



# Surrendered Victory



KC Kendrick

## SURRENDERED VICTORY

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BY

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SURRENDERED VICTORY  
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*In memory of Jeff (1957-1980), never forgotten.*

*You trusted me with your secret—and  
your copy of The Front Runner.*

# CHAPTER 1

His hand brushing mine excited me beyond anything I'd ever known. Large, tanned and callused, I knew he earned a living with his hands. His long, strong fingers possessed a muscled elegance, much like the rest of him. Short, neat nails belied his trade, that of a carpenter. I shivered as his hand found mine, hidden from public view between our torsos and the bar. Dalton trailed those well-tended fingernails lightly across my palm, sending me his teasing invitation.

"What do you say? Come back to my place for a while?" His clear tenor held no hint of accent, yet he'd alluded he hailed from somewhere in the South. I'd not heard the story of how he'd made his way to the West Virginian outback,

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although doubtless he knew my tale.

Everyone in the company knew I'd been banished here by my loving family with little hope for redemption, following some sort of serious disagreement with my father, the supposed details of which continued to fuel the rumor mill. None of my fellow barflies would guess the truth. I didn't wear it on the skin. It went much deeper, all the way to the soul.

Almost none of the assembled crowd would guess the truth, I corrected myself. Dalton suspected. Clearly he recognized the indefinable aura that marked us as different, as outsiders. I could still shake my head, decline his invitation, and tender my apologies with no hard feelings. His invitation would remain ambiguous to anyone who'd overheard it.

My body thrummed with awareness of his nearness. I did my best to avoid breathing, since every time I inhaled, the clean, crisp scent of his aftershave sank red-hot talons into my brain. And underneath the Old Spice, undeniable, alluring, dangerous and unmistakable on the gentle breeze from the ceiling fan overhead wafted a delicious, forbidden male musk.

"I was hoping to have another drink," I said, matter-of-factly, painfully, acutely aware that all walls have ears. "It was a long day and I need to unwind for a bit."

His sky blue eyes, so different from my blue-grey orbs, didn't flicker, reminding me he had some experience at this dance. He nodded. "Yeah, I heard RLK got the contract on River Crossing."

I nodded, not at all surprised word had already traveled

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through the local workforce to the “competition.”

“We signed for the first one hundred units. Townhouses. The single families in section three are still on the table.”

Dalton tapped his beer bottle to mine. “Well, then, may the best hammer win.”

We lifted our bottles and swallowed. Pleased I hadn’t choked, I set down my empty and motioned for the bartender. She was a cute little blonde with a high-wattage smile she turned on me as she plunked the fresh bottle onto the bar. Friday wasn’t her normal shift. I smiled back and tipped her a buck under Dalton’s watchful gaze.

“Do you know her?” he asked causally. I heard the unspoken question he couldn’t ask.

Did I want to know her, biblically speaking?

Not ready to commit to anything beyond banal conversation, I replied, “She’s a nice girl. Becky. Brenna. Bobbi. Something with a ‘B.’” I flashed him my best impish smile. “You should ask her out.”

He knew my game and laughed. “I’ve seen her boyfriend. Big mother fucker.” He held his hand over his head, indicating the boyfriend must be eight feet tall, considering Dalton was an inch or so taller than me at six-foot-three or four.

“In that case, I guess it’s good I can honestly say I don’t even remember her name.”

His triumphant gaze locked with mine. I raised my left eyebrow and played innocent. It was too late for stupid. He knew. Our greetings over and done with, we’d now move to a more private spot where we could talk without too much



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concern of being overheard. Sweat broke out on my back. Tonight, if offered again, I planned to accept the invitation he'd tendered every Friday for the past few weeks.

That cocky grin appeared again as he set his empty on the bar and issued his second invitation of the evening. "So, you want to grab a booth? Eat?"

"Sure. I'll extract trade secrets from you so I can undercut Quality Homes on section three."

He snorted. "The only secrets I know are measure twice, cut once, and never hand out payroll before three o'clock on any given Friday." He pointed at a couple vacating a booth. I nodded and we picked up our beers and ambled in that general direction.

I felt his gaze on my ass the entire twenty-foot stroll. I felt more and more uncomfortable about going home with him, so he was likely in for a big disappointment. I always panicked when the moment of decision was upon me. Only the idea of not going with him sent my heart rate skyrocketing and my vision narrowing into a long, dark, desperately lonely tunnel.

If I didn't go with him, I'd never know.

I slid into the booth across from him without looking at his face. I couldn't, for fear he'd see and know the level of indecision, panic, and longing his pursuit incited in me.

He saw it. "What's wrong? You're a little pale?"

"Must be the heat." The air conditioning kicked on at that moment. He looked relieved, and I found it oddly reassuring he wasn't as in control as he seemed.

I hadn't lied. I was hot, and not just for him. I slipped out

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of my jacket and tossed it on the seat beside me. I didn't usually wear a suit in the middle of August, but getting that contract signed had been vital. Without it, a lot of people would spend the winter on unemployment.

The devil on my shoulder, and the devil across from me, had me unfastening the top buttons on my shirt and rolling my sleeves up as far as I could. I watched as Dalton took note that I had a few muscles of my own. Just to tease him I stretched, rolling my shoulders back until the shirt strained across my chest and my spine popped audibly. Damn, it felt good.

His foot tapped mine. I was not about to play footsie with him in a public bar so I moved mine away and picked up the menu. The place wasn't on a par with New York, but it did offer fresh green salads and two-inch-thick strip steaks.

Dalton tapped my foot again, this time to draw my attention away from the menu and back to him. I looked into his troubled blue eyes.

"What are you doing here with me?"

The question surprised me. I thought he knew. He'd approached me and instigated our conversation after all. I had been sitting at the bar, alone, quietly enjoying my beer when he'd said hello.

*Liar.*

It wasn't good to lie to yourself and I'd certainly done enough of it in my life. I'd lived in denial for thirty-three years. What was denial if not a lie?

The truth was I'd been sitting at the bar enjoying my beer, hoping he'd walk in, sit down beside me, and flirt with me

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again. That's why I'd haunted this lovely establishment every Friday afternoon since the first time I'd seen him here and we'd struck up a conversation. It put a delightful spin on "thank God it's Friday" for me. We'd spent the last six weeks dancing around the fact we were headed for something more than casual friendship. I dropped all pretenses and looked into those sinfully blue eyes again.

"I'm having dinner with you. What are you doing here?"

"Trying to figure out why you're having dinner with me."

I laid my menu aside and fidgeted with my napkin-wrapped tableware. I didn't look directly at him when I spoke. "I need energy. For later."

Dalton froze for a six-count, then squirmed in his seat. I picked up my napkin and spread it over my lap. I had to give him just a little jab. I couldn't resist. My head would have exploded if I'd even tried not to ask. "Is that swelling painful?" I asked nonchalantly as I smoothed the napkin into place.

He echoed my actions with his own napkin. "Not a bit. I kinda enjoy it. You want another beer?"

"Not right now, thanks."

"How's your swelling?"

My swelling throbbed like a toothache, not that I'd confess such a thing to him. "I don't have a swelling."

"Right," he drawled. I finally pegged him as a Georgia boy. "I bet you do."

"I bet we're not going to sit here in a public place and flirt." My hand shook slightly as I downed two large swallows

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of my beer, knowing I'd better slow down on the brew or pay the price later. "I know I started it, but that guy who just walked in is one of my co-workers."

"Gotcha."

I hoped he well and truly did because the unwelcome arrival sauntered up to our booth and greeted me with a big smile. Doubtless he believed he'd stumbled onto me selling out company secrets or some such bullshit. I'd turn him in another direction.

"Evening, Reed."

I did the last thing I wanted to do. I offered him my menu and invited him to dinner. If he accepted, I hoped Dalton would be discreet. If he wasn't, I'd be on the road again to whatever destination my father deemed safer. Or I'd finally do the best thing and go work for another company. I knew sooner or later that would happen.

"Walter, join us. This is Alan Dalton of Quality Homes."

Walter looked surprised. Maybe he'd seen Dalton working in the field and not realized the carpenter running the job site was one of the owners of Quality Homes. He recovered quickly and extended his hand.

"Mr. Dalton, nice to met you." He turned to me. "Can't stay, Reed, but it's nice he's buying you a drink to celebrate RLK winning the River Crossing contracts." He clapped Dalton on the shoulder.

Dalton grinned. "One contract. One. QH is aiming for section three. That's where the real money will be."

Walter shook his head and looked at me again. "You didn't

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hear then. Your secretary was looking for you. Word came down and we got section three, too.” This time he thumped my shoulder. “The senior Mr. Kauffman is going to be proud of the job you did here. Well, you boys have a good dinner.”

With that, he meandered off. The senior Mr. Kauffman, my father, wouldn’t be pleased or displeased. I’d done my job. End of story. I breathed a sigh of relief at Walter’s disappearing back as I wondered if he’d been telling the truth. I reached for my cell phone.

“Do you mind if I call my secretary?”

Dalton shook his head. He had to be wondering the same thing. I hit speed dial and my secretary answered on the fourth ring.

“Where the hell are you?” she demanded.

I loved her. I really did. She was about my age and we got along great.

“I’m having dinner, and you?”

“Likewise. Next time you’ll call me before you bolt out for the weekend, buster. We got section three. Be on time Monday because we have work to do. She’d better be worth it, Reed.”

“Oh, she is. I’ll do better next time, Mother, I promise. I’ll see you bright and early Monday. And thanks. I owe you one.” I flipped the phone closed.

I rubbed the back of my neck in a futile attempt to ease the tension crawling up my spine. Getting section three wasn’t as easy as it sounded. A few of the finer points still needed to be worked out. I’d be in the boardroom, negotiating, for many

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long hours next week. The solution to one of the problems—additional manpower—might be Dalton himself, if he wanted some sub-contract work to get through the winter months.

“Congratulations,” Dalton said softly. His curious gaze was unnerving in its intensity. Maybe he wondered why I wasn’t doing cartwheels. I tossed a five-dollar bill on the table for the waitress even though we hadn’t ordered yet and reached for my jacket.

“Thanks. Listen, I need to get out here before anyone else comes in.”

“Okay. Is the evening over?”

*Was it?* I should have said it was. I should have left him sitting there. But sometimes I’m a fool of highest order.

