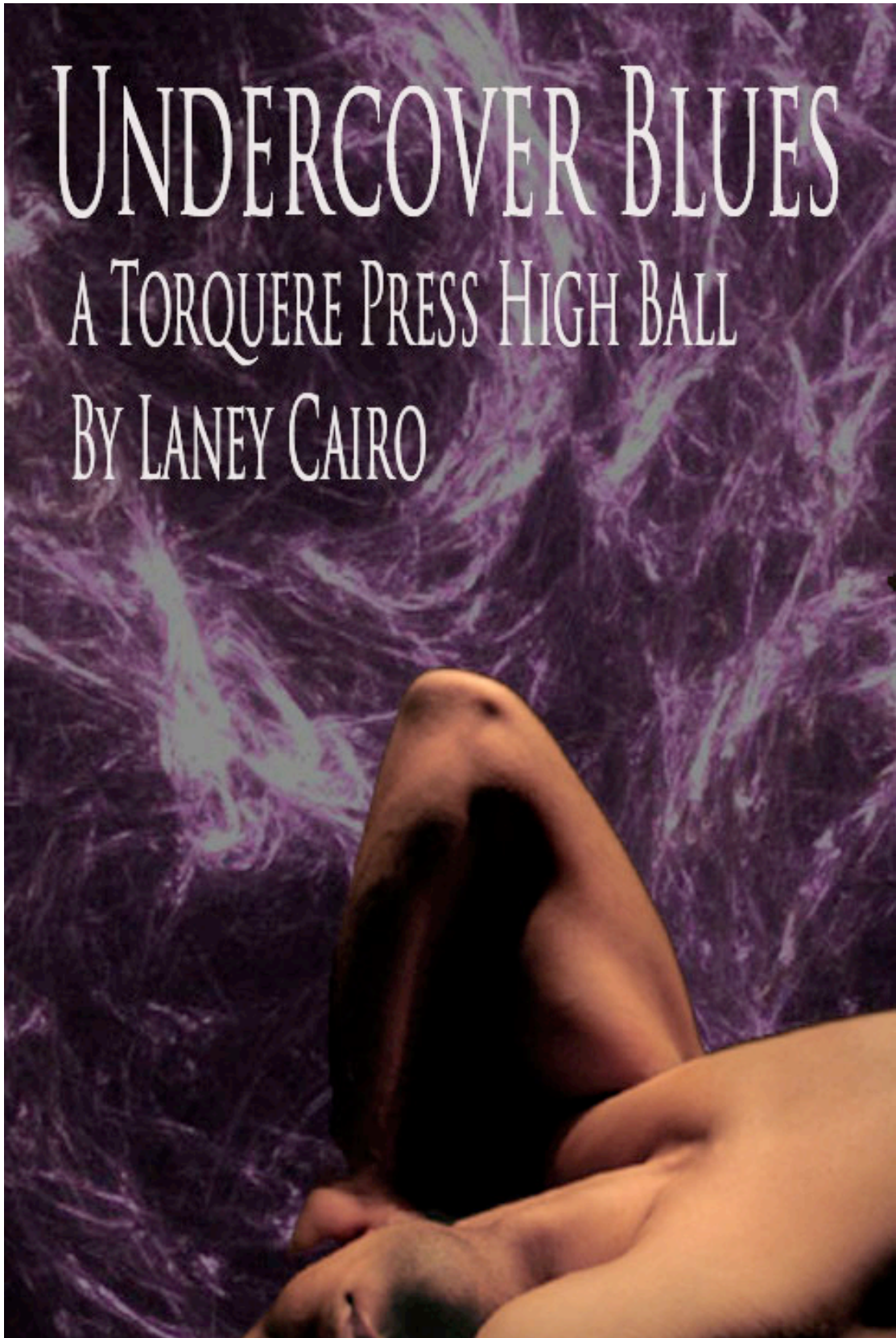


# UNDERCOVER BLUES

A TORQUERE PRESS HIGH BALL

BY LANEY CAIRO



High Ball: Undercover Blues

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## Chapter 1

The incident room was a second home, or perhaps a first home, to Ryan. He wasn't quite sure he remembered life before whiteboards and PC screens, before complex cases and obscure objectives. Ah, that was right: uniform and foot patrols, drunks and kids.

No, the villains were of a better quality here and at least the organised crime groups got their own rooms.

Detective Sergeant Longbottom, fondly known as Stretchyarse when he wasn't listening, was stabbing the surveillance camera photo of Harvey Cooper as he ranted.

"... highest priority is to get an inside line," he said. "Inspector Cassidy has approved another go at an undercover approach. What this team has to do is work out how to get someone close. Cooper is far too wily to approach directly and his missus would cut his knackers off if he strayed. So: any suggestions?"

They'd been trying to get a line on Harvey Cooper for months. He was a sneaky bastard with contacts the police could only dream of. Even attempting to impound his car hadn't worked; Teflon Harvey, he was called.

"Neighbours?" Tracey asked. She was sitting beside Ryan on the worktable, swinging her legs, and the sound of her hosiery brushing together was irritating.

Tracey was a Detective Constable, like Ryan. The slaves, everyone called them. If there was running to be done, they got to do it. People who had promotions and commendations didn't chase villains, apparently.

"Keeps himself to himself," Stretchyarse said. "Fancy being a cleaning lady, Trace?"

"He's got a cleaning lady," Gavin pointed out. "His brother cleans his pool."

"What about his brother?" Tracey asked, hopping down off the table and pointing at the Contacts board. "Is he vulnerable?"

They all studied that board. "Fuck knows," Stretchyarse said. He flicked through the printouts that were on his clipboard. "He's a bit of a no-hoper, though Cooper certainly seems to love him. Does odd jobs for Cooper, no visible means of support. Lives in one of Cooper's investment properties in Hayside, place looks like a complete dump from the outside. He's probably got plasma screen TVs and a hydroponics kit inside."

"So?" asked Roscoe, who was a Detective Sergeant, recently transferred in from Queensland and rising fast. "Can we raid him?"

There was a generalised laughter at the suggestion. "You've not been here long, Roscoe," Stretchyarse said. "There's not a magistrate in the state that'll issue a search warrant for Cooper's brother, not without some damn good reason. Cooper's lawyers are bastards and they're getting rich suing for false arrest and harassment."

“Someone needs to get into his house then,” Roscoe said. “Have a look around, see if they can get this brother to talk.”

“Jason,” Stretchyarse said. “Jason Cooper.” He looked at his clipboard again. “We’re sure Harvey uses him as a mule.”

There was a data projector hooked up to Stretchyarse’s PC, so he opened the Cooper file and flicked through the images for the team to look over. “Suggestions?” he said.

Jason Cooper drove a crappy old Holden ute, with surfboard racks and a scungy looking dog in the back. He was a shaggy surfer type, picked up by routine surveillance on his brother, going into various businesses that the squad suspected were fronts for Harvey Cooper’s scams. He seemed to spend most of his time sitting on his front veranda, drinking beer. It was a lifestyle Ryan could only aspire to.

“He’s single, right?” Ryan asked. “No missus has got him by his balls? Send out Trace to pick him up.”

Normally, Tracey would be at Ryan’s throat for that suggestion. She was quite rightly pissed off at always being used for undercover work like that. This time, however, she didn’t rise to the bait, merely grinning at Ryan.

Stretchyarse said, “Sounds like a plan. We’ll stick someone on him for a couple of days, just to work out where’ll be the best place to approach him.”

“Sarge?” Tracey said, and she was almost laughing. Ryan could hear her.

“What, Tracey?” Stretchyarse asked impatiently.

“Just something I noticed,” she said. “Put the surveillance shot of his ute back up.”

Stretchyarse scrolled through the pics, and the shot of Cooper’s ute reappeared. “Whadaya see?” Tracey asked.

“Rust in the tailgate,” Stretchyarse said. “You could be a panel-beater.”

“That’s a rainbow sticker, Sarge,” Tracey said. “Ain’t no use in sending me in to pick him up. Our boy Hadley’ll have to put on the fancy clothes this time.”

She was laughing, cacking herself, and Ryan felt the eyes of the entire squad on him. “No fucking way!” he stood up off the table. “Absolutely no fucking way!”

“You wouldn’t have to put out,” Stretchyarse said, sounding just like he did when Tracey and Ryan squabbled over shifts. “Just lead him on a bit, give him a quick cuddle and get him to take you home. Then have a look around and make your excuses.”

“Even better,” Tracey said. “Get him to fancy you, hold out on him, maybe he’ll take you home to meet his brother.”

Ryan could feel how red his face was. “No fucking way!” he shouted, over the combined mirth of the team. “I’m straight! I can’t fake that sort of thing!”

“Course you can,” Tracey said, patting Ryan’s arm, and Ryan looked up to find admin staff lined up at door, peering into the briefing room, presumably to see what the noise was about.

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Stretchyarse was cheerfully oblivious to Ryan’s protestations when Ryan spoke to him later in his office.

“You’ll be fine,” Stretchyarse said. “Just flirt with him a bit. Let him have a fondle of the package, you don’t need to go any further.”

Ryan crossed his arms sullenly. “I don’t know how to be gay,” he said. “I have no idea how to flirt with a bloke.”

“Don’t ask me,” Stretchyarse said. “Go and do some research.”

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Sharon opened the door when Jason rang the bell and he kissed her cheek. “Harve around?” he asked.

“In the office, babe,” Sharon said. “Want some food?”

Jason followed Sharon back through the mansion, past the living rooms and home theatre, into the kitchen. “Always,” he said. “What have you got?”

Sharon opened one of the fridges and peered inside. “Brioche, some smoked ham, I picked up a slab of brie.”

“All sounds good,” Jason said, opening another fridge and rummaging around amongst the Moët and Lambrusca to find a Corona for himself. “No vegemite, though? Just because Blue raised me on the stuff doesn’t mean I’ll eat it voluntarily.”

Sharon laughed, showing bright white teeth against a leathery tan. “No wuckers, hon. I’ll bring you out something.”

Jason took his beer and went down the stairs to Harvey’s office beside the garage. He knocked on the door and called out, “Open up!”

A bolt slid on the other side of the door and Jason pulled the door open and wrapped his arms around his brother.

“Jason, you wanker,” Harvey said, and he smiled broadly.

Jason hugged him back, then collapsed down into the reclining armchair. "You owe me a new pair of jeans, you bastard," Jason said, popping the top off his beer. "I've gone and grown a fucking tail."

Harvey's eyebrows shot up. "When d'ye get it?"

"Outside my place this morning, followed me here?" Jason said.

Harvey pursed his lips and frowned for a moment and pulled at the lapels of his designer jacket in thought. "Try and shake them?" he asked.

Jason shook his head and said, "Hello? In the ute? It didn't seem worth the effort. Better to just bitch to you about it."

"I'll go see who it is," Harvey said, and he picked up a pair of binoculars and headed back out into the garage.

Jason carefully didn't look at any of the papers strewn around Harvey's office, or at the spreadsheet on the PC. The less he knew, the better.

Harvey was back in a moment, sinking down into his leather executive chair and propping his feet on his desk. "The blue Mazda?" he asked, and Jason nodded. "It's one of the looking-for-clues boys," Harvey said. "Damn, I was going to get you to drive some documents around for me this afternoon. I'll courier them instead."

"Sure," Jason said, standing up. "I'm going to go vacuum your pool, it'll confuse the cop."

"Get the shagger to give you a feed, too. Need some cash?" Harvey asked, bending down to open the safe that was under his desk.

There were bundles of banknotes in the safe and a stack of documents. Harvey took out one of the bundles and peeled off five hundred-dollar notes and said, "It's clean, no need to run it through the casino."

"Thanks, bro," Jason said, and he punched Harvey in the arm gently as he stood up, putting the notes away in his jeans with the other hand.

"No probs," Harvey said. "Blue's here and she wants to know when you're going to meet some nice young man and settle down."

"Thanks for the warning," Jason said, and he let himself out of the study, closing the door behind him and hearing the bar slide into place.

Blue was their mother, an extravagant woman, over fond of purple hair and facelifts, who delighted in terrorising the high society of the city, who were all conflicted about her. On one hand, she was loud and uneducated and vulgar; on the other hand, she was wealthy and splashed it around.

She was waiting beside the pool, tanning her mahogany skin, and she kissed Jason's cheek, leaving crimson lipstick behind. He switched on the pool pump and tried hard not to listen to her admonishments about his love life.

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Collins, who was the Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer for HQ, almost fell off the brick wall he was sitting on, he was laughing so hard.

"Oh, God," he managed to gasp out. "That is so fucking funny." He wiped his face, and lit another cigarette. "If I'm going to have to talk you through this, I need another fag," he said, setting himself off laughing again.

"It's not funny," Ryan said, sighing and sitting down, too. "I need you to teach me how to be gay."

Collins choked for a bit longer, then said, "Honey, I can't teach you to be gay, no one can. It's something you just are, not something you learn, like an accent."

"That's no help," Ryan said miserably. "I'm going to be sent out, undercover, as a gay guy. You gotta help me out a little here."

Collins elbowed Ryan cheerfully. "Lots of different ways of being gay. There's plenty of straight-acting guys out there, but my personal suggestion is that you be a first-timer. Just tell your target that you're only beginning to come out and you don't know what to do. Odds on, he'll go crazy at the idea of breaking in someone like you."

"Breaking me in?" Ryan asked, and his voice came out as a squeak.

Collins was off, laughing again, and Ryan left him to his cigarettes and slunk back to the squad room and his PC. Damn, this was not going to be good.

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"The Majestic Hotel," Roscoe said to the full briefing room. "That's where he went, half past four. I followed him in and it was full of half-naked men writhing on the dance floor. All a bit much for the afternoon, in my opinion."

"What did he do there?" Stretchyarse asked. "Dance? Have sex?"

"Fuck knows," Roscoe said. "He spent all of his time at the bar or playing pool. If he had sex in the Gents, it was a quickie. He drinks Carlton, knows the bar staff by name, and wins at pool. I went back to the car after I got hit on for the fifth time and followed him home again. He slept alone."

"Fine," Stretchyarse said. "Sounds like it's his local. Tomorrow, Hadley goes in undercover."

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The Majestic was an old pub with grooves worn into the stone steps at the entrance by generations of thirsty patrons.

Those historic patrons would probably be surprised at the current clientele. There were gay men completely filling the front bar, spilling out into the hallway, and Ryan pushed his way through the crowd toward the beer garden. If the job meant he had to go to a gay bar, he was going to have a couple of beers on company time while he cased the place.

There were women in the back bar: short, fat, butch dykes; tall, elegant women in dark suits, carrying briefcases; women with no hair; women with moustaches. He spotted the dance floor Roscoe had mentioned. It was almost empty, apart from a couple of office-type guys slowdancing, groping each other through their suits. So much for half-naked men writhing; he was going to fucking kill Roscoe.

He went back to the front bar and ordered a Carlton Mid-strength for himself, just to get into the mindset, and took it across the room to lean against one of the old windowsills and have a good look at the patrons.

There were rainbow flags on the walls, the sound system was playing something hideous, and the bar had a mirror ball, but apart from that it was actually one of the better bars Ryan had been to. It was certainly better than the fake Irish pub the squad drank at.

There were a lot of men there. Some of them wore blue singlets and grubby jeans, work boots, obviously on their way home from a construction site. Some were yuppie lawyer types, ties loosened, shirt buttons undone.

People said “Hello,” to him as they squeezed past and a young guy with a full beard and tattoos chatted to Ryan about the Tigers’ defensive line-up. Ryan began to relax.

“You here alone?” Mr. Tattoo asked eventually, and Ryan nodded.

“Want to come back to my place?” Mr. Tattoo asked, and Ryan felt his cheeks colour. Fuck, someone was trying to pick him up.

“No thanks, mate,” Ryan said, hoping like crazy it was the right way to turn a bloke down.

Mr. Tattoo nodded and turned to chat to the middle-aged guy on the other side of him.

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Ryan briefly caught sight of Tracey across the room, hair tied back, dressed in jeans and a shirt. He didn’t make eye contact with her and she was gone when he looked back again. She was supposed to be his back-up; she was the one carrying the police radio and badge, just in case things went bad.



Ryan had nothing with him, just his wallet with some cash and his false ID in it and the condoms that Stretchyarse had given him. He felt like a kid again, being lectured by his mother about safe sex and contraception, only worse.

He had no intention of using the condoms, but it made sense to carry them. Part of the cover, just like his hipster jeans and tight shirt and the hair gel in his curls.

He'd had three beers and four offers before he spotted his mark, leaning against the bar and waving at the barman, then putting a dollar coin on the edge of the pool table, reserving a place in the queue.

Jason was a solid man, in his twenties like Ryan, broad-shouldered and lean, wearing a faded plaid shirt and ripped jeans. He had a few days' growth on his chin, straggly bleached hair, and tired-looking eyes...

Which were staring directly at Ryan.

Ryan had a brief moment of panic that he'd been spotted, then the suggestive smile on Jason's face calmed his fears. He'd been worrying about how to approach Jason and he'd just about settled on asking him for a game of pool and now Jason was strolling toward him, through the crowd, pool cue in one hand.

"Hey," he said, leaning against the wall beside Ryan. "Don't know your face."

"I've not been here before," Ryan said. Up close, Jason was weather-beaten and unshaven, smelling of cigarette smoke and beer and sweat and Ryan found himself staring at the chest hairs curling out the top of Jason's shirt.

"Welcome to the best bar in the universe," Jason said. "Let me buy you a drink. What'll it be?"

"Carlton Mid," Ryan said, smiling at Jason despite his heart beginning to pound in his chest. Fuck, but he was nervous. Undercover work was enough to scare anyone shitless, but there was such an aura of masculinity about Jason that Ryan felt completely intimidated.

Jason quirked a smile at Ryan and said, "I'm Jason. What's your name?"

"Peter," Ryan said.

Jason handed him the pool cue he was holding and Ryan watched Jason push through the crowd, lean across the bar and hold up two fingers, then carry two middies back. No money changed hands: either Jason had a bar tab or he didn't pay for his drinks.

Ryan exchanged the pool cue for one of the middies beaded with condensation and tried to smile encouragingly at Jason, hoping like crazy he was sending the right messages. Fuck knows how he was going to persuade Jason to take him home.

"You've got a pommy accent," Jason said. "You just moved here?"

Ryan shook his head. "Been here a few years. I've just, um, never been to a gay bar before."

"Really?" Jason said, and his voice was husky as he leaned closer to Ryan. "A terrible oversight on your part. Would you like to play pool?"

The fine hairs on the back of Jason's hand were golden and his watch was on a worn leather band. If Ryan hadn't seen the surveillance photos of Jason entering and leaving Cooper's mansion, he would never have believed this guy could possibly be profiting from crime. He certainly wasn't wasting any of the money on clothes or deodorant.

"Thanks," Ryan said. "That'd be good."

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Peter was a total babe, leaning over the pool table, chewing his lip as he lined up a shot, eyes twinkling flirtatiously at Jason, and Jason found himself charmed, and it set off alarm bells.

He was something of an institution at the Majestic, kept his own pool cue behind the bar, had fucked a fair few of the guys in the room, too. It was just too good to be true, this cute guy turning up and latching onto Jason.

This was a set-up.

Peter missed a cushion shot and looked up and smiled at Jason and there was just a touch too much welcome in his eyes.

If the cops were going to send him a pretty boy to play with, he wasn't going to turn down the offer. There was absolutely nothing at his house that was incriminating, except himself, and Peter was welcome to search the place to establish that. Beside, Peter had a mighty fine ass as Jason circled around behind him and Jason was willing to let him win at pool if it meant he got a piece of that ass.

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Jason leaned against the pool table beside Peter while he sunk the eight-ball. He ran his fingers lightly down the ridge of Peter's spine where it pressed against his shirt. Jason was sure he felt Peter shiver slightly.

"Want to get out of here?" Jason said, as Peter handed his pool cue on to the next person in the line waiting to use the table.

"Sure," Peter said, and he dropped his eyes nervously.

Jason was impressed. Either the kid was a class actor or the police had dragooned some poor guy who had just come out into doing this; he looked genuinely scared.

Either way, the kid was on overtime, no doubt, and something about that amused Jason, making him chuckle to himself as he took hold of the kid's clammy wrist and led him through the crowd.

"Got a car here?" he asked Peter once they were outside the pub, amongst the early-evening pedestrians.

"No," Peter said. "I was going to taxi home, figured I'd want to have a few beers."

Jason could have let go of the kid's wrist at the point, but he didn't. Instead, he slid his hand lower, entwining his fingers with Peter's, and said, "My car's down this way."

However good the kid was at acting, he was a fucking lousy undercover cop, telegraphing far too clearly that he already knew which car was Jason's.

The ute was glowering on an under-lit street and Jason leaned Peter against the passenger door and slid his hand up Peter's arm. Jason's other hand touched Peter's neck, finding his racing pulse briefly, then sliding up into his hair.

