



SAGE WHISTLER

All I Want
for
Christmas

Sometimes what you're looking for is right in front of you.

All I Want for Christmas

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Daniel has been in love with his boss, Jacy DeSalvo, for nine long years. Back then he was little more than a boy, but even as a man grown Daniel hasn't been able to move on.

Jacy's wife Marissa is a cheating harridan who trapped her husband with claims of a false pregnancy. Jacy has always been a pushover until proof hits him square in the face. He walks in on his wife having sex with a stranger in, of all places, a bar. □ □

Things only get more complicated when Daniel is injured in a scuffle outside the very same bar, and has to come live with Jacy. Tensions are high and lust is rampant. And it seems inevitable that with this much testosterone in one place that something is bound to happen.

The only question is how Jacy will handle his new found interest in a man he's always seen but never noticed. And now that Marissa's gone Daniel is going to have to take his heart in hand if he's ever going to get what he's been hankering after, for Christmas.

WARNING. THIS BOOK CONTAINS: EXPLICIT SEX SCENES, GRAPHIC LANGUAGE.

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All I Want for Christmas

By Sage Whistler

Love is friendship set on fire.

--Jeremy Irons

Dedication

Acknowledgement

CHAPTER 1

Twelve days until Christmas...

Marissa stood in the doorway, one hand on her hip, the other had its long, red nails tapping impatiently on the doorjamb. One golden eyebrow arched higher than the other. “You aren’t wearing that are you?”

Jacy turned from the mirror. His big, square hands paused in the middle of buttoning his shirt. “What?”

“Don’t you have anything red? I’m wearing red tonight, and blue is like the complete contrast of that. We are going as a couple, Jacy. You could at least make it look like we’re one.”

Jacy shook his head, unable to believe what he was hearing. Lately Marissa had been making a big deal out of the smallest things. She’d chewed him a new one for forgetting to put his razor back in its case, for leaving a glob of toothpaste in the sink, and failing to have her car washed.

Now she looked ready to draw blood for the simple fact that he was wearing a blue shirt when she was wearing red. Instead of arguing like he knew she wanted, Jacy went to the closet and started rifling through its contents for a red shirt. He didn’t particularly care for the color—a fact that she was well aware of, but he would wear it to make her happy.

A few minutes later, he came across a red shirt. It was one he hadn’t worn since college and looked to be about one size too small. His shoulders had filled out in the past five years, and

the sleeves were probably going to be a bit short, but he was wearing a jacket over it, so it would do.

It also needed ironing, he noticed, placing the hanger on a doorknob while he went off to get the ironing board and iron out of the storage closet. When he returned with the items in hand, he found Marissa sitting on the edge of their bed. Her legs were crossed and her foot was bobbing in the air in impatience. As he predicted, she waited until he started ironing, to start in on him again.

“Damn it, Jacy, you’re so slow. We’re going to be late, because you take a freakin’ hour to get dressed and ready.”

Jacy’s hand clenched the hanger hard enough to bend the wire frame. His shoulders tensed, but he said nothing. She knew it took about thirty minutes to dry his hair. It was thick and dark, and reached to his waist.

Marissa snorted. “You should cut your hair. It makes you look like an Indian chief or something.”

That did it! “I am *Native American* Marissa!”

“*And* part Latino”, Marissa shouted, “And don’t you take that tone of voice with me Jacy Alan DeSalvo.”

Jacy ground his teeth together and kept on ironing. “I’m not getting into this with you.”

“Oh ho, now that would be a change. You haven’t been getting into anything with me lately.”

Jacy whirled on her. “Is that what this is about, sex?”

Marissa hopped to her feet. She didn’t seem the slightest bit intimidated by the fact that her husband towered over her petite five-foot-five frame by over half a foot. “No, this is about

you being at the damned veterinarian's office more than you are here with me. You care more for your cats and dogs and gerbils than your wife."

"That's not true!" It wasn't true. He loved Marissa... at least until lately he had thought he did. Even so, he was sure he'd never treated her with anything less than the utmost respect. Which looking back on all the things she had done to him was more than she deserved. They had only been married for three years, and the first year had been great. After the initial shock of being coaxed into marriage by the lie about her pregnancy, he had forgiven her and resolved to make the best of their life together. He'd spent every spare hour he had with her, lavishing her with affection and gifts. As the leading veterinarian and owner of his office, his job had called him away at odd hours of the day, but he'd still made time for Marissa. That was until she began to show her true colors. The sweet, humorous woman he'd fallen in love with had gone and become a harping Valkyrie. Nothing that he did could please her. He'd known she'd been something of a perfectionist before they got married, but she'd assured him that it was only about her work. Then her need for perfection started to spill over into their home life.

She'd boss him around all day if he stayed home, so he left at every opportunity. He'd tried to talk to her about it, but she never made an effort to change. He was starting to believe that she couldn't. So, this was his last ditch effort to make her happy. Jacy had been doing everything she asked without fail, pampering her, and not arguing when she got into one of her moods, but a man could only take so much.

He would never hurt Marissa. Jacy was a big man, and he was very careful with his strength, and that was a weapon Marissa wielded at every opportunity.

Marissa placed her small palms in the center of his chest and shoved him. She couldn't possibly budge him, but he stepped back nonetheless. "It is true Jacy. You are never here for me!"

Jacy caught her small hands before she could shove him again. "Rissa stop! Listen to me. I've been really busy lately, but I'm trying, okay?"

His cell phone went off on the bed, the vibrator was on and the cell started to dance across the comforter. Marissa jerked her hands away. "Don't answer it."

Jacy shook his head. "It could be an emergency."

Marissa folded her arms over her chest. "Fine."

Cautiously he moved around Marissa, not knowing what that glimmer in her eyes meant. Last time it had meant one of her pumps sailing across the room and nailing him in the head.

He grabbed the cell phone, flipped it open, and pressed it to his ear. "Dr. DeSalvo here."

"Jacy, thank God! It's Rita, I'm down at St. Mary's Hospital."

Jacy felt his heart lurch into his ribcage. "What? What's wrong?!"

"Oh, sorry, it's not life threatening or anything. Daniel got into a scuffle down at The White Horse," she said, referring to the local bar. "Some guys jumped him on the way to his car and banged him up pretty bad. He's not going to be able to live on his own for a few days with his arm in a sling and his left eye swollen shut. Besides that the sheriff is worried there might be a repeat offense."

Jacy interjected a question when Rita paused, "What was the fight over?"

"They were gaybashers, Jacy. Those stupid assholes jumped Daniel because of his sexual preference." He could hear the venom in Rita's voice from over the phone.

His fist tightened on the phone as his own anger swelled.

“He’s going to need a place to stay for a couple of days; someone to look after him, until he’s on his feet again. I would do it if I didn’t have two little girls to look after, and he doesn’t have any family that will take him in.”

Jacy knew what Rita was alluding to before she asked. It was common knowledge among his staff that Daniel was gay, and he didn’t have anyone working for him that objected to having Daniel around. Daniel was a good kid. He’d worked for Jacy for nine years now, first as a volunteer in his teens and then as an assistant while he took some classes at a local community college. “He can stay here,” Jacy said without hesitation. He loved Daniel like a member of his family. He would do almost anything for him.

Rita’s sob of relief both surprised and terrified him. Was Daniel that bad off? “Thank you,” Rita sniffed.

His shirt sleeve was tugged, and he turned around to see Marissa glaring at him. “Who can stay here?”

He mouthed to her the words ‘not now,’ and turned away from her accusing gaze.

“It’s okay, Rita, don’t cry. When is he being released?”

“Sorry Jacy, I’m just really upset. You should see his face.” Jacy heard Rita moving around and then faintly the sound of her using a tissue. When she spoke again, she sounded a lot more composed. “The doctor said he can go home today if someone comes and picks him up. The sheriff said the same thing. He doesn’t want Daniel to be alone.”

Jacy nodded, although he knew Rita couldn’t see him. “I’m on my way.” He knew from experience that the hospital was a depressing place to be. He didn’t like staying in one—which was ironic considering his work—so he guessed that Daniel would be ready to go as well.

“I’ll stay here until you arrive,” Rita said, then said goodbye and hung up.

Jacy flipped his cell closed and slid it into his back pocket. He turned around and nearly ran into Marissa.

“What was that all about? Don’t tell me you’re not going to my Christmas office party.” Her little hands were resting on her slim hips. “Well?”

“One of my friends is in the hospital, and he’s going to need a place to stay for a while. I was on the phone with Rita and I told her that he could stay here.”

“Here? You didn’t ask me!”

Taking a deep breath for patience, Jacy speared a hand through his hair to keep from wrapping it around Marissa’s arm and tossing her onto the bed—out of his way. “And you didn’t ask me when your best friend stayed over a week *with* her boyfriend.”

The little harpy didn’t have a comeback for that one. Instead her rouge colored lips curled into a pout. Honestly, he was beginning to question what had attracted him to Marissa in the first place. Sure, she was pretty, but he wasn’t a guy who stayed with a woman because of her looks. “I have to go Marissa. I’m sorry I’ll miss your office party, but this is an emergency.” Not waiting for her to think up a nasty remark, Jacy stepped around her. He grabbed his car keys off the dresser and headed for the door.

Before he could reach the steps that lead to the first floor he heard Marissa shouting after him. “I’m going to the party anyway! Maybe someone there will know how to show me a good time.”

His jaw clenched, but he bit back the cutting remark that sprung to his lips. Let her bring another man into his house if she wanted to. Daniel wouldn’t be the only one visiting the hospital.

Jacy was driving toward St. Mary's Hospital when it occurred to him that he was angrier about the prospect of Marissa breaking their marriage vows than he was about her stepping out on him. The problem was, she didn't have the power to inflict damage to his heart, not like she'd had two years ago. His heart had grown hard and cold toward Marissa. Jacy reached down and twisted the knob to the volume. His car was flooded with the sound of an upbeat rock song. Still, the music didn't manage to drown out his thoughts. They were telling him that it was time to let go.

CHAPTER 2

If he hadn't know any better, Daniel would have sworn that someone was still kicking him in the head with his boot, while a little devil viciously prodded his shoulder with a hot poker.

"How bad is the pain on a scale of one to ten?"

Daniel pried his eye open. At least he tried to, the eye that wasn't completely swollen shut opened to a mere slit. Tears swam across his vision making the face that belonged to the voice a swimmy blur. What had he been asked again?

"Daniel, can you hear me?"

Prying his tongue from the roof of his dry mouth, Daniel managed to rasp
"Yeah." Shit, that hurt.

The doctor repeated his first question.

Assuming everyone had the same pain threshold meant that the scale was completely stupid. Some people thought a paper cut was a seven. "Really fucking bad, Doc," he said.

"Daniel Alec Clark," Rita's familiar voice reprimanded him gently. The doctor-bless him—chuckled.

"Then I think you'll need this." Something in his uninjured arm tugged a bit, and he assumed it was an IV line. "I've just given you something to help ease the pain, but your next dosage will be administered by mouth. I've written up a prescription that you will need to take to the pharmacy. Is there anyone coming to pick you up?"

No.

“Jacy is on his way now,” Rita said.

Huh? Elation and dread swirled through his head and plunged into his stomach. The mixed emotions made his stomach churn, even as it made his heart lurch into his ribs. If that weren’t bad enough, a familiar bleep let him know that it had been noted on the heart monitor.

“Whoa,” said the doctor. “That was quite a spike in your blood pressure.”

Mercifully, Rita didn’t comment. She was the only person who knew how he felt about Jacy. Without the support of his family, Rita had been like the mother he never had. His birth mother had kicked him out on his eighteenth birthday, dusting her hands of her ‘homosexual houseguest,’ as she had called him.

“Flash back,” Daniel offered lamely. Having the doctor believe he’d been thinking about the bashing he’d received earlier in the day was much easier than explaining how his body reacted when he thought of a certain man.

The doctor laid a hand on his arm, patting him in a sympathetic manner. “Try not to think about it until you have to. Sheriff Austin said he’d stop by your house tomorrow and ask you a few questions about the incident.”

Daniel swallowed a groan. The last thing he wanted to think about was the roughest fifteen minutes of his life; it made his bones ache at the ghost of the memory. Images flickered through his mind, most of them more blurry than the vision in his right eye. The tiny snatches of memory were mostly just bright colors and objects. His mind’s eye formed a picture of a boot descending on him, a fist curling in his shirt, a mouth forming words of hatred. But no faces; Daniel couldn’t recall what any of his attackers had looked like. Damn! He wasn’t going to be much help when the sheriff came a callin’.

Daniel was snatched from his musings by a familiar voice drifting in from the hallway.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Jacy’s rich voice drifted to his ears. He heard the nurse say ‘you’re welcome’ and then he heard shoes making a clicking sound as the man entered the room. “I’m here.”

The heart monitor started to sing again. Feeling his face going up in flames, Daniel made a clumsy grab for the sticky pads attached to his bare chest. “Get these off me.”

“Fuck!” Jacy exploded.

Daniel flinched, then winced at the pain such an action caused. Evidently, Jacy had gotten a look at his face.

His vision had begun to clear and he turned his head to see the fuzzy outline of Rita rising from her seat at the side of his bed. She went to Jacy’s much larger frame and spoke to him in a voice too low for Daniel to make out.

Meanwhile, the doctor leaned over and started to remove his IV and detach him from the heart monitor. “I think you’re in the clear, Mr. Clark.”

“Did they catch whoever did this?” Jacy asked, his voice sounding tight and strained to Daniel’s ears.

“No,” Rita said, her coffee and cream complexion ashen with fear and disgust. “One of the patrons from the bar came outside and found Daniel passed out in the parking lot.”

There was palpable tension in the air and Daniel could almost see Jacy thinking in his mind’s eye. He was adding up all the variables and it wasn’t long before he came up with a question. “Then how do you know it was gaybashers?”

“That’s a good question,” said the Doctor.

Daniel could literally feel Jacy’s gaze boring into him. He fervently wished in that moment that he was a fainter. He did *not* want to answer this question.

“Daniel?” There was no doubt in his mind that Jacy was pissed. “This isn’t the first time they have bothered you, is it?”

It hurt like hell, but Daniel couldn’t get his throat to work, so he shook his head instead.

Jacy swore a blue streak, marched across the room and grasped his chin. His grip was feather light but firm. Jacy was nothing, if not careful, but he forced Daniel to look up at him. He could feel the man’s steady gaze roving over every inch of his face. “Damn it, Daniel, you could have been hurt worse than you are. You could have been killed. Why didn’t you tell the sheriff? Why didn’t you tell me?!”

