controlling to James' ear.

“You said it all to Dunn, Bram. I need to be an equal with you if this is going to work. And it doesn't look like that's ever going to happen with you taking control of my life whenever it suits you. Even if it's to be kind.” James pushed at the air between them and closed his eyes for a second to ward off the nausea boiling up in his gut. Lips pressed in a thin line, he said, “I can't do this. I just can't.” He backed a few paces away from Bram. “Don't pick me up after work. I'll take a cab back to my place. I need to...” he stuttered, finally at a loss for words, “to think.”

James turned on his heel and strode out the office door, vaguely surprised and relieved when Bram didn't follow him. He shot past Angela Bell with only a slight nod of thanks. He took the first open elevator he spotted, heedless of the fact it was going up. Bracing himself in the corner, James closed his eyes and rode in silence until the doors chimed and the lobby came into view. He managed to hail a cab and collapse onto the back seat before his legs gave out and the headache won. He vomited into one of the handy paper bags the cabbie stocked in the back of the cab.

The miserable morning dragged into a dreary afternoon at a snail's pace for James. He divided his time between staring at the phone waiting for Dunn's secretary to return his call and grant his request to see the man as soon as possible, and staring at it wanting to call Bram just to hear the man's voice. He had a sure feeling he wouldn't be hearing it much longer, if ever again.

Between bouts of righteous indignation, telling himself he had done the right thing breaking it off with Bram, and paralyzing moments of fear that he had just thrown away the best thing he ever had, James glanced through the original plans for the project. He dabbed at the corner of his mouth where the cut had split open from his vomiting and tried to will his stomach to keep down the handful of Motrin he had swallowed on returning to his office.

By five o'clock the waiting took its toll on him and James headed off to Dunn's office to see if he could catch his boss on the way out the door. All he needed was five minutes to explain he couldn't accept the project without Wheeler's input. He had tried to find Art, but his usual secretary was out. All her replacement knew was that Wheeler hadn't been in today. She didn't know when he was scheduled to return.

James felt a new pang of guilt, certain his being given the job out from under Wheeler's nose was the reason the man wasn't at work. He didn't think he'd be able to face his coworkers right away if he'd lost a huge project to a junior member of the firm.

When he reached Mrs. Allen's desk, she was busy filing folders in a series of tall, sleek filing cabinets beside her desk. They were brushed metal and matched the walls exactly, blending in perfectly to disguise their form and function in the streamlined office area. She stopped working when James approached.

“Good evening, Mr. Justin. I'm sorry I haven't been able to get in touch with Mr. Dunn to let him know you needed to speak with him today.”

James glanced toward the closed office door. “Is he in now? Could I get five minutes, maybe?”

“I'm truly sorry. He's left already and I don't expect him back until tomorrow.” She sounded genuinely sympathetic.

Rubbing a hand over his face, James gave a deep sigh and hung his head. This was really shaping up to be one of the worst days of his life. A gentle touch to one shoulder made him raise his head up.

“I know he dropped a lot of work on you unexpectedly this morning, James, but he didn't have a choice. The project needed someone who knew the designs and was already up to speed on the specs. He didn't have time to waste.” She sighed and sadly added, “Not under these circumstances.” She patted his shoulder in a motherly gesture that surprised James. “He has confidence you're right for the job.”

James frowned and asked, “What circumstances?”

“The project didn't have an architect anymore as of this morning.”

“What? Did Art quit? I know he's been pretty quiet lately and he looked upset at the dinner party Friday night, but I didn't think he was going to leave.”

“He didn't.”

“He got fired?”

“No.”

James stared at her, searching for another valid reason for the man to be gone and coming up with nothing. He shrugged and waited. Eventually either his silence or his lost look got to her.

Mrs. Allen stepped closer and lowered her voice. "I suppose you have the right to know since you inherited Art's problem with this." She glanced out into the open lobby behind James then locked earnest gazes with him. "Art didn't leave, but his wife left him about a week ago."

"Then why isn't he still on the project if he's still here?"

She studied James for a moment then quietly confided, "Because he tried to commit suicide last night."

"What? What happened? Why? I mean...Jesus!"

"The details aren't important. He's still alive. He's in the ICU at General."

She picked up a pile of folders and walked them back over to her desk. James absently followed her. "That's where Mr. Dunn is right now. He spent the morning finding Art's wife, Amy, and getting her back in town and now he's at the hospital with her. It's going to be a rough road for them."

A sickening thought pushed through all the confusion and shock, suddenly dropping the bottom out of James' stomach. He stopped walking and jerked his head up to look at Mrs. Allen. "When did Mr. Dunn pick me as Art's replacement?"

"First thing this morning. And I do mean first thing." She dropped into her chair and began to put away her personal items for the day from the desktop. "He had me here by six o'clock gathering up all the paperwork and plans you were going to need. Darn good thing I'm an early riser *and* a workaholic or he'd have been on his own." She smiled to take the sting out of it, but James barely noticed.

"Thank you for telling me. I appreciate everything you've told me and Mr. Dunn's trust in me. I don't need to see him urgently anymore. Whenever he has time will be fine. Good night." James walked away without looking back.

This day just got better and better.

The call to Dunn from Bram had nothing to do with his getting the project. Once again, he had allowed his impulsive urges to control him rather than confront his own convoluted fears and misgivings about being in a lasting relationship. Being in the comfort and security of a loving, committed relationship was the one thing James wanted most in life and he had just shut the door on the one man who could have given it to him. James felt the nausea rising again.

There was complete silence in the hallway as James passed the Ellwood's apartment door. He almost made it past Macy's door as well, but at the last minute it popped open and the blonde bombshell tiptoed out on her feathered, pink-heeled slippers.

Speaking in an exaggerated whisper, Macy wiggled her fingers at James. "Hi ya, Jamie." Macy glanced meaningfully at the neighbor's apartment door and tiptoed closer to James' side. "How are you? I could get you some ice if you want?"

Her soft, breathy words puffed over his cheek as she invaded his personal space. James realized he didn't even mind now. Macy was a harmless, ditsy, sweet caricature in stilettos and hot pants. A pin-up girl with

a heart as big as her cup size. If he forgot about the fact that she'd tried to hit on him, James thought it was like having a super sexy Barbie doll for a big sister.

“Head still hurt?” She ran her hand over his hair and twirled a strand of curls around one finger before dropping it to lean in closer and examine his sutures. “Wow. That's going to leave a mark, isn't it? Alone tonight?”

“Yes, it'll probably leave a scar for a while.” He ignored her other question, thinking the answer was obvious.

“That's a real shame. You're cute. I suppose it will make you look rugged. Poor baby.”

Exhausted, both mentally and physically, James let Macy coo and fuss over him until she decided to stop. It didn't take long. He knew he looked like crap. He felt like it.

“You need to go take a nap.” Macy nodded wisely, wide-eyed. “Or a bubble bath, even. That's what I do when I'm not feeling up to anything much.”

“Yeah, that sounds nice. But maybe I'll make it a long, hot shower instead.”

“You want some company? I promise not to come on to you.” Her lips pursed and she nodded solemnly. “I think a committed relationship between two people is sacred.”

“Thanks anyway, Macy, but I think I'll just call it a night. See you later.” He turned away and walked to his own door. Just as he slid the key into the lock, a shriek followed by several dull, ominous thuds literally shook the Ellwood's door.

Looking back at Macy, James asked, “Do they do that all day or do they wait for me?”

Macy shrugged. “No, it's like this most evenings after dinner. I'm just glad I go to dance at the club in a couple of hours.”

James dropped his head against his door, debating whether to do something or not. He was saved from having to make any decision when Macy called out. “Go to bed. I'll call the police. I haven't seen that cute, little Sergeant Barclay in weeks.” She smiled broadly and winked at James. “He works Tuesdays!”

Macy disappeared into her apartment and James did the same. Even Kitty's high-pitched cry of distress didn't melt his resolve to let the police deal with it this time. He had more pressing issues to think about than the Ellwood's domestic battles. He had his own domestic problem to work on.

Or maybe he didn't. How could Bram ever want to even see him again after accusing the man of interfering with his job at Dunn and Piper the same way he'd jumped to conclusions about Bram interfering with his problem with Williams at his old place?

That had been bad enough, but thinking Bram had used his influence to secure a project for James was even more insulting than mistakenly accusing him of bullying a man who had tried to sexually assault James. James had thought it an act of over-protectiveness that fit Bram's caveman behavior, but this was an insult to the man's integrity and pride. One he didn't deserve.

A sharp bang and a deep-voiced bellow came from next door. The crash of metal hit the wall, bouncing off to clang again and again. James could visualize the entire fight in his head, calling up old childhood

memories of fear and isolation.

James kicked off his shoes, pulled his shirt from the waistband of his slacks, and dropped onto the couch. He covered his eyes with one arm, not caring if his shirt caught on the edges of his scabs and sutures. He barely noticed the stinging jabs, too overwhelmed by the crushing pain in his chest. The sense of being totally alone was so intense he could barely stand it. His headache was a dull throb, but his stomach churned and flipped as each new guilty thought occurred to him.

Everything else in his life was so measured and controlled, why did impulse have to take over when trust became a question between them? Christ, was he ever going to realize that Bram was different from other people in his past life?

Not that it was going to do him any good now. He moved his arm to stare at the phone, wanting desperately to use it, but terrified that Bram wouldn't answer, or worse, would hang up on him. He seemed like he was always apologizing to Bram for something.

He knew the other man had probably reached his limit of tolerance with him and his rash accusations. He'd undoubtedly driven the man away, like James knew he would. Like he always did. He just couldn't keep people in his life, especially people he loved. They all stopped loving him in time. If his own parents could stop caring after twenty-one years, what chance did he have at keeping the love of a man he only been seeing for a couple of months? He knew the answer to that. None.

Another series of muffled noises filtered through the wall. James rolled over, pulled a throw pillow over his exposed ear, and buried his face between the cushions of the couch, blocking out the world. He lay like that for several moments, trying to push the insistent pounding out of his head, but the noise just got louder and louder until he realized it was coming from his front door and not next door.

It had to be Macy checking on him. James groaned, threw the pillow on the other end of the couch, and pushed himself wearily to his feet. He didn't think he was up to more silly chatter, but Macy was being a friend and James didn't have many of those. He sighed, yanked open the door, and stepped back, stunned, looking right into Bram's determined, icy gaze.

Chapter Fourteen

“Ah, hi.” James knew he was giving Bram a wide-eyed, deer-in-the-headlights kind of stare, but he couldn't help it. He was stunned the man was at his doorstep. He'd been sure he'd never see Bram again. He hung onto the door handle for support, holding the wooden surface between them like a shield for his heart.

An uncomfortable silence settled between them as they stared at each other until Bram pressed his lips into a thin line and asked, “Can I come in?”

“What?” James swallowed past the lump in his throat and backed up a few steps to widen the entrance. “Oh, yeah, sure. I ...I just didn't think you'd want to.” From the corner of his eye James caught Macy watching them from her cracked open apartment door. She waved and shimmied out into the hall, but only stood there and watched them. There was another thud and bellow from the Ellwood's apartment. James ignored it. His gaze darted back to Bram's confused expression.

“Wouldn't want to what? Come in?”

Dropping his gaze, James admitted, “No, see me.” James stepped completely away from the door as Bram entered the room and shut the door behind him.

James suddenly felt trapped. His anxiety level rocketed and his headache danced to life at the edges of his consciousness, doing a slow waltz around his words, making it hard to concentrate. It was too soon for him to have to talk about this. He knew he couldn't keep his emotions in check yet. He might actually say how he really felt if forced to talk before he worked out a reasonable excuse for it all. He paced a small line back and forth a few feet from Bram.

“I think we need to talk.” Bram drew in a deep breath and gestured at the half-unpacked mess in the room. “And this is the best place because you can't go storming off. I might actually get a chance to say something.” Bram's gaze was piercing, biting right through to James' heart, making him embarrassed for his earlier incorrect accusations all over again.

Cheeks flaming, James stopped pacing long enough to gnaw at his lip and ask, “So... you want to talk?”

Bram crossed his arms over his chest. “Oh, yeah.” His voice was low and rough. His icy blue stare made James squirm.

The corner of his lower lip still held tightly between his teeth, James muttered, “You pissed off?”

“Oh, I'm plenty pissed.”

Bram took a step closer to James, invading his personal space. James didn't even notice. Bram's size had never intimidated him since the first night. It wasn't Bram's physical strength that he was afraid of.

“You have every right to be. I understand not wanting to see me again.” James backed away.

“*You* don't get to decide that for me.” Bram moved forward until he was even closer than before, stopping James from retreating farther away.

