



# SILENT PARTNER

TREVA HARTE

I ♥ THAT CITY

Loose Id

I HEART THAT CITY:  
**SILENT PARTNER**

Treva Harte

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# **I Heart That City: Silent Partner**

**Treva Harte**

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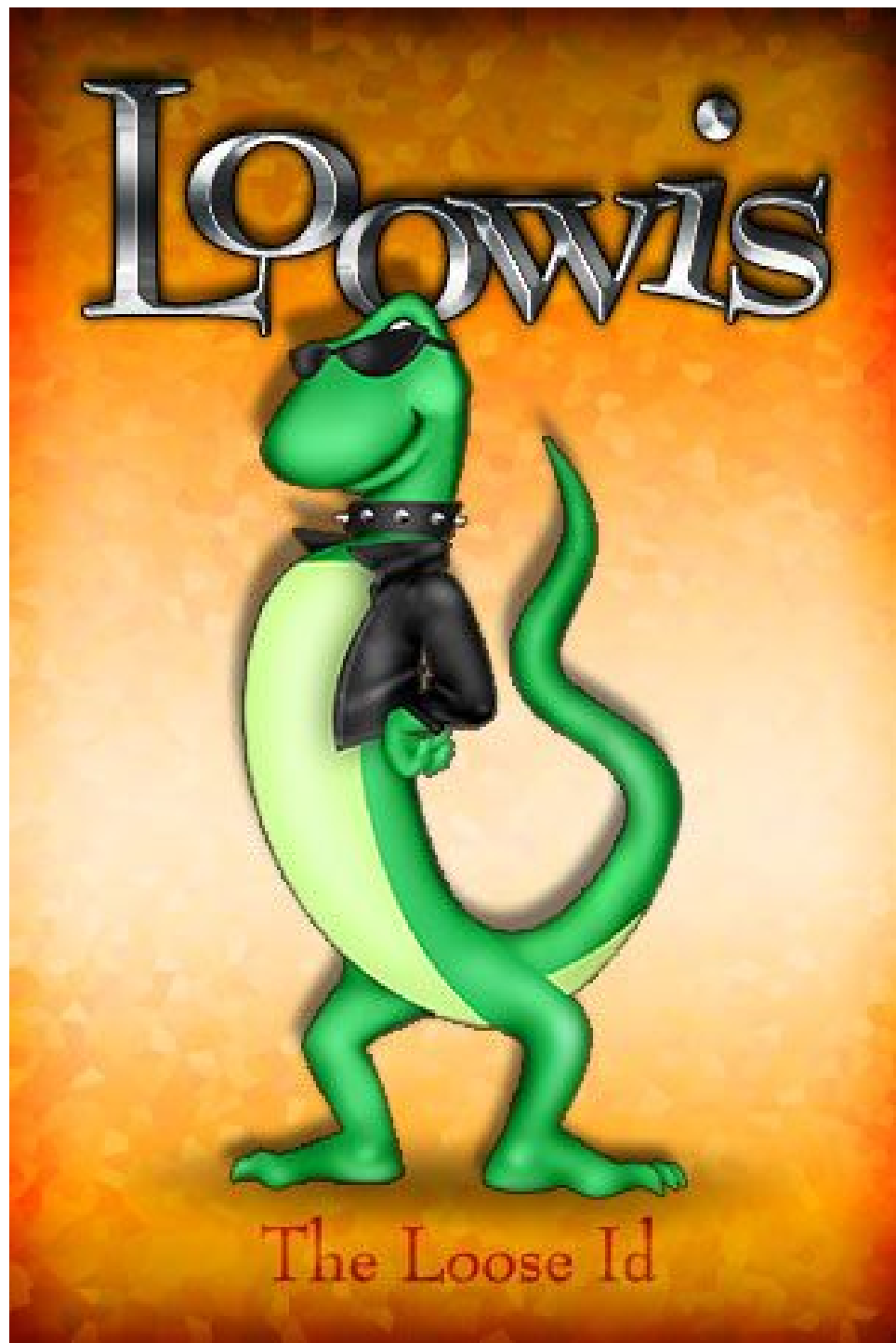
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## Chapter One

“What do you mean ‘no green beer’?” Bridget put her hands on her hips.

“Whaddya think I mean? If someone wants to profane good Guinness by adding green dye, he can bring his own frickin’ food coloring.” Joel shook his head as he pushed past the bartender. “Jeez. Pissing green. What a stupid frickin’ holiday.”

Zach shrugged as he checked out the stock behind the bar. “Pissing Green wouldn’t make a bad name for a drink, though. But we’ll stick to Fuck Me, I’m Irish for tonight.”

“Great. Give the whole bar a few. Maybe someone’ll get lucky, but more likely everyone will be too drunk to eff anyone. That’s an Irish tradition for you.”

“Don’t hold back, Joel. I’m not absolutely sure what you’re thinking.” The mellow, amused Southern drawl behind him belonged to Chaz.

Joel almost smiled. He almost turned around too. But he wasn’t going to let his partner stop a good rant that easily.

“I said ‘frickin’ and ‘eff’ instead of what I was thinking because of you.” Joel pulled out some gum from under the cash register and began to chomp before he turned to glare at the taller man. “Mealymouthed redneck.”

Chaz looked down at his chinos and cashmere sweater and then, more pointedly, at Joel's battered T-shirt. "If you didn't insist on opening your mouth and letting all that Yankee bile out, people might mistake you for the redneck, Bryant. And folks might get the idea you aren't proud of your Irish name, the way you carry on about St. Patrick's Day."

"People can kiss my" -- Joel swallowed hard -- "half-Irish behind. Ha! No matter how you push, I haven't sworn a word yet."

"You said 'pissing,'" Bridget called out from the other end of the bar.

"Oh, fuck. That's not a curse." Joel put his head down on the bar as everyone yelled and stomped. "Everyone in this...er, this place...is keeping score."

Chaz had made a very public bet that Joel would swear at least a dozen times before closing time on St. Patrick's Day. Joel now realized he'd been insane to agree to the wager. It wasn't fair to have to give up cursing and smoking too.

"You have a foul mouth, Bry." Chaz leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Makes me wonder why I want to stick my tongue in it."

"I can think of better things for you to stick your tongue into," Joel muttered back. Damn it, no one else called him Bry. Just like no one else could make him melt inside with the nickname.

"I've got some accounting to tend to this afternoon. Stop by the office in a few hours and we can attend to that. Oh, and don't scare off the clientele in the meantime, partner." Chaz made it sound all business.

"This place doesn't charge enough to have clientele. Customers will do." Joel called his parting shot to a disappearing Chaz.

The man would spend the next few hours adding and subtracting bills, and pay attention to it too. Meanwhile Joel was going to be thinking about tongue.

Tongue attached to a drawling, self-possessed Southern boy who could always make Joel look like a wild man. Feel like one, too, when Chaz got his hands on him...

“We’re having Celtic musicians show up tonight. That’s frickin’ Irish enough for me to suffer through. No green beer.” Joel glared at Bridget again and went back to the kitchen.

Smart-mouthed waitress. You’d think she owned the rights to St. Patrick’s Day just because of the red hair and some distant Irish ancestor who had to leave the Old Country or starve, and good riddance.

Emmy was chopping cabbage, humming a little bit to herself. Joel had often wondered what might make the restaurant’s resident hippie chick ever lose her serenity. St. Patrick’s Day wasn’t going to do it. She’d cooked through Joel’s worst temper tantrums, floods, power failure, and during one memorable evening, managed to cook and wait tables when every other staff member had come down with the flu and a hurricane threatened to descend on the Fan District. People had showed up that night too. No one wanted to miss Emmy-inspired food.

“Everything cool here?” Joel asked anyhow.

“Beautiful. I sent Kiki to buy curry for the lamb. And it should work for the new vegetarian dish.”

Joel knew better than to point out neither curried lamb nor a new vegetarian dish was what had been planned for the menu tonight. Emmy definitely always did her own thing.

“Great. Let me know if you need something.”

“Thank you. And I’ll light some aromatherapy candles in your office as soon as I get the chance. It should help calm you.” Emmy finished chopping onions and began to put them in a pan.

“I’m totally frickin’ calm, Emmy.”

“Of course you are. The candles will help.”

Joel knew better than to try to stop her. He hoped Chaz liked the scent of Emmy’s hand-dipped candles better than he did. The office would reek of them before Joel showed up.



Hours. Chaz had told him hours before they could get together.

Not that he didn't need to make sure the staff was there and everything was set up first. Joel gritted his teeth and got on with it.

I Heart That City was a decent place. He'd enjoyed it as much as he enjoyed anywhere. But he'd been here almost ten years now when he'd figured it would be three or four years max.

Richmond was totally not his town and never would be. What was a Brooklyn boy doing in the former capital of the Confederacy? When he first arrived, he'd spent six months waiting for someone to tell him what the joke was. It took that long before it dawned that these people really believed the stuff that came out of their mouths. In their heads, the South had never lost and Yankees still weren't entirely to be trusted.

He was as Yankee as they came. Half-Jewish, half-Irish, all New Yorker.

Joel glanced up at the clock. The lunch shift was almost over. The usual crowd was putting away the cabbage and corned beef special along with their dark Guinness. Joel wondered what Chaz's clientele would make of curried lamb for the special tonight instead of something faintly Celtic-related.

Screw 'em. They'd eat it and love it.

Soon it wouldn't matter what they wanted anyhow.

He stepped out into the alley, the way he had a million times, out of habit. Then he reminded himself that he wasn't going to have a smoke to steady his nerves.

He touched the letter in his pocket. He'd been thinking about the news off and on all day when he wasn't busy fighting nicotine cravings and checking on the bar.

The letter had to be a sign that it was time for Joel Bryant to change his ways yet again.

He glanced over at the light shining through the door of the back office. He'd have to tell Chaz first.

There wasn't anything to be nervous about. Hell, except for Chaz, who else was there to tell? No one would really give a damn. He'd go in and say what needed to be said to his business partner, and that would be that. They'd been good in business, better in bed, but that's as far as it ever went. The two of them were too different.

Not many people knew they were business partners. No one else even imagined Chaz was more. Chaz had insisted it be that way. He didn't want to upset his very proper, wealthy Southern family. Joel could see how he might not think it worth the effort of explaining a temporary friends-with-benefits relationship with a crazy Yankee. Joel took another breath in and out through his nose.

Almost ten years. Hey, everything was temporary, right? This gig had lasted a little longer than expected, but it was time to leave.

Joel patted his pockets, looking for a cigarette, and then realized what he was doing. He clenched his hands into fists instead.

Yeah. Just tell Chaz, and start getting ready to move on.

But he wished he could have a smoke first. One of his self-appointed nannies would catch him, though, and it wasn't worth it. They'd run and tell Chaz. Once he left, he wouldn't have Chaz on his ass about anything anymore. It got old. He didn't need nannies or Chaz to tell him how to live his life.

Right?

Joel pushed the door and headed to the office. He opened it to a dim and smoky glow.

Chaz had pulled the blinds and was reading papers at the desk by aromatherapy candlelight. Joel opened his mouth to make a crack and shut it again. He'd rather admire the view.

The man was goddamned gorgeous. Tall, dark-skinned, and runner lean. Self-possessed. Not much got past that controlled concentration. Joel thought about all the ways he could try.

“Wondered when you might drop by, Bry.”

And he had that damned rich drawl -- he'd make a fortune if he took up phone sex. His voice alone could make Joel want to jump him, even without the chocolate good looks.

“Well, I've dropped.” And here he was: short, stocky, five o'clock shadow by three thirty, and with a Brooklyn accent that wasn't ever going away, no matter how long he stayed out of the borough.

No wonder they'd never gotten further than good business and great sex.

“Something on your mind, Bry? You're twitching like a landed trout.”

“You fish too, don't you? Ride, play golf and tennis, a little squash on the weekend with the boys. The all-around country gentleman.”

“I work most of the time. I teach at VCU when I'm not helping run this place, if you recall.” Chaz leaned back and crossed his arms. “You want to fight about my lifestyle?”

“Naw.” Joel swallowed and turned the nearest candle around in his hand. “You look good by candlelight, Chaz. Like a landed gentleman with an estate. But then you are. The oldest son of a fine old Virginia family.”

Chaz laughed. “You make me sound like I own a plantation. My granddaddy was the one who made the money to buy our country place. He didn't leave anything to *maintain* it. There are plenty of mortgages and taxes on that estate, Joel. That's why my parents unloaded it on me and retired to a condo in Hampton Roads. Plenty of problems with the relatives too. But seeing me by candlelight isn't what you have on your mind, I'll bet. What's going on? Being indirect isn't your usual style.”

They could just go back to the restaurant, eat dinner, and then go back to his place or Chaz's. Forget the whole thing. Stay the way they were.

No.

“Got something from a lawyer today.”