His hand rested on the table, palm down, relaxed. The pale band around his wrist where he normally wore a watch showed off his suntan. Slowly, he rolled his hand over. Anyone watching wouldn’t think a thing about the small gesture, so easy and natural as he did it. But I knew it for what it really was.

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crossed my Rubicon, I would be forever changed.

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## CHAPTER 2

Dalton had a very nice condo in a nondescript building that had once housed a textile mill. Vaulted ceilings drew the eye up to a pair of modern skylights, while restored wide-plank oak floors retained a glowing patina of age. Turn of the century woodwork gleamed softly around doors and windows. I was impressed. When asked, he confirmed my suspicion he'd done much of the work himself.

"The bedroom isn't finished yet," he confessed, his gaze intent as he watched me. Maybe he expected I'd run like hell. Or something.

I deemed bolting an option worth serious consideration. I had, in fact, almost turned my truck around and headed home



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to the safety of denial.

Only knowing I'd regret that move for the rest of my life gave me the determination to make the last left turn into Dalton's parking lot. I owed this to myself. If it didn't turn out, so be it. Maybe I'd be able to find a nice girl without too many expectations and settle into a placid relationship. Dinner on Friday night, the weekend sleepovers, the occasional family gathering to keep everyone happy.

No, I knew I couldn't live that life with anyone, male or female. Besides, I really longed for something more than "placid." Nor did I intend to end up as fodder for some revolving Internet joke about men. Living alone wasn't as frightening as living a lie.

Dalton stepped to the large living room window and adjusted the blinds for privacy. I wasn't sure what to say about his bedroom. I just hoped it had a bed.

"Takes time to fix up a place." It was a non-committal reply and I was inanely proud of myself to have uttered it—considering I couldn't breathe.

I'd never taken any flirtation this far, if one could call this flirtation. The seriousness of the situation demanded a different definition of what I contemplated, and it was clear Dalton sensed that. That cool blue gaze never left me.

"You've never had a man."

Admitting the truth could lose nothing and perhaps gain much. Uncertainty about how to proceed kept me frozen, standing motionless in the middle of his living room. If he knew, and didn't care, he might guide me carefully over those

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first hurdles. And if the fact I'd never known a man turned him away, had I lost anything? I thought not.

I sailed the Rubicon and no matter on which side I chose to make landfall, the river had been breached and no longer held me in as much awe or fear. A second crossing would be easier, no matter with whom I might share that cruise, but I wanted Dalton to be first. I lifted my chin and looked him square in the eye.

"I've never been with a man," I confirmed, more calmly than I felt.

His next question caught me off guard. "Ever had a woman?"

That damn left eyebrow of mine shot up. You'd think I was Vulcan or something the way it did that when I was surprised. "Yes. Quite a few. I've enjoyed women. What about you?"

"Sure. Got two kids, both in college. Wouldn't trade them for anything."

That begged the question did they know their construction worker dad had a liking for men in his bed. I knew he was divorced. How big a part had his sexuality played in the dissolution of his marriage? I set my curiosity aside, recognizing it as my brain's futile attempt to distract my penis and regain control of my actions. This time I wanted my penis to have the last say.

Dalton stepped to the bar, set a couple of shot glasses on the counter and poured two bourbons. He held one out to me. "Here. You need this."

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“Like hell. I need ten more just like it.” I accepted the shot and downed it with a quick flick of my wrist. It hit the back of my throat and burned like fire, sliding hotly down to land in my stomach. A warm glow radiated out to my joints, loosening them.

Dalton held the bottle out to me and I shook my head. I had to be careful with the stuff. It had a way of biting my ass in the morning. “Later.”

He nodded and set the fifth on the bar, indicating with a wave of his hand it would be there in case I changed my mind. I set my shot glass down beside it, noticing how badly my hand shook. *Did he see it, too?* He’d not missed much about me.

Dalton picked up a multi-functional remote control and started pushing buttons. The lighting changed and the big screen television came to life with a sports wrap-up show. He flopped down on the sofa and plopped one booted foot on the coffee table.

“Drove my ex-wife crazy when I did this,” he commented with a grin.

It was clear I could join him on the couch or remain standing. The decision was mine. I took a breath that did nothing to ease my taut nerves and took up residence at the opposite end of the sofa. He didn’t comment on my presence, not with words, gesture, or even a look. Instead, he started talking sports, a topic where I could hold my own.

Two beers and a shot of bourbon on an empty stomach, coupled with the arousal bubbling low in my groin exacted a

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price. The world tilted nastily. I sucked in a deep breath to clear my head.

“You need something to eat?”

“Among other things,” I replied without looking at him.

“What do you want first? A burger or other things?”

“You’re killing me with kindness.”

Dalton snorted and rolled to his feet. “Sit there and relax. I’ll grill some burgers. Won’t be fancy, but it’ll help.”

I expected him to disappear into the kitchen. Instead, he leaned over me, his hands on the back of the sofa above my shoulders. My throat went dry as he paused, his face scant inches from mine. His gaze locked on mine, serious, concerned, and blazing hot with naked desire.

I couldn’t move, or even breathe. Never had anyone looked at me like that. Never. My very soul stilled, caught in an agonizing vise, with desperate longing on one side and numbing fear on the other. I stared up at him.

His lips finally touched mine, gentle and seeking. The shock of his soft lips on mine coursed through me as unexpected heat swept my skin, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. My cock, surer about all this and already at half-mast, filled and lengthened. I did the only pertinent thing I could think of. I opened my mouth and licked his lips. Dalton touched his tongue to mine, and I almost came.

One strong hand snaked up to cup the back of my head. His tongue swept into my mouth, demanding, searching, scorching. The aggression of a man on the prowl was there. I knew it on a visceral level. I tasted it as his teeth scraped my

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lower lip. Did he seek to lay claim to me? I suspected he did and nipped him back. Novice with a man or not, I knew some things about myself.

If he sought to dominate me, he would first understand it would not be without concessions from him. His lips bowed against mine and opened in invitation. I delved into the delicious heat of his mouth. Our tongues mated and danced until I was breathless and, even then, I didn't want to stop.

His hand dropped to my crotch, his fingers making a quick assessment of my package. I had nothing to be ashamed of there. Fully erect I topped out at a solid eight inches, but I was willing to bet I'd just hit a personal best, not that I was going to ask him to measure me.

Dalton pulled away, something dark and unfathomable in the way he looked at me. I didn't understand, but suspected I might before the night was over.

"We're pretty much the same height and build," he said. "Why don't you go in my bedroom and find something more comfortable to watch the television in than your suit?"

He straightened and moved on, I assumed to the kitchen. I stared dumbly at the television, seeing nothing, my mind blanked to everything except the fact Dalton had kissed me. Somehow I'd survived both the kiss and the stupidity of not putting my hands on him.

I licked my lips to savor the lingering taste of him. Beer, bourbon, and somewhere between the pub and here, a cigarette. The scent of Old Spice lingered—it never smelled that good on me. Go into his bedroom, he'd said. I shivered at

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the very idea of walking into that room and seeing his bed.

It seemed I had little choice. My feet took me to his Spartan room without my conscious permission. He hadn't been kidding when he said no work had been done on the room. The vaulted ceiling made up for the moderate floor space. The windows were bare, tucked up high under the eaves, and provided light with complete privacy.

The queen-sized bed and matching chest of drawers were the only real furniture in the room. The thick, chocolate-brown suede comforter neatly folded down to the foot of the bed looked expensive, as did the linens. A shadeless lamp and alarm clock sat on an old wooden electrical wire spool, and a pair of old webbed lawn chairs were in the corner. The walls were primed, but not painted. None of it mattered—just the bed, on which I perched.

Something more comfortable. What would that be? A pair of cut off blue jeans lay on the chest of drawers, as if Dalton had worn them last evening and planned to wear them again. Why not wear them? I stripped completely, underwear, too, then draped my suit over one of the lawn chairs. If it surprised him to find me running amok commando in his shorts, I'd assure him of my own surprise at doing it. The longer I traversed my Rubicon, the bolder I seemed to be. I pulled on the shorts. They fit perfectly.

A perverse thrill shivered though me knowing my cock rubbed the same fabric his did when he wore the shorts with nothing under them. I got a firm grip on my libido.

*Like hell.* It had a firm grip on me, and firm was a word

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that fit. Everything was *firm*.

I did a bit of judicious snooping in his bathroom and found his condoms. My knees gave out and I plopped down in the nearest rickety lawn chair. What the hell was I doing? If my heart didn't stop pounding, I'd have a stroke. Or something. I splashed some cold water on my face when I should have splashed it on my balls instead.

Then I girded my loins, figuratively speaking, and wearing nothing but a pair of borrowed pants, stepped boldly out to embrace my future.

## CHAPTER 3

Dalton stood shirtless in front of his gas grill, burger turner and one of those long nozzle lighters sticking jauntily out of his back pocket. Classically built with wide shoulders tapering to narrow hips, he sported well-defined muscles without excessive bulk. I doubted if he worked out. Just doing his job would keep him lean.

His torso was tanned, but a shade or so lighter than his neck and arms. It was another telltale sign of a man who worked construction for his living. His chest was covered with dark hair turned bronze-tipped by the summer sun, much the same as the unruly brown locks he'd sported six weeks ago before the September heat wave hit and he'd found a barber.



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I was envious of the nice pelt that spread across his pecs then trailed down in a tail to disappear at the waistband of his jeans. I had a nice little patch of hair right in the center of my chest, but I'd always wished for just what Dalton had. It seemed more, I don't know, *male* somehow.

He talked to someone I couldn't see from my vantage point, safe inside the kitchen. He bent over and clapped his hands. A small, furry mutt bounded out of the gathering darkness and dropped a ball at his feet. Dalton lobbed it out into the yard. I opened the door and breathed in the muggy evening air. He turned slightly, his eyes roving over me, top to bottom and back up with no comment on the state of my firmness.

"Reed, the bugs are going to eat you alive," he observed dryly.

"That's what you think." For some reason, insects rarely bothered me. "Your dog?"

"Fuck, no. She's a nice little thing, though. Quiet, if you know what I mean."

"I hear ya. Can I help with anything?"

"Sure. Get a few cheese slices for these." He waved his thumb in the general vicinity of the grill.

