

Loose Id

Adrianna Dane  
LONELY  
HE  RTS

# LONELY HEARTS

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Loose Id<sup>(R)</sup>  
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Adrianna Dane

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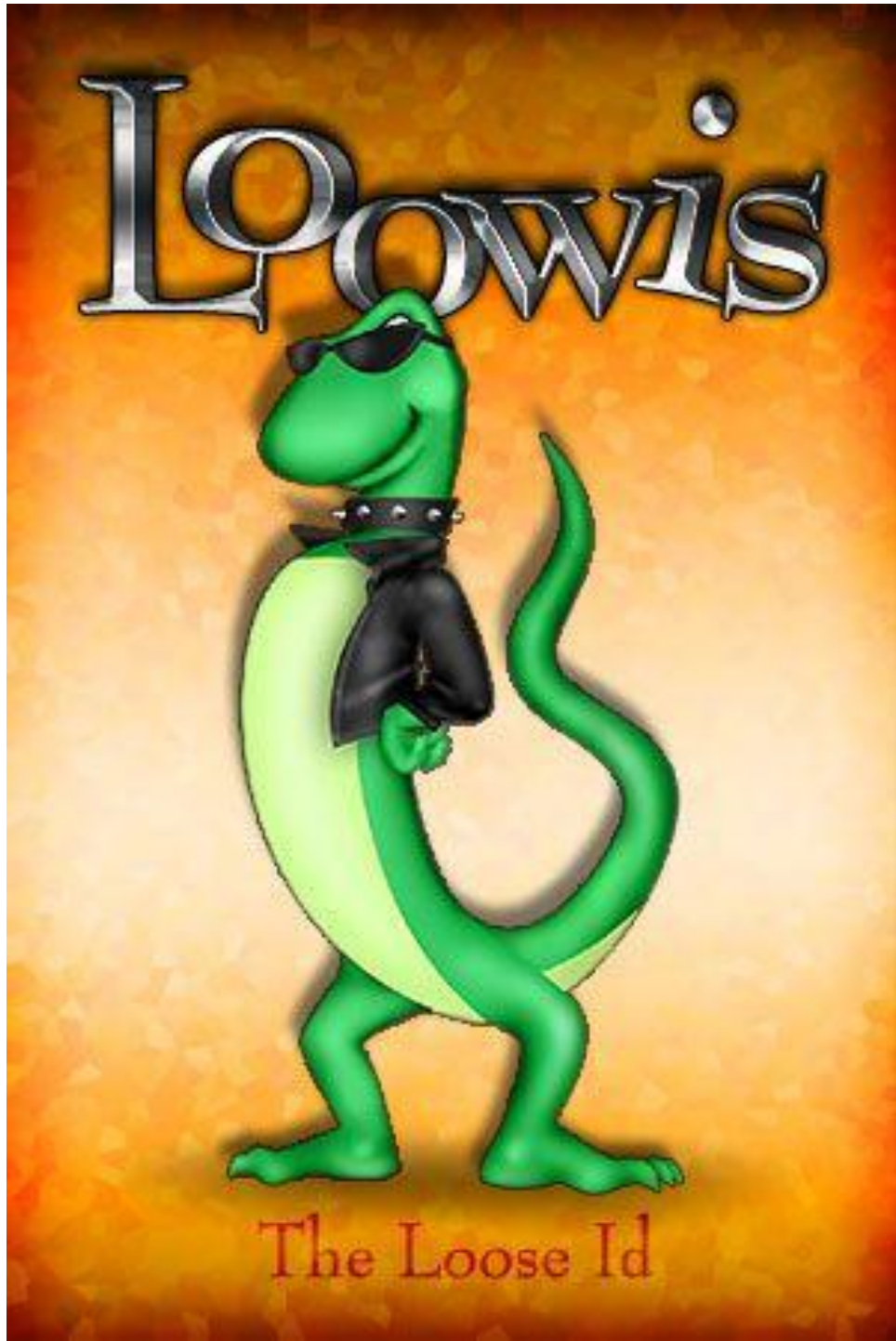
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## Chapter One

Ellis Wilson didn't look a day over fifty. That must be what contentment with one's lot in life looked like, Caleb mused. Last week his father had turned seventy-five, but one wouldn't know it by looking at him. There was still a sparkle in his eyes and a spring to his step. It said he loved life. And he still loved the woman he'd been married to for almost forty years.

Caleb had to wonder what it was like to meet the person who was the other half of your heart. At thirty-five, Caleb was still looking. Still hopeful. He was too much of a romantic. In fact wasn't that why he'd become a wedding planner? He loved happy endings. Or beginnings, depending on how one interpreted it. His company, Enduring Vows, also handled commitment ceremonies and handfasts. His clientele over the last few years had gone from straight to gay to polyamorous commitments with hardly a hiccup. He'd even begun to branch out into coordinating other types of what might be considered "nontraditional" events.

He was a dreamer. A romantic dream was going to get him into trouble, not that it hadn't already. He wanted everyone to find that perfect someone and to be able to make those vows any way they choose.

Caleb's father placed a small, scuffed jeweler's box onto the table. "You said you'd take care of this for me. Your mother's engagement ring. It means a lot to her." He pulled out a sheet of paper with a hand-drawn diagram. He held it out to Caleb. "This is what the new setting should look like."

Caleb took the piece of paper and looked at the penciled sketch, and then he folded it up and put it into his pocket. "I'll make sure it gets done before the ceremony."

"You've done everything the way I asked? This renewal ceremony is important to her. I don't want anything to go wrong."

Caleb had to smile. His father always did worry about every little detail. It's one of the traits Caleb had inherited. It's why his clients recommended him time and again to their friends. "Don't worry, Dad. It's all under control. I managed to track down the minister, ordered the gardenias, just the way you asked. I even found the right band to play. It's going to be perfect."

His father leaned back in his chair. "I don't know why we didn't do this at the twenty-fifth. I'm getting too old to be worrying about this stuff. But it's what your mother has her heart set on." Then he leaned forward again. "Did you locate Morgan? He's the one who cut the diamond in the first place. He's the only one I want touching this ring."

"Don't worry, Dad. I've got it covered." He reached out to squeeze his father's aged hand. "They've relocated from Main Street to that new mall out on the west end of town, where all that new development is going on. I'll take the ring in this afternoon."

He saw the relief soften his father's features. "I didn't realize -- I never thought they might relocate. I figured the old geezer just passed away."

"Well, it's still Morgan and Sons Jewelers, so I'm assuming the family still owns it. Everything's going to be fine, Dad. So don't worry."

Now that it was settled, his father turned his attention on Caleb. Inwardly, Caleb winced at the alert stare. "So tell me what's happening in your life? I haven't seen you in a

while. Seeing anyone knew? Shelly says she has a nice girl she wants to introduce you to, but you keep putting her off. Your sister has good taste, so you should meet the girl.”

“Dad, I’ve told you before...” And Caleb was probably going to have to repeat himself again. It wasn’t that the man was obtuse...he just wanted more grandchildren. Unfortunately, Caleb doubted his father was going to be getting any from him. “I don’t want to meet a nice girl.” *I want to meet a great man.* But he was tired of trying to get through to his father. His mother seemed to understand. He actually doubted Shelly had anyone lined up for him. She knew quite well that Caleb wasn’t interested in being set up.

“I want you to be happy, Caleb. You’re still so unsettled. You need someone in your life. You’re the eldest. You should have been the first to marry.”

“Someday I will. I just haven’t met the right person yet. And I’m not going to rush it.” He curled his fingers around the jeweler’s box containing his mother’s engagement ring. Picking it up, he then slipped it into his jacket pocket.

His father sighed. “Guess I can’t fault you, son. Just because I met my soul mate early on, doesn’t mean it happens to everyone, I guess.” His father peered across the table at him. “Are you sure you don’t want to meet a nice girl? It would be a hell of a lot easier. Look at the garbage going on with Prop 8. You really want to deal with all of that when the time comes?”

He was a bit surprised that his father had followed the news about Proposition 8 with the number of times he’d tried to matchmake for Caleb. But it pleased him, too. The ups and downs of gay marriage were certainly in the forefront of Caleb’s mind. The high of same-sex marriage being legalized and then having it voted down on the ballot had been a huge blow. There was going to be another demonstration next Saturday that he planned to attend.

He looked at his father. “I’ll do what I have to, Dad. If I meet the right person, whatever stupid laws exist aren’t going to stop us from being together. But I hope by then



people figure out marriage should be between two people who love each other and how that mix comes together shouldn't matter."

"Your mother and I worry about you, son. We can't help it. You always did walk around with your head in the clouds. Too much of a dreamer, and we don't want to see you get your heart trampled."

Caleb smiled. He knew his family loved him. They were a close-knit family. When he'd finally come out to them, Shelly and Gavin, his sister and brother, had hardly batted an eye. His mother had been concerned, what with all she'd heard about AIDS and the other possible consequences of unsafe sex. The pointed questions she'd asked had actually made him blush.

They cared about him, and he knew that. But he'd assured her he played it safe.

Out of habit, he glanced around the dining room. A lot of gorgeous men eating lunch there today. His attention was arrested by two men on the opposite side of the room. Something about their body language caught his interest. Lovers? Possibly. Maybe it was just the way they stared at each other. When the man with his back to him moved, Caleb caught the sparkling flash of something that almost blinded him. Diamond stud, maybe?

Even from the back, Caleb liked the look of those strong, broad shoulders. Thick, wavy hair, side parted, brown with streaks of wheat. The sun or a bottle? Not overly long. Well groomed. Brown tweed jacket, lean hips. Nice ass. From what he could see, deeply tanned complexion. When the man turned his head, Caleb scrutinized the strong jaw and high cheekbones. He wondered what color his eyes were. Did he have a mustache? Curiosity almost had him rising from his chair and walking over to the table just to obtain a full-frontal effect. His gaze drifted downward and then widened when he saw the sneakers. Granted they were expensive sneakers, but still... Now Caleb was intrigued.

He tore his eyes away from the delicious specimen to study the man across from him. Young. Blond. Bright smile. Casual clothes. But expensive. Athletic. Narrow face, weak jaw.

Shifty eyes. He didn't fit with the dark-haired stranger. Caleb had no idea why he was so certain of the fact. He just was.

How could he be jealous of someone he didn't even know? Caleb shook his head and turned his attention back to his father. He had no business mooning over the stranger on the other side of the room. He ignored the tight fit of his striped trousers. Damned cock, anyway. Had no sense of time and place. He certainly wasn't here to try to pick up anyone. He tried to concentrate on the meal with his father. But somehow his gaze kept straying to the couple across the room. Right up until they finally rose and left the dining room. So much for that little distraction.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim looked down at the sexy blond Adonis draped across the hotel bed, a satisfied smile on his lips. There was a sleepy expression on his face, his eyes half closed. He'd been fun.

"You don't have to go yet, do you?" The silky texture of his voice was meant to arouse. It was a learned skill that probably netted him a nice bonus on most afternoons.

Jim slipped the gold, diamond-encrusted watch onto his wrist and snapped the band closed. "Afraid so. I only have one person helping me in the shop today." These lunch-hour trysts tended to be very satisfying but extremely short.

Lars sat up, and the sheet dipped lower, just barely covering his groin. He reached out and curled his hand around the leather belt at Jim's waist. He tugged forward. Jim didn't resist. Lars's hand slipped beneath the waistband of his pants and found Jim's cock.

The blond grinned up at Jim. Damn, he had a great...smile. Jim grabbed a corner of the sheet and yanked it off the bed. Lars's cock was at full mast, thick and long.

"You sure you have to leave?" Lars's voice was low and sexy.

Jim looked at his watch. He really should go. But damn, Lars had really nice hands. He unbuckled Jim's belt. He peeled the zipper down and released Jim's dick, which was hammer hard.

"Are you like this with all your...dates?"

Lars smiled. "Well, you did pay for the hour. And I'm not cheap. And you are so sexy."

Lars dumped the box of condoms out onto the bed, snatched one up, and sheathed Jim's prick. Experienced and fast. His hand rode up and down Jim's cock.

"Come here, big boy. Let's play some more." His mouth surrounded Jim's erection.

He was good. Jim had to give him that. And Jim liked the fact that there were no strings attached to the relationship. He didn't do emotions. Too messy. Jim's cock popped out of Lars's mouth.

"Mmmm, you got hard really fast, lover. Not all my...boys do. Sometimes it takes a while to get them going again." He sucked Jim's prick back into his mouth hardly missing a beat.

Jim's eyes fluttered closed, his fingers threaded through the thick blond locks of the expensive escort. He thrust his hips, and his cock sank deeper into his mouth. Damn, did he know how to use that mouth. Oh, he was good all right. And well worth the money spent.

"Do you give all your boys such great service?" It wasn't going to be long before he shot his load again. And that was unusual.

Lars released his cock with a *pop* and grinned up at Jim. "Top service for my men. It usually means they'll come back for more. You've got my e-mail, right? And my cell? Besides, it's our first date; I want to make it really good for you. Maybe we can hook up again."

At this rate, it was a done deal. Lars had an exceptional mouth.

The sexy blond rose up onto his knees and leaned forward, but Jim pulled back. "I told you. No kissing."

Lars pouted and then shrugged. "Whatever you say, baby. It's your dime."

Jim did have his limits. There was an element of intimacy to kissing that he didn't want brought into any relationship with his lunch dates. It was just a pet peeve he had. But sucking his cock. Now that was exactly what he was paying for.

Lars leaned down and consumed Jim's dick into the moist heat of his mouth. Jim arched forward. A few more minutes wouldn't kill him. The man's mouth was divine. Well worth a lost sale or two at the store.

"Yeah, just like that," he said. His balls drew up, and he knew he was close.

Lars's hands cupped his ass, drawing on him deeply with his mouth. Within seconds, he was spurting into the condom. Minutes later, he was cleaned up and ready to leave.

He turned back to look at Lars. His lunchtime lover leaned back against the pillows, counting the nice tip that Jim had handed him. He looked up and grinned at Jim. "Hope we can do this again soon, Diamond Jim."

Jim grinned back, acknowledging the screen name that Lars knew him by from when they first hooked up.

"I'll give you a call. Stay as long as you like, the room's paid up."

"Love to. It's a great room." Lars rose to his feet like a sleek tiger stretching from a nap. "Unfortunately, I've got plans. Life of a working man, you know? You have a great day."

"Suit yourself."

The minute he closed the door on the room, Jim's thoughts turned to work and the designs he was considering for the new stones that had just been delivered.

An interlude, after all, was just that. A light diversion. He bought and sold happily ever after every day. He knew what the returns were on it. Not for him. He much preferred men like Lars. No strings attached.

He rode down in the elevator and stepped out into the foyer of the prestigious hotel. Looked like the sun was shining. His attention was on catching a cab and getting back to the

store. A sharp pain caught him in the chest, and he didn't even notice the man until he'd walked right into him.

"Whoa, sorry about that," he said. Instinctively he reached out to steady the other man. And then he looked up, and the pain in his chest grew sharper. He inhaled sharply. For a moment, it seemed as though time stopped dead in its tracks. Hard muscle flexed beneath his grip. It surprised Jim. The man didn't look that...solid. He was of average height, a couple of inches shorter than Jim. Slender and...colorful. Richly so.

It was his eyes that locked Jim in place. Bright copper, like new pennies, intelligent and curious. Jim saw humor within their sparkling depths. The color matched the rich velvet jacket he wore over a paisley textured waistcoat. An orange daisy in the lapel, a purple handkerchief in the breast pocket. Longish, dark, silky hair that looked like he'd just stepped out of a strong wind. The first thing that came to Jim's mind was poet, like Byron or Shelley, and...something odd tightened in his chest, moved lower, and stiffened his already well-serviced cock.

*My God, he's beautiful.*

"No problem," the man said. But he didn't move away from Jim's grip.

Something odd happened, but Jim wasn't quite certain what it was. And then time started once again, and he released the man as though he'd been burned.

"You okay? I'm afraid I wasn't looking where I was going."

"I'm fine."

"Caleb, you ready to go?"

Jim turned his head to see an older gentleman just behind the man he'd almost knocked over.

"Sure thing, Dad."