“I Heart That City isn't being sued, is it?”

“For God’s sake, Chaz, no. My aunt died. We used to be pretty close when I was a kid. I didn’t know she was so sick. No one told me.” Joel began to pace. “No one in the family thought to. Hell, no one in the family went to visit her to find out.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She left me her place in Canarsie of all places. I’m a landed gentleman now too.” He tried to smile, although Chaz wasn’t smiling. He wasn’t even blinking. “Chaz?”

“So you’ll have to go back to settle that.”

“Well, yeah.” Joel fingered the letter again. He didn’t want to say the rest. Not while Chaz looked so worried. Chaz knew there was more. But Joel knew a way to make the man feel better quick, and it wasn’t conversation. “Listen. We can take a break for an hour or so. Go to my place.”

“Let’s go to mine.”

“Mine’s closer.”

“Mine’s cleaner.” Chaz stood up. “Has a bigger bed too.”

He pulled Joel to him and kissed him hard, the way Chaz rarely did, grinding himself against Joel’s suddenly hard cock.

“All right.” Joel was a total sucker for Chaz when he got eager enough to get a little rough. “Snuff the damn candle. I only want to burn up your sheets, bud. We can’t afford the smoke damage.”

“Shut up, Bry, and get in my car.”

Joel pulled his face away with an effort. “Walk. We might not find a parking space close enough. I’m not spending a half hour looking for one right now.”

Chaz laughed, even though his eyes were hot. He pushed against the small of Joel’s back almost painfully, and his hand curled over part of Joel’s ass cheek. “Move, Yank. Time’s a-wasting while you take one of your misnamed New York minutes to chat instead of screw.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Chaz didn't waste any time locking his door as soon as they stumbled in. Joel was panting, and not only because he was unfastening Chaz's belt buckle. They'd started off at a brisk walk and then picked up the pace, almost running past the Victorian brick townhouses that dominated the Fan. They'd sprinted the last fifty yards, half-laughing and half-serious about getting to a bed as fast as humanly possible. Running up the stairs to Chaz's third-story apartment, carved out of what had been a single-family townhouse, almost finished them off.

"Jesus, you reek of candle wax," Joel muttered as he finally got his hands on the man's cock.

"You've smelled better yourself, Bry. After that run, you're sweating like a fucked pig." Chaz's teeth gleamed and then he rubbed his face against Joel's chest and took a sniff. "I like it."

Joel's face burned, and not just from their run. Chaz was so polite that when he said anything remotely hot, he made it sound twice as dirty as anyone else could. That was all right. As Chaz would say, Joel liked it.

He paused to shove his pants off, but his jeans were still around his knees when Chaz pushed him to the floor.

"Hey!" Joel managed before his partner was on top of him, his hard cock tight against Joel's.

Having his legs immobilized was a little kinky, but with Chaz on top of him, holding his shoulders down, Joel figured it was exactly what Chaz was trying for. Fine. It sure as hell wasn't too kinky for him, not if Chaz was willing to follow through. They bumped against each other and then Joel's head slammed against the floor, his hands slapping at the wooden boards. His head whirled, but that was more from Chaz rubbing against him, breathing hard, than the impact. Joel's balls tightened; his body tensed. He gritted his teeth, trying to hold on a little longer, build the need even higher.

“Come on, then, Bry. Jesus!” Chaz’s body jerked above him and cum spilled out, wet and sticky between them, a moment before Joel began to come in hard spurts.

They lay, stuck together, still panting.

Chaz looked down at him and smiled, a suddenly sweet smile. “You never do what I expect, Bry. It’s part of your charm.”

Joel tried to catch his breath. He could put things off a little longer. Enjoy the moment. Watch Chaz with that smile on his face and just bask in the glow while it lasted. There was no hurry --

Hell. He’d been doing that for years now. It was time to say it, straight out. “Then you’ll think this is really charming. I want to sell my half of the restaurant. It’s time for me to go home.”

“I see.”

Chaz shut down on him. Withdrew, and not just his body, as he stood up and began to wash off.

Joel struggled up on one elbow and said, “You knew this was coming someday. It’s not like we swore to stay together forever.”

“Almost a decade doesn’t count for anything? We fucking met on St. Patrick’s Day nine years ago, Joel. We went to bed together before Easter. We became business partners eight years ago, New Year’s Day, when we opened I Heart That City.”

“Of course we’re together on holidays. We run a restaurant, and we work them.” Joel let out the hurt he had refused to acknowledge until now, until Chaz’s unreasonable guilt trip got him going. “But I’m not good enough to be with on your days off. You head to your country home to be with your family on Sundays. I’d never have met your sisters except they eat at the restaurant and you acknowledge me while you talk to them. How many times have I been to the old ancestral estate you love so much, Chaz?”

Silence.

“You can use the fingers of one hand to count how often I’ve been permitted to show up, and have a few fingers left over.” Joel sat up. “So don’t pretend I mean anything much in your life.”

Chaz looked down at him, frowning. “You always laughed at me for liking the country. I didn’t think you’d feel particularly comfortable there.”

“You didn’t think you’d be particularly comfortable with me there, you mean.” Joel decided he was at too much of a disadvantage on the floor and stood. “You might have to explain to your nice Southern family and friends why someone like me hung around with you. And God knows, since there was no other reason, you might have people thinking you’re queer.”

“Excuse me, but you’re the one who announced he’s planning to leave, not me.”

“You never let me get close enough to leave.”

There was more silence. Joel let sense start to trickle in now that he’d let his mouth move faster than his brain. Again.

He mopped his face and cock with his shirt, pulling his jeans back up again. Chaz still didn’t say anything as he silently handed him a clean shirt from his drawer.

Things weren’t supposed to end this way. He liked Chaz, for God’s sake. In all these years, they’d never really fought. Not really.

What the fuck had happened? Joel put his shoes on and looked around, glancing at the door. Was this really it? He only had a toothbrush and a few toiletries at Chaz’s apartment. There was no grand good-bye to make. It wasn’t like he had a key to give back or anything.

He should have had a key after all this time.

“Bry?”

“Yeah?”

“You want to come to the house this Sunday? We probably need to talk.”

An invitation at last, just him alone, to the dear old family home. Now that it didn't matter.

It had never mattered, of course.

He should say no and let it all go. Keep things as friendly as they always had been up until this weird last fifteen minutes.

He'd never had any sense.

"Sure, Chaz. Why not?" Joel combed his hair with his fingers. "But I need to get back to the restaurant now. We still have St. Patrick's Day to get through."

When he left, Chaz didn't follow him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You need to visit the house this weekend."

Those were the words she'd been waiting for. She didn't like waiting. She *hated* waiting.

She wiped her hands on her jeans, realizing maybe she was a little nervous. Maybe a lot nervous.

This was it. She'd gotten this far. A little longer. A little more. Finally she wouldn't be waiting and wondering anymore.

She had a bad feeling from what he wasn't saying and the bleak note in his voice. She wouldn't ask. She'd find out soon enough. In the meantime, she wasn't going to let this big chance go.

"Then I'll be there."



## Chapter Two

He was avoiding problems again.

*“Excuse me, but you’re the one who announced he’s planning to leave, not me.”*

*“You never let me get close enough to leave.”*

With perfect hindsight, he knew that was when he should have said something to Bry. The man who had just announced the end date of their relationship. Everything could have worked out if he’d said the right thing. Instead, now he had this fierce clutch in his stomach that kept telling him he’d been a fool last night and was even more of one this morning.

He should have been more prepared. Every time Bry had announced he was going to go visit home, Chaz had been afraid he’d never come back. He just shut down whenever Bry talked about New York. Why the hell hadn’t he planned out what to say when his worst-case scenario came true?

*“You want to come to the house this Sunday? We probably need to talk.”*

That hadn’t been the right thing. That was spectacularly the *wrong* thing, in fact. His family home and Bry weren’t meant to mix. And the waiting made everything worse. It would be days before they went there. Days before they had time to talk.

Now he had a silent Bry in the truck with him. A silent Bry was a seriously unhappy Bry. Chaz had actually been relieved when Bry agreed to be picked up and taken to I Heart That City this morning. It must mean something that they were going to their restaurant together. It was the one thing they still had that was theirs, not something Bry's or his alone. At least until Bry sold his half of the partnership.

He'd take care of that. He was the champion of taking care of problems.

Just not his own. He was going to change that, starting now. He just wasn't sure how.

All right. If he couldn't think of the right thing to say, he'd show Bry. Chaz opened the door to his truck and ran to the other side to open Bry's.

He could take care of Bry. Think more about what he needed and wanted instead of forgetting his partner's tough-guy exterior was mostly talk. Opening the door for him was a start.

Bry blinked at him, already halfway out of the truck before Chaz managed to get there. Chaz turned and walked toward the restaurant, jiggling the key to open that door instead. How many times had he reminded himself to get someone to fix the lock?

He'd let that wait too. He'd known Bry was getting restless, but as long as Bry didn't talk about it, Chaz let it go. Just like the damn door. Until it didn't work anymore.

"I'll handle it, Chaz. The lock is getting more and more touchy, and my key works better." His partner brushed by him and muttered while he wrestled with the lock. It finally clicked.

"Allow me." Chaz opened the door that held their shared life. Maybe they'd get their rhythm back once they started working together today. They'd always clicked with I Heart That City.

Joel looked at him oddly again. "Knock yourself out."

They both stepped inside.

“Oh God.” Chaz stepped away from a pile of unidentifiable goo near the entrance. “Oh dear heavenly Jesus.”

“You know, I’m the one who lost the bet last night because of my mouth. Maybe I should have bet you couldn’t keep your language clean after seeing the aftermath of St. Patrick’s Day.” Bry picked up a chair and placed it upright against the table. “Is that any way for a minister’s grandkid to talk?”

He sounded almost as snappish as his normal self. That was promising.

“My mouth is the only thing marginally clean about this place today.” Chaz sighed, rolled up his dress shirtsleeves, and went to the back of the bar for a mop. “When will the staff show up?”

“When they get over their hangovers.” Bry began to roll up the tattered green paper table covers and toss them in the middle of the floor. “Any garbage bags back there?”

“Not enough. There isn’t enough in the entire Old Dominion to handle this.”

“At least it wasn’t on a Friday. They’re the worst. You see why I hate the holiday now?”

“I’ve seen it every year for the past eight, darlin’. But later I see how much was spent at the bar, and I get happy all over again.”

“It’s all about the money, right?” Bry ran his hand over Chaz’s ass as Chaz bent over to wring out the mop. Things were definitely getting back to normal. “Underneath that sweet Southern charm is a hard-boiled cynic.”

Chaz straightened, turned, then slid his hands inside Bry’s jeans. He squeezed, and Chaz could feel Bry’s cock start getting hard. Bry’s eyelids half shut in a telltale sign that he’d forgotten things were awkward right now. That he was leaving. All he was thinking about was what Chaz was doing to him. *Very, very good.* Chaz slid one finger against Bry’s asshole, determined to make Bry forget awhile longer.

Bry cupped Chaz's balls and leaned into his partner's body. *C'mon, Bry. Change your mind. Tell me it was a stupid idea to leave. Go back to things being the way they've always been.*

And then Chaz would screw him into next week.

The noise at the back door gave him just enough warning before he forgot where they were.

Chaz took a step back, although it damn near killed him. "I'm a pragmatist, Bry. Something you'll never be. And someone is coming in the back door."

"I wish someone else was coming in right now," Bry muttered and dropped his hands.

"You boys enjoying your spring housecleaning today?" Emmy asked, glancing at the still-god-awful mess. "When are you two heading to Rappahannock?"

"Not soon enough. We have days to get rid of the worst of last night's rampage before we go." Chaz put the mop back in the bucket.

"We could skip going." Bry shoved the last of the table covers into a bulging trash bag.

"Oh no." Chaz whacked him on the shoulder. "You don't get away that easy."

Maybe he wasn't stupid to take Bry home. After all, that was where he'd first been crazy enough to think he should try for it all -- Bry *and* the life his parents wanted for him, Richmond and the family home together at last, all in one tidy package. Maybe that's where he could make Bry understand what he wanted.

"Making this place fit for someone to eat in isn't getting off easy," Bry protested.

"That's why you pay us so well to do it. More folks will be here soon enough to clean, and things will be tidied up by dinner." Emmy began to pick up tankards at the bar.

Bry opened his mouth and shut it again. Chaz hid a smile. He might have tried to weasel out if it were Chaz alone, but Bry knew he couldn't argue with both his partner and Emmy. Two against Bry was the only way you could win an argument with him.

He let himself breathe again. He'd get Bry to accept everything once he explained. Besides, he wasn't alone once he got home. For the first time that day, he relaxed a little.

Susan.

Susan had his back. Tentative hope grew with just the thought, temporarily easing the ache in his gut. Chaz didn't want to lose his partner. He just wanted more. The need threatened to choke Chaz sometimes. He couldn't go on keeping things the way they'd become. He couldn't lose what he had. They all needed more.