I closed the door on the neighborhood mosquitoes to carry out my assignment. His kitchen was on the small side, not at all fancy, but laid out well. The door opened behind me as my builder's eye noted the quality of the materials used, but, for once, I didn't care. All I cared about was the heat coming off Dalton's body as his arms suddenly pinned me to the counter.

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His warm breath teased the fine hairs on the back of my neck raising gooseflesh across my skin. I closed my eyes, waiting, wanting him to close the gap between us.

His lips touched the softer skin where my neck joined to shoulder. My head fell forward in unspoken invitation for him to continue to do as he willed. I didn't need to breathe, nor did I need to stand. If my knees gave out again, we'd be laying down much faster, and that was okay with me. The coolness of the ceramic tile floor might feel good right about now.

I leaned back against him, my bare back to his bare chest. My cock pulsed strongly. My aching balls drew up tighter to my body. His hands grasped my hips, holding me firmly to him. His erection was rock hard between us. I reached back and laid my hands on his hips and pressed my ass to his cock—the first time I'd ever touched a man with any such intent. My own body responded forcefully. The blood pounding through my veins deafened me. I was so hard, so ready, I teetered on the verge of begging him for relief of any kind. He kissed the back of neck again, sighing, then moved away.

I turned and leaned on the counter, watching him, unsure if he'd changed his mind about the evening or not. Maybe showing a “virgin” the ropes was more than he'd bargained for. The corner of his mouth twitched, forming a smile. I'm sure my mouth dropped as he dipped his hand down the front of his jeans and rearranged the very prominent bulge to a more comfortable position.

“I had to do that, Reed.”

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I shrugged and did some rearranging of my own. He grinned and shook his head. "I meant I had to kiss you again."

"Then you'll understand I have to do this." I ran my hand up his arm, grasped the back of his neck, and pulled him to me. His pupils flickered. His eyes closed and so did mine as our lips touched and the world reeled around me again.

His strong arms clasped me to him as his fingers dug into my ass to keep my hips firmly pressed to his. I deepened the kiss, teasing his mouth, nibbling his lower lip until he groaned and thrust his tongue into my mouth, forcing me to behave. I pinched the small hard pebble of his nipple. He pinched my ass in return.

My body came alive in a way I'd never known, every cell, every molecule focused on Dalton. He drew me closer only to ease his embrace, then pull me to him again. The heat in my belly coiled, like a loaded spring waiting for a trigger. The hard planes of his torso, the crisp texture of his chest hair scratching lightly against my bare skin sent waves of self-awareness through me.

This had been the missing element in my sex life—to hold male strength and male power and feel it tremble in its longing for my touch. The need spiked to have my own strength tested to different limits with no apologies. Dalton pulled away, resting his forehead to mine.

"Slow down, Reed. You need to take this in small steps."

I doubted it. My skin itched on the inside where I couldn't scratch it. He could reach it, of that I was certain. I shook my head. "I've waited too long for this to slow down, Dalton. I

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need to know.”

“You know.” He kissed me again, his lips bowed in a little smile. “You’ll thank me later for insisting you’re fed before we fuck our brains out.”

I snorted and slipped my hand between our bodies to finally cop a feel. I moved my palm up and down over the hard ridge of his cock, which meant I also rubbed myself. So many things I’d never considered. He was right. We were pretty much the same build.

“Hmmm. Keep that up,” Dalton murmured in my ear.

“Right.” I swallowed hard. “I’m giving myself a cheap thrill, too, you know.”

“We have just enough time to get you off and still salvage the burgers, if that’s all you want.”

“No. It’s not all I want.” I stopped moving my hand. I’d had opportunity to be nothing but a rutting buck several times in my life and it had never been what I wanted. I’d walked away. Hell, who was I kidding? I’d run away. Some people might consider it a severe handicap, but I needed to have some sort of connection with anyone I planned to let suck my dick.

That didn’t mean I wanted to fall in love, not really. A completely different matter, love. Love found you, not you, it. If you went looking, love vanished like the mist.

Dalton flashed me a lop-sided grin and let me go. He didn’t speak, just grabbed a plate and walked outside to rescue the burgers from certain incineration. I hastily rummaged for a few cheese slices—my original errand a lifetime ago—and delivered them to the grill. A few minutes later we sat down at

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his table to eat the crispiest, driest, most delicious burgers I'd ever had.

"How's your swelling now?" Dalton asked, a wicked gleam in his eye.

"I still don't know what you're talking about," I replied, giving him a look of my own. "I'm sure it was hunger induced."

He laughed at the *double-entendre*, and I wondered how many hearts he'd broken in his younger years. Curious, I asked how old he was.

"Forty-three. How old are you?"

I told him he had me by ten years. He laid his hand loosely over mine. I noticed for the first time the slight indentation on his ring finger.

"So why did you wait until now, Reed?"

"I don't know. Maybe I hoped the urge would go away." The fact he'd worn a ring for so long gave mute testimony he understood.

"Now you don't think it will?"

He seemed to have a lot of questions all of a sudden, but I guess he liked to know some things about anyone who planned on sucking his dick, too. "No. I know it won't."

His fingers closed around mine. "You can still leave, no harm done."

I shook my head. He was wrong, but I wasn't going to point it out to him. Something inside me had shifted. He leaned over and kissed me again, a light brushing of his lips across mine. Arousal cracked through me, whip-like. The

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breath clogged in my throat. My cock twitched and lengthened, swelling full and hard. My chest tightened, an alarming sensation I hoped would pass quickly. We were down to it.

Dalton placed the dirty dishes in the sink and ran some water over them. I wondered if I'd share the coffee with him as I watched him load the brewer for the morning. He turned to me, and I saw all the fire in him carefully banked down, held in check. He knew what I only guessed.

Whether the greater powers of the universe held men like me in contempt or not, I offered up silent thanks that Dalton had a compassionate streak.

He held out his hand. I took it and he pulled me out of my chair and led me down the short hall to his bedroom. He flipped on the bathroom light and pulled the door closed far enough to only allow a sliver of light to shine into the bedroom. Rooted where I stood, between a lifetime of fantasy and flight, I embraced the dimness with gratitude. My nerves stretched taut, I feared I would shatter.

He came to me, put his hands on my shoulders and squeezed, shaking me gently once. "Relax."

"Right." To say more would force my brain to choose between speech and consciousness and I simply didn't have the blood flow that far north for decision-making.

Dalton's hands trailed down my arms, less than a caress but more than mere compassion for the strange brew of lust and fear that held me. Then he put his workingman hands on my chest and touched me, his fingertips carefully learning the

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ridges and planes of my torso. He stepped behind me and ran his thumbs up the sides of my spine, ending with a quick massage to help ease the tension in my neck. I jumped when his teeth nipped my shoulder. Far from hurting, the sting sang a siren song to my cock.

He spoke so softly in my ear, his voice low and rough, that I marveled I heard him above the pounding of my heart.

“Trust me, Reed. Tonight is for simple things. I want to fuck you in the worst kind of way, but maybe not tonight. You set the pace. Just relax and enjoy. Okay?”

I nodded, relieved and yet disappointed. I wanted to fuck him, too, and in my ignorance wondered how much of a problem that posed for him since he wanted me. His hands slid around my waist, down across my hips to grip the inside of my thighs.

Arousal shrieked through me. As I pressed firmly back to him, his hands held me to his pelvis, his cock pressed firmly into the cleft of my ass. Something gave way within me. I’d let him fuck me. I wanted him. I rocked into him, and he grabbed me. I tried to turn, to shove him to the bed. His balance was too good. He didn’t budge.

“Slow down,” he urged me breathlessly.

I couldn’t.

I bucked wildly against him, but his strength at least equaled mine. His arms tightened like bands of steel around me, holding me, forcing me to be still. I couldn’t breathe. Sweat trickled down my chest. I hung on the verge, riding the knife-edge of impending orgasm. I fought my way back to

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sanity, struggling to hold on to his words, “Slow down.”

I longed for so much more than a quick fuck, a fast easing of the need demanding release now. I’d be cheating myself, and him, if I didn’t get a grip on myself. The red haze lifted from my mind.

Damn, but my balls ached.

I laughed, sort of, as I relaxed into him. He eased his hold on me, and I sensed his relief that I’d come back from the edge of insanity—so he could send me there again.

Dalton unzipped my pants, let them fall, and wrapped his long fingers around my shaft, his grip firm. He stroked me, rolling the tight skin all the way over the glans. I’d waited my entire life for the touch of another man. I soared.

“I’m cut, too, if you’re curious. Is this all you want?” Dalton purred in my ear.

“Curious” was too mild a word when I wanted to strip him naked and give all eight inches of him a very clinical examination. Other than my own I’d not seen an adult male cock fully erect, except in photographs and that didn’t quite do it for me. I was *intensely* curious.

I shook my head. It most certainly was not all I wanted. His slow strokes had me ready to beg, and I would have if I’d known what I wanted most, besides everything.

The arm he held me with dropped away and he fumbled with his zipper. I laughed breathlessly as he teased my ass while pulling down the tab. His pants joined mine on the floor. His stiff cock pressed into the dark crevice of my ass where his fingers had just teased. I tensed, unsure if he planned to



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fuck me standing here, or just tease me until I passed out from lack of orgasm. He released me, leaving me bereft of his heat, even though I was drenched in sweat.

He smacked my ass with some force. I yelped in surprise and rounded on him, ready to show him if he wanted to play rough, he'd better take it as good as he gave it because I could give it. He grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and took my mouth. My protest at being struck evaporated. I plastered my body to his, dug my fingernails into his ass cheeks and boldly teased him as he had me. Dalton dropped to his knees in front of me and took me in his mouth.

I became reborn.

## CHAPTER 4

The heat of his mouth startled me as he took me, deep throat. I buried my fingers in his hair and tried to stay on my feet.

“Oh, God, Dalton.” My voice sounded strained in my ears. I needed to make it to the bed before I fell, or came. Or both and an unfortunate accident occurred. “Let me go.”

He released my penis, but kept a firm grip on my ass. Did he think I’d really leave now?

“Bed,” I croaked at him.

He rose, all smooth, sleek muscle. His cock jutted forward proud, full and ready to give and take pleasure. I regretted the dim light that kept me from seeing him clearly. I wrapped my

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fingers around his shaft. His eyes closed and he drew a slow, deep breath. I stroked his length as he'd stroked me. He'd really pegged it when he'd said we had the same build.