Panicked gaze darting from Bram's face to floor to couch and back again, James nodded. “Okay. Sorry.” That trapped feeling was making James tremble ever so slightly.

“You should be. I swear Jamie, getting you to trust me is like trying to peel an onion.. If you don't work fast enough, a new layer grows back before you get a chance to dig out the core.” Bram planted his hands on his hips and snorted in disgust.

Panic exploded in his chest. Tears burned in his eyes and James' heart pounded under his rib cage. His voice rose and his words tumbled out in a rapid-fire jumble. “I *told* you life with me wouldn't be easy. I *knew* this was a long shot. I knew you'd see it wouldn't work soon enough, that I mess everything up eventually. It's the way it always works. I fuck it up! I always do something to fuck it up. Nobody can stand to love me for too long!” James turned away.

“Stop.”

“No!” James batted away Bram's reaching hands.

“I said, stop!” Voice loud and commanding, Bram grabbed James by the upper arms and turned James back to face him. “Just stop and listen.” When James complied, he loosened his grip, sliding his hands down to cradle James' elbows as the smaller man hugged his arms tightly to his own chest. There was a thud against the far wall that both men ignored.

James trembled, headache barely at bay, but uncertainty making him anxious. He summoned his courage, preparing for the worst. He felt himself cringe, but managed to look Bram in the eye. Rejection was never easy for him. He just hoped he could hold it together until Bram left. They always left after they said their piece.

Bram squeezed James' arms and his expression went hard again. “It's my turn to talk now. You had your say in my office earlier. When I wanted to show you the pictures I found of my parents and the Dunns. Yeah, that's the reason I called your boss today, to make arrangements to share the photos with his wife. Not to interfere or influence your job.”

James knew this was the part where Bram said 'it's been nice, but so long, you're too fucked up for me' and went on his way. He blinked back the sting of unshed tears and waited. He watched as Bram's gaze searched his face. He blinked harder.

“Digging out a wart is painful and messy until you get to the core.” Bram gave a small, lopsided smile and rubbed his thumbs over James' arms, a tiny, comforting gesture. His voiced dropped lower. James started when Bram winked and added, “This is just some of the messy part.

“What?” A glimmer of confused hope crept into James' voice. *What was Bram saying?*

“I'm not taking responsibility for your lack of trust in me. But I had a hand in this, too. Not in getting you the project, but in pushing you about it.” He sighed and squeezed James' arms. “After you stormed out of my office, and I got over wanting to wring your arrogant little neck, I thought about it for a while. I could

see where you might have gotten the wrong idea about things.”

“This was all my fault. I know that.” James gritted his teeth, grinding out his words as if making them rough and grating would help make Bram understand. It made his bruised jaw ache. “It always is.” He tried to pull away, but Bram held on.

Bram stayed and he kept talking, but his clipped, deep voice began to reflect a lot of frustration. “Slow down, Jamie, and listen for Christ's sake!”

Blinking back his surprise, James pushed down on his panic and tried to focus on what Bram was saying. “Okay, I'm listening.”

“I was pushing you to show your work to Dunn. But that's only because it's good, solid work the project team needs to see. I should have let you handle things with your own job. But I hated seeing your hard work go unnoticed and unrewarded and it irked me from an engineer's point of view to think a building plan wasn't getting the best it could have.” Bram sighed, a slightly contrite expression on his face. “I'm sorry I pushed you. I should have respected your judgment and let you handle it alone.”

There was that all-important word 'alone'. James didn't know how to respond, so he didn't. He just watched, heart pounding and palms sweaty, waiting. How long would it take before Bram finished and walked away? James had said he wanted to be left alone. It was only a matter of time before Bram granted his wish. He felt sick again.

“But it isn't just that, Jamie.”

James could hear the hurt in Bram's voice. He felt the sting of tears burn his eyes.

“I'd have expected you to trust me enough to come and ask me about it, not jump straight to condemning me. Especially after Williams. What's it going to take to make you see I'm not trying to run your life, Jamie?”

His voice sounded so sincere James wanted to cry. But he still didn't understand. “I...I know I'm selfish and it sounds childish, but you're going to realize pretty soon that it's not worth all this effort.

Bram's tone was deadly serious. “You aren't, or we aren't worth it?”

Despite his best efforts, tears were falling fast and furiously now. James' frustration built. “Me. I'm not. I can't do this.” He grabbed the front of Bram's shirt in both fists and held on, a direct contradiction to his intent to break up with the man. “I don't know how.”

Bram's gaze softened, but his tone was still firm. “You can start by not walking away from me. That isn't the way to deal with any problem we have.” He slid his hands up to James' shoulders and lightly shook the man, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

James jerked his head up and looked Bram in the eye, confused and uncertain. “You can't still want me, Bram.”

Stare darkening again, Bram quietly said, “You can't tell me what I want, Jamie.”

“You don't understand!” He released Bram's shirt and pulled out of the man's grip.

Bram let him go, standing calmly, watching James pace and twirl rapidly around the room, hands flying as he talked.

“It's more than just trust. It's me, the whole package. I'm too much work, too many hang-ups.” James ran his hands through his curls, yanking at them, before dropping his arms to his sides only to raise them again and push at the air with his hands as he talked at high speed.

“I want to be an equal in your life. And you're the closest I'll ever get to having that, but today showed me another part of your life I haven't been thinking much about.” He stopped and gave Bram an awed look. “You manage to keep it all so separate. Your private life and your business world.” James shook his head, amazement in his voice. “You're a powerful, influential businessman, Bram. You deserve more in your life than a messed up, impulsive junior architect with a closet full of issues.” Tears trickled down his cheek unheeded. “You deserve a whole lot more.”

Bram shook his head and sat down on the arm of the couch, arms crossed over his chest again. His face was calm and composed, his tone light, but determined. “Lucky for you, you're exactly what I want.”

James instantly began pacing again. “You can't! I'm not worth the trouble! I'm a man even his own family can't love!” He choked on the words and had to take a few deep breaths before continuing. “I was meant to be alone.” He stuttered, voice low and defeated. He stared at the floor, afraid to see the disgust for him he was sure was on Bram's face. He wiped at his face with his hands, knocking away the latest stream of frustrated tears. “Let's just face it before we both get hurt any more. You should probably leave before I really fall apart.”

“I'm not leaving here without you.” The voice was deadly calm and certain. So calm that James jerked up his head to stare at Bram to make sure it was Bram that had spoken.

“Aren't you listening?” He was dumbfounded by Bram's persistence. “I'm not good for you or anyone else! Christ, even my own parents can't love me! Can't you get it through your thick head? I'm fucked up!”

Bram abruptly stood up and stalked over to James. “You think I don't know why you like making love the way you do? Why you like someone to take control in the bedroom, tie you up and hold you down? Press you into the mattress and pound you through the goddamn floor? Well, I do know and so do you!” He grabbed James by the shoulders and pulled him to stand at arm's length. James didn't resist him.

Voice low and forceful, Bram breathed down on James, his words like a hammer striking blows to the walls around James' heart. “I know deep inside of you there is tiny voice that says if you pretend you're forced to enjoy it, you can tell yourself you aren't letting your family down. There's still a little boy inside you that can say, 'But dad, mom, it wasn't entirely my fault!' I know that!”

James felt sick. The corner of his mouth that was bruised ached and the healing cut burned. He closed his eyes. He wanted to curl up into a ball, but Bram wouldn't let him. He kept hammering away with his words. Bram shook him until he looked up again, then Bram peeled away a few of his own layers.

“Just like I know that there's a voice inside of me that says if I hold on tight enough and long enough and keep *total* control of things, I won't lose another person I love. It's stupid and adolescent and wrong, but it's there.” He flexed his hands, fingers digging into James' flesh, then rubbing over the bruises.

“We both have issues from our past that make us do stupid things, but you know what, Jamie? It's okay. It's okay because we understand each other.” Bram let James go and he stepped back, but kept his gaze

locked on James' face. "And if *you* need me to hold you down and love you hard, I can do it. No matter why. I'm your man, baby. Because *I* need to feel you under me when I love you hard. We're made for each other."

Standing perfectly still, James suddenly felt exhausted and drained. He wanted to put everything on hold and come back to it in the morning. Avoidance was his best tactic. But Bram wasn't letting go. Bram towered over James and gave him that lopsided smile that melted his heart every time he saw it. James' stomach flipped and tears welled in his eyes again.

"No one's perfect, Jamie. We're just lucky enough that we found the person who has the flaw that makes the other one perfect for them. And I'm not giving that up without a fight."

"I don't want to fight any more." James wiped the excess moisture from his eyes, rubbing his hands over his face. Exhaustion made his words seem calmer, but his mind and heart were still in a panic. "But I'm not sure I can do this, Bram. I'll mess it up. I know it."

Bram stepped nearer. James had to fight down the urge to lean into him. An unreadable expression came over Bram's face that made James stand his ground.

"You know, I've been handling this whole thing with you wrong." Bram walked his fingers down the front of James' shirt. When his hands reached the shirt's bottom edge, he held on and fingered the hem. James watched, confused, as his lover's odd expression melted away, replaced by a distinctly predatory stare full of possessive lust.

"Wrong?" James could barely choke out the word. He took a step, backing away toward the front door. Bram followed, keeping a hold of James by his wrinkled, white shirttails.

"Oh, yeah." He nodded. "All wrong." Bram yanked on the shirt, tearing it open in one smooth motion, heedless of the buttons flying all over the room.

James barely had time to gape at the abused dress shirt before it was forcibly tugged down his shoulders and off his arms. He watched, amazed, as his blue striped silk tie was crushed and then stuffed partially into one of Bram's front pockets.

"What the hell are you doing? That was a great shirt! And an expensive tie!" Flustered and off balance, James could only stand, mouth open, eyelids blinking in disbelief as Bram grabbed one hand then the other, efficiently tying his wrists together with the sleeves of the shirt.

"I'll buy you a new one." Bram tugged on his handiwork, making sure the knots would hold. "Along with some nice, fur-lined cuffs, I think."

"*What?*"

Bram winked, then shoved James away, letting him stumble the two steps backward until his bare shoulders hit the front door. Bram followed and pinned James to the wooden surface. He grabbed the body of the shirt he'd left hanging between James' tied wrists and forced it above James' head. Once he had James' arms fully extended, he wrapped a beefy arm around James' squirming waist and lifted a few inches, enabling him to hook the bunched shirt over the long, square-tipped, brass coat hook at the very top of the door.

"Christ, Bram!" James gasped and kicked at the floor, trying to gain enough leverage to pull himself off

the hook. His feet barely touched the ground. He found he had to relax and let his weight dangle from the hook in order to keep any kind of balance or control of his own movements. Naked from the waist up, he felt exposed and vulnerable, trapped and helpless. And he was hard, painfully hard.

The front of his dress pants tented. The cloth strained against his cock, its fully erect shaft outlined nicely by the thin fabric and the clinging cotton of his briefs.

A solid weight pressed him into the door. Bram's hot breath scorched his neck as the man rubbed beard stubble over it. James' hips involuntarily jerked at the heavy contact, grinding against the thick tree trunk of muscle that was Bram's meaty thigh. The pressure against his cock increased until it went just beyond pleasurable to uncomfortable. Bram's voice was harsh and low in his ear.

"I've tried to show you that you could enjoy tender just as much as rough. That you *deserved* to have tenderness, too. But I forgot one thing."

"What's that?" James ground out between his teeth.

"You don't just need it rough. You *like* it rough." Bram ran his hands over James' skin, pinching and kneading the flesh hard. "Gonna give you exactly what you like, baby. Right here, right now."

"Bram, you can't!" James struggled against Bram's body, but his lover didn't give an inch. "We can't! The hall is full of people. They'll hear us. Macy's probably got her ear plastered to the outside of the door now!" He gave Bram a pleading look, his voice dropping low and urgent. "The police are on the way. They'll be knocking on my door!"

Gripping James' ass with both hands, Bram jerked James closer and rubbed his thigh over the growing bulge at James' groin. "Don't care. Let 'em listen. I'm doing you right and doing you now, so accept it, baby." He slid his jaw over James' flushed cheek and bumped their chins together before whispering, "There's no escape. Give it up, Jamie. I'm gonna love you hard."

Lifting his weight up, Bram grabbed Jamie's hips and spun him around, face first into the door. The fabric twisted and tightened, but the brass hook held. James gave a fleeting thought to what the over-sized hook had been originally put there for, then dug his fingers into the restraining sleeves as he felt Bram's arms wrap around him to rub his naked belly.

Stretched out long and lean, balancing on the balls of his feet, James squirmed away from the light touch. He unintentionally backed right into Bram's solid, unyielding chest. Twisting his face to one side, he strained to see behind him, but his own arms blocked the view. He finally tossed his head back, arched his spine, and caught a glimpse of Bram from the corner of his eye.

