



Loose Id

Self Preservation

ETHAN DAY

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LooseId^(R)
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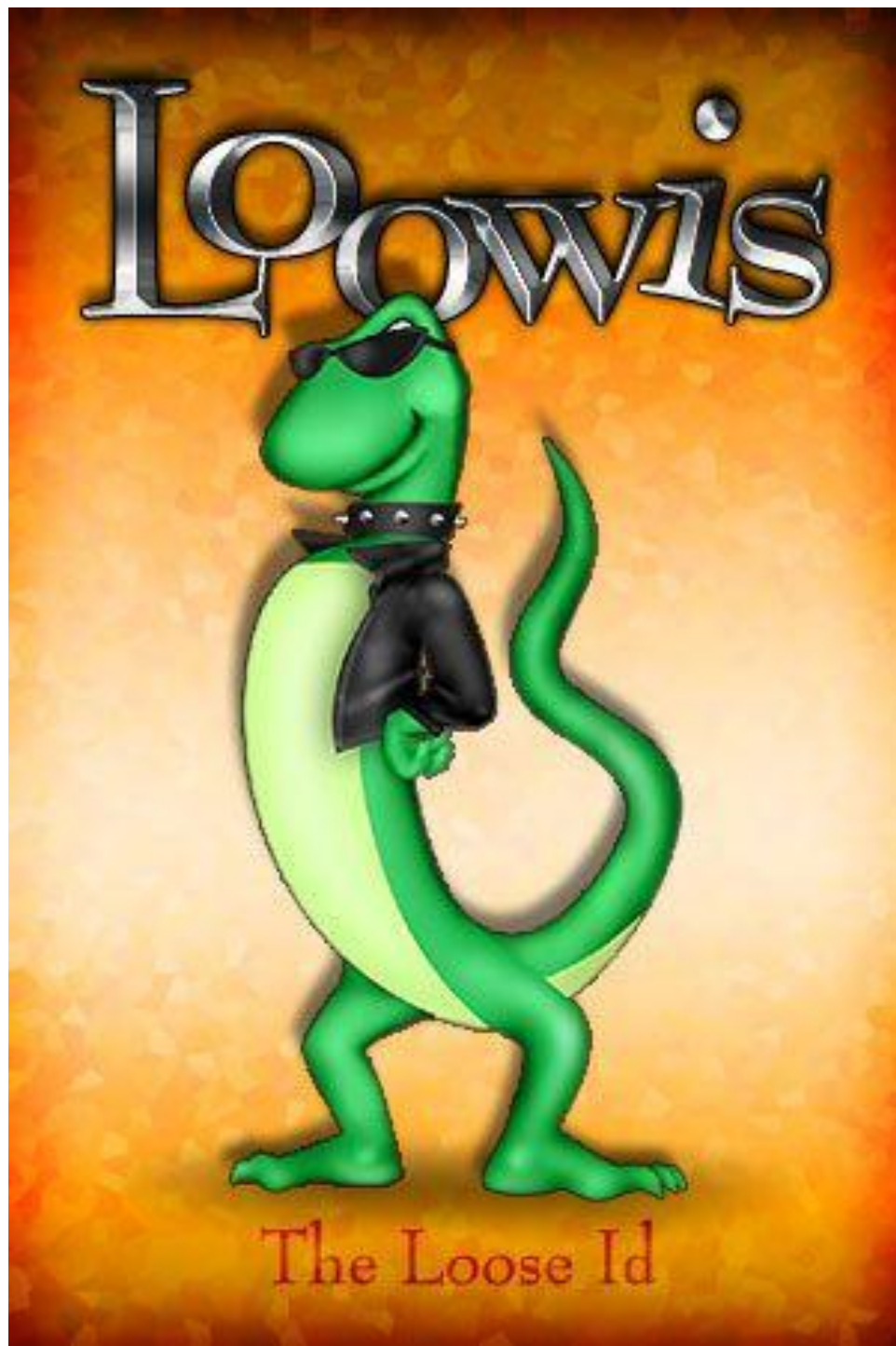
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Chapter One

The light bulb flickered in the dark stairwell as Davis made his way down the steps from his loft apartment on the third floor to his business, housed on the first. He made a mental note to change the bulb later that night on his way back upstairs. He turned the deadbolt on the door and walked into the hallway at the back of his store, Aesthetic Artifacts, an architectural remnant and restoration business. He closed the door behind him and flipped the switches on the wall as six globe lights dangling from the ceiling flooded the showroom with light. He breathed in the scent of musty old millwork mixed with Murphy Oil Soap, varnish, and mineral spirits. Comforted by the familiarity, he smiled.

Davis was terminally tangled up in the same old routines. For the past two years he'd spent New Year's Eve at home...alone. He'd long since stopped getting invitations to parties, to go out to bars, or out to dinner with friends -- not because he was disliked or socially inept, but because he'd always seemed to decline those invitations. He hated bars, hated being groped by complete strangers, preferred to stay at home, relaxing in front of his flat screen watching old black-and-white movies. The truth was, the only time he felt truly lonely was when he was out socializing with others. It seemed to make him more acutely aware of the fact that he wasn't with the one he loved.

He entered his small office across from the showroom and flicked on the light. The walls were covered with framed newspaper articles and photos of historic homes in successive stages of restoration. The largest of the framed headlines read LOCAL PRESERVATIONIST LENDS EXPERTISE IN RESTORATION OF HISTORIC MISSOURI HOTEL. An antique drafting table sat against the wall on his right, piled high with architectural drawings and blueprints. Reaching, he pulled a chain that turned on the table lamp atop his mahogany desk and placed his large mug of steaming coffee next to a local magazine. The cover had a picture of him captioned DAVIS ANDREWS: LIVING IN THE PAST.

Davis looked out through the glass window separating his office from the main part of the store. Sunlight poured in through the large plate-glass windows at the front of the three-story downtown building. Noticing the time, he grabbed up his coffee and headed back out into the hall. He walked down an aisle in the main room of the store, listening to the wood floors creak under his feet, passing salvaged columns, pieces of building facades, fireplace mantels, and rows of huge, ornately carved antique doors. He unlocked the front door and turned, heading back down a second aisle, making his way toward the back of the store. He passed the stacks of old milled crown and baseboard moldings stacked along the far wall and reached the counter, where he started the CD player. He turned, walking up to the enormous gilded plaster mirror frame and inspected the molded sections of the leaf pattern he'd created the day before to patch pieces broken off at some point in its history.

Davis was dressed in a pair of old, beat-up khaki coveralls covered in chemical and paint stains, along with a white T-shirt that looked to be in about the same condition of wear and tear. His brown leather work boots were worn, the ends of their laces frayed.

He looked like the contents of his store. At first glance they were disheveled and in desperate need of care and attention, but the well-trained eye could spot the beauty that lay beneath, just waiting to be revived. Davis was still in great physical condition at the ripe old age of twenty-eight. But his dirty blond hair looked ratty and way overdue for a cut, and he was beginning to get dark circles under his eyes, which looked worse considering the natural paleness of his skin. His thin, just-under-six-foot frame was toned, with long legs and arms. His hands and fingers were rough, worn, dry -- stained by chemicals and varnish.

Nineteen-forties big band music poured out of the speakers as Davis took up a brush, gently pressing the sheet of gold leaf over a patched section of the frame. He blew gently over the area as the tiny leftover pieces of gold flew off, floating to the floor around his feet. He stepped back, checking his progress and expertly did a three- or four-step Fred Astaire-style dance move.

Behind him, a waifish woman quietly walked through the front door of the store and placed two suitcases on the floor. Her tiny frame was pumped up several inches by the high heels she wore. She was well put together, wearing formfitting black slacks, a red linen shirt, and a cropped black jacket. Her wild, manufactured mane of curly blonde hair rained down over her shoulders, and she wore just enough jewelry to be noticeable without seeming tacky or over-the-top. She smiled as Davis looked up, freezing in his tracks.

"Davie," she said, cocking her head to one side. "Davie Unwavie. How's my favorite root-bound homo?"

"Holy shit, Deseree," Davis said, smiling uncontrollably. "I thought I was hallucinating."

Davis ran to her and tossed his arms around her, nearly knocking her over. "Whoa," Deseree said, squeezing him tightly. "Somebody's been eating his Wheaties."

"Somebody hasn't returned my phone calls for the last three months," Davis scolded as he pulled away to look her over, remembering how much the clothes she designed, loaded with taste and drama, resembled her personality.

"I'm sorry I haven't called," she said. "It's been hell putting together my collection for the nationwide release. I've been working like a demon to finish in time for the show last week at Bryant Park...which was complete insanity, by the way."

"I was beginning to get worried. I thought maybe you'd been devoured by a rogue pack of starving supermodels."

"Well, I'm here now." Deseree looked over her oldest and very best friend. And, that was the truth. In university, Davis's roommate Tim, and Deseree's roommate Cindy, were fucking like rabbits every night, whether or not anyone else was in the room. Needless to say, Deseree was appalled and Davis, with his fresh-off-the-farm innocence, didn't know how to handle it. Deseree suggested Cindy and Davis swap roomies. In the end, Davis and Deseree had lasted longer than Tim and Cindy.

"Who knew becoming a household name would require so much work?" Her eyes wandered around the store as she placed her hands on her hips. "Wow, this is quite an operation that you have here, Davie! I never realized."

"I've missed your face," he said, looking down at her suitcases. "You do realize it's been well over a year... You should have told me you were coming."

"I guess I didn't know," she said, smiling up at him.

"Is everything okay?" Davis asked, placing a hand on her arm and looking over her face. Her normally bubbly confidence was tinged with a slight edge of uneasiness.

She looked up at him for a moment and opened her mouth to speak as the phone started to ring.

"Hold that thought." He turned and jogged to the back of the store where he picked up the cordless phone off the glass display case. On the other end of the line a familiar voice said, "Hello, monkey face."

"Jack..." Davis hesitated, startled at hearing the voice of his first and only love.

"Davis," Jack's voice called through the phone.

"Yeah...I'm here."

Deseree whispered for him to say hi to Jack for her, and Davis watched as she smiled and began meandering about the store.

"I have some news, and, well, I hope you'll be excited for me."

A new part in a play, Davis thought. "You know I never wish anything but the best for you, Jack."

"I came home to visit Mom a couple weeks ago and, well..." Jack continued.

Davis put his hand over the phone and whispered to Deseree, "Jack's in a new play."

Deseree giggled as she ran her fingers over the gilded plaster mirror frame Davis had been working on. She looked back up at Davis. "I totally want this."

"I met someone," Jack said.

Davis stopped smiling and removed his hand from the mouthpiece. "I'm sorry...what?"

"I know this is going to sound crazy, but we've been inseparable since we met, and well...we've decided to get married."

"What do you mean?" Davis asked, his head beginning to swim. He was having trouble catching his breath. "Who is this person? Does Candace know about this?"

"Of course. She introduced us. His name is Tadd Austin; he's an architect here in Chicago. Davis, you're just gonna love him."

"He's moving to New York to be with you?"

Deseree poked around the store, quietly trying to eavesdrop.

"I'm moving back to Chicago, Davis. Mom's really excited, and I was hoping you could fly up on Thursday. It's going to be like this three-day extravaganza."

"This Thursday?" Davis placed an arm on the countertop to brace himself. "You're getting married this coming weekend?"

Deseree turned sharply, losing her balance as her heel caught in a notch in the wood floor. She flailed her arms out in an attempt to balance herself and fell back into a fluted column before landing on the floor.

"Please tell me you can make it, Davis. 'Cause if you weren't here... I don't know, it just wouldn't feel right."

Deseree scrambled off the floor as the column toppled, slamming into a door that fell into a large box of doorknobs. They spilled onto the floor, scattering like balls on a pool table.

"I don't know if I can come." Davis paced, unaware of Deseree and the carnage around him. "Deseree is visiting, and --"

"Great! I need as many friends around me as I can get. Most of the people coming are friends of either Tadd or Mom. I'll book a flight for the two of you."

"Okay," Davis said, "but Jack..."

"It's been forever. I'll e-mail you the flight info. Davis, I can't wait to see you. Gotta run."

Davis heard the click on the other end of the line. Frozen in place, he slowly pulled the phone away from his ear and turned to look at Deseree in shock, mouth agape.

Deseree stared back at him, unsure of what to say.

After a long silence she said, "Okay, maybe this is a good thing. Closure, this will help you move on."

"A good thing!" Davis finally replied, placing a hand on his forehead. "Closure!"

“Or not,” Deseree said, dusting off her pants.

Davis slammed the phone down onto the counter and stormed about the room, seemingly unaware that he was kicking the doorknobs.

“Married!” Davis finally screamed, causing Deseree to jump. “He can’t do that...it’s not even legal. And what the fuck kind of name is Tadd Austin? More like Toad Ass-ton.”

Deseree started to giggle.

“This isn’t funny, Des.” He shot her an irritated look as he flung his hands into the air. “He’s supposed to marry me! We were together for four goddamn years!”

“Davis.” Deseree tried to soothe him. “You haven’t been together for almost six years. What did you expect?”

“That we would find our way back to each other.” Tears began to well up in his eyes. “We’re still in love.”

“You mean *you’re* still in love,” Deseree corrected gently, reaching out to take his hand.

“We belong together,” he said, jerking away from her. “I know he still loves me. He still calls... He has to love me.”

“Maybe you two just aren’t meant to be, Davis.”

Davis stopped pacing and surveyed the room as if trying to find a place to hide from her words. She walked to him and placed her hands on his arms.

“When did you become so negative?” he asked.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said as he jerked away from her.

“You’re not helping here.”

“All I’m saying is that maybe you aren’t being very realistic.”

“I can’t let some Toad hop in and take Jack away from me,” Davis said, sitting down on a step to a raised platform filled with rows of doors. “Two weeks, Des... That’s all they’ve had together.”

Deseree let out a sigh and sat on the step next to him.

“Toad can’t possibly know how wonderful Jack is,” he said, resting his head in his hands. “The way the hair around his temples curls when he sweats, and how his eyes seem to be able to smile on their own. That he isn’t afraid to stand up and defend himself, or anyone else who’s being bullied. His cute little clean teeth dance.”

Deseree put her arm around him as Davis seemed to suddenly notice the doorknobs.

“What the hell happened here?”

“His... *what* dance?” Deseree asked, changing the subject.

“He has this little dance he does when he’s finished brushing his teeth,” Davis said, smiling as he reached down and picked up a glass doorknob. “Something he and Candace used to do when he was little.” He turned the knob in his hand as light caught the reflection

of the glass. Davis let out a defeated sigh as Deseree placed her head on his shoulder. She ran her hand over his back, and Davis felt a tear begin to run down his cheek as the thought of Jack being with someone else started to sink in.

"I can't lose him, Des. He's making a mistake. He means everything to me."

"You mean you're actually going to go?" Deseree asked as Davis stood. She got up next to him.

"Oh my God." He pointed to his reflection in the mirror of an antique fireplace mantel. As if seeing himself for the first time, he added, "Have you seen this?"

"It's not that bad," Deseree answered, crinkling up her face.

"Are you on crack?" He began to hyperventilate. "I look like...like a heterosexual! I can't go to Chicago looking like this!"

Davis took off running toward the back of the store and threw open the door to the stairwell. He let out a shriek and ran up the stairs. Deseree looked around helplessly. She dashed back to the front door, flipped the CLOSED sign to face the window, locked the door, and took off up the stairs after Davis.

Davis burst through the front door to his loft and paced around the living room, muttering under his breath. Deseree walked through the front door, trying to catch her breath after climbing the two flights of stairs.

The apartment looked as if it had been replicated from an old film noir movie set. Classic curved lines and geometric shapes typical of art deco dominated the design. A couch and matching chair with large curved arms took up the bulk of the living room. They were covered in the original fabric and, with the exception of a small worn area on the piping of one of the sofa's arms, looked almost new. A large, wool antique area rug covered most of the wood floors. Its rich burgundy color had faded over the years. A massive flat-screen TV mounted on the opposite wall was the only item in the room betraying the historical accuracy of the space. Three large double-hung windows, without blinds or curtains, allowed the full morning sun to pour in along the front wall.

"Those stairs are murder," Deseree said, observing Davis's tearstained cheeks.

"I can't meet the Toad like this," he said, crossing his arms.

"Calm down, Tammy Faye." Deseree looked him over. She walked up to him and ran her fingers through his hair, trying to figure out what to do with it. "You do have a world-renowned fashion designer at your disposal."

"You'll help me?" he asked, with pleading eyes.

"I'll drag you out of the denim and cotton nightmare known as your wardrobe and have you looking like a rock star within a day."

"And you'll come with me to Chicago?" he asked.

"You breaking out of your shell and laying claim to your man," she said, smiling at the thought. "I wouldn't miss that for the world."

"Thank you so much." He threw his arms around her. "I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here." Davis's eyes widened as panic swept over his face. He pulled away from her sharply. "Good Christ, I left the store open."

"Calm down," Deseree said, laughing at him. "I took care of it before I came up."

Davis let out a sigh of relief as he hugged her again. "Thank God you showed up today of all days."

They separated and she looked at him, started to say something, but stopped. She turned and walked over to a table full of framed photos. They consisted mainly of their college years, and she smiled looking over them. There were candid shots of Davis and Jack together, a shot of Deseree at one of her student fashion shows, Jack onstage performing in a play.

"Oh my God," she said, picking up a picture of her and Davis dressed like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, dancing together. "I can't believe you have this."

Davis walked over, looked down, and smiled. "From our ballroom dancing class," he said, wiping his face dry.

"We were maniacs," she said, setting the picture frame back down.

"We were good." Davis reached down and turned the frame slightly, putting it back exactly as it was before she'd disturbed it.

"Who's this?" she asked, pointing to another picture of a glamorous woman singing next to a piano.

"That's Jack's mother, Candace," he answered with a smile. "She has her own cabaret act in this really cool jazz club in Chicago, been doing it for years. We still talk once a week or so."

"That's strange," Deseree said, running her fingers over the top of the table, "still having a relationship with your ex-lover's mother."

"We're still close." He turned and headed into the kitchen. He picked an open bottle of wine up off the counter and yanked the cork out. "Although I don't understand why she didn't call me to warn me about the Toad," he added, putting the bottle to his lips and taking a big swig.

"Why yes, I'd love a glass, thanks," Deseree said with a smirk.

"Sorry." Davis pulled a couple of glasses out of the cabinet. He walked back into the living room and flopped down on the sofa, then filled each glass with wine.

"Jack's her son, Davis," she said, lingering at the photos a moment longer before joining him on the sofa. "If you and she are still friends, perhaps she's trying not to get involved."

He handed her a wineglass and leaned back into the sofa as Deseree took a drink. Her eyes widened as she quietly spit the wine back into the glass. She looked at the glass funny and set it down on the coffee table.

"Maybe," Davis said, staring out the windows. "But she was really upset with Jack when we broke up. I'd like to think she's on my side, but maybe she likes the stupid Toad. Jack did say she introduced them."

"So what's your plan?" Deseree asked, leaning back and resting her cheek on Davis's chest. "Are you gonna scratch Toad's eyes out and throw him in a pool?"

"Of course not." Davis put his arm around her and pulled her into him. "After you work your magic on me, all it will take is Jack and me being in the same room."

"I hope for your sake you're right," Deseree said, closing her eyes with a big yawn.

"Jack just needs to be reminded of what we had," Davis said, looking down at her and smiling. Seeing she'd fallen asleep, he reached down with his free hand and brushed a stray curl off her face. He looked back up facing the windows. "So that's what we're going to do, you and me. Show him what he's been missing."

As he listened to Deseree's breathing slow and regulate, he thought back to the comment she'd made about it being six years since he and Jack had stopped seeing each other. He wondered how it was even possible that much time had gone by without his realizing. His chest began to ache and he shut his eyes, squeezing them tight. In the back of his mind, he'd always felt as if he and Jack were still together. Just on a break of sorts. But not once had he ever really considered the fact that they wouldn't get back together. Random memories flooded his mind in a slide show. He smiled thinking about their first date. He'd been so nervous, but even that early in their history he'd felt an undercurrent flowing through his body that told him his life was about to change in ways he'd never even imagined it could.

Chapter Two

Ten years ago

“You have *got* to calm down,” Deseree said, tying her hair back into a ponytail. “You’re turning completely red all over.”

“I can’t help it,” Davis said, pacing back and forth in their dorm room. “I feel all angsty.” He fanned his face with his hand and looked down at his chest and stomach.

Their dorm room had two single beds pressed up against opposite walls. Davis had a plain brown comforter and a pillow on his bed, and Deseree’s bed was piled high with throw pillows and had a pale blue, shiny, silklike duvet cover filled with a fluffy down comforter. There was one wood nightstand between the beds with a round porcelain table lamp and two alarm clocks sitting on top. The concrete block walls were painted white, and curtains in a fabric matching Deseree’s bedding hung over the one window. Deseree had *Titanic* and *Good Will Hunting* movie posters hanging on the wall above her bed, and spread across the top of it were several vintage *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* magazines from the 1950s. Davis had spotted them in an antique store and bought them for her earlier that day.

On the opposite wall was a large antique partners’ desk. They’d found it together and bought it, along with two wooden chairs that had come out of an old school. One end was pushed up against the wall, so they each had access to their own side of the desk. Davis’s side was all very neat and organized, while Deseree had sketches, colored pencils, and wadded-up pieces of paper littering her side.

Davis stopped pacing, holding out a hand as if to balance himself. “I feel like I might pass out.”

“Good Lord,” she said, picking up one of the magazines and getting up off the bed. She stood in front of Davis, fanning him with it. “You look like you’re breaking out in a rash.”

"I know." Davis turned to look in the mirror. "I can't go. I look wretched. Call him and tell him I'm sick."

"It's too late," Deseree said, shaking her head while fanning him. "He could be here any minute."

"I'm not ready for this," he said, beginning to hyperventilate.

"It's just a date, for Christ's sake," Deseree said, laughing. "Sit down and put your head between your legs."

Davis did as she ordered. Deseree tossed the magazine down and went over to the minifridge, from which she extracted a can of Diet Coke. She walked over to his bed and placed the can on the back of his neck.

Davis let out a long groan. "That feels good."

"Just breathe slowly."

"I don't know what it is, but this doesn't feel...casual," Davis said. "When I see him or think about him...I get this feeling. It goes through me all the way down to the bone. Like...like he's going to completely change my world. Alter my universe to the point that I can never go back."

"It's going to be okay," Deseree said, lightly running her hand along his back. "I promise you, it will all be okay."

Davis sat up, and she looked over him. She got onto his bed on her knees and set the soda down. She began massaging his shoulders and he closed his eyes, letting out a sigh.

"See there," Deseree said. "The redness is beginning to fade."

"I feel better. Thank you."

"You're going to go and have a nice dinner," she said, massaging the back of his neck. "You'll talk and flirt and laugh and get to know one another...simple."

"You're right," Davis said, and his eyes popped open as he heard the knock at the door. He stood up and headed toward it.

"Shirt." Deseree picked it up off the bed.

"Oh, right," he said, smiling as he took it from her and slid it on. He walked to the door, buttoning it and shoving it into the waist of his jeans. He took a deep breath, exhaling as he opened the door. He felt his face flush as he smiled uncontrollably.

"Hello, beautiful," Jack said, standing in front of him, holding a single white rose by the stem. He had the bud resting on his chin and he winked, smiling up at Davis. Jack was dressed in an old pair of blue jeans that seemed almost strategically worn in the areas where you'd want others' eyes to be drawn, along with a thick off-white knit sweater. The sweater looked old and worn in an appealing, comfy way. It fit loosely through his midsection but showed off his well-defined chest and shoulders. The sleeves were a little too long and they bunched up slightly falling into his elbows. He looked like a live-action statue of *David*, only

in full color as opposed to carved out of white marble. He had large brown eyes, high cheekbones, defined chin, full lips, and wavy black hair.

Davis melted, taking the rose as Jack held it out for him. "You look amazing."

"I was going to get a red rose," Jack said, entering the room as Davis stood back, holding the door for him to pass, "but I saw that one and, I don't know, it made me think of you."

"Hi, Jack," Deseree said, smiling up from her bed and cracking open the can of soda.

"Hey." Jack glanced down over some of her sketches on the desk. "Those look great."

"Thanks," she said, twisting her hand back and forth. "I was just messing around."

"It's perfect," Davis said, placing the flower to his nose and smiling as Jack turned to face him. "You're perfect," he added, shrugging and turning red again.

"You are adorable," Jack said, reaching up and placing the back of his hand on Davis's red cheek. "Always blushing."

His hand felt cool on Davis's face. Davis closed his eyes for a second, leaning into the caress slightly.

"If you leave it on the desk I'll put it in some water," Deseree said, grinning.

"Thanks. Guess we should go?"

"Sure," Davis said, setting down the rose.

"Good-bye," Deseree called out as the door closed behind them. "Homos," she added, shaking her head. "Drama, drama, drama."

They walked down the dormitory hallway, and Jack followed Davis down the two flights of stairs. He grinned, letting his gaze settle on Davis's ass. They went out the doors into the cool fall night air, and Jack put his hand on Davis's shoulder to lead him in the opposite direction.

Davis felt chills run across his skin from Jack's touch, and he blushed again, thankful Jack couldn't see his crimson cheeks as they walked along the dimly lit sidewalk.

They made general chitchat as they walked to the Greek restaurant just off the far side of campus. Jack talked about the musical *Hairspray*, which he was going to be in that semester, playing the part of Corny Collins. He was looking forward to learning the music and all the choreography. They had a new music theater professor, and Jack seemed extremely excited by her. She was younger, in her late twenties, and Jack said he felt as though she had a ton of fresh ideas.

Davis sat back, letting Jack do most of the talking during dinner. He didn't know much about theater or musicals, other than some old Technicolor and black-and-white movie musicals he'd seen on TV. Davis loved to listen to Jack talk, the sound of his voice like velvet. His face became so animated and alive as he told stories about the theater and about other productions he'd been involved with.

The lights in the restaurant were low and the amber glass candle on the table flickered as the waitress took away their dinner plates. Drips of condensation ran down the glass as Davis picked up his soda and took a sip from the straw. He leaned back into the green vinyl booth and smiled back at Jack, who looked into his eyes.

"You don't talk much," Jack said, pushing a stray piece of silverware to the side.

"Oh, sorry," Davis said, looking down as he wiped the Formica tabletop with his paper napkin. "I just...I like listening to you."

Jack giggled, realizing he'd embarrassed Davis. "Well, I love to talk, so we'll get along famously."

Davis smiled, looking back up at him. "I'm sorry. I'm nervous."

"I realize that," Jack said, grinning. "And stop apologizing, I'm already crazy about you and I barely know you, so relax."

"Okay," Davis said, turning red again for the hundredth time as he smiled. *He likes you, dimwit, so just chill.* "I haven't really done this before, you know."

"Done what?" Jack asked, smiling as Davis looked down at the table.

"Gone on dates," Davis said, looking up to see if Jack would freak out.

"Not even in high school?" He was wide-eyed. "Like with a girl?"

"Nope," Davis said, scrunching up his face. "It's weird, I know."

"But you're so hot," Jack said with a half smile. "I don't believe it."

"I was kind of a nerd in school," Davis said, tilting his head to the side. "Always had my nose stuck in some old history book. There was a guy I liked, though."

"Really," Jack said, leaning forward a little. "I hate him already."

"No need," Davis said, chuckling. "He did football, as well as girls."

Jack smiled and then his mouth fell open. "Wait, are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"I don't know," Davis said, panicking. "What do you think I'm saying?"

"That you're a...virgin?" Jack asked, eyes bulging as Davis bit his lip and turned beet red. The corners of Jack's mouth turned up and he added, "Holy shit."

"You're right," Davis said, looking down at the table. "I'm sorry. I should have said so before agreeing to go out with you. It's just that I get sick to my stomach when I'm with you, and...wait...that didn't...shit."

Jack laughed out loud, startling Davis. *Way to go, idiot. Tell the guy he makes you sick.*

"I really like you," Davis said, shrugging. "A lot. I guess I hoped you'd get to know me, and it wouldn't matter that I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing."

"Oh, baby," Jack said, leaning forward and placing an elbow on the table. "I don't care about that. I can show you what to do. I'd love to show you what to do."

Davis felt Jack place his other hand on his knee under the table. His mouth fell open slightly, and he immediately felt his cock begin to stir between his legs. His chest began to fill with pressure as the waitress came up and dropped the check on the table. Jack removed his hand and leaned to the side, taking his wallet out of his back pocket. He was still smiling from ear to ear and laughed again, pulling some bills out and placing them on the table.

“Come on, Casanova,” he said, getting out of the booth.

Davis got up and followed him out of the restaurant. Back in the cool night air, Davis began to relax again and Jack reached up and mussed his hair a little before tossing his arm on Davis’s shoulder. “You can come back to my room, and I’ll teach you a few things?”

“What about your roommate?” Davis asked, stopping as panic swept over his whole body.

“Calm down, Gidget,” Jack said. “I have a single, so no roomie, and I won’t do anything you’re uncomfortable with.”

“Oh,” Davis said, as they began walking again. His heart began racing, and he felt his cock begin to twitch as he thought about being alone with Jack.

“You practically went into fight-or-flight mode, there,” Jack said, giggling. “We don’t have to go back to my room. We could go somewhere else.”

“No,” Davis said, “I’m sorry. I want to.” *He’s going to kiss me. Fuck, what if I’m a terrible kisser?*

“Okay, and stop saying you’re sorry,” Jack said, squeezing his shoulder.

“Sorry,” Davis said, beginning to chuckle as the wind blew across his face.

* * * * *

Jack’s room was the same size as the one he shared with Deseree, but he had a full-size bed. There was a small dresser on one wall with a TV and DVD player on top and an armoire in the corner. Davis sighed, a little relieved, thinking it probably wasn’t his intention to bring him back here; Jack’s bed hadn’t been made. The covers were tossed open on one side and the sheets looked a little rumpled. A wicker hamper stood in the corner next to the closet, filled with dirty clothes. Jack flipped on the lamp next to his bed and asked Davis to turn off the overhead light. He pulled the comforter up and smoothed it out a little.

“Sorry,” Jack said. “My bed’s always a mess.”

Hopefully not because he was in it with someone else last night, Davis thought.

“I suck when it comes to the mundane little day-to-day details,” Jack said, walking up to Davis and taking him by the hands. “You can actually come in.” Jack laughed, pulling Davis away from the doorway. “I promise you won’t need to make a run for it.”

Davis smiled as Jack pulled him closer. Jack wrapped his arms around his waist, and Davis looked up into his eyes. Jack cocked his head slightly and placed his lips onto Davis’s.

Davis watched Jack close his eyes, so he did the same and took in a sharp breath as Jack flicked his lips with the tip of his tongue. Davis opened his mouth and Jack slipped in his tongue, softly moving it in and out of his mouth. Davis began to reciprocate and he felt his cock spring up, fully erect and straining against the fabric of his underwear. Jack moaned and moved his hands to Davis's face, pressing his lips harder against his mouth, going deeper with his tongue. Davis felt Jack press into him and could tell he was hard as well. Jack pulled away and smiled, looking down between the two of them.

"Seems as though you enjoy that," he said, rubbing his own erection into Davis's through his jeans.

Davis blushed, grinning from ear to ear as he tried to look away. Jack pulled his face back, forcing him to keep eye contact.

"Don't look away, beautiful. Don't ever look away," Jack said with a serious expression as he leaned in to kiss Davis again.

Davis's entire body felt red-hot and his chest filled from Jack's words. He didn't want to look away. He didn't want to ever be away from Jack. Davis grabbed Jack by the belt loops of his jeans, pulling him tighter as Jack ground into him with his tongue and pelvis. Davis felt his dick begin to leak into his jeans and he felt a little light-headed, unable to catch a full breath as he kissed Jack. His entire body began to shake, and Jack pulled away.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Davis said, astonished, not knowing what was happening. He looked up at Jack and added, "You feel amazing."

"Are you sure?" Jack asked, looking over his face.

"Yeah." Davis laughed. "I don't know why I'm shaking."

Jack smiled and said, "Probably nerves."

Jack took a step back and turned, then walked over to the armoire. Davis's eyes widened, seeing how large the bulge in Jack's pants was. It was obvious Jack wasn't wearing any underwear, and Davis felt a little weak in the knees. He shook as he glanced over Jack's ass as Jack opened the doors to the armoire. He pulled out a bottle of wine and a corkscrew, then removed the cork. Jack filled two glasses and walked back to Davis, then handed him a glass.