Dalton yanked the covers down and shoved me towards the bed. If the man kept up the roughhousing, I'd have to hurt him.

My gaze locked with his in the dim light. His feral grin said more than words ever could. He'd like it if I pushed back. I shook my head. It would have to wait for another night.

"Not tonight, Dalton." I made another grab for his cock, but he sidestepped out of reach.

Even with my impaired brain function I knew it wasn't smart to play rough with two stiff dicks bobbing about, but I needed his mouth on me again. *Needed.*

I lunged, slamming full body into him. We tumbled to the bed. His arms came around me, his voice rough in my ear as he pinned me beneath him, sweaty naked skin to sweaty naked skin.

"Tell me what you want, Reed. Anything."

"Everything."

"You're not ready for everything, no matter what you think." Dalton rose up on his elbow and pushed the hair off my forehead. "Be still."

No problem. He slid down across my torso, trailing bites along the way. I jumped every time he nipped me, surprised by both his actions and the resulting pleasurable electric jolts that shot through my groin. The air left my lungs as his mouth came down over my cock again.

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His wet, warm tongue pressed firmly to the flat of the head. Soft lips surrounded my penis, lips as soft as the inside of any woman I'd ever had. My hips rocked up, pleading for more of the exquisite torture. The pressure grew in my balls as Dalton cupped them.

Strong fingers grasped the base of my shaft and he deep-throated my dick again. *How the hell could he do that?* I didn't know, didn't care, just wanted him to do it again.

He did. Again and again he moved his lips over my cock, sucking me in. Dalton hummed deep in his throat, making buzz-like vibrations that took my breath away. The heat in my groin spread. I wanted to come. I needed to come, but those skillful, tight fingers banded around the base of my cock wouldn't let me. My lungs burned with the effort to breathe.

The pressure of his fingers eased as he held my shaft between his thumb and forefinger, rolling the skin. Dalton teased me with his tongue, smoothly circling the rim, flicking the head with feather-light touches. He slipped his other hand beneath me and pressed against my anus. I crossed the threshold.

"I'm coming!"

The pressure at my ass increased and my world tilted and dropped me into darkness. My balls drew up tight to my body, throbbing mercilessly, gloriously. My leg muscles clenched to the point of cramping, then every nerve ending in my body came to life. The only thing that existed in my world was my cock in Dalton's greedy mouth. I came harder than I ever had in my life.

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The ecstasy seized me, turning me inside out. The pure white pleasure whipped through me. I was dimly aware of Dalton calmly sucking me dry as I shot in his mouth. His hands stilled and I fell back into myself, weak and panting, but alive.

So alive. Every molecule in my body vibrated deliciously with life.

With one last lick he released me and left the bed. I couldn't raise my head to see what he was doing. I didn't want to open my eyes and find I'd dreamed the last half-hour. My body had morphed into a gelatinous blob incapable of movement and still I wanted more. I needed three minutes to catch my breath and I'd be ready to go again.

Soft sounds drifted from the bathroom and then he was beside me again. Silhouetted in the beam of light from the other room, I got a tantalizing glimpse of his hard cock. I rolled to my side, facing him, as he settled back on the bed. Dalton stretched out beside me, his hand resting on my hip. My hand closed around his erect cock.

"Suck me," he growled in my ear, his fingers walking across my ass cheek.

"Oh, gawd." I groaned. "I can't move."

He pumped into my hand, and I tightened my grip on his shaft to increase the friction for him.

"Don't make me whoop you, boy." His tongue laved my ear. I rolled my head so he could get to my neck. He obliged, kissing his way down to my shoulder. His cock pulsed in my hand. Turning to him I found his mouth and tasted the

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lingering salty-bitter musk of my own semen. I ended the kiss and pulled away to look at him.

"It's clear you'd enjoy 'whooping' me, Dalton, so take this to heart. I can and will whoop you back."

Dalton snorted and kissed me again. I sensed his arousal rising once more. It wasn't lost on me that he had to be wondering if I would actually stay and continue or bolt for safety. Unsure of how to express my gratitude of his willingness to ease me through the evening, I said nothing, opting to go boldly forward to something I'd never done.

I eased from his embrace and licked my way down his chest. The springy mat of hair he sported tickled my nose. His skin tasted salty, and when I hit the spot where he'd splashed cologne, not so hot. I spit and sputtered in protest, drawing a soft laugh from him.

"Next time I'll splash my ass." He snickered at me. I smacked his hip and he laughed louder.

I knew he'd like the sting so I bit his nipple. His hand cupped the back of my head, holding me there. I laved the tiny nub with my tongue, suckling him. The breathy sigh that passed his lips encouraged me. My hand closed around his cock again. I lowered my head, and his hips flexed, rising to meet me.

In the sudden nervousness that hit me I feared I'd miss some of the finer points and disappoint him. I'd always wondered about giving head. I found it confusing half the women I'd known thought it disgusting, and half enjoyed it. None had ever excited me to the level Dalton had. The low

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moan that rolled out of Dalton put my nervous mental wanderings at rest. He stroked the back of my head, then buried his fingers in my hair.

His cock pulsed as I ran my fingertips over it. Base to tip, across the large vein, I didn't miss any spot as he quivered under my touch. A pearlescent drop appeared and I rubbed its silky moisture over the head. I breathed in his musky scent and eased my mouth down over him, savoring the unique taste of warm, male skin.

I teased him as he had me, with gentle licks and quick flicks of my tongue, giving special attention to the rim. My cock hardened as I pleased him and his arousal fed my own. His hips rose and fell restlessly and I slipped my hand beneath him. He tensed, then relaxed as I teased beneath his balls. I was awash with greed as I flexed my hips into the bedding, reveling in the friction of the linen on the sensitive skin of my dick.

I tasted the salty-sour drop of pre-cum his body released. He said my name, a breathy sigh, as his grip on my head tightened and I knew he was near orgasm. So was I.

Dalton cried out, a low, dark sound I knew, having made a similar one myself a few times on the verge of orgasm. His cock pulsed beneath my fingers, then his hot semen filled my mouth. The sensation surprised me and I jumped. He gripped my hair and pulled me away. I kept my hand moving on him, drawing a low moan from him every time he shot. It was all I needed to fall gloriously over the edge with him.

I brought my aching cock against his hairy thigh and thrust

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against him, releasing my load. I think he chuckled as he hauled my mouth up to his. I was floating in an orgasmic mist and it didn't matter if he laughed his ass off at me.

Making love with a man was everything I'd always dreamed it would be. Every joint in my body went weak as I floated down to earth, back to Dalton's arms around me and the wet, tangled sheets beneath me. And still I wanted more.

Some part of me registered disappointment that he had pulled me away from what was part of making love to him. I'd know what to expect next time, and he wouldn't need to fear injury.

*Hell.* He was laughing, a contented, happy sound that made my toes curl.

"What?" I rasped at him.

"You slimed me."

"So? What's your point? It's not like I could hold it in."

He laughed louder, before he sobered and turned to face me. His concerned gaze met mine. "Are you doing okay, Reed?"

There wasn't any point attempting to play stupid and avoid answering him. I knew what he meant. What I didn't know was the honest answer. I gave him a hug. "Yeah, I think so. I'm not freaked out or anything bad."

He cupped my cheek with his rough carpenter's palm. "You're welcome to stay all night, you know. But if you need some space to think about this..." His voice trailed off.

Did I want to go? Leave him and go back to a bed that would be lonelier than ever now?



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“I’d like to stay,” I said firmly.

Dalton was quiet for the space of several heartbeats, then spoke softly. “What if staying means I want to take this a step further?”

So much for his statement that tonight was for taking it slow and simple. My chest tightened, making it hard to breathe. I shivered, and it had nothing to do with the cool air blowing across my sweaty skin. My cock twitched. Was I really ready to let him fuck me?

The forbidden images of my dreams danced in the darkness above me, images that, for the last six weeks, had worn Dalton’s face.

“Reed?”

“No matter what I say, it’s going to be the wrong thing, Dalton. If I say okay and we take the next step, you’ll wonder if you pushed me. If I say I want to try and go to sleep, you’ll think I’m disappointed with you. If I say I’m going home, you’ll think I’m done with you.”

He draped his thigh over mine and sighed. “Why do you think yourself in circles? I’ve been right where you are, and it’s not that complicated.”

My curiosity ran rampant. Would he tell me more about himself? He’d said very little about his past. Our conversations had occurred at a very public bar was one of the reasons why, but I sensed his reluctance to dredge up bad memories to be the real reason. Still, I needed to know a few things.

“How long ago did you take the first step?”

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“A long time back, Reed. Before I married. I spent a lot of years denying who I was so I could be a father to my kids. When the youngest turned sixteen, I confessed to my wife. I don’t think it surprised her.”

“That’s when you divorced?”

“No, we waited a while. That’s when she and I very quietly did the things for her lifestyle not to be hurt when we did divorce. We took it slow for the kids, made the arrangements for college to be taken care of, and we told them their parents had married too young and had grown too far apart to stay together. It was all very civilized.”

And also cold and sterile. His voice held lingering grief.

“She must have been hurt.”

“Yeah. A bit. Enough, Reed. Just tell me, straight up, what you want.”

“Like straight up the ass?”

“No, smartass. Like be honest.”

I kissed him, delving into the heat of his mouth when his lips opened. He edged closer, easing his long frame over mine. His growing erection rose slowly along my thigh. I looked up at him. “I want you, Dalton.”

The corner of his mouth curved into a quirky smile. “I’m afraid you’ve already got me.”

Oh, Christ, what did that mean? My heart stopped, then lurched into high gear. However many layers there were to his statement, right now it was patently obvious which one came first. He gripped the back of my knee and lifted, spreading my thighs and easing between them. I started to shake, overcome

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by a strange mix of lust, eagerness, and plain old fear.

Dalton kissed me, lingering at my lips. The rest of him didn't seem in sync with that patient caress. His pelvis arched to mine, over and over, his cock gliding over mine, sending tiny shockwaves through my tense body. His forehead dropped against mine.

"You're not sure about this, Reed. We should let it go for now."

I wrapped my arms around his neck, uncertain of how to respond. He was right. I frequently did think myself into a maze. One thing I did know, sooner or later I would lose my "virginity," and sooner suited me better.