Wasn't that really why Bry was leaving? Because there hadn't been enough?

Chaz needed to make him understand.

Two against Bry again. Chaz might just win.

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is a movie set, not a house, you know." Joel climbed out of Chaz's truck, stopping only to grab his overnight bag. "You could win awards for most clichés used in decoration. It's not even the right fucking clichés for your family. This looks like a plantation house."

"My grandfather had a sense of irony. He liked the idea of us living like Southern gentry, so he built the place to look it. Said we'd been around as long and worked in the same places as they had. Of course, then he expected us to keep the lifestyle going. My daddy made enough money to oblige him and do things up even better. What bothers you most, Bry? The hunting scenes on the walls? The boxwood maze in the gardens? Growing up with a household staff that had been with us since before I was born?" Chaz sounded amused, but there was a tightness around his mouth that Joel wasn't sure about.

"All of it. None of it. But put it all together, and it's too much." Joel followed through the wide wooden doors and got hit between the eyes with the interior.

Chaz had modernized it some since Joel saw it last. The floral wallpaper had been stripped -- Joel remembered wondering aloud if it had been handed down by someone else's

original ancestor -- and the walls were painted a surprisingly strong blue. Blue enough to make Joel blink. The effect somehow made the walls look bigger, had the hall look even more imposing. Yeah. Like the place needed that.

Chaz even had portraits of family members hanging on those walls, of his grandfather, the preacher-turned-politician during the '60s, then his father, the trial lawyer who ran for senator. There was one small, battered tintype of sharecropper great-great-grandparents that looked out of place in this expensive display. Crowded on the wall, it was as if there were multiple copies of their portraits, reflecting off the hall's full-length mirrors with the gilt frames. Formal paintings of public men merged into expensive photographs of generations of Randolph faces. Dozens and dozens of them lined the hall, all looking down at him.

"It must be nice to be one of the Randolphs. I didn't even know there was such a thing as 'the Randolphs' until I got to Richmond."

"Are you going to spend the whole time being snide?" There was an edge in the man's voice. A definite edge. Joel bit his tongue. He'd forgotten that the family name had been taken from when they were owned by another famous Randolph family. It wasn't the kind of thing Chaz and his family forgot, though.

Seeing as Chaz was his ride home, making him mad would be a stupid plan.

"Naw. This whole setup intimidates me. You know that." Joel shifted his bag to the other hand. "Where do you want me to dump this?"

"You don't want the butler to take it up?" Chaz asked.

"Oh God, Chaz."

"Idiot. I don't have one. Mary retired last year. Now a housecleaning crew comes in once a week, and that's about it for people taking care of the house. There's no staff left. I'm not here often enough to make anything more worth it. Come on, Bry."

Joel stared ahead and tried not to look at the tasteful antiques he was walking past. Old furniture. That was all it was. Really old furniture that probably George Washington had sat

on, slept in, or eaten from. As they went up the hall and farther away from what most people would see, African masks and art began to appear on the walls, proclaiming a Randolph heritage even older than Washington.

“You aren’t getting all crazy on me again, are you? You always act this way when you show up.”

“How would you know? I’m always crazy.” Joel dropped his bag on the wooden floor the moment Chaz opened the door. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could hold it up. How long he would hold up, for that matter.

He hated to admit it, but Chaz had a point. The whole fucking place scared the shit out of him. He felt like a puppy that was going to pee on the most expensive rug in the house despite its best efforts. He hated it when his inferiority complex acted up.

All he needed to remember was it didn’t matter anymore. He and Chaz would iron out a few business details, and he was gone. Chaz would find someone else who could handle him dividing up his time. It might even take the guy as long as Joel to clue in that Chaz had two lives: one in Richmond as a gay bohemian academic, and a second one, his real life, as a country squire with any hint of an alternative lifestyle thrown deep into the closet. Chaz didn’t like to mix the two. In fact, Joel would probably never see this place again.

Of course, unless Chaz came up to the city for an academic conference or something, Joel would probably never see Chaz again anywhere.

He rubbed his chest absently, trying to ignore the sharp pain in there.

“Hey. This is your study.” Joel suddenly realized where he was.

“Yeah. Forgot your way? This is the shortcut to my bedroom.” Chaz pushed open the door that led to the master bedroom, with the four-poster bed and the huge fireplace. They’d made good use of both the last time Joel had been here.

And they’d definitely used the way in through the study. That had been the weekend Chaz had thrown himself a thirty-fifth birthday party. The shortcut had gotten plenty of use.

God knows Chaz couldn't have Joel walking in or out of his bedroom in the middle of the night. What would his sisters think?

He paused at Chaz's wooden desk, where an expensive computer took up a lot of the space. The black-and-white photos on the filing cabinet were mostly of his family. These weren't for show, although they were as good as any in the hall. These were around for love. Chaz had taken them, of course. He didn't just teach photography; he took every chance to use it.

"You have some new ones." Joel laughed suddenly. "That's me at the bar."

His hair was sticking up, and he was obviously mouthing off to someone. Probably Chaz. Joel remembered that he hadn't appreciated Chaz interrupting him during the busiest time of the day.

"Your pose there is pretty characteristic."

Joel hadn't expected to be included with the family portraits. He looked over at yet another Southern belle who was laughing into the camera. Nice. That was a new photo, but she looked a bit more exotic than the rest of the very upper-middle-class Randolphs. This one was dark-haired and stared directly into the camera for the shot, instead of demurely down, although Chaz had managed to get a shadow to shade half her face. She looked like -- damn, he should know her. "Who is that? Another third or fourth cousin?"

"No, idiot. That's Susan. I want you to see her later. Come on, Bry, what's taking you so long? Afraid I'm going to shove you down on the bed and have my wicked way with you?"

With a threat like that looming, Joel naturally stepped forward a little faster.

True to the implied promise, once Joel got to the bedroom, Chaz shoved. Hard. Joel skidded and fell facedown on the bed. He began to laugh.

"A guy likes to be asked first, you know."

"Not you. You just like it." Chaz's drawl thickened as he straddled Joel's ass, resting his cock between the cheeks.



Chaz was already hard, and Joel could feel his own response. He swallowed a small whimper. Shit, Chaz was right. He did like it. He fucking *loved* it. Chaz placed a wet kiss on his neck and moved closer, rubbing against him. Then he nipped the spot he'd kissed. This time Joel didn't swallow the whimper.

"I'll ask since it means so much to you, Bry. Foreplay or lube?"

"Where the fuck is the Astroglide?"

Chaz slapped him on the ass while he laughed, and damned if Joel didn't realize he was already leaking some precum. He began to rip off his pants, still facedown, and not caring too much if he humped ye olde eighteenth-century feather-down mattress while he got undressed, especially while Chaz was slowly sliding slickened fingers almost but not quite into his hole, teasing him all the way. Joel had the feeling the bed might be the only thing that would give him any relief for a while.

"Bastard," Joel muttered.

"That's 'Mr. Bastard and please hurry' to you, Yank. Remember to use 'please.' I like that."

"I just love it when we role-play and you do your Southern Slave Owner routine, Mr. Randolph," Joel answered in a falsetto. "Just remember who won that war. Aaaagh."

Chaz wasn't exactly rough, but he wasn't all that gentle as he slid on a condom and then slid inside Joel. Joel panted and shifted and realized he was already pushing up to get more of Chaz's cock. He wanted that burn today. He wanted it fast, wanted Chaz to need it as badly as he did.

"Fuck me. Ah, fuck me, Chaz." Joel hesitated, and Chaz stopped the slow thrusts in and out. "Please fuck me. Damn it."

"Sure, darlin'. As hard and as long as you want."

When Chaz started fucking him again, Joel wasn't sure but what he saw stars. That might have been from lack of oxygen, though. He didn't have time to breathe.

“Oh God.” Joel moaned the words into the mattress as his hands tried to grab for something to anchor him.

Too late. Chaz groaned behind him, and Joel let go, coming hard and long.

He opened his eyes, panting. With one last thought before he totally collapsed, he looked closer and made a bet with himself that he’d shot cum into an expensive antique quilt.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You have me all wrong, Joel.”

“Huh?” The couple of glasses of wine he’d had to relax were working well enough to make him murmur one syllable instead of ask more. He slumped more comfortably in front of the fireplace and let his back rest against Chaz’s chest. But when Chaz called him Joel, he usually meant something serious. Too bad Joel couldn’t muster up the energy to care.

“About this place. You think I’m devoted to being a Randolph. That I love owning this.”

“You don’t act like you hate it, that’s for sure.”

“I grew up in this house, and no, I don’t hate it. There are a lot of good memories and tradition here. But it owns me. Any money I get goes into upkeep and taxes. Every week I need to come out and make sure things are running smoothly. It’s a huge responsibility. It’s *my* responsibility, a part of me, the job I was raised to take on.” Chaz’s voice lowered. “And I’m a different person here. I know you think this is what I’m really like, but you’re wrong. Why do you think we’ve been together so long?”

Joel twisted his neck to look at him. “We own a restaurant, and we fuck each other really good.”

“I can’t argue either point.” Chaz’s face softened as he spoke. Joel smiled lazily back at him.

Chaz's voice got even more serious. "We're in the longest relationship I've ever had with a man -- with anyone -- because you're not part of this place. You let me forget about being responsible. About being careful. You let me be what I've always wanted to be."

Joel would have scowled at his wineglass, but he didn't have the energy to stop smiling at Chaz. *Stupid fucking wine*. It wasn't his usual drink, but it was what Chaz had offered while they stretched out in front of the fireplace. He shouldn't have had that last glass. He felt soppy with sweet, fuzzy feelings, which also meant his brain wasn't working right.

Because Chaz was trying to tell him something important but holding back more than he was telling. If he weren't so damned relaxed, he'd figure all of it out instead of basking in a warm glow that wasn't just from the fire.

"You like me because I'm a loudmouthed New Yorker who doesn't know shit about your traditions?"

"I like you because you've shed so many of your inhibitions, and you laugh at me when I struggle with mine. You let me be free, Bry. As free as I can let myself be."

What was Chaz trying to say? Had he made a mistake in deciding to leave Chaz and Richmond behind? Joel rubbed his forehead. If only his brain would get back into gear!

"I have something big to explain to you, Bry."

Joel wasn't sure he'd heard that or dreamed the words. By then, with his head on Chaz's shoulder and eyes shut, he was too far gone to care.

\* \* \* \* \*

He woke up hearing voices downstairs and realized Chaz must have dragged him into bed at some point. He appreciated the thought, but would have appreciated quiet and maybe not so much sunlight even more.

Joel rubbed his chin stubble and winced. He wasn't a morning person at the best of times -- one reason I Heart That City didn't serve breakfast -- but the ornate clock in the corner said it was one o'clock.

His stomach growled.

He got up, thought about shaving, and decided it might be too much effort. He did manage to put a robe on in case the owners of the voices downstairs cared about nakedness in the afternoon. In a house this big, he ought to be able to avoid guests while he grabbed something from the kitchen. His stomach growled again. Anything to eat would be fine. He ran his tongue over his lips. Liquid would be good too.

He managed to get to the middle of the central hall before he was caught. The voices had stopped, and Joel had figured he could make a dash for it, when a woman's voice behind him stopped him in his tracks.

"Joel, I'm so glad you stayed!"

He turned, warily. She seemed faintly familiar, but he couldn't figure out who...Susan. The photograph.

Black-and-white didn't do her justice. She was tinier than he'd thought, holding a huge bouquet of red and gold flowers in one hand and a vase in the other.

She wasn't a Randolph cousin. The exotic look he'd noted came from a multiracial heritage, one you couldn't see in a black-and-white photo.

*Oh fuck.* He knew her now despite the changes. He shut down all the internal alarm bells going off and concentrated on what she was saying. He wasn't going to make a fool of himself if he could help it.

"Delroy gave me the flowers to arrange now since Chaz wasn't here until late yesterday. Usually I do that after we go to church."

Joel nodded and smiled. He had no idea who Delroy was, or if he, Chaz, and Susan went together to church to pick up flowers, or she meant something else entirely. However,

he could tell Susan obviously knew her way around the place and knew more about him than he could remember about her.

That must be Chaz's doing. What had Chaz told her? What hadn't Chaz told him?

"How silly to be talking about that." Susan turned and put the flowers and vase on the hall table behind her. Her long, tightly waved hair fell forward to hide her expression for a moment. Then she whirled back and moved toward him, both hands stretched out and a smile lighting her face.

She was really quite pretty, especially when she smiled, and even more especially when that big smile clearly meant she was delighted to see him. He'd always loved that smile.

"I'm so glad you decided to stay after Chaz spoke to you!" She grabbed both his hands, stretched herself up, and kissed him on his unshaven chin.