"One of my best friends is a senior," Jack said, taking a sip from the glass. "She buys it for me."

Davis sniffed it and took a sip. He made an approving sound as he took a bigger drink. Jack smiled, watching him take another big gulp.

"Slow down there, buddy," Jack said, taking a sip. "We don't want you trashed."

"It's good," Davis said, having more. He giggled as he began to feel the effects of the wine. He glanced back down at Jack's crotch and bit his lip. "I feel better."

Laughing, Jack took Davis's glass and set it down on the dresser next to the TV. He set his own glass next to it and turned back to a smiling Davis. Jack smiled and walked back up to him. He took Davis's hand and placed it over the front of his jeans, pressing into his hand.

Davis's eyes got big as he took over for himself, massaging the large, hard lump that ran down Jack's pant leg. Jack pulled his sweater up over his head and tossed it to the floor as Davis ran his eyes over Jack's chiseled chest and cut abs. He had no hair other than a small trail running down from his belly button and disappearing into jeans. Davis lifted his hands and ran them over Jack's naked flesh. Jack reached up and began unbuttoning Davis's shirt. When he got halfway down, he slid a hand under the shirt and found his nipple. Davis gasped as Jack pinched it, lightly pulling it between his finger and thumb.

Davis leaned up, kissing him, while Jack pulled his hand out and continued with the remainder of the buttons. He pulled the shirt out of his jeans and slid it off Davis's shoulders. Their tongues were working one another over, and Jack grabbed Davis by the waistband of his jeans, pulling him closer. He unbuttoned and undid the zipper, shoving his hand into Davis's underwear. Davis moaned loudly as Jack took his hard-on into his hand, gently pulling up and down as he smeared the precum over the head.

Davis reached down, sliding his own jeans and briefs down over his hips, letting them fall to the floor. Jack pulled back and looked down over the naked body standing before him. Davis wasn't as cut as Jack, but he was thin, and Jack loved the way his tanned hands looked as they ran over Davis's soft white skin. Davis toed out of his sneakers and stepped out of his clothes, kicking them to the side. Jack turned, still with Davis's hard-on in his hand, and led him to the bed. He sat Davis on the bed, and Davis watched as Jack undid his jeans and slid them down his legs.

Davis looked at Jack's cock. "Jesus Christ." Realizing that he'd said it out loud, he turned beet red again.

"I'll be damned," Jack said, pushing Davis onto his back. "You actually blush all over." Jack bent down, placing his hands on the bed, and took Davis's dick into his mouth.

"Holy...fuck." Davis gasped, taking in a sharp breath as Jack's hot, wet mouth moved all the way down his shaft, sucking him in until Jack's nose pressed into his body. He lifted his body a little as Jack pulled up, creating more suction before taking him all the way in again. Jack took Davis's balls in his hand, wrapping his thumb and finger above them, and tugged gently on them as he worked his mouth up and down the shaft.

Davis felt the pressure build and his balls rise up. "I'm gonna..." He tried to get the words out before he exploded into Jack's mouth. Jack let out a deep, sexy moan as he continued to suck until Davis began to jerk wildly, putting his hands down to push him off.

Jack stood up and deviously smiled down at him. "I'm not forcing you into anything, am I?"

"No," Davis said, sitting up and looking at Jack's huge dick. He frowned a little, biting his lip, and Jack moved closer, placing it in front of his face. Davis looked up at him and asked, "What if I'm no good?"

"You're already better than you think," Jack said as a smile spread across Davis's face. "Just be careful with the teeth, and I know it's big, so don't worry about trying to take me all the way in."

Davis licked his lips and took the large head into his mouth. Jack moaned as Davis ran his tongue over the head before moving farther down the shaft. He got almost halfway down before choking and pulling back.

"Try to open your throat the way you do when you take a deep breath," Jack said, closing his eyes.

Davis moved his mouth back down the shaft and did as Jack suggested, getting a few more inches in. As he worked his way up and down, he began to pick up speed, gagging less as he got used to the feeling.

"Oh, yeah," Jack said, placing his hands on Davis's head. "That's really fucking good."

Davis tugged on his balls the same way Jack had done to him as he kept going. His jaw began to ache as Jack held his head in place, thrusting his hips forward, fucking his mouth, being careful not to shove too much of his dick in. Davis kept waiting for Jack to come, and finally pulled away, breathing heavily as sweat ran down his temple.

"Sorry," Davis said.

"It's okay," Jack said, through a deep groan. "That was pretty fucking good."

Jack pushed him back onto the bed and crawled on top of him, pressing his full weight into Davis. He placed his mouth roughly against Davis's and shoved his tongue in. Davis reciprocated but felt horrible feeling Jack's erection pressing into him.

"Let me try again," Davis said, pulling away.

"Just calm down," Jack said, reaching down and grabbing Davis's cock. "We've got all night."

Davis moaned as he began to feel himself getting hard again. "Are you going to fuck me?"

"What?" Jack asked, with a mildly shocked expression. "No."

"Oh," Davis said, looking confused as Jack leaned down to kiss him again. "You don't want to fuck me?"

Jack closed his eyes and smiled, still jacking Davis off as Davis ran his hand over Jack's chest. "Of course I want to fuck you. I'm just not going to. You're not ready for that, plus I'm too big for your first time." Jack moved in to kiss him again.

"So you want me to be fucked by other guys and then you'll fuck me?" Davis asked, seeming confused as he looked up at Jack.

Jack dropped his hand. "What? No," Jack said, shaking his head at the thought. "I don't think I'd like that at all. Don't go fucking other guys." Jack crinkled up his forehead, amazed that he'd actually just said that. It was a foreign feeling, realizing he didn't like the idea of Davis with anyone else.

"Then you're always gonna be my first time." Davis looked into Jack's eyes as he reached down and took Jack's cock in his hand.

"No way, Davis," Jack said, smiling. "I'm not fucking you tonight. We can go get some dildos and..."

"What's a dildo?" Davis asked.

"It's a rubber cock," Jack said, laughing. "And they come in several sizes."

"Yuck," Davis said, frowning as he squeezed the head of Jack's cock. "But I like this one."

Jack closed his eyes and moaned, pulling himself up off the bed. "You're the pushiest virgin I've ever met," Jack said as he walked over and grabbed the two glasses of wine off the bureau. He came back to Davis and shoved one of the glasses at him. "Drink it."

Davis sat up, took the glass, and sucked all the wine down.

"This one too," Jack said, switching glasses as Davis turned the glass up and finished off the second one.

"Roll over on your stomach," Jack said, taking the glass out of his hand.

Davis did as instructed, and Jack put the empty glasses down on the nightstand. Davis watched him as Jack pulled out a condom and a tube. He began breathing heavily from the anticipation as Jack dropped them on the bed next to him and reached down, spreading his legs. Davis felt his dick begin to get really hard as Jack pulled his cheeks open. He gasped, feeling Jack's tongue on his hole.

"Jack," he moaned, eyes rolling back.

Jack shoved his tongue into Davis, causing his body to spasm. He opened him up, pulling his ass cheeks tighter as he spit onto Davis's hole and began pressing a finger into him. "You have to relax your muscles," Jack said, sliding his finger inside.

Davis writhed on the bed as Jack worked in a second finger. He pushed his ass out farther while Jack worked his fingers over his prostate, twisting and turning, trying to loosen him up. Jack's cock dripped precum and ached as Davis moaned, wriggling around on the bed. Jack finally pulled out his fingers and told Davis to roll over onto his back. Jack climbed onto the bed and positioned himself between Davis's legs. He picked up the condom and opened it, rolling it on as he looked down at Davis. Davis watched with a look of desperation on his face that almost made Jack come before ever entering him.

"Don't say I didn't try to warn you," Jack said, closing the lid on the lube and working it over his shaft and into Davis's ass with his fingers. "You'll be begging me to stop in about one minute."

"I won't, Jack. I promise," Davis said, breathing heavily as his body glistened with sweat.

Jack shook his head and lifted Davis's legs, pushing them back as far as they could go, raising his ass up into the air. "Hold your legs back," Jack said, and Davis grabbed them behind the knees.

Jack took his cock in his hand and ran it over the pink hole, causing Davis to moan. He began to push the head in as Davis tightened up.

"Relax your muscles," Jack said, completely turned on and a little irritated, knowing he was going to have to stop as soon as he got started. He began to push in again, looking at Davis -- who was trying desperately not to yell out in pain.

"Keep going," Davis said, noticing Jack looking at him.

Jack pushed in farther, stretching Davis open. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth as he pressed farther in, feeling the tight heat envelop his cock.

Davis bit his lip, feeling like he was being split in two. He was screaming in his head to keep his mouth shut and take it like a man. He'd practically forced Jack into doing this and he'd be damned to hell and back before he made him stop. Davis breathed out, feeling Jack's cock slide deeper in.

"I can stop," Jack said, not wanting to hurt him but hoping he didn't have to stop at the same time. Davis's tight ass felt incredible and he wanted to keep going.

"Don't," Davis said, clenching his eyes shut as he felt Jack go deeper. His eyes popped open and he exhaled, feeling Jack's pelvis press into his ass. He let out a little laugh, relieved he'd been able to take him all the way in.

"You feel incredible, Davis," Jack said, placing his hands behind his knees, allowing Davis to let his arms fall to the bed. "We'll go really slowly."

Davis smiled weakly, feeling like his ass was on fire but more determined than ever to lie back and let Jack do his thing. He could feel his head begin to swim as he relaxed and the wine began to take effect. "I'm fine, Jack."

Jack began to slide his cock back out slowly, keeping constant watch over Davis's face. Davis winced a couple of times but maintained eye contact as Jack began to slowly work his shaft in and out. Beads of sweat ran down Jack's chest. It took every ounce of stamina he had to keep from getting lost in the ecstasy and letting his control slip. He picked up the rhythm, slowing for a bit when he felt Davis's body tense, then speeding up again. After a while, Davis began to moan and Jack watched with a smile as Davis's cock began to get hard again as he continued pumping his ass.

"Jack," Davis said, whimpering and thrashing his head back and forth. He balled up wads of the bedding in his hands.

"Do you like that?" Jack asked, going faster, beginning to slap his pelvis into Davis's ass.

"Yes," Davis said, between gasps. "Fuck yes."

"You feel so good, baby," Jack said, allowing his head to fall back and letting out a deep groan. He kept slamming into Davis, losing control as his eyes rolled back into his head. "I'm getting close."

Davis reached up and took his dick in his hand, jerking himself off. He could feel his balls rise up as Jack pounded into him. Davis screamed, feeling his ass clench around Jack's dick as he shot a thick stream out, hitting himself in the side of the face.

"Oh, fuck, yeah...Davis," Jack yelled, the head of his cock swelling as he filled the condom inside Davis.

Davis shot out again and again, each time Jack pushed back into him, feeling the warm fluid run over his fingers. Jack pushed all the way in one last time and let go of Davis's legs, which fell to the sides. Jack collapsed on top of him, breathing heavily, resting his cheek on Davis's shoulder. Davis wrapped his arms around Jack, hugging him tight.

"I've never...nothing ever," Davis said between breaths, feeling his ass ache. "Thank you."

"Thank you," Jack said, closing his eyes, laughing out of sheer bliss and happiness. "I could die right now and be perfectly content."

"Fuck that," Davis said, with a look of panic. "We have to do that again."

Jack's eyes popped open as he lifted his head and looked at Davis. "Seriously?"

Davis laughed as his body tingled. He nodded his head as he ran his hand through Jack's damp hair.

"I think I love you," Jack said with a half smile, leaning down to kiss him again.

* * * * *

Davis walked into his dorm room and closed the door behind him. A smile spread over his face as he shut his eyes and leaned back against the door. He was still able to feel Jack's hands on his body. He felt his dick twitch and he giggled.

"You whore," Deseree said, causing Davis's eyes to pop open.

Davis looked at her standing in the middle of the room with her arms crossed and felt his face turn bright red.

"You dirty, dirty, morning-after-walk-of-shame whore," she said, smiling from ear to ear. "You totally had sex last night."

Davis pushed his body off the door and walked into the room, kicking off his shoes. He went over to the minifridge, not making eye contact, and took out a Diet Coke.

"You did!" she squealed. "I thought maybe you just slept over, but you did it." She started jumping up and down yelling, "Davis did it," over and over.

Davis opened the soda and started laughing out of nervousness. "Will you shut up?" he asked as he tried to take a drink between laughs. "The entire floor's going to hear you."

“Oh please, half of them are in class, which is where I should be,” Deseree said, running up to him and shaking him. “Tell me, tell me... I wanna know everything!”

“I am so not discussing this with you.” Davis felt his face flush again. “Why aren’t you in class?”

“You most certainly will,” Deseree said, yanking him over between the beds and sitting down on hers as Davis continued to stand, hovering over her. “Like I’d leave... Hello...you didn’t come home last night. Nothing short of a fire was going to run me out of this room until you got back.”

Davis looked down at her as she sat patiently waiting for him to spill the beans. “I’m not giving any details.”

Deseree watched Davis flinch a little as he sat on his bed across from her and her eyes widened. He looked up as she gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, looking concerned.

“You did up-the-butt on the first date!” Deseree yelled. She fell back onto the bed laughing as she said, “Oh my God,” over and over.

“Will you please stop yelling things?” Davis begged. He took a drink and smiled a little, feeling the dull ache in his backside.

Deseree sat back up on the bed. “Look at you.”

Davis locked eyes with her and stopped smiling.

“You loved it. You loved up-the-butt.”

“I did not,” Davis said, giggling. “I mean, *we* did not.”

“Liar!” she said, putting her finger in his face. “You’re getting all splotchy. You could never play poker...although you loved getting poked.”

“If you don’t stop talking about poking and butts I’m leaving this room this instant,” Davis warned.

“Okay...sheesh, I’m sorry.” She grabbed his soda and took a drink before looking at the can and handing it back. “Fuck me, I just had Jack’s dick in my mouth.”

“You did not,” Davis said, laughing.

“Please tell me you didn’t lick his ass,” she said, getting up from her bed and looking around the room as if she needed to find something with which to disinfect her mouth.

“I brushed my teeth,” Davis said, taking another sip.

“You licked his ass!”

“No!” Davis yelled, beginning to laugh nervously..

“Oh thank God,” she said, sitting back down across from him on her bed.

“He did lick mine, though,” Davis said, laughing harder as he watched the eyes bug out of her head.

“Ew!” Deseree said.

“I highly recommend it,” Davis added.

“You probably kissed him after that, didn’t you?” she asked, thinking for a moment. “It was really that good?”

“Oh yeah,” Davis said, calming down a bit and blushing again, unable to believe he was talking with her about this.

Deseree put her fingers to her lips, like she was considering the possibility for the first time.

“How do you know so much about gay sex?” Davis asked.

“Like you’re my first gay friend,” she said, throwing an arm into the air. “So conceited. That and gay porn.”

“That might have been a helpful visual aid for the virgin in the room,” Davis said.

“There *is* no virgin in this room,” Deseree said, raising an eyebrow as Davis’s eyes opened wide. “And it’s not like I own any. It probably would have just scared the shit out of you. Honestly, what rock have you been living under, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” Davis looked up at her with wide eyes. “You’re kinda my first best friend.”

“Aw.” Deseree got up and sat next to him on his bed. She placed an arm around him and added, “That’s both very sweet and very sad.”

Davis giggled as he noticed the white rose sitting on the desk in a plastic cup. He got up and walked over to it, leaning down to sniff it.

“Look at that hot little ass,” Deseree said, grinning as Davis turned around. “Jack must have been salivating all over himself.”

“Stop that,” Davis said, scowling. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like?” Deseree raised her eyebrows.

He smiled a little and stopped. No way in hell was he going to tell her that he’d practically begged. “It was just...not like that.”

“Well, at least you’ve been broken in,” Deseree said, frowning. “Now you can start whoring around like the rest of us.”

Davis shook his head disapprovingly. “You don’t whore around, and I certainly won’t be. All I want is Jack.”

“Okay, calm down there,” Deseree said. “You don’t just settle down with a guy after one date. You’re not a lesbian for crying out loud. Jack’s a bit of a player...don’t go expecting too much.”

“He told me he didn’t want me to fuck other guys.” Davis looked confused.

“Was that before or after he fucked you?” she asked.

“Before,” Davis said. “And he said he thought he loved me.”

“My sweet, trusting little commitment queen,” she said, shaking her head. She pulled her legs up to sit cross-legged on the bed. “Guys will generally say anything they think you wanna hear in order to stick their thing in you.”

“Well, this is different.”

A knock at the door distracted them both.

“I just don’t want you to get too attached,” Deseree said as Davis went to the door. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Davis scowled at her, shaking his head as he opened the door. Deseree’s mouth fell open slightly as Davis opened the door and revealed Jack standing in the hall. He had his hands behind his back and a huge smile on his face, showing off his perfect rows of bright white teeth.

“You left something at my room last night,” Jack said in a teasing, sexy voice.

Davis blushed as a few people in the hall, hearing the comment, turned to look.

“I’m sorry,” Davis said, smiling weakly as he felt a charge rush through his entire body. “What did I leave?”

“This,” Jack said as he reached out with his arms, grabbing Davis around the neck and waist. Jack pulled him out of the doorway and into his body. He smiled wickedly as Davis gasped, and they locked eyes. Jack pressed his lips onto Davis’s mouth and softly slid his tongue in, kissing Davis deeply and slowly. One of the girls in the hallway let out a squeak and the other one smiled. The guy farther down the hall dropped his laundry basket. Deseree’s mouth fell totally open. She craned her body out trying to see better and lost her balance, falling off the bed onto the floor.

“Fuck me,” she said, giggling.

Chapter Three

Present day

Deseree convinced Davis to fly into Chicago Tuesday afternoon after explaining that Springfield might not be the most fashion-forward destination with which to pull off her grand make-over scheme. Davis booked a suite at the Belden-Stratford Hotel for himself and Deseree because it was located on the opposite side of Chicago from where Candace lived. They had to be back at the airport before four o'clock on Thursday, which was when Jack still assumed they would be arriving in Chicago. He was nervous about showing up two days early and didn't want to take the chance they might accidentally run into Candace or Jack. The last thing he wanted was to be seen before Deseree worked her magic on him. Deseree had already gotten to work making appointments for the following afternoon at a salon as well as a day spa. Her reputation as a designer opened a lot of doors. They had dinner in their room that first night and laid out plans for the following day. True to form, Davis had to have everything planned out. He wanted as much as possible, if not everything, done on Wednesday, leaving Thursday morning open for any last-minute fashion emergency.

Wednesday morning, after a power breakfast, including a few too many mimosas for Davis, they hit the stores. Deseree was, of course, meticulous. At each of the stores and boutiques they entered, she scouted the salesperson she thought would be the most willing to sympathize with Davis's situation and told them the whole story. Humiliated at first, Davis began to understand why she felt the need to do this. Each time, with a knowing look, the sales associate became a willing coconspirator in Davis's battle to win back Jack...another soldier in the Davis Andrews army of true love. Armed with the weapons of color coordination and the skills necessary to hide imperfection and accentuate packaging, they swarmed to Davis. Embarrassed and uncomfortable at first, having strangers yanking clothes

on and off his body with no regard for his modesty, he eventually settled into the rhythm, feeling like a life-size boy Barbie. It also didn't hurt his ego when a couple of salesmen flirted with him. He laughed, realizing that it was the first time in quite a while that he'd stood in front of another man in nothing but his underwear. He had to fight like hell to keep from getting aroused when one particularly cute blond guy with a tight, compact little body allowed his hands to linger a little longer than necessary and continually patted his ass. He and Deseree shopped like demons possessed by color and texture. Each time Davis picked something out, Deseree rolled her eyes and snatched the garment from him while giving him a disapproving look.

There were endless debates about the way the clothes hung on his frame, and a ludicrous amount of attention paid to the way everything made his butt look. At Macy's, there were a good six or seven people standing around offering up opinions about his ass, several of whom didn't even work at the store. Everywhere they went, as with a horrible car wreck, people seemed to have to stop and look. All eyes were focused on Davis, and he was truly shocked to realize how much he liked it.

Davis handed his credit cards over to Deseree after extracting a promise from her not to let him know how much they were spending. Still, he was sure that a small third world country could be fed for what he forked over. After leaving the last boutique, they sent all the clothes back to the hotel in the car they had hired for the day while the two of them hit the day spa. Davis had a deep tissue massage by a wet dream named Bruce. There was precious little of Davis's body that Bruce didn't have his very large, well-tanned hands on. After about ten minutes, Davis began to wish he'd massage that precious percentage too. He spent an hour in a chair having a variety of pastes spread over his face, and finally a compact pixie of a girl blew oxygen over his face. They left the spa with enough products to maintain his new glow for several weeks.

At the hair salon, Davis almost fell asleep during the scalp massage. Deseree asked Davis if he thought the stylist, whose name was Guinevere, looked like Fiona Apple. Deseree rolled her eyes when she realized that Davis didn't know about whom she was talking. Guinevere hand brushed some cream into his hair for highlights. It smelled funny and Davis couldn't imagine this was going to end well. After what felt like ages under a heat lamp with foil all over his head, Guinevere finally set about cutting his hair as Deseree threw out comments to her. She ultimately worked some goop into it, flipping it out in different directions. Des took one look at him and squealed with delight.

"You look like a Goo Goo Doll," she said, clapping her hands. "Toad is going down in flames. The only people on this earth who could resist that face now are six feet under, baby."

While Davis couldn't believe he was shelling out almost two hundred dollars to look the same way he looked when he rolled out of bed in the morning, and he wasn't entirely sure what a Goo Goo Doll looked like, he assumed by the expression on Deseree's face that it was a good thing.

As they rode back to the hotel in the cab, Davis stared out the window at the concrete and glass scenery passing by. Deseree was going over the list of things they still had to get done that day and talking to herself about which outfits should be worn and when. He closed his eyes, still able to feel the masseur's hands on his body. He wished it had been Jack's hands pressing into his skin.

Davis let out a little giggle as Deseree argued with herself over what he would wear the next day when they met up with Jack. He'd forgotten exactly how much life she brought into his own sedate existence and how lonely he'd been during his senior year with both Deseree and Jack graduated and gone. Between the sexual energy he'd always felt when Jack was around and Deseree's spirited disposition, it was as if someone had turned out all the lights and left him alone in the dark. Sitting beside her in the cab, he realized that it wasn't just Jack who he'd been living without all that time; it was Deseree as well.

Deseree had been the first person who ever looked Davis in the face and told him he was gay. Davis knew what the word meant, he'd heard it before, but for some reason had just never thought, *Hey, you're a big homo*. He had been amazed at the time with how comfortable he had been with it. There was finally a nice, neat little category in which he could place himself, and there was nothing Davis loved more than placing things in nice, neat categories. He'd instantly fallen in love with her at that moment for helping him realize it was okay to be who he was.

When he and Jack got back together, he'd be going back to New York with Jack -- getting Deseree back as well. He looked over at her, still talking to herself, and he took her hand. She looked at him, not missing a beat in her tangent, and he smiled. Maybe he had a fairy godmother he didn't know about. It seemed like providence that she had wound up on his doorstep yesterday.

Chapter Four

Davis woke up and rolled over in his bed to look at the clock. Seven thirty. He was used to waking up at the ass crack of dawn, but he'd hardly slept as it was. He yawned as he sat up, feeling his stomach flutter with uneasiness, but he was unable to tell if it was nerves or excitement. He got out of bed and made his way into the bathroom. He turned on the water and bent over the sink. Beginning his new morning skin regimen, he smiled at himself in the mirror.

If anyone had ever told him that pampering himself could change the way he perceived himself, he never would have believed them. Not on the inside, of course, but on the outside. There was something to it, though. It made him feel like a different person...special. He splashed water on his face and picked up a small tube. He rubbed the lotion like soap onto his face, gently massaging it into his skin. He just felt better looking. He splashed water on his face and patted it dry with a clean white hotel towel.

As he brushed his teeth, he heard Deseree come into his room and rummage through the bags. He rinsed and spat, then wiped his mouth with a towel. He looked over his body and frowned.

"Do you think I should have gone to a tanning thingy?" he asked as he walked back into the room.

Deseree was standing over the bed in a gray men's pajama top. Her black lace panties peeked out the teeniest bit along the sides. Her long legs stretched down to bare feet shuffling over the carpet as she moved around the bed sorting through the clothes. Her hair looked like a mangled mass of abused curls, except where it was mashed down on top by the sleep mask she'd pushed up onto her head.

"No." She looked up at him. "Hi, naked much?"

"Sorry," he said as he rifled through a shopping bag for new underwear. He found what he wanted and slipped them on. "I look awfully pale."

"You are awfully pale," she said, turning her attention back to the clothes. "But your skin is beautiful. It's a soft, powdery white, not a pasty redneck white. I know women who would kill for your skin."

"I'm not a woman," Davis said, standing next to her and looking down at the bed as she picked up a pair of black leather pants and set them to the side. "Yeah, I wasn't too sure about those either."

"Oh, you're wearing those," she said, placing her hand on his shoulder for balance as she lifted her leg to scratch it. "Along with this," she added, setting her foot back down and picking up a thin, black button-down shirt and placing it next to the leather pants.

"I think this is too much for daytime," Davis said, curling his lip.

"I told you I'd make you look like a rock star." She patted his ass. "Now try it on."

Davis pulled on the pants, secretly loving the way they hugged his hips. He slipped on the shirt, which hung a little longer than a normal shirt. Deseree buttoned it, leaving the top three undone. She stepped back and smiled.

"Christ, *I* wanna fuck you," she said.

Turning to look at himself in the mirror, he cocked his head to the side. He lifted his arm, puzzled still by what was so cool about the sleeves being a little too long. "I look like the undead."

"Vampires are hot," she said.

He squinted at his reflection and walked closer to the mirror. "Des, you can kinda see my nipples through this shirt."

"I know," she said with an evil smile. "You only get one shot at a new first impression. Might as well go in...both guns blazing."

A knock at the door told them that their breakfast from room service had arrived.

"You're dressed, do you mind?"

"Sure," Davis said. He was already walking out into the living area and heading toward the door.

Deseree waited in his room until she heard the door to the hotel room close.

"You look a little green," Davis observed, pouring coffee.

"Must be the moo shu from last night," she said.

After breakfast, Deseree gave Davis lessons in acting sexy. She showed him how she ran her finger gently from her neck toward her cleavage while she was talking, as if she didn't even realize what she was doing, and how she played with the collar of her shirt while tilting her head. Davis watched intently until she finally had him stand up and try it. She had

him do it a few more times before she moved on, showing him simple ways to touch another person suggestively, without seeming creepy.

* * * * *

As Deseree and Davis waited for Jack to pick them up at the new arrivals area, Davis began to get antsy.

"I feel like a prostitute," he said, pulling at the formfitting shirt.

"Bitch all you want," she said, shaking her head at him. "You just watch his eyes when he sees you. They'll be plastered to those pecs all day."

"I feel nauseous," he said, placing a hand on his stomach.

"Quit whining, and for Christ's sake, don't sweat," she said, looking him over. "You'll get all splotchy. Just breathe in and out very slowly."

Davis began the breathing exercises as he looked over the crowd. He reached over to grab Deseree's hand. "There he is."

Deseree turned, moving in front of Davis, and faced him. "Gotta turn on the headlights." She reached up, pinching and twisting his nipples.

"Ouch, what the hell?" he asked, as she turned back around, standing next to him.

"Nothing like hard nipples to make a man think about sex." She plastered on a smile.

"Right." Davis smiled as he watched Jack through the crowd. "'Cause it's not enough you can actually see my nipples through the shirt."

"Don't get snappish with me." She waved at Jack as he made his way through the crowd toward them. "For the next few days, my little Frankenqueen, you are going to be nothing but hot, juicy eye candy."

Davis began to fidget as Jack got closer, and Deseree reached over to smack him in the arm.

Only a few months older than Deseree, Jack Monroe still had the same boyish good looks from his college days. He was more beefed up and masculine looking, but he could still pass for much younger than his twenty-nine years. He had the same big brown eyes that always appeared to be smiling, but he walked with slightly more determination, like a man who was very comfortable in his skin. His black hair was parted to one side, slightly falling over one eye and cropped short in the back. As he got clear of the crowd, Jack stopped and his mouth fell slightly open.

"I told you," Deseree whispered under her breath. "Never doubt me again."

As Jack reached them, he looked briefly at Deseree and smiled before wrapping his arms around Davis, squeezing him tight. They still fit into one another perfectly, and Davis felt Jack noticed as much as he did.

"It's good to see you, monkey face," Jack said.

Davis could feel the heat from Jack's body. He felt the warm tears collect in his eyes. "You too," Davis said, breathing in the scent of soap mixed with a hint of cologne and leather from Jack's jacket.

They separated and Jack smiled, reaching up and wiping a little tear off Davis's cheek with his thumb. He turned and gave Deseree a hug.

"And you, you crazy woman," Jack said. "Everywhere I go in New York I see your name and clothes in display windows. We really should hang out more."

"When you got it, market it and sell the hell out of it," she said with a sharp nod into his shoulder. She patted his back.

"I'm glad you came," Jack said, pulling away from her.

"Someone had to come and beat the guys off him," Deseree said, nudging her head at Davis.

"I see that," Jack said, walking around Davis, looking him up and down. "I can't believe it, monkey face, you look..."

"Nutritious?" Deseree asked.

"I was going to say fucking hot, but..."

"Yeah, no...that works for me," Davis said, beaming from ear to ear.

As Jack and Davis exchanged small talk about Candace, luggage, and where they were heading from the airport, Deseree moved around and positioned herself behind Jack. Getting Davis's attention, she began puckering up her lips, shaking her shoulders, and making faux-sultry expressions. Bringing her hand up to her neck and letting it run slowly down between her breasts, she mouthed the command, "Think sex."

Davis took her cue and reached up to his neck, running his fingers slowly down through the center of his chest and across his stomach. Tilting his head to the side, Davis watched as Jack's eyes followed his hand.

"We should..." Jack started to say. He wet his lips with his tongue.

Davis moved his hand back up to his chest, slightly lifting his shirt so just a tiny bit of flesh peeked out above his belt.

"I'm sorry, Jack, what was that?" Davis asked as Deseree held up two thumbs behind Jack's back and mouthed, "Score."

"Huh," Jack said, snapping his eyes back up. "Uh...go. I was saying we should probably go."

* * * * *

In the car on the way to Candace's apartment, Jack filled them in on plans for the rest of the day. They had a couple of hours to talk over cocktails and dinner, and about an hour to

get ready for the party. Jack said it was kind of the gay equivalent to a bachelor party except that since there were two grooms, they had just decided to throw one huge party.

The whole thing seemed very disturbing to Davis. He'd imagined just being in a room alone with Jack, the two of them simply talking about what they loved about each other and privately exchanging their vows to one another.

When they reached Candace's apartment, Davis dropped his bags, and Jack pulled in two wheeled suitcases.

The apartment was spacious with high vaulted ceilings. There were large windows looking out over the Chicago skyline and the blue water of the lake in the distance. There was overstuffed furniture in tone-on-tone shades of cream with splashes of sage green accent pillows. Huge tropical plants in ornate pots were scattered about. The floors were a dark wood plank and the walls were painted a dark cream. A black grand piano covered with framed photos sat to one side.

"Welcome home," Jack said, gently squeezing Davis's shoulder.

"Everything's different." Davis looked over the room in mild shock.

"Candace has redone the place." Jack patted him softly on the back.

Davis turned to look at Deseree as if he was about to cry. She smiled at him and said, "It's lovely."

"My, my," that seductive Rita Hayworth-like voice called out from behind them. "Turn around and let me look at you."

Davis turned and smiled, looking over the voluptuous woman standing before him. Candace was leaning against the wall at the edge of the hallway wearing a formfitting dark green dress. As ever, she was perfectly made-up and coiffed, as if ready to go onstage and belt out a couple of Cole Porter standards. Davis walked over to her, and she stood up as he leaned into her.

"I can't believe you're actually here," Candace said, closing her eyes. She grabbed Davis by the shoulders and pushed him back. "What in the name of Cher have you done with the shy, skinny little boy that showed up on my doorstep all those years ago...and who is this extremely handsome imposter here in his place?"

