



FURTIVE LIAISON
Amanda Young

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That was all the permission Shawn needed to slip inside and close the door behind him. He stepped closer, and the dim, pulsing light from the screen flashed over the younger man's features, revealing large kohl-rimmed eyes and plump lips. His forehead was high, his nose a little too long for his face.

Shawn guessed his age as somewhere around early to mid-twenties.

The guy glanced up at Shawn as the screen flashed particularly bright and revealed eyes the color of stormy seas. He licked his lips in a slow and calculating move designed to make men speculate about what else his tongue would be useful for, then smiled with a small, beguiling upward twist of his mouth. “What took you so long?”...

ALSO BY AMANDA YOUNG

Precious Ache

FURTIVE LIAISON

BY

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FURTIVE LIAISON
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PROLOGUE

The last place Shawn Delaney planned to be on a Friday night was sitting in his car, parked against the curb of a quiet suburban street several hours outside Manhattan. Acid churned in his gut as he watched his lover of the past six months twirl a dark-headed little boy around and around in circles.

If he hadn't known better, he wouldn't have suspected the man in front of him was his lover at all. The kohl eyeliner and skin-tight denim were gone, replaced with loose khakis and a plain white polo shirt that hung on his slender frame. The dark locks he normally spiked with gel were tamed down and slicked back away from his high forehead in a preppy style

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Shawn never thought he'd see on the man. It was like looking at a polished doppelganger of the one he loved.

The child's exuberant squeals of joy carried on the light breeze and infiltrated Shawn's car through the closed windows, twisting the metaphorical knife a little deeper into his chest. In true masochistic fashion, he couldn't stop gazing at the Norman Rockwell scene in front of him.

Shawn didn't know how he'd gotten to this point—a spurned lover sitting outside his boyfriend's house without a clue about what to do now that he was faced with the concrete proof of his lover's betrayal. This lovelorn, angry and needy man was not who he wanted to be. Indeed, the man he'd always prided himself on being didn't accept the concept of vulnerability...especially for something as uncertain as commitment. He'd steered clear of attachments because he suspected this was the kind of shit he'd end up with for all his trouble. Some people inspired love and fidelity, but he clearly wasn't one of them. He should have fucked the man and left it that. Like a fool, he'd fallen in love.

And now he was paying for it.

In an ironic twist of fate, he'd been the catalyst for his own heartache. It was he who had dug and dug for dirt, convinced his lover was hiding something from him. His mother's admonitions from his childhood rang in his ears, taunting him with the knowledge that he'd brought this on himself. *Be careful what you ask for.*

It had all started so benignly...

CHAPTER 1

Shawn strolled into the XXX bookstore and glanced around the almost empty shop. He'd left his suit jacket and tie in the car, hoping the rolled sleeves and open collar of his white dress shirt would suffice as casual enough. If not, maybe he'd find someone who had a suit fetish. After all, he still wore the charcoal-colored Versace slacks and coordinating dress shoes.

Honestly, he didn't really care what ticket he punched with someone as long as he got off in the process. The muscles in his shoulders were tense, his body tight with pressure, but it was nothing a good orgasm or three wouldn't take care of. While he could manage on his own, as he had been for the last

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several months, he was in the mood for a little assistance this afternoon. All he had to do was find someone interested in helping him out.

There were a few people milling around the shelves—a guy dressed in black from head to toe, a bleach-blond bimbo who was clearly looking for tricks, and a man nearly old enough to be related to Father Time. A bored, overweight clerk with dark, greasy hair flipped through a *Juggz* magazine behind the counter.

All in all, Shawn had to say his options looked slim. For noon on a Friday, the place was dead. He'd expected more when he'd decided to pop by for a little lunchtime recreation after a round of annoying meetings. The morning had been one shit-storm after another, ending with the loss of a multi-million dollar merger with P & E systems when the homophobic CEO had gleefully announced they would be taking their business elsewhere...just because Shawn preferred dick over snatch. If he ever figured out who'd spilled his personal business to the bastard he was going to pound heads. What he did in his spare time was nobody else's fucking business. It didn't have a goddamn thing to do with how he ran his company.

What he needed now was a diversion to take his mind off the money he'd lost. Losing himself in a sweet piece of ass was preferable, but he'd settle for a nice hand job. Right then he wasn't in the position to be choosy.

He bypassed the shelves and headed toward the back, a pocket full of tokens from his last visit jangling in his pocket.

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Four movie stalls lined the short, dingy hall. Three out of the four were occupied, the doors closed. Whoever was in the last stall on the right had left the door ajar.

Shawn approached with the hope that the person inside was to his liking and willing to play. Although it was dim inside the booth, Shawn was able to discern a slender young man, his dark hair spiked with gel. One pale hand hung at his side, the short nails painted black. He faced the movie screen where two naked, muscle-bound jocks wrestled on a mat. Shawn hoped the actors on the screen didn't represent the only type of man the other guy was interested in, because he sure as hell wouldn't ever be described as overly muscular. He kept in shape, his six-foot frame lean and firm without being bulgy. Thanks to the gray hair encroaching on his temples, people would be more apt to describe him as a silver fox than anything else. The gay social scene revolved around youth, but Shawn knew without a doubt that he'd never been happier, more secure, more accepting of his lot in life than he was now at the ripe old age of forty-two. No way would he go back to the angst-ridden hell of his twenties.

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Shawn was a little taken aback, but he decided to play along with whatever game the other one had in mind. “Uh...I was caught in traffic.”

The guy made a tsk-tsk noise in the back of his throat. “That’s too bad. I was almost ready to start without you.”

Shawn crouched in front of the younger man, between him and the screen, and ran his hands up hard, denim-clad legs. “Now that would be a real shame.” He palmed the bulge behind the guy’s fly, sizing up the package beneath. “Why don’t you let me try to rectify my tardiness?”

“Help yourself.”

With pleasure. Shawn popped open the button and slid down the zipper, almost frothing at the mouth for a taste of what lay beneath. He pulled apart the sides of the fabric and leaned down to run his cheek over the jock-covered swell of flesh. The scent of horny male, salt and musk, mixed with light traces of whatever soap had been used that morning, hit Shawn’s nose and inflamed his rising libido. His own hard-on began to extend inside his silk boxers, the slide of the slick

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material hugging his crotch as he filled out.

The younger man groaned, a low and ragged sound, and lifted his hips. Shawn took advantage and quickly stripped the jeans down to the man's ankles.

"Wait." The guy pointed to his jeans. "There're unlubed rubbers in my left back pocket."

"Great." Shawn reached for the denim. He rifled through the pocket and pulled out a condom. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Now where were we?"

"Right about here, I'd say." Shawn pushed the younger man's knees as wide as possible and pulled the ass to the edge of the seat. He worked his fingers beneath the elastic band of the jock and caressed the hot, smooth skin beneath, teasing them both just a little. There was something so exciting about seeing a new cock, that brief moment of expectation that was over all too quickly.

Although Shawn hadn't planned to be the one doing the sucking this afternoon, he figured, *what the hell?* Everyone had to take a turn on their knees sometime. It wasn't as if he didn't like the taste of it. He could only hope the guy would return the favor once he'd gotten his jollies in Shawn's mouth.

The younger man rocked his hips upward toward Shawn's face. "Quit teasing and suck me. Unless you'd like a face full of spunk...?"

Amused by the guy's attitude, Shawn decided to tease him a little. "What are you going to give me if I do?"

The younger man groaned in impatience. "What do you want?"

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“Your ass will do, for starters.” Just the thought of shoving this one against the wall and fucking him was enough to make Shawn’s prick throb in anticipation.

“I’ll take it under advisement. Now suck me. Please.”

The “please” pushed Shawn’s buttons just right. He pulled the stretchy fabric to the side and revealed the long, thin cock hiding beneath. Released from the cramped confines, the younger man’s erection curved up toward his flat abs. The flared head drooled silvery threads of lust just beneath the guy’s innie belly button.

Feeling contrary, Shawn went for the plump sac first. He nosed the tender skin, licking a wide path up to the base of the young man’s cock. To his pleasant surprise, not a single hair stood in his way or abraded his tongue. He tickled the area with the tip of his tongue, moving it back and forth around the root. “You shave?”

“Wax.”

“Nice.”

“Thanks.”

Shawn tore open the unlubricated condom with his teeth. After a second’s remorse that he wouldn’t get to savor the sweet flesh in his hand, he wrapped the guy’s tool like he was supposed to. A lot of people considered a blow job to be an acceptable risk, but Shawn abided by the motto that it was better to be safe than sorry. The taste of cum, no matter how much he liked it, wasn’t worth the associated threat.

Shawn encircled the base of the dick with his thumb and forefinger, holding the condom secure, and wasted no time

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sucking in the fat head. He pushed down against the slit, taking advantage of the loose latex reservoir at the tip, and flicked his tongue back and forth.

“Oh, yeah. That’s it.” The punk rolled his hips, his body begging for more. “Keep going.”

Shawn obliged, sliding his lips down the shaft until they met the ring of his fingers clasping the base. He twisted and pulled in time with the rhythm of his mouth, careful not to displace the condom while he worked over the cock from root to crown. Thanks to a strong gag reflex he’d never be a deep-throater, but he knew how to use suction and his tongue to their utmost advantage. No one had ever accused of him giving bad head—and contrary to popular belief, there was such a thing as bad blowjobs.

Fingers slid into Shawn’s short hair and cradled his skull as he bobbed up and down. Without a break in his attention on the tool in his mouth, Shawn used his free hand to cup the younger man’s balls and massage the smooth, warm sac. He manipulated the firm, egg-shaped orbs within and then slid his mouth down to lick the tender skin. The younger man smelled delicious, his personal aroma growing stronger with need.

“Christ, your mouth feels good. Hot.”

“Mm hmm,” Shawn replied, sucking one ball so he could lick and tease it. After a moment, he moved on to the other testicle and gave it the same attention as the first. When he had both wet with his saliva, he returned to the cock, sliding his lips down the slippery shaft with ease.

Two hands clasped Shawn’s head right above his ears, and

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the younger man's hips began to rock, thrusting his prick into Shawn's mouth with rising force. "Oh, God...don't stop. Make me come."

Shawn kept sucking, vigorously bobbing up and down.

"Oh, fuck... *Yes!* I'm coming." The hands on Shawn's head tightened.

The hard flesh gliding over Shawn's tongue swelled and pulsed. The younger man's hips bucked forward, the latex reservoir ballooning outward as it filled with cum. Shawn slowed and then moved away before the condom slipped off.

The punk's heaving breathing eclipsed the low moaning of the porno still playing behind them. Shawn turned and glanced at the screen, surprised that he'd forgotten all about the damn movie.

He climbed to his feet and emptied his pockets, feeding the machine with all the tokens he had in a bid to keep it from stopping at the wrong time. The last thing he wanted was an interruption by the grease ball up front while he was trying to get relief.

Turning to face the younger man, he rubbed the needy flesh behind his fly and slid open the fastener on his slacks. His erection was harder than he could remember it being in recent memory, aching for a little of the relief he'd just given the younger man. He took a half step forward, fingers busy sliding down his zipper. "My turn."

The guy sat up and licked his lips. He leaned forward in his seat and reached for Shawn.

"Ah, ah, ah," Shawn said, sidestepping the other man's

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hands. “The agreement was for your sweet ass, remember?”

“As if I could forget, man, but I was hoping for a little taste of the merchandise first.”

Although Shawn was tempted, he didn’t want to spill his load in the punk’s mouth. “Thanks, but I’ll pass. I’d rather come in your ass.”

The younger man’s forehead creased in uncertainty. “All right, but I hope you have lubed rubbers. I only have non-lubed, cause the others taste like shit and I wasn’t exactly planning to get fucked.” He rose to his feet, his jeans clinging to his calves, and turned to face the wall.

“Don’t worry, baby, I came prepared.” Shawn pulled a condom from his pocket and tore it open. He shoved his slacks and boxer-briefs down over his hips, made quick work of the rubber and moved closer. He couldn’t wait to feel the tight heat of this guy’s ass around his tool. It’d been way too long since he’d been in the driver’s seat. Blowjob were nice, but sometimes a man needed a little something more. Something like the muscular, dimpled backside he was looking at.

Unable to wait a second longer, he stepped up behind his partner of the hour and ground his sheathed prick against the firm rear end. He used both hands to separate the hard-muscled cheeks and slid his dick between them, rutting up and down the smooth crevice. Keeping one hand on the younger man’s left hip, he used the other to reach around and press his pointer and middle finger against the guy’s mouth. Lips parted and sucked his fingers in, surrounding them in warm, wet heat. Shawn swallowed a whimper, imagining that same sensation

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around his dick. “That’s it, baby. Get ’em good and wet for your ass.”

His impatience growing, Shawn pulled his fingers from the mouth. He lowered his hand and pressed his wet fingertips against the clenched pucker between the spread cheeks before him. The wrinkled flesh quivered beneath his touch. Using his index finger alone, he pushed against the quivering entrance and said, “Relax.”

“Fuck that. Just do it.”

Shawn drove his digit all the way inside. The tight, squeezing heat felt fucking divine as he thrust in and out, trying to work open the channel he wanted to plunder with his penis. One finger quickly became two, stretching and loosening the taut muscle. Shawn’s eagerness to feel the yielding orifice around his cock escalated with every passing second he spent on readying the other man. His balls ached from his desire to bury himself deep inside.

Through a cascade of black fringe, the younger man glanced back at Shawn over his right shoulder. “Are you planning to fuck my ass, or just play with it all day?”

Shawn smirked. The guy’s words may have been sarcastic, but his voice was verging on whiny and desperate. He pulled his fingers out of the guy’s tight hole and lined up his hard-on. “You want it, baby. You got it.”

With one hand on the base of his erection and the other on the younger man’s hip, Shawn thrust home in one long, deep stroke. His partner’s body went rigid, a tortured moan spilling from his mouth. “Fuck, that stings.”

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“Hey, you asked for it.” Shawn held still, giving the other guy a few minutes to relax. The squeezing channel around his shaft was almost too tight, verging on painful.

“Yeah, well, that was before I knew about your horse cock.”

Shawn laughed, his body shaking.

The man groaned. “Fuck. Don’t laugh. Christ, just give me a minute.”

Shawn rolled his hips, not moving so much as grinding against the punk’s ass and wiggling his dick around inside. “Let me know when it’s all right to move. I’m dying back here.” The ass claspng him was hot as a furnace, even through the thin latex barrier between them. The channel massaged him like a thousand tiny fingers hell-bent on making him come long before he was ready.

“All right,” the younger man whispered. “Move. Fuck me.”

Shawn gripped both slim hips in front of him and slowly pulled back. He watched his prick slide out of the hole and then reverse direction, carefully sinking back inside until the two men’s bodies were pressed snug together. He closed his eyes and nuzzled the guy’s neck, breathed in the scent of sex and cum, and began a rhythm of long, hard strokes that taunted him with the pleasure to come.

“Oh, shit. Harder, man. Give it to me. It’s been too long since I was fucked good and hard.”

