

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVE

*Quickies*  
*Naughty Nuptials*

*Gaps*  
*IN Your Soul*  
Shayla Kersten

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Gaps in Your Soul

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# *GAPS IN YOUR SOUL*

**Shayla Kersten**

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To Megan Kerans and Cynthia D'Alba for their constant encouragement.

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## **Chapter One**

Jared North nudged his car into the right lane of Interstate 35. The afternoon sun warmed the side of his face in spite of the cool breeze from the air conditioner. Soft jazz filtered from the radio. Fortunately he didn't have to fight Dallas rush-hour traffic this early on a Friday afternoon. His thoughts weren't on his journey as much as his destination.

Since his best friend Steve asked him to be a groomsman at his wedding, Jared's mind had been filled with thoughts of Dalton Rainey, Steve's younger brother. So much had happened in the ten years since he'd last seen Dalton, but the memory of their one night together hadn't dimmed.

At nineteen, Dalton's quick smile and dark blue eyes had always triggered something in Jared. More often than not, that something was in Jared's pants. The women he dated back then never gave him the rush of excitement that had surged through him just being around Dalton. But back then, wanting to find out what Dalton's body felt like up close and personal was wrong. As a man, as a future officer in the Army, Jared couldn't allow a fleeting sexual fascination with Dalton change his chosen path.

The exit ramp arrived faster than Jared expected. Vehicles whizzed past him as he slowed the car and took the exit toward the hotel. His heart beat faster as he got closer to the hotel and Dalton.

As the tagalong kid brother, Dalton hadn't really registered as anything but a nuisance until he joined Steve and Jared at the University of Texas at Dallas. While Jared wasn't paying attention, the annoying little kid grew up. At college, Dalton was hard to ignore when his presence sent erotic heat through Jared's body.

Even now the sharp memory of Dalton's hot mouth around his cock made his flesh swell in the tight confines of his jeans. With Jared's mind screaming "no", Dalton had taken the lead in a way far beyond his nineteen years. Instead of pushing him away, Jared had leaned against the cool wall of Dalton's dorm room, shut his eyes and let it happen.

Between fingers and tongue, Dalton had mapped every square inch of Jared's body. All Jared had done was let him. He always regretted he'd passed up his one chance to do some exploring of his own.

Dalton's mouth had sent Jared to the edge of insanity. Now as the hotel loomed down the street, Jared wondered if he'd ever fully recovered. The pent-up excitement in the pit of his stomach said no.

He eased the car into the hotel's shaded valet parking lane. The long drive from his mother's house in San Antonio to the Dallas hotel made his leg ache. The shrapnel wound in his left thigh was only two months old. Sitting in a car for five hours made his leg stiffen and ache. When he opened the car door, the humid Dallas heat hit him with an almost physical blow. Sweat beaded his face and neck.

A red-vested valet ran up to the car with an agility Jared envied. "Checking in, sir?"

"Yes, part of the Rainey wedding party." Jared eased his leg from the car. He'd stopped using a cane a month ago but right now he almost wished he'd brought it along. Gripping the car door, he pulled his tired body out of the driver's seat. Stretching made the injured muscles burn but at least he still had a leg. The private next to him when the mortar exploded came home without his. And Jared's platoon sergeant—Martinez—came home in a box.

Jared palmed the young man a couple of dollars along with the keys.

A bellhop pulled his luggage out of the trunk and stood waiting in the sweltering Texas heat.

With a nod, Jared headed into the hotel. He welcomed the cool air as the automatic doors swished shut behind him. Stones set into the floor in the shape of a giant star

marked the entrance to the lobby. Luxurious couches and Texas-themed decorations littered the lobby. The buzz of voices hummed around him. The plush surroundings only captured part of his attention. Pausing on his way to check-in, his eyes searched for one face in the milling crowd of business travelers and vacationing families. A tall sandy-haired man walked across the lobby. Jared's breath caught before he realized it wasn't Dalton.

Ten years had passed since he'd seen Dalton. Even after his mother and sister moved to San Antonio, Jared had visited his hometown a number of times on leave. Each time, Dalton always seemed to be unavailable. Why he expected anything from the man, Jared didn't know. One night of wild sex didn't entitle Jared to any special consideration. Especially when Jared insisted they had no future. He should have at least told him goodbye before he left for his first duty station in Georgia. Maybe explained the way things had to be. He admitted now that he'd been afraid of saying something he couldn't take back.

His heart raced thinking about their last encounter. His pulse thundered in his ears at the idea of seeing him again.

At the time, his Army career was all Jared could think about. Having a homosexual relationship wasn't possible. Now... The pain of seeing Martinez bloodied and dying, calling out for someone to tell his wife he loved her, made Jared question his priorities.

As Martinez's captain, Jared swore to the dying man he'd tell her and he did. As soon as he was released from the hospital at Lackland Air Force Base, he'd visited the man's widow in San Antonio. Her stalwart attitude and profuse thanks only made her tear-filled eyes more poignant. Jared had never known a love so strong as the sergeant and his wife. He'd glimpsed something close once but he threw it away.

The bellhop cleared his throat.

Jared shook himself out of his musings and started toward the check-in desk.

Dalton watched the lean-muscled man limping through the lobby. A conveniently placed column provided him cover from the searching eyes. The cool stone under his hands did nothing to calm the heat surging through him. His heart raced as he devoured the sight of Jared North.

He'd aged more than Dalton thought possible in ten years. Only twenty-two when he left, Jared looked older than his thirty-two years. A touch of premature gray sprinkled through his brown hair. Lines creased his forehead and around his mouth. The dark rings beneath his eyes gave him a haunted look.

Of course combat would take a toll on a man. Especially one who was not only injured but who also had watched one of his men die.

All his anger over how their one night together ended almost evaporated. Dalton resisted the urge to go to him, wrap his arms around him and assure him everything would be okay. The thought of touching Jared, holding him, sent fire burning through his groin. His cock had been half erect all day knowing Jared would be here. Now his jeans were decidedly too tight.

But he wasn't planning on a sweet reunion. One night with Jared had left him wanting more than a hurried blowjob and frantic rubbing. Dalton wasted ten years wavering between what hadn't been and what could have been. Now he planned to get Jared North out of his system once and for all. He had exactly two days and he intended to use them and his once-upon-a-one-night-stand lover to purge his mind and body of regret.

With Jared facing the check-in desk, Dalton darted out of hiding and sprinted to the elevators. He ignored the startled look of a couple exiting the elevator as he rushed past them. The wedding party was staying on the sixth floor. Dalton would be waiting on his unsuspecting victim when Jared reached his room. Then things would get interesting.

\* \* \* \* \*



Jared pushed the heavy door to his hotel room open. He should have let the bellhop help him. His stubborn denial of his new physical limits wouldn't let him. His duffel bag bounced off his thigh, nailing the tender flesh beneath his scars. Pain swept through his leg on a dizzying wave. Off balanced by his luggage, he stumbled into the doorframe. He looked around at the typical hotel decoration. In spite of the ornate lobby, the room was simple, a calming pale cream color with brown accents.

Hobbling across the small room, he tossed his duffel on the neatly made bed. He opened the flap then pulled out his shaving kit. A Vicodin would numb the searing pain but the drugs made him sleepy. The digital readout on the clock showed two.

He dry-swallowed the pill. Grabbing his cell phone, he hit redial and waited through the ring.

A deep bass voice answered. "Hello."

"Steve, it's Jared. I'm at the hotel."

"Great! You made good time." Traffic noises cluttered the line. "I'm on the way to pick up Lydia's grandmother from the airport. Probably be back in about an hour or so. Dalton's around there somewhere."

"I haven't seen him yet." The idea of seeing Dalton made his heart beat faster. Grabbing a plastic-wrapped glass from the desk, Jared went into the bathroom. "My leg is acting up. I just took a pain pill and I think I'll lie down for a while." He ran some water into the glass and washed down the bitter aftertaste of the pill. If only it were as easy to wash away the bitter memories of his and Dalton's parting.

"What did the doctor say yesterday?" Steve's gravelly voice grew soft.

Jared sighed as he walked back into the bedroom area. "The same thing he said last week and last month. My leg won't ever be the same. I'll always have at least a ten to fifteen percent loss of mobility." He toed his sneakers off. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he stripped off his socks. The carpet was soft and cool against his feet.

"Are they putting you out?"

“No, not yet.” Jared ran his hand through his hair. That would be too easy. “I have a choice. I can stay in but I’ll be deskbound and out of combat permanently.”

“Not a bad deal. You could still see your pension.”

“Yeah. A pencil pusher for the next ten years.” Jared wished the military would just throw him out. Make the decision for him.

His lawyer friend chuckled on the other end of the line. “There are worse things, you know. And I have a place for you. We need good investigators with the firm. With your military police background, you’d be perfect.”

“I know. And don’t think I’m not grateful for the offer but...” The idea was tempting. If Jared left the Army, the city he grew up in would be as good a place as any to start his life over. Staying with his mother while he healed had been convenient but she tended to smother him. Not only would he have a good job, Dalton wouldn’t be able to avoid him all the time if he lived here and worked with his brother.