Davis hugged her again, trying to hold back his tears. Even though they talked by phone all the time, it had been years since he'd actually been in the same room with her.

"Sweetheart," Candace said, "I can't look at you when you're wrapped around me, and you are, if nothing else, a sight to behold."

"Candace, you look ravishing." Davis pulled away.

"I know," she said, walking around Davis and looking him up and down. She started fanning her face with her hand and added, "I bet you're sorry you let this one get away now, Jack. Davis, you look absolutely..."

“Luscious?” Deseree asked, sticking out her hand and walking up to Candace. “Hi...Deseree...the houseguest you weren’t expecting.”

“We all went to college together, Mom.” Jack glided up behind Davis and wrapped his arms around his waist. “She’s actually the one to blame for introducing me to the one that got away here.”

Davis settled back into Jack’s body as Candace hugged Deseree, giving her a peck on the cheek.

“Well, dear,” Candace said, thumbing the lipstick off Deseree’s cheek, “for that you will always be welcome in this house.”

“While I can take the credit,” Deseree said, looking over at Jack and Davis, “something tells me these two would have found one another without me. They were so glued together in college it would have taken the jaws of life to separate them.”

Davis smiled and winked at Des. He turned to Candace. “I’m sure you’ve heard of her. Deseree Wildwood...fashion designer.”

“Of course, I saw the piece the Style Network did on you,” Candace said, taking Deseree by the arm. “Jack, why don’t you show Davis to his room, and I’ll take Ms. Wildwood to hers...girl talk.”

“Call me Des.” She picked up a bag as Candace walked her toward the hall.

“Des, let’s talk shoes.”

“My favorite subject.” Deseree beamed.

As the two of them disappeared down the hall, Jack threw one of Davis’s hanging bags over his shoulder and picked up two of his suitcases. “Do you think you can handle the other two?” Jack asked.

Davis shot Jack a disapproving look as he picked up his other two bags. He followed Jack down the hall, stopping as if by instinct at the first door. Jack’s bedroom. It used to be *their* bedroom, Davis thought, as a slight pang in his chest made it momentarily difficult to catch his breath. He thought about the time the two of them had spent holed up in there, talking and laughing -- how he’d almost wound up with a concussion from banging his head into the massive, solid wood headboard over and over the first time Jack fucked him on that bed. Davis noticed Jack had disappeared down the hall and ran to catch up.

“Just how long were you planning to stay?” Jack asked, as he shifted the luggage in his hands. “You have enough luggage here for three people.”

“Well, you never know, Jack.” Davis walked into the guest room as Jack set the bags on the floor. “I’ve learned life tends to throw you a lot of curves. I like to be prepared for anything.”

“Oh, I see.” Jack winked. “The boy from the Ozarks has come to wreak havoc and turn the big city on its ear.”

You have no idea. “I like to keep my options open,” Davis said, walking in front of Jack and bending to set his bags on the floor. He looked back and caught Jack looking at his ass.

“Why do I get the feeling you have something up your sleeve?” Jack asked, squinting.

“It’s practically a see-through shirt,” Davis said, innocently, lifting his arms and folding them behind his head.

“That’s it. If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear you were flirting with me,” Jack said with a big grin.

“You would, ego man,” Davis responded. “I think it was you who was just checking out my ass. I’m just being me. Do you think you can handle that?”

Jack smiled as his face turned a little red. Busted. He moved close to Davis and reached up to grab his chin. Jack looked into Davis’s eyes as if searching for something. “Tough guy. I guess I don’t have much of a choice.”

“I guess you don’t.”

Davis took Jack’s hand and removed it from his face, but he didn’t loose the hand. He took a step closer. *Kiss me, damn it*, he thought, close enough to feel Jack’s breath on his face.

Jack blinked and let go of Davis’s hand. “I’m glad...to see you’re doing so well.” He took a step back and added, “I was a little worried you might be upset by all of this.”

“Please, Jack. It’s not like I’ve sat around mooning over you.” *I’m lying. I have been mooning!* “If you’re happy, I’m happy for you.”

“Great,” Jack said, with a half smile as he turned to walk out the door. “Dinner’s in about thirty minutes,” Jack tossed back, rounding the corner. He looked just a little uneasy in his departure.

Fuck me, Davis thought, letting out a big rush of air as he fell back onto the bed. He closed his eyes and let out a little whimper. *Damn, this sucks ass*. He rolled his head to the side, looking at the wall -- the only thing separating him from Jack’s bedroom. This room used to be Jack’s study. Now it was a guest room. He hated that everything about Candace’s apartment had changed. It used to feel like home to him. Now he actually felt like a guest -- *was* a guest -- and he didn’t like it one little bit.

For holidays and summer breaks, he and Jack had always stayed with Candace in Chicago. At first, Davis did it to avoid having the big coming-out discussion with his parents. He always found some excuse for why he was unable go home: work, intersession classes, whatever. After the first visit to Chicago, though, Candace and Davis had their own love affair of sorts. She was the type of mother for whom you’d date a guy just to spend more time with her. Over the summers, the three of them did everything together. Davis always felt Candace had been relieved Jack was gay. In her mind, she felt as though she would never lose her son to another woman the way she had lost Jack’s father. Candace never spoke about Jack’s father, but Davis always felt it was a very painful part of her life.

Davis rolled over onto his stomach and closed his eyes. He let out a whimper as he pulled himself up off the bed to head back into the apartment for dinner.

Chapter Five

Davis leaned back in his chair, stealing glances at Jack as Deseree and Candace conversed. The remnants of dinner still lay on the dining room table and Jack poured himself some coffee. Jack filled Davis's cup with the steaming liquid. He smiled at Davis, giving him a wink, and Davis smiled in turn into the half-empty glass as he took another sip of wine.

"Was your flight okay?" Candace asked, looking at Deseree. "I forgot to ask earlier."

"Yeah," Deseree answered, tapping the handle of her spoon with her nail. "Especially for Davis."

Davis looked at Deseree and smiled weakly, wondering what the hell she was talking about.

"There was this really hot businessman on the plane flirting shamelessly with him," Deseree said with a grin.

Davis laughed nervously and took a big sip of wine. He noticed Jack's ears perk up as he placed his coffee cup down and looked over at Davis.

"He was with some big production company in Hollywood, wasn't he?" Deseree asked, looking at Davis. "What was it he said to you?"

"I..." Davis started, clueless about what he was supposed to add to the growing lie. "I don't think this is the time..."

"He's so modest," Deseree continued. "The guy hands him his business card, telling Davis he'd love to fly him out to LA whenever he wants."

Candace leaned forward and placed an arm on the table. "Aren't you just the little tartlet?"

"Well, you know," Davis said, his face burning slightly, "these things happen."

"My monkey face has turned into a little pimp daddy," Jack said with a half smile.

“Okay.” Deseree laid her arms on the table. “So what’s with the monkey face? I’ve never understood this little term of endearment.”

“It’s nothing.” Davis smiled, as he and Jack looked at one another. “One of the first movies we ever saw together was some old black-and-white Hitchcock film with Cary Grant and...shoot...um, Joan something...Fontaine!”

“*Suspicion*,” Jack said, taking a sip of coffee and his eyes away from Davis.

Davis’s gaze drifted down to his wineglass, smile fading a bit. “Yeah, that was it.”

“I vaguely remember that one,” Candace said, looking between the two men.

“And monkey face?” Deseree asked.

“That was Cary’s pet name for Joan in the movie,” Jack explained, looking back over at Davis.

“Well, that’s not at all rude,” Deseree said a little loudly in an attempt to snap Davis out of his haze. “I’d smack the hell out of a guy if he called me that.”

Jack reached over and touched Davis’s hand. Davis looked up at him, then to Candace and Deseree. “No...it was sweet,” he said as his eyes began to well up. He smiled and let out a little laugh, feeling Jack squeeze his hand. “I guess you probably shouldn’t call me monkey face anymore.”

“Why not?”

“You’re getting married,” Davis answered, withdrawing his hand from Jack’s and pouring some cream into his coffee.

Deseree was examining Davis as if wondering what the hell he was doing. She turned her attention to Jack, who seemed a little stunned.

Jack pulled his hand back. “So what? I’ve always called you monkey face.”

“I don’t think your new husband would probably appreciate it, Jack.” Davis stirred his coffee. “I know I wouldn’t like it if the situation were reversed.”

“Oh,” Jack said, with a slight sting to the expression on his face. He looked at Candace. Her expression said that she agreed with Davis. “I see. I hadn’t really thought of that.”

“Deseree, is your wine okay?” Candace asked. “You’ve barely touched it.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Deseree answered with a big smile. She seemed happy the subject had been changed. “I’m saving myself for the party.”

Jack looked away from Davis and smiled at her. “Please, you could drink us all under the table.”

“And have many times,” Davis said, composing himself.

“Boys, stop it,” Deseree said in her flirty tone. “You insinuate I need a trip to the Betty.”

Candace laughed as she got out of her chair and picked up the plates in front of her. “Speaking of the party, it’s just about time for this gal to pull a wardrobe change.”

“Let me help,” Deseree said, grabbing up her own dishes along with Davis’s and following Candace into the kitchen.

Davis and Jack sat in silence for a moment before Davis got up. He faced Jack and smiled. “Well...guess I’ll go run through the shower. Wash the day off me.”

Jack spun around in his seat and opened his mouth to say something, only to stop himself. He crinkled up his forehead as he watched Davis disappear out of the room. “You’ll always be my monkey face,” he murmured. He let out a frustrated sigh as he got out of the chair, gathered up his dishes, and headed into the kitchen.

* * * * *

Deseree peeked out of her bedroom door, looking up and down the hall. She crept out of her room, quietly shutting the door behind her, and crossed the hall into Davis’s room. “Are you okay?” she asked. He was sitting on the bed, staring at the wall, with a towel wrapped around his waist. She shut the door and walked toward him.

Davis glanced up at her and smiled as he stood up. “I’m fine. You look incredible.”

She winked and twirled in a circle as Davis let his eyes move up and down her body. Pumped up to Jesus with her typical ridiculously high-heeled shoes, her long legs were bare and she was wearing a simple, tight little cocktail dress in a large black-and-white print that fell several inches above her knees. There were clusters of silver necklaces in various lengths dangling from her neck. Her hair was pulled back tight with her curly locks loosely bound on the back of her head, showing off her long neck and the delicate features of her face. Her skin was shiny and sun-kissed.

She giggled as she made her way over to the closet and began sorting through Davis’s new clothes. She pulled out a cream-colored suit with a long, trenchlike jacket that hung about halfway down his thighs. She paired it with a formfitting light blue silk shirt that she told him to leave untucked.

Deseree went into the connecting bathroom to do a last-minute check of her makeup. Davis ripped off his towel and snatched a pair of white boxer briefs off the bed. He leaned over to slip his feet into them as Jack opened the door without knocking.

“Damn.” A smile spread across Jack’s face. “I always did have great timing.”

Davis yanked the briefs up and whirled around to look at Jack. His entire body flushed with heat. He shuffled his feet and laughed nervously. “That does seem to be your special gift.”

Jack looked incredibly hot in jeans and a black jacket with a tight black T-shirt underneath. Davis let his gaze settle over his stomach, thinking about the tight abs underneath the shirt.

Deseree poked her head out of the bathroom. “Hey, Jack.”

"If only every evening could start out this way." Jack waved at her without taking his eyes off Davis. "I came to see if you're ready to go."

"Almost," Davis said, running his thumb under the elastic waistband, resisting the urge to tell him every evening could start this way if he'd just call off this farce of a wedding. He reached down and picked the pants up off the bed, then slid them on.

"You look great," Jack observed as Davis continued to dress.

"You think?" Davis decided on a bold response. "Well, it's been a while since you've seen me naked, I guess." As he pulled on his shirt, Deseree sidled over and tucked the tag that they'd missed removing into the collar. Davis looked at her as if to say, *thank you*.

Deseree winked at him "I'm going to go grab my purse. Meet you at the door."

Jack stepped up to Davis and reached out, then pulled his shirt closed as he began buttoning it for him. "I think just about every inch of your body is burned into my brain." Jack gazed into Davis's eyes. "No amount of time is ever going to erase that from my memory."

Davis watched Jack's face and felt his cock stir between his legs. He wanted desperately to lean in and kiss him. Instead, he cleared his throat. "You always did have a great memory."

Jack picked the jacket up off the bed as Davis ran his belt through the loops of his pants. He buckled it and held on to Jack's shoulder for balance as he slid into his new soft leather shoes. Jack held the jacket as Davis slipped it on, and Davis turned to face him, smiling. Jack leaned in and gave Davis a peck on the forehead. Davis wrapped his arms around Jack's waist, and Jack pulled Davis tight to him.

"Missed you, monkey f --" Jack said, stopping himself as Davis sighed, relaxing into him.

"Boys!" Candace called from down the hall. "We're going to be late!"

They separated, and Jack grabbed Davis by the chin. He winked at Davis, turning him toward the door. Jack swatted him on the ass. "Let's go."

Davis smiled. He'd known that Jack would find a way to touch his ass. He never could keep his hands off it.

As the four of them rode downstairs in the elevator, Davis examined Jack's demeanor reflected in the shiny metal doors. Deseree and Candace complimented one another on their outfits as Jack stood in place, looking forward without speaking. Davis averted his eyes and watched the numbers light up on the panel as they passed each floor. It had been just over a year since Davis had last seen Jack. That had also been the last time he'd seen Deseree. He smiled, remembering how great that night was, and how he'd fooled himself into thinking things would go back to the way they used to be.

Chapter Six

One year ago

Davis sat back in his seat at the theater as Jack and the other actors took their bows onstage. He'd been pissed as hell when Deseree called him at her apartment earlier and said she wasn't going to be able to make it back in time to go see Jack's play. She'd tried to throw out some piss-poor excuse, but he eventually got it out of her that she was going to go have sex with some hot guy she'd been attracted to for years. She kept saying how bad he was, and what a dog the guy was. Davis wondered why the hell she was going to sleep with him if he was so terrible, but he was too pissed to bring up that point.

He was actually just nervous about seeing Jack face-to-face for the first time in almost two years and was hoping she would be there as a buffer if things didn't go well. It was an off-Broadway production of *Speed-the-Plow*, and Jack was playing Bobby Gould. Davis had never seen Jack in anything other than Shakespeare or musicals, so he had no idea what to expect. He'd quickly gotten over his annoyance at the empty seat next to him once the play got under way. He'd been practically on the edge of his seat the entire time as the rapid-fire dialogue volleyed back and forth among the characters, leaving Davis almost breathless. Jack was incredible. Davis knew Jack could be funny -- he often was in the musicals -- but he'd never seen him funny like this. It was a different tone and style, and Davis was newly impressed.

He was supposed to have gone backstage afterward but decided to wait outside at the stage door entrance. He didn't know anybody else, and he never liked the fast-paced energy from behind the curtain. He felt awkward and in the way. He also didn't think he could handle watching Jack changing clothes. The mere thought of seeing Jack undressed gave him an instant erection, and he definitely didn't wish to share that with a bunch of strangers. He

stood back, patiently waiting as people began to file out the stage door. Finally Jack came through, laughing out loud, looking almost intoxicated by the rush of performing. Davis smiled, remembering they'd always had the most intense sex when Jack had a play going on.

Jack was joking around, talking with a couple of the other actors as they walked down the steps. Davis stepped away from the building he was leaning on and walked into the light as Jack turned and locked eyes with him.

"Monkey face!" Jack yelled at the top of his lungs, throwing his arms out. "I should have known you'd be back here hiding out... I thought you didn't stay."

Davis smiled uncontrollably as he walked up to him. Jack threw his arms around him, practically squeezing the life out of him. Davis laughed, hugging him back, loving the intense heat radiating off Jack's body. Jack pulled back slightly, yelling good-byes to the other actors before planting his lips on Davis's mouth. Jack thrust his tongue in, taking Davis a bit by surprise, but he kissed him back.

"Sorry about that." Jack pulled away, patting Davis on the ass. "You know how I get, though."

"Yes, I do." Davis smiled.

"Damn, I feel great," Jack said, throwing an arm over Davis's shoulder as they started to walk. "So, what did you think?"

"It was a very good kiss," Davis said teasingly.

Jack burst out laughing and threw his head back. "I meant about the play...but it's nice to know I still have it."

"Oh," Davis said, turning bright red as they rounded the corner and turned, heading down the sidewalk.

"My beautiful blushing boy," Jack said, kissing his red cheek.

"It was incredible. You were incredible." Davis laughed as he placed a hand on Jack's chest.

"You think so, monkey face?" Jack asked excitedly. "I've never had the opportunity to do anything like this before, and I love it."

"Well, you should do more like it. I was literally on the edge of my seat through the entire thing."

"It's a great play and a fantastic part," Jack said, squeezing Davis as they continued walking. "Fuck! We need a drink."

"I might," Davis said as Jack hailed for a cab. "But I think you're high enough."

"Damn, I've missed you, monkey face," Jack said as the hack pulled over to the curb.

They both climbed into the car and Jack gave the driver an address. "You've got to see my new place, I love it."

"Okay."

"Hey...where's Des?" Jack asked.

"She's out fucking some guy she referred to as a complete dog." Davis shook his head. "Sorry she bailed."

"No biggie." Jack put his arm around Davis. "You're the one I wanted to see."

Davis smiled and sank into Jack as he pulled him close. Davis felt his chest fill with pressure as Jack leaned over and kissed the side of his head. During the rest of the cab ride they talked about what Davis had been up to recently -- getting his store opened and the work he'd been doing restoring a three-story Victorian. Jack talked about Candace, and Davis filled Jack in on Deseree and how well her business was going.

When they got back to Jack's apartment, Davis meandered around, looking over the bookshelves, running his hands over the leather couch that looked cozy and worn in that nice, lived-in way. The walls were painted a mocha coffee color and the wood floors creaked the same way they did in Davis's loft back home. The room was disheveled in that very familiar way, not dirty, just disorganized. Davis smiled looking over the mismatched furniture that somehow managed to all work together.

Jack returned to the room with an open bottle of red wine and two glasses. Davis felt a stirring in his body looking over Jack's -- the way his jeans hugged his hips and ass in all the right places and the tight white T-shirt tucked into his waistband. Not to mention, Jack's strong, masculine hands, which Davis could still feel on his body when he closed his eyes.

Jack handed him a glass. "Here you go."

"Thank you, sir," Davis said, taking a sip and making an approving sound.

"You still do that, you know, make that little noise when you drink or taste something you like."

"I do?" Davis asked, feeling his face flush. He sat down on the couch. "I didn't know I did that."

"Just one of those little things," Jack said, sitting down next to him. "Christ, I feel incredible."

Davis laughed. "You always did after."

"I know. I can't help it... I really love what I do, especially when everything really clicks with the other actors. The heat from it when the chemistry's spot-on. There's this electricity that makes me..."

"Horny," Davis said, smiling as Jack burst out laughing.

"That too," Jack said, exploring Davis's eyes as he took a big drink. "You know me too well."

"Right back at ya, buddy," Davis said, leaning back into the couch, kicking off his shoes, then putting his feet up on the coffee table.

Jack laughed as he followed Davis's lead. "Make yourself at home."

"I will," Davis said, laughing as he took another drink.

They turned their heads, staring at one another for several seconds until they each began to smile. Davis's eyes followed Jack as he got up off the couch and went across the room to turn on some music. He picked up the wine and refilled both glasses before taking a seat back on the couch.

Davis took another big drink. "Thank you again, kind sir."

"You're most welcome, beautiful." Jack reached over and placed his hand on Davis's leg. "It really is so good to see you."

"I've missed you too, Jack," Davis said, placing his hand over Jack's.

Jack turned his hand and intertwined his fingers with Davis's as he began talking about how terrified he had been making the decision to do the play. He'd wanted to call Davis to talk about it, but never seemed to pick up the phone.

That tore at Davis's chest a little, realizing Jack had needed him and he wasn't there.

Jack thought that he'd been terrible when they first began rehearsals, but he'd quickly adapted and his confidence had grown as each day passed. Candace had been there on opening night, and it was the most terrified he had ever been.

Jack emptied the bottle into their glasses and went to the kitchen. He returned with another bottle. Davis talked about buying the building in downtown Springfield and all of the work and money that he had sunk into it.

As Davis went on, he sounded settled into his new life -- a life that didn't include Jack.

Jack cleared his throat as he sat up and refilled both of their glasses. They continued to drink, chuckling at first, then laughing out loud as they talked about safe topics, the good times, but each staying clear of anything that might throw cold water on the fun they were having.

Davis felt happier than he had in...forever, it seemed. He stood up off the couch, laughing as he grabbed Jack by the top of his head to steady himself.

"Where's the bathroom?" Davis asked laughing, dizzy from the wine. "Before I piss myself."

"That way," Jack said, pointing toward the hall, unable to turn his head. "I'll take you," he added, getting up as they both giggled, trying to keep each other from falling down. "I need to piss too."

"Holy have to piss, Batman," Davis said, as they both laughed, holding each other up while they walked down the hall. "Was that really funny or just drunk funny?"

"I don't know," Jack said, shoving Davis into the bathroom. "I'm too drunk to tell."

Jack leaned his back against the wall, bursting out laughing again when he heard Davis let out a long moan.

“Fuck, that’s amazing,” Davis said, reaching down to flush the toilet. He walked to the sink and washed his hands as Jack came in. Davis watched in the mirror as Jack unzipped and pulled his dick out. He turned off the faucet and dried his hands, feeling his cock begin to get hard. He walked back into the hall and took in deep breaths as he tried to calm himself.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked, coming up behind him.

“Nothing,” he said, startled and smiling as he stopped, breathing normally again.

Jack moved in front of him, concerned for a moment. Davis’s cheeks began to flush and Jack looked down, smiling as he noticed the bulge in Davis’s pants. “Monkey face,” Jack said in a faux-shocked voice, grinning from ear to ear. Jack reached over, firmly rubbing the hard flesh through his pants as Davis fell back into the wall. “I didn’t know you’d brought me a gift.”

Davis reached out, grabbed Jack by the shoulders, and yanked him into his body, then shoved his tongue into Jack’s mouth.

Jack’s eyes widened at the force Davis exerted. He grabbed Davis roughly by the waist and slammed him back into the wall, grinding his now fully erect cock into Davis.

Davis pulled at Jack’s shirt, jerking it over his head and tossing it to the floor. Jack’s body was thicker than it used to be, but still hard as a rock as Davis ran his hands over his chest and stomach.

Jack continued to fuck Davis’s mouth with his tongue, ripping his shirt open, popping off most of the buttons, which made tiny clicking noises as they hit the floor. He let out a deep, husky groan as he forcefully undid Davis’s belt, pulling on the button to his pants. He pulled back for a moment and they looked over one another’s face. Davis was flushed and his lips were swollen. Jack’s eyes were glassed over with lust as they pressed their mouths into one another again.

Davis pushed Jack’s jeans down over his hips, taking his cock into his hand, expertly working it over, knowing exactly where to apply pressure to create the most intense pleasure for Jack. Davis whimpered as Jack slid his pants and underwear down, freeing his hard-on and digging his fingers into his hips.

Jack pulled them both down onto the hardwood floor in the hall. Davis took Jack’s nipple into his mouth, chewing and sucking as Jack moaned roughly. He yanked Davis’s pants off and threw them down the hall. They lay on their sides as Davis moved to Jack’s other nipple. Jack dug his fingers into Davis ass, opening him up. He shoved a finger into his ass and Davis cried out. Jack pushed him onto his back, kicked his jeans out from around his ankles, and straddled Davis’s shoulders, facing his body. He shoved his cock into Davis’s mouth and bent to take Davis’s into his.

Davis sucked him greedily as Jack forced his dick down his throat. Jack pulled Davis’s legs apart and began working over his ass with his fingers, licking his balls and shaft. Davis moaned wildly, bucking his hips as Jack penetrated him with his fingers.

Their bodies were hot and beginning to drip with sweat as they each groaned. Jack began to feel his balls rise as he thrust his cock into Davis's mouth, exploding with a force that took Davis by surprise as he swallowed every last drop. Jack sucked Davis down to the back of his throat as Davis returned the favor, clamping his ass around Jack's fingers.

They were breathing heavily as Davis let out a small moan, his head swimming with alcohol and dizzy with lust. Davis started sucking the head of Jack's dick again, working his tongue over it as Jack began to get hard again.

Jack moaned, knowing what Davis still wanted from him. He didn't want to give it to him, even though he desperately wanted it for himself. Davis was just going to leave him tomorrow, and Jack didn't want him going away completely satisfied. Jack closed his eyes as Davis took him back deep into his mouth. Jack pulled himself up off the floor and went into the bathroom.

Davis heard him ripping open a drawer and rummaging through it, before slamming it shut. Jack came back around the corner, dropping a tube of lube and strip of condoms on the floor next to Davis. Davis closed his eyes, wishing he hadn't seen the condoms. They'd been monogamous before they broke up and had long since stopped using protection. He knew in the back of his mind Jack would have been having sex with other men, but he'd tried to convince himself he was wrong. Seeing them on the floor next to him was a red-hot slap in the face courtesy of reality.

Jack looked down at him. He smiled, watching Davis's face as he looked at the condoms. Jack knew it would cut through Davis, and he'd cruelly brought the whole pack as opposed to just one. Jack knew he didn't possess the willpower to not fuck Davis. He wanted Davis so badly he couldn't see straight, but at least Davis wasn't going to get it without paying a bit of a price. That thought made Jack's cock rock hard.

Jack dropped to his knees and picked up the condoms, ripping one off and tossing the rest to the floor. A big grin spread across his face as he opened it and rolled it down his thick, long shaft. Davis sat up, grabbed Jack by the neck, and shoved his tongue into Jack's mouth. They kissed one another as Davis grabbed the lube off the floor and stood up. He took Jack by the hand and helped him up. Davis led Jack back to the couch and shoved him down onto it.

Jack smiled a little, not used to Davis being so aggressive. Davis grabbed Jack behind the knees, pulling him down some as he straddled Jack. He squirted lube into his hand as Jack began to reach up for his ass. Davis pushed his hand away. He roughly took Jack's cock in his hand and rubbed the lube over his shaft. Davis reached back and placed Jack's cock against his ass and began to sit down, taking Jack inside him.

They both closed their eyes, groaning, and Jack reached up, running his hands over Davis's chest, pinching his nipples. Davis didn't move for several moments. He sat on his knees, facing Jack with his eyes closed, enjoying the intense sensation as the fire raged from his ass all the way up through his chest and made the roots of his hair tingle. It had been

almost five years since he'd had Jack inside him and he didn't want the pleasure to stop...ever.

Jack pulled on Davis's cock slowly as he looked up at him. Davis opened his eyes, looking down at Jack, and began lifting himself up and down, impaling himself. Jack's face strained from the pressure being applied to his dick. Davis began to go faster, and Jack started bucking his hips as if by instinct, trying to go deeper. Davis took Jack's hands, intertwining their fingers, and leaned forward, forcing Jack's arms down into the back of the couch. Davis pumped himself harder onto Jack's cock, rocking back and forth as the intense pleasure began to fill every inch of his body. He felt awake after a long sleep as his skin burned from the heat. Sweat dripped off him and down onto Jack.

Jack was moaning wildly, trying to force his hands free from Davis's but unable to. Jack was dying to get his hands on Davis's body. He continued bucking, meeting Davis's ass every time he came down on him.

They looked intently into one another's eyes as Davis whimpered at first, slowly building into louder groans and moans. Davis felt his stomach muscles tighten as he shot out thick loads onto Jack's stomach and chest. Jack's eyes widened at seeing Davis come without either of them laying a hand on his cock. Davis let go of Jack's arms, sitting up as he clamped his ass down. Jack shoved his head back into the couch, gritting his teeth as he unloaded into the condom inside Davis.

Davis sat on top of him as Jack ran his hands over Davis's legs. A large smile spread over Davis's face as he began to chuckle.

Jack looked up at the beautiful man who was still sitting on his softening dick and smiled as Davis went from chuckling to full-out laughter. He'd never seen Davis quite this way, taking control during sex, having that amazing of an orgasm, and now laughing his ass off. He loved these new little things, but they confused him as well.

"That was fucking amazing, Jack," Davis said, laughing as his entire body tingled from sex and happiness.

Davis leaned up, allowing Jack to slip out of him. He reached back and picked up a half-empty glass of wine off the table. He took a sip and looked down at Jack, handing him the glass. Jack took it, grinning from ear to ear, and took a drink. Davis closed his eyes and ran his hands down his sweat-soaked chest and stomach. His skin was still tingly and he let out a deep groan, smiling.

Jack watched intently as Davis's hands ran over his own body. Jack licked his lips and took another drink as he began to feel himself getting aroused again watching Davis rub himself. His eyes followed Davis's fingers as they ran over his hard nipples, then down over the smooth, creamy white ridges of his abs. Jack reached up to take Davis's cock into his hand. Davis's smile widened as he looked back down at Jack. Jack smiled back with a mischievous expression on his face.

They made love twice more that night, passing out on the floor afterward in Jack's living room. Jack slept deeply, the way he used to when Davis was curled up in his arms.

When Jack woke the next morning and slowly got up, trying not to wake Davis, he stood, feeling the dull ache in his head from the wine. He looked down at Davis and smiled for a moment. His smile faded as he began to feel a little sick to his stomach. The wine, he thought, at first. But, no. It was dread.

Jack walked into the kitchen and put on some coffee. Standing at the kitchen counter, he folded his arms and looked out the window. Davis was supposed to leave that afternoon to go home. He hated the thought. It made him sick with anger. Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he'd stay. He couldn't ask... He didn't have the right to. He'd pushed him away all those years ago without meaning to, and as much as he desperately wanted Davis to stay, it would have to be his decision, his choice to make.

Davis opened his eyes and looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. He grinned, remembering where he was. Feeling the dull ache in his backside, he rolled onto his back and stretched out, letting out a little groan. He sat up, feeling a bit of dizziness, and realized he was probably still a little drunk. He looked around for Jack and heard dishes clattering from the kitchen. He pulled himself up off the floor and walked through the living room and around the corner.

"Good morning," Davis said, smiling as he looked over Jack's beautiful, tanned, naked body.

"Hey," Jack said as he glanced up at him for a moment before looking away. It made his chest ache, seeing Davis stand in his kitchen completely naked and thinking he wouldn't be there the next day.

Davis crinkled his forehead as he took another step forward, then stopped. He wanted to go wrap his arms around Jack but felt like maybe Jack didn't want that. He wouldn't even look at him.

"There's Advil on the counter if you need it," Jack said, pouring two cups of coffee in mismatched mugs and handing one to Davis.

"Thanks," Davis said, looking at Jack, trying to read his face. "But I think I might still be a little drunk." Maybe he's not so happy about making love last night? Maybe it was just the rush of performing that made him do it, and not so much the rush of being together?

"Hungry?" Jack asked, placing his hands on the counter.

"I don't know," Davis said, sitting down on the tiny wood bar stool and wincing a little from the glorious abuse his ass had taken the night before.

Jack turned, leaning back against the cabinets. "So I guess you're leaving this afternoon, huh?"

Davis stared at him. *Fuck...he wants me to go.* After what they'd shared last night? He didn't understand. "Yeah," Davis said, closing his eyes. This isn't happening; it can't be. Why is he doing this?

"I'll call you a cab then," Jack said, reaching for the phone, then punching in the numbers.

Davis got up off the stool and walked around the corner, heading down the hall. He reached down and scooped up his clothes as he went into the bathroom. His eyes began to well up as he dressed. He looked at himself in the mirror and literally willed himself to stop. He wasn't going to cry in front of Jack. He didn't want Jack to know he could still cut him into shreds, and he certainly didn't want to guilt him into saying something he obviously didn't want to.

Jack stood outside the bathroom door. He bent down and picked up his jeans, then slid them on as he tried to listen through the door. It took everything he had to not break down the door and slam his fists into Davis. He wanted to drag him by the wrists down the hall and tie his ass to the bed, forcing him to stay if necessary. He knew it wouldn't work, but it still took everything he had not to try. Davis opened the door and looked up at Jack. Jack looked over his shirt, remembering he'd torn half the buttons off.

"I'll get you a shirt." Jack turned toward the bedroom.

"Don't bother," Davis said without emotion, turning back toward the living room. If Jack wanted to treat him like a random piece of ass he'd picked up, then he'd fucking walk out looking like one.