Jason leaned forward and pressed his mouth against Peter's. The kid tasted of beer and toothpaste and Jason discovered that some poor plod brushing his teeth just to try and pick him up was amusing and more than a little erotic.

The kid didn't kiss back at first, then a hand slid around Jason's neck and his mouth opened. Tentative and gentle, Jason explored Peter's mouth, feeling his own breathing pick up at the sensation, stepping closer so that his body pressed against Peter's in the darkness.

Peter gasped against Jason's mouth and Jason hoped there was an infrared camera recording this, it would make something a little special for the organised crime squad Christmas party. It should feel creepy, he supposed, to be making out with someone who was trying to investigate him, but Peter was lean and smooth-skinned when Jason slid his hand down the kid's back and under his shirt.

"Let's get out of here," he said, and he stepped back and unlocked the passenger door.

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Jason didn't live far away, close enough that he could stagger the distance if he was really too wasted to drive. He was still relatively sober tonight.

Peter looked subdued in the flickering streetlights and Jason put a hand onto his thigh and gave it a squeeze. An idea hit him suddenly, while he was waiting for the Main Street lights to turn green: the kid was a virgin! The plods had sent him a fucking virgin and Jason caught a rare glimpse of something he hadn't seen for a while as his conscience stirred.

"Hey," he said. "You're looking pretty freaked out there. Don't panic about anything."

Peter looked at him, washed-out pale in the light from a billboard. "What?" he said.

“Nothing,” Jason said, catching sight of a baker’s van putting its indicators on to follow him around a roundabout. There was the tail, or more accurately, one of them. They weren’t going to risk one of their precious boys with only one car as backup.

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When Jason pulled into his driveway, the useless suspension of the ute creaking at the cracks in the concrete, Blackie started up barking and he could hear her throwing herself against the inside of the front door, too. “That’s Black,” he said to Peter, turning the ignition and headlights off and getting out of the car. “She’s harmless.”

Peter followed him up the front steps onto the veranda and Jason unlocked the security grille, then the deadbolt on the front door. He’d drawn the line at Harvey installing an electronic security system, it wasn’t like there was much to steal.

And of course, if stuff did get nicked, Harve had the fencing business cornered in the city and he’d make sure Jason got it all back.

“Come in,” Jason said, resisting the urge to wave at the surveillance team like he usually did.

The house was tired and dilapidated, a renovator’s dream, a real estate ad would call it, but Jason liked it as it was.

The big front room was his bedroom, next room down was his studio, and the kitchen was at the end. Blackie seemed to want to hump Peter’s leg, so Jason said, “Blanket!” sternly, and she slunk off to his bedroom. “Sorry ‘bout that, apparently she’s not getting enough.”

Peter stood still, a stunned look on his face as he stared at the canvases propped in piles down the hall. “You paint?” he said.

“Sure do,” Jason said. “Fancy a handful of whiskey?”

“Handful?” Peter said, following Jason through the studio, stepping gingerly over the drop sheets and discarded palettes and into the kitchen.

“Five fingers,” Jason said, rummaging around on the draining board in the kitchen and finding two glasses to rinse out.

He put the glasses on the table, pushing aside the dirty plates and old newspapers, and then took the bottle of whiskey off the mantelpiece. He half-filled each glass and said, “Siddown.”

Peter perched on one of Jason’s rickety chairs, while Jason took a bottle of iced water out of the round fridge, spinning a shelf to reach it, and added a small splash of water to each glass. “That’s how they drink this stuff in Ireland,” Jason said, and he picked his glass up and sipped it.

The taste made him close his eyes in bliss: sweet and smooth, nutty and a little toasted, and a finish like fucking velvet. It didn't take much to make Jason happy.

Peter sipped his whiskey and leaned back in his chair, eyes glazing and lips curving up at the corners in a smile of appreciation, and Jason rested one hand on the table to steady himself and leaned forward and kissed Peter.

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It was unfair, kissing him while the whiskey was still melting down his throat, but Ryan made himself not push Jason away. He was there to do a job, have a scout around, get close to the suspect... person of interest...

He was drunk. That was the answer, that was why he was kissing Jason back. And he was working, that was it, too. This wasn't any different from the times when they'd sent Tracey undercover, she'd kissed the blokes, he was doing the same.

Jason pulled back and it took Ryan an eon to open his eyes, then Jason was picking him up. Jason was far stronger than he looked.

The kitchen counter was cluttered with dog food tins and used saucepans, but Jason sat him on the edge and then they were kissing again.

Ryan could do this; close his eyes, open his mouth again, wrap his arms around Jason's neck, let Jason lead, just like he had against the car. It had been easy actually, once they'd got started; Ryan couldn't see why Tracey bitched so much about it. The stubble on Jason's chin felt kind of good against his lips and chin, firm and rough, and, sure, Jason tasted of beer and cigarettes, but so did girls sometimes.

Jason slid his mouth wetly down Ryan's neck and began to suck on the sensitive skin and someone's breathing was loud and harsh over the hum and rattle of the surreal cylindrical fridge. Fuck; that was Ryan's own breathing and he began to think he needed to take control of the situation. He pulled back.

"Gotta take a slash, mate."

Jason's hands stilled their fumbling with the buttons of Ryan's shirt. "Sure," Jason said. "Can's right through there, off the laundry."

Ryan realised that, even if he was pissed, he was going to have to give a report to Stretchyarse, and he'd better bloody well start paying attention.

Back door unlocked; flyscreen squeaked. Piles of dirty clothes on the laundry floor, bathroom was surprisingly tidy, at least compared to Ryan's.

Ryan locked the bathroom door and opened the bathroom cupboard over the sink. Berrocca, Panadol, decent tweezers, Elastoplast. Nothing there.

He'd better piss, just to make the right sounds, and it was only when Ryan unzipped himself that the awful realisation sunk in.

He was hard; undeniably, indisputably packing wood.

Piss hard, that was what it was. He must have had half a dozen beers, it just needed a shake, that was all.

Ryan flushed, washed his hands, unlocked the bathroom door. He had to walk back in there now, make his excuses, and get the hell out of Dodge.

Jason was where he had been a few minutes ago, leaning against the kitchen bench, though he must have moved because he had a tumbler of whiskey in his hands now.

He had done some stupid things in his time, Ryan could admit that. There was the time he went surfing at Rotto, at Chickenshit reef. He had bits of reef still embedded in his chest because of that. He'd flirted with girls, STDs, being a dole bludger. He'd even worked one miserable rotation on a prawn trawler. He hated crustaceans.

None of this had taught him anything, obviously, because he just couldn't keep his eyes on Jason's face.

"Gonna go now," he said. "Work tomorrow, you know." Six buttons... that was how many Jason's shirt had. Stretchyarse would want to know that.

Jason's shirt was missing a button, at the bottom, and one side had come untucked from his jeans.

Sweet Jesus.

Jason was holding a piece of paper out, when Ryan managed to drag his eyes upward again. Jason could have been smirking, or leering, but he just looked smug. "My number, Pete," he said.

Oh yeah, that'd be Ryan's name. "Thanks," Ryan said, taking the paper, and he almost bolted for the front door, stumbling against one of the canvases, knocking it over so it thudded against a surfboard, not looking back, plunging out of the front door and through the weeds growing through the paving and out onto the street.

He couldn't break cover, despite knowing that there were several sets of night-vision binoculars trained on him, so he took out his mobile and called a taxi, however much he wanted to just dive into the stupid Buttercup Bread van.

Or maybe not, the squad would have been running a pool of some sort on him: how long he would last; how far he would go. The bastards.

It was cold and Ryan stalked down the street. Luckily Jason lived in the inner city and there was a cab within minutes. Ryan clambered into it and said, "Central Station, mate, thanks."

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In the squad room, Ryan sat on the edge of Roscoe's desk and swung his feet while Roscoe tapped his keyboard.

"... standard bathroom supplies, dodgy plumbing," he said, making himself recall everything he could. "Yates lock on the back door, big deadlock, he'd left the door unlocked. Course, the dog might be ferocious. No speed factory in the kitchen."

"Anything unusual?" Stretchyarse asked.

"He had a round fridge," Ryan said. "He doesn't wash his dishes. His dog tried to have sex with my leg."

"Round fridge?" Roscoe said, looking up from the keyboard at Ryan. "What the fuck is a round fridge?"

Ryan scribbled on a scrap of paper and handed it to Stretchyarse. "See? A round fridge. I thought it was some insane Aussie idea I'd not met before."

"My Gran had one," Stretchyarse said. "When I was a kid."

They all stared at Stretchyarse for a long moment and Ryan was relieved to see that no one else in the squad seemed to be able to get their head around the idea that Stretchyarse had ever been a child.

He flipped a finger at them all. "So all we've really learnt is that Jason paints, drinks good whiskey, wants to date Hadley, and doesn't lock his back door."

There was general sniggering at the last comment and Roscoe said, "Latent could try and lift a dentition set off Hadley's neck."

"Go fuck yourself," Ryan said, swinging himself off the table and pushing past Tracey to get out of the briefing room.

He was shoving stuff from his locker, fucking pansy shirt and hair gel, into his back pack, when Stretchyarse pushed the staff room door shut and reached across and closed Ryan's locker.

"Roscoe is going to apologise or I'll send him in next," he said, and there was no trace of amusement in his voice. "Don't fuck this one up, Ryan. You got into Cooper's house and inside his guard and that's a real achievement."

Ryan leaned against Tracey's locker and nodded. "Thanks, Sarge," he said.

"Go home, sleep in tomorrow. We'll meet at midday and plan out your phone call to Cooper," Stretchyarse said.

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Ryan wasn't a complicated man, he knew that.

He liked footie, beer and girls. Although he never had worked out what women actually wanted or how to make them happy.

He didn't like blokes, at least not that way.

Liz Hayes was on the TV, rabbiting away about some crap, while Ryan ate his pizza and tried to distract himself from what had happened. He needed to take his mind off it, that was all.

It wouldn't be the first time he'd done something that unsettled him for his job. The time they'd gone along with the Feds and the Tactical Response Squad to bust one of the brothels run by people smugglers, he'd seen things that had sickened him and given him nightmares.

He wasn't sickened by what had happened with Jason, but his gut was still churning and he could not seem to make himself care about what Liz was saying.

No, he wasn't going to think about Jason.

Liz's make-up was awful; pancake foundation, lumpy mascara, and her hair stylist had botched her hair, and she had an annoying speech pattern.

The pizza wasn't bad, lots of anchovies, and it washed down well with a beer, leaving Ryan back at the memory of kissing Jason, again.

He wasn't going to think about it, he refused to. He wasn't going to imagine what might have happened if he'd stayed, certainly wasn't going to put his pizza and beer down and undo his jeans.

He ached inside, balls and groin, but couldn't let himself do anything about it, no matter how much he needed to come. If he touched himself—sweetsweetrelief—he might remember the ridge that had been stretching at the front of Jason's jeans and he couldn't do that, or go there.

He couldn't let himself imagine he'd stayed: would Jason have undone the fly of his jeans, button by aching button, would he have pushed Ryan down onto his knees? Couldn't go there, no matter what...

Coming was stupid, stupidstupid. Ryan was stupid, he should have paid attention to Liz Hayes, should have given a damn about whatever shit she was promoting. Should never have let himself come.

Tomorrow he'd tell Stretchyarse he couldn't do this. He'd understand, or maybe not, but he'd let Ryan step back and someone else take over.



## Chapter 2

Harve was in his study, deep in discussion with his accountant and some dude from the Australian Tax Office when Sharon let him in, so Jason raided both of the fridges.

He put his plate and beer on the coffee table in the entertainment room and flopped down onto the huge couch and picked up the remote for the plasma screen TV and the keyboard.

Harve had been logged into the TAB, obviously, placing bets for the next day at Randwick, so Jason switched to the football page and quickly placed bets for the following weekend's games. Harve would never notice the losses and if any of the bets came through, he'd probably pay up, too.

There was crap on Sky Channel, so Jason rummaged around amongst the piles of DVDs and found something that appealed.

Jason was halfway through the movie before Harvey appeared, beer in his hand, and sat down in his armchair.

"Wassup?" Harve asked. "The shagger been bitching to you about the pool?"

"Not this time," Jason said. "Still got the problem I mentioned last time."

"Ah," Harvey said.

Sharon put her head around the door and said, "I'm off to aerobics. You right to pick the kids up from school, Harve?"

"Sure, shagger," Harvey said, blowing a kiss.

When the front door had closed and the security system had chimed, Harvey said, "Tell me about your tail. Have they increased the surveillance? Put a wire in?"

"Guess they might have got a tap on the line," Jason said. "But that isn't it. They sent a kid in to pick me up at the pub."

"Morons," Harvey said. "What'd you do? Need me to take care of it?"

Jason shook his head, he knew what Harvey meant by 'take care of' and Peter was far too cute for that. Besides, the cops would just crack down on both Harve and himself. "Is fine," he said. "I let him pick me up and took him home for a grope."

"Fuckin' hell," Harvey muttered. "You can't do that, Jase."

"Why not?" Jason said. "My house is clean."

"Your house is filthy," Harvey pointed out. "You should let someone clean it."

“Fucker,” Jason said good-naturedly. “Then I’d have to hide my porn. There’s nothing there for anyone to find. Besides he was soooo pretty.”

Harvey rolled his eyes at Jason. “Jesus, tell me you’re not planning on doing something really stupid.”

“Me?” Jason said. “Like what?”

“You’re fucking going to fuck a cop, aren’t you?” Harvey said.

“Gotta turn him first,” Jason said, taking a pull on his beer.

“Oh God, you’re going to fuck a straight cop?”

Harve looked genuinely distressed and Jason guessed he could see Harvey's point of view. The last thing Harve needed was an irate police force after him. An even more irate police force.

“Want me to recruit him, too?” Jason asked. “As an informant?”

“Oh God,” Harvey repeated.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Jason smiling to himself, Harvey’s face moving from disbelief to thoughtful consideration to amusement.

“Fuck, yeah,” he said. “Just be careful. No matter how pretty he is, he has mates that have the authority to ask you to step out of the car for a moment.”

Jason’s cell phone rang and he retrieved it from his jeans and hit the ‘answer’ button. He didn’t recognise the number, but then he never recognised anyone’s number.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Hi Jason, this is Peter,” the voice said.

“Hey, Peter,” Jason said warmly, grinning at Harvey. “You OK? Not too hungover?”

There was silence and Jason wondered how many people were listening to this call on speaker phone.

“Felt a bit crap this morning,” Peter said. “Took a flexi day off work. I wondered if you’d like to go surfing this afternoon? I’m sure I kicked a plank on my way out last night.”

“Sounds great,” Jason said. “Where and when?”

“Cable Point, couple of hours?” Peter said.

“Sea breeze will be in,” Jason said knowledgeably. “But there’s a good swell, so it’d still be surfable. I’ll see you there.”

“Great,” Peter said, and he cut off the call.

Harvey shook his head and laughed. “You’re a crazy bastard, Jason.”

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Jason was right, there was a stiff sea breeze blowing in from the Antarctic, flattening out the top of the swell, and Ryan reached behind himself and hauled on the tape tied to his wetsuit zip, zipping himself in.

It wasn’t cold in the suit and it’d be even warmer once he’d pissed in it, but that could wait until he hit the water.

Jason’s ute pulled into the half-full car park and Ryan scraped his hair back and secured it firmly, then waved to Jason, who parked beside Ryan’s borrowed van.

Ryan hadn’t been going to do this, but Stretchyarse had glowered at him when Ryan had asked to be taken off the assignment, then asked if Ryan was resigning from the squad.

So, there Ryan was, wearing a full-length wetsuit, being looked over comprehensively by a grinning Jason as he got out of his ute.

“Hey,” Jason said, the wind whipping his hair across his face, and he kissed Ryan, his hair blowing into Ryan’s eyes with the salty spray from a wave.

Acutely aware of the surveillance team in the panel van down the end of the car park, Ryan kissed Jason back. “Hi.”

“Give me a moment to put my suit on and we’ll hit the water,” Jason said.

Ryan slid open the back door of the van and took out his board, glad that he actually owned a board and wasn’t going to have to surf on a strange one. When Ryan turned back, leg rope in his hand, Jason had shed his jeans and hoodie and was standing in the shelter of the ute’s passenger door, rolling on a wetsuit, his back to Ryan.

Jason’s back was tanned and muscular and Ryan told himself that it was really only playing the role that made him look at Jason’s arse while he was wriggling into his suit.

When Jason turned around and undid the occy strap that held his board on the rack, his eyes twinkled at Ryan and Ryan grinned back.

The path down to the beach was rocky, but Jason bounded ahead of Ryan enthusiastically and Ryan had to admit, this was going to be fun. Out in the surf, out of the reach of the surveillance team, without a wire on, the pressure was off him to try and move any closer to Jason.

And dammit, he was going surfing on company time, on a weekday afternoon.

It was choppy paddling out, water icy cold on Ryan's face and hands, wind stinging his eyes, but there were only a couple of other guys out on the break, so Ryan lined up beside Jason, astride his board.

He hadn't surfed for a couple of months, but that was still recently enough that the muscle memory persisted, and he knelt up on his board, ahead of Jason in the queue.

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The clouds broke up and the sun came out and they spent a couple of hours out there, catching waves, bobbing in the swell between breaks, and Ryan didn't try and keep up a conversation. He was supposed to be building a rapport with Jason, that was Stretchyarse's instructions, and blokes didn't do that by chatting.

Ryan was starving hungry when they walked back up the path to the car park, boards under their arms, hungry and cold, and Jason said, "I brought coffee in a thermos. Want some?"

"Fuck, yeah," Ryan said, and he unlocked the van and tossed his board in the back and grabbed a towel.

After he'd rubbed at his hair and face, Jason handed him a plastic mug of sweet, black coffee and it was warm enough to feel mighty good sliding down his throat.

"Didn't bring any food," Jason said, opening the passenger door of the ute and standing out of the wind in its shelter. "Want to drive up the coast a bit and grab some fish and chips?"

"Sounds great," Ryan said.

He followed Jason's ute back toward the city until Jason turned off at a takeaway place overlooking one of the swimming beaches, then Ryan pulled in beside him.

The place must be popular with surfers; no one blinked as two bedraggled men wearing hoodies with wetsuits undone and rolled down to their waists tramped sand into the kiosk. And there was porridge on the menu, listed as 'available all day'. Ryan knew from experience that there was nothing like a bellyful of porridge to get you through a cold day on the ocean.

The panel van pulled into the car park just as Ryan leaned across the counter and said, "Piece of flake and three bucks of chips, mate, and a crab stick and a Chiko roll."

Ryan sat on the edge of one of the tables, beside where Jason was leaning against a poster advertising ice creams, and Jason said, "So, what do you do, Pete?"

This bit was easy, he had a legend ready. "Public servant," Ryan said. "With the Department of Veterans' Affairs, nothing exciting."

“Figured it had to be the public service if you got to take a day off. What sort of stuff do you do?” Jason asked.

Ryan had dated a girl from Vet Affairs the previous year. “DVA has this not-for-profit insurance company, for the Vets and their families, gives them discount home and car insurance, that sort of thing. I work there, as an office slave. What about you?”

“I do as little as I can get away with,” Jason said, grinning at Ryan. “My brother runs a few businesses and I work a bit in them, whatever needs doing.”

“What sort of stuff?” Ryan asked, aware that he was skating closer to where he was supposed to be headed. At least Jason had mentioned Cooper voluntarily.

“Fix anything that’s broken, wash dishes at the café, drive him around if he needs a chauffeur,” Jason said. “Means I get to go surfing a fair bit.”

Ryan nodded and the vacant girl behind the counter called out, “Got your orders.”

They picked up the bundles of white paper and Ryan followed Jason to his ute. When Jason leaned over and unlocked the passenger door, Ryan climbed in.

The food was wonderfully warm in Ryan’s lap and the steam from the two packages fogged up the windows quickly. It was late, the sun was setting behind the headland, leaving the ocean silver and black under the clouds.

Jason put the radio on quietly and poured Ryan more coffee, while Ryan bit into his Chiko roll.

“Where you from originally? That’s a yank accent, right?” he asked, around a mouthful of superheated cabbage and MSG.

“Yep,” Jason said, peeling the batter off his fish and eating it in one go. “Born there. My parents split up and I stayed in the US with my father, then came out here when I was 17. I’m closer to my mom now, and my brother. What about you?”

“Born in England, came here a few years ago with a girlfriend, just to tour around. We split up, she went back to London and I stayed on,” Ryan said, peeling the batter off his fish, too, and eating it in great chunks.

“Girlfriend, huh?” Jason said.

“Um, yeah. I’m just coming out.” There, he’d said it and he hoped like crazy that the advice Collins had given him was going to work.

“Kinda worked that out,” Jason said, chuckling and opening the car window to throw some chips to the squabbling seagulls. The blast of cold air cleared away some of the salt-and-vinegar fog from the cab of the ute, then Jason wound the window back up again.

