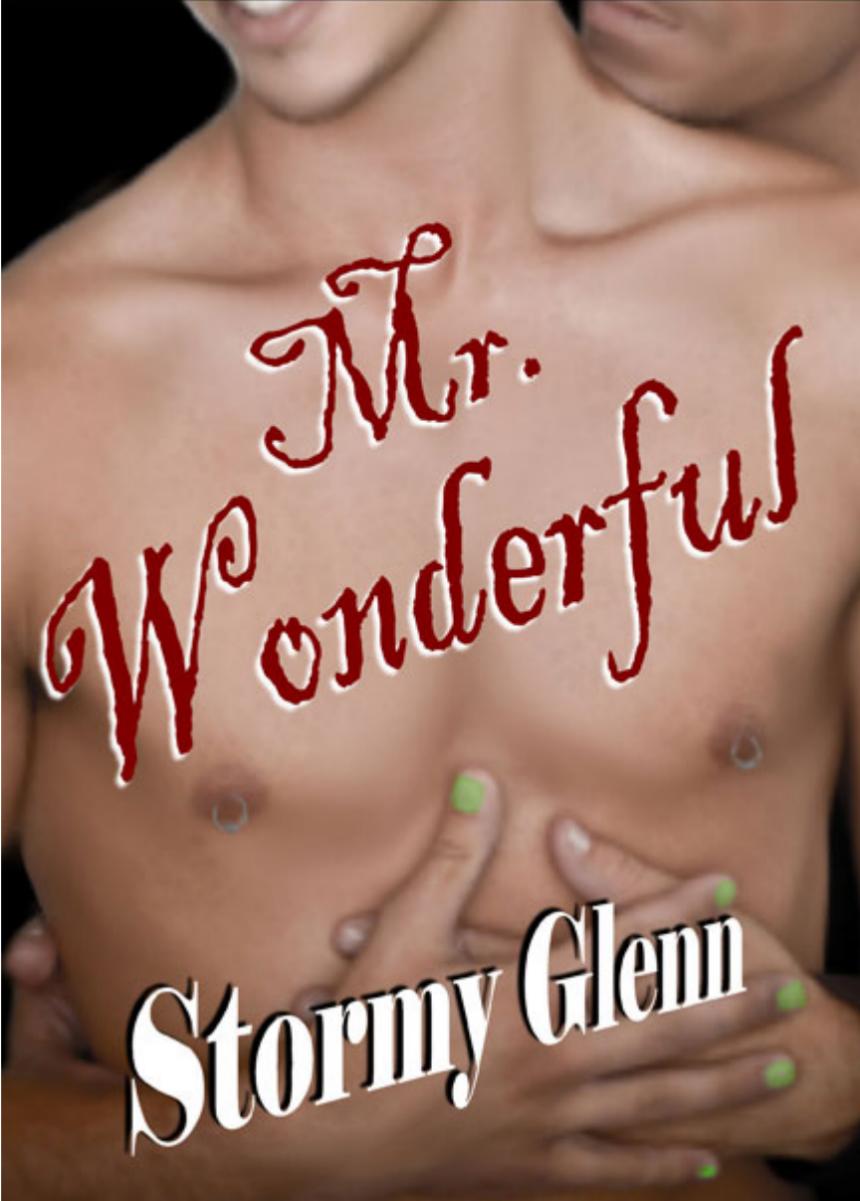


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Mr.
Wonderful

Stormy Glenn

MR. WONDERFUL

Sequel to Sweet Treats

Stormy Glenn

EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

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MR. WONDERFUL

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DEDICATION

To My Babygirl, thanks for the plot assistance.
You have an evil, evil mind.

MR. WONDERFUL

Sequel to Sweet Treats

STORMY GLENN

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Chapter One

Julian Sinclair groaned as his best friend, Dino Marcelli, dragged him by the arm into the line of waiting people outside of yet another nightclub. This was the third one tonight. Dino was bound and determined to find Julian a boyfriend, or at least a hot date.

“Oh, come on, Dino, let’s go home. I’m tired and my feet hurt. We’re never going to find Mr. Wonderful in this place.” Julian looked around the outside of the upscale club in awe. “I’m not even sure we can get into this place. Can we afford this?”

“Honey, for you, price is no object. Besides, I know one of the bouncers.” Dino smiled as he leaned down to Julian and wagged his eyebrows. “He’s sweet on me.”

Julian looked down the line of people to the two bouncers standing by the front door. Both looked huge, kind of like Mafia hit men, like, we’ll-break-your-knees-if-you-don’t-pay huge. And they had the clothing to match. Both were wearing black suits with stark white shirts and black ties. What gave them away were the rows of rings on their fingers. They looked more like sparkling brass knuckles. Julian bet those things hurt a lot.

Julian stood by Dino as they slowly moved up the line waiting for their turn to get into the club. He didn’t know much about the place, as he had never actually been inside. But he had heard things.

The place was called *The Club*, strangely enough. It catered to an upscale clientele. It had a reputation for being a clean, safe place for patrons, both gay and straight, to drink, dance, and have a good time.

The management had zero tolerance for drugs, drunks, or bullies, which was probably why it was fast becoming the *in* place to go for a little fun. Be that as it was, Julian still did not believe he would find his dream guy inside.

As they got to the front of the line, Dino flashed one of the bouncers a little smile and a wave. Julian couldn't have been more surprised if a marching band had walked by as the bouncer smiled back and waved them on in.

"I can't believe that worked," Julian whispered. He had seen person after person turned away from the front door of the club for one reason or another. He never thought they would make it inside, especially, with the way he looked.

Julian was a free spirit if he was anything. His light brown hair was frosted blond. His fingernails and toenails were painted neon green. And he probably wore more eyeliner than most women. Today his eyeliner was green, of course. To top it all off, he had a silver hoop in his ear, plus both nipples were pierced with silver hoops. His belly button had a silver hoop with a green gem in it.

He loved to wear anything flashy. Currently, he was toned down a little. He was wearing white leather loafers, white slacks that hugged his ass, and a silky neon green V-neck pullover shirt that was stretched nearly to the breaking point across his flat stomach.

Most people ran in the other direction when they saw Julian coming. Dino likened him to a car accident waiting to happen. People wanted to look away, but they just couldn't. Julian was just too much to take in—nearly hypnotic.

Personally, Julian loved it. The shock value alone was hilarious. Of course, it did tend to bring him a lot of trouble too. Being only five foot six and one hundred and fifty pounds, he had been on the

receiving end of a gay bashing more times than he could count. But he wasn't about to change who he was for anyone.

It also didn't get him a lot of dates. The guys that hit on him saw him as either a pet or a possession. Very rarely did they try to treat him as a human being with a mind of his own. That was also assuming that he could even get a date. It was hard to find someone who enjoyed how flamboyant Julian was.

Julian made no bones about the fact that he was gay. He loved to flirt. He loved men. He especially loved to flirt with men, and the bigger the better. Yeah, he probably was a masochist. But he loved big, strong, dominant men.

There was just something about being wrapped up in the arms of a big, strong man that made Julian all sorts of excited. It's when they turned out to be overbearing, abusive jerks that he tended to have problems.

Which explains why Dino was dragging him into yet another club to help him find a new boyfriend. The last one had been six months ago. Julian had left Johnny after he had knocked him around for refusing to be loaned to out to Johnny's friends for "a bit of fun." Julian had not been impressed.

"Stop daydreaming. Let's get us a place to sit, get us some drinks, and get us some men." Dino laughed as he dragged a reluctant Julian through the room. It wasn't too crowded for a Friday evening, but it was still early. That would change. They had best get a booth while they still could.

"Tell you what, you find us a booth. I'm going for the drinks. We'll meet in the middle."

Dino nodded at Julian's suggestion, already scanning the room for eye candy. Julian just rolled his eyes as he walked to the bar. Dino was a very dear friend, his best friend, in fact, but he could be so single-minded when it came to ogling men.

Julian leaned against the bar when he reached it, motioning to the bartender. Mmm, he was cute. Tall, dark, and sexy, just the way

Julian liked his men. Oh damn, the man wore a wedding ring. He was either married or committed. Strike one bartender off the availability list.

Julian flashed him a big smile anyway. Everyone deserved to be flirted with. “Hi, I need a strawberry margarita and a bottled water, please.”

The bartender took his order and began making the drinks. He smiled as he looked over at Julian. “Name’s Dillon. I’ve not seen you in here before. First time?”

Julian nodded. “I’m Julian. My friend, Dino, says this is the place to be if you want to have a little fun and ogle cute guys.” Julian winked. “It looks like a great place.”

Dillon looked around the bar proudly. “Yeah, it is. The boss man runs a pretty tight ship, but he knows his clubs.”

Dillon set the margarita and a bottled water on the bar top with a smile. When Julian went to pay him, he gave a little chuckle. “First time, it’s on the house. You go have a good time, and if you have any problems, just come see me.”

“Hey, thanks, Dillon.” Julian flashed him a big smile and grabbed the two drinks, carrying them over to the table where Dino was waving his arms in the air. Maybe this place wouldn’t be so bad after all.

* * * *

Darius picked up the phone as soon as it rang.

“Yeah, Dillon?”

“Isn’t your birthday coming up in a couple of weeks?” Dillon asked.

“You know it is, Dillon. You share the same birthday as me.”

“Well, I have an early birthday present for you. Look out your window, table seven, neon green shirt. And don’t say I never gave you anything, bro.” Dillon chuckled as he hung up.

Darius Alexander closed his cell phone, putting it back in his pocket, and walked across his office to look out the big one-way glass window that oversaw the bar below. He looked towards table number seven. As soon as he spotted the neon green shirt, he knew why his brother had called him.

The man was breathtaking. His hair was light brown, short, and kind of spiked. His tanned skin hinted at lots of time spent sunbathing. Darius briefly wondered if he sunbathed in the nude. Oh, man, he sure would love to find out.

The man's chest was svelte-looking and his stomach flat with an incredible six-pack abdomen and narrow hips. The way that his slacks displayed his perfectly round ass cheeks made Darius's mouth water.

He was not a large man, but that was okay with Darius. He liked being able to hold his lover wrapped up in his arms. At six foot eight, he preferred someone a bit smaller than he was, quite a bit smaller. The man below him fit that desire perfectly. He was, in Darius's estimations, physical perfection.

Darius smiled for the first time in a long time as he pulled out his cell phone and dialed the bar downstairs. "Have a bottle of our best champagne delivered to table seven, compliments of the house."

Dillon laughed. "Told you, bro. I will be expecting a really great birthday present this year."

"If he's single, you can have whatever you want," Darius replied as he continued to watch the object of his rapidly growing desire move out onto the dance floor with another man. Ten seconds into the dance, Darius was gripping the window seal for all he was worth. Fuck! The man danced like a wet dream.

"Oh, he's single, all right, and available. He's here with a friend, but I don't think they're *together*. And I do believe he is looking to buy."

"Really? And what gave you that idea? Maybe he's just window shopping." How could someone as gorgeous as the man Darius looked at possibly be single.

“No, I don’t think so. He’s definitely looking to buy. Why don’t you give him some time to settle in and then come down and introduce yourself? I have no doubt he’d like to meet the management. He was very impressed with the club.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll think about it.” The more Darius watched the little man move, the more he wondered if going downstairs to meet him would be such a good idea.

“Don’t mess this up, Darius. He’s just your type, in spades. He could be the one.”

“I told you I’d think about it,” Darius growled.

“If you’re not down here in thirty minutes, I’m going to bring him up to you.”

Darius stared at the phone in his hand after his brother hung up. Dillon would do it too. Sometimes Darius wondered how they could have possibly come from the same mother. His brother was outgoing and friendly. Darius was more remote and arrogant. It just didn’t make sense that they were twins.

Darius glanced down at his watch, trying to figure the amount of time he had before Dillon made good on his threat to bring the sexy little man upstairs. Thirty minutes wasn’t a lot of time. But it was enough.

Darius walked back to his desk and sat down. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed. He had some plans to make if he was going to make his interests known to this new man, who he hoped would become a regular fixture in his life.

Chapter Two

Julian and Dino were surprised when they reached their table to find Dillon standing there, holding a bucket filled with ice and an expensive-looking bottle of champagne. He gave them a wide grin as he set the bucket on the table.

Julian raised an eyebrow in query.

“Compliments of the management.” Dillon chuckled.

Dino seemed all sorts of excited as he grabbed a glass and held it out to Dillon, who gracefully poured him a bubbling glass. Dillon nodded to Julian and indicated the other glass. Julian shook his head no.

“Sorry, I don’t drink alcohol. But thank you for the offer. And please, thank the management for me. It was a nice gesture.” He was a little confused as to why the management would be complimenting them with a bottle of champagne.

Dillon nodded as he set the bottle back in the bucket. “Can I get you another water then?”

“No,” Julian replied, “I’m fine, thank you.”

“Okay. If you need anything, you know where I am.”

Julian nodded, giving Dillon another bright smile. He still couldn’t figure out the whole champagne thing. Dillon had already complimented him the strawberry margarita and bottled water. What was next? A car?

Dino and Julian watched Dillon walk back to the bar before they sat down at their table. Julian looked over at Dino’s amused expression. “Well, that was strange. Is the management sweet on you too?” he asked referring to their earlier experience with the bouncer.

"I don't think so, honey, but you never know." Julian couldn't help but laugh when Dino flashed him a devilish little grin and wiggled his eyebrows. "I am pretty damn sexy."

"Yeah, if you were gay, I'd do you." He laughed. Dino was almost as gay as he was, just in a bigger package. If they hadn't been such good friends for so many years, Julian would have made a play for him years ago. He really was pretty sexy. However, they had learned very early on in their friendship that they made much better friends than lovers.

That didn't mean they didn't flirt with each other every chance they got. And, on occasion, they used each other as "pretend lovers" when unwanted attention wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Hot damn!" Dino exclaimed, suddenly looking past Julian's shoulder. "Honey, I do believe Mr. Wonderful just walked through the door."

Julian turned around to look and nearly did a double take. There was no way that the astounding vision before him could be real. The man looked like a Greek god. Michelangelo would have been proud. Julian thought he might start drooling.

The man's deeply bronzed skin and shoulder-length black hair hinted at an eastern European ancestry, and he was so very tall, muscular, with legs that seemed to go on forever. His broad shoulders, solid chest, and powerful arms and thighs barely hinted at the obvious strength and power of this commanding male.

But it was his smile and deep, dark eyes that truly drew Julian. He seemed stern, unbending, until he smiled. Then he could light up a room. When he looked directly at him, Julian knew he was in trouble.

His eyes were so dark they were nearly black, and they seemed to be staring intently at Julian. The man briefly glanced away to shake hands with someone who came up to him, but glanced back several times as he talked. As he made his way across the room, Julian could see him stop to talk to several people, but his gaze always seemed to come back to Julian.

Briefly Julian thought that the beautiful man might be making his way across the room to him, but swiftly dismissed that thought. What would a gorgeous man like that see in him? He looked too straight-laced for someone as wild as Julian.

His dress was much like that of the bouncers outside, only he wore it better. The black suit and tie and white shirt only showed off his bronzed skin. He didn't carry all the jewelry that the bouncers did, only one small pinky ring and a very expensive-looking watch.

He made quite an impressive sight. For a moment, Julian entertained the fantasy of what it would be like to have him in his bed. *Oh, the things we could do together.* Oh, well, at least he was someone he could dream about.

Julian turned back to Dino. "Want to get back on the dance floor?"

"You're not going to wait for Mr. Wonderful?" Dino asked in surprise.

"Are you serious? Look at him. Look at me. Do you see anything happening between us? He's about as straight-laced as they come. I'm not even sure he's gay."

Dino glanced behind Julian to where Mr. Wonderful was staring intently at Julian, his eyes filled with undisguised hunger. He started chuckling. "Oh, he's gay all right, and, honey, I do believe he has you in his sights."

"Seriously?" Julian sat up straighter and started to turn around, but the arrival of Dillon stopped him. Julian looked up at the man in curiosity, suddenly noticing the similarity between Dillon and Mr. Wonderful. They *had* to be related.

"Hello, gentlemen, how is everything? Is there something I can get you? Another water, Julian? Some more champagne?"

Julian shook his head. "No, we're fine, Dillon, thank you."

"Are you sure I can't get you anything, Julian? Maybe some juice or a soda?"

“No, I’m good. I don’t ever drink anything that doesn’t have a safety cap on it when I’m out at a club. I had a friend that had his drink spiked once. It wasn’t pretty. I’m not taking any chances.”

“We run a very clean club here. I can assure you that no one’s going to spike your drink.”

“That’s okay. I’ll stick to my water. You can never be too safe.”

Dillon nodded his head. “Okay. Well, if you need anything, you know where I am.”

Dino started chuckling after Dillon walked away. “Does it seem like we are getting a little extra attention here, Julian? You must have made quite the impression on someone. I just wonder if it was the bartender or Mr. Wonderful.”

Julian started chuckling too. “How do you know it wasn’t the bouncer? You did say he was pretty sweet on you.”

Dino looked quickly towards the front door. “Ooh, do you think?”

Julian would swear that Dino suddenly started preening. He was such a hoot. “You’re such a slut! Come on, let’s go dance again. We might as well get a workout while we’re here.”

Julian and Dino stood up, laughing, and made their way out onto the crowded floor and began dancing. The music was upbeat and popular, the ambiance was great, and there were gorgeous men to drool over everywhere they looked. It was sure to be a great evening.

* * * *

Darius walked through the room trying to keep his gaze off the sexy little man on the dance floor. It wasn’t working well. He just couldn’t seem to stop staring at him. He was just so damn perfect.

He brought out every protective instinct that Darius had, and Darius had a lot of them. He just wanted to pull him into his arms and protect him from everything and everyone, to keep him safe from the world at large.

Of course, just the thought of holding the little man also brought out Darius's possessiveness. He tended to be a bit territorial. He didn't let people into his world very often. But once he did, especially if that someone was a lover, then, as far as Darius was concerned, they belonged to him.

Yeah, he knew it wasn't very politically correct, or whatever they wanted to call it. But it was what it was. He knew he was an aggressive, domineering alpha male. He didn't much care, though. He learned a long time ago that if he wanted something, he had to go after it himself. Nothing was going to be handed to him.

And he was going after the sexy man dressed in neon green. Darius kept one eye on him while he walked to the bar and leaned over to talk quietly with Dillon.

"Well, did he like the champagne?"

"Sorry, bro, he doesn't drink alcohol. And, apparently, when he's out and about, he doesn't drink anything that doesn't have a safety cap on it. A friend had a bad experience with a spiked drink, and Julian doesn't take any chances."

Darius looked over at the object of his desire. "Julian? That's his name?" Julian...somehow it fit him perfectly. "Who's the guy with him?" Darius asked when he noticed that Julian was dancing more with him than anyone else.

Dillon stifled his chuckle as he looked out onto the dance floor. "Oh, that's Dino, his best friend."

"Are you sure they're just friends?" Darius asked as he watched the two men gyrate together, their gestures and dance moves very sexual in nature. Darius was getting hard just watching. Julian and his friend were practically having sex on the dance floor. Darius did not like that one bit.

"Definitely. Dino has a thing for Tim, the door bouncer." Dillon laughed at Darius's sudden deep grin. "Would you like me to extend an invitation to him to join you in the VIP lounge?"

Darius nodded, not taking his eyes off of Julian. He desperately wanted to walk right out onto the dance floor and pull Julian into his arms, but he figured that would be just a little too obvious. Best to play this a little more low-key than that.

Darius grabbed the drink that Dillon handed him and turned away from the bar, going into the VIP lounge. It was still empty this time of night, but Darius knew it would be full within a few hours. The VIP lounge was hardly ever empty. Everyone wanted to be invited into here.

He quickly walked to the reserved owner's booth, his booth, and sat down, wrapping his hands tightly around the small glass of ginger ale Dillon had poured for him. He didn't drink much and certainly not when he was working. Ginger ale was about as wild as he got while at work.

Looking down at his glass, he suddenly remembered what Dillon had said about Julian not drinking anything without a safety cap on it. Grabbing his cell phone, he quickly dialed Dillon and asked for a tray of bottled juices and sodas to be brought to his table after Julian had arrived.

He watched from his vantage point as Julian and Dino made their way back to their table. They were joined moments later by Dillon, who gestured towards the VIP lounge where he was sitting. He was suddenly so nervous his hands shook.

He saw Dino jump to his feet with excitement, but Julian just looked his way quizzically. He seemed hesitant to come to the VIP lounge, but Dino's enthusiasm was such that he had no choice. Dino was practically bouncing. Thank god for Dino.

Julian finally nodded, his shoulders slumping slightly as he stood up and followed Dino and Dillon into the VIP lounge. They walked up the steps and right over to the table that Darius was sitting at.

"Julian, Dino, I would like you to meet the owner of The Club, Darius Alexander. Darius, this is Julian and Dino. This is Julian's first

time here. From the looks I'm getting from Tim, I think Dino has been here a time or two."

Julian nodded towards Darius as Dino leaned over to shake his large hand. When Dino went to scoot in next to Darius, Dillon held him back by his arm, giving him a slight wiggle of his eyebrows as he looked from Julian, to Darius, and then back to Dino.

Dino grinned. He leaned over to Julian. "Hey, I'm going to run to the little boys' room. I'll be back in just a second. Why don't you go ahead and save our places?"

Julian shrugged his shoulders and sat down, scooting into the booth as Dino walked off to use the bathroom, followed quickly by Dillon.

"It's a really nice club, Mr. Alexander."

"Please, call me Darius," he replied. "Are you having a good time?"

"Yes, everyone has been very friendly, and the music is really great." Julian smiled.

"I'm glad you like it. We aim to make everyone comfortable here," Darius replied.

Darius could tell that Julian was nervous. He was too. He almost wished Dino would hurry back from the bathroom so that he could take up the slack in the conversation. Dino seemed to have no problem talking, a lot.

"Dillon said this is your first time here?"

Julian smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I don't go to clubs much. It's usually too expensive. And this place, well, it's way out of my usual price range. Dino dragged me in here. He's bound and determined to find me a boyfriend."

Darius grinned as he watched Julian's face turn slightly red. Yes! Julian was single and gay. Just the way he liked them. If he had been anyone but who he was, he probably would have jumped up and danced a little jig right there and then.

“Sounds like your friend is trying to look out for you,” Darius stated, trying to ease Julian’s nervousness. “Do you have a specific set of parameters in mind, or will just anyone do?”

Before Julian could answer, Dino and Dillon returned. Dino slid in next to Julian, making him move closer to Darius until their thighs were nearly touching. Dillon slid in next to Darius, forcing Darius closer to Julian from the other side.

“Miss me?” Dino laughed.

“Yeah, with every bullet,” Julian mumbled under his breath but Darius heard him anyway. He couldn’t help but chuckle. Darius decided to be a little bold.

“Julian tells me that you are on the search for a boyfriend for him. Maybe I can be of some assistance. What specifically are you looking for in a boyfriend for him? Height, weight, build?” Darius asked.

“Hmmm, tall, dark, and breathtaking...basically...you,” Dino drawled. “We are accepting applications, however.”

Darius tried to keep his face from breaking out in a grin as he saw the hostile look Julian shot at Dino. *Oh, this is too good to be true.* Dino was trying to find Julian a boyfriend He couldn’t have planned this better if he had tried.

“Where would Darius apply, and what are the job requirements?” Dillon asked.

Darius grinned over at Dillon and Dino, catching on to their game. He leaned forward to rest his arms on the table as he looked down at Julian.

“I oversee all applications. Helps weed out the undesirables. However, Julian does have the final say on who we decide on. But I think I’m a pretty good judge of what he is looking for. As for the qualifications for the job, Darius does have the right height, weight, and build necessary for the—position.”

Julian suddenly started choking on the water he was swallowing. Darius reached over and rapidly patted Julian on the back. Once Julian waved his hand that he was okay, Darius stopped patting his

back, but he did not remove his arm from behind Julian. He just rested it on the back of the bench seat they sat on.

“Are there any other requirements we should know about?” Dillon asked.

“Well, obviously, whoever fills the position can’t be a heavy drinker since Julian doesn’t drink. He definitely has to have a sense of humor. It wouldn’t hurt if he was romantic either. A little romance does anyone some good.”

“That’s true. Can you be more specific as to what that might entail?”

“Well—” Dino began, only to be interrupted by Julian’s loud groan.

“Okay, that’s enough. We’ve all had a little fun at my expense,” Julian said as he waved one hand in the air. “It’s time to end this little game. I’m perfectly capable of finding my own boyfriend, thank you very much.”

Darius took a chance and leaned down to whisper in Julian’s ear. “Does that mean you don’t want me to apply for the job? I’m sure I could fill the position—more than adequately.”

Julian looked up at him sharply. Darius watched his eyes widen, groaning when Julian suddenly licked his lips. “Dino, go powder your nose.”

Dino smirked at Dillon before scooting out of the booth. Dino motioned for Dillon to follow him. Both men were smiling as they made their way through the growing crowd to the bar.

“You think this is going to work, Dillon?” Dino asked as he sat down at one of the few vacant bar stools.

“I don’t know. You came up with this plan. You tell me,” Dillon said.

“Look at them. I don’t think they’ve said a thing since we left. They just keep staring at one another. They’re perfect for each other. You told me last week that Darius needed someone he could take care of, and Julian definitely needs someone to take care of him. Johnny

really did a number on him. I wasn't even sure I was going to get him out the door tonight."

Dillon looked over at the couple they had just left. He nodded his head. "Darius does need someone. He's been alone for a long time, too long if you ask me. I'm not even sure the equipment still works. All he does is go to work and go home. He never has any fun."

"Julian can be a lot of fun. He's really a free spirit. But Darius couldn't do better than Julian when it comes to a committed relationship," Dino assured Dillon.

Dino looked back over at Dillon, his face suddenly serious. "You did say Darius would only want a committed relationship, right? I don't want Julian getting involved with someone that just wants to use him. He's been through enough of that. He doesn't need any more."

Dillon shook his head. "No, Darius has only ever been in committed relationships. He's not into one-night stands. If he goes after Julian, it will be for something long term. And from the way my brother is currently playing with Julian's hair, I'd say he's applying for the position as we speak."

Chapter Three

“So, would you consider my application if I applied for the position?” Darius asked as he lightly fingered the hair at the base of Julian’s neck, sending chills down Julian’s neck and spine.

“I’d consider it,” Julian whispered. His anger at Dino for his little game was slowly draining away as he realized that Darius might actually be serious about dating him. Still, it was a little hard to believe that a man as perfect as Darius would want to date him.

“What would it take to convince you that I would be perfect for the position?” Darius whispered back, his voice getting deeper and a little huskier as he spoke.

Julian looked up into Darius’s eyes before shyly stating, “Not much.”

“Then let me take you to dinner.” Darius’s eyes begged him to say yes.

Julian couldn’t believe it, but he found himself nodding slowly, never taking his eyes away from Darius’s. His breath hitched in his throat when Darius reached over and ran his finger across Julian’s lips.

“Okay,” he murmured quietly. In that moment Julian knew that Darius could do anything to him that he wanted and he would welcome him with open arms. This was almost too good to be true.

Darius grabbed a hold of Julian’s hand, rubbing his thumb over one of Julian’s neon green nails. “Do you always paint your nails green?”

“No. I like a lot of different colors. Why? Don’t you like it?” Oh great, was Darius going to complain about his nail color? Johnny had

hated him to paint his nails. But Julian loved it, the brighter the color, the better.

Darius looked up at Julian, flashing him a smile. "I love it. I think it's sexy as hell. I especially like this green you have here around your eyes," he murmured as he ran his finger around the edge of Julian's painted eyes. "I can't wait to see what other colors you have."

Julian felt giddy. He actually liked his nail color and eyeliner? Who would have thought? Darius seemed so straight laced. He was very *high society*. Julian never would have thought that he had a wild side. You wouldn't know it to look at him. Maybe he was a closet eccentric.

"Where would you like to go eat? Roman's? Anritsu's?"

"Anywhere is fine, I guess. Or I could just make us something at my place if you wanted." Julian felt a little out of his depth. He had heard about those places. Who hadn't? They were featured on almost all the lifestyle shows. You had to make reservations months in advance just for a seat in the bar. But he had never been there. He didn't even know if he had something nice enough to wear to one of those places.

"I'd much rather take you out and show you off," Darius replied.

"Oh, well I guess that would be okay too." Julian glanced down at his shirt and slacks. "I, uh, I just don't know if I'm dressed appropriately for those places."

Darius raised Julian's head with his hand. "You look beautiful just the way you are, I promise."

Julian felt his face flush. Oh, this guy knew all the right things to say. Julian just hoped it continued. Johnny had known a lot of the right words, too, and look how that had turned out.

He watched with fascination as Darius flipped open his cell phone and made a phone call. Within moments they had reservations at Anritsu's. Another phone call had Darius's limousine pulling around front. Wow! Apparently it paid to date a rich guy.

Darius scooted from the seat and held out his hand for Julian. As soon as Julian got to his feet, Darius wrapped an arm around him and escorted him to the bar. He leaned down and spoke briefly with Dillon, nodded at Dino, and gently pushed Julian towards the exit.

“Oh, wait, what about Dino?” Julian asked as he looked back and saw Dino laughing at something that Dillon was saying. One of the bouncers had walked up to join them, sitting down next to Dino. Dino didn’t seem to mind in the least that he was being left behind.

“Don’t worry about him. Dillon and Tim are going to take good care of him. Tonight is just for us. Just sit back and let me take care of you, okay?”

Julian gave Dino one last look, then turned back to Darius with a shrug. “Okay.”

He took Julian to his limousine and held the door open for him. Hmm, a romantic? On the drive to the restaurant, the conversation was still a little stale, but not as bad as it had been at the club. They talked about mundane stuff—the weather, current events, Darius’s club, stuff like that, nothing too deeply personal.

Once they arrived at the restaurant, Darius escorted Julian right to the front of the waiting line. They were greeted right away and shown to one of the more popular tables out on the veranda. The view was great. They were sitting right next to a beautiful pond with Koi fish, underneath beautifully colored hanging lanterns. It was a very romantic setting.

When the waitress came over to take their order, Julian was even more surprised when Darius greeted her by name. “Hello, Maria, how’s your mother? Is she feeling better? No lasting effects?”

“She’s great, Mr. Alexander. I’ll tell her you asked. She loved those flowers you sent her. That was so sweet of you.”

“No problem, Maria. She deserves them. She works hard. Tell her I can’t wait to see her back, but to take her time. Her job will be waiting for her, and I don’t care how long it takes. I don’t want to see her at work until she is fully recovered.”

“I will, Mr. Alexander. Now, what can I get you and your guest?”

“Maria, this sweet man is Julian Sinclair. If I’m lucky, you’ll be seeing a lot more of him. Tonight, I’m applying for the position as his boyfriend. So, we need to show him my best side.”

Maria laughed. “In that case, why don’t you let me have Tommy surprise you both?”

Darius looked over at Julian in question. “Would that be okay with you?”

Julian just nodded, shocked at what Darius was telling the waitress.

“Can I get you anything to drink in the meantime? A glass of wine, maybe? Some champagne?”

“I’ll have a ginger ale, Maria. Julian doesn’t drink, so I’m not sure what he wants. Julian?”

“I’ll have a ginger ale also, thank you, Maria.”

“If I might suggest, we recently started serving a wonderful strawberry lemonade. There’s absolutely no alcohol. They are very good.”

Julian shrugged his shoulders. “Okay, I’ll try that.” It sounded good.

“Yes, I’ll have one of those too, thank you, Maria.”

“Okay,” she said as she picked up their menus. “I’ll be right back with two strawberry lemonades.”

After Maria walked away, Julian leaned over towards Darius. “They seem to know you quite well. You must come here a lot.”

Darius smiled. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. I own the place.”

Julian sat back in his chair, his jaw hanging open in awe. “You own Anritsu’s?”

Darius nodded. “Yep, Dillon and I started it up a few years ago. This place, the club, and a couple of other little businesses.”

“From how much you two look alike, I’m assuming you and Dillon are related?”

“Yeah, he’s my baby brother by five minutes.”

“You’re twins? Cool.”

“What about you? Do you have any siblings?”

The smile dropped off of Julian’s face. “Yes. I have two brothers and a sister. I don’t see them much now days. I guess we’re all just so busy, you know. All of them are married with families of their own.”

“And your parents? What about them?”

“Dad is the vice president of a big accounting firm, and Mom is a housewife and community volunteer. I haven’t seen them in a while. They all live back east and are all so busy with their jobs and families. I’m the only one out here on the West Coast.”

“When was the last time you all got together?”

“It’s been a while. But that’s okay. They have difficulty understanding my lifestyle choice. As much as I miss them, I refuse to change myself to meet their expectations. I did that enough growing up.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Julian. I guess my experience is a little different than that. My father died when I was very small, but my mom always accepted my choice. She just wanted me to be happy. Maybe I can take you to meet her soon. She’d adore you.”

“Yeah, let’s wait and see what happens between us first before we go meeting parents. I still haven’t decided if you got the job yet.”

Darius reached over and covered Julian’s hand with his as he flashed a big smile. “You will. I have every confidence that I can fill the position.”

Julian gulped audibly. “Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of,” he murmured, swallowing hard again.

Maria showed up a moment later, bringing their drinks. Their meal followed soon after, prepared by Anritsu’s master chef, Tommy. The meal was outstanding. The company was even better. Julian was in heaven.

Darius was flirtatious, attentive, and gorgeous to look at. By the time he dropped Julian off at his apartment, Julian was positive he was in love, or at least falling fast. Darius kissed the tops of both

Julian's hands before asking if he could call the next day, then taking his leave.

Julian slowly walked into his apartment in a daze. It didn't bother him that Darius hadn't tried to kiss him. It showed that Darius wanted to take his time and get to know Julian better before they moved on to that step. Julian couldn't ever remember anyone doing that before. It was so sweet.

The next day Darius had a large bouquet of mixed flowers delivered to Julian, along with a small note that simply read, "*Thank you for last night, Darius.*" All the girls in the clothing store where he worked went crazy. They wanted to know all about Darius. Julian was in heaven.

When Darius called him that evening, he could barely hold the phone, he was so nervous.

"Hey, baby, how was your day?" Darius asked.

"It just got a lot better. How about you?" Julian sank back into the cushions of his couch, his hand clenched tightly around the phone. The hours since he had last seen Darius seemed like forever.

"Getting better by the moment. You going to come down to the club tonight and let me see you?" Darius asked.

"Just try and stop me." Julian laughed, already planning his outfit. He needed to look as sexy as he could.

"Can I ask you a small favor?" Darius asked hesitantly.

"Of course." Oh man, what was he going to ask?

"Could you wear blue tonight? I've been dreaming about you in blue," he whispered lustfully, making the hairs on the back of Julian's neck stand up. "If you don't want to, that's okay, really. I don't want to ask you to do anything you don't want to. I just thought—" he nearly stammered as he continued.

"Darius! It's okay. I can wear blue. In fact, I have the perfect outfit in mind." Julian wanted to laugh but held himself back so he didn't hurt Darius's feelings. He had thought Darius was going to ask

him to tone it down a bit. But Darius had surprised him by merely asking him to wear a different color.

“You really don’t mind all the color I wear?” he asked.

“Hell no. It’s hot! I especially love your eyes. I just can’t wait to see what you wear tonight.” Darius chuckled.

“If it ever bothers you, you’ll tell me, right?”

“Baby, I like you just the way you are. I don’t want you to change anything. Besides, I would never ask you to be someone you’re not. You’re flamboyant, eccentric, and wild. That’s just who you are. What do you think attracted me in the first place?”

“Really?” Julian knew he sounded mushy, but he couldn’t help it. No one, except maybe Dino, had accepted him just the way he was, wildness and all.

“Yeah. Now, unfortunately, I have to go if I want to get any work done before you get here tonight. I’ll see you soon, yes?”

“Well, I’m not too sure how soon I can get there. You don’t think looking this sexy comes easy, do you?” Julian joked. “It takes hours of primping. You don’t get perfection at the drop of a hat.”

Darius chuckled. “Baby, I have no doubt that you would be sexy no matter what you did. You can’t help it. I’m pretty sure you were born that way.”

Julian giggled. Darius was going to be a big boost to his ego. He just couldn’t believe that a man as hot as Darius was thought he was sexy. Julian was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“All right, baby, I have to go. I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

“I’ll be there with bells on,” Julian replied.

“Really? You have bells?” Darius groaned. “That is so hot!”

“Darius!” Even over the phone Darius could make him blush. Bells! He was turned on by bells?

“Okay, okay, I’m going. Bye, babe.” Darius hung up the phone, leaving Julian laughing on the other end and wondering where in the hell he could get some damn bells.

* * * *

Julian was once again nervous as he stood in line outside The Club. It had taken him less time than normal to get ready because he had wanted to get to there as fast as he could, but he had done as Darius had asked. Tonight his primary color was electric blue.

He was wearing tight white slacks, white loafers, and an electric blue nearly transparent silk shirt. He had taken special care with the blue eyeliner and painting of his nails, even adding a couple of diamond decals to his fingernails.

The special surprise was the two small ankle bracelets he had quickly found at a local store. Each bracelet had several small bells on them that jingled when he walked. He only hoped Darius liked them.

It took less than twenty minutes to reach the front of the line. He pulled his entrance fee out and went to hand it to the doorman, who looked at him carefully. Julian felt like he was on display.

“Sorry, dude, maybe next time.”

“But—I have to get in,” Julian replied.

“Like I said, maybe next time. Now, if you don’t mind—” He gestured for Julian to move aside. Julian just stared at him in shock.

“No, you don’t understand—”

“No, you don’t understand. I decide who gets in, and tonight, you do not. Now, you can either leave or I can call the police.” The man stood to his feet, menacingly. Julian took a step back. He was huge.