He smiled at Jim and then turned and left. Jim had the worst urge to go after him. He even took a step in his direction and then stopped himself. What the hell was he thinking? He didn't do pickups. At least not like this. And he sure didn't do relationships.

But he couldn't help watching the man with rapt attention as he and his father strode away. For the first time in a long time, he wondered what it would be like to actually be in an ongoing relationship. A chill raced down his spine that he was even considering it.

In one second, Jim's life had suddenly shifted, and he had to wonder. Why now?

## Chapter Two

It wasn't as busy in the mall this time of year as it was just before the holiday rush. A January lull just before the rush of the Valentine's Day crowd. But then again, everybody was pretty sick and tired of the cold weather.

Caleb stopped to look in the window of the chocolatier. Hearts of chocolate decorated with red candies, pictures of lovers -- male and female -- in close embraces advertised the Valentine's Day specials. He should be used to it by now, but it was still hard. Still made him feel like he wasn't the same as everyone else. Of course, he'd taken that a step further by dressing with a flourish and starting up a company that drew attention to himself. Velvet jackets, plaid vests, tweed trousers. He was really quite in love with the vintage black velvet frock coat he'd purchased at an auction last week. He'd gotten used to the strange looks. Strangers who summed him up with a glance. Why hide it?

He didn't have the brawny build of the trainers who he appreciated so much at his health club. His was a wiry frame, more from lack of regular meals than anything else. Although he did work out regularly, he just didn't look it. His profession kept him on the go more than in his office. He couldn't make it to every Enduring Vows affair; that's why he had a large staff. But if they were in the city, he tried to at least make an appearance. It

wasn't that he didn't trust his staff; he just felt that personal touch, and the contacts, were good for business.

Strolling past the chocolatier, Caleb gazed into shop windows, always on the lookout for inspiration. He stopped in front of a men's formal wear shop. Now this was a grand display. Two male mannequins dressed in tuxes. One with full tails, the other a standard-length jacket. The owner had sent him several good clients in the last couple of months. Nice guy. Bisexual who had a penchant for threesomes. Caleb didn't really want to think right now about how he knew that little fact. It had only happened once. It hadn't been planned. It was the frantic call from Caleb's assistant that had brought him to that particular reception just as it was ending. A walk past the coat closet. If he hadn't stopped, it wouldn't have happened. But there had been so much naked skin. One of the best-looking tight asses he'd ever seen flexing and humping away at the woman half dressed in rose taffeta.

He'd have slipped quietly away if Roy hadn't looked up and caught his eye. And Caleb just couldn't pass it up. Damn, it had been a long, hard day, and at the thought of sex with the gorgeous man whose cock was buried inside the pussy of the cute blonde, his scruples crumbled.

He'd taken a step inside the closet, and before he knew it, Roy had wrapped Caleb's tie around his hand, yanked him close, and fastened his mouth to Caleb's as he continued to fuck the woman spread out on the counter near the back of the small room.

Caleb shook himself out of his memories. That had been several months back. It had been damn hot, but it had been a one-time thing. He had since seen Roy out with the very same blonde on more than one occasion. No hard feelings on that score. Right place, right time, right strangers, could lead to some amazing sex. But it wasn't the kind of thing that Caleb liked to make a steady diet of. His gaze turned to study the mannequins in the window. He was looking for a guy -- the right guy. And even at the time, something had told him that Roy wasn't that man.



It was a shock when the image of the man from the restaurant flashed into his mind as he thought about the man of his dreams. They'd come face-to-face as Caleb and his father were leaving the restaurant. He'd felt a sharp pain in his chest and then the oddest sense of recognition. It was a sensation Caleb had never felt before they'd brushed shoulders. A jolt that shot right through him.

He shook himself free of the intriguing memory. He looked down at the watch and realized he had to get going; he had a meeting in an hour. What was he thinking? Woolgathering was something he most certainly didn't have time for. He had a meeting with the Smith-Huffington family, and they wouldn't take kindly if he was late. He hurried along, bypassing two jewelry stores, a bridal shop, and an engraver, until he finally reached the entrance of the store he was looking for. Morgan and Sons Jewelers.

He reached inside his pocket and his fingers curled around the ring box. Forty years his parents had been married. It was a long time to commit to another person. He admired his parents' staying power. Caleb had learned long ago to hide his feelings from his family. He had been happy for Shelly and Gavin when they found their partners. Hell, he'd planned their weddings for them. He'd stood up for his brother. He was godfather to Aimee, his sister's firstborn.

If he thought too hard, it would just make him depressed. An uncle, a brother, a best man, but never a father, a husband, a lover. Sometimes his life seemed so empty if he thought about it too deeply. Yes, he had friends, he had family, but there was still something missing. He should have found another profession, because every day it was brought home to him the very thing he yearned to have for himself but could never seem to find.

Well, so be it. He opened the glass door of the store and stepped inside. The place had the smell of fresh paint and new carpeting. From what he'd discovered, it had just moved into the mall not long ago. It certainly wasn't here the last time he'd stopped by the mall, so it was the first time he'd been inside this particular jewelry store. He strolled along the counters, studying the pristine displays. Looked like reasonable prices on those items that

were marked. He made a point of checking out the wedding sets and diamonds engagement rings. Very nice.

His father had been very specific about having Caleb's mother's ring cleaned and reset at this particular store. It was at Morgan's that his dad had purchased the ring, and he didn't want anyone else touching it but a Morgan.

"See if Old Man Morgan is still around," his father had said. "It was him who designed the setting and saw to the cut of the diamond for me. I don't want anyone else touching it."

"What if he's not around, Dad?" Caleb's father could be so stubborn sometimes. Once he got something in his head, there was no changing it.

"You'll find him."

Caleb was glad that he had finally discovered where Morgan had moved his shop to. He had relocated from the older section of town, in an area that no longer was as safe as it once had been, into the large mall on the outskirts of the city. It had to offer better exposure and traffic for the place.

"Can I help you?"

The deep, cultured voice took Caleb by surprised. He wheeled around to face the speaker. His heart almost stopped in his chest, and he felt that sharp pain again when he saw the man standing behind the counter. It seemed like the Fates had something planned for him because the man facing him was the very same gorgeous guy Caleb had been drooling over at lunch. And had bumped into before leaving the hotel. It took Caleb a moment to find his voice.

"Y-yes, you can. At least I hope so. I'm looking for James Morgan, the owner. Is he here?"

The man behind the counter studied Caleb for a long moment and then slowly nodded his head. "Yes. I'm James Morgan."

“But you’re too young,” Caleb blurted out and felt like an ass right after the words erupted from his mouth. He cleared his throat. Of all times for him to act like a stuttering idiot. “I mean -- hell, I guess you must be his son.”

Just a hint of a smile on those perfect lips in acknowledgment of the observation. He looked like a man out of time -- sophisticated, elegant, and dashing in the impeccable Italian-cut suit. There was simply no mistaking the Dolce & Gabbana stamp in the sleek way it clung to his body. It fit the man.

Thick sable locks, side-parted, and combed neatly. So thick. Intense dark eyes, just the shadow of a pencil mustache on his upper lip, a dusting of dark whiskers on his strong jaw.

But there was so much more to James Morgan, the younger. Caleb had an inkling that a rebel lurked beneath that calm, collected exterior. Maybe it was the flawless diamond stud, or maybe the sneakers he’d seen on his feet at the hotel. Yes, definitely much more to his classy veneer than met the eye.

Caleb’s hands curled into fists before he did something he shouldn’t. Or touched something that would get him in trouble. Like the man behind the counter. He so wanted to peel back those layers of sophistication and find out what lay beneath. He wanted to reach out to cup that strong jaw and stroke his fingers over the length of that sexy, shadowed, sensual upper lip. To trace those lovely, strong cheekbones, to lean over the damned counter and --

“Yes, I’m James, the third actually. My father is retired, or rather, semiretired. Is there something I can do for you?”

*Oh my God, is there ever.* Caleb could feel his cock surging for attention against the front of his navy striped trousers. Just looking at James Morgan the third almost had him coming in his pants right there. He could feel the hot color rising along his neck and flooding his face. He had to get hold of his emotions before he made a complete ass of himself.

Fumbling, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the small jeweler's box containing his mother's engagement ring and the drawing. "I-I'm on an errand for my father." He thrust the box and piece of paper toward James. "My dad wants this reset for my mother. The design he wants is on the paper. Before Valentine's Day. It's her original engagement ring. Your father -- well, I guess it's your father -- cut and set it for him." His words were tripping over each other. He had to get a grip. He inhaled deeply and then let the breath out slowly. He grinned at James. "Sorry." Taking another deep, calming breath, he flipped open the cover of the box. Then he slid a glance to James.

The man was a sphinx. Caleb couldn't decipher the look on his face. Blank. Intense, dark eyes, but a politely interested look on his face as he reached out to take the ring. Then he glanced at the drawing on the graph paper. He nodded.

"My father is retired. But I believe we can get this done for you. You need it by Valentine's Day?"

"Yeah. But you'll do it, right? Dad said he wanted it to be a Morgan, not just somebody who won't know what they're doing." He looked at James. The heat of embarrassment again flooded his face. "Sorry. I mean I'm sure you hire some very good people, but my father was very specific." For some reason, he wanted to call him Jimmy, just to see if he could get that polite look off his face.

The problem was that Caleb wasn't good at making the first move. And he had no idea whatsoever if Jimmy was gay or not. He watched as James Morgan carefully pulled out an invoice from beneath the counter and wrote up the order.

Caleb couldn't help studying his hands, his long, slender fingers wrapped around the gold pen he'd pulled from his inside pocket.

"Your father's name?" He looked up at Caleb, and the look in his eyes had Caleb's cock pressing for attention.

“Why don’t you put it under my name? I’ll be the one picking it up. My dad doesn’t come into the city much anymore. He’s retired.” Was he explaining too much?

James did smile then, and when he did that, those tiny little lines around his eyes deepened the intense bronze color of his irises. The smile softened his face. “Yes, my father retired three years ago. It’s hard to get them to ease off.”

The connection he felt just at that moment exuded a wonderful sensation of warm and fuzzy. “Yeah. Exactly.” He liked the man’s smile.

“So, your name?”

God, he’d lost his train of thought there for a minute and had forgotten why he was here. “Caleb. Caleb Wilson.” He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out one of his business cards. He pulled out the black bargain-basement pen from his pocket and wrote his private cell number on the back of the card. Don’t know if you don’t try. And he was going to take any opportunity he could to connect with this man.

He set the card down on the glass counter. “My card. On the front is my business phone where you can usually find me.” He flipped the card over. “My personal cell is on the back. It’s my private number.” A little emphasis there couldn’t hurt.

There was a moment when James looked up at Caleb, right into his eyes, when it seemed like the world stopped turning. Caleb’s stomach somersaulted. A couple more inches and lips would collide. James reached for the card and their fingertips brushed against each other. It sent a shuddering thrill through Caleb, a rush of sexual heat that almost sent him to his knees. He caught a whiff of expensive cologne. Nothing too strong, but definitely enticing.

James slid the card back across the counter and then straightened away. The wash of disappointment spilled over Caleb. He heard the electronic *ding* of the door sound as someone else entered the store. Damn.

James was again all business. "I'll just clip your card to the invoice. We'll call when the ring is ready." He glanced down at the card and then his gaze again turned to Caleb. "Enduring Vows."

"Yeah, you know, wedding planner. I also help organize commitment ceremonies." He had to tack that on, pushing for an opening. Anything that might indicate James was interested.

Nothing. The man was closed up tight and that polite mask again settled over his face. The smile he gave Caleb was cool and impersonal. "I'll keep that in mind. Of course, we have quite a number of couples who come through here who might be interested in your services."

That wasn't exactly what Caleb was hoping for, but he guessed he would settle for the crumb. Never knew what it might lead to. "That would be great. I'd appreciate the referral."

"Sir, could you please help me with these ruby and diamond rings? There's one I'm particularly interested in seeing."

Caleb wished the woman away. But that was unlikely to happen.

"Well then, I guess you'll call when it's ready?"

"Yes, I will. I don't see any problem in getting the ring done on time. The setting shouldn't be a problem."

"Yeah, okay then, I guess I'll see you later." Caleb wheeled around and left the store, equal parts excited and disappointed. He always had been an optimist, and James had his phone number. He stopped walking for a minute and pulled out his cell phone. A whoosh of breath left his lungs. Great, the battery looked good. He did not want to have a dead cell phone when he was potentially going to receive the most important call of his life. Any time now. Briskly, he made his way out of the mall, confident that one way or the other he would be seeing James Morgan the third again very soon.

### Chapter Three

“Did you see the way he dresses? He’s a fag. Mark my words.”

James carefully laid the Wilson ring along with the invoice down on the work desk in the back room. He stared at the business card attached to the front. He swore he wasn’t going to let his father get to him.

“You don’t know that, Father. And why does it matter, anyway?” He turned around to look at the old man, who was sitting in a straight-backed wooden chair at the other worktable, magnifying glasses on, bent over the pieces of a watch. At least he only came into the store three afternoons a week, not like the full six that he used to just after he had officially “retired.”

“I can do that. I’m quite competent at watch repair,” James pointed out.

“Ben’s a friend of mine. I promised him I’d do it myself.”

“You don’t have to come in. You should take a trip, visit someplace you’d enjoy seeing. Make friends.”

“Any friend of mine is already dead. Or has a foot in the grave. I’ve seen as much as I want of the world. More than I want to see.” Suddenly, he looked up at Jim. “So, when are

you getting married? I want grandchildren. I'm still waiting. It's long past time to do your duty."

James turned away. "I haven't found the right woman." God, he hated lying to his father. But he didn't have a choice. He thought about the stunning man who had left the shop an hour earlier. He hadn't let on, but he remembered him. The incident at the hotel. Caleb Wilson did things to him. He wasn't James's usual type, but it didn't seem to matter. There was something about him. The way he dressed, the vulnerability in his eyes, the shy grin. James had all he could do not to proposition him right there in the main showroom. That would have been great, wouldn't it? God, what would his father have thought then? He didn't even want to think about it.

"Well, you better get going. I'm not going to be around forever, you know. You're thirty-seven. You're the last to carry on my line."

"Yes, I know, Father. I know." The weight was heavy on James's shoulders. Guilt. Duty. Honor thy father. God, he was going to burn in hell for the lies he told. For the life he led. There were days when the self-loathing, more than the deceit and the failure to be the man his father wanted him to be, made it difficult to even put one foot in front of the other.

Every time he picked up that phone, made that call, and went to that hotel once a week, he knew he dug his hole deeper. Why couldn't he just be honest? Why couldn't he tell his father the truth? There would be no grandchildren. He simply couldn't carry the lie any further than it already was.

Was being gay the sin his father always made him feel like it was? When he was in the arms of another man, it didn't feel wrong. The strong attraction he felt for Caleb Wilson felt different from anything he'd felt before. But he dare not do it -- not after what had happened. Not after the way he'd betrayed his father. Yes, he'd been young, but he should have known. He shouldn't have let it happen.

"What about that Gifford girl? You like her well enough."



James shook his head. His father would never give up. “Margot is a friend, nothing more. She has her sights set on larger fish than me.”

“Doesn’t she know a good catch when she sees one? She should know what she’s missing.”

Oh, she knew well enough. That’s why she always called James to escort her when she wanted to go out. He was safe, and she knew it. He was the one person who wouldn’t mind her flirtatious streak. And there had been more than one night when he went home alone after she found something more to her taste.

“Please, just let it go for now. It’s been a long day. Why don’t you let me take you home?” The night manager would be in soon, and then James was free to leave. Rick Dawson had been a good hire. He knew his way around the gemstones and was rather adept with on-the-spot watch repairs. It was a relief to be able to count on him to cover the nights and weekends when necessary. Weekends especially were helpful when it required more than one person to handle the increased traffic. Jim had a woman who came in part-time during the day, but she didn’t possess the knowledge that Rick had.

“I don’t want to go home yet,” his father whined as he waved toward the door. “You go on if you want to; I’ll get a taxi home.”

God, Jim hated when his father got like this. But then he’d become increasingly more difficult since his mother...died. Jim had been eleven, and his whole world had changed from that point on. His father never talked about his mother, her name wasn’t mentioned in the house, and there were no pictures of her to be found anywhere. Jim had managed to smuggle a couple out of the house. He didn’t know why he had. She’d abandoned both him and his father, so why did he care?