“Okay. Know the offer is there if you need it.”

A yawn overcame Jared’s response. “Sorry. Must be the Vicodin kicking in.” Or the sleepless night thinking of facing Dalton again.

“Go. Rest. I’ll talk to you later at the rehearsal dinner.”

“Later.” Jared flipped the phone shut and tossed it on the nightstand. A slight wooziness accompanied the sweet numbness caressing his thigh. The hum of the air conditioner serenaded him like a lullaby. At least the drugs would take the edge off for a little while. Enforced sleep helped Jared forget his dilemma.

A knock caught him pulling his T-shirt over his head. Holding the sweat-damp material against his chest, he limped to the door.

He opened it and found himself face-to-face with the features he’d searched for in the lobby. “Dalton...” Jared stepped back as the man crowded him into the room.

“At your service.”

Blue eyes shone in a face leaner than Jared remembered. Gone was the baby fat of the nineteen-year-old that haunted his dreams. The man in front of him was muscled, compact without being bulky. His closeness took Jared's breath away. A heated flush seared his skin.

"You seem surprised to see me. Didn't you think I'd show up for my brother's wedding?" The door swung shut behind him.

"No, I knew you'd be here." He stopped his backward retreat into the room and struggled for a control he didn't feel.

Dalton kept coming until his body was mere inches away from Jared. His tall frame matched Jared's six-foot height. Almost nose to nose with Jared, he whispered, "Aren't you glad to see me?" A predatory gleam shone in the dark blue depths.

The tantalizing scent of sweat and something distinctly male overwhelmed him. Arousal shot through Jared's body. "Of course. You startled me." He pushed his crumpled T-shirt in front of his hips to hide the rising bulge in his jeans. He prayed Dalton wouldn't look down. Although he'd thought of nothing else in the last two months, he wasn't looking for a quick fuck. He wanted to know if more were possible before he made a decision about the rest of his life.

As if the man could read his thoughts, Dalton's gaze crawled down Jared's body. A smile quirked his lips when his eyes paused at Jared's obvious camouflage. "I guess you *are* glad to see me." Dalton's hand brushed aside the damp T-shirt and pressed against Jared's aching cock. "No date this weekend? I'd have thought you'd bring some buxom Army nurse along for the ride."

"No," Jared gasped. He fought the urge to push against the fleeting heat.

"Think you'll find someone at the wedding? These affairs are great for picking up a little piece of ass." Dalton's hand cupped Jared's cock.

Jared clenched his fists. "No. Don't want..." His words disappeared in a moan. Heat pressed hard against his cock and squeezed. Losing the battle of staring, his eyes fluttered shut. Hot breath caressed his face.

“You like this?”

Rough whispered words sent a shiver through Jared.

“A fast fuck to take the edge off?”

Jared couldn't say no. The desire to slam Dalton down on the bed and do just that was almost overwhelming. He couldn't say yes either. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. In spite of his desire, years of denial and hiding kept him quiet.

“Still confused? Still think two men shouldn't do this?” Dalton's growl warned him but Jared let it happen.

A hot mouth covered his with bruising force. Blood flavored the rough kiss. His fists still clenched at his side, Jared let Dalton compel him down the path he wanted to take.

When the hard body against him pressed forward, Jared lost his balance. The bed caught him, his duffel bounced and rolled to the floor. The cool satin of the bedspread met the overheated skin of his back. Dalton's body landed on him hard. Jared's breath whooshed out with the force. Or was it the hard cloth-covered cock pressing against his groin that left him breathless?

Rough hands grabbed his wrists and pushed them above his head. The heavy body held him in place. For a second he struggled against his training. He forced back the urge to fight his attacker and instead arched his hips against the hard ridge in Dalton's jeans.

“Yes,” Jared moaned as teeth and lips nipped at his neck. The sting of sandpaper beard marked him.

The tight grip on his wrists disappeared. Dalton sat up, straddling Jared's hips. Leaning forward, Dalton's mouth fastened on a peaked nipple. His hot tongue circled the sensitive nub. Teeth followed, tugging hard.

Jared's fingers wound through the sandy brown hair. Holding Dalton's head close to his chest, he groaned his approval. “More...”

Holding his weight on one hand, Dalton reached for Jared's jeans with the other. He made short work of his button and zipper. A hot hand slid under the elastic waistband of his briefs. Calloused fingers wrapped around his length.

"God, yes!" The memory of one night ten years ago flooded back. Of Dalton, of hot cocks rubbing, of rough kisses and a blowjob Jared had never imagined before. "Please..."

Jared slid his hands between them, reaching for Dalton's jeans. Evidently, Dalton had gotten there first. Jared's hand met with thick hot flesh jutting out of open jeans. He swiped his thumb over the damp tip and smeared the sticky fluid around the crown.

Dalton exhaled a sharp breath against Jared's nipple. Hard sucking tugged the tender flesh.

Not wanting their encounter to end with mutual hand jobs, Jared wound his fingers through Dalton's hair. He pulled the silken strands gently until the hungry mouth released his bruised flesh. Pulling Dalton's face close, Jared lunged up into a long, deep kiss. His tongue battled for control as he devoured Dalton's taste.

Dalton's weight pressed their cocks together. Pushing up into his tight stomach, the friction eased with slick-leaking pre-come. Sharp edges of zippers dug into tender skin.

The sweet trail of orgasm started low in his stomach. Struggling for the right amount of pressure, Jared slid his hands down Dalton's back and grabbed the hard muscles of his ass. "Almost...there..." he moaned between rough-bearded kisses.

"Not yet." Dalton pulled away. "Not yet." His eyes glittered with lust and something hotter below the surface.

Scooting down the bed, Dalton yanked Jared's jeans until they bunched around his thighs.

The coarse material and twisted tightness burned the tender flesh of his wound but Jared didn't have time to care.

A hot mouth engulfed his cock all the way to the base. A quick swallow tightened Dalton's throat around his crown. Jared's hips jerked against the sudden sensation.

Dalton licked his way back up to the tip.

Teeth nipped around the edge then his tongue circled to soothe.

Jared clutched the smooth material beneath him. "Dalton... Want to touch you... Taste you..." The words slipped out before he could think. He'd wanted to tell him that ten years ago but he couldn't. Instead, he'd let Dalton make love to him and then he walked away without saying goodbye.

Ten years of indecision and regret slipped away. The idea of dying without doing something about his feelings for Dalton terrified him. Agreeing to be a groomsman for Dalton's brother Steve gave him the perfect excuse to see him again.

Dalton stood up. His eyes held doubt but his hands quickly shed his clothes. He wrapped his hand around his cock, slowly stroking its length.

Jared hadn't really looked at Dalton back then. The barely lit dorm room had helped keep Jared's denial firmly in place. Now, in the well-lit hotel room, his gaze took in every detail from his muscled smooth chest to the thick, hard flesh in his hand. He licked his lips and nodded.

Dalton raised an eyebrow but he didn't voice whatever questions he had. Climbing on the bed close to Jared's head, he offered him his leaking cock.

Jared lifted his head, his tongue darted out to taste the clear liquid pooling on the tip. Bitterness exploded through his taste buds but sweetness filled his soul. His tongue tested the silky crown. His hand slid up the inside of Dalton's thigh. The wrinkled texture of his balls fascinated Jared's fingers. He rolled the soft sac as he sucked Dalton's flesh deeper.

A strangled moan made him look up. Heavy-lidded eyes watched his tentative motions. With a groan, Dalton pulled away.

Before Jared could find his voice to protest, Dalton climbed over him. The thighs straddling Jared's head were nearly as smooth as the muscled chest leaning over his stomach. The musky scent of arousal closed in around him. The heavy, thick cock jutted down a mere inch from Jared's mouth.

His hands slid around Dalton's waist then to his ass. Pulling his hips down, the hot flesh slipped deep into his mouth.

Panic threatened as Dalton pushed deeper. The sense of being restrained by the heavy body and the throat-gagging depth of his cock cleared as soon as Dalton's mouth closed around his own aching flesh. Lost in the sensation of wet heat, Jared sucked hard on the leaking shaft.

Once again Jared's desire pooled low in his stomach. His balls tightened, threatening to overflow. Dalton's aggressive fingers massaged the area behind the sensitive sac. One more twist of his mouth, one more stroke of his tongue would be all Jared needed. When Dalton's fingers slid down the crack of his ass and pushed at his hole, Jared flew through a molten orgasmic haze. His cock erupted into the wet, willing depths of Dalton's mouth.

Sucking frantically through his ecstasy, Jared's muddled mind expected Dalton's bitter fluids to fill his mouth. Instead Dalton pulled away. Jared leaned up, following the still-hard flesh. Cool air replaced the heat of Dalton's body.

"Stay," Dalton whispered. Jared's gaze followed his movements as Dalton rummaged through his discarded clothing. A stray shaft of sunlight slipped through the heavy curtains and highlighted Dalton's muscular body.