He’d told Rita, after making her promise to keep her mouth shut. But he wasn’t going to point that out. Not as long as Jacy was just pissed at him. Rita was not to blame. “It was just a phone call or two. I thought it was some guys being assholes. They never threatened me or anything. I would have gone to the police if they had.” To his horror, Daniel felt the burn of tears behind his lids and at the back of his throat. He swallowed hard, and clenched his jaw tight, but one of the traitors slid down his cheek. He wouldn’t have felt it because of all the bruising but it slid over one of the cuts in his cheek and burned like fire.

Daniel went utterly still inside when he felt the swipe of Jacy’s thumb on his cheek, wiping his tears away. The action was so tender and caring that his heart gave a painful thump in answer. God, he loved this man!

The doctor’s voice interrupted the silent moment. “I’ll be back in a few seconds with your release forms and prescriptions.”

Rita turned to follow him out, announcing that she was powerfully thirsty.

“You should have told me.” Jacy’s voice was low and gentle. “You know I’m always here for you Daniel.”

Daniel's nod was automatic. "Yeah I know. I'm sorry Jacy." Jacy nodded and released his chin, standing straight again. Relief and a sense of loss flooded his body at the same time. Daniel sighed. Would Jacy always inspire such mixed emotions inside him? It had been like this since the first day he met the man. It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd had a chance in hell with him, but there were big negatives standing in his way of any hope that Jacy might one day return his feelings. For one, he wasn't gay, and secondly he was married. His wife might be a bitch with a capital 'B,' but Daniel respected the vows and commitment of marriage too much to interfere; some days he questioned how deeply that respect ran, especially where Jacy was concerned.

Feeling as if he needed to get out of the hospital, and more importantly, out of Jacy's presence before he did something completely idiotic and unredeemable, he tossed the covers back, and swore when he realized he barely had anything on. The hospital coat he was wearing had been reversed and only a scrap of it covered his privates while the rest of it did nothing to hide the dark purplish bruises on his thighs and calves.

A deep rumbling sound emerged from Jacy's throat that made his balls draw up tight against his body, and his gut clench with fear for whoever had to be the recipient of that anger when and if it were ever released. Honestly, he'd never seen Jacy more than a little annoyed, and he was glad of it. He wasn't exactly the smallest guy in the world.

It was too late to hide the bruising so Daniel didn't even try. He cast his limited gaze around the room, searching for anything that belonged to him. When he didn't see anything he said, "Do you think you could find me something to wear aside from this thing?"

Jacy nodded. He walked over to a chair that sat against the wall pulling a plastic covered package, which Daniel had failed to see, off the seat. He turned it over in his hands and then

looked back at Daniel. "These are covered in dried blood, Daniel. I don't think they are salvageable, let alone wearable."

Daniel fell back against the raised bed with a groan. "Great, am I supposed to leave this place wearing this napkin?" he asked, gesturing to his dressing gown.

"I think I have some sweats and a t-shirt in the trunk of my Jeep that might fit you." The big man shrugged, placing his clothes back on the chair. "You know how messy a body can get at the clinic. So I always keep an extra change of clothes on hand."

"Please, if you don't mind." Daniel said.

Jacy nodded. "I'll be right back."

By the time Jacy returned to Daniel's room, Doctor Mitchell and Rita had returned. Daniel was sitting at the edge of his hospital bed looking small and lost with his slender legs dangling from the side. Jacy felt the urge to go to him and enfold him in his arms. But he didn't think Daniel would like it if he did. He'd known Daniel for nine years and in that time he'd come to realize that he was fiercely independent.

Daniel was slender and pretty looking. His pale blond hair and large aquamarine eyes dominated his face, making him look like an innocent nineteen year old when he was really twenty-three. As a result, Daniel acted as if he had to prove himself. He behaved as if every little slight was challenging his manhood, and often it was. His coming out at the age of sixteen hadn't helped any. Even some of Jacy's staff teased Daniel from time to time about being pretty.

Jacy was careful to never offend him in that way. God knows he knew how much words could hurt. The trouble was that Daniel wouldn't let him stop the teasing either. He wanted to do things his own way. "I'm not a baby." He'd said more times than Jacy could count.

“Well, I think I’ll be leaving now,” Rita said, glancing at her watch. She kissed Daniel on his less bruised cheek and said good bye to the doctor. She passed him on his way out and leaned up on tip-toe while he leaned down to allow her to kiss his cheek. “Take good care of him. You hear?”

Jacy couldn’t help but grin. “Yes, ma’am.”

Rita slapped his arm and disappeared out the door.

Jacy crossed the room and gave Daniel the clothes. “The sweats are newly washed but I think I might have worn the t-shirt already.” He’d sniffed both on his way up the elevator. The shirt smelled like his cologne.

“That’s cool. Thanks, man.”

Jacy nodded. “You’re welcome, Daniel.”

“Should I call in a nurse to help with those?” the doctor asked. He glanced up at Jacy. “Or do you—“

“No!” Daniel nearly shouted. He lowered his voice almost immediately as he saw Jacy’s and Doc Mitchell’s startled faces. “Call a nurse, please.” He nodded at the forms. “Jacy can fill those out while I get dressed.”

Jacy nodded. “Sure thing.”

About fifteen minutes passed and a dressed Daniel was being led out of the hospital with Jacy holding his arm. “Stop complaining.” Jacy hissed. Daniel had refused to leave in a wheelchair, and Jacy had refused to let him walk on his own.

Daniel frowned right back. “I can walk. ”

“Fine.” Stubborn brat. Jacy let go of Daniel’s arm, and the smaller man immediately teetered. Jacy caught his arm again before he could get acquainted with the floor.

Daniel's face flushed bright red, which only served to make the bruising worse. Wincing in sympathy, Jacy gently steered him into an elevator. Daniel must have been exhausted because as soon as the doors shut he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Jacy took the opportunity to study him to his heart's content. Daniel's familiar face was now a series of cuts, bruises and abrasions. The cheek facing Jacy had a large bruise tinged the colors of dark purple, green, and angry red. His left eye was swollen so badly it wasn't able to open, and the right was nearly as bad. His bottom lip was swollen as well, and split in the middle. There were three stitches just below his hairline. Aside from that, he had a dislocated shoulder and the rest of his body was a mass of bruises and scrapes.

The anger that had been simmering below the surface suddenly surfaced, and exploded through his system with the force of a volcano. Who could have done this to Daniel? He prayed to God that the sheriff got a hold of them before he did.

The feel of slender cool fingers touching his cheek brought Jacy's attention back to the present. When he looked down at Daniel, the blond quickly removed his hand. "I-I ...you looked so angry."

"I'm not mad at you. I was thinking about your attackers. Do you remember what they looked like?"

"No."

The doors to the elevator slid open. Jacy took Daniel's arm and led him out. He led Daniel through the downstairs lobby and to his Jeep, and all the while he was methodically going through the names of anyone who'd expressed a dislike for Daniel in the past. Somerville was a small town, and sooner or later the culprits were going to run out of places to hide.

Daniel was glad to give directions to his house once they got in Jacy's car. Rita must have been mistaken. There was no way Jacy would offer to take him in, not when Marissa clearly disliked him so much.

"It's right there." He pointed to the blue apartment complex. I'm 121B." Jacy nodded, parked the car, and turned off the ignition.

"I think I'll be okay from here. Thanks, man." Daniel reached for the door handle. Jacy got out of his side and was coming around to help him by the time he managed to stand. Daniel sighed. "Really Jacy, I know Marissa is probably worried about you." Jacy didn't say anything, just took his arm and pulled him along.

They made it to his door before he remembered that his keys and wallet had been in his jeans. Damn!

Jacy held up his keys. "The doctor gave these to me when I signed your release forms." Instead of handing them to Daniel, he opened his door and the two of them stepped inside. "I think I'll hang on to these so I can pick your truck up from the bar's parking lot." Daniel stood in the middle of his living room watching that broad back disappear into his bedroom. "Do you have a suitcase or a tote bag?"

"Damn, I forgot about my truck."

Jacy appeared at the doorway to offer him a reassuring smile, "Don't worry, I'll take care of everything." He disappeared back into the room.

Limping forward, Daniel paused in the threshold of his doorway. Jacy was down on his knees dragging a gym bag from under his bed. "What are you doing?"

"Getting you packed," he said, as if that was the end of the subject.

"For what? I'm staying here."

Jacy paused long enough to give him a look that said, 'Want to bet.' He opened one of Daniel's drawers. "What do you want to take?" When he realized no answer was forthcoming he shrugged. "Fine, I'll choose, then."

Less than ten minutes later Jacy had two small bags packed for him, and had even gone into the bathroom to collect his toothbrush. He held both bags in one hand and grasped Daniel's arm with the other. "Come on. I'm starving."

Daniel tried to pull his arm away, but Jacy held him firmly. "I'm not going home with you."

Jacy's brow went up. Those dark eyes sparkled with challenge. His grin was downright dangerous and Daniel felt his heart lurch against his ribcage. "You can get in the car under your own power, or I can carry you. But..." Jacy cupped his chin and made him look him in the eye. "You *are* going."

Daniel nodded, trying to squelch the part of him that had gotten aroused from the emergence of this new dominant side he hadn't known Jacy possessed.

It looked as if he *was* going to stay at Jacy's house after all, and God help him to hide his secret.

CHAPTER 3

Marissa wasn't home when they got there, which Jacy was grateful for. The last thing he needed was her pecking at him like a hen. He helped Daniel up the porch stairs into their spacious fourteen room house. Daniel had visited a few times before, and aside from his bedroom there was no place he hadn't been, so there was no need to explain the outlay. He deposited Daniel's bags in the guest room and went into the kitchen to snatch a menu off the refrigerator.

Daniel was sitting on the couch where he left him before going upstairs. He looked to be in pain, if the tightness around his eyes were any indication. "None of the pharmacies are open until eight in the morning, but I think we have some Tylenol in the cabinet upstairs." He handed Daniel the menu to Adina's Pizza. "If you can, try and see what you would like to eat. I'll be right back."

Daniel nodded and accepted the menu. He was squinting down at it when Jacy returned to the living room with a glass of water and two Tylenols. He accepted the drink and pills with a grateful nod.

Jacy took the seat beside him and took possession of the menu. "So what will it be, pizza, hot wings, chicken salad?"

Daniel shrugged, setting his empty glass down on the small table next to the couch. "I'm easy. I'll eat whatever you're having."

"All three then," Jacy said, with a sly wink that made him smile.

“So where is Marissa?” Daniel enquired when Jacy came and sat back in the living room with him. Jacy picked up the remote and turned on the TV. He was channel surfacing as he answered the question. “She’s at an office Christmas party.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re all dressed up.”

Jacy looked down at his dress slacks and blue shirt. Shit! He’d been so concerned with getting Daniel settled in that he hadn’t remembered to change out of his clothing. “Be right back.”

Watching Jacy come and go was giving him a worse headache than he already had. The man hadn’t sat for a full minute since he’d entered the house. He was as jittery as a Junebug, like something was on his mind. Daniel thought it might be Marissa. She was known for flirting quite openly with other men. If she was on her own at an office party, there was really no telling what she might do. His heart went out to Jacy in more ways than one. He wasn’t blind to the fact that the two of them had been drifting apart for over a year. He couldn’t possibly miss that fact when Jacy was at the clinic more than he was home.

Not that he was complaining. It might have been selfish of him to want to spend every spare moment he had with the man he’d fallen in love with, but he had long ago resigned himself to the position of a supportive friend for Jacy. It just wasn’t in the cards for them.

“I’m back.” Jacy announced, looking truly edible in nothing more than a pair of stressed jeans and t-shirt, which showed off his long, muscular legs and broad shoulders. Even his bare feet were sexy.

Daniel squirmed in his seat, trying and failing to find a comfortable position to relieve the ache in his hardening cock.

“Are you okay?” Jacy was close enough that he could smell the sandalwood scent of his cologne. The same scent he’d secretly basked in the entire ride back to Jacy’s house. It turned him on immensely to be cloaked in the scent of Jacy. He planned on sneaking the t-shirt into his bags and taking it home as a keepsake. A part of him realized he was being a bit desperate but the other part of him wanted what it could get. “Hmm?”

Jacy placed one big warm hand over his forehead, frowning as he checked for a fever. “You groaned. I thought you might be in pain. Does it hurt anywhere?”

Daniel felt his face heat with embarrassment. It hurt alright, but not anywhere he could tell Jacy about. “My back hurts a little.” And it did, just not as bad as the concerned look on Jacy’s face warranted.

Jacy surprised him by sitting down and gently maneuvering his back away from the back of the couch. This way he was sitting sideways, giving Jacy access to the back of his borrowed shirt, which he promptly began to lift.

Daniel froze. “Ah. Jacy?” He couldn’t help the shiver that traveled through him as those warm fingers gently prodded a bruise on his back.

Jacy swore vehemently. He traced a particularly sore bruise that wrapped around Daniel’s lower back and disappeared beneath his sweats. Daniel shivered again but this time it was from pain.

Jacy’s hands instantly gentled again, he barely felt the fingertips brushing over his skin. “I’ve got some salve. It’s an old Indian remedy that stinks to high heaven, but it should help to ease the sore muscles.”

Daniel shook his head. He couldn’t endure another moment of those hands. Moving gingerly he tried to pull down his shirt, but Jacy wouldn’t let him. “You won’t be able to sleep

while you're hurting like this." He rose from the couch prepared to leave once again. "I'll be right back."

He returned in record time, as if he were afraid he'd find Daniel missing. He held a jar of greenish-brown slime in one hand.

Daniel's eyes widened. "You are not rubbing that on me." He pushed himself to his feet using the arm of the chair. The stuff looked like it ought to be quarantined.

Jacy chuckled, catching him by the arm and maneuvering him back toward the couch. "It's all natural, promise. It will make you feel better."

"What would make me feel better is if you don't rub that crap on me!" Daniel grumbled. His nose wrinkled and he balked at the smell that erupted from the jar the moment Jacy cracked the lid. "Ugh, that stuff stinks!"

Jacy took a tentative sniff, and promptly launched into a bout of coughing that was so bad his eyes watered. "Not so bad," he rasped, trying to catch his breath.

Daniel edged toward the end of the couch, but only got an inch or two away from Jacy before the bigger man grabbed his shirt. "Oh, no, you don't, brat. I'm putting this on you."

A small struggle ensued, which naturally ended in Jacy's favor. Daniel ended up bent over the couch arm so that his arm in the sling was not trapped under his body. His shirt was shoved up to his neck, and one of Jacy's big hands was placed in the center of his bare back to hold him still as he scooped the stinking goop from the jar with the other one. "Don't fight me. I don't want your arm to slip out of socket again."