Joel smiled back.

"Susan." He managed to say her name and tried to ignore the sudden cold feeling inside, numbing him all over. What the hell was Chaz supposed to have said to him?

"I look different, I know. I've lost weight, grown up...grown older. I'd like to think my wild undergrad days weren't me at my best. But you haven't changed. You're just as I remembered you. And Chaz, of course." Her smile faded a little as she looked at him, and concern began to creep into her face. She dropped his hands.

She was just as pretty as he remembered. Prettier. Just as sweet as she was two years ago.

Out of the blue the thought hit. If Chaz liked women, she'd be exactly his type.

Joel corrected himself. Chaz liked women, of course. He adored his younger sisters. He liked the women at the restaurant. Joel had been told by his partner's old friends that Chaz's prowess with women was legendary back in the day.

Joel liked women too. Sexually even. It was just that with Chaz, it had never been much of an issue. They'd had a threesome with a woman, back in their early days. Years ago.

He was sure she hadn't been called Susan back then. He'd liked her...

"Chaz hasn't spoken to you." Her hand went up to her mouth.

"Not really. He mentioned your name." Joel cleared his throat. "How bad is this?"

*Ignore the whole thing, and it will go away. Ignore the past and get away.*

"I don't know how to answer that." Susan took a step back, hands stretched out behind her. She gripped the edge of the hall table, and then, as if relieved to have a task to do, she turned and quickly began to put the flowers in the vase. She obviously didn't want to talk anymore.

Despite her haste, the flowers looked pretty good. She knew her stuff -- probably all Southern women took a course in flower arrangement. It was stupid to think about that right now, but...but he wasn't sure what he should think.

"Hello." The front door swung open, and Joel turned toward the owner of the familiar voice with a mix of relief and terror. Chaz smiled when he saw him and took a step closer. Then he looked over Joel's shoulder. "Oh."

"Oh?" Susan looked at Chaz. "You seem to have forgotten to do something last night."

"He passed out on me before I could say anything." Chaz looked back at Joel. "I tried."

"I'm sure. And yet I still have no clue what you wanted to say." Joel hoped he didn't have a clue. But the knot congealing in his stomach was telling him a different story.

Chaz stepped forward and took Susan's hand. "Joel Bryant, you remember Susan Renard. Susan, you know what Bry means to me. Joel, Susan is the woman I've asked to marry."

*Breathe out. Breathe in.*

He was going back to Brooklyn, and none of this mattered. He was going back --

"Congratulations." Joel was stunned at how calm his voice sounded while he mouthed clichés. Thank God they existed. They gave him something safe to say. "Best wishes to you both."

“You don’t understand.” Chaz took a step toward him, his hand still in Susan’s. “I don’t want you to go. Stay here. With us.”

## Chapter Three

She'd loved Joel from the moment he spoke to her. It was hard to focus on anything other than stage fright when you were auditioning to sing for the first time outside the church choir, but Joel had the kind of personality that hit you between the eyes and made you forget everything else. She totally focused on him when he closed in on her a second before she was supposed to get on stage.

"Hello, Blondie. Chin up and nail that song." Joel had said that, taking her cold hands in his and grinning. "Surprise the hell out of me and everyone else. You look too sweet to nail anything."

She forgot to be afraid and found her voice again. "Then I'm not nearly as sweet as I look."

She laughed back at him and his sparkling blue eyes, so startling against his olive skin and dark hair. She'd lifted her chin and nailed that sucker, too. Open mike night was terrifying, but the audience had burst into applause right after her insane choice of an a cappella version of "Go Ask Alice." She'd never have picked that song, much less gone through with it, but for him.



She fell in love with him then. His continual wild-man antics in the restaurant only amused and entranced her more. He was totally original, even in a section of town known for crazy art students.

Of course he created problems for her, and not just with concentrating on her song routine.

The first problem was that the crowd constantly asked for her to sing “Go Ask Alice” when she moved up to singing for pay on Saturday nights at I Heart That City. It was a lot harder to do when adrenaline and puppy love faded a bit. The other problem was her nickname became Blondie. She’d put in a blonde hair weave to stand out at the audition, and the name stuck. She’d had to wear it every night she sang. It took years to outgrow that nickname.

Of course she noticed Chaz. He was only hard to miss if you were around Joel Bryant when he wanted to dazzle you. Once she really saw Charles Randolph, it only took a second before she recognized the older brother of one of the Randolph sisters. Mr. Charles had a rep at school, one she’d longed to discover for herself when she was a gangly fourteen, back when she was terrified she’d lose her scholarship and even more afraid of standing out in the private school her mother had insisted she attend. The Randolph family was one of the school’s institutions. It was probably just as well she’d been a grade behind Chaz’s youngest sister and therefore had no chance to even say hello.

However, when she realized both Chaz and Joel were partners at I Heart That City, bells went off. She’d won the jackpot. It was like her adolescent and college dreams had both come true. She wasn’t sure which one she wanted to take a bite out of first.

Her fantasies took a serious hit when it was made clear that Chaz and Joel were a couple. The two of them didn’t say anything, but from the way the staff talked about them -- and since Chaz no longer flirted with everyone who walked by -- Susan could see it was serious. Apparently Chaz had given up women, and Joel didn’t see anyone else when Chaz was in the room.

She'd shrugged at the time and complained to her girlfriends. Just her luck that two such fascinating guys were only interested in each other.

That would be the same two guys who were now staring at each other as if they couldn't speak another word in each other's presence.

"I don't think you understand." Susan cleared her throat and wondered how she would ever finesse this.

"I'm getting the idea pretty well." Joel looked over at her. She caught the faint puzzlement he'd had in his eyes right before they turned to blue ice.

"Chaz --" Susan stopped. No point in asking him to help. Chaz was the one who had gotten things off to such a spectacularly bad start. *Thanks, guy.* "Joel. Let's try going at this differently. Chaz, get Joel something to eat."

She pushed Joel toward one of the uncomfortable benches in the hall. They could both use the chance to sit down. Next she pushed Chaz toward the kitchen and prayed he'd stay away long enough for her to talk.

Joel did what she asked but didn't say anything, just stared at her like he was trying to place her. Not talking, just looking. That was a very bad sign.

He had either totally forgotten the night that had changed her world, or he was deliberately ignoring her. She didn't know which was worse.

She decided to hit him right between the eyes. "You're still so incredibly cute."

"What?" He almost jumped out of the seat, but at least he was talking and looking at her. Looking at her with alarm, but looking nonetheless.

"Blondie. Two years ago. I quit singing when I went for my MBA. Charlottesville was too tough to commute every weekend with the study load I had."

"Oh, yeah. You're right. You do look different now." Joel smiled uneasily. "But you'd outgrown the deer-in-the-headlights look before you left."

"I was a real badass by the time I was done." Susan smiled back.

I Heart That City had given her that.

Joel's smile faded. "You and Chaz knew each other back then?"

"No! Not like you're thinking."

Any minute now he'd bring up that one night from several years ago. *Come on, Joel, talk to me about it.*

"I haven't been sneaking around for years if that's what you mean." Chaz had returned with coffee and cinnamon sticky buns.

"I didn't say that."

Chaz placed the offering carefully near Joel and then backed off as if he was afraid Joel would run if Chaz got too close. "It sounded like it. Susan is my financial advisor."

"Just how long has she been examining your finances?" the other man said in a carefully neutral voice.

She'd lay bets that neutral voice was going to last ten seconds more, tops. God, things were crumbling right before her eyes.

"Joel, have some caffeine and eat something before we start arguing." Susan jumped in before Chaz could. "I'm not engaged to Chaz."

Not yet. Not until they resolved things. At this rate, that would be never.

"But you *are* sleeping with him." Joel swallowed some coffee and then some of the bun, as if it was a huge effort. "Like before."

He remembered. Unfortunately not the way she remembered it. The way Chaz did.

*Damn it!*

"Not exactly." Chaz unfastened the top button of his shirt before he continued talking. "Susan is wonderful, and she's incredibly loyal to both of us. I'll be very lucky if she agrees to marry me. But that's not the only reason I asked her."

“Go ahead and tell me why.” Joel visibly braced himself. “You’re going to explain how this is something I did, right?”

“I’ve been lonely, Bry.”

The sentence hung there. Looking at their faces, Susan wasn’t sure which one she wanted to hug and which one she wanted to smack. Or maybe she wanted to do both to both of them.

“Give me your car keys, Chaz.” Joel’s voice turned sharp and urgent.

“Don’t leave!” Susan and Chaz said it together.

She liked how they were responding with the same thought, but maybe the unified team approach wasn’t right for now. Joel looked at them both and slammed the coffee mug down.

The smack of it echoed in the hall.

“If I swear I’m going to be gone maybe a half hour and come back like a good boy, will you let me out of here?”

“You’re not a prisoner.” But Chaz didn’t reach for his keys.

Susan pulled out her own from her pocket. “Here.”

“I need to go to the store.” Joel stood up and took the keys, very carefully, not touching her fingers. “Thanks.”

Just like that, she and Chaz were the only ones left in the hall. Susan turned and wrapped her arms around his waist, trying to ignore how wrong it felt without Joel.

“That could have gone a lot better.” Chaz rubbed his temples, hard.

She laid her head on his shoulder. “It could have gone a lot worse. He’s coming back. And at least he finally admitted we all had a history together.”

Because if he had forgotten her -- them -- that would have gone beyond sucky. Her whole life had changed because of these two guys. She deserved to at least be a memory to them.

She'd hoped to be much more.

"That's something." Chaz put his hand on her hair and then kissed the top of her head. "Thanks. I do love you. And I doubt anyone could possibly forget you."

"I know. Now try saying 'I love you' to Joel when he shows up."

"Oh no. Joel and I never say anything like that to each other." Chaz's hold changed from gentle to purposeful. "It's against the code."

"God. The two of you spend all your time ignoring what you don't want to deal with? Break the code." Susan found herself being nudged gently toward the stairs. They needed to discuss things, to make a new plan. Having sex instead of talking was a terrible idea. "Charles Mason Randolph --"

"The third. That's the full name, if you're going to be that formal." He chuckled and then lifted her up.

"I'm not exactly Scarlett, Chaz." Susan clung to him anyhow. Bad idea or not, she could be flexible. "And Joel said he'd be back in a half hour."

Chaz increased his speed up the stairs, but he didn't even huff when he said, "That's a Bryant half hour. We have time. Lots of time."

She'd never been in his bedroom. The sheets were still crumpled from him and Joel. Before she could decide if she was uncomfortable about that or liked it, he threw them both down onto the bed with a sudden *whoosh*.

He crawled on top of her, and Susan realized how much she'd missed Charles. *Oh God. Very, very much*. Strangely, even after all this time, it was as if their bodies remembered and fit together. Her heartbeat skidded up a notch.

He held her wrists down -- not enough to hurt, but enough to make her know he intended her to stay just as she was. She smiled up at him. The weight and warmth of his body made her stretch up to catch more of it.

"Is it part of the code to have sex instead of talk?" She flicked his cheek with her tongue.

"Definitely."

"Men." She rubbed her face against his cheek. Taste and touch and talk, all designed to make him hers. No one should neglect the three *T's*. "Is it part of the code to cry after you talk to Joel and ask me to marry you?"

His cheeks darkened. "No. That was just...what I had to do then."

"If you hadn't been shattered you might never have, right? Lord. You two are destroying each other by not really talking. You and your damn codes. Joel talks too much about everything that doesn't matter, but you're just as bad. You just do it Southern instead of Yankee."

"Help us not do that, baby." His head slid under the skirt she'd picked out so carefully this morning.

Was he even listening to her? When his tongue began to explore up her thigh, she forgot to wonder. The smell of the two men she loved most in the world surrounded her as Chaz pulled her panties down. He made a small growling noise when he freed her. Another when he buried his face inside her.

She wanted to growl too. "Chaz?"

He raised his head enough to say, "Stay with me, Sue." His voice was rough, and she wasn't sure what he meant -- stay here forever, or stay and not soar, even though his tongue was teasing her, pushing her up higher...

It didn't matter. His fingers replaced his tongue and touched her clit. She shrieked and tried to swallow the sound.

“Don’t stop,” she managed.

“Can I fuck you, baby?”

“God, yes!” Had she held back before? Had he? She couldn’t remember. But right now, in the bed all of them had shared, though not together, she didn’t want to hold back anything. “Do me. Hard.”

“Tell me you want me to fuck you. Me.” His voice wasn’t gentle now. It was thick with want and possession. They both fumbled with their clothing, hands shaking.

“Chaz, I want you...fuck me...” She twisted against the sheets, Chaz’s cock deep inside her, his breath huffing against her shoulder as he used his whole body to jackhammer into her, hard and fast.