“Is it a problem?” Ryan asked, knowing he sounded nervous, hoping Jason wouldn’t pick up on exactly how nervous he was.

“Not for me,” Jason said, sliding one arm behind Ryan’s shoulders and sliding the other hand up Ryan’s neoprene-clad leg into the warmth that the fish and chips had left. “Hopefully not for you, either.”

Jason’s voice was just plain indecent when he spoke like that, his tone low, mouth dangerously close to Ryan’s ear. “You seem... conflicted,” he said against Ryan’s ear, smelling of seaweed and batter, his fingers pressing up between Ryan’s thighs. Ryan’s balls, not understanding the issues, wanted to be touched so badly that they hurt.

Jason tasted of fish and chip shop grease, sunscreen, coffee and impending disaster, but none of this stopped Ryan kissing Jason back, dislodging the fish and chip wrappers from his lap, spreading chips across the cluttered floor of Jason’s ute.

Conflicted? Conflicted wasn’t a strong enough word for it, not when Jason was kissing him and sliding a hand underneath Ryan’s hoodie, hand scraping sandily across Ryan’s chest to find his nipple.

Ryan whimpered against Jason’s mouth, unable to stop his body from responding to the touch. “That’s better,” Jason whispered. “Just let yourself feel it... don’t try and think...”

Thinking didn’t seem to be an option. Other bits of Ryan were in control and he found himself touching Jason, one hand under Jason’s hoodie, stroking his back, the other exploring the long slope of Jason’s thigh.

He lost track of where Jason was touching him; chest, neck, wet, stringy hair, then ohmygod his thigh, underneath the peeled off top of Ryan’s wetsuit, leaving him trembling and aroused and unbearably confused. This wasn’t supposed to be happening, he was supposed to be working, the other fuckers from the squad were presumably cacking themselves in the panel van, watching him make out with the suspect, but there didn’t seem to be any brakes on the particular train Ryan was riding.

Jason’s fingers trailed gently over the ridge of Ryan’s cock through the wetsuit, making Ryan’s breath hitch. “I think we should go back to my place and have showers, then you should let me help you with this.” The fingers pressed more firmly, then Jason caught Ryan’s hand where it was squeezing his thigh and moved it to the front of his wetsuit.

“Oh God,” Ryan groaned at the feel of Jason’s cock and he ran his fingertips down the length of the ridge. Jason was fucking huge and touching Jason made Ryan even harder than he already was. He must be doing something right because, in the street light slanting in through the window, he could see Jason’s eyes slide closed, and he moaned quietly when Ryan cupped his balls.

“Feels good,” Jason whispered, and Ryan’s hand became bolder, squeezing gently, then moving back to Jason’s cock. “We need to go... not private here...”

“Yeah,” Ryan said. It was far less private than Jason knew, with a surveillance team sitting a few metres away, no doubt with a laser microphone trained on the windscreen, furtively listening to them groping each other.

Walking back across the car park to his van wasn't too bad and at least the peeled down top of his wetsuit meant that no one could see his raging erection. He almost didn't follow Jason's ute out of the car park. He really really wanted to run away, a long way away, as far as he could go. London would be good. He could hide in his mum's wardrobe there.

But there was a panel van full of people watching him, so he flicked his indicator on and followed Jason out onto Ocean Road and shoved one hand down the front of his wetsuit and tried to rearrange his cock a little.

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Blackie was far too enthusiastic about seeing Peter again and Jason towed her by her collar out into the back yard and closed the door on her firmly, then grinned apologetically at Peter.

“Sorry 'bout that,” he said. “She's kind of excitable. That's why I didn't bring her to the beach today. I would have had to have spent all my time taking her back in to shore.”

“She is kinda bouncy,” Peter said, crossing and rubbing his arms. “Have you thought about getting her fixed?”

“She is fixed,” Jason said, wrapping his arms around Peter and hugging him. “You should have seen her before she was done. You're freezing, go and have a shower.”

Peter got his hunted rabbit look again and Jason stroked his knuckles against Peter's cheek. “By yourself,” he said gently.

There was gratitude in Peter's voice when he said, “Thanks,” and it made Jason smile.

“Don't think for one moment think that this means that we're not following through,” Jason murmured against Peter's ear.

“Jason,” Peter whispered, and Jason pulled back a little and tipped Peter's chin up with his fingertips.

“Shh,” Jason said. “Go and shower and get warm.”

Peter nodded and picked up his pack from the kitchen table and went into the bathroom. As soon as the door locked behind him, Jason grabbed clean sheets out of the pile of laundry in the studio and began to strip his bed quickly.

Footsteps on his creaking boards made him look up from tucking the bottom sheet in and Peter was standing in the doorway, bare-chested. “Um,” he said, looking morose. “I can't get my wetsuit off by myself.”

In the bathroom, Jason knelt down behind Peter and inspected the stuck zip. “Sand and hair, by the looks of it,” he said, pulling at the zip.

It came undone and Jason undid the zip carefully and peeled the suit away from Peter’s skin.

Wetsuits were inevitably funky on the inside and there was sand stuck to the small of Peter’s back. Jason pressed his lips carefully against the pale skin of Peter’s sacrum and kissed him gently.

The suit peeled off further to the top of Peter’s buttocks and Jason slid his hands over the clammy skin, brushing sand away, lingering and exploring. If Peter wasn’t a virgin, if he was sure this was what Peter actually wanted, he would be parting the buttocks, letting his mouth explore where he was hoping his cock was going to be soon.

When Jason looked, Peter’s hands were clamped so tightly around the towel rail that his knuckles were white, but he moaned quietly when Jason nuzzled his stubble across the curve of Peter’s buttock.

The suit peeled down further and Jason licked the arc of one buttock, then the other, then spat on his fingers and slid them between Peter’s buttocks.

“Oh God,” Peter moaned, and Jason fumbled for the zip of his own wetsuit with his other hand, tugging impatiently on the cord, then wriggling his suit down far enough to free his own cock before he went crazy.

Peter spread his legs a little and Jason’s fingertips found what they had been looking for, rough skin, tight ring of muscle. He was willing to bet that no one had touched Peter before there, not in that way, and he pressed kisses across the heaven of Peter’s buttock and circled his fingertips slowly, pressure so slight that Peter couldn’t possibly be threatened by it.

“Peter,” Jason said, relieved to find his voice still worked. “If you turn around, I’ll suck your cock.”

The shower dripped, someone did a burnout in a nearby street, and Blackie grizzled at the back door. Peter stayed where he was, still clinging to the towel rail, and there were fresh beads of sweat across his lower back when Jason pressed his cheek against it.

“I’m going to come,” Peter whispered. “Fuck, Jason...”

Sometimes, invitations were clear.

Jason stood up quickly and turned Peter around and pressed their mouths together, while his hand pulled roughly at the front of Peter’s wetsuit, pulling the neoprene away from his skin quickly.



There was something desperate about the way Peter was kissing Jason, primal and out of control, and Jason managed to pull Peter's wetsuit down far enough.

Peter tore his mouth away from Jason's and let out a shuddering sound that might almost have been a sob when Jason curled his hand around his cock.

"Let go," Jason whispered, and Peter clung to his neck, his face against Jason's shoulder.

Each stroke made Peter groan and Jason wrapped a free arm around Peter's waist and held him securely as his knees sagged. He was too far gone to hold back, Jason could tell that, crumbling completely in Jason's arms. It would be something special to fuck this man, to be his first.

Peter's legs were twitching, jerking his body slightly, and Jason squeezed the head of his cock hard, then pushed his hand roughly down the shaft, pulled it back up equally hard, and Peter began to come.

Come splashed across Jason's belly, trickled across his cock in a way that made him want to scream in frustration, seeped down his thighs, into wetsuit folds, dripped on his feet.

Jason used both hands to hold Peter up, reached out and kicked the toilet seat and lid down, then set Peter down carefully on it, not letting go. There was the not-so-small issue of his own cock, but he could wait for Peter to get his shit together first.

Kneeling beside the toilet wasn't great—perhaps Jason really should get someone in to clean occasionally?—but at least he still had his wetsuit on up to his thighs.

"You OK?" he asked when Peter took a deep breath in.

"No," Peter said. "Don't think I am."

He unwound his arms from Jason's neck and leaned back against the cistern, eyes closed, looking so miserable that Jason had to remember he wasn't allowed to laugh.

"Want some whiskey?" Jason said.

Peter nodded, eyes still closed, and Jason stood up and peeled off his wetsuit, took his robe off the back of the bathroom door.

The robe didn't actually do anything about hiding his cock, but at least he wouldn't scare Peter quite as much under a couple of layers of towelling, and when he carried two tumblers of Jameson's back into the bathroom, Peter had propped his elbows on his knees and hidden his face with his hands.

Jason nudged the back of one of his hands with a tumbler and Peter looked up and took it.

"Thanks," he said, and he drank a quarter of the glass down in one gulp.

“Gonna tell me?” Jason asked. It was just possible that the kid would spill at this point, confess all and retreat with as much dignity as he could manage, leaving Jason alone with his cock. It wasn’t likely; if the kid had any guts he’d try and salvage his cover, it’s what Jason would do.

“I’m straight,” Peter said dejectedly. “I’m sorry.”

No laughing. No laughing.

“Could have fooled me,” Jason said neutrally. “You came on my feet.”

“Oh God,” Peter muttered.

“Now you’ve told me that, how about a quick shower and then bed?” Jason said. “Anything we do won’t matter because you’re straight, right?”

“But...” Peter frowned, then drank another quarter of his glass. “Doesn’t it worry you?”

“My entire life is composed of mutually incompatible events,” Jason said. “I’ll just add this to the list.”

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The shower was hot, it should feel good, but Ryan’s wits seemed to be completely scattered now, fractured and fragmented, like life had hit the hash key on his keyboard over and over until it had stuck.

Habit made him wash his hair and soap his body, habit and the need to do something to stop himself falling apart completely. He couldn’t cope with what had happened, what Jason had done to him. It shouldn’t have felt that good, a wank was just a wank after all, but that had been mindblowingly intense. And then there was the way it had felt when Jason touched his arse...

Even with the water pelting his face, washing sand and salt and shampoo off him, he couldn’t ignore the lurch his cock gave at the sense memory of that.

He turned the taps off and picked up the towel Jason had left for him, then dried himself off quickly.

There were clothes in his pack, jeans and boxers and a jumper, and when he pulled them out his hand found the PDA he had with him. Fuckit, he was supposed to be working, not getting laid. He was going to have to show Stretchyarse something to explain the hours he’d spent in the house.

When he came out of the bathroom, pack in hand, Jason kissed him quickly and said, “Help yourself to more whiskey, I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Once the bathroom door was closed and the water running, Ryan quickly found Jason's mobile phone. It was on, the number pad was unlocked, it was so fucking easy to line the work PDA up with the mobile and quickly export the address book and call history. There was one thing about being a cop, it made you proficient at stealing information.

He put Jason's phone back exactly where it came from and used the PDA to take photos of the kitchen, including a close up of the piles of bills and bank statements strewn across the table.

It only took another moment to send all of the material to Stretchyarse, delete the files from the PDA's memory, and put it back in his pack.

Now, new glass of whiskey in his hand, Blackie yelping at the back door, he could have the breakdown he really needed to.

He only managed a minute or two of gibbering, then the taps shut off, and a damp Jason appeared from the bathroom, tying the belt of his robe.

"Shut up!" he yelled at Blackie through the flywire door, and she did.

Ryan must have looked like someone who had been gibbering, because Jason slid his hand around the back of Ryan's neck gently. "Peter," he said softly. "Come to bed."

Jason left the bedroom in darkness, so the only light was the kitchen light shining down the hall, and the darkness made it easier to lie down on the clean sheets, Jason's mouth on his.

When Jason shifted his weight, sliding one knee between Ryan's and lowering his weight so he settled over Ryan, there was no awkwardness. Jason's cock was pressed against Ryan's belly, insistent reminder of what this all meant, but Ryan didn't want to keep fighting this any longer.

Sometimes, you just had to accept that an operation was irretrievable. This was one of those times. Ryan kissed Jason deeply and pulled at his robe, finally getting his hands under the towelling to run them across Jason's back.

Jason's hands pulled Ryan's jumper up and he lifted his hands willingly.

There was one moment, when Jason knelt up and took his robe off and the light from the hall caught him in silhouette, his cock jutting out from his body, that Ryan wondered what madness had possessed him, then Jason's fingers were unbuttoning and unzipping him.

Ryan trembled when Jason lay back down on him, when their cocks brushed in the darkness, then Jason kissed him gently and sweetly.

It had never been like this with a woman for Ryan: he always had to think about what he was doing, he was never certain of himself, or of them. This time, though, his hands

knew how to touch Jason, his body moved by itself, gentle rocks upward that slid their cocks together in a warm friction that had Ryan gasping.

He gasped again when Jason crawled up his body and straddled his chest, then slid one hand behind Ryan's head and used the other one to guide his cock into Ryan's mouth.

"Just suck," Jason whispered, steadying himself now with one hand against the wall behind Ryan's head.

Ryan's own body was screaming for just such a touch, for a warm wet mouth to wrap around his cock, and he moaned and slid his tongue over the head of Jason's cock.

It felt... it felt like he was doing it to himself, like he could feel lips and tongue, suck and slide, and his mouth knew what to do.

Jason tasted of skin and soap and of something else that could only be pre-come leaking from him and it set Ryan on fire, making him crave more. He wanted so much more, wanted Jason to shove all of that impressive cock into Ryan's mouth hard, wanted Jason to do other unspeakable things to him.

He clutched at Jason, finding the hair on his belly and the solid muscle of his thigh, and encouraged by Jason's moans, he slid his hand around Jason's hip and across his buttock.

The hair was matted with sweat, and there was something about the feeling of being pinned down by Jason's weight, unable to move, unable to speak around the cock in his mouth, that unravelled Ryan's control.

His fingers found Jason's arse and Jason grunted and squirmed, pushing back onto Ryan's finger, pushing it inside.

Sure, Ryan knew what the inside of someone's arse felt like, anyone who'd done cavity searches in the lock up did, but that was with a glove on and a reluctant participant.

This, fuck, this was so different. Jason was tight and soft and hot inside, moaning steadily now and rocking backward and forward; alternating between pushing his cock into Ryan's mouth and his arse back onto Ryan's hand.

Ryan didn't have a clue what he was doing, but perhaps it wasn't an issue, not with the way Jason was hunched over him now, cock like steel in Ryan's mouth, and Ryan realised Jason was about to come. Girls that swallowed were something Ryan appreciated, but faced with having to do the same himself, he found himself beginning to panic.

Even in the dark, Jason must have picked up on this, because with a shuddering groan, he pulled back and up, jerking his cock out of Ryan's mouth, tearing Ryan's finger out of him.

The bed creaked and in the half-light Ryan could see Jason hunched over him. There was the familiar sound of a hand working a cock hard and fast and Ryan almost arched himself off the bed when Jason groaned deeply and something hot splashed across Ryan's cock.

Oh God, Jason was coming over him, over his belly and his cock, so it ran down his thighs and the room was heavy with the smell of come.

"Please," Ryan found himself begging, unable to cope with the feelings he was having any longer, and Jason bent over, disappearing into shadow, and a mouth slid down Ryan's cock.

Ryan came, he couldn't have held back for a moment longer without dying, crying out and thrashing on the bed.

Sliding down the other side of the orgasm, his body wet with sweat and come and maybe even tears, Ryan was profoundly glad the room was dark. He couldn't have faced Jason at that moment, couldn't have lied to him or pretended.

Then Jason was lowering himself over Ryan and they kissed and the knowledge that his own come and Jason's come were mixed in Jason's mouth made Ryan moan.

"Are you being greedy?" Jason whispered between kisses, as he rolled off Ryan and settled beside him, arms securely around Ryan's chest.

It was so easy, in the safety of the darkness, to settle his head against Jason's chest and run his hand down Jason's flank. "Don't think so," Ryan whispered back, and his voice sounded fragile to his own ears.

Blackie was scratching away at the back door and somewhere in the house a tap dripped or a clock ticked and Jason's hand was stroking Ryan's arm, chest, belly, faint whispers of movement.

Ryan sighed without meaning to and Jason propped himself up on one elbow, then leaned solidly across Ryan and rummaged around beside the bed.

"Here," he said, sitting up, and Ryan caught a glimmer of light on a bottle as Jason handed it to him.

He undid the bottle and whiskey fumes washed through his sinuses, smarting them. He sat up and drank from the bottle, three long swallows that warmed his throat and made his belly churn.

"I've gotta go," Ryan said, and Jason took the bottle from him and drank, too.

"Sure," he said. "Grab a shower if you want one and let Blackie in again, please. I'm gonna stay here, if that's OK?"

It only took a minute to scoop up his clothes and shower quickly and then he undid the flyscreen door to let the mad dog back in, using a hefty knee to her chest to deter her from jumping up at him.

He found all of his belongings and walked down the darkened hall, past the door to the bedroom, where he could just make out Blackie bounding around the bed.

When he unlocked the front door from the inside, from the bedroom Jason said, "You know where I am."

Ryan closed the door after himself.

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The squad room was quiet apart from the clack of keyboards when Ryan walked carefully into the room in the hope of not appearing drunk and/or like he'd just got laid, followed by Tracey, Roscoe and two uniforms, who had been his back-up.

Stretchyarse looked up from his PC and nodded at Ryan as he stood up.

"Damn good work, Hadley," he said, slapping Ryan on the back. "We're crunching his phone records at the moment."

The data projector was on, the image on the pull-down screen was of Jason's kitchen table, strewn with papers, and Tracey said, "Wow. Bank statements and all."

Stretchyarse shook Ryan's shoulder in congratulations, then peered at Ryan. "You pissed, Hadley?"

"Yeah," Ryan said truthfully. "Had to out-drink him to get this stuff." So easy to lie; so much for quality policing.

"Sit down," Stretchyarse said. "Millenson, feed him coffee and Berocca."

One of the uniforms disappeared obediently, returning almost instantly with a mug and a tube of Berocca. Ryan remembered being that obliging when he had first been seconded from uniform to the squad, keen to make a good impression and get a transfer.

Now he had sex with persons of interest. Fuck.

Ryan crunched two of the Beroccas and washed them down with Starfleet Standard coffee; white with two sugars. There had been a time when he'd drunk his coffee without sugar, but he'd given up the attempt to get anyone to make anything else now.

Stretchyarse said, "Make any other progress this time, Hadley?"

Ryan shrugged and tried to make his brain work. "He mentioned his brother a couple of times, that's all. And that he worked for him. I think he'll open up more now."

Now there was a place it wasn't safe to go.

"Good," Stretchyarse said. "Give us a day or two to wade through his phone records and address book and we'll send you in again, unless he rings you up. Try and get him to take you to one of his brother's cafés or clubs next time."

"K," Ryan said. "Can do that."

"You're as pissed as a newt, aren't you?" Roscoe said, looking up from his keyboard at Ryan.

"Think so," Ryan said. "Fuck knows how I drove here."

Stretchyarse groaned. "Oh God," he said. "'Officer on Duty in Drunk-Driving Scandal.' Millenson, take him home. 8.30 tomorrow morning, hangover or not, Hadley. We need you to go through this with us, tell us if you recognise any names."

Ryan nodded. The shit he had got together on the way back to Headquarters was rapidly dissolving, presumably in alcohol, and he was in need of a Good Lie Down before the carpet came and got him.

"Good work," Stretchyarse repeated, as Ryan pushed himself up off the desk with caution. That was high praise from Stretchyarse, to get that twice in a row, and Ryan found himself grinning goofily while Millenson took his elbow to lead him to the lifts.

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"What's the drama?" Jason asked Sharon when she let him into the foyer.

"Not sure, hon," Sharon said. "Harve said to tell you to go on down, they're in the garage."

Jason kissed her on the cheek and bypassed the fridges to go directly to the garage.

He'd slept deeply, worn out by surfing and sex, until Harve's phone call had woken him. He'd stumbled into his kitchen, mouth like the bottom of a cocky's cage, fed Blackie, fallen through the shower, then headed for Harve's place.

No one had tailed him, he was sure of that, so it didn't look like a Constable Care problem. Must be one of the other groups, that'd explain the meeting and the delay while someone slid back the restraining bar on the garage door.

Harve hugged him and Jason nodded at the men gathered in the garage. This was the bit of Harvey's life Jason tried not to have contact with: clandestine meetings with dangerous and anonymous men. One of them ran a scanner of some kind over Jason and it seemed a prudent move. It was always possible Peter was a lot sneakier than Jason thought he was and he'd put a bug in Jason's clothes.

"What's up?" Jason asked Harvey.

“The Dragon Boys took out a shipment yesterday, killed Vince and snatched it,” Harvey said.

“Fuck,” Jason said. He knew Vince from footie games and drinking sessions. “Do you really want me to know this?” He really didn’t like to hear the word ‘shipment,’ especially not with the police snooping around.