With that gentle tone ringing in his ears, Daniel let out a deep breath and went still. If Jacy was that adamant about using the salve who was he to stop him? Besides, he liked the fact

that Jacy cared enough about him to actually fight him over such a simple thing as his physical comfort.

Daniel flinched away at the feel the cold slime on his back. “Cold.”

“Sorry.”

The next time Jacy touched him, both his hands were warm. And soothing, he thought, pressing his lips together to keep the pleased sounds that wanted to spill forth locked in his throat. Jacy started a gentle massage with his strong hands, kneading his back with the expertise of a masseuse. Daniel felt the tension seep from his body, his muscles turned as loose and pliant as putty. And his chest sagged against the chair arm.

His heavy lids started to flutter rapidly as he struggled to stay awake. In an effort to find a topic of conversation to distract himself, he asked a question that had come to him upon entering Jacy’s home. “Where is your Christmas tree?” There was less than a week left before Christmas.

The hands on his back slowed, and for a moment Daniel thought that Jacy would pull away. He didn’t; he answered his question instead. “Marissa thinks the holidays are about money and presents and advertisements on TV. We don’t celebrate it.”

“What do you think?” He couldn’t honestly remember Jacy bringing things to the job that symbolized Christmas or any holiday, for that matter. He’d never seen him with a card or present. Well, except for the ones he and the staff at the veterinarian’s clinic gave him for his birthday. And when anyone else’s birthday ever rolled around he always gave an envelope with money. No card. No frills. Just cold cash. Now that he thought about it, the actions of the man did not represent his character. The Jacy he knew loved animals and people. The Jacy he knew bought cough drops and Kleenex for his staff and customers during the coldest months of winter.

The man at work and the man at home were two entirely different people.

“All finished.” Jacy’s hands fell away and he turned around on the couch reaching for the lid to his jar. “I never really celebrated the holidays either.” He shrugged. “I was raised by my grandfather. He was full-blooded Navajo. Christmas did not figure into his beliefs.”

He shouldn’t have felt as bad as he did to hear those words. After all, plenty of people didn’t celebrate the holidays because of faith or circumstance, but his heart *did* ache for him. It didn’t take a genius to look around Jacy’s home and see how neat, clinical and utterly devoid of color and vibrancy it was. Hell, the clinic held more warmth than Jacy’s fireplace. No wonder the man spent more time with his coworkers than he did with his wife. Marissa must be half ballistic by now. If only she were the type of person to warrant sympathy.

The doorbell rang, making him jump as it pulled him out of his musings. Jacy leapt up. “Must be the pizza.”

And there he went. Again.

What the hell is wrong with you? Jacy berated himself as he stripped off his t-shirt and flung it across the room. He’d felt like lightning had been running up and down the back of his legs since bringing Daniel home. He should have known these symptoms would show up with Daniel in close proximity. While worrying over his condition and focusing on getting him up and out of the hospital Jacy hadn’t had time to think about anything.

But as soon as Daniel crossed his threshold and insinuated his cute little ass—no—not cute! Men weren’t cute. Were they? Jacy sighed. The moment he was alone with Daniel he couldn’t seem to be still. Especially when those blue eyes focused on him. He could tolerate Daniel when he was around other people, but alone in his house with him! Why had he touched

him? Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! He could still feel the hot smooth skin of Daniel's back even now. His hands were still tingling. He hadn't wanted to *stop* touching him.

And how perverted was that? The man was injured, for Christ's sake! Growling with frustration, Jacy marched into the bathroom and pulled his toothbrush out of the cabinet above the sink. He caught sight of Marissa's toothbrush, and a wicked grin spread across his face. Snatching up the toothpaste, he shut the cabinet and squeezed the toothpaste onto his brush making sure a healthy dollop fell into the sink. He had no intention of cleaning it up.

Yes, he was aware that he was acting a bit childish, but he didn't care. It was damn near twelve thirty at night and Marissa wasn't back yet. She hadn't called; he'd already checked the answering machine. Not that he expected to find a voice message. When was the last time she'd left one? Five months ago?

He was rinsing out his mouth when a knock came at his bedroom door. "Coming." He grabbed a hand towel from the rack and wiped his face and hands.

He crossed the room and opened the door, and damn if something in the pit of his stomach didn't turn over. Daniel stood there, the golden strands of his hair sticking out in wayward tufts and *his* shirt twisted around his sling. His raised shirt displayed a lightly muscled flat belly with an intriguing arrow of golden hairs that disappeared into the sweats cinched tightly around his waist.

"Um, I could use some help here."

Jacy couldn't help the smile that tugged at his lips, and it only got wider when those impossibly blue eyes narrowed in mock irritation. He knew Daniel was amused himself, because he was struggling not to laugh too.

Jacy stepped back to allow him entrance into his room. He watched the younger man gaze around, and didn't miss the look of disappointment on his face when he'd finished. His room was just like everywhere else in house. It consisted of browns and tans, and was cleaner than a gambler's bank account. There was nothing of him in it except for a portrait of his mother and father.

Of course that was exactly what Daniel spotted. He crossed the room and picked up the portrait. Jacy had already told Daniel about the car accident that claimed his mother and father's lives when he was five, but Daniel had never seen pictures of them. Jacy had very few of those, and the one Daniel was holding was the only one featuring his father. Like his father before him, Jacy DeSalvo Senior had believed that portraits could capture your soul. He'd gone through special measures to protect his while taking that picture, and even then, he had only done it because of his love for his wife. Jacy's mother had been able to talk her husband into almost anything.

"Wow, I see where you inherited your eyes, and those cheekbones." Daniel said, and Jacy knew he was referring to his father. "You've got your mothers mouth, though." Looking up at him, Daniel flushed. "I-I don't mean to say you have a girl's mouth...it's just fuller then your father's."

"I know what you meant," Jacy said, taking the picture and putting it back on the fireplace that dominated the center of his room. "How about we get this off, yeah?" He grabbed the end of the shirt and paused. "How did the nurse do it?"

"I had to take my sling off and hold my arm still while she removed my shirt. She suggested I wear only button-ups for a while. It makes things a lot easier."

Jacy winced. "I only brought a couple of t-shirts. I'll have to make a run back to your place tomorrow." Probably when he went to get his prescription filled. Changing tactics, Jacy moved around Daniel to study the release on his sling. It unclipped easily enough and he eased it off. "Careful," he said supporting Daniel's arm as they lowered it to his side together. He lifted the shirt from the side of his uninjured arm first and pulled it up over his head. Then he began the careful descent down his injured shoulder and finally slid it off. Next he helped Daniel into the sling again. With that done, Jacy moved back in front of him.

Daniel looked at the t-shirt dangling from his right hand, and the expression that flashed across his face reminded Jacy of a child who'd just had his favorite toy taken away. But the look was only fleeting and Daniel's eyes darted back up to his face, making a show of missing his bare chest. "Thanks."

"No problem." He tossed the balled up shirt across the room to land in the opposite corner with the one he'd tossed earlier. "Anything else you need?"

"Ah, I'm afraid so." Daniel reached down and lifted the knotted drawstring that dangled between his legs. "The pants were a little too loose, so the nurse tightened them as best she could."

Oh, right. It was obvious that while the sweatpants hung low on his hips, the string inside was so tight that it hugged his rump from behind and he would have difficulty getting them off. He couldn't possibly undo the knot with one hand. Trying not to look awkward, Jacy bent over and started fumbling with the knot. Damn his blunt fingernails! He couldn't manage to get a decent hold on the string.

Forgetting for a moment the awkwardness of having his hands and face so close to another man's crotch, Jacy knelt before Daniel to get a better vantage point. He almost had the knot undone when it slipped back in its original place. "Dammit!" He leaned even closer.

Daniel closed his eyes, reciting every prayer he knew by heart and a few he didn't. He tried to recall images that disgusted him. His neighbor, Henry Tolland, who went out to get his newspaper every morning wearing little more than a pair of greasy biker shorts with his hairy potbelly stomach on display. Rats crawling through a sewage drain. The time he'd seen the back of Old Man Whitaker's truck after a day spent collecting road kill.

Okay, that did it! There was no way he was getting hard with that picture in his mind. Jacy's warm breath ghosted over his stomach, followed by the caress of the dark silk that was his hair. His abdominal muscles leapt at the contact, but thankfully, Jacy didn't seem to notice. He was too busy verbally coaxing the knot out of his drawstring. "Ah ha, gotcha!" Jacy crowed triumphantly, releasing the knot.

"What the hell is going on here?!"

Both men turned their attention to Jacy's red-faced wife who was glaring at them from the doorway.

Marissa stumbled into the room obviously drunk, but not so drunk that she fell on her face. She grabbed the doorknob and steadied herself. Her cool gray eyes latched onto Daniel. "What the hell are you doing with my husband you fag—"

Jacy stood so fast that Daniel didn't see it happen. "Marissa! Don't say it!"

Marissa's mouth snapped shut, but fire blazed from her eyes and her compliance only lasted half a minute. Obviously, she was too inebriated to realize the dragon she was baiting as she addressed Jacy. "I didn't know you swung that way, Jacy. How could you?!" She didn't look heartbroken, she looked...disgusted.

Jacy took a deep breath for patience. "Marissa it isn't what you think. I wasn't—"

"Bullshit!"

"Marissa!"

Daniel cleared his throat. Perhaps he could clear this up before it got worse. Marissa wasn't being reasonable. "Marissa, have you gotten a good look at me? I'm not in any shape to do anything. Jacy was just helping me with my drawstring so I could go back to my own room and get ready for bed."

He thought he saw acceptance in Marissa's eyes, but he was wrong. She was obviously just riling herself up for another outburst. "Then why was Jacy on his knees in front of you and your head thrown back and your eyes closed like you..." She obviously couldn't say the words and instead of finishing she just scowled at him, daring him to contradict her.

Daniel flushed several shades of red. There was no denying that he probably looked to be in agony, though not the sort he'd rather have been in. He raked his mind for a plausible excuse and couldn't come up with one. Luckily, Jacy stepped in to save him.

"I'd like to speak to my *wife* if you don't mind, Daniel."

Daniel nodded, all too happy to escape the little lady's wrath. He made sure to give her a wide birth as he went around her to reach the door. He'd no sooner hit the hallway when he heard Marissa lay into Jacy, again. "You two are lovers aren't you? That's why you are never home. I didn't know you liked to suck co—" The rest was cut off when Daniel shut his door. He

leaned against it, reveling in the cool sleek surface that was drastic contrast to his own heated body. He should have never gotten into Jacy's Jeep. He should have insisted on staying at his own house. Rita could have come by and checked up on him. Marissa had never liked him. He knew that, Jacy knew that, so why had he brought him here? He stood there debating the answer to that question until he began to doze off. The bed was beckoning him. He just barely managed to kick off his sweats before climbing between the cool covers. He jarred his injured arm in the process and hissed between clenched teeth, but the throb of pain quickly dissipated and sleep dragged him under. That night when he dreamed, as he did almost every night, it was of Jacy.

CHAPTER 4

Eleven days until Christmas...

Jacy pushed open the glass door to the drug store and stepped inside. A few heads turned his way, and he received a few curt nods and a wave from a familiar face or two. Jacy nodded at the people he knew and headed over to pharmacy counter. He had the strange feeling that people were watching him.

The pharmaceutical tech's familiar face greeted him with a broad smile as he paused in front of the counter and fished out Daniel's prescription. "Hey, Maggie," He said, sliding the paper toward her.

"Hey, Jacy, haven't seen you in a while."

Maggie picked up the prescription and read it. Her brow crinkled when she frowned. Leaning over and speaking in a low sympathetic voice she said, "I'm sorry to hear about what happened to Daniel. How is he doing?"

Jacy was taken back for a moment. News sure traveled fast. "He's fine. How did you find out?"

Maggie waved one thin, manicured hand. "Oh, it's been circulating all morning." Her mouth formed into a perfect O. "Hold on a minute Jacy." She disappeared from sight and when she returned she had a newspaper with her. She'd circled a column on the front page. "I'll get this prescription filled while you read."

Jacy barely heard her; he was already skimming the tiny section regarding an incident that happened outside The White Horse. The details were sketchy. Not a lot was known about the fight that took place in the parking lot. A few anonymous observers had apparently tipped off the newspaper somewhere between eight o'clock last night and four in the morning. Jacy knew that the papers circulated in Somerville at six in the morning, and only the subscribed to papers like the *Somerville Lantern* could afford such last minute alterations. Tomorrow the news of a hate crime could very well be plastered across the *New York Times*. The only good news was that Daniel's name had not been released; the paper only mentioned that he had been admitted to St. Mary's Hospital.

Jacy groaned. It would only be a matter of time before his name surfaced. Maggie returned with his prescription and Jacy handed her Daniel's insurance card. He paid the extra ten dollars that was not covered by his insurance and nodded to Maggie. "Can I keep this Maggie? I'll buy it off you." Jacy didn't have a subscription to the *Somerville Lantern*.

Maggie waved him off. "Oh, sure hun, you go on and take it with you. And you know better then to ask me if you have to pay for it."

Grinning sheepishly, Jacy took Daniel's meds and started back toward the front of the store. He was coming down an aisle laden with Christmas ornaments when a little boy ran into him.

The boy collided with Jacy's legs with an "uhf" and clung for dear life. Jacy reached down to steady the dark haired little boy. "You okay, little man?"

"Andy! Andy!" A petite brunette, with her face flushed red from exertion came marching down the aisle. "Andy what have I told you about running?" Andy tried to take off once again,

but his mother caught his shirt sleeve. Casting an apologetic look at Jacy, the mother took hold of her son's hand.

"But I want it!" the boy whined, twisting to break free. Clutched to his chest was a plush toy of a Christmas tree, complete with lights and all. Jacy watched mother and child struggle down the aisle to put the toy back.

"You have enough toys," the mother said, placing the tree back on the shelf. Jacy winced when the boy started hollering. The mother picked him up and walked out of the store. Jacy remained where he was until they'd left. And then he returned to the section of shelving to pick up the plush toy tree.

His thoughts turned back to Daniel, to that moment on the couch.

Where's your Christmas tree?

Marissa thinks the holidays are about money and presents and advertisements on TV. We don't celebrate it.

What do you think?

He thought he was going to have the perfect gift for Daniel when he went home.

Daniel was miserable. If anything, his injuries hurt worse than they had last night, and being a guest in a house where the hostess wasn't exactly happy to have him there had him walking on eggshells. He'd been up since nine in the morning, which was late for him. He usually woke up around six and went for a jog before going in for work. His sleep had been restless at best. He'd woken up too many times to count when he rolled onto his injured arm. The good news was that he could see a little out of both eyes now. The bad news was he'd been staring at four walls for too damn long.