Jack followed him back to the living room. Davis turned as he got to the door. He walked over and gave Jack a hug, lightly brushing his lips over Jack's mouth.

"I had a good time," Davis said, pulling away with a smile. He turned back around and opened the door. As he shut it behind him, he was screaming in his head to stop. Screaming at Jack to fling open the door and stop him. He walked slowly, thinking maybe he might, but as the elevator opened and he stepped in, he knew it wasn't going to happen.

Jack walked over to the window looking down onto the street. He couldn't believe he could go from such a complete high to this desperate low in so short a time. He watched as Davis stood out on the curb, waiting for the cab. Look up, he thought. *If Davis looks up it'll mean I'm supposed to stop him. Fuck, that's stupid. I should just go stop him. What if I do go to stop him and he still leaves? Damn it.*

Jack turned and ran for the door. He grabbed the door handle and stopped. He didn't have the right to try to stop him. Davis had made a life for himself, and maybe he was happy with that. He turned and ran back to the window and watched as Davis climbed into the cab.

He spun around as it drove away, taking the last bit of hope Jack had with it. Jack looked down at the room in which they'd fucked all night. He walked over, picked up an empty bottle of wine, and threw it across the room, shattering it into pieces against the wall.

Davis sat in the back seat of the cab and the tears started to flow. He was so confused. The way they'd looked at one another last night. He knew it was real. It felt so real. Davis noticed the cab driver looking back at him through the rearview mirror. He reached up self-consciously and pulled his shirt closed. He couldn't believe that it was happening. No...this couldn't be happening. Jack would call Deseree's looking for him. There would already be a message by the time he got to her apartment.

When there was no message, Davis told himself that by the time he got home, Jack would have called. The days passed with nothing, and after a few weeks, he knew Jack wasn't going to call. When Davis finally got up the nerve to call Jack, he acted as if nothing had happened. It was all run-of-the-mill chitchat. Nothing that led Davis to hope, but he still did hope. Hope was all he had left.

Chapter Seven

Present day

Tadd's condo occupied the front half of the third floor in an old four-story brick and stone warehouse that had been converted into living space. The floor plan was open, and in the living areas, the ceiling was two stories high. The walls were a bright white with large pieces of artwork hanging along them, and pieces of sculpture were scattered throughout. It was very contemporary looking with the clean lines of minimalist furniture and tons of track lighting, which hung from the high ceiling. A large dining table sat under a huge modernist rectangular crystal chandelier. It seemed more like an art gallery than a living space. Stairs in the back of the large room led to a second level where the bedrooms were located.

The party was already in full swing when Davis, Jack, Deseree, and Candace arrived. People were scattered about in clusters, chattering away with cocktails in hand. There was a bar set up at the far end of the room and a jazz quartet along the back wall next to the dining table. The caterers were running about the open kitchen, and waitstaff walked around the room with trays of hors d'oeuvres. Candace was immediately swallowed up by adoring fans.

Jack turned to Davis and Deseree. "I'll go see if I can find Tadd."

"We'll be at the bar," Deseree said as Jack walked off, leaving Davis and Deseree to move into the crowd.

"People are staring at me," Davis observed as several men looked him up and down.

"You can thank me anytime," Deseree said as they walked up to the bar.

The bartender awaited instructions as they pointed at one another. "Ketel One dirty martini, up," Deseree said at the same time Davis said, "Ketel One cosmo, up."

“Better make mine a club soda,” Deseree told the bartender as Davis gave her a look. “One of us needs to keep our wits. A glass of wine at dinner and you almost burst into tears.”

“Oh, fine.” Davis pouted, picking up a stir straw and fiddling with it. “Sue me for having feelings. It’s your fault. You’re the one that brought up monkey face.”

“Holy crap,” Deseree said, placing a hand on his arm. “What a minefield that was. And Jack’s face when you said he shouldn’t call you that anymore... I thought he was going to blow a gasket.”

“It did seem to have an effect.”

Deseree took the drinks from the bartender and held one out for Davis. He lifted his hand to take it and scowled. “These damn sleeves are too long.”

“They’re supposed to be. You look hip.”

Davis frowned, flinging his hand around, trying to flip the cuff off so he could take the drink from her.

“Stop that!” Deseree shook her head at him. “You look ridiculous.”

“Well, hell.” Davis grinned as he pushed the sleeve back with his other hand and took the martini from her.

“Lean back on the bar and rest your elbows on it,” Deseree said, setting her drink down and moving in front of him. He did as instructed, and she undid a couple of the buttons on the bottom of the shirt. A naughty grin spread over her face as he looked down to see a tiny bit of his stomach showing.

“Again with making me look like a hooker.”

“Zip it,” she said, moving back to his side. She picked up her glass as they examined the crowd. “See, there’s an extreme hottie over there checking you out. He looks kinda familiar.”

“Where?” Davis asked surveying the room. “I don’t see.”

“By the windows, are you fucking blind? No wonder you’ve never met anyone else. You were probably too dense to notice them staring at you.”

“I have issues, we know this.” Davis shot her a look. “Besides, he could be cross-eyed for all we know.”

“Shit, he’s coming this way,” Deseree said, excitedly taking a drink.

The man made his way through the crowd, and a hand grabbed his arm, stopping him. The crowd shifted and Davis and Deseree gasped. The hand that had halted him belonged to Jack.

“No fucking way.” Deseree watched as Jack embraced the other man. “That can’t be him.”

“The Toad,” Davis said, eyes widening.

“You were totally his eye candy,” Deseree said, seeming a little miffed as Jack kissed the man. “It is him.”

“And he doesn’t look very toad-like,” Davis said as his elbows slid off the top of the bar. “He’s gorgeous.”

Tadd Austin was in his mid- to late thirties and was the type of man who would appear to be every bit as comfortable at an evening at the opera as he would floating down the river in an inner tube with a can of beer in his hand. He was very well built with an almost-intimidating physical presence. That impression, though, was softened by the kind eyes behind the wire-rimmed glasses he wore. He was dressed in a sleek black suit with a pristine white shirt that had the top few buttons undone, revealing a hint of the well-tanned, sculpted chest that lay beneath. His sandy blond hair looked product free and was loosely parted to one side. He possessed all one would think of in terms of what a man was supposed to look like.

Jack and Tadd separated, and Jack pointed toward Davis and Deseree. The two men made their way through the crowd, stopping once so Tadd and Jack could shake someone’s hand, before walking up to Davis and Deseree.

“Davis, Des,” Jack said, placing his hand on Tadd’s shoulder, “this is my fiancé, Tadd Austin.”

Davis and Deseree flashed overcompensating smiles as Tadd reached out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you both. I’ve heard a lot about you,” he added, looking at Davis.

Davis stood there smiling up at him, wondering why Tadd couldn’t just be a normal guy instead of Rock fucking Hudson.

“I was just telling Davis that you look very familiar.” Deseree jumped in, taking Tadd’s hand. “Have we met?”

“No, but I’m a huge fan. I saw you on the VH1 Fashion Awards. You looked incredible.”

Look at him, Davis thought. I’m so screwed. He’s gay-faction.

“Oh, thanks,” Deseree said, taking her hand back. “I was a mess that night.”

“Well, honey, it didn’t show,” Jack said with a wink.

“So, Davis,” Tadd said, turning his attention back to him, “Jack told me what you do. There’s an old theater I was looking at doing some work on. I was really hoping to get a chance to pick your brain while you’re here.”

Davis continued to stand there, smiling as he stared at Tadd. Deseree reached down and pinched Davis on the leg.

“Fuck!” Davis screamed as the three of them jumped. A few other people who were standing about turned to look as Davis grabbed Tadd’s hand, shaking it vigorously. “You are one lucky man, Toad.” Davis’s mouth fell slightly open as his eyes widened. “Did I just say Toad? That is so funny! I am so stupid!” Davis let go of Tadd’s hand and slapped himself in the head. “I meant Tadd. ‘Cause your name’s Tadd, not Toad, isn’t it? It is so great to meet you! Jack has told me nothing about you, so spill, ‘cause I simply must know everything.”

Jack, Tadd, and Deseree all looked at Davis in silence. Deseree began to say something, but Davis jumped in, poking Tadd in the stomach. "Come on, don't be a shy guy."

"Jack, you never told me he was so...lively," Tadd said, visibly uncomfortable but grinning.

"Blah, blah, blah," Davis said, shaking his drink around, spilling some on the floor. "It's time to dig deep. Tell me your dreams."

Tadd turned his gaze toward Jack. "Well, at the moment, my only dream is to settle down with our guy here."

"That is so adorable," Deseree said, placing a hand on Tadd's arm.

"Thank you, baby," Jack said to Tadd with a wink.

Tadd looked back at Davis. "And, of course, getting to know you. Candace and Jack speak so fondly of you."

"Awww," Davis said, rolling his head back and smiling.

"Davis, are you feeling okay?" Jack asked, looking over his face. "You look a little flushed."

"Pee!"

"Excuse me?" Jack laughed, looking at Davis.

"I have to pee," Davis said as he looked at Tadd. "Can you point me to the potty?"

"Oh, sure," Tadd said, turning to point toward the hallway. "First door on the right."

Deseree smiled sweetly as she grabbed Davis by the arm. "I'll go with. Give you two a couple of minutes to yourselves."

Dragging Davis by the arm, she pushed through the crowd and entered the hallway. Davis opened the first door they came to and Deseree shoved him through the door, then closed it behind her. She flipped on the light and Davis gasped as he peered around the room.

Tadd's home office had a large drafting table sitting in front of the two double-hung wood frame windows. Stainless steel shelving units covered half of one wall, and a matching desk sat along the opposite wall with a lamp and cordless phone on a cradle.

There were a few architectural drawings framed and hanging in a grouping on one wall. Davis went over to the opposite wall and looked over the set of three framed *Architectural Digests* featuring Tadd's buildings. He let out a sick groan, walking along the wall, looking over the framed covers of *Out* and the *Advocate* with Tadd on the cover, one of which listed him as one of the most eligible bachelors in the country. There were also newspaper articles showing Tadd cutting the ribbon to an apartment building he'd renovated, donating his time and money for low-income housing for people living with HIV, and a photo of Tadd shaking hands with a boy who was the president of the gay youth group Tadd sponsored.

“He’s *that* Tadd Austin,” Deseree said, biting her lip and placing her hands on her hips as Davis began to hyperventilate.

“*That* Tadd Austin?” Davis asked, placing his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. “You knew about this!”

“I knew I recognized him.” She grabbed Davis by the hand and pulled him out of the room. She shoved him across the hall and into the bathroom, and locked the door behind them.

“Look at yourself.” She pointed toward Davis’s reflection in the mirror. “You’re getting all splotchy and you’re sweating... I told you not to sweat.” Deseree bent to rip some toilet paper off the roll. She dabbed his forehead with it.

“He’s everything I’m not and never could be,” Davis said, eyes glazing over as Deseree grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

“Exactly, he’s nothing like you, and Jack spent four years with you. You obviously have qualities Jack likes.”

“He’s like...Supergay.”

“Okay.” Deseree thought aloud, biting her nail. “How do I put this in a way you’ll understand? So, he’s perfect, we admit this. Like a gay man’s Grace Kelly.”

Davis sulked. “Um, hi...this is so not helping.”

“Snappish,” she said, smacking him.

“Sorry. Please continue.”

“Well, men may look at Grace Kelly and be initially sucked in by that kind of icy beauty...but in reality, they would be much happier with a funny, quirky, sexy Carole Lombard type with a heart of gold and an endearing, sweet innocence.”

“And I’m Carole Lombard?” Davis asked, chewing on his lip.

“Yes, the Toad may be the perfect beauty, but perfection can be very wearing.”

“That’s true,” Davis said, beginning to calm down. “I love Carole Lombard!”

“Who doesn’t? You are the girl next door, damn it,” Deseree said, turning Davis toward the mirror to look at himself. “And we all know the girl next door always wins in the end.”

“Right, you’re right.”

“You bet your new Guccis I’m right.”

Davis looked at her through the mirror. “But you’re a Carole Lombard too, and you’re still single.”

“That’s true, but I haven’t found my Clark Gable yet. You have,” Deseree said, turning to look at herself in the mirror. “Besides, I’m really more of a cross between Lucille Ball and Rosalind Russell.”

Davis smiled at her. “I can see that.”

“Now, do you think you can go back out there and not act like a cheerleader on crack?”

"Yeah, I'm good," Davis said, as he began to hop around like a boxer, throwing a few punches.

"Okay, stop it. You'll start sweating again."

"Right," Davis said, standing up straight.

Deseree shook her head as she opened the bathroom door. "That was very butch, though."

"Thanks," Davis said, following her out into the hall.

They walked back into the living area as Candace finished up a song with the jazz quartet. Davis watched with pride as the room erupted into applause.

Davis beamed, clapping. "God, she's fantastic."

"Aw, thank you," Candace gushed, taking a bow. "You people have impeccable taste." She pointed into the audience and added, "Okay, Tadd, you're up."

Davis's smile began to fade as Tadd hopped up on the makeshift stage next to Candace. He picked up a microphone, placing an arm around Candace's waist. He gazed out into the audience, finding Jack. "This is something your mother and I have been working on for you."

Jack beamed looking at the two of them. The music started playing Etta James's "At Last," and Tadd began singing the first verse. Tadd didn't have the best singing voice, but it was decent. He sang as if he knew he wasn't great, and the fact that he was willing to embarrass himself publicly made him seem sweet in an endearing way. Davis's mouth fell open as Candace joined in and Deseree smiled, shaking her head.

They finished the song and the room erupted into applause again. Jack jumped up on the stage and gave Tadd a long kiss as a few people made whooping noises and whistled. They separated and Candace hugged the two of them, smiling from ear to ear.

"That's my life," Davis whispered under his breath to Deseree as his eyes began to well up. "That two-bit goody-goody is stealing my life."

"It's going to be okay," Deseree said, placing her arm on his shoulder. "Just stay calm."

"Oh, I'm calm." Davis seethed as he fired a gaze at Tadd. "The Toad is toast."

Davis took a deep breath as if to get control of his faculties. He took off through the crowd toward the stage area, as Deseree jumped to attention, running after him.

"That was wonderful," Davis said, taking Candace by the hands and helping her down the step. "You can sing too. Is there anything you can't do?"

"Thanks, Davis." Tadd grinned as he and Jack stepped down next to them. "I'm really nothing compared to the queen here," he added, putting his arm around Candace's shoulder.

"Don't sell yourself short, Tadd," Candace said.

"Well, I mean it," Davis said, smiling as he shook his head. "That was so sweet, I was moved. Tell them, Des."

"He was very near tears," Deseree said with a half smile.

"You always were a big softy," Jack said, putting his arm around Davis.

Tadd scanned Davis's face as he crossed his arms. "I'm a little surprised. I got the feeling earlier you weren't too keen on me."

"I told him he was being silly," Jack said, looking at Tadd.

"Well, I was a bit skeptical." Davis came to Tadd's defense. "I mean...two weeks and you're getting married. It does seem a bit rushed. It's not like anyone here is pregnant."

Deseree coughed, laughing as she tried to catch her breath.

"I mentioned that as well," Candace said.

"As well you should," Deseree said, trying to control herself.

"Well, when you know it's right," Tadd said, holding out his hand for Jack, "you just have to jump on in."

"Head first," Deseree said.

"Without a second thought," Davis added.

"Yep," Jack said, removing his arm from Davis's shoulder and taking Tadd's hand. "Why waste any more time?"

"Well, I think that's great. I mean, when Jack and I split, I have to be honest, I wasted several years waiting around for his ass to come to his senses. Then one day..."

"...like the ringing of a bell..." Deseree said.

"...I woke up..."

"...like a slap across the face."

"We're moving on, dear," Davis said, putting his arm around Deseree's waist.

"Sorry," Deseree grinned.

"I realized, I am not to be taken lightly," Davis said, looking at Jack. "I am not to be tossed away after four years like a used Kleenex... No offense, Jack."

"Tossed away is a little harsh," Jack said, smile fading.

"Whatever, Jack." Davis tossed a hand through the air. "I have a lot of special gifts."

"Not to mention you're a little hottie," Candace said with a wink.

"Thank you!" Davis said, looking at Candace. "At some point you simply have to bare your fruits."

"And now you do," Deseree said, patting Davis on his tummy.

"Oh yeah," Davis said, raising his hands to Jesus. "I'm all like...check out my fruits!"

Candace and Deseree laughed as Jack shook his head and smiled.

"I was a little worried after we hooked up a year ago when I was visiting Des in New York, but I'm glad to see you're doing the same Jack." Davis reached out and placed a hand on Jack's cheek. "It warms my pea pickin' heart. Congrats to you both!"

"That's very sweet of you to say, Davis." Jack smiled as Tadd dropped his hand.

"I'm glad to hear you feel that way," Tadd said, crossing his arms and taking a step back. "I was a little nervous with you coming here."

Davis giggled and looked at Tadd. "Thanks, that's probably the best compliment I've had in ages."

"Well, babe," Tadd said to Jack, "seems like a few people are beginning to leave."

"We should go see them off." Jack nodded before turning back to Davis and Deseree. "A bunch of us were planning to meet up at a club later if you two want to come."

"Sure," Davis and Deseree said at the same time, looking at each other, smiling. "We'd love to!" they said in unison, looking back at Jack and Tadd.

Jack and Tadd turned and walked away as Davis snatched up Deseree's hand. Candace scrutinized Davis for a second, smiling in a way that made Davis feel like she might be onto him. She spun around abruptly and followed Jack and Tadd.

* * * * *

Davis and Deseree walked to the curb outside Tadd's condo as the cab pulled up.

"Holy shit," Deseree said, climbing into the cab and shutting the door behind her. "You shady little minx."

Davis laughed as the cab pulled away. "I was pretty good?"

"You were," Deseree said, staring at Davis. "Very un-you-like."

"Thanks," Davis said, smile fading, "I think."

Deseree sat up in the seat. "I can't believe you slept with Jack when you visited last year."

"I did stay all night at his place."

"You told me nothing happened," she said with an evil look. "You little liar."

Davis laughed, placing his hand on her knee. "I just... It was confusing. I didn't know what it meant. Nothing, I figured out after a couple of months went by without hearing from him."

"I'm sorry," Deseree said, putting her hand over his. "You should have told me. I could've... Well, I don't know what, but I could've done something."

"It's okay."

"I can't believe you said that in front of the Toad," she squealed, clapping her hands. "I thought I might shit a brick, and he didn't seem to like hearing it either. That was great...and the used Kleenex!"

Davis laughed as Deseree let out a full-blown belly laugh.

"Oh God," she said, calming down a bit as the cab stopped in front of the club. "I really miss being with you, you know."

"Me too," he said, squeezing her knee before opening the cab door. He got out, holding out a hand and helping her up off the seat. He paid the cab driver and they both turned, heading for the front door to the club.

They walked in as the thumping music enveloped them. Davis paid the doorman after they were carded, and they entered the large open space. Flashing lights were coming from the huge dance floor. There was a large round bar in the middle of the room, surrounded by groups of men dancing. There were four smaller bars in each corner, surrounded by people trying to get drinks. Deseree and Davis headed to the closest bar and got in line.

Deseree placed her hand on Davis's back. "I'm going to go find the bathroom."

"Okay, I'll wait right here."

Deseree disappeared into the crowd as Davis surveyed the bar to see if he could spot Jack. A beefy, shirtless guy in jeans with black leather chaps slowly made his way past Davis while staring at him greedily. Davis smiled weakly and turned back to face the bar, grabbing his shirt collar as if he feared the man might sexually assault him. The guy walked away and Davis shook his head.

"Stare a little closer, fucker," Davis mumbled, feeling slightly molested.

"Quite a nasty tongue you have there," said a deep voice from behind him.

Davis whipped around and found himself looking into the throat of a man who stood at least six and a half feet tall. Davis felt his face turn beet red. "Oh, I...so sorry."

"No need to apologize, I rather fancy a nasty tongue." The man offered his hand. "Alex Parker. I saw you earlier at the party."

British, thought Davis.

Davis shook his hand and looked Alex over. He was strikingly handsome with a long, lean body, accented by dark hair and dark eyes. Davis estimated his age at thirty-seven, give or take. While he was impeccably dressed in a dark suit, he somehow projected an ease, a casualness. Davis smiled at him, admiring the dichotomy.

"I'm..."

"Yes, I know," Alex said with a sly smile. "I asked around about you at the party."

"Really? And what did you discover?" Davis asked as he turned to move forward in the line.

"I'm ashamed to report, other than your name, nothing." Alex lightly touched Davis on the arm and added, "Which has made you all the more appealing."

Davis laughed as two guys passed through the line, knocking him face first into Alex. He caught Davis to keep him from falling. Feeling Alex's hand on his ass, Davis grabbed his shoulder, pulling himself back up. The two men laughed as they looked back.

"I'm fine...thanks." Davis shot them a nasty look as the guys walked off without so much as an apology. "Rude fuckers."

Alex laughed as he smoothed out Davis's jacket. "That filthy mouth of yours is delightfully charming."

"Well, I aim to please," Davis said, still irritated.

"Really?" Alex asked, looking into Davis's eyes entirely too seriously. "I think I'm in love."

Davis paused for a moment before laughing. "Do guys actually fall for that?"

"No go, huh?" Alex asked with a frown. "Bollocks."

"Has that ever worked for you?"

"Yes, actually... I've found most men find me utterly irresistible." Alex placed a hand on his stomach and added, "Especially when I'm making an ass out of myself."

"I'll have to get back to you on that one," Davis said, a little unsure what to make of him, even though he loved the way the word *ass* sounded in Alex's accent.

"Wise decision," Alex said, stepping forward as they were now only one person away from the bar. "It's good not to make snap judgments. And fear not, I have a wide range of ass-like behavior with which to impress."

"As well as a fondness for the word *ass*," Davis said, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes," Alex said with a devious grin, "and you seem partial to the word *fucker*. Together we make *ass fu* --"

"All righty." Davis scowled, patting Alex on the chest. "I think I get it."

"See how utterly perfect we are for one another?" Alex asked earnestly. "You...complete me."

Davis smiled despite himself as he turned to order a martini and cosmopolitan from the bartender for himself and Deseree. He paused momentarily and rolled his eyes before turning to ask Alex what he would like to drink.

"I'll have a dirty martini as well." Alex grinned. "Thank you."

"What's going on here?" Deseree asked, unnoticed by Davis until that moment.

"Deseree, meet Alex. He's an ass man."

"I'm kinda partial to a nice ass myself," Deseree said, smiling.

Alex pointed to Deseree and ran his finger up and down in the air over her frame. "Loving you."

"Yeah, well...what's not to love?" Deseree said, staring longingly at her drink as she took it from Davis.

Davis picked up the remaining two martinis and handed one to Alex. The three of them got out of line and moved over to occupy three bar stools to the right. Davis spotted Jack and Tadd walking through the bar and set his glass down in front of Deseree.

"Will you two excuse me for a minute?" He left without waiting for a response.

Tadd and Jack were standing in the middle of the club talking to an older gentleman. The three of them laughed as Davis joined them.

"Hey, you two," Davis said, smiling.

"You made it," Jack said, placing a hand on Davis's shoulder.

"Of course, Jack." Davis shot a wink at Tadd. "Thanks for the invite."

"No problem, Davis." Tadd placed his arm around Jack's waist. "It'll give you two a chance to catch up."

Jack squeezed Tadd as he looked over at Davis. "I'll go grab us some drinks if you think you can entertain one another."

Tadd and Davis smiled and nodded as Jack made his way into the crowd toward one of the bars. Tadd introduced Davis to the older gentleman to whom they'd been talking. Russell Henderson was one of Tadd's partners in the architectural firm and Davis smiled back at him, slightly creeped out by the lascivious way the older man leered at him.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Tadd said, leaning closer to Davis. "What area of preservation do you specialize in?"

"I deal with a little bit of everything, but my passion has always been art nouveau and art deco...the twenties through the forties, very distinct periods."

"That sounds perfect," Tadd said, turning to Russell. "Davis is a historic preservationist. I was thinking..."

Russell chimed in. "He might make a perfect consultant for the Hamilton Theater project, yes."

"We're bidding on a contract to restore this beautiful theater here downtown," Tadd said, placing a hand over his chest. "I think I mentioned it earlier. It was built in nineteen thirty-one, just after the switch from silent movies to talkies. Fantastic art deco architecture. You should swing by the office tomorrow. Sounds right up your alley."

"Sure," Davis said, folding his arms. "I could take a peek."

"We'd love to get your input," Tadd said.

"Then you shall have it, Tadd." *Offering me a job to buy me off, huh? Sneaky little bastard.*

Russell nodded as he waved at another group of men. "If Tadd recommends you, then we'd be lucky to have you."

"I'm dying to know," Tadd said, as Russell excused himself. "What did you think of the loft?"

"It suits you," Davis said. Plain...boring...no character. "Obviously well planned out, great space, you did a great job."

"You think?" Tadd asked, smiling. "I've always held a fascination with Bauhaus design...clean, uncomplicated lines."

“Bauhaus always felt a little sterile to me, personally,” Davis said, looking around the club for Jack, “but you really bring some life to it.”

“I like to think I bring a little persona to a room.”

“Speaking of persona,” Davis said, “you better go find your man. He’s not the type you want to take your eyes off for very long. Take it from me.”

“He does require a considerable amount of attention.”

“Puh-lease, Jack always has to have top billing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Tadd said, laughing as he and Davis turned and went in the direction Jack had disappeared to.

“It takes a strong man to be willing to take a backseat in Jack’s one-man ego show.”

Tadd smiled and waved at a group of friends. “True, but I believe we both understand the rewards. Even in a room full of people, he does have this way of making you feel as though no one else exists.”

“Well, there is that,” Davis said, smiling. *That’s right, rub it in. You ass.*

“And his laugh,” Tadd said, stopping and looking down at the floor. “The way it somehow fills you up with this complete feeling of joy. I love to make him laugh.” He glanced back over at Davis and started walking again. “And the way he kisses... Well, I don’t have to tell you.”

“He’s a great guy,” Davis said, smiling with a nod. *I really hate this fucker.* “But he does have some major flaws that go along with all the good.”

Tadd placed a hand on Davis’s shoulder to stop him. “I know you love him, Davis.”

“Well, of course, but...”

“I love that you want to protect him, and I know you’re worried by the amount of time we’ve known one another, but let me assure you, Davis... I love him. All I want to do is make him happy. If I do nothing else for him, I promise you I’ll move mountains to make sure he’s happy.”

“That’s... I’m glad to hear you say that.” Davis wanted to cry and scream at the same time. *I hate that hating this fucker makes me feel like shit...damn it!*

Tadd waved at another group of men. “Would you excuse me? I need to go say hi to these guys.”

“Sure,” Davis said, smiling sweetly.

Tadd turned to leave, and Davis walked through the crowd making his way back to Deseree and Alex. “Go ask one of *them* to marry you, you man-thieving prick.”

Davis jumped as someone ran a hand over his ass. He whirled around but couldn’t tell who’d done it. Shaking his head and muttering under his breath, he returned to Deseree and Alex, who were laughing hysterically. Deseree handed Davis his cocktail.

“You have to come visit me the next time you’re in New York,” Deseree said to Alex.

“Darling, I will,” Alex said, glancing up at Davis. “We can tear through the city being shamelessly decadent.”

“I’m your gal,” said Deseree.

Davis rolled his eyes and moved forward a step to make room for two men who stepped up to the bar laughing as they waited for the bartender.

“Exactly what is it you do, Alex?” Davis asked as Alex placed a hand on the small of his back.

“It’s just like Tadd to throw himself a bachelor party like that,” one guy said. “Have you ever been to a bachelor party where the mother-in-law was the main event? Where were the goddamn strippers?”

“Oh, she’s here too,” the other guy said in a can-you-believe-it tone.

“The mother-in-law?” the first guy said, as Davis looked at Deseree and frowned.

“It’s sick, isn’t it,” the second guy said. “I really hate Tadd. Nothing bothers him. It’s not natural...the fucking Boy Scout.”

“Nothing except bad press, the vain prick,” the first guy added, laughing as Davis smiled and chuckled to himself. “A nice fucking scandal in the tabloids would probably kill him.”

The two men laughed, grabbed their drinks, and walked back into the crowd. Davis peeked over at Deseree, and they both smiled. Davis scanned the room and spotted Candace on the dance floor surrounded by shirtless, sweaty men, twirling and laughing.

“People can be so beastly,” Alex said with a smile.

Davis took a sip from his now-lukewarm martini. “It’s really quite disgusting.”

“I think it’s deliciously fun,” Deseree said, clapping her hands and giggling.

Alex placed his hand on Deseree’s knee. “You and I are going to get along famously.”

“Time will tell,” Deseree said with a wink.

“Deseree, since you’re one of the few people who apparently knows Davis, perhaps you might tell me what one has to do to win his favor.”

“You mean get in his pants?” Deseree asked, looking up and placing her hand on her chin. “Do you know any hit men?”

“Deseree, honestly,” Davis said, shaking his head as he moved away from Alex and turned to face him. “Look, Alex, I’m sure you’re a very sweet man...”

“Ouch,” Alex said, placing a hand on his chest. “That one really hurt.”

“I’m going to be perfectly honest with you.”

“Darling, please,” Alex said, groaning, “anything but that.”

“You have something against honesty?” Davis asked, looking irritated.

“In my experience, nothing kills romance like the truth.”

"Hear, hear," Deseree said, lifting her glass. "Cheers to the fantasy!"

"Well, brace yourself, buck-o," Davis said to Alex while shooting Deseree a disapproving look.

"Good Lord," Alex said, setting down his cocktail. "Buck-o...really? Who in the name of John Wayne still uses the word *buck-o*?"

Davis rolled his eyes, completely frustrated as he placed a hand on his hip. "I just don't want to lead you on."

"I don't mind, honestly."

Davis threw his hands in the air as Deseree giggled. He took a deep breath and pointed across the bar toward Jack and Tadd. "You see those two guys over there?"

"The two that are getting married?" Alex asked, raising an eyebrow.

Jack noticed Davis pointing at him and waved, smiling.

Davis waved back with a big smile, putting his hand down and turning slightly red. He turned his attention back to Alex.

"That's Jack, he's my ex, and well...I'm here to get him back."

"Christ," Deseree said, looking at Davis in shock. "Why not go and announce it over the loud speaker."

Alex examined Davis with wide eyes. "You're here to break up the wedding?"

"Okay, it sounds worse when you say it," Davis said, scrunching up his face.

"Blow me," Alex said, looking Davis up and down. "You look so sweet and wholesome."

"Yeah, well, he was mine first, and...and..."

"Jolly good fun," Alex said, as a mischievous expression stole over his face.

"Huh?" Davis and Deseree asked at the same time.

"You little vixen, you should let me help."

"What?" Davis asked, looking at Alex suspiciously. "Why?"

"I have nothing better do," Alex said matter-of-factly, "and I'm gorgeous. Let's see if we can make him jealous?"

Davis sucked down the last of his martini. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Oh come on, Davis," Deseree said, patting her hand on the bar. "He's cute. Can't we keep him?"

Davis watched the two of them as they looked up at him like two children who had been naughty but still wanted dessert. He tossed his arms into the air in a full-body shrug.

"He's looking right now," Alex said, getting off his bar stool as Davis turned to look. Alex placed his hands on each side of Davis's face and pressed his lips onto Davis's. He slowly moved his tongue into Davis's mouth. Davis tensed as he closed his eyes, and to his surprise he reciprocated, kissing him back. Alex's full lips covered his and Davis let out a tiny moan as

Alex pushed farther into his mouth, massaging Davis's tongue with his. Davis placed his hands on Alex's hips to brace himself as his body began to tremble with chills running up his spine.

Jack stopped talking with the people around him and watched Alex and Davis from across the bar. Tadd looked at Jack and turned to see what Jack was staring at. Tadd rolled his eyes and looked back at Jack before turning his attention back to the group of people they were standing with. Jack excused himself from Tadd and the other men and headed toward Davis.

Davis felt a stirring between his legs as Alex pulled away slightly, looking into Davis's eyes. Alex smiled and gave him another soft kiss, lightly brushing his lips over Davis's. He reached down and gave Davis's ass a little squeeze before pulling away and sitting back down in his bar stool. Davis stood motionless for several seconds as Deseree looked up at him smiling.

"All right, now," Deseree said, slamming her hand onto the bar. "That's what I'm talkin' about."