Julian took a couple of more steps back as he was pushed out of the way by the next people in line. He had tears in his eyes as he walked back down the steps. Now what was he supposed to do? Darius was expecting him. How was he supposed to get in? He couldn’t even call Darius. He didn’t have his cell phone number.

His shoulders were slumped as he walked across the street to sit on the bus stop bench. He didn’t know what to do. Damn! He should have gotten Darius’s cell phone number. How could he have been so stupid?

Julian sat across the street from the club, the cold air starting to seep into his bones as he watched person after person being admitted into the club. Why wouldn't the doorman let him in? Was it his outfit? Was he dressed too outrageously?

He nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone rang. Quickly pulling it out of his pocket, he flipped it open.

"Julian? Baby, where are you? I expected you quite some time ago."

"Darius? Oh, I'm so happy you called. I'm outside, across the street from the club. I've been sitting here forever. The doorman won't let me in, and I didn't have your cell number to call you and—" Julian nearly cried into the phone when he heard Darius's voice on the other end.

"What? What do you mean the doorman wouldn't let you in? How long have you been sitting there?" Darius yelled into the phone.

"I don't know, a while. It's getting cold, Darius. Can I...can I come in now?" he asked hesitantly.

"I'll be right there, baby. Meet me at the door."

Julian put his phone away and walked back across the street to the door. The doorman met him, blocking his way.

"Didn't I tell you to go away? Do I really have to call the police and have you removed?" He stood between Julian and the door, his massive arms crossed over his chest as he stared down at Julian, his face filled with displeasure.

"No, Darius—"

"I would advise you to leave now, sir. We don't want your kind around here."

My kind? What the hell does that mean?

Julian swallowed deeply and picked up his courage, taking a step towards the door. "Mr. Alexander—"

"Listen, you little freak, either you leave now or I'm calling the cops. I will not tell you again. Now what's it going to be?"

Julian went to brush past the large man when he was grabbed by his arms and pushed back with such force that he fell, scraping one knee on the hard steps. Julian sat down heavily and cradled his injured knee in his hands, grimacing when he saw blood seeping through his new white slacks.

Hell, so much for looking hot tonight, he thought as he viewed his ripped pants.

“Julian?”

Julian looked up to see Darius running down the steps, Dillon and Tim right behind him. Darius quickly sat down on the steps then picked Julian up and cradled him in his lap. .

“What happened?” Darius asked.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Alexander,” the doorman began. “I asked him to leave, but he wouldn’t. I even told him that I was going to call the police if he didn’t leave. But he was insistent that he be allowed inside. Then he tried to force his way inside.”

“You imbecile,” Darius growled as he glared up at the shocked doorman.

“Sir, I was just doing my job. You hired me to weed out the undesirables from coming into the club. You don’t want his kind in here—”

“His kind? His kind?” Darius yelled as he stood up, Julian still cradled in his arms. “What’s wrong with *his kind*?”

“Well, just look at him, sir—” The doorman hedged.

“One, I love the way he looks. Two, he belongs to me. He’s—”

“Darius?” Julian whispered. “Can we go inside now? I’m really cold.” Julian felt ridiculous. They were making a scene. Everyone was staring at them. He buried his face in Darius’s warm neck.

Darius leaned his head down and kissed Julian on the head. “Of course, baby. We’ll get you warmed up in no time.” He looked over at Dillon as he carried Julian inside. “Deal with this!”

* * * *

Dillon watched the worried look on his brother's face as he carried Julian inside and upstairs to his office. He could see the rage underneath the calm mask on his brother's face. The doorman would be lucky to walk away from this one if he didn't do something fast. His brother was pissed.

He glanced over at the confused doorman. He really didn't understand. "Tim, will you take over the door? Rick and I need to have a little discussion about his further employment here."

Tim nodded and took his place at the door.

"Rick, if you would follow me, please?" Dillon called out behind him.

Dillon walked back to his office behind the bar and closed the door after Rick, indicating for him to have a seat. He walked over and sat down, looking over at the confused man.

"Rick, I realize that you have just started with us, but do you have any idea of how badly you have screwed up?"

"No, sir. I was hired to be the doorman, the bouncer. Aren't we supposed to keep certain people out of the club?"

"What exactly do you see wrong with the young man you denied access?"

"Well, you did see the way he was dressed, didn't you? I mean, he even had nail polish on. I've seen his type before. He's a troublemaker. They sleep with anything that walks, they do drugs, they bring in a bad sort. They just generally cause trouble."

"Do you have something against gay men, Rick? You do realize that this place is basically a gay bar, right?"

"Sure. Gay men don't bother me. My little brother is gay. But it's those druggie types that I don't like. Men like him are just trouble. I've worked gay clubs before, and you wouldn't believe how many times that I've seen men like him start fights between others and they just sit back and watch it all with a smile on their face."

“Okay, I guess I can see where you’re coming from, to a point. Some people can be like that. Julian is not.”

“Julian?”

Dillon nodded. “Yes, the guy that you booted out? His name is Julian. He happens to be your boss’s boyfriend. And I know for a fact that he doesn’t drink, do drugs, and the only guy he’s interested in is my brother.”

There was some satisfaction for Dillon in watching the dawning horror fill Rick’s face as he realized what he had done.

“Oh my god, do I still have a job?” Rick asked.

Dillon shrugged his shoulders. “That, I do not know. I guess it depends on how angry Darius is and whether Julian can talk him out of it.”

“He’d really try to get Mr. Alexander to let me keep my job even after the way I treated him? Why?”

“Julian is not one to hold a grudge. He understands that a lot of people don’t get him. He is a little...out there. But he never holds that against people. He’d rather just move on and enjoy life. Darius, on the other hand, is very protective of his man.”

Dillon chuckled. “Luckily for you, Julian has Darius wrapped around his little finger. If anyone can talk Darius out of a bad mood, it’s Julian. You just better hope he forgives you.”

* * * *

Darius carefully sat Julian on his desk and held his leg as he inspected the injury to his knee. There didn’t seem to be much more than a few scrapes and scratches. Still, it needed to be cleaned.

He picked Julian up by his arms and stood him up. “Come on, baby, that needs to be cleaned. Drop your pants.”

Julian’s face was red as it could be as he bowed his head in embarrassment.

Darius grabbed his first aid kit and turned back to Julian, expecting him to be ready. When Julian just stood there, his face flushed, Darius looked at him curiously. “Honey? Is something wrong?”

Julian mumbled something under his breath.

“What? I didn’t catch that, Julian.”

Julian blew out a deep breath. “I’m not wearing anything beneath my pants,” he screeched between his clenched teeth.

Darius froze in his spot. Julian was naked under his pants? Just the thought of it had Darius rock hard. He gulped. “You’re not—you don’t—” Hell, he couldn’t even finish saying it. Oh, he was in such trouble.

“Uh, let me get you something to cover up with.” Darius looked around the room desperately. He had to find something to cover all of Julian’s bits and pieces. It just wouldn’t do to have the gorgeous little man naked in front of him. It was going to be hard enough as it was just keeping his mind on his work knowing that Julian was going commando, let alone being alone with him like this.

Darius quickly found a towel and handed it to Julian before turning his back so that he could get undressed.

“Okay,” Julian murmured quietly.

Darius turned around to find Julian sitting on his desk, a towel covering his lap and his pants down around his ankles. He sat down in the chair and grabbed Julian’s leg and began cleaning his injury.

His eyes kept straying up to the growing bulge covered by the blue towel. He had to take several deep, controlling breaths as he watched the bulge grow before his eyes until there was an impressive tent in Julian’s lap.

Glancing up at Julian, he could see the blush covering his cheeks as Julian tried to hide his face by bowing his head. He quickly finished cleaning and bandaging Julian’s knee before disposing of the used items in the trashcan and closing the first aid kit.

Coming back to stand over Julian, looking down at his bent head, he smiled. His little man was embarrassed. It was adorable. Before Julian could stop him, he reached under the towel and grabbed Julian's hard cock in his hand and began to stroke him.

Julian let out a loud groan as he grabbed Darius's wrist to stop his movements.

"Shhh, baby, it's okay."

"I'm so embarrassed," Julian whispered, biting his lip as Darius began stroking his hot flesh again.

"No need to be embarrassed. I would be put out if I didn't get you turned on. Now, just sit back and enjoy yourself. Let me do this for you, please?" Darius pleaded.

Julian's answer was to remove his hand from Darius's wrist and lean back on his elbows. Darius watched the pleasure cross Julian's face as he began stroking him in earnest. Oh, Julian was glorious. But Darius wanted more. He wanted to see him.

Darius grabbed the towel with his other hand and pulled it off of Julian's lap. His breath came in a gasp as he looked down and saw his hand wrapped around Julian. He was perfect! Thick, and just long enough for Darius to hold him in one large hand. He even waxed.

"Oh, god, baby, you're so beautiful," Darius whispered as he fondled Julian's cock. He reached down with his free hand and began gently massaging Julian's silky sac. The little moans coming from Julian just added to the experience.

Darius suddenly sat down in his chair and scooted himself forward until Julian's groin was just below his face. He needed to taste him. Leaning down he flicked his tongue over the mushroom-shaped head, paying careful attention to the small slit in the top.

Julian went wild, wrapping his legs around Darius's chest. His moans became louder until he was filling the room with his pleasure. Darius had never experienced anything so wonderful in his life.

Lifting his head from Julian, he glanced up at him. Julian was resting back on his elbows, his head dropped back on the desk. He looked so sexy.

“Come for me, baby,” he demanded as he quickly worked Julian into a frenzy, his hand expertly manipulating Julian’s eager flesh. Julian started groaning, his hips beginning to hump up and down to meet Darius’s furious movements.

“Darius, oh god, don’t stop,” Julian cried out as his body suddenly went stiff. Darius quickly grabbed the discarded towel and held it to catch the white fluid that spurted from Julian’s cock as he came.

He continued to stroke him until Julian bucked. Darius quickly cleaned Julian up, then his own hand, before dropping the towel on the floor. Leaning over Julian’s pliant, panting body, he captured his lips, grinding his aching hard-on against him.

Opening his eyes, he looked down into Julian’s dazed ones. “That was beautiful, baby—watching you, feeling you. I don’t know if there is anything better on Earth.”

When Julian reached for his zipper, Darius grabbed his hand, stopping him. “No, baby, it’s okay.”

Julian looked up at Darius in confusion. “But you didn’t—”

“I got enough pleasure just from watching you. I don’t need to.” He stood Julian on his feet and pulled his pants up. “Come on, time to get dressed. We have some partying to do.”

Julian watched Darius in confusion. He could see the hard bulge tenting his pants and knew that Darius was still aroused. What he couldn’t figure out was why he wouldn’t let Julian take care of it.

As he pulled up his pants more and buttoned them up, he thought about it. Maybe it was because neither of them had been tested. That would explain why Darius hadn’t given him a full blow job and had just stroked him to climax.

It made good sense. They really didn’t know that much about each other. Not that he believed Darius would lie to him, but still, it was

always better to be safe than sorry. Julian smiled as he made the decision to get himself tested as soon as he could so that Darius would know he had nothing to worry about. And then they could both enjoy each other fully.

Chapter Four

The next few of weeks seemed to fly by. Julian talked to Darius on the phone at least once a day, usually more. Darius took him out several times. They went out to dinner, the theater, even to a couple of parties hosted by Darius's friends.

Darius was always as attentive as he had been on their first date. He never left Julian's side, nearly always having an arm wrapped around Julian's waist. He seemed to have no issue with introducing Julian as his boyfriend, no matter how many odd looks they received.

For Julian, the time spent with Darius was wonderful. He was beautiful and sexy, and thought that Julian was perfect just the way he was. The more outrageous that Julian became, the more Darius seemed to like it.

But little by little, Julian began to notice things. Darius never came into his apartment. He just dropped him off every night with a small kiss, sometimes on the lips, but usually on the cheek or forehead. Darius also never made any kind of sexual advances towards Julian other than the occasional hand job or nearly chaste kiss.

Julian thought Darius was attracted to him, but he seemed to want to wait, even after he had shown him his clean test results. In the beginning, when they had first started dating, it had been nice. But now Julian was ready to take their relationship to the next level, or at least to some heavy making out. Maybe Darius was just waiting for him to make the first move. It would be very like Darius to not want to push.

With that thought in mind, Julian dressed extra carefully for their date that night. Julian was going to meet up with Darius at the club, and then they were supposed to go out to dinner after Darius got off of work. Then he was going to seduce his new boyfriend.

His well-worn jeans were so tight around his ass that he could barely breathe. They also had several strategically placed rips in the legs. Of course, he was wearing absolutely no underwear. On top, he simply had a white T-shirt that showed off his carefully sculpted six-pack abdomen and was short enough to show off his belly button piercing if he moved just right.

He spiked his hair a bit with gel, drew on blue eyeliner, and painted his fingernails neon blue. He dabbed on a little cologne, then checked himself in the mirror one last time. Julian knew he looked good. With a quick smile to himself, he headed for the front door. *Watch out, Darius Alexander. Tonight you're mine!*

* * * *

Darius stared down at the club floor below. It was still early in the evening, but the place was already filling up. It would be a busy night tonight. Busy enough that he and Julian might have to make it a late dinner.

The thought of Julian brought a quick smile to his face. The last few weeks with him had been fantastic, everything he could have hoped for. After just one night, Darius had known that Julian was the one he had been looking for, his other half.

Julian was everything he could hope for in a mate. He was smart, funny, and easy to talk to. It was just a plus that he was also the most gorgeous thing Darius had ever seen in his life, a huge plus. Just looking at him had Darius so hard he could pound nails.

The only dark part of the whole situation was the curious, and sometimes sad, looks he was starting to get from Julian. He knew

Julian didn't understand why he didn't take their relationship to the next level. Maybe he didn't fully understand it either.

He just didn't want Julian to get hurt. And Darius knew from past history that it was a real possibility. Julian was so much smaller than him, more fragile. Darius didn't want to do anything that might harm Julian in any way. Letting loose his untamed lust on Julian was not an option.

He wasn't sure how he was going to work that out with Julian. He seemed to want that closeness more and more over the last few days, hinting at a desire to bring in more physical aspects into their relationship.

Darius just hoped he would be able to dissuade Julian without hurting his feelings or causing irreversible damage to their budding relationship. Julian meant everything to Darius, and he would do anything to make him happy.

A soft knock at the door brought Darius out of his deep thoughts. He turned towards the door and called for the knocker to come in. The door opened, and Julian stepped in, a big, welcoming grin on his face.

Darius felt the air leave his lungs when he saw him. *Oh, sweet hell!* Julian was dressed sexier than Darius had ever seen him. How was he supposed to keep his hands to himself when Julian looked like the poster boy for sex?

"Hey, babe, how's work going?" Julian swaggered into the room, having clearly seen the stunned look on Darius's face. "Looks to be a busy night."

Darius nodded, barely registering what Julian was saying to him. What was left of his mind was totally focused on the man sashaying towards him. The rest of his mind was pooling in his suddenly hardening groin.

"Julian?" he choked out as Julian walked right up to him and leaned up on his tiptoes to plant a kiss on his throat right above his shirt. Even with only his lips touching him, Darius could feel every line of Julian's body.

“You ready for tonight?” Julian asked as he leaned into Darius and took a deep breath. “Mmm, you smell good.”

Darius could feel Julian jump in surprise when he picked him up by the arms and moved him out of the way. Darius ignored his astonished look and pushed past him to go sit down at his desk.

“Darius? Is everything okay?” Julian asked.

“Yes, of course, I just have a lot to do before we can go tonight, and I want to get it done.”

“Oh.”

Darius tried to concentrate on the papers in front of him but his entire attention was on the man that walked up behind him. Julian’s hands settled on his shoulders, beginning to massage the tight muscles.

He continued to work on the accounting papers in front of him for several moments before suddenly reaching up and grabbing Julian’s hands in his.

“Julian, I can’t concentrate when you do that.”

Julian leaned down close to his ear. “Maybe that’s the idea. You work too hard sometimes, Darius. You need to loosen up.” He stuck out his tongue and ran it along the edge of Darius’s ear.

Darius abruptly tossed his pen down and grabbed both of Julian’s hands and held them together. He pushed him towards the couch on the other side of the room.

“Stop, Julian! Go sit down or something. I’ll have this done in a few minutes, and then we can go, but I have to do this.”

Julian took a couple of steps back, looking at Darius in confusion and just a little bit of hurt. “Okay, Darius.”

Darius watched Julian walked over and sit down on the couch. He sat down at his desk and stared at the papers on his desk without really seeing them.

He knew he shouldn’t have yelled at Julian, that Julian wouldn’t understand. Besides, he had no right to take his bad mood out on him. Darius just didn’t know how to tell him that.

After a few minutes, Darius saw Julian pull his knees up to his chest and wrap his arms around them, resting his head on his knees. Julian looked so dejected Darius felt like a monster.

When Julian stood up and walked over to stand in front of his desk, Darius pretended that he didn't see him. After a few minutes of waiting, Julian just turned and walked out of the office, closing the door softly behind him before heading downstairs to the main dance floor.

Darius's head dropped to his hands the second the door closed behind Julian. Pretending to ignore Julian had been one of the hardest things he had ever done. He knew he had hurt Julian's feelings. He hadn't meant to, but the sight of Julian dressed so...so sexy, had him tied up in knots. Putting distance between them was the best thing he could have done for both of them.

Darius stood and walked over to the large window that oversaw the bar below. He immediately spotted Julian standing on the edge of the dance floor watching the dancers. He watched as Julian looked up towards the window Darius stood in front of. He knew Julian couldn't see him through the one-way glass but took a step back anyway.

Even from where he stood, he could still see the sadness in Julian's posture as he wrapped his arms around himself again and walked away from the dance floor to the bar. Dillon was there immediately talking to him.

Darius watched for a few more moments before running a hand sharply through his black hair. This was going to be harder than he thought. He didn't think Julian was going to understand his reserved behavior.

He walked back to his desk and quickly stacked the papers he had been working on. They could wait until tomorrow. Julian could not. The least he could do was take him out to dinner and show him that he wasn't upset with him.

Darius smoothed down his hair and pulled on his suit jacket before going out the door to the stairs. Time to go get Julian into a

better mood. He had just reached the edge of the bar when he heard the conversation between Julian and his brother begin to heat up.

“I am not a child. I do not need Darius’s permission to have a drink, Dillon.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out some money and tossed it onto the bar. “There, I’m a paying customer. Now will you serve me?”

“Julian, you don’t want to do this. You know what alcohol does to you,” Dillon tried to reason.

“Dillon—” Julian began.

Darius decided now was the best time to step in. He walked to Julian and wrapped an arm around his waist, giving him a quick kiss on the head. He acknowledged Dillon’s quick look of thanks with a slight nod of his head.

“Hey, baby, I’m all done. Ready to go?”

Julian turned to look at Darius in astonishment. “Now you want to go?”

“Well, sure, baby, I just had to get my paperwork done. I told you that. Now we can go have some fun.”

Darius could tell that Julian was slow to buy his explanation. Maybe he just needed to encourage him a little bit. Grabbing Julian up in his arms, he started swinging him towards the dance floor.

“We could always just stay here and dance.” Darius swung Julian around and around until he held onto Darius’s neck, dizzy and laughing.

When the music stopped and a slow song came on, he started to lower Julian to his feet, but Julian refused to let go of Darius’s neck, holding on tighter and tucking his head into the soft spot between Darius’s neck and shoulder.

Darius slowly rocked Julian back and forth through the song, resting his head on top of Julian’s. It felt good to have Julian in his arms, even if they were getting some strange looks. It wasn’t often that someone danced carrying someone else in their arms.

He reluctantly lowered Julian to his feet when the song ended, leaning down to place a small kiss on Julian's nose. "You ready to go to dinner, baby?"

"Yeah, where are we going tonight?"

Darius gave Julian a big grin. "Since it's our one-month anniversary, I thought we'd go to Anritsu's. We had our first date there, and it's a special occasion. What do you think?"

Julian's smile was huge as he eagerly nodded. "I didn't think you'd remember."

"How could I possibly forget? It was the day you brought joy into my life."

* * * *

As Darius helped Julian into the limousine, Julian thought over Darius's words. He really could be sweet when he wanted to be. And not many guys remembered annual anniversaries, let alone one-month ones. Sometimes, Darius was just too good to be true.

Tommy outdid himself. The meal was wonderful, the atmosphere great, but the company was the best part. Darius was his usual attentive self and then some. When he pulled out a small box and handed it to Julian, his grin was from ear to ear.

"Here, baby, this is for you, to celebrate one month together."

"Darius, you've already given me so many gifts. You don't have to keep doing this," Julian said as he took the small box. It was true. Darius had practically showered him with presents, everything from having flowers delivered to silk shirts. He was constantly giving things to Julian.

"I like giving you things. But this one, this one is special. Go ahead, open it." Darius seemed almost as eager as Julian was.

Julian opened the small box and nearly dropped it. "Oh my god, is this real?" he asked after several moments of staring at the most

beautiful ring he had ever seen. The diamonds on the ring were in the shape of a *D* and a *J* intertwined. It was their initials.

“Of course it’s real, only the best for my baby. Put it on. See if it fits.”

Julian’s hands were shaking as he pulled the ring from its velvet box. The damn thing must have cost a fortune. Darius suddenly grabbed the ring from Julian’s trembling fingers and slid it on his ring finger.

“Oh good, it does fit. I was really worried that I hadn’t gotten your size right. Your fingers are so much smaller than mine.”

Darius looked over at Julian’s still-shocked face. “Do you like it?”

Julian looked up at him with tears in his eyes.

“Julian, I—”

“Darius, no one has ever gotten me something like this. Thank you.” Julian quickly squeezed the hand that was holding his. “I’ll think of you every time I look at it.”

“Then you do like it?” Worry was clear in his voice.

“Oh yes, it’s beautiful.”

Darius grinned. “Good. I was afraid it might be a little too...girlish. I mean, you don’t usually give another man a ring. A watch maybe, or even a necklace, but not a ring. It’s just so—”

“Darius, you’re rambling. I love it, so stop worrying. It’s perfect. I won’t ever take it off.” He held up one neon-blue-painted fingernail and wiggled it at Darius. “Besides, I tend to like *girly* stuff, remember?”

Darius grabbed Julian’s wiggling finger and kissed the tip. “I remember.” He was staring deep into Julian’s eyes when Maria suddenly set a bottle of champagne and two glasses down on the table between them.

“Happy anniversary, you two.”

“Oh, Maria, Julian doesn’t drink, remember?”

Julian looked up and saw Maria’s face fall. She had been trying to do something sweet, and now she thought she had messed it up.

“It’s okay, one glass won’t hurt me. As long as I don’t drive or operate heavy machinery, I should be fine.”

“Are you sure, Mr. Sinclair? I can bring you something else. Maybe some strawberry lemonade?”

Julian waved Maria closer until she was leaning down next to him. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. I have this really big, really hot boyfriend. He won’t let anything happen to me, so one glass of champagne won’t be a problem. And it’s not that I don’t drink. I just don’t drink often. Makes me loopier than a roller coaster.”

Maria was all smiles as she stood back up. “Okay, Mr. Sinclair, but if you change your mind, you just call me, okay?”

After Maria had walked away, Darius asked one more time if he was sure. At Julian’s nod he poured two glasses of champagne, one for each of them. He handed one glass to Julian and took the other in his hand.

“To us, may we have many more anniversaries together.” Julian clanked his glass against Darius’s and took a deep swallow. He giggled when the bubbles tickled his nose before making his own toast.

“To you, Mr. Wonderful, may we always be as happy as we are tonight.”

Both Julian and Darius took another swallow. Darius looked at Julian curiously. “Mr. Wonderful?”

Julian just laughed as he winked at Darius. “It’s a long story. On our one-year anniversary, ask me about it again, and I’ll tell you.”

“Our one-year anniversary, huh? I guess I can wait until then.”

* * * *

Darius walked Julian to his front door, stopping just in front of it. He pulled him into his arms. Julian giggled. He was so tipsy.

“I had a really good time tonight, Julian.”

“It doesn’t have to end, Darius,” Julian whispered against his lips as he tried to take the kiss deeper. “It could be just as good, maybe even better, if you came inside.”

For a brief moment, Darius seemed to accept the intimate kiss, his tongue exploring the recesses of Julian’s mouth before reluctantly stepping back.

“No, baby, that wouldn’t be a good idea. You’ve had a bit to drink, Julian. I think it would be best if I just go. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

Julian felt tears fill his eyes as he looked up at Darius with a determined gaze. “Don’t bother. You can’t blame this on my drinking. I’m tired of being your little arm trophy.”

Julian turned and walked into his apartment leaving a stunned Darius slowly trailing after him. “What are you talking about? I’ve never treated you like a trophy.”

“You treat me like a trophy every time we go out. You take me out to play with and put me back on the shelf when you’re done playing. I’m tired of not being touched, held, loved. If you want a showpiece to walk around on your arm, go find a marionette.”

“Julian, I can’t. I just—”

Julian pushed his trembling hand roughly through his hair, trying to reign in his out-of-control emotions. He knew he wouldn’t be speaking this freely if he hadn’t had a glass of champagne at dinner tonight. He was just so fed up with the hot-and-cold treatment he kept getting from Darius.

“Look, Darius, it’s clear that we want different things. I want a relationship with someone I care about. You want someone that you don’t have to commit to.”

“Are you—are you saying you don’t care about me?”

“No, I’m not saying that. In fact, I care a great deal for you.” *God, he could be exasperating sometimes.*

“Then what is the problem?”

“Stay the night with me. Make love to me.” *Please, please, please!*

“I can’t, Julian.”

“It’s our anniversary. This night could be really special. Why won’t you stay? Is it me? Is it the way I dress? The way I act? What? Why won’t you stay the night with me? It’s like, all you can do to kiss me. You hardly ever touch me. You never let things between us go farther than the occasional hand job. You won’t even let me touch you intimately. Do I disgust you that much?”

“No, baby, no. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Then why won’t you make love to me?”

“I can’t, Julian.”

A sudden horrible thought occurred to Julian. “Are you incapable of making love? Is there some medical reason we can’t be together?” Oh god, that would explain so much. It would be hard to take, but he would understand.

“No, the, uh, equipment works fine. I just—” Darius began.

“Then stay the night with me, Darius, please,” Julian pleaded. He grabbed the front of Darius’s shirt and held it tightly. “Please, Darius.”

“I can’t, Julian,” Darius replied as he peeled Julian’s fingers off his shirt. “Look, I need to go. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, fine, Darius, whatever you want.”

Julian held his tears back until he heard the front door softly close behind Darius as he left. He walked into his bedroom and slowly sank down onto the bed and wrapped his arms around himself, his sobs shaking his body until he finally succumbed to exhaustion and fell asleep.

* * * *

Julian woke the next morning to his doorbell ringing. Wiping the sleep from his puffy eyes, he went to open the front door. It was a woman delivering a big, beautiful bouquet of red roses. Julian thanked the lady and closed the door. He took the roses to the kitchen and set them down on the counter.

Grabbing the small note attached, he opened it up and read it. *"I'm sorry, baby. Forgive me?"* The flowers were from Darius. Julian set the note down on the counter and ran his fingers over one of the fragile rosebuds. They were so delicate.

Tears of sadness and regret filled his eyes as he picked up the bouquet of roses and dropped them into the garbage can. He held the handwritten note for just a moment, looking at it through his tears, before dropping it in the garbage can also.

He cared deeply for Darius and wanted to be with him. He didn't understand why Darius wouldn't be intimate with him. He had felt the hardness in Darius's pants time and time again. He knew Darius desired him. He just couldn't figure out why Darius wouldn't act on that desire.

Was it so bad to want to be with him? To want to hold him and kiss him, express his love for him in a physical way? Darius refused to do more than the occasional hand job. And he absolutely would not let Julian touch him.

Julian just couldn't take it anymore. He felt ugly and unwanted. There had to be some reason, something he was doing wrong or maybe not doing, that made him unlovable. Julian racked his brain trying to figure it out, but nothing came to mind.

Darius seemed to like his outrageous personality. He had never been afraid to introduce Julian to any of his friends or acquaintances. He had no problem being out in public with him. He just didn't want to spend any time with him in private.

The moment they were alone, Darius put up this invisible wall between them. Julian had even noticed him moving away from him in

the limousine. Sure, he still held his hand, but that was about it. If Julian got too close, Darius just moved away.

He never even came into the Julian's apartment. Usually he just dropped him off at the front door, gave him a peck on the cheek, and left, saying he would call the next day. He never came inside for drinks, to watch a movie, or even just to cuddle on the couch. They had never even had dinner together unless it was in a restaurant surrounded by people.

It was like Darius couldn't stand to be alone with him. He just wanted to be with him when they were in public. That is what made Julian think Darius saw him as an arm trophy. What else could it be? Darius himself admitted that there was nothing wrong with his equipment.

Maybe Darius just didn't want him that way. Or maybe he didn't want to want him. Just because Julian had felt the hardness in his pants didn't mean that Darius was getting hard because of him. But if that were true, why would Darius even be going out with him?

Just thinking about all of this was depressing. He didn't want to think about any of it. He just wanted to forget for a little while. Grabbing the phone, he dialed Dino's phone number.

"You have Dino, talk if you want."

"Hey, Dino, I've got two bottles of wine over here with our names on them. Bring the ice cream and your pajamas."

"Oh, honey, *pajama party*? Things not working out with your big hunk?"

"Yeah, something like that. I'll call Joseph and Andrew. How soon can you get here?"

"For you, honey, I'll be there tout suite."

"Thanks, Dino."

Twenty minutes later Dino, Joseph, and Andrew showed up, comfy clothes and comfort food in hand, for their impromptu pajama party. Once they were all settled in the living room, after having donned their pajama bottoms, they opened the ice cream and dug in.

The guys waited several moments for Julian to begin speaking. They could see that he had been crying. They also knew that he would talk when he was ready to. That's what a pajama party was. When one of them was hurting, the rest would come over with comfort food, and they would all sit around in their pajamas while listening and getting sloshed. They seemed to have a lot of them.

"He doesn't want me," Julian began. "He likes to take me out places and show me off. Don't get me wrong, he's very attentive. He never leaves my side when we go out. And he takes me to all the best places. He even gives me the most wonderful gifts. But he doesn't want me."

"How do you mean, sweetie?"

"He won't make love to me or let me touch him. Hell, he won't even give me more than a hand job and chaste kiss on the lips. He's never even been inside my apartment, nor have I ever been inside his. Hell, I don't even know where he lives. He takes me out all the time, wines and dines me, then drops me off at my doorstep with a little kiss on the lips."

"Maybe he's just waiting for the right moment," said Dino.

"Maybe he's shy?" asked Joseph.

"Maybe he wants to wait until you're more committed," Andrew added.

"And maybe he just doesn't want me," Julian said sadly. "Last night was our anniversary. When he brought me home, I begged him to stay the night. He said he couldn't. There was no discussion, no arguing. He just said he couldn't. I even asked him if maybe there was some medical reason we couldn't be together. He said the *equipment* worked just fine. But he still wouldn't stay. He just said he couldn't and left."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry."

"That's what he said. He sent me a bunch of roses this morning and a note saying he was sorry."

"Well, see, he does want to be with you."

“No, he doesn’t. He made that real clear last night. As long as I smile and look pretty, he wants me to be there, but if we get into anything personal, he runs for the hills. I doubt he even knows anything about me. If he cared enough, he would know that I hate red roses. He just doesn’t care that much. I’m just an arm trophy to him.”

“Ouch!” Dino replied.

“Everyone knows I hate roses. My mother always had bouquets of roses all over the house. I can’t stand the smell of them to this day. I’m more of a wildflower type of guy. Darius doesn’t even seem to care enough to find that out.”

“What are you going to do, Jules?” Dino asked quietly.

“What can I do?” Julian asked, shrugging his shoulders. “Either I accept being his arm trophy and never have anything personal with him or I—I never have anything with him.”

“There has to be something you can do. Have you tried talking to him? Maybe there’s some reason that he can’t be with you?”

“Oh my god, he’s not straight, is he?” Joseph asked suddenly.

Julian looked at him, stunned by the thought that Darius could be straight. “No, there’s no way. Why would he go out with me and introduce me to all of his friends and things if he were straight? No, it has to be something else, doesn’t it?”

“Well, you said he never does anything really physical with you. He barely even kisses you.”

“I hate to say this, Julian, but Joseph has a point,” Andrew added. “What if he’s just playing at being gay? He does own one of the most popular gay clubs in the state. Maybe it’s a PR gig or something.”

“I really don’t think Darius is straight. I mean, come on,” Dino tried to reason.

“You don’t think he’d do that, do you? Date a gay man just so that he looks better in his clubs?” Julian asked, ignoring Dino’s statement.

“It would explain why he only wants to be seen with you in public and why he won’t do more physical with you, why he won’t let you touch him.”

“But why me? There are a lot of other gay men out there that would love to be eye candy for a man like Darius. Why choose me?”

“Honey, I hate to say this, but you are the perfect example of a flamboyant gay man. You aren’t just gay, you’re really gay. Anyone who looks at you can instantly tell that you are gay. You walk gay, you talk gay, you dress gay, hell, honey, you breathe gay. You are gay!”

“So, it was my fault? He chose me because of the way that I am?” Julian started crying again.

“Oh sweetie, we love the way you are. You’re perfect,” Dino crooned as he took Julian into his arms. “But not everyone can see past all your gayness to the man beneath. You have the biggest heart in the world, and I know that right now it’s tearing in two. But it will get better. There will be someone out there for you. You’ll see.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore. It hurts too much. How could he do this to me? I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t pursue him. He’s the one that asked me out. Oh god, Dino, why would he do this to me? I’ve never done anything to him,” Julian sobbed.

“I know, baby, I know. We have to be wrong, Julian. Maybe he has some other reason for not being with you,” Dino said as he patted Julian on the shoulder.

“No, I don’t think you’re wrong. Everything Joseph said makes sense. He never touches me or kisses me unless we’re in public. He basically doesn’t want anything to do with me unless other people can see him doing it. We’re hardly ever alone together. And if we are, he can barely stand to be near me. No, you’re not wrong.”

Dino was holding Julian in his arms while he cried over his broken heart when the phone rang. Joseph reached over and picked it up. “Hello?” He looked quickly over at Julian in alarm. Holding his hand over the phone, he whispered, “It’s Darius. He wants to talk to you.”

Julian shook his head no.

“Sorry, Darius, he can’t come to the phone at the moment. Can I take a message?”

Joseph nodded a couple of times before looking back at Julian. “He says if you don’t come to the phone, he’s coming over.”

“Fine,” Julian growled as he grabbed the phone from Joseph. “I told you last night that I was done, Darius, and I meant it. I’m not going to play this little game with you anymore. I want you to stop calling me and stay away. If you come to my apartment, I’m going to call the police.”

Julian slammed the phone down and turned to look at his three shocked friends. “Well, that should do it, don’t you think?” Before they could answer him, Julian started crying again. All three of his friends stood up and hugged him. Life just sucked sometimes.

When Julian finally quieted down, they sat on the floor again, each with a glass of wine. Dino gave Julian a long look. “Julian, are you sure this is what you want to do? Have you tried talking to Darius about this?”

“I’m sure. If it was just the sex, I could go without. Hell, I’ve spent years going without. It wouldn’t be anything new. But it’s more than that. I can’t live with the hot-and-cold treatment anymore.”

“Hot-and-cold treatment?” Dino asked.

“One minute he’s all loving and hugging me, the next he can’t get far enough away from me. And Joseph’s right, now that I think more about it. He probably is straight.” Julian waved his hand in the air. “Like I said before, the only time he’s affectionate with me is when we’re in public, where other people can see us. Then he’s practically all over me. When we’re alone, it’s, like, all he can do to hold my hand. I just can’t do it anymore.”

“Julian, why don’t you give it a few days and think about it before you break up with him?” Dino asked. “You’ve been so happy these last few weeks, happier than we’ve seen you in years. Take some time. Think about this.”

“No, if I think about it, I’ll give in.” Julian shook his head. “I need to make this break now.”

“Honey, you’re never going to find another boyfriend like Darius,” Dino added. “Take some time before making this big of a decision.”

“No, you’re right, I will never find another boyfriend like Darius. I’m done looking. I’d rather be single for the rest of my life than go through this time and time again.”

Julian looked over at the three guys who had been his best friends for the last ten years. “What is it about me that attracts these guys? Do I have *sucker* tattooed on my forehead or something? I seem to draw them like flies. Every time I turn around, some other jerk is ready to take up the reins of my life and treat me like crap. What is it?”

“Honey, I wish I had something to tell you, but I don’t.” Dino chuckled as he reached for the ice cream. “Guess your picker is broke.”

“My picker?”

“Yeah, you know, the instinct in your gut that helps you pick out potential mates? We all have one. Guess yours is broke.”

“My picker is broke? My picker’s broke—that’s the funniest damn thing I think I’ve ever heard. My picker’s broke.” Julian started laughing hysterically.

Dino just watched sadly as Julian’s laughter turned to tears, and he cried until he fell asleep, and then he tucked him into bed. As Dino turned out the lights and locked the door behind him, he gave a silent prayer that Julian could fix his picker.

* * * *

Darius stared at the phone in his hand with disbelief. He couldn’t believe that Julian had just told him that he didn’t want to see him anymore and then hung up on him. What in the hell had happened since he left him last night?

He knew that Julian was upset that he hadn't stayed the night, but he hadn't thought it had been that bad. Hadn't the flowers made a difference? Darius had meant it when he had written that he was sorry. He really was.

He wouldn't hurt Julian for anything in the world. He loved him. Darius suddenly sat down. Wow, he loved him? When had that happened? He knew he cared about Julian. He would do anything for him. But when had he gone and fallen in love with him?

The more he thought about it, the more he knew that he had been falling in love with Julian the entire time. Julian was everything he had ever wanted in a mate.

This discovery made all the difference in the world. He couldn't lose Julian now. Julian was his world. He had to find a way to make it up to him. There had to be some way that they could be together. He just had to figure out how to win him back.