It wasn’t sweet, the way he’d been sweet for so long. She’d been afraid he might be too sweet in bed without Joel and novelty to spice things up. Thank God she’d been wrong. It wasn’t tentative or gentle or anything but what the two of them desperately wanted right then.

She clawed at him, the teasing forgotten, her hips tilting up to catch more of him, her vaginal walls closing tight on his cock.

She gripped his shoulders and bit down into his skin when the pressure became red and hot and too much to bear. And when she climaxed at last, Chaz slammed hard into her once, twice, three times, hard enough to make the aftershock of her climax almost as good as the first, before he came inside her with a groan.

The two of them panted, trying to gain back their old selves and not quite managing.

Susan tried to figure out what had happened. She had the feeling Chaz was wondering too. Not that he and his code would let him ask.

He’d never. She’d never -- not just him, just him without Joel...

She stopped herself. She wasn't going to overthink this. It had been good. Surprisingly good, considering what she had learned about her sexual quirks. Stunningly good. Chaz had done more for her than all the men she'd tried in grad school.

"Stay, Susan," he whispered against her wet hair. He obviously didn't mind a little sweat from a woman he had sex with.

Stay? No matter what happened? She wanted to. Right now she believed he wanted her to. She wanted him so much.

Keep it light until they were both sure.

"You might be taking on more than you planned if I stay." Susan yawned.

"Probably. But what do you mean?" He was amused and gentle again. Not desperate. Not hungry and needing her.

He was back to the guy who had been courting her now for weeks, being attentive and charming. Well, that had been fine then, but she wasn't going to put up with it after sex like that.

"You didn't use a condom, for starters."

He pulled himself up on one elbow to look down at her. "I'm clean, you know. Haven't forgotten a condom in years."

But he did this time. Interesting. Just like this was the first time in years she hadn't asked her partner first.

"I trusted you for that. I'm glad to know I was right. It would have been a shame to have to cut off all the parts of your body that you use so well."

"If you did that I'd have been sorry too."

She wasn't going to let him off that easily. "Maybe you've been with guys too long. There is another use for a condom, you know. You want children?"

He gave her a huge smile instead of squirming. Major points to Charles.



“Very much.” He kissed her again. “Yours, particularly. Ours.”

“Boys?” If men wanted kids, they almost always wanted sons.

“I grew up with sisters. I like kids. Boys. Girls. Kids.”

Better than any one guy she’d ever had in bed and he wanted kids.

“Just for the record, right now I like you a lot better than Joel.” Susan sat up in the bed, trying to say the words lightly.

“We had incredible sex while Joel is being even more of a pain in the ass than usual. It’s understandable.” Chaz stroked her leg, not sitting up. She hesitated, not wanting to leave. “Don’t worry. We still love him.”

No wonder these men were tied up in knots. She was getting confused just being around them. Joel was impossible enough, but Chaz was a puzzle all unto himself. He made her seem like the most important person in his life when he was with her...until he was with Joel. He said he loved her and said it sweetly. But he loved Joel intensely and never told him. Who was more important to him? Could both of them truly be equally important to Chaz?

Of course most folks didn’t want two other people desperately at the same time. Or if they did, they didn’t want the other two at the same time with equal intensity. Well, call her crazy, but she knew what she wanted. Both of them. It would be all right if she loved one a little more than the other for a few minutes, though, wouldn’t it? Wasn’t that what Chaz was telling her?

Suddenly she wasn’t as sure her plan would work. At least she wasn’t as confident as she’d been when she first saw Chaz again a few weeks ago. Things you mapped out in your head sometimes changed when real people got involved.

Somehow she hadn’t thought of Chaz apart from Joel, and she should have. He was an individual, not just part of a group. Could she love him as Chaz and not only as part of Chaz-and-Joel?

Probably.

He was an interesting, sexy individual who managed to demand her attention in a different way from Joel. But she realized now he was just as demanding and lovable as his partner. That was all right. You should love the pieces that made up the whole, shouldn't you?

*Ouch.*

She was trying to think after incredible sex. No wonder things weren't as clear as they used to be.

She looked at his chest, rising and falling, and his cock, which looked like it was about to fully rise again. His hand ran up and down her arm, promising more if she just stayed.

"You're much more complicated than I remembered, Chaz." Susan sat up, loosening herself from the sensual net he was weaving. "I hope I have time to take a shower before Joel arrives."

"I'll share the shower with you." Chaz made a gracious sweep of the arm toward the bathroom.

"I said I hope I have time, not that I wanted to romp."

"I hope you have time too, baby." He didn't smile, but she knew he was fighting it. His eyes crinkled up a little at the corners, and she wanted to melt all over again.

Very demanding. She liked it.

"All right. Catch up if you can." She jumped out of the bed and ran for the shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

She found him perched on the wide stair leading up to the front entry, puffing hard on a cigarette.

"I probably wouldn't have given you the keys if I knew you were going to go buy those."

“But since you did, and I did, I didn’t have to mug the two of you to get some smokes.”

She smiled, a little tentatively, and wrapped some sort of shawl tighter around her shoulders. Joel looked at her out of narrowed eyes.

Susan fit here. Chaz was smarter than Joel thought. She wasn’t the stereotype he’d have picked to live in this ridiculous house with Chaz before now, but she fit.

He didn’t.

She was being kind, but she belonged here and he’d broken up with Chaz. He had no reason to whine and even less to ask questions.

“So, just how not exactly are you having sex, and what the fuck is going on?” Joel threw the cigarette on the ground, stamped on it, and thought about lighting another.

She hesitated. He wondered if she looked a little guilty, but wasn’t sure. Oh hell, he might not know about her, but he knew Chaz. Whatever that not exactly sex they’d been having was, it wasn’t innocent.

“You’ll let me tell you?”

“Yes. Maybe. I’m more likely to let you finish than I would Chaz. I also probably won’t punch you.”

“He’s out on the veranda in the back, pacing, by the way. He’s terrified.”

Was he supposed to feel sorry about that?

“Why?”

“He fucked things up, and he knows it. He’s afraid you’re going to leave.”

“Well, yeah, I’m leaving. I told him that before he made his big announcement. How the hell is marrying you going to make me want to stay?”

“Do you remember me -- us -- at all?” Susan didn’t look at him. “The last time we were all together?”

He could lie. After all, he'd been pretty drunk back then. But it would be a lie. Susan hadn't remained the shy Blondie who had surprised him one night, but he remembered enough of the past. Bits and pieces he'd deliberately shut out, refused to think about, the way he usually did when things got too crazy, started to come back all too clearly once he let them back in. The memories had almost made him drive off the road on the way back from the drugstore.

Yeah. Susan was Blondie, all grown up and in charge. That was pretty damn arousing.

But the shy girl had been amazing too. He could remember it now.

*"I haven't ever, ever done this before." She reached forward to touch his face, trace his mouth.*

"We haven't done it all that often ourselves." Chaz wrapped his arms around both of them, nuzzled her neck, twisted his fingers into Joel's hair, then pulled Joel's head back so Chaz could kiss him.

Never. They'd never shared with a woman before.

Why were they doing it now then? Except that Blondie's eyes were so bright and eager, and Chaz looked so...so...

Joel couldn't find the words as the two of them turned to him and their hands brushed firmly down his body. Realization swam through the alcohol buzz. The two of them were goddamn seducing him. They'd set him up. He was older than them both, but these...these *kids* were putting moves on him.

And he liked it.

The office was dark and someone had locked the door, which was a good thing. The wail of Irish bagpipes hid any noise they were making. It was another crazy St. Patrick's holiday in the restaurant.

He was crazy too. The two of them were getting him insane. They crowded up against the desk, deliberately rubbing against him. Chaz bit the sinews of his neck in just the right spot. Blondie slid one hand under his shirt and slid her hand across his chest, her nails raking his skin lightly and promising him more sharp delight.

Oh, Jesus, it felt good.

Blondie played with Joel's shirt, teasingly slow, but Chaz ignored everything except the important part -- he damn near ripped Joel's pants off. Two pairs of hands cupped his cock and balls at the same time, and suddenly Joel was afraid he was going to explode before anything more happened. He grunted and breathed hard through his nose before he went on the attack.

He couldn't be passive if he wanted that *anything more*. They'd wring him dry in seconds if he let them, and it would all be over too soon. Instead, he leaned forward to tease the edge of Blondie's ear with his teeth. When she squirmed, he ran his hands under Chaz's shirt to reach the tiny ring that pierced Chaz's nipple. Chaz inhaled sharply.

The two of them -- one who twitched and one who gasped -- made everything sweet. The air shimmered around him, gold like honey. Sweet like sex.

Chaz held Joel's face and kissed him, deep. Joel was hard. He wasn't sure he'd ever been this hard. He wanted them both at the same time. He wasn't sure how he wanted it first. Possibilities played out in his mind -- disgusting, hot, and becoming absolutely necessary to do -- but he paused, not knowing which to pick.

Blondie's face was wet from Chaz's kiss, her lipstick smudged on one tooth. She smiled, crookedly, and then Joel knew he wanted her first.

Their shared woman twined around him, and Joel's cock sank inside, deep and wet within her. It had been a long time. She closed tight around his cock, clasping him like she'd never let go.

How the hell had he let so long go by without a woman like this?

Joel thrust and shut his eyes, the darkness contrasting with the heat building inside him. Good. Really good.

Behind him, Chaz adjusted for their height and pressed his cock against Joel's ass. Being joined with him, Chaz's balls slapping against him in a harsh staccato -- God, that feeling and sound had happened a lot more recently than being with a woman, but it felt good and right too. Chaz's hands grabbed him rough and strong and didn't let go.

The three of them, push and pull, friction and softness, eagerness and savoring, all joined together. Good and right. He kept the words in his head like a chant. The contrasts were fucking good. Right. So good.

And when Joel's release, sharp and sudden, spilled out into Blondie, and his man groaned his own climax behind him, that had been perfect.

Right at that moment, he'd wanted her -- him -- the two of them to stay that way forever.

Joel looked at her. "I remember. I remember we stopped too." *Can we stop now, please?*

"You *wanted* me to stop."

"What?" He picked up another cigarette. "Someone here isn't remembering things the right way. I never asked you anything."

"You didn't say it. You just started to avoid me." She clasped her hands. "You avoided Chaz too. It hurt us both. It scared him the most, though."

"Chaz? Scared?"

"He thought you would leave. That having me around would push you away." Susan shrugged. "I had already been accepted to grad school. I knew how much you meant to each other. So I left."

"You didn't ask me?"

"I don't need to ask anyone's permission to come or go. But then again, like you said, you didn't ask me either. Chaz called me once or twice back then, but what was the point? He'd made his real choice as soon as I told him I'd go. He stayed with you."

"It wasn't that way. Not what you thought. I liked you. It was...it was hot. What we did. I didn't mind. I --" Joel stopped. He remembered her face the day after, when he hadn't said anything to her. He owed her an explanation now. "I was scared."

"You were scared?"

"I was scared that I wasn't enough. For Chaz. I mean, it was good. Too good. It could've meant something if we pursued it." Joel tapped his finger against the cigarette. "And if we did, eventually Chaz would have left me for you. I couldn't handle that then. I couldn't handle feeling anything for you, either."

He could remember the blind panic of those days immediately afterward. He hadn't wanted to remember them, hadn't wanted to feel the confusion and fear and pain, so he willed them away. Not seeing Blondie helped. Having Chaz act like everything was the same helped more. He deliberately ignored what had happened until someone forced the issue.

Usually he ran when things got too bad. But this time he'd stayed, and sure enough, it finally came back to bite him in the ass.

"So you shut us out? We would have done anything for you, Joel, both of us. I left for you. Chaz stayed for you."

"No." He didn't believe it. Chaz stayed because it was convenient. He couldn't answer for Susan, but he couldn't accept her explanation of Chaz's actions.

"Why do you think Chaz would ever leave? We want you to be with us."

"I'm not what he wants. Not really. He wants a home and family. Kids. All that with the traditional wife. Not me." Joel let a long breath out.

He wondered yet again what it was like to know, the way Chaz did, about families. Joel had never been able to wrap his mind around the concept. Sometimes he'd thought Chaz was an idiot for believing in having one. Sometimes he thought he was for not.

Looked like Chaz went ahead and decided what he'd do without him.

He inhaled again carefully. "I thought about this a long time ago. Back when the three of us almost connected last time. We'd have had a good time for a while, but no. Things would've fallen apart, and I knew who would have gotten left."

He didn't know anyone who'd ever had a long-term threesome. There were rumors about at least one of the regular couples at the restaurant. They'd had more than one "friend" show up with them, though. That didn't make what they did long-term in his book. If the Thompsons couldn't handle it, neurotic Joel Bryant -- the guy who had already fucked up more relationships than he could remember -- sure as hell couldn't.

"I think you ought to talk to Chaz about that. But I also think you need to know what you want." Susan brushed a finger against his hair. Joel flinched.