"Why did you do that?" Davis asked, clearing his throat and trying to compose himself.

"I thought it might help," Alex said, shrugging, obviously pleased with himself, as he took a sip from his glass.

"Help who, you perv?" Davis asked, trying to sound indignant.

"I think it did," Deseree said as Jack came up behind Davis.

"Davis," Jack said as Davis whipped around. "Could I speak to you for a minute?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

Jack looked over at Alex. "Alone?"

"Oh, um...sure." Davis turned back to look at Alex. "Don't run away. I'll be right back."

"I'll keep an eye on him for you," Deseree said as Davis followed Jack several feet away. "That was some kiss," she added, looking back at Alex with a smile.

"Well," Alex said with a half smile, "it wasn't exactly the most difficult thing I've ever had to do."

"Mmm-hmm." Deseree raised an eyebrow at him.

"Are you having a good time?" Jack asked, smiling at Davis.

"Yeah, actually," Davis answered. "A really good time."

"Good, good, that's...good," Jack said as Davis turned back around to face him. "Cause I was a little worried, you know, you coming here not knowing anyone."

"Oh, well yeah, but please don't worry about me," Davis said, glancing back around to smile and wave at Alex. "I'm not having any trouble making new friends."

Jack looked at Alex as Davis turned back around to face Jack. "I was thinking...since we haven't really had a chance to spend any time alone together since you got here, maybe you and I could have lunch tomorrow."

Davis smiled as he reached out, lightly resting his fingertips on Jack's chest. "I'd like that, if you have the time."

"Great." Jack saw Tadd signaling him to come back. "I should get back over there. I...I'll see you and Deseree back at the apartment?"

"Of course."

Jack smiled at him before turning to head back over to Tadd. Davis smiled as he returned to Deseree and Alex.

"Well," Deseree asked exuberantly, "what happened?"

"He wants to have lunch tomorrow," Davis said. "Just the two of us."

"That sounds fun," Tadd said to Jack. "What time do we meet him?"

"I was thinking it would just be him and me," Jack said, smiling.

"Right." Tadd patted Jack's arm. "Of course, how silly of me."

"It's just..."

"No," Tadd said, smiling and glancing over toward Davis as he squeezed Jack's arm. "You don't need to explain anything to me."

"Thanks, baby. You're the greatest."

Tadd smiled at Jack and glanced back over at Davis. He put an arm around Jack's waist and turned his attention back to the friends around him.

Davis looked at Alex. "You are brilliant. I could kiss you right now, I'm so happy."

"I have absolutely no problem with that," Alex said, getting up off his bar stool.

Davis threw his arms around his waist and squeezed Alex, pressing his face into his chest.

A little stunned, Alex smiled and rested his chin on top of Davis's head as he hugged him back. Davis pulled away and Alex stared down at him. "I, um...I'll be around, if I can be of any further assistance."

"You're the best," Davis said, smiling and placing his hands on his stomach. "Jesus, I gotta pee." Davis spun around and headed off into the crowd.

"Amazing...truly," Alex said, taking his seat as he watched Davis walk away.

"What?" Deseree asked.

"He's attempting to do something right beastly," Alex answered, rubbing his chin, "and I find myself wanting to protect him from it all somehow."

“Davis has that quality about him,” Deseree said with a grin. “Those big blue eyes...”

“Like a bloody Disney cartoon character come to life. It’s intoxicating.”

“It’s difficult to resist the urge,” Deseree said, smiling as she watched Alex.

“I can’t quite suss it out,” Alex said, taking a drink. “It’s most unsettling.”

“You seem surprised.”

“I’m not the protective type,” Alex said, setting his glass back down on the bar. “And I’m a damn good judge of character. It’s a rare occasion that I’m wrong.”

* * * * *

Alex placed Davis and Deseree in the backseat of a cab and waved good-bye as he shut the door. As the car pulled away from the curb, Davis was beaming.

Deseree sat in deep thought as she leaned closer to Davis. “Okay, what kind of scandalous rumor can we leak to the tabloids about Toad?”

“Huh?” Davis asked, shaking his head. “I don’t know. That just seems a little too nasty.”

“We found a weak link in his armor. We need to use it. It doesn’t have to be true.”

“It doesn’t feel right,” he said, looking at her squeamishly. “Besides, I don’t think it’s necessary. That display with Alex really got some results.”

“But this is good stuff,” she said, grabbing his knee and shaking it. “We need to act on it.”

“Can’t we just hold off for a bit? We can always use it later if we have to.”

“We have one full day left. We may not get the chance later.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m willing to risk it if it means not having to sink that low.” He frowned at her.

“You’re too damn nice, Davis.”

“Just promise me you won’t act on this,” he said.

“Okay, but I’m going on record that it’s a mistake.”

“Fine.”

Deseree shook her head. “Fine.”

Davis sulked. He hated feeling like he was disappointing her, and he hated that she made him feel as though he didn’t have the balls to do whatever it took to win. He let out a sigh and his warm breath fogged the window of the cab. He wished he wasn’t even in this position. He shouldn’t be, damn it.

Chapter Eight

Davis yawned, stepping out of the guest room into the hallway. He ran a hand over his stomach and reached under the waistband of his pajama bottoms to scratch his hip. Candace's apartment was quiet as he made his way through the living room to the kitchen. He went through the swinging door and found Candace sitting at the small table.

She glanced up from her newspaper and smiled, taking a sip from her cup of coffee. "Somebody had quite the busy night."

Davis went over to the counter, smiling as he took a coffee cup out of the cabinet. He rubbed his eyes, picking up the old white Corningware cornflower blue coffee pot off the stove. He looked at the small blue flower on the side, remembering how Candace had told him she'd had the thing for thirty years. They'd stopped making them, and she lived in constant fear it would break. She'd bought it with green stamps just before Jack was born. Jack's father had left her about a month before, leaving her broke and seven months pregnant. Davis filled the cup with the steaming liquid, breathing in the heavenly scent.

"What do you mean?" he asked, turning to face Candace.

"The mouth-to-mouth resuscitation with that man, what else?"

Davis smiled as his face flushed a little. "You saw that, huh? Just a harmless little bit of flirting, dancing queen." He came up to the table and took a seat across from her.

"Ha...touché," she said, tapping her nail on the handle of her cup. "It was a kiss like that that led to my being pregnant at the ripe old age of twenty."

"It was just a little kiss," Davis said, giggling.

"Looked more like Cinemax After Dark if you ask me," she said, eyeing him. "Do you know who he is?"

Davis shook his head, unable to believe he couldn't remember. "Alex...something?"

"Parker," Candace said, raising an eyebrow.

"You know him?"

"Yes, I do. A bit of a playboy from what I understand. He's always got a different guy on his arm and comes from a wealthy family. Other than spending his parents' money, he has no profession to speak of."

"Well," Davis said, taking a sip of coffee, "he didn't exactly strike me as an altogether serious individual."

"No, but he sure is handsome," she said with a smile, closely examining Davis's face.

"There is that," Davis said, trying to hold on to his poker face.

"And what did you think of Tadd?"

I hate him. How could you let him anywhere near Jack? "I don't think I know him well enough to form an opinion."

"I see. Then just your first impression."

This it isn't going to be as easy as I thought, prying his toady feet off Jack. "I don't know. I mean, if Jack likes him, then he must be okay."

"Very diplomatic," Candace said with a cunning smile. "It's funny."

"What?"

"You don't know Tadd well enough to form an opinion, yet you lock lips with a man whose last name you didn't even catch."

"That is funny." Davis felt the heat rush to his face as he took a drink from his cup. "What do you think of Tadd?"

"I think he's very successful." She drained the last of the coffee in her cup.

"Well, that's not really an answer."

Candace got up out of her seat and went over to the sink, then placed her cup in it. She turned and walked to the kitchen door and stopped. Spinning back around, she added, "Honey, when you're ready to answer my question, I'll answer yours." She pushed the door open and disappeared into the living room.

"Well, fuck me," Davis said under his breath, looking down at his coffee cup.

* * * * *

Davis decided not to wear the clothes Deseree had picked out for him for his lunch with Jack. He opted instead for a pair of old jeans that felt like a second skin to him. He pulled on a clean white T-shirt and threw on a gray V-neck wool sweater that Candace had bought him for Christmas many years back. He slipped on his old, brown, beat-up penny loafers, and as he examined his reflection in the mirror, he saw *himself* looking back for the first time since he'd arrived in Chicago.

Jack seemed to like what he saw as well, grinning like a little kid as they left the apartment and walked down the sidewalk. There was almost a look of relief that came over his face, as if he was happy to see the man he used to know better than he even knew himself. The early fall wind whipped through the streets as they made their way a few blocks to the restaurant.

Davis followed Jack into the diner and to a booth in the back.

Davis slid into the booth to sit across from Jack. "This place reminds me of Kirby's."

"How many nights did we spend in that place during college?"

"It was practically a second home," Davis said, pushing his silverware out of the way and turning over his coffee cup, then setting it back down on the saucer.

"After we broke up," Jack said, his smile fading a bit, "I'd come here whenever I was in town. It always made me feel close to you somehow."

Davis reached across the table and placed his hand on Jack's, squeezing it. His chest swelled as they locked eyes. The waitress came to the table and pushed the coffee pot in her hands across the table, breaking their gaze. Davis could feel Jack's hand slide away as she filled his coffee cup. He cleared his throat as Jack gave her his order. Davis ordered the same thing. She scurried off, leaving them alone again.

"It's amazing," Jack said, tearing open a sugar packet and dumping it into his coffee. "I look at you and...it's like no time has passed. I instantly feel like a twenty-four-year-old kid again."

"I really liked that twenty-four-year-old kid."

"You always take me back," Jack said with a sigh. "Hard to believe we fucked it all up, huh?"

"Yeah," Davis said, looking into his coffee cup. "I sometimes wondered if you ever thought about us."

"Of course," Jack said, surprised. "You're not exactly the type of guy one is able to forget."

"I could say the same thing about you," Davis said with a half smile as he looked over Jack's face. "Why didn't you ever come to visit me in Springfield?"

"You never asked me to." He took a drink.

"Oh," Davis said, looking down as he played with the spoon sitting on the paper place mat. He wanted to cry. Jack was right. He never had asked. How stupid was that? Jack always called, and he'd even asked Davis to visit several times right after they first split, but Davis never went. His heart still hurt so bad at the time, and his nerves were so raw that he couldn't bring himself to go.

"I used to wish you'd just call and tell me you still loved me," Jack said, looking into Davis's eyes. "That's what you should do if you love someone, you know. Just say it, so they know."

Davis glanced up at Jack. He smiled but was dying to run away so he could go off by himself and cry. *I do love you, Jack*. The tears welled up in his eyes. Jack stared back, not taking his eyes off Davis. Davis opened his mouth as the waitress set two plates of hamburgers and fries down on the table. Jack shook his head as she tore off a ticket and laid it on the table.

"Can I get you two anything else?" she asked, smacking her gum.

"Maybe just a coffee refill," Jack answered, turning his attention to the plate in front of him.

The waitress left and Jack began to drown his fries in ketchup. Davis grinned as the waitress topped off their cups and left again.

"That still reminds me of road kill," Davis said as he took the ketchup and dumped some onto the side of his plate. Jack had always been a drowner while Davis was a dipper.

They both laughed as Jack picked up a fry and held it across the table for Davis. Davis leaned in, opening his mouth as Jack smacked him in the cheek with the sopping fry before yanking it back and shoving it in his mouth.

Davis smirked as he wiped his face with a paper napkin. "Bastard."

"So gullible."

"I can't believe I fell for that, how many years later?"

Jack let out a low rumble of a laugh as he shoved another fry into his mouth. Davis dipped a fry in his ketchup and ate it as Jack winked at him. Davis shook his head.

Tell him you love him. Tell him you'll die without him. Tell him you're a fool, and you'll do anything to get him back.

Davis fiddled with a fry, unable to look at Jack. "I'm sorry I never asked you to visit."

Jack let out a long sigh and took a sip of coffee. "I wish you had, but to be completely honest, I was afraid to do it. I even bought a ticket once. I actually still have it."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of getting swallowed up by us and not being able to leave should you still not want to come back to New York with me," Jack said, taking a deep breath. "If you knew how long it took me to be able to sleep through the night without you."

"God, Jack," Davis said, feeling a new low that he hadn't thought possible.

Jack shrugged. "I don't know; maybe I was also trying to punish you."

"We sure are a fucked-up pair." Davis looked at his food, but his appetite had fled.

"Do you ever think about how different our lives would be if you...?"

"Every day. I just didn't understand it, Jack. Not why it had to be New York, but why it had to be right then, no discussion, no compromise."

Jack let out a frustrated laugh. "Here we are...six years later and still blaming one another for fucking everything up."

Davis stared at his plate. "I don't blame you, Jack, at least not anymore. I was stupid and too frightened to make a wrong move."

"That's who you are, Davis." Jack leaned back in his seat. "You're not a caution-to-the-wind kind of guy. I wasn't exactly ignorant of that fact."

"Well, I'm not that guy anymore, Jack. I've changed."

"Really? What's the last crazy thing you've done?"

If you only knew. "This isn't about the past. I could pick up and move tomorrow without a second thought." Davis realized it was actually true. He hadn't really considered it before, but it was true. Something had shifted in him the past few days, and he knew he was capable of doing anything at this point.

"Well, you still look like the same guy, today at least."

Davis laughed lightly. "Well, I'm not."

"I don't know," Jack said, squinting as he scanned Davis's face. "Something tells me deep down you're not all that different from the guy I made love to that first night all those years ago."

"Jack, I..." Davis began to say, trying to summon the strength to say it.

"I've missed you too, monkey face."

* * * * *

Jack and Davis walked along the sidewalk. Occasionally they looked at one another and smiled. Jack reached over and took Davis by the hand. Davis smiled as he watched other people walking by, wondering if they were as happy as he was in that moment.

They came upon the window of one of the clothing stores Davis and Deseree had been in a few days earlier. Jack stopped to look at the clothes. Davis froze as a clerk came by the window inside and noticed Davis. She smiled and waved. She pointed at Jack and gave two thumbs up. Davis smiled back at her weakly and waved.

"Do you know her?"

"Never seen her before in my life," Davis said, pulling him away from the window.

"That's odd," Jack said, laughing. "Wait, I want to go in."

Davis continued to yank on Jack's arm. "She's probably just really friendly...no time to go shopping."

"Taskmaster," Jack said, frowning as he noticed a newsstand. "Oh, hang on a minute, *Entertainment Weekly's* supposed to be profiling a play one of my good friends is in."

Davis busied himself looking around the street as Jack went over to the newsstand and bought the magazine.

"Shit!" Jack screamed. Davis and several passersby jumped.

Davis looked over to see Jack holding a paper. He dug some money out of his pocket and tossed it at the man in the newsstand. Jack spun around and ran over to Davis. He grabbed his arm and took off running, dragging Davis behind him.

"What's wrong, were they out?" Davis asked as Jack shoved the paper into his hands.

"He'll be an absolute wreck."

Davis glanced over the featured article in the tabloid. It was led by an outsize picture of Tadd, obviously intoxicated, holding a beer in one hand, with his other arm tossed over the shoulder of a shirtless guy standing next to him. **BLOGGER IMPLICATES TADD AUSTIN IN SEX SCANDAL WITH MALE PROSTITUTE.**

Davis's mouth fell open. *I'm so going to kill her.*

Jack pulled Davis behind him as he ran down the sidewalk. "I have to get to him." He flagged a cab.

* * * * *

Tadd's office building was all glass and steel, very modern. As Davis followed Jack into Tadd's office, he noticed that all the interior walls were glass. It felt very open and voyeuristic to him. The charcoal-colored slate floors were beautiful, and Tadd's large office felt bright from all the windows despite the cool dark colors of the interior. His desk sat in the middle of the floor with a couple of chairs covered in a dark gray silky fabric that had a pearl-like sheen to it. There was another sitting area with two more matching chairs and a sleek black leather sofa.

Tadd slammed the phone down. He folded his arms and shook his head as he stared at the computer screen on the desk. He noticed Jack and attempted a smile. Davis had to admire the effort to distance his lover from his foul mood. Tadd stood as Jack approached him. Davis stood near the doorway, shifting his weight.

Tadd hugged Jack. "I was so afraid you might believe this."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jack said, pulling away and following Tadd back around the other side of his desk. "And neither will anyone else," he added with a smile as he placed his hand on Tadd's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Who's going to believe you'd go anywhere else when you have me?"

Tadd laughed as Jack smiled up at him. "This story is ridiculous. I hope like hell it doesn't affect my ability to keep working with the youth groups."

"Oh, surely not," Jack said. "You love mentoring those kids." But he'd dropped his voice, and there was pain in the statement. It was entirely possible that Tadd could be separated from work that he loved and that he thought was important.

Davis left the doorway and went over to the desk, standing next to Tadd. He patted him on the arm. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," Tadd said, reaching over and squeezing Davis's hand.

“I...” Christ, me and my evil minions have really done it now. The poor guy does all this charity work, and I come along and cut him off at the knees for it.

Tadd sat back down in his chair, and Jack knelt next to him as they looked over the monitor.

“I’m going to sue the pants off this bastard,” Tadd said, pointing at the picture.

“Baby, you do look a little worse for the wear,” Jack said, smiling

“It was a vacation, for Christ’s sake. I was visiting some friends.”

Jack looked back at the computer and began reading the gossip blog out loud. “Sources say this beefy media darling’...he got that part right.” Jack leaned over and gave Tadd a peck on the cheek.

Tadd laughed at Jack’s obvious yet sweet attempt to diffuse the mood, but he took up the reading where Jack had left off. “Vacationing in Palm Springs two years ago where he allegedly hired a well-known male escort for a raunchy evening of sex, drugs, and debauchery!”

Bad, bad, evil minions, Davis thought.

“It’s disgusting,” Tadd sneered. “I have no clue who that guy is, but I damn well didn’t have sex with him, paid or otherwise. All I did was go to that party with my friends. I sure as hell never took any drugs. I don’t do drugs. I never have.”

Jack winked at him. “My big, hunky Boy Scout.”

Jack’s presence and lighthearted flirting began to ease Tadd’s frustration as he looked over the picture. “I don’t even know where this prick got the picture.”

“It’s not really that big a deal, is it?” Davis asked.

“You don’t know what it’s like being in the public eye, Davis. You have to be perfect, and I’ve always done my best to put good back out there. I want to be a role model for gay teens, show them they could be out and still live a very full, successful, and respectful life.”

“And that’s really great, Tadd.” Davis began to fidget. “I’m sure no one is going to lend this any credibility.”

“I can’t believe the newspaper actually ran a story based on this, baby.”

“All they said in the article was that the blogger alleged it.” Tadd shook his head, looking over at the paper. “The article never says that the paper itself lends it any credibility.”

Davis watched Jack look lovingly at Tadd. “That’s shady as hell.” Davis closed his eyes as they kissed, completely pissed that merely an hour before he’d been holding hands with Jack. Guilt swept over him for thinking about himself, especially considering it was probably his fault that Tadd was even in this situation.

“I’m calling a media conference right now,” Tadd said decisively. “Let’s put an end to this here and now.”

* * * * *

Tadd sat a long conference table with a group of microphones placed in front of him. His attorneys flanked him right and left. Reporters peppered them with questions, and Davis found himself astonished by Tadd's discipline as he answered each insulting, prying query calmly and concisely. Another two men sat at the table, friends who'd accompanied Tadd on the trip and who were there to support him and to confirm the events. Davis felt wretched; he wouldn't wish this on someone he hated, and he certainly didn't hate Tadd. He wished he could be that kind of person, but it just wasn't in him. Tadd was good people. The blogger had named the prostitute, and Tadd's lawyers had tracked the guy down and gotten a sworn statement from the man that none of the allegations were true.

Davis reached into Jack's pocket and took out his cell phone. Jack turned, feeling the hand in his pocket, and smiled. He nodded his head as Davis slipped through the glass door into the hallway with the phone. He flipped it open, punched in the numbers, and placed it up to his ear. Tapping his foot and placing his hand on his hip, he waited as it rang.

"Hello, Deseree Wildwood."

"It's me," he whispered.

"I had nothing to do with it, so don't even start."

"Then who the hell did?" Davis asked.

"What am I, psychic?" she asked. "How the hell would I know?"

"You don't think...?"

"What?"

"Alex?" Davis asked.

"Well, he was there when we overheard the conversation."

"No...like he'd really care what happens here."

"You're probably right."

"This is so unfair," Davis said, feeling relieved that he wasn't to blame after all. He turned and saw Jack watching him from inside the conference room. He smiled and waved, and Jack smiled back. "We had a great lunch. I really felt like something was getting ready to happen and then this shit. I don't know what else to do."

"I did have one thought."

"At this point I'm getting desperate," Davis said, looking back to see if Jack was still watching. When he saw Jack had turned his attention back to the press conference, he added, "I'm willing to do whatever."

"I'm not sure I can pull it off. I'll have to call in a few favors."

"Just tell me, for the love of God," Davis said, smiling as a woman in Tadd's office walked by.

“Snappish.”

“Sorry.”

“Well, we know Jack wanted to move to New York for his career.”

“Right,” Davis said, rolling his hand in the air and shaking his head.

“Perhaps we could dangle a little carrot in front of him.”

“Such as,” Davis said, rolling his eyes.

“Well, there’s a casting director for NBC that I’m on really good terms with. I’ve dressed her for several public events. I could make a call on behalf of a very dear old friend from college.”

Davis stopped fidgeting and stood up straight as a grin spread across his face. “Oh, you are a naughty girl.”

“Do you know who his agent is?” she asked.

“Jessica something... She’s here for the wedding,” Davis said, pulling Jack’s phone away and looking at it. He put it back to his ear. “Her name and number would be in his phone, right?”

Deseree instructed Davis how to access the numbers in Jack’s cell phone while berating him for not having one of his own. He swore to Deseree he’d get one, though, if she made this happen. He felt a little bad for orchestrating this right after Tadd’s trauma, but at the end of the day, he could tell Jack still had feelings for him. It was obvious at lunch. He was really doing Tadd a favor in the long run.

* * * * *

Davis followed Tadd and Jack into the lobby of the hotel where most of the out-of-town guests were staying. As they entered the hotel bar, Davis looked around the swanky room, which had a slight antique feel to it. The rich, golden-colored walls, dark hardwood floors, and deep red upholstered chairs all had a slight patina to them that betrayed their age. They walked past the large dark-stained walnut bar and made their way to a table in the back where Alex, Candace, and Deseree waited. Davis gave Deseree a what-gives look. She closed her eyes, barely shaking her head back and forth.

“Tadd,” Candace squealed, getting up to hug him. “I watched the press conference. You were very strong. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Tadd said, sitting in the chair next to her.

Davis felt a sharp pain in his chest, nearly having an aneurysm hearing that, as he slid into the booth next to Alex. Jack sat down next to Davis.

“I agree, Tadd. You were completely brilliant,” Alex said. “It was all very dramatic, the shame you cast on the blogger, chastising the newspaper for not hurting you but the sweet

little children who look up to you. I could almost envision them standing in the cold, cruel world, lips quivering, very Dickens. I never knew you had it in you.”

“That was my beautiful husband-to-be here’s idea. Thanks, baby.” Tadd smiled as he leaned over and kissed Jack.

Davis shot a suspicious look over at Alex and found him sitting back in the booth, staring at Davis with a smooth smile on his face. Alex leaned over and said, “Tough break, love,” as he motioned to Tadd and Jack.

Davis let out a little huff, which caused Alex to laugh under his breath. Alex winked and poked him in the side playfully. Davis rolled his eyes, trying not to laugh.

“What is it exactly you’re doing here?” Davis asked, swatting Alex’s hand away.

“Oh shit,” Tadd said, tearing himself away from Jack’s gaze. “Davis, this is my best friend, Alex Parker. We were roommates at Yale.” Tadd started to turn back to Jack and asked, “Wait... I thought you both met last night?”

Candace’s eyes widened. “I’d say so.”

Davis smiled and shrugged his shoulders as he laughed a little. “Ha ha!” He glanced over at Deseree for help, but she deliberately looked away. Davis poked Alex in a not-so-playful way. “You!”

“Ouch, bloody hell, darling. I bruise easily.” Alex rubbed his side and looked at Tadd. “I may have neglected to mention we were such old friends.”

“Yeah!” Davis said, a little louder than he intended.

Alex slid his arm around Davis. “But, in all fairness, Jack neglected to tell anyone how absolutely adorable his ex was.”

“Well, maybe Jack doesn’t think he’s so adorable anymore,” Deseree finally piped in.

“Something tells me this is one of those situations where saying nothing is my safest option.”

“My son, everyone,” Candace said, with a raised eyebrow.

“That is rude, Jack. Davis was very supportive to me this afternoon. I consider it the act of a very dear friend. He never once even hinted that he thought that story might be true.”

Deseree tried to keep from laughing.

Davis thought, *I’m not guilty of anything. Okay, so I thought I was guilty, but I wasn’t, so it doesn’t count.*

“That’s true,” Jack said, looking at Davis. “You never speculated once.”

“Well, yeah,” Davis said, dropping an arm on the table. “Like I think you’d be marrying a hobag.”

Deseree and Alex burst out laughing as Davis reminded himself that it wasn’t always necessary for him to speak.

"Davis is a very trusting man," Candace said with a wink. "It's always been one of my favorite things about him."

"And it's rapidly becoming one of mine," Alex said, grabbing his hand and pulling it to his chest. "I'm utterly seduced by the Sandra Dee of it all."

Tadd and Deseree laughed as Candace rolled her eyes. Jack looked on with a half smile.

Davis smiled and looked at Deseree when he saw Jack's agent come into the bar. She was looking around the room, and relief swept over her face when she spotted them at the table. She scurried across the room and pulled up at the table, out of breath, holding up a hand.

"Jessica, are you okay?" Jack asked.

"For God's sake, Jack," Candace said. "Get the woman a chair."

Jack got up and pulled over a chair for her. Alex leaned in closer to Davis and whispered, "Should I kiss you again?"

"Swine," Davis whispered back through a smile.

"Jack, I've been looking everywhere for you," Jessica said.

"Don't worry, love," Alex said under his breath with a grin. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Asshole," Davis whispered.

"Don't you have your phone?" Jessica asked.

Alex leaned closer. "Now you're just deliberately trying to arouse me."

Davis rolled his eyes and sat up in his seat, irritated by Alex's constant interruptions.

"Of course," Jack said, reaching into his pockets.

"Oops," Davis said, cringing as he pulled Jack's cell out of his pocket. He slid it across the table. "But I swear it never rang."

Jack flipped it open and shook his head. "You turned it off, silly."

Davis sank back into the seat as Jessica shot him a nasty look. "My bad."

"I got a call this afternoon from casting at NBC," Jessica said, turning back to Jack. "They want to test you for a pilot they're working on for next season."

The table erupted with squeals and screams as Davis and Deseree glanced at one another and smiled. Alex looked at them both suspiciously.

This is it, Davis thought, so giddy he couldn't see straight.

"I didn't know you were sending my head shots to the studios," Jack said, looking surprised.

"That's just it," Jessica said excitedly. "Somebody from the studio saw you a year ago in *Speed-the-Plow* and remembered you when this part came along."

Tadd looked at Jack with a huge grin. "This is great!"

Candace looked up at the ceiling. "My son...a household name."

"Congrats, Jack," Deseree said.

"There is one teensy, little, minute catch," Jessica said, cringing.

"What?" Jack asked.

Here it comes, here it comes, Davis thought, scooting up in the seat, looking like he was about ready to leap out of it.

"They want you there tomorrow morning," Jessica said, squinting her eyes, waiting for Jack to explode.

Come on, come on, damn it. Davis watched Jack's face as it all sunk in.

"We're getting married tomorrow. I'm not flying to Los Angeles. I can't believe you would even tell them I'd consider it."

Davis's smile faded and Deseree looked over at him, confused.

"You most certainly can and will go. We can postpone the ceremony, Jack. We can get married anytime. You may never get another opportunity like this."

Jack leaned over and gave Tadd a soft kiss. "That settles it then. I'm definitely not going. If they can't wait, then it's their loss."

Davis stared blankly forward as Tadd shook his head, telling Jack he was crazy. Tadd kissed Jack and told him he loved him. Davis began to get up from the table, and Alex and Deseree scooted out for him.

"I'm so sorry," Davis said, smiling weakly. "Please excuse me for a minute."

Candace looked after him and asked Deseree, "Is he okay?"

"Oh yeah. I'll go check on him, though."

Davis rounded the corner into the posh lobby, placing his hand up on the wall for balance. His ears were ringing loudly as people popped in and out of the revolving doors. He leaned back against the wall and slowly slid down, sitting up on his ankles. He couldn't breathe and didn't notice Deseree walk by, looking over the lobby for him. She stood up on tiptoe but still couldn't find him. Instead, she almost tripped on him as she backed up. She sank down beside him.

"I don't understand."

"Look, I'm sure --"

"He left me for some tiny little supporting role in a musical," Davis said, calming his breathing down. "Why isn't he running off leaving the Toad in a lurch?"

"I don't know," Deseree said, afraid to touch him. "Maybe he learned from his mistakes. He was a lot younger --"

"Well, why now all of a sudden, damn it! This is all your fault! I should have never come here!"

Deseree took in a deep breath and rose. She began walking away, but stopped, turned around, and went back over to him. "Stand up!"

Davis peeked up at her and did as she instructed.

"Screw you, Davis! I don't need this shit! I have problems of my own!"

"Oh please," Davis said, looking back at her. "I don't think trying to figure out where next year's hemlines should be constitutes a problem."

"You selfish prick!" Deseree spoke too loudly, and a few people in the lobby began to take notice. "You haven't thought about anything other than yourself since I walked through your front door." She stood there looking at him as if waiting for a response. "That's right! Have you even thought about why I might have possibly shown up out of the blue in the first place?"

"Well..." Davis said, looking down at the floor and then back up at her.

"Of course you haven't. You never even bothered to ask if I'm okay?"

"I know you're okay. I'm looking at you," Davis said, fearing that she might deck him.

"Yeah, well, I'm not okay...okay! As it turns out, I'm pregnant." Deseree paced back and forth for a second as Davis watched her in shock.

"On top of that," she said, stopping to look up at him again, "I don't know what to do about it. Not only am I no longer seeing the father, but I also don't like him very much. Now I may have to deal with that asshole being in my life...forever! Maybe I don't have to tell him?" She tapped her chin with a finger and looked back up at Davis. "What do you think? Do I *have* to tell him?"

Davis started to say something, but she placed her hand over his mouth.

"Don't you dare speak to me," she said, holding back tears. "Selfish, little, thinking-only-about-yourself ass!" Tears started to come down her cheeks. "I don't even know if I'm capable of handling a kid. So I thought...hey, go see Davis. He's my rock. He's always been my rock. He'll know what to do. That was a stupid assumption, huh? You can't even let go of a stupid-ass man that's been out of your life now longer than he was in it to begin with!"

Deseree turned and stormed out of the hotel. Davis watched as she went the wrong direction on the street. She came back the other direction talking to herself and flinging her hands through the air.

Davis glimpsed around the lobby as several people stood looking at him. He turned a few times, unsure of where to go, before finally walking toward the door.

Alex stood just around the corner from where they'd fought, leaning against the wall in front of the hotel bar entryway. He watched Davis leave the hotel and head down the sidewalk.

As Davis walked along the sidewalk, he realized how terrified she must be and felt horrible that he hadn't seen it. He'd never seen Deseree cry in all the time he had known

her. He wasn't sure she could until now. It made him sick to his stomach thinking he hadn't been there for her.

Chapter Nine

Deseree sat on the corner of her bed in Candace's apartment. Her hair hung in wet curls and she was wrapped in a fluffy white terrycloth robe Candace had loaned her. She stared off into space and was startled by a soft knock at the door. She gazed at the door listlessly but got up to answer the knock. Davis stood in the hallway in his boxer briefs, cradling a pile of clothes in his arms. His eyes were puffy, and they began to well up again.

"I don't know what to wear." A tear began to run down his cheek.

She smiled and grabbed his arm, pulling him into the room.

"I'm sorry I'm such a scumbag," he said as she shut the door.

"You're my best friend of a scumbag, so what's a girl to do?" Deseree asked, giving him a hug. She pulled away and held up her arm to his face. "Dry your eyes."