Chapter Five

Julian had a plan. He was tired of being chosen by jerks, and since he didn't plan on ever dating again, there was no sense being outrageous and flamboyant anymore. That only seemed to inflame the situation more.

He spent the next couple of days making himself *normal*. He took out his earring, belly button ring, and nipple rings. He dyed his hair back to his natural light brown, took off all of his fingernail polish, took out his contacts, and put on his glasses. He tossed all of his makeup in the garbage. He even went through his closet and threw out anything that could be seen as *gay*.

Then he started on his apartment, getting rid of anything that screamed *alternative lifestyle*. He was never going to go through this again, even if it meant that he would be alone for the rest of his life.

As he looked at himself in the mirror, he realized that it would take a while to get used to his new look. He hadn't looked this normal since he first figured out that he was gay. There seemed to be no light, no vivaciousness, in his appearance. He looked boring.

And that's just the way he wanted it. Never again would someone hurt him because of the way he was, the way he looked. But the way he looked was just part of it. He couldn't go out to clubs anymore. There would be no more flirting with handsome men, no more dancing even.

That part of his life was over. Darius had picked him out because of the way he looked and acted. In order for that not to happen again, he had to change all of that, because the pain was just too much to deal with.

The last thing he did was gather up all the little presents that Darius had given him and put them in a box for Dino to deliver to him. He didn't want anything that Darius had given him. They didn't mean anything beyond Darius proving that he could buy a gay man.

Julian felt a tear trickle down his cheek when he pulled the little diamond ring off his finger. It had meant so much to him when Darius had given it to him. While it wasn't an engagement ring, it was the next best thing. Julian smiled as he remembered how happy he had been that night. But his smile quickly turned somber as he remembered the things that had happened afterwards.

No, that part of his life was over. And as much as he wanted to keep the little ring, the imagined promises that went with it were just that—imagined. It was better all around if he just made a clean break of things and gave everything back to Darius.

* * * *

When Dino had come by to get the box of gifts, he had barely recognized Julian. He was so angry with Darius for destroying such a perfect creature as Julian that he could have exploded. He took the box from Julian, promising to deliver it to Darius.

Oh boy, would he deliver it to Darius! Dino drove over to the bar. He grabbed the box from the front seat and climbed from his car, and walked into the bar. Tim, the bouncer, immediately met him at the door. Dino asked to see Darius and was shown to a small waiting area upstairs.

After a few moments, the office door opened, and Darius walked out. Dino jumped to his feet and quickly handed Darius the box.

"I hope you're happy with yourself. You took something that was beautiful and pure and destroyed it. One of these days, Darius, you will get yours. And when you do, I hope to have ringside seats."

Darius looked down at the box filled with all of the gifts he had given Julian over the last several weeks they had been together. His face was filled with confusion.

“What are you talking about, Dino? What’s with this?” he asked, indicating the box in his hands.

“Oh, like you don’t know. Stop pretending. Julian knows what you did. I can’t believe you would treat him like that. I guess it just goes to show you that even when the packaging looks beautiful the gift can still suck.”

Dino stepped towards the door, turning to rake Darius with a loathing gaze. “You know, all he wanted to do was love you and have you love him in return. He honestly thought you were his soul mate. He would have given you everything he had to give, devoted himself to you for the rest of his life. He would have loved you more than anyone has ever loved you. I pity you, Darius Alexander. You had something so precious in your hands, and you threw it away.”

* * * *

Darius stood there and watched Dino walk out the door. What had just happened? And why had Julian giving him back all of his gifts? And what did Dino mean that he had destroyed Julian? How?

Darius put the box in his office and ran down to his car. A million different thoughts flowed around in his head as he tried to figure out what had happened between that night and today.

He knew that Julian was upset that he wouldn’t stay the night, but that was no reason to end their relationship. He thought he had been making Julian happy. Hadn’t he shown him how much he cared? He had introduced Julian as his boyfriend to all of his friends and acquaintances, showered him with gifts, bought him roses, taken him out. What more could he have done?

Was sex so very important to Julian? If he needed it that much, maybe there was another way. There had to be a way that they could work this out. He couldn't lose Julian.

Pulling into Julian's driveway, Darius climbed out of his car and hurried to the front door. He knocked loudly. He was surprised when a brown-haired man with glasses answered the door. It took him a moment to realize that it was Julian, his Julian. He looked so very different, so not Julian.

"Julian?"

"What do you want, Darius?"

"What is going on, Julian? What have you done to yourself? And why did you have Dino give back my gifts?"

"I would have thought that it was obvious, even to you. I don't want to see you anymore. I told you that on the phone. So, go away." Julian tried to shut the door, but Darius was much bigger and stronger.

Darius pushed the door open and shoved his way inside. Julian took several steps back across the living room, glaring up at Darius.

"I want you to leave, Darius, now!"

"No. I'm not going to leave until we work this out."

"We have nothing to work out, Darius. I'm not willing to be your trophy boy anymore. It's over. Go away, Darius!"

"No. I didn't understand how upset you would be over my, well, because I won't stay the night with you. I've thought a lot about this, and I think I have come up with a solution that will work for both of us. Now, just hear me out, Julian," he said when Julian went to interrupt him.

* * * *

Julian folded his arms over his chest and waited for Darius to speak. *This was bound to be good.*

“As long as I get equal attention and you are totally up front and honest with me, I am willing to share you, but only for the sex part of things. If there is anymore than that, well, it just wouldn’t be good. You need to tell me each and every time you’re with someone. In fact, I would prefer if you just found one person for this. That way—”

Julian didn’t hear the rest of Darius’s words. He didn’t think Darius could hurt him any more than he already had. He had been wrong. Julian couldn’t ever remember feeling so unwanted, so undesirable, so unloved, not even when he had come out of the closet and his family had disowned him. Darius was willing to share him with someone else, to have someone else make love to him, so that he wouldn’t have to.

“Darius—” Julian started.

“Baby, I know this can work,” Darius said. He crossed the room and grabbed Julian by the arms. “I don’t want to share you with anyone. In fact, the thought of anyone touching you makes me ill. But if this is something you can’t live without, I’ll find a way to deal with it.”

Julian just didn’t have any words to say. He was just thankful he wasn’t crying. He didn’t want Darius to see him cry. That would be the final indignity. But, gratefully, there didn’t seem to be any tears left.

“Whatever you say, Darius,” he finally whispered.

“So, you agree?” Darius asked. He seemed surprised by Julian’s answer but wasn’t that what he wanted?

“I’m really tired, Darius. Maybe we can finish this discussion later. I’d like to get some sleep now.”

“Oh yeah, sure, Julian. Maybe later we can have dinner or something,” Darius said. He dropped his arms from Julian’s and walked towards the door.

Julian followed Darius to the front door.

“Why don’t you call me when you wake up?” Darius asked, quickly giving Julian another one of his famous chaste kisses on the lips.

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

“Are you going to be okay, baby?”

Julian gave a little smile. “Yeah, I think I am. I just need to sleep. Everything will be better once I get some sleep.”

“Okay, but don’t forget to call me, okay?”

“I won’t forget anything. Good-bye, Darius.”

Darius walked out the door, turning back when Julian called him.

“Darius, I love you.”

“I know, baby,” Darius replied with a wide grin.

Julian waited for Darius to say something more, to say he loved him back, to say anything that might save their relationship. But Darius just turned and walked away. Julian’s head dropped to his chest as he quietly closed the door behind him. He had tried, one last, desperate attempt, to get Darius to love him. He had put it all out there on the line. And it hadn’t mattered to Darius.

Julian quietly washed up his dishes, dried them, and put them away. He straightened up the living room, cleaned the bathroom, and made sure that everything was shipshape. He even watered his houseplants.

Finally, Julian packed a small bag and left it beside the couch. He wrote Darius a letter and left it on the dining room table. He knew Dino would get it to him. Finally, he locked the front door and then went to take a quick shower.

After drying off, he dressed in his favorite pajama bottoms and climbed into bed. He opened his nightstand and took out a bottle of prescription sleeping pills. He stared at the bottle for a long time before opening it. He swallowed four of the pills with a glass of water.

Once that was done, he cuddled down under the blankets and got comfortable. He picked up his phone and called Dino.

“This is Dino. Talk if you want.”

“Hey, Dino, it’s Julian.”

“Hi, sweetie. What’s up?” Dino asked.

“I just wanted to say thanks for dropping that stuff off to Darius.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem, sweetie. You know that. I’d do anything for you.”

“I know, Dino, and I thank you for that. You’ve been a true friend, and I can never tell you how much that has meant to me.”

“Ah, anytime, Julian. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine now. Look, I’m just getting ready to go to sleep. You take care and remember that I love you. Tell Joseph and Andrew that I love them too, okay?”

“Julian, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Dino. Darius came by and explained things to me. I understand everything now. He has this great idea on how we can work everything out. He even gave me another kiss. Said we would go out and do something tonight. I’m getting very tired, Dino. I’m going to go now.”

“Julian—”

“Good-bye, Dino.”

* * * *

“Julian? Julian!” Dino yelled into the phone, but Julian had already hung up. He quickly dialed Julian’s number, but the phone just rang and rang. He quickly grabbed his car keys as he raced out the door, dialing Joseph’s phone number as he went.

When Joseph answered, he yelled at him to get over to Julian’s apartment as soon as he could and to call Andrew also. Then he dialed Darius’s bar and asked to speak to him.

He didn't even wait for Darius to say hello when he came on the line. "I don't know what in the hell you said to Julian, but if something happens to him because of you, I will make it my mission in life to hunt you down and skin you alive."

"What? What are you talking about? What's happened to Julian? He was fine when I left him not an hour ago."

"Was he? Really? Or did he just tell you what he thought you wanted to hear? What exactly did you tell him, anyway?"

"I think that's between Julian and myself."

"Not anymore it's not. Tell me, Darius, now."

"I'd really rather not, Dino. It's—"

"Look, I don't care what you think anymore. I want to know exactly what you told Julian this afternoon, and I want to know now. He was obviously upset by it."

"I don't know why he would be upset by it. He agreed with it."

"Darius—" Dino growled.

"Oh, all right. I told him that since sex seemed so important to him that I would be willing for him to find someone to, well, someone that he could do that with, as long as that's all he did with them."

Dino didn't say anything immediately. He was too angry, and he had to concentrate on driving. He knew that he had to get to Julian's apartment as fast as he could. "You stupid son of a bitch," he growled into the phone before hanging up.

Dino pulled into the parking lot of Julian's apartment and jumped out of the car. He saw Joseph and Andrew pull up behind him. The three of them rushed to Julian's apartment. The door was locked, but Dino had a key. Unlocking the door, they rushed inside. They started yelling for Julian as they searched for him.

Dino nearly screamed when he reached the bedroom and saw Julian lying on the bed, not moving, a picture of Julian and Darius clutched in his hand. He quickly scanned the bottle of pills on the nightstand. Dino didn't realize that there were tears streaming down his face as he picked Julian up and carried him to the bathroom.

Andrew called the paramedics from the living room as Joseph helped Dino get Julian into the cold shower. Dino sat on the floor beside the tub, gently smacking Julian in the face, trying to get him to come around.

It seemed to take forever for the paramedics to get there and take over. But in less than ten minutes, they had Julian hooked up to oxygen and were wheeling him out to the waiting ambulance.

As Dino followed them out, he saw Darius pull up. Joseph and Andrew couldn't stop him in time as he ran to Darius and began pummeling him, screaming at him. It took both Andrew and Joseph to pull him off of Darius.

"You did this, you and your stupid ideas," Dino yelled at Darius. "Why couldn't you just love him the way he was? He didn't want anything from you but your love."

"I do love him."

"Great way to show it, Darius. First you refuse to be with him, making him feel lower than dirt. Then you tell him you're willing to share him, to have him go to someone else for sex? If you didn't want him, then why in the hell did you go after him? He was fine until you came along."

Dino looked Darius up and down with a hate-filled gaze. "Maybe he is better off dead than with the likes of you."

"Dead?" Darius shouted. His face paled. "What are you talking about? What happened? Why is that ambulance here? Did something happen to Julian?"

"Yeah, you did. I hope you enjoy knowing what you did to him. I hope that one of these days you fall in love with someone that doesn't want you, that treats you like shit. I hope you live a long, long life knowing that you drove Julian to this."

"Dino, I—"

"You had better hope he lives, Darius, because if he doesn't—"

"What the hell happened?" Darius finally yelled.

Dino shook Joseph and Andrew off of him and took a step towards Darius. He leaned in until their noses were almost touching. His voice was filled with hatred and rage as he replied.

“Julian couldn’t take it anymore, knowing that you will never love him like he loves you. That you are so repulsed by him that you couldn’t even touch him, that you wanted him to be with someone else so that you didn’t have to touch him. That all he was to you was a token gay man for your club. So he took sleeping pills.”

* * * *

Darius just stared at him, the words not making sense to him. No, Dino had to mean something else. There was no way that lively, vibrant Julian had taken a bottle of pills. He was the light, the morning sunshine. He was life itself.

“That’s right, Darius, because of you, sweet, beautiful Julian tried to kill himself. If he lives, I will make sure that you never go near him again. You will not see him, talk to him, or even call him ever again. But if he dies, if he dies, Darius, I will make your life a living hell!”

Darius just stood there in total shock as Dino turned and walked to the ambulance and climbed in. He watched Joseph and Andrew climb into their car and follow the ambulance. This couldn’t be happening.

Darius watched the taillights of the ambulance fade into the distance before he started walking towards Julian’s apartment. The door was still wide open. Darius slowly walked into Julian’s apartment and looked around, feeling dazed and disconnected.

In the bedroom he found a crumpled picture of him and Julian on the mattress. He sat down on the side of the bed, holding the picture in his hands. He gently rubbed over Julian’s face, the face that he loved so very much. The face that stared up at him with so much love that it brought tears to his eyes.

He had had it all in the palm of his hand, and he had lost it. He hadn’t seen it before, maybe he hadn’t wanted to, but Julian did love

him. It was all right there in Julian's gaze for anyone to see. And he had lost it.

And why, because he was afraid to love Julian? Afraid that his size and strength would hurt Julian? Or was it because he was afraid to let his heart be hurt by Julian, sweet, beautiful Julian? He was such an idiot. He deserved whatever Dino did to him.

Looking up, he saw the bottle of pills sitting on the nightstand next to a glass of water. He just couldn't believe that Julian would try to kill himself. It just didn't make sense. Tucking the picture into his breast pocket, he walked out of the bedroom and into the kitchen.

His heart clenched when he saw the bouquet of red roses that he had bought for Julian in the trash can. On the dining room table, he found a letter addressed to him. His hands shook as he opened the envelope and pulled out the note from Julian.

To My Darius, by the time you get this letter I will be gone. No matter what Dino says, it is not your fault. I made the decision to go on my own. I have just come to realize that I can no longer try so hard. It's just not worth it anymore. I couldn't be what my family wanted me to be and I can't be what you want me to be.

I thought for a while that I could. For you, I tried. I really did. I would have done almost anything to be with you. I even considered taking a lover like you wanted. But it just wouldn't work. I don't want to be with anyone but you, and you...you don't want me in that way. And that's okay. We can't choose who we love. I'm certainly proof of that.

I just don't want to be here anymore. It hurts too much to know that, in the eyes of the people I love, I will never be good enough. I thought I could change who I was to make people happy, but then I would no longer be me.

I will always love you, Darius. In the short time we were together, you gave me more joy than I have ever known in this world. I hope you find what you're looking for someday. As Dino says, there is a

soul mate out there for each of us. I know I found mine in you. I guess it just didn't go both ways. Maybe if I'm not around anymore, you can find your soul mate. I do hope that you find happiness, Darius.

Love always, Julian.

Darius stared at the tearstained paper in his hands knowing that these were the last words that Julian had written. He knew, despite what Julian had said in the letter, that he was responsible for this. He had just wanted Julian so much that he had done everything within his power to have him, despite how Julian had felt.

If Julian actually died because of this, Darius knew he would soon be following him. There was no point in living in a world without Julian.

Darius carefully folded the letter and placed it beside the picture in his breast pocket before leaving the kitchen and heading for the front door. He locked the front door behind him and he left to go to the hospital. He had to know if Julian was okay.

Twenty minutes later he walked into the emergency room of the hospital. He could see Joseph and Andrew sitting together in the waiting room. There was no sign of Dino. Darius figured he must be with Julian.

Walking up to the nurse's station, he asked for Julian's room. The nurse asked if he was family, and for a brief moment, Darius didn't know what to say. Then he replied that he was Julian's partner, his boyfriend.

He also provided a credit card and said that all medical bills were to be sent to him. He wanted the very best care for Julian. No expense was to be spared. Julian deserved the very best care that money could buy.

The nurse smiled as she picked up the phone and called back to the emergency room before waving him through the security doors. Another nurse met him on the other side and escorted him to Julian's room.

She explained along the way that they had pumped Julian's stomach and were currently treating him for an overdose of sleeping pills. But currently he was holding his own. The next twenty-four hours would tell them more.

The hospital psychologist had been called and would be meeting with Julian as soon as he woke up as this was considered a suicide attempt by the hospital. She was sure that he would want to meet with Darius too.

Darius's chest tightened when they stopped in front of the door to Julian's room. He took a deep breath and pushed the door open and walked in. He stifled a sob in his chest when he saw Julian lying on the bed, hooked up to an IV and heart monitor.

He looked so fragile, so delicate. His face was so pale, almost as white as the sheets he lay on. Darius pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed, taking Julian's small hand in his. He rubbed his thumb across the pale skin of Julian's fingers.

He leaned down and rested his head against Julian's hand as he silently cried, his shoulders shaking. He had done this. He had taken this bright, beautiful man and driven him to try to kill himself.

Chapter Six

“What the hell are you doing here, Darius?” Dino whispered harshly as he walked into the room and saw Darius sitting next to Julian. “Haven’t you done enough? Worried that he might pull through? Trying to finish the job?”

Darius raised his tearstained face to Dino, causing him to inhale deeply at the ravaged pain that he saw. “Please, Dino, I just need to know that he’s okay. Then I’ll leave. I won’t call him or come see him. I’ll never contact him again, I promise. I’ll do whatever you want me to do. I just need to know that, that he’s alive.”

Dino was silent as he walked the last couple of steps into the room and sat down across from Darius. For someone who didn’t care, Darius looked a little too torn up over this. That didn’t make sense.

“Why did you do it, Darius? Why did you tell Julian to find a lover? You knew that he loved you, that he wanted to be with you. How could you even consider having a third person in your relationship if you love him the way you say you do?”

“I’m afraid of hurting Julian,” Darius mumbled.

“What?”

“I’m afraid of hurting Julian.”

Dino scoffed, “You don’t think he’s hurting now? He tried to kill himself, Darius. What does he have to do to convince you he’s hurting? Die?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me. Tell me what good reason you have as to why we are sitting in this room,” Dino demanded.

“I don’t want to hurt Julian.”

“Yeah, yeah, you said that. Try again.”

“Don’t you get it, Dino? Look at me,” he whispered loudly as he stood up. “Do you see how big I am? What do you think would happen to Julian if I lost control while I was with him? Do you know what kind of damage I can do? Well, I do. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, Dino, with my first lover. I hurt him. Me! Just because I lost control during sex. And I didn’t want him nearly half as much as I want Julian.”

Dino suddenly saw an entirely different side of Darius. Julian had it all wrong. They all did. Darius wasn’t denying Julian because he just wanted a trophy. He was denying him because he truly thought that he would physically harm Julian.

“That’s why you refused to be alone with him. You don’t trust yourself with him,” he said.

“Look at him, Dino,” Darius whispered as he waved his hand at Julian’s sleeping body. “He’s the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. His hair, that face, those beautiful baby blue eyes. I even love his makeup, the way he dresses, and his outrageous behavior. It’s all so perfect and wrapped up in one small, delicate, little package.”

“I’m six foot eight and weigh two hundred and eighty-five pounds. Julian is five foot six and weighs one hundred and fifty pounds sopping wet. I’m a good foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than he is.” Darius reached down and placed the palm of his hand up against Julian’s. “Look at the difference in our hands even. You could fit two of Julian’s hands in mine. What do you think would happen if I lost control, if I became too rough? How badly do you think I would hurt him?”

“Darius, you would never hurt Julian like that.”

“Are you sure about that, Dino?” Darius asked as he glanced over at Dino. “Because I’m not. I’ve been here before, remember? I saw what I did to my first lover. I will never subject another lover to that, no matter what I have to do to prevent it. And if that means that Julian finds pleasure somewhere else, well then, that’s what it means. I don’t

like it. In fact, I hate it. I don't want anyone touching him but me. But if that is what he needs, I will deal with it."

Dino walked over to stand next to Darius. "Darius, all Julian needs is to know that you love him. The sex doesn't matter to him."

At Darius's severe look, he let out a little chuckle. "Okay, it does matter to him but not enough to give you up. He would be happy just knowing that you love him. That's all he wants. My God, Darius, he believes that you don't want him, that you find him ugly and disgusting. He actually thinks that you're straight and are just using him to promote your club. A gay club owner with a gay boyfriend looks a lot better than a straight owner of a gay club."

"What? That's ridiculous. I adore him. Haven't I shown him that? I took him out to the very best restaurants. I introduced him to everyone I know as my boyfriend. I bought him gifts to show my affection. I even sent him roses."

"That's just it. You sent him roses. You've never spent any time with him, real time, getting to know him. If you had, you would know that he hates roses. Think about what you've said, Darius. You took him out, you showed him off, and you bought him things. But did you ever take the time to learn anything about him? Did you ever spend any time in private with him? Did you ever even just cuddle with him on the couch? Or did you just drop him off at his doorstep every night with a little kiss on the cheek?"

Darius suddenly sat back down in his chair. Dino could see the confusion on his face. His eyes were filled with pain and uncertainty as he looked up at Dino.

"How do I...how do I make this better? How do I fix this? I can't stand to see him like this. He did this because of me, because of what I did. Do you know he left me a letter explaining to me why he did this?"

Darius pulled the letter out of his pocket and handed it to Dino to read. Dino was crying right along with Darius by the time he handed

the letter back to him. Darius carefully folded it back again and put it in his pocket.

“As much as I love him, I can’t do this to him. He needs a chance to find someone that can love him without fear of hurting him.” Darius picked up Julian’s hand and held it between his.

“Don’t you love him?” Dino asked quietly, mentally crossing his fingers for both Julian and Darius.

“With every breath in my body. But I can’t give him what he needs. I can’t be with him like that. I won’t hurt him. I want him so much, Dino. Every time he smiles at me or looks in my direction, I get aroused.” Darius’s face grimaced as if he were in pain. “Do you know hard it is for me to leave him every night when all I want to do is hold him and make love to him? What do you think would happen if I gave in to my desires? He could end up right back in here again.”

“Darius, I think it’s fairly obvious that he doesn’t want to live without you. When he wakes up, and he will wake up, what’s to keep him from trying this again? You have to give him a reason to want to live, and I think the only thing that will do that is if he knows that you love him.”

“I don’t know what to do, Dino,” Darius whispered against Julian’s hand. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“If you love him like you say you do, then the only thing you can do is prove it to him. He needs you. And I don’t care what you say about being afraid that you will hurt him. We will deal with that at a later time. Right now, we need to concentrate on getting Julian better and out of the hospital.”

“Dino—”

“Shut the hell up, Darius. Julian thinks you hate him, that you find him disgusting. He thinks you can’t even stand to be alone in the same room with him. You’ve screwed this relationship up enough. Now it’s time to listen to me because you obviously don’t have a clue.”

“But I’ve never...I don’t...It’s just that...” Darius stammered.

“Darius—”

Darius dropped his head again. “Please, just tell me what to do.”

“Well, the first thing you’re going to do is go out and buy the biggest bouquet of wildflowers that you can find.”

“Wildflowers?”

“I told you, Julian hates roses. But he loves wildflowers. If you had taken the time to really get to know him, you’d know that.”

“What else should I know?”

“Julian loves cuddling. It doesn’t matter if it’s in a car, on the couch, in bed, or wherever. He just loves to cuddle. He’s a very touchy-feely type of person. It’s a kind of reassurance thing for him. Tells him that someone cares about him.”

“So all this time when I’ve been trying to keep him at a distance, I’ve actually been telling him that I don’t care about him?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Julian’s family, well, they were about as screwed up as they could possibly be. His parents, and even his siblings, never had any time for him. He was basically ignored for most of his life. At least until he came out of the closet. Then he was just disowned. They kicked him out the very same day. That was nearly ten years ago. He hasn’t had any contact with them since.”

“How could they do that to him?”

“Darius, it’s basically the same thing you’ve done to him.”

“No, it’s not. What I did was nothing like that. I love Julian. I would never do that to him!” Darius said loudly.

“Oh yeah? Didn’t you want him only on your terms? You held him at arm’s length without explaining anything to him. He has no idea why you won’t make love to him, just that you won’t.” Dino waved his hand at Darius. “To top it all off, you want him to arrange his life to meet your sexual needs, to be with someone he doesn’t love just so that you can feel better. How is that any different than what his family did to him?”

“It just is,” Darius insisted.

“No, Darius, it’s not. All of you want Julian to conform to your wants and needs. None of you took into account what he wanted, what he needed. You just took what you wanted from him until he was no longer any use to you. Then you passed him on.”

“I never passed him on.”

“No, that’s right, Darius. You just tried to get him to have sex with a stranger so that you wouldn’t have to touch him. That certainly puts you in a whole other category than his family. Way to go, Darius.”

Dino watched Darius’s face turn slightly red with embarrassment as he dropped his head again. He was so quiet that Dino began to get worried until he raised his face up and Dino saw the tears falling.

“I think I’d just better go,” Darius said as he stood and walked towards the door.

“You walk out that door, Darius, and I will follow through with my promise. I will make sure that you never have any contact with Julian again. No coming by, no phone calls, no nothing.”

“Wouldn’t that be better for him?” Darius yelled as he turned to glare at Dino. “I certainly haven’t been doing him any good staying with him. If I’m gone, maybe he can find some happiness.”

“Damn it, Darius, you can be such an idiot.” Dino shot to his feet and walked over to Darius. He grabbed the letter out of his pocket and held it open to Darius. “What does that say right there? Read it.”

Darius took the letter from Dino and read over the lines he pointed at.

I will always love you, Darius. In the short time we were together, you gave me more joy than I have ever known in this world. I hope you find what you’re looking for someday. As Dino says, there is a soul mate out there for each of us. I know I found mine in you.

“Don’t you get it, Darius? You make him happy, happier than he has ever been. You bring joy to his life, joy, Darius. He wrote it right

there. *'In the short time we were together, you gave me more joy than I have ever known in this world.'* What do you think he was trying to say to you? You're his soul mate, man. He loves you. He needs you. Maybe as much as you need him."

"I do need him, Dino. I've never met anyone like him. He's just so, so, so damn perfect. Everything about him is perfect."

"Even his nail polish?" Dino chuckled. He nearly burst out laughing at the dreamy look Darius gave him.

"Oh yeah, I have an entire box of different colors in my office. Every color I could find. Do you know he even paints his toenails? I want to get him some of those little diamond decals to put on them. He'd look so sexy in them." Darius looked fanciful as he talked.

Dino patted Darius on the back. "Okay, way too much information, honey. But I'm glad that you like his nail polish. Did you ever mention that to Julian? Or paint his toenails for him? I'm sure he'd enjoy that. In fact, why don't you go find some nail polish now and paint his nails for him? I know he doesn't have any on right now, and I'm sure he'd appreciate having some."

"What's his favorite color of nail polish?"

"That would be neon green. Don't ask me why, but it is."

"You think they would have any downstairs in the gift shop?"

"If not, there's an all-night drugstore across the street. They'd probably have it. You might try there. Other than that, you're out of luck. I don't wear nail polish, so I have no clue as to where to get it."

"Okay, I'm going to run across the street and see what they have. Call me if he wakes up, okay? And don't leave him alone. I don't want him to wake up without someone he knows being with him."

"I promise. I'll stay right here until you return. Now, get going. You have a lot of nails to paint. And don't forget the flowers."

Dino smiled as the big hunk practically ran out of the room and down the hallway. Who knew that such a big dominant male would like nail polish? Apparently, there were still a few surprises in the world left for him to discover.

He just hoped he was doing the right thing where Julian was concerned. Dino really felt that Julian and Darius belonged together now that he knew what the problem between them was. If the two of them would just talk to each other, they would be able to work this out.

Instead, they tiptoed around each other, afraid to hurt the other's feelings, which was getting them exactly nowhere. Dino decided then and there that if he had to, he would lock the two of them in a room together until they worked their problems out.

It might lose him a friend, but somehow he didn't think so. Once Julian really knew what the problem was between Darius and himself, he would understand. Dino would bet his life on it. He just hoped he wasn't betting Julian's life.

He walked back across the room and sat down next to Julian. He picked Julian's small hand up in his. His worried gaze traveled up his frail-looking body to his pale face.

"I hope I'm doing the right thing here, honey. I really think you belong with Darius."

Dino wished that Julian was awake so that they could talk about this situation before he let Darius back into the room. If he was making a mistake where Julian's feelings were concerned, he would never forgive himself.

He was so deep in his thoughts that he nearly fell out of his chair in surprise when Darius came barreling back into the room, a large bouquet of wildflowers in one hand, a small bag in the other. He looked quite satisfied with himself.

"Found some. That little store across the street has a great selection of nail polish. I'm going to have to take Julian there when he...when he comes home."

Dino smiled. "He's going to be fine, Darius. Just give him some time."

Darius nodded. "Okay, I can do that." He set the flowers on the nightstand table and dumped the little bag on the bed. Several bottles of green fell out, every shade of green Dino could imagine.

"Which one do you think he will like best?"

Dino carefully looked through the little pile of nail polishes before picking up one and handing it to Darius. "This one, I think. It's certainly the most outrageous."

"Great," he said as he opened the bottle. He looked at the small bottle, then at Julian's hand, then back at the bottle. He finally looked up at Dino, his face completely confused.

"Any idea how to do this?"

Chapter Seven

Julian slowly opened his eyes and looked around. He was not in his bedroom. His walls were sage green. These walls were white. Boring white, if you asked Julian. Where in the hell was he?

Julian went to lift his hands to wipe his eyes, but he could only lift one hand. Looking down he saw that the other one was held tightly in Darius's grasp. What was he doing here? Before he opened his mouth to say something, he noticed the neon green nail polish on his fingernails. It was the worst job of nail painting he had ever seen.

Then he noticed the bottle of neon green nail polish held in Darius's other hand, a hand that was streaked with nail polish. If he didn't know better, he would think that Darius had tried to paint his nails. But that wouldn't make sense. Why would Darius paint his nails?

When he tried to pull his hand away from Darius's grasp, Darius quickly dropped the bottle of nail polish on the bed and reached over to gently caress his abdomen.

"Shhh, baby, it's okay. Everything's okay," he murmured quietly without even opening his eyes. He just laid his head down on Julian's hip next to his hand.

Julian reached down with his free hand and ran it through Darius's soft, dark curls. He looked so tired. There were bags under his eyes. He wasn't even wearing his suit jacket or tie. The sleeves of his wrinkled white shirt were rolled up and the buttons unbuttoned. Julian couldn't ever remember seeing Darius looking anything but his best. He almost looked—human.

“Glad to see that you’re awake,” said a quiet voice from the doorway. Julian looked up to see Dino walking towards him. He looked almost as tired as Darius did. Dino walked up to the other side of the bed from Darius and leaned down to give Julian a kiss on his forehead.

Julian looked at him, perplexed. “Where am I? What’s going on? And why is Darius here?”

Dino pulled up a chair and sat down. “You’re in the hospital.”

“The hospital? Why am I in the hospital?” Julian nearly yelled.

“Shhh, we don’t want to wake the big guy. This is the first time he’s slept since we brought you in here last night.”

“Why am I in the hospital? What happened?” Julian asked quietly this time.

“Julian, they had to pump your stomach because of the sleeping pills.” Dino ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “Honey, why did you do it? You could have talked to me, or Joseph or Andrew. You didn’t have to try to kill yourself. You know we will always be there for you. And nothing is as bad as you think it is.”

“Kill myself? Sleeping pills? Are you out of your ever-loving mind? I didn’t try to kill myself. What in the hell are you talking about?” This time, Julian yelled.

“Sweetie, you took a bunch of sleeping pills,” Dino said solemnly.

“I took four, four sleeping pills. That’s it. I would never try to kill myself.”

“Then what was with the suicide letter you left for Darius?”

“It wasn’t a suicide letter. It was a good-bye letter. I was leaving. I even have my bags packed. They’re in the living room next to the couch. Go look if you don’t believe me. My bag is sitting right next to the couch.”

“If you didn’t take a bunch of sleeping pills, why couldn’t we wake you up? They had to pump your stomach, Julian. They hooked you up to an IV. They don’t do that for two sleeping pills,” Dino said sternly.

“They do when you have my tolerance for drugs.”

That stopped Dino. He cocked his head to one side, a perplexed look on his face as he stared down at Julian. “What do you mean?”

Julian rolled his eyes. “I have almost zero tolerance for drugs. One aspirin and I’m loopy. Why do you think I never got into street drugs? I’d be a wreck if I walked by someone using drugs. I know I took more than I was supposed to, but I was really, really tired, and I just wanted to forget for a little while. I just wanted to go to sleep. So, I took four sleeping pills instead of the prescribed amount.”

“What is the prescribed amount?”

Julian could feel his face turning red as he looked down at the bedspread. “One,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“One tablet, okay? I am only supposed to take one tablet.” He looked back up at Dino.

“So, you really did overdose, but by accident? Oh man, Julian, you have no idea. When I thought you had tried to kill yourself, when I found you and you wouldn’t respond, well, there’s just no way to tell you how that felt. You are never to take more than the prescribed amount again. Do you hear me?” Dino started yelling. “If I ever find out that you’re doing something that stupid again, so help me, Julian—”

“I’m really sorry, Dino. I had no idea that this would happen. I just thought I’d sleep for a while.”

Just then Darius moved his head a little. Julian quickly looked down at him then back up to Dino. “That still doesn’t explain why he’s here.”

“All in good time, my dear, all in good time.”

Dino reached over and gently shook Darius’s shoulder. “Darius, wake up. Darius, Julian’s awake.”

Darius’s head instantly came up, his eyes shooting to Julian’s before he jumped to his feet and leaned over him. His hands ran

through Julian's hair, down his face, over his arms. He seemed to be trying to touch every part of him.

"Julian," he whispered hoarsely. "Oh, baby, how are you feeling? Are you in any pain? Do you need something? Are you thirsty? I'll go get the nurse. I'll be right back. Don't go back to sleep."

He leaned over and kissed Julian on his forehead, his cheek, his lips. He smiled down at Julian before he turned and rushed out the door in search of a nurse.

Julian looked over at Dino in utter confusion. "What was that all about?"

Dino chuckled. "That man is crazy about you."

"Yeah, right. That's why he can barely bring himself to touch me."

"You don't get it, but you will." Dino sat on the edge of the bed and grabbed Julian's hand, holding it up for Julian to see. "Who do you think did your nails?"

"Darius painted my nails?" Julian lifted his hands and turned them just a little, looking at the wild neon nail polish covering his fingernails, and a bit of his fingers too.

"And your toenails. He did a much better job on your toenails, though. You kept moving your hands when he was trying to paint them. I think he got more nail polish on himself than he did on your nails."

"Why would he paint my nails?"

"Because he loves you, just the way you are, wild nail polish and all."

"If he loves me so much, then why does he want me to find a lover? Why won't he spend any time alone with me? You said it the other night. He's just using me for publicity at his gay club."

"I was wrong, Julian. So wrong that I can't even begin to tell you how wrong I was. We were all wrong, very, very wrong. Julian, Darius, well, he...he loves you, Julian. He needs you, probably more

than you need him. I want you to give him a chance to explain. This whole situation, it's not what you think."

"Then what is it?"

Dino shook his head. "That's for him to explain. Just give him a chance, okay?"

"I don't know, Dino. I just don't think I can go through this again. It hurts too much. I love him but—"

Julian stopped talking when the door opened and Darius hurried in followed by a nurse. She quickly came over and began examining Julian, taking his pulse and his blood pressure. Then she took out his IV.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Sinclair? Are you having any pain?"

"No, my throat's a little sore, but nothing I can't deal with."

"That's good. I'll let the doctor know you're awake, and he'll be in to see you."

"Can I have some water?"

"I'll get you some ice chips for now. Once the doctor sees you, I'm sure we can get you something else. How does that sound?"

Julian nodded. "Thank you."

The nurse smiled at Julian and walked out of the room to get him some ice chips. Dino looked from Julian to Darius. Darius was hovering over Julian, once again holding his hand, his thumb absently rubbing the soft skin.

"I'll go get those ice chips from the nurse. Be right back."

Darius didn't even look away from Julian as he replied to Dino. "Take all the time you need." He sat down in the chair beside the bed. His gaze was anxious as he looked at Julian.

"I didn't try to kill myself, Darius. I took too many sleeping pills, but it was an accident."

"Julian—" Darius began before burying his face in Julian's stomach. Julian could feel his tears soaking through the thin material of his hospital gown. When Darius's shoulders began to shake, Julian

reached down and gently caressed his head, running his fingers through Darius's hair.

"Darius," he whispered softly.

When Darius lifted his head to look at him, Julian's breath caught in his throat at the look of pure anguish on his face. His eyes were tormented, teardrops streaming down his cheeks. Julian could barely make out the words he was mumbling.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I didn't mean to hurt you. I would do anything to take it all back. Please, please, forgive me. I'll, I'll stay at your apartment until you kick me out. I'll cuddle with you on the couch. Hell, I'll buy you every damn color of nail polish I can find. I'll do whatever you want. Just please, please don't leave me again."

"Why, Darius? How is now any different than before? Are you suddenly going to start touching me, being with me? What's the new lover I'm supposed to find going to say about that? Won't it be a bit awkward having both of you in my bed?"