He'd lain in bed listening to the sounds of Marissa getting ready for work. Only after the front door slammed shut did he throw back his covers and stand. Daniel made his bed as best he could with only one arm, which was a surprisingly tiring activity. He showered and got dressed, having to leave the shirt off because he couldn't manage to remove his sling without lifting his arm. Then he went downstairs to seek out the kitchen.

Jacy had told him to make himself at home, and since he didn't expect anyone to wait on him he managed to put together a bowl of cereal. It seemed a bit invasive to try and cook something, not to mention a daunting task with one arm.

He was just settling down to a bowl of Cheerios when Jacy strolled in. His presence was like a crackle of energy to Daniel. He couldn't put his finger on what changed when the man walked into the room, but it felt like the air itself shifted. Jacy's beautiful smile was an automatic trigger for his own, and he found himself grinning back like the lovesick pup he knew he was.

Then Jacy noticed his state of dress and the smile faltered a bit. For a heartbeat those dark eyes roamed over his chest and face. Daniel fought the impulse to cover himself. He knew he looked like death rolled over. Jacy didn't look disgusted, though. He could see the spark of anger in his eyes, as he sat his medication on the tabletop. "How are you feeling?"

Daniel swallowed. "Fine." The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

"That's good. Ah, when you're finished eating I'll help you get on a shirt."

Daniel nodded. "Thanks." He concentrated on eating his cereal. He wouldn't look up at Jacy. He was afraid his eyes would betray how he really felt. The man looked amazing, all bronze skin and lean muscles. The black t-shirt stretched over his broad shoulders, blending in almost perfectly with the raven mane that fell to his mid-back. Those dark eyes set over by equally dark brows made something in his stomach shift every time. His straight aquiline nose

with only the slightest hint of a hook at the end and his high cheekbones completed a face that Michelangelo would have been happy to capture. Jacy was sinfully beautiful and it wasn't fair!

Clearing his throat, Jacy paced around the kitchen straightening this and that. The man was like a ball of energy. As long as Daniel had known him he'd rarely been still. He got the idea that the older man might have something he wished to say every time those dark eyes slid to him.

The next time Jacy looked over at him Daniel put down his spoon and lifted a golden eyebrow.

Jacy approached the other side of the table. "I have a surprise for you."

"Oh?"

"In the living room." He nodded at the bowl, "You finished?"

"Yeah, just let me put this in the sink." He'd wash it after he found out what the surprise was. Jacy seemed anxious, and he was curious.

Jacy stood at the door, raking a hand through his hair in an anxious gesture. Daniel hadn't said anything when he'd spotted the tree he'd bought and the bags of ornaments lying under it. Now that he thought about it, his impulse probably seemed a bit silly. The tree he had purchased wasn't even a full sized one and it was artificial. Daniel had a real tree at his house. He should have purchased a real one. And the ornaments...well he wasn't really good at picking those out anyway. How was he supposed to know what to get? He'd never celebrated Christmas before. "If you don't like—"

"The evergreen symbolizes light and life and the needles point upward to heaven." Jacy remained quiet waiting for what he would say next. Daniel picked up one of the shopping bags

and rifled through its contents until he pulled out the star that went on top. “The star represents a heavenly prophecy fulfilled long ago. It’s the shining hope of mankind.” Next, he lifted out a box full of ornamental candy canes. “The cane represents the shepherd’s crook, used to bring lost lambs back to the fold.”

As Daniel rummaged through the second bag, Jacy moved from the doorway and came to stand beside him. Daniel pulled out the bells and this time he opened the package, handing one to Jacy. He nodded towards the tree, “Go ahead.”

Looking a bit doubtful Jacy held the bell to a spot on the tree. “Here?”

“You can put it anywhere you want.” He nodded when Daniel settled the tiny silver bell on the tree by its string. “The bell rings out to guide lost sheep back to the fold.” He handed Jacy a bow next. Their fingertips brushed as they exchanged the item and if either man felt a tingle run up their arm at the touch, they hid it very well. “The bow represents how we are tied together in good will.”

Daniel started to open the boxes with the rest of the Christmas tree ornaments and hand them off. Once they had the tree nearly covered Jacy saw that there was still something left in the bag. Since the lady at the gift shop had practically suggested things for him he wasn’t quite sure of everything he had. He picked up the bag and shook the object out into his hand. Then he held it out to Daniel. “And this?”

Daniel accepted his offering and included an explanation, “The wreath symbolizes the eternal value of love,” His eyes caught and held Jacy’s, “Which has no end.”

Jacy was aware his breathing had sped up, but he didn’t know why. He was looking into the bluest depths he’d ever seen and he couldn’t look away. Why was Daniel telling him this? And why did it seem as if his last explanation hadn’t been about the wreath? He felt his heart

give a hopeful lurch inside his chest. He shook his head. No! He didn't want Daniel's love. It would be wrong and selfish of him. Besides he couldn't ever return those feelings. Could he?

Cool fingertips touched the frown lines on his forehead. "What are you thinking about, Jacy?"

Jacy shuddered at the touch and had to close his eyes to compose himself. He shook his head refusing to answer the question. "Why are you telling me this, about the ornaments and the tree?"

The hand touching his forehead fell away and he almost opened his eyes to pull Daniel back. *Touch me!* He really wanted to say, and that frightened him more than anything. He couldn't understand why he felt this way about Daniel. He wasn't attracted to men and yet his desire to be near Daniel, to be touched by Daniel was undeniable.

"Because you should know that there is more to Christmas than price tags and wrapping paper."

"Like love?" He hadn't meant to say that out loud, and he held his breath in anticipation of what Daniel was going to do. At that moment he didn't have the courage to open his eyes and see the expression on Daniel's face, so he remained standing with his eyes closed.

"Like love," Daniel whispered, and Jacy felt his warm breath feather against his lips. He inhaled sharply and his big body shuddered as soft lips pressed against his own. He hesitated for a heartbeat. This was wrong on so many levels, but as Daniel's lips began to move against his own all he could think about was how right it felt.

He was going to regret it later, he was certain. But for now...now he tilted his head at an angle to deepen the kiss. Daniel moaned and wrapped his good arm around Jacy's neck.

Jacy felt the wet probe of Daniel's tongue and was helpless to do anything but let him inside. They both groaned at the first taste of each other and Jacy felt little shocks of pleasure running all the way down to his toes. Fire erupted in his belly and the inferno quickly fanned out, spreading to his groin and engulfing his cock and balls. He gasped with the surprise of it. He'd been aroused before, that was no question, but he'd never felt anything like this. Marissa had certainly never inspired such a potent reaction.

Marissa. Shit!

Reluctantly, Jacy pulled out of the kiss, making sure to steady Daniel as he backed away. He resisted the urge to touch his lips; they felt swollen and strangely cool having lost the heat of Daniel's mouth.

Daniel looked stricken. He looked as if he were expecting Jacy to kick him out of his house or worse beat the hell out of him. The bruises and swelling in his face didn't help Jacy feel any better about the way he had reacted. He felt like a jackass. He shouldn't have allowed that kiss to happen. He carded a hand through his hair, fishing for the right words to say. Nothing was coming to him though. He couldn't think beyond the fact that he'd just kissed Daniel Clark or the fact that he had liked it. Who was he kidding, he more than liked it. He was craving it again, already!

Ding! Dong!

Relief flooded his system at the sound of the doorbell, and avoiding those blue eyes that saw too much, Jacy headed for the door and nearly threw it open.

Sheriff Austin, an ex-cowboy from Oklahoma touched fingers to his hat in greeting. A broad smile was on his sun bronzed face. "Hello, Jacy, nice morning, isn't it? Bit mild for December, though."

The smile that graced his face in return felt brittle as Jacy greeted the sheriff and invited him in. They walked into the living room chatting about nothing in particular and Jacy was relieved to see that some of the color had come back to Daniel's cheeks. Now he was the one avoiding eye contact, as he bustled around trying to clean up the mess they'd made around the tree.

"Nice tree you got there, Jacy." He frowned a little. "Don't remember you celebrating Christmas though."

"I didn't—don't. That's Daniel's tree." And it was; he had bought it for him. Daniel was having trouble carrying everything, even with the hand in the sling full of wrapping paper. "Here, let me get that," Jacy said, moving across the room and taking the boxes and paper out of his hand. "The Sheriff's here to speak with you."

"That I am." Sheriff Austin agreed. "If you don't mind Daniel, I'd just like a few minutes of your time."

Daniel seemed reluctant, but nodded and joined the sheriff across the room. They sat down on a love seat, and the sheriff pulled out a small notepad and pencil. "Now Daniel, I just need you to tell me anything you can remember from last night. Names, faces, clothes your attackers might have been wearing."

Jacy tried to be as unobtrusive as possible as he cleaned the living room. He only slipped away once to bring the sheriff and Daniel a cup of coffee. He handed the sheriff his drink, but Daniel was too upset to see him standing there. He sat the drink down on the side table next to the couch and moved a few feet away offering his support but not interfering.

“You don’t remember what anyone looked like. What about hair color?” It was obvious that the sheriff was as anxious to catch Daniel’s attackers as Jacy was, but he was trying to avoid overly distressing Daniel.

Daniel wasn’t aware he was rubbing the arm in the sling with his other hand as he frowned. He was staring into space as he tried to recall details from the night before. After a few tense moments he shook his head, “I don’t remember what their hair color looked like, but I remember a tattoo. Here.” Daniel touched the side of his neck. “It was a scorpion with the tail curling around to mid throat.” As he spoke he traced his own throat with the tip of his finger.

“Anything else?” The Sheriff scribbled down his description on his notepad.

“I’m sorry, Sheriff, but my memory is just a jumble of broken images. There is nothing distinct enough to give you an accurate description. All I can tell you is what I’ve already said. There were three of them and they were all white males.” He snorted with self-derision, “Guess that narrows it down a bit, yeah?”

The Sheriff patted his knee in a sympathetic gesture. “You’ve been through a traumatic experience Daniel. No one will blame you if you can’t remember every detail. The important thing is that you came through it alive and you will go on to have a healthy life. Besides, Somerville is a small town. Sooner or later the guilty will run out of places to hide. All evil deeds done in the dark eventually come into the light.”

CHAPTER 5

“Hey, brat. I’m going out.”

Daniel looked up from his book he was reading to find Jacy hovering in his door. He’d thrown on a light jacket and was wearing the pair of cowboy boots Daniel so loved to see him in. Along with his leg-hugging jeans and black shirt he looked like a cross between a cowboy, an Indian, and a biker stud.

The use of the nickname brat was not lost on him. The tension between them had been thick all day, ever since that kiss in the living room which neither of them seemed willing to talk about. After the sheriff had left they’d both gone their separate ways. He realized now that the use of his pet name was an attempt at regaining a sense of normalcy between them. He was all too ready to pretend the kiss hadn’t happened, even if it meant stuffing his feelings into a box and hiding it away. He’d done it before, and he could do it again. “Yeah, where are you going?” he asked, with what he hoped appeared to be mild curiosity.

“The owner of The White Horse called to tell me he was going to be forced to have your truck towed if it weren’t moved by eight o’clock tonight. So I called my friend David to see if he could help. He’s going to go down with me to drive my truck back while I drive yours.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks.” After Jacy had said he’d take care of everything Daniel believed him, and that included his truck. He trusted the man implicitly.

“No problem. You need anything before I go?”

You. “Ah, no.” God, Daniel hoped his cheeks weren’t as red as they felt!

“Okay. I’ll be back soon.”

And there he went.

Again.

“You okay man?” David asked, looking at Jacy curiously.

“I’m cool. Just feeling a little bit antsy being in the same place where Daniel was attacked.” He pulled his Jeep alongside Daniel’s Ford F-150. At first he thought the pearly black surface was flawless, but as he got out and circled the truck he saw that he was wrong. Someone had gouged a long scratch from the driver’s side to the hood and halfway around to the passenger side. Daniel’s driver side window had also been shattered and the side mirror cracked. When he opened the door, broken glass spilled out onto the graveled parking lot.

David let out a low whistle. “Damn, someone did quite a number on this beauty.”

Hardening his jaw against the tirade of swear words that wanted to spill out he closed the door. “I’m going to see if they have a hand brush and a dust pan inside the bar.”

David fell in-step beside him, shaking his head. “When I was in college, there was this chick named Shelly who I dated all four years—“

Jacy cast him a hard look. “What has this got to do—“

David held up his hand. “Let me finish. *As* I was saying, when I was in college I dated this chick named Shelly and I fancied myself head over hills in love with her. Well, one day her ex-boyfriend caught up with her. He was this psycho sonofabitch who’d been threatening her ever since we started going out. Anyway, she would never let me do anything about it and she never called the police when he harassed her. When he finally got a hold of her, he beat her bad enough to put her in the hospital.” David paused waiting for Jacy to look him in the eye. “I don’t

think I need to say that I nearly killed the fucker when I found him.” David was as friendly as he was handsome, but the sparkle in his dark eyes as he recalled a time long past seemed to put a bit of the devil in him. The two men finally came to the entrance to The White Horse, and David put his hand on Jacy’s shoulder to stop him. “What I’m trying to say is I’ve been where you’re at, man. I know what its like to be so angry you think you can take on the whole world. I say this because you look like a man who is going to do something stupid. And as your best bud, I think it’s my right to warn you against it.” He squeezed Jacy’s shoulder, and let go.

Then taking a deep breath David plastered that Cheshire cat smile back on his face and opened the door. “Now that I’ve got that shit off my chest. Let’s go. I’ve got to take a major leak.”

Jacy couldn’t help but laugh and he shoved David into the bar. The inside of The White Horse always smelled the same. Benjamin, the bartender, had worked at the bar for over thirty years and he had an affinity for pine sol, so underneath the cigarette and heavy liquor smell was the woodsy, outdoorsy smell. It was fairly early to be at the bar, so the occupants were few. Only one older cowboy was sitting at the bar nursing a half empty glass of beer when Jacy approached.

“Hey Benny,” Jacy said. “How’s everything going?”

Benjamin looked up from wiping the bar and he looked a bit startled to see Jacy. “Jacy, hey, haven’t seen you in a while.” Yeah, he’d been hearing that a lot lately. “Things are going as well as you could expect. What can I do you for?”

“I just wanted to borrow your hand broom and a dustpan if you have it. There’s a bit of a mess out in the parking lot I need to clean up.”

“Yeah, I heard. It’s a damn shame what happened to Daniel. How’s he doing anyway?”

“He’s doing okay.” Jacy frowned. “Hey, you wouldn’t happen to have seen anything last night would you?”

Benny shook his head. “Oh, no. Wasn’t working last night. I heard what happened when I came in this afternoon. I just want you to know that Somerville takes care of its own. Ain’t nobody gonna give a name to the reporters. They’ve been around here twice already poking and prodding, but everyone’s mouth is sealed.”