Maybe it was the guilt. At every turn, he betrayed his father. He owed him. He owed him a grandchild. He owed him a son who could make him happy. How many years had he spent trying to be the man his father wanted him to be? Jim even thought he might succeed.

Until the summer when he had turned twenty and had gone to Argentina to learn about the mining of diamonds from Rudolf Valotsky. Count Rudolf Valotsky, an old friend of Jim's father. How could he have known what would happen? The Morgans and the Valotskys had started their relationship generations ago. Rudolf and Jim's father had roomed together in college.

And so, when it came time for Jim to get a better handle on the family's business, who else would his father send his son to but Rudolf. Jim had always wondered if his father knew about Rudolf or had it been a closely guarded secret?

Count Valotsky had been a charismatic man. Suave and sophisticated at the age of forty-five when Jim met him, he'd seemed like a god to the young, impressionable man. To this day, it shocked Jim to realize how easily he'd been taken in. His own father had become so bitter after his mother's death in a plane crash that Jim had soaked up Valotsky's kindness like a sponge thirsty for water.

They had been flipping through some old journals the night it began. The journals encompassed the history of the Valotsky diamond mines. How the family had left Russia during the Russian Revolution and escaped to Argentina. James had been eager to learn everything he could about diamonds. And Count Valotsky's family.

They were sitting close, heads together, in Rudolf's study. It was late, the vodka particularly potent, the room hot, when Jim felt Rudolf's hand on his thigh.

What surprised him was that he wasn't repulsed by the touch. His stomach had tightened like someone had used a vise on it. But it was the surging of his cock in response to the caress that truly took him by surprise. The hand had slid upward, slowly stroking across his responsive flesh.

He had turned to look into Valotsky's eyes, shocked and a little bit scared. Not of Valotsky -- of his own response.

“Have you ever been with a man?” Rudolf asked softly. His hand moved to cup James’s thick erection. The grip was sure, the strokes exciting. His eyelids fluttered.

“N-no.” James could hardly find his voice to respond.

And then Rudolf’s mouth was pressed against James’s lips. About to say something, his mouth was open, and Rudolf’s tongue easily slipped inside, making James’s toes curl.

He didn’t know how it had happened, but the next thing he knew they were on the rug, the chair tipped over, and Rudolf was over him, rubbing against him, and the fire in James’s blood had raged. His hands were inside Rudolf’s shirt, stroking over his bare back, fingers tracing along his spine.

It was unexpected, but at the time, it had seemed right. Rudolf had seduced him easily. Completely. And James had slipped into the role of the count’s young lover -- like a pup who lapped at the heels of his master.

The first time that Rudolf had taken him had hurt. Burning a hole deep inside him. Jim hadn’t said no; he didn’t want him to stop. He had been young, and he wanted to give Rudolf everything he asked of him. Count Valotsky had shown Jim a different world, and it was a place he eventually had learned to take pleasure in. That night had only been the beginning.

There were nights of drugging passion at the villa. In the offices of the mine. Even one time deep below the earth. There were nights when he had been bound, nights when pain and pleasure mingled. Afternoons when Rudolf had used the crop on his ass until the stripes throbbed hot.

It still made him cringe when he remembered crawling on hands and knees across the floor to the man he thought he’d been in love with. God, he’d licked the man’s boots.

Jim’s skin crawled as he remembered every moment of those summer months with Valotsky. Vivid and painful. Right up until the moment when he’d learned of the savage betrayal. The guilt of those weeks rode him all the way back to the States to his father’s

house. And he had sworn to never let his father see the true black nature of the man he had sired.

Guilt kept him silent. Painful need drove him to the hotel room for anonymous sex. The undeniable need to feel a man's arms around him. Need for human contact. For an hour once a week, he could rip away the veneer of the perfect son, the perfect man his father wanted him to be.

He knew the artifice was killing him. The desire to confess to his father about Valotsky. And the things he had learned in Argentina. But it was his choice all these years to carry the burden on his shoulders. His father didn't deserve to learn that it was more than his wife who could bring dishonor to the Morgan name. That was never going to happen, even if it killed him.

"Did you hear what I said, James?"

Jim shook himself out of his reverie and turned to look at his father, who was stooped over the worktable, hand gnarled with arthritis, white hair thinning, body frail.

"I'm sorry, no. I was thinking about something."

"Foolish dreamer. You always have been." Slowly, he lifted from the chair. "Forget it then. Take me home and then go about your business." He began to gather up the small tools and pocketed the watch he'd been working on. He reached over and turned off the desk lamp.

Jim was exhausted. He rubbed a hand across his eyes. Suddenly, the vision of Caleb Wilson entered his mind, a bright burst of color and light. It didn't make sense. Why was he drawn to the man? He certainly wasn't his type. And yet, he couldn't get him out of his mind.

Once he dropped his father off at home, he'd head over to the athletic club and work off some of this tension. He should have done that this afternoon with the good-looking blond. It usually worked, at least for a few days.

After his return from Argentina, James had sworn he would never get involved with another man. He would never allow himself to be duped again. So he paid for his sex. Cut-and-dried, no strings attached. It had worked. Up until now. Until a wedding planner had bumped into him that afternoon -- a poet who seemed about to turn Jim's whole world upside down.

He stepped across the room to help his father with his coat.

"I can do it myself," he grumbled, shoving Jim away. He waited on the other side of the room, watching his father try to situate his black wool coat.

Caleb Wilson was something he could not let happen.

## Chapter Four

Caleb mumbled to himself as he walked through the doors of the health club. This branch was across town from the one he usually went to. Unfortunately, his usual place was now closed for repairs. Which sucked. He wasn't one to worship exercise, but it did pay to at least stay toned, considering all the running around he had to do.

The meeting with Taylor Huffington could have gone better. Madam Huffington was totally displeased with the florist, and she expected Caleb to fix it. In person. Just because the flowers she wanted were not in season did not mean that her daughter's wedding would do without. Whatever the cost, she wanted the lilies shipped in from Germany if need be. But she would have them in the arrangement. Her daughter wanted them, and therefore, she would have them.

His shoulders ached after that session -- first with Taylor and then with the florist who was stubborn as a hundred-year-old tree stump. Ten o'clock at night was not his favorite time to work out. But the muscles in his shoulders screamed for attention, so he'd trekked across town to the one branch of the health club that had a masseur on staff. Thinking that maybe a long, hot shower at home would have been just as good, he walked up to the front desk.

“Hi,” he said to the young woman with the thick blonde ponytail and dressed in the skimpy exercise outfit. “I usually go to the club on Chestnut Street, but they’re closed right now. Is your masseur still around?”

She glanced down at his membership card and then handed it back to him. “I’m sorry, Danny came down sick this afternoon and he had to go home early. That flu is really knocking people flat, you know?”

Shit. All this way for nothing. As long as he was here, he might as well use the facilities. At least it was open twenty-four hours, so it wouldn’t be a complete loss.

“That’s too bad. Can you point me in the direction of the men’s locker room? Your layout seems to be different than the one I usually go to. Guess I might as well get a workout as long as I’m here.”

“Sure thing.” She wrote a number down on a piece of paper and handed it to him. “Here’s the combination to the locker room. Your card won’t work here, so you’ll have to key in the number. Just yell if you have any problems. Someone should be close by to help you out. Just walk straight down the hall and then turn right. You’ll see the door to the locker room right in front of you.”

He picked up the scrap of paper with the combination and walked toward the back of the building. Once he got his stretching over with, he’d probably be more awake. That’s usually the way it happened.

This time of night there usually weren’t a lot of people around, which was fine with him. He wouldn’t have to wait too long for access to equipment. He tried to go at odd hours so he could get in and get out with the least amount of wasted time and frustration. He didn’t have to be anywhere special tonight, so he might just take his time in the steam room and let the soreness and tension ease their way out.

He changed into plaid shorts and a tangerine T-shirt, stuffed his clothes and personal items into a locker, and locked it with the combination lock he’d brought with him. After

warming up, he headed out of the locker room. As he entered the equipment room, he stopped dead.

It couldn't be.

But it was.

On the other side of the room, stripped down to shorts and dripping sweat, was the man of his dreams. James Morgan. The third. Damn, but he looked even better peeled down to moist, tight muscle. Now this was...unexpected. This was like having your every wish come true.

Nonchalant. Must act as though it's just an everyday occurrence being here at this club. Bullshit it was ordinary. This was Caleb's chance. But how to proceed was not an easy decision. Oh, but he looked good. Maybe too good. Caleb was glad his shorts were baggy because his hard-on would certainly have embarrassed him if he'd worn his jogging shorts. They were much too tight for this display of manly fitness. This was certainly not what he'd expected. But now what?

First, eye contact. He had to make the connection. Make him aware Caleb was here. Athletic clothing didn't exactly put Caleb to advantage. After all, these clothes were for comfort, not display. Damn, he was really going to have to rethink his exercise wardrobe if he was going to hook up at the health club.

As he started across the room, James set down the weights, picked up a white towel, and dragged it across his very impressive pecs. At the same time, he happened to glance up, and like lightning streaking across the sky, Caleb was jolted to a stop by the recognition he saw in James's eyes. Again, there was that moment of disconnection, as though the rest of the room went dark and only he and James stood in the spotlight, not another sound in the room. He was just too delicious.

A lock of dark hair fell across James's eyes. It was like watching a movie set to slow motion as James reached up to push it back. Then he slung the towel around his neck, and



much to Caleb's surprise, he sauntered across the room. Right toward Caleb. Caleb trembled with anticipation. His dick thickened; his balls tightened. He was ready, so damned ready.

"Caleb Wilson?" There was interest in James's eyes. Caleb couldn't mistake it. It wasn't just that he wanted to see it -- it was right there stamped on that beautiful Adonis face.

"Yeah. James Morgan, right?"

And then he smiled. And it was brilliant and white, and Caleb felt like melting right there. A puddle at his feet.

"Actually, you can call me Jim. People get confused with the James moniker. They tend to think of my father. I didn't know you worked out here."

"Well, no, not usually. My usual place is down for renovations. I heard there was a masseur at this one, but apparently he went home sick. Thought I'd check out the machines as long as I was here." He was stumbling over his words again. What was it about this man that had him stuttering like a schoolboy?

"Trouble with your back?"

"Uh, my shoulders give me grief every now and then, but I figure a short workout will help with some of the kinks."

The look in Jim's eyes sent a bolt of lightning right through Caleb. Jim's gaze flickered for just a second, searching the room before coming back to settle on Caleb.

"I might be able to help. I've had a bit of experience."

Caleb's heart seemed to stutter, and his stomach tightened.

His cock throbbed, pushing to full attention. Had he heard what he'd thought he heard? Jim offering to give him a massage? He had to be dreaming.

"Hey, I don't want to take up your time. It's getting pretty late."

There was nothing in Jim's expression to indicate he wanted to do anything other than ease Caleb's aching muscles. Except in his eyes. The hungry look of a wolf that seemed to say he wanted to eat Caleb up. It was the subtext beneath the offer of a massage.

*Let's have sex.*

All Caleb had to answer was --

“Yes. That would be great. But I don't want to interrupt your workout.”

The slow smile that came to Jim's lips almost had Caleb gasping for breath. Jim's expression seemed to lighten, as though it came from some inner place.

“Don't worry about it. I'm done. Come on. Danny won't mind if we use the facility. And it will give us some privacy.”

Oh, Caleb liked the sound of that. Privacy and a flat surface. Yum.

“You sure it won't get you into trouble?”

“Not likely, since I'm part owner of the club.”

That caught Caleb by surprise. “You own it?”

“Well, one of the family companies does.”

“I thought you were into gemstones.”

“That's one branch of the business. Come on.”

Caleb was definitely awestruck by the man. He was also curious. Was he gay? Or was he straight and just wanting a little gay action? Caleb guessed he would find out soon enough.

Jim stopped at his locker and pulled out a small black leather bag before heading toward the back of the locker room to another door. He pulled a card from the bag and swiped it through the electronic reader. He opened the door, and Caleb found it led to what appeared to be a private entrance. The next door they came to had the word “MASSEUR” painted on it. Using the key card, he opened the door and stepped inside. He turned to look at Caleb.

“Having second thoughts?”

Definitely not. Caleb stepped in after him, and Jim shut the door behind him. Caleb noticed the table in the center of the room was draped with several white towels. The room looked neat, with shelves on one side and white towels stacked in a cupboard next to them. There were two chairs on the opposite side of the room, and a sink set into the opposite wall.

James walked over to the curtained wall and pulled back the drapes to reveal glass sliding doors that led to another tiled room beyond.

“Maybe you’d like to try out the private Jacuzzi first?”

“This isn’t all included in the regular club membership, is it?”

“It’s part of the executive package. Only executive members have a key card that grants them access to this area.”

“I’m not an executive member.” Caleb pointed out the obvious.

“But I am. What shall it be? Would you like to try out the Jacuzzi, loosen up a bit first? Or straight to a massage?”

“I-I didn’t bring my swim trunks in.”

Jim slid the doors open and walked into the other room. When he got to the edge of the Jacuzzi, he dropped the black bag and then dropped his own shorts. He looked over his shoulder at Caleb and then stepped into the water.

What was a man to do? He found it hard to move as he looked at the man who was now naked. Broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist. An ass to die for. Thighs bulging with ropy muscle. Caleb wished he’d turn around. He wanted to know if he was as turned on by the situation as Caleb was. Or would Caleb embarrass himself once he shucked his shorts and Jim saw exactly how aroused Caleb was?

“Come on,” Jim said. He stepped farther into the water, waded to the other side, and then turned to face Caleb.

Caleb couldn’t help sliding a look over the Adonis who waited for him to join him in the water. Cock rigid, bobbing stiff and ready against a hard, flat abdomen. Caleb noticed he

was shaved, not a speck of hair decorating his groin, leaving the man's dick cleanly displayed, and the sheen of smooth, bare flesh was so enticing.

Caleb's feet seemed to have a life of their own as he walked toward the Jacuzzi, his eyes fastened to the prick shooting up between Jim's legs. He couldn't help it. His gaze finally lifted as he reached the edge of the oval pool. Jim's eyes were fastened to Caleb. They were midnight black, and the intense look pierced and burned Caleb.

Jim waded toward Caleb. Caleb couldn't seem to move. Even his breath was locked inside his chest. And then Jim stepped out of the water and fastened his hands at Caleb's waist. He hooked his thumbs inside the waistband and stroked across Caleb's sensitive hip bones. A shudder ran through Caleb. The touch was exquisite.

Jim looked up at him. "Do you like that?"

"More than you know," Caleb answered.

Jim pushed the shorts down over Caleb's hips. They pooled around his feet, but he didn't notice because Jim's hands were cupping his cheeks, kneading the flesh with his fingers. A moan erupted from him as he was forced closer to Jim.

He could smell the heady scent of the man. Subtle, sophisticated cologne that wafted over him mixed with male sweat. Jim parted Caleb's cheeks and traced a finger along his crack. He swept his finger over Caleb's anus without penetrating, teasing Caleb's flesh, burning him up.

His cock pressed against James, a heady ache of need spinning through him as Jim continued to tease along his crack. With his other hand, he cupped Caleb's balls. Squeeze and release until Caleb was dizzy with need.

Suddenly, Jim released him and stepped back into the water. Caleb couldn't read the expression on his face. Inscrutable and so intriguing. He stepped out of his shorts and followed Jim into the swirling, warm water.

Jim sat down on a ledge on the other side of the pool. His eyes followed Caleb, but he didn't say anything. It made Caleb nervous, and still feeling the effects of Jim's hands on him, he plopped down where he stood.

Jim dropped his head back and closed his eyes.

"This is the best way to end the day. It really helps to work out some of that tension, you know?"

Caleb stared at him for a long time, trying to figure the man out. He wasn't easy to read, that was for sure.

"Yeah, I guess so. I don't get to the gym as much as I should."

Jim raised his head to look at Caleb. Caleb's body temperature peaked beneath that dark look. "You've got a great body. You're different than I expected."

"Different? In what way?"

"When I first met you, I thought you had sensitive eyes. You feel things, don't you, Caleb? You feel them deeply. Is that why you wear the clothes you do? All those bright colors. Or is that all about professional image?"