"Don't leave." Panic welled up. He wanted to talk, to tell him he was wrong to walk out the way he had.

Dalton's sharp laugh startled him. "I'm not leaving yet." He tossed something on the bed before dropping his jeans back on the floor.

Jared's gaze focused on the small plastic tube and a condom. "I... I..."

Dalton ignored his stuttered words. The mattress dipped and rolled under Dalton's weight. He grabbed Jared's jeans and yanked them off, taking his briefs with them. He arranged Jared's legs with one leg bent at the knee, foot on the bed and the other held against Jared's smooth-muscle chest.

The heat of his skin against Dalton's seared through him. Still almost limp from pleasure, Jared didn't resist even when his mind screamed for him to take action. His dreams of a reunion with Dalton had always had their positions reversed. He'd never really thought about being on the receiving end of a thick, hard cock.

Years of regret kept him from protesting when a lubed finger pushed into him. Joy over their reunion happening so easily kept him quiet. Two fingers burned but when they brushed against something inside him, a sharp spike of pleasure forced only a moan of excitement. Slow twisting fingers pushed deeper with each stroke.

With eyes shut, Jared clenched the covers beneath him and let the wave of new pleasure take him. Then the fingers were gone. His eyes flew open.

Dalton's face was unreadable, closed to him. His condom-covered cock in hand, he pushed against Jared's tight pucker. The burn of his fingers was insignificant to the heat of his thick flesh. "Breathe deep and exhale hard."

Jared did as he was told. The tight muscle gave way and Dalton's shaft slid deep. An unbelievable fullness filled him, brushing against a knot of pleasure. Shivers of heat spiked through Jared's body.

Slow, lazy strokes kept him gasping for air. Fingers tightened on his legs and lips brushed against his calf.

Dalton's expression had gone from blank to ecstatic, his eyes closed and his face rested against Jared's leg. A few short, hard strokes and Dalton's mouth gasped open. His moan vibrated through his connection with Jared. Sharp jerks of his hips signaled his orgasm. "Oh yes..."

Still holding Jared's leg against his chest, Dalton's teeth bit into Jared's calf. Tongue and lips quickly soothed the sting.



Pushing Jared's leg aside, Dalton leaned over him. Their intimate connection awkward but maintained as his mouth covered Jared's.

The bitter taste of his own come still flavored Dalton's mouth. Ten years of pretending and denial sloughed off Jared like a cleansing rain. He'd come back here with vague hopes and murky dreams. Everything clarified as Dalton's tongue tangled with his.

Dalton pulled away from him. "Seems maybe the Army isn't as strict on the whole gay thing after all. You evidently learned to take it up the ass."

His sneer surprised Jared. "What are you talking about? I never—"

"Oh please." Dalton pushed off him. Grabbing his half-erect cock, he slid out of Jared. "Don't tell me you haven't been fucked before. You were hot for it then, just not with me."

A chill swept through him with the loss of Dalton's heat and the harshness of his words. "That's not true!" Confusion clouded Jared's mind. "What the hell is with you?"

"What's with me?" Dalton rolled off the bed. He tossed the used condom in the trash. Bending over to grab his clothes, his angry voice continued. "Because it's my turn to walk away. I thought it would take all weekend to get my chance. Didn't realize you'd turned into such a slut."

"I'm not. I didn't..." He didn't know how to answer. Dalton wouldn't have understood then, why would he now? Looking back, Jared knew he'd walked out on something good but the Army had been his only goal in life. He'd signed a contract, committed to the military. He couldn't have stayed even if he wanted to. "I'm sorry."

The anger in Dalton's eyes dampened but didn't fade completely. "Ten years too late."

## Chapter Two

Dalton slammed the door to his room and leaned against it. His chest tightened to the point of breathlessness. He'd expected Jared to refuse him, fight him, not give in to him with such willingness. Never in a million years did he expect the macho military man to give up his ass.

His accusations rang hollow in his own ears. If Jared had ever had anal sex, it'd been a long time. The sweet heat was too tight for him to have been active.

He'd come here for revenge not a tender reunion. His heart nearly cracked open but the memory of his disappointment and anger resealed the gaps. Even with a resurgence of white-hot anger, he couldn't stop the sinking feeling in his gut.

The smell of sex assaulted his senses. He closed his eyes as his memories tumbled back in time.

*Dalton pushed the hard body against the wall. When he didn't find a fist in his face, he ran his lips across Jared's neck. Soft moans encouraged him. He licked a path across the rough stubble of his jaw. Not knowing how Jared would respond, Dalton flew into harm's way and covered the parted lips with his own.*

*Tentative kisses turned rough as Dalton rubbed his hips against the thick ridge in Jared's jeans. The tang of beer had never seemed so sweet as when Dalton tasted it on Jared's tongue. Finally, after two years of watching, Dalton was touching. His hands didn't know where to go first.*

*Sliding his hands around Jared's waist, his fingers tugged his T-shirt free. Smooth skin stretched taut over hard muscles. Dalton explored a path up Jared's back, bunching the damp cotton material as he went.*

*Hard pecs covered in light brown hair peeked into view. The flat nipples were too much temptation.*

*Dalton bent down. His lips latched on to the mouth-watering morsel of flesh. A soft moan vibrated through Jared's chest. Encouraged, Dalton slid his hands around to Jared's fly. His heart raced as his fingers dipped inside the front of Jared's jeans. The silken head of Jared's cock brushed against Dalton's hand.*

*Impatient for more, Dalton dropped to his knees. His fingers made frantic work of Jared's button and zipper. He tugged the tight briefs free.*

*Thick, hard flesh leapt forward, glancing against Dalton's cheek.*

*His fingers dug into the soft cotton and wrapped around the base. Licking sticky pre-come from the tip of the crown, Dalton let the flavor wash over his tongue.*

*Jared's body shuddered. Fingers twisted through Dalton's hair and tightened.*

*Instead of yanking Dalton away, the large hands caressed his head. Gentle pressure pulled him forward.*

*Opening his mouth, Dalton wrapped his lips around the crown. His heart swelled with his cock. Maybe his secret dreams could become reality, maybe...*

Loud feminine laughter from the hallway snapped Dalton back to the present.

He'd been young and stupid to think Jared could be more than a one-night stand. Now, his plan for revenge hadn't materialized the way he'd imagined. Once again his feelings for the man got in the way. He steeled his heart to survive Jared's presence for the rest of the weekend. But one question wouldn't stop running through his mind. Why had Jared given in so easily?

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared advanced into the hotel's restaurant with his back straight and armed with sheer determination. The noisy clatter of dishes chattered like enemy gunfire.

Murmured conversations hummed around him. He kept the intense desire to retreat firmly under control.

As he wove his way through the cloth-draped tables, his mind justified Dalton's actions. Jared had wronged him. He shouldn't have expected an easy truce. The man had avoided him for ten years. Each time Jared came home for a visit, Dalton had been conspicuously absent.

With a smile plastered on his face, he braved the crowd near the bar. Steve stood talking in hushed tones to Dalton. Refusing to show cowardice, he marched over to the two men.

"Steve, how's it going?"

Steve turned toward him at the sound of his voice. "Jared! Good to see you." A big burly man, Steve's hug almost swallowed Jared. At six foot four, the dark-haired man was the definition of a gentle giant.

A resounding slap on the back nearly knocked the air out of him. "Good to see you too," he gasped.

When Steve released him, he turned to his brother. "Dalton, you remember Jared?" He looked over at Jared and winked. "My scrawny little brother grew up."

"Of course I remember him." Jared offered his hand as relief washed through him. Dalton hadn't mentioned their earlier encounter. "How are you?" He gripped the warm hand tight. The hand that a few hours before had made his body fly. The tingling in his groin threatened to prove how much he wanted Dalton's hands on him again. Even the soreness in his ass made his heart flutter in his throat.

"Good. Glad you made it." Dalton's gaze couldn't quite meet his. His hand pulled away before Jared was ready. "Too bad your mom and Sarah couldn't make it. It would have been great to see them again."

Jared's forced smile relaxed a little. Somewhere beneath Dalton's cool exterior, something more was hiding. "Mom wanted to come but the ride up would have been too much for her. With her arthritis, she doesn't travel much anymore. Sis couldn't get

away from her lab. A big experiment due for her thesis." Jared's grin was genuine as he thought about his little sister. Only twenty-three, Sarah was a year away from her masters in chemistry.

"You should be proud of her," Steve said. "You put her through school."

Jared laughed off the praise. "All I did was earn the money. She did all the work." He looked around the room at the milling people. "So where's the lovely bride? I thought her presence was required at the rehearsal."

Steve laughed. "Lydia's running late. She wanted the bridal party to stay at the hotel so she could keep track of everyone and now she's the one missing. Her bridesmaids had her out shopping all day. She'll be here soon. We'll all head over to the church once everyone arrives."