"He's going to marry you, for God's sake! What does it matter to him what I want?"

"It should matter to you." Susan took a step away. "But what you want and need matters to both of us. Maybe it matters too much."

"Don't try to shit me."

The sweetness was gone from her face and her voice. "Do you know when he asked me to marry him? Five nights ago. St. Patrick's Day. The night you said you were leaving. The anniversary of when you two met. He was crying, Joel, when he begged me to marry him. We'd been dancing around each other for weeks now, and then he came out with that. God help me, I wanted to say yes right away. But I've been holding off giving him any answer because I wasn't sure what to do about you and him. I didn't know what the right thing was."



Joel wanted to say something, but what could he say? Chaz, crying? It didn't seem possible. But nothing seemed quite real today.

"But I know this much now. If you run away, I'll buy you out of the restaurant. This -- whatever this relationship is -- will be finished. You won't be able to come back and play, because playtime is over. I Heart That City would be ours. Chaz's and mine. Not yours. If you leave, I'll do my damndest to make sure Chaz never regrets that you've gone. And no, I'm not shitting you about any of this."

Bitch. He wanted to say it and couldn't quite. Not because he liked her, because right now he sure as hell didn't. Not because he was a gentleman, either. It was hurt that tightened his throat, stopping the words. So instead he fumbled for the car keys, still in his pocket.

Anger could work. Anger could get him through this.

"Chaz can take you home. I'll leave your keys back in the office. Don't worry. I won't be back. There will be no regrets on my part either, Blondie. You can discuss terms with our...Chaz's...the restaurant's...attorney. We're done."

Those were the perfect ending lines except his mouth wouldn't stop there. It never did.

"*What I want and need matters to you too much.*" He threw the words back at her in nasty mimicry. "What kind of schmuck do you think I am? You two will get married. Where does that leave me in this setup?"

Her breath gasped out.

Damn it, he was being an asshole. That wasn't how he wanted to be remembered. Too late, as usual, he finally got his mouth snapped shut and his body headed out the door.

"Joel, wait a minute!"

He wasn't going to wait. Last time Blondie left. Now it was his turn.

\* \* \* \* \*

“He’s gone.” He could feel the emptiness that was all that remained whenever Joel left the room, but magnified a thousand times.

“I fucked up.” Susan put her hand over her mouth.

“I should’ve talked to him. I --” Chaz shook his head, to clear it. The fear buzzing inside his skull rose instead of settling with the motion. If he were able, he’d have punched his nose. Hard. “This is my fault. I never should have pushed. Should have left things the way they were.” He heard Susan make a small pained sound and caught himself. “But then you wouldn’t be around. Oh, *fuck*.”

People called him charming, but he knew he used charm to avoid working too hard at things like this. He’d avoided his family’s expectations for him with charm and by keeping up the house. They wanted more for him, of course. They hadn’t squawked when he refused law or ministry or politics. But they expected a wife and children. He’d never wanted to be involved, really involved, with someone else. Joel had made it easy to let things drift. He’d liked it that way.

It was hard to think about another person. Harder still to think about two other people. Now here he was, stuck with more than he’d ever asked for.

For a minute, he wanted to damn both Joel and Susan for making him think about them. For making him care.

“Chaz --”

“When you turned out to be my new finance person, it was like everything went click. I knew we lived in the same city, but there was no reason for us to meet again except that it was so perfect when you walked into the office. Like you hadn’t left or, well, like you had but you were back, and the same pull was there, only stronger because you’d been gone so long. I wanted you and Joel so badly, and then you agreed to what I wanted. All I had to do was ask.”

Things had been a little too easy, obviously. He’d let them drift into disaster.

“Chaz.”

Hell. Where had easy ever gotten him? He had to try, even though it was hard. He would try, damn it, even though the expression on Susan’s face made him wonder what she needed to confess.

“Susan, whatever it is you’re going to say, please be sure I love you. Not the way I do Joel. But as much.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*“Well, yeah, I’m leaving. I told him that before he made his big announcement. How the hell is marrying you going to make me want to stay?”*

If she could have replayed it again, she would have said the truth. “Because if this doesn’t work I’ll never be complete.”

She hadn’t told Chaz, she hadn’t told anyone, what it was like to leave Richmond for the University of Virginia. What it was like to leave Chaz and Joel.

It should have been nothing. A crazy sexual experiment conducted while Joel was buzzed and she was crazy with curiosity and Chaz...well, Chaz was definitely there for the ride. When it ended, she should have chalked it up to a college experience that wouldn’t be repeated.

But she missed them even before she packed up her trailer and got into her tired old car. Within a day, she missed them more. By the end of the month, she thought about casually walking into I Heart That City and saying hi. Asking how they were. Jumping them both.

She didn’t.

She’d never hinted at anything to her family. She didn’t talk to her girlfriends this time. She knew what they’d say, what she’d have said if someone else told her they were in love with two men after a one-night stand with them both.

She tried what any sensible person would tell her to do. She studied hard. She went out with other guys. When other men didn't flick her switch, not the way it had been with Chaz and Joel, she was convinced she was some kind of freak, and not in a good way.

By now she didn't care. She was old enough to decide being a pervert was just what she was. Unfortunately, she was a picky pervert. She didn't want to sleep around. She just happened to be a two-man kind of woman.

And she wanted to get on her knees and unzip Joel's pants and convince him, the way he liked being convinced, that they were all meant for each other, like she should have done before she ran scared.

Since she hadn't done that, at least she should let Charles know the truth.

"Chaz, shut up. This one isn't about you." Susan began to pace. "You see, it's never been like that before or after for me. Not just the sex. The whole connection, you know? I tried. Even with two other guys. That's probably too much information. Anyhow, it didn't work. You see, they weren't my two guys. And as for why this happened again, it was me. All me. If it was supposed to happen, it was me who made it happen, not some random toss of the dice. Who do you think arranged for me to be your new advisor? I did. I practically had to sleep with my manager to get that account away from your old advisor. Pushing hard is the only way I've ever gotten anything."

"You did all that? Just to get to me? *Us?*" Chaz's face was a mix of amusement and amazement. "Susan, there's more to you than meets the eye. Not that what I see isn't very good."

She made an impatient gesture. "No sweet talk now. That's not all. I did the fuckup too. Because I wanted it too much, because I'm not sure it will work, that we'll let it work, because -- Why the hell are we talking about this and jumping all over each other to take the most blame? We did that before, and it didn't work."

The two of them stared at each other. Their hands met, and they both laughed, perfectly in sync.

“You said before that Joel and I don’t talk enough. But you and me? We talk *way* too much.” Chaz pulled on her hand, tugging her out of the hall, away from being trapped and powerless.

## Chapter Four

It was too early for anyone to be at I Heart That City. That's the way Joel wanted it.

The neon map of New York City blinked on and off, lighting the restaurant for a moment before it flashed back into the darkness. Chaz had found that and given it to him when they first met.

Joel touched one of the tables. Each table was different. Each chair. He and Chaz had scouted thrift stores and yard sales all over Richmond, looking for furniture. Crazy. The two of them had been crazy to start a place with almost no money.

Chaz had sold his Beemer and bought the little truck he still had. Joel had gotten a loan from his aunt. She'd been the first one he'd paid back after they spent the first year juggling finances and cutting costs. Joel had lived in what became the office to keep from paying rent. It was just as well. He'd lived and breathed the restaurant that first year.

He'd lived and breathed Chaz. Worked his ass off for him.

It had been that way ever since Joel first saw him.

*"Want to take a chance, Dixie?"*

*"A Southern man lives to take chances, Yank. What did you have in mind?"*

They'd barely known each other. Had just met in a crowded bar that served green goddamned beer, beer so bad it might have even deserved to have that atrocity done to it. Something had sparked when he first saw Chaz.

Not just sex, though that was there. Definitely there.

The sudden desire to try something, try anything, and know you had someone right there with you. He'd worked restaurants before but never wanted the responsibility of owning one. But starting a restaurant was simple once you had a partner to back you up.

And this was where it had gotten them.

Joel stared at the empty restaurant. He shoved a chair a little closer to the table. What would his share of the partnership be valued at?

It didn't matter. Whatever it was, it would be too much and not enough. That didn't matter, really. Not the money. But if he left now, at least he and Chaz could stay friends. Distant friends, but friends.

Chaz would have a shot at marriage and kids and family approval without him. And Joel could finally find something his. Not what Chaz needed. But what *he* needed.

"Did you see the review the *Post* gave us?" Emmy's voice called from the kitchen. "Nice. Even the big guys in DC like my cooking."

Of course Emmy would be here. She was like a cat -- arriving when you didn't expect her and where you didn't want her.

Joel swallowed. Even for him that was a shitty thing to think. Then again, the day was turning out to be something of a shitfest.

"You deserve a good review, Emmy."

The rustle of newspaper came next. "No one throws a St. Patrick's Day party like I Heart That City. It starts out with tasteful music and equally tasty food -- always ask what the special of the day is -- and ends as a raucous neighborhood blowout that will leave you not quite remembering what happened, but making you smile over what you do recall. And

do order at least one Fuck Me, I'm Irish cocktail. But not more than three." Emmy chuckled. "Perfect. Bet we get a bigger crowd next year."

She switched the light on in the dining area and handed Joel the newspaper. He pretended to read it.

"This might be almost as good as the Naked Richmond Blog about us," Joel said at last. "I don't know who that guy is, but he obviously shows up all the time and loves it."

Emmy didn't respond. He could feel her staring at him, pulling up a response he didn't want to make. How did she do that?

"Emmy, I'm going to be leaving soon. I mean really leaving." Once he left the keys in the office desk.

"Hmmm."

"Chaz will still be around. No one is going to lose their jobs or anything. Just me. I'm finally going home. Back to New York at last."

"I thought you were home."

"This is a restaurant and a bar. Just that."

"Not for me, honey." Emmy took the newspaper from his hand. "Not for you, either."

"Maybe once." Joel fumbled for cigarettes before he remembered what Emmy would say if he smoked near her. "Not now."

"*Especially* now." Emmy touched him on the shoulder. Joel shook his head.

"Emmy, I'm sorry." Joel didn't know what else to say. God knows, he was. About almost everything.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was noisy. The traffic outside I Heart That City seemed thicker than usual. Joel hesitated. Strange that the New York he remembered seemed quieter than here.



Then again, his aunt's New York house was quiet. The neighborhood was shabby and very off the beaten track. You could smell the beach sometimes and the garbage more often. No one had taken care of the house in a long time. His aunt had stayed long after the neighborhood had gotten run-down, long after she needed to stop living alone. The house was going to need a lot of work.

It could be good to start from scratch again. Time to realize there was a new life waiting. After all, he'd loved that place when he was younger. His aunt had been a good spot in a world where family let you down. He should have done better by her when she was alive. She deserved better.

That was what remembering did to you -- you started picking apart what you'd done, wondering if what went wrong had been you and not the other person.

*Fuck that.*

It was time to pack, sign some papers, and then move on for good. He could do that. He'd been doing it his whole life.

He opened the desk drawer and put the keys inside.

"Hello."

Susan's eyes looked brighter than usual, like she was ready to cry. Joel stared. This was no hallucination. He couldn't hallucinate two people, could he? But there they were, the last people he'd expected to show up.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," Chaz echoed.

They sounded like idiots. Then again, they probably were idiots. Who else would manage to get themselves into a situation like this and not cut out?

They came back for more.

"You followed me. Both of you." His voice sounded strange.

The tension left and peace crashed into him, so suddenly that he couldn't ignore it. This was what he'd been waiting for. Wanting. He hadn't even allowed himself to know what he wanted until she was here, Chaz right behind her.

"I did things wrong back at the house." Susan stayed by the door. "Can we try something different?"

"Different. Sure."

"Let's negotiate, like potential partners do." Susan took one hesitant step into the office. "Everything on the table. Are you willing to negotiate the future, Joel?"

Joel spread his hands out wide and shrugged. "Negotiate? I'm Jewish, and I'm from New York. What do you think?"

"What do you want, Joel? No jokes." Chaz looked at him, his face tight with tension.

The thing he had run from had followed right behind. What did he want? What was he willing to admit he wanted? Apparently these two wanted him enough to find out. And apparently he wanted them enough to tell them the truth.

"The marriage thing. It...bothers me." Joel gestured them both inside so he could shut the door. Emmy probably could hear through walls, even so. "It makes the two of you legal. You two become the partners. It leaves me out."

And he could see them together. The perfect couple, presenting the grandparents with perfect babies, tucked away in their country home. *Goddamn it.* He just couldn't see himself there.

"And that's your hang-up?" Chaz asked. "That I want to marry Susan?"

Susan sat down and crossed her legs. "Shut up, Chaz. You're a lousy negotiator. Joel, let's put it this way. Do you want to marry me instead?"

Joel stared at her legs. His possible-future-wife's legs. That sure as hell would be different. He tried imagining it and could, only too well.