Shawn was happy to give him what he wanted. He pumped harder, chasing his own orgasm as he reached around and

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found the other man's cock restored to life and leaking at the tip. Fisting the hard shaft, he stroked in time with his thrusts, trying to bring his partner off before it was too late. "You're so hot and tight. Damn, you feel good."

"You do, too," the younger man panted in between ragged breaths.

With a grunt, Shawn slammed himself deep within the tight inferno. His groin slapped against the punk's ass cheeks with every lunge forward, the aroma of male musk growing stronger.

"Don't stop."

"I won't." Shawn picked up his pace, rolling his hips faster. The building could have crumbled around them, and he wouldn't have quit fucking the tightest piece of ass he'd had since who knew when.

"So close. *Oh, God.* Please, make me come."

Beyond the ability to speak coherently, Shawn flexed his fingers around the other man's cock and squeezed harder. He pumped faster, the damp skin sliding back and forth over the steely shaft.

The younger man fucked Shawn's fist, then shoved his ass back toward Shawn, over and again. Quiet whimpers escaped his mouth, barely loud enough to be heard over their heavy breathing and the moans spilling from the porno still playing in the background.

The slick, internal walls around Shawn's hard-on began to tremble. The other man stiffened and wailed, spunk pouring over Shawn's fingers.

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Shawn cursed under his breath and kept going. He thrust through the rhythmic contractions kneading his shaft, so close to coming he could taste it. His balls pulled tight against his body in preparation.

The clenching oasis around Shawn's cock disappeared as the guy he was fucking jerked forward. "Stop."

"Wait— What?" Shawn stared down at his latex covered dick, at a loss for what to say.

No answer came. Instead, the younger man whirled around and dropped to his knees in front of Shawn. He stripped off the condom and bent forward, swallowing Shawn to the root.

Shawn's groin jerked forward, a subconscious act in response to the hot, moist mouth wrapped around his naked flesh. He groaned and tried to hold still, although it was almost impossible while soft lips descended down his tool, wetting his flesh and massaging every stiff inch with a soft, malleable tongue.

"Oh, God." Shawn buried his fingers in the other man's thick black hair. "That's it. Suck me."

The punk tilted his head back and stared up at Shawn through a dense fringe of ebony lashes. The bright blue eyes were nothing more than narrow slits, the lids heavy from pleasure. He hummed around Shawn's member as if it was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

"Fuck...yes!" Shawn reached for the wall in front of him, desperate for something to help steady himself. "So good, baby."

Shawn stared down at the younger man's bobbing head,

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his pleasure accelerated by watching the lips flying up and down his cock, and the feel of deft fingers twisting and pulling his flesh just right. He thrust forward as much as he dared, chasing after his orgasm. It was right there, just out of reach. All he needed was a little more friction...to get a tiny bit deeper.

As if the guy blowing him heard his silent plea for more, Shawn felt the tip of his prick breach the younger man's throat. Nothing had ever come close to feeling as good as that throat rippling around the head of his dick.

A rush of fire spread down Shawn's spine and extended outward, spreading to his ass and groin. He dropped his head back, his cock swelling to epic proportions as his eyelids drooped. Sharp pleasure radiated down his length and exploded in short, powerful bursts of cum. The soft lips surrounding him compressed, the younger man doing his best to swallow Shawn's load.

Shawn trembled through his orgasm and tried to stay upright. If not for the wall at his back, he wasn't sure his legs would continue to hold him. He shivered through the aftershocks, immensely pleased when the other guy stayed on his knees to clean Shawn's softening cock with his tongue.

His dick twitched, trying to refill for another round, but Shawn reluctantly pulled away. Although he was tempted to stay, he didn't have the time. He needed to get back to the office. There was still work to be done if he didn't want his sex life to cause discord with pending clients. As much as he'd like to tell anyone who had a problem with homosexuality to

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go fuck themselves, he wasn't willing to lose any more money over the issue. The best revenge was taking their money and using it for his own gains. Wealth had a way of whitewashing the issue and shutting up people like nothing else.

He glanced down at the younger man while he packed himself back into his slacks. Surprisingly, the other guy was hard again, the tip of his cock swollen where it peeked from between folds of denim, as if he hadn't just climaxed twice in a short space of time.

Ah, the benefits of youth. Shawn couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten it up three times in a row that fast.

The younger man stumbled to his feet and stuffed his prick back into his pants. "So, ah...thanks, man. That was great."

"Back at'cha," Shawn said, hating the awkward parting that inevitably popped up after getting off with a virtual stranger. "It was just what I needed."

A loud knock of the wall interrupted the awkwardness. A brash voice filtered through the door. "You have to put tokens in the machine if you plan to stay in the booth."

"Well," the younger man said. "I guess we should get out of here." One step took him to the door. With his hand on the door, he said, "See you around."

"Wait," Shawn said, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet. He pulled out a card. "If you're ever interested in getting together for a little fun, no strings attached, just give me a shout." He doubted he'd hear from the guy, but it was worth a shot. There was something about the smartass attitude wrapped in a lean, smooth body that turned on Shawn. He

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wouldn't mind getting another, less-rushed taste of those charms.

Long, nimble fingers snatched the card. The man glanced down and then back up at Shawn. "Thanks. I'll do that."

CHAPTER 2

Several weeks went by before Shawn received the phone call that changed his life. He'd put the bookstore encounter out of his mind and was trying to dig himself out from underneath a mountain of work when a unknown number popped up on his caller id one afternoon. After a brief conversation with a guy who identified himself as Marc Wright from the bookstore, he agreed to meet the younger man for coffee later that evening.

Even though not a single word was spoken about sex, Shawn knew the score. The other man wouldn't have called to talk to him about the stock market. His pulse quickened just at the thought of seeing Marc again.

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When he arrived outside Ginger's Java he was freshly showered and shaved. He'd changed out of his work clothes and opted for something more comfortable and easy to take off. The soft contours of the jeans he'd chosen hugged his ass and thighs, and displayed his package nicely. A simple black crewneck shirt enfolded his chest and showed off the width of his shoulders to perfection.

Thanks to high hopes for the evening ahead, he'd reserved a room at the hotel around the corner. If given the chance, he wanted more space to enjoy the younger man. He planned to take his time and enjoy the encounter—maybe get off a couple of times before they went their separate ways, if Marc was game.

He sauntered into the small, locally owned coffee house and glanced around, finding Marc easily. The younger man sat alone at the back of the store, a large Styrofoam cup clasped between delicate, long-fingered hands decorated with silver rings and chipped black polish. Spiky ebony hair topped a face sweet enough to make angels weep. The stormy blue eyes Shawn recalled were shaded by dark lashes as the younger man's head dipped to drink from the steaming cup.

Pure lust punched Shawn in the gut and spread lower so that his cock nudged his fly, searching for space to grow.

As Shawn approached, Marc looked up and smiled. "Shawn?"

He nodded and pulled out a chair. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

"No. I've only been here a few minutes, long enough to get

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my coffee and find a seat. You should get something. They have great muffins here.”

“Oh, yeah?” What Shawn wanted to eat wasn’t on the menu. He had no intention of wasting more time than he had to on small talk.

“Mm hmm.” Marc took a sip of his drink and set down the cup. “I’m a little partial to their raspberry lemon muffins myself.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when I’m in the mood for something sweet.” At the moment, all he wanted was a taste of the man sitting across from him.

Part of Shawn had expected the chemistry he recalled to be exaggerated in his mind. It wasn’t. If anything, he’d forgotten how strong a pull the younger man had on him. It was all he could do not to lean across the table and kiss Marc right there in front of God and present company. Shawn couldn’t wait to get him naked and spend his time exploring every inch of the lean, tight body he remembered. He could almost taste the tang of salt lingering on Marc’s smooth skin because he wanted to lick it so badly.

Shawn moistened his lips, gratified by the hungry way Marc’s gaze followed the progression of his tongue. “You about done with that coffee?”

“Almost.” Marc’s lips quirked up at the corners. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“Why should I? We both know why I’m here and it isn’t to discuss the muffins.”

Marc chuckled. “No, it isn’t. That doesn’t mean we can’t

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take a minute to discuss...other things of interest.”

“Fair enough.” Shawn leaned forward on his elbows. “What would you like to talk about?”

“I don’t know.” Marc picked up his cup and took a sip, probably buying time to think up something to say. “What do you do for a living?”

Shawn laughed. “Well, that’s generic enough. I own my own business. What about you?” He kept his answer vague, instead of explaining that he bought companies, tore them down and resold the pieces to the highest bidder.

“I’m in sales.”

“What kind of sales?”

“Lamps and things. Lighting fixtures. Nothing interesting. I’m just a lowly cog in the retail machine.”

Shawn smirked and let his gaze linger on the black fingernail polish. “And do you sell a lot of merchandise, dressed that way?”

“Ah, no. I don’t wear anything nearly this interesting at work. Mister and Missus America don’t want to buy their household goods from someone in leather.”

Shawn glanced under the table. Tight black leather encased Marc’s long legs and bunched over the impressive bulge between his thighs. “That’s a shame. They’re nice pants.” He couldn’t wait to see them balled up on the hotel room floor.

“Thanks. So, assuming you don’t want to take a quick trip into the men’s room, do you have somewhere in mind?”

“I do. There’s a hotel around the way we could go to.”

“All right. I’ll go in half on a room with you.”

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“Don’t worry about it. It’s taken care of.”

“Okay...Well, I’ll stop on the way and pick us up something to drink. Sex is thirsty work.”

“That’s fine with me. I plan on making you sweat it out anyway.”

A devilish twist spread Marc’s lips, revealing pearly white teeth. “I do appreciate a man with a plan.” His chair scraped against the floor as he pushed it back. “Let’s go.”

Shawn rose to his feet and followed Marc outside. Traffic bustled by, filling the cool evening air with the scent of exhaust and gas.

Marc stuck his hands in his pockets. “So, where to?”

“The hotel is just a couple of blocks up. We can walk, if you don’t mind. There’s a liquor store and a convenience shop between here and there, depending on what you want to drink.”

“Beer works for me, unless you’d rather have something different.”

“Beer’s fine. I prefer Heineken.”

“That’ll do.”

They walked side by side in silence, close enough to touch. While Marc went into the convenience store, Shawn waited on the sidewalk. Condoms and lube lingered in his pockets, ready to be put to good use. He didn’t need anything else.

Marc came out a few minutes later, a plastic bag with what looked like a six pack hanging from one hand. They fell into step with each other, walking briskly toward their destination.

When they reached the hotel, Shawn held the outer door

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open for Marc. He collected his keycard at the desk and led Marc to the elevator. Once inside, he hit the button for the tenth floor. The quiet slide and whoosh of the doors sliding shut signaled the end of Shawn's patience. He shoved the younger man against the mirrored wall and kissed him, their firm bodies pressed together. Marc's bag hit the wall with a thud and rustle of plastic, the glass bottles rattling noisily.

Shawn was oblivious to anything but the person in his arms. Marc's lips were warm and pliant beneath his own. The man's mouth opened easily beneath the onslaught of Shawn's prodding tongue and he took full advantage, slipping his tongue into Marc's mouth to explore. The moist interior tasted of coffee with a hint of mocha, a chocolaty treat for a ravenous man with a sweet tooth.

Marc's free hand wound around Shawn's neck, pulled him closer and returned Shawn's kiss with an exuberant passion of his own. Shawn took what Marc gave and ground his cock against the other man's hip, desperate for more stimulation. Thanks to their similarity in height, Marc's lean musculature was a perfect match for Shawn's lanky stature. The firm rise of Marc's erection pressed against Shawn's upper thigh, screaming his reciprocated need.

Even the thin layer of clothing between them was too much. Shawn wanted to feel bare skin under his hands, to savor every inch of flesh and then crawl inside Marc and fuck his way to paradise. His pulse raced and his balls ached with need, encouraging him to hurry. He wasn't sure how much longer he could wait.

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As if someone above was listening to his thoughts, the elevator dinged and signaled its arrival on the tenth floor. Shawn dragged himself away from Marc's mouth with reluctance. "Come on," he said, staring into Marc's heavy-lidded eyes.

Only the thought of getting Marc naked propelled Shawn out of the elevator and down the hall, Marc following close on his heels. He quickly located their room for the evening, but fumbled with the keycard in his haste to unlock the door.

Marc took the card from Shawn's fingers. "Here, let me."

Shawn moved in close behind Marc as the younger man rammmed the card in the lock. Laughing, Marc pushed his ass back against Shawn's groin as the lock flashed green. Shawn crowded Marc against the door, while Marc twisted the handle and shoved inward. They stumbled into the room together, barely taking the time to close the door behind them.

Marc dropped the bag with the beer in it and threw his arms around Shawn's neck, pulling his mouth down the scant inches separating their lips. Between one long wet kiss and the next, he whispered, "Want you."

"Mm hmm," Shawn murmured, working his way south down Marc's neck. "Gonna fuck you so hard."

"Oh, yeah. Can't wait..." Marc groaned and tilted his head back against the wall, making more room for Shawn's roving mouth.

Shawn licked the pulse point at the base of Marc's throat and smoothed his hands down Marc's sides. He found the hem of Marc's soft cotton shirt and tugged it up, murmuring, "Off."

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Marc lifted his arms and Shawn yanked the shirt over his head. He let it drop to the floor as he surveyed what he'd uncovered. Although the younger man wasn't overly muscular, he wasn't skinny either. Marc's skin was smooth and hairless, his pecs firm and topped by flat brown nipples, while his abs were clearly defined beneath. The cut V where Marc's torso narrowed into hips made Shawn long to trace the curve of muscle and bone with his tongue. That went on the long list of things Shawn planned to do before the night was over.

"Your turn," Marc said. He bypassed Shawn's shirt and reached for the button on his jeans instead, popping it from its mooring. The zipper slid down with ease, the quiet slide of metallic teeth forecasting the countless pleasures awaiting them. Marc maneuvered the jeans until they hung loose around Shawn's hips, then he slid his hand inside the denim. Warm fingers snuck beneath the elastic band of Shawn's jockstrap and wrapped around the base of his cock, squeezing.

Shawn's hips jerked forward. "Christ, let me get these off." He shoved down the pants and jockstrap, toed off his shoes and kicked them out of the way in a matter of seconds. Hoping to save time, he pulled off his shirt as well. Finished, he turned his attention to Marc's leather pants and worked open the ties. No help was offered as Shawn cajoled the tight fabric down Marc's thighs. At that point, he was forced to give up, unable to bend any lower when his cock was being fondled by such persistent hands.

With his pants bunched around his thighs, Marc walked

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backward toward the bed and dragged Shawn along by his hard-on. “Follow me.”

“As if I have much choice,” Shawn said, careful to stay close enough not to hurt himself.

Marc’s hand never once left Shawn’s dick. It merely glided up and down the ruddy stalk in a slow and languorous pace that belied both men’s rising desires for more. He sat on the edge of the bed and used his free hand to worm between Shawn’s legs and fondled the heavy sac below, rolling Shawn’s balls in his palm.

The light scrape of a fingernail over the soft skin behind Shawn’s testicles made him shiver, despite being in a perfectly warm room. “As someone said to me not too long ago, are you planning to do something with that, or just play with it all night?”