Darius dropped Julian's hand and jumped to his feet to pace back and forth beside the bed. He stopped walking and looked over at Julian several times, as if he wanted to say something, only to start pacing again.

"Damn it, Darius, spit it out!" Julian couldn't stand the waiting.

Darius stopped his pacing and took the couple of steps it took to get to the side of Julian's bed. He was totally astounded by the fierce look of possession on Darius's face as he snarled down at him.

"I don't want you to take a lover. I never wanted you to take a lover. I hate the idea of anyone touching you but me. You're mine, damn it, and no one should have the privilege of touching you but me."

"Well that's not going to do me a whole hell of a lot of good since you don't want to have anything to do with me," Julian growled back.

Darius leaned down so his face was right in Julian's, their noses nearly touching. "You have no idea the things I want to do with you."

Darius grabbed Julian by the shoulders and lifted him up off the bed. Their bodies were pressed together, chest to chest, as Darius's lips claimed Julian's. It was a rough, demanding, needy kiss, and totally unlike anything Julian had ever experienced in his life. Darius totally possessed Julian, his tongue exploring and his lips insistent.

Just when Julian began to move into the kiss and reach for Darius, he pushed Julian back down onto the bed. "Pray you never find out!"

Julian reached out for Darius again, but he just turned and stormed out of the room. Julian lifted his hand up to run softly over his ravaged lips. Now, why couldn't Darius kiss him like that more often?

Of course, now he was so horny that he didn't think the tent in his hospital gown would ever go down again. His history with Darius told him that he would have to take care of this problem on his own, as usual.

Julian flipped back the covers and crawled from the bed. He stood there for a moment while his legs adjusted before heading to the bathroom. He turned on the shower before dropping his hospital gown on the floor and climbing in.

He washed his hair, soaped up his body, and rinsed off, even just stood under the water after he turned it to cold, anything he could think of to take his mind off of the incredible kiss Darius had given him.

Nothing was working. If anything, he was getting harder by the moment. Julian soaped up his hand and grabbed his cock and started stroking himself. The more he thought about Darius, the harder he stroked.

Just when he thought he might be getting somewhere, he suddenly realized that he was standing in a hospital shower masturbating from a kiss he had gotten from the man who he loved more than life itself, a man who wouldn't do anything about it.

Julian's hand dropped from his hard cock as he slowly sank to the shower floor beneath the cold water. He wrapped his arms around his legs and buried his head in his knees and cried.

It all seemed so pointless. It was like a vicious circle. Julian wanting Darius. Darius not wanting Julian. Julian deciding to give up on Darius. And lastly, Darius doing something to bring Julian back to wanting him again. And then the whole cycle started all over again.

Running away like a thief in the night was looking better all the time. Maybe he should just continue with those plans, move, get away, and leave Darius and his cold, untouchable heart behind him. But how could he leave Darius when he seemed to need him so much?

Julian was so caught up in his deep thoughts that he didn't hear the hospital room door open or Darius's desperate call of his name. Nor his mad rush to the bathroom and anguished cry when he spotted Julian curled up in the shower.

He yelped when Darius's strong arms grabbed him and cradled him against his massive chest. Darius lifted him from the shower floor and quickly began drying him off with a towel.

"Baby, what were you thinking? That water's freezing."

Julian tried to free himself from his strong grasp before Darius discovered his erection. It would just be too embarrassing. But luck was not with him. Darius sat him on the toilet seat and knelt before him drying off his feet, then his calves, his thighs. Julian felt Darius's body suddenly still.

"Julian?" Darius asked then licked his lips as he stared at Julian's erection for several long moments before raising his eyes to look at him.

Julian bent his head, feeling totally embarrassed. He quickly grabbed the towel from Darius and covered his lap.

Darius reached over and gripped Julian's chin, gently lifting Julian's face with his hand. Julian attempted to resist but finally lifted his head at Darius's insistence.

Julian thought that Darius would say something, but he didn't. He just pulled the towel off of his lap, leaned down, and swiftly engulfed his cock and sucked fiercely. He flicked his tongue over the slit in the

top. He licked at the hard length like an ice cream cone, paying special attention to the sensitive underside of Julian's throbbing erection.

Darius's expert manipulations quickly had Julian's body trembling, his groans coming faster and faster as he gripped Darius's hair in his hands, his hips beginning to thrust up. Darius sucked and swallowed and licked until he triggered Julian's deeply moaned release. Engulfing his cock to the root, Darius greedily swallowed every drop Julian had to give him.

The second Darius released Julian's cock from his mouth, Julian wrapped his arms around Darius's neck and leaned in to kiss him. It was another ground-shattering kiss. It was hard and wet and demanding, and just as wonderful as the last kiss.

When Julian heard Darius moan, he knew he needed to get closer to him. He needed to feel all of Darius's body pressed up against his own. Sliding off the toilet seat, Julian straddled Darius's thighs, one leg on each side of his. His hands wrapped in Darius's hair holding him in place.

Julian could feel Darius's hard cock pressing against his body where he straddled him. He could feel it throbbing against his balls. Using his own legs, he began pushing harder and harder against Darius, up and down, rubbing himself against him.

Suddenly, Darius arched his head back, roaring out Julian's name. Julian felt the wetness of Darius's release through his slacks. The tight stiffness of Darius's body went on for several moments until Julian heard a loud clatter.

He jumped, startled when he looked over and saw that Darius had ripped one of the metal arm bars that went on each side of the toilet out of the wall. He hadn't realized that Darius had been holding it. A look to the other side of him showed that Darius still had a hold of that one. Thankfully, it was unbroken.

Julian looked up at Darius in surprise, only to find him with his head hung down to his chest, his face red with embarrassment. Julian,

his hands still in Darius's hair, pulled back until Darius lifted his head.

"Love you, Darius," he whispered as he leaned up and gave Darius a gentle kiss. He felt Darius's momentary surprise before he accepted the kiss, returning it with his one of his own. Julian felt his reluctance when the kiss finally ended several moments later.

* * * *

Darius was hesitant to meet Julian's gaze. What if he repulsed Julian? What if he was afraid? Darius didn't think he could go on living if he saw fear in Julian's eyes. Gathering up every last bit of courage that he could muster, he raised his eyelids and gazed down at Julian's beloved face.

"You're not upset with me?" he murmured quietly.

"Upset with you? Why would I be upset with you? That was hot! I just wish we had done it sooner."

Darius stared at Julian in bewilderment. He knew Julian had seen the metal arm bar he had ripped out of the wall. Wasn't he afraid of him now? Darius held up the bar for Julian to see.

"Because of this?"

"Are you kidding? That was the best part, well, maybe the second best part."

"What was the first best part?" Darius asked, suddenly desperate to know but afraid of the answer.

"This was." Julian leaned up to claim his lover's swollen lips again. "And this was." Julian began making a trail of kisses down Darius's cheek to his jaw, down to his neck. "And this." He kissed the bottom of Darius's throat before nipping him on the chin.

"But this, this was definitely the very best part right here," Julian whispered. He traced Darius's swollen lower lip with his thumb.

Darius's breath caught in his throat when he saw the love shining in Julian's eyes for Darius to see.

“J-Julian, I—” Darius swallowed audibly at the emotions shimmering in Julian’s beautiful blue eyes. The metal arm bar clanked loudly as it hit the floor, and Darius’s arms suddenly wrapped around Julian. He heard Julian let out a small surprised whimper when he lifted him up and hugged him close, his head pressed hard between Julian’s damp neck and shoulder.

Darius was overwhelmed with emotion. He couldn’t believe that not only was Julian not afraid of him, he had been aroused by his severe reaction to his lovemaking. *Julian had thought it was hot?*

* * * *

Julian, on the other hand, was astonished to find the big man hugging him for all he was worth. He still couldn’t figure out exactly what had happened. Darius seemed to want to be intimate with him, but it was almost as if he was afraid to be. But that just didn’t make sense.

Darius was huge. What did he have to be afraid of? Julian certainly couldn’t beat him in a fight, fair or not. Julian couldn’t overpower him. He couldn’t even hold the big man down unless Darius wanted him to. He was so much smaller than Darius that he barely reached his nipples when standing on his tiptoes.

“Darius.” Okay, how did you ask a huge alpha male if he was afraid of a small squirt without having your head handed to you? There was just no delicate way to do it.

Before Julian could say any more, the bathroom door opened, and Dino walked in, chuckling when he saw them sitting on the floor. Darius quickly grabbed the forgotten towel and wrapped it around Julian’s body to hide his nakedness.

“Might want to get him back to bed, Darius. The doctor is headed this way, and I don’t think he would quite understand your, uh, bedside manner.”

Julian turned three shades of red as he buried his face in Darius's neck. Darius just let out a small chuckle before reaching to help Julian into his hospital gown once more. Once all of Julian's bits and pieces were sufficiently covered, Darius picked him up in his arms and carried him out of the bathroom.

He had just set him down on the bed and pulled the covers up when the doctor walked in. He took a small step towards the head of Julian's bed, refusing to relinquish Julian's hand. The doctor looked over and saw their clasped hands and gave them a slight frown before looking down at his chart.

"Hello, Mr. Sinclair, I'm Dr. Dennis. How are you feeling today? Any soreness in your throat or stomach?" he asked without even looking at Julian.

"My throat's still a little sore, but other than that I feel fine."

"That's good." He looked up at Darius and Dino briefly. "Step outside, please. I need to examine my patient."

Dino started to walk towards the door, but Darius wasn't moving. He looked the doctor straight in the face and held his ground. "No," he simply said, crossing his big arms over his chest.

"Mr. Sinclair is my patient, Mr—?" The doctor began sternly.

"Alexander, Darius Alexander. And I am not leaving."

"Now, look—"

"No, you look, Doctor. Julian is my partner, and I am not leaving him alone for a second." Darius dropped his arms back down to his sides and stood to his full height, taking a menacing step towards the doctor. "You can either deal with it or get the hell out of this room."

The doctor took a few steps back towards the door as he stared at Darius. Julian almost laughed. The look on the doctor's face was half fear, half in disbelief that Darius had dared to tell him, a doctor, what to do.

"Well, I never—"

"I have no doubt, but maybe you should try it sometime. It feels a lot better than that stick you obviously have wedged up there." Darius

had a self-satisfied grin on his face as the red-faced doctor rushed from the room. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket as he turned back to face Julian.

“Darius, you can’t do that. He’s a doctor. He—” Julian began.

“Is he your doctor? Your regular doctor or just the doctor on call?” Darius asked.

“I guess he’s the doctor on call. I’m hardly ever sick. I don’t have a regular doctor.”

“Well, you do now.” Darius listened for a moment when someone came on the line. “Hello, Miles, it’s Darius. I’m down here at Cathedral Park Hospital. My partner’s in room 224. Can you come down and oversee his case? Dr. Dennis was just in here, and he’s a real ass. No, I didn’t threaten him, much. He was just very condescending over our relationship. Wouldn’t even let me stay in the room. No, no, that’s fine. Okay, I’ll see you when you get here. Thanks, Miles.”

Julian watched in wonder as Darius flipped his phone closed and slid it back into his pocket. He took the few steps towards Julian and leaned down to kiss him on the lips. “There, all fixed, baby. Miles will be here soon, and you’ll never have to deal with Dr. Dennis again.”

“Darius, you can’t just change my doctor because you don’t like him. That’s just not done.”

“Watch me!” he growled.

“Darius—”

Julian was stopped when Dino came in chuckling. “I don’t know what you said to the good doctor, but he went and gathered the troops, and they are on their way down here.”

Darius had a smirk on his face as he went over to the door and leaned back against it, blocking the door. “Miles should be here in a few moments.”

“Miles?”

Julian rolled his eyes. “Darius has decided that he doesn’t like Dr. Dennis, so he ordered me a new doctor. Miles somebody.”

Dino’s eyebrows rose as he looked over at Darius. “You ordered him a new doctor? I’m not sure you can do that, Darius.”

“That’s what I told him.”

“Watch me!” Darius replied again, his eyes sparkling fiercely.

“You said that already,” Julian added as he threw his hands up in the air.

Julian jumped when he heard pounding on the door. Darius’s body moved slightly when someone tried to push the door open. Darius grunted but just leaned back again, holding the door closed.

Chapter Eight

A while later Darius's cell phone rang. Julian watched Darius pull it out and flip it open. He talked briefly with the person on the other end then closed it, sliding it back into his pocket. Darius grinned over at Julian as he left his position blocking the door and walked over to stand beside him, grabbing his hand once again.

Dino settled himself into a chair, just giving Darius a curious raised-eyebrow look. Darius returned his look with a smug grin just as the door opened and a short brown-haired man with glasses walked in.

"Well, Darius, I see you're still spreading sunshine wherever you go. Dr. Dennis is doing his level best to have you arrested for assault and sexual harassment as we speak. Care to fill me in on your little situation?"

"Darius didn't do anything to Dr. Dennis, and if the doctor says he did, he's lying," Julian quickly piped in, suddenly angry that the doctor was trying to have his Darius arrested. The good doctor was the one who had been rude.

Miles looked at the little man lying on the bed, his curiosity plain to see in his face. "You must be my new patient. I'm Dr. Miles O'Bannon. It's a pleasure to meet anyone that would defend this big lug." Julian shook the hand Miles held out to him.

Miles looked at Darius and Dino and nodded his head towards the door. "I need to talk to Julian alone for a few moments, so if you could step outside, I'd appreciate it."

When both Darius and Dino turned to leave, Julian scoffed as he pointed to Miles, “What? It’s okay to leave me alone with him but not Dr. Dennis?”

Darius held the door open for Dino as he looked back over his shoulder at Julian, giving him a little wink. “Miles knows what will happen to him if he touches what belongs to me.” He turned and walked out, leaving Julian with his mouth hanging open.

“Interesting character, our Darius.” Miles chuckled as he walked over to sit down next to Julian’s bedside. “Never seen him quite so possessive before, though. So, young man, want to tell me why my services were needed? You look pretty healthy to me.”

Julian rolled his eyes again. “Oh good grief, I did not try to kill myself. I only took four sleeping pills, four. I have a horribly low tolerance for drugs. Sue me!”

“Were these prescription sleeping pills or over-the-counter sleeping pills?”

“Prescription. I have chronic insomnia. I don’t use them very often, just when I really can’t sleep. I’m only supposed to take one pill, but I really couldn’t sleep, so I took four.”

“Ah, so you couldn’t sleep? What’s going on that you are having such trouble sleeping?”

“Darius.”

Miles chuckled lightly. “Yes, well, I do see where he can cause some sleepless nights. I take it that your insomnia has been resolved?”

“Yes and no. We have a lot we need to work out, but I won’t be taking any more sleeping pills. I can’t believe that people actually thought I was trying to kill myself. They pumped my stomach and everything.”

“Well, Julian, you were unresponsive when they brought you in.”

“Duh! I took four sleeping pills. I was asleep.” Julian rolled his eyes as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Okay, okay, I get the picture. But you have to understand something here, Julian. You took sleeping pills, enough of a dosage to

knock you out. You were brought in unresponsive. We had to pump your stomach and give you fluids. You've been asleep for more than twenty-four hours. I think we had a right to be worried. Don't you?"

"I guess," Julian responded quietly as he brought his hands down to fiddle nervously with the edge of the blanket. "I didn't mean to make anyone upset. Darius and I had had a big argument, and I was just so tired. All I wanted to do was get some sleep."

"I understand that. But we can't have you risking your health like this anymore." Miles stood up and patted Julian's hand. "No taking more than the prescribed amount. Understood?"

Julian nodded his head, feeling rather sheepish that he had caused such a stir. He tentatively looked up at Miles. "Can I go home now?"

"I think we can arrange that. I'll get your paperwork done, and we can release you. I'll let the big guy know you are free to go"—Miles glanced down at his watch—"in about thirty minutes, okay?"

Julian eagerly nodded. "Thanks, Doc."

"No problem, Julian. And listen, don't let Darius get to you. He can be overbearing and egotistical most of the time, but he really does have a heart of gold. And from what I've seen, he wants to give that heart to you."

* * * *

Twenty minutes later a very relieved Darius wheeled Julian out of the front doors of Cathedral Park Hospital and put him into a nice shiny black limousine. As soon as Darius climbed in behind Julian, he reached over and pulled Julian into his lap and pushed Julian's head down onto his chest.

Dino climbed in behind them and shut the door before settling into the seat across from them. Darius heard Dino chuckle as he struggled with Julian. Julian was trying to extract himself from Darius's arms, and Darius was doing everything he could to keep Julian right where he was.

“Julian, stop struggling,” Dino said. “You’re fine right where you are. Just sit back and relax. Darius is going to take good care of you.”

Julian glared over at Dino but settled back into Darius’s chest anyway. “Fine!” He crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his chin out in protest, sending Dino into another round of laughing.

They rode in silence for a while until Darius realized that Julian had fallen back to sleep. Darius scooted Julian farther up in his arms and tucked him in a little more, wrapping both arms around him.

Julian mumbled a little bit but buried his head against Darius, sliding one hand along Darius’s chest to lay over his heart. Darius watched him for several moments before glancing over at Dino.

“Why does he do that?”

“Do what?” Dino asked.

“He always does exactly what you tell him to do. I have to wheedle and plead to get him to do what I want, but you just tell him something once and he does it. Why?”

Darius saw Dino turn away to stare out the car window for several moments before looking back to Darius. “Do you know anything about Julian’s coming out?”

When Darius shook his head no, Dino continued. “Julian figured out he was gay about the time he turned sixteen years old. His relationship with his family was never a strong one, but the day that he told them he was gay, they really stepped up to the plate. They threw him out on the spot. No money, no food, no place to go.”

Darius glanced down at the bundle he held in his arms. “My god, that’s horrible!” He remembered how it had been when he had come out to his mother. She had been a little disappointed but had accepted his choice with love and understanding.

“Yeah, something like that. Anyway, after he wandered the streets, hungry and cold, for a few days, he finally got the bright idea to find himself a *sugar daddy*. He came into this bar I was in and was going to hit up the guys there. Basically, he was just looking for a

roof over his head and a hot meal. The first guy he propositioned was me.”

Darius’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You?”

Dino crossed his arms over his chest as he nodded. “Yeah. I have to tell you, I almost considered taking him up on his proposal. He was quite beautiful, even then. But I knew just by looking at him that he didn’t really want a lover. He needed a friend more. So, I took him in, gave him a place to live, a roof over his head, food in his stomach. I made him finish high school, then helped him get into college. The rest is history. We’ve been friends ever since.”

“So, you’ve never—”

“No, we’ve never had sex. That’s not what our relationship is about. That’s why he trusts me. I’ve never taken anything from him or tried to make him into what I wanted him to be. I just accepted him the way he is, craziness and all.”

Darius leaned down and rubbed his cheek softly across the top of Julian’s head. “I guess I have a lot of work ahead of me. I want him to trust me like he trusts you.”

“Then don’t lie to him. Tell him the truth. Tell him why you have such an issue being intimate with him. He’ll understand, Darius. Right now he’s confused. All he knows is that you don’t want him. Explain things to him, and I’ll bet you you’ll earn some of that trust.”

“I don’t know, Dino. That all seems so simple. He’s a young, hot-blooded, gorgeous guy. Why in the hell would he want to be with an old stick-in-the-mud like me?”

“Sometimes simple is better. Just tell him. Give him a chance to decide what he wants. I think you owe him that, at least.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“No guessing about it, Darius,” Dino replied. He chuckled a little. “You’d be surprised what the truth can get you.”

All too soon they pulled up to a large apartment building not too far from Darius’s club. A doorman quickly came over and opened the

door, allowing Darius to climb out with the precious bundle still asleep in his arms.

“Thank you, Jeremy.”

“How are you today, Mr. Alexander?”

“I’m good, thank you for asking. How’s the wife and those beautiful children of yours? I hear number five is soon to appear?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Alexander. Janet is due any day now. We can’t wait. We’re hoping for a boy this time. I feel a little outnumbered with a wife and four little girls at home. Even the cat is female.”

“But you wouldn’t trade a single one of them, though, would you?”

The doorman chuckled. “Nope. Not a one.”

Once Dino had climbed from the car, Jeremy walked over and opened the main door to the building. Dino and Darius stepped through, Darius turning back to the doorman suddenly.

“Oh, Jeremy, this is Dino Marcelli,” he said, indicating Dino. “And this beautiful creature is Julian Sinclair. Both of them are to be given total access to the penthouse, anytime, day or night, along with their friends Joseph and Andrew, huh?”

Darius looked quickly over at Dino for more information.

“Joseph Patron and Andrew Gordon.”

Jeremy nodded. “Very good, Mr. Alexander.” Jeremy quickly pushed the elevator button and punched in the code for the penthouse. Darius and Dino stepped into the elevator and rode up to the penthouse on the tenth floor. The elevator door opened into a large foyer.

It was a very nice condo. Artfully decorated in black leather furniture, the sunken living room area could easily make the front pages of any design magazine. There were floor-to-ceiling windows all along two sides of the corner living room. From there Dino could see most of the nearby river and downtown area. A large winding staircase was off to one side of the entry to the living room.

Beyond the living room was a formal dining area that could easily seat no less than twelve people. Again, it was decorated in black and glass. The kitchen was huge, nearly as big as Julian's entire apartment. It was a chef's dream kitchen, with every conceivable kitchen convenience imaginable.

"I'm going to go put him to bed," Darius said.

"You'd think someone that had slept for twenty four hours wouldn't need to sleep," Dino replied.

"Miles said he might sleep a little more."

Dino nodded. "I'll just wait here."

Darius carried Julian up the stairs and into his bedroom. He pulled the covers back and carefully laid Julian down. He looked so good there, sleeping peacefully in Darius's bed. Darius just hoped he could keep Julian there.

Darius could hear Dino chuckling as he walked back downstairs and headed straight for the wet bar. He quickly poured himself a small drink and swallowed all of it before glaring over at Dino.

"What?"

Dino laughed a little harder. "I love your condo, very chic. I'll bet you could feature this place in a design magazine."

Darius looked around the room, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess. I hired someone to decorate it. Doesn't matter much to me. It's just a place."

"You realize that Julian will hate this place, right?"

Darius looked around again, his eyebrows drawn together in confusion. "Why? What's wrong with it? The decorator assured me that it was very *in*."

"Oh, I'm sure it is. But it's all very monochrome. Julian is all about color and comfort. This place will give him the creeps."

"Then he can decorate it however he wants. As long as he is happy, he can do anything with the damn place."

"Really? You'd let me redecorate your condo?" came a sleepy voice from the stairway.

Two heads swung towards the stairs. One was chuckling at the surprised look on Julian's face. The other softened in adoration as Julian walked farther into the room.

"Baby, this is your place as much as mine. You can do anything you want, as long as you're happy. Hell, if you really don't like it, I'll buy us a house somewhere else. You just say the word, and I'll get out my checkbook."

"Darius—" Julian began.

Before he could say more, there was a buzz from the house phone. Darius walked over and picked it up. He spoke briefly with the person on the other end before hanging up, then walking towards the elevator.

Julian watched him go, a slight frown on his face. He looked over at Dino. "You want to fill me in here? What's going on?"

Dino just shrugged his shoulders. "I don't have a clue. But it seems to me the big guy is asking you to move in with him."

"Oh, I don't think so. One blow job does not a relationship make. No matter how good it was, I am not playing this hot-and-cold game with Darius. And I'm not about to play house with him until he figures out what he wants."

"Julian, you need to—"

"Julian doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to do, and that includes listening to me," Darius said as he stood in the entryway with another man. "I hope that he will give me some time to explain everything, but if he chooses not to, that is his choice."

* * * *

Julian looked at Darius in complete surprise. Where had that come from? Darius was usually insistent that he have his own way, but suddenly he was letting Julian make all the decisions?

"Please, join me in the living room, Julian," Darius asked. "This concerns you."

Julian looked at Dino, silently asking him what was going on. Dino just shrugged his shoulders as he walked farther down into the living room to sit down. He didn't seem to have a clue either.

Darius waited until everyone was seated, Dino and the stranger in the suit on the couch, Julian sitting in a chair by himself, and Darius standing beside him. Darius reached down and picked him up and sat right back down, Julian cuddled on his lap.

"Darius," Julian squeaked.

"This is Alan Simpson, my lawyer. Alan, this is Julian Sinclair and Dino Marcelli. I called Alan from the hospital and asked him here today because I want to show to you that I want a long-term relationship with you. None of this fly-by-night crap."

"Mr. Alexander, are you sure you want to do this? As your attorney, I must strongly advise against this course of action," Alan asked quietly.

"I've never been more positive of anything in my life, Alan. I plan on—I'm hoping, anyway, that Julian will be in my life for a very long time. If this is one of the ways that I can ease his mind, I'll do it. The rest...the rest is between us."

Julian looked between Darius and the reluctant lawyer. He couldn't figure out what was going on. But clearly Alan Simpson was not happy doing whatever Darius was telling him to do.

"Very well. Mr. Sinclair," he began as he opened his briefcase and pulled out a stack of papers, "per Mr. Alexander's request, I have transferred fifty percent ownership of all of Mr. Alexander's holdings, properties, and business interests into your name. Your name has also been added to all of Mr. Alexander's financial accounts as well."

Julian's mouth hung open as the lawyer handed him paper after paper with his name on it. Darius had done what?

"Additionally, this is a copy of Mr. Alexander's will. If anything should happen to him, the entire bulk of his holdings, minus a few stipends for certain specified people, go to you as his legal heir. Lastly, this is a signed agreement from Mr. Alexander that states that

if you choose to discontinue your relationship with Mr. Alexander for whatever reason, and at any time, you will continue to maintain fifty percent interest in any and all of Mr. Alexander's present and future holdings."

The attorney looked up at Julian. "Do you have any questions, Mr. Sinclair?"

Julian looked at the papers in his hands, astonishment written all over his face. He tossed the papers down on the coffee table and jumped up from Darius's lap. He started pacing around the room, his hands on his hips.

He abruptly turned around to glower at Darius's calm face. "Are you out of your ever-loving mind? I don't want your money. I never wanted your money. I could care less if you were as poor as a church mouse. I just wanted you. Change it back, Darius."

The attorney snidely smirked as he stood up and rapidly began picking up the papers Julian had thrown down on the table, replacing them in his briefcase.

"Sit down, Alan. You're not going anywhere," Darius said without looking at his attorney. He stood up and walked the few feet to take Julian into his arms. He hugged Julian close to him for several moments before taking his hand and pulling him out of the living room.

Glancing once behind him at Dino, he said, "Dino, don't let him leave. I'm not done with him. Call Joseph and Andrew if you have to. We'll be back after we...after we discuss a few things."

Dino nodded as he reached for the phone. "Just tell him the truth, Darius. He'll understand."

Darius nodded, turning back to push Julian up the steps of the sunken living room and down the hallway to the stairs leading up to his bedroom. He dragged Julian into the room, then shut and locked the door.

Julian took several steps into the room before turning to glare at Darius. He was somewhat surprised at the agitation he could see on Darius's face as Darius began striding back and forth across the room.

"Darius, you can't buy me," Julian whispered, wrapping his arms around himself, suddenly feeling very cold. "Your money doesn't mean anything to me."

"I know that, Julian. That's not why I did it. I did it so that you would know that I'm serious about this relationship. I want you in my life, permanently, and I will do everything within my power to tie you to me."

"Darius—"

"Julian, you need to listen to me, please. Dino says that I need to be honest with you, but it's hard for me. I'm afraid."

"Of what?" Julian asked curiously. Darius looked so anxious he was nearly wringing his hands together.

Darius took a single step to reach Julian and fell to his knees, wrapping his arms around him, his head buried in Julian's chest. Julian didn't have any choice but to hold on to Darius or he would have fallen over.

"Darius," he tried again.

"What if you hate me? Or you become afraid of me? I don't think I could live if I saw fear in your eyes, Julian. I don't want to lose you."

"Darius, what is going on? This is obviously about more than just your money."

"Oh, this has nothing to do with my money. This is about us, about why I suggested you find a lover."

Julian pushed Darius away and took a couple of steps back. *Oh, that...*

Darius sat there on his knees, his hands resting on his thighs. "Please, just let me explain, and when I'm done, if you still want to leave me, I'll let you go. You can even keep the money. I wasn't joking about that, Julian."

Julian sat down on the edge of the bed, his shoulders slumping slightly. “Fine. Say what you have to say.” Was there really an explanation for Darius’s behavior? Could he really explain away the distance he had put between them?

Darius looked down at his hands as he twisted them around in his lap. He took several deep breaths before looking back up at Julian. There were tears in his eyes as he gazed at Julian.

“I figured out I was gay at a very early age. I also figured out early that I preferred men that were smaller than me, a lot smaller. My first lover was a man named Brian. We were both young and stupid but very ready to try things out. I’m not sure if it was our lack of experience or just being stupid, but one thing led to another, and we had sex. It didn’t end well.”

“What happened?” Julian asked softly, afraid of the answer.

“Brian was not a big man, not like I am, but he was bigger than you by about six inches. Sometime during our little experience, Brian got hurt. Unfortunately, I didn’t know until the next day when the police showed up at my door that he had been hurt. Like I said, I don’t know if it was our inexperience or my size or what. All I do know is that a week later, when I was finally able to sneak my way into his room, he was covered in bruises. I don’t even remember hurting him. I guess I had just lost control.”

“Darius, there’s no way you could ever—”

“Please, Julian, just let me finish. This is hard enough as it is.”

Julian shut his mouth and nodded his head.

“His parents wanted me charged with sexual assault, but because the sex was consensual and we were both underage, the police wouldn’t bring any charges against me. My mother moved us out of state a few weeks later, and I never saw Brian again. That was nearly twenty years ago.”

He took another deep breath before he continued. “Since then, I’ve done everything in my power to make sure I stayed away from small men, until you came along.” He gave a small chuckle. “You

were such a surprise. One look at you and I knew I was lost. I wanted you so bad I was willing to do anything to have you, even if that meant I never got to have you physically.”

Julian slid down the bed to kneel before Darius, taking his hands into his. “Darius, you would never hurt me. If I don’t know anything else, I know that.”

“But that’s just it, Julian. I don’t know that. Look at what happened when we were in the bathroom at the hospital. I ripped the damn metal arm bar out of the wall just from coming in my pants. What do you think will happen if I really lose control? I can’t take that chance with you.”

“Darius, this all comes down to one really simple question. Do you want me?” Julian asked.

Darius closed his eyes, his head falling back as he groaned. “God, yes! I want you so bad I’m losing my mind.” He opened his eyes and leaned his head forward to look down at Julian, his eyes filled with so much hunger that the air in Julian’s chest stopped moving. “I’ve wanted you since the moment I first saw you. But I can’t have you. I can’t take the chance that I will hurt you.”

Julian quickly climbed to his feet. Darius, thinking Julian was rejecting him, let out a small whimper. Julian smiled down at him as he leaned down to give him a small kiss. “Stay right here. I’ll be right back. I’m going to prove to you that we can be together and you will never hurt me.”

“Julian—” Darius started when Julian walked towards the door.

“Don’t worry, Darius. You just let me take care of everything.”

Chapter Nine

“Handcuffs, I need handcuffs.”

Dino turned sharply when Julian’s anxious voice floated across the room. He saw Julian practically running down the stairs towards the living room. His face was all smiles, but Dino could see frustration below the surface.

“You need what?” Andrew asked, he and Joseph having arrived a few minutes beforehand. Dino had been filling them in on all that had been happening when Julian had come running down the stairs.

“I need handcuffs, at least two pair, preferably four. I have two at my house. Anyone else have any?”

“Uh, I have a couple pair,” Joseph added. “What exactly do you need them for?”

Julian flushed. “You don’t want to know. I just need them. Can somebody go to my place and get them, then get the ones from Joseph’s house?”

“I guess I can,” Joseph answered, looking a little flushed himself. “I, at least, know where mine are. Where do you keep yours?”

“They’re in one of those blue wicker boxes I keep on the bookshelf, right next to the television. They were a gag gift from the girls at work last year. I never thought I’d have the chance to use them. Now go—and be quick about it. I’m on a tight time frame here.”

* * * *

Julian handed his key to Joseph and watched him hurry out the door before turning back to face the three men left in the room. He felt his cheeks redden again at the knowing grin on Dino's face.

"Oh, just shut up. This is all your fault."

"My fault? How could this be my fault?"

"Oh, like you didn't have this planned the whole time. You knew what would happen when Darius told me the truth."

Dino grinned. "I had an idea."

"You might want to call Dillon and arrange to have the owner's table at the club. If I have anything to say about it, this is going to take quite a while. I've been waiting for weeks to get that man in my bed, and now he is right where I want him. I don't plan on letting him out anytime soon."

"Are you sure you don't want us to stick around, maybe just for a little while?" Dino asked.

"Hell, no. There are just some things a person needs to do without an audience. Speaking of which, Mr. Simpson, you can go. Darius will contact you tomorrow if he needs anything from you."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sinclair, I work for Mr. Alexander, not you. He asked me to stay here, and here is where I am be staying," he said as he grabbed the edges of his suit and pulled them together.

"Actually, Mr. Simpson, according to those papers you brought with you, you do work for me. And if you have a problem with that, you can take it up with Mr. Alexander tomorrow."

"He can take it up with me now," Darius's voice said from the top of the stairs. "Mr. Simpson, do you have a problem with Julian? Something you would like to share with the rest of us?"

"Mr. Alexander, I really meant no disrespect. I just—"

"Sounded like it to me," Andrew added quietly under his breath, receiving a hostile scowl from the stammering attorney.

Darius walked down the rest of the stairs and across the floor until he stood beside Julian, wrapping an arm around Julian's shoulders.

"I'm waiting, Mr. Simpson."

"I apologize if I have offended you, Mr. Alexander. That was not my intention."

"Well, I am offended. What part of 'Julian is my partner in everything' didn't you understand?" Darius frowned at Mr. Simpson. "Did you think I was joking?"

"No, not at all. I just don't understand why you have to put his name on everything without some sort of signed agreement between you. It's not like he's going to stick around for very long. His kind never do. He's just going to take your money and run. And then where will you be?"

Darius didn't say a word, but Julian could tell from the stiffening of his body that he was pissed. He just reached for the phone and dialed a number.

"Robert, this is Darius. I have young Alan Simpson here at my house. I asked him to have some papers drawn up concerning my partner, Julian. Yes, he's the one I mentioned to you. Apparently, Alan is concerned that Julian is after my money and he—yes, of course. He's right here."

Darius turned and held out the phone to the attorney. "Mr. Thyne would like to speak with you."

Alan Simpson looked angry but somewhat contrite as he took the phone from Darius. Julian didn't think was sorry he had voiced his opinion but that his boss was chewing him out. He could hear Mr. Thyne yelling through the phone.

"Are you stupid? I knew I never should have let you handle this. Darius Alexander has one of the largest accounts this firm has. If he says he wants to sign his life savings away to a sheep, you do it with a smile on your face. Do you understand me?"

"But—" Alan stammered.

"No buts from you, Alan. You will apologize to Mr. Alexander and his partner, and then you will get your ass back here to the office. You and I need to have a little discussion about who runs this firm."

“As his lawyer it is my duty to make sure some charlatan doesn’t take him for all he’s worth. The man he wants to sign half of everything he is worth to is a flaming—”

“I wouldn’t finish that sentence if I were you, Mr. Simpson,” Darius growled as he reached over and took the phone from the flustered attorney.

“Robert, you will immediately remove Mr. Simpson from my account. If he so much as breathes in my direction, I will move my account to another law firm. No, you have never given me the impression that you have an issue with my lifestyle. That’s one of the reasons your firm has retained my business all of these years. But I will not put up with anyone calling Julian names or attacking his character. He is, without a doubt, one of the finest men I have ever met.”

Darius nodded a few more times before smiling over at Julian. “Very well, Robert. And please don’t forget to remind Mr. Simpson that not only does this fall under lawyer-client confidentiality, but he also signed a non-disclosure agreement before he took on my account. If he says anything to anyone, I will sue him for so much money that his grandchildren will be paying it off. Yes, I’ll expect you at ten o’clock in the morning. Thank you, Robert.”

Julian was stunned at the feral gleam in Darius’s eyes as he hung up the phone and turned towards the lawyer. “Mr. Simpson, you’re fired. Please return my papers to me and leave the premises. If I ever see you on my property again or within one hundred feet of myself or Mr. Sinclair, I will have you arrested.”

“You can’t do this. I was only looking out for your best interests. You’re worth millions and millions of dollars. You can’t just sign it all away to some, some—”

Darius picked the sputtering lawyer up by his tie, lifting him several inches off the floor. “I can do whatever I want. It’s my money. I made it, every last cent of it. If I want my partner to have it, that’s my business and not yours. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Simpson?”

Darius growled out every last word as he escorted the cringing man to the elevator. Julian followed, chuckling when Darius tossed the man in through the open doors and grabbed his briefcase, opening it and pulling out his file before throwing the briefcase in after him.

“Good day, Mr. Simpson,” he said as he hit the down button for the elevator. He wiped his hands together in a good-riddance gesture and turned back to smile at Julian.

Julian laughed as he clapped his hands. “Way to go, Mr. Alexander. I’m pretty sure you just scared ten years off his life. Do you like to eat little children too?”

Darius had the grace to turn a little red in the face as he walked over and swept Julian up in his arms. Julian giggled as Darius leaned in and nibbled on his throat.

“The only thing I want to eat is you,” Darius whispered.

“What’d I miss?” Joseph asked from the entryway. In his hand he was carrying a small bag, which he handed to Julian with a wink.

“Darius is just trying to scare away the help. Nothing new there. So, we all ready to go to the club? Dillon’s saving us a booth.” Dino laughed.

Joseph and Andrew nodded and headed towards the door. Dino gave Julian one last, long look. “Are you sure about this, honey?”

Julian immediately nodded his head. “Yes, I’m sure. I’ll call you later, okay?”