"I could ask the same of you. Your suits make you look...untouchable. Sleek and sophisticated. Maybe *remote* is the word I'm looking for. But I have to wonder. What are you trying to hide beneath all that sophistication? I like what I'm seeing, but I think you hide something of yourself too."

Suddenly, Jim was across the pool and pressing Caleb back against the rim. His mouth fastened to Caleb's open lips, his tongue delving deep inside, leaving Caleb breathless. He felt the hard body against his own.

It was like a twister had lifted him, and he was caught in its eye as Jim plundered his mouth, his hands pressed to Caleb's back, digging into his flesh.

Caleb's eyelids fluttered closed as he let Jim feed from him. His cock brushed against Jim's, and he shuddered with the ache of pleasure that shot through him. Jim broke the kiss and pulled away once again, leaving Caleb breathless.

"I think we should get to that massage."

It wasn't so much the words as the actions that caused Caleb some consternation. Jim was already out of the pool and wrapping a white towel around his waist. The man ran hot and cold, and Caleb couldn't begin to figure him out. Something told him Jim was playing him. And he wished he knew what game they were supposed to be engaged in.

Slowly, he rose up from the water and stepped out of the Jacuzzi. Grabbing a towel, he followed Jim back through the sliding glass doors, unsure of what to expect next. What he did know was that his body was raging out of control with the desire for sex with this man.

## Chapter Five

“What are you playing at? I think I better go.”

Jim dropped the bag onto the counter and whirled around to look at Caleb. The problem was, Jim couldn't get a solid handle on the emotions that were racing through him right now. He'd kissed him. Dammit, what was he thinking? He never kissed. Ever. This wasn't like the other men he'd had. Every time he looked at Caleb Wilson, something deeper tugged at him. He wanted to fuck the man, but something kept stopping him, telling him the minute he did, he'd be in way over his head. And that was something he couldn't afford to do.

“Suit yourself.” Jim shrugged. “But I'll be happy to give you that massage before you leave. I can see you're still pretty tense.”

He watched Caleb shake his head. He also knew he was the one who was probably making the tension worse, but he couldn't help himself. Caleb's lips had tasted wonderful. His body warm and responsive.

A deep sigh escaped Caleb and then he was climbing onto the table, and Jim released a breath. He wanted Caleb to stay; he wanted him to leave. He didn't know what he wanted. He shouldn't want this poet. He was dangerous.

Jim picked up his black bag and unzipped it. He pulled out the oil. Then he released the damp towel from around his hips and let it drop to the floor before he walked over to the table. He should not be doing this.

He reached for the towel hooked around Caleb's waist, tugged it free, and tossed it to the other side of the room. He felt the man tense beneath his hands. He dug into the muscles of Caleb's back, feeling the tightness.

He reached for the bottle of oil and dribbled some of the oil over Caleb's shoulders. Visions of Rudolf rose up before his eyes, and he tried to shove them away. He forced himself to concentrate on the man on the table, forcing the dark, guilty images of his past out of sight into the deepest hidden corner of his mind, where they belonged. Moments like this were all that he allowed himself. He would not let Rudolf's memory, or duty to his father, spoil it. It's all that kept him sane.

In an hour, Caleb Wilson would walk out that door, and that would be the end of this sweet interlude. But for now, the poet had placed himself in Jim's hands, and he planned to make the most of it. Maybe then he would get this poet out of his system and be done with it.

"Mmmm, that feels great." Caleb groaned.

Jim kneaded the supple muscles, moving ever downward, along Caleb's spine, his fingers digging into the flesh at his hips, moving lower still to the delectable curve of Caleb's ass. He dribbled more oil. Separating Caleb's cheeks with his hand, James tipped the bottle and a thin line of oil spilled along Caleb's crack. He felt the stillness of the man on the table.

"Such a nice ass you have, Caleb." He sank an oiled finger into his anus. "And so damned tight." He wiggled his finger to deepen the penetration and passed the tight ring of muscle. "Is this good for you? Is it what you wanted?"

All he caught was a deep, guttural groan from Caleb. He leaned closer. "Do you want me to stop?"



“No,” Caleb answered, his voice low and tight. “Don’t stop.”

Jim pressed in again and then pulled out. Did it again and again, until Caleb was humping against his hand, rising up off the table until the point where Jim had a good sense that he knew the man was close to coming. Then Jim withdrew his finger. One last enticing track with his finger between Caleb’s cheeks and he started to knead his thighs, moving down his legs. Slowly, taking his time, knowing that Caleb was at the edge, needy for release, but Jim didn’t want him to come yet.

He worked his way down Caleb’s legs, traveling down to his feet, kneading the soles, and each toe. Moving to his other leg, he worked his way back up Caleb’s body. Hands slick with fragrant oil, he dipped between Caleb’s cheeks once again, enjoying the feel of his tight ass. This time, adding a second finger to the first. Oh, God, the man was delicious.

Almost immediately, Caleb began moving against his fingers, pressing back, trying to force Jim to go faster. Deeper. Jim removed his fingers and slapped Caleb on the ass.

“Slow down, poet. Don’t rush it.”

“I can’t take much more of this.”

“Oh, yes you can.” Jim clamped his hands to Caleb’s hips. “Turn over for me, baby.” Jim helped him turn over onto his back. He spread his legs slightly, ran his hands along Caleb’s inner thighs, cupping his balls, squeezing, and then releasing the tightly drawn-up sac.

Caleb’s cock was thick and stiff. Purple, plumed head engorged, looking hot and ready. Veins stood out against rigid, hard flesh. Jim wrapped his fingers around the tempting prick, riding his hand up and down the rock-hard shaft. He reached for his bag and pulled out a condom. It wasn’t long before the rod was sheathed in latex, and it was James’s mouth and tongue sliding over the now-slick penis.

Caleb’s hips drove up, slapped back against the table, and surged upward again and again as Jim sucked him deep. Caleb’s hands gripped the sides of the table, his legs angled to give him leverage. Jim sucked, swirled his tongue over the broad tip. He cupped Caleb’s balls.

Within seconds, Caleb was coming, the shout erupting from deep within him. Jim saw the muscles of his thighs flex as he dug into the table with his feet and lifted his hips in an attempt to bury his cock down Jim's throat.

Quickly, Jim fastened his hands onto Caleb's hips, forcing them back down to the table. Finally, he lifted his head and Caleb's softening penis slipped from between his lips. Caleb dropped his head back onto the table, gasping for breath.

Jim wanted more. Definitely more than he should from this man. After a moment, he stepped away from the table. Grabbing a towel from the rack, he tossed it to Caleb. "It's getting late. I think we're done." Most of the men he had sex with here at the club were more than happy to be on their way after a session with Jim. Most of them were straight.

He glanced up at Caleb. Everything about this was different. Hadn't he known it when he invited Caleb back here? Known that he shouldn't have done it? Known that this was one man who would expect more than Jim could give?

Caleb's eyes were wide, questioning, and then he turned to getting himself cleaned up. Jim watched in silence as he stalked out to the Jacuzzi to retrieve his shorts. Jim just watched as Caleb tugged them up over his sweet ass.

He wanted to ask him to stay. Instead, Jim whirled away and busied himself with putting the cap back on the oil and shoving it into his black case. There were other things inside that black case that he could have used on Caleb. Oils that would have heightened his excitement even more, left him wanting, kept him hovering on the edge for hours after they parted. Toys that controlled, that pleased, that could bind Caleb to Jim. That could have him on his knees.

Again, Jim pushed the thought away -- back into the shadowy corner of his mind -- and locked it away. He glanced up at Caleb, who stood staring at him. As though waiting for something more.

“I’ll call you,” Jim finally blurted out. He shouldn’t raise his hopes, but he couldn’t help himself.

“Yeah, sure. Well, I guess, I’ll see you then. Thanks for the...massage.”

Jim shrugged. “Sure thing.”

It looked like Caleb was going to say something else, but then he turned and walked out of the room, and Jim breathed a sigh of relief. Thank God he hadn’t caused a scene. He had looked hurt, but at least he’d left it alone.

So why did James feel like such a heel? Well, more so than usual at any rate.

He straightened the room, dressed in the locker room, and left the club. It was well after midnight by the time he got back to his apartment.

He dropped his gym bag and stood in the darkened apartment. He was surrounded by silence. No pets, no man, no real friends. He’d never really cultivated them, always afraid they’d see too much, or that his father would somehow discover through his friends that he was gay and not the heterosexual son he had pinned all his hopes on.

Caleb Wilson was a man of a different breed. One that James wasn’t accustomed to. The hour at the gym shouldn’t still be riding him. It should be long gone from his memory, as was the usual case with the anonymous sex he’d had in the past. They always left satisfied.

Why now? Why this man? So different from any of the others from his past.

He stared off through the darkness as though ripping aside taboo curtains into his past. Ones that should stay closed.

*What do you want, Jim Morgan? To spend the rest of your life alone? Paying for your sins over and over again?*

That’s exactly what he’d done up until this point. Trying to be the son his father deserved, not the gay son who’d betrayed his father by having a sexual relationship with his father’s friend. And that wasn’t even the worst of it.

He jammed his hand against the light fixture on the wall and drenched the room in cold, stark light. He gazed around the apartment. There was not a bit of himself in this place. Nothing that spoke of James Morgan. It could have been anyone's apartment. It was a prop for the man he was supposed to be.

*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

Had his father known the depth of hate and desire for revenge burning inside Count Rudolf Valotsky? Would he have sent Jim to him if he had realized the depths the man would go to to gain revenge?

How could Jim, knowing that the family's jewelry business was so deeply intertwined with the Valotsky family's mines in Argentina, go to his father with the truth? How could he be the one responsible for destroying the generations-old family ties?

Right up to the day of his death in an automobile accident five years ago, Rudolf had played James like a marionette with strings, holding their relationship over his head to make Jim do his bidding. And Jim had agreed to do anything in order for his father never to discover the truth, knowing it would destroy him.

James the second lived in a world of tradition, responsibility, and duty. He lived and breathed for the family businesses. His dedication was to the gemstone trade. The Valotskys and the Morgans were closely intertwined, a relationship built in Jim's great-grandfather's days when the gemstone business had first been conceived. His great-grandfather had learned to cut stones from a Valotsky, just as Jim's father had done, and finally Jim himself. It was tradition that a Morgan apprenticed at the mines to learn the business from the ground up. And Jim had been no exception.

Rudolf had been the exception. A smooth-talking Argentinean who had a young man's head spinning almost before he stepped off the plane. A dangerous, dark-haired, dark-eyed man who talked to Jim not just about the mines and diamond cutting but also about sex. He introduced him to beautiful, decadent women and watched Jim like a hawk, choreographing

every move. But it wasn't until that first night when Rudolf orchestrated a threesome for Jim with a couple Rudolf was acquainted with, while the older man watched, that Jim really learned to crave the touch of another man. In the heat of passion, the man had allowed Jim to fuck him, and it had been the most delicious introduction to male-on-male sex he could have imagined.

He'd thought it was just the heat of passion that had caused it, but it wasn't. After that night, he'd yearned for the touch of the men more than the women. It had been his downfall with Valotsky. Because when Rudolf touched him that first time, Jim had already been primed to surrender to his touch. At that point, the walls to male passion had already crumbled.

He couldn't take it back. One part of him had discovered what and who he was. But it was a part of himself that he could never show to his father. His mother had already shattered him once. Jim couldn't add a second disillusionment to that tragedy.

In one sense, Valotsky had opened Jim's eyes to stunning possibilities, and in another, he'd ripped it all away. He was a monster, a manipulator, and Jim couldn't be sorry he was dead. His father had gone to Argentina for the funeral. It seemed Valotsky had a daughter who would carry on the tradition of the family. Jim shouldn't be surprised. Attending the funeral was one thing Jim couldn't bring himself to do. Instead, he stayed behind to manage the shop. But at least it had felt as though, with Valotsky's death, one set of burdens had been lifted from his shoulders. To that end, he was free.

Valotsky had put Jim off commitment and relationships a long time ago. He would never put himself in a position where he could be used and manipulated against everything his father and their family stood for. Duty to his father and the generations-old business had nailed the coffin of his life closed.

This room -- this apartment -- was as empty as he was inside. The trimmings of a life were all he had. Controlled and remote.

A man like Caleb Wilson was not a part of his plan. It shouldn't hurt as much as it did. He could still feel Caleb's warm flesh. His flamboyant clothes made Jim smile. He felt warm when he thought of Caleb, and that was dangerous for a man like Jim. Too different. Too tempting.

Caleb seemed like a man comfortable with himself.

Jim hid from the world.

Caleb was spontaneous and full of life.

Jim felt flat and colorless.

Caleb had the heart and soul of a poet.

Jim had no heart. He couldn't afford one. He couldn't afford wanting a man like Caleb. The price was just too high.

## Chapter Six

“Caleb, we’re good. I don’t know what your problem is. Everything is moving slick as a pig in mud.”

Caleb turned to glare at his assistant, Gail. “Has the cake arrived? What about the flowers? Did they get it right this time?”

Gail held up a hand. “Will you stop? You’ve hired people to handle all of this. Good people. They know their jobs. You reviewed all the details; the problems are solved. The seamstress got here in time to mend that small tear in Miss Vincent’s gown. The candles are exactly what we ordered. The flowers are perfect. The minister has arrived. It’s a perfect day for a wedding. Even the champagne glasses arrived without one chipped glass.”

Caleb looked down at his clipboard, noting that every last item was checked off. Not even one notation he would have to follow up on after the wedding to ream out a vendor who hadn’t come through as promised.

He looked up to find Gail almost nose to nose with him. She reached out to straighten the yellow daisy in the lapel of his jacket. Then she brushed away at something on the buttery yellow silk scarf draped beneath his lapel and fluffed the burgundy silk handkerchief in his breast pocket.

“Relax, Caleb. I’ve never seen you this flustered before.”

“This one’s important, Gail. These people are influential. The guests are some of the most powerful in the city. For God’s sake, the governor is supposed to be attending. Nothing can go wrong.”

“And it won’t, Caleb. You are the master at these things. You make magic for these people. And it always goes splendidly.”

“The Greystone wedding was a complete disaster.”

“But that wasn’t your fault. The bride decided to elope with another man. There was nothing you could do about that.”

“And the Markhams? That one fell apart, and neither one of them was eloping.”

“That wasn’t your fault either, and you know it. Once the law was passed in California making marriage legal for gays, they weren’t going to waste a minute. The commitment ceremony you arranged would have been beautiful. They just didn’t want to wait two months. It wasn’t your fault they called from city hall and canceled. And then took off for parts unknown, leaving you with an unpaid bill.

“Well, it turned out they made the right decision. Look what happened with Prop 8. Jerks!”

“The Markhams?”

“No, they did what they had to. But it would have been nice if they’d paid the bill before taking off. I’m going to make one more circuit. I want to be certain everything is in place.”

“So you’re not going to tell me what your problem is? Is it a man?” Gail’s words halted him in his tracks with his hand on the kitchen door.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Gail. Not right now. Check on the orchestra for the reception, will you? Make sure they have the list that Mrs. Vincent prepared. And make sure the best man and the groom are sober. God, I can’t believe they arrived still drunk from last



night. Why the hell didn't they take those damn pills on the market now? Then at least they'd be sober."

"Lewis has it under control. He's got them corralled and he's pouring black coffee down their throats."

Caleb pushed open the door and headed down the corridor of the mansion toward the ballroom on the first floor where the ceremony would be held. He stood at the back of the room and checked off in his head all the things he expected to see.

It really wasn't the wedding that was causing him problems. It was the memory of the damn hot jeweler. Three weeks had gone by since the incident at the athletic club. He hadn't gone back. It would have looked too...needy. And that wasn't a position he wanted to be in. Jim had said he would call, but of course he hadn't. Of course, Caleb wasn't surprised.

The man was a sphinx, and Caleb was certain there was a lot the man kept locked up inside. A complicated relationship was not what Caleb was looking for. Not with all the baggage he had a feeling that James Morgan the third carried around with him.

Caleb had gotten past that when he graduated from high school. He'd always been the type of guy the other boys made fun of. It was one of the reasons he'd taken up weight lifting, even though he hated it, and, once in shape, kept himself fit. There simply had been too many fights under the bridge where he'd come away black and blue until he'd turned sixteen. That was when he had gotten himself a part-time job and joined the health club in the city twenty miles away from his small town. It had been worth every penny.