"Now that she's finally gotten a proposal out of Steve, she's not likely to miss out on anything." Dalton's stiff-shouldered stance didn't soften but the smile on his lips reached his eyes. "Lydia's a great girl. Stupid here almost let her get away." A friendly cuff on his brother's chin emphasized his words. "If I didn't swing the other way, I'd have gone for her."

Jared's smile faltered before he shoved it firmly back in place. He hoped the heat on his face didn't show.

Steve laughed at his brother's words and smacked him on the back hard enough to jolt him a step forward. "Well, finally a reason to be glad my little brother's gay." His gaze landed on Jared. His jovial tone faded as he spoke quietly. "You don't have a problem with that?"

"No, no... Not at all."

"Good." Steve glanced toward an older couple Jared didn't recognize at the door. "Gotta go greet the in-laws. You two catch up." He hurried off, his big body plowing a wake through the crowd.

"So you're...out."

“Yes. I finally told my family a couple of months after you left.”

Jared swallowed past a lump in his throat. “With someone?” Thankfully his voice didn’t crack.

“No. Not now.” The blue eyes softened for a split second then anger flared. “Why?” Dalton stormed away without waiting for an answer.

Before Jared could make up his mind to follow him, the bride entered the room and the group surged toward her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dalton stood next to his brother as the groomsmen and bridesmaids ran through their walk down the aisle. The blonde wedding planner had been all over Jared like a fly on stink. Dalton barely resisted the urge to tell her he’d been in Jared’s bed only hours ago.

Doubt about his plan plagued him. For a moment in the restaurant, Jared seemed relieved when Dalton said he wasn’t seeing anyone. His Army career was all that mattered to Jared. A gay lover had no room in his life.

“Jared, Renee, go.” The wedding planner’s voice echoed in the high-vaulted church as she sent Jared and a pretty brunette bridesmaid down the aisle. “Slowly!”

When Jared started down the aisle with Renee, his limp was more pronounced. Earlier in the lobby, Jared’s slightly hobbled step had been barely noticeable.

Dalton bit his lip. In his haste for revenge, had he injured him? The memory of Jared’s body under him, lips wrapped around his cock, threatened to make things uncomfortable. He pushed the thought aside.

Renee slipped her hand out of the crook of Jared’s arm. With quick glance at her tall escort, she offered Jared more than Dalton wanted to see.

A flare of his anger at Jared shot out to encompass the woman. He schooled his face back to impassive when Jared looked his direction.

Renee's face fell with disappointment when she realized Jared never saw her look. A slight smile teased Dalton's lips.

Why wouldn't either woman want Jared? His tall, lean-muscled body and deep chocolate eyes were irresistible. The whole wounded war hero bit made him that much more tempting.

Dalton forced his gaze away before he revealed his own desire. To complete his revenge, he needed to display indifference not lust.

Jared stepped into place beside him. His slightly musky aroma courtesy of the summer heat sent shivers down Dalton's back.

"We need to talk. Later." Jared's whisper barely reached Dalton's ear. "My room."

Dalton shook his head slightly. He didn't dare look at him. A glance into temptation and he'd lose the battle and probably the war.

"Then I'll come to yours."

"No!" Dalton hissed between clenched teeth.

"We'll see."

Steve's glance kept Dalton from arguing but his heart raced with the idea of being alone with Jared again.

\* \* \* \* \*

For Jared, the rehearsal dinner stretched into eternity. Seated across from Dalton, saying what needed to be said was impossible. On his trip down the aisle, he'd caught his lustful looks. Hope of smoothing over the man's anger emboldened Jared when he had stepped up beside him. Now doubts settled in again.

His annoying dinner companions kept distracting him but not in a good way.

The bride's father, on Jared's right, wanted to talk about the war. A subject Jared wasn't ready to discuss with strangers.

“You boys are doin’ a fine job over there defendin’ freedom.” Mr. Blaise’s Texas twang was almost as irritating as the topic.

“Thank you, sir,” Jared mumbled as he took a sip of water. A sudden whiff of Renee’s floral perfume overwhelmed the aroma of the grilled steak and roasted vegetables. Heat flushed through him as she leaned closer and ran her hand along his thigh.

Not that he was the least bit interested in the woman, any woman, but her long sharp nails raked across the sensitive skin of his scar.

When the waitress set their main courses in front of them, Jared breathed a sigh of relief. Hopefully eating would occupy Renee’s hands and Mr. Blaise’s mouth.

“So Lydia tells me you were injured over there in Iraq.” Renee’s eyelashes fluttered as she glanced sideways. Her gaze gave him the once-over.

Jared didn’t know if she was trying to figure out where his injury was or if she was sizing him up as dessert. “Afghanistan. I wasn’t in Iraq.” Jared peered through the tall flowers of the centerpiece. A fleeting glimpse of Dalton’s eyes teased him.

His breath caught in his throat. Blue turned red. Martinez’s bloodied face flashed in front of him. Instead of the smell of flowers and grilled steak, Jared’s nostrils filled with the copper tang of blood and worse. Sudden nausea rumbled through his stomach. A wave of dizziness caught him off guard. “Excuse me.” A cold sweat beaded his forehead. The chair fell over as he bolted from the table.

In his staggered rush for the bathroom, Jared bumped the edge of a table. Sharp lances of brilliant pain shot through his leg. Grasping the back of a chair, he nearly crumbled until a strong arm caught his waist.

“Bathroom...” Jared managed to gasp.

“Hang on.” Dalton’s baritone voice rumbled against him.

Clinging to the solid body, Jared let him guide him through the restaurant. The nausea eased but his body burned with a combination of embarrassment, pain and



arousal. Bright fluorescent lights blinded him after the dim restaurant. Limping over to the cool porcelain sink, he flipped on the cold tap and dunked his head. Cold water shocked his system and sent a chill shuddering through his body.

“What happened?” Dalton’s words were partially obscured by the running water and Jared’s thundering heartbeat.

He raised his dripping head and stared at the mirror. “Everyone wants to talk about the war.” Instead of his reflection, he saw sandy ground dark with blood and scattered body parts. The smell of death and dying, of gunpowder and burning metal, assaulted his senses. “I’m not ready.” Cupping his hands, he splashed his face. Hot tears mingled with the icy water. “Not ready.”

The creak and clank of the paper towel holder barely registered. Gentle hands dried his hair and neck. The door squeaked open.

“He okay?” Steve’s deep bass asked.

“Yeah, I’ll take care of him. We’ll catch up to you later at the bachelor party.”

A fresh well of tears nearly got past hastily erected defenses.

In spite of his anger, Dalton cared.

“Okay. I’ll stop and check on him before we leave.” The door clicked closed.

The noisy towel dispenser creaked again. This time a warm body pressed against his hip as the rough paper dried his face. Jared straightened and leaned into Dalton.

“Thank you.”

His eyes met Dalton’s. No anger or animosity, only understanding and maybe, Jared hoped, something more.

“Better?”

“Yes.” Jared sighed. “Sorry.”

Dalton’s reflection shook his head. “Nothing to be sorry about. You want to finish dinner?”

“Not if I have to sit with those two again. Renee thinks I’m dessert.”

A soft chuckle teased his ear. "A tasty one at that." Dalton's hips rolled forward against Jared's ass.

The hazy vision of death finished fading into nothing. The sweet heat behind him chased away the horror and left peace in its place. The smell of death morphed into the scent of Dalton mixed with industrial-strength air freshener.

Jared twisted around to face him.

Dalton stood his ground. Pressing forward, he sandwiched Jared between the sink and his hard body. A flash of pink moistened his lips. A half smile reached his eyes, deep blue eyes daring Jared to do something.

So he did. Cupping Dalton's face between his hands, Jared pulled him closer. His tongue traced the tempting lips. Rough edges of stubble outlined the smooth flesh of his mouth.

Warm breath puffed against his skin. Strong arms wrapped Jared in a crushing embrace. Firm lips opened under his teasing tongue. The hint of beer had never tasted so sweet.

Aching arousal tightened his throat. Jared's hips surged forward, meeting Dalton's. The rising bulge in Dalton's slacks sent heat burning through him. "Yes..." His muffled moan spurred bruising kisses and grasping hands.

Hard, kneading fingers grabbed Jared's ass. The rough treatment rubbed against his still sensitive hole.

He fell into Dalton's kisses, starving for the moist heat. His fingers slid around Dalton's head, tightening in the short hair. "Need you," he mumbled through tangled tongues. "Need you."

His chest ached with emotions he couldn't control. He needed to get closer. Lifting his injured leg, he tucked his ankle behind Dalton's thigh. Pain lanced through his thigh as he yanked Dalton tighter against him.

Then Dalton pulled away.

"No..." Jared gripped his neck, leaning forward to follow the retreating lips.

"What's going on here?" Steve's gruff voice cut through the erotic haze clouding Jared's mind.

"Nothing, Steve," Dalton said. "We were about to leave."

His growl softened. "Wanted to let you know we're headed out."

"Thanks. We'll catch up later." Dalton's calm voice didn't ease Jared's anxiety.

The door swooshed and thudded shut.