Dino nodded. “Make sure you do. Darius”—Dino gave him a long look also—“this is your chance. Don’t blow it.”

Darius nodded his head and watched the three of them walk into the elevator, then the doors close. Turning his head to look down at the little man in his arms, he raised an eyebrow at him. “What now?”

Julian started giggling. “Upstairs, big guy, I have plans for you.” He held up the little brown bag in his hands and shook it, the items inside clanking together. Darius just raised another eyebrow at him but carried him upstairs anyway.

Once inside the bedroom, Darius let Julian's legs slide down until he was standing on his own two feet. Julian quickly grabbed a towel from the bathroom and set it on the side of the bed.

Looking up at Darius, he patted his chest. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course," Darius answered freely.

"Then I want you to take off all of your clothes and lie down on the bed."

Darius's jaw dropped open. "You want me to what?"

"You heard me."

"Julian, you know I can't do that. What if I lose control and you get hurt? I could—"

"Darius, honey, it's going to be okay. Trust me. I know what I'm doing."

He just shook his head no.

"Please?" Julian whispered. He knew he had gotten through the last of Darius's resistance when Darius dropped his head to his chest, taking several harsh breaths. After a moment he raised his eyes and looked down at Julian.

"Are you sure, Julian?"

"Just trust me, Darius. I promise, everything is going to be all right. Now, go do what I told you to do."

Julian watched with some interest as Darius walked over to the bed and began pulling his clothes off. *Damn, this is going to be good!* Watching Darius strip off his clothes, even from where he was standing behind him, was fabulous. He really was a gorgeous man.

When Darius dropped his pants to the floor, Julian thought he might stop breathing. He had the most perfect ass he had ever seen, two round globes begging to be kissed. *Yum!* He couldn't wait.

Julian watched Darius cast him a nervous glance over his shoulder, blushing. He quickly climbed onto the bed and lay down on his back, his hard cock springing free.

Julian smiled as he walked towards the bed, the little brown bag held in his hands. He climbed up on the bed and opened the bag.

Pulling out one handcuff, he swung it on his finger in front of Darius's face.

"Give me your arms."

Darius suddenly saw where Julian was headed, quickly holding both his hands out to him. Julian hooked a handcuff on each wrist, then crawled across the bed to hook the other end of each handcuff to a bedpost.

Once Darius's arms were secured over his head, he moved down to handcuff his legs to each of the bottom bedposts. Once he was done, he stood on the side of the bed and looked down at his achievement.

Darius lay spread-eagle on the bed, a limb handcuffed to each corner of the four-poster frame. The best part was that he was naked. *Okay, maybe that isn't the best part*, Julian thought, seeing Darius's hard cock jutting up from his groin.

"Can you get free?" Julian whispered. Darius jerked on each limb several times before shaking his head no. "Good. Now it's my turn to show you how good it can be between us."

Julian climbed up onto the bed and swung his leg over Darius so that he was straddling his stomach. He could feel Darius's cock pushing against his butt cheeks. Crawling up Darius's chest, he stuck out his tongue and slowly licked along his jawbone.

He kissed and nibbled his way up Darius's chin to his mouth, paying special attention to his lips. Julian played a game of hide-and-seek with Darius's tongue, shooting in to touch him, then back out, making Darius chase him until he was fairly shaking.

"Julian," he hissed.

"Yeah, Darius? What do you want, baby? Tell me," Julian whispered against Darius's lips.

"Please, baby, need you naked, need to feel you against me."

Julian suddenly sat up, his fingers going to the buttons on his shirt. "All you had to do was ask."

He could feel Darius's eyes on him as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it from his body. Julian suddenly stood to his feet, still straddling his body and lowered the waistband of his jogging pants.

When Julian had the waistband down just above his groin area, Julian waved a finger in front of Darius. "Uh-uh, close your eyes or they don't come off."

Julian chuckled when Darius quickly closed his eyes. He knew that Darius could hear everything he did. He lifted one leg, then the other, pulling his pants off before dropping them on the floor. Finally, Julian stood over Darius totally naked.

"Okay, you can open your eyes now."

"Fuck me!" Darius whispered.

* * * *

Julian gradually lowered his body over Darius's, both of them groaning when their bodies met, skin to skin, for the very first time. "Oh yeah, that's good," Julian whispered as he slowly slid against Darius.

"Julian, baby, I need—" Darius pleaded, lifting his head up off the bed.

Julian leaned over Darius, his body resting on his arms. He slowly lowered his body until his nipple was pressed up against Darius's mouth. Darius stuck out his tongue and licked at the tight little nub, manipulating the little silver ring piercing with his tongue.

Julian groaned, his arms shaking with his need. When Darius turned his head and took the other nipple into his mouth, it was more than he could take. He grabbed Darius by the hair, lifting his body off of him, and scooted down until their lips met.

It was a rough, savage kiss, filled with longing and need. "Need you," Darius murmured against Julian's mouth, nipping at his lips. His hips lifted, grinding his cock down against Julian's ass.

Julian lifted his head and smiled down at Darius. "You can have me." He reached over the side of the bed and grabbed the brown paper bag again, pulling out a brand new bottle of lube. He held it up. "A present from Joseph."

As Julian opened the bottle and poured some out onto his fingers, Darius gulped. "Remind me to buy him a car."

Julian dropped the bottle onto the bed, laughing before his face went serious. "You want to watch me get ready?"

"Oh, hell yes!" Darius hissed.

Julian turned around until he was again straddling Darius's body. With Darius's hard cock pulsing in front of him, Julian couldn't restrain himself. He leaned over and flicked his tongue across the head, licking up the small drop of pre-cum glistening on the surface.

Not to be left out, Darius lifted his head and ran his tongue across Julian's puckered hole. Julian's body jerked several times. As payback, he lowered his mouth completely over Darius's cock and sucked in, lavishing him with his tongue. He repeated this motion several times until he had Darius squirming and groaning for him to stop.

"Julian, please, I'm gonna blow, baby. You have to stop!"

Julian lifted his head and smiled over his shoulder at Darius while taking his finger and slowly inserting it into his eager hole. He could see Darius's eyes widening as he fingered himself, quickly adding a second one.

"Damn, that's pretty, baby. Does it feel good?"

Julian closed his eyes as he nodded. "Oh yeah. But it's going to feel so much better when you do this."

Julian opened his eyes and watched as Darius's eyes nearly crossed at his words before adding a third finger and moving it around, in and out repeatedly, until he felt he was ready. He quickly added some more lube to his hand and stroked the cock in front of him.

Julian wiped his hand on the nearby towel and quickly turned his body around until he was facing Darius once again. He could see the fear in his eyes.

“Are you ready for me, baby?”

Darius swallowed deeply, then nodded his head. He looked up at Julian, his eyes pleading. “Please don’t let me hurt you, Julian.”

“You’re not going to hurt me, Darius. I promise. Just feel.”

Julian grabbed a hold of Darius’s erection and placed it against himself. With his eyes on Darius’s, he slowly lowered himself down, little by little. It wasn’t easy. Darius was size proportionate throughout his entire body, here included. Julian realized that he should have used four, maybe five fingers. Both Julian and Darius groaned when they were finally together.

Julian slowly began pumping his hips against Darius, feeling him move in and out of him. He had never felt so full before. Darius touched every inch inside of him, the head of his cock hitting his sweet spot with every thrust.

Julian began to thrust his hips up and down, harder and faster. Darius pulled on the handcuffs holding him down. “Baby, my hands, need my hands, need to touch you.”

“Don’t need them,” Julian whispered harshly, his breath coming in short gasps.

“But you—”

“Don’t need them. Oh fuck, Darius!”

Julian threw back his head, the muscles on his neck cording and his whole body stiffening. His body jerked as his cock erupted, shooting semen across both of them.

Darius arched his body seconds later and roared his pleasure. Darius’s whole body trembled beneath Julian as he shuddered hard inside of him.

Their heavy breaths were all that was heard in the silent room as Julian settled himself across Darius’s chest. No words were spoken. None were needed.

Finally Darius lifted his head and gave Julian a light kiss on his head. “Baby, get the key and unlock these handcuffs. I need to hold you.”

Julian raised his eyes to Darius’s. “Key? There’s a key?”

Chapter Ten

Julian stared at the little silver key tied around the water bottle Dillon set down in front of him. He untied the small string and held up the key to Dino and Dillon. “Okay, guys, it’s been nearly a week already. This is starting to get a little old.”

“Honey, we just wanted to make sure you were prepared. Better to be safe than sorry.” Dino laughed.

“Haven’t you ever heard of safe sex?” Dillon added, nearly pushing Dino over as they both collapsed against the bar laughing hysterically.

Julian rolled his eyes at their laughter. It had been nearly a week since Julian had handcuffed Darius down to their bed and made love to him—and forgot the key to unlock the damn handcuffs. Dino and Dillon were still laughing over that one.

They hadn’t stopped laughing since the minute Julian had called them on the phone and asked them bring the key back. Even after showing up at Darius’s condo, they had refused to give Julian the key, instead running past him to the bedroom and unlocking an extremely embarrassed Darius themselves.

Since then they had done everything within their power to remind Julian that he had been so wrapped up in making love with Darius, he had forgotten to get the key for the handcuffs. Nearly every time Julian turned around, they were leaving keys all over the place.

He now had a box full of them in every shape and size. While he was slightly uncomfortable, and still horribly embarrassed, that he had forgotten the key, he had started keeping the keys. First, so that he

would never have to go through that scenario again and second, because it was actually kind of funny.

Julian slipped the key into his pocket and took a quick drink of his water, glaring at Dino and Dillon the entire time. Setting his water back on the bar, he stuck out his tongue at them. "I'm going to go dance."

That just sent Dino and Dillon into another fit of laughter. Julian just shook his head as he walked out onto the dance floor and started dancing. As he whirled around the floor, his gaze flickered to the large one-way mirror on the second floor overlooking the bar.

Knowing Darius watched him, Julian threw a little more sway into his hips, a little more swing into his step. Darius loved to watch Julian dance. He said it was like watching him have sex on the dance floor. But now, Julian only danced for Darius.

Julian now knew that he belonged to Darius as much as Darius belonged to him. Since that night nearly a week ago, they had been going at it like rabbits. Although Julian had yet to convince Darius to make love yet without the handcuffs, each time had been wonderful.

Making love with Darius was the most wonderful thing he had ever experienced. And he had no doubt that they would soon be doing it without handcuffs. They had both already relieved each other's tension using various other means without the restraints involved. It was just the final act of intercourse that still scared Darius enough that he insisted on being restrained.

Julian ran his hands up from his hips and over his chest, his eyes never leaving the mirror he knew Darius stood behind. He blew Darius a little kiss and mouthed the words "love you" before turning away to dance back over closer to the crowd. He smiled as he danced around the floor thinking about all the wonderful times yet to come with Darius in his life.

Strong, thick arms suddenly lifted Julian up into the air causing him to cry out in unexpected fear before he realized that it was

Darius. He let loose his joyous laughter as he wrapped his arms around his large lover and dropped kisses all over his face.

Darius pulled Julian tight against his chest as if he had forgotten the multitudes of people surrounding them. They were just two people in a crowd and the only thing that mattered to him was the small man in his arms.

“It’s not nice to play with fire, angel. You could get burned.”

Julian just grinned up at Darius. He ran his hand over Darius’s face before leaning in to kiss him. “Promise?” he whispered.

He had the sudden urge to let loose a primal yell as he watched Darius’s eyes darken and felt the tensing of his body. Watching his lover become aroused was almost as good as the actual lovemaking, almost.

“Do you know how beautiful you are to me?” Darius asked.

Julian reached into his pocket and pulled out a key, dangling it in front of Darius’s face. “Show me?” Julian didn’t think it was possible, but Darius’s eyes darkened even further, and he turned abruptly, carrying Julian off the dance floor towards the stairs leading to his office.

He seemed to take the stairs two at a time as he carried Julian up to his office, shutting and locking the door behind him. He quickly carried Julian over to the black leather couch against one wall and sat down, pulling Julian down to straddle his legs.

Julian immediately reached over and buried his hands in Darius’s hair, pulling his head in for a frantic, needy kiss as Darius’s hands began working the buttons of his shirt. He rubbed himself against Darius like a cat, nearly purring.

“Want you, Darius, want you now,” he groaned when Darius lifted him up enough for his lips to bite down on one of Julian’s nipple rings, tugging gently. His hand dropped from Darius’s hair down to the buttons of his black slacks.

He had Darius’s slacks unbuttoned and his hard cock out and in his hands in seconds. He stroked his lover’s solid length, relishing in

the feel of the silky, hard flesh beneath in hand. Darius was long and hard, drops of pre-cum dripping from him.

Darius dropped his head onto the back of the couch, savoring the feeling of Julian stroking him. Lifting his head, he reached for the buttons of Julian's slacks. "Off, baby, take them off," he pleaded as he yanked at Julian's pants.

Julian flipped his shoes off and wiggled around until he could push his slacks down his legs, then settled himself once more over Darius's lap, rubbing their hard cocks together to the enjoyment of them both.

"Lube, I don't have any—"

"Don't need any." Julian smiled.

"Don't want to hurt you, angel," Darius whispered.

Julian grabbed Darius's hand and brought it around to feel the butt plug lodged between his ass cheeks. At Darius's deep inhale, he giggled. "Told you we didn't need any."

"Oh fuck, have you had this in all night?"

Julian nodded eagerly, groaning when Darius grabbed the plug and tugged on it several times, pushing it in and out rapidly. *Damn, that felt good!*

"Oh yeah, wanted to be ready for you."

"Handcuffs," Darius growled as he pulled the butt plug out and dropped it on the couch beside him, then pulled Julian's body up against his own. "Need the handcuffs. Where are they?" His hands reached down and started searching for the handcuffs.

Julian's grin was impish as he grabbed Darius's cock placed against his entrance, sliding Darius inside before he could protest. Darius's hands instantly grabbed Julian's hips, holding him in place as the breath hissed out of his lungs.

"Julian, we can't, oh, God," he groaned as Julian began to move, rolling his hips against Darius's much larger ones. The pleasure was exquisite. He slowly began his own thrusting, plunging in and out of Julian's tight sheath.

Julian's entire body trembled as Darius took command of their lovemaking, the handcuffs all but forgotten. Each thrust into Julian nearly lifted him up in the air. The hands clamped on to Julian's hips held him in place.

Julian moaned as Darius prodded against his sweet spot again and again, calling out his name. He knew from the tightening of Darius's hands that he was close to release. He wanted it to be as amazing as his own growing climax.

As Julian's body began to tremble with impending release, Darius leaned forward and bit down on the side of his neck. Julian knew Darius would be leaving his mark on him, staking his claim of ownership for all to see.

Julian's hands clenched against his shoulders, head thrown back, as he screamed out Darius's name. His entire body stiffened as his inner muscles clamped down on Darius's throbbing cock.

Suddenly Darius cried out. Julian felt his fingernails dig into the soft flesh of his hips as he arched and thrust deep inside. Darius roared loud enough to shake the windows as he joined Julian in ecstasy, filling Julian with everything he had to give.

Darius wrapped shaking arms around Julian as he collapsed on his chest, his breath coming in harsh pants. It took several moments for either man to move. Finally, Julian pushed himself up with a hand placed on Darius's chest for leverage.

He reached over for his pants and pulled something out. Sitting up, he grinned at Darius. His grin grew as he held the little object in his hand out to Darius. "I believe this is yours, love."

Darius looked down at the small brass object in Julian's hand, confused. His jaw dropped open in astonishment as he looked back at Julian's smug face. "You...we...I didn't hurt you?"

"I'm fine, Darius. Not a scratch on me."

"But...you...we didn't—"

Julian leaned over and kissed Darius on the nose. "No, we didn't, and no, you didn't hurt me. I'm fine, great, in fact. I feel wonderful.

And so do you,” he whispered the last as he wiggled his hips where Darius was still buried deep inside of him.

Darius pulled Julian against him. Julian could feel Darius’s heart pounding in his chest. Suddenly, he began to laugh.

Julian laughed at the exuberance of his lover. He knew it would only be a matter of time before Darius realized what he already knew. Darius would never hurt him. He would anger him, drive him crazy, but he would never hurt him. He just didn’t have it in him to hurt someone he cared about.

He had begun to wonder over the course of the last week if Darius could ever really hurt anyone. After they had made love, he had even gone to Dillon and asked him about Brian. Dillon was almost as tight-lipped as Darius was concerning the whole situation.

His next option was to contact Darius’s mother and ask her about it. Why he felt a need to know, he couldn’t say. But something inside of him said that there was something off about the whole situation. He just couldn’t put his finger on it.

Darius picking him up and setting him on his feet brought him out of his deep thoughts. Darius leaned down and grabbed Julian’s slacks and pulled them up before grabbing a towel and cleaning up both of them.

Once they were both dressed, Darius pulled Julian over towards his desk. He sat down in his large black leather chair and pulled Julian down onto his lap. He reached over and pulled a small bag out of his desk drawer and held it up to Julian.

“I have something for you.”

“Darius, I don’t need you to buy me things. You’ve already given me enough.”

“Ah, but I am only returning this to its rightful owner, angel.” Darius opened the small bag and turned it upside down, dumping the small object inside into the palm of his hand.

“This belongs to you, baby, and I just want to give it back to you.” Darius lifted the small ring and pushed it back onto Julian’s finger

before bringing Julian's hands up to his lips, placing a small kiss on the D and J shaped by diamonds. "This is where it belongs."

"Darius, I didn't think I would ever see this again," Julian whispered as he held his hand up, staring at the small ring on his finger. He had felt lost without it. Who knew that such a small thing could come to mean so much to him?

Julian was so intent on the ring on his finger that he nearly jumped out of his skin when the phone on Darius's desk rang. Darius chuckled as he wrapped his one arm around Julian to steady him and reached for the phone with the other one.

"Darius. Okay, I'll be right down." Darius hung up the phone and lifted Julian onto his feet before standing himself. "They need me downstairs, baby."

Darius swatted Julian on the ass as he pushed him towards the door. "Why don't you go down and do a little dancing while I take care of this? It should only take a few moments, and then we can go get something to eat."

He gave Julian a quick kiss when they reached the bottom of the stairs. "Go have fun, baby."

Julian's smile was dazed as he walked towards the dance floor and began dancing. Someone started dancing behind him. Julian wasn't really interested in who it was. His eyes were on Darius as he talked briefly with Dillon, then one of the front door bouncers.

It wasn't until the man behind him began rocking his hips suggestively against his that Julian really noticed he was there. Julian took a step forward away from him, but the determined man followed him, holding Julian against his body by his hips.

"Dude!" he exclaimed as he started to turn around. "Back off, maaa—Johnny? What are you doing here?" Julian was so totally stunned to see his ex-boyfriend standing behind him that, for a moment, he didn't move.

"Missed you, babe. Thought we might, you know, hook up again." Johnny's intentions were all too clear as he pressed his growing

erection against Julian. Julian saw a slight movement behind him and looked to see three other men standing off to the side, eyeing him like a piece of fresh meat.

“Brought your butt buddies with you, I see,” Julian replied bitterly as he tried to disengage Johnny’s hands from his waist. Johnny was like an octopus. His hands were everywhere. Julian would get one hand detached only to have to fight off another hand.

“Would you stop?” Julian said vehemently.

“Oh, come on, babe, you know you missed me. I just want to spend a little time with you. All of us do.” He snickered as his three friends joined him, surrounding Julian on the dance floor, effectively pinning him in a circle between all of them.

“No, Johnny, I want you to get your hands off of me.” Julian started feeling claustrophobic and threatened when the four men took a few steps closer, blocking Julian’s view of anyone else on the dance floor. All four of the men were much bigger than Julian was.

“Don’t be like that, Jules.” Johnny smirked. Julian suddenly felt his arms being pinned behind him as Johnny reached for the button on his slacks. “We just want to have a little fun.”

“My name is not Jules. It’s Julian. And I do not want to have any fun with you. Get your hands off of me!” Julian knew he was starting to get hysterical, but he couldn’t help it. The last time he had seen Johnny, he was having the crap beat out of him because he wouldn’t “play nice” with Johnny and his friends.

Julian started to struggle and opened his mouth to scream when strong hands lifted Johnny out of the way and tossed him across the room like he weighed nothing. The other three men were quickly dealt with in the same manner, and Julian was suddenly wrapped in strong, loving arms.

“Julian, baby, are you okay? Did they hurt you?” exclaimed Darius’s anxious voice. His hands quickly moved over Julian’s arms and legs. Finding no discernable injuries, he wrapped his arms tightly around him and hugged him close. “Oh, god, baby, when Dillon told

me that someone was bothering you, and then I saw you surrounded by those men, oh god, Julian, I thought I would lose my mind.” Darius began dropping kisses all over Julian’s hair and face.

Julian snuggled into Darius’s tight embrace, feeling safe and protected. “I’m fine.”

“What happened?” Darius asked.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” yelled a voice from a several feet away. “Jules and I were just renewing our friendship when you interfered.”

Julian quickly turned his head as he looked up at Darius. “That’s not true, I swear. I told them to leave me alone.”

“Oh please, Jules, that’s not what you said the last time you took the four of us on. You wanted it then, and you know you wanted it now.”

Julian began to protest when Darius held up his hand for silence. “Let’s take this upstairs where we can have a little more privacy, if you don’t mind, gentlemen.”

Julian didn’t know what to think when Darius grabbed him by the arm and began escorting him up the stairs. Four really large bouncers were escorting Johnny and his friends right behind him.

* * * *

When they got upstairs, Darius pointed for Julian to sit in a chair by the far wall. “Sit!” he directed. He watched Johnny and his buddies walk in and pointed them to the couch before sitting down in his own chair.

He folded his hands together and sat back in his chair, carefully looking at each person in the room sternly. After several long moments, he let his hands drop into his lap and looked at Johnny.

“Your name is?”

“Jonathan Murphy the third,” Johnny replied, a haughty tone in his voice.

Darius stared at Johnny for a few more moments before nodding his head. “Jonathan Murphy the third? Your father is Jonathan Murphy, CEO of Murphy Industries?”

Johnny nodded his head, his smile snide. “I assume you’ve heard of my father?”

Darius nodded. “Oh yes, I’ve definitely heard of your father.” He looked over at the other three men with Johnny. “And they are?”

“My friends,” Johnny replied. His confidence and egotistical manner seemed high now that Darius knew who his father was. Murphy Industries was a multi-million dollar business.

Darius nodded again. He still hadn’t glanced at Julian. “Mr. Murphy, would you please tell me what occurred on the dance floor of my club?”

Johnny nodded eagerly. “It’s very simple. Jules here is my—an old friend. We had a little misunderstanding not long ago, and he—”

“That’s not true. You’re lying,” Julian started in, only to get a glare from Darius.

“Sit down!” Darius bellowed at Julian. “I do not believe I asked you for an explanation.” He glanced back at Johnny, his tone much more diplomatic. “Now, you were saying, Mr. Murphy?”

Johnny smirked over at Julian. “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, Jules here was a little upset with me. You know how it is. He thinks he can do whatever he wants. Every once in a while, I need to show him who’s really in charge.”

“Yes, of course, you were just reprimanding him, reminding him of his place, so to speak. Correct? And this happened tonight?”

“Oh, no, that was a few months ago. Like I said, we had a misunderstanding. Jules forgot where his place was, as you said. So, I had to remind him. He was a little upset with me. He needs me more than I need him. So, I went to Europe on vacation for a while. When I got home last week, I found that he had moved and was playing around. My friends and I simply came in tonight to reclaim what was mine.”

“So, how exactly did this disagreement start on my dance floor?”

“It’s very simple. Jules belongs to me and does what I tell him to do. Over the time I was gone, he seems to have forgotten that little rule. My friends and I were just going to have a little fun with him, remind him who he belongs to.”

Darius nodded his head several times as if he understood exactly where Johnny was coming from. “You mentioned that he was playing around. Here? In my bar?”

“Yes.” Johnny gave Julian a reproving look. “Seems he found someone to play with while I was on vacation without asking my permission. You have to understand, I put a lot of time and energy into him.”

“That must take a lot of dedication, Mr. Murphy.”

“Well, yes. Yes, it does. I’m glad you understand.”

“And you say that he belongs to you? That he’s been playing around behind your back?” The irritation was clear for all to see on Darius’s face.

“Yes, certainly. He’s been mine for over a year now. I found out through a few friends that he’s been messing around with someone here at your club, a regular. That’s why I came in here tonight.”

“Do you know who this, this *regular* is?”

“No, but I suspect that it is his friend, Dino. I never did like that guy. He said he didn’t have any designs on Jules, but I saw the way he looked at him. He’s always wanted him. And the moment my back was turned—”

Darius stood up from his seat and walked to his wet bar and poured himself a drink. He turned briefly to the men on the couch. “Can I get you gentlemen anything? A drink? Glass of wine?”

“Yes, a drink would be very nice,” Johnny replied, his grin getting bigger and bigger. Darius poured four more drinks and handed them to Johnny and his friends before stepping back to sit on the edge of his desk, his arms folded across his chest.

“So, just to see if I understand everything, this young man, Jules you call him, is your—?”

“Jules is my boy toy.”

“Boy toy, then, and several months ago you had to remind him that you are in charge. After that you went on vacation. When you came back, you were told by a friend that he was down here in my club fooling around on you with someone else. You and your friends came in here tonight to reclaim what you’ve said is your property and to have a little fun with him, renew your acquaintance, so to speak. Is all of this correct?”

“Yes, I’d say that about sums it up. We didn’t mean to cause a scene in your establishment, however. Jules was being uncooperative. He can be a little headstrong sometimes, but that’s one of things I like about him. It’s no fun playing with someone that just lays there.” Johnny leered over at Julian. “It’s much more fun when they protest a little. And Jules can be a lot of fun.”

Darius poured the men another drink and went to sit behind his desk again. He folded his hands briefly and looked at them. “You understand that I do not allow disturbances like this to happen in my club? I run a clean club. For those with more...discriminating tastes, we have a VIP lounge.”

“Yes, of course, and I do apologize for that. We never meant to break your club rules. However, if we had known you had a VIP lounge, well—”

“No, of course you didn’t.” Darius looked at Johnny. “The VIP lounge is only for a few *select* guests to enjoy, you understand? I would need to verify a few things before I could even discuss the VIP lounge with you.”

“Of course, I understand perfectly,” Johnny replied. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card, handing it to Darius.

Darius picked up the card and looked at it before nodding his head again. “This should only take a moment,” he said as he picked up the phone on his desk and dialed the number on the business card.

“Mr. Murphy, please. Darius Alexander. Yes, I’ll hold.”

Julian held his breath as they all listened intently to Darius. “Jonathan, Darius Alexander here. Yes, yes, I’m fine. Your son Jonathan came into my club tonight, and there was a small disturbance. No, no, of course I didn’t call the police. I feel this can be handled between us.”

* * * *

Out of the corner of his eye, Julian saw the wicked smile that crossed Johnny’s face. From where he was sitting, he knew that Darius saw it too. The stiffness of his posture told him that Darius was not a happy man.

“It took me a little while to find out what had happened, but here it is. Several months ago your son had a falling out with his current, er, boy toy, I believe he called him. Yes, one Julian Sinclair. Oh, you’ve heard of him? Then you know who I’m talking about, good. My understanding from your son is that he felt the need to teach his *boy toy* a lesson in manners at that time. So, you know about this incident too? The one where Mr. Sinclair ended up in the hospital? Good, good. Anyway, tonight Johnny and three of his friends came into my club because he had heard that Julian Sinclair had been hanging out here with one of my regulars and wanted to reclaim what he felt was his property.”

Darius paused and nodded his head several times. “Jonathan, let me put you on speakerphone. I want everyone to clearly hear what I have to say concerning this little situation.” Darius reached over and hit a button on the phone and then hung up the hand piece.

Julian could have fallen out of his chair if he hadn’t been holding on to the edges so hard when Darius crooked his finger at him. Julian stood up and walked across the floor to stand beside him. He was so tense that he nearly yelped when Darius’s arm wrapped around him and pulled him down to sit on his lap.

“First, Jonathan, I want to explain the numerous problems I have with this whole situation. I want it perfectly understood where I am coming from. Julian Sinclair is my partner, in my life and in my business, and has been for quite some time. As such, if your son continues to harass my partner in any form, I will be compelled to advise him to call in all loans we have with you personally, as well as cancel any contracts we have with Murphy Industries.”

Julian could hear both the senior and junior Murphy’s sputtering from where he had his head buried in Darius’s neck. Darius, in turn, was rubbing his back to calm him.

“But, but, Darius, that totals in the millions of dollars, just in the personal loans. How can I possibly raise that kind of money? It would bankrupt me.”

“Then, Jonathan, I suggest that you put a leash on your son.” Darius reached into the drawer of his desk and pulled out a file, which he flipped open. “Would you like a list of the injuries your son inflicted upon Mr. Sinclair several months ago? How about we start with the bruises? Or maybe you would like to hear about the number of stitches that Mr. Sinclair had to have to close his wounds?”

“Now, wait just one damn minute—” Johnny began as he started to stand up.

“Shut the hell up, Johnny. You’ve gotten me into enough trouble with your little shenanigans,” the senior Murphy yelled through the phone.

Julian lifted his head and watched with some amusement as Johnny sank back down into the couch. It seemed Johnny had finally come up against someone who he couldn’t bully.

“Jonathan, I want it understood that I like doing business with you. You have always been an honest man, and I have no fault with you personally, nor Murphy Industries. Your son, however, does not hold the same esteem. He has shown himself to be a bully and a thug. He feels he can do whatever he wishes to whomever he desires. In this case, my Julian.”

“Now, Darius, my son is over the age of eighteen. I have no control of his actions, and as such—”

“Not true, Jonathan, you do have control over his actions. Or should I say, over his finances. Have you ever considered making him work for his money like the rest of us? Isn’t that what you did? If I remember correctly, you started with nothing and built Murphy Industries into what it is today through your own hard work. Nothing was handed to you. I believe that has made you into a man that many people respect, myself included.”

“I, uh, thank you, Darius.” Jonathan sounded slightly confused by Darius’s praise.

“Junior here, however, has had everything handed to him, by you, to the point where he believes he deserves whatever he wants, Julian included. Has he ever had a job, or do you just continue to provide him with money whenever he wants it? Has he ever worked for any of it?”

“Well, no, but he’s my son. I never wanted him to have to scrimp and save like his mother and I did for so many years. I wanted him to have all the opportunities that I never had. Surely you can understand that?”

Darius nodded his head in understanding. “As a matter of fact, I do. That’s why I have a proposal for you. I believe it would be a benefit to you and to Junior.”

“What exactly do you have in mind?” Jonathan senior suddenly sounded very interested in what Darius planned. Julian wondered what Darius would do, but kept his mouth closed. Now was not the time to say anything.

“Your son has no concept of hard work, having to pay his own bills, or even how to treat people with respect and common decency. I suggest a little life experience. So, here is my suggestion. Cut off the financial support, right now. Cancel his credit cards, close his accounts, everything. In exchange, I will supply Junior with a job and a place to live. He will have to pay rent, of course, as well as any

other bills that the working person might have. If, after say, six months, there is an improvement in his behavior, you can begin to provide for him again. If there is not, cut him off until he gets his act together.”

“Father, you can’t do this. Don’t listen to him,” Johnny cried out. Julian knew the moment Johnny could no longer provide the financial benefits to his friends, they would drop him like a hot rock.

“How does Julian feel about this?” Jonathan senior asked.

“That’s very good question. Thank you for asking.” Darius patted Julian’s back as he looked down at him. “How do you feel about this, baby? Do you think that Junior can be reformed?”

Julian raised his head to look over at Johnny. He was somewhat surprised by what he saw. Johnny was sitting on the couch with his arms crossed, his lip nearly sticking out as he pouted. He looked like a little boy throwing a temper tantrum, totally unthreatening.

“If I may make a suggestion?” Julian asked quietly. Darius nodded, continuing to rub his back to calm him. “Johnny is not a bad guy, really, or I never would have gone out with him. He just doesn’t understand that the world does not revolve around him. But more than that, I do not believe he thinks anyone would be his friend if he didn’t have your money, Mr. Murphy. He doesn’t understand that friendship, true friendship, is given with no string attached.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, you little—” Johnny started to yell, only to be interrupted by Darius’s fierce glare.

“Do you really want to finish that statement, Junior?”

Julian leaned down and whispered in Darius’s ear for several moments. When Darius nodded, Julian sat up straighter. Darius looked Johnny straight in the face, a faint smile on his face.

“I propose that Johnny work here at the club. He should start as a dishwasher and work his way up the ranks just like everyone else. As for his living arrangements, I’m sure we can arrange something to fit his needs. Mind you, I said needs and not wants.”

“Johnny needs to learn how to treat people with respect. He also needs to learn that money will not buy him everything. It certainly won’t buy him respect or friends. Those have to be earned. Does that make sense?” Julian added.

Jonathan senior chuckled into the phone. “Strangely enough, it does. All right, Darius, and Julian, of course, I agree to this plan. I have faith that Jonathan can be a good person. He was a wonderful boy and didn’t start this behavior until the last couple of years. His mother and I will want to have contact with him still, you understand?”

“And that’s as it should be. I suggest dinner every Sunday evening at our place. How does that sound? We may even teach him how to cook.”

“Wonderful, then we will see you on Sunday. Jonathan, I expect you to do whatever Mr. Alexander tells you to do. If you don’t, you will be totally cut off. Do I make myself clear?”

Johnny turned from where he had been pacing to glare at Darius and Julian, the hatred in his eyes making them seem glassy. “I don’t need you or your money. I have friends that will take care of me. You can go screw yourself.”

Darius turned his amused eyes to the other three men sitting on the couch. “Gentlemen, you have a choice to make. You can take Junior with you and take care of him, knowing he has been cut off from his father’s money, or you may leave without him. The choice is yours.”

“Dude, you’re on your own.”

Johnny’s jaw dropped open when all three of his friends stood up and hurried from the door. The fight seemed to go out of Johnny at that point. Julian knew it had to be quite the blow to his confidence to know that his friends were his “friends” just because of the money his father provided for him. Johnny walked over to the couch and sank down, his hands in his hair.

“Well, the choice is now yours, Junior. Do you agree to our terms or not? You may walk out that door right now if you wish to, and no one will stop you. But, if you stay, you will follow the rules I lay out, and you will work.”

Johnny nodded his head sadly. “Fine, whatever.”

“I’m going to go now, Darius. Please take good care of my son. And Julian, I am truly sorry for whatever harm my son may have done to you. I know I should have stopped it earlier, but I just didn’t know how.”

“I understand, Mr. Murphy, and I do forgive you. Hopefully, with time, I will be able to forgive Johnny also.”

“Behave yourself, Jonathan. Be the man I know you can be. Your mother and I will see you on Sunday.” The phone went dead as Jonathan Murphy hung up, leaving his son in Darius’s hands. It almost seemed anticlimactic. The silence was deafening.

“Now, Junior, my terms. You will begin work tomorrow. That should give you enough time to gather your belongings and move into an apartment of our choosing. Dillon, the bartender, will give you your work schedule. You will not be late, understood?”

Johnny nodded.

“I will expect you to be on time every day and do your job to the best of your ability. You will get no special favors, Junior. The most important thing for you to remember is that Julian is mine. You will not touch him. You will not be rude to him or disrespect him. If, at any time, I find out that you have, not having your father’s money will be the least of your worries. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

His shoulders slumped a little as he nodded his head again.

“Very good. Now go downstairs, and wait for us at the bar. And remember, Junior, at any time you have the choice to stop this. All you have to do is leave. However, if you do, you will be cut off from your father. And if he doesn’t do it, I will. If you don’t believe that I can, call your father and ask him how much money he owes me. Not only can I keep you from your money, but I can ruin your father

financially. I will not hesitate to do so if you leave before the stated six months is up, if you do not do your job to the best of your ability, and most importantly, if you harm Julian in any way. Am I understood?"

Johnny's lips tightened in anger, but he nodded his head anyway and walked out the door.

As soon as the door closed, Darius turned to look down at Julian. "Are you sure you're okay with this, angel? I don't want you to be uncomfortable or afraid."

"No, I'll be okay. Johnny really is an okay guy. He just never learned that you don't have to buy people to get them to like you. It really wasn't until he hooked up with those friends of his that he turned into such an asshole."

"Baby, he did hurt you—"

"Yes, he did. But I really don't think he would have done that if his friends hadn't been there. I mean, when we would be alone, he wasn't like that. It was just when they were around. That's kind of what started it all. They wanted him to share me, and I said no. That's when I ended up getting knocked around."

"Hmmm, maybe having him here isn't such a good idea."

"No, it is. He needs to see that two people can have an honest, loving relationship without hurting each other or buying each other. Our relationship isn't about power. It's about caring. He needs to see that. That's why I suggested he work here, with us. But don't worry, at the first sign of trouble, you will know about it. I'm not stupid."

Darius laughed as he hugged Julian close. "No, no you're not, angel. You are not stupid by any means. You picked me, didn't you?"

Julian threw his head back, laughing. "So I did. And not a bad decision on my part, I'd say. You do have your...uses."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

Julian's grinned as he looked at Darius. "Lock the door, and I'll show you."

* * * *

Darius quickly got up and went to lock the door. He froze in his spot when he turned back around, his tongue nearly falling out of his mouth at the sight before him. Julian had his pants off, and he was kneeling on Darius's desk, his ass in the air.

"Fuck, Julian, you're trying to kill me," he groaned as he crossed the floor to stand behind him, his large hands moving to cover Julian's ass. His eyes nearly crossed when he pulled his cheeks apart, seeing that he was lubed and ready to go.

"Julian," he groaned feeling like his cock was going to bust through his zipper. He quickly reached down to unzip his pants and push them out of the way before grabbing his cock and pushing against Julian's tight entrance.

As he slowly sank into Julian, he could hear him cry out. "What, baby?"