Yeah, about more than just Daniel’s name, Jacy thought as Benny disappeared momentarily and came back with the items he’d asked for. “Thanks man. I’ll bring these right back.”

Jacy was turning from the bar when the restroom door banged open. Every eye in the bar turned to see what the commotion was. David flew out, heading straight for Jacy. That dark look was back on his face and let Jacy know that whatever his friend had to say he wasn’t going to like it.

He was startled when David took his elbow and started dragging him along, his stride eating up the space to the front door. Jacy planted his feet refusing to budge until he knew what was going on.

David turned back toward him and shook his head. “You know that talk we just had.”

And suddenly he knew. Jacy couldn’t say how he knew, but he did. He recalled the startled look on Benny’s face when he showed up at the bar. There was only one person that would matter enough to him that David would try and drag him out of the bar.

Twisting out of David’s grasp, Jacy crossed the distance to the restroom door in a few long strides. He burst through the door and came to a halt, gazing around. The area where the sinks and urinals were located was empty, but he heard moaning coming from one of the two

rusty stalls to the right of the sinks. The hairs on the back of his neck rose in recognition of the female cry, but he had to be sure. Moving closer, he saw what David must have saw. The first stall was occupied. A large jagged piece had been broken off where the stall connected to the wall, allowing him to see into it. What he saw was the shoulder of a male and the long blonde hair of a woman, her face obscured by the larger body. But as the female rose above the male during the course of their lovemaking, her face came into view. Her eyes were closed in ecstasy and soft moans poured from her lips.

Jacy felt a hand land on his shoulder and realized faintly that it must have been David, but he didn't take the time to find out. He walked over to the stall and snatched the door handle so hard that the rickety lock tore right out of the door and skittered across the floor.

The couple froze mid-motion, and Marissa's pale blue eyes flew open and widened. She screamed, scrambling to push the man off her.

David appeared at his side again and spoke in his ear. "Man, she's not worth it. Let's go."

Jacy clenched his jaw, but turned away. David was right. How could he fight for someone his heart had already decided to let go?

"Jacy! Wait! Get off me, Eric."

Eric chuckled, "Easy, babe. I'm still kind of busy here."

"Get the hell off me! That's my HUSBAND!"

There was a racket in the stall and then Marissa tore away from Eric, scrambling to tug her clothes to rights. "Wait, Jacy! Please! I-I..."

Jacy paused in the act of reaching for the door. "You what, Marissa?" He glared at her, knowing she wasn't going to come up with an answer. "I don't think there is anything left to

say!” It was over between them. Actually, their relationship had been dead for over a year now. Her actions had just pushed the last nail into the coffin.

Eric emerged from the stall, a shit-eating-grin stretched across his freckled face. He was the biggest redhead Jacy had ever seen, easily six-foot-four. His shirt was hanging open, displaying an impressive six pack sprinkled with brown dots. He held up an equally freckled hand. A piece of black lace was dangling from it. It took Jacy a moment to realize those were his wife’s panties. His eyes flew up to those smiling green eyes. He wanted nothing so much as to cross the room and plant his fist in the man’s face.

“Forgot these, honey?” Eric drawled, the muscles in his throat working as he laughed.

Everything in Jacy went completely still for a moment, and his eyes narrowed on the man’s neck, at the scorpion tattoo displayed there. The tail curled around to his Adam’s apple and actually seemed to bob with the movement of his throat. In the next moment, Jacy felt lightheaded with the rush of blood that flooded to his face. He faintly heard Marissa’s screams and David’s shouts. Hands pulled at his arms and tried to get a grip on his waist. Fabric tore when he refused to budge. Jacy paid the others no attention. His world had narrowed down to those smiling green eyes, now dimmed with pain, as his fist came down on that freckled face again.

And again.

And again.

CHAPTER 6

Ten days until Christmas...

Jacy sat down at the kitchen table with a heavy grunt when he jarred his sore fingers. Carefully, he flexed the digits silently thanking God that they were only bruised and swollen, but not broken, which was more than he could say about Eric's nose.

"What in the hell happened to you?" Daniel joined him at the table with the heavenly pot of coffee that had drawn him out of bed in the first place.

"Fight." He reached for the mug dangling from the hand Daniel had sticking out of his sling. He really didn't want to think about last night, not so early in the morning with his feelings so raw and exposed. He hadn't gotten much sleep last night, plagued as he was by the memory of the fight and what had occurred before it. Worse than that was when he finally managed to nod off, he'd had one endless dream after another and all of them involved Daniel. He kept dreaming about waking up wrapped around a warm, pliant body. He'd been so sure it was Marissa, but when he opened his eyes he had found Daniel in his arms. Sighing inwardly, Jacy sat the cup on the table. "Coffee, please." Daniel filled his cup to the brim and sat down the pot.

He walked over to the counter and when he returned to Jacy's side he tossed a newspaper in front of him. "Has it got anything to do with this?" It was the same paper Maggie had given him.

Jacy groaned, and shoved a hand through his hair. “Damn it, Daniel, I’m sorry. I was going to tell you yesterday but you seemed so happy about the tree and I couldn’t—I couldn’t ruin that for you.”

Daniel took the seat across for him reaching out to gently touch his bruised knuckles. Even that light touch started a fire kindling low in Jacy’s belly, and it was all he could do not to pull Daniel into his arms and hug him tightly. Hell, his arms fairly ached with emptiness. It had been so long since he’d simply held anyone. He suddenly came to the realization that he didn’t want to hug just anyone. He wanted to hug Daniel, to see if the dream he’d had could have a basis in reality. Jacy didn’t move though, fearing such an action would irrevocably change their relationship. He conveniently forgot that the kiss they’d shared already had.

“I don’t care about the paper, Jacy. That was sort of inevitable. I care about what happened to your hand. What was the fight about?” Daniel asked. His voice was gentle and calm, but Jacy could see how tense he was through the shoulders.

Jacy found the natural hesitation he felt when discussing things with Marissa missing when he spoke to Daniel. He *wanted* to tell Daniel everything. He didn’t want there to be any secrets between them, and if he examined the reasons for that too closely, he was liable to panic. So he didn’t. Instead he answered Daniel’s question. “Got in a fight at The White Horse last night. I caught Marissa in the men’s bathing having sex when she was supposed to be at work.”

“I’m sorry, Jacy.” Daniel lightly squeezed his hand.

“That’s not all.” Jacy pinched the bridge of his nose astonished to feel angry tears burning bitterly at the back of his throat. He had to clear his throat twice before continuing. He ignored the hurt look on Daniel’s face when he pulled his hand out from his stroking fingers. He was definitely going to cry if Daniel kept touching him like that, kept trying to soothe him when

he was the one who should be getting soothed. His face was clearing up nicely. Most of the swelling had gone down, but the dark circles under his eyes and the angry purplish marks on his throat and jaw still told the story of his pain. A pain Jacy wished with all his heart he could take away.

“God, I’m no good at this,” he said, blinking back tears. The first traitor slid down his cheek and he wiped it away. “I-I don’t usually get this emotional.” He said avoiding Daniel’s eyes. “I’m not the violent type, you see, but God... when I saw that son-of-a-bitch with the scorpion on his neck...” he looked up, watching surprise widen Daniel’s eyes, “I lost it. All I could think about was that he had hurt you and I wanted—I wanted to hurt him just as bad.” Worse.

Tears just kept spilling down his cheeks and Jacy gave up trying to wipe them away. Somewhere inside him a dam had broken and the water wasn’t going to cease until it had run its course. “Anyway, I don’t remember much, after that I sort of went blank when I let into him like I did. I do know that David finally dragged me off him and he was taken to the hospital for a broken nose and a few stitches.” David had said as much on the way home, speaking to Jacy via cell phone, while he drove Jacy’s truck and Jacy drove Daniel’s. He’d also lectured Jacy about how lucky he was that Eric wasn’t going to press charges. Of course, Jacy knew why Eric wasn’t going to demand his arrest. He wasn’t about to have anything to do with the police when he’d just recently committed a crime of his own. He had no idea that Daniel remembered almost nothing, but what he did remember was enough to place Eric as a suspect. Jacy smiled to himself when he imagined the look that would cross Eric’s face when Sheriff Austin came a-calling. He fully intended to speak with the sheriff today, but he’d leave that for when he went to work.

“The man with the tattoo was in the bar?”

“So to speak. He was in the bathroom, fucking my wife.”

Daniel looked even more flabbergasted then he had felt that Jacy couldn't help but chuckle softly. It was the most natural thing in the world to take his hand and pull him across the table, into his lap. It was more natural then breathing to cup that lovely face and look into his gorgeous baby blues. “Its okay, darlin', I'm not sad about it. Marissa and I were over a long time ago. All I'm going to do now is draw up the papers. She already packed a bag and is staying over a friend's house until our property can be divided.” Jacy was keeping the house. That much he knew. He'd had it paid in full before he even met Marissa. “What I want to know is if you're okay. How do you feel?” His hand slid down to Daniel's shoulder rubbing gently the abused area.

“I-I'm okay.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then a wide grin spread across his face. “Did you really break his nose?”

Daniel nodded, chuckling. “Yeah, I did.” He stiffened when he felt Daniel's fingertips on his cheeks wiping away his tears.

“I like when you call me that.” Daniel said, cheeks flushing sweetly.

“Call you what?”

“Darlin'.”

Their eyes met and held, and damn if Jacy didn't feel like he'd been socked in the gut. Easy as breathing, he was leaning forward before he knew it, touching his lips to Daniel's. The kiss started off feather light and then Daniel gasped, opening that sweet mouth and he just had to taste it, had to. His tongue delved inside, and Daniel opened right up, no hesitation.

Jacy groaned, arms wrapping around the smaller man, careful of his shoulder. Fingers splayed over Daniel's back and he was hot as anything. Furnace hot. His mouth was hot too and

tasted of orange juice. *Ah, not a coffee drinker then.* He'd made the coffee for Jacy. Should have remembered, he'd known Daniel for nine years. But how was a body supposed to remember anything when a part of it was frolicking in heaven?

Jacy must have been starving, because he ate at Daniel's mouth as though it were his last meal. His tongue lashed, his teeth nibbled. He sucked and licked each corner unable to get enough, to taste enough. It frightened him how much he wanted--no needed, Daniel. He was rock hard and burning up from the inside out.

Skin. He needed skin too. The fingers of one hand bunched up Daniel's shirt while the other slid over the bare skin of his back. Daniel was in one of the button-ups he'd brought him, but he wasn't about to pull away long enough to get it undone. His fingers explored the smooth skin of his back marveling at how hot and silky he was, at the firm muscles trembled for him as he stroked. His fingers encountered one heated spot low on Daniel's back finding it a different texture than the rest of his skin.

Daniel gasped into their kiss, confirming his suspicions. He had found a bruise. One that was still very tender. The sensual haze lifted under the knowledge that he couldn't risk doing more harm to Daniel when he was still injured. Reluctantly, Jacy pulled away from the kiss.

Daniel whimpered, eyes flying open. They were filled with questions.

Jacy touched a thumb to his swollen bottom lip, tracing the inner silken contours. "We shouldn't be doing this, Daniel." And with those words came a rush of guilt. What he was doing was wrong because he could never return the feelings he saw shining in Daniel's eyes. He loved him, sure, but it wasn't the kind of love Daniel deserved or needed. Daniel needed someone who was strong enough to protect him, smart enough to know what they had when they had it, and loved him as a partner—not a brother. He needed someone with a sense of humor that could

erase the defeated look in his eyes, and share in his joy about the little things. Someone who felt more emotion than Jacy was capable of giving, and was ready and able to commit himself to a man; to walk in view of the public and be comfortable with the fact that he was gay. That man was not him.

The silence between them was louder than any noise as Jacy urged Daniel to his feet and got out of his chair. He didn't know what to say, and it looked as if Daniel was just as clueless. He glanced down at his watch, looking for an out as he always had. It was time for him to go to work. While he wasn't happy about leaving Daniel alone, he was glad for a way to escape those probing eyes. All he could offer was, "I'm sorry, Daniel. I'm sorry I kissed you." Damn, he was as messy with this as everything else in his life. "I'm sorry." He said, lamely. Not waiting for Daniel to answer, he hurried from the room.

As he retrieved what he needed for work, he mentally went over his plans for the day. On his list of things to do for the day, call Sheriff Austin, call David to thank him, and arrange to pull a double shift at the clinic. Meanwhile, he would try to ignore the fact that he was running again, running from the kiss that burned him down to his soul. Running from a man he was determined to convince himself he didn't want and deserve.

CHAPTER 7

Three days until Christmas...

Daniel's arm was still a little sore, but he hardly felt any pain at all when he used it to do simple tasks. The sling had been removed two days earlier, but he was always careful to limit the use of his injured arm. He made use of the return of his flexibility as he stuffed clothes into his bag. He couldn't get out the door fast enough. The last week had been miserable for him. Instead of feeling like a guest in Jacy's house, he'd felt more like a convict trying to stay out of trouble. He'd hardly interacted with Jacy at all. No matter how much he longed to drag the man into his bedroom and love him senseless until he had no choice but to admit he had feelings for Daniel. There was no doubt in his mind that Jacy had feelings for him. It might not have been as deep as Daniel's was for him, but it was something.

Besides his problems with Jacy, Daniel had a life to live. He missed his job. Since Daniel didn't have any family, his coworkers and the animals at the clinic always gave him comfort. He missed them. He missed Rita and Elizabeth too. Both of them had run up their phone bills calling him, and Rita and her girls had come to visit in the middle of the week, but it wasn't the same.

He was still scared of running into the same guys who had assaulted him in the parking lot of the bar, but he couldn't let fear put his life on hold. It was his favorite holiday, and he was spending it cooped up inside. He had presents to buy and wrap, cookies to bake for Rita's little girls. He always hung stockings up at the clinic. He bet everyone was missing that.

It was definitely time to go. He zipped his bags and gave the room the once over to make sure he hadn't left anything behind or out of place. Satisfied that he had everything, he moved quietly toward the door. He'd deliberately woken up early to avoid running into Jacy. He'd worked double shifts ever since that day when they'd shared the kiss, and he was sure to be in his room now, dead to the world. He would only have to worry about running into Jacy at work on Monday. But he'd agonize about that later, not now.

Daniel made his way as quietly as he could to the front door only pausing once he got to the living room. His eyes fell on the tiny tree with the blinking lights; the one he had decorated with Jacy. Jacy had given the tree as a gift to him. Daniel shook his head, "You keep it."