Susan could be there permanently. His wife. His family. Him and Susan.

And Chaz. Chaz seemed to be part of the deal. Jesus God, that sounded good. Joel gripped the table hard trying not to yell *yes*.

He'd never been brave enough to imagine anything permanent with anyone before. Now just the idea of it made him weak with wanting and giddy with terror that it might happen. That it might not.

Then he looked up at Chaz's face. Chaz looked absolutely calm, with a slight trace of his charming smile on his face...but no glint in his eyes. Chaz's poker face was pretty good, but Joel wasn't a stranger. He knew what that meant.

"I would be honored, Susan. Thanks so much for asking." Joel cleared his throat. "But then Chaz is the one out. I'm not doing that to him."

He swallowed his disappointment. Maybe he could get over this stupid left-out feeling. Give Chaz what he wanted and stick it out with them. Maybe.

But he couldn't see it in his head. Couldn't see it working. Three didn't work. He'd been kicked aside too many times for something better. His parents got married again, and he hadn't been worth the time of day to either of them ever since. With other men or women he'd move on or they would, always looking for someone better. Crap, he'd probably screw it up before the other two did, because he was that kind of idiot.

Susan gave Chaz a quick smile.

"We know he wouldn't be left out. Or, well, we all should know that but don't. Let's not argue. Apparently marriage isn't your sticking point. Let me see what the real deal is." She folded her hands and used them to prop up her chin while she stared at Joel. "You and Chaz have a strong bond, no matter how much you want to deny it. I'd like to think ours will be as strong sometime soon, but you two have been together a long, long time and you have it right now. I think the two of *you* should get married." Susan's poker face was even better than Chaz's. Joel couldn't figure out what she was thinking at all.

"What?" Chaz sounded stunned.

“It is done nowadays. I could give you two away.” Susan leaned over to pat Chaz’s leg. “Unlike the two of you, I don’t believe for a minute that you’d kick me to the curb if I’m not married to you.”

Was she for real or was she shitting them? Maybe it was the truth. She’d left before rather than chance the two of them breaking up. Or was it because she was afraid she’d lose and so she’d walked first?

“What about kids?” Chaz asked. “Your reputation?”

“Other people in my family had kids without marriage, and the sky didn’t fall. My reputation is my own. I’m not concerned.” Susan put her hands down and recrossed her legs. *Damn, those were nice legs.* “What about it? You’ve worked together on a business. Why not extend the partnership to marriage?”

Chaz and him. Mr. and Mr. -- what?

“Bryant-Randolph sounds like a damned law firm. Or a building,” Joel muttered.

“Randolph-Bryant,” Chaz corrected.

Chaz might buy into the idea. *Naw.* Mr. Traditional Southern Boy? But if he really did, then what? Joel tried to visualize that.

Same name. Same name on a mailbox in their own place. Joel liked that idea too. Chaz and him. Him and Chaz. Holidays together, not just to work, but because they were a unit.

Him and Chaz.

And Susan.

He couldn’t imagine them without Susan anymore.

Unless she walked. She’d suggested they get married, but women were weird. Was she strong enough to believe in what she said for longer than a month or two? He didn’t believe it. She probably believed it, but she was young, a lot younger than either him or Chaz, and didn’t know how things changed. She’d decide it was the boys against her someday and then

they'd all be in big trouble, especially after Joel had finally gotten used to the idea of having them all together.

He didn't want her to walk.

"Bryant-Randolph-Renard is alphabetical." Joel turned his head to look at Susan's legs. And then checked out her expression. "Sounds kind of like a car manufacturer."

Her leg she'd draped over one knee was trembling a little. So were her lips.

"I don't think three people can get married anywhere." Susan tried to smile.

So it did matter to her. That meant it mattered to him too.

"Then I may have to opt out of that particular deal. Because I do want the two of you." Joel let himself say what he wanted out loud. "More than I ever wanted anything. But as equal partners."

Chaz and Joel and Susan. That was it. No qualifiers, no one left out, because he cared about these two as much -- *more* -- than he cared about himself.

"Listen, my parents come to visit for Easter. It's in April this year. I'm sure that date has skipped your mind, Joel, you heathen, but that's only a few weeks away. I'd like to know how I'm going to introduce you two to them." Chaz hesitated. "If I'm allowed to introduce you two as anything."

Chaz would actually acknowledge them to his family? Damn. Joel tried to imagine Easter dinner, just them and the perfect Randolph family, and couldn't.

But the important thing was that Chaz saw it happening. However they were going to work this, it was all for one and one for all.

They made a damned weird Three Musketeers.

"That's not fair, Chaz. We're making Joel make a decision he hasn't had a chance to think out. You know, you and I had time to reconnect. Joel deserves a chance to get to know me again."

"Yeah. I definitely should reconnect too." Joel beckoned. "Susan, come here."

She looked afraid. She looked like Blondie again. Especially when she lifted her chin and walked straight to him. Joel held her. She buried her face in his neck. She was holding herself so tightly he almost couldn't feel the little tremors of nerves going through her. Almost.

He never should have let her go in the first place.

He stared over at Chaz.

"If you'll give us a minute together?" Joel asked.

Chaz smiled at him. The sweet, totally bad smile that could make Joel's chest hurt and his balls tighten. "All the minutes you want, Bry. But I'd like to stay too. Just to watch."

"You know, Chaz, sometimes you surprise me." Joel smoothed down Susan's hair. "In a real good way. Just remember you two have had time together without me for a while now, you and your not exactly sex. I need to catch up. Susan and I need to."

"I didn't mean that --" Susan stopped and smiled. "Men."

When a woman said *men* with a smile like that, that meant things were all right. Usually. But despite the smile, her trembling had increased. Good fear or bad?

He licked the tip of her ear, mostly to see which emotion it was. Her fingers gripped his shoulders like they wouldn't let go.

Good fear. The best kind.

He pushed her hair out of the way.

"Chin up again, Blondie," he whispered, then kissed her.

He started slow, the way you're supposed to with women and the first time. Her mouth opened, just a little, and he touched her upper lip with his tongue. Gentle. Exploring.

Her head tilted back a little and let him push a little more. God, he hadn't done this in way too long. He hadn't had a first time in forever.

“You taste so sweet, pretty Susan,” he whispered to her, his voice gone suddenly hoarse.

Then he went back to tasting Susan. Smelling the sudden arousal under his tongue and hands. He smoothed his hands down her, stopping to linger but not quite touch her breasts, trying not to get too crazy. He hadn’t used finesse in a long time. Hadn’t needed finesse.

Gentle went fine for the first few minutes. But she was whimpering, just a little, and moving that body against him, rubbing his cock, and he wanted to dive in and fuck her.

Why the hell had he started this in his damned office?

“We did it here last time,” Susan said, over the buzzing in his ears. “Why not again? Like right now? For old times’ sake.”

There were reasons he could fall in love with this woman.

She danced away long enough to perch on the desk and draw her knees up, spreading her legs.

“It’s been forever, Joel. Come here.”

Joel held back a little, just long enough to see her frown at him.

“For God’s sake, don’t be a tease at this late date. Touch her!” Chaz said behind him. Joel recognized the thickness in Chaz’s voice. If he turned his head, he knew he’d see Chaz’s pants down, his hand on his cock.

Almost any other time, Joel would at least have looked. Instead he took a step closer to the woman in front of him, the one who was all but sobbing with impatience as she wiggled out of her clothes.

For him.

He touched the insides of her thighs, running his hands against the smooth silkiness of her legs, up to the coarse hair that covered her wet pussy.

For him.

The edge of the desk, as he'd discovered at least once before, was the perfect height for sliding his cock, slowly, very slowly, into Susan.

Perfect for letting that warm, wet, hungry heat close around him. She slid back on her elbows, and he leaned forward, just far enough to catch one nipple between his teeth. He closed his teeth on it, not tight, but enough to let her wonder. She liked a little bite to her sex, apparently. Then he sucked on the tip. She moaned.

God, he had missed that.

He heard another person's moan, even louder than Susan's. He hoped it was Chaz but was afraid it was him. God knows, he wanted to moan. He wanted to howl.

He wanted to move, hard and fast inside her. She wiggled below him, and flickers of lightning danced through his body. He gripped her hips and pushed in farther. Withdrew only long enough to bury himself inside again.

"Jo-el." Her breath caught.

"I remember you saying that before," he told her, suddenly desperate to let her know. "I remember how soft you were then. Like now. I remember how wild we got. Everything. I remember it."

And then he put his head down and began to move inside her like a crazy man. The memories and the reality mixed together into one heated rush. Skin and hair and cries and the rhythm of their bodies and hearts pulsing together.

"My God." Did he say that? Chaz?

"Faster." That was Susan.

And he was faster and faster yet as the heat of his climax poured over and out and filled her.

He braced himself on the desk, panting, but before he could get his breathing in order, Chaz was next to him.



“Allow me.” Chaz stroked his back before he gently moved him to one side. Susan had collapsed, her back flat against the desk, her legs shaking as they dangled over the edge.

When Chaz knelt down between her legs, Joel thought he might combust all over again. He leaned back and closed his eyes, running his tongue over his lips.

Chaz might look like he was ignoring Joel while he lapped up Susan, but Joel knew better. Joel could almost hear Chaz’s thoughts, because they were exactly what he’d be thinking if they’d switched places. Chaz’s eyes were shut because he wanted to better experience the smell and the taste of the two of them together. Sweat, saliva, semen. Chaz would savor what both his partners were like. Joel pushed his own tongue up to the roof of his mouth, imagining.

Susan arched back up into Chaz’s mouth with a shocked cry as he began to work her hard.

*Jesus.* Joel could feel his cock give a slow twitch all over again at the sight. It gave another when Susan shuddered, twisting under Chaz.

“No more. I think another orgasm might kill me.” Susan shut her eyes.

Chaz didn’t say anything more as he stood up. He didn’t leave. Joel’s cock gave a big jump of approval as Chaz jacked off over Susan, and he watched that ass tighten with effort. He heard the huff in Chaz’s breath that meant he was close.

“Wait.” Joel walked on legs that almost shook underneath him. “Bend over.”

He topped sometimes. Not much. But this was clearly a special occasion. Joel grabbed the lube and condom out of his desk drawer and almost yelped when he touched his sensitized cock with the Astroglide.

“Hurry up.” Chaz sounded like he was saying it through gritted teeth.

He did. When Joel sank his cock into Chaz’s ass, he realized he should have Chaz bottom more often. *God. Oh, God, that felt good. That fucker was so tight. So hot.*

“Fuck me,” Chaz almost whimpered.

Chaz hadn't whimpered in too long. Joel wanted to hear more. He slowed it down and leaned against his partner's back.

Chaz muttered a curse under his breath and began to jerk off again. Joel snorted against Chaz's wet neck and began to jackhammer him, hard and fast.

He was about ready to blow, despite his previous bout, when he felt Chaz erupt, coming with long, steady spurts. Joel let go then, biting his lip to keep from screaming at the almost-too-good explosion that racked through him.

*My. God.*

He almost hoped Susan wasn't too excited by what they'd done. She might rape one of them. In fact, they might all kill each other in one crazed, lustful afternoon.

Chaz rested his hands against the desk and then looked at Joel with another one of those bad, sweet grins.

Even though he didn't ask the question out loud, Joel shook his head, fighting a grin of his own.

"Nope. I'm not completely decided yet. You two will have to persuade me some more. A lot more. No writing up partnership papers until I'm convinced."

"Guess we're up to that." Chaz's voice was almost steady, his eyes sparking with amusement and lust. "As long as you stick around while we do it."

"Could we at least live together while you make up your mind?" Susan wiped her face and pushed her hair back. "Sex on a desk definitely has its moments, but a big bed would be nice for every day."

"Not Bry's apartment. He's a pig."

"Not Chaz's precious museum of an apartment. He couldn't possibly fit anyone else's stuff in the place, much less two other people's," Joel heard himself retort.

Was he ready for this? After all these years they were going to end up casually taunting each other into living together? Well, hell. He could be persuaded to that too. Good sex could persuade him any day.

And Susan would keep them on track. She seemed good at that.

"My house is big enough. Well, the one I'm about to close on next month." Susan started to talk a little faster than usual. "In this market, it was a steal. You wouldn't be living so close to the restaurant or VCU, but it's close."

"Where?" Chaz asked.

"Right near Carytown. We could walk to the stores. Maybe you guys could open another restaurant there. Franchises are the way to make money in the restaurant biz."

A threesome might almost fit in with that neighborhood. Joel could see the house in his head...could almost envision another restaurant... Wait. Just because they were talking about the future didn't mean he nodded and smiled and agreed to everything because he liked the idea of any kind of future with them. He wasn't a pushover.