The feral, decidedly Neanderthal expression on Bram's face made him swallow hard and lick his suddenly dry lips. He recognized the look as the same one Bram had worn that first night when they went out into the alley. Only this time, it was magnified tenfold. James' breath caught in his throat. His cock jerked, drawing his balls up more tightly between his tense thighs.

"I want to be able to see you." His neck ached with the hard angle required to see behind him. James finally let his head fall back into a comfortable position, unable to hold Bram's intense stare any longer without fearing he would come in his pants.

"Nope. You 'see' too much." Bram's words were hot against his neck. The man's lips mouthed through his curls and then breathed into his ear. "Even things that aren't there. Like problems that haven't even hap-

pened yet, or that aren't likely to happen." The swish of silk sliding against silk filled the air, exotic and unnaturally loud compared to Bram's low, sultry whispers. "I'm going to give you a break from all that, baby. Just let you feel things for a change."

A flash of dark and light blue stripes appeared before James' eyes and the room went black. A tremor rippled through him. "Jesus, Bram! What's happening?"

A soft band of fabric pressed over his eyes, sealing out every ray of bright daylight in the apartment. It pulled tight. James winced when strands of his hair were tugged and twisted at the back of his head as it was secured in place.

"Blindfold. Now you can't see those problems anymore. All you can do is feel." James' belly quivered as Bram's warm, rough hands groped at his belt and unzipped his trousers. The pants hung from his hips, held in place by Bram's groin pressed to his ass, the thick weight of his lover's full and ready cock jammed into the crease of his ass cheeks.

The throaty, now almost foreign sounding voice, rumbled in his ear again. "Feel me touching you. Giving you what you need. Giving you that bit of rough you like so much."

James' tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, blocking any protest that might have slipped out. Every limb vibrated with a mix of tension and lust.

He'd never been blindfolded before. The smell of dust and Bram's aftershave dominated his senses. His hearing became more acute. When he rested his forehead against the wooden door, James could hear the muffled shouts and occasional thump from the apartment of the battling couple next door. He could even distinguish the rustle of fabric and the scuff of heels as Macy paced outside his door.

All at once, the warm weight of Bram's reassuring presence left his back. Both his pants and cotton boxers were yanked down to his ankles. The room air, cold and damp, wafted over his skin, soothing the burn of small scratches Bram's nails had left behind over the firm swell of his ass.

James shivered, not so much from the temperature, but from the uncertainty of what his lover would do next. Even though he knew Bram, trusted the man, James felt as unnerved and anxious as he had in the dark, unfamiliar alley, pressed up against a gritty brick wall.

Sandpaper hands gripped his ass, kneading and spreading his cheeks. A blast of scalding breath traveled down the open crease of his butt as Bram nuzzled the delicate strip of hidden flesh. His fine facial stubble prickled over the entire area surrounding James' hole.

"Fuck! Bastard."

James gasped and flinched away, but his hips were taken in a bruising hold and yanked back into place. Thrown off balance and disoriented, he fumbled for a tighter grip on the shirt around his wrists, legs kicking to find something to give him a more secure stance. Mid-kick, Bram released his ass.

His shoes came off without even being untied. He heard them thump as they landed on the floor somewhere to his left. He couldn't resist the impulse to turn his head and follow the sound, desperate for more input to offset the lack of sight.

He heard Bram give a tiny grunt as his feet lifted up off the floor, knees bent and his bare ass sitting on the fluid, muscular angle of what he realized after a time was Bram's broad shoulder. Not high enough to

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allow him to disentangle the shirt from the hook, but far enough that his pants, boxers and socks could easily be removed,

James was too shocked to react. By the time he had recovered, the last of his clothing was missing and his impromptu seat had disappeared. His feet were back under him, still barely touching the floor, but now the gritty, worn nap of the carpeting brushed the soles of his feet. The swish of fabric drew his attention. In his mind, he clearly saw his clothing tossed aside and puddled on the floor near his feet.

Left completely alone, untouched, James was floating in a dark void. Cool air caressed all of his skin now. The sudden silence thundered in his ears. James couldn't suppress the series of shivers that covered him in gooseflesh. He shook so hard his full cock bobbed and shimmied, the tip rapping against the front door. With a whimpered groan, he immediately shifted back, irrationally panicked someone out in hallway would hear the sound and know what caused it.

Being blind was unnerving. Being blind and restrained was scary, nauseating, stressful, and seriously damn thrilling. James' skin tingled, the fine hairs of his legs standing on end, waiting, yearning for more contact.

“Where...where are you?”

When no answer came, he strained his hearing to locate his lover. He was abruptly overwhelmed by the tiny sounds in the apartment he had never noticed before. The hum of the refrigerator, the ping of the running furnace as air blew out the vents like the roar of a tornado to James' now abnormally acute hearing.

“We can't do this now. Really, we can't!”

“Can and will.”

He jumped when an unexpected hand suddenly groped his groin, the touch rough and rapid. Bram palmed his cock and tugged at his sac, mauling him, but the coarse caress made James' balls ache and his cock offer up a splash of pre-come.

For the first time ever, James could feel the fluid bead on the tip of his shaft. Then as suddenly as it appeared, the hand was gone and he was left hanging, literally, legs spread, skin on fire, and erection eager for more. Even his ass spasmed. The desire to have Bram deep inside of him despite the tense circumstances jumped up several notches.

Silence descended around James again. He cocked his head to one side trying to capture whatever sound the room had to offer him. The light pad of what he thought were footsteps scuffed in an irregular beat, far away and indistinct.

He leaned his head forward against the wooden door, discomforted by the continued motion outside in the hallway. At least three separate voices carried through the door, a mix of nervous pacing and mumbled swearing. It was unnerving to know people were standing only a few feet away. If he could hear them he knew they could hear him as well. He vowed to keep his voice low, no matter what his forceful lover had in store for him.

The silence stretched on and James' anxiety rose with each passing tick of the clock. When Bram didn't return, James called out, his voice rough and shaky, barely audible as half of the words stuck in his throat.

“What's...what's happening? Bram?” His voice rose and panic set in at the silence.

Beside the fact Bram wouldn't leave him like this, there was no other way out of the apartment except the fire escape. He knew he hadn't been abandoned, but the thought that Bram could be standing only a few feet away watching him, stretched out and helpless, eating him up with his hungry, blue gaze, unnerved him. He shivered, his cock pulsed and hardened, growing heavy and tight.

“Bram?” He groaned, wetting his dry lips between rapid, shallow gasps. The air surrounding him suddenly seemed to shift, turning warmer beside his right leg. Anticipating a grope to his ass again, James jerked and cried out as Bram finally touched him.

“Christ! You bastard!” His hips shoved forward, plunging the shaft of his partially encased cock farther down the hot channel of Bram's mouth and throat. Startled and frustrated by it, James hissed and shook his head, trying unsuccessfully to throw off the tight band of silk from his eyes. His heart pounded painfully in his chest and he felt light-headed.

Bucking his hips, James tried to pump into the heat and suction, skating close to the edge of climax in record time, but he couldn't move. Bram's callused hands griped his hips hard, one hand scalding hot, the other curiously wet and cold, immobilizing him. Then one thick-muscled arm wrapped around James' ass. His groin pressed into Bram's face, his cock swallowed to the root and held there.

The mental picture of what he must look like flooded James' mind and took him to a higher plane of arousal than he thought possible without coming. He could see himself: arms tied over his head, naked, aroused, feet barely making contact with the floor, sight gone, senses reeling, held motionless in an erotic pose with his cock buried between Bram's lips, his lover feasting on him, devouring him while he hung helpless and open to Bram's every whim.

He gasped and quivered, the need to come rising again. As if on cue, Bram's mouth tightened like a vise and his tongue pressed hard at the base of James' cock, driving back the urge.

James moaned and twisted, a dull ache in his bruised side awakening. He was aware he couldn't get away, but pulled at his restraints just to feel the cut of the fabric on his wrists and Bram's fingers digging into his flesh to still his movements. Bram was right. He enjoyed the feeling of not being able to escape, of being forced and overpowered, of being a captive to Bram's pleasure and will. Bram knew what he really needed, knew him inside and out.

A rattle and clunk by his feet that James couldn't place mingled with his pants and gasps. James nearly wrenched himself from Bram's hold when the sharp edge of something thin and cold moved up his abdomen and along his exposed ribcage. A knife? A letter opener? It left a burn along its path, but James could tell it hadn't cut his skin. It circled his nipples one at a time, and then it was pressed and held on each crinkled nub until they were red and impossibly stiff.

Just when James adjusted to the sharp chill, Bram began to suck on his cock, tonguing it and lapping at the underside of the swollen head. The wet, seductive sounds tore his focus away from the icy cold on his chest. His balls tightened and drew up, his climax boiling deep inside, teetering on the verge of spilling out. Just as his orgasm began to edge toward bursting, a sliver of icy cold popped into Bram's mouth and pressed against the base of his cock.

James grunted and jerked, all thoughts of coming slithering back behind his drawn up balls. He cried out and tugged at the bindings on his wrists, hips bucking away from the sudden burning cold. It magnified the sensations of heat from Bram's tightly sucking mouth, surrounding biting cold with sizzling waves of warmth with every stroke of his lover's tongue.

Strong, insistent hands grabbed his ass and pulled him forward, burying his cock in the tight inferno surrounding it, torturing him with sudden touches of cold here and there along his shaft. It slid over the tip only once, a burning slash of icy thrill teasing the slit until it melted away, consumed by the fire of Bram's firm, rough tongue.

James' erection returned, his cock full and hard, his need building rapidly, pulled out of him with each new swallow and sucking stroke of Bram's lips and tongue. James squirmed and gasped as a suddenly slick fingertip rubbed at the entrance to his ass, then entered him, resting at the opening, teasing the tight ring of muscle and stretching it. The burn and pressure it caused shot bolts of pleasure straight to his cock, drawing up his balls and gifting Bram with the taste of his pre-come.

James grunted and pushed his ass down, urging the finger deeper, but his efforts went unrewarded. Bram kept the pressure firm, but didn't go past the clenching ring begging for more. Then Bram added a second fingertip.

“Fuck! You bastard. Do something!” Voice a harsh whisper, James twisted and squirmed, unable to get his feet firmly enough on the floor to force more contact. He was helpless to do more than allow Bram to pleasure him any way the big man wanted to. And that thought sent a flush of arousal through him that nearly made him come.

Cock enveloped in the wet, sucking warmth of Bram's mouth and throat, groin pressed into Bram's face by the scorching heat of the man's massive, restraining hand on his ass while his eager opening was impaled on thick, invading fingers, James' mind whirled and his desire soared. Pleasure spiked through him and what felt like a trail of fire raced up his nervous system. He wanted to explode, but he needed more. He needed Bram inside of him.

“Fuck! Need you. Now. Want you!” His cock slid out of the tunnel of heat and the cold air of the room shocked him, but not enough to melt his need.

“Not just yet, baby. I want to hear you scream my name when you come. Want you to know who you need.” Bram licked at the head of James' cock and James could feel it bob and dance between his spread legs with each lap of that wet tongue. He could feel the trickle of pre-come as it beaded at the slit and cascaded over the head, chilled by the air in the room.

Bram mouthed his balls, then nipped at the crease between his groin and his thigh. “Then maybe you'll understand I need you, too.”

The hand on his ass disappeared and a new sensation at his asshole made James cry out and jump forward. A sliver of icy cold slid between the fingers in his opening, breaching the inner channel. It was shocking, icy cold and burning at the same time, unexpected and exotic, thrilling and scary. Bram's thick fingers pushed the blunt slice of cold deeper, filling and stretching him while making him gasp and shake, torn between uncertainty and blissful pleasure.

It was new, exciting, and oh-so erotic. His lack of sight made his focus sharper and the sensations seemed magnified to the point that James could barely experience them all. He was hot and cold, scared and thrilled, burning with a heated flush of arousal and covered in gooseflesh, shaking with excitement. He teetered on the edge of climax not knowing whether to explode with pleasure or frustration.

James nearly sobbed, the realization that Bram was the only man that could bring him here, the only one that understood him, hitting him like a punch to the gut. He felt like a long locked door inside of his chest

had its lock forced open and the release of the pressure building behind the door suddenly escaped. It was amazing how clearly he could see things blindfolded. Lightheaded and disoriented, his tears flowed unheeded.

The warm mass of Bram's body shifted around his legs. James listened to the sound of movements in the hall, new, deep, male voices and Macy's soft, delicate tones. He blocked them out, subconsciously registering the presence of the police and not caring. The strained huffs of Bram's breathing dominated his senses and he concentrated on his lover, visualizing the movements by the sounds Bram made as he repositioned himself behind James.