The shock of the cool early morning air put color in his cheeks, and he zipped his coat up to his chin. He locked the door before closing it and headed for his truck. True to his word, Jacy had taken care of everything. Although his insurance had paid for the damages, it had been Jacy who'd taken it to the shop to have a new window fitted and to touch up the paint. It looked as good as new.

He was just fitting the key into the lock when the front door to Jacy's house was thrown open. Jacy came marching out looking every inch the wet dream, as he was wearing nothing but a pair of thigh hugging black briefs. Daniel's mouth fell open as he took in the sight of Jacy's nearly-naked bronze body, muscles rippled in his abdomen and legs as he moved, and all that glorious hair was loose, blowing behind his body like a silken curtain. As he watched, the chocolate colored disks of his nipples shriveled into hard little points, a direct response to the cold.

Jacy felt a shudder travel through him, his belly clenched, and he had to close his eyes. God, this was not fair! The sound of Jacy's angry voice had his eyes snapping back open.

“Where in the hell are you going?”

Surprisingly, Daniel felt his own anger flare. Where was he going? Where else but back to his tiny apartment, back to misery, back home to forget that Jacy had ever kissed him like he needed him to breathe. He was going back to longing for a man he couldn't have, and probably back to watching him find and marry a woman that could never love him the way he could.

“Where do you get off demanding anything of me? I'm a grown man, Jacy! I can go where I damn well please!”

Jacy didn't even blink. Hell he didn't even seem to feel the cold, and he was barefoot, for God's sake! He reached down and neatly plucked Daniel's keys out of the door. Daniel reached for them, but Jacy held them out of the way. “Come back inside, Daniel,” he said evenly, “You're not going anywhere until those men are caught.”

Daniel lifted his chin stubbornly. “I'm not going back into that house.”

“You are,” Jacy growled.

All right, now they were sounding like kids, but so what. “Make me.”

He barely had time to gasp before Jacy wrapped strong arms around him locking his arms to his side and lifting him off his feet. The tight clasp made him lose his grip on his bags. His cheek was pressed into the defined pectoral muscles of Jacy's chest, which he really didn't mind. As Jacy walked him inside the house he cradled him to his chest as if he weighed no more than a baby. Daniel felt his body begin to relax, melding to fit the surprisingly heated contours of Jacy's body.

When Jacy set him down, it was all he could do not to push back into his arms and beg him to never let go. Gentle fingertips lifted his chin forcing his clenched jaw to lift, forcing him to look into those dark eyes. “I don't want you to get hurt again. I know you're a man with your

own mind, but I just need you to do this for me and not argue. Please, stay here with me.” Daniel felt Jacy’s calloused thumb rubbing over his chin at the tiny bruise that had yet to fade.

He wasn’t thinking at all, in fact every thought had flown right out of his head. His mind had stuttered to a halt the moment he looked up into Jacy’s warm brown eyes and saw the care and worry, and yes, love, shining back at him from their depths. Love for him. Jacy loved him, even if he could never say it.

Groaning, Daniel ducked his head and captured that roving finger gently between his teeth. He swirled his tongue around the pad of Jacy’s thumb, drawing a gasp from the bigger man’s lips.

“What are you doing?”

Without answering Daniel reached out and laid his hand over the smooth-hardness of Jacy’s belly, feeling the muscles flex under his skin. He continued to caress working his way up.

The thumb was pulled from his mouth and Jacy took possession of his wrists, pulling him away. “We can’t, Daniel.” But Daniel heard that trembling need, saw it in the ways those dark eyes shuttered, and Jacy’s tongue darted out to moisten his lips. He realized that, left to his own devices, Jacy might just keep on running until the day he died. It was ironic for a man to take a firm stand in the face of danger and adversity, and yet to run at the slightest hint of love. Daniel knew it was going to take an effort on his part to make the man stand still long enough to feel something. And he was going to start now.

There wasn’t much strength in the hands that held him back. It was easy for Daniel to push into that warm chest, to lace his fingers into that silken mane, and draw those lips down to his.

Jacy's lips felt like he remembered, dry and soft, the inside of his mouth incredibly hot and tasting slightly of mint. The kiss itself electrified him down to his toes, sending his pulse racing, bringing his blood to a boil. Jacy didn't kiss him back at first, letting him explore the contours of his mouth as if uncertain if he should stop him or not. Lucky for him, the big man didn't. Instead those powerful arms wrapped around him, tugging him flush against Jacy's body, allowing him to feel the evidence of Jacy's need digging into his belly.

With a growl that sent delighted shivers down his spine, Jacy took over the kiss. His hands cradled Daniel's head, angling him just so that he could deepen the thrusts of his tongue. Daniel latched onto the invading tongue and suckled, drawing deep rumbling sounds from the bigger man's chest.

Now free to roam as they would, Daniel slid his palms over Jacy's nipples delighting at the rippling effect it had on his lover's body. Jacy's cock jerked against his belly and suddenly Daniel had to know what he tasted like. Pulling away, he quickly dropped to his knees before Jacy could recover enough from their kiss to stop him. He wasted no time hooking two fingers in the waistband of Jacy's briefs. He pulled them down; at the same time he leaned forward, there to greet the thick column with the warmth of his mouth, as it emerged.

He licked over the mushroom shaped head of Jacy's cock tasting the first bittersweet drops of his essence. Jacy moaned, hips pushing forward in a silent plea. Daniel was all too happy to oblige. He began to lavish Jacy with slow licks and teasing suction, determined to drive the man half as crazy as he drove him.

"Y-You little tease," Jacy gasped. Daniel's blonde curls curled around his fingers.

Humming softly, Daniel cradled Jacy's shaft by the base and slid his lips further down, moaning at how wide his mouth was stretched open as he began to suck. His own cock throbbed

inside the confines of his jeans. He could feel the wet spot spreading against the inside of his jeans. He was so turned on by what he was doing that he knew he was going to come when Jacy did.

Lashing the head of his cock with his tongue produced more of the bitterly delicious cum and Daniel did so again and again. He fell into an easy rhythm of nursing Jacy's cock, bobbing his head for a moment, before sliding nearly all of it out of his mouth so he could tongue Jacy's slit. By the way that body was trembling, he knew Jacy was going to come soon. Sliding his hands around to grab handfuls of that firm ass, he encouraged Jacy to thrust as he leaned forward, taking as much of the thick shaft as he could.

Jacy resisted at first, "D-Don't want to hurt you, baby." Those careful hands sifted through his curls, moving the sweaty strands from his forehead. Daniel reluctantly backed off long enough to look up at Jacy. He let the need he felt shine clearly in his eyes. He wasn't going to hide anymore, especially if he insisted Jacy stop running from what he felt.

"You aren't going to hurt me, Jacy." And then he laid it on thick. "Please, *darlin'*, fuck my mouth."

Jacy's cock jerked in his hand. A wicked grin spread across Daniel's face. Someone was obviously up to the task. Knowing what was about to happen he wasted no more time on conversation. Daniel leaned in and wrapped his lips around Jacy's cock, sucking for all he was worth.

Jacy's participation was slow at first. He knew he was larger than average and didn't want to hurt Daniel. But as that hot mouth continued to suckle him and that wicked tongue kept

stroking over his most sensitive spots, he lost the battle to control him. His hips surged forward of their own accord, and his eyes flared. Damn, if the little minx didn't moan and urge him deeper. From then on, Jacy gave him exactly what he wanted, thrusting good and hard into that tight delicious vortex. He had to close his eyes after only a few seconds. If he kept watching the pale haired focusing those baby blues up at him while those rosy lips opened to accept him, he was going to come. Not that he lasted much longer by not looking.

He hadn't realized he'd spread his legs quite so wide until he felt the inquisitive fingertip caress his entrance. A guttural groan poured from his throat even as his cock began jerk. His balls drew up tight against the base of his dick and liquid pleasure spurted from him, almost violently so. Fuck! He'd never come so hard in his life, and it just kept coming and coming like it was never going to end. And Daniel was taking every drop; in fact, when he was sure his balls were empty Daniel continued to suck him. He started to beg off, the tip of his cock was hypersensitive and the sensation was so pleasurable it bordered on pain, but then realized he was getting hard again.

Those not-so-innocent blue eyes seemed to twinkle up at him. Jacy opened his mouth to say something, and then every thought flew out of his head as his body went rigid as stone. His sphincter clenched around the intruder, but it was too late. Daniel had slid a finger into his ass. The sensation was strange. He'd never been curious enough to play back there so even one of Daniel's slender fingers felt like a lot.

His lover seemed quite content to wait as he was lapping at his cock like a lazy cat and his finger remained still, waiting until Jacy's body relaxed. Eventually, it did. The finger wiggled inside him, making more room, and Jacy felt his cheeks flushing. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do and found himself at odds with his body. He tried to analyze how he felt. Did he

like it? Well, he didn't *not* like it. Did this mean that Daniel wanted to fuck him? He would have tensed up again, but the finger in his ass curled and touched something that made him come up on his toes. "Fuck, Daniel!"

Daniel drew his mouth off Jacy's cock and smiled up at him. "Bingo."

"B-Bingo—Ah?!" That finger touched the spot in him again. His cock was suddenly as hard as steel.

"That's your prostate, darlin'." Daniel rose to his feet, mercifully removing his hand from Jacy's ass at the same time. Jacy was a little surprised at how empty he felt, and it took no thought at all to reach for Daniel and tug him into the cradle of his body. Daniel fit against him nicely he noted, as those slender fingers slid over his pectoral muscles. "I want you to make love to me." Those long gold lashes lowered demurely. Oh. Ho. *Now* he was shy. Those smooth cheeks were red as anything. It didn't matter, because he was definitely up to the task. His throbbing hard-on said as much.

Kicking away his boxers, he lifted Daniel into his arms, chuckling at the little squeak the smaller man made. He started heading for the stairs, pushing any thoughts that wanted to clamber into his head to the back of his mind. A month ago he would never have imagined himself in this predicament. Sure, he'd admired Daniel's beauty and great body before, but he'd never entertained thoughts of what he'd look like naked. He'd never thought of him in the context of a potential lover. But now he was about to find out not only what he looked like naked, but also what it felt like to be joined with him. His heart gave an answering thud and a feeling of warmth spread through his chest. Everything about what he was doing felt right, unlike anything he'd ever felt with Marissa. Their couplings had only ever been about the sex. Marissa

had been an aggressive and demanding lover. She called most of the shots in the bedroom and used her womanly wiles to mold Jacy's behavior as she saw fit.

As Jacy strolled into a guest room holding Daniel, he knew that he would never be like that. Daniel would never use sex to control him. He was a giving, caring person. He had already shown Jacy that, and now Jacy was determined to return the favor. All his fears and hang-ups could wait until later.

Daniel looked a little crest-fallen as he laid him down on the guest bed, in the same room he'd been sleeping in every day since his incident. Jacy sat beside him on the bed and cupped his chin forcing those blue eyes to look up at him. "What's wrong, baby?."

Those golden cheeks flushed and Daniel shook his head dislodging his chin from Jacy's grasp. "Why did you bring me in here?"

Oh, Daniel had misunderstood his decision to avoid his bedroom. Leaning forward he kissed the corner of Daniel's mouth. Daniel turned his head, just as Jacy had anticipated, and he briefly kissed those pouty lips. "Darlin', I brought you in here because when we're making love I don't want to smell Marissa on the sheets or look over and see her pictures on the wall. When it's just you and me, that's all I want to focus on. I didn't bring you here because I don't want you in my bedroom."

The smile returned to that sweet mouth, and Jacy hadn't known his heart was beating erratically until it returned to its normal pattern. Not wanting to examine the affects Daniel's moods were having on him at the moment, he leaned in to kiss him again. Where the first kiss had been impatient and intense, this second kiss was sweet and passionate. Jacy's head fairly buzzed with the knowledge that he could taste himself in Daniel's mouth. The notion was startlingly erotic. So were the hungry little noises his lover was making.

Deciding it was time for more skin, Jacy rolled onto his knees and began tackling the small buttons on Jacy's shirt. He helped divest his partner, careful of his arm, and then started in on his pants. In seconds, he had Daniel naked and laying on the bed in front of him. He broke away from the kiss so he could have a look.

If he'd had the dexterity, he would have kicked his own ass. How could he have missed what was under those clothes for this long? He was surprised he'd never noticed Daniel was fairly muscular. He'd always looked on the lean side to Jacy, but that was probably because he was so much smaller in comparison. The man had long, toned, runner's legs. He wasn't so dense where Daniel was concerned that he'd forgotten he ran mornings. The rest of him was just as toned, from the smooth, golden belly sprinkled with gold hairs leading to his navel, to his long limbs. His shoulders were fairly broad, and if Jacy wasn't mistaken, sprinkled with freckles that were just a shade darker. They reminded Jacy of caramel and he found his mouth just watering thinking about it. He shrugged.

Hell, why not?

The blue eyes widened when Jacy licked over a shoulder. He playfully smacked his lips. "Yep, just like I thought. Sweet."

Daniel got this funny look on his face. He looked as if he thought Jacy was losing it on him.

Jacy chuckled, and nipped that tempting shoulder, then laved the small ache with his tongue. It earned him a shudder. "I think I'm in love with your freckles, darlin'."

The blond flushed and shook his head. "You can have them then. I certainly don't want them. I had some on the bridge of my nose, but fading cream works wonders... Ow!" Daniel rubbed his stinging shoulder, casting a phony glare up at Jacy.

“Those are my freckles, brat. Don’t you dare get rid of them!” He’d bite him again if he got rid of one more perfect dot.

Shaking his head, Daniel frowned. “You actually like them?”

“Yes.” It looked like he was going to have to prove to Daniel that he loved him, every part of his golden body was perfect to him, right down to the golden flecks on his skin. Nuzzling aside his fingers, Jacy proceeded to lick each of his freckles. His lover’s eyes fluttered shut and he began to moan, moving restlessly as Jacy lowered his bigger frame on top of him, until they were skin to skin. There were no words to describe how good it felt to have almost every inch of his body flush against the warm silk of Daniel’s body. Even the sparse hair on Daniel’s legs was a highly erotic sensation as they slid along his hairless calves.

When Daniel tried to wrap his arms around Jacy, he shook his head. Daniel looked puzzled until he interlocked their hands, weaving his fingers through Daniel’s, making them one. He gently pressed Daniel’s hands to the mattress, always keeping the memory of his recent injury at the forefront of his mind.

“Close your eyes, darlin’. I want you to concentrate on just feeling.” He hoped Daniel enjoyed this, because he sure as hell was going to. Never having had a man in his bed, Jacy was fascinated with all the differences the male form had from a female’s body. Of course he was a man too, but touching himself and touching someone else was hardly the same thing. He didn’t have the dexterity or the inclination to suck his own nipples, so he was curious at the reaction he’d get out of Daniel sucking on those tiny bits of flesh. And damn if they didn’t just pucker up when he blew on one.