He supposed sometimes he carried his own baggage and kept it well hidden. But he didn't hide who he was, and he was certain that Jim Morgan was not out about his sexual preference for men.

Caleb wished he could forget the man. He was obviously more trouble than he was worth. It wasn't like he didn't have a full social life with any number of friends ready to hook him up with some nice man they'd met. So why did he keep fixating on the jeweler?

His attention turned to the guests who were just arriving. He glanced down at his watch and noted it was almost time for the ceremony to begin. No one had paged him with some dire emergency, his cell phone remained silent, no buzzing at his waist. He heard the string quartet as they prepared to begin. He was about to head out to the conservatory where the reception would take place to make one last circuit before going to check on the groom and then the bride.

He could just call to check on things, but he needed to be doing something. The activity helped to settle him. He turned to leave and almost bumped into someone.

“Sorry. I hope --” This was not happening again. He froze when he looked into a pair of ebony eyes that he remembered so well. His gaze shifted to the beautiful socialite on his arm and then back again to the handsome, closed face.

Jim Morgan escorted a woman who, clinging to him like a leech, pressed close to his navy blue Armani-clothed shoulder. Neat and impeccably dressed, a pristine white Egyptian cotton shirt and silk tie. Every hair in place, making Caleb want to run his fingers through the thick, honey-kissed chocolate locks.

Instead, his hand went to his own unruly hair.

“Excuse me.” He pushed past Jim, feeling the burn of a directed stare sear his back. This was not what he’d expected. Was Jim Morgan a straight guy just wanting to play gay for a night? Caleb was no longer certain what he believed. What he did know was that he couldn’t stay in the same room with the man. Not without voicing his desire, already pitched to a level that was eating him up with intense yearning. He refused to embarrass himself with his blatant need.

So why was it that forty-five minutes later, Caleb found himself watching the ceremony from the back of the room? But this time, his attention was not fastened on the happy couple standing before the minister. He’d forced himself not to be envious of those who had found their perfect match. Sometimes it felt kind of like “always a groomsman,

never a groom.” Never a husband, a significant other, a partner. Only buddies who needed human contact now and again. Friendships that went a step further, but never beyond.

As the minister said those final indelible words, Caleb glanced to where Jim and his date were seated. Or maybe she wasn’t just a date -- maybe she was his fiancée, or God forbid, maybe his wife. Caleb’s stomach roiled at the thought. One thing he’d always made certain of was that he never poached territory -- man or woman. Yes, he’d had sex with straight men, but never anyone who was taken. The thought that he might have actually done so made him sick to his stomach. And just then, Jim turned his head and his hawklike gaze landed on Caleb. Their eyes locked, and Caleb couldn’t look away, caught in a snare he couldn’t seem to break free of.

As those last words were said by the minister, the gorgeous blonde turned to look up at Jim, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. The connection was broken. That was it, Caleb wheeled around and strode away from the ballroom and headed back out to the conservatory. There must be some tragedy somewhere that required his presence.

How could he have gotten himself in so deep with Jim Morgan when he hardly even knew the man? Unfortunately, everything was in order in the conservatory. Tables laid out, waiters on hand, the band ready to play. Almost too perfect.

He trudged on back to the kitchen and stepped into the pantry for no good reason that he could think of. He walked back out and headed toward the linen closet on the other side of the hallway. Everything was in disarray, and he leaned down to pick up a stack of towels that had fallen to the floor. His memory shot back to the stack of white towels at the athletic club. His fingers curled into the stack that he’d just replaced on the shelf.

His life was a mess. But that night at the health club had been one of the best nights he’d had in a long time. It just wasn’t long enough.

“So this is where you’re hiding out.”

Caleb stiffened as he recognized the voice. Why him? Was there no place he could hide? He straightened his shoulders and turned to look at Jim.

“Just cleaning up. My staff has everything under control. Is there something I can help you with?”

“So you put this on? Organized everything?”

Caleb nodded. His hands gripped the towel until his fingers turned bloodless. He tried to ease the grip. Finally, he looked at Jim. The space in this closet was not nearly big enough, and Jim blocked his only way out.

“Why? Are you planning a wedding?” He had to ask. He needed to know where he stood. The diamond stud in Jim’s left ear flashed. Caleb felt like he was choking; the pain in his groin turned molten as he stared at the gorgeous man standing only a few feet away. He waited for his answer.

Jim’s expression was tight, not a hint of lightness. “No, I’m not planning a wedding.”

“That woman you’re with is pretty hot.”

“Margot? Is she? I guess so. She’s an old friend. When she’s at loose ends, she calls me.”

It felt like Caleb’s heart was going to burst. He swore he could hear it thundering in his chest. “I need to get something straight.”

“What’s that?” Stepping farther into the closet, Jim pulled the door closed behind him. The sounds of laughter and music, dishes clattering, were now all muted. The closet got smaller. Caleb’s voice died, and he felt the heat rush over him, burning him alive. He cleared his throat. What he wouldn’t do for something strong to give him courage right now.

“Are you gay or straight?” There. The question was out there.

Something flickered in Jim’s expression. “Let’s just say I don’t do relationships -- either way. I’m a one-night stand sort of guy.”

He was circuiting around the question, refusing to answer it directly. Caleb could only assume that if he was gay, he certainly wasn’t ready to admit it to Caleb.

“I see. Are you engaged? Seeing anyone?” He paused for a moment, afraid to wrap his tongue around the last question. “Married?”

Jim stepped closer. Now, Caleb could feel the heat, he could smell the light fragrance of his woody cologne. Manly. Intriguing.

“I just said I don’t do commitments. I don’t like strings.”

“You don’t like them, or you’re afraid of them?”

Again, something flickered in Jim’s eyes. Was he getting closer to the truth? The secret hidden beneath the ultraconservative facade?

Holding his breath, he waited for an answer. Afraid of what it might be. He didn’t do relationships. He liked anonymous. Then why was he here? Why had he come after Caleb?

And then the light in the linen closet went out, and suddenly firm lips claimed his and Caleb’s mind blanked out on anything beyond the man whose arms now surrounded him, pulling him close.

This was unexpected bliss.

## Chapter Seven

He knew what he should do. He knew what he shouldn't do. He shouldn't have followed Caleb into this small room. Jim should have ignored his presence entirely. But something wouldn't let him. He had followed because he couldn't do otherwise. The beauty of his poet had reeled him in. Plumage that thumbed its nose at conservative. Caleb wore passion on his sleeve, and James was so deprived of human connection in his life. So lonely. He'd never realized how lonely he was. Not until Caleb. And something told him that only this man could give him what he needed right now -- right this minute.

The only sound in the room was ragged breathing. He cupped Caleb's face and drew him close once again. He tasted him, lightly at first, sips from the passionflower. Nips at his full lower lip. He heard Caleb inhale sharply as Jim nibbled at his engorged flesh.

Jim licked along Caleb's lower lip. The other man's mouth was open, he panted, and Jim captured his breath, gulping at the taste of him.

He stroked his fingers through Caleb's silky locks and, fisting his hand into the thick mass, yanked Caleb's head back so he could have better access to his neck. He traced the strong line of his jaw, planting kisses and love bites down the column of his throat. Caleb moaned, and Jim tasted the deep vibration.

He yanked at Caleb's jacket, shoving it off his shoulders. He heard the whisper of a *thump* as it landed on the floor. The air was thick and hot; the smell of men and desire drenched the tiny room. He had to fuck this man, and he couldn't wait to be inside him.

"This isn't exactly the place for this," Caleb whispered breathlessly.

"It's exactly the right place," Jim said. He'd sure as hell done it in a lot stranger places.

He released Caleb's tie and dropped it to the floor. Then he began unbuttoning his shirt. It was good in the darkness, not a speck of light. To feel him, to touch him, to smell the man he was about to claim.

This was different, so much more arousing than any encounter before.

Caleb was kissing him back, thrusting his tongue into Jim's mouth, sucking at his breath. His hands pushed Jim's jacket off his shoulders, then his tie. Finding his way, brailing his body, exciting him in the pitch-black atmosphere. Their arms tangled as they rushed to remove shirts. The jangle of belts being unbuckled and zippers unzipping. Raspy breath, the lust was so thick and dense that it clung to their bodies, driving his arousal higher and higher. Jim reached into his pocket to drag out a condom and a packet of lubricant. With his lifestyle, it always paid to be prepared. Never had he been more pleased with this preparedness than right at this moment. He set the packets just on the edge of the shelf, where he'd be able to reach them quickly.

He let his trousers and underwear slide over his hips to hang around his thighs, and his cock sprang free. He spread his legs and anchored himself. Caleb's warm hand surrounded him, sliding up and down his length.

"I didn't come prepared for this," Caleb said.

"I did. Turn around." The words came out more as a growl, deep and intimate. He'd never felt as needy for a man as he did right at this moment.

He didn't wait for Caleb to do as he asked. He pushed him around to lean against the built-in towel shelf. He curled Caleb's fingers around the edge.

Loud laughter right outside the door stilled his hand as he was about to grasp the condom wrapper from the shelf. He realized the door to the room didn't have a lock and anyone could walk in on them. His cock painfully engorged at the chance they took. It would be quite a shock if someone he actually knew happened to open the door.

Maybe he wanted it to be someone he knew. It would at least end the subterfuge of hiding his true desires. He forced his thoughts away from that taboo avenue. He didn't want to hurt his father, but he had to have Caleb. And he had to have him now.

He sheathed his prick in record time and then grabbed the packet of lube. He ran a finger along Caleb's crack and circled over his anus. He warmed the packet between his hands and then tore it open. He pulled Caleb's hips back at an angle, kicked his legs wider apart, and squirted the lube into his crack.

Jim knew he should hurry, before they actually were discovered. But his poet's ass was so damn fine. He swirled a finger in the lube and pressed it into Caleb's hole. Caleb let out a whoosh of breath as Jim buried his finger deep into Caleb's anus.

Caleb began to thrust back against his fingers, and he knew he was ready. Jim centered his cock at his lover's opening and pressed inward until the thick head popped past the anal ring.

"Damn you feel good," he whispered against Caleb's ear, then nipped his lobe.

"Someone could come in here at any moment. I'd say both our reputations would be mud."

Then he gasped as Jim pressed deeper into his channel.

"How long's it been since you've had a cock up your ass?"

Caleb thrust back, burying Jim's cock to the hilt. "What the fuck do you care? I haven't heard from you in three weeks. We wouldn't be here now if we hadn't just happened to be in the same place at the same time."



Jim ground himself against Caleb, pulled out, and surged inward again. Damn, this was heaven. Honestly, right at this moment, he didn't care if anyone opened that door and saw him fucking Caleb. It wouldn't have stopped him.

"I don't have explanations for you. But you have the best ass I've had in a long time. God, I could fuck you for hours."

"Damn you, Jim. Is that all I am to you? Just a good piece of ass?"

"I said the best, not just good. Why can't this be enough?"

Jim's thrusts grew faster, shallower, as he drew closer to his climax. He didn't want to think about anything other than fucking this man. Feeling his flesh wrap so tightly around Jim's dick. So damn good. And then he was spasming as he dropped off the edge.

"Jesus, Caleb." He gasped when it was over, and he pulled his softened prick from Caleb's opened channel.

He heard rustling, but Caleb didn't say a word as he dressed. He brushed past James.

"I don't know what you expect of me, Jim. A quick tug in the dark and I probably won't hear from you again unless we bump into each other by accident. And it seems you were awfully damned prepared for this. I'm guessing you do it a lot."

Jim blinked as Caleb turned on the overhead light. The thought raced through his mind that he wished he had a mirror to make sure his tie was straight.

"You look just fine," Caleb said as he reached out to straighten Jim's tie. "Damn fucking perfect."

Jim brushed a hand through his hair. "There's nothing wrong with what we just did. We both wanted it."

Caleb's irises turned a darker shade of copper as he looked at Jim. "You and I see things differently. I wish I knew what was going through your head. I want to know you better, but you close up and don't let anyone inside. It's all a game to you. But it's not a game to me. I want more than just a quick tumble in a linen closet. Damn you, I want it all."

He stood waiting for Jim to say something. But he had nothing to say. No answer to give Caleb. He didn't want him to leave like this. Caleb turned to the door and opened it a crack to make sure no one was hovering around.

"Caleb --"

But it was too late; he was already out the door. The rush of cold air from the open door almost had Jim shuddering at the sudden change in temperature. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the glimpse of something yellow. He turned his head, then reached down to pick up the bright yellow silk scarf. A broken daisy lay discarded on the floor. He brought the scarf to his nose and he inhaled the scent.

His poet. He should return the scarf. He wadded the silk up and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He'd return it later, when things had a chance to cool down between them. He had to keep reminding himself that he didn't want a relationship. There could be no commitment. He had family responsibilities.

He stepped outside into the corridor. No one seemed to be paying attention. Caleb was nowhere in sight. He couldn't decide if he was happy or sad about that fact.

He felt numb as he found his way back to the conservatory. He spotted his date deep in conversation with an attractive man who he knew she had targeted. She caught sight of Jim and gave him their prearranged signal. She wanted a clear playing field and gave him the thumbs-up to leave. Thank God. He didn't think he could stand another minute here.

He made his way to the bride and groom to offer his congratulations. Both families were very good customers of the Morgans. Then he made his way out to his car. For long moments, he sat behind the wheel without starting it up. He stared at the bright yellow sun in the sky and remembered the scarf. He pulled it out of his pocket and brought it up to his face.

The urge to drive to his father's house and come completely clean with everything rode him strong. He almost convinced himself that it was the right thing to do. He stuffed the

scarf back into his pocket. Who was he kidding? It might help him to bare his soul, but what would it do to his father? And then he would just be substituting the weight of one guilt for another -- one he would never be rid of. There was no easy out for him. He'd made his bed and now he'd have to suffer the consequences. If only it weren't such a heavy burden.

He started his car and was just about to pull out of the parking spot when a large van sped past emblazoned with a company name. His stomach plummeted.

Enduring Vows. It was Caleb's company.

Following behind the van was a sporty red convertible. A quick glance told him Caleb was behind the wheel. The plate read "VOWS1."

It was as though a noose were tightening around his neck, and he couldn't get it loose. He was in trouble, and he knew it. He just wished he knew what to do about it.

Jim made it home in record time. Slamming on the brakes, he skidded to a stop in his parking place. The first thing he did when he got to his apartment was strip and get into the shower. The day had not gone as he'd expected. Good and bad, wrong and right, delicious and unexpected.

He leaned back against the black tiled wall, his soapy hand roaming down to his cock. It was already half hard just remembering those moments in the linen closet. How close they'd come to being discovered. The daring uncertainty of being found out. His cock surged at the memory of thrusting into Caleb's tight little passage. God, the friction, the heat, the climax.

His hand slid up and down the tall stalk infused by the newly seeded memory. It had been so good. And Caleb was so damn beautiful. Sensitive and caring. His mark was on every detail of the wedding Jim had attended today. Right down to the last cut-glass vase of flowers. He hated wanting him so much, fought it with every bit of will he possessed.

His hand moved faster, fingers swirling over the broad, plumed head, and then he was spurting into his hand, his hips bucking as the orgasm overtook him.

Turning off the water, he stepped out of the shower and toweled himself dry. Tossing the damp towel into the hamper, he walked into the bedroom.

*Lonely.* Why was that particular word foremost in his mind suddenly? He'd never thought of himself as lonely before. Alone, yes. But that was his choice. He was more than willing to try to do what he could to please his father, up to a point. Marriage was not in his plan. Not even to please his father. He could easily have arranged a marriage of convenience. In some circles, he was considered quite the catch. But his guilt carried him only so far.

He saw his navy blue suit jacket lying across the chair on the other side of the room. He walked over to it and reached inside the pocket. His fingers curled around the wadded-up yellow silk scarf. He pulled it out of the pocket and let it dangle to the floor.

It was a bit of Caleb he'd secreted away. He trailed it around his neck and then dropped into the chair. Taking the end of the scarf, he dangled it over his prick and along the inside of his thighs. It was strange, but it seemed to hold the warmth of the sun within its fabric. He knew it was expensive, and he should return it. But not today, not yet.