The sound of the slip-slide of gel made his ass clench tightly in anticipation. James panted and rocked back, his body seeking out the coming penetration before his conscious thoughts registered the event. His hips were lifted and his legs knocked apart in one smooth, rough motion. A blunt, hot pressure stroked over his opening, pushing and backing off until James was ready to scream. Then suddenly, the rim of his ass was stretched. His opening was entered in one smooth, long, slow stroke until Bram was completely inside of him, the root of the man's stout cock stretching his fluttering ring so wide the burn became intense and consuming.

Bram flicked his hips and the delicious, heady burn shot directly to James' cock. Already hugely erect, it hardened and grew so heavy James felt if he could see it, it would reach his knees. His balls tightened and drew up, their sac plastered to his perineum, hot and compact.

Bram's hand held James' hips, immobilizing him and lifting him as Bram began lunging into him, the strokes long and hard, each one building on the last one until James was grunting and groaning with every jarring thrust. The sliver of cold had been forced deep and disappeared into the heat of his body, a lingering dot of icy thrill left buried in the center of his abdomen.

One nipple was suddenly pinched and plucked, its taut, swollen nub so aroused it burned like a hot ember from a fire. His chest filled with the resulting pleasure it caused until James thought there was no room for his heart to beat or his lungs to expand. Eager, ravenous lips settled on his neck and worked their way rapidly up the side of his throat to bite and lick at his jaw and the soft flesh behind his ear. Bram groaned into his neck and the sound made James tremble and his ass spasm.

“That's it baby, shake. Shake for me. Show me what I do to you. Show me how much you love.”

James quaked and bucked, Bram's rich, deep, growling tones vibrating through his neck and down his spine. He arched and shoved back, working with the stroking thrusts of his lover, forcing more power, more depth from each one until his head was spinning, his body on fire and his orgasm spiraling out of control.

He could see their entwined bodies in his mind, rutting, sweaty and taut with need and want, his own cock heavy and full, leaking, neglected and red between his spread, naked thighs, the blindfold made from his own business tie strapped over his eyes, his wrists bound and his body stretched and restrained, locked in the powerful hands of his massive lover while his entire being was held impaled and supported by Bram's shaft.

James shuddered. The warm growl rumbled in his ear between sharp bites of his ear lobe and hip-rolling thrusts. “Love you, baby. Need you, always. Right here. Like this. Shaking and hard. Love you, Jamie.”

Another deep, rough, jarring stroke and James exploded. His orgasm ripped through him, tearing away reality. He was tumbling through a churning whirlpool of heat, passion, and ecstatic bliss.

“Bram! Fuck, fuck! Bram!”

Come rocketed from his untouched cock, every continued stroke of Bram's shaft kneading his prostate, sending showers of sparks along his already sizzling nerves. The deep, building ache in his lower abdomen intensified until it finally burst. Pressure seemed to spread up his spine and shoot to the top of his head. James cried out, the need and pleasure overwhelming. It built and built until he clenched down hard and felt Bram bury his cock to the hilt in his ass.

His lover froze and a roar of passion vibrated through Bram's chest into James' back, shaking both of them. The vibrations forced new shockwaves down James' cock, sending more pearls of come from his slit. He felt each pulse as his body expelled his seed and his mind's eye watched it paint the door inches away.

As the last drops faded from his thoughts, James' focus was pulled to inside his body where hot spurts of come bathed his channel and the burn and stretch of Bram's thick, exploding cock took over his senses. He imagined he could see every ribbon of thick, white come as it splashed his inner walls, marking him, its heat branding him inside and out, claiming him as Bram's, owning him completely, just the way he wanted it.

James rode the crest of the climax for what seemed like forever, until exhausted and spent he slumped into his lover's waiting arms, weight suspended between bonds of fabric and bonds of love. He barely noticed when Bram slipped out of him, or when he was lifted and his arms removed from the door hook.

He suddenly realized that the fabric, while more tangible, was only symbolic, and that the love was the stronger of the two restraints. Whatever problems they faced, James wanted to face them together with this man. Bram was his future. James was going to have some adjusting to do.

Braced up, door against his naked back and Bram flush with his front, he felt the shirt slide off his wrists. Bram rubbed his arms for a few moments, helping the circulation return. Still blindfolded, James groaned and moved his feet to find a more stable stance, reluctantly letting reality seep back into his consciousness along with the returning feeling to his limbs.

James felt fingers working the blindfold's knot at the back of his head. Quickly, before the tie could be removed, James ran his hands along the broad, hard-muscled body in front of him and found Bram's head. Pulling the big man down, he managed to lock their lips together, his mouth ravenous and needy. He poured all of the unspoken passion into the kiss, hoping Bram would understand his inability to say the words he wanted to say. It was just too much emotion for James to express. He didn't have the comfort level with revealing his inner soul that Bram did. Maybe he could learn over time. Time Bram seemed willing to give him.

He broke the kiss just as the blindfold slipped away. Blinking hard at the sudden light, James held Bram close, looked him in the eye and whispered a raw, throaty, “Love you.”

“Good.” Bram placed a chaste kiss on each of James' fluttering eyelids. “Because I love you, too.”

James nodded shakily and buried his face in Bram's neck, savoring the warmth of the big man's embrace as Bram wrapped around him, plastering him to that broad chest. James' arms were leaden. He had to look at his fingers to know they were still attached. He felt exhausted, dizzy, and faintly terrified by the warmth and happiness filling up his chest, shoving his stomach up next to his wildly pounding heart.

“Coming home with me?”

Numb, James merely nodded again.

“No argument?”

He shook his head.

“No second thoughts?”

Again, a shake of his head.

“We'll split groceries, utilities, and chores.”

James nodded. The sound of footsteps outside the door made him freeze, but Bram ignored it, even when the doorbell rang.

“We talk if there's a problem, not accuse and run, right?”

“Kay.” His voice sounded raw and unnatural. The doorbell rang again. James jerked his head around to glance at the door.

Bram touched James' chin and turned James back to face him. “I'll get the guys to help us move again this weekend. Pack whatever you need for the rest of the week and we'll take it with us now, okay?”

Nodding, James flinched, startled when a knock on the door vibrated through his back. He looked down at his naked abdomen, the come-splashed floor, and Bram's still open pants. A smile broke out on his swollen mouth and he licked the last taste of Bram's mouth off his lips. “Think I should answer it?”

“Only if you want to be arrested for indecent exposure.”

James kissed Bram again, the passion threatening to rise. “Why don't I let you take me home and I'll show you what 'indecent' really is?”

“You,” Bram said, and kissed him until he was lightheaded, “have got a deal, baby.”

Chapter Fifteen

“So, you want the couch or the bookcases moved next?” Buck stood by James' open apartment door, fists curled on his lean hips and muscles flexing under the sweat-soaked, white t-shirt stretched across his tall, V-shaped frame. His red hair was a deep copper color in the afternoon light.

Without commenting, James wiped the sweat from his face and glanced out his door. Out in the hallway, two more of Bram's construction crew mates trekked out to the waiting pickup trucks loaded down with the last of the cartons of small belongings.

Dressed in snug, worn jeans and an old, denim work shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows and button front open enough to reveal the smooth, firm bulk of his muscular chest, Bram looked like the god of the blue collar workers as he straightened up from moving a chair to one side and looked at James. James moved to collapse his workstation desk next. It was large and awkward. He struggled with the locks that held the top angle motionless.

“What do you think, Jamie? Bookcases last so they come out first?” Bram moved to help James, quickly unlocking the large drafting table. It unexpectedly snapped closed, catching the meat of James' right hand in the joint.

“Shit! That hurt.” James yanked his arm back and sucked on the torn web between thumb and forefinger.

It had been a week since his fight with Nick Ellwood and most of his injuries were healing well. The worst of the bruises were fading to yellow-purple and the laceration over his temple was just an angry slash of red/pink. The last thing he wanted was a new hurt to slow him down again. This one wasn't deep, but it was going to leave a ragged mark on his hand.

“Christ, I'm sorry, Jamie. I thought your hands were clear. Let me look at it.” Bram leaned the table against the nearest wall and grabbed James' bleeding hand. He wrapped a handkerchief from his back pocket around the wound and the bleeding stopped after a few moments. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't worry about it.” He pressed the cloth to the jagged abrasion, gave a sardonic smile, and winked at Bram. “I've had worse.”

Bram ran a fingertip lightly over the yellow-purple bruising surrounding the healing red gash on James' face and nodded. “Yeah, I know. But I'm not responsible for those.”

“You didn't cause this one, either. Just an accident, don't sweat it, really. I'm okay.” He pressed the cloth more tightly to the wound until it went numb, pushing down the pain, masking it so he wouldn't have to deal with it. It wasn't important. James allowed himself to enjoy the feel of Bram's tender-rough hand as the other man soothingly rubbed his wrist above the handkerchief.

Buck waited until they stopped consoling each other before asking again, “Couch or bookcases, guys?”

Throwing Buck a disgruntled stare, Bram growled, “Bookcases. But get someone to give you a hand. They're black walnut, antiques and heavy.”

“Mitch hasn't done shit since we got here.” Buck wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. “I'll get him to do it.”

James glanced up and let his gaze wander around the rapidly emptying space. No one would know he had ever lived here. This place was nothing more than a small blip on the map of his life's travels. One he wasn't sorry to leave behind. Thankfully the apartment next door had been eerily quiet all morning. He was surprised to find the silence more disturbing to him than the fighting had been. It was like the calm before the storm from his childhood memories. The fighting always started again if you waited long enough.

Oddly, even Macy hadn't stopped by. With all the activity and mountains of buff, muscular men milling around, James was surprised the blond hadn't materialized at his doorstep seconds after the crew arrived.

Frowning, James looked out the living room window at the line of pickups parked outside the building. Only Marty and Mike were in sight. “Where is Mitch? I haven't seen him in a while.”

Grinning, Bram moved to James' side and slid his arm around his lover's shoulders. “He's getting your security deposit back.”

“How? That was a non-refundable deposit.” James gave Bram a suspicious frown. “I'd already accepted the fact I was going to lose the cash.”

“Two grand is a lot to lose, Jamie.” He squeezed James' shoulder. “Especially for a few days rent.” He dropped his arm down to wrap around James' waist. “Besides, the super lied.”

“Lied?” James relaxed a little into Bram's hold, willing himself to ignore the teasing grin on Bram's face. “When?”

“When he told us the police never got called here much. Both the officers at the hospital and Macy can testify the police are regular visitors here.”

Snorting, James wiggled out of Bram's embrace and picked up some trash off the floor, suddenly in a hurry to leave this place. “I wish it mattered, but I don't think the threat of legal action over a casual comment is going to convince him to give my money back.”

The low, nerve-shattering wail of a distressed baby split the air and James shuddered. A tan and charcoal-tipped streak shot into the room. All three men tracked Kitty's progress as the kitten briefly roamed the room then entwined herself around James' ankles. James reluctantly reached down and scratched her ears. She rubbed her snub face against his leg and purred like a racecar.

Kitty's contented, rough trills were drowned out by the heavy stomp of work boots and the click-clip of familiar high heels. A deep, gravelly voice started booming before its owner even crossed into the room. “Maybe the threat of being sued to cover all your extensive medical costs and traumatic, mental anguish caused by the owner's nephew and tenant will work instead, pup.”

Mitch strode through the open door with Macy, in a light gray business skirt and matching jacket over a lacy, pink, low-cut, satin top of some kind, miraculously attached to his arm. She looked like a Barbie doll dressed for a day at the office, very high heels and all. She flirted with Mitch with every bat and wink

of her long, dark eyelashes. Mitch appeared to be similarly smitten with Macy.

“I found a couple of *fine* looking things at that superintendent's place.” He spared Bram an admonishing glare. “You didn't say the pup was living next to an angel, Bram.” Mitch patted Macy's hand, which she had wrapped around his arm, and tucked it close to his big, flannel-shirted side as if for safe keeping, marking his territory before the other interested men in the group.

The pony-tailed, beefy man grinned and pulled a piece of paper out of his shirt pocket to wave it in the air. “Ellwood's got a long police record of abuse and assault. This was easy.”

“Hi, Mitch, Macy.” Bram winked at Macy, clapped his friend on the shoulder, and watched as the big man slapped a check into James' hand. His grin widened. “Knew you'd come through for us, buddy.”

“Hi Bram, Jamie!” Her soft, whispery voice had a seductive tone to it. James smiled and assumed it was for Mitch's benefit.

“Hey, Macy, morning!” Stunned, James stared at the slim rectangle of paper then slowly unfolded it. “This is my check.” He looked from Bram to Mitch, a grimace of confusion on his face. One hand rubbed at the crack at the corner of his mouth. “The one I gave him for the deposit. He never cashed it.”