“Yeah,” Harvey said. “We’ve cleaned up, but there will be recriminations. How’re things with the new boyfriend? I think we’re going to need a police contact on this one.”

How the hell did Jason explain Peter to a room full of gun-toting heterosexual blokes?

“He’s, um, compromised,” Jason said. “Not flipped yet, though, so I can’t ask him outright questions.”

“But if we needed to feed the cops info, you could do that?” Harvey asked.

“Yeah, I could do that,” Jason said. “He’s nosy, just give me stuff to leave lying around. Or I could bring him here.”

Harvey slapped Jason on the back. “Thanks, mate. You might want to duck out now.”

Jason hugged Harvey, nodded at the dangerous men, and let himself out of the barricaded garage.

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The hangover made a really good excuse to be sullen and morose in the squad room, and Ryan did feel a bit like he was dying, but he doubted that was from the booze.

It was hard to search databases and compile reports on people and places when he was still grappling with the enormity of what had happened. A guy had sucked him off. And Ryan had fucking loved it.

He clenched his jaw tighter and pulled the tax records for Jason’s vet, willing himself not to think about it. Blackie’s vet; Jason probably saw a doctor.

It was no good and Ryan slunk off to lock himself in a toilet cubicle.



### Chapter 3

Blackie went apeshit, throwing herself at the front door and giving her ‘hello’ bark, so Jason stuck his brush into the jar of turps and nudged Blackie aside to peer through the spyhole.

Peter was standing on the front porch, back against the meter box, out of easy sight of the street.

Jason undid the deadlock and the ordinary lock and opened the front door.

“Hey, good to see you,” he said, unlocking the security grille. “C’mon in.”

“Is it OK for me to drop around?” Peter asked, and he was even more jittery than the previous night.

“Sure,” Jason said, and as Peter walked past him into the hall Jason had a quick look out onto the street. All the cars there belonged to his neighbours; it was just possible this was an extra-curricular visit and the thought made Jason’s balls tighten just a little.

He hugged Peter and Peter’s mouth pressed urgently against his, open and demanding. Right at that moment there was nothing that Jason would rather do than kiss Peter, long and hard, but there was a dog in the way.

Pulling his mouth away with a sucking sound, Jason growled, “Blanket or back yard,” at Blackie, and she grumped off into the kitchen and Jason heard the screen door bang as she let herself out.

“Sorry,” he said, threading his fingers into Peter’s hair so the curls tumbled down the back of his hands. “Don’t think there’s any need to ask why you’re here, is there?”

Peter swallowed and his mouth twitched. “What you did—we did—last night, I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

Jason used the pad of one thumb to smudge the moisture at the corner of Peter’s mouth along his bottom lip. “Then you’ve been sleeping with the wrong people,” Jason murmured. “We can fix that.”

Peter licked his lip and Jason began to suspect he could get a real oral fixation going with Peter. “I had to have a wank at work today,” Peter said.

“I imagine the Department of Veterans’ Affairs is full of wankers,” Jason said, and he remembered how Peter had looked the night before, eyes closed, mouth stretched around Jason’s cock. “Had a wank myself this afternoon.”

“I wasn’t going to come around tonight,” Peter said. He was rocking his hips slightly now, dragging the ridge of his cock backward and forward across Jason’s, and Jason imagined for a moment what it would be like to bury himself deep inside that movement.

Enough talk, Jason grabbed Peter's elbow and pulled him into the bedroom and pushed him onto the bed. 'I wasn't going to come around tonight' was some kind of code for 'I wasn't going to come around ever again.'

If this was all going to end badly, in duty and blood-bonds and crap like that, then Jason was going to kiss Peter, over and over, while they squirmed out of their clothes, just this once.

In the light from the bedside lamp, Peter was golden and sleek, eyes fluttering closed, mouth open and inviting...

One more kiss, then Jason slid down the bed and took Peter's cock into his mouth, one quick slide down its length and Peter arched up off the bed. Using elbows and hands, Jason pinned Peter down so he couldn't squirm and began to suck him hard and deep.

What surprised Jason wasn't the way Peter still tried to rock his hips, despite Jason holding him still: it was the sounds that Peter made, the way he moaned and gasped, each whimper urging Jason on. Presumably knowing there wasn't a surveillance team outside made the difference.

Peter's thighs were smooth and creamy and when the one under Jason's hand tightened beneath his fingers, he lifted his mouth reluctantly from Peter's cock. He didn't want Peter to come yet, there was so much more he wanted to do.

When Jason sucked gently on Peter's balls, Peter spread his thighs wide and that was invitation enough. He pressed the pad of his thumb behind Peter's balls, then slid two fingers down over Peter's ass.

Peter cried out and Jason eased the tip of one finger in just a fraction.

Fuck, Peter was tight, his body clamping around Jason's finger, and if Jason didn't get to fuck him just this once, he was going to regret it for the rest of his life. When Jason looked up, Peter was a picture of abandon, rolling his head from side to side, arms outflung and clutching at the sheets, chest gleaming with sweat.

And it was only going to get better.

"Roll over," Jason said, and Peter must be pretty low down the food chain in the police force and used to be being bossed around, because he just groaned and rolled over.

It was a shame that Peter's cock was now out of sight, but there was always the consolation prize of that ass, waiting there when Jason spread Peter's cheeks, leaned forward and trailed his tongue gently across it.

Peter made a guttural noise and Jason wondered if he'd come, just from that first touch, but fuck, Peter was a natural at this, writhing as Jason's tongue slithered and slipped around his ass, then pressed in slowly.

Jason wasn't sure what the women of the city were up to, but they must be completely inadequate in bed if there was an ass like this one just waiting for someone to explore.

There were two ways this could go: one of them finished up with Jason's cock in Peter's mouth, the other with it in his ass, and it was a choice that Jason, no matter how pushy he was feeling, couldn't make.

Jason lifted his mouth, slid his tongue up Peter's spine, tracing the bumps of his vertebrae, up to his neck, where he nuzzled Peter's sweat-wet curls, and murmured, "Tell me what you want me to do to you."

"I can't," Peter whispered, and Jason closed his eyes for a moment.

"Sometimes saying the words is harder than doing the thing," he whispered back.

There was a pump pack of lube on his bedside table, so Jason leaned across Peter, squeezed some onto his fingers and pressed his fingers against Peter's ass. Close to Peter like this, half-sprawled across his back, Jason felt Peter jump at the cold touch, then relax again as Jason's fingers circled where that tongue had been a moment ago.

Peter was open when Jason eased his finger in, just waiting for the touch, and Jason moved his finger gently, coaxing Peter, sliding in deeper each time. Jason sucked hard on the skin of Peter's shoulder and pressed his finger down.

The pillow Peter was clutching was damp now. Peter made a strangled noise and Jason wanted to reassure Peter, tell him that it was supposed to feel like that, but he doubted Peter would be able to hear him right at that moment.

Two fingers wasn't really enough preparation for fucking, but both of them were too wound up now for Jason to take it to three. Peter had hitched one leg up, opening himself up further, and pushed a hand underneath his hips and was stroking himself. The air was thick with the smell of come already and it was just turning Jason on further.

He reached for a condom from the box beside the lube and slid his fingers out of Peter to roll it on securely. More lube, smeared on himself and pushed carefully into Peter's ass, and Jason said, "Just say 'yes,' just to tell me this is what you want."

Peter didn't make a sound, but those lips moved, forming the word, and that was the assurance Jason needed to lift his weight over Peter and use one hand to guide the head of his cock to Peter's ass.

He'd never slid into someone this slowly before, not agonising millimetre by millimetre. Their breathing was loud in the room, Peter's faster than Jason's, until the head of Jason's cock was finally inside. Then Peter gasped and held his breath for far too long, letting it out with a shudder as he whimpered, "Fuck..."

"Shh," Jason said through gritted teeth, then Peter stopped fighting Jason, the feeling, his own body, and let go.

Once he was fully inside, Jason rested his weight forward onto Peter and kissed his cheek, tasting sweat and fear. "You're so beautiful," he whispered, and he began to rock his hips slowly, just sliding in and out the slightest amount.

This would take some time and all of Jason's control, to get Peter to the point where Jason could fuck him hard, but every rock was a little deeper than the previous one, sweet slither and the aching drag backward again.

Peter moved, too, tilting his hips back to meet Jason's thrusts, bliss on his face, and Jason began to move faster and harder

This was how it should be every time, deep and bright and intense, two people making each other feel as good as they possibly could, then Peter was coming underneath Jason, fists beating on the mattress as he cried out over and over and Jason slammed into him as hard as he could.

The first moment of coming was more than Jason could bear, rammed deep inside Peter, Peter's body still rippling from coming. Then the pleasure hit, like a sledgehammer, and Jason collapsed down onto Peter helplessly, clutching onto him blindly.

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They weren't asleep, but Jason's hand was heavy on Ryan's hip, stroking his thumb over the edge of the bone, and his breathing was slow and deep against Ryan's shoulder.

A deep quiet had settled over Ryan now, he was profoundly relaxed, his body felt slack and boneless, aching deep inside him, this warm burn that made him smile to himself. It felt like someone—Jason—had turned a light on inside him: he'd never felt pleasure like that before, it felt like he had come home.

The sheet underneath him was sticky and cold, so he wriggled over a little closer to Jason and let out a deep sigh. He should go, he shouldn't be here, should never have come over at all...

His phone rang, the sound coming from somewhere on the floor, presumably in his jeans. Jason kissed his neck and a hand slid across Ryan's belly up to his chest.

"Don't answer it," he murmured.

"Not going to," Ryan said, closing his eyes.

He eventually did roll out of bed and rummage through his clothes to find the phone, after it had rung four times. Flicking it open, he sat on the edge of the bed and said, "What?"

Roscoe said, "Stop shagging whoever she is and get your arse into work."

Ryan frowned and rubbed at his hair. "I really can't."

"You have to," Roscoe said. "Cassidy's here demanding to be briefed by you. It's all gone pear-shaped."

"Oh, fuck," Ryan said. "I'll be there in twenty."

“Ten,” Roscoe said, and he hung up.

Jason had propped himself up on one elbow and was looking at Ryan. “I have to go,” Ryan said.

“Don’t,” Jason said, and he looked so tempting and in the face of sustained improbability Ryan’s cock twitched just a tiny bit. Fuck, there was so much he wanted that he had never known existed before.

“I have to,” Ryan said, finding his underwear on the floor and pulling it on. “Work crisis.”

Fuck, that was a stupid thing to say.

“Does DVA insurance have many crises?” Jason asked, reaching over the edge of the bed and handing Ryan his shirt.

Ryan stuffed his feet into his shoes, abandoning his socks to whatever fate awaited them under Jason’s bed, and ignored the question.

At Jason’s front door, he kissed Jason quickly and said, “I want to come back.”

“When you can,” Jason said, tying the belt on his robe then unlocking the front door.

## Chapter 4

Ryan expected some kind of response when he walked back into the squad room: teasing, ridicule, maybe even an inquisition into his sex life. What he hadn't expected was for the room to be full of brass and the shining lights of Homicide.

Stretchyarse was there, his tie done all the way up as an indication of the serious nature of the briefing, and he beckoned for Ryan to come and stand beside him.

Some serious shit must have gone down. Ryan recognised the senior sergeant who was currently speaking from the Academy.

"... currently. SOC are mopping up and uniform are handling the initial interviews, but I want officers who know the players to look over the punters from the nightclub."

"What happened?" Ryan whispered against Stretchyarse's shoulder.

"Three shootings tonight," Stretchyarse whispered back. "How drunk are you?"

"Sober, boss," he said quietly.

"You smell like a tomcat," Stretchyarse said under his breath.

"Sorry, no time to shower." Ryan did smell, of come and sex and sweat, and he still had the warm-belly feeling from what Jason had done to him, but he forced himself to focus on the briefing.

Three shootings, one in one of Cooper's nightclubs; one civilian casualty, one gang member dead. Fuck, no wonder they'd pulled him out of bed.

Inspector Cassidy nodded when the senior sergeant had finished and looked at Stretchyarse and said, "DS Longbottom? Is this your undercover officer?"

"Yes sir," Stretchyarse said, nudging Ryan so he stepped forward. "DC Hadley has been undercover for the past few days and he's formed an acquaintance with Jason Cooper."

Ryan shoved his hands in his jeans' pockets and tried to look competent rather than shagged senseless. "Good," Cassidy said. "Jason Cooper is a suspect for the last shooting, outside the Dragon Boys' headquarters, an hour ago. You're to brief Homicide, and they want you in when they interview both Coopers."

"Yes, sir," was about the only thing Ryan could possibly say. Fucking hell, he was Jason's fucking alibi for a shooting. He was fucking toast now. He crossed his arms over his chest and went and stood behind Stretchyarse again while his stomach turned to ice. He felt sick, physically sick, now.

And his arse hurt.

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“You look fucking wrecked,” Roscoe said helpfully while Ryan pulled on his jacket and picked up the Cooper file from Longbottom’s desk, while two Homicide cops stood in the doorway.

“Thanks,” Ryan said, and he walked towards the cops.

The briefing went well, or rather, at least Longbottom’s face at the back of the room wasn’t bleak, and then the questions started. When was he expecting to see Cooper again? Did he think he would talk this time? Personality disorder? Substance dependencies?

Ryan answered them as well as he could, then discussion turned to sending him in wearing a wire the next day.

Ryan opened his mouth to protest and Stretchyarse stepped forward and said, “No, definitely not. You send him into Cooper’s house wired, you’d be signing a death warrant for him.”

Ryan excused himself from the briefing and found the loos down the hall and washed his face and tried to get himself together enough to deal with this. Stretchyarse pushed the door open and it thudded closed behind him.

“Gonna tell me?” Stretchyarse asked, and Ryan stared at himself in the mirror while Stretchyarse pushed each of the cubicle doors open in turn to make sure they were empty.

“I slept with him,” Ryan said.

“Fuck, Ryan,” Stretchyarse said. “You didn’t have to do that, we don’t expect officers to put out for the job, we’re not ASIS. No wonder you were off shagging some sheila tonight.”

Ryan’s fingers had curled around the edge of the hand basin. “And I think he’s made me.”

“Did he challenge you?” Longbottom asked. “Give you some idea?”

Ryan shook his head. “He just seemed... suspicious of my legend. Dubious. I’m not sure that I can go back in undercover again.”

Longbottom nodded. “I’m willing to trust your instincts on this one. I won’t order you back in that case. And I won’t let Homicide do anything except request you to go back. No one sends one of my officers on a suicide mission.”

Relief washed through Ryan; he wouldn’t have to face Jason again, no one was going to force him to go back. Now he just had to work out how to get through the night.

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The coffee was insipid, the room bare. There was a one way mirror opposite Jason and Jason speculated as to who was behind it. Peter? They wouldn't let him interview Jason, which was probably a damn good thing.

Harvey was somewhere in the building, too, with the identical twin of the lawyer that was sitting with Jason. "Co-operate," Harvey had said on the phone, and Jason was co-operating. He hadn't punched anyone yet.

The cop, completely anonymous in his dark suit and buzz cut, was just plain ugly, and Jason wondered how come more cops didn't look like Peter.

"Where were you at 8pm today?" the cop asked.

The lawyer nodded slightly at Jason and Jason said, "In bed, fucking."

"Who?" the cop asked.

The lawyer said, "Don't answer that. If you charge my client, he'll provide the identity of his lover. If you're not going to charge him, he wishes to protect both parties' privacy."

"A white Holden utility was sighted in Greentown, speeding away from a murder scene," the cop said. "What do you drive?"

"A white ute," Jason said. "A lot of people drive white Holden utilities."

"A lot of people aren't brothers of one of the leading organised crime figures in the city."

Harvey's pet lawyer said, "Mr. Cooper has served his jail time and has no outstanding warrants for his arrest."

"Putative," the cop said. "Putative leading organised crime figure."

"I can't help who I'm related to," Jason pointed out. "I was in bed, having the best damned sex of my life, not committing a gangland killing. I don't have a criminal record, here or in the US."

The cop pushed a wad of folded papers across the table toward the lawyer and Jason resisted the urge to bang his head on the table in frustration.

"That's a warrant to search your car, issued under Australian Crime Commission Regulations, 2004, section 29. Did you drive your car here?"

"Yes," Jason said, and he fished the keys out of his pocket. "Here, that'll save you having to break a window. It's out the front in the car park."

"I want to observe," the lawyer said. "And videotape."



The cop nodded and scooped up the keys. "Mr. Cooper has to stay here."

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Ryan pressed his forehead against the glass of the observation window, needing to feel something cool and solid right at that moment. Jason was sitting in the room, by himself, hands folded on the table in front of him, his eyes vacant. Ryan wondered what he was thinking.

Was Jason protecting him? If he thought Peter was for real, why hadn't he just used him as an alibi? The legend was solid, a search of DVA personnel records would have turned up a Peter Clarke in Insurance, and the contact details would have led back to the squad. If Jason knew he was a cop, why hadn't he just dropped Ryan into the shit and said so?

Ryan would have given anything to speak to Jason privately right then.

The best damned sex of his life? Ryan closed his eyes for a moment. "Fuck," he said under his breath.

The Homicide DC beside him said, "You OK?"

"I hate fucking undercover work," Ryan said.

The door swung open and one of the other Homicide cops said, "Shooting victim just died in surgery, making three fatalities."

The door swung shut again.

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At three in the morning, Ryan managed to find time to have a shower. Jason had gone home some time earlier, without being arrested, Cooper was still being interviewed. SOC had found nothing except dog hair, stale chips and sand in Jason's car, at least on the first run over it.

There would be traces of him there, too: skin cells, hairs, saliva. That was all right, he was supposed to have been there. He was just glad he hadn't come in the car.

If they searched Jason's house, he was all over the sheets and soaking into the mattress. He didn't know how many times he'd come that night, he'd had no idea he could come like that, over and over. There was enough DNA there to alibi Jason forever. Obviously there wasn't the evidence for a warrant for Jason's house or they'd be searching it already. State law was far more specific about residential searches than it was about vehicle searches.

The water streamed over him and Ryan took a deep breath. He was tired, he needed to sleep. His arse didn't hurt so much anymore and it probably wouldn't have worried him if he'd stayed in Jason's bed. But sitting in endless briefings and meetings had not been easy.

He would have stayed the night if he could have.

Someone banged on the shower cubicle door and said, "Hadley! You're wanted to observe in interview room three again."

Harvey Cooper looked tired and worried, sitting silently in the interview room while his lawyer fielded questions. Ryan studied his face closely through the glass, looking for a resemblance and not finding one. Cooper looked clever and controlled, Jason was passionate and generous. Cooper wore a beautifully tailored suit, Jason wore oil paint and tattoos.

No comparison.

Cooper didn't speak and his lawyer became more and more pointed in his replies and Ryan was profoundly relieved when, at four in the morning, some kind of a stalemate was reached, and Homicide decided to drop the only charge against him; obtaining financial advantage by deception.

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It wasn't worth going home, not for just three hours, so Ryan took a blanket out of the organised crime store room and crashed out on the floor beside his desk. He was tired, completely exhausted, and in spite of everything that had happened, he found that his mind latched on to being with Jason.

Memories diffused through him; how it had felt to be touched, the way Jason had held him afterward... He closed his eyes and wondered where Jason was and what he was doing.

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The fluorescent lights in the room flicked on and Ryan groaned and rolled over and found his face pressed into the hideous industrial carpet of the squad room. "Wake up, Hadley," Roscoe said cheerfully, and when Ryan opened his eyes, Roscoe dropped a folded up newspaper beside him.

"What?" Ryan said, sitting upright and picking up the paper.

"Front page," Roscoe said, sitting down at his desk.

Ryan unfolded the paper. 'Gangland killing spree'. And there was a photo of Cooper and Jason together, walking down the steps of the Supreme Court, both wearing suits, presumably at one of Cooper's earlier court appearances.

Longbottom walked into the squad room, thudded his briefcase on Ryan's desk and said, "Hadley, office, now."

That was an order.

Ryan pushed Longbottom's office door closed and Longbottom pointed at a chair.

"Siddown. I'm under pressure from on high to send you back in. I don't want to," Stretchyarse said.

Ryan slouched down into one of the chairs. There wasn't anything to say to that.

"How much risk do you think there is of you being exposed?" Stretchyarse asked.

Ryan shrugged. "I'm not sure my cover isn't already blown," he said. "If it is, though, I'm not sure that I'm actually at risk of harm."

"Because you shagged this guy?" Stretchyarse asked, and Ryan had to work hard not to flinch.

"Um, yeah. He's never given me any indication that he was capable of violence and he seems pretty, um, protective," Ryan said, aware that he was colouring with embarrassment.

"Might not be so protective if he finds out you were investigating him and his brother," Stretchyarse said, and Ryan just wanted the floor to open up so he could hide in the hole.

Fucking hell, there was no way he could explain any of this, so he said nothing.

"Well?" Stretchyarse asked. "Give me a risk number, something to take into the morning meeting with Cassidy."