He was so torn. A part of him knew that he should not pursue this relationship. It was taboo. It was suicide.

He drifted the ends of the scarf over his lips, down over his chest, and then let it shroud his dick. It wouldn't work. Caleb would never understand. And Jim didn't know if he had the guts to tell Caleb the truth about his past. He'd never even considered revealing it to anyone else.

He slung the scarf around his neck and then, reaching for pain, pinched his nipples, needing to cut the fantasy of Caleb out of his thoughts. Twisting the nips, he forced the burn deeper, knowing that whichever path he chose, pain would follow him, one way or the other.

## Chapter Eight

Caleb glared at the swaths of brightly colored fabric strewn across his living room. Then he glared at Gail.

“She didn’t like any of them for the bridesmaids’ gowns?”

“None. We’ll have to go back to the drawing board.”

“But I thought she said rainbows. Exactly what colors of the rainbow was she thinking of. These are it, darling. There are no others.”

God, but the last week his patience was practically nonexistent. And he knew why. He just didn’t know what to do about it.

“Yeah, well, I tried to tell her that. Now she says she wants burgundy, peach, cream, and red-and-white pinstriped for the maid of honor.”

He rounded on Gail and fixed her with a look of disbelief. “She wants what?”

“You heard me.”

“Has the dear woman no sense of color?”

“Doubt it. You’re going to have to see her yourself. She’s not listening to anyone. Frankly, I think that’s her whole plan. She doesn’t want to deal with us -- she wants you personally.”

Caleb let out an exasperated sigh. “Temperamental.” He shoved a bolt of fabric aside and dropped onto the royal blue velvet sofa. “I think I’ve had about all I can stand this week.”

“And Mrs. Allerton?”

“Oh, all right. Check my calendar. Fit her in, and I’ll try to get her to go back to the colors we already discussed. God, what she decides impacts everything else. We simply cannot change things at this late date.”

Gail tapped the notation into her smartphone. “You know,” she said, still studying the screen, “maybe if you called him you’d be in a lot better frame of mind.”

He sat up straighter and peered at her. “Call who?”

She turned her head to stare at him with that give-me-a-break look she did so well. “The wedding guy. Who else?”

She leaned back in the lemon-colored cushioned side chair. “If you must know, I pointed him in the direction I saw you head. I followed. I also know how long you were in there together.”

Caleb felt the hot color spread up his neck. “Exactly why did you feel you needed to stalk him?”

She straightened her shoulders. “I was just trying to protect you. How did I know he wasn’t some angry, spurned groom out for revenge?”

Caleb snorted. “I know you better than that, Gail. You knew exactly what you were doing, and now you want all the gory details.”

She leaned forward in her chair. “I want to see you happy, Caleb. You are at the top of your profession. You’re booked for the next five years, for God’s sake. You create all of these wonderful confections for other couples -- you give them their dream weddings, and yet, here you are, all alone.”

“Not everyone finds their Prince Charming as easily as you did, honey.”

“I found him because of you. You’re the matchmaker for almost everyone around you, and I just hate seeing you alone.”

*Oh my God, she could not cry.* If she did, so would he. And that was so not what he wanted to do right now. “Stop feeling sorry for me, sweetie. My time will come when it’s right.” He stood up, went over to sit on the arm of the chair, and threw an arm around the sniffling woman. “It’s going to be all right.” He pulled out a purple silk handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. “Blow.”

She blew and then proceeded to mangle the fabric in her hands. It didn’t bother him -- he had a gross of the damned things in every color imaginable. Part of his signature was the variety of colored handkerchiefs he sported in his breast pocket. At least it wasn’t one of the vintage ones from his private collection.

“Tell me about him, Caleb. Is he *the one*?”

He rose from the arm of the chair and walked across the room to stand in front of the sliding glass doors that led to his patio, which overlooked the exclusive golf course beyond. If only he played golf, but it wasn’t one of the things he enjoyed. He had purchased the co-op long before the golf course came into existence. Back then, it had been farmland. This city was growing too quickly. He should move.

“Caleb.”

He spun around to look at her. He’d wanted to evade the question. “I hardly know him.”

“But you like him anyway, don’t you? He might be *the one*.”

Jim Morgan shouldn’t be the one. They were too different. Worlds apart. And yet the few times he’d been with him, something had clicked. It was as though Cupid had shot the damn arrow into him, and he’d looked the wrong way when it came time to set his sights on the person he was going to love for the rest of his life. It didn’t make sense -- not one bit.

His cell phone started ringing, and he picked it up off the gold end table. He looked at the number that flashed up but didn't recognize it.

"Hello?"

"Caleb? It's James Morgan."

*Oh my God.* Caleb's heart almost exploded, and his stomach tied itself into complicated knots. He swung away from Gail's all-too-intense stare.

"Jim." He paused. Think fast. What did he say? The state of their relationship was just as up in the air as it had been when Caleb left the health club. "How are you?"

"Fine. I hope you don't mind me calling you. I have something for you. Would it be all right if I stopped by your place and dropped it off? Or do you have other plans?"

He turned to look at the disarray in his apartment. It looked like a gigantic package of Starburst candy had exploded across his living room. He motioned frantically to Gail to wind up the bolts of fabric.

"My assistant is just leaving, so, yes, I'm free. Feel free to stop by. Do you need the address?"

Gail had the most stupid grin on her face as she raced around his living room gathering up the colorful array of material. He mouthed the word "out" to her. She made a pout, and he motioned toward the door.

"Now," he mouthed.

"No," Jim said. "I have it from the store files. Would half an hour be all right?"

"That would be great. I'll see you then."

Gail had her hand on the knob. She looked at him over her shoulder. "You'll tell me all about it after he leaves. I knew he was interested."

"You know nothing of the sort. He's just stopping by to drop something off."

"Oh, right. Like I believe that excuse. And don't try to tell me you believe it."



For a moment, he was panicked. “Truthfully, I don’t know what to believe. But I do know that you need to go before he gets here.”

“Good luck, Caleb. I hope he’s *the one*. But if he hurts you, you tell him he’ll have me to deal with.”

“Out,” he said. It was good to have friends. But sometimes they could be just a tad overprotective. He didn’t know what to expect when Jim got there, but he wanted to be ready.

Ready? God, he wasn’t certain that was possible. The man kept him totally off balance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim had mulled over his decision all week. It was out of character to his well-ordered life. If it hadn’t been for the scarf, he might have been able to ignore the feelings building inside him. But the more he handled Caleb’s scarf, the stronger the yearning became. He finally couldn’t stand it anymore.

He stood in front of Caleb’s apartment. He could still turn and walk away. Just leave the package on his doorstep. If he walked through that door, there would be no turning back.

He hit the doorbell. His heart thundered in his chest. He thought of his father. He thought of Rudolf. And he remembered the feel of Caleb in his arms.

Maybe it wasn’t necessarily what Caleb represented, but what he didn’t represent. An opposite to everything traditional that his father stood for. An opposite to the subterfuge and betrayal that Rudolf had represented.

Caleb Wilson was flamboyant and beautiful. Sensitivity bloomed in every line of who he was. In the last week, everyone he’d contacted about Caleb and his company, Enduring Vows, had spoken highly of him.

Could he really let this man slip through his fingers without at least trying to make a go of it? Jim had become adept at recognizing gemstones in the rough. He was very good at what he did.

But what about the perfect lover who was everything he purported to be. Could Jim recognize the face of love when it looked him right in the eyes? Would he let his fears override the recognition from deep within his soul when it screamed that this was the man his lonely heart desired?

It was a matter of seconds before Caleb opened the door, and for Jim, it was as though the sun shone brightly when he once again came face-to-face with the flamboyance and sweetness of his beautiful poet.

“Jim. Come in.” Caleb stepped back and opened the door wider in order for Jim to step inside.

The apartment almost took his breath away. It was a flower garden, a rainbow captured inside the living room. It was emotion and warmth; it was friendly and welcoming. And so opposite to his own cold black-and-white apartment.

“Wow. Nice place.”

“You think so?” Caleb walked over to the couch to pick up a swath of shiny turquoise material, folded it, and set it aside. “Sorry for the chaos. I’m afraid I’m not particularly known for neatness. Please have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

Jim walked over to a lemon-colored chair opposite the royal blue couch. He had to smile. It almost felt like he were inside a Crayola crayon factory. There was not one thing hard about this room. It was so...Caleb. And it made Jim feel comfortable from the moment he’d entered the apartment.

He settled into the chair, and Caleb sat across from him on the sofa. Jim could only sit there, looking at him for long moments trying to accept the fact that he was really there in

Caleb's apartment. His fingers tightened around the package gripped between his hands. Caleb was an original; everything about him spoke of passion.

"Why are you here, Jim?" Right to the point.

He wanted to brush the hair out of Caleb's eyes. It looked like he'd been running his hands through the mane rather than combing it. But it was a look Jim had become used to seeing on Caleb. That lovely, spontaneous look.

He held up the package that was in his hands. "This is for you."

Caleb took it from him and then sat back down on the couch. Jim watched him as he opened it. Caleb held up the scarf; then he looked at Jim.

"Why?"

This was the part that might be a little tricky. "You left your scarf in the closet at the wedding."

"But this isn't my scarf."

"No. Yours was damaged, so I bought you another."

He watched as Caleb looked at the scarf, his long fingers stroking the hand-painted, patchwork material of silk and velvet.

"It's beautiful, Jim. But you didn't have to do this."

He took a deep breath and then released it. "I know I didn't. I wanted to. I want --" He couldn't finish the thought. He was afraid to ask. Or maybe it was that he didn't know how to ask.

Caleb draped the scarf around his neck, and Jim smiled. It looked right on Caleb, just as he'd known it would. Jim couldn't think of another man it would adorn so well. He could think of only one other thing he would like even better.

He turned to look out the window across the green hills beyond the complex. "My feelings for you perplex me. I don't know what to do about them."

“How about act on them?”

He turned to look at Caleb and saw the twinkle of amusement in his beautiful copper gaze. “I wish it were that easy, but it’s not.”

“Why isn’t it? I’m attracted to you, and you’re apparently attracted to me. There’s nothing confusing about that.”

“You and I are totally different.” He paused for a moment as he tried to collect his scattered thoughts. Uppermost in his mind was taking the man to bed. Stripping him of everything but the attractive silk scarf.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t work things out. If we want to.”

“I’m not out -- I mean, I’ve never told anyone that --” He wasn’t certain he could say the word. Not out loud.

“Are you ashamed of being...gay, Jim? Are you ashamed of who you are?”

Jim whipped his head up to glare at Caleb. “No, damn you. It isn’t that. I’m angry that I...that I can’t.” He jumped up from the chair, running a hand through his hair. “I shouldn’t have come here. It was idiotic.”

Caleb stood up. There was something so calm about him, so soothing to Jim. The wild, clashing colors should have been jarring, but they weren’t.

“What are you afraid of? That you might actually feel something for one of your lovers beyond the usual lust and leave?”

“I haven’t...” Was he ever going to be able to finish a sentence again? He collapsed back into the chair, hunched over, head supported by his hands. “Why do you have to make things so difficult? Why can’t it just be what it is?”

“What is it?” Jim glanced up to find Caleb right in front of him. Caleb reached for his hands and lifted him to his feet. Then he cupped Jim’s face and suddenly their lips were fused together. For the first time in many years, Jim felt tears well in his eyes, and he released a shuddering breath.

## Chapter Nine

Caleb pulled the black sweater over Jim's head and threw it onto the couch. Then he took his hand and led him into the bedroom. He pushed Jim onto the bed and crawled over him. He yanked back the colorful patchwork quilt, exposing the fine white Egyptian cotton sheets beneath. He knew supplies were well in hand in the drawer next to the bed. He hadn't invited anyone home in months. At first he was far too busy working late at night. And then he'd met Jim and wasn't willing to settle for less.

He kissed the side of Jim's smooth jaw and then worked his way down the broad landscape of his chest. He fastened his lips onto a pebbled tit and sucked it into his mouth. He heard the *thump* of shoes hitting the Persian-carpeted, polished teak wood floor. His own shoes followed quickly. His hands were at Jim's belt, unfastening it, then moving to unzip his pants.

Jim's hands were beneath Caleb's shirt, stroking across his spine. Caleb's pants were unfastened, and he felt Jim slip his hand beneath the waistband and then flex his fingers against Caleb's ass. Both hands now cupped Caleb's cheeks as Jim rolled, forcing Caleb's back against the bed.

Jim claimed Caleb's lips as he continued to knead his ass. His tongue tasted and explored. His hands possessed him as Caleb shoved Jim's pants over his hips and down his legs. Late afternoon sunlight streamed in between the narrow blinds, highlighting the tawny locks of his lover's hair. Caleb reached up to stroke the thick, shiny-as-satin mane and twined his fingers into the usually neatly combed locks.

One curl fell forward, making Jim look younger. There was almost a surprised look in his coffee-colored eyes as Caleb forced his head down. Jim fastened his lips to one of Caleb's nipples and almost brought him up from the bed as he tugged exquisitely at the small, hard bud.

Jim moved down Caleb's body. Finally pulling his hands free, he shoved Caleb's pants down his legs and allowed them to drop to the floor. And then Caleb felt Jim's mouth on his cock, sucking him inside, and it was almost more than he could stand. Once his erection was hard and fully awake, Jim released him and licked his way back up Caleb's body.

He parted Caleb's shirt and then lazily pulled the yellow scarf from around Caleb's neck. He wound it between his two hands as he looked at Caleb.

"Do you know what happened to your other silk scarf?"

"What?" Caleb asked breathlessly.

Jim unwound one end and dangled the hem of the scarf over Caleb's cock. The whisper of silk against his hot, engorged prick had him shuddering beneath the exquisite sensation.

"That's what I did with your scarf. Late at night, I sat in my bedroom, naked and aching for you."

Caleb sat up and he watched as Jim did something with the scarf. With his prick. Jim wound it around his dick, moved lower, wrapping it tightly around his balls, and then he tied it off, allowing the ends to trail. On Jim, it looked strange and exotic and totally exciting.

"Why, Jim? All you had to do was call me."

When he looked at Caleb, there was so much anguish in his expression. Raw and revealing like Caleb had never seen before. Here was the vulnerable Jim he had wanted to see -- the man hidden behind the facade of composed sophistication. But why now?

He cupped Jim's face. "What is it you want?"

Jim shoved him forcefully back onto the pillows. He locked Caleb's hands above his head, rising over him. "I want you, dammit," he said between gritted teeth. "I don't want to fuck anyone else. Just you. And it's driving me crazy. I want my dick inside you. I want to feel how tight you wrap around me." He leaned closer. "And I want you to fuck me. I've never wanted it so badly before. I want to die for wanting you."

"Then have me, Jim. Take me. Fuck me."

Mouths clashed; bodies melded, rubbing against each other. Cocks stiff, raging and hot for release. Caleb fought against Jim's tight grip, and grappling with each other, they both rose to their knees and finally rolled off the bed and dropped onto the plush carpet. Landing astride Jim, Caleb locked the man's hands to the floor.

"Is this what you want? You want me to fuck you, baby?"

"Yes," Jim yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Do you want me to force you? Do you want me to make you need me, unable to deny me? Damn you, sweetheart, why do you have to make it so hard? Why can't you just let it happen?"

He looked down at his lover, but there was no answer in his eyes. No appeal, no submission. Only the glitter of challenge.

Caleb didn't know what to make of this mysterious man who was racked by some unvoiced secret. What Caleb did know was that he needed Caleb to love him. He didn't know how he knew it, he just did. He gripped Jim's bound cock and felt him shudder. He moved down and lifted Jim's legs up to his chest, opening his ass. Caleb reached over to the nightstand and pulled out the lube and condoms.

Using the lube, he prepared Jim's ass, penetrating with first one finger and then two.

"You're tight, Jim. So tight. I'm big, sweetheart. You sure you want me inside that tight hole of yours?"

Pressing back against his fingers, Jim forced them deeper. "Yes, damn you."

Caleb looked down at Jim's bound cock. His dick was purple, an inflexible iron rod, and the slit dripping with precum, balls bulging. The neat yellow bow so out of place and yet so perfect. A needy package just waiting to be unwrapped. Dynamite ready to explode. He stroked one finger along the hot length, and Jim shuddered beneath him, his eyes rolled back. He bucked as Caleb slid his fingers out and then into his hole once more.