## CHAPTER 5

“I’m as sure as I’ll be until it’s done, Dalton.” I thought the calm, clinical conversation about allowing another man to penetrate me strange. It was at great odds with how I felt. Every nerve ending in my body screamed to be fucked. My skin prickled, my balls tingled, and the longing inside me to be taken by him stole my breath with its insistent pounding.

He pulled away, watching me intently. I met his gaze without blinking. “How did you feel your first time? Uncertain? Hesitant? Scared?”

A muscle in his jaw flexed. He nodded. “All those things. I was young and stupid.”

An ugly thought coalesced in my mind, the form and

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substance of which sent an icy finger of dread down my spine. “You were hurt.”

He swallowed hard. The taut lines of his face sharpened, and I saw some of the anger he suppressed so well.

“I picked the wrong man,” he replied, his voice terse. “There was no one I could go to for help either. No one. I don’t want to hurt you like that.”

I glimpsed one of his demons, one that surely preyed on him in the dark when he was alone and defenseless against it. Did it keep him from reaching out? Had it been loosed these last few weeks while he conducted his careful courtship of me? Could I slay it and give him peace?

“Dalton, you’re not that man. That’s worlds away from right here, right now.”

“It’s in me, Reed. I’ve never...”

“What?”

“I’ve steered clear of the inexperienced.”

His unspoken “until now” hung in the air, piquing my curiosity to new levels. What was it about Dalton that made me want him so? “So I’m your first ‘deflowering’?”

“Oh, Lord,” he said with a sigh. Some of the tension flowed out of him, not that it affected his cock, which was still quite tense, in a good way. “You’re my second, if you want to be precise and count the ex-wife.”

My arms fell to the bed, limp. “Well, shit, Dalton, there goes that fantasy.”

“Sorry.” His arms slipped beneath me. I sensed a shift in him from urgency to something slower, less hurried. “Maybe

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if I knew what you expected, it would help.”

“Well, shit, Dalton,” I repeated, slipping my hand between our bodies and wrapping my fingers around his cock, “I expect this is going to hurt a bit at first.”

“Less than you’d imagine if I’m careful enough.” He looked at me sternly. “You’ve got to relax fully, and that’s not always easy.”

All the talk had me ready to jump out of my skin. If he refused to take me now, to show me what was possible between us, I’d do as threatened and whoop him until he did.

“I don’t know about you, but my eyes are crossing and I’m about to shoot all over your belly again.”

His mouth dropped open, then a slow smile spread across his features. “You need spanked, boy. You always this horny?”

I moaned at the thought of his hands on my ass, no matter what they were doing. He laughed wickedly. I pulled his mouth down to mine, eager to move to the place where our bodies talked for us. He kissed me soundly, our tongues moving in an intricate dance of give and take, while our hips pressed tighter. His lips moved to caress my cheek, my neck, my shoulders. I kept my eyes closed and drifted on the wings his touch gave me.

“I wish I knew why being with you is better than any woman I’ve ever been with.”

He inhaled, a short, quick breath. “It’s your question, Reed, and ultimately you’re the only one who can find the reason.” He released me and rolled off the bed. I watched his

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tight, muscular ass as he walked to the bathroom.

When he returned, he laid a pack of condoms and a tube of lube beside the bed. Gooseflesh rose on my skin in delicious anticipation. My cock lengthened again. Never had I been aroused enough to be able to get off a third time, but I had no doubt of it happening.

He turned and walked away again, treating me to a few more moments of ass voyeurism.

“Now where are you going?” I called after him.

He reappeared with two shots of bourbon. I accepted mine with thanks.

We tapped our shot glasses together and downed the golden-brown nectar in unison. Funny how I’d never cared too much for the stuff and now I liked it. Dalton flopped down on the bed beside me. My gaze dropped to his cock.

He shook his head. “First, I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

He grinned, showing even white teeth. “Does the elder Mr. Kauffman know you’re gay?”

I snorted. “What makes you think I’m gay? Because I’m naked in bed with another man and I just sucked his dick?”

“Well, Reed, that is sorta my first clue.”

The nervous tapping of his left index finger drew me. “If you want a cigarette, go get one.”

Dalton shot me a sideways glance. “I’ve had my one for today. I’ve come this far to quitting, I’m not backsliding now.”

It didn’t seem wise to point out to him if he could get by on one a day he could get by on none. I chose a safer course.

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“Congratulations. It’s a tough addiction to break.”

“So is boffing guys up the ass. I’m not even going to think about rehabbing myself on that. Are you going to answer my question?”

“I wouldn’t want you to, and no, dear old Dad does not know for certain his heir likes boys,” I told him dryly.

“That’s not the talk.”

“Oh? That’s always been the talk, and I’m sure he’s heard it. That’s why, when I broke it off with the last girlfriend, his head exploded. The fallout of that eruption landed me out here where he doesn’t have to look at his ‘failure.’” I sighed and stroked his cheek with my knuckles.

“His loss.” Dalton propped up on his elbow and looked down at me, his face earnest in the light from the bathroom. “Do you think you’re a failure?”

“Because I’m gay?”

Jesus, I’d uttered those two syllables as though they were merely words and didn’t define my past, present and future all at once. I’d come a long way in the space of a few hours. Or had I? I’d been moving toward tonight for a long time.

Dalton splayed his hand in the center of my chest, his middle finger gently tapping the flat disk of my nipple.

“I’ve failed at a lot of things, but never at being me,” I said.

His face underwent a curious change, morphing from earnestly curious, to surprise, to something akin to pleasure, before turning sad.

“You’re one of the lucky ones then.” He trailed his hand



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down my torso to my belly button. I nipped his shoulder.

“Go lower, Dalton. Just a few inches lower.”

He pinned me to the bed with a quick, controlled roll, the move of a street fighter. A frisson of excitement, mixed with trepidation, swept me. Those large, calloused hands cupped my face.

“Reed, you have to be sure. If you’re not, we’ll call it a night.”

That notion scared me worse than anything he would physically do to me. If he backed off now, I’d never get this close to him again. The demons we both danced with would see to it.

Before I could answer, his mouth claimed mine, searing my lips as his fused to mine. My world reeled as his kiss stole my breath. His body covered mine, tense with the urgency of his desire and his demand. His intention was clear. He meant to have me before I could change my mind. I cupped his ass and pulled him closer.

A low moan rumbled in his chest as his arms held me still. My cock filled to bursting. He guided my hands to the headboard and I grasped the rail and held on as he licked his way down my chest. The heat of his mouth enveloped my cock as he sucked me in, his tongue pressed to the smooth, flat surface of the head. I closed my eyes and let the pleasure draw me down past the darkness into a place of dancing starlight.

With his hands and his mouth he drove me nearer and nearer to insanity. I wanted fucked. I wanted to fuck him. If I only had him for tonight, I wanted it all, and I knew he

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understood. He teased at my ass, tickling me. My balls drew up as he took me deep again, the muscles in the back of his throat working, teasing, driving me wild. The blood roared in my ears.

“Dalton. I’m...”

I growled in frustration as he released my cock with a little pop.

“No, you’re not.” His voice was the purr of a big cat. The bed shifted as he leaned away from me.

I heard the small tearing sound as he opened the foil packet. Another shift of his weight, this time as he came back to me. A blob of cold gel hit my belly. I cried out as every muscle in my body seized, wondering wildly if I could come without being touched. I ached for release, but knew I couldn’t give in, not yet, not when I could perhaps fuck him as he was about to fuck me. I moaned, my hips rose off the bed, my cock strained up.

“Easy, Reed.” Dalton gripped my knees and lifted them, one at a time, to rest over his shoulders. His hands caressed the back of my thighs. “This will be cold for a second.”

It was. I jumped as his lubed hands stroked my dick, spreading the gel over my inner thighs, my balls, my ass. He grinned as he spread a glob of the lube over my chest and belly. I grinned back, but didn’t comment as he amused himself. One long finger slipped inside me. I hissed in surprise.

“Reed?”

I heard the strain in his voice, felt his concern in the

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careful way a second finger joined the first. My walls clenched around the invaders. Dozens of little muscles I didn't know I had danced delightfully around them as he massaged my insides. More lube drenched me, even as his fingers withdrew. I shook violently in anticipation.

Dalton's cock slid over my anus, gliding on the lube, taunting me with the promise of pleasure only dreamed of. He pressed into me, using great care as he pushed past the constricting ring of muscle. My flesh tightened against him.

"Relax, baby. Take a deep breath and blow it out. Press down against me."

*Baby?* My mind churned, but I did as ordered and then he was inside me. It didn't hurt, not really, and I struggled to find a definition of the sensation. Fullness, certainly, but no pain. But what stunned me was what I'd thought would be his possession of me was more mine of him. It was not his taking and my giving. The line between the two blurred and fused beyond those simple terms into an expression of trust and understanding.

Then he moved, withdrawing, and I almost passed out from the pleasure.

His hips flexed as he pushed into me again, only to withdrawal just as cautiously. My walls molded to his shape, learned his rhythm and synced with it. My hands reached for him and his found mine. Our fingers linked and my arms supported him as he took me. Someone moaned.

Dalton came into me, hard. I opened my eyes, and his gaze locked with mine. His rugged features sharpened with arousal

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as he approached orgasm. I fought to relax as he grew less careful and the feelings increased. The breath caught in his throat. His eyelids fluttered. I squeezed his hands as he cried out.

He slammed into me and held himself tightly to me as he climaxed. I lay in wonder beneath him, aching for my own release, but too engrossed in the strong pulsing and sudden sensation of heat within me to grab my cock and stroke. Dalton wasn't.

His long fingers closed around my shaft and stroked. Once, twice, then I came in a never-ending wave, engulfed in a fire that burned without scars, yet seared my body. The sweat that flowed from my pores baptized me clean, and Dalton's lips on mine made me whole.

Carefully he withdrew from me and eased my legs down to the bed. I reached for him as he rose from the bed, reluctant to lose physical contact with him. He murmured he'd not be long. I listened to the sounds in bathroom, then he called to me.

My knees shook as I stumbled to the bathroom. The steam already rose in the shower. Dalton stepped under the spray and pulled me, unresisting, into his embrace. I wanted to stay there forever.