"Harder. Need you hard tonight," Julian demanded.

Darius stared down at Julian for just a moment, then grabbed him by the hips. "You'll tell me if I'm too rough?"

"Darius!" Julian exclaimed, pushing back against him. "Now, damn it!"

"Yes, sir." Darius chuckled. Julian really could be commanding when he wanted to. It was actually a bit of a turn-on for someone like Darius, who was always used to being in charge.

Getting a firm hold of Julian's hips, Darius wasted no time with gentle thrusts, ramming into him, then pulling out just as fast. He started a quick rhythm that had him close to orgasm within moments.

"Julian, baby, gonna—" he groaned.

"Not without me, you're not." Julian giggled as he reached for his cock and began quickly stroking himself.

"Fuck!" Darius growled as he quickly flipped Julian over onto his back. He had to see this. His eyes immediately dropped down to where Julian had a hold of his cock, watching the swift movements of

his hand. Watching Julian play with himself was almost as good as doing it himself.

His eyes never left Julian's hand as he thrust into him. He could feel his balls drawing up close to his body. He knew his eruption was just moments away. "Julian." He groaned. "Now, baby."

Darius watched with fascination as Julian's head instantly fell back as he cried out, pearly white cream streaming from the head of his cock to cover his hand, his stomach, and Darius's abdomen.

The sweet smell of Julian's release reached him, sending him immediately into his own orgasm as he yelled out, sinking into Julian as far as he could go. As his head dropped back on his shoulders, he could feel his cock pulsing with each spurt that emptied into his love.

As Darius moved forward to drop his body down over Julian, dropping small kisses on his face, he heard Julian giggle.

"Well, I guess I showed you!" Julian said.

Chapter Eleven

Julian rolled his eyes and did the best he could to keep from laughing as Johnny dropped yet another pan of glasses onto the floor. That was the third one today. At this rate Darius wouldn't have any dishes left by the end of the week.

Dillon was losing his mind with Johnny, and just about to lose his temper. Johnny had only been working at the club for a couple of weeks, and already he had dropped more dishes than Dillon could remember dropping in his entire life.

"Johnny," he growled as he headed back to the kitchen. Julian couldn't help it. He started laughing at the look of near-rage on Dillon's face. Dillon had been in total support of Darius's plan to reform Johnny, but the more time he spent trying to teach him how to be a dishwasher, the more he looked like he wanted to strangle Johnny.

Darius wasn't doing much better. Johnny had been surly and disrespectful since he had started working at the club. Darius had to take him aside several times and remind him of the rules concerning Julian. He never made any moves towards Julian where Darius could see, but Julian had kept him informed when Johnny had done something he found unsettling.

Julian was beginning to wonder if having him here was such a good idea. If Dillon didn't strangle him by the end of the week, Darius might.

"Hey, baby, you ready to go?" Darius asked as he walked up to the bar to join Julian. He turned to face Darius, lifting his face for a kiss.

“Yeah, just about. I’ve just been listening to Johnny put us into the poorhouse.”

“What’s he been doing?”

Before Julian could answer, they heard another crash come from the back room. Darius shook his head. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. Hey, Dillon?” he yelled back to the kitchen area. “Every one of those dishes is to come out of Johnny’s paycheck, do you hear me?”

“Yeah, I hear you,” came the exasperated reply from Dillon. “He’ll be lucky to have a paycheck at all at this rate.”

Julian giggled as he stood up and grabbed Darius’s hand. “Come on, let Dillon handle this. We have a date with the couch and a bowl of popcorn.”

“Mmmm, popcorn, huh? Movie-night? What do you want to watch?” Darius asked as he walked Julian out of the club. “Comedy? Romance? Action? What?”

“You can watch whatever you want. I plan on being snuggled up to this really gorgeous guy I know. I doubt I will even have time to watch the movie,” Julian replied saucily as he climbed into the limousine.

“Oh, really? Anyone I know? Should I be jealous?” Darius asked as he climbed in beside Julian.

“Oh definitely, he’s totally hot. One of the best-looking men I’ve ever seen. I’d do him in a split second.”

“Oh, really?” Darius growled as he pulled Julian into his arms. “And what would you do to him if you had him?”

Julian giggled as he scooted down to kneel on the floorboard of the car. “Hmmm, let me show you. Maybe you can tell me if he might enjoy it?”

Darius’s breath was coming in harsh huffs by the time Julian had his pants open and his hard cock in his hands. “Oh, yeah, baby, show me,” Darius groaned as Julian leaned over and started licking him.

Julian ran his tongue over the top, catching the drops of pre-cum on his tongue before engulfing the head. He ran his mouth around the

mushroom shape, lightly scraping the sides with his teeth before swallowing as much of Darius's long length that he could.

He brought his hand up to gently massage Darius's delicate sac, rolling the twin globes gently between his fingers as he lavished his pulsing cock. He slid his tongue along the slit in the top and was rewarded by Darius's loud groan and the tightening of his hands in Julian's hair.

He swallowed Darius until his nose met with curls. He sucked and swallowed and licked until Darius's entire body went stiff and he yelled out his release.

"Oh fuck, Julian!"

Julian swallowed all the sweet cream Darius had to offer, continuing to lavish him with his tongue until he was spent.

Julian quickly cleaned Darius up before placing him back in his pants and zipping him up. He climbed up to sit beside Darius's heaving body and smiled. "So, do you think my date will approve?"

"Hell, yes!" Darius pulled Julian up against him. "And if you ever show that to anyone except me, I will probably end up in jail for murder."

Julian giggled against Darius's chest. "Never going to happen, big guy."

"So, have you decided what we're going to watch yet?" Darius asked as he enfolded Julian in his arms.

"Hmm, well, I was thinking we could call Joseph and Andrew up and see if they wanted come over, maybe Dino and Dillon too. We could order some pizza, a couple of bottles of wine, and just generally drool all over each other."

"Sounds like a plan to me. I'll call Dino and Dillon; you call Joseph and Andrew."

Julian nodded and reached for his cell phone as Darius reached for his. Both were on the phone for a brief moment, just long enough to arrive at their condo. Julian hung up and reached for the door just as Darius hung up.

“Joseph and Andrew are on their way. They’re gonna grab some Chinese food. They’ll be here in about thirty minutes. Did you get a hold of Dino and Dillon?”

Darius nodded. “Yep. Dino is going to grab the wine. He asked if he could bring a friend.”

“A friend? Hmm, that’s telling. Did he give you a name?” Julian asked curiously.

“Nope, just asked if he could bring a friend. Dillon is already on his way. He’s bringing Johnny. Will that be a problem?”

“No, I guess that’s okay. The only way he’s gonna learn how to gain real friends is to see it for himself. Maybe an evening spent with us wouldn’t be such a bad idea.”

“Okay, but only if you’re okay with it. If he makes you uncomfortable at any time, you just say the word and he’s out of here.”

Julian pushed the up button for the penthouse and typed in the security code. The ride to the top floor took just moments. As soon as they were inside, he felt Darius pat him on the ass.

“Go change into your cuddle clothes, baby. I’ll order the pizza.”

Julian nodded and hurried upstairs to change. A few minutes later, he passed Darius in the hallway carrying a pile of pillows and blankets. Darius paused briefly. Julian could feel Darius’s eyes rove over him.

“Although I do love that outfit, angel, naked would be better. But I suppose we couldn’t have our friends over then. Guess I’ll have to restrict my fun to the occasional kiss and snuggle.”

Julian held up the blankets he was holding and wiggled his eyebrows seductively. “Who says we can’t have a little fun?”

Darius just laughed as he went into the bedroom to change into his cotton pajama bottoms.

Julian hurried downstairs to get ready for movie night. He and his friends had a few rituals that they performed on a regular basis. One

was the famous pajama party, when one of their close-knit group of friends was upset. The other was movie night.

Julian loved movie night the best. It was the perfect excuse to snuggle up close to Darius. They would all get dressed in their pajamas, order tons of comfort food and a few bottles of wine, and pile into the living room to cuddle, lounging on pillows and blankets.

Julian was setting the pillows against one of the walls, creating a seating pallet when he heard Darius come downstairs. He had already spread the other stuff he had brought from upstairs around the room for their friends.

“Join me?” Julian whispered, licking his lips. He held the edge of the blanket up inviting Darius to cuddle. Julian could see the answering desire in Darius’s eyes as they shadowed almost to a pure black color. The darkening of Darius’s eyes was a dead giveaway every time.

Darius started to take a step towards Julian when the house phone rang. Julian laughed when Darius dropped his head regretfully to his chest and he went to answer it, letting their guests in. He hurried back and settled himself behind Julian, his back to the wall and Julian between his legs, head leaning back on his chest.

The elevator chimed, announcing the arrival of Andrew and Joseph. They came in and settled in also, both dressed in their own pajamas. Joseph, the larger of the two men, settled down onto the couch, his lover of several years, Andrew, cuddled beside him.

They had barely started chatting when the elevator chimed again, this time admitting Dino and his date, also dressed in their pajamas. Julian chuckled when he saw Dino escorting Dr. Miles O’Bannon into the living room.

“Miles, good to see you, although, I have to say, I don’t think I have ever seen you dressed quite so casually,” Darius said.

Julian could feel Darius laugh behind him when Miles ducked his head, turning several shades of red. Dino just shot him an evil glare.

“Be nice to my date, Darius,” Dino growled.

“Yes, Darius, be nice to his date. I know a hundred different ways to kill you without leaving a trace,” Miles replied as he settled himself next to Dino on yet another pallet of pillows. As mean as his words were, he still blushed when Dino wrapped an arm around him.

“Hmmm, seems Dino likes Miles’s bedside manner.” Darius laughed as both Dino and Miles shot him embarrassed glares.

Julian elbowed him in the stomach. “Be nice, Darius.” He watched Dino and Miles shoot him grateful looks before his grinned turned impish. “At least Dino is finally getting some,” he finished wickedly.

“Dino has been getting some for several weeks,” Dino replied. “You’ve just been too caught up in Julian to see anything else going on around you.”

Dino threw a pillow at him from across the room as Miles buried his face in Dino’s hair. Darius threw an arm around Julian to protect him as everyone in the room laughed.

The pizza arrived, and everyone dug in, watching the trilogy of movies that Joseph and Andrew had brought with them. They were all settled down watching when the elevator chimed and the doors opened to admit Dillon and Johnny.

Dillon raised an eyebrow when he saw Miles curled up with Dino but smiled when Dino shrugged his shoulders. He walked in and found an empty spot on the couch and sat down, grabbing some pizza and settling back to watch the movie.

* * * *

Johnny, on the other hand, stared at the three couples curled together in the living room with some perplexity. While he had been with several gay men over the years, including Julian, he had never been with one for more than just sex.

That’s not to say he had been with any women either. But he just couldn’t understand why they were cuddled together watching movies

when they could be having sex. What was the point? Was it like buying dinner and a movie hoping you'd get lucky with a girl?

He was especially curious about Julian and Darius. Julian was curled up between Darius's legs, his head resting back on his chest with Darius's arms wrapped around him. He could see Darius's arm moving as he absently stroked Julian's abdomen. Every once in a while Darius would lean down and kiss or nibble the side of Julian's neck or Julian would lean up and kiss Darius on the neck or chin. Neither of them seemed particularly aroused, so why do it? What was to be gained by all this girly stuff? It just didn't make sense to him.

Julian glanced over, having felt Johnny's eyes on him. "Aren't you going to join us, Johnny?"

Johnny nodded, walking into the living room and sitting down on the floor beside the couch, still confused. Julian had never cuddled with him like that. Not that he had ever given Julian the chance, but still, it might have been nice to be on the receiving end of one of those adoring looks that he was always bestowing on Darius.

He just didn't get it and he didn't understand why he suddenly felt like he needed to.

* * * *

Julian was sitting on Darius's lap feeding him bites of fruit, laughing, when Johnny walked into the employee lounge several days later. He poured himself a cup of coffee and leaned back against the counter as he took his first sip of coffee.

He watched the two of them for several moments over the brim of his cup. Julian seemed so happy and carefree. He had never looked like that when they were an item. In fact, he was usually pretty quiet and sullen.

Why was Darius different? What did he do that made Julian look at him the way he did? Johnny knew that they had a very active sex life. Julian was very vocal. Johnny had heard them in the office

several times. That didn't even bring into account the number of make-out sessions he had walked in on.

It didn't seem like the two of them could be in the same room together for more than five minutes without being all over each other. Johnny had never experienced that in any of the relationships he had been in, even when he was with Julian.

He watched as Darius glared up at him as if he had killed his puppy before giving Julian a small kiss, setting him on his feet, and leaving the room. Julian picked up their dishes and took them to the sink to rinse out before loading them in the dishwasher.

"He doesn't like me very much, does he?" Johnny asked, not lifting his head from his cup.

Julian shrugged, not looking up. "Not really."

Johnny thought for several moments before asking, "He doesn't see me as a—as some sort of rival, does he?"

Julian laughed. "No."

Johnny cocked his head to one side, looking at Julian curiously. "Why not? You and I were an item for several months."

"Johnny, despite what you may have thought, we were never an item. I was your little fuck toy. We never had a relationship. What I have with Darius is a relationship. There is definitely a difference."

"Is that why you're so different with him?"

"What do you mean?" Julian asked.

"The way you are with him, you were never that way with me. Why not?"

Julian shrugged his shoulders again. "It's simple. I love Darius. I didn't love you."

"What does love have to do with it?" Johnny scoffed, a little upset with how easily Julian said he didn't love him.

"That makes all the difference in the world. He makes me feel good, cared for, protected. You never did that. You just wanted what you could get from me, and when I was no longer any use to you, well, you and I both know what happened then."

“Yeah, about that, I never told you how sorry I was for what I did. I never meant for it to happen. It just kind of got out of hand, and before I knew it, well, you were hurt.” He lifted his head to look at Julian. “I am sorry, Jules.”

“I know you are, Johnny. It took me a while to understand that you didn’t mean it. It took me even longer to forgive you. But, I do, forgive you, I mean. You’re not a bad guy. I think that someday you could really have a chance with someone. But you have a lot of growing up to do before you get to that point.”

Johnny nodded, relieved that Julian was willing to forgive him so easily. In fact, it made him a little uncomfortable how easily Julian was forgiving him. He didn’t know if he could be so easily forgiving if someone had done to him what he did to Julian.

Still, Johnny was confused by Julian’s words. “Julian, I don’t understand any of this.”

“I know you don’t, Johnny. That’s why Darius suggested this whole thing in the first place. You have no concept of what a loving relationship between two people is like. You need to see it, experience it, to fully understand it.”

Johnny set his cup down on the counter and crossed his arms over his chest as he stared at Julian. “So, you’re saying that if I watch you and Darius together, I’ll suddenly have this epiphany about life, love, and the universe? Yeah, you go with that, Julian.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Johnny. You’ve already concluded that things are different between Darius and me than they were between you and me. That’s the first step, admitting that there is a problem.”

“Oh, please. There is nothing wrong with the way I live my life.”

“Really? Then beating me up because I wouldn’t put out for your so-called friends was okay with you? The same friends who abandoned you at the first sign of trouble? You can live your life that way? If that’s true, then leave. No one’s stopping you.”

Johnny mumbled something under his breath. Julian leaned a little closer, putting a hand to his ear. "What's that? I can't hear you."

"I said I can't leave!" Johnny yelled.

Seconds later Darius stepped into the doorway, looking mean and threatening. "Is everything okay, baby?" he asked, glaring over at Johnny.

"Yes, everything's fine. Johnny and I were just having a little discussion. Nothing to worry about." Julian sent Darius a smile. Darius nodded and left the room again.

Julian smiled as he watched Darius leave the room before turning back to Johnny. "That's what love is all about, Johnny. Worrying that the one you care about is okay." He leaned back against the counter.

"I'll tell you what, Johnny. I'll make you a deal. You can stay here and continue to learn, find out what a loving relationship is like, or, if you really want it, I will call your father right now and call the whole thing off, and you can go back to your life the way it was before. Your choice."

"You'd do that? You'd call my father and call the whole thing off? Why?"

"Because if you really don't want to learn anything, you won't. There would be no point in you being here. However, I believe that there is hope for you."

"Yeah, you and my father. What is it about you two anyway? Why do you think I can be saved? Why do you even think there is something wrong with me in the first place?"

"Because you're not happy, Johnny. You live your life from one moment to the next, staying with whatever idiot you can buy. That's no way to live."

"Who says I'm not happy?" Johnny replied hastily.

Julian's laugh was slightly bitter. "You know what, you're right. I'm sure you're very happy with your life just the way it is. I'm going to go call your father and tell him this whole thing is off. You just go

back to your butt buddies and your nameless fucks. I hope you're very happy."

"Wait, please?" Johnny bent his head, his fists clenched tightly at his sides. "Don't call my father. I'll stay." He felt defeated, sad. He didn't understand exactly what it was Julian wanted him to learn but Julian had been correct. He wasn't happy and hadn't been for a long time.

Julian walked over and grabbed one of his hands, giving him a little squeeze. "It's going to be okay, Johnny. This is the right decision. You deserve to have love in your life just as much as the next person, but you have to know how to give love before you can get it."

"You make it all sound so simple, Jules," Johnny said as he raised his eyes to look at Julian. "How can it be? How is my being around you and Darius going to change anything? And why are you so intent on saving my ass after what I did to you?"

"I'm pretty sure I can answer that," replied a deep voice from behind them. Johnny swung around to see Darius standing in the doorway. Julian gave him a loving smile, Johnny an anxious frown.

Darius walked forward to wrap his arms around Julian, who leaned back into his embrace. The smile on Julian's face was one of complete contentment as he leaned his head back to rest on Darius's chest.

"Julian obviously saw something in you that he believes can be saved. I don't, but I believe in him. If he says it's there, it's there. Just go with it, Johnny." Darius chuckled. "When he gets these little ideas in his head, it's better just to give in and not fight it. Otherwise you'll end up with one hell of a headache."

"So, what now?" Johnny asked.

"Just continue as you are. If you have any questions, ask them. Other than that, observe others around you. Figure out what you want in a relationship, and look to the people around you to see if they have that. If they do, why? If they don't, then why not?"

“You’ve given me some things to think about, that’s for sure,” Johnny replied as he rinsed his cup. He started walking out of the room, stopping as he got to the door. Without turning his head, he said, “Thank you.”

Julian’s smile was amused as he looked up at Darius. “See? I told you that there was hope.”

Darius leaned down to kiss Julian. “So you did, baby.”

Chapter Twelve

Julian was nervous as he waited for the lobby security phone to ring through. Any minute now Jeremy would be calling to say that they had company. Julian could feel the butterflies in his stomach get worse as the seconds ticked by.

He had done it. It had taken time and research and just a little secret manipulation on his part. But it was done. Julian had tracked down Darius's first lover, Brian, and got him to agree to come meet with Darius and tell him the truth about that time so long ago.

At first, Julian was hesitant until he talked with Brian and found out what he already knew. Darius did not hurt Brian. In fact, Brian's father had injured him when he had found out that Brian had been involved in a gay relationship with Darius. Darius hadn't done a thing.

Julian felt that Darius needed to know that. It was sure to rock Darius's foundation, but he had lived for so many years thinking he was capable of that type of harm to someone, and he wasn't. He needed to know the truth.

The ringing of the phone made Julian jump. He quickly reached over and answered it, telling Jeremy to send Brian on up. He got to his feet and walked to the door, his hands twisting together as he waited for the elevator doors to open.

When they did, a tall thin man, about five feet ten, stepped out. He was dressed in a simple suit of blue, a white dress shirt, and blue tie. It was nice, but conservative. Okay, that was fine. Julian wasn't here to critique his outfit.

He held out a hand. "Hello, I'm Julian. Thank you for coming."

Brian nodded, shaking Julian's hand as he looked around the opulent entryway. "Hello, I'm Brian Montgomery."

"Why don't you come in and sit down? I'll go get Darius. You understand that he doesn't know you're here or that I've even contacted you?" Julian led the way to the living room, gesturing for Brian to have a seat.

"Yes, you explained all of that to me over the phone. You have to know, if I had had any idea that Darius thought he had injured me, I would have found some way to tell him the truth. But by the time I was allowed out, he had moved. I had no way to contact him, and to tell you the truth, I didn't feel it was safe until I was an adult and moved away from home."

"Yes, I understand. I just hope you understand why I contacted you. Darius truly believes that he is capable of harming someone. He isn't, but, well, I'm sure you know how he can be. It's taken me a long time to get him to believe he won't hurt me. He needs to know the truth so that he can put this all behind him."

"I quite understand. Like I said, if I had known..."

Julian nodded. "I'll be right back. Please, make yourself comfortable." Julian turned and walked down the hallway to Darius's home office. He knocked quietly and then let himself in.

Darius was busy working on his laptop, looking up with a smile when he saw Julian at the door. "Hi, babe, did I hear the elevator?"

Julian nodded as he climbed into Darius's large lap, wrapping his arms around Darius's neck. He leaned down and stole a quick kiss before looking at Darius seriously.

"Yeah, we have company, an old friend of yours."

"Oh? And who would that be?"

Julian took a deep breath before answering. "Brian."

"Brian? I don't know any Brian," he replied, confused.

"Yes, you do. Brian Montgomery, your first lover." Julian held his breath while he waited for Darius's reaction.

Darius didn't say anything at first. He seemed to be in shock. His lips moved several times like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out.

"Darius?" Julian asked nervously.

"Why? Why is he here?" he whispered as he set Julian on his feet and stood up, pacing around the room. He ran a trembling hand through his hair.

"I knew that you were not capable of hurting someone physically. You just don't have it in you to be like that. We've been together enough times to prove that to me. So, I tracked him down and—"

"You tracked him down? You did this? Why would you do this to me, Julian?"

"Darius, please, just listen to what he has to say. You didn't do this thing. You didn't hurt him."

"What do you mean I didn't hurt him? I saw what I did to him!" Darius yelled as he stalked around the room.

"No, you didn't, Darius," came a quiet voice from the doorway.

Darius's head whipped around to see Brian standing there. He gulped several times before he spoke.

"Brian," he murmured quietly.

Julian could see the wheels of time turning in Darius's head as he remembered back all those years ago. Even though he was scared that Darius would be angry with him for interfering, he knew that this was important.

"I'm going to go make us some lunch. Why don't the two of you sit down and talk? Darius, Brian has some things he needs to tell you that you need to hear. Please, just hear him out. I promise, it will be worth it."

* * * *

Darius didn't even acknowledge Julian as he slipped out of the room, his whole attention centered on Brian.

“Hello, Darius. It’s good to see you after all of these years.” He looked around the plush office with its hardwood furniture and black leather chairs. “It seems you’ve done well for yourself.”

Darius nodded absently. “Yes, I’ve done okay. How about you?”

Brian nodded his head, his blond curls bouncing. “I’ve done okay, I guess. Certainly not as well as you have, but I’ve made by.”

“Why are you here, Brian?”

Brain looked at Darius, a small smile playing over his perfect white teeth. “Your little friend called me. He said that you were convinced that you had hurt me all those years ago.”

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t. My father did. But you were gone before I could tell you, your mother moving you away.”

Darius suddenly sat down in his chair, his head falling forward into his hands. “Don’t lie to me, Brian. I saw how you looked. I know what I did.”

Brain walked over and knelt at Darius’s feet. He cupped Darius’s face in his hands. “You didn’t hurt me, Darius. I swear. My father beat me up. I came home that night—god, I was flying on cloud nine. I loved you so much, and the things we had done together, they were wonderful. But, when I came home, my father found out. He hated me; he hated you. He hated anything that even hinted at homosexuality. He beat me up, then called the cops and told them that you had done it.”

“I want to believe you, Brian, I do, but—”Darius said

“Why do you think he wouldn’t let me out of my room? He knew I would go to you if I escaped. He kept me locked up until you left. He told me that if I ever told the real truth, he would have you put in jail. I’m sorry, Darius. I knew I should have said something, but by the time I got up the courage, you had already moved away. I thought you hated me for being such a coward.”

“Oh god, no, Brian. I loved you. I would have done anything for you. When I thought that I had hurt you...” Darius ran his hand

through his hair, realizing that he was shaking. “Fuck, man, you don’t know what that was like. Until Julian, I was afraid I would always hurt someone during sex. As a consequence, my love life has been nearly nonexistent since you.”

“Really? Oh, Darius, I’m so sorry. I knew I should have said something. If I had only known—”

“You couldn’t have known. It’s not your fault. Maybe I should have tried harder to see you. If I had known what your father would do...”

Brian stood up and walked over to look out the window for several moments before turning back to Darius.

“Maybe it’s no one’s fault, except maybe my father’s. And he’s long gone. You didn’t hurt me. That’s the truth of things. Like your young friend says, you could never hurt someone you care for. You just don’t have it in you.”

Darius was silent for a long while as he took in everything he had learned over the last twenty minutes. He still couldn’t believe it. He hadn’t been the one who had hurt Brian. He couldn’t believe all of this time, all of the hell he had gone through thinking he was capable of harming people. It was amazing.

“We were something back then, weren’t we?” Brian chuckled.

Darius’s head came up as he too chuckled. “Yeah, young, dumb, and full of cum. Go figure. We were teenagers.”

“Tell me about your little friend. He certainly seems to care about you.”

Darius smiled as he thought of his lover. “Julian? Yeah, he’s one of the good ones. How he ended up loving me, I will never know, but I’ll thank my lucky stars until the day I die that he does.”

“So, it’s serious, then?” Brian asked casually as he sat down on the couch.

“Yes, very. I’d commit to him tomorrow if I could. But he wants us to take our time and build our relationship. We’ve both been hurt

before, and he wants us to be sure before we take that step. But he's something, all right."

"Then I'm happy for you, Darius. You need to have someone special in your life." Brian chuckled sadly. "Not so happy for me, though."

"Why?" Darius asked curiously.

Brian shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Guess I never got over the one that got away. I've always compared you to others in my life, and they never measured up. I guess I always had this fantasy that we would get back together someday. First love and all that."

"I'm sorry, Brian. I don't know what to say. If I could have changed things...but Julian's my life now."

"Oh, I understand. Who wouldn't? It's not your fault I'm still carrying a torch for you. Hell, I'm sure even Julian would understand that. You're not very forgettable."

Brian jumped to his feet, a smile playing across his lips. "However, I could always use a friend. How about you?" He held out his hand to Darius.

Darius chuckled as he stood up, ignoring Brian's hand to hug him. "I can always use a friend."

Brian hugged Darius back. He laughed as he looked back at Darius, taking a couple of steps back. "Maybe I can take you out to lunch, talk about old times and all?"

"Oh, Julian's making us lunch—" Darius began.

"Please? For old time's sake? We really have a lot of catching up to do, just the two of us. I'd feel a little uncomfortable talking about old times with Julian there."

"We can't just leave Julian here alone."

"If he's as accepting as you say, I'm sure he'd understand two old friends having lunch. I just want to catch up on things. I haven't seen you in years, Darius. Please?" he pleaded.

"I guess. But I really want you to get to know Julian. He's important to me."

"I understand, Darius, and it's not a problem. Maybe we can go out to dinner with Julian or something. I'd just really like to catch up with you, and I don't want to make Julian feel like a third wheel. Wouldn't you feel out of place if he had lunch with one of his old lovers and they talked nonstop about their past?"

"Yes, I guess it would make Julian feel bad."

"And we don't want to do that. Look how considerate he has been, tracking me down and all. We need to make sure that Julian doesn't feel upset."

"All right, I'll go talk to him. Why don't you just wait here, and I will be right back." Darius turned and walked out the door, never seeing the cold, calculating smile on Brian's face as he watched him go.

"Yes, Darius, go tell Julian he's not wanted."

* * * *

Darius walked into the kitchen, stopping when he saw the food preparations Julian was working on. *Oh, this isn't going to be easy.* He walked over to him and wrapped his arms around him, careful to hold his arm while he did so Julian would not cut himself.

"Hey, baby," Julian whispered as he turned in the arms holding him. "You're not mad at me, are you?"

Darius shook his head. "No, angel, I'm not mad. I understand why you did it. And, in fact, I guess I owe you. You were right. I didn't do it. I never harmed Brian. His father did it because he hated homosexuals. If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else."

Julian gave Darius's lips a quick peck. "See, I told you that you couldn't hurt anyone you cared about. You just don't have it in you."

He bowed his head just a little before looking back up at Darius through his eyelashes. "I am sorry I went behind your back, though. I just didn't know any other way to do it. You wouldn't talk to me about it. Your brother wouldn't talk to me about it. Hell, even your

mother wouldn't talk to me about Brian. Finally, I just had to do it on my own. I hope you understand?"

"Yeah, I do, baby. Maybe I should have talked to you, but I was just so afraid. I know we had gotten to the point where we didn't have to use restraints, but I would still always wonder, you know? Now that I know the truth, I guess we can work through it."

"I sure hope so because I have some very kinky plans for you." Julian giggled.

Darius lifted Julian up to sit on the counter, moving to stand between his legs. "Oh, really? And just what do these plans include?" he growled.

"Well, most of them involve you and me, naked, usually in some compromising position."

"You have me intrigued so far." Darius chuckled as he scraped his teeth gently across Julian's neck, making him groan as his head fell back.

"Oh yeah, that's good, right there."

Darius started to lavish Julian's neck with his tongue when he heard Brian's voice from the other room. "Hey Darius, you ready to go yet?"

He dropped his head forward. "Shit!"

"What?" Julian asked. "What's wrong? Where are you going?"

"Huh, well, Brian wants to take me to lunch."

"Oh, well," Julian said as he looked around at the food he had been preparing, "I guess that would be okay. It'll just take me a moment to put this stuff away and get ready."

Darius flushed a little. "Yeah, about that. See, the thing is, Brian just wants me to go. He wants to talk about old times and catch up on things now. He thinks you will feel like a third wheel if you come."

"A third wheel?"

"Well, yeah. I told him how much you mean to me, and he just doesn't want to make you feel bad if we're talking about old times. He wants to be friends again. It's just lunch, Julian."

"I guess that would be okay. Just don't be gone too long. You know how I miss you when you're not here."

Darius smiled as he kissed the tip of Julian's nose. "Promise. And don't worry. Brian wants us all to go out to dinner later tonight so that he can get to know you better. Will that be okay with you? You don't mind getting to know him, do you?"

Julian smiled. "No, of course not. As long as he understands that you belong to me."

"Of course he understands that, baby. I told him you were my life. There's nothing to be jealous of, baby. You belong to me, and I belong to you. That's never going to change."

"All right, go have lunch with Brian. I'll see you back here in a couple of hours, and we can all go out to dinner. Maybe later we can go to the club or something."

Darius kissed Julian one more time before pulling him off the counter to stand on his feet. "Sounds like a good plan to me."

"I've had better plans," Julian whispered.

* * * *

Julian grumbled to himself as he placed the food that he had been preparing back into the fridge. There was no sense making lunch for the three of them since Darius and Brian were going out to lunch and he had not been invited. And he had lost his appetite.

He couldn't begrudge them some time to go over their past. They had a history together. But still, he did feel left out. Darius had explained Brian's reasons for wanting him to stay home. Logically, it made sense. He would have been a third wheel. But that didn't mean he wanted to be left at home alone.

Julian tried to bury the little green monster that was rearing its ugly head, giving him doubts. He was Darius's partner now, not Brian. It was okay that they had a past together. That didn't mean anything. Did it?

He closed the fridge and left the kitchen, his steps taking him upstairs to the bedroom he shared with Darius. Maybe he was making a big deal out of nothing. He had been the one who had wanted Darius to make peace with his past. Who was he to argue when he did?

Yeah, he was making problems for himself that weren't really there. Darius loved him, not Brian. He just wanted to spend some time with an old friend. When they got home later, they would all go out to dinner and have a good time.

Brain and Julian could get to know one another, maybe even be friends, and Julian could show Brian that Darius belonged to him. Sure, it wasn't very *friendly* thinking this way, but something about Brian just felt wrong.

Julian laughed as he suddenly sat down on the side of the bed. He could be such a drama queen. The first man to walk into their lives since they got together and suddenly Julian was getting all possessive and crap? This was ridiculous.

With a little chuckle, he went back downstairs to watch some television. Brian and Darius would be home soon enough, and then they could all go out to dinner and have a good time. Brian would go home after that, and Darius and Julian could spend some time alone together. Everything was going to be just fine. He hoped.

* * * *

Julian woke suddenly when he heard a loud noise coming from the entryway. He glanced quickly at the clock, 3:30 a.m. He rubbed a quick hand over his face. He had been asleep for hours. Darius had been gone for nearly fourteen hours, plenty of time to have lunch with Brian.

Hearing a noise come from the entryway again, he sat up on the couch. He could hear giggling. Giggling? Darius must be home, but giggling? He had never heard him giggle in all the time he had known him.

The living room light suddenly went on, and a very drunk Darius stumbled in, Brian right beside him. Brian did not seem as drunk as Darius, but still a little unsteady on his feet. In fact, he seemed pretty happy with himself.

“Darius?”

“Oh, hi, baby.” Darius chuckled. “Did you miss me?” His words were slurred, his cloths rumpled, and he reeked of alcohol. Brian was holding him up with an arm wrapped around him, a huge satisfied smile on his face.

“I thought you would be home hours ago. Weren’t we going to go out to dinner and then show Brian the club? I called your cell phone several times, but you didn’t answer. I was afraid something happened to you,” Julian said as he stood to his feet, his arms wrapped around his cold body.

“S’okay, baby, took Brain to the club already. He loved it, and I can’t find my cell phone. It must be around here somewhere,” Darius said as he started looking around the floor.

“But, I thought we were all going to go.”

“Oh, don’t be like that, baby. Brian just wanted to see the place,” Darius replied as he looked back up at Julian, a wide, drunken grin on his face.

“Yes, Julian, Darius told me all about his wonderful club, and I just had to see it. He seemed so proud of the club and wanted to show it off to me. You’re not upset, are you?”

“No, I guess not. It is a great club. Darius really loves it. I’m sure he just wanted to show it off. It would have been nice if you could have called, though. I’ve been sitting here all night waiting for you two to get home. I was worried.”

Just then Darius stumbled down the two steps into the sunken living room. Julian rushed forward to catch him, nearly collapsing under his weight.

“Okay, big guy, let’s get you to bed. I don’t think you need any more tonight.” Julian started steering Darius towards the stairs,

looking back briefly at Brian. "There's a spare bedroom upstairs you can use if you want. I'm not sure either of you should be out and about right now."

Brian nodded, following Darius and Julian up the stairs. Julian nodded at the door to the spare room as he walked by. "We'll see you in the morning."

"I really am sorry, Julian. I guess I just didn't think to call you," Brian said as he opened the door to the spare room and stepped in.

"It wasn't your place to call me," Julian murmured under his breath. He walked Darius to their bedroom. It was no easy feat considering Darius was drunk as a skunk and so much larger than he was.

Helping him to the bed, he let Darius fall back onto the bed. He reached down and began pulling his clothes off. Again, no easy feat as Darius was in an amorous mood and kept trying to pull Julian's clothes off and grab at him.

"Darius, stop it. You're in no condition to be getting frisky. I can't believe you stayed out all night and didn't call me."

Julian was pissed. He felt somewhat betrayed by Darius that he hadn't called. They were supposed to show Brian the club together. Instead, Julian had spent the evening clock-watching, waiting for Darius to come home.

"Julian," Darius whined as he pulled on Julian's arms, "I missed you, baby."

Julian tried to pull away from Darius as he replied angrily, "You wouldn't have missed me if you had come home like you promised you would."

"Oh, angel," Darius said as he pulled Julian down onto his chest, "don't be like that, baby. I'm home now, and I want you."

"No, Darius. You're drunk."

Darius suddenly rolled over, pinning Julian beneath him, his hand roughly caressing him through his clothes. "I'm not that drunk. I just had a wee bit to drink, I swear. I'm never too drunk to love my baby."

Julian squeaked when Darius grabbed his tank top and pulled, ripping it down the middle. “No, Darius, stop it.”

Darius leaned down and bit Julian’s nipple, making him cry out in pain as he bit too hard. “Darius, stop, please. That hurts. Come on, you need to stop. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

When Darius went for his pajama bottoms, Julian really began to squirm. He started pushing on Darius’s shoulders and pulling his hair. Darius just grabbed his wrists and held them over his head.

Julian felt tears prick his eyes as he begged Darius to stop. “Please, Darius, it hurts.”

Darius began furiously kissing him, his teeth biting into Julian’s lips. Julian pulled harder on his wrists, trying to get away from Darius’s tightening grasp.

Suddenly Darius’s head fell forward and his grip loosened. Julian held his breath as he pushed Darius’s head up. His eyes were closed. He had passed out. Julian pushed and wiggled until he was able to move his way out from under Darius.

He quickly scooted away from Darius and sat on the side of the bed. He rubbed his sore wrists as he tried to figure out what to do. He wasn’t even quite sure what had just happened. Darius had never tried to force him before. Julian didn’t understand it.

He stood up and walked into the bathroom, wincing when he saw the droplets of blood on his lip. Swell! He had a fat lip. The bruises that were already appearing on his wrists he could hide with a long shirt, but the lip? There was no way to hide that.

He washed his face before walking back into the bedroom. He quickly covered Darius up before grabbing a clean shirt and his pillow and walked out of the room, heading downstairs. He couldn’t sleep in the same room with Darius until they had a serious talk.

Walking into Darius’s home office, he grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch and covered up as he lay down. He snuggled into the big blanket, trying to get comfortable on the large black leather couch.

He felt tears gather in his eyes as he smelled Darius's scent in the blanket. He missed him.

Chapter Thirteen

Julian cracked open an eye to see sunlight coming through the curtains of Darius's home office. His head hurt, his back hurt, hell, his eyelids hurt. As he sat up, the previous night's activities came rushing back into his head.

He looked down at his wrists. Yep, big, bright purple bruises in the shape of Darius's fingers were wrapped totally around his wrists. He was going to be real colorful for several days to come. He wondered what his lip looked like.