Mitch chuckled and tapped the paper, making it shake and rattle. “Nope. Seems like you're not the first tenant in this apartment to want to leave a few days after moving in. The building sup is learning to wait for a while before cashing the checks. Easier to just rip it up than to do all the paperwork needed to write a new one!”

“It's a shame he's had to learn that the hard way, but if he doesn't like it, he could quit.” Bram shrugged and glanced at the check over James' shoulder. He squeezed James' neck and lightly shook the man. “You get to pay for the beer when we're done moving your things to the house.”

“Deal. It's worth it.” James jammed the check into his pocket and held out his hand to Mitch. “Thanks. I appreciate it. He wasn't too interested in talking to me about it. I tried last night on the phone.”

Mitch shook his hand, gripping it hard over the wrapped cloth. James grimaced and Mitch let go. “Hell, didn't see that. Hurt yourself?” James pulled his hand away before Mitch could grab it.

Bram frowned, reaching for his hand again, but James suddenly crouched down out of reach to pay attention to the insistent kitten still at his feet. “I closed his hand in the table joint by accident.”

Talking to the floor, James said, “It's nothing. A scratch. Looks worse than it is, guys. I'll be fine.”

Kitty meowed and tried to climb up James' leg. He reluctantly picked her up to escape being used as scratching post and stood, Kitty firmly seated in his injured hand to prevent any further examination of it. He hated being the center of attention.

“Why is this troublemaker here?” He playfully shook the kitten, then tucked it close to his chest and petted it until it curled up, closed its eyes, and purred so loud James entire body tingled with the vibrations. “Are you babysitting for Sheila Ellwood again, Macy?”

“Oh, no.” Macy's eyes got even bigger than usual and she disengaged from Mitch to shimmy over to James to pet the kitten. “You've been gone so you couldn't know.”

She nodded wisely and included Bram and Mitch in her story, dropping her already soft voice into a conspiratorial tone.

“Nick's in jail for the next thirty days. Sheila finally got her act together and moved out. She said she wasn't going to tell anyone where she was going and didn't think it would be fair to Kitty to take her on the road when she didn't know where she was going to end up.” Macy's eyes were as large as saucers. “Wasn't that brave of her?”

Swallowing hard against a sudden lump in his throat and the one memory he had of his mother packing a suitcase that had never left the bedroom, James nodded and tried to keep the catch out of his voice. “Trust me, it was. And it was the right thing for her to do. Not every woman has the courage to do it.” Bram gave him a funny look so he must not have succeeded in keeping his tone neutral.

James gestured at the uncharacteristic outfit Macy was wearing. “Look at you, Macy. All business-like. You look great.” He smiled and teasingly added, “You just need a briefcase and you'd be all set.”

Expression serious, Macy pointed one long, pink nail at the hallway, and solemnly informed him, “I left my case by my door. It's too heavy to carry around if I don't need to.” She shifted her weight on her four-inch heels and struck a cover girl pose. “A girl has to watch her balance in these shoes.”

Flashing a glance between the other two men, James looked for clarification, but Mitch was staring at Macy's ample breasts and Bram wore a similar confused expression as James knew he did. He searched his memory and came across a possible explanation.

“You said something about taking classes before. Is that what you wear this to?”

Macy nodded vigorously. She attached herself to Mitch's arm and gave him an adoring gaze before turning back to James. “Uh-huh. I have morning classes in Long Term Retirement Investment Counseling and Understanding Annuities. Every Saturday morning.”

All three men gave her a surprised stare. Bram recovered first. “You're a very ambitious woman, Macy. Most young ladies your age don't plan ahead for their futures.”

Mike and Marty walked back in from their extended cigarette break to take a silent stance against one wall and ogle Macy's long legs and ass. Mitch glared at them. Grinning, Marty flipped him off.

“How are you doing in the classes?” Recovering slightly, James was suddenly curious. Macy didn't give anyone the impression she could make correct change let alone take investment courses and understand them. “Financial matters take a lot of concentration. I have trouble with them myself.”

“I love working with numbers and finding the best way to make my money work for me. I mean, a girl's looks will only go so far and last so long, you know? Exotic dancing is a very limited profession. If I don't plan for my future, who will?” Macy suddenly seemed wiser and more mature than anyone else in the room. “I haven't met the right person to help me make a stable, secure future like my parents have.” She stared up into Mitch's face and added, “Yet.”

Bram stepped up to James' side and gave him the same adoring stare Macy was giving Mitch. “You keep working hard learning about investments and I'm sure the right guy will come along for you, too, Macy. Good people deserve to have good things happen to them.” He kissed the top of James' head and squeezed him before letting go. “Sometimes it just takes digging in your heels and holding on to what you want in life.”

“I’ll remember that.” Macy smoothed out any imagined wrinkles in her short skirt, probably more for Mitch’s benefit than for her skirts. “Oh, by the way, I don’t take the classes, I teach them.”

Bram froze in the middle of shifting a chair onto his shoulder. James traded disbelieving expressions with him. All of the men turned to stare at Macy. She preened and giggled.

“I have an MBA. Class of ’02. I support myself with teaching adult classes at the local junior college and I work nights as a dancer to have money for my investment fund. If a girl is any good at dancing, which I am,” she giggled again, “she can make over five thousand dollars a month in tips at a nice place like the Lounge. And all she has to do is dance, if you know what I mean.” Macy nodded knowingly and batted her eyelashes. “Lots of rich, older guys just want to watch a girl move, you know?”

“Jesus, Lord, angel woman. God help me. You are the answer to my nightly prayers.” Licking his lips, Mitch groaned out loud. The leering gleam in his stare softened and took on a more delighted, curious light. James thought he actually witnessed the man switch his interest in Macy from merely lustful to seriously intrigued. He’d recognized that same look in Bram’s eyes since their first night together. He felt a sudden flush of affection and lust for his lover and turned to look at him, drinking in the sight of the brawny man’s buff, tapered form and handsome, angled face. James knew he was a lucky man.

Swaying seductively in place on her heels and long legs, Macy giggled and returned Mitch’s single-minded stare.

Overwhelmed with the sudden need to leave this place and get back on track with his life with Bram, James moved to Macy and gently eased a sleeping Kitty into her arms. James glanced around at the other men. His eyes lingered appreciatively on Bram.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m interested in a cold beer and game of pool. What about hitting the Atlantic when we’re done?”

Bram winked at James and jumped to life. “Now there’s a plan. Let’s get the rest of the stuff loaded and over to the house. We can save arranging it for tomorrow once it’s inside.”

The rest of the crew followed suit, and the apartment was completely empty in a matter of three minutes.

Macy had run off to change her clothes, spurred on by an invitation from Mitch to join them that was seconded by every man present. She returned in under five minutes, minus Kitty, in a short, denim skirt, a pale blue tank top stretched to its limits, and pink and blue cowboy boots. She grinned at Mitch’s appreciative expression and climbed into the truck cab beside him.

Wedged in Bram’s truck, James was inordinately pleased for the first time ever to be the small guy that got stuck in the middle of the bench seat. He rubbed against Bram’s side and let his hand rest almost innocently on the man’s thigh, content to relax against Bram solid bulk and breathe in the earthy scent of Bram’s warm body. *This* day was getting better.

The Atlantic Bar and Grill hadn’t changed since the last time James cruised through it. The room was still dimly lit. The sharp crack of smacking pool balls competed with the rock and roll music thundering out of the jukebox and the floor still made a gritty scratch and scrape as he walked across it. The smell of beer

and peanuts brought back memories of the first time he laid eyes on Bram and his cock jumped and hardened. His gaze automatically darted to lock on Bram and he found his lover already eyeing him, lust and want in that pale blue stare.

The bar wasn't the most romantic place, but it held a deep meaning for them. He could see them coming here for their anniversary year after year. Gazes still riveted on each other, James had the sudden, feral mental image of Bram bending him over the pool table and taking him fast and hard. He wished he could subtly rearrange his swelling cock to keep it from being strangled in his jeans.

Buck slapped Bram on the back, forcing Bram to break the flirtatious stare, and Marty challenged Bram to a game of pool. Mitch and Mike volunteered to go to the bar for pitchers of beer while Macy dragged James off to pump the jukebox full of quarters looking for something she could dance to. James was a little afraid of the stir a professional pole dancer might make dancing in a biker bar, but he soon learned that trying to separate Macy from her music was a waste of energy. He dumped five dollars worth of quarters into the machine and let her pick and choose her favorite songs.

They wandered back over to the pool tables as Mitch and Mike appeared with the beer and they all watched Bram run Buck off the table in a leisurely game.

Macy swayed in time to Linda Ronstadt's *Desperado* and casually flirted with every man in the bar until Mitch made a move and asked her to dance on the tiny dance floor in front of the jukebox.

Mike punched James' arm every time the red jersey clad football team on the TV over the bar scored and kept topping off James' glass with beer from a pitcher when it got anywhere near half empty.

Everyone was feeling the bonds of friendship and the pleasant sensation of giving a helping hand to someone in need. James watched the affectionate, tight ties of brotherhood between Bram and the crew, seeing the basic goodness and caring of Bram's personality in his every interaction with his men. There was a strong bond of caring between these people, and he was being offered a place in their circle by virtue of Bram having chosen him to be at his side. These gruff, hard-bodied, and hard-living men trusted Bram. James realized it was about time he did, too.

Having gorged themselves on pizza and wings while unloading the trucks, thirst was their driving force once at the bar. Pitchers were emptied and refilled in record time.

All of James' things were now haphazardly piled in the once empty library at Bram's house. He was permanently ensconced in the man's bed and at his table. An odd feeling of surreal happiness made James almost giddy at the thought. Three beers into the evening, he found he had to keep himself from grabbing Bram and crawling up that towering, muscle-bound, sexy body.

Standing in the middle of a biker bar, that course of action seemed less than wise, but after all they'd been through, James wasn't in the mood to be denied. After a quick, covert glance around to judge the crowd in the rest of the place, he set down his glass, strode determinedly, if a bit unsteadily, over to Bram, and firmly took the pool cue out of Bram's unresisting hands. He tossed it at a surprised but quick acting Mike, who deftly caught it and moved to the table.

James stood squarely in front of Bram and looked up into his lover's curious, smiling face. Giving him a sultry, smoldering stare, James slowly wet his lips then raked his teeth over the lower swell of plump, shiny, pink flesh before saying, "Let's get some air."

When Bram took more than a second to respond, James turned up the heat of his stare and repeated

Bram's own words to him from their first night together here in this bar. "Do I have to drag you out?"

The predatory gleam that sparked to life in Bram's eyes made James nearly come in his jeans. His breathing became ragged and he shivered with anticipation. Bram's scorching stare fueled the shudders of need sizzling through his body.

With a huge effort, James broke his eyes away and walked toward the open back door that led to the alley behind the bar. A few quiet catcalls from Buck and Mitch traveled his way, but he knew Bram followed him by the wall of heat at his back and the smell of earthy sweat and old leather that was all Bram's own familiar scent.

The night was black as coal, the light from the single streetlight attached to the second story of the building cast a dirty yellow stream of light that didn't extend twenty feet into the damp, cold alleyway. James shivered and rubbed his hands together, glad he'd worn a thick, soft, chamois shirt tonight. As he passed by a stack of old crates outside the door, he glanced at several men and two women smoking a bong and comparing tattoos. No one paid him any more attention than a sleepy-eyed blink.

Several yards past them, a hand snaked down the back of his jeans and grabbed onto his waistband. James grunted, but smiled when he was jerked to one side and shoved up against a cold, grimy brick wall, Bram's weight pinning him to its rough, pitted surface. Jagged mortar lines dug into his back and his cock jumped. He could feel it leaking against the coarse weave of his jeans. The alley smelled of autumn, old leaves, crisp air, and the fumes from the bong. It was an invigorating, exotic mix for James.

The pleased, expectant smile disappeared off his face, swallowed by Bram's mouth as the man seemed to try to consume him. The kiss was hot, possessive, and rough. It seared right through him, hunger and heat forging a path past his lips, down his throat, through his heart, and straight into his groin. It stole his breath, made him blind, and dimmed his hearing. His knees went weak and his muscles trembled. The last breath in his lungs escaped as a needy groan and Bram swallowed it before James even knew he'd made it.

A hard knee forced its way between his thighs as James wantonly spread them, bucking his hips up to meet Bram's grinding flesh. It was like wrapping his thighs around a tree trunk, heavy, solid, and unyielding. Grabbing onto Bram's shoulders, James let Bram take all of his weight, settling his cock hard against the firmness of Bram's leg and melting into the growing demands of the still ongoing kiss.