Marc’s answering smile was nothing short of wicked. “Well, that depends. Exactly what did you have in mind when you reserved this room? I’d hate to suck you off if you were planning to plow my ass with this monster.”

Shawn groaned. “I have a lot of plans. There’s no rule saying we can’t do them all, one by one. Unless you’re afraid you can’t keep up with me?”

“I can take anything you have to dish out.” With a final squeeze, Marc released Shawn’s cock and balls. He lay back on the bed and lifted his calves in the air, gesturing to his pants and shoes. “Why don’t you start by getting these off me?”

With a nod, Shawn pulled the shoes, popping each one free

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before moving on to the snug leather. He worked the pants down and off, and then took his place between Marc's thighs.

Marc set his feet on the bed and pushed back, scooting sideways across the mattress. Shawn crawled onto the bed after him, stopping here and there to kiss every patch of skin that appealed to him: the outside of a hair-roughened thigh, the curve between hip and waist, the smooth skin over Marc's washboard abs. Marc squirmed and wiggled, making the sexiest little whimpers when Shawn tongued his navel. The sounds grew louder when Shawn moved on and mouthed one ripe brown nipple.

Marc's chest lifted. "That feels so good."

Shawn sucked harder and then worked his way across Marc's chest to give the other nipple the same treatment. The second tiny bud hardened under his tongue as quickly as the first, the skin hot as freshly brewed coffee. Shawn trailed his hand down Marc's stomach, the silken flesh rising and falling under his palm. He continued until his fingertips met the root of Marc's cock. At this point, he began to fist the firm shaft, pumping from base to head and squeezing the fat tip. The spongy crown throbbed beneath his touch, leaking copious beads of moisture. Shawn collected the silky liquid and spread it around the head before gliding his hand back down the heavily veined shaft once again. Marc's hips rocked up to meet his strokes, fucking his fist.

Shawn's attention returned to Marc's nipples, where he flicked his tongue back and forth over one stiff bud, then the other, while he watched Marc's hard cock slide through the

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tight ring of his fingers.

“Shawn,” Marc panted. “As much as I like your mouth on my chest, I’d rather you come up here and kiss me.”

Nothing could have sounded better. Without losing his grip on Marc’s cock, Shawn moved up the bed. He slid his free hand beneath Marc’s neck, carded his fingers through thick black hair at the nape and hauled the younger man’s head closer. He stared into Marc’s eyes as he lowered his head. Marc licked his lips and tilted up his chin in invitation. His lips met Shawn’s and parted, giving Shawn all the room he needed to invade Marc’s mouth and explore. He licked over Marc’s teeth and met Marc’s tongue with his own, the two slick appendages gliding over and under each other in a dueling kiss.

Marc gripped Shawn’s shoulders and jerked him down. “You make me so hot. Want you...”

Shawn eagerly released Marc’s tool and fell into the younger man’s arms. His own dick ached where it pressed against his lover’s side, in need of something more. “God, yes...want you, too.”

Before he could say anything more, like how much he loved the feel of Marc’s skin or the musky scent of flesh, Marc attacked with renewed vigor, eating at Shawn’s mouth as if it were his last meal...licking, kissing and nipping Shawn’s lips.

Their bodies pressed together from chest to groin as Shawn lost himself in the texture and flavor of his lover’s mouth, the luxury of a hard body beneath his own. He experimented with rolling his hips this way and that, not stopping until he found

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just the right angle to rub his aching erection against Marc's shaft.

Marc made a tiny noise in the back of his throat. He snuck his arms under Shawn's pits and gripped Shawn's shoulder blades, rocking his groin upward. Their pricks bumped and slid together, compressed between each other's abdomens. Marc's hands slid down Shawn's back and grabbed his butt, pushing down as Marc swiveled his hips. In turn, Shawn shoved down against Marc, the two of them rutting against each other while they kissed.

All too soon, Shawn felt a telltale tingling between his balls and ass. He dragged his mouth away from Marc's and buried his face in the curve of the younger man's throat, gritting his teeth to forestall his orgasm. He didn't want to come so soon, not yet...

Marc groaned and shoved up against Shawn. "Oh, fuck... I can't stop. I'm coming..."

Long fingers dug into Shawn's ass as the younger man blasted their stomachs with cum. With Marc shivering beneath him, Shawn gave in to his own pleasure. He drove hard against Marc's stomach, the younger man's release easing the way, and felt his balls contract. One more thrust and his balls released, his cock jerking against Marc's stomach as he added his own cum to the mix.

Panting through the aftershocks, Shawn pressed a kiss beneath Marc's ear and rolled off of him. Lying on his back beside the younger man, he tried to catch his breath in anticipation for the next round. He folded his forearms

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beneath his head, thinking that although he just gotten off in spectacular fashion, the night was young...*and so is the man resting beside me.*

Marc groaned and covered his face with his arm. “Man, that was way too quick.”

“Hey, it’s okay. I got off, too, in case you didn’t notice.”

“I noticed.” Marc rolled onto his side facing Shawn and ran the fingers of his right hand through the copious amount of spunk covering the cobbled ridges of his stomach. “Kind of hard not to when I’m the one you sprayed.”

Shawn chuckled. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’ll be ready for round two here in a minute. I haven’t been able to think of anything but burying my dick in you since you called.”

“If we’re making confessions here, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since that day in the bookstore. Man, I thought my head was going to pop off, I came so hard.”

Shawn laughed and slid his arm under Marc’s side to pull the younger man closer. Marc leaned down as Shawn stretched up, and their lips met in a slow, languorous kiss that was nothing like the way they’d devoured each other moments before. Marc curled beside Shawn and slung one of his legs between Shawn’s, practically lying on top of him as they kissed.

Shawn let his mind drift, surprisingly in no hurry to move things along. It was nice lying there and kissing, almost decadent. Soon enough, they’d both be hard again and he’d want more, but for now, he wanted to make out like a kid and

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enjoy the moment. One secret, self-indulgent thought circled through his mind.

I could get used to this.

CHAPTER 3

Shawn's anger rose as he stared out the car's windshield at the small white house and the domestic scene unfolding before him. A petite brunette woman appeared in the front doorway and called to a child in the front yard, asking him to come in to dinner. She reached down to a second little boy who huddled against her denim-covered leg and caressed his dark hair. Shawn's attention shifted to the man in the yard who hoisted one of the two boys onto his shoulders and headed toward the woman.

Shawn choked on a bitter laugh as he watched Marc disappear inside the house with his wife and kids. He stared at the now-closed front door for long moments, bittersweet

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memories assaulting his righteous anger and draining it like a balloon.

His tryst with Marc at the hotel had only been the beginning. Before long, Marc was coming to Shawn's office for nooners, they were meeting at motels and wherever else they could think of to glean a moment's privacy. Public or private, his lust for Marc knew no boundaries.

The progression from fuck-buddies to something more had been easy, so slight Shawn hadn't given it a second thought at the time. One week they were fucking and going their separate ways, and the next they were doing things together—going for dinner, or catching a movie—before engaging in sweaty, raucous sex. Shawn found himself thinking about Marc while they were apart, his thoughts always circling around some new thing he thought Marc would enjoy doing when they were together.

On the weeks when Marc was out of town on business, Shawn suffered from sexual withdrawal the likes of which he hadn't experienced previously. Although he'd never intended to stay celibate when Marc was away, and there'd been no mention of Marc being faithful either, Shawn always wound up keeping his dick to himself. An easy fuck with some random stranger had lost its appeal. He wanted only Marc.

Now, sitting in his car and studying the tidy little house—Marc's home—Shawn wished he could pull away and forget he'd ever met Marc. Unfortunately, there was about as much chance of that happening as there was being struck by lightning. Even after finding out what a lying, cheating bastard

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Marc was, Shawn's body still reacted to him as if nothing had changed. His dick ached, the leaden traitor cramped inside his boxers.

Part of Shawn wanted to get out of his car, stalk across the perfectly maintained lawn and confront Marc. The more realistic side of him knew better than to make a scene in front of the man's family, no matter how much he wanted answers.

Looking straight ahead, Shawn dropped the transmission into first gear and pulled out onto the street. His heart left a trail of bloody tears on the road as he drove away from the only man he'd ever loved.

* * *

Back in his motel room, Shawn flung himself on the bed and stared at the ceiling in abject sorrow. The lead weight in his chest bore down on him until the simple act of drawing in air became an almost unbearable task. He wanted to be angry, to shout and punch something, but he was too numb and empty to rouse enough energy to bother.

What was the use of making an ass of himself? It wouldn't erase the intolerable knowledge that his lover had been lying to him from the very start of their relationship.

Marc was married with children. He'd cast Shawn into the position of being the other "woman." He hadn't even used his real name with Shawn, choosing to go by Marc Wright, instead of Marcus Wainwright.

With a sigh of resignation, Shawn rolled onto his side and grabbed his cell phone from where it lay on the cheap

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pressboard nightstand by the bed. He hit the speed dial and then listened to the call ring through, nausea churning in his gut. Although he'd dialed Marc's cell phone number, part of him worried that his lover's wife would answer the phone. He didn't think he could take hearing her voice. The guilt he felt for potentially wrecking a family weighed on his shoulders like a mountain of sand...and he was sinking fast. If he didn't get this over with now, he might fall back into bed with Marc, regardless of the consequences. He had no intention of turning into that kind of man.

"Hello."

"Marc?" Just the sound of Marc's voice made Shawn shiver, his prick firming against his will. "It's me. Shawn."

"Shawn? Is everything all right? You don't usually call me this early."

"I'm fine, but I need to talk to you."

"Can you hold on a second, please?"

"Sure."

Everything went silent. Shawn didn't even hear the sound of white noise crossing the line. He figured Marc had covered the phone.

Knowing why his lover needed to conceal their conversation only made Shawn's normal impatience that much stronger. He wasn't going to sit on hold for long. After fifty seconds he was going to hang up and call back.

One, Mississippi... Two, Mississippi... He'd counted all the way to forty before Marc returned.

"Sorry about that, love. I just needed to step outside for a

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little privacy.”

Shawn knew why Marc needed to be somewhere remote, but he decided to test the man all the same. “I’m sorry to catch you at a bad time. Were you in a meeting or something? I’d hate to get you in trouble with your boss.” While Marc had always told him he was a sales rep, citing that as his reason for traveling so much, he’d left out that he was the district sales manager for the family business. His father-in-law held majority stock in the family-owned-and-operated company, Vanhoosier Lampworks, while Marc’s wife held a large portion of shares as well. For a public company, they sure loved to keep it in the family.

“Oh, your call was no bother. I’m just...working on a project.”

Hmm, not quite the blatant lie I was looking for. “So, you are at work, then?”

“Right.” There was a pause. “What’s going on, Shawn?”

Shawn inhaled and let the air escape in a long rush. Oddly enough, at that moment he felt empathy for balloons. He could relate to a vessel devoid of all its filling. Nevertheless, he forged on. “I know you aren’t at work, Marc.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m aware of where you are. In fact, I’m aware of a lot of things I’m sure you’d rather not have me know.”

“What are you getting at Shawn? I don’t have time to solve riddles.”

“I need to speak with you.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

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“No. I need to speak with you in person.”

“You know I’m out of town. I miss you, too, love, but I can’t do anything about it right now.”

“You don’t need to travel anywhere. I’m in town.”

“You’re...you’re what?”

“I’m in town. I’m staying at the motel on Sunset, Room 222. If you could come soon, I would appreciate it.”

“I...I don’t know if I can do that, Shawn. I’m kind of... Christ, what are you doing here?”

“I told you. I need to speak with you. Will you travel here, or do I need to come to you?”

“No! Um...just stay put. It’ll take me a few hours to break away, but I’ll be there.”

“Fine.” Shawn closed his eyes against the hurt and confusion he heard in Marc’s voice. “I’ll see you soon.”

Shawn disconnected and flipped his cell phone onto the mattress beside him without opening his eyes. His brain hurt from chaotic thoughts, from the effort he’d expended to alter his schedule and create available time for this trip to suburbia. He was going to have to scramble to catch up with his meetings or risk losing several high-profile business deals. It would have been worth the loss if he was going to walk away from this rendezvous with his man, but he wasn’t naïve enough to think that would be the case.

Lying back on the bed, Shawn considered what he knew about Marc, and what he only thought he knew. It was so hard to believe everything between them had been a lie. What he didn’t understand was why Marc had kept coming back to him

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if it had only been about sex. The younger man could have scored easily enough with just about anyone he wanted. He didn't need to come begging for scraps from some middle-aged gay man whose best days were long behind him. Shawn was cocky enough to know he was fit and attractive, but ageism ran rampant in gay culture. No matter how well he took care of himself, or how handsome he was, someone twenty years younger would always be considered the better choice.

Above all, Shawn wanted to know why Marc had resorted to lies and deception. If all he'd wanted was a hard dick up his ass, Shawn would have gone along with it. In the beginning, all Shawn, himself, had wanted was a hot body and a tight hole.

Taking into consideration what he knew now, Shawn realized things never should have progressed beyond the fuck-buddy stage of their relationship. He didn't mind having his body used, but his heart and soul were off limits. No one was supposed to have access to those parts of him, much less possess the power to shit all over them.

He should have ended things the night Marc said, "I love you." Those three words had put thoughts in Shawn's head that he'd never fathomed before. That had been the night he'd stopped thinking in terms of "me" and started considering himself part of a "we." The independent playboy had begun considering a scarier word than love: commitment.

Unknown to Shawn at the time, that had marked the beginning of the end of their relationship for him. His

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discovery of a clue to Marc's true betrayal on one fateful morning had launched the destruction of any hope Shawn might have had for a future with the younger man.

* * *

Shawn had awakened that morning with his bladder throbbing for release and his skull pounding from the stiff angle his neck had been stuck in all night without the cushion of a soft pillow beneath it. Marc always hogged the pillows when he slept over, not that he'd spent the night very often. After six months of seeing each other, Marc had only stayed with Shawn a dozen or so times, but he looked right at home stretched across Shawn's big bed.

Twisting his head to and fro, Shawn tried to work out the kinks as he stared at his lover. Marc was sprawled on his back, his long legs spread and covering more than half the large bed. One pillow was lodged under Marc's dark hair. The other one was scrunched beneath his back and shoulders. The pale cream of Marc's silken skin stood out like a beacon against Shawn's midnight blue sheets, tempting Shawn to touch and taste.

Shawn scratched his head, a grin spreading across his face. *Damn boy took all the bed and hogged the covers, too.* Who would have ever thought an old dog like him would put up with that shit, much less look forward to being smashed into one corner of the king-size mattress?

His gaze lingered over the smooth planes of Marc's defined abdomen, the way his lover's chest rose and fell with

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each breath. His attention trailed to Marc's groin, where his lover's cock lay in repose over the plump rise of his succulent balls.

Scooting up close, he breathed in the intoxicating scent of Marc's skin, along with the lingering aroma of sweat and sex from the night before. He could almost taste it, the fragrance was so thick on the air. It made him want to lick Marc from head to toe.