"I don't run I Heart That City just for money. You can't duplicate what we have," Joel protested before he found himself sucked into this sudden giddy opening of possibilities, where anything was possible. The last time he'd done that was with Chaz and it had changed his life, even when he hadn't meant it to.

"You run it because you love it. I know." Susan began to get dressed. "But think of having another baby of your own to love. And I mean just think about it. For now."

He could almost see her penciling it in on her mental calendar: two weeks from now, talk to Joel again.

"Are you always like this?" Joel asked, genuinely curious.

"Like a steamroller? Pretty much. It took a while before I figured out that being shy never got me what I wanted in life. Once I got that down, there was no stopping me."

He almost missed the uncertain look on her face, but it was there long enough to catch. She wasn't as sure of herself as she pretended. He could understand the feeling.

"I like it when you're shy too," Joel muttered.

"But when you're not, you manage to stop the Yank in his tracks. I've never seen anyone do that before. Sure you're not from New York yourself?" Chaz asked, pulling on his pants again. "And how big is this house of yours? Bry has as much stuff in his place as I do. Except his is crap."

"I'll probably be hauling in more crap too, from my aunt's. I'm going to have to go back to New York sometimes to take care of the house. At least until I figure out what the hell to do with it." Joel shook out his T-shirt.

"Welcome to being a property owner, Bry. Sometimes you have to spend time taking care of the property, like it or not. You never seemed to get that about my place."

"Fuck off, Chaz. I might enjoy taking a New York vacation from you now and then."

"Or we could arrange time to come up with you and help, if you want." Susan put on her shoes. "I have some baby wipes in my purse, boys. We shouldn't go public like this."

"Have some in the drawer too. Never hurts to be prepared." Chaz handed them out like they were after-dinner mints.

It was like everything was settled, when they hadn't agreed to anything. When he hadn't agreed.

"Well, you two can chatter here if you want. It's getting time to open up for dinner. Crap. Past time."

He didn't hear any noise outside even though most of the staff should be there by now, starting to set up. What the hell did that mean? He got distracted just one day and already the place was going to hell?

Joel pushed open the office door to the restaurant.

"Surprise!"

Damned if they weren't right about the surprise. He hadn't really expected a crowd to be outside the office hearing --

He looked over the smiling faces. Emmy, Hallie, Bridget, Zach, Kiki...and a lot of the regulars here. Eli. Daphne and Joe. Amos. More. He had no idea why, but he knew they were here for him.

He blinked. There was no way he was going to cry.

"Jesus God, it's three o'clock in the afternoon!" Joel said. "You can't have a surprise party then."

"Well, we're here, and you're surprised. Time to party. At least there's time for the rest of us to catch up to your private office party." Hallie didn't quite wipe the smirk off her face. Every one of the damned waitresses were smart-asses. Had that been in the job description or something?

He told himself there was also no way he was going to blush. Not in front of this group. But the three of them might as well have taken out a full-page ad in the *Times-Dispatch*. In fact, it might have drawn less notice.

"Um, why are we partying?" Joel was almost afraid of the answer. "St. Patrick's is long over."

"Emmy called everyone and said we needed to throw you a party. We don't ask questions when Emmy tells us to do something." Zach handed him a beer. The man always did have a good sense of timing.

"Jesus. Emmy, if this is a good-bye party, you made a big mistake. I'm going to stick around. For a while longer."

Emmy smiled. "Do we need a reason? But I thought it might be an engagement party."

"We haven't persuaded our shrinking violet here quite yet." Chaz put his hand on Joel's shoulder and then gripped it hard. "But Susan and I are working on it."

Bridget shrieked. “Susan! You’re back! About time, too, girl. Hey, Zach, where’s the karaoke machine? Fire it up, and let’s hear a few choruses of “Proud Mary”! Blondie, you’ve got to! For old times’ sake.”

Chaz began to laugh like a madman. Susan, a little bedraggled but laughing too, let herself be led toward the stage in the back. Zach started to set up the karaoke machine. A few folks in the crowd drew themselves some beers while they waited.

Chaz bumped shoulders with him. Very deliberately.

“Yeah?”

“She hasn’t said she loves us yet, you know.”

“She fucks us like she loves us,” Joel retorted and then scowled. “No, she hasn’t said so.”

Women liked to say that. They liked men to say it back.

“So, do we have a problem here?” Joel asked.

*Chaz hasn’t said he loves me either.* Susan had said it for him. Having Susan as a messenger would probably work out pretty well in the future, but some things needed to be said to a lover’s face.

“I don’t know. She doesn’t act like there is a problem.” Chaz stared at the stage.

Susan was laughing and waving off demands for more. Then she ducked her head and agreed.

“You and I never acted like we had problems, either. But if Susan hadn’t been around, I would have left anyhow.”

Chaz turned his head to stare at him just as Susan started her big wheel a-turnin’ onstage. “Come here, Yank.”

Joel didn’t trust that look. “Don’t you think we’ve done enough in public for today, Chaz?”

“It will only be in public if you don’t come along with me now.”

It was a wonder Chaz didn't take him by the hand and pull him along like a naughty three-year-old. As it was, Joel felt like a little kid, trotting at Chaz's heels, through the kitchen and out the back.

"The alley? You needed to take me to the alley?"

"Shut up, Bry." Chaz took two handfuls of Joel's shirt and pulled him close. "It's the nearest place I could think of that's relatively quiet around here."

"You know, you complain about the shape my T-shirts are in, and then you --"

"Shut up." Chaz's kiss was hard and bruising.

"Shutting up here."

"I love you. I'm going to introduce you to my family, to everyone in the goddamn world as my man if you're sure. I don't know what was going on in your squirrely New York head before, but I've always wanted to do that, do you understand? You were the one that had the doubts --"

"Bullsh --" Joel wasn't able to finish before Chaz kissed him again. As long as he kept kissing him, Joel was willing to concede the point. Maybe he had been doubtful. He wasn't a trusting kind of guy.

"I don't know if I'm marrying you or Susan or no one, but I love you. Settled? Now that I've told you, you aren't going to bug out?"

Mr. Charm and Romance was snarling this at him in an alley, looking more like he wanted to slug him than love him. Joel blinked. Chaz had thought he'd leave if Chaz told him he loved him?

"All right."

"All right' what?" Chaz glared at him.

Joel fought the insane giddiness threatening to overwhelm him and managed to coherently say, "I mean all right. I love you too. No matter what we end up as officially, I

suppose I always will.” It wasn’t exactly the method or place he’d recommend for a mutual declaration of love, but it did the trick.

Chaz had him flat up against the restaurant wall, kissing him some more, and for a moment Joel wondered if they were going to have another first with a daylight quickie in the alley behind their place of business. Chaz’s kiss was getting Joel crazier than usual, because before he lost all ability to reason he realized he wouldn’t mind risking arrest. Not for that.

Then all rational thought stopped. Joel grabbed at rich boy’s hair and kissed him back. He tasted blood and wasn’t sure which of them it came from. He didn’t care, and he ground against his man. *Chaz. Oh God, Chaz.*

Chaz was the one who broke free first. Of course. But at least he was breathing hard by the time he came up for air.

“Well, that’s taken care of then. I don’t care how we formalize things, Bry, just so long as we know we’re together on this.” Despite Chaz’s brisk tone, he traced his thumb against Joel’s lips slowly while he spoke. His eyes were still focused on Joel’s mouth when he sighed and stepped back.

Joel smiled at him, knowing he was giving the world’s soppiest, widest grin. His whole image was getting completely blown. Now if his cock would too --

Chaz let out a small sigh. “We may be settled, but that still leaves Susan.”

*Shit.*

“What are we supposed to do, Chaz? I’m easy that way, but I don’t think she’ll settle for a grope in the alley.”

“Easy? It took eight years of maneuvering, and I finally had to call in Susan to clinch the deal. God. Bry, I don’t think I can take that long to get someone else to commit. Should we talk to her?”

“Crap. We suck at that.”



“True. But we have to tell her we love her.”

“Uhhmm.”

“You idiot. You do love her, Bry, right?”

“You’re asking my intentions, Rhett? Why, this is so sudden!”

“Don’t try to joke your way out. You do, don’t you?”

“You know, Chaz, if you’re gay, usually the nightmare scenario is having the longtime partner come home and say he’s getting married to a woman. Because he’s rejecting everything about you and most of society is going to cheer him on.”

Chaz didn’t tell him he wasn’t answering the question this time.

“You know, Bry, if you’re a woman, usually the nightmare scenario is having the longtime partner come home and say he’s leaving you for a man. Because it means he’s willing to give up a hell of a lot to go there.” Chaz shrugged. “But that’s not what any of us are doing here. Can you get that shit out of your head?”

“I’m a natural shithead, so it’s kinda difficult, man.”

“For God’s sake. Let’s go back in, and try not to let your natural tendencies fuck up a good thing.”

\* \* \* \* \*

She slugged down the bottled water and mopped her face with the towel Zach handed to her. She’d forgotten how much fun and how draining it was to perform for the public.

But where were Joel and Chaz?

Even in the crowd, she knew they weren’t here. Was it strange to be that aware of their presence? Maybe it was because she already knew about missing them.

What the hell would she do if this didn’t work?

And then Chaz was at her right elbow and Joel at her left, just as if they’d been doing this for years.

“So, we were wondering when we were going to meet your family.” Joel whispered it in her ear.

“What?”

“Fair is fair. You can’t keep us your dirty little secret forever.”

“My dad is a high school football coach, and my brothers all played on the team. Are you sure you want to meet them? It’s a big commit --” Susan stopped. “Oh.”

Was this their way of saying...? Oh.

“I suppose we could invite your family over for Easter too. My place is big enough.” Chaz slipped something to her behind Joel’s back, and she caught it just as Joel grinned at her.

“I’m fine with getting the family stuff all over at once.” Joel signaled Hallie and then raised three fingers.

“Yeah. Yeah, we could.”

“It’s settled then?” Joel winked at Hallie, took the three beers she brought, then passed one to each of his partners.

“Sounds settled to me.” Susan didn’t have the faintest idea what her parents would say. She didn’t care. She almost wished she’d told them more before this, but they’d have to live with it. She’d been raised on stories about how shocked her grandparents had been when Mama brought home a white hooligan for Sunday dinner and said they’d been married that morning. It was payback time.

“Chaz will do just fine. They’ll hate me. I’m the type of guy parents hate.” Joel took a swallow and then another.

“They’ll probably love you. Did I tell you my dad is from Queens? And his mom is from Ireland. Dad’s this big, loud, red-haired dude... Oh. My. God. He’s not all that much older than you.” Susan covered her mouth to keep from laughing. “No, I do not plan to call you ‘Daddy’ in some of our kinky sex play.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Joel put the beer on the counter. “Maybe the visit-the-parents thing is a bad idea.”

“Wrong again, Bry. It’s what you do when you are serious about someone. I love you, Susan,” Chaz said. He stared at Joel. “You have something to add, Bry?”

Joel got that funny, half-terrified, half-delighted look on his face. “Ahh. Yeah. Eventually. It’s...it’s difficult. And, uh, so far I’m really liking all the work you two are doing at persuading me.”

Chaz said the words easily -- *too* easily? -- and Joel wouldn’t say them at all. The two of them were impossible. She scowled at them. Both of them smiled back at her at the same time.

They might not ever say or do exactly what she wanted, because they were impossible. Instead of continuing to scowl, she leaned against Chaz as Joel slid his hand over her cheek. She let the warmth grow inside her at being with them. It didn’t matter what she wanted. They were what she needed. Really, it was no wonder she loved them so impossibly much.

Chaz whacked the back of Joel’s head. “Idiot. I gave you your cue, and you blew it.”

That was her cue. She dumped the small container he’d given her into Joel’s beer.

“I’ll tell her I love her on my time, not yours. You’re not going to beat a confession out of me --”

“Look down, Joel.” Susan put one arm around his waist and the other around Chaz’s. “It’s a love token from the two of us. To show you how much we care.”

“J-Jesus!” Joel sputtered. “Green fucking beer!”

“We started off with that when we met. Seemed like the right sentimental gesture to make.” Chaz tried to say it without grinning and failed.

The two people he loved most in the world started laughing, followed by everyone in the restaurant.

Joel shook his head. They were insane. All of them.

Thank God. Since he was too, they all belonged.

 THE END 

## Treva Harte

Treva Harte lives near a city with many, many attorneys. Thanks to Loose Id and her writing, she is now able to be a recovering attorney and spends her time writing, editing, raising adolescents, taking care of an elderly mother, and dealing with a hyperactive husband (he says he's just very energetic.) She is also co-owner and Editor-in-Chief of the e-publishing company [Loose Id](#).

She and her husband both like writing in whatever time they have left, so they often fight over -- sorry, since he is still a practicing attorney they NEGOTIATE -- keyboard time. No wonder Treva's particular brand of sensual romance is a bit offbeat and usually mixed with fantasy.