His hips bucked, excitement building at a startling rate as callused fingers roughly raked through his curls and grabbed hold of his head. His face was tilted up and Bram became ravenous, tasting, licking, sucking and biting James' lips, tongue, chin, and neck in a dizzying, irregular pattern of lust and frenzied desire.

Passion sizzled across every nerve ending in James' system. Bram dropped one hand to knead and grope the curve of James' ass. James squirmed and moaned, his rim clenching and flaring, eager for more, demanding to be filled and stretched, instantly answering the familiar call of his lover's bold touch.

Desire exploded into desperate need and James resigned himself to coming in his pants.

"Hey, dudes! Break it up!"

Bram jerked back from the kiss, slid James' off his thigh, and turned so that his lover was mostly hidden from the interloper's sight.

A thirty-something biker in worn jeans, a Rolling Stones T-shirt, and a heavy road leather jacket that

showed the blue suede marks of numerous hits on pavement, indignantly stood ten feet away from them. He held out his hands in a beseeching gesture, an exasperated expression on his bedraggled, bearded face. Even at this distance, James could see the man was stoned.

“Come on, dudes, you're using my office. Got deals to make here tonight, you know?”

Bram gave his most intimidating stare, but it had little effect on the drugged and overly mellow man. “Got a problem, buddy?”

“Hey, no worries dudes, I'm cool.” The guy pulled a small packet half-full of a powdery white substance from his pocket and tapped it. “Name's Mule.” He palmed the packet and extended his hand. “Go ahead, dudes. Give it a hit. Best shit in town. You'll fly!”

Obviously pissed off, Bram grabbed James by the shoulder and brushed abruptly past Mule, bumping him forcefully with his shoulder. As he passed by, he quietly told Mule, “Thanks, *Jackass*, but we'll pass. If I'm going to suck down something that's going to make me feel good, it's going to be my boyfriend's dick, not that shit.”

“That's *Mule*, dude!”

James felt the possessive weight of Bram's hand on his shoulder and the heat of the man's large palm soothed away some of the anxiety the unwelcome interruption had sparked, but at the same time it fanned the flames of his aborted but not forgotten desires. He planned on Bram breaking a few speed limits on their way home.

Leaving a befuddled and swaying Mule behind them, they barely caught the biker's reaction as Bram's words finally penetrated the man's drug haze. “Christ! *Dudes!* Get a room!”

Chapter Sixteen

Bram's street was quiet and shrouded in familiar shadows, the streetlights barely cutting the moonless night. Fading, multi-hued leaves rustled in the light night breeze, adding a rhythmic beat to the crisp air. The street was dotted with parked cars here and there, all familiar and mostly unnoticed because of their familiarity. One or two registered on Bram as out of place, but his attention was focused on James and their mutually raging libidos.

Turning past a dark sedan parked at the entrance to his driveway, Bram pulled his truck into the circular drive at the front of his house. A manicured, six-foot hedge of privets separated the front drive from the street curb. He moved in close to James' small Vibe and parked his massive truck in the shadows created by the wide, towering house. He would have pulled up next to the garage out back, but he had plans for James that didn't include alerting Miss Emily to their presence.

Turning off the truck, Bram wasted no time in getting James back in his arms. He was eager to celebrate James' first official night in their home together.

“Come here, baby.”

Bram pulled James into his lap as much as he could with the steering wheel in the way.

“Let me see if I can find where we left off.” He pulled James close to his chest and rubbed his hands down James' slender back to the firm curve of his ass.

“Want to go inside?” James' voice was strained and his pupils were dilated with lust. Bram knew how James felt -- needy and desperate, just like he did.

“In a minute. Want you all to myself for a minute first. I hate being interrupted.”

Getting a firm hold on James' willing, warm body, he pulled his lover to him and ravaged James' willing mouth. Cradling James' upper torso in his arms, Bram supported James across his lean shoulders with one muscular arm. His other hand blindly groped James' waist, quickly succeeding in unzipping James' jeans. His deft fingers found and released the partially hard shaft. A few firm strokes and James was fully erect and shoving his hips into Bram's palm.

James moaned into Bram's mouth, tongue thrusting down Bram's throat and bathing the roof of his mouth with long, firm strokes.

Bram tangled his beefy hand in James' dark curls, increasing the pressure of lips to lips, and thrust his own tongue deeper into James' mouth, claiming him, and stealing his breath. He delighted in the sensation of James' hands knotted in the fabric of his shirt. Every jerky, aborted hit of his lover's fists against his shoulders raised his passion another notch until Bram was hard, leaking, and feeling like a teenager about to come in his pants.

He knew he couldn't wait for them to get into the house. Now seemed as good a night as any to christen the truck again. They had made out in the cab, it was the truck bed's turn tonight. It was a dark, moonless night, the neighborhood was asleep, and they were parked under the shadows of a massive, spreading maple tree. Tonight was actually better than most for a little starlight tryst with his lover.

“Come with me, baby. We're going to get comfortable.” Bram popped open the truck door and slid out, literally dragging James out with him. He grabbed hold of James' waist and lifted him up over the side of the truck bed.

James seemed to get the idea quickly enough, but still laughingly protested. “What the hell are you doing? It's cold out here.”

“Not that cold.” Bram swung up into the bed in one graceful, powerful move and landed beside James. He grabbed his lover by the waist and pulled James close, rubbing his thigh over James' open jeans, brushing his jutting cock against the soft weave of the worn denim of his own pants.

“There's still a stack of moving pads in the corner. Help me lay them out.” He ducked down and swooped in to give James a blistering, wet kiss. When he pulled back, he was painfully hard and James was glassy-eyed and panting. “I'll make you toasty in no time.”

James gulped down his next breath, returned Bram's kiss with a quick, passionately hungry one of his own, and then wiggled free of Bram's firm embrace to spread out the thick pads. Within seconds they had a makeshift mattress covering the hard plastic bed liner.

A few more seconds later, both men's shirts were unbuttoned and James had divested himself of his jeans and shorts, seemingly happy to use Bram's body for a blanket.

Bram happily complied by covering James' supine and spread body with his own, chest-to-chest. He held part of his weight off James with his forearms, mouth crushed to mouth. Having unzipped and shoved his jeans and briefs down his hips, Bram aligned their swollen erections. The heat of their bodies and the added friction of their cocks grinding against each other was magnified by the slight chill of the light breeze. Both men were groaning and panting, rapidly edging toward climax.

The snap and click of a car door opening and closing somewhere nearby echoed down the empty street. Bram distractedly tracked it, but the footsteps that accompanied it faded away and he dismissed it, returning his full attention to his lover.

Kissing his way up James' neck and jawline, Bram nudged James' chin down with his cheek. James responded to the familiar signal by opening his half-closed eyelids and staring into Bram's face.

In the pale shadows, Bram could see James' eyes glisten, and he felt the heat of his lover's ragged breath on his face. Never taking his gaze off of James, he tugged on James' lower lip with his teeth, then ran his tongue over the sensitive inner lining before he released it.

He stared into James' eyes. Even in the darkness Bram felt their souls connect, their bond tighten and strengthen. His voice sounded low and raw, a passionate growl that rose up from deep inside his chest. “Love you, baby. Love every fucking inch of you.” Bram shoved his cock faster along James' shaft, feeling the rise of his own climax in his tightening balls. He bumped chins with James and roughly ground out, “*You* make me fly.”

James groaned and squirmed, obviously needing more. “Fuck! Christ!” He grunted and pushed at Bram's clothing with frenzied, impatient movements. “Off! Get it off! Jesus!”

Straddling James, Bram rose up, shrugging his shirt off his broad shoulders, so that yards of muscles bunched and corded. He pushed the jeans hanging off his hips further down, then froze in place as a nearly hysterical female voice cut through the night right beside them.

“Oh, my God! *James!* He told you to get off him!”

Hands frantically grabbing for clothes, James shot up off the truck bed. “Jesus!” He gazed wildly over the truck's side, trying to hide behind Bram and look at the woman at the same time. “Julie? *Shit!*”

Bram tried to wrap his arms protectively around James. James frantically pushed him back and squirmed out from between his legs, dragging a thick moving pad over his exposed lower torso.

“Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?”

Eyes riveted on the female trespasser, Bram boldly stood up, tucked his fading erection into his pants, and carefully zipped them while the woman watched with wide eyes and an open mouth. Behind him James scabbled to get dressed while staying as hidden from view as possible.

The shocked expression fading from her face, the tall, willowy woman narrowed her eyes, put her hands on her hips, and spit her words right back at Bram with almost as much menace as he had used. “I'm looking for my missing little brother. I'm Julie Justin. Who the hell are you and why do you have him pinned down in your truck?”

“How could you move and just not tell anyone? How adolescent is that?”

Julie Justin stood in the dim light of the entry hall. Only a low wattage, Tiffany table lamp Bram used as a night light highlighted the large foyer and its three occupants. Dressed in a tailored, brown tweed business pantsuit and low pumps, dark brown hair layered to perfection in a professional, simple hairstyle that accented her eyes and pale skin, she was the picture of the successful lawyer James had told Bram his oldest sister was.

Right now, Bram wished she would be more of a sister and less of a prosecuting attorney. He pressed his lips together and tried not to interfere, but he could see the humiliation and shame in every line of James' body. He knew that James' sisters had discovered his sexual orientation during an unexpected visit to his college dorm where they had surprised James and his college boyfriend in bed. The resulting events ended up with James being thrown out of his parents' house and cut off from everyone in his family except this one sister. James didn't need a repeat of that event to lose him his last contact with his family. Bram could see James straining under the weight of being caught again by his family.

Bram drifted back to stand by the staircase and waited and watched, close enough to lend support to James if he needed it, but out of the personal conflict that brother and sister were working out.

Julie stayed near the front door and glared at James. Despite the chill from being outdoors for several hours, her face was flushed and her brown eyes flashed with unsuppressed anger. “What in the world were you thinking? Can you just tell me that?”

Julie kept talking to James, but her clipped, harsh words and her biting stare were aimed at Bram. “Maybe if you used the head on your shoulders instead of the one between your legs, you could think a little clearer. How was anyone supposed to know you were safe?”

Reduced to child status by what was apparently long-held family dynamics, James' response was defensive and angry, but he didn't raise his bowed head to meet his sister's outraged glare. “Come, on Julie! It's not like anyone in the family actually cares where I am!”

“You know that's not true.” She turned on her heel to confront Bram and gestured at the shadowed hall, frustration radiating out of every pore. “I assume you live in this place. Do you think we could have some more light in here? I'd like to actually see my brother.”

Bram just stared at her, a small smile sliding across his face as the sharp snap of the light switch clicked on behind her. He leaned on the stairway railing and calmly told her, “Jamie lives here, too, he knows where the light switches are.”

“Jamie? He calls you Jamie?” Julie turned back to James and suddenly froze in place, shocked gaze darting from his bruised face to search over every inch of exposed skin she could find. “Oh, my God. You're hurt.”

She traced the healing suture line on his temple with her fingertips, then grabbed James' recently injured hand. It had torn open slightly during his rush to get dressed. Blood oozed sluggishly from one end of the large abrasion. Moving to place herself protectively in front of James, she gave Bram a murderous glare. “What the hell is going on here? *James?*”

“It was an accident.” James peevishly pulled his hand away from her. He glanced at Bram and absent-mindedly rubbed at the wound. “Bram was--.”

“God, don't tell me you hooked up with another asshole that pushes you around? Mark Warner told me some 'slab of muscle' has been driving you to work and picking you up.” Voice rising, Julie grabbed James by the arm and held on, looking for all the world like she wanted to drag him out of the house. She was yelling now. “Why do you always have to pick gorillas?”

“Julie, don't!” James yanked away from her, eyes blazing. “You don't know anything about my life or my lifestyle right now. Don't pass judgment on me again, okay? Not like before! I'm not a kid anymore.” James' voice quivered and broke. Tears streamed down his pale, pinched face and his shoulders shook.

Bram was suddenly at his side and James automatically leaned into Bram's protective presence, watery eyes still pinned to his sister's shocked face.

Stepping in front of James, Bram shielded his lover from Julie's unwelcome reaction. He'd had enough of being pushed around inside his own house. James had taken all the abuse from this woman he was going to allow, sister or not.

“Hey, lady. I didn't hurt his hand on purpose and I had nothing to do with the rest of his injuries. Jamie got between some guy's fist and his wife's face at his last apartment building. Which is one of the reasons he's here, safe, with me.” He bristled at the disapproving look on Julie's face and added, “His family may have stopped showing him they love him, but I won't. So adjust!”