Finally, he removed his fingers from Jim's anus, reached for the condom, and sheathed his raging erection quickly. He then positioned the tip at Jim's opening. He curled the fingers of one hand around his lover's prick. As he slid inside, he swirled the tip of a finger across the wet tip of Jim's cock. With his other hand, he released the pretty bow, and then he slammed his dick home.

Jim screamed. It was a sound of pure lust. Caleb moaned, enjoying the tight sheathing of his cock. He pulled out and drove in again. Jim moved against him. So good, so impossibly divine.

Jim yelled again as his climax overtook him, and he spurted his seed. Moments later, Caleb followed. Feeling like he'd just run a marathon, Caleb pulled from inside Jim's passage and dropped down beside him.

"That was amazing."

"Yeah, it was," Jim said after a pause. "I don't know what it's like to fall in love. It's never happened before. But I'm going to say whatever is happening here, it scares the hell out of me."

Caleb turned onto his side to look at his lover. He saw the fear in the furrowed lines around his eyes and mouth, and he raised a hand to lightly trace the grooves of tension.



“Talk to me, darling. Don’t keep it locked inside you. Maybe I can help.”

Jim rolled to his side, away from Caleb. “Nobody can help me,” he said in a low voice.

Caleb didn’t know what to say, how to help his lover. But whatever it was, if Jim didn’t talk about it, it was going to eat him alive.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later, Jim sat up on the edge of the bed. His mind was mush. He wished he knew what he was going to do about this situation. He knew he was in way over his head.

He felt a hand brush across his shoulders. “What’s the matter?” Caleb’s voice was tinged with sleep, slurred and sexy. Jim felt his body respond to the sound of his voice, a Pavlovian response already ground deep inside him.

“Nothing’s wrong.” He stood up and yanked on his boxers. The best thing he could do was leave, right now.

And then a pair of strong arms wound around him, locking his arms to his body. Unable to walk away unless he wanted to force the issue.

“Yeah, there is. Don’t you think it’s time you talked to me about it? If this relationship is going to go anywhere, we need to be honest with each other.”

Something inside Jim wanted to turn and run. At the thought of an honest-to-goodness relationship, he froze. “What relationship? The sex is great. I’ll admit better than I’ve had in a long time. But a relationship -- I don’t know about that.”

The arms around him tightened like bands of iron, imprisoning him. And then he felt Caleb press a kiss to the side of his neck.

“If you want to go, I’m not going to try to force you to stay. You have to make the choice.” And then Jim was free.

But was that what he really wanted? He collapsed onto the bed, hunched over. It felt like everything he'd built over the last ten years was crumbling, the ruins piled at his feet. The facade cracked, leaving him exposed and vulnerable.

"I don't know what you want from me."

"I want you to want to try. I want you to at least admit you care. That you feel something."

Oh yeah, he felt something, and it was ripping him apart.

"I can't give you the kind of relationship you want, Caleb. I can't do that to my father. It doesn't matter what I feel, what I want. Or what I know about myself. I can't do that to him."

"Well, I'm sorry, Jim. I have to live honestly. I care about you. Maybe it could be love, maybe not. But it doesn't even have a chance if you can't be honest with the people you love. I can't be your guilty little secret, like a mistress on the side. Available when it's convenient to you. I want a man who's willing to take a chance, deal with the good as well as the bad."

It was still dark, no illumination beyond a small nightlight in the bathroom. It felt safe in the darkness. Safe enough maybe to reveal dirty little secrets that skittered in the blackness. His eyes fixed on the light in the bathroom, his mind on the pain of his past.

"When I was twenty, I went to Argentina to apprentice with an old friend of my father's. His family runs a diamond mine, and my family has always believed in developing our craft from the bottom up." It felt eerie talking into the darkness. Like he was sitting in a confessional baring his soul, except he was sitting in his underwear in his lover's bedroom.

"I'm here, Jim. Go on."

His throat felt dry, his stomach in knots. "Rudolf Valotsky was a very charming man. Very charismatic. Twice my age when I became his lover. It was a summer when I discovered myself, when I thought I knew who I was meant to be. And who it should be with."

He didn't know if he could tell the rest. He closed his eyes and shut out the light, free-falling into the murky past. He began to shiver, but he didn't know if it was because he was cold or because of the memories. Caleb threw a blanket over his shoulders as if he understood. He lightly rested his hands on Jim's shoulders.

"I'm right with you, Jim."

"I thought I knew what it meant to be in love. Rudolf was a demanding lover. Narcissistic might be a better word. Vengeful, another. Rudolf was out one day, and I found a journal in one of the drawers in his office. God, if I just hadn't looked at it. But then again, I don't think it would have changed anything. Eventually, he would have confronted me with the truth because he wanted to use me."

"What was the truth?"

He didn't know if he could get it out. He'd kept it buried inside for so long. Caleb pressed his fingers into Jim's tight shoulders and kneaded away the knotted tension. Jim took a deep breath and released it slowly.

"The truth was that Rudolf was my mother's lover. She was going to him when she was killed. Her betrayal practically destroyed my father. He never remarried. He was broken and bitter after she died. I was eleven when it happened. As far as I know, he never knew her lover's name. I doubt he would have sent me to Argentina if he had thought it was Rudolf."

"Was he a close friend of your father's?"

"They had gone to university together. The two families have had a business relationship for generations. The tradition of the eldest son going to the mines in Argentina and staying with the family is a long-standing obligation. I doubt my father would ever have thought -- that he would have considered that Rudolf would betray their friendship."

"And what about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why did he make you his lover? There must have been a reason."

“I confronted him when I discovered his liaison with my mother. I was young; I was angry. He was so cool, so unemotional. Yes, he’d been my mother’s lover, and now he had taken me as well. He had never loved me. It had all been for revenge against my father.”

Jim dropped his head forward, shamed by the memories. The guilt weighed heavily, even after all these years. “I came back home knowing that Rudolf would one day reveal what had transpired during those months in Argentina. I couldn’t tell my father what had happened. I was devastated. I was frantic. All I could do was try to be the son my father wanted and wait for the death knell.”

“Did Rudolf reveal the truth?”

“No. Oh no, he had other plans.” The self-loathing over the arrangement he’d struck with Rudolf ate at Jim bit by bit. “He and I came to an agreement. There were diamonds he stole from his own family that he wanted me to cut and sell. Then I was to deposit the money in a Swiss bank account for him.” He remembered the meetings in the hotel rooms where they passed the gems, the cruelty of the man he had once worshipped. “I was glad when he died. My father was upset when I wouldn’t go back to Argentina for the funeral. But I couldn’t do it. I was sick at what I had done, but I had to do it to protect my father. Do you understand now? Why I can’t be the man you want me to be?”

“My God, baby, you’ve kept this secret for how long? When did he die?”

“He died a little over five years ago.”

“So it’s finished.”

“I can never tell my father. I can’t tell him I’m gay. I can’t tell him I was Rudolf’s lover. If one of the bricks is removed, the whole wall will come tumbling down, and I can’t let that happen. I have to be the son he wants. I owe him.”

“Because a man used you for his own vile purposes? You aren’t responsible for that. It wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s not what’s important. My father is what’s important. He’s alone. If he ever found out the truth, it might kill him. And then I’d be responsible for that as well. I can’t do it.”

Caleb wrapped his arms around Jim. “We’ll think of something. There has to be a way to make this work. I won’t give up on you, baby. Don’t toss in the towel just yet.”

Jim released a pent-up breath. He reached for Caleb’s hand and twined his fingers with his lover’s. Was there any possibility of a chance for a life he never dared dream of? He was afraid to even consider the possibility.

## Chapter Ten

Caleb stood at the back of the church watching the ceremony that was taking place. His eyes automatically circled the room, checking every little detail. This one was particularly important as it was his parents' vow renewal ceremony. Even with his own family, he felt like an outsider, and there wasn't an easy way to fix that.

After three intense weeks of intimacy, he was now with a man whom he knew that he could very easily love. Once the walls had come down, Caleb had discovered a whole other side to Jim Morgan. One he knew very few people, if any, were privy to. In his own way, Jim was just as spontaneous as Caleb could be.

He reached up to touch the purple daisy in his lapel. The bouquet had arrived at his apartment that morning along with a vintage silk handkerchief of amethyst shot through with gold thread and with a rolled edge. The perfect color to go with the new midnight blue jacket he was wearing today. Already, Jim knew him so well. This handkerchief would hold a special place in his vintage collection. The note had said, *For the one man who has brought passionate color into my life. I hope these colors please you, darling. J.*

The use of the endearment had caused Caleb's stomach to do flip-flops. Jim rarely used such words, even in the heat of passion. He pulled the card from his pocket and looked down

at the bold black lettering. His lover had spent so much of his life with guilt bearing him down and suppressing all his desires in trying to pay penance for something that wasn't his fault. He oozed success in every line of his demeanor in public. But in the privacy of Caleb's apartment, the real Jim came through. A man whose sensitivity had almost been destroyed by a bastard only seeking revenge for something Jim had no part in.

He had learned not to trust. And Caleb could understand after what he'd been through. But it was like the man's emotions had been encased in ice, buried away until Caleb came along. His gaze turned to the cherubs painted on the ceiling of the church. Cupid certainly had a sense of humor sometimes. Or maybe not. Maybe they had needed each other. Jim was a centering force for Caleb. There were times when Caleb wanted to fly a little too high, and Jim had become his sensible self. On the other hand, when Jim was too somber, too inwardly focused on the guilt he seemed so set on shouldering, Caleb could lift his spirits and remind him of what love was all about.

They were opposites in many ways, but in others, they seemed to mesh together seamlessly. It was almost scary.

The one thing that could have made this day perfect for Caleb was if Jim would have come with him. But his lover wasn't ready for that next step yet. He wasn't ready for the scrutiny of the public eye. Caleb knew that would only come when he finally confronted his father with the dark secrets he kept buried inside.

Gail slipped next to him, linking her arm through his. "Your parents are delightful, Caleb. Did you see the look on your mother's face when your father got down on bended knee and presented her with the ring? I don't think there was a dry eye from any of your family. It was so sweet." She hugged Caleb's arm tighter. "I want it to be like that with Larry and me."

Caleb smiled. His parents had been together for forty years, and they were still as much in love as when they first met. Jim had done a superb job on the diamond, and when his father opened the jeweler's box, the sunlight had caught the facets, almost blinding them.

Jim should have been here to see what pleasure his workmanship had garnered. Caleb hated that he wasn't.

"How goes it with the jeweler, sweetie?" Gail whispered the question in his ear. "Is he *the one?*"

Caleb wished he knew the answer. "I'm hoping so. But it's too early to tell. He's got some issues to deal with."

"He's not --"

"No drugs or alcohol, and he's healthy as they come. Nothing like that," he assured her. "It's emotional stuff. It will come together for him."

"But you're in love with him, aren't you?" Gail just wouldn't let it go. He shook his head.

"You're such a hopeless romantic."

He slid a glance her way and saw her lips curve into a smile. "I am, and I admit it. I want to see everyone happy and in a committed relationship with the person of their dreams. He does fulfill your dreams, doesn't he? You're not just settling because you're...lonely?"

He turned fully in her direction. She always had a knack for surprising him with her uncanny ability to dissect his thoughts. "I was lonely, wasn't I? I never really thought about it until Jim came into my life."

"And that means you're not any longer. You've found your soul mate?"

He turned back to watch the ceremony. "We'll see, Gail. We'll see."

His attention flickered to where his sister, Shelly, sat with her husband and saw him wrap an arm around her shoulder, their two-year-old, Aimee, sitting on his knee. He saw Shelly dab at her eyes. And then he looked at his brother, Gavin, who sat with his wife, an arm wrapped around her, holding her close. And then there were his parents, smiles on their faces bright enough to light up the whole church.



And he had to wonder if he would ever have the chance to stand in front of a minister to profess his undying love to his husband. To sign the documents that made it official in the eyes of the law. Marriage seemed like such an unreachable dream for him right now. Maybe that's why he'd chosen it as his business, thumbing his nose at society and making every event as perfect and beautiful as he possibly could. Be it marriage or commitment, each pair of lovers deserved to shine on their day. And he was blessed to be someone who could make it happen for them.

Now, if he could only make it happen for himself. Maybe someday God's miracle would shine down on him.

And Jim.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim set the last tray of rings into the safe before closing and locking it. A strip of the yellow scarf peeked out from beneath his jacket as he leaned forward. Caleb's scarf. He stroked his fingers across the silky fabric. He couldn't help smiling.

"Where'd you get that thing? From that fag you keep mooning over whenever he comes in here?"

His father's gruff voice wiped the smile and pleasant feeling away quickly. And the weight settled back onto his shoulders. He straightened away from the safe and turned to face his father, who was seated at his worktable. He watched as his father leaned down to open the bottom drawer and lift out the cut-glass highball tumbler and the bottle of Anisette that he always kept handy. Some days more than others Jim would come to the back room and find an empty bottle on his father's table, his father hunched over, snoring, his fingers still curled around the empty glass.

He tried not to think about the days that turned into weeks when his father, red-eyed and bleary, would stumble out to Jim's car to go to the store. How a couple of years ago Jim had finally confiscated the old man's car keys and hired a driver for when Jim wasn't around.

Until just this moment, he hadn't realized the full extent of what his life had become. The narrow corner he'd allowed himself to be backed into. Because he had shouldered the responsibility for every bad thing that had happened to his father. He had never set the blame where it truly belonged. On Rudolf Valotsky, who had, in essence, destroyed three lives. Four, if he counted Valotsky himself.

Jim looked at his father. He straightened his shoulders. He hadn't expected it to happen like this, but there were times a person didn't choose a time and place for a confrontation like this. No time was a good time.

He watched his father pour himself a good measure of the licorice-tasting liqueur. Watched him swallow a healthy portion from the glass. How the hell he drank that stuff straight, Jim had no idea.

In that moment, he knew -- God forgive him Jim knew -- he did not want to be like his father. If it weren't for Caleb, he never would have realized, never would have understood that there was something more for him than to simply flit from bed to bed, hiding who he was, suffocating all emotion, forever living in cold, bleak shadow. My God, he could no longer stand the weight of the heavy burden he'd carried all these years. He had to be free of it.

He looked his father in the eyes. Fingering the silk scarf, he drew courage from its presence. He carefully pulled it out from beneath his navy blue jacket, settled it beneath the lapel, and trailed his fingertips down the brightly colored silk. He loved the texture, the color, the warmth.

He loved Caleb Wilson. My God, but he loved him with a passion that took his breath away and filled him with such an ache of longing right now. His eyes burned as he looked at his father. He blinked rapidly. He couldn't tell if the emotion was from sadness or anger. But right now it really didn't matter.

"I'm gay, Father. And Caleb Wilson is my lover. No, let me put it another way. I'm in love with Caleb. He's everything I could have ever wanted in a partner. And I mean to make it work with him. I'm not going to hide who I am any longer. Not for you, not for anyone."

"Son of a bitch!" It was the first time Jim had ever heard his father swear. "He ruined you. The son of a bitch ruined you."

"Caleb did no such thing."

His father squinted up at him, and there was such fiery hate in his faded eyes. "Not the damn peacock. Rudolf. He spoiled you."

Jim grabbed the back of a chair and collapsed onto it. His father had known? All this time he'd been keeping a secret that was no longer a secret.

"How long have you known?" Jim managed to gasp out.

His father narrowed his gaze as he looked at Jim. "Since the funeral. I thought you had more backbone in you, but I guess not. More like your mother -- that's the problem. He used you both -- to get back at me. Oh, he loved his cat-and-mouse games. And what a fine job he did of it. Robbing me of my heir. You should have done what I did. You should have found yourself a woman and married and given me my grandchild. It was your duty, just as it was mine."

"People marry for love, not duty, Father. I won't live my life to fulfill your idea of a sense of duty. I won't marry someone I cannot love -- not in the way I love Caleb."

"Then you're a fool. That kind of...man sex...isn't meant to be forever. It's not right. Rudolf never accepted that. I tried to tell him, to explain, but he wouldn't listen."