Davis wiped his cheeks over the sleeve of her robe. "I'm such a little shamelet, I know, but I want you to know that whatever you decide to do...you won't be alone."

"I figured you wouldn't leave me knocked up and flying solo," Deseree said as they walked over to the bed and she sat down.

"I'm so ashamed I didn't see it," Davis said, dropping the clothes onto the bed. "You were having morning sickness the other day, and you haven't touched liquor the entire time you've been here. That alone should have tipped me off."

"Okay," Deseree said, holding up her arms. "That's the second time in two days my drinking habits have been called into question. I'm beginning to get a complex."

"Sorry." Davis sat next to her on the bed. "So what are you thinking? What do you want to do?"

She took his hand. "I don't know. I'm scared, Davis."

“Please tell me the father isn’t the dog man you stood me up for the night of Jack’s play.”

“That would be the one,” Deseree said. “I’m such an idiot.”

“And I’ve been running around whining like a little bitch.”

“Actually, it’s been a nice distraction.”

“Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“No,” she said, smiling as she looked at him. “And I’m sorry I said those things about you and Jack.”

“I had it coming,” Davis said, looking over at the clothes. “Now I have to get ready to go to this stupid dinner whatever party thingy and watch as Tadd slathers himself all over Jack.”

“Rehearsal dinner?”

“I don’t know... I’m so confused. Candace mentioned a band?”

“For the reception tomorrow?” Deseree asked.

“No, for tonight...they have an orchestra for the reception.”

“This is the strangest wedding I’ve ever been to.”

“It’s the only one I’ve ever been to, and it sucks. Honestly, this whole thing is the most ridiculous Cecil B. DeMille-like spectacle I’ve ever seen. It’s like they’re trying to prove something.”

“Or rub it in everyone’s face,” she added with a grin.

“Yeah.” Davis laughed. “That’s probably it.”

“I still don’t understand how they’ve been able to pull this off in such a short amount of time,” Deseree said, shaking her head.

“Candace and Tadd know practically everyone in Chicago. The two of them didn’t have to work too hard after pulling in a few favors.”

“Well,” Deseree said, getting up off the bed and patting his shoulder. “I guess we better get you ready for your close-up.”

“Not that there’s much point,” Davis said with a sigh as he stood up next to her.

“Honey, if you learn nothing else from all this,” Deseree said, grabbing him by the shoulders, “please realize that there is never any excuse to not look fabulous.”

* * * * *

Davis and Deseree entered the elegant banquet hall. An enormous and very elaborate buffet occupied the far end, with people surrounding it, filling plates with food. A large dance floor was set up in the center and a huge big band orchestra along the back wall played live music. Round tables with pristine white tablecloths radiated out from the dance floor. A

large bar was located on the third wall, opposite, with several bartenders as well a champagne station. Enormous crystal chandeliers hung from the tall ceilings and the room was packed with people milling or standing in groups.

Davis and Deseree lingered in the doorway, surveying the room. Davis was wearing a sleek black suit Deseree had altered to fit him perfectly, paired with a pale pink shirt and a slightly oversize necktie. Deseree had on a vintage floor length gray silk dress that looked like something Jean Harlow might have worn in an old black-and-white movie from the thirties. Her hair was pulled back into a loose bun with several sparkly silver clips.

“Nice spread.”

“Candace doesn’t do simple,” Davis said, smiling as Candace approached them wearing a bright red dress that formed snugly to her figure. She had on a headset that had a microphone attached.

“It’s not polite to skulk about in doorways,” Candace said, giving Davis a hug.

“Everything’s beautiful,” Davis said as they separated. “Especially you.”

Candace held up her hand, listening to a muffled voice in her ear. She pulled a small receiver out from between her breasts. “I love these things. I feel like Janet Jackson.” She pressed a button and held the receiver up to her mouth. “I’m on my way.” She placed it back down in her cleavage and looked up. “Tempura trauma... I’ll find you two later.”

Candace made her way toward the food area and Davis and Deseree worked their way into the room. They spied Jack and Tadd sitting at a table. Jack smiled at Tadd and gave him a soft kiss.

Davis placed his hand on his stomach. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Have you eaten since lunch?”

“No, and I actually didn’t eat much then.”

Deseree took him by the arm and headed for the buffet. “Let’s get some food in you.”

“I’m not really hungry,” he said with a grimace.

“I don’t care. I’m starving and you aren’t going to sit by while I gorge. You don’t have to take this whole looking pretty thing too far.”

As they walked along the buffet, Deseree piled a plate full of hors d’oeuvres, while shoving one after another into her mouth. Davis laughed as she glanced up and popped a crab puff into his mouth. She scowled as he put his arm around her and escorted her away.

“I’m not done yet,” she said, with a mouth full of food.

“Christ, woman, I know you’re eating for two but leave some for the other guests.”

She gazed back at the buffet longingly as Davis led her to a table. He pulled out a chair for her. “I’ll go get us something to drink.”

She plopped down, looking over her plate. Before Davis could leave, though, Alex joined them, smiling. He had two flutes of champagne in one hand and a club soda with lime in the other.

"Oh look," Davis said, crossing his arms, "it's Judas."

"Now, now," Alex said, placing the soda in front of Deseree. "For the mommy to be," he added with a wink as Deseree's mouth fell open, revealing a half-chewed stuffed mushroom.

"That's a charming look for you," Alex said.

Deseree reached over and smacked Davis. "You told!"

"I did not!" Davis looked at Alex with a smirk. "The little weasel probably bugged us."

"Don't be daft," Alex said, handing Davis a glass of champagne. "It couldn't possibly be due to the fact you two were shamelessly screaming at one another like contestants on a reality TV show earlier today."

"Way to go," Deseree said to Davis as he looked down at her. She mumbled something about a scarlet letter under her breath.

"It's my fault. You're the one that thought Hagatha Christie here was so adorable. I don't want this." Davis looked at Alex and set the flute down on the table. "It's all tainty with your lies and deceit."

Alex pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize we'd switched to moral indignation. I do hope NBC won't be too disappointed about Jack declining that offer...which seemed to come out of nowhere."

Deseree's eyes bulged as she shoved another morsel of food into her mouth, and Davis huffed as he sat down between her and Alex.

Davis picked up the glass and took a drink. "I really hate you."

Alex laughed with a slight gleam in his eyes. "Well, it's a start."

Davis rolled his eyes, glaring at Alex as Deseree watched the two of them smiling.

"Very well," Alex said, getting up from the table. "I'll leave you to your intrigue."

Davis watched Alex walk off. "That man irritates me to no end."

"Gets right under your skin, huh?" Deseree said, smiling through a mouthful of food.

"Like you wouldn't believe." Davis turned his attention to Jack. He let out a little whimper. "I don't know what else to do."

"This may sound crazy, Davis, but perhaps you should just be honest with him."

"Just tell him I'm still in love with him and to please marry me?"

"It's not like any of our scheming has gotten us anywhere. What do you have to lose?"

"Jack," Davis said, sucking down the rest of the champagne.

Deseree watched Davis as he stared at Jack. She scrunched up her forehead, and a smile began to spread over her face. "I'll be right back."

Davis nodded, not really listening to her. *I love you, Jack*, Davis thought. It's not that difficult. How many times in the past had he spoken those words? Why did it scare him so much to say them now? Was he afraid the reply wouldn't be the same? How could it not? How could Jack realistically choose a man he'd only known for a few weeks over him? It was unthinkable.

As Davis watched, Jack suddenly turned and noticed him. They smiled at one another, and Jack started to get up out of his seat. But in an instant Deseree came back and grabbed Davis by the hand.

"If we're going to leave empty-handed," she said, dragging Davis out of the chair and across the room, "we're going out with style."

Davis followed her onto the center of the almost-empty dance floor. The song the band was playing ended, and Davis grinned at her as the next, very familiar, song began -- "Let's Face the Music and Dance."

"You can't be serious."

"We practiced this for an entire semester," Deseree said, grinning like a little girl. "Are you telling me you don't remember it?"

Davis lifted her arms, locking their wrists into the familiar frame. "Oh, I remember."

"Then shut up and dance."

Davis began leading Deseree around the floor in classic Astaire-and-Rogers-style, all twirling and intricate steps. He spun, releasing one hand as he turned, snapping her out to present her at the end of his arm. They smiled at one another as they locked arms again and tapped across the center of the floor. Deseree laughed out loud, and they swayed back and forth as Davis took her in his arms again, spinning her around the floor.

Candace stopped, watching the two of them, and let out a little joyful laugh. Her smile faded when she noticed Alex standing a few feet away from her, grinning as he watched them. She smirked and scanned the room. Everyone had turned their attention to the dance floor.

Deseree placed her hands around Davis's neck and he held out his arms as he spun, lifting her feet off the floor. He grabbed her by the waist, lifted her up, then lowered her as she bent at the waist, and he slid her between his legs, letting go of her as she glided across the floor. He turned with an outstretched hand and brought her back to her feet.

Tadd stared at Jack, who was watching with wide eyes, his mouth slightly agape. "Look at monkey face go," Jack said, and Tadd turned his attention back to them.

Davis and Deseree came back together, facing one another briefly before he dipped her. Then the music stopped. They each smiled at the other, breathing heavily as the room erupted into applause. He lifted her upright and they each turned and bowed, laughing.

"How about that, folks," the bandleader yelled into the microphone.

Davis looked at Deseree. "I do love you."

"Aw, shucks, Davie," she said, in her best little girl voice, giggling.

He yanked her back toward him and put his arm around her waist as they walked off the dance floor. Tadd and Jack met them before they'd made it back to their table.

Jack looked back and forth between the two of them. "That was wonderful, right out of an old musical. Davis, I..."

"You were both great!" Tadd chimed in, shaking his head and smiling at Davis. "I'm thinking I should be asking if there's anything you can't do."

"When did you learn to dance like that?" Jack asked excitedly.

"You don't remember?" Davis asked.

Deseree pulled Davis close. "He didn't make it to our recital, remember."

"That's right."

"Damn," Jack said, nodding and shaking his head, "that was the semester I was directing and starring in *Othello*. I do remember that."

"We should go on tour," Deseree said, giggling.

Alex had crossed the room again and stopped to stand behind Jack and Tadd, then moved between the two of them. He grabbed Davis, wrapping his arms around his waist, and kissed him. He dipped Davis back as he slid his tongue into his mouth. Davis placed his hands behind Alex's neck, kissing him back as Alex ran a hand down the small of his back and over his ass. Jack's smile began to fade as Alex lifted Davis back up slowly and pulled his lips away.

"You are a constant surprise," Alex said, breathing heavily as he put his hand on Davis's cheek. "Would you like to grab a cocktail after?"

"Love to," Davis said, and Jack's smile disappeared.

"It would be so great if the two of you wound up together," Tadd said, smiling. "We could all vacation together."

A half smile spread across Deseree's face as if mulling the possibilities. "That would be precious."

"Yes, it would," Jack said stiffly.

Alex stared into Davis's eyes. "Sorry, Taddious, but I doubt we'd make it out of the room long enough to congregate with others."

Davis bit his lip, still trying to catch his breath, unable to take his eyes away from Alex.

Tadd whacked Alex on the back and spoke again to Jack. "Honey, we should probably go mingle a little."

“Yeah,” Jack said as they turned and walked away. Jack glanced back for a moment, watching Davis and Alex stare at one another. He smirked and turned back around. “Can’t you keep Alex away from Davis?”

“What?” Tadd eyed Jack, shocked.

“Well, he’s not exactly right for him,” Jack said with a shrug. “Alex is kind of a man-whore.”

“I think Davis can take care of himself,” Tadd said. He took Jack’s hand as they wove back through the tables. “How would it look if either of us stuck our noses in it? Seriously.”

“Have they stopped watching?” Alex asked.

“Yep,” Deseree answered.

“How’d I do?” Alex asked, breaking his gaze with Davis and stepping away.

Davis blinked a few times and tried to get his bearings back.

Deseree reached over and pinched Alex on the ass. “You are a treasure.”

“Yeah,” Davis said, clearing his throat. “If I weren’t trying to break up my ex’s wedding, I’d be totally loving you.”

“There’s always something,” Alex said, smiling as he turned and walked off.

Davis scowled, irritated that Alex seemed completely unaffected by the kiss that had started to get him hard. “Scalawag.”

Deseree laughed and held his hand as they went back to the table.

Chapter Ten

Davis watched Alex dance with Deseree. From the corner of his eye, he saw Tadd and Jack get up from their table. He waited till they passed his chair, and got up, following them from a distance. A group of people stepped in front of him, but he kept his eye on the engaged couple. He thought he caught a glimpse of Jack going into the bathroom, and he hurried through the crowd, making a beeline for the bathroom door.

The bathroom was decorated in the same rich colors as the ballroom. It had smaller crystal chandeliers and matching wall sconces scattered throughout the room. Davis stood quietly, listening as the bathroom door closed behind him. He went around the corner, walking softly over the creamy marble-tiled floor and saw Tadd standing at a urinal. He began to back up as Tadd turned his head to the side and spotted him.

“Hey,” Tadd said, turning back to face the wall.

Damn, damn, damn. Davis stepped up to the next urinal. He unzipped as Tadd flushed. Tadd moved over to a sink and as soon as the water came on Davis began to pee.

Davis looked up at the ceiling. “Nice party.”

“Yes,” Tadd said, washing his hands. “Candace did an incredible job here tonight.”

Davis flushed and zipped up, heading to the sink next to Tadd’s.

Tadd watched Davis through his reflection in the mirror. “I know why you came to Chicago.”

“I came because Jack asked me to,” Davis said, rinsing his hands.

“That’s not exactly what I mean.” Tadd dried his hands with a paper towel.

Davis stared at him and bit his lip. He turned off the faucet and grabbed a paper towel.

“I don’t blame you. Jack’s a great guy.”

Davis stared blankly at Tadd with wide eyes. “I don’t follow.”

"Sure you do. The wide-eyed innocent routine isn't working with me, Davis."

Davis frowned and then smiled back at Tadd. "Let's cut through the bullshit, then. It's insulting to both of us."

"I knew from the second I first laid eyes on you what you were up to," Tadd said, smiling as he looked at Davis. "Jack's description of you didn't quite mesh with the person that showed up at my condo that night."

Davis searched the room for a trash can to throw his towel away. "What are you expecting to get out of this, an apology?"

"Of course not. If the situation were reversed, I'd have done the same thing. We've both probably done some things the past few days we wouldn't normally do. You using Alex, pretending to be my friend, and I suspect the NBC thing, though I have to say I'm still not sure how you pulled that one off."

"I had nothing to do with that blogger thingy, if that's what you're getting at."

"I know," Tadd said, shaking his head as a look of disappointment swept over his face. "I did that. The guy that runs that Web site can't stand me for whatever reason. I suppose he has good reason now after the way I painted him at the press conference."

Davis's eyes widened and his arms fell to his sides. "Why...why would you do that?"

"I could tell you were getting to Jack. I got a little nutty thinking I might lose him. I guess I thought if Jack saw it he'd... Shame on me."

"You're crazy," Davis said, mouth hanging open.

"I knew I could prove myself innocent," Tadd said, tossing a hand through the air. "I thought there was zero risk. I never dreamed the papers would pick up on it. I felt like a real idiot when Jack turned down the television gig. I still can't believe he did that." Tadd smiled, shaking his head. "I fell in love with him all over again in that moment. Guess I have you to thank you for that."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Davis asked, suppressing an urge to throttle Tadd.

"They both care for you a great deal, Davis. Like it or not, you and I are going to be thrown together again. I just thought I'd try to clear the air. I do hope at some point we might actually be friends."

Tadd turned and walked out of the bathroom. Davis leaned back against the wall. *Of all the... Well, I'm glad he thinks this is actually over.* He glanced at himself in the mirror. He reached up with his paper towel and tried to rub out his reflection.

"Idiot," he said to himself. "I have to tell Jack."

Davis stood up straight and turned, then practically ran out of the bathroom. Back out in the banquet hall, he found Deseree.

"Have you seen Jack?"

"No...why?" Deseree asked. "What happened?"

"We've been duped by the Toad," Davis answered, scanning the room. "The jig is up, and he leaked his own rumor to that stupid blog thingy."

"Sneaky," Deseree said, realizing by the look on Davis's face that this wasn't the time to stand back admiring Tadd's deceit.

Davis's eyes were flitting from one area to the next. "I have to find Jack... I have to tell him."

"You're going to rat out the Toad?"

"No, I'm no better than he is in that respect," Davis said, starting to walk. "I'm going to tell him I still love him. If I don't, I'm going to lose him forever."

They looked for Jack but didn't find him. Instead, they saw Candace standing alone by a buffet table, speaking into her cleavage. They joined her.

Davis took Candace by the arm. "Have you seen Jack?"

"He and Tadd just left," Candace said, pointing toward the entryway.

Davis turned and took off for the door as Deseree smiled at Candace. Candace eyed her with a little alarm. "What's all tha --"

"You know," Deseree interrupted, "you should really think about coming to New York. We could do some major shopping."

Davis ran out of the banquet room and into the wide reception hall. He saw no one, but he heard laughter followed by the tone warning that the elevator doors were closing. He sprinted toward them, getting there just after they shut all the way. He pressed the button furiously and checked the floor indicators for the bank of elevators behind him. He muttered under his breath and turned to find the door to the stairwell. He ran toward it, full speed, slamming into the bar, only to get knocked back onto the floor. He let out a little whimper and lay there for a moment before climbing to his feet. He pushed furiously on the locked bar.

"Who locks the goddamn stairwell doors?" Davis screamed. "What if there was a fucking fire? Hello... *Towering Inferno*, anyone?"

He heard a bell *ding* and he whipped around as the elevator doors began to open. He ran back and through the open doors, then started frantically pressing the Close button and jamming his finger against the Lobby light.

It took what seemed an eternity, but suddenly the elevator doors opened on the lobby and Davis flew out in time to see Jack and Tadd climbing into a cab outside. He ran toward the revolving doors and jumped in as an old lady entered from the outside, slowly hobbling through it. Trapped and panicking as he watched the cab pull away, he had little choice but to wait for the woman to get out on the other side.

He jumped out of the door onto the sidewalk. He looked up the street and saw several cabs sitting at the stoplight at the next intersection. He took off running down the sidewalk, dodging people, trying desperately to reach the taxis.

"Please...please," he said, picking up speed as the light changed.

Putting his all into it, he ran with renewed energy. The cabs began to take off as he got about three car lengths behind. He tried to call out for Jack, but he was too out of breath. He slowed to a stop, watching the cars pull farther away. He broke down, bending over as he placed his hands on his knees, trying to recover his wind.

"Damn it!" he screamed, turning around to return to the hotel. He saw Deseree and Alex standing on the sidewalk, watching as he made his way back.

"Are you okay?" Deseree asked.

"I couldn't catch them," Davis answered, smacking his hip.

Alex reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. "Just call him."

"I can't tell him over the phone," Davis said, circling like a caged animal, feeling defeated.

"So, we'll go over to Tadd's," Deseree said, nodding her head.

"That's good," Davis said, immediately hailing a cab.

Alex placed his phone back in his pocket. "I don't think that's going to work."

"Well, you don't have to come," Davis snapped back at him.

"It's not that," Alex said, following Deseree to the curb. "It's just that they aren't --"

"Blah, blah," Davis said as he opened the cab door and Deseree slid in. "If you can't offer anything positive to say, then just butt out."

"Fine," Alex said, climbing in after Davis and settling back into the seat. He shut the cab door and gave the driver the address.

"Thank you," Davis said, looking at Alex.

Alex stared forward, tapping his fingers on his knees. "No problem...wanker."

"I didn't mean to be so snippy," Davis said, touching his arm.

"No need to apologize, darling," Alex said, reaching over and patting Davis's hand. "Why start now?"

Davis ripped his hand away. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Boys!" Deseree screamed, placing her hands over her face. "Honestly, two adult men acting like babies. Just fuck each other and get it over with already."

"Now that's an idea. I'm thinking --"

"I'm thinking no," Davis said, cutting Alex off with a sneer.

Alex smiled.

* * * * *

They asked the cab driver to wait as they jumped out of the cab and walked up to the outside door of Tadd's building. Davis yanked on the door. It wouldn't open. He turned, looking at Alex.

"The doors lock automatically after ten," Alex explained.

Davis sneered and whipped around, pressing the buzzer for Tadd's apartment as Alex stood back, folding his arms and tapping his foot.

"Maybe they haven't made it back yet," Deseree said, looking at Davis.

Davis pushed the button again. "No...that chicken shit just isn't answering."

"Yes," Alex said, rolling his eyes. "I'm sure that's it."

"You would take his side," Davis said, pressing the buzzer again. He turned to face Alex. "Exactly why are you friends with him? You constantly cut him down."

"As tedious as he can be," Alex said, unfolding his arms and standing over Davis, "he is actually an extremely kind and generous man. He's a good, loyal mate that's always been there for me when I really needed him. And he's always accepted me for exactly who I am. There aren't many people in my life I can say that about."

Davis bit his lip as a rush of guilt sweep over him. "Then why are you trying to help us break off this wedding?" He turned around, pressing the button, and cast his eyes up at Tadd's windows.

Alex cringed as if he'd hoped that question wouldn't come up. "That's my affair. Perhaps I don't want Tadd marrying a man that might still be in love with his ex, though that scenario is becoming questionable at this point."

"Perhaps," Davis said in a mocking tone, punching the button, "you can't even commit to a reason! Everything always has to be very vague with you, doesn't it?"

"Let's just call them," Deseree suggested. She opened her purse to look for her cell.

Davis looked toward the corner of the building. "Maybe there's a fire escape on the side or back of the building."

Alex tossed hands into the air. "Breaking and entering...brilliant. You're off your trolley."

"Well, hell," Davis said, whirling back around. "He won't answer. I love how all of a sudden you get a conscience."

"Fine," Alex said, motioning toward the cab, "but only if Deseree leaves now. I won't be responsible for her spending the night in jail."

Deseree looked up from her phone. "I'm so not going anywhere."

"I think he's right," Davis said, placing a hand on her arm. "You're pregnant."

"Barely," she said, yanking away as she stomped her foot and crossed her arms. "I don't want to miss anything. I wanna break and enter!"

Alex laughed, placing a hand on Deseree's cheek. "You are definitely becoming one of my favorite people ever."

Davis smiled and turned her toward the cab. "Do you really want tomorrow's headline to be FASHION DESIGNER MOONLIGHTS AS CAT BURGLAR?"

"This blows," Deseree said as Davis opened the cab door for her. "I hate being famous, and I hate babies."

Davis gave her a kiss on the cheek and she climbed into the cab. Alex laughed, leaning down to hand some money to the driver as Davis told him the address.

"Keep your cell on," Davis said with a wink. "You'll be my one phone call."

She agreed defiantly and was pouting as the cab pulled off.

Davis and Alex watched as she drove off looking back through the rear window at the two of them.

"She's absolutely adorable. Maybe I should marry her?"

"What?" Davis asked.

Alex looked at Davis. "Aside from the no-penis thing, she's bloody perfect."

"You really are twisted."

"You're right. She deserves a penis every bit as much as the rest of us."

Davis shook his head and turned around. "She'd marry me if she were going to marry a homo."

Alex laughed as he walked back toward the door.

"Seriously," Davis said, following him back to the door. "We've already tried that. Let's just go look for the fire escape."

"Did you try the other apartments?"

"No," Davis said, feeling stupid. "Like that'll do any good."

"Look up and tell me if you see any lights come on," Alex said as he pressed a button.

Once Davis cast his eyes up the building, Alex turned back to punch a code into the control panel.

"I told y --" Davis started to say as the door buzzed.

Alex yanked it open and turned back to smile.

Davis grinned as he walked through the door. "You are a genius."

In the elevator, Alex hit the third-floor button. They rode up the two flights and got out. At Tadd's door, Davis started to knock as Alex spoke. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm sorry, Alex," Davis said, closing his eyes momentarily. "I know he's your friend, and well, to be perfectly honest, I don't exactly hate him, but I have to. If I don't..."

"Fair enough," Alex said, backing away and extending his arm as if inviting him to go ahead.

Davis knocked on the door and put his ear up to it, trying to hear evidence of Tadd and Jack behind the door. He knocked again, louder, and tried to listen again. He knocked longer the third time, beginning to get frustrated. The apartment door across the hall opened slightly. Alex turned and smiled at the curious neighbor.

"Hello," Alex said, as the middle-aged woman opened her door farther.

"He's not home," the lady said as Davis stopped knocking and turned around. "He's getting married tomorrow. I believe he and his fiancé...such a nice boy...they're staying in some hotel suite tonight. I don't remember which one."

Alex bowed politely. "Well, thank you, madam."

"Aren't you a friend of Tadd's?" the lady asked Alex.

"Yes, sorry to disturb," Alex answered, smiling at her. "He neglected to mention that to me."

"Well," she said, "have a good night."

Davis fell back into Tadd's door and let out a sigh. Alex took a deep breath and walked over to the fire extinguisher in the hall. He reached under it and pulled out a magnetic key box.

Davis frowned at him. "You might have mentioned that was there before allowing me to wake all the neighbors."

"I'm not in the habit of letting myself into people's flats while they might be inside doing God knows what," Alex said, unlocking the door and throwing it open. "Might as well go in and drink his liquor."

Davis rolled his eyes, exhaled deeply, and went into the apartment.

Alex walked over and replaced the key under the fire extinguisher, grinning. Then he entered Tadd's apartment, flipped on the light, and closed the door behind him. He went into the kitchen, watching as Davis pulled off his jacket and dropped it on the floor.

"How 'bout that drink?" Davis asked.

"Coming right up, love."

Davis laughed and began to undo his tie. He noticed Alex watching him from the kitchen as he pulled out two wineglasses.

"Don't get any funny ideas," Davis said, yanking his tie off.

Alex laughed as he grabbed a bottle of red and the corkscrew. "I wasn't...cheeky bastard."

"I saw that leer-y look you get," Davis said, eyeing Alex as he came into the living area. "You had dirty in your eyes."

Alex grinned, setting the glasses onto the coffee table. "I'll be a complete gentleman."

Davis undid the top few buttons on his shirt and flopped down onto the couch. "This has to be the most uncomfortable furniture ever." Davis kicked off his shoes as he wiggled around on the hard leather sofa.

Alex peered down at the couch while pulling the cork out of the bottle. "Yes, you're quite right." He picked up the glasses. "Follow me."

Davis watched as he headed for the stairs. He sighed and got up to follow him. Once upstairs, Alex opened the first door and Davis followed him into a huge, very chic bedroom. Like the downstairs, it had a gallery-like feel with the large modernistic paintings along the walls.

"This is lame, even for you," Davis said, turning to head back downstairs.

"Oh, bugger off." Alex set the wine and glasses down on the nightstand. He picked up a remote and pressed a button as a panel on the wall opened up and the television came on. "You aren't that irresistible."

Davis laughed sheepishly, turning back. He glanced down at the huge bed, which had to be more comfortable than the couch. He shrugged, looking at Alex, then flopped down and rolled around on the bed. "Wow! This is like...fuck me...I could die in this bed."

"You could refrain from rolling around like that and using the phrase *fuck me*," Alex said, handing Davis a glass. "I am only human, you little prat."

"Sorry," Davis said, sitting up and taking the glass. "This mattress is amazing."

"I know," Alex said, kicking off his shoes and pulling off his jacket. "I gave it to him."

Davis stared at Alex wide-eyed. "You are a good friend. No wonder you get so much ass."

Alex shot him a dirty look and smirked as he unbuttoned his shirt. "Yes, because I'm not at all attractive."

"I didn't mean it like that," Davis said, watching as Alex pulled off his shirt and tossed it on the chair with his jacket. His chest was flat but well defined and hard, and his stomach was ripped into the most incredible six-pack Davis had ever seen outside of a magazine. "Just maybe not the god you think you are." Christ, please don't let him take off his pants.

Alex crawled onto the bed and pushed some pillows up against the headboard. He leaned back into them and picked his glass up off the bedside table. He took a drink and winked at Davis, patting the bed next to him. "I don't think I'm a god."

Davis smiled as he shot Alex a look. He crawled over and sat next to him. Alex patted his chest and lifted his arm. Davis turned and leaned back, resting his head on Alex's chest. Alex wrapped his arm around his shoulder and pulled Davis into him.

"There now," Alex said, taking another drink. "That's not so terrible, is it?"

"No," Davis said, snuggling into him and taking a sip from his glass. He stared at the television and watched as the pictures changed. "You're not so bad."

Alex laughed, shaking his head. "Thank you. A ringing endorsement."

Davis laughed in spite of himself and felt his face flush a little. "You can be very sweet when you wanna be."

"Well, I'm sure the same could be said for you."

"Fucker," Davis said with a smirk, pinching his side.

"Violence again," Alex said, looking down at him. "Why does it always come back to pain with you?"

"I don't know." Davis's smile faded a bit. "It does seem like I've had my fair share of it the past few years, though."

Alex kissed him on the top of his head. "I'm sorry."

Davis sat up, looking toward the door on the far wall. "Is that the bathroom?"

"Yes."

Davis handed him his glass and crawled down the bed. He hopped off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

Alex smiled as he listened to Davis's pee hit the water. He stretched his arms out, lifting them above his head, somehow taking comfort in the fact Davis hadn't closed the door to the bathroom when he went in. He listened as the toilet flushed and as Davis splashed water into the sink while he washed his hands.

Davis came back into the room, looking over Alex and the bed. "I should probably call a cab."

"Don't be daft," Alex said, sitting up. "It's late. I'm not going back to my place at this point. Just stay here. You'll actually get more sleep if you don't waste an hour with a cab."

Davis bit his lip and shoved his thumbs into the waist of his pants, swaying back and forth from one foot to the other.

A serious expression came over Alex's face. "Honestly, Davis, it's a lot less hassle."

"You're right." Davis walked to the far side of the bed. "I don't really feel like being alone, anyway."

"Good, that's settled." Alex watched as Davis started taking off his shirt. Alex got up off the bed and pulled down the covers, yanking them free from underneath the mattress. He picked up his wineglass, took a drink, and let his eyes run down Davis's body as he took off his pants. "You are quite beautiful," Alex said as Davis stretched with a yawn.

Davis sat on the bed and pulled off his socks. "Thanks." Davis blushed as he slid his legs under the blankets.

"Sorry," Alex said, putting his wineglass down and unbuckling his belt. "That was inappropriate."

"No," Davis said, smiling as he rolled onto his side watching Alex unbutton and unzip his pants. "I'm sorry I'm such an asshole. It was a lovely thing to say."

Alex removed his pants, revealing his long legs. Davis let his gaze run down his lanky frame as Alex slid into the bed. Davis felt a pang shoot through chest, thinking about how long it had been since he'd slept in a bed with another man.

Davis looked up at Alex with wide eyes. "I know it's probably not your thing...but if you wouldn't mind...that is, if it didn't make you uncomfortable...and if it did, that's okay --"

"Are you going to go on like this all night?" Alex smiled as he watched Davis. "Or are you going to come out with it already?"

Davis felt his face flush. He couldn't believe he was even going to ask. *What the hell*, he thought, *humiliation seems to have become my middle name*. "Would you mind just holding me?"

Alex smiled and opened his arm out so Davis could nuzzle in against his body. Alex wrapped his arm around him and Davis laid his head on his chest, running his hand across Alex's stomach. Alex cleared his throat and cast his eyes up at the ceiling as Davis threw a leg over, letting it rest between Alex's.

"You're cool," Alex said, taking a deep breath.

"Yeah." Davis smiled. "My body temp's always run a bit cooler. Jack always... Sorry."

"It's all right, Davis." Alex closed his eyes. "We should try to get some sleep."

"Okay," Davis said, hugging him tighter as he tried to snuggle closer.

Alex concentrated on a tiny crack in the ceiling trying to keep control over his faculties. He crinkled up his forehead. "He's a very attractive man. I see that...but from what I know, which is admittedly not a lot, he hasn't really treated you all that well the past few years. So why put yourself through all this?"

"I know it looks that way," Davis said, staring off into space as he let his fingers run over the ridges in Alex's stomach, "but there are two sides to every story. I've made some mistakes too." Davis glanced up at Alex. "There's something that happens to you when you come across the right person. You'll know when it happens to you, Alex. And I do believe it will happen to you, and then you'll understand."

"Understand what?" Alex asked, rubbing Davis's shoulder.