A burning flush scorched Jared's face. Steve had seen him pawing Dalton as if he were a bitch in heat. Seen him kissing a man, wrapped around a man's body. Jared turned back to the sink, avoiding his reflection and turned on the water. Once again, he splashed the icy coolness against his face.

In all his dreams, his fantasies, no one knew what he wanted except Dalton. No one knew he wanted another man. Reality slapped him with a chill unmatched by the cold swirling water.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dalton watched the slow seductive movements of the stripper he'd hired for his brother's send-off into matrimony. He really hadn't wanted to be so clichéd. Steve didn't care about watching a strange woman getting naked but all his friends expected it.

The woman was beautiful. Muscled but not bulky and with a set of tits she must have had special-ordered. Her body flexed and twisted with the beat of the seductive music.

Most of the men in the dark-paneled private room of the club seemed to be enjoying the show, calling out with rowdy glee when each article of clothing miraculously fell free. Steve did his share to look enthusiastic but Dalton knew his mind was on his bride.

The two of them were a match made in heaven. In spite of their public bickering, Steve and Lydia were as close as two people could be and still have their own bodies.

Dalton glanced over at Jared. He played the game of drooling over the stripper well. His fingers stayed busy tucking money into the woman's ever-decreasing attire.

The scene in the bathroom dropped Dalton's defenses. He should have known his plan of attack would be a complete failure. He'd been in love with Jared as long as he could remember.

Then Dalton had seen Jared's look of horror when Steve caught them. No matter how far Jared had opened the closet on his sexuality, he wasn't ready to come out yet. If anything, he'd slammed the door shut again.

Laughing at something the stripper said, Jared leaned over and whispered in her ear.

She nodded, and with a wide smile, she straddled his lap. With barely a scrap of material covering her nipples, she rubbed her high, tight breasts against Jared's face.

Dalton forced his anger into a small corner of his brain. His laughter joined the rest of the men but disappointment settled heavy in his stomach. Where had he thought the relationship would go?

Jared would heal and go back to his unit. He wouldn't throw ten years of his life away for another man.

Suddenly the room was too small, the air too thin to breathe. Dalton couldn't watch anymore. He leaned over to his brother. "I'll be back."

"Something wrong?" From Steve's knowing expression, he already knew the answer to his question.

"No. Nothing." Dalton threw another glance at Jared.

The stripper, now facing her appreciative crowd, ground her ass into Jared's lap.

Dalton fled the room.

## Chapter Three

Nightfall hadn't cooled the Texas early summer air. Humidity hit Dalton like a tidal wave. Sweat beaded on his forehead and tickled his spine. Anything was better than watching Jared make a fool out of himself.

He stood near the curb without any idea of what to do next. His breath caught in his throat. Cars rolled past, their fumes adding to the heated air. The hotel was a couple of miles away. He'd ridden over with Jared. He couldn't stand the idea of returning with him in the same car. He wasn't sure he wanted to be in the same hotel. A long hot walk or call a cab.

"Hey there."

Dalton turned as Steve's voice startled him. "What are you doing out here? It's your party."

"Worried about you."

"Don't be. I'm okay." Dalton patted his big brother on the shoulder. "Go enjoy your last night of freedom."

"Freedom is just a state of mind." Steve grinned. "If being married to Lydia is slavery, then I'm a willing captive."

"I'm so happy for you." Dalton swallowed past the rising lump in his throat.

"Thank you, little brother." Steve squeezed the back of Dalton's neck. "I want you to be as happy."

"I know. Maybe someday I will." Just not today. And not with Jared.

"How long have you been in love with him?"

Dalton sighed. He should have known he couldn't avoid this conversation. "Too long." He ran his fingers through his sweat-damp hair. "Since before he left for the Army."

"And him?"

"I thought there was something then."

Steve's forehead wrinkled in a frown. "Did something happen?"

"The night before he left, we..." Dalton nodded. "Yes."

"I see." Steve's jaw clenched.

"You don't have to play big brother. It wasn't like that. I started it. He was a little drunk. Afterward, he said nothing could come of it. The next day he...left." Dalton didn't add "without saying goodbye". "I was nineteen. I knew about the military's attitude toward gays but I didn't really understand. He was right. The things I wanted back then could never happen. Still can't."

Steve's frown eased. His voice turned gentle. "But you still want him."

"Yes." In spite of the hopelessness of the situation, admitting his secret desires helped calm Dalton.

"And that's why you avoided him whenever he came home."

"Yes. I should have avoided him this weekend." Dalton wiped a trickle of sweat from his cheek. "But I didn't and now I've ruined your bachelor party. And he still doesn't want me." Dalton looked over his shoulder at the club entrance.

A gruff snort startled him. "Not from what I saw earlier." Steve laughed. "He was so wrapped up in you, he didn't know I walked in."

"I saw his face when he realized you were there." Dalton shook his head. "He can't handle the idea of people knowing he's gay. He's inside getting a lap dance from a stripper to prove his manhood."

"Well, maybe he's a little confused. But I know what I saw." Steve patted Dalton's back. "Little brother, I've never known you to back down when you wanted something."

Don't start now." He canted his head toward the entrance. "Come back inside." A big grin spread across his face. "Besides, there's some bitch making a move on your man."

The laugh bubbled up and escaped. Dalton grabbed his burly brother and hugged him.

Whatever happened this weekend, Dalton didn't want to spend the next ten years filled with regret.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared sat up a little straighter when Dalton walked back into the room. The stripper—Honey—had moved on to another customer. Evidently Jared's lack of enthusiastic participation turned her off.

At one time, a woman built like Honey would have sent his blood boiling and had his cock hard in seconds. Except his attention waned quickly and the relationships never lasted. No woman had ever sent fire through him as Dalton had. When Dalton left the room earlier, any possible interest exited with him.

Dalton walked over to the small bar and poured a drink. Even in the dim light, Jared drank in every detail. The way his jeans hugged his ass, the ripple of muscle teasing through the sweat-dampened cotton shirt.

Jared didn't understand his fascination with Dalton. Other men had discreetly offered. The only temptation was the idea of exorcising the memory of Dalton's body from his mind, not sexual release. He'd acted shocked but never turned in anyone military for it. The offers dropped off.

Now his cock took notice of Dalton's every move. Jared didn't deny his desire. He wanted Dalton. In every way imaginable. Finally honest with himself, he'd wanted him ten years ago. The consequences of his feelings were a different story.

Until Steve walked in to the bathroom, he hadn't thought about what it would mean to be in a relationship with Dalton. Ten years of military life didn't help his

attitude. The service hammered “don’t ask, don’t tell” into his brain. Since his most erotic dreams involved a blue-eyed nineteen-year-old man, he was overly cautious.

His gaze lingered on Dalton. Now the young man had grown up and Jared didn’t think his dreams would ever be of anyone else. Too bad his head couldn’t listen to his heart and get past the prejudice.

Jared rubbed his aching leg. He’d done too much in one day. Painkillers would be on the menu tonight. Of course, there was more than one way to stop the pain. Jared tossed back the last burning dregs of his scotch.

When Dalton returned to his seat, Jared stepped up to the bar to fill his prescription for the evening.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dalton lost track of Jared’s drinks. Each one added to his glassy-eyed daze. His limp became more noticeable and contributed to his stumbling gait.

“He’s blasted,” Steve mumbled. “You should get him back to the hotel before he passes out.”

“The way he is now, I’m afraid he’ll cause a scene.” Dalton sipped his drink. He’d switched to water when he noticed Jared’s rapid descent into an alcoholic stupor. “Everyone will be leaving soon. I’ll rein him in after everyone’s gone.”

“Okay, I’ll start the exodus.” Steve stood and stretched. He turned back to Dalton. “You remember all the times Jared came to visit?”

Confused at the sudden change of topic, Dalton merely nodded.

“Each time he asked about you and each time he couldn’t hide his disappointment when I said you wouldn’t be around.” Steve ruffled Dalton’s hair. “There’s something there. You may have to dig deep to find it but he might be worth it.”

“More words of wisdom from my big brother?” Dalton smiled to take the edge off his words. “Thanks.”



A flurry of goodbyes, backslapping and handshakes ensued. The happy groom left with a number of his guests.

When Dalton turned around to look for his drunken lover, he was gone. And so was Honey.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared stumbled through the hotel lobby. Without Honey wrapped around his waist, he'd never have made it to the elevator.

Once the doors closed, Jared found himself against the wall with a very determined woman all over him. Her spicy scent was a mix of sweat, perfume and arousal.

"We need to get things jumpstarted here, sweetie." Her soft hand slipped inside the front of his jeans. "Seems like you've had a little too much to drink. Junior doesn't want to come out and play."

What could he say? Drink had nothing to do with his lack of enthusiasm. If Dalton had him pinned in an elevator, his cock would have no trouble getting into the mood. Thinking about him got things started.

"Oh, that's better." The door slid open behind her.

Relief washed over him as she removed her hand from his jeans.

Insistent hands tugged him out of the elevator. "Which room?"

"Six oh three..." His room where the bedspread still smelled of sex and Dalton.