## CHAPTER 6

I shook in Dalton's arms as he held me under the cascading stream of hot water. I don't know what I'd expected, but this uncontrolled trembling wasn't it. His gentle hands soaped my back, soothing me until I stopped shaking.

"Okay, now?" he asked, his voice strangely resonant in tiled shower stall.

I nodded and cleared my throat, but didn't raise my head from his shoulder. "Yeah. Sorry about whatever that was."

"Probably the release of stress."

That sounded plausible. "Right. Let's go with that."

"You want the soap?"

I lifted my head, sputtering as the water hit me in the face.

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

He grinned and swung us around so the water hit him. Nothing seemed to faze him. I found that an enviable quality at three in the morning. I grabbed the shower gel from him and squirted a generous portion into my palm. The scent of Old Spice rose with the steam.

“Here, Reed. Let me do that before you keel over.”

He covered my hands with his and started to lather my skin. I was glad he did it. My brain had shut down and left me incapable of even lower function.

I was wired, pulled taut with some extra awareness of every touch, every sound and scent. I grabbed Dalton and kissed him soundly as he purred deep in his throat. His lips on mine, he spread an additional glob of shower gel over my shoulders.

“You like the slippery stuff, don’t you?” I knew he did or he wouldn’t have greased me up quite as much earlier.

He grinned, and I caught a glimpse of the boy in him for the first time.

“Busted. I like it. Some night we’ll spread a sheet of plastic on the floor and really play in it.”

“Surely, you jest.” I held my hand under a jet and deflected the stream at him. “I’m getting wrinkles.”

“Nope. I do not jest.” He reached past me and turned off the water.

I felt more like myself and reached for one of the two large towels hanging on the bar. I raised my eyebrow at him.

He shrugged. “I hoped you’d say yes, so I put out clean towels.”

## SURRENDERED VICTORY

“Cocky bastard,” I replied, as I finished drying off.

Dalton took my towel and hung it beside his, then reached for my hand. “You want another shot, Reed?”

“No, but I’ll have one.” I wanted to curl up in the middle of the bed with him and pass out until the sun shone directly overhead. Maybe he read minds.

He pointed at the bed, and I obediently padded off, sliding between sheets that held the scent of our lovemaking, and took my half out of the middle. Dalton brought back the whiskey and, knowing I shouldn’t, I downed mine without waiting for him. He set down his empty glass and climbed in beside me.

We settled in the middle of the bed, seeking and finding the way our bodies fit together when at rest. Facing each other, thighs intertwined intimately, hands resting on hips, we lay quietly. Or almost so.

His cock moved against my leg. He sighed and relaxed and the subtle stirring ceased. I wouldn’t have turned him down had he wanted sex again and pursued it, but I was glad to have some space and time to mull over a few things.

I wondered what the morning would bring. *How would I look at him in the daylight? How would he look at me?* I’d known a month ago that tonight was inevitable, but I’d never looked past the sex. Now I could, but the way still lay murky before me.

Dalton leaned into me and kissed me softly. “Reed, I can hear you thinking when you should be sleeping.”

“How can you just turn off after...”

“I can’t turn it off. I just need sleep. I’ve got to drive to

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Frostburg tomorrow afternoon to see my kids.” He snorted. “They need money.”

A wave of disappointment passed through me. I’d hoped...

Well, what I’d hoped made no difference. He had responsibilities tomorrow and so did I. There was work to do on the section three contract. I forced my muscles to relax and my mind to silence. Just before I drifted into sleep, Dalton murmured something against my lips.

The mind plays tricks, but I think he said he loved me.

\* \* \*

I must have lost my mind to wish for sunshine. I rolled over and pulled the pillow over my head, seeking blissful darkness again. I stretched out my leg and felt for Dalton’s foot with mine. I was alone in the bed. *Well, shit.* I rolled to my feet and almost hit the floor.

How many shots had I downed last night?

I sat on the edge of the bed and hoped my head would clear. Dalton strolled in carrying two mugs of coffee. He stopped, looked me over, and took a step back.

“You look a little green. Are you going to puke?”

“Oh, please,” I rasped at him. “I don’t puke.” I held my hand out for my coffee and snapped my fingers. He complied wordlessly, gingerly placing a mug into my grasp.

I sipped the hot, dark brew. Hell, I’d have shot it straight into my veins if I’d had a needle. “How much whiskey did I have last night?”

Dalton walked around the bed and settled on the pillows,



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sipping his coffee before he answered. "Maybe four shots. Maybe only three. I wasn't counting."

I set my mug on the spool and fell over sideways on the bed, groaning. "Two is enough to do this to me."

"You were fine last night," he observed.

"Always am until the morning. Kill me, please."

He chuckled softly, wickedly, and molded his frame around mine. Strange how in an instant I felt better, how his lips on the back of my neck made me forget the burning in my stomach and the ache behind my eyes. His hand wrapped around the engorged shaft of my morning erection.

"Are you up to doing anything with this?" Dalton licked my ear and gave me a few delicious strokes.

Was I? "Give me five minutes and I'll..." I broke off as his cell phone rang.

He answered, his gaze locked to mine. He looked away.

I listened as he told the caller he'd be there by two o'clock. One of his kids then. It occurred to me I'd not seen any photos of them. Maybe he didn't have any current pictures, or maybe he didn't need them to remind him of what his children looked like. Maybe he could remember on his own. Nothing mattered except that the call put an obvious damper on his libido.

"Sorry, Reed. Leslie calls me every Saturday morning. She's a good kid."

"No problem. Listen, I think I'm going to head home so you can do what you need to do, okay?"

He blew out a long breath. "Yeah. Just lean back here and drink your coffee first."

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

I agreed, and after a staggering trip to the head, propped myself up beside him. Something had changed. Our silence was stilted; our thoughts kept private. I'd feared this moment, knowing it would come.

Dalton laid his hand on my thigh. "I'm not sure what time I'll be back tonight. Should I call you?"

My heart flip-flopped like a fish out of water. I noticed the sunshine again. "Sure. I'll be up until about eleven."

He squeezed my leg. "Good. I'll call. Your place?"

I shook my head. "Not a good idea."

Dalton nodded. "Do you want a pair of jeans to wear home?"

My pervie streak reasserted itself. "Your jeans? My dick where yours has been? Sure."

"You're nuts, Reed, but I like that in you."

This from a man who wanted to lay plastic on the floor and swim in vegetable oil. I downed the last of my coffee and rolled over, pinning him down beneath me. His blue eyes darkened as his arms came around me.

"I want you, Dalton. I don't know if you like it or not, but I want you like this."

"That's a tall order. I've not had partners that... Okay, Reed. Okay."

The implications of his words sank in. Given what I'd gleaned about his first experience, I wasn't surprised he'd chosen partners carefully. Yet he agreed to a certain equality with me. He'd known from the beginning, though.

It was easy to judge what another man would tolerate and

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what he wouldn't. He knew without words that I'd ceded him a right I wouldn't another man. And he was willing to do the same. Those whispered words against my lips haunted me. I hardened in a rush.

Dalton's beautiful mouth curved in a smile. "Now?"

I brushed an errant lock of his short, dark hair off his forehead. "No. Now you have to go be a daddy and enjoy every minute of it."

"Kiss me again, then let me up."

His lips opened to mine. His hands kneaded my ass. God, it was heavenly to share such an unhurried moment with him. Finally I released him. He stood and his erection led the way to his closet.

I dressed in borrowed jeans and a comfortable henley. He wore jeans and a college T-shirt, no doubt to show his support for his daughter's school. I bet he broke a lot of hearts when he walked on campus, and I told him so. He laughed and shook his head, then told me how visiting the college made him feel old.

My suit folded and coffee mugs empty, he escorted me to the front door. I hated to leave, but the sooner I did, the sooner the night would come again. He kissed me once more, lingeringly, until my resolve melted and I leaned into his arms. His forehead rested against mine.

"Now you can go," he said, his voice barely a whisper.

I tipped up his chin and met his gaze, then opened the door and stepped back into the real world.

I'd stormed the banks of the Rubicon, but I didn't know if

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the victory was truly mine.

They say the night is darkest before the dawn. I can attest to this. I spent the next six nights in the darkest region of my own personal hell, staggering from my solitary bed at dawn, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep. I suffered through the interminable days because I had no choice but to survive them. I lived through the endless nights for the same reason.

Dalton had not called me upon his return to town.

## CHAPTER 7

By Friday afternoon, I was an angry wreck. Oh, I thought I hid it well from everyone, except maybe my secretary. Anyway, I'd finally given in and cruised the Quality Homes job sites and discovered Dalton was alive and working. It hurt, a deep, numbing cut that lost no time in festering angrily. I left work early, as soon as the ink was on the final contract for section three. I showered and changed into jeans—my own—and drove to the pub. Dalton's truck was already there.

*Damn the man.*

I parked my Chevy beside his and strolled through the front door.

It was a tad early and the pub wasn't too crowded. Dalton

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sat at the end of the bar with a boy of about twenty. They were laughing familiarly, being very chummy. Dalton put his arm around the boy, ruffling his collar-length, curly dark hair. My heart plummeted, even as anger seized me again. I stalked toward Dalton. Their conversation reached me before I reached them.

“C’mon, Dad! I’m twenty-one tomorrow. One beer.”

“No. Not here where I’ll get arrested over it.” Dalton turned a bit and saw me. He jerked, startled. Those sinful blue eyes widened. He shook his head ever so slightly, a tiny movement that no one but me would pick up.

I understood. The anger drained out of me, but not the hurt. I hoped the explanation of why he hadn’t called me sat beside him. He licked his lips. God, I wanted to do that for him. I had to speak with him. Nonchalantly, heart pounding, I eased onto the bar stool beside him. “Dalton.”

He didn’t quite meet my gaze. “Reed. Congratulations on the section three contract.”

“Thanks. I need to talk to you about that. RLK might need sub-contractors for some of the work over the winter.”

Dalton relaxed just a bit. A stranger wouldn’t have known it, but I knew his body language better than most. We’d just established for his son we knew each other through work. He leaned back and introduced us.

“Peter, this is Reed Kauffman. His family owns RLK Enterprises, so he’s technically the competition. Reed, this is my son, Peter Dalton.”

The younger Dalton watched me with his father’s eyes.

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Cute kid, one that would break a lot of hearts. It was all over him that he was straight and he wore some girl's ring on his left pinkie. His gaze flicked to his father, then back to me, all open curiosity and speculation.