After only a second, he tore his attention away from Marc and rolled toward the opposite side of the bed. It was too tempting to scoot down the bed and take Marc's cock in his mouth, suck on the luscious flesh until it hardened on his tongue. Instead of giving in to his desires, he got out of bed and quietly padded across the hall to the bathroom.

Although the thought of waking up Marc with a little morning sex was damn alluring, Shawn didn't want to disturb his lover's sleep. As energetic as Marc had been during their lovemaking the night before, he could tell the younger man was exhausted. The dark circles ringing his pretty blue eyes were testament to how overworked Marc was. Between all the nights they fucked until dawn and the massive amount of traveling Marc had to do for work, Shawn didn't know when Marc found the time to sleep.

He was damn tempted to offer Marc the option of quitting a job he hated so they could be together more. It wasn't as if Shawn didn't already possess more than enough money to keep them both in the lap of luxury. But something always froze the words in his throat before he could make the

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suggestion. As proud as Marc seemed to be, he probably wouldn't accept the offer...he wouldn't even let Shawn pay when they went out.

After relieving himself, Shawn brushed the funk off his teeth and thought about how little time he'd have with Marc before his lover left town again and all the things he wanted to do in the meantime. Which brought up fantasies of more love-making and a potential problem. The night before, Marc had slung the bottle of lube off the bed while he rode Shawn. The entire contents had drained onto the hardwood floor. Without more lube, no one was getting any more lovin'.

Shawn walked back to the bedroom and spied Marc's luggage lying next to the dresser. Was it possible Marc had brought a stash of his own?

Shawn unzipped the bag, hoping Marc would have something they could use. If worse came to worst, they could probably get by with spit since Marc would still be stretched from the night before, but it would be easier with lube. After pushing aside clothes and toiletries, Shawn spied a clear bottle with a blue cap lying at the bottom of the bag.

Cha-ching.

He pushed aside a dirty white sock and grabbed the bottle. The back of his fingers hit something hard, catching his attention. Whatever it was, the thing was yellow and made of rubber. He moved aside the same sock he'd smacked out of his way a second earlier and stared down at a child's bath toy. Why would Marc have a rubber ducky?

Thinking it might be a ridiculously disguised vibrator,

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Shawn bent closer for a better look.

Marc's voice drifted across the room. "Whatcha got there, big boy?"

Shawn jerked upright, the bottle of lube clutched in the fingers of his right hand. "Huh?"

He glanced at the bed, feeling slightly guilty for going through his lover's things and found Marc lying on his back with his legs spread. One leg was pulled back to Marc's chest, making way for two fingers working in and out of the tight hole. Marc's other hand was busy pumping his slender shaft, the long length glistening with moisture.

Shawn's mouth went dry and his blood raced south, squeezing into his rapidly thickening member. "I— Fuck, you look good enough to eat."

"Then come have a taste, lover. I woke up lonely and thought I would get warmed up for you." Marc groaned, his fingers flexing just beneath the head of his cock. "And you were even smart enough to find lube. I forgot that was even in there."

"Uh, huh," Shawn murmured, all his attention on the way those fingers were plunging in and out of Marc's ass, and the jealous throb of his own dick.

"Why don't you bring it over here and put it to good use? I want to feel you inside me so the memory will last for days, long enough to tide me over until I can come back to you."

Shawn stumbled toward the bed and crawled up the mattress toward Marc. He kissed the rise of his lover's knee, the soft flesh of his inner thigh, then licked a stripe up his

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sweet balls. He batted Marc's hands out of the way, wanting his lover's sweet flesh all to himself, and sucked one tender orb after the other. He loved the way Marc kept his skin bare, leaving every inch of his flesh sensitive and vulnerable for each caress.

Marc made a quiet noise in the back of his throat and squirmed. "Oh, God. Yes. Love your mouth, Shawn. Feels so fuckin' good."

As much as he wanted to suck off Marc quick and dirty, he needed to be inside his lover more. He yearned to do exactly as Marc asked and give them both something to remember while the younger man was out of town. It was getting harder and harder to let Marc go.

He moved up Marc's body, his desperation growing, and grabbed a condom out of the ceramic bowl on the nightstand. He handed the lube to Marc as he rolled the tight latex down his shaft and barked, "I can't wait. Get yourself ready for me."

Marc upended the bottle, poured a liberal amount into the palm of his hand and smeared the cool liquid over Shawn's shaft. "I'm good. Just fuck me, love. I want it as bad as you do."

Shawn paused. "Are you sure?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Thank fuck." Shawn reached down between them and lined up his cock with paradise. He added a little pressure behind his dick and watched as the blunt crown slid through the tight ring of muscle.

Marc groaned as his body clamped down around Shawn.

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“That’s it. Give it to me.”

Shawn took a deep breath and drove home in one, long, hard thrust. Nothing had ever felt as good as Marc’s tight channel rippling around him, and now was no different. The moment he bottomed out, he bent forward and pressed Marc down into the mattress, knowing his lover could take his weight, and sealed his lips over Marc’s. Marc’s mouth parted on a ragged moan, his tongue pressing up against Shawn’s in an eager, horny little parody of what was happening down below.

Shawn wasted no time setting up a fast and hard rhythm, chasing the orgasm even as Marc’s hand slid between them to pump his own cock. “That’s it, baby. Stroke yourself while I fuck you. Make yourself come for me.”

“Not gonna last long,” Marc panted, leaning up to nip at Shawn’s chin. His free hand snaked around Shawn’s side and pressed down on his lower back.

“Christ, me neither.” Shawn rocked his hips faster, slamming into Marc. “I’m almost there.” He wanted to make it last longer—he always did—but the clasp of Marc’s tight ass felt too damn good.

Marc swayed with Shawn, driving them both higher with every move. The slow burn of passion flared brightly, eradicating everything except the two of them locked in a common goal, striving toward the pinnacle of release.

Marc was the first to go over the edge, his ass rippling around Shawn with every steamy ribbon of spunk that exploded between them and smeared their straining torsos.

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Through sheer force of will, Shawn managed to keep his eyes open, unwilling to miss the pleasure racing across Marc's face.

The divine, massaging pressure around Shawn's cock was more than he could take. He shafted deep inside Marc and ground against his lover, trembling from the power of his orgasm.

"Love you..." Marc raised his arms and enveloped Shawn in the warmth of his embrace. He nuzzled the curve of Shawn's neck and pressed a sleepy kiss to the older man's throat. "I love you so much, Shawn."

"I love you, too, babe." Shawn slid his hands under Marc's back and hugged him close. No matter how many times he heard those three little words from Marc, they never lost their impact. He pressed a chaste kiss to the crown of Marc's head and closed his eyes, relishing the feel of his lover lying in his arms.

CHAPTER 4

By the time Shawn thought of the rubber duck again, Marc was on his way out of town—supposedly for a week-long business trip. The mystery of the child’s toy became an albatross hanging around Shawn’s neck. His gut clenched with the possible implications of what he’d found.

Thinking he was going to look into Marc’s personal history only as a means to relieve his incessant curiosity, Shawn had called one of his oldest friends and asked for a favor. Tex, a private investigator by trade, had quickly agreed to look into things for Shawn, claiming he only needed Marc’s license plate number to get the ball rolling. From there, Shawn had learned the truth about Marc and a valuable lesson—never

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ignore your baser instincts.

A loud knock on the door pulled Shawn from his musings. He stared at the door, knowing who waited on the other side, and shivered with dread. A little voice whispered that if he didn't open the door, if he didn't confront Marc with what he'd found out, they could go on as they'd been. He could go home and pretend he'd never learned anything about his lover, forget everything he'd seen with his own two eyes outside of Marc's house earlier that evening.

Although he didn't want to face the conversation ahead, he refused to be a pussy and ignore the evidence. He was forty-two fucking years old. A broken heart wouldn't kill him. He would go on as he had before Marc.

And maybe if I keep telling myself that, it'll eventually be true.

With reluctance, Shawn got up and crossed the small room. He pulled open the door and glared at Marc, determined to show no compassion. A hardened heart was the only way he was going to be able to make it through without doing something he would regret later.

Marc didn't reach for Shawn or do any of things he usually did. His hands fisted at his sides, opening and closing as if he wasn't sure what to do with them. His wary gaze searched Shawn's face. "Hey."

Marc was beautiful. He was everything Shawn had never known he wanted. And he belonged to someone else. Shawn stepped back and held open the door. "Come on in."

Marc entered the room, his normal stride cowed by the

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inward twist of his shoulders. He sat at the small wooden table beneath the window.

The part of Shawn that lived to see Marc smile yearned to do or say something to relieve his lover's fears, to promise him everything would be all right. But the bitter lies wouldn't surface. He couldn't console Marc. He shouldn't even want to. How could he want to be compassionate with a man who obviously cared so little for him in return? He didn't understand the urge, and it pissed him off.

Shawn closed the door and joined Marc at the table, choosing to sit across from him instead of beside him. They looked at each other, neither of them saying anything for a long, pregnant moment. Shawn wondered if Marc was as lost for words as he was.

Marc exhaled and seemed to deflate before Shawn's eyes. "What are you doing here, Shawn? How did you even know where to find me?"

"Is the 'how' really that important?"

"I suppose not."

"I'm here thanks to a friend, who just happens to be a private dick. I asked him to look you up after I found something in your luggage last weekend that didn't make sense to me. It...raised questions in my mind about who you really were."

"What did you find?" Marc's voice had a breathless quality.

"Of all things, a rubber duck."

"A rubber... Jesus." Marc laughed, the sound brittle and

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humorless. “I wondered what had happened to that damn duck. Wyatt has been throwing a tantrum at bath time every night without it. It didn’t even occur to me to look in my own luggage. He must have stuck it in there before I left.”

Shawn’s heart thumped painfully. He’d known the twins’ names—Wyatt and Dalton—but hearing them straight from Marc’s lips was like having the knife in his back twisted for good measure.

Marc took a deep breath. “So that’s it? Because of a stupid child’s toy, we’re over? You aren’t even going to give me a chance to explain?”

“What’s there to explain? Everything I thought I knew about you was a lie. You didn’t even tell me your real name.”

“I know. I’m sorry, but I was paranoid. At first, I thought we were just going to fuck, and it wouldn’t matter. By the time I realized how good things were between us, it was too late to say anything.”

“That isn’t good enough, Marc.”

“I don’t know what else to say.”

“Why did you apologize? For being a lying, cheating bastard, or because you were caught?”

Marc shook his head. “You don’t understand.”

“Explain it to me, then, because I’m having a hell of a hard time reconciling the family man I saw earlier today with the slut who rides my cock and begs for more.”

“That isn’t fair.”

Shawn snorted. “Life isn’t fair.” If it were, he wouldn’t be here now. He never would have met the man sitting across

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from him, much less have fallen for him.

Before Marc, he'd been perfectly happy on his own, working and taking comfort from strangers when the urge hit him. He hadn't known what he was missing. Now, thanks to Marc, he was going to know how cold and empty fucking some stranger would be every single time he went out cruising for someone new to scratch an itch he couldn't reach.

Shawn swallowed the anger rising inside him and tried to bury it beneath a wall of ice. They were both adults. He was not going to resort to hysterics, even if he did feel like jumping across the small table and wringing Marc's slender neck. His gaze drifted down to said neck. He'd kissed that throat, felt Marc's pulse flutter under tongue.

Fuck, why does this have to be so hard? Why can't I just treat this whole sordid mess like some business deal gone wrong?

"I may be a lying bastard," Marc said. "But I never cheated on you."

"No, I suppose if you want to split hairs, you cheated on your wife with me."

"What?" Marc's forehead wrinkled. "Shawn, my wife is dead."

Shawn rolled his eyes, so tired of all the drama. "There's no reason to keep lying or make up stories. I know all about your wife and kids. I know you work for you father-in-law, and by all reports, are living the perfect American dream. Then again, you may lose perfection status because you like a little cock on the side."

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He wanted to go back in time and erase the months he'd spent with Marc, wash his memory clean. The worst part of everything was the tiny voice in the back of his mind that argued, saying he would do it all again if given the chance. *Stupid, contrary fucking voice.*

"Olivia died two years ago, Shawn. She was killed by a drunk driver on her way home from the grocery store. I wouldn't lie about something like that."

"Stop it, Marc. Save all the bullshit for someone else who might actually buy it. I saw her outside your home when I drove by earlier." All he wanted was the truth. And then he wanted to be left alone to lick his wounds in private.

"You saw my sister, Maggie. She moved in with me to help take care of the boys after Olivia passed away."

"Can't you come up with a more original excuse than the 'she's my sister' bit?"

Marc cursed, shoved back the chair and rose to his feet. He slammed his hand down on the table, making it shake from the impact. The file Tex had sent Shawn slid to the floor and fell out of its folder, sending a cascade of white papers spilling over the cheap brown carpet. "What do you want from me, a fucking death certificate? Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not morbid enough to have one of those on me at all times."

Shawn wasn't about to back down or pretend he was intimidated. He stood, knocking over his chair in the process, and faced Marc head on. There was nothing short of murder that the other man could do to make Shawn feel any worse

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than he already did. “At this point, a death certificate would be the least of what I’d need in order to believe you. You’ve done a damn fine job of lying to me right from the start.”

“If you’re not going to believe a word I say anyway, why’d you want me to come here? You could have told me we were over on the phone.”

“I guess you’re right.” *How foolish of me to think our relationship deserved a face-to-face ending.* It was now obvious that Marc cared so little, that a brief “fuck you” via telephone or even an impersonal email would have sufficed.

“Why am I really here, Shawn? What do you want?”

You. I’ve never wanted anyone, until you. “I want closure. I want to know why you led me on and made me think we had something real when all you were looking for was a fuck. I would have screwed you without all the pretty words.”

Marc’s mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. He looked down at his hands. “I had my reasons for lying, Shawn. Reasons you wouldn’t understand because you’re not responsible for anyone other than yourself.”

“You keep saying that, but I think I understand just fine. You wanted to have your cake and eat it, too...the missus at home with the kids, and a nice bed-warmer or two whenever you were in the city. Was I the only man you were fucking on the side, or are there others?”

“You’re the only person I’ve slept with in the last six months. The only man I’ve wanted to be intimate with.”

“And if I believe that, I’m sure you have a real nifty bridge

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to sell me, right? Why don't you just save the bullshit for someone gullible enough to believe it, and tell me the real reason for all the lies?"

Marc scowled. "You can be a real bastard, you know that? For your information, I keep my sexuality under wraps because my father-in-law has been threatening to take the boys away from me ever since Olivia was killed. He's never really liked me, was always suspicious of the relationship I had with his daughter. Once Olivia was gone, the buffer between me and her parents disappeared. For the first year, they had me watched and followed. It was only in the last eight or nine months, after I threatened to quit my job and move the kids as far away as I could get, that they've backed off a little."

Marc moved in front of Shawn, gripped his shoulders, and stared up at him with eyes filled with torment. "I know I've hurt you with all the lies, but you have to understand that it wasn't a matter of cheating on you, or even being trapped in the closet. One slip-up and my in-laws will try to take my boys. I can't risk that. Not even for you."