He didn't want her but he couldn't have Dalton. The reality of being with him had never intruded in his fantasies. People would know about him, about his desires. His mother, his sister... What would they think? His step slowed down the long hall.

While he was away, every letter from his mother mentioned grandchildren and carrying on the family name. His baby sister looked up to him. Nine years her senior, he'd helped raise her, put her through school. What would Sarah do if she knew the things he wanted to do with another man?

His career would be over. He might even lose what little benefits he'd have from a medical discharge. Risking everything over a man?

Too soon they arrived at his room.

Hot lips sucked on his ear. "Where's your key, darlin'? Do I need to search you?" Her inane giggle turned his stomach. Sloppy kisses trailed across his neck. Fingers dug into his back pocket.

Reaching behind him, he grabbed her wrists. "Look, maybe this was a bad idea."

"Don't worry about Junior. I'll get him in the mood in no time."

The sound of the elevator spurred Jared to fish his keycard out of his back pocket. The hallway was too public.

"Now we're talkin', baby." Honey's sultry croon irritated him more than her wandering hands.

The door slammed shut behind them and Honey turned into an octopus. In a flurry of activity, her fingers opened the buttons down the front of his shirt. She didn't stop there. She attacked his fly with similar enthusiasm.

"Stop, Honey." His hands caught her wrists before she could get inside his briefs. "I said this was a bad idea." Alcohol slurred his words.

"You seemed anxious enough earlier." Her full, lipstick-smearred mouth pouted.

"Yes. But I've had time to think and to sober up a little. It wouldn't be right." Jared loosened his hold on her.

She stepped back. "There's someone you're being faithful to?"

"Kind of but not really."

A soft smile quirked the side of her mouth. "You should tell her how you feel. Lost chances have a way of not coming back."

"Yeah. And I've already blown it twice."

Honey sighed. "Too bad. We could've had some fun." She pointed at the bathroom door. "Mind if I use the facilities?"

“Go ahead.” He didn’t bother to button his shirt or his jeans. He used the tail of his shirt to wipe Honey’s lipstick from his face. The world spun around him. Scotch and the remnants of this afternoon’s Vicodin didn’t mix well. He leaned against the rough-spangled wall and closed his eyes.

The toilet flushed followed by the sound of running water. She’d better hurry or he’d pass out before she left.

As Honey emerged, a sharp knock sounded from the hall. “I’ll get it on my way out.” She leaned into him and kissed him. “Too bad things didn’t work out different. Hope you get the woman you’re after. She’d be a fool not to want you.” Her hand caressed his jaw as her thumb wiped the new smear of lipstick near his lips.

“Yeah, thanks.” If only it were a woman who complicated his life.

The rapping on the door grew louder. Honey walked away shaking her shapely ass. When she opened the door, Dalton’s glowering face showed over her head.

Jared couldn’t make out his growling words.

“Don’t worry, darlin’. I was just leaving.” She looked over her shoulder at Jared with a puzzled smile. “Goodbye.” She slipped around Dalton and was gone.

She knew. Whatever Dalton said to her, she’d figured out Jared’s dirty little secret.

Anger and embarrassment warred to claim the flush running through him. “What do you want?” His words slurred and his eyes refused to stay open long enough to glare.

“What did you think she’d do for you?” Dalton slammed the door. “Allow you to reclaim your heterosexuality?”

Jared forced one eye open. Dalton’s angry voice matched the flare of heat in his eyes.

“None of your damned business.” Jared pushed off the wall only to have Dalton knock him back. The hard wall caught him with a thud. Anger fueled his strength and he struck out, hitting Dalton on the chest.

Dalton stumbled backward several feet. As soon as he regained his balance, he lunged. Pinning Jared's arms to the wall, Dalton pressed his forehead against Jared's. "Why did you bring her back here?" he growled.

Jared melted against the wall. His eyes drifted shut again. Dalton's closeness proved "Junior's" reluctance had nothing to do with alcohol. Heat crept under his skin and threatened to ignite a blaze he'd never control. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. I want you to say it." Hot breath whispered against Jared's face.

His eyes flew open. Intense blue so close his eyes crossed to focus. Jared struggled to free his wrists. The scotch had drained his coordination and sapped his strength. "Fuck you."

"You want to. Don't you? Or maybe you want me to fuck you again." Dalton didn't give him time to answer. With a twist of his head, Dalton's mouth covered Jared's.

Rough kisses, full of anger and passion. Jared stopped struggling and melded into the heat of Dalton's body. Opening his mouth for Dalton's attacking tongue, Jared fell willingly into a furnace of desire.

The hard ridge of Dalton's cock thrust into Jared's groin. With a muffled moan, Jared surged forward.

Dalton freed Jared's wrists. Fingers yanked his unbuttoned shirt off his shoulders and down his arms. Calloused hands slid up his back then down again to his ass. A hard jerk forward and their cocks clashed through their clothes. Rough kneading stung his already aching passage.

"You want me, don't you?" Dalton's lips moved against Jared's. "Tell me. I want to hear you say it."

Jared slid his hands up Dalton's body to his head. Pulling his face toward him, he tried to shut him up with a hard kiss.

"I'll walk out of here unless you say it. Tell me you want me." Dalton thrust hard, pressing Jared tighter against the rough wall. His hands still grasped his ass.

“Yes,” Jared whispered. He wanted him—now, forever, and in every way possible.  
“Yes...”

Dalton pulled away.

“I said ‘yes’, damn it!” Jared clutched Dalton’s shirt.

With an almost feral smile, Dalton nodded. “I heard you.” He slid to his knees with the same grace he had ten years ago.

Jared’s gaze followed him. The tip of Jared’s cock peeked out of the waistband of his briefs. Liquid pooled in the slit.

Dalton leaned forward. His tongue flickered against the moisture.

Jared’s head bounced back against the wall when Dalton’s lips circled the crown. His hands fluttered against Dalton’s hair then clenched. Knocking his knuckles on the cool wall behind him, he groaned.

Fingers curled in the waist of his jeans. Cool air swirled around his aching cock as Dalton tugged his jeans and briefs down his thighs. With his eyes closed, Jared bit back a moan as wet heat engulfed his flesh.

Alcohol mingled his memories into the reality of a hot tongue teasing him. So many nights he’d dreamed of Dalton’s aggressive seduction and awakened to sticky heat lining his stomach. Jared hadn’t objected back then any more than he was now.

The air-conditioned room didn’t faze the warmth flowing through his body. Even the rough hand against his wounded thigh couldn’t distract the pleasure coursing through his veins.

The wet heat disappeared. “Say it again.”

“I want you.” The words he couldn’t say ten years ago.

Dalton’s mouth closed around him again. A long stroke deep into the tightness of his throat. His tongue teased up to the crown. “Again...”

“Want you...” Jared mumbled. “Want you.” He kept repeating the two words. Long strokes matched the cadence of his words.

With Jared on the edge of climax, Dalton stopped.

“Noooo...” His hands reached for Dalton’s hair. Casting his glance down, he met Dalton’s eyes. “I want you.” The words didn’t spur his lover back into action.

“Why?”

“Wha—”

“Why do you want me?” Dalton stood slowly. His gaze locked with Jared’s. “Why do you want me?”

The words were on the tip of his tongue. All he had to do was open his mouth. He couldn’t deny he loved Dalton, maybe always had, but his voice wouldn’t work.

## **Chapter Four**

Dalton saw Jared's answer in the chocolate brown eyes. His inability to say the words confirmed Dalton's fears. Jared would never admit he was gay. This weekend, tonight, was all Dalton would ever get from him unless he was willing to be a secret.

He nodded more to himself than to Jared. Sliding his arms around his reluctant lover, he whispered a kiss against his lips. Slow gentle nips and Jared welcomed his tongue. If tonight was all he had, then he'd make it enough for a lifetime.

His fingers caressed the tight skin layered over taut stomach muscles. Shivers transmitted through the light touch.

Jared's hands moved to Dalton's hips. His fingers trailed around to his fly. Timid and hesitant, he worked open the button and zipper. Trembling hands slid inside Dalton's jeans and around to his ass. The soft cotton of his briefs separated his skin from Jared's caress.

"I want you too," Dalton whispered.

A muffled groan and a hard kiss were Jared's only response.

Dalton pulled his reluctant lover across the room. With his jeans around his thighs, Jared's steps were slow. Turning him, Dalton pushed him down on the bed. He knelt at his feet. Starting with his shoes, Dalton took his time undressing Jared. His hands coaxed him up on the bed, the covers still ruffled from earlier.

As he stripped off his own clothes, he burned the sight of his lover into his memory. A lean body, his chest was well defined and scattered with sparse dark brown hair. A thin line of fuzz started below his navel and thickened as the trail headed south. His cock, thick and long, wept for attention. Long, well-toned legs completed the package.

Dalton's gaze swept back up until he reached Jared's left thigh. A long angry red scar, jagged and thick, marred his leg. Dalton traced the thickened skin with the tip of his finger.