Wrapping the blanket completely around his body, his wrists hidden deep within the folds, Julian made his way out of the office, looking for Darius. They needed to have a serious discussion about last night.

The living room was empty, as was the kitchen. Walking slowly up the stairs, he headed towards the bedroom. His shoulders slumped when he saw that it also was empty. Where was Darius? Had he gone out for breakfast? Gone to the club? Where in the hell was he?

Julian dropped the blanket onto the bed and walked into the bathroom. Looking into the bathroom mirror, he saw that he only had a little bruising on his lip, not too bad. He covered it up with some makeup. After a quick shower, he got dressed, making sure that the sleeves on his long-sleeved shirt covered him past his wrists.

He folded the blanket and set it on the chair by the door, then made up the bed. After that was done, Julian went downstairs to make some coffee. Sitting down at the table with his first cup, he picked up the phone and dialed Darius's cell phone.

After several rings he finally hung up. Apparently Darius wasn't answering his phone again. Or maybe Darius just wasn't answering for him. Julian was beginning to think that contacting Brian was one of the worst ideas he had ever had.

Picking up the phone, he dialed Dino.

"This is Dino. Talk if you want."

"Hey, Dino, you busy?"

"Well, if you count doing my laundry and cleaning my apartment as busy, then yeah. Why, what do you have in mind?"

"Nothing, I just thought maybe we could do lunch or something."

"Sure, Darius going to join us?" Dino asked curiously.

"No, I guess he has some other things to do today. But I don't feel like sticking around the house today. So, what do you say? Want to have lunch with me?"

"Oh, yeah, sure, Julian. Is anything wrong? You sound a little off."

"No, just feeling a little stir-crazy. I guess I'm used to going to work every day. This working from home stuff can get to you after a while. I just need to get out for a little while."

"Yeah, must be real hard to do all that stressful work from the comfort of your own home, dressed in your pajamas and bunny slippers." Dino chuckled.

Julian laughed as he looked down at his fuzz-covered feet. "How'd you know I have bunny slippers on?"

"Duh! Since when do you wear anything else on your feet while you're home?"

Julian laughed again. "Okay, so I'll meet you downtown at the fountain, and we can go from there. Sound good?"

"Sounds great. See you then."

Julian hung up the phone and reached for the pad of paper on the phone shelf. He wrote a small note to Darius and put it on the fridge. He grabbed his wallet and cell phone, putting them in a small fanny pack before heading for the elevator.

As the doors opened up, Julian nearly jumped out of his skin when Johnny stepped out. His hand flew to his chest as he jumped, his heart beating rapidly in his chest.

“Fuck, Johnny, you scared the crap out of me.” He looked him up and down. “What are you doing here?”

Johnny looked nervously down at Julian, his eyes never quite meeting his. “I was just wondering if we could talk.”

“I really don’t have time right now. I’m meeting Dino for lunch.” Julian went to push past Johnny, only to be stopped by a hand on his arm.

“Please, it’s important.” As soon as Julian looked at the hand grabbing his arm, Johnny dropped it, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Julian’s shoulders slumped as he turned around and headed towards the living room. He sat down in one of the living room chairs and looked across to Johnny as he sat on the couch.

“Well?” he asked when Johnny sat there quietly for several moments.

Johnny lifted his head to look at Julian, his gaze hesitant. “Look, I don’t know how to say this to you. I’m not even sure I should say anything at all. I mean, what do I know? My basis for what is right or wrong is all screwed up. But—”

“Johnny, spill!”

Johnny took a long, deep breath. “Okay, I was at the club, working, last night when Darius came in with this guy—”

“Brian.”

“You know him?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes, he’s an old friend of Darius’s.”

“Shit!”

“Why?” Julian asked suspiciously, his hands nervously twisting together in his lap.

“This guy is bad news, Julian. I know him. Hell, I’ve partied with him. I don’t know how Darius knows him, but—”

“Why are you telling me this, Johnny? Why do you even care?”

“I don’t know. I guess I don’t want anything bad to happen to you and Darius. This guy, Brian, he attracts trouble wherever he goes. He’s a user, Julian. How do you think I know him? He craves money and power, and I’m sure he sees Darius as the golden goose. If he can cause trouble between you two, he will. You need to be careful.”

Julian nodded sadly. “I think he’s already started.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Nothing I can really put my finger on, but still...” Julian shrugged.

“If you feel something is wrong, you’re probably right. The way he was acting last night at the club? Even I was hard-pressed not to think they were an item.”

Julian rubbed his eyes to keep Johnny from seeing the tears that had formed there.

“Look, Julian, it was probably nothing. I’m sure I’m overreacting. They were probably just reacquainting themselves again. Nothing happened. They didn’t kiss or anything. It’s not like Darius was being unfaithful or anything. He was just out having a good time with an old friend. I’m sure it meant nothing.”

Julian dropped his hand down in his lap when he heard Johnny sigh. When he glanced up he saw Johnny staring at his wrists. Julian looked down to see that the sleeve of his shirt had pulled up, showing off his bruises.

Julian quickly pulled the sleeve back down. He could feel his face heat up. He avoided Johnny’s eyes hoping he wouldn’t say anything to anyone.

“I’m going to go, okay? Don’t worry about any of this. I’m probably just imagining things. You know how I can be.”

Johnny quickly stood to his feet and started heading towards the door, Julian following quietly behind him. As they both climbed into the elevator, Johnny tried once again to alleviate Julian’s concerns.

"I'm sure this is all a big mistake, Julian. Darius loves you. He'd never do anything to mess with that."

"Yeah, it's probably all a big misunderstanding."

As they exited the elevator and made their way to the front door, Johnny turned to Julian again. "Where is Darius anyway?"

"I don't know."

* * * *

Dino spotted Julian sitting on the steps by the fountain and went over to join him. He tried putting his misgivings out of his mind and enjoy the day with his best friend but he knew something was up. He smiled at Julian as he sat down next to him.

"Hey, where would you like to go for lunch? It's on me," Julian said. He smiled over at Dino but Dino could see that it was forced.

"Hmm, big spender, huh?" Dino laughed. "Well, in that case, how about Anritsu's? I hear they serve a mean strawberry lemonade."

"Yeah, sure, Anritsu's is fine." Julian forced a smile to his lips as he stood up and they began walking the several blocks to the exclusive restaurant. Their conversation was light as they walked.

Dino could tell that Julian was upset, but apparently he wasn't ready to talk about it. Julian would say something when he was. Until then, Dino just had to wait and be there for Julian when he did need him.

As they walked around the corner to the street Anritsu's was on, Dino glanced up and nearly swallowed his tongue as he looked towards the restaurant. He glanced quickly down at Julian before pulling him to a stop, trying to turn him in the other direction.

"Hey, you know what? I've changed my mind. I think I'd rather go someplace a little more low-key, maybe get a burger or something. What do you say?"

"Uh, yeah, okay, but are you sure? Anritsu's is right over—" Julian's sudden painful inhale told Dino that his little friend had seen

the same thing he had when coming around the corner. Darius and a strange man were sitting in Julian's favorite spot having lunch.

That wasn't so unusual. Darius often brought business clients to the restaurant. What was unusual was the tight grasp that Brian had on Darius's hands and the long kiss that he was giving Darius. Darius didn't seem to be resisting at all. In fact, he seemed to be participating, his hand reaching up to caress Brian's cheek.

Dino's head turned sharply towards Julian as he whimpered, his eyes filled with absolute misery. He quickly pulled Julian to his side and walked his unresisting body back the way they had come. Well, so much for lunch. He needed to get Julian someplace quiet and find out what was going on.

"Come on, baby, let's go to my place. You look like you could use a drink."

Julian didn't even nod, just followed Dino down the street. He seemed to be in shock. Dino couldn't blame him. If he had seen his lover kissing another man, he probably would have been just as miserable.

It took less than twenty minutes to get Julian back to his apartment and settled on the couch. Julian still wasn't saying anything. He just sat there, staring off into space. Dino decided to forgo the drink and got Julian some hot tea instead.

Julian's movements were automatic as he took the tea and began slowly sipping it, but Dino still didn't think he was actually aware of things around him. He just continued to stare off into space.

"Julian?" Dino asked quietly as he sat down next to him. His arms wrapped around Julian, pulling him down to rest on his chest. "It's going to be okay, baby. I'm sure there is a good reason for what we saw. You just need to give Darius a chance to explain things."

Dino just held him as he tried to figure out what to say to him. There really didn't seem to be any words. How do you comfort a guy who just saw the love of his life kissing another man? Even if there

was some big explanation from Darius, he wasn't sure Julian could get through it.

Julian still didn't say anything. He was quiet, too quiet. He wasn't even crying. Dino was starting to get really worried when Julian suddenly sat up, brushing his hair out of his eyes. He looked around the room as if coming out of a daze.

"I need to go. Darius is going to be home soon, and I need to make dinner." Julian stood up and started for the door. Dino was confused. Julian was acting like nothing had ever happened.

"Julian—"

Julian turned to him, smiling. "I'll call you later. Maybe we can do lunch again." And he was out the door, leaving Dino with his mouth hanging open in shock. What had just happened here? Julian was acting very strange.

Dino reached for the phone. He needed to talk to Dillon and find out who that strange man was that Darius had been kissing and how to deal with this. He was very concerned that this was not going to end well.

* * * *

Julian let himself into the condo and went directly to the kitchen to start making dinner. Darius was sure to be home soon, and Julian knew he would be hungry. But as he entered the kitchen, he saw Brian standing in front of the stove, pots boiling as he cooked.

He looked up when Julian walked in, a slight smirk on his face. "Hello, Julian. Are you going to be joining us for dinner? I wish you had called. I only made enough for Darius and myself."

"Oh. I guess I'll find something then. Where's Darius?"

"Oh, he stepped out to get some wine. He should be back shortly. Is there anything I can get you in the meantime?"

Julian stared at him, shaking his head slowly. Brian was offering to get him something in his own home? How wrong was that? Brian

seemed to be making himself so comfortable. Julian began to wonder how long he was planning on being here.

Without saying anything else, Julian turned and walked upstairs to his room. He was surprised to find a pile of folded clothes sitting on the newly made bed. Had Darius suddenly decided to start being a clean freak? Usually Julian did most of the housework. Darius was just a mess about most things.

Julian put the clothes away and looked around the room. Maybe a romantic evening was in order. It had been a couple of days since they had had a chance to be alone together, not since Brian had shown up.

Julian smiled to himself as he started going about the room pulling out what he needed to seduce his love. That's just what they needed, a romantic evening to renew their love for each other, a little candlelight, a bubble bath, some mood music, some romantic aroma therapy. It would be just perfect.

It took Julian nearly an hour to get everything ready. He figured that would give Brian and Darius plenty of time to eat dinner before he went downstairs. And then he would have Darius all to himself for the rest of the evening.

Making sure he was dressed carefully, his hair spiked just the way Darius liked, his makeup and nail polish freshly applied, Julian went downstairs to claim his lover for a romantic evening for two.

He could hear laughing coming from the living room as he walked down the stairs. Looking into the living room as he walked, he saw Darius and Brian sitting on the couch together, too close if you asked Julian.

He walked the last steps into the living room to stand just above the sunken steps. His hands were clasped tightly together in front of him. He cleared his throat to get Darius's attention.

"Darius, I was hoping that maybe we could spend a little time together." He looked pointedly at Brian. "Alone."

Darius looked over at Julian in surprise. "Uh, Brian and I were just getting ready to watch a movie."

Julian looked closer at Darius. He seemed drunk again like he had been the previous night. His words were a little slurred, his eyes not quite focusing, but he seemed to be drinking soda. Maybe Julian was just seeing things.

“We’ve barely spent any time together the last couple of days, Darius,” Julian said. “I really wanted to spend some time with you, just the two of us.”

“We can spend some time together later tonight, after the movie. Why don’t you join us? Brian said it’s a really good one.”

Julian watched Brian move his hand to Darius’s thigh, close to his groin. Darius didn’t do anything to move it. Julian pressed his lips together when Brian began slowly rubbing his hand back and forth across Darius’s thigh. Why was Darius allowing this?

“Darius! Please, can you just come upstairs? We really need to talk.”

Brian leaned over and whispered something in Darius’s ear, causing Darius to look at him curiously before turning back to Julian.

“I’m spending time with Brian right now, Julian. We can talk later, after the movie.”

“But, Darius—”

“I said no, Julian. You don’t own me. Now, if you don’t mind, Brian and I are going to watch this movie.”

Julian watched with dismay as Darius turned his back on Julian and sat back into the couch, putting his arm on the back of the couch behind Brian’s head. Brian smirked as he leaned his head back onto Darius’s arm, his hand continuing to caress Darius’s thigh.

“Darius, we need to talk, right now!” Julian stated firmly.

Darius ignored him by turning up the volume on the television. Julian, filled with rage, walked over to stand in front of the television. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at both Darius and Brian.

“Julian, we are trying to watch a movie. Would you please move?” Darius asked through clenched teeth.

“No. I want you to come upstairs and talk with me.”

“I don’t want to talk right now, Julian.”

“I’m not moving until you do.” Julian glanced at Brian. “Maybe its time for you to go home, Brian.”

“Julian! Brian is my guest. You will not be rude to him.” Darius stood, swaying on his feet a little as he stared down at Julian.

Brian stood up, placing a placating hand on Darius’s shoulder. “Maybe I should go, Darius. I don’t want to cause problems for you with Julian. If he doesn’t really want me here—”

Julian looked at him, flabbergasted at what was coming out of Brian’s mouth. He was making it sound like this was all Julian’s fault. “You don’t want to cause problems between us? What do you think you’ve been doing since the moment you got here? You’ve been nothing but trouble since you walked through the door.”

“Julian! How dare you speak to Brian like that? He has been nothing but friendly to you. I can’t believe you’re acting this way.”

“Friendly?” Julian shouted. “Who are you trying to kid? He’s done everything he can to keep us apart.”

“That’s not true, Julian. He just—” Darius began.

“Just what, Darius? Didn’t mean it? Did he not mean to kiss you this afternoon too? Was that just a friendly little peck then? Maybe I should give Dino that kind of little peck.” Julian was so angry he could barely stand still as he yelled at Darius for his betrayal of their relationship.

“He’s following you, Darius? Having you watched? I thought you said Julian wasn’t the possessive type. I thought that you guys cared about each other. Does he pick your friends for you too?”

Julian was too stunned to speak as Darius glared at him. Brian was making it seem like Julian was stalking Darius. He didn’t even justify kissing Darius. He didn’t even address it, just made it sound like Julian was trying to control Darius’s life.

“Darius—”

“Is that true, Julian? Were you following me? I thought you trusted me. I thought we had something special together. I guess I was wrong.”

Darius sounded so sad, so defeated, so paranoid. Julian started to get really apprehensive. “What...what do you mean?” Julian stammered.

“I think maybe you need to leave, Julian.”

“You...you don’t mean that. You can’t mean that.” Julian held out his hand towards Darius, trying to placate him.

“I do, Julian. I will not have someone in my life that wants to control me. I thought we were partners, equal partners. But, apparently, I was wrong. I can’t love someone like that. Just call Dillon when you get settled and let him know where you’re staying. I’ll...I’ll make arrangements to have your stuff delivered to you.”

Julian watched as tears dripped down Darius’s face. He went to reach for him, to comfort him, only to see Darius turn towards Brian. Brian wrapped his arms around Darius, smiling at Julian over his shoulder.

He patted Darius on the back as he murmured to him. “Shhh, it’s okay, honey. You just let it all out. It’s okay. I’m here, and I’m never leaving you.”

Julian slowly started to back out of the room, his eyes never leaving the sight of Darius wrapped in Brian’s arms as Brian assured him over and over again that he would never leave him, that he would be there for him.

How had things gone so terribly wrong? Brian had Darius, and Julian had nothing. Darius actually believed Brian and all of the lies he spouted. He didn’t even seem to feel guilty about what he had done.

“Darius—” he tried one last time. This couldn’t be the end. They loved each other, didn’t they? Darius couldn’t be taking Brian’s word over his. Surely he saw what Brian was doing to them.

“Julian, I think it would be best if you just left. Darius doesn’t need this right now.” Brian sat Darius down on the couch, telling him he would see that Julian left. Darius was too upset to do more than nod his head.

“This is not your home. You cannot tell me what to do!” Julian yelled. “I’m not going to let you do this!”

Brian grabbed Julian by the arms, roughly pushing him backwards until Julian tripped on the steps, his head coming down with a crack on the hard marble steps.

“You need to leave now!” Brian yelled at Julian. “Darius doesn’t want you here anymore. You’ve hurt him enough.”

Julian reached back with his hand to feel the large gash on the back of his aching head, his hand coming back slightly bloody. “Darius,” he whispered, desperately reaching out for Darius to protect him. But Darius kept his back turned from Julian, not seeing him on the floor.

“Please go, Julian. I want you to leave, and don’t come back,” he whispered painfully as he stared out the large picture windows of the condo.

Brian pulled Julian to his feet and shoved him in the direction of the elevators. His hands were rough as he pushed Julian into the elevator and hit the down button. Just before the doors closed, he leaned in and whispered to Julian.

“He’s mine now, you little freak!”

Julian was still reeling as the elevator reached the bottom floor. Jeremy met him at the doors. He looked disappointed and sad as he escorted Julian to the front door. He held out his hand. “I’m sorry, Mr. Sinclair, Mr. Alexander asked that you return his floor key.”

Julian shook his head, looking down at his thin cotton pajamas. “I don’t have it. It’s in the apartment.”

Jeremy nodded. “Would you like me to call you a taxi, Mr. Sinclair?”

Julian held out his hands. “I don’t have any money on me. It’s all in the apartment.”

Jeremy nodded. Julian walked out into the rain, his arms wrapping around his body to ward off the wet and cold.

Chapter Fourteen

Julian walked, not really knowing where he was going, not really caring. His mind was numb. It was like he was in a fog. Nothing seemed real. It was all too unbelievable. Darius had broken up with him because of Brian.

Maybe he had never loved Julian. Maybe he had always loved Brian. Julian couldn't think of any other reason that Darius would take Brian's word over his. Julian was still reeling from the fact that Darius had bought Brian's lies.

He had not been following Darius, stalking him. He wasn't trying to control Darius. He had been going out to lunch with Dino. But what did that have to do with Brian and Darius kissing?

And why did Darius seem so out of it? Julian just didn't think Darius would be acting like this if Brian hadn't been around. Maybe Darius was drunk again.

Julian just didn't understand it all. And, at this point, he wasn't sure he wanted to. If Darius was ready to believe Brian over him, to kiss him, then maybe they really didn't have a relationship worth keeping. Maybe he was better off without Darius.

Stopping, he found himself in front of Dino's apartment, figures. Somehow he always seemed to find his way to Dino when he was in trouble. His life would be so much easier if he cared for Dino the way he cared for Darius. At least he knew that Dino cared for him. He was beginning to wonder if Darius ever had.

Knocking softly on Dino's door, he tried to formulate the answer to the question Dino was sure to ask as soon as he saw him. He was right. The second Dino answered the door and saw Julian standing

there, shivering and dripping wet in his pajamas, he swore loudly, pulling Julian into the apartment, and began the questions.

“Julian! What the hell happened? Are you okay? Why are you out in the rain in your pajamas? What’s going on? Where’s Darius?”

Dino quickly grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around Julian’s shaking shoulders and pushed him down onto the couch. He grabbed a towel and began drying Julian’s wet hair as he asked his questions.

When Julian winced, his hand moving up to his head, Dino saw the blood on Julian’s head.

“What the hell happened?” Dino growled.

Julian just shrugged his shoulders. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Hell!” Dino swore.

Julian cringed a little. He could tell from Dino’s posture as he left the room that he was pissed. A moment later Dino came back with a first aid kit.

Julian sat there silently while Dino doctored his head, thankful that the cut wasn’t deep enough that he had to go to the hospital. Finally, Dino was done.

“I want to know what happened, Julian. Where’s Darius?” Dino demanded.

“I can’t really say. The last I saw of him, he was curled up in Brian’s arms, watching a movie. Of course, that was after he told me to leave, that he never wanted to see me again.”

“What?” Dino yelled. “What do you mean he was with Brian? Who’s Brian?”

“The guy that was kissing him earlier today. Guess they’re a couple now.”

Dino suddenly sat down next to Julian. He opened his mouth several times but couldn’t seem to form a complete sentence. Julian knew how he felt.

Julian patted him on the hand. "Look, I just need a place to sleep tonight and a change of clothes for tomorrow. Is it okay if I crash here?" He gestured to the couch they were sitting on.

"Yeah, sure. You're always welcome here. You know that."

"Thanks."

"Julian, maybe Darius didn't really mean it. If you tried talking to him—"

"No, that's what started this whole mess in the first place. I wanted to talk to him. But he seemed to be too busy watching a movie with Brian."

"Well, what if I talked to him?"

"No, I don't want you to do that. It's over, Dino. Just let it be. Darius has made his wishes more than clear. He doesn't want me anymore. And to tell you the truth, I'm too tired to fight it anymore. I just want to move on with my life."

Julian laughed bitterly at Dino's worried look.

"Don't worry, I'm not planning on killing myself. I guess my blinders have finally come off. Darius isn't the man I thought he was, and I just don't want to have anything to do with him anymore. He's made his choice, and it's not me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, tomorrow I'm going to look for a new job and a place to live. Darius told me to let Dillon know where I am once I get settled and he will have my stuff delivered to me. After that, I want to forget that Darius Alexander ever existed."

"Are you sure that's what you want to do, Julian?"

"No." Julian laughed again. "But it's what I need to do. I guess Darius never really loved me, not the way I love him. It's better this way. I can't make him be something he's not. And I can't keep pretending. Mr. Wonderful is a fantasy. He doesn't really exist."

"If you're sure that's what you want, Julian. But I'd be happy to talk to Darius for you."

“No, the time for talking is over.” He looked up at Dino. “Would you mind if I crashed here until I found a place? I have some money saved up, so it shouldn’t take me too long.”

“No, that’s fine. Stay as long as you like.” Dino stood up and headed for the front door, pulling on his jacket. “I’m going to run out and grab us something to eat. You just get some rest. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

* * * *

Dino watched as Julian snuggled down into the blanket covering him and closed his eyes. He opened the door and closed it, carefully locking it behind him before heading towards Darius’s condo.

There was no way he was going to just let this sit without trying to talk to Darius. Something was seriously off about all of this. Darius adored Julian, and Dino knew it. They had been through too much to end it this way.

Dino opened the door to Darius’s building and walked in. He stopped in front of the security desk and smiled at Jeremy.

“Hey, Jeremy, I need to speak to Mr. Alexander. Can you let me up?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Marcelli. Mr. Alexander has revoked your entry. Yours and Mr. Sinclair’s both. He said I was not to let you up, and if I did, I was fired. I can’t lose my job, Mr. Marcelli.”

“No, of course not. I understand. Well, would you please let Mr. Alexander know I was here, and please ask him to call me as soon as possible?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Marcelli. I’ll give him the message the second I see him.” Jeremy looked around to see if they were all alone before looking back at Dino. “Mr. Marcelli, have you seen Mr. Sinclair? He left here a little while ago with no money or anything. Wouldn’t even let me call him a cab. He didn’t look good.”

Dino nodded. “Yeah, he’s at my place. He’s okay.”

Jeremy let out a relieved breath. "Oh good. I was really worried about him. Mr. Sinclair is such a nice guy. I don't know what's going on, but I'll bet you it has to do with that man Mr. Alexander has been hanging around with. If you ask me, he's bad news."

"Do you know his name?" Dino asked curiously.

Jeremy looked down at the sign-in sheet in front of him before glancing back up at Dino hesitantly. "I'm not supposed to do this, but considering it's you asking, his name is Brian Montgomery."

Dino nodded. "Thank you, Jeremy. I promise I won't let anyone know where I got the name."

"You just take good care of Mr. Sinclair."

Dino smiled. "I will, promise."

Dino left the building, even more confused than he had been before. What was going on, and who was Brian Montgomery?

* * * *

Julian took a deep breath as he signed his name to the documents before him. This was a big step in ending his relationship with Darius but one he felt he needed to take. It would be the final break in their relationship.

"Is that everything, Mr. Thyne?"

"Yes, but are you sure about this, Mr. Sinclair? I remember quite clearly that Mr. Alexander wanted you to have fifty percent of everything. He even signed an affidavit stating that if your relationship ended, you were to retain your interest in his businesses."

Julian nodded. "Yes, I'm sure. I was never interested in his money anyway. Now that we are no longer together, I don't want it."

He smiled over at Robert Thyne, Darius's lawyer. "Now, you're sure that this will return everything to Darius? My name will be totally out of it? Everything we bought together will be his? I don't want any of it. I want no further connection to him."

Robert Thyne nodded his head. “Yes, Mr. Sinclair. This returns all rights to Mr. Alexander, including ownership of any property that you purchased together.”

“How long will it take for him to receive these papers? Can you file them today?”

“I can file the papers this afternoon, as soon as I have Mr. Alexander’s signature. Will that be sufficient?”

Julian nodded, looking down at the ring on his hand. “Yes, that will be fine.” Julian pulled the small ring off his finger. “I wonder if I can ask you one last favor.”

“Certainly, anything.”

Julian handed Robert the small diamond ring Darius had given him. “Could you return this to Mr. Alexander, please? Tell him...tell him—hell, just give it to him. I’m sure he wants it back.”

Robert took the ring. “I’ll make sure that he gets this, I promise, Mr. Sinclair.”

Julian nodded, looking at the small ring clasped in Robert’s hand one last time before turning and walking out of the office. Well, that was done.

The last two weeks had been very productive. Julian had quickly found an apartment, Dillon getting his personal belongings for him. There were a few items that Julian had Dillon return to Darius that he felt didn’t belong to him. But other than that, everything he owned fit into three cardboard boxes. He didn’t even have any furniture, giving that up when he had moved in with Darius.

He had found a job waiting tables at a local pub at night and on weekends. He had also gotten his job back at the clothing store, which he worked during the day. It wasn’t much, it paid the bills, but at least he was too busy to think about what a mess his life was.

Today was the final break with Darius. He had gone to Mr. Thyne’s office and signed over everything to Darius. He didn’t want his money. He never had. That had all been Darius’s idea, and even

though Darius said he could keep the money if they broke up, Julian wasn't holding him to that.

Besides, he really didn't want anything that would remind him of Darius, not even his prized possession, the small diamond ring that Darius had given him. It would just remind him of the love he had found and lost. If he was going to move on with his life, he didn't need any reminders.

* * * *

Darius sighed deeply as he hung up the phone. Jeremy had called from downstairs to say that Robert was downstairs asking to come up. Great! Just what he needed, more people to bug him.

He knew that was why Robert was here. He had said that he had some papers for him from Julian. Brian suggested that maybe Julian was trying to get more money out of him, maybe sue him for palimony or something.

Brian seemed to think that it was the only reason that Julian had been with him, for the money. Darius didn't know if he was correct, but it sure seemed funny to Darius that Julian had suddenly become so possessive of him as soon as another man had come on the scene.

Darius had never seen Julian so controlling. Brian had been right about that. As Brian had said, Julian had started questioning his every movement, at least it seemed like that. Besides, if he had really meant something to Julian, why didn't he try to work things out with him?

He had just seemed to cut his losses and run. Sure, Darius had been angry and said some things he hadn't really meant, but Julian hadn't argued with him. He had just cleaned out his stuff and left.

Darius had been very surprised when Brian had informed him that Julian had cleaned out his pocket money box that he kept on the dresser, along with several of Darius's expensive watches. He never would have seen Julian as a thief.

Maybe he had seen Julian how he wanted to see him and not for what he really was, as Brian had said. But, maybe he had seen a lot of people for what he had wanted to see instead of how they really were.

Since his breakup with Julian, everyone had turned against him. His brother was no longer speaking to him unless it specifically had to do with the bar. Dino refused to speak with him at all. Even Johnny was refusing to talk with him.

The only person who seemed to be sticking by him was Brian. He was there every time that Darius started to cry, comforting him. He cooked him dinner, made sure that the condo was picked up; he had even started helping Darius out at the club.

He was turning into a true friend. Darius knew he wasn't completely over Julian, but maybe, when he was, there would be something there for him and Brian to work on. At this point, Brian seemed to be the only thing holding him together.

Everyone else in his life had left him high and dry. Brian had nailed that right on the head. They only seemed to care about him when he was taking care of them. Who was there to take care of him?

"Hey, honey, you thinking again?" Brian said from the doorway of Darius's home office. He held a cup of tea in his hand. He walked across the room and handed the cup to Darius. "Drink this. It will make you feel better."

"Yeah, I guess," Darius said as he grabbed the cup and took a sip before setting it on the desk. "My lawyer called from downstairs. He needs to see me about some paperwork. It just kind of brought up some stuff about Julian again."

"I'm sorry, hon. I wish these people would just leave you alone. I don't see why they don't understand that you're hurting right now."

Darius shrugged his shoulders. "It could be something totally unrelated to Julian, you know. Maybe it's business."

"I suppose." Brian walked around to stand behind Darius, his hands gently massaging his shoulders. "You work so hard. These people need to give you some downtime."

“Mmmm, that feels good.”

“You want me to handle your lawyer? You can just go upstairs and take a long soak in the tub.”

“No, I should see what he wants. Besides, I don’t think he would talk to you about it. Client confidentiality and all.”

“You know, as long as he’s here, you could take care of that. Then I could really help you out with all of this stuff. Give you more time to relax.”

Darius cocked his head to one side, looking back up at Brian curiously. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s simple really. If you signed something with your lawyer telling him he could deal with me, then I could help you out more. I really feel like I’m not earning my keep here. If I had more authority to work for you, I could take more things off your shoulders.”

Darius shrugged slightly. “I don’t know, Brian. I’d have to think about that.”

Brian suddenly stepped back, walking around the edge of the desk to look down at Darius, a slight pout on his lips. “Don’t you trust me, Darius? I thought we were building something here.”

“I do trust you, Brian. I’m just not ready to go to that point yet. I guess I just need a little more time. This thing with Julian is just too fresh.”

Brain crossed his arms over his chest, giving Darius a hurt look. “You really don’t trust me, do you? Its all those things Julian said about me, isn’t it? You actually believe them.” He sniffled. “I really thought—”

“Brian,” Darius began

“No, no, it’s okay. If you don’t trust me, of course you shouldn’t sign anything. I just hope that you will learn to trust me, to care for me the way I care for you.”

Brian turned and walked out of the room, his head bowed sadly. Darius sighed as he left. Damn! Now he had hurt Brian's feelings. He was just batting one thousand. Could the day get any worse?

A soft knock at the office door said that it could. Darius stood up and walked to the door, opening it for Robert. He gestured for Robert to come in, shutting the door behind him before walking back to sit behind his desk.

He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands together as he looked over at Robert.

"So, what is so important that you had to interrupt my evening, Robert?"

Robert opened his briefcase and pulled out a file. Opening it, he began handing the signed documents to Darius. His voice was stiff and serious as he explained the papers to a stunned Darius.

"Mr. Sinclair came to see me today. He asked me to write up the papers returning his fifty-percent interest in your holdings to you. He has also signed a document giving you all interest and ownership in any shared purchases you may have made during your association including furniture, clothing, artwork, et cetera. The papers have been signed and will be filed with appropriate courts as soon as you sign them."

"What is all of this, Robert? What do you mean he's returning everything to me? I thought you were coming here to tell me he was suing me for palimony."

Robert shook his head. "No, sir. Mr. Sinclair assured me that he wanted nothing of yours, that he was never interested in your money. He has withdrawn his name from all of your joint accounts. I have included here a list of every purchase he made using those accounts. If he still has the items, Mr. Sinclair said that your brother, Dillon, would be returning them to you in a few days. Any money he is unable to return to you immediately will be paid off in twice-monthly installments of a hundred dollars to be paid on the first and the fifteenth of every month until he has paid the amount off in full. He

has included two months of room and board, meals, and extras in the amount he feels that he owes you. ”

He pulled out a small sack and dumped the contents onto the desk. “He also asked me to return this to you. He said it belonged to you.”

Darius reached over and picked up the small diamond ring he had given to Julian, not once, but twice. Once again, it was back in his hands. He gripped it tight in his hand as he remembered how happy he had been both times he had given the ring to Julian.

Would the pain never stop? Would he constantly be reminded of how much he loved Julian and how little Julian cared?

Robert carefully laid a white envelope down on the table. “This is Mr. Sinclair’s first installment. The next one will be mailed to you on the fifteenth.”

Darius picked up the envelope and tore it open. Sure enough, it contained a bright, crisp hundred-dollar bill. He rubbed his thumb over the green paper, wondering if anything else could surprise him so much. Julian was paying him back for money Darius had spent on him? Why?

“Why is he paying me back? I never asked for that. I wanted to spend that money on him. I never asked for anything because of it.”

Robert cleared his throat. “I don’t rightly know, Mr. Alexander. But I got the impression that he didn’t want anything from you. He said he wanted no further contact with you. But I have to tell you, he was in a lot of pain, Mr. Alexander. I thought he was going to cry when he handed me the ring.”

Darius laughed. “Yeah, probably didn’t want to give up a diamond ring. It’s worth a lot of money.”

“Oh, Mr. Alexander, I don’t think that was it at all. Mr. Sinclair would never do something like that. He cared too much about you.”

“Right, that’s why he stole three Rolex watches and three-thousand dollars in cash when he left, because he cared too much for me.” Darius laughed bitterly.

“You have to be mistaken, Mr. Alexander. Why would he do that? Especially when he had millions of dollars at his fingertips. He could have kept it. I even have a paper signed by you that ensured he could keep his interest if you broke up. He didn’t have to sign everything back over to you.”

“I don’t know why, Robert, and frankly, I don’t care. I’m just glad he’s out of my life. At least this way I never have to see him again. He may have all of you fooled but not me. He’s a con artist and a charlatan. He was using me just like everyone else tries to use me.”

“Mr. Alexander, surely you don’t believe that!” Robert said.

“And why shouldn’t he believe it?” Brian said from the door. He walked in and sat on the edge of Darius’s desk. He picked up the papers Robert had handed to Darius and started reading through them.

“Oh, this is rich. He’s actually signing everything back over to you? I can’t believe the gall of this man. He’s trying to make you feel sorry for him, Darius.”

“That’s not true, Mr. Alexander. You know Mr. Sinclair would never do something like that.”

Brian laughed again. “Oh sure, what do you know? You’re just a lawyer. You haven’t seen the pain that little weasel has put Darius through, the things he’s done to him. How dare you question Darius’s decision to have Julian removed from his life? You’re just like all the rest of them, turning against him for that little freak. Man, he sure has you all snowed.”

“Mr. Alexander, I don’t know who this man is, but—”

“This is Brian Montgomery, my new business partner.”

“Your what?”

“You heard me. Brian is my new business partner. I want you to write up a power of attorney for me to sign giving Brian the right to work on my behalf. He’s going to be helping me out.”

“Are you sure, Mr. Alexander?”

“Are you questioning his decision? Isn’t that how Alan Simpson was removed from handling your account, Darius? Do we need to remove Robert also?”

“No, I’m sure Robert understands what I want goes. He’ll write up the papers exactly as I tell him to or I will move my account to another law firm. Isn’t that right, Robert?”

Robert stood to his feet, putting the papers back in his briefcase. “Of course, sir. It is your account. You can do whatever you want with it.”

Brian nodded as he handed the papers to Robert. “Very good. I’ll expect those papers by as soon as possible, Robert. The faster we do this, the better. Darius needs to have someone on his side. Everyone else is against him. Hell, even his brother isn’t talking to him.”

* * * *

Robert took in this tidbit of information with curiosity. Dillon wasn’t talking to his brother? That was interesting. Darius and Dillon were in business together in several areas. Maybe he could talk to him concerning all of this without breaking his client confidentiality clause.

“Very good, Mr. Alexander, Mr. Montgomery. I will have those papers to you as soon as possible. Good evening.”

Robert was disgusted as he watched Brian preen for Darius as he walked out of the room. He couldn’t believe this was happening. This Mr. Montgomery was clearly bamboozling Mr. Alexander. He just wasn’t sure what to do about it. He had no concrete proof—yet.

He hoped that Dillon Alexander had an answer. Robert truly liked Mr. Alexander, and he didn’t want to see anything happen to him. He had been so happy when he was with Mr. Sinclair. He seemed miserable without him.

There had to be a way to fix this and show Mr. Alexander that he was better off without Brian Montgomery in his life.

Chapter Fifteen

Julian put a drink order on his tray and walked it to a table. He grabbed his rag and began cleaning up the table next to that one. He was tired, but that was no surprise. He had started work at the clothing store at 8:00 a.m. that morning, and it was nearly 9:00 p.m. now. He had another five hours before he got off work.

He cleared the dishes off the table he was working on then moved to the next table. A flash of material caught his eyes, and he walked to a nearby table, pulling out his order pad. "What can I get for you tonight?"

Julian's breath caught in his throat when he lifted his head to find Dillon, Johnny, and Dino sitting at the table. They all had smiles on their faces but looked nervous.

"Hey, guys, how's it going? What can I get for you?" he asked as he returned their smiles.

"We need to talk to you, Julian. It's about Darius. It's important," Dillon said as he gestured to the seat across from him. "Please?"

Julian shook his head. "No, I don't want to discuss Darius. He's in my past now. I want nothing to do with him."

"Julian," Dino began, "you need to listen to what Dillon has to say."

"Are you going to order or not?" Julian asked.

"Damn it, Julian, if you ever cared about my brother, you need to listen to me. He's in trouble," Dillon exclaimed.

Julian looked at them suspiciously. "What kind of trouble?"

Darius was in trouble? What, had he fallen down drunk and couldn't get up? Or had he been kissing some other strange man besides Brian?