Bram felt James grab hold of the back of his shirt for an instant, grounding him. It reminded him this wasn't about James' college days or his parents' and sisters' expectations. This was about their life to-

gether. He stepped back to pull James to his side and slid his arm around James' shoulders, drawing James in close. He smiled and winked at James, then faced Julie. "I love him. Jamie and I are a family now."

"I love him, too!" Julie pushed a lock of hair back into place, exasperation in her voice and her precise, sharp hand gestures. She stared at Bram, her eyes reading his expression, obviously trying to decide if he was sincere or not. Finally her gaze darted to her brother's guarded face and her own expression softened. "I've been searching for you all day, James. *All day!*"

Silent, James swayed restlessly in place. Bram could tell he was fighting his natural urge to pace when upset. Bram tightened his arm for a brief squeeze, then relaxed it, allowing James to slip away if he wanted to. James didn't move.

"What are you doing here anyway? How did you find me?" James sounded weary and slightly lost. Bram shifted his body closer, rubbing his hand up and down James' arm. The comforting gesture wasn't lost on Julie, her gaze tracking every move Bram made.

"I'm leaving for Europe on a three-week business trip. I wanted to see you before I left and let you know how to get in contact with me in case you need me." She gave Bram a glare packed with intense dislike. "I haven't forgotten about you."

"I went to your old apartment, but the landlord said you were gone. Something about being evicted because of a brute of a boyfriend." Again Bram felt the heat of her righteous wrath. "She didn't have a forwarding address that she would give me. So I called Mark Warner, that guy from your office that asked me out last time I was here." She waited until James silently nodded before continuing.

"Mark told me, among other things, that you were seeing some big construction worker named Abraham Lord." She ran an appraising glance over Bram's towering, broad body and came up with a negative evaluation written on her face. "I looked up his home address in the phone book and ended up here around nine o'clock. Your car was parked in the driveway, so I knew I had the right place. I decided to wait."

Some of her anger drained away and Julie looked ill at ease and road-weary. "It was a four hour drive here from my place. I've spent hours trying to track you down." She sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. "I must have fallen asleep in my car. I didn't see you drive in." She tried to catch James' eye, but he wouldn't look at her. "When I woke up, I got out to stretch my legs, heard voices, and came to investigate." Julie sighed, a blush of pink tinting her cheeks. "We all know the story from there."

Frowning, Bram grew increasingly unhappy with the woman as James became more withdrawn while his sister talked. James wrapped his arms around his chest, hugging himself, body tense under Bram's arm, head bowed, face toward the floor. Julie either didn't recognize the signals of her brother's increasing distress or didn't care. Either way, Bram wasn't happy with her.

She began pacing in front of them, lecturing James like he was still a child. Her own embarrassment over finding the two of them making out in the back of the truck seemed to rekindle her suspicions and fan her initial anger back to life.

Her voice took on a biting quality that set Bram's teeth on edge. "Now I find you in a glaringly obvious destructive relationship with a gorilla that hurts you and whose idea of making love is exposing you to the entire neighborhood on the front lawn!"

James went very still under Bram's arm. He even seemed to stop breathing for a few beats. He raised his

head to stare at his sister, pain and disbelief clearly written on his stricken face. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Suddenly Bram didn't give a shit about not interfering in James' personal life. He didn't care if it looked like he was trying to control James or not, he wasn't going to let this woman, sister or not, get away with hurting the love of his life.

Bram imagined she was a formidable opponent in the courtroom, but here Julie Justin was just an unwelcome intrusion. Bram felt James tremble and sag slightly under his embrace, but whether it was out of frustration or rage, he didn't know. And he didn't care. All that mattered was that James was being crushed by his older sister's harsh verbal attack. And this was supposed to be the nice, accepting sister.

“Hold it right there, lady.” Bram squeezed James' shoulders and then moved to stand between brother and sister, blocking off both Julie's verbal attack and her accusing glare from hammering at James anymore. “I thought Jamie said you were a lawyer. I got the impression he thought you were bright. You should know better than to enter an argument without getting your facts straight first. Keep it up and this time you might lose a whole lot more than just an argument.”

“James? Are you going to just stand there while he talks to me like this?” Julie demanded.

Glancing behind him, Bram scowled as James hugged himself harder and sagged down to sit on the staircase. His face was pale and tears still slid down his cheeks, but when he raised his head, his eyes shone with a determined gleam that hadn't been there before.

“Yes, I am. Bram knows what he's talking about. He knows *me*.” James' voice was low, but steady. “Apparently, better than you do.”

“You're confused and upset by what happened earlier. I remember how embarrassing it was for you before when the three of us surprised you in your room. But you were just a kid. You're an adult now and your behavior hasn't changed! I want you to leave with me, James.”

Julie moved around Bram's hulking form so she could see her brother better, smoothly changing from demanding to beseeching in the next breath. “Please. At least for the night. So we can talk this out privately?”

“No.” The glimmer of determination in James' gaze hardened. Bram couldn't resist a small smile when James stood up from the step and looked his sister in the eye. “I live here. With Bram. My choice, my life. If you can't respect that, then...” James sniffed and blinked back the lingering tears in his eyes, “then I guess, you won't be a part of my life anymore.”

“What?” Obviously not used to being contradicted by her brother, Julie looked shocked and confused. “You're kidding, right? James?”

Bram felt a flash of pride for his lover's obvious struggle to hold onto his adulthood when faced with the overwhelming, familiar pressure to fall into old habits and allow his sister to reduce him to 'little brother' status with a few harsh words and a bad attitude.

It was apparent Julie and James had grown up in a household that used verbal abuse to control and shape behavior. Julie had learned her lessons well, even entering a career that allowed her to use what she had learned to serve justice.

James, on the other hand, had what Bram considered a paralyzing fear of ending up in a dysfunctional relationship like his parents had. No wonder James was so terrified of any hint that Bram might be controlling him outside of their bedroom activities. He'd grown up with it and it was the last thing he wanted to relive for himself. Bram considered that a healthy point of view on James' part and it reassured him his lover was more mentally stable than even James believed.

The whole unfortunate family situation hit Bram hard. His heart ached with the knowledge James hadn't had the kind of loving support and nurturing Bram's family had given him growing up. He felt like he was bleeding inside for James. He knew James must feel even worse than he did right now.

James loved this sister and her words were like a betrayal of his trust all over again from his college days. Bram wasn't going to let misinformation and biased attitudes hurt James anymore.

“Keep it up, Ms. Justin, and you'll lose your brother's respect and trust. Jamie and I are a family, but it's up to you whether it's a family of just two, or one that has room for extended members.” Bram joined James, slinging an arm around his lover's shoulders. Bram privately delighted in the way James straightened up under its weight and kept his gaze locked steadily on his sister's uncertain face.

Bram stared Julie in the eye and gave her his most sincere but penetrating boardroom stare. “Don't you think he's lost enough of his family already?” He nudged James' head with his chin as James relaxed and leaned against him. “I love him. Don't you?”

Flummoxed, Julie stammered, mouth opening and closing twice without any sound escaping. Her gaze jumped between James' determined expression and Bram's unyielding stare and back again several times as she seemed to give the situation more thought.

No one moved for several minutes, and the silence stretched to an almost unbearable level before Julie sighed and caved in, proud head dropping and her eyes closing briefly in defeat. When she looked up at both waiting men, there was a new expression on her attractive face, one Bram read as grudging acceptance.

Nodding slowly, Julie pursed her lips tightly before taking a deep breath, hands self-consciously smoothing out imaginary wrinkles from her still crisp pantsuit. She faced Bram. “You and I do have that in common, Mr. Lord. We both love James and will do anything to protect him. I worry about my younger brother and sometimes that makes me harsher than I mean to be.”

Her expression softened and her voice caught on a few words before she steadied it. “But I do it out of love, James, not meanness, or for a sense of power over you.” She held out her hand to James.

James blinked hard, but didn't move away from Bram's side. “I love you, too, Julie, but I'm not a kid anymore. Stop thinking of me like one.”

Dropping her empty hand, Julie's eyes turned up to meet Bram's icy gaze again. “He's my little brother. I've been protecting him from one thing or another, like big bullies,” she said, gesturing vaguely at Bram's impressive bulk, “most of our life growing up. I take protecting him very seriously because I seriously love him.”

She pinned Bram in place with a critical look, then a grudging, half smile tugged at her mouth. “I see that same need in you, too. I respect that. It's enough for me to try and like you.” Her smile grew just a tiny bit. “Maybe. I'm sorry I was rude to you and didn't give you a chance to talk. And still haven't, really.” She caught James' gaze again. “For James' sake. I'm sorry.”

“Thank you, Julie.” Obviously unable to contain himself any more, James burst out of Bram's embrace and hugged his sister, fresh tears rimming his eyes as he buried his face in her hair for a moment before squeezing her hard and whispered, “I was afraid I was going to lose you for good.”

Wiping his eyes on his palms, James released her and rejoined Bram, slipping back under Bram's arm, this time boldly taking his lover's hand in his own. Bram ruffled James' hair and planted a kiss on James' temple, relieved and pleased to see a smile on James' lips. It was uncertain and kept slipping a bit, but Bram knew James well enough by now to understand he'd need time to painstakingly work out the events of the evening. James would come to grips with it all eventually, and Bram would be right there beside him to help him, come hell or high water, or even meddling sisters.

The sharp adrenaline spike that started with the rush of the interrupted intimate moment back in the truck and continued through the confrontation with James' sister began to fade. A wave of lethargy washed over Bram and he fought back a massive yawn.

“It's late and we're all tired. Would you like to stay the night in our guest room, Ms. Justin?”

“Oh, I don't think--.” Julie frowned and darted an uncomfortable look up the stairs.

“Please, Julie.” James put on a puppy-dog expression. “It's after one o'clock in the morning. I'd like it if you would stay. We can talk over breakfast and you can spend some time getting to know Bram.” He suddenly dropped the dogged expression and quietly asked, “Please. For me?”

“Oh, wow, James--.” She still grimaced, uncertain.

“Truce?” Bram extended his hand to her. “I'll make sure you have a room at the far end of the hall from our room. It's a big house. You won't hear a thing.”

“Bram!” James elbowed his lover, eyes wide and teeth bared in a mock expression of shock.

“I meant so my snoring doesn't bother her.”

“You don't snore!”

“Then there shouldn't be any objection.” Bram looked questioningly at Julie. “Right, Ms. Justin?”

“Okay, truce.” She took his still extended hand and shook it. “And you can call me Julie. If we're going to be sharing a meal later, we might as well be on a first name basis. Abraham.”

Snorting lightly, Bram said, “Abraham was a president of the United States of America. Bram'll do fine for me. Do you have luggage out in your car?”

“One bag, yes. I'd only planned on staying the night. It's in the back seat. In all the chaos, I think I even left the car unlocked.”

Bram nodded and began to move toward the front door. Beside Bram, James sighed and rolled his head on his neck, exhaustion and stress having taken their toll on his already depleted resources. Bram could see the energy and color drain out of James.

“Jamie, why don't you take Julie upstairs and show her the guest room at the end of the hall? I'll get her

Roughhousing

bag for her and join you in our room as soon as I lock up, okay?"

"Yeah, sounds good. It's been a long day." James took his sister's arm and started up the stairs at a slow, measured pace, looking older than his twenty-eight years. "Let's go, sis, before I fall asleep on the steps and you both have to drag my bony body up to bed."

"Why do I get the impression it wouldn't be the first time you'd be carried up these steps?"

"Don't ask what you're not willing to have the answer to, Julie."

Bram watched the two of them start up, then he slipped out of the house, his gaze lingering over the sight of James' tight, curved, little ass as he climbed the stairs.

Some things never change. Thank god.

Chapter Seventeen

“Come here, Jamie. Wanta hold you. Think you could use it. I *know* I could.” Bram's voice purred deep, rich, and full of tenderness. James was amazed at all the emotion the big man could pack into just the tone of his voice. It vibrated through him, like a coating of healing salve soothing his raw nerves and tired limbs. “Christ, you've had a rough week, baby.”

“We both have.” Turning his head to watch Bram undress, James sighed and let his gaze wander over Bram's supple, muscle-bound abs and corded thighs.

Bram was an amazing sight to James, bronzed and buff, a mountain of strength and power that also housed a sharp business mind and the heart of a lion. A territorial, possessive, and assertive lion, but a tenderhearted, loving, and loyal beast, as well. It was as if the Chinese mythological creature from the statue Bram brought him back from Chicago had come to life.

The light was turned off, throwing the room into familiar shadows, a small night light on the far wall cast a romantic glow to every visible surface. James enjoyed the jiggle and sway of the mattress as his king-sized lover climbed into their bed. A few short weeks with Bram and James found he didn't like sleeping alone anymore.