Shit. "I think there's a 50% chance he knows I'm a cop," Ryan finally said. "I think there's a 10% risk that he will retaliate. If you send me into Cooper's house, I think there's a 75% chance that I'll be harmed. 100% if I'm wired and it's found."

Those sorts of numbers were all crap anyway and Ryan knew that Stretchyarse thought the same, but they could both play along with the management morons who'd replaced all of their law enforcement expertise with an MBA in HR.

"No wire," Stretchyarse said. "I agree. Let me go talk to Cassidy and Lorimer from Homicide."

Ryan nodded and uncurled himself from the chair and slouched back to his desk.

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Inspector Cassidy was sitting at the head of the table, surrounded by suits and brass, and Ryan made himself stand up straight and look calm.

"DC Hadley, sir," he said.

"Hadley, DS Longbottom has voiced his opposition to you returning to your undercover assignment. In the absence of significant leads into the gangland

shootings, I would like to request that you go undercover again, contact Cooper, and attempt to infiltrate Cooper's organisation," Inspector Cassidy said.

Ryan swallowed. "Request, sir?"

"Request. You'll have armed back-up and we've got surveillance on all the parties involved. Are you willing to do this?"

Ryan looked up from the table. Three dead, including two civilians. Whatever had happened with Jason didn't count for shit beside that, this was why he was a cop.

"Yes, sir."

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There was no one in the office apart from Stretchyarse and his door was shut, but Ryan still wouldn't use the speaker phone.

Jason answered quickly, sounding weary, and Ryan said, "Hey, Jason. This is Peter."

"Peter," Jason said. "I was hoping you'd call."

"Saw the paper this morning," Ryan said. "Are you all right?"

"Not really," Jason said. "I need to talk to you; my lawyer wants to talk to you. Can you get away from work?"

"Worked all night, don't have to work today," Ryan said, hoping that sounded authentic. "Are you at home?"

"I'm at my brother's place," Jason said, and he gave Ryan the address.

When Ryan had closed his phone, Stretchyarse said, "Well?"

"He's at Cooper's place. He wants me to go there."

There was approval in Stretchyarse's nod. "Solid work, Hadley. Just don't get yourself killed."

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Not getting himself killed seemed like a good idea to Ryan as he walked up to the gate in the broken glass-topped wall surrounding Cooper's house. There was an intercom and a woman's voice said, "Yes?" in a nasal whine from the speaker.

"My name's Peter, I'm here to see Jason," Ryan said.

There were a dozen sets of eyes on his back and not wearing a wire was beginning to feel like a stupid idea as the gate clunked unlocked and he pushed it open.

Ryan recognised the woman at the front door from the family dossier on Cooper, this was his mother, and she was beaming at Ryan.

“Peter, darlin’,” she said, and she planted a scarlet kiss on his cheek, making Ryan wonder what Jason had said about him. “I’m so pleased to meet Jason’s boyfriend. Do come in, darlin’, before someone takes a shot at one of us.”

“Call me Blue, honey,” she said, wrapping a hand with purple talons instead of nails around Ryan’s wrist and leading him into a completely white lounge room: white carpet, white couches, white shelves and curtains. The only colours in the room were the scarlet rugs over the couches and the huge canvases on the walls, green and brown splatters and streaks.

“I’ll go get Jason, he’s arguing with the lawyers at the moment,” Blue said, and she kissed Ryan’s cheek again.

While she was gone Ryan wondered if the paintings were Jason’s and how anyone kept white carpet clean.

Jason looked like shit when he walked into the room, - dark rings under his eyes, stress lines around his mouth, - but he hugged Ryan closely then pulled back and studied Ryan’s face.

A small smile lifted the corners of his mouth for a moment and he rubbed at Ryan’s cheek with his thumb, right where Blue had kissed him. “I can see Blue approved of you,” he said. “Are you OK? After last night?”

Ryan touched Jason’s cheek, brushing over the stubble, and it felt like the world had shrunk all of a sudden to the impossible white room and the impossible two of them.

“I wish I hadn’t had to leave,” Ryan said. “I wanted to stay.”

Jason’s mouth was gentle on his, brushing over his lips, and Ryan opened his mouth and kissed back, winding his arms around Jason’s neck.

Someone said, “Scuse me,” and Jason stopped fondling Ryan’s arse and broke the kiss.

“This is Harvey,” Jason said to Ryan. “Harve, meet Peter.”

Harvey held out his hand, Ryan let go of Jason and shook it, and the enormity of what he was doing hit Ryan all over again.

This was the closest a cop had gotten to Cooper in five years. Now he just had to not wind up dead.

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The lawyer didn’t look like he’d been awake all night. He was still smooth in his suit, no rings around his eyes, and looking like he’d just stepped out of the shower.

Jason, however, felt like shit. He'd showered some time around dawn and borrowed clothes from Harve and he was only awake thanks to enough coffee to make him so jittery that his hands didn't work anymore.

Peter looked pretty grim, too, and Jason found himself wishing this was over so he could take Peter home and make love to him over and over then sleep for days.

But it wasn't going to happen, so he contented himself with taking Peter's hand in his.

"What time did you arrive at Jason's place last night?" the lawyer asked, and Peter squeezed Jason's hand.

"'Bout twenty past six," Peter said. "I stayed until just before nine."

"And you were together the whole time?"

Peter nodded and Jason thought he might just be blushing.

"Would you be prepared to make a statement to the police to that effect?" the lawyer asked. "Or testify in court?"

The side of Peter's jaw worked and he said, "If Jason needs me to, I will."

Jason closed his eyes momentarily in relief. It was a big thing to ask—policemen weren't supposed to alibi people like him—but Jason wasn't confident that all of Harvey's contacts and money would keep him out of jail any other way.

"The DPP is going to want some kind of evidence you were there," the lawyer said. "Is there any?"

Jason said, "I've not cleaned up, so any forensic examination is going to put Peter in my bed."

The lawyer nodded. "Good. I'm sure the DPP won't be slow about that, as soon as they can scrape together enough for a search warrant."

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Sometimes darkness mattered and with only a sliver of light under the door, Harvey's guest bathroom was almost dark enough. The marble of the counter was cold against the backs of Jason's thighs, but, God, Peter's mouth was unbearably hot.

Jason shouldn't be hard, he was so fucking tired and wired. He so desperately wanted to believe this was for real; that Peter was into this as much as he was.

But, in the dark, he couldn't see Peter's eyes, had no way to judge whether he was enjoying it much as his muffled moans implied. Sometimes dark was a good thing.

Peter wasn't skilled, but his fingers were firm where they wrapped around the base of Jason's cock, stroking, and it made up for not taking Jason's cock down his throat.

"Wanna fuck you," Jason moaned, and Peter moaned too, deep vibrations that ran right through Jason.

They couldn't fuck, not like this, in Harvey's bathroom. No privacy, no time, but Jason could imagine they were, could imagine, remember the feeling of easing into Peter's body, how excruciatingly tight Peter had been, how he'd rocked, cautiously at first, then with abandon that had driven Jason wild...

"Oh, fuck," Jason moaned, and he couldn't stop himself from gripping Peter's hair and pushing his cock in deeper.

"Gonna come, babe," he whispered, forcing himself to let go of his grip and hold his hips still, giving Peter the chance to pull back. But Peter didn't, he just sucked harder. Jason tipped his head back so his head thudded against the mirror behind him and he gritted his teeth to stop from groaning, and he began to come.

A long slow kiss, then Jason undid Peter's jeans and pushed them down, and knelt between Peter's knees. Whatever role Peter was playing, he wasn't faking some things; he was as hard as stone when Jason slid his mouth down Peter's cock. As hard as stone, turned on as hell, groaning and moaning with every suck, coming almost immediately.

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In the kitchen, Jason held Peter close, just to feel him. "I'm so sorry to ask you to do this," he said, burying his face against Peter's neck.

Peter's hands slid up Jason's arms and wrapped around his shoulders. "I'm not going to let you go to prison," Peter said. "Not when I know it's something you didn't do."

"Christ," Harvey said behind them, under his breath, and Jason kissed Peter's forehead and turned to smile at his brother.

"Get over it, Harve. You and Sharon snog all the time."

Blue walked into the kitchen behind Harvey, hands full of used coffee cups. "He's right, hon," she said, dropping the mugs into the sink with a clatter and opening the dishwasher.

It felt so right somehow, leaning against the counter, his arm around Peter's shoulders, listening to Blue and Harve bantering, but it couldn't last. Peter would go away, back to where he came from, hopefully after alibiing Jason, and Jason would go back to surfing and painting.

"You should go," he said quietly to Peter. "You've seen my lawyer..."

Peter's eyes were so warm, smooth brown, and it seemed to Jason that, whoever Peter really was, he was reluctant to leave.

Glass shattered at the back of the house and Harvey's fancy security alarm went off.

Harvey shouted, "Garage!" and grabbed Blue's hand and dragged her out of the kitchen.

Jason wrapped a hand around Peter's wrist and went to run, too, and a bullet whistled somewhere nearby and thudded into the plaster of a wall.

Peter dove for cover beside the dishwasher, pulling his phone out of his pocket and flicking it open.

"Your raid?" Jason asked, pulling kitchen drawers open, hunting for decent knives.

"Not us," Peter said simply, "and I'm not armed."

"Fuck," Jason said, then Harvey reappeared from the laundry and slid two weapons across the floor toward them. God bless Harvey and his gun safe.

"Shots fired," Peter shouted into his phone. "Intruder in house. TRS."

Jason took the sawed-off Remington and handed the Glock to Peter, on the grounds that it was a standard issue police weapon so he was going to be more familiar with it. A Browning and clips for both the pistols clattered across the floor, too.

Beside him, Peter flicked the safety off the Glock and grabbed the spare clip.

Jason strained to hear, listening to footsteps elsewhere in the house, voices from the TV in the entertainment room, and Peter said, "Where the fuck are you?" into the phone.

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There was a crackle of static over the phone and Ryan could hear the police radio in Stretchyarse's car, so he dropped the phone and slipped the spare clip for the Glock into his jeans.

He crawled forward along the kitchen floor and peered around the edge of the cupboard, down the hall.

There was a person in jeans and hoodie, carrying a sawed-off shotgun, running down the hall away from Ryan. Sawed-off shotguns were messy and there were civilians in the house, so Ryan let off two shots.

The gunman went down, screaming his head off, and a shotgun blast hit the ceiling of the hall, showering plaster down.

"What's your name?" Jason said, behind Ryan.



“Ryan Hadley.”

“Nice to meet you, Ryan,” Jason said.

They waited and there were footsteps and a rapid spatter of shots as automatic weapon fire rattled the back of the house.

“Fucking hell,” Ryan muttered. “Has Harvey got an automatic weapon?”

“No,” Jason said. “Only semis and shotguns.”

“Stay here,” Ryan said. “Talk to my phone.”

If there was someone here with an automatic weapon, Ryan had to take them out right now, before this turned into a massacre.

He ducked low, ignoring the complaints from his lower back, and crouch-ran through the laundry.

There was a door opening onto a flight of steps downward, presumably to the garage, and Ryan hoped that Blue was safe down there. Someone with her past could hopefully look after herself.

He got down low and peered around the corner into the games room. Pool table in the middle, shattered sliding glass doors out to a swimming pool, two other internal doors opening off the games room.

He held his breath and caught the sound of someone else breathing in the room. Behind the bar, pool table between them and Ryan. He couldn't shoot, not without being sure who it was, but people with automatic weapons didn't hide behind bars, they ran around like lunatics, so Ryan took the chance and dashed through the games room, down low still.

This was insane.

He wanted a fucking bonus for this.

First door opened onto the entertainment room, plasma screen TV showing Bert Newton five times larger than life, expensive electronic gear. Empty.

Second door led through some kind of exercise room, body sprawled on the floor, sawed-off shotgun, blood seeping into the carpet. Harvey.

When he peered into the hall, the person Ryan had shot before had crawled off somewhere, blood smeared across the tiles.

The snub nose, silencer and sight of an MP5 were visible around the door frame, lined up to cover the front door. Ryan could hear a helicopter in the distance.

His memory told him there was a second entrance to the white room, off to the side, so he doubled back on himself and just plain ran through the house; exercise room, games room, small hall, laundry, kitchen—no Jason in sight, hopefully he'd gone to the basement—through the kitchen to the dining room.

The person in the white room was wearing a balaclava and they'd changed position and were covering the plate glass windows. Ryan could see figures scurrying around the garden through the glass: not TRS, this was his own squad. No helmets, only flak jackets; they couldn't go up against an MP5.

There was the sound of a battering ram pounding into the front door: metal on metal, and the gunman braced himself and opened fire at the window, exploding the plate glass with a couple of seconds of fire.

The MP5 didn't have much recoil, but the person wasn't using the shoulder stock and Ryan just held the trigger down on his Glock, hoping like crazy that the gunman wouldn't have enough control to swing the MP5 around quickly.

There was blinding pain in Ryan's shoulder and he pitched forward, hanging desperately on to the Glock, tumbling against a sideboard. It took an agonising moment to realise there had been the muffled bang of a shotgun firing behind him.

There was the unmistakeable sound of the pump action of a shotgun and someone was moaning and Ryan was pretty sure it wasn't him because his teeth were clenched shut as tightly as he could get them.

He curled up as small as he could, trying to edge further under the sideboard, and his arm wouldn't fucking work and he didn't have his phone with him, and it hurt worse than he'd imagined anything could...

Single pistol shot and then there were hands pulling him gently back out from the sideboard, rolling him over and Jason was kissing his face and talking into his phone.

"... been shot... don't know... quickly..."

Ryan found that he could talk, if he unclenched his jaws. "Jason," he said. Talking was good; if he'd been shot in the lungs there'd be blood in his mouth when he talked and there wasn't.

"Shh," Jason said, and he knelt beside Ryan, phone still against his ear. "Someone called Stretchyarse says to shut up, there's an ambulance on the way."

Ryan wanted to hold Jason's hand, but one arm wouldn't work and the other hand was locked around the Glock and he couldn't make himself let go of it.

Unconsciousness looked appealing from where Ryan was; it would stop the horrible grinding noises that his shoulder was making every time he moved or breathed and he was pretty sure it would make the pain stop, too. But on the other hand, Jason wouldn't be there, and he might never see him again, not with the way this had worked out...

“Drop your weapon!” someone shouted, and Ryan winced as Jason slid his arm out from underneath Ryan’s neck and lifted his hands in the air.

“Weapon’s beside me,” Jason said. “Don’t think Ryan can make himself let go of his, though.”

“Gnghh,” Ryan said. “DC Hadley. Do me a favour and don’t shoot me.”

The helmeted and armoured TRS officer squatted down beside Ryan’s head and picked up the pistol Jason had dropped. “Good to meet you, Hadley. Your DS is going crazy with worry outside. There’s an ambulance on the way.” Strong fingers pried the Glock out of his hand and Jason took hold of it instead.

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Jason stayed right beside Ryan while the TRS cleared the house out, he didn’t move away until the paramedics put the green tootie thing into Ryan’s mouth and glorious numbness flooded Ryan’s body.

He floated through the ride to the hospital, Longbottom white-faced and unhappy in the back of the ambulance with him, and Ryan was vaguely aware that he was babbling under the influence of the amazing drugs the paramedics were giving him.

He just hoped the sirens and crackle of the radio drowned out whatever embarrassing revelations he was making. He was absolutely sure, just before he finally blacked out, that he was asking for Jason.

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The first two ambulances had gone, taking Ryan and one of the gunmen away to hospital. Jason sat on the front steps of Harvey’s house, a blanket from an ambulance around his shoulders, and tried to talk to the young police officer who was taking his preliminary statement.

Blue was sitting in a police car in the driveway, sobbing hysterically, with a female police officer and a paramedic giving her oxygen. It was a pity about the TRS officer she had shot, but the guy didn’t seem too upset. Probably because none of the shotgun blast had got through his armour. Jason was kind of proud of her, it took courage and a certain strength of character to let go with a shotgun directly into the chest of an armed man.

That was indirectly Jason’s fault: it had been him that had run down the stairs to the garage and given Blue the shotgun, but he hadn’t been able to bear the thought of her being unarmed down there, just waiting to be murdered.

But, fuck, Harvey had never stood a chance, not against the machine gun.

“How’s Ryan?” he asked the police officer; Tracey, that was her name.

“We’ve not heard anything yet,” she said for what must have been the third time. Jason made an effort to remember not to ask her again.

“After you came back from giving the shotgun to Mrs. Cooper in the garage, what happened?” Tracey asked.

“There was automatic weapon fire from the front room,” Jason said, swallowing and trying to make himself concentrate. “I ran toward it and there was a man in jeans and hoodie in the kitchen, with a shotgun. He shot someone...”

Jason pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, and the noise from a news helicopter was loud. Tracey put her arm around his shoulders and hugged him.

“That was the man who shot Ryan?” she asked, raising her voice over the noise of the chopper.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “So I shot him. I didn’t want to kill him, but he was reloading his shotgun, standing over Ryan.” He dropped his hands and looked at her sideways. “This isn’t my world,” he said. “I don’t shoot people.”

“The gunman was alive when they put him in the ambulance,” Tracey said reassuringly. “And I can’t imagine you’ll be charged for that shot. The DPP tends to look kindly on people who are protecting police officers.”

Jason nodded and rested his head on her shoulder. He should go to Blue, but he just didn’t think he could at that moment. Thank God, Sharon and the kids were safe.

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If it wasn’t exactly the same interview room as before, Jason couldn’t tell. He had a different lawyer, though. His own lawyer had decided that he’d had far too rough a night and day to sit through yet another police interview session.

Nobody had offered Jason that option, so here he was again. They had loaned him clothes and let him shower Ryan’s blood off himself. The food had been bad, the coffee undrinkable, and Jason didn’t lift his head off the table when someone came in the room.

The officer interviewing him said, “For the benefit of the tape, Inspector Cassidy has just entered the room.”

## Chapter 5

A brief period of amnesia would have been a good thing, but Ryan didn't even get that: he opened his eyes to the sensation of someone hacking at his shoulder with an ice pick and the sight of Stretchyarse leaning over him, haloed by fluorescent lights, worry screwing up his face.

"Fuck."

"Welcome back, Ryan," Stretchyarse said. A nurse appeared, wearing a shower cap and purple floral pyjamas, and she held a straw against Ryan's mouth.

The water was cold and sweet and might just have been the best thing Ryan had ever tasted.

When she'd gone again, Ryan said, "Sarge, gotta tell you something..."

"Don't try and talk, Ryan," Stretchyarse said. "Go back to sleep, I'll be here when you wake up and your mum's on her way too."

"Did something wrong," Ryan said, and his throat was sore. All of him was sore. "Last night, I was with Jason. He wasn't the shooter."

Stretchyarse slowly said, "You alibiing him for the Greentown shooting?"

Nodding was going to hurt too much, what with the ice pick and all, so Ryan said, "Yeah."

"Did he recruit you?" Longbottom asked. "How bad is it?"

"No," Ryan said. "Was personal, no leak." He desperately wanted Jason to hold him, just for a moment. But he wasn't going to get to see Jason again, not after all that had happened.

"Personal?" Longbottom said. "Ah, makes sense now." He sighed and Ryan could almost hear the cogs whirring. So much for Ryan's career as a detective. "He probably saved your life," Longbottom said. "Taking out your shooter."

"What happened?" Ryan asked.

"We're still trying to put it all together," Longbottom said. "Matching bullets to guns. Seems that you killed the person with the MP5, took a shotgun blast to your shoulder from behind, then Jason shot that person in turn. Not fatally, your shooter's in surgery at the moment, with two gunshot wounds. We're looking forward to interviewing him."

"Think I shot him, too," Ryan said. "Anyone else hurt?"

"Cooper's dead," Longbottom said. "And we found two unharmed but shit-scared lawyers and a mad woman with a shotgun hiding around the house."

Ryan closed his eyes, too tired to keep them open. "Gonna fire me?"

"That's up to Cassidy," Stretchyarse said. "Not my call."

"My mum?" Ryan asked sleepily, suddenly remembering something Stretchyarse had said.

"Yeah, I called your mum, woke her up. She'll be on a plane by now, on her way here. Now, go back to sleep."

Ryan closed his eyes and wished the person with the ice pick would stop with the whole shoulder thing. Someone with a strong hand took hold of his hand, the one that wasn't being ice-picked, and held it carefully. Maybe it was Jason, maybe he was there with Ryan again, just like before.

He must be crying, his face was wet.

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It was a relief that the lawyer was painstakingly writing out the final version of Jason's statement, Jason's hand had almost cramped from the effort of writing the first draft.

The detectives that had been interviewing him looked as relieved as Jason felt that this was nearly over. Presumably they'd been up all night too.

The door to the interview room opened and a frazzled looking bloke in a rumpled suit came in.

One of the detectives said, "For the benefit of the tape, DS Longbottom has entered the room."