I accepted the hand Peter extended. His grip was firm and his eyes met mine, man-to-man. I could almost feel Dalton puffing with pride and risked a look at him.

Dalton's eyes pleaded for my silence. I wouldn't say a word, but I knew what Dalton hadn't realized or simply couldn't consciously accept yet. Peter knew his father was gay.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Kauffman." Peter released my hand and slid off his bar stool. "I need to make a phone call. I'll be right back."

Dalton nodded, and Peter eased around a group of plumbers blocking the way and slipped out the door, cell phone in hand.

*Shit.* I hoped he wasn't calling his mother. I turned to Dalton and found him watching me intently.

"I'm sorry, Reed," he said, voice pitched low enough no one would hear. "He wanted to come back with me for the week. I couldn't say no. I haven't seen much of him the last few years since he's away at college."

"Nice looking kid. I see the problem, but I'm still pissed." I caught the bartender's attention and she nodded. "You certainly could've found three minutes to sneak a call."

"You're right. I should have, but I was afraid if I heard your voice I'd ditch my kid and come find you."

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

Damn him. The hurt I'd carried for days bled away. "It's been a bad week, Dalton."

"I'm sorry. How pissed are you? He's leaving in an hour or so to go back to school. He wants to spend his birthday with his girlfriend."

"Hope springs eternal," I murmured as I accepted a beer from the bartender.

Dalton tapped the funds he had on the bar, and she smiled at him as she extracted a five-dollar bill and went to get change.

"He's been up here all week with me, hanging out, driving his mother crazy because he wouldn't stay with her."

"Well, if he was at your place, I guess having guests in would've been difficult."

"To say the least, and I tell you again...I'm sorry."

"Okay, okay. I got that. Now let's move on."

Dalton turned to face me. "Peter doesn't know about me."

I snorted. "That's what you think. You need to have a chat with him."

"Fuck."

"You know, Dalton, I've never heard that word uttered with such eloquence before."

Panic flickered in his eyes. His face paled. "He's my *son*, for God's sake."

"You don't think he's smart enough to put two and two together and get four?"

"I know how fucking smart he is! What would you do if your father told you he was..."



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“I’d laugh my fucking ass off, that’s what I’d do. But he’s not me. Peter just came back inside.”

“Fuck.”

In spite of the seriousness of the moment, I laughed. Dalton glared at me as Peter reclaimed his bar stool.

“Tiffany’s only one exit away on the Interstate. She’ll be here in ten minutes,” Peter said to his father. “It’s really been great spending time with you this week, Dad.”

Dalton beamed, his rugged features full of pride and love for his son. “Yeah, I’m really glad you could take a break and come up. Next time I’ll let you drink in public. Come on. We’d better get your duffel bag out of the truck.” He turned back to me. “Step outside with us?”

I shook my head. “No. I’ll wait.”

He nodded. Peter shook my hand again and flashed me a tentative smile. I appreciated how he must feel coming face to face with a man he no doubt suspected of being his father’s lover. I watched them as they walked through the door. I understood Dalton’s panic...at least I thought I did. I knew intellectually how hard it was for him. As to the emotions he experienced, I could only assume, but I didn’t think I was far off.

Guilt over an orientation not perceived as normal. Shame over what was often considered a sexual perversion. Fear that loved ones would ostracize him.

I knew these emotions from my own life, but how much greater the intensity when it was your child you needed to protect from unpleasant truths. I’d never know that first hand.

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

My curiosity over what transpired outside got the best of me. I picked up my beer and slunk to the window.

Dalton and Peter faced each other between my pickup and his, smiling warmly and chatting easily, laughing. My own father and I would never be that relaxed with each other again.

A classy-looking red coupe driven by a dark-haired beauty pulled up behind the trucks. Dalton waved at her as she climbed out of the car and opened the trunk. Father and son embraced for a few seconds, then Peter picked up his duffel, stowed it, kissed the smiling beauty with gusto, and settled in the driver's seat. With a final wave at his father, Peter drove off. Dalton watched the car as it hit the street with a little squeal of rubber and sped off. He leaned on his pickup, the lines of his face settled in a tired appearance. I set my half-finished beer on the bar and went to him.

His eyes burned with a strange fire as I approached him. I clapped him on the shoulder, the sort of gesture that friends make all the time.

"C'mon, Dalton. Let's ditch your truck at your place and go get some food."

Dalton shook his head. I stopped, surprised at his rebuff. "Do you know what Peter whispered in my ear?" he asked.

I steeled myself for something big. "Do I want to know?"

"Yeah. He said you were cute and I should go for it."

"Jesus." No wonder he looked feverish. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. I fucking said nothing." He turned and leaned over the side of the truck bed.

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

I eased up beside him and mirrored his position. “I doubt he expected you to say anything. Look at it this way—not every man gets his son’s approval.”

He held up his hand, a tired gesture I took to mean he’d had enough talking about it, or even thinking about it, for the moment.

“What did you two talk about all week?” I asked in the attempt to change the subject.

“Tiffany. Tiffany. Tiffany. Football and Tiffany some more,” he replied, then laughed. “He’s giving her a ring for Christmas.”

“Good for him!” I was sincerely happy for Peter. I hoped his marriage would give him everything he needed and he’d be the sort of man to thrive within its conventions. I grasped Dalton’s forearm. “Let’s go eat. It seems we both had a difficult week.”

He nodded. “I’ll stop and get a six-pack. You get a pizza. Throw the works on it. Meet you at my place.”

“Sounds good.” I stepped away from him when I really wanted to put my arms around him and lend him my strength.

He flashed me that quirky, lop-sided grin of his and climbed into his pickup. I hopped in mine and we left on our errands. When I arrived at his place, he was already there. I walked in without knocking. The living room certainly looked like a young man had camped out in it all week. I stepped over a couple of throw pillows as I carried the pizza to the kitchen and set it on the counter. Dalton was on the patio talking to a pretty woman holding the furry mutt. It wasn’t long before he

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came inside, securing the back door behind him.

I didn't wait. I couldn't. I'd been a whole week without him, a week in which despair had been a mocking companion who now needed banishment. I pulled him to me and claimed his mouth. Dalton backed me to the refrigerator and pinned me there. Lust sank talons into my brain as his hand snaked down the front of my jeans.

Turnabout is always fair play when someone has you by the balls. I unzipped his fly and maneuvered his hardening cock free. He smiled against my lips, his voice husky with humor and arousal as he squeezed my penis. "You know what kids call this these days?"

I didn't care. I thrust my tongue into the heat of his mouth. Dalton groaned and drew me in, giving back tenfold what I offered him. The pressure of his fingers around my shaft made me nuts.

"Okay, okay. What do kids call this..." I stroked him, sliding silky skin over the hard core of his erect penis.

"A stiffy."

I laughed in spite of myself. He joined in and we held each other as the tensions and disappointments of the past week dropped away. I soaked up his scent and committed the solid feel of him to memory, one to have and to keep so I could wrap myself in it during those times we couldn't physically be together.

"Do we have time to eat?" he asked nibbling at my neck and ear. I didn't want him to stop, but the mere mention of food made my stomach growl audibly.

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

“Yeah. I’m starving, Dalton.” Eating had not been a priority this past week. “I need fuel.”

He sighed and laid his forehead on my shoulder. I didn’t want to let go of him either, but I reluctantly did. Dalton grinned and pulled me away from the fridge.

“My hands are full. Get the beer out, will ya?”

“There’s a comedian born every minute,” I responded, snagging two long neck bottles of brew. Hand still down the front of my pants, he led me to the table.

We talked a little shop while we ate our pizza, both using two hands to hold the slices. I sensed Dalton’s continuing preoccupation with his son and finally took his hand.

“What’s the worst that can happen since Peter knows?”

His face went cold and stark for a split second, then the look was gone, far too late for I’d seen it. “I guess the worst is he never speaks to me again.”

“Yeah. And what did he say instead? Doesn’t sound like he’s going to cut you out of his life.”

“I’m struggling here.”

“I got that, Dalton.” He wasn’t alone. Six weeks of flirtation and one night of glorious, mind-bending, life altering, fuck-me-again-please sex didn’t give me too many clues on what to say to ease his mind over it. If anything other than a frank conversation with his son ever would ease his mind. I believed him to be the sort of man who would have that talk with Peter, sooner rather than later. He just needed time to think it through.

Dalton squeezed my hand and looked at me. Something

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dark and devilish danced in his blue eyes that stole my breath.  
“How about we go get naked and fix my insecurities later?”

It was the best suggestion I’d heard in a week.

## CHAPTER 8

Dalton stashed what was left of the pizza in the fridge, while I acted semi-domesticated and wiped the table. The tidy kitchen I'd viewed last week had vanished. I assumed father and son had had more important things to do than clean up and didn't fault Dalton for putting time with Peter ahead of less important pursuits. He must have read my mind.

"I gave up on cleanliness two hours after the boy landed," he said, fatherly pride warming his voice. "I wanted to enjoy him being here."

"You're lucky, you know? Not every son wants to spend time with their father."

He searched my face. "You and your father—no chance of

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patching it up?"

I shook my head. "Not for a while anyway."

"Don't wait too long, Reed. Life is short."

"So is the night. Why aren't you naked yet?"

Dalton snickered. "What? You don't want to work for it?"

I tossed the dishrag in the sink and stepped towards him. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it at me. I caught it, slinging it over my shoulder.

"Keep going," I urged him.

He backed into the hallway and I followed him. His bedroom was still neat. The walls had been painted caramel beige and the room glowed softly in the early evening light. "I take it you and Peter painted."

"Yep. His idea, too." Dalton sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his boots. I stripped out of my shirt and kicked off my sneakers. I shivered, but not with any chill.

Dalton stood and his jeans dropped to the floor. I went to him and hooked my fingers under the elastic of his briefs. I eased them down over his hips. He was already hard, full and firm. I went to my knees and took him in my mouth, the musky scent of male filling my senses. My mind burned with the knowledge of what we would do to, and for, each other during this night.

His hands stroked my hair as I sucked him, the action no longer foreign. His hips moved slightly, flexing to meet me as I moved my lips over his cock. I looked up. Dalton's eyes were closed, his lips parted in a dreamy smile. He took a sudden, short breath and moaned deep in his throat. I faltered



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on the echoing jolt that shot to my groin. I released him and accepted his hand as I rose, knees shaking. Our fingers fumbled as we both tried to unsnap my jeans.