Shawn didn't know what to say or do. Marc seemed so sincere and despondent. Frankly, Shawn wasn't sure whether to believe him or not. He wanted to...*oh, yes...*but how could he put any faith in the words of a liar?

He couldn't think with Marc so close. Just the sight of this man made Shawn want to forgive him anything, and that was something Shawn wasn't willing to do. He needed time and space to think things through. If Marc was telling the truth—

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and that was a big if—then maybe they could talk further.

Shawn shrugged off Marc's hands and stepped back. "You should leave."

Marc grabbed Shawn's hand, surrounding it with both of his. He rubbed the back of Shawn's knuckles. "I know you don't trust me, and I can't say as I blame you, but I'm telling you the truth, Shawn."

Shawn jerked his hand away, too close to the breaking point. Traitor that his body was, it was responding to Marc's touch. Apparently his heart, which clomped like a thoroughbred, didn't have qualms or morals when it involved someone he wanted so desperately. His body cried out for more of Marc's touch, even the slightest brush of the other man's palms over his face, but his mind warned him to tread carefully. "Just go, Marc. I can't have you here right now. I'll call you...or something."

Marc bit into his full lower lip and gave a jerky nod of his head before he turned and started toward the door.

Shawn stood in one place, as numb and unmoving as stone, and watched his lover walk out the door without a backward look. The second the door closed, the latch making a metallic pinging noise that filled the silence, Shawn slid down the wall and buried his face in his hands.

He fought to maintain his self control, torn between going after Marc and staying put. What difference did it really make if there wasn't a wife in the woodworks somewhere? Marc had lied to him about everything right from the very start of their relationship. He didn't know the man who'd just walked

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out on him. That man may have looked like his lover, talked like him and even smelled of his favorite cologne, but the Marc he loved didn't exist. He never had.

And that's the bitterest pill of all.

CHAPTER 5

Marc hadn't been gone fifteen minutes when Shawn decided he needed a fucking drink. Since he seriously doubted there was a gay-friendly establishment anywhere nearby, and he didn't particularly care to be surrounded by small-minded rednecks, he figured the best bet was to hit a liquor store and drown his sorrows in the comfort of his motel room.

After grabbing his phone and MapQuesting directions to the nearest store, Shawn drove across the tiny town and picked up a fifth of tequila and a bag of pork rinds. It wasn't exactly fancy cuisine, but he wasn't feeling particularly highbrow at the moment. Sometimes a man needed to go back to his roots, and Shawn's were as humble as they came.

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Raised in a single-wide trailer on the outskirts of Tulsa, Shawn had learned the term “trailer trash” early in life. His father had worked as a mechanic, and his mother had been employed part time at a local motel where she cleaned rooms. Shawn had been almost gleeful when his father caught him making out with Billy Corrigan and kicked him out shortly after high school graduation. He’d fled to the biggest city he could think of—New York City—with little more than a bus ticket and a ratty duffel bag stuffed with clothes.

The road to his current lot in life had been a winding one, full of brass balls and a hell of a lot of luck, but he’d managed to divorce himself from his birthplace and everyone associated with it through sheer determination to better himself. He’d come a hell of a long way since those days, but there were some ingrained tastes he couldn’t escape—like the occasional hankering for fried pork products and cheap booze.

Back in his room, Shawn kicked off his shoes and sat back against the rickety headboard. He unscrewed the cap on the tequila bottle and took a deep slug. The potent liquor burned like the devil going down and hit his empty stomach like lava. The moment his eyes stopped watering, he took another swig. After sitting the bottle on the nightstand, he tore into the bag of pork rinds. Flaky pieces of the crunchy snack spilled down the front of his shirt as he stuffed a handful of them into his mouth. The explosion of salt almost killed the bitter taste in his mouth.

Half a bag later, Shawn’s gaze landed on the loose sheets of Marc’s file, still scattered across the floor. He set aside the

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bag of rinds, fetched the papers and returned to the bed with them. He leafed through the pages, most of which contained basic information about Marc including name, birthday, social security number, driver's license number, and a bunch of other facts Shawn had no interest in. He flipped through until he found the copies of Marc's wedding certificate and the twins' birth records, and studied them yet again. The pages were bent and creased from over-handling. Not for the first time, he wished Tex had given him photos as well. It would be a hell of a lot easier to stay away from Marc if he could visualize the family he'd help ruin otherwise.

Marc's words replayed in Shawn's mind. He didn't know if he was just grasping at straws or what, but Marc had seemed so sincere about his wife's death and his need to protect the twins. Why would he make up something like that when it would have been so much easier to blame infidelity on a poor sex life or something equally clichéd?

Shawn fingered the worn pages, then put them back in the folder and set them aside. He wouldn't be able to rest until he found out if Marc's wife was truly deceased. He took another long draught from the bottle of tequila and then stretched across the bed to the nightstand and his cell phone.

It was almost ten o'clock on Friday night and well past normal office hours for his friend, Tex Connelly, private eye extraordinaire. Still, Shawn could call and leave a message. Thankfully, Shawn knew the older man well enough to have his phone number programmed into the cell phone.

When Shawn had been a new face in the city, long before

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he'd met Marc, he and Tex had had a bit of a thing. Nothing serious, just a little bump and go when the urge suited them. Shawn had been sowing his oats, and Tex had been the older, more experienced man. They'd remained friends after their sexual affiliation had run its course.

As soon as Shawn's gut had screamed something was wrong with Marc, going to his long-time friend had been a natural reaction. Now, he stared at the file from a slightly different perspective than he'd had when he'd first read it. After talking to Marc, Shawn was beginning to worry about Tex's thoroughness. As much as he hated the thought of questioning Tex's business practices, he really needed to ask the man some questions. Because if Marc was telling the truth about his wife's death—and he wanted to believe that—then that meant Tex had screwed up. He'd have to risk his friendship with the private eye in order to get to the bottom of things.

He cradled the cell phone in his hand and chose Tex's number from the list of contacts. The phone voicemail kicked in after the third ring. He left a brief message, asking Tex to call him back and disconnected.

So much for that.

After locating the remote control, he flipped through television channels. He wasn't really seeing any of them as he pushed one button and then another...too many scenes played in his head, most of which consisted of tidbits of conversations between himself and Marc. He hated second-guessing himself, but he kept thinking there was something he'd missed in all

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those months the two had spent together that would have warned him of Marc's duplicity.

Yet, no matter how long he analyzed even the smallest of details, Shawn couldn't find a single thing signaling a problem until the morning he uncovered that damn rubber ducky in Marc's bag. How could something so innocent be the catalyst for the hell he'd been through in the last week? It seemed almost absurd. If he never saw another bath toy in his life, it would be too soon.

The knock on the door surprised the hell out of him. No one knew where he was except Marc, and Shawn wasn't in any condition to talk to his lover. *And I really have to stop calling him that. Ex-lover. Former lover. Charming, two-faced bastard. Anything but lover.*

Since there wasn't anything to do but sit on the bed, or get up and answer the door, Shawn stayed put. He'd had enough drama for one day...for a fucking lifetime, actually...and he couldn't deal with any more. Marc would just have to go the hell away and wait for Shawn to get in touch with him...if he chose to.

When it became obvious Marc wasn't going away, Shawn trudged over to the door and unchained it. As much as he hated to admit it, he was curious about Marc's reason for coming back. He flung open the door. "Listen, Marc, now is not a—"

Shawn's words dried up at the sight of an older man standing in the hallway. He was approximately sixty or so, with salt-and-pepper hair, dressed casually in a pair of chinos

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and a short-sleeved, white dress shirt buttoned up the front. What had once been a square chin was hidden beneath jowls, and an unattractive paunch stuck out above his belt.

Shawn had never seen the man before in his life. “I’m sorry, buddy, but I think you have the wrong room. You might want to try the front desk”

“I’m at the right room. My name is William Vanhoosier. You don’t know me, but I believe you know my son-in-law, Marcus.”

Fuck. This is just what I need to cap the shitty night. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You must have me confused with someone else.” He moved to close the door and found a foot wedged between it and the frame. “Listen, asshole, if you don’t want to lose that foot, you’d best move it.”

“Wait a minute,” the man said with a creepy smile that reminded Shawn of the man from whom he’d bought his last car. “I didn’t come here to start any trouble. In fact, I came to make you a little offer.”

“I’m not interested in anything you have to share, mister.”

“It might be in your best interest to hear me out, son. You can’t be doing too well for yourself if you’re shackled up in a seedy motel like this one.”

Shawn didn’t bother correcting the man, or pointing out that he was spending the night there because it was the only damn motel in the two-bit town. All of sudden he wanted to see where the arrogant son of a bitch was going with his spiel.

When Shawn didn’t reply or move the door, a lurid smile

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spread across Mr. Vanhoosier's face, revealing teeth so white they probably glowed in the dark. "I thought that might catch your attention."

"How about you cut to the chase and tell me what you want?"

"Fair enough," Vanhoosier said with a nod that shook his jowls like gelatin. "In exchange for...let's say, one thousand dollars...I want to know how you know Marcus. I'd also like to know why you were sitting outside his house watching him play with Wyatt."

What the fuck? "I'm not sure what you're talking about," Shawn hedged.

"Don't give me that bullshit. I have two witnesses who saw you."

"It's a free country. If I want to park on the street and stare at strangers, it's my business. Why do you care?"

"So, you're going to play it like that, then?"

"Yeah, I am. Now if you'll excuse me, I have better things to do than stand here and play twenty questions." Shawn took a step back.

"I'll give you two thousand. But that's my final offer."

Shawn did an inner eye roll. His cheapest suit was worth more than that. "Fuck you, mister. I hate to break it to you, but some things are worth more than money."

Shawn tried not to laugh at the look of incredulity on Vanhoosier's face as he closed the door. What a fool. And that was the man Marc was allowing to bully him into a corner? *Jesus.*

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He paced back and forth along the narrow strip of floor between the door and the foot of the mattress, going over what had just happened. Although he didn't know whether Marc was telling the truth about his wife being dead, his lover—*former lover*—did have reason to worry about his father-in-law. The man was a nosy asshole. A nosy asshole who apparently had spies driving past Marc's house.

Shawn sat on the side of the bed and reached for the tequila bottle. Something wasn't adding up. A contrary thought tingled at the back of his mind, just out of reach. He took a swallow of the strong liquor and set aside the bottle. *Drinking more probably won't help matters.* He began searching his memory for whatever he was missing.

Vanhoosier had someone watching the house. The Vanhoosiers wouldn't need someone to keep an eye on it if Marc's wife was there to do it for herself. Unless—*could Marc's wife have been going out of town for the weekend?*

Fuck, my head hurts.

With his elbows resting on his knees, Shawn tried to rub the ache from his temples. It didn't work. His brain still felt too large for his skull, the pressure growing stronger. He swung his legs up on the bed and lay down, thinking a little sleep would do him good. All he could do was hope things looked clearer in the morning. If nothing else, at least he would feel better. That had to be a plus.

He closed his eyes and began thinking about the latest company he was trying to buy out. Beringer & Sons was a large automotive parts company on the brink of bankruptcy. If

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all went well, Shawn had every intention of swooping in to save the day and making a tidy profit while he was at it. He had several competitors of Beringer & Sons already lined up and waiting to make a deal once he deconstructed the company and started fishing out the different divisions.

After spending time ruminating on everything from business strategies to the apparel he should wear for upcoming meetings, Shawn felt anxiety begin to flow out of his body. Thinking of business was easier than acknowledging the train wreck his personal life had become. He continued to clear his mind until the only things in his head were the sounds of the motel's water pipes popping and the walls rattling. Now he was relaxed enough to sleep.

The loud chorus of AC/DC's song, *Back In Black*, blared out of Shawn's cell phone and pulled him out of his stupor. He jerked up, tension flooding back into his neck and shoulders, although the ring tone informed him about whom he was going to hear on the other end of the line. "Hey, old man."

"Not too old to whoop your ass, boy," a voice roughened by a lifetime of Marlboros growled back at him.

Shawn laughed. "It's good to hear from you, Tex. I'm sorry to bother you on a Friday night, but it's kind of important. I didn't pull you away from any pretty little thing's attention, did I?"

"If I had anything other than my own hand for company tonight, you wouldn't be talking to me now. So, tell me what's going on, boy. It's late and I have things to do."

"It's about the man I asked you to check for me."

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“Right. What about him?”

“You sent me a marriage license, but he’s claiming his wife is dead, Tex. I hate to ask, but is there any way you might have missed something?”

“I’m damn good at my job, boy. The fella you had me look up is widowed. There was a death certificate in the files I faxed you.”

“No, there wasn’t, Tex. I think I would have noticed that before I confronted him about being a lying, cheating, closeted bastard.”

Tex chuckled.

“It isn’t funny, dammit.”

“Oh, yes it is. You know I remember when you were this little skinny kid fresh off the bus. You swaggered into the club as if you owned it and then hugged the wall like you were afraid someone was going to bite you. The kid I brought home with me that night swore all he desired in life was enough money to write his own ticket and an easy lay whenever he wanted. Sounds to me like the mighty Shawn Delaney has finally met his match.”

“You’re an asshole, Tex. I don’t know why I still talk to you.”

“Because you love me. You just won’t admit it. Now, on a more serious note, your little friend really is a widower. I don’t have access to my files at the moment, but I clearly remember finding a death certificate for his wife...an Olivia something, I think.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Fuck, Tex. I may have made an ass out

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of myself with this one.”

“He’ll get over it. Besides, there’s still the matter of him lying to you about his name, the kids and a bunch of smaller shit, right?”

“You have a point.” *A good one.* Marc couldn’t exactly throw stones at the moment. “Listen, I hate to ask, but do you think you could do me one more tiny little favor?”

Tex groaned. “You know I’m going to have to start charging you if you keep this shit up. What is it?”

“Could you look into a company out here in the boonies? A...uh”—Shawn reached over and flipped through the files until he found the name of Marc’s father-in-law’s company—”Vanhoosier Lampworks.”

“That sounds familiar.” Tex’s voice was laced with sarcasm. “You aren’t going to do anything to get yourself in trouble, are you?”

“No, it’s just a little insurance in case I need it.”

“All right. I suppose I can do that for you.”

“You’re a god, Tex. A god among men.”

Tex hooted. “Haven’t I been telling you that all these years?”

“Yeah, I think so. Shame on me for doubting you.”

“Damn right. Well, I have to go, boy-o. I’ll look into the company for you on Monday.”

“Great. Thanks, Tex. I appreciate it, man.”

“Not a problem. Talk to you later.”

The phone died, leaving Shawn with his regrets and few ideas about how he could fix things. Against his will, hope

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began to blossom. He could forgive Marc about lying to him about the kids. That was really a lie of omission anyway. It wasn't as if Shawn had ever asked Marc if he had kids. Why would he? Shawn could even forgive him for lying about his job, because when you got right down to the bottom line, it was just a job.

Trust, on the other hand, wouldn't be so easy to rebuild.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he hit speed dial and called Marc. When it hit voicemail, Shawn hung up and called back. He wanted to talk to Marc right then, not in the morning. Although it was late, he wasn't particularly concerned about interrupting the other man's beauty sleep. He'd just have to get over it.