Davis stared blankly across the room. "What it feels like when you want another person so much that you find yourself doing and changing entire aspects of your personality just to be with them."

"I think I understand," Alex said, running his fingers through Davis's hair.

Davis felt his scalp tingle as he squeezed Alex tighter. "That feels nice."

"Good," Alex said, chewing on his lip.

It had been so long since anyone had touched him in that way, lovingly, as if attempting to soothe the pain and disappointment away. His entire body was screaming from

it as Alex continued to softly caress his fingers into Davis's hair. He'd taken all the memories he had with Jack, cataloging them the same way he would have had they been a collection of historic artifacts. He hadn't realized it until now, but he'd constructed a tower out of those memories and locked himself away in it like a prisoner. His chest began to ache as tears rolled down his cheeks.

Alex looked down at him, hearing Davis sniffing. He lifted Davis's face and ran his hand over his tearstained cheeks. He scooted down in the bed, facing him, and wrapped his arm around him, pulling him closer. "It's all right, love."

Davis looked into his eyes, trying to maintain control over his senses as Alex began to softly run his fingers over Davis's chest. Alex leaned forward and kissed both of his eyelids. Davis took in a sharp breath as Alex softly ran his lips over his cheeks before lightly kissing the tip of his nose.

Alex ran his eyes briefly over Davis's face, hesitating for a moment before gently pressing his lips to Davis's. His lips were soft and warm, and Alex could feel the little bits of breath Davis released before he tentatively moved his tongue into Davis's mouth. He ran his hand down Davis's back and over his ass as he began kissing him with more determination. He was cautious with every move, fearing Davis might begin to panic if he went too far too fast. He loved the way Davis's skin felt, soft yet firm at the same time.

The conflicting emotions running through Davis's head begun to be drowned out by the aching need his body was experiencing. Alex's long fingers seemed to soothingly reassure him in some way. He began to feel safe as if wrapped up in a protective little world where nothing could harm him.

Davis moaned softly, reciprocating as Alex probed deeper, sensuously entering his mouth. Davis could feel his body reacting as his cock began to swell. He ran his hand through Alex's hair and Alex pulled him closer, forcing their bodies into one another. Davis could feel Alex's erection pressing into his own as their legs intertwined.

When Alex felt Davis's hand run down between his legs, massaging his cock, he began to push his tongue deeper into Davis's mouth. He slipped his fingers under the waistband of his briefs and began massaging Davis's ass. He slowly inched his fingers deeper, feeling the heat envelop his hand as he pressed them to his hole. The need to have him grew as Davis began to softly whimper.

Davis began to push Alex's briefs down with one hand as he lightly pinched Alex's nipple with the other. He was astonished by the blinding pleasure of being touched again, groaning softly as Alex's finger entered him. Instinctively, he reached to massage the large head of Alex's cock as precum slicked it. Alex pushed Davis onto his back and pulled away. He peeled the blankets off and stared into Davis's eyes as he pulled his underwear off and tossed it onto the floor. He looked over the naked body lying before him as he removed his own briefs. Davis was a beautiful man -- and Alex was accustomed to beautiful men -- but seeing Davis like this made him ache for him in a way he had never wanted anyone before.

Alex climbed over him, pressing his full weight onto him. Davis took his face into his hands and kissed him, massaging Alex's tongue with his own. Alex's long, lanky body felt hard as his muscles tensed. They ground their cocks into one another as they each explored the other with their hands. Davis spread his legs and wrapped them around Alex's waist, clinging.

Alex felt not only his own need, but Davis's as well. The tears were still damp on Davis's face. How could he not respond to that pain? Alex worked his mouth over Davis's neck, lightly kissing and sucking his way down to a nipple. He nibbled and sucked as Davis pulled Alex into him with his legs.

Davis could feel the head of his cock pressing against his hole as Alex returned his mouth to Davis's lips. Davis felt the pressure building between his legs. He pulled Alex's face off his and looked up into his eyes.

"Please," Davis said while slowly gyrating his hips, pushing his ass down onto Alex's cock.

Alex leaned down and softly kissed him before rolling off and opening the drawer next to the bed. He pulled out a condom and bottle of lube and rolled back over next to Davis. Davis had thrown his arm over his eyes, and Alex wondered who he was thinking of. Here was the last moment that he could change what was about to happen. Was he about to offer the best comfort that he could, or was he inviting pain – for himself as well? He tore open the condom and placed his mouth over Davis's erection, sucking and licking the head as he rolled the condom onto his own straining cock.

Davis moaned as the wet heat enveloped his cock. Alex took him all the way into the back of his throat. He closed his eyes as Alex worked his tongue over the shaft and head. He could feel Alex's wet fingers pressing into him again and he let out a low groan. So long...so long since he'd felt.

Alex sat up, positioning himself between Davis's legs. Davis lifted his legs, opening himself up as Alex placed the head of his dick to Davis's hole. He pushed forward, slowly working himself in as Davis took in a sharp breath. Alex spread Davis's legs, letting them fall to the sides as he pressed his pelvis firmly against Davis's ass. He leaned down over Davis and kissed him as he began to work his cock slowly in and out.

Davis ran a hand into Alex's hair as their tongues intertwined. His body tingled all over as the pressure of Alex slowly massaging his prostate with his cock began to build. He reached down, taking his own dick in his hand. He could feel his eyes begin to well up and held Alex's head down while they kissed, not wanting him to see the tears. His entire body felt ravaged by emotion, and he began to moan louder.

Alex continued to slowly fuck Davis as he pulled his lips away, wanting to look into Davis's eyes. He could feel Davis's orgasm approaching, and he wanted to see him, watch his face as he came. He watched the tracks of the tears on his cheeks and leaned down, kissing

his face and licking the tears. Even through the haze of his own rising orgasm, the intense need Alex felt to comfort and protect Davis was all-consuming.

He could feel his balls begin to rise as Davis's breathing became heavier, his moans more ragged. The sounds drove Alex even higher, until he looked down and watched as Davis exploded, shooting streams out onto his chest and stomach. Alex closed his eyes, gritting his teeth as he screamed too, feeling the condom inside Davis begin to fill.

Davis felt the muscles in his body release as the tension began to fade. Alex kissed him again, softly, sweetly. He felt Alex slide out of him before pressing his body down onto him. They locked eyes and for a moment Davis felt something...a connection he hadn't experienced since Jack. It was both foreign and familiar, and as Alex continued to kiss him, Davis closed his eyes, trying not to think about Jack.

* * * * *

Davis's eyes fluttered open as sunlight filtered in through the windows. He smiled as the arms around him squeezed him a little. He closed his eyes for a moment, then flipped them back open as he felt the large erection pressing against his ass. Alex snored softly as Davis lay in his arms. A sense of dread swept over him. Why did that have to happen last night? What in the name of hell had he been thinking? Davis thought about Alex and began to feel worse. The sweet intensity and tenderness of their lovemaking almost felt like a gift, as if Alex had given a part of himself to Davis. Davis had felt safe and loved, but now in the light of day all he could think of was getting to Jack. His stomach began to twist into a knot at the realization that more than one person was probably going to be hurt by whatever happened today. He hated that more than anything else.

He let his eyes wander over to the clock on the bedside table. It was still only a little after six. The ceremony wasn't until noon. He'd have to get to the church early if he had any chance of getting to Jack before it was too late. Alex moaned softly, pulling Davis tighter as he ground his cock into his ass.

At least his snoring is soft, like a cat purring, Davis thought. His chest ached a little as he closed his eyes. *I don't think I can bear to look him in the eye. Fuck.* Davis slowly leaned backward. Alex made a little noise as he rolled over onto his back. Davis breathed steadily as he pulled away from Alex, inching over to the side of the bed. He lifted the covers and slid out.

He glanced back at Alex and made sure he hadn't woken him. Tiptoeing through the room, he collected his clothes as he headed out the bedroom door and down the stairs.

He went into Tadd's office and called for a cab before slipping across the hall to go pee. Regretting that he had no toothbrush, he shrugged and started to dress. He was pulling on his pants as a slight sense of panic swept over him. He felt his back pocket. He'd given his wallet to Deseree last night. She'd put it in her purse so he wouldn't have to carry it. He

looked up at the ceiling and cringed. *I'll just have to pay Alex back later for the cab*, he thought.

Davis slid on his shirt as he quietly climbed the stairs. He peeked into the room and saw that Alex was still sound asleep. He spotted his pants and jacket in the chair across the room and gradually made his way over to them. He stopped, turning to look back at Alex. He chewed his lip as he glanced down, running his eyes over Alex.

Davis turned back toward Alex's clothes and slowly picked up the pants. He froze as the keys in his pocket jingled and fell out onto the chair. He turned his head to make sure Alex was still sleeping. He smiled at him, thinking how sweet he seemed like that. He spun back around, biting his lip, and reached into the back pocket, pulling out the wallet. Davis opened it, and his eyes widened, seeing all the one-hundred-dollar bills. Must be nice, he thought, taking one out and folding up the wallet, shoving it back into the pocket. As he began to set the pants back down, he froze again, looking down at the key ring. His eyes began to well up seeing the name, *Tadd*, engraved on one of the keys.

Davis dropped the pants onto the chair and turned around, glaring at Alex.

Alex's face twitched, as if he could sense the contempt aimed toward him through his sleep and his eyes popped open. He saw Davis standing half dressed by the chair and pushed himself up a bit. Focusing on the expression on Davis's face, he felt his mood and smile fade.

"What's wrong?" Alex asked.

Davis was shaking he was so angry. He took a deep breath, reached down to pick up the keys, and held them up. "This is what's wrong." He threw the keys at Alex and stormed out of the room.

"Ouch, damn it," Alex said, looking confused. He scratched his head and looked at the keys. Recognition swept over his face, seeing the one with Tadd's name on it. "Davis," he yelled out. "Bloody hell! Let me explain!"

Davis grabbed his shoes off the living room floor and slid them on as Alex ran out onto the upstairs landing, tucking his dick into his underwear.

Alex was holding up the keys. "This isn't what you think."

"Is it a key to this apartment?" Davis asked, looking up at him as he buttoned his shirt.

"Well, yes," he answered, smiling weakly. "But..."

"Then it's exactly what I think!" Davis picked up his tie. "Christ, you probably even knew Jack wouldn't be here."

"I tried to tell you that!" Alex said. "You told me to butt out."

Davis screamed as he stomped around the living room. "You must *really* think I'm an idiot."

"No, damn it," Alex said, stumbling down the stairs. "I think you're great!"

Davis stood erect, yanking his jacket up off the floor. He turned slowly, shooting Alex a cold look. "Great that I fell for this stupid act!"

"Davis, no," Alex said, reaching out to grab his arm. "Please wait."

Davis opened the door and walked into the hall.

"I just wanted to spend some time alone with you!" Alex screamed, as the door slammed shut. "Alex, you stupid, stupid prat!" he yelled, sitting down on the stairs and dropping the keys on the floor. "Bollocks!"

Chapter Eleven

Davis and Deseree sat in the back of a cab on their way to the church. Davis was antsy and couldn't sit still in the seat.

"Will you please settle down?" Deseree asked, shaking her head.

Davis was still fuming as he clinched his fists. "I can't help it...that whole big act, going to all that trouble just to get me into bed."

"I'd be flattered," Deseree said, looking up with a smile.

"I think it's disgusting. He probably worked the whole thing out with Tadd just to keep me away from Jack. I'm sure they laughed, thinking if I slept with Alex, Jack would never forgive me. Well, it's not going to work!"

Deseree pulled a compact out of her purse. "Davis, really, you're such a conspiracy queen. Did it ever occur to you he might actually like you?"

"Please," Davis said, looking out the window, "that walking boner doesn't think about anything but himself, with his stupid British accent trying to come off all Cary Grant-ish." He looked at Deseree and added, in a mocking tone and exaggerated accent, "Hello. I'm Alex. I'm charming and sexy."

"You think he's charming and sexy," Deseree said in a singsong voice as she checked her makeup.

"He's a cad." Davis huffed, rolling his eyes at her. "A trickster!"

"I think you're giving Alex too much credit. Maybe it was the only way he could think of to get you alone. I like Alex, and I think he likes you."

"Oh sure," Davis said, reaching over and patting Deseree's stomach. "And your taste in men is apparently impeccable."

"Screw you," she said, swatting his hand away. "Besides, I knew what I was getting into. I knew up front the guy was a jerk, but he was so hot and I was horny. And he was really good in bed." Deseree closed her eyes for a moment and sighed before adding, "How was I supposed to know he had bionic sperm...able to rip through condoms in a single bound?"

"Sorry." Davis gave her a half smile as he let out a sigh. "Give me your phone. I want to try Jack's cell again."

"You've been trying all morning. He's obviously got the damn thing turned off. There's nothing you can do till we get to the church, so settle down."

Davis scowled, wiggling back into the seat and folding his arms in a bit of body language that spoke volumes about his state of mind. He bit his lip and turned to peek over at Deseree. "What will Jack do?"

"I don't know, Davis," she said, placing her hand on his knee. "Either way, though, at least you'll know."

* * * * *

The cab pulled up in front of the church, and Davis threw some money over the seat. He flung the door open and jumped out, then helped Deseree up and out. She shut the door to the car and they made their way up the walk, stopping when they reached the heavy wooden doors so Deseree could pull on her shoes. She ran her hands over Davis's khaki-colored suit, smoothing it out. He buttoned the top of his white linen shirt and she straightened the pink silk tie.

"Do I look okay?" she asked, twirling around in her deep cream-colored dress with an empire waist. The bottom was cut just above her knees and flared out as she spun. When she stopped, he reached over, smoothing out the spaghetti straps.

"Beautiful," he answered with a wink.

They looked at one another as Davis yanked the heavy door open. They walked into the vestibule, stopping when they saw Candace in a pale yellow Jackie O-style suit.

Candace looked up at them. "You two are early."

"We wanted to make sure we got good seats," Deseree said with an innocent smile.

"Not to worry, you're sitting with me."

"Right," Deseree said, as Davis stared at her with a panic-stricken face.

"Davis, are you okay?" Candace asked, turning toward him.

"He really needs to pee," Deseree said, pushing Davis toward the doors to the auditorium.

"I'll just go look for the bathroom."

“Oh, well, it’s right...” Candace began, then shook her head. “It’ll be easier if I just show you.”

“He’s a big boy,” Deseree said, opening the door and shoving Davis through it. Looking back at Candace, she added, “Besides, I’ve been meaning to ask you about that dress you wore last night. Was it vintage?”

Davis was momentarily caught up in the beautiful architecture as he gazed down the long aisle running through the center of the church. The dark wood pews lined up on each side of the aisle, gleamed in the light from the large, beautiful craftsman-style fixtures that hung from the dark wood beams running throughout the cathedral ceilings. Large rectangular windows lined each side of the room, each with multipaned stained glass in rich amber, red, and brown earth tones, surrounded by wood millwork with a dark stain.

Davis saw the minister at the other end of the church. He hastened down the aisle and came to a stop behind the elderly man. He tapped him on the shoulder.

“Have you seen Jack?” Manners were a luxury that Davis couldn’t afford.

“Yes,” the minister said, looking at Davis and turning back around.

Davis threw his clenched fists in the air in frustration and tapped the old man on the shoulder again. The minister turned back around and smiled at Davis.

“Might I ask where he is?” Apparently manners were all he could afford.

“I suppose you might,” the minister answered, nodding his head as he started to turn away.

Davis grabbed the man by the arm, spinning him around. He took him by the shoulders, slightly shaking him. “Where is he, old man? The clock is ticking!”

The minister looked at Davis wide-eyed and pointed to a door on the left. “They’re both back in the church together.”

“Shit!” Davis yelled. He noticed the minister looking back as if Davis might be insane. “Sorry, father, or pastor...whatever you are.” Davis smoothed out the minister’s shirt. “The...the...rings... I have the rings.”

Davis spun around and took off toward the door. He opened it and found himself in a long hallway. He made his way quickly down the hall, stopping to listen at each door. When he got almost to the end of the hall, he stopped, hearing voices behind a door. He stood, fidgeting for a moment, unsure of what to do. He needed to talk to Jack alone. He paced back and forth, stopping a few times, raising his hand as if he was going to knock on the door.

He backed away from the door and turned to leave, cursing under his breath, then glanced briefly up at the ceiling as if to apologize for the bad language. He slapped himself, turning back around and walking back up to the door. As he reached up to knock, the door started to open. He backed up, hiding behind the door, pressing his body into the wall.

Through the crack, he watched Jack and Tadd as they walked out of the room and disappeared down the hall. He rested his head against the wall and let out a deep breath. He

slowly came out from behind the door. He let his glance wander into the room. He went inside.

Davis surveyed the room, but his eyes started to burn as fear really set in. The dark wood paneled walls made the room feel small and the brown carpet seemed a little the worse for wear. He could smell that musty scent rooms get due to a lack of everyday use. He noticed a boutonniere sitting on a table and picked it up. He placed it up to his nose and inhaled the subtle scent deeply as tears began to roll down his cheeks.

From behind him, Davis heard Jack's voice.

"Davis?"

Davis opened his eyes and turned around. "You came back?"

"I forgot my boutonniere," he said, pointing to the flower in Davis's hand. "Are you okay?"

Davis wiped his eyes, then ran over to the door and pulled it shut. He whirled, leaning against the door as if to block Jack from leaving.

* * * * *

Guests were filing into the church, filling the pews. Tadd was sitting on a small pew against the wall just outside the door that led to the hallway. He smiled and waved at people as they found seats. Alex strolled easily down the aisle and spotted Tadd. He walked over to him and smiled, taking a seat next to him.

"Nervous?"

"No, I'm not. Someday you'll get past your commitment issues."

"Yes," Alex said, looking away. "Possibly."

Tadd watched Alex for a moment, surprised by the concession in his reply. They both turned as the minister came through the hall door. The minister stopped.

"Did he get the rings to you?" the minister asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"The young man that came running in earlier. He asked for Jack...said you forgot the rings. Did you get them?"

Tadd looked over at Alex, confused. Squinting his eyes and smiling, he looked back up at the minister. "Yes, sir. We got them."

The minister turned away, nodding as he mumbled something. He walked toward the pulpit and Tadd turned to look over the sanctuary. He saw Candace and Deseree talking in the back of the church.

"That little shit," Tadd said, getting up and walking toward the door to the hall. Alex grabbed his arm as Tadd got hold of the doorknob.

"Don't," Alex said, breathing steadily.

“Are you nuts?”

“If it’s meant to be,” Alex said, pulling Tadd’s hand off the doorknob, “then Jack will come walking out that door any minute.”

“Well, I don’t particularly feel like leaving it to chance,” Tadd said, yanking his arm free and grabbing the doorknob.

“Do you really want to marry Jack if he’s still in love with Davis?”

* * * * *

Davis moved away from the door and walked up to Jack, then took his hands.

“Jack,” Davis said, looking into his eyes. “Would it have been so awful...getting swallowed up again by us?”

“Davis, what are you doing?”

Davis squeezed Jack’s hands. “Telling you I love you, saying it out loud. I need you, Jack. I’ll do anything you want, go anywhere you want, just please...call this thing off.”

Jack closed his eyes for a moment before looking at him again. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

“We can have it all back, Jack,” Davis said, his eyes pleading the case as well. “Let me love you again. I can make you happy.”

“You can’t do this, Davis.” Jack shook his hands free and stepped back. “It’s not fair.”

Davis took a step forward. “Tell me you don’t still love me. Tell me you don’t miss us.”

“Of course I still love you, damn it,” Jack said, shaking his head. “Christ, we were everything to one another, and I can’t imagine going back to my everyday life without you in it.”

Davis smiled, throwing his arms around Jack. He locked his lips onto Jack’s and slid his tongue into Jack’s mouth. He wanted to cry it felt so perfect, like he’d come home. He felt Jack’s arms slide around his waist as he began to kiss Davis back.

* * * * *

Tadd and Alex stood at the doorway to the hall. Tadd had his hand on the doorknob. His eyes were flitting from one thing to another nervously as he tried to regulate his breathing. “I know he loves me, Alex.”

“You may be right, but let it go.” Alex motioned toward the doorknob. “At least this way, you’ll know. There will never be any doubts.”

Tadd dropped his hand away from the door and backed away, looking at it. “Shit, now I’m nervous.”

"All we can do is wait," Alex said, putting a hand on Tadd's shoulder. He looked at the door as nervously as Tadd did.

Tadd got a confused look on his face as he slowly turned his head, looking at Alex. "What do you mean, *we*?"

Alex turned and sat back down on the pew. "Just that I'm...right here with you...doing my duty as your best mate...support and all that."

Alex slid back to his seat and Tadd followed, intently examining Alex's face as he went over and took a seat next to him. "Oh...my...God!"

"What?" Alex asked, rearing his head back trying to pull away from Tadd's gaze. "That's creepy, stop that."

"You like him," Tadd accused.

"Rubbish," Alex said, turning away to look over the crowd. "He's just...fun to play with."

"Look at you... You're just as nervous as I am...maybe more!"

Tadd continued to stare at Alex, who finally looked back at him smiling weakly. "It's called empathy."

"I never thought I'd live to see the day," Tadd said, leaning back in the pew. "Alexander Parker in, dare I say it..."

Alex closed his eyes. "I really wish you wouldn't."

"Love," Tadd said, laughing as Alex rolled his eyes. "Love, love, lovedy love."

Alex began to get up as Tadd scowled at him. "I can't believe you're in love with...him."

"What do you mean by...him?" Alex mocked as he sat back down.

"He's such a...flake."

"He's absolutely adorable, and in no way is he flake-like," Alex said indignantly.

Tadd pointed at Alex. "Ha!"

"Sod off."

"Lovedy love," Tadd said, giggling. "I knew that kiss you planted on him in the club would lead to no good. Of course you'd fall for him...to piss me off, if for no other reason."

"Does it piss you off?" Alex asked, smiling.

"No...yes... I don't know." Tadd shook his head. "This just sucks."

Alex looked over at the door again. "What?"

"I could really, really enjoy this more if I didn't have to worry about myself," Tadd confessed with a sigh.

Alex frowned. "You really are an ass."

* * * * *

Davis ran his hand down Jack's chest as their tongues intertwined. He pressed into him. Jack took Davis by the arms and pushed him away, breathing heavily as Davis stared up at him confused.

Davis licked his lips and searched Jack's face. "What's wrong?"

"Why did you leave?" Jack asked, cocking his head to one side and wiping his mouth.

"What?"

"When you came to New York a year ago, Davis. After that night, why did you leave the next day?"

"I didn't know you wanted me to stay." Davis gestured with a huge shrug. "You were so quiet that morning. I thought you were upset by what happened. I thought you wanted me to go."

"No, damn it!" Jack yelled, startling Davis. "I was terrified you'd leave...and then you did."

"I'm sorry, Jack," Davis said, reaching out. "I didn't --"

"It doesn't matter now, Davis." Jack backed away. "Don't you see it?"

"I see you, Jack... I want you."

"No, Davis." Jack placed his hands on his own chest. "You don't want *me*. You want the me from six years ago. I'm not that guy anymore. We changed him, you and I. We both did it, and it altered us...as a couple and as individuals."

"I don't understand," Davis said, stepping back and looking away.

"Yes you do, Davis." Jack moved into his line of sight. "You may not want to admit it, but you know it's true. You're clinging to who we were, not who we are. We used to be so in tune with one another, Davis, no one could come between us. The fact that a year ago we were so disconnected that we crossed our signals to that extent proves it."

"I'm sorry, Jack," Davis said as a tear ran down his cheek. "I take it back... I take it all back."

Jack walked over and pulled Davis into his arms. "You can't take it back, monkey face. I wish you could -- we could, but we can't."

Davis pressed his face into Jack's chest. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

"Even yesterday at the diner...the intense instinct to run away with you...but it's too late. I knew it then, and I know it now. Part of me will always want to run away with you...to go back in time, but..."

"Do you really love Tadd?" Davis asked as he pulled away and looked up at Jack.

"I do. I knew I did, but I didn't know how much until yesterday when I realized Tadd was more important to me than a part on a TV show."

"But why him, and why now?" Davis asked, scowling.

"I don't know," Jack answered, laughing as he squeezed Davis in his arms. "I can't explain it any more than I could the way I felt the first time we made love. I understand how difficult this is for you, Davis. As much as I love Tadd, it still doesn't make it any easier seeing you kissing another guy."

Davis smiled and Jack reached up to wipe the tears off Davis's face with his thumbs. Davis scanned Jack's face and could see he was telling the truth. His heart ached as Jack watched him with pleading eyes, begging him to understand.

Davis reached up to brush the hair off Jack's forehead. "I do want you to be happy, Jack."

"Thank you," Jack said with a half smile. "You don't know how relieved I am to hear you say that."

"We were first loves," Davis said with a shrug. "Maybe first love isn't supposed to last, no matter how much we want it to."

"Maybe," Jack said, kissing Davis on the forehead.

"You really love him?" Davis asked, biting his lip. "You're sure?"

"Yes, monkey face," Jack answered, laughing as he gently ran his hand over Davis's cheek. "I really love him."

"Okay," Davis said weakly as he sniffled a little and inspected the flower in his hand. He grimaced as he attempted to fluff it back out. Having got it as close as he could to the way it looked before he smushed it, Davis held it up and pinned it onto Jack's lapel.

"Then let's go get you married," he said, looking up and smiling.

"Okay?"

"Yeah." Davis sighed, smiling up at him.

Davis ran his hands over Jack's jacket, smoothing it out; then he smoothed out the back. He reached down and ran the palm of his hand over Jack's ass.

Jack turned, frowning at Davis with his head cocked to one side.

Davis grinned innocently. "It was just one for the road."

Jack let out a deep laugh as that familiar smile spread across his face. He leaned down and gave Davis a soft peck on the cheek. "Promise me one thing."

"Anything, handsome," Davis said, adjusting himself.

"Don't go away again. Mom and I both..."

"I won't," Davis said with a shrug.

"Thank you," Jack said as he turned and opened the door, then walked out into the hall. He held out an arm. "You coming?"

"Yeah," Davis said, taking his arm and walking down the hall.

They opened the door leading into the church and Tadd and Alex stood up, anxious. Davis pulled Jack by the hand over to Tadd, took Tadd's hand, then placed it in Jack's. He looked up at Tadd. "Take good care of this one."

Tadd smiled, looking into Jack's eyes. "I will, Davis. I promise."

Davis glanced at Alex briefly with a sullen expression as he began walking toward the pews. He felt a hand grab his arm.

"Thank you," Tadd said, turning Davis back around.

"For trying to steal your fiancé?"

"Yes, actually," Tadd said, confused but laughing.

Davis winked and turned again to head toward the pews. He shrugged at Deseree and quickly glanced at Candace, who gave him a little wink. It filled him with relief. He sat down between his two favorite gals and watched as Alex went to the pew across the aisle. Davis glanced down as Candace took his hand. He smiled and looked over as Deseree took his other one.

Jack and Tadd walked together and stood in front of the minister, taking one another by the hands. The minister began the ceremony and Alex peeked over at Davis from across the aisle. He turned back toward the front as Davis cast his eyes over at Alex. Davis noticed Deseree looking at him with a grin, and he quickly turned his attention back to the front.

The minister got to the part where he asked if anyone knew just cause why these two should not be joined together, and Davis watched as Jack, Tadd, Alex, Deseree, and Candace all turned to look at him. He blushed and rolled his eyes as Deseree started to laugh. Candace squeezed his hand as everyone turned back.

Davis watched as Jack and Tadd each slid rings onto the other's finger. He bit his lip, feeling his chest ache a little. The minister announced they would be exchanging their vows and music began to play loudly over the church speakers.

Tadd and Jack walked over to a single candle sitting on a small table to the right of the pulpit. They each knelt down and held hands. They looked at one another and Tadd started saying something to Jack. Davis was thankful he couldn't hear over the music, but watched Jack's face, seeing him smile as he gazed into Tadd's eyes. Jack then began speaking to Tadd, smiling as he talked. When he finished, Tadd hugged him and Davis could see Tadd whispering the words *I love you* into Jack's ear. They separated and Jack picked up a long match. He lit it, and Tadd joined hands with Jack as they lit the candle together.

The music began to fade and the minister said, "With the lighting of this candle, may your two lives be joined together into one."

Jack and Tadd stood and the minister continued, "You may kiss one another."

They looked at each other, grinning as they embraced, and pressed their lips together. Davis shut his eyes, feeling his chest ache.

"With this kiss, may your love be joined together for eternity," the minister added.

Jack and Tadd separated and looked lovingly into one another's eyes. They began laughing as the room erupted with applause that rolled through the sanctuary.

Chapter Twelve

The guests were mingling outside the church as Tadd and Jack made their way down to the limo by the curb. They waved and shook hands with people, and when Jack got to Candace he gave her a big hug, smiling as she whispered something into his ear. Tadd leaned over, giving her a peck on the cheek. Davis and Deseree watched from the front door of the church as Tadd and Jack climbed into the limo. Alex glanced briefly at Davis, fidgeting as he tried to figure out what to do with his hands. He turned and went down the steps.

“Are you ready?” Deseree asked, placing a hand on Davis’s shoulder.

Davis looked up at her. “Can you give me a minute?”

“Of course.”

Davis turned around and went back into the church. Entering the auditorium, he inspected the deserted space and sighed, realizing he felt a little empty as well. A hand touched his shoulder, and he turned around to see Candace.

“You know a part of me wishes it had been you up there.”

Davis wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I know. Me too.”

“When Jack’s father ran out on me all those years ago,” she said, placing her hand over his heart, “it felt like a part of me died. For a long time I suppose it did. I worked like a demon, singing in whatever dive would have me, slowly building a career. I’ve wasted a lot of years hiding behind that, too afraid to let anyone else in. Do you understand what I’m getting at here?”

“Yes, Candace,” Davis said as she reached up, touching his face. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

"I shouldn't have run away like I did," Davis said, looking at her. "Regardless of what happened between me and Jack, I shouldn't have cut you out. You've always been wonderful to me. You deserved better."

"My home will always be your home," she said, starting to tear up. "Nothing will ever change that, my beautiful boy. Just don't waste any more of your life living in the past. I think we both deserve better than that."

Davis hugged her, squeezing tightly. "I love you." His jaw quaked as he began to cry once more. He'd lost track of the number of times it had happened that day -- and it was only just a little after noon.

* * * * *

Davis followed Deseree and Candace from the elevators into the rooftop restaurant where the reception was being held. The room looked out over downtown Chicago through floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides. The lake was only a block or so away. Sunlight poured in, giving the space a warm, happy feel. There were long tables set up covered with tablecloths and small arrangements of white flowers. Another huge buffet was set up along the back wall banked by tons of white flowers. The bar was just on the other side of the food, and an orchestra was playing next to the bar, with a dance floor separating them from the tables.

"Thinking about putting on another show?" Deseree asked, coming up behind Davis and looking over at the dance floor.

"We only know the one number," Davis said with a sigh.

Deseree giggled as she put her arms around his waist, hugging him from behind. "Think anyone would notice?"

"Maybe if we wait till they're all drunk," Davis speculated.

"Come on, you two," Candace called. They turned and followed her over to the table where Jack and Tadd sat in the middle of the room.

"Hey guys," Tadd said, grinning. "Take a seat, please."

Davis laughed as he pulled out a chair and sat down. "That actually sounded genuine."

"That's because it was," Tadd said, winking at him.

"This wedding was a lot more fun when everyone either secretly loved or hated everyone else," Deseree said, flopping down into a chair.

"Hear, hear," Alex said, walking up behind them, his hands filled with champagne flutes. "That's my girl."

"Oh goody." Deseree clapped. "The other half of my dark side is here."

"Honestly," Davis said, taking a glass from Alex, trying not to look at him.

“Alex,” Tadd said, shaking his head, “give Deseree a glass and quit hoarding it over there.”

“It’s okay,” Deseree said, leaning back in her seat. “I can’t.”

“You’re on the wagon!” Jack said, holding his glass up. “I’ve finally made it to the big time. I now have a famous friend that’s been to rehab.”

“Jack Monroe!” Candace cried disapprovingly.

“I have not, Jack.” Deseree looked up at Davis. He grinned as she turned her attention back to Jack. “I’m knocked up, okay.”

“Holy shit,” Jack said, sitting up in his chair. “I’m gonna be an uncle!”