He snatched his hand away when a shudder swept through his lover.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No." Jared rose up on his elbows and looked down at his leg. "The scar itself is sensitive to touch but doesn't hurt. The pain is from the damaged muscles and nerves."

Dalton couldn't resist retracing the line, first with his finger then with his lips. His gaze darted between Jared's face and the jagged wound.

"A mortar hit a vehicle near my team. Most of the injuries came from shrapnel from the truck." Jared's eyes glazed over as he spoke. His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "Patterson was between me and Martinez. The two of them shielded me from the worst of it."

Dalton felt Jared's shaking before he saw it. He shifted up on the bed and slipped his arms around him.

"Patterson was screaming. One leg looked like shredded meat. The other cut to the bone." His body jerked with tremors. "He's just a kid. Jonesy managed to get a tourniquet on him. Martinez... There was nothing we could do." Tears leaked out of tightly shut eyes.

Wrapping Jared in a tight hug, Dalton held on.

"He was going home in a few weeks. His enlistment was up and his wife wanted him home. He had kids, little kids."

"It's not your fault." Dalton couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I was in command. They were my men." The bed vibrated with Jared's shaking body.

Dalton leaned over him and grabbed the edge of the bedspread. Yanking the material over his shaking lover, he pulled him on his side and held him chest to chest.



“Still not your fault. You were doing the job you were sent there to do. You couldn’t have known what would happen.”

Jared’s arms slid around him. Hot tears coated Dalton’s neck.

“Martinez had so much to live for.”

“So do you. You can’t let guilt for surviving ruin your life.” Warm kisses covered his tear-dampened skin.

“I want you.”

Dalton almost missed Jared’s hoarse whisper. “You have me.” He pulled away so his hand could get to Jared’s chin. Cupping his lover’s face, he kissed away the streaks of tears. “You have me,” he repeated. His lips found Jared’s. Salty sweetness and hungry heat overwhelmed him.

Jared pushed Dalton onto his back. The lean body hid a surprising amount of weight as he settled on top of him. Jared’s flagging erection grew hard again. Hot flesh thrust against Dalton’s stomach. Cocks bumped together and Jared settled into a fast rhythm. Pre-come eased the friction.

Ten years ago, Dalton had been the one on top, pressing into the tight muscled stomach in frantic haste toward climax before Jared came to his senses. Then he’d wanted more but had been afraid to ask. Things change in ten years.

Hard kisses and frenzied thrusts pushed Dalton toward the edge of bliss. His heart ached knowing tomorrow would be the end of his fantasy. This time he wasn’t afraid to speak. “Fuck me.”

Jared’s movement faltered. His mouth ravaged Dalton’s lips. “Yes...”

Warm kisses fluttered over Dalton’s chin and down his throat. Jared paused at his neck. Sharp sucking then soft laving soothed the tender skin.

Dalton rolled his head back into the pillow, giving Jared better access. His hands rubbed up and down Jared’s biceps.

His lover scooted down farther. His mouth worked a sensitive nipple. First sweet suckling then teeth grazed the turgid nub of flesh.

Sharp spikes of pleasure shot through him. "God, yes..." Dalton gasped for air.

A soft chuckle teased his skin before Jared moved to the other nipple. Mirroring his treatment, his mouth tormented Dalton.

Anticipation and disappointment surged through him when Jared moved down his abdomen. A flurry of kisses traversed his stomach. A hot curious tongue dipped into his navel.

Dalton arched up off the bed at the teasing torture. His hands grabbed Jared's head.

"A little ticklish there?" Jared's tongue stretched back toward his stomach but Dalton restrained his head.

"Yes, and payback is a bitch."

Jared laughed. His whole demeanor was so different from only moments ago. His eyes sparkled before he lowered his head to finish his explorations.

Teasing kisses covered Dalton's lower stomach. His cock throbbed with excitement. Jared's chin brushed the tip. His rough five o'clock shadow only added to Dalton's need.

"Touch me..."

A calloused hand circled his cock. The tight squeeze and a long stroke nearly ended Dalton's wait. His hands pushed Jared's head toward his aching flesh.

"Anxious?" Mischievous brown eyes sparkled.

"Yes!"

Moist heat and a teasing tongue closed around the crown. Gentle suckling alternated with hard, deep strokes. Teeth raked lightly along his shaft. The moist depth left him. A flurry of kisses circled his flesh and then down the thick vein running the length. Nibbling lips teased his sac. Sucking heat engulfed one tight ball. Jared's tongue laved the flesh.

Fingers slid down behind Dalton's balls. One pressed against his hole.

"Lube?"

"What?" Dalton's attention snapped to Jared's voice.

"Lube. Did you bring any?"

"Fuck!"

Jared laughed. "I take that as a no." He sucked his finger into his mouth. With spit to ease the breach, he pushed against the tight pucker.

"Oh yes..." Dalton relaxed into the intrusion and the heat of stretching muscle.

"Too tight. We need lube if I'm going to get my dick in there."

"Damn." Dalton knew exactly where he'd left the tube...in his room. "Lotion. There should be some hand lotion in the bathroom."

Dalton winced when Jared slid his finger out of him. He already missed the heat.

Jared limped toward the bathroom. A stagger threw him off balance.

Dalton sat up. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I had a lot to drink tonight, remember?" Jared disappeared into the bathroom.

With a snort of laughter, Dalton flopped down on the bed. A shiver swept through him that had nothing to do with the temperature in the room.

"Yes! We're in business." He came out of the bathroom with the lotion raised in triumph. His grin fell from his face. "Condom?"

"Shit." After this afternoon, Dalton never thought he'd be in Jared's bed again. He didn't usually walk around prepared for sex.

"I'm not even going to ask you why you were carrying lube and a condom this afternoon."

"Good." Dalton sat up again.

Jared crawled up the bed, straddling Dalton's legs. "I'm clean, you know. The Army's real careful about that sort of thing."

Dalton's disappointment faded when he realized what Jared meant. "I am too. I mean I've been tested. Clean." He'd never gone bareback with anyone. His previous relationships had never attained that level of trust. Slowly he nodded.

A warm body knocked him back to the bed. Rough stubble grated together with hard kisses.

Jared started retracing the slow journey down Dalton's body.

"Oh no you don't." Dalton's hands pushed Jared's shoulders. "You can't start over. Get back to where you were."

Laughing, Jared fluttered quick kisses the length of Dalton's torso. He knelt between Dalton's legs.

Dalton bent his legs at the knees, planting his feet on either side of Jared. "Get a move on, will you?"

Jared made slow work of opening the tiny bottle. His teasing grin kept Dalton from being too impatient.

Squeezing a little in his palm, Jared set the bottle on the bed. He rolled his fingers through the bluish-green lotion.

Dalton pushed up on his feet to give Jared easy access. The slick cold finger circled his opening before pressing inside.

Closing his eyes, Dalton gave in to the cold heat and the inevitable burn. He hadn't been with anyone in several years. And this wasn't just anyone.

A second finger pushed in beside the first. Jared's fingers scissored from side to side then up and down.

A jolt of pleasure shot through Dalton. Then another as Jared brushed his prostate again. "Oh yeah..." He pumped his hips against Jared's hand. "More."

A third finger answered his whispered request.

“Feels good—” He gasped when Jared curled his fingers into his prostate. Again, sharp pleasure spiked through his body. His cock jerked with each brushing stroke.

Then emptiness. His eyes flew open.

Jared watched him with heavy-lidded eyes. The little bottle of lotion in one hand, he coated his cock with the other. With a final squeeze and tap of the bottle, Jared tossed the empty container over his shoulder. It clattered against the wall before landing with a soft thud on the carpet.

Dalton snatched a pillow from next to him. Raising his hips, he stuffed it under his ass. “Fuck me.”

A slick finger teased his hole then disappeared. With his hand wrapped around his cock, Jared eased forward until the blunt tip pressed against Dalton’s hole.

Exhaling, Dalton relaxed his body. Heat pushed inside. The tight ring stretched around the crown of Jared’s cock. Taking a deep breath, Dalton exhaled and pushed. The thick head popped past the muscle. One more breath and Jared slid deep.

“Oh fuck. You’re so tight, so hot...” Jared’s forehead beaded with sweat. “I want... I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. No. It was good. Too good.” Jared leaned forward, his hands pressed down on Dalton’s thighs.

“So move. Make me feel good.”

Jared’s strokes were short and slow. Each brushed Dalton’s prostate but not enough.

“Faster.”

“Can’t. I’ll come.”

“Jared.” His lover’s eyes opened. Sweet brown eyes glazed with pleasure stared at Dalton with a tinge of fear. “Fuck me hard and fill me.”

The lines around Jared's eyes relaxed. His gaze fixed on Dalton, his body began to move. Long slow strokes turned into pounding heat. Pleasure flooded Dalton's body.

Dalton reached for his own cock. A few quick pulls and his seed spurted across his stomach and chest. Orgasmic pleasure contracted through his body, his ass clenched on Jared's cock.

"Oh shit!" Jared's body jerked against Dalton. His eyes rolled back and his mouth fell open.