The phone rang twice, then Marc's voice filtered through the connection, deep and resonant. "What do you want, Shawn?"

Shawn winced at Marc's tone, but he was man enough to admit he probably deserved that after their earlier encounter. "I need to see you."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"It's important." Déjà vu besieged Shawn. Hadn't he already said those words, or something similar, not too long ago?

"I—" Marc paused and then sighed. "Fine. I'll come by your room."

"You can't do that. Someone may be watching the motel." Static filled the line. "Marc? You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I was just thinking my paranoia is

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beginning to rub off on you. That can't be a good thing."

"I'll explain everything when I see you. Is there a place we can meet? Somewhere secluded where we can talk without having to worry about eyes and ears everywhere?"

"Um...let me think."

Shawn tapped the fingers of his free hand against the bed, waiting.

Finally, Marc spoke again. "Okay, okay. There is a place, but I'm not sure you could locate it on your own. It isn't exactly on MapQuest."

"Sounds perfect. Why don't you meet me somewhere I can find in this one-horse town and then we can ride together, or I can follow you. That work?"

"Sure. There's an all-night convenience store located off the interstate exit ramp. Think you can find that?"

"Yep." *As if I'd ever forget the directions out of this burg.*

"All right. Give me thirty minutes. I need to wake up Maggie so she'll know to listen out for the boys."

"Uh, yeah..." Being reminded of Marc's children threw Shawn for a loop. It hadn't even entered his mind that he might wake them up when he called. He felt a little bad about that, although he probably shouldn't. "That's fine."

"Shawn? You okay?"

"Yes," he answered a little too quickly. "Yeah," he repeated. "I'm good. I'll...um...see you in few."

Shawn disconnected and stared at his cell phone. He hadn't thought about the restrictions inherent in Marc's role as a parent. In fact, Marc being a father hadn't truly registered

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until now.

Marc had small children...boys who would need him for a long time to come. As selfish as the thought was, Shawn wasn't sure if he wanted to be involved with someone who had kids. Under other circumstances it wouldn't be a big deal. Most of the fathers he knew had their kids every other weekend or something. But Marc was responsible for his kids seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day.

Other aspects of Marc's parenthood began to hit him. He wouldn't admit it under penalty of death, but he was beginning to admire just how much Marc compartmentalized different aspects of his life. Shawn wondered how the younger man did that and kept his sanity.

Shawn's life in the city was so very different. He worked and went out whenever the mood suited him. If he wanted to do something, he just did it. He didn't have to take care of anyone else, or be at some other person's beck and call. Children didn't figure into this picture. Indeed, like a lot of the gay men he knew, he'd never really thought of having children. Since parenting had seemed like an impossibility, he'd put the entire topic out of his mind. Now that he was confronted with the notion of children, he wasn't sure how he felt about it.

He shut down the subject and swore he'd think about it later. There was too much else that needed to be taken care of at the moment. No sense in considering the ramifications of getting involved with someone who had children when he wasn't even sure if that involvement was going to happen.

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Shawn's thoughts shifted to Marc. He seemed different here among the zillion trees and little-town scenery than he did in the city. He was more reserved and cautious—nothing like the free spirit Shawn had come to care about.

Shawn wanted to believe the free spirit facet of Marc's personality was the dominant one, repressed by in his current situation. But what if it was the other way around? What if the quiet, reserved fatherly type was more who Marc really was deep down inside? The other side of him could have been an elaborate act, like playing dress up while he was out of town.

There was only one way to know for sure. He'd get Marc alone and find out for himself.

CHAPTER 6

The ride from the convenience store was steeped in a silence only interrupted by the steady purr of the car engine echoing through the still night. Oddly enough, they didn't pass a single vehicle on the two-lane country road as they sped toward whatever destination Marc had in mind.

Shawn glanced at Marc out of the corner of his eye, too uncomfortable about the situation to stare outright, although he damn sure wanted to. Despite the fact that the younger man was mussed from sleep, his black hair unkempt and his clothes wrinkled, he was still the sexiest guy Shawn had ever seen. The plain white T-shirt and navy blue drawstring pants were loose, hiding the body beneath, but Shawn knew what was

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there without having to see it. He'd kissed and licked every inch of Marc's body, and knew how sensational it was. Instead of appearing scruffy, the dark stubble shadowing Marc's usually smooth jaw only added to the younger man's sexual appeal. Shawn wanted to rub his lips across the rough surface, feel the tiny bristles abrade the inside of his thighs as Marc's sweet lips sucked him off.

Of course, neither of those things was going to happen. He was going to be an adult and have a mature conversation.

I am going to be good. I am not going to do anything inappropriate. That's not why I'm here.

The horny little devil on his shoulder wasn't buying his spiel, cajoling Shawn to take what he wanted. *Good intentions paved the road to hell. Marc isn't married. He's widowed. There's nothing to stop you from fucking each other's brains out for the next forty or so years.*

He argued back, shutting down the contrary voice. *Nothing to stop me except a shitload of lies and two small boys.*

The inner dialogue ended as Marc turned off the main road onto what looked like little more than a dirt track. Shawn glanced around, the car's bright headlights only allowing him a glimpse of trees and grass. Finally, his curiosity got the best of him, and he turned sideways in the passenger seat to face Marc. "Where exactly are you taking me?"

"There used to be a cabin up ahead, right next to the river. It belonged to my grandparents and then my parents, once upon a time. I inherited it when my parents died. The cabin was struck by lightning and burnt to the ground a few years

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ago, but the land's still mine. No one comes out here anymore but me. I figured it would be a safe place to talk without having to worry about prying eyes."

Shawn's chewed over that insight into Marc's past as the car trudged forward, bouncing over one rough spot after another in the makeshift road, if one could call the goat path on which they were traveling a road. They'd never talked about much when they were together...certainly not about their pasts or the people who'd helped forge them into the men they'd become. Shawn's story wasn't a pretty one, and from what little he knew, he didn't imagine Marc's was much better. Certainly, Marc's past indicated sexual confusion at the very least. Otherwise he wouldn't have ended up married with children, although he was gay.

"Are you bisexual?" Shawn blurted out, the thought just occurring to him.

"What?" Marc asked, glancing at Shawn. "Uh, no." He returned his attention to the road.

"It's an honest question," Shawn replied tersely. "After all, your kids didn't spring out of thin air."

"I loved Olivia, but I wasn't in love with her any more than she was in love with me."

"Okay. But then why marry her? Why stay with her and have kids?"

"We were friends growing up. Our parents ran in the same social scene and pushed us together at every pass. I wasn't...comfortable with myself yet. And Olivia was more interested in studying than she was dating. We let our families

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believe what they wanted. After we graduated college, everyone assumed we would get married. Rather than put up a fight, we did what they wanted. It was easier. I know that makes me a coward, but at the time, my father was dying of cancer. It seemed more important to do what would make him happy than go against the grain and do what I wanted. Olivia got pregnant one of the few times I was drunk enough to make love to her. After that, there was no way I was going to leave my children.”

Marc slowed the car and parked. The river flowed just beyond the hood, filling the night air with the sound of rushing water. He shut off the lights and turned to Shawn. “Olivia was good to me and in return, I did the best I could by her. She was a good woman who deserved better than me. My only consolation is the knowledge that I never cheated on her—not once, although I was damn tempted being on the road all the time.”

“I’m sorry.” Shawn didn’t know what else to say. He didn’t understand the concept of being a martyr for the greater good. There was no way he would have hidden such an essential part of himself for so long. He wasn’t defined by his sexuality, but it was as much a part of him as the graying hair at his temples or the stubborn streak he’d been accused of possessing when things didn’t go his way.

“Don’t be sorry,” Marc said, laying his hand over Shawn’s where it rested on the console between them. “It wasn’t a bad life. It just wasn’t a passionate one. Not until I met you did I learn what it was like to love someone.”

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Pain seized Shawn's chest. He couldn't go there. Not right now. "Marc, I—"

It would be so easy to give in to temptation and forgive Marc for everything. It wasn't as if the younger man hadn't had his reasons for all the deception. But Shawn wasn't convinced he was willing to put everything behind them. He didn't know if he wanted to try. He loved Marc more than he'd ever thought possible, but he wasn't sure there was any future for a relationship built on lies.

Marc pulled his hand away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned my feelings for you. Why don't you tell me what was so important we had to talk tonight?"

Shawn took a deep breath and let it out. "After you left the hotel, I had a visitor—William Vanhoosier."

When it came, Marc's curse sounded bitter, but unsurprised. "I knew he was keeping tabs on me, but I had no idea he had people spying on me, too. Oh, shit..." He sat up a little straighter and looked around. "You didn't see anyone following us on our way here, did you?"

"Calm down. I didn't see any other vehicles at all."

"Yeah, you're right. But now I feel more paranoid than ever. What did the old bastard want? Dirt, right? He'd do anything to prove I'm an unfit father, so he and Mimi could raise the boys."

"Mimi?" Shawn snorted.

"Yeah, she's really something. At sixty-something, she still trying to pretend she's in her twenties...complete with bleached blonde hair and a gazillion facelifts."

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“I don’t know how you can be related to these people.”

“Hey, they aren’t *my* blood. Thank God.”

“Yeah.” Shawn had to admit he couldn’t see someone like Marc being kin to the pompous man who’d come to his motel room. “Your father-in-law is a real douche bag. He insinuated how poor I must be to stay at that sad excuse for a motel in town, then tried to bribe me with a grand.”

“I can’t say his actions surprise me. Olivia’s parents were always overbearing. They sure as hell never liked me once I quit kissing their ass after Olivia and I were married. But they’ve gotten worse since Olivia died. They’ve become obsessed with Wyatt and Dalton. Even took me to court not long after the funeral, but the judge refused to uproot the kids. Said the only way they could get custody was if they were able to prove I was endangering the boys or was unfit to raise them.” Marc ran his hands over the lower half of his face. “As if I’d ever do anything to hurt the twins. Wyatt and Dalton mean everything to me.”

Something deep inside Shawn’s chest twisted and ached. Although he knew he was being irrational, he couldn’t help feeling jealous of Marc’s love for his kids. Sure, Marc had claimed to love him, too, but there was no comparison. Shawn knew who Marc would be going home to after they finished talking, and who would be sleeping alone in a cardboard motel room bed.

“I appreciate you telling me about William’s visit,” Marc continued. “Even more so after...well, after everything else. But why couldn’t you just tell me on the phone?”

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Good question. But he needed to clear his mind about Olivia. And more. The fact was, he yearned to see Marc, to be close to him, if only one last time. How could he explain that he'd been afraid he would get Marc alone and not be able to recognize any of the qualities that had made him fall in love with the younger man to begin with? He'd sound ignorant if he told Marc a large part of him feared that some kind of pod person had hijacked his lover's body and taken over.

"I needed to tell you about your father-in-law, but I also wanted to see you. I owe you an apology for doubting what you said about Olivia. I jumped to conclusions when I saw the woman outside your house and then I refused to listen when you tried to tell me she was your sister.

"I forgive you, Shawn. It isn't like I haven't given you plenty of reason to doubt me. Is that it?"

"I—" Shawn swallowed his pride. "I needed to see if the man I fell in love with was real or a figment of my imagination."

Marc leaned over the console. "And?"

Shawn shifted until he was closer to Marc, brushing the hair from the younger man's forehead as he said, "I want to believe the man I love is in there somewhere, lurking beneath the widower and the loving father you've shown me. I need to know there was something real between us, that the way we were together wasn't all in my head. Tell me you're my Marc. I need so much to believe..."

Marc closed the narrow gap between them and pressed his mouth to Shawn's. Shawn held still, torn between wanting to

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return the kiss and pulling away. Confusion ran rampant inside his mind, warning him he should tread carefully.

In the end, desire overruled logic, the masculine scent of his lover overcoming him. He cupped Marc's cheek and pulled him closer, his lover's flesh hot and prickly under his palm. Skimming his lips over Marc's, he sought escape from all the bullshit swimming in his mind. And discovered harmony in the taste of his lover's mouth, in the way Marc sighed and parted his lips. He savored the hint of mint and the underlying flavor that belonged to Marc, alone, as his lover's tongue slid into his mouth and curled around his own tongue.

Shawn returned the caress, licking over Marc's tongue in a languorous motion that Marc immediately mimicked and returned with added enthusiasm. Shawn groaned, the quiet noise muffled by Marc's insistent mouth.

Marc fisted his hands in the front of Shawn's shirt and tugged his upper body close until it pressed against the console between them. He used his lips and tongue to cajole and tease Shawn to a fever pitch of need. Their mouths moved back and forth in a rhythm older than the tide, the give and take between them a taunting reminder of all the intimacies they'd shared.

The kiss went on and on, neither of them pulling away. Shawn was reluctant to let go of Marc, and he imagined his younger lover felt the same way. Neither of them knew what would happen the minute they broke apart. It was so easy to imagine nothing existed outside the vehicle. Their only reality was the way in which their mouths connected and their bodies

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vied to get closer in spite of the hard, immovable wedge between them.

Each meeting of lips burned away a bit of Shawn's resolve to walk away from Marc, making it that much harder to remember why they couldn't work things out. Every slick sweep of Marc's tongue enticed Shawn to throw caution to the wind and take things further. He let go of Marc's face and curled his fingers around his lover's hard biceps, squeezing the firm rise of muscle. A simple tilt of the head helped him deepen the kiss, their tongues frolicking back and forth. Shawn wanted the entire world could go to hell so he could focus solely on the man against him.

Marc stroked Shawn's pecs and nipples through his shirt, leaving him panting for more. The slow burn of want and need flared low in the pit of Shawn's stomach. He wanted to crawl across the console, force Marc back against the driver seat and trap him there, ride his wanton lover until they both forgot everything except how right it felt to be in each other's arms.

"I want you," Shawn panted between kisses. "So much."

"Mm hmm," Marc murmured. "Want you, too. Don't want to lose you."

Shawn tore his mouth away from Marc's. "I'll always love you, no matter what happens between us." Even though he knew it wasn't fair to do so, he wanted nothing more than to promise Marc the moon, itself, if it meant having his lover to himself...to be able to touch and kiss the younger man without interruption. They didn't even need to have sex, though he wasn't foolish enough to turn it down. The most important

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thing was being together.

Marc nuzzled Shawn's cheek and kissed his jaw. "If only things could just go back to the way they were..."

Shawn ran his mouth down the long line of Marc's neck, inhaling the musky scent of his lover's skin. He zeroed in on the pulse at the base of Marc's throat and licked it, hungrily feeding on the salt from his lover's skin. "What do you mean?"

Marc tilted his head to the side, making more room for Shawn's lips to explore. "I just want everything that happened today to be a bad dream. I want to go back to loving you on my own terms and not have to worry about anything else."

Shawn dragged his mouth away from Marc, his pulse hammering. He stared at the younger man, not quite sure what he was hearing. "You want to erase being caught in too many lies to count and go back to hiding me like a dirty little secret. Is that it?"