“Jacy,” Daniel whimpered. His name sounded good on Daniel’s lips.

“Right here, baby. I’ve got you.” He touched the tip of his tongue to Daniel’s nipple and flicked. Daniel’s back arched and he made one of those needy sounds that never failed to turn Jacy’s blood boiler up a notch. “Ah, sensitive here?”

Daniel shook his head, “I-I was never this sensitive b-before.”

That knowledge thrilled him. He might not be Daniel’s first, but no one could affect Daniel like he could. Fool he’d been to think another man deserved Daniel. He didn’t deserve him either, but if nobody deserved him, he certainly was going to be the first non-deserver in line.

Daniel’s reaction was certainly worth more exploration. Jacy indulged himself, wrapping his lips around that bit of flesh and sucking. His lover definitely was the singing type. All sorts of moans, groans and whimpers poured from that beautiful throat as he explored both nipples thoroughly. Only when he got the sinking suspicion that his lover was going to come did he move on. He was determined that when Daniel finally came it wasn’t going to be all over that flat belly. As he moved he kept their fingers interlaced, dragging their hands down to lay to either side of Daniel’s hips.

Hot, wet, licking kisses were placed on an ever narrowing trail down Daniel’s quivering belly. Jacy paused only once, to dip his tongue into the crescent shaped navel. He continued on his trail downward following the happy trail down to the part of Daniel he was quickly becoming too impatient to wait for a taste.

Daniel had a good size to him; he wasn’t as thick as Daniel, but he thought he might be an inch or so longer. “Hard as a rock,” he growled, dipping his head to taste the cum dribbling profusely from the crown. His taste was slightly bland, not overly strong, and far from bitter. It

reminded Jacy of the taste of coconuts. And just like coconuts, he was betting you had to have more than one taste to fully appreciate it.

He decided if he was going to do a good job of it, then he needed the use of his hands. Squeezing Daniel's hands once in reassurance, he released them and slid his arms under his buttocks, lifting and spreading at the same time. The spicy, musky scent that wafted to his nose had his cock jerking expectantly.

Ducking his head he licked at the heavy sac, savoring the salty, musky flavor of Daniel's skin and the way his hips rocked with each swipe of his tongue. The little hedonist knew how to maximize sensation. Jacy worked his way up to the base of his lover's cock, lavishing attention on the root and then nibbling his way up to the head.

By now Daniel had a chorus of whimpers going for him. It only intensified when he pressed his tongue to his lover's slit. Daniel's hips jerked, but Jacy was there to hold him down, to guide that eager cock between his lips.

"Uh. Uh. Uh!" Daniel's entire body began to tremble and then the first splash of cum hit Jacy's tongue. He quickly swallowed it, anticipating more. His baby didn't disappoint, and Jacy counted nine offerings before he was done. He sucked on the flagging organ a few minutes longer, making sure he'd gotten every drop and then crawled up Daniel's body to share the taste.

Despite being tuckered out from his orgasm, Daniel happily accepted his weight, suctioning to Jacy like an octopus. He hungrily returned his kisses until both of them had to come up for air.

Daniel reached down and grasped Jacy's cock, lightly squeezing it. "I want to feel you inside me."

Groaning, Jacy leaned down and kissed those tempting lips. "Okay." He'd done this before with Marissa and one other girl he'd dated before her. He knew how to control himself, how not to hurt Daniel.

He didn't have any lube, though.

Daniel saw his intense frown and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't have any lubricant."

"You've got lotion though, right?"

"You actually use lotion?" Jacy's look was incredulous.

"Well, yes. Its not my favorite thing to use, but it'll do in a squeeze." To emphasize his point, he squeezed Jacy's cock. Jacy would have teased him for his lame jokes, but the hand on his organ was making thinking too damn difficult.

Deciding he had better get the lotion before he came he reached down to ease Daniel's hand away. Dropping a kiss on his brow he said, "Be right back."

It took some searching but he finally found a bottle of sensitive-skin, unscented, lotion. The last thing they needed was a bad reaction.

The sight of Daniel stretched across the bed like a golden angel gave him heart palpitations as he crossed the room. His lover's legs were bent at the knees and spread wide, giving him an unobstructed view of that fine bottom, and rosy hole that was just begging to be filled. As he watched, Daniel stroked his own cock, moaning as he pushed his hips up. He offered Jacy his ass without hesitation.

He'd never seen anything quite as erotic as his lover offering him his long, golden body. *How the hell had he gotten this lucky?* he thought, crawling between those spread legs. He placed a kiss on Daniel's thigh and slid his hand from his lover's balls down to the warm

opening. Grabbing the lotion up, he poured a liberal amount onto two fingers and pressed the digits at Daniel's hole. "You ready for me, darlin'?"

Daniel's "yes" came out as a breathless cry as Jacy's fingers penetrated his hole. Jacy worked his fingers in and out marveling at the tight, clinging, heat surrounding his two fingers. "So beautiful," he admitted honestly.

It wasn't long before Daniel was begging to be taken, and scissoring one last time to make sure he was stretched enough Jacy positioned himself above his lover. Their lips met in a heated kiss as his cock did a tortuously slow descent into Daniel's welcoming heat. Daniel squirmed and bucked his hips, trying to take all of him at once, but Jacy held him still. He nipped a pouting lower lip, "Behave, sweetness, or this is going to be over before it's begun." His balls felt so ready to burst they actually hurt with it.

Daniel relented, focusing on the kiss as Jacy reined in his control. He began to move slowly, thrusting shallowly as if testing Daniel's response.

"I need more," Daniel gasped into the kiss. "Please."

"You don't have to be, darlin'." He sealed his mouth back over Daniel's. *Never have to beg.* He gave Daniel what he wanted, what they both needed, increasing his pace until the room was filled with the sounds of moans, groans, and heated flesh slapping together. The mattress springs squeaked in protest and the head board slammed against the wall, but neither of them cared. They were engulfed in a world where no one existed beyond themselves. Nothing mattered to Jacy but the small, golden body under his hands and around his cock. Nothing mattered but swallowing those desperate little cries his lover emitted, slamming his cock into that incredibly tight heat.

Jacy was entirely unprepared for the orgasm that claimed his body. He'd never felt anything like it, and not from lack of experience. The power of it was just that strong, bolstered by the love he felt, behind it. The satisfaction he felt when his seed poured into Daniel was purely animalistic. As if he was claiming Daniel in every sense of the word.

The body beneath his went stiff as a board and then started to shiver as Daniel, too, started to come. Jacy reached down to palm his lover's cock, stroking him to prolong the pleasure, to milk every drop of seed from his young body.

Rolling to the side so he wouldn't crush the smaller man, Jacy dragged Daniel onto his chest. He had no wish to break the connection they'd forged.

Daniel snuggled into his chest, fitting against him as if he were made for him. "Perhaps now is a good time to tell you."

Jacy cocked his head so he could look down into his lover's eyes. "Tell me what."

Those pretty blue peepers fluttered shut, and Daniel's breathing slowed. "Sex always makes me sleepy."

Chuckling, Jacy patted his partner's curls. "Then go to sleep."

"Kay," he murmured. "You promise?"

"Promise what?"

"You'll be here when I wake up."

"Yes. You don't have to ask. You know I will."

Daniel shook his head, causing his bright curls to tickle Jacy's arm. "Do too. You always run from me..." That was all Daniel got out. The next sounds he emitted were soft snores.

Jacy frowned, staring up at the ceiling. Was that what he had been doing all these years? He recalled always feeling restless in Daniel's presence. Hell yeah, he'd been running. Weird, he

didn't feel restless now. He felt content. Well ...aside from the fact that he had a raging hard-on.

But holding Daniel close felt right. It felt like coming home after a long weary journey.

The only thing he had to worry about was how long it would last. Did he, Jacy Alan DeSalvo, have the guts to stand beside Daniel as a partner? In public? To his co-workers?

"I don't know," he said to the ceiling. Jacy sighed. "I really don't know."

CHAPTER 8

Christmas Eve...

“I dunno,” Daniel wrinkled up his nose. “What do you think?”

“He’s all wet. Why don’t you hand me a towel?”

Daniel handed him a white hand towel. Jacy frowned at him, “Do we have anything bigger?”

Peeking over his shoulder, Daniel said, “He’s not that big. How much towel do you need?”

“He might be small, but wait until we get started. He’s going to get everything wet. He’s a tricky little thing.”

Rolling his eyes Daniel went and fetched a larger towel. “Here.” He hesitated. “Wait, do you want to do it or should I?”

“Don’t you want him?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then you can do it. I’ll hold him.”

The two men switched places and when Jacy was ready he gave the signal. “I’m ready.”

“Do you have a good grip on him? I don’t want to have to mop the floor.”

Daniel chuckled, “Just do it already. I want to see if we did a good job with his trimming.”

Knock! Knock! Knock! “I’m coming in, you guys, so if you’re, ah...compromised, please get uncompromised!” their secretary, Elizabeth yelled through the door seconds before opening it. She opened one eye and then the other with a sigh of relief.

“Hello, Elizabeth.” Jacy’s lips twitched.

“What did you think we were doing?” Daniel asked, not bothering to try and stop his broad smile.

The Scottish terrier named Biscuit issued a short bark, as if he were asking a question of his own.

Daniel stroked the wet, black fur of the terrier’s head. “Shush, you.”

Elizabeth’s face was an alarming shade of red and Daniel took pity on her. “Was there something you came to tell us, Elizabeth?”

“Oh! Oh, yes...Uh, let me see.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes, obviously trying to dredge up her memory. Suddenly she snapped her fingers and her eyes flew open. “Sheriff Austin called. He says he has some good and bad news to share with you all. He told me to tell you he’d be around here at four o’clock and he’s bringing a guest.”

Daniel and Jacy exchanged looks. They both suspected what the good news could be about, but Sheriff Austin said there was bad news too.

Jacy was the first to look away. “Did he say anything else, Elizabeth?”

“No, that was all.” She looked from one iron-jawed man to the other and took it as her cue to leave. “Well, I guess I’ll be getting back to my desk.” She hesitated at the door. “I know that sometimes I’m a busy body, but for what it’s worth I’m really happy for you two. You make a fine couple.” Cheeks flushing red, Elizabeth ducked out before they could comment.

“You okay?” Jacy asked, concerned with Daniel’s pallor.

Shaking himself out of his thoughtful stupor, Daniel said. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“No you’re not, darlin’.” Jacy was already heading toward him. Unfortunately, he let go of the dog. Biscuit immediately started shaking, splattering water and fur all over them.

“Damn it, Biscuit.” Jacy huffed, reaching up to pluck a strand of hair off his lip.

Daniel threw his head back and laughed.

“You think that’s funny, brat?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“You and that dog are going to drive me crazy for the rest of our natural born lives, aren’t you?”

Daniel’s laugh tapered off as he realized what Jacy had said. *Natural born lives*? He almost didn’t dare to breathe again, for fear he’d misheard Jacy.

Jacy grinned. “You heard me right, brat. You’re stuck with me from now on.”

With a happy cry—which was not a squeal—he’d *attest* to that, Daniel crossed the room and threw himself into Jacy’s arms.

Jacy wrapped his arms around Daniel. With water, dog hair, and all, he planted a tender kiss on his lips. “I love you, Daniel.”

Daniel’s smile could have rivaled the distance of the equator. “I love you too.”

And he knew that somehow everything was going to work itself out.

The place was spotless.

The floor had been swept.

Animals fed.

They'd even changed their clothes. Both men were wearing a pair of blue jeans and white t-shirts.

Biscuit was curled up on her bed, looking fine with her new haircut, and happily munching on a...well, dog biscuit.

There was nothing left to do now but wait. His nerves had driven him into a cleaning frenzy, until finally Jacy had ushered him into his office to wait for the sheriff in peace.

"You okay, sweetheart?" Jacy touched his shoulder, offering him support, but not wanting to hover.

"Yeah, sure, I'm fine." He looked down to watch his feet swinging a few inches off the floor from his perch on Jacy's desk. The both of them were waiting for the sheriff to arrive. Rita and her assistant, Chelsea had already taken over their shift. Usually Jacy didn't get off work until six, but Daniel was too important to him to let him face this news alone.

Jacy was about to say something more; he knew Daniel was not fine. He was worried about what news the sheriff would bring. Catching sight of Sheriff Austin from his peripheral view, Jacy snapped his mouth shut.

The usually animated and friendly face looked oddly devoid of its smile. "Good afternoon, gentlemen." Sheriff Austin said, moving from the door and revealing a slim man who Jacy first mistook for a teenager. It was only after his second glance that he determined he was a grown man. He was slender, almost to the point of looking too thin, and his cheeks were smoother than a baby's bottom. The wild mane of red curls didn't help matters any, nor did the face full of freckles. But there were lines around his mouth and eyes, and grooves only time could form in his face, which marked him as older.

“Good afternoon, sheriff.” Jacy and Daniel said in unison.

“This is Ryan Gainsworth. He’s Eric Gainsworth’s little brother.”

It took Jacy a moment to internalize just what he was insinuating, but the emphasis he put on the name Eric finally clicked in his head. His eyes flew to the redhead. He definitely bore a strong resemblance to his big brother. Daniel didn’t react at all. He’d never told him the name of the man in the bathroom.

The sheriff turned his attention to Daniel. “Daniel, this young man has valuable information about your attack over a week ago.” The sheriff turned and nodded to the man.

Despite his looks and size, the man’s voice was surprisingly deep and filled with bitterness. “My brother ain’t no gaybasher. He’s a mean sonofabitch and that’s for sure, but he ain’t never beat up a man because of his sexual preference.”

“Then why did he do it?” Jacy asked, fighting to keep his voice under control. It wasn’t Ryan’s fault. He couldn’t punish him for the deeds of his brother.

“Why else?” An odd little smile quirk lifted his lips. “Sex has been the downfall for many a man.” Ryan spread small freckled hands before him, like he was spreading cards on the table. “Look, I’m not going to beat around the bush. About two months ago, my brother met a woman by the name of Marissa DeSalvo. I overheard them talking a few times and then he told me himself. She paid him to crank call some homosexual guy and antagonize him. It never went no further than that. He placed a few phone calls and he and this woman hooked up and then nothing happened for a few weeks.

When he finally met back up with her about four days ago, she was in a tizzy. She went on a tirade for about an hour about some man she thought her husband was cheating on her with.

My brother told me she'd asked him to beat someone up for her. She didn't want him dead. She just wanted to hurt him."