"Scuse me," DS Longbottom said, and Jason's tired mind made the connections: Longbottom, Stretchyarse. This was the man he had talked to on Ryan's phone.

"I'd like the chance to speak to Mr. Cooper in a less formal setting," he said, and Jason's lawyer's head shot up.

"My client has given a full statement already," he said.

"No," Jason said. "It's all right."

"I'm coming with you," the lawyer said determinedly, and Jason shrugged.

"OK."

DS Longbottom led them to an empty office and sat down behind the desk, waving at the chairs. Jason sat down, but his lawyer stayed standing, arms crossed disapprovingly.

“Don’t say anything, Jason,” he warned.

“I’ve just got back from the hospital,” Longbottom said. “Ryan’s out of surgery and is awake.”

“How is he?” Jason asked, knowing he sounded desperate. “Is he OK?”

“He was in a fair bit of pain,” Longbottom said. “Now he’s having a little morphine holiday. Before he went away, he proved to be full of useful information. He’s alibied you for the Greentown shooting.”

The lawyer said, “Excellent. I assume that Mr. Cooper is no longer a person of interest in that inquiry?”

“He’s cleared for that one,” Longbottom said, then he leaned forward across the desk, big hands spread over the wood veneer. “What I’d really like to know now is what the fuck happened between Mr. Cooper and my officer.”

Jason rubbed his hands together nervously and his lawyer said, “Don’t answer that.”

“What do you want to know?” he asked Longbottom.

“When did you discover he was an undercover law enforcement officer?” Longbottom asked.

“At the Majestic, first time I saw him,” Jason said, and Longbottom’s eyebrows shot up. “Babes like him don’t just appear out of nowhere,” Jason explained. “Babes like him that hit on me don’t exist. If you’d sent in an ugly bastard, I might not have spotted him so quickly.”

“So you played him?” Longbottom asked.

Jason nodded. “I told Harve, we decided that I should try and flip him.”

The lawyer said, “Jason,” warning in his voice.

“What?” Jason said, looking at his lawyer. “Harvey’s dead, it’s not like they can charge him with anything. And I doubt that conspiring to seduce an undercover officer is an offence anyway.”

Longbottom looked thoroughly unhappy. “Did he flip?”

“You know what?” Jason said, standing up. “We didn’t actually talk about anything criminal. We mostly just made out. Then he turned up at my place last night and we fucked. It wasn’t until the nice detectives came knocking on my door that I even knew there’d been a shooting. I didn’t name him as an alibi because I didn’t want to embarrass him.”

Longbottom said, “Sit down, Mr. Cooper. This is a completely off-the-record discussion, I’m just trying to piece together what really happened.”

Jason sat down again and Longbottom said, "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, completely anonymously."

Jason glanced at his lawyer, who said, "Go ahead."

"Vincenzo Fabrioza was murdered by the Dragon Boys two nights ago. I don't know where his body has been taken, but Harvey told me he had cleaned up. That's what started this run of murders. I'd intended giving Ryan this information," Jason said.

"We'll find Fabrioza," Longbottom said. "This explains why he dropped off our surveillance suddenly. We assumed he'd left the country on a false passport."

The lawyer cleared his throat and said, "Now my client has demonstrated good faith by giving you this information, he has a request."

"I want to see Ryan," Jason said.

Longbottom shook his head and said, "Not a chance. You're not leaving here until we've finished searching your house, and when you do it's with a protective detail, just to make sure there aren't any more deaths. And you most definitely are not going anywhere near DC Hadley."

Jason crossed his arms and sat silently.

Time passed, there were faint noises from the offices around them; phones ringing, voices, someone laughing. A door opened and closed, someone knocked on the door of the office they were in, then went away when there was no answer.

Longbottom's face was impassive, Jason would hate to play poker against him, but Jason had been raised by Blue and knew about stubborn.

"I'm only agreeing to this because Ryan asked for you in the ambulance," Longbottom finally said. "You go in cuffed and with me as an escort, after you've signed off on your statement."

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It was late afternoon, sun slanting through the windows down the hospital corridor, and Jason felt painfully conspicuous being led along with his hands cuffed. At least Longbottom hadn't put leg shackles on him, too.

They skirted a nurse pushing a trolley and stopped outside the door to a private room, where an obviously bored uniform cop was suddenly trying to look purposeful for Longbottom's benefit.

Longbottom nodded at the cop, opened the door, and Jason stepped in.



Ryan was asleep, drip suspended beside the bed, tubes snaking out from under the covers, and Jason sat down beside the bed as quietly as he could and took Ryan's uninjured hand in his own.

Ryan looked pale, eyelashes dark against fragile skin, breath shallow, eyelids moving in his sleep.

Maybe it was just grief at Harvey's death, but it seemed to Jason that he couldn't bear to lose another person from his life, not in the same day.

Longbottom sat down, too, in the corner of the room, his eyes politely reading the notices on the wall, and Jason rubbed the pad of his thumb over the back of Ryan's hand.

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Last time he'd woken up amnesia-free, fully aware; no period of relief, straight into the pain.

This time was better. The ice pick seemed to be blunter, the lights not quite so bright through his eyelids, but Ryan delayed opening his eyes anyway, just in case Stretchyarse was leaning over him again. He'd take a moment, pretend to himself again it wasn't a detective sergeant holding his hand.

It was the snore that made him open his eyes, because he was pretty sure it wasn't him snoring.

Stretchyarse was there, slumped in an armchair in the corner of the room, eyes shut, mouth open, and he gave another gentle snore.

Which meant it must be Ryan's mum holding his hand.

It hurt to lift his head from the pillow, the kind of tight, prickly hurt that meant sutures, but it was worth every sharp stab to find Jason sitting on a chair beside the bed, slumped forward, face against the bedspread, two hands firmly wrapped around Ryan's hand.

"Hey," Ryan said quietly. "Good to see you."

Jason lifted his head slowly; he obviously had been weeping, not asleep, eyes red and swollen, but he managed a weak smile at Ryan.

"Shh," he whispered. "Don't wake Stretchyarse."

The sleeping man in the corner grunted in his sleep and gave another snore.

Jason's hand stroked the back of Ryan's gently and Ryan heard the clink of metal, felt the hard edge of the cuffs.

"Are you under arrest?" Ryan whispered.

“Not so far,” Jason said. “But I think I will be soon. How do you feel?”

“Shoulder hurts. I’m so sorry about Harvey. I didn’t get there in time to stop it,” Ryan said.

Jason nodded. “I know he wasn’t a good man, that he was greedy and vicious, but he was my brother.”

Jason lifted Ryan’s hand to his mouth and kissed his knuckles and Ryan said, “I think you saved my life.”

Stretchyarse snuffled and moved his weight, making his chair creak, and Jason whispered, “I know this started badly, with lies, but don’t disappear on me, please.”

Ryan spread his fingers across Jason’s cheek, through stubble long enough now to count as a beard, and said, “I wasn’t lying all the time. I wasn’t lying at all last night.”

When Jason turned his head and pressed his lips against Ryan’s palm, Ryan couldn’t tell if it was the morphine and the pain, or delayed shock, but a wave of warmth washed through him.

Stretchyarse cleared his throat in the corner and said, “Good to see you’re awake, Hadley, but this is not a conjugal visit.”

A nurse opened the door and looked inside. “Sorry, gentleman, I need to do my job now. Could you both step outside?”

Stretchyarse stood up and yawned. “I’m going to take the visitor away, then I’m going home to sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow, Ryan.”

It took a moment or two, but Ryan managed to tear his eyes away from Jason’s face to glance at Stretchyarse. “Thank you,” he said.

Stretchyarse looked glum, but he nodded back, then Jason stood up and Ryan’s hand slid off his face.

“Goodbye,” Jason said, then he followed Stretchyarse out of the door. The nurse came in and bustled around Ryan, crisp efficiency against the raw part of his mind.

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They must have turned the morphine off or something, because Ryan had been staring at the ceiling for hours, counting the dots in the panels as pain washed over him; curling at the top of the wave, then breaking in a foam that scoured his entire body.

People, nurses and doctors, tried to talk to him while they peered at his shoulder and waved his arm around, but he found he had nothing to say to them.

Somewhere during the equation which would tell him not only how many dots were on the ceiling of his room, but on the entire ward, hands that had a lifetime of familiarity smoothed his brow and his mum kissed his cheek.

"I know you're in there, Ryan," she said, and he opened his eyes and felt himself smiling despite the pain.

"Mum," he said, and they hugged as well as Ryan could manage without moving.

"You look like shit," Sarah said, straightening his bedding and kissing his forehead.

"Feel it, too," Ryan said.

"Stop wallowing," she said, sitting on the edge of his bed and hanging onto his hand tightly. "Now, tell me what happened. All I know is what your sergeant told me; you took a shotgun blast to the shoulder during an undercover operation. He wouldn't tell me what you were doing, but the front pages of the papers are covered in some story about underworld killings, so I guess you were involved."

"Not sure what I can tell you," Ryan said. "I've not given a statement yet and there's bound to be charges from the incident, too."

Sarah pursed her lips at Ryan. "Well? I'm not going to tell anyone anything."

His mother; nature's irresistible force.

"I was undercover," Ryan said. "Supposedly infiltrating a crime ring when another group decided that wiping out the opposition was a good idea. There were civilians in the house, so I had to act."

Sarah nodded and Ryan continued before he had a chance to change his mind. "Mum? There's something I need to tell you."

Sarah's face creased with worry and she said, "Something about your work? About the shooting?"

Ryan shook his head and winced. "No, Mum. About me. I think I might be gay."

Sarah's face went from concerned to flabbergasted, with a detour through disbelief, and Ryan regretted saying anything at all.

"Oh," she said. "Um, I'm not sure what to say. You only broke up with that girl Annie a few weeks ago. Was it a very bad break up? I didn't know you were that attached to her."

There was never a nurse bearing a morphine injection when you needed one.

"It's not because of Annie," Ryan said, feeling himself going bright red. "I, um, met someone special. A man."

“Met someone?” Sarah said, and Ryan felt like he was twelve years old again. “Just because you met a man and liked him doesn’t mean you’re gay, darling. Lots of men have close male friends.”

“Do they sleep with them?” Ryan asked, and immediately regretted it. He really tried not to discuss his sex life with his mother.

“You slept with him?” Sarah asked.

This was going downhill fast.

“Um, yeah,” Ryan said, wondering if he could fake passing out. “It, um, happened.”

“He seduced you into the homosexual lifestyle?” Sarah asked, and Ryan would have laughed, it sounded so ridiculous, but laughing would be excruciating on his shoulder.

“I don’t think he’s organised enough to have something as structured as a lifestyle,” Ryan said. “And he didn’t really seduce me, it was what I wanted, too.”

It had been a long time since Ryan had seen his mother look as disapproving as she did right then, but if he could deal with a homicidal maniac with an MP5, he could deal with his mother.

“Hmm,” she said. “I think you should talk to someone about this. A therapist, or your nice sergeant. Someone older and more experienced in the ways of the world. And perhaps you shouldn’t say anything to anyone about it, it might just be because of the shock you’ve been through.”

Ryan seriously considered arguing with his mother at that point, a real solid shouting match, like they’d had when he was a teenager, but there was something about being in pain and confined to bed that put him off the idea.

He settled for saying, “If I am gay and if things work out with a man, you’ll get used to it, right?”

Sarah sighed, then smiled. “Of course. I’m just jetlagged and all I can think of is that if you’d decided you were gay in secondary school, then we wouldn’t have had to go through the bit where you got that poor girl pregnant.”

“Please, Mum,” Ryan said. “Don’t.”

That was a low blow and it meant his mother had won the round, but if she was going to actually accept he was gay, it might be worth it. Now Ryan had to try and get his head around the idea himself. There was a world of difference between the way Jason touched him, what it had been like to suck Jason’s cock in the dark, and saying the words ‘I’m gay.’

Sarah squeezed his hand and said, “I’m sorry, sweetheart. It’s a bit of a shock, that’s all. I don’t want to argue with you, not now.” She smiled and it seemed that the worst

of it was over. "Sam sends her love. She says she can fly over, if you need her to be here. All you have to do is ask and she'll take leave from work."

"That's sweet of her," Ryan said. "I know how busy she is. Tell her that I'm all right and if she wants to come over in a couple of weeks' time, while I'm still off work, it would be great to see her. Promise her I'll introduce to every single police officer I know."

Sarah chuckled and Ryan began to think that it would all work out eventually.

"Close your eyes," Sarah said gently. "I'll be here when you wake up."

Ryan closed his eyes. So that was what it felt like to come out? He'd covered a lot of ground in forty-eight hours.

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Watching Stretchyarse shoo his mum out of the room was amusing. The bit where Inspector Cassidy followed him in wasn't so good.

Cassidy sat down on the chair beside Ryan's bed, looking glum, and said, "DS Longbottom and I have had a long and confidential chat and we went over the statement you made today."

"Yes, sir," Ryan said, swallowing hard and trying not to cringe.

"Cooper has been charged with an assortment of offences and his lawyer has posted his bail," Stretchyarse said from the armchair in the corner. "We've raided the Dragon Boys and arrested everyone we could get our hands on. And we've just been to a bedside hearing here for the surviving shooter."

"What was Jason charged with, sir?" Ryan asked Inspector Cassidy.

"Firearms offences," Cassidy said. "After DS Longbottom told me what had happened between the pair of you, we should have added conspiracy charges, too. But, if we do that, there's no way of keeping this quiet, and quite honestly we'd like to not have any sort of Royal Commission into the force right now."

"Yes, sir," Ryan said.

"However, you can't possibly stay with the force," Cassidy said. "DS Longbottom and I agreed that we would offer you a medical discharge, for the shoulder injury. It seems better for everyone; you get a pension, we get rid of you, and the question of what to do with you goes away."

"DC Hadley, I'm officially relieving you of your position as a sworn police officer," Inspector Cassidy said, standing up. "We'd appreciate if you didn't discuss this with anyone else, since the events leading to this decision happened while you were bound by the confidentiality provisions of your employment contract."

When Inspector Cassidy had left the room, Ryan let his head fall back against the pillow and closed his eyes.

“Sorry about this, Ryan,” DS Longbottom said. “You were a competent officer and I feel partly responsible, for putting you in undercover when you repeatedly asked me not to.”

Ryan opened his eyes reluctantly and Stretchyarse was standing beside his bed, hand held out for Ryan to shake.

“If you need a reference when you apply for a job, feel free to use me,” Stretchyarse said, as Ryan shook his hand.

“Thank you,” Ryan said, then DS Longbottom was gone, too, and Ryan closed his eyes, determined not to open them again for a long time.

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“They’ve made a mess,” the lawyer said, peering over Jason’s shoulder as he unlocked his front door and swung it open.

Blackie was leaping up at the pair of them, wildly excited to be home and with Jason again. She smelled of floral shampoo and flea wash, so the stay at the vet must have been exciting for everyone involved.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Jason said, bending down to pick up the canvases that were cluttering up the hall. “This is pretty much what it looked like before. Do you want a drink, mate?”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” the lawyer said. “It’s been a long day and I have a family to go home to.”

They shook hands and the lawyer left Jason to his exuberant dog and trashed house, complete with a police officer sitting in a marked car outside.

Once Jason had been released on bail, the lawyer had taken him to the house where Blue and Sharon and the kids were staying, under police protection, and the afternoon had been spent with them and the lawyers.

It looked like enough of Harvey’s estate would be left over for Sharon and Blue to be looked after and that was a weight off Jason’s mind.

There probably wouldn’t be anything for him, but that wasn’t an issue.

He began picking up the mess in the kitchen and working his way through a bottle of whiskey, while Blackie ran in and out of the back screen door over and over, exultant in her new found freedom.

Jason understood her excitement, he’d come damned close to being locked up in a cage himself.

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He was drunk, just plain drunk, when he picked up the sheets from his bedroom floor where the cops had dumped them, then hauled the mattress back on the base and began to make it.

Fuck, he really needed clean sheets, these were the ones he and Peter—no, Ryan—had fucked on and they smelled so strongly of sex that Jason sat down on the bare mattress, sheets bundled up in his arms, and wept.

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He woke sometime before dawn, sprawled across the mattress, sheets draped over him and Blackie, feeling like shit. That'd serve him right for drinking that much.

Blackie followed him to the bathroom and stuck her head in the toilet and drank the water loudly, so Jason unzipped himself and pissed in the shower recess instead. "Damned dog," he said affectionately. "Just you and me now, kiddo."

He put the kettle on, found a cleanish coffee cup, and gave Blackie another dinner to celebrate their mutual freedom. "Shall I go offer the nice police officer a cup of coffee?" Jason asked Blackie, as she wolfed down her tin of dog food.

She looked up hopefully, then went back to her dinner. Or was it breakfast?

"Perhaps not," Jason said. "Look at the trouble the last cop caused."

It was five in the morning, a good time to go surfing, but the cops hadn't returned his impounded ute yet, so that wasn't really an option. Instead he took out his oil paints and found a canvas to paint on the wrong side of amongst the mess in the studio. He'd play Leonard Cohen, loudly, and paint.

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It was after ten when Jason shook his cramped hand and stuffed the brush into the jar of turps and sat down on the gritty boards to survey the painting. He'd thought he'd paint about Harvey, about the pointlessness of his death, and his life to some extent, but these colours kept sneaking in; greens and yellows, like sunshine on the waves and the feel of the ocean swell.

Jason found his phone, it was in the envelope of belongings that the cops had returned to him. The battery was flat, of course, but there was a charger somewhere on the bedroom floor... He wound up carrying all his clothes out to the laundry, piling them beside the washer, and putting the first load on, just to clear his floor enough to find the charger.

If he was lucky, the cops would have been slack bastards and not locked down the phone line to Ryan's room.

The hospital reception put him through as soon as he asked, and a woman's voice said, "Hello? Ryan's room," in a British accent.

Jason could hear Ryan's voice in the background saying, 'Give it to me, Mum.'

"May I please speak with Ryan?" Jason said.

The phone went muffled and Jason could hear her saying, 'It's someone with an American accent, dear.'

"Hello?" Ryan's voice said. "Jason?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "How are you? How's the shoulder?"

"Fucking hurts," Ryan said. "Hang on."

The sound was muffled, but Jason could make out Ryan saying, 'Mum, can I have some privacy?'

"Sorry 'bout that," Ryan said. "My mum's here from the UK. I came out to her yesterday and she's a bit freaky about everything."

"You came out to her?" Jason asked, taken aback.

"Yeah. Big day, yesterday. Got fired too."

"Oh God," Jason said. "I feel deeply responsible on both counts. Guess I'm not your favourite person right now, right?"

There was silence and Ryan said, "You must be going through hell."

"Yesterday sucked in so many ways," Jason said. "Fuck, Ryan. I just want to get in a car with you and Blackie and a couple of boards and drive for as long as we can."

There was a contented woof when Jason said Blackie's name and she squirmed out from under his bed, something dangling from her mouth, then jumped onto the bed and began to chew.

"Your dog is a pain," Ryan said.

"She is," Jason agreed, poking at the object in Blackie's mouth with his toe, trying to work out what it was. "She seems to have hijacked an Elmo sock from somewhere and is chewing it at the moment."

"They're mine," Ryan said, chuckling. "I liked those socks."

"I don't think you'd want them back now," Jason said. "So, come with me? When you get out of hospital, after Harvey's funeral?"

"Yeah," Ryan said. "Hang on, there's something happening here..."



Jason could hear the muffled sounds of raised voices through the phone, then Ryan said, “Bugger, it’s Blue.”

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A black-clad Blue pushed past Ryan’s bewildered mother into the hospital room and dropped a huge bunch of flowers on the bed.

“Darling,” she shrieked, leaning forward to smack two magenta kisses on his cheeks.

Sarah’s eyebrows had hit her hairline when Ryan glanced over Blue’s shoulder at her.

“Peter, darling,” Blue said, then grinned at him, creasing surgically tightened cheeks. “No, Ryan. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Ryan said. “Blue, this is my mother, Sarah. Mum, this is Blue Cooper.”

“How do you do?” Sarah asked, holding her hand out, her voice dripping disapproval.

“Ryan’s mother!” Blue squealed. “Then we’re nearly family, darling.”

She hugged Sarah and Sarah glared at Ryan over Blue’s bright red coif.

Ryan grinned back at his mother, enjoying himself far too much to do anything about rescuing her from Blue’s air kisses.

“We are?” Sarah said icily. “I didn’t know.”

“Well, since our boys have got together...” Blue said, turning her attention back to Ryan. “And of course you were so brave, protecting us all.” She kicked off her shoes, crippling high heels that presumably cost a fortune, and sat on the edge of Ryan’s bed. “Now, tell me all about you and Jason.”

Sarah looked apoplectic, much to Ryan’s delight. He loved Blue right at that moment. “He just rang me,” Ryan said, and Blue clapped and jiggled on the bed, sending bolts of pain through Ryan’s shoulder.

She must have caught his wince because she froze. “Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry. I’ll sit still, no matter how exciting this is. So?!”