Head still turned, James locked stares with Bram, mesmerized by the other man's intense, affectionate gaze. He stammered at first, then admitted, “I-I put you through some ugly stuff lately, but you stayed with me every inch of the way.” He couldn't help the awe that crept into his voice. “Even when I tried to push you away, you stayed.”

“That's what you do when you love someone, Jamie. You stick with them, through thick and thin, and work things out.” Bram gently kissed the closest of James' fading facial bruises. He adjusted the covers over the both of them and bunched a pillow under his head.

The heat from Bram's body slid in naked and close as the man spooned up behind him. “That's the difference between just dating someone and being committed, married, to them.”

The touch of Bram's flesh against his back was like being embraced by warm satin pulled taut over rippling, hard muscle. James relaxed into Bram as one beefy arm wrapped around his waist and tugged his hips into the curve of Bram's groin.

“I'm learning that. Having this is all new to me.”

“We've got time.” Bram kissed his lips and then pulled him closer. “A whole lifetime, baby.”

James felt the semi-hard shaft between Bram's thighs nestle into the crack of his ass, comfortable and faintly interested, but apparently content just to be close to James. His own cock responded to Bram's presence in the same way the moment Bram's voice had rumbled in his ear -- interested, but undemanding of more attention. James settled down in Bram's embrace and let Bram's heat invade his chilled flesh.

A leisurely kiss landed on the side of his head, as Bram nuzzled his face through James' curls, inhaling deeply. James knew he smelled like beer and cigarette smoke, but was too tired to care. Besides, Bram liked earthy scents.

A low moan vibrated against his skull as Bram growled, "You smell good. Like autumn and peanuts. Not a bad combination." He sniffed James hair again and pretended to take a bite out of his neck.

James laughed and squirmed against Bram's tightening hold, pulling his head away, but actually offering more of his neck to the playful teeth at the same time. It felt good to laugh, if only a little bit. James felt lightheaded and weak-limbed. He needed sleep, but couldn't seem to relax, even with Bram at his side.

He sighed and closed his eyes, concentrating on the feel of Bram's solid, powerful presence and the secure, reassuring grip around his waist. James leaned back and rested on the pillow of Bram other arm as it snaked under his head. At times, Bram was the only thing grounding him, his anchor in a churning sea of emotional confusion. He rolled his head slightly and shrugged his shoulders to ease the dull ache in his tired muscles.

"Stop thinking so much, Jamie. You're beat."

"I am tired." James shifted restlessly, then rolled onto his back, carefully staying in Bram's embrace. "But I'm not sure if I can get to sleep yet."

"I don't think I ever explained what really happened at work. How I got the project." James felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment. "I think I owe you that."

"I figured you'd get around to it when you were ready to deal with it better." Bram bent the arm under James' head and tenderly pushed a few strands of dark curls off James' forehead. "We can talk about it in the morning."

"Can't sleep." James grimaced and gnawed on his lower lip. "Too many things on my mind."

Bram immediately used his thumb to coax it back out from between James' teeth.

"Okay. Tell me. I'm all ears." Bram ran his hand over James' lean abdomen, stroking the skin and sliding his fingers just under the waistband of James' shorts. James found it soothing, arousing, and very distracting, but he didn't want it to stop.

"Remember Art Wheeler, the lead architect on the project originally? He sat across from us at Dunn's dinner party? The quiet guy that seemed all distracted?"

"The one that didn't know about the additional building in the original plans? Yeah, I remember him."

"He tried to commit suicide that weekend. His wife left him last week."

"That's terrible, Jamie. I'm sorry to hear it. He seemed like a nice guy."

"He is. Dunn gave me the project because he needed someone who already knew the plans and he needed them fast. Even though he's taking a chance on me with this being my first big project, I was the logical choice."

Eyes narrowed, Bram stared down at James, then pointedly said, “You're saying you got picked because you were the best man for the job? That you earned it all on your own and everything then?”

Face burning, James swallowed down his embarrassment, steady gaze locked to Bram's critical, pale blue one. James took a deep breath and exhaled a shaky, “Yes. Just like you said I would.”

After a tense pause that threatened to stretch into an uncomfortable moment, Bram squeezed James' hip reassuringly and dropped a quick kiss on his lips, playfully proclaiming, “Told you so.”

After giving an unsteady chuckle, James ran his hand up the arm Bram had over his torso and kneaded the hard muscles of Bram's upper arm. He gazed up, his eyes searching his lover's face, trying to convey all the wonder and deep, aching love he felt for the man. A love he was beginning to feel freer to verbalize. “You believed in me more than I did, Bram. I can't tell you how much that means to me.”

Suddenly James knew what he had to say and that he needed to say it frequently until he got used to hearing his own voice speak the words and not just in the heat of passion. “I love you, Bram. I love you more than I ever thought I could love another person. I love you.” James fought back the burn of tears, deeply moved by the thrilled gleam that brightened Bram's eyes. “I think that lifetime you were talking about earlier sounds just about right.”

Leaning over James, Bram lowered his head until their lips brushed together as he talked. “Love you too, baby.” He softly kissed one corner of James' mouth, then the other. “With all of my body and soul.” He kissed James' chin and whispered roughly, “Love you so much.”

Bram captured James' lips in a kiss that was both tender and ravenous, with a decidedly feral quality. He kept the kiss under control, pouring heated passion into it, but reining in the natural response to take it to the next level of intimacy.

James moaned when Bram pulled back. “Ssh, baby. You're tired. Let's get some sleep. We can pick up where we left off,” he said, rolling his eyes slightly, “both times, after you've gotten some rest.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the closed bedroom door. “And your sister leaves.”

Running his hands up the corded muscles of Bram's neck, James pulled his lover down to kiss those lips again, his own mouth insistent and hungry. He ended the kiss only when he was breathless and panting, holding Bram's head close to gaze up into questioning, pale blue eyes. “I don't want to wait. I want you to love me now.”

“I'd love to take you long and hard the way you like it, baby, but we make enough noise some nights even Miss Em next door turns up her TV.” Rolling his weight more firmly between James' legs, but holding himself mostly off James' chest with one elbow, Bram ran a hand over James' side again and again, rubbing at the faint tremors vibrating James' body. “Aren't you afraid of Julie hearing and being upset?”

“I don't care. It's our place.” James didn't know if he was shaking from the chill air, from being overly tired, or from sexual need, but he couldn't stop them. He knew Bram could. Whether it was with his body heat, his shared energy, or by satisfying James' renewed arousal, Bram was his man. Being in Bram's arms made everything better, if not completely all right.

“Besides,” James traced the line of Bram's lips with his thumb. “I want quiet and tender this time. Like you said I deserve.”

Staring into Bram's eyes, James saw the moment when his lover understood James' attempt to take their

relationship to a stronger level. The bright light in Bram's eyes matched the lopsided grin James loved so much, both reflections of the big man's inner goodness and loving nature.

“You got it, baby.” Bram caressed the curve of James' throat, his fingers softly brushing over the soft, thin skin like a feather's touch. James shivered. “Tender, just like you deserve.”

James gasped when Bram suddenly dipped his head and captured James' thumb with his mouth. He sucked it deep into his mouth, pressing his tongue against it. He applied enough suction that James' cock immediately filled while his eager ass clenched and his hips jerked in response.

Transferring his questing mouth to James' lips, Bram kissed him until James was moaning and grinding his hips up to press his cock against Bram's own erect shaft.

The slide of a drawer touched the edges of James' hearing, between his own moans and faint grunts. The snap of a plastic lid told him Bram had found the lubrication. The sound made his ass spasm and flare in anticipation.

He sucked in a gasped breath when Bram's lips allowed him, as a warm, callused hand wormed its way between their bodies and a handful of cool gel was slathered over his cock and balls. The weight on his body shifted as Bram lifted himself to one side then slid his gelled fingers down James' perineum to his opening.

After only a few slow, firm circles around James' fluttering hole, Bram pressed his fingertips into James, stroking the blunt, slick tips in and out in rhythm to the thrusts of his tongue teasing James' mouth. Each thrust went deeper, until Bram was rubbing over James' sweet spot.

Hips bucking in time to Bram's fingers and tongue, James groaned and sighed, his muscles relaxing to welcome Bram in, and tightening to grab on to him as if they feared he'd never come back with the next sizzling touch.

As he eased the passage into James' body open, Bram's mouth, lips, and tongue explored James' mouth, jaw, throat, and the responsive curve of his neck. Tantalizing thrills sizzled along his nerves as Bram licked, sucked, and lapped at his flesh. Every stroke into his ass was a welcome sensation that filled him with delight and fueled his need to have Bram inside of him. The familiar burn at the stretched ring of muscle to his channel sent thick threads of electric passion from his ass directly to his cock. Heaviness filled his lower abdomen.

A rising sense of desperation made James moan, wanting more, yet afraid to move and dislodge the hands, lips, and arms that were giving him so much pleasure. Flushed with passion, James let his restless hands cling to Bram's shoulders, fingers kneading the iron hard flesh that rippled under his touch.

The mattress dipped as Bram rose up and positioned himself between James' thighs. He slowly opened James' legs wider and wrapped them around his own waist. Then Bram layered the remaining lube from his hand on his own shaft and gently guided it into James' stretched and eager opening. He slid in with a sigh and settled his torso over James', hands seeking out his partner's hands. He entwined their fingers in a possessive, adoring grip beside their heads on the pillow. He ran a thumb lightly over the palm of James' hand, making James shiver.

James moaned and opened his eyelids to focus on Bram's face, its high cheekbones and strong jaw highlighted by the soft light in the room. The tender, lustful expression in Bram's eyes contained so much emotion in the pale blue depths that James was rocked by it. He felt his heart pound faster and his stom-

ach flutter.

He strained his hips up to pull Bram in deeper, to make it faster, but his lover weighed him down and forced the tempo to remain slow and seductive, each stroke and thrust deep and long. The buildup of tension and need took time, and James was barely hanging onto sanity by the time Bram finally sped up his thrusts and added a little hip grind to his movements. The grinding motion rubbed Bram's washboard abs over James' neglected cock with just enough friction to make James pant and see stars.

Keeping his strokes long and lazy, Bram started to make them deeper, adding a jutting snap to his love-making that rubbed the blunt, spongy tip of his satiny cock over the swollen nub buried inside James. It only took seconds for the new, exotic caress to set James' climax spiraling up out of his balls to erupt between their sweat-plastered bodies. His cock jerked and spasmed, finally finding release.

He froze in place, every muscle taut, his skin covered in gooseflesh as tremors shook him from head to toe. Stilling flying high, James felt Bram stiffen and a burning heat filled his ass, his slicked channel bathed in Bram's offerings, branding him with scorching heat.

Bram grunted and arched his back, burying himself to the very base of his thick cock, widening James' opening until the burn of being stretched flushed James' skin all the way up to the roots of his dark curls. The pleasure was more intense than his orgasm had been.

James made to bite his lip to keep from crying out, but Bram covered James' mouth with his own and swallowed down James' cry. His massive weight crushed James to the mattress and his arms engulfed James in an urgent embrace that left James dizzy and disoriented by the time Bram released him and rolled off to one side. He hadn't regained his bearings before Bram pulled him in close, curled around him, and gently, almost chastely, kissed his chapped and swollen lips.

Voice raw and shaky, James whispered, "That was amazing, Bram. I don't know how to describe it." The look of adoration Bram gave him made him falter, but he managed to admit, "I-I didn't think sex could get better between us, but it has."

"Slow and tender has its place, baby." Bram's hot palm flowed over James' shoulders and down his ribs, mapping the contours of his body, reading his emotions like he was written in Braille. "The sex isn't better. It's our feelings for each other that have grown." Bram seemed to devour him with those eyes, leaving James yearning for more despite the sudden lethargy that was rapidly invading his limbs and mind. A heavy, breathy, "Love you, Jamie," rumbled into his neck, made his tired nerves tingle.

As sleep crept up over him like a beckoning fog, James struggled to stay alert for just a little while longer to be sure Bram understood how he felt. "Don't get me wrong. I still like it the other way best, but this was... awesome. I could do both."

"You could, could you?" Bram chuckled and lazily ruffled James' hair with his jaw. "I think we can arrange that now and then."

A sharp, hesitant knock rapped loudly on the bedroom door, jolting them both. Julie's voice seeped through the stout wood, a cautiously playful but still uncertain tone to it.

"Aren't you guys done yet? I need another blanket. It's cold in there and I can't find one in the closet. Take a break already." The door shook with the impact of what sounded like the flat of a palm striking it. "You know sound carries *really* well in the heating vents in this old house, don't you?"

Roughhousing

Both men buried their faces in the pillow, Bram to muffle his laughter and James to hide his blush. Soft lips found James ear and growled, “How long did she say she going to stay?”

The End