"What? No." Marc stared back. "And I don't think of you as a dirty secret at all. God damn it, Shawn, I just want to be able to love you and still raise my kids without having to worry about people sticking their nose in my business and fucking up everything. I don't think that's too much to ask."

"It shouldn't be, but no one ever said that life would be fair."

"I guess not." Marc hung his head.

Shawn was torn between promising to make everything better for Marc and knocking some sense into him. He didn't understand how he could feel so deeply betrayed and still have

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his heartstrings tugged at the same time. If this was what love was all about, then he wasn't sure he wanted it anymore. It was too fucking hard.

He was beginning to understand why some people claimed love wasn't enough to make a relationship work. He had no doubt he would go on caring about Marc until his heart stopped beating, but that didn't guarantee they could make a go of their relationship. Yet he couldn't just walk away and let it go. Marc meant too much to him.

"What exactly do you want from me, Marc? Lay it all out on the line and let me hear it."

Marc lifted his head. "Things were good between us before. Damn good. It's like I just said...I want to rewind the last day and continue on as we were before."

"That isn't getting us anywhere," Shawn said, his aggravation rising. "We can't go back to seeing each other when you're in town, pretending you don't have a family here waiting for you to come home. It's impossible."

"And if I choose to come out of the closet, I risk losing my kids. I won't do that, Shawn. I'm all they have."

"I wouldn't ask you to give up your children, Marc. I'm not a monster. I just want to be a part of your life—your *real* life. I want you so fucking bad I ache from it, but I can't go back to the way things were. It isn't enough."

"I don't understand. You didn't have any problem with the way things were before. What's so different now?"

"Now I know who you really are and what's important to you. I don't want to be some diversion for you whenever

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you're passing through. I *love* you, Marc. I want to be your friend *and* your lover. Let me help you. I can get your father-in-law off your back and make sure he never bothers you again. All you have to do is say the word."

"No. That isn't possible. And even if it were, I couldn't ask you to do it."

"You didn't ask. I offered."

"You're splitting hairs. As much as I would love to hand over all my problems and let someone else take care of them, I won't do that. What kind of role model would I be for my kids? No, I need to fight my own battles."

"That would be commendable if you were actually willing to fight for what you want, Marc, but it seems to me that all you've been doing is hiding and praying no one would figure out your secrets."

"Fuck you, Shawn. You don't know what it's like to be me. You have no idea how much stress I'm under."

"I know I could've helped you, if only you'd trusted me."

"Right." Marc snorted. "If I'd been honest with you, you would have run for the hills. No one wants a man who comes with two kids and enough baggage to sink a ship."

"You don't know that." Although Shawn had to admit, Marc had a point. He'd like to think he would've been open-minded enough to give Marc a chance if he'd known all the details of Marc's life in the early days of their liaison, but he couldn't honestly say he would have. Things had been so simple and easy with Marc when they'd first started seeing each other. That had been a large part of the charm. His

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previous aversion to love and commitment might have caused him to ditch Marc and seek out a simpler means of sating his needs. And that possibility made him feel like the lowest life form imaginable.

“It hardly matters now, anyway,” Marc said.

“You’re right. We could play shoulda-woulda-coulda all night, but it won’t change anything. You aren’t willing to fight for us, and I’m not willing to accept less than everything.”

Marc leaned back against the driver’s seat and ran his hand through his hair, making it stand up in ebony tufts. “So, what do we do now?”

Shawn swallowed the bile rising in his throat. “You take me back to my car, and we go our separate ways. Then life goes on.”

CHAPTER 7

A week later, Shawn swaggered out of William Vanhoosier's office and entered the elevator, feeling high and mighty after putting the sniveling little bastard in his place. Regardless of the fact that he'd lost Marc, he hadn't been able to stand by and do nothing while someone he cared about was mistreated. While it wasn't in his power to stop rampant homophobia, he had been able to solve Marc's dilemma with his father-in-law.

Tex had responded to Shawn's request for more information on the Vanhoosiers in glorious fashion, digging up all the dirt to be found on the family and their company. As it turned out, although the business was reputed to be a public

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company, allowing them tax breaks a private company wouldn't receive, no one outside the Vanhoosier clan owned stock. Using a little leg work of his own, Shawn had tracked down the most distant, estranged members of the family and purchased every single share of the company he could coax away from them. It had cost him a pretty penny to acquire enough stock to facilitate his plan, but he didn't give a shit. Money came and went, but he would go on loving Marc until the day he died.

He now owned thirty shares of the company. That, along with the twenty-five shares controlled by Marc on behalf of his children until they were old enough to inherit them from their mother's estate, had provided Shawn with sufficient leverage to get William Vanhoosier's attention. Indeed, Marc's father-in-law had been shaking in his designer shoes when Shawn had waltzed into the man's office and laid out exactly what he would do to the family business if the man ever so much as blinked at Marc's children again. Vanhoosier had been a stuttering, sweaty mess by the time Shawn finished with him. Shawn felt damn good, if a little sad that he couldn't share his success with the one man for whom it would have meant the most.

Now that he'd accomplished what he'd come for, Shawn planned to return home and wallow in his own misery, knowing he'd done his good deed for the century. Marc would have his boys, and Shawn would have peace of mind knowing he'd played a small part in Marc's future happiness. It wasn't all that he wanted, but it would have to be enough.

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The elevator dinged, announcing his arrival on the first floor, and the doors swung open. Shawn stepped out, and walked smack dab into Marc, himself. Hungry for even a glimpse of the man he loved, Shawn's gaze ate up the vision in front of him. Though Marc looked like shit, his eyes sunken and ringed with dark circles and his normally healthy pink skin almost sallow, he had never been a more welcome sight. Shawn's pulse leapt with joy, even if the timing of their encounter couldn't have been worse.

Marc stared, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He crowded Shawn's personal space until Shawn had no choice but to step back onto the elevator or risk making a scene.

Shawn didn't know what to say, so he kept his mouth shut. The doors slid closed, encasing them in the small mirrored box, and the elevator lurched upward. Marc hit the stop button, trapping them between the first and second floor. He faced Shawn, his expression grave. "I want to know what you're doing here."

Shawn swallowed. "I'd have to say that's none of your business."

Marc's aggressive demeanor faltered, revealing the tired man beneath his bluster. "Listen, Shawn, I'm sorry I hurt you, but please don't do anything that would cause me to lose my sons. They mean the world to me. I don't think you appreciate what a conniving asshole William is."

"No offense, Marc, but how is any of this my problem?" His heart went out to Marc, but his inner bastard wouldn't let him console the other man. Shawn couldn't believe Marc

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suspected he'd go behind his ex-lover's back and damage the young father's reputation.

Marc blinked. "I don't suppose it is your problem. All I want to know is whether or not you've done anything to affect my custody of the boys."

"Fine," Shawn said, willing to say anything as long as it got him away from the small space. He didn't think he could take being so close to Marc without touching his ex-lover, without having the right to push the shiny dark hair out of his beloved's face, or tenderly caress away the wrinkles lining Marc's forehead. "I didn't do anything to hurt you, Marc."

Marc continued to quietly stare at Shawn.

"What?" Shawn asked, breaking the oppressive silence. "You don't believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe. There's no other logical reason for you to be here."

"You think I'm lying." *And doesn't that sting like an open wound?*

Marc shrugged, the material of his black suit bunching around his shoulders. "I don't know what else to think."

"In case you missed the memo, what I do is no longer any of your concern. I said I wasn't here to hurt you, and I meant it. You can either take me at my word or fuck off."

Marc flinched. "So that's how it's going to be between us from now on?"

Shawn hit the elevator button. "There is no 'us.' You made that decision remember?"

Marc exhaled, his shoulders rounding. "Fine. Have it your

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way. Far be it from me to think we might be able to stay friends.”

“I don’t want to be your friend, Marc.” It would be too fucking painful. A clean break was best, even though it felt like he was trying to amputate a part of himself in the process.

The elevator door swung open on the second floor. Shawn saw his escape and took it. Being near Marc was a torment he couldn’t face.

Loss clawed at his insides as he calmly, but quickly, found the stairwell and entered. A chaotic jumble of want, need and regret coalesced inside his skull until all he knew was the urge to get away. He raced down the stairs, almost tripping over his feet in his haste to leave. He shoved through the exit doorway leading to the first floor and forced himself to move at a more sedate pace. No one gave him a second look as he pushed open the glass double doors, walking out of the building with his head held high.

He stepped onto the sidewalk, the perfect image of a calm businessman. While sunlight streamed down on his shoulders, a chunk of ice hemorrhaged inside his chest. It was a beautiful spring day, but Shawn wasn’t sure if he was ever going to feel warm again.

* * *

Shawn spent the three weeks following his run-in with Marc working himself to death. He came home only to sleep and shower...too many memories haunted the condo for him to spend any more time there. Without the benefit of work, he

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wasn't sure how he would have coped.

But regardless of how hard he worked, Shawn couldn't erase Marc from his thoughts. The nights were the worst. Even exhausted to the point of being numb, he'd lie in the dark and toss and turn, reflecting on all the things he'd done with Marc, all the pieces of himself he'd shared and the tiny bits of things Marc had given back in return. It was sheer masochism in motion, but he couldn't stop. Trying to figure out what part of Marc was real and what wasn't, became a warped game with which to torment himself night after night. Although he liked to think the version of Marc he'd come to care about was the "real" man, there was no way to know for sure. After all, he'd been blind enough not to see through Marc's act to begin with. Anything was possible.

Countless times, he mulled over their last night together as they had sat in Marc's car. Marc had seemed so broken and lost. It may have been Shawn's imagination, but Marc had appeared almost browbeaten into accepting his lot in life, as if he were afraid to fight for what he wanted. Shawn wasn't sure whether he should foster the anger he felt toward Marc for not being brave enough to fight for their relationship, or feel sorry for the younger man. Maybe Marc simply wasn't old enough to value love for the rare blessing Shawn considered it to be. Shawn, on the other hand, was fully able to appreciate what he'd lost.

Following a particularly harrowing seventy-hour work week, Shawn's beloved secretary, a matronly woman named Joan who'd been his employee for the last five years and was

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the closest thing he had to a nosy mother, threatened him with bodily harm if he called another mandatory weekend for his personal staff. With his ass on the line, he decided to stay home that weekend and give his people the time off.

Saturday dawned bright and warm, but Shawn was at a loss for what to do. After puttering around his condo all morning, bored out of his mind, he seriously considered going in to the office. He was the boss and could do as he damn well pleased. But in the end, he chose to stay home. He wouldn't be of use to anyone if he worked himself into an early grave.

Besides, it was stupid to allow himself to be chased out of his home because he was too big a pussy to deal with a few memories. He refused to give in to the urge to flee ghosts of the past like some silly child. Surely he could find something to do to occupy his mind.

When the doorbell rang, Shawn almost didn't recognize the sound, it had been so long since he'd heard it. He was curled up on the end of the sofa, immersed in a horror novel that had been new when he'd bought it the year before. He marked his place by dog-earring one of the page corners and set down the paperback on the glass side table as the bell sounded once again. He wasn't sure who was brave enough to come for a visit, as grouchy as he'd been lately, but the distraction was more than welcome. Anxious to talk to someone other than himself, he padded across the hardwood floor in his bare feet.

He jerked open the door, not thinking to look through the peephole, and blinked at the man standing on the other side.

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“What are you doing here, Marc?”

“Well, hello to you, too, Shawn. It’s lovely to see you.”

Shawn glared at Marc, although he quivered with curiosity on the inside. “Spare me the small talk. You wouldn’t be here unless you wanted something.”

Marc bit into the inside of his mouth, a gesture Shawn recognized as something he did when he was nervous. “I’m sorry to be a bother, but I need to speak with you.”

Shawn exhaled. “Fine. Come in, but make whatever you have to say short. I have plans.” A slight lie, but he was sure he could come up with something to keep it from being a complete falsity.

“I won’t take up much of your time. Maggie’s downstairs with the boys.” Marc took a few steps into the room and stopped, turning back toward Shawn. “I just wanted to stop by and say thank you for whatever it was you did the day I ran into you at the office.”

Shawn opened his mouth to deny having done anything, but Marc held up his hand, palm facing out. “Stop. I know you had something to do with William’s attitude change. William and Mimi have almost been nice to me when they’ve stopped by to visit the kids lately. That might not sound like much, but I would have settled for coldly polite after all the hostility. Mimi actually apologized for all the grief they’ve given me and promised they wouldn’t contest my custody of the boys as long as I agreed not to stand in their way of visiting them.” He paused for a moment. “Shit, I promised myself I wouldn’t ramble when I got here.” Marc smiled sheepishly. “Anyway, I

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quit my job. William seemed pleased when I turned in my resignation. That's how I knew you had to have done something on my behalf. It's also why I'm here in the city."

Shawn blinked, surprised Marc had accomplished so much in such a short time. He didn't want to care what Marc was doing, or why, but he did. "What are you going to do now?"

"I have a new position I'm going to start soon, but I need to find a house first. While I was here looking, I thought I would take a little initiative and drop by to see you. I know you said you didn't want to be friends the last time we spoke, but I've missed you so fucking bad, Shawn. Not a day has gone by when I haven't wanted to see you or talk to you about something that was happening in my life. There isn't any way to explain how grateful I am to you for whatever you did, but more than anything, I wanted to take this opportunity to see you again."

"I've missed you, too." There weren't words to describe how much he'd yearned for Marc in the time they'd been apart.

Shawn walked over to the couch, the action keeping him from giving in to his desire to reach out to the younger man. He propped his hip against the side of the sofa and crossed his arms over his chest. "As far as the other goes, you don't have to say anything. I may have intervened on your behalf, but I didn't do it for thanks. I just wanted to make sure you were going to be okay." There was no way Shawn would admit to the lengths he'd gone to assure Marc's happiness. If Marc had any inkling of what he'd done, the younger man would feel

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indebted, and that was the last thing Shawn wanted.

“You don’t know how much I appreciate your help, even though I told you not to interfere.”

“Yeah, well...I’m stubborn. Sue me.”

Marc smiled. “Yes, you are. It’s one of the many things I love about you.”

“What?” Shawn floundered for something to say in return. He sure as hell hadn’t been expecting that. He could deal with “want you,” “miss you,” or “need you.” “I love you” was his personal version of kryptonite.

Marc closed the distance between them and stopped in front of Shawn, hope shinning from his beautiful blue eyes. “I still love you, Shawn. I am so sorry for everything I’ve put you through. I know I don’t deserve you, but if you’re willing, I’d like the chance to start over.”

Shawn closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. “I love you, too, Marc, but that was never the problem.”

“I know, but I’ve had a lot of time to think in the last few weeks. It doesn’t seem like I’ve done anything else. The only two certainties in my life, the only two things that I don’t want to live without, are my boys and you. Nothing else matters...not where I work or where I live. None of that is important.”

“What about your kids? Just because your in-laws are being tolerant at the moment doesn’t mean they won’t shit a brick if they find out you’re gay.” Shawn knew that wasn’t going to happen, not with the loss of their precious company

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hanging over their heads, but Marc didn't.