“I’m really sorry for how things worked out, Blue,” Ryan said. “That Harvey died. I tried.”

Blue squeezed his hand and nodded. “I know you tried, love. Now, I’ve only got one son left and if you make him happy, then I’ll be delighted for him.”

“Our sons are involved?” Sarah asked Blue. “Ryan? Is this what this is about?”

Blue rolled her eyes dramatically and said, “Of course. You should see the look on my Jason’s face when he talks about your son. He’s got it bad, honey.” She squeezed Ryan’s hand.

Ryan could imagine any number of things that his mother might say at this point, starting with ‘I’m sure you’re mistaken,’ moving on to, ‘My son’s not gay,’ and winding up with, ‘Get out!’

She didn’t say anything, just pursed her lips and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Shucks,” Blue said, reaching out to punch Sarah’s arm with a hand dripping diamonds and rubies. “You gotta be happy, girl. If you’d lost your boy the same time I lost mine, you’d have a reason to look sour. But you didn’t, and my Jason will be good to Ryan.”

Sarah made a strange sound, like a kettle with a broken whistle, and if it weren’t for the repercussions later, Ryan would be convulsed with laughter. “Thank you, Blue,” he said. “For coming to see me when you’re mourning Harvey.”

Blue sighed theatrically. “Oh honey, when the police finally let Jason go yesterday, he came straight to us and told us what you’d done, how wonderful you’d been. You still look like someone just shot you, so I’ll leave you to rest. I just wanted to thank you in person.”

“You’re welcome, Blue,” Ryan said, and Blue kissed him again, on both cheeks.

“Take care, sweetie,” she said, and she was gone, high heels in one hand, crocodile skin clutch purse in the other, wagging long, acrylic nails at Sarah as she left, blowing her a kiss.

Sarah sat down heavily on the chair beside the bed. “Who was she? Who’s Jason?” she asked. “What exactly has been going on in your life?”

Ryan rested his head back against his propped up pillows and tried to arrange his back so the pain was minimised. “It’s kind of complicated, Mum,” he said. “Some of it’s confidential. Jason is the man I’ve been, um, involved with. Blue is his mother. I was shot during an, um, incident at Jason’s brother, Harvey’s, house. Harvey died.”

“Oh,” Sarah said. “Blue is, well, exuberant. Is Jason like that?”

Sarah’s fingers curled around Ryan’s hand.

“No,” Ryan said, cringing internally at the idea. “He’s a painter, does weird paintings that are all colour and no story, if you know what I mean. He lives in a dump of a house, with a demented dog, and does—or at least did—odd jobs for his brother. I don’t know what he’ll do for a living now, probably much the same.”

Sarah nodded and Ryan found himself smiling as he talked. “I’m not sure you’ll like him, he’s not particularly polite, but he’s never been anything except kind to me. I’ve not ever felt quite this out of control with a woman and I don’t want it to stop.”

Sarah squeezed his hand. "I think I understand," she said, and Ryan guessed that she must do, from her own life. "It just seems like I should have known."

"How do you think I feel? I didn't know this about myself."

"You're smiling," Sarah said. "You could have been killed because of this man, but you smile about him."

"It was my job that almost got me killed," Ryan pointed out. "My former job."

"What do you think you'll do now?" Sarah asked, smiling back at Ryan. "Do you think you'll come back home? Or do something exciting here, like go to university?"

Ryan stared at Sarah, puzzled as always by his mother's inability to actually listen to what he said instead of reconstructing it inside her own head. "No, I'm not coming back to the UK. When I get out of hospital, before Jason's trial, we're going to take off together, just drive and surf. Well, maybe not surf for me, at least not until my shoulder blade has healed. We won't be able to leave the state and he'll have to check into a police station every day as part of his bail conditions, but I just want to get away from here."

Ryan's voice was rising, he knew it, but his shoulder hurt and he hadn't actually asked Sarah to come to Australia and he was just plain fed up.

"You know what? Blue's right. You should just be happy I didn't get shot a second time, at close range, because you'd be planning my funeral right now."

His mum let go of his hand and stood up and Ryan found himself sitting bolt upright in bed, shoulder shrieking at him.

"I think I should go," Sarah said.

"And don't you dare reorganise my flat," Ryan yelled at her back, then he slumped back on the pillows, sweating from the pain and adrenaline. God, he'd needed that. Now he remembered exactly why staying in Australia had seemed like a good idea.

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The uniform cop that was supposed to be protecting Jason was obviously old mates with the cop that was on guard outside Ryan's room and Jason left the two of them being all blokey and pushed the door open.

Ryan was face down on his bed this time, with a nurse leaning over him, doing arcane and esoteric things to his back.

She looked up and smiled at Jason. "C'mon in," she said. "See if you can distract Ryan enough that he stays still."

She was wearing gloves, waving tongs or something in the air, cleaning Ryan's back, so Jason squatted down beside Ryan and smiled at the grimace on his face. "Hey," he said. "Stop squirming."

"Jason!" Ryan said, the grimace on his face turning into a grin. "What is the bitch doing to me? It feels like she's sticking kebab skewers in and wiggling them around."

Jason knelt up a bit more and peered at Ryan's back, where the nurse was picking bits of muck off the mangled flesh. "The nice nurse with the pointy things seems to be cleaning your back," Jason said. "And I wouldn't call her a bitch, she's got scissors and stuff there."

He knelt down again and Ryan said, "Seriously, what does it look like?"

"Like someone's taken to your back with a meat tenderiser," Jason said. "Then sewn you back up again with thick, black thread. I think your career as a topless model is over."

Ryan flinched and the nurse said, "Stop it. The longer it takes, the more bored I get."

Jason stroked Ryan's cheek, hoping to distract him. "Blue rang while I was on the way in here. She said your mum looked like she'd been sucking lemons."

Ryan shrugged his eyebrows. "Yeah, it didn't go well. Your mum is adorable, my mum is shell-shocked."

Jason chuckled and traced a finger across Ryan's cheek to push a curl behind his ear. "Oh yeah, Blue can be a bit much on first contact. She said you were adorable, too, so obviously you two have a mutual thing going." She'd also said that Jason should marry Ryan and give her lots of curly-haired grandchildren, but Jason thought he could leave that part out.

"Is she single?" Ryan asked, laughing too, making the nurse tut at him. "If things don't work out with you, I could ask her out."

"She's single," Jason said. "And you're a sick bastard. Besides," he said, leaning his face even closer to Ryan's, "I'm going to spoil you for women. You won't be able to go back to being straight."

"Jesus Christ," the nurse said. "Want me to leave the room for a moment?"

"No, you're right," Ryan said to the nurse, and Jason tracked the curve of his ear with a fingernail. "Not like I could do anything, is it?"

"Not with that hunk of a police officer outside of your door," the nurse said. "Nearly done here."

"He's a hunk?" Ryan asked.

“He is a hunk,” Jason said. “Not like my tame cop, who looks like a Chihuahua on stilts. He’s not a bad bloke; offered to drive me in here when I went and told him I was about to go catch a bus, so I can’t complain too much. And Blackie bit him.”

“She did?” Ryan said, and Jason dragged his finger back down Ryan’s chin, over stubble and smile.

“Yeah. She wants to hump you and bite everyone else. I have a dog with good taste.”

“I need to have a chat with her,” Ryan said, his eyes laughing at Jason. “While you’re not around. See if we can, ow, sort this out.”

“That didn’t hurt,” the nurse said, draping something over Ryan’s shoulder.

“Yes it fucking did,” Ryan said. “Take it easy there.”

“Nearly done,” she said. “You two go back to whatever you were doing. Just pretend I’m not here and I’ll take notes and make sure to tell all the other nurses about it. If you’re really lucky, I’ll document it in your file.”

“Fuck off,” Ryan said.

“So, tell me about your mum and my mum,” Jason grinned at Ryan. “And let the nice nurse do her job.”

“Not much to say,” Ryan said. “I’m just hoping that either my mum comes around soon, or pisses off back to England. I’m not interested in being lectured by her, not after being shot and coming within seconds of dying.”

“You know, if there wasn’t a nurse doing bad things to your back, I’d be tempted to snog you senseless now,” Jason said, conversationally.

The nurse groaned and Ryan said, “Think this might not be the time or the place.”

“Ice baths,” the nurse said. “I could document you for ice baths.”

Jason resisted the temptation to slip a finger into Ryan’s mouth and said, “She *is* a bitch. I see that now.”

Fuck, there was some serious chemistry happening with Ryan. Under the circumstances, with a nurse in the room fiddling with putting stuff on Ryan’s back, and two cops outside the door, lust should be the last thing on Jason’s mind. But there it was and desire flared brighter than the fluorescent light shining down on Ryan’s back.

Ryan licked his bottom lip and Jason suspected he wasn’t the only one caught in the moment.

“How long until you get out?” Jason asked, ignoring the way his cock stirred inside his jeans, at least for the moment.

“Five days or so,” Ryan said. “If I heal well. Have to take it easy for a few days after that, until the stitches come out. Right, Florence?”

“That’s right,” the nurse said. “No swinging from the chandeliers until your sutures are out.”

“Good thing you were shot in your shoulder,” Jason murmured. “Don’t think I could cope with waiting for two weeks.”

“All done,” the nurse said, and Jason looked up and watched her peel her sterile gloves off and dump them on the trolley beside her. “I’ll get out of here and you two can work out the mechanics of this. Ryan, want to roll over?”

“That’s my line,” Jason muttered, and he stood up and helped the nurse roll Ryan over onto his back.

Ryan gasped with pain as the nurse slid a sling over his shoulder and settled it over his arm and Jason said, “Ah, see what the nurse means. No chandeliers for a couple of weeks.”

“Trust me,” the nurse said, pulling the door open and pushing her trolley into the doorway to stop it closing again. “Wait until the sutures are out.”

“Fuck,” Ryan said under his breath, as the door swung shut again. “That was not good.”

Jason dragged a plastic chair over beside Ryan’s bed and sat down, then leaned forward and kissed Ryan’s forehead briefly. “So, you have to remain completely motionless?” he asked conversationally. “Absolutely still?”

“Yeah,” Ryan said, and Jason kissed his chin. “Think we can cope?”

“Sure we can,” Jason said. “And I’ll take your mind off the pain.”

Really, kissing Ryan was inevitable, even if he was propped up in a hospital bed, one arm strapped in place, smelling of alcohol, and not the sort that you drank.

“Oh God,” Ryan whispered. “Do that again.”

The door swung open again and Jason heard it and froze. Someone, some nurse no doubt, said, “Visiting hours are over, you have to come back at two.”

When Jason lifted his mouth reluctantly from Ryan’s, Ryan’s eyes were closed and his mouth pouted a little.

“I’ll be back,” Jason whispered. “With Constable Care, no doubt.”

## Chapter 6

The police car dropped Ryan at the entrance to the cemetery and he walked slowly from the gates to the chapel, the cop who was protecting him walking beside him. He felt stiff and sore already, just from the effort of showering and putting on the suit Sarah had brought him. Walking just plain hurt.

Luckily there were a large number of people making their way to the chapel, so Ryan's slow progress wasn't obvious and that was a relief.

His arm was in a contraption, immobilising it and his shoulder, under his suit jacket, but he still felt painfully conspicuous. He probably shouldn't be there at all, under the circumstances, but he was a private citizen now, there was no way the force could stop him from attending a funeral.

Jason and Blue and a woman Ryan knew from surveillance photos was Harvey's widow, Sharon, were all receiving the mourners outside the chapel. Jason was wearing a dark suit, a shirt and tie, with his hair pulled back, looking like some caricature of himself. Ryan's escort melted away discreetly as Ryan joined the queue of mourners at the chapel waiting to be greeted by the family.

"Ryan!" Jason said, smile spreading across his face for a moment. "I didn't think you'd be well enough to be here."

Jason kissed Ryan's cheek briefly, then they embraced, Ryan's undamaged arm around Jason's shoulders, Jason resting light fingers on Ryan's hip, avoiding his wounded shoulder.

"Look who's here, Blue," Jason said.

Blue was dressed in black, diamonds dripping from her hands and neck, and she said, "Ryan, darling. So kind of you to come."

She turned around and said, "Baz, get Ryan a seat, he's injured."

Baz was a towering mountain of a man, balding, with a beard down his chest, and he was wearing Death Head colours over his leathers.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and he led Ryan into the crowded chapel, past the line of police officers against the back wall.

"Just a moment," Ryan said, and he walked over to where Stretchyarse, Roscoe and Tracey were all standing.

It was kind of awkward, but Tracey kissed his cheek and Roscoe and Stretchyarse shook his hand and they all asked how he was.

Baz was standing patiently, waiting for Ryan, so he excused himself and let Baz lead him into the chapel, then evict an able-bodied person from his seat so Ryan could sit down.

“Thanks,” Ryan said, sitting down on the bench as carefully and slowly as he could.

“Not a problem, mate,” Baz said, and he took the elbow of an elderly lady and removed a young bloke from a seat for her.

Under different circumstance, Ryan would have been standing at the back of the chapel, too, taking the opportunity to firstly survey the organised crime players in the city all together in one place, and secondly make sure that nothing went bad at the funeral.

Instead, he was sitting on a bench, shoulder full of sutures and the occasional plate or pin, watching Blue and Sharon walk through the chapel to take their seats at the front, two children with them.

Silence fell over the chapel, then music began to play and Ryan pushed himself carefully to his feet along with the rest of the crowd as Harvey’s coffin was carried down the aisle by six men, Jason at the front on Ryan’s side.

Jason looked bleak, face drawn and pinched, and when the pallbearers had lowered the coffin onto the stand, Jason went to sit beside Blue; his face was wet.

As funerals went, it was short and simple, with a woman with an amazing voice singing a capella and no eulogy. Presumably there wasn’t much that could be said about someone like Harvey, at least not in public.

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When Ryan joined the stream of people filing into the reception area next door, Jason appeared beside him and took hold of his good elbow and guided him through the crowd and out of the doors, into the gardens.

“God, I just had to get out of there,” Jason said, fishing through his pockets for cigarettes and a lighter and lighting up, then offering one to Ryan.

“Didn’t know you smoked,” Ryan said, taking one, too.

“Or you,” Jason said. “Theoretically, I don’t.”

He took a drag, exhaled with a relieved sigh, then leaned forward and kissed Ryan.

It wasn’t a passionate kiss, just the brush of lips against lips, then Jason pulled back, but Ryan found his knees wobbling.

“Damn,” Jason said, sliding an arm around Ryan’s lower back and guiding him across to a concrete bench, then sitting beside him. “You’re in no shape to be here, are you?”

“Not really,” Ryan said. “But I must be getting better. I’m supposed to be out of hospital day after tomorrow.” He took another drag of his cigarette then stubbed it out on the bench. “I was wondering if, um, if I could come and stay with you?”



“My place is a mess, my dog is a lunatic,” Jason pointed out. “Don’t you want to be in your own place?”

“Mum’s there,” Ryan said, closing his eyes briefly and leaning back against the wall behind the bench. “Do not want to share a one bedroom flat with her.”

“Of course you can stay,” Jason said, and he took Ryan’s hand in his. “I’ll get someone to clean up, too.”

“She wants to meet you. I think this is progress,” Ryan said. “I figured we could go to a café. She’s so much less likely to be vile if she’s in public.”

“Unlike my mother, who never cares where she makes a scene,” Jason said, and he lifted Ryan’s hand to his mouth and kissed the fingers. “She’s probably making one right now.”

Jason was clean shaven, and freshly so, and Ryan’s fingers slid over the skin of his cheek. Then Jason leaned forward and kissed him. This was overwhelming, the way it felt when Jason kissed him, and Ryan kissed back, mouth opening so their tongues slid together. Fuck, he wanted this, wanted Jason, so desperately, wanted to crawl into Jason’s lap and kiss him until they were both dizzy, but this wasn’t the time or the place and Ryan probably couldn’t crawl, not without excruciating pain.

“Fuck,” Jason said in a low voice, as he lifted his mouth off Ryan’s. He hovered there, mouth inches from Ryan’s, and his eyes were the colour of the sea on a winter afternoon when the swell was rising and the wind was swinging to the west.

Ryan’s fingers found the line of Jason’s jaw and Jason murmured, “Is this what you really want?”

Ryan felt so raw at that moment, lacerated and bruised, and he was aware of the noise from the function room, not far away, and the distant thrum of a Harley. No way forward, no way back out of the implications of this moment. Was this what he wanted?

“Take me away with you, somewhere I can be a different person,” Ryan whispered.

“I can do that,” Jason murmured, and someone coughed politely.

There was another large man in leathers and the same distinctive Death Head colours, looking apologetic at the door to the function room and he said, “Sorry, mate, but Blue is asking for you.”

“I have to go,” Jason said, and he kissed Ryan again briefly, then stood up and walked past a bewildered looking Tracey who was standing in the doorway.

“Oh, fuck,” Ryan said under his breath, and Tracey blushed bright pink and disappeared back into the function room.

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When the ute came home from the cops, Jason couldn't believe how clean it was, carefully vacuumed out, with plastic bags full of the debris from the cab tossed into the back. Sure, it stunk of chemicals and there was grey fingerprint powder everywhere, but it had lost the whole wet dog stench.

Jason put fuel in it, tossed the bags of rubbish into the bin at the petrol station, and headed for the hospital.

He'd lost Constable Care, in any of his or her incarnations, since apparently the police had arrested everyone they could get their hands on and were happy to leave the rest of the crime community to sort its differences out unsupervised.

That suited Jason, too. It meant he could pick Ryan up from the hospital, spend a few days at his place while Ryan recuperated enough to be able to travel, then they were out of the city and away from all the crap that had happened.

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Ryan was sitting on his bed, wearing jeans and a T-shirt with his arm and shoulder in a harness contraption when Jason pushed open the door to his room.

What Jason hadn't expected was for there to be a middle-aged woman kneeling in front of Ryan, tying his shoelaces.

Ryan grinned at Jason and the woman stood up and looked at him, too.

"Mum, this is Jason. Jason, this is my mum, Sarah," Ryan said.

Sarah held out her hand for Jason to shake it and said, "How do you do?"

No welcome there, that was sure.

"Very well, thanks," Jason said. "How are you?"

"Glad to see Ryan getting better," she said with prim lips. "I've packed all of Ryan's belongings up for him. I really do think that I should be looking after him now, at his own flat."

"Mum," Ryan said, and Jason was surprised at the strength in his voice. "I'm going to Jason's. You're welcome to use my flat as long as you want, but I'm not going to be there."

"Hmmpf," she said. "Well, you obviously know what you want, so I'll leave you two alone now. Goodbye, Ryan." She kissed his cheek and nodded to Jason and stalked out.

Jason sat down on the bed beside Ryan and took Ryan's free hand in his own. "You OK?" he asked.

“How did your mum take it when you came out?” Ryan asked.

“She made me go clothes shopping with her,” Jason said, chuckling. “And took me to her beautician. It was not a success. I still get the feeling that I disappoint her in so many ways. She really would have liked a screaming queen for a son.”

“Oh God,” Ryan said with feeling. “You’re right, that would have been horrendous. I had one of those phone calls from my sister, Sam, last night. She tried to give me advice about men. Apparently we’re all bastards and I shouldn’t trust you.”

“All men are bastards,” Jason said cheerfully. “But it seems to me that so are all women, so the best a person can do is muddle through.”

“Women are impenetrable,” Ryan said, and Jason burst out laughing. “Fuck, that’s not what I meant, you bastard.” He thumped Jason’s thigh with his good hand. “I just never understood them, not in the slightest. It’s like they’re from another dimension or something.”

Ryan sounded so puzzled that Jason had to work hard not to keep laughing. “Never mind,” he said. “I’m not a complicated person, I promise not to bewilder you.”

“Arsehole,” Ryan said, and the door swung open again and a nurse put a brown paper bag and an envelope on the end of the bed.

“There you are, hon,” she said. “Discharge meds and a letter for whoever you get to take your sutures out. Just remember, they need doing in seven days' time.”

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Ryan had to be helped out of Jason’s ute, just like he’d had to be helped with his seatbelt, and Jason slid an arm carefully around his waist. Ryan looked pale and tired and Jason said, “Bed’s waiting for you.”

“I’ve spent the last five days in bed,” Ryan complained, but he had to hold on to the pressed tin wall beside the front door while Jason unlocked.

“Stop bitching,” Jason said, pushing the door open and then guiding Ryan to the bed, where the bedding was folded down, waiting for him.

“Fucking hell,” Ryan said weakly, when Jason pulled the covers over him. “What the fuck happened to your house? You cleaned up?”

“Not me,” Jason said. “I just told Blue that you were coming to stay and that the place needed cleaning and that afternoon all these biker babes arrived, carrying vacuum cleaners and mops. Guess Blue called in some favours, somewhere. Is there anything you need before I get your stuff out of the car?”

“I’m all right,” Ryan said, and then there was a crash and a woof and Blackie leapt up onto the bed, tail wagging and tongue dripping.