Dalton kissed my shoulder and left me to finish undressing, slipping past me into the bathroom. He returned with several condoms and the lube. I looked at him, hoping to see some sign of what he had in mind. I wanted to fuck him and see if that incredible merging was just as potent from the other side. He pulled the covers down and we stretched out, side by side, on the crisp sheets.

I reached for him, wanting to feel his skin against mine. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me soundly. My groin was tight, throbbing with each beat of my heart. Dalton rubbed his erection against my hip. I dug my fingers into his ass cheeks and held him to me. Breathless, I pulled away.

He smiled at me in the soft light. I rolled to my knees and looked at him, sprawled before me, mine for the taking, mine for the pleasuring. Not having had light to look at him last week, I took full advantage of it now. Long and lean, well proportioned, unmarred by scars, his body was beautiful. His full erection was dark red against the pale skin of his abdomen, reaching almost to his belly button. My body pulsed deeply with the memory of all that inside me.

Leaning over, I licked the length of him again. His cock rose to meet me. I sat back on my heels. Shadows clouded his eyes. I wondered about the memories that brought uncertainty to such a strong man's face. The past was behind him, and his future, I hoped, knelt over him.

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

“I want you, Dalton.”

He swallowed and nodded. “Okay. Now come down here and kiss me again.”

I eased my body down on his, covering him. With my lips and hands I caressed him, teasing him until he broke a sweat. I wanted him hot and greedy before taking him. He reached out a long arm, snagged a foil packet, and carefully sheathed me in latex, then rolled over onto his stomach.

The move surprised me somewhat. I’d wanted to see his eyes, watch his face as I took him, not for any voyeuristic pleasure, but to gauge how well I was doing. It would show on his face if I hurt him. That was my fear—that I’d be no better than the faceless man in his past. And hurting him was the last thing I wanted. I wanted him to take as much pleasure from me as I had from him.

“You’re stalling,” he growled at me, wiggling his ass.

I stretched out on top of him and licked his ear. “Take your hands off your dick and wait for me,” I growled back.

He chuckled, a low rumble in his chest, but I noticed the subtle flexing of muscles in his arm stilled. Reassured he still wanted me, I kissed and licked my way down his spine, tasting the salty dew of his sweat.

I opened the tube of lube and contemplated how far to indulge his slippery fetish, deciding now wasn’t quite the time to deny him. I coated my hands and cock with a liberal amount, then smeared it over his firm flanks while he moaned encouragement.

Using his example of how he’d readied me as my guide, I

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very carefully inserted one finger into him. It was easy to gauge the level of his tension as his body struggled to relax. I kept at it, coaxing until the level of Dalton's arousal climbed to where his flesh eagerly accepted my invasion and he urged me on.

His knees slipped apart and his butt lifted. I grasped his hips and pressed my cock that first little bit into him and felt him bear down against me. He hissed as I shifted my weight. I pushed, a little extra pressure, and slid into him fully. Dalton jerked in surprise, and I expected so did I. He was tight and hot, fisted around me. The primitive urge to plunge into him, to plunder, rode me hard.

He was mine. I'd staked my claim to him, a claim I would protect. I struggled to control the need within me. I would not hurt him, no matter how strong the urge to fuck him senseless became.

"Dalton, are you okay?"

His reply was a tightening of internal muscles around me. I took it to be a yes and slowly withdrew. He moaned breathlessly, the astonished sound ripped from him. I eased back into him and his body yielded, then clenched around me as I withdrew. I embraced the exquisite torture and moved strongly within him, over and over, at his urging. The world closed darkly around me as my whole being spun down to those eight inches of flesh that held me cocooned in pleasure.

"Reed. Reed..."

I dropped back into awareness at the strain in his voice. I covered him with my body, amazed at the heat he gave off. I

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slipped my hand beneath him and wrapped my fingers around his cock. The sheer ecstasy of his inner walls quivering along my shaft almost undid me. I stroked him slowly, moving my hand in unison with my hips. His flesh rippled and throbbed around mine. His erection pulsed in my hand. To hell with trying to finesse fucking him, I was ready to come and so was he. I pumped into him harder. His hand covered mine, urging me to stroke faster.

The beginning of my orgasm snaked down my spine, made sweeter by the sudden clenching of Dalton's inner walls. His back arched as he came, calling my name. I reached for my own climax and fell over the edge with him.

I rode the waves of orgasm, preternaturally aware of Dalton moaning in pleasure beneath me. My head cleared in a rush and I pushed into him and stilled, wanting nothing more than to catch my breath and have him open his eyes and smile at me to make my world complete. I moved with him as one as he eased down flat on the bed.

Dalton sighed contentedly and relaxed. I kissed the corner of his mouth and it twitched, smiling, then the one blue eye I could see popped open. I didn't need him to tell me he was okay. I felt it in every line of his body. The silence stretched on and I began to wonder if he'd fallen asleep. "Say something, Dalton."

"Get off me, Reed."

I shook my head. "Can't move."

It was time I did. I withdrew from the heat of him and padded off to the bathroom to freshen up. It wasn't long

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before Dalton joined me, turning on the shower. We held each other without speaking as the water rinsed and rejuvenated us.

Dalton nuzzled at my cheek until I turned my lips to his. He kissed me, holding nothing back, and I gave him everything I had inside me.

Where did we go from here? I hadn't a clue and was afraid to ask. His murmured words last week haunted me—what *did* he feel towards me? Was being with me scratching an itch, or much more? For my part of it, being with him felt right, not perverted or sinful.

“You’re thinking loudly again, Reed.”

“I know. I guess you want to know about what, too.”

“No. I can guess. You’re wondering, now what?” He hugged me. “So am I. Jesus, Reed, gay couples have really bad track records statistically.” My heart stuttered. I was monogamous by nature, but he didn’t know that. Now that I’d finally taken the plunge I had no intention of being promiscuous and courting the associated risks. I wanted something stable and I sensed he did, too.

“You know, I’m not going to walk away from you for fear of a few statistics.”

“That’s a bit of a relief, you know.” He reached for the bar of soap. It slipped from his fingers and fell to the tiled floor. We grinned at each other.

“You bend over, Kauffman. I already gave it up once today.”

I rolled my eyes at him and picked up the soap. I lathered my hands and rubbed his chest.

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

“Two rolls in the sack might not be enough to base a long-term relationship on,” I said as I pinched his nipples.

“Keep saying that and I’ll whoop you.” His hands covered mine. “Look at me.”

I did.

“Neither one of us would have laid hands on the other if this was just about sex.”

“You can’t know that about me, Dalton.”

“The hell I can’t. You waited until you were in your thirties to cross the line. How many offers have you had in the last fifteen years? I bet at least three a year.”

“Is that how many you’ve had?” I didn’t really want to know. I don’t know why I asked him the question.

“At least that many. I accepted very few of them, and most of those I kept to a quick business of trading hands.” He gripped both my shoulders and shook me gently. “And never, never, did I invite any of them to come to my home and fuck me. Until you.”

The pressure in my chest increased. I thought I could handle stress, but obviously this sort was beyond me. His hands cupped my face. “Reed, you’re something special. *We’re* something special together. I’m sorry it scares you.”

“What should I do? Should I confess I feel like some schoolboy when I’m with you? Should I stand here and declare my undying love for you? Should I shake your hand, say thanks for a good time and see you around? I don’t know what to do now. I don’t know!”

Dalton’s eyes searched my face, his concern evident. And

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

underneath the concern was something more elemental, something just for me, and it frightened me even as I wanted it.

“Nothing between us is wrong. It never will be. Tell me—what do you want? Can you see us as a couple? I can.”

“You’re asking a lot, Dalton.”

“I know. But all you have to do is look at it. Face it. Then it can’t hurt you any more.”

It hurt me plenty right now—in the chest, behind my eyes—and still he wasn’t finished with me.

“I know how hard this is. I know the hurt it causes people you love. My ex-wife is a good person who deserved more than I ever gave her. My kids? Don’t you think worry about how my life will affect my kids hasn’t kept me awake at night?”

“I’m sure it has,” I agreed quietly. “I get your point. Really, I do.”

“Yes. But you’re not alone in it.” He pulled me into his arms, and I clung to him gratefully. “I want you in my life, Reed. You’re worth facing my kids, my family, business partners. You’re worth it to me.”

I almost choked on the words, but I got them out. “And what happens in a year, or two, or three, when one of us decides to move on? What then, Dalton?”

“Then we had a good run. Life doesn’t come with guarantees.” He pulled away enough to look at me. I must have looked a little rough because his face softened. “I’ll never hate you, Reed. We’re starting out as equals. That’s a

## *SURRENDERED VICTORY*

helluva lot better beginning than a lot of couples ever get.” Dalton kissed me gently. “What do you want?”

Dalton was right about a lot of things. Life didn’t have a guarantee. Could I really squander the first true shot at happiness I’d ever found in my life? I couldn’t. I’d waited too long for it, endured too much heartache when I believed I would never find someone and be happy.

What was it about Dalton? I didn’t know. Who does? He had that indefinable something that made me long to be with him, made me crave his touch.

Did I love him? I wasn’t sure. Love had not visited me much in my life. I only knew what I felt for him eclipsed everything else in my life. So maybe it *was* love. The water had cooled. It was time to turn it off and find a towel, yet neither of us moved.

I looked at him and saw the warmth in his eyes, along with the total understanding and acceptance of me without any strings attached. The look gave form and substance to those murmured words of his love that had haunted me for a week. He smiled the quirky little smile where only one corner of his mouth moved, and I knew I loved him, too.

I knew. So did he.

It was enough.



## **KC KENDRICKS**

Multi-published in the arena of romance fiction, KC Kendricks is the pen name under which the author focuses on the interactions of men falling in love with men. Novels by KC Kendricks are adult in nature. Graphic without being vulgar, KC's stories are a celebration of love and hope for mature readers.

Writing more traditional romance under a different pseudonym, the author is an EPPIE Finalist and a CAPA nominee. With one contemporary best-selling title, and several other top-ten list titles, the author has established herself as a storyteller who delivers rich, satisfying romantic stories that feature strong themes of love, hope and redemption with positive, upbeat endings.

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