Jim tried to focus on what his father was saying. The words were softly spoken as if he was talking to himself, not Jim. Suddenly, things seemed to fall into place. Pieces of a horrible puzzle that now fit together.

"Father, are you tell me that you and Rudolf...?"

His father glared at him; he emptied the glass on his desk and refilled it to the top. “It was university; we were young. We got drunk one night, that’s how it started. It happened. It lasted until graduation. It was just sex. Experimentation. Nothing more than that.”

“How long did the relationship last?”

“It wasn’t a relationship. Anyway, what does it matter?” He shrugged, seeming to dismiss the foundation that had most likely shattered the rest of his life.

“How long?”

“Two years, damn you. I tried to tell him at graduation it couldn’t go on. I had a duty to my family just as he had to his. He was angry. I thought he’d get over it. Then I met your mother; we fell in love. That should have been the end of it. But Rudolf was different. That Latin temperament I guess.” He looked at Jim. “I thought your mother was safe from his charms. It probably started when I took her with me on a buying trip to Argentina. We spent several weeks that year at the Valotsky estate. I didn’t realize to what lengths he would go to destroy me just because I spurned his type of...of --”

“Love?”

“It wasn’t love. It was never that.”

“Maybe not for you, but apparently it was for him.”

“It should have been forgotten.”

“If you realized what type of man he was, why did you send me to him? Without telling me?”

His father leaned back in his chair and gulped down the rest of the liquid in the glass. His cheeks were now flushed either from anger or from the alcohol, Jim couldn’t be certain which. His expression turned hard, his eyes glittering as he looked at Jim.

“You want the whole truth?”

Jim nodded even though his insides twisted into a knot. “All of it.”

There was a long, tense pause, as though his father was considering exactly how much to tell his son. He had a feeling that whatever his father was about to reveal, it wasn't going to be good.

"I sold you to him. For the good of the family and the company."

Jim thought he had been prepared for the worst, but this wasn't what he'd expected to hear. All these years, even though his father had turned cold and hard after his mother's betrayal and subsequent death, he'd thought he loved him.

"Why?" He could barely get the word out. His white-knuckled grip on the yellow scarf was the only thing that seemed to keep him from shattering.

"The contracts were up for renegotiation with the mine. It was a difficult time for the company; we needed those diamonds. We could have lost everything. I had to do it, don't you see? I thought it would just be for the summer, that when you came home you'd see to your duty. Just as I did."

"But I didn't. He changed my life."

"As I said, he ruined you."

Suddenly, a sort of calmness overtook Jim. In the sense his father was speaking of, Rudolf hadn't "ruined" him. He had opened his eyes to the man he should have been, if revenge and hate hadn't been part of the package. But because of that, finding love had become a minefield, dangerous and deadly. Love was something he'd never allowed himself to experience. He'd made damn certain that any relationships he involved himself in were fleeting and all about the man sex, as his father put it.

Until Caleb.

"But you got your contracts, and you kept your business going."

His father nodded. "We thrived and grew. I figured eventually you would do your duty."

Jim rose to his feet. "Well, then, I guess the price was right."

“I want a grandson.”

He couldn't look at his father right now. He didn't dare. Trying to grasp the fact that the man had sold his son for money was just too much for Jim to wrap his mind around at the moment.

“Well, I doubt that's something you're going to get. I suggest you look to your nephew to carry on the business. Because you'll never get your hands on a child of mine.”

He yanked his cell phone out of his pocket and speed-dialed his father's driver. “Joseph, my father needs your assistance to get home this evening. Can you please come by the store to pick him up?” He ended the call and stuffed the cell back into his pocket.

“You usually drive me home.”

“Not tonight, Father. Joseph will be here in ten minutes.”

“So now you hate me.”

He looked at his father. An old man, bitter and hard. He'd probably live to be a hundred. But he was alone with a heart of ice. How had Jim ever thought he wanted to emulate his father? A father did not sell his son. He did not put business before his family. He did not put duty before love.

Slowly, like a man sleepwalking, Jim made his way out to the front of the store and locked the doors. He took his time setting the alarm, and then he returned to the back. His father was gone, and Jim felt like someone had cut a hole in his heart.

He put on his overcoat, picked up his briefcase, and left the store. It was raining when he got outside. He walked and walked and walked. He didn't know how much time had passed. Nor did he care. He didn't care if his father got home safely; he knew he would never see him with quite the same eyes again.

He knew that everything he'd sacrificed up to this point in his life was for nothing, and the taste of that knowledge was far more bitter, more painful, than he ever could have imagined.

He dropped onto a bench, numb and shaking in the aftermath of everything that had been revealed tonight. And yet, in one corner of his mind, he was freer than he had ever been before. He reached beneath his overcoat for the scarf hanging around his neck. It represented the one right choice he'd made in his life thus far. How it had happened he didn't know, but at the moment, he wasn't going to question it.

He pulled out his cell phone and called the only person who could help him right now. The one person who truly made him feel loved.

## Chapter Eleven

Two o'clock in the morning and Caleb had just walked into his apartment when he was surprised by his cell phone ringing. Who could it be at this hour of the morning? He now paced the floor waiting for Jim to arrive. An odd tone to his voice had told Caleb something was terribly wrong. The doorbell rang and Caleb lunged for the door. He threw it open and then stood there looking at Jim in shock. The man looked like he'd been dragged by a car and dropped into the river. His face was drawn and gray, dark circles beneath his eyes.

"My God, sweetheart, what happened?"

Jim strode into the apartment and stopped in the middle of the living room. He turned in a circle, his eyes taking in the room. To Caleb, it was like he'd never been inside the room before.

Then Jim looked at Caleb, and he saw such anguish in the man's eyes.

"I don't want to talk about it. I just...I just needed to see you. I needed to be...here."

Jim was shaking, a steady tremor, and his teeth chattered. Caleb didn't care about the water running in rivulets onto his rug. Things could be cleaned or replaced. But in the condition Jim was in right now, he could catch pneumonia. Nothing else mattered but helping his lover.



He walked to him, grabbed his arm, and led him through the bedroom and into the large bathroom. James stood there as though in shock and unable to help himself. Caleb turned on the water in the large oval tub and made the water as hot as he could stand it. A fleeting memory of the first time they had been together in the Jacuzzi at the health club ran through his mind. He pushed the memory away. Jim needed him in the here and now. As the tub began to fill, he added bath salts. Then he turned back to Jim, who hadn't moved. Still shivering, his clothes were a sodden mess, clinging to his broad shoulders and narrow hips. His trousers hugged his thighs. And his sneakers spattered with mud as though he'd walked for miles in the rain.

"Let's get you out of these clothes," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. By the time he had him stripped, the bathtub was full. He quickly pulled off his own clothes and then dragged down a pile of big, fluffy towels and set them next to the tub. He walked Jim up the two marble steps. He put a foot into the water to make certain it wasn't too hot. After all, it wasn't his intention to burn the man alive. The temperature was perfect. They climbed in and settled into the water. He turned to the control pad, adjusted the lighting, and set the whirlpool jets on low.

Picking up the soap and sponge, he began to soap Jim's body, trying to encourage circulation of his blood and to rid Jim of the bluish tinge to his skin. He then shampooed his hair with a fragrant herbal gel. By the time he was finished, the color was coming back into Jim's skin.

Jim lay back, his eyes closed, but Caleb didn't think he was asleep.

"You know," he suddenly said, "you live your life by a certain set of standards you believe to be true. And then you learn the ground you've been standing on is nothing but clay, ready to crumble without warning. Things happen that you have no control over; things happen that you see and ignore. And then suddenly, one day, everything is clear. And you discover how brutal life really is."

The sense of such complete disillusionment and devastation worried Caleb. Not a speck of Jim's usual veneer was evident. This man was raw and bleeding, and Caleb needed to do something to stem the flow of lifeblood or he knew he'd lose his lover forever.

"Jim, talk to me. Tell me what happened. Let me help you."

Jim's eyes opened, and he stared dully at Caleb for a long time. Then Caleb saw something ignite in the look. Without warning, Jim surged forward and fastened his lips to Caleb's. There was desperation in the kiss, a need so profound that all Caleb could do was submit.

He wound his arms around Jim's back and, hanging on to him, sealed himself to the man, letting him know without words that he was here for him. That he loved him regardless of whatever demons rode his back.

The kiss changed, softened and teased. Sought forgiveness. And acceptance. Jim probed inside Caleb's mouth, sucked at his breath, gave of his own.

Caleb spread his legs and Jim inserted himself between them. Rubbing flesh on flesh, cock to cock. Stiffened and unyielding flesh. Needy for release.

No words passed between them. None were needed. Jim moved down to suckle at Caleb's hardened nipple, drawing it deeply into his mouth. Caleb threaded his fingers through his lover's wet, dark hair. He gripped tightly as Jim licked at the droplets of water on his chest. He sucked and nipped, drawing a growl of need from Caleb.

Jim lifted away, the look in his eyes now hot and burning, dilated and almost completely black. Bottomless in the subdued light. Caleb caught the flash of the diamond stud in his earlobe. He leaned forward and caught the lobe with his teeth, lightly razing the flesh. He heard Jim's sharply indrawn breath.

Caleb swung around in the swirling water and grabbed onto the lip of the tub. He arched his back in invitation. Jim moved up behind him, cupped his jaw, and tilted his head

back. He kissed the corner of Caleb's mouth, moved across Caleb's shadowed, raspy cheek, nipping at the cusp of his ear.

Caleb felt Jim's cock pressing inward at his hole. He thrust back, and the glans passed through the muscular ring, spreading him, opening him.

Jim pumped his hips, shallow at first and then deeper thrusts. Water splashed, undulating waves surrounded them, providing more lubrication to Caleb's hole.

The only sounds in the room were water, moans of pleasure, and bodies slapping against each other in a rhythm as ancient and primal as the beginnings of man himself. A mating dance, primitive and demanding, fused them as one. Survival, honed by the fires of lust, baptized and cemented by the passion and emotion.

The eruption of Jim's surging seed hit the water as he pulled from inside Caleb's hot channel, leaving Caleb feeling open and empty. He turned around to clasp Jim in his arms as his climax grabbed hold of him. He leaned up to nuzzle at the shadowed jaw. Jim collapsed against him, boneless after expending so much emotion.

Caleb kissed his forehead. "Let's go to bed, sweetheart. Tomorrow's another day."

Jim's arm lifted to stroke Caleb's face. "I'm free, Caleb. I'm free. And I swear, tomorrow will be brighter. Especially if I know you'll be there."

"You can bet on it, baby. Always."

## Chapter Twelve

### *Three Months Later*

Jim was nervous. He kept fingering the jeweler's box in his pocket. For the last two months, he and Caleb had shared Caleb's apartment. Had shared their lives. It had its ups and downs as they learned each other's daily habits, but they had been the best months of Jim's life.

He was still trying to come to terms with the revelations about his father. It would take time. He also wasn't certain what he was going to do about the jewelry store. Everything would not be solved overnight. There was time. When the time came, Caleb would help him make the right decision.

He'd never realized love could be so...all encompassing. So warm. His heart was full. Now he was ready to take another chance.

There was a vigil in the park tonight for supporters of gay marriage. He was meeting Caleb there. He kept looking at his watch as he rode the subway. He should be able to find him easily even in a crowd with his wonderfully flamboyant suit. It was a warm night. There

were several gray clouds that covered the moon, but other than that, there didn't seem to be any impending storm in the offing.

He arrived at the gathering and wondered what he had been thinking. There were way too many people for him to try to locate his lover. He pulled out his cell phone and called him -- that was the easiest thing to do.

As he made his way to where Caleb stood with several of his friends and family, he thought about how much his life had changed in the last few months. And how good he felt about where he was right now.

When he finally spotted Caleb, he almost choked. Who had swapped out his lover for the most traditionally dressed man he had ever seen.

They kissed, and then Caleb handed him a lit candle. "I didn't think you would ever get here."

"What's with the blue suit? Has my lover been body snatched and an alien left in his place?"

He heard a snigger from behind Caleb and turned to see his pretty assistant, Gail, who was accompanied by her husband, Larry.

"You so have him pegged, Jim. Could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw him."

"Well, thank you both. I try to dress appropriately for an important occasion, and this is what I get."

Jim put his free hand on Caleb's shoulder and forced his lover to look at him. "Tell me the truth. Why the suit?"

Caleb looked sheepish and uncertain. Jim had learned the subtle nuances of his moods. Then Caleb lifted his chin to look Jim in the eyes. "I thought you would like it."

"I don't want you to change, baby. I love you just the way you are."

“What did you say?” Caleb’s eyes opened wide.

“I said don’t change. I love your taste in fashion. I love everything about you. Well, almost everything.” He grinned.

“You said the word.” He turned to Gail. “He said it.”

She grinned back. “Of course he did. I told you so.”

He looked at Jim. “Was I hearing things?”

Jim knew this was the moment. It wasn’t a huge event that Caleb had orchestrated. Yet Caleb was surrounded by the people he loved, including Jim. It would be...spontaneous. He turned and handed his candle to Gail and then took Caleb’s candle from him and handed it to her husband.

“Can you hold these for a minute?”

His hands shook as he removed the box from his pocket. He fumbled as he tried to open it.

He looked at Caleb. Then he showed him the rings. Caleb’s sister and brother moved closer to see what was happening. Several other people turned their attention to the two men. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as he tried to remember the words he’d written out. He looked at Caleb.

“I love you, Caleb Wilson. You’re the poet of my heart and my soul. I love the differences of us together, and I want to be with you always. I respect you as you are. In your eyes, I see what I can be with the right person in my life. You are that person. Will you be my husband? If not in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of our friends and family and of each other? Because, baby, my heart is yours. It’s been lonely and imprisoned for far too long, and it’s you who’s set it free.”

It was as though the world held its breath waiting for Caleb's answer. Jim removed one of the rings from the box. It was a gorgeous tricolored gold ring made of two interwoven 14-karat bands. The wider band contained small, channel-set glittering diamonds. The second, narrower band looked more like a tiny chain of intertwined hearts. The inside of the wider band was engraved with their names.

"Will you wear this ring as a symbol of my promise to you to love you for as long as you'll have me?"

Caleb's eyes glittered with unshed tears. Gail sniffled and Caleb handed her the white handkerchief from his breast pocket. "She always does that." He turned back to Jim.

"You call me the poet. You're the man of my dreams, darling. How could I possibly say no?"

Jim placed the ring on Caleb's ring finger. It fit perfectly. He leaned forward to kiss him, but Caleb pulled back.

"Oh no, baby. I know I saw another ring in that little box." He looked at Jim. "You designed them, didn't you? Just for us. And you cut those diamonds yourself."

Jim nodded; he found his heart almost too full to speak.

Caleb pulled the other ring from the nest of white satin. He grinned at Jim as he slipped the ring onto his finger. "Back at you, baby. All you said and more." He reached forward to cup Jim's jaw. He felt the warmth and love shining through.

And then they were in each other's arms, and Jim knew he'd finally come home.

There were squeals of pleasure and hands clapping and shouts of good wishes. People were hugging; Caleb's sister was crying, hugging first Caleb and then Jim.

For the first time in his life, he truly felt part of something greater than himself. A family and friends, filled with love. And then the full moon showed through the clouds, its

light bearing down on them. It was a moment like no other. And one he would always remember.

And his heart was filled with love as, with one hand, he held the lighted candle and, with the other, he tightly clasped his husband's hand.

 THE END 



## Adrianna Dane

The first defining love story Adrianna read back in junior high school was *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, and that set her on the road to her long standing love affair with the romance genre. Her inspiration in writing often can be found by listening to song lyrics and reading poetry by such poets as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edgar Allen Poe, and Ranier Maria Rilke. But finding inspiration for her stories truly has no boundaries for Adrianna.

She freely admits she is a romantic by nature and adding sensual heat to romance with a dusting of suspense is her motto. *Esmerelda's Secret*, released by Amber Quill Press in June of 2004, was Adrianna's first book, and with that story and her subsequent books has firmly established herself as a voice within the sensual/erotic romance genre.

Adrianna always looks forward to hearing from her readers and she may be contacted at [adriannadane@yahoo.com](mailto:adriannadane@yahoo.com). Find out more about her current releases as well as planned future releases and book signings by checking for updates at [www.adriannadane.com](http://www.adriannadane.com).