“Just yell ‘blanket’,” Jason said, pushing Blackie off the bed and standing up.

There was a shout of, “Blanket!” from inside the house before Jason had even got the bags out of the car and by the time Jason dropped Ryan’s belongings on the bare floorboards of the bedroom, Ryan was mostly asleep.

He dropped Ryan’s bag beside the bed and put the paper bag of medication on the bedside table, within Ryan’s reach, then went over to the blanket on the floor in the corner, where Blackie had bunched the material up and was humping it. He grabbed her collar, towed her out into the back yard, and shut the back door on her solidly. Ryan needed to sleep far more than Jason’s dog needed to act out her thwarted sexual needs.

There were bottles of water in his fridge, so Jason spun the shelf around and retrieved one and took it back to Ryan.

“Go to sleep,” he said, slipping his boots off and stretching out on top of the covers beside Ryan.

Ryan sighed and Jason rolled onto his side and slid one arm around Ryan’s waist, well clear of the sore arm. Jason could do with a nap himself.

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He was somewhere strange, that was all Ryan could work out. Light slanting through plain blinds, paintings on the wall, distant roar of traffic. It wasn’t his own place, it wasn’t the hospital.

It was Jason’s place; his bed, his house, newly cleaned by a horde of enthusiastic women who owed a deceased crime lord’s mother a favour or two. He’d gone to sleep with Jason beside him, but the other side of the bed was empty now when Ryan rolled over carefully to check.

There was music on in the house, it sounded like jazz playing quietly. Ryan sat up and slid his feet off the bed, wincing as his shoulder bitched at him.

Jason was in the studio, back to the doorway, a huge canvas propped in front of him, humming along to the stereo as he spread broad stripes of startling red across the cream of the canvas.

“Hey,” Ryan said, and Jason turned around, paintbrush in hand, dripping red across the bare boards, adding to the layers of paint already there.

“Hey,” he said, and he walked over and kissed Ryan quickly. “Feel better for some sleep?”

“Yeah,” Ryan said. “Feels a bit weird, being here.”

“Guess it would,” Jason said. “Under the circumstances.” He leaned his hand against the doorframe, brush still in his hand, spreading paint across the woodwork. “Want some food? I went and got some.”

Ryan had to laugh at that. “You make it sound like it’s not something you do very often.”

“Could be,” Jason said.

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Ryan sat on one of the rickety chairs, foot firmly planted on Blackie’s belly, stopping her from leaping up at him, while Jason clattered around the kitchen.

He had bought food and he seemed to know how to cook, at least better than Ryan did. The room smelled of fried onions and garlic and Jason was chopping tomatoes and frying mince.

“That smells so good after hospital food,” Ryan said.

“Yeah, well, I spent a couple of days in custody of various sorts,” Jason said. “And the food was rank. Mind you, the Australian Crime Commission served real coffee and chocolate biscuits, even if their interviewers had fangs and very pale skin.”

“Briefings at the ACC were always catered affairs, with croissants and fruit and stuff. I enjoyed their briefings,” Ryan said. “I won’t miss having to piss in a jar for the Australian Federal Police, though.”

Jason chuckled and prodded the frying mince with a spoon. Ryan rubbed his bare foot across Blackie’s belly, sending her into trembling paroxysms of ecstasy.

“You OK?” Jason asked a few minutes later, while the sauce bubbled and spat red gobs across the enamel of the stove.

“Think so,” Ryan said. “Shoulder itches like crazy and it just plain aches, but it’s not agonising any more.”

Jason sat down across the table from Ryan. “I didn’t mean the shoulder. I meant being here, with me.”

“..and your little dog too?” Ryan drawled, and they both cracked up laughing.

“Yeah, me and the canine lust machine.”

“It’s freaky,” Ryan said. “Or at least it should be, but dammit, I just want to be here. That’s gotta count for something.”

“Think that counts for a lot. If, after everything that happened, you came here of your own free will.” Jason said.

“Both times. The night when I just turned up here, I wasn’t working or anything. I just, oh God this is embarrassing.”

Jason took hold of Ryan’s hand and ran his fingertips over the back of it, where veins twisted beneath the skin. “I don’t think it’s embarrassing,” Jason said gently. “I think it was incredibly brave of you to be that honest about what you wanted.”

“I wasn’t brave,” Ryan said. “Just kind of desperate.” Jason’s hand cradled Ryan’s, no longer stroking it, just holding the weight in his own hand.

“I just had to know what it would be like to be with you,” Ryan admitted.

“I’m glad you liked it,” Jason said. “Because I want to do that again and again with you.”

“Please,” Ryan said. He’d wondered if he would be able to do this, just as himself, but Jason was kissing his hand now, nibbling and licking and sucking and Ryan’s body was demanding he do something, anything, just do it quickly.

“Just let me turn the dinner off,” Jason said.

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In the bedroom, Jason undressed Ryan carefully and it seemed somehow symbolic; his mother had dressed him, now his lover was peeling away the layers of clothing.

It took some effort to get his shirt off, but Jason’s hands were steady, holding Ryan’s arm in place while he slid the sling back on.

“Lie down,” Jason whispered, and while Ryan stretched himself back on the mattress, Jason took his own clothes off.

Blackie hopped up onto the bed and Jason said, “Blanket!” without even looking at her. His eyes were on Ryan and Ryan found his own gaze sliding down Jason’s body, across his chest as Jason shrugged off the inevitable plaid shirt and fixed on Jason’s fingers as they undid his button fly jeans.

Ryan had doubts, a ton of them, but God, watching Jason do that, peel his jeans down and free his cock, doubts seemed irrelevant. Then there was the moment when Jason held his weight on his arms and lowered his body over Ryan’s carefully, just so their hips, thighs, cocks touched. The body hair on Jason’s belly rubbed against Ryan’s skin, friction that made him want to scream with frustration.

He didn’t, partly because that might give Jason the impression that Ryan’s shoulder was hurting, which it was, and partly because Jason was sucking on Ryan’s bottom lip in preparation for kissing him.

The kiss, when it came, was devastating, leaving Ryan helpless, kissing Jason back as hard as he could, mouth against mouth.

Then Jason trailed his mouth across Ryan's chin and down his neck and staying quiet just wasn't going to happen, not when he hadn't come since the last time he'd been in this bed.

"Is that good, babe?" Jason murmured, and his hand slid between Ryan's thighs.

"Yeah," Ryan breathed, and Jason's fingers were doing wicked things, like they had before, only this time he wasn't as gentle and fuck it was good.

"Need to come?" Jason murmured, his mouth close to Ryan's ear.

"Yeah," Ryan said, and he would have given anything to be able to move effectively at that moment, so he could bite Jason, suck him, touch him, just hang onto him before...

Twisting and thrashing hurt so much, but there was nothing Ryan could do to keep himself still, not when Jason was doing something with finger and thumb that short-circuited his brain.

Jason's breath was loud in Ryan's ear and he was moaning quietly and Ryan gave up trying to move, to hold back, to rationalise, and when Jason's fingers finally curled around his cock, it was the best feeling ever, and he closed his eyes and cried out and began to come.

It took a while for Ryan's breathing to slow, for him to be able to open his eyes again. Jason was right there, solid and very real, his hand stroking his belly and hip and his mouth pressed against Ryan's uninjured shoulder. Contentment washed through Ryan.

"Feel good?" Jason murmured.

"Wonderful," Ryan said sleepily. He did feel wonderful, belly full of warmth, limbs heavy, mind relaxed, and he wasn't sure he'd ever felt that way before.

Jason smiled approvingly and said, "Touch me?"

Jason knelt up, since Ryan only had one hand that worked and the angles were all wrong, and when Ryan wrapped his hand around Jason's cock, it looked so good that Ryan almost wished he hadn't come already.

"S good," Jason said, and his cock was incredibly hard in Ryan's hand. The skin slipped backward and forward, foreskin sliding over the head, then pulling back with each slide.

Jason's fingers curled over Ryan's, guiding them, and Jason's eyes were glazed, his mouth open, when Ryan glanced at his face. "Gonna fuck you, babe, soon as I can," Jason said, and he squeezed his hand over Ryan's tightly and Ryan felt every pulse and bob of his cock as Jason came.

Jason slumped down onto the bed beside Ryan, goofy grin on his face, and Ryan grinned back.

“So, babe, when we gonna run away together?” Jason asked.

“When do you want to go?” Ryan said. “I’d probably need to go back to my flat and get clothes and shit and I have to go to a dressings clinic tomorrow to get my back looked at. We could go after that.”

“And I’ll have to tell your former employers I’m leaving the city when I do my mandatory bail check,” Jason said.

Jason’s mouth was gentle against Ryan’s, soft lips and brush of stubble, and Ryan’s stomach growled alarmingly.

“Feed me?” he asked.

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There was something strange about knocking on the door of his own flat, but his mum had Ryan’s keys, so he couldn’t just let himself in.

The door opened and Ryan almost felt his jaw drop.

“Hello, Ryan,” Sarah said, and he kissed her cheek then stared at her.

“Hi, Mum,” he said.

“Do you like it?” she held the door open and patted at her new bob with her other hand.

Ryan sat down on his own couch and blinked, just in case he was imagining it.

Nope. Her hair now hung straight to her shoulders, instead of bouncing wildly in curls that matched his own, and she was blonde.

“Um, yeah. It’s kinda different, that’s all,” he said.

Sarah smiled and said, “You look much better. How are you feeling? Would you like a cuppa?”

“Thanks,” Ryan said, adjusting his sling and frowning a little. There was something else he was supposed to notice, he could tell by the expectant curl to Sarah’s mouth.

“The flat looks lovely,” he said, just in case that was what Sarah was waiting for.

“Guess you don’t have much time for housework,” Sarah said, bustling around Ryan’s kitchen, putting the kettle on, clattering mugs.

OK, that wasn’t it. There was something about Sarah, about her face.



“You look different,” Ryan said. “Younger or something.” He couldn’t guess, for all he knew his mum had had botox or something.

“I had botox shots,” Sarah said, smiling with the bottom half of her face only. “And look.” She waved her arm at him, then pulled the neckline of her blouse across a little, revealing the kind of fake tan that belonged on Baywatch and that ended abruptly in a line across her chest.

“Isn’t it lovely?” she said, taking low fat milk out of Ryan’s fridge.

Ryan made a sound of agreement and wondered if his mother had gone completely mad.

“Blue took me to this wonderful spa she goes to,” Sarah said conversationally. “We had massages and seaweed wraps and then splashed out and had our faces done.”

Blue?

“You’ve, um, been out with Blue?” Ryan asked.

“She dropped around, said she and I should get to know each other better, because of you boys,” Sarah said. “Did you know she used to be a madam? What an exciting life she’s had!”

“I don’t think being widowed by an assassin, then losing a son the same way counts as exciting,” Ryan pointed out.

Sarah put a cup of some pale and murky liquid in front of Ryan and sat down beside him.

“True,” Sarah said. “She had some sensible things to say, too, about you and Jason. Guess I might have over-reacted. It doesn’t matter what you do, as long as you’re happy. God knows, of all people I should understand that you can’t help where you find love.”

Ryan put his mug of tea substitute down and hugged Sarah. “Thanks, Mum,” he said.

She hugged him back and smiled at him. “I do hope you boys are having safe sex,” she said.

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“Your Mum said what?” Jason said, and Ryan reached across and thumped Jason’s upper arm solidly.

“She hoped we were having safe sex,” he repeated.

Jason was laughing so hard that he was shaking the steering wheel of the ute and Ryan cracked up, too. It was all going to be all right; his mum had calmed down, he had a sheet of waterproof dressing stuff on his back that would stay on until it was time for

the stitches to come out, they were driving south, along the coast, heading away from the city.

Blackie sighed and crawled across Ryan's lap to press her nose wetly against the car window and Ryan hugged her with one arm and she farted.

"Oh God," he groaned, winding down the window to let some fresh air into the cab. It was spitting rain and the droplets stung his face as they blew in the window, but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything now, except being with Jason. There would be time later to worry about Jason's trial and about his future, but not now.

"What you thinking?" Jason asked, disturbing Ryan reverie.

"We've got half a tank of gas, a packet of cigarettes, it's dark and we're wearing sunglasses," he said, making Jason laugh again, and he wound the window back up, much to Blackie's displeasure.

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They found a holiday shack for rent in Southport, a short walk from the beach, and Ryan found himself in the strange position of standing on the punter's side of the counter of a cop shop while Jason checked in and registered his location.

The constable peered at Jason's bail papers and pushed a buzzer and a uniformed sergeant appeared from a back room. He got half way through reading Jason's papers before he glanced up at Ryan.

There was a flash of recognition and he dropped his eyes back to the papers and Ryan said, "It's OK, Thommo, I'm not undercover."

Thompson's face split in a grin and he said, "Hadley, you old bastard. I'd heard you were making a fool of yourself in Organised Crime. How come you're this far from home?"

Ryan patted his arm in its sling. "Not a cop anymore, got too badly hurt. Thought I'd head down the coast, get away for a while. How about you?"

"Doing fine, doing fine," Thompson said. "Fancy a middy or four later on? Both of you? I usually pop into the pub for a bite to eat after work."

Ryan was aware of Jason trying not to grin next to him, but he ignored it. If Jason thought it was amusing that an ex-cop and his underworld on-bail boyfriend were invited out for a drink by one of the state's finest, then who was Ryan to spoil his fun?

"Sounds good,"

There was a bereft howl from outside.

"That'd be the dog," Jason said. "We should go before she eats all the upholstery."

Jason held the police station door open for Ryan and groped Ryan's arse as he walked past. When Ryan glanced back through the glass door as they got into the ute, Thompson's jaw was practically on the counter.

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They sat on the front veranda of the shack, bare feet propped up on the railing, stubbies in their hands, while Blackie ran hysterically around the sandy yard in the fading light, chasing sea gulls. It was quiet, apart from the dog and the birds, with the muted roar of the waves in the distance. A deep contentment stole over Ryan that had nothing to do with prescription painkillers.

"Want a game and a meal?" Jason said, rubbing his hand over his stubble, then stretching his arms over his head.

"Sure."

The pub was a few hundred metres down the road and they strolled along the gravel verge through the darkness, Blackie bounding deliriously ahead of them, chasing imaginary rabbits into the sand dunes through the scrub.

The pub was only half full, its patrons a mix of itinerant surfers and locals, and Ryan sat on a bar stool while Jason put his dollar coin on the edge of the pool table to reserve their place, then ordered a jug. Ryan didn't have to drive, Jason didn't have to work the next day, and it looked like being a good evening.

Playing pool with his arm in a sling was tricky, even using the cue rest, and even though Jason thrashed him, Ryan felt a quiet satisfaction that he managed to sink as many balls as he did.

Thommo and the other cops turned up halfway through the jug, just before their steak and chips arrived, and Thommo's previous jocularly seemed to have disappeared as he merely nodded at Ryan on his way to the front bar.

There was concern in Jason's eyes when Ryan glanced across at him, so Ryan leaned across the pool table and kissed him soundly.

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The room was spinning slightly when Ryan closed his eyes, but Jason's hand was solid and reassuring on Ryan's hip, and Jason's mouth... His mouth was slick and slippery and so hot and it made Ryan ache inside with unnameable hungers.

In the darkened room the army surplus blankets were rough against Ryan's skin and his breathing was loud over the distant sound of the sea. He must have moved because the suck and slide of Jason's mouth stopped and Jason said, "Stay still, or I'll stop."

Stay still? When Jason's fingers were curled inside his arse and that mouth was...

His thighs trembled and he was gasping for air, drowning in the deluge of sensation that Jason was coaxing from his body. His fingers curled around the cold metal base of the bed, anchoring him as he rode out his orgasm, trying desperately to stay still, to do anything that Jason asked of him.

\*\*\*

There was a pattern now. When Ryan woke, Blackie would be grizzling and snivelling at the back door, and when Ryan rolled over, his shoulder complained at the movement. The other half of the bed would be empty, but when he hugged the other pillow, it would smell of Jason and sex.

He'd stay there, ignoring his hard on, at least until he absolutely had to piss, then stagger into the main room of the shack, pulling up his track pants carefully. There'd be an empty, gunky porridge saucepan in the sink, which Ryan would have to move when he filled the kettle, testimony to Jason's ability to wake up painfully early to go surfing.

He'd undo the back door and let Blackie in and the pair of them would sit on the front porch in the weak winter sunlight, while Ryan bit both ends off a Tim Tam and sucked his mug of instant coffee through the biscuit. When the whole lot collapsed into a sodden mess, he'd give it to Blackie as a consolation prize.

He could spend a couple of peaceful hours that way if he tried, long enough to drink three cups of coffee and make Blackie sick, long enough for the wind to swing around and blow the cloud bank inland, long enough for Blackie to start barking hysterically, which meant that she'd heard Jason's ute coming up the road.

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The district nurse tutted over Ryan's back and led the pair of them through to her examination room. "How long ago did you do this?" she asked, when Ryan pulled his T-shirt over his head carefully, revealing the fading bruising and stitches through the waterproof dressing.

"Two weeks ago," Ryan said.

"Messy," the nurse said unsympathetically, pointing at the examination table.

"Are all nurses bitches?" Ryan asked through gritted teeth, as he laid down on the cold vinyl, making Jason laugh. "And you're a callous bastard," he added.

"Oh, stop whining," the nurse said, and she ripped a bit of dressing off Ryan's back. "Just be glad you're not gorilla furry, like your ever-so-helpful friend."

"I want some drugs," Ryan said plaintively.

"You don't need any analgesia," the nurse said cheerfully. "This won't hurt a bit." There was a loud ripping sound and she tore great chunks out of Ryan's flesh. "Now,

I'm just going to clean the sutures, then I'll take them out. You did make a mess of your back, didn't you?"

The nurse scrubbed at Ryan's back with sandpaper dipped in acid and Jason rolled his eyes at Ryan's grimaces.

"Shut up," Ryan growled.

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He was floating, rocking gently on waves of sensation, each exhalation a sigh of pleasure. He was face down on the flannelette sheets while Jason's mouth licked and sucked and slithered over his arse. He didn't have to stay still now that his stitches were out and it was a blessed relief to rock his hips, rubbing his cock backward and forward against the pillow that was shoved under his hips.

Jason's tongue trailed wetly up Ryan's spine and there was the rustle of plastic wrapper in the dark room and the sudden sharp smell of latex.

Cold, lubed, fingers slid into his arse and Jason's beard brushed over his shoulder. "Tell me this is what you want," Jason breathed against Ryan's ear.

"Fuck me," Ryan said, and it was so easy to say now.

"Nothing I'd rather do," Jason said, chuckling, and Ryan had to laugh, too.

There was pressure and the lube was cold and it was too much to take, but Jason's breath was ragged against Ryan's ear and Jason said, "Just relax, babe."

Ryan took a deliberate breath in and let it go again, then Jason was all the way inside him. It felt like it should hurt, but over the top of the pain were bright bolts of pleasure, arcing directly through his body to his cock, and he couldn't feel anything except that.

Jason was heavy over the top of him, grunting against Ryan's shoulder as he began to move, this slow and gentle rocking motion that was impossible to resist. Everything Ryan thought he might have known about fucking and about himself was disappearing, lost in the slip and push, and all the burn went away, even the ache in his shoulder, gone as Jason's breath wet his ear.

There came a time when Ryan was spent, so overloaded by pleasure that he couldn't even lift his head from the pillow any longer, and Jason slumped down onto the sagging mattress beside Ryan, gasping for breath, too.

Carefully, holding his shoulder as still as possible, Ryan slid across so his head rested on Jason's chest and Jason's hand stroked Ryan's curls carefully.

## Epilogue

It was a closed court, so the courtroom was empty apart from the lawyers, the court stenographer and the judge. Ryan straightened his now-unaccustomed tie and sat down in the witness stand after being sworn in.

He'd given evidence before, plenty of times, but never with his lover sitting at the defence table, sporting an equally unfamiliar suit and haircut, with no beard.

They ran through the preliminaries; how Ryan had previously been a police officer and how he was still covered by the confidentiality requirements of his then job.

He was there as a defence witness, the DPP having not called him to give evidence. Ryan couldn't decide whether that was the force's desire to keep his role hushed up, or just plain indifference on their part, but it had been a relief.

Jason's lawyer said, "Could you tell us what led up to your involvement in the shooting at Harvey Cooper's house, in your own words?"

Ryan nodded and took out his notepad, just to make sure he didn't forget something.

It was all going to be all right, he would tell them everything, and the police force could go fuck themselves and get the court records sealed. He had every intention of saying exactly what had happened, how the undercover operation had become hopelessly messy and how Jason had done nothing wrong.

His shoulder was healed now, apart from the ridges and bumps from the hardware that was still in it, and soon that would be the only thing left still unfinished from this business.

He and Jason were going to take off again, follow the waves up the coast to Queensland, this time without any bail conditions, and he smiled at Jason reassuringly and began to talk.

\*end\*