“Fuck them. I'm sick of living in fear of what other people will think of me. Realistically, I know I shouldn't rock the boat right now when things are going okay, but I have been miserable these last three weeks. If I can't find the balls to stand up for what I want at this moment, when the future with the love of my life is on the line, then I never will. It took me a lot of sleepless nights, tossing and turning, to come to the conclusion that I don't want to live without you. I can accept if you don't want me, but I'll be damned if I give up what we could have together over the threats of a few homophobic assholes.”

“There's no guarantee they won't go back on their word once they find out you're dating a man, Marc.” Shawn hated to play devil's advocate, but he was having a hell of a time coming to terms with the fact that Marc was standing in his living room, practically begging to come back to him. The situation couldn't possibly be this simple. Nothing Shawn had ever wanted had fallen into his lap like this.

“I'm willing to take that chance. My kids deserve better than to be raised by a miserable, grumpy man who doesn't have the balls to be true to himself. If William and Mimi force me to court, so be it. I'll fight them until my last breath to keep my boys, but I am sick and tired of living a lie. I'm miserable without you in my life, Shawn. Say you'll take me back and give me another chance? I promise you won't regret it. I'll love you until my dying breath.”

Shawn blinked away the moisture building in his eyes and

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gazed at Marc, trying to gauge the younger man's sincerity. His words were beautiful, but Shawn was afraid to trust him after everything they'd been through. He wanted to so much, but... "Do you really mean that, Marc? Good or bad, you're ready to settle down and be with me? Just me? Because I don't think I could survive losing you twice."

A rush of air whooshed out of Marc, as if he'd been holding his breath. He pulled Shawn into his arms and held him tight, doing the very thing Shawn had longed to do upon opening the door and finding Marc on the other side.

"I've never meant anything more," Marc said. "Forgive me for being too much of a coward to fight for you when I should have. I was scared, but I know what I need now. I'm ready to take on the world as long as you're by my side."

Shawn wrapped his arms around Marc's waist and buried his face against the curve of the beloved throat. He inhaled the aroma of man and musk, a scent he'd missed so fucking much, and squeezed his lover tighter. "There's nothing to forgive. You were only doing what you thought was best for your kids." Shawn couldn't find fault with that, not even at the expense of his own happiness.

Without relinquishing his hold on Shawn, Marc pulled back far enough to skim his mouth over Shawn's in a soft, gentle meeting of lips. It was exactly what Shawn needed and yet nowhere near enough. He pressed closer to Marc, seeking the connection he'd been missing for the last three weeks.

A hungry, almost desperate sound vibrated in Marc's chest as he tilted his head and kissed Shawn with a passion that stole

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Shawn's breath and eradicated the thought of anything but having Marc back where he belonged.

Marc molded his hard body to Shawn's from chest to groin, pushing him back against the sofa. Shawn slid his left thigh between Marc's legs and ground his hard cock against the man's hip, letting Marc feel just how much Shawn still wanted him.

Marc pulled away, panting. His chest rose and fell, the material of his shirt stretched taut across his broad shoulders. "As much as I'd like to finish this, my sister and the boys are downstairs waiting for me."

"Christ," Shawn said, trying to calm his racing libido. "I forgot all about them."

"Don't worry about it. If it's any consolation, I almost forgot about them, too. It's hard to think about anything when you're rubbing against me."

Shawn laughed, feeling joyous for the first time in a month. "Well, don't keep them waiting. Why don't you go get them? We can have lunch or something."

"I would, but I need to keep an appointment to look at an apartment in Brooklyn."

"Brooklyn? Really?"

"Hey, don't look at me like that. Brooklyn isn't that far away, and it's cheaper to rent there than here in Manhattan. I can't afford to buy anything until the house sells."

"You're selling...?"

Marc nodded and kissed the tip of Shawn's nose. "I am. I really want a clean break with the past. My future is here."

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Any lingering doubt Shawn possessed vanished in the blink of an eye. Marc really was back for good. He tenderly kissed Marc, his mind spinning with possibilities. After everything they'd been through, he hated the idea of being separated from Marc for a moment longer than absolutely necessary. "Why don't you stay here? I have plenty of room to spare."

"I don't know." Marc bit into his lip and glanced around. "I love the thought of going to bed with you at night and waking up next to you every morning, but I'm not sure we should rush moving in together. Living with children is kind of like being in the circus, and you haven't even met Wyatt and Dalton yet."

"You have a point. Maybe we should take things a little slower and let me get to know your boys and your sister before we do anything drastic."

Shawn looked around his condo. He'd never really thought about it before, but as he tried to see his place through Marc's eyes, he realized the space wasn't exactly child friendly. The time he spent at work didn't lend itself to creating a warm home environment.

His living room, kitchen and dining room existed in one large open space, each room use delineated by flooring and strategically placed furnishings. His dining room table and living room end tables were composed of black, tempered glass and chrome. The tan suede sectional sofa and recliner coordinated with the dining room chairs. Austere, white walls boasted no decoration because he could never settle on

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artwork he liked. Besides, his lower-class origins balked at spending massive amounts of money on something pretty to look at when the view out the window was free. An aversion to clutter meant no knickknacks, and he had no family to place in framed photographs. The overall effect was cold and empty.

“Yes, I agree that there’s no reason to rush into anything now that we know where we stand with each other,” Marc said, grabbing Shawn’s right hand and taking a step back. “Keeping that thought in mind, why don’t you come downstairs with me? There are a few people I’d like you to meet.”

“I’d love to,” Shawn said, twining his fingers through Marc’s. Their hands united, Shawn let Marc lead him out of the apartment and toward the future.

EPILOGUE

Eighteen months later...

“God, yes,” Marc whimpered, pushing his ass toward Shawn. He glanced back over his shoulder at his lover, his hands white-knuckling the bedposts. “Please, Shawn, give it to me now.”

Shawn swiped his tongue over the hungry pink portal and into his lover’s body one last time, then took his place behind Marc. He grasped his cock at the base and rubbed the blunt, wet tip through the spit-licked crease between Marc’s firm buttocks. “This what you want, baby?”

“Fuck, yes.” Marc’s hips wiggled, wordlessly begging for

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Shawn's dick. "Take me hard and fast, hurry."

Shawn was in no position to argue. Although it had only been a couple of days since they'd made love, it felt like a lifetime. His member felt like steel in his fist, throbbing and leaking, demanding the tight channel Marc so eagerly offered. Using his left hand to hold Marc's hip, Shawn steadied his erection and pressed forward.

Marc's face ground into the pillow, muffling the groans as Shawn buried himself deep in one furious thrust forward. "Oh, Shawn..."

Shawn immediately pulled back and watched the glistening length of his cock slide free of Marc's body. The tiny ring of muscle guarding Marc's channel was angry red and begging to be defiled. Shawn closed his eyes and plunged home once again. He ground his pelvis against Marc's ass, trying to get deeper. "So hot and tight, baby. You feel so good."

"Yours," Marc panted, turning his face to the side.

"Mine," Shawn chanted, rolling his hips back and forth. He leaned forward and covered Marc's back with his wider torso and reached around his lover. The long, slender cock he cherished practically jumped into his hand, eager and leaking salty tears of anticipation. "All mine."

"That's right, love. My ass is all yours. Now take it and make me come. Hurry. We don't have much time."

Shawn gritted his teeth at the reminder and picked up his pace, riding his lover hard and deep. Marc's body clung to him like a custom-made glove, slick and hot and so damn good. "It

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won't be long," he panted, fighting the tingle behind his balls.

Marc shoved backward and squeezed down with his muscles. "Do it. Come deep inside me, lover. Want to carry you with me all day."

The extra pressure around his cock sent Shawn hurtling over the edge. He clenched his teeth and shook through the contractions, trying to stay quiet.

Marc whimpered and Shawn realized his lover hadn't gotten off, his dick still hot and hard in Shawn's immobile fist. Careful not to hurt Marc, Shawn gently pulled himself free and flipped over his lover. He bent forward and covered the slick crown of Marc's stalk with his mouth, sucking away the salty proof of Marc's need.

"Oh, yes." Marc thrust his hips up, rubbing his cock across Shawn's tongue. "Please. Suck me."

Shawn palmed Marc's balls, their weight heavy in his hand, and slid his lips down Marc's shaft. A tiny noise, more breath than sound, floated on the air as Marc rocked his hips back and forth, fucking Shawn's mouth in short, shallow thrusts.

Hot, silky flesh pulsed on Shawn's tongue, a brief warning before the first blast of cum hit the roof of Shawn's mouth. He kept moving, swallowing all that Marc had to give before gentling his touch and licking away every drop he could find. Then he released Marc's softening flesh with a final lingering kiss to the sensitive crown.

"Ohmygod. We should start every day like this."

"I'm game if you are," Shawn said with grin as he flopped

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down on the mattress beside Marc. “Of course, that means you’ll have to actually get up when the alarm clock rings, instead of hitting the snooze fifteen times like you usually do.”

Marc groaned. “I’ve never claimed to be a morning person.”

Shawn turned his head and kissed Marc’s shoulder. “No shit. You sure surprised me this morning.”

“I have to keep you on your toes.” Marc rolled onto his side and leaned over Shawn, kissing him softly. “I can’t have you getting tired of me.”

“That”—Shawn continued raining kisses on his lover—
”will never happen.”

The rapid tattoo of little fists on the bedroom door resonated through the room a second ahead of two voices yelling in unison.

“Dad!”

“Shawn!”

“We’re hungry!”

For the umpteenth time, Shawn cursed himself for agreeing to pay Maggie’s tuition and dorm fees at NYU. Marc’s little sister more than deserved to go to school after everything she’d done to help her brother in recent years, but Shawn missed her quirky presence and helping hand around the house at times like this. Wyatt and Dalton were awake and raring to go the second their little eyelids lifted. It wasn’t natural. Neither would they would stop beating on the door until someone got up and fed them.

Marc groaned and rolled out of the bed. He rose to his feet

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and held his hand out for Shawn. “Come on, love. Our little masters are calling.”

Shawn let Marc tug him to his feet. “We’d better hurry, then. Why don’t you go ahead and shower and get ready for work while I start breakfast?”

“I’d be a fool to turn down that offer. Just let me wash up and then I’ll join you.” Marc pressed a smacking kiss on Shawn’s lips before padding into the adjoining bathroom.

When Marc had finally agreed to move in with Shawn six months before, Shawn had been able to reorganize his work schedule so he could take care of the children he’d come to love as his own over the last year. He was eternally grateful for the latitude he enjoyed thanks to being his own boss. The ability to set his own work hours had been a godsend, something Marc wasn’t able to do in his position as sales manager of a local retail establishment.

The part of the day between the point when Marc left for work and the children were due at preschool had become a very special time when Shawn could bond with the boys, even if they were always a little rushed and behind schedule. He’d worried about that disorganization at first, but Marc had assured him it was perfectly normal when dealing with two rambunctious four-year-olds.

It had taken Shawn quite a while to get used to the chaos of having children under foot, but he was managing. Every day provided something new. In a way, Shawn felt like he was learning right along with the boys. Every discovery made by the twins about the world around them provided Shawn with a

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fresh outlook on life. Things were certainly never boring.

Shawn walked toward the bedroom door, anxious to start his day. He pulled the door open and was greeted by two disgruntled faces. Their serious, identical expressions of impatience were framed by wild tangles of shaggy black hair.

A smile twisted Shawn's lips. "Good morning, boys."

"Finally," Dalton groaned.

Wyatt bounced on his heels. "What took you so long? We almost starved."

Shawn laughed. God, he loved these kids. "You both look perfectly healthy to me." He bent down to their level and tickled Wyatt's pudgy midsection. Wyatt giggled and squirmed, dancing out of Shawn's reach.

Dalton peeked around Shawn, looking into the bedroom. "Where's Dad?"

"He's showering." Shawn closed the bedroom door. "Come on guys, let's go start breakfast." At least Marc would have a few minutes of peace before the boys pounced on him.

"I want pancakes," Wyatt shouted.

"Yeah," Dalton chimed in, following Shawn down the hall. "Can I help flip them?"

"Sure, as long as you both promise to help me clean up the mess when we're finished." The last time he'd let the kids help him cook pancakes, the batter had splattered over everything. Bits had even clung to the ceiling fan. The cleaning lady had asked for a raise shortly thereafter.

Breakfast shaped up quickly, with little fuss from the boys. Shawn was pouring syrup onto the kids' servings when Marc

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breezed into the kitchen. “Something smells good in here.”

The boys ran from the table and grabbed their father’s legs with syrupy hands. “Pancakes! We helped.”

Marc hugged the boys, one at a time, and then hustled them back to the table. “That’s great. I can’t wait to taste them.”

Shawn swallowed his laughter as Marc glanced at the ceiling. “Don’t worry, love. The boys are masters at flipping pancakes, now.” Except for the occasional one that hit the floor, but Marc didn’t need to know that.

“Mm hmm,” Marc replied, the twinkle in his eyes promising that he knew more than he was saying. “Well, I’m starving. Let’s eat.”

Shawn sat at the head of the table, his plate untouched in front of him, and watched his family demolish their food with a sense of wonder and contentment. Although the tranquil scene wasn’t what he’d had in mind for his future when he’d traveled to the big city all those years ago, it was so much sweeter than anything he could have imagined back then.

Life had never been more fulfilling.

AMANDA YOUNG

Amanda Young is a multi-published, erotic romance author. Since she tends to write whatever strikes her whimsy, all of her novels fall into various subgenres. You never know what merry adventure her evil muse will devise next.

Basically, she writes stories about people who love indiscriminately and wholeheartedly. Her characters are never perfect; they're flawed and oftentimes troubled. Which makes it that much more satisfying when they receive the happy ending we all deserve. No matter what genre her books fall into, she can guarantee they'll end with a happily ever after. In her opinion, it's just not a romance without one.

For more information about Amanda and her writing, please visit her website:

<http://www.AmandaYoung.org>

* * *

**Don't miss *Precious Ache*, by Amanda Young,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Falling in love was his biggest mistake...

Abandoned as a child, Dave Blanchard learned to be self-reliant at an early age. Puberty brought a distressing attraction to other boys, and an abnormal growth spurt that drove Dave further into his shell. Adulthood granted him the freedom to stand on his own two feet, but cloistered him in a plastic bubble of his own making. At seven and a half feet tall, Dave has no problem finding men for anonymous sex through sleazy backroom romps, but the experiences leave him feeling cold and unsatisfied. He dreams of love and commitment, but finding someone interested in a relationship seems like a pipe dream.

Desperate for companionship, Dave signs up for an online matchmaking service. To his utter embarrassment, his first date never shows, but his luck improves when he runs into a former foster brother, Micah Black. Dave and Micah quickly rebuild their friendship, but with it comes the resurrection of the forbidden crush Dave harbored for Micah when they were teens. Micah is off limits to Dave, but that doesn't stop Dave's imagination from spinning torrid scenarios involving his straight friend.

When Micah's life is threatened, Dave's inhibitions melt away. Unfortunately, the price of one chaste kiss could mean the end of the friendship Dave wants so badly...

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