"Jesus Christ!" Jacy spun around, shoving a hand through his hair. He forgot that he'd braided it this morning and his hand got snarled in the braid. He didn't care; in fact, he relished the pain. He nearly jumped out of skin when a warm palm settled at the center of his back. One of Daniel's arms snaked around his middle and a warm body pressed against his.

"Shhh, it's okay. I've got you." Daniel said, echoing his words from two nights prior.

The turmoil churning around in Jacy's stomach instantly quieted. He laced his fingers with that slender hand and felt Daniel's reassuring squeeze.

The sheriff cleared his throat, drawing their attention. "We still have a bit more news to share. Assuming you care to hear it just now. Then we'll be out of your hair."

Jacy looked down at Daniel and received his nod. "Go ahead, sheriff," Jacy said.

"We've got your wife—excuse me, soon to be ex-wife—down at the county jail. We're holding her on charges of instigating and plotting assault and battery. Eric Gainsworth settled the blame at her feet after his brother came in and spoke with us. He's in a cell right next to hers. If you want to press charges, you'll have to come down to the jail house and write out a statement."

"I don't want to press charges. What punishment will they receive if I don't?"

Sheriff Austin looked surprised. "No more than a slap on the wrist, community service, maybe. Despite his temper Eric has never earned a record. Miracle if you ask me." He shook his head. "Are you sure, Mr. Clark?"

"Yes. I think Marissa has already paid for her deeds. Losing Jacy had to be a punishment in itself. The shame and stigma that will be attached to her name will see that she never has a comfortable life in Somerville again."

Jacy turned in his arms and looked down at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Jacy nodded. He would respect Daniel's decision in this. He honestly didn't know what he would have done if their positions were reversed.

"Then that's settled." The sheriff looked greatly relieved to have that done with. He turned to the red-haired man at his side. "Thanks again, son."

Ryan nodded. "No problem." He addressed Jacy and Daniel. "Guilt was eating me up inside."

The nonchalant way he took in Jacy and Daniel's embrace and open affection led Jacy to believe there was more. "That's part of it, but not all."

A flush spread across the redhead's face and he ducked his head briefly, but when he lifted his eyes they were twinkling. "Maybe it just hit close to home."

Jacy nodded. He'd guessed as much about Ryan's sexual preference from his reaction to him and Daniel. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Sheriff Austin started to lead him out but the redhead paused at the door. "Oh, and Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," Jacy and Daniel said in unison.

CHAPTER 9

Christmas Day...

Daniel awoke slowly, aware of lips nibbling his ear. A swipe of tongue lashed the sensitive spot just behind it. He shivered, arching back into the strong body spooned around his. “Merry Christmas, darlin’,” Jacy murmured, burying his face into the crook of Daniel’s neck.

Turning in his arms, Daniel captured his lover’s face and brought their lips together. He kept the kiss light, feeling playful and happy. This was the first Christmas he had woken up without regret. He thought if he had no presents, no decorations, if he never heard another Christmas carol it would be okay, because he had Jacy.

Jacy growled into the kiss, “You little tease.” He nipped Daniel’s bottom lip and rolled the smaller man beneath him, letting him feel the evidence of his need. Daniel didn’t hesitate to spread his legs, offering himself up to the man he loved.

Even so, Jacy hesitated. “Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel like I—”
Daniel silenced him with a kiss.

“I need to, lover.”

Jacy grinned. “Hey, now, I can get *behind* that.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and chuckled. God save them from Jacy’s sense of humor.

“Or you could get behind me,” Jacy said, his expression serious.

Was he serious? He slid his hands up his lover's strong arms, marveling at their smoothness. "You don't have to, Jacy. I like being on the receiving end just fine. Especially with you pitching," he added with a blush.

Jacy wagged his eyebrows and then laughed. He shook his head though. "I know, darlin'. I like pitching. But I've been thinking about this thing for a day or so now. I was thinking about how good it felt to be inside of you and...well, I want you to feel that good too."

Oh hell, he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. "We'll need—"

A bottle of lube was tossed into his lap. "You really must have been thinking about this." He pushed up onto his elbows. "How do you want to do this?" It wasn't the most romantic thing he'd ever said, but he wanted Jacy to maintain a sense of control. Being on the receiving end could be a bit scary. He sure as hell was shaken up his first time, but it hadn't been all that bad. It was the waiting and not knowing how it would feel that was the worst part.

"Which way is easier?" Jacy sat back on his heels. And not for the first time since they had become lovers, the beauty of the man enraptured him. Bronze perfection was what he was. All sleek and muscled everywhere, and if that wasn't enough, his long midnight-black hair cascaded over powerful shoulders to tumble down his back. He looked like every wet dream Daniel had ever had.

It wasn't until Jacy noisily cleared his throat that he realized he was gaping. "Sorry, you're just sexy as all hell and I..." Want to lick you all over, rub myself against you like I'm a tabby cat, lock you up and wear the key around my neck. "...got lost admiring for a minute there."

Those high cheekbones flushed and Daniel felt his heart lurch. He'd done that, put color in his lover's cheeks. About time too, he always seemed to be the one with the flaming cheeks.

Grabbing the bottle of lube, he pushed back the covers and crawled next to Jacy. "It will be easier if we do it with me behind you." He held his breath. Here was the moment of truth. It wasn't easy for a man to bare himself so intimately. Especially knowing what was going to happen. He knew he'd been embarrassed with exposing himself the first time he'd done it, almost to the point where he'd changed his mind.

Jacy nodded, and dropped forward onto his hands. He crawled up the bed and Daniel almost swallowed his tongue as his partner's firm bubble butt swayed enticingly. *And he calls me a tease?* Daniel thought, watching as his handsome lover spread his legs and arched his back to look behind him.

"Like this?"

"Mmh." Cough. Cough. "T—That's good," he croaked.

Jacy chuckled. "I'm getting lonely over here, Danny."

So it was Danny now? He was going to have to think up a nickname for the big guy. Fair was only fair. Moving up behind him, Daniel decided fair *was* fair. Two could play this teasing game, and couldn't deny that he *was* a tease. One of the best, actually.

He popped open the bottle with extra zest so that his partner would definitely hear it. Jacy heard it all right, if his stiffening shoulders were any indication. Daniel laid a hand on his partner's ass, smoothing over the firm surface. His partner began to relax under his soothing strokes. Daniel placed the bottle on the bed, deciding it could wait.

Reaching under Jacy he found his partner's stiff cock. He wrapped his hand around it and stroked, making sure to rub his thumb over the leaking head. Jacy groaned and lowered his hips, pushing his cock through Daniel's fist.

“That’s it, babe,” Daniel coaxed, dropping a kiss at the small of Jacy’s back. He began nibbling his way down, pausing to suck and lick here and there. He could feel Jacy’s cock throbbing like a heartbeat in his hand. His lover was close.

He stopped the ministrations of his hand all together.

“Fuck! Daniel, you’re trying to kill me!” Jacy all but roared.

Daniel chuckled softly, and slid his tongue down the crevice between Jacy’s buttocks. He heard Jacy’s gasp of surprise, then muttered curses as he licked over his virgin opening.

Making his tongue as rigid as he could get it, Daniel probed at the tight little bud. It took some coaxing, but he finally slid in, neat as you please. The cock in his hand started pulsing and Jacy cried out, his hips jerking as he spilled his seed over Daniel’s hand and coated the covers beneath him.

That big body continued to shudder and rock as Daniel rimmed his partner’s ass. “Fuck, Daniel, want you in me!” Jacy, moaned.

Nodding, Daniel groped for the bottle of lube, even as he pushed one finger into Jacy along side his tongue. Groaning at the tightness that surrounded his finger, Daniel lifted his head to watch as Jacy’s body easily accepted him. He stroked in and out for a few moments until he felt Jacy pushing back against his hand. Slowly, he eased a second finger inside him and gently began to scissor his fingers. No way in hell was he rushing this and hurting Jacy.

What little patience he had soon dissipated all together as Jacy begged to be fucked. He wasted no further time applying a liberal amount of lube to his erection and pressing the head of his cock against Jacy’s ready hole. Grabbing his lover’s hips, he began to enter him. He had to grit his teeth and recite every prayer he knew—and a few he made up—as he pushed into the tightest, hottest, most perfect heat he’s ever known. Jacy’s body clenched around him like a

velvet fist. He had to hold perfectly still when he bottomed out because he knew he was a hairsbreadth for coming.

When he felt he'd gathered enough of his control he leaned forward and ran a hand over the sleek muscles of Jacy's back. "You okay, babe? This isn't hurting you, is it?"

"No, I'm fine. Just feels full." As if to emphasize his point, he flexed his inner muscles, squeezing around Daniel's cock.

Daniel groaned, feeling pleasure zinging down to his toes. At this rate he wasn't going to last much longer.

It wasn't as bad as he thought it was going to be, especially with the knowledge that he was one with Daniel. *He's inside me.* And holding absolutely still. Oh, they couldn't have that. Jacy shifted forward, letting Daniel's cock slip almost out of him before shoving back. Daniel's ragged groan greeted his ears and those fingers tightened around his waist. Daniel thrust forward and hit that spot deep within Jacy that set sparks off inside his brain.

"Ah, found it," Daniel groaned, angling his hips to nail his gland over and over again. Daniel's strokes altered from slow and deep to fast and shallow. Jacy matched him, pushing back onto the thick cock inside him determined to bring his lover just as desperately as he chased his own orgasm. He was going to come soon. It felt like his need was vibrating in his very bones, and every time Daniel's rigid length stroked across that spot fire erupted in his belly. He just about lost his balance and fell on his face, but caught himself just in time.

Daniel suddenly reached around and wrapped his hand around his dick. His thumb flicked across the head spreading the wetness he found there. He could feel his orgasm building in his balls, starting like a low rumble and building in intensity until he feared the top of his head

was going to blow off. He might have even whimpered as the most intense orgasm of his life ripped through him. His cock jerked, spilling offering after offering of his seed onto the sheets.

The hand on his ass dug into his hips, and Jacy knew he'd have crescent shaped bruises there in the morning, but right now he didn't care. Right now Daniel's cock was pulsing in his ass, and he was filled with liquid heat. He didn't have any more strength in his arms, so he just let go. He managed to turn his head to avoid suffocation, but he wasn't much better off.

His ass burned only a little as Daniel's softened organ slid out of him. Dead weight dropped the bed beside him and a sweaty arm slid across his equally sweaty back. Jacy smiled at his partner. "What the hell was that? And why didn't you seduce me years ago?" he said, only half jokingly.

Daniel chuckled, and reached up to push a hank of sweaty hair from his forehead. "There was the little matter of your wife."

Jacy's smile faded a bit. "You know after the holidays I'm getting divorce papers filed." He reached over and stroked his lover's arms. On second thought, he pulled him flush against his body.

"I'm sorry if I upset you, Jacy." Daniel looked worried. "I shouldn't have brought her up."

"Then lets not talk about her," Jacy said gently. "It's Christmas day. What do you usually do once you're awake?"

A smile split Daniel's face. "Open presents."

"Damn. Daniel, I didn't know. I usually just give cash—"

Daniel placed a finger on his lips to silence him. “Shush, it’s okay. I got what I wanted for Christmas.” Before Jacy could ask what he meant by that, he was already halfway out of bed. “I’ll be right back. I do my Christmas shopping during the spring so I’ve had yours for months.”

Hopping from the bed, Daniel went flying, quite naked, out of the room and returned a few minutes later with a red-ribbon box in hand. “Here open it.”

“Only if you promise to do that again.”

Looking puzzled Daniel asked, “Do what?”

“Put on the show you just did walking to and from the bed. You’ve got an adorable ass, darlin’.”

Blushing, Daniel playfully swatted his arm. “You’re so naughty.”

“No, I’m not.” Jacy grinned, and held up his box as proof. Bad little boys and girls don’t get presents from Santa. He at least knew that much. “I’ve got presents.”

“Not for long if you don’t open it.”

“You promise, then?”

Rolling his eyes, but clearly pleased, Daniel nodded. “Yes, I’ll wear reindeer antlers while I do it too, if you’ll just open the box.

“I’m opening. I’m opening.” He undid the ribbon and pulled off the lid.

“Do you like it?” Daniel asked nervously, nibbling on his lip.

Jacy was quiet for so long he worried he didn’t like the present. Relief flooded through him when his lover’s handsome face broke into a wide grin. It made Daniel’s heart turn over. “A silver and turquoise bracelet,” he said, touching the bracelet almost reverently. “It looks old.”

“It used to belong to a Navajo Chief named White Cloud.” He picked the bracelet up and turned it over. He pointed to the tiny etched letters in the back. There was a crooked W and C.

“When White Cloud died, he did not have a son or daughter and so his possessions fell to his people. The shop owner had been part of his tribe. He would not sell it to me until I promised to give it to some one who could truly appreciate it. He said he had to be of the Dine’. He said the luck would not work if you do not believe in it.”

“Yes, turquoise is a symbol of luck for my people.” He leaned over and kissed Daniel’s lips. “Thank you.” Words were beyond him. He had never received any gift of the kind from Marissa. She had never acknowledged his heritage and when he told her things about his people she would listen, but she never *heard* him.

“May I?” Daniel asked. Jacy felt sure he could see all the love Daniel felt for him shining in his eyes. He wordlessly offered his lover his right hand. Daniel clasped the bracelet on.

“Looks good on you.”

“You have excellent taste. Come here.” He pulled Daniel into his arms and kissed him soundly. When they finally broke apart, Daniel saw that his lover was frowning.

“What’s wrong?”

“You said you already had what you wanted for Christmas. What was it?”

“I do. All I want for Christmas is you.”

About The Author

Sage Whistler was born in North Carolina but spent the better part of her life in Connecticut. She now makes her home between the two traveling from college and back to visit her mother. At an early age Sage Whistler had a love for fairytales. Even before she knew how to write she was making up stories, reading to her grandparents from a magazine, using words that weren't actually printed in the book. In her later years she began reading and writing romance, but her evolution to erotica happened virtually over night. One day she was reading a sedate romance and then she stumbled upon an erotica book and it was all she wrote. Pleading guilty to a flirty mind Sage hopped from the mainstream to swim up creek with the bad boys and started writing homoerotic fiction only a year ago. She's been hooked ever since. Sage readily admits to being a bit quirky, prone to doing things like blurting out random lines from one of her favorite movies. She has only one sister who she swears is the complete opposite of her, and her greatest love right now is her books. Other than writing one of her immediate goals after graduating college is getting a Dachshund she plans to name Zombie.

Sage loves to hear from her fans, so feel free to email her anytime! To learn more about Sage Whistler please visit her at www.cacoethespublishing.com/sagewhistler. Send an email to Sage at sagewhistler@gmail.com.

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