Dillon shook his head. "Look, Julian, it's going to take more than a few minutes to explain this all to you. Is there any way that you can get the rest of the evening off? It really is important."

Julian thought about it for a few minutes, and then reluctantly nodded his head. "Yeah, I guess. But if this is some stupid plan of yours to get Darius and I back together, you can forget it."

Dino shook his head. "No, Julian. This isn't about that. We understand that Darius screwed up too much for that. No, this is something else. We're really worried about him. Look, just go clock out, and we'll go back to my place and discuss it. We need your help."

"Okay, as long as you all understand that things are over for me and Darius."

Dino nodded his heads, crossing his fingers under the table. Dino, Dillon, and Johnny had all agreed before even coming here that they needed to do everything they could to get Darius and Julian back together. They were both too miserable without each other.

But first, they had to get Brian out of the picture.

* * * *

Darius couldn't ever remember being so heartbroken. His friends had abandoned him. None of them would return his phone calls, not even his brother. He had even asked Brian to go see them and find out what was going on. Dillon had slammed his door in Brian's face after telling him that he wanted nothing to do with Darius.

He just didn't understand it. Why was everyone being like this? He felt like he had lost everything that was important in his life, Julian, Dillon, Dino. Hell, he even missed Johnny. But no matter how many times he called, they wouldn't call him back.

With Brian taking more of the workload off of his shoulders, he had spent less time at the club. He could barely remember the last time he had actually left his condo. He did everything over the Internet or phone. Anything that could take him out of the condo, Brian did for him.

He had been so tired lately it had been hard to concentrate on anything. He just wanted to sleep all of the time. Brian had even been making Darius tea to help him relax and sleep. He didn't know what he would do without Brian.

The sound of the elevator opening brought him out of his deep thoughts. Brian wasn't due home for several more hours, not until the club closed and the books were taken care of. That meant he wouldn't be home until around four or five in the morning.

So, who was coming in? Darius grabbed the tea that Brian had made for him earlier before he left and walked out into the hallway. He was so surprised when Dillon and Johnny stepped off the elevator that he nearly dropped his drink.

"Dillon," he whispered.

"Hello, Darius. I was wondering if we could talk with you?"

"Yes, of course, come in." Darius ran a hand through his ruffled hair, trying to look somewhat normal. He quickly tucked in his shirt and followed Dillon and Johnny into the living room, sitting down across from them.

"How are you, Darius?" Dillon asked, shocked by how bad his brother looked. He didn't just look sad, he looked physically ill. His eyes were sunken and red, he looked like he had lost weight, and his appearance was deplorable. Their mother would be shocked.

"I've been better."

"Yes, I can see that. What happened to you, Darius? Why are you avoiding us? You never come down to the club anymore. You don't return my phone calls—"

"Not return my phone calls? I've called you several times. You won't return my calls. I even sent Brian over to see you to try to find

out what was going on. You slammed the door in his face. If anyone's avoiding anyone, it's you."

"Brian never came by to see me. I haven't seen Brian since you fired me from the club three weeks ago."

"Fired you? What the hell are you talking about? I never fired you. You're making that up."

"No, I'm not. Three weeks ago, Brian came into the club and fired several of us. Me, Johnny, Tim, even Rick. He brought in all new people. Said you approved it, and if we came back on the premises, you would have us forcibly removed."

"Why would I do that, Dillon? You helped me make the club what it is today. You're my right-hand man down there." Darius was confused.

"Not anymore I'm not. And I have to tell you, the club sucks now. I wouldn't go in there now if you paid me. Since you decided to become a recluse and let Brian run everything, the place has gone to pot. It certainly isn't what it used to be."

"How can that be? It's a great club. I haven't made any changes."

Dillon sat forward on the edge of the couch. "That's just it, Darius. *You* haven't made any changes, but Brian has. He's made it into *his* club. He has quite the clientele too. I'm pretty sure most of them are on the FBI's top ten most wanted list."

Darius took a long drink of his tea before replying. "I don't understand any of this, Dillon. What happened?"

"Brian happened," said a quiet voice behind Darius. He turned quickly to see Julian, Dino, and Robert standing in the doorway. This time, in his shock, he did drop his drink on the floor, glass shattering all over the hard marble.

"Julian," he whispered as if he were seeing a ghost.

"Hello, Darius. Interesting what you've done with the place. Early slum?"

Darius looked around the condo, seeing it through someone else's eyes for the first time. It did look bad. Pizza boxes and dishes were

stacked everywhere. Half-empty bottles of booze littered the entertainment center. Clothes covered the floor. It did look like a slum. When had this happened, and why hadn't he noticed it?

"I guess I got a little behind in housekeeping."

"Yeah, guess so," Julian replied rudely. "But, I guess if that's what you like, you're entitled to it."

"Julian, we're not here to comment on Darius's interior design choices. Stick with the program," Dillon reminded him.

"Why are you here?" Darius asked curiously, his eyes going back to Julian. "I thought I banned you from the building."

Julian smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. It was a cold smile, ruthless. "Oh, you did. But, you see, there's a small problem. It's my condo. You're the one who's trespassing."

Darius's head swung back on his shoulders. "What? Have you lost your mind?"

"No, no, I'm as sane as I always have been. You, however, I wonder about. How could you ever think to give Brian control of your life? Don't you know what kind of man he is? He's a con man, Darius. He preys on peoples' weaknesses and steals their money."

"Like you stole mine when you left?" Darius yelled.

"You mean the three thousand dollars and the Rolex watches? Funny thing about those watches, Darius, the person who stole them was videotaped hawking them at a local pawnshop, and it wasn't me. Would you like to see who pawned them, Darius?"

Julian took the video that Robert handed to him and pushed it into the VCR, hitting the play button. Darius watched in shock as Brian's face appeared on the screen, pawning his Rolex watches, the same watches that he had said Julian had stolen.

"Wha-what's going on here?" he whispered desperately. He looked over his shoulder to Dillon, feeling like his world was shaking instead of just his body. "Dillon?"

Dillon held out his hand for the file Robert was pulling out of his briefcase. He set it on the table and began flipping through it, handing each page to Darius as he went.

“Brian Thomas Montgomery, aka Brian Thomas, aka Thomas Montgomery, has three arrests for fraud. He’s served time for fraud, burglary, ID theft, and drug running. His father, who is his partner in crime, is currently doing twenty-to-life for manslaughter.”

“His father? He told me that his father was dead.”

Dillon shook his head. “Nope. Seems both Brians, senior and junior, hatched up a scheme to bilk some guy out of his millions. Brian junior was the bait, get the old man to trust him, sign over power of attorney to him, then slowly steal all of his money. Sound familiar? Well, here’s the clincher. Seems Brian senior couldn’t wait for the old man to kick the bucket, so he killed him. Junior made a deal with prosecutors. He only got three years for fraud because he testified against his father.”

“That’s not...that’s not possible. Brian is not conning me out of my money.”

“Oh really?” Julian added. “Then tell me something, Darius. How come Brian has transferred more than three million dollars of your money to an offshore account? How about the way he’s taken over the club? Care to explain that?”

“Brian’s my friend. He wouldn’t do that to me,” Darius protested weakly.

“Oh, he’s done it, Darius, and then some. He’s trying to take you for everything you’re worth. He’s separated you from all of your friends and family, gotten you to sign away your fortune, and he’s turned you into a reclusive drunk.”

“I am not a drunk!” Darius roared, jumping to his feet, swaying just a bit.

“Really, Darius? Then do you want to explain the bruises you left on Julian?” Johnny asked, standing up to face Darius, his hands clenched on his hips.

“Johnny, shut up!” Julian yelled. “That has nothing to do with this conversation.”

“It has everything to do with this conversation. Darius is trying to say he’s not a drunk, but both you and I know he was drunk the night he hurt you and left those bruises on you. I saw him at the bar with Brian, drinking like there was no tomorrow. I saw the bruises on you the next day. You can’t tell me he didn’t do it.”

“Johnny—” Julian said.

“What bruises?” Darius and Dino asked at the same time as they both turned to look at Julian, whose face was turning red with embarrassment. Julian just shrugged his shoulders as he looked away.

“It doesn’t matter,” Julian said. “Let’s just drop it, okay? We have other things to talk about here.”

“No, I want to know what Johnny’s talking about. What bruises, Julian?” Darius demanded, coming to stand in front of Julian.

Julian let out a heavy sigh. “It was nothing, okay? It was that first night when you went out with Brian. When you and Brian came home, you were pretty drunk. You just got a little overexcited. I’m sure you didn’t mean it, and it really didn’t hurt that much.”

“I hurt you? I actually left bruises on you?” Darius stared, horrified, at Julian, who just stared back at him, not saying anything. Darius sat down suddenly on the couch, his head dropped into his hands.

“Was there any other time that I hurt you?” he asked through his fingers.

“You mean besides ignoring me, kissing another man when you were supposed to be with me, believing Brian over me, refusing to talk to me, thinking I would steal from you, thinking that your money meant more to me than you ever did, or cutting me out of your life? No, not really.”

Darius lifted his head to look up at Julian, his eyes shooting daggers at him. “You have all the answers, don’t you? You don’t

think I was hurt in all of this? You left me. You didn't even try to fight for me. You just gave up and left."

"What was I supposed to do, Darius? Brian was hanging all over you, and you did nothing. Nothing! You let him touch you, kiss you, and what? I was just supposed to look the other way? Ignore that it was going on?"

"He was just being friendly, Julian. It didn't mean anything."

"Neither does this." Darius's mouth dropped open when Julian walked over to Johnny and wrapped his arms around him, his lips plastered to his. This kiss went on for about thirty seconds before Julian stepped back, a dazed Johnny falling back to the couch.

"I was just being friendly." Julian smirked as he turned and walked out of the living room, heading for the elevators

"Julian." Dino stopped him. "Don't go, please. I know that you've been hurt in all of this, but you need to stay. Darius needs you right now."

Julian turned back to Dino, his eyes filling with tears. "He doesn't need me. He doesn't need anyone. He says that I just left? That I didn't try to fight for him? When was I supposed to fight for him? When Brian was throwing me to the floor so hard that I cracked my head open? When I begged him to help me and he just turned his back on me and told me to leave and never come back? Or maybe it was when Brian was throwing me into the elevator dressed in nothing but my pajamas. He wouldn't even give me time to change my clothes before he had Brian throw me out the door," Julian sobbed. "When was I supposed to fight for him? When?"

"Julian, I don't know what to tell you. It's fucked up. It's been fucked up for a long time. No matter how much I want to, I can't fix this. Only you and Darius can. But right now, we need you to help Darius. You know you have to be here and why. Please, just do this. Then you can go, okay?"

Julian sniffled a couple of times, wiping his eyes. "Fine. But then I'm gone, and I don't want to see any of you for a while. I can't keep dealing with this roller coaster ride. Understood?"

As soon as Dino nodded, Julian walked past him and back into the living room. He reached for one of the pieces of paper that Robert had in his hands.

"Darius, everyone has explained to you what Brian has done, what kind of man he is. You've heard the evidence. You have a choice to make. You can either take back control of your life or you can stick with Brian. It's your choice. Make it."

"Julian, look, about what happened—"

"Darius, this is not about you and me. It's about you and Brian. You need to make a choice."

"God, can't you even let me think here for a moment?"

"What's to think about? He's trying to alienate you from anyone that cares about you. He's stealing your money. He's turned your club, your pride and joy, into a shit hole. He did everything in his power to break us up. What more do you need to think about?" Julian yelled.

"I just need to think. Let me think."

Julian shook his head. "You know what, I'm done thinking. You once accused me of trying to control you. Buddy, you haven't seen anything yet."

Darius watched, confused, as Julian leaned down and signed two pieces of paper before handing them back to Robert. The lawyer looked them over carefully before pulling out a small box and notarizing them. He handed one of the papers back to Julian, who folded it up and put it in his pocket.

"Dino, please stay here and see that Darius gets cleaned up. Dillon, Johnny, and I will be back in a few hours. We have some business down at the club to take care of."

Julian turned and headed for the elevator, Dillon and Johnny fast on his heels. Robert closed his briefcase, nodded to Dino, and followed them out. Dino smiled as he looked over at Darius.

“You need a bath, my friend. Why don’t you go upstairs and get cleaned up while I try to clean this place up a bit?”

Darius looked at Dino, stunned. “What just happened here?”

“It’s very simple, Darius. Everything you own, every investment, every bank account, every piece of property and business, right down to your underwear, it all belongs to Julian now. He’s going to give you your life back, not that I think you deserve it, but apparently, he does. Right now, he’s on his way down to the club to clear Brian out.”

“What? How did that happen? I thought that Julian signed everything back over to me. How could he now own everything?”

“Because, you stupid ass, you’ve been so out of your mind with booze, you never looked to see what you were signing. Robert was concerned after Brian made several large transfers of money, so he went to Dillon. You remember him, your business partner? Dillon authorized it. It took some convincing to get Julian to agree to the plan, but he’s the only one we know who really doesn’t care about your money.”

“Then why else is he doing this, if not for the money?”

Dino laughed. “God, you can be so stupid. Julian is doing this because he loves you. Although, I have no idea why.”

Dino started to walk out of the room but stopped to look back at Darius, curiosity on his face. “Do you know, the night you kicked him out, Julian showed up at my house dressed in nothing but his pajamas? He didn’t have a jacket or anything, just the clothes on his back. And he had to walk to my house because he didn’t have any money. By the time he had gotten downstairs, you had arranged to have him barred from the building.”

“I never barred him from the building, at least not that night.”

“Well, someone did. If it wasn’t you, I assume it was Brian. Julian had to walk to my house in the rain. He was sopping wet and nearly

frozen by the time he got there. And to top it all off, he was bleeding from a cut to his head where Brian had pushed him. That's what Julian was talking about when he said he begged for your protection and you turned your back on him."

"I never knew, Dino, I swear. I just asked Julian to leave. I would never have let Brian hurt him. He didn't even argue. He just—"

"Yeah, whatever you need to tell yourself to be able to sleep at night, Darius."

"No, really, I wouldn't have let Brian hurt Julian if I had known."

"Brian's been hurting Julian since the day he got here, Darius. Julian tried to tell you, and you kicked him out. You believed everything that Brian fed you. You kissed him. How is that not hurting him?"

Darius just shook his head, mumbling to himself as he walked up the stairs. He couldn't believe this was happening. Brian was a con man? He had hurt Julian? Julian now owned everything?

It was just too much to take in. How was he supposed to believe all this crap? It seemed like no one would tell him the truth. The people who were lying to him were, well, lying to him. The people who weren't lying to him weren't talking to him. He was just so tired of all of this.

He had heard everything Julian had said to Dino in the entryway. Had Brian really thrown him out in his pajamas? He had told Darius that Julian had gone upstairs and cleaned him out. Julian had tried to tell him, but he hadn't wanted to hear it. Why? Julian seemed like the only one who wouldn't lie to him.

So, why had he believed Brian over Julian, the man he loved? Julian was his soul mate, his love. He should have believed him. He should have seen what Brian was doing. Why hadn't he? What was wrong with him that he could so easily have turned on Julian?

Maybe Julian was better off without him. At least if he was out of the way, he wasn't hurting Julian anymore. It seemed to him that all he had done since he walked into Julian's life was hurt him.

Darius climbed out of the shower and dried off, looking at himself in the mirror. He did look like shit. He chuckled as he reached for the shaving cream and his razor. No wonder everyone had looked at him so strangely. He had three weeks' worth of growth on his face. He looked like a mountain man.

Darius quickly shaved then dressed in clean clothes. He went back into the bedroom and changed the sheets on his bed. Then straightened up the room, it had become a pit. Out of curiosity he walked to the room that Brian had been using. It was very clean and uncluttered, unlike the rest of the house.

Darius snooped around until he found a small briefcase of papers sitting between the mattresses. Curious, he opened it up. Inside was the power of attorney he had signed for Brian, a stack of legal-looking papers, and numerous bank statements. There was also a little black book and a pad of paper with numerous pages of notes. These could be interesting.

He closed the briefcase and stuck it back between the mattresses, keeping the stack of papers in his hands. Further investigation around the room was enlightening as well. Hidden in a drawer was a small bag containing the ring Darius had given to Julian, along with one of his Rolex watches that 'Julian had stolen.' So, Brian had been lying about that after all.

After all of tonight's revelations, Darius wasn't sure anything else could surprise him. He was wrong. In another drawer Darius found a small bag of white pills. He vaguely remembered Brian giving him one and telling him it would help him sleep. Darius began to wonder what the little pills were.

"Darius!" Dino yelled as he ran up the stairs. Darius came running out of the spare bedroom, nearly knocking Dino down in his haste.

"What?" he yelled back. Dino's face was white as a sheet. Darius knew before he even said anything that something bad had happened. He just hadn't known how bad and wasn't prepared for it when Dino uttered the words that would send Darius's life into hell.

“Julian’s been shot.”

Chapter Sixteen

Darius stared down at Julian's pale sleeping form three days later and felt a sense of déjà vu. He remembered being in this position once before, Julian unconscious in a hospital bed, Darius knowing that it was his fault, and knowing that he would have to give Julian up to keep him safe.

Julian had gone to the club to have Brian removed. A loud argument had broken out when Julian had told him he had to leave. He had provided the police that had accompanied them with the paperwork to prove it. Before anyone could stop him, Brian had reached for a gun and shot Julian. The police had shot Brian, killing him instantly. Not that Darius cared. He just hoped that Brian was burning in hell.

Darius hadn't been surprised when he had learned that the little white pills Brian had been giving him were illegal barbiturates. They were meant to keep Darius loopy and turn him paranoid. They had worked far greater than Darius thought even Brian knew.

Darius had alienated everyone he cared about. His business that he had worked so hard to build had nearly gone down the tubes, and Darius had lost the love of his life all because of those stupid little pills.

The doctor had tried to assure Darius that there would be no lasting effects once the pills were out of his system but Darius knew she was wrong. The effects of those pills would be with him for the rest of his life. But that no longer mattered.

All he cared about now was the injured man lying in the bed before him. The moment that Dino had told him Julian had been shot,

everything had become so clear to Darius. Julian was his life. Without him, he was nothing. None of the money, reputation, or prestige meant anything if Julian wasn't there to share it with him.

After much thought, he had made a life-altering decision. His bags were packed and sitting in his new truck outside in the parking lot. On the small table next to him was a copy of the papers Robert had filed earlier that day giving Julian everything. He didn't want it anymore. It didn't mean anything.

All of the bank accounts now carried Julian's name, and only his name. Darius's name had been removed. The same had been done to all of Darius's business ventures, including The Club and Anritsu's. Everything, with the exception of Darius's new truck and twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, now belonged to Julian.

He just had one last thing to do before he left for good. Pulling a small black velvet bag from his pocket, he opened it and dumped the ring out into his hand. Lifting Julian's finger, he pushed the small diamond ring back onto his finger where it belonged.

Now, he just had to leave. It was harder than he thought, knowing that he would never see Julian again. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he knew he would not be coming back here. Julian was here, and if he was close enough, he knew he wouldn't be able to keep himself from seeing Julian.

Darius stood up, leaning over to place a small kiss on Julian's forehead. He reached up with a trembling hand and smoothed Julian's hair back from his beautiful face.

"I love you, angel. Please be happy," he whispered before forcing himself to turn and walk towards the door. He grabbed the handle, trying to force himself to open it. It was hard, so very hard. He had to take several deep breaths before he could pull the door open.

"You walk out that door and I will not be responsible for my actions!"

Darius whipped around to see Julian lying on the bed, his baby blue eyes trained on him. "Julian!" he exclaimed as he practically

jumped back towards the bed, grabbing Julian's hand in his. "How are you feeling? Are you in any pain? Should I get the doctor?"

"Miles can wait!" he exclaimed, then groaned as he exerted himself too much. "Shit, that hurts!"

Darius immediately jumped to his feet. "What hurts?"

"Everything," Julian groaned as he grabbed at his heavily bandaged arm.

Darius started to turn away to get the doctor when Julian's hand on his arm stopped him in his tracks. "You're not going anywhere!"

"Julian," Darius said as he turned back to him, "baby, let me get the doctor, please."

"No, you're not going anywhere. I own your ass now, and you're going to do exactly what I tell you to do from here on out. Do you understand me?"

Darius stared down at Julian's stern face in astonishment, his eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline at the tone of Julian's demanding words. His little five-foot-six Julian was telling him what to do, telling him that he was in control. The situation would have been hilarious if it wasn't so serious.

When he saw the small shine of a tear in Julian's apprehensive glance, he knew he was done for. Julian was demanding that he stay in his life. He would do whatever his little man wanted, no questions asked. "All right, Julian, whatever you say goes," he whispered with a beaming smile.

"That's right. I'm in charge now, and don't you forget it," Julian said bluntly. He yawned deeply, his eyelids starting to close. He grabbed at Darius's hand, squeezing it softly. "Just going to take a little nap now. Don't go anywhere, okay?"

"I promise. I'll be right here until you tell me differently." Darius squeezed his hand in return, the smile on Julian's face almost relieved, as if all of the troubles in the world had been lifted from his shoulders.

And to an effect, they had. Suddenly everything in his life made sense. If giving Julian control of everything meant that Darius could keep him in his life, so be it. It was a sacrifice he would gladly make.

Darius watched Julian's eyelids slowly close, holding tightly to his small hand. His eyes strayed to the rise and fall of his lithe chest, watching his restful, even breathing. He was stunned that Julian wanted anything to do with him after everything he had done. It didn't make any sense.

He knew Julian was more forgiving than anyone he had ever met in his life, but this was a little over the top, even for him. Darius had really screwed up. He didn't have any right to expect Julian to forgive him or even hope that he would.

"Stop thinking so much, Darius," Julian said without opening his eyes. "You're making my head hurt."

Darius chuckled at the little dictator's command. "Yes, Julian."

Still holding Julian's hand in his, Darius settled back into his chair to wait while Julian had his little nap. It didn't really matter anymore how long he was going to have to sit there. He wasn't going to move until Julian woke up. It was just that simple.

Even pale and injured, Julian was beautiful to watch while he slept. Darius felt like he could sit there in his uncomfortable plastic chair forever, just watching the rise and fall of his chest, knowing that it meant he was alive.

The door opening suddenly behind him had Darius turning to look, protectively putting his body between Julian and whoever was coming in. He nodded when he saw Miles step into the room, a clipboard in his hand, and sat back down.

"Miles."

"Hello, Darius." He nodded. "We've got to stop meeting like this. I'd much rather see you on movie night than in a hospital room looking like death warmed over."

"Yes, meeting in a hospital room is a tradition I'd certainly like to stop."

“So, how is your little man today?” Miles asked as he checked Julian’s vitals. Releasing his wrist, he quickly wrote something down in the chart, then pulled his stethoscope from around his neck to listen to Julian’s heart.

“Alive. That’s all that’s important to me,” Darius replied as he looked back down at Julian’s beloved face. As Julian started to stir, Darius reached up and rubbed his knuckles down his soft cheek. “As long as he’s breathing, nothing else matters,” Darius murmured quietly.

“Darius, you can be such a sap sometimes,” Julian whispered as he opened his eyes and looked up at him. He reached up with his uninjured arm to cup the side of Darius’s face with his hand. “But it’s good to know you care.”

Darius leaned into his hand, his dark eyes closing at the exquisite feel of Julian’s flesh touching his. “I care, Julian,” he whispered. His eyes were wet with tears as he opened them. “I care very much.”

“Good, because I’m not letting you get away from me this time.”

Darius chuckled as he brought his hand up to cover Julian’s, holding his hand against his cheek. “I’m okay with that.”

“Well, on that note,” Miles stated, “I’m going to go. Julian, if you keep recovering like you are, I’ll think about letting you go home day after tomorrow. I want you to get some sleep, though. You need your rest.”

“Darius stays!”

“I’m sorry, Julian, it’s against hospital policy. He can come back during visiting—”

“If Julian says I’m staying, then I’m staying.”

Miles could see that neither Julian nor Darius were going to budge on this issue. “All right, I suppose I can arrange something, but only if Julian gets some rest. Understood?”

Both Darius and Julian nodded their heads eagerly. “Thank you, Miles. I’ll be sure to leave you a good tip when I go.” Julian chuckled,

much to the amusement of both Darius and the good doctor. If Julian could crack jokes, he was well on the road to recovery.

“All right, you two, I’ll check in with you later. Darius, don’t keep Julian up too long. He really does need his rest. The more rest he gets, the sooner he can go home.”

“I promise, Miles. And thank you.”

Both Julian and Darius were quiet for a long time after Miles left, both deep in their own thoughts. Even though his eyes were closed, Darius knew Julian wasn’t sleeping by the way his hand twitched on his stomach occasionally.

“Julian?” he asked quietly, his head bent. His elbows rested on his knees, hands clasped tightly together in his lap. “Why did you let me stay?”

“Because I love you.”

“What?” Darius asked as he raised his eyes to meet Julian’s calm baby blue ones. He barely even opened his eyes as he answered, just reached out with his hand to pat at Darius’s arm.

“You love me and I love me. That’s all that either of us needs to know, Darius, all that really matters.”

“How can you love me after the things I did to you? All the horrible things I said?”

Julian opened his eyes and looked over at Darius. “No matter what you may think, I never stopped loving you, Darius. I also don’t believe that you ever stopped loving me, even if you never said you did in the first place.”

“I’ve loved you from the minute I saw you. I thought you knew that.”

“You never told me,” Julian scolded him.

“I’m not very good with words, Julian.” Darius bent his head, twisting his hands together. “There just didn’t seem any way to put the feelings inside of me into words. Nothing seemed adequate, you know? It was all just so overwhelming.”

“But you do love me.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes,” Darius whispered.

“Then say it.”

Darius’s eyes were damp as he looked at Julian. He was filled with fear and remorse. “I love you.”

Julian smiled, patting Darius’s arm as his eyes closed again. “See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Darius chuckled. “No, I suppose not.”

“Get used to saying it, Darius. I expect to hear it often.” Julian was so matter-of-fact in his words that Darius just stared at him in stunned silence before nearly yelling at him.

“That’s it? You’re not going to say anything about what happened? What about the last couple of months? About what I did to you? About Brian?”

Julian popped his eyes open to glare over at Darius. “I’d really prefer to never hear that name again, if you don’t mind. As for the last couple of months, what is there to say? We were tested, but we got through it. Both of us are alive and still loving each other. Nothing else matters.”

“How can you say that? Bri—*he* shot you.”

“But I’m alive.” Julian reached for Darius’s hand, holding it tight in his grasp. “Darius, when I was shot, lying in that ambulance, the only thing I wanted was you. Nothing else mattered, not our time apart, not what happened between us, not even what *he* did to us. None of it mattered, just you. I wanted you, your strong arms around me, your heartbeat beneath my ear, your body loving mine. That’s the only thing that mattered to me.”

“Julian, I don’t know what...” He bent his head briefly, swallowing hard before looking back up at Julian. “I don’t know if I can live up to that.”

“Yes, you can, and you will, because I refuse to have it any other way. I told you before, I own your sexy ass now, and I’m not letting you go. Now, shut up, Darius. I need to get my rest so that you can take me home.”

Darius watched with a bit of astonishment as Julian patted his arm again and shut his eyes. He didn't know what to say to him. Julian was handing him back his reason for living and telling him the cost would be something Darius had already given to Julian, his heart.

"All right, angel, you get some rest so that I can take you home. I'll be right here when you wake up."

"I know you will." After several quiet moments, Julian squeezed Darius's hand again. "I'm waiting, Darius."

"For what?"

"You know what I want."

Darius chuckled. "I love you, Julian."

"Don't worry, baby, it gets easier with time."

Darius shook his head, laughing. Julian was going to get his way by hook or by crook. It would probably be easier for him if he just gave in and did what Julian wanted. For such a small guy, Julian had more strength than anyone Darius had ever met.

"Hey, Darius?"

"Yes, Julian?"

"I love you, too."

Chapter Seventeen

Julian watched the movers lifting the last of the boxes as he stared out the large picture window of the new house Darius had built for them. It featured six bedrooms, four baths, an office that they both shared, a formal dining room, a kitchen that was a chef's dream, a family room with a huge movie screen, and an indoor pool. It was perfect.

He couldn't believe that they were moving in already. It had taken six months to plan and build. Somehow Darius had organized things so that they were moving into their new house on their one-year anniversary. It was hard to believe it had been that long already.

There had been a lot of changes in their lives since Julian had been shot. Dillon and Johnny shared an apartment now. Recently they had gone to one bedroom. Julian was happy that they were together, even though he wasn't quite sure how it had happened. But, Johnny seemed to want to do anything to make Dillon happy. He said it made him happy.

Johnny still needed to work on his *reformation* but he seemed to be well on his way. Julian suspected a lot of that was due to Dillon. Johnny wanted to be a better person, to be someone Dillon could care about. Julian had no doubt he would get there eventually.

Even Dino and Miles were still dating. They were, however, discussing something more permanent. Dino seemed to be proud of the fact that he was dating the director of Cathedral Park Hospital, even if Miles had only been in that position for a few months.

Dino had been spending more and more time with Miles and his family, including Miles's nephew Brandon, who made the world's best chocolate éclairs as far as Dino was concerned.

Darius had stopped drinking completely, afraid of hurting Julian even a little bit. No matter how many times Julian tried to tell him that it had been an accident, Darius was adamant. He said that the pleasure he received from loving Julian was far more important than anything he ever got from drinking. He hadn't had a drop since.

After learning that Brian had been drugging Darius, he had been relieved that there had been no lingering effects. Still, it explained a lot of Darius's strange behavior at the time.

After Julian had been released from the hospital, Darius had become the perfect househusband. He did nearly all the cooking and cleaning, refusing to have a housekeeper invade their privacy or to allow anyone else to take care of Julian except him. He had even perfected the art of fingernail painting.

Oh, he was still fully involved in the business and financial side of their lives, accompanying Julian wherever he went. With Darius's tutelage, Julian was becoming quite the successful businessman, taking over control of the club and turning it back into the place it had been before Brian had destroyed it.

Darius still refused to make any major decisions concerning anything that had to do with business or the finances without Julian's approval. He just told everyone that everything belonged to Julian and he was in charge. He seemed almost relieved to release control to someone else.

Their sex life seemed to be the only place that Darius dominated. He couldn't keep his hands off of Julian. It didn't matter what Julian was doing. If Darius was in the mood, he just picked Julian up and carried him off. Not that Julian was complaining. Darius was an insatiable lover with an imagination to rival even his own.

Julian chuckled as he watched Dino through the window, arguing with Dillon and Johnny over where some of the moving boxes went. Miles was standing beside Dino just shaking his head, laughing.

He smiled as he felt two strong arms wrap around him, leaning his head back against the massive chest behind him. “Mmm, you’d better be careful, baby. I have a very big, very jealous boyfriend.”

“Oh yeah? I’ll bet I’m a better lover than he is.”

“Prove it!” Julian chuckled as he turned to face that man holding him.

“Gladly!” Darius growled as he picked Julian up in his arms, carrying him out of the living room, up the stairs, and down the hall to their bedroom. He kicked the door closed before dropping Julian down in the middle of the bed.

Julian watched as Darius pulled his shirt over his head, then began unbuttoning his jeans. He kicked his shoes free and pushed his pants down, dropping them on the floor and standing up before Julian in all his naked glory.

“Damn!” Julian whispered as he slowly licked his lips. “You are so fucking hot!”

Julian started rubbing his hardening cock through his pants as he watched Darius grab a bottle of lube from his pants pocket and begin crawling up the bed towards him, settling between his legs.

“Why don’t you let me do that for you?” Darius asked as he reached for the button and zipper of Julian’s pants, undoing the button and pulling the zipper down so slowly that Julian thought he might scream with frustration.

“Darius,” he begged, “please—”

“All in good time, baby, all in good time.”

Darius pulled Julian’s pants down his legs and dropped them on the floor beside the bed. He reached for his shirt, ripping the buttons off as he pulled it apart before dropping it on the floor next to Julian’s pants.

There was a wicked gleam in his eyes as he looked back down at the naked body beneath his. He rubbed one hand down Julian's side from shoulder to hip, making Julian squirm beneath him.

"So beautiful, so sexy. What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"I don't know, but would you hurry up and do it?" Julian demanded as Darius flicked a finger across his nipple. "Oh god, yes, just like that." Julian arched his body towards Darius. "More," he begged.

Darius chuckled as he scooted down to lie between Julian's legs. "Patience, baby. You shouldn't hurry these things."

Darius leaned in to flick his tongue across the top of Julian's jutting cock. Julian's hips jumped so quickly off the bed that he had to use his hands to hold him down.

"Remember, baby, patience." Darius didn't give Julian any time to reply as he dove onto Julian's hard cock, swallowing him to the root, his tongue caressing the thick, veined sides as he bobbed his head up and down.

Julian groaned and buried his hands in Darius's thick hair, his eyes rolling back in his head. "Darius," he whispered. "Fuck, don't stop, please don't stop!"

Darius reached over and opened the bottle of lube with one hand, squirting some onto his fingers. Moving one hand down around to Julian's ass, he began lightly caressing Julian between his cheeks, rubbing repeatedly over his eager hole.

Julian released Darius's hair to quickly grab his legs and pull them up to his chest, opening himself up to Darius's hungry gaze.

"Fuck, that's so sexy, baby," Darius whispered as he looked down at Julian. Darius stroked the small rosette with his finger before slowly sinking in up to his knuckle.

Julian groaned as Darius wiggled his finger around. Pulling his finger nearly out, Darius added another, pushing them both in. Julian's heart started beating faster. He reached down with his hands and pulled his cheeks farther apart.

Julian knew his control was soon going to be a thing of the past. Darius added a third finger, leaning in to lick the base of Julian's sac as he pumped his fingers into him.

Suddenly, Darius scooted up and knelt between his legs. "Ready for me, baby?" he asked as he grabbed a hold of Julian's thighs and pushed them back against his chest, holding Julian open.

"Oh fuck, yes!" Julian demanded loudly. "Now, Darius, need you now!"

Darius pushed forward slowly, his thick, hard cock disappearing into Julian, bit by bit, until his balls rested against his ass.

"God, you were made for me," Darius groaned as his head dropped back on his shoulders as he took a deep breath and sighed.

"Darius—" Julian begged.

Darius opened his eyes and looked down at Julian. "Okay, baby, hold on."

Julian groaned as Darius began moving his hips, slowly at first but increasing the speed and strength of each thrust until he was pounding himself into Julian.

Julian loved every moment of it. Darius pegged his sweet spot with every plunge. Julian's cries increased in volume until he was nearly screaming. This was heaven.

"Touch yourself, baby," Darius demanded. "I've got your legs."

Julian released his legs into Darius's large hands and reached down to grab his cock, rubbing the drops of pre-cum across the top before eagerly matching his strokes to Darius's rapid thrusts.

He opened his eyes and looked up into Darius's unwavering gaze. "Harder," he demanded, watching as Darius's eyes darkened and he became ferocious in his need. Knowing what Darius wanted, what he needed, Julian reached up and began plucking at the small silver ring in his nipple.

He groaned at the combined stimulation of playing with his nipple, stroking his aching cock, and Darius thrusting into him. It was all too much. Julian's hips began lifting to meet Darius's thrusts.

“Oh fuck, Darius, I’m gonna...” Julian’s eyes shut tight and his head rolled back on his shoulders as his body arched up. Ropes of pearly white seed shot across his chest. His inner muscles tightened down like a vice, taking Darius with him.

Julian opened his eyes and looked up at Darius just in time to see the corded muscles on his neck tighten. His head fell back, his body going rigid as he emptied himself into Julian with a mighty roar.

His whole body quivered as he thrust into Julian once, twice, before dropping down to lay his head on Julian’s chest, his shaking arms supporting him, his breathing rapid.

Julian brought his hands up to run through Darius’s hair, waiting for him to regain his equilibrium.

Several moments later Darius lifted his head and smirked down at Julian. “Let’s see your boyfriend beat that!”

Julian’s giggle quickly turned to a groan of disappointment as Darius pulled out and moved to the side of the bed for a rag to clean them both up.

“I always hate that part.” Julian pouted.

“What part?” Darius asked as he cleaned them both off before dropping the rag in the nearby hamper.

“The part where you have to pull out.”

“Well, I am kind of attached to my cock, baby,” Darius replied as he climbed back onto the bed.

Julian giggled again. “So am I.”

Darius lay down on his back next to Julian and pulled him onto his chest, wrapping his arms around him. “You know, baby, this is our first anniversary.”

“Yeah?”

“You promised to tell me who *Mr. Wonderful* was on our first anniversary.”

“You remember that?” Julian asked, surprised.

“I remember everything concerning you, baby. Now, stop hedging and spill.”

Julian chuckled as he settled himself on top of Darius's chest, his head resting on his folded hands, his gaze centered on the man beneath him.

"Well, after that little fiasco with Johnny, Dino and I were talking. He felt that it was time for me to find a new boyfriend, so he wanted to know what I was after, what kind of man I wanted in my life."

"And you said?"

"I wanted someone who was tall, strong, and masculine without being a tough guy. He needed to be sweet, gentle, and affectionate. Smart, but not boorish, and humorous. But most importantly, he had to love me."

"How did the term 'Mr. Wonderful' come into that conversation?"

"Simple. I told Dino that all of those traits were what I believed would make the most wonderful man on earth, and that if I ever met Mr. Wonderful, I would know him on sight.

Julian let out a deep sigh. "Dino, of course, brought up my previous mistakes. So, I agreed to give Mr. Wonderful one year. If we were still together after one year, and I was still happy, I would know that he was the one for me and would be with him for the rest of my life."

"And are you? Still happy, I mean?"

Julian smiled. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stormy Glenn believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two, or three, men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul mates, true love, and happy endings.

When she's not being a mother to her six teenagers or cleaning up after her two 70-pound lap puppies, you can usually find her cuddled in bed with a book in her hand or her laptop, creating the next sexy character for her stories.

Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website at www.stormyglenn.com



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