Warmth spread through Dalton. Hot seed slicked the tight fit around Jared's flesh.

Jared fell forward, his mouth attacking Dalton's. "Yes... So good." Mumbled words lost in kisses. "Love you..."

Another form of pleasure swelled Dalton's heart. "Love you," he whispered.

## Chapter Five

The ringing phone was not helping Jared's headache. Sandpaper lined his tongue and the taste of day-old scotch nearly gagged him. His wounded thigh burned with overuse. Another Vicodin day ahead.

The bed dipped beside him and the incessant trilling of the phone stopped mid-ring. "Hello."

Memory flooded back into his aching brain. Dalton... He was still here and he'd answered his phone. In his room. Sounding half asleep. Fuck.

His heart took up a staccato beat and his chest tightened.

"Yeah, okay. I'll tell him. See you later." A soft chuckle. "Yeah, thanks." The phone clattered against the base. Dalton rolled toward him. "Breakfast." His warm body snuggled up against Jared. "Steve wants to know if we want breakfast."

"Steve?" It didn't matter that Steve had caught them in the bathroom yesterday. Finding Dalton half asleep in his room would confirm what Jared needed to hide.

"Yeah, you remember him. My brother, the groom. The big breakfast this morning since the wedding's at noon." Dalton propped his head on his hand, elbow planted near Jared's head.

"But he called my room for you?" Panic threatened to gain control. Jared swallowed hard against rising nausea.

"No. He called your room for you but I answered." Dalton's eyes narrowed. "What's wrong? Hangover making breakfast not a good idea?"

"He knows you spent the night here. What if..."

"Yes." Dalton ran his hand across Jared's chest. "What about it? He's not going to shoot you for messing with his brother."

The heat of Dalton's hand resurrected the memory of last night, of the uninhibited passion brought on by need and a great deal of alcohol. A flush of shame swept through him. He'd told Dalton he loved him. In his drunken lust-driven desire, he'd said what he could never say.

"I can't be gay."

Dalton's sleepy affectionate gaze turned hard. Blue steel flared with anger. "I've got news for you, buddy. You are gay. Nothing you say will ever change that." He rolled out of the bed. The compact muscles of his body rippled as he gathered his clothes from the floor. "I can't believe this is happening again," he mumbled. "I can't believe I let you get under my skin again!"

Jared sat up in the bed. He wanted to explain but words wouldn't form. Instead he watched Dalton yank on his jeans and shirt.

Grabbing his shoes, Dalton didn't bother to put them on. "You're really fucked up. I love you. I think I always have. And I know you feel the same about me. How often do you think a chance like this comes along?"

Jared swallowed against a lump in his throat. He couldn't do it any more than he could explain why. He shook his head.

With an exasperated sigh, Dalton stalked toward the door. "Fuck you, Jared."

The slamming door echoed in Jared's mind. He couldn't be what Dalton needed. No matter how much he wanted to be with him, Jared couldn't be gay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dalton darted across the hall to his room. His chest ached with pent-up emotion. Last night, he thought... He should have known better.

Drunk and in the middle of coming, Jared said something he didn't mean. How many people did that? Dalton snorted. Except with Jared's guard down, Dalton wanted to believe him. He should have known better.



As soon as he could leave this afternoon, he was out of here. He refused to spend his time and energy moping over Jared North. Dalton never had trouble finding dates when he wanted. His memory of Jared intruded whenever anyone got too close. Most of the time dating wasn't worth the trouble. Now he had his answer and he needed to move on with his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jared stood against a wall, nursing his headache with a little hair of the dog. He sipped the smooth scotch as dancing couples gyrated in the middle of the ballroom dance floor to rock music courtesy of a local band.

The wedding had gone off without a hitch. Steve and Lydia whirled around the dance floor oblivious to the crowd around them. Physically an odd matched pair, Steve towered over his blonde-haired petite bride. The obvious emotion between the newly married couple set a lump in Jared's throat that wouldn't go away.

To be so happy with someone... His gaze sought out Dalton. The man hadn't said a word to him since he stormed out of his room this morning. Of course Jared hadn't attended the breakfast. His stomach had objected at the idea. Even more, he hadn't been able to face Steve yet.

On the limo ride to the church, Steve had filled the uncomfortable lulls in conversation with praises for his bride. Once there, Jared hadn't seen Dalton again until he appeared at the altar next to Steve.

Most of the wedding was a blur of black tuxes, white and blue dresses. The bridesmaids' gowns were almost the exact same shade of dark blue as Dalton's eyes.

Now, with an ache in his chest his hangover couldn't explain, Jared wished the whole thing were over. As one of the groomsmen, he couldn't leave until the end.

His gaze finally found the sandy-haired figure. Dalton stood near the bar laughing with the bride's parents. His easygoing stance and smiling face were so different from this morning's pain-stricken frown.

Jared closed his eyes. The laughing eyes from last night would haunt him. The pain in his chest graduated to his throat. Another sip of scotch didn't clear the tightness.

The fast-paced music changed to a slow ballad. Dalton walked through the crowd and laid claim to the bride. His slow graceful movements mesmerized Jared. Dalton's large hand cupped Lydia's back. His other held her hand in an easy grip.

"How're you feeling?" Steve's voice interrupted his musing.

A flush spread through him. "Better." Jared dared a glance at his friend. "Sorry about the party last night. Guess I made a fool of myself."

"Not really. But you could be now."

Jared tore his gaze from Dalton's dancing form. "What do you mean?" He hoped he wasn't going to get the "don't ask, don't tell" lecture from his oldest friend. His career was the only thing he had left. Unless the Army decided to put him out on disability anyway.

"You know, at one time in my life I thought the world revolved around my career. Carrying on Dad's business after he died was all I could think about." A fond smile graced his lips. His eyes searched out his bride on the dance floor.

Jared frowned at the topic, not sure where Steve was going. His gaze followed Steve's and focused on Dalton.

"I almost lost Lydia. She's not a woman to take neglect well. We had a spectacular fight." Steve laughed. "Not that any of our fights are tame. The woman can be a real hellion. She won't take shit off anyone. Especially me." He sighed. "That night she told me I'd end up old and alone with only legal briefs to keep me company. This was Dad's firm. He was the foundation. I had a duty to see it carry on. I nearly let her walk out."

A huge hand grasped Jared's shoulder. "Careers, you can always start over, Jared. But someone who fills the gaps in your soul... That only happens once in a lifetime. Think about what you'd be giving up. Think hard, my friend."

Jared's eyes focused on the tall sandy-haired man dancing. His mind echoed four of Steve's words. *Gaps in your soul.*

The Army had been in his blood since he was a child. He'd never considered another career. With single-minded purpose, he'd worked toward his goal. Now it seemed insignificant compared to life without Dalton.

It wasn't until much later he remembered setting down his drink and walking toward the dance floor. Dalton's eyes locked with his as he wound his way through the slow-moving crowd.

Stopping behind Lydia, Jared drew a deep breath. A gentle tap on her shoulder caught her attention.

Her face glowed with happiness over her special day. She turned toward him, raising her arm so Jared could dance with her.

He smiled and shook his head.

Jared didn't think it was possible for her smile to be brighter as she stepped out of the way.

Dalton's closed expression cracked slightly. His lips quirked and a gentle frown creased his forehead.

Jared's heart beat in his throat. This was his life. What he wanted should have some say in the way he lived it. His family, friends, career, none of them made him as happy as one short weekend with Dalton. He had the right to decide his life's path. Right now the only thing he wanted, had wanted for over ten years, stood in front of him wearing a tux and a puzzled frown.

With a slight nod and a grin, Jared moved closer to Dalton. His arms didn't know where to go with another man. "Who leads?"

A tight hug eliminated his confusion about many things. The heat of Dalton's body combined with a flush of embarrassment. Jared pushed away the doubt. His gaze locked with Dalton's. "I'm sorry."

Blue eyes clouded briefly. "It's okay."

"I love you."

Dalton's eyes closed as he drew in a deep breath. "I love you too."

The music didn't matter, the onlookers faded away. Jared leaned into the hard body. His lips found comfort against Dalton's. Teasing tongues met. Rejoicing in the heat of his lover's embrace, Jared held on to his future with both hands.

## **About the Author**

By day, Shayla Kersten is a mild-mannered accountant. By night, she's a writer of sexy romances. Torn between genres, Shayla writes erotic stories about hot heroes and their sexy women as well as hot men and their passionate heroes.

A native of Arkansas, Shayla spent four years in the Army as a missile specialist, stationed in Germany and Oklahoma. After her enlistment was up, she spent eleven years in New York City taking a bite out of the Big Apple. Even her love of theatre and the nightlife of the big city couldn't cure terminal homesickness for the Natural State. In 1995 she returned to her roots in Arkansas.

Shayla now divides her time between her mother, her spoiled-rotten dogs, her dratted day job and her obsession — writing. And no, her mother doesn't know what she writes. That's between Shayla, her dogs and her readers!

Shayla welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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