Deseree’s arm swept the air around the table. “Christ, no husband to speak of...just a gaggle of fags.”

Candace took a sip from her glass. “There are worse things. Take it from me.”

“Yes, and good things...like eating whatever the fuck I want and having a built-in excuse for the gluttony.”

Alex bowed and offered his hand. “May I escort m’lady to the buffet?”

“Why, yes, kind sir,” Deseree said, doing her best Scarlett O’Hara impersonation as Alex helped lift her out of the chair.

“Try to bring her back in one piece,” Davis said with a sideways glance.

“Of course, love,” Alex said with a grin. “It *was* me trying to keep her out of jail last night.”

“What?” Tadd and Jack asked at the same time as Alex placed an arm around Deseree and led her off toward the buffet.

“He’s kidding,” Davis said, taking a drink and feeling his face turn red.

Jack gazed suspiciously at Davis. “Then why are you blushing?”

“None of your business,” Davis said, trying not to smile. He turned to Candace. “Don’t you just hate those nosy married people that constantly stick their nose in other folks’ business?”

“Yes,” Candace said, laughing.

Jack huffed and placed his arm around Tadd. “They’re turning on us already, honey.”

“And we haven’t even left the reception dinner,” Tadd grouched.

“Oh please,” Candace said, leaning back and crossing her legs. “The minute you said *I do*, you became yesterday’s news.”

Jack ran his hand through the air in a Vanna White gesture. “My mother, everyone.”

“I gave you life,” she said as a waiter came by and filled their champagne glasses. “You’d think that would be enough.”

Davis patted Candace’s hand. “Some people are never satisfied.”

"I take it all back," Jack said, looking at Davis. "You can go right back where you came from. I forgot how much fun it *wasn't* having you two gang up on me."

"Good times." Candace sighed.

"It's nice to see you smile," Alex whispered from behind Davis.

Deseree set her plate, piled high with food, on the table. "I'm starving."

"Jesus," Davis said as everyone else snickered.

"I knew I shouldn't have let you go without me," Davis said, giving Alex a dirty look.

"I was merely her escort," Alex said from behind Deseree's chair, "not her parole officer."

"Yeah," Deseree mumbled, shoving a piece of celery into her mouth. "He lets me do whatever I want."

"Yes, well, he won't be there to hold your hair back while you puke it all up either."

Deseree smiled, crunching the celery. "That's not true. Alex said he'd marry me *and* slip a great big diamond ring on my finger."

Davis shook his head. "It'll also be the first and last great big thing he'll slip you."

Jack, Tadd, and Candace all whooped as Deseree laughed, looking back at Alex.

"He's got us there, gorgeous," Alex said, leaning over and giving her a peck on the forehead.

"Wait a minute, how do you know he has a great big anything to not slip me, anyway?" Deseree asked, looking over at Davis.

Tadd's mouth fell open as he looked up at Alex, and Jack and Candace turned their attention to Davis.

"Don't be ridiculous," Davis said, taking another drink. "It's just an expression."

Deseree turned around and eyed Alex's crotch, as did Candace.

"How about a dance with your new husband?" Tadd asked, holding out his hand.

"Of course," Jack answered, jumping on any chance to escape the direction that the conversation was taking.

They got up and made their way to the dance floor. Deseree beamed at Davis, as if she knew some sort of secret.

Davis shook his head at her and picked up a piece of shrimp, effectively gagging her with it by shoving it into her mouth. "You really shouldn't speak."

"Damn, that's good," Deseree said, chewing.

"I think I'll go grab some food as well," Candace said, getting up out of her seat.

"Wait," Deseree said, jumping up. "I'll come with."

"You have a mountainous plate of food already."

"I have to get more of those coconut shrimps," she said, running after Candace.

“Good Christ, she’s gone off the deep end.”

Alex sat down next to Davis. “Cravings.”

“What about them?” Davis asked, feeling his cheeks burn. “I don’t have any... What?”

Alex looked at Davis with a half smile. “She’s having cravings. They’ll come and go over the next nine months.”

“I know that,” Davis said, sucking down the last of the champagne in his glass. “How do you know that?”

“I have three sisters,” Alex answered, reaching over to grab an open bottle that he’d brought back to the table with him. He refilled Davis’s glass. “The youngest of which lived with me for a year while her husband was deployed overseas. She happened to be pregnant at the time.”

“Really,” Davis said, picking up his glass. “I’m surprised that didn’t throw a wrench into all your evil plotting and man trickery.”

“It did actually,” Alex said with a large smile. He was watching Tadd and Jack come back to the table. “I think that’s around the time I got a key to Tadd’s apartment.”

“Of all the sneaky, underhanded, dishonest...”

“Be careful, darling, your beloved’s coming back to the table. Wouldn’t want him to know you’ve been cheating on him.”

Davis tapped his finger on the table, fuming as Jack and Tadd sat back down. Deseree returned with a plate full of shrimp and a large glass of water.

Davis looked over at her with pleading eyes. “Honestly, Des... You will be allowed to eat after today.”

“Zip it,” she said, sitting down. “Have a shrimp.”

Jack laughed, happy to be surrounded by all the people whom he most loved. He took Tadd’s hand and squeezed it.

“Happy?” Tadd asked, beaming.

“Deliriously.”

Davis smiled at them for a moment, then turned to look away. He caught Alex staring at him, but it was Davis who broke eye contact first. Candace came up behind them and handed Alex a microphone. He nodded at her as the orchestra finished a song.

“And now,” the singer announced, “we have some friends and family of the newlyweds who want to say a few words to the happy couple.”

Alex stood and switched on the microphone. He smiled and looked down at Tadd and Jack before turning his attention back out over the crowd. “Hello to everyone that knows me, and to those who do not...dry your eyes, the night is still young.” He glanced down at Davis out of the corner of his eye in response to Davis’s miffed puffing sound.

"I'm Alex Parker, Tadd's oldest but not necessarily dearest friend. When he called to inform me of the events that had led up to this fated nuptial, I was, of course, sickened by the desperation of it all...but not surprised."

Tadd leaned back, bracing for the traditional affectionate jokes at his expense. Jack laughed. He placed his arm around Tadd. Davis grinned, though he tried desperately not to as Deseree whispered, "I love this guy."

"As ludicrous as I think this beastly commitment scam everyone seems so gleefully happy about," Alex continued, "I do know that Tadd believes in it with his whole heart. I've known him since freshman year at university, and in all those years, he hasn't changed much. He's as disturbingly optimistic and as tediously boring as ever."

Tadd laughed as Alex peeked down, giving him a wink. "But, as easy as it is to loathe the man for being so utterly respectable, it is with equal ease that one can love him."

Alex let his gaze fall to the table for a moment as he lifted his glass and added, "Despite the fact you've always felt like that perfect older brother that I'm endlessly trying to live up to...I do wish you all the happiness the world has to offer. I know of no one who deserves it more."

Alex took a drink as everyone clapped. There are a few *ahs* from around the room as Tadd and Jack kissed and waved thank you to Alex.

"Though somewhat unorthodox...we are homosexuals, you know," Alex said, widening his eyes as if he'd just said something truly shocking. "With that delightful spirit in mind, Jack's ex, Davis, would like to say a few words."

Alex glimpsed down to see Davis frozen, eyes wide. He reached down and yanked Davis up out of his seat. "I'm desperately hoping it will be something deliciously catty."

Davis threw on a plastered smile as Alex shoved the microphone into his hand and sat down, leaving Davis alone in the glare of everyone's gaze.

Davis shooed Alex's hand away as he tried to pat Davis on the ass. "Um, hi... I really didn't have anything prepared...which is actually very unlike me." He glanced down at Deseree for help and she shrugged her shoulders.

"I guess I've actually been a little scattered as of late. I suppose that's what happens when your first love finds and marries his true love." He smiled at the couple. "Of course, we all weren't given a lot of notice...which is the excuse I'm going to use for not getting you a gift, by the way. It's just as well, Tadd, because after seeing your condo, you so would have hated anything I might have brought you."

Davis shoved his hand in his pocket as several people laughed. "Jack is a really great guy." Davis looked back at Tadd. He pinched his leg to keep himself from welling up with tears. "And along with him you also inherit Candace, who is truly the most beautiful and special woman I have ever had the honor of knowing. Take it from me, Tadd, this is a really great family to be a part of, and I know they will welcome you with the same open arms and

unconditional love that was so graciously provided to me. And Jack...I do hope with all my heart you finally have all the happiness you deserve. Aside from being one of the grooms, you are also, truly, the best man. To the happy couple.”

Applause broke out as Davis tipped his glass, finishing off his champagne. Jack smiled as Tadd reached over and wiped a tear off his cheek. Candace wiped her eyes as she turned, looking over at Jack. Davis sat down and Deseree grabbed his hand. He shrugged as Alex leaned over and planted a soft kiss on his cheek. Davis turned to look at him and Alex whispered in all earnestness, “Jolly well done.”

“Why did you do that to me?” Davis whispered, getting up from the table. He smiled at Jack and Tadd, saying, “Excuse me.”

Alex sighed at Deseree as Davis walked away. She began to get up and Alex offered, “No. I’ll go.”

Deseree sighed but turned her attention back to her plate. She shoved another coconut-encrusted shrimp into her mouth, chewing and smiling contentedly. She looked up and stopped chewing as she noticed a man at the next table watching her with a smile on his face. He was a stunningly beautiful Latin man with coal black hair, bronze skin, and large brown eyes. He got up and sat in the chair next to her.

“I never realized fashion designers ate like that,” he said with a slight Spanish accent.

She grinned, loving the fact he knew who she was and praying that didn’t mean he was gay. “Really? Well, maybe if you spent more time around us, you wouldn’t find that to be so odd.”

“I’m a fashion photographer,” he said, with a wink. “I’ve spent a lot of time around designers.”

“I guess you haven’t been around the right ones then,” she said, snarfing down another shrimp.

He offered his hand to her. “I’m Nicolás. I wasn’t trying to offend. I like a girl with a healthy appetite.”

“Then you’ll really love me,” she said through a mouthful of food as they shook hands.

Nicolás pulled his hand back and looked at her. He leaned his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his hand, smiling. “I just might.”

She beamed. *I love you, universe!*

“Davis, please,” Alex said as he reached out and grabbed Davis by the arm.

Davis took a deep breath and turned around. “You know, I realize you think I’m a fool, but do you really dislike me that much?”

Alex took him by both arms and looked into his eyes. “I don’t think you’re a fool, Davis. Quite the contrary, I rather fancy you...which is why I did that to you.”

"That makes no sense," Davis said, trying unsuccessfully to pull away. "I swear you drive me completely insane, Alex. Half the time, I wanna hug you, and the other half, I wanna shank you."

"Davis," Alex said, letting out a little laugh. "I realize I don't know you, but...I believe you to be the type of man who would always have regrets had you not had the opportunity to say what you did...to make amends. I realize it was difficult, but perhaps it was something you needed to do."

Davis peered up at him and sighed. It sounded almost concessionary. Perhaps Alex had a point.

"At the end of the day, you said good-bye and wished them both well. A year from now, that's what they'll remember."

Alex dropped his arms, letting Davis go. Davis smacked him in the stomach with the back of his hand.

"Ouch," Alex said, rubbing his stomach. "Why are you *so* violent?"

Davis grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes, actually," Alex said with a grimace. "I think I might."

"Regardless, you asked for it."

"I most certainly did no such thing," Alex said, grabbing his hand. "Come on, you little deviant."

Alex led Davis out onto the dance floor, taking him into his arms. Davis laid his cheek on Alex's chest and wrapped his arms around his waist as they slow danced to the orchestra. Davis could feel Alex rest his chin on top of his head. Davis relaxed into him and hoped Alex was right. Maybe that would be what they remembered. He frowned, wishing he could say the same. As Alex slowly led Davis around the floor, he smiled a little. At least he knew Jack would be happy, and that made him happy.

He saw Deseree dancing with the handsome man from the table next to theirs. A large smile spread across his face.

"What are you smiling at?"

"How the hell did you know I was smiling?" Davis asked, able to still feel Alex's chin on the top of his head.

"I just could," Alex answered with a grin. "Now out with it."

"I was just watching Deseree dance, thankful she wasn't crouched in a corner somewhere shoveling food in her face."

Davis felt the rumbling in Alex's chest as he laughed.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"If you must," Alex said teasingly.

"That night in the club, did you know who I was?"

Alex held Davis tighter as if afraid Davis might run away.

“I knew you were Jack’s ex,” Alex said, moving them slowly over the dance floor, “but I didn’t know who you are.”

Oh, he’s good, Davis thought.

Chapter Thirteen

“Thank you for coming, monkey face,” Jack said, squeezing Davis.

Tadd was standing behind Jack, and Davis winked at him.

“I told him to stop calling me that,” Davis said as Jack pulled away. “It’s disrespectful.”

“I think I can handle it,” Tadd said, hugging Davis as Deseree hugged Jack. “And thank you for coming.”

“You sure about that?” Davis asked as they separated.

“Most definitely,” Tadd said, looking at Davis and squeezing his shoulder. “Somehow knowing we have our own little secrets Jack knows nothing about makes me feel closer to you.”

“Kinda sick, huh?” Davis asked, grinning.

“Yes, actually, and thank you for that speech earlier as well. I know Jack feels better after hearing it.”

“Well, you should probably thank that fellow over there for that,” Davis said, looking at Alex. “That wasn’t really ever part of the plan.”

Tadd looked at Alex. “He is actually a good guy. A bit of a scamp, but underneath all the bravado... Let’s just say if there was anyone he ever really cared for, they’d be very lucky.”

Davis smacked Tadd in the arm. “Will you stop it? Quit having those group vacation fantasies already.”

“You ready?” Jack asked.

Tadd nodded and looked back at Davis. “I never thought I’d ever hear myself say this, but we’ll call you the instant we get back.”

Davis winked as Deseree and Alex walked up beside him. "I'll actually pick up the phone if you promise to keep all the details to yourselves."

"That goes double for me," Alex said, nodding.

Candace walked up behind them. "I expect all the details."

"Me too," Deseree said with a grin. "Gimme the good stuff."

Jack and Tadd laughed as they stepped into the elevator and the doors slid shut.

"Are you sure you two can't stay another night?" Candace asked.

"I can't, gorgeous," Davis answered, giving her a hug. "I've been gone for almost a week and I have a ton to do when I get back. I'll visit in a few weeks, though...if you'll have me."

"When...what time...? I want a date."

Davis kissed her on the cheek. "I'll call you on Monday. We'll pick a time then."

"Fair enough," Candace said. "And you, young lady... I'm taking you up on that shopping trip."

"Anytime, anywhere," Deseree said, hugging Candace. "Thank you for having me."

"You're always welcome," Candace said, pulling away.

Alex stared at Davis, then glanced over to Deseree. She nudged her head toward Davis.

Alex pulled out his wallet and extracted a business card. He handed it to Davis. "Give us a bell?"

Davis took the card and glanced at it before shoving it in his pocket. "Of course... I still owe you a hundred bucks."

Alex's smile faded a bit as Davis turned and went over to the elevator.

Deseree shook her head as the doors opened and Davis walked in. She glared at Alex, who just stood there. Then, suddenly, she spun on her heel and launched herself into the elevator with Davis. She gave Davis a half smile and watched as the doors closed. She let out a sigh and frowned.

* * * * *

Deseree and Davis stood outside her gate at the airport. He reached up and ran the back of his hand over her cheek.

"I'm really glad I came."

"Me too," Davis said. "Though I can't for the life of me imagine why."

"Cause you've missed spending time with me, you twit."

"That much is true."

Deseree let out a frustrated sigh. "I wish you were coming back with me."

"I have to go home," Davis said as Deseree scowled at him. "I need a few days to figure some things out, but maybe after I put some things in order, I'll come stay with you for a while?"

"Really?" Deseree squealed as they made a final call for her flight. She threw her arms around him, knocking him back a bit as he began laughing. "Davis, that would be so great. I could really use having you around right now."

"I told you I wouldn't let you go through this alone."

"I know," she said wide-eyed and pulling away, "but I figured you'd be too busy wallowing in your own self-pity to actually do it."

"Nice," Davis said, shaking his head at her.

"Ma'am," the gate attendant said, looking at Deseree, "if you're planning on taking this flight you need to board now."

Deseree hugged Davis one last time. She pulled away and turned around, handing the lady her ticket. She turned back and waved. "You actually proved me wrong...be satisfied with that."

Davis laughed as she disappeared down the corridor. Davis let out a big sigh as he began to make his way through the airport to go wait at his own gate. As he weaved in and out of the knots of people and luggage, his chest began to ache. Even though his head understood that everything was as it should be, his heart still hadn't seemed to receive the memo. It was hard to say good-bye to a life he'd always thought he could get back... To the life he'd never really accepted he'd lost such a long time ago. He felt a tear start to run down his cheek as he came upon his gate. He looked up to see Alex leaning against a row of chairs. He smiled, a little surprised by how good it felt to see him there. Davis went up to him and he stood up, glancing down at Davis.

"A little songbird told me you might have a couple of hours before your flight boards," Alex said, placing a hand on Davis's shoulder. "Let's get you pissed."

Davis scanned his face for a moment as Alex reached up with his other hand and wiped the tear off his cheek with his finger.

"I don't wanna be pissed anymore, Alex."

Alex laughed as he placed his arm around Davis's shoulder. "I meant get you drunk."

"Oh," Davis said, crinkling up his forehead and smiling. "Okay."

"You know," Alex said as they turned and began to slowly walk through the airport. "I was remembering just the other day how much I've always wanted to visit... Where is it you live?"

"Springfield?"

Alex began nodding his head with a smile. "Springfield, yes, that's it."

"Really?" Davis asked, turning his head to look up at him.

“Though I’m not sure what made me think of it.”

“It’s kinda bad timing, though,” Davis said as they continued to walk together.

“Of course,” Alex said, nodding his head. “Right...stupid of me...so sorry.”

“Mostly ’cause I’ll probably be in New York,” Davis said with a half smile.

Alex stopped and peeked over at Davis. “Did I say Springfield? I am a daft prick. I meant New York. Who doesn’t want to visit New York?”

“I figured that’s what you meant,” Davis said, smiling as they began walking again.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Alex said, cocking his head to one side, “Tadd has a really small penis.”

Davis gazed up at him as they walked along together. He turned back, facing forward as the corners of his mouth turned up. “It does, actually...thanks.”

Alex laughed and squeezed Davis’s shoulder, pulling him closer. They walked slowly down the corridor, and Davis rested his head against Alex’s shoulder and let out a sigh.

Chapter Fourteen

In any other circumstance, the sight of so much cardboard would have made Davis ill. He reached down under the waistband of his boxer briefs and scratched his hip as he turned, looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows over the view of New York City. The view was about the only thing he truly liked about the new apartment. The place was too big for one, he thought, looking over at the new very modern kitchen with the dark brown cabinets, stainless steel appliances, and granite countertops. He missed the old white fridge from the forties he'd had back home. He loved the round corners of the door with the chrome accents and the tiny little freezer compartment with the ice trays.

He would have never agreed to live here if it hadn't been so close to Deseree and the rent hadn't been so damn reasonable. Morning sun filled the large modern living room, stacked to the brim with boxes, antique art deco furniture, and several large architectural pieces that had come from Davis's store. Closing the store had been difficult. It was the only thing he'd ever done completely on his own, all for himself, without thinking about anyone else. He'd promised Des, though, and she needed him. She'd been there for him so many times over the years. This was his chance to return the favor. Stepping into the sunlight, he felt the temperature of the wood floor change under his bare feet. As his eyes ran over the room, he thought how all of his stuff seemed very much out of place. They landed on his big flat-screen television sitting in the corner and he smiled. *At least you look at home here*, he thought.

He turned his attention back out the window, folding his arms and smiling as he smelled the coffeemaker begin to do its job. He closed his eyes, feeling a pair of long arms slip under his, wrapping around his chest and squeezing him tightly, like a boa constrictor. The warmth of Alex's body radiated into Davis's back. The embrace made Davis quake just a bit. Davis hadn't wanted to fall for Alex. He'd actually made it a point to not fall for him.

Alex infuriated him but he also made him laugh, and if he'd figured out anything in the six months since Jack married Tadd, it was that he needed to laugh.

"Why in the name of all that is unholy are you awake at this ungodly hour?" Alex asked in a gravelly morning voice.

"This is when poor people usually get out of bed, *Richie Rich*." Davis opened his eyes and looked back out the windows.

"I'll give you a few million then so we can go back to bed," Alex said, tugging Davis backward.

"Very funny." Davis reached up to run his hand through Alex's hair.

Alex nuzzled his mouth into Davis's neck and lightly kissed him. "I'm completely serious."

"I don't want your money, Alex." Tingles ran down his spine as Alex nibbled on him. "And stop trying to bribe me every time you wanna get your way."

"I would have to fall for the only man in the world who can't be bought," Alex said, sliding a hand over Davis's chest. He pressed his lips to Davis's ear. "You haven't even thanked me for the apartment."

"I thanked you plenty last night," Davis said, feeling his cock begin to thicken. "I wouldn't have agreed to this arrangement in the first place if you hadn't forced me."

A slightly ornery grin spread over Alex's face. "I did no such thing."

"You pulled the lease papers out while you were fucking me," Davis said, reaching back and smacking him in the hip. "You waited till I was so worked up I'd have agreed to just about anything."

"I had to do something. You're so bloody stubborn." Alex's laugh rumbled through Davis's body. "You refused to let me buy us a house and move in with me, you beastly little ingrate."

"You're very spoiled, and it's too soon to move in together," Davis said. "And don't think I don't know why you picked this apartment. You knew I'd despise it."

"I hate that you see through all my little intrigues. Besides, I already owned the building, so I didn't buy it for you."

Davis let out a little groan, loving the way Alex's body felt pressing into him. "You're about as transparent as these windows."

"I don't want you settling in and getting all comfy somewhere without me," Alex said, kissing Davis on top of his head. "This lovely place buys me time to find some dreadfully old home with loads of history I can purchase and tempt you with."

"I just don't want to take advantage of you."

"Darling, please," Alex said, letting out a little moan while running his hand down Davis's stomach and into his underwear. "I want you to take advantage of me."

Davis pulled Alex's hand out of his undies and smacked it. "I'm being serious and you're making jokes."

"I'm not joking." Alex ran his fingers over Davis's nipple. "I want you to take advantage of me right this minute."

"And you need to stop lavishing Des with so many gifts. You're spoiling her rotten."

"I can't seem to stop myself. She's like a greedy little child. I love indulging her. Besides," Alex said, nibbling on Davis's earlobe, "most of it's for my soon-to-arrive new niece or nephew."

Davis closed his eyes as his cock strained to break free from the confines of his underwear. "No straight man will ever be able to make her happy at this point unless he's a billionaire."

"No," Alex said, running the tip of his tongue down Davis's neck. "She has me to buy her pretty things, love. She's now free to marry for orgasms."

"You mean love, don't you?"

"Sure, sure," Alex answered, pressing his erection into Davis's ass. "That too."

Davis chewed on his lip, feeling his body begin to reach that boiling point. "And I've already told you I love you, so you don't need to shower me with presents anymore."

"At the moment I'd like to shower you with something else," Alex said, running his hand back down and over Davis's cock. "Hello, love."

Davis moaned and reached back, running his hand over Alex's bare ass. Alex slowly pulled Davis's briefs down, running his long fingers over his firm ass and allowing his erection to spring free in the warm sunlight. Alex ground his own hard cock against Davis's ass as Davis spread his legs a little.

"That's it, beautiful," Alex said, sucking on his neck and sliding his fingers between his cheeks. "I'm dying to slide inside you and see what else I can get you to agree to."

Davis took in a sharp breath, feeling Alex's fingers reach their intended target. "Now you're just rubbing it in."

"I'd bloody well like to," Alex said as Davis turned and raised up on his tiptoes, hungrily shoving his tongue into Alex's mouth.

Alex reciprocated and continued to rub his fingers over Davis's hole. Davis put his arms around his neck and hopped up into Alex's arms, wrapping his legs around his waist. Alex turned and began to walk back toward the bedroom as Davis ground his erection into his stomach. Davis sucked on his lips and kissed his nose and cheeks as Alex passed through the doorway into the bedroom. He ran them into a box, knocking it over, and kept going till he reached the bed, which was lying in the middle of the floor. He knelt on the bed and laid Davis down, pressing his full weight on top of him.

Davis pushed him off, rolling Alex onto his back, and began licking his way down his neck, nibbling and sucking a path to a nipple. Davis took it between his teeth and pulled.

“Fuck me!” Alex said, grabbing Davis by the back of the head and shoving his face into his chest.

“I didn’t know you liked that,” Davis said, reaching down between Alex’s legs and shoving a finger between his ass cheeks.

“That wasn’t an invitation, love,” Alex said, looking down at Davis with a raised eyebrow, “merely an exclamation.”

Davis giggled and looked down at Alex’s long, hard cock. He roughly took the head into his mouth and sucked him all the way down to the back of his throat. Alex groaned, running his hands into Davis’s hair. He closed his eyes, thanking Tadd over and over in the back of his mind for marrying Jack. Davis worked his way up and down, sucking his dick with a voraciousness that he felt all the way to the tension in his abs. His upper body began to lift up off the bed.

“Christ, your mouth is like a Hoover,” Alex yelled, feeling his vision began to blur. He swore to himself he’d buy Davis the oldest, mustiest, most expensive anniversary gift he could find as he felt the head of his cock begin to swell and his balls begin to rise. “Come,” was all he could manage to get out as Davis took him all the way into the back of his throat, sucking hard as Alex shot into his mouth. He slammed the back of his head into the bed, thrusting his pelvis and yelling out his pleasure as the sound echoed off the bare walls.

Davis lifted his head and looked up at Alex. He looked down and practically got hard again seeing Davis’s pink cheeks, swollen lips, and all the hair around his face wet and sticking to his forehead and temples.

“I don’t think you’ve ever looked more beautiful than you do at this very moment,” Alex said.

Davis crawled up his long, lanky body and sat down on top of his ravaged cock, gasping for air as he tried to catch his breath.

“I bet you say that to all the boys,” Davis said, smiling between breaths as he began to gyrate, grinding his ass onto Alex.

“I’m serious,” Alex said, reaching up and running his thumb over Davis’s bottom lip.

Davis reached back, spreading his cheeks, and ground his ass harder over Alex’s already-swelling dick. Davis loved that Alex could drive him to near delirium in bed, and he loved being able to drive Alex into a sex-hazed frenzy as well. Davis bit his lower lip and looked down at Alex with his best wide-eyed, innocent expression. “I need it,” he said with an almost-pleading whimper. “Please, Alex. Give it to me?”

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Alex said, picking Davis up and tossing him to the side.

“Come on, old man,” Davis said, laughing out loud, throwing his arms up above his head.

Alex rolled him over onto his stomach, grabbed him by the ankles, and yanked him closer. He got between his legs and pulled Davis up by his hips, lifting his ass into the air. Davis got up on his hands and knees and Alex smacked him on the ass with the palm of his hand. Davis gasped, feeling the sting as heat and tingles ran over his skin.

"I'll show you *old man*," Alex said, pushing his chest out as he ripped open a condom and rolled it over his cock.

Davis laughed at his display of manliness, and Alex shook his head at him. "Shameless harlot," he said, slapping his ass a little harder the second time.

Alex felt his cock get harder as Davis moaned, shoving his face into the bed and pushing his ass out. Alex worked lube over the condom and groaned as he noticed the red handprint forming on the pale white skin of Davis's ass.

"You have a right sexy little bum," Alex said, biting his lip. He ran his hands slowly down the center of Davis's back and shoved his knees between Davis's legs, forcing them farther apart until his ass was opened and exposed.

He rubbed the head of his cock over the pink hole. Davis moaned more as he pushed his ass back, trying to force it in. Alex popped the head in slowly, then thrust deeper, sliding all the way in, pressing his pelvis firmly against Davis's ass. Davis started to lift his upper body with his arms and Alex reached up, shoving his face back into the bed.

"Stay down," Alex said forcefully, watching a smile spread across Davis's face. He began to slide out and slapped his ass again with the palm of his hand. "And stop smiling," he added as he thrust back deep inside him.

Davis gasped, feeling Alex drive into him, and another smile spread over his face. Alex began to work his cock in and out, quickly picking up the pace. Davis's breath began to get rougher. He balled up wads of blanket in his fists and bit his lip as his face was forced into the mattress each time Alex slammed into him.

"Is this what you needed?" Alex asked, breathing heavily as sweat began to run down his back and chest.

"Fuck me, yes, Alex. I love you." Davis felt his face get warmer as he breathed into the mattress.

Alex grabbed his hip with one hand and reached down, taking Davis's cock into the other. Davis bit into the mattress as Alex stroked his dick. He clamped his ass down as Alex penetrated him deeper. Davis began to moan wildly, pressing his face into the bed as his balls began to rise up.

He closed his eyes tight and yelled out as Alex began to groan deeply. Davis felt his cock tingle as the warm juice shot out into Alex's hand. He whimpered as Alex pounded into his ass. Alex bellowed, "Bloody hell," as he filled the condom inside Davis.

For a minute, their bodies were so wrapped in the aftershock of orgasms that they remained locked in position before Alex collapsed on top of Davis. They struggled desperately to get their wind back.

"I really hope you love me," Alex said, between breaths, "because I'm never letting you go."

"You'll never have to," Davis said, feeling his chest swell as tears began to sting his eyes.

Alex kissed him softly between his shoulder blades as he slid out of Davis. He fell to the side, facing him as Davis rolled onto his side.

"Hey now," Alex said, reaching over and running his hand over Davis's cheek. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Davis said, smiling as the tears keep coming. "I'm just happy."

"That's no way to behave when you're happy," Alex said, scooting closer and throwing a leg over him. "I'll not have that. We get nothing but laughter, you and I."

"Okay," Davis said, sucking in a deep breath, holding it in to try to stop the tears. He ran his hand over Alex's sweat-soaked chest and breathed out. He looked into Alex's eyes and started crying again. "I'm sorry," he said between sobs.

Alex laughed his rumbling laugh and pulled him close, giving him a soft peck on the lips. "We do also get mind-altering, searingly red-hot, life-changing, come-fuck-me-daddy sex in addition to the laughs," Alex said with a reassuring expression, "if that helps at all."

Davis burst out laughing as the tears kept coming.

"Darling, stop. You really can't afford to lose any more fluids," Alex said as Davis began to laugh harder. "I'll be left with a dried-out husk for a boyfriend. There isn't enough lube in the world. I'll chafe. I loathe chafing."

Davis continued laughing as he leaned over and kissed Alex. He rolled onto his back, laughing until his sides began to ache as Alex went on about the horrors of chafing.

He glanced over at Alex, placing his hand on his stomach as he laughed, thinking how strange it all was. He'd completely uprooted his life; everything he owned was currently packed in boxes waiting for him to unpack, organize, and put away. He had no job nor any prospects of one. He should be terrified and running around in a state of panic. Instead, he was just deliriously happy. He didn't quite know what he'd done in his life to be allowed this much joy, but he wasn't going to start asking questions this time around. He was just going to take it and run.



Ethan Day

I am a gay man living in Missouri...I can hear the gasps already!! How very un-sheik of me, yes I know. It was here I was born, and here I have stayed.

The worst thing about being a romance writer is finding a real-life hottie that can live up to the fantasy I create in my head and subsequently thrust upon him before actually getting to know him. To all my past and future boyfriends, my sincerest apologies...I can't help myself!

I was the youngest of four children and the only boy, so needless to say, I was spoiled rotten. I've always had an extravagant fantasy life. When I played with my *Star Wars* action figures as a child, I liked to make up my own stories. Naturally, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo were totally meant for each other, and Princess Leia made a bitchin' wise-cracking fag hag.

I somehow managed to survive high school living in a small racist town in Southwest Missouri and emerged unscathed, realizing life was too short to pretend to be anything other than who I was. I was the little homo that could...so damn it, I did!

After a few stints in college, I eventually signed up for a Creative Writing course. I took the class because there were no tests. For once my scholastic laziness paid off, and I found an outlet for all the fantasies running amok in my head. It was love at first write, and I've been doing it off and on ever since.

Now I have decided it's time to un-barricade the doors and unleash my imagination onto the world. So very sorry, world!! With the help of the lovely and talented team at Loose Id, LLC, my fantasy life is now available for public consumption. I'm desperately hoping you're really, really hungry.